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THE BLACKNESS OF THE BEAST: GODZILLA IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

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ALEX ADAMS
alexthomasadams@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: The critical consensus around Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Godzilla* is widely known: the creature is a metaphor for Japan's mid-century national traumas, including firebombing, nuclear violence, and Japan's own war crimes. This essay examines Gareth Edwards' 2014 *Godzilla*, arguing that the film both draws heavily on the original's visual darkness (both films feature sequences of night-time destruction and chiaroscuro contrast, for instance) and substantially modifies the conceptual commitments of the creature. Where Honda's original was a warning about the perils of unfettered political sovereignty – the horrors unleashed by modern war – Edwards' reboot emphasizes the demonstration of Godzilla's worldly authority over all other monsters. No longer a critique of the excesses of power, the contemporary incarnation of Godzilla is an embodiment of the natural rightness of violently enforced hierarchy. Visual darkness is key to this political shift: *Godzilla* 2014 uses darkness to reference the visual style of the original and to emphasize its 'serious' take on the monster genre, to be sure, but what is more, its commitment to a 'gritty', desaturated, 'realist' war-movie visual style aligns the remake with a set of drastically different political positions to those of the original.

RESUMEN: El consenso crítico en torno al *Godzilla* de Ishiro Honda de 1954 es ampliamente conocido: la criatura es una metáfora de los traumas nacionales japoneses de mediados de siglo, incluidos los bombardeos, la violencia nuclear y los propios crímenes de guerra de Japón. Este ensayo examina el *Godzilla* de Gareth Edwards de 2014, argumentando que si bien la película se basa en gran medida en la oscuridad visual del original (ambas películas cuentan con secuencias de destrucción nocturna y contraste claroscuro, por ejemplo),

> modifica sustancialmente los compromisos conceptuales de la criatura. Mientras que el original de Honda era una advertencia sobre los peligros de la soberanía política sin límites—los horrores desatados por la guerra moderna—, la adaptación de Edwards hace hincapié en la demostración de la autoridad mundana de Godzilla sobre todos los demás monstruos. La encarnación contemporánea de Godzilla ya no es una crítica de los excesos del poder, sino una encarnación de la legitimidad natural de la jerarquía impuesta violentamente. La oscuridad visual es clave en este cambio político: *Godzilla* 2014 sin duda utiliza la oscuridad para hacer referencia al estilo visual del original y para enfatizar su visión «seria» del género de monstruos, pero por añadidura su compromiso con un estilo visual de película de guerra «descarnado», desaturado y «realista» alinea la adaptación con un conjunto de posiciones políticas drásticamente diferentes de las del original.

The dominant reading of Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Godzilla* is widely known: the creature is a bold, unmistakable metaphor for Japan's mid-century national traumas, including the firebombing and nuclear violence dealt out by the US Air Force, and, more obliquely perhaps, Japan's own history of perpetrating war crimes. This essay examines Gareth Edwards' 2014 US reboot *Godzilla*, arguing that the later film both draws heavily on the original's visual darkness, appropriating its sense of 'seriousness', at the same time that it substantially modifies the conceptual commitments of the eponymous creature. Where Honda's original was a warning about the perils of unfettered political sovereignty – the unimaginable, monstrous horrors unleashed by total warfare – Edwards' reboot emphasizes the demonstration of Godzilla's worldly authority over all other creatures, celebrating the monster for its fearsome ability to maintain natural hierarchy. No longer a critique of the excesses of power, the contemporary incarnation of Godzilla is an embodiment of the natural rightness of violently enforced hierarchy. Visual darkness is key to this political shift: *Godzilla* 2014 uses darkness to reference the visual style of the original and to emphasize its 'serious' take on the monster genre, to be sure, but what is more, its commitment to a 'gritty', 'realist' war-movie visual style expresses a great deal about the politics of Godzilla's twenty-first century reincarnation.

GODZILLA 1954: EMPEROR OF A WORLD OF ASHES

In "Mammoth," the 74th essay in *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno writes that "the repulsive humoristic craze" for monster spectacle – his examples are a recently excavated dinosaur specimen, the Loch Ness Monster, and *King Kong* (1933) – represents

> collective projections of the monstrous total State. People prepare themselves for its terrors by familiarizing themselves with gigantic images. In its absurd readiness to accept these, impotently prostrate humanity tries desperately to assimilate to experience what defies all experience. (123)

For Adorno, images of gigantic monsters are images of total power, a kind of displaced (and, for him, disreputable) political sublime which translates the unspeakable horror of unfettered sovereign force into a digestible, attractive image. Adorno's postwar context is essential here; in many ways, *Minima Moralia* is an attempt to make sense of a world that could produce the sustained violence seen the world over in the Second World War. Because we are unable to fully grasp the terrifying human consequences of this form of power which can not only wage mechanised war but can unleash atomic destruction and consign millions of people to extermination camps, Adorno claims, we must substitute our understanding of this terror with images of grotesque (yet, for Adorno, absurd) beasts.

