



## FILM STUDIES

# History, in Celluloid

Joanne Bernardi introduces students to the delicate art of preserving films—and to the enduring appeal of “monster/creature” movies.

By Kathleen McGarvey

THERE ARE MANY ICONIC IMAGES OF THE nuclear age, but among those spawned by pop culture, perhaps none is more familiar than a certain enormous lizard. Atomic Creatures: Godzilla, a film and media studies course taught this fall by Joanne Bernardi, an associate professor of Japanese and a member of the film and media studies program faculty, takes a look at the phenom-



**MONSTER KING:** Bernardi (with her own collection of monster movie memorabilia) teaches a course on Japanese monster films, a genre that has established Godzilla (above) as a fixture in global popular culture since the postnuclear lizard's debut in 1954.

enon that generated and helped define the Japanese *kaiju eiga*, or monster film.

"I think it's the most important course I teach—it's a matter of life and death," says Bernardi, who says the films bring together cultural and historical responses to nuclear issues. The larger context of the course is a critical investigation of the science-fiction/horror/creature feature film inspired by the dawn of the nuclear age. The kitschiness of many American post-atomic creature movies resulted in part from limited awareness of the full effects of nuclear weapons.

Photographic footage taken immediately after the explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki weren't seen in the United States until the 1970s, Bernardi says.

Godzilla had his start in the movies in 1954 with the original Japanese film *Gojira*, directed by Ishiro Honda, sometimes a second-unit director for Akira Kurosawa. More familiar to most American audiences is the 1956 remake starring Raymond Burr, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*.

But those making *Gojira* and its cultural offspring weren't only thinking of an anti-nuclear message, Bernardi says. They were also trying to entertain. Even as she outlines the somber questions she leads her students to discuss, she can't help but break out in a grin at the thought of a good monster movie.

Bernardi was already well at work on her

doctorate in Japanese and film studies at Columbia before she ever encountered the original *Gojira*. It played at the Public Theater's Summer in Japan film series in New York City in 1982.

"It simply wasn't available then," she says, noting that while a restored version was released theatrically in 2004, the original *Gojira* had only very limited screenings in the United States.

Seeing the 1954 movie lit Bernardi's interest in the genre and in what it reveals about the postwar period. But her chance encounter with the movie also heightened her awareness of the precariousness of films' availability. Two decades later, Bernardi enrolled in a certificate program of the Jeffrey L. Selznick

School of Film Preservation at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film

in Rochester.

Drawing from her experiences in the Eastman House archives—one of the four major film archives in the United States, where she was trained in restoring, preserving, and caring for films—she developed a new course for Rochester students, Film as Object.

"Knowledge of film preservation enables a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of filmmaking," she says. "It's easier to understand

the diversity of national film industries, and helps students become more aware of the breadth of film and media studies as a discipline. It also gives us an appreciation of all kinds of film—not just Hollywood feature films, but industrial films, films for advertising and promotion, and government propaganda films."

It was in part student questions that led her to pursue the Selznick program certificate, she says. "They wanted to know where films come from, where they go, and why we see some films—and not others."

Students are aware that such knowledge is especially pertinent today, Bernardi says, with the accumulation of more than three decades of evolving home viewing formats, TV-release versions, and film prints that have weathered the wear and tear of storage and use under unregulated, highly variable conditions.

"The titles screened in Atomic Creatures: Godzilla are excellent case studies of how films can be—and have been—altered over time both deliberately, for marketing purposes, for example, and inadvertently through their continuous use," she adds.

"Students have a keen awareness of films as artifacts and not just as abstract, individual 'film titles' presumably passed down to us in the same condition in which they were made." **R**

## Going to the Movies

Here are a few of Joanne Bernardi's top recommendations for films that helped set the stage for the Godzilla series:

**The Lost World (1925):** The silent film adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 novel pioneered cinema special effects in its depiction of scientists in a land of prehistoric creatures.

**King Kong (1933):** The original ape-meets-girl flick was rereleased worldwide in 1952 and 1953, earning more revenue than in its original release and priming audiences for Godzilla's debut the following year.

**The Thing from Another World (1951):** An American 1950s creature film that walked a thin line between the science fiction and horror genres, it introduced a

conflict between scientists and military men that became a staple of these films.

**The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953):** Opening with footage of the Crossroads Baker atomic test shot, the film—about a dinosaur, thawed out by an Arctic nuclear test, that makes its way to Manhattan—was an obvious precursor to the Godzilla story.

**Them! (1954):** Not all the creatures in creature films towered over city blocks. The monsters of *Them!* were mutant ants, the result of Alamogordo atomic bomb tests.

—Kathleen McGarvey



**ANCESTORS:**  
"I treat *King Kong* and *The Lost World* as films leading up to *Godzilla*," says Bernardi.