

TITAN OF TERROR

A Personification of the Destroyer of Worlds

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IN 1954, JAPAN WAS BARELY RECOVERING FROM A DEVASTATING DEFEAT IN WORLD WAR II AND A HUMILIATING SEVEN-YEAR AMERICAN OCCUPATION WHEN THE UNITED STATES DROPPED TWO ATOMIC BOMBS OVER HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI. PLUNGED INTO THE ATOMIC AGE, JAPAN PRODUCED A FILM, *GOJIRA* (GODZILLA), THAT REFLECTED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF A PEOPLE TRYING TO SALVAGE THEIR CITIES, THEIR CULTURE, AND THEIR LIVES. IN THE FILM, THE MONSTER IS THE PHYSICAL EMBODIMENT OF THE DESTRUCTIVE FORCES OF NUCLEAR POWER. ITS POIGNANCY IS DERIVED FROM ITS HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS TO REAL EVENTS, INCLUDING THE *LUCKY DRAGON 5* INCIDENT IN WHICH A JAPANESE TUNA TRAWLER WAS COVERED IN RADIOACTIVE ASH FROM THE DETONATION OF AN UNDERWATER AMERICAN ATOM BOMB. MOREOVER, THE FILM CAPTURES THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CENSORSHIP OF THE EXPOSITION OF TRUTH, FOCUSING ON THE BURDEN OF SCIENTIFIC RESPONSIBILITY. FINALLY, THE FILM CONCLUDES BY UNDERSCORING THE ULTIMATE VICTIMIZATION OF HUMANITY UNDER THE TYRANNY OF MASSIVE DESTRUCTION AND WARNS AGAINST THE PERILS OF NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION.

The attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Imperial Navy “provoked a rage bordering on the genocidal among Americans.” It prompted “exterminationist rhetoric” that reflected deep-seated anti-Oriental sentiment, including Admiral William Halsey’s motivational slogan, “Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs” and the popular wartime phrase, “the only good Jap is a dead Jap.”¹ The Japanese were pejoratively referred to as “Japs” and “Nips” in the media and official government memoranda.² These racial epithets were also frequently heard in wartime songs such as “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap” and “Good-bye Mama, I’m Off to Yokohama.”³ Anti-Japanese sentiment was further characterized by its “nonhuman or subhuman representation”.⁴ The Japanese were perceived as animals, reptiles, and insects, which translated to their dehumanization and humiliating treatment in American internment camps during the Second World War. Specifically, the Japanese were associated with “simian imagery,” or the monkey and ape.⁵ The reduction to “stupid, bestial, even pestilential subhuman caricatures on the enemy” made it easier to tolerate the prospect of mass killing other human beings.⁶ Indeed, in his private diary, President Harry Truman, in reference to the planned use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki commented:

Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital or the new” [in reference to Kyoto and Tokyo]...I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare...because they are beasts...⁷

The superiority complex espoused by the United States extended to its occupation of Japan from 1945-1952. The stated purpose was to democratize the country and to establish peace within the nation. General MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied forces, claimed, “We could not simply encourage the growth of democracy. We had to make sure that it grew.” Following the detonation of the atomic bombs, Japanese resistance remained “muted”.⁸ The United States enacted a stringent censorship policy that banned all newspapers, magazines, and other print media from publishing anything that “might invite mistrust or resentment” of the occupation forces due to fear of the publication of such material would “tarnish the reputation of the United States both in Japan and in other nations.”⁹ The censorship extended to school textbooks, which omitted any mention of atomic bombings or scientific research on the bombing casualties. As a result, the

Japanese were denied the ability to reflect on the meaning of nuclear weapons and their impact on the nation.

That is, until *Gojira* appeared. The film, directed by Ishira Honda, provided the psychological outlet to externalize the fears of nuclear annihilation and the attempts of a people to rebuild their cities, their culture, and their lives, threatened by radioactive fallout. The monster is the physical embodiment of the destructive forces of nuclear power. The texture of Godzilla’s skin is made to simulate radiation scarring, his roar to resemble air-raid sirens, and his footsteps to reverberate like exploding bombs.¹⁰ The film’s poignancy derives from its historical allusions to the tragedies wrought by the atom bombs. The most significant of these include the *Lucky Dragon 5* incident, hypostatizing the pervasive tension between censorship and truth, the burden of scientific responsibility, and the film’s humanitarian ending.



