

be as scrupulously free of genitalia—one way or the other—as your average Ken doll. And although several of the Japanese films posit offspring for Godzilla—the curiously lumpen Minilla of the 1960s, the cartoonish Baby of the 1990s—the precise biological relationship of Godzilla to these annoying young is never made explicit. The Japanese language itself contributes to this ambiguity, since nouns are not classified by gender as in many European languages. Had Godzilla been made in Germany, at least we would have known for sure if the films' creators intended the monster to be masculine, feminine, or neuter.

Many American fans call Godzilla “the Big Guy,” a form of address I consider a little too familiar, but one which at least makes clear their assumptions about Godzilla's sex. The fact that the 1998 Hollywood Godzilla was a proud and fertile female really need not distract us too much. Indeed, for me, this fact simply affirms my belief that the real Godzilla, the Japanese Godzilla, the radioactive rebel without a cause, was a pure 50,000 metric tons of foot-stomping, muscle-bound, mad-as-hell-and-I'm-not-going-to-take-it-anymore saurian male. So for the purposes of this book, at least, Godzilla will be referred to as “he.”

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF GOJIRA

EVERY FEW MONTHS, SOMEONE WILL ASK ME, innocently enough, “So what's your favorite Godzilla movie?” And invariably I respond that it's the original 1954 Godzilla film, called *Gojira* in Japanese. “Why that one?” is usually the next question. I always begin to explain that Godzilla's debut was a somber, gripping, and thought-provoking film, though I seldom get to complete my explanation. “What?” my incredulous friend, relative or co-worker will interject, “There was actually a *serious* Godzilla movie?”

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, and there was a dead-serious Godzilla movie. Well before the series degenerated into big-time wrestling in seedy latex suits, well before Godzilla had a laughably unlikely son, well before a giant technicolor moth was passed off as a gruesome monster, well before Tokyo was besieged by rapacious aliens or vengeful undersea civilizations (all fluent in Japanese, of

course), *Gojira* was a solemn affair, an earnest attempt to grapple with compelling and timely issues, more meditative and elegiac than block busting and spine chilling. Godzilla did not begin his career in the Japan of the 1950s as the tail end of a double bill, a B-list laugher, or a tongue-in-cheek parody. The original *Gojira* was a sincere horror film, intended to frighten rather than amuse, which engaged honestly—indeed, even grimly—with contemporary Japanese unease over a mounting nuclear menace, untrammelled environmental degradation, and the long shadows of World War II. “Classic” is a terribly overused word in the vocabulary of film critics, yet this label undeniably applies to the dark, brooding, and still profoundly compelling 1954 *Gojira*.



The origins of Godzilla, both as a film and as a creature, are a little murky. The time-honored story of Godzilla's genesis begins in the spring of 1954 with Tanaka Tomoyuki, then a young and aspiring producer at Japan's Tōhō Studios.¹ Once dominant in Japan's domestic film industry, Tōhō had fallen on hard times in the wake of World War II and was struggling in the early 1950s to regain its market leadership. The studio was looking to Tanaka to restore some of its sheen and assigned him *In the Shadow of Honor*, a splashy, big-budget Japanese-Indonesian coproduction that would be Tōhō's headlining blockbuster in the competitive fall movie season. But a variety of snags—most notably rising diplomatic tensions between Tokyo and Jakarta well beyond Tōhō's control—compelled Tanaka to shelve the project before filming had even begun. This left a gaping hole in Tōhō's release schedule, and Tanaka was responsible for filling it.

Godzilla, as the legendry has it, was Tanaka's brainchild, the result of a brilliant “lightbulb” moment at a time of

intense pressure. Flying home dispirited from Indonesia, Tanaka looked out over the expansive Pacific Ocean and agonized over the box office hit he was expected to deliver in six short months. His mind racing through the headlines of the day, the trends in the film industry, and, just perhaps, a personal nightmare or two, Tanaka hit upon a notion. “The thesis was very simple,” Tanaka later recalled. “What if a dinosaur sleeping in the Southern Hemisphere had been awakened and transformed into a giant by the Bomb? What if it attacked Tokyo?”²

Many later commentators have been skeptical of Tanaka's dramatic, bolt-from-the-blue account of Godzilla's creation, but even if there is a “true” story of Godzilla's birth out there, we are unlikely ever to discover it. What we can be certain of, however, is that Godzilla did not emerge from a vacuum, even if the monster was originally conceived in the pressurized cabin of a transpacific airliner. Godzilla in all his glory was spawned from a virtual primordial soup of political concerns, cultural influences, cinematic inspirations, genre traditions, economic crassness, simple opportunism, and sheer creativity.

