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### Monster and Memory:

#### Godzilla and the Unearthing of Grief in the Wake of Nuclear Disaster

Good art does not have to be beautiful art. In fact, some of the most powerful artworks are grotesque in appearance, hiding their true power in the ability to sublimate grief. Conversely, Sigmund Freud theorized a phenomenon known as a “screen memory.” According to Freud, a screen memory is a sublimation that acts as a stand-in for an event that is too traumatizing to be faced directly, stating “[Screen memories] owe their existence to a process of displacement: they are substitutes in (mnemic) reproduction, for other impressions which are really significant” (Freud 1). In this regard, screen memories, which Freud theorized as a *displacement* of a truly important event, can be a powerful form of catharsis when employed artistically. By referencing the repressed event, the sublimation of art can allow for collective grief and subsequent catharsis to surface. The artist’s chosen medium acts as the “screen” that filters trauma into something more manageable, creating a space of exchange and dialogue between creator and viewer.

This artistic use of the screen memory characterized Honda Ishirō’s film *Godzilla* (1954). The movie not only acts as a condemnation of nuclear weapons, but also uses the monster Godzilla as a screen memory. Yet relative to the geopolitical context in which the film was released, the monster, I argue, served as a tool of mourning to help make sense of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the aftermath of nuclear fallout. As such, the monster Godzilla is not merely a monster that gets awakened by H-bomb testings, it is also an

unfathomable, terrifying creature that appears seemingly out of nowhere and levels an entire city in seconds, much like an atomic bomb. However, *Godzilla* functions not only as a proxy for the atomic bomb or a sublimation that cloaks the history of U.S. atomic violence on Japanese citizens, but also as a tool for catharsis that *allows* for grief, pain, and outrage to surface, as well as fosters processing and potentially even healing.

In this regard, the significance of *Godzilla* cannot be understood without the context of nuclear history. The film was released in 1954, just two short years after the formal U.S. occupation of Japan ended. During this occupation, the Japanese people were heavily censored and the stories of the *hibakusha*, or survivors of the atomic blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were virtually muted. It is in the context of that silent suffering that a monster like *Godzilla*, as a sublimation, was born. It is also significant to note that 1954 was also the year of the Lucky Dragon incident, where 23 crew members of a Japanese tuna fishing boat, along with their tuna supply, became irradiated as a result of the United States conducted nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. More specifically, it was the result of the hydrogen bomb, Castle Bravo, which was dropped on March 1, 1954 in Bikini Atoll. Castle Bravo was approximately one-thousand times more powerful than Little Boy, the bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima, making the contamination of the Lucky Dragon a horrific reproduction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the postwar Japanese nation. Given such, the timing of the release of *Godzilla* hardly seems accidental.

With that understanding, we begin to see the imperative of *Godzilla* beyond acting as a condemnation or warning, but as a plea for a nation's pain to be seen, heard, and validated in the midst of a global nuclear frenzy. The film begins with a confused tension, people huddled into

what appears to be a police station demanding answers about boats that have been destroyed in what appears to have been a freak accident. After finding out there are survivors, an unidentified man states, “Thank goodness three survived. They’ll help us figure out what’s caused this.” (7:14 min., *Godzilla* 1954). This question moves beyond that moment as an isolated scene and lays the foundation for *Godzilla* to act as a methodical way to furnish a path to reconciliation; for Japan to ask “why did this happen to us?” and “how?” It begins to offer a means of working through these questions and moving forward.

In this confusion and questioning, we meet Godzilla for the first time roughly thirteen minutes into the film as a powerful yet faceless form. He ravages through the tiny fishing village of Odo with all the elemental rage of an unyielding storm. The next day, the villagers are left to deal with the ruin of their homes without a definitive, understandable cause to speak of. The choice to show the destruction of Godzilla’s path without showing the monster itself speaks to the lack of context for the atomic bombs. It shows obliteration and loss amidst confusion and pain. Seeking to make sense of what was behind the sheer devastation, one of the villagers states, “It was hard to see in the dark, but it was very much alive” (15:15 min., *Godzilla* 1954). These words serve as an interpretive lens for the viewer, almost as if to say that even if we do not know its name or see its shape, we know its vitality from the devastation it leaves behind.

When the anthropologist Professor Yamane and his crew arrive in Odo, they discover that the footsteps Godzilla left behind in the village are radioactive. The destruction of Godzilla corresponds not just to the immediate destruction of destroyed buildings, but to the lingering aftermath, even after clean-up. He has marked the earth, leaving the very soil that the villagers inhabit poisonous. This is radioactive fallout that leaves uncertain the promise of a future to the

people of Odo. As with the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki who were besieged with worry about the inhabitability of these radiation-blasted cities, questions about the sustainability of the Odo islanders' land and life remain, and they are left to grapple with how to move forward.

In the midst of the professor's dawning realization that the source of the destruction is radioactive, the characters and the audience catch a glimpse of Godzilla for the first time roughly 21 minutes into the film. At first, someone shouts, "It's Godzilla!" (*Godzilla* 1954), before the monster comes into view, and everyone begins to flee. When we finally do get to see the monster, we see just his head peering over the side of a mountain, a comparison that speaks to the size of the creature and its ability to overwhelm ordinary human spaces. This makes ridiculous the fact that the characters were trying to outrun Godzilla. It becomes rapidly clear that this monster is not something the villagers could have outrun, even if they saw it coming. The defenselessness of the Odo islanders in this scene has as a historical parallel the vulnerability of the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the late days of World War II. Even before the name Enola Gay was printed on the side of the plane that transported Little Boy, Hiroshima had its destiny laid out for it by the U.S. military. Similarly, once Godzilla moved to descend upon Odo, even before its irradiated footprints contaminated its shores, the village was marked. A sense of helplessness falls over both the viewers and the characters.

