

**Long Live the King:  
How Godzilla Evolved Through the Cold War to  
Confront Modern Day Monsters**

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## Introduction

On August 6th, 1945 a decision that changed the course of history was made. The United States military flew the bomber *Enola Gay* over the Japanese city of Hiroshima and dropped an atomic bomb, then another from the *Bockscar* three days later on August 9th onto the city of Nagasaki, thus ending the Pacific Theatre of World War II not long after with an unconditional Japanese surrender. This horrific tragedy which killed upwards of 200,000 Japanese soldiers and civilians did not come suddenly, as it was the climax to a long campaign of firebombings of Japanese cities on top of an already horrific war throughout various islands in the Pacific. Though horrific, the top brass of the United States military justified these actions by not only arguing it would end the war, but also deter the Soviet Union from any immediate follow up conflict.

These cities were leveled on a scale never before seen in human history. The city was demolished to rubble and fiery ruin; many who survived suffered serious radiation sickness and those caught in the heat flashes of the twin bombs—even miles away from ground zero—formed horrific burns known as keloid scars. According to the 1946 Strategic Bombing Survey found in John Dower's book *Cultures of War*, "No less than 15 to 20 percent of deaths were from radiation... if the effects of the blast and the fire had been entirely absent from the bombing, the number of deaths among people within a radius of one-half mile from ground zero would have been almost as great as the actual figures and the deaths among those within 1 mile would have been only slightly less." It's difficult to understate the global implications of this bomb, as the nuke has hung over mankind's head as a weapon of mass destruction and certain global extinction to this very day. However, for Japan, the immediate impacts physically and culturally reverberated. It would not be the last time the country dealt with the horrors of atomic radiation.

On March 1st, 1954 a small Japanese fishing vessel, the *Daigo Fukuryū Maru*, known as the *Lucky Dragon 5* in English altered course to head for new waters at the Marshall Islands, unaware of the nuclear tests being performed around the same time. The Castle Bravo bomb went off, coating the crew, the ship, and its haul of shark and tuna in a blanket of atomic ash. By the time they had returned to Japanese waters, they had been experiencing severe symptoms of radiation sickness and most died within days or weeks. The ship and its crew made national news and, as it had been less than a decade since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, only compounded the intense fears felt by the Japanese public about nuclear proliferation. Two creatives, director Ishirō Honda and film producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, saw these horrific national tragedies one after another and, inspired by a wave of American monster films including *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* the year prior and a re-release of 1933's *King Kong*, created not just a film steeped in deep relevance and metaphor, but an international cultural phenomenon: 1954's *Gojira*.

After a fishing boat is destroyed and a local village's food supply is decimated, scientists discover Godzilla, a 50 meter tall sea creature awoken and mutated by nuclear testing. Though many attempts to stop him are made, he ultimately rampages through Tokyo and leaves absolute devastation in his wake until he is eventually stopped in Tokyo Bay with the invention of an even deadlier weapon: the oxygen destroyer, a bomb which destroys oxygen atoms and rots away all life caught in its blast. Dr. Daisuke Serizawa, one of the scientists, sacrifices his life to put Godzilla down but not before he burns all notes on the weapon to prevent such a thing from falling in the hands of anyone who would use it for any other purpose. The film ends on a bittersweet note: though Godzilla has been stopped, it will never bring back those who died, and if nuclear weapons continue to be used more creatures like Godzilla may appear.

The messaging of the film was as obvious then as it is today, and it's shown in all aspects of this critically acclaimed masterpiece of a film. Imagery of Tokyo streets in ruin, refugees sickened after encounters with the nuclear horror, even Godzilla's skin texture being much more reminiscent of keloid scarring than scales like a typical reptile. However, I find that these topics have been discussed at length before, and there isn't much I, as an author can do to add to them. While yes, many average American moviegoers and even some film academics are unaware of this dark history (in no small part thanks to the 1956 American cut of the film *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* removing much of this context and metaphor), it is also a topic commonly tread by those who talk about Godzilla and Kaiju cinema. Books like William M. Tsutsui's *In Godzilla's Footsteps* and Steven Ryfle's *Ishirō Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa* weave the background and metaphor of the 1954 original quite well, explaining how nuclear tragedy shaped the iconic character. But as a writer and researcher of Kaiju cinema, I find myself frustrated. Much of the prior academic focus on the topic of Godzilla has been about the 1954 classic and its importance to film, which is entirely understandable because it is a very important film and many Western scholars were relatively unaware of the deeper meanings behind *Gojira*. However, it bothers me that the rest of the franchise remains untouched in terms of introspection beyond some occasional fan deep dives I've found throughout my years following this series. As of 2021, there are 35 other films besides the original and they are scarcely touched in mainstream English language film critique and literature, which I suspect is due in part to the sheer quantity of the franchise, its inaccessibility to Western audiences through inexpensive and well-subtitled means, and an image of shallowness or childishness cast upon the character early on.

Godzilla as a character evolved rapidly from a symbol of horror and fear to an iconic figure of Japanese cultural pride. Within a handful of films, the king of the monsters was headed in a much more light-hearted and campy direction. The rest of this period from the release of *Gojira* in 1954 to 1975, known commonly among Godzilla fans as the *Shōwa* era named after the reign of Emperor Hirohito and his time as the symbolic ruler of Japan, followed this path. By the time of the fifth film, *Ghidorah, the Three Headed Monster* in 1964, where Godzilla, Mothra, and Rodan (two other Toho monsters adopted into the Godzilla mythos) took on the space dragon King Ghidorah, his antagonistic nature was washed away and replaced entirely with a more heroic attitude, fighting more destructive monsters alongside a colorful cast of allies. Though occasionally the films would brush topics of their era, such as 1971's *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* and its psychedelic metaphors for pollution and environmental damage, they were largely seen as shallow and childish by critics of the time and general audiences. The *Shōwa* era ended in 1975, with *Terror of Mechagodzilla*, about Godzilla squaring off one more time with his now famous robotic doppelgänger Mechagodzilla.

However, this was not the end of Godzilla, as he was revived on his 30th anniversary in 1984 with *The Return of Godzilla*, which began the start of what is now known as the *Heisei* era named for the new reign of Emperor Akihito, who would take power from his father Hirohito five years after *Return* in 1989. This era begins a return to form for Godzilla's character, who had been a hero in so many of the prior films, and once again strayed the line between anti-hero and antagonist depending on the film and touched on many of the topics of its day, such as Japan's place in the Cold War (*The Return of Godzilla* in 1984), genetic engineering and gene splicing (*Godzilla vs Biollante* in 1989), Japanese nationalism and the economic miracle (*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah*), and so on. This era would come to an end in 1995 with *Godzilla*

*vs Destoroyah*, where Godzilla dies fighting Destoroyah, a crustacean monster formed from the oxygen destroyer that killed Godzilla 40 years before in a grandiose finale that cemented the darker, more serious nature of this period in Godzilla's history. Though unlike Shōwa's finale, this was intentional to allow for the Heisei era to come to a natural conclusion, and allow the American adaptation and intended trilogy some breathing room.

What began a new era for Godzilla was not success, but failure. The now-infamous 1998 American film *Godzilla*, directed by Roland Emmerich, was released to disastrous critical and financial response from American and Japanese audiences alike. This failure was so immediate and apparent that it sparked a new era from its creators. The Millennium era, not named for any exchange of hands in the Japanese monarchy but instead the turn of the century, was born a year later with *Godzilla 2000* in 1999. Though maintaining its dark tone, his era shied away from the traditional sequeled nature of Heisei, and instead relied more on anthology-esque storytelling about different "what ifs" of the Godzilla character. This era is commonly known to rely on style over substance, but some like *Godzilla, Mothra, and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack* in 2001 discuss Japanese war crimes during World War II and how they have been forgotten by the world at large by casting Godzilla not as a radioactive dinosaur born from a bomb, but as a white-eyed spirit of vengeance incarnate of those wronged by the Imperial Japanese Army during the war. Unfortunately, much of this era does not follow this intelligent discussion of real-world events and history, instead sadly falling into the unfortunate sandtrap that Godzilla films should not give any care to deeper meaning to make way for entertaining fights. Further proven by the end of the era, 2004's *Godzilla: Final Wars*, a loud and hollow but ultimately loving homage to Godzilla and his mythos on the character's 50th anniversary, which

marked the end of the series for another brief period. However, as you can guess, Godzilla is never gone for long.

After a decade-long silence, America was allowed another try at the monster it inadvertently helped create with Gareth Edwards' *Godzilla* in 2014. Though Kaiju films such as *Cloverfield* (2008) and *Pacific Rim* (2013) had come out of the United States before, and indeed the genre had been started there with 1933's *King Kong*, many were hesitant about America's second attempt to bring this iconic character to life. Though it was seen as flawed, it was the spark of what eventually became the new *Reiwa* era. What is notable about the *Reiwa* period is how Godzilla has feet planted on two sides of the Pacific: while American studio Legendary Pictures set up what became known as the "Monsterverse" with many of Toho's staples as well as *King Kong*, Toho saw the international rebirth of their series as a sign and decided to use recent events to create its next Godzilla project. Under the guidance of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* creator Hideaki Anno, 2016's *Shin Godzilla* was born as a modernized *Gojira*, using the horrific catastrophe from the earthquake, tsunami, and eventual meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, known commonly as "3.11" due to the catalyst earthquake happening on March 11th, 2011 as a metaphorical backdrop much the same way *Gojira* used Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The film also discusses American militarism similar to *The Return of Godzilla*, deriding Japan's place as a United States protectorate state as American governance is quick to dispose of Japan with another nuke as a means to get rid of Godzilla. Meanwhile, Legendary's *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* in 2019 dealt with themes of environmentalism in a more modern sense by interpreting its star monster and his cast as natural disasters being exploited by eco-fascists to "clear the slate," but while the antagonistic monsters represent



unnatural changes to nature and climate disaster, the more benevolent monsters represent balance: if we live in harmony with nature, nature will not harm us.

The Reiwa era is still going, and seems to have no sign of stopping. In 2021, *Godzilla vs. Kong*, the sequel to *King of the Monsters*, was released to a surprisingly warm critical and commercial reception given how *King of the Monsters* languished at the box office and was met with lukewarm reception by critics and *Godzilla vs. Kong*'s home/theatrical release during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toho also released a new Netflix anime series *Godzilla: Singular Point* in 2021 to great success, bringing back many old fan-favorite Kaiju who hadn't been seen in years and giving them a fresh coat of paint. Godzilla as a character has taken many forms, his films and character constantly being altered to fit the social and political anxieties of the time while keeping what makes him so beloved. However, it stands out that the rest of the franchise remains relatively untouched in Western media beyond the occasional paper or fan deep dives I've found throughout my years following this series. Outside of some brief texts, little can be found on *Godzilla vs. Biollante* and the morality of gene splicing and cloning, a plot ripped straight from the headlines of its day in 1989. Very little discussion is had on *The Return of Godzilla* and its commentary on Japan's place in the Cold War. It's understandable why there's little on more recent films, but *Biollante* is 10 years older than the writer of this piece and there's so few articles on it? It feels strange to see, with a franchise so rich in metaphor and historical context even if the franchise itself doesn't always take advantage of those strengths. Shōwa's iconization and lightening of the character, Heisei's building on themes of war and environmentalism, Millennium's interrogation of the past, and Reiwa's dismal view of our future all paint the image of a character who has evolved to match the times but kept the heart and soul all the way through.

## Chapter 1 - Shōwa and the Nuclear Hero

Not long after *Gojira*'s release, the series began to undergo a radical metamorphosis.

