

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Michael Dougherty, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*
(Qindao, China: Legendary Pictures, 2019)

Carter Soles

Misha Kavka (2002) contends that Gothic cinema ‘captures the fear associated with the unstable boundaries of our subjectivity, usually cast onto an imagined or imaginary past’ (p. 211). For Kavka, the Gothic traffics in ‘paranoia’—a ‘blurring of boundaries between self and other, to the extent that the other becomes a version of the self returned, with interest, in the form of hostility’ (p. 210). *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), which frames its battling monsters as avenging giants hailing from the Earth’s ancient past, has great potential to deliver effective ecohorror. However, it fails to engage with those key Gothic notions. Rather than evoking paranoid fear about the planet’s perceived hostility toward humans, it instead lapses into predictable Hollywood blockbuster conventions, reducing the horrific power of its narrative and creatures.

Gareth Edwards’ *Godzilla* (2014) uses the term MUTO to refer to its giant creatures, evoking science and atomic mutation. By contrast, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* uses the word Titan, invoking Greek mythology, romance, and the roots of Western culture. Yet the (lengthy) film is mainly a paternal melodrama centered upon the nuclear family of Mark (Kyle Chandler), the film’s ‘manly’ wildlife photographer protagonist. Mark spends most of his screen time in *King of the Monsters* shouting about how he intends to get his daughter Madison (Millie Bobby Brown) back from the vile clutches of his environmentally radicalised ex-wife Emma (Vera Farmiga). This is family melodrama first, monster movie second. The mode of human-centered melodrama so drives this film that even its scientists suffer melodramatic fates, e.g. Serizawa (Ken Watanabe), whose sacrifice is the most noble and story-relevant: he dies to save Godzilla.

Film scholar Linda Williams (1998) describes the melodramatic mode as one in which suffering victim-heroes, beset by foes far more powerful than they, make noble sacrifices so that viewers may see their purity, innocence, and moral goodness (pp. 58, 62). Melodrama exists chiefly to tap into viewer emotions and to make a clearly defined moral universe—one that *feels* right—legible to the viewer. *King of the Monsters* so indulges its anthropocentric, melodramatic

instincts that it unwittingly—despite a few visually dazzling monster fights, especially the first Rodan sequence—short-changes the Titans as characters. The monsters' sketchy back stories are explained to us in rapid-fire expositional snippets from the human characters. The movie, to its detriment I think, is not fundamentally *about* the Titans: it is about the people watching them.

Which is a shame because *KotM*'s concept of Godzilla as one of many Titans, a gigantic and elder species of beings against which humanity seems puny and powerless, is a potent one for ecocritics. A shared world of 'peaceful coexistence' as Serizawa puts it, can help us vicariously experience ourselves as within the food chain rather than comfortably atop or outside it. This kind of onscreen narrative, if fully explored, can get us into the head space Val Plumwood (2000) describes as 'a test of our acceptance of our ecological identity' in which non-human apex predators 'indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognise ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater'. But *KotM* is a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, chock full of internal contradictions, steadfastly patriarchal and Eurocentric.

Indeed, in *King of the Monsters*, the central struggle is between Godzilla and alien, three-headed dragon King Ghidora for ultimate dominion over the monsters (Titans) of Earth, of which there are many. King Ghidora's identity as an invading extraterrestrial alien, plus the colossal size of the monsters themselves, suggests cosmic horror, a mode Jason Colavito (2008) contends 'removes humans from the center of creation toward a peripheral place in the universal order' (p. 161). However, rather than generate horrifying and mysterious ambiguities around its Titans by centering its narrative around them, the film moves these monsters around like chess pieces, with little regard for their back stories or motivations. For example, upon arriving on Earth, King Ghidora generates a tropical storm that envelops him as he flies across the Atlantic Ocean toward Brazil. This aligns the film's ostensible villain with a real-world extreme weather phenomenon, generating ecohorrific fear of the Titans' ability to affect Earth's environment and climate. Yet, this monster-as-weather/weather-as-monster concept is never developed nor does Ghidora generate a storm again in the film. Indeed, much of the time, the Titans are manipulated by Emma's sonic emulator device, which she uses to subdue Ghidora at one point, and which Madison uses to lure all the monsters to Boston for the movie's climactic battle. This onscreen contrivance serves

as a metaphor for how the monsters are mainly used in this film: as pawns in big action set pieces. The film gestures toward pathos for Godzilla and especially Mothra, who gets a featured moment of self-sacrifice near the film's end, but most of its attention goes to its human protagonists.

