

Aaron Kerner's Faux Proposal for:  
*Gojira vs. Godzilla*

**Synopsis:**

*Gojira vs. Godzilla* is a short experimental film surveying the historical significance of the monster known as "Gojira" in Japan. The short film details the specific historical events that are embedded in the monstrous allegory. The monster is a potent signifier of Japanese anger, pain, resentment, and trauma. However, following the original film's release in 1954, Hollywood "re-made/re-edited" the film to reconfigure the narrative to suit an American ideological agenda, and at the same time, anesthetize the poignancy of the monster in the Japanese cultural context. This narrative conflict is the subject of the proposed film.

**Style/Form:**

Applying "experimental" techniques the film's aesthetic is a performative embodiment of the historical struggle inherent in the monster Gojira, the fifty-year film series, and repeated American efforts to render the monster benign. On the surface the film might resemble the "painterly" qualities of Carolee Scheenmann's *Fuses* (1967), or some of the films of Stan Brakhage that emphasize light and color (e.g., *Mothlight*, 1963), however, insofar as content is concerned the proposed film is very different. The painterly qualities of the proposed film are derived literally from the struggle between the original 1954 film *Gojira* and the American 1956 "re-make/re-edit" of the film; by feeding two video feeds into single channel source simultaneously the two video feeds compete for dominance. The resulting image is a twisted and mangled kinetic surface, resembling the painterly and/or distressed surface of *Fuses* or *Mothlight*.

At the same time, the film appropriates material from other sources – specific the opening sequences of *Gojira* (1954) and the American *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956), as well as US Military archival footage from the March 1, 1954 *Bravo* test blast at the Bikini Atoll. In this regard the film might be comparable to the work of Bruce Conner or Nam June Paik. While the film draws on appropriated material – such as found in Conner's work – the material is also freely manipulated, and allows for "chance" to play a part in the final configuration of the images on screen, which might come closer to Paik's work. Also like Paik, the piece relies on superimposition to create tension in the juxtaposition of images.

The sound design is created analogously, relying on superimpositions of appropriated material and allowing chance to bring some audio material to the fore, while permitting other sounds to recede, or be canceled out altogether.

**Research/Theoretical Framing:**

Americans are familiar with the *Godzilla* films, but they only saw the original 1954 Japanese film *Gojira*, directed by Ishiro Honda, for the first time in 2004. To-date the Gojira film series (currently 29 films if the two American films are included) is the

longest running in the history of cinema, spanning fifty-years. The word *Gojira* (ゴジラ) is a composite of the words “gorira,” the Japanese phonetic for “gorilla,” and “kujira,” the Japanese word for whale. While the latter connotes sheer size, the former, is an appropriation of the ‘original’ big cinematic monster: King Kong.<sup>1</sup> The name is attributable to the fact that in 1952, *King Kong* (Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1933) was re-released in Japan, and was a huge success as well as being influential for the creators of *Gojira*.

Godzilla is the English translation of Gojira, but in this translation many things are lost. Americans tend to assume, for example, that the 1956 film, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, directed by Terry Morse, is the original film, however, Morse’s film is a re-edited version of Honda’s 1954 film, which inserts an American protagonist, Steven Martin, played by Raymond Burr. In 1998 Roland Emmerich directed, *Godzilla*, transforming the monster (i.e., its physical form and thematic content) into something virtually unrecognizable in Japan. There was also a short-lived American animated cartoon series that ran in 1978, *The Godzilla Power Hour*, in which an American marine research team take Godzilla’s son, Godzooky, as a pet/crewmember. When the research team encountered some monstrous creature – as they inevitably would every week – Godzilla would be summoned to the rescue. In this cartoon series Godzilla is not the embodiment of horrific historical events, but instead a “team player” restoring the moral balance of the world with the American crew at its center.

Gojira on the other hand adopts an allegorical approach to Japan’s catastrophic history while the two American *Godzilla* films and cartoon series attempt to neutralize its historical poignancy. Although direct references to the American atomic attacks against Japan and to subsequent American atomic testing are self-evident in the first *Gojira* film many of the historical and cultural nuances can pass unnoticed even to contemporary Japanese audiences.