Less than a year after the original, *Godzilla Raids Again* was released in April of 1955 to far less love and box office success than its predecessor. It's often considered one of the handful of black sheep of the franchise, though however true that may be, it's the black sheep that helped set the framework for this era. Cheaply made and rushed out the door without its original creatives like Ishirō Honda behind the camera, it pits a second Godzilla once again awoken by hydrogen bomb tests against an ankylosaur-esque opponent named Anguirus in a by-the-books rerun of *Gojira* but with the addition of one of Godzilla's future boxing buddies. The trend of Godzilla fighting another monster begins here, and it only becomes cemented as a core aspect of these films as *King Kong vs. Godzilla* and *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (known stateside as *Godzilla vs. The Thing*) were released in 1962 and 1964. While Godzilla was getting goofy with it and fighting the Eighth Wonder of the World and Toho's new roster of Kaiju, he was earning a reputation at home and overseas. Though Japan had seen the pain-filled and meaningful original, Americans were subjected to a much different version of the film.

After *Gojira*'s Japanese release, American production companies and distributors were looking for "cheap" foreign films to fill double feature spaces in theaters. Toho, eager to make any money they could, sold to up and coming Embassy Pictures and gave them carte blanche to edit the film how they chose due to the fact that financially, they had no choice otherwise. Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu in the book *In Godzilla's Footsteps - Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* elaborates: "In the hands of Embassy Pictures' executive producer Joseph

Levine (along with producers Harold Ross, Richard Kay, and writer/director Terry Morse), the movie - the deliberate message of which was bound to offend the mainstream American audience - received a relatively quick and inexpensive makeover into an inoffensive object of mass entertainment and was marketed through radio saturation campaigns... the terms and conditions of the Toho-Embassy Picture contract gave the American side infinitely wide latitude in what they could crop, add, and superimpose, reflecting metaphorically the reality of contemporary power relations between the two countries. As denizens of a vanquished nation desperate to replenish its war-depleted reserves of the now almighty U.S. dollar, Toho's executives were willing to sell almost anything to tap into an American movie market that would remain alluring through the 1960s and early 1970s. One of the commodities sold was artistic integrity and pride, resignedly forsworn by *Gojira's* cinematic progenitors” (Guthrie-Shimizu, 55). *Gojira* was cut down into *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, removing over 30 minutes from the film and any explicit references to Hiroshima or Nagasaki, and adding scenes of actor Raymond Burr playing reporter Steve Martin who describes Godzilla's destruction to audiences and is precariously edited into scenes from the original film. This melodramatic reporting combined with the laughably executed English dubbing, as Americans and their relationship to subtitles is complex, created a film that was mocked and belittled by critics of the time, many of whom called it “cheap cinematic horror stuff” (Guthrie-Shimizu, 55) although one could argue the substance-devoid cut of the 1954 classic deserves these criticisms.

This cut of the film, combined with the handful of lighthearted sequel films that immediately followed, helped cement *Godzilla* internationally not as a warning against nuclear war but as B-movie filler meant for late night television features and an almost superhero-like persona. Stripped of all context and meaning, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* was quickly

shuffled into the same category that creature features of its time such as *Them!* (1954) or *Tarantula* (1955). The television embargo that Hollywood had did not affect Godzilla, so many of his early films took up timeslots in the weekend afternoons or late evenings. In Toho's executive offices, this attitude was matched. In the early 1960's, Toho made a "calculated decision to tone down Godzilla's villainous image and credentials and cultivate a following among children" (Guthrie-Shimizu, 59). Though Godzilla maintained his villainous "heel" status in *King Kong vs. Godzilla*, which presented the iconic American ape as the underdog hero of the film in contrast to Godzilla, and in *Mothra vs. Godzilla*, it's clear that in both films he is a far cry from the tortured reptilian who spreads radioactive dust wherever he walks when he's kicking rocks at King Kong or getting dragged around by the tail by Mothra. By the time *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* was released in Japanese theaters in December 1964, Godzilla was placed as a protagonist alongside Mothra and Rodan, another Toho Kaiju, against King Ghidorah the three-headed space dragon who Godzilla would go on to call his arch-nemesis.

As the 1960s wore on, Godzilla continued to shy away from his darker roots and embrace the strange. One interpretation of why Godzilla continued to become more and more absurd is the economic conditions of his home country. Historian William M. Tsutsui explains: "The monster itself was tamed and transformed in the 1960s, reflecting not just the swelling national self-confidence of the economic miracle years but also the changing demographics of the Japanese moviegoing audience and the creeping infantilization - the cutification - that is a distinguishing characteristic of post-war Japanese culture (from dark and vengeful to goofy, and then eventually back again)" (Tsutsui, 4). As Japanese audiences became more comfortable with this new era of economic prosperity and a new middle class rose from the ashes of World War

II, Godzilla became a far more palatable character for children and young audiences. Looking to the next films that follow the first five, such as *Invasion of Astro-Monster* (1966), *Ebirah, Horror of the Deep* (1966) or *Son of Godzilla* (1967), one can immediately see not only a continued appeal to the West, but also an appeal to young audiences. *Invasion of Astro-Monster*'s space setting and borrowing of tropes from American shows like *Star Trek* (such as the fictional Xilians who control Ghidorah looking suspiciously human), as well as casting white American actor Nick Adams as Astronaut Glenn demonstrates a certain desire to sell these films to Western audiences. With Godzilla's iconic dance after beating King Ghidorah in their first bout also referencing then-popular children's manga *Osomatsu-kun* which ran from 1962 to 1969, the slow turn to appeal to young audiences only grew with 1967's *Son of Godzilla*. Introducing Minilla, Godzilla's adopted son of the same species, we see them build a father-son bond and follow their misadventures on an island full of giant praying mantis known as Kamacuras. Though the next two films, *Destroy All Monsters* in 1968 and *All Monsters Attack* in 1969 would feature Minilla prominently and indeed both followed a much more upbeat and lighthearted tone, for a brief moment Godzilla would slip back into his darker environmentalist roots.

The 1960s brought about an era of unprecedented economic prosperity and a rebirth of industry to Japan. However, as we can see throughout history, "progress" leaves a mark. As Kevin Holt Richardson explains in his article *Scientific Wastelands and Toxic Utopias: The New Environmentalism of 1970s Japan*, "By the end of the 1960s, a severe environmental crisis had gripped the Japanese public and ushered in an era of national concern over the toxic burdens of industrial growth. Poor rural communities poisoned by industrial runoff and middle-class metropolitan residents choked by air pollution found that Japan's two decades of rapid

economic growth required a toxic sacrifice that their bodies were made to bear.” (Richardson, 1). The country, seeking to pull itself into the new world order, industrialized on a rapid and unregulated scale whether or not the people of Japan being poisoned and smothered wanted it. Indeed, three of the Four Big Pollution Diseases of Japan (Minamata, Niigata Minamata, and Yokkaichi Asthma) cropped up in the decades following the war. Each of these diseases came to communities downwind of industrial pollutants like methylmercury and cadmium, and each one caused permanent injuries, sickness, or even death in many cases. Films such as *Minamata: Their Victims and Their World*, directed by Noriaki Tsuchimoto in 1971, were made at the time in response to how widespread the problems were and showed the rampant neglectfulness of corporate and industrial powers. As resistance from citizens and student unions became more and more apparent in the 1970’s, a Japanese director named Yoshimitsu Banno looked out at the city of Yokkaichi “just covered in black, the sea filled with detergent from all the detergent dumped into it” as he recalled in 2014 during an interview with SciFi Japan, and after seeing this imagined a tadpole-esque creature being mutated by all this pollution. *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, one of the strangest and most divisive films of the Shōwa era, was thus born.

Starring Akira Yamauchi and Hiroyuki Kawase as Dr. Toru Yano and his son Ken respectively, the film centers on a scientist and his son who encounter a poisonous sea monster which is revealed to be an alien creature who feeds on pollution named Hedorah. After she sinks an oil tanker to feed on it, Hedorah adapts to land to feed on industrial and metropolitan wastes while Ken insists that Godzilla will come to the aid of humanity in this battle against its own folly. As she consumes more and more pollutants, she grows in power and develops new abilities, such as the power to fly and spray toxic mist. Godzilla, who wins the first bout between the two, cannot even handle the toxic fumes and amorphous shape of the Smog

Monster and is nearly killed in a surprisingly bloody mess of a fight. Afterwards, the father-son combination and the usual deluge of scientists and military types concoct a plan to both allow Godzilla to heal and beat Hedorah by drying her out with electrodes. Following another messy and surreal fight where Godzilla propels himself into flight with his atomic breath to catch up with Hedorah, Godzilla beats the pollution monster by drying her to dust, giving one final look to our cast of characters as if ashamed of man for bringing this onto themselves before doing his usual walk into the sea.

This movie is, frankly, the most bizarre film of the franchise. A variety of psychedelic visuals litter the film, particularly during the party sequence early on in the film coinciding with the first clash of the two titular monsters where everyone is masqueraded in fish masks dancing to a song about how pollution is going to kill all life. There are random animated vignettes littered throughout the film and a variety of unique, avant-garde visual styles never seen before or since in the franchise help *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* stand out among its peers. The film isn't shy or subtle about its environmentalist messaging, and neither was Banno, who spoke openly about his influences from 1962's *Silent Spring* and America's dangerous usage of pesticides (*Yoshimitsu Banno - Behind Hedorah*) on the lyrics of the film's feature song *Return the Sun!* (also known as *Save the Earth!* in English). Lyrics like:

*"Islands... fish... where've you gone?*

*Dragonflies... butterflies... where've you gone?"*

Referencing Rachel Carson's famous 1962 book *Silent Spring* and her studies on pesticides like DDT's effects on wildlife, as well as lines naming off chemicals like lead, mercury, and cadmium creating "filthy polluted oceans, filthy polluted air." Despite the film's trippy visuals, animated sequences, and funkadelic soundtrack, the moments of carnage on the

ground are some of the most visceral and graphic since *Gojira*, maybe even moreso than that film. Images of people drowned in brackish grey sludge, entire blocks of pedestrians choked by the air they breathe when Hedorah flies overhead, and most disturbing of all a man boiled to the bone by Hedorah's acidic runoff seen firsthand by a young boy who doesn't fully comprehend the horror.

Though Hedorah herself is one of the most fascinating Kaiju in all of Godzilla's history, from her frog-like blob design to her stand-in as the ever-growing pile of waste that an industrial capitalist society creates to her strange powerset, what I find most interesting about this film is Godzilla himself. Though his slow slide into a heroic position is well-documented at this point in this paper, it's in this movie where he truly finishes that transformation. No longer do people cry out in fear at his presence like the original, nor is his allegiance ever in doubt like in *Ebirah, Horror of the Deep*, here he is a superhero come to save the day and the human characters not only work alongside him to stop a far worse threat but actively cheer him on during his fights. The only sign of aggression towards mankind is his final look of disdain before he returns to the ocean. He is the environmentalist protector of the Earth, a far cry from his original film but still keeping the core of his character. His warning and message simply moved on with the times, going from the foreboding and paranoid attitudes of the immediate post-war period to a time more concerned about the aftereffects of industrial society and its consequences.

This would not be the last time the king of the monsters dabbled in man's place in the natural world, but it would be for the Shōwa era. My own love of this film was, unfortunately, not enough to make it stick to general audiences 28 years before I was born. According to Banno in a 2006 interview, "the critics were harsh. Only the *Yomiuri Shimbun* offered a good



review and most other media ignored it.” The English dub was put into 1978’s *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* coming in at Number 14, though notably Roger Ebert said years later that *Hedorah* was his favorite of the series in his 1985 review of *The Return of Godzilla*. Banno was famously given complete creative control during the making of the film due to higher ups in the Godzilla pantheon like Ishirō Honda or Tomoyuki Tanaka being unavailable for a variety of reasons. When they, particularly Tanaka, discovered what was released to theaters he was forbidden from ever making another Godzilla film as long as Tanaka lived and the series returned to its normal track.