Though Adorno writes dismissively, interpreting monster movies as trivializations of the serious matter of power, *Godzilla* 1954 in fact readily fits into the paradigm that Adorno sets out here. Godzilla's rampage in Tokyo is widely read as a cathartic parable of warfare that obliquely yet unmistakably references the aerial bombardment suffered across Japan in the closing months of the Pacific War, most prominently in the two uses of atomic weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki and more broadly in the blanket firebombing of many Japanese cities. The movie, then, directly takes on the task of symbolically narrativizing historic horrors that are difficult either to fully comprehend or directly represent, using an image of a dreadful monster as a way into a serious exploration of the human cost and existential terror of total war. Susan Napier, for example, writes that Godzilla is "a displaced version of the atomic bomb" (10). For Kerry Brougher, Godzilla represents "the inconceivable destructiveness of the new atomic age" and "the fear of

that which cannot be seen, the fear of radiation, of the possibility of sickness and death descending unseen" (14). Godzilla, as Mark Bould succinctly puts it, "is the bomb" (27). In fact, it doesn't require a great deal of interpretive labour to arrive at this conclusion about *Godzilla*, given both that it is one of the most widely-known uses of cinematic allegory and that this metaphorical resonance was boldly and deliberately encoded into the film by its creative team. Director Ishiro Honda, for instance, remarked that he wanted his monster "to possess the terrifying characteristics of an atomic bomb" (cited in Ryfle and Godziszewski, 85) and that "Godzilla represents the frightfulness of nuclear weapons" (speaking in Anon). It is not merely Godzilla's destructive power that is redolent of nuclear destruction; its blackened skin, for instance, was deliberately designed to echo the thick keloid scarring that marked many survivors of the atomic attacks.

Yoshikuni Igarashi, however, points out that critical attention to the nuclear metaphoricity of *Godzilla* does not exhaust the interpretive options available to its viewers, and that other notions of political sovereignty are pertinent to *Godzilla*. As well as being alarmingly blunt symbols of American military might, the atomic attacks on Japan have long been associated with the power of Emperor Hirohito, the autocrat who ruled Japan from 1926 until his death in 1989. Historically, the atomic detonations over Hiroshima and Nagasaki are considered the final push that forced Hirohito to concede defeat, a decision only he had the power to make and that he had steadfastly refused to countenance in the months leading up to the use of the bombs. "The bomb and Hirohito mirror each other in their singular political impact," Igarashi writes. "The destructive power of the bomb brought peace to the Pacific, while the autocratic power of the emperor was the key to that peace" (24-25). A full account of the complementarity between the two forms of supreme authority at play is beyond my scope here; suffice it to say that Hirohito's power – the power of a man treated as though his authority was literally divine – was central to the Japanese military's relentless commitment to pursuing war well beyond the point at which Japan could hope to prevail in the Pacific. Godzilla's cinematic scourging of Japan is not, then, simply a symbolic replaying of Japan's near-total immolation in the Second World War. It is also a critique of the extremes to which Japan was pushed by Emperor Hirohito and the ultranationalist military-political establishment that pursued suicidal war policies in his name. David Deamer writes that *Godzilla* condemns "that which actioned the death marches, industrial slavery, sexual slavery,

cannibalism, vivisection and the mutilation of prisoners of war and the peoples of subject nations", that the movie "captures, and puts before a tribunal, the monstrous force of the Japanese militaristic regime" (34). In late 1945, Japan hung between two extreme and murderous forms of political sovereignty: the overwhelming air power of the United States and the single-minded fascism of the Japanese state, both of which can be read in Godzilla's merciless onslaught against the physical fabric of Tokyo and the Japanese population who inhabited it. What is more, the movie stands in uneasy anticipation of future nuclear destruction; in its closing moments, protagonist Dr Yamane gloomily warns that the nuclear age may yet awaken more Godzillas. In short, *Godzilla* may be best known as a fantastical memorialization of the American use of nuclear weapons against Japan, but it articulates a multivocal critique of total power.

