



THE COLOUR OF MONSTROSITY IN *GODZILLA 2014* AND *GODZILLA VS KONG*

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In 2014, Legendary Pictures released *Godzilla*, the first entry in a still-expanding cinematic franchise of monster movies known to fans as the MonsterVerse. Ten years and three movies later, the MonsterVerse continues to present audiences with multi-layered sensory spectacle that, alongside cacophonous sound design, increasingly audacious storytelling, and genre-leading visual effects, makes full use of an extraordinarily expressive palette of colour. This article looks at two specific examples of the MonsterVerse's use of colour. First, it explores the austere visual palette of *Godzilla 2014*, looking first at the ways that this movie's use of black, white, and grey is a deliberate invocation of the high-contrast monochrome of Ishiro Honda's 1954 original *Godzilla*, and secondly at the film's sparing yet impactful use of red accents, which function to build a sense of scale and awe. Second, this paper looks at the 'bisexual lighting' in *Godzilla Vs Kong* (2021), the latest and most bombastic entry in the MonsterVerse. This film's narrative conceit—a clash of 'alpha titans'—is most compelling when queered into a story of doomed attraction, and the use of colour is a major visual element of this reading of the movie. The use of colour in both of these MonsterVerse films is interesting because, in addition to being a key factor in the films' visual spectacle, it speaks to contextual and extra-diegetic factors that enrich the films with extra layers of nostalgic meaning.

THE BLACKNESS OF THE BEAST: DARKNESS AND HIGHLIGHT IN *GODZILLA*

Few monster movies have received the critical attention that has been lavished upon Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Godzilla*. Though it was far from the first creature feature, it is a genre cornerstone rivalled in historical significance only by Merian C Cooper's 1933

King Kong, from which it took considerable influence. In terms of sound design, creature characterisation, thematic preoccupations, storytelling style, and more, the movie laid the foundations for the giant monster genre as we continue to know it today.

Visually, the film is characterised by deep chiaroscuro contrast reminiscent of German Expressionism and American Film Noir. Specifically, during the movie's key scenes of monster rampage, *Godzilla* is seen in deep black shadow, often in silhouette, with sharp white points of contrast provided by bursts of electricity or gouts of flame (fig. 1, 2).

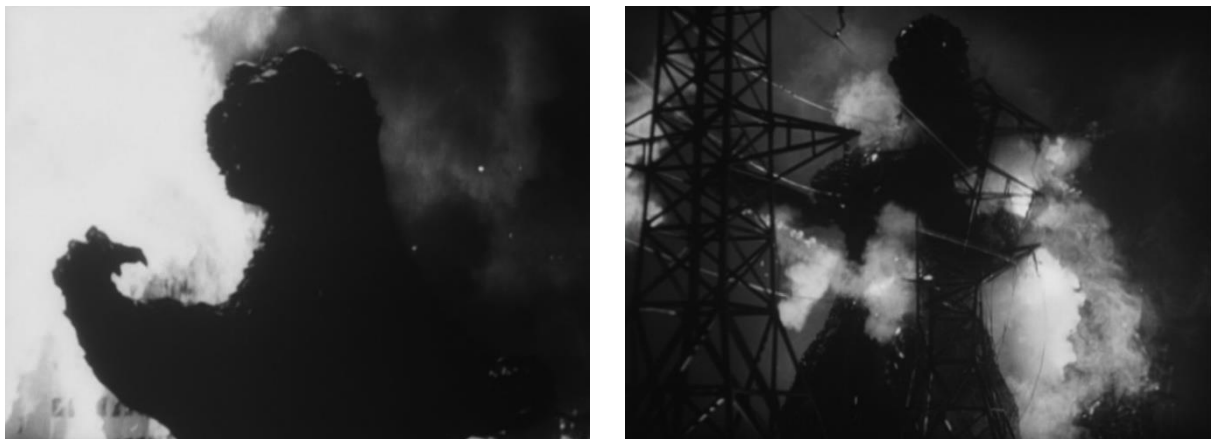


Fig. 1, 2: *Godzilla*. Dir. Ishiro Honda, 1954.

