



**Sean Rhoads, Brooke McCorkle.** *Japan's Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2018. 226 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6390-6.

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Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle's *Japan's Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaijū Cinema* offers a needed reassessment of the *kaijū eiga* (giant monster movie) genre, arguing that it is animated not simply by nuclear fears and commercialism but by environmental critique more broadly considered. To make this argument, the authors expand their focus to include not only *Godzilla* but also his foe-turned-sometimes-friend Mothra, and the lesser-known but beloved giant turtle Gamera, of Daiei Company. As the authors note, the latter two monsters have almost never been discussed in *kaijū* scholarship, and they take their intervention further by considering all of the movies in their original Japanese-language versions, rather than the often horribly recut English dub versions that are most familiar to audiences in North America. That they are the first to do so in a systematic manner is to their credit, though it does not redound well on the scholars whose prior work on *Godzilla* they cite most frequently, namely William Tsutsui (*Godzilla on My Mind*, 2004) and Stuart Galbraith IV (*Japanese Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films*, 1994 and *Monsters Are Attacking Tokyo*, 1998). Although they note that many authors have discussed *Godzilla* in passing or more substantively, particularly Yoshikuni Igarashi in *Bodies of Memory* (2000), *Japan's Green Monsters* certainly stands out for its

serious and systematic attention to the topic, animated by their conviction that “beneath a fantastic facade, *kaijū eiga* contain a kernel of the serious and can be interpreted as important sources of environmental, social, and political critiques” (p. 2).

The authors cover the whole span of the *kaijū eiga* era, from its origins in 1954 with *Godzilla* to the more recent entries *Shin Godzilla* (2016) and *Skull Island* (2017), although the bulk of their attention lies with the films of the long Showa era (1925-89). Beginning with a useful overview of the genre's roots both in native Japanese art forms and the influence of movies like *King Kong* (1933), as well as the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, the authors proceed in a roughly chronological order, situating the monsters and their movies in their relevant historical and commercial context in each chapter. From *Godzilla* and its American version, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956) to the first two films featuring Mothra in the 1960s (1961's *Mothra* and 1964's *Mothra vs. Godzilla*) and then the first few films of the Gamera series in that same decade, the authors chart the slow receding of nuclear concerns and wartime trauma in the genre and the rise of concerns about humans' impact on the environment, as well as the addition of children and the stock type of “temptress” characters as television put increasing fiscal pressures on the Japanese film industry:

studios sought to appeal to all age groups in an attempt to put bodies in seats and stave off fiscal ruin. The so-called Monster Boom of that decade succeeded for a while, but by the time of the pivotal, explicitly political, and widely panned *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* (1971), Japan had become a “polluter’s paradise” and the movie industry as a whole was on the rocks, along with the kaijū eiga genre. Gamera’s parent studio declared bankruptcy and after the abysmal ticket sales of *Terror of Mechagodzilla* (1975), the giant saurian was also put out to pasture. But new environmental laws and regulations began to remediate the polluted Japanese landscape by the end of the 1970s, and the wealthy Bubble years saw both Godzilla and Gamera return to the big screen, introducing new concerns such as Cold War-era nuclear proliferation and genetic engineering to the genre; Mothra followed in the 1990s after the Bubble burst, with her new movies focusing on conservation as well as on “normative family structures” (p. 157). All three monsters rampaged on film in the latter two decades of the Heisei era (1989-2019), incorporating emerging issues such as climate change and the 3/11 disasters into their critiques. (The commonly agreed eras in kaijū filmography do not quite match up with the imperial era names; I have used the latter for clarity in this review.)

The authors situate their work within ecocriticism or “green studies,” and throughout the book they do a nimble job of balancing the diegetic content of the movies themselves with the exegetic processes of their production and the larger social context in which those productions took place, incorporating the perspectives of film studies as well as environmental studies and social history. Although environmental commentary is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when most people think of kaijū movies, the authors’ arguments are convincing, and their clear affection for the genre and its giant monster protagonists animates the work even as they remain clear-eyed about many of these movies’ obvious shortcomings. They also pay commendable attention to eas-

ily ignored elements such as the movies’ soundtracks, which play a crucial role in communicating the films’ messages that is too often overlooked in favor of elements such as special effects. Their focus on the role of women, not only in the Mothra films in the person of the monster herself and her votary fairies but across the genre as a whole in the form of evolving female character types, is also salutary. Likewise, their attention to Gamera, who was eventually termed “the Friend to All Children,” allows them to consider movies with more explicitly didactic aims and a younger target audience than most Godzilla or Mothra films, offering a useful comparison and contrast. The most explicitly environmental kaijū movie, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, well merits the chapter-length reconsideration that the authors devote to it. And though the authors are not historians, they largely do a competent job of sketching out the relevant historical contexts, drawing on the work of notable scholars including Conrad Totman and Andrew Gordon.

There are a few quibbles, such as some kneejerk heteronormativity in the discussion of to whom the “temptress” characters supposedly appealed, and at points some obvious questions—such as the possible role of the Gaia hypothesis as an influence on the 1990s Mothra films; the role of Three Mile Island in the depiction of superpower nuclear incompetence in *Godzilla 1984*; and the connection between the 1980s occult boom and the emergence of characters with psychic powers in the Godzilla films of the era—are unfortunately not taken up. Their historical sketch is also notably inadequate in their discussion of the role of women’s labor in modern Japan in the background to the first Mothra films, neglecting such key developments as the essential role of female labor in Japan’s early industrialization, women working outside the home in the 1920s and 1930s as the source of social anxiety about the “moga,” or “modern girl,” and the continued female labor that built items such as transistors in postwar Japan—the very same transistors that powered the

Electone electric organ/synthesizer providing the fairies' means of communication in the soundtrack to *Mothra*. Although the authors cite Marxist intellectuals who argued that women's labor in 1960s Japan did not produce commodities, they are apparently unaware that this was an ideological claim rather than a factual statement, and their analysis of the twinned and contradictory intersections of gender, capitalism, and ideology in these movies is necessarily somewhat incomplete because of it. On a more pedestrian note, it is too bad that the exigencies of academic publishing mean that there are very few images in the book; one hopes this lack will inspire readers to seek out the movies themselves—specifically in their original Japanese-language versions, which, happily, are now more widely available worldwide than at any previous point.

Overall, *Japan's Green Monsters* makes for an enjoyable and engaging read, and the book will appeal to scholars of film studies, Asian studies, environmental studies, and popular culture seeking a more in-depth look at the rise of the giant monsters. It is certainly suitable for classroom use in any of those disciplines and would work particularly well when paired with some of the movies that are discussed at length within. The authors summarize the warnings embedded in these films as “nature will have its revenge” (p. 183), and the book and the movies' commentary will remain relevant until that warning is heeded.

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