

# ‘Every Kaiju Movie ever made’: fan collecting and curation of the *kaijū* film

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v21.i0.2703>



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 21 (2023)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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## **‘Every Kaiju Movie ever made’: fan collecting and curation of the *kaijū* film**

By Steven Rawle

There were no Godzilla films in either the critics’ or filmmakers’ *Sight and Sound* polls in 2022.<sup>1</sup> No giant monster movies made the top 250 critics’ choices, nor the top 100 filmmakers’ picks. Even Guillermo del Toro, who once described *Gojira* (Honda Ishirō, 1954) as ‘deep and affecting’,<sup>2</sup> and directed *Pacific Rim* (2013), his own take on the giant monster film, didn’t vote for a Godzilla film. The polls include classics of Japanese national cinema, with *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, Ozu Yasujirō, 1953) and *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no Samurai*, Kurosawa Akira, 1954) in the top 20 of both. Not counting co-productions,<sup>3</sup> there are six Japanese films in the top 100 directors’ choices, all directed by Ozu and Kurosawa, and none produced after 1957. The critics’ poll, unsurprisingly since it’s a longer list (250 as opposed to 100), features 13 Japanese films, again not counting co-productions,<sup>4</sup> 8 directed by Ozu and Kurosawa, 2 by Mizoguchi Kenji, and 3 produced by Studio Ghibli. This produces a very limited view of Japanese cinema, in specific national contexts and mostly aligned with conventional *auteurist* notions of art cinema traditions. *Gojira* remains perhaps the most impactful Japanese film ever made, spawning a host of imitations, and producing the *kaijū eiga* as a viable sub-genre at the intersection of horror and science fiction. In an ironic twist, since it was produced by the same studio, *Gojira* also features some of the same cast as *Seven Samurai*, iconic star Shimura Takashi, and Nakajima Haruo, a stunt player who was inside the monster suit for most of the Godzilla films in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

This article isn’t arguing for the inclusion of *Gojira*, or any Godzilla films, in lists such as these. What this paper is going to argue about is the narrow definitions created by such lists. Kurosawa, Ozu and Mizoguchi represent a common thread in the consideration of

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Japanese cinema. As Yomota Inuhiko has argued, the recurring focus on the trio as global representatives of Japanese cinema have been a consequence of the ‘readily fulfilled Orientalist desires’ that have been the subject of Japanese national cinema since the growth of *auteurist* criticism in 1950s Europe.<sup>5</sup> *Gojira* is ‘an antinuclear film with an ecological perspective’ born of the nightmare of the end of the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> It fits comfortably with notions of national cinema, but fails to conform with the *auteurist* dimensions of the majority of the films on the *Sight and Sound* list. The critics’ inclusion of three Studio Ghibli films, *My Neighbour Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*, Miyazaki Hayao, 1988), *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*, Takahata Isao, 1988) and *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, Miyazaki Hayao, 2001), represents a widening of the established canon, to include animated films, and each shares superficial similarities with *Gojira*: the presence of strange creatures (*kaijū* translates literally as ‘strange beasts’ and shares the 怪 (*kai*) kanji with the *kami*-like spirits *yōkai*) or the direct engagement with post-atomic horror. Nevertheless, they still fit largely with exoticist tropes, especially the Miyazaki films, often posited as alternatives to Hollywood animation. This would place them within common oppositional taste hierarchies, world cinema still often revolving around a Hollywood centre. In addition to this, it’s worth noting that monsters do appear on both lists: *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) features on both critics’ and filmmakers’ lists, and *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) are both on the critics’ lists. Genre cinema is therefore not excluded from such lists, but there is a preference for big budget Hollywood genre films.

The *Sight and Sound* list represents a legitimate canon. The list of voters covers a diverse list of filmmakers, academics and critics from around the world. It is inclusive, and the critics’ list in particular was lauded for voting Chantal Ackerman’s avant-garde feminist epic *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) the greatest film of all time. Yet, the list maintains a preference for a particular kind of cinema, generally *auteur*-led

art or arthouse cinema. As a self-proclaimed poll of ‘The Greatest Films of all Time’ it makes clear distinctions in terms of quality and represents a defined taste culture.<sup>7</sup> Some responses to the poll focused on what were seen as niche successes. An *All the Anime* blog celebrated the poll’s promotion of anime, and scraped the raw votes to construct a list of ‘the Best Anime Films of all Time’, highlighting filmmakers whose work was voted for, but not within the 250, including Kon Satoshi, Otomo Katsuhiro and Anno Hideaki. This piece celebrated ‘a world where we only valued the opinions of those with notable taste and distinction (i.e. the 8% of critics and 5% of directors who included an anime on their top 10)’.<sup>8</sup> The sub-Reddit r/Letterboxd conducted their own poll, and published a list that overlapped strongly with the *Sight and Sound* one, but arguably more conservative: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) beat *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) to the top spot. But there were also more surprising inclusions: Obayashi Nobuhiko’s *House (Hausu)*, (1977) was just outside the top 50, and *Top Gun: Maverick* (Joseph Kosinski, 2022) was ranked higher (203) than Ozu’s *Late Spring (Banshun)*, (1949) (215). Still, no *Godzilla*. Such lists speak to the curation and cultivation of canons by a range of gatekeepers, filmmakers, professional and validated critics and fans.

