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Godzilla - Gojira Deluxe Collector's Edition

[Sony Pictures](#) // Unrated // \$21.98 // September 5, 2006

Review by [DVD Savant](#) | posted August 28, 2006 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Discuss](#)

Reviewed by Glenn Erickson

The giant Japanese monster *Godzilla* has entered and exited the public imagination for over fifty years and weathered innumerable sequels, including Sony's ill-fated 1998 remake attempt. Because his films quickly became kiddie TV fodder badly dubbed into English, the fire-breathing aquatic monster has at times been more of an adolescent joke than a serious film subject.

American fans began importing Japanese videos and subtitle-challenged Laserdiscs in the 1980s, leading to a growing interest in the original Japanese versions of these films. Heard in their original language they played like real movies and yielded unexpected treasures like added scenes and terrific original music tracks, sometimes in stereophonic sound. Latter-day *Godzilla* movies increased interest in the 'classics,' and after years of disappointing graymarket DVDs we started seeing terrific licensed DVDs of great Japanese fantasy. The most prominent importing company so far is [Media Blasters](#) with their "Tokyo Shock" series.

A couple of years ago the 1954 Japanese cut of **Gojira** premiered on American screens. An enthusiastic audience was surprised to discover that, in its original form, the movie is a thoughtful and sobering meditation on nuclear war made by the only country to suffer an atomic attack -- only nine years after that attack.



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★ ★ ★ ★ ★

AUDIO
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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★ ★ ★ ★ ★

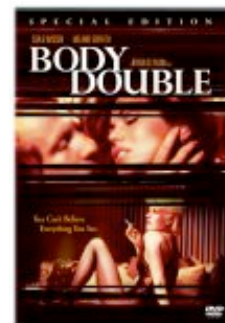
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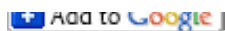
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The original *Gojira* is now on a double-disc special edition paired with its American variant version (the one we've been watching for the last half-century) **Godzilla, King of the Monsters!**

Gojira

1954 / 98 min.

Starring Akira Takarada, Momoko Kôchi, Akihiko Hirata, Takashi Shimura, Fuyuki Murakami, Sachio Sakai

Cinematography Masao Tamai

Director Special Visual Effects Eiji Tsuburaya

Production Design/Art Direction Satoshi Chuko, Takeo Kita

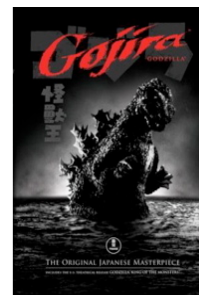
Film Editor Yasunobu Taira

Original Music Akira Ifukube

Written by Ishirô Honda, Shigeru Kayama, Takeo Murata

Produced by Tomoyuki Tanaka

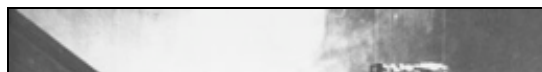
Directed by Ishirô Honda



Synopsis:

Japanese sailors are irradiated and their ship sunk by an unknown thing that continues to destroy other vessels. Searching for the cause, scientist Dr. Yamane (Takashi Shimura) and some associates travel to a tiny fishing island and are confronted by a colossal water dragon, which soon comes ashore to march through Tokyo, leaving a broad wake of utter destruction. Conventional weapons prove useless, which puts the eccentric Dr. Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata) in a bind: He's invented a new weapon he calls an "Oxygen Destroyer" but refuses to use it on moral grounds. Serizawa's fiancée Emiko Yamane (Momoko Kôchi) begs the scientist to reconsider.

By now many Americans and certainly most fantasy film fans are quite aware that the original *Gojira* was a serious picture. Japanese filmmakers tailor their film fare to the cultural 'mood on the street' just as does Hollywood, so it's not surprising that Japanese critics in 1954 charged the film with extreme bad taste and using a national shame for purposes of movie exploitation. I say 'shame' because in 50s Japanese pop culture most anything to do with the atom bombings was swept under the carpet -- see [Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima](#). *Gojira* revisits the still-fresh horror of much of urban Japan being burned or blasted by long-range bombers. Faced by a radioactive monster from the ocean, Takashi Shimura's somber scientist behaves as if Japan were paying some terrible karmic debt through yet another ordeal by fire. Subway passengers lament the idea of going back into those smelly shelters again. And a (presumed) war widow clutches her children as buildings crumble around them, crying that "We will be with daddy soon." It all plays like national masochism of the highest order..