This film was not the end of the Shōwa era, and the four films that followed (*Godzilla vs. Gigan*, *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla*, and *Terror of Mechagodzilla*) merely hammered home the point I’ve beaten into the wood: Godzilla’s days as a menace to Japan were long since past. To Japan and the world he was an icon of a nation in its zenith, a cultural landmark and a late-night creature feature staple for the kids. Indeed, the films that followed took great inspiration from other *Tokusatsu* (or special effects heavy) media that had cropped up over the intervening years. One only needs to look at Jet Jaguar, Godzilla’s kind-hearted robotic ally with his own theme song in *Godzilla vs. Megalon* to see the resemblance to something like *Ultraman*, another Japanese cultural phenomenon of the time featuring a benevolent size-changing humanoid who fights evil monsters. As the era came to a close in 1975 with *Terror of Mechagodzilla*, Godzilla’s cultural relevance as a symbol of Japanese cultural dominance was sealed the world over. Though Godzilla quickly became known for b-movie schlock and quirky weirdness, films like *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* proved it wasn’t impossible to return him to a darker, more allegorical place.

The Shōwa era was, in many ways, the defining moment for Godzilla. It would define the many forms that the character took, from his origins as an allegory for the atom bomb to better known position as a figurehead of the golden age of Kaiju cinema. Though American media at large would treat Godzilla as disposable, and the films were largely made for a mass audience with low budgets, they were not incapable of touching on relevant themes of their time, such as the Space Race or pollution and early environmentalism. However, it would be some time until the series returned to its darker roots.

## Chapter 2 - Heisei: Cold War Science From the Headlines

There was nearly a decade between *Terror of Mechagodzilla* and the eventual release of *The Return of Godzilla* in December of 1984, and both in the world of monsters and our own the landscape was rapidly changing. In the halls of Toho, several attempts were made to bring the king of the monsters back during these intervening years as the Shōwa era did not end with a bang, but with a whimper. *Terror of Mechagodzilla* was one of the lowest performing Godzilla films in the series' long history, selling less than a million tickets (around 980,000 to be precise) in its home country according to David Kalat's *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series*, which kept a record of all box office returns from every Godzilla film until 2004. Attempts like *The Rebirth of Godzilla*, an in-color remake of *Gojira* and, according to Steve Ryfle's *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"*, "reports surfaced in Japan (and were transmitted to the U.S. in the fanzine *Japanese Giants* #5, published in 1978) that Toho and Henry G. Saperstein's UPA Productions would jointly produce *Godzilla vs. the Devil (Gojira Tai Debiru)* to be released sometime in 1978" (Ryfle, 216). The film would have involved Godzilla fighting a variety of giant animal-like monsters before eventually fighting Lucifer himself. *Godzilla vs. the Devil* was quietly canned some time after this announcement and film as a medium became lesser for it. A 25th anniversary film was also planned, using the backdrop of the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear plant failure in the United States as its own nuclear tragedy to reboot the character, but sadly the plans fizzled out with nary an explanation.

Meanwhile, outside Toho's writing rooms and offices Japan continued to find itself caught both politically and geographically in the middle of two world powers struggling for

dominance. Although the Shōwa era can be seen as a time when Japan was growing in power and strength, it did not mean the nation wasn't caught in the middle of conflicts not its own.

After World War II came to a close in Asia, Japan was taken apart similarly to fellow Axis ally Germany and turned into what is essentially an American proxy state. In September 1952, the newly occupied nation was forced into the US-Japan Security Treaty, known more commonly as *Anpo* (from *Anpo jōyaku* in Japanese). This treaty, signed alongside the San Francisco Peace Treaty that ended the Pacific Theatre, was a heavily lopsided soft colonization by the United States.

Nick Kapur's *Japan at the Crossroads - Conflict and Compromise after Anpo* explains in detail: "...the security pact was unquestionably an 'unequal' treaty that enshrined semicolonial status for Japan, with 'subordinate independence' under U.S. hegemony, by allowing the United States to keep the island of Okinawa and maintain thousands of military installations throughout the Japanese mainland" (Kapur, 11). In addition, the treaty also "allowed U.S. forces stationed in Japan to be used for any purpose in the 'Far East' without any prior consultation with the Japanese government, made no mention of a U.S. obligation to defend Japan if Japan were to be attacked, and explicitly allowed U.S. troops stationed in Japan to be used to put down 'internal riots or disturbances' (presumably referring to leftist or communist-inspired protests)" (Kapur, 11). The initial version of *Anpo* stripped Japan of all self-determination, and many voices from both sides of the Japanese political spectrum spoke out against the treaty. The United States planting bases all over Japan forced it to take a side in the Cold War and went against a growing sentiment of neutrality among the people of Japan. It wasn't until the *Anpo* Protests of 1959-1960, in which millions of citizens from all walks of life protested the disparities of the treaty, that anything was done to rectify it.

Though Japan eventually received better and more fair treatment under the 1960 revisions, and a significant portion of Japanese citizens would and continue to chafe under United States occupation, their alliance with the United States forced them to take a side in a conflict they wished to remain neutral in. Throughout the next few decades, Japan would remain a staging ground from which America fought wars to “contain” communism in Korea and Vietnam, and its proximity to the Soviet Union and China made it a valuable ally to America’s continued imperialism. Though the Cold War would cool and heat up at various points throughout the decades, the United States under president Ronald Reagan began the Strategic Defense Initiative in March of 1983, also known as the “Star Wars program”, as an intention to eliminate nuclear weapons as mutually assured threat which was seen by the Soviets as a “re-ignition” of a new type of arms race<sup>1</sup>. This placed Japan in a precarious position between two nuclear powers, both of which saw the nations value but both of whom really didn’t care about Japan itself. Under these circumstances, it’s no surprise that *The Return of Godzilla* winds up feeling so impassioned.

A direct sequel to *Gojira* and ignoring all films after it, a new Godzilla rises from an offshore volcano 30 years after the original burned down Japan. He destroys a fishing vessel but his presence is kept secret from the world lest his resurgence cause a panic. However, Godzilla causes an international crisis when he destroys a Soviet nuclear submarine which is believed to be an attack by the Americans due to their relationship with (and the sub’s proximity to) Japan. This forces Japan to reveal that Godzilla has returned to diplomatically prevent a new arms race, but both America and the Soviet Union immediately turn around and demand that not only should Godzilla be nuked, but either superpower should lead the charge in the fight against him.

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<sup>1</sup> The Star Wars program and its impact on the latter end of the Cold War are a subject best covered in Pavel Podvig’s article for the *Science and Global Security*, “*Did Star Wars Help End the Cold War? Soviet Response to the SDI Program.*”

As Godzilla rampages through the countryside, he finds a nuclear power plant to feed on but is led away by a flock of birds. As birds navigate the Earth using the magnetic poles, it's theorized that Godzilla can be led around using a magnetic transmitter. Though the Prime Minister assures the two butting superpowers that neither will decide Japan's fate and neither will be dropping atom bombs, the Soviets move a control ship armed with the ability to launch a nuke from space secretly into Tokyo Bay in order to stop Godzilla on their own terms if they feel it necessary. When Godzilla arrives in Tokyo as predicted, the Soviet ship is damaged and a nuke is accidentally launched, and the United States launches one as well to counteract it. Godzilla is eventually stopped not by a nuclear bomb, but by natural means: the magnetic field leads Godzilla to the volcano he crawled out of in the opening where he's trapped inside. But similar to *Gojira*, the victory is bittersweet: as long as there are nuclear weapons on Earth, Godzilla will live, and Godzilla will reign.

What interests me the most about *The Return of Godzilla* is how it compares to *Gojira*. Whereas *Gojira*, as has been shown, came in an era of Japanese mourning and trauma, *The Return of Godzilla* came during a much more international time. In an industrial golden age, with a global dominance in the increasingly popular electronics industry as well as a cultural footprint in the West, we see a Japan that is much more confident. Though it's caught between two superpowers wrestling for control, it's a nation on its own two feet and willing to stand up for its own fate against the wishes of the Soviet Union and the United States who care more about flexing their might against the other rather than ensuring Godzilla is stopped and that as few people as possible are harmed in the process. Even though the Anpo protests had happened decades before, Japanese society's resistance to the United States' colonialism and their continued determination to be as neutral as possible throughout the Cold War is palpable here.

One scene in particular that really demonstrates this is during the talks between the U.S. and Soviet Union over what to do with Godzilla, meanwhile Japanese Prime Minister Mitamura and his entourage are quite literally sat in between the two parties. They are not screaming at the Japanese envoy; they're screaming at one another, without any consideration of the third party whose home hangs in the balance. Even after the ambassador makes it clear that the Godzilla question is in Japan's hands, the two powers still have their weapons pointed at Japan in secret.

Something to note as well is Godzilla himself in this film. Compared to his superheroic appearance in *Terror of Mechagodzilla* and the rest of the later Shōwa era, this version has more or less returned to his roots, albeit with some slight differences. This new and improved Godzilla is stated to be much larger, now 80 meters tall instead of his former 50, modernizing him to match up with Japan's increasing number of towering skyscrapers. Though he retains a degree of the bug eyed glance he adopted in Shōwa, his scowl is menacing and he looks far more like the original suit than ever before. His new, fierce look matches the new, darker tone this era would take on. He's also much more animalistic than many other interpretations, following the Earth's magnetic field and being lured around from location to location once that's discovered. The magnetic field method used to lure Godzilla into a trap is an interesting one, a very rare moment where Godzilla isn't matched by another big monster or a military solution, but by the forces of nature itself. If Godzilla in the 1954 film is a walking metaphor for nuclear fallout, poisoning and burning everything in its wake, then Godzilla in this film is a metaphor for the Cold War: a lumbering, destructive catastrophe that Japan found itself unwillingly caught in the middle of years ago, and continues to be caught up in 40 years after the bomb by two powers who see Japan as territory, and not a nation. Though it would take some time for any sequel to come about, the *Heisei* era of Godzilla had begun.

Though it would be 5 years until it adopted this name, it came with a reason. Heisei (meaning “peace everywhere”) as a historical period of Japan began in January 1989 with the new reign of Emperor Akihito shortly after the death of Emperor Hirohito. Though the Cold War was near its theoretical end and the so-called “end of history<sup>2</sup>” was beginning, it didn’t mean there weren’t plenty of new challenges on the horizon. The idea of humans being able to alter organisms on a fundamental level using genetic engineering was not a new concept. For thousands of years, humanity selectively bred plants to grow higher crop yields as well as the domestication of dogs, cats, and livestock for various purposes. However, it wasn’t until within the past 50 or so years where a variety of advancements were made in the field, such as the process of “gene splicing” (or the process of chemically cutting DNA in order to add bases to the strand) in 1971 by American biochemist Paul Berg. 1980 in particular was a landmark year for bioengineering. With the creation of the first genetically modified vaccine as well as the first ever biotechnology patent granted by the United States Supreme Court in 1980, American scientists Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer created insulin from genetically modified bacteria.

The field was new and advancing rapidly, however while many greeted the concept of nature bending backwards to suit man's needs with fascination and optimism, and there were benefits to be had from genetic engineering, many had their objections. From genetically modified crops to genome alteration, people from all over the world were in doubt about many aspects of altering life on such a fundamental level. “Playing God” has become a strong argument against genetic engineering, ethically how much is humanity allowed to interfere with nature? Due to the youth of the field, there are questions of its ecological safety. As per Satyajit

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<sup>2</sup> The term “the end of history” was coined by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in the book *“The End of History and the Last Man”* released in 1992. It posits that after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ideological endpoint of civilization has been reached with liberal democracy. The idea has mostly fallen into disuse after the September 11th attacks, as many of his ideas fell apart even without the Soviet Union.