The development of alternative and oppositional lists is central to the discussion of cinema. But, what of the films deemed too alternative to fit into such validated canons? How do we account for how fans curate genres or forms through lists and collecting that share and promote such disreputable experiences? This article will explore how *kaijū* fan communities play a key role in defining the ‘disreputable’ *kaijū* film. Due to its fragmentation outside official distribution channels, fans play a key role in curating a *kaijū* canon. Adopting a conventional Fan Studies approach to netnography,<sup>9</sup> combined with a ‘platform studies approach’,<sup>10</sup> this article investigates the labour of *kaijū* fans on Letterboxd, along with several wikis. Letterboxd is a quasi-social media platform that allows users to build lists and

communicate with other film fans, share recommendations and review films. It is an open platform that allows sharing, rating and commenting, and thus forms the bulk of the exploration here.

Letterboxd lists of *kaijū* films can cover anything from the ‘classics’, Tōhō’s *Godzilla* films and other Japanese *kaijū eiga*, to collections of over 2000 works featuring giant monsters of every kind, covering everything from major studio movies to fan films. Rumours circulate among fans of lost classics, such as *Tokyo 1960* (Teodorico C. Santos, 1960), a Filipino version of *Gojira*, while digitised VHS rips of obscure Taiwanese films like *War God* (*Zhànshén*, Chan Hung-man, 1974) are shared online. They perform the labour of cultivating a global *kaijū* film. They fit with ways that Lucia Nagib discusses world cinema: it ‘is not a discipline, but a method, a way of cutting across film history according to waves of relevant films and movements, thus creating flexible geographies’.<sup>11</sup> *Kaijū* fans are highly attentive to geographies and politics, especially given the origins of the genre, but their collecting and curating can draw attention to complex dynamics of national and transnational boundaries.

### **The *kaijū* canon**

Canon formation can be an ongoing process of collecting, sharing and validation that can completely disregard notions of quality. The *kaijū eiga* has long had a noted place in cult film canons. It is considered a quintessentially paracinematic experience,<sup>12</sup> and has a privileged place within bad film canons.<sup>13</sup> However, since *kaijū* films have often fallen outside conventional mainstream distribution, in exploitation and low-budget cycles, there is often a fragmented picture of this horror/sci-fi sub-genre. The films can often fall into the cracks between Ramon Lobato’s distinctions of formal and informal distribution, and ‘shadow film economies’.<sup>14</sup>

Fans, therefore, play a key role in collecting and sharing the *kaijū* canon. The briefest online search can easily find sites in which *kaijū* films and examples of *kaijū* are shared by fans, as a means of genrifying.<sup>15</sup> Two wikis, ‘Gojipedia’ and ‘Wikizilla’, both help collect examples of the *kaijū* film from around the globe as a means of sharing and discussing giant monster movies. The industrial roots of the *kaijū* film range back to the 1920s and 1930s and the production of very early examples of dinosaur and giant ape films, principally Harry O. Hoyt’s *The Lost World* (1925) and *King Kong* (Edgar Wallace and Merian C. Cooper, 1933). *Gojira* emerges from producer Tanaka Tomoyuki’s need for an idea to replace a production that had collapsed. *King Kong*’s popular global release to mark its twentieth anniversary and the new American film *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugène Lourié, 1953) provided the inspiration for new type of big monster movie, different from that of the atomic-era movies being produced by American studios at the time, rooted in the atomic nightmares of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.<sup>16</sup> By the late 1950s, Japanese critics were discussing the *kaijū eiga* alongside *kaiki eiga* (strange stories) as a form of the horror film, but they soon became *passé* as the films became more childish and horror more fashionable through foreign imports.<sup>17</sup> *Kaijū* wikis echo the transnational roots of the genre. On the surface, they are devoted to Japanese *kaijū* films, but collect and reference monsters from around the world. This ranges from the monsters from Japanese studios, Tōhō’s universe of monsters, and those from rival studio Daiei’s Gamera movies. But they sit comfortably alongside Kong and its sequels, the more recent Legendary series of Godzilla and Kong films, as well as del Toro’s *Pacific Rim*.

What’s immediately apparent in *kaijū* fans’ canonisation of their object of fandom is how flexible they appear in their approach toward national criteria. The term *kaijū* is applied to films from any country, from Japan, Taiwan, Denmark, Britain, as well as the US. This sits relatively comfortably with the ways in which Bâ & Higbee define de-westernization in their collection, *De-Westernizing Film Studies*. As they describe the concept, de-westernization: ‘is

(and embraces) the reality of how economically and culturally, films, filmmakers and our analyses, function across national and/or cultural borders and boundaries in the current phase of globalization. This functioning takes place in a way that (paradoxically) challenges the hegemony of the West at the same time as it appears to reinforce it'.<sup>18</sup> The paradox of a form that adopts a Japanese term for its name but that is also a product of mid-twentieth century post-war occupation and globalisation sees fans engage with tropes of nation in their conceptualisation of the *kaijū* film. The canon does not subscribe to a particular frame of reference to national cinemas or cultural standards of filmmaking (the neocolonial reference to Hollywood as the aspirational pinnacle of standards). However, it paradoxically adopts terminology that periodises the *kaijū* film through Japanese imperial periods. 'Gojipedia' utilises a timeline of Japanese Emperors to define periods of production. Hirohito's *Shōwa* reign from 1926 to 1989 is used to classify films up until around 1980, encompassing the monster boom of the 1960s up until around *Gamera: Super Monster (Uchū Kaijū Gamera, Yuasa Noriaki, 1980)*. *Heisei*, the period of Akihito's reign, covers all films between 1984 and 1999, despite the reign lasting till the emperor's abdication in 2019. Millennium describes films made around the turn of the century when Tōhō took a break from producing Godzilla movies to allow for the 1998 Hollywood version directed by Ronald Emmerich. Naruhito's reign is known as *Reiwa*, and this term covers *kaijū* films produced since 2016 – following *Shin Gōjira* (Anno Hideaki & Higuchi Shinji) – unless they form part of the Legendary Monsterverse. The flexible periodisation of 'Gojipedia' means that Japanese terms are applied to a range of non-Japanese films, including British film *Konga* (John Lemont, 1961), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Zarkorr! The Invader* (Michael Deak and Aaron Osborne, 1996), a low budget straight-to-video production.

