

### “Looks like a huge turtle made its appearance.”

Godzilla, giant lizard. Sure—makes sense. Could be a dinosaur, and besides, he can represent, symbolically, ‘Nature’ avenging the ill treatment it has received from Mankind. King Kong, giant ape. Yeah, why not? And besides, he can represent, symbolically, man’s primitive or bestial inner being and the destruction it causes. Gamera, giant flying turtle. Say what? Oh, and he’s friendly with children. But how does that even work? Well, he walks on his hind legs, and then spins around like a Fourth of July pinwheel to get airborne and, no, the physics of it make no more sense than the biology, but that is the point.

Essentially a Japanese lampoon of the Japanese giant monster genre, the original Daiiei **Gamera**, without even having to walk across the road and down to the beach, spawned seven sequels from the Sixties and Seventies and four reboots from the Nineties and beyond, and all twelve films (and four alternate versions) have been collected in a marvelous eight-platter Blu-ray set by Arrow Video, **Gamera The Complete Collection** (UPC#760137365983, \$180).

The initial films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and transition to 1.85:1 where noted. All are in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and all have alternate English language tracks. It should be pointed out that on many of the films, special effects shots that may have seemed inconsequential when viewed cropped on TV are substantially more impressive when seen in widescreen with a lovely image transfer, despite the inherent artificiality of their staging. The picture quality is so sharp that you have to force yourself not to look at the ubiquitous wires, which the filmmakers often barely try to hide anyway. Despite the sometimes irritating nature of the musical scores (many of the films have an annoying children’s chorus singing a Gamera theme song), the sounds of the monsters and ordnance are so rousing it is very worthwhile to raise the volume to high levels, and actual distortion is minimal. The 5.1-channel DTS sound from the Nineties films is especially lively and definitely worth amplifying. Every film is accompanied by a terrific collection of memorabilia and production photos in still frame.

The original 1965 *Gamera The Giant Monster* makes its appearance on the first platter. The black-and-white film is so simple and so ridiculous that it is pop art in its purest form, and has held us utterly spellbound since the first time we saw it on late night television. An airplane carrying a nuclear weapon crashes in the Arctic and explodes (a plot point that is then never revisited). The explosion awakens and/or thaws the giant turtle, who goes on a bit of rampage, as would anyone disturbed from a pleasant slumber. After a suitable number of explosions, and delightful toy models getting crunched, the monster approaches a Japanese lighthouse where a young boy who has a turtle obsession lives with his sister. The sister, annoyed at the amount of attention the boy gives to his pet turtle, makes him toss it into the water. The boy climbs to the top of the lighthouse to see if he can see the giant turtle because news reports say it is wandering around in the ocean somewhere and, sure enough, it rises from the sea and knocks down the rotating light. The boy falls, but the turtle catches him in his paw (who knew turtles had paws that could catch things?) and puts him gently on the ground. From that point forward, the boy is convinced that Gamera was once his pet turtle.

For the rest of the 79-minute film, while the monster is smashing buildings in Tokyo and munching on power stations, serious looking scientists come up with brilliant plans to trap and blow up or bury the turtle. At every opportunity, the little boy sneaks past all of the military guys and all of the fire and explosions to warn the turtle about the traps that are being set for it. Most of the mayhem takes place at night and is tacky as all get out, but it is plentiful and sets the hearts of anybody who enjoys fire and explosions afluttering. For the close-ups of the huge turtle, who has a serious under bite with two purposeless saber teeth several times the size of the rest of his dental work protruding from inside his bottom lip, the filmmakers have added goop around his mouth, which is just enough of a hint of real life to contradict the charming glass eyeballs. Meanwhile, all of the noises and the music and the bursts of conversation—most of which is in Japanese, but some of which is in wonderfully demented English from non-Asian actors dressed in military uniforms (“Hmmm. Huge turtle. Sixty meters. What’s going on around here?” “I don’t know, sir. Looks like a huge turtle made its appearance.” “Well, I will have to order out the observation planes. To find out what’s goin’ on.”) who have in all likelihood never before acted a day in their lives—create a symphony of monster movie bliss. The narrative’s repetitiveness, the cheapness of the special effects and the deer-in-a-headlight performances ought to make the film boring as all get out, but quite the opposite is true. The whole concoction is just absurd enough that no matter how many times the same action is repeated or the same dramatic situation is restaged, there is never, ever a dull moment.

The source material is soft and grainy, and one assumes that the budget limitations prevented it from looking any nicer, although otherwise it is free of additional wear and it grows on you once you realize it is the best you are going to get. There are two English dubbed audio tracks (a decent one from American International Pictures Television and a tackier one made for home video releases when the distributor didn’t want to pay AIP), and a commentary by Gamera authority August Ragone, who talks about the careers of every player he can identify, studiously discusses the role of turtles in Japanese mythology, and otherwise explains how the film was staged, describing the different sorts of models and suits used for the monster. Ragone also supplies a 13-minute introduction to the film and the series, summarizing the information he shares on

the commentary. Later, he provides the introductions to each of the other films in the set. There are two trailers, a 5-minute alternate English language title sequence, a great 23-minute collection of retrospective interviews with the people who worked on the series (“As a designer, it’s terribly frustrating for me to recognize a human figure inside a monster costume. I can’t stand noticing the shape of a human body inside. I have to design my costumes so that you don’t notice the person inside, but the person has to fit inside the costume.”) and includes a wonderful collection of staged models and storyboards with a voiceover narration summarizing a sequel that was never made; an additional 13-minute interview with director Noriaki Yuasa about the series; and a marvelous 58-minute montage of the battle sequences from the first seven films, some rare behind-the-scenes footage and trailers for all eight initial movies—but of course, don’t watch it until after you’ve seen the complete films!

Also included on the platter is the American release, *Gamera the Invincible*, from 1966, which runs 86 minutes, sadly replacing the American actors the original producers found in a hotel lobby or something with Americans who have at least memorized a script before, along with Brian Donlevy, who, from the looks of his performance, they probably did just happen to find in a hotel lobby, or bar. The essence of the film’s primary narrative and the little boy’s obsession with the big turtle is preserved, and while we find the earnest discussions among Japanese scientists and bureaucrats about what to do with the monster an enjoyable component of the original film, the scenes of American and Russian diplomats arguing over the right course of action in the revised version has its own charms and will be preferable to most viewers outside of Japan. Nothing is stopping you from watching both versions, anyway.

