Journal of Aesthetics & Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/zjac20

"Whose roar is it, anyway? Localization and ideological communication with respect to the Toho *Godzilla* franchise"

Jeeshan Gazi

To cite this article: Jeeshan Gazi (2024) "Whose roar is it, anyway? Localization and ideological communication with respect to the Toho *Godzilla* franchise", Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, 16:1, 2367264, DOI: 10.1080/20004214.2024.2367264

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2367264

Published online: 16 Jun 2024.

JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS & CULTURE
2024, VOL. 16, 2367264
https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2367264

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

"Whose roar is it, anyway? Localization and ideological communication with respect to the Toho *Godzilla* franchise"

Jeeshan Gazi

Research and Knowledge Exchange, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s, film critics and audiences have come to recognize Ishirō Honda's original cut of *Gojira/Godzilla* (1954) to be a substantial meditation on the atomic bombing of Japan, an analysis that had been initially obscured by the re-working of the film for distribution to Western audiences. This article elucidates how the story of the international distribution and localization of Toho's *Godzilla* films communicates the story of Japan's relationship to the United States, who dropped those bombs and shaped Japan's post-war constitution, through the analysis of a further three key films from Toho's *Godzilla* franchise: Koji Hashimoto's *Gojira/The Return of Godzilla* (1984), Takao Okawara's *Gojira Nisen: Mireniamu/Godzilla 2000: Millennium* (1999), and Hideaki Anno & Shinji Higuchi's *Shin Gojira/Shin Godzilla* (2016). Each of these films re-set the series' continuity, and all but the last were radically re-cut for distribution abroad. Comparative analysis of the Japanese versions of the films with their American cuts demonstrates that the *Godzilla* franchise provides a unique transnational frame for charting the tensions concerning Japan's re-emergence upon the world stage at key moments since the Second World War.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 17 February 2024
Accepted 8 June 2024

KEYWORDS
Godzilla; localization; cinema; Japan; U.S. relations; ideology

Introduction

Since the mid-nineteen-eighties many scholars, critics, and cinephiles—if not general audiences—have come to recognize Ishirō Honda's original cut of *Gojira/Godzilla* (1954) "as not only the cinema's first antinuclear film but also the finest re-creation of the mood and desperation of a civilian population devastated by the worst weapon ever used" (Brothers 2011, 40). The belatedness of this recognition is largely due to the re-editing and global distribution of the film as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956)—an American localization of the film that stripped Honda's original of its substance and came to inform the popular imagination of the monster. Other key films of the now 70 years old *Godzilla* franchise suffered much the same fate, and this article demonstrates that they similarly deserve critical attention by placing them under the frame of U.S.–Japanese relations across time. These three films are Koji Hashimoto's *Gojira/The Return of Godzilla* (1984), Takao Okawara's *Gojira Nisen: Mireniamu/Godzilla 2000: Millennium* (1999), and Hideaki Anno & Shinji Higuchi's *Shin Gojira/Shin Godzilla* (2016). Each of these films re-set the series' continuity, and all but the last were radically recut for distribution abroad. Comparative analysis of the Japanese versions of the films with their American cuts demonstrates that the *Godzilla* franchise provides a unique transnational frame for charting the tensions concerning Japan's re-emergence upon the world stage at key moments since the Second World War.

Gojira/Godzilla (1954)

Following the dropping of the atomic bombs "Little Boy" on Hiroshima and "Fat Boy" on Nagasaki in August 1945, Japan endured a seven-year occupation by a U.S.-led military force that "employed over 8,000 censors who virtually silenced the voices of those who had suffered from the atomic bombs" (Szasz and Issei 2007, 740). Given that "cautious Japanese governments continued the policy of suppressing overt atomic-related themes as late as the 1970s" (Szasz and Issei 2007, 740), Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla* was at the vanguard of works that would allow Japanese audiences to process the trauma of war:

> *Godzilla* drew in nearly ten million Japanese viewers who were now able to deal with images that were indelibly integrated into their national psyche. Indeed the cathartic effect the film apparently had was quite possibly the main reason for *Godzilla*'s success; the horrific sufferings of the past could be addressed and soothed by the most horrific fiction of the present (Brothers 2011, 40).

An examination of how the *Godzilla* franchise speaks to tensions relating to the emergence of contemporary Japan begins with an understanding that, while it

CONTACT Jeeshan Gazi j.gazi@gold.ac.uk Research and Knowledge Exchange, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

is now widely understood that Honda had "resolved to use the monster as a metaphor for the growing fears of a nation living in the shadow of doomsday", it took several decades for this to be recognized in the West (Brothers 2011, 36). This is because the film was radically recut and reshot under the direction of American producers Joseph E. Levine, Harold Ross, and Richard Kay, and distributed globally through their joint company Transworld, as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956).

The radical suppression of *Godzilla*'s atomic themes to the American, and then global, audience is encapsulated by the scene in which paleontologist Dr. Yamane reports the findings of his investigation into the creature at the Diet (Japan's legislature).

In Honda's film, Yamane's conclusion that Godzilla emerged as "the H-bomb tests disturbed its peace" and that it is thus "carrying sand of disastrous thermos-nuclear material" to the extent that it is "strongly radioactive" itself, provokes a heated debate. A government official is the first to respond: "How can we tell people that the nuclear bomb tests brought Godzilla to life? If we publicize such a thing it will harm international relations. It's too grave. It will create terror and panic among the people and lead to uncontrollable economic and diplomatic confusion". The dialogue here clearly alludes to the real-world reticence of the Japanese government to confront the U.S. over the Bomb, their subsequent atomic testing in the Pacific Ocean, and the continuing suppression and self-censorship of such subject matter following the end of the U.S. occupation. Enraged by the official's urging that this information "be kept secret", citizens at this hearing, relations of the fishermen victims and members of the Odo island village destroyed by Godzilla, exclaim: "No! Everyone should know about it!" The scene ends with the two sides confronting each other in a shouting match and the press pack rising to their feet.

This same sequence marks the only moment in the *King of the Monsters* version in which the nuclear connection is stated, yet we find that the reference serves a far different function than in the Japanese original. In his English dubbed dialogue, *this* Dr. Yamane's report is rewritten and ends as follows: "now that analysis of radioactivity of the creature's footprint shows the existence of Strontium-90 – a product of the H-bomb—it is my belief that Godzilla was resurrected due to the repeated experiments of H-bombs". Off screen the clamor of the gallery voices rises and as Yamane seats himself we cut to the chaos that closes the original scene also. Except here, without the confrontation between the politician and the citizens, it seems as if the crowd is angered by Yamane's suggestion itself. This leaves his conclusion as to Godzilla's atomic origins open to incredulity on the part of the viewer also, where in the original it is affirmed by the responses of his audience at the Diet. Further, the use of expressions by Yamane such as "the nuclear menace", and the notion that even Godzilla itself is seeking to escape it, are also cut from the Japanese original, thus removing the negative characterization of the then ongoing U.S. bomb tests.

The scenes that immediately follow this outrage at the Diet in both films then go on to establish the thematic focus of each version.

In Honda's film, train commuters link "radioactive fish and rain" to the appearance of Godzilla, affirming the film's connection to the Bikini Atoll incident of March 1st 1954, when "the United States detonated a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, a weapon almost one thousand times more powerful than that dropped on Hiroshima" (Tsutsui 2004, 18). This first underwater nuclear explosion, in a series of 23 atomic bomb tests conducted by the U.S. in the central Pacific between 1945 and 1958, resulted in catastrophe when a Japanese tuna trawler named Daigo Fukuryū Maru (Lucky Dragon No. 5) found itself covered in radioactive ash, resulting in its crew members suffering from acute radiation syndrome, one subsequent death, days of radioactive rain on the mainland, and the contamination of fish that had already entered the Japanese markets before the extent of the initially concealed fallout radius had been established. The first half of Honda's film makes several references to the Bikini Atoll incident, such as giving the name Eiko-Maru No.5 to the tuna boat that is caught up in the bright light that marks Godzilla's awakening —"a representation of a phenomenon known to the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the '*pikadon*' or 'flash-boom' caused by the explosion of atomic bombs" (Brothers 2011, 36)—and depicting the villagers of Odo, on which the shipwrecked survivors wash up, as suffering from poor fishing hauls and radioactive rain following the explosion in the ocean.

Returning to the commuters on the train, they then express fear of a repeat of "what I went through in Nagasaki" and the possibility that they might have to "[e]vacuate Tokyo", foreshadowing the images of Godzilla's raid to come. Amongst the "WWII analogies in *Godzilla*" that Peter H. Brothers (2011, 37) identifies are those communicated via this raid: the depictions of Tokyo as a fiery hellscape amidst Godzilla's rampage, which would remind Japanese viewers of the American firebombing of that city on March 9th 1945; the Japanese military's air response to Godzilla, which recalled the real "Operation Olympic" that was initiated to halt the U.S. assault from the sea; and the overflowing hospitals in the aftermath of the monster's destruction, which echoed those filled with the victims of the real atomic bombs.

