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Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When Them! Is U.S.

by Chon Noriega

History shows again and again how nature points out the folly of man; Go, Go, Godzilla.

Blue Oyster Cult

In 1954, Japan's Toho Studios—in what appeared to be merely an imitation of the 1953 American film *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*—unleashed *Godzilla*. The film was Japan's first international hit, inspiring sixteen sequels and a dozen other radioactive dinosaurs. Today, *Godzilla* has achieved icon status in Japan and America, making plausible James Twitchell's jibe in *Dreadful Pleasures* that "it is one of the first images Westerners think of when they hear the word 'Japan.'" If the word *Japan* evokes *Godzilla*—and not Hiroshima, 1985's \$62 billion trade surplus, and compact cars—one wonders why these films are so easily dismissed by Twitchell and ignored by others.¹ That this genre—Japan's most popular filmic export—has been neglected seems in itself to indicate a mechanics of repression at work. These movies are ascribed the same attributes as those "made in Japan" products that in the fifties connoted shoddiness. When examined, however, they reveal a self-conscious attempt to deal with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society.

There are two related impediments to a sociohistorical reading of *Godzilla* films: critical approach and the concept of Otherness. Noel Carroll sums up the prevailing approach to the horror film when he states that "as a matter of social tradition, psychoanalysis is more or less *lingua franca* of the horror film and thus the privileged critical tool for discussing the genre."² He also notes that "the horror and science fiction film poignantly expresses the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion."³ Ironically, Carroll does not attempt to historicize the psychoanalytic archetypes he goes on to posit.

Unlike Carroll, Robin Wood makes a direct link between psychoanalysis and history in examining the horror film. In "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," Wood applies the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and projection to the horror film: "It is repression . . . that makes impossible the healthy alternative: the full recognition and acceptance of the other's autonomy and right

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to exist.”⁴ While Wood argues that such repression is ultimately sexual, he outlines a process very similar to Fredric Jameson’s doctrine of the political unconscious. In both cases, repressed social contradictions that threaten the hegemonic “self” are projected onto a text where they struggle for recognition, but are ultimately “resolved.”⁵ Central to Wood’s sexual repression and Jameson’s “absent cause” is the concept of Otherness.

The concept of Otherness defines a dynamic in Western culture that extends to the psychoanalytical, anthropological, and historical. According to this dynamic, the individual and/or society project “what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self” onto an Other in order to define or delimit a self.⁶ Interpolating an Other then becomes an externalized way of dealing with oneself, a point made again and again by historians of American foreign policy: “For most Americans, the external world has been a remote, ill-defined sphere which can be molded into almost anything they wish. More often than we might care to think, this attitude has translated into foreign policies which have relieved and encouraged a nation struggling with tormenting domestic concerns.”⁷

That American foreign policy so closely follows the self/Other model outlined above implicates the model in the problem it describes, becoming the mechanism whereby the Soviet and nuclear threats are variously appropriated, and the cold war perpetuated. Because the political environment encourages literal adherence to the self/Other model, while at the same time political realities have become increasingly multilateral and fragmented since the “two camp” days of the late forties and early fifties, a sociohistorical reading requires an examination of the gaps and fissures in both the concept and implementation of the self/Other model.

A good place to begin would be Japan, given its unique position in the cold war, where, curiously enough, Godzilla films provide an opportunity to challenge our constructions of the self and the Other. These films were popular in the United States during the fifties and early sixties, while Godzilla remains a cultural icon used in numerous commercials and parodied in television’s *Saturday Night Live* and the 1986 film *Pee Wee’s Big Adventure*. But in many ways Japanese culture, foreign policy, and language complicate the cold war paradigm. Any sociohistorical interpretation must remain sensitive to differences in culture and language in order to register the difference between American and Japanese reception. Psychoanalysis—if it is to be “the privileged critical tool”—must account for these differences. In Godzilla films, it is the United States that exists as Other—a fact that Hollywood and American culture at large has masked. To see how we are seen by another culture is central to understanding that culture as other than a projection of our own internal social anxieties. We are then on the way to answering some seemingly simple questions: Why does Japan produce radioactive-dinosaur films while the United States imports them? And if Godzilla is so destructive, why do the Japanese sympathize with him as a tragic hero, while Americans see him as little more than a comic icon?

