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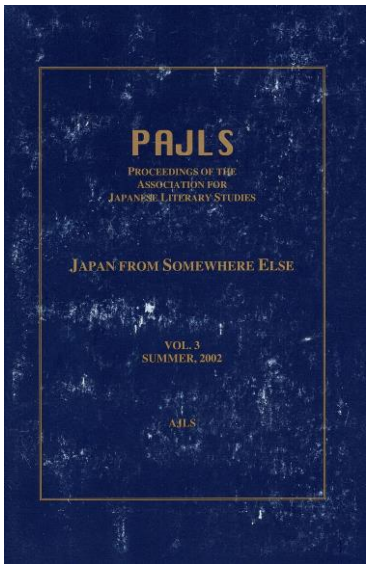
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 3 (2002): 63–69.



PAJLS 3:
Japan From Somewhere Else.
Eiji Sekine, Editor; Joyce L. Detzner, Production Editor.

GODZILLA, THE MONSTER MADE IN JAPAN

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Of all the monster movies produced during the 1950s, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956), the re-edited and dubbed American version of the Japanese film *Gojira* (1954), was arguably the most commercially successful, landing on *Variety*'s list of the top money-makers for the summer of 1956. The success of *Godzilla* is especially surprising, given that it was released in a market already saturated with comparable offerings. Further working against the film was its association with Japan. Although prestigious filmmakers like Kurosawa and Mizoguchi had started making an impression in American art houses during the early '50s, there had been no precedence of a Japanese release attracting a wide audience in the U.S. (And it's probably safe to say that the success of the *Godzilla* has yet to be repeated.) Another detraction was the clumsy manner in which the original film was modified for American release. About 25 minutes of new footage, featuring Raymond Burr, was edited into the film, and much of the original dialogue was awkwardly dubbed into English.

Despite these strikes against it, however, *Godzilla* emerged as an unprecedented commercial and cultural phenomenon, racking up profits and all but eclipsing contemporaneous monster movies in the American cultural imagination. Testament to the film's impact is the rash of sequels and imitators that it spawned. Indeed, the franchise became so successful that, as James Twitchell has observed, "Godzilla is one of the first images that Americans think of when they hear the word Japan."[1] Yet none of the sequels equaled the U.S. success of *Godzilla* (although aficionados might argue that the artistic high-point of the series wasn't reached until *Godzilla vs. Mothra* in 1961). *Godzilla* had the longest U.S. run, the widest U.S. release, and in absolute U.S. dollars the highest grosses.[2]

The question that arises, then, is why this particular cultural product resonated so powerfully with American audiences in 1956. In my paper today I will argue that the film served as a vehicle for Americans to negotiate their ambivalence toward Japan. On one level, these ambivalent

[1] Quoted in Chon Noriega, "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When *Them!* Is U.S." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Fall 1987), p. 63.
[2] Stuart Galbraith, *Japanese Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1994), pp. 7-14.

feelings were an inevitable product of the abrupt about-face in U.S. cold war foreign policy, in which Japan, seemingly overnight, was transformed from an enemy to an ally. According to Margot Hendrikson, this shift was one of the most disconcerting features of the cold war for many Americans.[3] Former WWII allies, the U.S.S.R. and China, became enemies of the U.S., while Germany and Japan became America's allies. In the case of Japan, the discontinuity with WWII-era rhetoric was especially evident, as the U.S. aggressively lobbied for Japan to remilitarize and assisted in reasserting Japan's economic dominance over East Asia.[4] Part of the pleasure of the film for American audiences in 1956, therefore, is that it allowed them simultaneously to enjoy the spectacle of Tokyo's destruction (in a manner remarkably consistent with the air-raids of WWII) and to appreciate Japan in its new role as an essential component in a world-wide security network. In other words, Embassy Pictures translated a cautionary tale about the dangers of reckless hydrogen bomb testing (by the U.S.) into a film that reaffirmed the new hierarchy of the cold war world order, in which Japan occupied a critical, but subordinate, position in the U.S.'s line of defense.

