

**Creature Double Feature:  
America's Encounter with Godzilla,  
the King of Monsters**

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The *Godzilla* film franchise has long been cherished as a comically odd if not ludicrous cultural icon in the realm of science fiction; however, this representation misses the deep-rooted significance of the original film and reduces the series from high grade, culturally aware cinema to trivial “monster movies.” In the words of William Tsutsui, both an Ivy League scholar and a lifelong Godzilla fan, the original and powerfully meaningful *Gojira* film<sup>1</sup> watched as many of its successors “degenerated into big-time wrestling in seedy latex suits.”<sup>2</sup> In spite of its legacy’s deterioration, however, the initial film retains its integrity and significance. Although the altered version of the film had significant financial success in the United States, Toho Company’s *Gojira* is not widely recognized for its philosophical and cultural significance in this foreign sphere. To a considerable extent, the American encounter with the film has failed due to nativism and prejudice, and in the intercultural exchange the film has lost some of its literary depth, as well as the poignancy in its protest against nuclear proliferation and destructive science in general.

When *Gojira* was released in 1954, the Japanese audience whom it met was still traumatized by the brutal incendiary and atomic attacks of World War II, post-war economic distress, and continuing off-shore nuclear experimentation by the United States. All of these factors contributed to a national “victim” identity as well as a general sense of crisis among the struggling citizens.<sup>3</sup> What is also significant of these cultural surroundings is that they were largely caused by an American hand, either directly or indirectly. The atomic bombs dropped on

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<sup>1</sup> “*Gojira*” will refer to the original, 1954 Japanese Godzilla film as opposed the the 1956 American *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* And the 2014 *Godzilla* films as “*Gojira*” was the original title..

<sup>2</sup> William Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 14

<sup>3</sup> Barton Palmer "Gojira." *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*. 4th ed. Vol. 1: Films. (2000): 467-469.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki did more than crush buildings and industrial infrastructure, they were probably the most significant events affecting the Japanese psyche. Along with the earlier annihilatory fire bombings of Tokyo, they crushed a national spirit with their demoralizing destructive power.

Director Ishiro Honda's own World War II military experience in the Japanese Imperial Army aroused both horror and fascination toward destructive technology and especially the invisible force of radiation.<sup>4</sup> That new and nearly inconceivable force possibly caused the greatest destruction of all: as film historian and prolific Godzilla writer, David Kalat, states, it irradiated food sources and killed many civilians even after the war was over as a result of continued U.S. hydrogen bomb testing near the Bikini Atoll in the southern Pacific Ocean, less than 3,000 miles from Japan.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the event that inspired the film, and dually serves as its opening scene, was the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (Lucky Dragon Number Five) being showered with radiation during U.S. bomb tests. The Japanese fishing vessel's entire crew developed radiation sickness, one among them eventually dying.<sup>6</sup> This context of immediate disaster and general malaise is the lens in which one must view the *Gojira* film in order to understand its true meaning beyond its sensational special effects. The overwhelming motivation provided by these hardships makes clear the ideological drive behind Toho's production.

Film critics widely agree that Godzilla is a symbol of the atomic bomb, but the true purpose and message of *Gojira* goes far beyond nuclear representation to specifically broadcast an international message about Japanese suffering and to generally warn the global community

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<sup>4</sup> David Kalat, *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 15

<sup>5</sup> Rene Rodriguez, "It's Godzilla." *The Miami Herald* (May 9, 2014), Accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/reeling-with-rene-rodriguez/article1964177.html>.

<sup>6</sup> James Hoberman, "Poetry After the A-Bomb." *Criterion Collection*, (2012)

against mass destructive technology. Being the only country to have firsthand experience with the devastating power of the nuclear weapons, Japan was thrust into a unique position in the debate over nuclear proliferation. In many ways, the *Gojira* production took advantage of this position to explore mediums of protest, especially in spite of postwar censorship. Even after the formal end of the American occupation of Japan in 1952, one which imposed strict censorship laws barring speech against the United States, discomfort and lasting grievances prevented many from addressing traumatic issues such as the atomic bombs. William Tsutsui reasons that film was a “safer vehicle” for confronting these national issues than facing them directly in political speech.<sup>7</sup> Akira Takarada, the original film’s lead actor, also asserted that the producers and staff made the symbolic significance of Godzilla very clear to him: the film was meant as an explicit warning on the part of the Japanese population against the atomic bomb, “a protest against nuclear war.”<sup>8</sup> This pointed message that guides the film gives it deeper significance than a mere cinematic spectacle and further communicates its intellectual value.

