

Japan and America in Godzilla Films

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Godzilla is recognized by many as the first successful product of Japanese pop culture to win international success. Major league baseball player Hideki Matsui is adorably nicknamed “Godzilla,” suggesting that his rugged face and his raw power are compared to those of Godzilla’s. The DVD of Tim Burton’s memorable 1993 animated film, *The Nightmare before Christmas*, came out in Japan with the same cover jacket as the American’s, but in Japanese advertisement on the web a Godzilla figure was emphasized behind the protagonist (**figure 1**). Godzilla has nothing to do with the film, of course, but certainly grabs the attention of Japanese consumers.

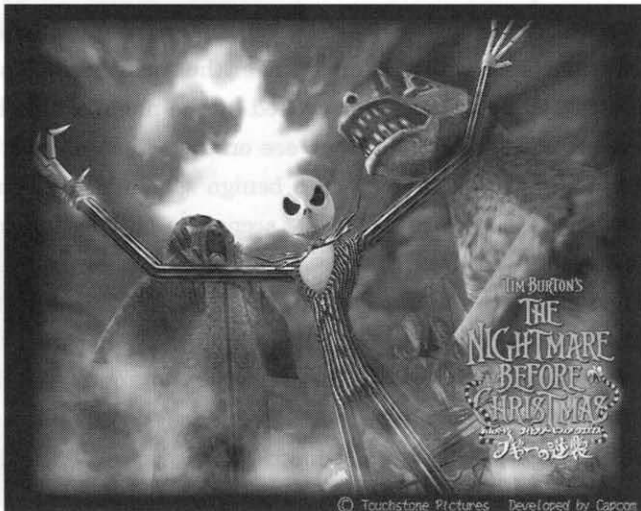


figure 1

During the past fifty years thirty-seven Godzilla films (including those loosely related to the Godzilla family of films) have appeared. America plays a significant role in many of them, since the origin of the monster is closely connected to American foreign policy and its guidelines of nuclear development. The depiction of America, however, changes as social and political relations between the U.S. and Japan change. In the present paper I shall attempt to show how America is portrayed in Japanese film from the mid 1950s through the end of the twentieth century. I shall also explore the way Americans responded to Godzilla films and the way they re-wrote Godzilla films when these were released in the U. S.

I select two groups of Godzilla films -- one presenting Godzilla as destroyer, and the other featuring Mothra, Japan's favorite monster, as an antagonist of Godzilla. I do not include the films where Godzilla becomes a benevolent protector of the Earth, for neither the U.S. nor any other country receives distinctive characterization if Godzilla is friendly to good boys and girls and if everything is all right when the monster arrives.

The original *Godzilla* of 1954 is often said to be a protest against American nuclear testing. This may be true, but how this might be so has not always been explored in detail. The film begins ambiguously, for what we see does not match what we hear. The very first shot we encounter is a simple black frame with white letters: "Under the Auspices of Japan Coast Guard." An atmosphere of tension is evoked by the name of this branch of the Japanese security system. We then see on the screen a Japanese fishing boat with a group of fishermen on a benign sea suddenly being blown up with a bright flash (**figure 2-4**). This scene can only be interpreted as a nuclear explosion -- at least by the Japanese, for whom a bright flash has functioned as an icon of nuclear explosion ever since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The association of innocent fishermen and a nuclear blast was especially strong in the socio-political context of November 1954, when the film was released. At this time the terrible news of a Japanese fishing boat, Daigo-Fukuryumaru, being exposed near Bikini Islands to the H-bomb test by the U.S. only eight months earlier was still vivid in the Japanese mind.



