

# ***Shin Gojira: Return of the Angry God***

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## **Abstract**

*Shin Gojira returns to the original themes of horror and cultural commentary that were the foundation of the original 1954 film. It works as a running analogy to many of the most pressing issues on the mind of Japanese society at the time of this film's creation. It serves also as a window into these pressing issues and a medium through which we can look and understand these issues.*

Anno Hideki and Higuchi Shinji's 2016 film, *Shin Gojira*, literally translates as "the New Godzilla." It stands out as one of the few Godzilla films that could be called a horror film. *Shin Gojira* harkens back to the original with its tone and presents us with a slow film that is terrifying and touching through a conservative but effective portrayal of action and a graphic depiction of the human toll of the monster.

Apart from its novel and immersive blend of cinematography, the film is unique for how it packages its politics by being upfront about its key points but tactful in their presentation. It is not about the monster, but rather about Japan reminiscing on the success of the Japanese Economic Miracle or the optimism of 1954 when it was the success story of Asia. Now, Japan faces challenges to its very survival. At home, it has to cope with a geriatric government, economic stagnation, and a military with a questionable ability to defend the country. Abroad, it has growing enemies who are long-standing rivals and overbearing allies who are sometimes no better. All these things are made manifest in a film that takes us back to a Godzilla that is an angry god and not just a monster. It presents us a question of identity: as the old way of doing and being comes to an end, what identity will Japan make for itself? In trying to understand Japan and how it struggles with and will answer this question, analyzing *Shin Gojira* and its symbolism creates a window for us into the psyche of the Japanese people.

#### **A Chip on its Shoulder: Domestic Politics, Foreign Relations, and Military**

*Shin Gojira* is often more political drama than *Kaiju* film. The monster is used carefully, and large stretches of screen time are devoted to the government's attempts to respond to the crisis, or its relations with other countries. Japan's government appears cautious and bureaucratic, and the other nations of the world equally help and hinder Japan. Even the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is criticized in the movie for its inability to counter the monster. How the government, military, and foreign powers are portrayed tells us how anxious Japan is about its state of affairs.

##### *Domestic*

Japan would not be the first country to make a film critical of its government; neither is *Shin Gojira* the first Godzilla film to be critical. However, in *Shin Gojira*, criticism of government stagnation and bureaucracy is front and center.

Japan is an aging country. Those in power are old and getting older and want to do what is safe and conventional. This is what we see in *Shin Gojira's* critical depiction of the Japanese government. Throughout the film, the Prime Minister (PM) and the members of his cabinet are depicted as capable, if not exceptional, administrators during normal times. During exceptional times, like those in the film, they are inflexible and cling to procedure.

Before they even know what Godzilla is, or that he is the cause of the current crisis, our protagonist, Yaguchi, and a fellow aid are discussing what to do since the PM is not in.<sup>1</sup> This frames the story as a political one, dealing with two types of people, the young and able like Yaguchi, and the old and incompetent. The leader of the country is

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<sup>1</sup> *Shin Gojira*, directed by Hideaki Anno and Shinji Higuchi (2016, Tokyo: Toho Co. Ltd., 2017), DVD.

absent during a crisis. Even once the elderly PM arrives, his image does not much improve. He is not presented as unqualified; however, he is incapable of dealing with a crisis of such a monumental scale. A giant, constantly evolving monster may be something with which even the most exceptional leaders would struggle. However, a monster can easily be replaced with invasion by a foreign power, an unprecedented natural disaster, or a historic nuclear catastrophe.

The Fukushima Dai-ichii Nuclear Disaster was the worst in history. It was a part of a string of events that began with a magnitude 9.0-9.1 earthquake. This, in itself, was a tragedy, but Japan often experienced them and was prepared for one of this magnitude. Even the fifteen-meter tsunami that followed, which was large enough to sweep over seawalls, was a possibility they had prepared for.<sup>2</sup> No one was prepared for the subsequent failure at the Fukushima Dai-ichii nuclear plant.