This online fan canonisation represents a form of 'narractivity', Paul Booth's term for the ways in which web commons models of collaborative fandom produce databases of

knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Canon building is a form of databasing that produces an object, in this case a quasi-genre with a core set of terminology. That terminology is not solely a product of online narrativity, since the terms used to describe the *kaijū* film are well established pre-internet, in a range of publications and fanzines, such as *G-FAN* (1993-present), *The Monster Times* (1972-1976), *Japanese Giants* (1974-2004), as well as the long-running *Famous Monsters of Filmland* (1958-2019). But these canons now sit online in various forms, with ‘Wikizilla’ and ‘Gojipedia’ just two of those forms. While there is a primary focus on Japanese monsters and movies (this might be described as a purist approach, to which I’ll return later), the canon that develops is one that is largely transnational. It subscribes to Bâ & Higbee’s paradox, at once a product of a form of globalisation while simultaneously adopting a centre away from Hollywood. We can view fans canon building as de-Westernization,

an ongoing *process* that enables debate and negotiation [...] defined more in terms of a shared attitude toward the need for a more diverse approach to [...] film history [...] than a given geographical location[...] In this context, [...] de-Westernizing also becomes the act (through theory and practice) of exposing, challenging, and thus repositioning the West’s dominance (real and imagined) as a conceptual “force,” representational norm, epistemological center, and ontological “fact”.<sup>20</sup>

This returns us to the initial focus of the article, most established greatest films canons retain a focus on the West as centre and fact. *Kaijū* fan processes of canonisation posit a centre away from Hollywood. While such a position does rely upon a colonial history and neocolonial relationship, the hierarchisation of nation is problematised by many *kaijū* fans.

### **The purist *kaijū* canon**

Kevin Derendorf’s book *Kaijū for Hipsters: 101 “Alternative” Giant Monster Movies* is a self-published reference tome of *kaijū* movies, from major movies to X-rated examples such



as *Cleavagefield* (Jim Wynorski, 2009), *King Dong* (Yancey Hendrieth, 1984) or *Chinkozilla* (*Chin Kojira*, Nakamura Rino, 2016). Derendorf acknowledges what we might refer to as a ‘cultural roots’<sup>21</sup> argument about the origins of *kaijū* films. As he notes, there are fans who would see American films like *Pacific Rim* or *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2009) disqualified. Derendorf classifies *kaijū* films based on their proximity to the tradition established by *Gojira* and the special effects work of Tsuburaya Eiji. They ‘build on the Japanese tradition’ more than films that might have the word *kaijū* in their translated titles, but ultimately don’t reflect Tsuburaya’s influence, such as *The Monster from Green Hell*,<sup>22</sup> a 1957 B-picture released in Japan as *Konchū kaijū no shūrai*, literally *Invasion of Insect Monsters*.

In a post on his blog, Maser Patrol, Derendorf also reflects on the nature of the term *kaijū* and its national specificity. He suggests that foreign *kaijū* could be reclassified: ‘utilizing the kanji that already exists for foreignness (外), and shortening those “gaikoku kaiju” down to just “gai-jū”, like the slang term “gaijin” for foreign people’.<sup>23</sup> As we consider the constitution of such canons, Derendorf here is attempting, in two different fashions, to determine what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’ through notions of national specificity. This is notable as Derendorf is a high profile *kaijū* fan, someone that Matt Hills would determine to be a subcultural celebrity: as ‘fan culture sustains its own specific network of subcultural celebrities’.<sup>24</sup> Such fans, Hills argues, are ‘working at the level of secondary textuality’.<sup>25</sup> Respected *kaijū* fans like Derendorf, along with SpaceHunterX, Steve Ryfle, August Ragone, JD Lees, play a different role in defining the *kaijū* canon to that of the mostly anonymous fans whose narrativity contributes to the curation of the *kaijū* film. This could be in collecting and showcasing different versions of films,<sup>26</sup> determining the parameters of what constitutes a *kaijū* in the first place,<sup>27</sup> or, importantly, denouncing appropriations of the *kaijū* film by Hollywood.<sup>28</sup> This final point, positioning texts outside the canon of the *kaijū* film,

often because they whitewash the Japanese films' origins,<sup>29</sup> ultimately shape what is 'out', not just determining what is 'in'.

