

Signs Taken for Monsters: What Made Godzilla So Angry Then?

Hiromi Nakano

Introduction

After reviving the Gamera franchise in the 1990s, Shusuke Kaneko, a former *roman porno* director at Nikkatsu studios, created *Godzilla, Mothra and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-out Attack* (hereafter *GMK*) in 2001. With a strong nationalistic subtext, the film is basically built in a revenge-play framework. The work eventually grossed more than ¥1 billion on 2.4 million at the box office paid admissions.

The so-called Gamera trilogy—*Gamera, Guardian of the Universe* (1995), *Gamera 2, Attack of Legion* (1996) and *Gamera 3, Revenge of Iris* (1999)—is said to have set a new standard for monster films (*Kaiju eiga* as fans call it in Japanese) with a serious tone, a hip sensibility and great technical skill. *GMK* does almost the same simulation of the disasters caused by monsters as the Gamera trilogy does, but its emotional power, instinctive impact and social relevance render this movie quite unique and distinctive. This paper focuses on the provocative aspect of *GMK*, and aspires to find out how Japanese culture and society are revealed through disasters named monsters.

Disasters named monsters

The Heisei Godzilla series (1989–96) left some lingering dissatisfaction to the hard-core fans. Their complaints were as follows: Godzilla seldom wrestled other monsters physically; the destruction of cities was portrayed as not involving the direct loss of human life; the death of human beings at the hands (or feet) of monsters was never depicted; politicians and the military leaders remained observing and commenting rather than taking responsibility for decisive action themselves; people appeared impotent and reduced to frustrated spectators in a distant place (Kiridoshi, 2002: 64–7).

GMK seems to have addressed these problems in its own way. First and foremost, a large number of people are killed. Human life inevitably becomes the victim of bad accidents caused by monsters. In a scene, for example, brutal motorcycle gangs are annoying the residents at the foot of Mount Myoko in Niigata Prefecture. Baragon, one of three legendary guardian deities—the Sacred Beasts of Yamato—appears from the mountain and buries them alive in a tunnel. Another scene represents some young punks robbing a convenience store by Lake Ikeda in Kagoshima Prefecture, going on a drinking spree and trying to drown a little puppy. Then Mothra, another Sacred Beast, emerges from the lake and drowns them.

Bad guys should be punished. These depictions surely give guilty pleasure to monster lovers. However, matters take a turn for the worse. Baragon appears next around the Owakudani valley, a tourist attraction in Hakone district. Many tourists are insensitive to the impending danger, taking a picture of the monster and saying, “It’s scary but it’s cute as well.” At that very moment, the cliff behind them collapses and Godzilla emerges. A great number of crumbling

rocks rain down upon the tourists, and they are crushed to death by debris. People lose all means of escape in the face of Godzilla.

For Godzilla fans, his appearance over a hill evokes the monster's first-ever grand entrance on Odo Island in *Gojira* (1954). *GMK* is, in a sense, a cinematic tribute to the first Godzilla movie. In the plot of *GMK*, Godzilla is said to have rampaged in Japan only once in 1954. Producer Tomoyuki Tanaka observed, "The theme of the film [the original *Gojira*], from the beginning, was the terror of the Bomb. Mankind had created the Bomb, and now nature was going to take revenge on mankind" (Ryfle, 1998: 20 as quoted in Tsutsui, 2004: 18). *GMK* depicts the destruction of Shimizu City in Shizuoka Prefecture. Godzilla destroys the city with his radioactive breath, drawing a nuclear blast with a mushroom cloud. An elementary school teacher (acted by Kazuko Kato) gasps, "What? Is it an atomic bomb?" Audiences see a nuclear weapon in Godzilla himself.

Director Kaneko says in an interview, "Godzilla is a wild fellow, rowdy and a hooligan. He is ill-natured, mean and dirty" (Kiridoshi, 2002: 442). The creature is indeed a murderous, ruthless, radioactive villain in the film. In an impressive fighting scene with Baragon, Godzilla, twice the size of his opponent, kicks the Sacred Beast's body again and again, and stamps on its face over and over. It looks like a bad boy is cruelly bullying a weak child. Godzilla attacks his enemies persistently and relentlessly in *GMK*. That kind of characterization is represented best in some sequences in which certain persons encounter Godzilla again and again.

