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THE MENACE FROM THE SOUTH SEAS

Honda Ishirō's Godzilla (1954)

Yomota Inuhiko

In 1954, two years after Japan regained its independence following the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Tōhō managed to resume production following a protracted struggle with its trade union. This is also the year when the studio made two films that would long be remembered in film history: Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurair, Kurosawa Akira) and Godzilla (Gojira, Honda Ishirō). Both films were remarkably successful both in Japan and abroad, and ever since that time ‘samurai film’ and ‘monster movie’ have become mythologised as perhaps the two most representative genres of Japanese cinema.

Godzilla's producer, Tanaka Tomoyuki, initially had the idea of making a film about a gigantic monster that emerges from 20,000 fathoms below the sea. In light of this, it is significant that in March 1954 the US tested a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific, which exposed numerous Japanese fishermen to lethal doses of radiation in the process. The news of this incident shocked the whole nation, for after Hiroshima and Nagasaki this was the third time that Japanese citizens had been killed and maimed from nuclear exposure. It is against this historical context of a keenly felt sense of emergency that Kayama Shigeru – who had already established his reputation before the Second World War as the author of detective thriller novels and lurid adventure stories reminiscent of the work of H. Rider Haggard – wrote the original story of Godzilla. Tanaka modified Kamaya's original story into a more realistic plot, and assigned Honda Ishirō as the film’s director and Tsuburaya Eiji as special effects artist. The titular monster’s name – ‘Godzilla’ – was derived as a result of synthesising the words ‘gorilla’ and ‘kujira’ (whale). It was kept strictly confidential during all stages of the film’s pre-production.

Honda Ishirō (1910–1993) joined PCL (the company which later became Tōhō) in 1933. He spent his apprenticeship as assistant director to such established filmmakers as Yamamoto Kajirō and Naruse Mikio. Honda was also born in the same year as Kurosawa Akira, and the two of them worked as assistant directors for Yamamoto in the same period and remained lifelong friends. Tōhō was the production company most closely affiliated with the military and thus producer of the greatest number of propaganda films during the Second World War. Due to these wartime commitments, however, it was not until 1949 that Honda had the opportunity to make his belated debut as a director. Honda’s early documentary film, Ise Island (Ise shima, 1950), betrays the influence of Robert Flaherty, for whom he had a great respect and whose Nanook of the North (US, 1922) he especially admired. However, while Kurosawa actively expressed his individual style and progressed as an auteur, Honda was by contrast regarded as an artisan filmmaker capable of making various types of movies ranging from highbrow films to ‘teen pics’ within the restrictions of the Japanese studio system. In fact, during the 1950s he was one of the country’s most prolific directors, making an average of three to four films per year.

Tsuburaya Eiji (1901–1970) was an art director immensely influenced by the aesthetics of German Expressionism. In 1926, he worked on Kinugasa Teinosuke's legendary A Page of Madness (Kurutta ippeji) as an assistant cinematographer. Tsuburaya favoured visual images that conveyed an austere, shadowy atmosphere often through the use of low-key lighting. Tsuburaya’s remarkable talent for directing special effects led to his involvement in a film produced in collaboration with Nazi Germany, Atarashiki tsuchii/Die Tochter des Samurais (New Earth/Daughter of the Samurai, 1937), in which he employed such techniques as matte shots and superimposition for the first time in Japan. During the Second World War, Tsuburaya made the most of his skills in the area of special effects when shooting war films. A film that drew particular praise was The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malay (Hawaii maru oki kaisen, 1942) in which Tsuburaya vividly staged the infamous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor using a carefully constructed studio set. His reproduction of the South Seas in the studio established his reputation and led to his participation in the shooting in Japan of Joseph Von Sternberg's The Saga of Anatahan (Anatahan, 1953).

