

# JFFS

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## NEWSLETTER





## the JAPANESE FANTASY FILM SOCIETY



Welcome to the Japanese Fantasy Film Society! It is with great excitement and anticipation that we present the JFFS to its new members as we attempt to organize the ever-increasing following of this all-too-often overlooked area of fandom. Your JFFS membership is your passport to the incredible world of fantastic cinema, Japanese style. We would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to the society, its goals and aspirations, and to familiarize you with the benefits which accrue to its members.

Japanese fantasy fandom has always existed as a widely fragmented group at best. Over the years, this fandom has produced a number of fanzines and fan clubs, each of which has met with varying degrees of success. We acknowledge the efforts of those involved; the JFFS intends no competition with others nor does it wish to fragment fandom--it is our desire to unite. For one reason or another, a widespread, unified fandom has not surfaced to encompass all areas of Japanese fantasy fandom. It is our desire that, circumstances willing, the JFFS be able to achieve the goal of a unified following for the Japanese fantasy film product. We hope that you, as your JFFS membership would indicate, share with us this vision.

One may well ask, "Why form an organization devoted to Japanese fantasy? What is so special about it?" The special esteem which each fan holds for Japanese fantasy takes on many forms throughout fandom. The most basic appeal of Japanese fantasy surely lies within the pure entertainment value offered by the genre. The Japanese fantasy product is far less pretentious than others, as the improbable and physically impossible do not preclude what has become commonplace in the genre--giant monsters and robots, fleets of spacecraft, disembodied ghouls, scheming aliens, superhuman heroes, and even flying battleships! An enthusiastic and willing acceptance of such uninhibited imagination, momentarily suspending our disbelief, sets apart the Japanese fantasy fan from those who are either unwilling to suspend their disbelief or only do so on a selective basis. Film can be many different things to many people--it should not be forgotten that entertainment is one which is indeed both legitimate and necessary. Allowing one's imagination to drift freely in such a manner can produce one of the most wonderful, natural highs in life.

Of course, the Japanese fantasy cinema does not exist merely to entertain. Entertainment serves as a basic foundation upon which the attraction to other aspects of the genre is built. Quite often it serves to convey important messages to audiences such as nationalism, the horrors of nuclear war, or the endurance and nobility of the human spirit.

The technical aspects involved in the Japanese fantasy cinema come to fascinate many a fan. Each subdivision of fantasy fandom has given special attention to special effects, and Japanese fantasy is no exception. The miniature technique of Eiji Tsuburaya and visual composition of optical effects in live action film sparks as much interest as does inventive Japanese animation techniques. Musically, the Japanese fantasy cinema offers a true feast in comparison to most other segments of the genre--from major feature films to the minor animated TV series, the Japanese fantasy cinema is embellished

with a number of impressive orchestrations. The Japanese fantasy cinema even offers its viewers the opportunity to capture some revealing insights into the world of Japanese culture and folklore.

As there are a number of different reasons why one appreciates Japanese fantasy, so too are there a number of reasons why it is advantageous for its fandom to unite. The JFFS can act as the voice of Japanese fandom, a voice which is sorely needed for this oft-maligned and unduly criticized genre. Hopefully, the JFFS will be able to exert its influence on behalf of Japanese fandom wherever and whenever necessary. On an individual basis, each member will be accorded the following benefits which would normally not be otherwise available to individuals:

One of the most valuable benefits available to JFFS members will be the monthly JFFS Newsletter. Through this publication, each member will be kept abreast of both society activities and new developments surfacing in all areas of Japanese fantasy cinema. Whether it be the announcement of a new Godzilla feature, a rundown on the latest schedule of animation and superhero TV shows in Japan, or the reported stateside release of new films, the JFFS Newsletter will serve to keep each member fully informed. Although much information will be provided by society sources in Japan, each member is encouraged to take an active part in supplying any news or information which he or she may uncover. The JFFS is a society of fans; thusly the newsletter, and indeed every other aspect of the society, can only be as good as you, the fans, strive to make it. An active membership can insure that each member derives the utmost in benefits in return for one's dues. The newsletter can also act as a forum for members to voice their opinions, ideas, and desires on any subject, be it society business or general discussion of film. As an added feature to the regular contents of the newsletter, there will periodically be supplements containing a profile of a particular monster or character consisting of schematics, statistical information, etc.

On a yearly basis, the JFFS plans to produce a society annual. Among the contents of this deluxe yearbook will be a summary of society activities, letters and fan artwork as contributed by members, and a number of special interest articles (illustrated with photos), as well as a few surprises. Again, we look for member involvement here. This is your society--make it something to be proud of!