This scene with the commuters is excised in its entirety from the American cut and a newly filmed sequence takes its place. Here Raymond Burr's journalist phones his editor back in the U.S. to discuss the looming military action against Godzilla, establishing that the conflict at the heart of the narrative relates to whether the beast can be beaten, and thus positioning the film as an FX-laden blockbuster. As William Tsutsui (2004, 41) puts it, Honda's original had been turned into "a standard monster-on-the-loose action film" in which "radiation became a gimmick rather than a moral crisis, and Godzilla was firmly recast in the inoffensive tradition of American atomic-age science fiction cinema"; films such as *Them!* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), and, subsequently, *The Beginning of the End* (1957).

Aided by Levine's rebranding of Godzilla as "King of the Monsters", which "connect[ed] the newest beast on the block to an established Hollywood property, the great King Kong, in the minds of the ticket-buying public", the new version of the film became a huge success, domestically, globally, and in Japan itself, where this cut was released the following year, resulting in the important and somber message of Honda's original being "neutralized" (Tsutsui 2004, 40).[1] Given that the Office of War Information had long been disbanded,[2] we have no reason to believe the Transworld cut of *Godzilla* was undertaken for ideological reasons directed by the State, which would be to suggest a continuation of the censorship of atomic themes within Japanese cultural works produced during the U.S.-led occupation, nor that Levine himself held any specific ideological views on the matter. After all, he had earlier distributed the movie *Ravaged Earth* (1942), "a film of Japanese atrocities in China" for which he was proud to have written promotional copy that stated: "*It will make you fighting mad! Jap Rats Stop at Nothing! See the Rape of China!*", while he would later "quip" that a major demographic of his production *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) would be the Japanese, because "they love to see white men kill each other" (McKenna 2016, 29 and 189). This mercenary approach to film distribution suggests that this reworking of Honda's film was largely guided by an attempt to maximise profits, as would be asserted by fellow *King of the Monsters* producer Richard Kay: "the movie was strictly a job for me. It was a matter of bucks, not art" (Matzer 1998). As Tsutsui concludes, "the film was cut, edited, shuffled, and augmented to produce something that would meet American audiences' action-heavy expectations of a creature feature and would cater to the filmgoing masses who demanded to hear their movies rather than read them" (2005, 4).

This reworking of Honda's *Godzilla* thus aligns with the broader approach to the localization of Japanese media in North America, which relates to "the process of modifying an existing [work] to make it accessible, usable and culturally suitable to a target audience" (Di Marco 2007). A process more commonly associated with anime, manga, and video games, *Godzilla* serves as an early instance of the localization of live-action Japanese media. Unlike the approach to video games, where the aim is to "sell a game in a different territory while also maintaining the 'look and feel' of the original game and providing target players with a similar gameplay experience to that of the original players" (Mangiron 2021, 9), *King of the Monsters* demonstrates an approach to localization that Brian Ruh identifies as becoming prominent with respect to televisual anime in the late 1970s, where, through the employment of "techniques of selective editing and dubbing", American producers "took the source animation as a kind of raw material and completely rewrote the stories to make them something unique for presentation to American audiences as well as to television audiences around the world" (Ruh 2010, 31).

In this connection, it is important to remember that while the seriousness of Honda's *Godzilla* "has been difficult for American critics to acknowledge, for to do so is to admit the guilt belonging solely to the society that had dropped the bombs in the first place" (Brothers 2011, 37), we need to also recognize that, with respect to general audiences, the content and circumstances surrounding the first entry in the *Godzilla* franchise must be situated within the broader re-emergence of contemporary Japan upon the world stage following the catastrophe of World War II. This re-emergence was mediated and carefully managed by those outside of the country, particularly the U.S., whose "military occupation force dismantled and rebuilt the Japanese family and society in such a way as to ensure that Japan could never again become a *military* threat to the allies" (Noriega 1987, 65), but also the U.K. and Australia, whose soldiers had endured horrific Prisoner of War camps and who were thus reluctant to afford either power or sympathy to the nation that had operated them.[3] Similarly, regional governments—China, who had endured "Japan's wartime use of the Three-Alls policy ('kill all, burn all, destroy all')" and the forced prostitution of women, along with Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia, who also shared the brunt of such brutality—have continued to seek accountability for such atrocities from successive Japanese governments (Jeans 2005, 188). Given this, it seems unlikely that the filmmakers involved in *Godzilla*'s localization would not have been aware that, from a *commercial* perspective, a film that ultimately functions to explore the suffering of the Japanese in the final months of WWII would hardly be an attractive proposition for global audiences still

reeling from the cruelties of that war, even if its thematic stakes relate to humanity as a whole.

To some extent the de-politicization of *Godzilla* was an inherent vice present within the original picture itself. For while the figure of Godzilla was partly inspired by the supernatural demons and monsters prevalent in Japanese culture before the Meiji period (Tsutsui 2004, 15), the creature sharing with the *kami* their status as "gods not because of any moral attributes … but because of their literally awesome powers" (Napier 2001, 185), the film was commissioned by Toho Studios to compete with American monster movies such as *King Kong* – produced in 1933 but re-released globally in 1952 to much commercial success—and the worldwide blockbuster *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953). The seven-year U.S.-led occupation found previously suppressed works of American pop culture, from Hollywood film to Disney animation to Western comics, flooding into Japan and significantly impacting its native forms of cinema, anime, and manga (Gravett 2004, 24). Honda's *Godzilla* is no exception.

It is for this reason that the series' movement away from its political and cultural subtexts can be observed as early as Motoyoshi Oda's direct sequel to Honda's film, *Gojira no Gyakushū/Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), which was produced and released months before the original movie had even been licensed for localization in overseas markets (Ryfle 1998, 51–52). Yamane returns at the beginning of Oda's movie and tells us that the monster in this picture is *another* Godzilla, with the first having been successfully destroyed, and it is notable that we first see *this* Godzilla battling another prehistoric creature, known as Angilas. Though Yamane hypothesizes that both creatures have arisen due to continuing hydrogen bomb tests, neither are characterized as embodiments of the Bomb, or of human callousness towards life. Further, the uniqueness of the original Godzilla as a singular being has been undermined, such that the *kaiju* (strange beast) is no longer met with reverence and awe, as in the first film, but anger and annoyance. Godzilla is instead branded a "violent creature" and is positioned as an unambiguous villain, as is communicated by his defeat of the Angilas monster half-way through the film. Given that the latter had been described as exhibiting "a thorough hatred for war-like predators", positioning it as a possible savior to the humans of the film, Godzilla's brutal killing of the creature emphasizes his malevolence. Further, with a set of characters whose humor and familial interactions constitute the emotional heart of the movie, *Godzilla Raids Again* moves the franchise away from commentary on the nation and towards interpersonal relationships that foreground the impact of Godzilla's destruction for the viewer, setting the tone for many of the other films that would follow (Godzilla is what happens while other people are making plans).

This sequel was only a moderate success in Japan, and so Godzilla lay dormant for several years and was only revived when Toho was given the opportunity to create a King Kong movie, reworking the script they had bought from American producer John Beck so that the iconic monster that had originally inspired their *kaiju* would now come head-to-head with him in battle. *King Kong vs Godzilla* (1962), which saw Ishirō Honda return as director, is the first of the films to be shot in colour and its bright images heighten the film's sharp satirical sensibilities—its skewering of "office politics and the petty travails of white-collar life", which Toho had previously found success with via its comedic "salaryman" series (Tsutsui 2004, 60), and, in particular, its "biting critique of the banal programming that dominated television" (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, 185). Responding to an increasingly dumbed down spectator culture within Japan, Honda would state: "People were making a big deal out of ratings […] But my own view of TV shows was that they did not take the viewer seriously, that they took the audience for granted … so I decided to show that through my movie" (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, 185). The fights between the monsters are thus explicitly characterized as wrestling matches by the advertising chief of the Japanese pharmaceutical company that brings Kong to the island in order to compete with the media coverage generated by a rival firm's collaboration with the U.N.-led scientific expedition that had unearthed Godzilla, and their battles very much unfold as such—Haruo Nakajima, the actor in the *kaiju* suit who choreographed the fights, "freely borrow[ing] their moves from professional wrestling, a sport gaining popularity in Japan at the time" (Ryfle 1998, 84). The film's broader commentary, however, also speaks to the cultural status of Godzilla itself, with Honda well-aware of the ludicrousness of the film having "transformed [Godzilla] from nuclear protest monster into outsized [superstar Japanese wrestler] Rikidōzan, engaging in comic wrestling antics" (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, 186).