Patra and Araromi Adewale Andrew of the *Journal of Biomedical Sciences*, “One cannot predict the changes that a genetically engineered species would make on the environment. The release of a new genetically engineered species would also have the possibility of causing an imbalance in the ecology of a region. An accident or an unknown result could cause several problems. An accident in engineering the genetics of a virus or bacteria for example could result in a stronger type, which could cause a serious epidemic when released” (Patra, Andrew). Ironically, genetic engineering is often compared to the splitting of the atom in terms of importance to human history: a feat of scientific discovery where man is playing God. The mindset of the 1980s by many scientists can be best summed up by biochemist Liebe F. Cavalieri in 1982 writing for Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists: “There is a striking similarity between nuclear science and genetic engineering. Both major scientific accomplishments confer a power on humans for which they are psychologically and morally unprepared. The physicists have already learned this, to their dismay; the biologists, not yet.” (Cavalieri, 72).

Something to note going forward is how the subject of environmentalism in the East (mostly referring to Japan) vs. the West (mostly referring to America) are perceived. As mentioned in the discussion of *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* previously, there is some overlap: the dangers of reckless pollution is a universal concept of course, but the difference largely lies in the perception of humanity in the equation. While Western environmentalism is the idea that humankind is charged to steward the natural world, Japanese environmental theory posits living alongside it. Some of this stems from differences in spiritual ideology, as Bond Benton and Tracy Mariofiote in their analysis “Japanese Environmentalism in *Godzilla vs. Biollante*” point out. *Wa*, translating loosely to “harmony,” “peace,” or “balance” is a defining aspect of the movement. While Western environmentalism has aspects of this as well, Japan’s “cultural

emphasis on Confucianism and fatalism suggests a natural retribution will come when an imbalance is created,” While Western Judeo-Christian views are “grounded in the taming of nature” and “encourage the human domination of the natural world” (Benton, Mariofiote). This more spiritual approach to nature and the environment, as well as the anxieties and prospects of genetic engineering, are the driving forces behind *Godzilla vs. Biollante*’s deeper meanings.

A direct sequel to *The Return of Godzilla*, the film picks up directly where the previous left off, but from a different perspective. A team of scientists are picking over the rubble of Tokyo in the aftermath of Godzilla’s rampage and finding samples of his DNA scattered throughout the battlefield when they’re accosted by a team of English-speaking paramilitary soldiers. Stealing the DNA samples, they themselves are then ambushed by an assassin who takes the cells for himself to the Republic of Saradia, a fictional OPEC Middle East nation. They’re given to Dr. Genshiro Shiragami (played by Koji Takahashi) and his young daughter Erika, who are cross-breeding wheat DNA to grow crops more capable of growing in the dry soil of the region when their facility is bombed by the same people who stole the Godzilla cells. Erika is killed in the blast and Shiragami returns to his home country with no desire to continue his life's work. After five years, Japan has largely recovered from Godzilla’s rampage and a somewhat reclusive Shiragami has spliced his daughter's DNA into her favorite roses in an attempt to keep her alive in some way. After enlisting the help of two psychics, Miki Saegusa (played by Megumi Odaka) and Asuka Okochi (played by Yoshiko Tanaka), it’s revealed that Erika’s spirit lives on within the plants, who call out to Asuka.

However, the trio is being watched by two parties: the Saradian assassin who stole the cells initially, and agents of American scientific corporation Bio-Major, who intend to monopolize the global genetic engineering market by cutthroat and lethal means. The two

parties are locked in a war to steal Godzilla's cells from the Japanese government, who have their own ace in the hole: Anti-Nuclear Energy Bacteria (or ANEB), created to clean up radioactive waste and may be used to eventually kill Godzilla who is finally awakening from his imprisonment in the volcano, though the bacteria can only be created from Godzilla's DNA. After Erika's roses are damaged in an earthquake, Shinagami agrees to work alongside the ANEB project if he's allowed to take the Godzilla cells home and study them for a time. He is granted permission and he injects a single cell into the rose petals with the hope that the regenerative powers of Godzilla will bring the roses new life. He isn't wrong. After some time, both the Bio-Major agents and the Saradian hitman break into Shiragami's lab intending to steal Godzilla's cells and are attacked by a web of vines with teeth. The plant attacks the two parties and escapes, becoming a giant rose creature in the middle of Lake Ashi. Shiragami confesses to the two psychics that this is his creation, with Erika's genetics put into the mixture as part of his own desperate grief to keep her alive in some way. They nickname the creature Biollante, because although Erika's soul exists within the rose, she herself is only one part of the chimera.

Under the guise of a fake terrorist group ALIEN, Bio-Major threatens to detonate a bomb over the volcano where Godzilla is imprisoned and awaken him if they aren't given ANEB. Godzilla awakens, and Biollante calls out to him from across Japan. Though the usual barrage of tanks, planes, and sci-fi weaponry slows him down, Godzilla and Biollante face off and our title "hero" seemingly kills Biollante. Godzilla heads to Osaka to feed on the radiation from its power plant, but is momentarily stopped by Miki attempting to reach into his mind and is later injected with ANEB, though it has little effect due to Godzilla's body temperature. After attempting to finally kill off Godzilla with ANEB, Biollante reappears sporting a new, more Godzilla-esque look. They fight one more time, ending with Godzilla blowing her up but

collapsing due to his raised temperature making ANEB more effective. Biollante turns into a cloud of spores and, after Erika's face appears among them, flies off into space. Shiragami renounces his work to his higher ups, and is immediately shot by the Saradian assassin who is himself killed. The film ends with Godzilla, cooled down by the seawater, returning to the ocean once more.

The plot for this film is dense, but *Godzilla vs. Biollante* has so much to say for itself. The film not only continues to develop the themes of geopolitical tensions and anti-American struggles, with the American Bio-Major as a major antagonistic presence throughout the film and Saradia as a thinly-veiled allegory for anxieties in the Middle East during the late 1980s, but also returns the Godzilla series to an environmentalist standpoint. Almost a modernized version of *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, the film brings the then-modern fear of genetic engineering to the forefront while straying from a more Westernized interpretation of nature. The film immediately begins with a multi-tiered warning system for Godzilla not dissimilar to how real-life natural disasters are ranked in terms of danger and proximity around the world. Humanity, not content with having learned the lesson of the previous film, is all too eager to collect Godzilla's DNA for abuse in their own devices, like weaponry and agricultural purposes. Even though the Anti-Nuclear Energy Bacteria was derived from Godzilla's blood, it was never intended as a weapon until it was placed in the hands of interests who wanted to dispose of it in order to maintain the status quo of global nuclear checkmate. The film consistently discusses the idea of altering the set genetic code of life as not only negative, but one that will "create a new life form, different from what God intended for this Earth" and "create something worse than Godzilla."

The Chimera from Greek mythology is also briefly discussed, in reference to not only Godzilla but Biollante. A creature that rises from the ocean, breathes fire, and destroys human life (Godzilla). It is the combination of multiple different life forms and as Dr. Kirishima (played by Kunihiro Mitamura) references while sitting in a memorial restaurant made from Godzilla's destruction, "if genetic engineers keep playing with cells, they may create their own chimera" (Biollante). Though this film plays on an environmentalist anxiety similar to *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, this time on the topic of genetic tampering with the presence of the psychic children and the concept of souls, it maintains a far more traditionalist standpoint. The children have a spiritual connection to the Kaiju, the motif of the psychics drawing images of both Godzilla and Biollante at several points throughout the film as a conscious warning of their arrival. Miki as well is able to reach out to Godzilla and Asuka to Biollante. Though their capability is doubted by the more logically minded, conservative military types throughout the film, Asuka and Miki are the reason we are able to translate and understand the motives of the twin beasts and are implied to understand them beyond anyone's comprehension. Though there is some doubt to her identity, Biollante is not merely a plant, not just Godzilla's cells, and not Erika: she is her own creature, with all three playing some role in her existence and choices.

She begins her existence as a gargantuan rose creature, aided by a swarm of vines with toothed maws and after her "death" she loses her floral visage and grows a far more Godzilla-esque, almost crocodilian, look with massive jaws and rows of teeth, even getting her own form of atomic breath by spewing acid. However, throughout the film and quite literally during her final defeat, she carries the soul of Erika. She is a genetic mistake, born of science gone too far, but the constant reminder of the humanity within her reminds the audience that man and nature are closer than Western environmental movements often think. Godzilla and

Biollante are treated with a twin-like aspect. Not “brother and sister, but the same creature” according to Dr. Shiragami. “In a twisted representation of yin and yang-like harmony and balance, Godzilla and Biollante symbolize the masculine and feminine, animal and plant, sea and land; both formed as a result of human interference with nature” (Benton, Mariofiote). They are both mistakes of mankind, but of two eras: Godzilla a mistake of the nuclear bomb, while Biollante is a mistake of the genome. Both of them are the result of man’s continued disruption of *wa*, leading to nature striking back against man in an attempt to re-balance.

This film is notable for introducing two prominent characters: Miki Saegusa, who would return in every film after this in the Heisei era as a pseudo-translator between the monsters and our human heroes, and Genshiro Shiragami. Among a sea of largely one-dimensional human protagonists, Dr. Shiragami stands out as a genuinely tragic and memorable figure. An embodiment of the phrase “the road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” his journey throughout the film paints the potentially horrific scenario of genetic modification gone horribly wrong. He begins the film attempting to use his knowledge for good, working for the Saradian Institute of Biotechnology, hoping to genetically alter crops and steer Saradia away from an oil-dependent economy so they may gain a better position of power among nations such as the United States and Japan.

When Erika is killed by American corporate terrorists, he recedes into retirement but in a home surrounded by the lush greenery he is used to working in and holding onto Erika’s roses, showing the audience that he isn’t quite done with his old life. It isn’t until his trauma is re-awakened, when the earthquakes damage the roses, that he’s willing to work in the field once again. The scene where he’s “resurrecting” Erika by combining her and the roses with Godzilla feels very classically *Frankenstein*-esque, a mish-mash of remains brought together featuring a

lightning storm on a dark night. Throughout the film, Shiragami remains tormented over what he's done, though speaking later to Kirishima about his regrets over "passing the torch" to a new generation who must now live with the mistakes he and others have made. By the end of the film, he refuses to use his knowledge ever again, bemoaning that Godzilla and Biollante "aren't monsters, it's the arrogant scientists who create them." Though he is dead before the credits roll, his transformation is complete and his message is clear.

Though Godzilla's treatment in this film is certainly less villainous than in *Return*, he doesn't feel like the hero of this film. Much like *Mothra vs. Godzilla* from the Shōwa era casting the titular insect as the underdog hero, it feels as though Biollante is the monster protagonist of this film, having a very literal human face behind her, a cast of characters in her corner, and (initially) a far kinder appearance. Godzilla at this point in the era is still the bitter, misanthropic reptilian we left in the volcano some years ago, and though his anger is righteous as humanity hasn't learned a single thing in the intervening years, he still feels far more antagonistic in comparison to Biollante who is simply guilty of killing American corporate terrorists and causing mild destruction. After Biollante's supposed death, he immediately returns to his routine of smashing up Japanese cities and causing chaos like he never left. His appearance as well, with narrower and less cartoonish eyes and a much more animalistic face drawing from predator animals like big cats and otters, makes him feel far more menacing than he had been in previous films besides *Gojira*.

Though this was not the last we would see of Godzilla from this era, this would be the last we saw of Biollante on film. In another ironic parallel to *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, this film at the time of its release was largely seen as the black sheep of its era due to its lack of classic monsters like Ghidorah or Mechagodzilla coupled with the strange monster and concept, though

it has since been re-appraised by fans and is now thankfully considered among the best of the series. And indeed, though it may seem like we have strayed far from the tone and message of the original film at times, this film is one that helps demonstrate the versatility of Godzilla. Going from nuclear proliferation to pollution to genetic modification, the character successfully evolves over the course of history, adapting with the anxieties and tragedies of the times.

