

## 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”<sup>1</sup>—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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre: Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Crandol, "Godzilla vs. Dracula: Hammer Horror Films in Japan," *Cinephile* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2019), p. 21.