Socio-Political Aspects of Kaijū Eiga Genre: A Case Study of the Original Godzilla

ABSTRACT

Kaijū eiga – literally “monster movie” – is one of the most easily recognizable genres of Japanese cinema, as well as one of its biggest export products. Yet, despite its tremendous popularity in North America and Europe, for decades this genre was ignored by Western film scholars. The main goal of the present article is to discuss the kaijū eiga phenomenon as an area of intersection between escapist entertainment and socio-political commentary. As kaijū eiga productions are numerous, detailed analysis of even the most important representatives of the genre is beyond the scope of a single paper. Therefore, I have decided to focus on the first instalment of the Godzilla series. In the first section of the article I present a brief history of the Western reception of kaijū eiga, from its disregard by mainstream film criticism to its recognition as an important cultural phenomenon by the academic community. The second section serves as a brief review of the canonical and unorthodox interpretations of the original Godzilla that appeared in the subject literature during the course of the last three decades. In the next part of the article I discuss Honda Ishirō’s influence on the Godzilla form and purport within the context of his world-view and the traumatic events of his past. The last section of the article is devoted to the changes introduced to the film by its American distributors that led to the distortion of its original purport.

KEYWORDS: kaijū eiga, monster movie, Gojilla, socio-political aspects.

Gojira, Godzilla, King of the Monsters, The Big G, The Kaijū – he is a beast of many names as well as many faces. Born as a menace, he becomes an anti-hero, then turns into a super-hero, then returns to his roots, only to once again become a creature with an ambivalent nature. Yet, despite these changes in his character, there are two things constant about him – he always brings about spectacular destruction... and a message.

The main goal of this article is to present Japanese film genre called kaijū eiga (怪獣映画, literally “films about mysterious creatures”) as an area of constant interactions between escapist entertainment and socio-political commentary. As kaijū eiga productions are numerous – three Godzilla subseries alone consist of 28 films¹ – comprehensive discussion and

¹ Godzilla films are divided into three subseries, which are referred to as eras: Shōwa (1954-1975), Heisei (1984-1995), and Millenium (1999-2004). The same nomenclature is applied to kaijū eiga
evaluation of the formula is beyond the scope of a single paper. Therefore, instead of providing analyses of a large number of films – that would be at best sketchy, and as such of no particular value – I have decided to focus on the first instalment of the *Godzilla* series. Nevertheless, I present basic notions concerning properties and evolution of the genre, as well as a few examples of possible interpretations of *tokusatsu* films other than the original *Godzilla*. This approach was dictated by the fact that I have envisioned this paper as the first of a series of articles dedicated to the historical transformations of the *kaijū eiga* formula which I hope to write in the near future.

In the first section of the article I present a brief history of the Western reception of *kaijū eiga*, from its disregard by mainstream film criticism to its recognition as an important cultural phenomenon by the academic community. The second section serves as a brief review of the canonical and unorthodox interpretations of the original *Godzilla* that appeared in the subject literature over the course of the last three decades. In the next part of the article I discuss Honda Ishirō’s influence on *Godzilla’s* form and purport within the context of his world-view and the traumatic events of his past. The last section of the article is devoted to the changes introduced to the film by its American distributors that led to the distortion of its original purpose and design.

**From Negation to Affirmation: The Western Reception of *kaijū eiga***

Honda Ishirō’s *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, 1954) not only initiated one of the most successful media franchises in the history of Japanese popular culture, but also served as a model for the development of the purely Japanese film genre called *kaijū eiga*. Although inspired by Western monster movies and science-fiction films, the genre was to develop its own distinctive features in terms of both form and content. The most characteristic formal trait of *kaijū eiga* is the utilisation of the technique of suitmation (stuntmen in latex monster suits operating in an artificial environment comprised of miniature models of landscapes, building, vehicles etc.) instead of stop-motion animation, extensive animatronics, or CGI rendering. *Kaijū eiga* plots are highly standardized and can be divided into three categories: a) people defend themselves against the monster, b) the monster, intentionally

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2 Some authors (McRoy 2008: 6; Debus 2010: 220) prefer to use the term *daikaijū eiga* (大怪獣映画, “films about huge monsters”). However, as *kaijū* is by definition a creature of immense size, applying this term is rather artificial.
or not, saves people from another monster, c) the monster, intentionally or not, saves humanity from an alien invasion. Despite being rather simple and made of interchangeable components, *kaijū eiga* plots often offer something extra – a commentary on the public moods and important political and social issues current at the time of the film’s release. To a lesser extent the same can be said about a broader category of films called *tokusatsu* (特撮, literally “special filming”), encompassing science-fiction, fantasy, and horror films with a significant amount of special effects. Yet, the “critical” aspect of these films was recognized – especially by Western scholars and journalists – relatively late.

On May 2, 2004 *The New York Times* published Terrence Rafferty’s article “The Monster That Morphed Into a Metaphor”, written on the occasion of 50th anniversary screenings of the original *Godzilla* at Manhattan’s Film Forum movie theatre. It is a first-rate testament to the fundamental change that had occurred during the last few decades within the Western perception of both The Big G and the *kaijū eiga* genre. Although Godzilla had previously appeared on the pages of various journals, mostly in the reviews sections, this particular event should not be overlooked, nor the notion of its symbolic significance perceived as an exaggeration. The editors of this influential newspaper had decided to publish an article devoted to a movie about a giant radioactive monster wreaking havoc in Tokyo, which did not place it within the area of interest of cult aficionados – fans of celluloid curiosities, for whom the weirdness or campiness of a picture constitutes its very value – nor treated it as escapist entertainment with an oriental flavour, but identified it as a cultural phenomenon worthy of serious analysis. Back to back with the brief history of the film’s import to the United States, Rafferty presented its dominant interpretation, according to which Godzilla was conveyed as a metaphor for the atomic bomb. An interpretation, that for nearly three decades struggled to enter into Western mainstream film criticism.

Rafferty was by no means the first one to analyse *Godzilla* in such a way. What is important about his article is that it clearly shows that by 2004 the anti-nuclear agenda of the film was well known, Godzilla was perceived as an important cultural phenomenon, and there was no shame in writing about it.

