Rebellion and Despair. Children and Adolescents in Recent Japanese Films

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Abstract
Children and adolescents have been a prominent subject for Japanese cinema in recent years. From the viewpoint of the proposed thematic scope of "Individual, Community & Society: Conflict, Resolution & Synergy", the non-adult characters and its conflicts are a privileged theme. Cinema, as a popular culture manifestation, contributes to the discourses on construction of the sense of community, belonging –or lack of it– and identity. This paper approaches the depiction of conflictive childhood and adolescence in recent films, its significance and its fitting in the stream of Japanese cinema history. This historic approach is not intended to be a comprehensive account, but a tour across selected moments and films of Japanese cinematographic culture. The aim is to draw a map on some connections that can shed some light on the contemporary filmmakers –including names such as Miike Takashi, Nakashima Tetsuya, Sono Sion or Iwai Shunji–, tendencies and films.

Keywords: Childhood, adolescence, Japanese cinema, conflict, identity

Introduction

The topic of childhood and adolescence is not new for Japanese cinema. Many titles, some of them remarkable ones, have approached the subject. This subject has become especially prominent in recent years, particularly depicting generational clash, and rebellious attitudes amongst the youngsters, with a certain amount of violence in many cases.

Having selected some of the most prominent of important authors in the latest contemporary Japanese cinema films, starting from the concepts of *childhood* and *adolescence* and their historical significance in the Japanese context, along with some relevant examples from the history of Japanese cinema, this paper will explore a map through all this complex. It should allow us to tend the lines of correspondence to understand both the peculiarities of this current phenomenon and also the continuities with the dynamics already set in the national cinematography.

On the concept of *childhood* and its importance in Meiji Japan

According to the French scholar Philippe Ariès, "by the eighteenth century, special conventions in artistic and literary representation marked children as a distinct group and *childhood* as a separate domain, set apart from the everyday life of adult society. The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture. " (Shiraishi: 2005, 1) So there is a social and historical construction of a space of *childhood* as an ideally safe, innocent, and carefree domain. On a collection of *nishiki-e* prints edited by the Japanese Ministry of Education in the Meiji era, can be observed that the modern Japanese state redefines childhood in the same way as their referential capitalist western countries and identifies it as "a time of crucial importance for making useful, active citizens". (Paget: 2011, 3) It is accepted that we all live with some sense of belonging, being it to some place, community or nation. But this sense of belonging, rather than natural, is constructed so can be forged and reshaped. (Wada-Marciano: 2012, 87) That's why the institutions sought to integrate individuals, mobilise them for service to the nation and inspire in them a sense of personal identification with it. (Paget: 2011, 3)

In order to consolidate the radical shift the country was undertaking from the Meiji era, the Japanese people's sense of belonging and identity "was gradually established through various discourses in public or private spheres, via, for instance, the government's official announcements or popular culture, such as cinema." (Wada-Marciano: 2012, 87) From various accounts, policies, and proclamations of the early Meiji officials, it can be found an ambivalent view of children. They are regarded at the same time as the embodiment of the nation's hopes for the new era, as well as a potential danger "to be subdued through a rigorous regime of surveillance, indoctrination, drills and endless recitations", (Paget: 2011, 6) This resulted in a duality of images. On one hand, children are heroic beings, willing defenders of the nation who could be relied on to bring Japan power and glory. On the other, they are targets of relentless surveillance and rigorous discipline, suggesting an anxiety about what they might do should the government fail in its task to thoroughly indoctrinate them. (Paget: 2011, 17)

Good boys of the 30s, orphans of the 40s, bad boys of the 50s

In the 30's, cinema was already consolidated as mass media, perhaps the most prominent. The imperial and militaristic regime showed some kind of success in those indoctrination policies described in the previous section and the depiction of children in those days can be considered a continuation of it. Nevertheless, there were ways to circumvent censorship by using those conventions. A fine example is Ozu's *I Was Born, But...* (生れてはみたけれど Umarete wa mita keredo, 1932). With this film, Ozu cleverly, embeds a veiled critic to the official policies in the form of a comedy about children.

