Postcolonial Studies, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2003

Killing kids: recession and survival in twenty-first-century Japan

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> Today's lesson is on killing one another.
> Life is a game. Get desperate and fight. Become an adult of value.[1]

Deeply engrossed in their private conversations, the thirty-six junior-high students of *Class B* fail to notice the military presence along the highway on which their excursion bus is traveling. That this is no ordinary school outing becomes shockingly apparent as the bus, entering a long tunnel, fills with knockout gas, and the students awaken some time later confined in an abandoned schoolroom on a deserted island. The sound of helicopters ushers in their newly armed homeroom teacher, flanked by military personnel. He introduces the students of *Class B* to the horrific capacities of the exploding collars now secured around their necks, and to the fact that they are to be the participants in the annual government enforced survival game, out of which only one may emerge alive. Created under the auspices of the 'New Century Education Reform Law' (*Shinseki Kyōiku Kaikakuhō*), this survival game is known for short in Japan as the 'BR Law' or 'Battle Royale'.

This officially contracted and legalized killing of kids by their peers is the shocking focus of the film, *Battle Royale*, which became both scandal and blockbuster hit during the inaugural year of the twenty-first century in Japan.[2] Paralleling the horrific hi-tech annihilation of the youth in the film is the equally terrifying futuristic projection of Japan's relentless recession turned desperate (unemployment hits 15 percent). The final collapse of the financial sector reveals the vulnerabilities of 'Japan, Inc.,' as disintegrating families, collapsing schools and hopeless youth cast a long shadow on Japan's fate in the global struggle for competitiveness. The film projects the lengths to which the government is prepared to go to restore control—sacrificing the young as it once did in the last, last-ditch effort to preserve the integrity of the nation.[3] At the beginning of the twenty-first century this sacrifice seems inextricable from the new dynamics of survival (and battle) in the global marketplace.

Objections to the film came from various quarters, but most virulent among them were the protests of members of the Japanese Diet to the portrayal of the recent (real) education reforms, and other recessionary-motivated reorganizations of power, as indicative of a return to past repressions. Their qualms about the film put the release of *Battle Royale* in jeopardy for a short time, though in the end the decision was made to restrict entrance to those over the age of 15 (in other words junior-high students). As I will argue, however, the repression and overt violence in the film—the source of such concern to the members of the Diet—conversely acts to render manageable (and thereby ultimately more

ISSN 1368-8790 print/ISSN 1466-1888 online/03/030367–13 © 2003 The Institute of Postcolonial Studies
DOI: 10.1080/1368879032000162211

crowd-pleasing) the more abstract violences of the recession, and the larger geopolitical forces of globalisation against which Japan feels increasingly vulnerable.

This article explores the connections between these various visions (and potentials) of violence and battle in *Battle Royale*. I examine the way that the tropes of battle, survival, and the figure of the schoolchild, reflect and refract social anxieties about the Japanese future in an era of globalisation and neoliberal reform, and the enduring historical conundrums of Japan's twentieth-century past.[4] My analysis tacks back and forth between the economic and social plight of new century Japan, the *real* social anxieties about this plight, and the sci-fi projections of these in the film.

I consider the popularity of the film and its audience effect. How can a film about the mutual slaughter of kids be so moving (*kandō suru*), as advertisements for *Battle Royale* so boldly proclaim? The answer is to be found in the blending of realism, futuristic fears, and the seeming promise of resistance and recovery rendered in the survival conditions of battle and war in the film. In *Battle Royale*, the (harder-to-combat indirect) violences of neoliberal reform are converted to the (directly discernible) violences of physical battle, sacrifice, and singularity of purpose, neatly eliding the close connection between economics and warfare, and paving the way, as I argue, for its popularity among the young.

I begin by discussing the geopolitical realities that provide the realistic (and futuristic) backdrop of the film, exploring the various signs of collapse of the recessionary period. I discuss how the promises of prosperity, stability and security of the once famous Japanese 'economic miracle' have turned into a Japanese 'fear of falling' (accompanied by an international fear of following Japan down its less than envied path of debt and deflation). I focus here on how the terrors of decline and collapse have culminated in a discourse that has shifted the spotlight of concern from the flagrant oversights of political and financial institutions to the home, school and the hapless youth—the failed sites of socio-cultural reproduction.

My consideration of this discourse of national collapse moves into a short discussion of how the 2002 education reforms (*kyōiku kaikaku)* gained much of their legitimacy from this aura of anxiety or moral panic surrounding the youth. The image of a failed progeny has provided fertile ground for the argument for a different approach to schooling, and a new relationship between the home, school and State, which I argue seeks to relieve the State of the costs and moral burden of social management, without relieving it of its ultimate authority or power.