As with Honda's original movie, the film would be reworked for Western audiences for its distribution, this time through Universal-International, in 1963. The U.S. version of the film is framed as a U.N. newscast based in New York, with further dispatches from a Tokyo news room; these two interior locations, and the frequently re-used shot of a model communications satellite for transitions between them, constitute the only new footage filmed for the American version of *King Kong vs Godzilla*, with much of Honda's footage reordered and weaved together into sustained action sequences, with shortened, dubbed, versions of the

interpersonal, character-based, scenes featured in order to plug potential plot holes relating to the effects heavy set pieces. While this re-framing of the narrative via the journalistic reportage motif suggests Beck simply copied the model provided by the Transworld reworking of *Godzilla* into *King of the Monsters*, it is notable that Beck had sold the script to Toho, originally as *King Kong vs Prometheus*, due to an apparent inability to secure funding from American studios for the stop-motion animation that had originally been sought for the film (SciFiJapan 2014), and that he had retained the distribution rights for the picture in territories outside of Asia. Given this, it might be considered that, rather than localizing a pre-existing work—as Transworld did, Beck undertook a pioneering approach to media production by which effects heavy live-action sequences are outsourced to international production companies and employed in service of domestically shot American narrative content, in order to save money on production costs for works aimed at Western markets.[4] A similar approach would be adopted, to great success, decades later by Saban Entertainment for its *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* television series,[5] and it is notable that Margaret Loesch, the head of Fox Children's Network, commissioned the show, when many other networks would not, due to her recognition of how localized *Godzilla* movies had been received by Western audiences in the past: "As a child I loved the old 'Godzilla' movies. I couldn't get enough of them. It didn't matter if I could see the wires and the seams in the costumes and the lips moving when the words didn't—they were so fanciful and imaginative" (Heffley 1993).

The enormous success of *King Kong vs Godzilla* within Japan—it would remain the franchise's highest grossing film in the country for over half a century, until 2016's *Shin Godzilla* – led Toho to produce many more sequels, and far more frequently. With *San Daikaijū Chikyū Saidai no Kessen/Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964), Noriega (1987, 71) writes that Toho's president had decided to tailor Godzilla to "Japanese children, his image soon adorning their clothing, lunch boxes, toys, and candy", while Szasz and Issei (2007, 245) identify the 1973 film *Gojira tai Megaro/Godzilla vs Megalon* as the point where the former became depicted as "a benign monster", completing the de-politicization of the figure of Godzilla during the Shōwa era of the franchise. Many of these films would reach the West in the poorly dubbed format described by Loesch, firmly establishing the *Godzilla* franchise as "a defining example of the so-bad-its-good genre of B-movie-making, fare suitable only for a laugh and a kiddie audience" (Tsutsui 2004, 8).

Gojira/The Return of Godzilla (1984)

While the first series of 15 original Japanese movies ended in 1975, the franchise would be rebooted in 1984 with a film that would reset the timeline and function as a direct sequel to Honda's *Godzilla*. Intended to be a return to the seriousness of the original movie, with the production marking its 30th anniversary, it also saw the return of Godzilla as a vehicle for ideological communication.

Both the timing and content of Koji Hashimoto's *Gojira/The Return of Godzilla* is significant as it speaks to Japan's rise as an economic force upon the world stage. *The Return of Godzilla* was produced at the point at which Japan had achieved a US$62 billion trade surplus, aided by the flooding of the American market by Japanese products—from cars, stereos, and personal computers to video games, manga, and anime—as if in a reversal of the cultural impact of the post-war U.S.-led occupation (Gravett 2004, 154). "Japan's own global vision had dramatically emerged", and this film aesthetically and thematically communicates the nation's burgeoning self-confidence (Cavanaugh 2001, 254).

The Return of Godzilla is set 30 years after Honda's original film, in a Japan where the creature had since been absent. Incubated by a volcanic crater, Godzilla is aligned with the forces of nature and thus resituated within the tradition of Japanese tales of the supernatural (Napier 2001, 177), while the timing of the monster's re-emergence coincides with the peak of the Cold War, thus updating Honda's nuclear concerns to address the dangerous tussle between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

Following Godzilla's sinking of a Russian submarine, a committee is convened in which the Japanese Prime Minister is confronted by representatives of the two superpowers, both of whom are determined to use nuclear weapons off the coast of Japan in order to destroy the monster. The Soviet Special Envoy growls that it is "the only alternative" to the monster's own destruction, while the U.S. Special Envoy childishly exclaims: "He's right!" A subsequent closed-door discussion amongst Japanese government ministers on this matter communicates the various dimensions of the nation's position within the Cold War. One minister reminds the P.M. that "if we refuse their request, we will be diplomatically isolated!" Another points out that the effects of such nuclear weapons "even on a small scale are hard to quantify. The Americans and Russians have hesitated to use them on the battlefield because of this". And it is notable that a further member states: "if Tokyo is destroyed, our economy will be destroyed as well!" Following this heated debate, the following exchange takes place between the Japanese P.M. and the two Special Envoys of the superpowers:

> Japanese P.M.: "Let me state Japan's overall principles. We neither possess, nor use nuclear weapons. With that being said, we cannot permit their use now. That is final".
>
> Soviet Envoy: "Your country's pride is at stake! Russia has already lost a valuable nuclear sub to Godzilla! We have the right to destroy it!"
>
> U.S. Envoy: "This is no time to be discussing principles!"
>
> Japanese P.M.: "No, it is the right time when principles are at stake. We cannot lose our heads because of this crisis. Besides, we have no proof that nuclear weapons will work. If we can use them, who can say when they will be used again… [*The U.S. envoy here shakes his head in despair and distaste.*] You think that we are acting out of national pride and maybe we are… But what of your attitudes? What right do you have to say that we must follow you? I will personally speak with your leaders regarding our country's stand."

This fantasy of Japanese power reflects a broader belief that was brewing in the nation "during the 1980s, the gilded age of Japan, [when] worship of the US dissolved into a state of euphoria to celebrate Japan's own economic superpower" (Matsui 2014, 83). Such euphoria would culminate in the 1989 essay *The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will Be First Among Equals*. Written by nationalist politician Shintaro Ishihara, and featuring contributions from Sony co-founder and chairman Akio Morita, the text critiques "the unwillingness of Japanese officials to stand up to Washington" and their "acceptance of the subordinate status of a tributary state" (1991, 67–8), given that "[u]ntil very recently, the United States was the unrivaled military and economical leader of the free world. [But] [n]ow, suddenly, Japan seems to have usurped that economic power" (84).

The ideological stance of this essay, which would become a bestseller in Japan, underpins *The Return of Godzilla*, both through the aforementioned committee sequence and the aesthetic presentation of the nation's economic power. This takes the form of the neon-lit skyscraper filled cityscape of Tokyo that Godzilla rampages within. The colourful, electronic, skyline is contrasted with the photos from Honda's original film of the Tokyo that was fire-bombed (by Godzilla… and the U.S.) that are presented to the monster's first survivor early on in the film. That the neon advertising and corporate branding of the tall buildings are a conscious choice of the filmmakers, rather than coincidental to the fact of Tokyo in 1984, can be seen in the narrative's divergence from the original sequel, *Godzilla Raids Again*. In the latter, the strategy to lure away Godzilla involves shutting off the neon lights of the coastal city of Osaka towards which the monster approaches and dropping light-bombs from fighter jets that it will follow out to sea amidst the black-out. The reasoning here is that the glare of the hydrogen bomb awoke Godzilla in the first place, and we note that the light-bombs remind us of the atomic phenomenon of *pikadon* referred to earlier. In *The Return of Godzilla*, the monster is understood to have a biological sonar which the heroes plan to manipulate to lure it back to Mount Mihara, an active volcano on Oshima island whose raw nature is highlighted via a juxtaposition of wide shots that stress the expanse of its desolate landscape and shots of the metropolis at night via aerial views and canted angles that emphasize the height of the towering buildings. This rethinking of the character allows the filmmakers to keep the lights on in Tokyo as an aesthetic representation of Japan's economic boom. This is further emphasized by Godzilla's feeding on nuclear power reactors and its trashing of the infrastructure of the city—intercity railways, busy flyovers, the multi-story office buildings—as well as a piece of fantasy tech known as Super-X, a "flying fortress" intended to bring Godzilla down.

It is notable that the many shots of the bright lights of contemporary Tokyo are minimized in the American version of the movie: *Godzilla 1985* (1985). As with *King of the Monsters*, this U.S. version is radically recut with the shooting of additional footage, newly written dialogue (for both newly introduced English-speaking actors and the dubbed Japanese voices), and the reappearance of Raymond Burr as the reporter who framed the carnage of the first movie for American audiences. The re-editing of the film largely works to emphasize the villainy of the Soviets and the reliance of the Japanese upon the U.S.

In regard to the Soviets, it is notable that the dialogue of Russian characters is not dubbed in English, as it is with the Japanese, but instead re-subtitled. Keeping the Soviet voices in their native tongue, but not the U.S.'s allies of the Japanese, is, of course, a technique of othering that plays on xenophobia. And the new subtitles are used to revise a key plot point in which a Russian command ship with nuclear codes is destroyed by Godzilla, resulting in the accidental launching of a nuclear missile from a Soviet satellite directly towards Tokyo. Rather than showing the Soviets complying with the Japanese decision to ban the use of such weapons by switching off their launch system (as in the original), the same character is instead depicted (via subtitles) as ignoring the directive and instead ensuring that the system is switched on. Later on in the film(s), as Godzilla trashes the ship, the original version finds the Soviet commander desperately trying to ensure that such a launch cannot occur before dying a few meters from the missile control system, where the American version depicts the commander striving to *launch* the nuke, which he does in his dying moments, via a newly shot insert of a finger hitting a big red button.