Although Gamera was trapped in a giant phallus and blasted off to Mars at the end of the original film, he found his way back to Earth when the rocket bumped into a meteor for *Gamera vs. Barugon* (or, as the title card is translated: *Great Monster Duel: Gamera vs. Barugon*), from 1966, the first film on the second platter. More than just a little annoyed, he takes his irritation out on a dam, and then disappears from the 100-minute film for the next 47 minutes as it segues into an entertaining story about two thugs and a handsome guy who are taking a trip to the jungles of New Guinea to find a rare opal that is hidden in a cave. Long story short, it is not really an opal, but an egg, and the dumbest thug causes it to hatch when he gets back to Japan, unleashing a, well, giant lizard, sort of, with lovely purple blood (Gamera’s blood, incidentally, is green), a rhinoceros horn in the middle of its head, a tail that can function as a mace and a tongue that can not only shoot out a couple of hundred meters, but also freezes whatever it touches. Oh, and also, it emits a deadly rainbow ray with an even further range from the ridges on its back. Now it was established in the first film that Gamera doesn’t take to freezing all that well, but rainbow rays are just his thing, so the two behemoths have an initial contretemps, Gamera gets turned into a popsicle, and he’s out of the picture again for another 20 minutes or so while Barugon rampages and the Japanese scientists and military men try to find a way to stop him. Fortunately, the handsome guy brought a hot babe back from the jungle with him and she knows all of Barugon’s weaknesses. Besides, Gamera is eventually going to thaw.

All of the initial Gamera films were directed by Yuasa except *Barugon*, which was directed by Shigeo Tanaka (Yuasa just did the special effects). In the film’s nicest edit, a shot of Gamera flying off the upper left of the screen cuts to the female lead dropping into the shot from the same position. It is because of the extended time given to the adventure story and the dramatic conflicts among the thugs, along with the increase in violence and the absence of children, added to plenty of miniatures and monster destruction, that makes the film the best of the earlier Gamera features. There is also a very impressive rear projection shot in one of the miniatures, making it look like there are people in a building that is being smashed. Blink and you’ll miss it, but it is a terrific effect.

After the black-and-white spectacle of the first feature, the rich lavish colors in the sequel are glorious, and the transfer is lovely, so that the jungle adventure part of the film is captivating, the copious miniatures are delightful and the monsters are awesome. The fleshtones on the humans look terrific, as well. There are two English audio tracks, an 8-minute introduction to the film, two alternate credit sequences in English running a total of 3 minutes and three trailers.

Ragone is joined by Japanese film enthusiast Jason Verney on the commentary track, in which they talk about the cast and the crew, the popularity of the series, the intentions of the film at hand, and what went on during its production. “These scenes of Barugon’s demise were planned to be shot on the last day of production, but they ran into a bit of a problem. The Barugon suit absorbed water, and thus made it extremely heavy. The damn thing wouldn’t sink. No matter how much they weighed the suit down, Barugon kept floating. This mishap delayed the production for a full day.”

Finally, the shortened AIP version, known as *War of the Monsters* and running 89 minutes, is included, as well. The film loses the narrative texture that makes the Japanese version exceptionally appealing, but it presents a coherent story, full of decent battles, and remains the strongest of all the initial Gamera features.

A pterodactyl with a nasty-looking triangular skull, a piercing ray coming out of its mouth that can cut through anything, and fire extinguishers in its belly, pops out of the ground after a lot of seismic activity in the companion film on the second platter, *Gamera vs. Gyaos* (translated by the subtitles as *Giant Monster Dogfight: Gamera vs. Gyaos*), from 1967. Most of the action is set around the construction of a freeway, which local villagers are trying to delay

until they can get more money for their land, but when a villager boy finds himself about to become the monster's midnight snack, Gamera, ostensibly attracted to the volcanic activity nearby, shows up to save him. While the humans, who are no longer bent out of shape by Gamera but are concerned about the new beast, try to figure out what its weakness is and how to stop him (the boy, naturally, comes up with the winning idea), there are various clashes between the monsters, or between the military and the bad monster. Running 86 minutes, the inclusion of the child character is not overly tiresome, and the material involving the contractors and the villagers gives the movie all of the texture it needs. A wonderful shot is included of the boy's toy cars that deliberately evokes the miniature cars appearing in other shots. Despite the preponderance of wires, the monster battles are exciting (that death ray coming out of reptile bird's mouth can do real damage if the turtle isn't careful) and the film is total fun.

Again, the color transfer looks great, although the cinematography is not as luscious as it is on *Barugon*. There are two English language tracks, two different sets of alternate English language opening credits for the film (one calling it *Return of the Giant Monsters*) running a total of 5 minutes, a great minute-long clip of signs that were changed from Japanese to English within the film for one of those releases, and a 9-minute introduction.

Japanese film historian Stuart Galbraith IV provides an excellent commentary track. His overviews of the biographies of the filmmakers and the stars, for example, aren't just rote recitations of their filmographies, they are interesting summaries of their lives, their careers, their specialties and the talents they brought to the film. He also goes over the film's production history, points out incidents of Japanese culture that the film captures during the course of its narrative ("Here's something you'll find in Japanese movies of all kinds, a kind of group-think mentality. Japanese workers rarely act hastily, and rarer still, on their own. A consensus is almost always a requisite, which is why in almost all Japanese monster movies, you'll always find endless meetings and group conversations."), and even supplies a rewarding thumbnail summary of Japan's postwar freeway construction projects. More importantly, he understands every aspect of the Gamera movie series dynamics, talking about its popularity around the world, its appeal in Japan and how the features differed from the other monster movies of the day. "Another characteristic of the Showa Era Gamera films, distinguishing it from Toho's monster movies, are the use of the monster's eyes. Toho may have been the first with the moving eyeballs, but Daiei really went to town in this department. The monsters almost always have moving, frequently bloodshot and backlit eyes, as well as expressive eyelids. You know Gamera's opponents are dead when the lights in their eyes go out and their lids flutter shut."

Three versions are offered for the first film on the third platter, the 1968 *Gamera vs. Viras* (translated in the subtitles as *Gamera vs. Space Monster Viras*), the *Theatrical Version*, which runs 72 minutes, the *Director's Cut*, which runs 81 minutes, and the *Extended U.S. Version*, which runs 90 minutes. On the second two versions, however, the extra minutes are mostly clips from earlier Gamera movies, although the new footage that isn't expressly clips involves fresh special effects that are genuinely stimulating. The film opens with a spacecraft approaching Earth ('Viras' is a planet, rather than a monster, although the alien inside does turn into a gigantic squid with a pointy head for the final battles) with the intention of inhabiting it themselves (you don't see them, you just hear their pronouncements), but Gamera stops them in outer space before they even have a chance to ask to see our leader, and so they return and shine a beam onto Gamera's head to upload his memories and find a weak spot—hence, a lengthy clips sequence with footage, albeit the good stuff, from the previous three features (with *U.S. Version* containing even more clips). When the aliens, using their beam, send Gamera to wreak destruction on Japan, it is entirely clips from the earlier movies, as well. At the same time, two boy scouts (an American kid and a Japanese kid) trick their way into going for a joyride on a minisub, and are later kidnapped by the aliens, who discover that sympathy for little ones is Gamera's Achilles heel. Partially inspired by *Invaders from Mars*, much of the film is about the adventures of the kids inside the spaceship, but it is suitably creepy and intriguing as the kids attempt to solve the puzzle of what needs to be done to save the day. For what is ostensibly a kiddie film, there are some wonderfully gruesome moments, such as a mass decapitation, and the alien also sports a pronounced phallus that becomes larger and larger as he grows into the big squid.

Although the clips look a little degraded in places, otherwise the film is in good shape and colors are gorgeous. There is a shot of the two kids running on the beach while above them over the water, Gamera flies toward the alien spacecraft, that is especially captivating.

