

## SKREEONK: The Roar Heard 'Round the World — Japan's Legacy and the Echoes of the Atom

The sea is calmest before the storm. Somewhere between memory and myth, something stirs beneath the waves. It is a relic of man's foolish advancements, born not from nature but from our own foolish fire. Tokyo sleeps uneasily, its skyline rebuilt over ashes, its streets lit by flickering neon and lingering nightmares. The sirens will come soon. The ground will tremble. And when it does, the people will look upward. Not toward the sky, but into eyes full of fury. The consequence of everything man thought would make them powerful. Godzilla's earth-shaking arrival did more than shock audiences, it cemented a new cinematic language for postwar Japan. Other kaiju have come and gone, but none of them truly carried the weight that Godzilla did. He was a creature built on living terror itself, giving the films true distinction and the ability to resonate even today. More than just a monster; a cultural wound made visible. Living and breathing, and full of rage.

When *Gojira* rose from the depths in 1954, he did not come merely to destroy. He came as a messenger, molded by radiation and guilt, shrieking through the smog of a nation still haunted by devastation brighter than the sun. To Japan, he was not fantasy. He was the past they could not bury, and the future they feared might happen again. The cultural landscape at the time in Japan was also influenced by American occupation and censorship, which prohibited any criticism of nuclear weapons (Ikeda). Scholars noted that Godzilla cleverly bypassed the restrictions through their clever allegory, threading criticism blatantly into the spectacle (Whelan). It allowed the filmmakers to dive deeper into the trauma directly, something that

audiences immediately recognized and saw as sincere (Ikeda) and deeply personal. There were reports that people wept in theatres when they saw it, for it was grief manifested in moving picture (Roberto) before their very eyes after such a recent travesty. Gojira himself became a vessel through which Japan and its people could process the atrocious loss of life they so recently experienced, and the horrors it brough afterwords.

Godzilla's own evolution from a grim symbol of nuclear devastation to a global icon reveals how film can absorb and reflect a society's fears, hopes, and anxieties. Through all the postwar trauma, artistry and allegory, genre expansion, and international reinterpretation, Godzilla's cinematic metamorphosis traces not only Japan's relationship with its own past but humanity's ongoing struggle with how to handle destruction and rebirth. The technical artistry itself behind the first film gave birth to a broad range of possibilities for special effects in filmmaking. Tsuburaya's use of suitmation, miniatures, and pyrotechnics opened the floodgates and inspired not only all of Toho's later films, but rather the entire tokusatsu industry (Bivens). The techniques and artistry used in Gojira laid the groundwork for other franchises like Ultraman and Super Sentai (Mullins), which fully adopted the same miniature destruction and highly dynamic choreography. Productions like these, in turn, really helped to normalize the whole kaiju aesthetic within Japanese media, giving credence to the idea that the style could sustain long term storytelling. In this way, Godzilla's technical and artistic legacy expanded far beyond just the films they made, instead it helped to shape Japanese science fiction itself for decades which can be seen being used in countless other shows and movies.

Postwar Japan itself was haunted by what Yoshiko Ikeda calls “the psychological aftershock of victimhood and culpability.” The nation’s wounds were healing but there was still lingering radiation, political and cultural humiliation, and moral confusion. In March 1954, the crew of the tuna fishing boat the Lucky Dragon No. 5 were all exposed to American hydrogen-bomb fallout, reigniting national trauma just as Japan was rebuilding. Within months, producer Tomoyuki Tanaka commissioned *Gojira*, a monster born of man’s own atomic sins. Tanaka himself stated that *Gojira* was very inspired from *King Kong* and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, but with a distinctly Japanese lens. Grounded in suffering rather than spectacle like the other monster movies before him. The incident with the Lucky Dragon No. 5 boat was a grim reminder that trauma born from nuclear devastation was not just tied where the bomb was dropped. instead haunting its victims long after it physical damage was done and gone.

As Roberto’s *Japan, Godzilla and the Atomic Bomb* explains, *Godzilla*’s textured skin purposefully resembled the scars of Hiroshima’s survivors (Roberto). He was the destruction of the atom personified, a living breathing reminder that human progress can and will annihilate its makers if not careful. For many viewers, his destruction of Tokyo was symbolic, the victim face to face with their tormentor (Ikeda). Ikeda observes that *Godzilla* changed from “scapegoat of the Americans” to “savior of the Japanese,” (Ikeda) encapsulating both their suffering and endurance. In this way, *Gojira* became not a tale of sci-fi fantasy but a national mirror, with Japan’s pain and rage projected forty stories high. Ikeda’s framing of *Godzilla* being dual symbolic in nature, being both victim and savior, and can be clearly seen later in the first era, or Showa era, of films. In movies like *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster*, *Godzilla* shifts away from the city leveling threat to being the only force capable of defending Japan from a threat that

comes from beyond the stars. The tone shift mirrors how Japan itself was developing in the 1960's, from a country devastated and left in ashes, to a nation that was growing into an economic and technological powerhouse. One could say that this sort of shift may take away from *Godzilla* and the message it once fought so hard to portray even under censorship, but it adds layers onto what *Godzilla* is. A paradox really, born of our nuclear sins, yet so essential in protecting us from forces we are helpless against.

