

Why Godzilla? The Factors for Global Fame of *Tokusatsu* Giant Monsters

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss what kind of factors that possibly make Godzilla, a tokusatsu giant monster, so famous among the global cinematic scope. By adopting the narrative analysis of qualitative approach, this paper suggests that there are four socio, political, historical and biological factors that promote Godzilla's global fandom: Nuclear War Fearsome, National Identity, Societal Development and Dinosaur Characteristic. For Godzilla being originally a monster born out of nuclear explosion, its destruction force allows audience to experience the terror of nuclear attack or other massive natural disaster that they would rather not experience ever in real life; Godzilla's flexible cinematic characteristic enables various personal or collective ideologies to be attached to, including the national identity Japan sought after WWII and the later economic booming, environmental pollution, Cold War conflict and generation anxiety of societies. The dinosaur figure of Godzilla inspires people's imagination toward the ancient powerful creature which nobody has ever witnessed, and adds further entertainment elements to it. All in all, the fandom of Godzilla could be extended through those four general-recognized factors, along with the globalized trend worldwide, making Godzilla- the fire-breathing monster a global "mon-star".

Keywords: Godzilla, Culture, Tokusatsu, Globalization, Fandom, Movies

1. Introduction

When it comes to giant monsters, one may think of a giant reptile creature that swings its tail and ruins the city into debris, and maybe, breathes fire along its path. The 1925 silent film “*The Lost World*” had a Brontosaurus brought to and crashed London, and the 1953 movie “*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*” with a hibernated prehistoric reptile creature *Rhedosaurus* woken by nuclear bomb test then tumbled New York City. The 1933 “*King Kong*” though the big mammal gorilla was the main feature, Kong battled a T-rex dinosaur on the remote Skull Island as one of the climactic scenes of the film. All in all, perhaps it is Godzilla that first comes to people’s minds when imagining the “city under giant monster attack” scene.

Godzilla first appeared in Japanese cinemas in the 1954 Japanese movie “*Gojira*” (in original Japanese term, ゴジラ), which was the Japanese pronunciation of the monster’s name, and later spawned 28 sequels/remakes and three American Hollywood’s remakes as of December, 2016. Being the longest continuously running movie franchise that recognized by Guinness World Records¹ and the only “monster star” that ever obtained the star medal on Hollywood Walk of Fame, Godzilla has the worldwide fandom that almost find no significant match at its cinematic body size. The recent box office success of Hollywood remake in 2014 and Japan’s Toho Studios’ reboot in 2016, along with guaranteed sequels/follow-ups for both², all are indicating this more than 60-year-old movie icon still has enough fuel to light the fire to attract fans or ordinary people.

More interesting is that Godzilla, a giant monster of the *tokusatsu* genre films- meaning those Japanese live-action films or TV series featuring rather heavy use of special effects- was the one of the top three most recognizable Japanese characters only after Emperor *Hirohito* and Bruce Lee (obviously a misunderstanding since he was a Chinese-descendant Hong Kong movie actor) in a poll conducted by New York Times/CBS News in 1985. (Tsutusi, 2004) For 1980s was a time period which the Internet had not been widely utilized yet, it was quite astonishing for an Eastern Asian cinematic figure to be widely recognized by Western general population by then. Furthermore, according to Głownia (2013), during the times of 1950s and 1960s, an American had a statistically greater chance to encounter Godzilla films than to see one of *Akira Kurosawa*’s samurai dramas even though the latter was considered to be more award and artistic-claimed.

These observations trigger the motivation of this paper to investigate what kind of factors that make Godzilla’s broad fame and fandom at the global cinematic scope. The literature review would be conducted first to take a brief overview of the development of Godzilla’s movie progress. Then the research methods would be introduced along with the suggested findings and conclusion to be presented one after another.

¹ As cited in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godzilla_\(franchise\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godzilla_(franchise)).

² For American version of Godzilla, which is “*Godzilla*” (2014), its sequel “*Godzilla: King of the Monsters*” is scheduled to be released on March 22, 2019; while in November, 2017, Japanese version of Godzilla- “*Godzilla: Monster Planet*” would be released, following a possible trilogy series. For any updates, please check <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3741700/> and http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5979874/?ref=nm_sr_8.