figure 2

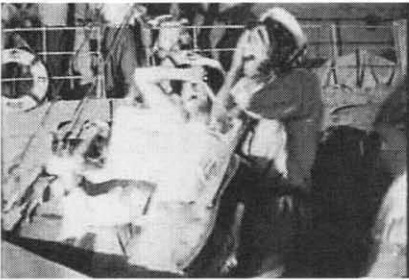


figure 3

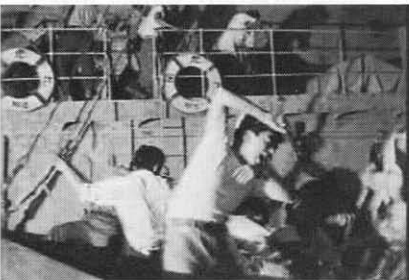


figure 4

The producer of the film, Tomoyuki Tanaka, actually showed a newspaper clip of the bombing of Daigo-Fukuryumaru to the executives of Toho Movie Studio while he was explaining his new idea of a nuclear monster: "It is a story where the primitive giant creature is revived as a nuclear monster due to the H-bombs experiments and then attacks Tokyo.... Daigo-Fukuryumaru in fact underwent a terrible experience near Bikini Islands."¹ He wanted to depict "a monster which is associated with H-bombs."² Shigeru Koyama, who wrote a script of *Godzilla* at Tanaka's request, also demonstrated his opposition to the nuclear experiments: "I charged the story [of *Godzilla*] with my resistance against atomic weapons."³ When *Godzilla* was released, the ban-the-bomb movement was rapidly spreading, being sparked by the dying words of Aikichi Kuboyama, the radio transmitter of the bombed boat: "Let me be the last nuclear victim."⁴ Both *Godzilla* and the ban-the-bomb movement are, in a sense, twin results from the nuclear bombing of the Japanese

fishing boat.

But what we hear as an explanation of the opening explosion scene in *Godzilla* is not that it is an atomic explosion but that the cause of the shipwreck is mysterious and indefinable. Here is a curious twist to veil the responsibility of the U.S. A little later on the fishermen's island, an old man begins to talk about the legend of Godzilla, identifying the shipwreck as the result of the monster's violence. Without any proof, his words are taken for granted in the following course of events. The criticism against the U.S. as a nuclear-bomb tester was thus masked until Doctor Yamane, the only true authority of Godzilla (except for Doctor Ashizawa who at the end of the film sacrifices his own life to destroy Godzilla by his invented Oxygen Destroyer), gives an account of the arrival of Godzilla as the results of the H-Bomb experiments, when he is asked to make a report of what he has discovered by his investigation on the island. He says: "These creatures were living quietly in caves deep in the sea until the repeated H-Bomb experiments destroyed their environment completely and turned them into destructive, nuclear monsters." He pities Godzilla and understands the creature's anger, regarding Godzilla as a victim of the H-Bombs. His statement plainly accuses the U.S. of the repeated nuclear tests. His body language, however subtle it may be, also conveys his indignation at those who were experimenting with H-bombs.

Yamane's statement triggers uproar in the parliament. A male member is against disclosing the truth to the public, because he is wary of stirring public opinion against the U.S. and of complicating international relations. The female member, on the other hand, forcefully claims that the truth should be disclosed. They shout at each other (**figure 5-14**):

Male: Doctor Yamane's report is tremendously important, and we should not disclose it to the public.

Female: What are you talking about? We should disclose it to the public, because it is tremendously important.

Male: Sht up! If Godzilla is the fruit of the H-bomb ...

Female: It exactly is, isn't it?



figure 5



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8



figure 9



figure 10



figure 11



figure 12

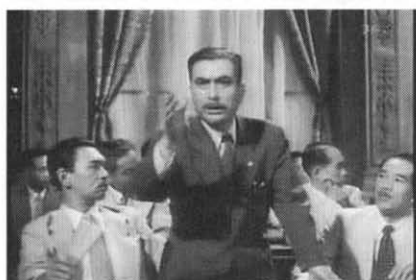


figure 13



figure 14

Male: If we announce that, what will become of our already complicated international relations?

Female: But it is the truth.