Moreover, the image of the schoolchild, as victimizer and victim, strange and estranged—the once promised and now failed site of national reproduction—is, I argue, critical to how the phantasmagoria of overt violence in the film converts the terror of increasingly indirect violences into the ultimately popular, cult-like object that *Battle Royale* has become.[5] The sometimes monstrosity of the schoolchild (within the film and without) is powerful precisely for the way it evokes the current problem of national reproduction (both social and economic) in light of the close calibration between Japan's education system and the

economic sector's push for parity with western nations over the course of the twentieth century.[6]

This image of the schoolchild is taken a step further in the streams of neonationalist thought that see the ruination of youth as the result of the disabling postwar peace, foisted on a defeated Japan. In the present piece, I am concerned principally with the resonances between *Battle Royale* and the *Discourses on War* (*Sensoron I*, *II* and, soon to be, *III*) of comic artist Kobayashi Yoshinori.[7] In the first two volumes of the series, as I discuss at more length below, the young protagonist (a much younger and more dapper Kobayashi) discovers that the forced peace has created a youth that has lost the ability to die or sacrifice themselves for anything outside themselves.

Both scandalous and scandalously attractive, *Battle Royale* brings a violent dystopic vision of the future of Japan together with the seeming potential of violence to suture the battle for economic survival of the present onto the larger frame of battle or war as a means of uniting with the past of the nation.

Miraculous un-doings or how *not* to follow Japan

The unprecedented (for a nonwestern nation) postwar rise of Japan to the status of world economic power caused what became known as 'the Japanese miracle' to be studied, codified, and above all envied. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the seemingly unanimous conclusion across the academy, both inside Japan and abroad, was that the country's unparalleled economic trajectory was due to the resilience of its cultural repository. The traditional values at the foundation of this repository of Japanese culture were presumed to have survived the massive reorganizations of lifeways coincident with the emergence of statehood, the totalitarian expansion and brutality of the Second World War, and the defeat, occupation and the major reorientation of the nation to 'double-digit' growth.[8]

In establishing 'Japanese culture' as the vital core of the seemingly unflappable Japanese economy, the focus of worldwide curiosity at the time fell on the assumed origins of these highly envied results—the overall system of Japanese socialization from homes to schools.[9] The bursting of the Japanese economic bubble, and the protracted recession that has followed, however, opened up these naturalized linkages between economic prowess and culture to scrutiny, causing doubts to be shed (and ultimately new anxieties to emerge) about cultural continuity, identity and the legitimacy of State policies.

The dissolution of the miracle also brought forceful retreats from this previous praise for Japan's unique cultural endowment, as the 'learn from Japan' decade of the 1980s was succeeded by the 'fear of following Japan' decade of the 1990s.[10] With the drastic decline of property values and the revelation of enormous bank debt, the era of feared Japanese global domination (remember the Sony take-over of Universal Studios) was revealed to be the product of unrealistic forecasts, and a 'hollowing out' of the domestic economic front.[11]

While the 'catch-up' economy of the early 1960s to late 1970s had produced sufficient revenue to support the growing number of non-competitive domestic industries, from the 1980s on, the economy could no longer maintain these at its

then stable, but less than fantastic, rate of growth. The government inevitably put off confronting mandatory reforms to this system at the time, counting instead on a rather wishful return to phenomenal growth on the one hand, and on a tinkering with the caps on the credit–debt ratios for lenders, so as to facilitate the large numbers of domestic development projects of the 1980s, on the other. These, of course, generated provisional revenue, but have since resulted in the staggering bank debt that plagues Japan's economy through the present.[12]

By the first years of the twenty-first century, as the recessionary news turned into the more palpably frightening 'restructuring' (*risutora*), downsizing of salaries, and the growing absence of the promised 'escalator' to a company job for college graduates, survival (national and individual) seemed more a battle than ever.[13] Revelations of the less than miraculous miracle, coupled with these very real effects of the bursting of the bubble economy, led to a deluge of discourse on the impending 'decline' (*suitai*) and 'collapse' (*hōkai*) of the nation. In her 'Roadmap to Millennial Japan,' Tomiko Yoda lays out cogently why this aura of collapse should be seen as the final deterioration of a system of social management rather than, as the Japanese Ministry of Education has insisted, the sudden downfall of intact systems that are now in drastic need of reform and require drastic changes to do so.

During the first years of the twenty-first century, the focus shifted dramatically in the Japanese media onto what became known as the collapsing classrooms (*gakkyū hōkai*), failing homes (*katei hōkai*) and strange kids (*hen da kodomo*) of the new millennium. These descriptions of decline were filled with the details of the frightening deficiencies of academic ability, physical strength and social skills among the young, on the one hand, and their excesses of desire for commodities and death on the other.[14] As examples in the media of the moral and physical decline of the youth preoccupied national interest, a new credence was lent to government proposals for the need to strengthen and revitalize the population.[15]

In many of these accounts, the moment of collapse is set somewhere between the cultic felonies of Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, and the Kobe 'Youth A' killing and wounding of elementary schoolchildren incident in 1997.[16] Aum Shinrikyo was the infamous cult whose antics included placing poisonous gas in the packed subways of Tokyo, with the clear intent of the annihilation of millions. Profusely written about and interpreted, the cult's actions have left their most enduring mark on society as a sign of the madly competitive education system, whose best and brightest (many of Aum's adherents had attended Japan's top universities) turned out to be not only bullies, but murderers.