The *Director's Version* has a wonderful commentary from BD producer Jim Cirronella and the former child actor who plays the American kid in the film, Carl Craig. Craig shares oodles of stories about the shoot and how he became involved (his father was stationed at a nearby military base and his mother was Japanese, so he spoke the language well), and about reactions to the film later in life. "When I came back to the states and my American friends, when they finally figured out that I was in these movies, I was in like eighth grade, ninth grade, or something, in high school, they were like freaked out. They were like, 'Wow, you're in one of these movies!'" He also talks about the long hours he worked, what a typical day was like, and vividly recalls the shooting of many different scenes. Meanwhile, Cirronella provides the requisite background information about the film and offers up a number of insights on his

own, including an apt comparison between how the fights in the **Gamera** movies are similar to the **Rocky** sequels, where nice guy Rocky is always getting pounded by a wacky opponent, but then comes back to defeat him in the end.

Along with a trailer and a TV commercial, there is a minute-long alternate English language credit sequence ('*Destroy All Planets*') with different music, a good 11-minute introduction to the film, a terrific, additional 12-minute interview with Craig showing several of the props he kept from the film and other memorabilia in his possession, 61 minutes of wonderful clips from a 2003 Gamera convention attended by Craig (who gives another fantastic talk with more fresh information) and by Yuasa, and a fascinating 1968 documentary short running 6 minutes that Yuasa made in conjunction with *Viras*, about an international Boy Scout Jamboree held in Japan.

A different pair of young boys, but still one American (speaking impeccable Japanese) and one Japanese, are the central characters in the 1969 *Gamera vs. Guiron* (translated title: *Gamera vs. Giant Evil Beast Guiron*), but the film is so liberated from the normal monster movie template that it is fully entertaining despite the youth of its heroes. When a flying saucer lands in a local park, the pair board it and play with the controls. It soon takes off and flies to another planet (in Earth's orbit, but on the other side of the sun where nobody can see it). That planet has strange and lovely topography, and a really cool layout of spherical buildings connected by tubes, but there are only two humans left on it—both young Japanese women—and they are looking to get out since the planet is falling apart and occasionally being attacked by Gyaos monsters. They keep a pet Guiron to fight the Gyaos. He is another giant lizard who has a nose like a meat cleaver, with additional ninja stars above his eyes that shoot out to slice and dice what didn't get cleaved. At first the boys think they have found paradise, but when the girls shave the head of one boy and are about to drill open his skull so they can eat his brains, they realize they are in trouble. Fortunately, Gamera knows where they are and comes to rescue them, although he has to deal with Guiron first. Running 82 minutes, the film is good fun and the creative production designs more than compensate for the occasional juvenilia.

The color transfer looks terrific, once again, and there are two English language tracks, a passable 11-minute introduction, two alternate credit sequences in English (including one entitled *Attack of the Monsters*) running a total of 5 minutes, a trailer, a TV commercial, and an additional 7-minute montage of videocassette artwork and other memorabilia.

Film historian David Kalat supplies an outstanding commentary track, summarizing the career of Yuasa better than the previous commentators had, delineating the history of the two dubbed tracks (the bad/campy one was done in Asia), describing the film's production history and what was happening at Daiei at the time, going over the idea of how monster movies began as a reaction to Japan's experiences with war but then morphed into something more universal, and succinctly expressing the essence of the movie's appeal. "We've got a plot that, on paper, is a string of ludicrous coincidences that absolutely stagger the mind. Set aside suspension of disbelief. Give me a break. This is the logic of a child's fantasy. Specifically, a child's wish fulfillment fantasy. None of the wooden, lifeless adults believe them at first, but every word of these kids' outlandish tales turns out to be true. At every point, they are vindicated and shown to be superior. Like classic children's fairytales, what we have here is a story about precocious children who disobey their parents, go off into the woods, are kidnapped by witches who want to eat them, but they manage to escape through a combination of luck, pluck and the intervention of a hero."

The next platter holds three separate films. The first, *Gamera vs. Jiger* (translated title: *Gamera vs. Giant Demon Beast Jiger*), from 1970, initially seems like a template film. Archeologists remove a statue that turns out to have the shape of a bottle stopper and fly it back to Japan for exhibition at a World's Fair (which provides some choice location shots). The statue, however, was holding a monster at bay, and as soon as it is removed, the monster follows to wreak the sort of destruction that only Gamera can put a stop to. The monster looks like a fat lizard with several horns on its head, two of which shoot arrows. Its tail also doubles as a switchblade (and as an inseminator, but we'll get to that in a moment), and it can project a death ray, as well. The heroes are two young boys, again one Japanese and one American, whose parents are working on various displays for the Fair, including a minisub. But then, after one particularly rough bout between the two monsters, it appears that Gamera, his head having turned a different color and dropped into the water, is done for, and to add insult to injury, the other monster has left a larva inside of him. Much to the delight, surely, of anyone sitting through the series, the 83-minute production suddenly turns into **Fantastic Voyage**, with the two kids using the minisub to travel into Gamera's mouth and down his throat to deal with the larva. After that, the film can do nothing wrong.

The colors look great again, as well. Along with two trailers, a TV commercial and a minute of opening credits for an American release (*Gamera vs. Monster X*), there is a good 9-minute introduction to the film.

In marked contrast to Kalat's talk on the previous film, movie expert Edward H. Holland's commentary on *Jiger* is lackluster. He is knowledgeable about the movie and its creators, and shares little tidbits now and then, but most of the time he just describes what is on the screen ("That's some quality suit-mation acting right there. And quickly we see that in his child state, the Jiger cannot handle the radio waves, but it's still smart enough to attempt to get it off its body."), especially during the film's second half.

A pair of younger children—a Japanese boy about eight and a partially American girl who can't be more than five or so but delivers a terrific

performance for her age—are abducted with their fathers by an alien in the 1971 *Gamera vs. Ziger* (translated: *Gamera vs. Deep-Sea Monster Ziger*, although again, in the story, Ziger is actually a planet, not the monster). The alien's ship looks like a crown-shaped dish filled with candy, but when Gamera eventually destroys it, the alien emerges and turns into a gigantic cross between an armored shark and a swordfish. Much of the film was shot around Japan's Sea World complex. Running 88 minutes, there is as much delight in the story from the kids getting the best of the alien and running around the spaceship interior, and later, Sea World, to avoid capture (the alien has no trouble hypnotizing adults, but the kids are smart enough to avoid it, since it's an eye level thing) as there is in the eventual monster clashes and the lovely opening sequence set on a moon base.

The color transfer looks super, although there was one shot that wasn't a stock image and was only sort of a process shot where there was a vertical line running through it. Along with two trailers and 3 minutes of alternate American beginning and end credit sequences, there is an excellent 8-minute introduction about how Daiei's financial difficulties at the time, sliding into bankruptcy, affected the production. Not only were the monster battles compromised (and one planned fight was dropped), but one of the suit performers died from the stress of not knowing whether or not he would get a paycheck.