In the original 1954 film American nuclear testing in the Pacific awakens the prehistoric monster Gojira. Boats off the coast of Japan begin mysteriously disappearing, sketchy reports suggests that something monstrous might be responsible. A research team is dispatched to study the mysterious phenomena, amongst the research group is a paleontologist, Doctor Yamane, and his daughter Emiko. On board the research vessel as well is Ogata, a member of the Japanese Navy, and Emiko’s romantic love interest. Emiko is conflicted though because her marriage has already been arranged to a research scientist, Doctor Serizawa. The research team dispatched to discover the source of the disappearing vessels reveals that Gojira is indeed to blame. Doctor Yamane in a presentation to government officials, the public and the press, explains that Gojira has been awakened by hydrogen bomb testing, as evident in the presence of Strontium 90 (one of the isotopes associated with radioactive fallout) in his samples. The monster eventually emerges from the ocean and destroys Tokyo, crushing vehicles under-foot, pushing buildings over, and setting the city ablaze with its radioactive/fire-breathing abilities, and despite human ingenuity and the application of military force nothing seems capable of stopping it.

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<sup>1</sup> Given that Gojira’s monstrosity is at least partially related to the idea of ‘foreignness’ (a subject for later discussion) the connotations of appropriating King Kong are very interesting.

It is later revealed that Doctor Serizawa has made an awesome discovery: the oxygen destroyer. Emiko Yamane learns of Doctor Serizawa's discovery and pleads with him to use it against Gojira. The young scientist is reluctant to use his discovery because he fears that if it were to be made public, and to fall into the wrong hands, this could be far more destructive than Gojira. Doctor Serizawa relents and decides to use it after discovering Emiko's love for the seaman Ogata. Doctor Serizawa destroys all his research papers, and insists that he be the one to deploy the oxygen destroyer. A boat ferrying all the principle characters sets out to find the monster. Once the monster is located Ogata and Doctor Serizawa are lowered into the ocean water in frogman suits. At the appointed moment Doctor Serizawa deploys the oxygen destroy and then cuts his own air-hose. While Ogata returns safely to the surface, and is re-united with Emiko, Gojira and Doctor Serizawa die.<sup>2</sup>

As an allegory on the surface the 1954 *Gojira* film is just another monster movie, but woven into the narrative and the monster's body are atomic anxieties specifically relating to Japanese history and American aggression. This parallel structure is employed in many of the subsequent films in the series. At first the monster appears to embody the destructive force of atomic weapons, which it most certainly does, however, upon further investigation the monster is also revealed to personify the suffering of atomic bomb survivors, who the Japanese call, "hibakusha." The *Gojira* allegory is doubled then, embodying not just the catastrophic violence of atomic weapons, but also personifying human suffering. Although the film largely relies on the allegorical device, on a number of occasions the films slips out of the allegorical mode and makes explicit references to specific historical events relating to American aggression against Japan. The *Gojira* film series, especially in its allegorical mode, engages the anxieties associated with atomic issues, as Hayden White explains, the catastrophic events of the last century, "function in the consciousness" such as the atomic attacks against Japan "exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotics individuals."<sup>3</sup>

This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind or, conversely, adequately remembered, which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Japanese culture the *Gojira* allegory works-through atomic anxieties, the trauma that can never be forgotten or fully recalled.

The 1954 film establishes a fundamental pattern on which almost all the subsequent films follow. The monster is frequently attributed as 'foreign'; the monster almost invariably emerges from the ocean, coming from 'outside' Japan, likewise, the conclusion of most *Gojira* films ends with the monster returning to the sea. When *Gojira* makes landfall, the monster marches into an urban center and proceeds to demolish it.

