

The Memory That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Memory, Monsters and Oblivion in Japanese Popular Culture

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Abstract: *In this paper, I aim at identifying traces of the trauma in Japanese popular and visual culture of the postwar period. Following the Freudian definition, the recollection of the traumatic event is repressed and thus constitutes an absent presence that resurfaces in compulsive repetitions either in the form of re-enactments or in the form of flashbacks. These resist conscious remembering and take on an agency of their own, that is, they are experienced as independent entities that come back to haunt the traumatized person. I thus maintain that when researching the traces of trauma in postwar Japan it is to monsters and ghosts that we need to turn.*

Keywords: Godzilla, Japan, postwar, memory, monsters, Freud

[An earlier version of this paper was published as Gygi, Fabio (2008) 'Mnemonic Monsters: Memory, Oblivion and Continuity in Japanese Popular Culture.' MINIKOMI, 75. pp. 5-12. We thank the editor of Minikomi, Roland Domenig (Meiji Gakuin University) for permission to republish it in a revised open-access version here.]

'In war there is no substitute for victory'. This famous epigram is attributed to General Douglas MacArthur, the leader of the American occupation of Japan that lasted from 1945 until Japan's independence in 1952. It is particularly true for modern total wars that mobilize not only armies and governments, but also society and culture in general. A nation – for it is in the confines of national identity that these total wars are fought – directs all its productive, economic and military forces towards overcoming the enemy. The totalitarian logic of modern warfare can be summed up in terms of sacrifice: The products of the state, mainly young men and commodities that are traded to acquire weapons, are sacrificed to a demonized enemy in order to consolidate national identity and unity, in short, the nation as a transcendent entity (Girard 1979, Ingle and Marvin 1999). However, defeat cannot be understood within this sacrificial logic. Defeat makes the death of millions of soldiers and civilians meaningless. This meaningfulness of something that previously meant everything is at the core of the collective trauma, which Kai Erikson defines as '*blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community*' (1994: 233). Such a shock can render the members of a community epistemically disempowered, that is, they are at a loss to explain what happened and why, and to derive any meaning from their own suffering.

Social historians have recently been coming to terms with the 'culture of defeat' that arises from this rupture of meaning, most notably Schivelbusch (2003), who compares civil war-torn America, France after the Franco-Prussian war and Germany after World War One. He maintains that

although it is the victors who write history, it is the vanquished who are forced to creatively re-negotiate their identity in relation to the former state. The culture of defeat is the framework in which meaning is recreated, past events are remembered or rendered unthinkable.

The Japanese defeat, culminating in the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was the epitome of such an epistemic disempowerment of a whole people (Dower 1998). It took the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki weeks to realize what had happened to them; dispersed soldiers on pacific islands continued the war for years before knowing that it had been lost. These extreme cases only highlight what critic Katô Norihiro has called '*senjo no abekobe no seka*' (1995: 256), the topsy-turvy world of the postwar period, a place where no meanings and values were fixed and survival was based on opportunistic day to day decisions in the face of the occupation forces.

In this paper, I aim at identifying traces of the trauma in Japanese popular and visual culture of the postwar period. Following the Freudian definition, the recollection of the traumatic event is repressed and thus constitutes an absent presence that resurfaces in compulsive repetitions either in the form of re-enactments or in the form of flashbacks. These resist conscious remembering and take on an agency of their own, that is, they are experienced as independent entities that come back to haunt the traumatized person. I thus maintain that when researching the traces of trauma in postwar Japan it is to monsters and ghosts that we need to turn.