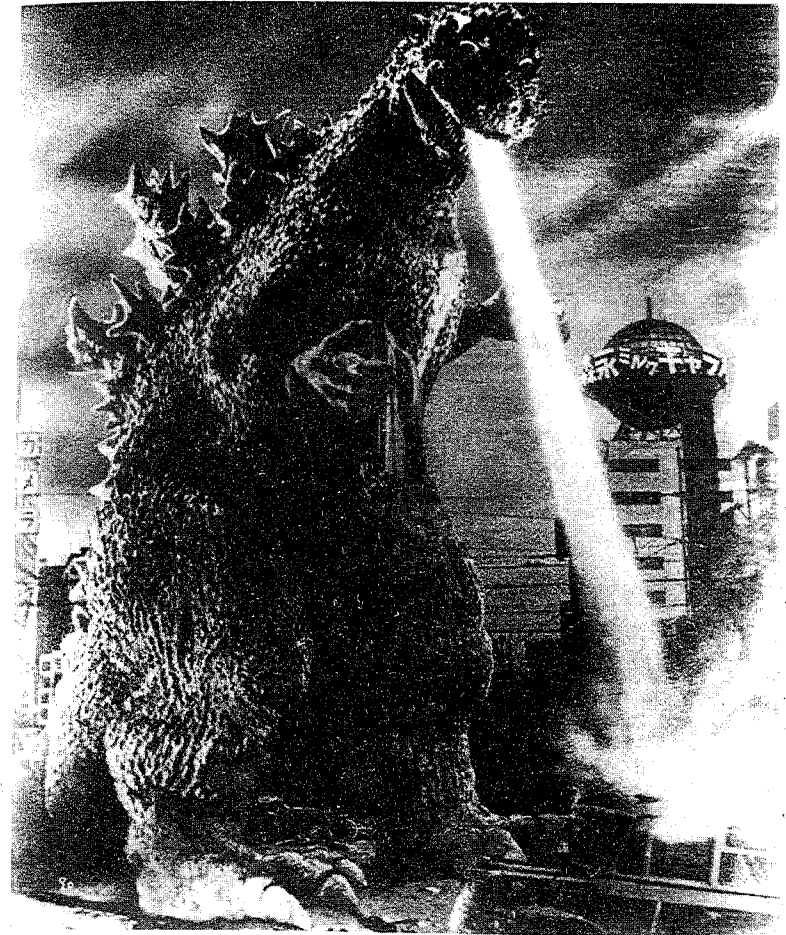


Godzilla was not, as some people may still believe, borrowed wholesale from Japanese folklore. Nonetheless, Godzilla the raging reptile, breathing fire and shattering cities, resonated with legends—both Japanese and Western—stretching back through millennia of civilization. Japanese traditional art and literature, so scholars tell us, boasted bizarre supernatural demons and monsters “in an abundance unequalled in any other culture.”³ Giant serpent deities inhabited remote mountain valleys, and dragons moved across water, land, and sky. In East Asia, according to one folklorist, “the dragon is

not the monstrous destroyer found in [Western] tradition, but a majestic and benevolent beast, whose close association with the element of water turns him into a dispenser of fertility in a wet rice growing community. He becomes a potential source of disaster, through flood and storm, only when wrongly treated.”⁴ In *Godzilla* one senses the echoes of such legendary beasts, awe-inspiring and ever threatening, associated with the oceans, with longevity and, above all, with ruin and calamity. *Godzilla* also fits comfortably into the bestiaries of Western mythology, joining a rich heritage of Norse monsters, beasts of Revelation and medieval dragons that ate children, ravaged cities, and heralded apocalypse. As one author plainly put it, *Godzilla* lies “squarely in the tradition of the fire-breathing dragons of folklore.”⁵

The figure of *Godzilla* played on other long-standing Japanese fears, and particularly on a deeply rooted vulnerability to the awesome and erratic forces of nature. Japan, as geologists, geographers, and meteorologists will attest, lies directly in the crosshairs of almost every destructive power Mother Nature can command. The natives of the Japanese islands have always had to endure the unpredictable assaults of earthquakes and volcanoes, typhoons and tidal waves, floods and landslides. Fire has been another ever-present natural enemy, especially to the dense, wood-built, readily inflammable cities of Japan. The Japanese have an old proverb, *jishin kaminari kaji oyaji*, which lists the four most fearsome things in the world as earthquake, thunder, fire, and father. Given *Godzilla*’s volatility, capriciousness, and propensity for devastation—as well as the monster’s fundamental character as a natural phenomenon that brings disaster—that old Japanese saying might well be rewritten as *jishin kaminari kaji Gojira*.

But the original *Godzilla* film also drew on more immediate and agonizing memories of man-made destruction. Although the Japanese government wishfully announced in 1956 that “the postwar period is now over,” the Japan of the



Godzilla's first stroll through Tokyo, 1954.

mid-1950s still bore the scars—both physical and emotional—of total war and defeat. Japan's cities were still rebuilding from wartime fire bombings, families remained broken and grieving, and a complex sense of loss—lost lives, lost dreams, the lost war—tormented many survivors. Long after Japan's surrender in 1945, even long after the departure of General MacArthur and the American occupation forces in 1952, the shadows of war tenaciously haunted the Japanese people. Despite the guarded return of economic prosperity in the 1950s and steady progress on physical rebuilding, the dark memories of war—so compellingly evoked in *Gojira*—remained fresh and traumatic.

The specters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though repressed formally and informally by Japanese society, the Japanese government, and the U.S. occupation forces, were particularly vivid, harrowing, and unresolved in 1950s Japan. Worsening Cold War tensions and accelerating nuclear testing contributed to anxiety around the globe, but nowhere more so than in Japan, which alone had suffered the ordeal of atomic warfare. Such issues weighed heavily on the minds of Godzilla's creators. As Tanaka Tomoyuki later observed: "The theme of the film, from the beginning, was the terror of the Bomb. Mankind had created the Bomb, and now nature was going to take revenge on mankind."⁶

The climate of nuclear anxiety in Japan reached new heights in 1954, even well before the film *Gojira* was released. On March 1—only a few weeks prior to Tanaka's storied trip from Indonesia back to Japan—the United States detonated a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, a weapon almost one thousand times more powerful than that dropped on Hiroshima, on Bikini Atoll in the central Pacific. A small Japanese trawler in search of tuna, named (ironically enough) the *Lucky Dragon No. 5* (*Dai-go Fukuryū Maru*), had strayed perilously close to the testing zone. The twenty-three-man crew reported seeing "the sun rising in the west" and being

covered with a powdery white ash as they pulled in their lines and headed for port. The seamen were subsequently found to be suffering from radiation poisoning, tainted tuna entered Japanese markets before the radioactive contamination was discovered, and the news media erupted in a fury of nuclear fear and anti-American hostility. Millions of Japanese (including the emperor) refused to eat fish, the tabloids proclaimed the incident yet another U.S. atomic attack on Japan, and strident antinuclear peace movements sprouted around the country. That *Gojira* emerged from this environment suggests not only the canny opportunism (or, as some at the time complained, bald cynicism) of its creators, but also the extent to which the film and its message engaged with the most profound, contentious, and chilling issues of the day.⁷

But not all of the inspiration for *Gojira* came straight from the current events headlines. Tanaka Tomoyuki and Tōhō Studios were well aware of trends in the international film industry and, perhaps most important, of what sorts of movies were delivering big box-office returns, both in Tokyo and in Hollywood. The year 1952 saw the re-release of the 1933 classic *King Kong*, the prototype of the "giant monster on the loose" genre and a masterpiece of Willis O'Brien's stop-motion special effects. The film earned four times as much in 1952 as it had in its original release and was a hit in Japan as well as in the United States. In the wake of *Kong*'s success, Warner Brothers pushed into distribution the independently produced *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, which proved a worldwide blockbuster in 1953. In this story of a dinosaur thawed from its prehistoric hibernation by American nuclear testing in Baffin Bay, the eponymous beast wreaks havoc on lower Manhattan before expiring in the flaming ruins of Coney Island, a deadly radioactive isotope—launched, of course, by the scientific and military good guys—firmly embedded in its neck. *The Beast* was perceived by many as a mere low-budget rip-off of *King Kong*, but it

was based on an original story by sci-fi pioneer Ray Bradbury and featured the impressive special effects of O'Brien disciple Ray Harryhausen. Although hardly a thoughtful musing on the dangers of nuclear weaponry, *The Beast* was—as Tanaka and Tōhō were well aware—a financial bonanza for its creators and distributors.

