Metaphor and Allegory in the Relationship Between Donald Trump and Godzilla

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In their classic study of the purpose of metaphor, Lakoff and Turner (1989) contend that a metaphor is a linguistic object that illustrates distinctive cognitive and cultural ways of understanding the world. A metaphor thus captures recognizable characteristics of the thing it is supposed to represent. It does not capture every feature of that thing, nor does a metaphor suggest that the thing represented will necessarily have the same use or experience as the thing doing the representing. In this sense, metaphor is quite different from allegory – an allegorical representation of particular events implies that those events will follow a particular path. Allegorical accounts of totalitarianism, such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* or Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, for instance, purport to show not just what a totalitarian leader is, but how totalitarian rule will develop. In both cases, one object is used to represent another. But in the case of allegory, there is an element of time or movement – it is not just the object that represents; it is the development of the object that represents.

Our descriptions of political affairs often move easily from metaphor to allegory – and perhaps necessarily so. One might even argue that the task of political science is to identify patterns in historical events, to determine how one might appropriately use one era to explain another. Consider the concept of party realignments in the study of American politics. Realignment theories posit that there are cycles within American political history – that partisan or ideological regimes occur in American government, and that these regimes decay within roughly three to four decades, to be replaced by new ones.[1] Discussions of presidential regimes, such as Skowronek's (1993) four-part categorization, serve much the same purpose. Allegations of such patterns within American government suggest that there is a sort of pattern to history – either history moves in cycles, or there is some sort of dialectical process at work. These patterns can also provide a sense of comfort to the political losers of one moment – they can anticipate that their antagonists' control of government will decay, that the pendulum can swing backward. We have seen this thing before, and we know how it will end. A prior political leader can, thus serve as a metaphor for another, and that era can serve as an allegorical story about what will come of the present. To argue that a contemporary politician is Churchillian, or Napoleonic, can thus serve a metaphoric purpose as we search for the essential qualities that we associate with those leaders; at the same time, we might anticipate that the person represented by Churchill or Napoleon will embark on a course of action or meet a fate similar to these two figures.

Metaphorical representations can, however, mislead us – they may falsely indicate that the thing being represented will act in a particular way. We may draw the wrong lessons from the metaphorical representation by conflating metaphor with allegory. This may be the case because those who use the metaphor have not carefully considered all of the essential features of the thing doing the representing. The task of this essay is to expand the ways in which one

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[1] See, for example, Burnham 1971.

particular metaphor – the representation of Donald Trump as Godzilla – can be more richly understood when we consider the allegorical representation of Donald Trump as Godzilla.

Metaphorical representations of Trump as Godzilla are quite common. A google search for "Donald Trump Godzilla" yields over one million hits, including a range of GIFs, editorials, news stories, and even merchandise. Both highbrow and lowbrow political commentators have used this metaphor, sometimes merely as a direct comparison with no context, but sometimes with details. A *Politico* article on Trump's post-presidency described him as a "Godzilla in exile" (Orr and McGraw 2021). Meghan McCain at one point stated that Trump, like Godzilla, would come back to seek his revenge (Wilson 2021). In one of the more detailed discussions of Trump and Godzilla, the British journalist Mike Small (2020) argues that Trump, like Godzilla, is "a beast who draws strength from any attack, becomes stronger with the more chaos and violence that surrounds it. Godzilla, you'll remember, can survive for years at a time under the sea; he can survive in hostile environments like other planets, outer space, and submerged in lava. He has bones denser than titanium, he has survived getting hit in the eye by the Human Torch and can devastate a city with his Atomic Breath."

It is easy to see the utility of this metaphor. Godzilla tramples things without meaning to, he was created by us, and he never seems to go away. As Donald Roeser (Blue Öyster Cult 1977) notes, his very existence is testament to "the folly of men." Regular citizens have few tools they can use to get him to go away entirely, but he can be distracted or redirected. Most citizens flee from him, but there are those who try to use his destruction for their own ends – and often regret it. Godzilla seems particularly hostile toward modern technology, but we do not know whether he is necessarily evil – his actions rarely demonstrate a master plan. He is of indeterminate intelligence. He is natural, in a sense, but he has been perverted by our own tampering with the natural world. And he is impervious to our standard arsenal of weapons – we must develop unprecedented weapons to combat him.

It is not just the "folly of men" that is the problem in these films, however – it is the inadequacy of our institutions. In all of the Godzilla films – but in the first in particular – heroic individual responses are not sufficient to stop Godzilla. Tanks do not work, nor do individual fighter pilots. Combating Godzilla requires the establishment of social institutions that function across multiple levels of society – bringing together, for instance, the public, scientists, and government officials in an effort not to conquer the monster, but to understand what it wants (Westfahl 2005). While the Godzilla films often feature small personal stories, such as love triangles of family dramas, these are diversions from the main conflict. Godzilla has succeeded because our technology has made our social institutions inadequate. One could, of course, say the same of Trump's twitter-fueled capture of the Republican Party and the presidency.

