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Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film

by William M. Tsutsui

Includes Pedagogical/Classroom Resources

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Abstract

Godzilla, the star of thirty-five live-action films, may be Japan's most recognizable movie star and is now an icon of global popular culture. Going back to *Gojira* (1954), the somber, politically changed movie that launched the franchise, the giant irradiated monster famed for terrorizing Japan has been widely associated with the traumas of the atomic age: nuclear fear, Cold War anxieties, and the haunting nightmares of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But how can *Gojira* be used in the classroom to explore aspects of the Japanese experience beyond the legacies of the atomic bombs? This article suggests five approaches for framing the first Godzilla film that shed light on important aspects of Japanese history, folklore, culture, and film. In addition to deepening students' understanding of Japan and their appreciation of a familiar cinematic icon, these approaches to *Gojira* will also help them learn to read pop culture creations as primary sources offering valuable (and frequently surprising) insights on Japan.

William M. Tsutsui at Tōhō Studios, Tokyo.

This article provides a broad introduction to using Godzilla in the high school or college classroom. After discussing the value of Japanese giant monster films as rich and accessible pedagogical tools, it provides a concise introduction to the Godzilla franchise and its relevance to the study of Japan. The article then presents five strategies for leveraging student engagement with the film *Gojira* in class discussions and assignments:

- How does a giant monster movie help us understand Japan's unique nuclear traumas and fractured postwar history?
- How can a scene from *Gojira* shed light on the hidden histories of democracy, political conflict, and gender relations in early postwar Japan?

- Godzilla is widely believed to have been inspired by Japanese mythology and folklore. But is Godzilla a yōkai?
- There are unexpected similarities between *Gojira* and Noh, Japan's ancient theatrical form which prominently features monstrous characters. How can a creative writing assignment allow students to better appreciate both Godzilla and a notoriously stylized and challenging dramatic art?
- Film genres are categories used by critics and scholars to analyze and understand movies based on similarities in their narratives, themes, settings, and tones. Is there such a thing as a kaiju (giant monster) genre? If so, how were its conventions first established in *Gojira*?

The article is accompanied by detailed classroom resources—discussion questions, suggested readings, sample assignments, and supplemental background materials—for teachers to draw upon.

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Since 1954, when Godzilla first roared onto Japanese movie screens, the giant radioactive monster has become an icon in global popular culture. The star of **thirty-five live-action films made both in Japan and Hollywood**—arguably the longest continuous cinematic franchise in history—Godzilla has attracted a passionate fan following and come to symbolize Japan, nuclear anxiety, and the enduring charm of "creature features" for generations of moviegoers around the world. The King of the Monsters, as Godzilla was marketed when first introduced into American theaters, was a pioneer in the global diffusion of Japanese popular culture after World War II, breaking trail in international markets for forms like anime, manga, and video games. Over the decades, Godzilla has inspired tributes and parodies (from Blue Öyster Cult to *The Simpsons*), been the subject of countless internet memes and *New Yorker* cartoons and become part of the English language through the -zilla suffix. Today, with films appearing both from Tōhō Co. in Japan and in Legendary Pictures' Monsterverse multimedia franchise, Godzilla is more popular globally than ever before.

Godzilla atop the Hotel Gracery Shinjuku in Tokyo. Photo courtesy of Mohamed Jamil Latrach via Unsplash.

Until recently, the presumption that Japanese monster movies are lightweight commercial entertainment—pitched at children and notorious for their low production values, from actors in rubber suits to bad dubbing—has been widespread among film critics and scholars. Since 2004, however, when the first film in the series, the 1954 *Gojira*, was belatedly released internationally in its unedited, original form, a reappraisal of Godzilla has been underway. Not only has *Gojira* been hailed as a Cold-War-era classic of anti-nuclear cinema, but the Godzilla franchise, like so many aspects of Japanese popular culture, is now increasingly appreciated for the significant social and political themes it has tackled, as well as the insights it can provide on Japan's postwar experience and culture. Over the past few years, in particular, academic research on Godzilla and the other giant creatures of Japanese

cinema (known collectively as **kaiju)** has flourished. The King of the Monsters has even enjoyed some hard-won critical respect, with films from the franchise released in the highbrow Criterion Collection and *Godzilla Minus One* (2023) winning an Academy Award.

For me, growing up Japanese American in a small central Texas town, Godzilla was a childhood obsession and an unlikely ethnic hero. Perhaps inevitably, when I began teaching modern Japanese history at the college level in the mid-1990s, I was eager to introduce the film *Gojira* (a name created from the Japanese words for whale and gorilla, later rendered into English as Godzilla) into my undergraduate survey classes. Thirty years ago, there were few (if any) other scholars of Japan who used monster movies in their teaching, and I remember receiving a few raised eyebrows from skeptical colleagues in the field. Nonetheless, I felt confident that popular cinema like *Gojira* would prove an effective means for engaging American students with a wide range of significant issues in the history of postwar Japan: the unresolved legacies of the atomic bombs and Japan's defeat in World War II; the evolution of the U.S.-Japan relationship; environmental concerns; gender roles and anxieties; and shifting Japanese attitudes toward technology, remilitarization, and nationalism.

From my very first classroom screening of *Gojira*—back then a bootlegged VHS from Hong Kong with fractured subtitles—the reaction of students immediately affirmed my hunches about the value of integrating Godzilla into my teaching. Not only did monster movies provide a means for addressing important historical themes already on my syllabus, but they did so in a way that was appealing and almost always surprising to my students. Even today, when the academic relevance of pop culture is widely acknowledged, few people approach a Japanese monster movie expecting it to be a serious educational experience. Consequently, students who might tune out watching a sober historical documentary with scholarly talking heads are often delighted to discover that they have actually learned something from a Godzilla film. But sources like *Gojira* are more than just an entertaining hook for capturing the attention of unsuspecting undergraduates: the accessibility of Japanese creature features (like Miyazaki Hayao anime, Hello Kitty, or Pokémon Go) empowers students to engage with the material, participate actively, and gain confidence in historical interpretation. In my experience, those who might feel intimated challenging the pronouncements of an eminent professor in a documentary will readily offer their opinions and join debates over the meaning of a cinematic monster destroying Tokyo.

The Godzilla films, even more so than many other pop culture forms, invite audience and student engagement by being consistently (and sometimes exasperatingly) open-ended, provoking questions but providing little in the way of firm answers. Thus, fans of the franchise have long discussed and debated many fundamental issues about Godzilla—*What compels the monster to keep attacking Tokyo? What sex is the creature? Where did Godzilla's purported offspring come from?*—without any clear resolution from the movies themselves. Indeed, the refusal to provide closure on such questions is a conscious strategy on the part of the filmmakers at Tōhō. As the studio's president Matsuoka Hiroyasu has remarked, "We want to make Godzilla as mysterious as possible. That way, we . . . can give audiences room to imagine what Godzilla is doing [and] why Godzilla is doing it. So, mysteriousness may be what we believe is the secret of the popularity of Godzilla."[1]

I have found that the unanswered, and unanswerable, questions posed by Japanese monster movies can lead to productive classroom discussions, encouraging speculation, drawing students into the conversation, and sparking good-natured contention. With no wrong answers, students feel emboldened to share their thoughts and, in the process, they sharpen their skills in drawing upon historical evidence and shaping compelling arguments. Of course, not everyone approaches the "mysterious" Godzilla with cold analytical rigor: the films also allow students to express their creativity and use the King of the Monsters as a springboard for imaginative, original, and sometimes deeply personal responses.

In this article, I will provide a broad introduction to using Godzilla in the classroom. I will focus on *Gojira*: not only was it the first film in the series, but it is particularly rich as a primary source and is widely available online and on DVD. I will suggest how the King of the Monster's debut can be effective

in deepening students' understanding of Japan's unique nuclear traumas and fractured postwar history, the traditions and scholarship of Japan's folkloric monsters (*yōkai*), Japanese literary forms and aesthetics, and the concept of film genres. After starting with a brief overview of the Godzilla franchise, I will then present five specific strategies for integrating Godzilla into secondary and undergraduate coursework. For each, I provide detailed but open-ended pedagogical resources—discussion questions, suggested readings, sample assignments, and supplemental background materials—for instructors to draw upon. Although there are more ways to utilize Japanese monster movies as educational tools than I could possibly list (or even imagine), this article is a starting point for teaching Godzilla and exploring new approaches to mobilizing Japan's popular culture for classroom learning.

