

## Editor revisits “KILLER KAIJU MONSTERS”

Written by Nick Masercola  
Friday, 21 May 2010 14:54

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Are you sick and tired of lifeless, synthetic CGI monsters filling the multiplexes? Do you long for the glory days of Japanese monster movies? Own all the Godzilla movies at home? Want to kick back with Rodan and Mothra?

Well, so does Ivan Vartanian (pictured), editor of *KILLER KAIJU MONSTERS: STRANGE BEASTS OF JAPANESE FILM* (Collins Design). The book, out June 1, chronicles the period in Japanese cinema after the country was left reeling from the atomic bombing of WWII, when extravagant monster movies ruled. “I was interested in the basic ideas of the *tokusatsu eiga* [special effects film],” Vartanian tells Fango. “Namely, the urbanization of postwar Japan and the neurosis surrounding it, along with a disconnection with nature and the agrarian way of life that characterized Japan up until the Showa period.”



The response to all of this disconnect? The creation of the *kaiju eiga*—the Japanese creature feature. Extremely popular in their heyday, these films have managed to remain pop-culture fixtures to this day. Why? “For many viewers, the appeal has mostly to do with a heightened sort of nostalgia,” Vartanian says. “Not unlike western superheroes, the *kaiju* hold a special place in the hearts of a whole generation—or two—of viewers. The fundamental difference is that the monsters are also heroes in their own way. That’s in part what makes this genre an interesting counterpoint to western films.”

The book takes a look at all *kaiju*, from the ever-famous Godzilla to lesser-known creatures such as Hedorah. While one would think getting the rights to use pictures of all these beasts would be a nightmarish undertaking (especially when the company that owns many of them is

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Toho, a lawsuit-happy company if there ever was one), it turned out be a fairly painless experience. “Toho was extremely cooperative and helpful,” Vartanian says. “They even allowed me to look at the original negatives of the films. I spent some time with them reviewing the entire book and even getting their feedback. I think if one is willing to see Toho as a trove of information and work with them in a collaborative manner, the experience is totally positive.”

The result is wide assortment of text and images celebrating the Japanese bestiary. “It’s a broad mix of film stills, contemporary illustration, toys and numerous commissioned pieces,” the editor explains. “For example, there is a comic about *kaiju* and *yokai* [smaller creatures from Japanese mythology] that appears in the last section of book. I also commissioned a paper toy [with a snapping, moveable head] that’s a cut-out from a book by Keisuke Saka, an awesome craftsman. We have cross-sections of several

*kaiju*

by contemporary artist Mark Nagata, as well as Shoji Ohtomo, who is a legend in the *kaiju*

world. Then there’s a black-and-white frieze drawing by Ryohei Tanaka that homages the aesthetic of Ultraman.”

With such a fervent and lasting following in the States, it’s surprising that in today’s era, Hollywood has rarely tackled the giant-monster genre. CLOVERFIELD was the last one, but in Vartanian’s mind, that wasn’t even close. “Even though it seemed to be a homage to *kaiju* films, it totally missed the mark,” he says. “What distinguishes these older films is the character design of the

*kaiju*

. Apart from knowing their backstories, we have some sense of their ‘personalities.’ The monsters of many big-budget [U.S.] films lack personality, and are faceless threats to civilization.”

In addition to KILLER KAIJU MONSTERS, Vartanian has written several other books on various aspects of Japanese culture, including JAPANESE PHOTOBOOKS OF THE 1960S & 70S (2009, Aperture), DROP DEAD CUTE: THE NEW GENERATION OF FEMALE ARTISTS IN JAPAN (2005, Chronicle Books), FULL VINYL: THE SUBVERSIVE ART OF DESIGNER TOYS (2007, Collins Design) and SETTING SUN: WRITINGS BY JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHERS (2005, Aperture). All are available at major bookstores everywhere and on-line.

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