Beyond just its message, *Gojira* represented a triumph of cinematic innovation. Director Ishirō Honda and effects genius Eiji Tsuburaya combined miniature cityscapes, rear projection, and “suitmation” to create a practical effect style that shocked audiences in 1954. As Bryce Bivens argues in *Culture Through the Camera's Lens*, Honda's lower angled cinematography forced viewers to experience everything from the civilian's perspective (Bivens), while Akira Ifukube's gripping music score echoed a more serious tone rather than an adventuring theme. Adding to this, Biven even pointed out that Honda tried avoiding the sensationalizing of the destruction in the movie. He also aimed to film scenes as though they were documentary footage, with the low angled shots, long drawn-out scenes, focus on civilian reaction, and really threading it all together to make the deviation feel as intimate as possible rather than just pure theatrics. The approach influenced later films like *Shin Godzilla* which took large inspiration from Honda's camerawork to being front and center the bureaucratic failure of the Japanese government during a crisis. Meanwhile, Ifukube's score became so iconic that later films, even the western ones like Legendary studios *Godzilla (2014)* reused and reinterpreted it. It all contributes to why the original film has carved such a lineage of work so long after in ways that other monster films only hoped to manage.

The film's narrative centered on moral tension rather than spectacle, using scenes like scientist Daisuke Serizawa's decision to use his Oxygen Destroyer weapon to kill Godzilla at the cost of his own life. It all paralleled Japan's very real reckoning with science's painful duality. Scholars at the University of San Francisco interpret the film as "an allegory for coping with trauma," (USF) turning calamity into catharsis, with Honda himself saying the monster was "a warning from nature." (Whelan). Doctor Serizawa's dilemma also reflects the unease in Japan with scientific advancement altogether after World War II, with him refusing to let the Oxygen Destroyer become simply another weapon. His actions and sentiment reflect the very real-world debates surrounding the concept of nuclear energy and responsibility of nations in the 1950's. The University of Sanfransisco's trauma analysis found that Serizawa's sacrifice to kill Godzilla was not merely a plot device, but a sort of cleansing. It was a refusal to let one disaster give birth to another. Later films like *Godzilla vs. Destroyah* tie Godzilla's meltdown that happens in the movie to the original Oxygen Destroyer itself, turning Godzilla's death this time into a multi-generational tragedy. For people in Japan, these sorts of parallels further reinforced how technological power always comes hand in hand with moral cost.

The success of *Gojira* launched the kaiju genre, Japan's unique mythology of giant monsters. Justin Mullis describes kaiju as "modern gods for an industrial age," (Mullis) embodying both dread and wonder. As Japan's economy recovered, the tone of these films evolved. In *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (1964), corporate greed and environmental abuse replaced nuclear testing as the forces of destruction (Yamashita). By *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964), Godzilla had shifted from destroyer to reluctant protector (Mullis), symbolizing

a nation striving to balance power with compassion. This sort of character evolution reached its most unexpected form in *Son of Godzilla* (1967), where the once all terrifying Godzilla adopts and protects a baby kaiju named Minilla who is the same species. Though usually dismissed as a silly entry, the film reframed Godzilla's power through empathy and guidance, reflecting a Japan eager to nurture and grow rather than fear its future. Minilla's presence transformed the kaiju genre itself into a generational one with even monsters raising new life amid ruin. The introduction of Minilla also marked when the franchise began shifting towards more intergenerational metaphors. This is also shown in other kaiju films like Daiei's *Gamera the Brave* (2006), where a young girl finds and raises the bay kaiju Gamera. Narratives like these show the cultural turn towards rebuilding and culturing a future beyond destruction. An article by ReseachGate notes that by the 1970's, Japan was far more focused on industrial pollution rather than nuclear annihilation. Movies like *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971) remain one of the most socially charged films of the entire series to date, whereas other films like *Destroy All Monsters* became a Marvel-styled crossover decades before it was ever thought of. The kaiju genre had become so flexible and culturally significant that it no longer only reflected trauma, rather it was predictive of future anxieties and fears.

According to *Why Godzilla? The Factors for Global Fame of Tokusatsu Giant Monsters*, the genre's popularity stemmed from its reflection of Japan's new anxieties like pollution, over-industrialization, and Cold War fear (Yamashita). Films like *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971) transformed smog and air pollution into a villain (Yamashita), merging environmental activism with spectacle. This film and many others in Godzilla's long history became Japan's storytelling laboratory, continually reframing national identity through their monstrous metaphors. Scholars

noted that Hedorah's design was meant to mimic industrial runoff and waste sludge, aiming to turn pollution into a villainous lifeform to be combatted against. The shift to represent whatever threat loomed overhead was even adopted by Daiei's *Gamera vs. Jiger* (1970), which confronted the dangers of unchecked construction, while Tsubayara Productions' *Ultraman* made a habit of featuring monsters born from radioactive waste, emissions, or abandoned weapons projects (Mullis). These sorts of patterns show that the kaiju genre had evolved from simple allegories into much broader commentaries on ecological harm that humans were causing. Through each new metaphor, Godzilla was not only a defender or destroyer, but a blatant warning signal, like the cinematic canary in Japan's industrial mines.