When the tsunami hit, power and cooling were lost at three of the reactors. Further damage to the roads made access difficult. Non-essential personnel was evacuated, and a skeleton crew struggled to prevent a catastrophic meltdown and control any radiation leaks. Over the next few days, the situation became progressively worse as the reactors experienced explosions, leaks, and further damage. Eventually, a zone of evacuation was established around the plant. Four of the six reactors would suffer damage, and the presence of large amounts of spent—but still hot—radioactive fuel, as well as in-use fuel rods, complicated the situation.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the radioactive material that escaped from the plant went into the atmosphere and was primarily composed of elements with a half-life of only a few days.<sup>4</sup> and <sup>5</sup> Small amounts of contaminated water were vented into the ocean. Exactly how much radiation was released into the environment can only be estimated since most sensors were destroyed by the quake. A mandatory evacuation was extended out to a twenty-kilometer radius around the plant, which was later turned into an exclusion zone. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the area around Fukushima. It is considered the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986. The Fukushima Dai-ichii Disaster was an evolving and complex problem, only made more difficult by having to deal with quake and tsunami damage. Despite mitigating circumstances, it was not handled well. Later, the full scale of the incompetence with which the disaster was handled came to light.

Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), the operators of the plant, failed to properly prepare for such a disaster. The government regulators were also complicit. The Japanese courts ruled that Tepco was negligent for the failure to make proper preparation for a quake and tsunami of such magnitude in a country prone to them. The government

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<sup>2</sup>“Fukushima Daiichi Accident,” *World Nuclear Association*, October 2018, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-accident.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup>“Fukushima Daiichi Accident,” *World Nuclear Association*.

<sup>4</sup>“Fukushima Daiichi Accident,” *World Nuclear Association*.

<sup>5</sup> Author’s note: half-life is a term used to refer to the time it takes for a radioactive element to break down and lose its radioactivity.

was ruled negligent for failing to regulate Tepco and ensure the safety of the plant.<sup>6</sup> There were accusations of collusion between government regulators and the industry that created the lax standards, but this was not the end of controversy.

While the disasters—both the natural and nuclear—were still an ongoing crisis, the Japanese government was already facing accusations over lax regulation and their handling of the disaster, despite having dealt with preceding natural disasters well.<sup>7</sup> Their response to Fukushima was disorganized. Over the several-day attempt to get the reactors and radiation under control, the government struggled to deal with constantly evolving problems. There was a lack of communication between the different offices and teams trying to deal with the disaster. The PM at the time was not notified of the disaster until an hour after it had begun. There was a severe lack of cooperation between Tepco and the government.<sup>8</sup> Tepco was reluctant to cooperate and was defensive and lacked transparency. Instead of taking swift action, NISA (the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency) was relatively passive. It did not send a representative to communicate with Tepco.<sup>9</sup> Centers set up close to the disaster area to help with quick crisis response were hindered by personnel failing to arrive.<sup>10</sup>

At first, the government personnel in *Shin Gojira* believe the monster to be a strange natural phenomenon, and they handle it in an orderly and professional fashion.<sup>11</sup> The events begin strangely but not outside the limits of standard operating procedures. It is only when the monster comes ashore that he becomes a disaster. Throughout the film, the monster is a constantly evolving threat. The monster changes his form during different acts of the film, in parallel to the Fukushima disaster, and the incompetence with which he is handled is an equal parallel. The PM and his cabinet are consistently portrayed as indecisive and inept. Often they wait too long to make decisions because they do not have the stomach for hard choices. They spend so much energy trying not to make mistakes that they seem to fall into them. Early in the film, the PM and his cabinet members dismiss the idea that what is happening in the bay could involve a creature. In the same scene, the monster causes them to appear comically incompetent.<sup>12</sup> Nothing significant is achieved by the cabinet or the PM. The work that led them to the defeat of Godzilla does not come from firm leadership at the very top but from driven and innovative thinking from lower levels. The real change is driven by young and ambitious citizens who are beginning to become politically active and are eager to create