2. Literature Review

Godzilla, a fire-breathing atomic giant monster, was described as a mutated creature created by nuclear explosion in the 1954 original film. The never-seen-before monster terrified Japanese audience and resulted in considerably huge box office success. The 1954 Godzilla movie was described as the reification of a series of societal or political structural changing of the post-war (post-World War II, post-WWII) Japan which was under Allied Force occupation. (Hamilton, 2014) Later the film was released in United States with the alternative title “Godzilla: King of the Monsters!” in 1956 which the movie plot was heavily re-edited and some scenes featuring American actors were added. In Yang and Isnadi (2017), the additional American characters were added for the partial purpose to make connection between American audiences and the movie because American mass public at the early times after the WWII put quite little attention to East Asia. However, in Ryfle (1998), it stated that the American distributors simply claimed that the re-editing of the 1954 original served nothing but to make audiences go to see the film by “giving it an American point of view” of the story.

Further, the 1962 “*King Kong vs. Godzilla*” broadened even greater audience base for Godzilla film series. And in the 1960s, the economic booming of Japan allowed Godzilla films to be more productive and various monster sidekicks or enemies featuring different themes from environmental pollution derived from industrial development to pure entertainment purposes and so on appeared. All this can imply the initial potential of entertainment while delivering mutual political and cultural context perspective which Godzilla films may be capable of.

The end of WWII is the dawn of the Cold War era, a period the fear of global nuclear war outbreak threats haunted nations worldwide. In Napier (1993), the “secure horror” was presented; it is a concept that people can experience the horrible devastated disaster or other terrifying stuff without really being in such disasters in person. Godzilla was the materialized symbol of nuclear weapon attack, what’s unique is that Japan is the only nation in the globe so far that truly got hit by atomic bombs twice. Therefore, like Napier (2006) mentioned, the Godzilla movies concerning the abuse of nuclear power can serve as the way “as a form of cultural therapy” which allows the defeated Japanese to get over with the physical-mental trauma of homeland bombardment during WWII. Moreover, as Reischauer (1980) indicated that “*the Japanese have a strong consciousness of history. ... They will delve a thousand years and more into their past in analyzing their contemporary traits,*” Yang and Isnadi (2017) considered this interpretation as that Japanese Godzilla movies series repeatedly tended to examine or dig into the interaction of atomic power abuse as well as the human-nature relationship.

3. Methods

In this paper, the narrative analysis is adopted to explore the context of the icon of Godzilla via film media and other related materials. The narrative analysis for cultural studies tends to be social criticism, which often

appears in media works that using some metaphors to expose and delineate sources of social injustice and such works often need to be placed within the historical context that produced them.³From the previous literature review, one may get the basic understanding that Godzilla has a strong connection between its origin and WWII bombing in Japan as well as the nuclear-military race during the Cold War era.

In other terms, Godzilla films of the early age could put considerable critics, reflection or even condemnation upon the wartime bombing or nuclear misuse, which embodied within the materialized body of Godzilla; and through the more than half a century of the series development, so could it have various argument toward multiple social phenomenon and progress until recent time. Therefore, the narrative analysis is chosen to be the major research method of this paper.

4. Results

From observing the Godzilla films and related literature, this paper suggests that of so many multiple factors for the global fame of Godzilla- the *tokusatsu* giant monster can be categorized into four sets of major factors as shown and discussed below:

4.1 Nuclear War Fearsome

As mentioned above and observed, Godzilla was initially depicted as the mutated giant monster created by nuclear explosion. In the historical background, Japan during the final stage of WWII endured countless bombardment and most of all, the two atomic bombs that hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, causing massive destruction and civilian death in both cities. The aftermath including radiation pollution on environment and disease on *hibakusha* (the survived victims of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) further deeply carved the scars of war trauma that can hardly be completely removed. The first Godzilla movie was released at the time less than a decade after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tragedy, the social censorship on discussing *hibakusha* or related issues loudly was still at its heyday.