Yet like all compelling monsters, Godzilla also has human qualities. The Trump / Godzilla discussions rarely note these. Classic monsters, such as Frankenstein, are unhappy, tragic figures. Unlike Frankenstein, however, Godzilla and other Japanese monsters have distinctive personalities – they cannot just be boiled down to the psychological or social concepts they represent (see Noriega 1987). Godzilla has reason to be unhappy with humans, since the disturbed his peaceful underwater existence. With the possible exception of the original film, Godzilla rarely kills people on purpose. He has tender impulses, particularly toward his adopted

son, Minzilla. He is distinctly Japanese and at times defends Japan. He is not even the principal villain of the Godzilla movies – usually, the principal villains are aliens. The most consequential villain is an alien and a monster – King Ghidorah, a three-headed monster from outer space whose name implies that he is unconstrained by democratic politics. And Godzilla is a thing of the past, a dinosaur, brought to life in altered form in the present. For the post-World War II Japanese, he entails a reckoning with what Japan was, with its imperial legacy or its past greatness.

Most importantly, in all but the first film of the Godzilla oeuvre, Godzilla fights against other monsters, or kaiju, each of which has its own superpower or other distinctive characteristic or personal history. The audience, like the people of Japan, is reduced to the status of observer as the monsters clash, but the outcome of the battle matters. The audience must decide for itself who should win – is it better to have Godzilla on the loose, or for Godzilla to be decisively defeated by, for instance, Anguirus, Rodan, King Kong, Hedorah (the Smog Monster), or Ebirah (the Sea Monster). Some of the Trump / Godzilla discussions posit conflicts – with Joe Biden, Ron DeSantis, or Mitch McConnell playing the role of King Kong, for instance. But they rarely ever explain the additional comparisons – what does Mitch McConnell have in common with King Kong?

The question addressed in this essay is whether we should understand the Trump / Godzilla relationship as a metaphorical one, where Trump has similar characteristics to Godzilla, or an allegorical one, in which we can understand Trump's political career as one that parallels Godzilla's history. While the definitive answer to this question will remain unclear as long as Trump remains a political figure, I argue that we can gain a richer understanding of Trump, Trump's allies and antagonists, and his legacy by considering the Godzilla films as allegory.

Hypotheses, Data, and Method

To formally state the task of this essay, I seek to test the following proposition:

H_1: Parallels are evident in the development of the Godzilla films that are not evident in the single-state Godzilla / Trump metaphor.

This proposition has a number of implications if shown to be true. The most important of these implications is

H_2: Because most Godzilla films feature conflicts between Godzilla and other monsters, the other monsters can also be taken to be representative of individuals associated with Trump.

As noted above, Godzilla metaphors are common, but allegorical statements that include other characters are rare, and when they do appear, they tend to lack convincing explanations of why the supporting character in question has anything in common with the equivalent kaiju.

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To these hypotheses, I draw data from the Showa era of Japanese Godzilla films. Although Godzilla films continue to be made, Godzillologists generally agree that only the first fifteen films – made between 1954 and 1989 – make any claims to be a sequential narrative.[2] Subsequent films, including animated films and American adaptations, largely recycle story lines from the original Godzilla movies or present apocryphal stories that cannot easily be placed within the historical sequence presented in the Showa films. Although this demarcation of the Godzilla films is based on the transition in Japanese Emperors (from Hirohito or Showa to Akihito) it should not be taken to imply that the content of the films was in any way determined by Hirohito. The Showa films also, however, have artistic pretenses that were largely abandoned as the series went on. The Showa films were also produced by the Toho Company (later reorganized as Toho Eizo), the same film studio that made several of the Akira Kurosawa films of the 1950s, and the director of the most important early Godzilla films, Ishiro Honda, was a close friend and protégé of Kurosawa.

Godzillologists furthermore distinguish between the Honda films (seven of the first ten films) and the later Showa era films. Honda also directed several other early kaiju films, such as *Mothra* (1961) and *Rodan* (1956). In the foundational text of Godzillology, *A Critical History of the Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series*, David Kalat contends that the Honda films had a seriousness of purpose and a moral component that was lacking in the later films and in the handful of early Showa-era films not directed by Honda, which Kalat (2010) describes as "turkeys."

The method for this essay is simply to compare the allegorical messages of the Showa era films with important developments of the Trump presidency. For the purpose of constructing a similar narrative arc, I contend that only the initial 1954 Godzilla film, *Godzilla* (or its 1956 English-language remake *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*) can uncontroversially be presented as an allegory of the initial Trump campaign. Subsequent Godzilla films can be seen as allegorical representations of events of the Trump presidency. The decline of "moral purpose" in Godzilla films can be paralleled with the years following Trump's 2020 defeat; just as the films from roughly 1969 onward prioritized the monster battles and deemphasized moral conflicts, so Trump's 2024 candidacy has thus far been seen by many as a matter of revenge of grievances, without moral claims to speak for those left behind by globalization or to present a clear ideological alternative to the status quo.

As this essay is exploratory in nature, I do not seek to present a comprehensive account of all of the Godzilla films and their Trumpian equivalents; rather, I seek to show that there is in fact a narrative arc to the Showa era Godzilla films that parallels the Trump presidency and its aftermath by focusing on four moments in the Showa era: *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), the first sequel; *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (1964), arguably the highlight of the Honda directorship; *Destroy All Monsters* (1968), considered by Godzillologists to be the last great film of the Honda

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[2] Even here, the sequential narrative often fails – for instance, kaiju that die in one film return two or three movies later, or new creates or the same species emerge.

directorship;[3] and (as a group) the final four Showa period films, *Godzilla vs. Gigan* (1972), *Godzilla vs. Megalon* (1973), *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla* (1974) and Honda's final Godzilla film, *Terror of Mechagodzilla* (1975). I provide plot details of these films and present the relationship between these details and the Trump history since 2016. I leave it to other researchers to consider links between contemporary events and other Godzilla films.