The protagonist family moves to the western suburbs of Tokyo, shown as an empty land to conquer which seems to allude to the new colonized lands in continental Asia, what which places us in the realm of political commentary. The children start a struggle to fit in the newly met neighbourhood children's society. They soon succeed and, by their witty actions, even replace the son of the president of a big company owner, incidentally their father's boss, as the leaders of the group. Later, watching a film shot by the president of the company, the children discover their father's submission to the hierarchy as he follows instructions to perform ridiculously in front of the camera. They get angry and urge their father to react. This episode underlines how fair the children's society is, as the prevalent positions are acquired by merits, and boosts a contrast of their dignity against the adults' miserable attitude towards power. The wise use of children's depiction reveals in this film useful to somehow resist power structures and its indoctrination efforts generating some critical thought by subtle irony.

Following the defeat and under the rule of the allied forces, post-war Japan becomes a *place* without effective guardianship by the nation-state. Therefore there was no "citizenship" in the practical sense of the rights and legal protections. Cinema specifically highlights this *condition of stateless-ness* by the depiction of orphans, "figures whose susceptibility to the post-war's disintegrated state granted them singular power in dramatic narratives", and so they depicted "Japan as a place without 'citizenship' in a large number of films. (Wada-Marciano: 2012, 87-88) Time and again, the act of working grant these figures a way back in the social fold, a way to claim their identity in the post-war landscape. (Wada-Marciano: 2012, 107)

As the country starts to recover social and economically, fathers returned to the screen. But a sense of detachment from parents remained in youth depictions, as stablished in the *Taiyōzoku* films. *Taiyōzoku* is the name given to a cultural phenomenon triggered by the success of Ishihara Shintarō's novels and the films based on them. It basically consist in stories of unemployed and lazy hedonist youngsters, practicing beach sports by daytime and frequenting jazz clubs by night, with dancing, alcohol and fights as amusements, ideally supplemented by casual sex without commitment. For the first generation raised in the new postwar system, freed from national-imperialist suffocation and the compulsory military duties their parents have had, that created a great enthusiasm. The dazzling public appearance of the Ishihara brothers meant for them the consecration of the life of conspicuous consumption to which they aspired, and made them role models and champions of a new masculinity that young people wanted to emulate.

So *Taiyōzoku* could be considered a revolt only in its façade, as it is based on the values of consumerism, leading some to argue that in reality was nothing more than a creation of the media tabloid media, which focused attention on the need for youth riots for something to argue against a backdrop of serenity, as the country was in the way of successful social and economic recovery. (Richie: 2005, 151) And so seems to do Ozu in his film *Good Morning* (□ □ □ □ , Ohay*ō*, 1959). Considered a remake of *I Was Born, But...*, this film also shows the domestic rebellion of a couple of brothers against their parents. But there isn't any noble reason in this case, but just a strategy to force them buying a television. The selfish couple of boys seems to be Ozu's parody of the Ishiharas and their hedonistic rebelliousness, depicting a change of his view of the children, therefore of the future, from optimism in pre-war to a negative one in the post-war era. (Montaño: 2012)

Adolescence, subculture and consumerism

The protagonist of the *Tai*y*ō*z*oku* movement were not children but youngsters in the verge of adulthood. Adolescents. Needless to say, new attitudes brought by the culture fired great anxiety in a fearful adult society that their imitative children were to fall in the whirlpool of sex and violence shown on screen, and led to increasing pressure from various lobbies parents and teachers. British *Cultural Studies* had being stating from the 70s that the marginal nature of so-called *subcultures* doesn't rely in themselves but in the disqualification exercised by institutions. The debate stands on whether they represent a form of resistance against the *establishment*'s values, threatened by new subversive ones, or whether it is simply inconsequential recreations that capitalism allows off-production hours (school and work). This second idea would be strengthened by the way these expressions come into a negotiation process of the image they project, usually stigmatized as a provocation by institutions but at the same time used by the media, specially advertisement industry, either as a form of stigmatization or provoking, but ultimately incorporating it for its commercial use. (Mattelart & Neveu: 2004, 53-56) That being said, it would be easier to understand why adolescence is frequently linked to subcultures and its depiction in public spaces.