A short two years later, an incident, which became the most dramatic one of the decade involving a youth, took place in the city of Kobe. What became known as 'the Kobe wounding and murdering of children incident' (*Kobe renzoku sasshō jiken*) consisted of a third-year junior-high student at the time (the same age as the members of the doomed *Class B* in *Battle Royale*), *Shōnen A* (Youth A), wounding and murdering a series of elementary-aged children, decapitating the final victim.[17] Youth A accompanied his heinous deeds with chilling taunts to the authorities (hey, the game starts now—*sa gēmu no hajimari desu*), and explanations of his monstrous transformation (I just want to kill—

koroshite mitai) that indicted the education system for the invisibility of his existence (*tōmeina sonzai*). The proclamations of revenge issued by Youth A were accentuated by the results of a survey of attitudes toward these crimes done by the Ministry of Education following the discovery that the culprit was not, as suspected, 'a man in a black sedan,' but a junior-high student. Cited throughout the media at the time, the survey showed that over fifty percent of the secondary students surveyed sympathized and identified (though did not necessarily admit to considering similar actions) with the plight of Youth A. When in the year 2000 a series of new juvenile crime incidents took place involving 17-year-olds, who all seemed to come from solid middle-class stock like the boy from Kobe, Youth A's pronouncements of 'killing as a game' (and the perverse pleasures he derived from it), revenge, and his sense of invisibility became strong frames for the failure of inculturation and the loss of moral foundation amongst youth.[18]

Reform in an age of 'roll out' (neoliberalism)

The Ministry of Education began to publicize its plans in earnest for the current overhauling of the education system, starting shortly after the Kobe event. The underlying impetus behind the move to implement significant reforms was that this new era of social collapse called out for a different approach to education. During the 1980s, the Nakasone government had put together a proposal for the wide-ranging reform of the education system, but lacking the financial exigency and social anxiety of the present recessionary era, these nascent plans were left uncompleted. As the political atmosphere congealed around the current reforms, problems of school refusal (*tōkōkyohi*), bullying (*ijime*), inner-school violence (*kōnai bōryoku*), fatherless homes, and others—that had been dealt with through recourse to a top-down bureaucratization of school life during the previous decade—were now integrated into the new rationale of reform that called for a changed relationship between home, school and State.[19]

In an unusual show of transparency on the part of the Ministry, the current reforms have been accompanied by a nationwide explanation campaign—a sort of hard sell of the reform catch-phrases ('zest for living,' 'end of competition,' 'education of the heart')—which combines instruction of the official position with a revised view of the postwar education past.[20] Conspicuously absent in all of this is mention that the changes being implemented correspond closely with the view that a major shift in the requirements for a labour force has occurred as a result of the accelerated globalisation of markets. To remain in step with the pace of these changes, Japan needs to alter its means for producing this labour force, which has rested throughout the latter half of the twentieth century on the close calibration between the education system and the market. The long, drawn out recession, however, changed the need (and practical possibilities) for top-down management, and demonstrated the necessity for the government to adapt its systems to the pressures and heightened competition of globalisation.

The spokesmen for the Ministry of Education maintain that the purpose of the present reforms is to relieve the pressure on the child and home, by creating a system that shifts the balance of responsibility between the school, home and State.

The current reforms call for the final elimination of school on Saturdays, and a significant (thirty percent) reduction in the current elementary and junior high school core curriculum. These hours are replaced by a new course of study, called 'comprehensive study' (*sōgōtekina gakushū*), which is independent and individually centered, though themes for the study are chosen by grade level and by individual schools. The directives of the Ministry of Education state that this study should help students develop the necessary 'zest for life' (*ikiru chikara*) as well as the social ties and national allegiances that are sorely missing among the youth. The reform program also includes a wider-ranging set of proposals for how to deal with students who do not accept the proper responsibility for their learning (and/or continue to make trouble), including a mandatory term of 'service to the nation' (*hōshi katsudo*), and the even wider-ranging possibility of these reforms as the springboard to the revising of the 'fundamental law of education' (*kyōiku kihonhō*), the basis of Japan's postwar democratic approach to education. Of equal significance, this set of education reforms is informed by a larger overall governmental trend to reorganize the relationship between the citizenry and the State. In what the members of a committee on 'The Structure of Japan in the Twenty-First Century' concluded, Japan is ripe for a new form of 'governance', one that transfers the responsibility (though not necessarily the means of power) for more of school and local management to the individual and individual community, thereby reducing the financial burden (and blame for problems in the system) on the federal government.[21]

