

The Immigrant, The Native Son, and the Ambassador: The Transnational Travels  
of Godzilla, Speed Racer," and Akira

Amber Shandling Cohen

Madison, WI

Bachelor of Arts, Oberlin College, 2005

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

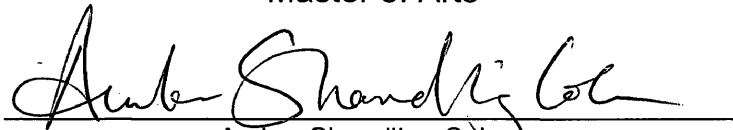
American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary  
January 2010

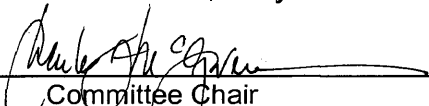
# APPROVAL PAGE

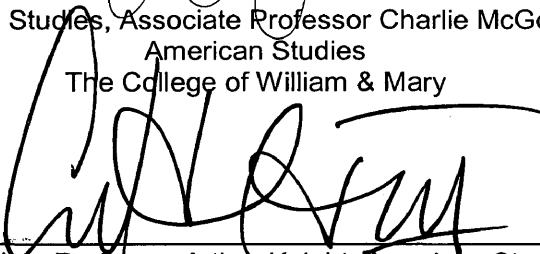
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

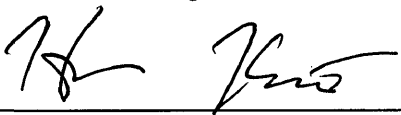
Master of Arts

  
Amber Shandling Cohen

Approved by the Committee, May 2009

  
Committee Chair  
Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor Charlie McGovern, History and  
American Studies  
The College of William & Mary

  
Associate Professor Arthur Knight, American Studies  
The College of William & Mary

  
Professor Hiroshi Kitamura, History  
The College of William & Mary

## ABSTRACT PAGE

While Japanese media has risen to perceptible prominence in American society over the past decade, it is often considered to be sudden and unfounded, but there is historical and societal precedence. Since 1858, when American sailor Commodore Matthew Perry forced open the gates of the then-isolationist Japanese society, the United States and Japan have had a singular relationship on the global stage, one both destructive and creative, fraught with cultural and political tensions but also defined by exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural mores. The two countries have long traveled through the tumults of history together.

This thesis is an illustration of this particular relationship. Through the vectors of three visual media commodities -the movie "Godzilla," the television program "Speed Racer," and the animated film "Akira"- it tells the story of a complicated dynamic that has existed for nearly two centuries. Through the overarching narrative path of trauma, denial, and recovery, it considers how politics have affected the way media is marketed and perceived; the changes that are made when an object is transferred from one society to another, and how it is differently interpreted; the way world events and politics shape stories, and finally how all these things come together not only as a means to better understand each other -culturally, socially, politically- but how we understand ourselves, and where these transnational trends may take us in the future.

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements . . . . .	iii
Chapter 1- Introduction . . . . .	Page 1
Chapter 2 - Godzilla . . . . .	Page 15
Chapter 3 - Speed Racer . . . . .	Page 28
Chapter 4 - Akira . . . . .	Page 42
Chapter 5 - Conclusions . . . . .	Page 47
Bibliography . . . . .	Page 51

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Charles and Christine, my tireless advisor Charlie McGovern, my guinea pigs Nicky and Oliva, and my dearly departed Oni.

## Acknowledgments

The existence and completion of this thesis owes itself to the endless support of my parents, Charles Cohen and Christine Schindler, my thesis committee and professors Arthur Knight, Hiroshi Kitamura, and Charlie McGovern, and my mentor Wendy Korwin. The inspiration for this work and my interests in Japanese media belong to Tatsu-no-Ko Productions and the Yoshida brothers for creating *Speed Racer*, Honda Ishida for the masterpiece that is *Godzilla*, and Otomo Katsuhiro for *Akira*. I owe a great deal of thanks to my friends who put up with me through the endless mazes of writing and research and provided me suggestions, consolation, and hope.

Above all, my utmost and inexpressible gratitude goes to Charlie McGovern, who never stopped believing in me or this thesis.

# **The Immigrant, The Native Son, and the Ambassador: The Transnational Travels of *Godzilla, Speed Racer, and Akira***

## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

When I was eight years old, I saw the movie *Akira* for the first time. There is no doubt in my mind that the after school teachers who screened it that afternoon had no intention of showing us anything but another seemingly innocuous cartoon; I do wonder, however, why no one thought to turn it off once the film began. For two hours we sat and stared as the film played out: a neo-apocalyptic tale of biker gangs, illicit drugs, political corruption and media excess. Perhaps such themes were commonplace for children of the later Reagan administration, but the film's central image was the psychic conflagration of a Japanese boy's consciousness that ultimately manifests outwardly and consumes Japan—if not the world—in a flash of atomic silence and light. The word that I would later use to describe my impressions of the experience was, appropriately, “traumatic.”

Now let me step back and put this in a broader context.

I was eight years old in 1991, and the Cold War was over. This was two years after *Akira*'s multinational release in the spring of 1989, the same year the Berlin Wall came down and political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history<sup>1</sup>. Its opening sequence—a placid and calm Tokyo (date, July 16, 1988), decimated by a fireball reminiscent of the ones that consumed Hiroshima and Nagasaki four decades earlier—must have resonated very deeply in the minds of *Akira*'s initial audiences. The fact that the words on the screen immediately preceding the title—“31 years after the end of World War III”—might have seemed both prophetic and evocative of the nuclear fear that lingered like so much fallout after the Japanese surrender of August 15, 1945.

---

<sup>1</sup>Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989)  
Accessed online at: <http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm> Aug. 5, 2008

What did this film have to do with communism and/or nuclear policy? Absolutely nothing. In fact, the blast around which the film centers had nothing to do with a weapon. But *Akira* emerges in the narrative of post-atomic global relations at the point where history returns to its traumatic ground zero and its denizens finally begin to recover..

*Akira* gnawed at my consciousness for the next six years; in 1997 the Sci-Fi channel, riding the wave of a burgeoning new trend, showed the movie on its weekly feature “Saturday Anime.” And I was changed, not in as poetic a way as undergoing a revelation; rather it was as if I was clotheslined by a cultural medium that has only grown stronger and more prevalent over the past decade. When *Akira* first appeared, the word *anime*<sup>2</sup> was overshadowed by the then-popular term “Japanimation”; by 1997, not only had anime entered into the vernacular, but it was suddenly everywhere, *Japan* was everywhere. Since then the threads of our intersecting cultures have only become more knotted and inescapable. And yet we look around and seem shocked that suddenly these pictures, these characters, these products of a society so different and yet so frighteningly like our own have risen to a kind of pop cultural dominance so far from their native land.<sup>3</sup>

I speak of *Akira*, in a sense, as an ambassador at the “end of history,” not just of time and place. *Akira* closes the historical narrative of trauma, denial, and recovery that has metaphorically (and metaphysically at times) characterized our cultural discourse with Japan. As a site of

---

<sup>2</sup>The Merriam Webster website cites the word “anime” as being added in 1988. Accessed online at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anime> Aug. 5, 2008

<sup>3</sup>Several books that address this phenomenon include: *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.*, Roland Kelts; *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*, ed. Joseph Tobin; *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America*, Takayuki Tatsumi; *Mechademia 1: Emerging Worlds of Anime and Manga*, ed. Frenchy Cunning. Except for Cunning's book, all of these are cited throughout this paper.

reclamation, *Akira* allows for the doors to the past to be flung wide, letting in the global, familiar products that preceded it: a rather conspicuous immigrant, and a native son that has only been recognized as an Other many years later. Even at the end of the film, we are meant to understand that the dialogue of American-Japanese cultural relations is neither new nor exceptional, that the narrative of these encounters is underway; “mo hajimateiru kara ne,” says a child’s voice: “It’s already started.”

It seems that few countries delight in visual representations of their own destruction quite as much as the United States and Japan<sup>4</sup>, which is oddly fitting: as the creators and only intended victims of the atomic bomb, the two are uniquely paired in a relationship of conflagration that all at once altered and unequivocally bound them together.

Even before this connection, Japan and the United States shared a telling and important feature in their history. Prior to World War II—with the exception of the War of 1812 in the U.S.—each had little to no experience with a large-scale invading foreign force. The origins of the word “kamikaze” (the “divine wind” that would become such a memorable and terrifying part of World War II’s Pacific theater) led back to a 13<sup>th</sup> century Chinese attempt to attack Japan which was thwarted by horrific storms. The Atlantic gap between the U.S. and Europe allowed the former to

---

<sup>4</sup>Examples include a number of large-scale disaster movies made in each country. To name a few: *Independence Day* (USA, 1996), *Miracle Mile* (USA, 1988), *The Sum of All Fears* (USA, 2002) *The Sinking of Japan* (Japan, 2006), *Dragonhead* (Japan, 2003) *Godzilla* (Japan, 1956), *Akira* (Japan, 1988). Further examples include apocalyptic literature and television programs. *Internet Movie Database*: <http://www.imdb.com> Accessed online: Aug. 5, 2008 and Craddock, Jim ed. *Videohound’s Golden Movie Retriever 2008* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale Group, 2008)

escape the massive devastation of the first World War. Beginning in 1931 with the Manchurian Incident, Japan cut an enormous military swath through southeast Asia, remaining untouched itself until more than a decade later.

I have chosen to focus on the U.S.-Japanese relationship as a forum and site for discussing the processes of time and cultural understanding because they are a unique bonding of the destroyer and the destroyed, the typhoid Mary that heals the sick, the teacher and the student, the other that resembles the United States so closely that we fail to recognize (or perhaps choose to disregard) that it is not of our own place/time/ideology/culture. The relationship that has evolved between them is dangerous, fast, and revolutionary. It will continue to evolve as the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawns on a world where Asian powers are already challenging Western economic powers that have dominated the global economy for almost a millenium.

This state of affairs began at the end of the Pacific War; two morally and mortally opposed countries hesitantly stretched out the metaphorical olive branch of tentative reconciliation that would bring them together at the political table and open up the avenue of communication.<sup>5</sup> The conversation that arose from the ashes is one of policy and politics, economics and marketing, of social regeneration and national realignment in an increasingly globalized world, of cultural border crossing and domestic infiltration.