Many critics have been tempted to see the 1954 *Gojira* as a thinly veiled Japanese remake of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. And the similarities between the two films are numerous: both Godzilla and the Beast result from H-bomb testing, both are amphibious dinosaurs who sink fishing boats and inexplicably attack major cities, both occasion debates between scientists intent on studying the monster and army officers preoccupied with exterminating it. The team from Tōhō Studios even quietly admitted that much of their inspiration did indeed come from *King Kong* and *The Beast*: “The basic film is American,” the director of *Gojira* once confided to a reporter.⁸ Indeed, the Godzilla project allegedly began under the confidential working title “The Giant Monster from 20,000 Miles Beneath the Sea,” a smoking gun if ever there was one. But inspiration is far different from imitation, and today no one who has seen *Gojira* would, I suspect, damn it as a simple, slavish copy of earlier American blockbusters. In any case, compared to *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (or even, if I may be sacrilegious, to the great *Kong*), the message of the original Godzilla film is so much more nuanced, the special effects so different, and the emotions stirred so much more profound that any charges of cinematic plagiarism seem all but irrelevant.



Given the personnel, effort, and expense Tōhō invested in *Gojira*, there can be no doubt that the studio intended the

film to be an original, polished, serious, honest-to-God blockbuster. The first Godzilla was certainly not a self-consciously cerebral, art-house film like the period drama *Rashōmon*, which had won an Oscar and the 1951 Venice Festival grand prize, bringing unprecedented international attention to the Japanese movie industry. But neither was *Gojira* a cheesy, low-budget exploitation film, just another example of the “plethora of nudity, teenage heroes, science-fiction monsters, animated cartoons and pictures about cute animals” that the esteemed critic Donald Richie once decried as the stock-in-trade of Japan’s popular cinema.⁹ The Godzilla series would, of course, soon descend into the B-movie morass, but the script, acting, special effects, and spirited, confident style of *Gojira* would set it apart from the cinematic run of the mill.

The men who made Godzilla were talented, committed professionals who still remain largely unheralded outside fan circles. Tanaka Tomoyuki, the producer, had only overseen his first film in 1944, but he quickly earned a reputation for delivering quality pictures on time and on budget. Tanaka was also remarkably prolific: he often produced more than ten films in a single year, and *Gojira* was his fifth movie in 1954 alone. Tanaka would later produce critically acclaimed works—including the samurai favorites *Yojimbo* and *Sanjūrō*, both directed by the modern master Kurosawa Akira—as well as twenty-two films in the Godzilla series and a long list of Japanese sci-fi stunners. Honda Ishirō, *Gojira*’s director, studied film at Nihon University and directed dozens of features—including eight starring Godzilla—over a long career. Honda was deeply committed to international cooperation and the cause of world peace, very likely as a result of his experiences in World War II, during which he served three tours of duty in the infantry, was a prisoner of war in China, and passed through the ruins of Hiroshima upon his repatriation to Japan. Honda was a lifelong friend

of Kurosawa's and served as associate director on five of Kurosawa's later films, including *Kagemusha*, *Ran*, and *Rhapsody in August*. Tsuburaya Eiji, who brought Godzilla and his rampages to life, was one of Japan's pioneers in special effects, inspired as a young man by the marvels of *King Kong*. During World War II, Tsuburaya used meticulously detailed miniature models to achieve new standards of realism; his work on naval scenes in one effort, *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya*, was said to be so convincing that occupation authorities initially mistook some sequences for actual newsreel footage. Intense, creative, skilled, and blessed with a childlike joy in making fantasies real, Tsuburaya worked on fifty-six feature films, won numerous professional awards, and went on to create the campy icon Ultraman. As one author acutely observed, Tanaka, Honda, and Tsuburaya were "sophisticated men working in a highly unsophisticated genre."¹⁰

Making *Gojira* was a substantial financial outlay for Tōhō Studios. The film cost more than ¥62,000,000—about \$175,000 at the exchange rate of the day—which was well beyond twice the budget of the average Japanese film. This total was laughable by Hollywood standards, even at the time; *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, for instance, was a low-budget indie production and still came in at \$200,000. *Gojira* also took far longer to shoot than was the Japanese industry norm. In the mid-1950s, Tōhō generally aimed to get all of its features in the can within fifty days; for that first Godzilla film, the special-effects crew alone required a whopping seventy-one days to complete its work. The on-screen talent further reflected the importance accorded *Gojira*: while the cast included its fair share of unknowns and fresh faces, its star—at least its *human* star—was the distinguished actor Shimura Takashi. A longtime favorite of Kurosawa, Shimura had major roles in both *Rashōmon* and *The Seven Samurai* (considered by many to be the greatest Japanese film ever

made) and was praised by the *New York Times* as "the best actor in the world" for his 1956 lead in *Ikiru*.¹¹

The special effects of *Gojira* were not high tech, even for the time, but were painstakingly staged and can still be admired as chillingly convincing. Today's movie audiences, jaded by the latest spectacles of computer-generated animation, may snigger at a few of the effects in the original *Godzilla* (as, admittedly, do I): a toylike helicopter blown about in a gale, a miniature fire engine with tiny, fake firemen. Yet the overall depiction of the monster taking it to Tokyo remains visually arresting and surprisingly realistic even fifty years—and a technological revolution—later. Tsuburaya was meticulous in creating 1/25 scale miniatures of Japan's capital city: his model buildings were often detailed inside as well as out in order to look most convincing when trampled; he built electric pylons of wax that could be melted with heat lamps to simulate the impact of Godzilla's radioactive ray; hundreds of small pyrotechnic charges were installed and ignited. Tsuburaya's commitment to realism even got him into trouble with the law. One day before filming began, the special effects master and his assistants gathered on the roof garden of one of the tony department stores in the Ginza, looked out over the city, and charted Godzilla's path of destruction. An alert security guard overhead them and, thinking he'd stumbled onto a terrorist plot, informed the authorities.¹² The police eventually let Tsuburaya go, and he went on to create one of the greatest sequences of urban devastation in cinematic history.