The original *Godzilla* (1954) had no national filmic tradition per se, because

it was the first Japanese monster *cum* science fiction film. Bill Warren argues that the 1952 rerelease of *King Kong* strongly influenced Eiji Tsuburaya, the special effects artist for *Godzilla*.⁸ American newspaper reviews at the time label *Godzilla* a remake of *King Kong*.⁹ It should be noted, however, that Embassy Pictures encouraged such comparisons, emphasizing them heavily in their advertising campaign.¹⁰ In any case, the emphasis on special effects ignores the re-inscription of *King Kong* (1933) into the emerging cold war, reducing the text to its special effects rather than acknowledging how those effects—central to the film's impact during the depression¹¹—were received in the fifties. To understand why *Godzilla* developed its own genre, it is necessary to look at its historical environment, and not just apparent American precursors. Edwin Reischauer gives a cultural impetus to such an approach: "Unlike the Americans . . . the Japanese have a strong consciousness of history. They see themselves in historical perspective. They will delve a thousand years and more into their past in analyzing their contemporary traits."¹²

For the moment we need only go back to the ten years between Hiroshima and *Godzilla*. After the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, an essentially American military occupation force dismantled and rebuilt the Japanese family and society in such a way as to ensure that Japan could never again become a *military* threat to the Allies. Reform gave women full *legal* equality and ended the authority of the clan over the family and the father over adult children. Compulsory education was extended to nine years, further reducing parental influence. So-called reform exceeded what American society would have accepted for itself at the time, indicating that the purpose was more to undermine the patriarchal base of Japanese society than to reform it. (In America, women were being forced out of the workplace in order to make room for returning soldiers *cum* patriarchs.) For the most part, however, the Japanese cooperated with the Americans, bringing about enormous socioeconomic and political change during the relatively short occupation (1945–52). Such change, however much desired by both Japanese and Americans, required repression in order to succeed; and as Wood aptly puts it, "what is repressed must always strive to return."¹³

Occupation ended in 1952, but the United States nuclear presence did not. On November 6, the United States exploded its first H-bomb, a ten-megaton weapon one thousand times more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima, on a Pacific Island near Japan. The island evaporated. In 1953, on the other side of Japan, the Soviet Union exploded its first H-bomb. Then in March 1954, the United States exploded a fifteen-megaton H-bomb that unexpectedly sent substantial fallout across a seven-thousand-square-mile area. Twenty-eight military personnel and 239 Marshall Islanders at a presumably "safe" distance were exposed to high radiation. The United States attempted to downplay the incident until it was discovered that a Japanese tuna boat, the Fukuryû Maru or "Lucky Dragon," had also been hit by fallout. The entire crew developed radiation sickness, and one member soon died. Japanese protest against the tests escalated,

especially when the United States, accepting blame for the fisherman's death, paid his widow less than \$4,000: "Almost overnight, the Japanese revived a buried interest in their own nuclear victims. For the first time in nearly a decade, the condition of the survivors of Hiroshima became a national preoccupation. The protests quickly became international. . . ."¹⁴ Amid these events, Toho Studios began shooting Japan's first monster film, *Godzilla*.¹⁵ The repressed had returned.

Go, Go, Godzilla.

How do American actions since V-J day appear to other nations? I mean by action concrete things like \$13,000,000,000 for the War and Navy Departments, the Bikini tests of the atomic bomb and continued production of bombs. . . . I cannot but feel that these actions must make us look to the rest of the world as if we were only paying lip service to peace at the conference table.

How would it look to us if Russia had the atomic bomb and we did not, if Russia had 10,000 mile bombers and air bases within 1,000 miles of our coastline and we did not. (Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace, letter to President Truman, 23 July 1946)¹⁶

On 18 September 1946, *The New York Times* reprinted Wallace's letter to President Truman. Two days later Truman fired Wallace: such questions were not open to public debate. Wallace validated the Other's perspective and threw into question the motives behind United States actions. To accept Wallace's criticism would threaten the perceived (perhaps willfully misread) Manichaeian opposition against the Soviet Union. As the cold war developed, American monster films reflected this inability to identify with the Other. In concurrent Japanese monster films, however, the relationship between monster and society became integral. A comparison of American and Japanese horror films in the fifties reveals fundamentally different cultural and political attitudes toward nuclear history and the Other. The Japanese monster film also provides a look at the cold war from somewhere between the United States-Soviet Union dichotomy. Perhaps it is at this point that a nuclear dialectic can begin.

The Fifties. The American monster films of the fifties are notable for their support of the bomb and cold war attitudes. *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) was the first Hollywood movie that dealt with the problem of nuclear testing, and it was a box office success. In the film, a nuclear explosion in the Arctic melts an iceberg, awakening the "rhedosaurus" frozen within. The rhedosaurus heads for New York, where it destroys Coney Island and Manhattan. Eventually, the military kills the monster by shooting a nuclear missile into its mouth. The message is clear: nuclear weapons can solve the problems and anxieties they create. But in order to provide such a resolution, the real site of United States nuclear testing is displaced onto the more politically distant and isolated Arctic—locus or final destination of other American monsters like the Thing and the Blob that threaten to subsume "civilization" or "us."