---

<sup>5</sup>“Beginning with Pearl Harbor and ending with the emperor’s capitulation after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war between Japan and the Allied forces lasted three years and eight months; the occupation of the defeated nation began in August 1945 and ended in April 1952, six years and eight months later, almost twice as long as the war itself. ...Responsibility for occupied Germany...divided as it was among the United States, England, France, and the Soviet Union, lack the focused intensity that came with America’s unilateral control over Japan.” John Dower *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 23

The era that began on August 6, 1945 offers a defining time frame of analysis and confrontation. After the atomic bombs, Japanese surrender, and American occupation, Japan and the U.S. —once the greatest of enemies— became the best and strangest of friends, sharing and trading objects and ideologies until origins become clouded, forgotten or unrecognized for years.<sup>6</sup> The resulting cultural products, such as cars, electronics, and forms of media challenged the two countries to construct the new narrative of transnationalism in the broader scope of time. The cultural production of postwar Japan, the atomic United States, and their new life together not only rewrote their national self-definitions, but also rewrote their national boundaries through a new hybrid cultural identity. This identity—global, cosmopolitan, culturally charged and forcefully appealing— suggests that the current and longstanding nationalist paradigm is insufficient. The hybrid identity rested on incorporating cultural goods transnationally into everyday life. It is no longer enough to speak in definitives, to say “this is what a people is”; the popular acceptance and readings of transnational products does not simply concern the social life of goods.<sup>7</sup> Rather the socializing by which goods enter into relationships with the people they visit across national borders leaves both the landscape and audiences changed. Particularly where Asian (in this case Japanese) commodities are concerned, Thomas Kim asserts the following:

“Both the pedagogical and performative aspects of the Oriental object reveal how the Orient comes to be almost exclusively associated with things, things that can gather the problematics of the Orient both inside and outside American and things that can showcase

---

<sup>6</sup>This is particularly notable in the world of visual entertainment, where *The Magnificent Seven* was derived from Kurosawa Akira’s *Seven Samurai*, and in television programming where a number of the animation shows aimed at children through the 1960’s and 70’s were Japanese in origin and theme. *Speed Racer*, of course, was one of them.

<sup>7</sup>Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4

the modernist dialectic of distance and proximity within the registers of history and geography, The traffic in...Oriental objects -and their absorption into the very homes of the middle class consumers- occasions an intimacy with the other, and...this process creates destabilizations in the time and space of the self and its attendant culture even as it ostensibly promises self-aggrandizement.”<sup>8</sup>

If the Orient was manifest in goods, the postwar U.S./Japanese national identities were remade with and through things. By approaching relationship through visual mediators, one can understand both the context of such products and their influence on American popular conceptions of the world. As a people, we come to know ourselves in the broader context of our experiences outside our person, our culture, our country, through the rhetoric of healing and affirmation in an increasingly global world, in this instance through transition from trauma to denial to recovery. Such transnational relations are played out not only in politics and society but in the visual and the easily consumed: “[...]the very operations of American consumer culture conditions the way in which the Orient is conceived... this idea of the Orient with its discursive operations is inseparable from thinking about oneself as modern.”<sup>9</sup> The awkward immigrant, the neighbor perceived as a native son, and the ambassador finally open the passage to this modernity, to a new age of understanding and conversation.

And now I will introduce them to you by the names you should already know. The immigrant is *Godzilla*, the giant radioactive lizard that served as the metaphor of the dawning nuclear age. Arriving on American shores in 1956, *Godzilla* was stripped of its political and social contexts and consumed as a commodity rather than a piece of Cold War self-consciousness. The native son is

---

<sup>8</sup>Thomas W. Kim, “Being Modern: The Circulation of Oriental Objects,” *American Quarterly* 58, 2 (June, 2006): 380

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 386

*Speed Racer* (1966-1968), a culturally androgynous world traveler drawn in Japan but inspired by American superheroes. He just wants to be allowed to drive a car that would make James Bond jealous, but he inhabits the static social space between the beginning and the end of Japanese/American global power narratives. The ambassador is *Akira* (1988), often absent even within his own film, a psychic child whose untapped power is both the destruction and hope of a world at the end of a century. Their three stories implicate larger transnational relationships of the U.S. and Japan and a global post-nuclear world. They confront worlds not of their making — they bring the warning that without adaptation we are vulnerable, not only to our enemies and friends, but to the relentless cycles of forgetting and denial and continued trauma.

In this thesis I will argue the following: that *Godzilla* had to be deeply altered and virtually stripped of its symbolic associations to find acceptance from the American audience is key to making legitimate our claims upon and perceptions of the world and our place within the larger global culture. *Speed Racer* is significant as an all-American hero who is nonetheless distinctly Japanese. He seems to be “American” but he exists in a world defined by very specific Japanese cultural constructions and values, while playing out power politics in the microcosms of the international racing circuit. Americans only came to recognize the Japanese invasion of their televisions years after the fact, when *Akira* blew up the world not once but twice, and his story’s popularity revealed an American awareness that Japan had colonized U.S. consciousness. Progressing from the trauma of nuclear war, through the denial of a so-called apolitical age to ultimate recovery at the end of a century, these stories tell us about the future of U.S.-Japanese cultural connections, and how commodities can reflect and create those international relations. Since the wrong sun rose in that distant August, America and Japan have traveled together through ages of cultural collision, book-

ended by earth-changing and world-shattering explosions (physical and metaphorical), each one ending and beginning with the promise of a new day and a new world.

Each still confronts the challenges of the commitment to that promise.

Before there was trauma, there was history.

Following the death of retired regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1598, the warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu assumed control of Japan, and from the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, enforced a strict policy of political and national isolation.<sup>10</sup> No foreign books, ideas, or people were permitted into the country, with only existing trade relations between China and the Netherlands still permitted, the Dutch emissaries nevertheless confined to the small island of Deshima in the Nagasaki harbor, forbidden from entering the mainland.<sup>11</sup> At the time of Japan's closure the United States did not exist and was a mere scattering of struggling colonies emanating from the Virginia swamp where the English had landed in 1607. Two centuries later, however, America had established its independence on the battlefields and after the War of 1812, emerged as a viable contender on the global stage.<sup>12</sup> In 1842, notwithstanding the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. would join the British in prying open the doors of Chinese trade in the aftermath of the Opium War. Although its concessions and rights from

---

<sup>10</sup>Louis Frederic and Kathe Roth, *Japan Encyclopedia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 332

<sup>11</sup>Donald Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969)

<sup>12</sup>Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815*, The New American Nation Series (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 324

China would follow British terms of reparations, with the Treaty of Wanxia in 1844 the U.S. could claim its first extraterritorial ventures into the same colonial trends that had spawned it.<sup>13</sup>

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry and his fleet, forever after to be remembered by the ominous title “The Black Ships,” arrived on Japanese shores near the Edo capital requesting a treaty and a cessation of the self-imposed isolation. Although initially rebuffed, Perry returned again in 1854, securing the Treaty of Kanagawa; the U.S. became the first nation to claim full friendship and cooperation with Japan since its removal from history in 1598.<sup>14</sup>

The story appears as a tale of liberation from bondage: without Perry or the Americans and their frightening, imposing technology, Japan might have been lost in the seas of antiquity, hopelessly adrift far away from the rapid tides of modernity. The truth is, of course, more complicated. A decade after Perry’s initial visit, Japan fell into the period of intense turmoil known as the Bakumatsu, during which the shogunate and bakufu governmental structures collapsed, and

---

<sup>13</sup>Emily S. Rosenberg, Dennis Merrill, Lawrence S. Kaplan, Paul S. Boyer, T. Christopher Jespersen, Nancy Mitchell, Bruce Kuniholm, J. L. Granatstein, Mark T. Gilderhaus, “Foreign Relations” *The Oxford Companion to United States History*. Paul S. Boyer ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001), found in Oxford Reference Online, accessed online at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/entry.html?subview=main&entry=t119.e0556-s0005> Apr. 22, 2009

<sup>14</sup>Signed on March 31, 1854, the Treaty of Kanagawa was a peace and friendship treaty between Japan and the United States as represented by Commodore Perry. To wit, the Treaty allowed for “opening the ports of Shimoda and Hakodate to international trade, allowing ships to resupply in these ports, and establishing an American consulate at Shimoda.” This agreement would eventually force Japan to concede to the desires of other Western powers -the English, Dutch, and Russians- and sign similar treaties with them over the next few years. Frederic and Rothe, *Japan Encyclopedia*, 466

the country divided over whether to rebuild them or reinstate the imperial system abandoned in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup>

The imperialists were victorious, and the conflict ended in what is called the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji Emperor ascended the throne in the new imperial capital of Tokyo, and quite abruptly, secular time began again. Japan not only caught up to the world it had once abandoned, but surpassed all expectations. With the same ingenuity it had used in reworking the Chinese writing system into its own ingenious kanji or in bending Buddhist beliefs to adhere around its indigenous Shinto religion, Japan modernized and industrialized at a truly startling pace. This time Japan embraced the now-considerable Western influence it had formerly denied and rejected.<sup>16</sup> Modernity infiltrated even those things traditionally Japanese —woodblock prints of the age depict Japanese soldiers in western-style dress uniforms, carriages, and ships to match the great sea trawlers of the Eurocentric world. Japanese students spread out across the globe to western universities and brought back knowledge of political and cultural systems, as well as methods of industrialization. But it was not only Europe that Japan referenced— it looked to the United States, its own “far east,”

---

<sup>15</sup>In Japan, the period of time from 1485 to 1576 is known as the “Warring States Era,” an age during which various lords struggled to attain power over the country. At this time, “the imperial court -powerless and uninterested in the fate of the country, concerned only with surviving in its devastated capital [Kyoto], and prey to bandits of all sorts- was forced to place itself under the ‘protection’ of whoever held power at the time.” When the civil wars ended, Japan was under the control of shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Frederic and Roth, 329

<sup>16</sup>“[...]Europeans had become little more than exotic and amusing creatures by the end of the [18<sup>th</sup>] century.” Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 83

a nation itself undergoing its own global metamorphosis in the realm of international and cosmopolitan consumerism.<sup>17</sup>

As these changes took place, the West examined the East, and delighted in Japan's mirroring of western and consumer culture. China might have been a novel site for retrieving tea and fine dishware, but "the Japanese in particular won favor because of their manufactures and artwork."<sup>18</sup> One article praising design said the "'ingenious' Japanese deserved the title 'Yankees of the East.'" Another lauded the Japanese for their 'Western quickness.'<sup>19</sup>

1905 saw little Japan defeat the Russian navy in the first Asian victory over a Western power. The end of the First World War found Japan participating in the Treaty of Versailles talks, receiving small reparations and emerging as the only Asian nation to be considered a truly legitimate member of the global hierarchical order. Japan would seize on this privilege throughout the post-Meiji Taisho government and capitalize on it during Hirohito's Showa regime, striding across East Asian and European colonial holdings throughout the East Indies in the decade prior to the assault on Pearl Harbor in 1941.<sup>20</sup> From the country of the "thirteen original colonies," Japan had learned to itself become a colonizer, an act that would not merely alter history, but start it again.