The two film experts providing the commentary, Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, are both authorities on movies with environmental themes, which becomes a key message in several of these Gamera features. Their talk is more engaging than Holland's. While they do comment on the narrative, it is usually in terms of how the filmmakers are approaching the scenes, and they also talk about the production, the cast, the use of Sea World (before it opened to the public), the way in which the film plays better in widescreen than it does when it is cropped and the message the movie imparts about protecting the planet, something a number of monster movies at the time were doing.

It is best to take a break—like, say, a couple of years—before watching the 1980 *Gamera Super Monster*. The film is mostly a clip movie, integrating the battle scenes with each of the monsters from the previous films. There are also briefer clips from *Galaxy Express 999* and *Space Battleship Yamato*. Go figure. Running 92 minutes, there is a story, about a young boy who thinks the pet turtle he returned to the local river has become Gamera, and intrigue between an evil space woman (the guys the evil space woman works for are the ones supposedly sending the monsters to Earth that Gamera is fighting) and three good space women, all of whom befriend the boy, but while the fresh special effects involving them are passable, the attempt to resurrect Gamera looks awful. The film opens with a ripoff of the spaceship flyover that began the *Star Wars* movies, and it is all downhill from there.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, as are the subsequent films. The color transfer on the new material not involving special effects looks fine. The clips, however, are blander than they appear in their original iterations. Along with two trailers, there are two alternate opening and closing credit sequences and monster identifications in English, running a total of 11 minutes, and a passable 6-minute introduction to the film.

Genre expert Richard Pusateri supplies a commentary track, such as it is. He includes various items of engaging trivia (Such as pointing out one of our childhood favorite jet planes: "Now, nice stock footage of the Lockheed F-104 Starfighters, an early jet fighter designed to be an agile pilot's plane, but was plagued with control problems. It was a popular sale to other countries, like these with the Japanese markings, and it shows up in a number of giant monster movies.") and touches on the backgrounds of the cast members. Most of the time, he pretty much just describes what is on the screen, but he is a lot better than Holland at lacing the description with humor and insight. "It must have seemed very empowering to a twelve-year old Japanese boy to see a completely free, unrestrained boy skip school, to have hamburger lunches with good-looking bad space women, and then deduce that she's actually up to no good, then successfully negotiate the truth out of a good-looking good space woman, on adult terms."

The second phase of the Gamera films began with the 1995 reboot, *Gamera Guardian of the Universe*, which appears by itself on the fifth platter (each of the three subsequent films are also presented singularly on the last three platters). The film and its two immediate sequels were directed by Shusuke Kaneko. From the very first moment of the film, when the 5.1-channel DTS sound kicks in, the viewer is whipsawed into a new frenzy of excitement for the genre and the character. This is especially true if one has been satiated with the older special effects films. While still primitive by today's standards, the effects in the movie are nevertheless an exponential improvement over the rubber suits and piano wires dominating the past, and you suddenly feel, oddly, like you are watching a 'real movie.'

Running 96 minutes, the film has two story threads that, of course, converge and clash. One is about the initial emergence of Gamera, who is assumed by the government to be a threat—special legislation is passed by the parliament to allow the Japanese Defense Force permission to attack monsters—although a couple of the younger scientists are not so sure, since the monster comes with an instruction manual written in an ancient language (the teenage daughter of one scientist also develops a psychic connection with Gamera after finding an artifact). The second is about the emergence of Gyaos, which, ironically, the government is not so worried about, because it is just a bird, while a young female ornithologist sees enough warning signs to believe that it is the true danger. The scenes where the snooty government officials dismiss the warnings from the heroes are especially well staged. The entire film is

invigorating, however, with terrific location footage, exciting crosscutting, grand explosions (the final blasts, set at some sort of oil and gas refinery, are especially gargantuan) and well developed characters that you genuinely care about.

The picture quality is excellent, and the audio directional effects add significantly to the entertainment. There are two alternate English language dubs (the British version has different music); five trailers; six TV commercials; two separate alternate end credit sequences in English running a total of 7 minutes; a cute 5-minute clip of the elaborate press announcement regarding the start of production; a 3-minute clip of the film's opening day at a major theater; a nice 6-minute piece on the film's appearance at a festival; a rewarding 16-minute presentation of behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with real sound and a 4-minute montage of additional behind-the-scenes footage set to music; 36 minutes of informative interviews with Kaneko and special effects supervisor Shinji Higuchi; an entertaining 93-minute discussion with Higuchi about the visual effects in the Nineties series; and an exhaustive 116-minute collection of retrospective interviews with many primary and secondary members of the crew from the Nineties series that includes quite a bit of behind-the-scenes footage, too, as they share lots of interesting details about creating the films and about themselves (including an assistant producer who knows he didn't do a good job on the first film and wasn't asked back for the second two).

The commentary is by Arrow designer and Gamera enthusiast Matt Frank, who does a good job going over the film's production history and also talks a lot about its dubbing (there is even an interview with one of the dubbing actresses) and some of the changes that were made to the musical score when the film was dubbed in England. Additionally, he provides a running appreciation of the film's stylistic accomplishments. "We've got a nice, cool standoff sequence here. I just really appreciate how Gamera and Gyaos contrast one another in shape and color."

The filmmakers do their best to replicate the thrills in *Gamera 2 Attack of Legion*, from 1996. There are attractive, sympathetic characters, although they are never as elaborately entwined as they are in the first film, and the sequel just doesn't carry the same thrill of discovery that the first movie conveyed. The girl with the psychic connection to Gamera and the ornithologist return from the earlier film. Nevertheless, running 100 minutes, and despite some budgetary limitations, it is still a worthy spectacle. There is one terrific jump scare—the only jump scare in the entire set—and plenty of gnarly battles. A creature evocative of the creatures in *Starship Troopers* crash lands in Northern Japan and begins searching for resources so that it can lay its eggs. It also spews forth a swarming batch of smaller but still nasty creatures of similar design, which help it to build its nest. Gamera senses its presence and rises to exterminate it. This time, the military is a bit more sensible and realizes Gamera is on their side, although it still takes the whole movie for their coordinated efforts, along with the brilliant insights of a couple of younger scientists, to eliminate the threat.

Not only is the picture quality excellent, but the special effects are designed so that fewer of them are discernibly artificial in comparison to the first reboot. There are not as many creative separation effects on the 5.1 DTS track, but the bass is well developed. Another audio track, in stereo, presents a purposely skewed English dubbing of the film by the same actors that recorded the actual English dub, calling themselves the 'Lake Texarkana' comedy group. It presents a coherent version of the film, following the genuine narrative and otherwise using the audio material provided in the background of the genuine English language dub, with funny voices inserted now and then for some of the characters (one of the leads is voiced by an imitation of Bill Clinton, although that only generates one topical political gag; they also add a harmonica accompaniment to some of the music). Once in a while there are vague stabs at humor ("Where's the Second Air Group?" "I believe they stopped for mimosas."). It really isn't all that amusing, relying more on soft curse words than witty reactions to what is on the screen, and in fact there is a 4-minute segment in the supplement of alternate gags that are somewhat funnier, including giving Gamera, who has no voice in the comedy dub itself, a British accent.

