

Movie Mutants Give A Face To Our Nuclear Fears

by Neda Ulaby

March 30, 2011

Morning Edition



Embassy Pictures/Getty Images

Radioactive monster Godzilla stomps through a city and eats a commuter train in a scene from *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, directed by Ishiro Honda and Terry O. Morse. The 1956 film was a re-edited version of the 1954 Japanese film *Gojira*, directed by Honda.

March 30, 2011

Within the first few days of the threefold tragedy in Japan, Wikipedia trend-spotters noticed a startling spike in searches ... for "Godzilla."

It feels callow to be discussing popular culture at a moment when bodies are still being pulled from rubble, says Grady Hendrix, co-director of the New York Asian Film Festival. "The Godzilla movies don't have anything to do with what's going on now," he says.

Radiation needed a face in the 1950s ... and the monster in 'Godzilla' provided a horrible external representation of what that could be.

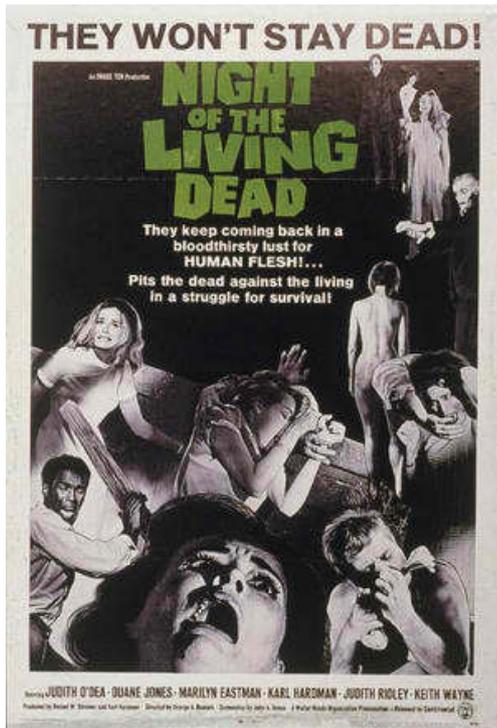
- Historian Bill Tsutsui

But Hendrix admits that those Wikipedia searches prove how much our perception of the world is shaped by cultural images. Still, he takes exception to the idea that you can infer something about Japan's current catastrophe from a movie made almost 57 years ago.

Sure, he says, the Godzilla films *are* about radiation — from 1945, when the U.S. bombed Japan, twice. "And," he adds, "what happened in 1954, when the U.S. detonated a thermonuclear device in the Bikini Atoll and irradiated a Japanese fishing boat."

Hendrix says that incident was the main inspiration for the wave of Japanese mutant monster movies that followed.

But, notes historian Bill Tsutsui, Japan hardly has a corner on the genre. He points to *Them!*, a 1954 American movie about irradiated 8-foot-long ants that came out the same year as *Godzilla*.



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The ghouls in the 1968 zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* were a byproduct of radioactive contamination.

"Radiation needed a face in the 1950s, and the giant ants in *Them!* and the monster in *Godzilla* provided a horrible external representation of what that could be," Tsutsui says.

Tsutsui says people didn't understand radiation in the 1950s. So the U.S. government enlisted Disney to assuage their concerns with the film *Our Friend the Atom*. Still, fears about radiation helped launch an entire genre of horror into the next decade.

The zombies in 1968's *Night of the Living Dead* (called "ghouls" in the movie) were a byproduct of radiation. Lisa Lynch, a professor who studies nuclear culture, says until the end of the Cold War, fears about mutation were conflated with fears of radiation. Then, fear of global pandemics started

to overshadow concern about radiation in popular culture.

"So all of a sudden you have these mutation movies," she says, citing films ranging from *Outbreak* (1995) to *28 Days Later* (2002). "But they're not radiation produced. They're mutated viruses."

Lynch says nuclear fears went in another direction, first about nuclear power plant accidents — like in *Silkwood* (1983) or *The China Syndrome* (1979). Today, the popular imagination is more concerned with acts of deliberate terrorism. "Hijacking nuclear power plants, stealing nuclear power plants, stealing fissionable material, dirty bombs," Lynch explains.

But there's also something about this moment that seems to resonate with a more heroic side of radiation — one imbued with midcentury optimism. Broadway's most-discussed musical, after all, begins with a radioactive spider bite. And one of the summer's most anticipated action movies is also based on a Marvel comics superhero whose powers come from radiation — Captain America.

Hollywood is even remaking *Akira*, a Japanese anime classic set in a nightmarish post-apocalyptic Tokyo after a nuclear explosion. (The Warner Bros. version is said to take place in New York.) Some of the characters are children given strange powers by radiation. Unlike Spider-Man or Captain America, they're victims.

"When you make a movie, you're able to say, 'Hey, here's something I'm scared of. Let me see what it's like,'" says Grady Hendrix. "When I visualize it, does it make me more scared? Less scared?"

Whatever it is, Hendrix says, he hopes Wikipedia searches for *Godzilla* don't distract us from real human suffering and real human costs in Japan.