---

<sup>17</sup>Frederic and Roth, *Japan Encyclopedia*, 332

<sup>18</sup>In his discussion of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century interest in goods from East Asia, Kim touches on this particular favoritism by suggesting that "an object from the Orient can indeed produce a new modern sensibility, conditioning the individual with a new attitude toward consumption, making legible the contradictions that mass culture presents to the consumer." (See "Becoming Oriental"), 387

<sup>19</sup>Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 30

<sup>20</sup>Akira Iriye, *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War: A Brief History with Documents and Essays* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 8

Would Japan have emerged as an international player without the influence of the United States? Probably. But it is impossible to deny the sheer magnitude of the effect that the U.S. had on Japan, simply by virtue of each country's unique position in the world. The United States developed as a kind of new-West, independent of Europe and Japan a new-East, more civilized than and unruled by China. While the Japanese relationship had at times been considered a kind of colonial endeavor in the United States, Japan was never actually colonized like the Philippines, nor its people ever subjugated or enslaved like the Africans. It was not a relationship of equals necessarily, for racism and cultural imperialism abounded on both sides of the Pacific (with Edward Said's notion of Orientalism almost rampant on the Western edge), but the particular and often parallel connections between the two have remained. Each a respective "city on a hill" for its way of life - unique, bold, and largely unchallenged- Japan and the United States are bookends to the Pacific Ocean: "It would be difficult to find another cross-cultural moment more intense, unpredictable, ambiguous, confusing, and *electric* than this one."<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have argued that the American/Japanese relationship has revealed racism, feminization of the Japanese as an other, and cultural and economical subjugation enacted from Perry's arrival to the outbreak of World War II, and beyond. But the intercourse has been shaped by mutual, domestic, cultural exchanges as well as those actions and forces negative in the U.S.-Japanese dynamic. I do not suggest that popular culture exists in a void, but the aim of this thesis is not to tread on already well-worn ground. If the conversation shifts that way, it is only in the service of reading the cultural texts I have chosen in their immediate context —one that, as will be seen, is prone to shifting opinions and perceptions.

---

<sup>21</sup> Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 23

Less than a century after the Black Ships arrived in Japan came the American Navy, and the U.S. met Japan again for the first time. When the dust and fallout of World War II had cleared, the decimated Japanese were pulled back to their feet by General Douglas MacArthur and the occupation agency known as SCAP, the Supreme Command of Allied Powers.<sup>22</sup> Working with Hirohito, MacArthur and SCAP created a new Japanese constitution, and with considerable economic assistance from the United States, Japan was able to rebuild its industry, just in time to become a key supporter and supplier to the U.S. Army in the Korean war. But because the new constitution forbid Japan from creating or maintaining a standing army,<sup>23</sup> once the Korean war ended the focus became on domestic industry, and “Japan’s top priority became to conquer, peacefully, the business world by producing high-tech, high-quality products.”<sup>24</sup> By the 1980s, Japan was no longer a place from which one bought cheap goods, but high-end electronics and software, and the Japanese economy was one of the most powerful in the world: “the yen rose in value and became a currency of reference, although always in association with the American dollar.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1964, *Time Magazine*’s creator and editor-in-chief Henry Luce cheerily exclaimed the following:

---

<sup>22</sup>Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 45.

<sup>23</sup>This is stated in Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. However, should the need arise for Japan to defend itself, it maintains the JSDF, or Japanese Self-Defense Force. Ostensibly the JSDF is not to be used for purposes other than defending the Japanese mainland, but Japan did deploy some of these forces to Iraq in 2004. It seems an odd double-standard is in action. JSDF website: <http://www.mod.go.jp/gsdf/> Aug. 5, 2008

<sup>24</sup>Frederic and Roth, *Japan Encyclopedia*, 336

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 336

“In all the annals of history, it would be difficult to match the extremes of adulation and hate, treachery and trust, cooperation and terrible violence which have marked the short, intense relationship between Japan and the U.S. ...Today Japan and the U.S. are intricately linked by trade, defense policies, and political systems - and are even having somewhat of a cultural love affair.”<sup>26</sup>

Nearly two decades after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Luce’s bright words inhabit the period of historical imagination that I have referred to as the era of “denial.” Beyond the Second World War, before the upheavals of Vietnam and Reaganomics, it is the period in which *Speed Racer* emerged, a culturally ambiguous representation of a historical lull, a text that effortlessly and internationally bridges the turbulent experiences of trauma and recovery. When history moved far enough beyond the events of World War II to a new generation that did not have the same ideals or experience the same cultural contexts as their predecessors, *Akira* paved the way to a final internal/international reconciliation of history, memory and societies.

Roland Kelts reminds us that “...it is true that in the wake of the two atomic bombs - the most immediately destructive weapons used in human history thus far (not to mention the firebombing of its cities which ultimately killed more than the A-bombs did), Japan avidly embraced the products of American popular culture.”<sup>27</sup> However, Susan J. Napier establishes a baseline for these encounters by asserting that the texts should speak for themselves: “turning to contemporary Japan, the works...show a fascinating and problematic relationship with history, starting with

---

<sup>26</sup>Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 29

<sup>27</sup>Roland Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2006), 38

Godzilla's attempt to rewrite it...and ending with Akira's largely successful effort to erase it."<sup>28</sup> This dynamic of history and memory brought forth first a film steeped in the most American of genres, a "B" movie.

## **Chapter 2 - Godzilla**

The importance of his dramatic entrance cannot be understated. It may be preceded with regal threats of godly dominance in Shakespearian terms — "Therefore in fierce tempest is he coming/ In thunder, and in earthquake, like a Jove[.]"<sup>29</sup> — or in the colloquialisms that designate his most famous and world-altering actions: "Oh no, there goes Tokyo!"<sup>30</sup> A familiar icon on both sides of the Pacific, Honda Ishiro's 1954 film *Godzilla* staged Japan's historical trauma. From the depths of a conflict-tainted ocean he rose, an ancient relic woken by a post-modern disaster, the combination of the past and future resulting in a creature, a movie, a concept, a metaphor that would hit Japan and the U.S. in successive but markedly different waves.

While the Japanese had established a cinema culture in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fifteen years<sup>31</sup> of the Asian conflict had seen the film market dominated by movies whose thematic purposes and ultimate goals were to fuel the tide of imperial patriotism across the country.

---

<sup>28</sup>Susan J. Napier, "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster From Godzilla to Akira," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 331

<sup>29</sup>William Shakespear, *Henry V*, IV, i, 1003-4

<sup>30</sup>Blue Oyster Cult, "Godzilla" *Some Enchanted Evening*, Catalogue No. 75204, 1978

<sup>31</sup>In Japan, because of the beginning of aggressive actions in China during the Manchurian Incident of 1931, World War II is referred to as being 15 years in length. Akira Iriye, *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War: A Brief History With Documents and Essays*, (N.p.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996) 3.

Employing a kind of nationalism called “Nihonjinron”<sup>32</sup>, such patriotic films were of particular concern to the SCAP officials who set about rebuilding Japan’s popular culture market in the immediate postwar years. These films were banned and destroyed, and SCAP deployed a list of themes that were henceforth deemed dangerous and illegal.<sup>33</sup>

But the wonderful world of film would not be denied, and seeking to revive and rebuild its international markets, Hollywood authorities leapt at the chance to spread their influence to the Pacific Rim. As Hiroshi Kitamura describes in his dissertation on American film in postwar Japan:

“SCAP responded to Hollywood with zeal and enthusiasm. Aware of its potential popularity and appeal, SCAP eagerly incorporated American movies to further the occupations programs. ...SCAP believed that Hollywood entertainment could aid the hearts and minds of the war-shattered population. Knowing that its products had gained substantial following during the interwar years, MacArthur’s headquarters believed that American films could provide light and hope to the despaired. Ultimately, the mixture of entertainment and enlightenment would facilitate Japan’s reconstruction.”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>“Nihonjinron” is a word which means “the theories of Japanese cultural or racial uniqueness.” The ideology of “nihonjinron” is similar to “white man’s privilege” -that this uniqueness allows them a kind of privilege unavailable to other cultures or races- and has been a cornerstone of nationalist ideology. This particular definition is from Jim Breen’s WWWJDIC, accessed online at <http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/cgi-bin/wwwjdic.cgi?1C> Dec. 16, 2008

<sup>33</sup>According to Hiroshi Kitamura, SCAP’s Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD) had a bureau in charge of Japanese cinema, which stipulated the Motion Picture Code for Japan. The Code consisted of nine items. To name a few: “...the code stipulated that all film narratives conformed to the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration and the Allied Forces. Portrayals of crime and militarism were prohibited, unless they were both shown as ‘evil.’ All themes and narratives that were ‘capable of disturbing public tranquility’ were banned...and the presentation of historical events were permissible only when they were presented ‘truthfully.’”

Hiroshi Kitamura, “Globalizing Entertainment: Hollywood and the Cultural Reconstruction of Defeated Japan, 1945-1952”(Phd Thesis, University of Wisconsin: Madison, 2004), 88

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 60

Of course, SCAP and Hollywood had no idea that their planned reconstruction would bring about the means for a new Japanese film trend of deconstruction, but Japanese audiences viewed films within the lens of their own histories and experiences of war, defeat, and occupation. Kitamura asserts, “fans voiced a strong willingness to see Hollywood movies as a cultural text that transcended mere entertainment. They made sense of the movies in their own terms by discussing different ways through which to gain a deeper understand of the world behind the silver screen.”<sup>35</sup> Films were explicitly understood to offer deeper meanings and truths about the world. This was not lost on Japanese filmmakers.

The Japanese would use that knowledge when they once again stepped behind their own cameras. Although seemingly worlds apart, *Godzilla* was part of the same resurgence of Japanese filmmaking that also saw the creation of Kurosawa Akira’s legendary samurai films. Undeniably influenced by the American trend of popular and genre movie-making that had been rejected by European film elites, the Japanese read —or at least witnessed the power of— the “cultural texts” inherent in the Hollywood imports, even in the radioactive monster movies prevalent in the early 1950s.<sup>36</sup> The birth of *Godzilla* himself is, therefore, a study in transnational media: reworking an American theme, Japan created a monster unrecognizable although blatantly familiar to viewers in both Japan and the U.S..

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 244

<sup>36</sup>A few of the radiation-caused/radioactive monster movies from the 1950s include: *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *The Magnetic Monster* (1953), *Bride of the Atom*, aka *Bride of the Monster* (1955), *Tarantula* (1955), *Phantom From 10,000 Leagues* (1956), and *Beginning of the End* (1956). Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 362-4

Released in Japan in the same year that the stars of *THEM!* were making their insectuous way across the U.S., *Godzilla* was a triumph of special effects, high-class casting, and two men alternating inside a giant and mercilessly hot rubber suit, accompanied by an orchestral score written exclusively for the film by Ifukube Akira. Its tepid reception by American critics starkly contrasted the overwhelmingly positive feedback and commercial success it generated in Japan; in domestic sales alone, the movie paid for itself twice over. When it was brought to the U.S. two years later in 1956, however, it arrived as a foreigner dressed in familiar clothes. Pandering to “the filmgoing masses that demanded to hear their movies rather than read them[,]” Hollywood reworked the film so it would play as “a mass-market, thrill-a-minute horror flick, not a dark and broody art-house release.”<sup>37</sup> Just another nuclear monster to be vanquished by the very science that created it at the end of the day, *Godzilla*’s American face was devoid of anything but pure entertainment value. To the editing floor fell fragments of the film that kindled reminders of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with an ambiguous ending that pondered the necessity and intelligence of continuing to build and test nuclear weapons. Replacing the somber nuclear fear was a trite final monologue that spoke of a day saved and happiness (however false) restored.