Among other key personnel involved in the production of Godzilla – including the director of photography, art director, and lighting technician, among others – were a group of highly skilled veterans who had worked with established auteur Naruse Mikio. They included the musical composer, Ifukube Akira, who was strongly influenced by the folkloric music of the ethnic minorities from northern Japan such as the Ainus and Nivkhis. The style of his music for Naruse was known for its combination of an archaic rusticity and lyricism that was grounded in simple and straightforward rhythms. Ifukube created Godzilla's legendary scream by employing a double bass. Given the impressive group of artists and technicians involved in Godzilla’s production, it is obvious that Tōhō considered this monster film a serious piece of work for discerning audiences, rather than a hack job designed merely to entice children.

The plot of Godzilla is as follows. A Japanese fishing boat, making its way across the Pacific Ocean, is suddenly attacked by a mysterious monster and consequently sinks. At around the same time, an unspecified disaster occurs on Ōto Island, situated in a remote part of the Pacific. Ogata (Takarada Akira), a young employee on a ship, and a palaeontologist, Professor Yamane (Shimura Takashi), visit the island on a research exhibition. They witness the rituals and dances performed by the islanders for the purpose of pacifying the soul of a
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Huge sea dragon that is said to emerge from the depths. It is revealed that the islanders have long worshipped this entity and have named it 'Gojira'. The gigantic footprints left on the island convince Professor Yamane that the mysterious monster is the cause of the series of recent disastrous incidents. Godzilla, a surviving dinosaur from the Jurassic period, had been resting under the sea for millennia, but a series of hydrogen bomb experiments have now disturbed and provoked the monster. It is soon revealed that this monster is making its way towards Tokyo. While the public inevitably panics, the government in Tokyo calls an emergency meeting where it is agreed that Godzilla must be destroyed. Professor Yamane is the only person to question this decision openly and to think past the hysteria. He proposes instead a rescue mission to save the monster, noting that Godzilla is in fact a victim of man-made nuclear technology. Yamane also suggests that examining the monster might lead to discoveries that could help human beings survive nuclear war. However, with Godzilla being extremely frightened and thus unusually aggressive, neither the government nor the public expresses any interest in the professor's proposal. In the meantime, the monster emerges from Tokyo Bay to lay waste the capital. Indifferent to the volleys of fire emanating from the Self Defence Forces, Godzilla goes on the rampage, destroying every building in sight and spewing radioactive rays from his mouth. Having exhausted himself demolishing much of Tokyo, Godzilla disappears back into the bay to recuperate.

The Japanese discover that the only way to confront and extinguish Godzilla is to use a secret weapon called the Oxygen Destroyer - an intensely hazardous substance requiring immense caution to avoid resulting in an even greater calamity. Interestingly, it is at this point in the narrative that a somewhat unexpectedly melodramatic element begins to surface. The only person capable of handling this dangerous material is one Professor Serizawa, an oxygen expert who in fact invented this substance. It so happens that Serizawa is also engaged to marry Yamane's daughter, but to make matters even more complicated, she is actually in love with Ogata. The young woman is torn, unable to choose between her two admirers. Before long - and having been convinced by Ogata's sound reasoning - Serizawa agrees to permit use of the mysterious weapon. In the presence of a large crowd of anxious well-wishers, including Yamane and his daughter, Ogata and Serizawa thus go to sea in order to find Godzilla. While Ogata eventually returns to the patrol boat, Serizawa crashes into Godzilla with the Oxygen Destroyer, hence sacrificing his own life for his country and its people. The scene then changes abruptly upon the sight of Godzilla's silhouette appearing suddenly against the night sky and the unlit outline of the city. He emits powerful beams from his mouth while his dorsal fin flickers like neon signs. This sequence beautifully and effectively employs chiaroscuro, suggesting the aesthetic influence of German Expressionism. The miniature stage set of Tokyo, designed by Tsuburaya, is impeccably precise, and this and other scenes of destruction are packed with special effects that blend with the scenes of ordinary day-to-day life without any sense of awkwardness. Honda's talent undoubtedly shines through in his ability to deftly juxtapose three quite different cinematographic components: shots taken on life-size studio sets, the miniature shots, and superimpositions. Despite being openly dismissed by more sombre critics, Godzilla nevertheless gained worldwide approval. The beast's reputation travelled across the Pacific, leading the then young Susan Sontag (1966) to write her famous article entitled 'The Imagination of Disaster'.