The film's many overlapping political valences are closely connected to its expressive use of light and shade. Like the film noir that was so prominent a feature of Hollywood film production at the time, and indeed like noir's major stylistic antecedent German expressionism, *Godzilla* makes extensive use of chiaroscuro contrast between bright light and deep blackness in its most visually intense scenes. Noir's themes, such as entrapment, manipulation, and doomed encounters with a cursed past, are often relentlessly pessimistic and bleak (Sanders 92), and the use of stark monochrome contrast (in addition to noir's characteristically offbeat frame compositions) is often central to establishing this gloomy psychological ambience; in films noirs, that is to say, the juxtaposition of stark white highlights and deep black voids is often used to visualize psychological horror and uncertainty [Figures 1, 2]. Expressionism, too, is defined in part by "the use of stylization to indicate the state of the mind viewing the world" (Coates 156). Expressionist cinema builds its sense of horror out of its use of fantastical aesthetic techniques, chief among them chiaroscuro contrast and the embodiment of political tendencies into concrete monsters [Figures 3, 4]. Crucially, scholars of expressionism such as Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner have connected its labyrinthine thematic explorations of despair and horror to its cultural and historical context, arguing that the violence and darkness of the movies in some way prefigures or prophecies the mid-century horrors perpetrated by Nazi fascism. Werner Sudendorf, for example, writes that German cinema "transformed speculations about an unsettled present and an uncertain future into images of a frightening, unknown territory of supernatural powers" (93). Noir, too,

is obsessed with the vulnerability of its characters to the dire consequences of a horrifying recent past; Alain Silver and James Ursini write that "the past to a noir protagonist is no fleeting phantom. It is real and tangible and menacing" (15). Both cinemas, that is, use their characteristic visual techniques to obliquely explore their horrifying historical contexts, whether past, present, or future.

Honda's use of chiaroscuro lighting in his genre-founding monster horror has similar effects, effects which are especially pronounced in *Godzilla*'s central scenes of night-time rampage [Figures 5, 6]. In these sequences, the creature is eerily highlighted by the splashes of white light emanating from towering flames, sudden blasts of electricity, and the poison fire of its own radioactive breath. These special effects scenes, which fuse psychologically expressive lighting, pioneering creature effects, and realistic representations of a burning city, are especially evocative both of wartime destruction and of psychological horror. The movie's scenes of destruction simultaneously recall and explore the nightmare of the recent past and prophesy a hopeless future in which further destruction returns to Tokyo. Like expressionism and noir, then, *Godzilla* transubstantiates historical horrors into a visual and narrative nightmare. It is not only monstrosity that is crucial to this aesthetic alchemy: the visual technique of chiaroscuro, too, is indispensable.

DARKNESS AND SERIOUSNESS

The use of chiaroscuro in *Godzilla*, then, is an invocation not only of the visual style of noir and expressionism but, in addition, is a means of drawing on their thematic gravity and cultural capital. *Godzilla* is positioned as a serious piece of artistic work, that is, through its visual reference to cinematic traditions that were noted both for their tonal darkness and their intellectual respectability. Godzilla's first sequel, *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), was also notable for its high-contrast special effects scenes which fused monster fantasy with visually realistic scenes of urban destruction [Figures 7, 8]. Within ten years, however, Godzilla was humanity's champion rather than our bane, teaming up with fire-hawk Rodan and magical lepidopteran Mothra to protect the world from a three-headed space hydra in *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964). In the sequels that followed, Godzilla movies became family entertainment, with increasingly baroque storylines, more outlandish monster adversaries, and—not insignificantly—far brighter colour palettes. Godzilla's first American

incarnation, for instance, was a children's cartoon produced by Hanna Barbera in 1978-1979, and it was notable both for its light-hearted tone and its bold, vivid use of colour, in which Godzilla was not black or grey but rather a bright pastel green. The tension between playful, rock'em-sock'em silliness and straight-faced, cerebral seriousness is perhaps the constitutive dynamic of the Godzilla franchise, and many commentators are quick to seize upon it in order to establish a sort of class hierarchy among the films. Avowed Godzilla fan and scholar William Tsutsui, for instance, emphasizes that the original *Godzilla* is "a thoughtful, sophisticated and timely classic of world cinema" which "engaged with the most profound, chilling, and contentious issues of the day" (38), but the remainder of his book *Godzilla on My Mind* (2004) repeatedly and explicitly dismisses the idea that the broader franchise has anything of substance to say. The later films of the Showa period (the fourteen sequels made between 1955 and 1975) are, he insists, "simplistic, preachy, didactic, and ultimately insubstantial" (61), and the political and conceptual commitments of the Heisei films (the eight Godzilla movies made between 1984 and 1995) are "diluted and shallow, affording only confused and preachy messages" (66). Even some of Godzilla's most prominent defenders, then, uphold a clear distinction between the films that are supposed to be embraced as serious and those that are to be condemned as trivial.