The *Godzilla* film that Honda and the Toho Studios made was not made to be evaluated as camp or comedy. “With even just a glimmer of understanding about the filmmaker’s intentions[,]” Steve Ryfle suggests in the companion book the 2006 DVD release of the official version, “[...]Gorjira [sic] emerges as one of the great antinuclear films[,]”<sup>38</sup> displaying in unwavering detail

---

<sup>37</sup>William Tsutsui, *Godzilla On My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 38

<sup>38</sup>Steve Ryfle, “Godzilla’s Footprint,” DVD booklet from *Gojira: The Original Japanese Masterpiece*, Classic Video, 2006

the dangers of nuclear testing both on nature and on the human population with which it fatefully interacts. Islands are devastated, cities are destroyed, oceans polluted. Homes collapse on their inhabitants. Children are orphaned. People are injured and burned beyond recognition and lie in hospital hallways waiting to die. All the suffering in the film issues from one profound, terrible source.

*Godzilla* was a both revision and rejection of history; in the first sense, we can see an example of the Japanese who wrote themselves into a position on the side of right, ensuring a victory that actual history denied. In the second sense, *Godzilla* embodies a kind of national punishment, both for Japan's actions during the war, and for ultimately losing it. That defeat forced the populace to endure not only "the unendurable,"<sup>39</sup> —their defeat and impending occupation— but the catastrophic atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose after-effects would be felt for years to come. The monster is at once both penance, and a despairing cry—the suffering of the film allows Japanese to reject any culpability that could justify so great a punishment. Beneath *Godzilla*'s contrition lurks resentment and the hint of retribution. It is no accident that while in his rampage through Tokyo that *Godzilla* tears down buildings erected in a conspicuously western style. He is ancient and all powerful; he enacts the national pride that no longer dares to be publicly expressed. He is a stubborn reminder it cannot be killed or made beautiful.

For Japanese viewers, *Godzilla* existed as both the terrifying other and the misunderstood self. The film's destruction of both Japanese cities and of the monster itself brought a (necessary?)

---

<sup>39</sup>In his official speech to the Japanese populace declaring surrender, Emperor Hirohito urged his people to "endure the unendurable and suffer what is insufferable" - the unendurable being the shameful loss of the war and its repercussions and affect on the Japanese national self. Accessed online: <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~jobrien/reference/ob101.html> Aug. 6, 2008

decimation, a trauma that was personal, recognizable, and achingly specific to Japan. It evoked reminiscent of familiar scenes of devastation on a physical and human level unimaginable to those who lived through the atomic bombings or feel the creeping terror of the irradiated tuna carried on the Daigo Fukuryu Maru.<sup>40</sup> A woman crouches beneath an awning, watching the monster's fiery rampage and cradling her small children and telling them tearfully that soon they'll join their father, apparently a casualty of war. Sweeping images of hospital hallways linger on the bandaged and the burned, the rows of bodies with helpless families beside them, waiting for the few doctors to do what little they can while the city falls outside. They could be scenes from any country in any war, but particularly in a Japanese context, they were reminders of a particular pain felt only too recently.

The larger tragedy of *Godzilla* locates the film's trauma in the sorrowful tasks the humans in his wake must undertake. Dr. Yamane, the father of the female protagonist, sits in his darkened study and laments that Godzilla must be destroyed. The people of Odo Island and Tokyo must bury their dead and rebuild their homes. The film's final moments offer a shockingly blunt parable of blame and morality in regards to atomic science: faced with the necessity of using his terrible "Oxygen Destroyer," Dr. Serizawa is distraught at the idea that such a terrible creation might ever be used again. He dies on the ocean floor with Godzilla to ensure that no one can ever recreate the weapon or learn the secret from him. Dr. Yamane eulogizes him with the uncomfortable sentiment that, "if we keep testing H-bombs, it is possible that someday, another Godzilla might appear somewhere in the world." It is a sharp and poignant stab at the Manhattan Project scientists and the

---

<sup>40</sup>The "Daigo Fukuryu Maru Incident," known in English as the "Lucky Dragon Incident" will be explained below.

American government who not only used awfulness when they invented it, but continued to expound upon it for decades after.

Picture this.

After long months of travel, an immigrant arrives on the California coast. Fumbling in a new society, the immigrant attempts to establish a life, adapting the clothing, housing, and social systems of the new environment. But the clothes are always ill-fitting, the house never quite a home, and the individual is still regarded as a curiosity. In order for its neighbors to understand the newcomer, they rename and give him a new background, reworking his life story until they can speak to and about the immigrant in their own familiar context. Such an immigrant was Godzilla.

When producers Harold Ross and Richard Kay unleashed “Godzilla: The King of Monsters” onto the American public in 1956, the movie met an audience that had never known continental destruction except on its periphery. This important distinction is specifically relevant in this case, says Takayuki Tatsumi, because “while Japan has continuously emphasized the threat of the atomic bomb, the United States has never forgotten the indignity of Pearl Harbor.”<sup>41</sup>

To say that the reworking of Godzilla for American audiences was meant to glorify the destruction of the sneaky yellow bastards who attacked Hawaii would be a bit unfair; by the end of World War II, the U.S. had repaid Japan for that insult twice over. Yet the producers were unable in any sense to evoke the scorched earth to an audience who had never experienced an event of that

---

<sup>41</sup>Takayuki Tatsumi, *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 175

kind. For *Godzilla's* viewers in the U.S., Pearl Harbor was the most familiar point of reference, which meant that the film had a completely different meaning to its new audience.

The resulting (and now-Americanized) film is a garbled reference book of personalization and second-hand horror. Made to be acceptable in the eyes of a country still wary of the Asian “other,” the film’s principle alteration was the insertion —through Hollywood-made scenes intercut with the original footage— of an all-American male, the journalist Steve Martin (played by Raymond Burr). The rationale for creating Martin’s character was to offer someone with whom U.S. viewers could relate; producers did not assume an American audience could or would want to identify with an all-Japanese cast. As both a journalist —a temporary observer— and an American, Martin was the focal point through which the audience experienced the disasters of the movie, but with a tangible sense of detachment. Martin just happened to be there; when he reported to his superiors on the events shaking Japan, he was the sole and imperfect connection to a world American publishers hardly imagined. He expresses grief and dismay, but Japan is not his homeland, and so he will not have to live with its scars. His presence reframes the entire story; the Japanese are “others” to him and their destruction does not resonate. No one doubts that at the end of the catastrophe, Martin will return home to his own country. His distance, emotional and ultimately physical, allows the American film-goer to be complicit in Japan’s punishment.

In the original Japanese version, *Godzilla's* extended assault on Tokyo featured a brief but startling scene wherein a news crew is broadcasting from a TV tower, the anchorman shouting into the microphone with an almost gleeful frenzy:

“We are reporting to you live from a short-wave transmitter. *Godzilla* is now approaching this broadcasting station, heading toward our TV tower! There is no time to take cover! We don’t know what will happen to us! He is getting even closer! It looks like our doom! I’m

watching as he grabs onto the tower! He has incredible strength! This broadcast is over! Goodbye, everyone, goodbye!”<sup>42</sup>

In the American version, Martin watches from a building somewhere on the edge of the city, dramatically relating the carnage to a tape recorder. “Nothing can save the city now,” he intones solemnly. “This is it, George. Steve Martin signing off from Tokyo, Japan.” Almost devoid of emotion, Martin’s deadpan send-off is a stark contrast to the kamikaze news crew. While their scene remained in the American version, it was undubbed and un-subtitled, incomprehensible to the common movie-goer. We see Martin in these scenes only through a window, a small space in a wall of misunderstanding, offering only a self-absorbed part of the view. It is this sense of detachment that permeates the film: the Americans as observers, troubled but unwilling to throw themselves headlong into an emotional fray that could dredge up old memories. The Japanese personally narrate their own destruction. Martin observes from afar and gives little sense that he feels threatened himself.

The contrasts between American and Japanese perspectives are even more apparent in the film’s climax. At a moment when a quiet, respectful response to destruction might seem more appropriate, the American version completely excises Dr. Yamane’s warning, showing only a few seconds of the man as he sits alone and sadly contemplates the ocean. It also breezes past the greater implications of Dr. Serizawa’s sacrifice, considering only the perceived greater good that has finally come of all this terror and condensing it all into a shockingly trite summation: “The menace was

---

<sup>42</sup>More than a little reminiscent of the famous recording by the reporter witnessing the explosion of the Hindenberg in 1937 and the narration of reporter “Carl Phillips” in the Mercury Theater’s “War of the Worlds” broadcast in 1938.

gone, and so was a great man. But the whole world could wake up and live again.” There is no lesson in Godzilla’s destruction, the living have vanquished the threat and found nothing to learn or change.

The Japanese might reject history, but it seemed the Americans are incapable of learning from it, as the American ending is amoral and unincriminating, absorbing all of the suffering (or as much as can be mustered for such a distant other) and none of the guilt, the remorse, or sense of continued danger. Since 1946, Manhattan Project director J. Robert Oppenheimer had been speaking out against his creation, only to be subsequently declared a communist and stripped of his security clearance in 1956. When even the guiding hand behind the atomic bomb was no longer a viable American hero, let alone citizen, the scariest part of the immigrant fable was how little we looked into his true self, instead imposing upon him the trappings of ourselves and making him into something we understood and wanted to see - something novel, but harmless. Godzilla was forced to assimilate, learning in the process, as Mae Ngai states, “the telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been an enduring narrative of American history, but it has not always been the reality of the migrant’s desires or their experiences and interactions with American society and state.”<sup>43</sup> And particularly by being of Asian origin in a country that had permanently framed Asians as ineligible for complete citizenship, Godzilla would be denied the kind of deep familiarity or kin found in his home country.