Paradoxically, despite the tremendous popularity of Japanese monster movies in North America and Europe, it took quite a lot of time for Godzilla and his kinsmen to break their way into “serious” discourse, both publicistic and academic. For decades *kaijū eiga* films were perceived as “campy kiddie spectacles, devoid of particular artistic, intellectual, or
ideological content” (Tsutsui 2006: 3), and thus deemed unworthy of in-depth analysis. It is important to note that this approach was but a part of a broader attitude toward Japanese popular culture in general (perhaps with a few exceptions, such as samurai cinema). As late as the mid-1990s, Mark Schelling was commenting on many writers for the English-language media in Japan, that:

“Assuming that pop-culture phenomena appealing to the mass audience are beneath contempt and can therefore be safely ignored, they prefer to discover and promote artists on the commercial fringe, be they traditionalists, avant-gardists, or simple self-publishers. Their readers, consequently, learn a great deal about [butō] dancers and taiko drummers whose audiences number in the hundreds, and virtually nothing about pop singers and groups who fill stadiums”. (Schilling 1997: 12)

In the dominant discourse that tended to equate “culture” with “highbrow culture”, there was literally no place for any kind of serious discussion of the kaijū eiga phenomenon, the internal diversification and evolution of the formula, and the differences in its reception in Japan and abroad. Thus, when historians of Japanese cinema, both scholars and journalists, engaged in creating the narrative of its expansion into foreign markets, they often tended to forget that this expansion had proceeded along two lines. In parallel to the works of renown directors – such as Rashōmon (1950) by Kurosawa Akira, Gate of Hell (Jigokumon, 1953) by Kinugasa Teinosuke, and 47 Samurai (Chūshingura: Hana no maki, yuki no maki, 1962) by Inagaki Hiroshi – which usually had a limited distribution and were screened in art-house theatres, Western film companies massively imported Japanese monster movies, which were subsequently re-edited and re-dubbed in order to attract a broader audience. The truth is that in the 1950s and 1960s an American had a statistically greater chance to become acquainted with Godzilla than to see one of Kurosawa’s samurai dramas.

Stuart Galbraith IV argues that due to the fact that kaijū eiga has been the most consistently exportable Japanese film genre, it came to symbolize Japanese cinema for the rest of the world, and in the process made Godzilla the biggest “star” ever to come out of Japan (Galbraith 2009: 89). The most telling example of the huge popularity and awareness of The Big G outside of its native country are the results of a poll conducted in 1985 by “The New York Times” and CBS News on 1,500 Americans who were asked to
name a famous Japanese person. The top three answers were Emperor Hirohito, Bruce Lee, and Godzilla (Tsutsui 2004: 7).

For years, scholars had tended to look at *kaijū eiga* with nothing but contempt – at least officially, as Tsutsui’s “coming out of the closet” book *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of the Monsters* proves that privately some of them were rather fond of this genre. The fact that Japanese monsters were finally able to penetrate academia – which had previously been defended more eagerly than the metropolises they easily stomped on – corresponds with the broader trend of a gradual opening up on the part of the academic world to the subject of popular culture, identified – especially on the level of its reception – as an important social practice.

Although the idea of a serious analysis of Japanese monster movies dates back to the 1960s, most notably to Susan Sontag’s essay “The Imagination of Disaster”, the real breakthrough came in 1987 with the publication of Chon Noriega’s article “Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When "Them!" Is U.S.” which appeared in *Cinema Journal*, the renowned academic quarterly devoted to film and media studies. During the 1990s the number of academics interested in the socio-political aspects of *kaijū eiga* movies gradually increased. The publication of the anthology *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage*, collecting the speeches given at the conference of the same name organized in 2004 at the University of Kansas, can be seen as the culmination of these processes.

Changes in the perception of *kaijū eiga* occurred even in the writings of Donald Richie, one of the initiators of Western studies on Japanese cinema and a foremost expert on the subject. For years his negative attitude toward popular cinema – contrasted with *auteur* film and independent cinema – tended to legitimize both its ruthless criticism and total disregard. Still in 1990 he rendered the image of Japanese popular cinema as a “plethora of nudity, teenage heroes, science-fiction monsters, animated cartoons, and pictures about cute animals” (Richie 1990: 80). Although it is hard to speak about a radical shift or a total revaluation in Richie’s views on popular cinema, in recent years he has adopted a more liberal attitude toward it, recognizing the fact that it can convey deeper meanings. Fifteen years after he had ironically commented on *kaijū eiga* monsters, he admitted that the genre was able to express the *Zeitgeist* of different decades, stating that:

“Godzilla became a kind of barometer of the political mood. From punishment-figure-from-the-past he turned friendly and
finally took to defending his country (right or wrong) from not only foreign monsters but also the machinations of both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.”. (Richie 2005: 178)

It is necessary to underline that academic interest on the subject of kaijū eiga is not only a relatively new trend, but also one rather limited in scope. Generally, scholars tend to focus on the first installment of the Godzilla series, and rarely write extensively about its follow-ups or movies with other monsters. Thus, there are a substantial number of in-depth analyses of the original Godzilla, yet few of, for instance, King Kong vs. Godzilla (Kingu Kongu tai Gojira, 1962) or Mothra (Mosura, 1961), notable of their anti-consumerism. What is more, most of these analyses were actually conducted by members of the Godzilla fan community. The decisive factor for this “unequal distribution of analyses” within the academia is the evolution – or rather ‘degradation’ of the series, which gradually departed from its roots and morphed into light-hearted spectacles for younger audiences. Due to this radical shift in the series production policy, Godzilla is remembered, especially outside of his native country, primarily “as the bug-eyed slapstick superhero for kids of the 1960s films, not as the sombre and politically engaged monster-with-a-message that began the series in the 1950s” (Tsutsui 2006: 3-4). The reorientation of the Godzilla series under the pressure of changes within the demographics of Japanese cinema audiences is a fact. However, it is hard to agree with Rafferty’s opinion, according to which:

“The metaphor had slipped its moorings and headed far out to sea, refitted as a tacky cruise ship. [...] [E]ven the Japanese hadn't believed in their metaphor for ages, and had long since turned their home-grown monsters into lovable entertainers”. (Rafferty 2004)

In comparison to the original movie, subsequent instalments of the Godzilla series are indeed scantier in meaning and lacking in an explicitly articulated ideological message. Yet they still remain a valuable source of knowledge about public moods, anxieties, and the hot social and political topics of the time of their release. As Tsutsui notes:

“Even in later decades, as the series targeted a much younger and less politically aware demographic, the Godzilla films continued to address some of the weighty issues confronting
Japanese society: corporate corruption, pollution, school bullying, remilitarization, and rising Japanese nationalism, just to name a few”. (Tsutsui 2010: 208)

Although some of the socio-political interpretations of the Godzilla movies seem to be too far-fetched, they clearly demonstrate the critical potential of the *kaijū eiga* formula. Steve Ryfle’s impressive book *Japan’s Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of “The Big G”* contains a vast number of such interpretations. Among them are notions that *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (*Mosura tai Gojira*, 1964) served as a critique of commercialism, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (*Gojira tai Hedora*, 1971) warned against increasing pollution, and *Godzilla vs. Destroyah* (*Gojira tai Desutoroia*, 1995) expressed Japanese fears of losing their dominant economic position in the region on the eve of the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong (Ryfle 1998: 14). Even though the idea of Godzilla serving as a metaphor for nuclear threat wore off relatively quickly, and was thus abandoned, nuclear themes tended to resurface in the series, most notably in its 1984 reboot. What is more, nuclear themes constituted an important ingredient of many *tokusatsu* films produced within a few years after the premiere of the original *Godzilla*, especially those directed by Honda Ishirō.