While *Beast* is the only American radioactive-dinosaur film, other radio-

active-monster films from the fifties use the same plot: *Them!* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), and *The Beginning of the End* (1957). The complete Otherness of these monsters is emphasized by their impersonal names: "Them" and "It." The monsters are hated, feared, and eventually destroyed through force, often a variation of the technology that created them. The films' apparent self-examination—"look at what we've accidentally created"—lasts until the monster's autonomy and threat shifts responsibility from American science onto the monster itself. The films effectively destroy any causal relationship, thereby constructing the monster as complete Other. The Americans in the film, freed from implication in the monster's threat, can now use nuclear or other force to destroy it.

Derek Hill and Susan Sontag, writing at the time these films were still in vogue in the United States, equate the monster as Other with the bomb. But perhaps an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of McCarthyism and cold war consensus prevents either from acknowledging or analyzing the political context within which the monster as bomb existed. Twenty years later, Peter Biskind writes that "like the Bomb, the Red Menace theory stands in the way of thinking through the idea of the Other . . . [these theories being] no more than a smoke screen for a domestic power struggle."¹⁷ Here, however, the problem with the concept of the Other is that it allows only a reading of the self. True, the bomb and the Red Menace are powerful smoke screens for internal struggles and problems. But what also hides behind these smoke screens is a very real cold war relation between the Soviet Union and the United States. These films both perpetuate cold war attitudes and resolve anxieties about possessing annihilatory weapons in a warlike environment. Describing fifties foreign policy—although it could also have been American monster films of the period—Eisenhower once said, "Our armaments did not reflect the way we wanted to live; they merely reflected the way we had to live." The monster created by the bomb requires the bomb to kill the monster. This is the circuitous logic of the arms race.

Japanese monster films of the same period likewise have origins in American and cold war history. And yet within the films—contrary to Wood's claim—the Japanese sympathize with the "totally non-human" monsters.¹⁸ Unlike American monsters, Japanese monsters have personalities, legends, and names: Godzilla, Rodan, Mothra.¹⁹ Clearly Western conceptions of the Other or monster as repressed sexual energy (Wood), class struggle (Jameson), or "archaic, conflicting impulses" (Carroll) do not fully explain the Japanese monster. Takao Suzuki's sociolinguistic examination of the Other as it operates in Japanese—as opposed to Western—culture helps explain how the Other operates in Japanese monster films.²⁰ Suzuki notes that the Japanese language, unlike Indo-European languages, does not have a long or consistent history of personal pronouns to distinguish between "I" and "You," "We" and "Them" that make it easy for the repressed in Western culture to be, in Wood's words, "projected outward in order to be hated and disowned":²¹ "It is frequently pointed out that whereas Western culture is based on the distinction between the observer and the observed, on the opposition of the self versus the other, Japanese culture and sentiment show a strong

tendency to overcome this distinction by having the self immerse itself in the other."²²

In Japan, Suzuki argues, the above-described "other-oriented self-designation" operates *as long as the other belongs to the culture*.²³ While cultural criticism in the West generally acknowledges that construction of an Other primarily defines a self, the Japanese language carries within it the added stipulation that both self and Other remain within the culture. The monster's name and legend necessarily insert the monster into the culture as always-already-extant. Because the monster has always-already-been Japanese, its continuance is assured: the legend will continue to return as an archetype of Japanese horror that explicates the present. Consequently, the monster's American and cold war historical origins, now rooted in Japanese mythology,²⁴ allow it to serve as an intermediary in the Japanese designating themselves vis-à-vis the United States and, later, the Soviet Union. The plot must then uncover why the *distant* past (embodied in the dinosaur) again confronts the present.²⁵

While the Japanese monster does not constitute a projected Other, it can be seen to operate according to the defense mechanism that is central to therapeutic psychoanalysis: transference. The shift from theoretical to therapeutic psychoanalysis provides a critical analogue to cultural and historical processes that struggle against a cold war ideology based on repression and projection. In Freud's paradigm, the analysand transfers onto the analyst a central role in a symbolic reenactment of a problem that would cause "unpleasure" to remember outright. Godzilla films exhibit this compulsion to repeat a traumatic event in symbolic narrative. The necessity for a quick solution is inherent in each film, because the monster must be destroyed or pacified in order to save Japan and the world. Because brute force cannot affect the monster, the search for a solution ("What does Godzilla want?") becomes equally as fascinating as the spectacle of mass destruction. In later films, the search becomes the central plot element, a sign that these films are serious attempts at dealing with trauma therapeutically. For the first step toward psychic health is exactly at that point where the search for answers (the psychoanalytic process) is seen as more attractive than the drive toward destruction.