An Introduction to the Godzilla Franchise

In 1952, the Hollywood classic King Kong, originally made in 1933, was re-released around the world and was a smash hit, including in Japan. American studios were quick to capitalize, and the following year Warner Brothers came out with *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, a blockbuster about a dinosaur freed from arctic hibernation by a nuclear bomb test that goes on to attack New York City. Japanese moviemakers, never hesitant to learn from Hollywood's successes, soon began to think about creating their own creature feature. But there were more than just commercial motivations at work in the birth of Godzilla: the giant monster was very much ripped from the headlines and conditioned by atomic-age fears, superpower politics, and Japan's particular history of war and defeat. On March 1, 1954, a Japanese fishing boat called the Lucky Dragon No. 5 (*Dai-go Fukuryū Maru*) strayed into the U.S. nuclear testing zone near Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The crew were exposed to massive amounts of radiation in the Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb test, leading to the eventual death of one of the crewmen and the introduction of contaminated tuna to the Japanese market. This ignited media and public outcry in Japan, especially since the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 remained raw and unresolved memories.[2]

Godzilla was apparently the brainchild of Tōhō producer Tanaka Tomoyuki, who imagined the story of a reptilian survivor of the Jurassic Period that is rendered monstrous by American nuclear testing in the Pacific and proceeds to attack Tokyo. Tanaka recruited top talent for his picture since Godzilla was intended to be serious, politically charged fare for adult audiences: the scenario was drafted by noted science fiction author Kayama Shigeru and the film was directed by Honda Ishirō, a war veteran reputedly committed to its anti-nuclear message. *Gojira* was released on November 3, 1954, and despite lukewarm reviews in the Japanese press, performed strongly at the box office.

***Gojira* is a dark, thoughtful, and powerful film that made unavoidable painful topics and tensions that Japanese society had not thoroughly addressed in the 1950s.** During the American Occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952, the U.S. forces aggressively censored discussions of the atomic bombs in the media and film; even after the occupiers pulled out, many Japanese were hesitant to explore the traumas of war, the atomic attacks, and defeat. *Gojira* masterfully played upon the audience's fears of the mounting Cold War—it opens with clear references to the Lucky Dragon incident—and the lingering psychological and physical scars of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the fire-bombings of Japanese cities during World War II. Godzilla's deeply furrowed skin, for instance, is said to have been inspired by the keloid scars that afflicted the survivors of the atomic bombs in 1945. Many Japanese moviegoers at the time reportedly left theaters in tears. *Gojira* was cathartic and therapeutic for a nation still struggling to make sense of its recent history and an emerging geopolitical order in which Japan was marginal, weak, and vulnerable.

Godzilla, King of the Monsters! opened in the United States in 1956: it was a cleverly re-edited version of the Japanese original with the insertion of Raymond Burr as a voyeuristic American reporter who witnesses the destruction of Tokyo. This version was substantially altered from original Japanese film (some have called it "censored" or even "white-washed"), notably in that **all references to World War II, all mention of the atomic bombs, and anything that could be considered even vaguely critical of America were removed.** The fact that *Gojira* had to be sanitized for American and global audiences shows just how sharp-edged, politically potent, and compelling the Japanese original was.

The success of Godzilla domestically and overseas inspired Tōhō and other Japanese studios to produce a steady stream of kaiju movies using the imaginative (and inexpensive) special effects methods pioneered in *Gojira*. From 1962 to 1975, Tōhō released a Godzilla feature almost annually, invariably pitting the King of the Monsters against other giant creatures including Mothra, King Ghidorah, and Mechagodzilla. Many such science fiction films received subsidies from the Japanese government, which was eager to promote movie exports. Hollywood distributors played a major role in shaping the pictures for international audiences, dubbing and extensively editing them for release abroad.[3] This process of localization amplified trends already underway in the series. During the 1960s, the somber tone and message of *Gojira* soon disappeared: the movies became more cheerful and even comic, with increasingly far-fetched storylines. Godzilla was repositioned as a heroic defender of Japan rather than as a vengeful monster intent on destroying the country. The transformation of Godzilla reflected broad changes in Japanese society, as rapid economic growth made moviegoers more optimistic, increasingly affluent, and uninterested in seeing their nation ravaged by monsters. It also addressed the shifting demographics of movie audiences, as Japan experienced an exodus of adults from theaters after the introduction of television. The stereotype of Japanese monster movies as lighthearted, low-quality entertainment for children is an enduring relic of this time, when Godzilla offerings came to be associated in America with drive-in theaters, Saturday afternoon double features, and late-night television reruns.

Tōhō put Godzilla on an almost decade-long hiatus in 1975, as the series was suffering from tight studio budgets and dwindling box-office receipts. The monster returned to the screen in 1984, at least in part due to the activism of nostalgic Japanese fans, with Tanaka Tomoyuki once again at the helm as producer. *Godzilla* (1984) was an attempt to reset the franchise to the spirit of the original *Gojira*, with a serious message about the dangers of nuclear energy, inspired this time not so much by Hiroshima and the Lucky Dragon, but by still-fresh memories of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979 and by spiking superpower tensions around Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" initiative.[4] Remarkably, though, like *Gojira* thirty years before, American distributors thought the film too politically provocative for American audiences, and again did a heavy-handed edit on the Tōhō movie, even bringing back an aging Raymond Burr to reprise his role in *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* The subsequent twelve franchise films produced between 1989 and 2004 featured enhanced special effects, a parade of new and returning kaiju, and a renewed focus on adult audiences. While ticket sales and licensing revenue proved relatively strong in Japan, the movies attracted scant attention and only achieved very limited distribution in America and globally. The fiftieth anniversary feature, *Godzilla: Final Wars* in 2004, would prove to be the last made with the time-honored "suitmation" technology (using a costumed actor and miniature sets) and, after its disappointing global release, Tōhō paused the series once more.

Although several films broke the continuity of the franchise over its first half century, the characterization of Godzilla as radioactive and created from postwar nuclear testing was consistent throughout. Nevertheless, **few of the movies after *Gojira* revolved around the nuclear threat**: even in the earliest sequels, atomic-age anxieties became more of an afterthought rather than a central focus. That is not to say that the Godzilla films shied away from addressing larger issues facing Japanese society and the world. Indeed, over the decades, the series touched upon (and sometimes vigorously grappled with) timely topics including government corruption, the rise of Japan's consumer economy, the problem of industrial pollution, Japanese remilitarization, the delicate relationship between Tokyo and Washington, and even school bullying. Perhaps most famously, a psychedelic (and now much beloved) outlier in the franchise, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971), provided an imaginative and surprisingly compelling perspective on Japan's environmental crisis at the time.[5] So even though the theme of nuclear fear, which is now so closely associated with Godzilla in the popular imagination, was marginalized after *Gojira*, the Tōhō series remained topically engaged and is a rich resource for exploring the treatment of hot-button issues of politics, society, and the economy in postwar Japanese popular culture.

Tōhō was renowned for strictly protecting its rights to Godzilla but, in 1992, looking for a financial windfall, the King of the Monsters was licensed to TriStar Pictures in Hollywood. The resulting 1998 film, *Godzilla*, was directed by "master of disaster" Roland Emmerich who, with inspiration from *Jurassic Park*, reimagined the creature as a maternal velociraptor defending its clutch of eggs in New York City. Reflecting the longstanding American sensitivity to the monster's origins, the TriStar feature posited that Godzilla was created not by American H-bombs in the South Pacific but instead by French nuclear testing in Polynesia. *Godzilla* proved a critical dud and box-office disappointment, so it was more than a decade before Tōhō once again explored a Hollywood partnership. In 2014, however, Legendary Pictures' high-budget, high-concept Monsterverse franchise was launched with a new Godzilla reboot that returned the monster to a more traditional look and heroic characterization. In Legendary's complex cinematic universe, Godzilla's genesis narrative was again revised to ensure American blamelessness: the monster, we are told, was naturally occurring but rendered radioactive when the U.S. military attempted (unsuccessfully) to control it with nuclear weapons. The financial success of the Monsterverse *Godzilla* (2014), especially in international distribution, led to blockbuster sequels in 2019, 2021, and 2024, and has spawned a multimedia franchise now spanning films, television series, video games, comics, and books.