These efforts coincident with the reform plan to reorganize the relationship between government and the individual are heavily articulated with what Thomas Lemke, Jamie Peck, Adam Tickell and others call the logics of neoliberalism. According to Peck and Tickell, neoliberal reform, particularly in its 1990s inflection of 'roll-out' (vs. roll-back) neoliberalism, involves a changed relationship between the government and the individual. This relationship is premised upon the transference of responsibility from the one to the other, which does not so much represent a shift in control from the government to the individual, but a discharging onto the individual (and individual community) of former responsibilities for education, the child, and the home. This is often effected through the rhetoric of empowering the individual, or, as in the case of new century Japan, of identifying a lack in the individual (as in youth generally) and offering to remedy this deficiency through the implementation of a new knowledge (often of the body or the psyche), what Foucault called a 'biopolitics.'[22] Moreover, neoliberal reform seeks to reorganize the applications of power through discourses of 'biopolitics' (like the 'zest for living' (*ikiru chikara*)), such that the burden for social management rests with the individual and individual community.[23]

Kids, killing and the meaning of survival

Terse white titles and the orchestral sounds of dread announce a drastically worsened financial and social situation in new century Japan. They serve as our only introduction to the 'new century education reform law', represented by the enormous red seal of the 'B.R. Survival Program', that accosts the screen in the

opening scene of *Battle Royale*.[24] Just as abruptly, we are swept into the atmosphere of the education reform's 'survival program.' The sounds of helicopters overhead and microphones on the ground announce the return of the lone survivor of the previous year's 'game.' Surrounded by military escort, the survivor of the murderous ordeal, a junior high school girl, returns covered in blood, but as the media announcer and the camera take great pains to tell and show, 'smiling' (*waratteimasu*). We find ourselves asking, what is the meaning of survival under these conditions? What are the potentialities that are being sought here, and what is the right stuff of survival in the grid of crisis and capitalization that now engulfs the society?

Again, just as suddenly, forty-some uniformed students of junior-high third year, *Class B*, appear on the screen posing for their class picture, as the focus moves to two of the members in particular, the young hero and heroine, Nanahara Shuya and Nakagawa Noriko. From this scene of the opening of the school year and seeming order, Nanahara returns to the cramped apartment that he and his father have shared since his mother's departure from the family several years earlier. The entrance, where shoes are removed, is just a brief spatial remove from the one and only main room. As Nanahara looks up from the entrance, he is aghast to see that his father has hanged himself with an electrical cord, out of desperation at remaining unemployed. The father's lifeless body is draped in a suicide message. Under the conditions of the prolonged recession of the 1990s, these messages draping the drained bodies of the older male generation have become the all-too-familiar markers of the incapacity to adapt to the collapse of the miracle in which the past generations were so heavily invested.

'Everything is twisted; there is no one to show us the way,' grieves Nanahara, as he departs from the final remnants of the family. This scene of familial depletion is followed by the setting of the junior high school, where guidance is absent as well. *Class B* is not convened due to unexplained circumstances and battles among students, and students and teachers, reign in the halls. The head teacher, Kitano (Beat-o Takeshi) is caught in the midst of one of these skirmishes and has his leg slashed by a student, upon whom he later takes revenge. Our introduction to the world of the collapsing school is through this junior-high plagued by lawlessness, and upon which the wrath (or violence) of the law turns, as the lack of guidance that confronts Nanahara and others is assumed to be the cause rather than the effect of economic breakdown.

The scene again shifts to what appears at first to be a regular school outing were it not for the huge military presence on the sides of the highway along which the bus is traveling. As the bus emerges from a long tunnel, its student occupants lie unconscious in their seats. The outing, we realize, is none other than a pretense for their abduction to the deserted island that serves as the setting for the survival program of the 'battle royale law'.

Helicopters now usher in the beginning of the survival game. Landing outside the command center where the students have been sequestered, they carry the military command and the teacher who will oversee the three days of prescribed battle. The program begins with instructions to the students of the rules, aims and proper conduct of survival. According to the dictates of the 'BR Law', the

students are forced to murder their peers within a period of three days, or face total annihilation. An incongruously cheery 'video gal,' who cuts an ironic figure somewhere between kindergarten teacher and executioner, walks the kids through the process. Her explanation includes a sudden graphic demonstration of the explosive collars (*bakuyaku kubiwa*) secured around the students' necks. These stylish Seiko-like collars, bizarre depictions of the outcome of Japanese industrial innovation, are equipped with an ultra-sophisticated tracking and monitoring device that enables the command center to constantly track the whereabouts and survival rate of the students at the same time as they are capable of decapitating heads.

At first, the students appear dumbfounded, challenging the teacher and refusing to take this presentation of raw power seriously. But, within the dictates of this game of survival, disrespect for authority (of the teacher and the State) is met with swift and violent retribution. (Two of the kids are slain before the game even begins.) At which point, the class representative asks how has this happened to their class. The teacher replies that the participants are chosen randomly through an annual lottery of the 43,000 junior-high classes nationwide, and that the aim of the game is to produce a resolute adult population.[25]

The survival game roll-call commences. This is the final moment before the students head off on their own to become each other's rival in the game of life and death. As they leave the room, they receive a bag of supplies which includes a map, compass, some sustenance for the three days and most importantly various implements of destruction (these vary from crossbows to rapid-fire machine guns, poison, pistols and knives of all sorts).