Also featured in the supplement is a minute-long end credit scroll in English; nine trailers; seven TV commercials; a brief 4-minute introduction; a 7-minute clip of more press announcements promoting different phases in the shooting of the film; another 3-minute montage of behind-the-scenes footage set to music; 5 minutes of footage depicting museum displays and promotions for the film; 4 minutes of footage from an introduction to an opening day screening; 40 minutes of terrific behind-the-scenes views of the second unit physical effects testing and execution; another 60 minutes of great behind-the-scenes shots with the main unit; and another extensive 122 minutes of interviews with secondary crew members.

Another giant monster expert, Kyle Yount, supplies an adept commentary track, covering the history of the genre, the history of Gamera, and the history of the production of the Nineties series, while also identifying the primary cast members and their backgrounds, going over a history of the film's distribution (including where the comedy dub came from) and pointing out other cultural aspects to the movie as they appear.

The 1999 *Gamera 3 Revenge of Iris* runs 108 minutes, but it has so much plot that not only does the story jump breathlessly from one development to the next, but the movie ends on a cliffhanger, with dozens of Gyaos heading toward Japan and Gamera, missing one leg, preparing to defend the island as long as he can. Unfortunately, they never made a sequel, and from the interviews included in the supplements on all three features, it was never intended to be more than an apocalyptic conclusion to the trilogy. The film is in some ways

unlike the other movies. There are a couple of obligatory Gamera battles during its first half (and the idiotic government is back to prioritizing him as their biggest threat), but the fights occur suddenly, without much build up, and conclude just as quickly. Instead, there is elaborate character development. Along with several secondary characters, the two female characters are carried over from the previous two movies, thus turning the films into a distinctive and grand cycle. Among the new characters is a girl who hates Gamera because her parents were collateral damage in one of his fights, and a boy who likes the girl but apparently possesses a dagger that is intended to help kill Gamera's enemies, a conflict that comes to a crisis point when she starts raising a baby creature ('Iris') in a cave he is supposed to be guarding in case such creatures appear. The climax is set in an urban shopping mall, which is pretty much a wreck by the time the now huge creature and Gamera are done with it. At one point there is another attempt at a jump scare, but it is nowhere near as good as the previous one. The film plays like a manga adaptation, allowing the characters to position themselves, reposition themselves and carry out hidden agendas as the end of the world—or, at least, the mall—goes on in the background. The film's own story does have a sufficient conclusion to round out the cycle but despite the pyrotechnics in the final act, the very promising series ends with a whimper rather than a bang.

The picture and sound quality is on par with the second film. There are six trailers; eighteen TV commercials; a commercial for a Gamera Playstation game; a minute long end credit scroll in English; 2 minutes of silent special effects tests; 6 minutes of animated storyboards set to music and noises; a 4-minute clip of the production announcement press conference; a minute-long clip of a press event during the shoot; a 6-minute look at the film's enthusiastic opening day; 5 minutes of fresh behind-the-scenes footage set to music; an 11-minute promotion from 2020 for a traveling exhibition of props from the film; 10 minutes of very interesting deleted scenes, some of which were sensibly dropped for pacing and such, but some elaborating upon an intriguing subplot involving the origin and purpose of the monsters; and the final 135 minutes of interviews with secondary crewmembers (ninety people were interviewed across the three segments) filled, as the other segments were, with all sorts of fun details ("We put a lot of effort into the second movie, like the low-range sounds. In the Nikkatsu studio, one of the subwoofers blew up. We tested it to its limits, and we went a bit overboard. The speaker exploded and we had to stop the recording for a while.") and thumbnail personality sketches (many of the workers became involved because of their affection for Gamera).

Monster movie experts Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski provide a very good commentary track, going over the production history and context of all three films, appreciating the film's technical finesse ("This sequence really shows how the filmmakers mix up traditional genre tropes and techniques with new ideas to create a fresh take on this type of classic scene. It all starts with the giant flaming body of a Gyaos falling from the sky, a very bold move, and crashing down to the subway system and trapping people in the station and tunnels. You got a giant monster foot crashing down, something you've seen many times, but here the impact sends people flying. There's smoke and debris and bodies being cast about, and the editing is very effective here. Some of these shots are very tight and don't really show that much, but the effect is very convincing. You got crowds fleeing, people trapped in rubble, a giant man-in-suit monster composited into the frame with people running away in the foreground, buildings crumbling—all things you've seen before, but never with this sense of immediacy and this seamless mix of practical and digital and live action and miniature work.") and explaining the narrative's references and structure, which is compared at one point to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*.

The film also has a spoof commentary track, supposedly featuring 'Gamera,' 'Iris,' and an actor claiming to play innumerable background roles in the film. Iris has an Eastern European accent and Gamera has an erudite British accent, while the actor has an American good old boy accent. The talk is never outrageously funny, but it is consistently lighthearted and periodically amusing.

"I didn't mean to say, certainly, that Kaneko is not a visionary and absolutely marvelous. He is. I mean, look at the work he's produced. But all I was saying is I have my preferences, and I know that I can convey to the audience that I'm flying and I'm exerting myself and I'm here to save the planet, without doing the bloody pinwheel. That's all I'm saying."

"I got say, that pinwheel's lookin' purty cool to me."

"Yes, yes. I know. Everyone likes the pinwheel."

The final film on the final platter, from 2006, *Gamera the Brave*, directed by Ryuta Tazaki, is a children's film, but it is unlike any other movie in the set. Composed with more advanced special effects, it is everything you want a children's film to be—heartwarming, full of gore and exciting as all hell. It's a cross between *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Jurassic Park*. Most of it is set in a small seaside community where a young boy lives with his widowed father. The boy finds a turtle egg sitting atop of a glowing red jewel of some sort near a remote beach, and the egg hatches in his hand, revealing an adorable baby turtle, which he brings home and befriends. The first surprise is too delightful to spoil, so we'll just cut to the end of the film, set in a large metropolis that is getting wasted by a vicious tyrannosaurus-styled monster. The only thing preventing the monster from gobbling everyone in the city is the turtle, now fully grown, but he is losing the fight and is lodged in the upper floor of a skyscraper, unable to move, as the other monster closes in for the kill. Fortunately, a relay team of children instinctively passes along the jewel to the young hero, who then climbs the stairs of the skyscraper with his father in order to reach the turtle and pop the

jewel in his mouth. Does he make it? Of course, he does, but you're screaming at him to hurry up the entire time. Running 97 minutes, although there are cutaways to the government bureaucracy deciding that they must capture and study the turtle and that sort of nonsense, the film is centered almost entirely on the feelings and actions of the young boy and his close friends. Unlike the earlier child-oriented movies, however, which were by no means bad, there is enough realism to the movie's unfolding, regardless of the fantasy elements, that adults will not require untoward patience or saccharine suppression pills to tolerate it joys and share in its thrills (and wit—there is a marvelous Guiron gag for fans).

