

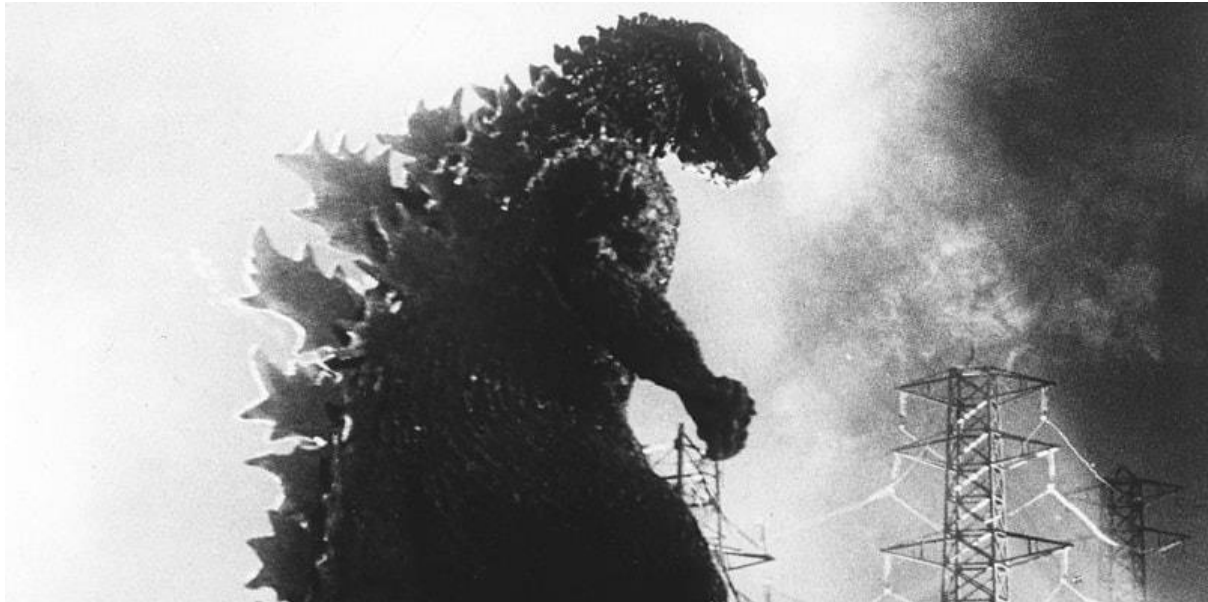
What is the cultural impact of Godzilla?

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BA Illustration

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(FIGURE 1 , Chrisreedfilm, 2014)

INTRODUCTION

“Godzilla is the son of the atomic bomb. He is a nightmare created out of the darkness of the human soul. He is the sacred beast of the apocalypse.” Tomoyuki Tamaka (IMDB, 2025)

The King of the Monsters, the God of Destruction, the Symbol of Fear, the Monster Who Ate a Star; Godzilla, or Gojira, has rampaged and invaded cinema for over 70 years and 31 destructive movies, achieving multiple awards and a well-deserved Oscar. Godzilla has stood as a titanic pillar in the already cavernous Japanese media, standing the test of time as a king of not just the kaiju but the entertainment and special effects industry to boot. His reign has inspired countless of other stories and shows through his near century long tyranny and has had his story and design rewritten to the extent that he feels like a new character every time. In this essay, I would like to understand what the significance of Godzilla and his effect on culture.

P1. HISTORY & CREATION

The creation of cinema's greatest monster started with the construction of another. The Manhattan project, the beginning of atomic warfare and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the genesis for Godzilla's inspiration. On August 6th, 1945, the "Little Boy" uranium atomic bomb was dropped on the industrial port city of Hiroshima. Upon its detonation, which is described to be as "Bright as a thousand suns," the blast instantly eviscerated everyone near its epicentre, in some cases the only remains being a "shadow on the wall." Descriptions of the event describe hair and skin burning off, blinding's, clothing fusing to bodies, houses disappearing, ash and debris blackening the sun and mass fires. (Grant, 1999, p.4 - 6). 3 Days later, Nagasaki succumbed the same fate; the aptly named "Fat man" plutonium atom bomb was dropped on its secondary target after it was unable to fly over its primary target, Kokura. (Grant, 1999, p.42). 210,000 people were instantly killed in the initial blasts, but an inconceivable number were injured and permanently maimed by the devastating effects of radiation. Some survivors were simply named hibakusha; poor souls that cannot comprehend what happened, their bodies stripped of skin clothing disintegrated and their faces no longer human, impossible to recognise. (Lifton, Hosoe, 1985, p.26).



(FIGURE 2, Wikipedia contributors, 2019) figure 1:A Hibakusha that survived Hiroshima; her kimono pattern burnt onto her skin.

