

Rise of the Smog God: Ecological Apocalypse in ‘Godzilla vs. Hedorah’



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Godzilla is one of the boldest visual metaphors in cinematic history, widely recognized as a phantasmagorical embodiment of the nuclear destruction inflicted on Japan by the US at the end of the Second World War. But perhaps less well known are the many spectacular creatures that he has battled with over the almost seventy years of his bombastic gladiatorial career. Western audiences may well be familiar with smash-hit headliners like King Ghidorah, Mothra, and Mechagodzilla, titans that our radioactive lizard lord has confronted time and again over the years. But ask a non-fan to describe deep-cut back-catalog obscurities like Megalon, Gigan, Titanosaurus, or King Caesar, and you will be met with incredulity—or, more likely, a straightforward and very definite lack of interest.

This is a terrible shame, because some of the creatures from Godzilla’s Shōwa era (1954-1975) are tremendously evocative and great fun. Consider, for instance, the screeching lobster colossus Ebirah who chirps and squeals through a surf-movie showdown with Godzilla; the mutant Ankylosaur

Anguirus who often comes to Godzilla's aid in his hour of need; or the oversize praying mantises Kamacuras (known as "Gimantis" in the English dub of *Son of Godzilla*) who cruelly wallop boulders at Godzilla's helpless offspring Minilla. Despite the widespread critical dismissal of *Godzilla's* many sequels as increasingly childish and redundant, many of the fifteen Shōwa films are rich with social commentary and formal and stylistic innovations. Perhaps the boldest of them all—and perhaps the most unfairly maligned—is 1971's psychedelic eco-horror *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*.

Hedorah is an alien lifeform that feeds on filth and thrives on pollution. Falling to Earth and landing in Japanese waters, it quickly grows to enormous proportions, feasting greedily on the omnipresent slurry and sludge to be found in Japan's once-green environment until it is the size of Godzilla. After the turning point of 1964's *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster*, in which Godzilla teamed up with Mothra and Rodan to defeat the golden space-hydra King Ghidorah, Godzilla would remain a hero, and it would be his godlike opponents who in their turn would represent mankind's imminent doom. The black-green reptile-god was no longer an uncontrollable force of judgment; now, he was a family-friendly crusader for justice. By pitting him against Hedorah, Kaiju maverick Yoshimitsu Banno made a bold statement about climate change, the Anthropocene, and pollution that was years ahead of its time.

Hedorah: Anthropocene, Apocalypse, Appetite

The contested term "Anthropocene" refers to the current geological epoch that we inhabit here on Earth, an epoch characterized by alarming increases in temperature caused by the organized human destruction of our natural habitat. That is, whereas previous epochs such as the Pliocene and Oligocene were characterized by natural and long-term evolutionary, climatic, and environmental changes (such as the diversification of vertebrates, the development of weather patterns, or the formation of ocean currents), the Anthropocene is a state of ecological emergency precipitated by the drastic effects of man-made climate change. Though the term is relatively recent—popularized by Paul Crutzen only 21 years ago, in 2000—and though its beginning is sometimes located in or around 1950, the processes that have contributed most to its emergence have a longer history. Admittedly, this history is chicken feed in geological time, but the Anthropocene has dawned over the last few centuries and is roughly contemporaneous with the environmentally annihilatory rampages of capitalist globalization.



For capitalism has always thrived amid shattering environmental catastrophe. In his book *Slave Empire*, historian Padraic X Scanlan describes how plantation agriculture at the height of the British Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries turned the Caribbean into “a creeping frontier of money, human suffering, dispossession and ecological mayhem.” Sweeping deforestation, monoculture, and industrialization permanently changed the weather systems of the Caribbean, to say nothing of the environmental ravages of the more or less constant colonial warfare between the multiple slave economies of the time. And this is only one example. From the disastrous spread of disease and the wanton destruction of biodiversity, through the sustained ruination caused by multiple forms of mining, drilling, and fracking, to the generation and release of the toxic waste that devastates precious and irreplaceable habitats the world over, industrialized international capitalism has always been at war with the natural world—plundering, polluting, and poisoning it for profit.

By the 1970s, Japan had been politically rehabilitated after the devastation of the war, welcomed back into the West as a full participant in international capitalism, and Japanese corporations (like their American and British counterparts) had wasted no time getting rich quick and dirty. Industrial endeavors including mining, smelting, petroleum production, chemical refinement, city construction, and more led to near-catastrophic deforestation, contamination of air and water, and at least three man-made diseases: Itai-itai disease, named onomatopoeically after the screams of those who suffered from it, was a debilitatingly painful result of cadmium poisoning; Minamata disease, acquired by eating fish contaminated with mercury, attacked the central nervous system, sometimes causing insanity and death; and the city of Yokkaichi, a center of petroleum refinement, experienced skyrocketing levels of a specific form of chronic bronchitis caused by the release of untreated sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere. By the time filmmaker Yoshimitsu Banno came to create his debut Kaiju picture, Japan was choking on smog.

