Godzilla's Footprint

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In the final moments of *Godzilla*, a brilliant and tormented physicist awkwardly dons diving gear and plunges to the bottom of Tokyo Bay, cradling in his arms a miniature doomsday weapon housed in a metal-and-glass cylinder. Standing on the ocean floor, the scientist pauses a moment and comes face to face with death in the form of a 150-foot-tall prehistoric monstrosity. Soft requiem strains are heard as man and creature float weightlessly in the depths, two innocent victims of the nuclear age, their fates intertwined.

It's a peaceful moment, but it cannot last. Bound by duty and destiny, the scientist detonates the device and in seconds the sea becomes a bubbling cauldron. Godzilla, the seemingly indestructible creature that reduced Tokyo to a smoldering ruin, helplessly gasps for breath, surfacing with a final death cry before disintegrating into nothingness. And the man, guilt-ridden for unleashing a force as destructive as the atomic bomb, chooses to die alongside Godzilla rather than risk letting his Oxygen Destroyer fall into the hands of war-makers. As the movie ends, the immediate threat of mass destruction has been lifted, but there is no rejoicing; instead, a feeling of profound tragedy and deep sorrow. "I can't believe Godzilla is the only survivor of its species," intones an old scientist. "If we continue testing H-bombs, another Godzilla will one day appear again, somewhere in the world."

In summer 2004, fifty years after its debut, *Godzilla* played in cinemas all across the United States for the first time. Not the heavily reedited cult classic starring Raymond Burr but the original, Japanese-language picture that first unspooled in Tokyo on November 3, 1954, and has rarely been seen outside Japan in the five decades since then. The critics called it a revelation, and instead of complaining about bad dubbing and tacky special effects (Godzilla's two enduring claims to infamy), they praised the film's thinly veiled depiction of a nuclear holocaust, its documentary-style realism, its overpowering sadness, and of course its monster-mash entertainment value. A reviewer for Slate.com said it best: "Godzilla is the most emotionally resonant fake monster movie ever made."

Godzilla, that city-smashing, vaguely mammalian-looking mutant reptile with the white-hot radiation breath and that trademark high-pitched roar, is a worldwide pop

icon and Japan's most internationally famous movie star. In this corner of the world, he's considered little more than a cartoon character, a low-tech holdover from the time of atomic bug movies and drive-in theaters, and a nostalgia trip for aging boomers and post-boomers who spent the Saturdays of their youth watching creature-feature programs. For any Cold War–era kid fascinated by giants, monsters, outer space, warfare, technological wonders, the future, and the bizarre, the Godzilla movies of the sixties and seventies were the ultimate *outré* playground for the imagination. Sometimes it was simply a horrific, gigantic monster bent on leveling Japan, like the three-headed space demon King Ghidorah; other times, it was Earth-conquering aliens, or nuclear terrorists, or mad scientists building giant robots, but Godzilla could always be counted on to stem the tide of evil (after an entire city had been leveled in a WWF-style monster melee, naturally). Even if it was obvious the monsters were men in rubber suits, Godzilla had charm and personality that American atomic monsters (usually stiff-moving animated models or live lizards with plastic fins glued on their backs) never did. And even if the Tokyo that Godzilla trampled was obviously a model, those epic-scale destruction scenes had a pseudoreality all their own; entire city blocks were leveled, yet human casualties were almost never acknowledged. Godzilla movies showed us a fantasy world where gigantic monsters were an everyday fact of life and the struggle between good and evil routinely caused catastrophic property damage, and because they were uniquely Japanese, there was an alluring and mysterious quality that made Hollywood's vintage giant monsters just plain dull by comparison.

A few years ago, a Hollywood studio spent $150 million to produce a high-tech *Godzilla* remake. The old Godzilla films still play regularly on cable television, and Japan's Toho studio is still making new ones (there are 28 so far). He's no Tom Cruise, but it's obvious that Godzilla is an international star of sorts. What's far from obvious, though, is that underneath the rubber suits, the fire breathing, and the decimated Tokyos, far removed from the titanic battles with the Smog Monster, Mecha-Godzilla, and Mothra, Godzilla once had something meaningful to say. Born just nine years after the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and made by a director who had witnessed the destruction firsthand, *Godzilla* wasn't just Japan's answer to *King Kong* but a grave warning about the folly of nuclear testing and proliferation. Only now, fifty years after the fact, can the country responsible for dropping those bombs see the film as not simply a vintage science-fiction flick, but an epic postwar tragedy.

Godzilla, as it turns out, we hardly knew ye.

"*The theme of the film, from the beginning, was the terror of the bomb.*

Mankind had created the bomb, and now nature was going to take revenge on mankind."
—Producer Tomoyuki Tanaka

The opening scene of *Godzilla* must have been particularly chilling for Japanese moviegoers in 1954. A small fishing boat sails somewhere in the equatorial Pacific, the crew members playing music and passing away the time on deck. All of a sudden, the ocean's surface boils white-hot; the men jump up to take a look, and their eyes are blinded by a flash of light; then the boat bursts into flames. A mysterious sea monster sinking a ship? Yes, but it was also an unmistakable reference to *The Lucky Dragon*, a tuna trawler that strayed dangerously close to an American H-bomb test and ignited an international controversy when its crew returned to Japan, sick with radiation poisoning. Godzilla was born in the mushroom clouds of World War II, but the tragedy of *The Lucky Dragon*—an incident now reduced to a footnote in most history books if it is included at all—stirred his anger.

