

# Film Analysis

## BATTLE ROYALE

バトル・ロワイアル

Batoru Rowaiaru

2000



**Director**

Fukasaku Kinji

**Cast**

Takeshi Kitano (Kitano-sensei), Tatsuya Fujiwara (Shuya Nanahara aka Boy 15), Aki Maeda (Noriko Nakagawa aka Girl 15), Taro Yamamoto (Shôgo Kawada), Masanobu Ando (Kazuo Kiriyaama), Chiaki Kuriyama (Takako Chigusa aka Girl 13), Kou Shibasaki (Mitsuko Souma aka Girl 11), Yukihiro Kotani (Yoshitoki 'Nobu' Kuninobu)

**Plot Summary**

In Japan in the near future, fear of out-of-control teenagers has resulted in the government creating the 'Battle Royale' act. With this act, randomly selected school classes are taken to an island and forced to fight and kill each other until there is only one survivor. Refusal to fight will result in the activation of the exploding necklace that they have all been fitted with.

Shuya is struggling to come to terms with his father's suicide. His friend Noriko witnesses Shuya's friend Nobu stabbing their teacher Kitano-sensei in the leg and hides the knife to protect Nobu. Later the entire class is on a school trip when they are drugged and taken to the Battle Royale Island. Kitano-sensei is overseeing the 'game'. They are shown a DVD of the rules and issued with a kit bag which each contains a weapon of variable deadliness. During this session Kitano-sensei kills a girl that was talking during the DVD and activates Nobu's necklace – blowing off his head. There are two 'exchange students' who are part of the class for the duration of the game: Kiriyaama and Kawada. They have both played the game successfully before. Once the game commences we see all the different strategies the students apply. Some commit suicide rather than fight, some immediately start brutally killing their peers (especially Girl 13), and others join together to work on an escape plan. Gradually they are all killed by the deadly Kiriyaama or by each other as the tensions mount. Noriko and Shuya stay together and are gradually joined by the brave and resourceful Kawada who is haunted by the memory of his girlfriend whom he killed in the last game. Together they defeat the system, escape and kill Kitano-sensei. Kawada dies of his injuries and Noriko and Shuya, now wanted by the police, are forced to go on the run.

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'The nail that protrudes gets hammered down': traditional Japanese saying.

'The nail that comes all the way out never gets hammered down': contemporary Japanese saying.

These two opening adages offer a unique insight into the main themes of *Battle Royale*. Set in the near future this violent tale of schoolchildren being forced to kill each other became a worldwide phenomenon. It was a fitting tribute to a director that had thrilled Japanese audiences for years with his high-octane action dramas. As with all Fukasaku's works there is an underlying message rather than just an exciting presentation of violence. The opening scenes set the tone for what is to come. With Verdi's *Requiem* dramatically introducing the inter-titles we are told that Japan has suffered from economic and social collapse and that with 800,000 children boycotting school the adults took fright and instigated the Millennium Education Reform Act (known as 'Battle Royale'). The exact contents of this Act are not yet revealed but the next images are of a young teenage girl covered in blood and clutching a doll, being presented to the mass media under the cover of helicopters and army jeeps. She is the 'winner' of Battle Royale and her smile directed at the TV cameras is terrible to behold. The notion of 'winner' opens the images of game shows and quizzes but instead the blood-soaked child seems to hark at a totally different type of event.

We are then introduced to Class B of Zantsuji Middle School via a black-and-white class photo. The central face is a recognisable one, the actor/director/comedian 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano. It will be their teacher Kitano-sensei (the film keeps the same name for the character as the real-life person) who will run the brutal game that Class B will soon find themselves involved in. The use of Kitano serves several purposes: first, as will be examined in later chapters, Kitano is one of the most successful Japanese stars to have emerged in last few decades and as a result he has very high levels of audience recognition on both the domestic and the international stages. This can be seen in the poster that was used to advertise the film where several of the children's faces are crossed out but he remains a dominant central figure. Secondly, Kitano is clearly an adult male and placing him as the opponent makes the children's fights all the more tragic since they are competing against a figure who has a proven 'history' of violent behaviour. Thirdly, and perhaps more vitally, his role as iconic mass media figure opens up the notion that this game could actually happen. Kitano himself presents many TV game shows such as *Takeshi's Castle* (1986–89) and the use of a real game show presenter gives a depth and a potential realism to this outrageous new show concept.

