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Is Your War over Now? Nationalism, Nostalgia, and Japan's Long Postwar from *Gojira* (1954) to *Godzilla Minus One* (2023)

William M. Tsutsui

Office of the Chancellor, Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS 66067, USA; bill.tsutsui@ottawa.edu

Abstract: This essay explores the political dynamics of the Godzilla film franchise over the past 70 years, arguing that critical and scholarly characterizations commonly oversimplify the movies' complicated messages, which reflect the complex, often contradictory responses of Japanese film-makers and audiences to the experiences of war, the atomic bombings, defeat, occupation, lasting subordination to the United States, and a seemingly endless postwar period. The analysis focuses on Honda Ishirō's *Gojira* (1954), in which pacifist sentiments are tempered by depictions of military weaponry and patriotic pride, and Yamazaki Takashi's *Godzilla Minus One* (2023), where ahistorical narratives, misty-eyed nostalgia, and ultranationalist tropes co-exist with strong anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment themes. By contextualizing these two films within the contested history of early postwar Japan and the polarized politics of the early twenty-first century, this essay suggests that the Godzilla series has shown remarkable continuities over time and has captured the profound ambivalence with which the Japanese people have negotiated memory, nationalism, and the charged relationship between Japan and the United States since the end of World War II.

Keywords: Godzilla; kaijū; Yamazaki Takashi; nationalism; nostalgia; militarism; populism; memory; World War II

1. Introduction

For most of its now 70-year history, the Godzilla film series has been regarded as light-hearted, apolitical mass entertainment, a prime example of the “plethora of nudity, teenage heroes, science-fiction monsters, animated cartoons and pictures about cute animals” that critic Donald Richie once described as the staples of postwar Japanese popular cinema (Richie 1990, p. 80). Until the early twenty-first century, when the kaijū features produced by Tōhō studios began to attract more serious scholarly and critical attention, the Godzilla movies were widely dismissed as “catchpenny productions [with] faded American stars in featured roles, abysmal dubbing, [and] uneven special effects” (Baxter 1970, p. 77). Even when the films did address topical issues in Japan, from rampant postwar consumerism in *Mothra* vs. *Godzilla* (Honda Ishirō, 1964) to the pollution crisis in *Godzilla* vs. *Hedorah* (Banno Yoshimitsu, 1971), their commentary on contemporary political and social concerns was often written off as frivolous satire, a cynical exploitation of current events, or simple marketing hoopla. Global audiences, who only experienced Japanese science-fiction pictures in extensively edited international versions, seemed to expect little substantive cultural commentary from giant monster movies, cheering and chuckling at one “hoho from Tōhō” after another (Doherty 1988, p. 170).

With the belated global release of *Gojira* (Honda Ishirō, 1954) in 2004, a reappraisal of the Godzilla franchise was soon evident. After decades of mistakenly assuming that *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (Honda credited with Terry O. Morse, 1956), the heavily reworked, “whitewashed” Hollywood edit of the 1954 Japanese film, was the original entry in the franchise, international scholars, critics, and viewers expressed newfound respect for *Gojira* as a pathbreaking anti-nuclear “statement movie” (Ryfle 2014; Alt 2023). Academic research that placed the series within the shifting political, social, and economic



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contexts of postwar Japan (and that has only grown more rich and diverse over the years) brought new attention to the broader historical relevance and sometimes pointed messages of Godzilla and other kaijū films (Igarashi 2000; Tsutsui 2004; Tsutsui and Ito 2006). This new sensitivity to a political Godzilla also grew from an increasing awareness of popular culture products—from Hello Kitty to Hollywood’s “big bug” movies of the Cold War era—as texts worthy of scholarly analysis that reflect (and shape) social norms and frame cultural critiques (Tsutsui 2007). Moreover, with increasing political polarization in societies and mass media globally, the tendency of moviegoers (as well as professional critics) to engage with (and assess) popular cinema using politically inflected lenses has surged.

After a long hiatus following the disappointing critical and box-office performance of the fiftieth-anniversary film *Godzilla: Final Wars* (Kitamura Ryūhei, 2004), Tōhō’s Godzilla returned to the screen in 2016 with arguably the most politically charged picture in the series since *Gojira*. *Shin Godzilla* was a radical departure from its immediate predecessors in the franchise, boasting a renowned director (Anno Hideaki, with Higuchi Shinji) known for producing challenging, popular animated features, a storyline that addressed the still-raw traumas of Japan’s 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, and a perspective that harshly critiqued Tokyo’s sclerotic political establishment while simultaneously celebrating the capacity and effectiveness of the Japanese state (Ryfle 2016; Tsutsui 2016). Described by Thomas Lamarre as a “rebuild” of the 1954 *Gojira* (Lamarre 2022), *Shin Godzilla* proved a commercial success in Japan and in limited international release, demonstrating to Tōhō that more thoughtful, topically relevant, and even provocative Godzilla films were appealing in the early twenty-first-century entertainment marketplace.

Godzilla Minus One (Yamazaki Takashi, 2023), a bold reimagining of the monster’s origins set in the immediate aftermath of World War II, brought unprecedented global attention and acclaim to Tōhō’s Godzilla. Leveraging the seventieth anniversary of the series, the popularity of Legendary’s *MonsterVerse* films (which have featured Godzilla since 2014), and the buzz of controversy surrounding *Oppenheimer* (Christopher Nolan, 2023) and its treatment of the development of nuclear weapons, *Godzilla Minus One* broke box-office records in the United States, won the first Academy Award in the franchise’s history, and inspired raptures from fans and some commentators. For all the hoopla, however, the movie proved divisive critically: while audiences were enthusiastic, film critics in Japan and internationally had a mixed response, and many academics were pointedly negative, even hostile, taking the film to task for an allegedly toxic nationalist message. Such polarization was hardly surprising, given that *Godzilla Minus One* was directed by the celebrated—some would say notorious—Yamazaki Takashi, whose nostalgic and crowd-pleasing films that often focus on World War II and its legacies have been consistently controversial in Japan. Just as *Godzilla Minus One* may well be the most commercially successful film in the Japanese franchise, so it may also prove to be the most earnestly discussed, actively debated, and politically contentious Godzilla feature ever.

This article will examine the Tōhō Godzilla in a political context, not by surveying each film in the series’ now seven-decade span, but by focusing on the two films bookending it, *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One*, both of which have been widely interpreted as speaking directly to timely domestic and international political issues. Beginning with *Godzilla Minus One* and the divided response to it from fans, critics, and scholars, the article will analyze Yamazaki’s addition to the franchise from the perspective of Japan’s immediate postwar history and in light of contemporary political discourse in Japan regarding war memory, nostalgia, and nationalism. The article will then revisit the 1954 *Gojira*, nuancing the common characterization of it as a transparent and coherent anti-nuclear, pacifist statement movie. The article will conclude by suggesting that the reception and interpretation of both films have frequently oversimplified their complicated and often contradictory messages, and that both *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One* show striking similarities in their treatments of the traumas and legacies of World War II in Japan. Although separated by seventy years, the two movies and the reactions to them exemplify the fractured social and political

dynamics of Japan's "long postwar" and the enduring struggles to find consensus and closure for a still unsettled history of war, defeat, and occupation (Harootunian 2000).¹

2. "Ahistoric Spectacle": *Godzilla Minus One*

In recruiting Yamazaki to write, direct, and create the special effects for the seventieth-anniversary *Godzilla* movie, Tōhō entrusted the monster to one of Japan's most acclaimed and commercially successful filmmakers, a proven "master of spectacle and sentiment". Although largely unknown internationally, Yamazaki earned the reputation of a contemporary Japanese auteur through a series of domestic blockbusters that showcased his signature "command of visual effects and . . . trustworthy read on Japan's cultural scene" (Leheny 2020, p. 2). His selection virtually guaranteed that *Godzilla Minus One* would perform well at the box office, feature a sentimental, humanistic storyline, offer stylish visual effects, address the war and its lingering psychic scars, and prove divisive politically in Japan.