As the Legendary features were coming to dominate global multiplexes, Tōhō decided to capitalize on the rising popularity of Godzilla by relaunching its own production of monster movies. *Shin Godzilla* (2016), co-directed by celebrated anime veteran Anno Hideaki, used the monster to explore Japan's experience of the devastating 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, offering a scathing critique of the nation's ineffective ruling gerontocracy.[6] *Godzilla Minus One* (2023), set in the months immediately following Japan's defeat in World War II, also featured a vengeful, threatening monster and a politically charged message about contemporary Japanese society. Directed by Yamazaki Takashi, whose films have consistently attracted both large audiences and controversy, the movie enjoyed unprecedented success at the international box office and a sharply polarized response from critics and scholars.[7] Condemned by some as historical revisionism, a celebration of militarism, and fodder for Japanese ultranationalism, *Godzilla Minus One* is an imaginative, complex, and provocative rethinking of the monster in the context of divisive political, social, and cultural issues in Japan. Thus, in the wake of its seventieth anniversary, the Godzilla franchise appears healthier than ever, with Hollywood continuing to churn out polished mass-market, special-effects blockbusters while Tōhō seems to have found a creative and market niche with more thoughtful, challenging films in the spirit of the pathbreaking *Gojira*.

Although Godzilla has remained a giant, radioactive, bipedal saurian over the decades, the monster has proven remarkably malleable for filmmakers both in Japan and Hollywood. Godzilla has been a horror and a hero, a sinister avenger and a goofy guardian, a heavily freighted symbol of everything from nuclear apocalypse to natural disasters to the souls of Japanese soldiers killed in World War II. As one scholar has written, **the King of the Monsters is the "perfect floating, empty metaphor,"[8] a cinematic chameleon that is endlessly adaptable to changing audience expectations, film technologies, political contexts, social dynamics, and cultural norms.** As a fundamentally mysterious character—silent, self-contained, cryptic—to whom countless motivations and meanings may be plausibly ascribed, Godzilla has endured as an icon for over seven decades. As a result, the Godzilla franchise is a boon to educators as a valuable archive for observing transitions in Japanese society (from changing living standards to gender relations, collective memory to shifting perceptions of nuclear energy) and exploring the topical relevance of Japan's vibrant popular culture over the postwar period.

Bringing *Gojira* into the Classroom: Five Strategies

Although it is extremely difficult to expose students to the full sweep of the Godzilla series in a classroom setting, the film *Gojira* is an unusually accessible, versatile, and effective resource for teaching at the high school and undergraduate levels. It lends itself to classroom use in introductory courses as well as more advanced or topics offerings in a wide range of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas:

- Japanese or East Asian history;
- Asian studies;
- popular culture;
- film and media studies;
- anthropology;
- folklore and mythology;
- world theater;
- and the rapidly growing field of monster studies.

Gojira is, above all, a productive springboard for engaging students and deepening their understanding of Japanese history and culture. But it is also extremely valuable as a means of helping students to develop new critical and analytical skills, from **the use of pop culture texts as historical primary sources**, to the **close reading of movie scenes**, to the deployment of scholarly concepts like **memory**, **folklore**, and **film genre**.

The five specific strategies for teaching *Gojira* outlined below and developed in more detail in the appended "classroom resources" documents are not fully elaborated lesson plans or curricular modules ready for immediate use with students. Instead, these materials are intended to be generative examples, possible starting points for educators interested in using *Gojira* in their courses, based on my three decades of experience teaching with Godzilla films at the college level and engaging with public audiences (at fan conventions, Japan festivals, and K–12 teacher training seminars) on Japanese giant monster movies. My hope is that this "idea bank" will provide some practical illustrations of how (and how broadly) Godzilla can be used pedagogically and will inspire teachers to invite the King of the Monsters into their classrooms.

1: *Gojira* as a Historical Source

How does a giant monster movie help us understand Japan's unique nuclear traumas and fractured postwar history?

A screening of *Gojira* provides opportunities for engaging classroom discussions of the long-term impact of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the wartime firebombing of Japanese cities, as well as the anxieties generated by Cold War nuclear weapons testing, on the Japanese people. **Comparisons of *Gojira* with the heavily edited 1956 U.S. release, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, allow for insights into the complicated relationship between Japan and the United States.** Students can gain experience analyzing symbolism in film and "reading" a popular culture artifact as a historical primary source by analyzing *Gojira* in the context of the time in which it was made.

2: Close Reading a Scene from *Gojira*

How can a single scene from *Gojira* shed light on the hidden histories of democracy, political conflict, and gender relations in early postwar Japan?

A careful analysis of a single movie scene can provide students with an in-depth, highly textured experience of exploring the work's historical context and the cinematic techniques used by its creators. By focusing on a celebrated scene in *Gojira* where Japanese legislators clash over publicly revealing the existence of the monster, students can learn about political polarization in postwar Japan, the changing

status of women after World War II, and the place of conflict in Japanese culture. Moreover, a close reading can reveal much about the process of filmmaking, especially the techniques employed by *Gojira*'s makers, the distributors in Hollywood who created *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, and the translators who subtitled the film for international release.

3: Is Godzilla a Yōkai?

Godzilla is widely believed to have been inspired by Japanese mythology and folklore. But is Godzilla a yōkai?

Defining what constitute yōkai—Japan's mythological and folkloric monsters—is notoriously difficult, and the question of whether or not Godzilla is a yōkai has proven particularly contentious. Inserting *Gojira* into discussions of yōkai (or integrating yōkai into consideration of Godzilla) can expose students to the richness and complexity of Japan's fertile monster culture and yield new perspectives on kaiju cinema. Debating Godzilla's status as a yōkai is also a useful means of introducing students to the concept of folklore, as well as exploring the differences between Japanese and Western cultural conceptions of monstrosity.

4: The Inner Life of Monsters: *Gojira* and Noh Theater

There are unexpected similarities between *Gojira* and Noh, Japan's ancient theatrical form which prominently features monstrous characters. How can a creative writing assignment allow students to better appreciate both Godzilla and a notoriously stylized and challenging dramatic art?

Comparing the fifteenth-century Noh play *Nue*, which focuses on the restless ghost of a fearsome monster, and *Gojira* provides surprising opportunities for students to gain insights into the content and structure of Noh, the aesthetics and characterization in Godzilla films, and the understanding of monsters across five centuries of Japanese culture. Asking students to write a short Noh play based on the narrative and characters of *Gojira* develops creative as well as analytical skills, providing them with an accessible way into a difficult theatrical form and encouraging them to rethink monster stories from the perspective of the creature.

5: Using *Gojira* to Explore Film Genre

Film genres are categories used by critics and scholars to analyze and understand movies based on similarities in their narratives, themes, settings, and tones. Is there such a thing as a kaiju genre? If so, how were its conventions first established in *Gojira*?

Film genre is an important conceptual tool for analyzing the production, aesthetics, economics, and reception of commercial movies. *Gojira* and the Godzilla series provide an exceptional case study for exploring the concept of film genre and its implications; the way genre conventions are set, evolve, and can be creatively adapted; and the globalization of genre films.

These five strategies suggest that—like other forms of Japanese popular culture (manga, anime, video games, pop music, character goods)—the Godzilla films are a rich, versatile, and still surprisingly underutilized resource for educators. *Gojira* and other kaiju movies provide an accessible and enjoyable entry point for tackling important issues in Japanese history and culture, introducing new concepts and approaches, and honing student skills in analyzing sources, forming interpretations, and contributing to discussions and debates. What's more, bringing Godzilla into the classroom seems to stir the imagination and spark the creativity of students, engaging them, empowering them, and exciting them about the study of Japan, film, and popular culture. Hopefully, the short introduction to Godzilla as a pedagogical tool presented in this article will prove similarly energizing for teachers, encouraging innovative ways of weaving the King of the Monsters into courses and curricula, and inspiring more instructors to let Godzilla loose among their students.

