

FEARING THE YOUTH: ECONOMIC TURMOIL, ADULT ANXIETY AND THE
JAPANESE *BATTLE ROYALE* CONTROVERSY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

May 2011

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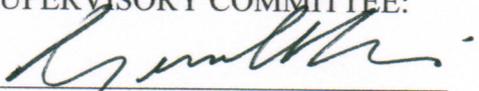
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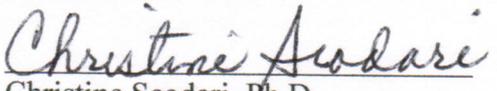
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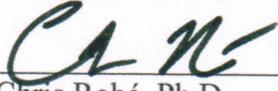
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Gerald Sim, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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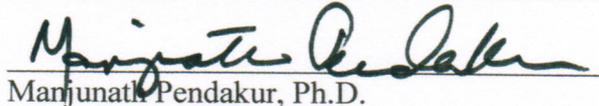

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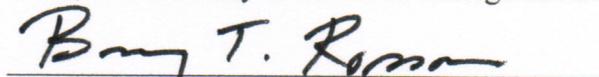
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the School of Communication and Multimedia Studies at Florida Atlantic University and its director, Dr. Susan Reilly. I would also like to thank Dr. Christine Scodari and Dr. Chris Robé for their time and input in the preparation of this thesis. Most of all I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Gerald Sim, for his hard work, guidance, knowledge and support in the writing of this thesis and the completion of my degree.

ABSTRACT

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Title: Fearing the Youth: Economic Turmoil, Adult Anxiety and the Japanese *Battle Royale* Controversy
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Gerald Sim
Degree: Master of Arts
Year: 2011

In December 2000, Japanese lawmakers took unprecedented steps to ban Fukasaku Kinji's *Battle Royale* from theaters prior to its scheduled release. The film was deemed "crude and tasteless" for its portrayal of teen violence in a state run game of kill-or-be-killed and attempts to ban the film were pursued through the film certification process all the way to the floor of Japanese parliament. This thesis investigates the controversy surrounding the release of *Battle Royale* and the socioeconomic and cultural factors—in particular, the Japanese recession and widening generation gap of the 1990s—that influenced both the film's message and the extraordinary political reaction in Japan. This thesis argues that the objections to the film were not based solely on the violent content as is often reported, but rather were the combination of adult economic and cultural anxiety regarding themselves and the youth, the anti-authority message of

the film that encouraged the youth to reject adult systems, and a political campaign that exploited the adult fears by using *Battle Royale* as a scapegoat for youth problems.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Forty students. Three days. One survivor. The premise of Kinji Fukasaku's 2000 film *Battle Royale* may seem straightforward but the controversy surrounding the release of the film in Japan was a complicated fight between politicians and the director that illustrated the widening social and economic gap between adults and the youth in millennial Japan that fostered an adult distrust in the youth and a youth rejection of adult ideals. Produced by Toei Company, the film depicts the violent and deadly battle between forty middle-schoolers who are forced to fight to the death by the state in a economically depressed, not-too-distant future Japan. Prior to the film's release, *Battle Royale* came under attack from politicians for its violent content and attempts were made by Japanese parliament members in the Diet to ban the film before its release. In a film industry where director's such as Takashi Miike, Takeshi Kitano and Kinji Fukasaku himself have fostered long, successful careers by making exceedingly violent films filled with graphic depictions of murder, torture and dismemberment—all without any objections from politicians—attempts to ban *Battle Royale* represented a drastic change in the regulation of films in Japan stands as an extraordinary case of attempted censorship in an otherwise liberal, self-regulated industry.

Prior to the release of the film in Japan, Liberal Democratic politician and Diet member Morioka Masahiro declared that *Battle Royale* is "antisocial" and "shows distinct

acts of violence that have no place on the screen."¹ In the United States, political uproar and condemnation of violent films, music and video games does not seem surprising after similar congressional hearings relating to violence in music, film and video games. However, both government interference in the industry and the regulation of a film because of violent content—as well as outrage over this screen violence—are almost unheard of in Japan where no other film has been restricted solely for its depictions of violence and no film before *Battle Royale* had faced official condemnation or government interference in the production and release of a film by lawmakers in the Diet.²

Based on a novel that faced similar threats of banning upon its release,³ *Battle Royale* takes place in a post-millennial Japan that is crippled by an economic crisis with an unemployment rate of 15% and generation of teenagers who are dropping out of school rather than face their bleak futures. To rectify this situation the government has instituted the Battle Royale Act that each year drafts a class of ninth grade students and forces them to compete in a game. The goal of this game: kill your classmates one by one until there is a single winner left alive. Each student is fitted with a radio-controlled explosive collar that monitors their progress and mandates their participation and given a weapon, which could be anything from lucky items such as automatic firearms, pistols

¹ Jon Herskovitz, "Japan Pols Blast Helmer for Violent 'Battle,'" *Variety*, December 1, 2000, accessed March 11, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117789841.html?categoryid=19&cs=1&query=japan+pols+blast+helmer>.

² Los Angeles Times, "Film on Homicidal Teen Melee Sets Japan on Edge," *Dallas Morning News*, January 13, 2001, 21A.

³ Tomo Machiyama, "The Most Dangerous Movie Ever Made: Behind the *Battle Royale* Controversy in Japan," in *Tokyoscope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion*, ed. Patrick Macias, 148 (San Francisco: Cadence Books, 2001).

and knives to decidedly unlucky items such as a pot lid, boxing gloves or a paper fan.⁴ The film unflinchingly chronicles the deaths of the forty students over the course of the bloody game and leaves the viewer with little respite from the systematic and often tragic violence as it plays out.

Little of the violence in the film occurs offscreen with each individual's death graphically depicted either in the process of dying or post-mortem. Fukasaku's use of editing, shot composition and bloody special effects—along with the attention paid to each death—forces the viewer to confront the violence inherent in the game and produces a strong sense of intimacy and knowledge of each individual character. Rather than cut away from the violence before the moment of impact in order to create the illusion of violence, Fukasaku repeatedly refuses to protect the viewer through cuts away from the action and instead depicts the death in a single unwavering take that forces the viewer to become a witness to all aspects of the violence. In order to further emphasize the violence and prevent the viewer from escaping the scene, most of the deaths are shot as close-ups or medium close-ups with the unfortunate individual placed in the center of the frame as the focal point of the scene providing a sense of intimacy with the individual and closeness to the action. This is illustrated early in the film when a girl is killed by a knife to her forehead. Just after the teacher is shown throwing the knife from the front of the room, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the girl placed in the center of the frame as she staggers, stunned and staring at the knife handle protruding from the center of her forehead near her eyes. Instead of cutting away, the camera cuts into a close-up that

⁴ “The Student Matrix,” Battleroyalefilm.com, accessed March 23, 2009, <http://www.battleroyalefilm.net/movie/students/index.html>.

follows her face as she falls dead to the ground with the knife still lodged in her head. The camera cuts back to a medium shot only after she is dead in order to show the panic and fear on the faces of the other students as the teacher—standing over the body of the girl—pulls the knife from the body of the dead girl. To further emphasize each death, each deceased student's body is shown a final time with the student's name and number to both mark the course of the game and recognize each life.

The nature of the deaths and the special effects are often gruesome, bloody and cruel and further emphasize the horrific nature of the violence. Before the game even begins, the teacher detonates the explosive collar in order to make an example of him before the rest of the class. As he frantically grabs at the collar and anyone around him for help, the student's collar explodes snapping his head back as blood sprays from his neck and he falls dead to the ground only to be left in the middle of the students in a pool of his own blood. Another student—after decapitating a student with a sword—uses the dead student's severed head as a delivery device for a hand grenade by tossing the head after the grenade in its mouth. Many more students are shot or stabbed in the course of the game and are depicted with bloody wounds and missing limbs. Some students reject the game altogether and are shown committing suicide by jumping off cliffs or by hanging.

In the United States, there have been several recent examples of controversy surrounding the release of films—including *Kids* (1995), *Elephant* (2003) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994)—that depict violent youth behavior against both teens and adults. *Natural Born Killers*, in particular, became the subject of controversy in the United States after it was blamed for inspiring young people to commit murders, which prompted

several lawsuits against the filmmaker and distributor Time Warner.⁵ However, in Japan films are not usually considered objectionable or restricted because of violent content⁶ and many violent R-rated Hollywood films receive ratings that allow viewers of all ages unrestricted access to the films.⁷ Gary Schaffer reports that the furor over the film purportedly arose from the graphic depictions of teenage—rather than adult—violence coupled with the hot-button concerns regarding several incidents of inexplicable, high-profile teen violence in the six months prior to the film’s release including a 17-year-old boy who hijacked a bus with a knife and another who beat his mother to death with a baseball bat.⁸ However, these incidents of youth violence may have also served to exacerbate existing adult anxieties towards a generation of youth who—because of the Japanese economic breakdown of the 1990s—had begun to reject traditional employment roles and attitudes at the same time that many adults found themselves clinging to the last, crumbling vestiges of the Japanese employment system.

Although often attributed solely to fears concerning juvenile delinquency in the wake of attacks earlier in the year and the film's depiction of youth violence, the controversy likely stems from a combination of cultural, economic and political factors that had been building in Japan during the recessionary 1990s and culminated in a division between an anxious, confidenceless adult populace and a generation of youth

⁵ Susan J. Douglas, "The Devil Made Me Do It: Is *Natural Born Killers* the Ford Pinto of Movies?" *The Nation*, April 5, 1999, 51.

⁶ Gary Schafer, "Japan Politician Warns Against Film," *Associated Press*, December 16, 2000.

⁷ "Certificates: Japan PG-12, 2009," Internet Movie Database, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.imdb.com/List?tv=on&&certificates=Japan%3APG-12>.

