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MASSIVE MISUNDERSTOOD MENACE: *GOJIRA* (1954), AN ALLEGORY FOR COPING
WITH TRAUMA

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Capstone

Professor Leung

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Abstract

In my essay I will be examining whether exposure therapy is an effective method of those coping with PTSD. This is an idea which circulates around the original 1954 *Gojira* film, where its ending can be interpreted as supporting the idea that coping with trauma must necessarily involve some form of exposure therapy. In the end my research concludes that exposure therapy is effective for those suffering with PTSD under a select few circumstances. This is because trauma can spur symptoms, including borderline personality syndrome, that can negatively affect the outcome of exposure therapy. Despite this, exposure therapy is still highly recommended for patients with anxiety disorders in an effort to desensitize them to whatever prompts their symptoms.

Introduction

Godzilla: King of the Monsters or just like one of us? Godzilla has been a symbol of Japanese pop culture for decades, with movie and tv show reiterations being created by American companies like TriStar and Legendary pictures. Most people associate Godzilla with cheesy movies where men in rubber monster suits battle it out. What most people don't know is that the films didn't always have the same entertainment purpose. Originally Toho, the company that owns the rights to Godzilla, had produced the first film in 1954 in the wake of WWII to portray the devastation resulting from nuclear warfare. For my capstone project I will be writing an analysis of the original 1954 Godzilla movie, *Gojira* by Ishirō Honda, and assert that the film is a portrayal of how trauma can be tackled.

A fact that most viewers may not take away from the film, is that Godzilla is also a victim of nuclear radiation and it would be more accurate to view him as an allegory for generational trauma. He is a walking devastating reminder of what has been lost and continues to ravage the citizens of Japan. Despite military intervention, in the end Godzilla is finally destroyed by a scientist who has made a device which kills both him and Godzilla in the process. Making this an allegory for how the road to psychological recovery begins at the level of the individual.

This will be coupled with a dissection of the film as a piece of film, as well as why the themes of the original Godzilla movie are still relevant to this day as it relates to how Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be appropriately memorialized. Finally I will conclude with whether it is worthwhile to apply the messages of overcoming trauma to other contexts by consulting someone in this field of psychology, this will potentially be a therapist who specializes in trauma coping methods. The main purpose of this essay is to analyze themes in the film through a psychological/trauma-informed perspective. I will assess whether the ideas presented, with regard to how trauma can be coped with, have any real efficacy when seen through the lens of contemporary understanding of the psychology of recovering from trauma. In this essay I will be referring to the film as *Gojira* to pay respect to the original material. However I will refer to the creature itself as Godzilla to avoid confusion when discussing its attributes and significance.

Argument

My argument is that *Gojira* is a film which subscribes to the idea that issues that affect an entire group of people must first be tackled at the level of the individual. There is this idea presented, which is a motif utilized in other forms of media and literature, which argues that in

order to overcome trauma you must be willing to die. This death is meant to be figurative and indicative of an individual's willingness to jeopardize his or her own mental health in an effort to overcome trauma. I believe that this would be an effective method of healing from trauma, so I will be reviewing contemporary psychology studies to see if it is true that this extreme method is effective. In the case of my essay I will be examining exposure therapy.

As mentioned in the introduction, Godzilla was a giant mutated creature that came about as a result of nuclear testing in the Pacific. His design was meant to be reminiscent of a burnt corpse. His hide is a charred black color with chipped bumpy skin. Likewise his roar is not much of a roar at all; it's a wail. If you listen to the original audio it's clear that, as many other writers have pointed out, that his signature bellows sound more akin to a creature in pain¹. This is exactly what Godzilla is: a giant, burned, and disfigured creature. At the same time he is seemingly unstoppable, meaning his existence is drawn out in agony. Godzilla wanders aimlessly, wreaking havoc, throughout the film. He acts as a walking reminder of what nuclear weapons bring.

