

Cinema as a proxy of place: A comparative analysis of affective imaginaries and lived realities in Hiroshima

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INTRODUCTION

Following August 6, 1945, Hiroshima has come to embody a dual identity: a globally recognized site of atomic destruction and peace, and a contemporary city that actively pursues normalization through everyday urban life. Yet Hiroshima's mediated image has long been shaped by post-trauma cinematic representations (e.g., *Children of Hiroshima*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Black Rain*), which foreground memory, loss, and remembrance. In contrast, contemporary tourism strategies increasingly position Hiroshima beyond its tragic legacy by highlighting ordinary urban experiences and surrounding landscapes. A similar shift is detectable in more recent films set in Hiroshima (e.g., *Drive My Car*), where the city functions less as a singular trauma-symbol and more as a lived, relational space. This discussion is particularly timely in light of former U.S. President Barack Obama's 2016 visit and the 2023 G7 Hiroshima Summit, which heightened Hiroshima's international visibility and tourism interest and carry political as well as economic significance. This produces a focal point for the present study: how Hiroshima's affective, mediated meanings circulate through cultural and artistic representations, versus how Hiroshima is practically negotiated through travel and real place experience.

Films can function as diagnostic texts, providing cultural and affective references through which places can be imagined. Hiroshima provides a particularly significant case in this regard, because its global visibility is anchored in atomic memory while its contemporary urban life continues to expand beyond that singular frame. Hiroshima is a destination example where stakeholders must balance ethical remembrance with sustainable, everyday urban tourism with a broader outlook on the city's cultural and place identity. Addressing this division is crucial, and thus it leads to the central empirical question of the present project: how do viewers and visitors negotiate Hiroshima as a place across affective media representations and logistical travel decision-making? This study contributes by conceptualizing Hiroshima's place identity as co-produced through (a) cinematic representation and reception, and (b) digitally mediated tourist discourse.

This study investigates how Hiroshima's place meanings are co-created and negotiated across the interface of mediated representation and lived travel practice. First, it examines how cinematic reception constructs affective and moral place imaginaries such as vulnerability, innocence, trauma, and ethical witnessing, and evaluates the prominence of softer mediated forms, notably the animation genre, in shaping viewers' engagements with Hiroshima. In parallel, it conducts a comparative film analysis of classical and contemporary Hiroshima cinema to trace representational shifts and assess how the city's cinematic framing has evolved from trauma-centered narratives toward more normalized everyday registrations. Second, the study maps how Hiroshima is framed, and practically negotiated in online tourism discourse, focusing on planning and itinerary, mobility and constraints, and the articulation of experiential and ethical concerns. Third, it bridges these domains through systematic comparison of cinematic and tourism narratives to identify where film-induced affective perceptions align with, or rather diverge from the tourist discourse, including differences in affective intensity, emotional activation, imagery, and moral positioning. Together, these analyses develop an integrated and holistic conceptual account of Hiroshima as a place negotiated across (aesthetic) representation, mobility and travel, ethical positioning, and normalization stigma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film tourism has moved beyond exploring simple image effects to explain how screen and media attributes place meaning and sustains destination imaginaries through affective attachment and cultural transmission (Connell, 2012). Film and Cinema operate within wider cultural, tourism, and place brandings where institutional narratives and visitor discourse help stabilize or even reshape destination images (Cardoso et al., 2017). Applying mobilities lens positions tourism beyond physical movement,

but rather as a set of communicative and imaginative movement system, making online planning and advice practices integral to travel experience (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Additionally, Hiroshima as an atomic heritage in global memory, is also central to dark tourism debates. As explained by Stone (2006), the darkness phenomena are best approached as a spectrum (education, commemoration, reflection) rather than a single motivation, and this remains conceptually entangled with heritage tourism politics (Light, 2017). Empirical work on Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggests tourism may reframe the concept of darkness through educational and reconciliation-oriented narratives (Yoshida et al., 2016), supporting the core comparative analysis lens of this research across cinematic and touristic discourse.

This research conceptualizes Hiroshima's contemporary identity as negotiated between trauma-dominant framings and normalized ordinary flows. Cinema shapes Hiroshima's meaning by forming emotionally patterned place-related images that shifts in representation over time, and these cinematic framings evolve in tandem with changing travel imaginaries, cultural sensitivities and norms, and tourism practices (Connell, 2012). To bridge cinematic imaginaries with travel practice, Kołodyńska et al.'s (2025) sense of place/mobilities nexus theorizes place meaning as co-constituted through mobilities and constraints. Furthermore, because the study compares affect across film reception and tourism discourse, an appraisal-based emotions framework supports treating language as an empirical trace of meaning-making that can be systematically coded and analyzed (Scherer, 2005).

In this study, Hiroshima, its meaning, and place identity is analyzed as co-produced through three interacting mediations: (1) cinematic mediation (films/reception shaping affective and moral imaginaries without directly leading to the film-to-travel causality) (Connell, 2012); (2) tourism mobilities mediation (itinerary, mobility, constraints, and communicative planning producing practical place meanings and experiential accounts) (Sheller & Urry, 2006); and (3) ethical-heritage mediation (dark tourism spectrum and interpretive politics shaping how atomic heritage is engaged and reframed) (Light, 2017; Stone, 2006; Yoshida et al., 2016). Systematically, Kołodyńska et al.'s (2025) sense of place/mobility model guides the study's comparative lens, focusing on the coding of narratives for drivers (push/pull), orientations (move/resist), and outcomes (integration/disruption), while affect triangulation (e.g., GALC, Whissell's Dictionary of Affect) enables systematic comparison of emotional tone across corpora (Scherer, 2005).