As Derek Kompare argues in his chapter, "Fan curators and the gateways into fandom", such activity is at the heart of the activity of fans. Fans curate the objects of their fandom, creating unofficial canons in a variety of ways: 'The most basic form of curation is *suggested canon*: simply *suggesting, loaning, copying, or gifting* additional material to interested fans. This canon is likely not "official," but is based instead on the *curator's perceptions* of fannish texts, and their relationship to their fandom.'<sup>30</sup> The examples above all revolve around aspects of *suggested canon*, via the *kaijū* fan's 'secondary textuality'. Ultimately, Kompare sees such curation as contributing to *Encyclopedic media*, which he describes as 'the most common form of curated fan media, the perspectives that fans research, write, discuss, and argue about'.<sup>31</sup> Polls like the *Sight & Sound* list are also examples of *encyclopedic media*, where 'elite fans', as Matt Hills might refer to them,<sup>32</sup> the scholars or celebrity fans whose reputations 'combine the symbolic and discursive power of subcultural celebrity status with industry power', namely the filmmakers and critics whose fandom overlaps with their 'media-professionalism'.<sup>33</sup> Such lists therefore represent 'secondary textuality' in relation to a fan's curation of the genre, from whatever perspective that is manifest. As Philipp Dominick Keidl has argued in response to the growth of fan-run museums, such curation relies upon 'subcultural networks and intermediaries that represent a crucial space for community building'.<sup>34</sup>

To explore how alternative lists can be defined in relation to the genre-building function of such lists and *kaijū* fandom, this study has looked at Letterboxd as way of determining how oppositional lists can be understood. Letterboxd features over 250 lists that match the tag *kaijū*.<sup>35</sup> Associated terms deliver variable numbers of lists: *daikaijū* (26), *tokusatsu* (特撮, "special filming", the term used mostly to refer to *Henshin* [transforming

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series like *Ultraman* [1966-present]) (188), *Godzilla* (250+), *Gamera* (250+), Toho kaijū (64), Daiei kaijū (2), American kaijū (15), King Kong (250+), strange beasts (5), Japanese kaijū (14, including several that highlight the non-inclusion of *Godzilla* or that are just non-*kaijū* Japanese films). This spread of lists is not terribly revealing, although we might argue that as terms become more niche, such as *daikaijū*, or more refined in their relationship with national cinemas, such as identifying Japanese studios or specific national cinemas, the lists become less numerous. In terms of canon building impulses though, several lists seem to stand out. For this purpose, I want to look at several lists, all of which matched a search for the term *kaijū* and have more than 10 likes, and preferably comments, as they contribute to an ongoing discussion amongst viewers about the composition and understanding of the *kaijū* film. This represents 8 lists, each of which demonstrate flexible demonstrations of their understanding of what constitutes a *kaijū* and varying degrees of deference toward national origins. Such lists make little concession to notions of quality or, in some cases, media, shifting across various forms.

All the lists represent Kompare's ideas of how fans manufacture *suggested canon*, some more flexibly than others. The first list I want to discuss is simply entitled 'Kaiju', by William Carpenter, and is described as 'The chronology of the kaiju, starting with the true start of King Kong.' The list is tagged 'kaiju', 'king kong', 'godzilla', and curiously, 'foreign' and 'black and white' (perhaps in reference to *Gojira*). This list collects 76 films, only 14 of which are not Japanese. It includes 31 of the 32 Tōhō *Godzilla* films (not including *Shin Godzilla*), alongside a handful of other Tōhō *kaijū* films, such as *Mothra* (*Mosura*, Honda Ishirō, 1961), *Varan the Unbelievable* (*Daikaijū Baran*, Honda Ishirō, 1958) and *Frankenstein Conquers the Earth* (*Furankenshutain tai Chitei Kaijū Baragon*, Honda Ishirō, 1965). It also features all 12 of Daiei/Kadokawa's *Gamera* films and the mid-1960s *Daimajin* trilogy. The relatively small number of non-Japanese *kaijū* films include fairly predictable

examples, such as *The Lost World*, *King Kong*, its sequels and 1976 remake, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and some of the Legendary series (the list was last updated in 2020, so this does not include *Godzilla vs. Kong*). North Korean film *Pulgasari* (Shin Sang-ok, 1985) and British *Gorgo* (Eugène Lourié, 1961) are also included. This list represents perhaps the best evocation of the tradition that Derendorf alluded to, with a lineage of special effects practitioners from Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen to Tsuburaya (who was heavily influenced by *King Kong*, to the point where the Go- in *Gojira* is adopted from gorilla). There is a clear continuity communicated through this list. What is perhaps most of interest is what is missing from the list: Peter Jackson's remake of *King Kong* (2005) and Emmerich's reviled American version of *Godzilla* (1998). The latter is so detested by Godzilla fans that the monster design from the film is conventionally referred to as GINO (Godzilla-in-name-only). This therefore represents something of a 'purist' canon of *kaijū* movies, aligned with established narratives around the development of the form, its core influences and the main studios responsible for its key works. As many commentaries about the *kaijū* film have done,<sup>36</sup> this tends to essentialise the 'Japaneseness' of the *kaijū* movie, even if it alludes to the transnational background to its formation.<sup>37</sup>