Military heroics
are useless but
there are still





heroics, here expressed in the operatic self-sacrifice of the lonely and mysterious Dr. Serizawa, an odd character pictured as an unnatural

freak. He has a physical infirmity (the eye patch) like Rotwang of *Metropolis* that suggests an intense but limited vision. His 'mad lab' displays technical décor reminiscent of Rotwang's lair with its theme of electro-alchemy. Serizawa's obsession with his work has left him with little social sense or sex drive, and he watches impotently as the handsome Ogata (Akira Takarada) charms his fiancée Emiko right out from under his nose.

Serizawa's scientist carries the same dubious moral burden that was heaped onto American scientists after the development of the bomb. Politicians are gregarious and military men are heroes, but scientists are shifty 'unknown quantities' that don't think as do you or I. They're always coming up with inventions that cause unexpected change or bring bad news. Serizawa doesn't want to 'repeat the error' of his American counterparts by allowing the awful potential of his discovery to be exploited for war, but he makes the mistake of spilling the beans to his girlfriend. Undaunted, he keeps the faith with his scientific responsibility by carrying out a death pact.

Serizawa's sterling example implies that the developers of the American bomb were traitors to mankind, thoughtlessly enabling the construction of a profane weapon. That perceived judgment in the *Gojira* script is well-intentioned but faulty, as it's based on the false assumption that scientists in any country have authority over their work or what its eventual application might be. Scientists in the Manhattan project were subjected to loyalty investigations and considered difficult to control -- brilliant engineers have the same wide range of political beliefs that might be found in any group of intellectuals.

Gojira's Serizawa is a convenient fantasy scientist who produces a modern miracle singlehanded, in a brick basement lab. I doubt any scientist anywhere would identify with this gothic Frankenstein figure or his situation. Serizawa's 'moral choice' is to take his secret with him to the grave, withholding his Oxygen Destroyer from the hands of evil men. Baloney. After the demo in Tokyo Bay, every nation with a University system would instantly assign a crack crew to retrace Serizawa's research. ¹

Gojira's outlandish donation to 20th Century mythology is to materialize the abstract concept of Atom-age anxiety as a

Golem-like monster we can see with our own eyes. Plotwise, it's a bald rip-off of [The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms](#), in which the nuclear origin of the monster was developed little further than a convenient gimmick. *Gojira's* towering horror is only Atomic by association, starting as a radioactive embodiment of what really might have wiped out the crew of the good ship *Lucky Dragon*. No explanation is given for Gojira's origin, what he wants, or why he's trampling Tokyo into the mud. He just is. Gojira is a new kind of implacable atomic enemy: A mobile natural disaster, a typhoon in the form of a firestorm. The film grabbed the Japanese public at a gut level -- revealing a horror that had been living with them intimately for ten years, only they never knew it.

We're told that *Gojira* came at a time of expansion at the Toho studio and was not a cheap picture. Eiji Tsuburaya's effects are all very good for the time (some are excellent), and Ishirô Honda's masterful direction creates a nightmarish spectacle of violent destruction by a juggernaut that crushes in slow strides. Akira Ifukube's grim music intensifies the dread, with deep, slow themes for the



monster and a relentlessly grim march to represent Japan's futile defense. Gojira victimizes the whole city and not just a select group of individuals; the entire first wave of Japanese *kaiju* and science fiction films would mostly threaten society as a whole while rewarding selfless teamwork in the defense of the nation.

Gojira is an expression of Japanese mass-ochism, placing the blame for Atomic Terror at the doorstep of irresponsible Science. Later Honda epics would harmonize with other themes, some political, some not. *Rodan* is a romantic suicide tale of flying gods doomed to perish in volcanic fire. [The Mysterians](#) is a rallying call to repel conquering foreign influences. [Mothra](#) pits the forces of storybook magic and myth against predatory material commercialism. Quite a few 'lowly' Japanese monster movies of the 50s and 60s display thematic riches that put the average science fiction extravaganza to shame.



Godzilla, King of the Monsters!

1956 / 80 min.

English Version actors: Raymond Burr, Frank Iwanaga

English Version Cinematography Guy Roe



English Version Film Editor Terry O. Morse
 English Version Written by Al C. Ward
 English Version Produced by Edward B. Barison,
 Richard Kay, Joseph E. Levine, Harry

Rybnick

English Version Directed by Terry O. Morse

In 1954 only a handful of Japanese art films had been exhibited in the United States outside of Japanese-American neighborhoods. Japanese art was something to be found in museums and the effect of the country's post-war economic boom was reflected mostly in jokes about cheap Japanese toys. Everyone "knew" that anything Made in Japan was inferior. Anti-Japanese sentiment was still easy to find: Why spend a dime that might find it's way back to the people who brought us Pearl Harbor? [2](#)

This was an obvious problem for the wildcat exploitation promoters that saw big \$\$ potential in *Gojira's* special effects scenes. Whereas later importers would have to do revisionist backflips to jettison unwanted socialist content from Soviet space epics, American version director Terry Morse needed to make *Gojira* look like any other Yankee film shot in an 'exotic' Eastern land -- by backgrounding all the local storytelling and inserting an American actor as the star. Character actor Raymond Burr got the job as Steve Martin, intrepid foreign news correspondent. Morse pulled off one of the most clever cinematic retrofit jobs in film history by making Steve a fly-on-the-wall witness to all the events of the original film.