It would be tempting to perceive Godzilla’s revaluation within mainstream film criticism solely as a by-product of the same processes that lead to popcultural reorientation within the academic community. However, there was another factor at play. For 26 years Western film critics were unable to see the original version of the movie. Their reviews and the unjust opinions that followed were based on the drastically altered American(ized) version of the film, entitled *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*

In September 1955, Edmund Goldman approached the American branch of the Tōhō Company and purchased the theatrical and TV distribution rights for *Godzilla* on the territory of the United States and Canada. In order to obtain funds and the know-how necessary to successfully embark on this project, he established a business partnership with Harold Ross and Richard Kay, the owners of Jewel Enterprises, and Joseph E. Levin of Transworld Pictures. Since the contract allowed the license holders to alter the original movie, they re-dubbed and re-edited it to suit the tastes and expectations of North American audiences. A more detailed list of the changes introduced to the movie by Terry O. Morse on behalf of its American distributors will be discussed in more detail in the last section of the article. At this point it is sufficient to say that he added about twenty minutes of new material with Raymond Burr playing an American
correspondent in Japan, and deleted over thirty minutes of the original footage, which led to the elimination of many references to the atomic bomb and a distortion of the film’s purport.

*Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* premiered on April 27, 1956 and was met with negative critical reception. While some of the reviewers praised the film for its special effects, most expressed opinions similar to that of Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, who described it as “an incredibly awful film [...] in the category of cheap cinematic horror-stuff” (Crowther 1956: 11). Negative reviews did not stop the film from becoming a box office success, earning two million dollars on its initial U.S. release, and thus paving the way for more Japanese monster movies to be imported. On the other hand, the popularity of *kaijū eiga* among American audiences did not change the critics’ attitude toward the formula. Only after the American premiere of the original version of *Godzilla* in 1982, did they recognize it as something more than lowbrow entertainment. This time, reviews were mostly favourable and focused on the ideological aspects of the movie, which had previously been cut out of the film by its American distributors. For example, Carrie Rickey of the *Village Voice* wrote that though Godzilla is only a rubberized miniature, the issues he addresses are global (Galbraith 1994: 13), while Howard Reich of the *Chicago Tribune* described the film as an eerie metaphor for nuclear war and a parable on life-and-death issues with striking visual messages, definitely not sophisticated, but whose sledgehammer means of communication actually work and powerfully underscore the message (Reich 1982).

Long before the artistic and intellectual quality of at least some *tokusatsu* films were recognized by academics and professional journalists, this outlook had consistently been articulated among fans. On the pages of fanzines such as *Japanese Fantasy Film Journal* (published in 1968-1983) or *G-FAN* (established in 1992 and published to date) one can find plenty of articles with titles such as “Godzilla and Postwar Japan”, “Godzilla Symbolism”, “Godzilla and the Second World War” or “Japan, Godzilla and the Atomic Bomb”. It would be hard to argue against the fact that the contributors of such magazines and Internet fanpages tended to over-interpret certain movies. I believe that one of the best examples of such a case is Tom Miller’s and Sean Ledden’s discussion of the symbolic meanings of two antagonistic monsters from *Frankenstein Conquers the World* (*Furankenshutain tai chitei kaijū Baragon*, 1966). While Miller argued that Baragon represented the United States of America defeated by a Japanese-German alliance symbolized by the Frankenstein monster,
according to Ledden Frankenstein actually served as a symbol of the capitalist economies of Germany and Japan growing under the protection of America’s nuclear umbrella, yet threatened by the International Communism represented by Baragon (Ledden 2002). Despite their occasional ventures into the realm of over-interpretation, fan writers deserve recognition and credit as pioneers of critical reflection on the socio-political purport of Japanese science-fiction cinema.

**Interpreting Godzilla: From Canonical Reading to a (Re)Production of Meanings**

*Godzilla’s* plot is not complex, as it follows the well-established pattern of a monster movie. Nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific Ocean irradiate a prehistoric beast that had survived for millions of years in an ecological niche in the deep sea near Odo Island. After a series of furious attacks committed by the enraged monster on a few ships and a fishing village, the authorities decide to organize an investigation team led by the palaeontologist Dr. Yamane (Shimura Takashi). On Odo Island researchers first discover giant radioactive footprints, and then are confronted by the monster himself. Soon the government decides to annihilated Gojira, as the beast is called by the islanders. Yamane objects, as he believes that the monster should be examined in order to discover how he was able to survive such a strong dose of radiation. Two subsequent attacks by the monster on Tokyo prove that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are no match for him. Japan’s only hope for survival is a device called the Oxygen Destroyer, developed by Dr. Serizawa (Hirata Akihiko). However, Serizawa is not willing to publicize his invention, fearing that it would be later used by politicians as a weapon of mass destruction. Although he is finally convinced to kill the monster, he destroys all of his notes and commits suicide, so his invention cannot be used in the future.

The simplicity of the plot combined with the viewer’s strong impression that there is something more than meets the eye (and ear, for that matter) in this film, makes it open to a number of interpretations, which both complement and contradict each other. Although radioactive mutation was a popular leitmotif of 1950s science-fiction cinema – to name just *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Monster from the Ocean Floor* (1954), *Them!* (1954) *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) – *Godzilla* considerably differs from its American counterparts. While in most of these productions radiation served solely as MacGuffin initiating the film’s narrative, in *Godzilla* the atomic theme was a central aspect of the film and the basis for broader reflection on nuclear
warfare. What is more, the purport of Honda’s movie was drastically different from that of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* or *It Came from Beneath the Sea*. In these movies the remedy for atomic threat, symbolized by the monster, was to use a stronger weapon. In the first one Rhedosaurus is killed by a bullet containing a radioactive isotope, while in the second, the giant octopus is killed by a torpedo with a nuclear warhead. In contrast, Godzilla does not legitimize the nuclear arms race, but strongly opposes it. The dominant interpretation of *Godzilla* states that the monster symbolizes the atomic bomb, and the whole movie serves as an allegorical warning against potential nuclear conflict. However, the vagueness of meaning of certain aspects of the film, and the ambiguous character of Godzilla, who can be perceived both as a demonic oppressor and as an innocent victim of a weapon of mass destruction, tend to support less canonical readings of the movie. The analysis of the literature devoted to the King of the Monster’s debut, allows one to distinguish two interpretative practices. The first aims to universalize the meaning of the movie, while the second tends to specify it, that is – ascribe specific meaning to whole film, Godzilla’s symbolism or particular scenes. Steve Ryfle’s opinion is the prime example of the first trend:

Producer Tanaka [Tomoyuki] and director Honda [Ishirō] clearly created the monster in the image of the Bomb, but the metaphor is universal. Godzilla's hell-born wrath represents more than one specific anxiety in the modern age — it is the embodiment of the destruction, disaster, anarchy, and death that man unleashes when he foolishly unlocks the forbidden secrets of nature, probes the frightening reaches of technology and science, and [...] allows his greed and thirst for power to erupt in war. (Ryfle 1998: 37)

Although this interpretation detaches *Godzilla* from its atomic context, it does not diverge significantly from the intentions of the film’s creators. However, this cannot be said about some of the interpretations that aim to specify film’s meaning. Scenes depicting the inefficiency of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in their struggles with Godzilla are often interpreted as a symbolic representation of the dread of not being able to repel potential foreign invasion, especially from the Communist Bloc (Palmer 2000: 468). On the other hand, some argue that, as Godzilla is depicted as a creature from the Odo islanders’ folklore, it is more reasonable to perceive the movie as a metaphor for Japan’s former imperialistic policy, which led
to American retaliation that literally levelled Japanese cities (Rafferty 2004). The most unorthodox interpretations of this kind are articulated by Japanese commentators. According to Kobayashi Tomayasu, the fact that in the world of *kaijū eiga* the United States never assists Japan in its struggle against the monsters sends a clear message that the Japanese can only count on themselves to defend their country. Akasaka Norio perceives Godzilla as a representation of the spirits of those Japanese soldiers who fell in World War II, while Nagayama Yosuo compares the monster to Takamori Saigō, arguing that both were not enemies of the people, but enemies of the state’s harmful policy (Kalat 1997: 22-23).

The most interesting analyses of the original *Godzilla* derive their origins from post-war Japanese society’s traumas related to the wartime experiences of the Japanese populace, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and more general fears of a potential global nuclear conflict. In psychoanalytic terminology “trauma” is most commonly defined as a state of shock, terror, and constant insecurity conditioned by a certain severely distressing event or a series of events that took place in the subject’s past. As Krzysztof Loska notes, according to this view the subject is often unable to rework and overcome the angst related to the traumatic event because it is hard for him or her to describe and express it in a form that may lead to alleviation or solace (Loska 2009: 349-350). As R. Barton Palmer notes:

> “*Godzilla* is a significant construction of Japanese popular culture that resonates with themes specific to that country’s post-war experience. In fact, it seems to confirm what sociologists such as Siegfried Kracauer have said of mainstream cinema, that, especially in times of profound social crisis, its offerings often screen the fears of disaster and hopes for deliverance that are deep in the unconsciousness of its eager spectators”. (Palmer 2000: 368)

In applying psychoanalytic terminology various authors tend to perceive *Godzilla* as both an embodiment of the fears of Japanese society and a means for defining, reworking and taming its traumas. Although the first intuition of the therapeutic functions of *tokusatsu* films was articulated in 1965 by Susan Sontag, who wrote that most of these movies “bear witness to [nuclear] trauma, and in a way, attempt to exorcise it” (Sontag 1965: 46), the idea was not pursued – at least not in an extensive manner – by other scholars for over twenty years. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that the
trend of traumatic analyses of Godzilla was initiated by Chon Noriega, who linked the monster with Japanese post-war traumas, Cold War tensions, and the uncertainty of Japanese-American relations (Noriega 1987). Following this lead Susan Napier argues that Godzilla – especially its scenes depicting panic and destruction – may be read “as a form of cultural therapy, allowing the defeated Japanese to work through the trauma of wartime bombings” (Napier 2006: 10).

Another representative of the psychoanalytic approach to Godzilla worth mentioning is Mark Anderson. The basis for his analysis is a Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholy, according to which, while mourning is a reaction to the loss of either a loved person or an important abstraction that takes the form of the grieving process, melancholy is a symptom of a hostility originally felt for an Other but internalized and redirected at oneself. Thus, people who are melancholic have an ambivalent feeling of love and hate for the other as well as for themselves. According to Anderson it is difficult not to read Godzilla – at least partially – as a symptom of national Japanese melancholia. He asks:

“After destruction and defeat at the hands of the United States, after a would-be war of liberation was redefined as a crime against humanity, after the Japanese troops that had been held up as paragons of virtue were accused of war crimes, is there any doubt that Japanese feelings toward the United States and their own war dead must have involved ambivalent feelings of both love and hate?”. (Anderson 2006: 26-27)

The issue of the ambiguous feelings of Japanese society towards the role of Japan in World War II, the soldiers of the Imperial Army, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in short – toward the country’s recent history, is another important aspect of Godzilla analyses. As Ōshima Nagisa once said: “Before the war we had been taught that Japan was the leading nation in the world. After the war we had to be reborn and revise our way of thinking” (Sadoul 1969: 34). Urayama Kirirō adds: “For me the central issue was the way of thinking I was implanted with during my childhood, and the collapse of this worldview after the shock of Japanese defeat in the last war” (Ibidem: 30). The feeling of dissonance between the image of Japan circulating within its borders before and during the war, and the antithetical image imported there after the Japanese surrender, was common. Thus Godzilla could have served – the question is: whether by design or not – as a basis for the reinterpretation of Japan’s twentieth
century history. Tatsumi Takayuki argues that the monster “helped the post-war Japanese to reconstruct national identity by making themselves into victims of and resisters against an outside threat” (Tatsumi 2000: 228). The brief review of Godzilla interpretations presented above – which are by no means comprehensive and definite – clearly illustrates that they often tend to contradict each other. This diversity of both meanings and readings should be embraced by everyone interested in studying Godzilla as a social and cultural phenomenon. Critics and scholars who aim to reveal the hidden meaning of the film’s smallest details, as well as those trying to discover its “proper” (that is: precise and undisputed, the one and only) interpretation tend to commit a fundamental error. Namely, they overlook the fact, that Godzilla is not an auteur film, not even a fully coherent one, thus the application of art-house film criteria in its analysis is unjustified. Godzilla was developed relatively quickly. Its initial idea was born in March 1954 and the project was green-lighted by studio executives in mid-April. Work on the film’s story was initiated on May 12 and finished by the end of the month. The subsequent transformation of the story into a screenplay took barely three weeks and the film’s production was officially announced on July 5. Shooting began in early August and the finished film was presented at a private screening for the crew on October 23, eleven days before its official premiere. As a result of this – as well as the fact that Godzilla was after all a genre film – not all of the details in its layer of meaning were précised, not to mention that – in spite of commentators’ attempts at decoding them – some aspects of the movie have no meaning other than a purely referential one. What is more, on various occasions the creators of Godzilla presented slightly different interpretations of their film – although the atomic bomb was still the common denominator, there were some differences in the details (Godzilla as a bomb, Godzilla as nature taking revenge on mankind for creating the bomb, etc.).