The Lucky Dragon set sail from the port of Yaizu on January 22, 1954, with omens signaling that the voyage was ill-fated from the very beginning. At the last minute before departure, the boat's owner decided to fish in the area around the Midway Islands, more than 2,000 miles east of Japan, thinking the tuna catch would be better there than in the Indonesian waters where *The Lucky Dragon* had fished recently. Most of the 23-member crew was not informed of this change (which meant a longer, tougher trip) until they were already at sea, and many were angered by the news. Making matters worse, when the boat made an emergency stop for spare engine parts at the port of Ogawa, it accidentally ran aground and could not be freed until high tide came in. The fishermen considered this a very bad sign but could not have known what dangers it portended.

By the first week of February, *The Lucky Dragon* had reached Midway, but the catch was poor, the engine was acting up, the weather was bad, and nearly half the fishing lines became mysteriously snagged on the ocean floor and had to be cut. Things were looking bleak, and it was decided to head southwest for the calmer waters near the Marshall Islands and drop the lines one last time before heading home. Then luck began to smile upon the little boat. The sun came out, the waters were calm, and on February 19 the men caught 1,600 pounds of prime tuna. Fortune began to ebb, however, as *The Lucky Dragon* edged closer to the heart of the Marshall Islands. Aikichi Kuboyama, the ship's radioman and one of the older hands on deck, warned the captain to stay away from Bikini Atoll, knowing the U.S. had conducted atomic bomb tests there after the war. But no bombs had been exploded at Bikini since 1946, and the most recent tests were done at Eniwetok Atoll, 600 miles to the west, a safe

distance. Besides that, the boat had received no warnings from the Maritime Safety Board to stay out of the area, so the men believed there was no danger.

They were dead wrong. At that very moment, the U.S. was preparing to test its most powerful hydrogen bomb yet, and the Marshall Islands—dubbed the Pacific Proving Ground after the war—were center stage. In the predawn hours of March 1, 1954, America detonated a 15-megaton H-bomb, with about 1,000 times the explosive power of the weapon used at Hiroshima, at Bikini Atoll. The blast, code-named Operation Bravo, was labeled a "routine atomic test" by the Atomic Energy Commission, but it proved far more powerful than expected, vaporizing a large portion of Bikini and sending a plume of highly radioactive debris floating eastward over a 7,000-square-mile area of the Pacific Ocean. About 85 miles away aboard *The Lucky Dragon*, a sleepless crewman named Suzuki had left his bunk to stand on deck and gaze at the stars. Suddenly a huge flare ignited in the western sky, changing colors from yellow to flaming orange as it rose above the horizon, lighting up the sea. "The sun rises in the west!" yelled Suzuki, and soon other crew members were outside, gawking at the strange nocturnal disturbance. After a few minutes, *The Lucky Dragon* was rocked by an invisible concussion, followed by the sound of two distant blasts that made the men hit the deck and cover their heads for safety. Some of them were now sure the strange light was a *pika-don* ("thunder flash"), a word coined in the aftermath of the atomic bombings. As they pulled up the nets and prepared to leave the area, the fishermen were showered with a sticky white ash. During the journey back to Japan several became sick with headaches, nausea, and eye problems, and a few of their faces turned eerily dark. Once safely home, *The Lucky Dragon*'s strange journey became a major news story, and an unprecedented public outcry followed, including a national tuna boycott, a signature campaign to ban the bomb, and the formation of antinuclear activist groups. Several fishermen eventually died, including Kuboyama, the radioman who had warned against sailing near Bikini Atoll.

While these tragic events were unfolding, an ambitious movie producer was dealing with a crisis of his own. Tomoyuki Tanaka (1910–97) was quickly rising in stature at the Toho Motion Picture Company, having produced early films by Akira Kurosawa and other prominent directors and earning the confidence of the studio brass. Tanaka's latest project, a Japanese-Indonesian coproduction, was in disarray. The Indonesian backers pulled out just weeks before shooting was to begin, and Tanaka was now under tremendous pressure to come up with a replacement project. As the story goes, Tanaka was returning to Tokyo from a meeting in Jakarta, flying over the Pacific. Nervous and sweating, he looked out the window at the ocean below, and a light went on in his head.

