

Godzilla vs. Kong: Impressive visuals and sound design can't hide the absence of artistic value

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Godzilla vs. Kong (directed by Adam Wingard) was released in theaters and online streaming services on March 31. It is effectively both a remake of the original 1962 film (*King Kong vs. Godzilla*) and the climax of producer Legendary's MonsterVerse film franchise. The MonsterVerse kicked off with *Godzilla* (2014), with each subsequent entry (*Kong: Skull Island*, 2017 and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, 2019) sliding further into nonsensical spectacle and divorce from reality.

The estimated budget of each franchise film amounts to just under half a billion dollars, providing them all with a substantial quantity of computer-generated effects. Sadly, while *Godzilla vs. Kong* is yet another demonstration of the scale and complexity of modern film technology, its impressive visuals and astounding sound design cannot hide the absence of artistic value.

The MonsterVerse franchise appears to be substantially influenced by the original Toho *Godzilla* films (1954-1975) during the Showa era (which refers to the reign of Emperor Shōwa [Hirohito] 1926 to 1989). While the 1954 *Godzilla* and some of the other films dealt with serious themes, this series quickly devolved, turning toward childish themes and *kaiju* ["strange beast" or giant monster] battles, mostly lacking any depth or critical thought. Unfortunately, the worst elements of this era have come to embody what most viewers think of when hearing about the *Godzilla* franchise. Whether consciously created with this influence in mind or not, *Godzilla vs. Kong* and the rest of the MonsterVerse franchise succumb to the same mindless excesses.

In terms of its plot, the movie borders on the embarrassing. It takes incredible leaps in logic,

conjures up baseless character motivation out of thin air and kills off antagonists, all with virtually no explanation. The film opens with *Godzilla* attacking the facilities of Apex Cybernetics (a fictitious tech corporation) for some unknown reason. Apex and its founder, Walter Simmons (Demián Bichir), are later revealed to be developing Mechagodzilla (a giant robotic copy of *Godzilla*) to exterminate the remaining monsters and protect humanity from future threats.

In Simmons's character lies the only semblance of a message or idea in the movie. In the presentation of Simmons as the symbol of out-of-touch humanity hell-bent on playing God and bending nature to its will and his ultimate downfall at the hands of his creation, the film paints a rather unsettling, Nietzschean picture. Other than this surface-level theming, Simmons and the rest of the Apex goons remain flat and often cartoonish. Yet, the nihilistic attitude becomes even grosser through the movie's promotion of conspiracy theories held by the other human characters set up in opposition to Apex and Simmons. While used partially for comedy, the fact that the movie attempts to make individuals expounding on ignorant and right-wing conspiracies into its heroes is ridiculous at best and reactionary at worst.

While Simmons has no regard for the cost of human life and the social toll his operations create, the film itself seems to suffer from the same lack of focus. Both *Godzilla* and *Kong* lay waste to the sites they fight at, destroying hundreds of homes and likely killing and injuring thousands. Only short cutaway shots of panicked people stampeding into subways pay any attention to the rest of humanity. As the main cast of human characters is mostly insufferable or

uninteresting, the lack of this general perspective results in an empty movie detached from reality. Alexander Skarsgård, Rebecca Hall, Kyle Chandler, Lance Reddick and a number of other talented performers are unaccountably on hand.

By comparison, in the significantly better 1954 *Godzilla*, the presence and brutality of Godzilla are both purposeful and expressed through the toll they take on humanity. The 1954 film takes a starkly political stance, creating in Godzilla a symbol of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by US imperialism. After being revived and mutated by the detonation of nuclear weapons, the monster, an ancient sea creature, now radioactive and armed with atomic breath, directs its wrath against Japan. Numerous scenes of widespread carnage, eerily reminiscent of the American atomic bombings, unfold as Godzilla continues his assault, unfazed by every conventional military attack.

Godzilla's devastation of Tokyo in the original film leads the researcher character Dr. Daisuke Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata) to agree to utilize his findings as a weapon. Fearing his weapon's success would result in its duplication and usage by other world powers, Serizawa burns all of his research. He ultimately decides to eliminate the creature and himself with the weapon, dubbed the "Oxygen Destroyer" for its ability to disintegrate oxygen atoms. This aspect of the 1954 film once again echoes the creation of the nuclear bomb, and the movie ends with the worry that another Godzilla could arise in the future.

Godzilla vs. Kong lacks all of the 1954 *Godzilla*'s depth and intrigue, which, while simple, remains impactful and thought-provoking. The MonsterVerse take on Godzilla removes much of the critical edge in Godzilla's symbolism and origin, making him into a force of nature and a functional anti-hero. Gone is Godzilla's mindless path of destruction in the 1954 film, replaced in *Godzilla vs. Kong* merely with a drive to block Kong's challenge to his position as alpha-predator and stop Apex's goal to destroy and replace him.



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