The King of the Monsters is a truly polysemic beast, and as such it can symbolize the atomic bomb, nature taking revenge on humanity, the threat of nuclear conflict, the spirit of Japan punishing its citizens for embarking on an imperialistic path, as well as many other things (and all of this at the same time). This, however, is not a shortcoming of the movie. On the contrary – herein lies its greatest strength. As a cultural phenomenon Godzilla belongs not to the order of reason, but to the order of intuition, both on the level of its creation, and the level of its reception. It allowed for the symbolic expression of ambivalent feelings that could have not
been articulated openly and conceptually, and to intuitively approach what could have not been rationally comprehended and described.

**When Individual and Collective Traumas Meet: The Case of Honda Ishirō**

The majority of the authors of analyses of *Godzilla* tend to apply a perspective that could be called “collective”, “universal”, perhaps even “impersonal”, as they write about Japan, the Japanese, nation, society and so on. The problem with that approach is that while Godzilla is indeed a monster sensitive to public moods, he was neither conceived by all of the Japanese, nor by the nation, society, or any other abstract entity. Although he has many creators, all of them can be pointed out by name. They are: the film producer Tanaka Tomoyuki, the novelist Kayama Shigeru, the screenwriter Murata Takeo, the special effects specialist Tsuburaya Eiji, the composer Ifukube Akira, and the director Honda Ishirō. I believe it is worth breaking – at least to some extent – with the dominant collective approach towards *Godzilla*, and to apply a more individual perspective that would focus on the issue of how the film reflected the personal experiences, anxieties and beliefs of its director. The choice of Honda as a central figure in this section of the article is neither arbitrary nor random. Although he was attached to the project after its preliminary outline was formulated, he played a decisive role in moulding its final form and meaning. Thus, I argue that the first instalment of the Godzilla series should be perceived mainly in terms of Honda’s (and only secondarily – the nation’s or the society’s) cleansing reaction to the traumatic events of the past, and a (not entirely) symbolic articulation of his ideological beliefs and political postulates for the future.

The discussion of Honda’s personal influence on the final shape of the original *Godzilla* is all the more important because in the literature one can find two erroneous opinions on the subject. The first one is more or less an explicit assumption that *Godzilla* was Honda’s auteur project. For example, Samara Lea Allsop states that “[i]n order for *Godzilla* to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, [...] Honda sought out the best special effects artist in Japan, who would share his vision for the film” (Allsop 2004: 63). Honda, however, did not “seek out” anyone, as both he and Tsuburaya Eiji – mentioned in the quote above – were attached to the already existing project by the producer. What is more, Honda was not even Tanaka’s first choice for a director. Originally *Godzilla* was to be directed by Taniguchi Senkichi, but by the time the project was green-lighted, he was already working on a different film (Ryfle 1998: 37). The diametrically opposed
view, yet one no less erroneous than the former, is a complete depreciation of Honda’s personal contribution to the significative layer of the *Godzilla* and *tokusatsu* films he subsequently directed. Alexander Jacoby suggests that though there are some sociological concerns in these movies, they were expressed in the scripts rather than through any directorial subtleties. He adds that Honda is remembered rather because of the films he was attached to than because of any personal distinction (Jacoby 2008: 49). Honda’s lack of personal distinction may be true in terms of the films’ style – though this is debatable – but definitely not in terms of his thematic inclinations. It is true that he was a contract director, a skilled craftsman rather than a film *auteur* (at least in the meaning applied to this term by classic auteur theory). However, the fact that radiation is a recurring theme in 18 of his *tokusatsu* films (Brothers 2009: 11) is no coincidence. Honda was known for exerting substantial influence on the scripts he worked with and infusing them with themes he was particularly interested in. The reason why information about this aspect of his work was usually not included in the credits is that he did not want to take recognition away from the official screenwriters (Ibidem: 9).

At this point it is important to note that the analytical approach focusing on the influence of Honda’s biography and beliefs on the final shape of *Godzilla* faces a fundamental problem, namely the inevitable blurring of the demarcation line between individual and collective perspective. After all, Honda’s traumas and war-time experiences were shared by a large part of Japanese society. Nevertheless, an analysis of Honda’s films, his public statements, and the recollections of his relatives and co-workers makes it possible to determine which events affected him most and were to have a substantial influence on his work.

In 1945 within a short period of time Japanese society experienced two traumatic events – the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August, and the act of the unconditional surrender of Japan, announced in the unprecedented radio broadcast of the emperor’s proclamation to the nation on August 15, and officially signed aboard the USS Missouri on September 2. For many Japanese citizens the most traumatic experience had been the war itself. This was true for the soldiers fighting on the front lines, the repressed dissidents, as well as for the civilians living in fear of bombing raids. Hani Sasumu, a Japanese film director, once said: “I have never perceived this war as a holy one, among other things because of the repressions on my family […], so I wanted it to end as soon as possible (Sadoul 1969: 34). Even though some Japanese
welcomed the news about capitulation with joy and relief, the war left its mark on every one of them.

In the first quarter of 1954 an incident occurred that reopened the unhealed wounds of Japanese society and triggered large-scale anti-nuclear protests. On March 1 an American thermonuclear hydrogen bomb was detonated at Bikini Atoll near the Marshall Islands as part of nuclear tests code-named Operation Castle and conducted in the region by the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Defense. The expected explosive yield of the Castle Bravo test was estimated at 4 to 6 megatons of TNT. However, the actual blast yielded 15 megatons, being nearly 1,000 times stronger than that of Little Boy dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The unexpected strength of the explosion combined with the sudden change of weather resulted in heavy contamination of over 7,000 square miles of the Pacific Ocean, including Rongerik, Utirik, Rongelap, Ailllinginae Atolls (Titus 2001: 47). Within the range of the radioactive cloud was also a Japanese tuna fishing vessel, Lucky Dragon 5 (Dago Fukuryu Maru). A few hours after the explosion the ship was covered with radioactive ash. For the next two weeks the crew members suffered from severe headaches and nausea, boils and scabs, painful swelling of the hands, hair loss, and the oozing of a yellow secretion from the eyes and ears (Barton 1994: 148; Wilkening 2004: 275). After reaching Yaizu port on March 14 they were hospitalized and diagnosed with acute radiation syndrome. However, by the time fishermen’s condition was diagnosed, their cargo had already entered the market. The ship’s chief radio operator Kuboyama Aikichi died of liver failure on September 23, and was identified as the first fatal victim of the incident, although the American side claimed that the main reason for his death was not irradiation, but a hepatitis infection introduced through one of his blood transfusions. The first press article devoted to the incident appeared in the Yomiuri Shinbun newspaper on March 16. A wave of social unrest followed. A boycott of tuna fish was organized, as well as a nationwide action of collecting signatures on a ban-the-bomb petition, which by August 1955 had been signed by over 30 million people.