Notes

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[1] Matsuoka Hiroyasu, "Is Godzilla an Ambassador?" presented at the CULCON Symposium "Shaping the U.S.-Japan Partnership: Creative Industries, Information Access, and Subnational Diplomacy," Washington, DC, February 18, 2025.

[2] This section is based on the extensive critical, scholarly, and fan literature on the Godzilla franchise available in English. On the production and reception of the Godzilla films, see David Kalat, *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997); Steve Ryfle, *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998); Peter Brothers, *Atomic Dreams and the Nuclear Nightmare: The Making of* Godzilla *(1954)* (Privately published, 2015); Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, *Ishiro Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); and Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, *Godzilla: The First 70 Years* (New York: Abrams, 2025). On the historical and cultural context of Godzilla, see Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); William M. Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito, eds., *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Jeffrey Angles, "Afterword: Translating an Icon" in Shigeru Kayama (Jeffrey Angles, trans.), *Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), pp. 189–221. On the teaching of Godzilla, a pioneering and thought-provoking work is Joanne Bernardi, "Teaching Godzilla: Classroom Encounters with a Cultural Icon" in Tsutsui and Ito, eds., *In Godzilla's Footsteps*, pp. 111–125.

[3] William M. Tsutsui, "The Prehistory of Soft Power: Godzilla, Cheese, and the American Consumption of Japan" in Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, eds., *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 193–203.

[4] The Three Mile Island accident was a partial meltdown at a commercial nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania that heightened public fears about nuclear safety worldwide. President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, nicknamed "Star Wars," was a proposed system to defend against ballistic nuclear missile attack that inflamed tensions with the Soviet Union.

[5] Sean Rhodes and Brooke McCorkle, *Japan's Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018); Jonathan Abel, "Hedorah vs. Hyperobject; or Why Smog Monsters Are Real and We Must Object to Object-Oriented Ontologies" in Rachel DiNitto, ed., *Eco-Disasters in Japanese Cinema* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2024), pp. 29–43.

[6] Thomas Lamarre, "Fukushima and the Rebuild of Godzilla: Multiplying Media in an Era of Multiplying Disaster" in Livia Monnet, ed., *Toxic Immanence: Decolonizing Nuclear Legacies and Futures* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), pp. 94–126.

[7] William M. Tsutsui, "Is Your War over Now? Nationalism, Nostalgia, and Japan's Long Postwar from *Gojira* (1954) to *Godzilla Minus One* (2023)," *Humanities* 2024, 13(6), 158; https://doi.org/10.3390/h1306015.

[8] Peter B. High, "Godzilla," KineJapan Message Board, May 29, 1998, archived at https://mailman.yale.edu/pipermail/kinejapan/1998-May/003338.html.

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Classroom Resource 1

This classroom resource accompanies the article "Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film" by William M. Tsutsui

Gojira as a Historical Source

Gojira (1954) can provide important insights for students into Japanese society, politics, and culture in the wake of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan's defeat in World War II.

Screening the full, subtitled film in class (96 minutes running time) allows students to immerse themselves in the engaging narrative and the movie's rich depiction of Japan in the early 1950s. Some contextualization in the history of Japan at the time, including World War II, the firebombing of major cities, the atomic attacks of 1945, the postwar American Occupation, the Cold War, U.S. nuclear testing in the Pacific, and the Lucky Dragon Incident in 1954, will facilitate their understanding of the film and its importance. In addition, a brief introduction to the history of giant monster movies, especially *King Kong* (1933) and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) will help students appreciate the origins and pioneering contributions of *Gojira*, as well as the history of cross-fertilization between the American and Japanese movie industries.

Students are generally eager to talk about *Gojira* after watching the full film. The discussion questions suggested below are designed to steer students away from topics like the quality of the special effects (which were remarkable at the time, but seem primitive by contemporary standards) and toward the analysis of the movie as a historical source.

Objectives

- Explore the legacies of the atomic bombs and World War II on the Japanese people, using *Gojira* to provide a Japanese perspective.
- Consider the impact of the Cold War and nuclear weapons testing on Japan and the Japanese people.
- Explore aspects of Japan's postwar society and culture, including political divisions, international relations, attitudes toward science and technology, gender relations, and nationalism.
- Provide the opportunity for students to "read" a popular culture artifact (in this case, a film) as a historical primary source.
- Understand the origins and complex history of the now-ubiquitous pop culture icon, Godzilla.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think you would have responded to this film as Japanese moviegoer in 1954 who had lived through World War II? As a survivor of Hiroshima or Nagasaki?
- What parts of *Gojira* do you think would have evoked painful memories of World War II for Japanese moviegoers? What parts might have played upon contemporary fears of nuclear testing and the Cold War?

- What does Godzilla symbolize in the film? Is the monster a metaphor? *There is no single right answer here—America, nuclear weapons, death, and nature's revenge are frequently mentioned—and student opinions often differ, leading to productive conversations.*
- Why does Godzilla attack Japan? If the monster was created by American H-bomb testing, why didn't it turn on the United States?
- How is the monster characterized in *Gojira*? Is Godzilla presented as purely evil?
- Why do you think American distributors felt the need to edit *Gojira* extensively before releasing it two years later as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* in the United States? *Short clips from the 1956 American version could be shown in class to underline the extent and specific nature of the changes. One particularly stark comparison is the final scenes of both films:* Gojira *ends with a solemn warning about the dangers of continued nuclear testing while* Godzilla, King of the Monsters! *closes on a note of cheerful optimism.*
- *Gojira* often focuses more on human characters and their personal dramas than on the monster. What insight does the movie provide on the changes in gender roles, traditional customs (like the practice of arranged marriage), and the family in postwar Japan?
- Why do you think this movie was popular in Japan at the time it was released? Why, more than seventy years on, does Godzilla still resonate with global movie audiences?

Materials

Although the original 1954 *Gojira* was not released outside Japan until 2004, it is now widely available on DVD and streaming online. Take care not to confuse *Gojira* (often marketed under the English title *Godzilla*) with the heavily edited 1956 Hollywood version, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* If you see Raymond Burr or don't see subtitles, you are watching the wrong film!

The quality of the print and the subtitles in the Criterion Collection release of *Gojira* are high. This version is available on DVD, can be rented or purchased on several online platforms, and is streamed through various subscription services. It is also accessible through Kanopy, a subscription service available to users through many public libraries and educational institutions (K–12 schools, colleges, and universities).

Gojira is also available online through many free streaming platforms like the non-profit Internet Archive. Unfortunately, the quality of the video and subtitles on such platforms varies widely and the availability of specific uploads can be unpredictable.

Godzilla, King of the Monsters!, the 1956 Hollywood edit of *Gojira* for U.S. release in 1956, is widely available on DVD and streaming. It should not be confused with the 2019 *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* in the Legendary Pictures Monsterverse franchise.

Instructor Resources

There are countless resources on Godzilla available online, inevitably of very uneven quality and relevance to the classroom. Among the sources that might be particularly useful pedagogically are:

- "Godzilla, King of the Monsters," a 1998 BBC documentary featuring interviews with many of the individuals responsible for creating the Tōhō Godzilla films. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjxBzx2zAsw&t=11s)
- "Godzilla: A Pioneer of Global Pop Culture," a webinar featuring scholars and writers on the Godzilla franchise, organized by the Japan Foundation, New York. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Aq9orZolZE)
- "Growing Up With Godzilla: A Global History," a rich (but regrettably never completed) overview of kaiju cinema by historian Greg Pflugfelder, including a very useful introduction to *Gojira*. (https://www.growingupwithgodzilla.org/)

Among the many print resources on *Gojira*, the following are particularly useful for contextualizing the film historically:

- Jeffrey Angles, "Afterword: Translating an Icon" in Shigeru Kayama (Jeffrey Angles, trans.), *Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), pp. 189–221.
- Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Chapter 4.
- Chon Noriega, "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When Them! is U.S." *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 63–77.
- Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, *Ishiro Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), Chapter 11.
- Claire Stanford, "A Monstrous Burden," *The American Scholar* 91, no. 4 (Autumn 2022), pp. 90–95.
- William M. Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Chapter 1.
- William M. Tsutsui, "Is Your War over Now? Nationalism, Nostalgia, and Japan's Long Postwar from *Gojira* (1954) to *Godzilla Minus One* (2023)," *Humanities* 2024, 13(6), 158; https://doi.org/10.3390/h1306015.