This use of light contributes to the horror-inflected atmosphere of the monster's rampage through Tokyo by cloaking it in obscurity, showing *Godzilla* in snatched glimpses rather than in full illumination. In time-honoured horror genre fashion, this allows the monster to be more suggested than displayed, and invites the audience to fill in the shadows with their imaginations. Crucially, the scenes of night devastation evoke the night-time firebombing raids suffered throughout Japan during the Second World War which, for the movie's original audience, would have been a deeply felt recent memory (fig. 3, 4). As such, this expressive use of light and shade is central to the film's political valences and, as a consequence, its lasting importance. The dominant reading of *Godzilla* 1954 is that the movie provides a severe and sincere commentary on the experience and consequences of the Second World War, with the monster representing a bold allegory for the aerial bombardment and nuclear violence suffered by Japan during the 1940s and the ongoing atomic weapons testing of the Cold War period.

Morris Low (1993), for instance, writes that "Godzilla and the Japanese monster movies represent an attempt by the Japanese to come to terms with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society" (53). Chon Noriega (1987) writes that films in the kaiju genre, of which *Godzilla* is a foundational text, "reveal a self-conscious attempt to deal with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society" (63). Peter Wynn Kirby

(2011) calls *Godzilla* “stridently anti-nuclear” and notes that the film’s “explosions, dead bodies and flood of refugees evoked dire scenes from the final days of the war, images still seared in the memories of Japanese viewers”. The film’s austere high-contrast use of light and shade is central to the way the film articulates its poignant commentary, and is part of the reason the film retains its status as a serious artistic accomplishment as well as a genre-founding piece of science fiction fantasy.



Fig. 3, 4: *Godzilla*. Dir. Ishiro Honda, 1954.

Over the following fifty years, *Godzilla* movies changed drastically, transitioning into widescreen colour formats, incorporating humour, and pitting the creature against a range of increasingly outré adversaries in a wrestling-based format in order to appeal more directly to family audiences. *Godzilla* itself changed from an inchoate apocalyptic nightmare into a child-friendly hero complete with sidekicks, victory dances, and jolly songs. The tonal range and variety to be found across the movies enables them to speak to a wider range of audiences and to engage a broader range of ideas, and is one of the major factors in the series’ longevity; speaking as a fan, the vertiginous differences in tone and approach across the *Godzilla* corpus is one of its major attractions. In any case, this tension between seriousness and schlock is a longstanding, perhaps constitutive, dynamic in the *Godzilla* series, a dynamic that is reflective of the thematic and affective elasticity of science fiction more generally.

For many viewers, however, these developments were increasingly unwelcome, and in the United States particularly *Godzilla* soon became a byword for cheaply made garbage. Genre commentator Stuart Galbraith IV (1998), for instance, calls 1970s movies such as *Godzilla Vs Megalon* (fig. 5) “cheap, uninspired, and juvenile,” (32) and Jim Knipfel (2019), writing for fan website *Den of Geek*, observes that by the 1980s “Americans in particular were coming to see *Godzilla* films as a punchline, as the cheapest of the cheap and the dumbest of the dumb.” American adaptations of *Godzilla*, too, were light-hearted, and were perceived by many as unacceptably silly. The 1978–1979 Hanna Barbera cartoon (fig. 6) and the 1998 Hollywood movie (fig. 7)—though they

were both successful and popular, and remain fondly remembered by many today – were perceived by vocal detractors as further trivialization of a once-grand cinematic icon. Throughout these later films, Godzilla’s body is seen much more clearly, in more even lighting and much clearer direct close-ups, so the visual complexity and ambivalence of the original is lost at the same time as its original conceptual commitments are abandoned. This may well be attributable to the improvements in special effects technologies, which led to filmmakers choosing to showcase rather than obscure the monster. Whatever the reason, the dark, ambiguous austerity of the original was gradually superseded by a brighter, more fun-first visual style.