The two techniques of cinematic "translation" that transform *Godzilla* are re-editing and dubbing. I am going to consider them separately, looking first at re-editing. The decision to edit new footage into the film was made by Joseph Levine, who acquired the foreign rights to the original *Gojira* in early 1956. Working under the assumption that the film would not attract American audiences without the presence of a recognized Hollywood actor, Levine hired Raymond Burr, a well-known character actor and a rising television performer, to star in the new footage. The Burr character, Steve Martin, a reporter for United World News, is a composite of various characters from *Gojira*. But despite some superficial similarities to these characters, especially to a Japanese reporter, the Burr character performs an entirely different function, re-inscribing onto the film an American presence, which, as Yoshiyuki Igarashi points out, is conspicuously absent from the original Japanese version.[5]

On the most basic level, the Burr character provides a point of linguistic entry for the American viewer. In the diegetic frame, he justifies the occurrence of English dialogue, often eliciting summaries of crucial scenes with statements such as "My Japanese is a little rusty." In the non-diegetic

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[3] Margot Hendrikson, *Dr. Strangelove's America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 26-27.
[4] Nam G. Kim, *From Enemies to Allies* (Bethesda, Maryland: International Scholars Publications, 1997), pp. 151-77.
[5] Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 114-22.

frame, he addresses voice-over commentaries directly to the American audience, providing English explanations of the action occurring on the screen.

The Burr character also provides a point of conceptual entry into the film, serving as a stand-in for the American public as the events of the story unfold. He is present at all of the critical events of the film—traveling to Ōto Island where the monster first appears, attending government hearings where the origins of the monster are explained, sustaining injuries during the monster's attack on Tokyo, and participating in the final, successful venture to exterminate the monster with an oxygen destroying device. Although the Burr character is present at all of these events, he does not exactly participate in them. This, of course, is an inevitable consequence of the fact that his footage was added after the completion of the original film, making scenes in which the Burr character actually interacts with the Japanese characters difficult to pull off. The solution was to intercut reaction shots of Burr, standing alone or surrounded by extras, with scenes involving the principal Japanese actors. This technique establishes the Burr character as an interested, but somewhat aloof, observer of the events occurring in Japan. It is precisely this combined sense of proximity and distance that facilitates the viewing pleasure of American audiences, since it allows them witness the destruction wrought by Godzilla while maintaining a degree of separation.

Through these mediating functions, the Burr character transforms the original film and provides American viewers with a new frame of reference through which to interpret the events on the screen. Specifically, he reconciles the film with the U.S. position on East Asia, echoing cold war slogans, such as the Domino Theory and Massive Retaliation. The Domino Theory was a metaphor first used by Eisenhower in 1955 to justify U.S. intervention in Indochina. Eisenhower argued that fall of that region to Communism would lead to a chain reaction, which ultimately would threaten "the so-called island defensive chain of Japan, Formosa, and of the Philippines; and it would move on to threaten Australia and New Zealand."[6] The loss of any East Asian ally, in other words, was a cataclysmic development for U.S. security, since it could potentially bring down the entire line of peripheral defenses, leaving the U.S. itself vulnerable to attack. Massive Retaliation referred to a policy position in which the U.S. decided to diminish its conventional armed forces, as an economizing measure, and rely on the threat of massive retaliation with its nuclear

[6] Quoted in Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 41.

arsenal to deter foreign aggression. One consequence of this position was that allies were expected to shoulder more of the conventional military burden in regional "hot spots" that developed around the globe.

The Burr character frames the action of *Godzilla* so that it reproduces these cold war patterns. In the opening sequence, for example, he utilizes a cold war rhetoric to describe Godzilla's rampage, evoking the specter of the Red Menace: "What has happened here was caused by a force which up until a few days ago was entirely beyond the scope of man's imagination. […] An unknown force which still prevails and at any moment could lash out with its terrible destruction anywhere else in the world." Unless this local crisis is contained, he suggests, it could easily spread, threatening civilization all over the world. Later, as the Japanese self-defense force launches an attack on the monster, Burr voices support for this impressive show of conventional military force (consisting of tanks, rocket launchers, and jet fighters). He presents it as a crucial line of defense, protecting the rest of the world (that is to say, America) from a threat of global dimensions. He declares: "The military used every man and machine available in an effort to stem the oncoming terror." The fact that an American character makes this comment is significant, since it justifies a demonstration of Japanese military prowess (including the awesomely powerful "oxygen destroying device") that in another context might have been disturbing to U.S. audiences in the 1950s, memories of WWII still comparatively fresh in their minds.

Ultimately, plugging into this interpretative framework makes *Godzilla* more relevant for American audiences, since it reconfigures the monster's Tokyo rampage into a regional cold war crisis, with serious implications for global security. The entertainment value for Americans is further enhanced by the fact the destruction occurs on the periphery of the U.S. line of defense, one step removed from U.S. territory. In other words, it was more fun for American audiences to watch the destruction of Tokyo than it was for them to see comparable damage done to U.S. city, which helps to explain why *Godzilla* was more commercially successful than contemporaneous American-made monster movies.

The other translation device employed by Levine was dubbing. As anyone who has seen the film can attest, dubbing profoundly affects the viewing experience of *Godzilla*—the monotone delivery of dialogue, the comical lack of synchronization between lip movements and words, and the jarring discontinuity between the spoken dialogue and the gestures and facial expressions of the actors. Rightly or wrongly, these features contribute to the overall impression of the film. In his impassioned defense

of Japanese monster movies, Stuart Galbraith explicitly addresses the issue of dubbing.