Male: That is why it is so serious. If we announce the truth, we will end up getting the public up in arms and causing confusion in politics, economics, and foreign affairs.

Female: Idiot! What are you talking about?

Male: Idiot? How dare you call me that?

Female: We must disclose the facts to the public.

The parliament scene is modified a great deal in the American version, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956). This film was supposed to be an English-dubbed version of the original Japanese film, but it actually was produced by an American staff under the direction of Terry O. Morse, who had some scenes deleted and new scenes added, even with new characters and new plots. It replaces the famous beginning with the nuclear flash in the Japanese version with the narration by a new protagonist who was not in the original film, an American newspaper reporter named Steven Martin. The narration begins: "This is Tokyo." An audience familiar with the original version would be puzzled by this alteration and would be further disturbed to find in the parliament scene that the heated debate over publication of the U.S. involvement in Godzilla's origins has been deleted entirely. Instead, the American version adds new shots of Martin sitting and listening to Yamane virtually attacking U.S. nuclear policy. His shots are inserted at short intervals into the original shots of Yamane so that the two groups of shots form shot-reverse shot to indicate that Martin tentatively listens to Yamane and grasps the causal connection between Godzilla and the nuclear experiments by the U.S. (**figures 15-18**).

The succeeding scene in the American version, however, shows that Martin conceals the involvement of the U.S. in the arrival of Godzilla, when asked by his boss to report what he has found out about the monster (**figures 19-20**). Martin only says that "It's big and terrible, more frightening than I ever thought possible," and that the Japanese security



figure 15



figure 16



figure 17



figure 18



figure 19



figure 20

authority has decided to use Jet Bombs on Godzilla.

In the original Japanese version, the scene showing passengers on a train, which was replaced by the scene of Martin telling his boss a half-truth of Godzilla, plays an important role in providing significant socio-cultural information of 1950s Japan. The train scene begins with a close-up of the newspaper headlines about the advent of the nuclear monster (**figure 21**). Thus we see that the demand of the female parliament has been met. Anonymous passengers on the train read the headlines and discuss nuclear matters. A woman passenger connects the Godzilla news to her own experience in the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki and complains to



figure 21



figure 22

her fellow passengers (**figure 22**): “I am scared by hydrogen tuna, radioactive rain, and Godzilla... I have barely escaped alive from the nuclear bombing in Nagasaki.” This scene, which is intended to remind the audience of America’s responsibility for the introduction of nuclear power, is completely deleted in the American version. Such re-writing of the Japanese Godzilla films by the Americans for their release in the U.S. continued up to the 1985 *Godzilla*.

Criticism of the U.S. policy of nuclear testing is expressed with some reserve in the original *Godzilla* -- mainly through the comments of Doctor Yamane and through those of the female parliament member. But in a film of 1961 it receives straightforward articulation. In the film entitled *Mothra* (1961) made by the same staff that made the original *Godzilla* film, a monster named *Mothra* appears for the first time as a byproduct of the *Godzilla* series. *Mothra* will fight against *Godzilla* in later films, but in this film, which is his debut, he only appears and destroys most parts of New York, which is named “New Kirk.” *Mothra* begins in a way similar to that which introduced *Godzilla*. This time, however, the boat is wrecked simply due to a storm (and not by a nuclear explosion), and the surviving members wait to be rescued on a nearby island named Infant Island, which is introduced as a place for U.S. nuclear tests, echoing the actual nuclear explosions at Bikini in the Marshall Islands. As soon as the survi-

vors testify to the existence of inhabitants on the island, the morality of the U.S. is questioned. The Embassy of the U.S. (called Lorishika in this film) issues a statement which only strengthens the negative image of America: "We conducted H-bomb experiments on Infant Island because we had reached the conclusion after careful investigations that it was an uninhabited island. We have not changed our view."