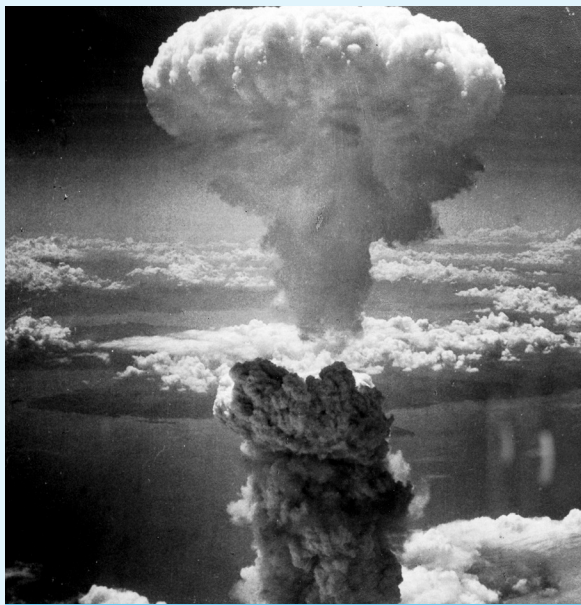
JAPANESE MOVIE POSTER FOR GODZILLA, 1954 (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“The Japanese were perceived as animals, reptiles and insects which translated to their dehumanization and humiliating treatment in American internment camps during the Second World War.”

The *Lucky Dragon 5* incident refers to a Japanese tuna trawler, *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* (*Lucky Dragon 5*) which, in mid-March 1954, found itself covered in radioactive fallout from the thermonuclear tests the United States was conducting on Bikini Atoll. The hydrogen bombs far exceeded their predicted effectiveness, causing the damage from the nuclear fallout to extend far past the designated danger zones. A member of the boat's crew remembered, “The sky in the west suddenly lit up and the sea became brighter than day.”¹¹ The 23 crewmembers were all hospitalized for more than a year, while the *Lucky Dragon's* radio operator died seven months later. *Gojira's* opening scene depicts the very incident just described. A fishing boat is peacefully floating on the ocean when a sudden burst of light, accompanied by a thunderous explosion, blinds the fishermen on board. The film emphasizes the radio operator, who is

seen frantically transmitting the distress signal, and whose death keenly mirrors the reality that had befallen *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* months earlier. Furthermore, the blinding light illuminates a white, round raft revealing a “No. 5” painted upon it in black letters, blatantly establishing the historical connection. The significance of this allusion is primarily political. Japan inculpates the United States for the devastation and destruction of its cities through fire and radiation. The burden of responsibility falls on the Americans. In fact, Dr. Yamane attributes *Gojira's* menacing presence to the “recent experimental nuclear detonations...that may have removed it from its surroundings.”¹²

The insinuations against the United States are momentous for their audacity, given the times. The tension between compliance with secrecy and the exposition of truth is realized in the parliamentary committee to which Dr. Yamane addresses the dangers of *Gojira*. Half of the committee asserts that “Professor Yamane's report is of such extreme importance it must not be made public” to which three vociferous women dissent by exclaiming, “What are you saying? Because it is so important, it should be made public!”¹³ These opposite viewpoints were emblematic of Japan's competing cultures following the occupation. Half of the Japanese population was disillusioned by Japan's militarism and embraced the cause of peace. They sought to cultivate peaceful diplomatic relations with the United States and further democratize values within the country. The other half resented American encroachment and was staunchly against US nuclear experimentation. In the film, the newspapers on the following morning divulge the panic-inducing information on *Gojira*: truth had prevailed. In this scene, a new meta-dimension is spawned, wherein the film proffers a criticism against censorship policies instated by the United States. The film errs on the side of truth, allowing Japan to unite in opposition against the nuclear threat embodied in *Gojira*, and consequently, American nuclear proliferation. The scenes that portray these critical points of discussion also ground the film in realism, depicting the events as though they were occurring in real



AERIAL VIEW OF THE BOMBING OF NAGASAKI (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)



CREW MEMBER OF DAIGO FUKURYU MARU RECEIVING TREATMENT (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

time. This characteristic differentiates the film from fantasy and places it within the science fiction genre.