The public fearsome toward nuclear power later burst as the notoriously famous “Luck Dragon Five Incident” (*Daigo Fukuryū Maru Jiken*) surfaced to the public which the fishermen crew of a Japanese tuna fishing boat got contaminated by nuclear radiation dust produced by a hydrogen bomb test conducted by U.S. military on March 1, 1954. The Japanese citizens became horrified by the polluted fish catch as the fishermen crew got horrible disease such as leukemia, triggering the recession of national fishery business and further political dispute between Japan and United States government.

Such social big event, along with the censorship on *hibakusha* issues, Godzilla became an exit for emotional anxieties, it could be observed that the original Godzilla had several features that represented *hibakusha*, like Miyamoto (2016) mentioned, the rough and bumpy dark skin of Godzilla served as a hidden symbol of the burnt scars and keloids of *hibakusha*. Moreover, Miyamoto (2016) cleverly pointed that

³The detailed ideas can be found in <https://www.reference.com/world-view/examples-social-criticism-a5d22ec358aa679b>.

Godzilla's inhuman outlook and destructive behaviors could avoid the direct linkage to the images of *hibakusha* for the audience which could be heavily criticized and battered verbally in Japanese society even in 1970s⁴.

And to explore deeper, Godzilla could also be the reflection of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) that occupied and basically ruled Japan at the early times of post- WWII era; Godzilla's formidable strength that totally defied the force of Japanese military and human efforts, no conventional weapons did significant damage to Godzilla, and eventually people were left with no options but watching Godzilla came to destroy Tokyo and left into the ocean in futile, which was the basic interpretation of the overwhelming military powers of the Allied from the Japanese in 1940s and 1950s. More cinematic images like Godzilla "intentionally" surpassed the Royal Palace where the Japanese Emperor and the family resided could be easily expressed as the natural respect to the Emperor from Japanese tradition as well as the decision of SCAP Leader- General Douglas MacArthur for not forcing Emperor Hirohito to the trial of International Military Tribunal for the Far East when investigating Japan's WWII crimes.

Just to name a few like the above, one may discover the complicated ideological and cultural context embodied in the original Godzilla. For the 1956 American release, though being heavily re-edited, the indestructible Godzilla surprised American audiences as well. And the defeat of Godzilla by using an even more powerful secret unknown weapon can be referred as the anxious debate of the progress of technology that created such fearful monster (nuclear power), though being overcome by a more advanced technology (something more powerful than nuclear weapon), the paradoxical situation for human to pursuit more advanced technology progress (especially for military purpose) would easily lead to "security dilemma" proposed by international relation theories. Since America was the leader of the Western Bloc during the Cold War era, the pressure and social anxiety about the backfire or attack from nuclear power or even stronger unknown weapon just almost perfectly portrayed by the original Godzilla; which was seldom illustrated in the similar monster movies with nuclear power abuse themes and could further promote the popularity in the globe.

4.2 National Identity

From 1945 until 1952, Japan was under the occupation and ruling of SCAP. To speak in a literal aspect, no sovereignty was available for Japan itself; it may be significant since the modern Constitution of Japan was written by a group of *gaijin* (any individual that is non-Japanese considering his/her bloodline origin). It is interesting to observe that Japan during WWII and occupation period was viewed by the Western communities as "a premature 12-year-old boy" and shall be guided by "western adults" to help such boy growing on the correct path (Shibusawa, 2010).

⁴ For detailed information, please refer to the history of "*HibakuSeijin*" (被爆星人-スペル星人).

As discussed previously, the original Godzilla partially represented the unstoppable forces from Allied forces, especially the U.S. troops, like Hamilton (2000) stated that “*Godzilla represented America in both the scope of power that the beast possessed, and the damage that it inflicted on the country (Japan).*” The long-time love-hate relations between Japan and United States often give the latter more benefits on political or economic issues since Japan got devastated defeat from America and its national structure got massive reformation ever since. As a country with more than a thousand years of imperial traditions of East Asia, the sudden defeat and transition of the nation could lead to many uncertainties since it was indicated previously that Japanese people usually have a strong consciousness of history.

