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Godzilla at 70: Time for *Kaijū* Studies

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Abstract: This article contextualises the history of *kaijū* scholarship and looks particularly at the swell of publishing that has emerged in the last decade. It argues that the release of a series of new Godzilla films has led to a greater focus on the *kaijū* film, but that there is recurrence of critical themes that have persisted throughout scholarship on giant monster movies since the 1960s. This provides a literature review to understand how *kaijū* media has been critiqued, defined and challenged in response to the near three-quarter century history of *kaijū* cinema to consider if studies of the *kaijū* media provide the impetus to look at the *kaijū* as deserving of its own field of study. If zombie studies and vampire studies can occupy their own emerging fields of study, why not the *kaijū*? If the figure of the *kaijū* asks the biggest questions of our cultures, then do the giant monsters not deserve their own field? But, if this is an emerging field of study, the article poses, it needs to be more than *kaijū* film studies.

Keywords: Godzilla; *kaiju*; nuclear; Anthropocene; monster; Japan; United States; war; cinema

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1. Introduction

As we reach the 70th anniversary of the release of *Gojira* (Honda Ishirō, 1954), now seems the perfect time to re-assess the legacy of the King of the Monsters. Perhaps one of the most significant exports of Japanese popular culture, the giant monster has become a major global icon. The worldwide success of Tōhō's most recent Godzilla blockbuster, *Godzilla Minus One* (*Gojira Mainasu Wan*, Yamakazi Takashi, 2023) and the latest instalments of Legendary Entertainment's MonsterVerse series, *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* (Adam Wingard, 2024) and *Monarch: Legacy of Monsters* (2023–present), streamed on Apple TV+, seem to have created a peak in *kaijū*-related entertainment to coincide with the greatest of the monsters moving into their eighth decade. When we also consider further *kaijū* media, such as the Netflix animated feature, *Ultraman Rising* (Shannon Tindle, 2024), which followed the distribution of the *Ultraman* anime series produced by Tsuburaya Production and Production IG (three seasons, 2019–2023) and *Gamera Rebirth* (Seshita Hiroyuki,[1] 2023–present), it seems *kaijū* have never been more prominent in global culture. *Godzilla Minus One* subsequently became one of the most anticipated streaming releases of 2024, when Netflix released the film on their platform by surprise in June.[2]

Along with popular success, including a first Oscar for the Godzilla franchise (at the same time, the first Japanese film to win the special effects category), the growing mass of *kaijū* entertainment has produced a new wave of critical and political analysis of the Godzilla series. Alongside Tōhō's previous film, *Shin Godzilla* (*Shin Gojira*, Anno Hideaki, Higuchi Shinji), released in 2016, Godzilla and other *kaijū* films have found themselves being scholarly re-appraised. The first Godzilla film, released in 1954, spawned a wave of critical and political analysis that spent much of the last seven decades focussing on ways in which *kaijū* films have interpreted key political discourses during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from the nuclear anxieties of the post-war and Cold War eras to becoming important cultural signifiers of the Anthropocene. Two clear areas of critical discourse surrounding *kaijū* films have emerged, along the lines of the most significant fears of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, notably the historical and contemporary nuclear anxieties following the two atomic bombings in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945 and the waves of testing throughout the 1940s until the 1990s. The second thread relates

closely to the growing concerns around ecological damage and the ways in which monsters have begun to embody environmental anxieties, both intentionally and figuratively. Drawing on Susan Sontag (2009), Jason Barr (2016) has discussed how the *kaijū* film, as a response to contemporary global concerns, tends not to provide succour. It is a form that has long related to destruction as a visual spectacle and a political tendency that it, perhaps consciously, does not resolve.

At the end of his book *The Kaijū Film: A Critical Study of Cinema's Biggest Monsters* (2016), Barr references 'a continuing need for academics to examine the [*kaijū*] genre.' For Barr, there are many noted scholars of the *kaijū* film, not just those working in the academy but also fans and critics looking at giant monster films. He notes how 'there are certainly a number of critics who are investigating the genre, [but] the relatively small number of articles and authors still pales in comparison to any number of separate genres'. This, Barr suggests, is due to 'resistance from academic journals to granting page space (and, let's be honest, money) to kaiju cinema' (p. 176). At the time of the publication of Barr's book (he has since published a second looking at different aspects of the *kaijū* film), there were a growing number of academic articles devoted to what came after Godzilla's first outing, but this has swelled in number since then.

Throughout this article, I will explore the history of *kaijū* scholarship and look at the wave of scholarly publishing that has emerged since the publication of Barr's book nearly a decade ago. It is clear the release of a series of new Godzilla films, made by Tōhō and American/transnational studios has led to a greater focus on the *kaijū* film, and the quality of the films certainly has an impact, but there is a recurrence of critical themes in the *kaijū* film's more recent iterations that has stimulated a near-*kaijū* sized amount of criticism on the Godzilla series and *kaijū eiga*. Therefore, I will explore how the *kaijū* film has been defined across decades of scholarship. While this provides a wider literature review to provide an understanding of how *kaijū* media has been critiqued, defined and challenged as a form of cultural communication, the timing in response to the near three-quarter century history of *kaijū* cinema[3] provides the opportunity to consider if studies of *kaijū* cinema provide the impetus to look at the *kaijū* as deserving of its own field of study. If zombie studies (Zombie Studies Network 2024) and vampire studies (Vampire Studies Association 2024) occupy their own fields of study, why not the *kaijū*? If the figure of the *kaijū* asks the biggest questions of our cultures, then do the giant monsters not deserve their own domain? And, does this not also necessitate a widening of the scope of media to look more closely at the comics, games, literature and other media that form part of the *kaijū* genre?

2. *Daikaijū* and the Turn from Monster Theory

In the seminal 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posits monster theory in perhaps its most succinct fashion: 'a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender' (p. 3). Cohen continues, 'the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns"' (p. 4). He mentions Godzilla just once, as a sign that undoes the cultural fabric that 'unite[s] every private body to the public world' (p. 12). Like all monsters, *kaijū* are cultural beasts, not just because they emerge from a series of global cultures, but because they emphasise the systems by which our cultures shape, mould and police the subjectivities of its citizens. In this regard, the *kaijū* is a classic representative of the theories that constitute monster studies. The division proposed by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel between 'monster theory' and 'monster studies' provides a place where we might situate *kaijū* studies as a research field: the former represents the frameworks through which monsters can be read, the intersections of postmodern, queer and postcolonial theory that follow Cohen, to build a platform on which studies of monsters can draw (Mittman and Hensel 2018). *Kaijū* studies, as a monster study, therefore sits comfortably with Cohen's theses, where the monster is 'pure culture' (Cohen 1996, p. 4), a rendering not just of the fears reflected in the make-up of the monster, but the systems that make them manifest.

Mittman and Hensel discuss how *kaijū* tropes have even been adopted by the American far-right to envision an invasion of cities from outside, but it is, despite a sign carried by one angry marcher, impossible to 'destroy all monsters'; 'there is always a sequel' (p. 6). *Destroy All Monsters* (*Kaijū Sō-shingeki*, Honda Ishirō, 1968) is a classic *Shōwa*-era Godzilla film, in which several *kaijū* attack cities around the Earth under the control of an alien race, the Kilaaks. The example discussed by Mittman and Hensel here shows how embedded *kaijū* tropes are within Western culture, despite their origins in East Asian popular culture. The *kaijū* is a rarefied cultural symbol, a giant invader brought to wrought destruction on the innocent citizens of cities around the world. Of course, this is never so clear, they are never a symbol of purely of one culture (see Rawle 2022) and the citizens of the cities attacked were rarely without some form of complicity or guilt for the means through which the monster was created (see Igarashi 2000; Yomota 2007).

As I will discuss throughout this article, analyses of *kaijū* media have given impetus to the emergence of a research field investigating the symbolic meanings of giant monsters. While it returns again and again to Godzilla and to films in particular, the idea of a 'field' is bound up with broader questions of how a 'studies' field emerges. Other texts on disciplinary formation pose key questions around the 'professionalization' related to disciplinary formation. Gregory Steirer's work on the formation of Comics Studies highlights the development of networks and institutional structures, rising PhD completions and geographical methodological plurality belying an absence of '"concrete" disciplinarity' (Steirer 2011, p. 278). What might be termed *kaijū* studies, as a field of knowledge, depends much less on formalised networks or structures than comics scholarship did at the time of Sterier's article. James Elkins (2003) considered the growth of 'visual studies' in terms of how colleges and universities had institutionalised an emerging field as it developed as a field of knowledge, but he argued that, at the time, it was narrowly defined in theoretical terms. Its institutionalisation was ahead of its development as a field. We are very far from *kaijū* studies becoming institutionalised in Bachelors or Masters programmes, or in departments, like the University of Hertfordshire's 'Reading the Vampire' MA course (George 2014) or the growth of zombie studies courses that attracted the ire of Florida governor Ron DeSantis (McCole 2023). Courses such as these proceed from academic networks, conferences and publishing, as well as within departments, even while the market-driven discourse of neoliberal Higher Education disparages, or erases, their existence. They nevertheless persist as fields of knowledge.