Of course, merely by virtue of its nature as a unified body of fans, the society can serve a useful purpose to its members. There can scarcely be a Japanese fantasy film fan who at one time or another has not felt the loneliness of being the only person about who truly appreciated these films, positive that there had to be others "out there" who shared their opinions. But alas, there was hardly any means available to find who these people were or how to contact them. It is the expressed goal of the society to solve this problem by providing members the opportunity to meet with and encounter others with similar interests. In fact, members may be surprised to discover that many fans exist in their very own town! But whether it be through correspondence, society publications, or at monthly screenings, the opportunity is provided to interested members for becoming acquainted with fellow

fans and sharing their ideas and experiences. Undoubtedly this is one of the simplest, yet most significant benefits of JFFS membership. Indeed, this also served as a primary motivation for the formation of the society.

The advantages of fan unification also extend into another area near and dear to the hearts of many fans--the collecting of memorabilia and other merchandise related to the genre. As it is anticipated that a healthy portion of the membership will be interested in acquiring Japanese film items, the society can use its size to exercise its buying power in the member's favor. It is infinitely easier to obtain an ongoing cooperation with trading companies and other merchandising outlets when these concerns can be assured of regular, volume purchases. In addition, attractive economies of scale present themselves when quantity purchases are to be made. Therefore, although as individuals our purchasing abilities may be quite limited, as a whole the society expects to succeed in obtaining those valuable collectibles which members covet, and at the best price possible. As items become available, they will be offered to members through the monthly newsletters. From time to time, the society hopes to offer books, magazines, toys, etc. In addition, the JFFS will be offering copies of selected rare stills (both b&w and color) for sale on an ongoing basis. As the society is strictly a non-profit organization, those profits, if any, made on the sale of merchandise will be rechanneled back into society activities or used to purchase additional merchandise stocks for use in future offerings.

One of the most enjoyable benefits of JFFS membership is the opportunity for members to periodically view the Japanese fantasy cinema in the finest quality formats, encompassing 35mm, 16mm, and videotape. The society is pleased to be able to schedule such rare, quality films, each of which will be of great concern to the ever-increasing fold of Japanese fantasy fandom. In addition to the familiar and rarely seen titles, members will also have the opportunity to visually experience unique footage never before seen state-side. The society can offer films in their original

Japanese versions, an added delight for those who appreciate unedited, and hence unspoiled versions. Many years of diligent research have made an impressive array of titles available to the society for its monthly screenings. Presentation of one's membership card or pin will be required for those planning to attend; non-members will also be welcome to attend, but will be required to submit a small donation at the door. The screenings should not be passed up if at all possible.

Finally, not only should JFFS membership serve to heighten a member's enjoyment of his or her favorite aspects of Japanese fantasy cinema, it may also serve to introduce members to new elements of the genre, thus broadening one's horizons. In all these ways and more, the JFFS can offer a rewarding experience to each member.

As an organization of fans, the JFFS recognizes its responsibility to service its membership in whatever ways possible. To this end, all comments and suggestions are welcomed--although the staff has provided the basic framework for organizing fandom, we ultimately look to you, the members, for direction. It is your society; make of it what you can. If there are any questions or matters in which we may render assistance to members, they should be submitted to the society (an SASE, though not necessary, will speed the reply). Each inquiry will be given the personal attention of one of the staff, and will be answered to the best of our abilities. No inquiry will go without a reply.

So, as we embark upon the ambitious project of organizing Japanese fantasy fandom under the JFFS banner, we would like to hereby express our appreciation for your interest in the society. We hope that your membership will prove to be the door to a fruitful and mutually beneficial experience for all of us! Sayonara!

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#### ORIGINS OF THE JAPANESE FANTASY FILM

On the threshold of the Space-Age, our Earth is slowly, though somewhat reluctantly, becoming a vital global community. The greatest benefit of 20th century technology is the science of communication; yet, international provincialism is insured by ideological conflicts and cultural misconceptions.

In the West, we are fond of pointing out how the Japanese have assimilated our technology and cultural styles into their everyday lives. The imitation and emulation are undeniable, but of more importance is the degree to which native Japanese values have been retained in the face of economic expansion and media onslaught. The very Japaneseness of their culture to which we are exposed has often been an obstacle to our full appreciation of it. Perhaps by investigation into Japan's religious, mythic, and folk beliefs may a better understanding be reached.

The earliest stories of the supernatural arise from Shinto, Japan's ancient pre-Buddhist cult. Izanagi and Izanami are the primal dieties who together give birth to the Japanese islands and the gods who inhabit them. In this Age of the Gods the entire world is permeated by kami, or spirit, a sensibility that confers personality to animals, elements, and even artifacts. Later Buddhist influences from India, China, and Korea introduced a source of ghosts, demons, and creatures whose ethical existence served to instruct or punish mortals. Such mythic traditions persist through the centuries, and today, under the guise of "entertainment", their

values remain intact. If monsters and demons thrive in popular culture, it is because they have never been truly exorcised from the human heart.