Some of these sources (or excerpts from them) could be assigned to students as required or recommended reading. The short essay by Stanford and the chapter from Tsutsui's *Godzilla on My Mind* would be appropriate for use with high school students.

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Classroom Resource 2

This classroom resource accompanies the article "Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film" by William M. Tsutsui

Close Reading a Scene from *Gojira*

As a supplement to (or instead of) watching an entire film, a careful review and analysis of a single scene can provide students with a rich experience of exploring the work's historical context and the filmmaking techniques employed by its creators. Many scenes in *Gojira* reward such a close reading, including the one presented here as an example.

Near the start of the film, when Godzilla has appeared on a remote island but has not yet come to Tokyo, a scene (of just under five minutes in length) shows a paleontologist reporting to members of Japan's parliament, the Diet, on the origins of the monster. The scientific revelations prove contentious among the politicians, with a group of right-wing (and almost entirely male) politicians arguing that Godzilla should be kept secret from the Japanese public while a group of left-wing (and largely female) ones insist on transparency.

This scene is a dramatic portrayal of the polarized political landscape of Japan between the end of World War II in 1945 and the consolidation of the Liberal Democratic Party and conservative dominance in national politics in 1955. With profound disagreements between right-wing parties and left-wing ones over domestic issues and foreign policy, especially the relationship with the United States, debates in the Diet were fiercely contested and sometimes violent, including what the media described as a "riot" among parliamentarians in June 1954. Significantly, the scene features an outspoken female politician: women were only gained the right to vote in Japan after World War II and those elected to the powerful lower house of the Diet were generally associated with progressive parties (or sat as independents).

The Diet debate scene thus encourages conversations about conflict in Japan, which is often characterized as an unusually harmonious and conflict-averse society. Conflict is a significant theme through *Gojira*, including arguments over whether to destroy the monster or study it and the struggle with Dr. Serizawa over the use of the Oxygen Destroyer. The scene can also lead to productive discussions of the depictions of women in the film and the changes in female roles and expectations in Japan in the wake of the war.

Importantly, close scrutiny allows for consideration of the techniques used by the filmmakers—the dramatic opening of curtains, the costuming of the female legislators—to heighten the drama and reinforce characterization in the scene. In addition, choices made in the English subtitling of this scene in the Criterion Collection release of *Gojira* provide a useful springboard for discussing translation and the subtitling/dubbing of international films, as well as the abiding ambiguity of Godzilla's sex and gender.

Comparing the Diet debate scene in *Gojira* to the extensively edited and shortened equivalent in *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* is an effective way of exploring the changes made by American distributors, which excised potentially provocative political content and diminished the drama of the scene.

Objectives

- Explore the profoundly divided political environment in early postwar Japan.
- Consider conflict in *Gojira* in the context of global stereotypes of Japan as a society that particularly values harmony and consensus-building.
- Explore the depictions of women in *Gojira* to gain insights on changing gender roles in postwar Japan.
- Give students the experience of "close reading" a scene in a film to understand its historical context and the techniques used by its makers.
- Explore the implications of translation and subtitling in the experience of non-native-language viewers.
- Compare *Gojira* and *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, considering how and why edits were made for American release.

Discussion Questions

- What happens in this scene?
- Who are the individuals involved? How did the filmmakers differentiate the two groups arguing in this scene (clothing, demographics, tone of voice) and why is this significant? *Revealing the persistence of gender stereotypes in American society, many U.S. viewers, including film critics and writers on Godzilla, often mistakenly assume that the left-wing female members of the Diet are journalists or members of the public.*
- How do the depictions of women in this scene compare to others in *Gojira*? How did women's roles in Japanese society change (and how did they stay the same) after World War II?
- Why does one of the characters in this scene argue for keeping the appearance of Godzilla secret? What insights does this provide on the relationship between Japan and the United States in the 1950s?
- How does the director build a sense of drama in this scene?
- What do you think the scientists are thinking to themselves at the very end of the scene?
- Later in *Gojira*, Godzilla destroys the National Diet Building, where this scene takes place. What message, if any, do you believe the filmmakers were sending with this? How do you think Japanese audiences at the time responded to the destruction of their nation's parliament building? *It was widely reported that Japanese movie theaters erupted in cheers and applause when Godzilla was shown attacking the Diet Building, just as American audiences would, decades later, celebrate the obliteration of the White House in* Independence Day *(1996).*
- What other examples of interpersonal conflict are depicted in *Gojira*? How are they resolved? What insight, if any, does this provide on Japanese culture at the time?
- The subtitles here (at least in the Criterion Collection version) refer to Godzilla as a "he." There are no grammatical genders in the Japanese language (unlike, for example, Spanish or German), so the original dialogue does not ascribe a gender to Godzilla. Would you refer to Godzilla as he, she, or use another pronoun? Why do you think the translator of the subtitles gendered Godzilla as male?
- How would you compare this scene from *Gojira* to the heavily edited (and shortened) version in *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*? Why do you think the edits in this scene were made for American audiences?

Materials

The debate scene in the Japanese Diet is at 00:23:35 to 00:28:22 of *Gojira*. The Criterion Collection release of *Gojira* is available on DVD, can be rented or purchased on several online platforms, and is streamed through various subscription services (including Kanopy).

The edited (and much shorter) version of the scene in *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* is at 00:29:58 to 00:32:00. Like *Gojira*, the 1956 film is widely available on DVD and streaming.

Instructor Resources

There are numerous resources online about close reading and its application to film scenes. A good general overview, suitable for students, on the practice of literary close reading is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2KHX1Pm5co; an accessible introduction to close reading in film studies is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D4b7HfRsP4.

Among the many valuable academic sources on the political and social history of postwar Japan, the recent collection edited by Simon Avenell, *Reconsidering Postwar Japanese History: A Handbook* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023) is particularly useful, with chapters addressing topics including postwar politics and gender relations. Some textbooks on modern Japanese history provide concise introductions to the conflicted politics of the 1950s, notably Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, 4th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Chapter 15 and Elise Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2008), Chapter 10. These books also shed light on the history of women in Japanese politics and changing gender roles in Japan after World War II.

An exceptional lesson plan on the history of women in modern Japan, from the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado Boulder is https://www.colorado.edu/ptea-curriculum/sites/default/files/attached-files/mogafactorygirlslesson_0.pdf.

On the dubbing and subtitling of Godzilla films for international audiences and its impact on the series' reception outside Japan, see William M. Tsutsui, "The Prehistory of Soft Power: Godzilla, Cheese, and the American Consumption of Japan" in Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, eds., *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp.193–203.

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Classroom Resource 3

This classroom resource accompanies the article "Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film" by William M. Tsutsui

Is Godzilla a Yōkai?

Yōkai are the monsters of Japanese folklore and mythology, an integral part of Japanese culture whose origins are deeply intertwined with Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and practices. Japan has an incredibly rich tradition of monstrous creatures, demons, spirits, and shapeshifters. Dragons and giant spiders figured heavily in the *Kojiki*, Japan's earliest literary work, compiled in the eighth century, which chronicled the mythological origins of the Japanese islands and the Japanese imperial system. Local legends of monsters—like the well-known *kappa*, amphibious creatures both cute and grotesque, playful and threatening—are common throughout the islands. Stories of monsters have been a major inspiration for Japanese art and literature, from dramatic medieval warrior tales to colorful woodblock prints. And monster lore in Japan has proven enduringly dynamic and vibrant, with old tales constantly being revived and elaborated—like stories of the obscure yōkai *Amabie*, which surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic—and new urban legends emerging through social media. Today, yōkai are more popular globally than ever before: their appeal has been stoked through manga and anime (like the classic work of Mizuki Shigeru or the hit franchise *Demon Slayer*), movies, and other forms of popular culture, including Pokémon, the "pocket monsters," many of which take inspiration from yōkai. Monsters remain a part of everyday life in Japan, notably through the annual Setsubun festival, which marks the beginning of spring and involves the beloved family ritual of driving away someone dressed like a demon with handfuls of roasted soybeans.

