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Godzilla vs. the Editors: A critical analysis of the narrative editing of *Shin Godzilla*

In 2014, Toho Company, Ltd. announced plans for the first Japanese-produced Godzilla film in over a decade. Directed by veteran filmmakers Hideaki Anno and Shinji Higuchi from a screenplay by Anno, 2016's *Shin Godzilla* rebooted the Japanese Godzilla film series with a story about Godzilla appearing for the first time in modern Japan, and Japan's subsequent attempts to stop Godzilla's destructive rampages whilst hindered by the bureaucracy of its government. *Shin Godzilla* was a critical and commercial success both in Japan and abroad, and won seven Japan Academy Prize awards, including the awards for Picture of the Year, Director of the Year for both Anno and Higuchi, and Best Film Editing (Squires).

Shin Godzilla's primary editors were Anno and frequent collaborator Atsuki Sato – who also served as the film's visual effects supervisor – with Higuchi providing occasional additional input. Using the Adobe Premiere Pro CC software to collaboratively edit the film (Keane), Anno, Sato, and Higuchi managed to shape a complex, sprawling story into a two-hour-long film. *Shin Godzilla*'s narrative editing draws attention to itself instead of making itself invisible. In fact, the narrative editing style is the most important factor in telling the film's story. In this paper, I will examine the strategic uses of editing decisions in *Shin Godzilla*, and explain how these decisions allow filmmakers Anno, Higuchi, and Sato to tell a unique story that would not be possible to tell with traditional editing techniques. First, I will examine the use of fast cutting. Second, I will highlight the use of explanatory captions in the film. Finally, I will discuss the variations in pacing with each of the film's story acts.

In an interview that I recently conducted with veteran film editor Peter Teschner (whose credits include 2006's *Borat* and 2016's *Hidden Figures*), Teschner told me about a conversation that he had with actor Ryan Reynolds on the set of the film *Definitely, Maybe*. The conversation topic was the role of the film editor. Teschner and Reynolds agreed that, in theory, the editor should already know what the finished film will look like from the available footage. They also agreed that in many cases, a previously-established story can change, sometimes drastically, in post-production depending on the footage available to the editor (Teschner).

Shin Godzilla co-editor Sato elaborates on the post-production of the film in an interview with Forbes contributor Ollie Barder:

Hideaki Anno as a director pays very close attention to every little detail and will change the length of cuts in any films even if it is in the sound editing process. Tinkering the length of cuts during the dubbing process is not usually permissible, but such a rule does not apply to director Anno. (Barder)

Keeping Teschner's comments in mind, Anno's preferences as both an editor and a director strongly influence the overall narrative of *Shin Godzilla*. Anno, Sato, and Higuchi need to tell a certain type of story and edit in the way that they do because there would be no other way to tell the story. There are three key facets of the editing that allow the story to work.

First, much of *Shin Godzilla* features fast cutting to introduce locations and characters. When the film introduces new locations or reintroduces recurring ones, establishing shots are not always present. When they are present, however, they are short in length in order for the story to progress as quickly and efficiently as possible. The establishing shots only give the audience the

bare minimum of context and show that the specific locations themselves are important in so far as they are the settings for the characters' actions, instead of characters themselves. One notable example of fast cutting with regards to location is a montage of the cityscape of Tokyo on the day after Godzilla's initial appearance and attack on the city. Accompanied by the jazz number "Early Morning from Tokyo," the montage does not focus on the areas of the city that Godzilla visited and ravaged, but rather establishes the city as a whole to be the main location – the place where the main story happens. Shots of the city appear in rapid succession as the camera travels all over to effectively tell the audience that 'this is where you are, and all of what you see is at stake.' But, in the film's narrative, Tokyo and the surrounding areas are not characters in their own right.

The introductions of the film's human characters also feature rapid cuts. The reason for the film's fast cutting when introducing the cast is that, in *Shin Godzilla*, there are many characters with important roles as part of the narrative. In the first five minutes of the film alone, two of the principal characters, Rando Yaguchi (played by Hiroki Hasegawa) and Yusuke Shimura (played by Kengo Kōra), debut along with nine other major characters, with more introductions following soon after. *Dragnet*-style editing – in which the film cuts to whoever is speaking at a given moment – plays an important role throughout the film, as the dialogue among characters is delivered at a quick pace, and the audience needs to recognize which character is speaking at a given time. Since so many characters have bearing on the story, fast cutting among them during the film's dialogue-heavy scenes is necessary. This is especially important when multiple crucial conversations occur in rapid succession. The focus has to shift to the speaking characters in order for the audience to get as much information as possible.

Key to *Shin Godzilla* is a sense of urgency, and the film's editing properly conveys that urgency through the use of fast cutting. The audience perceives time to move at a fast clip, even though many events happen over a longer period of time off-screen. The filmmakers as editors choose not to draw out the time that the human characters spend in front of the audience. This decision by the filmmakers works in the film's favor. Right at the beginning, the audience needs to understand the frantic nature of the overall situation – of trying to deal with an unprecedented and seemingly unstoppable threat within a short period of time – and thus requires constant important information without any “filler” or “fluff.” Through fast cutting, the audience better follows the human characters' efforts with stop Godzilla, as the film does not need to focus on the characters outside of their relationship to Godzilla. Time has to move very quickly for these people, and audience members need to feel the urgency of the in-universe situation for the film to work as well as it does.