But, what does it means to be a victor in *battle royale*? The stated aim of the new century education reform act at the center of the film is to produce a pool of sound (*kenzen*) adults, who as a result of their strength of conviction (the wartime resonances are not lost on us here) will be unambiguous about how to prepare the new generation for the demands of the new century. The scenes of slaughter and brutality seem to reinforce the idea that survival is a violent process, and the survival of the individual is predicated upon the unified resolve of the nation. Yet, as the desperate opening scene of Nanahara and his father forcefully portrays, the survival of the nation does not guarantee individual futures, presaging suicides and the heightened competition for what is now perceived as the shrinking access to the places at the top.[26]

One is reminded here 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 that not 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.

The entrance-examination cram schools (*shingaku juku*) have tailored their entreaties to anxious parents for this new era of reform and survival.[27] Making 'global excellence' their keyword for the new century, these schools have found the new directions of 'governance' (i.e. the transfer of responsibility for education onto the parents) to be their departure point. At this critical juncture,

when the nation seems less invested in the idea of social homogeneity, with its qualified certainties of personal survival, the cram school's promise to ensure that children have what they need (and what the schools seem increasingly unwilling or unable to provide) to compete successfully in the international market for excellence has become increasingly in demand by anxious parents.[28]

Through the designs of director Fukasaku, *Battle Royale* takes the survival game trope a step further.[29] Thrust out into the jungle of battle, the students do not *en masse* turn to the deliberate destruction of their peers. While scenes of carnage predominate, there are also poignant moments of refusal to participate. Students take their own lives, others attempt to subvert (with some degree of success) the central control, and in a final showing of true selflessness, one of the remaining three sacrifices himself for the remaining pair. Moreover, even the bloodier scenes (of knivings, poisonings and shootings) are punctuated by the expression of connection (even if only through the communication of resentments) between the students, pointing to the strangely salutary effects of these war-like conditions.

This life and death struggle (complete with its compulsion from above) is meant to evoke the atmosphere of battle that director Fukasaku experienced as an adolescent at the end of the Second World War. Fukasaku sees this film in terms of his own youth in the closing years of war, when death was everywhere. 'If the war had continued one more year, I'd have been sent to the front lines'. Dismayed by the discrediting of beliefs for which they were prepared to die (from the transcendence of the emperor to the fact that Japan had gone to war to secure peace for 'greater Asia'), their camaraderie, says Fukusaku, was all they had left. Comparing himself to the young hero of *Battle Royale* who lost his family and his way, Fukasaku describes the unbearable feeling of emptiness that accompanied the end of the war for his generation. His generation, however, had the advantage of the wartime (*senyū*) friendships, connections that traversed all barriers and times.

Of this his sixtieth film, Fukasaku says that he wanted to relate how he saw this story as a venue through which to show (and graphically at that) that life gains its meaning from the conviction that one would be ready to die for something larger than the self if necessary. Looking at the situation among the young today at home and in school, Fukasaku finds this common cause (this unity of purpose) lacking, and says he wanted to make a film that dramatized the importance of rediscovering this fight-to-the-death cause. Because of their wartime experiences, the youth of his generation knew the precious meaning of the bonds of friendship in defeat. For Fukasaku, the extremes of life and death experienced in a battle to the end suggest a way to recover the physical and moral bonds of society that seem to have come so unglued, but were available for his generation.

Fukasaku is, of course, not alone in his anxiousness about the void of contemporary life, and the lack of attachment of the young to anything. In his fantastically popular series on the war, *Sensoron* (*Discourses on War*), Kobayashi Yoshinori takes these concerns a step further to compare the youth of the past—his model is the *kamikaze* pilots—to the young of today, who are either lackluster or simply selfishly violent, and are no longer able to die for

anything.[30] In the first volume of *Discourses on War*, Kobayashi bemoans the fact that Japan's peace has created a youth with no sense of belonging to the nation. They are consumers (*shohisha*), rather than citizens (*kokumin*), writes Kobayashi. Without the opportunity to experience the 'moving feeling of individual sacrifice' of battle for the nation, the young are doomed (and so by insinuation is the nation) to live out a life of irreparable psychic split (*bunritsu*) between the individual (*ko*) and the public (*ko*).