Anxiety over the atomic bombs, the fallout, and continuing nuclear tests are pervasive concerns in the film. It depicts a mimicry of the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* as well as civilians complaining of atomic aftermath; one woman even directly addresses “Atomic tuna, nuclear fallout ... I barely escaped the atomic bomb in Nagasaki, and now this!”<sup>9</sup> The public’s undisguised agitation conveys its painfully obvious and popular nuclear opposition. Fictionally renowned paleontologist, Dr. Kyohei Yamane, also directly accredits the creature’s awakening to American hydrogen bomb testing during a crisis summit on the matter, not to mention the fact that Godzilla’s destructive breath itself is a focused radioactive beam.

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<sup>7</sup> William Tsutsui, Interview by Gus Huiskamp. (March 18, 2016)

<sup>8</sup> Akira Takarada, Interview by Natsume Date. (2011). DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ishiro Honda, dir. *Gojira*. (Toho Company, 1954). DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

The film expands its moral scope to lament any future scientific advances with violent capabilities through the character of Dr. Daisuke Serizawa. Young and brilliant, Serizawa develops a device that “liquefies” all of the oxygen in a given sample of water, henceforth killing all life inside. Though obviously unrealistic, this “Oxygen Destroyer” holds greater meaning by representing scientific advances in general and serves as a primary conflict point in the story. (See Appendix I.) While the protagonist, Hideto Ogata, seeks to use the invention to destroy Godzilla for the good of Japan, Serizawa refuses for as long as possible, worried about “what will become of us if a weapon such as I now have falls into the wrong hands.”<sup>10</sup> Serizawa ultimately kills himself in order to protect the secrets of supremely destructive invention and reasserts the film’s message regarding the danger of weapons of mass destruction. Serizawa’s final demonstration seals the film’s powerful message and denotes it as the true core of the piece, rather than a side plot alongside spectacular destruction.

In contrast to the original film’s staunch focus on the negatives of nuclear force and destructive scientific advancement, the 1956 American reworking, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, favored giant monster action, violence, and a degree of American egotism. The original *Gojira* did make it to America the year after it was released; however it did so only in small Japanese language theaters which offered a subtitled, but otherwise unaltered version of the film.<sup>11</sup> The film encountered by most of the American public was an altered version co-directed by American Terry Morse and the original director, Ishiro Honda. It combined recut original footage with completely new scenes, a common trend in ensuing Godzilla remakes that rendered the films unrecognizable and confusing.<sup>12</sup> Probably the most blatant discrepancy is the

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<sup>10</sup> Honda 1954

<sup>11</sup> Kalat 1997, 18

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3

addition of the character Steve Martin, an American reporter played by Canadian-American actor, Raymond Burr. The fact that American filmmakers deemed it necessary for box office success to incorporate a familiar, caucasian face into the otherwise foreign film, demonstrates American prejudice and disinterest toward foreign culture.

Robert Dallek argues that “For most Americans, the external world has been a remote, ill-defined sphere which can be molded into almost anything they wish.”<sup>13</sup> In the “Americanization” of *Godzilla*, the United States release displaces or even excludes many scenes and lines from the original that directly criticize American nuclear use. While *Gojira* opened with its obvious allusion to the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* tragedy, *Godzilla* instead offers the event (one that made only small news in the United States)<sup>14</sup> only as exposition following the much more exciting image of Steve Martin awakening to a ruined Tokyo and a receding behemoth lizard. The film also omits comments regarding radiation, as well as an entire dialogue between government officials arguing that publicizing any American blame in arousing *Godzilla* would hurt Japan’s already fragile western relations.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to this nuclear omission in the film, the advertising techniques of the films differed drastically as the Japanese version focused on the human suffering and destruction caused by the disaster and the American one instead emphasizes the amazing destruction and spectacle, bereft of emotional meaning. (See Appendix II) Not recognizing this foreign perspective is both expectable due to Americans’ demonstrated level of nativism<sup>16</sup> as well as

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs*. (New York: New American Library, 1983), xiii

<sup>14</sup> Hoberman 2012

<sup>15</sup> Ishiro Honda and Terry O. Morse, dir. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*. (Toho Company, and Jewell Enterprises Inc., 1956). DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> This point is also supported by the Munson Report, an investigation commissioned by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration into the loyalty of Japanese-Americans before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Suspicions

understandable due to the film's rather anti-American message. (See Appendix III) The remake does however impressively incorporate Dr. Yamane's association of American hydrogen bomb testing with Godzilla as well as Dr. Serizawa's moral struggle with scientific discovery.