The atom bomb was not the end of Japan's nuclear catastrophe. The introduction of the vastly stronger Hydrogen bomb also marked tragedy for the nation. Project Castle Bravo marked the first test of a functional hydrogen bomb, which with a severe miscalculation of power allowed a small fishing boat, the Daigo Fukuryū Maru (or Lucky Dragon V) to enter the blast radius and fallout zone. This caused radioactive ash to rain on the crew; contaminating their skin, clothing, and the boat itself with dangerous levels of radiation. Once ashore, the anglers were admitted to hospital, with one losing his life; the boat itself was and is used as radiation research and currently is harboured in a museum. (Wikipedia, 2024)

These two cataclysmic events inspired Tomoyuki Tanaka, on a flight back to Japan after a failed movie attempt abroad. He thought to combine the tragedy of these events, the fear of radiation and the visuals of a 1953 American monster movie, "The beast from 20,000 fathoms", a prehistoric dinosaur that rampages through New York. After landing he immediately approached Ishiro Honda, a director and writer at the recently formed

TOHO industries, and alongside the special effects of Eiji Tsuburaya and Akira Watanabe created the first Godzilla movie. (BigActionBill, 2020, 14.30)

This first movie was an unforgiving and brutal message on anti-atomic warfare. Godzilla's debut brought a necessary analogy for how malevolent the use of nuclear warfare was by creating a greater evil. Ishiro Honda poured his time in service and his viewing of the aftermath of Hiroshima as a traumatic showing of how negative human beings can be. Tying back to the first sentence of this essay; “... *a nightmare created out of the darkness of the human soul.*”



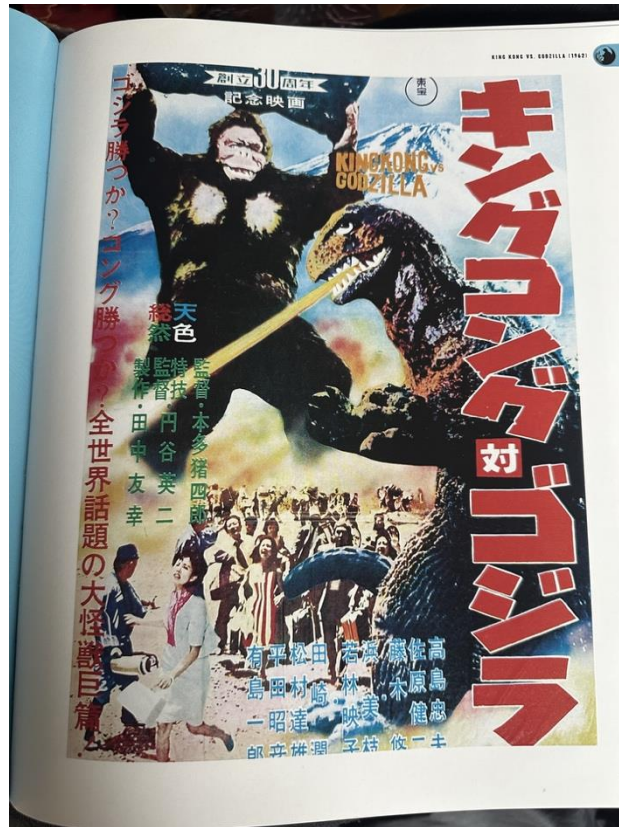
(FIGURE 3, Wikizilla, 2025) Figure 2: Storyboards of Godzilla rampaging through Tokyo.

There are several design elements that makes 1954 Godzilla a special nightmare fuel. He was the first monster born from a concept with a real meaning, not simply for cinema spectacle. Honda had the idea to have Godzilla fire “Radiation”, to make the devastation a visible problem unlike the real counterpart. Finally, the Hibakusha previously mentioned inspired Godzilla’s skin; scarring covering his body resemble the

burnt flesh on the Hiroshima victims. (Milner, 2024). This chilling addition creates a symbolic realism to Godzilla; these are what highlights Godzilla in the Monster flick genre. The fact his skin is made to mimic burns and radiation scarring adds another layer of symbolism, implying that he himself is a victim of the Atom bomb. The burns could also show that Honda wanted Godzilla to seem in pain, possibly making him a more sympathetic show of the negativity of nuclear warfare.

P2. GOING THROUGH HISTORY

The roots of Godzilla remain consistent, the creature born of the atomic bomb. That isn't to say that he didn't change. After the first movie, ending in Godzilla's death through an oxygen destroying bomb, Godzilla returns in "Godzilla raids again". This movie takes a different direction entirely, pitching the kaiju king against an "old foe", ankylosaurus named Anguirus. This is obviously a turn from the somber and symbolic first movie, but still showing aspects of the horrors witnessed during WWII. Honda was not a fan of the new approach of Godzilla simply fighting other large monsters. His thoughts on the next movie, "King Kong VS Godzilla" (1962) are as follows: *"The reason I showed the monster battle through the prism of a ratings war was to depict the reality of the times. When you think of King Kong just plain fighting Godzilla, it is stupid."* (IMDB, 2025) This shows that even with the change of tides, Ishiro Honda wanted to give these monster movies moral and meaning.