Yamazaki first achieved fame through the *Always: Sunset on Third Street* trilogy (2005–2012), a nostalgic treatment of daily life in a hardscrabble Tokyo neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s.² Widely praised in Japan for creating a "world of filtered memories" (Hidaka 2017, p. 66) suffused with a warm humanism and "good hearted humor" (Leheny 2020, p. 9), the films appealed to audiences and critics alike during Japan's economically troubled "Lost Decades" by looking back—through very rose-colored glasses—to a time when the Japanese people seemed to come together to rebuild the nation. Yamazaki went on to gain notoriety for his films related to the sensitive topic of Japan's experience in World War II, notably *The Eternal Zero* (2013), about a reluctant kamikaze pilot, and *The Great War of Archimedes* (2019), a fictionalized account of the decision to build the battleship Yamato. *The Eternal Zero*, based on a novel by the controversial nationalist and historical denialist Hyakuta Naoki, proved particularly contentious and was criticized for romanticizing kamikaze, glorifying war, fetishizing military hardware, and promoting ultranationalism by commentators including the eminent animator Miyazaki Hayao (Schilling 2014; Leheny 2020). The fact that the staunchly conservative Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his wife were both outspoken admirers of Yamazaki—Abe reported being "moved" by *The Eternal Zero*—contributed to the politicized response to his films and their chilly reception by progressive critics, journalists, and scholars (Mission Accomplished: A Film About Kamikaze Pilots Gives a Worrying Boost to Nationalists 2014). Indeed, Yamazaki's works have often been cited as landmark manifestations in popular culture of a broader rightward shift in Japanese politics and society regarding questions of war memory and responsibility, remilitarization and constitutional revision, and Japanese nationalism that emerged in the 1980s, accelerated in the 1990s with the establishment of prominent ultranationalist groups like Nippon Kaigi, and intensified during Abe's two polarizing terms as prime minister from 2006 to 2007 and 2012 to 2020 (Leheny 2018; Takenaka 2016).

Godzilla Minus One ended up bearing the unmistakable stamp of Yamazaki Takashi. Set in the closing days of World War II and the first two years after Japan's surrender, the movie recast the origins of the monster while drawing heavily upon imagery (and the unforgettable Ifukube Akira score) from *Gojira*. Pivoting on a compelling human narrative and very much focused on non-elite members of Japanese society (with not a single high-ranking politician, bureaucrat, or military leader in evidence, unlike so many pictures in the franchise), *Godzilla Minus One* offered both strong storytelling and polished, imaginative special effects. Yamazaki did not shy away from political controversy (or from drawing heavily on his previous work), centering the plot on a reluctant kamikaze pilot, the makeshift family he builds after the war, and his quest (along with other Japanese veterans and, by extension, the nation as a whole) for redemption and closure. Throughout the film, from the opening shots to the monster-imploding climax, Japan's wartime military technology is very much in the spotlight, including an iconic Zero fighter spared suicide attack (only to be crushed by *Godzilla*) and the "unsinkable" destroyer *Yukikaze*. *Godzilla Minus One*—like the *Always* trilogy and *The Eternal Zero*—looks backward with misty eyes

and is suffused with a yearning for the national unity, direction, and pride that so many (especially on the political right) find lacking in contemporary Japan.

Audience and fan reactions to Yamazaki's film were rapturous: one American viewer awarded it "10 out of 5 stars" and the "Popcorn Bucket" (which measures popular response) and the "Tomatometer" (which surveys critical opinion) on the Rotten Tomatoes website both rated it 98% positive (Ferguson 2024; Rotten Tomatoes 2023). Many critics were similarly over the top in their appraisals: writing in the *Washington Post*, Lucas Trevor called *Godzilla Minus One* "nothing short of magical" (Trevor 2023) while Saitō Tamaki judged it "a masterpiece . . . comparable to *Gojira*" in the leading Japanese film magazine *Kinema Junpō* (Saitō 2024, p. 120). The visual effects—and above all the virtuoso rendering of Godzilla's rampage through the Ginza—were almost universally celebrated, but the human drama, long a weakness in the Tōhō franchise, was praised with particular enthusiasm by many moviegoers and commentators. Described as "serious and heartfelt" as well as "unusually emotional", critics called out the movie's "robust storytelling", warm humanism, and creation of characters that viewers could care about (Kuipers 2023; Brzeski 2023; Strauss 2023). *Godzilla Minus One*'s sensitive treatment of survivors' guilt and PTSD were also widely remarked upon, and Japanese reviewers, in particular, reflected on the film's somber, elegiac qualities, with one characterizing it as "a requiem for the people of the Shōwa era who were traumatized by the war" (Onda 2024, p. 140). Yamazaki's respectful deference to *Gojira*, even as he recast Godzilla's postwar genesis, and the inspiration he drew from other films in the series also won over many fans.

Despite such a warm popular reception, not to mention its resounding box-office success in Japan and the United States or its history-making Oscar for visual effects, a number of critics and many academic commentators were (to no one's surprise, given Yamazaki's reputation) outspokenly negative and sometimes downright withering in their assessments of *Godzilla Minus One*. On the most superficial level, some faulted the film for the sentimentality that Yamazaki had honed in the *Always* series and which has proven consistently popular in his work: "simplistic", "obvious", and "predictable", concluded critic Tanikawa (2024, p. 138); "chintzy" and with a "terrible script", one prominent American scholar of Japanese film opined (Gerow 2023); "schmaltzy, contrived, and emotionally manipulative", an anonymous reviewer on the Medium website asserted (WordsMaybe 2023). Even some generally positive appraisals of the movie faulted it for occasional "lumpy melodrama" (Kuipers 2023) and a panel of veteran crewmembers from the Godzilla franchise assembled by *Kinema Junpō* expressed regret that Yamazaki chose to focus so heavily on the human element at the expense of more screen time for the monster (Okazaki 2024).

Although not all commentators could even agree that *Godzilla Minus One* made "canonical use of the kaiju as a metaphor for social critique" (Brzeski 2023), the critical consensus was that it, like Yamazaki's prior blockbusters, was very much a statement movie with a pointed—and distinctly right-wing—political agenda. Two aspects of the film attracted particularly heated reactions. First was Yamazaki's treatment of the Japanese people's collective memory of World War II and the nation's history of empire, war, defeat, and postwar occupation by the United States. Critics detected in *Godzilla Minus One*'s warm glow of nostalgia the romanticization of a troubled past, a construction of memory selectively inflected by politics, and a disturbing embrace of historical revisionism. Second was the movie's apparent endorsement of resurgent Japanese nationalism and its celebration of militarism. In Yamazaki's depiction of kamikaze, his vision of the Japanese navy's postwar resurrection, and his narrative of Japan redeemed from the psychic residues of war, critics saw in *Godzilla Minus One* further evidence of a rightward tilt in twenty-first century Japanese cinema and national politics more broadly.

Godzilla Minus One, despite its setting in the rubble of war and its focus on the devastating attacks of a giant monster, has a decidedly nostalgic air. Popular perceptions of nostalgia generally regard it as "sweet" and "harmless" (Hidaka 2017, p. 8), an imaginative space of emotional retreat or psychic refuge, perhaps shading at times (and at its worst)

into excessive sentimentality or kitschiness (Becker 2023). Yet in recent decades, nostalgia has come to carry what Tobias Becker characterizes as a “sinister veneer” and now has “overwhelmingly pejorative and polemical connotations” (at least in political and academic circles) as a transparent reflection of anti-progressive tendencies and conservative agendas (Becker 2023, pp. 9, 57). Not surprisingly, particularly considering the polarized response to the *Always* films, numerous critics condemned *Godzilla Minus One* for its “misguided and troubled nostalgia” for the original 1954 *Gojira*, for the postwar ideal of the nuclear family, and (above all) for a lost sense of “Japanese perseverance” and “community spirit in the face of adversity” (WordsMaybe 2023; Kelts 2024).