My approach to monsters follows Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx', in which he develops the idea of ghosts as at the same time *revenant* and *arrivant*, as agents that connect the past (as something that returns to the present) with the future (as something that the present fears will materialize soon). The ghost is never there, it never IS, it hovers on the threshold of presence/absence. To understand the workings of the ghost, Derrida argues, we first need to understand its mode of presence. In typical Derridean fashion he devises a pun on ontology – 'hauntology' (1994: 10; 18) – to refer to the unstable ontological status of the ghost and invokes 'spectropolitics' as a mode of integration of the past and acknowledgement of the spectre. I would add that hauntology is not only a contrast to ontology, but also to history. The haunting disrupts the stable structures of meaning that history is trying to establish. While history largely pretends to be about the past, hauntings remind us that these apparently past forces are very much alive and active in the present. Indeed, Derrida maintains that the more or less hysterical denial that ghosts do exist is usually the very sign that a haunting takes place. The ghost or monster is thus a highly political figure and dealing with it – spectropolitics – is a politics of repressed memory.

In preferring Derrida over Freud I hope to move away from the staunch Freudianism adopted by the classic scholarship on predominantly American horror films (for example Wood 1978; Carroll 1981) while not succumbing to the school of thought describing horror films as mere 'recreational terror' (Pinedo 1997). Rather than to sweepingly generalize that horror films are ultimately about teen angst of unleashed sexuality (Twitchell 1985), my interest is to understand the case of the Japanese monster film as a way of negotiating epistemic empowerment and to make a statement about a specific memory that became monstrous itself.

The question of the ontology of the monster in my opinion is intimately linked with the question of location, that is, the genre and with it the cultural strata in which the monster appears. The monsters cannot enter official discourse because they would be dismissed as irrational, thus, befitting their status of repression, they materialized in the so-called low brow popular culture of the caricature and the comic book, the trick film and the science fiction film, from where they extend their metaphorical tentacles towards the present. Nowhere is the compulsive repetition more

evident than in the orgies of destruction that often are the main visual attraction of anime and manga, where stories are set in Neo Tokyo or even third Tokyo, suggesting an ongoing series of demolitions. The success of the longest running film series ever, *Godzilla*¹, is clearly a sign of compulsive repetition as Godzilla rises again and again and again to destroy or sometimes even defend Tokyo, but never without leaving large parts of the city demolished in its wake. Godzilla does not speak, but it signifies. The monster is there on the threshold of cognition and its haunts us from this unstable place. If we look at it, we don't see it. But it does see us and if we look away, we know it is there. How to exorcise a monster? We can only exorcise it, getting a grip on it, tame it, if it is there. The only way to exorcise a monster thus, is to conjure it, that is, paradoxically, to make it appear.

The State as Monster Manager

To understand the postwar monsters that haunted Japan mediated through popular and visual culture, we need to understand their relationship with the monsters of the pre-modern area and more importantly their peculiar relationship with the pre-modern state. The cultural anthropologist Komatsu Kazuhiko has argued in his book *Nihon, Oni ga tsukutta Kuni* (1985) that monsters and the state depended on each other to create symbolic power. The early authorities of Heian-kyô derived much of their aura of power through the control of the threatening other world by magico-religious practices, while the monsters remained powerful entities precisely through the acknowledgement of the state that they existed on the margin of the known world. This virtual symbiosis can be traced up to the Tokugawa military administration that installed placards around the Tōshōgū shrine in Nikkō, advising all ogres and demons not to cross the boundaries of the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu when the shōgun was visiting (Volker 1950: 161f). To the reader of its message, this simple piece of material culture became at the same time a proof of the repelling force of the military administration AND a proof of the existence of monster. This spectral strategy to create power over certain domains of the country, that is, the use of the monster as an 'other' to mark the shifting boundaries of the supernatural is only possible because the supernatural power of the shōgun himself. At the same time, the concept of monsters at the periphery of society could easily be instrumentalised to marginalize political adversaries and liminal figures, such as wandering priests and other parts of the population that were hard to control. However, the spectral strategy could backlash when the people labelled as monstrous appropriated that label in a positive manner to gain the strength and determination of the monster. In his study of conflict in early modern Japan, Victor J. Koschmann describes this appropriation as a form of resistance in the *tengu* revolts, where the *tengu* became a hero of the people and turned against the ruling class (1982).