The *kaijū* genre is perhaps most aligned with other fields that study analogous objects. The Hong Kong martial arts film is another cult film genre that has become embedded within the idea of a 'studies' field, Martial Arts Studies. Paul Bowman, in *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (Bowman 2015), considers how mass-cultural objects such as Bruce Lee films fit within a broader cultural field that investigates the histories, meanings and representations of martial arts. Bowman considers relatively straightforwardly that '[a]cademic subjects study objects' (Bowman 2015, p. 19). The objects we will discuss herein proceed from the *kaijū* films produced in multiple countries, the cultural and historical threads of investigation that constitute the broadest sense of an academic subject area. However, a field proceeds from the questions it asks, and how it draws on 'problematics' drawn from a range of different theoretical fields (p. 8). Bowman's subject matter is as widely constituted as that of Sterier's, where methodological lines are drawn widely and across disciplines, rather than genuinely inter-disciplinary. The scholars whose work suggests a mass of research hinting at *kaijū* studies are drawn from different fields and work in different disciplinary departments, including English, Film, Media Production, Economics, Paleontology, Astronomy, some working in their main disciplines, some in secondary ones, where representations of their discipline are echoed in *kaijū* films. The questions and problematics they pose are widely aligned with their established disciplines, and this poses questions about whether the objects of study here are used for purposes too broadly drawn to constitute a field of knowledge. For Bowman, a field also draws 'inclusionary [and] exclusionary lines' (p. 27), and while some of these relate to the object (what

constitutes a *kaijū* film in the first place), they also relate to the developing networks of scholars (who is in, who is out) from which a field of study relies upon to define its core principles and 'problematics' that underpin the questions it asks. As I will discuss later, events such as conferences have helped the field of knowledge take baby steps toward something more formalised, but they are rare. If this field is emerging, it is currently a collection of published research rather than a more professionalised subject.

The first problematic point is, if *kaijū* studies can represent an offshoot from monster studies, how can we define a *kaijū*, or a *kaijū* film? Godzilla is perhaps the most recognisable *kaijū* in the world, followed closely by one its most regular foes, King Kong. If the term *kaijū* has entered the English language, its most simple meaning is 'giant monster'.[4] The gargantuan scale of the *kaijū* is relative to modern structures, grand architecture and skyscrapers, from King Kong scaling the Empire State Building to Godzilla smashing the Japanese Diet Building. *Kaijū eiga* (怪獣映画) generally translates directly to 'monster movie', but more rightly, we should refer to *daikaijū* (大怪獣), as the initial character denotes the scale of the monster (McRoy 2008). They are closer to Biblical giants, as discussed by Cohen, as 'fantastic overabundance' (Cohen 1999, p. 33), than to more classical Japanese *kami*. Their modernity defines them—they are not folkloric. In this regard, we could consider the *kaijū eiga* as encompassing any film, or media series, that features monsters, or giants, fighting each other or bringing spectacular destruction to human-created spaces. The Godzilla films constitute the core canon of the *kaijū eiga*. They are the field's main objects of study, but their spread, appropriation and adoption in other cultures has become a regular subject for *kaijū* scholars, and therefore we cannot simply pigeonhole the *kaijū* as having essentialist origins that limit its understand only to iterations produced in Japan. This would foreclose studies of the genre, limiting it to nationally-specific studies, and would disregard how classic genre studies, of the Western for instance, have broadened their own fields to encompass global trends and flows (Fisher 2011; Hunt 2011; Lee 2015; Broughton 2016).

Michael Crandol (2019) has discussed how Japanese critics fairly quickly defined the *kaijū eiga* as a distinct genre. He demonstrates the ways in which the *kaiki eiga* (the 'strange film') was understood initially to encompass the *kaijū* film. Such was the understanding of horror in Japanese cinema that the burgeoning generic roots of the Godzilla series meant that the small number of serious, and relatively dark, films produced in the 1950s sat more comfortably with strange, mysterious films, such as the Edo-inspired tales of ghost cats and vengeful spirits that inspired fear and began to be understood to be more like imported British and Hollywood horror films under the heading of *kaiki* than the more colourful and family friendly *kaijū* films of the 1960s (Crandol 2021).

As the *kaijū* film begins to emerge as a more defined object, however, it becomes subject to particular kinds of criticism. Perhaps the first piece of Anglophone criticism to treat the *kaijū* film seriously is Susan Sontag's article, 'The Imagination of Disaster'. It is important to highlight how, at the time Sontag published the article in 1965, *kaijū* films tended to arrive in America often radically different from those seen by Japanese audiences. The original cut of Honda Ishirō's first Godzilla film was not seen in wide release on the other side of the Pacific until 2004 (see Ryfle 2005), and the version in circulation for many years was *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (Terry O. Morse and Honda, 1956), a dubbed and re-edited version with added sequences featuring Raymond Burr. This version diminished the main conflict in the film between the US nuclear bombings and subsequent testing and their impact on the Japanese people. Therefore, Sontag's exploration of the films is more surprising given the cultural stigma around the 'cheesy' movies arriving from Japan.

Sontag positions Honda's (she references Honda as 'Inoshiro', a common mistranslation of his name) films alongside those produced by Hollywood in the 1950s, such as *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951) and *This Island Earth* (Joseph M. Newman and Jack Arnold, 1955). The science fiction film, she posits, 'is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction' (Sontag 2009, p. 213). Perhaps surprisingly therefore, she does not discuss *Gojira*,[5] but several of Honda's films released after the first *kaijū* film had proven so successful: *Rodan* (*Radon*, 1956), *The Mysterians* (*Chikyū Bōeigun*, 1957), *Battle in Outer Space*

(*Uchū Daisensō*, 1959), and *The H-Man* (*Bijo to Ekitai-ningen*, 1958), even though the latter does not feature a giant of some kind (in *The Mysterians*, it is a huge robot). Sontag argues that such films embody the 'imagination of disaster' for an 'age of extremity', where these films sit at the 'intersection between a naïve and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation' (p. 224). Like the idea of the monster as 'pure culture', Sontag argues that the growing body of science fiction films that feature colossal threats to urban spaces capture the contemporary feelings of anxiety that pervaded the Cold War era. She explores how the films are trapped between a Utopian vision, where scientific consensus offers a way out of crisis, but, in the simplistic morality of the films, there lurks a continual 'contemporary negative imagination about the impersonal' (p. 221). Such a 'negative imagination' may explain why the films and associated media have gained greater traction in recent years, certainly as a critical focus, where societies face existential threats like war and climate change.

Sontag's 'imagination of disaster' becomes a dominant thread in the history of *kaijū* scholarship. As I mention earlier, Barr adopts her points about the films' reflection of 'worldwide anxieties' as a core element of his first book on the *kaijū* film, while the few articles that followed tended to adopt similar tones to that of Sontag. In an article published in the *Journal of Popular Film* in 1974, Lawrence Wharton (1974) looked to redress some of the prevailing negativity around the films at the time. He notes that 'the monster becomes a symbol for technology' (p. 33). Technology, he argues, become a more accepted resolution for the films, not to warn of problematic technology, like nuclear bombs, but those technologies that fight off invasions. This was a common thread for those films in the 1960s, as invasion narratives became more prevalent. However, Wharton's article demonstrates some of the issues with early scholarship around *kaijū* films, the lack of availability of Japanese versions and lapses, perhaps in relation to memories of films screened late at night on TV. For instance, Wharton discusses how *King Kong* vs. *Godzilla* (*Kingu Kongu tai Gojira*, Honda Ishirō, 1962) depicts the 'positive aspect of technology' as Godzilla drives King Kong out of Tokyo (p. 35), with good triumphing over evil. However, in its original Japanese format, the film is an exceptionally pessimistic and cynical satire of media cultures, as the head of a pharmaceutical company seeks to exploit the myths of a monster on a pacific island to boost the ratings of the television show that his company sponsors. When Kong reaches the Japanese mainland, it is pure coincidence that Godzilla shows up to fight off the giant ape, after being accidentally awoken by an American submarine. The Japan Self Defence Forces are also able to pacify Kong with electricity and move him to Godzilla for the climactic fight (which, despite long standing rumours, is a draw[6]) but this plot line is largely removed in the American version. Wharton also seems to confuse *Latitude Zero* (1969), Honda's only English language film about a utopian community under the sea fighting off Cesar Romero's villain, with *Monster Zero*, a reissued version of *Invasion of Astro-Monster* (*Kaijū Daisensō*, Honda Ishirō, 1965), where several monsters are hijacked to fight on behalf of aliens. However, this may sit comfortably with Wharton's dismissal of the quality of the films: 'I am not urging that the films should receive special attention or consideration in "a new light," but ("as I see it") they seem to be emblematic of the progression of societal acceptance of technology' (p. 37). Such distinctions of quality—an important factor in the monster movie becoming a cult genre—have continually been referenced in *kaijū* film scholarship, but, as we have seen the rise of cult film studies, as well as greater focus on 'world' or transnational cinema, there have been regular challenges to such distinctions. Adoptions of 'bad films' can often be a foundation for fans' love of these works, their difference from Hollywood standards, but they can also problematically dismiss global cinema that fails to reach the perceived standards of Hollywood cinema.

