PLAY AND KILL - FILM TEENAGE VIOLENCE IN WESTERN AND EASTERN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES: VAN SANT'S ELEPHANT AND FUKASAKU'S BATTLE ROYALE

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ABSTRACT

In spite of all the cultural and social differences that separate the American and Japanese societies and the way these same differences are depicted by these two films, the controversy of the topic is similar in both countries and it jumped from the underground culture and press to the mainstream, showing the growing importance of the subject not only among the audiences but also among scholars all around the world.

Both films take place in fictional worlds but they depict real teenagers who play high school students giving an extreme effect of reality, especially of physical violence, involving guns, shots and deaths. In a way, the killers are living their lives as a video game (in Elephant we watch Eric playing a violent video game before the massacre occurs; in Battle Royale the kidnapped teenagers are informed they have to play a game and kill if they want to survive) but there is no conveyed moral message in either film concerning teenage copy cat effects.

If Elephant avoids gore scenes and concentrates on faces and bodies, Battle Royale explores these almost as a B-movie, a genre loved by most teenagers.

Is the aesthetics of violence inappropriate or the substance of the film comes from its form denying the exogenous motives for social determinism? Draining from significance the violent images can be watched as philosophical allegories of the systemic violence in our societies.

Keywords: Teenagers; violence; aesthetics; philosophy; film

INTRODUCTION

> *"Which is better- to have laws and agree, or to hunt and kill?"*
> William Golding, Lord of the Flies

> *"The human body is the best picture of the human soul."*
> Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

Violence as a catalyst for narration and identification or as a stylistic and aesthetic spectacle is always an interesting topic for debating and investigation beyond the controversial influence of the media in real-life events, especially when it's too challenging, as it depicts teenagers played by real teen actors committing the most horrific acts. The scope of this text is to debate how teen violence is represented in both films that are not concerned in providing answers but asking questions and demanding pluralistic readings beyond their entertaining function. The spectacle of explicit gore and brutality in Battle Royale contrasts with the minimalist approach of violence in Elephant, but despite the totally different stylistic approach, the mutilated bodies resulting from the eruption of irrational violence is what can be terribly disturbing for the viewer and often a complicated issue to frame:

As the very terms gratuitous and excessive indicate, violence in film is somehow essentially questionable or suspect; framed by ethical and social responsibilities and issues, the presence of graphic violence is thus frequently thrown into a discourse of justification or condemnation based on its perceived relation to actual violence, audience identification, and response or character, narration and style (Coulthard 2007: 157)

Having this in mind this text focuses on moving images that depict more than gratuitous violence but rather it questions the power of the image in our society and the need to reflect deeply on its substance. The movement of the damaged and dying bodies through space relates closely to the camera mobility - it's the matter concerning image that we must concentrate on and not look for social and psychological meanings just to find a scapegoat for a society suffering from an overdose of luxury and anxiety and lost in a "thin sea of representations that represent other representations whose active content has been exploited until they are empty images without meaning." (Heim 2000: 29)

Battle Royale is based on TakamiKoushun's 1999 novel of the same name. When it was released in the West, critics and film journalists were eager to find pop culture references to analyze its concept such as the international reality TV show Survivor, William Golding's The Lord of the Flies or Kubrick's The Clockwork Orange. Even if the plot can be pitched in one sentence[1], the film works on different levels, despite the shocking action, the gore scenes and the entertainment it encompasses. And it became a hit both inside and outside Japan, attracting many teenagers prompt to watch the film that was R15 rated in Japan, alleged by Japanese parliamentarians to be "very harmful to the youth" (Mes and sharp 2001: 1) and saw its commercial release forbidden in the USA[2].

If on the surface Battle Royale is an entertainment action film full of gruesome and bloody scenes underlined by black humor[3] so appealing to the teenage audiences, on a deeper level it shows a good sense of social absurdity. The rules of the game are simple as the teacher explains on the video the students must watch: it lasts for three days; only one survivor is allowed; all the players are fitted with a high-tech collar that tracks their position and there are zones in the island where they can't remain after being informed they are forbidden. They are giving food and water supplies, weapons and other survival kits. The punishment for not obeying the rules is death: their collar will be detonated. The irony of it all is that even if they obey all the rules, they will also be killed, except one. So death becomes the intrinsic value for entertainment. The game starts and the audiences watch the game/film: not yet being familiar with these violent teenagers, they get ready for fun and distraction. The overlapping of video game and film medium is intentionally confusing. Teenagers, both as the product of consumerism and as the potential consumer of this kind of entertainment, become the underlying motif of the film. However its goal is not to parody game shows or video games but exposing the various layers of possible readings concerning youth and violence without the pretentious idea of presenting solutions for this problem. The film was very controversial and a political issue was raised when politicians wanted to ban it, arguing that it could get teenagers into copycat incidents. Fukasaku's answer to this argument was a subtle and emphatic turning-away from contemporary violence: in the film the winner is excitably interviewed by TV news crews, but everything that happens in the island is far from the

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[1] A class of Junior high school students is taken to a deserted island to take part in a game where they must kill one another until only one survivor remains.

