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Fear of Youth: Modernity, Media, and the Figure of the Child
in Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale*

To casual observers, the 1990s in Japan were a decade characterized by extreme fear and anxiety over perceived threats to the nation's safety and economic prosperity. A nerve gas attack on a crowded Tokyo subway by a religious group that left twelve people dead, a poorly-handled response to the Hanshin Earthquake, and a series of highly publicized murders involving juveniles led many to believe that Japanese society was experiencing unprecedented levels of violence and insecurity. In the midst of these large-scale disasters, however, the problem that seemed to captivate the nation more than earthquakes or domestic terrorism was *enjo kōsai*, or compensated dating, a practice in which high school girls exchange companionship and occasionally sex with older men for money. In *Think Global, Fear Local*, Japan scholar David Leheny writes that the phenomenon caused a media frenzy in Japan in the 1990s, leading casual observers to believe that huge numbers of girls were prostituting themselves. In fact, the perceptions and the actual numbers did not match up: "With some polls in 1995 and 1996 indicating that as many as 30 percent of Tokyo high school girls had contacted the telephone club dating systems that have been central to *enjo kōsai*...A 1998 study commissioned by the Asian Women's Fund found that fewer than 10 percent of schoolgirls had engaged in *enjo kōsai*, with only a small number of that group actually trading sexual services for money" (Leheny 2006, p. 72). This gap between the actual magnitude of the juvenile delinquency problem and public perception illustrates the fact that, as in many other countries, juvenile delinquency and the figure of the delinquent youth have long existed as a kind of litmus test for the stability of Japanese society. Problems with youth signal the impending disintegration of society's moral and "traditional" values—an unstable youth population is a threat to children everywhere, and by extension a threat to Japan's future. On the figure of the Child in contemporary American discourse, Lee Edelman writes in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that

order is held in perpetual trust...we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child” (Edelman 11). For Japan, the “vague anxiety” of the 1990s turned its attention more and more to the figure of the child—specifically, to “a generation that threatened Japan not only through selfishness and irresponsibility but also through their alienation from traditional values and the willingness of some to use brutal violence in acting out their frustrations” (Leheny 2006, p. 41). Into this climate of fear and unease came a film that imagined a Japanese future at once alien and remarkably familiar: *Battle Royale*.

This paper will examine *Battle Royale*'s use of the figure of the child¹ as a reflection of national anxieties concerning juvenile delinquency, the collapse of “traditional” values, and the stability of the state. Through a close reading of several key scenes and images in the film, I will attempt to show how *Battle Royale*'s images of violent, disaffected children both exploit and satirize national fears of youth. As barometers of state stability, *Battle Royale*'s child figures exist as both icons of national fears about moral collapse and as reminders of the role that the media and the state itself play in cultivating those fears. With reference to the recent history of “moral panic” in Japan and its relation to the problem (or perceived problem) of juvenile delinquency, I will attempt to show how the figure of the violent child in *Battle Royale* exists as part of a historical connection between juvenile delinquency, state control, and the protection of “traditional” values in the face of rapid modernization.

Based on a 1999 novel of the same name, the film *Battle Royale* imagines a dystopian, not-too-distant future in which unemployment has reached 15%, students boycott school, and adults pass extreme educational reforms out of a “fear of the youth”—in short, a reflection of many of the anxieties that plagued Japan in the 1990s. The film was directed by Fukasaku Kinji, best known for his gangster films of the 1970s, part of a genre that arguably created the icon of the rebellious Japanese outcast (Mes and Sharp 2005). In *Battle Royale*, the government deals with increasing youth violence and delinquency by passing the Millennium Education Reform Act, which randomly selects a

¹ It is important to point out here that the figure of the Child as analyzed by Lee Edelman refers, as I understand it, to a figure of a pre-adolescent child. The children depicted in *Battle Royale* are obviously closer to “young adults,” but I would argue that they are still associated with a kind of ‘innocence in need of protection’ that makes their images effective tools to promote state control.

class of junior high school students once a year and deposits them on a deserted island. They are given food, water, and an object (sometimes a weapon, but sometimes a pot lid or a pair of binoculars) and are told that they have three days to kill each other. The last student left standing will be allowed to return to society. If more than one student is left standing after the time limit has expired, all the remaining students will be killed. Over the course of the film some students will commit suicide, some will form uneasy alliances, some will kill each other out of fear, and some will seem to take genuine pleasure in killing as many of their classmates as they can. The film ends on a note of uncertainty—two students manage to beat the system and escape from the island, but they will live their lives as permanent fugitives.