In both versions of the film, Japan is saved from the Soviet missile via its interception by an American missile, which results in the production of a striking red sky from the nuclear fallout of the atomic blast within the stratosphere, and an electrical storm that revives the seemingly defeated Godzilla. However, without the preceding demonstration of strength by the Japanese Prime Minister, the latter nation is seen to be a country utterly dependent upon the U.S.

This is to say that the earlier sequence in which the Special Envoys lobby the Japanese P.M. to use nuclear weapons is recut in the U.S. version in a manner that changes the dynamics of the situation. The U.S. Envoy's outburst is excised, saving the Americans embarrassment (provided elsewhere in the new version by way of a comic relief character at the Pentagon; a transference of the humor from the political to the interpersonal), and the internal discussion within the Japanese cabinet is cut completely, stripping the movie of its contemporary political resonances. Similarly, the P.M.'s decision, given immediately after the cases made by the Envoys, is less a determined declaration of intent than a brief statement: "Gentlemen, Japan has a firm nuclear policy. We will not make, possess, or allow nuclear weapons. We cannot make an exception. Not even in a situation as grave as this".

Though *The Return of Godzilla* was produced at the point at which Japan had become an economic powerhouse it can be seen that their cultural self-determination was largely compromised with the release of *Godzilla 1985*, just as it had been with the U.S. version of Honda's *Gojira*, and that the radical reworking of Hashimoto's film for Western audiences resonates with a reticence to further burnish Japan's (inter)national success story, at a time when

> Anxieties in the United States over Japan's economic success—over the possibility that Japan may have after all "won the war" or "beaten America at its own game"—were so strong not only because they threatened the United States' global economic domination but, more profoundly, because they challenged the very core of American identity as the world's leader (Darling-Wolf 2015, 104).

However, as with Transworld's reworking of Honda's original film, there appears to be a lack of explicit ideological intent behind the American reworking of *The Return of Godzilla*. This is evident from Brett Homenick's series of interviews with *Godzilla 1985*'s editor, producer, director, and screenwriters of the dubbed dialogue and newly shot scenes. As the editor, Michael Spencer recalls, the focus of the rework was determined by the commercial concerns of New World Pictures—an independent production and distribution company that had been co-founded by exploitation movie entrepreneur Roger Corman and had by then come under new ownership—who had procured the North American distribution rights to Hashimoto's film:

> "I think it was felt at New World that the picture was too concerned with the anti-nuclear issues and was too 'talky.' Our instructions were to make it play more like a (genre) picture. Emphasize the action, etc. [...] I think it was totally a marketing decision. I don't think anyone minded the political or nuclear issues; they just wanted it to sell and believed the market was not really that interested in those concerns, at least not the demographic they were aiming at. Who knows." (Homenick 2018c)

The uncredited screenwriter Straw Weisman was at least aware that "Godzilla movies are really about getting bombed by the Americans. That's where Godzilla really comes from. Godzilla is a product of the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima" (Homenick 2018b), but found matching English words to Japanese mouth movements constrained what could be produced for the dubbed dialogue, and decided, ultimately, that they "were writing for a horror/monster audience, and the idea was to have fun with the material and the characters". This aligns with the approach to the American localization of anime during this era, where "the length of each [visual] speech utterance [...] provided a template for the rescripting"; rather than drawing on translations of the original Japanese scripts, the U.S. localization teams "made up the story and dialogue based on what they saw (and created) onscreen" (Ruh 2010, 35).

A key focus for the localization team of *Godzilla 1985* was the streamlining of the narrative, which included the editor and producer "simplif[ying] the second act's B-story about the dangers of super tall high-rise buildings. It's a B-story that probably made a lot of sense, and had some impact, in Japan at the time. But it was a story line that was a distraction to an American audience", according to R.J. Kizer, the director of the newly shot American scenes (Homenick 2021). As for the matter of the Russians intentionally launching nuclear missiles towards Japan, the film's producer, Tony Randel, ultimately takes credit for this change[6]:

> "That was totally me. [...] That was a complete joke I did. (laughs) I did it. I remember looking over the film and trying to figure out how we were going to integrate scenes. I had a really funny idea: Let's make it so the Russians start the whole thing! (laughs) [...] I'll take 100% blame for that, and to this day I get the biggest laugh about it. Because it was the Reagan era, and because I made it look like the Russians started the whole (thing), it was a 1980s joke." (Homenick 2018a)

Taken together, the filmmakers responsible for localizing *The Return of Godzilla* clearly lacked interest in retaining the substance of the Japanese film's narrative and ideological concerns in favour of ensuring its distribution to American audiences

would result in commercial success, leading to Hashimoto's film suffering the same fate as Honda's. The approach taken by the New World Pictures team to reach Western audiences very much plugs into, and draws upon, the aforementioned cultural status of Godzilla in the West, as established through the localization of the previous films of the Shōwa era, as is evident in their short, but effective, tongue-in-cheek trailer for *Godzilla 1985*. Written by former *Saturday Night Live* writer Nelson Lyon (Homenick 2018a), this trailer takes the form of the following narrated text, displayed as white on black title cards, before the canted image of Godzilla between two skyscrapers amidst a laser attack appears on the screen, quickly followed by a close-up shot of the monster unleashing his famous roar:

> In 1956… he first appeared on motion picture screens across the country.
>
> His impact on audiences was instantaneous and unprecedented.
>
> His acting technique was revolutionary… his presence overwhelming.
>
> He possessed more raw talent than any performer of his generation.
>
> He soon became an international legend, a giant who took the world by storm.
>
> Then, suddenly, at the height of his fame, he retired from motion pictures.
>
> Now he is back.
>
> And he's more magnificent, more glamorous, more devastating than ever.
>
> Prepare yourself.
>
> The greatest star of all has returned.

The comedic framing of this return of Godzilla to American cinema screens connected the movie with the kitsch status of the earlier series of localized films, and this status would be proactively embraced by Toho themselves with their next reboot of the *Godzilla* franchise.

Gojira Nisen: Mireniamu/Godzilla 2000: Millennium (1999)

Somewhat embarrassingly for Ishihara, his notorious book would come to be published in an English translation in 1991, just as Japan's economic bubble burst. However, while its economy would drastically decline across the nineties, it is the global popularity of Japan's cultural output that would instead ascend across the last decade of the twentieth century. It is this context that underpins the next reboot of the franchise: Takao Okawara's *Godzilla 2000: Millennium*.

Okawara's film functions less as a reset of continuity than an international re-launch. For instance, where Honda's *Godzilla* and Hashimoto's *The Return of Godzilla* built up the mystery surrounding the re/emergence of the monster in their first acts, here Godzilla is seen in all its apocalyptic ferociousness within minutes of the film's opening, following the introduction of a Godzilla Prediction Network that indicates that, in this timeline, the monster is already a fixture of Japanese life. And that Toho privileged the international version of the film is evident in the fact that the Japanese cut was not available on home media outside of Germany until a Blu-Ray release in 2010. This is interesting because the international cut embraces both the Hollywood blockbuster aesthetic of Roland Emmerich's TriStar *Godzilla* (1998), which became that year's third highest grossing movie globally, and the aforementioned popular Western conception of the *Godzilla* franchise as "a defining example of the so-bad-its-good genre of B-moviemaking" (Tsutsui 2004, 8).

The international version of *Godzilla 2000* saw TriStar Pictures cut eight minutes of the film, which included dropping entire scenes and trimming most of those that remained in order to accelerate the pacing of the narrative, which was further aided by a new, dynamic, musical score. The effect of these changes is such that the international cut emphasizes and foregrounds the already evident influence of contemporary Hollywood disaster movies on Okawara's film; movies such as Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), with the floor-by-floor destruction of Tokyo Opera City Tower by an alien craft resembling the beams bursting down onto the White House in the American film, as well as the most successful monster movie of the nineties, Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), as evidenced by the opening sequence in which Godzilla plays T-Rex and chases down a jeep driven by the film's protagonists.

In regard to the embrace of the franchise's kitsch status, the English dub replaces the original's hard sci-fi tendencies with comical action movie dialogue that almost parodies that of Hollywood blockbusters. For instance, the claim that a missile will "drill Godzilla's skin, no matter how thick it is", in the Japanese version, is instead said to "go through Godzilla like **crap** through a goose" (emphasis their own), in the dub. And the campiness of the dubbed vocal performances inevitably evokes nostalgia for the original Shōwa *Godzilla* series as they would have been received by Western audiences.

This embrace of the popular Western conception of the *Godzilla* franchise by Toho, and their enthusiasm for its dissemination, reflects the state of Japan itself upon the world stage at the turn of the century.

For while its economic status—and power—would shrink considerably across the nineties, Japan's popular culture would come to be embraced around the globe.