*Godzilla* was the product of a new kind of globalization in a specific political moment. By 1949, the Soviet Union had tested its first atomic bomb, a warning and terrifying new threat to the

---

<sup>43</sup>Mae Ngai *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5

United States, which could no longer claim the precious monopoly on nuclear power.<sup>44</sup> In response, despite the objections of a number of nuclear scientists and contributors to the Manhattan Project, on November 1, 1952 the U.S. tested the world's first Hydrogen bomb on the atoll of Eniwetok in the Pacific.<sup>45</sup> The shot—called “Ivy-Mike” and part of Operation Ivy—was a success, but ultimately the triggering device was inordinately massive; there was no way for it to be used tactically in a modern combat situation. Operation Ivy opened the door to further H-bomb experimentation, the most notable of which being the Castle-Bravo test of March 1, 1954. Detonated on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, unexpected wind patterns carried the fallout westward, onto the decks of the Japanese fishing trawler the Daigo Fukuryu Maru (or “Lucky Dragon No. 5”). The crew fell ill with severe radiation poisoning, and one member died. Unfortunately, by the time of the fatality, the irradiated catch of the Daigo Fukuryu Maru had already been sold in Japanese fish markets and panicked a populace already too familiar with the effects of nuclear weapons.<sup>46</sup>

*Godzilla* plainly references these events both in conversation and in action. The opening scene of the Japanese film is of men on a fishing boat, sitting on deck, idling, strumming a guitar, etc., when a massive flash erupts from the ocean and sends them scrambling for cover, to no avail. The ship and its crew are destroyed, and a public too familiar with the events of March 1954 could not possibly have missed the implications. Within the film Dr. Yamane explicitly states that the H-bomb tests awoke Godzilla from his watery slumber. How convenient that SCAP and the Allied

---

<sup>44</sup>The Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic bomb in August, 1949. Brian VanDeMark, *Pandora's Keepers: Nine Men and the Atomic Bomb* (Boston: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 219

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*, 246-247

<sup>46</sup>Kevin and Pierce Rafferty, *The Atomic Café* (New Video Group, 2002)

Forces had left Japan two years before the release of *Godzilla*. How interesting that the bomb itself keeps reviving *Godzilla*, or *Godzilla*-like destructive forces. The West's arms race will revive *Godzilla*, assuring destruction for the innocent as well.

The monster arrived in the United States a full four years later after the end of the Occupation. Its mangled state as a new American hero notwithstanding, *Godzilla* could make little political sense to an American public obsessed with the Cold War, nuclear fear, and anti-communism. With Japan no longer a threat, *Godzilla's* presentation of that country's destruction emphasized U.S. dominance in the two nations' relationship. We were allies once more, albeit bedfellows as strange and opposed as geishas and soldiers. Inasmuch as Japan remained a concern to the American populace, the pseudo-colonized vision offered by the reedited film was the predominant characteristic. Did we even remember Japan as anything else? If anyone even saw the film as a nuclear warning, perhaps it registered no more than as an extreme flight of insane fantasy—the kind that had produced those giant ants in the desert.<sup>47</sup>

While *Godzilla* is now recognized as a traveler with its own message from distant shores, the American audience and critical responses (or lack thereof) at the time reflected at best ignorance and at worst a kind of selective blindness. In a time when mutually assured destruction and nuclear zealotry were two sides of the same coin, *Godzilla* fell within the parameters of Susan Sontag's discussion of films that “are not just safe, vicarious and cathartic ecstasies of urban obliteration,” but consider “two fundamental dilemmas characteristic of the atomic age:

---

<sup>47</sup>Gordon Douglas, *THEM!* (Warner Home Video, 2002 [1954])

“We live under the continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is a fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allows most people to cope with these twin specters. For one job that fantasy can do is lift us out of the unbearably humdrum and to distract us from terrors—real or anticipated—by an escape into exotic, dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings. But another of the things that fantasy can do is to normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it.”<sup>48</sup>

What could be more fanciful than a giant lizard tearing apart a modern metropolis that at the same time represents exactly the force of an all-too real weapon?

Further considering the dichotomy of the destroyed and the destroying, Japan and the U.S., Godzilla and nuclear weaponry, Chon Noriega neatly summarizes the essential point of conflict:

“...in film criticism the concept of the repressed-returned-as-Other allows us to examine the projection of ourselves onto another’s existence. In doing so, we avoid the other culture. Finally, because we are unable to acknowledge ourselves as the Other in another culture’s text, we can only colonize the other’s text.”<sup>49</sup>

In trying to make the text available to a larger audience, *Godzilla*’s producers, along with American viewers, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and misunderstood. The Japanese *Godzilla* has long-since entered into the cultural lexicon of our age — who doesn’t recognize the spectacle of a monster flattening Tokyo behind a mob of shrieking Japanese?— but the millions of Americans under 30 have grown up alongside monsters and watched a hundred representations of catastrophic destruction, yet never known the nuclear fear that accompanied the genre originals. The atrocious 1998 remake of *Godzilla*, where the monster is unleashed on New York City, seemed trite and overdone; what *doesn’t* destroy New York these days?

---

<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Tsutsui, *Godzilla*, 107-108

<sup>49</sup>Chon Noriega, “Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When ‘THEM!’ is U.S.” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987): 74

Until the spring of 2006 when it was released in a double DVD set with its American half-sibling, the original Japanese version of Godzilla was unavailable in the U.S. outside of the rare arthouse venue. For the first time, however, the convenience of modern technology —an odd parable, even moreso when we consider just how many of our home electronics come from Japan— has allowed sixty years of Godzilla-watching Americans not just to reinterpret, but to recognize the trauma and “recover” the context and language of the immigrant who has lived unassumingly among us all this time.

### **Chapter 3 - Speed Racer**

In her book, “Millenial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination,” cultural anthropologist Anne Allison relates an interesting anecdote. Prior to World War II, “the [Japanese] toy industry had been a vital part of the national economy, valued for its worldwide reputation as a top-ranked producer of children’s playthings[,]” particularly high-quality metal toys.<sup>50</sup> When the war disrupted all aspects of day-to-day society, and all available raw materials were coopted for militaristic purposes, the toy industry suffered a devastating blow, and the scarcity of necessary implements continued even into the Occupation.<sup>51</sup>

However, in a move of extreme ingenuity, in what might have been its darkest hour, the toymakers of Japan found a solution to their problem - one unintentionally offered by the SCAP personnel themselves:

---

<sup>50</sup>Allison 36

<sup>51</sup> Dower, 64

“...it was here—in the refuse of the occupier’s everyday existence—that the toy industry found a resource with which to rekindle business... Lacking anything else, Japanese toy makers used the only substance they could find—discarded tin cans from SCAP food rations. Modeling these toys after the jeeps being driven by American soldiers...the Japanese toy industry recycled, both literally and figuratively, the U.S. occupation as fodder for its postwar reconstruction. [...] American soldiers found these playthings amusing. So did officials at SCAP, who, already aware of the prewar stature of the Japanese toy industry, called its representatives into General Headquarters...and ordered them to manufacture their ware for American children. ... Japanese toy makers were commanded to send a portion of their goods to the United States.”<sup>52</sup>

So it was that—amidst the irony of selling the U.S. its trash back in a newer, shinier form.

Long before Honda and Toyota became household names, an influx of Japanese cars invaded American homes and makeshift living room streets. A child enamored of a new toy truck would hardly be prone to questioning its origins, or its arrival; cars were as American as Cracker Jacks. They were not inherently foreign, but familiar. It was easy to embrace them.

On this tide of metallic wonder came one of the most famous cars of all time, the Mach 5. At the wheel was the boy would be king of the international racing circuit: Speed Racer.

“Once seen in childhood,” says Trish Ledoux, “Speed Racer is never forgotten, which can be a bogey or a blessing depending on one’s attitude. Devotees of the daily, half-hour series can’t get enough of Speed Racer and his adventures both on and off the track. Non-fans find the program ridiculous in the extreme, its ‘funny’ artwork, jarringly at odds with its ‘straight’ plotlines.”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006): 38

<sup>53</sup>Trish Ledoux, *The Complete Anime Guide: Japanese Animation Film Directory and Resource Guide* (Seattle, WA: Tiger Mountain Pr, 1997),16

Ledoux offers a fair assessment; partaking of large amounts of Speed Racer can be a daunting experience not so much seen as lived through, its eye-gouging primary colors and breakneck pace searing into the brain. With his monogrammed helmet, dashing ascot, and large blue eyes, Speed is the guy next door, provided you live next to someone with a penchant for bouts of excessive expository dialogue.

The touching story of a boy, his fantastic car, and the weirdly animated friends and family that support his international racing endeavors, Speed Racer is a strange cultural icon of the 1960s — a Japanese teenager who has fairly consistently passed as naturalized citizen for going on forty years. Speed Racer’s frenetic adventures and clipped speech are still recognized and parodied in contemporary shows like *Family Guy* and *Robot Chicken*, even in a commercial for Volkswagen.

Speed is archetypally an American hero: his creators the Yoshida brothers (Tatsuo, Kenji, and Toyoharu) were inspired by American comic book characters like Superman, one of the reasons that his nationality was rarely called into question during his wild racing heyday. Closer examination, however, provides a strange breeding of cultural mores, where the American action star met typically Japanese conventions of the group-oriented rhetoric and even mortality. Unlike American animation series’, in *Speed Racer* cars blow up, rocks fall, missiles fly and even good people die.<sup>54</sup> Speed looked like and posed as an American, but the action and values which framed his adventures were Japanese.

---

<sup>54</sup>In episode 13, “The Race for Revenge (Part 2),” the adventure’s opponent, Flash, is in a helicopter crash. Although he is almost certainly killed, the fact of his death is never explicitly mentioned, and his sister Lily is quickly cheered by the promise that she can always find friends in Speed and Trixie.

The complicated and interesting truth of *Speed Racer* is that the Japanese conventions which with he was portrayed were often lost in the U.S. translation, and thus his stories offered and offer a muted political meaning in the American context while they specifically critiqued the multi-national order in the third world. Made and presented at a time when the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia had become a damaging and polarizing force, Speed rebuked the international order of things even as his adventures affirmed it.<sup>55</sup> Designed to showcase a Cold War worldview, Speed's adventures critiqued the assumptions and actions of the first world.

According to the official Speed Racer website, Yoshida Toyoharu (commonly known by the pen name Kuri Ippei) stated that "the series was based strictly on the brothers' all-out adoration of America. American movies show a life of abundance in the average household. To the brothers, the American lifestyle was as fantastic as American comic books."<sup>56</sup> And American comics were exciting; Kuri easily recalls that he was "overwhelmed and strongly influenced by the character Superman, his robust physique and his macho appearance. In contrast, Japanese comic books were amateurish. I longed to design in the realistic style of the Americans."

---

<sup>55</sup>The later 1960's notably being the time in which U.S. forces were not only tearing through Vietnam, but also finding their way into Cambodia, and Laos. Richard Nixon's "Cambodia Incursion Address," April 30, 1970, accessed online at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/richardnixoncambodia.html>, July 26, 2009; Leary, William, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974: Supporting the 'Secret War,'" accessed online at the CIA homepage, <http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html>, July 26, 2009.

