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NATALIA V. VERESHCHAGINA*

HSE University

20, Myasnitckaya, Moscow 101000, Russia

ResearcherID: JAD-0266-2023

ORCID: 0000-0003-3592-2833

e-mail: nataliavereschagina@gmail.com

PANOS KOMPATSIARIS

HSE University

20, Myasnitckaya, Moscow 101000, Russia

ResearcherID: M-6064-2015

ORCID: 0000-0002-2452-6109

e-mail: panoskompa@gmail.com

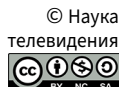
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Catastrophism and Nature's Revolt: Ecological Monstrosity in Popular Media Narratives

Abstract. This article examines the cinematic transformations of monstrosity within the context of a growing ecological awareness and the Anthropocene. The authors argue that these transformations reflect a posthumanist shift in popular culture ethics, suggesting that human nature is intertwined with the natural world, indigenous cultures should be protected, and our relationships with other beings should be nurtured. The blockbuster film franchise *MonsterVerse* illustrates similar shifts occurring in the portrayal of movie monsters. It creates new narratives for cinema's most iconic monsters, the Japanese *Godzilla* and

* Corresponding author.



American King Kong. The authors analyze the types of monstrosities presented in the franchise, the narratives they are placed in, and whether the media franchise reflects posthumanist trends in contemporary culture by constructing images of monsters. In the MonsterVerse, Godzilla and American King Kong are reimagined as ecological monsters of the Anthropocene era that represent nature's rebellion, the urgency to save the planet, and popular posthuman perspectives on ecology. MonsterVerse thus becomes one of the popular manifestations of posthuman ethics.

Keywords: monster, monstrosity, film franchise, MonsterVerse, Godzilla, King Kong, Anthropocene, posthumanism, nuclear narrative, ecological narrative, ecological monster, human, non-human

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ВЕРЕЩАГИНА НАТАЛЬЯ ВИКТОРОВНА*

Национальный исследовательский университет
«Высшая школа экономики»
101000, Россия, Москва, ул. Мясницкая, д. 20

ResearcherID: JAD-0266-2023

ORCID: 0000-0003-3592-2833

e-mail: nataliavereschagina@gmail.com

КОМПАЦИАРИС ПАНОС

Национальный исследовательский университет
«Высшая школа экономики»
101000, Россия, Москва, ул. Мясницкая, д. 20

ResearcherID: M-6064-2015

ORCID: 0000-0002-2452-6109

e-mail: panoskomp@gmail.com

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Катастрофизм и восстание природы: экологическая монструозность в нарративах популярной медиакультуры

Аннотация. Данная статья обращается к кинематографической трансформации монструозности в контексте нарастающего экологического сознания в эпоху антропоцена. Авторы утверждают, что описываемая трансформация является неотъемлемой частью постгуманистического поворота и шире популярных культурных этик, которые предлагают взглянуть на человеческую природу и отношения с другими с точки зрения более экологичного понимания включенности человека в мир природы, защиты культуры коренных народов и отношений с другими существами. В частности, авторы обращаются к кинофраншизе MonsterVerse, чтобы продемонстрировать сдвиги, находящие отражения в принципах создания киномонстров. MonsterVerse по-новому рассказывает истории об одних из самых популярных монстров кинематографа: японском Годзилле и американском Кинг Конге. Авторы анализируют, какие типы монструозности представлены во франшизе, в какие нарративы они помещены, и как медиафраншиза работает с постгуманистическими тенденциями современной культуры, используя образы монстров. Авторы показывают, что Годзилла и Кинг Конг перерождаются во вселенной MonsterVerse и становятся «экологическими монстрами» эпохи антропоцена, репрезентирующими восстание природы, идею сохранения планеты и популярные постгуманистические взгляды на экологию. MonsterVerse воспроизводит постчеловеческие этики в популярной форме.

Ключевые слова: монстр, монструозность, кинофраншиза, MonsterVerse, Годзилла, Кинг Конг, антропоцен, постгуманизм, ядерный нарратив, экологический нарратив, экологический монстр, человеческое, нечеловеческое

"It's impossible!" I said.

"No, Johnny, we're impossible. It's like it always was ten million years ago. It hasn't changed. It's us and the land that've changed, become impossible. Us!"

— Ray Bradbury, *The Fog Horn* (1951)¹

INTRODUCTION

Ranging from fairy tales to films, comics, and sci-fi literature, monsters are commonly portrayed as creatures nesting in places of invisibility, where life is least felt. Monstrosity, that is, the quality of being a monster, craves for such eerie "liminal spaces" that rest in the indistinguishability between human and non-human worlds, out of either necessity or preference (Felton, 2012). Hidden from public view, the monster is careful in picking up its whereabouts, as its unusual and often repulsive manners and appearance can provoke hostility in people, since "normal humans" tend to mobilize in order to threaten their target and eliminate it. The monster is an a priori estranged entity, which prefers invisibility not due to some inherent anti-socialness, but because its strangeness can trigger fears, feelings of collective self-preservation, and revenge. The fundamental features of the monster vary, as do its shape and form.

