



A FEW OBSERVATIONS ABOUT PREVIEWS

RICHMOND ADAMS
POPMEC RESEARCH BLOG

In the early spring of 2019, my wife and I went to see Peter Farrelly's *Green Book* and appreciated its presentation of the ever-present issues involving race, sexuality, and class. More interesting than another presentation of promise concerning the 1960s, however, had nothing to do with the film we went to see or even its portrayal of the relationship between Frank Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen) and Dr. Donald Shirley (Mahershala Ali). Rather, it was the specific previews shown that evening which suggested more prescient questions concerning our present circumstances. At the same time, I have no idea if Dream Works planned those specific previews to be shown as lead-ins to Farrelly's film. By placing *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* and *Captain Marvel* as prefaces to *Green Book*, viewers were given, even unintentionally, a glimpse not so much at the human propensity for self-destruction, but our acquiescence to what appear as various expressions of deepening cultural impotence.

The initial preview was for *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, which reminded viewers of the inevitable sequel to the simply named *Godzilla*, and how it served as 2014's renewal of the films released in the mid-50s. With the usual reliance on CGI that almost invariably reduces narrative to "blowing up the world" (or at least a good portion of it), the preview showed the creature who happened to generate intense cinematic horror during the era of American post war hegemony not as an (almost) undefeatable villain who indiscriminately destroys, but rather, as the apparent savior for what remained of national stability in the aftermath of 9-11, the Iraq War, and the 2008 and 2009 Great Recession. Quite naturally, the viewpoint of monster as savior differs from Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Godzilla* or its 1956 sequel (*Godzilla: King of the Monsters!*) in which Raymond Burr played "the intrepid [reporter] Steve Martin" by providing narration to the horrors that seemed almost resurrected from the bottom of the ocean (Zoeller Seitz 2014). Both portrayals of *Godzilla* serve, of course, to analogize the indifference of American H-bomb testing throughout the Pacific that could obliterate in a "flash of



light” all the humans who had created it (Decker 2004). Continuing from its 2014 predecessor, however, the monster from the deep in 2019 does not resemble “a man in a lizard suit, [awkwardly] stomping on cardboard sets,” but instead might as well be Christopher Nolan’s Batman (Christian Bale) standing tall atop the shoulders of Henry Cavill’s Superman as they protect the scores of hapless humans who scurry across an urban street toward buildings that provide even less safety than when the Bombs fell in either *The Day After* (1983) or *Threads* (1984) (Ebert 2004). Instead of Dr. Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata) creating the Oxygen Destroyer that ingeniously, and, through the sacrifice of himself, heroically saved the world, it seems that humans of the present era can evidently do little but run, hide, and hope for our latest monster-hero to emerge scathed but still victorious against the forces of chaotic indifference.

As *Godzilla* left the screen, a preview for *Captain Marvel* took its place. In retelling the transformation of Carol Danvers (Brie Larson), once an American fighter pilot, directors Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck present the latest intergalactic superhero as appearing just in time to rescue the yet again incapacitated humans. Soon enough, battle will commence, this time not against creatures from oceanic depths, but attackers from outer space known as “the Skrulls—a race of alien shapeshifters led by Talos (Ben Mendelsohn) that are ruthlessly invading the galaxy.” (Lemire 2019). Standing tall between mere humans and our final destruction, my wife and I saw a second portrayal of how superheroes do their duty, in the present case, of doing what humans will not even attempt to do for themselves. Given how the Captain’s gallantry primarily seems to occur in outer space, however, Boden and Fleck’s mutual direction suggests another tale of virtual human passivity that eliminates all forms of creativity, virtue, and sacrifice for the life of our fellows.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the fallacies of the Iraq War, the 2008 economic collapse, and as these words are being written in the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic, such acquiescence—perhaps unintentional and unconscious—portray an indifference that is no longer an aberration, but that began, I would argue, sometime during the middle 1960s, has become the predominant cultural discourse throughout America and Western society. On the one hand, these previews suggest that the generically titled—as historian Dan Carter referenced in his 1995 biography of former Alabama Governor George Wallace— “government” has proven itself once more incapable of performing its most basic functions, such as protecting citizens from sea monsters, alien invaders, or, as of 2020, a worldwide virus. Conversely, however, we those same citizens have become little more than Superman’s acolytes who follow his orders to “get off the street” while General Zod (Michael Shannon) and his fellow Kryptonians come perilously close to obliterating our military (the last line of defense in preserving our sense of national selves) while they bring havoc to Smallville, Kansas during *Man of Steel* (2013) (Carter 1995, 466). As we watch or hide from our all too weak sense of security behind our latched Main Street doors, those two previews offer