The study of yōkai is a huge, complex, and fascinating subject. Even understanding what yōkai are can be challenging: the kanji that make up the word yōkai (妖怪) both mean strangeness or mystery, suggesting something unusually odd or curious, and even academic specialists struggle to nail down a clear and coherent definition. The Japanese scholar Komatsu Kazuhiko, for example, has written that "Yōkai is a vague concept and not one easy to grasp. Yōkai can be broadly defined as perplexing, supernatural existences (or beings) and phenomena (events, incidences, things) that occur in dimensions beyond human understanding."[1] The folklorist Michael Dylan Foster—whose article on "hometown yōkai" is featured in this issue of *Education About Asia*—has offered that: "a yōkai is a weird or mysterious creature, a monster or fantastic being, a spirit or sprite,"[2] or, even more suggestively, that they are "highly creative metaphors for things for which we have no words."[3] To Zack Davisson—an insightful authority on yōkai and Japanese culture, who also has an article featured in this issue of *Education About Asia*— they are "by their nature, undefinable. They are the mysterious manifest. They are the unknowable. . . . Yōkai are the expression of human imagination and creativity, and equally limitless."[4]

Significantly, Godzilla is generally not considered a yōkai, either by scholars or by most Japanese. While in the United States we would probably consider both a *kappa* and Godzilla to be monsters, in Japan *kappa* are yōkai while giant movie monsters like Godzilla and Mothra are kaiju or "strange beasts" (怪獣), where the character *kai* (怪) is shared with the word yōkai. Michael Dylan Foster, for instance, is insistent in arguing that Godzilla and other kaiju are not yōkai because: (1) kaiju are huge; (2) they do not appear in Japanese folklore and thus are not "traditional" and did not spring from the imaginations

of the Japanese people; and (3) because **they are commercial creations, intended to make money and provide entertainment**. Although most Japanese scholars share this view, some experts do not, notably Zack Davisson, who defiantly declares *Gojira* a "yōkai film."

Many American fans of Godzilla believe erroneously that the monster was directly inspired by Japanese legends and mythology. This might not be terribly surprising, as a character in the series' first film, *Gojira* (1954), links the monster to the folk beliefs of Ōdo Island, the fictional location where Godzilla first comes ashore. But while Japan's mythological dragons and yōkai like *hōnengyo*, a giant river fish, do bear some resemblance to Godzilla, the makers of *Gojira* based the cinematic monster on dinosaurs, using depictions in a 1953 *Life* magazine article, among other sources. That being said, Godzilla's characterization in the franchise does resonate with the legendry of yōkai, where demons and monsters may be both protective and menacing, and the beliefs of Shinto, where gods (*kami*) are neither inherently good or evil.

The question of whether Godzilla should be considered a yōkai presents an opportunity for classroom discovery, discussion, and learning. Watching *Gojira* provides an excellent chance not just to better understand postwar Japan, but also to introduce the concept of yōkai and explore Japan's rich monster culture. Alternately, a class or unit on yōkai can be supplemented and deepened by including the debatable case of Godzilla. Either way, **discussing whether or not Godzilla is a yōkai can lead to productive consideration of the differences between Western and Japanese conceptions of monsters as well as the nature of folklore,** what it means, and how the ways cultures create and transmit stories may have changed in an age of movies, new media, and rapid technological change.

Objectives

- **Explore the rich culture of yōkai**, Japan's folkloric monsters, including the complexities of defining the term yōkai.
- Engage with the debate over why Godzilla and other **kaiju** should (or should not) be considered yōkai, providing insights on the Japanese cultural understanding of monsters.
- Understand what **folklore** is, as well as how and why legends of monsters have emerged in Japan and other cultures.
- Explore how **Japanese understandings of yōkai and kaiju** compare to Western understandings of monsters.

Suggested Student Readings

The articles in this special issue of *Education About Asia* are an excellent resource for classroom use: they are accessible to students at a variety of levels and are suitable as required readings in a wide range of subject areas.

Michael Dylan Foster's *The Book of Yōkai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024) is a widely used classroom text and extracts would be suitable for use at the advanced secondary and college levels. Foster's first chapter, in addition to giving a sweeping overview of the concept of yōkai, includes a brief and enlightening introduction to folklore. Zack Davisson's *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024) is also based on strong scholarship and is pitched to audiences deeply immersed in Japanese pop culture forms like anime and manga.

Discussion Questions

- What is a yōkai?
- Michael Dylan Foster notes that yōkai often developed as a way for Japanese people to make sense out of strange, unexplained phenomena that they could not fully understand. Can you imagine a new yōkai that could help us explain something in our world today that is mysterious, unfamiliar, or difficult to comprehend?

- Is Godzilla a yōkai? Why or why not?
- How would you define a "monster"? How does your definition compare to how the Japanese view yōkai?
- How would you compare yōkai (and kaiju like Godzilla) to celebrated Western monsters like vampires or Frankenstein?
- What is folklore? What is mythology? What are some examples of folkloric and mythological monsters from outside the Japanese tradition? Can you think of any folkloric monsters created in the United States?
- Why do you think yōkai, like Godzilla and other kaiju, are so popular globally right now?

Instructor Resources

There are countless resources on yōkai available online. Among those that might be useful to instructors, including as sources of historic artworks and other forms of material culture featuring yōkai, are:

- "Yōkai Senjafuda," featuring a collection of illustrated votive slips traditionally used to mark visits to Shinto shrine and Buddhist temples, University of Oregon Libraries and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, https://glam.uoregon.edu/yokaisenjafuda/page/welcome.
- "Bakemono no e Scroll," featuring annotated images from an Edo Period handscroll illustrating *bakemono* ("shapeshifters," a term closely related to yōkai), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, https://bakemono.lib.byu.edu/.
- "Yōkai: Ghosts & Demons of Japan," materials from a 2019–2023 museum exhibition, including useful lesson plans and other resources, Museum of International Folk Art, https://yokai.moifa.org/#/; lesson plans: https://moifa.org/assets/files/learn/lessonplans/Yokai%20-%20Lesson%20Plans%20.pdf.

In addition to Foster's *The Book of Yōkai* and Davisson's *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai*, valuable print sources include Michael Dylan Foster's research monograph, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) and Toriyama Sekien, trans. and annotated by Hiroko Yoka and Matt Alt, *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yokai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien* (New York: Dover Publications, 2016).

Notes

[1] Komatsu Kazuhiko, "Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan," *Japan Foundation Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (June 1999), p. 1.

[2] Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), p. 5.

[3] Michael Dylan Foster, "Yōkai: Fantastic Creatures of Japanese Folklore: About Japan, A Teacher's Resource, https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/yokai-fantastic-creatures-of-japanese-folklore#sthash.hxFTeSPD.dpbs

[4] Zack Davisson, *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024), pp. 9–10.

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Classroom Resource 4

This classroom resource accompanies the article "Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film" by William M. Tsutsui

The Inner Life of Monsters
Gojira and Noh Theater

Noh theater emerged in the fourteenth century as a favored art form of Japan's rising warrior elite of the time. The staging of Noh includes a chorus (reciters) and an ensemble of instrumentalists; it is chanted (somewhat like opera), incorporates dance and very stylized forms of acting, and the performers wear distinctive carved masks. Today, Noh is very much an acquired taste: it can be opaque, monotonous, and difficult to understand and appreciate, not just for American students, but for many Japanese as well. Noh is an important literary and performance form in Japanese culture, with a profound influence on the development of Japanese aesthetics and deep relevance to Japanese history, but it is not highly accessible to contemporary audiences.

