

THE KAIJU AS BEHOLDER: FINDING EMPATHY IN GODZILLA

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Abstract

Toho Studios created the first Godzilla film in Japan in 1954, the film was Japan's first international movie success story, and the franchise went on to inspire multiple sequels and dozens of other radioactive Daikaiju films. The Godzilla creature was particularly successful and garnered a huge following around the world. This paper examines the history of this iconic monster and attempts to understand some of the reasons for Godzilla's global popularity. This paper attempts to analyse and explain the multiple ways in which the audience has empathised with each of the different incarnations of Godzilla throughout the franchise's history. This is undertaken with particular reference to the oft-seen parenting roles performed by Godzilla in many of the major franchise films.

Keywords: Kaiju, Japan, Godzilla, cinema, Toho Studios

INTRODUCTION

The imagery is classic, a devastated city, fire spreading across a once perfect metropolis. All this happening in the shadow of a colossal creature beyond imagination. This popular image of monster cinema that graced so many late-night TV Screens was born out of a tragic event in Japan at the end of World War II.

The Kaijū Eiga (often translated as "Monster Movie") is one of the most easily recognizable genres of Japanese cinema. The term Kaijū in Japanese means "Strange Beast", and Eiga means "Project Picture" (Glownia, 2013). The first, and most famous, Kaijū Eiga film was *Gojira* (Honda, 1954). This monster movie was later re-edited, renamed, and released as "Godzilla, King of the Monsters" in 1956 in the USA (Honda and Morse, 1956).

The film *Gojira* (Honda, 1954) was crafted purely to place on screen a small fraction of the pain, loss and agony felt by the Japanese population after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Godzilla's initial appearance is a dark and violent portrayal of nuclear devastation. The early Japanese Godzilla films equate the monster with the atomic bomb, symbolically repeating the trauma, establishing the archetype of Japanese horror that explicates the present (Noriega, 1987; Anisfield, 1995; Shapiro, 2013). For many film historians and fans of the franchise, the first film attains an iconic cultural weight that few of the subsequent Godzilla sequels come close to.

It is easy to label Godzilla as simply a walking metaphor, a beast, a tsunami, an echo, and a reminder. However, that underestimates the purpose and potential of the creature throughout

the entire franchise. Like many other filmic icons (Superman, Spiderman, or Darth Vader perhaps), Godzilla has become more than the words or images on the screen. The monster has evolved into more than a reminder of nuclear devastation, perhaps now providing an answer to the horrors of war (Nakano, 2008).

Godzilla is ultimately an animal, and in many of the films is often depicted as a victim. The filmic narratives often portray the giant creature as a sort of abused dog abandoned by humanity. His rampages can usually be seen in two different ways: either Godzilla is drawn to cities by instinct, or he lashes out in anger or pain unable to respond to any other stimuli (Kalat, 2017). Over the years however, like any sentient being, Godzilla has grown from his experiences and become more than the pure destructive force as he was initially presented. As the franchise films progress, Godzilla develops into a being that expresses a range of emotions and allows the audience to empathise with giant creatures on the screen.

THE SHŌWA ERA (1954-1975)

Outside of the *Kaijū Eiga*, the Shōwa Era usually refers to the period of Japanese history corresponding to the reign of Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) from 1926 until his death in 1989 (Kosaka, 1990). In the *Kaijū Eiga* universe, the Shōwa Era begins with the first *Gojira* film in 1954 (Honda, 1954) and ends with *Terror of Mechagodzilla* in 1975 (Honda, 1975). There was then a decade-long hiatus before the next *Godzilla* film in the franchise was produced.

After the first couple of dark horror-based monster films, the Shōwa Era of *Godzilla* films are primarily recognised by their campy, comedic nature (Soles, 2021). There is a rich, western filmic history where the boundary line between horror and incongruity humor is drawn in terms of fear. In the horror genre, the audience's attention is focused, usually relentlessly, on the physical plight of characters harried by monsters. Ordinary moral concern for human injury at the hands of the monsters is never far from our minds as we watch these films (Hallenbeck, 2009).

However, readily identifiable creatures, such as the classic Universal monsters can be alternately horrifying or laughable depending upon whether the narrative context invests them with fearsomeness or not – for example, think of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (Barton and Lantz, 1948). Thus, fear is the *métier* of the horror films we watch. In order to transform horror into laughter, the fearsomeness of the monster (its threat to human life) must be sublated or hidden from our attention. Then we will laugh where we would otherwise scream (Carroll, 1999; Paul 1994).

King Kong vs. Godzilla (Honda and Montgomery, 1963), the third in both the *Godzilla* and *King Kong* franchises, was the starting point for the foray into a more comedic genre. This film featured indestructible materials, a corrupt TV network, a drunken King Kong, and some humorous stop motion action sequences. The rest of the *Godzilla* franchise films of this period would continue with this lighter tone (Kalat, 2017). Unfortunately, many critics and fans regretted the loss of the more serious and poignant tone that the original film had set. The importance of the original anti-nuclear sentiment appeared to be either lost or buried (Anisfield, 1995). However, even with the change in tone, the *Godzilla* films continued to

deal with large, serious issues. Narratives in these films often dealt with topics such as pollution, corporate greed, and fatherhood.