This is a missed opportunity given the crucial importance of monsters to horror and the Gothic. As Robin Wood (2004) writes, cinematic monsters are deeply ambivalent figures who are almost always presented (at least somewhat) sympathetically: many are the 'emotional center' of their films, much more relatable than the human 'cardboard representatives of normality' (p. 119). Thus such films can encourage viewers to develop an environmental ethos by sympathizing with nonhuman creatures who show up to wreak vengeance upon humankind. Indeed, Wood suggests that a horror movie is ideologically progressive precisely to the extent that it generates sympathy for its monster(s) (p. 134). By that measure, *King of the Monsters* is a conservative monster movie with little disruptive power or Gothic ambivalence.

To the limited extent that the film pays attention to its monsters, the visuals and plot of *KotM* inscribe a clear, legible moral universe in which Godzilla is an underdog hero and King Ghidora is a demonic, hellish invader. Like the human plotlines, this is a Manichean struggle of good vs. evil, so whatever ecocritical notions the film might raise (like Ghidora's ability to synergize with storms) are subordinated to those conventions. For example, a provocative cut from a shot of King Ghidora perched demonically atop a distant, flaming mountain, wooden Christian cross in the foreground, to an image of pumping oil derricks in the Sedona desert, suggests some sinister connection between petroleum dependence and the rise of this destructive, fire-bringing (and clearly Satanic) dragon monster. But whatever association this editing creates, it is quickly buried in the film's onrush of human-scale tear-jerking and monster-scale fight sequences. Like the previous American *Godzilla* film and many other contemporary eco-blockbusters, *KotM* seems to have little idea exactly what it wants to say, except that the heteropatriarchal nuclear family—or at least its steadfast and reliable father—is doing great.

Meanwhile, the central mother figure must suffer most of all. Emma, the film's main human advocate for a globe dominated by the Titans, is shown to be out of her depth and playing with forces she does not fully comprehend. She is the classic 'overreacher' figure in horror

narratives who, by engaging with mad science and grasping for forbidden knowledge, provokes or awakens the horror. Her radical stance against human self-imposed dominion over the Earth is quickly discredited when she is shown to be woefully naïve about the extent of King Ghidora's powers and to have endangered her own daughter, the worst crime imaginable under the film's melodramatic logic. We learn that her activism itself is born out of her maternal rage at losing a son. And despite her final, noble act of self-sacrifice allowing Maddie and Mark to escape, Emma is portrayed throughout the movie as impulsive and unreliable, a bad mother whose ultimate choice to leave Madison with her father makes sense in the film's misogynistic worldview.

Whereas *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* could have more intimately explored what it would be like for humans to really (in Donna Haraway's phrase) 'become with' titanic creatures like those it depicts (p. 19), as Gareth Edwards' excellent, artsy 2010 film *Monsters* does, this film instead bombastically reinstates a rigid social hierarchy built around traditionally masculine father figures like Mark and Godzilla. Furthermore, *KotM* ends as so many other eco-blockbusters do: with the surviving protagonists (now rid of their crazy, pesky ex-wife and mother) sailing above it all in a helicopter. As with similar scenes concluding *Jurassic Park* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, these helicopter shots position the human characters—and viewers—safely above the implications of the Titans' battle. Rather than confront viewers with a troubling, uncanny embodiment of a society's deepest repressed fears—as the original *Gojira* (1954) so hauntingly does with atomic-age terror—this big-budget actioner dulls the edges of its own promising premise by instead re-centering its 'cardboard' human heroes and their anthropocentric family entanglements.

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