METHODOLOGY & PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

This study employs a qualitative-dominant, comparative multi-corpus design that integrates interpretive analysis with affect-oriented text analysis to examine how Hiroshima is constructed across mediated imaginaries and practical travel negotiation. The design proceeds through three linked datasets, each with a distinct analytic role, and culminates in a cross-corpus comparison.

Dataset I: Comparative Film Analysis (Representation)

Selected scenes from Hiroshima Mon Amour (classical example of Hiroshima's cinema legacy) and Drive My Car (contemporary example) are analyzed through semiotic and textual analysis focused on spatial representation, recurring motifs, and dialogue/transcript elements that construct Hiroshima's image as an affective and ethical place. Outputs include a structured set of place-meaning indicators such as dominant motifs, tones, and frames. The initial semiotic and textual reading of selected scenes suggests that Hiroshima Mon Amour constructs Hiroshima through a dyadic logic of remembering/forgetting and an insider/outsider tension that challenges the possibility of outsiders remembering Hiroshima. Affect-oriented text analysis indicates a subdued, negative tone (i.e., low pleasantness, calm activation) in the film transcript, while it shows a relatively higher activation in audience reviews.

Dataset II: Viewer Reflections Discourse (Reception)

Film reviews of the same films mentioned above, as well as Hiroshima University students' reflection sheets on Hiroshima films are qualitatively coded to identify affective and moral place imaginaries (e.g., vulnerability, innocence, trauma, ethical witnessing). The latter includes a broader sampling of Hiroshima film examples, complementing the data set. The corpus is currently weighed toward softer forms, namely the animation genre (e.g., In This Corner of the World), and it

predominantly shows international perspectives. Preliminary coding suggests viewers treat Hiroshima films as transnational device of memory enabling emotional access to events and places not experienced firsthand. Review sampling and reflection collection, and data expansion are ongoing to strengthen longitudinal reception analysis.

Dataset III: Netnographic Travel Discourse Analysis of Tourism Forums (Experience)

The study so far analyzes 214 TripAdvisor Hiroshima forum units (2020–2025) as naturally occurring discourse through which tourists plan, interpret, and negotiate Hiroshima. An inductive netnographic approach is applied through two coding axes: (1) Question/Unit Types and (2) Place Anchors. Preliminary distributions show dominance of mobility and itinerary planning and frequent spatial anchoring of Hiroshima as a generalized destination, with peace sites not structurally dominant in planning discourse. Following the quantification of the units, a cross-tabulation of the axes were employed which consequently led to selective sampling of contrasting cases (e.g., radiation/safety concerns, museum-with-children decisions, post-visit reflection) for deeper matrix-based and interpretive analysis of tourist positioning, place positioning, and spatial practices.

Cross-corpus triangulation and Integration (Analytic Bridge)

To support systematic comparison across datasets while remaining interpretively grounded, the study so far applies two affect-oriented tools: Whissell's Dictionary of Affect (pleasantness, activation, imagery) and the Geneva Affect Label Coder (GALC) to selected textual corpora (film transcripts, film reviews/reflections, and forum segments). These measures are used as comparative descriptors rather than substitutes for interpretation. Across the three datasets, the study compares (1) cinematic place representation, (2) viewer affective imaginaries, and (3) tourist discourse as practical negotiation, to identify where Hiroshima is exceptionalized (trauma-dominant, ethically heavy, high emotional burden) versus normalized (ordinary city framing, logistical planning, everyday urban experience), and how these framings align or diverge across media and mobility dialogues.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study contributes to tourism theory by reframing the atomic and peace heritage tourism as a mobility-embedded practice rather than an attraction-centric encounter. Preliminary patterns suggest that Hiroshima is often negotiated first through itinerary and access logic, while peace-related meanings become central later within specific experiential and reflective narratives. Conceptually, this supports an account of ethical destinations as places whose meanings are activated across phases of movement, decision-making, and encounter. In parallel, the project links cinematic geography to tourism negotiation by showing that film reception can create affectively patterned place imaginaries which are often shaped through soft everyday representations that may structure what visitors eventually anticipate, regulate, avoid, or seek in the destination. Methodologically, integrating interpretive analysis with affect metrics extends place research by enabling comparison not only of what is said across corpora, but how the city is felt, thereby clarifying the tension between aesthetic memory and practical mobility through which Hiroshima's destination meaning is co-produced.

Practically, the findings inform visitors' experience for emotionally demanding sites by highlighting the role of emotional management. The data also suggests that peace tourism may frequently become a care practice under family (companion) conditions, pointing to the need for generation appropriateness, guidance, and companion-sensitive mediation. Finally, ongoing safety narratives indicate that Hiroshima's nuclear past can be reactivated as perceived environmental risk, underscoring the importance of clear, accessible, and non-sensational public communication. Overall, the study suggests that peace is often not the primary entry point in travel planning but it is an experiential and individual stage that requires careful mediation, and as it was discussed earlier, the soft narratives (e.g., animation or gastronomy culture) can function as mechanisms of emotional regulation that help visitors engage with both Hiroshima's traumatic history and its contemporary urban identity.

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