The Heisei era would continue a few years after this, though as the films went on Godzilla would slowly but surely become more heroic. He would act as an anti-hero in *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah*, going back and forth with the titular three-headed dragon in the time travel induced plot as to who would menace mankind more. In *Godzilla vs. Mothra*, a reimagining of the original 1964 film, he would return in a more villainous sense with Mothra and her black-clad twin brother Battra acting as the yin and yang protectors of the Earth against the radioactive monster. Though he would maintain his anti-heroic persona with *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla II*, his acquisition of the small and cutified Godzilla Junior in the film sealed his fate as a more heroic character for the final two films. *Godzilla vs. Spacegodzilla* casts Godzilla on the side of Earth and humanity against his crystalline cosmic counterpart, working alongside a human-built mecha named MOGUERA to not only protect the planet but save his son from Spacegodzilla's clutches. The era would come to an end with *Godzilla vs. Destoroyah* in 1995, featuring a dying Godzilla melting down like a nuclear power plant facing off against Destoroyah, a demonic looking crustacean who was born at the same time the original Godzilla died: when the Oxygen Destroyer killed Godzilla. The film was made as a swan song to the era, with this version of Godzilla dying and Godzilla Junior taking over the mantle as the king of the monsters.



If Shōwa was the defining era for Godzilla, while straying from its more serious roots, Heisei feels like a return to form in many ways. Despite this darker direction, the era was largely unnoticed in American critical circles. This is due in no small part to the fact that outside of *The Return of Godzilla*, renamed *Godzilla 1985* and given a lighthearted *King of the Monsters!* style dub and the return of Raymond Burr, none of the films received an American theatrical release and were largely difficult to come by in the United States until much later on. Though the films were still made for spectacle, they were unafraid to foreground dialogue voicing anxieties of the moment. Even among the films I only vaguely touched on, discussions of topics like global fears over the Japanese economic miracle in *Godzilla vs King Ghidorah* and rampant deforestation in *Godzilla vs. Mothra* are still present. Unlike Shōwa however, this era came to an end with purpose: to give America a try at bringing Godzilla to life on screen.

### Chapter 3 - Millennium and Forgetting the Past

The gap between the end of the Heisei era and the next Godzilla film was brief, a mere three years compared to the near-decade between Shōwa and Heisei. In the past, there had been some attempts by American filmmakers to adapt Godzilla, among them horror director Steve Miner's pitch in 1983 which was rejected due to the high proposed budget for what was considered to be a "children's film." Indeed, the Shōwa-era Western perception that Godzilla was nothing more than children's entertainment bled into the creative team behind this pitch, as screenwriter Fred Dekker found the original films to be "cheesy" and stated "He [Miner] did not want to make a cheesy film, and I wasn't interested in just special effects and knocking buildings down. The first thing I said to Steve was, 'If all this movie is about is this big monster destroying buildings, we're screwed.'" (Ryfle, 220).

In 1992, with the help of former *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* US distributor Henry G. Saperstein, a trilogy of American films were greenlit under TriStar Pictures which languished in development purgatory for several years as budgetary and creative discussions held the initial pitch back. One such pitch had Godzilla not as a vengeful atomic mistake, but as a superweapon created by the ancient civilization of Atlantis to defend the Earth from an alien threat. Though Godzilla has taken many shapes at this point in time, and will continue to take many more as we arrive into the new century and beyond, it's telling that so many of these interpretations miss the intention of Godzilla almost entirely by depriving the character of any historical context. Without any tragedy or anxiety to grapple with, combined with a preconceived dismissive idea of the Kaiju film as a genre, Godzilla is simply a lumbering, money-making behemoth to the Hollywood of the 1990s. However, the project was eventually picked up by

director/screenwriter duo Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, fresh off of big budget action film and box office darling from 1996, *Independence Day*.

Released in May 1998, *Godzilla* is often considered the “black sheep” of the franchise. Without diving too in-depth on the film, the continuing theme of attempting to try something new with the character while dismissing his legacy is palpable. One only needs to look at interviews with Roland Emmerich himself to understand why. “I didn’t want to make the original *Godzilla*, I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted to make my own. We took part of [the original movie’s] basic storyline, in that the creature becomes created by radiation and it becomes a big challenge. But that’s all we took. Then we asked ourselves what we would do today with a monster movie and a story like that. We forgot everything about the original *Godzilla* right there.” The perception of *Godzilla* as pure silliness, as “weekend matinees” as Emmerich puts it earlier in the same interview, allows us to make sense of the new adaptation and the perceived realistic “edge” that the character was given. A marine iguana mutated by nuclear testing in French Polynesia, this *Godzilla* is treated much more like an animal both in design and manner. Instead of stomping over endless arrays of tanks and planes, our title monster simply runs away and hides during the many action scenes. Deprived of the classic atomic breath or any of the traditional moveset, the creature relies on stealthy hit and run attacks despite being the size of a Manhattan skyscraper. During the final action scene, *Godzilla* is killed by a group of military jets after being trapped on a bridge despite *Godzilla* famously being impervious to conventional firepower. However, many of these famous aspects of *Godzilla* are unrealistic for an actual animal, and Emmerich’s intent to make *Godzilla* feel more “authentic” to American audiences is also felt in the design.

Leaner, smaller, and more like the T-Rex from 1993's *Jurassic Park* than any version of Godzilla seen before, the creature's look puzzled fans and even casual filmgoers and has become something of a lightning rod for the harsh criticism the film received. Though many of the previous pitches had a more traditional design, due to Emmerich and Devlin's full creative control they demanded the monster take a new approach in appearance, slimming him down in order to make him able to run fast and maneuver effectively. The film, despite an extensive marketing campaign, was lambasted critically and a disaster financially. Criticism ranged from a terrible plot and writing, to tension-less action scenes, and most notably Godzilla's rather lame duck demeanor. The criticism was no different overseas, and while much of the old guard of the series was at first receptive to the idea of a new American Godzilla, they were scathing in their reviews of the film. During an online interview with Shōwa Godzilla suit actor Haruo Nakajima, he stated the American Godzilla "looks like an iguana and its body and limbs look like a frog." Kenpachiro Satsuma, the suit actor for Heisei, walked out of a screening of the film at a convention in 1998, stating "It's not Godzilla, it doesn't have his spirit."<sup>3</sup> Heisei *Gamera* trilogy director and future Godzilla director Shusuke Kaneko said of the 1998 film in *Fangoria* magazine, "American Kaiju films almost always focus on the weapons that work. In the U.S. *Godzilla*, if he is shot, he dies so the monster is always running to avoid being hit. To the Japanese, the image of Kaiju is that of a natural disaster. I mean, weapons can't work against tornados, earthquakes, or an atomic bomb. Since weapons don't work on Kaiju, the problem has to be solved with diligence and cunning. But in America, it seems people can't believe their weapons won't work. Americans believe in the power of their weapons more than they do the

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<sup>3</sup> This version of Godzilla has been called a variety of different names since the film premiered. One is G.I.N.O. (Godzilla In Name Only), however in 2007 the creature became officially known as "Zilla" and is now considered a separate Kaiju, because according to producer Shōgo Tomiyama in a 2004 interview for *Godzilla: Final Wars*, "they [TriStar] took the God out of Godzilla."

Kaiju.”

There is much debate as to where *Godzilla* falls in the timeline of eras not only because of its quality and place between eras, but its authenticity due to its American-ness. As will be briefly touched on in Chapter 4 of this text with the modern Monsterverse *Godzilla* films vs. the Reiwa era, going forward I will not only be placing the Monsterverse films into Reiwa, but arguing that *Godzilla* in 1998 was the beginning of the Millennium era. The Millennium era, not named for exchange in monarch but for the new millennia, would never have existed without *Godzilla* and its many failures. As Toho was content to let TriStar make their own films, they then found themselves scrambling to put a film into production after the prospect of a sequel was becoming increasingly uncertain. Rushed into production less than two months after *Godzilla*, *Godzilla 2000* was released to theaters. And so the Millennium era, to many, truly began and the era was very much interested in course correction.

The Millennium era is a difficult period to discuss when dealing with overarching themes and dialogues with the moment in which it was made. While Shōwa and Heisei can both be relatively easily summed up, Millennium’s identity and what it meant for *Godzilla* as a character and cultural icon can be hard to discern due to the anthological nature of the films. Among the six films, only one is a direct sequel to anything except *Gojira*. This isn’t to say that a continuity between films is necessary for thematic cohesion; the Shōwa era is a largely incohesive timeline if you’re following what year each film takes place as half of them are set at some nebulous point in the future. However, many of the films from this era not only do not tie into one another, but offer little in the way of social commentary. The films, while certainly entertaining, often feel like they exist without a political or social context to latch onto like Shōwa and Heisei had with the nuclear bomb, the Cold War, etc. However, it could be argued

that Millennium is about abandoning the past. The abandoning of Godzilla's past and legacy with the 1998 film and the constant reimaginings throughout the era, and the abandoning of Japan's past in *Godzilla, Mothra, King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack*.

Released in December 2001 and directed by *Gamera* visionary Shusuke Kaneko, *Godzilla, Mothra, King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack* (often shortened by fans to *GMK*) is an unusual film, even by the standards of the many tonal twists and turns the series has taken up to this point. The story takes on a much more spiritual and mystical role than any other Godzilla film before or since, retroactively casting Godzilla as not just a radioactive animal, but a vengeful and angry reincarnation of the souls of war crimes victims from the Pacific Theater of World War II. Japan, as a nation, stands in a unique place among nations as both colonized and *colonizer*. Though this paper has discussed at length many of the ways Japan to this day is used as a client state of the United States and its global military, it is important to discuss Japan's place prior to the Cold War. During World War II and for many years before, the Japanese military ran an expansionist colonial campaign throughout Asia in nations such as China, Korea, and beyond, both out of an attempt to gain resources and out of a feeling of racial supremacy over non-Japanese peoples. Events such as the Nanjing Massacre, a terror campaign by the Imperial Japanese military where thousands of Chinese soldiers and citizens were raped and killed, or the "comfort women" system, an organized sexual slavery ring set up by the Japanese Army across their Asian and Pacific territories with nearly 200,000 victims, are tragic events which many in Japan have tried very hard to push under the rug.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the serious amounts of intentional misinformation regarding the Nanjing Massacre, it can be difficult to ascertain what is factual as pointed out here. In the interest of not sidetracking, student researcher Joseph Chapel from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2004 provided a detailed explanation of both the massacre itself and the years of denial following.

In the years following the war, intensive efforts were made to cover up Japan's atrocities during their imperialist era. Throughout the 1990s, a rising right wing in Japan under the *Nippon Kaigi* (or Japan Conference) aimed to return Japan to a more militaristic state by removing American restrictions on military building and the belief that "Japan should be applauded for liberating much of East Asia from Western colonial powers, that the 1946-1948 Tokyo War Crimes tribunals were illegitimate, and that the killings by Imperial Japanese troops during the 1937 'Nanjing Massacre' were exaggerated or fabricated" according to a 2021 Congressional report on American-Japanese relations. The rising right wing during this period and the increasing denial and downplaying of atrocities during World War II created the perfect staging ground for this new interpretation of Godzilla.