Hedorah, Banno’s monster, the name derived from the Japanese word meaning sludge, polluted mud, or chemical slurry, is the embodiment of a uniquely Anthropocene apocalypse. So foul is our treatment of our precious planet that a scum-loving alien considers our once-beautiful home a delightfully appetizing smorgasbord, and now that it is here it certainly does not intend to stop eating. One of the strengths of the Kaiju genre is its obligation to forego subtlety; the films’ characteristic exaggeration, caricature, and hyperbole enable them to treat their subject matter with both knockabout playfulness and polemic intensity. In their scholarly volume *Japan’s Green Monsters*, Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle describe *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* as an “environmental call-to action”, and “a protest film of a different order.” Banno’s only Kaiju movie is a bold, flamboyantly weird parable about mankind’s responsibility for the murder of the Earth.

Trouble at Toho

Though it may be uniquely uncompromising—even preachy—in its prioritization of eco-doom-mongering, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* is by no means the only Kaiju movie with an environmentalist message. The theme features in many a Shōwa movie, and would resurface in the later Heisei series too (in particular *Godzilla vs. Biollante* [1989] and *Godzilla vs. Mothra* [1992]). 2016’s *Shin Godzilla*, which deals with the environmental and political fallout of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, is another vivid example of this preoccupation. Many Toho films end with a character looking into the sunset and delivering a didactic epithet about humanity’s responsibility to live in greater harmony with nature.

And yet, although it is perhaps the boldest expression of Toho's major theme, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* remains a divisive oddity in the Shōwa series, 80 pulsating minutes stuffed with bizarre aesthetic choices and jarring narrative turns. Critics at the time tended towards the dismissive, a trend that was consolidated into an orthodoxy when Harry Medved lambasted the film in his 1978 book *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*. Perhaps this was because the film explicitly withholds the pleasures that audiences had come to associate with Toho's work. Rather than the stomping, triumphant orchestral score familiar to fans, the film has a soundtrack peppered with rock'n'roll, Moog electronica, and jazz—including an introductory musical number with swirling lava lamp visuals that wouldn't have been out of place in a Bond movie. Formally, it experiments with delirious hippie psychedelia, including the insertions of some baffling (yet oddly beautiful) animated sequences. None of the familiar faces from previous films—such as Akira Takarada, Akihiko Hirata, or Yoshio Tsuchiya, stars of many of the most popular Kaiju movies of the 1960s—appear in the cast, which instead features a young child protagonist and a group of dropout longhairs partying on Mount Fuji. Moments of humor and warmth rub up against scenes of striking horror; dry sequences of “scientific” exposition sit awkwardly alongside sequences of luminous, hallucinatory surrealism. Memorably, one of Godzilla's early clashes with Hedorah is intercut with vivid scenes of fish-headed young people dancing frantically in a go-go bar.



The result is a singularly strange mix of arthouse avant-gardism, early music video aesthetics, children's dreams, and special effects-led genre pugilism—in short, a tonal miasma that some audiences (especially overseas audiences, who lacked the cultural context provided by the many poisoning scandals in Japan) found almost unwatchably dissonant. “Even for a movie about a big anthropomorphic fire breathing reptile fighting a giant pollution eating monster that looks like a big pile of blackened teriyaki chicken,” writes [Kaiju fan site Stomp Tokyo](#), “*Godzilla Vs. Hedorah* is a weird movie.” [Another reviewer](#) writes that they've never “seen such an intractable tangle of the laugh-out-loud stupid and the chills-up-the-spine disturbing in one movie,” in part because of the way that the film features some of the franchise's most goofily comic moments—such as Godzilla's atomic-breath-fueled flight—and some of its most openly horrific set pieces, such as the famous sequences in which the noxious fumes Hedorah exudes dissolve human flesh. “Sometimes,” [writes yet another reviewer](#), “the grim and the giddy are mixed in the same sequence.”

But such criticisms overstate the strangeness of the film. It is weird, but in a spirit of experimentation and adventure, rather than gloomy or pretentious incoherence; it is dark and audacious, even somber in some places, but so are the best entries in the Godzilla canon. Quite apart

from its many peculiarities, perhaps the most noticeable departure that *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* makes from its predecessors is the visible cheapness and roughness of the movie. In the 1970s, the Japanese film industry struggled with slashed budgets; the dramatic rise in the popularity of television corresponded with a precipitous dive in cinema ticket sales that hit Toho in the wallet, hard. Banno had to shoot the whole movie with only one crew, on a drastically reduced timescale and with half the money that the studio would usually spend on a Godzilla movie.

