Age of the Atom, Age of the Gods: Intersections of Shinto Myth and Atomic Bomb Imagery in Gojira, Akira, and Princess Mononoke

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Gojira, Akira, and Princess Mononoke

Shannon Mewes

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of the
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in Japanese Language and Culture
under the advisement of Robert Goree

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Introduction

The effect of the atomic bomb on postwar Japanese film is well-documented, and to an extent so is the influence of Shintō. However, there is a gap in the scholarship where these two concepts intersect. This presents a unique academic problem: in works of film where both Shintō and nuclear trauma have observable influences, how do these concepts overlap and to what degree is each influence present? What is the effect of combining the two concepts in one piece of media? The aim of this thesis is to examine the relationship between Shintō mythology and the atomic bomb as influences on postwar Japanese film. Specifically, it will address a sample of three films—Gojira, Akira, and Princess Mononoke—which all feature a destructive god or godlike figure. By comparing and contrasting each film’s depiction of the atomic bomb and the aspects of mythology it employs, this paper will attempt to illustrate the relationship between these elements.

Before proceeding to the main body of the thesis, it is important to include some clarifying notes on Japan’s nuclear history as well as on Shintō. None of this is exhaustive, but it will provide sufficient background information that readers who have less experience in studying Japanese history and culture will be equipped to read this thesis.

Although the nuclear attacks on Japan and their historical repercussions are generally well understood, the specifics relevant to this thesis nevertheless merit discussion. Japan’s nuclear history began at 8:16 AM on August 6, 1945 with the world’s first deployment of an atomic bomb on human targets (Atomic Heritage Foundation, 2016). That morning, during rush hour, a single American bomber dropped the “Little Boy” bomb over Hiroshima. The resulting
explosion leveled most of the city, and an estimated 80,000 people were killed or seriously wounded in the blast. As time passed and the health effects of radiation began to make themselves known, the death toll increased; according to the city of Hiroshima’s estimates, “237,000 people were killed directly or indirectly by the bomb's effects, including burns, radiation sickness, and cancer” (AHF).

Three days after the bombing of Hiroshima, on August 9th, another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, at precisely the same time that the Imperial Supreme War Council was discussing potential conditional surrender in Tokyo. The death toll of the Nagasaki bomb, dubbed “Fat Man,” “may have reached 80,000” (AHF) by the end of the year.

Before the end of the week, on August 12, Emperor Hirohito officially accepted unconditional surrender. From this moment forward, Japan was under American occupation, and would remain so until April 1952 (Encyclopædia Britannica). Not quite two years later, on March 1, 1954, Japan experienced a third nuclear disaster at the hands of America, albeit an accidental one of much smaller scale. The Daigo Fukuryū Maru, a Japanese fishing boat, encountered fallout from America’s “Castle Bravo” thermonuclear weapons tests. The exposure caused radiation sickness in the vessel’s crew and claimed the life of one fisherman, in addition to contaminating sufficient amounts of tuna to cause a major panic over potential radiation exposure. The Daigo Fukuryū Maru incident is heavily alluded to in Gojira, and more information on it can be found in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Compared to the atomic bomb, Shintō is perhaps not as widely understood in the West. Shintō, which can be translated to “way of the gods,” is a Japanese religion which is difficult to define as a result of the many disparate elements which make up “Shintō” as a concept.
However, the information a reader of this thesis would need to know is presented here or within the text.

Shintō is highly polytheistic, with a broad pantheon of kami, a term which is generally translated as “god” or “deity” but which can refer to a number of spiritual, natural, or heavenly entities. Much of the Shintō mythology cited in this thesis is taken from the Kojiki, or “Records of Ancient Matters,” and the Nihon Shoki/Nihongi, “Chronicles of Japan.” These compilations are the oldest mythological and historical records in Japan, and their early chapters describe the events of the mythic “Age of the Gods,” during which the world was created by the kami Izanagi and Izanami; natural elements like seasons, weather, and landforms were born from the deities’ union; and the Shintō pantheon of gods came gradually into being as Izanagi and Izanami interacted with each other and the world.

The kami of these myths are not all benevolent or even neutral; in fact, aggressive or “rough” gods, araburugami, are not unheard of. One of Izanagi and Izanami’s most famous offspring, the god Susanoo, is primarily known for being impetuous, violent, and nasty to the other gods. Araburugami can threaten human lives as well; after Izanami dies and enters the underworld, she is transformed into an evil, corrupted form of herself who is violent and hateful toward both kami and humans. This corruption is the result of her exposure to death; in Shintō, death is a polluting influence which causes kegare, or “[a] polluted and evil condition” (Encyclopedia of Shinto).

Humans have always created mythologies to make sense of the incomprehensible—the awesome powers of nature, the inevitability of death, the origin of the world. Shintō myth as recorded in the Kojiki and Nihongi is no exception. Mythical accounts of the “Age of the Gods”
explain the origins of the Japanese islands and of Earth’s natural phenomena, the separation of
day and night, and the existence of death by ascribing them to the godly actions and relational
dramas of primordial deities. Though the gods of Shintō myth are portrayed as beyond mortal
comprehension in thought and deed, they are also anthropomorphized in many ways. They are
not infallible or immune to emotion, and their personalities are as diverse as those of humans.
They can even take sick and die. That the mysteries of life can be attributed to these gods who
are incomprehensibly powerful but often humanlike renders the incomprehensible
comprehensible and explains the inexplicable.

In earlier centuries, these myths explained phenomena like natural disasters, astronomical
events, and the existence of death and disease. The three films addressed in this thesis perform a
similar function, but rather than explaining the unpredictable natural world, they provide a
mythos through which the destructive might of the atomic bomb can be understood.
Gojira (ゴジラ)

Godzilla is, in a word, an icon. He is the face of the kaijū eiga (Japanese giant-monster movies) genre and arguably of monster movies in general, a cultural symbol of size and ferocity (as demonstrated by the popular use of -zilla as a suffix denoting something unusually large or aggressive, as in “Bridezilla”), and a broadly recognized representative of Japanese pop culture. However, before Godzilla was a household name associated with campy “creature feature” films featuring actors in toylike rubber suits stomping through miniature cities, his debut film, 1954’s Gojira, established him as a far darker and more solemn presence, born of director Ishiro Honda’s “belief that the monster should represent the horror of nuclear warfare and the lingering fears and anxieties of post-Hiroshima Japan” (Ryfle 52).

Godzilla occupies the fraught space between the ancient and the modern, the natural and the technological, and the native and the foreign. He is simultaneously a living relic who has lived for millions of years and an unprecedented threat. He represents both nature’s might and technology’s potential for destruction. He originates from the natural world but derives his unique power from the hydrogen bomb, a deeply unnatural device.

Though Godzilla is the main attraction and titular character of the film, much of the plot focuses not on him, but on the human drama occurring amid the carnage. The three primary characters are Hideo Ogata, a sailor whose work is put at risk by Godzilla’s attacks on ships; Emiko, the daughter of respected paleontologist Dr. Yamane; and Dr. Serizawa, Emiko’s betrothed whose first love is science. Ogata and Emiko are in love and seek to convince

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1 The monster is not gendered, at least in the original 1954 film, but I use “he” to refer to Godzilla since this is conventional.
Serizawa to break off his engagement to Emiko. However, their aim changes when it is revealed that Serizawa has created a weapon, the Oxygen Destroyer, which could kill Godzilla. The couple desperately try to persuade him to use his creation to eliminate the threat to Japan’s safety, but he refuses to allow its use due to its potential for harm should it fall into the wrong hands. However, when he is confronted with the devastation Godzilla has wrought in his numerous attacks, he yields, agreeing to use the only existing Oxygen Destroyer and burning all records of his work so the technology cannot be replicated. Ultimately, he sacrifices his life to ensure that the weapon is deployed effectively, as well as to prevent anyone from attempting to coerce him into revealing how to create the oxygen destroyer. Though the threat is neutralized (and Emiko is free to marry Ogata), the film ends on an uncertain note; Yamane muses that he fears Godzilla is not the last of his kind, and that humanity is at risk of awakening further threats if they continue to act without regard for the earth—that is, if they continue to develop and spread nuclear weapons.

A brief note: in this chapter, “Godzilla” will be used to refer to the monster itself, while “Gojira” will refer to the film.
I. Shintō Influence in *Godzilla*

When he first emerges from the sea, Godzilla does not have a name—he is an unknown monster of unknown origin. The name Godzilla is given by his first victims, the residents of Odoshima Island. The effects of the attack are originally believed, at least by non-residents of Odoshima, to be the aftermath of a typhoon, but several of the victims testify that the culprit was not a storm but a living thing. It is as if the monster is a part of the storm, or the storm itself, enacting nature’s fury. Accordingly, the islanders, particularly the elders, associate the monster tormenting them with a local *kami* named Gojira (or Godzilla) whose existence is the subject of orally transmitted myth, and believe the monster’s behavior—eating (or killing) all of the fish in the nearby sea—to be the wrath of an insufficiently placated god. They are shown performing a traditional *kagura* dance in order to pacify Godzilla, recreating an ancient practice native to the island. This practice is reminiscent of the Shintō ritual of *goryō-e*, in which offerings and performances, including *kagura*, are given in order to pacify an angry or vengeful spirit (Teruyoshi). The *kagura* costumes are also noteworthy, since they feature long-nosed *tengu* masks. *Tengu* are “troublesome spirits that have a strong connection to their mountain homes, often terrorizing those who encroach on their territory” (Fiske 87). Godzilla, too, is an aggressive and territorial supernatural being; while this commonality may not be intentional within the film, from a metatextual perspective it is easy to see that the use of *tengu* in the *kagura* foreshadows Godzilla’s own impending territorial rampage. One villager reflects that the Odoshima ritual

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2 A fictitious location. References to Odoshima and its culture should therefore be understood in the context of the film’s internal lore; while inspired by real places and real *kami* worship, Odoshima and its local *kami* from whom Godzilla takes his name are specifically fabrications.
originally involved human sacrifice to calm the angry deity, foreshadowing the future “sacrifice” of the humans killed in Godzilla’s continued attacks. The association between the monster and this local myth inspires Dr. Yamane to officially name the monster Godzilla, a designation which implicitly suggests that Godzilla is, in some way, the *kami* the locals believe him to be.