After 50 years of dormancy (as, much like every other entry in this era, the film uses *Gojira* as a springboard), Godzilla returns to wreak havoc on Japan. We see a Japan that has lived in Godzilla's shadow, but ultimately forgotten his wrath: they live in an era where the military has not been needed since his initial rampage, and some of the younger generation even deny his existence outright. The film jokingly poses the question during a meeting between government officials after Godzilla is discovered to have returned: "Does it (Godzilla) hate Japan?" In contrast to *Gojira* which makes Godzilla an external menace to Japan the way the atom bomb and the *Lucky Dragon 5* were, *GMK* makes Godzilla an internal menace. As the title suggests, the film has several of Godzilla's classic opponents: Mothra, a classic Toho monster named Baragon, and King Ghidorah are all pitted as the "protagonists" of the film as the elemental Guardian Monsters. The protectors of the "homeland, not nation" of Japan, the three awaken from their slumber whenever Japan is in dire need of help. Due to the mythological nature of the Kaiju in this film, and the covered-up lie that the military are the ones who initially

beat Godzilla as opposed to Dr. Serizawa and his Oxygen Destroyer, there is a misplaced faith in direct assault and advanced weaponry.

Much of the military, including major character Admiral Taizo Tachibana (played by Ryudo Uzaki), are quick to dismiss any idea that Godzilla or the Guardian Monsters would shrug off 50 years of new technology despite Tachibana having lived through the initial Godzilla attack. Not only does this feel like a jab at the 1998 American film and its supreme treatment of military arms<sup>5</sup>, but it could be interpreted as a criticism of the Japanese right wing's desire for re-armament<sup>6</sup>, and how surrounding oneself with weapons will not save you from the problems the nation has ignored. Considering Kaneko himself is a pacifist, it wouldn't be surprising to consider this as intentional. Throughout the film, a team of low-level reporters investigate the legitimacy of the Guardian Monsters with the aid of an old man jailed for smashing and desecrating Japanese war memorial shrines, later revealed to be the spectral reincarnation of a victim of Godzilla's first rampage. The film's spiritual and mythological nature is frequently touched on in connection to its running conversation about genocide denial, with characters making passing references to Native American mythology and the Salem Witch Trials in comparison to the government of Japan's own willful burying of its heinous crimes.

Godzilla in this film is usually seen as the most outrightly sinister of any incarnation of the character before or since, and it's not difficult to see why. While the Guardians like Baragon and Mothra only harm people unintentionally from their sheer size, or harm aggressive criminals attempting to drown a dog for the fun of it, Godzilla is smashing everything with

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<sup>5</sup> The film takes a few more shots at the 1998 attempt. The first scene in the film makes a joke of the monster, saying that rumors were that the monster who attacked a few years ago was thought to be Godzilla by Americans, but it turned out to be a different monster. Even when Godzilla comes ashore, he arrives similarly to how he does in the '98 film: a giant tidal wave-esque rush of water destroying a dock with fishermen running off it, a scene featured heavily in *Godzilla's* marketing campaign.

<sup>6</sup> Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution states that Japan is not allowed to maintain an offensive army. Though it's allowed a defensive army, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), they cannot be the belligerent in a conflict.



intention. Within minutes of the classic “Godzilla comes to shore” scene, our title monster has knowingly trampled a hospital with people inside and decimated a crowd of screaming and running pedestrians with atomic breath. He ruthlessly kills Baragon and is merciless to every other opponent he faces, coupled with his menacing appearance featuring blank white eyes and a somewhat bloated appearance not unlike a corpse during rigor mortis. However, it could be argued that this Godzilla is a far more nuanced figure than initially seen.

Godzilla in this film is a victim, the physical embodiment of the anger and trauma felt by the victims of a colonial expansionist empire at its apex. Though the character is usually victimized by humanity and its abuse of nature, this interpretation is very literal and directed anger. This is also the only film to have a direct point-of-view shot from Godzilla’s perspective, which puts us into his shoes and is Kaneko’s way of allowing us to sit for a moment in the monster’s shoes. In contrast, if *GMK*’s Godzilla is more heroic than at first glance, the trinity of Guardian Monsters may be less than heroic. Though they don’t go out of their way to kill people, they are not above putting ordinary people in danger such as when Baragon first appears out of a mountain, killing a truck driver and a passing motorbike gang. Ghidorah is also stated to feed off of souls, and we find him hibernating beneath the infamous *Aokigahara* forest, known commonly as “the suicide forest” due to the amount of suicides that occur there. The three monsters, one could argue, represent Japanese national pride and might, all of them wrestling with the physical embodiment of Japan’s sins and all failing to actually beat it. Even after Mothra gives King Ghidorah her power, Godzilla is still too strong to be beaten back, it takes the combined strength of Japan’s nationalism (the Guardian Monsters) with Admiral Tachibana and his weapons (the military and re-militarization) to push Godzilla back whence he came. Though they win the fight, the classic Godzilla theme plays over an image of Godzilla’s

heart, still beating on the ocean floor. Though Japan's nationalism may be on the rise, the pain caused by the country's past imperialism and its effects still exist and will return to haunt it again someday.

Unfortunately, none of the other films of the Millennium era quite matched the level of depth of *GMK*. The films both before and after do not connect to this in any way like Heisei, and are scarcely interested in building a thematic cohesion the way Shōwa does. The era is more interesting in anthological storytelling, and playing around with what the "past" is. Many of the other films of this era were selective about what they used from Toho's past, films like 2000's *Godzilla vs. Megaguirus* for instance were only sequels to *Gojira* and 1956's *Rodan*, using one of the creatures from that film to retroactively create a new monster. This also means that how Godzilla was treated in this era was very inconsistent. At times, in films like *Godzilla 2000* or 2004's *Godzilla: Final Wars*, Godzilla harkened back to his anti-heroic treatment like the Heisei era where he may not care for humanity, but that can be put aside if a much larger threat is on the horizon. However, films like *GMK* and 2002's *Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla* treat Godzilla with much more of a villainous face, casting a group of heroes to put a stop to his rampages. The era ended on Godzilla's 50th anniversary in 2004 with *Godzilla: Final Wars*, a messy but action-packed film that even featured a cameo from "Zilla" who was quickly defeated by the real Godzilla. Though the Millennium films felt unwilling to commit to a thematic throughline and all too willing to abandon whatever the last creative team put forward, its experimentation resulted in *GMK*'s spiritual interpretation and other films which were willing to try new avenues for Godzilla as a character. Though Godzilla would go into hibernation for a decade, tragedy and disaster will always bring him back.

#### **Chapter 4 - Reiwa, Fukushima, and the Climate of Tomorrow**

During the ten years between *Godzilla: Final Wars* and the rebirth of the series in 2014, a series of disasters had struck both Japan and America. Though the September 11th attacks happened in 2001, obviously they didn't much affect the already underway Millennium era due to its American-centric emotional trauma and nor did the following invasion of Iraq by American coalition forces in 2003. Two years later in 2005, another American city was rocked when the Category 5 hurricane known as Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans and the surrounding Louisiana area, causing over 1,800 deaths and countless residents of the city displaced due to the sheer scale of damage to homes and buildings. In Japan, on March 11th, 2011, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake struck the northeastern coast of Honshu, the main island of the country. The earthquake, the fourth largest ever recorded in human history according to a 2019 United States Geological Survey report, lasted approximately six minutes and spawned a barrage of massive waves, some reaching over 130 feet in some instances according to National Geographic, which submerged large sections of the coast in seawater, causing over 19,000 deaths and thousands more injured and missing, with over 450,000 people in the area becoming permanently displaced by the destruction. Homes were smashed with debris carried by the colossal waves, and infrastructure was water damaged and destroyed, making evacuation and care for refugees after the matter significantly more challenging.

The troubles did not end when tsunamis ceased however. To make matters worse, a nearly 50 foot wave struck the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant while it was attempting to shut down and caused the reactor to melt down. Though no immediate deaths occurred directly as a result of radioactive contamination according to initial government reports, an evacuation zone that grew as new estimates were found day by day displaced thousands from

their homes and made water in the nearby area contaminated with high levels of radioactive particulates. Large sections of the Prefecture were left uninhabitable initially, though decontamination efforts have allowed more of the previously closed off areas to become liveable to some extent once more, the Fukushima facility itself would not stabilize until December of 2011. Concerns over the safety of food, specifically fish caught in the contaminated water, in the immediate aftermath loomed in former residents' minds. The disaster is the only other event to be categorized by the International Atomic Energy Agency (or the IAEA) since the 1986 Chernobyl, Ukraine disaster as a Level 7, in which a "major release of radioactive material with widespread health and environmental effects requiring implementation of planned and extended countermeasures" occurs. This series of disasters, most commonly dubbed "3.11," has become a deeply important moment for Japan both socially and culturally, not unlike the similarly named 9/11 in the United States. Its effects are still felt to this day, as even now a large area around the reactor is estimated to be uninhabitable by humans for at least a hundred years, while the Japanese government confirmed plans to dump 1.25 million tons of contaminated radioactive wastewater into the ocean.

After years of attempts to get a new Godzilla film into production, including a sequel to *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* by none other than Yoshimitsu Banno which never got off the ground, a second American attempt at the character was finally granted to Legendary Pictures and Warner Brothers. Directed by Gareth Edwards, *Godzilla* was released in May 2014 to warm reception and over 500 million dollars at the international box office, and in many ways was not only a response to Fukushima and 3.11, and the 1998 *Godzilla*, but America's own trauma in the 2000s. Though the film was being written during 3.11, it incorporated elements of the disaster. When the film begins, Joe Brody (played by Bryan Cranston) and his wife are workers at the

fictional Janjira nuclear power plant which collapses (though due to a monster feeding on the plant's energy as opposed to flooding), killing several workers including Brody's wife Sandra and putting the surrounding area under a familiar looking quarantine zone, with overgrown vegetation and wild animals like stray dogs having overtaken the abandoned areas not unlike how Chernobyl and Fukushima looked years after, as Christophe Thouny worded it in the introductory chapter of *Planetary Atmospheres and Urban Societies After Fukushima*, "humans left and bees returned to abandoned rice fields, safe from deadly pesticides. Cherry trees blossomed in the contaminated perimeter, weeds invaded houses and roads, life grew back."

Though the film's acknowledgement of Fukushima is cursory, its imagery is draped in the seriousness of a post-9/11 America. Contrary to the America of the 1990's and how it treated their Godzilla with a plastic cartoonish-ness, this film treats Godzilla like a natural disaster and shows us skyscrapers realistically crumbling under the weight of these titanic monsters fighting for dominance. In a 2014 interview with *Mother Jones*, Edwards discussed how he was inspired by modern warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as drawing on natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, saying "There's never really going to be giant monsters that come out of the ocean and smash a city and cause a tsunami and things like this. But, there are events that smash cities and cause tsunamis within nature and war, and so you don't have to think very hard to recall that imagery. It's so scarred in our minds that as we are creating the movie, we are getting all of those reference images and it's nearly impossible not to be influenced by them... A lot of war books, a lot of aftermath, whether it be terrorist or natural disasters; just because people are so familiar with that imagery that [...] now we have a reference for what it's supposed to look like when a giant monster comes... Science fiction is

not really about the future. It's about the time today when it was made and it's reflecting the things of the moment.”

In contrast to the 1998 film, 2014's design was well-received as a modernization of the classic Godzilla look. In America's endless desire for fiction to be practical and realistic, this Godzilla takes on many physical aspects of an animal including a set of gills to breathe underwater, and moving and fighting similarly to how large animals like bears and komodo dragons attack their prey. Unlike the lithe and vulnerable Zilla, the Legendary Godzilla (as he is often dubbed by fans) is massive and weighty, and though he might react to military weaponry when shot it rarely does more than slow him down briefly. Godzilla in this universe is not a creature of the atom bomb, nor is he a ghost of past crimes; he's described as an ancient apex predator from a time even before the dinosaurs where titanic creatures just like him roamed the Earth and fed on radiation, and in this film the monsters he's fighting, the MUTOs<sup>7</sup>, are just a part of a food chain much larger and older than humankind. This newfound origin story casting Godzilla as part of the Earth's ecosystem is a thread expanded on in the film's American sequel some years later, but Godzilla's return to a creature born of radiation would return just two years later in Hideaki Anno's *Shin Godzilla*. However, the 2014 *Godzilla* was the beginning of the *Reiwa* era<sup>8</sup> and would help to set the tone for the films that followed.