The nostalgia suffusing Yamazaki’s movie is for a historical moment not remembered with great affection by most Japanese. The first two years after Japan’s defeat in World War II were “an era of black markets and shantytowns, streetwalkers and foreign soldiers, of sickness and starvation” (Alt 2023). Yamazaki depicts the physical realities, personal deprivations, and societal traumas of the time in obsessive and compelling detail. However, much like Hollywood’s “nostalgia films” of the 1970s that harkened back to the bleak days of the Great Depression (Becker 2023, pp. 151–54), *Godzilla Minus One* does not stir nostalgia for the threadbare lifestyle of 1945 so much as for an idealized vision of the Japanese people’s postwar spirit. The object of Yamazaki’s longing, captured in the stories of the protagonist’s impromptu family, the spunky crew of the *Shinsei-maru*, and the band of veterans who vanquish Godzilla, is a cohesive national community, fired by a faith in progress and hope, working collectively and energetically to rebuild a proud Japan. In this light, *Godzilla Minus One* is part of a mediascape in millennial Japan crowded with yearnings for times gone by of national consensus, direction, and optimism. Such sentiments were particularly evident in the genre of “Shōwa nostalgia” (exemplified by the *Always* trilogy) that evokes the spirit that supposedly powered Japan’s postwar high-growth economy (Hidaka 2017; Leheny 2018) and apocalyptic popular culture (from disaster and kaijū movies to anime and manga) that has long foregrounded the “social solidarity driven by shared catastrophe” (Tsutsui 2010, p. 121). The nostalgia of Yamazaki’s film goes beyond tugging sentimentally at its viewers’ heartstrings and, as Katsuyuki Hidaka characterizes “Shōwa nostalgia”, it “embodies deep criticism” of a contemporary Japanese society thought to be fragmented, purposeless, and dispirited (Hidaka 2017, p. 23). *Godzilla Minus One*, in other words, seems less an emotional, apolitical retreat than a politically engaged statement, with a message already familiar to early twenty-first-century Japanese audiences.

Beyond its gauzy haze of nostalgia, *Godzilla Minus One* was also faulted by many reviewers for its lack of historical fidelity. One blogger dismissed it as “ahistoric spectacle, flattening the socio-political landscape” (Pratt 2023) while Tanikawa Takeshi concluded that the film “lacks realism”, despite Yamazaki’s fastidious visual reconstruction of immediate postwar Japan and the remnants of its wartime military hardware (Tanikawa 2024, p. 138). The movie’s most obvious historical omission is, of course, the United States (or, at least technically, Allied) forces that occupied Japan between 1945 and 1952. Yamazaki provides a brief digression explaining that the Americans were compelled to sit on the sidelines through Godzilla’s attacks for fear of inflaming tensions with the Soviet Union, but some reviewers were indignant that he had “all but deleted the Americans from the film”: “Sidelineing the Occupation is a jarring stylistic choice. . . . At this point in history, Japan was, quite literally, American territory. U.S. soldiers were everywhere. . . . The roads were filled with American Jeeps and tanks, to which Japanese had to give right of way” (Alt 2023). Although one might well ask what standards of historical authenticity should be applied to a mass-market science-fiction feature about a 50-meter-tall, radioactive lizard destroying Tokyo, *Godzilla Minus One*’s ahistorical liberties went beyond editing out American GIs from the streets of the Ginza.

As one online critic observed, Yamazaki has evinced “little interest in interrogating what post-war Japan actually was” in any of his films (WordsMaybe 2023). In *Godzilla Minus One*, this meant that the filmmaker’s rose-colored glasses filtered out the complexities of the immediate postwar period, a time of profound political divisions between the left and

right in Japan, when the camaraderie and consensus celebrated in the movie was notably lacking in a traumatized, fractured, contentious society (Dower 1999). To some detractors, Yamazaki went beyond romanticizing the past—or at least having a very selective memory of it—to suffering from a politically inflected amnesia for inconvenient and unpleasant historical truths, seemingly affirming Michael Kammen’s observation that nostalgia is “essentially history without guilt” (Kammen 1991, p. 688). Forgotten in *Godzilla Minus One* are “an imperial past for which anyone bears responsibility” (Leheny 2018, p. 15), Japan’s role as the aggressor in World War II in the Pacific, and all the people across Asia (and beyond) who suffered from Japan’s expansionist ambitions. *Godzilla Minus One* thus participates in the longstanding practice in Japanese popular culture (including, significantly, the kaijū genre) of evading questions of accountability for the violence of empire and war, focusing instead on the victimhood of a Japanese populace betrayed by an authoritarian state and targeted by American nuclear weapons (Orr 2001; Seraphim 2006). A skeptic might well wonder how much meaningful engagement with the sensitive issue of Japan’s imperial and wartime responsibility one can expect from Yamazaki’s film considering that no other *Godzilla* feature (and precious few mainstream Japanese movies at all) have substantively addressed the topic over the past seven decades. Moreover, *Godzilla Minus One*, made by a filmmaker born in 1964, addressed audiences with no personal experience or direct memories of World War II and who, consequently, has far less acute senses of individual responsibility or collective guilt for Japan’s history of empire and war than did the moviegoers that flocked to see *Gojira* seventy years earlier (Fukuoka and Takita-Ishii 2022). In any case, there can be little question that *Godzilla Minus One*’s vision of a unified, blameless, victimized postwar Japanese public is as historically incomplete as is its depiction of an occupied Japan without occupiers.

To some critics and scholars of Japanese film, however, Yamazaki was guilty not just of sentimentalizing, editing, and cherry-picking Japan’s past for box-office success and social critique, but also of the even more cynical and politically charged act of historical revisionism. Aaron Gerow called Yamazaki out for “rewriting postwar history” (Gerow 2024), characterizing *Godzilla Minus One* as “right-wing revisionism” (Gerow 2023). Matt Alt wrote that Yamazaki’s film “flirts with the fever-dreams of nationalists, with their selective memories, and who would undoubtedly love a revised history in which Japan bounced back from the war without any outside help at all” (Alt 2023). In effectively erasing the American Occupation, the movie offers the vision of a postwar Japan unconstrained by the “postwar regime” of U.S. reforms deeply resented by the Japanese Right: the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, the new constitution imposed by the American forces in 1946, and, significantly, Article 9 of that document which famously renounced war and dictated that “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained” (Saaler 2016). From this vantage, *Godzilla Minus One* was no longer an innocuous fantasy but was insidious “alt history” (Saarinen 2023), tapping into rich veins of revisionist thought in Japan’s public sphere, echoing reactionary narratives running through contemporary Japanese pop culture, and supporting the pronounced rightward tendencies in Japanese politics and society.

To many commentators, Yamazaki’s deployment of nostalgia and manipulation of history were all part of a larger political agenda of right-wing nationalism, the celebration of war and militarism, and Japanese rearmament. Some reviewers were measured in their appraisals: commenting on Facebook, leading scholar of Japanese film Marcus Nornes accused Yamazaki of the “beautification of militarism” (17 December 2023, comment in Gerow 2023); journalist Onda Yasuko reported feeling “uneasy” about *Godzilla Minus One* and its apparent political prescriptions for contemporary Japan (Onda 2024, p. 140); and cinema historian Tanikawa Takeshi noted the “bad taste that *Godzilla Minus One* leaves in your mouth” regarding Japanese remilitarization and pointedly compared the movie to the wartime propaganda film *Shina no Yoru* [*China Nights*, Fushimizu Osamu, 1940] (Tanikawa 2024, p. 138). But other critics, especially respected figures from the academic world, were less shy about expressing outrage in their initial responses to the film on

social media.³ Poet and literary critic Suga Keijirō, for example, wrote that “the cheap self-righteous nationalism of *Minus One* is abominable and scary how it infiltrates the mind of those who are determined to live without history at all”. “It’s a disgusting film”, he concluded (17 December 2023, comment on Gerow 2023). To media studies specialist Julia Alekseyeva, Yamazaki’s film was “completely ridiculous, abhorrent, and honestly fascist” (18 December 2023, comment on Gerow 2023). Probing deeper than such provocative characterizations, Aaron Gerow, who has written extensively on nationalism in Japanese war movies, described *Godzilla Minus One* as “a narrative of Japan rearming based on its imperial armed forces, free of its pacifist constitution or world realities, an erasure than essentially elides postwar history while . . . forgetting that these same imperial forces killed millions during the war. This is a narrative the revisionist right in Japan has been spouting for years” (Gerow 2023). To Gerow, the unsubtle message of the film indicated that “the right-wing narrative is getting bolder as the country itself lurches to the right” (Gerow 2023).