This lighthearted focus for the Godzilla franchise was not without merit or reasoning, the Godzilla and Kaijū Eiga franchise was proving very popular among children. Godzilla's creator, the producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, saw this as an opportunity to increasingly change the character of Godzilla to have more appeal for children (Tanaka, 2005). Children see the world not necessarily more innocently than adults but more abstractly. To them Godzilla isn't a metaphor for nuclear destruction but an upgraded version of their beloved dinosaur and dragon toys (West, 2008). In many ways, this focus on a younger audience helped to put Godzilla on, what we can call, his path of personal growth.

The films in the Shōwa Era can be seen to demonstrate a gradual progression of the identity of the monster itself. Over the films of this period, Godzilla evolves from disturbed giant animal to a defender of the earth, the narrative can be read as an underdog story about a victim of nuclear destruction (Anisfield, 1995). Godzilla, throughout these films, can be seen as a victim rising above their pain to be a warrior, a defender, a savior, a friend and even a father.

Godzilla became a father when his adopted son, Minilla, first appeared in the film *Son of Godzilla* (Fukuda, 1967). In this film Godzilla is portrayed as a loving parent, a father who won't abandon his child. The imagery of Godzilla embracing his son, Minilla, as their island home is frozen by a weather machine is a truly heart-warming image. In many ways this marks a turning point for how the audience perceives and relates to the monster on the screen. Godzilla can be viewed with empathy, as a father – and as a metaphor for Japanese citizens overcoming the trauma of the dropping of the nuclear bombs (Low, 1993).

Godzilla's Revenge (Honda and Fukuda, 1969) is one of the lowest ranked films of this period. Ichiro, a young boy whose parents are always working, drifts into a dream where he meets Godzilla's son, Minilla, and overcomes both a dream bully and real-life robbers. However, despite the heavy use of stock footage and comedic antics this movie contains a strong social and political commentary. The film depicts the burden of industrial Japanese society on children. Ichiro's neighborhood is heavily polluted and is littered with abandoned factories. Through Godzilla and Minilla, Ichiro finds solace as a fellow outcast. As Godzilla trains his son and defeats his enemies, this mirrors Ichiro's subconscious ideal, a fantasy where he spends time with his own absent father (Kalat, 2017).

The final film in the Shōwa Era is 1975's *Terror of Mechagodzilla* (Honda, 1975). This film sees Godzilla fighting against duplicates of the creature he once was - a mindless machine, a terrifying dinosaur. The film portrays a disturbed mad scientist, Dr. Mafuni (like Dr. Serizawa from the first *Gojira* film) who turns his back on humanity after being forced out of the scientific community, losing his wife, and almost losing his daughter. Godzilla, on other hand, overcomes the negative versions of himself and retreats back into the sea to gain some peace away from mankind.

Living on his fictional island, Godzilla is often seen as an abomination of man and nature. However, it is possible to provide an alternative reading, that Godzilla represents someone who has escaped the polluted cityscape to find peace. As more children are born in this age of

climate change, Godzilla can perhaps be seen as an inspiration. In the Shōwa Era, Godzilla is even seen fighting an alien that fed off pollution in the film *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (Banno and Honda, 1971).

For many children around the world the Godzilla films act as a gateway to cinema. For others, perhaps he is a symbol of their own insecurities, a beast who has been hurt by society, but who still fights even when the world and humanity continue to attack him (Benzon, 2007).

OTHER KAIJŪ FILMS OF THE SHŌWA ERA (1954-1975)

During the Shōwa Era, Godzilla was not the only monster headlining his own films in Japan. Toho also produced a set of kaijū movies to capitalise on the success of the Godzilla franchise. Many of these films were also headed by director Ishirō Honda and carried his trademark as a filmmaker. Honda was a close friend, partner, and student of one of the greatest filmmakers of all time, Akira Kurosawa. Ishirō Honda's work has a strong correlation with many of Kurosawa's films (Ryfle and Godziszewski, 2017). Both directors often focused on nature, industrialization, and finding humanity in unusual places. Ishirō Honda's many monster films often showed the dangers inherent in industrial progress. The monsters that were featured in Honda's non-Godzilla films were again often more victims than destroyers (Galbraith, 2008).

For example, in the film *Rodan* (Honda, 1956a), two Kaijū are shown as lovers. When the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) finally defeats one of the monsters by triggering a volcanic eruption, its mate cannot bear to live without the other and purposely plunges itself into the volcano.

The film *The War of The Gargantuas* (Honda, 1966) is a classic story of nature versus nurture. The sons of Frankenstein's monster are raised in two different environments. While one monster (Sanda) was raised in an environment of love and compassion among humans, the other (Giara) was raised in the wild. Sanda seeks to save and love his brother but when Giara cannot reform and continues to attack human cities, the two brothers fight which eventually leads to both their deaths.