Godzilla often destroys cities in the movies, and people have to come up with various ideas to eliminate or cast such monster away, from “mecha” (mechanic type) versions of Godzilla that equal at the size (such as “*Godzilla vs. Mecha Godzilla*” (1993) and “*Godzilla X Mecha Godzilla*” (2002)) to imaginary military weapon producing black holes to suck Godzilla away (“*Godzilla X Megaguirus: The G Extermination Strategy*” (2000)). But often, people at the end of movies realize that Godzilla is the “established existence” in nature that human can do little to change such facts, if further expressing, Japan after WWII had been confronted by the overwhelming power which it could do nothing to reject such power - the American-led forces that was able to do almost anything it favors to the nation. Resistance had been made (such as the protests against the United States-Japan Security Treaty in 1960), yet little had been achieved. In “*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah*” (1991), Japan is depicted as a powerful country in the 23rd century that dominates the globe, triggering jealous non-Japanese to create the three-headed dragon-like monster, King Ghidorah, for reducing Japan’s global influence and “putting Japan back under check”. From actual protest to cinematic “emotional expression” concerning Japan’s failure in the way of direct confrontation against societal transition issued by foreigners⁵, the Japanese would then turn to other approach to live with such “unchangeable existence” (at least from Japan’s perspective) and try to find the suitable place in modern world. In the latest Godzilla movies “*Godzilla Resurgence*” (2016), the Japanese is forced to continue their daily lives with Godzilla since it is indestructible and only could be temporarily frozen. Pretty much reflecting the rather awkward position of Japan in the real life international relations; and as the imbalanced political interaction with western countries of Japan continues, Japanese can only coexist with the power that prevents it from becoming a country with full sovereignty until it comes up with some practical solutions. And Godzilla series can be referred as the rather “surreal” method for Japanese to carry on while continuously seeking their national identity.

4.3 Societal Development

The original Godzilla had its perfect timing when it was premiered, and for the world to be gradually recovered from the WWII destruction, country development- especially economic aspects, became more

⁵ The director of “*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah*” (1991) had expressed that he intended to “picture the identity of Japanese people”, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4CCF4tPRUY> for details.

important. The miraculous economic recovery of Japan since 1960s gradually regained Japanese's confidence while facing certain tremendous modernization, the large-scale urban renovations of Tokyo in 1964 in order to perfectly host the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, a national development progress that may affect some of the traditional life styles.

Like previously discussed, the "premature 12-year-old" then grew up to be mature enough to enter the communities of western adults, hosting an Olympics Games event was a way of "Coming-of-age Ceremony" for such East Asian country, and meant that Japan had to live with the way of life of adult mature countries. For hosting Olympics Games, the city of Tokyo had gone through multiple renovations, modern hotels, restaurants, mass transportation systems, entertainment facilities and other infrastructures were constructed and the atmosphere of capitalism got heavier, further challenging the traditional life styles. In "*Godzilla vs. The Thing*" (1964), an evil corporation attempted to exploit the giant egg of Mothra- a giant moth-shaped creature for entertainment purpose and confronted against the sacred convention the aboriginals made with Mothra. Godzilla soon emerged from the company's construction site and stated destroy of the city, somehow representing a warning about how the uncontrolled capitalist modernization (criticized to be led by greed as the movie depicted) would achieve- massive destruction on traditions and self-destruction toward the nation's foundation.

Such message did not fade away since the 1971 "*Godzilla vs. Smog Monster*" had Godzilla fight Hedora- a monster spawned from industrial pollution in the 1970s era which the massive environmental pollution was severe in Japanese domestic; and 1992 "*Godzilla vs. Mothra: The Battle for Earth*" featured a more direct and strong voice of protecting environment from corporation development. And besides environmental issues, the entertainment is of course most Godzilla movies provided. For acknowledging children audiences were the major source of moviegoers, Godzilla in the mid-1960s was transformed into a heroic metaphor that drove other evil enemy monsters away to protect Earth. Similarly, as Tsutusi (2004) pointed out, the American film industry was boosted after WWII and the moviegoers' age was getting younger, so films with potential attraction to teenagers or kids became popular. Godzilla movies in 1960s featured the beloved, kid-friendly giant monster equipped with superhero-tones of characteristic, which had managed to attract younger audiences with abundant of entertainment; "*King Kong vs. Godzilla*" (1962) or "*Son of Godzilla*" (1967) and "*Destroy All Monsters*" (1968) could provide the fitting examples for the entertainment aspects. Additionally, the suburbanization of city population pushed moviegoers visited local neighboring double-billed theaters or drive-ins and popularization of televisions in households allowed Godzilla films to be repeatedly displayed at lower cost to the audience, further fostering the fandom across the world.

