

Godzilla Minus One: A little more thoughtful approach to the genre

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8 February 2024

Godzilla Minus One, directed by Takashi Yamazaki and produced by longtime franchise producer Toho, premiered at the Toho Cinema's theater on October 18, 2023, and has since gone on to become a global box office success.

It is the 37th film in the *Godzilla* franchise, Toho's fourth remake of the original 1954 film, and the second film in the franchise's ongoing *Reiwa* era (referring to the Toho-produced films created since 2016, in conjunction with the ascendancy of Naruhito as Japan's latest emperor on May 1, 2019). It became the sixth-highest grossing Japanese film to have played in the US only days after its international release. It is the most successful live-action Japanese film of all time and the highest-grossing film in the *Godzilla* franchise.

Minus One is the immediate predecessor to *Shin Godzilla* (2016), which re-imagines Godzilla as identified with the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Drawing from concrete events, *Shin Godzilla* deals directly with the immense crisis within Japanese ruling circles exposed during the disastrous handling of the nuclear meltdown.

The new film has struck a nerve among audiences far wider than the typical fans of the *kaiju* (giant monster) genre, which has become an unfortunate mainstay of modern filmmaking. It takes a noticeably more sensitive approach toward its human subjects. "It's the rare *kaiju* movie that cares this deeply about the inner lives and motivations of the people scurrying out of the way of the monster's ginormous thudding feet," noted a recent *Slate* article.

Godzilla Minus One (a reference to Japan's desolate state in the days after World War Two) borrows heavily from the 1954 original. The latter, despite its elements of kitsch (more on this below), was a generally moving statement in opposition to the horrors of nuclear war.

Briefly, the plot begins at the tail end of World War II, in 1945, with the US closing in on mainland Japan. Kamikaze pilot K?ichi Shikishima (Ryunosuke Kamiki) lands at an island base for repairs, seeking to avoid being forced to commit suicide in the war effort. The base is attacked by a giant dinosaur. The entire unit is wiped out aside from K?ichi and one other, who witnesses the former's cowardice when faced with the monster.

Returning to Tokyo, K?ichi finds much of Tokyo burned by US firebombings and his family dead. He meets Noriko (Minami Hamabe), a young woman whose family has also perished in the raids, and her adopted child Akiko, whom she has rescued. The three form an unlikely bond, with Noriko and Shikishima growing closer.

With shanties for dwellings and starvation commonplace, Shikishima and Noriko struggle to keep body and soul together. This is all done well: one not only identifies with the struggles of these common people, but wishes to see their lives stabilize.

K?ichi finds work on a mine sweeper, as one of his shipmates explains that "the US and imperial navies laid 60,000 mines off the Japanese coast." He states that both navies laid "all kinds, but the worst is the American magnetic mines. Any approaching boat made of metal sets them off."

In a montage, a nuclear test at Bikini Atoll (conducted by the US) mutates Godzilla, creating a radioactive monster that soon attacks Ginza, killing tens of thousands and destroying many of the city's remaining buildings. In a horrific scene recalling the 1954 film's hauntingly memorable Tokyo attack scene, Godzilla unleashes an atomic blast, effectively vaporizing parts of the city as entire families are turned to ash. It is as though a third nuclear attack has been

launched...

The final chapter of the film involves Ginza's survivors, without the support of the Japanese or US governments, hatching a scientific approach to kill Godzilla and protect all those involved from more needless deaths.

As noted above, there are truthful elements at work here and others that are not as effective. *Minus One* thrives best when dealing with its human characters and their interactions in the reality that the monster generates. The feelings of loss, instability, poverty and physical and mental anguish bound up with the postwar period in Japan expressed in the first half of the film have connected with audiences, in Japan and elsewhere.

One cannot help but see in the seemingly unstoppable Godzilla an artistic representation or generalized image of the war danger that currently threatens humanity. US imperialism, with the support of Japan and its other allies, is fueling and directing the Israel-led genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. It is likewise planning a horrific clash with China, another nuclear-armed power.

The film's attention to the horrors inflicted by militarism and the devaluation of human life by the great powers, at a time when ruling class representatives internationally are promoting attacks on democratic rights and now in numerous cases, fascism, strikes a chord.

However, these strengths are blunted by *Minus One's* tendency, unsurprising in the genre, to avoid direct analysis and criticism of the forces responsible for the havoc presented.

Yamazaki's film avoids an indictment of the US occupation, nuclear bombing or the results of Japanese imperialism's crimes. One gets a sense that the filmmakers—either due to the interests of Toho, themselves or the Japanese government—don't want to address the historical forces and the political actors responsible.

(The 1954 original paints Godzilla as a product of US actions while setting out how the scientific development of nuclear fission, represented by the fictional "oxygen destroyer" weapon, becomes a deadly tool of destruction).

While criticisms of the US are noticeably absent,

critiques of the Japanese government are present. In an interview with the *Verge* last December, director Yamazaki, described writing the script for the movie at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It was right in the middle of the pandemic when I was first writing that script," Yamazaki recounted to the *Verge*. "In those early first few weeks, we had the sense of, 'Hey, the government's not doing anything. This is going to be up to us.'"

Yamazaki continued, "I wanted this script to reflect the feeling of people realizing that, presented with a problem like Godzilla, they would have to rise to the occasion themselves to survive."

There are, unfortunately, unavoidable elements of kitsch and vulgarity in the film. One senses the filmmakers being torn between the desire to create a genuinely moving depiction of conditions in postwar Japan and the pressure to administer to the needs of a Hollywood-type "blockbuster." The result is that the film undermines its own seriousness when one is torn away from the *genuine* drama onscreen by a lumbering, nuclear CGI monster.

This is, of course, what has become of the Godzilla franchise in its seven-decade history. One awaits with headache medicine in hand the newest installment of the *Godzilla x Kong* Legendary Pictures "monsterverse" sequel slated for this spring.

Despite *Minus One's* weaknesses, it is a step away from the typical bombast, with a strong anti-war message which audiences have reacted to positively.



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