First, the monster is most often represented as a genetic deviation from the "norm," whether human or animal, in various capacities and degrees, such as size (gigantic or too small), bodily parts (inconsistent teeth, head, or legs), and hybrid form (Cerberus, Sphinx, or Sirens). Second, alongside or independently of the genetic aspect, the monster embodies moral deviation against which society should be protected. It represents a figure of transgression that can activate conservative and progressive political responses, depending on the nature of the violation. The portrayal of monsters as primarily genetic and/or moral deviants is contextual and reflects, among other factors, how certain societies imagine threats and enemies, attribute meaning to bodily (dis)abilities, and grapple with existential fears (Asma, 2011).²

¹ Ray Bradbury's story influenced many works of popular media, including *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* by Eugène Lourié (1953). We will mention this film and its monster more than once.

² The focus of this study is not the representation of fears in the monsters figures; instead, considering the structure of monstrosity, narrative constructions (both past and contemporary) are analyzed. In this way, the authors aim to comprehend the theories of monstrosity in their classical and posthumanistic reflections (editors' note).

Considering the ever-changing nature of monstrosity, this article examines its cinematic transformation within the context of a growing ecological awareness in the Anthropocene, a geological epoch irreversibly marked by human activity (Crutzen, 2016). Specifically, we focus on the MonsterVerse blockbuster film franchise. Established in 2014, the franchise encompasses an ecosystem of giant monsters, including the classic figures such as Godzilla and King Kong, as well as new monsters designed specifically for the universe. The MonsterVerse became an effective reboot of two popular media franchises—the Japanese Godzilla and the American King Kong—attracting significant media attention.

On the one hand, it appears that the giant monsters are being reimagined within the framework of new stories and contemporary ecological contexts. We suggest that, instead of being merely destructive, giant monsters in the MonsterVerse cosmology often assume the roles of guardians and protectors of planet Earth from human-generated destructiveness. On the other hand, the stories still contain monstrous agents that pose a threat to humans. We analyze the types of monstrosities presented in the franchise, the narratives they are embedded in, and whether the media franchise reflects posthumanist trends in contemporary culture by constructing images of monsters.

To address these questions, we conduct a historical and cultural analysis of the monsters' images (Godzilla and King Kong) and perform a narrative analysis of the first and latest franchise stories to identify the characteristics of monstrosity in the MonsterVerse. We reconstruct the cultural context surrounding the birth of these monsters and analyze the narrative elements of their stories.

In the first part, *Reading Monster Cultures: Dreadful Otherness and the Promise of a Better Future*, we examine monstrosity through the lenses of monster studies and posthumanism as a shifting cultural and material form. Given the mutable nature of monstrosity, stories about monsters and the roles they embody are also changing. In the second part, *Giant Monsters and the Nuclear Narrative: MonsterVerse's Nuclear Ancestors*, we explore the cultural context of the origins of giant monsters. Finally, in the concluding sections, *Godzilla and Ecological Narrative: Nature vs. Invasive Species and King Kong: Guardian of Primordial Nature*, we analyze the narratives of the films and the franchise to demonstrate that Godzilla and King Kong in the MonsterVerse represent popular embodiments of posthuman ethics.

READING MONSTER CULTURES:

DREADFUL OTHERNESS AND THE PROMISE OF A BETTER FUTURE

In *Monster Culture: Seven Theses* (1996), a seminal text in the field of monster studies, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monstrous body is “pure culture” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). This means that the monster cannot be viewed as an ahistorical and transcendental entity that simply arouses generic fear and disgust. Rather, it should be understood as a being whose physical and moral characteristics are given in the context of different cultural forms. In fact, interpreting and deciphering the monster is a method for eventually understanding cultures, as it sheds light on the physical and mental attributes that different societies deem undesirable. By examining these traits, we can gain insights into the prevailing values, moralities, and beliefs that underpin these cultures. Furthermore, there is no teleology, no ultimate demise of monsters that would liberate humanity from the anxieties they embody. These anxieties would always adopt diverse monstrous forms according to the temporal and spatial contexts in which they are articulated. Conversely, old monsters may adopt new anxieties and relinquish their original ones.

One way to observe this pattern is through the resurrection of a quintessential monstrous form—the figure of Dracula—in modernity.³ In his book *Skin Shows*, Jack Halberstam analyzes Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, published in England in 1897, and the broader genre of Gothic literature, revealing strong anti-Semitic references and the reinforcement of stereotypes that implicitly portray Jews as monstrous. In the aristocratic and enigmatic character of Dracula, Stoker gave the folkloric vampire a bodily form accentuating certain features to resemble prevalent anxieties surrounding Jewish populations in England at the time. Halberstam connects this portrayal to the fact that in the 1850s many Jews were relocated from Russia and Eastern Europe to England, which led to their particularly negative depiction in popular culture. In line with these fears, Dracula was portrayed as an Eastern European foreigner and traveler, obsessed with wealth, engaging in deviant sexuality, and exhibiting the physiognomic and bodily stereotypes associated with Jews at that time, such as a “peculiar nose, pointed ears, sharp teeth, claw-like hands” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 14). Here, the monstrous body becomes a literal expression and creator of the deviant ethnic other, functioning as a *technology of subjectivity* in Foucauldian terms, with the monstrous body representing rejected and non-normative cultural bodies (a similar argument can be found in Rai, 2013). However, in different temporal and spatial contexts, this iconic form of the mythological vampire and the tale of Dracula assume diverse bodily manifestations

