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Jeffrey Angles’s English-language translation of Shigeru Kayama’s original Japanese-language novellas *Godzilla* and *Godzilla Raids Again* corrects a longstanding oversight in the scholarship of the *kaijū eiga* (giant monster movie) genre.[1] Published by the University of Minnesota Press (2023), Angles’s book not only includes his deft translation of Kayama’s two novellas but also Angles’s own afterword, titled “Translating an Icon,” which places the novellas in context within the broader framework of the monster’s legacy as well as Japanese history and culture.

The book is divided into three distinct sections. The first two are Kayama’s novellas—*Godzilla*, based on Kayama’s vision for the original 1954 film, and *Godzilla Raids Again*, likewise based on his plans for the 1955 sequel. Angles notes that although Kayama worked hand-in-hand with *Godzilla* producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, director Ishirō Honda, and special effects master Eiji Tsuburaya, “Kayama was the main architect who laid the foundation of the Godzilla story” (p. 189). Angles argues that the novellas represent a purer, primordial form of Kayama’s original intentions for Godzilla. This contention includes a more direct antinuclear message, beginning with Kayama’s somber introduction, wherein he states, “atomic and hydrogen bombs ... have taken on the form of Godzilla in this story” (p. 3). The Tōhō Studios’ film version of *Godzilla* is never so direct regarding the monster’s meaning.

Angles nimbly translates both *Godzilla* and *Godzilla Raids Again* in this combined volume, the only two Godzilla stories to be penned by Kayama before he backed away from the series. Kayama refused to write any further installments, “No matter how much the movie companies might request it.” In his perception, the monster’s turn from a strident antinuclear message to a more sympathetic figure following the first film signaled “a tacit approval of the hydrogen bomb” (p. 207). Both stories are likely already familiar to anyone
picking up Angles’s book or this review, and Kayama’s novellas largely track the films and their screenplays, but the black-and-white words on the page often sketch a starker picture than the film noir spectacle of the monster on the silver screen.

In *Godzilla*, one of the most surprising differences for readers familiar with the Tōhō production is a shift of characters in Kayama’s novella. In the film, the character Ogata (played by Akira Takarada, a fan favorite who would go on to star in numerous Tōhō Godzilla films into the twenty-first century) is relegated to side-character territory, while the minor film character Shinkichi is elevated to the primary protagonist. Angles notes this bit of *dramatis personae* legerdemain likely provided Kayama with two narrative benefits: it eliminated the movie’s messy Ogata-Emiko-Serizawa love triangle that might not have appealed to his young target audience, and it also promoted a younger character to the fore. Angles argues that this swap set up Shinkichi “as an ideal postwar citizen—hard-working, idealistic, and motivated by concern for his family, loved ones, and country” (p. 215).

*Godzilla Raids Again*, on the other hand, tracks the sequel film even more closely than Kayama’s story for the original movie. In the second novella, Kayama does not resurrect the Godzilla killed by Dr. Serizawa’s oxygen-destroyer in the first story, but instead uses Prof. Yamane’s warning that continued nuclear testing may lead to the emergence of more monsters to do just that: “Hydrogen bomb testing awakened not just Godzilla but also this other monster too—[Anguirus]” (p. 126). Angles only comments on the addition of Anguirus briefly, noting it “permitted a different kind of exciting action scene with two monsters pitted against one another” (pp. 205–6). This addition, however, may well be Kayama’s most enduring legacy to the franchise aside from Godzilla himself. After all, following the format established in *Godzilla Raids Again* and continuing in the third installment, 1962’s *King Kong vs. Godzilla*, most Godzilla films (not to mention *kaijū eiga* generally) were based on two or more opposing monsters doing battle.

In his translation of both novellas, Angles successfully balances the oft-competing interests of maintaining a faithful translation while also allowing some poetic license, rather than be constrained to a mechanically literal translation of the Japanese that could lead to awkward and unnatural phrasing. However, one aspect of the translation that may become distracting to some readers is the sheer number of onomatopoeias throughout the text. From a caged canary singing “*Pipipippirrrrrrrr* ... *Pipipippirrrrrrrr*” to the “*Glub-glub-glub-glub*” of bubbles from Dr. Serizawa’s oxygen-destroyer invention, to the “*GRAAAWWRR!*” and “*WROOOWRR!*” roars and ululations of the monsters themselves, onomatopoeias permeate the words on the page throughout both novellas to the point of sometimes overwhelming the rest of the prose (pp. 84, 108, 121, 122).