To focus on the West here, Japan would continue to dominate the video game industry across the nineteen-nineties, with Sony and Sega emerging to compete with Nintendo. The latter had revived the home console market following the American "video game crash" of 1983, which found retailers overstocked with poor quality games they couldn't sell and the American console giant Atari bearing the brunt of their refusal to purchase any more. This is significant because Japanese video games speak to a broader communication of the nation's popular culture. This is due to the "cross-sectoral use of creative resources" involved in their production (Aoyama and Izushi 2003, 424). Animators and illustrators from the anime and manga fields would often train alongside video game programmers and designers in vocational schools in which "programs on animated films and cartoons are run in conjunction with ones on videogames, often sharing curricula (e.g. computer graphics, 3D animations) between them", thus resulting in games that communicate the broader aesthetic of Japanese pop (Aoyama and Izushi 2003, 440).

Anime movies would crash into the consciousness of American and British audiences via Katsuhiro Otomo's stunning apocalyptic cyberpunk film *Akira* (1988) and would continue to build in popularity across the following decade.[7] The first stage of this process would be somewhat controversial, however, with Western home media distributors importing titles filled with sex and violence in an attempt to court a receptive audience of young males, to the extent that some voice-overs were even riddled with extra expletives, "leading one BBFC [British Board of Film Classification] examiner to point out that they were deliberately making their titles seem ruder than they were" (Clements 2009, 274). The upshot of such controversy was that, in the UK at least, anime received the same negative attention from the press and Parliament as the "video nasties" of the nineteen-eighties.

Toho's privileging of the international version of *Godzilla 2000* appears to be underpinned by all of the above factors. For though it most obviously mimics the biggest Hollywood blockbusters of the era, the film's corny dialogue and action pacing also align with the video nasty anime and arcade sci-fi of the Japanese exports popular with young Western audiences in the early nineties, while tapping into the kitsch associated with the popular Western conception of Godzilla meant the film could also attract older, nostalgic, audience members familiar with the franchise.

It is arguable, however, that Toho had underestimated the tastes of its envisioned Western audience, who had recently come into contact with a higher quality of Japanese pop culture exports by the time of *Godzilla 2000*'s release, perhaps explaining the poor box office showing for its international version.[8] Where the TriStar version of the film reflects the Japanese media received by Western audiences in the first half of the nineteen-nineties, Okawara's *Godzilla 2000* better reflects, and situates the franchise within, the Japanese popular media of the late nineteen-nineties, which Western consumers were being exposed to through a number of avenues. The critically-acclaimed films of Studio Ghibli had begun to tap into "the mainstream family demographic through their [distribution] partnership with the multinational giant Walt Disney Studios", as well as "a cine-sophisticated audience" via the distribution of *Princess Mononoke* (1999 in the U.S.), specifically, under the banner of the Disney subsidiary Miramax, which had cultivated a commercially successful catalogue of independently and internationally produced movies across the decade (Carter 2017, 152 and 161). Anime and manga would also figure within contemporary art galleries thanks to Takashi Murakami's superflat aesthetic, which drew heavily on otaku culture and communicated it as pop art.[9] Sony's hugely successful entry into the video game console market with the PlayStation targeted adult consumers through the release on its platform of cinematic titles such as Capcom's *Resident Evil* (1996) and Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), which expanded the horizons of 3D gaming. And, in regard to live-action cinema, home media distributor Tartan Films[10] would bring Asian "extreme" cinema to wider audiences, characterizing such Japanese films as a form of transgressive art cinema by way of their alignment with the other international, auteur-driven, titles in their catalogue.

The original version of *Godzilla 2000* could certainly be improved in regard to its pacing, but the film's overall tone sits well with other Japanese films of its era and the broader, mature audience oriented, pop cultural exports reaching the West. As with Hideo Nakata's *Ringu/Ring* (1998), the musical score is minimal, with its sound design instead placing emphasis on Foley FX and ambience in order to create a sense of suspense, tension, and terror as appropriate. Further, the original dialogue—either excised or rewritten for the international cut—better establishes the dynamics between the various characters, providing substance to the relationship between the three heroes of Shinoda, his daughter Lo, and the photo-journalist Yuki, as well as between Shinoda and his former friend, now antagonist, Katagiri. The ideological conflict between Shinoda and Katagiri relates to the question as to whether to learn from

Godzilla or destroy it, echoing the thematic tensions featured in Honda's original film, and we also find elsewhere that the narrative content of Okawara's *Godzilla 2000* is far more substantial than the international cut would suggest. The Y2K theme takes center stage, with the *kaiju* antagonist of the UFO first shutting down all computers in its vicinity, then hacking a super computer to absorb all of humanity's recorded (or at least uploaded) intelligence, before communicating its intentions to destroy humanity through the various computer screens in which its tendrils have been attached. The theme of this movie thus recontextualizes another key theme of Honda's original movie—that of the threat posed by the pursuit of modern science, updating it from grave concern over atomic warfare to a reflection upon the trap we may be setting for ourselves with our reliance on networked information technology. Finally, and in contrast to the alien's intention to dominate and "erase" the human species, Godzilla's genetic code is found to provide the secret to "the origin of life" – thus making the showdown between Godzilla and the alien beast that emerges from the UFO a symbolic battle between life-itself and total annihilation. Stripped of the triumphant musical score of the international version, this show down emphasizes both the menace of the alien creature and its various stages of real-time evolution through the use of fragmented musical cues and an emphasis on the sounds of destruction in-between.

The original version of *Godzilla 2000* is by no means a masterpiece, but it may have better accommodated for the shift in the tastes and expectations of Western audiences, and the international release of *Shin Godzilla*, uncut and in its original language, suggests that Toho has since learnt from this mistake. This most recent reboot of the franchise, launching the current Reiwa era of the series, also speaks to the current context of Japan upon the world stage.

Shin Gojira/Shin Godzilla (2016)

Japanese popular media would continue to thrive internationally across the turn of the century and its first two decades—with the popularity of anime in the West being increased by its inclusion in the television programming of Adult Swim,[11] and manga becoming a popular sequential art form thanks to the broader distribution of translated titles by publishers such as VIZ Media and Kodansha International. And this global success has been actively promoted by the Japanese government through its official "Cool Japan" branding exercise.

As Takeshi Matsui explains, this exercise originated in the U.S. with the 2002 publication of a *Foreign Policy* article by journalist Douglas McGray,[12] who

> reported that Japan, which used to be an economic superpower in the 1980s and lost international presence in the 1990s due to its severe recession, now had global cultural influence. He stated that although Japan's gross national production had been shrinking, it created a mighty engine of "gross national cool." This national cool is a kind of "soft power," a term Joseph S. Nye coined to explain the non-traditional ways a country can influence another country's wants or its public's value (Matsui 2014, 83).

Though Japanese ministers had begun recognizing the importance of Japanese popular culture exports as early as 2000, it was following a Japanese translation of McGray's text in May 2003 that "the phrase *japan culu* and *culu japan* (loan words of 'Japan Cool' and 'Cool Japan,' respectively) became buzzwords in Japan" (Matsui 2014, 83). The article began to be cited in government documents and a "Cool Japan thesis" gained traction as a form of "cultural diplomacy" within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Matsui 2014, 89). Within a decade such ideas would come to be consolidated in a policy strategy put forward by the Creative Industries Division of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. The January 2012 document noted that "Japan's nominal GDP decreased by 55 trillion yen over the three years from 2008 to 2011", and made the case that: "Capitalizing on the popularity of 'Cool Japan' can accomplish the following: 1) unearthing of domestic demand, 2) incorporation of foreign demand, and 3) transformation of industrial structure. These accomplishments can secure new income sources and jobs, leading to regional economic revitalization" (MITA/Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry 2012).

It is this continuing global embrace of Japanese pop culture that has allowed Toho's most recent reboot of the *Godzilla* franchise – *Shin Godzilla* (Abrams 2016)—to be distributed in the West uncut and, even, in its original language. While an English dub is available on the Blu-Ray release of the film as a second disc alongside the original language version, the dialogue is not radically rewritten, or performed in a comical manner, as in previous releases, thus allowing the film to retain its thematic substance and tone.

Hideaki Anno & Shinji Higuchi's film is by far the most radical of the franchise's three reboots in the sense that it does not follow on from Honda's original but replaces it as an account of the very first appearance of Godzilla to the citizens of Tokyo. As such, while the film makes several references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even fills the screen with still images of the aftermath of their destruction, the filmmakers are able to direct their narrative towards issues that are better relevant to the Japanese nation in the twenty-first century.

One narrative concern resonates with recent memories of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster of 2011. The negligence of the government in regard to this event is evoked by the discovery that Godzilla had been feeding on the "unregulated dumping of nuclear materials" from 60 years earlier, while the political fallout of the disaster is reflected in the government's reticence to engage Godzilla in battle out of fear of invoking radioactive fallout from its body.