The abrupt emergence from the south of this monstrous, unspeakable threat reminded Japanese audiences of the US military bombers that had reduced their cities to flaming ruins only a few years earlier. Indeed, these associations are explicitly drawn at various points in the film, such as the moment when people mourn 'yet another air raid' and the scene where city residents are forcefully relocated to the countryside. (This practice occurred during the air raids of the Second World War, although the former scene was removed from prints of Godzilla struck for US distribution.) The film also depicts television reporting of the monster's rampage that is particularly unsettling, and again evocative of war trauma. Images of Tokyo's casualties - devastated and strewn across a city reduced to rubble - flicker across the screen while a requiem sung by a girls' choir plays on the soundtrack.
However, despite the powerful wartime memories symbolically recalled through such scenes, the most commonly evoked reading of the concept of Godzilla remains the monster’s powerful appropriateness as a metaphor for the nuclear bomb. The shipwreck depicted at the beginning of the film clearly recalls the 1954 exposure to radiation of the Japanese tuna fishing boat mentioned above. One of the survivors of Godzilla’s first attack in the film actually decries his own misfortune by asking himself: ‘What did I survive Nagasaki for?’ (The scene containing this remark was also edited out of the US version of the film.) Like the nuclear bombs and the American military bombers that delivered them, the monster appears invulnerable as it ignores the immense firepower of Japan’s conventional weapons such as artillery, tanks and aeroplanes. Moreover, when it emits lethal radioactive rays from its mouth, the monster itself appears to resemble a nuclear bomb. As if to reinforce this impression, Ogata comments at one point that ‘Godzilla is indeed the hydrogen bomb itself overshadowing us Japanese’. Similarly, the fact that Serizawa (Ogata’s competitor) decides, after prolonged meditation on the matter, to resort to a suicide mission in order to save the country brings to mind the kamikaze (divine wind) suicide pilots who were, by the end of the war, virtually Japan’s only means of counterattack against the military might of the US. The significance of this drastic action taken by the character Serizawa is further complicated by his having lost an eye during the Second World War. Against the backdrop of a seemingly cheerful and prosperous post-war Japan, he is thus portrayed as an enigmatic critic of society.

In fact, matters are actually even more complicated. Godzilla is as much a threat menacing Japan as another victim of nuclear attack itself. That is, he is defined as a metaphor of post-war Japanese society that has survived the catastrophe caused by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Godzilla has a precedent in the Hollywood film, The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (Eugene Lourie, US, 1953). This Warner Brothers B-film also features a nuclear bomb experiment and a monster; in this case, a nuclear blast at the North Pole awakens a dinosaur. Although the dinosaur attempts to raid Manhattan, a nuclear warhead attached to a US army missile finally destroys it. The film’s characters do not hesitate to use nuclear arms. Instead, what the film communicates is the vehement message that nuclear weapons are indispensable when it comes to the repelling of the enemies of civilisation. By contrast, what is distinctive about Godzilla is that its characters actively engage in earnest discussions about the best way to deal with the monster. On being informed of Godzilla’s likely attack trajectory, Yamane locks himself in his study and frets over the monster’s survival. Given Godzilla’s uniqueness, he also regards the monster as a singularly valuable specimen for study. In his view, analysis of the creature may result in discoveries that could ensure Japan’s survival in the nuclear age.