Adolescence, which can be described as an intermediate stage between childhood and adultness, can be considered as a product of consumer capitalism as it has erased from society the habit of the rites of passage. Walter Benjamin observed that "over the nineteenth century, bourgeois society, by means of hygienic and social, private and public devices, produced a secondary effect, probably its true subconscious: to offer people the opportunity to avoid seeing the dying." (Pintor: 2005, 4) Moving away from the consciousness of mortality, capitalism trivializes human life reducing it to a pulse for consumption with adolescence as an ideal state.

Indeed, the consumerism involved in the Taiyōzok*u* movement had an impact in Japanese film industry. In the moment when television started to threaten the film business, the major studios detected through the success of those films a wish for new faces and new forms of expression. The combination of sex and violence shown in the film *Crazed Fruit* (狂った果実, Kurutta kajitsu, 1956) was followed by the studios in a wide range of series of films. New genres emerged, around the so called *seishun-eiga*.[1] In the following years, film production entered a serious crisis, as authors

[1] 青春映画or films about adolescents

eventually left the majors. This brain drain led to a split between independent filmmaking and a studio system creatively impoverished and fully devoted to serialized film instalments that proved to work well.

The only girl mentioned until now was Misora Hibari pretending to be a boy, so masculinity has been an issue. Many of those serials where based on exploitation movies involving youngsters, many times high school students, violence and eroticism. And several of the main characters where feminine.

Girls take up the stage

Getting back to the Meiji *nishiki-e*, girls are portrayed in "scenes of female multitasking. [which is considered] The girls' exemplary behaviour." (Paget: 2011, 10) If the traditional roles assigned to women were instilled to girls and their visual representation, the film industry seems not having care of girls –mind again Misora's masculine identification–, until exploitation films made adolescent girls attractive to masculine audiences because of their dual quality: childlike but in the verge to become adults. They can be considered innocent and pure, as well as be regarded as sexual subjects (although mere objects in most cases). Not a really fair panorama from a gender point of view.

This secular disregard for women has had some effects in artistic expression that, nevertheless, can be pointed as somehow positive. In the field of manga the *shōjo* genre,[2] oriented to young girls, experienced in the 60s and 70s a kind of revolution when women started to take a prominent creative role. Logically, they understood girls' feelings, desires and expectations far better than her masculine peers, so developed new plots and styles that not just fitted better their target's tastes, but lead to a completely new way of expression.

Shōjo turns to melodrama, to the progressive sophistication of the plots and the expression of feelings to recreate the individual inner world as a space of feminine freedom. They usually rely on expressive compositions, in most cases very abstract, that concentrate in an only panel or layout several ideas and dramatic visual effects, like glitter or flower patterns, and sometimes combine different places, times and points of view simultaneously. Their stories flow through new narrative conventions and evoke a fanciful private space that projects girls' intimate desires and aspirations. This includes a sublimation of adolescence and a late entry into adulthood, which appears to be the product of a context of social crisis in which young people express their rejection to a society they dislike. (Berndt: 1996, 95-96)

Besides this new aesthetic findings, it is relevant that men developed an interest on girls' stories, be it for fascination on the new ways of expressions, for curiosity on learning about girls' inner world or both. So a positive effect in all this is that both masculine and feminine worlds have somehow started to come closer and seek for mutual understanding. One example of all this can be found in Iwai Shunji's films, as we will see in the next section.