What follows also adds to confirm the negative image of America. Japan and the U.S. send out a team to the island for investigation, and there the team encounters a pair of beautiful dwarf girls. Nelson, an American, wants to catch the girls, but he is hindered by one of the Japanese men. However, he later returns to the island secretly and, killing a large number of the inhabitants, kidnaps the little girls and exhibits them in a show in Japan in order to make money. The U.S. Embassy supports Nelson's claim that the little girls belong to him. When criticisms by the Japanese increase formidably, Nelson escapes Japan with the captured little girls to New York. Mothra soon flies after the girls, for, as the girls explain, "He only behaves following his instinct to bring us back to the Island." Wherever Mothra flies, buildings and streets are destroyed due to the enormous air pressure he creates with his flapping wings. Even a little Japanese boy knows that Nelson is the cause of all the destruction, for he writes in his diary: "Mothra attacks us because Nelson will not let the little girls go back to their island. He is a very bad man. Many people will be hurt because of him." New Yorkers finally learn that the destruction is caused by Nelson's kidnapping of the little girls and begin to blame him. He becomes isolated and is finally shot by American police officers (**figures 23-26**). Americans suddenly become dependent on a group of Japanese who have been sent to New York, and ask them to communicate with the little girls so that the girls' protector, Mothra, would not go on destroying the city: "Now please tell us what to do about these girls."

The social and political turmoil of the year 1960 in Japan, which was marked by the bloody, deadly struggle "Anpo" against the Japan-U.S. security treaty (**figures 27-28**) and by the general resignation of the Cabinet Kishi, is not unrelated to the uncomplimentary representation of the



figure 23



figure 24



figure 25



figure 26

U.S. in the 1961 film. How could this film, so permeated with anti-U.S. sentiments, be re-written by the Americans? The answer to this question is unexpectedly unchallenging, for the American version (produced by David D. Horne, directed by Lee Kresel, script by Robert Myerson) is almost identical to the original version except for minor deletions such as a scene where two American priests, witnessing the destruction of New York by Mothra, come close together and pray in an artificial way: “Now we must rely on God’s will. Amen. Have mercy on us” (**figure 29**) The negative image of America, however, is to disappear rapidly in the succeeding *Godzilla* films. *King Kong vs. Godzilla* in 1963 shows no sign of



figure 27



figure 28

presenting American as villain. The world-famous monster representative of American pop culture is introduced as a good monster who will fight against Godzilla to save human beings. Such a plot is itself indicative of a favorable reception of America by the Japanese. King Kong lives on a southern island (which resembles Mothra's nuclear island), and is worshipped as a guardian deity by the inhabitants. His function resembles that of Mothra in that he fights against Godzilla to save human beings, but there is a remarkable difference: King Kong is captured and is to be carried over the sea to Japan to be used in a TV commercial by a Japanese company. The eagerness that the executive of the publicity department of the company displays in his plan to use King Kong as an advertising gimmick is indicative of a new commercial outlook in Japan in the new age of high economic growth. Endeavoring to put King Kong (as America) under Japanese rule implies that Japan would assimilate its modernization model to itself and would eventually take pride in its eco-

conomic superpower. The film begins with a TV commercial promoting their product (**figures 30-31**), to which the executive responds by blurting out “boring” repeatedly. He becomes so sullen that he works off his bad temper by abusing his subordinates (**figure 32**). He decides to turn over a new leaf and plans a grand voyage to the southern island to capture the legendary creature called “great machine,” which turns out to be King Kong. The boss’s voyage with two of his people forms a significant plot of capturing King Kong until it intersects with the other plot of Godzilla appearing in the northern sea, destroying a submarine, and finally meeting King Kong. The battle of the two monsters, grappling with each other in



figure 29

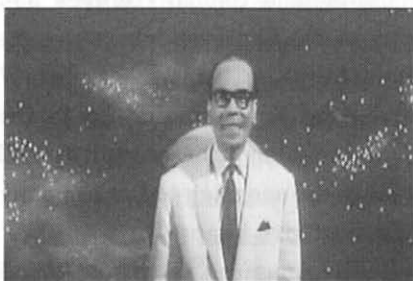


figure 30



figure 31



figure 32



figure 33



figure 34

hand-to-hand combat (**figures 33-34**), becomes a highlight of the final part of the film even where the executive's motivation for capturing King Kong keeps on being mentioned. When the two monsters fall into the sea and King Kong, coming up to the surface, begins to swim toward his southern island, the executive finally but regretfully abandons his idea of taking the monster to his company, and mumbles, "What's gone is gone. We must give him up."