Relating Noh theater to Godzilla may seem like a bit of a stretch. But monsters, ghosts, spirits, and deities frequently appear in Noh and one of the main genres of Noh plays focuses on demons. Several scholars have suggested that traditional Japanese theatre, especially Noh and *bunraku* puppet theatre, may have inspired the structure, aesthetics, and special effects of giant monster films, including *Gojira*. Although this is difficult to document, there do seem to be some direct influences from Noh on kaiju cinema: in the 1984 movie *Godzilla*, for instance, the director instructed the actor playing the monster to study the stylized gestures of Noh performers in order to give Godzilla an otherworldly and dignified presence on screen. At the very least, there are cultural resonances between Noh and Godzilla that can be explored in the classroom and can allow for deeper and richer understandings of both an ancient and arcane theatrical form (Noh) and a cinematic form (giant monster movies) not generally associated with great artistry or sophistication.

In 2021, I taught an undergraduate elective course entitled "Japanese Monsters" which surveyed Japan's bountiful monster culture from the mythology of the *Kojiki* through the folkloric traditions of yōkai to the contemporary monsters of pop culture like Godzilla and Pokémon. One of the readings I assigned for the course was the Noh play *Nue* (sometimes translated as "Monster Nue") written in the early fifteenth century by the most famous of Noh playwrights, Zeami. It proved to be an exceptional classroom source: it revolves around the engaging story of a monster and a hero; a translation of the very concise play is readily available online; and numerous videos of productions of it are available on YouTube. The play is based on a famous tale (included in the thirteenth-century historical epic *The Tale of the Heike*) involving the warrior Minamoto no Yorimasa. The story goes that Japan's Emperor was suffering from a debilitating nervous illness, caused (his doctors decided) by a monster called the Nue, which appeared over one corner of the imperial palace every morning at 2 a.m., hidden in a black cloud. Medicine and prayer having failed to cure the Emperor, a hero was sent for, in the person of Yorimasa. When the black cloud appeared one morning, Yorimasa shot a magic arrow into it and hit the monster, which had a monkey's head, a raccoon dog's body,

a tiger's legs, and a snake's tail, as well as a haunting bird-like cry. Struck by the arrow, the Nue fell to the ground, where Yorimasa's servant finished it off with a sword. A cuckoo then sang out through the night, the Emperor was instantly cured, and the palace staff, not knowing what to do with the corpse of a dead monster, placed it in a small boat and sent it downriver toward the sea.

Zeami's Noh play picks up the story there, although, as with most Noh plays, the plot is minimal: a traveling monk stops for the night at a remote temple by a river, where he encounters a ghostly boatman headed downstream. The boatman reveals that he is the spirit of the monster Nue and proceeds to recount his suffering and death at the hands of Yorimasa. He implores the monk to pray for his salvation before floating despondently out to sea.

What is striking about *Nue* (and about the treatment of monsters more generally in Noh), is the way in which it focuses not on the hero, but on the creature—not on the victor, but on the vanquished—and the way it explores the monster's inner torments, revealing the Nue's sorrow, pain, remorse, and intense longing for forgiveness, redemption, and peace. In this, of course, Noh differs profoundly from most traditional European tales (and many Japanese ones) of heroes and monsters, which generally focus on the strength and bravery of the stereotypical knight in shining armor rather than the suffering and regret of the dragon he slays.

The emphasis in Noh on the anguish of the monster and its interiority resonates in productive ways with the Godzilla series, and above all with the film *Gojira*. That movie ends with Godzilla being killed by a new super-weapon called the Oxygen Destroyer, obviously in a very painful fashion. While the assembled Japanese scientists and sailors cheer the destruction of the monster, their celebrations are tempered by a real sense of sadness. In fact, it is very hard for viewers not to feel tremendous sympathy and grief for Godzilla at the end of *Gojira*, as the filmmakers effectively convey that Godzilla was a victim too, one who had not asked to be irradiated by American H-bomb testing or suffer an excruciating death from a new Japanese technology.

To encourage my students in "Japanese Monsters" to reflect on Noh, on the characterization of Godzilla in that original film, and on cultural understandings of monstrosity in Japan, I assigned them the play *Nue* and screened *Gojira*. After a classroom discussion, I gave them what I called a "creative assignment" (of which there were several in the course, as well as "analytical assignments" and a final research project) asking them to write a short Noh play based on the narrative and characters of *Gojira*. The students enjoyed the project, and many wrote very imaginative and thoughtful scripts. One, for example, developed the idea that the real monster in *Gojira* was not Godzilla but Dr. Serizawa, the Japanese scientist who invented the Oxygen Destroyer. Another student framed her play as a conversation between the ghost of Godzilla and a seagull; yet another explored the feelings of guilt shared by Godzilla and the scientists who studied and eventually helped slay the monster. All the students were challenged to think about the content and structure of Noh plays, consider the sophisticated approaches to monstrosity in both *Nue* and *Gojira*, and reflect on the continuities in sensibility in two rich primary sources, created about 500 years apart.

Objectives

- Gain a basic understanding of Noh theater and its traditions.
- Use the film *Gojira* to better understand and appreciate an ancient and often inaccessible theatrical form.
- Appreciate *Gojira* and other Godzilla films in the cultural context of ancient Japanese warrior tales and theatrical forms like Noh.
- Explore continuities in Japanese understandings of monsters and monstrosity over a span of more than 500 years.
- Encourage engagement with Japanese traditional art forms by drawing upon the creativity of students and the relevance of those forms to contemporary concerns.

Student Readings

In my "Japanese Monsters" course, I screened the full film *Gojira* (1954) and assigned the students the following readings:

- *The Tale of the Heike*, Helen Craig McCullough, trans. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), Chapter 4, Part 15 "The Thrush Monsters" (Nue), pp. 160–163. There are several English translations of *The Tale of the Heike* (Heike monogatari) available.
- Zeami, *Nue*, available in translation and with a useful synopsis at https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_052.html. The play as translated here is only ten pages long. A more through (and longer) translation is included in Chifumi Shimazaki and Stephen Comee, *Supernatural Beings from Japanese Noh Plays of the Fifth Group* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), pp. 271–297.

During our classroom discussion, I showed the students clips of productions (in Japanese) of *Nue*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFRjsUfzTOc (full play); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu_ab8wYkxI (highlights). These videos provided the students with a basic introduction to the staging, aesthetics, and experience of Noh theater. I also played the call of White's thrush, a migratory songbird of Northeast Asia, which is believed to be the inspiration for the haunting call of the Nue: https://ebird.org/species/scathr2.

Written Assignment

I subsequently assigned what I described as a "creative assignment" that required students to engage with both Noh conventions and the story of *Gojira*, exploring how both encouraged audiences to reflect on the inner lives of monsters:

- ***Godzilla, the Noh Play.*** Write a short Noh play based on *Gojira*. The play should follow the basic style and format of Zeami's *Nue* and draw on the narrative and characters of *Gojira*. You may take some creative license with both Noh drama and the film, but keep in mind how monsters (and heroes) are treated in both forms. Aim for 750–1,000 words total. Your play should be titled and include essential stage directions.

Discussion Questions

- What is the story of Minamoto no Yoshimasa and the Nue?
- How would you compare the presentation of the Nue in *The Tale of the Heike* to that in Zeami's Noh play? How does Zeami's approach complicate, enrich, or undermine the story of the Nue as told in *The Tale of the Heike*? How do you feel about the Nue at the end of the narrative in *The Tale of the Heike*? How about at the end of *Nue*?
- What does the play *Nue* tell us about how monsters were perceived and the role they played in traditional Japanese culture?
- How would you compare the depiction of the monster in *Gojira* to that in Zeami's *Nue*? Zeami evokes sympathy for the Nue in his play: do you feel similar sympathy for Godzilla in *Gojira*?
- Do you see any influence from the staging and performance traditions of Noh on *Gojira*? Some commentators have suggested that the stylized movements of the performers in Noh may have influenced the actors who portrayed Godzilla in *Gojira* and later films in the franchise. What do you think?