The origins of fantasy in Japanese cinema are obscure, possibly dating back to the 1910's. Available literature lists no Oriental counterpart for Frenchman G. Melies in live action film. Animation is established during the 1920's, with cartoon folk tales displaying both Japanese and Disney-ish graphic styles as in OCTOPUS BONES (Tako no Hone, Y. Murata, 1927) and MONKEY ISLAND (Saru ga Shima, K. Masoaka, 1930).

Perhaps one of the first fantasies produced after WWII has never been released. Ichikawa's GIRL AT DOJO TEMPLE (Musume Dojoji, 1946) seems to be a variant on the legend of Kiyohime, whose worldly love for an unresponsive monk causes her to become a raging serpent demon. Produced as a puppetfilm, it was confiscated by U.S. Occupation censors, and no prints are known to exist. The authorities of the Occupation prohibited period dramas in the belief that it fostered national feelings. The snake-girl theme resurfaces in later period dramas: PANDA AND THE MAGIC SERPENT (Hakuja Den, H. Okawa, 1958), THE WHITE SERPENT (Byakufu no Yoren, S. Toyoda, 1956), and SNAKE AND THE SILVER HAIRED WITCH (Hebimusume to Hakuhatsuma, N. Yuasa, 1969).

In the late 1960's, Daiei Studios enjoyed a mini-ghost series with SPOOK WARFARE (Yukai Daisenso, Y. Kuroda), ALONG WITH GHOSTS (Tokaido Obake Dochu, K. Yasuda), and THE HUNDRED MONSTERS (Yokai Hyaku Monogatari, K. Yasuda) all featuring a uniquely Japanese



selection of phantoms. Named after a traditional story-telling contest, THE HUNDRED MONSTERS includes horned oni (devils), skeletons, ogres, as well as the bizarre one-eyed, one-legged taunting umbrella ghost, and a woman whose ever-lengthening serpentine neck strangles her victims.

An example of mythology in transition exists in Majin, the Great Demon God. These dramas are faithful to the warrior-state period of 17th century Japan. Majin, a helmeted warrior who is a haniwa figure (a clay tomb ornament from the Tumulus Period) waking to avenge his worshippers, is borrowed from the Hebrew legend of the golem. Dai Majin is awakened by the tears of his priestess; having destroyed the evil Daimyo and his soldiers, Majin fades away, his wrath now ended.

Similarly, films dealing with the invisible man represent the transformation of the traditional phantom into a modern world. Daiei's INVISIBLE MAN APPEARS (Tomei Ningen Arawaru, S. Adachi) in 1949 was probably the first SF film in Japan. The success of this theme inspired later versions such as Toho's INVISIBLE MAN (1954) through INVISIBLE SWORDSMAN (1970).

Of course, the event which effectively sends a shock wave through the Japanese film industry and stimulates a market for the genre worldwide is the Toho Co. feature GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS in 1954. Inspired by the U.S. success of BEAST FROM 20,000 FATHOMS, executive producer Tomoyuki Tanaka planned to make a film along similar lines. He contacted special effects director Eiji Tsuburaya, whose admiration for KING KONG made him long to produce a similar film. The resulting collaboration between the two produced a script titled "G". The name "Gojira" was adopted for this new monster by taking the nickname of a huge fellow on the Toho lot who was like a gorilla and a whale (kujira). The domestic phenomenon created by GOJIRA prompted a sequel the next year (GOJIRA NO GYAKUSHU), followed by worldwide release of GOJIRA with added scenes of Raymond Burr as a Chicago reporter. From this point on, a seemingly endless progression of rubber-suited monsters were concocted to terrorize Toho's audiences.

Certainly there is a purely commercial incentive to the continued exploitation of a desirable property, yet the mythic dimensions of Godzilla's appeal is the true core of his great popular success. Quite unlike American monster films wherein mechanical inventiveness is the ultimate saviour, the Godzilla series is distinguished by presenting the monsters as an integral part of their environment, and therefore victorious over human intervention. Satisfaction is derived from monsters crushing cities, in seeing the environment of our frustrations turned to waste, and also in the monsters' beauty and strength, knowing that he is a living creature, like ourselves. The concern that we may betray nature irrevocably is expressed on several levels: as symbolic imagination in GOJIRA, speculative extrapolation (CATASTROPHE: 1999), or as absurd personification of environmental peril (the SMOG MONSTER).

