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Godzilla and the Sacred Monster

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in voce **a. Tanizaki**

Abstract

Godzilla read through a Japanese aesthetics of shadow and depth: the kaijū as collective persona—set apart, half-hidden, bearing what cannot be lit too brightly—rather than as spectacle alone.

by a. Tanizaki

(Faculty Essay, Castalia Institute)

This essay is a faculty synthesis written in the voice of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. It is not a historical text and should not be attributed to the original author.

Introduction

We have grown accustomed, in the modern world, to a kind of light that admits no rest—a glare in which everything must declare itself at once, sharp-edged and fully exposed. Yet there are things that withdraw from such illumination: memories that prefer the recess of a room, griefs that keep their dignity only when they are not dragged into the center of the stage. The figure of *Gojira* belongs, I think, among these shadow-loving things.

The monster rises from black water. It is enormous, loud, destructive; critics abroad have often mistaken it for mere spectacle. But to see it only as brightness—fire, explosion, the white flash of the screen—is to miss what makes it *sacred* in the older, humbler sense I mean here: not divine, but *set apart*, carried in half-darkness, entrusted with meanings the culture does not wish to spell out in plain prose.

This essay asks how Godzilla functions as such a figure—as a collective *persona*, a mask through which a people speaks of trauma without naming it too directly—and why that function depends on shadow, ambiguity, and depth rather than on the clarifying violence of full daylight.

What rises from the depths

In 1954, not ten years after the cities had known another kind of fire, Honda Ishirō's *Gojira* returned the wound to the surface of narrative. The creature is awakened by tests whose light reaches beneath the sea; it comes ashore as if the sea itself had grown a will. The parallel is not allegorical tidiness—it is atmospheric. The imagination of disaster, as Susan Napier has traced it from Godzilla toward later cinema, is not only a set of plots; it is a climate in which certain images can live because the culture needs somewhere to put what otherwise stays numb.

We do not always heal by explanation. Sometimes we heal by giving the unbearable a *shape* that still keeps a little darkness in the folds. Godzilla is that shape: too large to be private, too strange to be a simple enemy, too persistent to be dismissed after one season of films.

Sacred as shadow, not as spotlight

In our temples of old, gold was beautiful because it caught only a little light; lacquer was prized where lamplight sank into it and did not throw it back. The sacred, in that sensibility, is what recedes—what you approach on your knees, slowly, because direct inspection would kill the mood.

Godzilla is profane in the obvious sense: it crushes, burns, floods. Yet it is also sacred in the sense I am sketching: it is cordoned off from ordinary life, surrounded by taboo and fascination, laden with a national memory of fire. It is a *kami* of the wrong kind, perhaps—an angry one—or perhaps only a vessel into which many kinds of anger have been poured across decades. The point is not theological precision; the point is that the figure is not consumed by the everyday. It returns, film after film, because something in the culture still needs a mouth that is not a human mouth to say what humans find difficult to say.

The mask the nation half-wears

Elsewhere in this issue, colleagues speak of *persona*—the mask through which sound passes. A collective persona is the same structure at another scale: not one actor's mouthpiece, but a shared fiction that lets a society utter a tone it could not sustain in official documents alone.

Godzilla is clumsy for diplomacy; it is exact for dream-work. When children imitate the roar, when posters flatten the scales into graphic icons, the culture is trying on a face—not permanently, but long enough for feeling to move through the body. That is how masks work in the Nō theatre Ortolani describes: they do not *replace* the actor; they narrow and deepen what can be shown.

How the shadow has moved

If the figure were fixed, it would have died. Instead it has shifted with the anxieties of its times—destroyer, guardian, joke, cosmic threat—because the sacred monster is a *responsive* darkness, not a fossil. The early films keep close to nuclear terror; later cycles bend toward environmental collapse, toward geopolitical comedy, toward the bureaucratic paralysis *Shin Godzilla* turns into a kind of anti-spectacle. Each mutation preserves something of the original pact: the audience agrees not to demand too much realism, and the monster agrees to carry what realism cannot hold.

Kristeva's abjection helps here only up to a point; her language is often Western glare. What matters for our purposes is simpler: the monster is *other*, yet *ours*—the abject neighbor we cannot expel because we fed it.

The mirror in dim light

When we look at Godzilla, we should not turn up the house lights. The creature is also a mirror, but mirrors in old rooms gave back faces softened by shadow; they did not flatter with high-definition honesty.

To see ourselves in the monster is to admit that our technologies outrun our wisdom, that our cities are fragile, that our peace is a thin film over depth. The mirror punishes only if we insist on seeing every pore. The kaijū offers a darker courtesy: it lets us glimpse outline, silhouette, consequence—enough to tremble, not enough to pretend we have mastered the lesson.

Conclusion

Godzilla will remain a sacred monster—not because worship is intended, but because some meanings still ask for the old arrangement: gold in a dark alcove, story in a recess, terror shaped so that it can be lived beside rather than swallowed whole.

If we understand that, we understand something about *persona* at large: not every truth improves under the brightest bulb. Some truths need the tolerance of obscurity—the patience of shadow—before they can be borne.

In that spirit I leave the reader with the image of the horizon at night: a line one cannot quite focus on, where something large might already be moving, and where the culture, for a moment, allows itself to look.

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