Jackson Lockhart

Dr. David Magill

ENGL-379-01

12/7/19

The Nuclear Age, Neo-Imperialism, Nature, and The King of the Monsters

Despite its popularity in America, the Godzilla franchise is distinctly Japanese. Now, while America has produced several of its own iterations of Godzilla, by and large, he remains Japanese. Within the films are Japanese values, their stories told in Japanese style, and of course, their monsters, and more importantly, their perception of said monsters, are purely Japanese. This means that in order to understand Godzilla, it is important to understand Japan. What is Godzilla? He is not simply a monster, wreaking havoc upon Japan, not in the slightest. Godzilla is the atomic bomb, not simply an effect of the atomic bomb, but the atomic bomb personified. More specifically, he is the *American* atomic bomb, and he represents everything America and its weaponry, conventional and atomic, have done to Japan and its people. His atomic breath is the firebombs dropped on Tokyo, his roar the air raid sirens, his nigh-invulnerability is Japan's weakness against the technologically superior America, his existence and capability for destruction, of course, is the atom bomb. Godzilla, in his debut film *Gojira* (a Japanese word combining the words "whale" and "gorilla", translated into English as the iconic *Godzilla*), is not a monster movie, but a movie with a monster. The story is not about Godzilla destroying Japan, but about the anxieties of the Japanese people living in a world with Godzilla, and thus, a world with the atom bomb. The message he carries is as potent now as it was in 1954: we have

weapons with the capacity to destroy ourselves and our planet, what now? Godzilla is not an irradiated beast, he is nuclear angst made manifest.

The roots of Godzilla go back further than Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however. Further back even than the Second World War. The roots of Godzilla, arguably, began with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Two critical roles in *Godzilla*, that of the mad, obsessed human scientist and that of the inhuman monster of their creation, are famously and first displayed here. More importantly than just character archetypes, however, are the ideas within *Frankenstein* that are also resonant within *Godzilla*. There is, of course, the idea of tampering with forbidden knowledge and its consequences, the danger of human ambition, and the risks of interfering with nature. In *Frankenstein*, Dr. Victor Frankenstein is the mad, obsessed scientist, who attempts to one-up nature by creating a new form of human life, since he is only a man and cannot rise to the level of nature, the result is an inhuman monster, and only then does he regret and understand the dangerous nature of his actions. *Godzilla*, on the other hand, is the opposite. In *Godzilla*, the mad, obsessed scientist and the inhuman monster is a twofold role. On the Japanese side, we have Dr. Daisuke Serizawa, who accidentally discovers the oxygen destroyer, our inhuman monster, he immediately recognizes the inherent danger and is obsessed with both keeping it a secret and finding some way to make his discovery beneficial to humanity. On the American side, American scientists intentionally discover atomic weaponry and are obsessed with more and more testing, their monstrous technology results in a new monster, Godzilla. Here, the danger lies not in what might happen if we try to usurp the perfection of nature by creating new forms of life, the danger lies in how our endless drive to create new forms of death could disturb the perfection of nature.

One of the greatest mistakes people make is to assume that these films have nothing beyond their value as entertainment. This is not due to the weakness, but rather due to the strength of the storytelling, as Peter Brothers states, "by not making a direct statement and discreetly avoiding the real issue, he [Ishirō Honda] nevertheless made a picture so stunning that it succeeds as entertainment, thereby distracting many viewers from its moral compass" (39). The film's morals are expressed largely through subtext and metaphor, most importantly in Dr. Daisuke Serizawa. While Godzilla is a powerful metaphor, it is important to remember that "Godzilla is a film about men" (Brothers 37). Dr. Serizawa recognizes the danger inherent in the capabilities of his Oxygen Destroyer, but when his fiancé Emiko Yamane brings his friend (her lover) Hideo Ogata to try to convince him to use the Oxygen Destroyer against Godzilla, he refuses. Ogata then states, "Look, then you have a responsibility no man has ever faced. You have your fear, which might become reality, and you have Godzilla, which is reality" (Morse and Honda). Following a broadcast showing the suffering of the Japanese people, Serizawa relents, but only before he destroys his notes, stating that this is the only time the Oxygen Destroyer must be used, as the one thing he fears more than the power of his weapon is that it might be exploited for military use and incite a new, more dangerous arms race (Ryfle 53). Dr. Serizawa's agonizing struggle can be seen as the struggle of Japan as a nation personified into a single man. How does Serizawa (Japan) exist in a world with Godzilla (American military power, atomic weaponry, and their restructuring of Japan as a nation) the destruction of Tokyo (the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and the Oxygen Destroyer (the next great weapon of mass destruction)? Put simply, how does Japan exist in a nuclear world, having been the only victim of a nuclear attack? And how should they rebuild themselves when America is pushing them down

