

Discipline and Resistance: A Foucauldian Interpretation of Children's Subjectivity in Monster

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Abstract. As research on subjectivity deepens, the alienation and reconstruction of children's subjectivity within power structures have become widely discussed in educational and sociocultural contexts. Grounded in Foucault's theories of discipline and self-technologies, this paper analyzes the process of alienation and reconstruction of children's subjectivity as depicted in *Monster*. It argues that when parents and teachers excessively mold children according to stereotypical social norms during education, oppression manifests at linguistic, bodily, and other levels. Coupled with the implicit discipline embedded in spatial structures, this ultimately leads to the dissolution of children's subjectivity. However, as active agents, children can gradually reconstruct their subjectivity through self-redefinition, discursive resistance, and the creation of heterotopic spaces. By using *Monster* as a case study to examine issues in children's education, this paper not only highlights the film's resonance with real-world social problems, enhancing its thematic interpretation but also expands the application of Foucauldian theories of discipline and self-technologies in film criticism and East Asian educational discourse.

Keywords: *Monster*, Foucault, Discipline, Self-technologies, Children's subjectivity

1. Introduction

Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda and written by Yûji Sakamoto, *Monster* employs a Rashomon-style multi-perspective narrative to unravel the mystery of "who is the real monster," while depicting the process of alienation and reconstruction of children's subjectivity under the disciplinary constraints imposed by parents and teachers' stereotypical perceptions. During Japan's period of rapid economic growth, the education system was designed to align with labor market demands, fostering a homogenized approach encapsulated in the phrase "growing up in unison." As noted by Japanese critic Tsunehiro Uno, this standardization-centric pedagogy led to extreme unification in Japanese education for over half a century. Foucault's theory of educational discipline posits that institutions employ micro-level disciplinary techniques to produce "docile bodies." In *Monster*, Koreeda retains his delicate and understated style while innovatively structuring the narrative to critically examine the disciplinary mechanisms embedded in familial and school education.

As a Japanese director of the new generation renowned for his humanistic sensitivity and social consciousness, Koreeda's works have attracted extensive scholarly attention globally. Western scholars such as Arthur Nolletti Jr.[1] and Mark Schilling[2] have comprehensively analyzed

Koreeda's creative philosophy and background from an auteur perspective. Japanese scholars, benefiting from their cultural proximity, have explored his films through localized frameworks. For instance, Takazo Hanado[3] examines shifts in Japanese familial ethics reflected in Koreeda's cinema through a sociological lens, while Hiroto Itō[4] deciphers interpersonal dynamics through bathing scenes, a cultural trope in his films. In contrast, Chinese scholarship has primarily focused on character portrayal, narrative deconstruction, and aesthetic features in Koreeda's oeuvre. While existing studies offer diverse perspectives, *Monster*, groundbreaking work in Koreeda's recent filmography, remains underexplored, whether in terms of its aesthetic innovations, audiovisual language, or sociopolitical commentary.

Foucault's theories of discipline and resistance have opened new avenues for cultural criticism, enabling deconstructions of disciplinary phenomena in traditional cinema while inspiring discussions on gender ethics in posthuman sci-fi films and East-West power structures[5]. However, applications of Foucauldian theory in cultural criticism often suffer from perspectival limitations, with most scholars concentrating on textual analysis rather than elevating the discourse to societal realities. Chinese scholars like Weimin Mo and Min'an Wang have laid the groundwork for interdisciplinary adaptations of Foucault's theories. In education studies, research building on *Discipline and Punish* critiques "disciplinary education," advocating for a shift beyond the "rational individual" paradigm toward nurturing "whole persons"[6]—a framework equally applicable to films centering on children, families, and schools.

This paper employs Foucault's theories of discipline and resistance to analyze *Monster*, structuring its argument around three phases of children's subjectivity: its subjugation under discipline, acts of resistance, and eventual return. By bridging the film's narrative with real-world educational dilemmas, the study not only enriches interpretations of *Monster* but also expands the utility of Foucauldian theory in cinematic analysis.