One final note on method is in order before proceeding, however. Due to the constraints of the making of popular films, each of the Godzilla films includes a resolution that involves Godzilla being thrown into the sea, encased in ice, quarantined on an island, or otherwise being neutralized (but not killed). Of course, one might see Trump's exile to Mar-a-Lago following his 2020 defeat as an analogous resolution, but of course this only happened once, not every time Trump suffered any sort of setback. I would contend that we can understand these endings by seeking the Godzilla films as largely aspirational – they show possible outcomes from conflicts with Trump, but these endings should not be taken as literal representations of events. I expand below on the importance of aspirational narratives in each of the Godzilla films considered.

Four Allegorical Lessons from the Godzilla Films

Godzilla Raids Again

At the close of the original *Godzilla* film, the monster is left for dead. In the second Godzilla film, *Godzilla Raids Again*, Godzilla is rediscovered by stranded aviators on a coastal island, while in the middle of a fight with Anguirus, a giant ankylosaurus. Scientists quickly establish that Godzilla is angered by bright flashing lights, and that these lights can be used to distract Godzilla. Japan develops a system of flares that aircraft can use to draw Godzilla away from cities. The first effort to use these flares, in Osaka, is couple with a full evacuation of the city. Unfortunately, at the time of the evacuation a group of thieves use the opportunity of the evacuation to steal a truck, which, after a police chase, they drive into an oil tank and create a massive blaze that draws Godzilla back to the city. Godzilla destroys Osaka. After this, his rage is temporarily exhausted and he heads out to see. Eventually he is trapped on an island, and through a series of bombings he is trapped in an avalanche on that island.

Like the first film, *Godzilla Raids Again* is a far more serious and grim movie than those that would follow. It is often framed, like *Godzilla*, as being an allegory about nuclear weapons. While the first film expressed the terror of nuclear warfare, the second can be seen as an explanation of how humanity could live the threat of nuclear war. The film provides, as well, some basic lessons in how to use military force to distract or contain one's foe. It works equally well as a political metaphor, or as an explanation of how many of those in the Trump White House likely thought about their role. Many tell-all stories discussed the efforts advisors made to distract Trump when they thought he was doing something harmful. The flares in the movie are

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[3] Honda directed one film immediately after this, *All Monsters Attack* (1969), this film was aimed primarily at children and was, according to Kalat (2010, 106-110), largely a recycling of old outtakes and stock footage. He then stepped away from the Godzilla films for six years before returning once more to direct *Terror of Mechagodzilla*.

analogous to efforts by White House staff to remove document from Trump's desk, bring in outsiders to entertain him, or other efforts at distraction (Dawsey 2017). Anguirus himself is portrayed fighting with Godzilla, but their battles are not mortal ones. They are the sort of meaningless "kayfabe" wrestling that Trump engaged in frequently as president. Ultimately, Osaka is destroyed not out of anger or malice, but simply because it has become the staging ground for a tussle between Godzilla and Anguirus. One could analogize Anguirus to someone like Jeff Sessions – he is, like Trump, a monster of sorts, but the battles between the two are not important because of who wins or loses but what else is destroyed in the process. A number of humans also sacrifice their lives in the movie to contain Godzilla; we can honor their sacrifice while acknowledging that ultimately Godzilla would go on to escape and wreak havoc again. The same could be said for those in the White House who resigned or took other steps to contain Trump but are now largely forgotten.

Godzilla Raids Again broke from *Godzilla* by failing to kill Godzilla. At the end of the film, Godzilla is subdued (or sated) and swims out to sea. As Noriega (1987) notes, this pattern – repeated in all subsequent Godzilla films – is an incomplete resolution. There is no celebration, just a reminder that humans must take steps to prepare for the potential of Godzilla's return. The parallels here require little elaboration.

Mothra vs. Godzilla

In the opening scenes of *Mothra vs. Godzilla*, a tsunami ravages the coast of Japan and washes ashore a giant egg. The egg, it turns out, belongs to Mothra, a giant moth. Mothra was actually known to the Japanese; she had attacked Japan in the past, and she ruled (in a benevolent way) a nearby island, Infant Island.[4] An unscrupulous entrepreneur places the egg in a sort of incubator, and then begins plans to build an amusement park, the Shizunoura Happy Center, around the captured hatchling. Soon after the appropriation of the egg, however, Godzilla emerges from the earth and begins his usual exploits throughout major Japanese cities. A delegation of citizens goes to infant island, where they meet with some of the residents and beg them to ask Mothra to intervene to fight Godzilla. The island's residents conduct elaborate rituals in honor of Mothra, and Mothra also has two shobjin, small fairy-like priestesses, who communicate on her behalf. Although she does not feel warmly toward the Japanese because of what has happened to her egg, Mothra subsequently realizes that Godzilla also poses a threat to her offspring and that the best way to ensure their survival is to go to Japan. However, Mothras do not live long past the moment where they lay their eggs. Mothra gives her life to incubate her egg, and Mothra's offspring subsequently fight Godzilla and drive him into the sea. After doing this, the baby Mothras (and the shobjin) joyfully dive into the water to return to Infant Island. Several humans gather at the seashore; one asks "So, you think they won't come back? We didn't get to thank them." The other answers "No, their thanks comes from knowing that they made our society better."