The Meiji-Restoration deeply transformed the exchange of symbolical power by installing a supernatural being at the heart of the modern state. The Emperor of Japan, direct descendant of the sun-goddess *Amaterasu-Ōmikami*, a living god (*ikigami*) reigned over his children, the Japanese people. Gerald Figal, to whose fabulous book on 'Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan' I am very much indebted, maintains that the supernatural beings of pre-modern days were on one side eradicated as superstition and on the other absorbed into this new symbolic economy of supernatural power (Figal 1999). Although its institutions worked according to the modern principles of rationality, the Japanese nation was embodied in the emperor, a transcendent being. The belief in monsters became the object of a newly formed science called *yōkaigaku* that lay at the core of the project of nativist ethnology later formulated by Yanagita Kunio. Its main proponent was Inoue Enryō (1845-1911), a psychologist trained in Western science and an educator who fought superstition while trying to comprehend it. *Yōkaigaku*, usually translated as 'monsterology', was essential to the project of Japanese modernity as it allowed a redrawing of the boundaries of the supernatural. The monsters that had haunted pre-modern Japan were said to be figments of

the imagination and where thus relocated into the potentially pathological imagination of persons². The science of monsters also embodied the deepest of all contradictions of the modern Japanese nation state: while it was based on rationality in its organisation, the core of the nation, its cultural identity, was to be found in everything that by this very rationality was dismissed as irrational and primitive. Folk belief, folk custom and local culture was romanticised as authentically Japanese and at the same time marginalized as primitive survival of the past. Parallel to this, the official doctrine of state shintô loosely based on the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* that were rediscovered by the Tokugawa nativist school, the *kokugaku*, was installed as the true Japanese heritage.

The 1930's saw the further development of increasingly totalitarian ideologies of the Japanese state that culminated in the 1937 *Kokutai no Hongi* ('On the cardinal principles of the body politic') compiled by a group of constitutional scholars and published by the Ministry of Education. In it, the state was described as an organic whole in which everything worked together harmoniously and dissent was inherently impossible. In this rather monadic vision, the Japanese nation was held together by virtue of *yamato damashi*, the spirit of Japan that underpinned Japanese militaristic ideology and the feeling of supremacy³. The popular formulation *ichioku isshin* 'a hundred million with one heart' sums up the idea of *kokutai*, a national body politic that has been shattered into millions of scarred individual bodies in the aftermath of the war, as the historian Igarashi Yoshikuni has shown (2000). Parallel to this, the supernatural essence epitomized in the Emperor and the Spirit of Japan, disintegrated and set the monsters free again⁴. But these were not the demons and ogres, the *oni* and *tengu* of premodern Japan. True to their name *bakemono*, literally 'changing things', they had changed too. The ghostly phenomena of post war Japanese culture were hybrid apparitions that had assimilated modernity and science.

The Foundational Narrative and the Sutures of Memory

The swift change in U.S.-Japanese relations from being enemies to closest allies in the aftermath of war was made possible by the production of a joint narrative that could make sense of the events at the end of the war and somehow explain the sudden proximity of the two countries. It was based on a view of history as the deed of great men and pivoted on the 'divine intervention' of Emperor Hirohito who surrendered after the atomic bomb because of the suffering it brought to his people. This version of the Japanese surrender dovetailed with the American version that made President Harry S. Truman use the bomb to spare the life of a million soldiers. MacArthur's wise decision to champion the Emperor as a man of peace and humanity led to an effective cultural demobilisation (Dower 1998). The Emperor's announcement of surrender broadcasted over the radio lifted his divinity and sketched the trajectory of the future discourse. In his analysis of the broadcasted rescript, Washida Koyata identifies several elements that would define official postwar doctrine for the duration of the Cold War (1989): First, the Emperor was the agency that ended the war without defeat, for it was his conscious decision to end it. Second, the war was defined in relation to the European powers and the United States of America, neglecting Japanese aggression against other Asian countries. And third, the Japanese populace was a victim of brutal weapons and the Emperor risked his life to protect them. Thus the road was paved for the victim consciousness (*higaishaishiki*) that masked much of the Japanese agency during and before the war (Orr 2001).