Fig. 5: Godzilla Vs Megalon. Dir. Jun Fukuda, 1973.



Fig. 6: Godzilla. Dir. Ray Patterson & Carl Urbano, 1978. Godzilla with its offspring Godzooky.



Fig. 7: *Godzilla*. Dir. Roland Emmerich, 1998.

In this longer-term context, then, the austere colour palette of *Godzilla* 2014 can be read as a deliberate invocation of the visual style and approach of Honda's 1954 original. In particular, the climactic night battle between Godzilla and the MUTOs, two colossal arachnids whose mating habits have led them to drag an atomic weapon into San Francisco, is presented almost entirely in greyscale. As smoke billows and debris burns, the coal-black creatures wrestle amongst a darkened city, illuminated by their own eerie phosphorescences and intermittent crackles of ominous, rainless lightning (fig. 8). Particularly notable is a moment that has been affectionately named “the kiss of death” by fans, in which Godzilla exhales white-hot fire into the mouth of its opponent (fig. 9). As the atomic breath kills the MUTO, it ruptures the beast at the neck: flame billowing out of the wound, Godzilla triumphantly tears off the head of its adversary. These moments derive their spectacular impact from the strident use of high-contrast monochrome colouration.



Fig. 8: *Godzilla*. Dir. Gareth Edwards, 2014.



Fig. 9: *Godzilla*. Dir. Gareth Edwards, 2014. The 'kiss of death'.

This use of light and colour has effects and implications beyond mere homage or imitation. It is a deliberate attempt to distance the MonsterVerse from the more playful and frivolous entries in *Godzilla's* long filmography, a bold and clear statement that—unlike Hanna Barbera's Saturday morning cartoon or Roland Emmerich's 1998 interpretation of *Godzilla* (dubbed *Godzilla In Name Only*, or GINO, by detractors such as William Tsutsui (2004, 201))—this new American incarnation of *Godzilla* was a serious and sober attempt to capture the grandeur and gravitas of the original movie. In conjunction with the film's slow-paced storyline, its use of imagery such as collapsing power plants and the devastation associated with tsunamis to evoke the Fukushima disaster of 2011 (Cho 2019, 123), and its incorporation of generic elements from contemporary war movies, this use of colour is more than an aesthetic strategy: it is an attempt to position the movie as a close descendant of the first film and to place it at arms' length from its less 'respectable' sequels. The first *Godzilla* movie since Ryuhei Kitamura's camp extravaganza *Final Wars* (2004), a box-office flop which remains divisive among fans, *Godzilla 2014* was carefully and deliberately positioned as a cinematic attempt to return the titular titan to its rightful status as the sovereign of serious monster film.

Colour is key to this self-consciously straight-faced reimagining in another way, as it contributes directly to the sense of scale and weight that characterizes the 21st century American *Godzilla*. Above all, MonsterVerse *Godzilla* is *big*. Many cinematic techniques are used to demonstrate the scale of Edwards' new version of *Godzilla*, including multiple low angle shots and bass-heavy sound design. When it lands on Hawaii to fight the male MUTO, in particular, viewers get many indirect indications of its size. As it comes to shore, the waves retreat. As it approaches the airport, its footsteps drown out the sound of exploding planes. A key visual moment comes as soldiers fire flares from the rooftops near Hawaii beach, tiny yet vivid pinpricks of red

which illuminate patches of Godzilla's side as it strides past our eyes (fig. 10). The small visual accents provided by these points of colour are especially effective at establishing scale. These red glimmers, which smother the nearby humans in their glow (fig. 11), are miniscule next to Godzilla's gigantic flank (fig. 12).



Fig. 10: Godzilla. Dir. Gareth Edwards, 2014.



Fig. 11: Godzilla. Dir. Gareth Edwards, 2014.



Fig. 12: *Godzilla*. Dir. Gareth Edwards, 2014.