This near miss in recreating the original film's pointed intent is also reflected in the 2014 American remake of Godzilla as neither truly reaches the point condemning nuclear weapons for their excessive destruction.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in this most recent adaptation, United States nuclear bomb tests in the Pacific Ocean are portrayed as an attempt to destroy Godzilla for the good of mankind. This depiction of Godzilla as an "excuse" for dangerous military experimentation underplays the destructive nature of the testing and uses it to glorify American altruism rather than to acknowledge responsibility for the longstanding damage.<sup>18</sup> Despite attempts to mimic the Japanese original, American remakes and adaptations have fallen short of their lofty model.

Perhaps even more representative than American versions of the films is their American reception, by audiences and critics alike. With a budget of about ¥60 million, *Gojira* made ¥225 million (\$2.25 million) in Japan.<sup>19</sup> With 9.8 million moviegoers representing 11% of the Japanese population, the film was an "unprecedented hit."<sup>20</sup> Due to its very limited American release however, it unsurprisingly drew few crowds across the Pacific. The Americanized version, on the other hand, made a comparable \$2 million in American theaters,<sup>21</sup> confirming the audience's preference for domestic culture. In spite of this box office success, however,

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arose specifically against the Japanese because they were the most visibly foreign. The report deemed that these citizens were harmless and at least "not anymore disloyal than any other racial group in the United States with whom we went to war." (see 15-16) In spite of this, Japanese-Americans were incarcerated en masse, demonstrating the driving force of racial fear in domestic policy.

<sup>17</sup> Gareth Edwards, (Legendary Pictures, 2014). DVD. Turner Classic Movies, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Tsutsui 2016

<sup>19</sup> J.D. Lees and Marc Cerasini, *The Official Godzilla Compendium*. New York :Random House, 1998), 15

<sup>20</sup> Takarada 2011

<sup>21</sup> "Box office for Godzilla." *IMDb*. Accessed December 20, 2015, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047034/business>.

American reviews of the film were less favorable. Contemporary film critics almost universally condemned *Gojira* as shallow and cheap, either disregarding or overlooking both the cultural symbolism and depth of the films as well as special effects director Eiji Tsuburaya's innovative filming techniques. To their discredit, many reviewers even have inaccurate information and plot summaries concerning different Godzilla movies, such as mistakenly claiming that *King Kong vs. Godzilla* has two separate endings for Japan and the United States or failing to acknowledge that Godzilla attacks more cities than just Tokyo. This plain inaccuracy demonstrates that several critics have judged Toho's films without even having an understanding or knowledge of them beforehand.<sup>22</sup> This prejudice bespeaks the same inability or unwillingness to accept foreign culture as does the necessity of Americanizing the films for U.S. audiences, and that closed- mindedness is a fundamental failure of encounter. Even beyond incorrect and unfounded criticisms, many of the films' characteristics so mocked by American audiences are those added by American distribution companies. Poorly dubbed lines by completely unknown voice actors, added scratchy stock footage, cheap studio sound bites in place of original score, and confusing, rearranged plotlines are the very characteristics that paint many Godzilla films as ridiculous; however, none of them are original to the Japanese productions.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Toho's Godzilla series, misguided and unfair reception led to the failure of intercultural exchange.

As demonstrated by *Gojira*, some of the most moving and meaningful messages are conveyed through art, and therefore the transfer and exchange of art is equal to any other medium of ideological traffic. For this reason, cultural encounter is made all the more important

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<sup>22</sup> Kalat 1997, 1

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3



so that ideas can spread internationally and be received appropriately. Ideas like nuclear demilitarization and scientific responsibility are no trifling matters, and, therefore, deserve the same attention and respect as all issues concerning the global community. In matters of such import, one cannot afford to be ignorant towards a perspective merely because it is not from a familiar source or because it does not agree with one's own, but one sees this unwillingness all the same. *Gojira's* message is a strong one, and a wise one at that, but still it was largely dismissed as an argumentative vehicle. The United States as well as all countries must be more open-minded to intellectual and ideological perspectives in order to preserve and improve the world they share.

## Appendix I

Still image from *Gojira*



Dr. Serizawa demonstrates the destructive power of his Oxygen Destroyer to his fiancée, Emiko. After showing her the device's capability to kill, he acknowledges the grave danger of his invention falling into the wrong hands and swears Emiko to secrecy about its existence.

