Dilating Fixing: *Pacific Rim*, and the Erasure of Birth

Bob Grimm, in a not-so-famous *Reno News* film review, describes Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* in the following way: “It’s stupid but I liked it.” Del Toro, director of such films as *Pan’s Labyrinth*, *Chronos*, and *Blade II*, does not make “stupid” films. *Pacific Rim*, while overflowing with fighting, mecha, and Godzilla-like aliens, is in fact a serious film, concerned as it is with power, technology, and ontology.

Cultural critics are used to interpreting *Godzilla* and its cinematic progeny as metaphorical representations of post-war cultural anxiety. The classic reading of the first film directed by Ishiro Honda, might be that of Chon Noriega who describes the 1954 film as a “nuclear parable.” Noriega writes that “Godzilla represents nuclear fears ‘too terrible for humans to see.’ Rather than ‘resolve’ the unthinkable, the film uses Godzilla as a focal point, which allows a marginal examination of current nuclear instabilities and fears” (69). The original Japanese film was influenced by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (cite). However, it might have been the more 1954 test bombing of an H bomb whose explosive fallout accidentally hit a Japanese boat, the Lucky Dragon, that influenced the film most immediately. The crew of the Lucky Dragon “developed radiation sickness” and one man died as a result (Noriega 57). In the film, which alludes
to the Lucky Dragon, it is the use of nuclear weaponry that awakens Godzilla. It is easy to see Godzilla as the embodiment of Nature’s wrath in response to an over-reaching Humanity. Godzilla, in such a reading, is less an enemy than a “victim”, like Japan in the aftermath of Nagasaki (Anderson 30).

*Pacific Rim* to a large extent demonstrates not a fear of nuclear technology, but our relative mastery of it (cultural anxiety, *instead*, is grounded in an anxious relation to birth as I will argue). The final climactic battle between mecha and the Godzilla-like aliens in fact is won ultimately due to a mecha that doubles in an emergency as a nuclear bomb. [Picture of GD] What we see throughout much of the film, admittedly, is quite cliché. Even Del Toro in his commentary unfortunately describes *Pacific Rim* as a sports film, following many of the ableist elements of that genre. Raleigh, the central character opens the film with comments about feeling “small or lonely” and “wonder[ing],” assumedly as a result of his experience of finitude, about whether there is life on other planets. This wonder-filled moment is soon extinguished: Raleigh loses all wonder as he becomes a hero, then an underdog, and by the end of 131 minutes once again a hero, controlling as he does a giant kaiju-killing mecha. The ontology of supermen is, of course, that of the atom and here we have a simple example of precisely that ontology: Raleigh and the film begin in awe and relationality only to end, apparently, in violence and dualism.

Of course matters are not that stark, or I would not be presenting this paper. Mecha may be monadic in relation to the alien kaiju, but in most cases, mecha have within them two pilots, since, as we are told the neural load is too strong for one person,
leading as it does to limp bodies and vacant stares. To share such a load, the two pilots must also share a neural link; they must share, through an electronic link, their entire history and thoughts. It is an intimate relationship that makes possible the monadic and violent relationship between mecha and the kaiju. So, yet again, we have a glimpse here of finitude leading to relationality. But it is a limited relationality, a relationality without depth, determined by the larger militaristic project. Mako, Raleigh’s co-pilot, is told not to “chase the rabbit” once they are neurally linked. They may be fluidly linked to one another, but Mako should not go deep into her past memories (which of course she does), revealing a traumatic and violent past. We see her as a young girl being chased by a kaiju through the streets of Tokyo. The phrase “chase the rabbit” evokes, simultaneously, Alice in Wonderland (and its rabbit hole), nonsense, and childhood. It is memory, ultimately, that this phrase evokes. Raleigh tells Mako as she falters, “Don’t get stuck in a memory. Stay with me. Stay in the now.” To not chase the rabbit is to firmly remain in the present, denying any attention to those traces of the past out of which our present selves are born.

And it is here that the film becomes interesting because this seeming denial of birth is seen in numerous places in the film. The aliens enter our world from another dimension through a rabbit hole of sorts whose opening “dilates”, giving “birth” to kaiju at regular intervals. Humanity’s final winning tactic amounts to the destruction of the “breach” and the denial as a result of alien birth. At another point, the mecha kill a pregnant kaiju, whose child, births itself despite the bloody remains of its mother, only to chase and then chomp down on Hannibal Chau—the black marketeer who cuts up and sells odds and ends of kaiju—before strangling to death on its own umbilical cord.
Taken together these three examples suggest a deep anxiety about birth which might be understood in the following manner: The injunction to not chase the rabbit amounts to an erasure of birth on an individual level. However, due to the fact that the kaiju are in fact dinosaurs, this argument may also be exploded to the geohistorical level: What is at risk on the geohistorical level? In short Humanism with a capital H and what we have come to designate as the Anthropocene. To recognize our geohistorical past is to decenter humanity. On a particular and universal level then the past is denied.

