

Monos [15] 2019 | Colombia + others | 102 mins

UK release date	25th October 2019
Director	Alejandro Landes
Screenplay	Alejandro Landes, Alexis Dos Santos
Cinematography	Jasper Wolf
Music	Mica Levi
Cast	Julianne Nicholson (Doctor Sara Watson); Moisés Arias (Patagrande (Bigfoot)); Sofia Buenaventura (Rambo); Deiby Rueda (Pitufo (Smurf)); Karen Quintero (Leidi (Lady)); Laura Castrillón (Sueca (Swede)); Julián Giraldo (Lobo (Wolf)); Paul Cubides (Perro (Dog)); Sneider Castro (Boom Boom); Wilson Salazar (Mensajero); Jorge Román (Buscador de Oro)

This overpoweringly tense and deeply mad thriller from Colombian film-maker Alejandro Landes is the best thing I have seen at Berlin this year: something between *Apocalypse Now*, *Lord of the Flies* and *Embrace of the Serpent*. It depicts a dysfunctional society and guilt-ridden family in miniature, and demonstrates the shifting power dynamics of a cult, the craziness embedded in the minds of child soldiers, the resentments nursed in a military unit without a supervising commanding officer, and the very real danger of eating shrooms grown in cowshit.

The Monos are a unit of teenage guerrilla bandits, operating in a country very similar to Colombia or Bolivia — and apparently named after the Mono Grande, the mythical giant monkey for centuries rumoured to exist somewhere in South America. They are initially shown in their up-country mountainous retreat where they have little to do but hang out, await orders on the radio, look after a cow that has been given to them for milk (good for their young bones and teeth) and see to their American hostage, an engineer who is being held captive separately from her small child. They are permitted and even encouraged to develop sexual relationships among themselves, and have developed weird rituals and traditions. When one of them has a birthday, there is a version of the bumps, except it's sexualised thrashing with a belt. Everyone joins in and their hostage is also sportingly allowed a go.

But what they most like doing is firing their semi-automatics, an excitement simply impossible to resist, and this, inevitably, leads to disaster. The Monos are

required to move from the eerie aloneness of the mountain down into the jungle, and when the hostage shows signs of wanting to escape, the leader has a spasm of rage, trashes the radio that theoretically connects them to a larger command structure and the entire group effectively goes rogue – even more rogue than it was in the first place.

There is a driving narrative impulse: tense things happen. And they are made even tenser by the vivid, disturbing musical score from Mica Levi, which periodically rolls in timpani like exclamations of thunder.

Jasper Wolf's cinematography captures the transcendent beauty of the landscape, the density and hostile lushness of the undergrowth and the banks of cloud with us floating overhead.

In some ways, *Monos* is a ritual heading to disaster, or alternatively a dream, a hallucination, one that we are having about them, or they are having about themselves: a delirium brought on by altitude sickness or hunger or post-traumatic stress disorder. And Landes withholds from us any sense of when precisely this is supposed to be happening: now, or in some postapocalyptic future or in the past, as if his children are a version of the mythic Japanese soldier in the jungle unaware the war is over.

Perhaps it is an allegory about his homeland, Colombia, a country awakening as if from an endless dream of violence but with an uneasy suspicion that the seedlings of new violence are always there. An unforgettable immersion in terror.

After: **Peter Bradshaw**, *The Guardian*, 13 February 2019

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