

Monster [12A]

2023 Japan 127 mins

UK released	15 March 2024
Director	Kore-eda Hirokazu
Screenplay	Yûji Sakamoto
Cinematography	Ryûto Kondô
Music	Ryuichi Sakamoto
Cast	Sakura Andô (Saori Mugino, a single mother); Eita Nagayama (Michitoshi Hori, Minato and Yori's homeroom teacher); Sôya Kurokawa (Minato Mugino, Saori's son); Hinata Hiiragi (Yori Hoshikawa, Minato's classmate); Yûko Tanaka (Makiko Fushimi, elementary school principal)

Hirokazu Kore-eda challenges us with intricacy and complexity in this family drama about bullying, homophobia, family dysfunction, uncritical respect for flawed authority, and social media rumour-mongering; all working together to create a monster of wrongness. Sakamoto's score creates a layer of nuance and meaning. Its plangent, sad piano chords will often counterintuitively be added to a scene of apparent drama or tension, implying that the meaning of this scene has not yet been disclosed. *Monster* is a movie that does not render up its meanings easily in general, and its repeated motif is to replay the same events from a different viewpoint; in another type of film this might deliver the smooth and gratifying narrative click of a twist-reveal falling into place, but here it has a way of raising more questions than answers.

The action begins with a building burning to the ground. This was the site of a sleazy hostess-bar, and a scandalous rumour runs around that local schoolteacher Mr Hori (Eita Nagayami) was a customer. Single mum Saori (Sakura Ando) has heard this tale and is thus perhaps already disposed to think ill of the man; her son Minato (Soya Kurokawa) then comes home from school saying that Mr Hori has humiliated him with a bizarre "pig brain" insult (or has

Minato appropriated that insult from elsewhere?), and the teacher also appears to have hit him.

Furious Saori storms into the office of the principal (Yûko Tanaka) – a woman already almost catatonic with grief for a dead grandson – demanding an explanation, and the school attempts to fob her off with a bizarrely formal, legalistic apology, complete with bowing from Horii and three colleagues. This is an event so utterly insincere and irrelevant to her request for a clear explanation that Saori only becomes more livid. But then mumbling Mr Horii snaps, and tells her that Minato was bullying another child: sensitive, imaginative Eri (Hinata Hiragi).

This claim is apparently substantiated and then un-substantiated with flashbacks and point-of-view shifts showing various classroom events from different angles, and we see more of the boys' relationship, incubated by their shared secret place: a (possibly rather romantically imagined) abandoned railway carriage in the nearby urban wilderness. The children appear to have a hidden capacity for spite, violence and self-harm, which creates a miasma of fear in the lives of the adults, while the schoolteachers are trying to cover up a situation that could damage their professional reputations. The parent involved is trying to do the opposite: to uncover and get at some extraordinary and scary truth.

Monster isn't about what it initially appears to be; the narrative peels away the diversionary misapprehensions until it arrives at its emotional kernel of truth, and the film offers us hope, not despair. The performances from Sakura Ando, Eita Nagayami and the boys have a calm frankness and integrity. The story itself is arguably a little contrived with a thicket of mystery that perhaps didn't need to be so dense. But this is a film created with a great moral intelligence and humanity.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 17 May 2023 (abridged)

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