[2] Apparently because of the Columbine massacre.

[3] For instance, the scene when a severed head with a hand grenade stuffed into his shocked mouth flying through the air; or when a student with an axe buried deep in the centre of his head assures that he is absolutely fine.

cameras. The students in the film aren't violent because they are used to watching violence on the screen. That's the false premise.

Being today's reality stuffed with virtual worlds, it's important to reflect upon the role of the subject in-between. The game the students are playing is being watched by the spectator outside the film. So, the artificial world is hands-in-hands with the reality of the viewer, who no longer is completely away from the screened fictional world but, even if he can't control it, he's also somehow being implicated. The issue here is not to discuss the influence of fictional and virtual worlds in our everyday attitudes and behaviors, but nonetheless we must accept that the way we are looking at our reality is filtrated through fiction. Behind all the screened events, a reality emerges. That's why it is so important to understand the several layers of production of an illusory reality. The teacher Kitano says at one point: "Life is a game", something we can take as an allegory of the media for the making of present and future human relations. The game, being sponsored by a commercial enterprise, becomes the metaphor of a society where the individual and morals are being tested: "This dystopic youth picture is not set in a subcultural ward, quarantined from reality. It's an allegory of society eating its young and a black comedy about forcing delinquent teenagers to kill each other as a media event." (Davis 2006: 202)

The video game as a social phenomenon and tool redefines the narrative world of images in terms of physical and psychological involvement of the player and the viewer, considering identification and alienation. As spectators of a game within a film, we can't immerge in the game the teens are playing, we aren't allowed to control anything, but we can experience through perception the emotional struggles of the characters and feel this ambiguous doubleness. Lacking the interactivity of computer based-media, the film structure, however, blurs the distinction of the two different fictional spaces and consequently of perception, where shocking images are also a source of pleasure. As the game progresses, the body count and the number of the remaining players are displayed on the screen and the spectator experiences a continuous and complementary hybrid perception. This doesn't mean that the boundaries between of the two mediums are erased, but it creates a dubious feeling of engagement from the part of the viewer who makes up his/ her lack of bodily movement. This engagement is both perceptional and emotional.

Both the theme and the tone of the film are given by an introductory text in the opening scenes: set in an alternate near future, the Japanese government passed the Millennium Education Act (Battle Royale) to reassert its authority and to stop youth apathy, violence and widespread school boycott. Images of the previous Battle Royale game finale are displayed and the camera focuses upon a photograph of a class of Zentsuji Middle School: students and teacher Kitano. The resentful teacher as the only present adult who talks to the teenagers mostly through video may well be considered as a representation of the adult world, responsible for the society it has shaped but also fearful of the uncontrollable behaviors it generated. Surrounded by soldiers, who exist to assure that order and safety rule, he is no longer the victim of a student's stabbing but the representation of the political power that once had to carry out a tremendous violence "to establish the basis for its Right", (Neyrat 2006: 99) but can't no longer control it. So, it seems there is no exit for this political aporia, except termination. The only survivor of the game, the one who can kill and escape killing, will succeed in getting away from the deserted island and return to society to become one of its future valuable members. Being the fittest implies to accept the rules imposed on him/ her such as competition, individualism and survival instinct. This imposed Darwinism leaves a void for a stronger questioning and reflection upon our contemporary societies, mainly the interstices of violence, success and youth.