Godzilla 2014, then, uses black, white, and small accents of red to complex effect. At the level of the screen, they contribute to a sense of scale and seriousness. Extradiegetically, at the level of genre history, they are a self-conscious attempt to position the movie in a specific way in relation to the existing corpus of *Godzilla* movies, the expectations of fans, and the predilections of cinema historians. No longer a goofy punchline, *Godzilla* is established in this movie as a force to be reckoned with.

JUST FUCK ALREADY: BISEXUAL LIGHTING IN *GODZILLA VS KONG*

This visual austerity did not characterise the MonsterVerse for long. Three movies later, in 2021, Adam Wingard's *Godzilla Vs Kong* fully embraced the more flamboyant and freewheeling aspects of *Godzilla*'s past. Where *Godzilla* 2014 shows us a grounded, sober story of an everyman caught up in the catastrophic re-emergence of a long-secluded mythic titan, *Godzilla Vs Kong* focuses on a high-octane showdown between *Godzilla* and *Kong* which propels the audience from Skull Island, to an ancient civilization inside the Hollow Earth, and, ultimately, to a Hong Kong showdown with Mechagodzilla, a giant telepathically-controlled robot. Where *Godzilla* 2014 embraces the aesthetics and tone of the 1954 original, *Godzilla Vs Kong* looks back fondly on the more kinetic, anything-goes approach of the sequels; where *Godzilla* 2014 needs you to know that it went to film school, *Godzilla Vs Kong* needs you to know that it likes to party.

In a short and sassy article for *Dread Central*, Cressa Beer (2023) names *Godzilla Vs Kong* one of the four gayest *Godzilla* movies. "Did you know that *Godzilla Vs Kong* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* have the same ending?" she writes, playfully reading the monster smash as a tale of bitter, conflict-ridden love: "Anyone who's dated a fire sign will understand." As well as being archly provocative, Beer is right, and Adam Wingard's use of colour in the latest MonsterVerse instalment contributes a great deal to this

queer reading. *Godzilla's* intimidation display and its atomic breath are both a lurid blue, and the film's climactic confrontation takes place in a Hong Kong illuminated by pink, blue and purple lights. This use of expressive light to saturate the frame with pink, purple, and blue, the three constituent colours of the bisexual pride flag, is known popularly – mostly online – as “bisexual lighting.” The use of this colour palette throughout *Godzilla Vs Kong* subtly recodes the story as a parable of attraction.

Bisexual lighting came to prominence between 2013 and 2016, and is often used in order to make suggestive indications about desire and identity. Frequently emphasizing the physical beauty of the characters on screen, it is often featured in scenes of danger, tension, and intrigue alongside those of seduction, intimacy, and attraction. In *Atomic Blonde* (2017), for example, queer sexual tension fizzles between two women in a Berlin nightclub lit in blue and pink (fig. 13).



Fig. 13: *Atomic Blonde*. Dir. David Leitch, 2017.

In *The Neon Demon* (2016), a group of cannibal models lasciviously appraise their next victim in a nightclub bathroom bathed in pink and blue neon light (fig. 14).



Fig. 14: *The Neon Demon*. Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016.

In Wingard's prior film *The Guest* (2014), the heroine claims revenge on her tormentor in a climactic scene doused with blue, pink, and purple light (fig. 15).



Fig. 15: *The Guest*. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2014.

Elsewhere, Josh Jackman (2018) gives a raft of examples from 2017–2018, including Marvel movies, music videos, and more. Vaporwave artists, in particular, made use of the colour scheme in the imagery that accompanied their seductive, sleazy, ironic music. Notably, vaporwave artists (and musicians in adjacent genres such as darksynth and synthwave) were often explicitly concerned with nostalgia for 1980s aesthetics such as cyberpunk, pre-console video games, and horror soundtracks, creating a heady, uncanny admixture that evoked a spooky nostalgia for things never experienced (Tanner 2016, 43). The bisexual lighting of *Godzilla Vs Kong* is also a nod to a nostalgia for late twentieth century aesthetics such as the explosive, glitter-soaked

practical effects spectacle of 1990s Godzilla movies such as *Godzilla Vs Mothra* (1992) and *Godzilla Vs SpaceGodzilla* (1994).

