¡Yo Soy Godzilla!—The Possibilities and Futilities of Cuban Horror

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In his 1996 collection, *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*, Mick Broderick gathers articles discussing the variety of ways in which the traumatic events of 1945 not only impacted Japanese culture at large, but served as the genesis of multiple atomic-age science fiction narratives. Broderick suggests that the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki "evoke powerful and somber associations of holocaust and apocalypse, a microcosm of the twentieth century's staging ground for a global nuclear war." (1) The focus on the cultural and psychological turmoil present within the hibakusha, roughly translated as the people of the day of the explosion, aims to reinforce and perhaps reinterpret Donald Richie's assumption that "no one has come to terms with the bomb--least of all, perhaps, the people upon whom it was originally inflicted." (2) Broderick goes on to cast, albeit in ambiguous terms, the American act as a manifestation of unchecked scientific experimentation primarily directed by two specific impulses: military prowess and perceived occidental superiority.

Chon Noriega's addition to the collection reifies the United States military's penchant for casting the East as the exotic other that merits exploration towards the inevitable goal of either colonization or outright armed engagement. By analyzing films produced relatively soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Noriega suggests how the trauma of nuclear terror shapes the cinematic narratives overtly concerned with apocalyptic visions of the island in peril. Using Noel Carroll's formulation of the horror film as an expression of "the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion," (3) Noriega investigates this constellation of social and cultural disturbances via Toho studio's 1954 release of *Gojira*.

Directed by Honda Ishiro, *Gojira* enacts a narrative of geopolitical disturbance based on the event which took place less than a decade earlier in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moved by the human toll paid by the escalation of nuclear weaponry, the producers of the original film intended to create a valuable morality tale revolving around the use of new technologies whose magnitude had not yet been seen or even understood. The diegetic awakening of Godzilla, brought about by American nuclear testing at the Bikini Atoll after the conclusion of the war, served to illustrate the continuation of militaristic threat for the island of Japan. Moved by the continued presence of and potential for nuclear radiation, especially after the March 1954 nuclear encounter between the United States and the crew of the *Daigo Fukuryumaru* (Lucky Dragon No. 5), a tuna fishing vessel navigating too close to American nuclear testing sites, Honda created a film to underscore the themes of, in the words of Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, “nuclear annihilation, environmental degradation, and the apocalyptic potential of modern science run amuck.” (4)

Beyond the realm of the purely scientific, however, Honda’s film suggests a working through of the traumatic events surrounding not only the nuclear detonation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by American forces but also the swift resolution to the war and the political reconciliation between the United States and Japan. In an extended reading of the surrender and subsequent occupation of Japan, Yoshikuni Igarashi explores how the historical and political events enacted by the American government and Emperor Hirohito served to create a “foundational narrative of U.S.-Japanese post-war relations.” (5) Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, urging the unconditional surrender of Japanese armed forces, constructs what Igarashi deems a melodrama of unbalanced power relationships that will show national “efforts to render understandable the experiences of the atomic bomb and the ensuing

transformation of their relationship." (6) What is rendered unavailable in the construction of this particular foundational narrative, especially given its accelerated momentum away from enemy towards ally, is the removal of the military and civilian losses suffered by Japan. The attempt to cover over a national memory with a different definition of nationalism arguably revokes the events leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After the Lucky Dragon incident, it is these barely suppressed memories that arise to the surface: "*Gojira* deliberately evokes the destruction of Tokyo by fire bombing, and by extension urban destruction, the terror of urban warfare among civilians . . . the horror of aerial bombardments that left more dead than the atomic bombings." (7) It is also these dead, these victims of American military aggression, which Honda wishes to invoke with resurrection of the titular being. Godzilla is the embodiment of Japan's wartime national trauma. To Ifukube Akira, the music director for the film, the movie represents "the atmosphere of the time period; I even thought Godzilla was like the souls of the Japanese soldiers who died in the Pacific Ocean during the war." (8) The absence of the dead from the national political narrative is rendered visible, re-presented, in the form of Godzilla. Emerging from the deep, literally and psychologically, his "monstrous [body] became replacements for tangible markers of loss." (9) According to Igarashi, "memories of the war, even without specific markers, were still ubiquitous in postwar society." (10) He goes on to suggest that "increasingly removed from the scene of destruction and devoid of particular references, the memories were transformed into amorphous destructive forces [and] were burdened with the mission to represent memories of war loss." (11)