Many of these monsters who were perceived as evil villainous in standalone kaijū films from the Shōwa Era - for example, *Gorosaurus* (Honda, 1956b), *Manda* (Honda and Matsubayashi, 1963), *Varan* (Honda and Oda, 1958) and *Baragon* (Honda, 1958) are alternatively seen as saviors in the film *Destroy all Monsters* (Honda and Fukuda, 1958), fighting against the villainous King Ghidorah.

Ishirō Honda laid the groundwork for the whole kaijū Genre with Godzilla and the other monster films of the Shōwa Era. The kaijū genre continued to evolve throughout this period of films, overseen by director Ishirō Honda and his producer, Tomoyuki Tanaka. On a passing view, the films appear to be black and white, classic conflicts of man against monster. However, a deeper analysis reveals each of these kaijū to be a large animal, with hopes and desires, as nebulous in concept as nuclear energy itself (Noriega, 1987; Anisfield, 1995; Crowder et al, 2016).

THE HEISEI ERA (1984-1995)

The hiatus in Godzilla film production from 1975 to 1984 saw an increase in political tensions across the globe with the escalation of the New Cold War. This was a period of intensive reawakening of Cold War tensions and conflicts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A different kind of fear was now prevalent, instead of seeing the devastation a nuclear weapon could bring, society was constantly waiting and expecting that destruction. This was an idea that grew and festered in the minds of many civilian populations around the world (Whitfield, 1996; Guthrie-Shimizu, 2006; Durkin, 2021).

Godzilla returned to the screen in 1984's film *The Return of Godzilla* (Hashimoto, 1984). With a new director, Koji Hashimoto, taking over from Ishirō Honda, Godzilla returned to more animalistic roots. In this film, the monster is seen as a beast driven and grounded by instinct. This version of Godzilla was more animalistic, not just in terms of violence, but in all aspects of the monster's behavior. For example, Godzilla is drawn to the sounds of birds because of an inherited genetic aspect of his saurian brain. This aspect of Godzilla, an alignment with nature, would be present in all the films of the Heisei era (Tsutsui, 2004; Kalat, 2017).

Throughout the films of this period, Godzilla has claimed the country of Japan as its rightful home. The battles that Godzilla undertakes in these films focus heavily on the idea of an animal protecting its territory. The Cold War led to an increasing sense of protectionism within Japan, a trait mirrored in the Godzilla films of the time, as the monster defended Japan's borders from external invaders (Guthrie-Shimizu, 2006; Durkin, 2021).

For the majority of the films of the Heisei Era, other kaijū demonstrate their empathic natures more than Godzilla. For example, *Biollante* (Ohmori, 1989) is a human soul trapped within a genetic rose hybrid. *King Ghidorah* (Ohmori, 1991) is mutated from harmless pets into a monster, then controlled and abused by its captors to the point of full body mutilation and a complete loss of autonomy. Once again referencing an environmental narrative, the kaijū *Battra* and *Mothra* (Okawara, 1992) are extensions of the Earth's life force and feel the pain inflicted on it by humanity. Throughout these early films, Godzilla remains true to his animalistic nature, a metaphorical wave of destruction providing limited potential for the audience to empathize directly with the monster as they did in the films of the Shōwa Era (Kalat, 2017).

However, the Heisei Era films do allow the audience to have a different kind of understanding of Godzilla's motivations. The film *Godzilla vs Biollante* (Ohmori, 1989) introduces Miki Senguzo as the first recurring character of the Godzilla franchise. Miki appears in every film of Heisei Era, where her character is a psychic who can access Godzilla's mind. Over the sequence of films, her character develops from initially merely following the emotions of Godzilla, to genuinely feeling for the creature and wanting to understand him. Miki experiences the rage and pain that lies within the heart of the creature, and shares this pain with the audience, rage and pain that stems from betrayal (Smith, 2002; Ragone, 2007).

Godzilla's sense of betrayal is explained in the film *Godzilla Vs. King Ghidorah* (Ohmori, 1991), where time travelers travel back to before Godzilla was mutated. They discover that

the monster was a dinosaur called a Godzillasaurus living on Lagos Island. In keeping with the Cold War protectionist themes of the Heisei Era, the dinosaur is seen defending Japanese troops from invading American forces. Godzillasaurus is badly injured, and then abandoned and left to die by the Japanese forces when they receive new orders. The modern incarnation of Godzilla continues to live with constant anger at being discarded by those he trusted. This feeling of betrayal is so strong that when Godzilla once again meets the commander of those forces in the film, he incinerates him without a thought (Guthrie-Shimizu, 2006; Durkin, 2021).

In the films of the Heisei Era, Godzilla exhibited less of the human-like emotions that were increasingly on display through the films of the Shōwa Era. Godzilla functions as an animal, angry and hurt - a fallen soldier that feels betrayed by the people he saved and now seeks retribution (Ragone, 2007). There is little chance for the audience to feel empathy with the monster until the film *Godzilla Vs. Mechagodzilla II* (Okawara, 1993) where Godzilla once again undertakes the mantle of fatherhood.

