

# *The Truth*: Catherine Deneuve as an actress with her feet on the ground

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*Written and directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda*

Hirokazu Kore-eda (born 1962) is a well-known Japanese film director, who has been making features since the mid-1990s, including *Maborosi*, *Distance*, *Nobody Knows*, *Hana*, *Still Walking*, *After the Storm*, *The Third Murder* and *Shoplifters*.

In Kore-eda's new film, *The Truth* (*La vérité*), his first set outside Japan, a well-known French actress now in her 70s, Fabienne Dangeville (Catherine Deneuve), receives a visit at her elegant Paris home from her daughter Lumir (Juliette Binoche), son-in-law Hank (Ethan Hawke—who has very little to do) and grand-daughter Charlotte (Clémentine Grenier), who live in New York.

Fabienne has just published a memoir, which manages to annoy numerous people with its omissions, falsifications and exaggerations. She is also busy shooting a science fiction art film, whose plot revolves around an ill woman (Manon Clavel) going into deep space (where the aging process slows down radically) to impede the progress of her disease and only returning to Earth once every seven years. Fabienne plays her daughter, who, because of her mother's peculiar situation, appears much older ("You stay young, I keep getting older").

Fabienne is self-involved, fussy and argumentative. She speaks her mind. On arrival, Lumir is angry that her mother broke her promise, or simply forgot, to allow her to read the manuscript before it was published. "This never happened!," she later complains about some incident reported in the book. Fabienne responds blithely, "I can pick and choose."

Fabienne's assistant Luc (Alain Libolt) quits or threatens to because he is left out of the autobiography altogether. Her eccentric, down-on-his-luck former husband Pierre (Roger Van Hool) fares even worse. His daughter Lumir informs him, "The book says you're dead."

The presence of an old friend (and acting rival) of Fabienne's, Sarah, hovers over the proceedings. Lumir accuses Fabienne of years ago sleeping with a director and stealing a major part from Sarah. Her mother doesn't deny any of it. Sarah later died, drunk, in an accident.

Sardonically, Fabienne tells Lumir, "It's a shame you weren't her daughter." The latter bitterly agrees.

Fabienne has a crisis on the set of the science fiction movie, in part out of jealousy of the younger, talented actress, Manon, a "rising star." She asks, "Am I washed up as an actress?," and later, fleeing the studio, Fabienne exclaims, "I can't act anymore." Lumir convinces her to return, arguing that running away "is worse." Fabienne ends up performing well, and even becomes close to Manon, who reminds her of the dead Sarah.

There are interesting things in *The Truth*, and less interesting ones.

We have been critical of Kore-eda in the past, sometimes quite critical. He belongs to a generation of filmmakers that (obviously, through no fault of its own) came of artistic age in the 1990s, a bad time, and who seemed intimidated by the bourgeois triumphalism of the era into shying away from *any* strong commitments or views. Instead, we were offered—at best—the art of marking time, of stagnation, of little vignettes.

In 2009, we wrote that we didn't share many critics' high opinion of Kore-eda. We explained that we found his films generally "dull and unenlightening. At present, art film critics too often mistake a self-consciously subdued (or simply non-committal) approach to life for a serious one."

Kore-eda made a specialty of family relations and personal identity crises, largely divorced from history and the big changes in Japanese social life.

His last two films, however, have proved more interesting. *Shoplifters* (2019), the WSWS explained, "tells the story of a family that relies on shoplifting and other schemes to maintain its impoverished standard of living." The film, which bore some resemblance to South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho's more celebrated *Parasite* (also 2019), was "sincere and at times caustic in its depiction of modern-day Tokyo."

The family (not biologically related for the most part) in *Shoplifters* "live in a small and cramped, flimsily constructed house cluttered with their personal effects and

beds. All in all, life looks pretty awful in 21st century Japanese capitalism.”

*The Truth* is not concerned with such social issues, but it too has an appealing concreteness.