By the 1980s, Godzilla had become a global powerhouse. *The Return of Godzilla* (1984) recast the creature within Cold War tension, a nuclear warning to both superpowers (Kawasaki). In contrast, the Americanized *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956) diluted the allegory (Kawasaki), reframing him as a generic beast. It ends up coming off as a cultural translation that, as *Exploring the Iconicity of Godzilla in Popular Culture* notes, reflected the West's detachment from Japan's trauma. The Long Postwar study points out that during the Cold War; Japan's anxieties were caught somewhere between American influence and more local geopolitical tensions. This is reflected in films like *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991) and ended up causing controversy with western audiences for its imagery of WWII nationalism. Things like this and the changes to the original film caused a divergence, creating split meaning for Godzilla. A symbol of trauma to his people, yet a simple creature-feature to others abroad. Only in recent years with films like *Shin Godzilla* and *Minus One* have western audiences and others around the world begin to reconnect with what Godzilla meant in both political and emotional depth.

Decades later, *Shin Godzilla* (2016) revived the allegory with bureaucratic satire (Rawle), turning the monster into a symbol of political paralysis in the wake of Fukushima. *Godzilla Minus One* (2023) circled back to the 1940s, grounding its story in survivor's guilt (Rawle) and postwar despair. Rawle's study *Is Your War Over Now?* argues that these reboots capture Japan's "long postwar" (Rawle), a cycle of remembering and forgetting that Godzilla perpetually disrupts. Across continents, every reinvention carries echoes of the same deafening roar. Both current day films highlight how Godzilla has become a rather accurate gauge for any crisis in Japan. With *Shin Godzilla*, scholars spoke on how the creature himself with its constantly mutating body throughout the film reflects modern fears of unpredictable, uncontrollable failure. In contrast, *Minus One* goes back to the postwar trauma of Japan, using a lens of survivor's guilt, shame, and cultural weight as everyday people work to rebuild from nothing. As a pairing, these two films demonstrate how Godzilla himself continues to evolve and morph to meet the emotional and psychological needs of each generation in Japan. Whether he is the embodiment of bureaucratic gridlock or the scars of war, he opens audiences' eyes to confront unresolved pasts and very real and dangerous futures. Modern interpretation just goes to prove Rawle's argument that Japan's "long postwar" never truly ended. It transforms. And Godzilla transforms with it.

Today, Godzilla endures not simply as entertainment but as an evolving metaphor for human consequence. In *The Kaiju as Beholder* (Beholder), they argue that modern portrayals invite empathy rather than fear. His meltdown in *Godzilla vs. Destoroyah* (1995) evokes a deep tragedy more than terror (Beholder), the atom's creation dying by its very own instability.

Others, like *The Memory That Dare Not Speak Its Name* (Memory), connect Godzilla's longevity to Japan's unresolved relationship with guilt and remembrance. Each new era molds him to their own fears, from nuclear annihilation to climate collapse and governmental failure. Yet his daunting shadow remains constant. He is a reminder that humanity's greatest monsters are the ones of our own making. This all explains better why there was such a strong audience reaction to *Minus One*, with Godzilla being the embodiment of survivor's guilt helping to reconnect the monster to old, very deeply personal emotional wounds. Meanwhile entries like *Shin Godzilla* and his unstoppable mutation sequences and Legendary's framing of their MonsterVerse with its kaiju ecology demonstrate how Godzilla seamlessly absorbs new cultural fears. Scholars have described Godzilla as being a "container for crisis," able to hold trauma, political tension, environmental fears, and collective guilt with no issue at all. His continued persistence even today is more than enough proof that the metaphor remains all too relevant.

From the fire and ashes of 1954 to the visual spectacles of 2023, Godzilla has outlived reboots and interpretations. Born from nuclear terror and death, he became a voice for the voiceless, a global icon of resilience and warning. In films like *Shin Godzilla* and *Minus One*, he repeatedly resurfaces wherever things are unaddressed, embodying the "long postwar" in Japan. He is the unresolved cycle of trauma, rebuilding, and the reflection that still shapes the nation today and his unending roar, that shrill glass-cracking "*SKREEONK!*," is not merely a scream, but an echo. Of cities rebuilt and of lessons half-learned, of a world forever teetering on that cliff edge between progress and ruin. Over seven decades, Godzilla has been many things. Destroyer, protector, omen, mirror, but he remains a reminder that the consequences we create will find

their way back to us. And sometimes, to rebuild, the world must first stop and listen to the sound of its own deafening destruction to truly learn.



Figure 1. *Gojira* (1954). Toho Studios.

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