The design of the Godzilla suit was drawn from picture books of dinosaurs—as well as some illustrations in an issue of *Life* magazine—and the distinctive physical appearance of the monster was formed from a fossil-record-be-damned fusion of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, *Iguanodon*, and *Stegosaurus*. The costume itself was fabricated from a framework of bamboo stakes and wire, with thick overlays of latex and

plentiful padding of urethane foam. The first prototype weighed in at more than two hundred pounds and was too rigid and ponderous to be used as designed. A second, lighter, and more flexible suit was produced, but even it was only slightly more accommodating for the actor chosen to play Godzilla. That honor went to Nakajima Haruo, a bit player and stunt man recruited specifically for the role because of his good physical conditioning, endurance, and dogged determination. To prepare for the role—not that being encased in a cumbersome rubber lizard suit allowed for much in the way of dramatic expression—Nakajima watched prints of *King Kong* and *Mighty Joe Young* and even visited Tokyo's Ueno Zoo to observe the behavior of bears and other large animals. Under hot stage lights, barely able to breathe or see, Nakajima could spend no more than a few minutes at a time sealed within the costume. Technicians would regularly pour a cup of Nakajima's sweat out of the suit between takes and the actor reported losing twenty pounds in weight over the course of the shoot. But from such sacrifice came magic. Although generations of critics may have pooh-poohed Godzilla's special effects—charmingly christened “suitmation” by the folks at Tōhō—no less an authority than Steven Spielberg has declared that *Gojira* “was the most masterful of all the dinosaur movies because it made you believe it was really happening.”¹³

Sound complemented image in making the vicarious experience of disaster credible, thrilling, and compelling in *Gojira*. The powerful score to the film—cited by many fans as the element that truly breathed life into Godzilla—was the work of Ifukube Akira, a distinguished classical composer and prolific creator of film music. Born in Hokkaido and influenced by the folk traditions of the indigenous Ainu people, Ifukube composed nationalistic marches during World War II before becoming a workhorse of the postwar Japanese movie industry, completing more than two hundred scores in his



Teatime on the back lot. Nakajima Haruo takes a break during the filming of *Godzilla vs. the Thing* (1964).

forty-year career. Amazingly, Ifukube penned the music for *Gojira* in just one week—having never seen the movie or even any rushes—and directed the recording of the soundtrack in only a single day. Ifukube was also responsible for Godzilla's unmistakable roar. After failing to produce anything convincing using recordings of wild animals, Ifukube made Godzilla's "melancholy, ear-splitting cry" by drawing a leather glove across the strings of a contrabass and manipulating the resulting sound in an echo chamber.¹⁴ Ifukube also created the sonorous, haunting footfalls of the monster, though sources disagree on whether he used a Japanese taiko drum, a scratch-built amplifier, or the electronically altered sound of an explosion to complete the fantasy of Godzilla's resounding, mighty steps.¹⁵

The origins of the name *Gojira* and its English-language incarnation *Godzilla* are mysterious even today. *Gojira* is a portmanteau word, the creative fusion of *gorira* (Japanese for gorilla) and *kujira* (meaning whale). That Tanaka Tomoyuki's giant radioactive dinosaur bears little resemblance to an ape, a cetacean, or a biologically inconceivable blending of the two was apparently irrelevant; Tanaka liked the sound of the name (as indeed have generations of Japanese fans) and he applied it to his monster. Age-old legend has it that Tanaka took his inspiration from an overweight employee of Tōhō Studios nicknamed "Gojira" by his pesky co-workers. Many observers have cast doubt on this story, however, largely because this supposed burly stagehand has never been positively identified. As Honda Ishirō's widow once suggested, *Gojira* was more likely the result of a high-level committee meeting at Tōhō rather than an imaginative epithet overheard on the back lot.¹⁶ The derivation of the name *Godzilla* is equally uncertain. Although American fans have longed to believe that the use of the deifying syllable "god" was some publicity agent's stroke of genius, it seems that *Godzilla* was more or less a straight job of

transliteration on *Gojira*: in the 1950s, the Japanese sound "ji" was often rendered "dzi" and "ra" became "la."¹⁷ That *Godzilla* sounds so appropriate in English, evoking the grandeur, mystery, and saurian nature of the monster, was more the result of dumb luck than shrewd planning. From such fortuitous turns of fate was a cultural icon born.



The 1954 *Gojira* has not—unfortunately—been widely distributed outside Japan. Although bootlegged videotapes and DVDs have circulated among fans the world over and a long-overdue American theatrical release took place in 2004, the original film remains among those in the *Godzilla* series least seen by international audiences. Thus a brief recounting of *Gojira*'s story—a satisfying blend of conventional movie melodrama, sci-fi tradition, brooding horror tale, Cold War morality play, and sheer innovation—is certainly in order.

The film begins with a thinly veiled reference to the *Lucky Dragon* incident: the crew of a Japanese freighter, the *Glory No. 5*, witness a blinding flash from the sea, the ship bursts into flames, and immediately sinks. One search vessel dispatched from Tokyo disappears, and then another. Survivors recount that "the ocean just blew up." On nearby Ōdo Island, the villagers rescue an all-but-dead local fisherman whose boat was also destroyed and who manages to utter "He did it. . . . A monster . . ." just before expiring. A village elder solemnly intones that *Godzilla*—a legendary "creature that lives in the sea"—must be responsible. The anxious Ōdo islanders perform a ceremonial dance and traditional exorcism ceremony to appease the monster and preserve their community. But, as it turns out, to no avail: in the teeth of a midnight gale, *Godzilla* raids the island, crushing houses, killing livestock, and terrifying the populace.

