

GODZILLA'S BODY: REVIVING MEMORIES THROUGH COLLECTIVE FLESH

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Abstract: Through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body, this paper explores the one of the most recognizable characters of Japanese pop culture – Godzilla. Born in specific historical conditions of the postwar Japan, Godzilla stands as a cinematic behemoth which has been countlessly (re)generated ever since, both domestically and internationally. In Godzilla narrative, Merleau-Ponty's statement that „I am my Body“ can be extended to „we are other's Body“ by transcending Japanese collective entity into its monstrous embodiment. Positioning Godzilla's body as a site of remembrance, a walking monument, the memories of nuclear attack and fallen soldiers in South Seas battle become alive. Variety of those memories in flesh is followed by abundant Godzilla filmography which can be understood by Deleuze's argument „that each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities“. Godzilla's identity shifts, from terrifying invading force meant to reflect on a national trauma, morphing to benevolent protector of Japan from foreign intruders, into a global phenomenon preying the western audience.

Keywords: Godzilla, body, phantom limb, memory, Japan

Today, in a year celebrating the 60th anniversary of the original *Godzilla* by Ishiro Honda, famous Japanese pop culture symbol re-emerges from the silver screen in its second Hollywood blockbuster film version. Over the last six decades, Godzilla appeared in total of 30 films, positioning itself as the most prominent monster character in the world of cinema. Through three Japanese eras of *Godzilla* series – Showa (1954-1975), Hesei (1984-1995) and Shinsei (1999-2004) and two American films, Godzilla's identity shifts from terrifying invading force meant to reflect on a national trauma, morphing to a benevolent protector of Japan from foreign intruders, and then into a global phenomenon preying on the western audience. Even the original 1954 *Godzilla* has been a subject of transmogrification, turned into *Godzilla: King of The Monsters* for US audience by adaptation and sound editing.

Borrowing Deleuze's and Guattari's term, Godzilla franchise is a perfect example of cinematic "de-territorialization", maintaining consistency without repetition of the sameness in meaning, aesthetics and politics. "A multiplicity is defined by the number of dimensions it has, it is not divisible, it

cannot lose or gain a dimension without changing its nature" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987: 249). For more than a half of century, different scholars, film critics and Godzilla fans tried to define and inevitably limit the scope of possible conclusions of what Godzilla represents. Nevertheless, even if the rest of 29 films were to be neglected, the original *Godzilla* resists the unambiguous interpretative limitations and provides diverse dimensions on the meaning of its nature, therefore imposing heterogeneous readings. These diversified interpretations could be gathered in two corporeal sections – *mnemonic body* and *phantom limbs*. In Godzilla discourse, mnemonic body refers to a vast multitude of meanings that could be inscribed into and manifested through the monster's body, while phantom limbs indicate this creature's continual presence and perseverance through decades and its many incarnations in pop cultural domain. In his notable book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that "body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 134). It could be said that Godzilla's mnemonic body revives the past, and its phantom limb figures as an indicator of looming future anxieties brought into cinematic present.

MNEMONIC BODY

The notion of a body as a place of memory has already been conceptualized by many scholars in the fields of philosophy and psychology. Curiously, even Descartes whose concept of body-mind separation has been established as a fundamental paradigm of Western thought, acknowledged the presence of a

memory in a body part of a flute player. This procedural memory is installed in his hands and fingers through regular practice of playing the instrument, allowing "mind forgetfulness" to be an integral part of oneself's identity, overcoming mental dominance in terms of perception. Investigating the case of brain-dead patient whose cardiovascular functions always stabilized in his father presence (illustrated as a result of provoking the reminiscence in the absence of channels of communication which are typically used), Christian Steineck suggests to renounce the exclusiveness of brain as a recollection "cerberus", a certified guardian of memory, and accept that "the body is a memorial continuing a person's past into present" (Steineck, 2006: 51). At the same time, clinically dead patient remains to be „a part of intercorporeal exchange“ - reacting to those who marked his personal history and provoking the memories in those around him. (Steineck, 2006: 43) Therefore, taking perspective of the body as a medium of memory, we should examine Godzilla's body in terms of mnemonic variety.

Undoubtedly, Godzilla reflected postwar nuclear anxieties that were not only prompted by Hiroshima and Nagasaki incidents but also by 1954 US detonation of 15-megaton hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific, when several Japanese tuna boat fishermen were exposed to lethal doses of radiation. Producer Tanaka Tomoyuki's reflections that "mankind had created the Bomb, and now nature was going to take revenge on mankind" (quoted in Tsutsui, 2004: 18) offer apparent notions of Godzilla's origin. However, merely probing Godzilla's physical characteristics, the polyphony of different understandings becomes vivid. Godzilla's dark, scaly