The picture is back to being letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and the special effects look great. The end credits suggest that the film's audio track had EX-encoding, so the 5.1-channel DTS sound may not achieve its full potential. The film's sound design seems to deliberately activate and deactivate a strong surround presence, but most of the time the audio is a secondary component of the entertainment. There are three trailers; two TV commercials; an enthusiastic 5-minute depiction of the film's opening day; a superficial but appealing 10-minute depiction of the young female star, Kaho Shibuya, on a modeling assignment at the seaside town; and a generalized 37-minute explanation of how movies are made, soup to nuts, using *Gamera the Brave* as an example and including interviews with different members of the crew.

There are also two other, rewarding documentaries. One is a terrific 43-minute history of the entire twelve-film series that despite all of the other material in the collection still manages to come up with fresh interviews and new information about the creation of the films. The second is an excellent, smartly-designed 64-minute production documentary that effectively steps the viewer through all aspects of the film's creation, from the work that had to be done by the child actors to the creation of the miniatures (art director Yoshiyuki Kasuga: "It wouldn't work to simply scale down real objects. It wouldn't look realistic. We change some little things like shapes, so that they look realistic when they're filmed. Sometimes we change the colors, too. We try to make them look real on film. I don't feel any sentiment for them when they're destroyed. The value of the set lies in the way it's destroyed. I want to make them look cool.") and the monsters. All of the supplementary segments on the platter are informative, but seem to have been designed for a somewhat younger viewership than the supplements for the other films.

Japanese sci-fi experts Keith Aiken and Bob Johnson provide an adequate commentary track, going over the film's production context, the story and other details about the shoot. "They hired a bunch of people, obviously. They always hire extras for the running scenes, but since this was digitally shot, they were doing a lot of chroma keying. Anyone who showed up in a green shirt, they had to either pull them from the running or have them change their shirt before, because they would basically be reflecting background when they're wearing a green shirt." The talk is not as extensive as some of the best talks, but a basic sense of the film's purpose and its sadly undeserving boxoffice fate is conveyed.

**Collection** also features a hardbound compilation of four manga comics featuring Gamera, a large retrospective book, and a map of Japan identifying Gamera's visits. Arrow subsequently released the platters in two separate sets without those collectibles. The first four platters are contained in **Gamera: The Showa Era** (UPC#760137441083, \$100) and the second four platters are presented in **Gamera: The Heisei Era** (UPC#760137441182, \$100). It seems worth noting, incidentally, that throughout the extensive supplements on every platter, not one expert, fan or filmmaker makes reference to another popular cultural touchstone from the late Twentieth Century that could unquestionably be said to owe at least a strand of creative DNA to Gamera, and that would be The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

The first two Nineties reboots were also released on a single-platter Mill Creek Entertainment *Double Feature* Blu-ray, **Gamera: Gamera Guardian of the Universe / Gamera 2 Attack of the Legion** (UPC#683904630179, \$30). While the menu only offers the choice between the two films, which default to their 5.1-channel DTS Japanese tracks and English subtitling, alternate 5.1 English language tracks and subtitle suppression are also available through manual activation. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the picture quality on both films looks terrific, although in direct comparison, the presentation on the **Collection** set, in both instances, has slightly brighter and richer colors, and sharper audio detail.

### A match made in monster heaven

The 1963 American version of the 1962 *King Kong vs Godzilla* is available on Blu-ray from Universal (UPC#025192231612, \$15). We reviewed a cropped DVD from Goodtimes Video in Mar 00, but too much is spoiled with the cropping. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and given a lovely color transfer, the film's miniatures are very beguiling in widescreen and the film was an inspired invigoration to not just the Godzilla franchise, but giant monster mania in general. Footage from the original feature, directed by Ishirō Honda, was substantially tweaked by director Thomas Montgomery and producer John Beck, adding 'news reports' and other material while trimming down transitional footage to bring the running time to 91 minutes. The music was also replaced with a blander score as part of the dubbing, but the original monster noises come through just fine on the monophonic audio track. There are optional English and French subtitles.

The film begins by cutting back and forth between its two prongs.

Godzilla is frozen in a northern sea, but wakes up, defrosts and decides to go for a stroll in Japan, working his way from Hokkaido to the top to Mt. Fuji. A pharmaceutical company learns of the existence of Kong in the South Seas and sends an expedition to retrieve him for use as a mascot. Hence, the entire film is kind of a metaphor for Japan's weather. And the poor girlfriend of one of the expedition's leaders not only misses her boyfriend, but gets on a train going north that Godzilla takes a liking to, gets away in the nick of time, only to go back south and get grabbed by Kong, who is looking for some companionship. The final act features an extended wrestling match between the two beasts over all sorts of picturesque miniatures, and whatever shortcomings you may feel the film has, even those compounded by the off key news reports and other newly staged footage, fall away like the dust from a recently pummeled office building as you take delight in the massive pair's tenacious fury and resourcefulness.

### Trust the dinosaurs for entertainment

The second film in the second cycle of the **Jurassic Park** series, Universal's 2018 **Jurassic World Fallen Kingdom**, begins several years after the conclusion of the previous **Jurassic World** (Apr 16), with the upgraded theme park as rusted and overgrown as its predecessor and the dinosaurs once again running about untethered on the Pacific island. Only this time, the island is about to self-destruct with an active volcano. A billionaire ostensibly dreams of transporting as many dinosaurs as possible, Noah-like, to another island paradise where the animals can thrive, but greedy and nefarious individuals working for him have entirely different plans. The stars from the previous film, Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard, return when their characters are roped into helping with the gathering and transporting of the creatures.

Released on a two-platter DVD & Blu-ray by Universal Studios Home Entertainment (UPC#191329002469, \$17), the first half of the 128-minute feature is about the activities on the island, rounding up the creatures. With the volcano spewing, a lovely microcosm of the supposed event that eliminated most of the dinosaurs in the first place is slyly presented, and the heroes must avoid enormous carnivores, enormous and stampeding herbivores, and chunks of flaming rock and lava, providing plenty of the requisite thrills. The second and somewhat more absurd half (if that is possible) of the film is set in a woodsy mansion, where the rescued dinosaurs are being auctioned to the highest foreign bidders and the heroes, in attempting to escape their entrapment, unleash pandemonium to an even greater level of suspense and excitement. Directed by J. A. Bayona, the film has lovely little moments spread through it, such as when the silhouette of a dinosaur supersedes the profile of a toy horse, and it has a decent pace, filled with excitements and dinosaurs, so that while it is not the strongest film in either series, it is a viable and satisfying entry in the continuation of Michael Crichton's wonderful invention.

Ted Levine, Isabella Sermon, Daniella Pineda, Rafe Spall, Toby Jones, Geraldine Chaplin (!), Jeff Goldblum, BD Wong and James Cromwell are also featured. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.45:1, and the image quality is outstanding. Details are clear and the special effects are seamless. The Dolby Atmos sound has a grand dimensionality and plenty of subwoofer action. There is an audio track that describes the action ("The dinosaur steps out from behind the softly billowing curtains surrounding Maisie's bed. Peering at her, it extends its clawed hand over her body. Saliva drips from the raptor's intimidating jaws as it slowly moves its snout toward Maisie."); alternate French and Spanish audio tracks; optional English, French and Spanish subtitles; 47 minutes of passable promotional featurettes shot on the set; a good 12-minute segment with Pratt interviewing secondary members of the cast and crew that also spotlights Pratt's improvisational acumen; a really nice 10-minute conversation with Howard, Goldblum, Pratt, Boyana and others about their experiences making the movies and the impact the series has had on popular culture; and a pointless 3-minute juxtaposition of scenes from the original **Jurassic Park** film and **Fallen Kingdom**. The special features do not start up where they left off if playback is terminated.