The films transfer onto Godzilla the role of the United States in order to symbolically re-enact a problematic United States-Japan relationship that includes atomic war, occupation, and thermonuclear tests. The films, however, in their search for a solution do more than blame and destroy the transferred object, and thereby "resolve" the "problem." "Other-oriented self-designation" mitigates the sharp division between self and Other implicit in the transference process, so that Godzilla comes to symbolize Japan (self) as well as the United States (Other). Like Godzilla, identified as a four-hundred-foot tall dinosaur marking a transition between sea and land creatures and aroused "after all these centuries" by Strontium-90 (a radioactive product of H-bomb explosions), Japan in 1954 is a transitional monster caught between the imperial past and the postwar industrial future, aroused by United States H-bomb tests. Thus the monster expresses more

than impotent rage made powerful in fantasy, because the anxieties Godzilla reflects are as much about Japan as the United States. The films must balance these two anxieties, but cannot resolve them since they reside in one figure: they must be simultaneously repressed in order to rebuild the "beloved land" (to make the transition) and yet be actively directed at United States H-bomb testing in order to address a pressing concern at the mass cultural level.

In the films, the news media function as psychoanalyst at the mass cultural level, mediating between society and the monster. The psychoanalyst plays two roles in the transference relationship: a symbolic one and an investigative one. The Japanese monster film divides these roles between the monster (symbolic) and the reporter (investigative). The reporter represents an institutionalized attempt to discover and expose social anxieties (the monster) and their causes, while working "behind the scenes" to discover and implement a solution. The investigative role, both within psychoanalysis and the news media, is not without inherent contradictions. The reporter in *Godzilla vs. Mothra* (1964) realizes "that newspapers have a limited capacity to influence people . . . the more I write, the more Happy Enterprises [which works against the interest of the investigation] benefits from the publicity." The statement reveals more about the news media—and its reliance on larger structures of authority for information and advertising—than it does about those who actually read newspapers. Similarly, implicit in the transference relationship is the underlying problem of authority in psychoanalysis, especially given the complicity assumed by the analyst when in the transference role. The Japanese monster films acknowledge these problems and attempt to work around them.

The United States release of *Godzilla* shows the two approaches to the radioactive monster (projection and transference) in high-relief. Embassy Pictures reedited the film, cutting more than thirty minutes and adding new scenes with Anglo-American Raymond Burr as reporter Steve Martin. Included in the cuts were direct references to Hiroshima ("First the radioactive rain. Then the evacuation. What's next?") and songs about peace. The film was renamed *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* in an effort to link the film with *King Kong*. Additional dialogue about young women sacrificed to Godzilla by Micronesian Islanders backs up the advertising and the title's reference to *King Kong*. Thus the film tells a different story to its new audience.

Although the scenes with Martin largely replace similar scenes with a Japanese reporter, the shift in narrative perspective is crucial to the subsequent appropriation of the film's message. The film begins with a voice-over by Martin of inserted scenes showing "scorched flesh" and the destruction of Tokyo. He describes himself as a reporter cast into "the living Hell of another world that lives in the paralyzing fear that *it* could happen again today or tomorrow." But "it" is never named, merely encoded as "an incident that has shaken the foundations of the civilized world." The film then switches to the chronological beginning in which the first Japanese ship is engulfed by white light mushrooming up from beneath the water. The sustained ambiguity implies the initial cause

("it") to be the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, and not the Godzilla mentioned in the title. The second scene alludes to the "Lucky Dragon" (at this point still a sensitive issue in the United States), confirming "the paralyzing fear that *it* could happen again."

The Hollywood re-edited film plays on an American sense of guilt toward the Japanese in the early fifties, saying in effect, "look at what we've done/are doing to Japan." As with other American radioactive-monster films, this guilt is then projected onto the monster, who is revealed to be the true cause within the movie. Godzilla's death represses American guilt and anxieties about nuclear weapons: both history and Japan's own filmic rendition are retextualized to erase the bomb and thereby relieve anxieties about the American occupation and H-bomb tests.

Détente. In 1961, Mothra became the first Japanese monster to be recognized as a moral force and consequently to be alive at the fade-out. *Mothra* (U.S. release, 1962) pits a giant Micronesian caterpillar/moth against an entrepreneur who steals a pair of twelve-inch-tall female twins who protect the islanders from the effects of nuclear testing. Mothra proves indestructible, even against the United States Army's new atomic heat gun. Because force cannot stop the monster, the Japanese must discover what it is Mothra wants. To appease the creature, they catch the entrepreneur and return the twins, using church bells to attract Mothra because they sound like the twins' singing, in addition to a large cross which resembles the cross found on Mothra Island.