<sup>56</sup>Speed Racer Official Website: <http://www.speedracer.com/> Accessed online: Aug. 6, 2008

“Maha Go, Go, Go” debuted on Japan’s Fuji Television on April 2, 1967, its influences reflected proudly in its protagonist’s Clark Kent hairstyle and the aforementioned sparkling azure gaze. But in his home country, this young man had a distinctly Japanese name: Mifune Go. A construction of the easily pun-able Japanese language, “Mifune” came from the celebrated actor Mifune Toshiro, and “go” is a homonym for the Japanese word for “5;” suddenly the huge red “M” on the Mach 5’s hood makes sense, as does the seemingly incongruous “G” on our hero’s shirt.<sup>57</sup> Accompanied by a hypnotically catchy theme, we meet Go as he leaps into his fantastic car and sets off down the racetrack and out into the world. The Japanese opening depicts Go driving alongside a host of African fauna, through jungles and across the Savannah, before sweeping across the American southwest and the Sahara desert. As long as there’s space to drive, he is at home anywhere in the world. The Mach 5—the epitome of progress, speed, and Western modernity—knows no bounds. Everything about him and his wonderful car push Western ingenuity and newness.

And that’s a very good thing for him, as five months after its initial release, the newly dubbed (in name and language) “Speed Racer” was syndicated worldwide in 1967. Distributed for handy home viewing by the Trans-Lux Television Corporation,<sup>58</sup> with a new moniker apt for both his racing penchant and his breakneck speech (is he actually *on* speed?), Speed became a culturally ambiguous character, a change helped in no small way by his creator’s influences: the international setting of the show. Moreover, Speed’s is an international and comfortable world. He and his family live a

---

<sup>57</sup>Other name changes included the name of Go/Speed’s girlfriend, from the Japanese Michi to Trixie, hence the noticeable M on her pink shirt. Speed’s mechanic was renamed Sparky from “Sabu;” luckily his shirt and initials continued to match.

<sup>58</sup>Elizabeth Moran, *Speed Racer: The Official 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Guide*, (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 28

distinctly un-Japanese, indeed almost suburban lifestyle. They reside in a sprawling house of unapologetic 1960's international modern design; they own and operate at least one car; they can afford to board not only a monkey but Sparky and Trixie alongside their remaining two sons.

As we learn in the first episode, Speed is actually the middle son of the Racer family. His older brother Rex left the family years ago after a racing accident led to a confrontation between he and family patriarch "Pops Racer." After Rex crashed his car in a rash attempt to win a race, Pops forbid him from competing further until he grew up and became a more responsible driver. Unwilling to accept this ultimatum, Rex felt he was "given no choice but to run away from home," and supposedly vanished. This devastating loss of his eldest son made Pops unwilling to accommodate Speed's desire to pursue a similar career, and it is only through Speed's earnestness, tenacity, and a fair amount of flat-out disobedience that he convinces his father he won't act with Rex's hubris. Seen in a Japanese context, it would be hard to miss the allegorical implications of the family dynamic. Rex's rebellion against the father who trained him, and the tragic consequences and Speed's avowal to make Pops proud and do it right this time, are a microcosmic representation of Imperial Japan and its postwar identities respectively.

Further metaphors abound in the very structure of Speed's pursuit of the World Racing Championship. I have spoken already of the global scale and setting of the show; nowhere is it more blatantly and graphically implied than in the opening, where a team of cars in V-formation (with the Mach 5 at the apex, of course) drive latitudinal and longitudinal lines across a map of the world. Speed and his friends are in a different country every week, the location (sometimes real, sometimes

not) often stated by the authoritative voice of narrator Jack Curtis<sup>59</sup> just after the title screen. A number of Speed's victories also encompass the foiling of some devious international plot. For example, in "The Trick Race," a terrorist group known as "International Spies Incorporated" has a long standing grudge against Speed and the mysterious Racer X for foiling a number of their evil schemes that have ranged from scientific espionage to political assassination. In several episodes, it is implied—if not explicitly stated—that the fate of world peace rests in Speed's yellow-gloved hands.

The masked rider who both challenges and assists Speed in his many endeavors, Racer X is actually (and obviously) the estranged Rex Racer. Over the course of the series it becomes clear that Racer X works for an international police organization (akin to a fancified Interpol) and keeps tabs on Speed as both a watchful older brother and a secret agent. Particularly in the teen years of the Cold War, when concerns regarding global intelligence and alliances ran particularly high, there is little to question in its thematic inclusion in Speed Racer. In fact it probably passed as mundane or commonplace, particularly in an America that still had its schoolchildren diving under their desks in anticipation of a Soviet airstrike. Luckily, Speed Racer is no red, and he can't lose. The show clearly defines where the appropriate lines of power are—the U.S., western Europe, and Japan as the flagship (flag island) for the capitalist rhetoric in East Asia. While he traverses Africa and even the Middle East, he never ventures near Vietnam or Cambodia; when in China, he only visits Hong Kong. Speed is a diplomat, but in the show's context he cannot bring world peace, only stability and market-friendly international understanding.

---

<sup>59</sup>Curtis also played other voices such as Pops Racer and Inspector Detector. His is the voiced reality in the series, underlying the import of his voicing the Racer patriarch.

Two particularly striking examples that further illustrate the series's geo-politics are episodes 16 and 17, which focus on an event called "The Fire Race." The story opens with a scene unequivocally meant to evoke images of the United Nations. The members of this organization, the League of Countries, have called forth Chief Zuma of Kapekapec, requesting (read: demanding) that he open the borders to his country. No country can remain isolated forever, they assert, and Zuma's unwillingness to allow foreign dignitaries or tourists indicates questionable motives, namely that the Kapekapecians might be building weapons, a grave concern to the international community. Zuma denies any sort of weapons program, stating that his resistance is based on fears that the influx of international traffic would damage the existing culture of his home. Ultimately unable to reach any kind of consensus on the issue, the League of Counties suggests an international race to decide Kapekapec's fate: if an outside entrant can beat Kapekapec's legendary racer Kabala, the country will have to open its doors. Progress will have a showdown with tradition.<sup>60</sup>

There is much to be read into this story, but I will highlight a few choice elements here. Despite its native populace dressing in a style that can really only be described as "crazy witch doctor chic," Kapekapec has a very modern airport, and apparently enough technology for Kabala to have a car whose features rival the Mach 5. Zuma, his granddaughter Silvana, and the other Kapekapecians are generally portrayed as fierce and backward while nevertheless successfully guarding historic artifacts and maintaining an apparently enviable GDP. The fateful race is through a labyrinthine volcanic passage that opens once every one hundred years, and only for five hours at a time. Any racer to fails to make it out will certainly die.

---

<sup>60</sup>That this scenario is highly reminiscent of Admiral Perry's request to the Japanese government just a century before is unlikely to be purely coincidental.

Although a dozen racers start the event, the true contest is held among Speed, the villainous, treasure-hungry Kadar, and Kabala. But underscoring the treacherous nature of reality in “closed” societies, we learn that Kabala is not even the man himself; he died several years prior, and in his place is Racer X, who pleads with Speed to lose the race and protect the indigenous culture. In a show of his cavalier attitude and devotion to progress, Speed brushes off Racer X. This is a race and not politics, and Speed just wants to win. If culture and history are compromised or denied or deleted, that is just a consequence of progress, and it's probably better that way.

In blatant disregard of the physical fact that he ostensibly must keep a consistent pace of 165 mph in order to make it out of the tunnel in time (a split-second calculation by Trixie), Speed spends half the race outside the car, arguing with Racer X or attempting to thwart Kadar's plans to loot the cavern of its treasures. But all fears are allayed, of course, as Speed (followed closely by Racer X) exits the track just as the mountain's doors close. Our hero wins, finally forcing a compromise between Zuma and the League of Countries that Kapekapec will be open to tourists for the ambiguously stated “part of the year.” Zuma agrees, and the day is saved—as far as we know. Speed will never go back to Kapekapec, nor will it ever be mentioned again, although in Silvana, he leaves behind at least one native attracted to Western technology and manhood, i.e. Speed.

Circa summer 1967, “The Fire Race” episodes in particular are especially loaded as metaphorical representations of mid-Cold War policies. Physically occupying the space between the U.S. and the twin monoliths of Red China, and the U.S.S.R., Japan could just as easily have ended up on the other side of history. Indeed it once was: like Kapekapec, it took foreign intervention and initiative to pry open the gates of Japan and thrust it into the world, first in 1854 and once more in 1945. But look, the show's narrative seems to suggest, how far Japan has come under its Western

tutelage; it is a latter-day symbol of the power of capitalist culture and society. Forward momentum must be maintained. The Kapekapeckians must be liberated from their dangerous isolationist ideology and made part of the greater global construct, or fall into red shadow and infamy. If this can only be attained through a car race, why not? It's better than a bomb, as positive international relations can work towards maintaining and preserving indigenous cultures.

Another episode from later in the series that speaks to dynamics of transnational politics is 40, "The Man Behind the Mask." No location is designated for the opening sequence, but it takes place in an airport from which Speed and Trixie are departing for the North American Grand Prix. Loaded onto the plane with the Mach 5 is a rather imposing looking rocket which belongs to the scientist Dr. Fantasy.

Ever the gentleman, Speed introduces himself and Trixie to Dr. Fantasy, and as they board the plane, a man identified only as "Dr. Fantasy's friend" addresses the crowd, stating excitedly that the rocket will make space travel accessible to any and everyone. Once seated, Dr. Fantasy reveals that he invented the fuel that powers the rocket, not the rocket itself, and that it is so potent, "only a few drops equal one-hundred gallons of high-octane gas." Speed is impressed, and Trixie exhorts her desire to go into space, to which the good scientist offers an oddly somber reply: "Someday you'll be able to, provided that the fuel is used for peaceful purposes and not war. I'm afraid certain people want to use my fuel to power weapons, but I've been insisting they must not use my fuel for war purposes."

Fate and the plotline obviously have other things in store, as the pilot has been killed and the plane hijacked by men in rather inexplicable tiki-style masks who tell Dr. Fantasy that his fuel will indeed be used for nefarious and dangerous schemes. The plane is rerouted to a secret island and

once there, Speed, Trixie, Dr. Fantasy, little brother Spritle and pet monkey Chim Chim (who had unsurprisingly stowed away in the hold) find themselves the captives of a man who calls himself “Mark Meglaton the Great.” Meglaton is “an ardent admirer of three things: champion racers, top scientists, and magnificent works of art.”

Meglaton<sup>61</sup> has already stolen quite a bit of the world’s famous art pieces—including the Mona Lisa—and keeps them in a room that is both earthquake and fire-proof. But he also keeps another kind of art—a storeroom of gigantic warheads. They are homing missiles to be powered by Dr. Fantasy’s fuel, making them particularly fast and efficient. Meglaton intends to use Speed, who “goes to races all around the world” as an intermediary, acquiring more art and loading it into a rocket that will fly back to the secret island. To ensure he does as commanded, Speed will be chained to the Mach 5 which is rigged with a bomb, and will be monitored by closed-circuit camera.

Dr. Fantasy’s friend goes to the show’s default police investigator, Inspector Detector, and insists, “This is a worldwide problem, do you understand? The peace of the world is at stake!” But the plan is already in progress, and Speed is sent to the Louvre in Paris, then the British Museum and National Gallery in England. Meglaton states that his ability to subjugate the art world with his threats have proven he is unstoppable, and he demands that Dr. Fantasy make more fuel so that he can launch “super missiles one by one at every city in every country around the world...[He] will make the world surrender.”