skin is often referred as of those of the atom bomb survivors and its gigantic size calls attention to numerous Japanese casualties of war. On the other hand, its dimensions and radioactive breath symbolize the Bomb itself and its massive impact on Japan. Yoshikuni Igarashi in his book *Bodies of Memory* draws a compelling assumption of "a circular referential relationship between the bomb and the emperor: the bomb was special because it shocked the emperor into accepting the terms of surrender; the emperor accepted the peace because he realized the bomb was special" (Igarashi 2000: 24-25). This paradoxical "unique" signification of both the emperor and the bomb is also recurrent in *Godzilla* – the monster does not speak (although it later occurs in 1972 *Godzilla vs. Gigan* with the sounds it makes, translated into Japanese) and the (apolitical) voicelessness of Japanese emperor Hirohito was only to be disrupted by his speech broadcasted on the radio on August 15th 1945. For many Japanese, the emperor – "a god, the authority of the nation, the organizing principle of reality" (Oe, 1995) – silent over the years became human the moment he spoke his famous words of "bearing the unbearable and enduring the unendurable". By employing the anti-war theory of famous Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio and his notion that Japanese people have to die only in their homeland in order to rest peacefully, Yomota Inuhiko constructs *Godzilla's* body out of the dead Imperial soldiers who met their deaths in the battles of the South Seas. Even the path which *Godzilla* takes in the destruction of Tokyo, evading the Imperial Palace in spite of it being on its route, supports aforementioned inscriptions of the emperor or soldiers into the *Godzilla's* body.

In *Godzilla* narrative, Merleau-Ponty's statement that „I am my Body“ can be extended to „we are other's Body“ by transcending Japanese collective entity into its monstrous embodiment. Positioning *Godzilla's* body as a site of remembrance, a walking monument, the memories of nuclear attack and its victims, as well as fallen soldiers in South Seas, become alive. Variety of those memories in flesh is followed by the abundance of consistently popular *Godzilla* films which could be understood by Deleuze's argument „that each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities“ (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987: 249). David Deamer's inspiring *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema and The Atom Bomb* stands against overproduction of discourses on Japanese victimology on screen, marking the monstrosity of the atom bomb to be "not just experienced, not just survived, but resolved"(Deamer, 2014: 31). Employing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body on this cinematic behemoth born in the specific historical conditions of postwar Japan and countless (re)generated ever since, both domestically and internationally, we have to accept the understanding which emphasizes the possibility of "truthfulness" of seemingly contradictory interpretations and discourses.

RELENTLESS PHANTOM LIMBS

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body in his theory of perception has been often denounced as a type of relativism, especially concerning his standpoint on human understanding of the world only through „lived-body“ which cannot be assigned as a

carrier of objective thought or totality in reasoning. Opposed to both empiricist and intellectual theories, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the human body as a "being in the world" assumes "ordinary intuitive point of view from which we understand ourselves as neither disembodied intellects nor physical mechanisms, but living bodily subjects" (Carman, 2008: 132). He proclaims the importance of the visual experience and underlines the complexity of perception which is immanent to the nature of bodily intentionality and spontaneous efficacy. Reflecting the ambiguity of the phantom limb, and comparing it to a syndrome of anosognosia (patient's refusal to accept the existence of a disability or disease) in which a body part becomes "a bit of forgetfulness and failure to perceive", Merleau-Ponty marks it as a memory and "positive judgement or a perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 91).

Let us consider one of the most recognizable characters of Japanese pop culture as a symbolic phantom limb which incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy of a Japanese collective body. For this purpose, we first need to address Mark Anderson's text *Mobilizing Gojira: Mourning Modernity as Monstrosity* which relates *Godzilla* with Japanese media system and phantom limbs. Anderson was influenced by Samuel Weber's assertions that television employs a simultaneity of transmission which actually marks a division of place, bodies and subjects unity by allowing multiple perceptions not subordinated to spatial limitations (of a body). This leads to an apt observation that in *Godzilla*, Japanese collective body is assembled through the medium of both television and radio. Namely, *Godzilla* depicts numerous scenes of radio and television broadcasting,

direct filming of the actions from tv-camera perspective and its viewing where "this unsettling migration of the camera registers the effects of the multiplication of sites of the viewers' perception even as the perceptual unity of the individual's body itself split by way of various media prosthetics that the film camera jumps back and forth between" (Anderson, 2006: 26). Here, through framing and editing techniques, we witness the process of assembling the Japanese collective body, consisting of numerous spectators as well as the recording staff, as one expanding mediated entity. It is clear that bodies of individual recipients become virtually dismembered by different media vessels, but are reassembled into an entirely new mediated organism.

On the other hand, according to Anderson, Japanese media system is "amputated" from its colonial attribution which was prevalent during the war, now reduced to its domestic proportions with *Godzilla* serving as an imperial vessel that announces "ghosted messages from an outside that was formerly inside". (Anderson, 2006: 26) As if those imperial tendencies came back to haunt the Japanese in the form of a gigantic outsider.