The creature first comes ashore at Magonote Island, which is located near Odo Island. Young people in a tourist home of the island are chatting in the ping-pong room. A girl (Tomoe Shinohara) casually says, "It's sad that the Security Forces should kill it. Why don't they protect and keep it?" At that very moment, they are assaulted by Godzilla. Later on, this girl is in a hospital of Shimizu City, strapping her broken legs, unable to flee. She becomes hysterical when Godzilla stomps by the hospital; with the creature apparently passed, she sighs in relief, only to have a belated flick of Godzilla's tail blast the ward.

This episode may be reminiscent of a scene in the 1954 *Gojira*, in which the monster is bringing ruin to Tokyo when a woman cowers beside a Ginza building, holding her young children close as flaming debris rains down upon them. "We'll be joining your father soon," she moans, referring to a husband killed in the World War II. "Just a little longer, a little longer." Godzilla takes on the dark character of war personified (Tsutsui, 2004: 37). The original *Gojira* also represents the fear in which certain people meet disasters more than once.

A person with a traumatic experience suffers the same terrible pain once again. If we watch the sequence mentioned above when we were children, a sort of trauma might haunt us a long time. *GMK* was released as a double bill with cartoons featuring Hamutaro, an adventurous and cute hamster. Kaneko once commented that he wanted to make the kids, who look forward to seeing Hamutaro, cry and scream over *GMK* (Kiridoshi, 2002: 342).

For whom does the military work?

When *Gamera, Guardian of the Universe* was released in 1995, the Great Hanshin Earthquake happened, and then the Aum Shinrikyo cult carried out the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system that killed 12 people and injured some 5,500. When *GMK* was premiered in 2001, the Sept. 11 terrorists' attack occurred in USA. Traumatic realities have surpassed fictional worlds in recent years. We have to endure the unpredictable assaults of earthquakes, typhoons or man-made destruction like war and terrorism. These unreasonable and outrageous incidents are personified in Godzilla, which calls the *raison d'être* of the military into question in the film.

In the plot of *GMK*, the Security Forces are maintained under the Constitution of the People's Republic of Japan. The pacifist constitution justifies the possession of a self-defense military. Furthermore, Japan observes a peace treaty with USA and Russia in this parallel world. In a shot, Admiral Tachibana (Ryudo Uzaki) lectures in the Naval Academy

that Godzilla's only prior attack on Japan was in 1954, when the Security Forces expelled the monster from Japan. Audiences find that *GMK* offers some sober reflections on nationalism and the role of the military in contemporary Japan. The army plays a major role in the movie, which portrays Japanese soldiers, sailors and airmen as capable, dedicated and honorable. Kaneko confides in an interview as follows:

The famous passage in Article 9 of the Constitution: "Land, sea, and air forces, as well as war potential, will never be maintained" is contradictory to the fact. So we need to change the Constitution but we shouldn't conclude any military alliance with other countries. I can't recognize Japan's right to collective self-defense to act with the United States, while both the left wing and the right one are criticizing me for my opinion.

(Kiridoshi, 2002: 440)

Article 9 renounces war and prohibits the nation from maintaining a military, even though it does. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party are pushing to change the Constitution—especially Article 9—and pave the way for Japan to engage in collective defense, which they call the right to collective self-defense. The current interpretation of the Constitution bans such action. Clause 1 of Article 9 states the nation forever renounces the use of force as a means of settling international disputes. To accomplish this aim, Clause 2 says the country will not maintain a military or recognize the right of belligerency. This has kept the status of the Self-Defense Forces controversial.

Kaneko directed the films of the Gamera trilogy in cooperation with the Self-Defense Forces of Japan (SDF). That is why he couldn't shoot any fighter-crash scenes. Concerning *GMK*, however, SDF did not cooperate in making the film. The first thing Kaneko wanted to do was to make a jet fighter crash into a field. Moreover, the scene shows a lot of people killed in a plane crash. The picture shows the military does not always play the role of the guardian of people.