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<sup>2</sup> Doctor Serizawa's moral quandary over the use of his oxygen destroyer is in some fashion related to the moral questions regarding the use of atomic weapons. His moral struggle, which is dramatized with melodramatic flare, and his choice to die along with his 'horrific discovery,' are possibly intended to illustrate the moral superiority of the Japanese. Whereas the Americans preach peace and justice, their actions, especially in the application (and testing) of atomic weapons, say something else entirely.

<sup>3</sup> Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Typically the urban center, whether it's Tokyo, Yokohama or some other city, is associated with contemporaneous events, or a new distinctive architectural feature. Gojira films frequently incorporate nuclear issues into the narrative. For example, one of the major battle scenes in the 1999 film *Gojira ni-sen mireniamu* (directed by Takao Okawara, in the U.S. *Godzilla 2000: Millennium*) takes place in Tokaimura, 80 miles North East of Tokyo. Gojira transfixed on destroying a nuclear power plant, because it draws energy from such sources, is drawn to the Tokaimura area. It is no coincident that this location is figured within this particular film because on September 30, 1999, Japan experienced its worst nuclear accident, when "an employee mistake at a uranium fuel processing plant left two workers in critical condition and exposed at least 69 people to dangerous radiation."<sup>5</sup> Because many of the Gojira films rely on cultural knowledge specific to Japan, American audiences typically fail to see the significance of the films' allusions. Further complicating the American perception of the Gojira film series, are the American appropriations of Gojira – the 1956 film *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, the 1998 film *Godzilla* and the 1978 cartoon *The Godzilla Power Hour* – which distort the historical content frequently embedded in Gojira films.

The 1956 film, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, keeps much of the 1954 plot intact, however, it expunges anti-American sentiments and is presented from an American perspective. The primary character in the 1956 film, Steve Martin is on his way to Cairo, but on his way makes a layover in Tokyo to visit an old friend, Doctor Serizawa. Martin is a journalist and accidentally stumbles into a major news-story: the mysterious disappearance of ships off the coast of Japan. Martin's editor encourages him to stay in Tokyo to cover the story. It is eventually revealed that the mysterious disappearance of vessels is the result of a monster: Godzilla. As a journalist, Martin's character functions as an observer, often narrating scenes through voice-over. On the one hand, Martin's voice-over narratives have a practical function limiting the necessity to translate (i.e., dubbing or subtitling) the Japanese dialogue, and effectively transforming the Japanese film into an 'American' film, but at the same time, this also encourages spectator identification with Martin's character. In the 1956 *Godzilla* it is through Martin that the narrative takes place, he is the omnipotent observer that sees all, and this is reinforced in his voice-over commentaries guiding the spectator through the narrative. By re-editing the original 1954 film, in essence cannibalizing it, the 1956 film is transformed into a discrete entity, quite different from its Japanese progenitor.

Morse's film incorporates Martin's character into the 'original' film by shooting, from behind, stand-ins for Japanese characters, thus giving the appearance that Martin is conversing with the 'original' members of the Japanese cast. The vast majority of the material that remains in the 1956 film is Gojira/Godzilla's wanton destruction of Tokyo. The 1956 American film transforms Gojira it into a run-of-the-mill Cold War science fiction film. This is not to say that the 1956 film renders the monster utterly meaningless. Rather, transforming the Japanese monster, Gojira, into the American *Godzilla*, offers American audiences an opportunity, as Susan Napier says, "to work through their own nuclear-age anxiety."<sup>6</sup> This transformation nevertheless does violence to the original

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin Sims, "A Curtain Call for Godzilla, Back From the Dead (Again)," *New York Times*, 2 December 1999, E2.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Napier, "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from *Godzilla* to *Akira*," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 332.

Japanese narrative, and to a certain extent revisits American violence directed towards the Japanese. Even though *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* attempts to conceal the history of American-Japanese aggression, the film never fully suppresses the specter of the Japanese past, not only because the film also incorporates footage from the original 1954 release, but because the closing moments of the Pacific War – specifically Hiroshima and Nagasaki – amount to the opening salvo of the Cold War. That is to say, that the Cold War itself is inherently related to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Later Gojira films, aside from their titles and laughable dubbed dialogue, go unchanged; but unfamiliar with Japanese current affairs and historical concerns, the poignancy of Gojira despite its sometimes-campy guise is lost on American audiences. Godzilla, as opposed to Gojira, in the American context is just an irradiated over-grown lizard.