A blue-ribbon fact-finding mission, led by the eminent paleontologist Dr. Yamane (portrayed by Shimura Takashi), is dispatched from Tokyo. The group's geiger counters go crazy on Ōdo Island: the groundwater is found to be tainted by radiation, Yamane inspects a giant footprint, and, in a rivulet of nuclear runoff, a living trilobite is discovered. Godzilla then makes a rare daytime appearance, obligingly rearing up over one of the island's mountains while the natives flee and the scientists take snapshots. Dr. Yamane hastens back to Tokyo and testifies before a committee of the Diet, Japan's parliament. The monster, Yamane pronounces, is an amazing survivor of the Jurassic period who has lingered unnoticed for millions of years in one of the ocean's "deep pockets, abyssal regions that contain secrets we have yet to discover." Disrupted from its habitat and transformed by nuclear testing, the fifty-meter-tall Godzilla, Yamane concludes, "must have absorbed an enormous amount of atomic radiation."

The Japanese authorities prove woefully unprepared to deal with the threat of Godzilla. The nation's political leaders bicker unproductively. The military launches a barrage of depth charges, but with no apparent effect. "International researchers" fly in from around the globe, yet bring with them no silver bullets. The government pleads with Dr. Yamane to find a way of killing the menace, but he refuses, arguing trenchantly that the monster should be investigated, not eradicated. Godzilla, he declares, provides scientists with "a unique opportunity" and, moreover, one that "only those of us in Japan can study."

Amidst the mounting crisis, the story of a rather weepy love triangle is unfolding. Emiko, Dr. Yamane's young daughter, is head over heels in love with the dashing Lieutenant Ogata, an officer in a Japanese shipping firm. But Emiko, it turns out, is betrothed to wed Dr. Serizawa, a former student of her father, in a traditional Japanese arranged

marriage. Prepared to reveal her love for Ogata, Emiko pays a visit on Serizawa, who lives in a dark, gloomy castle of a house with a laboratory in the basement and a choice selection of modern electrical appliances. Serizawa, who sports an eye patch (the result of an unelaborated wartime injury) and an unruly mane of hair (befitting an apparent mad scientist), does not seem particularly interested in talking feelings and relationships; instead, he demonstrates for Emiko the amazing and horrible discovery he has made. Serizawa drops a small metallic orb in a tank of fish and Emiko watches in revulsion as the fish are progressively liquefied. Serizawa explains that his "oxygen destroyer" disintegrates the oxygen in water, asphyxiating all living organisms: "Used as a weapon, this would be as powerful as a nuclear bomb. It could totally destroy humankind." Emiko, more than a little frightened by all this, swears to keep her fiancé's awesome discovery a secret.

Godzilla, meanwhile, begins his attacks on Japan proper. Wading ashore from Tokyo Bay one evening, the monster drags his feet through the rail yards at Shinagawa before returning to the sea. The military makes plans to evacuate the city, erect a huge barrier of electric lines and barbed wire around the waterfront, and roll out their best military hardware to confront the next assault. But fifty thousand volts and a few howitzers have little effect on Godzilla. The monster returns the following evening and cuts a swath of destruction across Tokyo, from gritty industrial districts to the chic precincts of the Ginza. Landmarks collapse under Godzilla's feet and from blasts of his radioactive breath: the creature walks through a wing of the Diet; the chiming clock tower on the Hattori Building is silenced by the annoyed monster; in one of the film's only tongue-in-cheek moments, Godzilla crumbles the Nichigeki Theater (Tōhō's flagship property in Tokyo) with a flip of his mighty tail. Looking over a sea of flames engulfing Japan's

capital, one reporter asks, "Is the world going to be destroyed by a two-million-year-old monster?"

Godzilla leaves death and devastation in his wake. Vistas of the burned-out city recall images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, hospitals overflow with the dead and dying, the camera lingers on a little girl, her eyes glazed in shock, whose irradiated body sends a geiger counter gauge off the scale. Emiko, deeply moved by the human suffering, decides that the oxygen destroyer is the only weapon that can stop Godzilla and that she must betray Serizawa's trust. Emiko divulges the secret to Ogata, and the two hurry to Serizawa's laboratory, where they plead with the scientist to allow the use of the device against Godzilla. Serizawa refuses and he scuffles with Ogata—as much, one suspects, over Emiko as over the oxygen destroyer—leaving the seaman bloodied and the doctor contrite. Weighing the horror of Godzilla against the potential misuse of his potent discovery, Serizawa reveals his profound moral torment: "If the oxygen destroyer is used even once, politicians from around the world will see it. Of course, they'll want to use it as a weapon. Bombs versus bombs, missiles versus missiles, and now a new super-weapon to throw upon us all! As a scientist, as a human being, I can't allow that to happen." Burying his head in his hands, Serizawa cries, "What am I going to do?"

A television in the laboratory inexplicably comes on, showing scenes of Godzilla's trail of destruction as a chorus of schoolgirls sings the heart-rending hymn "Oh Peace, Oh Light, Return." Serizawa's will crumbles under the weight of the tragedy, and he relents. But swearing that "this will be the first and last time that I will ever allow the oxygen destroyer to be used," Serizawa methodically burns all his scientific notes. Recognizing his sacrifice, Emiko—once again—breaks into tears.

From a ship in Tokyo Bay, Ogata and Dr. Serizawa descend into the water in deep-sea diving suits, the oxygen de-

stroyer at the ready. They come upon Godzilla casually napping in the depths of the bay. As Serizawa places the device near the monster, Ogata returns to the surface. Seeing that the oxygen destroyer is successful, Serizawa radios Ogata and Emiko on the ship: "It worked! Both of you, be happy. Goodbye . . . goodbye." With a glinting knife, Serizawa cuts his oxygen line, ensuring with his death that the secrets of the oxygen destroyer will never be revealed and that the movie's central love triangle will be resolved.

As the water churns and the ship pitches, Godzilla rises from the bay in agony. His body slowly disintegrates, first to a skeleton and then to nothingness. The crew of the ship is jubilant, but their celebrations are tempered by the self-sacrifice of Serizawa and a nagging cloud of doubt. Dr. Yamane muses aloud: "I can't believe that Godzilla was the only surviving member of its species. But if we keep on conducting nuclear tests, it's possible that another Godzilla might appear somewhere in the world, again." As the film ends, all on the ship come to attention, remove their hats and pay their silent respects. But are they saluting Serizawa or the monster? Are they mourning the dead or lamenting their loss of innocence, humankind's shortsightedness, and the inevitable horrors of the future? Is the final shot, with the sun dancing over the water, a hopeful dawn for Japan or an ominous sunset for the world?



