

MOTHER (MADEO)

Bong Joon-ho / South Korea / 128 minutes / Digital Projection
 Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1
 US Release: 12 March 2010 / Magnolia Pictures / Rated R
 UK Release: 20 August 2010 / Optimum Releasing / Rated 15



"Bong Joon-ho does it again. He really is the new Hitchcock."
 - Edgar Wright
 (from the Ultra Culture Review of the Year 2009)

Three films in, and a pattern has yet to emerge over the films of Ultra Culture Cinema. We've travelled from New Orleans to Nashville to an unnamed town in South Korea, through a drug-addled cop, a gang of freakish misfits and finally a vengeful herbalist. We haven't even had to show the same aspect ratio twice yet:

<p>This might just be the most boring / amazing diagram of all time.</p>	<p>Trash Humpers (1.66:1)</p>	<p>Bad Lieutenant (1.85:1)</p>	<p>Mother (2.35:1)</p>
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But our choice of *Mother* to follow *Bad Lieutenant* and *Trash Humpers* is not without its internal logic. Director Bong Joon-ho (or Joon-ho Bong depending on who you talk to) is fast joining the ranks of Herzog and Korine in that journalists seem unable to write his name without prefixing it with the word 'auteur'. Like his earlier work, this new Bong hit (lulz) also shares with our previous films a glorious disregard for genre classifications, strutting wildly between family drama, mystery thriller and even black comedy as the titular matriarch desperately tries to prove the innocence of her imprisoned son.

And that's not to say that it's a messy film. *Mother* is a remarkably efficient, beautifully constructed movie, almost arrogant in its effortless mastery of narrative structure. For the first time in a long while, the many comparisons to Hitchcock actually seem entirely justified (suck on that, 'Polanski') and have been made not just by the aforementioned Mr. Wright, but also *Variety*, *NPR*, *Empire* and every other critic who didn't just switch off after ten minutes and decide it wasn't as good as *The Host* *cough* Total Film *end cough*.

Hitch's influence is evident not only in the film's complex mystery plotting, but also in its brilliantly evocative cinematography. Bong's work has always been noted for its keen visual sense, but here

he trades regular collaborator Kim Hyung-Ku for Hong Kyung-Pyo (my laptop's hyphen key is going into overdrive today) who lends the film the meditative atmosphere it commands. The impact of Hong's work on the film is impossible to overstate, even if his beautifully understated tonal palette is somewhat difficult to convey on a crappy black and white photocopy:



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 Just look at those beautiful Cerulean hues

The film premiered in the *Un Certain Regard* strand at last year's Cannes Film Festival, but was beaten to the prize by the also-amazing *Dogtooth*. Like that film, *Mother* is primarily about family. The unnamed parent of the title displays an unwavering devotion to her son, whose undiagnosed mental illness renders him helpless against a police force more concerned with conviction rates than justice (get ready, *Wire* fans!) As the son in question, Bin Won (familiar from 2004 South Korean war drama *Brotherhood*) is disconcertingly hard to read, his strange facial movements conveying both naïve dislocation and a certain amount of cunning. But it's veteran actress Kim Hye-Ja as his fiercely loyal mother who delivers the film's most powerful performance.

Bong was inspired to write the film by Kim, who is something of a national treasure in her native South Korea for her TV work, but remains largely unknown elsewhere. A bit like a South Korean Zoë Wanamaker if you will. In fact, they don't look entirely dissimilar either. But where Wanamaker's foray into film saw her swiftly removed from the Harry Potter franchise after only one film, Kim's breakout performance has been lauded both at home and around the world, winning her Best Actress at the Asian Film Awards (... me neither).

Her turn as the eponymous mother is brilliantly uninhibited and impossible to predict, veering from fits of nervous laughter to raw, primal screams as her journey continues ever onward. It might just be the most fearless performance by a sexagenarian since Lorna Raver went around vomiting in sexy young women's mouths in *Drag Me To Hell*. Such a spectacle is sadly absent from *Mother*, but don't worry: there are plenty of other transgressions to be enjoyed.

Not least this outrageous scarf:



It appears that we're coming to the end of these notes and I haven't even mentioned the guy who plays the lawyer, the Photoshop scene or the film's exemplary use of pathetic fallacy. I probably shouldn't have spent so much time talking about Zoë Wanamaker. Oh well.

So here's to our first non-English-language entry in the Ultra Culture Cinema 'canon': an expertly realised, tense-as-fuck epic with more spellbinding moments in its opening reel (not that we're using reels, this is the digital age don't you know) than a million *Twilight* saga entries could ever hope to achieve. And who knows, if we're lucky maybe one day the director of *Cloverfield* will remake it in English with Meryl Streep and we can all enjoy it that little bit more.