The historical events of 1945 nevertheless make Gojira a poignant cultural signifier with quasi-ritual dimensions for both Japanese and American audiences. Given that the Gojira series spans fifty-years I do not intend to provide a definitive reading, but want instead to explicate the historical and cultural nuances that make the monster what it is. My particular emphasis shall be on the first film, *Gojira*, and its immediate historical context.

Allegory is one of the rhetorical strategies most amenable to the representation of the catastrophic. As a metaphor projected onto the metonymic axis the very fiber of allegory is the poetic.<sup>7</sup> Allegory maintains an independence from its referent. In other terms, there is no essentialist continuity between the allegorical form and its signification. When allegory takes the form of a sustained metaphor it is inherently severed from essential continuity, appearing instead as a substitute. Although allegory never illustrates ‘how it really was,’ it embodies general concepts and facilitates an *emotionally felt* ‘truth’ as opposed to what we might call a *historical* ‘truth.’ It is the very quality of detachment that mobilizes allegory as a hypersign,<sup>8</sup> one that can wrap around the catastrophic effects of the atomic bombings against Japan, events whose violence is of such a magnitude that they are considered incomprehensible, unspeakable, or unimaginable. Allegory can serve to negotiate the impasse of the supposed ‘incomprehensibility’ of catastrophic events.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godin, Publisher, Inc., 1988), 208.

<sup>8</sup> I adopted this idea of the ‘hypersign’ from Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun*, where more specifically she envisions the hypersign as capable of sublimating catastrophic trauma or paralyzing melancholy. “Sublimation’s dynamics,” Kristeva writes, “by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves a *hypersign* around and with the depressive void. This is *allegory*, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*, but which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else.” Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Emotive truth is no less ‘real,’ than historical truth. To completely repress, or divorce human emotion from historical events, is to render them utterly ‘unhuman.’ In order to offer any justice to a historical event is not merely a matter of solving the problem of historical discourse, recalibrating historical methodologies, as Hayden White notes, but rather, it is a problem “of representation and that this problem, that of representing the events of the Holocaust,” or any other catastrophic event I might add, “requires the full exploitation of modernist as well as premodernist artistic techniques for its resolution.” White, *Figural Realism*, 81.

This detachment from reality, or from the historical representation of events, such as we find it in the Gojira allegory, is nevertheless inextricably linked to real horror and catastrophic suffering. The parallel structure of the allegory permits for this simultaneous and seemingly paradoxical detachment from and inextricable relationship to historical events. Historical discourse is of course responsible for disseminating ‘factual’ knowledge regarding past events such as the atomic attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but, as Hayden White observes, historians distance themselves from the possibility of multiple readings of an historical event, “because, in conventional historical inquiry, the facts established about a specific event are taken to *be* the meaning of a that event.”<sup>10</sup> To this I might add that historians also tend to distance themselves from the emotional charge associated with historical events, because in a similar manner ‘emotional content’ might be seen to impinge on the factual veracity of an event. In short, there are limits to what ‘kind’ of knowledge history is capable of transmitting.<sup>11</sup> What is typically missing from historical discourse is the visceral experience; the emotional is suppressed in traditional forms of historical discourse. I argue, then, that the allegory *supplements* the traditional historical narrative allowing, in almost a ritualistic sense, the public to work-through that which historical discourse tends to disavow. By adopting the allegorical device Gojira enables the spectator to come to terms with the historical record’s inadequacies. Gojira expresses the complex and conflicting emotions left in the wake of the atomic attacks and Japan’s postwar relationship with the United States.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>11</sup> This is precisely Julia Kristeva’s thesis in her influential essay, “Women’s Time.” See [The Kristeva Reader](#). Edited by Toril Moi and translated by Seán Hand and Léon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

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