

# Facing Global Issues with Godzilla

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**Abstract**—The world is often filled with controversial topics that people may find hard or too taboo to discuss. The character of Godzilla is one example of how fictional characters may be used to combat and bring these topics in to the spotlight for discussion. This paper aims to provide history and insight in to the character and how one small monstrosity evolved in to the giant beast we know today.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

THIS literature review is intended to provide readers with more in depth knowledge and understanding of how the Godzilla character has been interpreted in scholarly papers over the decades. The aspects associated with these rather seemingly innocently films may hold more meaning and depth than one may initially expect. Perhaps Godzilla is more than a simple science fiction entertainment piece.

## 2 ORIGINS

### 2.1 The Men

The film, *Godzilla* (1954), is known for three main contributors from the film and special effects industry. Those three men are named: Eiji Tsuburaya, Ishiro Honda, Tomoyuki Tanaka.[4] Though the contributors and the film are very well known today, it was tough to tell at the time how a piece such as *Godzilla* would do in theaters.

With Ishiro Honda as director, Tomoyuki Tanaka as producer, and special effects work by Eiji Tsuburaya, *Godzilla* is one piece of entertainment that would prove to stand the test of time. It is still often times brought up and referenced in both technical and philosophical discussions today.

### 2.2 The Film

The *Godzilla* series is essentially a series of films focused around large kaijus (Japanese

for strange beast) with the main kaiju named *Godzilla*. The films usually deal with the concept of how the humans of that world deal with problems in the face of monstrosities.

This film is well known for its use of special effects because of Tsuburaya's contributions. Eiji Tsuburaya was able to use miniatures to emphasize and show the larger than life stature of the *Godzilla*. This will also play in to supporting and pushing the underlying themes and tones of the film.



Fig. 1. *Godzilla* (Gojira)

## 3 THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS

### 3.1 Japanese Nuclear Destruction

In many papers and discussion, you will find *Godzilla* being compared to the wrath of atomic bombs and nuclear warfare. The publication thesis, "*Godzilla and the Changing Contract Between Science and Society*" by Stefanie Maletich explains this well. "A ship, broken

and shattered, washes up on a Japanese coastline with islanders telling tales of a mythical beast that “will come from the ocean to feed on humankind to survive.” A Geiger counter indicates dangerous amounts of radioactivity. A creature, a monster, silent and menacing, glares over a hilltop at the fleeing villagers. This is the story of 1954’s *Gojira*, the first image of the reptile-dinosaur hybrid that would become the king of monsters.” [1]

During the era of this film’s release, Japan was attacked with atomic bombs several times as of result of World War II. Maletich emphasizes that the scars created by these bombings during World War II had long lasting and reprehensible effects.

One event in particular, The Lucky Dragon Number 5 incident, holds enormous significance and is considered to have inspired the opening scene of *Godzilla*. A Japanese fishing boat returning to Japan’s port was found to be covered in radioactive debris from miscalculated nuclear test. As a result, the fishers on the boat were greatly affected and even fell ill. This was evident by their symptoms of radiation poisoning. “They were covered in burns, bleeding from their gums and barely able to open their eyes” [5] You will find that many other scholarly journals such as Shannon Victoria Stevens’ “The Rhetorical Significance of *Gojira*” and Benny Chen-Heng Yang and Yuli Isnadi’s “A Cultural Perspective on American *Godzilla* Movies” also refer to events such as the above as the key for the creation of such big horrors in the realm of science fiction.

It should be noted that these papers also claim it would have been considered taboo to take on the subject of war head on in film. That is why, scholars commonly agree that *Godzilla* created to act as a Japanese stand-in figure to represent the dangers of nuclear war and destruction in the original film. Just take a look at the special effects created by Tsuburaya. *Godzilla*’s skin was textured like that of the scarred fishermen and his breath attack is that of the radioactive kind hence the name “Atomic Breath.” *Godzilla* also rampages and destroys leaving no room for morality just like a nuclear warhead.



Fig. 2. Lucky Dragon Number 5

### 3.2 Nature and Control

In addition to referring to *Godzilla* as a metaphor for messages about nuclear destruction, *Godzilla* is also subject to many other interpretations as well. One such example being the 2014 American Hollywood interpretation of *Godzilla*.

In contrast to it’s Japanese counterpart, the American film takes a more grounded and realistic approach when handling *Godzilla*. Benny Chen-Heng Yang and Yuli Isnadi’s “A Cultural Perspective on American *Godzilla* Movies” expands on this idea. Their paper in particular focuses on the interpretations of *Godzilla* and how *Godzilla*, in general, can be used as an icon for any culture becoming a “globalized symbol.” [2]

It seems over time the need to use *Godzilla* as a symbol of atomic warfare as decreased. We see in the 2014 *Godzilla* film that the monster is instead characterized as a force of nature. In recent times, the topic of climate change, environmental disaster, and unethical use of natural resources has jumped in to the spotlight. These are the major relevant global problems



Fig. 3. Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster

commonly discussed nowadays.

Take the 2011 Fukushima incident as Yang and Isnadi lists for example. [2] Japan faced a series of earthquake and tsunamis in 2011 causing the the biggest nuclear accident in recent history. Many people were displaced and affected by the radiation from the nuclear plant. Similar to the nuclear accident, Godzilla in his film is also impossible to keep control of. Mankind is a fool to think that they can control every aspect of the globe. "The current movie has a message that is a warning from nature about things mankind has done," he said. "We have to see how people respond, including those who experienced Fukushima" said a Toho spokesperson. [8]

This 2014 iteration once again uses the character of Godzilla to tackle real life events. It mirrors the original 1954 film in that both contain scenes that heavily imitate the events that inspired them. (Fig. 3) For the 2014 film, we are presented with nuclear accident as well. Instead of showing a natural disaster causing the accident like in real life, the kaijus in the film are shown as the cause of the nuclear plant accident. The kaijus act as a metaphor for nature. What Yang and Isnadi is trying to show is that Godzilla can transcend time and be adapted to express aspects of life and nature no matter what era it is. At the end of the day, Godzilla is a legendary character that can be used to help audiences understand tragedies no matter what the cause may be.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to show Godzilla through a different spotlight and how the character can be shaped with the times. The Godzilla films are not just simply science fiction monster flicks. They very much deal with the current climate of the world and that is what many previous researchers seem to agree with. Though an old franchise, the series has shown that even with it's 10 year hiatus from 2004 to 2014, the character can always be brought back to reflect and discuss real world problems. As Stevens puts it in "The Rhetorical Significance of Gojira": Godzilla "helps us to understand and perhaps even feel some of the guilt and anger, pain and suffering, and powerlessness and fear." [3]

## REFERENCES

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