2. Discipline: The molding of children's subjectivity

Power, for Foucault, is not a substance or a property possessed by individuals or institutions, but rather a strategic situation in a complex network of relations. It is exercised rather than possessed, and functions through a productive mode that generates knowledge, discourses, and subjects—not merely through repression[7]. This decentralized power operates via productive discursive practices, shaping individual subjectivity. This section analyzes *Monster*'s protagonists, Minato Mugino and Yori Hoshikawa, to examine how power structures mold children into socially compliant subjects through bodily discipline, discursive discipline, and spatial discipline.

2.1. Bodily discipline

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out that "the body is ... directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it..."[8] The development of bodily disciplinary methods has undergone two stages: during the classical period, power institutions inflicted direct physical suffering; with the development of humanism, power institutions shifted to more covert means to achieve control over the body. In the film *Monster*, when adults shape children's subjectivity through bodily means, they employ a dual-disciplinary mechanism.

The first mechanism mirrors Foucault's archeology of classical "monarchical power." Yori's father enforces explicit violent discipline: when Yori disobeys, he drags her into a room for punishment, using physiological pain to condition reflexive compliance. The film contrasts Minato's

helpless knocking, Yori's pleas, and the father's reprimands, while Yori's post-punishment back scars visually underscore how violent bodily discipline fractures children's subjectivity integrity.

In the context where those in superior power positions touch the bodies of subordinates, this enacts the second paradigm of discipline. This approach corresponds to the humanistic model of implicit bodily discipline. For instance, during a negotiation scene concerning home-school conflicts, the teacher and Saori gradually encircle Yori, utilizing their physical size advantage to compress her space, thereby creating physical oppression against the child (Figure 1). The teacher and Saori repeatedly touch Yori's arms and back, either encouraging or preventing her from disclosing information beneficial or detrimental to their respective positions. At this moment, the child's bodily boundaries are continuously violated, and his words and actions become further constrained by the interests of home and school. This signifies the child's progressive loss of control over his own subjectivity. Through non-violent means, adults achieve implicit control over the child's body.



Figure 1: The teacher and Saori touch Yori's body, imposing covert bodily discipline



Figure 2: Minato is forced to apologize. under Hori's control; his subjectivity is erased



Figure 3: Under Hori's control, Minato's subjectivity is erased

Foucault's Technologies of the Self identifies "public confession" as a disciplinary ritual where subjects theatrically enact guilt, reducing their bodies to tools of power. Misinterpreting Minato's self-defense as bullying, teacher Hori stages a coercive apology (Figures 2、3). Minato, physically

restrained, admits to fictitious wrongdoing. The truth behind his actions is erased; the teacher, abandoning justice, becomes a pure enforcer of power. The child's "voluntary" confession masks passive self-alienation—his subjectivity dissolves under pressure.

2.2. Discursive discipline

Discourse is a core concept in Foucault's theory. "Foucault insists that power operates through discursive regimes to produce culturally specific 'truths,' which in turn legitimize societal norms and institutional authorities[9]. In the film, adults employ patriarchal discourse to impose "normal" standards upon children's subjectivity.

The film maintains a social context where patriarchal discourse dominates. Saori completes her discipline of Minato by constructing an image of the "perfect father." When mentioning Minato's father, Saori says: "I've promised your father—I'll persist until you get married and have your own family—an ordinary family like those seen everywhere will be fine." How should "like those seen everywhere" and "ordinary" be defined? While seemingly comforting Minato, this actually excludes children's subjective differences, implicitly creating a hierarchy between "mainstream" and "non-mainstream," while reinforcing stereotypical cognition through paternal disciplinary measures. Additionally, Saori and Hori frequently use phrases like "a boy girls don't like" and "a boy who isn't like other boys" to confine children's subjectivity within stereotypical masculine norms. Rather than excelling at learning flower names, they should prioritize acting brave, strong, and magnanimous.

Yori's father directly embodies patriarchal discourse. Building upon patriarchal oppression, he further reinforces children's negative perceptions of their "abnormal" subjectivity through stigmatizing signifiers. He tells Hori: "He (Yori) is a monster. His brain isn't human - it's a pig's brain. That's why I'm trying to make him normal." Both "monster" and "pig's brain" carry derogatory connotations of "non-human" and "abnormal." Similarly, he tells Minato: "Yori's illness has been cured." In Foucault's theory, the illness itself results from power institutions conducting the "political anatomy" of individuals. By pathologizing Yori's homosexual tendencies, the father uses discourse to cognitively mold children's subjectivity to conform to social norms. This creates contradictory subjective cognition in children as their instinctive emotional experiences conflict with authoritative discourse, plunging them into cycles of self-doubt and fear.