Jean Luc Nancy writes of how birth is in “excess of representation.” Knowledge and the subject which is concomitant with it, he explains, cannot know its birth. Nancy writes, “Already Hegel grasps essential knowledge—which will engender absolute knowledge—as this movement of arising and negating any representation given with this rising, as well as any representation of this rising.” At the moment of the presence of knowledge, it immediately loses knowledge of that which made its presence present (2-3). The contingency and the essential “withness” of being is marginalized at the moment that representation enters the equation. The injunction against “chasing the rabbit” is a moment of representation; it is a carving out of identity that solidifies itself through extraction. This is no less true of the attack on the breach. In both cases, it is identity that is at stake—an identity that must be written and performed obsessively to keep birth at bay.

And it is therefore fitting that the aliens do not simply come from the stars (which originally filled Raleigh with wonder), but from within our world. Birth, our birth is, while part of us, also alien to us. As such, birth is always threatening to engulf us, swallow us
whole, as happened to Hannibal Chau. Chau operates on the black market, dissecting, processing, and selling pieces of dead kaiju, which are, in this case, a metaphor for birth. His illegal actions are not, from the standpoint of birth, any different than the actions of capitalism in the film. When kaiju are made into dolls, and people grotesquely parade around on television programs in felt kaiju suits both the horror of these monsters and their alterity is denied. A critique of capitalism, as built upon the commodification and representation of the past, would begin here.

The film may then be seen as part of an unbroken commentary on nuclear weapons insofar as it is our technological, capitalistic, and nuclear capability that allows us to close the “breach” and, figuratively stop birth. Rather than fear of the nuke, what we see here is an excessive assimilation of technology and nuclear capability so that, following the logic of the film, birth is denied and maturity is all that remains. Technology provides us with an ontological “fixed point” to such a degree that we lose sight of how we have had to empty ourselves of all substance on our way to transcendence and certainty in an age of convergence.

Mecha pilots and the international alliance supporting them are, as Lyotard might say dealing with the “unmanageable” (43). “Politics,” he writes, “never ceases calling for union, for solidarity.” The “unmanageable,” he writes, is only present “outside” of representation: in death, in birth, one’s absolute and singular dependency, which prohibits any instantiated disposition of oneself from being unitary and total” (44). In a memorable essay, Lyotard discusses the May 1968 protests in France as an example of the unmanageable, which he connects with “childhood” and “dependency".
Dependency, the dependency of childhood, is “unbearable;” still, the events of May 1968 are an example of an opening in the political and representational strategies of the time that allow us to recognize that there are things that escape our rational nets. “But at the same time [as it was unbearable] it was an admirable state,” he writes, “that we insisted deserved homage, as if we could in that way get . . . (the adult community) to recognize that despite its ideas of autonomy and progress . . . such a community could not avoid leaving a residue beyond its control, to which the community itself remained hostage” (47).

If one were to single out one man who embodied the strength of mecha and denied the unmanageable, it would be Marshall Pentecost. The leader of the resistance and a pilot himself, he has one goal, to be a “fixed point. The last man standing.” And that he is. Along with Raleigh, he is the only other man who has ever piloted a mecha alone and he certainly has the most immaculate clothing in the film. He is a man who is composed, but within and without. But this representational composure has killed him. I have argued that nuclear power, unlike in the first Godzilla film, has been mastered and put to use in this film. It is not the great dread at the center of this most recent addition to the Godzilla genre.

Nevertheless, the first mechas were rushed into production and proper radiation shielding was not a priority; the radioactive fallout was not properly contained. And it burned Marshal Pentecost. His ever-present nosebleed, as tellingly contrasted with his impeccable suits and those shiny, shiny shoes, reminds us that maturity comes with a cost. How are we to understand this weakness in the “fixed point” which is Marshal
Pentecost? It is evidence, finally, of the unmaneagable. If subjective identity is centripetal, a massive assimilation of the world to a pinpoint self, here is a thread, a loose thread that is in danger of unraveling all of our obsessive identity construction. Augustine somewhat famously said that “we are all born between shit and piss.” He forgot blood. I’ve been present at two births and there was blood, and lots of it. Blood reminds us, or should remind us, equally of death and birth.

Perhaps this blood is an opening, and when Pentecost dies, it is an opening for a new birth as solidified in Mako and Raleigh who may lead the new resistance. But the presence of this blood could just as easily be seen in the reverse fashion. Yes, it kills us to be mature. Once we have fixed the breach—assimilated alterity and the unmanageable through our representational schemes—what can come then? Nothing. Maturity and its simultaneous denial of birth in a real sense is also an attack on maturity. Such fixity is impossible, logically, and death, if it were possible, is the only result. Not a necessarily a literal death, of course, but a human life lived, if you will, as an imperturbable stone, or as a pristine element in a periodic table, is hardly a life.