³ This section of the article deals with the structure of monstrosity (based on various—including posthumanist—theories of monstrosity). The authors illustrate the pattern for constructing the monstrosity on the example of other familiar monsters, that readers may recognize. Ultimately, the text reveals the principle of monster formation and its cultural variability (editors’ note).

that reflect different anxieties. For example, Abel Ferrara's deconstructive film *The Addiction* (1992), featuring a female vampire who is a philosophy PhD student in New York, addresses anxieties related to depression, dark sexuality, and substance abuse. Similarly, the film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) by Ana Lily Amirpour portrays a female vampire in Iran who punishes men guilty of violence against women. The evolution of vampires exemplifies Cohen's notion of the monster as pure culture, a body that assumes transient forms, adapting and reshaping itself according to the social values and morals of distinct contexts and periods.

In the realm of posthuman ethics, the role of monsters transcends their function as threatening adversaries or mirrors through which one can view human values. They become marginalized entities that are disenfranchised by dominant power structures. One of the influential texts in this regard is Donna Haraway's *The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others* (1992). According to it, monsters are entities that have been deemed "inappropriate/d" in different settings, that is, produced as unfit and "wrong" in specific times and places by cultural, historical and scientific signifiers. Keeping with her idea of cyborg ontology, Haraway argues that "if organisms are natural objects, it is crucial to remember that organisms are not born; they are made in world-changing technoscientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places" (Haraway, 1992, p. 297). Within her material-semiotic approach, natural entities are not mere biological facts but rather products shaped within the respective nexuses of established scientific truths. In this framework, the monster becomes a metaphor for organisms that cannot fit in the taxonomy of both the *self* and the *other*. They are more than just the others to a given knowledge system, but rather disturbing entities that defy identification, specifically within the taxonomic canon. Monsters represent a constant excess and surplus of meaning. According to Patricia McCormack, "monsters themselves are defined, most basically, as ambiguities", resisting both epistemological and biological categorization (McCormack, 2012, p. 293). The monsters are subjects that "fail to fulfill the criteria of human subjects," and as such, they have "an ideal and intimate relationship with the concept of the posthuman" insofar as the latter questions transcendental narratives (McCormack, 2012, p. 293). Following this approach and echoing Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Paul Preciado, in his lecture and subsequent book *Can the Monster Speak*, argues that transsexual bodies have been constructed as dangerous and monstrous by established epistemologies. It is eventually this uncategorized excess inherent in the trans body that gives monsters their emancipatory potential (Preciado, 2021). In other words, in posthuman approaches, the monster, as Haraway's title suggests, represents a promise of a better future rather than a menacing adversary.

The posthuman monster does not only signify a transgression from normativity in the sense that it is produced where the "normal" human ends. As an embodiment of excess, the monster is not a mere warning against human excess,

as commonly discussed, but an inappropriate/d and unjustly treated excess that harbors a positive, if not emancipatory, potential. This discourse has spilled over into popular culture and media in recent decades. As monsters evolve beyond the image of dreadful otherness, the stories about them and the roles they assume in these stories are changing as well.

The reconstruction of these giant monsters, Godzilla and King Kong, within the fictional MonsterVerse, which we will explore below, is an intriguing example of monstrosity reconfigured through posthuman ethical inquiry.

GIANT MONSTERS AND THE NUCLEAR NARRATIVE: MONSTERVERSE'S NUCLEAR ANCESTORS

The MonsterVerse is a multimedia franchise owned by Warner Bros., at this writing including four films about giant monsters: *Godzilla* (2014, Gareth Edwards), *Kong: Skull Island* (2017, Jordan Charles Vogt-Roberts), *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019, Michael Dougherty), and *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021, Adam Wingard). The first two films, released in 2014 and 2017, rebooted the stories of cinema's most iconic monsters—the Japanese Godzilla (Fig. 1) and the American King Kong (Fig. 2).

The most recent film in the fictional universe, as of the time of writing, is a crossover between the two monsters, a reference to the classic *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962, Ishirō Honda). The creators of the franchise are currently working on a sequel, *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*, that explores the complex relationship between these two monsters. The film is scheduled for release in 2024.



Fig. 1. Godzilla. Still from *Gojira* directed by Ishirō Honda (1954)⁴

⁴ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047034/mediaviewer/rm4056468480?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_7 (05.09.2023).