Men and women in uniform dutifully undertake the necessary humanitarian and administrative functions—evacuating cities and caring for the injured—as professional skilled workers. The film offers a high tribute to the professionalism, resolve and determination of the armed forces. Nevertheless, the military proves helpless against Godzilla. Seeing it with his own eyes, Admiral Tachibana says to himself, "Did our army really expel the monster from Japan fifty years ago?"

Secretary Hinogaki (Kunio Murai) gives him a true account of the event. According to him, one scientist [Dr. Serizawa] invented a lethal weapon [Oxygen Destroyer] fifty years ago, which disintegrates the oxygen in water, suffocating all living organisms. The device was the only weapon that could terminate Godzilla. Hinogaki added, "The conventional arms didn't work at all and the Security Forces were totally useless at that time. But if this fact were unveiled, that would lead to the unfavorable argument that Japan need not possess any military power. That's why the authorities must conceal the fact from the public. Well, that's my job, indeed."

This episode arouses our interest in the post-World War II Japanese discourse over militarization. William Tsutsui, an associate professor of history at the University of Kansas, rightly observes:

Under the pressures of the Cold War, Japan did cautiously remilitarize, but only under the banner of "Self Defense Forces" (*Jieitai*), ground, maritime, and air units charged and equipped solely for limited defensive action. Although sentiment in Japan favoring a more substantial military capability has surged from time to time (most notably in recent decades), the majority of the Japanese populace has strongly embraced pacifism and resisted Japan's reemergence as a regional military power.

(Tsutsui, 2004: 95–6)

Facing the decisive battle against Godzilla, Tachibana confesses to his colleague (Takeo Nakahara) that he feels pride in not experiencing any actual fighting. Kaneko says, "Some may consider it dishonorable to have no combat experience. I don't think that. We should take pride in what Japanese people have learned during the last fifty years" (Kiridoshi, 2002: 439). *GMK* implicitly inquires what the military signifies to people in Japan.

"What made Godzilla so angry then?"

As a child, Tachibana had a traumatic experience in face of Godzilla fifty years ago, when he was separated from his parents due to the monster. He has never met them since then. "I can never forget the cries for help of men and women, who were killed by him," he shouts. Actually, this line of the officer is quite different from the original one in the screenplay. It was supposed to say, "What made Godzilla so angry then?" (Kiridoshi, 2002: 440-1)

The original line will naturally lead us to think about what monsters symbolize. The film seeks to locate monsters in the foundational mythology of Japan. It posits that three legendary guardian deities rose from the earth to defend the country from Godzilla's rampages. Long time ago, an ancient dynasty got rid of various monsters in the course of its conquest, then worshipped them as deities. The custom and practice were taken over by the Yamato State.

The subject material of this anecdote comes from Motohiko Izawa's novel, *Gyakusetsu no Nihonshi* (The paradoxical History of Japan). Given the Imperial Family succeeds distantly to the throne of the Yamato State, the anecdote turns out a politically bold statement about the root of the emperor system of Japan. Actually, *Gamera 3, Revenge of Iris* tried to take up this argument and brought out one question, "What makes monsters attack Japan?" Its answer was so much concerned with Japanese traditional culture that the main stage of the movie was set in Kyoto, the ancient capital.

In the original scenario of *Gamera 3* by the screenwriter Kazunori Ito, who scripted the animated classic *Ghost in the Shell*, the Moribe family has long inherited a peculiar system of scapegoats, in which the children in this family have been sacrificed to Ryu-Sei-Chou, a deity of the family. The custom has kept the Moribe family prosperous until now. This anecdote was eventually cut from the plot for fear that it should lead to a problem about the origin of the emperor system (*Gamera Perfect Box*, 1999).