Battle Royale opens, appropriately, with a media frenzy surrounding the survivor of the most recent battle, who is returning to society after killing all of the other students on the island. The girl's school uniform, youthful face, and warm smile call to mind the media frenzy surrounding 1990s youth problems such as compensated dating and youth violence, which frequently attached a kind of glamour to said crimes even as it condemned them. David Leheny comments that media coverage of compensated dating seemed to focus much more on the girls than on the customers: "Moral responsibility appeared to lie with these 'little sluts' (as one Japanese friend half-jokingly described them to me) rather than with their adult boyfriends or customers" (Leheny 2006, p. 17). Television news stories on the subject of compensated dating frequently showed slightly blurred images of girls in short skirts loitering outside train stations, and coverage of a series of murders by a fourteen-year-old boy led to a short-lived fame via a popular weekly newsmagazine (Leheny 2006). While ostensibly condemning their actions, the news media also inadvertently (or purposefully) granted a kind of celebrity status to the youths in question, a trend also seen in the American news media's portrayal of the Columbine High School shootings and the recent shootings at Virginia Tech. In the case of *Battle Royale*'s image of the blood-soaked girl, the bright flashes of cameras at first make it difficult to see the girl's face, but then the camera lingers long on her, on the school uniform that has become sexualized by both Japanese and international media, on the doll that marks her as a child, on the blood that covers the doll, her face, and her body, and on the smile that seems to show that she is proud of what she has done. In the

reporter's repeated shouts we hear no condemnation or horror, only pure fascination. This sensational figure, in the same moment that it confirms national anxieties about a youth population (and by extension a society) in collapse, is also glorified by the media as a figure of grotesque beauty and national adoration—the child who, ironically, is allowed a place in society by virtue of her violent nature.

After cutting quickly to the opening titles, *Battle Royale*'s next image slowly zooms in on an innocuous-looking school photo of the students who will eventually be forced to kill each other on an island. They wear identical uniforms and identical expressions. The photo is an institutional image, calling to mind thousands of similar photos catalogued and archived, an institutional version of the history of youth in which students are homogeneous and obedient. The photograph exists in stark contrast to that of the blood-spattered girl, and will also exist in stark contrast to later images of these students, who will soon be wielding knives, guns, and bows and arrows in a battle to the death. In successive images, they will degenerate before our eyes. From the class photo to a school bus in which they all laugh and joke with each other, to a darkened classroom where they wake up frightened and disoriented, to the world of the island where one after another they are stabbed, shot, and dismembered, the film's images show the gradual disintegration of order and morality in the form of seemingly "innocent" youths who ultimately kill off their classmates and friends to survive. Interestingly, though the winners are given much media attention, the battle itself takes place away from the cameras, which one reviewer commented on: "So how can Battle Royale appall and pacify the populace if it doesn't happen on live television? Fukasaku appears to suggest that part of the game's power is its secrecy: like some strange newly invented ritual of adulthood, it is a blood-letting that happens far away from the rest of the tribe" (Bradshaw 2001). Though it does seem odd for a news media that delights in portraying violent images to abstain from filming the battle itself, choosing *not* to show an image can give it just as much power as showing it. What the news media chooses to show and not to show of any violent event most certainly plays a key role in creating the narrative that is revealed on screen, the hyper-real image that, in the case of contemporary juvenile delinquency, creates the perception that youth everywhere are succumbing to lives of crime. As Baudrillard writes in *The Precession of Simulacra*, "The real is produced from

miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance... It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Baudrillard 1981, p. 1733). The images in *Battle Royale*, like images of youth in 1990s news media, use “miniaturized units” of fact to create sensationalized images that convince the public that the problem is much larger than it actually is. In its collection of images that show the gradual decline of one group of students from “innocents” to betrayers and murderers, *Battle Royale* presents a condensed version of the fears cultivated by 1990s news media reporting—the youth are falling into ruin, and they are taking society with them.