Fig. 2. King Kong. Still from *King Kong* directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1933)⁵

The MonsterVerse is an elaborate ecosystem of monsters featuring both classic and newly designed creatures. It exists between two worlds: the realm of humans and their technologies, and the world of planet Earth that is hidden from people. The popular media franchise represents an implicit ecological narrative aiming to address the global anthropogenic issues of our time. We argue here that this narrative is further shaped by typical posthumanist concerns regarding monstrosity and the monstrous, as discussed previously. In the following sections, we will see how Godzilla and Kong assume the role of Earth's guardians—on both planetary and global scales⁶—protecting it from external threats as well as human actions (we will return to this later).

However, King Kong and Godzilla were not always the central protagonists in the monster cinematic universe. They emerged under different circumstances and initially appeared on the big screen in the genre of giant monster films, where the monsters portrayed a destructive and antagonistic force. In Japanese cinema, such creatures were known as *kaiju* ("strange beast"), and *Godzilla* is considered a *kaiju*. The emergence of Godzilla is connected to several cinematic creatures, with King Kong being one of them. The first cinematic *atomic monster*, or *nuclear monster*, Rhedosaurus, is its closest predecessor. In 1953, Rhedosaurus (Fig. 3) appeared in Eugène Lourié's *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*. According to Ishirō Honda, the

⁵ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024216/mediaviewer/rm1138636288?ref_=ttmi_mi_typ_sf_47 (05.09.2023).

⁶ The Earth can be perceived as a planet, world, or globe, depending on the discourse. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his study of the climate change debate, connects it with regimes of historicity. He states,

Earth System Science (ESS), the science that among other things explains planetary warming and cooling, gives humans a very long, multilayered, and heterotemporal past by placing them at the conjuncture of three (and now variously interdependent) histories whose events are defined by very different timescales: the history of the planet,

origin story of Godzilla, a Japanese monster from the sea, was influenced by The Beast (Kalat, 2017).



Fig. 3. Rhedosaurus. Still from *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* directed by Eugène Lourié (1953)⁷

Eugène Lourié directed a series of films portraying giant creatures destroying cities, including Rhedosaurus from *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), Behemoth from *The Giant Behemoth* (1959), and Gorgo and its mother Ogra from *Gorgo* (1961). The first two films follow a common narrative structure, which includes:

- nuclear tests;
- the awakening of a giant monster and the dilemma of the sole witness;
- the monster's public appearance and demonstration of its destructive power;
- the military's unsuccessful attempts to eliminate the monster (involving conflicts between scientists and the military);
- the discovery of an innovative scientific solution that ultimately leads to the monster's demise.

These films initiated a series of works that incorporate giant monstrosities within the context of the nuclear narrative. The narrative unfolds in a continuous timeline, without splitting into parallel storylines or multiple narrative arcs, progressing relentlessly in one direction, which is the path of "overcoming the monster." Geographically, the narrative space is not on a planetary dimension or scale—it is quite localized, with territories defined by the destructive movements

the planet, and the history of the globe made by the logics of empires, capital, and technology (Chakrabarty, 2019, p. 1).

Historical regimes are no longer solely human-centric.

⁷ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045546/mediaviewer/rm3079477504?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_106 (05.09.2023).

of the monsters (Rhedosaurus in New York, Behemoth in London, and Godzilla in Tokyo).

The structure of these works also highlights intriguing features of the nuclear narrative related to depictions of science and scientists (Fig. 4). There are three narrative points in it. The first is the figure of a scientist. Not only he (always a “he”) possesses an in-depth knowledge of nature, but also warns of danger, cautioning against the mistakes which might be caused by action or inaction, and often expresses concerns about the consequences of utilizing new technologies.⁸ In *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, physicist Thomas Nesbitt opens the film with the line, “What the cumulative effects of all these atomic explosions and tests will be, only time will tell.” Nesbitt becomes the only survivor of the monster’s first appearance. A similar narrative element is depicted through scientist Steve Karnes in *The Giant Behemoth*, who delivers a speech to the British Scientific Society concerning the perils of nuclear tests on marine life.

Furthermore, three different causes for the genesis of monstrosity can be observed in the history of the giant monsters of the “nuclear period”:

- (1) the reawakening of the ancient creature, as seen in the aforementioned Eugène Lourié films;
- (2) a failed experiment, such as depicted in *Tarantula* (1955, Jack Arnold), where a giant tarantula is the result of an experiment gone wrong;
- (3) the unexpected effects, exemplified in Brickner’s horror film *Them* (1954), where nuclear experiments in the desert lead to unforeseen repercussions, including the creation of terrifying gigantic ants. Another example is the mutant octopus from Robert Gordon’s film, *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955).

⁸ This aligns with certain philosophical approaches that resist the absolutization of scientism and adopt a critical attitude towards science, its role in culture, and the limits of scientific knowledge.