With the rebirth of the series in 2014 and a wave of new fans both in Japan and America, Toho were interested in bringing their own version of the character to life once more. Hiring Hideaki Anno, known primarily for his work on the Kaiju/mecha deconstructionist anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, he and co-director Shinji Higuchi logically chose to use the recent

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<sup>7</sup> Stands for “Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism.”

<sup>8</sup> This name returns to the tradition of being named after a change in emperor, this time from Emperor Akihito to his son Naruhito, although this name wouldn't be used until Naruhito took power in May 2019, ironically similar to Heisei and Akihito.

3.11 as primary inspiration for the narrative and Godzilla's origins. Released in August 2016 in Japan, over 5 years after 3.11, the film begins with Godzilla waking up in Tokyo Bay. Using the angles of Coast Guard body cams and civilian phones, we see the perspectives of different people in different places. While scores and scores of bureaucrats move in and out of different offices and bicker over titles to confer about what to do over the new creature, the larval Godzilla sprouts legs and trundles his way onto shore, demolishing a residential area and a dock with little resistance while younger, more inexperienced figures in office like Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Rando Yaguchi (played by Hiroki Hasegawa) chafe under the pointlessness of the formality while people's lives are at risk. He is placed in charge of a task force, made up of the political outsiders and rejects considered too radical for cushy positions, to begin understanding what Godzilla is. With the help of a half Japanese-American envoy named Kayoko Anne Paterson, the team discovers that Godzilla was a deep sea lifeform which fed on old nuclear waste abandoned by the United States government, first uncovered by disgraced Japanese biologist Goro Maki who attempted to bring the creature's existence and the radioactive materials to light but was hushed up, leaving him to commit suicide in Tokyo Bay where the monster first appeared.

While the team figures out a way to stop Godzilla using a blood coolant to slow the internal nuclear reactor that keeps him upright and evolving, the government is finally permitted to use military force after much deliberation and hand-wringing when Godzilla comes to shore once again, now the size of a skyscraper. A combination of Self-Defense Force arms and American military might barrage Godzilla, but most of it merely bounces off him until a bombing run hurts the mutated monster, causing him to use his version of the atomic breath, a plume of napalm-esque fire and a purple beam, which demolishes large chunks of Tokyo. This

also kills the Prime Minister and much of his Cabinet, leaving all those who could succeed him dead, though Godzilla freezes in place to recuperate after exerting all that energy. The team continues to work on a solution to permanently halt Godzilla while the United States, concerned with what they saw in Tokyo, plans a nuclear strike on the dormant monster and gives the Japanese government two weeks to evacuate the city. The ragtag team, with the help of France who convinces the U.N. Security Council to delay the strike as well as Goro Maki's comprehensive notes on Godzilla's biology, inject Godzilla with a blood coagulant after distracting him with drones and toppling an empty skyscraper on top of him and freeze him solid. Yaguchi and Paterson meet on a nearby roof with Godzilla in the background, lamenting that although there may be a day Godzilla awakens again and the nuke countdown starts again, for now they have saved Japan. We see how close the government truly got to devastation however, as on Godzilla's tail are a collection of skeletal humanoids with Godzilla features on them, perhaps a new form the ever-evolving creature would take.

*Shin Godzilla* is a film rich with meaning, and extensive in its criticism. From the first minutes, the trauma of 3.11 is palpable as Godzilla, initially presented as an unsettlingly silly smaller creature with wobbling flesh and leaking blood, rises from the sea through a massive explosion in the bay which some in underwater tunnels think could be an earthquake. When he makes landfall, the piles of debris and boats rising up onto shore and crashing into houses don't look so out of place next to the earliest hours of 3.11, with Godzilla moving like a wave throughout and sweeping over cars and buildings. The film throws us into this moment, with no time to get to know (at least, initially) any of the politicians outside their titles. This quick pacing parallels the early moments of 3.11, with a slow stream of information, but panicked people having to make quick decisions with little understanding of the circumstances.



Anno and Higuchi's frustration with bureaucracy is also very apparent, as nearly every senior member of the Japanese government in the stilted and gray scenes happening at the same time insist on wasting time going from boardroom to boardroom and exchanging formalities as Godzilla causes carnage outside. Just when it seems the military is finally going to step in, a lone civilian at risk of being caught in the crossfire prevents what could have been an early solution to the problem. Not concerned with the civilians' lives, but with how that would reflect on his career if they were hurt by JSDF fire, Prime Minister Okouchi resolves to pull back offensive forces. Much like how Fukushima could have been prevented had TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) sufficiently installed safety measures, as a report by the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission pointed out in 2012 which not only pointed out that Fukushima's meltdown was "a 'man-made disaster' that unfolded as a result of collusion between the facility's operator, regulators and the government" who "failed to correctly develop the most basic safety requirements -- such as assessing the probability of damage, preparing for containing collateral damage from such a disaster, and developing evacuation plans."

Though Godzilla's changes in design, personality, and origin have followed a relatively consistent path with the occasional turn, *Shin Godzilla* is an outlier. Though he eventually adopts a traditional Godzilla silhouette, the film plays with audience expectations by giving Godzilla multiple forms, a first for the series. Beginning as a massive tail, when he sprouts legs and comes to land he takes on an appearance that's both charmingly goofy with his big lifeless google eyes and jerky walking and soon disturbing, as the creature begins inadvertently crushing buildings with people inside. It eventually walks more proper and upright before it takes to the sea, returning days later sporting a look that is definitely Godzilla, but with a far

more disturbing appearance: jagged teeth, emaciated arms, red-and-black skin covered in burns, protruding bones, and maintaining the googly eye. When he fires his atomic breath for the first time, his jaw splits open and holes in his back open up to shoot out beams as well. Even at the very end of the film, the endlessly adapting creature seemed to be prepared to split into multiples, learning from humanity's ability to work together as a unit. A far cry from the Legendary version overseas in appearance, this Godzilla is an abomination. An outwardly emotionless statue who rarely changes facial expression but looks to be in a constant state of discomfort and agony. Though it may seem like he has no expression, "Who Will Know ", an original song from the score by Shiro Sagisu taking place from the perspective of Godzilla, details a character lost and scared in a world that hates him. Lyrics such as:

*"If I die in this world*

*Who will know something of me?*

*I am lost, no one knows*

*There's no trace of my yearning"*

Show us a character who is unsure of his place in the world, and is aware that people hate him merely for existing. However, he is treated with a degree of reverence by characters, his name meaning "incarnation of God " in the films mythos and characters constantly pondering just how much the creature can adapt to and what it can truly do considering the nuclear reactor contained in his body. Kayako calls him, "truly a God incarnate" upon finding out that he managed to destroy U.S. bombers from the ground. "Persecution of the Masses", also from the film's score, uses religious language when referring to Godzilla, asking for "your protection", and "letting no blame lie at the innocents who have prayed". Though there had always been a degree of mythology to Godzilla as a character, this film's imagery of Godzilla as pure natural

disaster is mixed with a degree of *wa*, a concept of natural and spiritual mentioned in Chapter 2, and fits with its intention of casting him as the embodiment of 3.11.

Playing into themes similar to *The Return of Godzilla*, the American military and Japan's place on the world stage are also important aspects of the film. When the Prime Minister is concerned about firing on Godzilla for fear of backlash early in the film, the specter of American colonialism, Article 9, and Japan's status as a client state looms over the rest of the film. The U.S. military takes some time to get involved in the Godzilla affair but when they do, much like in *Return*, they intend to take over the entire operation and throw caution to the wind by nuking Japan. Even when they send Kayoko as a go-between for the two countries, it often feels like a pittance despite Kayoko's skills as a diplomat and eventual siding with the Yaguchi Plan due to the guilt she would feel over being responsible for a hypothetical third bomb falling on the country her grandmother was born in. Even when Godzilla has been frozen, and is presumably going to be out of the picture for some time, the looming threat of U.S. interventionism and nuclear weaponry hangs over the city. The timer has not gone away, it's merely stopped in place for now and Japan must now live with it.

Ironically, the scene where this takes place can be seen as *Shin Godzilla's* relationship with nuclear energy, and its divergent point with *Gojira* (of which, it could be argued, *Shin* is the modernization of and the closest thing to a remake the original film has ever received). Godzilla is not killed with a superweapon in this film, the monster is merely stopped in his tracks as a way to buy Japan and the rest of the world a few more years to come up with a new solution. In the last scene when Kayoko and Yaguchi talk, Godzilla's dormant form looms in the background as a constant reminder to the audience that the problem isn't truly solved and we have to learn to work around the beast in order to not incur its wrath again. Though many

Japanese political figures railed against nuclear energy in an effort to calm a public shaken by the events of 3.11, such as then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan stating in a July 2011 press conference, “Japan should aim for a society that does not depend on nuclear energy [...] When we think of the magnitude of the risks involved with nuclear power, the safety measures we previously conceived are inadequate.” However controversial the issue in Japan, Anno makes a statement with the ending: for better or for worse, nuclear power is here to stay, and given the oncoming climate crisis, it may become a valuable tool as energy demands soar.

In the 2010’s, the perception of climate change has become one of growing concern. Though the idea that humans could have a global effect on the environment has roots back to the late 1800s, it was in the 1970s where the problem began to become a mainstream concern. The first Earth Day, an annual holiday aimed at raising awareness for environmental health and protections, was held on April 22, 1970. Books like *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson from 1962 placed great emphasis on environmental degradation and inspired movements in the United States and beyond. Building off of what was discussed in Chapter 1 with the rise of Japanese environmental movements in response to the nation's industrial golden age, many countries followed a similar path. In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency, or the E.P.A., was founded in 1970 in response to the waves of protests over the rampant pollution problems stemming from industrial runoff, as well as new concerns over ozone protections and air pollution.

And even though nearly 70 percent of all carbon emissions, more than 1 trillion tons of carbon, come from a mere one hundred companies according to a study by the Carbon Majors Report in 2017, a common perception is that the reason for much of our environmental problem stems from the sheer number of people on Earth. This theory often stems from Thomas

Malthus, a famous and controversial British economist who believed that human populations will always outgrow its food supply and that poverty and starvation are inevitable, so without a strong guiding hand to ensure these people stay in line, society will head for disaster. Malthus' ideas have trickled down into many forms, a common one being eco-fascism. As explained by *Teen Vogue* in a 2020 article identifying many of the traits of eco-fascism, “While it’s true human consumption harms the environment, eco-fascists place the blame exclusively on the marginalized. Because consumerism produces massive amounts of garbage, eco-fascists incorrectly blame poor people (of color) for using plastic bags and other cheap, disposable products — often without pointing to the damage done by major polluting corporations, like those in the fossil fuel industry.”

Though climate change was often seen as a far off problem to be kicked down the road in decades past, it has become a very real fear for our very immediate future. Forest fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other storms of increasing intensity, melting ice caps bringing rising sea levels and flooding, and more have plagued countries across the globe and it seems to only be getting worse. The 2021 International Panel for Climate Change, or the IPCC, has stated that although many of these changes are irreversible and on their way to intensify, a more thoughtful approach to our actions and healing our broken relationship with nature will slow some of them. Though it is not the first science fiction film of the decade to touch on the subject of climate, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), directed by Michael Dougherty, is a film very much steeped in climate anxiety but also a sense of optimism.