During the Shōwa Era, the pandering to a younger audience, particularly the introduction of Godzilla's son, Minilla, was not well received among critics and the adult audience. However, towards the end of the Heisei Era, a new representation of Godzilla's son was introduced into the franchise, this time simply called *Godzilla Junior* (West, 2008). In the last three film of the Heisei Era, the audience are able to once again empathize with Godzilla as a parent. *Godzilla Junior* behaves in a very different manner to his father, causing Godzilla to question his own animalistic actions and alter his behavior to care for his son (Tsutsui, 2004).

In the film *Godzilla Vs. Mechagodzilla II* (Okawara, 1993), the kaijū are seen in far more empathetic light, repeatedly demonstrating their feelings towards other creatures, and making decisions based on emotions other than rage and anger. The film shows that the Godzillasaurus species is similar to a cuckoo bird, in which it lays its eggs in other nests. The monster Rodan is again introduced and is now cast as an adoptive older brother to *Godzilla Junior*, their eggs having been in the same nest. A team of scientists take *Godzilla Junior* to a research center, both Godzilla and Rodan display familial attachment and attempt to rescue the child. Godzilla is defeated, and Rodan sacrifices his life to revive Godzilla to save the infant's life. While the human characters in this film repeatedly show a lack of empathy (experimenting on *Godzilla Junior* and using the child as bait) the kaijū are represented in a far more positive and empathetic manner (Bernardi, 2006).

The final two movies in this era show Godzilla actively raising and protecting his son. *Godzilla Vs. SpaceGodzilla* (Yamashita, 1994) sees Godzilla attempting to protect his son as he is kidnapped and imprisoned by his evil counterpart, *Spacegodzilla*. *Spacegodzilla* is a destructive, animalistic force, which Godzilla is tasked with stopping. In contrast to the earlier films of this era, Godzilla's motives are now aimed at living in peace and raising his son.

The final film in this era, *Godzilla vs Destoroyah* (Okawara, 1995), *Godzilla's heart*, which is a nuclear reactor, is going into meltdown. While the human authorities seek a solution to this, Godzilla cares only about the safety of his son. In the film, *Godzilla Junior* is killed by *Destoroyah*. Godzilla's rage over the loss of his son helps him to defeat the evil monster. Godzilla dies after the battle, but the nuclear fallout from his death revives *Godzilla Junior* as

a fully matured kaijū. In a final, ultimate, act of parental compassion, Godzilla's death brings nuclear rebirth to his offspring.

From the early animalistic, brutal destruction of the Godzilla incarnations in the early films of the Heisei Era, the audience has seen a complete reversal in how they are now meant to perceive this creature. The final film of this era also returns to the nuclear themes of the initial 1954 film, however, the nuclear energy from Godzilla is now seen as a source of rebirth, rather than a weapon of destruction (Anisfield, 1995; Shapiro, 2013).

THE AMERICAN GODZILLA (1998)

The Japanese Godzilla franchise would now take another short production hiatus to allow Hollywood to create their own Godzilla (Emmerich, 1998) film. The film attempted to update the image of Godzilla from the traditional Japanese representation of a man in a rubber suit, to a modern computer-generated creation, something along the lines of the successful Jurassic Park franchise (Spielberg, 1998).

The production became very controversial for a number of reasons. In the film, the nuclear testing that creates Godzilla is now blamed on France (Shapiro, 2013; Jones, 2015). Also, the dramatic change in the design of Godzilla led many fans to name the creature from the Hollywood produced film GINO - Godzilla In Name Only (Maletich, 2011).

Godzilla was portrayed as an asexual male in this film which caused some misinterpretations among the audience who often referred to the creature as a "she", despite the fact that Godzilla was evidently supposed to be a male (Brophy, 2000). Reproducing asexually, this film represents Godzilla as an active biological parent.

The Hollywood Godzilla returns to the role of an animal, bringing havoc and destruction around the world. However, throughout the film, Godzilla repeatedly avoids military engagement because he is pregnant and does not wish to risk the life of his unborn spawn. As the eggs hatch in Madison Square Garden, an air strike is called, and all of Godzilla's children are killed. The audience is asked to once again empathize with Godzilla, as the monster seeks retribution against the human characters who destroyed his offspring (Srivatsan and Venkatesh, 2021). As Godzilla dies, he stares into the eyes of the main character, Dr. Niko Tatopolous. The eyes are full of pain and loss.

GODZILLA: THE SERIES (1998-2000)

Godzilla: The Series (Devlin et al, 1998-2000) was an American-Japanese animated TV series that aired on Fox Kids in the United States, as a sequel to the 1998 Godzilla film. The show featured Dr. Nick Tatopolous from the previous film, working with a team of scientists in order to combat many other giant mutated creatures.