In such a way the dismembered imperial past was re-membered and reassembled into a coherent whole. Igarashi uses the term 'suture' to describe the dialectic relationship between remembering and forgetting:

Body parts were metaphorically sutured together to regain the nation's organic unity and to overcome its trauma; yet the suture left on the discursive body's surface served as a

constant reminder of the trauma. Japan's loss was concealed and simultaneously inscribed as a visible sign on the body's surface. (Igarashi 2000: 14)

It is through these sutures on the discursive body that the monstrous leaks into collective consciousness. The monster arises from the interstices of discourse, from contradictions that are silenced. It is something that is not reducible to doctrine, something that cannot be articulated within the confines of the foundational narrative and yet has an uncanny life of its own. As the shadow of official memory, it makes itself felt through the structure of feeling I refer to as haunting. The loss of national unity and power and the haunting by the effects of this same power are paradoxically connected by inversion. While loss is the absence of something that should be present, haunting is the presence of something that is made absent by hegemonic discourse. This absence, felt to be very tangible and real to those affected by trauma, takes the shape of the voiceless monster.

Godzilla, or, How to Make Sense of the Bomb

Let us now after these rather long theoretical and historical prolegomena consider a specific monster. Much has been written on Godzilla and its relation to nuclear war, from Susan Sontag's influential essay 'The imagination of disaster' (1965) to William Tsutsui's hagiography 'Godzilla on My Mind' celebrating the 50th birthday of the King of Monsters (2004), not to mention the numberless articles in fanzines and internet forums. Despite these more or less academic efforts, Godzilla remains a moving target, and 'intertextual beast' as Aaron Gerow calls it:

As a monster stomping over the years through a variety of cultural, political, and social contexts, Godzilla has been intertextual precisely because it has always broken free of attempts to enclose its semiotic wanderings in a single text (or to confine it on Monster Island, for that matter). There have always been other contexts that problematize efforts to fix Godzilla's meaning, and which therefore point to complicated forms of spectatorship that might not only create alternative meanings for the giant lizard, but also celebrate this wandering textuality. Godzilla can offer one window onto what we could call the dual monsters of textuality and spectatorship in Japanese film history, offering an example of the historical struggles over what movies mean and who determines that. (Gerow 2006: 63)

This has much to do with disciplinary boundaries: film critics were the first to expound on Godzilla followed by the practitioners of cultural studies, both disciplines with an inclination towards symbolism. Susan Napier categorizes Godzilla films as belonging to the genre of 'secure horror' where the monster only destroys to be destroyed itself to reinforce the status quo (1993: 332), while Chon Noriega emphasises that Godzilla can symbolize at the same time Japan as a perpetrator and the U.S. as an aggressor (1987). It is precisely this multivocality that makes Godzilla such a powerful instrument to manage conflicts of meaning or the absence of meaning.

Before I attempt to interpret the 1954 Godzilla film as a conjuration of the monstrous, I feel I need to clarify an important issue pertaining to monster interpretation in general. In his book on monsters and mythical beasts, the historian and anthropologist David Gilmore makes a case for the universality of monsters in a survey of the different monster cultures around the world (2003). There is indeed ample material to support his conclusion that the monster is a universal signifier of the externalized id forces: monsters seem indeed to refer to early stages of phylogenetic (the prehistoric beast) and ontogenetic development (the child in its oral phase, thus the gaping mouth, the cannibalistic inclinations and the emphasis on the scream of the monster rather than the voice).