⁸ Jon Herskovitz, "The 'Battle' Rattle," *Variety*, December 20, 2000, accessed March 11, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117790773.html?categoryid=19&cs=1&query=battle+rattle>.

who had begun to reject traditional economic and cultural values. After a decade of economic turmoil in Japan that led to the restructuring of an employment system that once guaranteed employment and benefits for life and a recession that persists in Japan to this day, many of the youth rejected the traditional employment system that had long abandoned workers and instead became accustomed to unstable temporary and part-time employment in order to hang in and keep going in Japan's troubled economy. Many of the adults could not adapt to the changes in the economy and—fueled by several high-profile incidents of teen violence against adults—found a scapegoat in the youth who refused to play the old economic game—a game, much like the one depicted in *Battle Royale*, that pitted the youth themselves in a chaotic system of which they have no control.⁹

When *Battle Royale* was released at the end of the decade and several months after these violent incidents, politicians attacked the film for its depiction of youth violence. However, the politicians' interest in the film was not simply to protect young people from being inspired by the violence in the film. The violence in the film is not particularly extraordinary in the context of Japanese cinema, but the film's message and depiction of the decay of adult systems that may have exacerbated adult fears at this weakened point in Japan's history. The film—rather than attempt to bridge the gap adults and the youth rejection of the traditional systems—depicts the adult economic and educational apparatuses as crumbling and the adult populace as giving up and abandoning their responsibilities to the youth rather than deal with the nation's issues. To the youth of

⁹ Tomiko Yoda, "Roadmap to Millennial Japan," in *Japan After Japan*, ed. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian, 42 (Durham: Duke, 2006).

Japan the film's explicit message of "run!" implores to the youth that the only way to win the adult game is simply not to play. It is this message that conservative politicians in the Diet likely found to be obscene and prompted many of these politicians not merely to attack the film, but use it in a cynical ploy to exploit adult fears in order to strengthen their control of the Diet and pass legislation aimed at punishing the youth more severely.

Although Japanese politicians and PTA members dismissed the film as “crude and tasteless”¹⁰ because of its violence, several film critics—including Anthony Quinn, Andrea Arai and Tony Williams—observed more substance beneath the film’s violent surface. In a review of the film written for the United Kingdom release of the film that echoes Arai and Williams' analysis of the film, Anthony Quinn read the film as a critique of Japan’s notoriously competitive school system that places overwhelming pressure on students to succeed academically¹¹ and saw the uniformed students of *Battle Royale*—trapped in a free-for-all struggle for victory against their peers at all costs—as analogous to Japanese students pitted against each other in competition for academic accolades and scholastic survival. Although comparisons between the Japanese school system and the students in the film can be easily made, this reading may also invoke Orientalist notions of a Japanese school system that supposedly encourages students to sacrifice their own interests and devote all of their time and energy to fierce academic competition and ‘cram schools’ in order to succeed despite studies that show Japanese students do not spend as

¹⁰ Jon Herskovitz, “Japan Pols Blast Helmer for Violent ‘Battle.’”

¹¹ Anthony Quinn, “The Big Picture: Teacher , Leave Them Kids Alone,” *The Independent*, September 14, 2001, 10.

much time in the classroom as students in many other countries and school activities are not limited to academics.¹²

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the controversy surrounding the release of *Battle Royale* in Japan and the likely causes for the extraordinary reaction to the film. In order to understand the controversy and why it occurred it will be necessary to trace the path the film took through certification and the objections raised before its release. It will also be necessary to provide an outline of the socio-historical and cultural context at work in Japan at the time of the film's release and how these factors influenced both the film and the reaction to the film. Furthermore, this thesis will also examine the content of the film as it relates to both the violence and the message of *Battle Royale* and the politicians' motivations for attacking the film. The theoretical framework of this thesis sets out to prove that the objections to the film was not based solely on the violent content as is often reported, but rather were the combination of adult economic and cultural anxiety regarding themselves and the youth, the anti-authority message of the film that encouraged the youth to reject adult systems, and a political campaign that exploited the adult fears by using *Battle Royale* as a scapegoat for youth problems.

SIGNIFICANCE: JAPANESE CULTURE AND CINEMA

This thesis will contribute to the field of Japanese cinema studies by examining the certifications and rating process in Japan and the unprecedented attempts taken by Japanese lawmakers to ban the film and pass legislation to control the historically film industry-regulated ratings process and the specific objections to the film and its rating

¹² Chisaki Toyama-Bialke, "Adolescence," in *Modern Japanese Society*, ed. Josef Kreiner, Ulrich Möhlwald and Hans Dieter Ölschleger, 67 (Boston: Brill, 2004).

when Toei attempted to release the film and will expand the study of censorship in Japan—which has focused mainly on censorship during and immediately after World War II—to include a contemporary incident. Building on Keiko MacDonald's 1990 essay on the Japanese film industry that outlines some of the normal procedures for rating and certifying a film, this thesis also considers the Japanese film regulatory board, Eirin's, own published guidelines and examines how they are applied in a survey of films and their ratings and the specific Eirin objections to *Battle Royale*. Although partial reports regarding the controversy exist from several sources, no single complete account of the course of events has been available and this thesis provides an overarching narrative of the unusual certification process and attempted banning by the Diet.

In addition to expanding scholarship regarding censorship and certification in Japan, this study will also contribute to Japanese cinema studies by exploring a significant film in the oeuvre of a lesser-known but prodigious Japanese director, Kinji Fukasaku. Despite not being as well known in the west, Fukasaku spent more than forty years in the Japanese film industry and has been recognized in Japan by both critics and audiences not only for his films but his influence on the yakuza genre and other young filmmakers.¹³ For its part, *Battle Royale*—the last film Fukasaku completed before his death—represents the culmination of a directorial career that constantly examined themes relating to the effects of government control of the people and the individual rejection of control in often violent situations. This study offers the opportunity to contribute to

¹³ Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer, "Introduction," in *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer, 18 (Routledge: London, 2007).

scholarship on Fukasaku by both bringing attention to his films and some of the recurring subtexts and themes, including youth struggle, violence and government repression.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to Japanese cultural studies and the historical understanding of the recessionary 1990s by examining the confluence of several political, historical and economic factors at a specific point in Japan's history that influenced the attacks on *Battle Royale* but also revealed a widening gap between adults and the youth. After a decade of economic decline and instability, many adults had lost hope in the economy and many of the youth found themselves chronically underemployed. Anxiety and stress over the economy had been building and in 2000 this anxiety was only exacerbated by a series of youth crimes. This thesis will show that politicians—rather than attempt to bridge the gap between adults and the youth—exploited these fears and the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale* in an attempt to pass legislation that would reform juvenile crimes laws.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CENSORSHIP IN JAPANESE CINEMA STUDIES AND *BATTLE ROYALE*

Previous research on censorship in Japanese cinema and textual analysis of *Battle Royale* and its critique of past and present educational systems provide the critical foundation for this analysis by presenting the historical precedence for censorship in Japanese cinema and offer a starting point for textual analysis of the film as it relates to the controversy. Several studies have dealt with censorship and regulation in Japanese cinema studies and have focused primarily on the restrictions instituted by the Meiji and Shouwa governments prior to World War II and by the occupation forces after the end of

the war. Although they have since been removed, these restrictions—in particular, the Film Law of 1939 that attempted to curb individualism, elevate the family system and public sacrifice through reeducation and censorship¹⁴—became the precursor to contemporary regulations of Japanese cinema and the foundation for the current regulatory process in Japan. Two authors in particular—Isolde Standish and Darrell William Davis—have contributed significant studies of censorship laws and practices in World War II Japan that both offer differing cultural explanations for the push towards censorship and regulation.

In *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, Standish examines the roots of the prewar regulations and their effects on the aesthetics and cultural practices in Japanese film and the political motivations behind censorship in Japanese cinema. Standish writes that regulations during the 1910s and 1920s were inspired by government concerns over the rise of socialism and anti-imperialism and were instituted as a means to guide the populace away from such ideologies.¹⁵ In order to achieve this, the Ministry for Internal Affairs was given control over film censorship and took steps to increase government approved educational films and regulate the content permitted in films. Standish also argues that the enactment of the 1939 Film Law—which gave the state greater control of the film industry—must be examined within the context of the nexus points of crackdowns of left-wing activities in all aspects of public life and

¹⁴ Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film*, (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 64.

¹⁵ Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 135.

the war with China¹⁶ that was exploited to push Japan towards war and hand over control of the Japanese film industry to the Cabinet Propaganda Office, which then strengthened censorship controls and instituted a process of pre-production film censorship through the revision and censorship of script content prior to shooting, a process that is still in place today but was under legislative attack from the Diet as a result of the *Battle Royale* controversy.¹⁷ In response, many Japanese filmmakers adopted the style—which could not be regulated by the script censors—and subject matter of soviet montage and Italian neorealism as a means to produce films critical of current events and practices in Japan while also not raising the ire of censors.¹⁸

Whereas Standish explored censorship and an aesthetic adopted in opposition to ideological crackdowns and the eventual institution of self-regulation, Darrell William Davis explored the connections between censorship and the production of a monumental style that embraced nationalism and totalitarianism rather than reject it. Davis argues that film censorship acted as a mediation between the monumental style that developed and the ideological function the film served in society. Furthermore, Davis argues that regulations did not necessarily hinder filmmakers, but rather enabled the creation of works through the artificial guidance of certain ideologies over others.¹⁹ According to Davis, the enactment of the 1939 Film Law was necessary not as a measure for the war effort, but because of a prevailing belief that traditional Japanese values were in a

¹⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹⁷ Ibid., 142-143.

¹⁸ Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁹ Davis, 64.

troubling decline with this decline most evident in Japanese cinema. In particular, officials believed there was a need to eradicate depictions of individualism, frivolous language and behavior by the youth—both seen as originating in Western influences—while encouraging the family system, public sacrifice and a return to Confucian ideals.²⁰ Although the restrictions of the Film Law are no longer mandated, the social ideals of the law have not been entirely discarded by the rating's board that attempted to censor youth behavior—in this case in terms of violence—and diminish the film's anti-authority message by removing violent acts by the state in the film.

Keiko MacDonald offers a more contemporary analysis of the Japanese film industry and the process of regulation and certification in her chapter "Japan" from John A. Lent's *The Asian Film Industry*. Although MacDonald's essay is now over twenty years old, it remains one of the most detailed and thorough explanations of the Japanese regulatory system and covers Eirin's (The Motion Picture Code of Ethics Committee) formation as a self-regulatory committee similar in nature to the MPAA during the American occupation of Japan as well as the processes Eirin undertakes in its regulation and certification of films.²¹ Eirin, which is meant to protect both the industry and the audience, rates and certifies films based on moral standards that regulate depictions of sex, nudity, acts of brutality, and the depictions of social institutions such as education and marriage in order maintain the respect for and sanctity of these institutions.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 65.