The film deliberately omits certain events in order to tell a more focused and engaging story. The most notable instance of this is during a scene early in the film, where the Japanese Prime Minister and the members of his Cabinet meet to discuss an anomaly in Tokyo Bay that turns out to be Godzilla. Midway through the scene, just after the beginning of the meeting, the film abruptly cuts to a title card that displays the words “Following abbreviated.” This is a humorous insert, but it also keeps the audience focused by skipping some unneeded parts of the meeting and getting to the points that are absolutely necessary to tell the story – such as the pivotal moment when the government finally realizes that Godzilla is a giant, living creature. The minor gap also tells a story in and of itself. It shows, beyond the length of the meeting, that Japan's governmental bureaucracy is a major hindrance to progress and action.

In a subversion of fast cutting, however, the film's action scenes, though quite fast-paced, feature fewer cuts than the dialogue-heavy scenes do. Godzilla, who appears on screen for just a bit over eighteen minutes – around fifteen percent of the finished film (Ashcraft) – is the subject of longer takes, and frequently shown from a long distance away. Whenever Godzilla appears in the film, the audience sees more of him in a single take than it usually does with most of the human characters. This editing decision gives the audience members a proper understanding of Godzilla as the main threat, and the central driving factor of the plot. In addition, because Godzilla is the only monster that appears in the film, and has no monologue or dialogue with others (by virtue of being a wild animal), the film has far more time to focus singularly on him, as opposed to scenes that need to shift focus frequently because of verbal exchanges between characters.

Similarly, in most shots involving military equipment as opposed to human characters, the camera takes more time to show the vehicles and weapons that the Japanese Self Defense Forces pit against Godzilla, and how this equipment spectacularly fails to work, instead of cutting away in an somewhat abrupt manner. As these combat-oriented scenes have far less dialogue than the more human-centric scenes, the audience thus needs to pay attention to the bigger picture, and fewer of the smaller details. The filmmakers' editing choices in these more spectacular, action-heavy sequences elicit a different response – one less analytical and far more shocked and fearful – from the audience than their choices for the more dialogue-heavy sequences.

Longer takes do appear in human-centric scenes after the end of the third act, at which point the characters and the audience realize the full extent of Godzilla's power after he uses his

devastating atomic ray attack on Tokyo. The human characters have more focus in response to Godzilla having plenty of focus in the third act, which establishes Godzilla's full strength. The fourth act therefore needs to establish the full extent of the humans' desperation and what they have at stake in the conflict, so the focus must return to the humans and the takes must become longer. If the third act truly establishes Godzilla as the main antagonist of the film, then the fourth act cements the human characters as the heroes of the story.

The second important aspect of the narrative editing in *Shin Godzilla* is the use of descriptive captions to introduce new characters, new locations, and even vehicles and weapons. In introductions of the human characters (Godzilla himself needs no introduction, of course), the captions provide a quick description of their names and job titles. This way, the dialogue can focus on *who* the characters are, as opposed to merely what their jobs are. Less verbal exposition is necessary with the captions in place, and in a film with so many important named characters and a fairly compact run time, the less time spent on exposition, the better. This a rare case of averting the "show, don't tell" rule; in effect, only by *telling* at certain moments rather than *showing* can the film properly progress.

In the case of lead protagonist Rando Yaguchi, the captions show how he progresses in rank, thereby showing his progression as a character. At the beginning of the film, Yaguchi ranks as the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary. However, by the point in the film where Japan begins planning for Godzilla's reawakening after his second attack, the captions reveal Yaguchi's full job title to be "Cabinet Minister of State for Special Missions, Giant Unidentified Creature Unified Response Task Force HQ Bureau Chief & Deputy Director, Rando Yaguchi." In addition to appearing for humorous effect, the captions illustrate the bureaucracy present in the Japanese

government, an essential part of the story. They also show how Yaguchi has developed over the course of the film from a mid-level bureaucrat to an instrumental leader. However, perhaps most importantly, the captions help the audience to see Yaguchi as someone more confident in himself and his ability to lead.

Shin Godzilla also spends less time establishing concepts through dialogue and telling an overall streamlined, quicker story through the use of the descriptive captions. The captions for the film's locations reduce the need for establishing shots or character descriptions of the scenes, and thus allow for more important story with a reduced run time. Concepts of the film's universe, such as "Article 76" – which hinders action by the government during Godzilla's first attack – or the later evacuation of Tokyo residents left homeless by Godzilla's rampage, also receive captions for the same reason as the locations.