Inspired by the antinuke clamor surrounding *The Lucky Dragon*'s misfortune, Tanaka approached his boss, Toho's powerful production chief Iwao Mori, and said he wanted to make Japan's first-ever giant monster movie. Tanaka had no story and no idea what the monster would look like, but he had a premise: what if a nuclear explosion stirred a monster from an eons-long sleep on the ocean floor and that monster vented its wrath on Japan? It was hardly an original idea. The year before, Warner Bros. had made a killing with *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), the story of a prehistoric beast that awakens from hibernation in the Arctic after an atomic test and swims to New York, terrorizing the citizenry until the military kills it in spectacular fashion at Coney Island. It's not clear whether Tanaka had actually seen that film (it wasn't yet released in Japan), but he most certainly was aware of it, as he gave his own project the working title *The Giant Monster from 20,000 Miles beneath the Sea*. Tanaka's thinking also must have been influenced by RKO's highly successful international reissue of *King Kong* in 1952, which netted about twice as much at the box office as the original 1933 release. It was Kong's comeback that begat *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and an entire cycle of American giant monster pictures, mostly of the low-budget pedigree, that lasted through the late 1950s. Almost every one of them followed a strict formula: an atomic explosion, or an experiment concerning the effects of radiation, produces an outsized reptile, sea creature, insect, or even human being (as in *The Amazing Colossal Man*). "The Beast was a creature of the unknown," said stop-motion animator Ray Harryhausen, whose special-effects work on *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and other movies is legendary. "That was a period in history when no one really knew what would happen with the radiation from an atomic blast."

The Japanese knew. They lived through it, and although the country was rebuilding physically and economically, the wounds of World War II were far from healed by 1954. Japan had suffered defeat unlike any other nation in history. Even before the atom bombs killed nearly 300,000 civilians, American B-29 planes had firebombed Tokyo for three days in March 1945, wiping out 100,000. By the war's end, entire cities were leveled and the magnitude of casualties was astonishing: an estimated 1.8 million dead, another 680,000 wounded or missing. Factories were destroyed, crippling the economy. Japan's massive Pacific empire was now just a memory, and six million soldiers and civilians returned home to a country whose spirit was crushed. Adding insult to injury, then came the Allied Occupation (1945–52), and a nation that had remained unconquered for thousands of years now suffered the indignity of being governed by a foreign power and forced to adopt a Western-style constitution that reduced the emperor to a symbolic figure, abolished state Shintoism, and threatened other traditions. Under the rule of Gen. Douglas MacArthur (appointed the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces), numerous clampdowns were designed to democratize Japan, including strict oversight of the movie industry. Once

the Allies left Japan to govern itself, a number of bomb-inspired films were made, including *Children of the Atom Bomb* (1952), in which a Hiroshima schoolteacher searches for students who were victims of the blast; *Hiroshima* (1952), an angry film accusing the U.S. of using the Japanese as nuclear guinea pigs; and Akira Kurosawa's satire *Record of a Living Being* (1955), starring Toshiro Mifune as a man driven insane by fear of another nuclear strike. As a monster film, *Godzilla* is usually considered little more than light entertainment, but in terms of theme and tone, it has much in common with these antiwar, pacifist movies that appeared after the occupation restrictions were lifted.

"The Japanese had fought with all their spirit, but it was modern technology that defeated them. Godzilla is unaffected by modern technology. He is stronger than the weapons that brought Japan to its knees."
—Composer Akira Ifukube

When *Godzilla* went into preproduction in April 1954, it was known simply as *Project G*, short for "Giant," as the monster still had no name. Soon thereafter, producer Tanaka decided to call it *Gojira* (later transposed to "Godzilla" for the English-speaking world). According to Godzilla lore, *Gojira* is an amalgam of the Japanese words for "gorilla" and "whale," and it was borrowed from a burly man employed on the Toho studio lot; the man had earned the nickname because some people thought he was "as big as a gorilla," while others said he was "as big as a whale." Chosen to direct the picture was Ishiro Honda (1911–93), who began his career in the early 1930s as a cameraman and ascended through the studio system, learning the craft of directing alongside Akira Kurosawa, his lifelong friend. Although Honda was not the studio's first choice (another director opted out due to scheduling conflicts), he proved to be the ideal man for the job because he shared the belief that the monster should represent the horror of nuclear warfare and the lingering fears and anxieties of post-Hiroshima Japan.

Honda had a personal stake in the subject matter. In 1936, he was drafted into the Japanese Imperial Army and forced to put his film career on hold. Over the next eight years he served three tours of duty as a foot soldier in Japanese-occupied China, and in 1945, while stationed along the Yangtze River, he was taken as a prisoner of war. While held captive, Honda learned of the atomic bombings and Japan's surrender, and after he was freed, he passed through decimated Hiroshima on his way home, an experience that haunted him forever. The son of a Buddhist priest, Honda was a quiet, cheerful man and a skilled director with a humanist streak, his films usually populated by everyday Japanese characters working at everyday occupations. Honda's earliest films were documentaries, which may account for *Godzilla*'s realistic feel and

its unblinking re-creation of widespread urban destruction. For Honda, Godzilla was not a metaphor for the bomb but a physical manifestation of it. "Most of the visual images I got were from my war experience," he said years later. "After the war, all of Japan, as well as Tokyo, was left in ashes. The atomic bomb had emerged and completely destroyed Hiroshima… . If Godzilla had been a dinosaur or some other animal, he would have been killed by just one cannonball. But if he were equal to an atomic bomb, we wouldn't know what to do. So, I took the characteristics of an atomic bomb and applied them to Godzilla."