Three of the most sensational figures of violent youth in the film seem, in one way or another, to take pleasure in the killing they are forced to do. One of them, Kazuo Kiriya, is not even a member of the junior high class, but signed up for fun. When we first see him, he sits in the corner of the dark classroom, his shirt hanging out and his school uniform disheveled. His hair is dyed and permed, and he stares sullenly at the other students or at the wall while smacking his gum, utterly indifferent when one of the students is killed by their former teacher. He is given the deadliest weapon—a machine gun—and goes on a murderous rampage, silently gunning down student after student over the course of the film. At one point he emerges from a burning building, swaggering through the flames with his gun, calling to mind images of monsters emerging from hell. Just before he dies he seems to turn more monstrous than ever—tears that look like streaks of black paint trickle down his cheeks, and his pupils have turned white. In his silence, his bravado, his disheveled clothing, and the joy he seems to take in killing, Kiriya is the sensationalized version of the juvenile delinquent, the enigmatic monster created by the Japanese news media that signals the downfall of Japanese morals. In the case of the two girls, Mitsuko and Takako, pleasure in killing off other students is combined with an aggressive sexuality. Mitsuko spends the majority of the film in shorts and a tight-fitting top, casually applies makeup between violent encounters with her classmates, and is accused by another student of “stealing all the boys.” Takako violently rejects the advances of one boy and ends up stabbing him

repeatedly in the groin. Both girls are images of a kind of hyper-sexuality coupled with the threat of violence, made alternately frightening and alluring in the same way that delinquent teenage girls are both condemned and glamorized by the news media.

In *Bad Youth: Juvenile Delinquency and the Politics of Everyday Life in Modern Japan*, David R. Ambras writes that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, dealing with the problems of street children, child thieves, and child prostitutes was closely associated with Japan's "modernization": "Since 1868, the Meiji state had promoted a series of far-reaching reforms aimed at constructing a modern nation that could thrive in an international capitalist economy and an imperialist diplomatic structure... (the war with China) and its aftermath stimulated a heightened perception among urban middle-class intellectuals that society required them to act upon the problems they confronted" (Ambras 2006, p. 33). Though it was this "modern" way of thinking that spurred efforts to combat juvenile delinquency and other societal problems, it was the ultra-rapid economic growth, urbanization, and industrialization of the late Meiji period that exacerbated such problems. A drive toward modernity was coupled with a fear of losing "Japaneseness" in the face of an influx of foreign influences, both bad and good. H.D. Harootunian writes that Japan's rapid modernization "prompted a widespread effort among intellectuals, writers, thinkers, scholars, and activists to discover a fixed identity in relation to origin in the pre-capitalist past" (Harootunian, p. 144). Specifically, this search for a "fixed identity" took the form of native ethnology, with scholars attempting to construct "an imaginary folk, complete, coherent and unchanging, continuously living everyday life under the sign of immutable custom" (Harootunian, p. 144). The ethnographer Yanagita Kunio saw this task as "particularly urgent... To freeze-dry this moment of cultural unevenness, it was necessary to create an image of a timeless and eternal folk (*jōmin*), which continued to exist in custom and religious observances within the vortex of modernizing changes" (149). The idea that delinquent youth represent a breakdown of traditional values is, of course, hardly unique to Japan. What *is* unique is the way in which the control of delinquent youth connects to a political desire to adhere to international norms. In the 1990s, the policing and prosecution of teenagers engaging in compensated dating would also become connected to ideas of "modernization," specifically as it relates to international laws concerning child