Notably, vehicles and weapons receive descriptive captions as well. While their labels might seem to be present just for the sake of consistency, in truth, these captions also help to tell the story. The captions for Japan's numerous vehicles and weapons, in effect, reveal that while the military hardware might be state-of-the-art – the best that Japan has to offer – Japan is ultimately not properly equipped to counter Godzilla, even *with* such a powerful arsenal. This facet of the film's editing makes Godzilla come across as the most dangerous threat, and thus elicits a fearful response from the audience.

Finally, I will examine variations in pacing across what I have determined to be the five acts of the movie, from Godzilla's first appearance to the climactic Operation: "Yashiori" and the finale. In an interview that I recently conducted with filmmaker Blake Simon (who was credited as apprentice editor on 2017's *Logan*), Simon told me that as far as pacing is concerned, there is

no ‘golden rule’, and as such pacing can vary wildly as long as it serves the story well (Simon). *Shin Godzilla* varies its pacing from act to act to convey a certain tone for each one. Moreover, the variations in pacing in *Shin Godzilla* are intended to elicit emotional responses from the audience concerning events, as opposed to emotions from characters. Because of this facet of the film’s editing, the audience cares more about the overall scope of the film – they realize just how much is at stake for the characters and the world in which the characters live.

In the film’s first act, which chronicles the events leading up to and during Godzilla’s first appearance, the pace is fast and frenetic, drawing in the audience quickly. As the threat of natural disaster emerges, the characters try to figure out what is happening, and the audience feels a sense of urgency and perhaps even *panic* because of the particular editing style. When Godzilla makes himself apparent, the government tries to determine what to do in order to stop his rampage, and must weigh the consequences of using certain strategies to defeat him. All of these events move very quickly, but they are far from trivial. In this part of the film, the story events have enough weight to them to give the audience a sense of what truly is at stake, but the pacing – much like the aforementioned fast cutting – is as quick as it is in order to keep the sense of urgency going for the audience. There are multiple important events happening in rapid succession, and the audience feels the gravity of the situation in an appropriately rapid frame of reference, rather than in real time. This hooks the audience at the beginning and keeps viewer interest high as the film goes into the second act.

In the second act, after Godzilla’s unexplained return to the sea, the government attempts to formulate strategies against Godzilla should he reappear. At this point in the film, the pace remains quick, but becomes less urgent. In the first act, the characters recognize that Godzilla’s

advance into Tokyo is inevitable, whereas, in the second act, no one knows when or even where Godzilla will reappear. The pace slows just enough for audiences to obtain and process, or “sit” with, more information, including the reason for Godzilla’s sudden departure at the end of the first act. The relative calmness of the second act leads into a quicker third act, where Godzilla returns and once more heads for Tokyo.

In the third act, the audience experiences more events in real-time, which allows for greater focus on the overall threat of the film: Godzilla. This time, Japan is more properly prepared to deal with Godzilla. None of the many weapons at its disposal manage to stop him, however, and Godzilla retaliates using his powerful atomic ray attack, which destroys hundreds of buildings and kills much of the Cabinet, thereby causing great distress for the characters who survive the devastating attack. The audience feels this distress for itself, as the third act leads into the film’s fourth act, where Japan plans to defeat Godzilla once and for all before it is too late.

The fourth act is notably slow and thoughtful compared to the previous one. Japan needs to find a viable way to incapacitate Godzilla on its own before the United States can drop a thermonuclear warhead on him and cause even more destruction. This act establishes, through the relatively slow pace, that the characters are in the gravest possible situation. In addition, the audience receives more vital information and gets to properly take it in.

The film culminates with the fifth act, where Japan successfully extends the countdown to the bomb drop with outside help. Japan then enacts Operation: “Yashiori,” a full-scale assault on Godzilla to freeze his internal nuclear reactor and render him unable to move. In this massive and violent final battle, the audience can see the action clearly without much fast cutting. After all, so much is riding on the success of the operation, so the audience needs as much detail as

possible. At the same time, the audience should not and cannot find the action boring, so the overall pace needs to be energetic.

The full impact of the resolution is felt through the relatively slow pace of the finale, in which Japan plans to rebuild after Godzilla's temporary defeat. Here, the audience manages to breathe a sigh of relief, because while the horror may not be gone for good, it is contained for now. The very last shot of the film, which shows hideous humanoid creatures sprouting out of Godzilla's petrified tail, occurs in a very long take, indicating that the next time Japan has to face Godzilla, the threat will be even more terrifying than what came before.

Although *Shin Godzilla* is, at its core, a film about a giant monster attacking Japan, it incorporates many social and political statements. Filmmakers Anno, Higuchi, and Sato are only able to tell the sprawling, politically-charged story of the film through the use of unconventional editing choices. Fast cutting quickly sets the scene and establishes the characters, and creates tension. Descriptive captions both inform the audience and add new layers to the story. Finally, the pacing is varied by act to add suspense and develop characters on both sides of the conflict in preparation for the final showdown. Though many might consider the director to be the one who shapes the film, in this case, the editors are the driving forces behind the film. Since in *Shin Godzilla* the directors were also editors, there is a meeting in the middle, and that is the main reason for the film's success as a story.

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