The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms was based upon a Ray Bradbury story, and that may have inspired Tanaka's hiring of Shigeru Kayama, a popular postwar horror and mystery writer, to pen a treatment for *Godzilla*. In Kayama's draft, completed in late May 1954, Godzilla behaved like a wild animal searching for food (in one scene, it attacked a container ship full of safari animals from Africa, eating the cargo) and appeared in the city just once, briefly raiding the harbor area of Tokyo. The story was handed to director Honda and his cowriter Takeo Murata (a longtime assistant director at Toho), who spent three weeks holed up in a Japanese inn in Shibuya, fleshing out the screenplay. Honda and Murata's script followed Kayama's outline closely but turned Godzilla into a walking nightmare, devoid of animal-like instinct and motivated only by the will to destroy; and it embellished the drama with a love triangle, political infighting, and several overt references to World War II, the atomic bombings, and *The Lucky Dragon*.

Godzilla begins with a series of mysterious shipping disasters in Japanese waters. Authorities are baffled, and there are only a few survivors, suffering radiation sickness, who describe the sea catching fire before they sank. In a tiny, rustic fishing village on Odo Island, a fisherman named Masaji washes ashore on a raft. His skin is burned and he's nearly dead, but when he says a monster attacked his boat, no one believes it. The local waters are suddenly devoid of fish, and an eccentric old man believes the spate of strange occurrences must be the work of Godzilla, a legendary sea beast that could only be pacified by human sacrifice. The others just laugh, but late one night an eerie typhoon strikes Odo Island, thunderclaps shaking the Earth like giant footfalls. Masaji, awakened by the tremors, steps outside his house and is nearly frightened to death by a horrifying sight. He takes cover indoors, but a powerful, unseen force flattens his home and tramples the village. The government dispatches a scientific team to investigate the Odo Island disaster, led by a prominent paleontologist, Dr. Kyohei Yamane (played by Takashi Shimura, star of Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*). While Yamane is surveying a huge, radioactive footprint, the eerie din of those giant footsteps is heard again, and suddenly, a giant reptile pokes its head up from behind a low ridgeline and roars mightily before disappearing. Yamane

deduces the creature is a holdover from the Jurassic period and believes America's recent H-bomb tests stirred it from an eons-long undersea sleep, and he names the creature Godzilla, after the Odo Island myth. While all of this is taking place, a soap opera subplot unfolds, involving Yamane's twentyish daughter Emiko (Momoko Kochi) and her boyfriend Ogata (Akira Takarada), who is following the monster story because his company owns one of the sunken ships. Emiko and Ogata secretly want to marry, but first she has to terminate her arranged marriage to Dr. Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata), a reclusive, eye-patch-wearing scientist bearing physical and psychological scars from the war. The girl never gets to break the bad news to her fiancé, however, because Serizawa has something more urgent to discuss. He takes Emiko to his creepy basement lab and shows her his latest experiment, the sight of which (off camera) terrifies her; then Serizawa makes Emiko promise never to tell a soul about it. Godzilla is sighted in Tokyo Bay, and the military responds by dropping depth bombs, ignoring Yamane's plea to preserve the creature for study. The bombs only anger Godzilla, and it storms ashore after nightfall, trashing the harbor before retreating to sea. To protect the city from further damage, the authorities erect a huge electrical barrier along the shoreline, but Godzilla easily melts the power lines with its radioactive breath and proceeds to lay waste, mercilessly, to vast portions of the metropolis. As casualties mount, a distraught Emiko reveals Serizawa's secret: he has accidentally created a deadly device called the Oxygen Destroyer that most certainly is capable of killing Godzilla. Serizawa at first refuses to hand over the weapon, fearing it would ignite a new, even more dangerous arms race. In the dramatic climax, Serizawa agonizes over his predicament: to introduce a new weapon of mass destruction or allow the human carnage to continue? Ultimately he relents, only after destroying his research papers to ensure the Oxygen Destroyer cannot be rebuilt.

King Kong is often called the greatest monster movie of all time, and deservedly so. The film's special effects broke new ground technically, and its epic spectacle and entertainment value have never really been matched. *Godzilla*, then, is arguably the most important and enduring postwar monster movie—important because it attempted to address a global issue that still resonates 50 years later. At first glance, several similarities between Godzilla and Kong jump out. Both monsters were born in the folklore of island dwellers, giving them a godlike mystique. Both monsters are heard before they are seen, with Godzilla's terrible roar piercing the night during the typhoon on Odo Island and Kong's battle cry booming from behind the jungle rampart on Skull Island. Both Kong and Godzilla move from their primitive worlds to a final showdown in a modern metropolis, and both can be killed only by the most advanced weapons technology of the time (Kong by fighter planes, Godzilla by a pseudonuclear device). The contrasts between these two giants are even more interesting. Kong is a humanoid creature with emotional and physical feelings, while

Godzilla (ignoring, for argument's sake, the fact that it is a man in a suit) is completely inhuman both in form and expression, blank eyes showing no remorse as the monster tramples innocent victims, and it is unharmed by the artillery shells and other weapons lobbed at it. Another important difference is the size of Godzilla, about ten times as big as Kong; whereas the big ape walks the streets of Manhattan and climbs buildings, Godzilla plows through entire city tracts without much effort. Godzilla's impossible size lends the film added thematic weight: the creature is as massive and unstoppable as the technology that created it, as if nature itself were retaliating against man for his foolish tinkering with the laws of physics.