Godzilla's periodic reboots have often reflected this tension. The franchise has re-emerged from hiatuses on several occasions, and the attempts to restart the series have very often been characterized by a conspicuous rejection of the series' light-hearted elements and a 'return' to the visual and thematic 'seriousness' of the original movie. This gesture has been particularly visible in the ways that the filmmakers use colour. *The Return of Godzilla* (1984), *Godzilla 2000* (1999), *Godzilla* (2014), *Shin Godzilla* (2016) and *Godzilla Minus One* (2023) have all, in various ways and to different degrees, used visual austerity and muted, black-heavy colour palettes to signal their commitment to the "authentic" Godzilla and their rejection of the more light-hearted, playful films that, for some audiences, dilute the impact of the more serious Godzilla movies. Consider the period from 2021 to 2024, for example. 2021's *Godzilla Vs Kong* was a bombastic, fun-first spectacle with little in the way of explicit political commitments, and it was soaked in neon tones of blue, pink, and purple that are often referred to by fan communities as "bisexual lighting" (Adams) [Figure 9]. Its follow-up *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* (2024) was, if anything, even thematically wilder, and its colour palette was even

more oversaturated with pinks, blues, reds, and yellows; Godzilla itself developed a lurid pink colouration to signify its overcharged power in this movie, and director Adam Wingard said that his inspirations for the film's vibrant palette included the brightly coloured toy aisles of his youth (Neuwirth) [Figure 10]. These two American productions, however, could not have been more tonally and visually different from the feature films that Toho, the Japanese studio who own Godzilla, were producing in this period. *Godzilla Minus One* (2023) was a sober, downbeat iteration of the Godzilla story that explicitly engaged ideas of wartime trauma (Jones and Trefalt). Noted for its thematic engagement with postwar reconstruction and the verisimilitude of its Oscar-winning effects, the movie was rereleased in 2024 in black and white as *Godzilla Minus One Minus Colour*. [Figure 11]. *Shin Godzilla*, too, which was celebrated for its explicit engagement with the Japanese government's inadequate response to the Fukushima disaster of 2011 (Bivens 71), was rereleased in black and white in 2024 as *Shin Godzilla Orthochromatic* [Figure 12]. These black and white reissues self-consciously position the films as serious and cinematic, implicitly contrasted with the pulpier, less intellectually reputable visual splendour of the American series. The implicit class hierarchy of Godzilla movies, then, is legible in this use of colour. The films that were rereleased in black and white are positioned as 'serious', as culturally respectable, in express contrast to the colourful frivolity of the later MonsterVerse films, which, while enormously popular, were not well received by critics.

"Seriousness," after all, is no more natural or objective an aesthetic effect than any other (Baspehlivan & Wedderburn), and positioning cultural texts or forms of political discourse as serious or unserious is a key way in which distinctions are drawn between legitimate and illegitimate forms of textual production (Berlant 12). What is more, "seriousness" is just as stylised and artificial as any other aesthetic register, and a set of deliberate aesthetic choices, the use of colour among them, are key to constructing it. Monochrome may have been the dominant option in 1954,[1] but its deliberate use in the age of colour images can signal the intent to be perceived as

[1] The first Japanese colour film was Keisuke Kinoshita's *Carmen Comes Home* (1951). Colour remained an expensive rarity in Japanese cinema for several years, however; Toho studios first used colour for Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai Trilogy* (1954-1956), and the first monster movie they made in colour was Honda's *Rodan: Giant Monster of the Sky* (1956).

"grown-up," as legitimately cinematic, as non-frivolous. Realism, too, is an effect constructed through a range of cinematic techniques that have been conventionally associated not only with seriousness but also with historical significance and cultural value—or rather, with cultural capital. Visual austerity or restraint, after all, is no less deliberate a choice than excess or spectacle, and it has just as clear a set of connotations. Significantly, realism has an especial claim to intellectual respectability. "Realism has been the dominant discourse on film since the 1910s in both criticism and scholarship," writes Aaron Gerow, arguing that realism's intellectual dominance is the reason that the more light-hearted Godzilla movies have been seen as "second-rung cinematic citizens" (79). Identifying "serious" films through their embrace of certain visual and narrative techniques was a way, he continues, of "differentiating a culturally acceptable cinema from one that was not" (68). Godzilla's more lightweight movies had, after the critical panning of Roland Emmerich's 1998 *Godzilla* and the box office disappointment of 2004's camp extravaganza *Godzilla: Final Wars*, cemented its reputation among some audiences as a shallow, unimportant piece of pop culture trash. When Legendary pictures came to reboot the franchise, then, positioning the new series of films as serious was key to positioning them as a valuable, worthwhile, and respectable endeavour. The remainder of this essay reads the use of visual austerity and high-contrast darkness and light in *Godzilla* 2014, the first movie in the ongoing American MonsterVerse franchise, which, unlike its later sequels, was very much invested in an aesthetic of seriousness. The movie also engages with the theme of sovereignty and power in ways that are remarkably different to the original *Godzilla*.

