

## Finding Redemption for *Gigantis, the Fire Monster*



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*Godzilla* (1954) remains one of the most critically acclaimed and influential monster movies in the history of cinema. *King Kong Versus Godzilla* (1962/3), its second sequel and the movie that helped Godzilla really crack America, still holds the record for the most bums in picture house seats of any Godzilla feature ever made. Sandwiched between these two towering and iconic movies is *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), an underrated quickie sequel whose many charms are often overshadowed by the titanic achievements of its cousins. Most overshadowed of all, however, is *Gigantis, The Fire Monster* (1959), the US recut of *Godzilla Raids Again*. Where the Japanese sequel often flies under the radar, its American adaptation *Gigantis* is frequently singled out as an example of everything that can go wrong with both a sequel and an adaptation.

The story is simple. Godzilla is discovered fighting a giant ankylosaur, Anguirus (or Angilas), on a remote Pacific island. Soon, the monsters make their way to the Japanese

urban center of Osaka, where they stage a feral showdown that demolishes the city. After Godzilla kills Anguirus, a group of Japanese pilots bury Godzilla in an icy mountainside. The major differences between *Godzilla Raids Again* and *Gigantis, The Fire Monster* are superficial. An explanatory voiceover accompanies most of the film, the dialogue is dubbed into English, and stock music replaces the original score. A certain amount of stock footage is added to speed along the exposition, and — perhaps most perplexingly — Godzilla’s name is changed to Gigantis.

These changes, though essentially cosmetic, have attracted an extraordinary degree of hostility. On Rotten Tomatoes, *Gigantis* has a measly 37% audience rating and one lonely, dismissive review. “A frequently hilarious hodgepodge”, writes Rob Humanick in one damning sentence, “of reworked dialogue and unnecessary, often absurd changes.” In a no-holds-barred review, *Up From The Depths* condemns the adaptation as “neither respectful nor entertaining,” lazy, confusing, and poorly executed, calling it “a lackluster version of an already lackluster movie that makes it even more of a chore to sit through.” Ouch.

More formal Godzilla scholarship is rarely any more generous. Ed Godziszewski, for instance, sticks the knife into *Gigantis*. His brief essay on *Godzilla Raids Again* included in the 2019 Criterion Godzilla box set praises the work of director **Motoyoshi Oda**, a workhorse filmmaker whose movies generally do not receive the same level of esteem as that lavished upon Godzilla’s father **Ishiro Honda**. But though he praises *Godzilla Raids Again*, Godziszewski writes that *Gigantis* is “a prime example of how incompetent Americanization helped fuel the perception among US audiences of Japanese sci-fi films as cheesy and laughable.” In the gesture of rehabilitating the original Japanese sequel as a worthy successor to *Godzilla*, *Gigantis* is made the object of scorn and derision.

(What is more, whereas the Americanizations of *Godzilla* and *King Kong Vs Godzilla* are available on the box set fully restored, *Gigantis* is nowhere to be seen. Like *Godzilla 1985*, *Gigantis* is kept in circulation not by its legal copyright owners but by bootleggers and vigilante restorationists.)

Elsewhere, in his 2004 book *Godzilla on My Mind*, William Tsutsui calls *Godzilla Raids Again* “a pale shadow” of *Godzilla* and, when it comes to *Gigantis*, he calls the voiceover “condescending” and describes the dialogue dub as “frequently downright nonsensical.” And it is true that some bits of dialogue have earned the movie a reputation as an unintentional comedy. Famously, when Tsukioka’s girlfriend Hidemi praises his bravery, he modestly brushes it off with the words “Ah, banana oil!”

The insertion of such goofy lines may raise a smile, but for many viewers it also reflects the contempt with which the adaptors treated the source material. *Godzilla Raids Again* was a sincerely made piece of work, and *Gigantis* sometimes seems to laugh at the film at the same time as it brings the story to a broader audience.