This brief foray into vaporwave demonstrates that there is no hard and fast rule that this colour palette is automatically an indicator of bisexuality, and that it can be built into a wide range of forms with multiple and elastic effects and meanings. Bisexual lighting is most often in the eye of the beholder: in an online essay on the topic, Michelle Olguin (2021) writes that the term ‘bisexual lighting’ has more to do with internet fan cultures and their habits of reception and interpretation—the eagerness of users of sites such as Tumblr and Twitter to read texts as queer, often against the grain of the dominant readings of such texts—than it does with any systematic or strategically agreed cinematic practice of using specific colours to denote particular themes, ideas, or relationships between characters. That is, although the colour palette has been used by artists and filmmakers in a panoply of ways, many viewers interpret its use as a coded reference to forms of suppressed queer desire. Even—perhaps especially—when no queer reading is explicitly intended, the use of so-called bisexual lighting adds a certain charged cocktail-bar sheen to visual texts, with the effect of layering extra bonus meaning into them for certain audiences. (It’s also worth noting that coyly suggesting queer sexuality without actually committing to directly representing it is considered problematic by many LGBT+ viewers: the term “queerbaiting” refers to this opportunistic, partial, and deniable approach to representing queer desire (Woods and Hardman 2022). *Godzilla Vs Kong* is an example of queer subtext more than queerbaiting, I would argue, as there is scant likelihood that Godzilla and Kong would actually kiss onscreen.)

The MonsterVerse became much more colourful after *Godzilla* 2014. The second MonsterVerse movie, *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), showcases bisexual lighting when tracker Conrad is recruited by monster-hunters Monarch in a seedy East Asian bar (fig. 16).



Fig 16: *Kong: Skull Island*. Dir. Jordan Vogt-Roberts, 2017.

Two years later, *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019) introduced Godzilla's blue visual signature. Where its atomic breath was white in *Godzilla* 2014, in this sequel it appeared blue, as did its bioluminescent intimidation display (fig. 17).



Fig. 17: *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. Dir. Michael Dougherty, 2019.

Godzilla Vs Kong builds upon this, with Godzilla's eyes and scales flashing blue several times in the film (fig. 18, 19).



Fig. 18: *Godzilla Vs Kong*. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.



Fig. 19: Godzilla Vs Kong. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.

Elsewhere, as a trio of intrepid human characters explore the subterranean world of sinister tech empire Apex, they are frequently smothered in pink and blue neon light, with various technologies providing bright accents of purple (fig. 20).

