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The rhetorical significance of *Gojira*

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INTRODUCTION:

Immediately upon the spread of the news that the American military had used nuclear weapons against Japan, understanding of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy infused every aspect of our society from politics to civic engagement and even pop culture, launching us into the Cold War that would define America and much of the world for decades to come. As the oppression of Cold War politics and culture dominated in the U.S., the science fiction genre as we know it today emerged, providing an outlet for expression of fear and guilt at a time when the dominant powers attempted to create a positive world view regarding atomic energy and weapons.

It would seem that the Japanese would be the most likely to speak out against nuclear weapons use, as their country remains the only one to have atomic bombs used against her people. However, Japanese society was so restricted by censorship after the war that it was not until after the Allied occupation ended that any windows opened for anti-nuclear expression in Japan. Through that opening emerged *Gojira*, a film that exists as a needed rhetorical response to a profound historical-cultural experience.

METHOD/BACKGROUND LITERATURE:

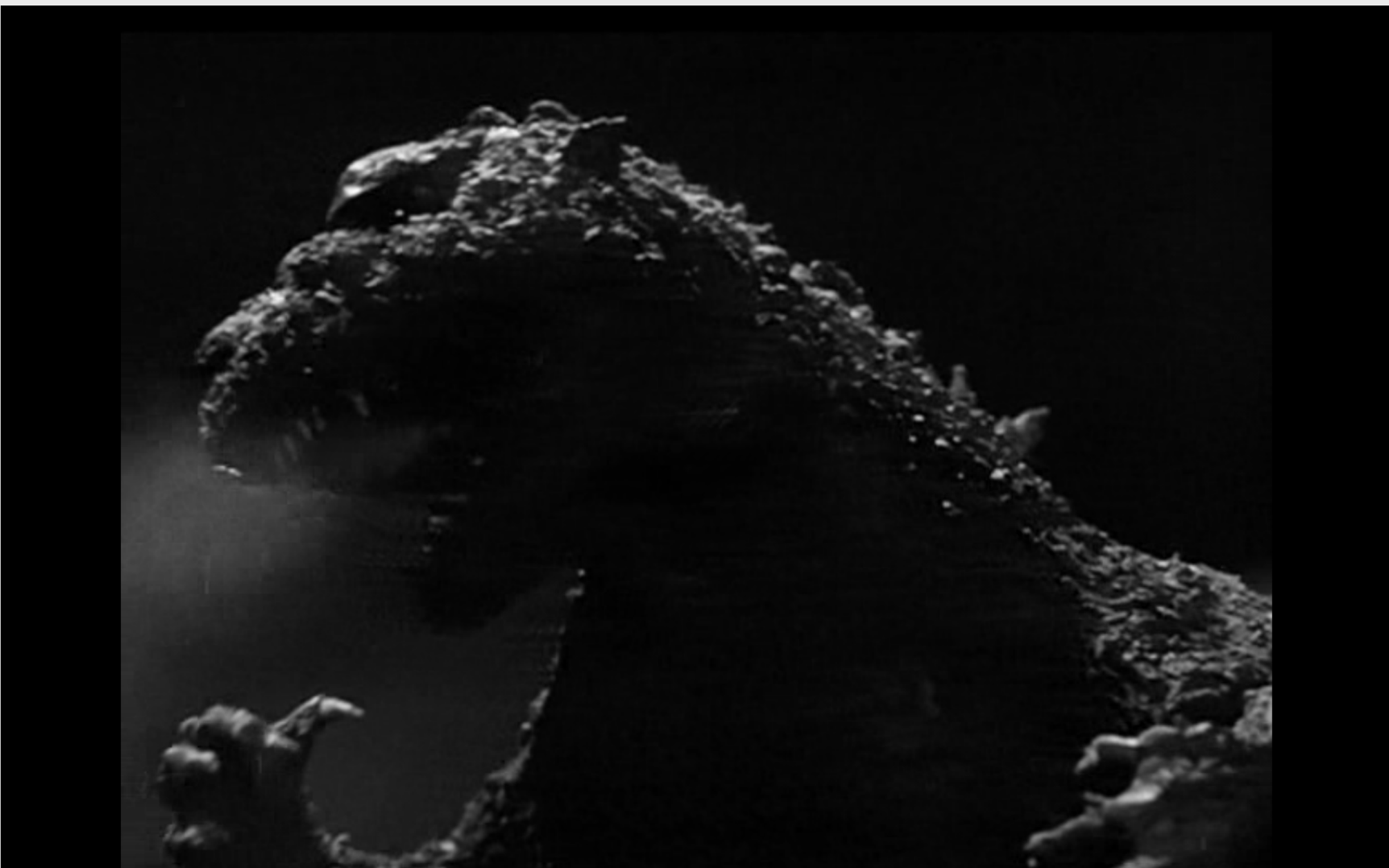
Based primarily on the work of rhetoricians Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, the method used here was to first establish the historical framework in which the film exists. To establish that context, a depth of rhetorical and historical texts on the time period were utilized, including the work of Paul Loeb, Paul Boyer, Allan M. Winkler, Spencer R. Weart, and William Tsutsui as well as primary texts (government documents, news reports from the period, speeches from the period including Emperor Hirohito's surrender speech).