Even in Japan, critical reception of *kaijū* films, which arguably became *the* major cultural export in Japan throughout the 1950s and 60s, and a core component of Gross National Cool (McGray 2002), was slow to be taken seriously. Donald Richie and Joseph L. Anderson's early exploration in *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (Anderson and Richie 1959) dismissed the burgeoning *kaijū* (and *tokusatsu*, the Japanese term for special effects)

film as exploitation fare, cheaply produced to turn a quick buck in the world film markets. However, this is largely in line with the ways in which national cinemas have over privileged standards that tend to align with European *auteurist* art film traditions (see Caoduro and Carroll 2014). Key works on Godzilla and the *kaijū* film in the 1980s and 90s tended to move forward thinking about the meanings shared more broadly with Japanese culture and the explosion of Japanese science fiction on the global stage, especially after the release of Otomo Katsuhiro's adaptation of his manga *Akira* (1988), which helped anime break through to the international stage. Susan Napier's important article, 'Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from Godzilla to Akira', expands on Sontag's take on the science fiction film with a more Japanese Studies focus. Yet, she begins by noting the same tendency in Western criticism that has overlooked such popular works: Japanese 'popular cinema was ignored or bemoaned by critics in the West, who saw the rise of mass-produced and mass-marketed films as a link to a perceived decline in the quality of Japanese cinema overall' (Napier 1993, p. 327). Napier's focus on the Godzilla series does privilege the first film, in which the monster is defeated, preceding a warning of the monsters' return, and other *kaijū* films, such as *Battle from Outer Space* that imagine positive international co-operation in the face of outside threats. *Gojira*, she notes, is in keeping with Andrew Tudor's notion of 'secure horror', where the state is able to reinstate order when the national collective is threatened. It is a genre in which human agency is positively imagined, or it is in some of its iterations (as we will encounter later). This utopian tendency is largely explored in Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski's biography of Honda as being rooted in the series' director's philosophy shaped by his war-time experiences, which included witnessing the excesses of Japanese occupation in Manchuria, overseeing a comfort station, and spending time as a prisoner of war (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017).

The impact of the end of the Second World War is the most pronounced aspect of scholarship around *kaijū* films. Simply, for Morris Low, 'Godzilla and the Japanese monster movies represent an attempt by the Japanese to come to terms with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society' (Low 1993, p. 53). However, Chon Noriega's article 'Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When "Them!" is U.S.', takes a more nuanced look at the monster's origins, the development of the film, and the influence of American films, such as *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), which had been re-released in the run up to the production of *Gojira*, and Eugene Lourié's *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953). In keeping with Napier's Japanese Studies focus, Noriega points out that Western methods for interpreting the monster cannot account for Godzilla's origins: 'Western conceptions of the Other or monster as repressed sexual energy (Wood), class struggle (Jameson), or "archaic, conflicting impulses" (Carroll) do not fully explain the Japanese monster' (Noriega 1987, p. 67). Japanese conceptions of the Other, Noriega explains, have the capacity to see the monster as Other (external) and Self (internal) at the same time. Thus, the monster cannot simply be dismissed as representing American aggression (as it certainly does, from the opening scenes that re-imagine the very recent impact of US nuclear testing on Japanese fishing boats), 'so that Godzilla comes to symbolize Japan (self) as well as the United States (Other)' (Noriega 1987, p. 68). It is a 'nuclear dialectic' (p. 70) played out across the film series, as Noriega begins to consider, in a way that few articles do at this point, how later films in the *Shōwa* and *Heisei* series[7] began to think about how Japanese restructuring following the war had been depicted during the 1960s and how nuclear narratives were repositioned during the 1980s, especially in *Gojira* (Hashimoto Koji, 1984).[8] Noriega's article emphasises an orthodox critical position on the Godzilla films and the *kaijū* genre: 'the nuclear threat the monster signifies never leaves; it is always here' (p. 75). As we will see, this has been a recurring feature of Godzilla and *kaijū* scholarship, reflecting the 'stickiness' of certain themes in critical takes on the monsters. Discussing Mark Jacobson's novel *Gojiro* (1991) and its adaptation of the Godzilla mythos, Nancy Anisfield succinctly defines the conventionally reading in *kaijū* scholarship to this point: 'Humans made the bombs. The bombs created the monsters. The monsters punish the humans. After enough punishment, the humans triumph and are left in peace'

(Anisfield 1995, p. 56). Mark Bould is even more succinct in *The Anthropocene Unconscious*: 'Godzilla is the bomb' (Bould 2021, p. 27), while David Deamer discusses, in Deleuzian terms, the 'indirect expressions' of nuclear trauma that take shape as action-images 'not just survived, but resolved' (Deamer 2014, p. 31).

Nuclear suffering remains a constant in the growing scholarship around Godzilla and the monster's legacy. In his article concerning the translation of *Gojira* into its American adaptation in the 1990s, Aaron Kerner discusses how the monster 'is an abject referent, and in this double allegory—of *hibakusha* and the horrors of atomic warfare—the monster's skin and the use of *suitmation* are visual keys to the historical events' (Kerner 2006, p. 118). *Hibakusha* is the Japanese term used to refer to survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts, those physically scarred by the bombs, the physicalities referenced by the monster's own skin. For Kerner, the transformation of the monster's body in computer generated images, removes the person in *suitmation*, the performer (*suitmation* is the term usually used to refer to the special effects in the Japanese Godzilla films and TV shows until the last decade), and therefore presents us with the absence of the *hibakusha* referent behind the monster. The body of the monster is an important signifier of elements of Japanese culture, not just the bomb itself and the trauma enacted on Japan by Allied forces, but seen as a more complex rendering of the Japanese national psyche. As such, Yomota Inuhiko finds in the body of the monster, 'a mental image of the casualties of the war… in an abject relation to those Japanese who had survived the atrocities and who now enjoyed the prosperity and democracy of post-war life' (Yomota 2007, p. 108). In *What is Japanese Cinema?: A History* however, he says the genre is a 'globally unprecedented' one, entirely and deeply fused with the contemporary Japanese consciousness. He says it is:

> an antinuclear film with an ecological perspective… The idea of a threat to Tokyo, born in the south seas, is unthinkable without considering the air raids by the American forces that scorched the Japanese archipelago just nine years before the film was shot, as well as offering repose for the Japanese soldiers sent to the south seas. (Yomota 2019, p. 117)

Aaron Gerow has further discussed how the body of the monster is a 'sutured national' one. In 'Wrestling with Godzilla: Intertextuality, Childish Spectatorship, and the National Body', Gerow explores how the 'deliriously unstable pleasure' of 'wrestling with monsters' (Gerow 2006, p. 80) can be at the deliberate expense of the stability of meaning in the text. He aligns the Godzilla films of the 1960s with the popularity of *kaijū puroresu* (monster pro-wrestling) in Japan. For Gerow, an American scholar based in Japan, there is a direct and clear relationship between the monstrous bodies in the Godzilla films and that of the popular Japanese wrestler Rikidōzan, a body as constructed as that of the *kaijū* onscreen. The heroic Rikidōzan, who was actually Korean, could be understood and enjoyed by the same young audiences who loved the monster-on-monster battles on the cinema screen. It was a culture that could 'enjoy the fake as the fake': 'the suspension of disbelief allows the vicarious experience of the nation without necessarily believing or being interpellated by it' (p. 79). This is a different national body to the ones discussed by Kerner or Yomota, even though scholarship has repeatedly returned again and again to the nuclear metaphors of the original film. Gerow's argument here, along with Yomota's (as well as the work of Yoshikuni Igarashi), bring a more nuanced perspective to reading *kaijū* from the perspective of Japan. They offer pathways that have been referenced regularly by Western-based critics, including those based in Japanese Studies.