We are introduced to the class via their literal absence. When Kitano-sensei walks into a classroom he is greeted by rows of empty chairs and a rude message

on the board informing him of their decision not to attend class. It is only Noriko, the central female character, that attends class and even she is late. Noriko's role, however, as a 'good' student is immediately called into question when Kitano-sensei is stabbed in the leg by Nobu, Noriko's friend. Rather than helping the injured teacher Noriko hides the knife to prevent Nobu's arrest. This short scene immediately sets up the conflict that we are told inundates the whole of society. The adult, in this case personified by Kitano-sensei, has given up in the face of teenage disobedience. The children are seen to be running riot and the adults are seen to be unable to cope, and it is their insecurity that leads to the carnage that follows. As the film progresses we discover that Kitano-sensei has an estranged daughter and his decision to become involved in the game, rather than attempting to mend bridges with her, seems to indicate the pathetic level that adult society has sunk to. The other main adult characters are even less effective than him. Shuyu's father hangs himself and leaves his son alone, and Class B's new teacher is brutally shot by the army for protesting at the choice of Class B for the game. This teacher who had previously been seen giggling and laughing with a group of teenage girls at the back of the school bus is dubbed by Kitano-sensei as a 'bad adult'. His humanitarian refusal to force the conflict between adults and children results in his death and Class B are on their own without any adult advice or help.

After they are drugged the children are taken to a classroom on the island and introduced to the rules of the game. This is done via a mixture of an upbeat pop-aesthetic training video presented by an enthusiastic young woman (making direct reference to contemporary Japanese pop culture which the teenagers can directly relate to) and the more violent teaching methods of Kitano-sensei. Before the game commences he has killed one young girl and gained his revenge on Nobu. All the children have been fitted with necklaces that monitor where they are on the island and are fitted with a hidden microphone, and can be activated to blow the heads of the wearer. Kitano-sensei demonstrates the effectiveness of the necklace on Nobu and Shuya is left covered in his friend's blood and the dawning realisation that there is no help coming for Class B.

Each individual member of class B is given a kit bag containing a weapon, from a pan lid (Shuya) to a scythe (Girl 11) to an automatic assault rifle (which ends in the hands of the deadly exchange student Kiriyama). As the game commences we are shown how, faced with such an extreme situation, people respond in a myriad of ways. Some immediately embrace killing, others commit suicide rather than

fight, and others just die quietly. Old passions, resentments and fears are reignited. One boy runs all over the island to tell a girl that he loves her only to be shot dead when she panics. Two girls attempt to unite the whole class but are publicly killed by Kiriama. Others try to sustain a sense of community spirit but these attempts quickly fall apart due to fear, jealousy and the usual teenage concerns made all the more fatal by the presence of deadly weapons. One group of students, led by the inventive Shinji, attempt to beat the system. Although it looks like they might have succeeded, Kiriama kills them all before they can complete their escape. He is an enigmatic character and we never get to understand his motivations; unlike Shogo, Kiriama is a natural born killer and his previous experience on Battle Royale seems to have given him the taste for murder. He easily dispatches all the students he encounters until he is killed by Nobu and Shogo.

Shuya and Noriko decide to stay together and Shuya does his best to protect Noriko as he feels that he failed to protect Nobu. When the pair join forces with the practical and inventive Shogo they will learn that feelings of love can be ruined in the face of such extreme situations. In a previous battle Shogo and his beloved girlfriend were the last two to survive and he ended up killing her in self-defence when she panicked and shot him when their necklaces were activated. Her death deactivates them and left Shogo the winner but he is hunted by her last words of 'thank you', and her smile. It is Shogo who figures out how to beat the game so that he, Shuyu and Noriko all survive. Once the army has left the island the threesome confronts Kitano-sensei. He presents to them a painting that he has drawn of all the murders with Noriko standing as an angel-like figure in the centre. He says that of all the students, Noriko would be the only one worth dying with. His admiration for Noriko relates back to a dream that she had where she and Kitano-sensei were walking on the beach. When she wakes up she comments that Kitano-sensei seemed sad. The sadness of Kitano-sensei is the heart of the film's narrative impetus. *Battle Royale* is far more about these feelings of sadness than it is a violent action film. It is telling that he would die with Noriko but not for her. Rather than embracing a higher purpose of a meaningful relationship, Kitano-sensei has no desire to protect those he cares for, he just wishes to see everything around him eradicated and does not care if he lives or dies as a consequence. The motivation of Fukasaku is to reveal a real social problem that he sees as affecting contemporary Japan. For him the sadness of Kitano-sensei reflects the malaise and feelings of inferiority that Japanese adults have suffered in the last few years. He states:

The fact that adults lost confidence in themselves, that is what is shown in *Battle Royale*. Those adults worked very hard through the 1970s in order to rebuild Japan. They went through that period working for the national interest. Of course there was a generation gap between the young and the adults, even throughout that period, but consistently adults were in control in terms of political stability and whatever was going on in the nation. However, since the burst of the economy bubble, these same adults, many of them salary men and working-class people, were put in a very difficult position with the economic downturn, and all of a sudden most of them started to lose confidence in themselves. And the children who have grown up and witnessed what happened to the adults, their anxiety became heightened as well. So I set the film in this context of children versus adults. (2001).