The connection between Mothra and the Christian church suggests a facile "resolution" to the monster's existence. The connection, however, works at a deeper level to explicate Japan's Westernization. Mothra, like Godzilla, represents repressed consequences of Western actions. Initially, it is the Other (the West) who causes Japan's social contradictions, but it is also that same Other who offers new spiritual ideals along with the socioeconomic realities. Unlike Godzilla, who is a transitional monster, Mothra is a monster in transition. Both monsters, like postwar Japan, are awakened by H-bomb tests. Mothra, however, changes from a larva into a moth. This represents a shift in the nature of the repressed-returned-as monster and points to the positive and moral forces within history that can arise out of the negative. The film uses the Judeo-Christian tradition to construct a nuclear dialectic within the West that speaks to Japanese concerns (for example, industrial pollution) as well.

Godzilla vs. Mothra (1964) brings the nuclear dialectic into open conflict: Godzilla (the bomb) versus Mothra (Christianity). The following dialogue on Mothra's island appears to make nuclearism a central concern:

Photographer: This is the result of atomic tests.

Reporter: At one time this was a beautiful green island.

Scientist: As a scientist I feel partly responsible for this.

Photographer: All of mankind is responsible.

Reporter: Like the end of the world here.

Scientist: This alone is a good reason to end nuclear testing.

Reporter: Those who dream of war should come see this.

Photographer: Can anyone really live here? . . . I'm sure they hate us for what happened here . . . the nuclear tests.

Here, however, the emphasis is on Japan as cause: United States nuclear testing becomes something for which the Japanese feel guilt. The reporters and scientist act out the investigative role in a transference relation with Japanese society, becoming both the focus of guilt and the source of therapy. Godzilla's emergence out of the ground of an industrial development reinforces the idea that Japan itself is at issue. Godzilla does not return from some distant island, but exists beneath the soil upon which Japan rebuilds itself.

Mothra fights Godzilla and dies. Her²⁶ egg—stolen by a self-proclaimed “great entrepreneur”—hatches and two caterpillars emerge to wrap Godzilla in silk, causing him to fall into the sea. It is conceivable, however, that the sea beast breaks its silk bonds. In any case, Godzilla's repression, in light of its sudden eruption from the ground, is by no means final. Rather than resolve the anxieties and social problems Godzilla embodies, the film instead exposes these problems for recognition and at the same time points to Mothra, whose previous embodiment of Christian morality is doubled in this film. The reporter calls Mothra “one of us” in convincing her to fight Godzilla. It is the moral relationship between the Japanese and Mothra that succeeds in dealing with (though not destroying) Godzilla and the problems of capitalism and industrialism. Thus we have one return of the repressed dealing with another, a standard process in later Japanese monster films.²⁷

The Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which prohibited atmospheric nuclear tests, resolved the problem behind Godzilla and the other radioactive monsters. By 1965, Toho Studios' president had decided to tailor Godzilla to its primary audience: children. Thus in *Ghidrah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1965) Mothra convinces Godzilla and Rodan to stop fighting each other and to join together to save the earth from the three-headed monster from outer space. The film transformed Godzilla into a hero, especially among Japanese children, his image soon adorning their clothing, lunch boxes, toys, and candy. But Godzilla did not become a monster without a cause; he would continue to rely on his nuclear origins to explicate new social problems to a younger audience.

The genre now focused on the role of a child guiding the monster to save Japan from another monster, reflecting changes in postwar Japan. The family, atomized by occupation reform, began to restabilize in the mid-sixties when Japan's economic success began to alleviate social anxieties. Children born in the sixties were also a generation removed from World War II. The realities Godzilla reflects became “history” rather than lived experience.

The introduction of children in the films of the sixties and seventies is central to reconstructing society. (It is interesting to note that both the original *Godzilla* and *Godzilla 1985*, occurring amid times of increased cold war tensions, have no children in the plot.) The male reporter and female photographer in both

Mothra films represent an intramedia “marriage” bound by an urgent need to return history to the conscious. The central child in these films aligns himself with the reporter and photographer, suggesting a nuclear family constructed in relation to the monster. Each film recreates the entire society around the problem(s). We see where women, men, and children fit in, what types of marriages and families are constructed and under what conditions. As the political dimension changes with time so does the sociofamilial, here seen as the “unconscious” within the Japanese films. Thus history (in addition to cultural difference) must temper purely psychoanalytic interpretations.²⁸

The Eighties. *Godzilla 1985*, the first *Godzilla* film since 1976, ostensibly celebrates *Godzilla*’s thirtieth birthday. The film was released in the United States in September 1985. Because the narrative takes place in August 1985, the film provides a retrospect on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945 and the fortieth-year commemorations in early August 1985.²⁹ In early 1985, NATO decided that Japan should have a nuclear arsenal in order to “pay for peace” like the other (less economically stable) NATO members. But Japan’s three non-nuclear principles—no manufacture, no introduction, and no possession of nuclear weapons—formally codified in 1967, have been a centerpiece of Japanese policy since it became the only country ever to suffer atomic attacks.