The American show, following the lead of the previous Japanese film series introduced another child of Godzilla. In this TV series, a lone sterile Godzilla infant is shown to have survived the bombing of Madison Square Garden. In a weird break from the paternal

relationships shown in the previous Godzilla films, Dr. Nick Tatopulous imprints himself on the infant creature as its father. The two continue to share a father son relationship throughout the TV series. Nick constantly risks his life, in episode after episode, to ensure that the infant Godzilla is safe.

During a three-episode arc in which Aliens revive the original Godzilla as a cyborg, the paternal bond between Nick and the infant Godzilla is tested. In the end however, the infant chooses Nick over his re-animated cyborg father. This interspecies bond shown on screen, mirrors the parasocial relationship the human audience experiences as their empathy for the young creature develops over the episodes of the TV series (Gerow, 2006).

THE MILLENNIUM ERA (1999-2004)

Godzilla would not remain in Hollywood for long, Toho Pictures in Japan rebooted the Godzilla franchise for a second time with the 1999 film *Godzilla 2000: Millennium* (Okawara, 1999) starting the third era of Godzilla films, known as the Millennium Era. These Godzilla films are treated as an anthology series where each film is a standalone story, with the original 1954 Godzilla film (Honda, 1954) serving as the only previous point of reference. *Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla* (Tezuka, 2002) and *Godzilla: Tokyo S.O.S.* (Tezuka, 2003) are the only films in the series to share continuity with each other, these two films are known as the Kiryu Saga (Kalat, 2017).

The Kiryu Saga is a complex duology that focuses on the sanctity of life. This saga sees Japan reeling from multiple monster attacks over the years. This incarnation of Godzilla is once again a destructive force, regularly attacking major cities in Japan. In order to combat the kaijū threat, the Japan Self-Defense Force builds a cyborg, Kiryu. However, unlike previous incarnations of Mechagodzilla from the Shōwa Era and Heisei Era, this version is a cyborg built upon the bones of the original Godzilla, from the 1954 movie. Hence, we see a completion of the cycle, where the nuclear threat from the first Godzilla film is now transformed, through technology, into the machine that will save Japan from the threat posed by a new Godzilla (Shapiro, 2013).

However, there is a possible ghost in the machine. The sound of the roar made by the new Godzilla incarnation causes the memories of the original 1954 Godzilla to resurface in the cyborg. The original 1954 monster is very much an animalistic being, a dinosaur, a destructive force of nature created by nuclear testing. However, this film challenges the way the monster was interpreted and understood in the original Godzilla film (Honda, 1954), the audience begins to understand how much pain the original monster suffered. This cyborg, Kiryu, behaves throughout the Kiryu Saga with intense emotion and intelligence as the memories are awoken (Jones, 2015).

The audience is forced to question the nature of the cyborg Godzilla. Is it a machine? Is it alive? Does it have a soul? In the second film of the Kiryu Saga, *Godzilla: Tokyo S.O.S.* (Tezuka, 2003), Mothra returns and demands that the bones of the original 1954 Godzilla be put to rest. In the film, the original Godzilla is honored as a monster who in its last moments choose to end its life by protecting Japan. The audience is left in no doubt that this creature deserves as much respect in death as any other sentient being. Once again, as in the films of

the Shōwa Era and Heisei Era, the audience is asked to re-evaluate Godzilla; to leave behind the links with the nuclear past and the memories of destruction, and to re-imagine Godzilla as a source of national pride (Shapiro, 2013; Jones, 2015).

However, a post-credits scene from the film *Godzilla: Tokyo S.O.S.* (Tezuka, 2003), seems to suggest that no matter how much empathy and respect is now given to Godzilla in these films, humanity will never learn from its previous experiences with the kaijū. An undisclosed laboratory is shown with canisters containing the DNA of numerous kaijū. In the Japanese version, an unidentified voice announces that a "bio-formation" experiment involving an "extinct subject" is about to take place again.

The 2004 Millennium Era film *Godzilla Final Wars* (Kitamura, 2004) reintroduces Godzilla's son, Minilla. The film also illustrates the recurring environmental narrative, where Godzilla is represented as a force for good, protecting the planet from the ravages of human destruction (Murray and Heumann, 2016).

The narrative of *Godzilla Final Wars* (Kitamura, 2004) primarily focuses on the crew of the Gotengo battleship luring Godzilla around the world to fight monsters controlled by an alien force. However, a subplot runs through the film involving a hunter and his grandson escorting Minilla across the country. At one point the grandson pointedly asks why Godzilla is so angry. The grandfather responds with the line "They made a huge fire and burned everything on the land. Godzilla will never forget it."

Godzilla's anger at humanity is repeatedly shown to stem from pain inflicted upon himself and his home. His hatred is genuine and, in many ways, understandable. Towards the end of the film, Godzilla's son, Minilla, is once again introduced as the voice of reason and compassion. Minilla appeals to his father to stop seeking vengeance, once again Godzilla's parental empathy overcomes his destructive rage, and the two return to the sea.