<sup>6</sup> Motoko Rich, "Japanese Government and Utility Are Found Negligent in Nuclear Disaster," *The New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/17/world/asia/japan-fukushima-nuclear-disaster-tepco-ruling.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Kaufmann and Veronika Penciakova, "Japan's Triple Disaster: Governance and the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Crises," Brookings Institute, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/japans-triple-disaster-governance-and-the-earthquake-tsunami-and-nuclear-crises/>.

<sup>8</sup> Akiyama Nobumasa, et al., *The Fukushima Nuclear Accident and Crisis Management*, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2012, [https://www.spf.org/jpus/img/investigation/book\\_fukushima.pdf](https://www.spf.org/jpus/img/investigation/book_fukushima.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Nobumasa, *The Fukushima Nuclear Accident*.

<sup>10</sup> Nobumasa, *The Fukushima Nuclear Accident*.

<sup>11</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>12</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

change.<sup>13</sup>

This criticism is from, not just the directors of this film, but the Japanese people. In the wake of the mishandled Fukushima event, a downward trend in government trust only accelerated.<sup>14</sup> Japan is a country that has a chronic problem of public mistrust of the government, and the Japanese government's handling of Godzilla, like its handling of Fukushima, is a clear criticism coming from public discontent.

### **Japan and its "Military"**

The JSDF is not a military; it is a self-defense force. The important difference is that a self-defense force is limited to only possessing those arms and equipment with defensive value and not those with primarily offensive value. This JSDF has tanks, helicopters, and enough artillery to repel an invasion. It does not have long-range bombers, true aircraft carriers, or sufficient offensive weaponry and logistics to be an aggressor. For Japan, especially with the pacifist sentiment that has dominated for the last few decades, this has not been a problem. While under the protective umbrella of the Cold War-era American military, and not facing any real challengers in the region, there was no reason to change the status quo. But in recent years things have changed. American military dominance is not what it used to be, even if the American commitment to Japan is no less now than it was twenty years ago. New threats have risen in the area, not just military threats in a nuclear-armed North Korea and strengthening of China, but economic threats as well.

In *Shin Gojira*, the JSDF does not make a good show of itself. The government is hesitant to let them do anything that might bring about civilian casualties, and so is the JSDF. The politicians are shown to be inflexible and overly cautious. It is clear that that JSDF is playing politics as well to guard its reputation. In other Godzilla films, the JSDF is sometimes instrumental in Godzilla's defeat, Godzilla does not even notice them in this film, even when they are ordered to act.

The JSDF is not thought of as military by many in Japan; it is considered more akin to a well-armed search and rescue service.<sup>15</sup> After WWII, the Japanese were afraid of a military as strong as the Imperial Army and Navy. They feared the political power of the military, which had led to the disastrous war and how a return to military strength would be perceived internationally. For decades, the people were willing to accept the pacifist constitution given to them by Occupying U.S. forces after the war. Japan has kept its defense force close to home and tried to avoid anything that resembled a show of force. Although the JSDF is respected for their high professionalism in humanitarian efforts, they are a small force that depends on the U.S. to make up for the firepower they lack.

The last time the JSDF is featured prominently is when they attempt to stop

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<sup>13</sup> "Students finally find their voice," *The Japan Times*, 2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/15/editorials/students-finally-find-voice/>.

<sup>14</sup> Kerstin Lukner, et al., "Japan's Political Trust Deficit," *Japan Forum* 29, no. 1 (2016): 1–18, doi:10.1080/09555803.2016.1227349.

<sup>15</sup> John Traphagan, "How Japan Sees its Military," *The Diplomat*, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/08/how-japan-sees-its-military/>.