Th allegory here is quite clear. One can see *Mothra vs. Godzilla* as a parable describing the fate of Representative Elizabeth Cheney and the House Special Committee investigating the January 6 insurrection. Cheney is, of course, from the same party as Trump, and the island in

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[4] This history is described in *Mothra* (1961), also directed by Ishiro Honda.

this case is metaphorical – Cheney rose to her position as the Republican Whip because of her family's role in the old Republican establishment. Cheney has served as the leading figure in Congress associated with the older Bush / Cheney regime, and one can see in the behavior of the Infant Island residents the efforts by leading "Never Trump" Republicans to see Cheney as the person who represented their conservative ideals. Cheney certainly did sacrifice her career as a legislator in voting to impeach Trump and in repeatedly standing up against him. The birth of her offspring is perhaps the aspiration that guided Cheney's participation in the January 6 committee – the belief that one day, new Republicans would emerge who would present an alternative to Trump. They would not be Democrats – just as Cheney herself has no interest in being a Democrat – and hence, there was no reason at the end of the film for the offspring to stay and accept the thanks of the humans. The Mothra offspring would continue to live apart, but would occasionally work in a bipartisan fashion when they faced a joint threat. In fact, they would return in several subsequent movies, including *Destroy All Monsters*, to fight against Ghidorah.

Mothra vs. Godzilla effectively shows how compromised humans are in their efforts to fight Godzilla. Although Godzilla does not appear in the movie because of anything humans did, humans would have had a much easier time working with Mothra had one of them not sought to profit from her egg. Just like Democrats, the motives of the humans here are mixed. They want to survive, and they can overcome their own divisions to fight Godzilla, but absent a clear and present threat they squander opportunities to run their own affairs effectively. One of the most controversial aspects of the January 6 committee was its partisan makeup – Democrats initially sought to make it bipartisan but were unsuccessful in getting the Republican leadership to select Republicans who would not be hostile to the committee's goals. Hence, the effort to fight the forces Trump had unleashed became difficult to separate from efforts to gain a partisan advantage.

Mothra vs. Godzilla also shows how natural human interests in sensationalist entertainment can heighten the threat. The central problem here is the human appropriation of Mothra's egg. When a reporter begins to write about the questionable business practices of Happy Enterprises, the company that has build the amusement part, the articles actually help the business. The reporter concludes that "newspapers have a limited capacity to influence people … the more I write, the more Happy Enterprises benefits from the publicity."[5] Again, there are clear parallels here to contemporary media coverage of more outrageous or provocative political behavior.

The Kalat account of *Mothra vs. Godzilla* notes how unusual the film is within the Godzilla series. Mothra is treated as a goddess by the people of her island. She makes profoundly moral choices without even explaining them; like the other kaiju in the Showa era films, she does not speak at all. Yet she has the two shobjin, who communicate on her behalf.[6] We can only speculate about why she makes choices that seem indisputably correct, while the characters who actually can speak, such as the humans, tend to make flawed choices. In many

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[5] See Noriega 1987 for discussion of this point.
[6] In *Ebirah, Horror of the Deep* (1966) we see the full ritual that is used to awaken Mothra; in its ritualistic structure it is arguably similar to a gathering of like-minded ideologues – perhaps like a CPAC event from before the Trump era.

ways, Kalat (2010, 67-71) goes on to note, the film was a failure – most notably, it was hard to market Mothra as a villain when she really wasn't one, and a giant moth does not make for a compelling villain. Other monsters with supporting roles have similar problems – Rodan may look fierce but there is no interesting internal conflict that explains him. The allegory here suggests that even the "good" characters cannot last, or cannot become main characters. They exist to serve a purpose, to propel the narrative, but they cannot replace Godzilla.

Destroy All Monsters

By the time *Destroy All Monsters* takes place, all of the kaiju from prior films (and some who have not appeared in any previous Godzilla movie) have been quarantined on Monsterland, an island where they can be monitored and controlled by humans, where they appear to live in harmony. This harmony is disrupted, however, when an alien race, the Kilaaks, unleashes an incapacitating gas on the monsters and the humans at the island's monitoring facility. Soon thereafter, the freed monsters begin attacking major world cities. The Kilaaks have gained control of the minds of the monsters, and they have seized control of the minds of some of the humans as well. A band of humans travels to the moon base that the Kilaaks have established; there, they fight to disable the central mind control apparatus. Once they have done so, the monsters revert to human control and they fight together to subdue King Ghidorah, an alien monster who serves the Kilaaks.