Godzilla is a child of economic calculation, the love for cinema, and the fear of nuclear warfare. After he was forced to abandon plans for a Japanese-Indonesian war film, Tanaka Tomoyuki found himself under strong pressure from Tôhô executives to quickly come up with an idea for another potential blockbuster. As he remembered the box office success of the 1952 re-release of King Kong (1933) and the subsequent theatrical run of The Beast of 20,000 Fathoms, Tanaka thought that the making of an indigenous monster movie might be a lucrative undertaking. Tsuburaya Eiji,
being a great fan of *King Kong*, which he had seen for the first time in the 1930s, was delighted by this idea, as he had long dreamed about participating in the making of a similar movie. Although it was Tanaka who imagined Godzilla as an allegory for the atomic bomb (it is said that the crucial arguments that allowed him to convince Tōhō executives to invest in such a risky venture were Japanese box office numbers for *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *King Kong*, and a pile of articles on the Lucky Dragon 5 incident), it was Honda who snatched the monster from the grip of clichés, and did not allow the science-fiction idiom to overwhelm the film’s message.

Honda Ishirō was born on May 7, 1911. He fell in love with cinema in his youth and eventually decided to pursue a career in the film industry. After graduating from Kōgyokusha Middle School, where he majored in Arts, he enrolled in the newly established Film Department at Nihon University. In August 1933 he joined P.C.L. Studios, one of the companies that were later to merge into the Tōhō film company. His most valuable professional experience came from working under Yamamoto Kajirō on *Horse* (*Uma*, 1941), *Katō’s Fighting Falcons* (*Katō hayabusa sentō-tai*, 1944), and comedies starring Enoken (Enomoto Ken’ichi). Although Yamamoto was forced during World War II to direct propagandistic war films such as *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya* (*Hawai Marei oki kaisan*, 1942), he was well known as a liberal, whose beliefs had a significant influence on young Honda’s world-view. In 1937 Honda met Kurosawa Akira, who was to remain his close friend until his death. Although Kurosawa had soon embarked on the path of *auteur* film, while Honda was to work with genre films for the rest of his directorial career, they shared similar beliefs and anxieties. It is significant that almost at the same time they both directed symbolic cautionary tales on the subject of nuclear warfare – Honda’s *Godzilla* and Kurosawa’s *I Live in Fear* (*Ikimono no kiroku*, 1955).

Unlike Kurosawa, Honda had experienced at first-hand the horrors of war. He had been drafted into the Japanese Imperial Army in January 1935 and sent to Manchuria 16 month later, yet he was relieved before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He was mobilized again at the end of 1939 and served until December 1941. He was once again sent to the front line in March 1944. Shortly after the formal capitulation of Japan he surrendered to American soldiers and was sent to a Chinese prisoner-of-war camp, where he spent about half a year. After his return to Japan in March of 1946 he went to Hiroshima to witness the scale of the destruction and pay his respects to the dead.
From the recollections of Honda’s relatives and co-workers there emerges the image of a man agitated by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and severely disturbed by his experience of war. This mind-set was reflected in his most famous work. As Nakajima Haruo, the stuntman and suit actor who played Godzilla and various other monsters from 1954 to 1972, once said: “Godzilla is a monster movie. But the director, Mr. Honda, added many layers to the story about the horror of war” (Roberto 1999). This opinion was confirmed by Honda himself, who said: “Most of the visual images I got [in Godzilla] were from my war experience” (Ryfle 1998: 43). However, a few years had to pass before he was ready to talk about his wartime experiences, and to express them on film. As his wife recalls:

“[Shortly after the premiere of The Blue Pearl (Aoi shinju, 1951) he] received an offer to work on a project about the suicide squad. Upon reading volumes of reference material, including wills written by lost soldiers and thinking about a variety of things while cooped up in his study, he came to the conclusion that he was just not capable of writing about this topic yet, and he declined the offer. I believe the mental scarring from eight years of being in the war must have been deeper than one can ever imagine”. (Honda).

According to Samara Lea Allsop the reason for using a science-fiction formula as a platform for the articulation of anti-nuclear sentiments was the need to uphold the delicate status quo achieved at the end of World War II. She argues that though global public opinion favoured the Japanese, who were perceived as victims of American aggression, it was still unacceptable for them to be openly critical of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Allsop 2004: 63). However, it is difficult to agree with that opinion for two reasons. Firstly, Godzilla’s creators did not try to veil the anti-nuclear purport of their work – there is even a direct reference to Nagasaki in the movie. Secondly, before the idea of Godzilla was born, several films that directly addressed the American atomic bombings had already been produced and screened in Japan – among them being Ōba Hideo’s The Bells of Nagasaki (Nagasaki no kane, 1950), Shindō Kaneto’s Children of Hiroshima (Genbaku no ko, 1952) Tasaka Tomotaka’s Never Forget the Song of Nagasaki (Nagasaki no uta wa wasureji, 1952), and Sekigawa Hideo’s Hiroshima (1953). Allsop’s opinion can be considered valid only in relation to the period of the American occupation of Japan.
Although at that time there was no official ban on the subject of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, filmmakers were not only not allowed to show the full extent of the destruction and the suffering of civilians, but were also obliged to present the bombing in a broader context and as a necessary step toward ending the war (Loska 2009: 352). In 1954, however, an indirect treatment of the bombings was not necessary. The reason why Honda decided to communicate his experiences and beliefs through allegory is probably because previous “rational” films had failed to enable audiences to rework their traumas and to tame their nuclear fears. A symbolic monster from the domain of the irrationality was more suited to express the unspeakable and to present the unpresentable.

Although Honda utilised monster movie aesthetics, he put great effort into making the movie as realistic as possible while working within genre conventions. As Steve Ryfle observed – Honda approached the project with a documentary-like straightforwardness, more like it was a war drama than a science-fiction film (Ryfle 1998: 43). During their work on the screenplay Murata Takeo and Honda introduced significant changes to the initial story written by Kayama Shigeru, then a popular author of mystery/horror novels. Kayama envisioned Dr. Yamane as an eccentric in the style of Edogawa Rampo characters – wearing a black cape and dark shades, living in an old European-style house, and coming out only at night. Murata and Honda decided that for the sake of greater realism Yamane should be an ordinary person, as the titular monster itself would be weird enough. Godzilla’s character also underwent serious transformation. In Kayama’s original story Godzilla is definitely campier. Yet at the same time it is a creature that behaves more naturally than his film counterpart, as it comes to land mainly to hunt for food and develops an interest in human females. Honda and Murata transformed Godzilla into an allegorical creature, an indefinite menace destroying everything in its path without any clear preferences.

