

# 2019

## H-Diplo

 [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

Article Review  
No. 867  
20 June 2019

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse  
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

**Meghan Warner Mettler. "Godzilla versus Kurosawa: Presentation and Interpretation of Japanese Cinema in the Post World War II United States." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25:4 (2018): 413-437.**

URL: <http://hdiplo.org/to/AR867>

Review by **Hiroshi Kitamura**, College of William and Mary

---

In recent years, scholars of 'America in the world' have cast greater attention to what might be called the 'internal globalization' of the United States.<sup>1</sup> In "Godzilla versus Kurosawa," Meghan Warner Mettler builds on this growing literature through an insightful analysis of two famous Japanese films from the 1950s: *Rashomon* (released in Japan in 1950 and in the U.S. in 1951) and *Gojira/Godzilla* (1954/1956). The pairing of these films is illuminating because their fan base in the United States, argues Mettler, was considerably different. Even though both were made by established directors at major studios, in addition to embodying similarly "profound themes" (418), the former found its niche among critics, intellectuals, and educated fans, while the latter became a hit among popular movie-goers. What, then, "widened the gap between these two movies so dramatically" (414)?

Mettler acknowledges that the differing patterns of reception had something to do with the film text. Generically speaking, *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, was a historical period drama that lacked fierce action. It offered an unorthodox narrative that not only introduced an event (a murder) from four different perspectives, but also left the case rather unresolved. *Gojira/Godzilla*, made by Ishiro Honda and Eiji Tsuburaya, was a special-effects heavy *kaiju* (monster) film. It showcased the destruction of tanks, planes, buildings, and bridges.

But the essay argues that we ought to pay closer attention to the context, particularly the placement and manipulation of narrative products in the United States. Although both films were released in the studios' first-run houses in Japan, *Rashomon*, in the United States, distinguished itself as a "marker of refined, elegant,

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Andrew C. McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

upper-class taste” (416) by touring art house venues in big cities before circulating through museums, churches and schools in the months and years that followed. Its translation was provided in English-language subtitles to keep the original lines intact to the extent possible. Promotional ads dignified the film by featuring laudatory remarks by top critics. *Rashomon* also became the highlight in “propaganda events” (415) aimed to foster official exchanges between the United States and Japan.

*Gojira/Godzilla*, by contrast, experienced ‘B treatment’ by popping up in double-bill matinees and drive-in programs after a brief stint at first-run theaters. In diffusing the film in such venues, Embassy Pictures, which acquired distribution rights from Toho for a bargain price, dubbed and re-edited the film in ways that downplayed the (more serious) themes of World War II and nuclear destruction. Even more strikingly, it radically reconstructed the narrative by shooting new scenes and inserting actor Raymond Burr—a Caucasian male actor—as the film’s main protagonist. Ads downplayed the film’s Japanese roots by highlighting the terrifying monster’s rampage and destruction. Yet while ending up being nothing more than “straightforward entertainment” (425), *Gojira/Godzilla* developed a strong following and eventually came to enjoy a lasting presence in the United States. As Mettler aptly argues, the enduring popularity of the iconic monster, interestingly, owed to its failure to gain art-house status.

Written clearly and lucidly, “Godzilla and Kurosawa” introduces readers to a pair of important examples that illustrate the transpacific diffusion of cultural commodities. By examining how *Rashomon* and *Gojira/Godzilla* spread in the U.S. market, Mettler successfully shows how ‘Japanese culture’ became a source of fascination to an expanding body of American consumers during the height of the Cold War. In tracing the ways in which the films were contextualized and recalibrated for U.S. circulation, the essay suggests that the consumption of things Japanese involved the voluntary participation of multiple social groups, possibly demarcated by a combination of factors including geographical location, education level, occupation, social status, and economic wealth. This indicates that cultural consumption was segmented and certainly far from monolithic.

The essay also helps generate larger questions that the author might have not been able to fully explore due to spatial constraints.<sup>2</sup> One of them concerns cultural status. The critical success of *Rashomon* invokes Lawrence Levine’s discussion of William Shakespeare’s changing cultural standing in nineteenth-century America, as the Kurosawa film, a *hoga* (Japanese film) production that was generally held down to a ‘lower’ status than Western films in Japan, came to enjoy art-house respectability in the United States.<sup>3</sup> But how much ‘high culture’ was there in *Rashomon*? As the author is aware, the post-World War II era gave rise to something of a ‘foreign film renaissance’ in the United States, as cinephiles in cities across the country discovered the marvel of non-U.S. films imported primarily from Europe.<sup>4</sup> If these international cinemas were clustered together as ‘art films,’ how much dignity and respect did *Rashomon* command in relation to the ‘highbrow’ films by

---

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller treatment of America’s fascination with Japanese culture after World War II, see Mettler’s recently published monograph. Meghan Warner Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America’s Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945-1965* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13-81.