However, the central concern of the film is Japan's status as a pacifist nation within a regional situation now markedly different to the period after World War II, when it was forced to adopt that stance by the U.S. The threat posed to Japan by the young superpower of China and a rejuvenated Russia is reflected in their lobbying for Godzilla (and therefore Tokyo) to be put under international jurisdiction, while the U.S.–Japan coalition is depicted as strained due to the imbalance of power within that relationship.

This theme is present from the opening of the movie, wherein Godzilla's emergence as an aquatic life form finds it crashing through a number of bridges as it makes its way onto land, emphasizing the notion of Japan as an island untethered from other nations, and so needing to rest on its own initiative and defenses. A day later, while other nations are reported to have made "pledges of support", their key ally of the U.S. removes a large military carrier from port due to the radiation levels spiked by the appearance of Godzilla, intensifying this sense of isolation.

The Japanese government's response to Godzilla is initially frustrated by the "lack of precedent" for such a state of emergency, whereby this "first ever mobilization of Self-Defense Forces" (SDF) would be their "first post-war military action since World War II". And the precarious status of the SDF is such that the use of military force is held back upon Godzilla's first appearance on land, given that "[a]ny civilian casualties could destroy the SDF forever".

It is the U.S. that is presented as further frustrating the Japanese government's strategy for dealing with Godzilla. The American-Japanese Kayoko Anne Patterson, Special Envoy for the President of the United States, only releases vital information on the creature in exchange for help in finding the professor who hypothesized the existence of Godzilla years earlier and whose data is of keen interest to the U.S. Department of Energy, given that the creature is a walking nuclear reactor. Rando Yaguchi, the film's main protagonist, agrees to co-operate with Patterson, and the following exchange is telling.

> Yaguchi: "What does the U.S. want with Gojira? Study or exterminate?"
>
> Patterson: "That's for the President to decide. Who decides in your country?"

Japan's lack of self-determination on national defense matters is further communicated by the U.S.'s initial military intervention, by which it declares a bombing zone that would result in destruction worse than that wrought by Godzilla, without seeking authorization from the Japanese P.M. After those assaults fail, the U.S. Defense Secretary lobbies the U.N. to allow the launch of a nuclear warhead that would dwarf the impact of that dropped on Hiroshima and which would completely obliterate Tokyo. The newly appointed P.M. (the previous having been killed amidst *kaiju*-related chaos) reluctantly agrees, as does his new Chief Cabinet Secretary Hideki Akasaka, on the basis that Japan's economy is in free-fall and needs international funding in order to survive: "That country foists some crazy things on us". Along with the real-world "foisting" of the atomic bomb upon the nation, and the aforementioned H-bomb testing that followed, this comment undoubtedly refers to the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. This agreement rendered the latter constrained in its ability to defend itself from foreign military aggression, with the decisions of the United Nations and its Security Council taking precedence in any such dispute.

Given this narrative concern with national security and Japan's (in)ability to defend itself, the film situates itself within contemporary debates concerning Japanese nationalism. In July 2014, the nation's then Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe

> introduced reforms to Japan's national security policy that could lead to a reinterpretation of the Japanese Constitution's Article 9, in order to allow the Japanese Self-Defense Force to exercise the right of collective self-defense. For historical and geopolitical reasons, other regional actors—most notably China and South Korea—regarded with consternation the prospect of Japan's defense "normalization" engineered by a conservative and arguably nationalistic government (Tow 2015, 13).

The Japanese Self-Defense Force is praised in *Shin Godzilla*, with Yaguchi announcing that: "The SDF is the last fortress able to protect the country. Japan's future we place in your hands", and, as Matt Alt (2016) points out, Anno and Higuchi were granted the SDF's "total coöperation", providing them with "access [to military machinery that] enhances the realism for the filmmakers". While this is often the case with war movies produced in various nations, it is notable that the film mischaracterizes the aforementioned Treaty of Mutual Cooperation. Initially signed in 1951 and later amended in 1960, the later version ruled out direct and unauthorized military

interventions by the U.S. within Japan without previous agreement from the latter's government, i.e. the kind of intervention that occurs in *Shin Godzilla*. Further, contrary to the sentiments of the film, William T. Tow points out that Abe's projected defense reforms were viewed positively by the Obama administration, who pitched it "as an exemplar for alliance defense burden-sharing at a time of continuing U.S. fiscal austerity" (2015, 14). In this respect, we can establish that *Shin Godzilla* presents a pro-military rhetoric that makes its case in a manner that reflects the kind of fear-based strategy often employed by right-wing politicians regardless of the reality of the situation.

Yet it is important to point out that Anno and Higuchi's narrative does not ultimately conform to the kind of nationalism espoused by Abe and his government. For instance, *Shin Godzilla* determinedly rejects the hierarchical structures that, historically, ultra-conservative governance requires. In the opening segment of the film a group of 30 consisting of the Japanese Prime Minister, various ministers, and their multitude of aides all move from a conference room designated a "crisis management center" over to the "main" conference room for a cabinet meeting, and then, again, to a conference room at the Prime Minister's Office, each of which look basically the same, and each time in response to increasingly worrying reports of the destruction being wrought. This comically spatializes and critiques the hierarchical nature of Japanese political bureaucracy, which the film's ostensible heroes of Yaguchi, Hiromi Ogashira, and Yusuke Shimura reject when they set up their own research and strategy headquarters comprised of "a crack team of lone wolves, nerds, troublemakers, outcasts, academic heretics and general pains-in-the-bureaucracy", with the power structure taking the form of "a flat organization. Forget about titles and seniority. Speak freely here".

Further, while the film's production coincides with the controversy surrounding Abe's re-envisioning of the SDF, it is also important to note that "the Self-Defense Forces ha[d] gone from little more than an afterthought to folk heroes for their role in 2011 tsunami rescue efforts" (Alt 2016). With Godzilla positioned as an amalgamation of the threats to Japan's stability—natural disaster, nuclear disaster, foreign invasion—the film's ideological stance is thus arguably focused on Japanese self-determination ("Perhaps it is time Japan did as it pleased"), rather than military expansionism. However, it is for the threat of the latter that the first was initially suppressed—"Post-war Japan is a tributary state", Akasaka reminds us mid-way through the movie, to which Yaguchi responds: "Post-war extends forever, huh?" – and it has been argued that the kind of cultural nationalism that *Shin Godzilla* could be said to both benefit from and contribute to feeds into the kind of militaristic nationalism expressed by Abe, contemporarily to the film's production and release, and Shintaro Ishihara, in the late eighties.

Satoko Suzuki contrasts the "political and extreme forms" of nationalism that she aligns with Abe and other "ultra-conservative[s]" in Japan, with a cultural nationalism that "resonate[s] with the suppressed nationalistic feelings of the public" through its communication in a "subtle and mundane form" (2015, 509–10). Such cultural nationalism "flourished in 1980s Japan", amidst the boom of its economy, as it "allowed the Japanese to embrace nationalism in cultural terms and view themselves positively when political nationalism was [still] frowned upon because of the war" (Suzuki 2015, 522), which is evident in the images and ideology of *The Return of Godzilla*. During the economic malaise of the nineties the "Japanese no longer confidently propagated the uniqueness of Japanese people and culture to the world" (Suzuki 2015, 522), which speaks to Toho's deference towards the American reworking of *Godzilla 2000: Millennium*. However during this latter period the embrace of Japanese uniqueness became intensified within Japan itself, resulting in a collapse between the cultural and political forms of nationalism. For instance, as Roger B. Jeans explains, the Society for the Creation of New History Textbooks was founded in December 1996 with the aim of revising the apologetic depiction of Japan's wartime atrocities within the educational texts that are provided to the nation's school children (2005, 186). That "the Right had gone mainstream after decades of marginalization" was further evidenced by the domestic success of *Sensoron/A Theory of War* (1998), a manga authored by another member of that Society, Yoshinori Kobayashi, that "called the Nanjing Massacre and the enslavement of comfort women fictitious" (Jeans 2005, 187). More contemporarily, it is clear that, beyond historical revisionism, recent works of Japanese pop culture have expressed a nostalgia for an idealized techno-fascist past through their fantasy and sci-fi worlds (Villanueva 2018). This is a theme particularly strong in the source manga material for *Attack on Titan* (2009—), the most popular anime of recent times, whose live-action movie adaptations were directed by Higuchi.

The international release of *Shin Godzilla* in its original language situates the film within this lineage of cultural nationalism. Suzuki argues that "[l]anguage is clearly an integral part of Japanese cultural nationalism" as it is seen by the Japanese as intrinsic to their uniqueness, given the difficulty foreigners have in regard to fluently speaking, reading, and writing the language (2015, 511). Through an analysis of contemporary print and televisual media that

exploit this "folk belief" that the Japanese language is essential to their ethnic identity, the scholar demonstrates that the belief persists even after Japan's contemporary exposure to globalization (Suzuki 2015, 512). While many Japanese films are now released in the West in their original language, in correspondence with the increasing sophistication in the tastes of its Western consumers, this approach to *Shin Godzilla* is significant for a number of reasons: this distribution strategy contrasts with all of the previous releases in the franchise; this particular film has a larger than usual amount of dialogue and on-screen titles—resulting in a bombardment of subtitled text to be read by non-Japanese speaking audiences[13]; and the global recognition associated with this most iconic of all Japanese characters, which is such that the film was expected to reach a broader audience than the Japanese art movies that are usually screened abroad in their original language. Taken together, the theatrical distribution of such a film in the U.S. would typically warrant a dub.

