

INTERVIEW
KASUMIKO MURAKAMI



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HIROKAZU KORE-EDA

Delicate Devastation

FILMMAKER Hirokazu Kore-eda has won accolades for his SENSITIVE APPROACH to the complexities of childhood, parenthood and contemporary Japanese society.

WINNER OF THE PALME D'OR in 2018 for *Shoplifters* and the Jury Prize in 2013 for *Like Father, Like Son*, Hirokazu Kore-eda returned to Cannes for the seventh time this past May to debut his new thriller, *Monster*. Once again, the film festival recognized the Japanese director's exceptional work: *Monster* won the Queer Palm, and its writer, Yuji Sakamoto, won the Best Screenplay award.

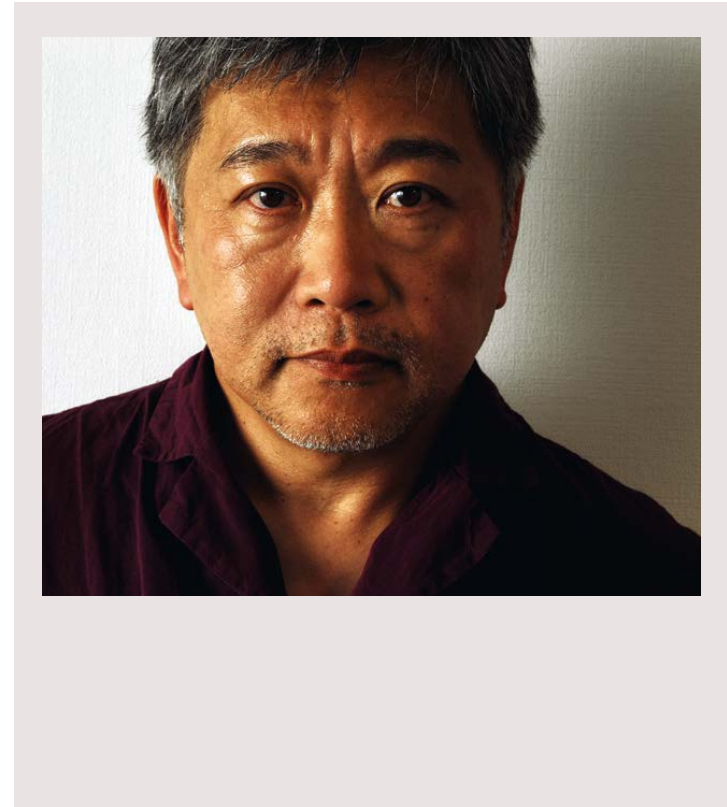
It was a triumphant moment for the 61-year-old, who began his career making documentaries before turning to feature films in which he scrutinizes contemporary Japanese society. Kore-eda is renowned for his subtle and delicate cinematography, taking a gentle approach to often harsh themes without the slightest artifice or spectacle.

In the film world, he is considered one of the masters of modern Japanese cinema, a worthy heir of Yasujiro Ozu. A singular teller of human stories, Kore-eda's tender treatment of social outcasts (*Shoplifters*), abandoned children (*Nobody Knows*)

or dysfunctional families (*Like Father, Like Son*) contain subtle criticisms of Japanese society. He is a discreet man whose work speaks for itself.

Monster is no different. In the film, a single mother who is worried by her son's erratic behavior learns that he has been insulted by his schoolteacher, who said he had a "pig brain." As the mother pursues an explanation from the school, little does she know that an entirely different drama is unfolding. Perspective by perspective, Kore-eda reveals a layered tale of grief and suffering. Underscoring the dignified performances is the music of Oscar-winning composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, who died in March, making this his final work.

I met Kore-eda, who is at once intellectual and modest to the core, in early August at his office in Nanpeidai in central Tokyo, a few days before he began filming his new project. It was midday in the scorching heat when I arrived, but upon entering the building, a serene atmosphere unfolded.



Hirokazu Kore-eda, photographed in Tokyo, August 2023.



Monster (2023).

KASUMIKO MURAKAMI *You are considered a regular at the Cannes Film Festival. What were your first impressions of France?*

HIROKAZU KORE-EDA The first time I went to France was for a film festival in Nantes, I believe. That was around 1996. After that, I started going to smaller film festivals in places like Turin or Thessaloniki in Greece. At that time, I found the sweetest pleasures in walking around cities I did not know. From the very start, I thought my films just might be accepted in France. Since my 2004 film *Nobody Knows*, I started going to France on press tours and, soon after, started getting invited to Cannes every year.