Terry Morse analyzed the original film to see where Raymond Burr could be sandwiched in. He filmed the actor against a few judiciously-chosen wild walls and surrounded him with just enough bystanders from Los Angeles' Little Tokyo to fool the casual viewer. The entire narrative of the first film becomes Steve Martin's feverish memory after barely surviving a direct Godzilla attack. Aided by shrewd English scripting, the new scenes intercut well; Raymond Burr really seems to be in the middle of the chaos.

We all know the rest of the story, as the American *Godzilla* that resulted was a smash international success only two years after the Japanese release. Fledgling mogul Joseph Levine thought up a dozen possible tag lines and ended up using them all in an unending litany of hectoring hyperbole:

"Incredible, Unstoppable Titan of Terror!" "Is Godzilla fantasy, or a prophecy of doom?" "Fantastic beyond comprehension, beyond compare - Astounding beyond belief!" "Terror staggers the mind as the gargantuan creature of the sea surges up on a tidal wave of destruction to wreak vengeance on the Earth!" "Civilization crumbles as its death rays blast a city of 6 million from the face of the Earth!" "Mightiest Monster! Mightiest Melodrama of them All!"

Godzilla hit American screens in 1956 and attracted a sizeable audience that surely included a surfeit of hyperactive kids. At age 5, I remember overhearing some older boys talking breathlessly about something called Godzilla and King Kong, but didn't know that they were monsters. Godzilla's legend grew slowly but steadily through sequels, toys and playground mythmaking: *Yeah, yeah, King Kong is cool but Godzilla would just step on him, dork.* Even though Godzilla eventually morphed into a clownish gang leader, rallying Mothra and Rodan to defeat outerspace freaks like King Ghidorah ("Look Ma, no arms!"), he kept his original bad-dude reputation because the original film never fell out of favor.

The **Godzilla - Gojira Deluxe Collector's Edition - The Official U.S. & Japanese film Versions** is a classy release that elevates the general stature of the Godzilla franchise. Logos for Classic Media, Sony Music and Toho are right up front, and the handsome packaging for the reasonably-priced disc says 'quality special edition' all the way.

Previous transfers of both versions have had serious problems. I've seen *Gojira* on VHS and during its 2004 theatrical reissue, in prints plagued with fine digs and scratches. Although it still looks well worn, this transfer is a great improvement. The scratching is minimized and the film retains its gray-grayer-black texture. So far as I could tell there are no glaring flaws from artificial enhancement or digital futzing. *Godzilla* always looked darker and had tight framing that chopped off the top of the picture. It too is greatly improved, to the point that we can appreciate when Guy Roe's new photography comes close to matching the quality of the original, which is maybe half the time. The version includes the echoey footfalls heard over black (no Transworld logo), until the "King of the Monsters!" main title zooms up on Godzilla's metallic roar. Also included are a set of "Jewell Enterprises" end titles (matted to 1:75!) showing all the American credits over an oddly patterned background. I've never seen those before.

Godzilla fans will be enthusiastic about the extras on the double-disc set. Classic Media has enlisted a gallery of authors and experts armed with plenty of information and insights. Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewsky double up on commentaries for both features, and manage to cover All Things Godzilla in an efficient and entertaining matter. They report in a no-nonsense fashion that separates publicity myth from practical reality -- producer Tomoyuko Tanaka may claim to have been inspired by a view of the ocean viewed from an airplane, but the previous year's Ray Harryhausen movie is referenced as the deal-setter. Godzilla was even originally scripted to destroy a lighthouse!

Steve and Ed consider the big question of "what Godzilla means" from several interesting angles without insisting on a particular interpretation. That privilege is reserved, of course,

for egocentric reviewers. They also note a relationship between Terry Morse's version and the 1945 PRC film *First Yank into Tokyo* that fans will definitely find amusing. In another good call, Ed and Steve downplay the notion (instigated by a Japanese dialogue reference) that Dr. Serizawa may have collaborated with Nazi scientists during WW2.