The quasi-documentary character of the film is visible especially in the scenes depicting preparations for the defence and monster’s rampage through the streets of Tokyo. Although the main carriers of the film’s meaning are the main characters – most notably Dr. Yamane and Dr. Serizawa – an important role in this respect is also played by the collective hero – Japanese society facing an external threat. Honda recreated on film the same reactions and moods of the civilians that he had encountered in real life during the war. What is more, the monster’s *modus operandi* evokes wartime American night air rides. As Yomota Inuhiko notes:
“The abrupt emergence from the south of this monstrous, unspeakable threat reminded Japanese audiences of the US military bombers that had reduced their cities to flaming ruins only a few years earlier”. (Yomota 2007: 105).

*Godzilla* contains a number of scenes reminiscent of the real events from the recent past. After the first of the monster’s attacks on Tokyo, the authorities decide to move the inhabitants of the city’s coastal area to the countryside. The evacuation operation conducted by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces is similar to the action the Imperial Japanese Army used to regularly engage in a decade earlier. The realities of the Pacific War are also evoked by scenes depicting the utilisation of the mass media in the psychological mobilization of citizens and the organization of mass evacuations. In *Godzilla* an important role in these processes is played not only by television – introduced to Japan in 1953 – but also by radio and the press, which had been widely used by the authorities during the war. The nuclear fears of Japanese society, nurtured by the fresh memory of American atomic bombings and intensified by the escalation of the Cold War, manifested themselves with a new force after the Lucky Dragon 5 incident had been publicized. Although Tanaka had used the incident as an argument for producing *Godzilla*, and Honda had been deeply shocked by the tragedy, they dealt with the topic delicately. The finished film contains only a few – more or less obvious – references to the real events, such as a flash of blinding white light during Godzilla’s first attack on a ship (a reference to what the crew of Lucky Dragon 5 actually saw on March 1, 1954), the death of the ship’s radio operator (reference to Kuboyama Aikichi), or the depiction of the empty fishing nets of the Odo islanders (reference to the tuna fish boycott). Initially Honda thought about making a more explicit connection between the plight of Lucky Dragon 5 and *Godzilla*, especially with the film’s intended opening scene depicting an irradiated and completely uninhabited vessel floating back to its port (Kalat 1997: 33). However, he later reconsidered the idea, and reached the conclusion that the issue was too delicate to address it directly, especially within a genre film. Honda himself said: “[W]e felt that putting a real-life accident into a fictional story with a monster appearing in the midst of it wouldn’t sit well in the world of a film entitled *Gojira*” (Galbraith 1998: 23). The tragic story of Lucky Dragon 5 and its crew made its way to the big screen five years after the premiere of *Godzilla* in Shindo Kaneto’s film entitled simply *Lucky Dragon No. 5* (*Daigo Fukuryū Maru*, 1959).
In the final version of the script certain aspects of the original characteristics of Dr. Yamane were transferred onto Dr. Serizawa. While in Kayama’s draft of the story he was merely a supporting character, Murata and Honda gave him a more prominent role in the movie. It is not difficult to recognize in this character the representation of Honda and many of his contemporaries, who came back from the great “Holy War” not only disillusioned, but also with severe wounds to the body and soul. In one of the scenes Dr. Yamane’s daughter Emiko (Kōchi Momoko) says: “I can’t help feeling uneasy when I think about Serizawa. If it was not for the war, he would have not been left with such a terrible scar”. Serizawa is representative of the generation that lost both the war and their faith in their leaders who had pushed the nation into a disastrous total conflict. The reasons why Serizawa is reluctant to use the Oxygen Destroyer on Godzilla is not out of some unspecified whim – “I won’t because I won’t” attitude so common in pulp fiction. His standpoint is based on sound foundations and rational – he is afraid that by publicizing his invention he will initiate the next stage of the global arms race. Serizawa argues that even now atomic bombs are placed against atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs against hydrogen bombs, so if politicians from all over the world were to see what the Oxygen Destroyer was capable of, they would want to make it into a weapon.

Serizawa is unable to find a common ground with the younger Ogata (Takarada Akira), who urges him to use his invention to kill the monster. Ogata represents the generation that have only a distant and faded memory of the horrors of war. Honda partially made Godzilla with exactly that kind of audience in mind. He said: “Many young viewers didn’t have any first-hand knowledge, or [had] only dim memories, of the war” (Ryfle 1998: 38). Godzilla is – in a certain sense – a popcultural treatise on memory and the necessity to nurture it. The horrors of war, crimes against humanity, the physical and mental scars of combatants, the suffering of civilians – this should all be remembered so similar things do not happened in the future. Particularly meaningful in that context is the scene that takes place on Odo Island, in which an old man puts the blame on the mythical Godzilla for the recent attacks on ships. A young woman mocks him, saying that both he and Godzilla are relics of the past. He replies: “What can you know about the old days? If you all keep thinking like that, you will all become prey for Godzilla”.

The most important aspect of Honda’s personal influence on the final shape of Godzilla lies not in the cinematic manifestations of the director’s memories of the war or the traumatic events that had left a lasting imprint
on his psyche, but in his anti-nuclear and pacifist world-view that is present in nearly every frame of his greatest film. As Honda said: “Believe it or not, [but] we naively hoped that the end of Godzilla was going to coincide with the end of nuclear testing” (Tsutsui 2010: 2008). He managed to infuse the rest of the crew with his enthusiasm. Takarada Akira recalls a series of discussions carried out on the set during lunch breaks by Honda Ishirō, Tanaka Tomoyuki, Shimura Takashi, Kōchi Momoko, Hirata Akihiko and himself:

“In this harmonious and happy atmosphere, our conversations naturally gravitated towards the current events and [their] backgrounds, especially about the damage caused by atom and hydrogen bomb testing and the tragic reality of the Daigo Fukuryū Maru incident. The conversations further went into how, Japan being the first country to have an atomic bomb dropped on its lands, we should especially vocalize a warning to the world through film, [to] try to precede the fast-progressing field of science”. (Takarada)

Godzilla’s anti-nuclear purport is explicitly verbalized in Dr. Yamane’s words at the end of the film: “I cannot believe that Godzilla was the only surviving member of its species. If we keep on conducting nuclear tests, it is possible that another Godzilla will appear”. Honda was an idealist – perhaps naïve, but sincere – honestly believing that his film would be recognized as an important voice in the debate on the nuclear arms race. Near the end of his life, Honda recalled being deeply hurt by the reviews that called his film a grotesque piece of junk and a crass attempt to capitalize on Japan’s nuclear nightmares (Ryfle 1998: 37). He never lost hope that the world would free itself of the spectre of nuclear war:

“It is said that the number of atomic bombs hasn't been reduced even by one since 1954. [...] We'd really like to demand abolition of nuclear weapons to both America and Russia. That is where Godzilla's origin is. No matter how many Godzilla movies are produced, it is never enough to explain the theme of Godzilla”. (Ibidem: 44).