However, where I believe my interpretation adds to the understanding of the film, is that the monster is a terror to those who survived and not just a one off event. He keeps coming back over and over, which is why I believe he is an embodiment of the legacy of the trauma brought about by the Hiroshima bombing. The monster can't be brought down through military intervention, this is something that is a staple in the Godzilla films. He is supposed to be seemingly unstoppable. Which is why at the end of *Gojira*, Godzilla is stopped by a single scientist who creates a weapon capable of killing Godzilla. But, in order to do that, he must be willing to sacrifice himself in the process. This idea of tackling something as daunting as a

¹ The original roar for Godzilla was actually achieved by rubbing a leather glove, coated in pine tar, over the strings of a double bass.

monster, that can't be reasoned with or destroyed by massive armies, requires one's own death is not a trope unique to this film. Death in this sense is figurative, it's a signifier that you have become something more or other than your current self to begin to attempt to tackle psychological issues.

Literature Review

I recall a debate from my Society and Culture class where we discussed how the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan should be remembered. It was a complicated issue which emphasizes the clashing of ideals with some saying it's a remembrance of the civilians who died while others see any monuments being a way for the Japanese to paint themselves as victims of war with a disregard for their trespasses in WWII². So dissecting this movie as an instance where people are trying to figure out how they should or can move past the dropping of nuclear bombs is still relevant. Even today it seems as though the issue of how such an event should be memorialized still hasn't been resolved.

I would like to go about this essay from a movie analysis perspective where I dissect the film as a piece of media. This will include a reflection of different themes, the plot of the film, a summary of the film, etc. But I will also have a psychological angle as well where I will address what has already been written on the underlying meaning of the film. For instance, *Godzilla (1954): Reconfiguring national trauma into national symbol* by Syamsu, has a fairly in depth discussion of what has already been stated in terms of thematic content and symbolism of the movie by other people who have published dissections of the film. It will be useful for my argument as a point of reference for where my interpretation deviates from these other

² Mettler, M. W. (2018). *Godzilla Versus Kurosawa*: Presentation and Interpretation of Japanese Cinema in the Post World War II United States. *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 25, 413-437.

perspectives. It also has background information about the political climate around the time that the film was released in Japan. It was released after the American occupation had ended in Japan, which prohibited the Japanese citizens from discussing the subject. Noting that, in a way, this film acted as a sort of catharsis for those who survived the bombs.

The Noriega piece I will be incorporating, *Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When “Them!”* The U.S., will be extremely useful for context. This article discusses how *Gojira* (1954) can also be seen as an allegory for the U.S.’s cold war with Russia where there was tension and the threat of nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia but there was never an established firefight or direct battle. *Gojira* is used as it is a story about fighting an enemy that is unknowable or an Other. The idea that people can be at odds with other people but there is such a divide between the two that one side can not even identify with the other. There’s this barrier where the identity you place on the other party as your enemy, overshadows the enemy’s own identity. This is argued to essentially be what happens when the symbol of the monster is utilized, a symbol that is actually touched on in the 2016 film *Shin Gojira*, any character the monster may have is irrelevant and all that matters is the label of “enemy”. This is what the article claims occurs with instances of cold wars. I will be digging around for studies on PTSD and see what academic literature has been written on the subject. I will also look at accounts written by people living in the wake of Hiroshima for the sake of context when discussing the movie.

This idea of the death of the self in a figurative is not something unique to this film. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in particular discusses how in order to refine an individual’s character, hardships and adversity must be overcome. I feel that this philosophy, which is written from the perspective of a philosopher who struggles his whole life from physical ailments, asserts that the human condition is marked by struggle. That the way to obtain the best outcome

for ourselves from adversity, is to go through it. Psychology and philosophy often go hand in hand. Philosophy discusses how people experience the world and analyzes said experiences through a more abstract lens. Whereas psychology is the other side of the coin where it analyzes the human condition in a more grounded sense and even utilizes human physiology.