²¹ Keiko MacDonald, "Japan," in *Asian Film Industry*, ed. John Lent (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 48.

²² Ibid., 49.

In terms of critical analysis of the film itself, there are several authors who have attempted to look past the violent imagery of the film for a deeper meaning and relevancy in the film's subtext and have offered several different interpretations as to the significance of the game and its relation to past and present Japan. These analyses may vary but each offers an insight into the film and some of the reasons it may have hit a nerve with Japanese politicians and audiences, particularly the film's critical depiction of the widening social and economic generation gap in 1990s Japan.

In his essay on *Battle Royale*, film scholar Tony Williams argues that the film should not be dismissed as another example of gratuitously violent Japanese trash cinema. Williams notes a connection between the depiction of the game in the film and the structure and function of the Japanese educational system and zero-sum mindset that existed prior to World War II. The strict, militaristically regimented education system in Japan in the 1930s severely disciplined and indoctrinated students to believe that national goals could only be achieved through the dominance and expense of others.²³ Williams sees a connection between this militaristic attitude and zero-sum policy of the past and the not-too-distant future world of *Battle Royale* wherein students are required to use overpowering force to dominate others in order to achieve the objective of becoming the sole winner of the game.²⁴

Building on Williams' assessment of the film as a critique of Japan's educational system, anthropologist Andrea G. Arai connects the film to the more contemporary

²³ Tony Williams, "Case Study: *Battle Royale*'s Apocalyptic Millennial Warning," in *Japanese Horror Cinema*, ed. Jay McRoy (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 131.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 132-133.

neoliberal reforms of the Japanese educational system of the early 2000s that were influenced by the then decade-old Japanese economic recession and the resulting pressures placed on students from these reforms. According to Arai, the educational reforms not only took steps to individualize formal education to better meet the needs of students but also contained proposals meant to deal with unwilling students that included mandatory service to the nation and attempts to transfer more of the financial and educational burden from the state onto the individual.²⁵ Further, Arai sees similarities between the pressures placed on real-life Japanese students and the students of the film that reminds one of:

The less obvious kinds of battle for survival or ‘examination wars’ (*juken senso*) kids in which Japanese have been involved for several decades. In the post-bubble economy, despite the rhetoric of the end of competition, in education reform, the new reality of survival is not that all will reach the top, but those who do, like the kids in the film will have to engage desperately (*hisshi ni*) to become worthy competitors for Japan in the amorphous battlefield of the global economy.²⁶

According to Arai, the relaxing of strict educational guidelines that, on the surface, should seem to ease pressures on students instead intensified academic pressures on students by making them rather than the state responsible for their own level of achievement and in greater competition with their peers, whose academic survival—

²⁵ Andrea G. Arai, “Killing Kids: Recession and Survival in Twenty-First-Century Japan.” *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003): 372

²⁶ *Ibid.* 374.

much like the literal competition and survival of the students of *Battle Royale*—is a brutal and overwhelming process.²⁷

In his essay focusing on the of the controversy surrounding the film, journalist Machiyama Tomo briefly focuses on the connection between the economic upheaval and instability of the Japanese recession that had begun in the 1990s and dragged into the 2000s and how it affected the employment and long-term prospects for youths beyond education and the resulting insecurity in Japan and the world depicted in *Battle Royale* as serves as a jumping off point for some of the analysis in this thesis. After decades of seemingly endless growth, Japan's economic bubble burst in the 1990s leading to recession and post-WWII highs of unemployment that eroded previously guaranteed lifetime employment opportunities and threatened both national and individual identity in Japan.²⁸ Machiyama quotes the beginning of the film and draws attention to the similarities between the Japan of the 1990s and the film. He writes:

'In the beginning of the new century, the country fell apart.' The film begins with that subtitle, and the set up continues, 'The Japanese economy collapsed, the unemployment rate skyrocketed, and all grownups lost their confidence. Therefore, the children came to feel contempt for parents, teachers, and authorities. Disorder in classrooms, stabbing of teachers, and boycotting of schools became a widespread epidemic.'²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Harry Harootunian and Tomiko Yoda, "Introduction," in *Japan After Japan*, eds. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian, 1 (Durham: Duke University, 2006).

²⁹ Machiyama, "The Most Dangerous Film," 151.

According to Machiyama, the world of *Battle Royale* is not merely the setup for a violent science fiction film, but a thinly veiled allegorical representation of the current social and economic climate of Japan and the greater loss of confidence in the government's ability to maintain the nation.³⁰

Along with these critical analyses, published interviews with director Fukasaku have also provided insight into the connection between Fukasaku's own World War II experiences and the deeper subtext of the film. For Fukasaku, much of the violence of the game reminded him of his own experiences as a teenager during World War II and he, in part, wanted to relate the violence and the morally destructive nature of war and its aftermath—themes common throughout many of his films—to his teen audience. Regarding his experiences and how they have influenced his perception and representation of violence and its relation to *Battle Royale*, Fukasaku said:

I was working in a weapons factory that was a regular target for enemy bombing. During the raids, even though we were friends working together, the only thing we would be thinking of was self-preservation. We would try to get behind each other or beneath dead bodies to avoid the bombs. When the raid was over, we didn't really blame each other, but it made me understand the limits of our friendship. I also had to clean up all the dead bodies after the bombings. I'm sure those experiences have influenced the way I look at violence.³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Steve Rose, "The Kid Killers: The Veteran Japanese Filmmaker Behind *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, Has Turned His Talents to Murderous Teenagers," *The Guardian*, September 7, 2001, 8.

Fukasaku translated these experiences of violence and self-preservation at the cost of friends into the anguish and experiences of the students—many of whom are friends—and their struggles to work together to survive a game that ultimately only one can win.

METHODS: THE HISTORICAL RECORD, CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

This thesis relies on a Marxist approach to history that traces the effects of the turbulent Japanese economy on the attitudes and experiences of Japan's worker and youth populations and how these effects were mediated into the allegorical subtext in the film and the negative adult reactions to the film. Much like Robin Wood attempted to identify a "decisive 'moment,' an ideological shift, in Hollywood cinema and (by implication) in American culture" through the combination of sociological and textual analysis³² in his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, this thesis attempts to identify the reasons for Japan's shift in the perception of youth violence, generational divide and film regulation that culminated in the *Battle Royale* controversy and the film's allegorical critique that speaks to the economic and cultural shift in Japan during the 1990s. Specifically, this thesis presents a narrative of the events that transpired during attempts to ban the film and then examines the major social and economic changes that occurred—including recession, reorganization of the workforce, and a widening generation gap—in Japan and then places the film within the context of Japanese culture through textual analysis.

Chapter Two will deal with the historical events of the controversy itself and the process undertaken to attempt to ban the film. In order to understand the unusual

³² Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, (New York: Columbia), 2.

certification process of the film prior to its release, it will be necessary to first discuss the normal process for certifying and rating the film by Eirin as well as the meaning and the cultural and economic significance of the ratings a film may be awarded. This will include background information from scholarly writing, newspaper reports, Eirin's own website and will also place *Battle Royale's* rating and certification in context and comparison with other films. This chapter will then deal with the controversy in Japan that began prior to the film's release and culminated with the attempted banning of the film in the Diet. Although the major dailies in Japan may have ignored the film,³³ a record of what transpired does exist and will be utilized to attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the controversy. This section will rely on news reports of the time from several regions and accounts of the controversy later reported. This includes American sources such as *Variety* and *Premiere*, British sources such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and articles published in the English-language versions of the Japanese *Daily Yomiuri* and *Japan Times* among others.

Chapter Three attempts to put the film and the reaction to the film into cultural and historical context. This will include an historical survey of the political, historical and economic issues of post-World War II Japan with particular attention paid to the economic downturn and loss of stability of the 1990s and Japan's reaction to the end of Japan's so-called 'Economic Miracle.' During this period, Japan faced record numbers of unemployment, financial sector failings, and government bailouts and the social and economic stability of the past forty years began to crumble as workers who had once been guaranteed jobs for life were suddenly laid off and many youths began to abandon

³³ Sid Adilman, "Movie Incites a Bloody Battle," *The Toronto Star*, November 23, 2001, F12.

the idea of ever securing steady employment. The 1990s also produced several high-profile incidents of unusual and sensationalized violence committed by young people in Japan that sparked a general distrust for youths allowed them to become an easy target for scapegoating by adults.³⁴ This section will explore how these then recent events in Japanese history not only influenced the production and narrative of the film but also how these events may have made it more likely that the film would be viewed as controversial.

This section will also address the motivations for government interference in the film's release. In 1999, the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party introduced a bill to amend the Juvenile Law that has been on the books since 1949 in order to more severely punish juvenile offenders.³⁵ This section will examine efforts to pass reforms in the Diet in 2000 and political efforts to connect *Battle Royale* to potential youth crime as well politicians' attempts to bolster the case for reform by attacking the film at a critical point during the legislative process that helped pass reform.

The second section of Chapter Three will undertake a textual analysis of the film and expand the previous section by placing the film into the context of then recent Japanese socioeconomic history. There are several main factors that the film may have attracted such a high level of controversy that relate both to what was shown on screen and had recently transpired in Japan. As has been discussed by several critics including Andrea Arai, the film can easily be read as a critique of the Japanese educational system and reforms of that system made in the 1990s based on the idea that the harsh competition between the students in the game is allegorical to the harsh competition

³⁴ Yoda, "Roadmap to Millennial Japan," 42-43.