Among the many aspects of *Godzilla Minus One* that attracted the ire of progressive critics were, perhaps most obviously, Yamazaki’s sensitive portrayal of kamikaze pilots, his fixation on the postwar renewal of wartime military technology (from the gleamingly refitted cruiser *Takao* to the Shinden fighter pulled from mothballs for combat with Godzilla⁴), and his celebration of Japanese masculinity redeemed triumphantly from the humiliation of defeat. Even the choice of Shikishima as the surname of the movie’s male protagonist was taken to be heavily freighted with symbolic significance. Roland Kelts has noted that Shikishima is an ancient poetic term for Japan (Kelts 2024); it is also linked etymologically with the murky origins of Japan’s imperial house, and was the name given to an Imperial Japanese Navy battleship at the turn of the twentieth century and the “Shikishima Squadron” that launched the first kamikaze attacks of the war at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944. Moreover, Tanikawa suggested that the name was a reference to Dr. Shikishima, a central character in the popular *Tetsujin 28-gō* manga and anime series, created by Yokoyama Mitsuteru in the mid-1950s and later released in the United States as *Gigantor* (Tanikawa 2024, p. 138). The implied connection between Yamazaki’s reluctant kamikaze pilot and Tetsujin 28-gō—a giant robot designed during World War II that was not completed in time to fight the Allied forces, only to be revived after the war as a superhero-like crusader for good that fought alongside Japan’s postwar Self-Defense Forces—appeared to be further evidence of *Godzilla Minus One*’s nationalist, militarist message. As one online reviewer encapsulated it, Yamazaki’s feature was “a military fetish film”, “steeped in the artifice of history”, preaching that Japanese “demilitarization was a mistake” (Saarinen 2023). As another commentator concluded, Godzilla in the twenty-first century has become “a public relations monster promoting war” (Nagasaka 2024, p. 84).

3. “Someone Has to Do It”: Complicating *Godzilla Minus One*

Yamazaki, of course, has had a great deal of experience responding to heated accusations that his films endorse reactionary political agendas. In the media firestorm over *The Eternal Zero*, for instance, he insisted that the movie’s message was far from militarist. “The film depicts the war as a complete tragedy”, Yamazaki explained, “so how can you say it glorifies war? In the end, people see what they want to see. If you think from the start that ‘this movie glorifies war’ you’re going to see it as a movie that glorifies war, no matter what” (Schilling 2014). “I wanted to make a movie that didn’t lean either to the ‘right’ or the ‘left,’” he declared (Hyakuta and Yamazaki 2013). Like *The Eternal Zero*, *Godzilla Minus One* is filled with solemn (some might say sanctimonious) condemnations of the wartime Japanese regime and the spirit of self-sacrifice that it extolled. “Come to think of it”, one character sermonizes before the ragtag outfit of veterans attacks Godzilla, “this country has treated life far too cheaply. Poorly armored tanks. Poor supply chains resulting in half of all deaths from starvation and disease. Fighter planes built without ejection seats and finally, kamikaze and suicide attacks. That’s why this time I’d take pride in a citizen-led effort that sacrifices no lives at all! This next battle is not one waged to the death, but a battle to live

for the future". *Godzilla Minus One*'s unmistakably humanistic core—which celebrates survival rather than sacrifice, shared purpose rather than submission to state dictates—seems to support Yamazaki's protestations of a more neutral (or at least less extreme) political subtext, as even a review in the left-leaning *Asahi Shinbun* agreed (Kitakoji 2023).

Yamazaki has spoken extensively to the media about his inspirations and intentions in the creation of his *Godzilla* film. "I love the original *Godzilla*", he told the Associated Press, "And I felt I should stay true to that spirit, addressing the issues of war and nuclear weapons" (Kageyama 2023). Consequently (but perhaps less intuitively), he explained, "I thought I must incorporate the suicide missions into the story because they were a large aspect of the war" (Ohara 2023). Yamazaki highlighted the historical and intergenerational imperative of his choices: "It's been 78 years since the end of the war and we may be the last generation to hear directly from those who experienced it. With this in mind, I feel that we need to pass it on to future generations in some way" (Inoue 2023, p. 16). At the same time, Yamazaki acknowledged the longstanding use of *Godzilla* (going back to the 1954 *Gojira*) to imaginatively explore contemporary anxieties in Japanese society. "I felt I needed to be conscious of a recent sense of unease, a sense that the world is sliding towards war", he told the popular magazine *Aera*. "I also feel that *Godzilla* is a reflection of the modern world and that our sense of anxiety is manifested in this film" (Yonehara 2023). Although it is unclear whether Yamazaki was thinking of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza or the possibility of hostilities in Asia precipitated by China or North Korea, an issue raised perceptively by Kelts (2024), he clearly seems to have brought timely presentist concerns as well as historical ones to *Godzilla Minus One*.

In several interviews, Yamazaki was explicit that one of the major themes in the movie was inspired in large part by Japan's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The popular wisdom in Japan has been that the government's initial efforts to control the coronavirus were, ineffective by and large, but that the nation avoided high death rates thanks to the community-spirited actions of the common people, particularly through the widespread use of facemasks and the voluntary restriction of social contacts. "When I was planning [*Godzilla Minus One*] in 2019", Yamazaki stated, "the pandemic worsened. Anxiety spread through society, with people thinking the government was unreliable and that the private sector had to do something about it" (Yonehara 2023). He expressed his hope that the movie would bring home to audiences "the reality of a government that doesn't do much in the face of national emergencies" and underline "that things do not go very well without civil initiative to resolve them" (Ntim 2023).

Godzilla Minus One, which follows a volunteer force of war survivors stepping up to save Japan from the monster with the Occupation forces AWOL and the Japanese state nowhere to be seen, is heavy-handed throughout in its condemnation of government authorities and its adulation for the spirit, bravery, and collective genius of the Japanese people. "The government is not telling the public!" one character indignantly snarls; "We can't rely on the U.S. or Japanese government. So the future of this country is in our hands", another rousing concludes. Even on a symbolic level—such as when a flotilla of tiny private tugboats miraculously turn the tide in the climactic battle with *Godzilla*, clearly evoking the movie *Dunkirk* and the "Dunkirk spirit" of citizens pulling together in the face of adversity (Fujisaki 2023)—the movie heaps scorn on the elites and praise on the common people. As Yamazaki himself has suggested, while *Shin Godzilla* was obsessed with Tokyo officialdom (*kan* in Japanese) and evinced a profound trust in the effectiveness of the Japanese state, *Godzilla Minus One* celebrates the workaday Japanese (*min*) and focuses hope for the nation's future on their communal strength (Hoichoi-teki eiga seikatsu 2023). As critic Fujisaki Taketo has suggested, Yamazaki skillfully frames the grassroots campaign to defeat *Godzilla* as "a fight to break away from the prewar militarist system and build the foundations for a new Japan" (Fujisaki 2023).

For all the life-affirming humanism, faith in the spirit of the Japanese people, agonized hindsight on the war, and cynicism about state power permeating *Godzilla Minus One*, the film resonates with many themes in the postwar Japanese genre of "war movies" that

scholars have long linked with nationalist, militarist, and historical revisionist sentiments. Isolde Standish, in her work on heroism and masculinity in the kamikaze films of the 1950s and 1960s, stressed the role of male homosocial bonding in sentimentalizing and glorifying war: “While ostensibly adopting a pacifist position through a critique of wartime ideologies [these films reaffirm] the centrality of a code of brotherhood (*sen’yūai*) as both a mechanism for control and a site of pleasure . . . as it allows men to express an intensity of emotion prohibited in society under more ‘normal’ conditions” (Standish 2000, p. 79). Aaron Gerow, in his valuable study of millennial Japanese war movies, notes numerous tropes from films like *Lorelei* (Higuchi Shinji, 2005) and *Aegis* (Sakamoto Junji, 2005) that Yamazaki would later channel in *Godzilla Minus One*. Beyond the prominence of “homosocial camaraderie”, among the many commonalities are a palpable sense of “crisis in patriarchal leadership”, protagonists that live on after battle, the ubiquity of “children missing parents”, and the transformation of warfare “from the horrible space of killing to a more benevolent and less offensive practice of defending against an attack” (Gerow 2006, pp. 5, 7, 10). In this context, *Godzilla Minus One*—with its all-male bands on Odo Island, aboard the *Shinsei-maru*, and in the decisive assault on the monster; a pseudo-family composed entirely of war orphans; an aggressive non-human enemy; and its heroic narrative of redemption—appears to politically sanitize resurgent patriotic feelings, romanticize the experience of war, and affirm Japanese remilitarization in time-honored ways.