Throughout *Destroy All Monsters*, the monsters are always under the control of someone, either the Kilaaks or the humans.[7] This was not the first time aliens had sought either to invade Earth or control Godzilla (or both); aliens from Planet X had attempted this feat in *Invasion of Astro-Monster*. What is distinctive about the Kilaaks is that they are odd creatures that resemble slugs, but when they appear to the humans they adopt human-like forms – to be precise, they appear as ethereal women in silver robes. They speak frequently to the humans about their goals; they are using the monsters to destroy the earth in order to make it habitable for their own, vastly superior, civilization. They do not necessarily intend to kill all humans; they offer to allow some humans to live on as their slaves, and some of the humans appear ready to accept this offer, to renounce human rule and democracy.

Trump represented a political type that has long had a place in Republican Party politics but which had never been in charge; one can, therefore, read Monsterland as a sort of figurative quarantine or isolation with the larger conservative movement. Throughout his initial campaign and his presidency, Trump was seen as the agent of wiser political actors. Steve Bannon, for instance, proposed that the destruction wrought by Trump – the "deconstruction of the administrative state" – was necessary in order to establish a new sort of politics. A range of conservative intellectuals, such as Michael Anton and others affiliated with the Claremont Institute, sought to establish an intellectual version of Trumpism, and they drew on exotic yet obscure conservative thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, René Guénon, Julius Evola, or

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[7] *Destroy all Monsters* is not the first film to feature alien invaders harnessing the power of Godzilla, this also occurred in *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964) and *Invasion of Astro-Monster* (1965). As noted below, the major distinction between *Destroy all Monsters* and the other films featuring aliens is the godlike presentation of the aliens.

Aleksander Dugin. Evangelicals may have found Trump problematic as a person, but saw him as someone whose destructive habits could help them to advance their agenda. The Kilaaks thus represent those intellectuals who saw Trump as a useful tool despite their lack of personal fondness for him.[8]

Just as the ending *Mothra vs. Godzilla* is an aspirational account of how the old Republican Party might be reborn, so the ending of *Destroy All Monsters* is analogous to some of the lessons one might draw from the 2022 election. Can the monsters be controlled and used for good? One of the most controversial aspects of the 2022 election was the early effort by Democratic-allied Super PACs to interfere in Republican primaries to encourage voters to select more extreme candidates. All of the candidates supported in this way lost – it was as if Democrat had created a set of monsters who would alienate voters and thus damage the Trumpist brand. It is perhaps a natural impulse across all political eras to assume that monstrous forces can be effectively quarantined, or used to advance our aims. This is a risky proposition, as *Destroy All Monsters* shows.

Gigan, Megalon, and the Mechagodzilla Films

By the 1970s, a formula of sorts had been developed. Godzilla received remarkably little screen time in these films; there is ultimately very little that can be done, in terms of narrative, with a monster who does not speak, but he can still play a bit part. All of the final four Shows films have plots similar to *Astro Monster* or *Destroy All Monsters* – aliens want to invade Earth, either to enslave humans or to destroy them entirely so that they can have the planet for themselves. Unlike *Destroy All Monsters*, however, these aliens are not seductive in any sense; they do not seek to use spiritual or ideological appeals to win over humans. And these aliens do not even pretend to be beautiful or appealing. In *Godzilla vs. Gigan*, the aliens are cockroaches disguised as humans, and not very attractive humans at that. In *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, we are not actually dealing with aliens but with a race of humans, the Seatopians, who have lived under the Earth for millennia. These subterranean beings dress in sartorial robes but are otherwise slovenly and unappealing.

The central problem in *Godzilla vs. Megalon* is how the Seatopians will seek their revenge on humans (or, rather, above-ground humans) for their repeated nuclear testing. They have a monster deity of their own, Megalon, and they eventually enlist the alien owners of Gigan (from the prior film) to help them subjugate the humans. The problem, however, is that they Megalon needs a guide in his movements on Earth. The Seatopians commandeer a robot named Jet Jaguar who some human inventors had created, and reprogram Jet Jaguar for this purpose.

The central question in *Megalon*, then, has to do with the nature of political representation. Megalon and Gigan can destroy things, but they do not do so in a rational manner. Their destruction cannot easily be directed or controlled. Jet Jaguar, on the other hand, can be told to destroy things but he has no mind of his own, and if he were to develop one (as he does in the movie) he might not develop in the ways his programmers intended. Furthermore,

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[8] It is not easy, however, to explain what it means that the Kilaaks are all female. Perhaps this is an effort to personify knowledge as being feminine?

others might seize control of Jet Jaguar for their own purposes. This is the classic problem of representation, as described by Thomas Burke. Jet Jaguar can serve as a delegate, fulfilling his constituents' orders but nothing more; like all robots he is morally neutral. Megalon and most of the other kaiju, on the other hand, tend to follow the trustee model – if you generally like what they do, you can turn them loose.

The protracted battle among Republicans over choosing a House Speaker in early 2023 illustrated this problem. Here, Kevin McCarthy plays the role of Jet Jaguar – he offered the dissenting Republicans a number of concessions and limits on the Speaker's power. McCarthy came out of the process diminished in part because it was clear that conservatives in the party did not trust his judgment and were worried about what might happen were he to provided with different incentives once given the office. No viable opponent to McCarthy emerged, however, largely because there was no appealing ideological message, no story about what the Republicans were all about, at stake, so there was no figure who could play the role of Megalon or Gigan. The only creature Republicans could point to who fulfilled a role like this was, of course, Trump, and Trump, like Godzilla, was effectively quarantined on his island.