Other *kaijū* Letterboxd lists also follow the pattern of highlighting the core Japaneseness of the giant monster film. 'Kaiju!', a list by MadCetologist, an active user with 75 lists, has just 45 films. Around half are Godzilla films, with a smattering of Tōhō films, including *Rodan* (*Sora no Daikaijū Radon*, Honda Ishirō, 1956) and *Space Amoeba* (*Gezora Ganime Kamēba Kessen! Nankai no Daikaijū*, Honda Ishirō, 1970), but also a few American films, including three Legendary MonsterVerse films, *Colossal* (Nacho Vigalondo, 2016), an independent film in which a *kaijū* attacking Seoul is controlled by a young woman experiencing mental illness exacerbated by the toxic masculinity around her, and *The Amazing Colossal Man* (Bert I. Gordon, 1957). Emmerich's *Godzilla* is included, but receives

the lowest rating of all from MadCetologist. The function of Letterboxd to sort lists by individual users' and average ratings emphasises a further function of *suggested canon*, not simply the inclusion of films within a canon, but rankings and ordering that recommend and suggest orders in which films should be watched or the best pathways into that canon. Lists like this one and the 'Kaiju' list, while they are aligned with the conventional narratives around the origins and essentialism of the *kaijū* movie, are much less niche in the curation of obscure films. They are generally bound by films that are readily commercially available (especially in the US), whereas other lists, which take a less purist approach to narratives of nation or notions of 'quality' rely much more on fan labour for their objects.

### **Every *kaijū* film ever made**

There are a few *kaijū* Letterboxd lists that promise an exhaustive curation of giant monster movies: the Raccoon Archives' list 'Kaijū: Every Kaijū Movie ever made', includes 366 texts, collecting *tokusatsu* films and TV shows; 'Strange Beasts: A Comprehensive List of Creature Features and Genre Films Starring Kaijū, Daikajū, Dinosaurs, and Giant Monsters', by Stephen Bush, is an ongoing list of 1421 texts dating back to 1905 with all sorts of giant monsters; while 'The Complete Kaiju/Tokusatsu Guide 1921 - Present (Refined)', a list of 'kaiju/ kaiju adjacent films and tokusatsu films', by Trey Sharp, features 2026, with dozens more listed that are not featured on Letterboxd. Such lists disregard more essentialist narratives around the national origins of the *kaijū*, collecting films from around the world, with little conscious focus on medium, quality or the popular availability of such films. They reflect the labour of fan sharing, collecting and suggestion. Since many of the films fall outside popular distribution channels, into the shadow economies of cinema, the very existence and discussion of some films is the product of fan discussion, rumour and myth. Since some films are lost, partially lost, or only available in poor quality VHS dubs, complete lists such as these reflect some of the fan mythology shared by sites like Letterboxd,

‘Wikizilla’, ‘Gojipedia’, and the many *kaijū* podcasts, such as *Kaijū Transmissions*, *Kaijū Curry House*, *Monster Island Commentaries*, and *Podzooky*.<sup>38</sup>

Many commentators have discussed distinctions of fan labour and the ways it contributes to knowledge production in a variety of fashions. Sandra Annett has argued that anime fans are ‘adding to’ conversations that are transcultural in nature.<sup>39</sup> There is no distinct general vision provided by a fandom (understanding fan communities is not a case of ‘adding up’ conversations), but fan work is plural by nature. Similarly, Jamie Sexton has celebrated the ‘hard work’ of fans whose transnational activity collects and shares knowledge of national texts.<sup>40</sup> Booth’s conception of fandom relies upon socialised knowledge of etiquette, sharing, gifting and re-gifting. Such ‘digi-gratis’ work helps manufacture the ‘narrative database’ accessible to all fans, whether they contribute to that base of knowledge or not,<sup>41</sup> a process Tisha Turk has described as ‘fundamentally asymmetrical’ as not all gifts are reciprocated.<sup>42</sup> Suzanne Scott has explored how the feminization of fan gift economies functions as ‘a defensive front to impede encroaching industrial factions.’ Producers’ attempts to appropriate those gifts into commercial networks are largely through male gatekeepers: ‘male audiences are more valued and courted... [U]sers [...] consume and create in a fanboyish manner by acknowledging some genres of fan production and obscuring others.’<sup>43</sup> This is problematic in this regard, as most *kaijū* fans are male. Just 5 of the approximately 50 speakers at 2022’s G-FEST convention in Chicago were female, and the majority of elite *kaijū* fans are male. This appears to be mirrored in the lists under discussion here – the majority of gatekeepers here are male, but not exclusively so. Nevertheless, the type of fan labour being discussed here is of the kind defined by Scott, Turk and Booth, gratis and gifted. The more exhaustive lists mentioned here however do define those creators as elite in relation to the depth of their knowledge, and their labour is of the kind described by Meicheng Sun: they are ‘distinguishing themselves from ordinary audience members and the self-proclaimed fans

who do not expend money, time, or energy on their idols'<sup>44</sup> by aiming to curate encyclopedic media that demonstrates engagement with deep knowledge of the *kaijū* film, far beyond that of the casual viewer, in significantly subcultural ways. Such lists also synthesise knowledge from the 'narrativity' of other fans, building on the dispersed communal archives available online.

'The Complete Kaiju/Tokusatsu Guide 1921 - Present (Refined)' highlights aspects of the ways in which fan curation can aim to develop a broadly inclusive canon of works that collect lost, unknown and diverse work that fall outside conventional distribution and emphasise the subcultural labour of such fan practices. This list is a mind-boggling collection of films, both features and shorts, and TV shows, both extant and rumoured. It features everything from exploitative mockbusters, like *Monster vs. Ape* (Daniel Lusko, 2021), The Asylum's *Godzilla vs. Kong* knockoff, major Hollywood blockbusters (Emmerich's film is included), *anime* (Anno Hideaki is very well represented), *yōkai* films, even effects-heavy horror films like *House* are featured. Several films however are representative of aspects of fan labour that reflect collecting and sharing and ways in which canon building relies on other fan practices, as well as how suggested canon can broaden the horizons of what is typically reflected in more essentialised lists.