The moral quandary of the film is embodied in the scientist, Serizawa, and the scientific responsibility with which he is charged. Serizawa recognizes the dangerous, dual nature of his “oxygen destroyer” in harnessing its power for the benefit of mankind, and his profound fear that, in other hands, it could instead be used as a weapon, perhaps more grievous than the atom bomb itself.¹⁴ Serizawa’s concerns stem deeper, as he is concerned that not only will his work be put to destructive and violent purposes, but also that he will be the primary instigator of its realization—that he will be responsible for allowing his discovery to be used against humanity. Serizawa argues, “Even if I burn my notes, the secret will still be in my head. Until I die, how can I be sure I won’t be forced by someone to make the device again?”¹⁵ Again, the film accesses the meta-dimension when Ogata and Serizawa engage in a physical

struggle, representing the two poles of the debate. Serizawa knocks Ogata down and injures him; the violence he has inflicted causes the scientist to stop in his tracks. The realization prompts Serizawa to burn his notes, and undertake the ultimate sacrifice to ensure the oxygen destroyer would only ever be used once. This moral predicament parallels similar concerns among the physicists working on the atomic bomb in the United States. Robert Oppenheimer, the leading physicist in charge of the Manhattan Project (the organization which manufactured the first atom bomb), knowing the full capacity of the bomb’s destructive powers, advised against using it on Japanese civilians. Instead, he counseled releasing it on benign territory so that “the first atomic bombings would be an act of rhetoric, aimed less at the enemy’s cities than at his mind.”¹⁶ Upon watching a test bomb explode, Oppenheimer was reminded of a passage from Hebrew scripture: “I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”¹⁷ *Gojira* recoils from the bomb’s magnitude of power. This is made poignantly clear in the film’s ending.

Gojira’s humanitarian ideology is encapsulated in the victimization of *Godzilla* and Serizawa in the closing scene of the film. Throughout the entire movie, *Godzilla*’s catastrophic potency has underscored the cataclysmic effect of the atomic bomb on Japan. Yet, the ending scene introduces a paradigm shift in which compassion reaches out to embrace even the destructive power at the center of its story—*Godzilla*. Underwater, the audience glimpses the beast in a peaceful state, so that they are reminded of the external stimulus, namely, nuclear force, which has violently wrenched *Godzilla* from his natural habitat. As humanity responds by unleashing a force greater even than *Godzilla* himself, the film’s underlying narrative reveals *Godzilla*’s victimization. Yet, humanity is not victorious, for both man and monster perish as victims of massive devastation. While the film’s conclusion is the culmination of the atomic tragedy that ravaged Japan during World War II, the entire film maintains a gravitas and sincerity in its effort to convey this historical misfortune. *Godzilla*’s destructive acts are never gratuitous; the audience is never invited to admire and derive enjoyment from *Godzilla*’s

“If we keep on conducting nuclear tests, it’s possible that another *Godzilla* might appear somewhere in the world, again.”

tremendous feats of destructive might. This again distinguishes the film as a science fiction portrayal of an emotional reality. The film's historical inspiration retains a cogent presence, which eludes the fantasy film genre. Indeed, the film's parting words allude to the real fears of a nuclearized world, which Dr. Yamane articulates by stating, "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."¹⁸

Gojira is a Japanese science fiction film incorporating a monster as symbolic of the destructive and terrifying effects of atomic warfare. Japanese-American relations had been strained prior to World War II, underscored by deep-seated racism that endowed the United States with a superiority complex. The occupation that ensued established a rigid censorship policy that curtailed freedom of speech and expression. As a result, Japan was denied the ability to grieve and reflect over its ravaged nation. *Gojira* was finally produced two years after the occupation had ended, resulting in Japan's first emotional response to the events of the war. Representative of this, the film presents various historical allusions, including the *Lucky Dragon 5* incident, the debate between censorship and truth, and the moral tension ensuing from the bomb's unprecedented power. *Gojira* employs the science fiction genre to present a historical reality with a humanitarian emphasis that was once believed to be the stuff of fantasy. The film serves as a warning to the world about the perils of nuclear warfare and the fate that might arise if more "Godzillas" are awakened.

ENDNOTES

1. John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 36-37, 79.
2. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 78.
3. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 81.
4. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 81.
5. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 87.
6. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 89.
7. Harry Truman, *Hiroshima*.
8. Lawrence Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993), 39.
9. Wittner, *One World or None*, 46.
10. Wittner, *One World or None*, 46.
11. Peter Brothers, *Japan's Nuclear Nightmare: How the Bomb Became a Beast Called 'Godzilla'* (JSTOR), 37.
12. Derek Duke and Fred Dungan, *Chasing Loose Nukes* (Riverside, CA: Dungan, 2007), 9.

13. *Gojira* (Toho Company, 1954).
14. *Gojira* (Toho Company, 1954).
15. *Gojira* (Toho Company, 1954).
16. *Gojira* (Toho Company, 1954).
17. Spencer Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012), 51.
18. Weart, *Rise of Nuclear Fear*, 53.
19. *Gojira* (Toho Company), 1954

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