Once the historical context was established, it was possible to move forward with a close reading of the film, a method utilized by many of the most effective rhetorical scholars who study the medium, including Medhurst, Benson, David Blakesley, Janice Hocker Rushing, Thomas S. Frentz, Christine Harold, Brian L. Ott, and Ron Greene. Through repeated close readings, what emerged as the most appropriate method for study of *Gojira* was a psychoanalytic approach, much like that utilized by Hocker Rushing and Frentz, as a way to make sense of the dominant motifs in the film.

Unlike Hocker Rushing and Frentz, however, who largely base their analysis on Jungian theory, here research in the area of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was used to better understand the film's response to the war. Further, the rhetorical approach to narrative, as outlined by Walter R. Fisher, was used because narrative is not only a powerful tool for symbol making by all humans, but is a dominant method used to deal with PTSD, thereby making it all the more useful here as a rhetorical method for analysis.



Guilt and anger, common emotional responses to wartime trauma, are expressed in various ways throughout the film. Above left the character Serizawa expresses guilt for his scientific discovery (the Oxygen Destroyer) that has the power to destroy all humankind, an allegory for the guilt felt by many nuclear scientists in real life. Above right *Gojira's* anger is unchecked as it destroys Tokyo in a clear metaphor for the wrath unleashed upon Japan when it awoke the beast of the United States.



Pain and suffering, also common emotional responses to wartime trauma that are prevalent themes in the film, are illustrated. Above left is *Gojira*, clearly scarred and suffering from terrible burns caused by atomic bomb tests, causes pain with its atomic-hot breath; in its final death throws the monster screams in agony, an outcry for a people forbidden such expressions. Above right, a survivor of a *Gojira* attack, his injuries evocative of hibakusha, or survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.



Powerlessness and fear, two of the most psychologically damaging emotions born of trauma, exist in many forms in *Gojira*. Above left a fictional mother, powerlessly awaiting certain death as she cowers in an alleyway in Tokyo during *Gojira's* attack, tells her children that they soon will join their father, a direct allusion to the many women and children killed in Japan during the war. Above right Emiko, an educated woman and daughter of an esteemed scientist, shows the fear of a nation.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

All photos are stills from the 2004 DVD release of *Gojira* by Toho Co., Ltd. Thanks to Toho for releasing a subtitled DVD in America, to my advisor David Henry for his guidance, and to my committee members David Schmoeller, Tara Emmers-Sommer, and Donovan Conley. Thanks also to Adam Bucci for his artistic support.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

If you would like more information about this project or would like an electronic version of this poster, please send an email request to stevens.shannon@gmail.com. A link to the library's electronic copy of the thesis also will be made available.

RESEARCH:

Analysis of the time period established that while the rest of the world was largely free to express a full range of emotion in response to nuclear weapons, particularly in the powerfully metaphorical realm of science fiction, the Japanese were forbidden from criticizing or expressing anything negative about the bombs. Even after the occupation forces left Japan in 1952, giving the citizens at last the freedom to express themselves, the result of a decade of strict governmental controls and more than five years of censorship was that what was once verboten through hegemonic means remained a cultural taboo that limited open criticism of atomic weapons and weapons testing.

However, for survivors of trauma to heal and move beyond a traumatic event to lead positive and productive lives, the negative must be recognized and dealt with. Often narrative is the most effective way to achieve that goal. Here, the narrative of the monster *Gojira* serves as a means for the Japanese people to express the effects of the war on their psyches and their culture. What emerges from close study of the film is three emotional pairings, which also represent primary emotions present in PTSD literature. Those pairings are guilt and anger, pain and suffering, and powerlessness and fear.

Gojira, developed simultaneously by its creators to be a blockbuster film and a response to the war, functioned as a safe venue for the Japanese people to gather publicly and share their experiences and their memories of the horrors of the war that changed everything for them. By sharing that experience through a creative narrative that ultimately restores Japan's honor, the creators and watchers of the film could use the fiction of *Gojira* to find some peace in the reality of their existence. As such, the film served a needed function in Japan by helping its people to work through their trauma and create a healthier narrative in which to move forward with their lives.

DISCUSSION:

Gojira serves as a bridge to understanding the consequences of war and nuclear weapons' use. By using PTSD and narrative as frameworks for examining the film, it is possible for those outside Japanese culture to begin to understand and share in some small way the trauma of nuclear attack.

It is hoped that this project will contribute to the body of rhetoric in two ways: first, by providing a new psychoanalytic framework to analyze meaning and affect in film, and second, by adding to the growing body of communication research related to nuclear weapons research and use. By studying artifacts that function outside standard, expected means of persuasion, an opportunity arises to see the effects of nuclear weapons from a fresh perspective.