## Appendix II

Left: 1954 Japanese movie poster for *Gojira*

Right: 1956 American movie poster for *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*



The original Japanese movie poster puts emphasis on the human aspect of Godzilla's rampage as it focuses on specific characters experiencing the terror and destruction of the monster. As analyzed by Cornell University's "Animal Legends", the American poster largely dehumanizes the destruction of Tokyo, depicting a mostly faceless crowd as a footnote to the awesome power that can "blast a city." This flagrant difference from the Japanese version marks the lack of cultural significance in the American version of the film, as its producers and distributors focused on selling its grand destruction rather than its human meaning.

### Appendix III

Left: Circa 1920 anti-Japanese signage

Right: World War II Dr. Seuss anti-Japanese editorial cartoon



The disproportionate xenophobia and demeaning depictions towards the Japanese before and during World War II demonstrates the underlying racism that pervaded the United States. Both private displays predating Japanese aggression (left) and wartime media in national magazines (right) reflect this racist sentiment.



## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Edwards, Gareth, dir. *Godzilla*. Legendary Pictures, 2014. DVD. Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2014.

This current primary source offered insight toward the continuing recreation of Godzilla films and allowed me to compare the original American adaptation with one made in a modern context. This allows demonstration of progression in the films and connects modern day to the topic as opposed to just the 1950s. This is a primary source because it is not offering insight about a past event, but rather it is directly presenting its own characteristics that I and others could analyze and interpret.

Geisel, Theodore Seuss. *Wipe that Sneer Off His Face*. Editorial Cartoon. (October 13, 1942): 16, seen in Richard H. Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*. New York, NY: The New Press, 1999.

This editorial cartoon created by Theodore Seuss Geisel demonstrates the overt racism displayed toward the Japanese enemy. This vastly exceeds that toward Germans and Italians during the war and exhibits American racial nativism. This piece, first published in *PM* magazine, served in Appendix III to help me to prove this point about U.S. prejudice.

Honda, Ishiro, dir. *Gojira*. Toho Company, 1954. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

This primary source is the original Japanese Godzilla film and offers direct evidence toward its content and message. Viewing this allowed me to witness production and creative choices first hand and gave me the opportunity to compare it with the Americanized version for its creative and literary changes. I also used a still frame of this film for Appendix I.

Honda, Ishiro, and Morse, Terry O., dir. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*. Toho Company, and Jewell Enterprises Inc., 1956. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

This primary source is the mainstream American release and adaptation of the original *Gojira* film which most Americans recognize as the original. This film gave me direct contrast with the original and allowed me to remark on the discrepancy in their content, especially in regard to nuclear weapons. The Americanized version was altered to be more culturally homogenous with its audience and referenced the politics of nuclear weaponization to a far lesser degree.

*Japs Keep Moving - This is a White Man's Neighborhood*. ca. 1920. National Japanese American Society. Accessed March 25, 2016.  
<http://amhistory.si.edu/perfection/collection/image.asp?ID=411>.

This photograph of anti-Japanese sentiment before the Second World War even began demonstrates the deep-rooted prejudice against the Japanese held by Americans, a prejudice only exacerbated by war. This discredits the claim that fear of Japanese-Americans was only in reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and helped in Appendix III to prove my point of American nativism.

Munson, Curtis B. U.S. State Department. *Japanese on the West Coast*. 1940. Accessed March 20, 2016.  
<http://www.michiweglyn.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Munson-Report.pdf>.

This 1940 government-commissioned report on the loyalty of Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast, spurred by race-based fear of the Japanese, supports the idea of American nativism. The report also found that the loyalty in question was strong and that the population posed no threat. Nevertheless, the Japanese were the only racial group sent to internment camp, further underlining the racial basis of American fear.

Takarada, Akira. Interview by Natsume Date. 2011. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2012.

This primary source gave the direct views and testimony of the original lead actor of *Gojira* and offered insight to the meaning behind the film. His direct quote addressing the fact that the film was indeed a nuclear protest directly and strongly helped to support my thesis. He also included statistics regarding the Japanese release of the original film and its enormous success there, allowing me to contrast this success with that in the United States.

Toho Company. *Gojira* (Trailer/Extra). Toho Company, 1954. Criterion Collection, 2012.

This primary source demonstrated the aspects of the film, namely the mass destruction with nuclear undertones, that the producers chose to sensationalize and highlight to potential audiences. This allowed me to understand what themes and issues were most important to the original production members as well as the Japanese audiences to which they were appealing.