*Tokyo 1960* is one such film. The film appears in most of the most exhaustive lists of *kaijū* and in a total of 59 lists devoted to *kaijū*, *Godzilla* and Japanese horror films. It also appears on lists of lost Filipino films. The film is legend amongst fans after the existence of the Pinoy film was highlighted by a blog devoted to lost Philippine cinema.<sup>45</sup> But, it's important to note, nobody appears to have seen this film since 1957, and it is ultimately an object of niche fan knowledge. The original post that referenced the film points to the existence of a series of Pinoy films in the 1950s that borrowed tropes from films made in the US and Japan. The poster shows *Godzilla*, devouring a train in its jaws, while the faces of the

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film's stars, Tessie Quintana, Eddie Del Mar and Zaldy Zshornack, look on. Japanese names from the film seem to have been erased, replaced with the Filipino crew. Fan theories speculate that the film is a localisation in the vein of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (Honda and Terry O. Morse, 1956), the American version of *Gojira* that inserted Raymond Burr into the action as an observer. SpaceHunterX's video essay on the multiple versions of *Gojira* also 'compares' the film with the other alternate versions produced by German and French distributors, both of which remain in circulation due to fan sharing of VHS copies. Hence, the 'hard work' of fans here is 'adding to' discussions of *suggested canon*, highlighting subcultural knowledge of lost and mythic works that help define the completist canon of the *kaijū* film.

*War God* is another film referenced in similar tones, a little-seen mid-1970s film directed by Chen Hung-Min, who was best known for his martial arts films. This is a Trans-East Asian film, Taiwanese but set in Hong Kong, with special effects by Takano Koichi, a Japanese technician whose work include dozens of *Ultraman* episodes and the *Monkey (Saiyūki)* TV show. Koichi Iwabuchi's notion of 'Trans-East Asia as Method' emphasises a vision of the region as a 'dialogic communicative space in which people across borders strive to connect'.<sup>46</sup> Films like *War God* are the dialogic potentials of the *kaijū* film, speaking strongly to cross-border connectivity within these spaces. The story is very particularly Chinese. It centres on a family divided by modernity and tradition. The father is obsessed with carving statues, haunted by the loss of his wife. His son is a scientist, experimenting with bees. There is also a daughter who is a tearaway, riding motorbikes and hanging out with bad boys. The story maps traditional conservative values onto the giant monster action. The father is a representative of traditional cultural values. He is motivated by his obsession to produce the perfect statue of third century General Guan Yu, a deified god from the Three Kingdoms era. As his eyes fade, he tries to open those of the statue of the deity. Aliens then



invade. They demand that humanity destroy its nuclear arsenal after an explosion in outer space has disrupted the atmosphere. The old man's daughter is kidnapped to be their emissary, but she's such a troublemaker nobody believes her, even when the weather superheats and then suddenly freezes. Eventually, the general returns in giant form, which leads to the monster action. The film seems to riff on ideas shared with two Daiei movies: *Warning from Space* (*Uchūjin Tokyo ni arawaru*, Shima Koji, 1956) and *Daimajin* (Yasuda Kimiyoshi, 1966). It lifts the literal warning from space from the former and a prayer to a statue that becomes a giant monster from the latter. The identification of the film as a *kaijū* movie (supplanting the language of Japan onto former colonised nations' filmmaking in the process) relies on levels of knowledge, not just the derivative similarities between other movies, but also the role of Takano as a worker across borders. However, unlike *Tokyo 1960*, the film remains in circulation, but in a poor condition version shared widely online. The video quality is poor, since it is a dub of a VHS, with blurry images and difficult to read burned in subtitles (figure 1). The existence of the film echoes earlier sharing, the traces of VHS a reflection of the film's marginal production, but also reminding of earlier forms of fan curation, when 'curators functioned as "tape hubs"' in the 1970s and 80s'.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 1: The low resolution and artefacts of the VHS rip of *War God* testify to its source as a copy shared many times by fans (Hsing Hua Film Production Company/Tai Ji Film Company/Cathay).

### **Conclusion: Discovering new canon**

Like the *Sight & Sound* list, curated lists of suggested canon have the capacity to enable discovery of new films. They can validate previously unknown media and broaden the understanding of a genre. While the first lists considered in this article were more purist in their devotion to Japanese *tokusatsu* and *kaijū* media, the more exhaustive lists encompass wider sets of films, appeal to different taste cultures and suggest a more diverse audience for niche media than perhaps expected from other visions of *kaijū* fandoms. Alternative canons that aim at completeness, regardless of distinctions of taste, can both help fans discover new works and show off the elite fans' superiority in curating 'every *kaijū* film ever made', even if that collection might reflect communal effort.

The inclusion of short and fan-produced films represents areas that more conventional lists of cinema tend to overlook. Some of those shorts have been in circulation for a long time and are well known by fans, such as *Bambi Meets Godzilla* (Marv Newland, 1969). This is a short, under two minutes, animated film. Most of the running time is credits. A young deer

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grazes happily in a peaceful field. Suddenly, a huge lizard's foot stamps on it. The William Tell overture is replaced by a slowed discordance from The Beatles' 'A Day in a Life' as the *kaijū's* giant foot flattens the fawn. This is a well-known short to many *kaijū* fans, having played with the cinema and VHS releases of *Godzilla 1985* (R.J. Kizer, Koji Hashimoto, 1985), New World Cinema's localised version of *Gojira* (Hashimoto, 1984). Other inclusions are less well known commercials, such as *Minions x Godzilla x Toho Cinema Collaboration Movie* (2015), a short sting for Tōhō Cinemas in which some Minions are scared off by Godzilla.

