

GOJIRA: CHARACTERIZATION OF DEVASTATION

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In 1954, two years after the end of the American occupation and months after the “Lucky Dragon 5” incident, Toho Studios in Japan produced Ishirō Honda’s sci-fi horror classic *Gojira*, which gave birth to one of cinema’s great icons: Gojira. In the film, the monster is a gigantic ancient dinosaur, awoken by nuclear testing, and hellbent on exacting vengeance upon the Japanese people. Gojira has been the basis for over 30 films including remakes, reboots, and numerous sequels, and has achieved an incomparable status in popular culture. However, what originally made the monster so horrifying and iconic in the original 1954 film, was its characterization and use as a metaphor for nuclear devastation. *Gojira* is a culturally, historically, and artistically significant film in that its characterization and allegorical use of the Gojira monster reflects the emotional context of Japan at the time of its production, as well as a more universal horror in its representation of the destruction of nuclear weapons.

Gojira has arguably spawned the largest franchise film series of any fictional cinematic character. The series boasts nearly 30 films, both American and Japanese, and spanning over 60 years. Despite occasional fundamental changes in the character’s origin or demeanor, Gojira’s longevity can be credited to his original appeal: his ability to inspire terror through his physical presence and allegorical characteristics. In the 1954 Honda film, Gojira represents the dread and horror of atomic weapons and their destruction in every element of his character.

The mythology and origin of Gojira is one of the major clues to how the audience should interpret him. Gojira was a slumbering dinosaur residing beneath the bed of the Pacific ocean, disturbed, awoken, and angered by nuclear testing in his immediate vicinity. The fact that Gojira is an ancient being and an animal at that, can then be read as an alignment with nature and the consequences of acting against nature. Gojira’s awakening represents an assault against nature

through technology, or a symbol of the use of nuclear weapons as an abomination against nature. Gojira's subsequent rampage after his rude awakening is also emblematic of the theory of mutually assured destruction: devastation begetting devastation. Gojira's single goal in the film is to seek retribution on the Japanese people, personifying the ultimate mass destruction of all following any sort of nuclear attack. This search for revenge also works as a different dynamic of the character: Gojira's rage, demonstrated most fully in his attacks on Tokyo, is punishment for Japanese audiences who might feel guilty for creating him, or more realistically, guilt for their part in the starting the war and inadvertently causing their own destruction at the hands of the Americans. Gojira as a character then functions as a catalyst for a lot of different emotions shared by Japanese viewers at the time, with fear, paranoia, guilt, and anger being at the forefront¹.

Another of Gojira's most intimidating and memorable characteristics is his terribly slow, steady, creeping movement. This element of his presence is a reflection of the dread and paranoia of a nuclear attack and or of the languorous pain and looming death of radiation poisoning. The pure anticipation of his horror is one of the more powerful aspects of Gojira's relation to the destruction of nuclear fallout. His terror is one of complete helplessness and hopeless despair. He is unstoppable and impenetrable, unphased by tanks, missiles, and all manner of guns. Once the hydrogen bomb is launched, there is no escape and no defense, as is the case with the onslaught of the dreaded Gojira.

Gojira's characterization continues through more filmic means as well. One of Gojira's most memorable calling cards is his roar: a rather mechanical tumult that emulates the twisting

¹ Stevens, Shannon, "The Rhetorical Significance of Gojira: Equipment for Living Through Trauma" in *The Atomic Bomb in Japanese Cinema: Critical Essays* ed. Matthew Edwards (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2015) 20.

and screeching of steel. Gojira's roar is considerably more terrifying than, in its connection with his inevitable onslaught and rage: it is the sound of destruction, both literally and figuratively. It is reminiscent of the forewarning call of a war siren. It is the screams of the victims and the crashing of the buildings in his wake. His footsteps recall the sound of war drums or distant bombs, furthering the association with mass destruction and creating a greater atmosphere of paranoia. This sort of sound design would be especially impactful for Japanese audiences who had experienced the era of the bomb, only nine years prior to the film's release.

The film's treatment of Gojira's visibility is also key to understanding him as a symbol: in the ninety-six minutes of the original Japanese cut he appears first, and only partially, at the twenty minute mark, and then is not revealed in full until the halfway point, where he is still yet shrouded in darkness. While it is most likely that the use of black and white film and emphasized darkness and shadow are meant to mask the practical effects, it also enhances the character as a metaphor. He strikes exclusively in the night, unexpectedly and without warning. The film's restrained use of Gojira is powerful in that it leaves more to the mind of the viewer, as well as connecting with the fact that a nuclear attack would be conducted with little to no forethought. Another restrained but significant physical characteristic is Gojira's fire-breathing abilities, a direct correlation to explosives and the flames of radiation. In every sense of his being, Gojira is the atomic bomb, and this makes him the most terrifying monster imaginable for Japanese audiences who would've already been so familiar with such terror, and could seek catharsis in relating to the fears and trauma of *Gojira*.