The American version of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (written by Paul Mason and Bruce Howard, edited by Peter Zinner, and directed by Thomas Montgomery) deletes much of the plot concerning the Japanese company's project to use King Kong as their publicity campaign animal, thereby leaving the monster a monument of American imagination. It replaces the opening episode with the TV commercial and the executive's sullen complaint with a view of the United Nations building in New York with the Chrysler building in the background (**figure 35**), where Carter enters and introduces himself: "The United Nations reporter, Eric Carter, with the news" (**figure 36**). A comparison of the beginning of the Japanese (**figures 30-32**) and American (**figures 35-36**) versions reveals clearly the divergent focuses of the two versions. The American version develops with this Carter as stage manager. He is intrusive and comments frequently on what is going on. The ending of the film corresponds to the beginning,

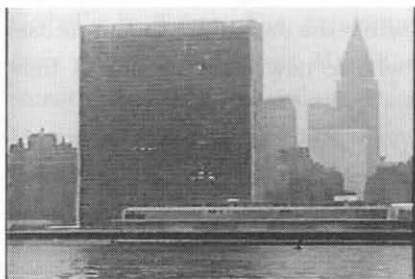


figure 35



figure 36



figure 37

having Carter comment on the battle of the monsters. He bids a fond farewell to King Kong, the popular American monster, wishing “him luck on his long, long journey home” (figure 37). He does not clarify where his “home” is. He might have thought of New York, which is inseparably connected with this monster in *King Kong* directed by Merriam Cooper in 1933.

When the plot of creating an effective TV commercial by using King Kong was deleted from the American version, the conversations of the characters were changed so that they would be consistent and logical. In the final sequence, for example, we see the unhappiness of the Japanese executive over having to give up King Kong, but all of his words are deleted in the American version. The words of the other characters are also changed. The American version keeps only one conversation in the final sequence, and even that conversation is changed drastically from what it was in the original version. If we compare the two versions of this conversation, we no-

tice that the American version applauds King Kong, who had won and now had escaped the terror of Godzilla, while the Japanese version focuses on the issue of capturing King Kong, who is now escaping out of their hands.

Japanese version

Man1: King Kong is escaping to the sea. What shall we do about him?

Man2: Let him go back to the southern island, which he must miss,

American version

Man1: Kong is swimming safely out to sea. No Godzilla.

Man2: That's wonderful. I hope we've seen the last of them for a long time.

The re-writing of the Godzilla films thus continued up until 1980s. The last film to be rewritten by the Americans was titled simply *Godzilla*, which was released in 1984 in Japan. It has an opening sequence similar to that of the 1954 film (**figures 38-39**). The difference is that in the later film the cause of the shipwreck is immediately identified as Godzilla, who is resurrected by an eruption of a volcano and not by nuclear experiments. The film does not represent America as the villain. On the contrary, America is favorably depicted, for it fires a counterattack missile to shoot



