



JAPAN 2021 AT THE BFI IMAX

Battle Royale

Made with a cast of 35-year-old cowboys, soldiers or gangsters, *Battle Royale* would be no more shocking than any other post-Peckinpah bloodbath, and many violent dystopian satires – from Peter Watkins' *Punishment Park* (1971) through *Turkey Shoot* (1981) and *No Escape* (1994) to *Series 7: The Contenders* (2001) – have covered roughly the same ground. In this case, however, the kill-or-be-killed situation is Battle Royale, a game backed by a Japanese government of the near future, in which a group of schoolchildren are left on an island and given three days to try to kill each other off.

Making the most out of a premise which casts schoolchildren in their mid-teens as killers or victims, *Battle Royale* demonstrates that it is still possible to be transgressive, as roughly 40 uniformed, apparently ordinary kids are murdered in familiar, blood-bursting action-picture manner – riddled with bullets from automatic weapons, throats slashed or blasted out, stabbed, shot with arrows, decapitated with a samurai sword, blown up, gruesomely poisoned.

As in *Lord of the Flies*, an obvious precedent, we are in the territory of allegory rather than a study of real-world child violence. The teenagers of Class B do not represent the likes of the Littleton, Colorado trenchcoat mafia, the killers of Jamie Bulger or genocidal teenage Khmer Rouge soldiers. Instead they are ordinary kids, representing people we are or might be, and their actions in extraordinary circumstances are supposed to expose the range of human behaviour on the edge of societal madness.

The film balances its minx-cum-sociopath and hacker-terrorist with kids who refuse to accept what is going on or simply hide out and hope it'll all go away. A US movie like *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) posits that we would all become murderers if threatened with murder, but this Japanese film insists that sometimes we would choose to die rather than kill.

The Koshun Takami novel on which the film is based isn't set in the future, but an alternative present (like Stephen King's somewhat similar book *The Long Walk* and the often-misinterpreted *Series 7*), predicated on a Japanese victory in World War II that has created a society in which Battle Royale seems to make sense.

The script skips over the set up, with some statistics about unemployment and kid crime that don't sink in, and then delivers a few preliminary jabs, as narrator Shuya comes home to find his unemployed father has committed suicide and soon-to-be killed tearaway Nobu stabs apparently sympathetic teacher Kitano in the school hallway. Then, on the bus as they are supposedly taken on a school trip, we meet the class who have been selected for this cruel contest, and it is established that they are neither particularly innocent nor especially deserving of this punishment. Nobu, the only guilty party, is killed off quickly, and the chill sets in.

Most other films in this sub-genre are primarily satires at the expense of crass media. This is not an avenue *Battle Royale* chooses to explore – although we do get a hideous moment as a bloodied little girl with braces and a Norman

Bates smile is hailed as a celebrity for surviving the last BR, and there is an hilariously perky instructional video for mass murder presented by a pouting Japanese MTV-type hostess.

Though monitored by the game officials, and a sad-eyed but brutalised 'Beat' Takeshi (who plays former teacher Kitano), the kids are on their own. An especially horrific aspect of the premise is that the point of BR is not to entertain sadistic mobs, but to teach children a lesson.

The film keeps count of who has died, with print-outs on screen and regular announcements, but with so many characters it can't get close to them all. The obvious central figures, meek Noriko and numb Shuya, are less vivid than some of the shorter-lived characters and the most effective moments in the film are vignettes: the take-charge head-girl type cheerfully organising her clique to survive, only for everything to go wrong as girls with ordinary grievances ('Why do you have to be the leader all the time?') reach for guns; contrasting moments as boys approach girls on whom they have crushes, with one trying to bully a girl into liking him through death threats and another being shot dead by the girl he has just confessed his love to; the revelation that Kiriyama, sporting a sharp suit and Johnny Rotten hair, has entered the contest for fun; sickle-wielding Mitsuko's assumption of the role of serial murderess, paying back all the real and imaginary sleights she has suffered in school ('I didn't want to be a loser any more').

Perhaps because it's impossible to rationalise the situation as credible, and perhaps because taking it deadly seriously would make the film unwatchably grim, veteran director Kenji Fukasaku mines a seam of very black humour, with the wry, impassive, hard-to-fathom Kitano acting as if this were a normal school activity, as classical music is played over the Tannoy and updates on the classes' progress are read out.

As the scrambling of character name and actor suggests, Kitano is our anchor in this picture, a familiar presence with an inimitable stance, and his poised, perfect death scene tells us that we must take *Battle Royale* seriously but not literally.

Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, September 2001

BATTLE ROYALE

Director: Kenji Fukasaku

Production Company: Battle Royal Production Committee

Presented by: Toei

Executive Producer: Ikuro Takano

Producers: Masao Sato, Masumi Okada, Teruo Kamaya, Tetsu Kayama

Co-producers: Kimio Kataoka, Chie Kobayashi, Kenta Fukasaku,

Hisao Nabeshima

Assistant Director: Toru Harada

Screenplay: Kenta Fukasaku

Based on the novel by: Koshun Takami

Director of Photography: Katsumi Yanagijima

Lighting: Akira Ono

Editor: Hirohide Abe

Production Designer: Kyoko Heya

Original Painting: Takeshi Kitano

Music: Masamichi Amano

Sound: Kunio Ando

Cast

'Beat' Takeshi (*Kitano*)

Taro Yamamoto (*Shogo Kawada, male student 5*)

Masanobu Ando (*Kazuo Kiriyama, male student 6*)

Sosuke Takaoka (*Hiroki Sugimura, male student 11*)

Tatsuya Fujiwara (*Shuya Nanahara, male student 15*)

Hirohito Honda (*Niida Yoriyuki, male student 16*)

Eri Ishikawa (*Yukie Utsumi, female student 2*)

Sayaka Ikeda (*Megumi Eto, female student 3*)

Tomomi Shimaki (*Sakura Ogawa, female student 4*)

Tamaki Mihara (*Izumi Kanai, female student 5*)

Yukari Kanazawa (*Yukiko Kitano, female student 6*)

Yasuyo Mimura (*Kayoko Kotodan, female student 8*)

Hitomi Hinata (*Yuko Sakaki, female student 9*)

Ko Shibasaki (*Mitsuko Soma, female student 11*)

Satomi Ishii (*Haruka Yazawa, female student 12*)

Chiaki Kuriyama (*Takako Chigusa, female student 13*)

Haruka Nomiyama (*Mayumi Tendo, female student 14*)

Aki Maeda (*Noriko Nakagawa, female student 15*)

Satomi Hanamura (*Yuka Nakagawa, female student 16*)

Ryo Kamiya (*Satomi Noda, female student 17*)

Aki Inoue (*Fumiyo Fujiyoshi, female student 18*)

Japan 2000

114 mins

JAPAN 2021 AT THE BFI IMAX

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no Samurai)

Thu 9 Dec 13:30

Akira

Thu 9 Dec 18:00

Battle Royale (Batoru rowaiaru)

Thu 9 Dec 20:45

JAPAN 2021: ANOTHER GAZE

Dear Pyongyang

Sat 11 Dec 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by director Yang Yong-hi); Thu 23 Dec 18:10

Restoration Premiere: The Far Road (Toi ippon no michi) + intro

Tue 14 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Tue 28 Dec 15:00

Experimenta presents: A selection of video and film works by experimental filmmaker Mako Idemitsu

Wed 15 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Another Gaze's Daniella Shreir); Wed 29 Dec 20:40

Naomi Kawase: Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth (Kya ka ra ba a) + Birth/Mother (Tarachime)

Wed 15 Dec 20:45

0.5mm (0.5 miri)

Mon 27 Dec 16:30

JAPAN 2021

100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Pale Flower (Kawaita hana)

Thu 9 Dec 18:00; Sun 19 Dec 18:20

Death By Hanging (Kôshikei)

Fri 10 Dec 17:50; Fri 17 Dec 18:00

After Life (Wandafuru raifu) Fri 10 Dec 20:40; Mon 13 Dec 20:40; Wed 29 Dec 14:20

In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)

Sat 11 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 18:20

Muddy River (Doro no kawa)

Sun 12 Dec 11:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Thu 23 Dec 20:40

The Demon (Kichiku)

Sun 12 Dec 14:50 (+ intro by season co-programmer Alexander Jacoby); Sun 19 Dec 16:00

The Man Who Stole the Sun (Taiyô wo nusunda otoko) Sun 12 Dec 18:00; Thu 16 Dec 20:10

Tampopo Mon 13 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London); Fri 17 Dec 20:45; Tue 28 Dec 15:10

Philosophical Screens: Tampopo

Mon 13 Dec 20:15 Blue Room

Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)

Tue 14 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 15:50

Silence Has No Wings (Tobenai chinmoku)

Wed 15 Dec 18:00

Woman of the Lake (Onna no mizûmi)

Wed 15 Dec 20:50

The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On (Yuki Yukite, Shingun)

Sat 18 Dec 11:40; Mon 27 Dec 18:20

Straits of Hunger (aka A Fugitive from the Past) (Kiga kaikyô) Sat 18 Dec 14:30

Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna)

Sat 18 Dec 17:30

Moving (Ohikkoshi)

Sat 18 Dec 20:35; Wed 29 Dec 20:30

The Long Darkness (Shinobugawa)

Sun 19 Dec 12:40

Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20

Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)

Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00

Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)

Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40

Love Letter Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)

Thu 23 Dec 18:30

Black Rain (Kuroi ame)

Tue 28 Dec 18:15

Supported by:



In partnership with:



With special thanks to:



With the kind support of:

Janus Films/The Criterion Collection, Kadokawa Corporation, Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, Kokusai Hoei Co. Ltd, Nikkatsu Corporation, Toei Co. Ltd

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://www.player.bfi.org.uk)

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780