



GODZILLA AND JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

PART OF
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Godzilla (gojira in Japanese) first appeared on the silver screen almost fifty years ago. Since that time, more than twenty additional Godzilla films have been produced, making this giant radiation-breathing lizard one of the world's most recognizable, enduring and unlikely movie stars. This exhibition traces the history of the Godzilla series and explores the rise of Godzilla as a pop-culture icon in Japan and the United States.

The original GOJIRA (1954) created the Godzilla legend, telling the story of a mutant monster spawned by U.S. hydrogen-bomb testing on Bikini Atoll and driven to wreak its vengeance on human civilization. Far from simple escapism, this first film had a serious political message and addressed some of the deepest fears of the Japanese people. Made at a time when the destruction of World War II and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still fresh memories in Japan, GOJIRA was meant not only as entertainment but also as a sincere protest against nuclear war and technology out of control. Boasting state-of-the-art special effects, an all-star cast and a huge budget (equivalent to \$70 million today), GOJIRA was a box-office hit in Japan. Subsequently edited for overseas audiences, and with Raymond Burr added to the cast, GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS opened in U.S. theaters in 1956 to immediate popular acclaim.

Godzilla's success at home and abroad led to the production of numerous sequels, where Godzilla battled with old movie villains (like King Kong) and new monster enemies (such as Mothra, Ghidorah and Rodan). Over time, the quality of the scripts and the production values declined, however; the films became formulaic and increasingly were aimed at younger viewers. The series was discontinued in 1975, as movie-goers began to demand special effects more elaborate than actors in rubber suits demolishing toy cities. Revived in 1984, Godzilla's more recent films have aimed to restore the series to its original standards, featuring improved special effects and more sophisticated plots. A 1998 American production of Godzilla was a critical flop, but the latest Japanese offering, GOJIRA 2000: MILLENNIUM, will be released in the United States in mid-August.

Like any cultural icon, Godzilla cannot be said to have a simple, unitary "meaning." Although initially portrayed as a threat to humanity, later films often depicted Godzilla as a hero defending Japan from more sinister forces (including the United States). As with other works of science fiction, the Godzilla series presented an ambivalent view of modern science and technology, deploring the misuse of scientific expertise while simultaneously celebrating its power and its potential for good. Since the early 1990s, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to Godzilla, analyzing the films and their popularity as a means of understanding postwar Japanese society and culture. Reputable academic publications have addressed the significance of Godzilla in understanding Japanese attitudes toward democracy, the environment, military affairs and relations with the United States. Some scholars have approached Godzilla more lightheartedly; paleontologists have attempted to trace Godzilla's dinosaur ancestry while economists have attempted to estimate the monetary impact of Godzilla's rampages through Tokyo.

Godzilla was Japan's first great pop culture export to the United States. Others have since followed in Godzilla's tracks - most recently, of course, Pokemon - but none has yet rivaled Godzilla's long-term popularity. Whatever Godzilla "means," and why ever this giant lizard remains so beloved, Godzilla's importance to postwar popular culture in Japan and America is beyond doubt.

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