GODZILLA 2014: EMPEROR OF A WORLD OF MONSTERS

Seriousness has been signalled in myriad different ways across the history of cinema. As we have seen, in 1954, Ishiro Honda drew on the iconographies and visual styles of American film noir and German expressionism in order to signal the artistic seriousness of his work. When Legendary Pictures rebooted Godzilla in 2014, director Gareth Edwards drew on the visual iconography and representational conventions of the post-9/11 war movie, perhaps the genre with the greatest claim to "seriousness" in this period due to its engagement with historically important yet politically sensitive events, its (often very explicit) representations of violence, and its embrace of self-

consciously "weighty" themes such as trauma, guilt, and suffering. Diegetically, *Godzilla*'s lead character, Ford Brody, is a military explosive ordnance disposal technician whose professional identity enables him to get close to the action, and—more broadly speaking—the story follows the movements and activities of the US military as they struggle to confront the story's monsters. Key scenes in Brody's character arc replay conventional moments in the war movie genre: in his first appearance, he disembarks a military plane and a colleague tells him that returning to civilian life is "the one thing they don't train you for," and Brody's team's entry into San Francisco—one of the film's major visual setpieces – features the group of soldiers skydiving in a military manoeuvre referred to as a "halo insertion." In terms of visual style, too, the film embraces the textual strategies of the war genre in order to emphasize its grounded, "realistic" take on the monster movie genre. Perhaps unsurprisingly, visual darkness is key.

Characterized by the use of multiple visual styles that aim to establish a sense of "realism;" the contemporary war film has several distinguishing features. Roger Luckhurst itemizes what he describes as the "iconography of contemporary asymmetric warfare" to be found in many post-9/11 war films about the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan: "dusty checkpoints, handheld cameras, choppy edits, inscrutable Arabs, humvees, IEDs, hooded prisoners, queasy torture scenes, vague liberal angst" (717). Though *Godzilla* may not feature these explicit signifiers of overseas warfare, many aspects of the visual style used by post-9/11 war films are nevertheless clearly incorporated into its visual and narrative style. Crucially, though it gestures towards one or two aesthetic techniques, Luckhurst's list does not account for the range of ways that the war genre developed a broad stylistic and thematic arsenal aimed at building a sense of 'the real'. Writing that post-9/11 war films such as *Act of Valor* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) "seem to embody a concerted need to convince the audience of their authenticity," Terence McSweeney observes that a broad range of visual techniques are used to achieve this reality effect (72). *Act of Valor*, for instance, though its story is characterized by bombastic artifice, stars active duty personnel and uses live ammunition in its scenes of violence, providing the audience with the spectacle of real weapons being fired by real soldiers on-screen; *Zero Dark Thirty* narrativizes real events and claims to be based on real accounts, and is characterized by a visual austerity that culminates in an extended, very dark sequence of a night raid that uses naturalistic lighting.

More broadly, realism and authenticity were signalled by an increase in "grittiness," in narrative harshness, horror, cruelty, and violence that was accompanied by visual techniques that refused stylization in favour of a more pared-back aesthetic style. Writing that many filmmakers of this genre "strive for a realistic and objective view, one close to that of documentary films" (224), Thomas Ærvold Bjerre observes that the political effects of these attempts to make war movies more "realistic" can be just as easily propagandistic and gung-ho as they can be part of attempts to critically expose the horrors of war; underpinning this position is the idea that these aesthetic techniques do in fact enable war films to show their audiences what war is "really" like. This early 21st-century trend of using visual restraint and thematic darkness to signal a sense of authenticity was not limited to the war film, however. Science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres quickly appropriated it in order to lend their texts the flavour of 'seriousness'. The cartoonish swashbuckling of James Bond, for example, was rebooted with an emphasis on visual (if not narrative) realism and darkness in *Casino Royale* (2006) and its sequels; where Batman had been a jovial caped crusader in his earlier filmic incarnations (notably the 1960s TV serial and 1997's *Batman and Robin*), his representation in Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012) was considerably darker and more violent, focusing on lose-lose moral dilemmas and ruthless, powerful villains who could not be bargained with. Fantasy fiction and quality TV, too, embraced thematic and visual darkness by embracing a style that became informally known as "grimdark." Such cultural productions often self-consciously positioned themselves as "serious" or "adult" by emphasizing excessive or taboo subject matter or activities, such as violence (often extreme violence such as torture, executions, or sexual assault), nudity, swearing, cruelty, criminality, suffering, betrayal, and so on. *Game of Thrones* and its parent novels, George R R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* cycle, were often-cited examples, especially due to the ways in which the violent content was credited with making the show more "authentic," but productions such as *Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk Empire*, too, were often discussed under this umbrella. In a ferociously critical essay, Sebastian Milbank writes that the "fast metastasizing cultural meme of Grimdark" emerged "as a way to bring 'realism' to fantasy mediaeval settings"—that is, that the emphasis on suffering and pain in such texts originated in a desire to reveal the harshnesses of life glossed over by the conventional romantic traditions of genre fiction. In short, the implicit idea in the darker