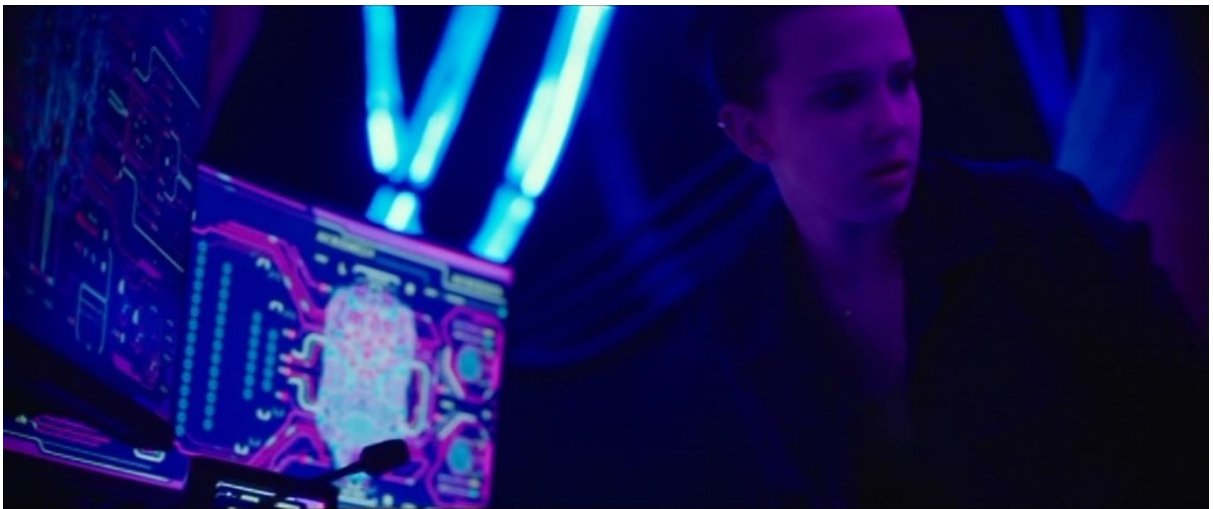


Fig. 20: Godzilla Vs Kong. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.

These colour schemes mesh together in the film's climactic night battle in Hong Kong, in which Godzilla gradually beats Kong into submission. As the creatures clash, the frame is illuminated by bright blue, pink, and purple neon lights that frame many of the skyscrapers (fig. 21, 22, 23). As sparks fly and flames bloom, they do so in blue and pink rather than strictly realistic tones of white, yellow, or red.



Fig. 21: Godzilla Vs Kong. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.



Fig. 22: Godzilla Vs Kong. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.

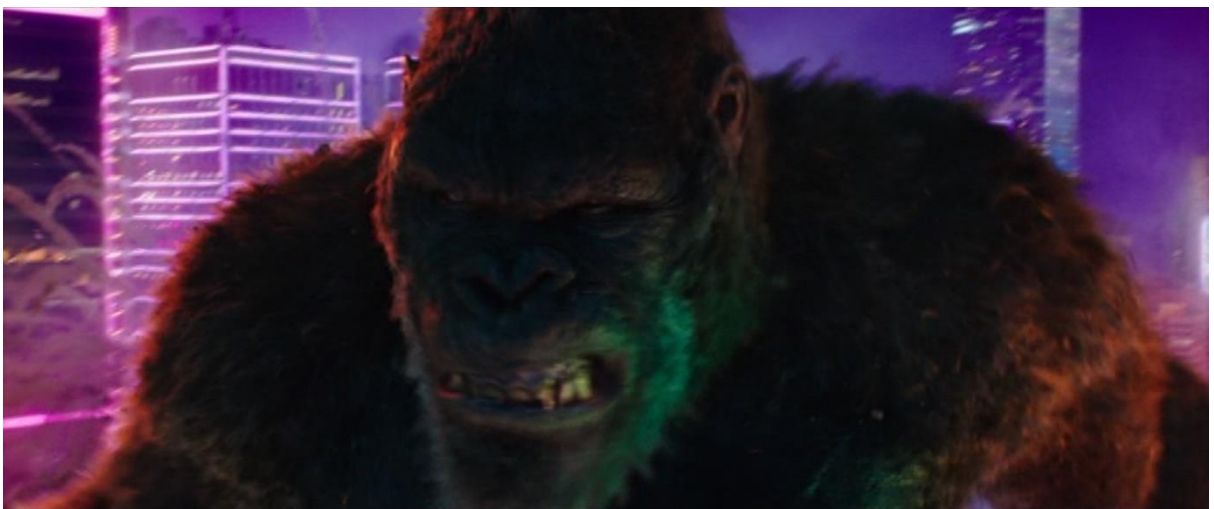


Fig. 23: Godzilla Vs Kong. Dir. Adam Wingard, 2021.