Fig. 4. Lee Hunter, Elson's assistant (left), Prof. Thurgood Elson, paleontologist (center), and Prof. Tom Nesbitt, physicist (right). Still from *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* directed by Eugène Lourié (1953)⁹

The second narrative point regarding the representation of science is the motif of confrontation between academics and the military within their otherwise united battle against the monster. The initially aggressive actions by the military forces become erratic and ultimately futile in the face of the giant monster, leading to the scientists' victory. Through consistent and rational actions based on their scientific knowledge, the scientists discover the only true and innovative solution.

Lastly, the third narrative point introduces another scientist figure who advocates for preserving the creature's life for further study. This character is driven by utilitarian goals rather than any specific ideology related to anti-speciesism or species preservation. However, the image of this scientist reflects romantic ideas about scientific knowledge. By refusing to control nature and advocating for peaceful coexistence, representatives of romanticism criticize scientism of the Enlightenment (Poggi & Bossi, 1994). Such characters appear in both *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *The Giant Behemoth* as paleontologists—Thurgood Elson and Dr. Sampson. Heedless of the danger, they try to approach the monster—the object of their scientific interest—as close as possible, but typically fail and die. Dr. Kyohei Yamane from the original 1954 *Godzilla* and Ishiro Serizawa from the 2014 MonsterVerse reboot of *Godzilla* exemplify these archetypes. She also suggests that these monsters mask the immense trauma caused by nuclear weapons and

⁹ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045546/mediaviewer/rm848639488?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_94 (05.09.2023).

the fear of future wars (Sontag, 2013, p. 46). The dichotomous image of science in the catastrophic nuclear narrative resembles magic, capable of being both black and white at the same time. As a result, a scientist can be both a “satanist and a savior” (Sontag, 2013, p. 46).

GODZILLA AND ECOLOGICAL NARRATIVE: NATURE VS INVASIVE SPECIES

Godzilla is among the nuclear monsters, and the idea that this giant monster is a reminder of the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons is widely accepted (Ryfle, 1998; Sontag, 2013; Barr, 2016; Debus, 2022). Some researchers also draw connections between the first Godzilla film and the Bikini Atoll test conducted by the United States (specifically, the Castle Bravo bomb test on March 1, 1954), which resulted in severe and unforeseen repercussions. The radioactive contamination affected a vast area, even reaching people on a Japanese fishing boat located 170 km from Bikini (Low, 1993; Dominy & Calsbeek, 2019).

Godzilla first appeared on the big screen in 1954, thanks to the Japanese director Ishirō Honda and special effects director Eiji Tsuburaya. Since then, there have been over thirty films featuring Godzilla, not including TV series and cartoons. The first Godzilla's performance follows the familiar structure of monstrosity associated with the abovementioned nuclear catastrophe narrative. A colossal ancient reptile-like (or resembling a dinosaur) creature emerges from the depths of the Pacific Ocean, awakened by a hydrogen bomb test (Fig. 1). We can recognize the well-established formula:

- nuclear tests leading to the awakening of the monster;
- demonstration of the monster's destructive power, as Godzilla attacks fishing boats and Odo, destroys villages, and ultimately poses a threat to Tokyo;
- unsuccessful attempts by the military to resist the monster: Japan's Self-Defence Forces built an electric fence and deploy tanks and fighters, all to no avail;
- the discovery of an innovative scientific solution: only the newly invented deadly weapon, the Oxygen Destroyer, resulting from
- Serizawa's extensive research, proves effective against Godzilla.

The representation of science, the portrayal of scientists (paleontologist Kyohei Yamane and physicist Daisuke Serizawa), and the type of monstrosity depicted point at the nuclear narrative, which had gained popularity during that time. Yamane makes a speech about the monster, stating, “It's impossible! Godzilla

absorbed massive amounts of atomic radiation and yet it still survived! What do you think could kill it? Instead, we should focus on why it is still alive. That should be our top priority!" The film conveys a strong anti-nuclear sentiment.

In the MonsterVerse, the narrative and the monsters undergo a transformation. The nuclear narrative shift towards an ecological one, losing its anti-nuclear connotation, and the fearsome nuclear monster becomes an ecological creature rather than solely a dreadful menace. The creation of the universe started with the 2014 reboot of the Godzilla franchise, and to date, it has included four films. The media franchise expands its universe, adding new story arcs, using intertextual techniques, and arranging complex narrative structures of time and space. The monster's "appearance-destruction" formula has also evolved. At the same time, new monsters are introduced to the universe, interacting with one another. Godzilla loses its antagonist status (Suzuki, 2017, p. 23); instead, this role is assumed by MUTO (*Godzilla*, 2014), Monster Zero, or King Ghidorah (*Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, 2019), and Mechagodzilla (*Godzilla vs. Kong*, 2021), while Godzilla gets a different, more positive, role within the new catastrophic narrative.