"Mr. Tsuburaya said it would take seven years to make Godzilla *by using the same stop-motion method as King Kong, and I'm hiring you because I need to finish the movie in three months."*
—Godzilla stunt actor Haruo Nakajima

When Spider-Man glides through the Manhattan skyline, most people hardly even blink, much less gasp in awe. Digital-age special effects have made amazing feats possible on film, but almost no one is amazed anymore because heightened realism is taken for granted. In the fifties, the opposite was true: audiences were wowed by effects that now look all too obviously fake. Back then, the state of the art in big-scale motion picture magic was Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), which required construction of massive sets and intricate matte photography (the parting of the Red Sea took six months to shoot). Producer George Pal won an Oscar for the awesome destruction depicted in *War of the Worlds* (1953) and spent more than $1 million on the effects alone, twice as much as on the drama scenes. Ray Harryhausen took *King Kong*–style stop-motion animation to the next level in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and other films. But Eiji Tsuburaya (1901–70), the man who was given the job of designing, creating, and filming *Godzilla*'s special effects, had only a fraction of the time, money, and equipment that his American contemporaries did. What he did have, however, was a vivid imagination, a willingness to experiment, and an opportunity to fulfill a dream.

Tsuburaya began his career as a cinematographer in the early 1920s, and although he experimented with trick photography early on, only after seeing *King Kong* did he dedicate himself to advancing the art of special effects in Japanese cinema. By the late 1930s, Tsuburaya was appointed head of Toho's "special photographic techniques department," and his reputation grew when the studio produced about 40 commercially successful, nationalist war films from 1939 to 1945. Using detailed miniature models and elaborate pyrotechnics, Tsuburaya re-created military battles in the air and on the sea. *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaysia* (1942) was both an

amazing piece of wartime propaganda and the biggest display of Japanese special effects to date. Budgeted at nearly $400,000 (about ten times the average feature in those days), its depiction of the attack on Pearl Harbor was rendered so realistically that during the postwar occupation the American authorities mistook it for actual newsreel footage. With film production curtailed following the war, there was little work for a man with Tsuburaya's expertise (and because he had worked on war films, he was likely forced out of the industry for a while). By the time Tsuburaya returned to Toho Studios in the early 1950s, he was entering his fifties, but his most creative days still lay ahead.

Even though it was far removed from the war scenes he specialized in, the challenge of creating Godzilla was tailor-made for Tsuburaya, who had longed to make a Kong-style monster movie of his own. But questions remained. For one thing, what did Godzilla look like? Several concepts were discussed during the planning stages. At one point, Godzilla was described as "a cross between a gorilla and a whale." Early sketches showed an odd creature with mammalian features and a stubby head. Tsuburaya dusted off an old idea, a story about a gigantic octopus attacking Japanese ships. Producer Tanaka passed on all of them and eventually took another cue from *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, deciding Godzilla would be a reptile.

Tsuburaya would have preferred to film *Godzilla* with animated models, but the tight production schedule allowed roughly three months to supervise the design, construction, and filming of all the effects scenes. Stop-motion animation was meticulous and time-consuming, requiring tiny increments of movement to be photographed one frame at a time, so it simply was out of the question. And even though the man-in-suit method was technically inferior to animation, in a strange way it was an innovation. No one had done it quite like this before; there had been a few American-made dinosaur movies with actors wearing T-rex costumes, but Godzilla, as it turned out, would be a prototype for a new genre. The Godzilla suit, in concert with all the other effects that Tsuburaya's team of craftsmen had mastered during and since their days making war films (designing and building detailed miniatures, pyrotechnics and fire effects, puppetry, mechanical models, matte photography, and so on), was a feasible, effective, and simple way to portray the monster's size and power.

Once Tsuburaya and his artists had finalized Godzilla's design (based on a cocktail of various dinosaur species), they built a costume. An inner frame was built of bamboo and wire, covered by wire mesh and cushioning, and topped with several coats of molten rubber. When it was finished, Tsuburaya and his crew gave the monster a screen test, but the results weren't very promising. "I have an incredible memory of

the first time I ever tried on a Godzilla suit," said Haruo Nakajima (b. 1929), one of two actors cast as the titular beast. The costume weighed about 200 pounds and felt like a straitjacket. Breathing was nearly impossible. The huge tail dragging behind felt like a dozen sandbags. "I and Katsumi Tezuka (the other Godzilla actor) tried on the suit in front of Mr. Honda, Mr. Tsuburaya, Mr. Tanaka and members of the staff," Nakajima said. "But the suit was so heavy, so stiff. I was able to walk about ten meters, but Mr. Tezuka could only walk about three meters and then he fell down. I thought, 'This is going to be impossible.'" A new, more flexible costume was made, enabling Godzilla to successfully complete his film debut. Nakajima suffered blisters and fainting spells and dropped about 20 pounds under the blazing studio lights, but he relished the role and would play Godzilla and other monsters in dozens of films before retiring in 1972. "I was disappointed when I was first cast as Godzilla because inside the suit, you couldn't see my face," he said. "But then I realized Godzilla is the star of the movie, so I felt proud."