Despite Igarashi's telling interpretation of the film from a distinctly nationalistic vantage point, I would argue that one should not summarily discount the inherent geopolitical events compelling the production. Although, as Susan Napier reminds us, "Godzilla is vanquished through Japanese science" (12) and the film itself becomes "a form of cultural therapy, allowing the defeated Japanese to work through the trauma of the wartime bombings in the scenes of panic and destruction and, with the film's happy end, giving them a chance to reimagine and rewrite their devastating defeat," (13) it is ultimately the reality of Western aggression that is at the core of the film. An alternate reading of the film and its central reptilian character recognizes the narrative as a prolonged meditation on extraterritorial uncertainty. *Gojira* sets the stage for understanding geopolitical fragmentation as well as the power relationships attempted, negated, and/or reinforced by that fragmentation: "In Godzilla films, it is the United States that exists as Other--a fact that Hollywood and American culture at large has masked. To see how we are seen by another culture is central to understanding that culture as other than a projection of our own internal social anxieties." (14) The psychological ambivalence inherent in Noriega's conceptualization of the recurrent Godzilla motif makes way for a richer understanding of the power struggles--internal and external--that unavoidably define traumatized populations. As a product of the atomic age, like its parallel, the bomb itself, Godzilla simultaneously represents the frenzy of scientific pursuit devoid of its humanistic precepts as well as the embodiment of what Mark Anderson labels a "Japanese melancholia." (15) For Anderson the resulting synthesis of the two, creates a sense of cultural and national ambivalence quite difficult to reconcile: "After destruction and defeat at the hands of the United States, after a would-be war of liberation was redefined as a crime against humanity, after the Japanese troops that had been held up as paragons of virtue were accused of war crimes, it is any doubt that Japanese feelings towards the United States and their own war dead must have involved ambivalent feelings of both love and hate?" (16) Furthermore, the monster's ability to potentially destroy Japan and, if unvanquished, the rest of the world, metaphorizes the exorbitant price paid for the failure of intranational and international reconciliation. Within the narrative of Gojira, "the contamination of modernity ultimately comes from the outside, and from the United States, situating Japan as a passive, perhaps even heroic victim of the cold war and perhaps even World War II as well." (17)

The Caribbean Godzilla

Jorge Molina's invocation of Godzilla, in his 2000 short film, *Yo Soy Godzilla*, occurs in a Cuba where, to the director, social, economic, and political monstrosities are readily apparent. His compelling employment of the archetype acts as a narrative of resistance that tries to undermine an apparatus of power that has left him essentially bereft of power. An avid admirer and collector of the films of George Romero, David Cronenberg, Tobe Hooper and Dario Argento, Molina actively engages in the creation of counterrevolutionary film, what he calls decadent and degenerate art, within a nation beholden to the principles of the revolution. A Cuban-born avant-garde underground film director, working outside of the government's sanctioning board for cinema, the ICAIC (*Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficas*), Molina appropriates archetypal images of global horror (vampires, slashers, werewolves, monsters) in order to explore his philosophical and political ideology under the repression of a totalitarian regime. *Dolman 2000*, the collection of short films in which *Yo Soy Godzilla* appears, uses the horrific in order to impart to the audience the horror that is living in modern-day Cuba outside of the dictates of the regime. Employing a single camera and using almost no editing, Molina traps the audience within visceral scenes of mutilation, sexual coercion, and dismemberment all while the camera refuses to look away. The brevity of the films, along with almost no attempt at narrative structure or storytelling, creates an atmosphere where one questions even the fictitious nature of the violence perpetrated.

In one of the more sedate offerings in the collection, Molina uses Honda's creation to compellingly explore a distinct moment of socio-political convergence. The monster is both his dissection of the Castro government as well as the difficult acceptance of the monstrosity he himself has become under this government. The director seems unable to create a vision of contemporary Cuba that is critical of the system without exploring his own transformation, his own complicity. Similar to the inability to mourn the war dead in the original 1954 film in an environment where political oppression reconfigured the national narrative, Molina seems unable to mourn his own country's loss of freedom and the multiple revolutionary anti-Castro dead who have been seemingly erased from history. Unable to be part of the nation and apart from the nation, Molina uses his camera to autobiographically depict the monster that he has become and that history has wrought.

His Godzilla is a vision of himself. The creature represents those whose artistic enterprises have failed to reach any semblance of a substantial audience. Rendered impotent by the dictates of the regime, his characters attempt to find avenues suitable enough to express those intrinsic beliefs taken away by the exigencies of totalitarianism. The identity politics necessary to extricate these characters from a system founded upon the mythology of universal identity, namely that of revolutionary, creates rather difficult quests for individual power predicated upon often times disturbing tendencies.