It is true that *Gigantis* has its flaws. The dub is lifeless in places, and the voiceover feels intrusive to a modern ear. The film is — in both cuts — structurally uneven, peaking in the middle and tailing off somewhat towards the end, and it is undeniably simple when compared to the baroque and zany overcomplication found in the later, more successful Godzilla movies. But to dismiss it as a boilerplate monster-on-the-loose dud overlooks the fact that the film creates many of the best-loved visual and narrative conventions that fans would later come to expect of the genre. It also has a reasonable amount of thematic and visual depth. *Gigantis, The Fire Monster*, arguably the Godzilla franchise's ugliest duckling, actually complements *Godzilla* in surprisingly interesting ways.

Perhaps we should begin with its special effects. *Godzilla's* moody chiaroscuro imagery of annihilation is justly celebrated as a monumental cinematic accomplishment approaching the status of fine art. But **Eiji Tsuburaya's** extraordinary miniature work in this sequel, particularly the scene in which a subway is flooded during the destruction of Osaka, is also remarkably powerful. Much of the movie's imagery of monster-inflicted ruination is easily as suggestive of nuclear devastation or the American firebombing raids suffered across Japan during World War 2 as anything in *Godzilla*.

The narrative perspective is also interesting. Where *Godzilla* followed the actions of the scientific and military establishments, this first sequel is concerned with ordinary working folk — the staff of a commercial fishery — whose lives, homes, jobs, and relationships are all mercilessly smashed by the rampaging monsters. This tightening of scale results in a compelling, dignified, modest intimacy in which the actions of ordinary people can have colossal consequences. The film's central set piece of destruction, for instance, is triggered by a runaway van of convicts who crash their hijacked vehicle into an oil refinery. An initially comic caper has enormous and ironic knock-on effects: just as the creatures seem to have been dissuaded from attacking the city, an accidental fire lures them back to shore and initiates their brutal confrontation.

And the film also paints a uniquely downbeat vision of the world. At the end of *Godzilla*, tortured scientist Dr. Serizawa is able to kill Godzilla with the Oxygen Destroyer. In *Godzilla Raids Again* and *Gigantis*, however, Godzilla fights another monster, the vicious ankylosaur Anguirus, and neither creature can be killed by man. This seemingly hopeless world, in which there are multiple indestructible monsters, is substantially bleaker than that of *Godzilla*. Where the first film was able to provide a resolution to the problem of the monster (however grimly), this sequel withdraws the hope that humanity will ever be truly free of the beast. Godzilla is not a *creature*, but a *species*.

Now, these points are as true of *Godzilla Raids Again* as they are of *Gigantis, The Fire Monster*. The source material, naturally, looms large in the adaptation, and the story and themes survive for the most part intact. But one aspect of *Gigantis* distinguishes the movie from every other Godzilla movie: Godzilla is not Godzilla, but Gigantis, a prehistoric brute who flourishes amongst fire and flame. If we can, for a moment, separate the two creatures, it's worth considering that unlike Godzilla, who has a fatal weakness, Gigantis simply

cannot be killed. At the film's climax, the immortal Gigantis is entombed in ice: not dead, but locked in uneasy stasis.

This may not necessarily *improve* the movie, but it does make the antinuclear message even more stark. Monsters are — like nuclear weapons — proliferating, and containment is the only hope. Most importantly, Gigantis kills Anguirus, and once this cosmic battle is over, Gigantis turns its pitiless savagery back onto man. As a smaller nation in the tense early years of the Cold War, surrounded by ballooning nuclear arsenals and gruesome proxy wars, Japan would have been preoccupied with the question of what could happen when one larger power defeated the other. What happens when the war of monsters is won, and one of the monsters turns its attention back to us?

In conclusion, then, it's difficult to see why *Gigantis* is so loathed. Perhaps inevitably it suffers in comparison to its more popular companion movies, but the US adaptation of *Godzilla* — *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956) — is easily as intrusive a restructuring as this one, yet it is remembered far more generously. Recent years have also seen critical reassessments of strange outliers in the Godzilla canon such as *Godzilla Vs Hedorah* (1971) and *All Monsters Attack* (1969), movies which have long been seen as low points or embarrassing oddballs but are now embraced, often celebrated, for their wackily generative defiance of convention. It is past time for us in the Godzilla fandom to abandon our habit of dismissing these adaptations as 'butchered versions' or 'American atrocities' and to start loving *Gigantis*, too, as much as it deserves.