Nevertheless, in the majority of the scholarship discussed so far, we find a recurring focus more or less solely on the meanings and contexts related to the first film, such as Mark Anderson's argument that the film represents a tussle between incoming modernity and nature as potential 'unproblematic or hopeful alternatives' (Anderson 2006, p. 33). *Gojira* is undoubtedly a national film in the sense that it communicates significant sensibilities experienced by Japanese people. However, often this focus on disaster and trauma has tended to leave behind the films that came after, either dismissed as trash or unworthy of significant critical investigation, aside from a few commentators, such as Yomota, Gerow

or Noriega. This tends to show us how 'sticky' monster bodies can be. If there is an issue at stake in the development of *kaijū* studies, it is how several issues and histories have 'stuck' to the body of Godzilla and the giant monsters who rampage across the screen. As studies of *kaijū* have developed and become more numerous, some discourses have stuck fast.

3. *Kaijū* Are 'Sticky'

The Monster Network, a group of intersectional monster theorists whose work considers how monsterisation shapes cultural viewpoints, have discussed how monsters are 'messy, unruly' figures. A monster is 'something that travels, moves, sticks and slides to and through imaginaries' (Hellstrand et al. 2024, p. 5). The monster does not simply wind up being pushed around, they are 'locked into place' (p. 13). As we have already seen, in critical discourse, *kaijū* (but mostly Godzilla) became subject to several essentialising concepts. Disaster, specifically nuclear disaster, became originary for the monsters. They became 'locked in place' not just as representations of the bomb, but also of essentialist national discourses. Where *kaijū* were not fused with the Japanese imaginary, they were effectively mistaken for being American. Over the first fifty years of Godzilla's history, we saw a narrow focus on the nuclear body of the monster. It was only until a few scholars looked beyond the first Godzilla film, and *King Kong*, that histories relating to the *kaijū* film as a variant of the science-fiction film began to gain its own place in Japanese film history and to be seen as more than 'the bomb'.

This tendency shows how the cultural monster can become 'stuck'. *Kaijū* bodies can be literally sticky, like that of the smog monster Hedorah, but, in Sara Ahmed's terms, can become surfaces that collect traumas, histories and negative emotions. The Monster Network draw strongly on Ahmed's work in their own focus on the monster's 'messiness', but Ahmed emphasised how marginalised bodies can become surfaces for hate and negativity. Monsters are normally subjects of disgust and hatred, and hated bodies become 'the cause of an injury to the national body… [H]istories… 'stick', making some objects more than others seem fearsome' (Ahmed 2014). Godzilla is fearsome precisely because a traumatic national history is stuck to them. They are both victim and cause of the very wound that is made visible on their body. As Kerner discussed, the keloid scars of Godzilla's body—that were so easily elided by American CGI artists—are visible symbols of the national body's wounds. Although *hibakusha* were hidden from view in Japan, Godzilla is fearsome in their endless visibility, growing larger each generation. As Ahmed argues, '[h]ow the object impresses (upon) us may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions. The object may stand in for other objects, or may be proximate to some objects, and slide over others' (Ahmed 2014).

We can see Godzilla as 'standing in' for the bomb, and proximate to other histories that are dependent on trauma for their impressions upon us. If Godzilla and *kaijū* are worthy of study, it is because of their relationship with greater cultural themes, as Cohen suggested monsters must always represent. Film theorists can consider how the monster is representative of 'action-images', as Deamer presented, as a source of spectacle. However, this elides the serious themes that differentiate some films as worthy of study, or canonisation, or at least worth being remembered. '[W]e can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, *as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects and signs*' (Ahmed 2014, emphasis in original). Godzilla has proven to be endlessly sticky, and so have other *kaijū* as their shapes have mutated across nearly three-quarters of a century. As Cynthia Erb has shown, *King Kong* has shifted from its initial proximity to ethnographic films to become a problematic horror film about racial relationships. However, as she also shows, *Gojira* highlighted how global producers were able to pick up key themes in American cinema and stick them to their own national contexts (Erb 2009). Godzilla shows what happens when the figure of the monster can be changed and stuck to different histories and signs. Because, as Ahmed makes clear, 'what gets unstuck can always get restuck and can even engender new and more adhesive forms of sticking'.

Several texts published around the turn of this century begin to set the tenor for an emergent *kaijū* studies and constitute the first major wave of *kaijū* scholarship beyond the sporadic publishing of the previous decades. The first, and still most cited, book on the history of *kaijū* cinema is William Tsutsui's *Godzilla on my Mind: Fifty Years of the King of the Monsters* (Tsutsui 2004). In a later article, Tsutsui describes the book as 'an accessible but intelligent, personal but historically sound work for a non-academic audience on the Godzilla phenomenon' (Tsutsui 2013, p. 352). Tsutsui has documented how the crossover nature of the book's popularity was treated with sneers by his academic colleagues, but was too academic for many fans of Godzilla, who did not think the 'Egghead' took the object of their fandom seriously enough. He recounted how the editor of the *G-FAN* fanzine declined to offer an endorsement for the book because of the repeated references to the Godzilla films as 'cheesy' (Tsutsui 2013, p. 355). Nevertheless, Tsutsui's book has become a recurring reference point for many *kaijū* scholars. The book is part-memoir-part-scholarly-reflection on the importance of Godzilla as a global icon and representative of Japanese culture. Tsutsui resists some of the threads that have been developed in this article: the 'reductive' nature of theorising about Godzilla as to be 'distilled down to a very simple message or a straight, one-to-one allegory' (Tsutsui 2004, p. 104). At a time when the original cut of Honda's film was only just beginning to be released outside Japan, Tsutsui recounts the origins of the film (this story has been told a lot in the scholarship around *kaijū* films). Whereas we have already seen how a range of texts have engaged with Japanese post-war society, Tsutsui resists the tendency to see the films as serious ideological reflections of Japanese society:

> Godzilla films are not some magical oracle on Japanese culture, late-twentieth century global society, or the abnormal psychology of prepubescent moviegoers; they are, however, a collection of idiosyncratic—and oddly compelling—cultural artefacts, fully worthy of close scrutiny, sympathetic analysis, and lighthearted celebration. (pp. 44–45)

It is the lightheartedness that led to Tsutsui's own reflection on the negative reception of the book nearly a decade later—on the same page, he refers to the films as 'good clean fun. Ahh… the power of cheese' (p. 44).

Underlying Tsutsui's book, which resists the kind of deep or grand theorisation of film-philosophy, is an argument about why Godzilla should be taken seriously, as well as why Godzilla should attract so much love: in response to another scholar's comment that Godzilla is 'the perfect floating, empty metaphor', Tsutsui calls Godzilla 'a malleable monster, an interpretive chameleon, a ready vehicle for others' hopes, agendas, and fantasies' (p. 207), whereas earlier in the book, he refers to the monster's 'ambiguity, his ambivalence as a symbol and his frustrating elusiveness as a subject of interpretation' (p. 111). Roger Luckhurst has dismissed this as a problematic, 'weak hermeneutic pluralism where anything goes' (Luckhurst 2020, p. 276), but Tsutsui emphasises the polyvalent nature of *kaijū* scholarship. In Ahmed's terms, certain histories and intensities are stuck, but can be un- and re-stuck to monstrous bodies. As Tsutsui shows in his book, and in the co-edited (with Michiko Ito) collection that followed a fiftieth anniversary conference and film festival, *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage*, the history of *kaijū* has proven the malleability of the monster symbol: 'Godzilla is a complex and multifaceted pop idol, embedded in intricate networks of cultural signification and personal meaning, with a profound and lasting global impact unexpected from a low-budget, big-screen creature' (Tsutsui 2006, p. 7). Such cultural signification has proven to be highly context-specific, as changing times have mutated the monster (and its brethren) further. Tsutsui's work with Ito has also proven to be a landmark in the development of academic networks for scholars interested in looking at *kaijū* media within the academy.