Tomiko Yoda underlines how these longings for the return of an imagined past unity obscure the reorganizations taking place under the guise of the *real* education and social reform acts of the year 2002. While purporting to ease up the pressure-cooker-like education system, they 'are in fact creating a system that can openly round up and expel its lowest (or unruly) performers, while creating a separate accelerated track for the high performers'.[31]

Surviving the nation

In terms of cinema attendance, *Battle Royale* was a huge hit. Up to this day, the film continues to be in high demand in video rentals, and has produced a number of websites, chat groups, and accessories (toy replicas of the tools, weapons of the battle, action figures—sometimes in their dismembered form—of the members of *Class B*).[32] There are even opportunities on the web now for fans to enter into the battle of *battle royale*, pleasurably having their own dilemmas of survival converted into the direct tactics and violences of survival in the game.[33]

Battle Royale has also been popular with youth outside of Japan. The fascination with the film abroad seems not unconnected to the associations of war with camaraderie that resonate with Japanese youth. However, I want to emphasize that the specific kinds of identification and enjoyment that are derived from the viewing of *Battle Royale*, as well as the interchanges that occur on the internet about the film and its meanings, are not generalizable to youth in different countries. Which is to say that the associations of militarization and total war in the film evoke for Japanese youth the themes and tropes of war and defeat that continue to permeate Japanese society, as in the animated series on the war (*Sensoron*) by Kobayashi. I would argue that this broader attraction of the film has rather to do with the suggestion of resistance to the more insidious forms of indirect violences perpetrated upon individuals, and the young, as the particular object of programs to raise national output and manage the population, whether in moments of high growth or recession.

As Anne Allison, writing of 'cyborg violence' in films like *Robocop*, argues, we too quickly condemn the popularity of cinematic violence among children, on the grounds that it leads (directly) to violent action on their part, without a careful consideration of the complex meanings that children construct from these portrayals of violence. Moreover, we fail to look at the way that their viewing enjoyment (and imaginative play) speaks of the tensions experienced by children under the conditions of late industrialization and globalisation and their attempts to construct subjectivities, however partial, under these conditions.[34]

In *The Cinematic Body*, Steven Shaviro pairs the shock of cinematic viewing or 'the violence of the sensation that powerfully engages the eyes and body of

the spectator inviting them to stay within the orbit of the senses,' with the thrill that is often derived from violence on the screen.[35] 'Safely distant, but garishly immediate,' violent film, according to Shaviro, 'concerns rescuing the possibility of life from the encounter with death'.[36] This rescue, however, is never quite the meeting of survival with triumph.

Here too is where *Battle Royale* leaves us. The battle has ended. All but two of the students have met violent ends. Mutual sacrifice (along with the cyber-sabotaging of the command headquarters by one of their peers prior to his own death) has earned the pair the right to remain alive. But their cheating of the State is only partial. The survivors are destined to live a partial life, on the run, without the moorings of family or friends. In the final scenes, their displacement from the rest of society, on the one hand, projects their survival as resistance (and a hope for recovery in the future). On the other, however, their status as fugitives suggests the struggle for personal survival in an era of increasingly less direct forms of coercion, where triumph is always qualified by the demands of the global market.

Notes

[1] *Honjitsu no jugyō, koroshiai. Jinsei wa ga-mu desu. Hisshi ni nate, tatakatte. Kachi ga aru otona ni narimasho*. Instructions given to the students of *Class B*, by their teacher Kitano (played by the contemporary icon of dissidence and violence Kitano (Biito) Takeshi).

[2] *Battle Royale* (*Batoru Rowaiaru*) was directed by (the recently deceased) Fukasaku Kinji of gangster (*yakusa*) flick fame, and based on the first-time novel of the same name by Kōshun Takami.

[3] I am referring in particular to the *tōkkotai* (more colloquially known as the *kamikaze*) pilots of the Second World War. Reading the personal diaries of these young pilots, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, in *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms and Nationalisms: Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, has provided a penetrating account of the ambivalences these young pilots experienced, as they headed off to their deaths, and the extent to which the symbolic structures of wartime ideology were successful in assuaging their sacrifice.

[4] My sense of the 'neoliberal' and the neoliberalism of the current education reforms in Japan and elsewhere is informed by Thomas Lemke's 'The Birth of Biopolitics: Michel Foucault's Lecture at the College de France on Neoliberal Governmentality', Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell's 'Neoliberalizing Space', Pierre Bourdieu's, 'The Essence of Neoliberalism', and the volume, *Foucault and Political Reason*, edited by Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose.

[5] *Battle Royale* enjoyed huge box office success, has produced chat sites, simulation games, and, it would appear, the possibility of new forms of identification for 'real schoolchildren.'

[6] I have written in more detail about this relationship between industry, government and education, Japan's recent education reforms, the child as victimizer and victim, and the relation between home and school in recessionary Japan in my dissertation, 'Recessionary Effects: The Crisis of the Child and the Culture of Reform in Contemporary Japan.'

[7] Aaron Gerow argues that Kobayashi's animated volumes have been particularly popular among the young. Longer and more focused discussions of the (re)appearances of neonationalisms within the mainstream of Japanese media and popular publications can be found in Aaron Gerow's 'Consuming Asia, Consuming Japan: The New Neonationalistic Revisionism in Japan', in L. Hein and M. Seldon, eds, *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States*, Armour, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000, pp 74–95; Yumiko Iida's 'Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s', *Positions*, 8(2), 2000, pp 421–464; and Marilyn Ivy's 'Revenge and Recapitation in Recessionary Japan', in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99(4), 2000, pp 819–840.