a view of our abdication to duty toward one another and ourselves. Such an avoidance stands in stark contrast to the answers given by our twentieth-century ancestors.

These answers were spoken at the conclusion of *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943) as Basil Rathbone quoted Winston Churchill's speech in the United States Capitol. They were echoed and reinforced some twenty years later through Atticus Finch's summation to the jury in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960 and 1962). Americans, we were told, were called to responsibility as active and engaged citizens of the post-war world. Only some six decades later, the previews for *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* and *Captain Marvel* portray a reality in which if either Gregory Peck or Basil Rathbone were able to stand before us in reflective righteousness, it remains all too plausible that few, if any, of the Americans who heard their calls would comprehend what either or both were trying to say. Instead, we might still be waiting either for some version of another fictional mythic hero, as John Ford put it, to "save us from ourselves" (*The Sun Shines Bright*). In the aftermath of 9–11, Iraq, the Great Recession, and the COVID–19 outbreak, such a cultural shift remains more than a bit troubling.

[I wish to thank the student editors of the *Northwestern News*, which is the campus newspaper of Northwestern Oklahoma State University, for their permitting me to extend an initial version of this work and transform it into more scholastic form. I also wish to thank Dr. Kaylene Armstrong, who serves as faculty sponsor of the *News*, for her permission as well.]

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Carter, Dan T. 1995. *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Lee, Harper. 1960. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia, Lippincott.
- Lemire, Christy. 2019. Review of *Captain Marvel*. Christy Lemire official site. Published March 6, 2019. <http://christylemire.com/rogerebert-com-captain-marvel/>.
- Zoeller Seitz, Matt. 2014. Review of *Godzilla*. Roger Ebert official site. Published May 15, 2014. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/godzilla-2014>.



Decker, Nathan. 2004. Review of *Godzilla: King of the Monsters!* Million Monkey Theater site. Published April, 2004. <http://www.millionmonkeytheater.com/Godzilla1954.html>.

Ebert, Roger. 2004. "Idiotic? Yes, but Godzilla reflect its nuclear times". Roger Ebert official site. Published July 2, 2004. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/godzilla-2004>.

Boden, Anna, and Ryan Fleck, dirs. 2019. *Captain Marvel*. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney.

Dougherty, Michael, dir. 2019. *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. Burbank, CA: Legendary Entertainment.

Farrelly, Peter, dir. 2018. *Green Book*. Glendale, CA: Dream Works.

Ford, John, dir. 1953. *The Sun Shines Bright*. Los Angeles: Argosy.

Honda, Ishiro, dir. 1954. *Godzilla*. 1954. Tokyo: Toho.

Honda, Ishiro, and Terry Morse, dirs. 1956. *Godzilla: King of the Monsters!* Lincolnwood, IL: Embassy Pictures.

Jackson, Mick, dir. 1984. *Threads*. London, UK: BBC.

Meyer, Nicholas, dir. 1983. *The Day After*. New York: ABC Circle Films.

Mulligan, Robert, dir. 1962. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Universal City, CA: Universal.

Neill, Roy William, dir. 1942. *Sherlock Holmes in Washington*. Universal City, CA: Universal.

Snyder, Zack, dir. 2013. *Man of Steel*. Burbank, CA: Legendary Pictures.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Adams, Richmond. 2020. "A few observations on previews." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published May 11, 2020.