After Godzilla’s first attack on Odoshima, the island’s residents send representatives to Tokyo to petition for disaster relief. The villagers, as well as a journalist who surveyed the destruction, testify that the incident was definitely caused by a living creature, not simply a storm. The last individual to speak before the assembly is Dr. Yamane, who admits that he has not yet seen the disaster site, but states that he believes it is possible the villagers are right, and that the destruction on Odoshima was caused by the giant creature they describe. Yamane soon travels to Odoshima to see the evidence himself; while he is examining what is allegedly one of the monster’s footprints, Godzilla comes ashore again, giving Yamane the chance not only to see him in broad daylight but to photograph him as well.
Equipped with the evidence he has found, Yamane gives a presentation before the Diet on the little information known about the monster. He states that Godzilla is from the Jurassic Period, and has survived locked away in a deep-sea cavern that was eventually disturbed by underwater hydrogen bomb tests. As evidence to support this startling claim, Yamane presents a trilobite, which is known to have gone extinct millions of years ago, found in Godzilla’s footprint, as well as sand left behind by the monster consistent with that of extremely old sediment layers. Not only is Godzilla ancient; he also carries souvenirs of his ancient origins when he emerges in the modern world. That such a powerful being hails from so long ago already brings to mind the primordial kami of the “Age of the Gods,” and the comparison becomes stronger when Godzilla begins to take vengeance on the people of Japan—directly echoing the myth of Izanami. In fact, Gojira could even be taken as a modern reimagining of the myth.

Many of the events in Godzilla’s life can be mapped onto events in Izanami’s, beginning in the Jurassic Period. Much as Izanami lived in the “Age of the Gods,” the period before humans were the primary mythic figures, Godzilla originated thousands or even millions of years before humanity emerged. In this early stage of life, both Godzilla and Izanami were not yet violent or corrupted. When the dinosaurs became extinct—an event marked by nearly worldwide death—Godzilla was forced underground and hidden in a deep-sea cavern. Izanami died and was sent to Yomi, the dark land of the dead; Yomi has also been called “ne no kuni” or “the root-country” (Aston), implying that it is in some way subterranean like Godzilla’s hiding place.

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3 He is also said to be two million years old, which would not place him anywhere near the Jurassic, but this is an unimportant paleontological discrepancy. While I felt it worthwhile to note that this inconsistency was present in the film and is not an error on my part, it does not affect my arguments.
Here, the temporal order of events is not a precise match, but remains clearly related. After he has remained hidden for eons, Godzilla’s hiding place is disturbed by nuclear testing. It is likely that Godzilla’s powers (including radioactive fire-breathing) were brought on by the radiation from this testing, and it is certain that it was the disturbance of nature that awakened Godzilla’s vengeful rage. Turned monstrous by radiation and filled with anger at humanity for breaching his hiding place, Godzilla emerges from the sea and rampages, destroying cities and killing countless humans. Izanami, by contrast, was corrupted not by radiation but by her exposure to death in the underworld, which transformed her into a disgusting and monstrous version of herself. Though she was wronged by her husband Izanagi, not by humans, the violation of her boundaries drove her to revenge and empowered her to enact violence on humanity. She emerged from Yomi in a rage and pursued Izanagi furiously, seeking to punish him for looking upon her when she sought to remain hidden.

Both Godzilla and Izanami were originally peaceful, primordial beings. They were forced out of the surface world and into a literal or figurative underworld by unforeseen disaster—an extinction event in Godzilla’s case and the physical trauma of birthing a fire deity in Izanami’s—and would have remained there without violence had an external force not disrupted the order of nature. In Godzilla’s case, the infraction was hydrogen bomb testing, which disrupted the ocean environment and released dangerous fallout. In Izanami’s, the violation was committed by Izanagi, who defied her wishes and looked directly at her decayed body, which was, according to Shinto belief, polluted by exposure to death. In both cases, the once-peaceful kami is turned monstrous by a corrupting influence, which is either literally (in the case of Izanami) or symbolically (in the case of Godzilla’s radioactive contamination) a form of kegare,
the Shintō concept of “[a] polluted and evil condition” (Encyclopedia of Shinto) which is brought about by many corrupting influences including death and sin. Both then become a source of this kegare themselves; Izanami contaminates Izanagi with the pollution of death, and Godzilla’s powerful radioactivity contaminates his victims and all that he touches.

As mentioned earlier, the parallels between Godzilla and Izanami in conjunction with Godzilla’s status as a local kami mean Gojira can be read as a modern iteration of the myth of Izanami, in which the mistreatment of a powerful primordial deity is the inciting event for a disastrous loss of human life. In the Kojiki, the vengeful Izanami swears to Izanagi that she will “in one day strangle to death a thousand of the folk of [his] land” (Chamberlain)—i.e. human beings. Since it was humanity that wronged Godzilla, he retaliates by killing the folk of their land, so to speak. If Izanami was the goddess of Yomi and of death, then Godzilla is the god of the atomic bomb. Both represent a phenomenon which threatens humanity but which is difficult to comprehend without the framework of myth.
II. Nuclear Influence in *Gojira*

Put simply, neither *Gojira* the film nor Godzilla the monster could exist without the atomic bomb. That Godzilla represents the bomb—or perhaps nuclear weapons in general—is practically a given, but this is not the only angle from which to view him as a post-nuclear monster. He is at the same time a symbol of the bomb, a representation of burgeoning nuclear aggression and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and, curiously, a sort of dramatic foil to the bomb which strikes a contrast between the destructive powers of technology and nature. The monster is also not the only nuclear symbol in *Gojira*; in fact, he is surrounded by references both implicit and explicit to the anxiety and internal conflict which arose from Japan’s nuclear trauma. I refer broadly to this trauma since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not the only nuclear incidents in Japanese memory at the time of *Gojira*’s creation; in fact, the event which inspired the film’s creation and its opening scene was not a bombing at all.

On March 1, 1954, the Japanese fishing boat *Daigo Fukuryū Maru* was located approximately 80 miles away from Bikini Atoll when it encountered fallout from the “Castle Bravo” American thermonuclear weapons test. As a result of exposure to the radiation, “one of the 23 crew members died of acute radiation poisoning, while many others faced serious health effects” (Rowberry). The ship’s haul of tuna, as well as other sea life exposed to fallout, was contaminated with radioactivity as well. The illness and death of the crew members, as well as the negative effects on a major food supply, sparked argument between the United States and Japan, and in Japan “an unprecedented public outcry followed, including a national tuna boycott, a signature campaign to ban the bomb, and the formation of antinuclear activist groups” (Ryfle
Many felt that this incident was tantamount to another American nuclear attack on Japan, which “had become not only the first atomic bomb victim, it was also the first hydrogen bomb victim” (Szasz & Takechi 744).

This event was still fresh in the public consciousness, not even a year old, when Gojira was released. In the first scene of the film, an event that is unavoidably reminiscent of the Daigo Fukuryū Maru incident plays out before the audience’s eyes, in which a civilian fishing boat is attacked by an as-yet unknown force which makes the sea boil and glow before incinerating the vessel entirely. Gojira embellishes the event, depicting other ships which, whether specifically searching for the ill-fated fishing boat or merely passing through the area, meet the same fate. It becomes clear that something about that place is not safe. Viewers of the film can easily infer that what they are seeing is somehow related to the titular monster, but the mysterious danger lurking underwater also explicitly brings to mind a nuclear test site due to the localized danger taken in combination with the association with Daigo Fukuryū Maru.

When Godzilla emerges onto land, his impact is not yet reminiscent of the atomic bomb. In fact, the damage resulting from his first attack on Odoshima is confused with the effects of a typhoon. However, as he encroaches increasingly on the Japanese mainland, Godzilla inflicts more and more destruction upon humanity until he is engaged in a full scale attack on Tokyo. He levels buildings and “[f]amous landmarks… including the Nichigeki Theatre… the clock tower atop the Wakko Building in Ginza, and the Diet Building, Japan's house of parliament” (Ryfle 56-57). Godzilla “essentially function[s] as a walking nuclear reactor, breathing out radiation” (Szasz & Takechi 745) with which he melts metal structures and creates raging fires. This atomic fire renders those exposed highly radioactive and horribly burned, as shown in a later scene in
which victims of the attack lie in a crowded disaster shelter which immediately suggests images of the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Among the chaos, “A doctor tests a child for radiation, and the Geiger counter goes berserk. A little girl wails as she watches her mother die of terrible burns” (Ryfle 57). Earlier, during the attack, another mother tearfully comforts her doomed children as Godzilla advances on them, telling them that they are “going to where Daddy is.” Though it is impossible to know whether their father simply died in the war or was killed by an atomic bomb, it is clear that this line is meant to evoke the trauma of the war and Japan’s defeat.

Godzilla himself is not the only nuclear analogue in the film. Dr. Serizawa’s creation, the Oxygen Destroyer, also bears many similarities to the atomic bomb, a fact of which Serizawa is painfully aware. The Oxygen Destroyer is a substance which, when activated, destroys the oxygen in an environment. Serizawa demonstrates its abilities by deploying it in the fish tank in his laboratory; when activated, the Oxygen Destroyer instantaneously reduces the fish inside to skeletons. Serizawa further explains that it does not only work at small scale; in fact, “just a small ball of [Oxygen Destroyer] could turn all of Tokyo Bay into an aquatic graveyard.” This destructive capacity means the Oxygen Destroyer is a device which could surpass the hydrogen
bomb in power, and which would be catastrophic if exploited for offensive use. This potential is Serizawa’s greatest fear, and it drives him to choose secrecy and isolation in order to prevent the Oxygen Destroyer from becoming another weapon like the atomic and hydrogen bomb. Serizawa fears the dissemination of his technology, a concern which echoes the real issue of nuclear proliferation and stockpiling. “Nuclear proliferation” specifically refers to the spread of nuclear technology and weapons to countries not designated as “nuclear-weapon states” in the United Nations’ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. This phenomenon is a concern because, although it does not necessarily guarantee that nuclear war is more likely, it introduces more potential participants in nuclear warfare and therefore creates the potential for more and different incidents of nuclear aggression. Serizawa does not mention nuclear proliferation by name, but his refusal to allow the use of his Oxygen Destroyer comes from fear of more or less the same phenomenon: parties with unknown motives gaining access to a uniquely powerful weapon. Serizawa’s concerns also reflect the tension between the nonviolent applications of nuclear technology and the danger of their appeal as weapons; while he did not develop the technology specifically as a weapon, in his mind its potential for destruction outweighs the hypothetical benefits it might present in a different context.