Gojira opened across Japan on November 3, 1954. An elaborate marketing campaign stoked public anticipation of the release: an eleven-installment radio serial told the story of "monster Godzilla" (*kaijū Gojira*), and the creature's image was plastered all over Tokyo. As one observer reported at the time, Godzilla "has glowered from bus and subway

posters, has lunged in papier-mache effigy, and at present dangles over Ginza in the form of a rather large balloon.”¹⁸ The publicity stunts paid off: *Gojira* recorded the best opening-day ticket sales ever in Tokyo and eventually grossed ¥152 million (well over twice its production costs) on 9.69 million paid admissions. In a memorable year for Japanese cinema—1954 also saw the release of Kurosawa’s epic *The Seven Samurai* and Kinoshita Keisuke’s sentimental antiwar masterpiece *The Twenty-Four Eyes*—*Gojira* more than held its own at the box office. Tanaka and Honda’s offering would end up boasting the eighth-largest gross among Japanese-made films—and the twelfth largest when counting Hollywood imports as well—in 1954.

The critical response was a little less enthusiastic. Some writers had kind words for the much-hyped *Gojira*, although crediting it with “intellectual content usually lacking in foreign pictures of the same genre” may seem like faint praise. Other critics drew less favorable comparisons to American sci-fi imports or damned the film as “grotesque junk” that “looked like something you’d spit up.”¹⁹ Donald Richie expressed grudging admiration for *Gojira* and its special effects: “As monsters go, he’s quite well done.” But even Richie could not see beyond some of the technical lackings of suitmation: “If a film is strong enough, one willingly suspends logic and agreeably refuses to believe that what one sees is false. ‘Gojilla’ [*sic*], though vastly entertaining, is not that strong. There are so many long talky scenes that the monster’s appearance becomes positively welcome. It’s fun to watch the man walking on the toy buildings.”²⁰

Although Richie (and very likely many other viewers) took a childlike delight in Godzilla’s rampages, the creators of *Gojira* always intended the film to be an antinuclear fable with a deadly serious message. “When I returned from the war and passed through Hiroshima,” Honda Ishirō once recalled, “there was a heavy atmosphere—a fear the earth was already coming to an end. That became the basis for the

film.” To Honda, Godzilla was a means of “making radiation visible,” of giving tangible form to unspoken fears of the Bomb, nuclear testing, and environmental degradation.²¹ *Gojira* challenged the morality of the atomic age and rendered terrifyingly real the destructive power of radiation (and did so in ways that contemporary American films seldom, if ever, would). *Gojira*, one critic has written, “was a rare monster movie to go into the nasty details of the catastrophe: hordes of injured refugees, thronging field hospitals, churches full of widows and orphans.”²² Death and suffering are depicted matter-of-factly in Godzilla’s attacks; radiation is not something mysterious, antiseptic, or theoretical in *Gojira*, but is an unrelentingly lethal force unleashed against nature and humankind alike. Even Godzilla’s skin, thick and furrowed like the keloid scars that afflicted the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, evoked the agony of irradiation. The moral was clear: nuclear war and the uncontrollable horrors within the atom were to be avoided at all cost. Japanese moviegoers reportedly approached the film and its cautionary message with appropriate solemnity: audiences were said to have watched the destruction of Tokyo—and subsequently of Godzilla—in respectful silence, sometimes leaving the theaters in tears. And the creators of the monster idealistically felt their cinematic statement could have a political impact: “Believe it or not,” Honda once confided to an interviewer, “we naively hoped that the end of Godzilla was going to coincide with the end of nuclear testing.”²³

Many critics have looked upon films that exploited Cold War nuclear paranoia—and especially those in the “monster on the loose” genre—with a certain cynicism. Bill Warren, for one, has asserted that the use of radiation in classic science fiction movies “was just a gimmick”:

In the 1930s the equivalent gimmick was electricity; in the 1920s, it was surgery and often gland operations. In the 1950s, it was radiation that got the monster going.

The 1930s didn't suffer from fear of electrical annihilation; although the 1950s did tend to be worried about atomic warfare, radiation in science fiction films wasn't a means of expressing this fear, probably not even unconsciously. It was just a way of originating an unusual or interesting menace. . . . Radiation was used to explain many wonderful things, from giant insects to walking trees to resurrecting the dead. This was not a form of nuclear paranoia, merely cheap and simple plotting.²⁴

Other detractors have dismissed allegedly lightweight "creature features" for trivializing the specter of nuclear war. Jonathan Lake Crane ranted:

The characters in most of these efforts are flat caricatures who bathetically spout maudlin clichés, mouth scientific mumbo-jumbo, and scream hysterically for far too long in the direction of monstrously large reptiles. These gross efforts, pathetic claptrap, answer the most significant question of the 20th century with tacky special effects, papier-mâché sets, and idiotic plots. How can lumbering dinosaurs spewing atomic fire, giant carnivorous plants, and implacable mutant insects approach the fiery chaos that engulfed Japan?²⁵

Gojira's message may not have been terribly deep or particularly subtle, but the film was not egregiously cynical or disrespectful in its treatment of radiation, nuclear anxiety, or Japan's own atomic-age history. Indeed, there is an appealing ingenuousness and honesty about *Gojira* that makes its antinuclear subtext—what one author has characterized as "easy moral certainties"²⁶—seem surprisingly free of didacticism, condescension, and, for want of a better word, preachiness. Perhaps Japan's twentieth-century experience—as the target of atomic attacks and as a mere bit player in the Cold War clash of the superpowers—allowed the nation's filmmakers to reflect with immediacy, authentic-

ity, and passion on the threat of nuclear apocalypse. Even, one might add, when the vehicle for that thoughtful reflection was a huge irradiated dinosaur, mad as hell and headed for Tokyo.