Nakajima should have won an Oscar for Godzilla's final attack, a thirteen-minute-long nocturnal rampage through the pitch-dark streets of Tokyo. The ominous, psychologically striking music of composer Akira Ifukube underscores the dread as Godzilla advances like a slow-moving nuclear explosion, the force of the blast plodding methodically across the city. Stragglers who ignored evacuation warnings are trampled under outsized feet. Tanks hurl artillery shells at the giant, and retaliation is swift and deadly. Famous landmarks crumble, including the Nichigeki Theatre (Tokyo's answer to Radio City, a victim of the wrecking ball years later), the clock tower atop the Wakko Building in Ginza, and the Diet Building, Japan's house of parliament. As the destruction builds to a crescendo, a ring of fire encircles the metropolis from the shoreline to the outskirts. Next morning, daylight reveals the magnitude of the damage. Nothing remains standing; the streets are buried under rubble, and a thick smoke layer hangs above, a blanket of gloom. Disaster shelters overflow with the dead and dying. A doctor tests a child for radiation, and the Geiger counter goes berserk. A little girl wails as she watches her mother die of terrible burns.

Are these images merely the stuff of science fiction, of a B-movie? With even just a glimmer of understanding about the filmmakers' intentions and the political climate of the time, *Godzilla* emerges as one of the great antinuclear films, comparable in it power and pacifism to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), Alan Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), and Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959). Visually, the monster and the havoc it wreaks allude to the bomb, the war, and the victims at ground zero. Scenes of Tokyo on fire, with flames streaming out of windows and licking the sides of buildings, clearly evoke the American firebombing in 1945, an

attack in which a napalm-like chemical was used. Thematically, the story brims with tragic figures and symbols. Yamane represents the ethical pursuit of science for humane purposes, but his appeal for a peaceful response to the crisis, to learn the secrets of Godzilla's post-holocaust survival, falls upon deaf ears. Serizawa is a reclusive genius haunted by the global implications of his own terrifying discovery. Godzilla is more than a living nuclear bomb—its prehistoric heritage suggests an ancient life force, a conduit to Japan's past, perhaps even to those killed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a way, Godzilla's death is the movie's second reenactment of the atomic bombings, with the monster signifying the suffering of the *hibakusha* (A-bomb victims). At the same time, Serizawa's self-sacrifice symbolizes disarmament and an end to the reckless science that led the world to this fateful point, offering a glimpse of hope amid the sadness. *Godzilla* is not an angry film, not a simplistic indictment of the United States for the events of August 1945. It is a powerful condemnation of the atomic age and a plea for nuclear powers to end the march toward oblivion.

Why has the world ignored the message behind the monster, unable to see anything more than a city-stomping goliath? Because for fifty years, that message has been lost in the translation.

> *"George, here in Tokyo time has been turned back two million years. This is my report as it happens."*
> *—Raymond Burr in* Godzilla, King of the Monsters

Godzilla was released at the dawn of the Showa 30s (1955–65), a decade when more than one billion movie tickets were sold, many critically acclaimed films were made, and Japan's annual film output briefly surpassed that of America and Britain combined. *Godzilla* represented a significant risk for Toho Studios, not only because it was the first of its kind, not because its man-in-suit special effects were unproven, but because at about $167,000, the budget was roughly three times that of the average Japanese feature. But Toho, spurred by the creative and productive climate of the day, was taking a lot of risks. Also released in 1954 were the historical drama *Musashi Miyamoto*, budgeted at about $500,000, and *Seven Samurai*, budgeted at about $560,000 and three-plus hours long, making it the longest and most expensive Japanese film to date. These gambles paid huge dividends. All three films ranked among the year's Top 10 box office draws; *Musashi Miyamoto* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film; *Seven Samurai* is widely considered the greatest film of all time; and *Godzilla* launched a legendary franchise and a new genre, *kaiju eiga* (monster movie).

Around this time, Japanese movies were getting their first international exposure, with Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1951), Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (1953), and

other pictures winning prizes at film festivals around the world. To capitalize on the trend, Toho opened an office in the Little Tokyo section of downtown Los Angeles, offering movies to distributors in the U.S. and other countries. Meanwhile, across town, Hollywood was swept up in an era of exploitation-movie madness. In the shadows of the big studios, independent producers and filmmakers were rapidly cranking out low-budget flicks, most of which had little socially redeeming value but compensated with lots of monsters, violence, rock 'n' roll, and titillation. These were the days when legendary B-movie men such as Samuel Z. Arkoff, Roger Corman, Bert I. Gordon, and the illustrious Ed Wood earned their rightful place on the fringe of cinematic history with classics like

It Conquered the World, King Dinosaur, Reform School Girl, She-Creature, and hundreds more. *Godzilla* was brought to America by Harold Ross and Richard Kay, two Hollywood bottom-feeders whose biggest success thus far was *Untamed Women* (1952), an un-epic story of soldiers marooned on an island inhabited by cavegirls.