Despite the anti-elitist appeal of Yamazaki’s celebration of Japanese citizens stepping in for an absent state at a moment of crisis, this too has raised concerns over the deeper political implications of *Godzilla Minus One*. Kelts has not been alone in suggesting that Yamazaki brought a distinctly “populist lens” to his *Godzilla* film (Kelts 2024). Although once associated primarily with democratic, anti-establishment values, populism has (like nostalgia) come to take on increasingly pejorative connotations globally in the early twenty-first century, particularly since the rise of Donald Trump and the emergence of a range of demagogic, nativist movements around the world. Although scholars generally agree that right-wing populism—with its easy embrace of authoritarianism, neo-nationalism, and social conservatism—has not found the same fertile ground in Japan as in United States or Europe (Fahey et al. 2021), many aspects of its political agenda do echo through Japan’s right-wing activist movements as well as Yamazaki’s films. At the same time, the populist storyline of *Godzilla Minus One* evokes the Japanese concept of *gekokuujō*, “the low overthrowing the high”. Originally used in medieval warrior society, the term gained new currency in the interwar period when it was applied to a series of violent acts by renegade Japanese military units seeking to drive political change, particularly militarist, expansionist, and non-democratic policies (Orbach 2017). Perhaps with this in mind, several Japanese critics expressed uneasiness that Yamazaki’s band of military veterans take matters into their own hands (including the appropriation of destroyers and a fighter plane) to confront *Godzilla* rather than demanding that their rightful government take action (Onda 2024; Fujisaki 2023).

Even considering all these concerns, concluding that *Godzilla Minus One* is as transparently reactionary or “honestly fascist” as some commentators have maintained seems to be an analytical stretch. A few critics have found unexpected aspects of Yamazaki’s film that complicate easy assumptions about its political leanings. Kawamoto Saburō, who famously theorized that *Godzilla* embodied the souls of Japan’s war dead from Asia and the South Pacific, compared *Godzilla Minus One* and its humanistic message to the acclaimed 1950s antiwar novel and movie *Fires on the Plain* (Kawamoto 2024). Saitō Tamaki makes the acute observation that when Yamazaki’s *Godzilla* shoots its radioactive ray toward the Japanese Diet building, the resulting nuclear explosion must have engulfed the nearby Imperial Palace; as the emperor’s residence had always been sacrosanct in previous cinematic raids by *Godzilla* through Tokyo, *Godzilla Minus One* thus “breaks a taboo, but not explicitly” (Saitō 2024, p. 120). And significantly, the film’s populist perspective is, like its nostalgia, less easy to pigeonhole as unabashedly conservative or nationalistic when framed in broader historical and contemporary political and cultural contexts. Yamazaki’s

uplifting and idealized “people power” does not appear authoritarian or socially reactionary, except perhaps in its gender politics, which suggest that women are sacrificed in their supporting roles while men lead and survive. Instead, the populism of *Godzilla Minus One* seems more a pragmatic response from a populace used to being let down by their government: “Someone has to do it!” hardly seems like the most rousing rallying cry, but it galvanizes the navy veterans off to battle the monster. In this respect, the film resonates with other contemporary Japanese popular culture, which shares a weary frustration with state ineptitude or absence. As Thomas Lamarre notes, in the acclaimed 2016 animated movie *Your Name* (Shinkai Makoto), a group of teenagers “band together and engage in direct action, taking out the electric grid to save a small rural town from destruction” after being dismissed by local government authorities (Lamarre 2022, p. 95).

Surprisingly, Yamazaki’s populism takes on a far different political cast when contextualized in the polarized and fluid historical moment in which *Godzilla Minus One* is set. In the immediate wake of the surrender, and with the encouragement of the U.S. Occupation, radical political thought and labor activism blossomed across Japan. Among the distinctive strategies adopted by assertive left-wing unions at the time was an unorthodox form of workplace struggle called “production control” (*seisan kanri*). Instead of walking off the job on strike, under production control a company’s workers and union locked out corporate management and assumed direct operation of the means of production themselves. This was, of course, an extremely radical act as it “flouted traditional rights of private property” and challenged the legitimacy (and efficacy) of the entire capitalist order (Moore 1983, p. xvi). One of the most famous examples of this militant strategy in action was at Tōhō studios where, in a series of three bitter disputes between 1946 and 1948, the Communist union took over day-to-day management and filmmaking before Occupation concerns over the revolutionary potential of production control eventually precipitated intervention by American armored cars and tanks (Anderson and Richie 1982, pp. 165–71). For all the journalistic ink spilt vilifying Yamazaki’s political agenda, the fact that *Godzilla Minus One* provides such a textbook example of production control in action—with a party of experienced sailors bypassing an ineffective government, taking charge of the means of production (or, in this case, destruction), and ultimately protecting Japan far more successfully than the discredited elites ever could have—further complicates simplistic caricatures of the film and its message.⁵

As the polarized critical reaction suggests—and historical contextualization seems to confirm—*Godzilla Minus One* defies easy political characterization and is more complex (or at least less coherent) in its messages than many commentators have assumed. On the one hand, Yamazaki’s feature can be seen to shine with idealism, humanism, a communitarian spirit, and heartwarming nostalgia; to be sincere in its sharp criticism of the wartime state (and its pointed commentary on Japan’s current one); and to champion a kind of activist, progressive populism for the workaday Japanese let down and abandoned by their leaders. On the other hand, *Godzilla Minus One* can also be read as a “sequel to *The Eternal Zero*” (Gerow 2024) which, behind kaijū window-dressing and manipulative sentimentality, recycles longstanding themes and narrative strategies deployed by Japan’s extreme right wing to support a dangerous agenda of militarism, historical revisionism, nationalism, and reactionary populism. If indeed *Godzilla Minus One* is a statement movie, then that statement is far from obvious. As a look back at the very start of the franchise—and the *Godzilla* film generally considered to be the most unequivocal in its political commentary—suggests, however, messages that seem inconsistent, contradictory, and uncertain are not a unique feature of *Godzilla Minus One*, but may well have characterized the series over seven decades.

4. “Victory at Last!”: *Gojira*

Over the twenty years since it was released internationally, the 1954 *Gojira* has been lionized as a pioneering and globally significant masterpiece of anti-nuclear and antiwar cinema.⁶ Now widely accepted as a “highly politicized” movie (Ryfle and Godziszewski

2017, p. 97), *Gojira* has been understood as a transparent reflection of the popular anxieties of a fraught historical moment in early Cold War Japan and of the personal experiences and principles of its creator, director Honda Ishirō. “When I returned from the war and passed through Hiroshima”, Honda later recalled, “there was . . . a fear the earth was already coming to an end. That became the basis for the film” (Tsutsui 2004, pp. 32–33). Aimed at a domestic audience traumatized by a decade that brought the dawn of the atomic age, unconditional surrender, occupation by a former enemy, and the rising specter of global nuclear apocalypse, *Gojira* provided not just entertainment but also offered the promise of a therapeutic, cathartic, and personally relevant experience to moviegoers whose memories of World War II remained raw, unsettled, and increasingly entangled with the divided politics of the time. *Gojira* is now generally regarded as “the most important and enduring postwar monster movie” and “one of the great anti-nuclear films, comparable in its power and pacifism to Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr Strangelove* . . . and Stanley Kramer’s *On the Beach*” (Ryfle 2005, pp. 54, 57). The movie has come to be so deeply associated with the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and with an anti-nuclear, pacifist call to action as to become “something of a cliché” (Lamarre 2022, p. 97).