This use of bisexual lighting invites a queer read of *Godzilla Vs Kong*. In particular, it invites a reading that queers one of the central concepts of the MonsterVerse: the idea that the monster battles are expressions of ‘natural balance.’ In each of Godzilla’s MonsterVerse movies, a survival-of-the-fittest worldview is validated when Godzilla—an apex predator animated by hate and a desire to dominate—ruthlessly murders his titanic opponents in order to maintain the world’s natural ecological balance. In *Godzilla* 2014, Godzilla emerges from seclusion in order to contain the threat of the MUTOs, a pair of creatures whose sudden emergence, radiation-fuelled mating, and future proliferation threatens to overwhelm the world. In *King of the Monsters*, Godzilla reclaims his title as the alpha titan of the planet Earth by destroying rival extraterrestrial alpha Monster Zero. *Godzilla Vs Kong*, too, stages a showdown in which two powerful, masculine-coded creatures violently battle to establish dominance over one another. This concept of natural balance, then, is actually a euphemism for rigid natural *hierarchy*, in which one all-powerful creature reigns supreme over all other forms of life.

This concept draws much from a common pop psychology trope in which brutish and domitory ‘alpha masculinity’ is represented as a desirable form of masculinity, a popular yet misleading account of ‘natural order’ in which violence and physical strength rigidly determine hierarchies of social value. This framing of masculinity is attractive to conservative commentators, who attempt to use examples from the animal world to naturalise and thereby justify human systems of gendered power. Jordan Peterson’s famous argument about the social dynamics of lobsters in *Twelve Rules for Life* (2018), for example, in which the controversial right-wing psychologist claims that there is an objective organic continuity between the forms of social organisation and hierarchy found naturally among crustaceans and those built by humans, is scientifically incoherent (Gonçalves 2018) but, for many readers, attractive and persuasive due to the ways that it makes patriarchal human power systems appear natural and inevitable. However, the scientist Dave Mech, who coined the term “alpha wolf” in 1968, now considers the use of such terms outdated and inappropriate precisely because these patriarchal meanings have been layered into them. It is the ability to provide care, rather than the capacity to enforce hierarchy, that establishes status in the natural world, and any masculinist pop psychology significance that has been added to it is bogus, reactionary, and misleading. Much as I love the MonsterVerse movies, this problematic and macho account of natural hierarchy is a central pillar of their storytelling.

Cutting through this obnoxious masculinist iconography is precisely why a queer read of *Godzilla Vs Kong* is so appealing. Though on the surface it is a story about a battle to the death, most of all *Godzilla Vs Kong* is about *attraction*. Both monsters are pursuing different, specific aims—Godzilla is pursuing Mechagodzilla, which it can sense but not find, and Kong is helping the human characters access a secret power source in the Hollow Earth—but as soon as they become aware of one another, they



drop everything and grapple. *They can't wait to get their hands on one another.* In terms of the canonical mythology of the MonsterVerse, this is because they have a long-standing ancestral hate of one another due to an ancient titan war between their respective species. And yet we all know that love can be a dangerous obsession, that rivalry has an erotic component, and that power has a sexual charge. Why, after all, when Godzilla decapitates the MUTO and literally blasts Monster Zero into atoms, does it let Kong survive? Godzilla usually asserts dominance through murder, and yet here Godzilla exhausts Kong, roars in his face, and then leaves the ape gasping on his back. Soon, too, Godzilla and Kong team up against Mechagodzilla, with Kong tearing the robot to scrap in order to rescue his so-called enemy Godzilla. Tell me again how much you hate him, sis...

To conclude, colour is tremendously important to the MonsterVerse. I haven't had room here to discuss *King of the Monsters* or *Kong: Skull Island*, both of which do plenty with colour. *Godzilla 2014* and *Godzilla Vs Kong*, however, are particularly interesting because of the way their uses of colour connect with extra-textual factors, such as a gesture towards the history of the genre in the case of *Godzilla 2014* and with the use of a colour scheme that invites queer interpretation in *Godzilla Vs Kong*. What really connects the lighting and colour schemes of these two movies, however, is two specific complementary genre nostalgias: *Godzilla 2014* is nostalgic for the high seriousness of monochrome political allegory, and *Godzilla Vs Kong* is nostalgic for the rough and tumble playfulness of the later Godzilla sequels of the 1970s and 1990s.

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