

The Eel, directed by Shohei Imamura, screenplay by Daisuke Tengan and Shohei Imamura

A naive answer to some serious questions

Peter Symonds
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The Eel is Shohei Imamura's first film since *Black Rain* in 1989. Born in 1926, Imamura is a leading figure in Japanese film and the director of over 20 feature films. In 1951 he worked as an assistant director to Ozu and Kobayashi and in 1958 made his directorial debut with *Stolen Desire*. In 1983 he won the major prize at the Cannes Festival for *The Ballad of Narayama*.

The Eel attempts to deal with the social and psychological problems confronting Takuro Yamashita (Koji Yakusho), a young man who is attempting to reintegrate himself into Japanese society after brutally murdering his wife. Yamashita had stabbed his wife to death upon discovering her in bed with another lover.

Released following eight years in jail, Yamashita is so alienated that the only thing he can relate to is a pet eel that he caught and cared for whilst in prison.

Yamashita, who is paroled to a Buddhist priest, establishes a barber shop on an isolated piece of land near a river outside a small town. Despite his attempts to shun personal relations, he is befriended by the local characters. His life takes a further turn when he saves the life of a young woman, Keiko Hattori (Misa Shimizu), who attempted to commit suicide. Reluctantly, he agrees to let Keiko, who resembles his murdered wife, work in the barber shop. The plot revolves around their developing relationship.

The film, which shared the Grand Prix with *Taste of Cherry* at last year's Cannes Film Festival, is well acted, faultlessly photographed and has its comic and lighter touches -- a young misfit engaged in building a fantastic UFO attractor; Yamashita's over-the-top concern when Keiko cuts her finger; the odd-ball antics of Keiko's mother.

Imamura cleverly takes simple events and turns them into symbols -- the acceptance of a lunchbox becomes a focus for the emotional tensions between Yamashita and Keiko. The 'talks' with the eel produce nightmare-like scenes, revealing all of Yamashita's secret fears and terrors.

The Eel is certainly an intelligent film but in the end one is left dissatisfied with its simplistic answers to the problems confronting its characters. Imamura seems to argue that the complexities of modern life can be resolved by a return to traditional Japanese values and the simpler things of life.

Jarring glimpses of city life are constantly contrasted to the languid pace of life along a river and the beauty of its scenery.

Those who are most sensitive to Yamashita's feelings, who help him exorcise his demons and come to accept what life offers him, are all rather traditional figures -- the Buddhist priest, the priest's wife and the rough but worldly wise fisherman. And, when Keiko's former boyfriend confronts her at the barber shop, it is the earthier and more human characters of the small town who triumph over his semi-gangster associates.

Overall *The Eel* fails to rise above a rather lightweight moral tale. One is left with the distinct impression that Imamura has given up attempting to deal with the contradictions of modern society.



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