Following Peter Fitting theories, we may accept that the film, set in a dark future in the context of a deep economical and social crisis is a critical dystopia[4] since: "the description of the dystopian society contains an implicit warning that this may be where we are heading, as well as an account of those elements in our present that have produced this future." (Fitting 2003: 156) The brutal premise of the film is inevitably followed by a brutal film concerning both the graphic violence and its context: the solutions are far worse than the problem. An implicit critique of a conservative politics wrapped in a wild capitalism is at stake. The burst of the bubble economy brought contemporary societies to an economic downturn and to a level of uncontrollable anxiety where adults, who are supposed to be the role models for a more equalitarian and free society became, instead, a bizarre example for self-determination and freedom. In the film there is a boy who constantly credits his father for something he's good at and another says he's able to do Molotov cocktails because his uncle taught him how to do it. This adult motivation seems to lead to a dead end and not a better future. An antagonistic dialects runs throughout the film[5], because adults and teenagers are in opposite poles as Fukasaku explained: "I put this film in this context of children versus adult." (Mes and Sharp 2001: 4) These violent teenagers become a political problem to be eradicated from society because it can't deal with their demands of subjectivizing the events they undergo as individuals, not as products of a massive cultural and social determinism. It's important to recall that the captive classes are randomly chosen; even the most innocent and pacifist teenager can become an executioner. The political speech is perceived as a lie and helpless to restore social order.

The students with their petty immature rivalries, emotional vulnerabilities and unshakeable romanticism, behave as they should for their own age, making the film an accurate portrayal of youthful concerns and worldviews. The fact that most actors are real teenagers and not young adults playing teenagers is what makes the carnage more disturbing for the adult spectators. Besides, girls and boys are equally violent and capable of the most possible atrocities, something that destabilizes mass culturally derived values and conventions that characterize society, since in most mainstream action films girls and women are given the roles of victims. However, when girls and women step out of their roles, the violent narrative and images can have a "disruptive and traumatic impact" (Neroni 2005: 59) in the social order. Of course, popular culture has accepted female violent roles, but most films address violence as something instrumental, rational and fully justified, which invites a degree of audience's empathy and identification. Violence becomes a redemptive act. In Battle Royale the protagonists of the game can't even understand the apparently purgative goal of it. The emphasis on graphic bodily injury displayed in the film is something structural and not ideologically empty, even if the violent acts seem gratuitous, irrational and excessive. For instance, the scene in which a group of girls are chatty and giggly and, all of sudden, they mow one another down with paranoia and fear. These pointless and illogical reactions may suggest that violence is "employed as a lazy signifier". (Slocum 2001: 2) However, as the narrative evolves, we learn something about these teenagers' backgrounds (through the flashbacks). They become much more than faceless identities to rise as personalities whether they are sadist, vulnerable, sensitive, selfish or ruthless, engaging the viewer into something deeper than bloodbath images, as Peter Bradshaw points out: "(…) as the film progresses, the violence and suspense take second place to the intensity of the adolescent crushes and

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[4] The author distinguishes between *critical* dystopia and other dystopias: while generally speaking, a dystopian setting only serves to provide a justification for the film's events, a *critical* dystopia: "implies an explanation of how the dystopian situation came about as much as what should be done about it" (Fitting: 2003: 156)
[5] The relationship between Kitano and his daughter Shiori is the most striking example of this antagonism: she hates her father and he tells her people must accept the consequences of hating someone.

unspoken yearnings, which emerge, purified, under these horrific laboratory conditions." (Bradshaw 2001:1)[6] The violence happens outside an ethical framework of justice and it's just the result of extreme political measures of prevention. As the students are randomly chosen, there is no sense in trying to discuss teenage delinquency and violence as a problem urgent to discuss and solve. Apparently, it is rather a joke. That's why the director chose to extrapolate it and focus on the things behind.

If there is no sign of an imminent US release for Battle Royale, Van Sant's Elephant, vaguely inspired by the Columbine massacres, has also caused a great deal of controversy for the exposure of teen violence. The film is a record of a day at an anonymous high school on the day of a massacre, but it offers no explanation for the tragedy or insights into the psyches of the killers. The film is not, although there are pockets of resistance[7], about the Columbine tragedy, as Harris Savides, the film's cinematographer, explained:

> *We weren't setting out to make a movie about the Columbine killings, so we were careful about not to. There was to be no explanation and no resolution. We weren't going to slap anybody's hand or preach. The audience was going to take what they wanted from this film and interpret it the way they felt. In the beginning we were given all the Columbine material and Michael's Moore Bowling for Columbine (2002) as research, which we looked at to understand how to structure our scenes and find out accurately what was done in Columbine, so we would have an understanding of what went on. (Savides 2004: 180)*