Another reading of Gojira is also possible: one in which Godzilla represents not the atomic bomb, but rather the forces of nature pushing back against humanity’s destructive behavior. Godzilla, an ancient animal locked within the earth, is diametrically opposed to the hydrogen bombs which awaken him. Where they are modern, he is ancient; where they are technological, he is natural; where they are foreign, he is, in the words of Dr. Yamane, “a priceless specimen, found only in Japan.” This opposition is illustrative of what Sheng-mei Ma
describes as “an ‘atom dialectic’ that yokes such binary opposites of miniature, diminutive, and subliminal that is the atomic molecule, on the one hand, and transcendent, hyperbolic, and sublime that is nothing short of the atomic apocalypse, on the other” (97). According to Ma, this dialectical pairing is one of the earliest examples of “[t]he anime pattern of juxtaposing and thus resolving confrontations”, and is exemplified by scenes in which Godzilla “inaugurates [his] urban rampage by smashing a train, symbol of industrialization and modernity” before “breaking through the last defense of Tokyo, high-voltage electric wires and transmission towers that ring the city” (98). The atomic bomb represents the modern, the technological, and the human; Godzilla, driven to vengeful rage, must therefore violently oppose all of these.
III. Synthesis

Godzilla is a curious symbol, occupying two seemingly contradictory roles. In one, he symbolizes the devastation of the atomic bomb, leveling cities with powers unleashed by nuclear testing. However, he can also be seen as an agent of nature itself, a primordial force striking back against humans’ advances as the consequences of disturbing the natural order with nuclear technology. In this role, Godzilla is actually opposed by an atomic symbol as found in the Oxygen Destroyer. This technology, which was not developed with the express intention of being used as an instrument of destruction, is nevertheless a powerful weapon. In the same way, Godzilla was not born a killing machine, but was made one by the hydrogen bomb, an instrument of death and aggression. The clear motif is that of a power which, while not inherently harmful and possibly even beneficial, is corrupted by human aggression and the pursuit of military strength.

Regardless of what is symbolic of the atomic bomb—whether Godzilla in his destructive rampages or the Oxygen Destroyer with its life-eliminating power—the film ends with the threat neutralized but not permanently eliminated. Godzilla and the Oxygen Destroyer are both destroyed in the finale of the film, but Yamane acknowledges that it is possible or even likely that Godzilla is not the only or last threat of his kind. Similarly, though Serizawa and all records of his research are both eliminated, preventing others from discovering his scientific methods, the film emphasizes the progression from the atomic bomb to the hydrogen bomb and finally to Godzilla and the Oxygen Destroyer, implying that there may be yet more, even stronger weapons to be developed, as Serizawa feared. The film, already a cautionary allegory, ends with a
warning against awakening more monsters—whether natural or man-made—that are too strong for humanity to control.

In addition to being representative of the bomb, Godzilla also plays the role of a kami in an homage to mythology that casts him both as victim and aggressor. Like the goddess Izanami, he began his life as a powerful but peaceful being, but was exposed to a corrupting force which gave him new power as well as a hunger for revenge. The detonations and fallout from hydrogen bomb testing take death’s place as the kegare which pollutes and transforms the once-harmless kami. Like proximity to death in Shintō myth, radiation exposure physically transforms beings exposed to it, both in reality and in Gojira; even more directly, both nuclear blasts and the fallout they create are, of course, fatal to humans. If the film is a modern Shintō myth and Godzilla is a kami, then nuclear weaponry takes the role of death, or more broadly kegare.

However, since Godzilla himself is symbolic of the bomb, it is also reasonable to extrapolate that the bomb is a kind of kami itself. This may seem a strange claim to make, since the atomic bomb is inanimate and does not possess a will of its own, this misgiving comes from an anthropomorphized understanding of kami as being synonymous with “god” or “deity.” Though it is a hard term to define, the scholar of Shintō and Japanese “national studies” Motoori Norinaga has been quoted⁴ as defining kami thus:

Generally speaking, “kami” denotes, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient texts and also the spirits enshrined in the shrines; furthermore, among all kinds of beings—including not only human beings but also such objects as birds, beasts, trees, grass, seas, mountains, and so forth—any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe-inspiring, is called kami. (Eminence here does not refer simply to superiority in nobility, goodness, or meritoriousness. Evil or queer things, if they are extraordinarily awe-inspiring, are also called kami.)

⁴ By Shigeru Matsumoto in Motoori Norinaga, 1730-1801, pg 84.
By this definition, if Izanami was a death-bringing *kami* by merit of her godlike power and superhuman nature, it is not unreasonable to say the same of the atomic bomb. Indeed, *Gojira* does exactly that by symbolically rendering the titular character as both a *kami* and a bomb.
**Akira** (アキラ)

*Akira*, like *Gojira*, is explicit about its nuclear origins. The film begins with a shot of an apparent nuclear blast enveloping Tokyo, and the memory of this event is a constant presence. Even Neo Tokyo, the cyberpunk-styled metropolis in which *Akira* is set, is situated in the crater left behind by the explosion. However, mixed with the futuristic post-atomic society of the film’s fictitious 2019 is a definite sense of the superhuman or even supernatural. Unbeknownst to the average people of Neo Tokyo, humans with psychic abilities exist in secret, including the individual who was the real cause of the blast: a young boy named Akira.

The 1988 explosion on which the film opens is not, in literal terms, a nuclear detonation. In actuality it is a singularity created by Akira, a child with massively powerful psychic abilities. He and other children with such abilities are experimented upon in a government facility until Akira experiences a “transcendental awakening” which triggers the disaster. After this event, the remaining three psychic children, known as the “Numbers” after the identification numbers tattooed on their hands, are hidden from public knowledge until the year 2019, when the events of the film take place.

The film’s protagonist is Tetsuo Shima, a teenage member of the Capsules, one of Neo Tokyo’s many motorcycle gangs. Compared to the rest of the gang, Tetsuo is seen as somewhat weak, and is often dependent on his childhood friend and gang leader Kaneda. However, his life changes when he crashes his motorcycle into one of the Numbers, Takashi, who has escaped from government custody. The exposure to Takashi’s psychic energy activates Tetsuo’s own, and he is captured by the government under pretenses of taking him to a hospital due to his
injuries from the crash. He is tested upon, and the head scientist who oversees the Numbers (known simply as “Doctor”) observes that Tetsuo’s psychic energies are unusually powerful, speculating that the patterns of Tetsuo’s psychic growth may be “the key to solving the riddle of Akira's pattern growth process.” Meanwhile, an unconscious Tetsuo receives telepathic messages and images of Akira, which he does not yet understand.

Tetsuo escapes from the hospital where he is held and returns to his high school to find his girlfriend, Kaori. The two plan to flee Neo Tokyo together, and Tetsuo steals Kaneda’s motorcycle in order to do so. However, they are overtaken by members of a rival gang, and Kaneda and the other Capsules are forced to save him. When he lashes out in anger at Kaneda for saving him, he is struck by a massive headache and gruesome hallucinations as his psychic power begins to manifest. He is recaptured shortly thereafter and taken back to the hospital, where he first uses his psychic abilities.

As Tetsuo’s power grows, he becomes violent, impulsive, and egotistical despite the Numbers’ attempts to convince him not to act aggressively. He seeks out Akira, creating destruction and chaos across Neo Tokyo as he does. All the while, Kaneda tries to find and stop him, aided by an anti-government revolutionary named Kei and other members of the resistance group she belongs to. Ultimately, Kaneda and Tetsuo come to a standoff in the partially constructed stadium for the next year’s Olympics. The stadium is constructed above a secret facility where the remains of Akira are kept in cryogenic storage. Tetsuo learns from Colonel Shikishima, who officially oversees the government programs dealing with psychics, that “After [Akira’s] transcendental awakening, his body was subjected to every test known to science,” leaving only tissues and organs preserved in canisters. The “transcendental awakening” to which
Shikishima refers is the event which caused the initial “nuclear” blast; after unlocking the full extent of his power, Akira created a massive singularity which destroyed much of the city.

It is during the ensuing encounter with Kaneda that Tetsuo reaches the pinnacle of his own powers. However, the massive psychic energy corrupts and mutates his body, and it begins to expand and deform grotesquely until he is a colossal and expanding mass of flesh which threatens to consume everything in its path. The Numbers are forced to reawaken Akira, who is the only being powerful enough to stop Tetsuo. They escape from the hospital and appear at the stadium, psychically communing with Akira’s remains. They are able to bring him back, at which point he creates another singularity which envelops Tetsuo. However, Kaneda and Shikishima are also pulled into the singularity, and the Numbers sacrifice themselves to get both people to safety. Once Tetsuo is contained, Akira’s singularity disappears, along with Tetsuo and the Numbers. As it did the first time, the singularity has razed Neo Tokyo, leaving few survivors. However, Kaneda, Kei, a gang member named Kai, and Colonel Shikishima are all alive, and the film ends on a cautiously hopeful note for these survivors. Meanwhile, in what the Doctor proclaimed to be “the birth of a universe” before he was killed in the disaster, Tetsuo exists in another plane, where Akira evidently took him. The last shots of the film are surreal and suggestive of a big bang, with Tetsuo stating in voiceover, “I am… Tetsuo.”

Akira’s singularities are visually and conceptually evocative of the atomic bomb, even to the untrained eye. The image of a city reduced to rubble by a single disaster, as seen after each Akira event, is immediately reminiscent of the aftermath of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Furthermore, the wholesale destruction of cities is a frequently employed narrative element in postwar Japanese media. As William Tsutsui puts it, “Through most of the postwar
period, and certainly since the mid-1960s, Japanese media consumers could take in the fictionalized obliteration of their capital city on television or at a nearby movie theater at least every week, and sometimes every day” (105). Extrapolating from the clear atomic imagery of these disasters, one finds that both Akira and his successor Tetsuo are, symbolically speaking, the atomic bombs of the film.

However, at the same time, both are reminiscent of prominent figures from Shintō myth. Both possess godlike abilities thanks to psychic energy which is not fully understood or explained by humans, and which is likened in the film’s dialogue to “the power of god.” Akira, whose power is unparalleled by other psychics and who exerts continuous influence on the plot and characters of the film despite being dead, suggests the primordial gods Izanagi and Izanami. Tetsuo, on the other hand, splits his time between being an emotionally volatile younger-brother figure to his peers and wreaking gratuitous, gruesome violence with his powers in part (or completely) for the fun of it; this divided personality is nearly the same as that of the storm god Susanoo. These Shintō archetypes are blended with imagery of the atomic bomb to form a syncretic whole in which the atomic and the divine are intertwined. Nuclear weapons are reimagined as humans with disproportionate destructive power, and these humans are themselves imagined to be gods or at the very least godlike. Akira explores these intersections of human behavior, nuclear aggression, post-nuclear societal trauma, and the realm of the divine, drawing the viewer towards a conclusion that the atomic bomb possesses a kind of divinity of its own.
I. Shintō Influence in Akira

One might expect not to find kami in the futuristic setting of Neo Tokyo. After all, the term kami often suggests images of nature deities, ancient beings, and classic Shintō shrines—not cyberpunk technology, juvenile delinquents in motorcycle gangs, and covert government laboratories. And yet it is in this very environment that Tetsuo is thrust unwittingly into the role of a modern kami.

Before elaborating, it seems worthwhile to mention that it is not unheard of for a human being to become a kami, and the categories of “human” and “kami” have historically had areas of overlap. Consider the Japanese imperial line, which until relatively recently was officially considered to be descended from the eminent kami Amaterasu, or the practice of deifying deceased people of importance. Tetsuo’s experience is somewhat different than these practices, of course, but it falls within the very existent territory of humanity intersecting with divinity in Shintō.