> Roger Ebert, in his review of *Godzilla 1985*, suggested Japanese fantasy film fans have "treasured the absurd dialogue, the bad lip synching, the unbelievable special effects, and the phony profundity. […] They have deliberately gone after the same inept feeling in *Godzilla 1985*." This is sheer nonsense. Ebert, like so many American film reviewers, mistook the ineptitude of the slapdash Americanization with the sincerely made (if not entirely successful) original Japanese production. Nobody I know "treasures" bad lip synching; most fans of the genre prefer subtitles to dubbing."[7]

Although Galbraith probably speaks accurately for hardcore fans of the genre, I would argue that "slapdash" dubbing was one of the elements that contributed to *Godzilla* success in 1956.

Upon first glance, a survey of reviews of *Godzilla* would not seem to corroborate my hypothesis. The film was roundly criticized upon its U.S. release. Reviews filed in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Variety*, were all dismissive. Dubbing, in particular, was the target of much disdain, often said to epitomize the overall poor quality of the film. A closer examination of critical commentary on the film, however, proves to be illuminating. The review filed in the May 14, 1956 issue of *Newsweek*, for instance, captures the general tone of the critical opinion.

> The Japanese, famous in American economic folklore for their imitation Amazonian shrunken heads, Confederate flags, and American-looking gadgets, have now turned their sharp-eyed attention to the King Kong type of movie. "Godzilla" features what looks like a 400-foot-high plucked chicken, which emerges from the Sea of Japan and, understandably, terrorizes Tokyo. The movie could very easily pass for an old American one. The new American monster-pictures, however, are vastly superior to the old.[8]

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[7] Galbraith, p. xii.
[8] "Godzilla, King of the Monsters," *Newsweek*, vol. 47 (May 14, 1956), p. 126.

The reviewer thus presents *Godzilla* as another in a long line of second-rate products exported from Japan to the U.S. According to this line of reasoning, the film's flaws can be attributed to its Japanese origins.

The Newsweek reviewer's smug assessment is representative of a commonly held bias against Japan. In the mid-1950s Japan was associated with shoddy merchandise. The label "made in Japan" connoted inferiority, as evidenced by an exchange from an episode of I Love Lucy, in which Ethel wryly comments, "Oh Lucy, your marriage to Ricky might have been made in heaven, but Fred and I have the only marriage made in Japan." Statements like this reveal the derision with which many Americans viewed Japan in the 1950s. This bias was an extension of the overt hostility that was directed toward Japan during WWII, somewhat modified once Japan had been recuperated as an American ally. In this racist context, it could be argued that dubbing actually heightened the appeal of Godzilla for U.S. audiences precisely because it reinforced their stereotypical image of Japan, and therefore, indirectly, their own sense of superiority.

In another important respect, dubbing was critical to the film's popular reception in the U.S. It is possible to argue that dubbing, as a technique of translation, reinforces linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. Indeed, to a greater degree than even literary translation, dubbing and subtitling heighten the sense of "foreignness" since the audience is constantly aware of the process (and therefore its necessity) as they watch the film. In the case of Godzilla this sense of foreignness is underscored not only by the obvious, and clearly inadequate, dubbing, but also by the fact that in some sections of the film Japanese dialogue is left untranslated, remaining inaccessible to American viewers. For the sake of continuity, American producer Levine even inserted sections of "Japanese" dialogue into the new footage for the American release, resulting in the odd spectacle of Asian-American actors delivering lines in halting Japanese. The cumulative effect of these elements is to render a product that can only be described as "Japanese kitsch."

This quality, I contend, helped to neutralize the impact of the original film's critical stance vis-à-vis U.S. thermonuclear testing. As numerous discussions of *Godzilla* have pointed out, Levine was careful to excise most of original film's inflammatory commentary on atomic war and thermonuclear weapons.[9] But as long as the monster was represented as a product of America's H-bomb tests, Levine's editorial strategies could not entirely contain the film's anti-American subtext—that message remained for those who wanted to see it. In the interpretative regime of 1950s

[9] See Noriega, pp. 66-70 and Galbraith, pp. 11-14.

America, however, where difference and foreignness were markers of inferiority, the film's distinct brand of Japanese kitsch, epitomized by its "slapdash" dubbing, made it easier for U.S. audiences to dismiss *Godzilla*'s more subversive implications. Like the reviewer for *Newsweek*, general audiences could appreciate the film as a monster movie "made in Japan," thereby relegating it to the category of cheap curio, not to be taken seriously.