Toho Company. *Gojira*. 1954. Tokyo, Japan: Cornell University Library. Poster.

This original Japanese movie poster, similarly to the original trailer, offered insight to the main advertising focuses of the first production and emphasis on emotion and human meaning to the films. It also again provided contrast with its American counterpart, therefore allowing me to demonstrate the latter's shortcomings in cultural significance. It also served as a useful reference piece in Appendix II.

Toho Company, and Jewell Enterprises. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (Trailer/Extra). Toho Company, and Jewell Enterprises, 1956. Criterion Collection, 2012.

This Trailer for the Americanized version of the Japanese original offered contrast against the *Gojira* trailer as it highlighted the action-packed monster violence significantly more than the nuclear pathology of disaster. This deepened my understanding of the holistic differences between the two productions.

Toho Company, and Jewell Enterprises. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*. 1956. Aurora, CO: Cornell University Library. Poster.

This poster for the Americanized version of the *Gojira* film offered contrast to the original Japanese poster and focused more on the action-packed destruction of Godzilla rather than the story's human and emotional impact. This again helped to exhibit its lack of cultural depth and significance. It also served as a useful reference in Appendix II.

### Secondary Sources

“Box office for Godzilla.” *IMDb*. Accessed December 20, 2015. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047034/business>.

This source provided me with box office statistics about the American release of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* and therefore helped me to prove part of my thesis regarding the film's financial success in the United States. The Internet Movie Database served as an authority on film statistics.

Dallek, Robert. *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs*. New York, NY: New American Library, 1983.

This secondary source offered a directly relevant and helpful quote regarding American perspective and molding of foreign culture. It continued to describe the United States' foreign policy as very self-centered and hypocritical, lacking regard to other countries and their ideologies. This idea applies very well to the U.S. adaptation of *Gojira*.

Hoberman, James. “Poetry After the A-Bomb.” (Booklet). *Criterion Collection*, 2012.

This secondary source, released with copies of *Gojira* and *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* by the Criterion Collection, describes art and sentiment in Japan in reaction to radiation and atomic attack. Specifically, this source introduced me to the story of the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru*, the fishing boat affected by U.S. fallout which inspired the *Gojira* film.

Lees, J.D. and Cerasini, Marc. *The Official Godzilla Compendium*. New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

Co-written by the editor of *G-Fan* magazine, one dedicated to Godzilla and including many articles and analysis on the monster, this secondary source provided data about the original *Gojira* film's profit. This information helped prove part of my thesis in regard to the film's financial success.

Kalat, David. *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997.

Kalat's analysis of the Godzilla films and their cultural contexts offered detailed insight in regard to their depth as well as to American reception of the films. I received most of my information from this source as Kalat is a respected authority on the Godzilla franchise and his dual analysis of film and context greatly assisted me in supporting my thesis.

Palmer, R. Barton. "Gojira." *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*. Ed. Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast. 4th ed. Vol. 1: Films. Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2000. 467-469. *World History in Context* (GALE|CX3406800364).

This was the first secondary source that I used and it provided much general information which I used to guide my research following. It provided specific information and insight into the cultural motivation behind *Gojira* and explained the many problems that contributed to Japan's state. This helped me to support the film's cultural significance and therefore its deeper meaning beyond monster action.

Rodriguez, Rene. "It's Godzilla." *The Miami Herald* (May 9, 2014). Accessed December 17, 2015. <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/reeling-with-rene-rodriguez/article1964177.html>.

This news article provided some insight into the original *Gojira* film as well as included a useful quote from David Kalat referring to the symbolism and cultural backdrop of the film. This source also brought the 2014 *Godzilla* narrowly into my scope as it mentioned the new movie as attempting to return to the roots of the Godzilla franchise.

Tsutsui, William. Interview by Gus Huiskamp. Conway, AR: March 18, 2016.

This expert interview (via telephone) offered broad insight on the films and their historical context, especially with regard to their exploration of protest. Having written multiple books and articles on Godzilla, Dr. Tsutsui gave valuable information and interpretation of the films, such as a criticism of the 2014 American adaptation and its shortcomings.



Tsutsui, William. *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

This secondary source offered an anecdotal account of Godzilla's significance, therefore giving insight to the perspective of real Godzilla fans as opposed to exclusively those of film critics and historians. This source helped me to develop an understanding of some popular views of Godzilla as well as commented on the characteristic evolution of Godzilla films and ultimately their deterioration.