Alongside Tsutsui's landmark academic text, key works from around the same time have become significant reference texts. Steve Ryfle's *Japan's Favorite Mon-star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"* (Ryfle 1998), and David Kalat's *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series* (Kalat 1997) are both regularly cited throughout many

academic texts. More journalistic than many of the books and journal articles being discussed here, both contribute significantly to Anglophone understanding of the Godzilla films.[9] Ryfle's work in particular has challenged conventional reception of the Godzilla films. Whereas his biography of 'The Big G' is a significant reference text, with excellent journalism and revealing interviews, Ryfle has elsewhere revealed the longstanding legacy of the 1954 version of the film on its re-release (Ryfle 2005) while he has also been an outspoken critic of American co-optations of the monster, accusing the 2014 Gareth Edwards film of 'whitewashing' the monster in 'disaster porn' (Ryfle 2014). Along with texts such as his biography of Honda, written with the former editor of the *Japanese Giants* (1977–) fanzine, Ed Godziszewski, their documentary *Bringing Godzilla Down to Size: The Art of Japanese Special Effects* (2008) and the numerous commentaries they have provided for DVD and Blu-Ray releases of *kaijū* films, these specialists on *kaijū* movies have made immeasurable contributions to an emergent *kaijū* studies. Popular investigation of the films, such as that by August Ragone (2014), John LeMay (see, for instance, LeMay 2017 or LeMay 2019), Peter H. Brothers (2015, 2011) or Kevin Derendorf (2018), have explored the origins, production histories and personnel, as well as the little seen and lost *kaijū* films. And, in focussing more on traditional publishing, it is important not to completely dismiss the many websites, blogs, podcasts and YouTube channels devoted to *kaijū* films. With journalist rigour, published work contributes to fan-scholarship, that, while it sits outside the academy, is of equal value for an emergent discipline of *kaijū* studies. As Matt Hills has discussed, there is considerable crossover between fan and academic subjectivities (Hills 2002). If *kaijū* studies has reached a critical mass of investigation and critical inquiry, the identities of scholars as fans (and fans as scholars) are highly salient in terms of understanding the development of an academic area of inquiry devoted to Godzilla and the films it inspired. The more recent wave of publishing builds on this first turn toward more serious consideration of the *kaijū* and many of the scholars who work on giant monsters are open about their position as fans (see Barr 2017, 2023).

4. The Legendary-Tōhō Era

As I have discussed throughout this article, earlier study of Godzilla and the *kaijū* film had tended to be relatively sporadic, and regularly subject to perceptions of cultural distinction. *Kaijū* films are cult movies, especially when they cross boundaries. They are regularly parodied and relegated to the bargain bin of cinematic quality. However, they inspire intense love from fans and many audience members. For Mathijs and Sexton (2011), Godzilla films are key cult films. They are transgressive. The fans who adopt them regularly emphasise their difference from the standards of the fans' home culture—what Jeffrey Sconce refers to as 'the parent taste culture' (Sconce 1995, p. 376)—emphasising oppositional tastes and thinking about Otherness. It is assumptions such as these that are perhaps at the root of Barr's accusation that—in 2016—academic journals were unwilling to publish work on Godzilla and *kaijū* movies. *Kaijū* movies even appear in Sconce's list of paracinematic genres in his seminal article, 'Trashing the Academy', and are associated with sub-cultural capital, an often-self-reflexive politics about the mainstream in the viewer's own taste culture. As Tsutsui's experience of dismissive colleagues and press testifies, *kaijū* (and cult film) scholars often have to justify their investigations of such works, even though, as has been made clear here, the study of giant monsters engages with key themes in national cinema, studies of Japan and film production histories. If the monster is 'pure culture', the *kaijū* is a key signifier of macro-level international issues relating to political history and the changing power relations of modern cinema.

With this in mind, the last decade has witnessed a significant growth in academic books and articles published on Godzilla films and the *kaijū* movie more widely. The preceding period had begun to see an emerging focus on *kaijū* media, as we have already considered, scholars such as Tsutsui and Ryfle provided a platform from which many other scholars have followed. The 50th anniversary of the first Godzilla film, and the global release of the original version of *Gojira*, provided further impetus for scholars to treat these

monsters more seriously. Cult film studies (Mathijs and Mendik 2008) provided a further platform for further work on less reputable genres, including *kaijū* films alongside martial arts film and exploitation cinema, to become not just more recognised but also more acceptable in academic study. Work on previously maligned subjects, from a number of angles, became more widespread in the academy, even if scholarly prejudices remained. Turns toward transnational theories of cinema, including in cult film studies (I. R. Smith 2017), enabled further critical focus on work outside the accepted canon. This has perhaps helped to explain why a great deal of the work that follows the initial wave of *kaijū* scholarship has tended to sit within film and media studies in a disciplinary sense, with many works in other media still unexplored.

Therefore, Barr's perceived snobbery from academic publishers may be changing. There are perhaps several reasons why this should be happening, but chief among them is the glut of transnational *kaijū* media that has been produced and distributed during the past decade. For many years, releases of *kaijū* films were sporadic, or subject to the decisions made by exploitation cinema producers and distributors. Many earlier reflections on Godzilla movies refer to their place on American TV, as late-night creature features or as fodder for the riffing on *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–1999, 2017–2022), and good quality releases, exhibitions, or broadcast of a wider range of *kaijū* movies could be difficult to come by, especially outside the US. Some of that redress is only happening as Godzilla reaches key milestones, such as the exhibition of Godzilla and Gamera films at London's Barbican in 2024, supported by The Japan Foundation, while Blu-ray releases by the Criterion Collection and Arrow Films add to the growing cult prestige of the films.

Legendary's MonsterVerse has helped to significantly raise the profile of Godzilla. After the first film in 2014, the five features, comics and TV series that comprise the series have reached a much wider audience than the Tōhō features released in the first 50 years of Godzilla's existence. Netflix and Apple distribution for some of the series, as well as the significant online profile that the trailer for *Godzilla* vs. *Kong* (Adam Wingard, 2021) achieved during the height of Covid lockdowns in 2020 (see Rawle 2021), have further boosted the visibility of Godzilla. The animated Godzilla films produced by Tōhō, *Godzilla: Planet of the Monsters* (*Godzilla: Kaiju wakusei*, Shizuno Kōbun and Seshita Hiroyuki, 2017), *Godzilla: City on the Edge of Battle* (Godzilla: *Kessen Kidō Zōshoku ToshiI*, Shizuno Kōbun and Seshita Hiroyuki, 2018) and *Godzilla: The Planet Eater* (*Godzilla: Hoshi o Kū Mono*, Shizuno Kōbun and Seshita Hiroyuki, 2018), along with the anime series *Godzilla Singular Point* (*Gojira Shingyura Pointo*, 2021), were all released by Netflix for international audiences. Perhaps more significant for the growth of Godzilla-related scholarship have been the release of the two Tōhō films, *Shin Godzilla* and *Godzilla Minus One*. Both have returned to the origins of the series, the nuclear anxieties of the first film and rising Japanese nationalism that have become important points of reference for this latest generation of *kaijū* scholars, globally and in Japan. These are not a group raised on TV screenings of dubbed *kaijū* movies, but those who have been able to engage with better quality releases and a wider range of media than the first generations of scholars who worked with notes and recollections of films seen a few times in localised formats.

5. Revisiting Nuclear Disaster

In a relatively short space of time, academic journals and publishers have begun to redress the absence that Barr described. There are a growing number of academics writing about Godzilla, both in academic presses and through online sources, such as *The Conversation*, which publishes scholarly takes on popular topics. At the time of writing, *Conversation* articles on Godzilla and *kaijū* number in the double digits, covering a range of topics, from how *Gojira* mirrors contemporary Syria (Mattes 2015), a functional morphologist deciding who would win between Godzilla and Kong (Formoso 2021) or how *Godzilla Minus One* reflects the difficult scenarios regarding Japan's memories of the war (Jones and Trefalt 2024). While I will focus on two predominant threads in the recent academic reception of *kaijū* media below, attention has also been paid to a range of different themes. The questions and

problematics of studies of *kaijū* are relatively broad, and these studies can be multiple in their disciplinary perspectives, and therefore cross- rather than inter-disciplinary; such as how *kaijū* films mediate our understanding of dinosaurs and palaeontology (Feldman and Wilson 1998; Mullis 2024). A growing body of work also looks at *kaijū* films as they were adopted or reworked in other national cinemas, such as how *Gojira* was adapted in South Korea (Cheung and Diffrient 2015; Kim 2018), and how the North Korean *kaijū* film *Pulgasari* (Shin Sang-ok, 1985) represents aspects the North-South division (Park 2019; Shaw 2022), or simply the bizarre story behind its production by the kidnapped South Korean Shin (Fischer 2015). Global *kaijū* films have been explored too, such as the British film *Gorgo* (Eugène Lourié, 1961) (Conrich 1999) or *kaijū*-adjacent films, to use Jason Barr's term (2023), produced in Hollywood and beyond. The includes the post-9/11 themes of *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) (Hantke 2010; Pile 2011; Wessels 2011), the colonial border concerns of Gareth Edwards' *Monsters* (2010) (Butler 2024; Combe 2015; Deleyto 2020; Luckhurst 2020), the visions of transnational collaboration in *Pacific Rim* (Thornton 2014) or globalising Chinese modernity in *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016) (Kokas 2019; Yang et al. 2020). While there are a number of emerging areas in *kaijū* scholarship, the most prominent threads deal with the historical legacies of the Godzilla series, and especially the political tensions around nuclear power. While such films can transcend some definitions of *kaijū* media (being produced outside Japan or using CGI rather than *suitmation* methods, and so on), bringing those works within the borders of a *kaijū* genre helps to evidence the legacy of the films (their filmmakers often talk about their love of *kaijū* films), as well as demonstrate how *kaijū* tropes circulate globally. Defining a genre often means understanding its borders as porous and 'fuzzy' (Chandler 2020).