Summary of *Gojira* (1954)

Directed by Ishiro Honda and distributed by Toho co.³ *Gojira*⁴ came to Japanese cinema in 1954. Many confuse this with the 1956 release of a version more geared towards American audiences. The film starts off with the mysterious destruction of fishing ships near a small Japanese island called Odo Island. The villagers of Odo island also note that fish populations around the island have plummeted. The villagers suspect that this is connected to the sinking ships as they are already aware of the existence of Godzilla and his reliance on the fish as a food source. Godzilla then comes ashore to ravage the village, Kyohei Yamane, and requests for aid from Tokyo are made by residents of Odo Island. A paleontologist, who was sent to the island finds that Godzilla's footprints are radioactive and that his sudden shift in behavior must be linked to recent testing of nuclear bombs in the indo-pacific. Japanese Government officials debate whether or not to inform the rest of Japan, meanwhile Godzilla is off destroying multiple ships. Following these debates, all attempts by Japanese warships to kill Godzilla failed. At this point officials look to Yamane for ways to kill it. Yamane advises that because it survived a hydrogen bomb that conventional weaponry wouldn't kill it and that it would be more fruitful to study him.

³ "Gojira (1954)." Nuclear Museum. Accessed April 2023. <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/gojira-1954/>.

⁴ "Godzilla (1954 Film)." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, April 26, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godzilla_\(1954_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godzilla_(1954_film)).

Yamane's daughter, Emiko, is set to be married to Daisuke Serizawa, one of her father's colleagues. However, on her way to break off the engagement she is asked by a reporter to take him to Serizawa. Upon arriving at his house, Serizawa shoos off the reporter and tells Emiko that only she can see what Serizawa is working on if she swears to keep it a secret. The following is one of the most iconic scenes in the entire franchise with Serizawa revealing his invention, the "Oxygen Destroyer", a device that effectively kills all life within a certain underwater range. Demonstrated by turning an entire tank of fish into nothing but bones in a matter of seconds. The sight terrifies Emiko so much she runs off forgetting to discuss the engagement. Godzilla then surfaces in Tokyo Bay near Shinagawa, coming ashore only to destroy a train.

After this attack, Japan constructs a 30 m high electrical fence in an attempt to kill Godzilla upon his next arrival. When Godzilla isn't stopped by the fence, the military attacks with jets and tanks. The attempts fail and Godzilla wreaks even more havoc on the city before returning to the sea. In the aftermath of the attack, hospitals are flooded with dead and wounded citizens. Some of which even display signs of radiation sickness.

Upon seeing this, Emiko tells the man she's actually in love with, Hideto Ogata, about Serizawa's Oxygen Destroyer. They fail to convince Serizawa to use his weapon as he feels that the leaders of powerful nations would force him to make more Oxygen Destroyers, furthering the arms races across the world. But Serizawa changes his mind as he sees the devastation of Godzilla's last attack. After burning all his notes on the Oxygen Destroyer, Serizawa is taken via ship to where Godzilla is in Tokyo Bay. In the end Serizawa uses the Oxygen Destroyer while he is still within range, taking the secrets of the weapon with him in death. The movie concludes with Yamane stating that it's likely another Godzilla would arise if humanity continued to test nuclear weapons.

Details of The Film

While the purpose and significance of the monster are meant to be a warning of the devastation that nuclear weapons can bring about, there are still many ways in which the film has been interpreted. This is, in part, due to the original inspiration for the film. The producers and director were inspired by the American film *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and tied it into nuclear radiation in the wake of the nuclear testing in Bikini Bottom. There was an incident in which the crew of a fishing vessel, which was out of the predicted danger zone of the nuclear tests, were affected by nuclear fallout. Despite supposedly being out of range, the crew had experienced burns on exposed skin and all had eventually succumbed to radiation sickness. Ishirō Honda and producers heard of this and came up with the idea for *Godzilla*. Meaning that the original point of the movie was to be a monster movie and the allegory of Godzilla as a warning of the horrors of nuclear weapons was a secondary thought.