A sequel to the 2014 *Godzilla*, the film picks up 5 years after the events of its predecessor with a world processing the trauma caused by the Titans (The Monsterverns name for the Kaiju) after Godzilla and the MUTOs destroyed San Francisco. Scientist Emma Russell

(played by Vera Farmiga) is an expert on Titan physiology and alongside her ex-husband Mark (played by Kyle Chandler), have created a sonar device capable of communicating with the creatures known as the ORCA. After using it to communicate with the newly hatched Mothra larva, she and her daughter Madison (played by Millie Bobby Brown) are kidnapped by a group of eco-terrorists who intend to use the device to awaken dormant Titans to trigger an ecological kickstart and dispose of humankind as the dominant species on the planet. Mark is recruited by Dr. Serizawa (played by Ken Watanabe, who also appeared in the previous film) to join Monarch, an organization devoted to the study of Titans who are under pressure from the military to help find ways to kill them off, to find Emma and the Orca. They uncover the cell's plan, who head to a secret Monarch base in Antarctica to awaken "Monster Zero," AKA King Ghidorah, who is believed to be another alpha predator similar to Godzilla, the two of whom having an ancient rivalry. Once Emma is revealed to be part of the plot by the terrorists, she awakens Ghidorah who fights Godzilla and sets about on a rampage throughout the world with Godzilla hot on his tail and the Monarch team not far behind them.

Emma calls the Monarch team to inform them of her motive: the world is too overpopulated in her eyes, and far too many mouths to feed has created too much pollution, and so awakening the Titans and causing an apocalypse will "clean the slate." She awakens Rodan from a volcano in Mexico who decimates a small town while attempting to fight Ghidorah, but when Godzilla catches up to him and it looks like Godzilla is about to beat him, the U.S. military decides to use the Oxygen Destroyer to kill the both of them. Though it takes Godzilla out of the fight, Ghidorah is still standing and regrows one of his heads torn off in the battle. He lets out a call and asserts his dominance over the Titans, ordering them to destroy everything in their path. Mothra, who had up until this point been in a chrysalis since the beginning scene,

transforms into her classic winged form and sets off to find Godzilla. The Monarch scientists uncover that the reason Ghidorah survived the Oxygen Destroyer and has such unnatural abilities is because he's an alien, an unnatural entity that exists outside the Titan ecosystem. Serizawa tells Mark about his ideas of co-existence, that Titans and mankind do not have to be at odds with one another and that the world can be shared. Mothra helps our human protagonists realize that Godzilla is still alive, but healing due to injuries. After being rejuvenated with a nuclear bomb, Godzilla awakens stronger than ever to fight King Ghidorah in Boston with Mothra, winning after an intense battle with some human help. Roaring to the sky surrounded by an array of Titans who once aligned with Ghidorah, including Rodan, Godzilla reclaims his natural throne as alpha Titan while what's left of our human heroes rejoice that Godzilla is on their side, but allude to the fact that he may not always be. As the credits roll, we see from in-universe news snippets that the return of the Titans has brought about newly bloomed rainforests, rejuvenated wildlife populations, and new fields of science studying Titan biology that can benefit humankind.

With films like 2018's *Avengers: Infinity War* creating empathetic eco-fascist villains in Thanos the Mad Titan, *King of the Monsters* feels refreshing to see as a criticism of Malthusian thought. When Emma Russell tells the Monarch crew, and in turn the audience, that her solution to Earth's ecological strife is wiping out a large section of humanity using the Titans, Dr. Serizawa responds to her with a simple "you are wrong." Much like actual eco-fascist beliefs, the awakening of the Titans under King Ghidorah's reign doesn't harm the rich whose company helps create half the plastic in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch for instance, we see the chaos decimate a small fishing village in Mexico, the occupants of whom likely could never produce half as much waste as an American town of the same size, and who wind up losing their local

food supply thanks to the U.S. military's deployment of the Oxygen Destroyer. Serizawa's belief of co-existence, that neither the military's method of extermination nor the eco-terrorists' desire for Titan dominance, is reasserted when Monarch finds the exhausted Godzilla surrounded by evidence of ancient civilizations who used to live alongside creatures like Godzilla and Mothra. When the film ends and the natural balance is restored, headlines on fictional online articles and newspapers show us heart-warming and relieving titles like "Mysterious Rainforest Blooms in Sahara Desert" and "Godzilla's Path Through Pacific Bringing Life Back to Reefs, Restoring Fish Populations" among others showing the benefits of treating the natural world with respect.

Godzilla's origins as an ancient apex predator are expanded on here, casting him alongside Mothra and even Rodan as a part of the Earth's immune system, ensuring natural balance and only lashing out when either provoked or something disrupts that ecosystem. Each of the monsters is given a sense of godlike reverence; while Godzilla has his trademark blue glow, Rodan is called "the Fire Demon" by ancient texts written of him, finding his nest in a volcano and constantly emanating a flaming magmatic hum, and Mothra a bioluminescent sun glow that quite literally parts storm clouds with her presence. Many of the other original monsters made for the film have names steeped in myths and legends around the world, such as Methuselah or Behemoth from Biblical theology and Scylla from Greek mythology. Even if these monsters can be antagonistic to humans on occasion, they all feel like a living piece of the planet. By contrast, King Ghidorah is a metaphor for the unnatural. Though he is quite literally an alien life-form, making him a wrench in the complex chain that is the Titan sense of balance, from a meta-narrative standpoint he feels like the living embodiment of climate change.



When this version of King Ghidorah arrives anywhere, he generates a massive electrical storm with gale force winds following him, summoning imagery of the worsening hurricanes and typhoons that warming temperatures are bound to bring in our future. It's only when humanity interferes using the Oxygen Destroyer that Ghidorah is allowed to take power, ominously forecasted before the revelation that he survived the underwater struggle against Godzilla by the mass die-off of fish in the water before causing untold disaster worldwide, using the Earth's own ecosystem against it in the form of his controlled Titans in what is implied by one of the Monarch scientists to be a terraforming operation. His waking up from a destroyed iceberg feels very distinct as well, as a long-held anxiety relating to the melting ice caps is the potential for all manner of ancient and, to us, alien bacteria and viruses that our bodies were never equipped to deal with coming out of the thawed permafrost<sup>9</sup>.

Upon *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*' release in May 2019, it was met with somewhat poor reviews and a lukewarm box office return especially in comparison to its prequel and *Kong: Skull Island* in 2017, a film that shares the same universe as *King of the Monsters*. As briefly touched on before, the still ongoing Reiwa era is a unique period for Godzilla's extensive history, as the franchise is being made in both East and West, by Legendary and by Toho who maintain a friendly rivalry—if the game of chicken between the heights of their Godzillas is anything to go by.<sup>10</sup> Though some Godzilla fans would consider the Monsterverse a separate era, it's difficult to make the argument as to why it isn't a part of Reiwa. Not only did it start the era, it has also maintained the momentum by continuing to make live action films while Toho experimented for a few years in animation, with Gen Urobuchi's Godzilla anime trilogy (*Planet*

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<sup>9</sup> In some cases, this is already happening. In 2016, an outbreak of anthrax hit a small village in the Yamal Peninsula of Russia, believed to have started from a reindeer carcass that thawed out of permafrost during a heat wave.

<sup>10</sup> The 2014 film made Godzilla the largest the character had ever been, at 108 meters tall. *Shin Godzilla* proceeded to one-up the Legendary films by making their Godzilla exactly 10 meters taller at 118 meters. *King of the Monsters* then made the Legendary Godzilla exactly one meter larger.

*of the Monsters, City on the Edge of Battle, and The Planet Eater*) which itself took inspiration from the Legendary films with Godzilla's design. *Godzilla: Singular Point*, a Netflix streaming series released in 2021, has also continued to experiment with the character while the Legendary/Monsterverse films continued their Marvel-esque plan that same year with *Godzilla vs. Kong*, an endearing fan-service filled film that delivers a modernized update of the 1962 original and was warmly received in a post COVID-19 box office, hungry for fun escapism after pandemic lockdowns shut down the Hollywood machine for so long.

Though it's difficult to determine since the era is still ongoing at the time of this writing, Reiwa feels like a natural return to form for Godzilla, while also an expansion to new avenues as times have changed. Godzilla's new ecologically based origin in both the Legendary and anime films is a fascinating take on the character, especially as the growing ecological collapse knocks on our doorstep and fears of nukes have (at least, for the moment) largely subsided as an immediate threat in comparison. The future of Godzilla and the anxieties that bring him around may not necessarily lie in the atom bomb, but in the abuse of the natural world and climate disaster that seems to tragically be our bed to lie in as a species.

### Conclusion

*“The image of what a monster is shouldn't stay the same. It should be different so that people will be shocked and surprised, just as they were by Godzilla in 1954. Something new, and strange, must be created.”*

#### - **Ishirō Honda**

The reason Godzilla has endured, moreso than any other Kaiju in film history, is because of how he has managed to stay relevant. While many of the monsters who sprang from the golden age of Kaiju films in the 1950s and 60s stayed relics of their time, Godzilla has always deftly adapted to fit the cultural moment. Starting as a tragic symbol of radioactive destruction, Godzilla became a children's superhero fighting aliens and an environmentalist to fit an era of economic stability and unprecedented pollution, only to return as the Cold War heated up once more and new fields of science raised new moral questions and implications, then bouncing back from an attempt to bridge the gap between Japan and an America who never seemed to quite understand what the character meant with a bold interrogation of the nation's past, before settling in the moment back to true form with two films that tackle the struggles of both present and future. Though there was never a linear path from point A to B, with the movies finding new topics to discuss or picking up subjects already touched on but bringing them to life in a more current context, they were films built from trauma and never afraid to deal with social and political issues.

There are few characters who have found their way to mainstream popular culture like Godzilla that are so well-rounded. It makes it hard to determine what the Godzilla of the future looks like, a character so shaped by the social, cultural, and geopolitical anxieties of the day can take on so many different forms, and though many Americans have often had trouble understanding the character's deeper meanings, Godzilla is a character who will always find a

way to be relevant so long as mankind keeps making mistakes.

### **Filmography**

#### **Shōwa (1954-1975) -**

*Gojira* (1954)\*  
*Godzilla Raids Again* (1955)  
*Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956)  
*King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962)  
*Mothra vs. Godzilla* (1964)  
*Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964)  
*Invasion of Astro-Monster* (1965)  
*Ebirah, Horror of the Deep* (1966)  
*Son of Godzilla* (1967)  
*Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971)\*  
*Godzilla vs. Gigan* (1972)  
*Godzilla vs. Megalon* (1973)  
*Godzilla vs Mechagodzilla* (1974)  
*Terror of Mechagodzilla* (1975)

#### **Heisei (1984-1995) -**

*The Return of Godzilla* (1984)\*  
*Godzilla vs. Biollante* (1989)\*  
*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991)  
*Godzilla vs. Mothra* (1992)  
*Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla II* (1993)  
*Godzilla vs. Spacegodzilla* (1994)  
*Godzilla vs. Destoroyah* (1995)

#### **Millennium (1998-2004) -**

*Godzilla* (1998)  
*Godzilla 2000* (1999)  
*Godzilla vs. Megaguirus* (2000)  
*Godzilla, Mothra, and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack* (2001)\*  
*Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla* (2002)  
*Godzilla: Final Wars* (2004)

#### **Reiwa (2014-present) -**

*Godzilla* (2014)  
*Shin Godzilla* (2016)\*  
*Godzilla: Planet of the Monsters* (2017)  
*Godzilla: City on the Edge of Battle* (2018)  
*Godzilla: The Planet Eater* (2018)  
*Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019)\*

*Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021)  
*Godzilla: Singular Point* (2021)

**Non-Godzilla media mentioned -**

*Frankenstein* (1931)  
*King Kong* (1933)  
*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953)  
*Them!* (1954)  
*Tarantula* (1955)  
*Rodan* (1956)  
*Osomatsu-kun* (1962)  
*Silent Spring* (1962)  
*Minamata: The Victims and Their World* (1971)  
*The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* (1978)  
*Jurassic Park* (1993)  
*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995)  
*Independence Day* (1996)  
*Cloverfield* (2008)  
*Pacific Rim* (2013)  
*Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)

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