On the 11th of March 2011, Japan was struck by its most powerful earthquake off the east coast of Honshu, directly east of Sendai. The area was struck by a devastating tsunami which killed nearly 20,000 people and led to the meltdown of three of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. With the release of *Shin Godzilla* in April 2016, which became the most popular Godzilla film in Japan for over fifty years, the Fukushima disaster was an originating incident for the film's figurative drama. Just as *Gojira* took its cue from the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (*Lucky Dragon No. 5*) incident when the fishing boat was caught in the radiation fallout from the Bikini Atoll nuclear tests in 1954 leading to panics around tuna stocks and anti-nuclear protests,[10] the Fukushima incident and subsequent government response have been the main focus of critical responses to the film. Recently, Jeeshan Gazi has revisited the series, looking beyond the limited set of films that have been considered for a long time, to explore how localisation of the series plays with the tensions between the US and Japan that have existed since the Second World War. Of *Shin Godzilla* though, it is noted that the film was released without significant localisation, just an English dub, which emphasises the intentions of the makers: '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.' (Gazi 2024, p. 11).

This revisits the core theme of the series, as Thomas Lamarre puts it: '[t]he association of Godzilla with nuclear crisis and especially with the atomic bomb is a basic premise of the original 1954 film and now something of a cliché' (Lamarre 2022, p. 97). The suspended ending of the 2016 film, where the monster is left frozen and looming over Tokyo has a relatively simple message: 'Japan will have to learn to live with the threat posed by nuclear energy/weaponry' (p. 114). Erik Lofgren expresses the film's text in the clearest of terms: '[i]t is clear from the outset that *Shin Gojira* interrogates the implications of the Fukushima disaster' (Lofgren 2021, p. 275). The monster's role in the film, as it slithers through Tokyo toward the centre of the city, is relatively low-key—it is a problem to be solved. As such, from the blue overalls of the original announcements of the Fukushima disaster, the film's visuals refer heavily to the scenes of the real disaster. As many scholars noted, this revisited the core ('clichéd') themes of the series, as the 'imagination of disaster' was understood in the 1960s, but now in a different form: '[s]ince 2011, it has no longer

been possible to recognize atomic energy as simply bad (the bomb) or good (the power plant), as it was the latter that brought about annihilation' (Kiejziewicz 2017, p. 129). Despite this, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto is critical of much of the initial critique of the film: '[f]rom a post-3/11 perspective, what is most striking about the Godzilla criticism is the relative lack of attention given to the issue of nuclear power' (Yoshimoto 2019, p. 180). If we reflect Bould's statement that 'Godzilla is the bomb', the mutation of the nuclear discourse in *Shin Godzilla* provides a strong motivating point for many scholars to consider how the film has both revisited the traditional themes of the *kaijū* film and reconnected with the first entry in the Godzilla series 62 years previously.

The open readings of *kaijū* have, as we have seen, been a factor of *kaijū* scholarship, from Tsutsui's point about Godzilla meaning everything and nothing simultaneously, and this is something that scholars have reflected upon in their responses to *Shin Godzilla*. The shifting of the nuclear allegory from atomic bombs to the Fukushima disaster is not just reflected in the film, but in the paratextual materials around the film, as Godzilla becomes the subject of memes in the aftermath of the disaster, as explored by John Schneiderwind (2020): the monster's 'malleability […] 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'. However, this becomes a major theme for others who see how the absence of meaning in the monster's body as a key element of the critical and satiric intent behind the film. This monster is not 'pure culture', but a McGuffin to highlight criticisms of the Japanese government. Yoshimoto defines the Godzilla of *Shin Godzilla* as 'an empty signifier' (perhaps a reflection of the 'weak hermeneutic pluralism' that Luckhurst observed), a visible hyperobject that the plot—concerning 'issues of bureaucracy, states of exception, national and international security, the US–Japan relationship, radiation, the use of a nuclear bomb, and so on'—revolves around (Yoshimoto 2019, p. 182). Godzilla is no longer 'the bomb' nor as anthropomorphised as in the past (Murphy 2023), as it 'surpasses the perpetual metaphor of nuclear destruction' witnessed in many instalments of the series (Pelea 2020, p. 28). Yoshikuni Igarashi may have been discussing *Shin Godzilla* when he wrote, the 'monster, which [once] both embodied the war deceased and is empowered by United States' nuclear weapons, serves a gross caricature of postwar Japanese-US relations' (Igarashi 2000, p. 118). Motoko Tanaka reflects this message, considering how the film presents an image of a Japan that is 'pitifully dependent' on the 'Father' US, that the government's lack of preparedness and inflexibility in the face of repeated disasters has left it incapable of functioning in the face of inescapable reality (Tanaka 2022). The imagination is no longer, therefore, just of disaster, but of apocalyptic proportions, despite which the film, and the wider series, has been seen as a positive reflection of Defence Force responses, normalising depictions of the military in a re-nationalising contemporary Japan (Hall 2017; Jaworowicz-Zimny and Yamamura 2022).

The ending of the film has also offered a significant enigma for several writers. This has been overlooked by some, such as Agnieszka Kiejziewicz, who sees the crisis 'concluded with optimism… the monster is finally defeated. It turns into a concrete monument, remaining in the heart of the city as a testament to the victims of the tragedy' (p. 125), but others have tended to see this differently. Just as the film ends, we witness, in close-up, ambiguous forms beginning to move in Godzilla's tail, part-human-part-monster. This offers a clear enigma in terms of interpretation—what are these creatures? Where have they come from? What will they do? Are they human victims of the monster, mutated? Since the film never received a sequel, the questions were never answered, and analyses of the film have sometimes overlooked these images. However, a few scholars have focused almost exclusively on these final images, such as Erik Lofgren, who likens the images to Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Gates of Hell* depicting the Inferno from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As the film closes, Lofgren argues, 'Godzilla stands in the middle of the most populous city in Japan, at the political heart of the nation, a frozen warning that through Godzilla, through nuclear power for which it is a metaphor, lies a hell without hope. Pursue this form of

power and "abandon all your hope who enter here"' (Lofgren 2021, p. 284). Meanwhile, Timothy Murphy argues, '*Shin Godzilla* seems in fact to have looked long into the abyss of humanity while fighting us, and at the film's conclusion has begun the process of becoming something like us in bodily shape and size (Murphy 2023, p. 238). Once again, such responses extend and reconceptualise the 'imagination of disaster' that has long loomed over the scholarship of the Godzilla series. As Murphy puts it, the film is 'a potent example of how we might learn to respond ethically to our own uncertain fate as a species' (p. 246). The ethics of nuclear power and, as we will see in the next section, environmentalism, and the climate crisis, are writ large across Godzilla movies and the wider *kaijū* film. As scholarly works focus more on *kaijū* and Godzilla, who still occupies the vast majority of space in *kaijū* studies, the implicit question of ethics, especially the ethics of human tragedy, is more and more the focus (Sakamoto 2024).

More critically, however, *kaijū* scholarship is problematic when it comes to explorations of gender. Monster studies have, from their inception, engaged strongly with questions of identity, especially gender and queerness (Sedgwick 1993; Halberstam 1995). Jason Barr argues that the 'role of women and gender in the kaiju genre remains woefully underexamined' (Barr 2016, p. 156), and he expands on this in his later book, *The Kaijū Connection*, without significantly addressing this lack, when he notes that the *kaijū* film 'tended to be dominated by men from almost any angle, from creature to directors to the fans themselves' (Barr 2023, p. 246). Tsutsui and subsequent commentators make little reference to gender, perhaps other than considering the gendering of Godzilla, as perhaps male, but problematised both by the lack of gendering in the Japanese language (W. Tsutsui 2004, pp. 11–12) and how the presence of multiple progenies led to one of the suit actors who played Godzilla theorising the monster was able to change gender (Ryfle 1998). Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, in their excellent book *Japan's Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaijū Cinema* (Rhoads and McCorkle 2018), devote more space to the question of gender, especially in relation to emerging gender politics in Japan in the 1960s. Focussing on the films featuring Mothra, they find 'an increasing nexus of gender, economics, and environmentalism in a Japan emerging from defeat' (p. 54). Mothra is largely understood to be one of few female monsters in the *kaijū* pantheon, along with the rose-*kaijū* hybrid Biollante, and one that engages strongly with feminine themes, especially in relation to the films' wider commentary on nature's relationship with capitalism. Rhoads and McCorkle chart a shift in the *kaijū* film from the largely secondary roles for women to the more empowered and sexual characters (who were often villainous aliens) of later films. Yuki Miyamoto, however, perhaps offers one of the strongest arguments around the questions of gender in *kaijū* and wider *tokusatsu* media, regarding the erasure of women from the historical connections between the nuclear aftermath and male representation in the Godzilla series and the works influenced by them: 'Taking into consideration the wide popularity of *tokusatsu* over several generations, and current problems of the radiation spills from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant,' she argues, 'narrative analyses of *tokusatsu* series are helpful to see how *hibakusha* experiences are interpreted and understood' (Miyamoto 2016, p. 1089).