[2] *Shōjo* (少女), literally means *little women*

Children and adolescents in contemporary Japanese films

Fireworks (打ち上げ花火、下から見るか? 横から見るか, Uchiage hanabi shita kara miruka? yoko kara miruka?, 1993) is an example of Iwai's moments of expressive concentration, synthesizing in multiple readings and emotions in a visual composition –effect that can also be traced in the field of music video, where the director was trained before he started filmmaking–. The movie tells the dream of a child on an impossible date with the girls he secretly loves, who is moving to another town and won't keep attending the same school. During the daydream, planning to run away, the girl dresses and makeup as an adult to pretend having the legal age to work. But it is significant that she suddenly abandon this idea and drags the boy to the school, where she gets into the pool, wash her face and share for a while their last infantile plays together in the water. The whole film includes many *shōjo* aesthetic effects, such as environments dominated by flowers, glitter and sparkles with expressive intention to emphasize the charm and idealization of the beloved girl.

In *All About Lily* (リリイ・シュシュのすべて, Ririi Shushu no Subete, 2001), the text intertwined in the image leads us into reflection on identity in the contemporary world characterized by the rise of networking and the virtual. A tension between the real and the simulated moving into the sphere of identity in the terms the conceptualized by Scott Bukatman as *terminal identity*. This concept consists in the dissolution the boundaries between the human and the technological, which shapes society by transforming each individual in a node of the communication networks. The human body is transmuted into a simple inbound and outbound data, information accumulation juxtaposed a reality not physical but virtual. (Bukatman: 1993)

But the physical dramatically intersects the characters by the cruel reality determined by bulling and forced prostitution[3] they suffer at school. Emotional expressiveness through a stylization is searched to make the beauty in the images collide with the nasty violence, moral degradation and lack of hope for their characters. In this context, they seem to be disconnected from the adult world. Throughout the film, the main character doesn't talk at all to his parents. They supply money, scold him and even slap him, but he never answer and merely look down to the ground. Neither that elementary and intuitive form of communication, the look, is able to articulate the boy. In fact, adults practically vanish from the screen. The vigilant parenting and guidance, is completely erased.

Not completely erased but equally impossible is intergenerational communication in Sono's *Suicide* Club (自殺サークル Jisatsu Sākuru, 2002) which shows the other side. In this film, the view is that of the older generation incapable of understanding the young behaviours. This Lack of understanding is shown in a disturbing opening scene, featuring a bunch of scholar girls, in apparently quotidian and even pleasant moments in a station. Nothing seems suspicious in their behaviour nor their cheering moods, but when an express train approaches, all fifty girls jump in front of it holding hands

[3] Enjo-kōsai (援助交際) or *compensated dating*, is a practice involving schoolgirls receiving money for accompany adult men. It doesn't necessarily involves sex intercourse, but it does in many cases. The practice spread and got media attention in the 90s in Japan

In both *Suicide Club* and *All About Lilly*, it is evident that Japanese filmmaking is not detached from international trends, as can be noticed in these passages about *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) and *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003):

> The world of Elephant is a bleak one in which people fail to connect meaningfully. For the greater part of the film Van Sant focuses on the quotidian and ritualised routines of the adolescent protagonists (…) Even before violence erupts on screen the viewer is made aware of the implicit brutality at play in the everyday. As we shall see, the protagonists are quintessential examples of what Thomas Docherty calls 'the postmodern character' – they are emptied out of all 'personal' characteristics and exist merely as drifting, rootless bodies on screen. (Backman: 2012, 157)

> They address a disconcerting and even radical refusal to progress into adulthood. As such, while these two films draw on the teen pic inheritance, they offer far more complex portraits of adolescence and subtly indict the way in which the traditional (and obsolete) adolescent rite of passage has been re-appropriated
> into even more pernicious forms of order and control that stifle metamorphosis and becoming. These films centre on bodies in transition in which the passage from childhood into adulthood is mapped allegorically, and in a disturbing manner, onto the passage from life to death. (Backman: 2012, 165)