In the first film of the franchise, the creators of the new version of Godzilla pay tribute to the original film and establish intertextual connections using narrative elements, names, and visual images. For example, the name of Dr. Ishirō Serizawa is a reference to Ishirō Honda, who directed the original film, and the character Professor Daisuke Serizawa. The initial shots, taken with vintage lenses, imitate documentary style to remind the events of 1954 (Castillo, 2017, pp. 94–95). In the first act, the anti-nuclear motive of the original film is portrayed through a nuclear power plant, a catastrophe, the death of people, and a quarantine zone (Marshall, 2022, pp. 6–7). However, this might be the only aspect that remains of the original film's anti-nuclear sentiment. In the franchise, the catastrophism is based on the planetary disaster (Castillo, 2017, p. 94), so the monstrosity is fueled by other fears.

The first antagonist in the MonsterVerse is the new monster MUTO (Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism), who was created specifically for the film and has never been part of any fictional universes before (Fig. 5). MUTO resided within a Philippines uranium mine, feeding off the radiation of this "natural element" of the Earth. When the source depleted, it attacked a nuclear plant, where it was captured and kept dormant by the secret organization Monarch. However, there was more than one monster. A male and female pair of MUTO (referred to as Hokmuto and Femuto) were discovered, whose primary purpose was reproduction. The increase in the number of such creatures on Earth would deplete energy resources (as they feed on nuclear energy) and lead to the planet's destruction. Humanity found itself on the brink of a planetary catastrophe.



Fig. 5. MUTO. Still from *Godzilla* directed by Gareth Edwards (2014)¹⁰

The next antagonist in the franchise is Monster Zero, or King Ghidorah (Fig. 6). It debuted in the 1964 Ishirō Honda's movie, *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster*, and later appeared more than once in films by Toho entertainment company. There are various versions of Ghidorah's origin, but in the MonsterVerse, it is a dangerous alien posing a threat to Earth. Ghidorah subjugates the other monsters, known as the titans, and its primary goal is destruction in order to terraform the planet for itself. The only resistance it encounters is from Mothra,¹¹ who remains loyal to Godzilla. Monster Zero was awakened by an eco-terrorist organization seeking to restore natural and climatic balance by releasing the titans. Dr. Emma Russell, who joined the organization, manifests their main message:

Humans have been the dominant species for thousands of years, and look what's happened. Overpopulation, pollution, and war. The mass extinction we feared has already begun. And we are the cause. We are the infection. But like all living organisms, the Earth unleashed a fever to fight this infection. Its original and rightful rulers were the Titans. They are part of the Earth's natural defense system. A way to protect the planet, to maintain its balance.¹²

Unfortunately, the false titan Ghidorah was among the other giant monsters; it is not part of the natural order and turns out to be an invasive species. Just like in the first film, Godzilla is the only hope; only it is capable of correcting the mistakes made by humans and restoring the very balance Dr. Russell spoke of. However, this time, Godzilla cannot do it alone; the monster needs the help of humans to replenish its nuclear power. The US Navy and Monarch descend into the depths of

¹⁰ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0831387/mediaviewer/rm3134172929?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_111 (05.09.2023).

¹¹ Mothra was the first good kaiju. In 1961, a film was released about a giant caterpillar that rescues the twin girls who were kidnapped from their home island.

¹² Dougherty, M. (Director). (2019). *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* [Film, 0:48:46]. Legendary Pictures.



Fig. 6. Monster Zero. Still from *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* directed by Michael Dougherty (2019)¹³

nuclear power. The US Navy and Monarch descend into the depths of the Pacific (the realm of the inhuman) to help their savior to recover.

The final monster antagonist in the franchise is Mechagodzilla (Fig. 7). Similar to Ghidorah, who appeared earlier in the films, Mechagodzilla has had several different incarnations, but in each of them, it is the mechanical counterpart to Godzilla. In *MonsterVerse* (*Godzilla vs. Kong*, 2021), Mechagodzilla is a weapon created by the Apex Cybernetics Corporation using the head of the alien invader Ghidorah. Mechagodzilla was intended to be the technology to contain and subdue the titans, who represent the forces of nature in the films. However, the experiment went out of control, highlighting the narrative of the unpredictability of science and technology.



Fig. 7. Mechagodzilla. Still from *Godzilla vs. Kong* directed by Adam Wingard (2021)¹⁴

¹³ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3741700/mediaviewer/rm814442240?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_1 (05.09.2023).

¹⁴ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5034838/mediaviewer/rm1576661505?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_433 (05.09.2023).

The magnitude of the catastrophe expands the dimensional and temporal narrative structures as we see non-human worlds in the depths of the ocean and the Hollow Earth (Fig. 8), and hear about the events that occurred before the emergence of mankind. Non-human historical regimes are incorporated into the narrative, but the planet itself remains somewhat in the background as an active agent.



Fig. 8. The Hollow Earth. Still from *Godzilla vs. Kong* directed by Adam Wingard (2021)¹⁵

Despite the posthumanist perspective in the ecological narrative, the franchise still uses anthropomorphic elements and themes. The overarching plot still revolves around families and relationships within them, such as the Brody and Russell families. The protagonist monsters, devoid of their dreadfulness, are becoming more and more humanized—in their views, affections, and relationships with other creatures and people. This is particularly evident in the new portrayal of King Kong that we will explore in the following section.