Banno himself is an interesting figure with a complicated, unfortunate story. Former assistant director to the legendary Akira Kurosawa, he was offered the directorial role on the new Godzilla feature after he impressed Toho by completing a documentary on behalf of special effects maestro Eiji Tsuburaya, who fell ill during production. Toho was looking to expand its pool of regular Godzilla directors, and Banno's strong credentials and valuable experience placed him first in line. Immediately upon accepting the job, Banno knew that he wanted to make a serious and powerful statement about pollution, which he called "the most notorious thing in current society." Despite the severe budgetary and time constraints, he was able to realize and deliver a singular, extraordinary piece of work.



But the film quickly made enemies in high places. Tomoyuki Tanaka, one of the most senior figures at Toho, hated Banno's film so unreservedly that he swore never to allow Banno anywhere near another Godzilla picture. And Tanaka got his wish: even though Banno teased a sequel at the close of *Godzilla vs. Hedorah*, he was never to work on another Godzilla production for Toho, and Hedorah would never be heard from again apart from one blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in 2004's *Godzilla: Final Wars*. Banno's enthusiasm for Godzilla, though, remained undiminished to the end of his life in 2017, and, despite his creative exile, he would later become a key figure in the development and production of Legendary's 21st century Godzilla movies. For Banno, the spectacular success of 2021's *Godzilla vs. Kong* is an extraordinary posthumous vindication: Toho's anarchic outsider belatedly bringing Godzilla to his widest ever audience.

"Green pastures exist only in our hearts now"

To return once more to Banno's creature itself: Hedorah is interesting primarily because of its near-indestructibility. Our prehistoric hero's atomic breath and powerful physical brawling have little to no effect upon Hedorah's viscous, semi-solid body, and neither can human weapons damage Hedorah. Bullets and Kaiju fists simply pass harmlessly through the evanescent sludge. Like the

flesh-eating snot-monster in classic US sci-fi *The Blob* (1958), Hedorah is uniquely adapted for pure, unthinking consumption, and the very simplicity of its anatomy—an uncomplicated embodiment of sheer appetite—is what makes it virtually impossible to stop.

Hedorah is also the first of Toho's monsters to metamorphose through a range of physical embodiments. It begins life as a species of microscopic organisms, a dispersed collective of hungry tadpole-spores from outer space; after gorging on the plentiful industrial slime encountered in Japanese waters, they meld into one solid organism, growing, absorbing and mutating, constituting itself in a series of increasingly threatening forms. First it appears as a mean, amorphous marine creature; second, a crawling, slug-like amphibian; third, as a sort of flying disc of malevolent ooze; and finally, after repeatedly frustrating Godzilla in battle and guzzling more goo, it achieves its final incarnation as a semi-anthropomorphic titan. Such an evolution would recur with Godzilla's later foes Biollante—the product of weapons-grade bioengineering, half Godzilla, half haunted rose; Destoroyah—a hostile crustacean life form created by the Oxygen Destroyer, a weapon of environmental annihilation used to kill the very first Godzilla back in 1954; and, with time, Godzilla himself, as he grows from a sea-beast, to an enormous worm, to a murderous ambulatory nightmare over the course of *Shin Godzilla*.



Each of these movies feature monsters that embody some form of ecological disaster, and this dynamic metamorphic principle is key to their meaning. Ever-changing, ever-growing, unfixable, slippery, unkillable, given ever more power by humanity's hubristic efforts to defeat them, Hedorah and his later analogues embody this most central and confounding aspect of climate disaster. It is not only that we humans are responsible for the desecration of the Earth, but also that the problem we have created is so nightmarishly flexible and generative that anything we do to tackle it simply makes it worse. In the face of this doom-laden iconography, Godzilla represents not merely justice or virtue: he represents hope itself.

However, even though child protagonist Ken calls Godzilla "a superman" at the start of the movie, the film is unrelentingly pessimistic about the possibility of ever defeating Hedorah for good. For most of the film, Godzilla is simply unable to wound Hedorah, and the beast is only (ambiguously) banished through Godzilla's cooperation with the military. State institutions are powerless to stop Hedorah, and the counterculture youth who attempt a mass mobilization against the smog monster are unable to imagine any form of resistance to it apart from throwing a party and playing vacuous

protest songs. “Why complain about it?” asks the guitar player. “Green pastures exist only in our hearts now. Let’s sing! Let’s dance!”

This muted hope is, in the final analysis, what makes *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* really compelling. The previous entries in the series, notably 1968’s *Destroy All Monsters* and 1969’s *All Monsters Attack*, were lighthearted, triumphant, and easygoing—and all the more enjoyable and relatable for it. Yoshimitsu Banno, though, knew how to take the Godzilla films back to their shocking, politically urgent origins. Decadent, sour, and an idiosyncratic gem, *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* is one of the most striking entries in that most idiosyncratic and freewheeling of cinematic cycles—the Shōwa series of Godzilla movies.