One can also detect in *Gojira* a strong theme of Japanese patriotic bravado and a less explicit, though no less insistent, tone of anti-American resentment. Much of the film's musical score recalls Japan's wartime martial airs, staples of World War II home-front propaganda and today replayed ad nauseam (and at ear-splitting volume) in Japan's *pachinko* pinball arcades. In *Gojira*, heroic scenes of mobilizing troops, crisply efficient naval maneuvers and tanks emblazoned with the rising sun—not images one might expect to see glorified less than a decade after Japan's defeat and supposed demilitarization—are all set to rousing nationalistic marches. Moreover, at one of the emotional high points of the film, just after the oxygen destroyer has been deployed and Ogata begins to ascend to the surface of Tokyo Bay, the soundtrack swells into a few incongruous but majestic bars curiously reminiscent of Japan's funereal national anthem, *Kimigayo*. Just a moment later, after the success of the oxygen destroyer has been confirmed, the assembled mob of reporters, sailors, and military brass aboard the support ship erupt in spontaneous celebration; the cry goes up, "What exhilaration! What jubilation! We have won!" The victory here is clearly Japan's, and not a broader triumph of humankind over the monster. *Gojira* thus closes with a highly charged revision of the outcome of World War II, exemplifying what Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie refer to as "a favorite Japanese science-fiction stance: Japan, saviour of the world."²⁷

The manner in which *Gojira* "demonizes American nuclear science"²⁸—and by extension the America that invented the atomic bomb and used it on Japan—is revealed in the stark morality play at the heart of the film. Dr. Serizawa

is caught in an excruciating ethical quandary: should he reveal the secret of the oxygen destroyer and risk introducing a deadly new superweapon into the volatile Cold War world? Or should he conceal his awesome discovery, keeping humankind safe from a force mightier than the H-bomb but, in the process, forsaking Japan to devastation by Godzilla? Serizawa, of course, chooses the most righteous path of all: the oxygen destroyer is used to liberate Japan from the monster while Serizawa's ultimate self-sacrifice—as noble an act of harakiri as could be performed in a diving suit—ensures that his cataclysmic device will never fall into the wrong hands. The moral here is obvious: “good” Japanese science, which would never be used for aggressive or self-serving ends, triumphs over “bad” American science, which has misused the wonders of technology and bears responsibility, after all, for creating the scourge of Godzilla. Japanese audiences could thus leave *Gojira* confident in the knowledge that the monster was vanquished, that their nation had prevailed single-handedly, and that Japan was superior—technologically as well as morally—to atomic-age America.

Throughout *Gojira*, memories of the past war and fears of a coming war are seamlessly intertwined. Images of chaos, flight, and destruction—families pulling cartloads of possessions, children being relocated in Army trucks, Tokyo consumed by flames—surely evoked in *Gojira*'s viewers all-too-real recollections of World War II. Short vignettes in the film make the connection explicit. Prior to Godzilla's attack, a group of commuters chat in a train. “It's terrible, huh?” one remarks. “Radioactive tuna, atomic fallout, and now this Godzilla to top it all off.” “I guess I'll have to find a shelter soon,” another chimes in. “The shelters again?” one of their companions exclaims, “That stinks!” Later, when the monster is bringing ruin to the city, the camera falls on a woman cowering beside a Ginza building, holding her young

children close as flaming debris rains down upon them. “We'll be joining your father soon,” she moans, referring (one must assume) to a husband killed in the war. “Just a little longer, a little longer.” Godzilla, as one author has perceptively suggested, takes on the dark character of “war personified.”²⁹

The association of Godzilla's attacks with the ravages of World War II on the Japanese homeland undoubtedly brought with it substantial ideological baggage. To a Japanese populace that earnestly (and, to a certain extent, justifiably) wished to see itself as the victim—rather than the aggressor—in the recently ended war, *Gojira*'s implications could in some ways have proven very welcome and therapeutic. Godzilla, like the physical and emotional suffering of war, was an uncontrollable, unfathomable curse visited upon a helpless, blameless Japan. The land of the rising sun was culpable for neither the atomic bomb nor Godzilla, yet had borne the unique agonies of them both. But at the same time that Godzilla may have helped naturalize Japanese victimhood, it also brought to the fore a welter of unsettled memories and unresolved issues from Japan's wartime experience. As a number of observers have recognized, Godzilla functioned not simply as a figure of war incarnate or a metaphorical admonition of nuclear annihilation, but also became a reproachful symbol embodying the spirits of Japan's war dead. Ifukube Akira once noted that, for his generation, which came of age in the 1940s, Godzilla was “like the souls of the Japanese soldiers who died in the Pacific Ocean during the war.”³⁰ As the image of a vengeful, violent homecoming of souls in *Gojira* suggests, postwar Japan had not fully come to terms with the human losses of World War II, the unruly memories of wartime trauma, or the guilt of survival, recovery, and forgetfulness. Godzilla thus emerged as something of a conscience for Japanese society in the 1950s, forcefully reminding the reconstructed, prosperous

"new" Japan of the sacrifices, losses, and repressed shadows of the recent past.

In the end, belying most preconceptions of the giant monster genre, *Gojira* was a complex film, and Godzilla a multifaceted character. On different levels and in different ways, both movie and monster reassured and unsettled, affirmed and challenged, terrified and amused. *Gojira* explored both an unresolved past and an uncertain future, providing some soothing reassurance but no simple remedies for the fears, phantoms, and profound insecurities of Japanese society. That such meaning, relevance, and intensity of feeling could emerge from an actor in a latex suit, blithely stomping miniature models of Tokyo, is remarkable indeed. Beneath *Gojira*'s "monster on the loose" plot, sci-fi cheapie effects, and radioactive saurian hero lay a thoughtful, sophisticated and timely classic of world cinema.



The domestic success of *Gojira*—along with the international attention accorded Japanese exports like *Rashōmon* and *The Seven Samurai*—convinced Tōhō to seek an American distributor for its first blockbuster monster film. Hollywood dealmakers were very receptive, but their vision of an American *Gojira* was a mass-market, thrill-a-minute horror flick, not a dark and broody, subtitled art-house release. As a result, *Gojira* was cut, edited, shuffled, and augmented to produce a feature that would meet American audiences' action-heavy, substance-lite expectations of a creature film and would cater to the filmgoing masses who demanded to hear their movies rather than read them. Although *Gojira* was not exactly eviscerated in this transition, with the terrifying charm of the monster thankfully surviving the cinematic surgery, much of the emotional power, intellectual depth, social

relevance, and visceral impact of *Gojira* was lost in its translation to U.S. movie screens.