Yet for a film now taken to be so strong and unambiguous in its political message, *Gojira* has not always been seen as such an obvious and deliberate statement movie. As religious studies scholar Yuki Miyamoto has explored, Honda was inconsistent later in his life in explaining his intentions in *Gojira*: while his widow Kimi insisted that Honda was sincere in his anti-nuclear views, the director told one critic that the film lacked “any sort of social critique” and admitted to another that the nuclear focus was simply an expedient and timely plot device (Miyamoto 2016, pp. 1102–3). One of the crew on *Gojira*, assistant director Kajita Kōji, maintained that Honda had no political ax to grind, later declaring that the picture was conceived “purely as an entertainment work, and [it was not Honda’s] intention to advocate the abolition of the atomic bomb” (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, p. 103). Reviews at the time (and scholarly reaction in the subsequent decades) were often skeptical about the movie’s political commentary. *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther famously dismissed any possibility of substance in *Gojira* (or at least in the highly edited *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*):

One might remotely regard [Godzilla] as a symbol of Japanese hate for the destruction that came out of nowhere and descended upon Hiroshima one pleasant August morn. But we assure you that the quality of the picture and the childishness of the whole idea do not indicate such calculation. Godzilla was simply meant to scare people. (Crowther 1956)

Some Japanese commentators took similarly trivializing perspectives when the movie first appeared, refusing to believe that a science-fiction special-effects feature could have a compelling political agenda (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, pp. 104–5). A few scholars have subsequently affirmed these interpretations, discounting *Gojira* for its “easy moral certainties” (Napier 1993, p. 331) and Honda for indulging in a simplistic “fantasy of futuristic monsters, at the cost of confronting the monstrous reality of the past” (Cavanaugh 2001, p. 252).

If the intent and effectiveness of *Gojira* as a statement movie has not always gone unchallenged, so the specific message of the film has proven far less “simple” and “univocal” than is now commonly assumed (Miyamoto 2016, p. 1091). As closer scrutiny and broader historical contextualization reveals, the retrospective ascription of political clarity to *Gojira* obscures its complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. In fact, there are far more similarities between the iconically anti-nuclear and pacifist *Gojira* and the reputedly nationalist, militarist, and revisionist *Godzilla Minus One* than reductive media caricatures and academic pigeonholing might suggest. As Thomas Schnellbächer noted over twenty years ago, an overlooked but defining characteristic of *Gojira* (and, it turns out, *Godzilla Minus One* as well) is the “co-existence of conservative and progressive messages” (Schnellbächer 2002, p. 387).

For a celebrated antiwar movie, *Gojira* featured a remarkable range of gleaming military hardware in exhilarating action against the monster. In addition to scenes depicting Japan's postwar Self Defense Forces assisting with crowd control, evacuating civilians, and aiding the injured, the film provides a visual catalog of Japan's limited military arsenal at the time: machine guns and howitzers are futilely deployed against Godzilla, light tanks bearing the *Hinomaru* flag roll to Tokyo's defense, jets emblazoned with the rising sun fire missiles at the rampaging creature, and minesweepers drop depth charges to the rousing martial rhythm of Ifukube Akira's "Frigate March". Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie could hardly have been more wrong in their declaration that "The temper of the Japanese populace in the mid-1950s was such that no film which in any way favored the Self Defense Forces and rearmament could have been successful at the box office; hence none were made" (Anderson and Richie 1982, p. 269). As one historian has concluded of the "upbeat—one might almost say gung-ho—depiction of Japan's military" in *Gojira*, Honda's picture seems "a kind of military pornography, allowing the guilt-ridden, chastened, and disarmed Japanese public to indulge its illicit (and explicit) martial fantasies on the silver screen" (Tsutsui 2004, pp. 96–97). Although it is far less obsessive in its focus on military technology than *Godzilla Minus One*, *Gojira* similarly fetishizes the tools of war and luxuriates in scenes of armed combat.

In a curious coincidence, just as *Godzilla Minus One* was the third of Yamazaki Takashi's major films to take World War II as its subject, so Honda Ishirō had directed two blockbusters about Japan's wartime experience immediately prior to *Gojira*. In *Eagle of the Pacific* (1953), an epic naval war picture, Honda dramatized the story of the reluctant hero Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku; in *Farewell Rabaul* (1954), a melodrama set at a remote island airbase, he portrayed a squadron of Japanese fighter pilots haunted by death and doubt. Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski, while acknowledging that *Eagle of the Pacific* "glorifies the bravery of military men and the excitement of battle", described these films and *Gojira* as Honda's "antiwar trilogy", stressing their inherent humanism, explicit criticisms of Japan's wartime leadership, and sensitivity to the tragedies of war (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, pp. 72, 75). Yet some historians have interpreted these works far differently, placing them within a substantial body of early postwar war films (numbering as many as 175 released between 1945 and 1963) that "were often surprisingly positive in their portrayal of Japanese soldiers" (Wilson 2013, p. 539). Even some overseas observers at the time, including American critic A.H. Weiler, worried that rousing action movies like *Eagle of the Pacific* were an "effort to reawaken Japanese patriotism" (Weiler 1952). With their "dramatic battle scenes" and heroic characterizations, Honda's movies (like many others at the time) "conveyed the often unexpected message to Japanese viewers that the Japanese military had been a skilled, powerful, and disciplined force that the enemy had feared rather than despised" (Wilson 2013, p. 541). This contextualization—as much as the cinematic celebration of Self Defense Forces military hardware—problematizes the easy assumption that *Gojira* was an unequivocally antiwar statement movie. As in Yamazaki's *Godzilla Minus One* (and his much maligned *The Eternal Zero*), Honda's expressions of humanism and critiques of wartime militarism in his supposed "antiwar trilogy" are tempered by the films' revels in the spectacle of war and romanticization of Japan's wartime experience.

Gojira has seldom been regarded as an explicitly nationalistic film, perhaps because Honda later earned a reputation as a cinematic champion of international understanding and cooperation (Ryfle 2019). Nonetheless, the movie is punctuated by moments expressing pride in Japan and inviting patriotic responses from viewers. The paleontologist Dr. Yamane, for instance, bemoans efforts to kill the monster, as Godzilla's resistance to radiation (like the Japanese people's endurance through atomic attacks) presents Japanese scientists with a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" for research. Later, after jet fighters drive Godzilla back into the sea after a devastating nighttime attack on the city, a crowd of onlookers cheer excitedly at the effectiveness of Japanese planes, pilots, and missiles. And, most memorably, when Godzilla is finally vanquished—by a new weapon devised by a Japanese scientist that "could lead humanity to extinction"—the assembled throng of sailors, reporters, and

technicians on the decks of ships in Tokyo Bay erupt into spontaneous jubilation: “What emotion! What joy! Victory at last!” an announcer breathlessly proclaims. “The victory here is clearly Japan’s”, one commentator later noted. “*Gojira* thus closes with a highly charged revision of the outcome of World War II”, with the nation and the Japanese people redeemed from the shame and guilt of war and defeat (Tsutsui 2004, p. 35).