³⁵ Setsuko Kamiya, "Revisions to Juvenile Law Questioned," *Japan Times*, May 26, 2000.

between Japanese students.³⁶ Some such as Machiyama Tomo have suggested that the film's allegorical focus lies in critique of the then recent Japanese economic downturn that had created instability in Japan.³⁷ However, it is likely that a combination of narrative and subtextual elements in the film—including those dealing with the economy, the fear of the youth and the widening generation gap—along with the recent violent incidents and the unflinching violence of the film all played a role in inciting the controversy. Further, the critical tone of the film may have also exacerbated this situation because it lays blame for the violence not with the students, but rather the system that has forced the students into the brutal game—a system controlled by politicians and adults—and encourages the youth to reject the adult system. This section will also address the specific Eirin objections to the film and examine the effects the alterations would have made to the film, in particular, how the cuts would have shifted blame for the violence away from the adults and the government while reinforcing fears of youth violence by eliminating the students' dire motivation for competing in the game.

³⁶ Arai, "Killing Kids," 374.

³⁷ Machiyama, "The Most Dangerous Film," 148.

CHAPTER TWO: FILM REGULATION IN JAPAN AND THE BATTLE OVER
BATTLE ROYALE

In order to fully understand the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale* and its significance as an unusual attempt at censorship, it is important to understand the normal process that a film goes through before release in Japan as well as Japan's rating system and its guidelines. Before any film can be released theatrically in Japan, it must first be reviewed and certified by Eirin (the Administration Commission of Motion Picture Ethics), Japan's film regulatory body. Much like the MPAA, Eirin was formed as an industry self-regulatory organization in order to protect the industry from government interference and children from harmful images.³⁸ Although it does not advertise itself as such, Eirin is not merely a regulatory board but also, in essence, a censorship board and does have the legal power to prevent a film from being released in theaters if the film does not pass review. Every film released in Japan must pass an Eirin Committee review that may consist of several stages. First, the committee passes judgment on the film according to the Motion Picture Code of Ethics guidelines and, if necessary, suggests changes to the film in order to eliminate objectionable content or imagery. The producers are then informed and negotiations take place in order to come to an agreement on how to alter the film. If no agreement can be reached with the producer, the Committee takes over the matter. Once the film has been reviewed, it is affixed with the Eirin Code Seal

³⁸ MacDonald, 48.

which permits its release into theaters as no film will be legally permitted to be shown in theaters without the seal.³⁹ Because all films are required to have the seal before they can be shown in theaters, Eirin may effectively ban a film by refusing to award a seal.

Each film is also certified by Eirin with one of four ratings classifications that either restrict films or suggest viewing guidelines according to the age of the viewer. Films that are rated G are recommended for general audiences and open to all ages. A PG-12 rating suggests parents accompany children under twelve and does not restrict any viewers from entering the theater. Films that have been rated either R-15 or R-18 prohibit viewers under the ages of fifteen and eighteen respectively from films with these ratings and are reserved for films that depict behaviors that would be perceived to be potentially harmful to children. According to figures released on Eirin's official website for films from 2003-2007, most international and domestic films received a G rating by an overwhelming majority (366 out of a total of 614 films in 2007 alone) with R-18 coming in a far distant second and populated mostly by short erotic films.⁴⁰

How and why a film earns a certain rating seems to conform to a set of guidelines published by Eirin with some not so publicized thematic or content guidelines. According to Eirin's online page describing film classification guidelines:

Films are classified according to the treatment and impact of the eight main classifiable elements of public concern, specifically theme, language, sex, nudity, violence & cruelty, horror & menace, drug use, and criminal behavior.

³⁹ Ibid. 49.

⁴⁰ "Number of Feature Films by Rating," Eirin: Administration Commission of Motion Picture Code of Ethics, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.eirin.jp/english/009.html>.

Classification also depends on the context. It is illegal to show indecent images of minors under the age of 18, and to show a work that is obscene. Real explicit sex and detailed exposure of sexual organs are not allowed, nor is pornography.⁴¹

What sorts of depictions and the extent to which any of them can be shown is not made explicitly clear, but there seem to be some common features between films of a given rating and elements that will earn a film a restricted rather than a general rating. The R-18 rating is usually reserved for erotic films and films that depict extremely graphic or perverted sex scenes, graphic illegal drug use, and grotesque acts such as *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *Ichi the Killer* (2001) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972).⁴² The R-15 rating seems to be applied mostly to films that depict strong—but not perverted or graphic—sexuality, less graphic depictions of illegal drug use such as *Audition* (1999), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994).⁴³ Many Western films that would be R-rated in the United States fall into the PG-12 rating category that seems to be comprised mostly of adult-themed films that do not explicitly depict any of the aforementioned objectionable content. PG-12 includes such films as *Funny Games* (2007), *Goodfellas* (1990), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Gummo* (1997).⁴⁴ Films aimed specifically at children are rated G and contain no perceptively objectionable content.

⁴¹ "Film Classifications," Eirin: Administration Commission of Motion Picture Code of Ethics, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.eirin.jp/english/008.html>.

⁴² "Certifications Japan R-18," Internet Movie Database, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.imdb.com/List?tv=on&&certificates=Japan%3AR-18>.

⁴³ "Certifications: Japan R-15," Internet Movie Database, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.imdb.com/List?certificates=Japan:R-15&&heading=14;Japan:R-15>.

⁴⁴ "Certifications: Japan PG-12."

For *Battle Royale*, the review and ratings process did not proceed smoothly as problems arose concerning the recommendations and rating for the film. Fukasaku's initial script—not the filmed version—was immediately slapped with an R-15 rating when up for review by the Committee. Once filming was complete, Eirin reviewed the rough cut of the film and suggested the removal of several scenes including:

The scene where the teacher (Takeshi Kitano) throws a knife into a whispering female student's forehead. The scene where a band around a male student's neck explodes.... The scene where blood gushes out of a female student's throat cut by a scythe. The scene where a dying female student is torn apart by a full-automatic machine gun's bullets. The scene where a male student's decapitated head with a grenade in its mouth is used as a weapon.⁴⁵

It is important to note that all but one of these acts of violence was committed not by students, but by the teacher Kitano and transfer student Kiriyama, an ostensible agent of Kitano and the government brought into the game to kill as many students as possible. Why these scenes were flagged for removal while other scenes just as bloody and gruesome—including separate scenes where a boy has a hatchet lodged in his bloody head and then removed, another where a girl kills a boy by repeatedly stabbing a boy in the groin while they both become soaked in blood, or another scene where several girls engage in a brutal, bloody shootout with machine guns while in the top floor of a lighthouse—remains unclear but seems to provide evidence that censors were not just concerned with the violence but the anti-authority message of the film.

⁴⁵ Machiyama, "The Most Dangerous Film," 150.

Fukasaku refused to make the changes to the then R-15 rated film and instead decided to file an appeal with the Eirin committee to reconsider an R-12 rating for the film. Along with his more formal response to the Committee, Fukasaku also encouraged teenagers—for whom he had made the film—not to worry about the potential R-15 rating that would ban them from theaters and told them to “just rush into the theater! I made this just for you, kids! I hope you guys have enough guts and wits to make it!”⁴⁶ Apparently, this encouragement did not help the film’s chances of being released with a non-restrictive rating and was construed as further provocation by some parents and politicians. One month before the film’s scheduled December 16, 2000 release politicians and cabinet members began to take aim at the film and its depiction of teenager-on-teenager violence. Diet member Koki Ishii of the conservative ruling Japanese Liberal Democratic Party led the charge against the film and took the unusual step of bringing his concerns about the film before the Diet. Ishii claimed that the film could be harmful to children and made an appeal not only to censor the film—which historically has been left up to the industry to do itself—but to legally control and ban the film from theaters altogether.⁴⁷ However, none of the politicians or concerned citizens could decisively say whether or not the film should be banned because none of them had actually seen the film and Ishii ordered Toei to set up a special screening of *Battle Royale* so it could be evaluated by lawmakers.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid. 151.

⁴⁷ Rose, “The Kid Killers,” 8.

⁴⁸ Machiyama, “The Most Dangerous Film,” 151.

On November 28, 2000, a nonpartisan group of thirteen members of parliament and twenty-two officials representing other members of parliament screened the film with Fukasaku and expressed their concerns to him about the film.⁴⁹ After the screening, Ishii publicly denounced the film saying, “This movie is crude and tasteless,”⁵⁰ and later added, “This film is rubbish. It turns murder into a game.”⁵¹ Another Liberal Democratic Party member Masahiro Morioka left the theater in disgust and deemed the film “anti-social.”⁵²

Despite Ishii’s forceful remarks, one writer reports that the reaction to the screening was not so cut and dry. Tomo Machiyama attended the November 28 screening with the members of parliament and Fukasaku and reported that Ishii preceded the screening of the film with a call that things harmful to children—apparently meaning the film—should be banned.⁵³ Machiyama reports that none of the viewers left the theater during the screening and some very unexpectedly applauded the film when it had ended. During the question and answer session after the film, Liberal Democratic Party member Hiroshi Kawaguchi even expressed that he was deeply touched by the film and believed that, “It gives serious and earnest commentary about family, friendship, education, parenthood and love. I was really impressed. I think it should be shown to junior high school students.”⁵⁴ Unlike Kawaguchi, Ishii was not moved and continued to attack

⁴⁹ Herskovitz, “Japanese Pals Target Pic of Violent Youth.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ LA Times, “Film on Homicidal Teen Melee.”

⁵² Colin Joyce, “Film Inflames Youth Crime Fears,” *The Daily Telegraph*, December 26, 2000, 15.

⁵³ Machiyama, “The Most Dangerous Film,” 151.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 152.

Fukasaku and the film and call for the film's banning to which Fukasaku curtly replied, "Do you really want the government to control movies? Do you really want to get back to the time of World War II, when the government really made children kill people?"⁵⁵

Despite the controversy and Ishii's campaign against the film, *Battle Royale* was released with the R-15 rating on schedule on December 16, 2000 in Toei-owned theaters throughout the country. Most likely encouraged to see the film because of the controversy over its violence and its restrictive R-15 rating, tens of thousands of teenagers reportedly lined up to see the film for as long as two days before its release.⁵⁶ With Ishii's free publicity, *Battle Royale* was propelled into becoming what Toei considered a major commercial success making US\$25 million in Japan alone with a box office success that *Time* magazine says is "usually reserved for cartoons and TV-drama spin-offs."⁵⁷ ⁵⁸ The film had become so popular that Toei even released a second 'special version' into theaters in April 2001 that included more blood and several scenes that expanded the backgrounds and motivations of several of the characters and carried the same R-15 rating of the original version. Not only was the film financially successful in Japan, but it was also nominated for best picture, best director, best screenplay, best actor, best music, best sound recording and ultimately won the audience Popularity Award.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Europe Intelligence Wire, "Gory Film Fuels Japanese Fears Over Youth Violence," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2000.