The portions of the film that are not especially intriguing continue Kore-eda’s interest in the small change of intra-family vibrations, frictions and transitions. Lumir’s banal and self-pitying complaints about Fabienne’s insufficient attention to her as a child fall into this general category. Grown-ups who still bemoan their neglect as children only reveal they haven’t truly grown up and remain attached firmly to the parent in question. It is tedious in life, and tedious in art. One is entirely sympathetic to Fabienne when she notes that her daughter “takes herself way too seriously.” She might be referring to an entire generation of self-centered and self-obsessed affluent petty bourgeois.

Fabienne may not represent the healthiest alternative, but she has figured some things out, including the fact that imperfect human beings make art and that they often are obliged to undergo personal sacrifice—and inflict sacrifices on others—in that cause. Whether Kore-eda and Deneuve have the #MeToo witch-hunts in mind or not, the actress explains at one point, having had her failings as a mother and a friend enumerated (and having acknowledged them), “You may not forgive me, but the public does.” The artist *as artist* needs to be considered apart from his or her personal shortcomings. What counts most is the body of work, although this may be small consolation to those around the individual in question.

Deneuve, of course, was one of the signatories to the open letter in January 2018 that criticized the #MeToo campaign, contrasting sexual assault with “persistently or clumsily hitting on someone,” and insisting that the two were not the same thing. The statement attacked #MeToo advocates for branding as “traitors” and “accomplices” those who made such a distinction, creating a climate of intimidation, where freedom of speech was “today turning into its opposite.”

Deneuve has a long, complicated history as an actress. She appeared memorably in Jacques Demy’s *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) and later, along with her sister Françoise Dorléac, in Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). Deneuve gave at least two other especially notable performances in the 1960s, in Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965), as a young woman who goes mad under the weight of her sexual neuroses and repression, and Luis Buñuel’s *Belle de Jour* (1967), about a respectable, middle class wife who degrades herself during the day in a high-class brothel. (Deneuve has had the temerity to defend Polanski in recent years against his bitter enemies among the French feminists and others.)

Deneuve went on to appear in additional movies by Demy

and Buñuel, along with films by François Truffaut, Jean-Pierre Melville, Mauro Bolognini, Robert Aldrich and many others.

Oddly, she may not herself be haunted by the ghost of another actress, but her public perception has suffered that fate. Deneuve’s elder sister (by one year) Françoise Dorléac died tragically in a car accident in 1967 at the age of 25. Dorléac had already established herself as an accomplished, vivacious performer, in *That Man from Rio* (Philippe de Broca, 1964), *The Soft Skin* (Truffaut, 1964) and *Cul-de-sac* (Polanski, 1966). For many years, critics muttered under their breath that Deneuve was not nearly so lively or gifted as her late sister.

Deneuve is a better actress today than she was decades ago, when she seemed chosen as much for her impeccable looks and demeanor, for what her physical appearance seemed to represent, as her artistic gifts. Critic Andrew Sarris, for example, described her casting in Polanski’s *Repulsion* as “inspired,” adding that the “lack of sensual anticipation in her [Deneuve’s] eyes masks insanity with innocence, while the irreproachable symmetry of her delicate features conveys an illusion of order and discipline in her personality, an illusion belied by the reality of her absentminded alienation from other human beings.”

Deneuve does amusingly well in Kore-eda’s film as an actress who suffers from self-centeredness, but has a keen nose for pretentiousness and absurdity, including the “artistic” variety.

The weakest side of Kore-eda’s film is reflected in its title, *The Truth*, which may as well be wrapped in quotation marks several inches high. We are made to understand about six—or is it eight?—times that no such thing as truth exists with any certainty. “Memory can’t be trusted,” we learn, and then just for good measure, later on (twice!), “You can’t trust memories.” (Just to drive home the point, unnecessarily, the film within the film is entitled *Memories of My Mother*.)

These ideological trappings (one critic describes *The Truth* as “a postmodern waltz of a film”) seem almost unavoidable at present. It will be a healthy indicator when they dissipate. Meanwhile, fortunately, we still have the hard-headed, determined, quite energetic Deneuve-Fabienne, who seems oriented toward some of the more important, actually existing problems in life.



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