a particular path? Serizawa decides to sacrifice himself, letting his knowledge die with him and Godzilla. But the threat does not end here, as Dr. Kyohei Yamane remarks, “I can't believe that Godzilla was the last of its species. If nuclear testing continues, then someday, somewhere in the world... another Godzilla may appear” (Honda). Japan appears to have followed Dr. Yamane’s advice, as in 1967 they codified their three non-nuclear principles: no manufacture, no introduction, and no possession of nuclear weapons (Noriega 72).

The second great mistake comes once viewers have been able to pick up on the subtext, maybe even to understand it, but at this fatal junction is where the mistake comes into play. As previously stated, to understand Godzilla is to understand Japan. Many viewers fail to remove themselves from their own culture and to place themselves in a Japanese one. They may have come close, but close only counts in horseshoes, hand grenades, and (the main vessel of misunderstanding) nuclear strikes. America creates the bomb, the bomb destroys Japan; The bomb creates Godzilla, Godzilla destroys Japan; Japan creates the Oxygen Destroyer, the Oxygen Destroyer destroys Godzilla; a vicious cycle (Noriega 67). If we as viewers are to truly understand the message behind *Godzilla*’s nuclear metaphor, we have to acknowledge and understand that it is anti-American. As Brothers states, “*Godzilla* is a film that deserves to be taken seriously, but to accept what the movie is saying on its own terms one must understand its subtle anti-American tone and dissertation of destruction, which has been difficult for American critics to acknowledge, for to do so is to admit the guilt belonging solely to the society that had dropped the bombs in the first place (in America the Bomb is viewed as a necessary evil; in Japan the Bomb is evil, period)” (37). The bomb is evil to the Japanese, and since Godzilla represents the bomb, an American creation, he ostensibly represents America as well, an evil,

unstoppable force that has changed forever the destiny of Japan. The change comes not only in the still visible atomic scars and the still present rubble but also in Japanese society itself. The Allies, America specifically, forced Japan to change its government and society so that they would never again be able to threaten the West militarily, the suppression of the patriarchy, the (all but) removal of the emperor, the removal of clan authority over the family, and the structure of the new democratic government and constitution all served to repress Japan, but the repressed always returns (Noriega 65). In the Godzilla films, this returns in the form of the radiation burns the sailors in the start of *Godzilla* died from, similar to the victims of radiation poisoning on the fishing trawler *The Lucky Dragon* after having the misfortune to be too close to unannounced American nuclear testing in 1954, and in the criticism launched at the ineffective and stifling Japanese bureaucracy, and how the American government still treats Japan as "a tributary state" (Ryfle 47; Hideaki and Higuchi).

Understanding the history of Japan, and its culture at the time, that lead to the creation of *Godzilla* finally allows us to begin to understand how the Japanese see *Godzilla*. As stated in the beginning, Hollywood has several times introduced its own, Americanized version of Godzilla. Most notoriously in the heavily edited version of the original film released to American audiences in 1956 as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* The edits largely toned down connections to the American atomic attacks and nuclear testing, added Raymond Burr as a reporter and narrator, and cut down other Japanese roles due to lingering racial tensions from the Second World War, as to the Americans, Godzilla was the star of the show (Ryfle 58-61). This is an excellent example of the differences in how Americans and Japanese portray and relate to their monsters or otherness. Let's start with the atomic bomb itself. In its own monster movies,