Similarly, in *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla* and *The Terror of Mechagodzilla*, Godzilla receives remarkably little screen time. Both films feature an alien race, the Black Hole Planet 3 Aliens, who intend to use a giant robot to destroy Earth's cities so that they can colonize the planet. As in *Destroy All Monsters*, the aliens promise select humans that they will be permitted to live if they help them. In the first of the two films, Mechagodzilla has an external skin that makes him look like Godzilla. We first meet Mechagodzilla as he rampages through Tokyo; soon after he appears, Godzilla also appears and inflicts enough of a wound upon Mechagodzilla that we can see the metal underneath. Many of the humans in the film spend time deciphering various prophecies about how to respond to the alien invasion; the prophecies ultimately lead them to awaken another monster, King Caesar, who joins with Godzilla and another monster, Anguirus, to fight the robot. While all of this is taking place, the humans join with a scientist who has special knowledge of the metals the Black Hole aliens use; these humans ultimately are able to make their way to the aliens' lair and destroy the computer they use to control Mechagodzilla.

In *The Terror of Mechagodzilla* the same aliens are back; in this film they revive a Titanosaurus from underwater and use the Titanosaur and a reconstituted Mechagodzilla (without bothering to add a Godzilla-like skin) to again fight Godzilla and lay waste to the world. They are aided in their efforts by Shinzo Mafune, a marine biologist who had been working to understand Titanosaurus. Mafune had already become bitter about the lack of respect he received from other humans for his efforts. When Mafune's daughter Katsura is accidentally electrocuted, the aliens revive her, turn her into a cyborg, and implant the controller for the Titanosaurus inside of her. Battles again ensue between humans and aliens, and between Godzilla, the Titanosaurus, and the robot. The humans ultimately prevail, and the cyborg Kastura retains enough of her humanity that in the end she realizes the role she has played and shoots herself.

Although *Terror of Mechagodzilla* again features the sort of moral dramas among humans that Honda had used to great effect in the earlier Godzilla films, it is apparent that all of

the 1970 Showa films were made on a shoestring budget. The special effects are mediocre and there are editing errors in several scenes. The most important problem with these films, however, is that the Black Hole Planet 3 Aliens simply are not very convincing. They are apes masquerading as humans, they do not seem particularly adept at fighting with humans or even staying alive, and they do little in the films to show that they are in fact a more advanced species than humans. While the Kilaaks clearly had the ability to radically change their form and to appear to humans as divine priestesses, the Black Hole Aliens just look like regular, if socially inept, people, with the occasional bout of unconvincing villainous laughter. There is nothing particularly seductive about them.

If the Black Hole Planet 3 Aliens have a contemporary political analogue, it is just regular Republicans – not the intellectuals represented by the Kilaaks. The aliens have studied Godzilla and have sought to develop a robot that can do roughly the same things. It is apparent early in *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla*, however, that this robot is in fact quite different. The robot destroys with much more of a purpose than Godzilla, and it is far more efficient at fighting. One could argue that Republicans since 2021 have been seeking to develop a Mechagodzilla of their own —the current candidate for that position, Ron DeSantis, would appear to have the same characteristics as the robot. He seems to be able to effectively emulate Trump, but in a more ruthless and efficient – and less human – manner. As *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie (2022) described DeSantis recently, "He may be a more competent Trump in terms of his ability to use the levers of state to amass power, but he's also meaner and more rigid, without the soft edges and eccentricity of the actual Donald Trump."

The humans who work with the Black Hole Aliens know that what they are doing is immoral; Mafune, the scientist, has become preoccupied enough with recognition, with receiving credit for his scientific prowess that he welcomes the destruction his acts will create – and yet, he does not actually see the destruction firsthand, he only experiences it from the aliens' lab. The humans in the first Mechagodzilla film, likewise, are preoccupied with omens and prophecies about what will happen. Everyone in this movie is looking for the next monster, the monster who will help us move on from the era of Godzilla. The humans in *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla* are looking for portents, often absurd ones ("when the red moon sets and the sun rises in the west") just as so many Americans have searched for signs that Trump's sway over American politics is about to come to an end.

Godzilla himself, however, scarcely matters, except in the end when he makes it evident that it is not possible to recreate him in a lab. And, as in *Destroy All Monsters*, the late Showa films demonstrate that that monsters controlled either by humans or by aliens are no match for those that are making their own decisions. The late Showa films, like the others, are about aspiration, but they also show how aspirations to move on from Godzilla will be thwarted.

Implications

The easiest lesson to draw from these examples is that if Trump is a monster, he is one of many. He can be weakened, but it is unlikely that he, or the forces that animate him, will go away. We may not like the various monsters that emerge to fight Godzilla, but when this happens we need to decide – are we better having Rodan, Megalon, or the like roaming free or even governing us, or are we better with Trump? Some of these monsters are smarter than others, some are less destructive, but we don't know them as well as we know Godzilla. They have only appeared in some films in the series. To an extent we know Trump, and we know his superpowers. He weakens his own party, he has had little success in passing legislation or accomplishing his goals, and his term in office was characterized by haphazard destruction. As 2022 showed, Democrats may even prefer to have Trump as an opponent in 2024 if the alternative is a smarter politician who can win over Trump's audience but govern more effectively. A range of conservative intellectuals has sought to establish an agenda for what Trump might accomplish were he to return to office, but there is little evidence that Trump himself has been part of this effort.