Even though *hibakusha* cinema, according to Mick Broderick (1996), was rarely produced by those most directly impacted by the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings,[11] Godzilla is still seen as a key expression of the *hibakusha* experience. Nevertheless, as Miyamoto concludes, the *kaijū* film shares more widely with Japanese culture a tendency to overlook the female *hibakusha* body:

> If the *hibakusha's* body—in particular a man's—is analogized to something other than "human," such as aliens, monsters, mutants, or animals, this is precisely because the norm of the human men's bodies prevents us from imagining the irradiated, thus vulnerable, human man. By the same token, the irradiated woman's body, which would not sooth men's reproductive anxiety, has been excluded from *tokusatsu* stories. (Miyamoto 2016, p. 1101)

As Rhoads and McCorkle mentioned, the monster boom of the 1960s tended to feature women in background roles, and this could often be the case for images of *hibakusha*, where male suffering was mapped onto the monsters' bodies, especially that of Godzilla. Miyamoto discusses how visions of *hibakusha* could be trivialising in early *tokusatsu* work. One example that she does not discuss (her examples are *Gojira*, *The Mysterians* and the third *Ultura* TV series *Ultraseven* [1967]), which is highly relevant is *Frankenstein Conquers the World* (*Furankenshutain tai Chitei Kaijū Baragon*, Honda Ishirō, 1965). The wider conflict in the film concerns the (male) monster that grows from the irradiated heart of Frankenstein's Monster (humanoid monsters in this regard are undoubtedly *kaijū*, even though they are not beasts). The film, which raises questions about intercultural understanding, opens in Hiroshima, introduced through a wide shot of the Genbaku Dome. Cut to the 'Hiroshima International Institute of Radiotherapentics', where Dr James Bowen (the American actor Nick Adams) works with his colleagues to treat survivors of radiation sickness. The patients all seem to be beautiful young women, visibly unscarred, whose time is near. A woman that Bowen consults, who we're told was a baby at the time of the bombing, is about to die. However, the focus of the narrative quickly switches to the Frankenstein *kaijū*, growing from a young boy to a giant, but, in the end, still too abject to survive. In Miyamoto's terms, the male survivor is analogised as 'other', a mutated giant, but the female victim's body is imagined first as tragic beauty, and then forgotten about. This offers an alternative point of view to consider how *kaijū* movies have engaged with the themes of nuclear trauma in more recent scholarship, broadening the scope to look at different perspectives as more scholars begin to look more closely and seriously at *kaijū*. This expands on the apocalyptic and disaster cinema at the core of the *kaijū* film, but with a rare focus on gender.

6. *Kaijū* and the Anthropocene

Mark Bould's statement that 'Godzilla is the bomb' has been referenced more than once so far in this article. What is surprising though is that it is the only reference to Godzilla in his book. He does refer to how evidence of *kaijū* highlight how the Anthropocene is impacting animal life or providing the perfect world for alien invaders, such as the *kaijū* in *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2012), to colonise the planet, an ironic response to climate colonialism. With these few examples, it is becoming clear that *kaijū* films are becoming an important focus for ecocritical perspectives.

Undoubtedly the most significant in this regard is Rhoads and McCorkle's *Japan's Green Monsters*. Their book is perhaps the most wide-ranging in terms of its investigation of the *kaijū* film, alongside the work of Jason Barr, whose approach is more pluralist than that of Rhoads and McCorkle. As I have presented here, Rhoads and McCorkle also highlight the paucity of work on the wider *kaijū* film, with work limited mostly to the original *Gojira* and the early monster boom of the 1960s, even in Japan, where Godzilla is a prominent icon. *Japan's Green Monsters* roams across not just the Godzilla series, but also looks closely at the Tōhō monster's closest rival, Gamera. The book's narrative, arranged chronologically, investigates the ways in which Japan's economic progress in the latter half of the twentieth century contributed to the development of a genre that repetitively looked at environmental concerns. As they note, the anti-nuclear themes so prevalent at the inception of the *kaijū* film began to give way to more ecological themes, in particular stressing the destructive potential of capitalism to extract resources and undermine the previously spiritual attachment to nature in Shinto Buddhism. When economic growth accelerated, the more confident Japan became one of the most polluted nations on Earth. Rhoads and McCorkle explain here that the Gamera series became the first to discuss aspects of energy consumption, and as the monster's 'lust for natural resources like coal, old and fissile atomic materials' grew, it mirrored 'Japan's own reckless industrial expansion' (p. 181). Films such as *Godzilla* vs. *Hedorah* (*Gojira tai Hedora*, Banno Yoshimitsu, 1971) and *Gamera* vs. *Zigra* (*Gamera tai Shinkai Kaijū Jigura*, Yuasa Noriaki, 1971) aimed ecological messages squarely at young children. The latter film they describe as 'an exciting, interesting, and

amusing film, keeping children entertained while providing a pedagogical moment about the importance of protecting Japan's seas and aquatic life' (p. 135). The former is about the accidental arrival of a sludgy tadpole on Earth from a 'dark, sticky world' that is mutated by the pollution in the seas around Japan. It becomes a threat that spews toxic acid on humans and animals and kills fish. Later films, such as Mothra's 1990s trilogy focus on topics such as deforestation, rubbish in the sea, and preach harmony with nature. Rhoads and McCorkle also note how the Godzilla films of the 2010s, both American and Japanese, have returned to the preoccupations with nuclear energy, but also with a focus on pro-militarism as part of a new conservatism (Jason Barr also notes this in *The Kaiju Connection*).

Other scholars have begun to explore 'dystopian ecological visions' (Smith and Hughes 2013, p. 4) in *kaijū* cinema. These align with what Smith and Hughes term 'ecoGothic' as a way of exploring how Gothic narratives are ecocritical. However, there is also a tendency of ecocritical scholars to focus more on the American variants of the *kaijū* film than on their Japanese forebears. Erin Suzuki has considered how the conception of the Pacific Ocean in a range of Hollywood blockbusters has imagined the space as an ecology but also as a zone of trade. The very existence of the Godzilla franchise draws on the Pacific as a space from which both the monster and the trans-Pacific influence and lines of cultural flow have originated. Suzuki discusses how the nature of the MonsterVerse Godzilla as a force of nature highlights how the Anthropocene is understood. She draws on Frederick Buell's notion of environmental crisis as a new normal, the consciousness from which these films developed. While it is in no way clear that the creators of these films are thinking explicitly about the environmental themes of their films, the makers of *Godzilla* (2014) spoke at length about the monster representing a natural force that was a restorative alpha species. The subsequent films in the series have reinforced these messages. Yet, as others have discussed, the increasingly pro-military stance of the films overwhelms the seriousness of its ecological messages:

> although Gareth Edwards's *Godzilla* (2014) is represented as a force of nature that easily overpowers— and remains relatively indifferent to— American military infrastructures, the film's monster-versus-monster showdown problematically renders the human (and specifically U.S. military) contributions to environmental destruction less visible. (Suzuki 2020, p. 427)

As human action becomes less prominent in the foreground of the film's narrative, the impact of human action is diminished. The Hollywood version of Godzilla also drew on the Fukushima disaster, while what Yu-Fang Cho terms 'the Godzilla complex' describes the ways in which settler colonialism has erased Pacific Island identities of those between Japan and the US in the history of the events that inspired the series. The Lucky Dragon memorial and *Godzilla* (2014) both map the past and present of the trans-Pacific in the nuclear Anthropocene. The film projects a future modernity, where life is threatened, but ultimately it partly appropriates and erases the public histories related to that past. Their relationship, Cho argues, 'worlds' a vision of the nuclear Anthropocene.

