

## 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.