[8] It is precisely the dedication and sacrifices of this first post-war generation, together with the larger ideological foundations of post-war Japan as a nation of 'peace and prosperity,' that are at stake in this era of recession and fears of decline and national collapse.

[9] I have shown elsewhere how this fascination with the socialization of the Japanese child in the home and the school emerged out of the American cultural anthropology of Franz Boas and his students, whose

concept of the relativity of cultures elevated the study of the distinctive traits or 'personalities' of different 'cultures' to the status of a scientific endeavor.

[10] Prominent in the 'learn from Japan' genre are volumes such as: H. Stevenson and J. W. Stigler's *The Learning Gap*, New York: Touchstone Books, 1994; Merry White's *The Japanese Educational Challenge*, New York: Free Press, 1987, and Catherine Lewis's *Educating Hearts and Minds*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. These works on education parallel a long list of writings on the successes of the unique form of capitalism managed by the Japanese as a result of their unique system of socialization (read largely as schooling and childrearing). By the late 1990s, however, the economists had come full circle to retreat from this view, though it could be argued that this retreat has not included a problematizing of their own desire to believe in the possibility of what Slavoj Zizek has called a 'capitalism without capitalism'. By the late 1990s, a number of noted economists, among them Paul Krugman, began making their views widely known concerning the danger of following Japan into the quagmire of debt and deflation.

[11] 'Hollowing out' is a term used concurrently by economists to point to the emptying or weakening from the inside out of an industry or company, and by social theorists like Eric Santner to describe the waning of an ideology or structure of authority, such as he analyzes in *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

[12] Richard Katz's *Japan: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Economic Miracle*; *The System that Soured*, Armour, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998; Bai Gao's *Japan's Economic Dilemma: The Institutional Origins of Prosperity and Stagnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Gavan McCormack's *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence*, (revised edition), Armour, N.Y.: M.E Sharpe, 2001.

[13] I am referring here to the fact that life prior to the recession, while the model of capitalist existence for much of the rest of the world, was hardly without its struggles, violences and sacrifices. Many of these were subsumed within the larger ideological framework of 'homogeneous nation', behind which stood the battle for inclusion within this homogeneous race and class structure, epitomized by the exam wars and single-minded devotion of the family resources to entrance to an elite university, and a good company.

[14] These depictions range widely from bizarre crimes and the lack of emotional control or 'quick to frustration' kinds of classroom disturbance known as *kireru* (sundered) and *mukatsuku* (frustrated), to the burgeoning numbers of 'school refusers' or the schoolgirl prostitution, euphemistically known as 'financed dating' (*enjo kōsai*).

[15] During the period of my fieldwork in Tokyo and Kobe, I was continually engaged (by others) in conversation about the connection between national collapse and the dire situation among youth. Several times, complete strangers on the train, looking over at an article I was reading, would begin to question me about what I thought the cause was and where it would all lead.

[16] I conducted my fieldwork in Japan from early 2000 to fall of 2001 in the greater Tokyo and Kobe areas (the latter the site some two years earlier (1997) of the 'Kobe serial wounding and killing of elementary children incident' also known as the 'Youth A' (*Shōnen A*) incident).

[17] The name of the juvenile perpetrator of these acts against his peers cannot be divulged in public according to Japanese juvenile law, so as to protect the juvenile's identity (as well as that of his parents) and their future reputation. However, due to the various bizarre aspects of the crime, as well as its timing in the midst of the concerns over national decline, the lack of information about his identity seemed to fuel the desire for information all the more. Moreover, in the case of Youth A, the crimes were committed close enough to home (and school) such that the identity of the youth and his family was known to all in the area–in fact on a fieldwork trip to Kobe, I was guided by local residents to the now deserted home where the family once lived.

[18] I have written about the panic of 'unknowability' that accompanied the Kobe Youth A crimes, as the demand for information about Youth A seemed to be insatiable, and numerous special issues were devoted to exploring the dark and unknowable recesses of the 'child's' psyche (*naimen, kokoro*). See my 'The Wild Child of 1990s Japan', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99(4), 2000, pp 841–863. I also want to add here that the image created in the media of youth, during both of these events, was not a singular one by any means. For that matter, neither has the focus on the young been restricted to seeing them as victimizers.

[19] In the first instance of the disciplinization of the 1980s, one recalls the regulation of school life down to its most minute details, as well as a number of incidents, such as the 'school gate killing' at a high school in Kobe in the early 1990s, in which a female student, who was late to school, died when her head was smashed in the iron school gate by a teacher whose focus was more on the punctual closing of the gate than the student trying to enter it.

[20] Embedded within these reforms is a strong 'moral education' component. While seeking to strengthen the emotional ties between the individual and the nation, much like the moral education (*shūshin kyōiku*) of the past, the 'education of the heart' of the current reforms is linked strongly with the forward-looking neoliberal program to develop a new, more competitive individual.

[21] The report on 'The Structure of Japan in the Twenty-First Century' was the product of a special prime minister's committee, set up by the past prime minister Obuchi, under the directorship of past director of the International Center for the Study of Japanese Culture, Kawai Hayao.

