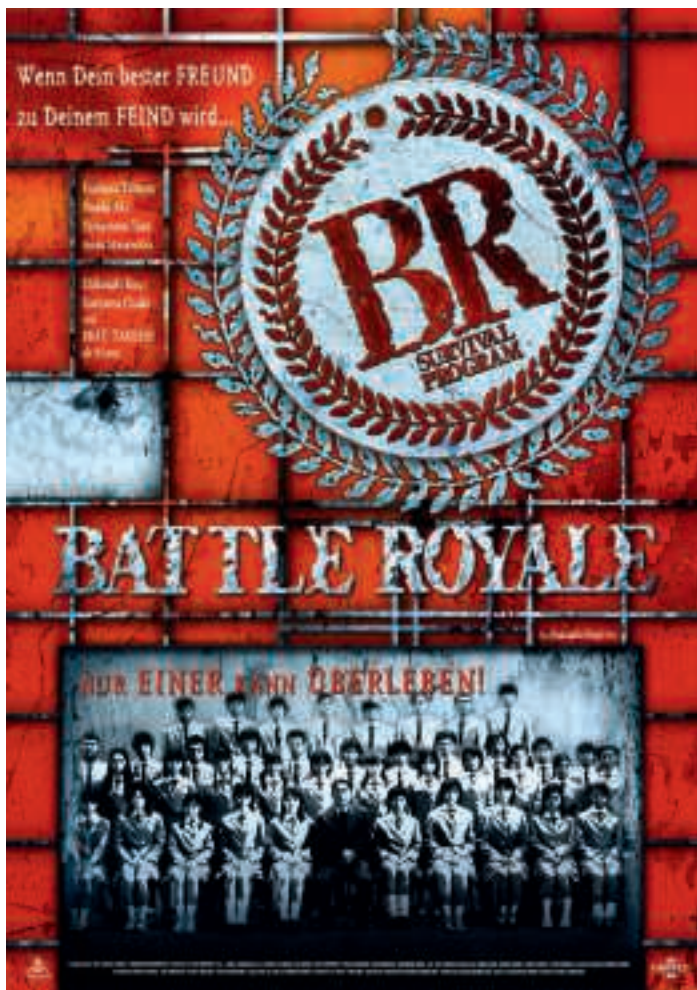


KINJI FUKASAKU'S

BATTLE ROYALE





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A BATTLE WITHOUT END

BY TOM MES



Japanese filmmaker Kinji Fukasaku (1930-2003) used cinema to rewrite the history of his country. His signature film, the 1973 gangster epic *Battles Without Honour and Humanity*, tells of the rise of the modern yakuza, from the chaotic days immediately following Japan's defeat in World War II to the dawn of the seventies and the economic miracle. Its story and characters were inspired by events that were true but hardly of the sort that make it into the history books. Yet, the film lays bare the backroom dealings, under-the-table kickbacks and alleyway assassinations that helped the country rise from its ashes and become an economic superpower.

Fukasaku lived through wartime as a teenager. In the final days of the Pacific War, he was sent to work in a munitions factory. The factory became a target for Allied bombing raids in which Fukasaku saw many friends his own age perish. He later recalled that he survived the bombing by taking cover under the dead bodies of his co-workers.

The young Fukasaku emerged from the war with a deep-seated distrust of authority. When he attained his position in the director's chair in the early 1960s, he let his camera take aim at the officially sanctioned account of Japan's post-war reconstruction. Films like *If*

You Were Young: Rage, Under the Flag of the Rising Sun and *Graveyard of Honour* showed what went on behind the headlines of newspapers and between the lines of history books: strikes, corruption, maddening bureaucracy, violence.

Battle Royale was Kinji Fukasaku's 60th and final film (he succumbed to cancer in the first days of shooting the sequel *Battle Royal II: Requiem*). It has one marked difference from all Fukasaku films that came before it: instead of telling an alternative history, it posits an alternative future.

The future, of course, is never written, so to speak of an "alternative" future is a contradiction in terms. In the case of *Battle Royale*, though, what is shown is a future that deviates from the one that politicians like to paint us in their electoral promises: that future of harmony, security and growth in which we would so much like to believe when we cast our votes. Instead, the film stares unflinchingly at what the acts of these decision makers could very realistically lead to. 'Where are these politics taking us?', as the director himself phrased the premise.

In *Battle Royale*, the country has officially sanctioned the extermination of its own youth. A pre-emptive measure that is, as pre-emptive measure tend to be, massively out of proportion to the problem it is supposed to tackle, that of juvenile delinquency. Here is a future society that rather sees its children die than turn into criminals.

Fukasaku's adaptation of the novel by Takami Koshun features a cast of soon-to-be young stars (nearly all the main actors, and some of the minor ones, went on to achieve star status in Japan thanks to the success of *Battle Royale*) murdering each other. More than a tale of Ten Little Indians, however, the film focuses on how each individual teenager deals with this live-or-die situation. Scythe-wielding vixen Mitsuko (Kou Shibasaki) calmly applies her make-up while a PA system lists the names of all her classmates that died the previous day. Takako (Chiaki Kuriyama, later of Tarantino's *Kill Bill*) can, in this lawless environment, deal with harassment by sticking a knife in her unwanted suitor. Shuya (Tatsuya Fujiwara) emerges as protector of the put-upon Noriko (Aki Maeda), who was bullied for being the favourite of teacher Kitano (Beat Takeshi) – the same teacher who is now the man orchestrating this brutal, governmentally sanctioned massacre.