Other films are less common in the *kaijū* canon, and reflect different appropriations. Alternative canon building can help share and spotlight films that would ordinarily fall outside other means of canonising media. Stop-motion artist Cressa Maeve Beer's short *Coming Out* (2020) is one such film. It begins *in media res* with Godzilla fighting horned enemy Baragon.<sup>48</sup> Godzilla is distracted by a sad Godzilla Junior, who we see watching Sailor Moon and hear crying on the bed while their parent looks on. The young *kaijū* asks to speak to Godzilla, and, over tea, explains they don't feel male but are female (this is captioned with gender symbols). They hug, and we see Godzilla wearing reading glasses and researching on their laptop. We subsequently see the giant monster knitting. It's revealed to be a trans flag (figure 2). The monsters return to the fight with Baragon (who is patiently waiting with mug and book in hand), Godzilla Junior now with a pink bow in her hair. Beer explained that the story behind the film drew from her own experience of losing her father: 'He was the one who introduced me to Godzilla when I was little, and then our last conversation ended up being my coming out to him as Transgender'.<sup>49</sup> While the film was shared at the time of its release by Tōhō and Legendary's official social media accounts, the inclusion of films like *Coming Out* in fan curated lists helps to draw attention to works that would conventionally sit outside more mainstream interpretations of canon.



Figure 2: The inclusion of *Coming Out* within the canon of kaiju films enables a broadening of canon beyond the conventional politics and forms of the sub-genre (Cressa Maeve Beer).

Film lists like the ones that have been discussed throughout this article can perform multiple functions. Like the more widely reported *Sight and Sound* list, they enable discovery for more general audiences, and draw attention to lesser-known works. The elevation of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* to the position of ‘Greatest Film of All Time’ did just that, sparking a range of discussion, even if some of it descended into misogyny. However, the elite voters of that list continued to elevate particular kinds of cinema and taste to the forefront of cinephile culture. The focus remained largely on classic Hollywood and *auteur*-led art cinema from around the globe, mostly Europe. Distinctions of cultural capital and taste exclude different kinds of cinema experiences and types of media that alternative and fan curated lists draw attention to. Such lists rely upon different subcultural distinctions, drawing upon an archive of fan-curated knowledge and encyclopedic media. They reflect and draw upon the ‘hard work’ of fan labour, sharing and narrating myths of lost films and works that could only be seen on poor quality VHS dubs shared ad infinitum. Ultimately, they perform some of the work of de-Westernization, posting a

cinematic centre away from Hollywood and Europe. While this does fit with tropes of Orientalism in some cases, the curation of the *kaijū* film by its fans creates a genuinely transnational and transcultural space that genrifies the *kaijū* film.

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<sup>1</sup> British Film Institute, “The Greatest Films of All Time”, British Film Institute, 1 December 2022, accessed May 2023, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/greatest-films-all-time>.

<sup>2</sup> Criterion Collection, “Guillermo del Toro on Godzilla”, Criterion Collection, 11 July 2013, accessed May 2023, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2830-guillermo-del-toro-on-godzilla>.

<sup>3</sup> I’ve discounted two Japanese co-productions, Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* (1999) and Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga* (2001) since they sit in different national traditions.

<sup>4</sup> There are 6 Japanese co-productions on the list, included *Yi Yi* and *La ciénaga*, along with films in other national cinema traditions, such as *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) and *Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Inuhiko Yomota, *What Is Japanese Cinema? A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Some responses to the list were not especially surprising. The *National Review* bemoaned ‘the end of popular cinema’ via a ‘an inarguably political choice, made by radical Marxist feminists’ (Armond White, “Sight & Sound Poll Results: The End of Popular Cinema.” *The National Review*, 7 December 2022, Accessed May 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/12/sight-sound-poll-results-the-end-of-popular-cinema/>); filmmaker Paul Schrader complained the winner ‘undermined... the poll’s credibility’ and complained of ‘politically correct rejiggering’ and ‘a landmark of distorted woke reappraisal’ (Christian Zilko, “Paul Schrader Slams ‘Jeanne Dielman’ Topping Sight &

Sound Poll as ‘Distorted Woke Reappraisal’.”, *Indiewire*, 3 December 2022, accessed May 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/paul-schrader-sight-and-sound-poll-too-woke-1234787868/>).

<sup>8</sup> Mike Atherton, “*Sight & Sound & Anime*”, *All the Anime*, 12 March 2023, accessed May 2023, <https://blog.alltheanime.com/sight-sound-anime/>.

<sup>9</sup> Abby Waysdorf describes netnography, derived from Robert Kozinets’ work, as ‘one of the backbones of fandom research’. Abby Waysdorf, “Placing Fandom, Studying Fans: Modified Acafandom in Practice”, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020), accessed July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1739>.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Alberto defines a platform studies approach as a form of netnography that investigates interactions between fans online, but accounting for ways in which the online platform operates, such as how Twitter differs from Tumblr in the form interactions take. Maria Alberto, ‘Exploring How Fans Use Platforms: A Platform Studies Approach to Fan Studies Project’, in *A Fan Studies Primer: Method, Research, Ethics*, eds. Paul Booth and Rebecca Williams (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022), pp. 239-254.