If Tetsuo resembles any type of kami, it is without a doubt the “ill-disposed rough god (araburukami, aragami)” (Ouwehand 143). This archetype is associated with power as well as violence and impetuosity, and an early and exemplary example is the god Susanoo5. Along with the sun goddess Amaterasu and the moon god Tsukuyomi, Susanoo is the youngest of the three powerful children of Izanagi who were born from his acts of cleansing after he returned from the land of Yomi (Aston 22). Susanoo is characterized by volatility, violence, and immaturity; in this respect, he has much in common with Tetsuo, the juvenile delinquent who

5 Whose name can be verbosely translated as “His Swift-Impetuous-Male-Augustness” (Horne).
suddenly acquires psychic abilities that mimic the powers of a god. Both are members of a cohort in which they believe they are insufficiently respected, both are represented as childish or spoiled in some way, and both use their godly strength for selfish and destructive purposes.

Immediately after their creation, Susanoo and his siblings were allotted the dominions over which they would rule as deities. Though Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi were satisfied with their assignments, “[Susanoo] did not rule the land entrusted to him. [Instead], he wept and howled [even] until his beard eight hands long extended down over his chest” (Philippi 72). In this anecdote, Susanoo is depicted as a sort of adult spoiled child, driven to the point of tantrum-throwing by discontentment with his lot. Similarly, Tetsuo’s childishness and the way it contrasts with his nearly-adult age are established early in Akira through his experiences as a member of a motorcycle gang. Tetsuo is treated almost as a little brother by other gang members, particularly Kaneda, who always “treat[s] [him] like a kid” and pokes fun at him. When he expresses his envy of Kaneda’s superior bike—an important social status symbol, similar here to the kami’s assigned dominions—Kaneda’s response is dismissive: “That bike's been customized just for me. It's too wild. You couldn't handle it. […] If you want one so bad, steal a big one for yourself.” Once he is more powerful than Kaneda, Tetsuo alludes to a history of Kaneda having to keep him out of trouble, telling him that he “won't be needing [Kaneda] to save [him] anymore.” This background information is reinforced by a flashback of their childhood which occurs during the climax of the film, in which Kaneda retrieves Tetsuo’s action figure from another group of children after they bully him. Much like Susanoo and his siblings, Tetsuo and Kaneda have similar origins, but much as Susanoo is the youngest sibling, Tetsuo generally plays the role of the weakest member of a group. Because of this, when he is faced with a situation in
which, like Susanoo, he feels he has not been dealt a fair hand, Tetsuo lashes out. For example, Kaneda and the other gang members seek him out after he steals Kaneda’s bike and is attacked by rival gang members, he is enraged that they’ve come to find him, screaming at them:

Shut up! Don't order me around! [...] Why do you always have to come and save me? I could've handled it myself! I admit I got beat up that one time, but I won't always be on the receiving end! Understand?!

Ironically, it is just after this outburst that Tetsuo’s psychic abilities begin to manifest, as if he is unknowingly taking control of his own sort of godly domain. Once Tetsuo begins to realize and use his powers in earnest, he also begins to embody the more impulsive and violent—and supernatural—aspects of Susanoo, whose “character was to love destruction” (Aston 20).

Though he features in many myths set in the “Age of the Gods” as retold in the Kojiki and Nihongi, Susanoo is perhaps best known for his role in the story of Ama no Iwato, or the “heavenly rock cave.” Though the plot of this myth primarily involves Amaterasu’s self-seclusion in the titular cave and the other gods’ plot to retrieve her, the inciting event is Susanoo’s bad behavior. In the two chapters of the Kojiki preceding the actual Ama no Iwato story, Amaterasu and Susanoo engaged in a competition which Susanoo won. In response, Susanoo “raged with victory” (Philippi 79) and engaged in a number of escalating acts of mischief, including sabotaging Amaterasu’s rice fields and relieving himself in her palace before a sacred ceremony was supposed to occur. Amaterasu did not act in retaliation, attempting to rationalize Susanoo’s actions and assume he meant no harm, but

[e]ven though she thus spoke with good intention, his misdeeds did not cease, but became even more flagrant. When [Amaterasu] was inside the sacred weaving hall seeing to the weaving of the divine garments, [Susanoo] opened a hole in the roof of the sacred weaving hall and dropped down into it the heavenly dappled pony which he had skinned with a backwards skinning. The heavenly weaving maiden, seeing this, was alarmed and struck her genitals against the shuttle and died. (Philippi 80)
The death of one of her handmaidens finally proved too severe for Amaterasu to accept, and she fled to the cave where she would conceal herself.

Susanoo’s pattern of continuous escalation as depicted in the *Ama no Iwato* myth is mirrored by Tetsuo’s increased violence as the plot of *Akira* progresses. As his powers strengthen, and therefore as he becomes more godlike, he develops a tendency toward destruction and death that only intensifies as he continues to gain strength. At the same time, he develops a malicious, megalomaniacal attitude; the more damage he does, the more satisfied and vindicated he feels. This combination is heavily reminiscent of Susanoo’s violent mischief, especially since it is eventually turned against the people closest to Tetsuo as Susanoo’s aggression was directed at his sister.

When Tetsuo is recaptured after his escape from the hospital, his telekinetic powers begin to manifest. His first conscious application of these abilities is the swift and gruesome dismemberment of three people, and he proceeds to kill or seriously injure several more as he makes his way to the “baby room,” where the Numbers live. It is here, after Tetsuo has attempted to attack the Numbers and caused significant damage to his surroundings, where Kaneda and Kei find him. Tetsuo is shocked at his arrival, speaking to him in his normal manner, but once Kaneda tells Tetsuo that he has come to rescue him, Tetsuo shifts into the bitter and egotistical tone with which he spoke to the Numbers while fighting them. He gloats, telling Kaneda, “See, Kaneda? I won’t be needing you to come to the rescue ever again. Okay? From now on, I’ll be in charge of the heroics.” Then, like Susanoo when he “raged in victory,” he telekinetically attacks Kaneda by exploding the floor under him before using his powers to fly out of the hospital and laughing maniacally all the while.
Tetsuo’s first destination upon leaving the hospital is the bar which he and the Capsules once frequented. After attempting to purchase drugs from the bartender, he decides instead to kill him, destroying the interior of the bar in the process. When two members of the gang arrive at the bar unaware of Tetsuo’s presence, they are greeted by a scene of complete disarray before discovering the murdered bartender propped up among the wreckage. When Kai, one of the gangsters, catches sight of his corpse, he screams and reels back; the situation is reminiscent of Susanoo’s throwing of the skinned horse and the handmaiden’s horror at the sight. This is not the only violent action he undertakes wholly or partially in order to shock; in fact, Tetsuo revels in a great deal more destruction as he makes his way to the stadium, killing as much for show as for self-defense. In a standoff with several tanks on a bridge, he shouts “Watch this!” as he destroys the bridge, sending the tanks as well as many of the onlookers following him into the water. Though this is clearly an unnecessary degree of force, Tetsuo is showing off as much as he is fighting. Like Susanoo, he constantly raises the stakes to prove his power.

It should be noted that Susanoo’s violent behavior did not go unpunished by the other gods. According to the Nihongi, after Amaterasu was coaxed out of her cave, “all the Gods put the blame on [Susanoo], …and so at length chastised him… When this was done, they at last banished him downwards” (Aston 45). Specifically, he was expelled “to the Bottom Nether Land” (Horne 50), which was beneath the other heavenly realms, and was cut off from contact with the rest of the pantheon. Tetsuo is similarly chastised by the Numbers—who are analogues for the rest of the godly pantheon—for his behavior. When Tetsuo first encounters the Numbers in person, Kiyoko tells him that “big people like [him] should never use the power in the way that [he is].” Later, when Tetsuo is about to break into Akira’s cryogenic vault, Kiyoko possesses
Kei in order to speak through her, telling Tetsuo on behalf of all of the Numbers that “[he] shouldn’t use [his] power in this way, for it is not correct.” Later, the Numbers come to a unanimous decision to reawaken Akira in order to keep Tetsuo’s unbridled powers from causing more destruction. Specifically, Akira is meant to “take Tetsuo with him” to an unknown destination which is implied to be a different universe (which will be addressed later). Whereas Susanoo was expelled from his home in heaven to Earth because of his unconscionable actions, Tetsuo is expelled from Earth for the same reason. In both cases, a sort of jury of peers—the other kami for Susanoo, the other espers for Tetsuo—came to the decision to banish the offender.

The *Ama no伊度* myth is not directly referenced in the film, but it does appear to be a narrative framework for Tetsuo’s character arc.

Near the conclusion of the film, the doctor watches Tetsuo and Akira’s energy signatures in bewilderment, crying out, “If this is correct, it’s showing that this is the birth of the universe!” Though this would not necessarily be suggestive of any particular creation myth, taken in conjunction with other imagery from the film, the “birth of a universe” suggests that *Akira’s* psychic characters are influenced not only by Susanoo, but by the primordial gods Izanami and Izanagi as well. In particular, Akira shares a number of qualities with these two figures and particularly with Izanami.

In Shintō creation myths, Izanagi and Izanami were the first generation of gods who lived on Earth, rather than in the separate realm of the heavens. The two were the progenitors of a huge number of deities, both as a parental pair and independently. Susanoo, for one, was born from Izanagi’s act of washing his face after his return from the land of Yomi. Though Akira’s role is certainly not parental, he too can be seen as a precursor to Tetsuo as Izanagi was to
Susanoo, and he holds power over Tetsuo similar to Izanagi’s authority over Susanoo. Akira is also the one who removes Tetsuo from his universe of origin; in one of the variations of Susanoo’s tale cited in the Nihongi, it is Izanagi along with Izanami who “addressed [Susanoo], saying:—‘Thou art exceedingly wicked, and it is not meet that thou shouldst reign over the world. Certainly thou must depart far away to the Nether Land’” (Horne 19-20). In addition to his Izanagi-like position among the younger and/or less powerful espers, Akira fulfills a number of characteristics of the Izanami archetype as well.