Knowing the director's wartime experiences, it's not hard to see where the main inspiration for Fukasaku's approach to the material came from. The situation painted in the film is one that is almost impossible to imagine for anyone who grew up in a peaceful world; how we would react if we were placed in the shoes of these characters even more so. This is not the case for Fukasaku, who did see his friends die and who survived by pure luck where they perished.

The director's empathy for his young characters is remarkable, all the more for the 55-year age gap between them. There is not a trace of the pedantic 'I can tell you didn't experience the war'-attitude with which a generation attempted to alleviate their shared trauma by laying it on the shoulders of their children and grandchildren. Fukasaku has always taken the side of the downtrodden against those in power.

For *Battle Royale*, the director's son Kenta, then in his late twenties, served as the bridge across the generation gap. Kenta Fukasaku wrote the screenplay, bringing to the table an understanding of these kids' predicament of having to grow up in a world in which all of society's securities have vanished. When Japan's economic bubble burst in the early 1990s (when Kenta Fukasaku himself was a teenager), the country's social fabric came apart.

The phenomenon of a job for life, which was such an integral feature of the economic miracle, virtually disappeared overnight. As a result, the whole educational system that groomed the nation's youth for this one goal lost its meaning. An entire generation was left with a future like a gaping black hole.

"In the beginning of the new century, the country fell apart. The Japanese economy collapsed, the unemployment rate skyrocketed and all grownups lost their confidence. Children came to feel contempt for their parents, teachers and the authorities. Disorder



in classrooms, stabbings of teachers and boycotting of school became a widespread epidemic": *Battle Royale's* opening words don't describe a future dystopia, but the unraveling social fabric of 1990s Japan. Today, almost ten years after the film was made, it is still as valid and topical as it was upon its release. Case in point: China has now officially usurped the position of the world's second-largest economy, held for decades by Japan. A belief is currently taking hold among the Japanese who are just now starting families: that by the time their children graduate from university, they will need to move to China to find a job.

It is a paradox that a father-son team should be responsible for making a film about parents who have lost faith in their children and vice versa. "Go Shuya! You can do it Shuya!" is the final message from the protagonist's father – their pathetic futility only emphasised for having been scribbled on a roll of toilet paper. Mitsuko's drunk mother tells her daughter to always fend for herself, "or you will end up like mommy" – words no sooner spoken than realised: the toddler pushes her mother's creepy new boyfriend down the stairs, killing him instantly.

Lack of confidence was hardly an issue between the two generations of Fukasaku. Kenta had already assisted his father on several films before tackling the screenplay for *Battle*



Royale. He boldly took over the reins on *Battle Royale II* after his father lost the battle with cancer. Kenta is currently forging a career as a director in his own right: after the genre exercises *Yo-Yo Girl Cop* and *X-Cross*, he is taking on the challenge of adapting novelist Junichiro Tanizaki's classic tale of twisted amour fou, *Naomi*.

Battle Royale's volatile cocktail of violence and razor sharp social commentary landed the film in hot water even before its release. Members of parliament called for a ban. The film was released with an R-15 rating, prompting Kinji Fukasaku to call upon 14 and 15-year-olds (the same age group depicted in the film) to storm the theatres. Distributor Toei refused to have the film released in North America, fearing legal problems in the wake of Columbine and other high-school killings.

In spite of all this, *Battle Royale* became a phenomenon both at home and around the world, playing a capital role in reawakening interest in Asian genre cinema. Even today, ten years after, it is not only still topical but also unstoppable: after spawning a Special Edition and a sequel, *Battle Royale* is about to be re-released theatrically in 3D.

The battle continues.

INTERVIEW WITH KINJI FUKASAKU

BY TOM MES



TM: Is *Battle Royale* a warning to the youth or advice?

KF: (long silence) You know, both those words sound very strong to me, like things you would very active set out to do. But I didn't make the film which such strong thoughts in my mind. This film is a fable. The themes which are included in the film are very much realistic modern issues, youth crime is a very serious issue in Japan. It's not that I'm not concerned or not interested, but those are just the basis of the fable.

I asked specifically about it being a warning or an advice, because the film ends with a very strong message: "Run". It came across as being very positive.

That was the conclusion of the fable that was developed throughout the film. I guess it could be seen as a message. I took your question as having a much stronger meaning than just a simple message. That's why I answered that it wasn't particularly a warning or advice. To me, these are greetings to the young people. Those were my words to the next generation of young people, so whether you take that as a message or as a warning or advice is up to you as the viewer.

In the film you're taking these children, contemporary children, and putting them through wartime experiences. Maybe they are similar to the kind of experiences you yourself lived through in World War II or right after. Is there a reason behind this? Do you feel living through those experiences builds a person's character?

