

My first thought walking out of the theater after watching *Godzilla Minus One* was “why can’t we have movies like this anymore in Hollywood”? Sure, I could do without the strangely big-footed and short-armed CGI abomination that was the titular creature or the old-fashioned cinematography and sound-mixing of the opening scene on Odo Island (possible due to budgeting constraints), but movies used to *mean* something. And I don’t mean in some bombastic, prophetic way, but certainly, movies used to mean something to the characters in them. How come we get a complete examination of Indy’s relationship with his father with a resolution as powerful as him giving up the Holy Grail in 1989, but in 2023, Indy’s family relationship is magically repaired with a couple of hand waves and one-liners? How come all we get in Hollywood’s *Monsterverse* are big explosions and “epic” battles when one of the most heartfelt stories of the year can be told with the same IP at a fraction of the budget?

Godzilla is simply a plot element in *Godzilla Minus One*, yet somehow I think that movies in the franchise are the strongest when this is true. Of course moviegoers are rewarded with an extremely daring, quite exhilarating, and slightly optimistic plan to defeat the seemingly invincible Godzilla, but this is something that is generally expected in movies of basically any quality. However, the movie serves more as a retrospective into Japanese post-war life; remove Godzilla and replace it with any disaster, say a nuclear power plant meltdown (I don’t know if this would actually work), and the underlying message remains the same.

At its heart, the movie is inherently anti-war. “My war isn’t over yet” is maybe the most powerful line that I heard in theaters this year; the gravity that comes with it, the fact that the conflict that settled 3 years ago is still causing irreversible damage to Koichi’s relationships, illuminates the burden on Koichi’s shoulders. It’s *his* fault that the squadron died on Odo Island. Disgraceful soldiers like *him* are what caused Japan to lose the war. *His* failures to go through with his duties as a kamikaze pilot led to the firebombings of Tokyo. He did not *deserve to survive*. He’s a coward and never should have come back. As irrational as all these thoughts may seem, they are all **told**, not thought, explicitly **told** to him by people throughout the movie.

This year, *Ahsoka* spent an entire episode with Anakin Skywalker so that he could teach an important Jedi lesson to Ahsoka: that she should “choose to live”! It’s not until you are shown the perspective of someone who feels that they do not deserve to live, to dream, that it becomes apparent that living is truly a choice. Godzilla is a physical manifestation of all of Koichi’s guilt, and it is fitting that it is the cause of Odo Island squadron and Noriko’s death. Just for the sake of spelling it out, Godzilla directly parallels the war: first Koichi feels he is at fault for being a coward and as a result his family dies. The rest of the runtime serves to disentangle this cause-and-effect chain for Koichi; he is not at fault for any of these deaths.

It’s also fitting that at the beginning of the film, it’s clear that the soldiers are scapegoated given Sumiko’s reaction to seeing Koichi alive, and the Japanese are very much still stuck in the mindset of “it’s an honor to sacrifice your life for the country”. However, as time progresses, the sentiment of the country is clearly moving away from this, culminating in Captain’s line: “not seeing war is something to be proud of”. I feel that this is nicely bundled with Tachibana’s forgiveness of Koichi to deliver the potentially predictable twist that Koichi decided to live. This is

a clear juxtaposition from what Koichi and Japan as a whole thought heroes looked like at the beginning of the film.

There is a tendency to “overact” in this movie from my perspective, but this may just be a difference between Japanese and Western cinema/culture. Some of the scenes felt slightly off to me. For example, Koichi’s anger at the suggestion that the war should have lasted longer and his mental breakdown about surviving Godzilla seem unrealistic or at least not how I’d imagine it to go. These moments are few and far between though (those two scenes are basically the only ones that stuck out to me).

SPOILERS!

One thing I can’t seem to stop gravitating towards is the death and subsequent resurrection of Noriko. It felt like a pretty bold choice to kill off an important character so early, and the reversal of such a decision was a bit weak. I understand the temptation to end the film on a happy ending and hammer home the idea that “choosing life” is important (given the future can be unexpected), but I felt like the film worked just fine without this.

Overall, the CGI and strange (maybe I just don’t understand this) cinematography/sound-mixing/acting are not much of a detriment to such a layered though predictable story. I’d say **8.1/10**.