Carter Soles has also looked at the Godzilla series' depiction of Anthropocenic fears (Soles 2021, p. 299). Engineered de-extinction of giant creatures, like dinosaurs, not just in *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998), but also in *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), leads to 'fears of mass human extinction' (p. 301), as the protagonists of the film are overrun not by the giant creature destroying the urban space like a bomb, but by little monsters. Emmerich's film ends with a sequence in Madison Square Garden in New York where the main characters must contain eggs and hatchling Godzillas. Soles argues the film is camp in its ironic address, but serious in its haphazard attempts to discuss both the nuclear concerns of the era (it is French, rather than American, testing that creates *this* monster) and the growing awareness and unifying moves to combat the changing climate, such as the Kyoto accords, which were signed the same year, and have been as toothless in destroying monstrous climate change as the US military have been in combatting monsters. It is also not accidental that a 2020 expedition to draw attention to oceanic pollution, industrialisation of the Baltic Sea, and ecosystem collapse was entitled *Imagining Godzilla* (Best

2021). This growing focus on climate change and how fiction is dealing with the climate emergency is an emerging theme in scholarship around *kaijū* films. Murray and Heumann (2016) also refer to *Godzilla* (2014) as a work of cli-fi (climate fiction) in their book *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* (2016). As the emergency becomes more urgent, further work will undoubtedly come to engage more with these aspects of the films' representations of monstrous reality.

7. Conclusions

As I have attempted to show throughout this article, there is now a growing body of scholarship that treats the *kaijū* film as an object worthy of study. While *kaijū* films have regularly been a source of simultaneous celebration and mockery, like many cult films (I. R. Smith 2013), academics, taking up Barr's challenge, have now seen 'beyond the rubber suits and the flaming Tokyos' (Ryfle 2005, p. 63). As we have seen, this is partly down to the quality of the films released in the last decade or so, especially Tōhō's recent Godzilla films. However, it is clear the *kaijū* film is currently a transnational genre (Rawle 2021) enjoying a global renaissance that has precipitated greater academic engagement due to its growing popular success. As more scholars have engaged with the form and content of *kaijū* movies, distinct threads of scholarship have emerged, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this paper. Much of the recent scholarship has cut through the often ironic or detached criticism of the past to look seriously at the emergent trends in this wave of *kaijū* cinema. Some of these return to and expand previous themes, such as the recurring focus on nuclear anxiety and the historical connection between the genre and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, as well as the attendant trans-Pacific issues in the relationship between Japan and the US. However, more recently, ecocritical explorations of the *kaijū* film have looked at the place of these creatures relative to the growing climate emergency and the 'dark pedagogy' embedded in how the films have narrated the looming crisis (Rawle 2024). The impending impacts of anthropogenic climate change loom just as large as the giant creatures hang over us, ready to destroy urban spaces without a thought for humanity. They become ciphers for the changing climate. This is a consequence of the 'sticky' nature of their bodies, that histories and ideologies become fused with the monsters, just as Japanese traumas following the Second World War are forever stuck to Godzilla. However, as Ahmed pointed out, what could be stuck could be re-stuck, and different fears and negative associations could be stuck to those bodies, making us fear the same bodies differently. Many scholars have charted this over the last decade or so, such as Rhoads and McCorkle, whose focus on environmental issues argues that the nuclear discourse is stuck too fast and obscures other themes in the *kaijū* movie's history. Their book sutures those themes.

The intention of this article has been to function as a partial historiography of Godzilla and *kaijū* scholarship to explore how *kaijū* studies fuses several academic disciplines, from film studies to Japanese studies, ecocriticism, transnational and comparative studies, and postcolonialism. In just eight years, we have come a long way from Barr's comments about the paucity of academic attention to the *kaijū* film, especially in academic journals (the shift from print to online open access journals may have contributed to this growth in some regard, as print costs shift), but academic publishers have also released a number of collections and monographs that engage with *kaijū* movies. *Kaijū* studies is far from a defined field, however. While *kaijū* scholarship has attended to its core questions and drawn problematics from a range of established academic subjects, there is little to suggest a unified field. A potential field may emerge, but it will only do so through the development of transnational networks and increasing collaboration between researchers. Researchers are publishing across a range of disciplines and there are a lot of exclusions.

What is surprising in reviewing this growing body of academic literature is the relative absence of reference to the multitude of *kaijū* in other media. There are passing references to *kaijū* television and animation throughout this literature, but almost nothing on *kaijū* video and board games, such as Bally Midway's *Rampage* (1986) and its sequels—

even the movie adaptation is generally only tangentially mentioned—while video games such as *Crush, Crumble and Chomp!* (1981), *War of the Monsters* (2003), or the myriad of Godzilla console games receive scant attention. Likewise, I can see little work on *kaijū* comics, such as Legendary or IDW's Godzilla and *kaijū*-related series (2011–present), although Blair Davis does reference them as an 'extension' of the film cycle (Davis 2019). Even when Godzilla is discussed in the context of comic books and *manga*, academics have pivoted back to the films (Szasz and Takechi 2007). The Marvel Godzilla series from 1977 is surprisingly little explored, as are more recent manga like Matsumoto Naoya's *Kaijū No. 8* (2020–present) or Minamoto Kazuki's BL title *The Gay Who Turned Kaijū* (2022).[12] Furthermore, except for *Gojiro*, scholars have also been slow to explore how *kaijū* narratives have developed in literature. Novels such as John Scalzi's *The Kaiju Preservation Society* (2022) and Jeremy Robinson's '*kaijū* thriller' series *Project Nemesis* (2013–2016) demonstrate the growing body of work across media that remains unexplored. If *kaijū* studies is emerging as a subfield of monster studies, there are cross-disciplinary threads that remain to be examined by scholars, to consider how different media intersect, are appropriated, engage with fans and become more like classical Gothic texts in the ways that engage with questions of identity. Since the *kaijū* film has tended to be a conservative form, both thematically and formally, its progressive potential is yet to be considered. So, while I have been examining how *kaijū* studies might be at a point of growth that suggests a nascent field, it is easy to conclude that, for now, this is *kaijū film* studies, and the potential breadth of a field is currently untapped as published studies return again and again not just to Godzilla, but to cinema.

Nevertheless, the *kaijū* film continues to fascinate scholars, fans, journalists, and moviegoers alike. It is clear that scholars are meeting the challenge of looking at giant monster films in a range of ways. While many have stuck traditional themes to their *kaijū* analyses, there is a widening field of study, as producers create more films and media that explore how giant creatures can threaten the security of humanity as the apex species on the planet that aligns broadly with principles of monster theory, the monster as technological body and pure culture that will continue to speak to global themes and political tensions for well into the next century.

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Notes

1 Japanese and East Asian names are included in the format of family name-given name, unless known otherwise.

2 The recent release of a translated version of Kayama Shigeru's prose versions of the scripts of two films (Kayama 2023) has also coincided with this peak in interest in the *kaijū* film.

3 The *kaijū* film can be traced back longer than this to precursors like *The Lost World* (Harry O. Hoyt, 1925).

4 The etymology of the term is slightly different. *Kaijū* (怪獣) simply translates as 'strange beast', the strangeness of the monster shared with other monsters, such as *yōkai*, with a shared character (怪), but without shared characteristics of scale. *Yōkai* are human-sized traditional Japanese monsters, often tricksters that dwell in natural rural spaces, *kami* marked with the divine. However, *kaijū* are modern monsters—they might share their form with dragons (like Godzilla or the three-headed King Ghidorah), or *kame* (turtles like Gamera), ultimately, though, it is their scale that marks them as different, altered, and therefore as a threat (or sometimes a saviour) to humanity.

5 To avoid any confusion with other films named Godzilla, I will continue to refer to the Japanese title *Gojira*.

6 Rumours have persisted that the two versions have different endings, an American one where Kong wins and a Japanese victory for Godzilla. Nevertheless, the endings of both are the same.

7 *Kaijū* films are generally periodised relative to Japanese imperial eras, with *Shōwa* describing films up until the mid-70s and Heisei films from 1985 onwards, even though the Heisei era did not technically begin until 1989.

8 This was released in the US as *Godzilla 1985* in a re-edited version that saw the return of Raymond Burr as Steve Martin, alongside significant product placement for Dr Pepper.

[9] *Kaijū* scholarship has been enriched by contributions from those outside the academic community, those who fans felt had been marginalised by Tsutsui's book (Rawle 2023).

[10] For Steve Brown, Godzilla plays an important part in the memoralisation of the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (DFM) as part of the 'active unfolding of the meanings and values placed on the *DFM* from 1947 to the present', 'more-than-human actor' in the Heritage process (Brown 2024, p. 11, see also Cho 2019).

[11] Although many of Godzilla's key personnel were involved with the military during the war and Japanese occupations of China and Korea.

[12] Alongside Minamoto's *manga*, a small body of queer reworkings of *kaijū* motifs is emerging, including Cressa Maeve Áine stop motion film, *Coming Out* (2020), in which Godzilla becomes an ally when Godzilla Jr. comes out as transgender. Godzilla knits a trans flag in support.

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