

Godzilla vs. the Giant Scissors: Cutting the Antiwar Heart out of a Classic

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Born in 1951 and raised in Chester, Pennsylvania, Brent Staples is an editorial writer for the *New York Times* and an influential commentator on American politics and culture. He earned a BA with honors from Widener University and studied at the University of Chicago on a Danforth Fellowship. There he earned a PhD in psychology. In 1994, he published a memoir, *Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White*, which won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His essays, such as "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Spaces," are frequently anthologized. The essay that follows appeared on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* in May 2005.

Film directors who once stood helpless while studios recut their movies can now console themselves with "directors' cuts" put out on DVD. This option was not available to the influential Japanese director Ishiro Honda, whose 1954 classic *Godzilla* — known in Japan as "Gojira" — made a household name of the towering reptile who stomped a miniature Tokyo into the ground while raking the landscape with his fiery thermonuclear breath.

A fire-breathing reptile is pretty much the same in any language. But the butchered version of the film that swept the world after release in the United States was stripped of the political subtext — and the anti-American, antinuclear messages — that had saturated the original. The uncut version of the film is due out on home video early next year, and should push serious *Godzilla* fans to rethink the 50-year evolution of the series. It should also show them that they were hoodwinked by the denatured Americanized version that dominated many of their childhoods in the late 20th century. At the same time, *Godzilla* fans are on the edge of their seats about a new film that should be released in the United States soon.

The original "Gojira" was never intended as a conventional monster-on-the-loose movie. Nor did it resemble the farcical rubber-suit wrestling matches or the domesticated movies (with *Godzilla* cast as a mammoth household pet) that the series degenerated into during the 1960s and 70s.

As the historian William Tsutsui reminded us in last year's cult classic, "Godzilla on My Mind," the 1954 movie was a dark, poetic production that dealt openly with Japanese misgivings about the nuclear menace, environmental degradation and the traumatic experience associated with World War II.

The nuclear annihilations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still fresh in mind when the famous Toho Company embarked on the "Gojira" project in 1954. But Japanese fear of nuclear catastrophe was given fresh impetus in the

2. Who is Staples's audience in addition to "serious *Godzilla* fans" (para. 2)? Does Staples give the impression that he himself is a fan? How does he characterize the serious fan?
3. In paragraph 10, Staples says, "The essence of *Godzilla* is that he keeps stomping relentlessly forward, no matter what you throw his way." What might the American *Godzilla* stand for?
4. Despite its serious subject, there is an undercurrent of humor in Staples's essay. How does Staples create the mock serious tone? Cite specific passages. What effect does it have on his message?
5. In paragraph 10, Staples compares the American *Godzilla* to the original. What is the effect of the images he creates for each one?
6. Staples's essay heralds both the rerelease of the original version of *Godzilla* and a new American film version. Watch several versions of *Godzilla*, and then discuss the ways they reflect the hopes and anxieties of the times in which they were made.