⁵⁷ LA Times, "Film on Homicidal Teen Melee."

⁵⁸ Ilya Garger, "Royale Terror," *Time*, June 30, 2003, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,501030707-461891,00.html>.

⁵⁹ "Japan Academy Prize 2001," Nippon Academy-Sho Association, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.japan-academy-prize.jp/allprizes/2001/index.html>.

After all the controversy surrounding the film's violence and its R-15 rating, audiences didn't seem to be as fazed by it the way Japan's politicians had been. But if audiences were not upset about the film—and, in fact, clamoring to see it—then it suggests that furor over the film's violence, its effect on filmgoers and its R-15 rating may have been unwarranted. Writers and insiders who have weighed in on the issue decidedly did not agree with Ishii and the Committee's appraisals of the film. *Japan Times* film reviewer and author Mark Schilling did not believe that the film deserved the R-15 rating because there is nothing in *Battle Royale's* depiction of violence and “blood-soaked survival game that audiences haven't seen again and again in years past including Fukasaku's *Battles Without Honor or Humanity* series about gang wars in early postwar Hiroshima.”⁶⁰ Aaron Gerow of the English version of the *Daily Yomiuri*—which, unlike its Japanese-language counterpart, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, did review the film—scornfully asks the politicians responsible for the controversy, “what the hubbub was about: even with this class of 40 kids slaughtering each other, *Battle Royale* still features a fraction of the deaths of your average Arnold Schwarzenegger flick—which gets nary a word of complaint from the so-called defenders of youth.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Mark Schilling, “I Was a Fake Juvenile Delinquent,” *Japan Times*, December 19, 2000.

⁶¹ Aaron Gerow, “Battle Squares Off with Youth Violence,” *Daily Yomiuri*, December 21, 2000, 11.

CHAPTER THREE: RECESSION, REJECTION AND REFORM IN JAPAN AND
BATTLE ROYALE

TURMOIL AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM AND THE POLITICAL ATTACK
AGAINST *BATTLE ROYALE*

In order to understand why *Battle Royale*—and not another bloody Hollywood action flick—received such unusual attention from politicians and defenders of youth it is important to understand the historical background and economic and cultural climate in Japan at the time of the film's release. After the turmoil and destruction—to the economy, infrastructure and national psyche—of World War II, Japan rose from the ashes of a defeated nation to seemingly miraculously rebuild itself as an economic powerhouse rivaled for many years only the United States. During the postwar period, the Japanese economy and nation recovered at a remarkable rate that created a period of economic growth and prosperity that benefitted both the Japanese economy and its workers. But like many good things this era of prosperity and growth simply couldn't last and by the 1990s the Japanese economy plunged into a recession that would leave many unemployed and fundamentally alter the relationship between worker and company that would widen the generation divide between adults who attempted to protect and hold onto a crumbling system and the increasingly disenfranchised youth who began to reject rather than buy into the adult's system.

Japanese culture is influenced by Confucian ideals that included principles of loyalty, filial piety and benevolence that informed a sense of obligation of inferiors to superiors and the larger group but also the obligation of the superior to maintain the moral center of society and well-being of inferiors.⁶² In feudal Japan, this relationship of social obligation most often took the form of a loyal retainer who devotedly served and protected his lord in exchange for land, titles and resources for loyal service to the benefit of both retainer and lord.

This relationship continued in some form through the Tokugawa and Meiji eras until after World War II when corporations—rather than lords or emperors—began to fulfill the role of benevolent superior to its loyal workers.⁶³

By the end of World War II, Japan as a nation had violently transitioned from a powerful, highly nationalistic empire to a humiliated and broken nation occupied by American forces. The economy and much of the nation's infrastructure was in ruins, but in the midst of this turmoil Japan would come together as a nation to effect an economic and national recovery so successful and so unprecedented that it would come to be known as the "Japanese Miracle" and turn Japan into an economic superpower. During the twenty year period after the war, Japan's economy grew at an incredible rate of more than ten percent per year with considerable investment in new technologies and sharp increases in industrial production.⁶⁴ Young entrepreneurs broke away from established

⁶² Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Japanese Civilization*, (New York: Wadsworth, 1993), 21-24.

⁶³ William E. Deal, *Handbook to Life in Medieval and Early Modern Japan*, (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 139.

⁶⁴ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, (New York: Oxford, 2003), 246.

corporations and—against government advisement towards consolidation—found success forming smaller upstarts in manufacturing and electronics that quickly expanded fueled by massive amounts of borrowed capital. Human capital also played a significant role in this economic growth as workers were committed to their jobs and willing to work long hours and then just as willing to turn around and transfer their wages back into the economy in the form of consumer goods purchases.⁶⁵ Based on these changes Japan was able to elevate itself from a postwar catastrophe to the second largest economy in the world in only a few short years.

Because of this economic success, Japanese workers enjoyed certain guarantees when it came to job security, wages and quality of life. The so-called three jewels of the Japanese employment system—lifetime employment, seniority wages and enterprise unions—contributed to the economic growth by benefitting both workers and employers. Lifetime employment meant that most workers spent their entire careers at a single corporation without fear of termination or competition. Seniority wages meant that—although starting wages may have been relatively low—workers were guaranteed relatively high wage increases based on time spent in service to the company as a reward for their loyalty to the company, not based on competition between workers. Enterprise unions—unions based at a single corporation rather than in an entire industry—created forums for dialogue between workers and management that provided opportunities for worker input, compromise and community between workers and management that would not otherwise have been possible.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., 248-249.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey Kingston, *Japan in Transformation 1952-2000*, (New York: Pearson, 2001), 39-40.

By the end of the 1980s, Japan's record period of economic growth and prosperity began to come to an end and signal a shift away from the stable economic environment enjoyed by both workers and corporations for so many years after the war. During the 1980s, the Japanese economy experienced an asset bubble that eventually burst and drove Japan into an unforgiving recession. A combination of excessive liquidity, low interest rates, and excessive and reckless lending produced record levels of inflation and spending and by 1989 the bubble burst sending Japan into recession that would last for at least the next twenty years.⁶⁷ Land that had served as collateral for loans became worth less than the original loan and many found they could no longer afford to pay back their loans forcing many into default. Taxpayer-funded government bailouts of banks and other major institutions restored some stability to the markets but also caused many citizens to lose confidence in the government and financial institutions.⁶⁸ The Japanese miracle was over and Japanese companies began to lose their sense of benevolence in favor of profits and began to alter the relationship that companies had cultivated with workers.

Many Japanese corporations—troubled by falling profits during the recession—came to the belief that excessive personnel costs in the form of too many workers with too high of wages were the primary source of their economic woes. In response, corporations began to hack away at the "three sacred treasures" of the Japanese employment system and devised ways to cut workers and pay and began to eliminate

⁶⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 107.

benefits and guaranteed lifetime employment.⁶⁹ Rather than attempt to layoff senior workers, many corporations forced workers into earlier retirement through restructuring and transfers and the reduction of pay, overtime and bonuses for workers and eliminating job security.⁷⁰ Corporations also began to rely heavily on part-time and temporary workers—many of whom were young and recent graduates—who were ineligible for pensions, bonuses and other benefits available to full-time employees, a practice that served to cut financial costs for the corporation but also created resentment among adults towards the youths now employed in their place.⁷¹

The end result of this process is that young—and often middle-class and well-educated—workers were disproportionately becoming under or unemployed without much hope of improving their situation while also becoming a greater threat to the economic security of older workers. As Japanese corporations restructured and downsized, opportunities for employment for young workers became scarce and the possibility of securing lifetime employment seemed a thing of the past as too many young people fought each other for too few available jobs. By the end of the decade, unemployment among Japanese in their twenties had risen to around ten percent and many of those who were employed were comprised of a new class of young workers dubbed "freeters" (*furitaa*) who had resigned themselves to indifference when it came to career aspirations and good job prospects and routinely drifted from one temporary job to

⁶⁹ Richard Katz, *Japanese Phoenix: The Long Road to Economic Revival*, (Armonk, New York: East Gate, 2003), 252.

⁷⁰ Kingston, "Japan in Transformation," 92.

⁷¹ Katz, "Japanese Phoenix," 252.

another.⁷² To make matters worse for young workers, many conservative leaders in Japan held the youth responsible for Japan's societal problems based on a perceived morally deficient, underachieving youth.⁷³

During the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, Japan would also experience a new and traumatic form of change after several acts of inexplicable violence by young offenders whose acts would be exploited to connect the youth to Japan's problems and instill fear in adults. One murder in particular that took place in Kobe in March of 1997 sent Japan into a panic over youth violence after a 14-year-old boy murdered an 11-year-old boy and left his decapitated head in front of the main school gate with a note explaining his hatred for the boy and society in general.⁷⁴ Acts of violence by youth offenders had been increasing since the early 1990s, but this extremely unusual and gruesome 1997 murder by a juvenile sent Japan into a moral panic and lead many adults to fear a youth populace they would come to view as inexplicably deviant.⁷⁵

This fear was only exacerbated in spring of 2000 after three separate incidents of a bus hijacking, a beating of a train passenger, and the murder of a housewife all perpetrated by unconnected 17-year-old boys over several weeks. The first incident on May 1, 2000 involved a 17-year-old male who murdered a 65-year-old housewife reportedly because he wanted to know what it felt like to kill someone. On May 3, 2000, a 17-year-old male hijacked a bus, killing one and taking ten others hostage. Finally, on

⁷² Yoda, "A Roadmap to Millennial Japan," 42.

⁷³ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁴ Mark Fenwick, "Youth Crime in Contemporary Japan," in *The Blackwell Companion to Criminology*. 132.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 131.

May 12, 2000 another 17-year-old male tried to kill a train passenger with a hammer by beating him on the head.⁷⁶ Although these sorts of violent crimes committed by youths are relatively unusual in Japan, the severity of these incidents and the short period of time in which they took place drove many in Japan to fear a youth population that they perceived to be violent and out-of-control.