The DVD, which is also available separately (UPC#191329002445, \$15), looks great, although it lacks the detail offered by the BD, and the 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound does not have as much power or presence. The 12-minute piece with Pratt is included, along with the 10-minute conversation, the 3-minute juxtaposition segment and 27 minutes of the featurettes.

Having exhausted the park concept, the concluding film of the cycle, **Jurassic World Dominion**, from 2022, shifts from a horror movie template to a James Bond template, bringing all of the Jurassic algorithms along for the ride and improving them, as such efforts do with each passing year. Released as a two-platter *Special Extended Edition* DVD & Blu-ray by Universal (UPC#19-1329223420, \$23) and directed by Colin Trevorrow, Pratt, Howard and Sermon return, along with expanded parts for Goldblum and Wong, with Laura Dern and Sam Neill brought back from the original **Jurassic Park** for major roles. DeWanda Wise, Omar Sy and Campbell Scott are also featured. And the film goes all over the world, sort of. It begins in Montana, moves to Malta and then supposedly to Northern Italy, although that part, like Montana, really looks like British Columbia. Anyway, the dinosaurs are loose and the world is coping with them. Sermon's young character has had genetic work done to her as well, and is kidnapped by the villains, who want to examine her to improve the genetic advancements they are pioneering. Pratt and Howard have to find her and bring her back. Dern and Neill's character are investigating an outbreak of genetically altered locusts, wishing to prove that they were engineered by the same villains who have abducted Sermon's character, and so they all end up in a protected

valley in the Dolomites where dinosaurs and their improvements are being studied but otherwise left to roam free. How the beasts all have enough to eat is never really explained, but there is no time anyway, since the thrills of each action sequence, often involving the heroes being chased by both bad guys and hungry dinosaurs, create one fantastic ride after another. Hence, the 161-minute *Extended Version*, which manages to work in a decent amount of character development, add some background narrative and ultimately deliver more dinosaurs, is preferable to the 147-minute *Theatrical Version*, and becomes a thoroughly satisfying and constantly entertaining adventure that not only puts the viewer in the predicaments the heroes are experiencing, but at the same time reinforces the idea that corporations and corruption that compromise environmental rules may not be leading us to become overridden by dinosaurs, but is nevertheless going to because something just as disastrous and seemingly unstoppable—so grab the movie and enjoy it while there is still time.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1. The image looks terrific, and the 7.1-channel DTS sound is wonderful. There is an audio track that describes the action ("The raptor breaks through the door and Claire jumps out a window, rolling off a pigeon coup below. The raptor breaks through the coup. The predator chases Claire across the rooftop. She leaps from one building to another. Jumping after her, the raptor falls onto its side and tumbles. Claire enters a spiral stairwell and the raptor crashes through the door, sliding down the stairs behind her."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, a really, really great 10-minute suspense short entitled *Battle at Big Rock* about a family in a camper holding off a dinosaur, and 53 minutes of terrific production (the locust puppet is so realistic it looks alive even as they show you how it works) and promotional (Goldblum recites a truly lovely, lengthy quote about life's purpose from George Bernard Shaw) featurettes.

The DVD in the set, which is also available separately (UPC#1913-29152959, \$20), contains just the *Theatrical Version* and comes with *Battle at Big Rock*. The picture quality still looks terrific, but can't equal the clarity and smoothness of the BD, and the sound is only in 5.1-channel Dolby Digital, which is also less impactful at key moments.

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The films coming out from Well Go USA Entertainment do not deserve to be as good, or as wholeheartedly enjoyable, as they often turn out to be. Like the straight-to-video movies of the old days, the films are ostensibly ripoffs of more popular and widely distributed productions, cashing in on look-alike marketing or genre familiarity. The difference is that in the old days, no matter how great the jacket art or the carefully constructed trailer (included ubiquitously on other releases by the same company) looked, the actual film was not just mindless nonsense, it was depressing, because the raised heights of anticipation took the viewer crashing that much farther and harder when the depression of reality set in. But that hasn't been the case with Well Go. Suckers that we are, their trailers look so good and their jacket art so promising that again and again, we sample their wares, but instead of coming away chastened, swearing to partake in such catnip nevermore, we eagerly dive into their recent releases and come up with one entertainment high after another. From foreign pickups such as **Customs Frontline** (May 25) to domestic thrillers such as **Get Fast** (Mar 25), it is becoming harder and harder to resist the siren call of their titles.

Take, for example, Well Go's Blu-ray, **The Jurassic Games Extinction** (UPC#810348038975, \$32). It can't possibly be any good, right? Indeed, what might prevent the 2025 title from succeeding is the very same marketing needed to enable its success. Patterned on **The Hunger Games** and the forthcoming reboot of **The Running Man**, the film's premise is that hardened criminals compete against one another for amnesty in a virtual reality 'Jurassic' environment that is broadcast to the world and garners phenomenal ratings, especially since when the criminals die in the game, they die, and only one survives. But all of that happens before the film begins. The actual movie is **Tron** with dinosaurs. Instead of criminals, the game's programmers themselves have become trapped in the virtual reality worlds and competitions they created, and must try to override, from within, the firewalls they installed in order to shut down the game and free themselves, an adventure that is also being broadcast, to even greater ratings.

The challenge in virtual reality movies is to make you care about the characters when they are in flashy but artificial virtual environments. That was the failing of the pioneering **Matrix** series, for example. As spectacular as the action sequences in its sequels were, there was apathy to their resolution because within the story, it was just a simulation. The fixes for **Jurassic Games** are simple, but work well enough. The characters die if they fail. The performances by the cast—Adam Hampton, Katie Burgess doing a pretty good Drew Barrymore thing, Leila Anastasia Scott, Sophie Proctor and Ryan Frances—are utterly competent. You believe their emotional responses to each situation and you care about them. The metaphysical metaphors are also simple, but engaging. No matter how much the characters talk about the challenges they are facing, the mistakes being made, and so on, the immediate drama is readily enhanced by the meta-drama, with bonus points if you start believing your own world is just another level of the same construct. And finally, the dinosaurs are simple but fun. They don't have to be vividly perfect because it is just a simulation, but at the same time, they are mean, bloodthirsty creatures that the heroes must avoid or conquer to achieve their goals. Running 102 minutes, the film's pacing is decent,

its execution is admirable, and its story is good enough to justify the professional effort that has gone into presenting it. It may not have a fingernail's worth of the entertainment contained in **Jurassic World Dominion**, but that doesn't mean it isn't enjoyable. Even the song played over the end credits, from Ash Kurz, is exceptionally witty and appealing. In other words, the movie may be a little silly, but it doesn't let you down.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is slick and sharp. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a workable dimensionality. There are optional English subtitles, and a trailer.