As mentioned earlier, most of the Honda’s later tokusatsu productions contained – more or less expanded – atomic themes. However, only once did he manage to achieve the level of ideological commitment and artistry
comparable to *Godzilla*. *Matango* (1963), an intimate science-fiction drama loosely based on William Hope Hodgson’s short story *The Voice in the Night*, was not only another warning against the dangers of the Atomic Age, but also an allegorical reflection on the fate of *hibakusha* (被爆者, literally “people exposed to the bomb” or “people exposed to radiation”), people who had survived an atomic explosion and later suffered from radiation-related illnesses and social ostracism. While in the original *Godzilla* the plot was somewhat subordinated to the film’s anti-nuclear purport, in most of Honda’s later science-fiction films the atomic themes either served mainly as a pretext to initiate a fantastic story, or functioned solely as a surplus to the plot. In some of these films, especially the early ones, the presence of the atomic themes had a significantly meaningful potential – for example, in *The Mysterians* (*Chikyū bōeigun*, 1957) the Earth is threatened by the last surviving members of a once powerful extra-terrestrial civilization destroyed by a nuclear war, who suffer from genetic disorders caused by radiation. However, it is difficult to perceive the inclusion of atomic bomb themes in films such as *Frankenstein Conquers the World* in categories other than the director’s fixation on the subject.

**The Beast Becomes Depoliticized: The Americanization of Godzilla**

Honda had put a lot of effort into creating a movie that would go beyond the standard monster movie formula. It seems that the American distributors of his film did everything they could to reverse this process. It is difficult – if at all possible – to agree with Jerome Franklin Shapiro’s opinion that:

> “Although significantly altered, the 1956 film remains faithful to the spirit of the original 1954 release; if anything, for American audiences, it makes certain issues even more obvious”. (Shapiro 2002: 112)

The fact is that *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* was a defective product, deprived of most of the references to the atomic bomb and war that had made the original movie so powerful and politically engaged. Among the elements of the original film deleted in the process of its Americanization are Emiko’s notion about Serizawa’s “scars”, the furious debate in the Japanese National Diet, and the train scene in which many of *Godzilla’s* extra-filmic associations with real events – the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, irradiated tuna, and war-time evacuations – are expressed explicitly. Terry O. Morse also altered the reasons for Serizawa’s
reluctance to use the Oxygen Destroyer. In the American version he is not afraid that if publicized his invention would initiate a new arms race, rather that it could fall into the wrong hands. Thus *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* tends to legitimize the possession of weapons of mass destruction by the “good guys”, and at the same time deny this right to the “bad guys”. The biggest of the changes introduced to the film by its American distributors is the alteration of the film’s closing comment. While in the original *Godzilla* Dr. Yamane expresses great concern about the future of mankind if nuclear experiments were to be continued, in the American version Steve Martin (sic!) – the reporter played by Raymond Burr – says: “The menace was gone. So was the great man. But the whole world could wake up and live again”. Because of this change, the explicit anti-nuclear message conveyed by the original *Godzilla* is missing from the American version of the film.

As for the reasons for the introduction of such drastic changes in the process of *Godzilla’s* Americanization, the dominant opinion of *kaijū eiga* historians is that the film’s thinly-veiled anti-American sentiments disturbed the American distributors, so they decided to delete the most politically-charged footage (Tsutsui 2010: 208). Some even go a step further and argue that Levine was actually aware that *Godzilla* was, in fact, a political film based on real events, and as such could have not been presented to American audiences in its original form (Allsop 2004: 64). The American distributors, however, defended themselves against such accusations. As Richard Kay once said:

“No. We weren't interested in politics, believe me. We only wanted to make a movie we could sell. At that time, the American public wouldn't have gone for a movie with an all-Japanese cast. That's why we did what we did. We didn't really change the story. We just gave it an American point of view”. (Ryfle 1998: 57-58)

Contrary to Shapiro’s and Kay’s opinions, the change in the film’s purport did occur in the process of its Americanization. The open question is to what extent it was deliberate on the part of its distributors. Some of the minor cuts introduced to the film seem to corroborate Kay’s statement, as apart from the references to the atomic bombings, nuclear tests, and the war, Morse also deleted portions of the original footage that served to present the personality traits of the main characters and the relations between them (most notable the early scene establishing Emiko and Ogata
However, whatever the distributors’ intensions were, the fact is that – unlike Honda’s original – *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* is not a celluloid treatise on nuclear warfare. Apart from its Japanese setting and cast, the film falls into line with other representatives of the 1950s atomic science-fiction cinema, in which the way to overcome the nuclear threat was to have a stronger weapon, whether it was a nuclear-warhead torpedo, radioactive isotope bullet, or Oxygen Destroyer. Although in the decades following the film’s premiere Godzilla and his kinsmen regularly roared in American cinemas, Honda Ishirō’s voice was not to be heard there until 1982.

**Post Scriptum**

In the article I presented *kaijū eiga* genre as an area of interactions between entertainment and socio-political commentary. I summarized a gradual change in the perception of Godzilla film series by Western journalists and academics, that culminated in the recognition of these films as a cultural artifacts. In the later parts of the article I focused on the first instalment of the series. After brief discussion of various interpretation of the original *Godzilla*, I presented it as a celluloid manifesto of political views of its director – Honda Ishirō. I argued that due to Honda’s pacifistic world-view, war-time experiences and trauma caused by atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki he played a crucial role in filling the film with anti-nuclear themes. I also argued that subsequent changes introduced to the film prior to its American release distorted its original purport.

As in the case of Western science-fiction cinema, most of the *tokusatsu* films were designed solely to entertain audiences. Although Japanese screens had often hosted ideologically committed monsters, such as pro-ecological Mothra, education or agitation was rarely a primary goal in Japanese fantasy films. And yet, the *kaijū eiga* formula proved to be highly susceptible to an ideological surplus. Even in its most *light-hearted* variety it reflected public moods, anxieties, and important socio-political issues of Japanese post-war history. Back in 1965, Sontag wrote:

“The interest of the [science-fiction] films, aside from their considerable amount of cinematic charm, consists in this intersection between a naïvely and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation”. (Sontag 1965: 48)
Popular cinema can exist only if it maintains a close relationship with society. It has to reflect the world of the audience, to relate to the experiences and problems of its members, even if it does that indirectly, by filtering them through the filmmakers’ imagination and genre conventions. Even if the atomic bomb is represented by Godzilla, pollution by Hedorah, communism by invaders from outer space and so on.

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