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Friday September 13th, 2024

Monster (12a)

Dir: Hirokazu Kore-eda

**with: Sakura Andō, Eita Nagayama, Soya Kurokawa,
Hinata Hiiragi**

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Synopsis: Japan, present day. Single mother Saori is increasingly concerned about the behaviour of her son Minato. He cuts his hair, asks bizarre questions and has become reluctant to engage with her. She is convinced the source of the problem lies with Mr Hori, Minato's teacher at school, over whose conduct she has heard there is some sort of question mark. She visits the school to complain but receives an unconvincing explanation from the principal. Meanwhile Minato's friendship with Yori, a fellow pupil at the school begins to answer some of the questions and reveals a gulf of understanding between the two boys and the adults in their lives

An incident of classroom misconduct – and its ramifications, both domestic and institutional – plays out from three different vantage points in *Monster*. 'Perspectives' wouldn't quite be the right term: though each section of Koreeda Hirokazu's elegantly folded new film leads with a different character, the action is never shown explicitly through anyone's eyes. Reverse angles and newly adjacent, contextualising scenes shift our conception of blame and victimhood in a story that narrows from one of a hostile community to intimate, ecstatic isolation.

Rashomon (1950) has been raised repeatedly by critics as a reference point since *Monster* premiered at Cannes last year, but it's hardly the same. Koreeda's film doesn't pit contradicting stories against each other; rather, it layers accounts fraught with blind spots and psychological frailties – building a bigger picture while stressing everyone's essential unknowability. At Cannes, *Monster* won the Queer Palme for the best LGBTQ+ story; it's indicative of the film's lithe, shimmying structure that viewers may spend the bulk of its running time mystified as to why.

For Koreeda, the film marks both a homecoming – to Japanese cinema, after somewhat ungainly excursions to France (*The Truth*, 2019) and South Korea (*Broker*, 2022) – and a departure. It's his first feature since his 1995 debut *Maborosi* that he hasn't written, and while Sakamoto Yūji's elaborately diagrammatic screenplay plays to Koreeda's strengths with its fine-grained family drama and empathetic focus on children, its narrative switches and reversals require more opacity and emotional reticence than is customary from his filmmaking.

It begins with a building ablaze on the squat skyline of a small, unspecified Japanese city; a freak rainstorm will bookend

proceedings, the elements twice uncannily intervening in a story of human impulse and foible. On one floor of the burning block is a hostess bar supposedly frequented by mild-mannered primary school teacher Mr Hori (Nagayama Eita); some distance away, widowed single mother Saori (Andō Sakura, the marvellous star of Koreeda's 2018 film *Shoplifters*) watches the inferno with morbid interest from her apartment balcony. Her pre-teen son Minato (Kurokawa Soya) is one of Hori's students; his mother's distaste for Hori's rumoured extracurricular activities will soon factor into a tense bust-up with the school staff.

The hitherto gentle Minato has become sullen and unreadable – cutting his own hair, going awol in a storm drain, jumping from his mother's moving car. When he comes home from school with a facial injury, saying Hori is responsible, Saori reads the teacher and oddly impassive headmistress Fushimi (Tanaka Yūko) the riot act. She gets repeated deferential apologies, but no explanation; the script is sharp on how a culture of courtesy can impede candour. After 45 minutes, we rewind to the beginning, with Hori's knowledge of classroom dynamics recalibrating our perception of Minato's behaviour. But the teacher's outburst that Minato is a bully – and his smaller, feyer classmate Yori (Hiiragi Hinata) his target – doesn't ring true either: the boys are friends, perhaps chastely more, with an understanding of each other that increasingly excludes their minds.

'Who is the monster?' is a recurring question in Koreeda's film, vocalised by the boys in a taunting, sing-song chant, but essentially paraphrased by adult characters keen to divide the world into villains and victims. Fushimi's strange, affectless manner stems from the recent death of her grandchild, in which she may have been culpable; Yori's alcoholic single father (Nakamura Shidō) may be his real abuser, implanting a ludicrous lie in the boy's mind – that his brain was transplanted with a pig's – which ripples maliciously through the action.

Some may find this a lot of business to wade through to get to the film's heart, crystallised in its final third: a naive, intensely pure romance of sorts between two grieving boys, exquisitely played by

Hiiragi and Kurokawa. But the friction between adults' rule-determined antagonism and the unbound emotional and imaginative expression of childhood is essential to the film's payoff – ineffable tragedy rising into galloping, sunlit release.