Izanami began her mythological life as a very similar deity to Izanagi, with dominion over other deities as well as humanity. However, after she died in childbirth and lived for a time in Yomi, the land of darkness and death, she was transformed into a grotesque and defiled goddess of death. Ultimately, she separated from Izanagi permanently and lived in Yomi, overseeing it as he oversaw the Earth. In her new and monstrous form, Izanami swore to Izanagi that she would “each day strangle to death one thousand of the populace of [his] country” (Philippi 23), and was then cut off permanently from the world of the living. While Akira is not rendered grotesque by death in the same way as Izanami—that is, he has no “putrefying matter” or “maggots swarm[ing]” (Aston 24)—the collection of tissue and organ samples preserved in canisters which is all that remains of Akira’s physical form is still alarming to see. Like Izanami, he has been rendered absent by death, but is not permanently erased. Izanami remains in Yomi, while something of Akira survives both in his physical specimens and in psychic impressions left on other psychics. He is also a presence associated with dread and destruction; when she predicts his return, Kiyoko tells Shikishima that “[t]he city will crumble, and so many people will die.” Both Akira and Izanami are absent figures, but both still pose a threat of massive human
casualties. However, both are also prevented from total destruction of humanity; Izanagi swears that he “will each day build one thousand five hundred parturition huts” (Philippi 66) to counteract Izanami’s killings by encouraging human reproduction, and the Numbers sacrifice themselves to rescue Kaneda and Shikishima from Akira’s singularity which would otherwise have consumed them. In the end, Izanami remains in Yomi, and Akira and Tetsuo disappear from the film’s universe. The frightful gods are banished from the worlds they could have destroyed, and their permanent absence neutralizes their threats. Humanity is therefore given a chance to survive.

As Tetsuo moves through the streets of Neo Tokyo toward the Olympic stadium, he attracts the attention of the millenarian cult of Akira shown earlier in the film, and the cultists become convinced that he is the reincarnation or second coming of Akira. Though this behavior is less typical of Shintō than of contemporary cults, it is still important to note that Tetsuo and Akira are both considered deities in some way within the film. Earlier in the film, Shikishima also implies that psychic energy is akin to “the power of God,” while questioning whether humans should seek to control it. Though they are subject to scientific inquiry and potential scientific explanations for their powers are given, Akira and Tetsuo are both positioned as supernaturally gifted in a way that science cannot fully grasp.
II. Nuclear Influence in Akira

The post-nuclear tone of Akira is established in its opening shot. The camera pans over a sunny view of Tokyo, which is silent but for the wind, and moves upward to the horizon before stopping with a view of Tokyo’s skyscrapers and Mt. Fuji in the distance. Without fanfare, a dome-shaped shockwave rises from the city, followed by a burst of light from within. Though not the stereotypical mushroom cloud, this image is recognizable immediately as signifying a nuclear blast. The flash of the detonation washes the scene with white light and casts stark shadows behind the skyscrapers, evoking the nuclear shadows left behind after a nuclear bombing. There is no sound of an explosion; only the continuing sound of wind is heard. The domed blast expands, engulfing the city, until the audience’s view is completely whitened out. This prologue lasts less than 45 seconds. The white screen fades into an abstract image rendered entirely in red, which resembles organic matter, then shifts to reveal that it is the silhouette of a city surrounded by water and several long bridges, as viewed from above. The effect is that of a city resolving itself out of the entrails left by the initial blast. A title card states that this is Neo Tokyo, 31 years after World War III, providing context for both the opening shot and this establishing shot. Over the shadowy blast crater, the title of the film appears. From this point forward, the audience sees only Neo Tokyo. The old city is bombed-out, empty, and off-limits to citizens.
From a distance, Neo Tokyo May appear to be a futuristic vision, dotted with bright lights and holographic advertisements straight out of science fiction, but this image doesn’t reflect the reality of the city’s residents. With modernity has come violence, lawlessness, corruption, and chaos. The silence of Old Tokyo as seen in the prologue is replaced with the constant noise of Neo Tokyo; riots, motorcycle gang fights, and terrorist acts punctuate the film with explosive violence. The quintessentially modern atomic bomb pushed Tokyo into the future—but its modern and destructive natures are inextricably linked. That is, Akira employs the atomic bomb as a dual symbol, both driving Tokyo to become a new and futuristic version of itself and infusing the city with violence in one explosive moment of change. The concept of a city reborn after cataclysmic disaster is one that appears frequently in post-atomic Japanese works; indeed, it is present in all of the films addressed by this thesis. Sheng-mei Ma posits that, “filmmakers alchemize Western modernity, the most traumatizing of which landed in 1945, into a godsend or “manna” fallen from the sky” (97),

It becomes clear as the plot progresses that Neo Tokyo was born not because of an actual atomic bomb, but because of a child, Akira, whose psychic powers created a singularity which destroyed the city much as an atomic bomb would. The disparity between Akira’s small size and the cataclysm he creates is very much in keeping with what Ma describes as “an ‘atom dialectic’ that yokes such binary opposites of miniature, diminutive, and subliminal that is the atomic molecule, on the one hand, and transcendent, hyperbolic, and sublime that is nothing short of the atomic apocalypse, on the other” (97), which is characteristic of anime films like Akira. This dialectic is discussed on screen by Kei as she channels Kiyoko. After reflecting on the fact that all living things, ranging in size and complexity from amoebas to human beings, contain energy
and genetic memory, she asks, “What if there were some mistake and the progression went wrong, and something like an amoeba were given power like a human's?” in reference to the disproportionate “energy” which Akira and Tetsuo both wield. According to Ma’s point of view, Kei’s question is answered in-universe by the existence of psychically gifted humans, and in reality by humans’ development of the atomic bomb. In both cases, human beings harnessed—or attempted to harness—energy as disproportionate to themselves as a human’s energy would be to a single-celled organism, and in both cases the result was catastrophic.

It was the unchecked scientific ambitions of the government which made Akira into a bomb—had he not been subjected to extensive experimentation, his abilities would likely never have developed to the strength and volatility they did. However, the government proceeded to investigate the superhuman energy Akira contained, and the result was a psychic being which was powerful enough to level a city and kill countless uninvolved and unaware people. This development mirrors that of the atomic bomb. Both Akira’s powers and the bomb were researched and developed with utmost secrecy. Much as Akira and the other psychically gifted children were theorized to be “the next stage of human evolution,” the atomic bomb represented a new echelon of weapons with unequaled destructive power. Both nuclear fission and psychic abilities were mysterious and powerful forces when they were discovered, and both were refined scientifically into forms that humans could take advantage of. The exploitation of such superhuman forces is one of the most prominent thematic elements of the film.

Humans in the world of Akira, particularly scientists and government officials, seem to be characterized by hubris and ego. Even when it is clear that they are experimenting with forces humans should not meddle with, humans continue in their attempts to control them. In the words
of Colonel Shikishima, “Maybe we shouldn't touch that power. But we have to. We have to touch it and control it.” They are willing to go to unethical extremes in order to touch and control that power; they sacrifice the health and safety of children in order to understand their abilities, just as America was willing to use Japanese civilians as test subjects for the atomic bombs. Although Tetsuo lacks the scientific or military motives of his adult counterparts, he is no exception to this generalization. When his psychic abilities begin to manifest, his instinctive response is to use them selfishly. He lashes out at the other “espers” (as those with psychic powers are known) as well as his friends, causing destruction, injury, and even death. This may not seem to relate to nuclear aggression, but the connection is elucidated by the espers’ response to Tetsuo’s behavior.

Though they have similar abilities, the children do not intentionally use their powers destructively. Rather, they act in the service of scientific, government, or more generally human interests. For example, Masaru is able to psychically locate people, which the army takes advantage of in order to find Takashi after his escape. Kiyoko possesses a “precognitive power” which has been extensively studied, and which she uses to warn the Colonel about the dangers of Tetsuo’s strengthening abilities. She is also able to possess and communicate through other humans, which she demonstrates by possessing Kei in order to direct Kaneda to Tetsuo, and later in order to remotely confront Tetsuo about his reckless use of his powers. She tells him he “shouldn’t use [his] power this way,” and that he will ultimately lose control of it if he doesn’t change his behavior. Though her actions in this scene are not sanctioned by a higher authority, they are in the interest of humanity.
This fundamental divide between Tetsuo and the other espers is a symbolic one. The Numbers’ actions prove that espers’ abilities do not have to be destructive, much as nuclear technology is not inherently destructive. However, when used selfishly, recklessly, and in the interest of one’s own anger and grudges, psychic powers spiral fatally out of control and nuclear technology develops into atomic bombs. Tetsuo, desperate to prove his strength, bites off more than he can chew and unlocks powers he cannot hope to control. Even Akira himself is an example of selfishness corrupting psychic powers, though the selfishness was not his own. It is heavily implied that had Akira not been subject to such extensive experimentation, forcing his powers to grow to such magnitude, the devastating 1988 blast would not have occurred. In this case it was not his own ambition which corrupted his powers into a destructive force, but his fate was ultimately the same as Tetsuo’s: instead of controlling his power, it ultimately controlled him, causing a massive disaster.

The actual shockwave of Akira’s 1988 explosion is far from the only visual imagery that is suggestive of the atomic bomb and its aftermath. The image of the dome-shaped shockwave is echoed later in the film in the psychic “energy signatures” created by Akira. These signatures are readings created by humans with psychic abilities, and when projected holographically usually take the shape of a circle of wavelike patterns. Akira’s energy signature is unique in that it is far larger than a “normal” signature (implying much stronger powers) and takes the shape of a dome rather than an open ring. This striking image indicates to the viewer that Akira and the nuclear blast from the prologue are connected. Much later in the film, it is this same domed pattern that alerts the doctor that Akira has returned, and in this case it is clearly juxtaposed with the dome of another destructive shockwave which forms as Akira uses his massive psychic energy to remove
Tetsuo from this plane of existence. The repetition of this image reinforces the nuclear symbolism of psychic powers.

Not every esper is destined to the same fate as Akira and Tetsuo. However, they are all affected negatively by their powerful psychic energy. This clearly parallels the deleterious effects of exposure to nuclear radiation or material. Though the espers are in actuality over 30 years old, having been around the age of elementary school students at the time of the explosion, they still appear to be the age they were in 1988, albeit with discolored skin and significant signs of premature aging. They retain a number of childlike qualities as well—they live in a hidden area of the hospital known as the “baby room,” which is decorated like a huge nursery; they project themselves psychically into Tetsuo’s room in the form of giant toys; and though they speak about adult matters, their way of speaking frequently tends toward the childlike (for example, Kiyoko refers to Tetsuo and adults as “big people”). The canonical reason for this extended childhood is a concerted effort by scientists to prevent the espers’ powers from strengthening enough to cause another Akira event. However, symbolically, it is evocative of children affected by the atomic bomb. The fact that the espers are adults in child bodies suggests emotional trauma, blurring the lines between childhood and adulthood so it is not always clear whether they are children who have been unnaturally aged—forced to grow up too fast—or adults who did not sufficiently grow up. They are also sickly and physically fragile; Masaru reminds Takashi after his escape that “[they] can't survive on the outside.” Kiyoko is apparently frail enough to be confined to a bed under a protective dome, which suggests the highly recognizable image of young hibakusha like Sadako Sasaki. It is unsurprising that Kiyoko is both the only female esper and the member of the Numbers whose body is most severely
affected; while “[y]oung children and foetuses are especially sensitive to radiation effects” (Ruff 227) in general, “Females are more sensitive to radiation than males; the younger the people are the greater is the difference [sic]” (Ruff 232). Since the Numbers have been forced to remain in their childhood forms and have sustained 30 years of psychic damage, they are significantly physically harmed. In contrast, for most of the film Tetsuo remains physically undamaged by psychic energy, only experiencing dramatic physical effects when his powers reach their peak.