If recapturing national pride is a theme in both *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One*, so too is a nostalgia-tinged yearning for consensus and community. The Japanese war movies of the 1950s, historian Sandra Wilson notes (in a line that could apply equally well to Yamazaki’s films many decades later), “catered to nostalgia about brave young fliers, tropical locations, fast planes, big ships, military comradeship and the supposed social unity of wartime” (Wilson 2013, p. 554). Made in an era of deep (and sometimes violent) fractures in Japanese politics and emerging generational cleavages in Japanese society, *Gojira* offered the vision of national crisis driving a welcome return to cohesion and purpose. An atmosphere of discord permeates most of the movie, as debates over studying or killing the monster rage, parliamentarians clash on questions of transparency and integrity, and a love triangle (played out against vast postwar shifts in gender roles and social mores) strains personal relationships. But following Godzilla’s catastrophic attacks on Tokyo, the divisions are quickly forgotten as the Japanese people come together to defeat the monster. The closing euphoria on the ships in Tokyo Bay, in addition to rewriting the end of the war, thus celebrates “the spiritual unification of the Japanese collectivity, ultimately drawn together in harmony and strength (out of the political divides, social schisms, and individual animosities that marked Japan in the 1950s) by a common foe and brief glimpse into Armageddon” (Tsutsui 2010, p. 111).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Honda brought some of the same blind spots in his view of Japan’s past to *Gojira* that Yamazaki did to *Godzilla Minus One*. While both directors turned longing eyes backwards to certain aspects of the war years, both managed to completely overlook Japan’s role as an aggressor in World War II and a brutal imperial ruler over much of Asia. Setting a pattern that would go on to characterize the franchise, *Gojira* reserved victimhood for the Japanese people: the movie repeatedly references (in dialog and visually) wartime suffering on the home front, from the experience of bomb shelters and the loss of loved ones to the firebombing of Japanese cities and the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Godzilla, following soon after the agonies of war, is thus depicted as just the latest tragedy visited upon an endlessly blameless Japanese public. One of the most widely cited interpretations of the symbolism of *Gojira*—Kawamoto Saburō’s notion of the monster representing the revenants of the war in the Pacific—affirmed the film’s reification of Japanese victimization and sacrifice: Godzilla, it seems, can readily be imagined as the embodiment of Japanese souls returning home from distant battlefield graves, still under the thrall of Japan’s imperial ideology, but never as a representation of the Asian victims of war and empire, drawn to Tokyo to exact justice or vengeance (Igarashi 2000, pp. 116–17).

Although not as explicit in its critiques of wartime and postwar Japanese government elites as *Godzilla Minus One*, *Gojira* depicts politicians with cynicism and casts doubt on the effectiveness of the state in the face of crisis. In the film’s famous scene in the Japanese Diet chamber, for instance, right-wing legislators advocate for keeping Godzilla a secret from the Japanese people and end up virtually in fistcuffs with strident leftists, drawing sighs of exasperation from Dr. Yamane and the other assembled scientists; while Honda does not openly question the trustworthiness of politicians or the value of the democratic process, his implications seem clear (Tsutsui 2004, pp. 91–92). Similarly, Godzilla’s later destruction of the National Diet Building, which was reported to have sent audiences into raucous applause when the film was first released in Japan, was surely more than just incidental damage to a prominent Tokyo landmark and carried a pointed political message (Tsutsui 2004, p. 92). Honda may well have tipped his hand earlier in *Farewell Rabaul*, when one of the characters damns Japan’s wartime regime with words Yamazaki could have cribbed verbatim 70 years later: “Japanese tactics, military thinking, and even equipment [were] all based on the principle of making light of human life. A nation that doesn’t consider

the importance of human life cannot hope to win” (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, p. 77). In the end, *Gojira* does not endorse populist visions or idealize direct challenges to state authority, as Yamazaki does in *Godzilla Minus One*, but the films share a jaundiced view of government even as they celebrate pride in the Japanese nation.

The invisibility of the U.S. Occupation in *Godzilla Minus One* may have unleashed a critical firestorm in 2023, but the fact that America is also “conspicuously absent” from *Gojira* has occasioned far less scholarly scrutiny and invective over the decades. The United States is never specifically mentioned in Honda’s film and, from historian Yoshikuni Igarashi’s perspective, “there is not even a hint of [American] responsibility in the . . . destruction of Tokyo by the monster” (Igarashi 2000, p. 115). This omission reflected, at least in part, sensitivity to U.S. media outrage over allegedly anti-American sentiments in post-Occupation Japanese cinema, especially atomic bomb and war movies, that imperiled film exports from studios like Tōhō across the Pacific (Howard 2016). Although the Occupation had been over for more than two years by the time of *Godzilla*’s first cinematic appearance, the absence of Americans is no less glaring in *Gojira* than it is in *Godzilla Minus One*. Not only were over 200,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan in 1954, but the 1951 Security Treaty specifically empowered those forces to step in to defend Japan or put down internal disturbances. Yet, while Yamazaki has been pilloried by critics for historical revisionism, Honda’s decision to excise Americans from *Gojira* has been interpreted as an inevitable outgrowth of a postwar “foundational narrative” that made expressions of resentment against the victorious United States impossible (Igarashi 2000, p. 115), being explained as a necessity to the plot (Igarashi 2000, pp. 115–16) or extolled as “an even-handed treatment of the tenuous and asymmetrical Japan-US relationship” (Ryfle and Godziszewski 2017, p. 101). All this suggests that a scholarly reappraisal of the political messages of *Gojira* is warranted in light of the controversy surrounding *Godzilla Minus One* (not to mention the furor over *Oppenheimer*’s failure to depict any Japanese), as Honda was clearly foreshadowing Yamazaki in “imagining a Japan free of postwar American dominance” (Gerow 2006, p. 11).

For all the points of continuity between *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One*, the juxtaposition of the two films reveals some notable shifts in hot-button issues and social mores in Japan (and globally) over the past seven decades. *Gojira*, of course, directly addressed several preoccupations of its day: most famously, the Japanese people’s unresolved traumas of war, firebombing, and the atomic attacks and widespread anxieties over nuclear testing and the mounting Cold War. In *Godzilla Minus One*, Yamazaki makes an obligatory nod to the atomic origins of *Godzilla* but, in the end, the monster’s radioactivity is more an opportunity for visual spectacle—a fiery mushroom cloud rising over central Tokyo—rather than an occasion for thoughtful reflection.⁷ This superficial treatment underlines the fact that even in an age of nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine, North Korean missiles flying over Japan, and ongoing repercussions from the 2011 meltdown at Fukushima, the threats that the world continues to face from nuclear war, waste, and accidents are now seldom top of the public agenda either in Japan or internationally. Similarly, *Gojira* ends with Dr. Serizawa dying “by suicide in order to both silence the monster and save the world from the destructive technologies he unleashed to do it” in an act of principled self-sacrifice which moviegoers at the time would have regarded as noble and honorable; in *Godzilla Minus One*, however, the protagonist is spared from certain death by a retrofitted ejection seat and “seems like a creature of a later era who puts his own welfare before the needs of others” (Kelts 2024). As one critic concluded, capturing the shifting moral compass of early twenty-first century Japanese society, “The message here that kamikaze pilots who survived deserve to bear neither shame nor guilt will resonate strongly with modern audiences” (Kuipers 2023).

Contextualizing *Gojira* within Japan’s war films of the 1950s (including Honda’s two preceding movies) and reconsidering it in light of *Godzilla Minus One* and the polarized debate it stirred casts considerable doubt on the easy assumption that the first film in the franchise was an uncomplicated affirmation of anti-nuclear and antiwar

ideals. *Gojira* does make strong statements about the dangers of nuclear testing and the suffering caused by war, but it also celebrates Japan's reborn postwar military, appeals to patriotic sentiments, expresses longing for an imagined past of unity, and elides America's continued presence in the nation, all of which have been overlooked or downplayed by later commentators keen to frame Honda's film in a progressive light. Even a brief analysis suggests that, at the very least, a more nuanced reading of *Gojira* is warranted. Given the considerable resonances between *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One*, however, the possibility that Honda's film should be fundamentally reassessed as being as complicated, contradictory, and potentially disturbing in its political implications as Yamazaki's 70 years later cannot be blithely ignored.

5. Conclusions

If nothing else, *Godzilla Minus One* suggests how much room for creativity and innovation remains in the Godzilla franchise, even as it shows how certain enduring issues have continued to engage both the creators and consumers of kaijū movies over the 70 years since the release of *Gojira*. In 2023 as in 1954, filmmakers and audiences have shared a fixation on finding closure and redemption from Japan's wartime experience, on seeking solace in a romanticized past of consensus and collective purpose, and on exploring ways of understanding and negotiating Japanese nationalism, rearmament, and relations with the United States during a seemingly endless postwar period. The Godzilla movies have addressed some of the specters haunting Japan since World War II therapeutically and cathartically, and (as Susan Sontag famously observed) served as desensitizers and diversions in a historical moment of pervasive anxiety (Sontag 1965). And yet, as the complex popular reactions to and critical analyses of *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One* demonstrate, the franchise has not been able to provide tidy answers to the persistent, unsettled questions tormenting Japanese society in the wake of war, atomic attacks, defeat, and occupation, offering instead only uncertain, inconsistent, and often contradictory responses.