However plausible these universal claims are – and we must not forget that they are also problematic claims to the universal validity of psychoanalysis – I feel that they can only serve as a basic scheme upon which the specifics of each haunting must be asserted. For the monsters do not just haunt us as part of our human condition, they appear only under the most special circumstances taking on individual form. Attempts to interpret Godzilla as a phallic symbol for example do explain more about psychoanalysis than monsters. Also, the claim of film critics such as Noel Carroll that psychoanalysis is the *lingua franca* of the monster or horror movie (1981: 17)⁵ of which the genre of *kaijū-eiga* is a sub-genre, seems to me a confusion of actual psychic processes and their deliberate and artificial re-enactment by the film industry. Following Derrida's question of the ontology of the ghostly, it is important to differentiate between the case of the monster and the case of the monster film. The apparitions of the pre-modern period are not to be confounded with their appearance on screen. I argue that monster films are precisely not apparitions, but conjurations of monsters. Only by conjuring the monster, by making it appear, can it be successfully exorcised. The spectral strategy of power becomes a spectral technology to create the appearance of monsters just to destroy them. The film monster is not so much a re-enactment as a displacement: the monster is invoked and exorcised, but never on its own ground. Thus it returns in a series of hauntings that are transformed into a consumable spectacle. In other words, the commercial interests of film studios dovetail nicely with the logic of the revenant.

Although I have been drawing on a vocabulary of trauma derived from Freud's understanding of the mechanisms of repression, I would maintain that the monster is not the trauma itself, but a manifestation that already has a certain distancing effect. By externalizing the monster and giving it a certain shape, something unthinkable and intangible that is uncannily present is poured into a manifest form that can be manipulated to understand the unthinkable. Monsters are arguably food for thought and are ultimately a form of epistemic empowerment. As something deemed irrational by modern science, it is precisely by virtue of this irrationality that it can make sense of the irrationale created by modern science.

Monsters are not only terrifying creatures of the id, they are also tools to think with. This is particularly evident in the first *Gojira* film directed by Honda Ishirō, released in 1954. A short summary of the plot reads like this: Unleashed by an American nuclear test in the Pacific, a prehistoric, lizard-like monster with radioactive breath ravages a small tropical island. Japanese scientists led by Dr. Yamane are sent to investigate and report the monstrous apparition to the Japanese Diet. While the politicians are unable to make up their minds as to some decisive plan of action, Godzilla rises from Tokyo Bay and destroys Shinjuku. The military forces are called upon to prevent another feast of destruction, but with little effect. Japan's only hope is a newly developed weapon, the oxygen destroyer, but its inventor, Dr. Serizawa, does not want to use its incredible power because he fears that it would become the new nuclear bomb. He is convinced however when pictures of a devastated city and overflowing hospitals reminiscent of war time scenes appear on his monitor. Godzilla is eventually killed by means of the oxygen destroyer; Dr. Serizawa kills himself and destroys all the plans of his super-weapon; and Dr. Yamane muses on whether this was really the only Godzilla that was left, thus alluding to the many hauntings that Godzilla has afforded us up to the present.

Gojira, the king of monsters, is a hybrid through and through, he has very little in common with his Japanese antecedents: his name is derived from conflating the words *gorira* and *kujira*, an obvious allusion to his Hollywood predecessor King Kong. The plot of the film is almost identical to the 1953 American release 'The Beast of 20,000 Fathoms'. Yet what makes the *Gojira* film stand out is the eerie similarity to the infamous 'Lucky Dragon Incident' earlier in 1954, when the crew of the Japanese fishing trawler Lucky Dragon Nr. 5 accidentally was contaminated by the nuclear fall-out

of an American hydrogen bomb test and one of the crew members subsequently died of exposure to radiation. This incident was the origin of a fierce, broad-based anti-nuclear movement, fed by fears of contaminated fish entering the Japanese market and the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that resurfaced after almost a decade of official silence and American censorship (see Hirano 1996).

There is no doubt that this resonance was the main reason *Gojira* set a box office record of 9,610,000 tickets sold (Kushner 2006: 42), in spite of the lukewarm response of critics, whose standards had been set by the likes of *Rashômon* (Kurosawa 1950) and *The Gate of Hell* (Kinugasa 1953). Furthermore, for many members of the early audience, the fire bombing of Tokyo was still a painful memory, and accordingly audience reactions were solemn and muted; many cried (Galbraith 1998: 30).