The young people's existence in the current time in this world presents different issues. To themselves as well as to others, the adults. Looking back to when I was fifteen I went through a certain period and experience. For this film I posed myself the question "How would that be for these young people?" I am fully aware that there is a generation gap between where I stand and where those kids stand. How we fill this gap was one of the issues we had to deal with during the actual shooting of this film.

So I wondered what the significance of making this kind of film in today's Japan would be. What sort of result or conclusion would that bring? To be honest to you, that was something I had to wait for until the film was actually made. When I mentioned it wasn't as strong as warning or advice, I couldn't answer your question in a strong, positive way, that this was the message or that. It was just my way of talking to them, saying some words to the children.



Was it a problem for you that many children couldn't see the film as a result of the R15 rating it received from the Eirin ratings board?

Because of my own experiences as a fifteen-year-old, and also through the original novel which sets the story around fifteen year olds and then the actors who were all cast around the age of fifteen - although there are differences, some are older - the R15 decision by Eirin naturally was something I couldn't accept. I did lodge a complaint and asked for a review.

However before this issue with the censor board came to any kind of conclusion, we had an interjection from the parliamentarians who alledged that this film is very harmful to the youth. Then there was also the question cast by them as to the validity of the organisation and system of the censor board itself. Because Eirin is a self-regulatory censor board and board members are selected by the film industry. So I had to withdraw my objections against the censor board for the time being in order to fight the parliamentarians. Therefore the issues which are still pending with the board will have to wait until I get



back to Japan after the festival.

I want to explain just so there will be no misunderstanding. These censor board members are elected by the film industry. Japan went through an experience during the war of being oppressed by different government regulations as well as after the war, when we were subjected to a different kind of very painful experience of oppression by the occupational forces.

The censor board has a role to play to actually appeal to society by self-regulating with a strong message: that we oppose any government regulation or repression as well as any restrictive measures by the police for example. In this sense I don't believe Japan is unique. This stance is prevalent all over the world.

You call the film a fable, but I feel it's certainly a political fable. It's very interesting that the politics of the government in this film are very conservative or reactionary and that they are the ideological opposite of the politics you questioned in your films from the sixties and seventies. There the politics seemed to be more progressive, wanting to rebuild Japan and move forward.

If you talk about the reconstruction of Japan after the war, the most important objective for the government at the time was to really rebuild Japan, so in that sense you may consider the attitude of that government progressive. However if you put the spotlight on the people, also the situation I went through, I could not help being very interested in the fact that people were actually going in the opposite direction, in the interest of the government's banner of reconstruction of Japan. Because the government was very keen on, and pre-occupied with, the reconstruction of Japan and rapid economic growth.

But I had doubts. Under that kind of situation where would the government be taking the whole nation? What direction are they taking us? And those were the question I could never shake off and I even felt resistance to what was going on. That was very much clear in my films of the seventies.

So with Battle Royale you're still asking basically the same question? Where are these politics taking us?

Yes.

A strong theme in the film is the generation gap. Especially that the older generations feel



that the younger generation no longer respect their elders. But in the film, many of the children's main motivation is a father or an uncle, an elder figure.

The fact that adults lost confidence in themselves, that's what is shown in the film. Those adults worked very hard in the seventies in order to rebuild Japan. They went through that period working for the national interest. Of course there was a generation gap between the young and adults, even throughout that period, but consistently adults were in control in terms of political stability and whatever was going in the nation.

However, since the burst of the bubble economy, these same adults, many of them salarymen and working class people, they were put in a very difficult position with the recession or economic downturn and all of a sudden most of them started to lose confidence in themselves. And the children who have grown up and witnessed what happened to the adults, their anxiety became heightened as well. So I put this film in this context of children versus adults.

It also seems to me that the children in the film are trying to do good towards their elders. For instance the stranger in the class constantly credits his father for something he is good at, another says he is able to make molotov cocktails because he was taught by his uncle and so on.

For these boys, the older people are not right there by their side to give advice. They are in a very distant presence. They have gone off to an area from which they will never return. Take the father who hung himself. He told his son the message to "go for it" and "you will make it", but he is no longer there. In the classroom, the teacher is not even liked by his own daughter and then he loses his affection for the children who are the same generation as his daughter.

All these things are all dramas unfolding in front of the children. But these adults behave at their own whim. They have their own thing to do, their own logics or arguments or emotion. Not to any specific purpose. They are just running wild as it were with their own feeling or whatever they wanted to do or didn't want to do. The impact of those adults' behavior on the children was something that was interesting.

The generation gap was also a theme in a film you made about ten years ago, called The Triple Cross. But there it seemed to be the opposite, you seemed to be on the side of the elders.



Yes. You say that I was on the other side, but the young people in that film were not fifteen years old, they were all in their twenties. Even if they are in their twenties, they don't really have a significant purpose or a standing of where they wanted to go. And they would go really far off, to the point of anarchism in order to support the band that they had. Even if that meant at the expense of the lives of some of their friends.

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