Throughout the film, as Tetsuo’s powers grow in intensity, he becomes increasingly aggressive and impetuous, which in turn drives him to push his powers further. He is also faced with aggressive armed resistance from the government, causing him to retaliate with stronger psychic force in a sort of arms race. As he uses his powers more frequently and for larger actions, the regulatory effects of the medications he was given (the same used on the Numbers) no longer affect him. Gradually, exposure to his intensifying powers begins to cause him physical pain. This extended progression, much like a nuclear chain reaction, ultimately results in a “detonation” of sorts. Tetsuo’s body begins to be manipulated by the psychic energy, deforming and swelling grotesquely, at times visually suggesting an explosion with its shape. He is no longer able to control this process, and as a result his body expands rapidly and engulfs everything in its path, including Kaneda and Colonel Shikishima, who attempted to confront Tetsuo, and Kaori, Tetsuo’s girlfriend who has to this point been unharmed by Tetsuo’s psychic rampage. Despite Tetsuo’s frantic attempts to control his body, it continues to grow and deform, crushing Kaori to death. She plays the role of an innocent destroyed needlessly by Tetsuo, the figurative bomb, evoking images of civilians killed by the literal bomb. Tetsuo’s physical transformation is also suggestive of after-effects of exposure to nuclear explosions or radiation.
His fully mutated form, though barely humanoid, has a visible face which resembles that of a baby. The combination of an infant face with the rest of his misshapen form suggest radiation-related birth defects. The uneven stretching and expansion of his flesh is reminiscent at times of the swelling of keloids caused by burns from the atomic blast, or of cancers brought on by exposure to radiation.

After Akira disappears again, taking Tetsuo and the Numbers with him, the tone of the film shifts dramatically. Over the wreckage of Neo Tokyo, the clouds clear and the sun rises. The survivors—Kaneda, Kai (a member of the gang), Kei, and Colonel Shikishima—exist in a mix of grief and awe. Though the city lies in ruins and is half underwater, the three teenagers take to Kaneda and Kai’s damaged but still-running motorcycles and ride off, an image of uncertain hope. The motorcycle riders, much as they did at the beginning of the film, represent a youthful energy that is now no longer delinquent and criminal but rather hopeful. The reversal from catastrophe to hope for the future illustrates that “the imagination of apocalypse seems less a reflection of pessimism and nihilism than a potential cure for it, a kind of pop millenarian vision
of hope,” (Tsutsui 121), creating a sort of counterpoint to Ma’s description of the traumatizing modernity ushered in by the atomic bomb. Akira’s first “nuclear” disaster led to hyper-modernization at the cost of corruption, social unrest, and the further development of psychics, illustrating Ma’s theory, while the second disaster led to a sense of closure with the removal of all known psychics. This, in turn, suggests a hope for rebuilding and a permanent end to psychic threats.
III. Synthesis

It is no stretch of the imagination to assert that the atomic bomb possesses a godlike power—in fact, such an assertion is central to this thesis. *Akira*, then, explores the relationship between atomic bomb and *kami* by combining the two in a single person in the form of Tetsuo. His psychic abilities are a multifaceted symbol. On the one hand, they seem to be the powers of an angry god, giving him the capacity to inhabit the role of an *aragami* and even be regarded as a god within the scope of the film. On the other hand, the powerful and destructive nature of his powers, the catastrophic results of their use, and the dishonest acts of science which amplified them all point to these same abilities being symbolic of nuclear technology. That psychic energy represents both godly might and nuclear power suggests that *Akira* blurs the boundaries between these categories. The atomic bomb as represented by both Tetsuo and Akira, then, is a type of god itself.

If Tetsuo, the destructive Susanoo figure, is representative of the bomb’s senseless destruction—the “trauma” in Ma’s “atom dialectic”—then Akira, the departed Izanami figure who razes the city twice but in doing so allows the construction of a new world, represents the “manna.” While the implication of this connection could simply be that *Akira* employs Shintō character archetypes in a narrative heavily influenced by the atomic bomb, this is not the assertion I seek to make. Rather, I propose that *Akira* draws on Shintō in order to explore the superhuman power of the bomb—something that is difficult or impossible to adequately depict on film. The use of *kami* whose natures and histories can be understood through Shintō is “another attempt to figure the unrepresentable nature of the atomic bombings” (Lippit 120).
Very little in the human world can be reasonably compared to an atomic bomb, with its ability to scrub cities from the earth, vaporize solid matter, and poison the environment for years or centuries, and above all its premeditated nature; however, a destructive god or gods can fill the blank left by the scientifically observable. A volcano may block out the sun with ash and turn a city into a featureless lava plain. An earthquake or fire may level a city, as has occurred in numerous Japanese cities on numerous occasions. However, these disasters lack the conscious malice of a man-made weapon. The wrath of a god, on the other hand, shares the premeditation and motive which sets the bomb apart. Akira and Tetsuo, therefore, are symbols or perhaps avatars of kami whose power and deadliness most resemble those of the atomic bomb. By juxtaposing the might of gods with these youthful human avatars, Akira emphasizes the sheer incomprehensible might of the atomic bomb, but it also provides an analytic lens with which the viewer can consider the otherwise “unrepresentable.”
Princess Mononoke (もののけ姫)

Of the three films addressed by this thesis, only Princess Mononoke contains no explicit reference to the atomic bomb. This makes sense; Mononoke is stylistically a jidaigeki, or Japanese period piece, and is presented against the backdrop of a fictionalized Muromachi period. However, the bomb’s imprints, so to speak, are still plentiful in the plot and visuals of the film. Lacking an actual bomb, Mononoke finds an analogue in the death throes of a nature deity whose head is blasted from its body by an iron bullet. The headless body becomes a spreading pillar of death which blocks out the sky, blackens the earth, and gruesomely burns those who touch it, blending the mythic figure of a primordial, destructive god with the image of the atomic bomb. Rather than portraying a real nuclear weapon in a way which suggests mythic powers, Mononoke does the opposite and makes direct use of gods to evoke images of the bomb.

The death scene described above is the climax of the film, as well as the apex of a sprawling conflict between the natural/spiritual world and human civilization. Located at the center of this struggle are the young adult deuteragonists of the narrative, Ashitaka and San. Ashitaka is the prince of the last remaining village of the Emishi people (an actual ancient Japanese ethnic group, fictionalized in the film); San is a human girl raised from infancy by a wolf deity and her two pups. Both Ashitaka and San exist in a state of balance between the human world and the natural/spiritual, with differing allegiances. Ashitaka and the Emishi are in tune and at peace with nature, but Ashitaka is first and foremost a human; San, on the other hand, does not view herself as human at all, instead considering herself a wolf and staunchly hating humanity. Both seek to end the conflict between the human world and the world of animals and
gods; Ashitaka through peace between humans and nature and the rejection of hatred, San through the elimination of Lady Eboshi, the leader of the human settlement of Tatara (known in the English dub as “Irontown”). Eboshi is a complicated figure—willing to destroy the natural and spiritual world if it will allow her to exploit the rich natural resources of the forested land around her island city, but motivated primarily by the well-being of her formerly marginalized citizens.
I. Shintō Influence in Princess Mononoke

The gods and spirits of Princess Mononoke are not Shintō deities in name; however, they are definitely kami. While the term kami is often difficult to give a single definition, recall Norinaga’s concept of kami as anything exceptional and awe-inspiring. This description certainly fits the giant, intelligent animals in Princess Mononoke. Among those relevant to this thesis are Moro (or, more honorifically, Moro no Kimi), the two-tailed wolf goddess who raised San as a daughter along with her two biological wolf sons; Nago (or Nago no Mori), the boar god turned demonic by human weapons who causes Ashitaka’s cursed wound; and Lord Okkoto (or Okkoto-nushi), the boar god who replaces Nago as the leader of the boar spirits. Most important is the Great Forest Spirit (known variously as “shishigami” in animal form and “daidarabotchi” in humanoid form, hereafter referred to as Shishigami), a deerlike deity of life and death who transforms into a giant humanoid at night, and who is superior to the other gods and spirits of the forest in power. As Norinaga describes, these gods are widely varied in personality and morality, or even separate from such human conceptions altogether.

The English dub of Princess Mononoke begins with a voiceover not present in the original Japanese, included for the benefit of viewers who lack background knowledge of Japanese mythology and folklore:

In ancient times, the land lay covered in forests, where, from ages long past, dwelt the spirits of the gods. Back then, man and beast lived in harmony, but as time went by, most of the great forests were destroyed. Those that remained were guarded by gigantic beasts, who owed their allegiance to the Great Forest Spirit, for those were the days of gods and demons.
Here, the phrases “ancient times” and “the days of gods” call to mind the Kojiki and Nihongi (also known as Nihon Shoki), two compilations of classical Japanese history (both mythical and factually verifiable). While the two works differ in scale and content, they both begin with the creation myth, which details the formation of the world, the Japanese archipelago, and the kami. “Kojiki” translates to “Record of Ancient Things,” and the first two of the 30 books of the Nihongi detail the “Age of the Gods,” two phrases to which the opening narration alludes. This places the film and its godly characters firmly in the realm of Shinto, and in particular involves the primordial kami who oversaw the creation of life, death, and the world at large.

According to the Kojiki and Nihongi, the natural world and its myriad spirits and deities were created by the activities of two powerful kami, Izanagi and Izanami. The two were husband and wife, and they produced a multitude of offspring, including the Japanese islands and various deities of seasons, natural phenomena, etc. before Izanami was mortally wounded while giving birth to the god of fire. Upon her death, Izanagi followed her to Yomi, the land of the dead, only to find that since arriving in Yomi and consuming its food, Izanami had become a monstrous, disgusting being who was tainted by her exposure to death. Enraged at being seen after she had commanded Izanagi not to look upon her, Izanami sent demons and thunder gods to chase Izanagi, then pursued him herself. Izanagi placed an impassable boulder between them to stop Izanami from following him back into the world of the living, at which point they separated (an act called “leave-taking” (Horne) in one translation of the Kojiki and “divorce” (Aston 25) in a translation of the Nihongi). Izanami swore to kill 1,000 of the humans in Izanagi’s domain daily,
and Izanagi swore that he would oversee enough births to balance this new death rate. From this point forward, Izanami held power over Yomi and death, while Izanagi reigned over the living.