The North American rights to *Gojira* were purchased by movie mogul Joseph E. Levine, who along with producers Harold Ross and Richard Kay and writer/director Terry Morse (veterans all of the low-budget B-movie business), created the made-for-America *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*. In order to avoid dubbing the entire film, new footage incorporating a voyeuristic American reporter (who narrates the destruction of Tokyo) and his Japanese sidekick (who conveniently translates and summarizes Japanese dialogue) was added. The use of some neat editing tricks, body doubles, and over-the-shoulder shots allowed for sequences in which the newly inserted characters appeared to talk with Emiko, Dr. Serizawa, and the others. Cheesy, yes, but creative too. *Gojira* was sliced and diced to accommodate the new material, with almost a third of Honda's film left on the cutting room floor. Nevertheless, as one movie critic has acknowledged, "Much has been done to Americanize the Godzilla series over the decades, much of it inane and destructive, but the craft and cleverness of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* is immediately apparent."³¹

The actor chosen to headline *Godzilla* was Raymond Burr, a hardworking Hollywood leading man but hardly A-list talent. In the mid-1950s—long before he gained fame for his TV roles as Perry Mason and Ironside, his immense physical size, his private South Pacific island, or his alleged coprophilia—Burr could boast some box-office profile, having appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as well as a slew of forgettable cheapies from *Bride of the Gorilla* to *Tarzan and the She-Devil*. Not a lot of time or money was invested in shooting the new scenes for *Godzilla*: Burr's contributions were filmed in a small Los Angeles studio in a single day of almost twenty-four hours straight work. All the filming was completed in less than a week and the limited

dubbing—including a voice for Dr. Yamane that sounded like a retarded Yogi Bear and stumbled repeatedly on the pronunciation of “phenomenon”—wrapped in only five hours.

Levine’s promotional efforts for *Godzilla* were intense and imaginative. The moniker “King of the Monsters” was adopted to connect the newest beast on the block to an established Hollywood property, the great King Kong, in the minds of the ticket-buying public. Needless to say, the American marketing campaign did not focus on the more provocative or compelling aspects of the original *Gojira*; in any case, nuclear anxiety and memories of World War II did not play the same way in 1950s America as they did in Japan. Instead, the movie was promoted as a pure action pulse-pounder that would wow audiences with its realistic, spine-tingling special effects. *Godzilla*’s theatrical trailer was a masterpiece of marketing hyperbole: “It’s alive! A gigantic beast, stalking the earth! Crushing all before it in a psychotic cavalcade of electrifying horror! Raging through the streets on a rampage of total destruction!” What red-blooded, flag-loving American moviegoer could ignore the appeal of “Dynamic violence! Savage action! Spectacular thrills! *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*”

Donald Richie complained that “all of the good stuff” in *Gojira* was “cut out to accommodate the gesticulations of Raymond Burr” in its American incarnation.³² This is, at most, only a slight exaggeration. Virtually all sections of the original film that might have reflected negatively on the United States, highlighted Japanese resentments arising from World War II, or explored the nuclear issue in any depth were excised or otherwise neutralized in the Americanization process. The discussion on the commuter train was cropped out, the plaintive cries of the woman crouching on the Ginza are left untranslated, and Serizawa’s ethical agonies are abbreviated and trivialized. Many of the meatiest

and most stimulating scenes in *Gojira* were unceremoniously cut, sapping the film of its gravity and its message. Most strikingly, the ending of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* completely ignored the ambiguous and chilling close of the Japanese prototype. Instead of Dr. Yamane’s prophetic soliloquy on the threat of future nuclear testing and the possibility of other Godzillas, the American version fades out on a note of contrived closure. “The monster was gone,” Raymond Burr’s character authoritatively intones. “The whole world could wake up and live again.” Americanization thus rendered *Gojira* a standard monster-on-the-loose action film, radiation became a gimmick rather than a moral crisis, and *Godzilla* was firmly recast in the inoffensive tradition of American atomic-age science fiction cinema. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* does not challenge its viewers or even pretend to carry a socially relevant moral. In the end, the American *Godzilla* does nothing to jar the status quo, to question the benevolence of science, the atom, and the good old U.S. of A., or to otherwise mar the average American moviegoer’s entertainment experience with unwanted demands of self-reflection or intellectual engagement.

Godzilla, King of the Monsters opened at the palatial Loew’s State Theater in New York City on April 27, 1956. As had been the case in Japan, the film garnered mixed reviews but recorded strong box-office receipts. *Variety* praised *Godzilla*’s “startling special effects,” though a dyspeptic Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* rated it “an incredibly awful film,” describing Tsuburaya’s work as “a miniature of a dinosaur made of gum-shoes and about \$20 worth of toy buildings and electric trains.”³³ The film grossed more than \$2 million, which was a heady figure considering that the rights were purchased from Tōhō for only \$25,000 and that the American production costs were minimal. Remarkably, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* was subsequently subtitled in Japanese and released in Japan in 1957, drawing respectable

crowds. And so Godzilla came full circle. Though no one may have realized it at the time, the monster's lasting popularity was assured: for all Hollywood's best efforts to render Godzilla bland and inoffensive to American sensitivities, audiences in the United States and around the world were smitten with the new cinematic creature from Japan. From an unlikely blend of Cold War inspiration, technical proficiency, canny publicity, and industrial-grade latex was a global icon born.

CHAPTER 2

THE GODZILLA FRANCHISE

THE GODZILLA THAT MOST AMERICANS KNOW and love is not the sinister, homicidal, black-and-white, fresh-from-Bikini-Atoll-and-bent-on-revenge monster of the 1954 *Gojira*. Instead, the image rooted in America's pop culture subconscious is that of Godzilla the goofy champion, the saurian defender of the world, the judo-kicking, karate-chopping, bug-eyed, technicolor creature from the films of the 1960s and 1970s. While some fans may prefer the prototype—Godzilla as a sober allegorical figure packing a serious message as well as radioactive halitosis—most seem to identify with the monster of the sequels, Godzilla the benevolent, reptilian superhero, a kind of Japanese Spider-Man sans the spandex suit and bulging pectorals.

Despite popular acclaim, critics and scholars have generally not been kind to the entries in the long and ongoing