One supposed influence for the film's story was a very real incident that took place in early 1954, in which the fishing boat "Daigo Fukuryū Maru" or the "Lucky Dragon 5" was

exposed to extreme amounts of radiation from American nuclear testing on the Bikini Atoll, when they were blasted with radioactive ash. Despite being outside the proposed “danger zone”, twenty-three crew members fell ill, with some losing skin and hair, and one man dying of liver cirrhosis². The opening sequence of the film depicts a sizable and joyous crew being destroyed by an invisible enemy from below. When asked what happened, one of the survivors responds: “the ocean just exploded”. This is *Gojira*’s first strike on film, and his most genuine, because it’s not far from the reality of the effects of the then-relevant bomb testing. The crew of the boat is consumed in an instant by the monster, with no defense and few survivors. *Gojira* hides in the sea and lurks in the shadows, much like the radiation, he remains unseen. Consequently, it’s easy to see how relevant nuclear fallout still was, even years after the bombings, and how the filmmakers attempted to address this still present fear and paranoia. This is key to appreciating *Gojira* as a film: its attempt to address very real and then-present emotions and events has solidified it in the hearts and minds of filmgoers to this day.

Gojira’s ability to inspire terror through his symbolic nature of nuclear assault, is key to understanding the original film. Despite some popular belief, *Gojira* is very much a horror film. It’s unique in this way as well, as its predecessors *King Kong* and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* were both fantasy and action flicks, while David Kalat calls *Gojira* “a harsh, dark movie suffused with a sense of dread and doom, a horror movie about the end of the world. No other giant monster movie of the era dwells so on pain and suffering”³. Other classic horror films have often touched on real fears and the terrors of real life through symbolism and

²Aya Homei.. “The Contentious Death of Mr. Kuboyama: Science as Politics in the 1954 Lucky Dragon Incident” *Japan Forum* 25.2 (2013): 213, doi: 10.1080/09555803.2012.745585.

³ David Kalat.. *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho’s Godzilla Series* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 2010) 20.

characterization. George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was about a country at war with itself. The central characters attempting to escape the zombie hordes, with all of their absentness and directional motivation reflected a rebellion and reluctance to succumb to the control of external and institutionalized forces. In this way, *Night of the Living Dead* is very much about the American protests of the Vietnam conflict, as well as the at-the-time ongoing civil rights movement. Much like *Gojira*, the film also ties the origin of its monsters to nuclear means⁴. *Gojira* had the same cathartic effect for its audiences in Japan. Being released in 1954, the film would've come out less than a decade after the bombings themselves, and only two years after the end of the American occupation. The nightmare of nuclear fallout would've been on the minds of the majority Japanese citizens, trying to cope with, or move on from such terror. Through the character of Gojira and his effects on the human characters, the film presented imagery that they could relate to: the dread and helplessness of some external force destroying the lives of thousands at once⁵. In one particularly powerful scene from the film, a mother protects her children, telling them that they shall reunite with their father soon. The father might be presumed to have died in the war or in the previous bombings. Another particularly poignant scene is when the reluctant Dr. Serizawa observes a school choir on TV, a moment that convinces him of the possible loss of human life at stake with the next arrival of Gojira's nuclear rampage. This could've only been a very genuine and moving display for Japanese audiences, and one missing from so many horror films now, adding an emotional weight to the lives of the characters. Such impactful and cathartic images are why this film has imprinted itself so firmly in the Japanese canon, along with the character of Gojira.

⁴ Caputi, Jane. "Films of the Nuclear Age" *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 16.3 (1988): 102.

⁵ Stevens. "The Rhetorical Significance of Gojira" 17.

Perhaps the most critical piece of the original *Gojira* is the plan for the creature's demise and the ending. In the final act, Dr. Serizawa has developed an "oxygen destroyer" that can be used to kill Gojira, but is reluctant, as his weapon may prove to be the next most popular form of mass destruction, and he would rather it be used for scientific and constructive purposes. Serizawa then sees the footage of the death and destruction on television, as well as a choir of schoolchildren singing, prompting him to reconsider, but only after burning his notes to make sure the device can never be used again. Serizawa uses the weapon and destroys Gojira, but only after sacrificing himself. The final scene shows a solemn Dr. Yamane, who makes a plea for an end to atomic testing, for "it's possible another Gojira may appear". Throughout the film, Dr. Yamane is the biggest proponent of saving Gojira for the benefit of scientific advancement, but by the end realizes the cost is too great. This is a sentiment of frustration against the creators of the bomb, having dashed the hope of using such intelligence for our benefit instead of our destruction. Despite the tone of the film generally being one of grieving and trauma, and the monster symbolically representing a horror unleashed upon Japan by America, there is a show of empathy, compassion, and understanding in these final scenes. Serizawa is reluctant to stop the monster, but after seeing so much death and pain, he must give in, but on the condition that his device never be used again. Serizawa's sacrifice will allow the country time to heal in the wake of the attack, but Yamane's final lines are where the film and the monster becomes truly insightful. The film itself is a plea for the end of nuclear testing, and the end of Gojira, the symbol of all the pain and destruction that comes with it. There is no resentment or anger or complacency in this plea, it is one for peace and restriction. *Gojira* functions as a great deal of things for different audiences: a horror film to be used as catharsis for those faced with the

memory and pain of the bombings, or a blockbuster action film for those looking to escape the memory of the bombings, but with its final breath, the film simply asks one thing of all audiences: end the nuclear nightmare, so we may kill Gojira and his nuclear wake. In creating such a brilliant and iconic image with the Gojira character, who effectively recalls such real pain and horror, and through its endeavor to spread this message, *Gojira* becomes a culturally, historically, and artistically significant film that we must use as an example for not only ourselves, but for future generations so that we may never forget the traumas of our mistakes. Its characterization and use of the character is profound and affecting, and makes for imagery and emotion that is unique to this film, and that is why we must treasure *Gojira* and heed its warning.

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