According to McRoy, Van Sant's film is "a meditation on the limits of 'seeing' and the impossibility of 'knowing.'" (McRoy 2005: 52) The distant camera and the long takes avoid a moral message and open a plurality of readings and perspectives to the spectator. The formalist aesthetics of the film, given by a poetic manipulation of the camera, goes hands-in-hands with a realistic style inspired by documentary filmmakers such as Frederick Weiseman[8]. This apparent incongruity is the basis for the illusion of objectivity the film intends rather than questioning violence as a controversial topic displayed by the media and its hypothetical influence on teenagers. The spectator observes the students wandering in the endless and labyrinthian corridors and some of them rise above anonymity, as the camera follows them for a long time in their daily routines and he/she can hear about their anxieties and expectations. But as the camera moves away from them the spectator realizes the knowledge he/she gets of these characters is almost none. The spectator is allowed to observe what the characters observe but he/she is never given the true chance of figuring out the world as they perceive it. The director was looking for an authenticity in the film, so that's why the cast is made of non-professional teen actors and there is a lot of improvisation in their dialogues. As a result, their conversations don't seem too artificial and imposed by a screenplay written by an adult who probably would invest these adolescents with an emotional maturity beyond their age.

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[7]Some critics understood the film as pointless and empty because it avoids a social and moral message: "To make a film about something like the student shootings incident and provide no insight or enlightenment would seem to be pointless at best and irresponsible at worst, and that it was what Gus Van Sant has done in 'Elephant.'" (MacCarthy 2003: 1) The critic didn't take into consideration that the violence in the film is not glamorized or purposeful and the social context can't explain anything really, since these are high middle class teenagers who were integrated in society.

[8] "It's not that I don't want you involved in the characters, but I want you involved by *watching* them, an observation, the way documentarian Frederick Wiseman sits back and lets things occur." (Peary 2003: 1)

The upsetting realism with which the film defines its events is blurred with different techniques (the non-linear narrative, the still shots, the slow motion, the circular pans, the repetition of the same scenes with a different angle and perspective and the surrealistic use of sound in some scenes)[9], creating layers of meanings that often end in a sense of absurdity and resists easy interpretation. Also the natural lighting used in the beginning of the film to establish some documentary verisimilitude gives way to a very controlled system of illumination to inflict a certain feeling to the film, as Harris Savides explained: "Rather than seeing the world changing I thought it would be great if we walked through the door and it stayed bright and then we made really slowly which was more integral to the film. It seemed to work better with the tone and the way things were moving." (Ballinger 2004: 182-183)

Elias, the photographer in the film, takes pictures of his colleagues and this obsession with capturing images may well express the power images have as a representation and manipulation of reality. Elias asks a couple to smile while they're posing for the camera. These photos aren't realistic but controlled and manipulated by the photographer's intention because he wants them to convey what he intends to. In this sense, MacRoy argues that Elephant is a film about spectacle:

> *It is a work concerned with the power of the filmed (or photographed) and the risks one takes when one either imposes dogmatic systems of signification upon visual signs, or mechanically embraces hyper-mediated images that have been virtually decontextualised through their repetition and incorporation into popular culture.* (McRoy 2005: 53).

When the two killers watch a Nazi-documentary on TV, the spectator may try to find a motif for the insane acts of the boys but that would be a reductionist and distorted perception of the eruption of violence. After all, the boys are very ignorant of the cultural and historical background that is being shown on the documentary they are watching. One of them even asks: "That's Hitler, right?" And when Eric is playing the violent video game he shows "no aggression or pleasure" (Higgin 2006: 73), so it would be very naïve of the spectator to consider it one of the causes for the massacre. Before the killings start, Alex says to Eric "Most importantly, have fun." The comprehensibility of such acts remains obscure, in spite of the apparent information given to the audience to make them understand the reasons for the massacre: the violent video game Eric plays on the computer, the gun ordering through the Internet, the spitball thrown at Alex in the classroom (bullying?) and the Nazi-documentary.

The fact that our society is living an era of saturated images implies that we must be aware of all the manipulation behind reality. By not giving answers to the audience, the director demands a more intelligent perspective of the viewer: images are malleable and not objective, so if meanings are to be conveyed, they are always controlled and subjective. It is up to the viewer to keep a distance from the images he watches and find meanings on his own. Taking meanings for granted is already part of the problem, not of the solution. Van Sant does not concentrate in dramatizing characters or events, so "the film is unclear about whose story is this", as Dancyger and Rush justify: "This unwillingness to provide a definite answer is heightened by an act structure that is not character-based, but rather abstractly thematic." (Dancyger and Rush 2007: 55) It's important not to concentrate on the motivations of the two boys for their act. After all, when the spectator meets them, almost half of the film action has already happened. The narrative structure is anchored in temporality and not in motivations. The cinematic devices used by the director reinforce this idea: the shots of the clouds in the sky are shown periodically, either in time lapses or in time delay. The inexorability of time