THE MONSTERVERSE (2014-2021)

The MonsterVerse is an American multimedia franchise and shared fictional universe that is centered on a series of monster films featuring Godzilla and King Kong, produced by Legendary Entertainment and co-produced and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures. The first installment was *Godzilla* (Edwards, 2014), another American reboot of the Godzilla franchise, which was followed by *Kong: Skull Island* (Vogt-Roberts, 2017), *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (Dougherty, 2019), and *Godzilla vs. Kong* (Wingard, 2021).

The MonsterVerse series of films follows an organization called Monarch as it studies and does battle with Titans. Titans are massive organisms born from a power source in the hollowed earth that are created to balance the earth's ecosystem. They once shared a symbiotic relationship with humanity, however that time is over, and their re-emergence threatens to spark conflict and disaster (Koenig-Woodyard et al, 2018).

This series continues the trend of distancing the Godzilla franchise from its early Japanese anti-nuclear message. Here, Godzilla was not created by American nuclear bomb tests, but from a natural process occurring deep within the earth. The MonsterVerse film series has been

repeatedly criticized for generally having a more positive outlook on nuclear energy (Peacock, 2021).

The Monsterverse films explicitly avoid any direct mention of nuclear testing or any sort of anti-nuclear message. The films also partake in revisionist history in which the Castle Bravo nuclear tests were done in an attempt to kill Godzilla. However, a few images and symbols of nuclear devastation do still appear. In the film *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (Dougherty, 2019), a device called the Oxygen Destroyer makes an appearance, this is a reference to the weapon of mass destruction used to kill Godzilla in the original 1954 *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) film. When this device is used in the Monsterverse film the audience sees a huge mushroom cloud rising above the site of impact (Peacock, 2021).

If anything, the Monsterverse films illustrate nuclear energy as a positive or complex force actually showing that it could be effective in defeating global warming. In *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (Dougherty, 2019) the kaijū King Ghidorah again makes an appearance, and is portrayed as a terraformer of the planet, representing climate change. The other titans are shown as being capable of healing the planet using radiation that they emit. However, with King Ghidorah controlling them, they are also shown as being capable of destroying the planet. Showing the positives and negatives of nuclear energy.

This representation of nuclear power in these movies, and the shift in the origin story of *Godzilla* has been repeatedly criticised. One could argue that it seems like the American filmmakers are ignoring America's part in creating the *Godzilla* monster by dropping the nuclear bombs on Japan during the second world war. This has been called by critics and fans as a cheap attempt to rewrite history. (Koenig-Woodyard et al, 2018; Schneiderwind, 2020; Peacock, 2021).

The Monsterverse incarnation of *Godzilla* is depicted as the sole survivor of a prehistoric superspecies, once again acting as a force of nature that maintains ecological balance. The films contain an ever-present fear that *Godzilla* might turn upon humanity and wreak destruction on population centers. *Godzilla* is forced to watch as humans continue to destroy the environment, while the titans are constantly attempting to repair the damage. As the film series progresses, *Godzilla* appears to become more frustrated with the damage humanity inflicts on the earth and is even forced to watch as human organisations build weapons designed to kill him. The monster is here portrayed as a weary warrior who has seen it all and is now wondering if any of it is worth fighting for. The computer-generated *Godzilla* of the Monsterverse exhibits many human emotions throughout the film series; the audience sees him tired, sad, and even sees him laugh.

Nowhere is this new humanity in the creature illustrated as well as in one of the final scenes from *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (Dougherty, 2019). Dr. Ishirō Serizawa (played by Ken Watanabe) is a scientist and survivor of the Hiroshima nuclear bomb droppings. He has devoted his life to studying *Godzilla*, and feels a deep empathic, even familial, connection to the monster. Dr. Serizawa sacrifices himself to save *Godzilla*. In one of the most emotional scenes of any *Godzilla* film, the monster stares at Dr. Serizawa as he dies, fully aware of the sacrifice the scientist is making for him.

Throughout the franchise, Godzilla has been repeatedly hurt and betrayed by humanity. In the end, he is saved by a man who understands the suffering that Godzilla has gone through. Dr Serizawa dies knowing that Godzilla appreciates his sacrifice.

SHIN GODZILLA (2016)

While Hollywood was busy creating the Monsterverse, Japan went back to basics with the film *Shin Godzilla* (Anno and Higuchi, 2016). The film is considered as the first in a new era of Japanese Godzilla movies, the Reiwa Era. Outside of the *Kaijū Eiga*, the Reiwa Period usually refers to the current era of Japan's official calendar. It began on 1 May 2019, the day on which Emperor Akihito's elder son, Naruhito, ascended the throne as the 126th Emperor of Japan (Anzai, 2021).

Shin Godzilla (Anno and Higuchi, 2016) was seen by fans and critics as a return to the monster's classic creature-feature roots, a mirror to the Hollywood versions of Godzilla, and a revival of a more traditional Japanese Godzilla (Lofgren, 2020; Pelea, 2020; Greene, 2021). Kazuo Ozaki summed up this sentiment, writing, "Hollywood, even with all its money, can't approach this kind of perfection." (Schilling, 2016).