Many adults in Japan were now afraid of the youth and Japanese politicians—possibly motivated by upcoming parliamentary elections—responded with a campaign to reform the Juvenile Law (*shonenhou*) that specified the treatment and classification of juveniles in the Japanese judicial system that had been left untouched since its passage in 1949. The Juvenile Law had been designed not for punishment of juvenile offenders, but rather to protect offenders from the stigma of crime and rehabilitate the youth.⁷⁷ This meant that offenders remained anonymous with records wiped clean once the offender reached the age of twenty and that hearings remained informal with prosecutors and victims barred from participating in the hearings. With the focus towards rehabilitation rather than punishment, it also meant that many violent offenders under twenty years of age—even murderers—received no prison sentence for their crimes.⁷⁸

By May 26, 2000, only weeks after the third incident, members of the Liberal Democratic Party—the same party that anti-*Battle Royale* crusader Ishii was a member—reintroduced a proposed revision to the existing Juvenile Law in a bill that had been

⁷⁶ Stephan M. Salzberg, "A Century of Juvenile Law in Japan," in *Japan at the Millennium: Joining Past and Future*, ed. David W. Edgington (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 182

⁷⁷ Fenwick, "Youth Crime," 135.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

languishing on the backburner for the past year. These revisions would shift some of the focus away from rehabilitation and make it easier for juveniles to be punished by the criminal justice system. Specifically, the revisions would allow prosecutors into hearings, lower the age of criminal liability from sixteen to fourteen, and punish juvenile offenders who commit crimes such as robbery, rape and murder according to adult sentencing guidelines rather than leaving sentencing to the discretion of the judge.⁷⁹

After the bill had been scrapped after the forming of a new parliament, the Liberal Democratic Party reintroduced a bill that would reform the current Juvenile Law.⁸⁰ By September the three ruling parties had agreed to the main provisions of the bill,⁸¹ and the bill would be up for deliberation during an extraordinary Diet session that would end December 1, 2000. By mid-November and after the Liberal Democratic Party had begun to lose influence in the Diet,⁸² *Battle Royale* became the subject of discussion amidst discussions of amending the Juvenile Law. According to Machiyama, Ishii began his campaign against the film in the Diet on November 17, 2000 when he questioned the Minister of Education about the film. Ishii reportedly condemned the film after showing a copy of the book to the Diet by saying:

The story is about how the government forces 42 junior high school students to kill one another. Some girl gets her throat cut, and some boy gets his eyeball

⁷⁹ Kamiya, "Revisions to Juvenile Law."

⁸⁰ Setsuko Kamiya, "New Justice Minister Urges Changes to Juvenile Law," *Japan Times*, June 13, 2000.

⁸¹ The Japan Times, "Changes in Crime—and Punishment," *Japan Times*, September 20, 2000.

⁸² Kenzo Uchida, "Politicians Face a Busy Fall," *Japan Times*, September 23, 2000.

ripped out. To make matters worse, this story is being made into a movie. This kind of entertainment causes juvenile crime.

Ishii then went on to question the ratings system and theaters' ability to enforce them and proposed that the government "needs to control and censor movies by law."⁸³

The timing of Ishii and the Liberal Democratic Party's campaign against *Battle Royale* and the call for the government to regulate films that are believed to cause juvenile crime appears to have been a political ploy for power based on the fears of ordinary citizens and the relatively abrupt end to the furor over *Battle Royale* only supports this assessment. Both Machiyama and Mes and Sharp suggest that the politicians and concerned citizens ended their campaign after viewing the film and realizing that it was more than senseless youth violence and actually had something of value to say.^{84 85} This may have been part of the reason politicians dropped their appeals for banning but the timing of the passing of the reforms to the Juvenile Law likely also played a role. Ishii's condemnation of the film in the Diet came only a week before the reforms to the Juvenile Law would be voted on and the viewing of the film for Diet members and concerned citizens took place within days of the vote.⁸⁶ The bill passed at the end of November with the support of the government coalition parties and the two main opposition parties and now made it easier to prosecute and punish juvenile

⁸³ Machiyama, "The Most Dangerous Film," 151.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁵ Mes and Sharp, "New Japanese Film," 51.

⁸⁶ Tetsushi Kajimoto, "Tougher Juvenile Law Best Remedy?" *Japan Times*, November 24, 2000.

offenders for their crimes.⁸⁷ The objections to *Battle Royale* were dropped in time for its scheduled December 16, 2000 and calls for government regulation of films died down as the film went on to set both office records in Japan.

GANBARE! : BATTLE ROYALE'S MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH OF JAPAN

It is at this point, at the end of the millennium and after a decade of change and economic turmoil for Japan that *Battle Royale* picks up. Set in an alternative history Japan that has also endured a great period of economic hardship and blame at the end of the millennium—and, other than the use of the game, shares the same problems of youth violence and delinquency and adult fear and resentment of young people who would rather reject established order than preserve it as its realworld counterpart—*Battle Royale* does include a significant amount of violence with almost all of it committed by teens against teens.

As Aaron Gerow points out, it's arguable that the level of violence depicted in the film is any worse than standard Hollywood fare and that *Battle Royale* didn't deserve the attention it received from politicians and concerned citizens. It is, however, unquestionable that *Battle Royale* is a violent film and does not avoid depicting violence onscreen by cutting away from the action or distancing the viewer from the violence through the use of long shots and shaky, handheld cameras and with over 40 deaths throughout the course of the film the body count is relatively high. However, *Battle Royale* is hardly an anomaly when it comes to violence in Japanese and the mostly Hollywood-produced foreign cinema released in Japan. Japan's Takashi Miike's films are

⁸⁷ Fenwick, "Youth Crime," 137.

notorious for their gruesome and graphic depictions of violence, crime and delinquent behavior and many of his films such as *Dead or Alive* (1999), *Audition* (1999), and *Ichi the Killer* (2001) contain high body counts—often as a result of brutal gang wars—and extreme depictions of violence including shootouts, dismemberment and various forms of unusual torture and other deviant behavior. The violence in one film, *Ichi the Killer*, was considered so extreme and disturbing that vomit bags were provided before a screening at the Toronto International Film Festival.⁸⁸ Many of Miike's films are rated R-15 or R-18 by Eirin, but unlike *Battle Royale* none of the often four to five films Miike produces per year have warranted discussion in the Diet. Furthermore, many Hollywood films including *Die Hard* (1988), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Fight Club* (1999) feature a seemingly endless amount of bloody violence and death and have all received PG-12 ratings in Japan⁸⁹ with no public outcry.

But if the violent content was not particularly unusual or extreme for a Japanese film and unlikely to be cause for concern, then perhaps it is the motivation and attitudes among the youth in the film and their similarities to the behavior and attitudes of Japan's youth—behaviors and attitudes that have become the source for adult anxiety—and the overall message of the film that hit a raw nerve and provoked outrage in conservative elements of Japanese society. *Battle Royale* is not a merely film about youth violence in an economically depressed Japan, but a film that examines the adult loss of control and security during the turbulent recession of the 1990s and adult attempts to hang on to the traditional Japanese way of life juxtaposed against a generation of youth who have come

⁸⁸ Tom Mes, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*, (Surrey, England: FAB Press, 2006) , 351

⁸⁹ "Certifications Japan: PG-12."

to reject their parents beliefs in the Japanese economic system. This subject matter and the film's ultimate message to youth to "run!" and abandon the established system altogether may have been more irksome to conservative politicians and citizens than the violence alone.

On several occasions throughout the film, it is made clear that the game—which is ostensibly to reform the youth—has been implemented and executed by the adults not merely as a method to curb juvenile delinquency but also in response to Japan's failing economy. Through a series of title cards at the beginning of the film, the audience learns that:

At the dawn of the millennium, the nation collapsed. At fifteen percent unemployment, ten million people were out of work. 800,000 students boycotted school. The adults lost confidence and, fearing the youth, eventually passed the Millennium Educational Reform Act, AKA the BR Act.

From the onset of the film there is a strong connection made between the fear and displacement felt by the adults in a crumbling economic system, the inability of the adults to control a generation of youth who had begun to reject the educational and economic establishment, and an ideological divide between the adults and the youth who then attempted to punish the youth based on an adult loss of confidence in the system. The idea that the adults were creating an unnecessary adversarial gap between the generations and blaming the increasingly boycotting youth is spelled out even clearer later in the film when several students ask their teacher, Kitano, why they are being forced to play the game. He responds to their question by saying:

No good. That's what this country has become. Want to know why?... Because of folks like Kinonobu [a student who has dropped out of school] this country is absolutely no good anymore. So, the bigwigs got together and passed this law: the Battle Royale act.

The irony of the system is that the Battle Royale Act does nothing to curb juvenile delinquency and in fact only serves to further alienate the youth from adult society by forcing otherwise nonviolent drop outs and abstainers into violent acts and further away from the desirable behavior.

Although the adults of *Battle Royale* have blamed the youth for the nation's problems, the film itself takes issue with the negligent and often contradictory behavior of the adults while maintaining a sympathetic portrayal of the youth. There are three key flashbacks early in the film directly preceding the start of the game that alert the audience to the broken relationship between the adults and the youth. In a voiceover Shuya, an eventual winner of the game, informs the audience that his mother left him and his father when Shuya was in the fourth grade and that his father had hanged himself on Shuya's first day of the seventh grade. In the flashback, Shuya returns to their sparse, monotone apartment to find his father—who had become unemployed and hopeless because of the economic downturn—hanging from an electrical cord from the ceiling with the phrase *ganbare* written over and over again on toilet paper strewn throughout the apartment. *Ganbare* is a particularly Japanese phrase of encouragement that roughly translates to "hang in there," "go for it" and "give it your best" against all obstacles no matter how difficult. But Shuya's father has not only abandoned his son after having failed to give it

his best, but also left his son with a contradictory message to hold onto ideals of perseverance, loyalty and family that the father has clearly given up.