Sample Student Work

Two examples of student work from the 2021 course "Japanese Monsters" are available, with permission of the authors, **Nicole Araya** and **Katrina Gonzalez** (please click on each student's name to view/download a PDF). They demonstrate the creativity that students brought to this written assignment, the sensitivity

they showed toward the traditions of Noh and the story in Gojira, and their ability to link their short plays to contemporary concerns about human nature, nuclear proliferation, and environmental degradation.

Instructor Resources

The Japanese website the-noh.com (https://www.the-noh.com/en/world/index.html) has a variety of accessible resources on the history and performance traditions of Noh theater. For a detailed scholarly treatment of Noh plays focused on demons, spirits, and monsters, see Chifumi Shimazaki and Stephen Comee, *Supernatural Beings from Japanese Noh Plays of the Fifth Group* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012).

Several authors with backgrounds in film and popular culture have explored the influence of Noh on the Godzilla films, including *Gojira*:

- Rick Wallach, *In Search of Godzilla: Myth, Stagecraft and Politics in Ishiro Honda's Masterpiece* (McFarland, 2025), Chapter VII.
- John E. Petty, "Stage and Scream: The Influence of Traditional Japanese Theater, Culture, and Aesthetics on Japan's Cinema of the Fantastic" (Master of Science thesis, University of North Texas, 2011), https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc68031/.
- John E. Petty, "Godzilla: Just Say Nō," *G-FAN* 99 (Summer 2012): 20–28.

On the story of Minamoto no Yoshimasa and the Nue, see Zack Davisson, *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024), pp. 202–205 and Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), pp. 243–24.

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Classroom Resource 5

This classroom resource accompanies the article "Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film" by William M. Tsutsui

Using *Gojira* to Explore Film Genre

Film genres are a way of categorizing movies based on common elements such as their topics, settings, narrative structures, moods, aesthetics, target audiences, or emotional impact on viewers. Examples of film genres—types of movies that "tell familiar stories with familiar characters and familiar situations"[1]—include Westerns, musicals, thrillers, and fantasy films. The shared characteristics of films in a genre, such as shootouts in Westerns or happy endings in romantic comedies, are known as conventions. Film genres tend to be repetitive and predictable, yet they allow filmmakers room for variation and creativity, especially as genres can change over time, new genres can emerge, and the hybridization of genres (such as the fusion of zombie horror and comedy in *Shaun of the Dead* [2004]) create opportunities for innovation. Although most film genres originated in Hollywood or European cinema, some have developed in Asia, such as martial arts films, samurai pictures, and Korean horror.

Genre analysis of films has proven a powerful analytical tool for critics and scholars. Studios, filmmakers, and audiences are also deeply invested in genres. For example, genre films offer the industry proven markets and familiar formulas which "assure production simplicity, standardization, and economy."[2] Screenwriters and directors appreciate the established frameworks and conventions of genres, as well as the space for experimentation and novelty, and moviegoers are drawn to the familiarity and predictability of their favored genres. Significantly, as Rick Altman has noted, genre films are "*functional* for their society … permitting viewers to consider and resolve (albeit fictively) contradictions that [they have] not fully mastered."[3] Thus, musicals may help audiences negotiate cultural changes in gender relations while horror, monster, and science fiction films can address unresolved social, political, or technological anxieties.

Even though Godzilla was inspired by *King Kong* (1933) and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Gojira* is widely considered to have been the prototype for a new genre, kaiju (or giant monster) films. When it was released in 1954, *Gojira* spanned many existing genres—horror, science fiction, melodrama—but Japanese critics and scholars initially considered it an example of *kaiki eiga*, a term meaning "strange" or "bizarre" films. By the 1960s, however, as giant monster features emerged as a staple at Tōhō and other Japanese studios, they were increasingly understood as constituting a distinctive kaiju genre. As Michael Crandol has masterfully explained, horror films and *kaiki eiga* evoked dread (suspenseful fear of what may happen) while giant monster pictures aroused panic (the fearful reaction to what has already happened).[4]

Many of the conventions of the emergent kaiju genre were set by *Gojira.* Among others, these included a huge reptilian creature whose genesis is somehow connected with nuclear energy and inexplicably attacks cities (especially Japanese ones); prominent roles for scientists, military leaders, and government officials; special effects based on the use of elaborate miniatures and actors in monster costumes; and final resolution with the monster killed, neutralized, or driven away. Genre films lend themselves to imitation, and movies

in the kaiju genre were soon produced by other Japanese studios (like Daiei with its Gamera franchise) and international filmmakers in Britain, Denmark, South Korea, and (in the 1980s) even North Korea. In the twenty-first century, global interest in cinematic giant monsters exploded, with a range of creative features that extended and hybridized the kaiju genre—such as *Cloverfield* (2008), *Monsters* (2010), *Pacific Rim* (2013), and *Colossal* (2016)—emerging from major Hollywood studios and smaller independent producers.

Gojira and the Godzilla series provide an excellent case study for exploring the concept of film genre and its implications; the way genre conventions are set, evolve, and can be creatively adapted; and the globalization of genre films. Discussions of *Gojira* and genre allow students to tap into their own knowledge of popular culture (recent Hollywood giant monster movies, other film genres), giving them a sense of ownership and expertise, while equipping them with analytical frameworks that can sharpen and deepen their understandings of films and other popular texts.

Objectives

- Understand what a film genre is and why it is a powerful concept for scholars and critics analyzing movies.
- Understand why film genres are important to filmmakers, movie studios, and movie audiences.
- Explore what is meant by the conventions of film genres, how they are established, and how they might change over time.
- Analyze *Gojira* and the Godzilla series as examples of genre films.
- Consider whether there is a kaiju genre, what its conventions are, and how it has been globalized.

Discussion Questions

- What does film genre mean? What are some examples of film genres?
- What is a convention in a film genre? Focusing on one genre (like Westerns or horror movies), what conventions distinguish it from other genres?
- Why are film genres meaningful for filmmakers, movie studios, and audiences? Why might all be invested in making and consuming movies that are relatively similar and predictable?
- When *Gojira* was released in 1954, what genre or genres do you think Japanese critics and audiences may have associated it with?
- Is there such a thing as a kaiju genre? If there is, and if *Gojira* was a landmark in the genre's development, what conventions of kaiju movies were established in *Gojira*?
- How would you differentiate kaiju films from other related genres, like science fiction, horror, disaster, and monster movies?
- Do kaiju films have to be set in Japan or associated in some way with Japan, as some writers have argued? Can you give any examples of films featuring giant monsters with no connection to Japan in their setting, narrative, or characters?
- How have filmmakers expanded upon and experimented with the kaiju genre in the decades following the release of *Gojira*?

Instructor Resources

There are numerous online resources related to film genres. One concise introduction that could be assigned to students at the high school or undergraduate levels is https://www.bbcmaestro.com/blog/film-genre-guide. Dartmouth College Libraries has a convenient online guide to film genres: https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/filmgenres.

A great deal of work on film genre theory and specific genres of movies has been published by scholars and critics. Three classic overviews of film genre are:

- Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).
- Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007)
- Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

Of these, Grant's 2007 volume—or his more recent introduction, *Film Genre: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2024)—is likely the most accessible for non-specialist readers.

On the kaiju genre, see Steven Rawle, *Transnational Kaiju: Exploitation, Globalisation and Cult Monster Movies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022) and Jason Barr, *The Kaiju Film: A Critical Study of Cinema's Biggest Monsters* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016). An excellent short study of how the genre of *Gojira* was understood by Japanese film critics is Michael Crandol, "Godzilla vs. Dracula: Hammer Horror Films in Japan," *Cinephile* 13:1 (Spring 2019), pp. 18–23. Biographies of two prominent Japanese filmmakers in the kaiju genre, director Honda Ishirō and special effects director Tsuburaya Eiji, are available in English: Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, *Ishiro Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017) and August Ragone, *Eiji Tsuburaya: Master of Monsters* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).

Notes

[1] Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 1.

[2] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 38.

[3] Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 25.

[4] Michael Crandol, "Godzilla vs. Dracula: Hammer Horror Films in Japan," *Cinephile* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2019), p. 21. See also Joanne Bernardi, "Teaching Godzilla: Classroom Encounters with a Cultural Icon" in William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito, eds., *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 115–117.