Ultimately, Speed manages to convince Meglaton to let him work as Dr. Fantasy’s assistant, ostensibly to develop the fuel faster, but inevitably turn the proverbial tables on Meglaton, using his own homing missiles to destroy his lair. In his dying exposition, Meglaton reveals himself to be Dr.

---

<sup>61</sup>A pun on “megaton” (the yield of a bomb) and “megalomaniac,” perhaps?

Fantasty's friend: "You're disappointed in me Doctor, but I'm an ambitious man and I saw your invention as a means to get what I wanted. I knew that if I possessed your rocket fuel I could possess the world." Meglaton eventually suffocates in his own private museum, Speed and Trixie continue on to the North American Grand Prix, and Dr. Fantasty states, relieved that "Thanks to Speed, my rocket fuel will now be used only for peaceful purposes." It's never clear if any of the art is returned.

It is decidedly telling that the great museums Meglaton targets are in Europe, reaffirming Speed's association with the western (not the communist or non-aligned) world. In a short scene where Racer X tells Mom and Pops Racer about Meglaton's plan, he suggests that Speed may soon "be coming to this country," maintaining the ambiguous location of the family home and of Speed's true nationality — really, it could be anywhere, assuming anywhere is decidedly Western-centric and progressive.

This episode aired in 1968, the same year that the United Nations opened the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for signing to the five countries then considered nuclear powers.<sup>62</sup> Undoubtedly "The Man Behind the Mask" plays to the continued fear of treaty subversion, of madmen compassing exciting new science for their own sinister ends, but the episode also resolves itself and the issue easily, and emphasizes the necessity of using science for peaceful and exploratory purposes. With his upstanding nature and no discernable allegiance, Speed's opposition to weapons proliferation marks him as a conscientious citizen of the world with whom anyone could identify.

We encounter Anne Allison again in her contribution to Joseph Tobin's essay collection, "Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon."

---

<sup>62</sup>The Nuclear Information Project: "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons [NPT]" Accessed online: <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt> Apr. 22, 2009

“What makes Japan newly successful in its marketing of games, comics, and cartoons is not simply technology or business prowess but what some call the ‘expressive power’ (hyougenryoku) of Japanese creators. According to some, the stories, images, and ideas generated by these products constitute an emerging ‘international common culture’ in which Japan’s contribution is both significant and historically unprecedented.”<sup>63</sup>

In the same volume, Iwabuchi Koichi carries her ideas one step further when he discusses “[...]cultural artifacts in which bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristic [sic] have been erased or softened:

“This is particularly evident in Japanese animation where the characters, for the most part, do not look ‘Japanese.’ Such non Japanese-ness is referred to in Japanese as “mukokuseki,” which literally means something or someone lacking any nationality, but which is also used to refer to the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics and context from a cultural product.”<sup>64</sup> (58)

It would seem that *Speed Racer* exemplifies both Allison and Iwabuchi’s points: here is a violently expressive Japanese show whose American influence strips it of its national origins while simultaneously allowing it a familiar iconic status around the world. Ethnically ambiguous once outside of Japan, Speed belongs nowhere and everywhere; he is as recognizable to the audience he found in the U.S. in the 1960's as he is to the Japanese. But he occupies a particular space between Japan and the U.S. because he is not inherently “American;” there is nothing of the U.S. about him.

Examination of the series reveals Japanese themes that couldn’t be erased by a change in language: the group dynamic and circle of family and friends that constantly surround and assist Speed despite his heroic individualist status; the shame and shadow of a dangerous past embodied

---

<sup>63</sup>Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 36

<sup>64</sup>Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 58

in Racer X's hubris and eased by Speed's international cosmopolitanism; the ongoing lessons of mortality.<sup>65</sup> Even in his moment of greatest triumph, winning the "Race Around the World," Speed is not alone - Sparky is riding with him, Spritle and Chim Chim follow close behind and gather important information, and the rest of his family and friends watch and cheer them on with profound enthusiasm. The group dynamic remains strong throughout. But again reminding ourselves that the show itself is a love letter to American culture, we find in Speed Racer the perfectly globalized citizen. The location of the Racer estate is never specified; Speed has no home because he is at home everywhere in the (free) world. He is transnational, but as he is also the title-character, the signature hero who would be familiar to an American audience who wouldn't even consider seeing him as anything but one of the guys.

Although it is his large expressive eyes that allow a child familiar with anime to recognize him as a Japanese invention, it is the American-ness of his mannerisms, story, and truly enviable sports car that pinpointed him as a native son for a generation of U.S. fans. He is easily identified with anywhere in the world; while his bravado sometimes eclipses his charm, he is as good a spokesperson as any to iterate (and reiterate later) the lessons and how-to's of a world for once oddly at peace with its detente —it is not a perfect world by any means, and there is still political corruption and the threat of war, but for the time during which Speed completes his bid for international fame, we experienced a world racing not towards its own destruction, but to a finish line where we might finally begin to cease denying unaddressed postwar trauma, and move towards a victorious recovery.

---

<sup>65</sup>Antonia Levi, *Samuria From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation* (Peru, Illinois: Carus Publishing Company, 1996), 24

If only all international disagreements could be solved by a good lap around the track; you bet your life Speed Racer would see it through.

#### **Chapter 4 - Akira**

Where were you at the “End of History?”

Despite its hyperbolic and contentious title, Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay was based around a discussion of the dominant political structures of a post-Cold War world, and not, as it would seem, a statement that events would cease and time would be no more. It did, however, echo a worldly sentiment that the end of the Cold War had changed the course of the future as surely as its beginning had altered thirty years of global relations.

Where was the end of history? The terrain was unfamiliar, and littered with the nuclear age debris that no longer conveyed a world order built on armed detente, but a trash heap of global posturing and antagonistic rhetoric that would have to be cleared in order to build the foundations of a brave new international society. Perhaps it truly was the end of history as we knew it. And maybe it would be easier to move forward if we simply started over altogether, the past consumed in a silent fade to white. It is this image of blankness that begins *Akira*, a film that plunges headlong and headstrong into memory, trauma, and denial, redeeming history even as it seems to “[celebrate] history’s imminent demise.”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup>Napier, “Panic Sites,” 336

This animated rendering of Tokyo, July 16, 1988 seems to be a fairly unremarkable day. The sky is clear, traffic lopes along, the city is vast but seems untarnished from an aerial view. The only sign of impending trouble is a flicker of unspecified motion at the top of the screen, a split-second not-quite-seen movement that suddenly swells outward into a giant, all-consuming cloud of white light that evokes nothing but pure atomic imagery. Tokyo is devoured, and the confusion (was it an attack? Where did it come from?) sets off the long-feared World War III. As the world devolves into nightmare, no one imagines that ground zero was the psychic consciousness of a little boy whose very name is often written with the character meaning “bright” - Akira.

A masterpiece of animation, cinematography, and apocalyptic storytelling, Otomo Katsuhiro’s *Akira* was a landmark achievement not only for its creator, but for the film and anime genres as a whole. “It was dark,” Trish Ledoux muses, “it was unsettling; it was unlike any science fiction story —animated or otherwise— anyone had seen before. It wasn’t the first Japanese-animated film to be released theatrically in the U.S., but for many, *Akira* was the film which would make the crucial break into American pop-culture mainstream.”<sup>67</sup> *Akira* garnered a record-breaking audience in Japan (as *Godzilla* once had so long ago), became an international phenomenon, a rallying point for fans of Japan’s (seemingly) singular animation style, and the first icon to be celebrated for and recognized by its inherent Japanese-ness.

*Akira* is not the main character of his own story; he himself is given no lines and few actions, and appears only in memory and revelation in the film’s climax. It is his power —the “absolute energy” that blew up Tokyo in 1988— rather than his personage that underscores the story, which is itself an allegory for a world fallen into excess, unwilling to face its mistakes or invest in its future.

---

<sup>67</sup>Ledoux, *Complete Anime Guide*, 46-47

*Akira*'s accidental hero and antihero, Kaneda Shoutaro and Shima Tetsuo respectively, are members of a motorcycle gang and failures of the education system; they lack any deep sense of discipline or allegiance to anything but the present moment—they are ultimate rejects of the postwar Japanese new power. Tetsuo's encounter with Takashi, also a psychic and a friend of the long-dead Akira, awakens Tetsuo's own innate powers, and he is quickly claimed by the military as part of the ongoing "Akira Project." Still seeking to leash the power that ran rampant three decades before, the scientists ultimately release a monster that neither they nor Tetsuo himself can control. It falls upon Kaneda, swept into the fray by the loss of his friend and his interest in the resistance fighter Kei, to set things right, inasmuch as he can.

When Susan Napier suggests that "*Akira* is perhaps the most vividly realized evocation of disaster to be produced in Japan thus far,"<sup>68</sup> she seems to overlook the madness, terror, and cataclysm that Godzilla brought to Tokyo forty years earlier. But no one can really blame her for forgetting—the trauma had long since been buried and subsequently denied by a world that had no desire to reconsider the implications of its atomic actions. The character of the Colonel says as much as he considers the monstrous refrigeration facility that houses the remains of Akira: "Look at what they abandoned in their panic. They were *afraid!* There were too scared, so they hid it away from the public. They forgot all shame and honor and cast off the civilization and science we had created, and shut the lid of the Pandora's Box they themselves had opened."

In the brilliance of *Akira*, however, there will be no more hiding. The fact that the date of Akira's psychic collapse is firmly established as July 16, 1988 is no accident—forty-three years

---

<sup>68</sup>Napier, "Panic Sites," 336

earlier to the day, the scientists of the Manhattan Project had detonated the world's first atomic bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico. How much more fitting a remembrance could there be than a nearly identical explosion? And why shouldn't Japan, with its aforementioned affection for razing Tokyo to the ground, explode itself this time, completing the circle of destruction? Why shouldn't this period of history end the way it began?

Echoing the refrain that all we ever learn is that we never learn, the scientists of *Akira* have continued to pursue their energy project, apparently operating under the assumption that they can somehow avoid the mistakes of the past. After all, Akira's body was dissected and bequeathed to their generation for study. Surely after all this time, they would finally know what to do, and how to do it right. Watching Tetsuo's psychic energy patterns spike to dangerous level, the Colonel briefly muses whether or not this power—"the power of god," as the chief scientist refers to it—can or should be grasped by human hands. His contemplation is short-lived, however: "But we *have* to. We have to touch it and *control* it." His brusque manner and military stylings leave no question that he is not only a mirror but an indictment of the Manhattan scientists who bespoke similar conclusions, an uncanny echo of the navy/military, and a rejection of the responsible adults in *Godzilla*.