The flashback then cuts to a shot of seventh grade teacher Kitano in a dim and empty classroom at the same time that Shuya states in his voiceover that during that time period he had no idea what to do and no one to show him. Kitano sits on his desk—in a long shot from the back of the room that emphasizes his distance from the students and the audience—in front of the chalkboard staring detachedly at a note from the students declaring a holiday from class. He leaves the classroom after finally giving up on the class only to be minorly stabbed by an unruly student and rather than stay and attempt to show the students how to behave properly soon abandoned the students and left the school only to return later to officiate the brutal game. In the world of *Battle Royale*, parents and teachers seem not only to have abandoned the youth by turning their backs on their futures in favor of throwing them into the brutal game, but also abandoned Japanese ideals of not giving up and giving it your best no matter how tough. In contrast to the failure and gloom of the adults, the third and very brief flashback shows the jubilant students working together and giving it their best during a school basketball game before they are forced to enter the adult run competition.

Also in contrast to the adults who have given up in real life, most of the students give the game their best shot despite the unfairness of the game and the hopelessness of their situation. Two pairs of students choose to give early on up rather than play the game and commit suicide by jumping off a cliff and hanging themselves respectively in acts that reenact the hopelessness and despair of the earlier suicide of Shuya's father. Some of the students such as Mitsuko and transfer student ringer Kiriya ruthlessly attempt to

play the game to win, but most of the students merely attempt to survive, hoping against reason that they may live to the end of the game. Several students even attempt to subvert the system through 1960s radical inspired anarchist tactics by attempting to hack into the game's computer system to bring it down and build homemade bombs to destroy the government compound while others band together in small groups of friends and attempt to find a way to survive the three days of the game.

If *Battle Royale* is an allegory for the economic situation at the end of the recessionary 1990s, then the game represents the hopeless, unstable economic situation that many young people found themselves in and that many adults feared for themselves. In the uncertainty and gloom of the 1990s many of the youth, believing their opportunities for regular employment to be hopeless from the start began boycotting the traditional employment system and were instead forced to compete in a brutal and unstable job market. Many adults desired a return to the traditional three jewels of the Japanese employment system. However, rather than fight for the adult employment ideals and buy into a system many of the adults had already given up on, Japan's youth rejected the adult ideals instead giving it their best to form their own ideals, an attitude reflected in the film.

Battle Royale's rejection of the adult system is most apparent in its depiction of the game's two winners and how they chose to make their way through the game. Despite the rules, two students, Shuya and Noriko, manage to survive the three days of the game and escape the island, a feat that itself signals that the system can be circumvented. Both are initially placed at a disadvantage from the start when they discover that their random weapons consist of a pot lid and binoculars respectively that allow them to observe the

field of play but does them no good in a fight. In fact, both Shuya and Noriko—the two eventual winners and heroes of the game and the film—never once even attempt to play the game instead rejecting what they have been told to do and simply doing their best to keep going without hurting anyone else in the process. If the message to abandon the adult system wasn't clear enough, the film ends with a final message to the audience written in large, red kanji on the screen and with Shuya's voice commanding the audience to "run!" from the old economic game of loyalty to the company and the nation in an economy that has failed both the youth and adults.

In an interview after the release of the film, Fukasaku reiterated that the film was just as much about the behavior of adults as it was about the children when he said:

Adults lost confidence in themselves, that's what is shown in *Battle Royale*. The adults worked very hard in the '70s in order to rebuild Japan.... consistently adults were in control in terms of whatever was going on in the nation. However, since the burst of the bubble economy, these same adults, many of them salarymen 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.⁹⁰

It is this loss of confidence of the adults in themselves that fuels the generation gap between the adults and the youth and the adult fear of the youth that motivates the adults to abandon the youth and force them into a rejection of the system and competition in a

⁹⁰ Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp, *The Midnight Guide to New Japanese Film*, (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), 51.

game that pits the youth against each other—rather than against the adults—where survival is almost impossible.

This adult loss of confidence and control and distancing from the youth is most apparent in the film in the characterization of the main adult representative and antagonist, Kitano. First introduced in his empty classroom, Kitano is immediately established as an adult who has given up on the youth when he abandons teaching after losing control of his students at the start of the film only later to be situated as the main antagonist to the youth when reintroduced as the adult responsible for forcing the students into deadly competition. Whereas Fukasaku attempted to create a sense of intimacy and closeness between the audience and the students through the use of close-ups, Kitano is almost always shown in medium and medium-long shots that emphasize a sense of distance between Kitano and the audience and the students with whom the audience is meant to identify. This distancing is further emphasized by the blocking in the Battle Royale classroom at the start of the game where Kitano is placed at the front of the classroom in opposition to the students huddled in fear in the back and the game settings that constantly show the students unprotected in the outdoors while Kitano is insulated in an indoor military compound and shut off from the students and the game. Kitano's abandonment of the youth and loss of control is further illustrated throughout the film through several abusive phone calls from his daughter—whom he has apparently, at least emotionally, abandoned along with her mother—who belittles him and calls him names but for whom he has no response and has instead left alone.

It is also through Kitano that the film establishes its main critique of the harshness of the adult response to the youth, the adult's inability to affect the situation and the

adult's out-of touchness with both the youth and the effects of the adult response. Kitano claims that the imposition of the game is meant for the students' own good—much like the claims of politicians who attempted to ban the film for the sake of children—and there are several scenes that indicate that his often misguided and ineffective actions are intended to show his concern for the students and bridge the broken gap between the youth and adults. Two of Kitano's scenes with Noriko reveal both his desire to help the youth and his inability to do so. Although he is not permitted to interfere in the game, Kitano—risking attack from students—leaves the compound during the game to protect Noriko from deadly Mitsuko by scaring Mitsuko away from Noriko's position in an act that displays Kitano's desire to protect the student but also his impotence in creating any long-term effect because of his inability to change the system of the game itself. After the completion of the game, Kawada, Shuya and Noriko confront Kitano in the classroom who pulls a gun—soon revealed to be a water pistol—aims at Noriko and repeatedly commands Noriko to *ganbare* or "go for it," encouraging her to shoot him and escape the game, presumably for a better life.

Although it seems that Kitano indeed wanted to help the students, the film is clear that his methods and attitudes toward the students and the game were an overreaction to the youth and the nation's problems. The intent of the game to make the students into better adults is immediately revealed to be ineffective because of the premise that all but one die in the game as sacrifices to the system, never to become adults at all. Despite this obvious fact, Kitano and the adults seem to be oblivious to the deleterious effects of the game to the youth and the widening generation gap and persist in holding the game year after year with no obvious attempts to change the system. Kitano also displays the out-of-

touch nature of the adults during the viewing of the instruction video on how to play the game—modeled after Japanese educational videos with video game graphics and an perky young female host—when he cheerfully and with gusto responds to the video-taped host as she exuberantly describes how students will die while the students rightly cower in fear and astonishment in the back of the room. By the end of the film, the two winners, Shuya and Noriko—who have rejected the game and the system and decided to "go for it"—have been rewarded by the system and branded criminals because of their refusal to buy into the system, further illustrating the adults' disproportionate response to the youth.

Along with the violence depicted in the film as well as the timeliness of its subject, it is the questioning of the adult role in Japan's problems that may have upset some concerned citizens and politicians. This and the depiction of education may also explain why Eirin insisted *Battle Royale* be rated R-15. According to Keiko MacDonald, Eirin not only considers sexuality and drug use as topics for public moral concern and regulation but also the depiction of education and students' attitudes toward education. Part of this moral code is "geared to the respect for and maintenance of democratic educational systems. Therefore, educators should not be ridiculed or insulted in a film."⁹¹ Not only are educators ridiculed by students in the film but the entire educational system itself is depicted as irrelevant and in a state of decline. Students have begun to boycott classes leaving the classrooms empty and the hallways full of rowdy, uncontrollable teenagers who have so little respect for their teacher that one of the students even goes so far as to stab their teacher in the ass when he tries to get them in line. The teachers and the school system itself have lost control of what ideally should be timid and above all

⁹¹ MacDonald, "Japan," 49.

else respectful students reflecting adult fears of the youth in the wake of Japan's moral panic over juvenile violence.

Further, it may not have been the basic premise of kids killing kids and their lack of respect for authority, but rather the graphic depiction of an adult cultural and state apparatus that systematically forces kids into killing kids and imbues them with a lack of respect for such a system. Unlike the real acts of teenage violence, the kids do not kill of their own accord but rather are drafted into this state-run program and forced into playing what is called a game that has the purported aim of conditioning the kids into better and more subservient adults.

The scenes the Eirin reviewers wanted cut from the film seem to reinforce the idea that it is the violence of the state and culture and not the violence of the students that is ultimately so objectionable. Four of the five acts of objectionable violence were not perpetrated by students but rather by the teacher himself or by an ostensible agent of the teacher. The two acts by the teacher—the throwing of the knife into a girl's head and the detonation of a boy's explosive collar—are both critical to the progression of the game and the statement the film makes about the role of adults in children's behavior because it is these two acts of violence that ultimately break down the students' sense of resistance and forces compliance in the game. In the film, the killing of these two students—particularly through the demonstration of the explosive collar—conveys to the students the power that the teacher and the system has to punish them at anytime, anywhere if they do not conform to the rules of the game. More importantly, if these two scenes of adult violence were removed from the film, the students' participation in the violent game would appear to be uncoerced and make them seem to be willing participants in the

violence of their own accord and remove their true motivation for playing the game—because the adults have forced their participation through threats of violence—making it seem as if the students have become inexplicably violent for no reason.

The combination of the disrespect and indictment of the Japanese educational system along with the message that the education and economic system of Japan may very well offer no hope for young people together may have been enough to rankle politicians and parents. However, the attempts by Eirin to remove responsibility for the violence from the state and place it squarely on the students—which would have altered the film to conform to the politicians' accusations of what the film supposedly represented, rather than solve the problem—seem to indicate that Eirin was ultimately more concerned with protecting Japan's social and economic institutions and maintaining the order of things rather than the depiction of the film's violence and its effect on viewers.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Despite objections from politicians, *Battle Royale* was released in Japan on December 16, 2000 to an eager audience of mostly teenagers some of whom who had waited outside theaters for several days before the opening of the film.⁹² Politicians may have found the film crude and tasteless but the intended audience, the youth, did not find the film to be as valueless or dangerous as purported with one 16-year-old high school student stating that *Battle Royale* is "a movie that makes you think."⁹³ The film quickly became an unequivocal box office hit for Toei, which released a second extended and bloodier version of the film into theaters in April of 2000 with the same R-15 rating and none of the reported outrage the original version received.