The ten-minute film begins with the juxtaposition of a radio broadcast counting down the island's fiction bestsellers and Molina's character at a rudimentary typewriter creating his own novel. The black and white film intersperses the typing with the cultural iconography that surrounds the novelist's living room. Pornographic pencil sketches, posters of B-movie gore films, and ink drawings of random vampiric activity construct an atmosphere of horror that show's the writer's penchant for the taboo culture of the United States and Europe. Surrounded by these items anathema to a nationalistic state, the author focuses intently on the blank page that will eventually carry the title of the work recently produced. The 1000-yard stare onto the empty page reiterates the turbulent nature of creation within a perpetually censoring environment. Given that the ultimate victory over individual expression is self-doubt and self-censorship, the author's initial inability to readily title his work covertly engages the Cuban artist's

struggle for apolitical labor within hyperpolitical circumstances. In Molina's work, however, this struggle takes a distinctly masculinist register.

Naming his text *Arma de Amor, Love Weapon*, the novelist's manuscript embodies the phallocentric drive believed to be imperiled by strict editorial practices and by a revolution defined by its movements towards the abolition of gender. Fearing emasculation at the hands of the state, the character steps before a mirror and utters his phrase of empowerment: *¡Yo Soy Godzilla!* He speaks this several times in order to embolden himself before a conversation with the editor at a state-run publishing house. The repeated invocation serves also to remind the viewer of Molina's alignment with a wholly foreign cultural product that would be perceived, in Cuba, as politically dangerous. Molina's Godzilla, the ultimate fusion of masculinity and destructive power, helps to ameliorate the fact that both of these concepts so central to his character have been destabilized by communism. This intimate call to arms, however, is disrupted by his discordant engagement with Cuban bureaucracy.

Repeatedly placed on hold and after what seems a profoundly long wait, the author begins a rather difficult conversation with the head of the publishing house. The author's explanation of his literary prowess and innate talent, given his creation of ten novels in the space of a couple of years, is met by the silencing concern of the editor as to whether this book is another one of those unpublishable little terror tales the writer is so stubbornly fascinated by. Told that this is not the appropriate subject matter for good Cuban fiction and that this recent attempt will also go as unpublished as the previous nine literary attempts, Molina's author wields a different type of disturbing weapon. The tirade that follows the rejection, although Godzilla-like in its intensity, reinforces the director's hyper-masculine gender politics. The author slanders the editor by hurtling a barrage of homosexual epithets through the phone line: "*Eres un maricón. Un maricón con leche en el culo. Maricón. Con leche en el culo y en la boca*." The attack, translated as "You are a faggot. A faggot with cum in your ass. A faggot. With cum in your ass and in your mouth," serves to underscore the author's sense of intolerable emasculation at the hands of the state. Fearless of political repercussions or other more lethal forms of censure, the writer verbally attempts to mimic that which has been done to him artistically, culturally, and politically. Multiply unable to adequately display what he considers his productive potency via his work, Molina's author resorts to naming others what he perceives, covertly, is his own self image vis-à-vis the state, namely the repeatedly penetrated homosexual whose own "milk" fails to procreate neither a viable artistic product nor an identity masculine enough nor powerful enough to transcend revolutionary dogma.

Symbolically emasculated by the editor as well as by the regime, the novelist spends the remainder of the short film engaging in what Ian Lumsden has referred to as "oppressive masculinity." (18) The viewer follows the writer to a local bar. The author proceeds to drink in order to spur on some momentary amnesia and viewers are given the opportunity to eavesdrop on his conversation with a black prostitute. The dialogue in this scene shows the very precarious nature of self-aggrandizement and hypermasculinity in light of the author's inability to publish in his native land. Although he constantly returns to talk of his talent, ability, and vision, the woman at the bar's lone question, "Qué has publicado?"—"What have you published?" instantaneously deflates the image of himself as Cuba's great man of letters once again. His earlier self-portrayal as the resurrected monster, the one who will strive triumphantly through the streets of Havana and dismantle the government with his rage, cannot wholly cover over his relative impotence. The question, though apt, speaks of an unproductive history and a neglected self within a dictatorship that has left his own narrative unwritten as its narrative has taken precedence.

Molina's use of the prostitute as a symbol of the internal decadence of the island and the inability of the revolution to meet its goal of universal gender equality politicizes the short film even further. Her

presence speaks to the liminal spaces of life in contemporary Cuba where, despite the presumed pervasiveness of revolutionary ideals, moments of counterrevolution abound and some citizens do generate their own identities within societal margins. The prostitute marks the dictatorship's hypocrisy. Additionally, the color of her skin adds another potential layer of political commentary. In a nation whose political formation is primarily constructed upon the framework of economic and racial equality, the black prostitute serves to undermine those precepts entirely. Plying her trade for those interested in experiencing the exotic taboo other, she symbolically represents the failure of the revolution and her body acts as an initiation into, as Toni Morrison suggests, "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability." (19)