prostitution. David Leheny writes: “Although the 1999 Law for Punishing Acts Related to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and for Protecting Children (*Jidō Poruno / Jidō Kaishun Kinshi Hō*) was a result in part of the efforts of Japanese dedicated to ending the scourge of rich sex tourists’ preying on minors in countries like Thailand and the Philippines, its implementation was shaped in large measure by growing fears at home over Japanese girls gone wild” (Leheny 2006, p. 51). In the same way that late nineteenth century crackdowns on delinquent youth stemmed from a desire to “thrive in an international capitalist economy,” laws that ostensibly sought to control “Japanese girls gone wild” were more concerned with curbing international sex tourism. The figure of the *kogal*, with her “dyed hair, affection for gaudy makeup, and apparent access to high-priced fashion items...became central, if sometimes only implied, figures in a debate over Japan’s adherence to a developing international norm regarding child prostitution and child pornography (Leheny 2006, pp. 50-51). Like the *moga* (modern girl) of the 1920s, who became associated with loose sexual mores and gaudy fashions, the *kogal* inspired both fascination and fear. And like the *moga*, she was a sensationalized media image, a juvenile delinquent for her time: “The actual number of women fitting the modern-girl stereotype may have been rather limited, but the press, as Sato Takeshi has noted, latched onto the *moga*, or more broadly the ‘modern aspect’ for which she stood, and turned it into a ‘pseudo-event’ for popular consumption” (Ambras 2006, p. 149) These sensationalized media images, existing nearly a hundred years apart, were nonetheless both central figures in a debate over “traditional” values, international norms, and possibly exaggerated fears about the problem of delinquent youth.

In summary, the figure of the juvenile delinquent, whether a turn-of-the-century street child, a 1920s *moga*, or a contemporary teenage girl who may or may not be selling sex for money, has long been connected in Japan with notions of modernity, tradition, and adherence to international norms. Problems with youth have historically signaled the collapse of Japan’s moral core, its “fixed identity” that, H.D. Harootunian argues, is built on invented ideas of an unchanging, timeless folklore. At the same time that the “vortex of modernizing changes” carries with it the fear of this loss of a fixed identity, it has also spearheaded efforts to police and protect juveniles, whether in the form of Meiji-era social welfare organizations or contemporary child prostitution laws that seek to adhere

to international norms. Threats to the safety and virtue of children are, naturally, seen as threats to the social order. As Lee Edelman writes, “whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11). The juvenile delinquent, who embodies this threat to “social order as such” by being a threat to children everywhere, and thus a threat to Japan’s future, has become an image endlessly manipulated by film, television, and print media, a justification for the passing of strict reforms, and a warning not to stray too far from “traditional” values. In the case of *Battle Royale*, the figure of the juvenile delinquent exists in a world that has, in a sense, been created by panic over this perceived threat, a world in which the response to the problem has elevated the problem to even more sensational proportions.

In the midst of this historical and cultural context, the youths of *Battle Royale* can be read as an embodiment of national anxieties over a juvenile delinquency problem that has arguably been exaggerated and sensationalized by the news media. At the same time, *Battle Royale* also satirizes the media’s exaggeration of the problem by taking that exaggeration a step further, presenting a government-sponsored solution to youth delinquency that is at once unimaginable and not so far removed from the national panic induced by media frenzy over a problem that it arguably helped to construct. In the end, *Battle Royale* is, as described by Guardian reviewer Peter Bradshaw, a “futuristic nightmare,” a “satirical vision,” and a “pulp-exploitation shocker,” all at the same time (Bradshaw 2001). It comments on the media’s exaggeration of the juvenile delinquency problem by presenting a hyper-exaggerated version of that problem. It condemns the killers and applauds those who struggle to trust others, but also glamorizes its most aggressive killers and hints that those who trust too much will end up dead. Finally, it confirms the figure of the juvenile delinquent as a barometer for societal stability, showing a world in which juvenile unrest has led to the collapse of Japanese society, just as everyone feared it would.

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