A closer examination of the film also reveals yet another layer of meaning in that Godzilla may also be identified with numerous former Imperial soldiers who died in battle in the South Seas. A consideration of the places that Godzilla destroys after emerging from Tokyo Bay is thus insightful. Godzilla comes onto land from Shinagawa before continuing on to Shinbashi and Ginza. After turning Japan’s busiest commercial district into a blazing inferno, he stomps upon the nation’s political and communications hubs – the Diet Building and the Television Broadcasting Tower. What appears strange here, though, is that communication (of information) suddenly gets disrupted at this very point. By the time the national defence forces manage to re-identify the location of the monster, Godzilla has already moved to Shitamachi, the traditional shopping, entertainment and residential districts surrounding Sumida River. Having passed Ueno and Asakusa, he enters the river and then withdraws into Tokyo Bay. For those possessing even the slightest knowledge of Tokyo’s spatial layout it must be noticeable that there is one important monument, the Imperial Palace, that is never depicted or referred to – despite the fact that geographical logic decrees that Godzilla would have certainly walked past it on this route. The question therefore remains: why did this monster, having travelled all the way from the South Seas to Japan, return into the sea at the very point where it should have reached the Imperial Palace?

It is helpful in this respect to recall that in the popular and mythical imagination of Japan, the South Seas had always been considered an ambivalent space which possesses both utopian charm and sacred qualities. After Japan experienced West European-style modernisation in the mid-nineteenth century, such popular sentiments concerning the region were actively promoted by the government because they provided a legitimate justification for the nation’s colonial policies. Numerous colonisers left Japan for South Seas destinations such as Saipan and Palau and this was followed by military expansion. As a consequence of its defeat by the Allies in 1945, however, Japan lost all its pre-war colonies and a longing for the South Pacific in general was forbidden. Many Japanese soldiers died after being confronted with the overwhelming force of the US military and, significantly, only a relative handful survived the war. Yanagita Kunio, a renowned Japanese folklorist active during the Second World War, subsequently developed an anti-war theory based upon this phenomenon. In Yanagita’s view, Japanese people have to meet their death in their homeland – the only place where the souls of the dead are considered able to rest peacefully. According to this doctrine, however, when soldiers die in battle abroad, the final destination of their souls remains undetermined and their souls therefore remain in limbo. Assuming Yanagita’s view, Japan’s numerous Pacific war-dead would therefore have been left in the South Seas, abandoned forever, and unable ever to return to their distant home.

The contemporary folklorist, Akasaka Norio, has thus provided an interpretation of Godzilla’s journey towards the Imperial Palace in which the monster is identified as the embodiment of the unquiet ghosts of the soldiers who met with violent deaths far from home. As indirect evidence supporting this view, Akasaka points to the fact that Godzilla evoked Mishima Yukio’s profound sympathy (cf. Yomota 1992: 13–18). So why then did the souls of fallen warriors assume the terrifying form of a monster? The Freudian concept of the ‘return of the repressed’ provides a crucial point of reference here. Godzilla was horrifying precisely because he embodied the souls of those who died during the war.
is to say that the mental image of the casualties of the war was placed in an abject relation to those Japanese who had survived the atrocities and who now enjoyed the prosperity and democracy of post-war life. This psychological process is also profoundly caught up with the issue of collective ‘historical oblivion’ felt by many Japanese people when it came to public discussion of the war. For instance, in the very year when Godzilla is imagined to have visited Tokyo on film, the Japanese Emperor Hirohito, then 54 years old but still the figurehead of the country, would have been uniquely absorbed in his marine biology studies.

This monster, saddled with such a burden of complex metaphors and covert meanings, is finally defeated by means of Serizawa’s noble self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, it was only six months after the production of Godzilla in 1954 that the monster struck back in a sequel entitled Godzilla’s Counter Attack (Gojira no gyakushū, Oda Motoyoshi, 1955). Ever since then, 24 more films (including a big-budget version of the Godzilla story made in the US in 1998) have been shot and this series of films is now regarded as a well-established genre in its own right. Indeed, the tally of Godzilla films only increases further if we also include specially edited versions (often featuring additional scenes) that have been released in territories such as the Philippines and the US. While Godzilla appeared as a sinister and menacing entity during the 1950s, he was transformed into a straightforward embodiment of Japanese nationalism for the 1962 King Kong versus Godzilla (Kingukongu tai Gojiru, Honda Ishirō) in which he fights against foreign enemies in the foothills of Mount Fuji. Godzilla, alongside two other ‘friendly monsters’, also defended Japan from the invader from outer space, King Ghidora, in The Greatest Battle on Earth (San daikaijū: chikyū saidai no kessen, Honda Ishirō, 1964). In this way, Godzilla has been transformed from foreign menace into Japan’s raging guardian deity while in the process he has lost his historically ambivalent meaning and has simultaneously learnt to give off a certain air of ‘cuteness’. Godzilla and other post-war Japanese movie monsters can thus be divided into good and bad guys as if they are professional wrestlers fighting against one other. Certainly, within a fairly short space of time, monsters such as Godzilla no longer seem able to possess or communicate any overwhelming or awe-inspiring qualities. They even occasionally use joking gestures more familiar from print and television cartoons. This degradation of the ‘Godzilla dynasty’ parallels the decline of the Japanese studio system.

