Godzilla as the Bridge: The Destruction of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima

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Summary

After the Triple Disasters of the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi on March 11, 2011, visual artists around the world repurposed the image of Godzilla to represent the Japanese urban destruction, creating a visual bridge between that day and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.



An Internet meme portraying Godzilla's atomic breath weapon as the cause of the Fukushima Daiichi explosion.

Unknown creator, n.d.

Copyright undetermined

On March 11, 2011, the world watched in awe and horror as Japan suffered three successive disasters: a destructive earthquake, a devastating tsunami, and the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In the age of the Internet, it should not be surprising that what followed was a global response of visual works offering support for Japan and invoking unity with the suffering Japanese people. Often with the tagline, "Pray for Japan," these images invoked visual tropes with recognizably Japanese connections from Hello Kitty to anime to Hokusai's *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*. Arguably the most frequent character used in response to the Triple Disasters was Godzilla, a globally recognizable icon originally serving as a Japanese warning against the dangers of nuclear weaponry. By repurposing Godzilla as a symbol of the 2011 Triple Disasters, it is my contention that visual artists encapsulate the destructive and emotional nature of that day's events while simultaneously building a historical bridge between March 11 and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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A menacing Godzilla explodes out of the bay causing a tsunami on March 11, 2011.

Unknown creator, n.d.

Copyright undetermined

Godzilla films have often been criticized for comical rubber suits, poor special effects, and pro wrestling-style monster fights. The historical Godzilla, however, was born of a serious and potent anti-nuclear message in Toho's 1954 film *Gojira*. Released on the heels of the "Lucky Dragon Incident" in which 23 Japanese fisherman were caught in the fallout from the United States' Castle Bravo nuclear test, *Gojira* opens with a fishing boat succumbing to an unknown flash and explosion in the ocean. The film would later reveal this phenomenon to be the emergence of Godzilla, an irradiated prehistoric dinosaur released from a sealed underwater cavern by American nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific. Standing 50 meters tall, his heft causes tsunami waves to crash against a coastal village as he first emerges from the water. On land, his footsteps cause the ground to shake violently, announcing his arrival. Finally, the radiation from nuclear testing gifted him radioactive breath, which he uses to set Tokyo aflame. The radioactive destruction he brings upon Tokyo invokes a metaphorical depiction of the horrors of nuclear war within his very body.

This metaphor was no accident. Godzilla's design was intended to invoke both the destructive capability of

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nuclear weapons and Japan's own nuclear victimhood. Obviously, his size displayed great physical power capable of leveling buildings, but the rubber suit held more subtle connections to the bombings. In an essay for *Turner Classic Movies*, David Kalat suggests that Godzilla's deeply grooved, craggy skin was meant to be reminiscent of the keloid scars on the bodies of survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His head was misshapen, bulbous, perched at the top of a long neck meant to resemble a mushroom cloud rising from the ground. Armed with his size, strength, and radioactivity, Godzilla's destruction of Tokyo would surely reverberate with a Japanese populace still climbing out of the urban rubble of wartime destruction.



In this 2017 editorial cartoon from *Nondoc.com*, Michael Allen uses Godzilla's size and radioactivity to communicate the exceedingly high radiation levels at Fukushima Daiichi.

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Just as Japanese audiences could connect to his metaphorical representation of nuclear war, Godzilla served as a lens through which many around the world could process the spectacle of the Triple Disasters. Memes and editorial cartoons using Godzilla brought familiarity to the shock of fresh disasters by recycling a known visual vocabulary. One meme, for example, embeds a snarling Godzilla within a tsunami wave from March 11, bearing down on a coastal town. Another shows the instant Fukushima Daiichi exploded with a superimposed Godzilla aiming his breath weapon at the site. Even years after the original disasters, Godzilla's destructive potential endured. In February 2017, when the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) announced continuing high radiation levels at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, Mike Allen published an editorial cartoon on *Nondoc.com* showing a prominent Godzilla stomping through Fukushima Daiichi with the tagline "Pictured: Japanese

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scientists measuring lethal radiation levels at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant this week," implying the threat of Daiichi's radiation levels was much greater and potentially more harmful than TEPCO was willing to acknowledge publicly.



A global expert on radioactivity, Godzilla issues a frantic warning about the high radiation levels at Fukushima Daiichi.

Unknown creator, n.d.

Copyright undetermined

As an icon, Godzilla inhabits a global space allowing those outside Japan to process their fears, awe, and hope for Japan's resilience in congress with the suffering Japanese. As a Japanese creation, he also inhabits a distinctly Japanese space representing myriad Japanese experiences within the Triple Disasters. This is best seen when visual artists portray Godzilla as a Japanese victim of the Triple Disasters, just as he was a victim of nuclear testing in the original film. David Fitzsimmons of the *Arizona Daily Star*, for example, published an editorial cartoon on March 11 depicting a weeping Godzilla standing in a flooded Japan thinking to himself, "I've never seen a monster like this," referring to the immense destruction of his home country around him. In a similar vein, a meme appearing on imgflip.com shows an aggressive-looking Godzilla sending a concerned warning to Japan, yelling "Fukushima... your radiation is to [sic] damn high!" Godzilla, then, equally embodies both the potential to destroy Japan and the capacity to act as a compassionate "citizen" of the nation. It is this malleability that allows his image to be repurposed to process the spectacle of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown of March 11 while also visually bridging them to the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a single body.

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- Kalat, David. *A Critical History of Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series*. Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2017.
- Tsutsui, William. *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.

Related links:

- *NonDoc*. "Only Godzilla can bring attention to the Fukushima nuclear plant." https://nondoc.com/2017/02/05/godzilla-fukushima-nuclear-plant/
- "Monster Movies." Chapter from Hsuan Hsu's virtual exhibition *Risk and Militarization* https://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/risk-and-militarization/monster-movies

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