versions of contemporary fantasy and the iconography of modern war movies is that thematic and visual darkness is more 'true to life'. Though it avoids the more gruesome excesses of the grimdark trend, *Godzilla*, too, embraced a "grounded" aesthetic by emphasizing visual and thematic darkness and central aspects of the counterinsurgency aesthetics found in contemporary war film.

The most significant visual technique that *Godzilla* 2014 appropriates from the post-9/11 war movie is the use of naturalistic lighting. Throughout the movie, many key scenes take place at night, underground, or in overcast weather, resulting in a very dark visual palette. Naturalistic lighting is often used to expressive effect in the post-9/11 war movie. Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is a particularly vivid case in point, as its climactic sequence, in which SEAL Team Six raid Osama Bin Laden's Abbottobad compound, was shot using natural light [Figures 13, 14]. As a consequence, the frame is very often almost entirely black, featuring obscure figures barely illuminated by ambient light or by the brief flashes of flame associated with silenced gunfire or the percussive breaching of locked gates. As the soldiers venture further into the murky gloom of Bin Laden's stronghold, their weapons provide brief chiaroscuro illuminations. Theme, then, is expressed through the use of naturalistic lighting, as the soldiers penetrate to the 'heart of darkness' represented by Bin Laden's refuge. Other texts, such as *Act of Valor* (2012) [Figure 15] and *American Sniper* (2014) [Figure 16] use similar techniques at key points in their narratives, articulating the darkness of their themes through the use of naturalistic low-key lighting.

Godzilla 2014 uses low-key lighting throughout its most atmospheric and expressive scenes. The film's narrative, which traces the emergence of two new, mysterious species of megafauna, is thematically preoccupied with the revelation of ancient secrets and the search for knowledge about obscure, hidden creatures and events. This central theme is bolstered by the use of blacks and greys which cloak the characters—human and creature alike—in evocative shadow. At the film's opening, monster hunters Monarch examine a gloomy subterranean tunnel filled with strange, unintelligible remains [Figure 17]. When the MUTOs (Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms)—colossal prehistoric arachnids bent on reproducing and swarming the world with their offspring—emerge, they do so at night, and many of the scenes that track their progress across the American continent use naturalistic lighting, alongside the bass-heavy, eerie creaks of the creatures, to emphasize their size and their spooky,

malevolent elegance [Figures 18, 19]. In Honda's original *Godzilla*, the titular creature is shown as an enigmatic, unexplainable force of nature, often cloaked in a deep, impenetrable blackness. *Godzilla* 2014 self-consciously replicates this strategy in order to reveal its creatures as majestic, enormous, and threatening. Their sparing use by the filmmakers, too—the monsters have very limited screen time, which was a major complaint among certain spectacle-hungry elements of the film's audience—is an example of an aesthetic restraint that was conspicuously missing from some of Godzilla's wackier escapades; in conjunction with the thematic and visual darkness, this restrained use of monster effects is made all the more powerful.

The film is characterized, however, by *multiple* layers of visual reference. When Brody's unit enter San Francisco, their progress through the darkened city is shot in a way that evokes the post-9/11 war movie. The camera moves fluidly alongside and among the soldiers, frequent cuts generating cinematic momentum; the soldiers clank and rattle, their heavy-duty military gear cutting the familiar silhouette of the contemporary elite soldier [Figure 20]. Like *Zero Dark Thirty*'s cast of marines penetrating into the gloom of Bin Laden's compound, Brody's unit enter a San Francisco rendered pitch-black by the electromagnetic pulses emitted by the MUTOs. The naturalistic lighting used in both the effects shots and the more kinetically filmed shots following the soldiers acts as a connective element, fusing the representation of the monsters as mysterious, godlike titans with the more realist representation of the soldiers scrambling through the devastated city. Referring both to *Godzilla* 1954—and by proxy to its film noir and expressionist visual interlocutors—and to the visual strategies of the post-9/11 war movie, *Godzilla* 2014 builds up a multi-layered effect of "seriousness"—that is, cultural respectability—that expressly positions the film both as a legitimate inheritor of the cultural kudos of Honda's *Godzilla* and as radically different to the many Godzillas that are considered, by some, to be second class cinematic citizens.