2.3. Spatial discipline

Foucault places spatial analysis at the heart of social theory, declaring in an interview: "Space is fundamental in any exercise of power... knowledge invests itself in spatial practices and becomes inscribed within space as both a field of action and a domain of knowledge[10]." Within disciplinary institutions such as schools and families, individuals become embedded within spatially segmented networks that are functionally organized by power structures.

The living spaces occupied by children in the film symbolize discipline and homogeneity. The school building features a hollow-centered architectural design, with student activity areas arranged in a square formation around the central hall. In addition to standard railings serving as boundaries, safety nets have been installed - with the railing height precisely matching the average stature of students. While ostensibly implemented for safety considerations, these architectural elements collectively create a panopticon-like structure (Figure 4), ensuring students remain under constant potential surveillance. During a school cleaning scene, Yori and Minato are shown carrying musical instruments through extremely narrow corridors (Figure 5). This spatial constraint visually represents their existential predicament - the children's inability to escape structural discipline. Even

domestic spaces offer no refuge for differential self-formation. Although bedrooms are conventionally considered private domains, the film depicts Saori forcibly entering Minato's room despite his clearly displayed "Do Not Enter" sign. This violation demonstrates how adults' controlling impulses and voyeuristic tendencies, when justified under the guise of parental love, systematically override children's autonomy, progressively eroding the private spaces necessary for subjective development.

Consequently, children's subjectivity becomes confined within these panoptic spaces, where they inevitably internalize disciplinary mechanisms as personal principles, ultimately constructing standardized subjectivities that conform to societal expectations. The spatial organization thus functions as a crucial apparatus for producing docile, normalized subjects.

3. Resistance: The reconstruction of children's subjectivity

Foucault pointed out in his later years that subjects can reconstruct themselves through resistance within power mechanisms. This resistance is not a partial struggle against specific disciplinary methods, but rather a productive and comprehensive process of self-reconstruction. Following Foucault's research trajectory, the reconstruction of children's subjectivity in the film can be summarized into three stages: first, self-knowledge; second, rebellion against guidance; and third, establishing new subjectivity. Below, we elaborate on Minato Mugino and Yori Hoshikawa's self-reconstruction process according to these three stages.

In his study of *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault first traced back to the ancient Greek philosophical concept of "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*), advocating for embedding "self-knowledge" into the subjectification process of daily existence. In the film, Minato Mugino and Yori Hoshikawa deconstruct established disciplinary frameworks through their interactions and reconstruct self-awareness on both physiological and cognitive levels. On the physiological level, this manifests as mutual redemption: Minato carries Yori out of the bathtub after he suffers violent discipline from his father. Through intersubjective care, the bodily integrity damaged by violent discipline is restored, laying a physiological foundation for self-knowledge. On the cognitive level, during their "Who is the Monster?" game, Yori unconsciously projects the negative self-evaluation generated under disciplinary power onto descriptions of animals, such as "Pigs can't look at the sky" and "Sloths just give up when attacked." By identifying the sloth as "Yori Hoshikawa," Minato breaks through this unconscious projection, revealing Yori's obscured subjectivity and completing the breakthrough of the established cognitive framework under power discipline. When Minato develops affection for Yori, he undergoes a transformation from fearing the stigmatized label of "pig's brain" to actively accepting these feelings. This transformation stems from Minato's continuous cognition of self and emotions, establishing a self-awareness that transcends the stereotypical boy image in social norms.