On the second disc they dig fairly deep into the process by which the movie was transformed for American consumption, and include sound bites from one of the original importers and the screenwriter who came up with the surprisingly good American dialogue and narration. In another brief sound bite Ted Newsom relates a conversation he had with Myron Healey about Raymond Burr's quickie acting gig on this film. [3](#)

The two docu featurettes cover the original film's story development and the construction of the rubber monster suit. They display quite a few Godzilla stills held tightly by Toho. Magazine articles and entire books about Toho films have had to be scrapped due to the company's policing of rights to their images, which include even old publicity stills distributed to the press. We see plenty of images of the men who made the monsters along with fascinating behind-the-scenes shots of the rubber-suited characters taking breaks between stomp Tokyo duties -- images previously available only in expensive Japanese fan books without English captions.

Colorful menus made of poster artwork take us to the original trailer. On the second disc the only extra beyond the commentary



is Joseph Levine's ultra-hyped trailer for the Yankee release. The set comes in a sturdy 'Little Golden Book' -style case with the two discs in plastic holders. A slick twelve-page insert booklet has more stills, acknowledgements and a longform text essay by Steve Ryfle called *Godzilla's Footprint*.

This is a big release for Japanese fantasy fanatics, and in succeeding months more Toho Kaiju is scheduled to emerge under the Classic Media label: *Godzilla Raids Again*, *Godzilla vs. Mothra*. Savant notes that Sony Music is distributing this release. Sony Home Video is an unrelated corporate entity, but perhaps it will take notice and give their loyal DVD fans what they want: Handsome releases of original Japanese versions of *The H-Man*, *Battle in Outer Space* and *Mothra*.

On a scale of Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor,

Gojira

rates:

Movie:

Excellent

Video:

Excellent

Sound: Very

Good

Supplements:

Commentary,

two docu

featurettes, art

gallery, trailer

Godzilla, King of the Monsters!

rates:

Movie: Excellent

Video: Excellent

Sound: Very Good

Supplements: Commentary, trailer

Packaging: 2 discs in plastic holders
in 'Little Golden Book' hard case
Reviewed: August 27, 2006

Footnotes:

1. So *Gojira* encourages American Cold War paranoia, and the assertion that if the Russkies could make nuclear weapons, it had to be because Commie spies and traitors stole the secret from us. They could steal specific practical technology, sure, but the 'nuclear secret' is a set of mathematical theories from the 1920s and before. The Germans would have figured it out if Hitler hadn't been fanatically opposed to 'Jewish science.' The Russians had the concept, the ingredients and the talent, and only lacked a detailed recipe. They would have been delayed by only a few years at most.

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2. Personal testimony: Savant is a 'Korean war baby', born in a U.S. Army hospital in Tachikawa while the Korean war was still being fought. I spent my childhood on Air Force bases hearing about crummy Japanese goods. Later, in Hawaii and California, my father's flying pals would pass through and give me outrageously clever Japanese space toys -- gaudy metal robots and vehicles that made noise, flashed lights and crawled along on the floor. The joke was that if I looked inside, I'd see that the cheap metal still had beer can labels on the back! (I looked; it didn't). I also remember a store displaying a Subaru car as a prize of some kind. Everyone who saw it laughed because it was so tiny, like a badly-made toy. Veterans made bitter remarks about the "%#@ Jap" car. But around 1961 or '62 something happened. When visitors gave me a transistor radio or a miniature tape recorder, it worked well and was reasonably durable. When my cousin was in Vietnam, he sent me a Sansui stereo receiver that was the best-sounding thing I ever had. People no longer gave superior smiles when they said "Made in Japan" -- many kinds of Japanese goods earned a reputation for superior quality. My uncle professed little sentiment for anything Japanese, but swore by his Datsun pickup truck.







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3. Also for the record (since the commentators grant themselves the luxury): Savant saw *Godzilla* on Honolulu television probably in 1959, and definitely saw *Gigantis the Fire Monster*, *The Mysterians* and *Battle in Outer Space* at glorious kiddie matinees at Hickam Air Force Base's main theater within the same year. Falling in with the ultra cool (in our own estimation) *Famous Monsters* crowd on a San Bernardino grade school recess yard in 1962, Savant learned all about Eiji Tsuburaya (he made his own movie projector!) and saw *King Kong vs. Godzilla* and *Godzilla vs. The Thing* at more kiddie matinees. But poor Savant missed *Mothra* because an idiot neighbor kid talked his mom into taking us to *Babes in Toyland* instead. The agony. After that the Toho pictures played at drive-ins so I missed most of them. By the time I caught up with *Destroy All Monsters* the ship had definitely sailed ... the movies just seemed dumb.

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