Whereas Godzilla was originally conceived as a metaphor for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this modern incarnation of Godzilla drew inspiration from the Fukushima nuclear disaster and the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. The widespread devastation left in the wake of Godzilla, the huge piles of debris, the government spokesmen convening emergency press conferences; this all seems to be taken from a modern television news report (Schneiderwind, 2020).

Shin Godzilla (Anno and Higuchi, 2016), with its reality vs idealism themes, is the most political movie in the franchise since the original film *Godzilla* was released in 1954 (Honda, 1954). At a time when Japan faces existential threats from China's expansionist policies and increasing intimidation from North Korea, this film was seen as creating a new Godzilla for a new, more nationalistic Japan. While the film has plenty of large-scale destruction, its true focus is on laying the foundation for a new Japan and radiating confidence in the country's future (Schneiderwind, 2020; Pelea, 2020). Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has even spoken positively of the film's pro-nationalist themes, stating, "I think that [Godzilla's] popularity is rooted in the unwavering support that the public has for the Self-Defense Forces" (Fifield, 2016). *Shin Godzilla* (Anno and Higuchi, 2016) completes a 60-year emotional and national arc. Japan is shown developing new attitudes toward its military, towards America, and its energy sector (Schneiderwind, 2020).

Midway through *Shin Godzilla* (Anno and Higuchi, 2016), American B2 stealth bombers drop their payload on the monster as it destroys downtown Tokyo. The creature launches a counterattack, tantamount to a nuclear explosion, and through the computer-generated fire and smoke the implication becomes clear: Japan can no longer rely on the United States to keep it safe (Ryfle and Godziszewski, 2017).

At one point in the film, the American special liaison attempts to sacrifice Tokyo to serve her own self-centered political ambitions. She becomes the film's representation of America and

its selfish, individualist values. Japan's leaders in the film question America's commitment to help defend the country, they suggest it's time all American bases and troops leave the country. *Shin Godzilla*³⁷ imagines a world in which Japan gets out from under Washington's thumb (Fifield, 2016; Hioe, 2016; Ryfle and Godziszewski, 2017).

This is reinforced by the leaders of Japan's Self Defense Force espousing themes of national and cultural pride, the film shows Japan flexing its military muscle and breaking ranks with the U.S. to save itself from destruction through a combination of political, diplomatic, and scientific means (Ryfle and Godziszewski, 2017; Lofgren, 2020).

Shin Godzilla (Anno and Higuchi, 2016) also acts as a satire of Japanese politics, where the greatest threat to Japan comes not from without but from within, from the old-school government bureaucracy who are unable to act decisively or to stand up resolutely to foreign pressure (Tsutsui, 2016). The film calls for change in the face of disaster, the incompetent bureaucrats are replaced by young people who have learned from the mistakes of their forefathers. The message is clear, the monsters of the past and present can be defeated by heroes of the future (Ryfle, S. and Godziszewski, 2017).

The film seems to discard all previous incarnations of *Godzilla* as a caring parent, a pacifist, an environmental activist, or a victim with human-like emotions and understanding. In its place is a lifeform with no expression, an unfeeling animal that mindlessly evolves in order to survive. *Godzilla* appears to have once again become an "ambulatory tsunami, earthquake and nuclear reactor, leaving radioactive contamination in his wake" (Schilling, 2016). The *kaijū* becomes a metaphor for the government's inability to act during the Fukushima nuclear plant incident (Hioe, 2016).

Throughout *Shin Godzilla* (Anno and Higuchi, 2016) the *kaijū* constantly evolves to combat the harsh environments and military bombardment. Unfortunately, evolution is not kind, throughout the film *Godzilla* appears scarred and in pain.

On the surface, *Shin Godzilla* (Anno and Higuchi, 2016) seems to have abandoned the empathy demonstrated in many of the past films. However, *Godzilla* is in fact portrayed as a being caught between the political machinations of two countries. In this sense, *Godzilla* is portrayed as a victim of government, who is used by both sides for political gain.

The main sign of any emotion that can be attached to *Godzilla* in this film is in the translated lyrics of the song that plays during the atomic ray display. The song lyrics explain how *Godzilla* is scared, and doesn't know where he is, or what is happening to him. *Godzilla* contemplates his own death and wonders if anyone will remember or mourn him.

NETFLIX TRILOGY (2017-2018)

Between 2017 and 2018 Netflix released a *Godzilla* Anime trilogy consisting of the films *Godzilla: Planet of the Monsters* (Seshita and Shizuno, 2017), *Godzilla: City on the Edge of Battle* (Seshita and Shizuno, 2018a), and *Godzilla: The Planet Eater* (Seshita and Shizuno, 2018b). These films are also known as the *Anigoji* Trilogy (the term *Anigoji* comes from combining the words Anime and *Gojira*) and are considered to be part of the Reiwa Era of *Godzilla* films (Morehead, 2019).

Once again, a new origin story is created, this incarnation reinvents Godzilla (now known as Godzilla Earth) as an apex kaijū born from plant life, part of a cosmic ecosystem. Godzilla is now the final form of evolution on every planet. The Godzilla in these films is the largest that he has ever been, so large that he towers over mountains and is capable of terraforming planets.