Angles addresses this proliferation of auditory language in his afterword, noting the prevalence of onomatopoeias in the original Japanese text (where they are likely somewhat less conspicuous) as part of Kayama’s attempt to appeal to young readers and, perhaps, reveal more of his own roots as a pulp science fiction writer. Angles admits that this leads to a sometimes “noisy” translation but rationalizes: “by retaining [the onomatopoeias] in this translation, I hope the book comes alive in all its clanging, crashing, booming, roaring excessiveness,” not unlike “comic books and manga” (p. 217). Although the heavy use of onomatopoeias likely works better in Kayama’s original Japanese, a language where their use and prevalence are far more common than in English, it is hard to fault Angles for maintaining a more faithful translation even when the result is sometimes clunky and distracting.

Following both novellas, the afterword, the third distinct section of the book, offers a short
biography of Kayama, a brief history of Godzilla’s origins, an overview of the production of the films, and Angles’s own work on translating the novellas and the various issues he encountered while doing so (such as the always irksome question of if and how to gender Godzilla, due to the Japanese language’s absence of gendered pronouns). Some portions of Angles’s afterword, for example, the biography of Kayama and brief history of Godzilla, may have made more sense to include as a foreword before the translated novellas for general readers familiar with the monster but not his antinuclear origins. In particular, the historical irradiation of the Japanese fishing trawler Lucky Dragon No. 5 from American nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll looms large beginning on the first page of the novella, and a brief recounting of the incident before the translation, rather than after, would likely have been more beneficial to many readers.

Although Angles’s afterword provides unfamiliar readers with the basic origins of the monster and key players in Kayama’s creation, it is not without some minor flaws, particularly regarding Angles’s sources and overview of other kaijū eiga scholarship. In his analysis, Angles handles Kayama’s Japanese sources deftly, offering new insights previously missing from English-language Godzilla commentary. However, in his discussion of the Godzilla franchise, Angles relies almost entirely on Steve Ryfle and Ed Godziszewski’s Ishirō Honda: A Life in Film, from Godzilla to Kurosawa (2017). While Ryfle and Godziszewski’s duograph provides a fine source for Godzilla’s origins, others like William Tsutsui’s Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters (2004) and August Ragone’s Eiji Tsuburaya: Master of Monsters (2007) offer other details and, at the very least, a different point of view distinct from an Ishirō Honda biography.

Likewise, Angles provides a limited offering of the burgeoning academic scholarship on Godzilla, again relying almost entirely on Ryfle and Godziszewski’s volume and his primary Japanese-language Kayama sources. Tsutsui’s monograph would have proven a valuable additional source here as well, while others like Yoshikuni Igarashi’s Bodies of Memory (2000) would have provided a useful foil during Kayama’s discussion of Dr. Serizawa, Japanese war guilt, and the “wartime generation” (pp. 212–14). Lastly, Angles also makes a brief foray into the environmental considerations of Godzilla’s antinuclear message: “Godzilla reminds us that nature will fight back in ways humanity cannot possibly predict from the onset” (p. 212). Angles’s analysis and argument here could have benefited from additional sourcing, such as Steven Rawle’s Transnational Kaijū: Exploitation, Globalisation and Cult Monster Movies (2022) or Japan’s Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaijū Cinema (2018), by me and Brooke McCorkle, wherein we consider Godzilla from the environmental perspective Angles raises.

Overall, Angles’s book makes for an engaging read that fills a notable absence in Japanese film and kaijū eiga scholarship in English. As a global pop culture icon, Godzilla boasts millions of fans around the world, and to date Kayama’s original novellas have been unavailable to most readers globally. Angles’s translation of Kayama’s Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again will appeal to monster fans and scholars of film studies, Japanese studies, and popular culture seeking another aspect of the irradiated dinosaur’s origins. Through this translation, Angles provides an important missing piece to the puzzle of Godzilla’s creation, one overlooked in prior English-language sources: the contributions of Tanaka, Honda, and Tsuburaya to Godzilla have been widely covered, but now, thanks to Angles’s efforts, Kayama can take his proper place by their sides.

Note

[1]. Japanese names in this review appear in the English order, with surnames last, rather than the traditional Japanese order, to keep them consistent with the use in the reviewed book.
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