Foucault first mentioned "counter-conduct" (*contre-conduite*) in his March 1, 1978 lecture at the Collège de France. Fundamentally, disciplinary mechanisms represent power's guidance over individuals, and "counter-conduct" is the subject's rebellion against this guidance[11]. In discipline, power often guides individuals to confess the truth, which is seen as the individual's submission to power and internalization of discipline. Therefore, concealing the truth in disciplinary scenarios becomes a way to rebel against guidance. Silence is a concealment of truth. In the film, when adults pressure the children, they respond with silence. For example, when Saori demands that Minato report his school situation to his "perfect father," Minato remains silent; when Saori grabs Yori's arm to ask about his burns, Yori also responds with silence. When the methods of power discipline become more radical, they provoke lies from the children—further destruction of the truth. When

Saori loses emotional control and aggressively corners Minato, her care becomes distorted into pathological control, using maternal love as an emotional bargaining chip to oppress Minato. In this scenario, Minato chooses to lie in response to the questioning. Similarly, when Yori faces comprehensive oppression in the negotiation scene, he also lies to resist adult guidance.

In his 1982 work *The Subject and Power*, Foucault more precisely articulated resistance: “The fundamental question of resistance is the struggle for a new subjectivity”[12]. Within the Western religious context, “eschatology” served as one means of establishing new subjectivity—by viewing God as the sole redemption upon the apocalypse, thereby negating all existing power structures in the present world. Minato Mugino and Yori Hoshikawa transcend religious constraints, maximizing their subjective agency within an “apocalyptic” framework. To confront the impending cosmic contraction, the two construct a heterotopic space within an abandoned train carriage, far removed from society. The film’s depiction of their arduous journey to reach the carriage not only establishes its remote geographical location but also symbolizes their escape from disciplinary society and return to a primordial state. Inside the carriage, through games and conversations about futures unconstrained by disciplinary evaluations, they reconstruct self-awareness. As they decorate the carriage, the lighting transitions from dim to bright, foreshadowing their gradual establishment of new subjectivity within this utopian heterotopia. When disaster strikes, the stark contrast between the carriage’s interior and the external chaos culminates in their survival—guided solely by their own agency as they navigate toward the sewer’s light.

Foucault’s axiom “Where there is power, there is resistance” affirms subjects’ capacity for self-reconstruction under disciplinary power while underscoring resistance’s fluid nature. Subjectivity reconstruction is not an endpoint but an aesthetic of existence spanning life trajectories. Though Minato and Yori ultimately survive the disaster yet must leave their utopian carriage, this neither signifies the resistance’s success nor failure. Having traversed the three reconstruction stages, they remain unable to overturn entrenched social disciplinary systems—yet gain the perpetual possibility of ongoing subjective reformation throughout life.

4. The return of subjectivity: Letting children be themselves

As a significant theme in Hirokazu Koreeda’s films, child characters are not merely narrators of the plot but symbolic carriers of children’s growth dilemmas within specific social contexts. The film *Monster* presents to the audience the dissolution of children’s subjectivity through adults’ implicit discipline while also demonstrating children’s process of active self-reconstruction as agential subjects. Within the power network jointly constructed by homes and schools, adults in the film permeate stereotypical values into children through bodily, linguistic, and spatial disciplinary means. Operating under an adult-centric framework, they excessively interfere with and manipulate children’s behaviors. Consequently, the subjectivity and cognitive potential of children as independent beings become dissolved. Conflicts between homes and schools fail to effectively alleviate children’s predicaments, as the ostensibly well-intentioned rationale of “for your own good” transforms into emotional oppression. Trapped in the contradiction between their authentic “self” and the socially expected “otherized self,” children develop stigmatized self-perceptions. Foucault places the subject at the core of *Technologies of the Self*, arguing that individuals should explore and shape their subjectivity throughout life’s journey. When education prioritizes producing “docile bodies,” children’s subjectivity is stripped away by unequal power relations and remolded according to rigid standards. In this process, education not only deviates from child-centered principles and the fundamental purpose of nurturing individuals but also imposes upon children disciplinary predicaments that are nearly impossible to overthrow.

Foucault constructed an interpretive system of the subject centered on the relationships between subject and truth, subject and power, and subject and self. Within his aesthetics of existence, he emphasized the productive role of the self in the reconstruction of subjectivity. *Monster* takes family and school as entry points, revealing children's existential dilemmas while also presenting their practices of subjectivity reconstruction. By escaping social structures and returning to nature—a symbolic space detached from power—Minato and Yori shatter the stigmatizing labels imposed by societal disciplinary norms within their heterotopic environment, reinstating the subject at the core of cognition. As Foucault emphasized, power and resistance, discipline and freedom are mutually constitutive. Although children's subjectivity cannot deconstruct power networks within disciplinary education, they can reclaim and differentially reconstruct their subjectivity through self-exploration and mutual redemption.