(FIGURE 4, ToHo, Skipper, 2022, p.31)

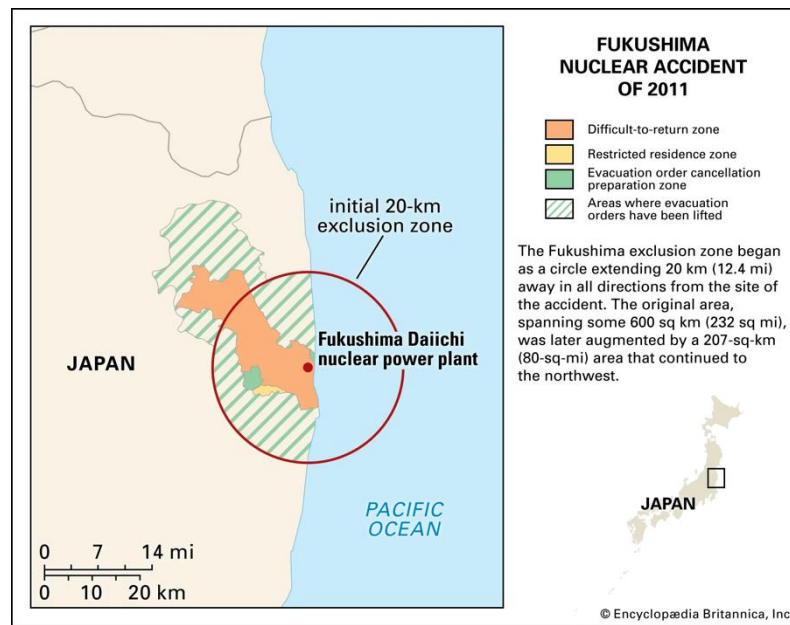
Honda would direct multiple Godzilla movies after these three, ending his calling with the big lizard with “Godzilla: All Monsters Attack” (1969). A director for ToHo marked his final movie as “...a film that showcases Hondas fondness for telling personal human stories, using the monsters as allegory to shine a light on our more human struggles.” (ToHo, Skipper, 2022, p.86) After Honda’s retirement from the franchise, the usage of serious analogies would dwindle severely, be it intentionally or not. There was “Godzilla VS Hedora” (1971), which was a reference to the world's climate and pollution struggles, but other than this the movies with meaning ended here; to be replaced by more action and destruction.



(FIGURE 5, Parnell, 2019)

The image above shows the designs for each iteration of Godzilla, other than the most recent movie. Each movie, although not always with the strong themes of nuclear warfare and fighting against it, are important in culture. From my understanding, Godzilla is used as a conduit to talk about world issues, more specifically humanities issues. Two of Godzillas most recent movies are testament to this, Shin Godzilla (2016) and Godzilla Minus One (2023). They return to the roots, commenting on world problems or events that are impactful. Shin Godzilla is unlike other movies based off and is themed around the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster and the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, directed by Hideaki Anno, the creator of Neon Genesis Evangelion. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2025) March 11th, 2011, a catastrophic 9.0 magnitude hit the coast of Japan off the coast of Japan's mainland. The earthquake triggered a tsunami, 2.7 meters high upon impact. The death toll and missing bodies reached to around 10,000 or higher, however the disasters triggered yet another catastrophe. Fukushima

nuclear power plant sustained significant damage, including fires and explosions at 4 of the 6 reactors. This led to radiation leakage and evacuations of nearby areas in a diameter of around 20km; the severity of the incident was placed in the same category as the Chernobyl accident. Around quarter of a million people were displaced from their homes. (Kenneth, Rafferty, 2019)



(FIGURE 6, Pletcher, Kenneth, Rafferty, 2019)

Shin Godzilla was a commentary on the failure of the Japanese Government to act, and how their lack of haste cost countless lives. Godzilla is shown to be an environmental disaster and a creature constantly in pain; no negotiation, just an animal in agony. (Kaiju News, 2025)

Godzilla minus one is a little more straightforward, being a commentary on PTSD, and survivors' guilt after WW2. A major part of the movie is the main character, Koichi Shikishima, trying to live his life after the war as a failed kamikaze pilot; feeling the guilt of watching a repair platoon die due to his inaction and fear. Minus one is an emotional masterpiece and explored humanity in such a way it recaptured the essence of what Ishiro Honda's Godzilla meant. (Kodama, 2023)

CONCLUSION

Monster movies have been a pivotal part in my life since a young age; Pacific Rim, Cloverfield and Godzilla were monumental in the type of artist I want to be. This essay

let me understand one of my favourite pieces of media more than ever. My answer to the question of Godzillas cultural importance is he is a funnel; a character that is used to comment on the world's problems and controversies. Contradicting this, he can also just be a monster, an entertaining brute, and most importantly, the king of the monsters.



(FIGURE 7, Nishikawa, 2016, p.124)

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FIGURES

- FIGURE 1: View. “Midday on 60 Years of Godzilla, Friday, May 16.” *Chrisreedfilm*, 14 May 2014, chrisreedfilm.com/2014/05/14/midday-on-60-years-of-godzilla-friday-may-16/. Accessed 5 Apr. 2025.
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