

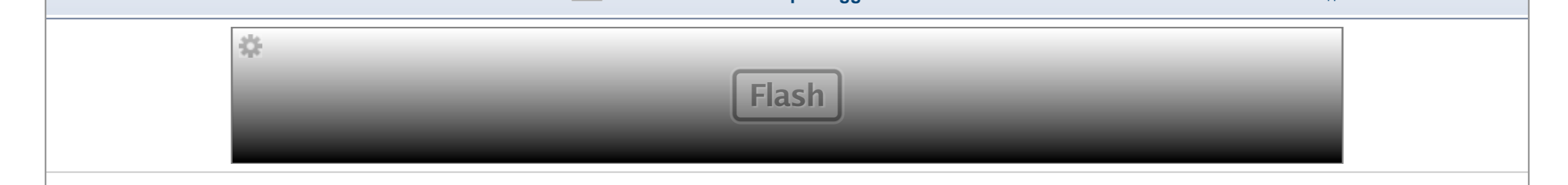
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MOVIE REVIEW **Mother (2009)** NYT Critics' Pick



Kim Hye-Ja in "Mother," directed by Bong Joon-ho. Magnolia Pictures

Fierce Love: Better Not Make This Mom Angry

By MANOHLA DARGIS | Published: March 12, 2010

The last monster to run wild through **Bong Joon-ho's** imagination was an enormous creature from the watery deep. A different menace storms through **"Mother,"** the fourth feature from this sensationally talented South Korean filmmaker, though she too seems to spring from unfathomable depths. Unlike the beast in **"The Host"** — a catastrophic byproduct of the American military — the monster in **"Mother"** doesn't come with much of a backstory, which suggests that she is a primal force, in other words, a natural.

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She is and she isn't as Mr. Bong reveals through a kinked narrative and a monumental, ferocious performance by Kim Hye-ja as the title character. Written by Mr. Bong, sharing credit with Park Eun-kyo, **"Mother"** opens as a love story that turns into a crime story before fusing into something of a criminal love story. Nothing is really certain here, even the film's genre, and little is explained, even when the characters fill in the blanks. Though richly and believably drawn, Mr. Bong's characters are often opaque and mysterious, given to sudden rages, behavioral blurts and hiccups of weird humor. But it's this very mystery that can make them feel terribly real.

None are truer, more disturbingly persuasive than Mother, who lives with her 27-year-old son, Do-joon (Won Bin), in cramped quarters adjoining her tiny apothecary. Beautiful and strangely childlike, Do-joon doesn't seem right in the head: he's forgetful, seemingly naïve, perhaps retarded. (When he tries to remember something, he violently massages both sides of his head in an exercise that Mother, without apparent irony, calls "the temple of doom.") But if he runs a little slow, Mother runs exceedingly fast, as you see shortly after the movie opens when, while playing with a dog one bright day, Do-joon puts himself in the path of an oncoming **BMW**, which leaves him dazed if not particularly more addled.

You watch the accident unfold alongside Mother, who busily chops herbs with a big blade in her darkened shop while casting worried glances at Do-joon as he goofs off across the street. From her vantage point, he looks as centered within the shop's front door as a little prince inside a framed portrait. The dim interior and bright exterior only accentuate his body — the daylight functions as a kind of floodlight — which puts into visual terms the idea that he is the only thing that Mother really sees. Mr. Bong may like narrative detours, stories filled with more wrong turns than a maze, but he's a born filmmaker whose images — the spilled water that foreshadows spilled blood — tell more than you might initially grasp.

He's also a filmmaker who finds great, unsettling dark comedy in violence, and once again the blood does run, if somewhat less generously than in **"The Host"** and his often brilliant **"Memories of Murder."** Although Do-joon seems to recover from his accident, the event sets off a chain of increasingly violent incidents that culminate in the murder of a local schoolgirl, Ah-jung (Moon Hee-ra), whose body is found slumped over a roof wall in the village, positioned, one character says, like "laundry." Do-joon is summarily arrested for the death after an incriminating golf ball is found at the scene. Mad with grief, Mother sets off to clear him and begins furiously rooting around the village in search of the killer.

The hard-pounding heart of **"Mother,"** Ms. Kim is a wonderment. Perched on the knife edge between tragedy and comedy, her delivery gives the narrative — which tends to drift, sometimes beguilingly, sometimes less so — much of its momentum. At times it feels as if Ms. Kim is actually willing it, or perhaps Mr. Bong, forward. Yet while Mother can seem like a caricature of monstrous maternity ("You and I are one," she insists to the jailed Do-joon) the performance is enormously subtle, filled with shades of gray that emerge in tandem with the unwinding investigation. There are several crimes in **"Mother,"** and while none can be justified, Mr. Bong works hard to make sure none are easily condemned.

"Mother" is a curious film, alternately dazzling and frustrating. Mr. Bong's virtues as a filmmaker, including his snaking storytelling and refusal to overexplain actions and behaviors, can here feel like evasions or indulgences rather than fully thought-out choices. There's a vagueness to the film that doesn't feel organic — as if, having created a powerhouse central character, he didn't exactly know what to do with her. That said, his visual style and the way he mixes eccentric types with the more banal, like a chemist preparing a combustible formula, are often sublime, as is Ms. Kim's turn as the mother of all nightmarish mothers, a dreadful manifestation of a love so consuming it all but swallows the world.

"Mother" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Bloody violence, intimations of depravity.

MOTHER

Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.

Directed by **Bong Joon-ho**; written by Park Eun-kyo and Mr. Bong, based on a story by Mr. Bong; director of photography, Hong Kyung-pyo; edited by Moon Sae-kyoung; music by Lee Byeong-woo; production designer, Ryu Seong-hie; costumes by Choi Se-yeon; martial arts by Jung Doo-hong and Heo Myeong-haeng; produced by Moon Yang-kwon, Seo Woo-sik and Park Tae-joon; released by Magnolia Pictures. In Korean, with English subtitles. Running time: 2 hours 9 minutes.

WITH: Kim Hye-ja (Mother), Won Bin (Yoon Do-joon), Jin Goo (Jin-tae), Yoon Jaemoon (Je-mun), Jun Mi-sun (Mi-sun), Song Sae-beauk (Sepaktakraw Detective) and Moon Hee-ra (Moon Ah-jung).

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