



**JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA**

# Godzilla

Made in 1954, *Godzilla* was Japan's first foray into the big budget feature, costing ten times as much as the average Japanese movie and twice as much as the same studio's *Seven Samurai* which was released the same year.

Takashi Shimura stars as the revered palaeontologist who uncovers the horrible secret at the heart of the monster (Godzilla is a long dormant Jurassic beast awoken by the atom bomb). The original *Godzilla* is a fierce indictment of the atomic age. Sold to an American distributor, the film was cut, dubbed into English and retitled *Godzilla: King of the Monsters!* New scenes were added starring Raymond Burr as an American reporter observing the monster's rampage from the sidelines. All trace of the anti-nuclear message was excised in the American version.

An enormous hit for the Toho film studio, the original film created a legendary monster that would enter the lexicon of popular culture worldwide, spawning more than 20 sequels over 50 years, countless rip-offs, and a new genre: the *kaiju-eiga* or Japanese monster movie. Still rated amongst the top 20 Japanese movies of all time, the original *Godzilla* is perhaps the definitive monster movie – both a bold metaphor for the atomic age and a thrilling tour de force of pioneering special effects.

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For a giant monster, Godzilla has had to endure his fair share of being looked down upon. Roland Emmerich, director of TriStar's 1998 attempt to transfer the *Godzilla* franchise to Hollywood, declared him to be a great monster who'd never appeared in a great movie, before failing spectacularly to deliver either a great movie or a great monster himself. For more than half a century Godzilla has been subject to such stunted perceptions. A Japanese monster with an Americanised name, an apocalyptic beast born of an atomic blast and belonging to both past and future, or a man in a rubber suit capable of toppling entire city blocks: whatever your take, he doesn't easily fit our frames of reference.

It's not surprising to discover, then, that most of the 28 *Godzilla* movies produced by Toho in Japan between 1954 and 2004 developed format fatigue by the time they reached western audiences. Scenes were added and removed; original soundtrack scores were stripped away, screen-ratios mangled and poorly translated dialogue inserted into the actors' mouths. It's hard to ascertain where the pop-culture icon ends and the screen presence begins.

What started out as an operatic, big-budget tale of 'love versus reason' costing over 11 billion yen became 'a psychotic avalanche of electrifying horror' by the time it hit US shores. Such drive-in hyperbole helped distract audiences from one of the original themes: concern over US atomic tests in the South Pacific. Early in 1954, the crew of the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon No. 5 were showered with radioactive debris from the US hydrogen bomb detonated on Bikini Atoll. The event is reconstructed as a terrifying play of light and shadow glimpsed through darkness at the beginning of the movie.

When the film was released in the US two years later this scene was cut, together with references to Nagasaki, the firebombing of Tokyo during World War II and the contamination of rain and soil by fallout from nuclear testing. What US audiences got instead was Raymond Burr as a bemused reporter wandering through Tokyo's ruins in the wake of Godzilla's attack.

**Ken Hollings, *Sight & Sound*, March 2006**

### **A contemporary review**

A Japanese science fiction film inevitably rouses a certain curiosity as to the brand of monster favoured by Asian filmmakers. In the event, Godzilla turns out to be a cross between a tyrannosaurus, a large dragon and our old friend King Kong. Estimated as 400 feet tall, he roars like a lion, emits great quantities of fire from his ugly mouth, and occasionally waves his front paws in a pathetic, rather dazed manner. Emerging from Tokyo bay, Godzilla lays waste large areas of the city before being destroyed in an underwater ambush by a Japanese scientist armed with an agent designed to destroy the oxygen in water. Extensive special effects and model work help to create an authentic impression of chaos, as Godzilla rampages over skyscrapers, bridges and streets; and his final disintegration, amid a wild confusion of bubbles and threshing limbs, is effectively managed.

Judged simply as another excursion into a gruesome fantasy world, the film merits little more attention than its American or British predecessors. However, an underlying note of social protest is apparent in the characterisation (the scientist is at first reluctant to unleash his terrible secret even against the monster); also, Godzilla's radioactive appearance is directly attributed to H-bomb experiments. A more obviously symbolic sequence shows a long line of maimed bodies followed by a children's choir singing a prayer for deliverance slightly reminiscent of the wonderful dirge in *Children of Hiroshima*. So this fusion of fantasy and reality inevitably harks back to the events of 11 years ago.

The film has reached this country in a curiously disjointed version, part Japanese and part American. Some of the scenes featuring the leading character – a bland, pipe-smoking reporter played by Raymond Burr – seem to have been cut into the picture after its completion. His melodramatic despatches from 'Tokyo, Japan' strike a decidedly alien note, his only useful function being as commentator on occasions when the Japanese dialogue is not dubbed. The playing, incidentally, is rather naive by Japanese standards, with a hygienic, Westernised boy-and-girl romance. (Early hopes that the attractive heroine might be a potential Fay Wray are unrealised, as she is never allowed to meet Godzilla at close quarters.) All in all, an effectively savage addition to the cinema's repertoire of Things, and perhaps a slightly more disturbing sign of the times than most.

**James Morgan, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1956-7**

GODZILLA (GOJIRA)

Director: Ishiro Honda  
Production Company: Toho Co. Ltd.  
Producer: Tomoyuki Tanaka  
Screenplay: Takeo Murata, Ishiro Honda  
Original story: Shigeru Kayama  
Director of Photography: Masao Tamai  
Special Effects: Eiji Tsuburaya, Akira Watanabe, Hiroshi Mukoyama, Kuichiro Kishida  
Art Directors: Takeo Kita, Satoshi Chûko  
Music: Akira Ifukube  
Sound: Hisashi Shimonaga

Cast

Takashi Shimura (Dr Kyohei Yamane)  
Momoko Kochi (Emiko Yamane)  
Akira Takarada (Hideto Ogata)  
Akihiko Hirata (Dr Daisuke Serizawa)  
Sachio Sakai (Hagiwara)  
Fuyuki Murakami (Dr Tabata)  
Ren Yamamoto (Sieji)  
Toyoaki Suzuki (Shinkichi)  
Takashi Okabe (Dr Tabata’s assistant)  
Toranosuke Ogawa (president of company)  
Kokuten Kodo  
Toranosuke Ogawa  
Kenji Sahara  
Katsumi Tezuka (Gojira)

Japan 1954  
96 mins

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