In the wake of the controversy, *Battle Royale* became a success for both Toei and Fukasaku and helped bolster the popularity of what has now become the *Battle Royale* franchise around the world. The original pulpy, controversial novel has received attention outside of Japan and has now been translated and published outside of Japan and has also spawned a highly successful fifteen volume manga series that were both helped to become popularized outside of Japan by the success—and controversy—surrounding the film. In 2003, Fukasaku began preparations for a sequel to *Battle Royale* that would take place several years after the events of the first film and depict a revised game that drafted

⁹² Schaeffer, "Japan Politician Warns Against Film."

⁹³ Ibid.

students to fight enemies of the state—in this case, previous winners of the Battle Royale game—rather than each other. However, the 77-year-old Fukasaku was unable to film more than several flashbacks sequences before he succumbed to his second bout with cancer, forcing his son and scriptwriter Kenta to complete the film after his death.

Battle Royale became a major financial success for Toei and was seen by the studio as a film that had the potential to become just as successful in international markets. The film was released in as many as twenty-one different countries⁹⁴ with seemingly less fanfare than the original release but with some concerns nonetheless, much of which had likely been raised solely because of the original controversy in Japan. In the United Kingdom, for instance, fears that the film's violence would provoke copy-cat teenage violence put into question whether the film would be certified for release in the country,⁹⁵ but when the film was eventually released several days after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, D.C. concerns about the violence of the films seemed to be deemed trivial in light of the violence of real life.⁹⁶

However, the *Battle Royale* has not been released in any legal form in the United States due in part because of concerns regarding the depiction of youth violence in the film. Despite rumors that the film has been banned in the United States, the truth seems to be that Toei has decided that—fearing a lawsuit over the violence and themes of the film—has abandoned their attempts to distribute the film in any form in the United

⁹⁴ "Battle Royale," Internet Movie Database, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266308/>.

⁹⁵ Gareth Ruin and Matt Wells, "Grisly Film Comes to UK Despite Crime Fears," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2001, 9.

⁹⁶ Quinn, "The Big Picture," 10.

States.⁹⁷ Fears of a lawsuit after an incident of youth violence may have kept Toei from distributing the film in the United States, but it did not prevent it from selling the rights to a remake to New Line Cinema in 2006 that has yet to begin production.⁹⁸

Although objections to the film were based on the notion that *Battle Royale* would inspire youth violence and delinquency, there has been no connection made between the film's release and specific acts of teen violence or increases in juvenile delinquency in Japan by politicians or otherwise. In fact, after the passage of the Juvenile Law reform in the Diet and the release of the film several weeks later, *Battle Royale* quickly dropped off the critics' radar and only the industry that nominated it for best picture and the audience members who flocked to theaters to see both versions of the film appear not to have had the same objections to the film as the politicians. The fact that objections were quickly dropped once politicians passed their legislation rather than pursue the banning of the film further indicates that the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale* was not only extraordinary but overblown and had little to do with protecting children from violence. Instead this lack of interest on the part of the politicians suggests that the controversy was aimed at protecting adults from a economic system by exploiting adult fears and punishing the youth.

There have been no other attempts of censorship of this nature in Japan before or since the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale*, which further emphasizes the unusual

⁹⁷ "Is the Movie Really Banned in America?," Battleroyalefilm, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.battleroyalefilm.net/movie/banned.html>.

⁹⁸ David McNary, "New Line Set to Do 'Battle'," *Variety*, June 7, 2006, accessed April 2, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117944872.html?categoryid=1238&cs=1&query=battle+royale+new+line>.

nature of the incident and indicates that the attacks on the film were largely unwarranted. It also emphasizes the fact that this event was not merely a cynical attempt by politicians to curry favor, but a unique event in Japanese history and culture that could have only occurred at this point in time after a particular chain of events set in motion years before the controversy itself. After a decade of recession, change and anxiety, the nation found itself more open feelings of fear and divisiveness that drove many to search for a scapegoat to blame for the overwhelming problems that faced Japan. A place to lay blame was found in the nation's youth who—finding themselves with an untenable economic future—were underemployed and rejecting the underachieving adult economic system. This was only made worse after the teen killings in 1997 and 2000 that propelled adult fears of the youth to its peak in 2000 and at that point in Japanese history afforded politicians the opportunity to exploit adults fears for their own aims while using *Battle Royale* to further inflame anxieties.

Similarly, *Battle Royale* itself could not have been made as it was at any other time in Japanese history because the film's critiques are direct responses to the current state of affairs in Japan. In particular, the film addresses the adult loss of confidence in the economy and the nation that took place over the ten years prior to the release of the film and the adults' fear of and competition with the youth that began to foster after the adults lost the ability to compete in the new economy at the end of the decade. The film also addresses the insecurity that the youth felt in a job market that often offered only temporary or part-time employment in a turbulent system and develop new strategies to survive with constant underemployment that began to become commonplace at the end of the 1990s.

The controversy surrounding *Battle Royale*—while extraordinary and ultimately overblown—offers insight into the Japanese film industry and the process of certification and ratings furthers our understanding how films are regulated in Japan by providing a specific and unusual example of the process that illustrates how the process is intended to function and how it is not always applied equally. This controversy also represents an extraordinary example of attempts at censorship and government interference in the regulation of films in an industry that has historically been self-regulated. But perhaps most importantly, the *Battle Royale* controversy offers insight into the political, economic and historical factors that were driving both the adults and the youth at a singular moment in Japanese history and reveals the varying cultural attitudes and responses by the adults, youth and filmmakers to a common loss of confidence and economic stability in millennial Japan.

This study examines several aspects of the controversy surrounding the release of *Battle Royale* and several critical perspectives on the film most notably from lawmakers, critics and the filmmaker himself. Further research on the controversy should take a more cultural studies-based approach to the controversy, in particular, to issues of audience reception of both the film and the controversy in Japan and incorporate readings of the film beyond the dominant ideological perception of the film offered by the politicians in the Diet. Because of the limited reporting on the controversy and limited access to Japanese materials, a thorough examination of audience reaction to the film would require surveys of reactions from Japanese audience members and their opinions on the violence in the films and their perception of its long-term effects. Although most of the websites are no longer available, there is significant evidence that Japanese fansites for

the film did exist but few sites with substantial information remain available because many of the sites' domain registrations have lapsed and provide evidence that there was an online fan presence for the film.

This aspect of the controversy is significant because it would incorporate the perspective of the teen and adult audience members that supposedly needed protection from the film, and expand the perspectives on the film beyond that of the lawmakers, critics and director and present a more thorough understanding of the film and the controversy. A study of audience reception should attempt to answer several questions regarding the film and its release that includes but is not limited to the following issues. How did Japanese moviegoers perceive the controversy surrounding the film and how much of a positive or negative effect did the controversy have on moviegoers' desire to view the film? What were the average ages for the audience that went to see *Battle Royale*? Did the R-15 rating keep underage youths out of the theater or did it encourage them to seek out this restricted film? What were the perceptions of the violence and the message of the film by audience members and did different age groups have different perspectives? What message did audience members take away from the film and how did they relate this message to their own experiences? Did the perceptions and attitudes of audience members towards the film and its message reflect the dominant ideology or did audience members produce more oppositional or negotiated readings of the text and, if so, why? How did age, socioeconomic status and gender affect audience members' reading of the film and controversy? Although there is not much in the way of specific responses from audience members, box office figures and Toei's response to selling the film suggests that audience responses were generally favorable.

Although this study focuses on the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale's* release in Japan, the film also met significant controversy outside of Japan, particularly in the United States where the film has still not been released. There are conflicting reports as to why *Battle Royale* has not been released in the United States with claims that both the violence of the film and Toei's financial expectations have hindered distribution but the reasons behind the American controversy remain unclear. Several North American industry sources have claimed that Toei—coming off of the film's success in Japan—had unrealistic expectations for the North American market and seemed not to have a clear understanding of the differences between what could be expected to be acceptable in the Japanese versus the North American market. One unnamed distributor claims to have offered to purchase the *Battle Royale* and distribute it as an art house film. However, Toei refused the deal because—based on the film's success in Japan—they believed that the film would be a giant commercial success on the level of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and should be playing on 300 screens across North America.⁹⁹ Additionally, Toei apparently halted its attempts to distribute the film in the United States after concerns were raised that Toei might open itself up to a lawsuit over the violence in the film if real violence were connected to the film in the United States.¹⁰⁰

An in-depth study of the controversy in the United States should first and foremost attempt to clarify the reasons for the lack of distribution for the film and determine whether or not it was money, violence or a combination of the two that kept

⁹⁹ David Chute, "The Kids Aren't Alright," *Premiere*, July 2001, accessed April 2, 2009. <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Island/3102/battle.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Toei from selling the rights to the film and also offer greater insight into the distribution of Japanese films in the American market. Although the film has not been released in the United States, it has been made available to viewers of all ages through YouTube, torrents and DVD imports and audience reactions and statistics based on the film's North American cult following would help gauge some of the reaction to a potential release of the film in the United States, while also offering a different reading of the film that would further understanding of the reaction to the film in the United States and adding to the Japanese perspective.

In the ten years since the release of *Battle Royale*, the state of the Japanese economy has continued to decline because of stagnation and deflation and a crisis of political leadership that has led to the election and resignation of five prime ministers in the past six years. The Japanese economy that had produced the post-war "Japanese miracle" and propelled Japan to number two in the world for over sixty years has since given up its place to the rapidly expanding Chinese economy.¹⁰¹ For new and old workers alike this has meant that the employment and economic trends of the 1990s critiqued in *Battle Royale* have continued with temporary employment, underemployment and economic instability becoming the norm in Japan while corporations continue to lay off workers in a recessionary economy further forcing adults and the youth into a competitive game for survival in an unstable Japan.

¹⁰¹ Kyung Lah, "Japan: Economy Slips to Third in World," *CNN.com*, February 14, 2011, accessed March 16, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/BUSINESS/02/13/japan.economy.third/index.html>.

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