It is worth noting in this context that the original *Gojira* film is far more complex and multilayered to have appealed to a particular ideological position. It is a meditation on agency, causation and responsibility, the very pressing issues that could not be articulated within the official discourse of postwar Japanese society. The problem of what exactly caused the unprecedented destruction of Japanese cities and ultimately Japan's defeat finds an elegant and befitting solution: the agency is relegated to the monster as an intermediary between the U.S. as the aggressor and Japan as a victim. But the nexus that causes the monster to rise does not only point at the American nuclear attack on Japan or the air raids on Tokyo. Godzilla is not created by radioactivity but awoken by it. Ifukube Akira, composer of the soundtrack of the 1954 original *Gojira*, saw in him not the nuclear threat but the souls of the dead Japanese soldiers rising from the Pacific (quoted in Igarashi 2000: 114). In this interpretation it is the soldiers who return to haunt their own country who had sacrificed them to the enemy. What rears its ugly head is an association of causes and consequences that ultimately lead into the cauldron of the war and its origins. Godzilla is not a monster that accuses someone, but a relay that connects different modes of causality and thus enables several thinkable, ambiguous realities to emerge. Although Godzilla is raised by U.S. nuclear tests, it subsequently takes on a logic/life of its own, probably best described by director Honda Ishirô, as 'tragic': '*The monster is born to wreak havoc, whether it wants this or not, for after all, that is what monsters do*'⁶. Thus responsibility for the war is diluted and distributed. Neither the bickering politicians, the scientists nor the military have any answer, although it must be noted that the self defense forces are portrayed as very effective and impressive, a fact that led William Tsutsui to the conclusion that Godzilla films are a form of 'military pornography' (2004: 97). The plot grinds to a halt here. What is needed is a *Deus ex machina* to resolve the contradictions that have been building up. It is found in the quasi-magical/quasi-scientific device of the oxygen destroyer that kills the monster – and eventually creates a new one in the 1995 sequel 'Godzilla vs. Desutoroiya'. Although the oxygen destroyer is presented as a scientific wonder weapon, the structure of the solution remains the same: while in pre-modern times the supernatural beings were pitched against each other to create symbolical power, the artificially created monster can only be destroyed artificially. To unleash such power has its price however, thus the sacrifice of Dr. Serizawa that contains and limits the power of the device.

It is the very idea of contamination embodied by radioactivity that make Godzilla terrifying for a post-war society concerned with concepts of spiritual purity and pollution, suspended between the idealised innocence of the young soldiers willing to sacrifice their life for their country and the revelation of atrocities committed by the very same men at the Tokyo tribunal. The radioactivity that Godzilla emits presents a metaphorical answer to both the questions 'What is contamination?' and 'Why did this happen?' By making the invisible visible within the confines of the spectral technology of cinema – 'spectral' because the presence of something that is absent is the very essence of

photography and film – the locus of the trauma is commodified into something that can be understood and consumed from a distance.

To artificially rise the monster and then to ritually destroy it is albeit no resolution an effective exorcism of the contradictions between the militaristic war-time ideology and the messianic pacifism Japan adopted after the war (Orr 2001). The excess of meaning, that is, the unacknowledged militaristic past, is invoked through the monster and sacrificed to pacify the new nation. Godzilla does not represent the bomb, he negotiates its meaning by splitting up the unity of violence – nuclear and military violence alike – into two sides: the ‘good’ violence that saves life embodied in the oxygen destroyer (that mirrors the idea that the bomb actually saved millions of both Japanese and American lives) and the ‘bad’ violence that killed the innocent civilians of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This double face of the bomb reflects not only the ambiguous past but also seamlessly ties in with the circuitous logic of the cold war nuclear arms race. Thus Godzilla is a multivocal signifier that alludes to Japan’s aggressive past and its ending through the bomb and parallel to this include the logic of sacrifice that killed the soldier by offering them to the enemy in vain. What returns is not uniform but always multiform and dangerous precisely because of the inherent destabilizing ambiguity. The souls of the dead soldiers, the ghosts of the atomized civilians, the remains of a supernatural ideology – all these virulent spectres are given shape by conjuring the monster.