Godzilla from reentering Tokyo after he returns. The JSDF throws everything it has at Godzilla—tanks, artillery, bombs, missiles, guns—but nothing works. A brilliant display of firepower becomes a spectacular display of impotence. The monster is not only unharmed but unfazed.<sup>16</sup>

In other Godzilla films, they at least get the monster's attention. In this film, Godzilla's utter disregard makes them look particularly useless. In contrast, although the American assault still fails to kill Godzilla, they wound him badly with considerably less effort.

The JSDF is a well-trained and equipped force, with some of the most advanced technology available. However, Japan is surrounded by some of the largest militaries in the world and by many countries that are much more militant. China, Russia, and North Korea have historically confrontational relations with Japan, dating back to WWII or farther. Most of its neighbors still hold lingering resentments over 20th-century wrongs, even among allies. The image of a Japan surrounded by enemies is not hard to understand. Their display of firepower shows us that the JSDF is a capable force. The quality of its men and equipment make it the equal of any military, but what it does not have puts it at a disadvantage. It lacks offensive weapons like intercontinental missiles, heavy bombers, and nuclear weapons, which have the power to actually hurt Godzilla. Yet surrounding countries such as China and Russia do possess intercontinental missiles and nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them.

Every year, the JSDF conducts live-fire drills called the Fuji Firepower Demonstration near Mt. Fuji. Similar to the scene from *Shin Gojira*, it is a well-orchestrated and impressive display, but some commenters argue that, as is seen in the film, it would only be a grand but ineffective show against a real enemy. In the face of fundamental flaws in the JSDF, well-orchestrated drills mean little.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, Japan has faced a number of threats from other countries. The firing of North Korean missiles over Japan helped bring current prime minister, Abe Shinzo, and his more hawkish policies to the forefront. This chain of events was already building in the background when *Shin Gojira* premiered. At that time, and arguably today, the much greater threat lies in China and its aggressive push to become a regional naval power to contend with the U.S.<sup>18</sup> These threats, and rising nationalism that PM Abe fosters, suggests that a more expansive and capable JSDF is called for.

PM Abe, when he was elected in 2014, made it clear that one of his goals was to change the constitution, article 9 in particular, and strengthen the JSDF's position, allowing for it to be deployed abroad if necessary. He upgraded the Defense Agency to a

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<sup>16</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>17</sup> Grant Newsham, "Japan's Military Has Some Serious Problems (As China's Military Gets Stronger)," *The National Interest*, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/japans-military-has-some-serious-problems-chinas-military-17613>.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 2018, <https://fas.org/spg/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>.

ministry and has taken other steps towards his goal of a more powerful JSDF.<sup>19</sup> Looking at current events, and back on the film, we can see the beginning of current trends already being illustrated in the weakness of the JSDF.

Japan is not fully committed to turning the JSDF into a military. Although the memories of WWII are no longer fresh, the lesson is still hard to forget, especially for Japan's elderly population. For this reason, it may be too soon to say that the film points to the beginning of an inevitable remilitarization. In recent years, however, Japan has started acquiring technologies and capabilities that are questionable under Article 9.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that Japan recognizes its relatively weak military posture. It is falling behind its neighbors and remains dependent on the U.S. China has already overtaken it economically, and recent events point to its continued dependence on the U.S. to supplement its defense. The filmmakers present a Japan critical of the JSDF and, through this, point to some of Japan's shortcomings.

### **America and the International Community**

It is easy to see this film as anti-American with the U.S. portrayal. The U.S. fluctuates between being Japan's closest friend or biggest bully from scene to scene. When one looks more closely at the criticism and the context, it is not directed as much at America, as it is at Japanese dependence on America and the position of "tributary" that this attitude has left the country.<sup>21</sup>

The U.S. is the most actively involved foreign nation in the film, and its military power is featured prominently. Apart from the mention of countries like China, or organizations like the U.N., there are two scenes where countries besides Japan or the U.S. are shown contributing. In one we see a German computer lab and the other the French ambassador.