Despite the proclivity of fans, critics, journalists, and scholars to hang reductive labels on Godzilla films—anti-nuclear, antiwar, pacifist, humanist, right-wing, fascist—ambivalence has been at the heart of those movies that have aspired (or been assumed) to offer political statements. Aaron Gerow captured the fundamental contradictions within *Godzilla Minus One* (and the franchise more broadly) by describing the film as simultaneously anti-war and pro-war, anti-kamikaze and pro-kamikaze (Gerow 2024). Such mixed messages are incongruous but perhaps not terribly surprising, and not only because of the potential perils of trying to read too much ideological coherence and analytical sophistication into what is, after all, a series of science-fiction movies for mass audiences about a giant, radioactive lizard. Such internal inconsistencies have characterized not just kaijū cinema but other related film genres and media products in postwar Japan, from the war movies that flourished in the 1950s and at the start of the new millennium (Wilson 2013; Gerow 2006) to the twenty-first-century boom in “Shōwa nostalgia” across film, anime, and television documented by Hidaka (2017). Even the works of the celebrated and outspoken pacifist Miyazaki Hayao have attracted scholarly attention for their “ambiguous” and “problematic” messages about military technology, war responsibility, and Japanese victimhood (Mizuno 2022; Napier 2018). That ambivalence over World War II and its legacies in Japan is so widespread and enduring across popular culture suggests that the messages conveyed by *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One* were not simply confused or poorly digested, but instead have replicated the profound tensions, deep fractures, and many unresolved struggles—what Akiko Hashimoto has called a “conflictive and polyphonic public discourse” of war memory (Hashimoto 2015, p. 14)—that have troubled Japanese society since 1945.

Both Honda Ishirō and Yamazaki Takashi, as successful creators of popular mass entertainment, displayed a keen awareness of the preferences and sensitivities of the audiences for their Godzilla films. Both seem to have been attentive to the lack of consensus within Japanese society as a whole and the contradictory views held by many Japanese

individually on vexing and nagging issues, perhaps most notably on the question of Japan's postwar national identity: like the makers of war movies in the 1950s and at the millennium, they appeared "very conscious of an audience that is divided and not universally supportive of militarist visions of nationalism" (Gerow 2006, p. 10). As a result, *Gojira* and *Godzilla Minus One* did not offer bold political statements or clear agendas for action, only guarded, "nominally anti-war" sentiments (Wilson 2013, p. 545), "amorphous" and "innocuous" formulations of Japanese nationalism (Gerow 2006, p. 8), and inconsistent, equivocal, and "politically correct" perspectives on Japan's past and future paths (Fujisaki 2023). The Godzilla franchise, like other forms of Japanese popular culture, has thus reflected (and, in the process, reinforced) the larger, ongoing struggles in postwar Japan to address the nation's war responsibility, the generational trauma of atomic warfare, the search for a useable past in the experience of war and defeat, and the forging of a relationship with the United States that goes beyond subservience, resentment, or revisionist amnesia.

If any more evidence was required to support the notion that Japan remains locked in a long (and some would argue endless) postwar period, one need look no further than the Godzilla franchise, as the series has returned compulsively to same persistent themes and same intractable issues from *Gojira* to *Godzilla Minus One*. Chon Noriega noted perceptively in one of the first scholarly studies of Godzilla in English that "After all, the nuclear threat the monster signifies never leaves; it is always here" (Noriega 1987, p. 75). Moreover, many commentators have argued that as long as the Japanese prove unable to move beyond the "irreconcilable sentiments" of victimhood and culpability as wartime aggressors (Wada-Marciano 2009, p. 1) and cannot look backward with a sense of responsibility, their never-ending postwar will continue (Orr 2001; Nagasaka 2024). As one Japanese critic concluded, with a clear sense of resignation, "70 years after the release of the original Godzilla film, there is no sign that the war is over" (Kitakoji 2023). For Japan, closure on World War II and release from its tenacious legacies continue to prove elusive, just like respite from Godzilla's periodic rampages through Tokyo (Seraphim 2006; Lucken and Grimwade 2017).

It is telling that, in the closing scenes of *Godzilla Minus One*, the question posed by the long-suffering (but miraculously surviving) Noriko to the tortured (but also surviving) Shikishima—"Is your war over now?"—goes unanswered, except with a pathetic whimper and a halting nod of the head. The movie then ends with the fragments of the only fleetingly suppressed Godzilla regenerating once again in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps, someday, the world will know that Japan's lingering postwar has finally come to a close when the monster—along with the burdens of Japan's contested history and unresolved traumas—can be overcome once and for all, and the credits roll on the very last Godzilla film.

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Notes

- ¹ Franziska Seraphim has suggested that "Sixty years after Japan's defeat in World War II, issues of memory remain important precisely because they are at once politically useful, personally meaningful, intellectually stimulating, and perennially interesting to the public, whether at the box office or in the bookstore" (Seraphim 2006, p. 305).
- ² *Always: Sunset on Third Street 2* (2007), the second in Yamazaki's trilogy, featured Godzilla in a cameo role. During a rousing dream sequence, filmed in black and white and with music from *Gojira*'s soundtrack, Yamazaki pays tribute to the 1954 film and foreshadows the look and feel of *Godzilla Minus One*. Yamazaki's use of Godzilla in this sentimental family drama suggests that he has long regarded the monster nostalgically as an important element in early postwar Japanese culture. One might even consider the dream sequence in *Always: Sunset on Third Street 2* Yamazaki's audition for making his own Godzilla movie. Since the global success of *Godzilla Minus One*, he has been outspoken about his desire to make a *Star Wars* film.

- 3 Academic analyses of contemporary cinema are notorious for only appearing with a substantial time lag due to the extended processes of writing, research, and peer review. Peer-reviewed scholarly studies of the 2016 film *Shin Godzilla*, for instance, only began to be published in English in 2022. While reliance on online commentary from established scholars of Japanese film may not be optimal, in the absence of published academic materials so soon after the release of *Godzilla Minus One*, this article makes use of reactions shared publicly on social media as well as published criticism by academic authors from the Japanese mass media.
- 4 *Godzilla Minus One* spawned a boom in sales of plastic models of the Shinden fighter and inspired a crowdfunding campaign to preserve the hangar in Ibaraki Prefecture where Shinden had been based and where the movie was filmed (Totsui 2024).
- 5 Seraphim observed that “the Occupation’s ‘reverse course’ policies”, of which the intervention at Tōhō was one dramatic manifestation, “convinced many progressives in Japan that ‘democracy’ was less a matter of state structure than of civic political participation. . . [A] significant number of Japanese who had embraced the earlier emphasis on demilitarization and democratization concluded that under the circumstances it was up to ‘the people’ (as opposed to the state) to bring about a democratic revolution” (Seraphim 2006, p. 319).
- 6 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this article who suggested that separating *Gojira*’s reputation as an anti-nuclear film from its characterization as an antiwar one could further complicate interpretations of its political resonances. While there was broad societal consensus on the dangers of nuclear weaponry and power (encompassing both ends of the political spectrum) in Japan in the early 1950s, antiwar sentiments were associated with the political left and especially the Japan Socialist Party and the Japan Communist Party (Cai 2008). Further research on the implications of this observation are warranted.
- 7 Tanikawa Takeshi makes the interesting observation that the texture of *Godzilla*’s skin in *Godzilla Minus One* is apparently the same before and after exposure to radiation (Tanikawa 2024). In *Gojira*, it has widely been surmised, the monster’s skin was scarred by H-bomb testing, creating a texture similar to the keloids that affected the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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