

Mortal Critters Join Forces: Living in a Kaiju Film

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We are living in a monster movie. The abandoned cityscapes of the COVID-19 quarantine and militarized police violence during Black Lives Matter protests bring to mind the razed cities in kaiju films such as the *Godzilla* and *Gamera* series. The mid-twentieth-century films take part in what Susan Sontag calls “aesthetics of destruction,” campy demolition that replays atomic devastation and allows viewers to “participate in the fantasy of living through one’s own death [...], the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself” (Sontag, 1966, p. 212). In these mid-century films, the campy special effects of humans in rubber monster suits clumsily destroying miniature models of cities playfully reproduces actual horrific events, working through the violence with camp, which uses absurdity as resistance. But the current large-scale aesthetics of destruction also exposes less visible slow violence, which Rob Nixon (2011) defines as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (p. 2). The lure of kaiju films is the aesthetics of destruction, but *Gamera vs. Zigra* (1971) uses it to expose slow violence, and the campy film can offer a way of analyzing our current monster movie, “Mortal Critters vs. Murder Hornets.”

Gamera vs. Zigra (1971) is an example of environmental SF that explicitly demonstrates both the aesthetics of destruction and slow violence. When I presented on the *Gamera* series at the 2015 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference, I realized that few people had heard of *Gamera*. The important thing to know is that *Gamera*—camp at its best—is a jet-fueled, acrobatic, child-saving turtle kaiju first freed from Arctic ice in 1965 during an atomic accident. A few films into the series, *Gamera vs. Zigra* (1971) is set in a Sea World marine center and focuses on ocean pollution. The fish-like kaiju, *Zigra*, invades Earth, rages about contaminated oceans, and plans to kill all humans for causing it. The film asserts the permeable boundaries—what Stacy Alaimo calls

“trans-corporeality” (Alaimo, 2014, p. 238)—between bodies and environments, addressing real-world environmental health issues of the time.

The film premiered just a few years after Shoji Kitamura published his results on the mercury-laden sea life in Minamata Bay, and the film reflects those trans-corporeal health and environmental concerns. Brett L. Walker writes that Kitamura’s research showed the degree of mercury pollution from the Chisso fertilizer and plastics factory that caused methylmercury poisoning, referred to as Minamata Disease (Walker, 2010, p. 148). The disease—which impacted birds, cats, and humans that ate the toxic fish—caused lesions on victims’ brains, producing convulsions. Locals called it “dancing-cat disease” because cats who ate the fish “became delirious and wandered and wobbled throughout villages near Minamata City” (Walker, 2010, p. 145). While *Gamera vs. Zigra* (1971) does not address the trans-corporeal issues of methylmercury poisoning, the storyline does invoke toxic trans-corporeality with heavy-handed commentary about human impact on oceans and sea life.

The same aesthetics of destruction and slow violence are evident in the monster movie we are currently living in. Like the campy film about serious topics, the absurdities of politicized medical advice, discord over masks, and Trump tear-gassing citizens to pose in front of a church are painfully ludicrous. And our streets are changed. Images of quarantined Paris, São Paulo, and New York, for example, are haunting. Images of police violence during Black Lives Matter protests are chilling. Like the aesthetics of destruction, these flashpoints expose often less visible slow violence, such as the greater impact of COVID-19 on IBPoC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Color) communities. The current moment tallies slow violence in a form more people can see, but as Harriet A. Washington writes, these issues are longstanding: “Marginalized minority ethnic groups have increased exposure to environmental pollution and reduced access

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to health care,” and toxic exposure is connected to “increased likelihood of dying from COVID-19” (Washington, 2020, para. 4). Additionally, Black Lives Matter protesters may be more at-risk for the virus because tear gas spreads the disease and exacerbates respiratory health issues (Singh, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis and police violence at Black Lives Matter protests expose such insidious, long-standing systemic violence of toxicity and inequality, like a kaiju emerging from its icy sleep or arriving from another planet to begin its destruction. I can imagine Zigma chiding us earthlings to fix our messes.

But this exposure of slow violence also makes visible the hope of intra/inter-species solidarity. The destruction is just part of the story; the promise of revealed slow violence is that it holds the potential to transform toxic systems. Once the issues are more visible to more people, we can address them. Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle write that from 1971-1973, “Japan’s environmental situation began to markedly improve” and that court decisions “led to not only direct compensation for the victims of industrial pollution,” but also led to preventative regulations (Rhoads and McCorkle, 2018, p. 136). The film did not make that change, of course, but it was part of cultural attention to toxicity. Flashpoints illuminate. The light making slow violence visible can lead to solidarity and change. Donna Haraway (2015) writes, “One way to live and die well as mortal critters [...] is to join forces [...] to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition” (p. 160) because “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care” (p. 162). In *Gamera vs. Zigma* (1971), Gamera saves earthlings, but they realize that Zigma is right about pollution. The campy film emphasizes the importance of reverence for water, a serious message with real-world impact. Ecocritical readings of kaiju films like these can expose and thereby address the slow violence of toxic systems and help us address the slow violence of our own toxic systems, hopefully before murder hornet kaiju start smashing cities.

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