Much has been written about the supposed "World War II guilt complex" expressed in the repeated destruction of the Japanese homeland. Rather, a concern with the maintenance of peace and sovereignty for Japan is indicated. The representation of Mothra as a messenger of peace and mediator for the other monsters (GHIDRAH, 1964) is particularly effective: its form, movements, colors are unlike all the other predominantly reptilian monsters. By contrast, Mothra has a more spiritual presence--its weapons, forceful winds produced by the larvae and the silken restraints spun by the larvae, are more suggestive of resistance than aggression.

Of all the other major studios entering the kaiju sweepstakes of the 1960's, only Daiei produced a contender--Gamera, the flying turtle, with a series of 6 films. In GAMERA, THE INVINCIBLE (1965), there are early hints of this monster's distinct personality. Ponderous and awkward on land, yet capable of relative freedom of movement under water, or amazingly jetting through the air, Gamera is consistently docile unless provoked. Fiercely savage against an adversary, the monster is physically more violent than Godzilla, copiously shedding the enemy's blood.

In the East, the tortoise is symbolic of longevity, strength, and endurance. These attributes have been amplified in scale with Gamera's physical stature. Gamera's most astonishing quality is his inordinate sympathy towards human children. Children and monsters have much in common (indeed, parents universally claim they are indistinguishable). Both share feelings of awkwardness, persecution, and repression by authorities. Gamera frequently rescues his young allies from aliens, bad monsters, and even brain-eating girls.

The juvenile slant of the Gamera films eventually infected the Godzilla series as well. The distance travelled from the original GOJIRA is striking in Honda's own GODZILLA'S REVENGE, wherein the young hero visits Monsterland to chat and play with Minya in his subjective, dream reality. Unsatisfying as an authentic continuation of the Godzilla legend, Honda's construction of the child's interior world and his estranged relationship with school and friends is sensitively portrayed.

The trend in fantasy films to cater to children was only logical responsiveness by the studios to their rapidly expanding young audiences. In 1965, a revolution occurred which would influence the course of Japanese fantasy history. Television, increasingly competing for the same market as the theaters, presented a hero who was simultaneously identifiable to, yet alien to its grade-school constituency. MIGHTY ATOM (Astro-Boy U.S.), the creation of pioneer cartoonist Osamu Tezuka, was the first animated series to be produced strictly for television, and it was an immediate sensation. Atom, a robot replica of an eight-year old boy with amazing super powers, fights robots many times larger than himself with both exceptional bravery and skill. Other series featuring robot heroes or space boys followed on the air, among them Mitsuteru Tokoyama's TETSUJIN NIJU HACHI GO (Gigantor, U.S.), S. Ishimori's RAINBOW SENTAI ROBIN, and CYBORG 009. Toei Doga, the cartoon division of Toei Studios, became a leading producer of TV and feature animation through the 1960's and 1970's.

Live action television's contribution to the swollen ranks of superfighters was the adoption of the superhero in the late 1960's. The Japanese, borrowing from U.S. comics, also introduced some Eastern elements. The ninja, hooded spies with alleged magic powers, are incorporated into the concept and image of heroes like MAN IN THE MOON-LIGHT MASK (Toei, 1958) and PRINCE OF SPACE (Toei, 1958). These heroes originally appeared in features and only later surfaced on television. The first superhero designed for broadcast seems to be NATIONAL KID in August 1960. A caped and masked flying hero with the letter "N" emblazoned on his chest, this champion arrives in a flying saucer to fight the Inca Men.

Tsuburaya Productions' ULTRAMAN (1966), like D.C.'s Superman, is an alien with a secret identity who defends Earth from evil. Contrary to his cybernetic appearance, Ultraman is not a robot, but one of a race of such Ultramen. The series, continuing through 1975 and still popular, has the first Ultraman joined by 10 family members, 5 of which rated their own contracts with the network. Tsuburaya's company also introduced merchandising of toys, books, records, etc. which expanded the popular interest and inspired competition.

Prominent among the competition which was to develop was Tezuka's SPACE GIANTS (1966) and KAMEN RIDER (1967-1980). Giant robots, both live action and animated, have gained increasing popularity since 1972, paralleling the giant monster trend of the 1960's. The popularity of live action robots such as MACH BARON, ZEBOGA, and JANBORG ACE have led to Stan Lee's Spiderman becoming a Japanese TV superhero with his own giant robot, Leopardus. Departing from the remote-controlled robot concept, the animated MAZINGER Z was operable only by the symbiotic relationship it has with its detachable pilot-brain, manned by teenagers. Again linking past to present, giant robots invariably are designed in the image of 5th century warriors.

---Alex Wald---