figure 38

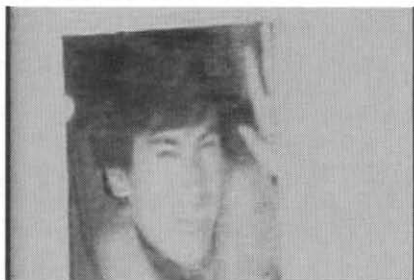


figure 39

down a Russian nuclear ballistic missile, which was fired accidentally on Godzilla in Tokyo. The American version, which is made the following year, reintroduces Steven Martin as “the only American who survived that catastrophe” thirty years ago. Being considered an authority on Godzilla, Martin is asked by the U.S. navy: “Please tell us what to do.” He comments on the nature of Godzilla: “Godzilla is like a hurricane or tidal wave. We must approach him as we would a force of nature. We must understand him, deal with him perhaps even try to communicate with him.” At the end of the film he further comments, “Nature has a way sometimes of reminding man of just how small he is,” and he again identifies Godzilla as a natural phenomenon by lining up “tornado, earthquake, or Godzilla.” His understanding of Godzilla is much closer to the Japanese conception, which take Godzilla as a pitiful natural object, which is forced to be present by the humans, than to the 1998 American definition of their own Godzilla: “He is just an animal.” Steven Martin is no longer an ignorant outsider, which is what he was in 1955, but an expert on Japan and Godzilla. His presence helps to maintain the same silently sad atmosphere at the death of Godzilla as in the Japanese version. When Godzilla is led to fall into a volcano, no one smiles or looks happy. In the Japanese version people line up quietly (**figure 40-43**), and in the American version (**figure 44-47**) people line up in a way similar to that in the Japanese version. The American version does not change the plot from the original Japanese plot but, on the contrary, sympathetically follows the mode in the original.



figure 40



figure 41



figure 42



figure 43



figure 44



figure 45



figure 46



figure 47

In both versions, a feeling of pity for the dying Godzilla is aroused, with the pathetic music added to the scene. Martin here correctly comments on Godzilla: “a strangely innocent and tragic monster.”

The reception of *Godzilla* in the U.S. makes progress in the 1990s. American versions do not make changes to the original, keeping the original language and providing English subtitles. This progress occurred along with the remarkable change in the depiction of America by the Japanese. There was no longer shipwreck caused by nuclear blast or evil Nelson or captured King Kong. *Godzilla vs. Mothra* made in 1992 presents an ardent, innocent American scientist, who, in order to study the little girls, offers to buy them from a Japanese man (**figures 48-50**). But this American scientist does not acquire the girls, for the Japanese soon repentantly gave up the trading so that the little girls should help their *Mothra* fight against *Godzilla*.

America becomes invisible in *Godzilla 2000 Millennium*, when the emphasis is put more on what people think and feel than how



figure 48

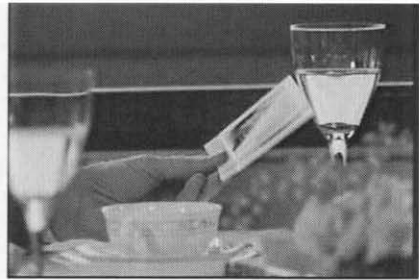


figure 49



figure 50



figure 51



figure 52



figure 53



figure 54

Godzilla destroys towns. There is a group of Japanese people who compassionately try to understand Godzilla by studying his ecology. No particular event triggers his arrival in this film. Godzilla suddenly appears and begins to destroy towns. Godzilla becomes a symbol of the product of human greed for the almighty, just as Frankenstein's monster does. That is why the film ends with a disturbing phrase: "Godzilla is in ourselves." With these words, we see Godzilla still destroying buildings, firing his atomic fire breath (**figures 51-54**). There is no room for Americans to enter into this rather psychological film of Godzilla. To conclude my essay, I point

out that the farther Godzilla moves away from its original connection with the nuclear motif, the less frequently America appears.

Notes

¹ Hideyuki Inoue. *Investigatlon: The Birth of Godzilla* (Tokyo Asahi Sonorama, 1994), p.34.

² Inoue, p.44.

³ Inoue, p.45.

⁴ The Medical Association of Shizuoka, A Presentation at the Second Session in the International Symposium of the Atomic Bombing (1995).

<http://shizumin.com/kikima-rion2.html>