There are several more subtle lessons we can draw from the way in which the Godzilla story develops over the course of the Showa films, however. The Showa films are characterized by an unexpected need to improvise – by most accounts, *Godzilla* was expected to be a one-off film, and the sequels sought to make up a story line without any sort of overarching narrative about where to go. Unlike, say, the *Star Wars* films, they did not pretend that they were a multi-part epic with an omniscient director who knew how it would all end. So too, the Trump story was not contained by one campaign, or one term in office; we have certainly realized since 2020 that it is an ongoing problem – that there is an uncertain narrative for Trump, for Democrats responding to Trump, and for the Republican Party as it was before Trump and as it is now.

Trump and the Descent Into Parody

The first Godzilla film arguably captured something real and important about the moment in which it was made: it described Japanese fears about the nuclear age. The original Ishiro Honda films offered the viewer important moral or political questions. Although Godzillologists differ about the merits of the first ten Godzilla movies, the consensus among scholars is that by 1969 or so, Godzilla movies had become stupid. They were aimed at children, not adults. They included musical numbers, and much more overt hawking of toys and other products. The special effects got worse, as did the plots. By the 1980s, the Godzilla series had become a disjointed set of movies that no longer purported to have anything to do with each other or to tell a coherent story at all. Directors came and went, and the series had simply become a money-making enterprise. The Kurosawa legacy was long gone.

It is easy to see what this tells us about Trump's prospects in 2024 and beyond. As Marx (1852) noted in his discussion of Napoleon (another occasional Trump analogue), tragedy will become farce. The heightened effort by Trump and his allies to profit from his post-presidency has supplanted any pretense to stand for any critique of American political orthodoxy. Yet just

as tragedy becomes farce, the tragic monster also becomes ridiculous, and even somewhat endearing. This may be evident in other leaders as well – comparisons between George W. Bush and Godzilla, for instance, are not plentiful, but Bush was at times characterized by his opponents as a "monster."[9] Today, Bush is a somewhat awkward older man, adrift from his party, who paints pictures and chats amiably with his former opponents. Perhaps such a fate awaits Trump.

And perhaps this outcome is inevitable when we begin to frame our leaders using tropes from monster movies. Even the scariest movie monsters ultimate are defanged – as in the case of Godzilla, they get used to sell toys, or they get turned into animated children's shows. Some truly evil historical figures may resist this – even today it is a risky proposition to parody a Stalin or a Hitler.[10] For everyone else, metaphors such as those explored here give way to allegories – as ways to say that we have seen these particular actions before, and that even thought we do not control them now, we know how they will end, and we know that they will not amount to the sort of transformative changes that their perpetrators claim.

One might further argue that Godzilla, or Trump, are somewhat comedic figure to begin with. Godzilla has human-like qualities, and his facial expressions betray humanlike emotions – anger, amusement, confusion, and so forth. Not all of the kaiju can easily be rendered in this fashion – and hence, it is harder to use all of these monsters in a parodic fashion. There may be a political lesson in this as well.

In its 1985 reboot of the Godzilla series, Toho announced that henceforth the Godzilla films would be an "alternate history" of Godzilla – they abandoned the pretense that each Godzilla film had any relationship to the previous films. As Westfahl (1985) notes, this is what happened to Superman, Tarzan, and other movie superheroes, monsters, and other iconic figures, and it is what has happened to *Star Wars* now that the nine-film epic has concluded. After a while, the weight of the narrative becomes too constricting, and movie heroes must be freed from history and given the ability to reinvent themselves. There are many signs that this is what is happening to the Trump movement – the QAnon conspiracy's recreation of Trump as a largely fictional character, and Trump's own effort to market Trump NFT trading cards are just two examples of this. Trump's tendency to prevaricate was well-known while he was president; in his post-presidency, the prevarication may well be the point, the way for Trump to continue to play a role unencumbered by the facts about his presidency.

The Future of the Democratic Party

One of the most astute observations made by Kalat has to do with the nature of the humans who fight Godzilla. Above, I noted that the humans in Godzilla films could be taken as representative of Democrats. They have little control over Godzilla's behavior unless they can unify to fight him, and even when they successfully repel him there is always a threat that he will return. Kalat notes that in most Godzilla films, the heroes are usually institutional figures –

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[9] See, for instance, Chamseddine 2018.

[10] Although, of course, this does happen, as shown by recent films such as *The Death of Stalin* and *Look Who's Back*.

doctors, scientists, or low-level government officials. Today's Democratic Party, similarly, has become the party of such individuals – they are elites, but their "elite" status does little to help them fight large corporations, tech billionaires, or figures such as Trump himself. Kalat (2010, 41) contends that there are only two classic Godzilla movie – *Godzilla Raids Again* and *Rodan* – where the human heroes are working class. Perhaps this is why Democrats can repel Trump's allies, or Trump himself, but have had little success in creating a political alternative to Trump? Perhaps this is the broader predicament of those who would combat the wave of right-wing populist leaders in today's world – that populism can be contained by not destroyed as long as the principal alternative is a technocratic, administrative state. One lesson from the Godzilla films may be found in the absence of a decisive victory by humans – should Democrats actually create a coalition between elites and working people, they might do more than merely continue to return Trump to his fortress or his island.