I feel that the interpretations I have read, including the idea that Godzilla embodies humanity's balance with nature and that in response to that balance being abused/disturbed, Godzilla attacks all articles of modernity. This includes radio towers, electrical lines, and tanks. On another end of the discussion, the film is viewed as a metaphor for the cold war between the U.S. and Russia. Dr. Zerkow in the film produces the oxygen destroyer and keeps the process of creating it a secret as it would only continue the arms race between nations. As mentioned in my literature review *Godzilla* also has been interpreted as the idea of an enemy nation.

What Dr. Serizawa Represents

Upon viewing the *Gojira*, it is my assertion that the film can be viewed as an allegory for looking at the solution for trauma at the level of the individual. Dr. Serizawa, the man responsible for the death of Godzilla, did it alone.



⁵ Something blatantly noticeable about his character is the eye patch he wears across his right eye to hide an empty socket from a wound he sustained in battle during WWII. This is a trope seen, and elaborated on, in the anime *Cowboy Bebop* where the main protagonist Spike Spiegel had lost his right eye in an accident. Spike had stated he lost it in an accident and that now “[he’s] been seeing the past in one eye and the present in the other, never having the whole picture.”, which is much the same as Dr. Serizawa.

He, like many, had known first hand the devastation of war. However, his perspective was unique to the point that he saw what no one else in the film could, how to bring an end to the

⁵ *Gojira*. Toho co., 1954.

suffering Godzilla brought. Which was first, a recognition that the current state of operations for dealing with Godzilla was not going to cut in, there needed to be something else that could be used in this battle. The second being a recognition that Dr. Serizawa himself must be willing to change as well. That he had to take the first step forward and be willing to sacrifice who he was for the prospect of a better future. That an unknowable force like psychological trauma can't be reasoned with or stomped away by military forces, but it can be overcome by way of the figurative death of the present self. A willingness to face the metaphorical monster at your door, jeopardizing your mental well being, in an effort to move forward. That is what I believe the ending of the film, in part, represents.

Defining Trauma Through Contemporary Psychological Definitions

Pre 1945 the literature on trauma of a large group of people was not as extensive. Currently there is a medically established definition and criteria from PTSD. "PTSD is classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 5th Edition*(DSM-V) as a trauma and stress-related disorder with eight criteria points which are as follows: "exposure to or the threat of violence (including sexual and emotional violence); death, or injury to oneself or another; a response to the trauma that involves feelings of helplessness or terror that are beyond the range of normal experience; re-occurring and intrusive re-experiencing of the event; persistent numbing of emotions; drastic mood alterations; physiological responses such as sleep cycle problems, hyper vigilance, anger and irritability; the inability to concentrate; and physical behaviors to avoid remembering the trauma. According to the DSM-V, to be considered PTSD, these problems must persist for the duration of at least one month and must cause significant

impairment in the life of the individual.’’⁶ With the onset of the disorder stemming “as a result of involvement in or witnessing of any traumatic event, such as war, rape or sexual assault, interpersonal violence, accidents, or natural disasters.”⁷

The field of study grew after the Vietnam war, most literature revolved around those who survived combat. It wasn’t until 1980 the PTSD was added to the DSM-III⁸. At the time of Hiroshima there was little in the way of treatment options for psychological damage, as it was not as well understood. ⁹Interest in PTSD has been roused in the 20th century on both the medical end of study, as well as in the field of litigation. (ties into WWII Hiroshima and Vietnam War) but also into domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, diseases like HIV, all things we associate with PTSD now.

Although it wasn’t until 1952 that the earliest discussion of what would later be called PTSD, was described in the DSM-I and what was dubbed Gross Stress Reaction. One of the first publications surrounding the symptoms of PTSD was actually in 1879 where Sigmund Freud asserted that there was a range of events that could traumatize an individual and that the individual would instinctively repress the uncomfortable emotions and memories. This is an act of ego-defense, and would lead to the springing up of neurotic symptoms. It is these symptoms that said individuals would seek treatment for.¹⁰ His original assertion revolved around the necessity for there to be a sexual aspect to the trauma until 1897 when he faced heavy backlash

⁶ “Hiroshima and Mass Trauma Today: Treating Post-Traumatic Stress ...” Accessed April 2023. <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=irj>.