In Kaneko's original idea of *GMK*, the Sacred Beasts of Yamato were supposed to consist of Varan, Baragon and Angilas. President Matsuoka of Toho studios, however, ordered him to change Varan and Angilas into Mothra and King Ghidorah. It was because some market research suggested that women like Mothra and men prefer King Ghidorah (Kiridoshi, 2002: 444; Tsutsui, 2004: 69).

As Norio Akasaka has persuasively described, Godzilla and Mothra would often come to Japan from across the seas in several movies. But interestingly, Varan and Rodan emerge from the interior of Japan. There is an underlying structure of the opposition between the central and the marginal in Japan. Varan appears around the basin of the Kitakami River which was the base of the Ezo people, while Rodan inhabits Mount Aso where the Kumaso people lived as their base. Both native people resisted the invasion of the Yamato State to the last (Akasaka, 1992a).

Masao Higashi points out that Varan is called "Bataragi" by the inhabitants in *Varan the Unbelievable* (1958). He connects that name with "Arahabaki," a deity that native people in Touhoku regions worshipped. Historically, the Yamato State (the central) would regard native people (the marginal) as monsters like 'Oni' (ogre) and 'Tsuchigumo' (ground-spider). That kind of perception is often showed in *Kaiju eiga* genre (Higashi, 1992).

It is very interesting to sacralize three monsters as the ultimate protectors of Yamato/Japan when it comes to issues of power and order. How do power and order emerge from the chaotic stage where everyone fights against everyone? As Hitoshi Imamura puts it, the confusing situation comes to an end when one member becomes the only target of the violence by the rest of members. Focusing all the forces upon one object, the other members can evade

each other's violence. The one member that has been excluded is considered to be defiled, stained and abject by the others. After getting rid of those scars with a certain ritual, that one is sacralized by the others. This is the way power and order emerge from chaos (Imamura, 1982; Imamura, 1992).

This theory is especially useful in understanding the closing sequences of *GMK*, in which the Sacred Beasts of Yamato fight side-by-side with the Security Forces to subdue Godzilla. Turning their violence toward their common enemy, two forces are able to avoid arousing any unnecessary antagonism and identify each other as protectors of the nation state. That's why Godzilla has to be constructed as the outsider.

But we cannot take things so simply and easily. Now let's get back to the initial question, "What made Godzilla so angry then?" *GMK* is based on an interpretation of Godzilla long favored by right-wing critics in Japan. One ghostly old man (Hideyo Amamoto) in the movie explains, "The souls of countless people who fell victim in the Pacific War gathered in Godzilla's body." The monster proceeds to attack Japan because people have forgotten the agony of those killed in the war.

Akira Ifukube, who composed the score of the 1954 *Gojira*, once noted that, for his generation, which came of age in the 1940s, Godzilla was like the souls of Japanese soldiers who died in the Pacific Ocean during the war (Igarashi, 2000: 116 as quoted in Tsutsui, 2004: 37). In the same vein, Akasaka argues that Godzilla represents the unquiet souls of soldiers and sailors who died in the Pacific during World War II, returning to Japan to wreak vengeance (Akasaka, 1992b). These explanations for Godzilla and his blind fury link *GMK* to the original *Gojira*. The monster becomes a powerful symbol of Japan's repressed memories and suppressed patriotism.

Godzilla is heading for Tokyo in the same way as he was fifty years ago. Lieutenant General Mikumo (Shinya Oowada) groans, "Why Tokyo?" No clear-cut answer is offered in the film, but Akasaka reasons that like the spirits of the war dead, Godzilla (in the original film) would head toward the Imperial Palace. There again, Tsutsui has some truly interesting things to say:

Japanese commentators have also long linked Godzilla with Saigo Takamori, a nineteenth-century samurai warrior who led an ultimately futile revolt in 1876–1877 against a modernizing, Westernizing national regime. Saigo, beloved in Japan as a principled and sincere rebel in the mold of Robert E. Lee, was the model for the character Katsumoto in the 2003 Hollywood epic *The Last Samurai*. Some suggest that Godzilla, like Saigo, turned his wrath on Tokyo as a protest against slavish Westernization and the dilution of Japan's national spirit. *GMK* repeatedly invokes the Saigo connection: Mothra first appears in a lake associated with Saigo, and the midget submarine that Admiral Tachibana pilots in the decisive battle against Godzilla is named the *Satsuma*, after the home province of Saigo in southern Japan.