Science and the half-forgotten lessons of past mistakes haunt Neo-Tokyo. Politicians and researchers have struggled to keep the ghosts under wraps, but Tetsuo's Godzilla-esque rampage summons them back to the surface. Although it is his unrestrained psyche that destroys the city, he is not entirely to blame; Tetsuo and Kaneda are trapped in the confines of a world order created long before they were born, and it has been their misfortune to inherit a world devastated by trauma and denial.

In an effort to stop Tetsuo's ultimate metamorphosis into a catastrophic amalgamation of flesh and psychosis, Takashi and two other members of the Akira Project —Kiyoko and Masaru, childhood and still childlike friends of Akira— summon Akira to take Tetsuo away, but Kaneda is accidentally caught in the mushrooming light of revelation. Against the urgings of his friends, Takashi sprints toward the encroaching disaster to save Kaneda because, he says, "it's not his fault." The return of Akira is a symbol of the sins of the past revisited on the present, but through the efforts of a few individuals who dare to face trauma head-on, this time the future escapes the wrath of history. Kaneda lives, and one hopes that the horror he has seen and experienced has finally made an impact that cannot be paved over or ignored. He rides back into the ruined city, but while he moves away from the site of traumatic past, we can hope that this time he'll take its lessons with him.

Unlike *Godzilla*, these corollaries between nuclear war and the dangers of losing control were not excised from the film when it reached the U.S. No longer the hesitant population unwilling to even speak the names Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Americans embraced *Akira* for everything it was, stylistically and thematically. Beautiful and horrible, confusing and succinct, *Akira* arrived in time to show us a fate we had narrowly avoided, and to encourage a new analysis of the pain of history that the Cold War had so efficiently denied. *Akira* is usually construed as an apocalyptic wet-dream, a nihilistic symphony of catastrophe that glorifies the end of all things, but I have chosen to interpret it in a different light, a nearly post-history text that suggested car races and ambiguous alliances were all well and good, but now it was time to heal.

*Akira* is rightfully considered a cult classic, the leader of the anime revolution. The children who watch -and recognize- anime on the Cartoon Network today may not be aware, but they might never have met Pikachu if *Akira* hadn't come through the door with SWAT team ferocity and efficiency. While its roots are in the flash that summoned Godzilla, and its style born of the same American-influenced animation envy that produced *Speed Racer*, the film has never been anything other than explicitly Japanese. It was not an immigrant, nor was it confused with the natives. It was and is appreciated not for a version that was stripped of its identity or submitted to a removal of its messages. There are no extraneous cast additions, and the characters keep their original (and distinctly Japanese) names. *Akira* is the ambassador, a transnational traveler that actually transfers: it carries clearly and permanently one culture's vision to another with its differing social and cultural paroxysms intact.

The blinding light of history is no longer a wall, but merely an obstacle on the road to recovery. With a good pair of sunglasses and a tricked-out motorcycle, who could resist going for a ride?

## **Chapter 5 - Conclusions**

Ten years ago, anime and Japanese cultural products were a niche market. *Akira* and its ilk were relegated to the children's section of video stores, *Godzilla* to science fiction where it would continue to be viewed as an effort in pure camp. *Speed Racer*, though celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997, had not been seen on the air in years, and existed in no official form for consumption—you might have found it on tapes at the back of a closet. Japan itself was reeling from the collapse of its

bubble economy. It seemed that the distance between Japan and the U.S. had not been traversed at all.

We find ourselves now two decades removed from the so-called end of history, recognizing that not only has history continued ever dynamically, but that true international and political power encompasses not one governmental structure, but an understanding of all of them. In order to stay afloat in the sea of modern affairs, one has to learn how to manage the flows of globalization, and in the United States, to accept and understand the specific and particular nature of globalization in response to its relationship with Japan. Katsuno and Maret suggest that, “There is no longer a solid line separating the Japanese and American cultural spheres. The global flow of pop culture and media contributes to an expanding complex of shared texts and references.”<sup>69</sup> Children born after the fall of the Berlin Wall are now applying for college, and they have grown up in a world where, Kelts offers, “we no longer refer to Japan as ‘the far East,’ not only because we fly west to get there, but also because Japan, literally and figuratively, feels a lot closer to us than it used to.”<sup>70</sup>

Although I maintain that *Godzilla*, *Speed Racer*, and *Akira* are connected within and as transnational history, standard-bearers of a relationship of particular global uniqueness, it would still be possible to dismiss them as mere cultural imports that have done little to affect the American conception of the past and the world. What should it matter that they speak to trauma, denial, and recovery if we were not the intended audience, and we did not recognize those themes? That was then and there, and this is here and now.

---

<sup>69</sup>Joseph Tobin, ed. “Localizing the Pokemon TV Series for the American Market,” *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004): 89

<sup>70</sup>Kelts, *Japanamerica*, 37

We embrace this conclusion only at our own peril, for it denies the significance of the Japanese-American connection and speaks to a self-understanding that has taken nothing from the past half-century. The local and the familiar and now bound up in the larger narrative of the world, as Morley and Robins state that, “Whilst globalization may be the prevailing force of our times, this does not mean that localism is without significance...Globalization is, in fact, also associated with new dynamics of *re*-localization. It is about the achievement of a new global-local nexus, about new and intricate relations between global space and local space.”<sup>71</sup> *Godzilla*, *Speed Racer*, and *Akira* are commodities who represent exchange, the transfer of ideas and emotions. The feelings inherent in them are the site of a cultural international relationship. And within that global construct, the transnational travels of the immigrant, the native son, and the ambassador are key players in the American national identity whether or not they were intended as such.

Charles Cohen asserts, “that those who forget the past tend to repeat it, those who have never learned about it do not even know enough to forget it, and those who, through either obliviousness or ignorance do not come to grips with it, will be at history’s mercy on the day when it takes them by surprise and smirkingly lays them low.”<sup>72</sup> Globally, we share a history riddled with scars earned by not heeding this warning. Memory is an elephant, is traumatic and painful and more easily denied than accepted, but in order to recover from the wounds of the past and to move forward to a more enlightened age of international understanding, we must look closer at what we passed over as inconsequential the first time.

---

<sup>71</sup>Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 43

<sup>72</sup>Homepage of Charles L. Cohen. Accessed online: <http://history.wisc.edu/cohen> Apr. 22, 2009

The guiding path of my research is laid out in the words of T.S. Eliot, in the “Love Letter of J. Alfred Prufrock:”

“We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring,  
will be to arrive where we started,  
and know the place for the first time.”

Departing from the end of history, we find ourselves at the beginning, hopefully better informed, better equipped to deal with trauma, denial, and recovery, better able to learn from it. The process is not static and is the responsibility of international society as a whole; it is the transnational facets of world culture that will enable us to redefine ourselves and our place, and connect with one another in the larger context of shared experience. It is facilitated by the texts that continually open themselves to political, social, and cultural analysis. This is where we came in, and from where we will leave again. History is not over. It has already started, and it is in the pursuit of a more enlightened future that we take our place behind the wheel, drive out into the world, and go, go, go.

## Works Cited

### Books:

- Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006)
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 1988)
- Craddock, Jim ed. *Videohound's Golden Movie Retriever 2008* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale Group, 2008)
- Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (W. W. Norton & Company/The New Press, 1999)
- Frederic, Louis and Kathe Roth. *Japan Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)
- Hoganson, Kristin. *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (N.p.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007)
- Iriye, Akira. *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War: A Brief History with Documents and Essays* (N.p.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996)
- Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002)
- Jansen, Marius B. *The Making of Modern Japan* (N.p.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)
- Keene, Donald. *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1969)
- Kelts, Roland. *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (N.p.: Palgrave-MacMillian, 2006)
- Kitamura, Hiroshi *Globalizing Entertainment: Hollywood and the Cultural Reconstruction of Defeated Japan, 1945-1952* (Phd Thesis, University of Wisconsin: Madison, 2004)
- Ledoux, Trish *The Complete Anime Guide: Japanese Animation Film Directory and Resource Guide* (N.p.: Tiger Mountain Pr, 1997)

Levi, Antonia *Samurai From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation* (N.p.: Open Court, 1998)

Moran, Elizabeth. *Speed Racer: The Official 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Guide*, (New York, New York: Hyperion, 1997)

Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (N.p.: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Ryfle, Steve. "Godzilla's Footprint," DVD booklet from *Gojira: The Original Japanese Masterpiece*, Classic Video, 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Riverside Shakespeare: Second Edition* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1997)

Shapiro, Jerome F. *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (N.p.: Routledge, 2002)

Shibusawa, Naoko. *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000)

Smelser, Marshall. *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815*, The New American Nation Series (New York: Haper & Row, 1968), 324

Tatsumi, Takayuki. *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006)

Tobin, Joseph ed. *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004)

Tsutsui, William. *Godzilla On My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004)

VanDeMark, Brian. *Pandora's Keepers: Nine Men and the Atomic Bomb* (Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Company, 2003)

### **Films:**

*Akira*. Dir. Katsuhiro Otomo, Pioneer Entertainment, 2001.

*The Atomic Café*. Dir. Kevin and Pierce Rafferty, New Video Group, 2002.

*Godzilla: King of the Monsters!* Dir. Ishiro Honda and Terry O. Morse. Toho Film Co. Ltd, 2006

*Gojira*. Dir. Ishiro Honda. Toho Film Co. Ltd, 2006

*Speed Racer*. Dir. Tatsuo Yoshida and Peter Fernandez. FHE Entertainment, 2003

*THEM!* Dir. Gordon Douglas. Warner Home Video, 2002.

### **Journal Articles:**

Kim, Thomas W. "Being Modern: The Circulation of Oriental Objects," *American Quarterly* (June 2006)

Napier, Susan J. "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster From Godzilla to Akira," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 1993)

Noriega, Chon. "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When 'THEM!' is U.S." *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987)

### **Websites:**

"Anime." *Merriam Webster* website: Aug. 5, 2008  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anime>

Cohen, Charles L. Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, homepage. Apr. 22, 2009  
<http://history.wisc.edu/cohen>

Emperor Hirohito's Official Speech to the Japanese Populace Declaring Surrender, Aug. 15, 1945. Aug. 6, 2008  
<http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~jobrien/reference/ob101.html>

Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History," *The National Interest* (Summer 1989) Aug. 5, 2008  
<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>

*Internet Movie Database* Aug. 5, 2008 <http://www.imdb.com>

Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) website, Aug. 5, 2008 <http://www.mod.go.jp/gsd/>

Jim Breen's WWWJDIC, Dec. 16, 2008 <http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/cgi-bin/wwwjdic.cgi?1C>

*New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*. 2002. Dec. 16, 2008  
<http://www.bartley.com/59/3/thosewhocann.html>

The Nuclear Information Project: "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons [NPT]"  
Apr. 22, 2009 <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt>

Rosenberg, Emily S. et al. "Foreign Relations" *The Oxford Companion to United States History*.  
Paul S. Boyer ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001) Oxford Reference Online Apr. 22, 2009.  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/entry.html?subview=main&entry=t119.e0556-s0005>

Speed Racer Official Website. Aug. 6, 2008 <http://www.speedracer.com/>