K.M. *Monster, which will premiere in December, created a stir at Cannes. It is difficult to grasp the entire picture of the intricate story, and the theme is not clearly asserted. Does that mean it's okay for individuals to draw their own conclusions, even if it's not the interpretation you imagined?*

H.K. The inherent flavor of that script comes from everything not being so obvious. I think it's okay for the audience to draw their own conclusions.

K.M. *It's the first film since 1995's Maborosi, for which you did not write the screenplay yourself...*

H.K. I always write screenplays on my own, but for *Monster*, I was involved in the scenario from the very beginning and all the trial-and-error until its completion. It was in the palm of my hand for three-and-a-half years, so I had plenty of time to ripen it. I was able to think a lot about the distance between the characters. So, at the time of shooting, I didn't really think, "This is not a screenplay that I wrote." But I could not have written the characters' traits in the first half of the movie, so there was a lot for me to learn.

K.M. *How did you find the challenge of making this film?*

H.K. I am satisfied with the finished product, but that doesn't mean that from

now on, I only want to make movies of that genre. I've always been easily bored. It's dull, doing the same kind of thing.

K.M. *Beyond film, what novels do you like?*

H.K. As a student, I enjoyed nonfiction. I consumed a lot of journalism. From France, I liked *Is Paris Burning?* [by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre]. I was fascinated by it. My younger self wanted to become a novelist, but before I knew it, I was working in documentaries and started crafting my own screenplays, and from there I started making fictional concoctions.

K.M. *I am always impressed by the natural performances of young actors in your films, like Yuya Yagira in Nobody Knows. In Monster, the performances of the main characters, by Hinata Hiragi and Soya Kurokawa, were dazzling. How do you draw out such performances?*

H.K. We all lived together in Suwa, a lake town in Japan, while filming and

“My younger self wanted to become a novelist, but before I knew it, I was working in documentaries and started crafting my own screenplays.”

naturally became like a family. I was staying at a hotel, and the young actors were sleeping in an apartment building we had rented out, but they would always come to play in my hotel lobby, or we would all go out and have a meal together. Since the daily interaction was like that, it wasn't like I'd say, "Okay, action!" and the actors would suddenly tense up. It was more like, before they knew it, the cameras had started rolling.

K.M. *What was the deciding factor in casting those two boys?*

H.K. There isn't anything I can point to; it was more of an instinct. I wanted to put them in front of a camera, and I thought that the two would contrast each other well.

K.M. *The theme of Monster, while ambiguous, could be said to be everyday boyhood love – what do you make of that idea?*

H.K. What I want to convey is that Japan could become – should become – a bit more complicated in that way. Japan is

behind on same-sex marriage, and getting there will take quite a bit of time. But if you look around in the real world, those people are accepted. In Japan, politics are so behind. People who think of themselves as the conservatives of Japan are trying to protect its citizens, but the way they are going about things doesn't protect people at all.

K.M. *François Truffaut once said that if there are three great scenes in a film, it will be spectacular. If you were to pick three scenes from Monster, which would they be? Perhaps the fire, or the scene in the abandoned train?*

H.K. If I were to choose one other, I would say the last scene was the most challenging to film, where the mother and teacher are frantically searching for the kids in the pouring rain. Since the dirt and sand kept flowing down the window, it would get covered right away. They frantically wiped the window with their hands to see into the train, but no matter how

much wiping they did, the window would get covered with mud again instantly. Naturally, Ryuichi Sakamoto's piano ballads were stunning, but another important part was that the actor who portrayed the school principal, Yuko Tanaka, played the horn. She said that she wanted to learn how to play herself, so we got her a coach, and she diligently practiced for nearly a year and a half.

K.M. *What can you tell me about your next project?*

H.K. At this point, we are not sure if this will become a seven-episode series or a full-length film. We don't even know when the premiere date will be. The only certain part is that it will involve seven stories.

K.M. *Where do you display the Palme d'Or that you received at Cannes for your film Shoplifters?*

H.K. It's somewhere on the corner of a shelf in this office, a place where people can't really see it. ▶

This feature has been translated from the Japanese by Hikari Hida.