Situating *Godzilla* as a phantom limb we should concede its spectral meaning. Based on ancient Greek word *phantasma*, English term *phantom* offers several meanings – an illusion, a ghost, a figment of the imagination. In addition to these meanings, in Japanese language 幻 (まぼろし) refers also to a vision or a dream. Having these meanings considered, it is apparent that phantom presupposes "inherent tension between supernatural phenomena and psychic or mental phenomena" (Satz, 2010: 114). That said and acknowledging McLuhanian perspective of

technology as an extension of the central nervous system, we draw attention to Aura Satz who points out that invention of new media in the 19th century - telegraph, radio, telephone and gramophone (with their variety of "disembodied voices") as well as photography (and its images of the absent) and neuroscience all share the same notion - that of spirituality. American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell often indicated the phantasmal accounts of amputee patients, relating phantom limbs to "spirit members" or "dead souls" and patient himself as "being haunted, as it were, by a constant or inconstant fractional phantom of so much of himself as was lopped away - an unseen ghost of the lost part" (quoted in Satz, 2010: 122). Indestructibility and perpetual reemergence of Godzilla, both as a character and a cinematic franchise, suggest its haunting nature. Akin to a restless, unorthodox ghost, Godzilla haunts the Japanese in a such an obsessive manner that it progressively infested the rest of the world, too. Satz concludes that phantom limbs are simultaneously fiction, scientific occurrence and sometimes even supernatural manifestation - obviously, Godzilla can be recognized in all three categories.

I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's perspective that "the phantom arm is not representation of the arm, but the ambivalent presence of an arm" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 92), could indicate not to a specific reading of particular Godzilla film, but to its complete filmography. The societal changes in the course of six decades reflect the need for specificity of a particular limb, its pain and necessity to be "visible". The fact that none other than Japanese generated a character which relentlessly and continuously emerges from the international silver screen could be reflected through

the words of globally influential Japanese designer Takashi Murakami.

"We [Japanese] don't have both arms, yet we imagine that we feel the presence of two normal limbs. [...] The fingers of that nonexistent arm throb with pain. It's impossible to get rid of it, because no one understands why or how. At the height of the bubble economy, hoping to eliminate our lost arm, we held drunken orgies, the equivalent of orthopedic surgery. But our pain persisted. Its source was our forced remediation to Westernization and our predicament as a nation situated in the ambiguous environment that followed defeat in the Pacific War." (Murakami, 2005: 139)

In the line with this quote, we can surmise that Japan's urge to overcome a lack of numerous limbs amputated by the outside forces in the aftermath of the war, resulted in the creation of an eternal fictional entity which would restore the fragmented national body.

In famous Ramachandran's mirror box experiment, through optical illusion a patient with a missing arm sees both of his hands receiving "positive visual feedback informing his brain that his phantom arm is moving correctly" in response to his command (Ramachandran, Hirstein, 1998: 1620). The constant pain that was actually never there is relieved by visual illusions and brain deceptiveness. Since the experience of a phantom limb is intrinsically related to a first person perspective, in our case, the array of missing limbs is vast, allowing different visual feedbacks within the collective body. Thus, Godzilla's body becomes a fictional missing organ that "completes" the ever mutable hybrid identity. American Civil War physician Mitchell describing amputees' "vivid

hallucinations" states that "nearly every man who loses a limb, carries about with him a constant or inconstant phantom of the missing member, a sensory ghost of that much of himself"(cited in Wood, 2006). The ghosts of the postwar repression of Japan's defeat - strong roar of discriminated *hibakusha*, restless spirits of soldiers or/and outraged emperor being forced to decline into a form of a human being - kept haunting the audience from the big screens. Although in some of the sequels Godzilla remains to be a menace threatening to ruin Japan, in several others - it represents a protector from the hostile outsiders adamant to bring suffering and fragmentation of Japanese national body. Merleau-Ponty approached the subject of phantoms as a philosopher whose real concern is with the body as a vehicle of being in the world. He concludes:

"In the self-evidence of this complete world in which manipulatable objects still figure, in the force of their movement which still flows towards him, and in which is still present the project of writing or playing the piano, the cripple still finds the guarantee of his wholeness. But concealing his deficiency from him, the world cannot fail simultaneously to reveal it to him: for if it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the centre of the world towards which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world." (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 93)

Godzilla's body serves as a motif for uncovering a deeper understanding of the Japanese world. Instead of just mourning what has been lost and keeping the melancholic memory of what used to be a "useful"

body part, Godzilla as a phantom limb serves a proactive purpose of celebrating the profusion of brain commands subduing the pain due to mirror images. The complete franchise operates as both a painful phantom limb and its own successful amputation through the cinematic medium.

However, the descriptions of phantom limb pain could only be partially understood because that discomfort is largely unfelt by those outside of the inflicted body. Character of Dr. Yamane in original *Godzilla* states that Godzilla provides "unique opportunity to *only those in Japan*" to study it. Therefore, we can never fully understand Godzilla franchise as it is a phantom limb of a Japanese body and not of our own.

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