The double face of the bomb and its representation as either monstrous weapon or benign science echoes the theory of sacrifice, violence and their relationship to the sacred as developed by René Girard (1979). The sacrifice is the basis for the social contract and the condition under which the nation becomes transcendent. By redirecting the power of sacrifice against one’s own past and ritually slaying the monsters that disrupt the apparently smooth flow of consensus, a new continuity is created. Although the occupation forces were successful in instilling a basis for a democratic system in Japan, some pieces of imperial ideology prevailed in disguise in spite of all the efforts to the contrary. The victim consciousness that was spread by the grass-root pacifism of Yasui Kaoru was based on the experience of nuclear defeat but cunningly retained the notion of a unique and possibly superior Japan as apparent in such popular formulas as *yuiitsu no hibakukoku*, Japan as the only country that has suffered from a nuclear attack (Orr 2010).

But as persistent as these notions were, the ghosts and monsters attached to them were equally persistent. Conserved in the derided lower strata of cultural production, they survived through displacement to what the artist Murakami Takashi has called a ‘culture of impotence’ (2001: 60). Manga and later anime, monster and science fiction films, although mostly set in the future, are about a not too distant past and retain some of the trauma of war experience by conjuring it in displaced contexts.

The Hero as a Child

I have argued so far that certain monstrous apparitions can be read as unruly traces of memory that defy being tamed and incorporated into public collective consciousness. The monster film in this context is a more or less successful attempt at controlling traumatic memories by attributing meaning and sense to certain events. Monsters can be food for thought and instruments for understanding, but in order to fulfil this function, they need to be slain and controlled. Thus the cultural task of the monster in fact is to create heroes. The hero in this context is a by-product of the monster or vice-versa. This relationship becomes clear if we look at one of the most well loved Japanese fairy tales, Momotarô. The Peach Boy, found by his parent in a giant peach, has supernatural strength and sets out to conquer the island of demons. Momotarô pacifies the demons, brings them civilisation and returns home victoriously with their treasures.

As opposed to the Japanese film monster that represents difference, the underlying pattern of Momotarô is the encounter with the Other and its appropriation. The dreadful demons are tamed and thus are transformed into harmless and even pitiful creatures. Antoni (1991) has shown that the pattern of this fairy tale is strikingly similar to the myths of Yamato Takeru and Minamoto no Tametomo who both set out to conquer the Other and bring it under their control. The folk tale versions that Takizawa Bakkin compiled in the *enseki zesshu* to the form we know today seem harmless enough. But the basic pattern of conquering and appropriation was recognized by the militant faction within Japan's ministry of education and Momotarô was set as a standard text in ethical education from 1933 on. Its influence was so strong that Dower even speaks of a 'Momotarô paradigm' during the war (1987). It is thus no coincidence that Momotarô, the childlike, innocent, strong and patriotic hero stars in one of the first long play anime created during in 1942 as a propaganda measure. 'Momotarô and the Eagles of the Ocean' follows the standard version of the fairy tale with the exception of the use of modern weapons and the recasting of the demons as allied troops. Its sequel 'Momotarô – Divine Troops of the Ocean' was produced as late as 1945, showing an astounding trust in Momotarô's power.

Opposed to the tragic hero whose real destiny is to die in vain (and being aware of the meaninglessness) as Ivan Morris has described it in his seminal 'The Nobility of Failure' (1975), the child hero survives and prospers because of his innocence. Momotarô propaganda was forbidden under the Allied occupation, but in spite of censorship I would maintain that he was reborn in his modern form as early as 1946 in Tetsuka Osamu's manga series 'Tetsuwan Atomu'.⁷ Tetsuwan Atomu is the brainchild of a science genius whose son is killed in a car accident. Bereft by the loss he builds a robot substitute, a child of supernatural strength with the ability to fly and an array of weapons hidden within his body. Interestingly, the monstrous is ever-present: First attempts to activate a droid end in a Frankenstein-like scenario where the headless robot attacks its creators.