KING KONG: GUARD OF PRIMORDIAL NATURE

King Kong is one of the MonsterVerse monsters, but he was never an atomic monster. Its origin took place in a completely different colonial context. The character of King Kong first appeared in the 1933 film *King Kong*, directed by Ernest Schoedsack and Merian Cooper. The film was a massive success and featured not only King Kong but also other giant monsters, such as dinosaurs. The screenplay revolves around

¹⁵ There is a visual reference to Michelangelo's fresco painting, *The Creation of Adam*, which enhances the anthropomorphism of the monstrous images. See the image source: https://irecommend.ru/content/betmen-protiv-supermena#&gid=gallery_node7668598field_imgf1&pid=15 (05.09.2023).

a film director and businessman who aims to shoot his next project on Skull Island, the home of King Kong, a gigantic ape that no one apart from the black islanders has ever seen. The director hopes to capture King Kong on camera and make a cinematic sensation by showing a real monster to American audiences. To accomplish this, he recruits Ann Darrow, a conventionally attractive blonde, for the leading role. As soon as Kong sees her, he becomes captivated by Ann's beauty and kidnaps her. Determined to get Ann back, the director organizes a mission to capture Kong and bring him to New York—and succeeds. Kong is then paraded in New York as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” (Fig. 9). Eventually the gigantic ape breaks free, recaptures Ann, but is ultimately shot dead by American airplanes.



Fig. 9. King Kong. Still from *King Kong*
directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1933)¹⁶

The very physicality and portrayal of King Kong embodied racial stereotypes prevalent in American society at the time, where it was common to liken black people to apes (Frazier, 2007; Schleier, 2008). Kong's infatuation with a blonde white woman further reinforced dominant American racial tensions, according to which black men are sexually promiscuous with uncontrollable sexual urges. The film thus “tapped into many of the subconscious fears about blackness and masculinity in the 1930s” (Frazier, 2007, p. 186), expressing how the dominant gaze of colonial whiteness inferiorized black man. The inferior ape was a monstrosity that had to be suppressed, if not exploited as a spectacle. In other words, King Kong's monstrosity represented a rejected otherness that held no value in the “civilized” world. King Kong had to be exterminated as he represented an unambiguous threat, an almost alien force with whom communication or co-creation was deemed impossible.

The new Kong is entirely different. Similar to Godzilla, he has lost his monstrosity upon becoming part of the MonsterVerse. King Kong is now the protagonist of a new

¹⁶ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024216/mediaviewer/rm3750332160?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_10 (05.09.2023).

story, passing the role of the real monster to the Skullcrawler, a dinosaur-like creature that lives underground (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Skullcrawler. Still from *Kong: Skull Island* directed by Jordan Charles Vogt-Roberts (2017)¹⁷

Kong: Skull Island (2017), directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts, is the second film in the MonsterVerse franchise. The story follows an expedition to the uncharted Skull Island in the Pacific Ocean, Kong's home. The expedition group consists of scientists, soldiers, and a female anti-war photojournalist with a traditionally male name—Mason Weaver.¹⁸ Within the group, there are those who seek to conquer the island and its inhabitants, including Kong, and those who oppose such actions.

The island, on which the narrative unfolds, is a picturesque place that strikes with its beauty. Inhabited by paleoendemic creatures, ancient species preserved due to their isolation from the human world, the island resembles a “museum” of pre-human life, governed by Kong, representing the mechanism of nature. As Mircea Eliade would say, “in that image of primordial Nature we can easily recognize the feature of a paradisiac landscape” (Eliade, 1961, p. 41).

But there is also a hidden dark side of the island—the dangerous underground monsters known as Skullcrawlers. King Kong stands at the border between the two worlds of the island, safeguarding the “above-ground world” from alien invaders. Like Godzilla, King Kong maintains the natural order. The bombs used by the expedition team to explore the uncharted island represent an aggressive and violent approach towards nature, which causes the awakening of the Skullcrawlers (referencing the birth of the nuclear monster because of the bomb).

¹⁷ See the image source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3731562/mediaviewer/m2747020032?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_28 (05.09.2023).

¹⁸ She serves an important function in the story because female and child characters usually have a human ethical connection with the kaiju monster.

CONCLUSION

In the 1950s and 1960s, giant monsters gained popularity in science fiction, becoming part of the catastrophic nuclear narrative extensively used by the film industry. These nuclear monsters embodied traditional figures of monstrosity, reflecting threats to the human world such as nuclear weapons and the unpredictable consequences of nuclear energy and technology.

The MonsterVerse franchise revisits some elements and images of monsters from the past but reframes them within the context of a planetary eco-disaster. While “the anxiety global warming gives rise to is reminiscent of the days when many feared a global nuclear war” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 221), the ecological narrative produces ecologically versed monsters.

