Arts & Humanities

Godzilla the Chameleon

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The final scene of the Japanese film *Kaiju soshingeki* (known to English-speaking audiences as *Destroy All Monsters*) is a battle royal pitting, among others, Godzilla, Mothra, Rodan, and a vaguely armadillo-like creature called Anguilas against a three-headed dragon summoned from space by a race of evil moon women. About the only monster who doesn't appear in the movie is King Kong. But that didn't stop promoters in Italy from putting him on the poster, or from translating the title as *The Children of King Kong*.

B-movie promotional materials are notoriously dishonest, but European posters for kaiju eiga, Japanese monster movies, are in a class by themselves. Sometimes their creatures are simply the best guesses of an artist who clearly hasn't seen the film. Sometimes they get the credits completely wrong. Almost always, they feature a superfluous, bosomy woman Fay-Wraying it up in the foreground.

"Only one of the four actors listed on the bottom of this 1977 Italian poster was in the actual film, and even his name is misspelled," says Gregory Pflugfelder, associate professor of East Asian language and culture at Columbia. On the projection screen behind him, over the words *Il Ritorno di Gorgo*, a giant Godzilla claw is poised to pluck an aircraft carrier off the water. The suspiciously Anglo-sounding names of the other cast members — John Wembley, Dick Kennedy — "seem to be utter fabrications," Pflugfelder says. "Even Godzilla's name has been anglicized, since Gorgo — and many of you will know this — is the name of a British knockoff of Godzilla that debuted in 1959."

Pflugfelder was undoubtedly right about his audience, a mix of cultural-studies scholars and Godzilla buffs (some in souvenir T-shirts), along with a few drop-ins who just couldn't resist a symposium called "Global Fantasies: Godzilla in World

Culture.” Held last semester in Altschul Auditorium, it was part two of Columbia’s yearlong celebration of the big lizard’s 50th anniversary. “Godzilla Conquers the Globe,” a companion exhibition of poster art, occupied the C. V. Starr East Asian Library for most of 2004. A film series, “Godzilla for Thinking People,” ran through this semester.

Pflugfelder, who also directs the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture, is an avid collector of Godzilliana. Most of the posters in his presentation, and in “Godzilla Conquers the Globe,” came from his apartment. He hopes to write a book about them.

It’s a fairly recent interest, he says, stemming not from any childhood obsession with matinee monsters, although he did catch his share of Godzilla double features as a boy, but from his work as a Japanese historian. Godzilla movies and their paraphernalia, Pflugfelder says, are the first truly global products of Japan. He’s fascinated by the ways different cultures have devoured the movies without ever really swallowing their Japanese-ness. When Godzilla first appeared, he points out, “Made in Japan” was not a compliment in much of the Western world.

“I’m tempted to say that there are more foreign posters that get the names of Japanese actors wrong than get them right,” he adds. “Even the King of Monsters himself has at least once suffered the indignity of having his name misspelled.” Pflugfelder presses a button, and a 1957 Argentine poster appears on the screen: “Godilla.” Relieved of its z, the name seems to lose some of its essential lizardliness. Then again, the z wasn’t there in the first place. “Godzilla” is an English approximation of the word the Japanese pronounce *“Gojira”* — a Westernization, in other words, just like John Wembley, Dick Kennedy, and *The Children of King Kong*.

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