The self plays a crucial role in the process of subjectivity construction. However, due to its inherent connections with truth dissemination and power structures, this process cannot be completed independently of others. For children, receiving education constitutes the essential path through which their physiological selves are transformed into spiritual selves with others' assistance. Educational theorists, adopting the perspective of the "other," offer insights for practitioners to assist children in establishing subjectivity. First, education's fundamental purpose of "cultivating human beings" fundamentally distinguishes it from other oppressive forms of disciplinary power. British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead emphasized in his educational philosophy that the goal of education is to stimulate and guide students' self-development. Only child-centered education can facilitate children's differentiated self-construction. Second, the educational process should avoid irrational disciplinary methods and excessive external interference. American pragmatist educator John Dewey's "Child-centered Approach" advocates making children's subjectivity the core value of education, opposing excessive discipline and external constraints. Ideal education calls for liberating children's spiritual worlds through subjectivity construction—restoring education to its essential purpose of "enabling humans to become fully human."

Compared to disciplinary practices in other social contexts (e.g., factories, prisons, hospitals), the discipline children experience in families and schools is more complex and covert. Through *Monster*, Hirokazu Koreeda delineates the socialization of children within Japanese educational models. Other East Asian films—including China's *Dogman* (2018), *The Puppetmaster* (2024), and *Rabbit Training* (2018); India's *Hindi Medium* (2017); and Singapore's *I Not Stupid* series—thematically resonate with *Monster*. By centering children and adolescents as narrative subjects, these works expose the universality of dilemmas within disciplinary education. The self-alienation and reconstruction of children's subjectivity under disciplinary systems prompts audiences to reexamine educational realities. Education should not be an instrument to mold children into vessels of adult expectations, but rather a process that—through rational methods—assists children in constructing subjectivity and igniting their potential for self-exploration.

5. Conclusion

This paper employs theories of discipline and the technologies of the self to interpret *Monster*, analyzing children's subjectivity through a Foucauldian lens to reveal its alienation and reconstruction within power networks. The film uses child narratives to uncover the truth, diminishing adults' dominant role in discourse systems, making children's subjectivity "visible," and transforming them from spoken objects into agential subjects through depictions of their self-reconstruction. In East Asian societies, children commonly face implicit discipline from parents and teachers—discipline enacted in the name of love that dissolves their subjectivity. The film's

portrayal of adults' discursive, bodily, and spatial disciplinary tactics offers an inverse reference for avoiding such practices, while children's intersubjective care, discursive resistance, and spatial escape exemplify concrete applications of Foucault's self-technologies under disciplinary oppression. The film not only enacts Foucault's theories textually but also critically engages with real-world educational practices.

Foucault's work elucidates power's operational modes and the self's role in subjectivity construction. This paper supplements his framework with educational philosophy, arguing that ideal education should adopt a child-centered approach, actively fostering differentiated subjectivity formation. In the film, teacher Hori becomes both a victim of the principal's authority maintenance and an unconscious perpetrator of this oppression onto children, creating a vicious cycle of power transmission across the "principal-teacher-student" generational structure. This aspect remains underexplored here, revealing two limitations: theoretically, the analysis insufficiently incorporates intergenerational factors in disciplinary power systems; practically, while educational philosophy provides a supplementary framework, it fails to deeply address educators' ethical dilemmas as "disciplined disciplinarians." Child-centered education requires not only perspectival shifts but also explorations of subjectivity's complexity across macro-theoretical and micro-practical dimensions. Future research could adopt pedagogical lenses to critically analyze persistent over-discipline in modern education, offering theoretical and practical pathways for educator reflection.

As capillary disciplinary networks permeate society, power structures continuously produce normalized subjects through knowledge production and bodily discipline. This productive nature means children's resistance aims not to overthrow disciplinary systems but to seek paths for differentiated subjectivity reconstruction within power. In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault notes that modern power's objective has shifted from individual domestication to achieving worldly health and well-being[13]. Educational practice should follow this guidance, liberating children's minds and developing their subjectivity to realize the ideal of child-centered education.

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