

## 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](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.