Monster Island: Godzilla and Japanese sci-fi/horror/fantasy

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To stand in front of the large shallow pool that served as Tokyo Bay for over a dozen Toho Godzilla movies evokes a strange sensation. Two sides of the pool are accessible; the other sides touch walls across which curves a cyclorama of painted sky and clouds. A carney fakeness is exuded typically enough, but the strangeness arises from the potency with which this theatrical seaside recalls the precise plasticity of the movies themselves. When one sees the Bates residence from Psycho (1960) for the first time on the Universal lot, one is struck by how small it appears, and wonders at how such slight architecture could have induced dread on the silver screen. When one sees the Toho pool, the inverse occurs: one feels incongruously transported into the world of the Godzilla movies’ blatant simulacra. This sensation of being disoriented by overt fakery rather than overcome by verisimilitude is worth investigating further, for those shallow waters belie greater depths of meaning.

In nearly all the Godzilla films, Tokyo Bay is sited as the epidermis of Japan’s postnuclear urb. Its still waters lap at docks whose perimeters are lined with giant gas tanks and towering electrical stations, creating a halo of energy which hums at the peripheries of Tokyo’s expanse. Time and time again, Godzilla and fellow monsters wade towards that fatal shore, attracted to its glowing ring of tensile danger—then blithely careen through it, detonating all in their path. In much Japanese sci-fi/horror/fantasy (kaiju eiga, anime and manga), the insecurity of Japan’s island status is founded equally on an isolationist perspective and a technologically compensated concept of fortification: no moats with bridges, no walls with turrets, no mountains with crags. Tokyo is figured as a floating berg of energy: impenetrable and omnipotent. Arguably, this marriage of psyche and technology resides so deeply in the Japanese consciousness that the ways in which images and narratives of the city are generated constitutes a kind of ‘psycho-islanding’, with the designs of Tokyo’s futuristic metropoli serving to fortify a sense of Japanese self-security as much as to project how Japan might socially and industrially navigate the globe as an island. Not surprisingly, the invasion of Japan in general and the destruction of Tokyo in particular remain traumatic fixtures in those images and narratives, especially as they fuse Japan’s latent imperialist itches with its own graven misfortune at the hands of America’s atomic and pyrotechnic tactics during World War II. Every time Neo-Tokyo is razed to the ground, silent footage of Hiroshima seems to be subliminally superimposed in a way that

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collapses Us–Them binaries into a common ground of regret peculiar to Japanese sci-fi/fantasy.

If the docks of Tokyo Bay symbolically function as a haunting epidermis of the Japanese embodiment of such regret, Godzilla and company ritually rupture that outer skin of the metropolis like fallout on flesh. Within minutes, the horizon of Tokyo Bay will resemble any fiery catastrophe the mind can recall, from engraved etchings of the Great Fire of London to helicopter videos of the blazing oil wells of Iraq. The pool at Toho Studios which served as the setting for Godzilla’s diabolical dioramas is thus a strangely calm lake of discontent. It has been the psychological stage for playing out both Japan’s self-critical past (how Japan persisted in nuclear testing after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings to create accidentally the ray of destruction genetically fused into Godzilla’s spinal column) and its problematised future (how Japan might control a frantic increase in energy production and consumption which is forever on the verge of growing beyond the available land of Japan). The Toho monster movies document this moral drama of postnuclearity, and imply an inevitability on a multitude of narrative planes: nuclear testing will produce mutations; Japan’s postwar industrial boom will explode; Godzilla will destroy Tokyo. Fission aptly works as a deadly metaphor for two trajectories hurtling towards a head-on collision.

Yet this eerie feeling of cultural scarring is not simply borne by mournful poetics. Phenomenological aspects of direct physicality also come into play. Standing in front of the Toho pool, one feels like Godzilla himself, for this stage is set to amplify human scale while retaining a sense of human presence. This feeling is not uncommon when one is placed in front of or within any miniature diorama. From young girls playing with doll houses to grown men playing with train sets, one engages in play with an enlarged sense of self. While this tends to suggest notions of Olympian godliness under a Judeo-Christian light, such notions are not pertinent to Oriental shades of mortal existence. This crucial difference becomes clear when identifying modes of practice in American and Japanese cinema. The predigital mechanics of fantasy in American cinema lean toward the human-as-engineer, with Willis O’Brien (King Kong, 1933) and Ray Harryhausen (Jason and the Argonauts, 1963) exemplifying and perfecting the stop-motion animation technique of articulated gurines. The engineer in this process is the unseen God, operating beyond the frame and between the edit; invisible in the act of animation yet perceivable through the product of motion. By contrast, concurrent Japanese fantasy privileges the human-as-agent, building upon the parallel crafts of Bunraku and Kabuki. These theatrical traditions invoke the phantasmagorical, but always through the presence of the human within the prosenium arch (as black-clothed puppeteer in the former and ornately costumed actor in the latter). It logically follows that Japanese sci-fi/fantasy cinema embraces the human figure within the cinematic frame rather than denies its status just because of the photographic medium’s propensity to be seemingly more ‘realistic’ (which itself is less relevant to Japanese visuality and its calligraphic base).