(Tsutsui, 2004: 220)

Is this a curious variation on the opposition between the central and the marginal? Furthermore, literary critic Takayuki Tatsumi makes us aware of Yasuo Nagayama's postcolonialist reading of Godzilla. In his opinion, the monster may have had his genesis not in a nuclear mishap but rather in a pseudoreligious and pseudoscientific theory championed by 19th-century Shintoist Masumi Ohishigori (Nagayama, 1992: 185–8 as quote in Tatsumi, 2006: 175). Tatsumi convincingly remarks:

From the end of the Edo era up through the Meiji era, Ohishigori was so aware of the limits of Shintoism that he modernized it so it could catch up with Christianity or Buddhism. Thus, deeply influenced by the rise of Darwinism and paleontology, Ohishigori the Shintoist, a practitioner of ancestor worship, came to invent an amazing theory

that located the origin of man in dinosaurs born of Japanese gods. This theory of dinosaurs as the origin of the Japanese had a tremendous impact on one of the mystic cult, Oomoto-kyo, which was very active in the Taisho era. (Tatsumi, 2006: 175)

The members of this cult believed some dinosaurs still survive in the ocean as dragon gods. When we recall that the original Godzilla seems to have emerged from the sea, we feel certain that the monster's creators had Ohishigori's theory somewhere in the backs of their minds.

What does Godzilla mean in *GMK*? Is he the son of the atomic bomb? Is he wrath incarnate and a vengeful god with the image of unquiet and violent homecoming souls of Japan's war dead? Or, is he an uncontrollable, unfathomable catastrophe visited upon a helpless Japan? At least, we cannot regard the monster as a simple outsider. The point is what the picture tells us about our society and ourselves through the creature.

Conclusion

If Godzilla embodies the souls of the Japanese soldiers, he is not the ultimate alien but an insider, 'one of us.' We can reason Godzilla represents 'the self' as well as 'the other.' Nevertheless, we should remember the monster's milky eyes have no pupils, which represent death. We don't fear Godzilla because he is such a disaster that we lose all empathy for him, but because he is the living dead.

The living dead represents the confusion between life and death. They are positioned as the ambivalent presence in the boundary between this world and the other world. Monsters are born under such a border and disturb the established order of society on the earth. So we are extremely horrified by them (Girard, 1972, 1982).

The 1954 *Gojira* begins with a reference to the Lucky Dragon No.5 (Dai-go Fukuryu Maru) incident. A small Japanese trawler in search of tuna strayed close to the nuclear testing zone of Bikini Atoll in the central Pacific. The seamen were exposed to radiation, and tainted tuna entered Japanese markets before the radioactive contamination was discovered. The original *Gojira* surely evoked in its viewers the memories of the past war and nuclear anxiety as a clear and present danger. Audiences could consider themselves victims under imminent threat from outside.

However, we must acknowledge the fundamental change in what realities signify from fifty years ago. The original *Gojira* was intended to frighten rather than amuse the audiences with Japanese unease over a mounting nuclear menace and the long shadows of World War II. In contrast, *GMK* lets us see our worst nightmares and conquer them cinematically, exorcising our deepest demons through a process into which a subtle patriotic subtext is interwoven.

Today, we experience plenty of things through the various media. Those devices might present an appalling disaster as an amusing spectacle, giving us the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering and calamity. Terrible things really do happen. A lot of people have suffered cruelties beyond our imagination, and then we also hear a lot about the effect of violence-as-entertainment on children and adults. Our perception of the world is shaped by the media we access. Our behavior, in turn, is shaped by our perception. If many of us expect violence to break out at any moment, don't we increase the energy available for that to occur? The monster is the symbol of what we have to fear.

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[なかの ひろみ 横浜国立大学経営学部・大学院国際社会科学部研究科教授]