Chiaroscuro light is also central to *Godzilla* 2014's most powerful scenes. Almost two hours into the film, Godzilla finally uses its atomic breath against the MUTOs. This moment, absolutely central to audience expectations of any Godzilla movie, is the object of significant anticipation, and when it finally arrives the brightness is dazzling in comparison to the deep greys and blacks that have characterized the prior scenes of monster brawling. When Godzilla finally executes the MUTOs, its atomic fire is a stark, lurid white

slashing through the frame. Visually invoking the chiaroscuro of *Godzilla* 1954, Godzilla's killing of the two MUTOs also mirrors the new bodily cruelty that is central to the post-9/11 war movie. Where prior versions of Godzilla have often chased away their adversaries or dispatched them in bursts of pyrotechnics, MonsterVerse Godzilla's first kills are viscerally brutal: Godzilla impales the first MUTO on the wreckage of a skyscraper, and breathes flame into the mouth of the second, savagely decapitating it by drowning it in fire. Not only does this visual moment refer back to the intellectual respectability of Honda's first *Godzilla:* it also gestures to its contemporary context by bringing Godzilla into its contemporary grimdark moment.

There is also a richer thematic link between *Godzilla* and its war movie contemporaries. Politically, the post-9/11 war movie functions as sledgehammer propaganda for the American wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere (Der Derian). The war films I have referenced here are vivid examples: one reviewer of *Act of Valor* describes it as a "no-holds-barred recruiting video" (Ebiri); *American Sniper* is a hagiography based on the autobiography of its central character, the most prolific killer in American military history, who referred to his many Muslim victims as "savages" and "despicable evil" (Kyle et al. 4); *Zero Dark Thirty* has raised a sustained controversy over the way in which its narrative represents the CIA torture programme as effective and necessary, and thereby justifies that torture system (Adams 145-151). The genre, that is, has something to say about power, and it is as directly antithetical to the political commitments of *Godzilla* 1954 as can be imagined. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are frequently shown as justified civilizational battles against an irredeemably evil foe; no matter how morally compromised the conduct of the war may be in these movies, the political task of the United States is fundamentally unquestionable and the moral right of the US to wage war anywhere on the planet at will is a fundamentally necessary coordinate of the films' conceptual imaginary.

Godzilla, too, is a global hegemon whose colossal, city-flattening violence is shown as justified and liberatory. Godzilla's task in this movie is to bring the two MUTOs back in line, as their emergence from hibernation brings destruction to Hawaii, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, and their mating threatens to overwhelm the planet with their thousands of offspring. After chasing the pair across the globe, Godzilla destroys both creatures, triumphantly asserting its dominance through species extermination. At the film's conclusion, the human leads of the story are sentimentally reunited amongst the

wreckage of city, and in the background a huge screen shows footage of Godzilla returning to the sea captioned with the phrase "King of the Monsters—saviour of our city?" Much earlier in the film, Dr Serizawa, the head of the suggestively-named monster-hunting organisation Monarch, describes Godzilla as "an ancient alpha predator" whose unmatched physical power brings balance to the Earth's natural systems. "Nature has an order," he continues. "A power to restore balance. I believe he is that power." His colleague Dr Graham also describes Godzilla as "the top of a primordial ecosystem—a god, for all intents and purposes."

Godzilla's power, that is, is expressly shown as overwhelmingly superior to, and uncontrollable by, any human force. The military are, at all points, powerless to stop either the MUTOs or Godzilla with any conventional weapons, and their plan to destroy the monsters backfires when the nuclear warhead they plan to use to lure the creatures into the ocean is stolen by the MUTOs so that they can feed off its radiation. Describing his counterplan, Serizawa says that "the arrogance of man is thinking nature is in our control, and not the other way around." He concludes that the only way to resolve the issue is to "let them fight." Godzilla's power, then, represents a transcendent and inhuman sovereign force: like the Hirohito of myth, he is a god incarnate, an image of Adorno's monstrous total State, an invincible ruler with total, planetary authority. Unlike Honda's Godzilla, however, the MonsterVerse Godzilla is a king whose supra-natural reign is—however fearsome—embraced as legitimate by the film's human cast, especially as it rescues the US from destruction (Barr 147). Later MonsterVerse films develop this hierarchical mythology far more explicitly. In the final shot of 2019's *King of the Monsters*, many monsters bow before Godzilla after it has destroyed rival alpha King Ghidorah; in the two films that Godzilla co-headlines with its major rival Kong—2021's *Godzilla Vs Kong* and 2024's *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*—Godzilla wrestles for dominion over the surface of the Earth, first against Kong and second alongside Kong against a malevolent army of apes who plan to colonize the planet. Serizawa, that is, *undersells* Godzilla's might: Godzilla's power is not merely a matter of *balance*. By repeatedly physically shattering its enemies when they refuse to act according to its order, Godzilla exercises its power in the service of maintaining *hierarchy*. To return to Adorno: where *Godzilla* 1954 showed untamed sovereign force as the ultimate monstrosity, *Godzilla* 2014 shows the monstrous State as an immortal, indestructible hero.