Both quotes could perfectly fit also for Sono and Iwai's films and, at some extent, also to Nakashima Testsuya's *Confessions* (告白Kokuhaku, 2010). *Confessions* goes a step beyond to the classical rebel students film, even further than the famous and polemical *Battle Royal* (バトル・ロワイアル, Batoru Rowaiaru, Fukasaku Kinji, 2000), which depicted the alienation and excess of competitiveness in the educational system at the same time as the fears of parents of revolted adolescents and claims for firm hand on it. The plot sets a dystopian law to punish misbehaviour in class groups, by a game consisting on killing each other until only one is left alive. *Confessions*, is not the story of a confrontation of students against their teachers and classmates, but the explosive revenge of a teacher against her students. Cold and elegant, this film shares many of the stile trends seen on Iwai's filmmaking. Also many of the topics in *All About Lily*, especially bulling and lack of effective ways of communication between the young and the adults worlds. But there is an essential difference, as the parents, far from being erased from the account, are very present in the film. It seems that all the conflict has its origin in parental faults at not caring at all or, on the contrary, overprotecting their children. This double attitude points at the dual common situation of absent overworking parents or/and overprotective mothers devoted to childcare.

But more important, the film seems to confront the idea of children as innocent creatures. A socially unconceivable idea, like that of a teacher hatching a personal revenge against her students, is the principle plot of the films. This contrasts with the useless attitude of the substitute teacher, whose naïve conception of his role is shown as ridiculous, as it is also perceived by his students. All this seems to support the thesis that adolescents, despite still being formally under parental guidance and school formation, should take full responsibility if they commit serious crimes.

In more positive terms, Nakashima directed some years before *Kamikaze* Girls (下妻物語, *Shimotsuma Monogatari*, 2004). This film as well is comparable with those by Iwai, for setting a story of girls –Iwai's films are usually starred by young girls. The exceptions, as the two films commented on previously, also include important female characters–. It talks about the uncertainties that adolescents try to fill by fitting in some social categories. In this case, the story is about the unlikely friendship between two girls belonging to different, and mostly incompatible, urban tribes. But it isn't set in an urban location but in a rural area, that makes their lifestyle even more misunderstood. But the films doesn't seem intended to judge, neither in a negative or positive way, the dressing and behaviour codes the girls have chosen to follow. Those subcultures are also not under scrutiny, but simply act as a mean to set a specific appearance to the film and to trigger comical situations. The tone of this movie is far less grimly and with a happy ending. If none of the previous films are strictly realistic but expressive and stylized, humour in Kamikaze girls relies in exaggeration, both in the storytelling and the visual record.

The last film to comment on is also set in a funny mood. It is a recent work by the prolific Miike Takashi, in the form of a musical romantic comedy. *For Love's Sake* (愛と誠, Ai to Makoto, 2012) also includes violence and some ironic views to class difference. The film incorporates many parodies of common places of Japanese cinema too, especially those films addressed to or depicting adolescents. The musical scenes feature famous pop songs which lyrics fits with the situations and characters. Let's talk about three of them.

In the opening one, with the song of significant title *Violent Love*[4], the main characters are presented. The stereotyped, dominant and aggressive masculinity of the young delinquent Makoto, dazzles with his look and bravery in a street brawl the apparently fragile and submissive Ai. Both dressed in their school uniforms, the high class girl looks spotless while the low class boy's is already dirty and shabby even at the start of the combat. Choreographed violence appears very natural to Makoto, who looks so comfortable acting violently. If all of this doesn't reminds enough the commonalities on certain advertisements addressed to male audiences, all the scene is colourful and full of effects reinforcing its look as an advertisement for television.