The Future of the Republican Party

Kalat notes that the later Godzilla franchises had more success with some of the kaiju than others. Mothra, for instance, poses a problem. The first Mothra, the mother, is portrayed as a goddess of sorts, and her death protecting her egg is presented as an inevitable and natural development – as indeed is the fate that befalls most female moths. In subsequent films, her larvae are portrayed as caterpillars, not as adult moths. They have some of the powers that their mother gave them – in *Ghidorah the Three-Headed Monster*, for instance, they are able to convince Godzilla and Rodan to set aside their differences to fight Ghidorah, and they can spray a web over Ghidorah. But with the exception of the ritual scene in *Invasion of Astro-Monster* they never assume the gravitas that their mother had.

The most tragic of the kaiju, however, is clearly Rodan. Rodan (or, rather, two Rodans) first appear(s) on earth after being disturbed by mining. They emerge from the earth and wreak havoc on the city of Fukuoka without even meaning to; the Rodans are giant pterodactyls whose wings create gale force winds that destroy cities. It is not the fault of the Rodans that they were disturbed, yet they must be killed. They are killed in a particularly painful way; a fusillade of bombs and artillery disturbs the earth around their subterranean home, causing them to be buried alive. As they are buried, they squawk in a truly painful way. Shigeru, the miner who is the film's protagonist, watches their destruction with regret. In the dubbed, American version, a voice (presumably Shigeru's) offers a sort of benediction: "Masters of the air and earth, the strongest creatures that ever breathed . . . now they sank against the earth like weary children. I wondered whether I, a twentieth century man, could ever hope to die as well."[11]

Clearly, the Rodans had to die – they were creatures out of their time, and they were too destructive to be permitted to live. In the closing monologue, Shigeru mentions that they sound almost human. Yet nothing they do in the movie suggests they have humanlike qualities, and the creatures themselves are animated in a crude way – when they fly, they look more like airplanes than birds or other flying creatures. Presumably those who would propose antagonists for Trump have considered Trump to be engaged in a war with the old Republican Party. Ultimately it is

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[11] Interestingly, this monologue was only present in the American version. In the Japanese version, Shigeru and the assembled miners and soldiers watch the Rodans' death but do not comment on it.

hard to think of a sympathetic modern politician who represents that party; Mitch McConnell, for instance, capitulated to Trump rather than fight him, and those Republicans who have chosen to fight Trump have found themselves cast out of the party. One might think of Rodan representing the archetypal older Republican – someone like, for instance, Robert Taft. There is no question that Rodan must die, just as, perhaps, the old ideology of the Republican Party has been exhausted. There is something sad about it, even if we don't have contemporary politicians for whom we can feel sad.

Rodan would return in later Godzilla movies, but there is little effort to explain how it was that he emerged from underground. The Rodan who appears in later films also looks different – he has facial expressions, and he fights with Godzilla primarily for sport, as a sort of kayfabe. This Rodan bears little resemblance to the Rodan of the original film, either in appearance or behavior. He is certainly not the noble creature of that film. He is a sort of Lindsay Graham – he is a representation of a thing that existed in the past, but in his subservience to Godzilla shows that he is not really the same thing at all.

Conclusions

There is actually a serious point to this account. Much of political science – and in particular, public-facing political science – rests on comparisons across time or across nations. Ever since 2016 there have been a number of parallels drawn to moments of democratic erosion in Europe and South America; between Trump and would-be demagogues in American history such as Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, or Patrick Buchanan; or to watershed elections in American history. Some of the narratives about these events or people may be more compelling than others, or they may prescribe difference courses of action. None are indisputably correct, but some of them will "win" in that they become widely accepted or lead to actions by politicians. The implications I have drawn above, likewise, prescribe different responses. Political metaphors, it seems, lend themselves to allegorical accounts that can provide comfort or a spur to action. We should choose our metaphors carefully, with the awareness that they are not just one-off comparisons but tools that can in themselves inspire political action.

Just as importantly, allegories have the power to shape how we interpret and act upon contemporary political events. We assimilate political events based on their fit to narratives from history such as, again, Jackson, Bryan, Long, McCarthy and so forth, but we also understand them with reference to fictional narratives. To understand this point, one need only ask oneself what fate befell William Jennings Bryan, and what fate befell Godzilla, Darth Vader, or any other well-known film icon. In an article on Deleuze and the Godzilla films, Martin-Jones and Brown (2012) note that we often see movies as representing societal conflicts, at the expense of considering how they present them. In other words, directors may consciously seek to present allegories of past events – as in the case of the original Godzilla movie and nuclear weapons testing or American imperialism – but this representation may, in turn, contribute to how we understand subsequent events. Cass Sunstein (2016) makes a strong case that the Star Wars

films and their narratives were seen by so many people that they played a role in discussions among political leaders. Political science does not have the tools to understand when fictional stories gain this role in our politics, but the fact that so many people reached for the Godzilla metaphor when Trump's presidential campaign began suggests that this is another example. Just because the Godzilla stories did not actually happen as originally told does not mean that they have not played a role in structuring our political discourse.

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