Fan communities have often pointed out that *Godzilla* 2014 features a tremendously sympathetic representation of the US military. YouTuber David J Bradley, for instance, notes that the military characters are stoic under pressure, calmly competent, and remorselessly committed to the resolution of the film's dramatic problems. Like other Hollywood representations of the US military, the soldiers in *Godzilla* 2014 are "hyper competent, totally badass, and most importantly, relatable. They're cool and fun and always doing the right thing." Elsewhere, Steve Ryfle and Kyle Bird are scathing with relation to the ways in which the script was subject to Department of Defense approval, ensuring a flattering representation of the US military in exchange for production cooperation; Erin Suzuki, too, argues provocatively that Godzilla's indestructibility—a natural creature that humans cannot, try as they might, harm—obliquely downplays US military culpability in environmental destruction (427). Also of note is the way in which the movie's backstory reframes Cold War nuclear weapons testing as attempts to kill Godzilla rather than an indefensible and murderous arms race. The movie, that is, not only represents a supernatural embodiment of total power as an awe-inspiring hero, but it also reframes the dread weaponry that inspired *Godzilla* in the first place as a technology that can have legitimate defensive uses. *Godzilla* 2014, then, though it draws on the visual idiom of Ishiro Honda's original, could not be more politically different to it.

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Figures

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Figure 2: *Out of the Past*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, RKO Pictures, 1947.

Figure 3: *The Testament of Dr Mabuse*. Directed by Fritz Lang, Nero Films, 1933.

Figure 4: *Nosferatu*. Directed by FW Mirnau, Prana Film, 1922.

Figure 5: *Godzilla*. Directed by Ishiro Honda, Toho Films, 1954.

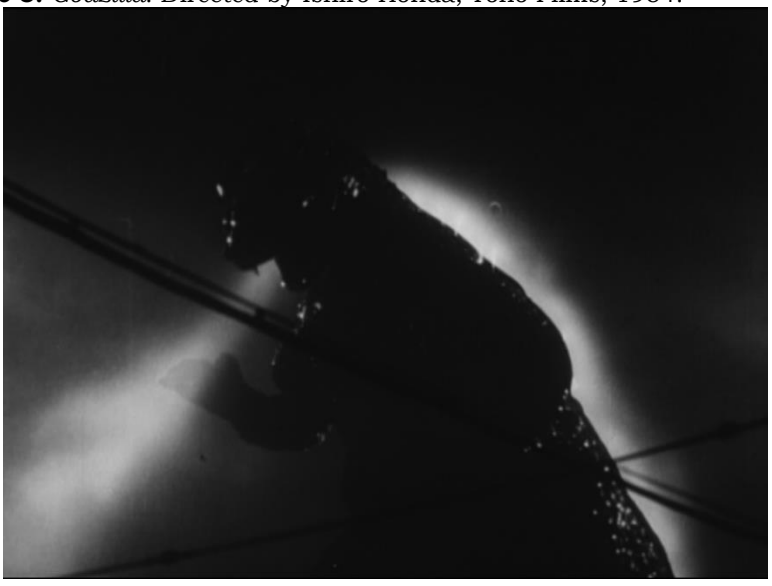

Figure 6: *Godzilla*. Directed by Ishiro Honda, Toho Films, 1954.

Figure 7: *Godzilla Raids Again*. Directed by Motoyoshi Oda, Toho Films, 1955.

Figure 8: *Godzilla Raids Again*. Directed by Motoyoshi Oda, Toho Films, 1955.

Figure 9: *Godzilla Vs Kong*. Directed by Adam Wingard, Legendary Pictures, 2021.

Figure 10: *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*. Directed by Adam Wingard, Legendary Pictures, 2024.

Figure 11: *Godzilla Minus One Minus Colour*. 2024. Directed by Takashi Yamazaki, Toho Films, 2024.

Figure 12: *Shin Godzilla Orthochromatic*. Directed by Hideaki Anno and Shinju Higuchi, Toho Films, 2024.

Figure 13: *Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Universal Pictures, 2012.

Figure 14: *Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Universal Pictures, 2012.

Figure 15: *Act of Valor*. Directed by Mouse McCoy and Scott Waugh, Bandito Brothers, 2012.

Figure 16: *American Sniper*. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Warner Brothers, 2014.

Figure 17: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.

Figure 18: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.

Figure 19: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.

Figure 20: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.

Figure 21: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.

Figure 22: *Godzilla*. Directed by Gareth Edwards, Legendary Pictures, 2014.