One of the main supporting characters is a Japanese-American representative from the U.S. named Kayoko. In her first appearance, she is a stereotypical assertive American. She makes a John Wayne-esque arrival, wearing an aviator's jacket and immediately takes control of the conversation, presenting Yaguchi with a deal for information exchange that seems non-negotiable.<sup>22</sup> Next time, after the JSDF has failed to stop Godzilla, the United States informs the Japanese government that it plans to use conventional high-power bombs against Godzilla while he is in Tokyo. The film takes the time to tell us the bombers are carrying Massive Ordnance Penetrator, one of the largest non-nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal. The U.S. government does not request permission. The Japanese government can only make a chaotic attempt to save face and respond to a potentially wide-area urban bombing—a sly reference to the WWII carpet bombings so heavily symbolized in the 1954 film. The next time America appears is to tell

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<sup>19</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Where is Japan in Its Military Under Abe?" 2018, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2-18/03/where-is-japan-in-its-military-push-abe/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Long-range cruise missiles for the SDF's arsenal," *The Japan Times*, 2019, <https://www.japan-times.co.jp/opinion/2017/12/19/editorials/long-range-cruise-missiles-sdfs-arsenal/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>22</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

Japan that the U.S. is ready to use nuclear weapons to kill Godzilla. A closer look at these two scenes reveals some enlightening context.

America's role in the film, though often incredibly helpful, is usually that of a schoolyard bully, telling Japan what it should do or dictating what it will do to Japan. Before the bombing of Godzilla by B-2 heavy bombers (a weapon the JSDF cannot possess), the Americans have been helpful. They are not selfless but did not extort anything in exchange. Earlier in the film, a cabinet member even asks if the government can just have the Americans kill Godzilla to avoid a controversial deployment of its own forces.<sup>23</sup> In this scene and several others, we see references to the long-standing security arrangement between the U.S. and Japan. During the Economic Miracle, relying on the U.S. for defense allowed Japan to put all their resources into an economic recovery, and it worked. The old leaders of recently pacifist Japan are unwilling to break that mold and take action. It is still trying to shift its security burden onto the U.S.<sup>24</sup>

Bombing the middle of Tokyo without permission seems like a callous move by the Americans. When considering the long-standing security partnership between the two, it is not surprising that the Japanese government does not seem upset. The PM and his subordinates are merely insulted; they had so little warning or input, not that the Americans intervened. During the bombing scene, Yaguchi and several others are apparently excited by American success. This is the only point in the film where Godzilla is actually wounded.<sup>25</sup> Even in the final showdown, when he is defeated, no blood is ever drawn. At no point is the American attack condemned. In fact, the attack forces the monster into hibernation and gives the film's heroes time to find a way to defeat Godzilla. This scene may seem like American overbearing, but it only comes after the Japanese fail to stop the monster.

The next noteworthy moment for the Americans as the bully is when they tell the Japanese that, on behalf of the U.N., they intend to launch a nuclear missile at Godzilla before he wakes up, despite the resultant destruction of Tokyo.<sup>26</sup> This decision is condemned throughout the film, and many characters are clearly emotional at this apparent betrayal. Many not only come to accept this fact but also begin to rationalize it as the only correct decision. In one scene, a character tries to convince Yaguchi that, due to the building economic and humanitarian crisis from the monster, the only way to save Japan from imploding is with international aid promised in return for Japan's cooperation with the nuclear strike.<sup>27</sup>

The nuclear option was not, originally, an American plan. Kayoko tells Yaguchi that it was not Americans, but the Russians and Chinese, who pushed forward the plan.<sup>28</sup> Both countries have long-standing disputes with Japan, and in the case of China, it is

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<sup>23</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>24</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>25</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>26</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>27</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

<sup>28</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

becoming an active challenger in the region.<sup>29</sup> At this first mention of the plan, there is little to suggest that, with the backing of the U.N., the U.S. will be taking the lead against Godzilla.