Credits

Saori	Sakura Andô
Hori	Eita Nagayama
Minato	Soya Kurokawa
Yori	Hinata Hiiragi
Hirona	Mitsuki Takahata
Shoda	Akihiro Kakuta
Kiyotaka	Shidô Nakamura
Fushimi	Yûko Tanaka
Director	Hirokazu Kore-eda
Screenplay	Yuji Sakamoto
Cinematography	Ryûto Kondô
Editing	Hirokazu Kore-eda
Music	Ryuichi Sakamoto

Japan 2023. 127mins

Another view

Frazzled widowed mother, Saori (Sakura Andô), suspects that all is not well with her preteen son, Minato (Soya Kurokawa). The boy seems subdued and withdrawn; she catches him hacking inches from his mop of hair. He asks odd, troubling questions: if the brain of a pig was transplanted into a human, what would the resulting creature be, human or pig? Or some kind of monster? And then there are the injuries – an ear yanked so brutally that it bleeds; a livid facial bruise. Saori soon deduces that her son's new teacher, Michitoshi Hori (Eita Nagayama), at his provincial Japanese elementary school, is responsible for her son's brooding disquiet. She confronts the school principal (a confounding reflecting prism of a performance from veteran actor Yûko Tanaka), but is frustrated by the school's response: a suffocating blanket of meaningless apologies designed to stifle her complaints. Saori is understandably angry: her son, after all, is the victim of a cruel teacher.

Or is he? The latest film from Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Shoplifters*), and the first since 1995's *Maborosi* that he didn't also write or co-write (the screenplay is by Yûji Sakamoto), rewinds to the beginning of the story – a burning building is a marker point – and replays key scenes, fleshing out the tale, this time from the perspective of the well-meaning teacher. Hori feels, perhaps fairly, that he is being thrown to the wolves by the school authorities (“What actually happened does not matter,” says the chillingly dispassionate headteacher). His view of the classroom dynamic is that Minato is a bully who has systematically targeted a smaller, weirder child, Yori (Hinata Hiiragi), the social outcast of his class.

But then we rewind again, and the story plays out from the point of view of the two boys, showing the fragile new growth of a tentative friendship and the beginning of an understanding of deeper feelings for each other. The kind of feelings that Yori's drunken, boorish father already suspects in his sensitive son, and is prepared to beat out of him.

It's a difficult thing to pull off without it feeling a little disingenuous. This structure – the *Rashomon* technique of offering different perspectives on a single story, with each new angle subtly shifting the audience's view – is by its nature manipulative. It only works when we, the viewers, accept that the film-maker is deliberately misleading us through selective omission and unreliable witness accounts; when we agree to be led astray and then guided toward some kind of truth and resolution.

Monster is an interesting case. Aided by a delicate, crystalline score by the late Ryuichi Sakamoto, Kore-eda deftly carries us through the shifting perspectives of the story with an ease born of extensive

practice – the director of films such as *Broker* and *Our Little Sister* is no stranger to elegantly handled emotional manipulation, after all. There are a few too many red herrings, and some nagging questions. Why, for example, if the teacher suspected that Yori was being bullied by Minato, did he somehow fail to notice the campaign of terror being run by the other little shits in the class?

But when it comes to the payoff, that satisfying clincher that ties everything together, we are confronted with not one but two starkly contrasting readings of the ultimate “truth” at the end, one optimistic of a new start, the other involving the deaths of several characters. After the first viewing I veered emphatically towards the bleaker option. A rewatch opened up the possibility that the more hopeful take was the correct one. For what it's worth, Kore-eda said after the film's Cannes premiere that the cast and crew opted for the positive reading of events, but he conceded that the tragic interpretation was equally valid.

Does it matter that there is such ambiguity about the film's ending? Perhaps not as much as you might expect, although there's a sense that *Monster* pulls its punches throughout, forever stopping short of making a bold statement. The decision to focus on the relationship between pre-adolescents rather than older children is a key example – the film hints at questions of sexuality but neatly sidesteps actual sex. Ultimately, the question of what actually happened is just another red herring. The real point of the film is its heartfelt, if slightly trite, message: that it's the wider world that needs to adapt and accept the differences of children like Minato and Yori, rather than the other way around.

Wendy Ide: The Observer

Our next screening: Friday September 27th, 7.30pm That They May Face the Rising Sun (Ireland/UK 2023)

The rural charm of 1970s Ireland is beautifully captured in this delightful film of a year in the lives of writer Joe and his artist wife Anna. Set in Galway, we see the two of them grappling with creative and career-defining decisions and interacting with their neighbours, who are every bit as idiosyncratic and characterful as the countryside is spellbindingly lush. The film has no plot as such but it's the relationship Joe and Anna have with their surroundings and their neighbours - “a lyrical, loving celebration of the everyday” - that make this such a quietly compelling film.