In this respect, it can be argued that, though the film does not actively promote an ultra-conservative ideology, *Shin Godzilla*'s international release in its original language is informed by this trend of cultural nationalism, which is evident also in the subsequent, and most recent, live-action entry in Toho's franchise, *Gojira Mainasu Wan/Godzilla Minus One* (2023). Though beginning at the end of the Second World War and unfolding across the years during which Japan was occupied by U.S. military forces, the film's writer-director Takashi Yamazaki largely relegates the presence of the U.S. to the out-of-field and instead presents a narrative focused on Japanese survivor guilt, societal hardships, and anger towards the Japanese authorities in the immediate aftermath of the war. Nevertheless, Toho International—the American distribution arm of the Japanese production company—were confident that American audiences would engage with the work, uncut and in its original language. This was perhaps due to evidence of an increased mainstream interest in unfiltered Japanese media amongst U.S. audiences in recent years. Anime is a particularly interesting touchpoint for assessing the popularity of Japanese media, given it "stands as the main ambassador of Japanese popular culture", and the manner in which anime functions as an intersection between all aspects of Japanese media mix—including animation, manga, video games, light novels, toys, and otaku culture, the latter of which encompasses the Japanese fans of Godzilla (Navarro Remesal and Loriguillo López 2015, 7).[14] These synergies are evident in the Reiwa era of the Godzilla franchise, with both directors of *Shin Godzilla* most widely known for creating what some consider to be "the single greatest anime series ever made", *Shinseiki Evangelion/Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996), with Anno being its creator and director and Higuchi serving as a writer and art director on the show, and the three subsequent entries in the series having been feature-length anime movies (Redmond 2007, 184). The growth of Crunchyroll, the premiere dedicated anime streaming service in the United States, demonstrates the rise in popularity of anime in the territory. In February 2017, around three months after *Shin Godzilla* had ended its limited North American theatrical run, Crunchyroll had 1 million paid subscribers worldwide, by August 2021, when the site was acquired by Sony's Funimation Global Group for US$1.175 billion (Hedges 2022), it had 5 million—with this figure growing to 13 million worldwide subscribers by January 2024, albeit also incorporating the subscribers of the Funimation anime streaming service with which it had merged, with the majority of these viewers (31%/4 million as of December 2023) being based in the U.S (Stoll 2024; Lindner 2023). While data on viewership of subtitled content as opposed to dubbed content on this site is unavailable, a survey of 1,020 U.S. viewers of foreign content, between the ages of 16 and 64, undertaken by GWI in November 2021 found that 76% of the respondents preferred subtitles to the dubbing of foreign media, and that Japanese media was "the most popular non-English foreign media in the US" (Hedges 2022). Taken together, this speaks to the wider context in which *Godzilla Minus One* was released, theatrically and exclusively in a subtitled format, and provides some insight into its popularity with North American audiences. Where *Shin Godzilla* only made US$1.9 million across its 31 day North American release in a limited number of theatres in late 2016,[15] *Godzilla Minus One*'s wide release in late 2023 attained a box office gross of US$55 million, making it the most successful Japanese movie to be theatrically released in North America, and the territory's third highest grossing foreign language film of all time (Hughes 2024).

The cultural nationalism evident in the Reiwa era of the Toho *Godzilla* franchise is, as Suzuki points out, of great significance given that, internationally, such cultural products constitute a form of "soft power", and, domestically, "cultural nationalism and political nationalism stimulate each other" (2015, 521). It has also enabled the filmmakers of these pictures to have their meaning and messaging communicated to international audiences unfiltered and uncut upon initial release, for the first time in the franchise's 70 year history.

Conclusion

In many respects, the story of the Toho *Godzilla* franchise's international distribution is the story of Japan's relationship to the United States. As Fabienne Darling-Wolf (2015, 104) writes, this relationship is "steeped in the legacy of its World War II defeat, of the psychologically marking events of the nuclear

bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of a post-war period marked by American occupation and concomitant cultural influence", and analysis of the narrative content of Honda's original movie and the three subsequent reboots of the franchise demonstrate how stories based around this flagship character of Japanese popular culture has been utilized to communicate how the nation has negotiated this relationship across 70 years. Analysis of the international distribution of these films have further demonstrated the way in which such ideological communication has previously been thwarted, most often due to the localization of the media—re-edits, reshoots, and rewritten dialogue for dubbed voices—by American distributors focused on achieving commercial success amongst Western audiences over the retention of narrative substance, sometimes at the behest of Toho itself, as with *Godzilla 2000: Millennium*, until recently, whereby the broader change in the cultural reception of Japanese media by Western audiences, and a strategy informed by soft power and cultural nationalism, has seen the *Godzilla* franchise finally able to speak for itself.

Notes

1. Toho's promotional material for the *King of the Monsters* release in Japan went as far as stating that "this version was '100 times more interesting' than the original" (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, 106).
2. See Koppes and Black (1990).
3. See, for instance, the British government's handling of the problematic visit of Japan's Crown Prince Akihito to the UK for the Queen's coronation ceremony in 1953 (Conte-Helm 1989, 128–135).
4. The wrestling theme, which would have resonated in Japan, is dispensed with entirely in the U.S. version of *King Kong vs Godzilla*, in favour of a sense of the epic ("a battle of the giants that may or may not have taken place millions of years ago, [but] may be recreated soon") and an America-saves-Japan narrative; for instance, the idea that Kong can be powered up through electricity, which is key to Godzilla's defeat, is depicted as the suggestion of a newly introduced American scientist, the American pop cultural icon of Kong is characterized by this scientist as a "thinking animal" where Godzilla is described as having "sheer brute force" and the brain the size of a literal marble, and Kong is wished luck on his journey home by the U.N. newscaster, rendering him the definitive hero of the film where he was one part of a dual threat to Japan in Honda's version.
5. Launched in 1993, the producers at Saban licensed Toei Company's *Super Sentai* series in order to utilise its live-action special effects sequences involving helmeted superheroes fighting monsters, their concealed faces enabling easy dubbing of the dialogue of these scenes, while the narrative content would be completely re-written and shot with American actors, sans helmets, thus saving money on the production costs while making the show more saleable to Western markets (Allison 2000, 72 and 75). Unlike the case of *King Kong vs Godzilla*, however, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* should be considered an example of localization of Japanese media due to its licensing of a pre-existing media property and its associated transmedial products (i.e. toys and other merchandise), even if the intent was similar to that which I have attributed to Beck.
6. Kizer admits to Homenick that he may have been the source of the mistaken rumour "that maybe the whole changing of the Soviet officer's behavior was due to the political outlook of the owners of New World [which] was pure speculation! It was inspired by a casual conversation I had with Tony Randel *after* the movie was finished and released where I completely misunderstood Tony's response to my statement. When he said to me, 'Bob, consider what this company is,' he was referring to the *type of budget* for projects, *not* their political content or perceived political content. But I, like the fool that I am, took it the other way" (Homenick 2021).
7. An early Hayao Miyazaki masterpiece, *Kaze no Tani no Naushika/Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), would fare poorly in the U.S. box office in 1985 due to a poor localization of, and marketing campaign for, the film by New World Pictures, the distributors responsible for the localization of *Godzilla 1985* – though via a different team within the company (see Ruh 2010).
8. TriStar's *Godzilla 2000* grossed US$10,037,390 worldwide, according to figures on *BoxOfficeMojo* https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=godzilla2000.htm. Accessed 15/05/2024
9. The term "otaku" refers to a form of obsessive fan culture in Japan. More, specifically, as Thomas Lamarre (2018, 196) writes, the term was coined to refer to males whose "love for anime, manga, games, and related media had transformed them into anti-social types who preferred the two-dimensional characters of multimedia worlds, and who feared and shunned contact with actual humans".
10. The U.K. based Tartan Films operated between 1984 and 2008, trading under the name Metro-Tartan Distribution between 1992 and 2003, with an additional U.S. outlet named Tartan Films USA.
11. Adult Swim was launched in 2001 as the evening programming block of the children's animation orientated Cartoon Network; as the latter already reached millions of audience members, Adult Swim was an influential platform for the Japanese animation that it would import.
12. See McGray (2002).
13. As one (positive) American critic put it: "for the most part the film's human-driven segments are walls of dialogue/consultation" (Abrams 2016).
14. Referencing the writings of "self-proclaimed king of otaku Okada Toshio", Lamarre states that "Okada characterizes the first generation of otaku in terms of a passion for 'special effects' or *tokusatsu*, that is, the special filming techniques associated with live-action science fiction, fantasy, and horror fare such as *Godzilla* and *Kamen Rider*" (2018, 197).
15. According to figures from *BoxOfficeMojo*: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl587302401/. Accessed 27/04/24.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Jeeshan Gazi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7178-8112

References

Abrams, S. 2016. "Shin Godzilla." *RogerEbert.com*. October 11. Accessed 04/08/19. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shin-godzilla-2016.