In *Godzilla 1985*, *Godzilla*—as yet the absent cause—attacks a Japanese fishing boat and then a Soviet submarine. The Soviets mobilize, while the Americans—portrayed as LBJ/Reagan-style cowboys—are unable to clear themselves because the hotline is “down for repairs.” The Japanese news reports: “tension increases as Soviet and U.S. forces step up mobilization for an all out confrontation. Concerns are mounting throughout Europe, the most likely battleground for a limited nuclear exchange.” It is at this point that the Japanese prime minister reveals *Godzilla* to be the cause.

American and Soviet delegations meet with the prime minister to demand that he allow them to use nuclear weapons to destroy *Godzilla*. The prime minister refuses: “Japan has a firm nuclear policy: we will not make, possess, or allow nuclear weapons. We cannot make an exception, not even in a situation as grave as this.” The Japanese use their self-defense forces to “kill” *Godzilla*, but in all the confusion the Soviets accidentally launch a space-based nuclear missile at Tokyo. The United States successfully intercepts the Soviet missile. The blast and fallout, however, revive *Godzilla*, who proceeds to rampage until the Japanese use a birdcall to lure *Godzilla* away to a volcano lined with explosives. The volcano is activated, and *Godzilla* is consumed by the lava. Where weapons fail, nature succeeds. And the Japanese prove that they can deal with *Godzilla* outside an East-West framework.

In *Godzilla 1985*, it is the Japanese who can defuse the nuclear crisis. To do so, they must name (textualize) the absent cause: *Godzilla*. The immediate crisis is resolved, but the United States and Soviet Union now join together and threaten to use nuclear weapons to stop *Godzilla*. Japan, therefore, becomes a

nuclear target upon which, forty years later, the Soviets drop the bomb. Japan—as the NATO member purposefully without nuclear weapons—takes on a pivotal role in critiquing the United States–Soviet Union dichotomy. Both countries are represented not as enemies dividing the world between them but as a single interactive force that has brought the world together under the threat of global annihilation. Japan and Europe (the first “nuclear theater”) become Other to what is now seen as a schizophrenic self.

Just as the politics of using nuclear weapons conflates the United States and Soviet Union, the specter of nuclear annihilation effectively conflates civilization and nature (often symbolized respectively as the United States and the Soviet Union in American cold war politics and films), so that Godzilla becomes at once a sign from nature and a product of human civilization. Godzilla is almost never referred to as a monster, but is described instead through simile and metaphor. The sole survivor of Godzilla’s first attack describes it as “like a monster.” To Professor Hayashida, “Godzilla is more like a nuclear weapon. A living nuclear weapon destined to walk the earth forever—indestructible—a victim of the modern nuclear age.” To Steve Martin, “Godzilla is like a hurricane or tidal wave. We must approach him as we would a force of nature: we must understand him, deal with him, perhaps even try to communicate with him.” Hayashida, responding to the Japanese plan to shoot cadmium bombs into Godzilla’s mouth, explains that it will not work because “Godzilla is not a reactor.” Shortly before Godzilla attacks Tokyo, Hayashida states, “Godzilla is a warning—a warning to every one of us. When mankind falls into conflict with nature, monsters are born.” These descriptions obscure the nature/civilization distinction, especially Martin’s admonition to deal with Godzilla as “a force of nature” and “*communicate* with him” (emphasis added).

This done, the film can be more directly historical. The film contains numerous historical allusions: the fishing boat evokes the “Lucky Dragon,”³⁰ while the hotline being “down for repairs” evokes Reagan’s stance toward the Soviets and arms control in which, ironically, technology will solve political problems. While, ultimately, it is Japan’s non-nuclear efforts that “kill” Godzilla, the film enacts a “Star Wars” or Strategic Defense Initiative scenario between the Soviets and the United States, played out over Japan. A variation on the *Star Wars* (1977) musical theme underscores these scenes. Steve Martin historicizes the event after an elated major explains, “Mr. Martin, this is the natural aftermath of stratospheric nuclear blast: absolutely harmless.” Martin replies, “Major, in 1962, for forty whole minutes, a high atmospheric test shut down transmissions across a seven-thousand-mile perimeter—all the way from Australia to California.” The stunned major walks away. Martin invokes the apex of the cold war to show that no nuclear blast is politically harmless in citing the test that “first” made electromagnetic pulse (EMP) known. “The seven-thousand-mile perimeter” recalls the 1954 test that spread fallout across seven thousand square miles.