What's remarkable about the following scene, when Professor Yamane reports back to officials in Tokyo, is the way the image of Godzilla is captured and shown. In order to illustrate the danger, he presents a photograph of the scene where Godzilla peers its head over the mountain. When it is shown as an image, however, the still-shot allows for another telling detail to surface. Godzilla's head over the mountain range looks like the atomic mushroom cloud.

There is multi-tiered significance here. First, what is commonly understood about *hibakusha* art is that it does not direct blame or point fingers. That narrative is fundamentally challenged here because the mushroom cloud is predominantly a western, or American, sublimation of the atomic bomb. By contrast, the Japanese refer to the blast as *pikadon*, or “flash boom,” having in the first instance no concept of an *outside* experience of the atomic bomb. This shot of Godzilla’s head in mushroom-cloud form arguably directs blame, as it reflects the consequences of the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan back onto American viewers of Honda’s film via our own perspective.

Second, in assigning that blame, the film indicts the United States, which otherwise goes overtly unmentioned, implying that not only did you create this monster, but also you did this to us; you destroyed us. Before this point, the film allowed for the collecting of surface tension. This shot erupts this tension, allowing for the first instance of grief and catharsis to ripple outward.

The tension reels itself back in order to show the matter-of-factness of trauma that characterizes daily life in the wake of the atomic bombings. A man and a woman are talking on the train, discussing Godzilla with a slightly disconcerting unceremonious tone. She says, “This is awful. Atomic tuna, radioactive fallout, and now this Godzilla to top it off” (28:20 *Godzilla* 1954). There is resignation here when the woman further reveals, “I barely escaped the atomic bomb in Nagasaki and now this” (*Godzilla* 1954). This disclosure is deeply important, as it illustrates how people have been forced to continue their lives, same as it ever was, after inconceivable loss, maintaining their routine of riding the train to work even as nuclear fallout continues ravaging the land, water, and food supply--all things vital to human survival.

However, this tension begins to erupt once again as we see Godzilla reappears with a vengeance as monster rising with almost incandescent rage from the ocean, tearing down with

ease the electrical wiring constructed to stop it in its path (45:00 min. *Godzilla* 1954). As people flee, Godzilla destroys everything in its sight, without an ounce of sentimentality. We see people cowering, hiding from the monster (47:07 min. *Godzilla* 1954). The looks on their faces read as scared, devastated, but defenseless and helpless to do anything to stop the destruction. The volleys from machine guns fall against Godzilla's skin in vain, with the inconsequence of bugs dying against a windshield.

Honda and his audience are engaged in an unspoken dialogue once again as Godzilla breathes radioactive fire onto everything within his sight, and the scenes that unfold are ones that would have resonated as all too familiar for Japanese audiences. Having furiously decimated everything in Tokyo, Godzilla stands as a silhouette against a cityscape burning with radioactive fire (59:00 min. *Godzilla* 1954). When the camera pans out again, we see the destruction in Godzilla's wake as poignantly similar to the leveled landscapes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the aftermath of the atomic bombs. We see a heartbreaking moment where the suffering of those left behind after the bombs were exploded are given a platform: the shot pans to a nameless woman, cuddling her three children and with resolute tears saying, "We'll be where Daddy is soon" (*Godzilla* 1954). Grief and resignation befalls on her face. These scenes of destruction end with a news broadcaster announcing, "This really is the end. Farewell, ladies and gentlemen!" (*Godzilla* 1954) to an invisible audience. This moment offers a visible and formal moment of historical reckoning denied to the people blindsided, and subsequently killed immediately, when the bombs exploded. In all of these moments, we feel the palpable pain of numerous nameless characters.

If the Japanese monster films to follow and their American equivalents were rarely, if ever, celebrated for their emotional complexity, Honda's film, which popularized the *kaiju* genre, notably dilates spaces of human pain. Grief fully surfaces as the film moves into a hospital scene following Godzilla's rampage. Dead and injured bodies litter the frame as a somber silence eclipses any speech. A little girl stares at her mother's body in traumatized silence, eventually catapulting her tiny body into cries of inconsolable grief as her mother's lifeless body is carried away (1:10:00 min. *Godzilla* 1954). The pain has overcome her small frame so much so that she barely even notices that Emiko has taken her in her arms, seemingly crying into a comfortless void, unsure that she will ever feel safe again.

While the scene with the little girl is inarguably a moment of grief surfacing as a way to process the pain of the atomic bombs, Peter Wynn Kirby notes the difference in national reception between the Japanese and U.S. responses to the film (and its bowdlerized American version) in his article "Japan's Long Nuclear Disaster film": "Far from the heavily edited and jingoistic, shoot'em-up, stomp'em-down flick that moviegoers saw in the United States, Japanese audiences reportedly watched 'Gojira' in somber silence, broken by periodic weeping." This comparison not only evidences that Japanese audiences understood the film as a way to process, grieve, and heal from nuclear disasters--gaining long-awaited validity in a public sphere--but also highlights the obliviousness of Americans. The film thus speaks to American ignorance about their country's own destructive global politics. American audiences lacked the foundational understanding that Godzilla, peering over the hill in the form of a mushroom cloud, is a critique of the dominant U.S. perspective. Arguably even today, Americans have never stopped to think what nuclear disaster looks like *from within* the bomb's target range. There is no

sense of, or curiosity about, *pikadon* in the American consciousness. In this way, *Godzilla* is not just a platform for Japanese people to feel a collective catharsis through the processing of grief or to condemn postwar U.S. nuclear technology, but also a blatant critique of the violence of American empire that Americans are too solipsistic to understand. In all, *Godzilla* employs and weaponizes the one technology that America does not possess: subtlety.



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