This segment of the creation myth emphasizes the polluting influence of death, an important concept in Shintō. Proximity to death transforms Izanami, a primordial goddess of life and creation, into a vengeful monster who seeks to kill humans. This character arc can be observed more than once in Princess Mononoke, in the cases of Nago and the Shishigami.

While Nago was not as eminent a deity as Izanami, he “was beautiful and strong” according to the other boars in his clan, and like any of the giant animal gods of the forest he was in tune with the power of the Shishigami. However, when he was shot with an iron bullet by one of Lady Eboshi’s rifles, he became polluted as if by death. The bullet, which remained lodged in his body, turned him angry and violent, as well as causing physical changes to his body. The “curse,” as it is known by characters in the film, manifests as dark, writhing, smoking tendrils which cover his body completely, occasionally parting to reveal his original form underneath. The appearance of the tendrils is reminiscent of swarming maggots or worms, which calls to mind the Kojiki’s description of Izanami’s polluted body in Yomi, in which “maggots were swarming, and she was rotting” (Horne). Once Ashitaka subdues Nago with an arrow to the head, the tendrils recede. The boar collapses and, as he dies, decays rapidly and grotesquely into a bloodied skeleton. Worms or maggots, apparently made up of the same material as the tendrils which formerly covered him, writhe around Nago on the grass, then disappear as his flesh dissolves. The wise woman of the village (known in English subtitles as the oracle) attempts to placate Nago as he dies, only to have him rebuke her offer and express disgust at humanity, threatening that “soon all of [them] will feel [his] hate, and suffer as [he] suffered.” The
corruption, the imagery of maggots and decay, and the threats and aggression toward humans all suggest the corrupting influence death has on Izanami.

Later in the film, the Shishigami is also corrupted by one of Eboshi’s bullets in a manner similarly evocative of Izanami’s pollution. When the bullet decapitates the spirit, ostensibly killing it, the body does collapse; however, a bubble of dark slime expands from the mortal wound, and from a monstrous humanoid specter forms. This figure, the headless undead Shishigami, kills indiscriminately, sending out tendrils of toxic slime which kill living beings on contact. The emergence of the vengeful spirit as an effusion of grotesque fluid calls to mind the Nihongi account of Izanami’s monstrous appearance: “Putrefying matter had gushed up, and maggots swarmed” (Aston 24). Though the Shishigami has none of the maggot-like tendrils that appeared on Nago, it does continuously display the decay and effusion of noxious matter that the Kojiki and Nihongi suggest. Its body is slightly amorphous and appears to be melting in various places, and it gives off waves of the same toxic ooze which kills humans instantly. This parallel to Izanami’s polluted form is made stronger by the Shishigami’s initial similarity to Izanami’s unspoiled form. The Shishigami is an ancient deity, responsible for the power and presence of all nature spirits around it, in a role that resembles Izanami’s parental relationship to the early kami.
Like both Izanami and Izanagi, the Shishigami also has power over life and death for both humans and other living beings.

When the Shishigami dies, it is separated from its former domain and the rest of the *kami*. Though physically present and visible, it is no longer itself, and its quiet, wise behavior is replaced by anger and vengeance. Izanami, formerly a submissive wife to Izanagi, similarly loses herself to the corrupting influence of death, and becomes a death-bringing monster as well. Both undead deities are only stopped by a climactic confrontation in which they are cut off from both humans and other *kami* forever. Where Izanami was cut off from the world of the living by a giant boulder, the barrier facing the Shishigami is simply that of nonexistence. Once its head is reattached, the sun begins to rise, and as the Yomi-like darkness of its rampage begins to give way to light, the Shishigami collapses and is fully destroyed by the flaming ruins of Tatara. However, as Izanami’s isolation in Yomi gave Izanagi the chance to ensure humanity’s survival, the loss of the Shishigami provides a chance for the world to recover from the human/nature conflict. The wind from its explosion sweeps away the wreckage of Tatara and the samurai encampment, and is likely what causes the immediate, lush plant growth in the formerly burned soil. Though both Izanami and the Shishigami are irreversibly lost, both leave the human world in a manner which grants humanity the possibility of survival.
II. Nuclear Influence in *Princess Mononoke*

As mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, *Princess Mononoke* is unique in that it is set in a historical era long before the invention of nuclear weapons. Unlike in *Akira* and *Gojira*, there is no direct reference to the atomic bomb. However, through imagery suggestive of the bomb’s detonation and aftermath, as well as the themes which surround weapons and human-nature interactions, the film alludes to the bomb without ever saying its name. The East-West conflict from which the bomb was born is reinterpreted as an internal affair, between the expanding, industrial human civilization and the primordial world of nature (and the indigenous people who live at peace with it).

The clearest nuclear allusion in the film occurs in the Shishigami’s death scene, beginning when Lady Eboshi shoots it in order to separate its head from its body. That the destruction of the Shishigami is specifically an act of splitting in two is noteworthy; while not necessarily a direct allusion to the splitting of the atom, it is a creative choice that is at least evocative of the fission which powered the atomic bomb. Just as splitting the atom catalyzed the nuclear blast, splitting the Shishigami creates a similarly destructive force that visually and conceptually calls that blast to mind. The decapitated body of the spirit crumples to the ground, and the decapitation wound produces a bubble of dark, translucent fluid visually similar to the Shishigami’s translucent bipedal form. The bubble expands, reminiscent of the shape of some nuclear flashes, then abruptly explodes outward in all directions. The fluid blackens any plants it touches and kills living beings on contact, consistent with the fatally intense burning at close proximity to a nuclear blast. The fluid then coalesces into a large, growing mass which develops
into a mostly humanoid but headless shape. This body grows taller, surpassing the height of the trees and even the mountains, then splits at the shoulders and spreads laterally in all directions. The silhouette of this phenomenon—a tall, rising pillar which widens and flattens at the top—is not identical to, but is certainly reminiscent of a mushroom cloud.

The Shishigami takes this mushroom cloud form in an attempt to find its head—in the above film still, the extension of the “cloud” which reaches down into the forest is a pseudo-arm feeling around for it blindly. The spirit’s head was blown off in part so that Lady Eboshi could exploit the area’s iron ore without the interference of the animal spirits, which would become “nothing but dumb beasts once more” without the Shishigami’s powers, and in part so that Jigo, the corrupt monk, could present it to the Emperor for a hefty monetary reward. Both parties are motivated by greed and hate, but in two very different ways. Eboshi seeks to make the land around Tatara “the richest land in the world,” as well as to attempt to exploit the reputed healing powers of the Shishigami’s blood to cure the lepers she employs as riflemakers; that is, she is motivated by ambition and a desire to provide for her citizens, which has led her to feel hatred toward the animal spirits and especially toward San and the wolves. Jigo, on the other hand, is a
jaded and money-minded individual motivated by his own self-interest. He bears no directed hate for other groups like Eboshi does, but he does view humans as a whole with a cynical distaste that allows him to place himself first, above the rules as well as concern for others. It is the combination of his selfishness and Eboshi’s desire to subjugate the spirits which leads to the beheading of the Shishigami. This strange cooperation is supposed to result in a substantial gain for both parties, but both Eboshi and Jigo narrowly escape with their lives and without material gain. Like the atomic bomb, however, the murdered Shishigami does lead to the conclusion of a lengthy conflict, fulfilling one of Eboshi’s numerous ambitions. Unlike the bomb, it also leads to a change of alignment on Eboshi’s part; an analogue in the real world would be the United States committing to rebuild postwar Japan in collaboration with the Japanese instead of instigating an American occupation.

The iron bullets fired by Lady Eboshi’s rifles are in many ways analogous to nuclear weapons. Though they appear to be relatively normal metal projectiles, both are imbued with a superhuman force which renders them destructive in unforeseen ways—the bomb with nuclear fission, the bullet with human hate. The word “hate” is frequently spoken in the English version of *Princess Mononoke*. Upon leaving his home village, Ashitaka undertakes his quest across Japan in hopes that he can “see with eyes unclouded by hate” and understand the conflict which led to the confrontation with Nago and his resulting curse. Nago threatens the villagers as he dies: “Soon all of you will feel my hate, and suffer as I have suffered.” The curse itself is described by the village oracle as “some kind of poison inside [Nago], driving him mad, a poisonous hatred that consumed his heart and flesh.”
The hate is variously known as a curse and an infection, and it is shown to be communicated by contact with a cursed being/demon. In its strongest form, the curse of hate manifests as swarming tendrils which cover the afflicted being or area; both Nago and Okkoto become covered with these as hate overcomes them. When San is trapped by Okkoto’s tendrils, more begin to appear on her own skin, displaying the communicability of the curse. Ashitaka’s wound also appears to be covered in spectral tendrils during his confrontation with San and Lady Eboshi in Tatara, and similarly-shaped bulges appear under his sleeve when he fires on the samurai attacking a village, implying that they are also physically present in times of duress.

Normally, however, the cursed area appears to be a burnlike wound which gradually extends to cover more of his skin and ultimately “will spread throughout [his] whole body, bone and flesh alike. It will cause [him] great pain and then kill [him],” according to the oracle. These characteristics—burnlike wounds, contagion by coming in contact with an afflicted object, gradually spreading and ultimately fatal illness—are clearly evocative of the effects of the atomic bomb and resulting radioactivity.

Ashitaka’s wound, which manifests as dark, tattoo-like marks, visually suggests the starkly demarcated flash burns found on victims of atomic bombing, and the spread of the wound, while lateral rather than three-dimensional, mirrors the expanding keloid scars found on
some burn victims. Notably, such burns are also caused by contact with the Shishigami’s severed head; when Ashitaka and San raise it in offering, the light-colored fluid dripping from it creates the same dark marks after touching their skin for a few seconds. In the final moments before the head is reattached, they are covered almost completely with the same dark burns, only to have the wounds healed after the Shishigami dies. It is unclear whether this fluid is the spirit’s blood—which is reported to have healing powers—or if it is similar to the toxic slime which burst from the Shishigami’s wound. If we assume it to be the latter, it therefore follows that this effusion is a sort of analogue to radioactivity; though this is neither the bullet (the original source of radiation/hate) or the revenant corpse (which is analogous to the actual atomic blast), it has been rendered equally toxic by the act of killing the Shishigami, just as fallout leaves its effects even when separated from the source.

The specific image of a city demolished in a massive explosion, clearly associated with the effects of nuclear detonation, appears at the end of the Shishigami’s rampage. Once San and Ashitaka return the forest spirit’s head, the completed body collapses and lands atop Tatara, which is already ablaze after being besieged by samurai seeking to control the city’s lucrative iron. Heated by the flames, the body inflates, then bursts, releasing a massive gale of wind and destroying the city as well as the samurai encampments. However, the explosion is not solely destructive. When the sky clears and the sun rises, the earth that was blackened by the headless Shishigami is no longer burned; the explosion has not only wrecked the human structures and flung the pieces into the distance, but has also begun to erase the damage to the land. Even the remains of Tatara are covered in plant life, as though the ruins had been left alone for years. Even more miraculous, the lepers whom Lady Eboshi had employed as riflemakers find
themselves healed, and San and Ashitaka’s burns have disappeared, leaving only a pigmented scar on Ashitaka’s palm. Although the forest has been leveled and the Shishigami is permanently dead, the curse—greed, hate, and their effects on the land—has been lifted.