Ross and Kay weren't artists, but they were shrewd producers. *Godzilla*'s appeal was the star monster, but almost everything else about the film was problematic. It had been just over a decade since Pearl Harbor, since Japanese Americans were sent off to live in camps, since movies like *Bataan* (1943) depicted "the Japs" as buck-toothed homicidal maniacs. By and large, the atomic bombings were seen as a necessary evil, and Americans had little sympathy for the Japanese and their postwar plight. To merely add English-language dialogue and release *Godzilla* to the U.S. market "as is" would risk a monster flop. But the producers had a savvy idea: they would give *Godzilla* an American point of view, inserting a Yankee reporter who visits Japan during the monster's raid. They hired Raymond Burr (who, in those days, was playing heavies like the wife-killer in *Rear Window*) and filmed new scenes, using body doubles, clever editing, and other tricks to make it appear Burr was interacting with the Japanese cast. Entire sections of the original movie were excised, and the new material was spliced in. The whole thing was done on the cheap: all of Burr's scenes, according to one version of events, were filmed in one, long, grueling day at a small soundstage on Vermont Avenue, using minimal set dressings and the actor's own wardrobe. Asian-looking actors and extras were hired to play Burr's Japanese interpreter and various bit parts. For scenes that required English dubbing, just three actors (two men, one woman) did all the voices. To put the whole thing together, Ross and Kay recruited Terry O. Morse, a no-name director and editor who had toiled in the lower echelons of Hollywood for two decades.

To fund this no-frills production, Ross and Kay dealt half their interest in *Godzilla* to Joseph E. Levine (1905–87), a Boston-based distributor who had a knack for

exploiting gimmick films with loud, obnoxious publicity campaigns. Levine (who, as head of Embassy Pictures, would later produce *The Graduate* and other movies) launched an advertising blitz boasting that Godzilla made King Kong "seem like Peter Pan by comparison," and with the audacious, attention-grabbing new title *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, the movie made its debut on April 4, 1956, at Loew's State Theater in Times Square, a gigantic, 3,450-seat movie palace. Levine was so confident he had a major hit that he simultaneously booked the film in hundreds of theaters, a rare feat at the time. The reviews were terrible, but it didn't matter. *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* grossed about $2 million, not bad for a low-budget, independently released, black-and-white picture in those days.

Two years earlier, when *Godzilla* first played in Japan, the reviews also were negative, but for different reasons. Japanese critics were offended by allusions to the atomic bombings, the H-bomb tests in the Pacific, and *The Lucky Dragon*, accusing the filmmakers of cashing in on national hysteria. ("They called it grotesque junk," director Honda later lamented.) Over time, however, *Godzilla* became accepted as a classic, and recent surveys of top film writers continue to rank it among the best Japanese features of all time. The "Americanized" print, on the other hand, is still a critical pariah nearly 50 years later, even while it endures as a pop culture phenomenon (amusingly, it's been playing on American Movie Classics of late). *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* is a different animal than its Japanese counterpart; the most glaring distinction is that journalist Steve Martin (Burr) is in almost every scene, and the story is told in flashback, through Martin's eyes. At about 80 minutes, this version is considerably shorter (the original clocks in at about 98 minutes), and numerous scenes were deleted, shortened, altered, or reordered to make room for Burr's superfluous subplot. Only about 60 minutes of material from the Japanese cut remained, much of it devoted to Godzilla's rampages. The movie's conscience, its antiwar moralizing, is heavily muted (although not completely silenced), and even if what remains is entertaining as a piece of sci-fi nostalgia, it is hardly insightful or thought-provoking.

How many films have been recut and rereleased in a second version so dissimilar to the first? In the history of motion pictures, even in this age of director's cuts, the drastic differences between *Godzilla* and *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* remain a rare case. To understand the impact of these differences, fast-forward to the final scenes of the American version. Serizawa detonates the Oxygen Destroyer and the ocean rumbles. Godzilla surfaces, roars in agony, and sinks to its death. Aboard the ship, Serizawa's air hose is reeled in, but it's been severed, and the scientist's shocked friends shed tears of grief. Steve Martin remains off to the side, a near-blank expression on his face. Everyone stands at attention, doffs their hats, and salutes

Serizawa's self-sacrifice. "The menace was gone," Martin says in voice-over. "So was a great man. But the whole world could wake up and live again." Fade out.

The events are nearly identical to those in the original cut, but the old scientist's warning that "if we continue testing H-bombs, another Godzilla will one day appear" is replaced by Raymond Burr's suggestion that everyone "wake up and live again," aping American atomic-monster movies and their upbeat endings (with the military victorious, the monster dead). Throughout *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, other references to nukes were negated in similar fashion. A fiery debate in the Japanese senate (should Godzilla's connection to H-bomb tests be kept secret, to avoid a panic?) was cut. A lively chat among subway commuters, all survivors of wartime devastation ("I hope I didn't survive Nagasaki for nothing," says a woman), was cut. One man's insistence that Godzilla be killed because the monster is "a menace to all Japanese, like the H-bomb," was cut. So was a heartbreaking moment alluding to the war, if not the bomb specifically, when a young widow comforts her terrified daughter ("We'll see Daddy in heaven," she says) as Godzilla approaches.