Godzilla 1985, more than anything else, is a nuclear parable. As in the fifties original, Godzilla represents nuclear fears “too terrible for humans to see.” Rather

than “resolve” the unthinkable, the film uses Godzilla as a focal point, which allows a marginal examination of current nuclear instabilities and fears: the clash between Japan’s non-nuclear principles and the new cold war centered around Reagan’s “Star Wars.” The film addresses an internal dilemma as well as one of global politics, because the non-nuclear principles are not universally accepted among Japanese voters. When Godzilla “dies,” these problems remain. The final voice-over by Martin emphasizes the film’s moral/warning: “The reckless ambitions of man are often dwarfed by their dangerous consequences. For now, Godzilla, that strangely innocent and tragic monster, has gone to earth. Whether he returns or not, or is ever seen again by human eyes, the things he has taught us remain.”

Surprisingly, American film reviewers did not comment on the nuclear issues raised by the film. One scene may explain why the film—so popular in Japan that a sequel is underway—showed less than a week in the United States. In the scene following Godzilla’s attack on a Japanese nuclear reactor, a small American boy plays with a toy Godzilla robot. Shiny black shoes appear at his feet. The camera, using the boy’s perspective, tilts up to the body’s full height to reveal a towering MacArthur-like officer in sunglasses. The man asks for Steve Martin, the boy’s grandfather. The same tilt and perspective had been used in the previous scene to reveal (for the first time in the film) Godzilla to an unsuspecting worker at the nuclear reactor. The contrast inverts General Douglas MacArthur’s description of Japan as a twelve-year-old boy (above which he towered), and implicates the American audience in the current nuclear crisis: the boy returns to play, smashing Godzilla into other plastic weapons, himself mimicking the American and Soviet military actions within the film and in real life. The scene implies that American popular culture—in its “escapism”—underscores the military-industrial complex, creating a plastic/video replica in which nuclear war is quite thinkable.

Unfortunately, Godzilla (horror) films are not perceived historically, but aesthetically according to Hollywood technical standards. These films received critical and popular attention in the United States in the fifties and early sixties, when they contained state-of-the-art special effects.³¹ But by the eighties, these films were considered to have fallen behind in a special effects race similar to the nuclear arms race. *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1986* provides the most concise example of this view in its review of *Godzilla 1985*: “This upgrading of the Godzilla saga does not improve on the original 1956 film, despite thirty years of progress in special-effects technology.”³² This in itself seems to be a mechanism of repression that assures we will miss the point when *Them!* is U.S. The evaluation according to Hollywood standards de-historicizes the text, assuring an ethno-centric reading. Likewise, in film criticism the concept of the repressed-returned-as-Other allows us to examine the projection of ourselves onto another’s existence. In doing so, we avoid the other culture. Finally, because we are unable to acknowledge ourselves as the Other in another culture’s text, we can only colonize the other’s text.

Most Godzilla films end with the monster(s) swimming out to sea. The scenes are almost always melancholic, filled with restrained music and close-ups of pensive faces. Rather than celebrate the monster's retreat, the films reveal the narrative "resolution" to be incomplete. They acknowledge that necessary confrontation has been avoided within the narrative, and that pensiveness outside the narrative is needed to understand what the monster's return means. The end also indicates a prescience of the monster's (re)turn, or worse. After all, the nuclear threat the monster signifies never leaves; it is always here. What returns then is narrativity itself, the act of resolving contradictions by retextualizing them into one polysemous figure and "killing" it. The films, however, deconstruct themselves in an attempt to link the "thinkable" monster to the "unthinkable" nuclear environment. In this sense, the films are aimed not at resolving an absent cause, but providing a reinterpretation (or retextualization) of the past that allows Japan to examine repressed anxieties within a historical context. The monster surfaces only when—as in the case of rapid postwar industrialization and the new cold war—the lessons of the past are overlooked in writing the future.

Notes

1. James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 259, 320. Most monster anthologies either ignore the Godzilla films or use them as a half-page foil to other, "better" films. Donald Richie does much the same in his books on Japanese film. For critical works that consider Godzilla films, see Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1977), 68–74; and Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978): 209–25. For perhaps the only monster anthology with an extended treatment of Godzilla films, see Donald Glut, "Godzilla, the New King," *Classic Movie Monsters* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 374–412.
2. Noel Carroll, "Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings," *Film Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1981): 17.
3. Carroll, "Nightmare and the Horror Film," 16; Derek Hill noted the correlation between the horror film and "hard times" as early as 1958: "Every horror film cycle has coincided with economic depression or war." Hill concluded: "Now we have the biggest, ugliest threat of them all, and a bigger, uglier horror boom than ever before." He referred of course to the newly arrived situation of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and the coinciding popularity of the numerous American, Japanese, and British movies about radioactive insects, dinosaurs, and humans. (Derek Hill, "The Face of Horror," *Sight and Sound* 28 [Winter 1958–59]: 6–11.)
4. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 199.
5. Wood, "American Horror Film," 201; and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 79–83. Wood and Jameson argue that the text can nonetheless contain "progressive" or "utopian" elements.
6. Wood, "American Horror Film," 199; and James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 23–24.
7. Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs* (New York: New American Library, 1983), xii–xiii.

8. Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies! American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties: 1950-1957* (London: McFarland, 1982), i, 276.
9. For representative reviews, see Bosley Crowther, "Film Reviews," *New York Times*, 28 April 1956, sec. C, 11; "Movies," *Newsweek*, 14 May 1956, 126; and Gilb., "Film Reviews," *Variety*, 25 April 1956, 6.
10. Warren, *Keep Watching*, 276. The film's poster stated something to the effect that Godzilla "makes King Kong look like a chimpanzee."
11. Claude Ollier, "A King in New York," in *Focus on the Horror Film*, ed. Roy G. Huss and T. J. Ross (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 110-20.
12. Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 41.
13. Wood, "American Horror Film," 205.
14. Peter Pringle and James Spigelman, *The Nuclear Barons* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 245.
15. Denmark, Great Britain, and America also produced radioactive-dinosaur films between 1953 and 1962—that is, between the first H-bomb tests and the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Inoshira Honda directed *Godzilla* and almost all sequels. In a recent interview he stated the importance of *Godzilla* as a political statement. (*Our World*, ABC News, 6 Nov. 1986)
16. Edgar M. Bottome, *The Balance of Terror* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 5-6.
17. Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 111.
18. Wood, "American Horror Film," 216.
19. Mothra is sometimes referred to as "the Thing" in American releases. This impersonal name, however, is the result of Hollywood reediting obviously aimed at making Mothra "Other" enough to appeal to American audiences. Thus, Mothra might have been renamed "the Thing" in order to capitalize on *The Thing (from Another World)* (1951). Mothra did not appear in the film's American advertising, which instead asked "What is it . . . how much terror can you stand?" (Glut, *Classic Movie Monsters*, 386; emphasis added)
20. Takao Suzuki, *Words in Context: A Japanese Perspective on Language and Culture* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984).
21. Suzuki, *Words in Context*, 116-24; Wood, "American Horror Film," 199.
22. Suzuki, *Words in Context*, 167.
23. *Ibid.*, 169.
24. Charles Derry argues that these films create a Japanese popular culture mythology that "redefines the atomic bombs in terms of overt animalistic, natural instincts rather than in terms of some intellectual 'humanity'" (Derry, *Dark Dreams*, 69-70). As I will discuss, however, the films actually conflate civilization and nature in order to foreground a more immediate nuclear history. Thus the mythology serves primarily to enculturate the bomb.
25. The dinosaur symbolizes nuclear annihilation (extinction) and the uncontrollable power in a nuclear explosion. The dinosaur's small brain and huge size implies that neither reason nor force can "resolve" its return. On the other hand, the dinosaur as merchandise has become increasingly popular, especially among women and children, those denied power.
26. I do not go into the full implications of the monsters' sex because it is not known whether Godzilla is actually male or female. See Glut, *Classic Movie Monsters*, 391. I refer to Godzilla as "he" only because most films do so. That Mothra and Godzilla reproduce does not pose the problems seen in American cold war films in which "promiscuous, undifferentiated, vegetable reproduction threatens family bonds" with female-engendered mass society. (Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism,

- Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations* 6 [Spring 1984]: 26–27.) But I cannot say what the monsters' sex does say about Japanese society.
27. For example, *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster* (1971).
 28. The films—now dealing more and more with Japanese children—were, as a consequence, marketed in the United States as “kiddie flicks.” Since the early seventies, these movies have been shown primarily on UHF channels on weekend mornings and afternoons. The basic framework the films establish may explain why these films have been popular among younger viewers. The monster can be seen to symbolize the viewer-child’s conscious and unconscious antisocial impulses, which are simultaneously acted out in grand spectacle while being redirected toward the good of society by the filmic-child with whom the viewer identifies. The films resolve or alleviate the contradictions inherent in childhood and puberty. Thus *Godzilla* joins the ranks of the Teenage Werewolf and other archetypal monsters in expressing anxieties about the uncontrollable changes of puberty. As such, its political message seems to be lost in America.
 29. August is a pivotal month in nuclear history: in August 1949, the Soviets exploded their first nuclear bomb, prompting the United States and Western Europe to form NATO.
 30. The boat’s name, *Yahada Maru*, sounds similar to *Fukuryû Maru* (or *Lucky Dragon*).
 31. James Morgan, “In Brief,” *Sight and Sound* 26 (Winter 1956–57): 154; Gilb., “Film Reviews”; and Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” 213.
 32. Frank N. Magill, ed. *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1986: A Survey of the Films of 1985* (Pasadena: Salem Press, 1986), 444.