Despite his attempt at remasculinization via renegade sex acts, the author is once again wholly undermined by his inability to inculcate a sense of machismo within a political system desirous, at least in spirit, of its eradication. Taking the prostitute home, after her feigned interest in his literary output, the author's physical desires are met with his own self doubts about his ability to perform. Rendered as an interior dialogue between himself and a photograph of Compay Segundo, a recently deceased Cuban performer featured in Ry Cooder's *Buena Vista Social Club* project and a film by Wim Wenders of the same name, Molina's novelist seems concerned about his approaching contact with what he perceives to be untamable black sexuality. Fearing he will be rendered impotent once again, this time in the presence of the woman he reduces linguistically to *la negra*, he enters the bedroom just as she removes the final article of clothing. Standing nude next to a poster of *The Naked Beast*, a 1971 Argentinian sexploitative horror film about a murderous hunchback, the prostitute's offered body is further metaphorized by its proximity to the advertisement. Within the environment of lust, horror, and savagery, the author feels enough gender security to utter the expanded version of his signature phrase: *¡Yo Soy Godzilla! ¡Tú eres Japón!*" The statement, while rendering his own unassailable masculinity, also speaks to the power dynamics the author wishes to inculcate within his private domain. Literally and figuratively erecting his own diminished status, Molina's character reifies the classic confrontation between the empowered and the powerless. His is not a nuanced reading of Honda's creation; instead he envisions himself as the source of power that nations are powerless to stop. Encapsulating his rage against the state, authority, and bureaucracy, Molina appropriates Godzilla as his alter-ego, his all-powerful double created by the exigencies of communism as well as cultural and economic deprivation. The use of the black body to counter his own issues of male inadequacy enacts a troubling discourse of unconditional authority, however. The unchecked masculine power-base, built upon the brutal destruction of Tokyo via the chaos of an invincible Godzilla, helps to initiate Molina's author into the vicious arena of sexual domination. Penetrating the black body, especially under the guise of obliterating his own unclear gender position and socio-sexual inadequacy, becomes coded as a phallic attack upon the revolution itself. Given the racial and sexual equality purported by the state, the author returns to a conceptual past girded by sexual intimidation, racial domination, and unquestioned male superiority. It is this return to the history before the emasculation, the time before citizens were left to the desires of others, which becomes the source of his momentary power.

Reconstituting a momentary glimpse into pre-revolutionary Cuba, Molina's writer upholds his own "savage encroachments of power" in order to "facilitate subjugation, domination, and terror precisely by preying on the flesh." (20) This predatory sexuality upon the prostitute's black body is short lived, however. The sexual montage that ends the film, an allusion to standard pornographic fare, has Molina's character only able to maintain the missionary position for a matter of seconds. The woman ably pins him on his back and uses the author's belt to engage in what appears to be a pleasurable foray into sadomasochism. The viewer soon realizes that her intent is much more sinister as she begins to tighten the

belt around his neck. The exchange of power as well as the move from pre-revolutionary fantasy to revolutionary reality is swift. The author, strangled to death by his own belt, and at the hands of the black prostitute, the naked beast, *la negra*, *Japón*, upends the promise of masculine power so central to the character. Made violently aware that old regimes and that their social and gender dynamics no longer can exist, the dead author suffers the consequences for his fascination with sexual terror, racial humiliation, and masculinist propaganda.

Ironically, the prostitute steals his manuscript for *Love Weapon* and finds herself at the center of sudden, phenomenal artistic success. The film ends as it begins with a radio broadcast of the new Cuban bestsellers. Only this time the announcer presents the incandescent talents of Vera Alberti, a woman whose first novel ushers in a new voice in Cuban letters. The once unnamed prostitute, known at first only for her profession and her skin color, is now named and celebrated. She also promises to deliver future novels as soon as she is able to "create" them. Left behind from this moment of racial and sexual equality is the novel's original author. Never found. He is left strangled and nude amid the claustrophobic clutter of forbidden culture. In death, he transforms into a still metaphor of the revolution's triumph over his art, his vision, his talent, and, above all, his chaotic, reptilian masculinity.

Molina's brief film underscores the ongoing critical and cultural fascination with Honda's creature despite the half century that has elapsed since its creation. That Godzilla's presence has managed to be felt thousands of miles away in a small island where foreign popular culture is not only forbidden but also considered a counterrevolutionary act truly makes one realize how his iconic status has maintained him in "some sort of only partially suspended animation across generations." (21) His legacy, despite whatever body of water from which he resurrects, is the pressing knowledge that "destruction is all around us, some of it wrought by nature, some by humans, often compounded by the incompetence (or arrogance) of humans who think they have conquered, tamed, or contained the furies of nature or the furies of their fellow human beings." (22) As the embodiment of the tales untold, whether left unspoken after Hiroshima and Nagasaki or after the Cuban revolution, he will always rise up to speak for those who no longer cannot.

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