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[9]The sounds of animalistic howling and screechingduring and after the shootings; the sound of running water;

for the inevitability of the tragedy reinforces the subjectivity of time and reality. The fact that some sequences are repeated from a different perspective also contributes to this purpose. The scene when John meets the killers just before the tragedy is one of the most striking examples. The viewer watches a reprise of the meeting from three different points of view: Alex and Eric's, John's and Brittany, Jordan and Nicole's. The loop and the elliptical structure are also cinematic devices for emptying the frames of any special signification as they are different perceptions of the same event and the non-chronological order of the events emphasizes the subjectivity of time. Perception and memory coexist and it's hardly possible to distinguish the true event from its recollection, or the real event from fiction. In this way, we may argue that the film follows Derrida's theories on time and temporality which state that linearity and punctuality "emerge only in on the basis of the workings of a temporality of delay, curvature, and an elliptical movement back and forth between intending act and intended content." (Hodge 2007: 35) The confusion between fiction and reality is intentionally brought up by the director during the killing spree at the cafeteria when we see Alex sitting in a chair and drinking from a cup of coffee that was on the table. This scene mimics the footage captured by the surveillance camera during the real Columbine massacre. The camera shifts from looking to moving through space implying that reality is always displaced and scattered with fiction:

> *À la croisée du reel et du fictive, au coeur des mouvements et des entrecoisements de l'un et de l'autre, les événements (…) portent l'attentionsur la dispersion de la realité (inspire ou non d'un 'fait réel', fidèleou non à cequ'on en saitoucequ'on on reticent).* (Arnoldy 2009: 146)

The camera drifts from person to person and place to place implying the invisible people and things that are there but we choose to ignore. As the camera makes a circular pan in Alex's room while he's playing Beethoven on the piano it focuses a drawing of an elephant hanged on the wall. Van Sant said the title refers to Alan Clarke's film with the same title[10] but also evokes the parable of the elephant as something that is present but people are only able to see the parts of it, never the whole:

> *"J'enairetenul'idée de ne pas donnerd'explication à la violence. Elle surgitdans le quotidien, de façonaussisaugrenuequ'unéléphantdans un magasin de porcelainemaisqu'onnevoudraitpasvoir. D'où le titre du film de Clarke, quej'airepris pour luirendrehommage."* (Nicklaus 2003:1)

The space of the school looks comfortable, modern and peaceful and there aren't any signs of aggression[11], rage or anxiety among the students that could predict the violent spree. It's just kids with their everyday problems and banal conversations regarding school, family and fashion. However, there's a scene at the cafeteria where we watch Alex with head on his hands and listen to a disturbing noise that engulfs the surrounding environment, suggesting Alex's alienating mind. And that's something threatening about the apparent ordinariness of a school day.

The act of seeing functions as both the act of perceiving and being perceived, so the materiality of the image is too important to be surpassed by the goal of finding meanings and messages beyond; it only complicates the perception of the factual. The realm of language,

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[10]A 1989 BBC film about violence in Northern Ireland.

[11]There's a scene where Alex is hazed in the classroom when someone throws a spitball at him, but we wouldn't consider it an act of violence, it's just kids playing. Besides, if we consider Alex as a victim and ostracized by his peers as a possible reason for a revengeful action, why is Michelle, the lonely girl, the first victim of their acts?

the inability to access the signified through the signifier can be seen in the scene when Alex says the meaningless words of a children's game ("Eeney... meeney... meiny... moe…") to Nathan and Carrie (the couple hidden in the cold-room) to decide which one to kill first. We may accept the fact that there is no specific motivation behind the killings. Students interact, some with the killers, others don't; some die, others escape, but for no particular reason.

The visual idiom of video gaming is used in some crucial moments during the shootings: the third-person perspective gives place to first-person shooter perspective. The same happens when Eric is playing the video game in Alex's room. The migration of certain videogame conventions into film narrative proves that the director is well aware of the changes regarding vision and perception of film during the last decades, influenced by the videogame as a medium for interacting: "Additionally, the film uses a boxy 1:33 frame shape, rather than the wide aspect ratio often used in feature films, to reference the boxy shape of television monitors and the console game systems that rely on them." (Galloway 2006: 60)

As a conclusion, we may well argue that teen violence in film can't be seen as a matter for social conventions and political interests but as a philosophical ground for questioning our being in the world in a time of overwhelming images but where you must experience them as something that provoke a new frame of thought and reflection. We may accept Žižek's suggestion: "Precisely because the universe in which we live is somehow a universe of dead conventions and artificiality, the only authentic real experience must be some extremely violent, shattering experience." (Reul and Deichmann 2001:1)

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