While America (and Britain) employed rubber suits for human-scaled monsters, Japan employed rubber suits to depict gigantic monsters. But what seems
like a simple distinction between the role of costumery is a fundamental schism in human characterisation and performance which illuminates the specificity of Japanese sci-fi/horror/fantasy. Virtually all American rubber-suit movies redirect initial fears of the monstrous Other into a paraphilic exploration of the expanded tactile self. Movies like *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *The Monster that Challenged the World* (1957), *The She-Creature* (1957), *Curse of the Demon* (1958) and many other 1950s horror/sci-fi movies foreground their plasticity in the form of sexual grotesqueries. The Creature’s gelatine lips, the Demon’s hairy nostrils, the Monster’s cellulite bulk, the She-Creature’s crustaceous breasts—all stir up a gorgeous heady confusion between the penile, the vaginal, the mammalian, the anal. In key dramatic scenes, the costumed form of these monsters comes into heaving and salivating proximity of the normalised human body, suggesting acts of sex more than death. The man in the Godzilla suit has no such contact with humans. Instead he chews trains, crushes buildings, destroys power lines and melts army tanks. For Godzilla is not there to titillate with the prospect of aberrant sex (which is the key charm of the Western monster movie); he is there to embody energy *per se*, and to perform the action of wilfully unleashing that energy without control. In short, the Japanese monster movie is more about monstrous energy than it is about the ‘monstrous-isings’ of sexuality. This is the subtextual drive of the Toho monster movies: to plainly destroy. The use of a human-in-a-suit is crucial to one’s identification with this act, so that one might imagine the power in being that person who is the agent of destruction. As juvenile as it sounds, destroying things can be highly gratifying. Destroying whole cities has to be exhilarating.

Accepting this subtextual drive as a pleasure push within the Toho monster movie cycles, one is confronted by a chaotic swirl of contradictions which the movies themselves eventually affirmed. This is most noticeable in the change from Godzilla as innocent victim of nuclear testing (*Godzilla*, 1959) to Godzilla as evil monster (*Godzilla vs. Mothra*, 1964) to Godzilla as tamed being (*Ghidorah—The Three-Headed Monster*, 1965) to Godzilla as heroic champion (*Godzilla vs. The Smog Monster*, 1972). His might and energy shifted from one of critical neutrality to modified humanism, and in doing so struck unsettling angles in relation to his original embodiment of Japan’s doubts in advocating nuclear energy. Once the American occupation of Japan ceased in 1958, Japanese popular cinema certainly shifted its axis away from regret and atonement to rebuilding and rejuvenation. Godzilla accordingly waivered between being a threat to super-industrialization and a symbol of Japan’s super-industrial strength, and in doing so was aligned more to the ambivalent amorality of tag-team wrestling (where good and evil change between bouts and managers) and less to the social critique instigated in the original *Godzilla*. The wildest and most fantastic attempt to create a coherent fictional realm for the cohabitation of Godzilla and Japan has to be in *Destroy All Monsters* (1968). No fewer than 11 monsters (including Godzilla, Mothra, Rodan and Ghidrah) are interred on Monster Island and controlled by a sonic perimeter which keeps the monsters at peace with one another. Presented as a holiday resort while operating as a high-tech penal colony, the songs of praise for Japan’s futuristic control of unstable energy drown out issues of colonisation (where exactly in the Pacific is
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this ‘uninhabited island’?) and individualism (who has the right to reprogramme monsters into not being themselves?). As hidden cameras monitor the monsters on the island for the scientists and technicians housed deep below the ground, the desperate dream of human and monster control in *Destroy All Monsters* uncannily recalls Disneyland’s ‘It’s A Small World’ ride. Both miniaturise life in diorama form to be viewed from a safe distance; both induce dread through their aim to create utopia.

However, this is not to say that the character or figure of Godzilla was rendered impotent or vague, or that somehow the first cycle of Toho monster movies (between 1954 and 1976) was corrupted by these contradictions. The figure of Godzilla—as famous as a suit as he is a character—is less a vessel for consistent authorial and thematic meaning as he is a shell to be used for the generation of potential and variable meanings. As puppet, doll and prop on a stage of special effects, his theatricalised unreality is never hidden. To this day, most Westerners cannot comprehend the sensibility that unflinchingly photographs a man in a rubber suit squashing toy cars and crumbling cardboard buildings and presents it as cinema. Yet that sensibility explains how the non-human (from a rubber suit to plastic doll) can be invested with such a flux of dramatic sway and cultural signification. The meta-issues and socioeconomic fissures that irrationally sprout forth from the ‘psycho-islanding’ of the first Godzilla movie cycle are perfectly captured in all their opposing aspirations, and constitute the basis for many postnuclear, post-human and post-robotic figures and themes which define the uniqueness of Japanese sci-fi/horror/fantasy from the late 1970s through to the present day.

Notes

1 The first cycle of Godzilla movies starts with *Godzilla King of Monsters* (1959) and concludes in 1976 with *Godzilla vs. Mecha Godzilla*. The second cycle starts with Toho’s intent to re-market Godzilla in 1985 with *Godzilla 85*. This second cycle—a set of remakes that are glossy, hi-tech, but still replete with rubber suits and dioramas—continues to this day. The American release of their own version of Godzilla (*Godzilla*, 1998) will possibly ensure that this second cycle of Toho-produced films will continue for some time.

2 This brief article does not wish to define the specifics of ‘sci-fi’, ‘horror’ and ‘fantasy’. The term *kaiju eiga* refers simply to ‘monster movies’, which in Japan combine elements of both horror and science fiction. *Anime* is the romanised contraction of the phonetic pronunciation of ‘animation’. *Manga* is the field of comics. While *anime* and *manga* are entirely different from their counterparts in English-speaking cultures, the birth and various rejuvenations of both media forms in Japan are largely built upon innovative work produced in the genres of science fiction (or what in the 1980s was dubbed ‘hard sf’).