### Don't mind this monster, it's British

Britain's wonderful entry into the Sixties large monster craze, Eugène Lourie's 1961 **Gorgo**, is available on Blu-ray with some nice extras from VCI Entertainment (UPC#089859900822, \$20). Since there are no female cast members beyond the extras in the crowd scenes, the film runs a succinct 77 minutes. Bill Travers and the especially appealing William Sylvester are salvage ship operators who capture an enormous dinosaur-like creature in Ireland and eventually bring it to a London circus, **King Kong**-style. Neither the Tower Bridge nor Big Ben survives. The special effects may be basic, but they are smartly applied and carefully portioned to sustain the film's enjoyable thrills without redundancy. Naturally evoking the Blitz, the combination of simple character arcs (the salvage men also pick up a young, parentless Irish boy along the way—although less intentional, the film can also be read as a metaphor for Irish reunification), rising levels of destruction and a witty twist for the final act has enabled the film to withstand the tests of time and remain wholly entertaining despite its relatively small footprint in a crowded field of giant monster extravaganzas.

The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The colors are very fresh and bright, and fleshtones are accurate. The source material is somewhat soft and grainy, and more problematic during the many scenes set at night, or in the fog, or at night and in the fog, or during the many process shots. There are a couple of thin vertical lines running through the image as well. That said, however, the presentation is in admirable condition, free of any other major scratches or speckling (a 2-minute split montage in the supplement demonstrates how much the image has been improved over earlier home video releases), and more importantly, once a viewer gets used to how the film was conceived, its occasional lack of clarity is part of its strategy, not necessarily to make things look realistic, but to minimize the artifice. Similarly, the monophonic sound may be a little harsh, but it can withstand amplification, which adds greatly to the film's sense of spectacle. There is an audio track with just the music and sound effects, an alternate French audio track, optional English subtitles, a trailer, an excellent 34-minute montage of the original 'Gorgo' comic book (it is one of the best replications of a comic book in a disc supplement that we have ever come across) set for a while to a suite of music from the film, an equally adept 41-minute montage of a French photo comic book adaptation, a 5-minute look at lobby cards and posters for the film, a 3-minute look at sculpted figures from the film, a 2-minute look at the film's pressbook, a 2-minute view of original production sheets and notations for the film, a 2-minute collection of production photos and stills, and an excellent 31-minute retrospective documentary that covers all aspects of the film's creation, execution, personnel and popularity.

### Try to hold down your curds and whey

If enormous reptiles aren't your thing, how about arachnids? Jack Arnold's 1955 Universal Pictures production, **Tarantula!**, is available from Universal and Shout! Factory as a *Scream Factory* Blu-ray (UPC#82666318-8639, \$28). John Agar is a doctor in a small Arizona town who must initially investigate the unusual death of a scientist that has come down with Elephant Man syndrome in a matter of a couple of days. It seems that he and his associate, the latter played by Leo G. Carroll, have been experimenting with growth drugs to aid in the world's food crisis or something, but instead of just making huge hamsters and mice, he tried it on himself. Another scientist also tries it, goes crazy, and stabs Carroll with the needle, and in the commotion, the large spider they had also been testing kind of gets loose and nobody notices. Most of the 80-minute film, in fact, is about Carroll going nuts and sporting some viably icky makeup effects, and it is only in the final act that the spider becomes the main attraction. Mara Corday plays the brand new assistant of Carroll's character, who makes Agar forget about spiders for a while—the spider, on the other hand, peeks into her bedroom just as she is getting on her nightgown, so she made it forget about Agar, as well. Since it is an older film, the effects really aren't all that good, often resorting to a blurry silhouette crossing a horizon—Arnold's big spider in the 1957 **Incredible Shrinking Man** (Nov 21) is much better, but perhaps the practice of this earlier film helped—and plenty of viewers just won't understand the film's appeal, but it is so earnestly dumb and sober that it catches you in a web of outlandish science, proportion-defying special effects and Fifties performances, and you stick with it in order to find out what the USAF has prepared for just these sorts of situations. (Hint: They would later use it on the Vietcong.)

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Since the special effects are a little uneven, the image is soft now and then, but it is also sharp and clear much of the time. The monophonic sound is passable. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer and a very nice 9-minute montage of memorabilia.

Fifties genre authority Tom Weaver supplies a very thorough and fully

engaging commentary track, identifying almost every actor who appears on the screen, going over the details of the careers of the crew as well, explaining in clear terms how the special effects were achieved, supplying a full history of the production and sharing all sorts of trivia, such as a description of a scene and dialog that would have featured Clint Eastwood, but was dropped from the film. As he has on other commentaries, he recreates some interviews with artists who have passed using voice actors, and he offloads details on the film's musical score and boxoffice history to David Schecter and Robert J. Kiss, each supplying briefer but minutely detailed talks on their respective topics. Weaver loves the film and understands some of the dynamics that have made it enduringly appealing. "It sometimes has the feel of a western. As David Schecter mentioned, it features a good bit of music originally written for westerns, including its main title cue. We visit Andy's cattle and horse ranch. Some actors and extras are dressed in modern cowboy clothes, the sheriff wears a double-pocket cowboy shirt, etc. All these things combine to give **Tarantula** a little bit of a western vibe, to the movie's benefit, I think."

### Huge monsters

Paul W.S. Anderson's imaginative 2020 Screen Gems and Sony Pictures special effects extravaganza, **Monster Hunter**, is available on Blu-ray from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (UPC#043396573727, \$20). Milla Jovovich is a platoon captain leading a reconnaissance mission in the desert when they pass through a wormhole to another dimension, encountering an enormous sand creature. The survivors make it to a rock outcropping, only to find themselves prey for huge spiders. Later on, she encounters a herd of ankylosaurs and a dragon. There is also a human-sized cat working as a cook on a wooden sailing ship, but that is only for humor. Anyway, most of the 103-minute film (the end credits last for nearly 10 minutes of that) features Jovovich and another dimensional traveler, played by Tony Jaa, trying to get away from the spiders, off of the rock and to a promising oasis on the horizon. The film is by its nature suspenseful, but not creatively so. Anderson is not known for his finesse. It is still highly enjoyable simply because it combines so many engaging abstractions (it is based upon a computer game) and realizes them so effectively. Jovovich and Jaa make a good team even though their characters do not understand each other's languages, and the sympathy they establish for one another is sufficient justification for the action. Rather than creating a satisfying ending, however, the filmmakers focused on establishing a franchise, sort of putting the cart before the horse. Nevertheless, the movie has plenty of excitements, and its huge monsters will give you nightmares, if you are so inclined.

Ron Perlman is also featured. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The special effects are seamless and the South African locations are quite effectively otherworldly. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has some marvelous directional touches and invigorates the action. There is an audio track that describes what is going on ("As her comrades fire at the beast, Davis tries to start the truck. Steeler and the captain shoot at the monster."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, 3 minutes of deleted scenes from a point in the film when the action needed to be revved up a little faster, and 19 minutes of informative promotional featurettes ("We built the movie so that it would certainly work for people that know nothing about the video game, but if you play the video game, you'll know the people that made this movie love [the game]. The movie is very much the video game, put on screen.").