⁷ Everly, George S., and Jeffrey M. Lating. *Psychotraumatology: Key Papers and Core Concepts in Post-Traumatic Stress*. New York: Plenum Press, 1995.

⁸ “Hiroshima and Mass Trauma Today: Treating Post-Traumatic Stress ...” Accessed April 2023. <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=irj>.

⁹ Wilson JP. The historical evolution of PTSD diagnostic criteria: from Freud to DSM-IV. *J Trauma Stress*. 1994 Oct;7(4):681-98. doi: 10.1007/BF02103015. PMID: 7820357.

¹⁰ Wilson JP. The historical evolution of PTSD diagnostic criteria: from Freud to DSM-IV. *J Trauma Stress*. 1994 Oct;7(4):681-98. doi: 10.1007/BF02103015. PMID: 7820357.

from his peers and asserted that it is only a factor at play in some instances of trauma repression.¹¹

The Film as a Proxy for Conversation

Something interesting to note surrounding the conversation of this film is the context it came out in. As noted in the section on how PTSD is defined, there was not a great deal of research into instances of mass trauma at the time of the Hiroshima bombing. So something interesting that arose from its release, was in instance of mass catharsis. Post WWII, U.S. troops occupied Japan. As a result, discussion of Hiroshima was banned and it wasn't until U.S. occupation had ended in the 50's and troops were pulled out, that Japanese citizens were free to discuss the incident. At the same time, *Gojira* was released with depictions of devastation similar to those witnessed in the wake of Hiroshima. Reportedly, many Japanese film goers were left in tears after seeing the depictions of destruction in the film.¹² This was not the intention of the people who made the film, which is why I find it so interesting.

This is not a one off instance of a film acting as a proxy for a discussion or movement. A film that comes to mind for this, is *Fight Club*. The film overtly is a dissection of the modern man and a look into forms of masculinity. Predictably, there was a mass movement in which young men gravitated towards the film. However it wasn't because it was gritty and cool, it was because there was a large population of young men who felt purposeless and it was an instance

¹¹ Everly, George S., and Jeffrey M. Lating. *Psychotraumatology: Key Papers and Core Concepts in Post-Traumatic Stress*. New York: Plenum Press, 1995.

¹² Syamsu, Bondan. "Godzilla (1954): Reconfiguring National Trauma into National Symbol." *Broadly Specific*, December 5, 2022. <https://broadly-specific.com/2021/01/29/godzilla-1954-reconfiguring-national-trauma-into-national-symbol/>

of media opening up the floodgates of a discussion most people don't enjoy having, which is loosely characterized as wondering what is a young man's place in society.

As is in the case of the film *Gojira*, showing those who are trying to cope with trauma imagery relating to their experiences can be beneficial. The film had acted as a proxy for conversation about the bombing of Hiroshima. Likewise it reportedly worked as a form of catharsis for the Japanese survivors who watched the film in theaters. It gave the survivors a space to discuss their experiences and work to come to terms with what happened.



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¹³ *Gojira*. Toho co., 1954.



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It is understandable that this film elicited such a reaction for the Japanese audiences at the time. As can be seen in these two screenshots, the film makers took great care to recreate what it was like in the wake of Hiroshima.

While it is true that many of the Japanese filmgoers who saw these scenes were given an outlet for their grief. A step in the direction towards emotionally and mentally healing from the trauma. It's important to look at what contemporary psychology says about the efficacy of coping with trauma in such a drastic method.