The international community's decision to nuke Godzilla seems callous. It is important to note that the focus is never solely on the Americans in this respect, but often on the U.N., and surprisingly, Japan. The Japanese would consent to make Godzilla a U.N. problem, with America at the lead. The only people who can be said to be acting strangely are the Japanese, who are consenting to being the victims of a third nuclear attack. It is not unusual to see Americans taking the lead in multi-national military actions. Japan is a long-standing junior security partner to the U.S. The Japanese response is, unfortunately, not out of keeping with one of the major approaches to Japanese foreign policy, which is to simply follow the American lead. It is a strange parody to see Japan, a victim of nuclear war, trying to justify something it finds so appalling. This scene is not simply critical of the rest of the world; it is critical of Japan. Japan continues to do as it always has—follow the American lead and consent to American wishes.

This reflects on two of the major political divides in Japan—the conservative approach of keeping closely tied to the U.S. security and foreign policy in Asia, and the anti-clientelist who want Japan to carve its own path.<sup>30</sup> These ideologies roughly correspond to the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party,) and the former DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan,) two of the largest parties in Japanese politics at the time. The competition between the young officials striving to make change and the older leaders looking to follow convention illustrates the competition between the LDP and the DPJ. In this case, the directors are clearly taking the anti-clientelist perspective, portraying Japan as a country that lacks the determination to solve its problems on its own terms, or the resolve to fight America and the other world powers. It is a tributary, but only because it acts like one. If Japan stands up for itself, it can carve its own path instead of the one America, China, or the U.N. creates for it.

### **What Does the Future Hold?**

At the film's climax, humanity has won this time. But, we are warned that there may be more monsters, and we are shown that there are with every new Godzilla film. At the end of *Shin Gojira*, the constantly evolving monster Godzilla is shown to have been on the brink of splitting into thousands of smaller firms, which may have made it unstoppable.<sup>31</sup> This time, they barely managed to stop the monster. But will they be able to next time?

This is the question the movie leaves us with, and the question those seeking to understand a changing Japan must ask themselves. All that we see in the film have

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew L Oros, "Japan's Relative Decline and New Security Challenges in a Multipolar Asia," in *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 66-95.

<sup>30</sup> Margarita Estévez-Abe, "Feeling Triumphant in Tokyo: The Real Reasons Nationalism Is Back in Japan," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 165-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483416>.

<sup>31</sup> *Shin Gojira*, Anno.

been on the minds of the people of Japan as they tackle the metaphorical monsters of government, security, or economy the country must decide what new identity it will create. Since *Shin Gojira* premiered almost four years ago, and the concepts struggled within the film are starting to coming to fruition. You could call this monster North Korean aggression or China's increasing political, military, and economic power in Asia. It could be the rising number of natural and man-made disasters that call into question the health and safety of the Japanese.

Now, almost four years after the film's release, we can see some of these images coming to fruition. Japan has quietly and carefully acquired new weapons systems or adapted what it has. For a country facing challenges on all sides, this is not surprising. However, it is still divided over the question of the military. Even if it has offensive capability in practice, the principle of it still has great symbolic significance and divides the nation, perhaps now more than it has since WW II.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the generational gap between the old and careful and the new and hopeful has manifested in a variety of social movements regarding gender, sexuality, immigrants, and more. Japan is a country in transition. Through films like *Shin Gojira*, we can see the stresses of transition come alive the sources of fears, the possible solutions, and the monsters of daily life turned into something real that people can face and tackle through film.

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<sup>32</sup> William Sposato, "Shinzo Abe Can't Afford to Rest on His Laurels," *Foreign Policy*, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/24/japan-shinzo-abe-2020-prime-minister-rest-laurels/>.

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