<sup>4</sup> Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, or François Truffaut? Did *Rashomon* share common traits and values with foreign imports from the West? In addition, how did Kurosawa's film fare against non-Western films such as the ones directed by Satyajit Ray?

Another question can be asked about Japanese motivations. In discussing how the two films were released in the United States, Mettler concentrates on U.S. intermediaries and perspectives, while leaving the intentions of Japanese studios, mostly, to the reader's imagination. What, then, were their thoughts and actions? How did they affect viewer outcomes in the United States? As two of the 'Big Five' ('Big Six' after Nikkatsu resumed film production in 1954) film companies in Japan, Daiei and Toho were known to have ambitiously endeavored to break into U.S. and international markets in the 1950s. Although *Rashomon's* award-winning success at the Venice Film Festival did come as a surprise to Daiei, its company head Masaichi Nagata quickly began to enter historic period dramas to international competitions and seek commercial opportunities overseas. Aiming to compete with Hollywood, Nagata had in fact visited the United States as early as 1949.<sup>5</sup> Here, one might ask how Nagata dealt with the U.S. market following *Rashomon's* breakthrough at Venice. Toho was no less ambitious, as it founded a company in 1953 to facilitate international trade and went so far as to own movie houses in Los Angeles and New York.<sup>6</sup> Given its bold aspirations to expand across the Pacific, why did the Japanese company cede distribution rights of *Gojira/Godzilla* to a U.S. distributor at such a modest price? Also, how did Toho set up distribution rights with the many sequels of the monster flick?

Finally, did U.S. moviegoers appreciate *Rashomon* and *Gojira/Godzilla* because they offered something fundamentally different from U.S. norms or because they actually shared some similarities? Mettler suggests that contemporary critics treated *Rashomon* as a representation of an Oriental Other, one that seemed to introduce a "uniquely Japanese spirit" to the Western viewer (427). In other words, the film fascinated viewers because it appeared alien to their worldviews. Yet as film and media scholars have argued of late, motion pictures do not exist in a national void, and international/transnational influences help shape 'national' cinemas. On this issue, Kurosawa serves as a case in point, as his *jidaigeki* classics, such as *The Seven Samurai* (1954/1956) and *Yojimbo* (1961/1961), are said to have been fueled in part by his respect for Hollywood westerns such those of John Ford.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even though *Rashomon* reveals a great deal of narratological and stylistic creativity—Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto calls it a "formal experiment"—one also wonders how much of Kurosawa's interest in classical Hollywood cinema influenced his own craft.<sup>8</sup> In the case of *Gojira/Godzilla*, American influence is perhaps more apparent because it drew inspiration from *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) in addition to being heavily re-edited prior to U.S. release. How did these Japanese films work on the American movie-goer? Did they gain traction by calling upon the viewer's sense of

---

<sup>5</sup> Hamano Yasuki, *Itsuwari no minshu shugi: GHQ, eiga, kabuki no sengo hishi* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 2007), 220.

<sup>6</sup> Hamano, 265-268.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mifune Toshiro, Shimura Takashi and Tsushima Keiko, "Ame no hi mo kaze no hi mo," in *Taikei Kurosawa Akira dai 2 kan*, ed. Hamano Yasuki (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2009), 154. On Kurosawa's fascination with the Hollywood western, see Suzuki Noriko, "Furontia to Nihon: sengo Nihon ni okeru seibu gensetsu no 'dochakuka' to Nihon no jiko saisei o meguru bunka seijigaku," *Otsuna joshi daigaku kiyo, bunkei* 45 (2013), 66.

<sup>8</sup> Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 185.

## H-Diplo Article Review

familiarity or by looking originally Japanese? Overall, what does narrative appeal say about the ways in which the United States interconnects with the world?

“Godzilla versus Kurosawa” is a carefully researched essay that delivers fruitful findings. It usefully stimulates further thinking on cinema and cultural formations involving Japan, the United States, and the wider world.

**Hiroshi Kitamura** is Associate Professor of History at the College of William and Mary. He is the author of *Screening Enlightenment: Hollywood and the Cultural Reconstruction of Defeated Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). Its Japanese-language version appeared from Nagoya University Press in 2014. He is currently working on a book-length study of Hollywood’s transpacific interactions during the Cold War, and a second study on Japanese cinema and high growth.

© 2019 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)