Although Tetsuwan Atomu uses his powers to combat all sorts of monsters, he shares some of the ambiguities of Godzilla, most apparent in his relation to nuclear power. His body contains a little reactor to create the energy to fly and to emit laser beams. Also, Tetsuka called the originally serialized manga 'Atomu Taishi', literally 'Ambassador Atom'. In Tetsuwan Atomu we encounter an interpretation of nuclear power as benign and human- friendly. The double face of the bomb mentioned above stares at us again, this time in the seemingly harmless form of an innocent child⁸.

Conclusion

What does Derrida say about the hero and his relation to memory? There is indeed a small passage in 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' (1996) that alludes to a second, benign form of haunting. When discussing Freud's complex relationship with Jewish legacy and memory, Derrida mentions Lou Andreas-Salomé, a student of Freud,

'who says she read a new form of 'the return of the repressed' in "Moses", this time not in the form of "phantoms out of the past" but rather in the form of what one could call a "triumph of life". The afterlife [survivance] no longer means death and the return of the specter, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation ("the triumph of the most vital elements of the past").' (1996: 60)

Momotarô is an enduring agent that can be traced back to the very beginning of Japanese mythology. Yet this continuity does not make him a bearer of memory. The opposite is the case: Momotarô is a master of disguise who proffers certain patterns of thought about the self, the other and their relationship without revealing its history. He is a child and remains innocent, which in this

case means untouched by the traces of time. This leads me to the tentative conclusion that contrary to popular opinion, the child hero in the Japanese context does not only represent continuity but also a sort of amnesia. Is it not the monster that represents the unsettling forces of memory? Does not the hero try to erase the traces of past events in order for the country to return to a state of innocence? And wouldn't this help to explain the very difficult stand history, memory and the past has in today's Japan?

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Endnotes

1. 28 full-feature films were produced by Tōhō 1954-2004; plus two American productions: in 1998 TriStar released *Godzilla* featuring a velociraptor-like Godzilla and Warner Bros with legendary pictures produced *Godzilla* (2014), which saw a return to a more ominous, less animal-like incarnation of Godzilla. Tōhō announced in 2014 their own reboot of the Godzilla franchise under the title "Shin-Gojira" (*New Godzilla*). [▶](#)
2. For parallel developments in Europe and North America see Terry Castle's essay 'Phantasmagoria. Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie' (Castle 1988). [▶](#)
3. The Chinese system was perceived as inferior because it allowed for revolutions if the ruler failed to fulfil the mandate of heaven. [▶](#)
4. 'The specter is *of the spirit*, it participates in the latter and stems from it even as it follows it as its ghostly double' as Derrida puts it (1994, p 126). I am aware that Derrida derives much of his deconstructivist analysis from Marx's word play on the German word 'Geist', meaning both spirit (in the Hegelian sense) and spectre. In a similar fashion, Figal uses 'the spirit' and 'spirits' to allude to the same spectralization. Against the argument that this approach is based in the particular history of Western philosophy, I maintain that a closely related equivalent exists in Japan: 魂 refers to both the individual soul and the spirit of something, without its radical it 'becomes' the demon 鬼, the ghostly can thus be seen literally as incorporated within the spirit according to the deconstructionist method. [▶](#)
5. To be fair it must be stated that Carroll later abandoned his psychoanalytical approach for a more cognitive perspective (see Carroll 1987). [▶](#)
6. Honda Ishirō interviewed by James Bailey, quoted in Galbraith 1998. [▶](#)
7. Literally 'Atom With Iron Arms', known abroad as 'Astroboy'. [▶](#)
8. It is worth mentioning that Murakami Takashi curated an exhibition in 2005 at the Japan Foundation in New York called 'Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture' in which the myth of the innocent child hero is ironically held against the apocalyptic imagination of war. [▶](#)

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