America has always been ready and willing to throw its most advanced weapons and technology at the monster. In *King Kong*, it is fighter planes, in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and 1953s *The War of the Worlds*, it is the atomic bomb. In Hollywood's most recent foray into the franchise, Godzilla and other monsters (referred to as Titans) are awoken by the dawn of the nuclear age, but they were already inherently radioactive and already possessed their huge size and fantastical abilities (Dougherty). While there are Japanese elements within these films, such as a new iteration of the character of Dr. Serizawa and, especially in 2019s *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, an eastern view of nature and our relationship with nature is highly present, the subtext that made the original so great is abandoned for a pro-American one, intentionally or not. Instead of having nuclear testing being the cause of these Titans and Godzilla's rampage, the Americans instead are disguising their use of nuclear weapons in the Pacific as tests, when they are in fact trying to kill Godzilla (Edwards). The American military and the American organization Monarch, responsible for the study and containment of the Titans, are portrayed as heroes, trying to protect the world and its people and to adjust it peacefully to a world with monsters, ignoring the fact that they have tried to kill multiple Titans several times and are inherently responsible for their return (Edwards and Dougherty). They are also all too eager to use weapons of mass destruction; they attempt to use a nuclear device to kill a resurgent Godzilla throughout history, from his awakening in the 50s to the events of the 2014 film, they use radiation waste and nuclear weapons to lure Titans into traps (albeit, away from populated areas), and in the 2019 film, they use the Oxygen Destroyer (this time a purpose-built American anti-Titan weapon) to try to kill both Godzilla and King Ghidorah, but only end up mortally wounding Godzilla and allowing King Ghidorah to win their second battle, along with killing

every aquatic life form in a massive radius (Dougherty). How is Godzilla revived? Why, by detonating a nuclear missile right next to him (Dougherty). Despite the touching moment between Dr. Serizawa and Godzilla, showing the potential for coexistence before his sacrifice, this shows throughout American Godzilla movies in particular, that we are all too happy to use the nuclear option, but never ready to deal with its consequences or accept the guilt for being the ones who turned the key, as Nancy Anisfield states, "the Japanese embrace the bomb/monster into their cultural conscience, whereas Americans push it away" (Anisfield 53; Dougherty).

The Japanese see *Godzilla*, and the atomic bomb, in an entirely different way. It starts with their language itself, unlike English and other western languages "do [does] not have a long or consistent history of personal pronouns to distinguish between 'I' and 'You,' 'We' and 'Them'", this makes it easier for the Japanese to overcome the differences between themselves and otherness by "'having the self immerse itself within the other'" (Noriega 67-68). We, as Westerners, use the other to define the self, but the Japanese see themselves in "'a historical perspective'", and this, along with their language, allows the monster to be both self and other, to both represent their culture and its threats (Noriega 65-68). The hardest lesson to learn from *Godzilla* is that we, as Americans, are the other. We are Godzilla, and we are the radiation that created him. This is why American Godzilla movies will only ever be adaptations and need to be fundamentally reworked to revise this sense of otherness, such as in the case of Mark Jacobson's *Gojiro*, a satire on *Godzilla* that retains the spirit of the films but plants it solely in American culture, a beast irradiated through nuclear testing that has now become "a suicidal and reluctant movie idol" (Anisfield 53).

Through *Godzilla*, the Japanese have taken a scarred piece of their history, themes and archetypes as old as *Frankenstein*, and their concerns about the dawn of the nuclear age, and created what is in all respects, a masterpiece of monster fiction. A story so well told that it can be seen as a simple, entertaining, cheap film about a giant monster; yet with a subtext so rich it can teach of the anxieties of an entire nation, to bring into the open wounds borne in atomic fire that may never heal. It was able to send this message across the seas, to us, the Americans, the others. And though we may not have wanted to hear it at the time, and may not even to this day, the success of this story means that the spirit of Ishirō Honda's message is still present to this day. All we have to do is be willing to accept it.

Works Cited

Anisfield, Nancy. "Godzilla/Gojiro: Evolution of the Nuclear Metaphor." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1995, pp. 53. *ProQuest*, https://login.proxy.longwood.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/195369863?accountid=12144.

Anno, Hideaki and Shinji Higuchi, directors. *Shin Godzilla*. Toho Pictures, 2016.

Brothers, Peter H. "Japan's Nuclear Nightmare: How the Bomb Became a Beast Called 'Godzilla.'" Vol. 36, no. 3, 2011, pp. 36–40. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org.proxy.longwood.edu/stable/41691033. Accessed 10 Nov. 2019.

Dougherty, Michael, director. *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019.

Edwards, Gareth, director. *Godzilla*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014.

Honda, Ishirō, director. *Godzilla*. Toho Studios, 1954.

Morse, Terry and Ishirō Honda, directors. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* Toho Studio and TransWorld Releasing Corporation and Embassy Pictures, 1956.

Noriega, Chon. "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When 'Them!" Is U.S." Vol. 27, no. 1, 1987, pp. 63–77. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/1225324. Accessed 10 Nov. 2019.

Ryfle, Steve. "Godzilla's Footprint." Vol. 81, no. 1, 2005, pp. 44–63. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26441723. Accessed 10 Nov. 2019.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by Maurice Hindle, Revised ed., Penguin, 2003.