The year 1984 saw the emergence of a movement that aimed to restore the Godzilla film to the status of serious cinema. Evident in the Godzilla films of the 1990s is a certain critical tendency that attempts to transcribe the ambivalent notions of nationalism and anti-nuclear ideology inscribed in the original Godzilla to a contemporary context. For example, one of the more contemporary films opens with a prologue set on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. Godzilla, in this rendition of the island’s guardian spirit, saves a group of desperate Japanese soldiers from the Americans. Among the survivors is a soldier destined to become a major figure in Japanese financial circles. Years later, this character, who now owns a vast international information network, yearns to see his saviour, Godzilla, just one more time. Another film is set in a futuristic society after Japan’s powerful economy has conquered the entire world. A group of evil Caucasians goes back into the past in a time-travel machine in an attempt to destroy Japan’s utopian future through the malicious use of a robot dinosaur they have created, but Godzilla defeats this rival to ensure Japan’s promised world-historical destiny. Moreover, in yet another of the films from the 1990s, a secret weapon made half a century ago in order to destroy Godzilla, ends up disrupting the ecosystem thus resulting in the emergence of a second monster that wrecks Tokyo. The narrative has Godzilla enact a rather melodramatic self-sacrifice and constitutes a critically acclaimed remake of the first film in the series. By contrast, the later Hollywood version of Godzilla (Ronald Emmerich, US, 1998) cites a French nuclear experiment (an actual contemporary event) as the cause of the disturbances that awaken the monster from his aeons of slumber. The narrative of this film principally revolves around the activities of a shadowy French security agency, and therefore eliminates from its storyline the idea of America as a nuclear threat. This concept of America has long been an essential core of the ‘Godzilla genre’. As a result, this particular version of the Godzilla story received a negative critical response in Japan.

Half a century has now passed since Godzilla was produced, and the fact that both it and Seven Samurai were made at Tōhō in 1954 appears ever more intriguing. Although nobody paid attention to the association at the time, both films recount the protection of a vulnerable community against a foreign threat. Furthermore, Shimura Takashi, who played Professor Yamane in Godzilla, was assigned a similar role in Seven Samurai as a samurai leader. The mayor of Ōto Island in Godzilla is also played by the same actor who appears in Seven Samurai as the mayor of the village to which the titular samurai travel. Meanwhile, in real life, Honda Ishirō and Kurosawa Akira, as already noted, remained firm friends. Kurosawa asked his old friend for assistance in directing most of his later films, and Honda’s influence can indeed be detected in such Kurosawa titles as Kagemusha (1980), Ran (1985), and Dreams (Yume, 1990).

Critics have frequently dismissed Honda as unworthy of serious consideration, regarding him merely as the director of entertainment films aimed at children. By contrast, they have elevated Kurosawa to the status of national treasure. As for the men themselves, by all accounts Honda and Kurosawa had nothing but respect for one another’s work. Prospective studies of the history of Japanese cinema should therefore treat Honda’s direction of monster movies and Kurosawa’s interpretation of prestigious sources such as Shakespeare as equally deserving of serious discussion.

Translated by Sachiko Shikoda

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(Note: * indicates special effects supervision by Tsuburaya Eiji)

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