Godzilla Earth is again initially an animalistic force of nature, fighting against humanity. Most of humanity leaves earth aboard a space vessel which returns many thousands of years later (due to time dilation) to try again to defeat Godzilla. The attack on Godzilla is led by Captain Haru who witnessed his whole family killed by Godzilla before the spaceship left earth, his hatred for Godzilla consumes him (Looch, 2019; Morehead, 2019).

However, the Godzilla now battled by Captain Haru, is not the same as he was 20,000 years ago. Godzilla has again become a parent, of sorts. Godzilla Filius is a spawned clone of the original. Filius's death at the hands of Captain Haru causes the original to rise from his slumber. Godzilla Earth now exhibits large, blue, human-like eyes and a beard, which emphasises the wisdom that comes with age. Godzilla Earth is now an elderly sage, forced to survive throughout the years, after enduring all manner of pain. The monster now simply wishes to rest in peace, he is again portrayed as a balance to the ravages of humanity (Looch, 2019).

In the final film of the trilogy, *Godzilla: The Planet Eater* (Seshita and Shizuno, 2018b), Haru learns that the cycle of hatred must be broken and kills himself to stop the endless violence. The final message is that as long as hatred and anger exist there can be no peace.

CONCLUSIONS

For many children, their first experience of a giant monster or kaijū is not Godzilla, it was learning about dinosaurs in school. The first time any child experiences a real dinosaur skeleton in a museum, they are filled with wonder and curiosity. The Godzilla franchise provides a way for audiences to re-experience that sense of wonder and form a connection to the long extinct roamers of the earth.

In 1954, H-Bomb testing in the Pacific by the American military, brings a dinosaur to life on the silver screen in Japan. Godzilla is born and transformed into a force of nature. In a perverse twist, there is a glaring scientific warning, by unintentionally distorting nature, mankind can engineer its doom (Maletich, 2011). The mutation of Godzilla can also be seen to signify humanity's inability to conceive extinction, we fear it, but we rarely acknowledge it (Viragh, 2013; Okuno, 2016).

It is a popular misconception to underestimate this franchise, generalizing the film's themes to be solely related to the recalcitrant feelings of the post-war Japanese population about the dangers of nuclear bomb. This paper has tried to illustrate how the themes within the franchise have evolved, allowing much more complex leitmotifs and representations to be identified (Noriega, 1987; Anisfield, 1995).

Some of the Godzilla films focus on the animalistic nature of Godzilla, he lives, eats, breathes, and feels pain. The kaijū are often portrayed as devastating forces, trapped in a cycle that they can't stop, destined to destroy over and over again. But Godzilla is more than this, the audience is repeatedly shown that he can be hurt even killed. Often crying out in pain, as he is once again attacked by a human military force. But, over and over again, we see in the narratives of these films that Godzilla does not usually initiate these attacks, but instead has been provoked and taunted to rise from the ocean and obliterate the creations of humanity (Smith, 2002).

Throughout Godzilla's existence he has been many things: a storm, a warning, life, death, nature incarnate, a marvel, or an unstoppable force of destruction (Moser and Zelaya, 2020). A conceptual metaphor analysis demonstrates that often the different incarnations of Godzilla exhibit a correlation to real world crises of the time. Beginning with the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; through to the more recent nuclear power plant catastrophes at Chernobyl and Fukushima; and including the Haiti Earthquake and the Indian Ocean Tsunami (Anisfield, 1995; Shapiro, 2013; Hioe, 2016; Schneiderwind, 2020).

Many of the films in the Godzilla franchise project and illuminate the causes and the consequences of mankind's inconsiderate actions. Whenever humanity interferes with the natural equilibrium Godzilla is often represented as a force of nature or an eco-warrior, attempting to restore the balance (Bernardi, 2006; Murray and Heumann, 2016; Kalat, 2017).

This paper has attempted to illustrate the wide range of ways the audience is able to empathise with Godzilla through the various phases and eras of the Godzilla franchise. Audiences should empathise with Godzilla, since the monster is often an accidental victim. No creature deserves to live in constant pain, Godzilla is an ultimate survivor (Gerow, 2006; Nakano, 2008). As this paper has repeatedly demonstrated, many times Godzilla just wants to be left alone. The monster defeats every foe and then goes home (Durkin, 2021).

Throughout the franchise, Godzilla is motivated by a wide range of emotions. Initially, destructive rampages are often fueled by hate, rage, and revenge. But many of the films show a softer, more compassionate side to the monster. Human emotions are repeatedly projected onto Godzilla in an anthropomorphic manner. The creature expresses happiness, sadness, and love. In multiple film eras the audience have watched as Godzilla cares for his child, helps other human characters, tries to defend the environment, and saves the planet (Nakano, 2008)

The Godzilla films have the capacity to teach the audience many important lessons about making the world a better place. It should be impossible for an audience to feel empathy for a giant radioactive dinosaur. However, we find a way, and we learn how to love a monster.

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