Another song shows Ai's classmate, Iwashimizu, proposing to her in an empty classroom. The girl looks terrorized and the performance of Takei Emi, in the role of Ai, reminds those of threatened girls in *slasher* films. In a particular moment, a shot-reverse shot sequence suddenly reveals an astonished crowd, the rest of the class group, behind Iwashimizu. Another technique taken from horror films that will be stressed by their terrorized reaction when Iwashimizu approaches them.

Some clue on how to understand this blend of genre could be found, once again, resorting to Backman's thoughts about Coppola and Van Sant's films:

> (…) both of these films hinge on the crisis of making meaning and the impossibility of addressing specific forms of crisis within established, or culturally accepted, language. By subverting generic representation and form from within, I would suggest that American Independent Cinema as

[4] 激しい恋 Hageshii koi

> exemplified in these two films engages with forms of cultural cliché and established film genres specifically in order to create new modes of seeing and thinking. In The Virgin Suicides and Elephant we are no longer dealing with a situation of crisis (which is commonly the case in any classical film) but a crisis-image: an image of instability, transition, and metamorphosis. By privileging uniquely cinematic elements the ontological status of the moving image is thrown into crisis. Bodies on screen are already inherently in a situation of flux and becoming because this is the very essence of the cinematic. (Backman: 2012, 164-165)

This playful use of horror film devices keeps on in the third song scene. In this case is Ai who is declaring her love to Makoto in the school garden, with the teachers and the rest of students as witnesses. His response is, unsurprisingly, pushing away the girl aggressively. Contrary to the usual in musicals, prone to emphasize movement, with even the passer-byes casually joining the singing and gaily dancing, everyone but the involved main characters stands still, expressionless, staring at Ai. Those presence are a kind of menace. If in the second scene, the love declaration seems to terrorize the crowd, in this one they act like if the girl's sentiments were something inconceivable, something to severely punish and proscribe.

Conclusion

In contemporary Japanese films of children and adolescents, a pessimistic viewpoint stands out, displayed in a formally stylised way.[5] Artistically, they mainly search for some sense of visual poetry as displaying violent depictions of conflict, both inter and intragenerational. Violence seems an easier way of relationship than any kind of communication. In this sense, links with a certain historical trend in Japanese cinema and certain continuity on with them can be traced. Nevertheless, also many and significant breakaways can be spotted.

There is a new space for a feminine voice, or at least to more sophisticated female characters, not just intended for a mere exploitative gaze. Also the depiction of masculinity is evolving, put in question or at least treated in an ironic way. The adoption of specific characteristics popularized by *shōjo manga* would have been fundamental in this regard.

Far from relying on any sort of discourse conducting to promote behavioural patterns or contribute to shape national identity in any way, some social criticism is implied in those films. Especially, a strong discomfort and uncertainty amongst the young Japanese can be underlined. The idea of a homogeneous society of middle class citizens seems to be confronted. This is not anymore the stable and wealthy society with bright future of the previous decades, before the burst of the bubble economy, the natural disasters as the big earthquakes in 1995 and 2011 or other serious events

[5] Of course, there are some other films and authors with more realistic styles –Koreeda Hirokazu and his Nobody Knows or Kawase Naomis's Shara or Suzaku, for instance– that are excluded from this account. But it is mainly due to the space given and to an aim to talk about films and directors that traditionally get less attention from scholar publication. Including them in the article wouldn't really change substantially my final conclusions as they also share many trends with their colleagues analysed here.

like the gas attacks in the underground, also in 1995, and more recently the nuclear issues.

Nevertheless, it doesn't looks to be intended as part of a subversive discourse or transforming program. Those films, despite arguably independent from major studios, some artistic achievements and clever observations on society, can't be removed from its close relation to consumerism. But an appeal for commercial purposes, does not invalidate both its artistic achievements and its relevance as cultural artefacts. As products of its time, those films are infused with the potentiality to critically reflect on contemporary Japanese society and the place of children and youth in it.

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