Allison, A. 2000. "A Challenge to Hollywood? Japanese Character Goods Hit the US." *Japanese Studies* 20 (1): 67–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/10371390050009075.

Alt, M. 2016. "Godzilla Returns to Japan." *The New Yorker*. May 14. Accessed 01/27/19. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/godzilla-returns-to-japan.

Aoyama, Y., and H. Izushi. 2003. "Hardware Gimmick or Cultural Innovation? Technological, Cultural, and Social Foundations of the Japanese Video Game Industry." *Research Policy* 32 (3): 423–444. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-7333(02)00016-1.

Brothers, P. H. 2011. "Japan's Nuclear Nightmare: How the Bomb Became a Beast Called 'Godzilla'." *Cinéaste* 36 (3 (Summer)): 36–40.

Carter, L. 2017. "Marketing *Mononoke*: The *Daihitto* Becoming Disney." In *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess*, edited by D. Rayna, 151–172. By. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Cavanaugh, C. 2001. "A Working Ideology for Hiroshima: Imamura Shohei's *Black Rain*." In *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*, edited by D. Washburn and C. Cavenaugh, 250–270. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clements, J. 2009. *School Girl Milky Crisis: Adventures in the Anime and Manga Trade*. London: Titan Books.

Conte-Helm, M. 1989. *Japan and the North East of England: From 1862 to the Present Day*. London: Athlone Press.

Darling-Wolf, F. 2015. *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Popular Culture Beyond East and West*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, Digital culture books.

Di Marco, F. 2007. "Cultural Localization: orientation and Disorientation in Japanese Video Games." *Revista Tradumàtica – Traducció i Tecnologies de la Informació i la Comunicació 05: Localització de videojocs*. https://raco.cat/index.php/Tradumatica/article/view/75765/96195.

Gravett, P. 2004. *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*. London: Laurence King Publishing.

Hedges, T. 2022. "Chart of the Week: Casting Insight on Foreign Language Media." GWI. February 8. Accessed 04/27/24. https://blog.gwi.com/chart-of-the-week/foreign-language-media/.

Heffley, L. 1993. "Low-Tech Equals High Ratings: Fox's Offbeat 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' Flexes Its Kidvid Muscle." *Los Angeles Times*. November 25. Accessed 04/22/2024. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-11-25-ca-60885-story.html.

Homenick, B. 2018a. "GODZILLA ATTACKS the NEW WORLD! Producer Tony Randel on Bringing 'Godzilla 1985' to American Shores!" *Vantage Point Interviews*. June 26. Accessed 20/06/22. https://vantagepointinterviews.com/2018/06/26/godzilla-attacks-the-new-world-producer-tony-randel-on-bringing-godzilla-1985-to-american-shores/.

Homenick, B. 2018b. "GODZILLA GETS AMERICANIZED! Straw Weisman on Rewriting 'Godzilla 1985'!" *Vantage Point Interviews*. June 29. Accessed 20/06/22. https://vantagepointinterviews.com/2018/06/29/godzilla-gets-americanized-straw-weisman-on-rewriting-godzilla-1985/.

Homenick, B. 2018c. "GODZILLA MAKES THE CUT! Editor Michael Spence on Trimming 'Godzilla 1985'!" *Vantage Point Interviews*. June 29. Accessed 20/06/22 https://vantagepointinterviews.com/2018/06/29/godzilla-makes-the-cut-editor-michael-spence-on-trimming-godzilla-1985/.

Homenick, B. 2021. "REVISITING THE LEGEND'S REBIRTH! Director R. J. Kizer's In-Depth History of the Americanization of 'Godzilla 1985'!" *Vantage Point Interviews*. September 16. Accessed 20/06/22. https://vantagepointinterviews.com/2021/09/16/revisiting-the-legends-rebirth-director-r-j-kizers-in-depth-history-the-americanization-of-godzilla-1985/.

Hughes, M. 2024. "How the 'Godzilla Minus One' Oscar-Nominated Visual Effects Were Made." *Forbes*, February 15th. Accessed 17/02/22. https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2024/02/15/exclusive-the-making-of-godzilla-minus-one-oscar-2024-nominated-visual-effects/?sh=532aa8dc3ec6.

Ishihara, S. 1991. *The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will be First Among Equals*. Translated by Frank Baldwin. London: Simon & Schuster.

Jeans, R. B. 2005. "Victim or Victimizers? Museums, Textbooks, and the War Debate in Contemporary Japan." *The Journal of Military History* 69 (1. (Jan)): 149–195. https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2005.0025.

Koppes, C. R., and G. D. Black. 1990. *Hollywood Goes to War How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Lamarre, T. 2018. *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Game Media*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Lindner, J. 2023. "The Most Surprising Crunchyroll Statistics and Trends in 2024." *Gitnux*. December 16. Accessed 28/04/24. https://gitnux.org/crunchyroll-statistics/.

Mangiron, C. 2021. "Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games." *Arts* 10 (1): 9. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010009.

Matsui, T. 2014. "Nation Branding Through Stigmatized Popular Culture: The 'Cool Japan' Craze Among Central Ministries in Japan." *Hitotsubashi Journal of Commerce and Management* 48 (1): 81–97.

Matzer, M. 1998. "How Godzilla Made His Way to the U. S." *Los Angeles Times*. May 22. Accessed 06/05/24. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-may-22-ca-52315-story.html.

McGray, D. 2002. "Japan's Gross National Cool." *Foreign Policy* 130 (May/June): 44–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/3183487.

McKenna, A. T. 2016. *Showman of the Screen: Joseph E. Levine and His Revolutions in Film Promotion*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.

MITA/Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Creative Industries Division. 2012. "Cool Japan Strategy." January. Accessed 01/27/19. http://www.meti.go.jp/eng

lish/policy/mono_info_service/creative_industries/pdf/120116_01a.pdf.

Napier, S. J. 2001. *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Navarro Remesal, V., and A. Loriguillo López. 2015. "What Makes Gêmu Different? A Look at the Distinctive Design Traits of Japanese Video Games and Their Place in the Japanese Media Mix." *Journal of Games Criticism* 2 (1): 1–17. https://gamescriticism.org/2023/07/24/what-makes-gemu-different-a-look-at-the-distinctive-design-traits-of-japanese-video-games-and-their-place-in-the-japanese-media-mix/.

Noriega, C. 1987. "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When *Them!* Is U.S." *Cinema Journal* 27 (1 (Autumn)): 63–77. https://doi.org/10.2307/1225324.

Redmond, D. 2007. "Anime and East Asian Culture: *Neon Genesis Evangelion*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24 (2): 183–188. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200500486205.

Ruh, B. 2010. "Transforming U.S. Anime in the 1980s: Localization and Longevity." *Mechademia* 5:31–49. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400549.

Ryfle, S. 1998. *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"*. Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press.

Ryfle, S., and Godziszewski E. D. 2017. *Ishiro Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa; with Yuuko Honda-Yun*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

SciFiJapan. 2014. "KING KONG VS GODZILLA and KING KONG ESCAPES on Blu-Ray from Universal." *SciFijapan*. 07/2/2014. Accessed 25/04/2024. https://www.scifijapan.com/dvd-blu-ray-digital/king-kong-vs-godzilla-and-king-kong-escapes-on-blu-ray-from-universal.

Stoll, J. 2024. "Number of Crunchyroll Paying Subscribers Worldwide from 2012 to 2024(in Millions)." *Statista*. Jan 16. Accessed 27/04/24. https://www.statista.com/statistics/594952/crunchyroll-users/.

Suzuki, S. 2015. "Nationalism Lite? The Commodification of Non-Japanese Speech in Japanese Media." *Japanese Language and Literature* 49 (2), Special Section: The Politics of Speaking Japanese (October): 509–529.

Szasz, F. M., and T. Issei. 2007. "Atomic Heroes and Atomic Monsters: American and Japanese Cartoonists Confront the Onset of the Nuclear Age, 1945–80." *The Historian* 69, No. 4 (Winter): 728–752. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.2007.00196.x.

Tow, W. T. 2015. "The United States and Asia in 2014: Reconciling Rebalancing and Strategic Constraints." *Asian Survey* 55 (1), A Survey of Asia in 2014 (January/February): 12–20. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.1.12.

Tsutsui, W. 2004. *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters*. New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tsutsui, W. 2005. "Godzilla and Postwar Japan Lunch Keynote Address 2004 National Meeting Asian Studies Development Program." *East-West Connections: Review of Asian Studies* 5 (1): 1–14. https://philarchive.org/archive/LIEAL-2.

Villanueva, M. 2018. "The Troubling Relationship Between Anime and Fascism." *Syfy Wire*. Oct 8. Accessed 27/01/19. https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-troubling-relationship-between-anime-and-fascism.