What Contemporary Psychology Says Works in Terms of Healing From Trauma

The main purpose of this essay was to analyze the efficacy of exposure therapy as it relates to the film's reception in 1954 Japan and the interpretation of the film as an allegory for coping with trauma. When looking at when exposure therapy is recommended, it is an interesting and nuanced discussion. Exposure therapy is considered a very effective method of coping with

¹⁴ *Gojira*. Toho co., 1954.

trauma.¹⁵ Exposure therapy varies depending on the patient's circumstances for requiring it. For the most part it's actually recommended for those suffering from anxiety disorders. In an effort to desensitize those with phobias or de swayed patients from acting upon their disorders. For example, someone suffering from eating disorders may benefit from exposure therapy. The rate of relapse for these cases can be as high as 50% however.¹⁶ When it comes to PTSD the field has shown promising results in terms of efficacy.

However it isn't as commonplace as it is for more severe anxiety disorders.¹⁷ The reason why Exposure Therapy isn't a silver bullet remedy to overcoming trauma is because PTSD isn't the only disorder that can arise from experiencing trauma.¹⁸ One such disorder is bipolar personality disorder. Something like this complicates the process of exposure therapy, as it destabilizes the patient's conditions even further than what might be expected. This unfortunately increases the possibility of the patient not being able to distinguish their current situation from the images that elicit a reaction. When the patient's condition is this volatile, it isn't recommended to follow through with exposure therapy.

In addition exposure therapy doesn't always work to desensitize the patients to their triggers. This has become the foundation for a new branch of exposure therapy, virtual reality exposure therapy. Virtual reality exposure therapy or (VRET)¹⁹ has been shown in recent years to be effective for some patients who were dissatisfied with prior attempts at exposure therapy. The theory behind its efficacy is that (VRET) is far more immersive and so it removes the barrier

¹⁵ Gerson, Melissa. "The Promise of Exposure Therapy." Columbus Park, March 29, 2022.

<https://columbuspark.com/2018/03/12/exposure-therapy-reducing-relapse-rates-for-adults-with-an/>.

¹⁶ Patterson, Eric and Reviewed by: Benjamin Troy MD. "Exposure Therapy: How It Works & What to Expect." Choosing Therapy. Accessed April 2023.

¹⁷ Lannette, Jennie LCSW. "10 Life-Changing Exposure Therapies and Techniques." Counseling Palette, August 21, 2022.

¹⁸ "The Efficacy of Exposure Therapy for Anxiety-Related ... - Annual Reviews." Accessed April 2023.

¹⁹ Kothgassner OD, Goreis A, Kafka JX, Van Eickels RL, Plener PL, Felnhofer A. Virtual reality exposure therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): a meta-analysis. *Eur J Psychotraumatol*. 2019 Aug 19;10(1):1654782. doi: 10.1080/20008198.2019.1654782. PMID: 31489138; PMCID: PMC6713125.

between the images and the patient observing them. Essentially placing the patient in a situation that could not be achieved physically, like a burning building or under water.

Conclusion

It is clear from what is currently understood in practical psychology, that exposure therapy is an effective method of recovering from numerous anxiety disorders. It is more commonly used for disorders that are less severe than PTSD, like eating disorders, phobias, and social anxiety. The only reason it would not always be recommended for those who are dealing with PTSD is, not because of a lack of evidence supporting its efficacy, but because of trauma itself. Traumatic experiences can cause anxiety disorders other than PTSD to arise. These can include bipolar disorder and split personality disorder, which can negatively impact the reception of treatment.

So in the case of *Gojira*, there is great potential in its benefits as a tool for those coping with trauma, as a result of the Hiroshima bombings. The efficacy of the allegory within the film *Gojira* and the film acting as a proxy for conversation upon its release in Japan post-Hiroshima, can be reasonably asserted to be viable methods of mental recovery. In the case of the Serizawa allegory, yes it is true that confronting one's demons head on and being willing to jeopardize one's own mental state is a highly recommended method of coping, under the right circumstances. The film's reception by Japanese audiences runs the risk of potentially worsening some of the viewers mental health due to other underlying anxiety disorders. In that way it is a gamble in terms of its efficacy, which would require screening the audience for said underlying disorders. However, there were no reports I found of such occurrences so it is safe to say that the

resulting catharsis felt by many of the audience members was an instance of a successful session of exposure therapy.

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