



Evil Does Not Exist (Aku wa sonzai shinai)

Directed by: Ryusuke Hamaguchi

Production Companies: NEOPA Inc., Fictive LLC

Produced by: Satoshi Takata

Screenplay: Ryusuke Hamaguchi

Original Concept: Ryusuke Hamaguchi,

Eiko Ishibashi

Director of Photography: Yoshio Kitagawa

Editors: Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Azusa Yamazaki

Production Designer: Masato Nunobe

Music: Eiko Ishibashi

Sound Editor/Mix: Izumi Matsuno

Cast:

Hitoshi Omika (Takumi)

Ryo Nishikawa (Hana)

Ryuji Kosaka (Takahashi)

Ayaka Shibutani (Mayuzumi)

Hazuki Kikuchi (Sachi)

Hiroyuki Miura (Kazuo)

Japan 2023

106 mins

Digital

Courtesy of Modern Films

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PREVIEW

Evil Does Not Exist (Aku wa sonzai shinai)

The love for Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car*, which won an Academy Award for Best International Feature in 2022, can feel like a dream. Needless to say, Hamaguchi's refraction of Chekhov endures, but fans could still fret over just how the director could manage a comparable follow-up. The beguiling *Evil Does Not Exist*, with its story of a community's defiance of an intrusive land development, puts fears to rest and reconfirms Hamaguchi's talents as one of today's greatest dramaturges.

Plot summaries describe the setting, Mizubiki Village, as close to Tokyo, which might make it sound like a suburb, but that couldn't feel further from the reality of this sylvan hamlet. A hypnotic opening shot of treetops, tracked from below, sets our clocks to local time, as it were, and establishes the rural rhythms and exquisite score that prevail in the film. Takumi (Hitoshi Omika) is a self-described jack-of-all-trades and knowledgeable local, though it seems as if he would be content keeping to himself, chopping wood, and doting on his eight-year-old daughter, Hana (Ryo Nishikawa, making her debut), whose mother seems to have passed away.

Trouble brews for Mizubiki in the form of a planned glamping site catering to city-dwellers who want to get out of town. As if the project wasn't already an affront – glamping, not even camping? – Takumi and his neighbours attend a company presentation by hired flaks who know enough only to parry questions. Amid a simmering fed-up mood, one villager after another punctures their talking points and explains the problems: water pollution from the site's septic tank, risk of forest fires because of insufficient staffing, disruption of migrating wildlife, a threat to local businesses (like an udon restaurant). The mood among respondents varies – mostly civil if wildly impatient – but even though someone else nearly gets physical, it's Takumi whose flat rebuffing of the project sticks in the mind.

Hamaguchi steers clear of the traditional ecological drama this local/outsider impasse might invite, in part with his elegantly diffuse approach. (Hamaguchi co-edited the film with Azusa Yamazaki.) The story briskly humanises the two company reps by showing them off-hours, driving back to the city, and venting over the bruising reception. Takahashi (Ryuji Kosaka) ribs the more reflective Mayuzumi (Ayaka Shibutani), who confessed their ignorance during the meeting, and now, it seems, meant the sentiment fairly genuinely. They make a return visit, goaded by Tokyo co-workers whose bad-faith strategising reflects a daunting corporate relentlessness.

How exactly the return visit plays out is best left unrevealed, though it starts with Takahashi and Mayuzumi trying to make let's-grab-a-beer inroads with Takumi. Hamaguchi maintains a mystery around the direction of the film that is sustained by Eiko Ishibashi's shifting music, which creates a robust structure for the film quite apart from the dramatic development – almost as if it's channelling the interiority of nature, and of a specific place, but even that feels like oversimplification, and the score can also cut out abruptly to unsettling effect. Hamaguchi and Ishibashi also worked together on *Drive My Car*, though incredibly, *Evil Does Not Exist* emerged out of her asking the director to shoot

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

TV Preview: This Town + Q&A with Steven Knight, cast members Michelle Dockery, Jordan Bolger, Ben Rose and Levi Brown, director Paul Whittington and executive producer Karen Wilson

Mon 26 Feb 18:15

Preview: Frank Capra: Mr America + Q&A with director Matthew Wells

Fri 1 Mar 18:15

Preview: Doctor Who: The Celestial Toymaker (Animated)

Sun 2 Mar 12:00

Busting the Bias presents Special People + Q&A with director Justin Edgar and actors Dominic Coleman & David Proud

Sat 2 Mar 15:50

Funday Preview: Robot Dreams

Sun 3 Mar 12:00

Preview: La Chimera

Sun 3 Mar 17:30

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 4 Mar 18:30

Preview: High & Low – John Galliano

Mon 4 Mar 20:40

Kinoteka Polish Film Festival London Premiere:

Green Border Zielona granica + Q&A with director Agnieszka Holland

Wed 6 Mar 19:00

Woman With A Movie Camera International

Women's Day Preview: Banel & Adama + Q&A with director Ramata-Toulaye Sy

Fri 8 Mar 20:45

TV Preview: Inside No. 9: The Final Series + Q&A with Reece Shearsmith, Steve Pemberton and executive producer Adam Tandy

Mon 11 Mar 18:15

TV Preview: Mandy + Q&A with Diane Morgan

Tue 12 Mar 18:10

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material for a live performance. (In October, Ishibashi will perform her music to *Gift*, a separate feature directed by Hamaguchi using the same material without dialogue.)

The feedback meeting that crystallises the conflict between the villagers and the glamping concern has recent cinematic kin in the town hall of Cristi Mungiu's *R.M.N.* (2022) or possibly the teacher-parent gathering in Radu Jude's *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (2021). But Hamaguchi puts his scene earlier, letting us track how the tensions seep throughout the community, without letting the film be overtaken or defined by the seemingly intractable dispute with pure profit motive. Yoshio Kitagawa's lambent cinematography lets us breathe in the natural beauty of their woodsy surroundings, though the movie also does not hold up their way of life as somehow pure.

The ambiguous ending of the film lands all the more jarringly after the preceding orchestration of mood and drama. It's not only a departure from what came before, but it's not entirely clear what to make of it. Yet rather than frustrate, it feels like the kind of adventuresome move that might actually succeed in bottling something of the unpredictable nature of human behaviour. *Evil Does Not Exist* – Hamaguchi has said the title entered his mind while visiting the film's locations – shows a filmmaker willing to muss up his own conceits and take gratifying risks when we might least expect them.

Nicolas Rapold, *Sight and Sound*, March 2024

Director's Statement

In this film, I had a wonderful opportunity to work with *Drive My Car*'s composer Eiko Ishibashi again. The film project began when she asked me to create some footage for her live performance, and I conceived of the film as an 'original source material' for the footage. As I became more and more connected to this film we were creating, Eiko and her friends helped me a lot in the shooting, too. It was a very free way of filmmaking, which vitalised me a lot. After the shoot, I felt that I had captured interactions of people in nature and completed the work as a single film with Eiko Ishibashi's beautiful theme music. I hope the audience will feel the life force of the figures that are stirring in nature and music.

Production notes