This restoration of nature may seem contrary to the atomic-bomb imagery previously shown, but it is in fact in keeping with artistic choices made in numerous pieces of post-WWII Japanese media. According to William Tsutsui, the fictionalized destruction and un-destruction of a major city (often Tokyo, but not always) reflects the way in which “[a]pocalypse... [does] indeed promise a kind of vital regeneration, a reaffirmation of human ties and the forging of a shared commitment to the process of rebuilding,” and that many such works “celebrated annihilation as a valuable reset for society, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) espousing disaster as a means of forging consensus, bringing out the best in the Japanese people, and imagining a new beginning” (Tsutsui 120-121). The Shishigami’s death throes and the aftermath thereof directly illustrate this concept. Though the human city is destroyed, reversing the leaps in technology and industry that went into its construction, the destroying blast wipes the slate clean. Tatara, which was a symbol of the worst tendencies of humanity, is transformed into an uninhabited island upon which Ashitaka vows to help rebuild the city anew—in Lady Eboshi’s words, “We're going to start all over again. This time we'll build a better town.” Much as Hiroshima has become a sort of hub for pro-peace and anti-nuclear efforts, driven by the collective trauma which befell the city, the new Tatara which Lady Eboshi plans to build is a response to the former city’s fate. It is enabled to exist by the Shishigami’s demise, and Eboshi’s plans for it are inspired by a desire to avoid the mistakes made by humanity which led to the
conflict with the spirits in the first place. Destruction and loss of life give way to hope and a
determination not to repeat the past mistakes which spawned the catastrophe.

Another theme of the film which connects, perhaps surprisingly, to the atomic bomb is
that of duality. Though good and evil are fuzzy categories, other dichotomies (and the exceptions
which highlight the dichotomies themselves) are fundamental to the structure of the story. The
stark divide between humans and nature is one such dichotomy which has already been
addressed. Closely related is the conflict between modern technological progress and traditional
ways of life, as exemplified in the contrast between the agrarian Emishi tribe and the Yamato
people (the ethnic majority that wiped out all but Ashitaka’s village, assumed to bear the same
name in *Princess Mononoke* as the analogous group did in reality). Notably, the ostensibly
modern conflict of “East versus West” is also transferred into a solely Japanese work, since Nago
and the bullet which drove him mad “came from far to the west,” where “there is evil at work.”
This vague western origin turns out to be Tatara, creating a divide between the traditional,
peaceful East and the aggressively modernized West—a clear parallel to the idealized dichotomy
between Japan/the East (in conjunction with nature, tradition, and peace) and America/the West
(in conjunction with technological advances and violence). This phenomenon, wherein an atomic
bomb or analogue thereof throws basic dichotomies into sharp relief within a work of fiction, is
referred to by Sheng-mei Ma as an “atom dialectic” (97) wherein

massive cataclysms in postwar Godzilla movies and Japanese animations… are often
reflected in the pupils of a child, teen, or young protagonist: the incomprehensible balanced by the inconsequential; cornucopia by destitution; the cosmic by the comic;
extreme human conditions by miniaturized bugs or critter “familiars”; a “gift” from the
West by legacy of ancient Japan. Inspired by the double-entendre of “atom” for both the
smallest particle of matter and for the Bomb, Godzilla movies and anime… seem to share
an “atom dialectic” that yokes such binary opposites of miniature, diminutive, and
subliminal that is the atomic molecule, on the one hand, and transcendent, hyperbolic,
and sublime that is nothing short of the atomic apocalypse, on the other. (Ma 97)
In other words, the unification of opposites inherent in the atomic bomb (infinitesimally small particles, incomparably massive detonation and fallout) has the effect in film and anime of accentuating similarly stark dichotomies. While Mononoke has no actual bomb, a tiny rifle bullet removing the head of an already megafauna-esque creature that swells into a pillar of destruction hundreds of meters tall is a reasonable facsimile thereof, in terms of sheer disparity in scale. Therefore, according to Ma’s theory of the “atom dialectic,” Mononoke’s motif of duality is characteristic of postwar films of the same variety, especially those which rely in whole or in part on the trauma of the atomic bomb. Furthermore, in the “atom dialectic,” dualities are emphasized with the ultimate aim of blurring or equalizing them, “not so much neutraliz[ing] and transcend[ing] the extremes as obliterate[ing] contingencies in between” (Ma 97). In Mononoke, we see Ashitaka and San take sides, so to speak, at the end of the film—Ashitaka remaining with the humans to rebuild Tatara, San returning to the forest as she “can't forgive the humans for what they've done.” The most ambiguously aligned characters have chosen their alignments at opposite ends of a spectrum, but there is notably harmony and even love between them. This ending implies that while the pseudo-atomic cataclysm amplified the human/nature distinction by pushing Ashitaka and San from the middle of the scale to their respective extremes, in doing so it sets these counterparts “in a contrapuntal rather than a contestational arrangement” (Ma 98). Put differently, the human realm and the natural realm remain opposites, but the relationship between the opposites is no longer inherently negative or adversarial.
III. Synthesis

Ambiguity is crucial to *Princess Mononoke*. The film notably has no strictly defined villain—rather, numerous forces both human and supernatural are at play, with no one party fully guilty or fully innocent. The forest gods strive to protect nature, whether that means surreptitiously planting trees by night or killing humans indiscriminately as they transport goods to Tatara. Lady Eboshi seeks to further the interests of humans, and in doing so provides work and protection to the lepers and former brothel girls who reside in Tatara, but to sustain her city she must exploit the land for iron and destroy the forests. Jigo the mercenary monk and Lord Asano’s men are motivated entirely by money, not by allegiance to humanity or nature, and Ashitaka and San are constantly in limbo between nature—with which they are both more in tune than most other humans are—and humanity. Duality, balance, and polarity are crucial in this context, and they can be examined from both religious and nuclear angles. In the *Kojiki*, the two primordial deities begin as a loving husband and wife but ultimately end up diametrically opposed as well as physically separated, one the goddess of the land of the dead and the other the god of the land of the living. Similarly, in the opening narration of *Mononoke*, humankind and the spirits and animals of nature were once on friendly terms, but their relationship becomes adversarial as humans overstep their boundaries as Izanagi overstepped his in looking at Izanami’s decaying body. From an alternate perspective, the dualistic separations between human and animal, the human world and the spiritual world, tradition and progress, East and West, etc. which arise in the film are a manifestation of “anime’s atom dialectic” in which the atomic bomb or its analogue (i.e. something which comparably combines irreconcilable extremes
such as the smallness of the atom and the massive scale of the nuclear blast) emphasizes and flattens other existing dichotomies, heightening their differences while rendering them less opposed and more concurrent and contrasting.

*Princess Mononoke* is a highly symbolic and referential film, which can be taken as representative or even allegorical of concepts ranging from the atomic bomb to the estrangement between humans and the spiritual world (with others, less relevant to the focus of this thesis, somewhere in that range). Depending on the lens through which one views the film, its critical symbols take on different, but perhaps connected, connotations. In particular, the iron bullet is relevant to the purposes of this thesis. In the context of Shintō, the bullet seems to be a representation of death; it is a killing tool, and the influence of death it carries is what gives it the power to corrupt gods. In a nuclear context, however, it is most closely representative of nuclear weaponry, as an instrument of aggression created by humans with a mindset of greed and hate. In any case, the bullet is a small object with a disproportionately strong polluting power. Whether this is *kegare*, the Shintō concept of “[a] polluted and evil condition” (Encyclopedia of Shinto) which is brought about by many corrupting influences including death and sin, or whether it is nuclear detonation and the radiation which sickens and kills, depends on the viewpoint. It is functionally both a symbol of death and killing and an allegorical representation of the bomb. However, if the two lenses of interpretation are employed in conjunction with each other, the implication is that the real atomic bomb is itself an agent of death, and that its radioactivity is a form of *kegare*. As in *Gojira*, it could even be further asserted that the bomb itself is a *kami* in its own right; specifically, an evil *kami* which, as Izanami contaminated Izanagi by being corrupt
herself, bears an intrinsic power to pollute and corrupt, and which kills indiscriminate swaths of humans as she vowed to do.
Conclusion

In *Gojira*, *Akira*, and *Princess Mononoke*, the atomic bomb is fused in some way with a *kami*, creating a dual symbol in which the bomb is a god in its own right. *Gojira* achieves this by using the titular monster—a modern *kami*—as a symbol for the bomb. He is depicted simultaneously as both the city-destroying atomic bomb, leaving the city leveled and burning, and the angry god, emerging from the subterranean world to destroy humans like Izanami returning from the dead. All of the carnage in his wake can be alternately read as the aftermath of an atomic explosion or as the destruction wrought by a force of nature. In *Akira*, it is revealed that what appeared to the characters as well as the viewer to be an atomic blast was in fact created by Akira himself. Akira’s psychic powers have rendered him akin to a god, and the culmination of his ascent to godhood is his pseudo-nuclear detonation. In becoming a god, he also becomes a bomb; for the psychics in *Akira*, these two classifications are functionally the same. While *Princess Mononoke* contains no explicit, literal reference to nuclear weapons, it makes an obvious allusion to the atomic bomb in the Shishigami’s death scene. The forest god, separated from its head, becomes a spreading pillar of death which mirrors the nuclear mushroom cloud and similarly destroys all life and all human-made structures in its path. Where the other films cast the bomb as a god, *Mononoke* casts a god as the atomic bomb, but the thematic effect is the same: the destructive might of nuclear weapons is a form of godly power.

As established in the introduction, all three of these films act as a sort of modern Shintō myth. Though the devastation inflicted by the atomic bomb is as confounding to human consciousness as tsunamis, earthquakes, or famine were to the ancient people who compiled the
myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, the reimagining of the calamity as the willful action of an angry god allows the average human to gain some degree of understanding of it. The bomb is incomprehensible, creating destruction on an unimaginable scale from the splitting of infinitesimal particles; much as assigning a *kami* to the sea makes sense of tsunamis by rendering them as the rage of a conscious being, making the atomic bomb a *kami* makes sense of nuclear devastation by giving it a face and consciousness. There may be still more postwar Japanese works of film and literature which mythologize the bomb in this way; ideally, this paper will not be the last to address the use of Shintō to render the incomprehensibility of nuclear warfare, or even modernity at large, more comprehensible.
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