<sup>11</sup> Lúcia Nagib, “Towards a positive definition of World Cinema”, in *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, eds. Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (London and New York: Wallflower, 2016), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> See Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style”, *Screen* 36 (4) (1995): 371-393; Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Harry Medved and Michael Medved, *The Fifty Worst Movies of All Time (And How They Got That Way)* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: British Film Institute, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Steven Rawle, *Transnational Kaiju: Exploitation, Globalisation and Cult Monster Movies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

<sup>17</sup> Michael Crandol, "Godzilla vs. Dracula: Hammer Horror Films in Japan", *Cinephile* 13 (1) (2019): 18-23.

<sup>18</sup> Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee, "Introduction: de-westernizing film studies", in *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, eds. Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee, "Introduction: de-westernizing film studies", p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Derendorf, *Kaiju for Hipsters: 101 "Alternative" Giant Monster Movies* (No Place: Maser Press, 2018), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Maser Patrol, "怪獣 or 外獣? (Kaiju or Gaiju?)", 8 January 2017, accessed July 2020, <https://maserpatrol.wordpress.com/2017/01/08/怪獣-or-外獣-kaiju-or-gaiju/>.

<sup>24</sup> Matt Hills, "Not just another powerless elite?: when media fans become subcultural celebrities", in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, eds. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> Wikizilla, "Five Versions of the First Godzilla Movie | MONSTER PLANET." *YouTube*. 5 March 2021, accessed August 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1yE5hlu2Dc>.

<sup>27</sup> JD Lees, "What is a Kaiju?" *G-Fan* 78 (2006), 68-72.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Ryfle, “Whitewashing Godzilla”, *In These Times*, 14 May 2014, accessed September 2021, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/whitewashing-godzilla>.

<sup>29</sup> William Tsutsui, “For Godzilla and Country”, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 March 2014, accessed May 2023, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141472/william-m-tsutsui/for-godzilla-and-country>.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Kompare, “Fan curators and the gateways into fandom .” In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2017), accessed May 2023, <https://doi-org.yorksj.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781315637518>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Matt Hills, “Not just another powerless elite?: when media fans become subcultural celebrities”, p. 108.

<sup>34</sup> Philipp Dominik Keidl, “The Labor of Curating: Fandom, Museums, and the Value of Fan Heritage”, *Journal of Popular Culture* 54 (2021): p. 414.

<sup>35</sup> This is the maximum number of search results possible in the platform’s engine.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Anderson, “Mobilizing Gojira: Mourning Modernity as Monstrosity”, in *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage*, eds. by William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 21-40; Michael J. Blouin, *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic: Specters of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); David Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema and the Atom Bomb* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Chon Noriega, “Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When "Them!" Is U.S.”, *Cinema Journal* 27 (1) (1987): 63-77; Steve Ryfle, Steve, “Whitewashing Godzilla”; Kimmy Yam, “'Godzilla' was a metaphor for Hiroshima, and Hollywood whitewashed it”, *NBCNews*, 7 August 2020, accessed August 2021,  
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<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/godzilla-was-metaphor-hiroshima-hollywood-whitewashed-it-n1236165>; Inuhiko Yomota, “The Menace from the South Seas: Honda Ishirō’s Godzilla (1954)”, in *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 102-111.

<sup>37</sup> Such activity also fits with Hill’s notion of ‘techno-occidentalism’, ‘reading-for-cultural-difference’ in ways that create oppositions between Hollywood and an Orientalised Far East. Matt Hills, “Ringing the Changes: Cult Distinctions and Cultural Differences in US Fans’ Readings of Japanese Horror Cinema”, in *Japanese Horror Cinema*, ed. Jay McRoy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 171.

<sup>38</sup> PlayerFM lists nearly 100 kaijū-related podcasts. PlayerFM, “Kaiju Podcasts”, 26 May 2023, accessed May 2023, <https://player.fm/podcasts/Kaiju>.

<sup>39</sup> Sandra Annett, *Anime Fan Communities: Transcultural Flows and Frictions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> Jamie Sexton, “The allure of otherness: transnational cult film fandom and the exoticist assumption”, *Transnational Cinemas* 8 (1) (2016): p. 16

<sup>41</sup> Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies*, pp. 85-7.

<sup>42</sup> Tisha Turk, “Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15 (2014), accessed August 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0518>.

<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Scott, “Repackaging fan culture: The regifting economy of ancillary content models”, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (2009), accessed August 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0150>.

<sup>44</sup> Meicheng Sun, “K-pop fan labor and an alternative creative industry: A case study of GOT7 Chinese fans”, *Global Media and China* 5 (4) (2020): p. 402.

<sup>45</sup>Simon Santos, “*Pinoy Sci-Fi #4: Three 'Atomic Monster' Movies in the Fifties*”, Video48, 24 May 2008, accessed August 2021, <http://video48.blogspot.com/2008/05/pinoy-sci-fi-4-three-atomic-monster.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, “Trans–East Asia as method”, in *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, eds. Koichi Iwabuchi, Eva Tsai and Chris Berry (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 281.

<sup>47</sup> Derek Kompare, “Fan curators and the gateways into fandom”.

<sup>48</sup> Beer’s social media handle is @beeragon.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Stewardson, “Interview: Cressa Maeve Beer”, *ourculture*, 17 July 2020, accessed May 2023, <https://ourculturemag.com/2020/07/17/interview-cressa-maeve-beer/>.

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