Godzilla ceases to be a monster embodying the fear of nuclear weapons or energy. In fact, nuclear radiation is shown as a natural and beneficial superhero power (Marshall, 2022, p. 10). Now, Godzilla is a force of nature representing the natural order. Although the specifics of this order are concealed, we can see Godzilla as an ecological agent aligned with the discourse of sustainable development, representing the interests of the Earth. In the film *Kong: Skull Island*, there is no global catastrophe or planetary destruction, yet the ecological narrative remains a persistent part of the story, and the revival of King Kong’s monstrosity follows the abovementioned trends.

A special feature of the narrative is the presence of an indigenous tribe that lives in harmony with nature and reveres Kong as a god. In an ecological context, it represents the resurrection of the archetype of the “noble savage” uncorrupted by civilization, “the pure, free and happy” human being surrounded by maternal and generous nature (Eliade, 1961, p. 41).

The giant monsters, Godzilla and King Kong, were once terrifying, but they have now shed their traditional monstrosity. Their immense size within a planetary context is no longer dreadful; they now appear proportionate to the size of the planet and are integrated into its ecosystem. They act as ecological agents, defending the interests of the Earth and maintaining ecosystem balance. Godzilla and King Kong are what can be referred to as the *ecological monsters* of the Anthropocene era. They follow the logic of posthumanist monstrosity. This transformation reflects a posthumanist shift in the humanities and, more broadly, popular culture, which suggests that human nature is embedded in the natural world, indigenous cultures should be protected, and our relationships with other beings should be nourished (Braidotti, 2013). On the other hand, ecological fears are embodied by MUTO, Ghidorah and Mechagodzilla, acting as invasive species, alien to Earth’s ecosystem, and representing a classical form of monstrosity related to fears and warnings. The ecological narrative in popular media is based on mass extinction, biodiversity decline, and climate change, which are widely discussed issues (Marshall, 2022). Such a representation of monstrosity as invasiveness embodies these ecological fears.

The human characters in the franchise also undergo changes, becoming institutionalized. For instance, figures of scientists and military personnel are replaced by social, economic, and political organizations such as the secret organization Monarch, the US Navy, and the Apex Cybernetics Corporation—an eco-terrorist group with a radical plan to save the Earth. All of them act as ecological agents, representing different ecological discourses (administrative rationalism, democratic pragmatism, sustainable development, and ecological modernization, among others) (Dryzek, 2022). However, this is portrayed in a chaotic manner without a strict sequence.

The media franchise brings classical and new forms of monstrosity together, reproducing cultural trends in its own visual media language, including posthumanist theories and ideas. The MonsterVerse constructs an ecological narrative,¹⁹ with a particular emphasis on the concept of the ecological monster that describes Godzilla and King Kong in the franchise. This concept can be utilized in the future for ecocritical analysis.

Authors' contributions

Natalia Vereshchagina developed the theoretical framework, analyzed and interpreted the cases (Godzilla), and prepared the final version of the manuscript.

Panos Kompatsiaris developed the theoretical framework, analyzed and interpreted the cases (King Kong), and prepared the final version of the manuscript.

Both authors discussed the final version of the manuscript.

Авторский вклад

Н. Верещагина — теоретическая рамка, анализ и интерпретация кейсов (Годзилла), подготовка финальной рукописи.

П. Компациарис — теоретическая рамка, анализ и интерпретация кейсов (Кинг Конг), подготовка финальной рукописи.

Оба автора приняли участие в обсуждении финального варианта рукописи.

¹⁹ Furthermore, it is interesting to observe the ongoing transformation of the monster universe. The next film in the franchise is scheduled for release in 2024, which may offer an updated configuration of the monster within new cultural contexts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NATALIA V. VERESHCHAGINA

Visiting Lecturer,
Institute of Media, Faculty of Creative Industries,
HSE University,
20, Myasnitskaya, Moscow 101000, Russia

ResearcherID: JAD-0266-2023

ORCID: 0000-0003-3592-2833

e-mail: nataliavereschagina@gmail.com

PANOS KOMPATSIARIS

PhD in Art Theory, Associate Professor,
Institute of Media, Faculty of Creative Industries,
HSE University,
20, Myasnitskaya, Moscow 101000, Russia

ResearcherID: M-6064-2015

ORCID: 0000-0002-2452-6109

e-mail: panoskompa@gmail.com

ВЕРЕЩАГИНА НАТАЛЬЯ ВИКТОРОВНА

приглашённый преподаватель,
Институт медиа, Факультет креативных индустрий,
Национальный исследовательский университет
«Высшая школа экономики»,
101000, Россия, Москва, ул. Мясницкая, д. 20

ResearcherID: JAD-0266-2023

ORCID: 0000-0003-3592-2833

e-mail: nataliavereschagina@gmail.com

КОМПАЦИАРИС ПАНОС

PhD in Art Theory, доцент,
Институт медиа, Факультет креативных индустрий,
Национальный исследовательский университет
«Высшая школа экономики»,
101000, Россия, Москва, ул. Мясницкая, д. 20

ResearcherID: M-6064-2015

ORCID: 0000-0002-2452-6109

e-mail: panoskomp@gmail.com