To sum up the aforesaid, despite being the resemblance of nuclear terror at the beginning, Godzilla was precious to maintain the flexibility to include various perceptions and transformed into cinematic themes that did little awkward against the giant monster. Godzilla movie series then became the embodiment for multiple cultural or socio context to fit in and could be easily introduced to every corner in the world. Thus, the societal

development is one of the factors that trigger the global fame of Godzilla.

4.4 Dinosaur Characteristic

The last factor introduced by this paper is in the biological approach. Godzilla's nuclear characteristics could be easily observed not only from its shape- especially the head that representing a nuclear mushroom cloud- but also its reptile origins.

A year before the original Godzilla, the *Rhedosaurus* in "*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*" (1953) was a lizard-like four-legged monster accidentally woken by artic nuclear bombing test, the monster's rampage in New York City was a rare cinematic scene back then and of course became one of the classics. However, to the extent, the reptile-dinosaur appearance could contribute significant portion for attracting audiences. The *Rhedosaurus* or Godzilla were ancient prehistoric species woken or mutated by nuclear bomb, the prehistoric age where no human has ever witnessed provides imagination for film makers as well as audiences. The dinosaur species are the iconic creatures resembling the prehistoric times, the powerful impression of such giant ancient animals can produce greater appeal which the humanoid mammal monsters can hardly offer. The mammals are generally considered to be more intelligent than reptile, therefore the nuclear mutation origins for mammal or even humanoid creatures can be rather disturbing that may not be accepted widely by general public since the mutated mammals could be self-aware and suffer conscious pain. And the illustration of humanoid creatures may somewhat lead to possible racial dispute. Therefore, from the aggressive aspects of imagination of powerful dinosaur-like creatures to the passive perspectives of avoiding attracting negative response to films, the Dinosaur Characteristic factor allows Godzilla to pick multiple social contexts to portray without offending the audience at the significant level.

5. Conclusions

Dr. *Yamane*, portrayed by the late Japanese actor *Takashi Shimura* (1905–1982) had one famous quote in "*Godzilla*" (1954) as below:

"I can't believe that Godzilla was the only surviving member of its species... But if we continue conducting nuclear tests, it's possible that another Godzilla might appear somewhere in the world again."

Such apocalyptic message is not only realized in the later dozens of sequels in the series, but also appears in the growing population of Godzilla fandom worldwide. This paper has attempted to put initial effort on academically categorizing the complex factors to explain the fame and longevity of Godzilla series due to its existence in such a complicated, intertwined, globalized world.

This paper suggests that there are four socio, political, historical and biological factors that promote Godzilla's global fandom: Nuclear War Fearsome, National Identity, Societal Development and Dinosaur Characteristic. For Godzilla as originally a monster born out of nuclear explosion, its destruction force allows audience to experience the terror of nuclear attack or other massive natural disaster that they would rather not experience ever in real life; Godzilla's flexible cinematic characteristic enables various personal or collective ideologies or cultural context to be attached to, including the national identity that Japanese sought after WWII and the later economic booming, environmental pollution, Cold War conflict and generation anxiety of societies. Lastly, the dinosaur figure of Godzilla inspires people's imagination toward the ancient powerful creature which nobody has ever witnessed, and adds further entertainment elements to it.

In summary, throughout the past time of more than 60 years, Godzilla surely has gained considerable population of fandom worldwide, by understanding the generalized categories of factors that contributed to Godzilla- the *tokusatsu* giant monster- global fame, it could serve as the implication for creators of such genre to find certain approach to foster the popularity of their works and yet not at the expense of abandoning their creativity.

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