For Fukasaku, the state of the nation has spawned this brutal game. Juvenile delinquency has been caused by a chronic lack of confidence and the crisis that has set in amidst the older social groups rather than any innate problem with youth. The children are not originally to blame but they will be disproportionately punished for the failures of the adults. This reflects a real crisis in Japan where there have been several well-documented cases of teachers and the school system showing an extreme approach to the disobedience of children. The fear of those in positions of authority is that their inadequacies will lead to them losing power and control, and as a result they conduct themselves in an overly aggressive fashion towards the children that most represent their fears. In *The Japanese High School: Silence and Resistance*, Shoko Yoneyama (1999) cites two examples of this effect. In May 1985 a student was beaten to death by his teacher for using a hairdryer on a school trip. The students were forbidden from using hairdryers but the student had not wanted to go out into the cold with wet hair. Five years later in 1990, a 15-year-old girl called Ishida Ryoko was late for school for the first time. There was a heavy iron gate that the school shut at 8.30am. The teacher shut the gate at precisely that time even though he could see that she was running through the doorway, and the heavy gate crushed her against the wall, killing her instantly. The principal, Nomura Atsuo, rather than mourning the tragic death of the teenager, claimed that 'tardiness and absence led to delinquency' and that after Ryoko's death the 'message' was not to be tardy or late in life. This appalling dismissal of a teenager's death demonstrates the motivation

for the game in *Battle Royale*. The teenagers from Class B are not 'mad and bad' delinquents. With the exception of Kiriya, we see that even Mitsuko, deadly Girl 11, is motivated by her own experiences and feelings of inadequacy ('I just didn't want to be a loser anymore') rather than any innate cruelty.

The presentation of the brutal government structures that are using a vulnerable group as scapegoats reflects the concerns that Fukasaku expressed for his entire filmmaking career. Fukasaku himself had witnessed the brutal effects of the war, including having to clear away the bodies of his own classmates after a bombing raid (see Antoniou 2004). He saw first-hand the damage that a government can cause a nation to suffer, and was always a harsh critic of the post-war reconstruction and the failures that he perceived in post-war Japanese social and economic structures. He was part of the 1960s movement to challenge the status quo and of course in *Battle Royale* we are told that Shinji's uncle was an activist in the 1960s and had taught Shinji how to make bombs. This evocation of an earlier attempt to challenge the social system (which failed) is seen as an encouragement for the children to attempt to fight back. Although Shinji himself will ultimately die, Shuya and Noriko survive and it is on them that Fukasaku places his hope for the future. His final call for them to 'run as fast as they can' offers hope for a future that will challenge the dominant structures and create a new type of society. The opening sayings reflect the changes that are taking place in Japanese society and culture. From a situation where any dissent from individuals would be repressed for the benefit of collective harmony, the situation in the contemporary age is one where more and more people are beginning to challenge the status quo and society is beginning to acknowledge that individual opinions cannot always be ignored (see Yoneyama 1999).

It is perhaps ironic that *Battle Royale* was seen as promoting teenage violence when in fact it was commenting on the system that caused children to feel so aggressive and dislocated from society. The Japanese government even debated whether to prevent the film's cinematic release. The motivation for this considered embargo seems to have been as a response to the government's concerns about out-of-control teenagers challenging authority. In the USA, the events at Columbine High School and other examples of teenage rage resulted in *Battle Royale* being restricted. In the UK, Anthony Antoniou notes that the film was released just three days after 9/11 and perhaps this was key to its success. It seemed to speak to people who were struggling to consider and rationalise the interplay between violence and social structures. It is via this questioning of the

causes and results of social unrest and decline that *Battle Royale* continues to have political meaning and relevance to the current day. The continual stagnation of the Japanese economy since the 1990s, the devastating 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster have seen an increasing sense of social unrest and unease about the future of Japan develop. March 2012 saw over 20,000 people take to the streets in anti-nuclear protests and these generally peaceful mass gatherings have become the largest displays of public unrest since the 1960s, and seem to indicate a shift in Japanese politics and the wider Japanese society (see Aldrich and Dusi 2011). As a film *Battle Royale* contains many of the themes that are present in Fukasaku's wider works, and the recent contemporary rise in political awareness and activism directly speaks to many of his film's themes and content, making them relevant again decades after they were first made. His continuing belief that governmental structures need reconsideration and amendment is an idea that he has maintained throughout his entire working career and is one that more Japanese people are now seriously considering. *Battle Royale* is not just an action film; although violence is always present, Fukasaku allows the fears and feelings of the teenagers to be clearly shown to make clear political and social comment. The film offers a melding of action, popular culture and political questioning and was a fitting end to Fukasaku Kinji's career as a director that always sought to challenge.