[22] See Barbara Cruikshank's article, 'Revolutions Within: Self-government and Self-esteem,' in A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose (eds), *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neoliberalism and Rationalities of Government*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, for an excellent example of the type of 1990s 'roll-out' neoliberal reform.

[23] There are strong resonances here with the conflicted issue of child's rights (and other seeming child protection plans) that began in the late 1990s. When Japan joined the treaty on child's rights in the mid-1990s, it was required to create its own domestic plan for the implementation of the child's rights treaty. The city of Kawasaki, on the outskirts of Tokyo, where I resided during the period of my fieldwork, became the first municipality in the country to create such a plan, known as the child's rights initiative (*kodomo no kenri jōrei*). As described to me by its main drafter in the Kawasaki municipality, the rationale of the local government in drafting such a plan was linked to the sense that the new era of recession required a new approach to governance. The experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s, with violent outbreaks among youth, and the local government's unsuccessful attempts to deal with them by means of force, had convinced the authorities of Kawasaki, who govern an area that is strongly diverse, socio-economically, as well as racially, that they would have to look for another solution. They found this solution in the idea of making local families and children themselves 'responsible' for their own actions, by giving them 'rights.'

[24] In total, these opening titles read: 'At the beginning of the new century, one country finds itself in a state of collapse. As unemployment reaches fifteen percent, the value system breaks down, and along with it the home and the school. Why is it wrong to kill wonder the kids? Adults having lost their power are unable to provide an answer. Kids begin to detest adults, and adults to fear children. With their confidence shattered, the adult population begins to live in fear of the young, and passes a bill–the new century education law– to restore authority, and create a strong Japanese people for the future.'

[25] In the original novel, *Battle Royale*, junior-high students live in constant fear of their class being chosen for what is known as 'the Program.' Under the dictates of 'the Program,' four classes a year are sent to slaughter each other. The novel, in comparison to the screenplay, emphasizes a Spencerian type of survival-of-the-fittest of the future adult population. In the film, as I discuss shortly, the emphasis is rather on the important effects of the life and death struggle for survival.

[26] A striking contrast to the 'killing of kids' in *Battle Royale* is provided by Miyazaki Hayao's newest blockbuster hit, *Spirited Away*, in which the young heroine, Chihiro, a lackluster 10-year-old girl at the beginning of the film, emerges as the perfect example of recovered 'inner strength' (*ikiru chikara*) by the conclusion of the film. Read both as physical endurance and moral fortitude, Chihiro's battle is, symbolically, with the detritus of the past post-miracle degeneration that has overcome the older generation (and much of her own as well).

[27] The Japanese *juku* or supplementary schools come in a variety of forms, from remedial classes designed to help students at all levels keep up with the fast-paced general curriculum of Japanese schools, to the high-powered and highly competitive ranks of the entrance examination schools. These also divide into smaller and larger nationwide chain establishments. During the period of my fieldwork, I made observations at one of the larger chain schools specializing in junior high school entrance examinations.

[28] Despite the falling salaries, lay-offs and uncertainties of employment in the future, the entrance-exam cram schools have experienced one of the largest peaks in enrollment the mid-1990s on.

[29] This is one of the main points at which the screenplay diverges from the novel by first-time author Takami Kōshun. Takami seems to have intended to focus on the past several decades, his own generation, and to enact a parody of romantic views of this generation, like the TV drama (*Kinpachi sensei*) about how one teacher single-handedly takes on the range of problems that crop up in the everyday of the junior high school, and miraculously by the conclusion of each program has found a solution for them. Director Fukasaku, on the other hand, interpreted the story of *Battle Royale* as a story of his own adolescence during the war, and, moreover, a way to reconnect the younger generation with Japan's past and the brutality but also the unifying powers of battle and war.

[30] Aaron Gerow in his article on the *Sensoron* series points out that Kobayashi's greatest fans are the young. Gerow argues that the very 'disconnectedness of the youth lies behind Kobayashi's popularity.' According to Gerow, Kobayasahi's powerful State provides the youth with a place for identity formation, when the more local institutions of family and school have ceased to function.

[31] Tomiko Yoda, 'Roadmap to Millennial Japan', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99(4), 2000, pp 865–902.

[32] An even greater sign of its popularity is the appearance during the summer of 2003 of a sequel, *Battle Royale II*, in which the remaining two students turn 'terrorists', joining forces with other past 'victors', to try to subvert this despotic game.

[33] In the various interviews that director Fukasaku has given, he notes that above all the film for him was a way of showing the youth the importance of real friendship and the meaning of their shared Japanese past, something that all the terrible youth crime, with its announced disregard for life and pleasure at death, suggests to him is missing.

[34] Anne Allison, 'Cyborg Violence: Bursting Borders and Bodies with Queer Machines', *Cultural Anthropology* 16(2), May, 2001, pp 237–266.

[35] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p 49.

[36] Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p 99.