With so many differences between the two versions, it has been speculated that the producers of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* were politically motivated, erasing all those A-bomb allusions to avoid offending American audiences. It's an amusing conspiracy theory, but there is little evidence to support it. Even if the U.S. release isn't as heavy-handed as the Japanese film it was made from, it includes one unmistakable, direct reference to atomic testing that rings loud and clear: a scientist's declaration that Godzilla is "a product of the H-bomb." And if the Americans who recut the movie *were* trying to suppress its message, they failed, because many reviewers had no trouble decoding the metaphor. *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther was angered by the notion of Godzilla as "a symbol of Japanese hate for the destruction that came out of nowhere and descended upon Hiroshima," and dismissed the picture as "incredibly awful." Rather than politics, Godzilla's American handlers were driven by bottom-line considerations. They cobbled together a movie that was both profitable and durable, though in terms of emotional and psychological impact, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* isn't all that much different from other fifties sci-fi films that used big monsters, flying saucers, or body-snatching invaders to evoke the Red Scare, the Cold War, and the bomb.

> *"We'd really like to demand abolition of nuclear weapons to both America and Russia. That is where Godzilla's origin is."*
> *—Director Ishiro Honda*

"I can't believe Godzilla is the only survivor of its species," the old scientist warned in

1954, and his suspicions were correct. The success of *Godzilla* meant more Godzillas, and on April 25, 1955, less than six months after the first film made its debut, the hastily made sequel *Godzilla Raids Again* was released in Japan. A new Godzilla and a second creature called Angilas decimate some exotic architecture in the city of Osaka. The sense of urgency that propelled *Godzilla* was gone, and the torpid, uninspired movie ends with Godzilla buried under a man-made avalanche, courtesy of some rather unconvincing effects. *Godzilla*, it seemed, was a one-shot atomic allegory, so the character was sent on hiatus while Toho tinkered with the mutant-monster formula in films like *Rodan* (1956, starring a giant pteranodon) and *Mothra* (1961, a gigantic insect with decidedly feminine traits).

King Kong deserves a good deal of credit for Godzilla's worldwide popularity. Not only was Kong a major influence on and inspiration for the 1954 *Godzilla*, but the success of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962) launched an international Godzilla franchise. Kong was, of course, played by a man in a costume—an ugly, lumpy costume not worthy of Kong's name—just one reason why *King Kong vs. Godzilla* is known as one of the biggest cinematic turkeys of all time. Nevertheless, it was a big hit. Twelve million tickets were sold in Japan (even today, it remains the most commercially successful Godzilla movie), and a reedited American cut distributed by Universal-International also was highly profitable. Godzilla was back to trash Japan again, but something had changed. Now Godzilla had a comic wink in his eye. The monster taunted his enemy and performed judo flips in the heat of battle. This Godzilla, not the sinister beast roused by the Bikini H-bomb eight years before, is the one that became ingrained in world pop culture.

During the sixties, in sequel after sequel, Godzilla's apocalyptic origins continued to blur until they vanished. The character transformed from a nuclear terror into a run-of-the-mill monster on the loose and finally into a rather silly, Earth-defending superhero. Kids adored the big lug, and the antics became more and more endearing. In one movie, Godzilla gave his bashful son a lesson in fire-breathing techniques; in another, Godzilla flew through the air. Most of the films were pure escapist entertainment, while a few added some heavy-handed moralizing about issues of the times. The much-maligned *Godzilla's Revenge* (1969) is actually a pretty good children's film about latch-key kids in the era of two-income families, while *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971, aka *Godzilla vs. The Smog Monster*) serves up a gigantic, living pile of sludge as a ham-fisted symbol of rampant pollution. The first cycle of Godzilla films ended in 1975, followed by a second series from 1984 to 1995, and a third from 1999 to 2004. In these films, Godzilla was mean and nasty once more, a malevolent god reluctantly defending its homeland against even more terrible threats. Again the films touched on topical issues like environmentalism, genetic engineering, and the

Japanese bubble economy of the late eighties, but they were often content to just let the monsters duke it out. By the end of the 20th century the Cold War was history, and nuclear weapons didn't seem so scary anymore. When Godzilla threatened to explode like an H-bomb in 1995's *Godzilla vs. Destroyah*, the world didn't exactly shudder in fear.

Perhaps director Ishiro Honda was a bit naive. In 1991, two years before his death, Honda said he had always hoped that *Godzilla* could help bring an end to nuclear testing and arms proliferation and lamented that he had failed. Indeed, the situation has grown ever more dangerous since Godzilla's first rampage. More and more countries are going nuclear, and terrorists covet the bomb. A monster movie can't change the world, but Godzilla is a lasting reminder of the Pandora's Box opened in August 1945. Born in the hellfire of a mushroom cloud, the "King of the Monsters" warned man to shut that box and extinguish the fire. If we can't look beyond the rubber suits and the flaming Tokyos and stare the monster in the eye, perhaps we're all a bit naive.

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