# New Kids on the Street: The Pan-Asian Youth Film

## A review by David Desser, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, USA

### Youth in Asia

One of the most interesting phenomena of recent years in the world of international cinema has been the rise of youth-oriented films across Asia. This is not to say that various Asian cinemas have not previously produced significant films about youth, nor is it to say that given the prevalence of youth films in the West, especially the dominant Hollywood cinema, we should be surprised at the rise and/or continuation of an Asian-youth film. What is truly interesting about this phenomenon is how prevalent youth films are currently and how similar are the subject, themes and imagery across the region. That is to say, there is something one can define as a "pan-Asian youth film," a type recognizable across national boundaries and with international appeal. Recent films from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong-China and Singapore bear remarkable similarities. The films focus on disaffected youth, sometimes in near-poverty, sometimes decidedly middle-class, but always in an unstable family structure. Divorce is ubiquitous, with such films that use this motif almost always relying on mother-son dynamics. Many films focus on youth that live on the streets or in otherwise marginalized and dangerous situations. All the films take place in recognizably contemporary urban locations - it's obviously Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong. Such recurring motifs as smoking, drinking, taking drugs, illicit sexuality, petty crime, and shocking violence are prevalent. Common locations include video arcades, street corners, dance clubs, restaurants and coffee bars. Besides walking and hanging out, motorcycle riding provides the most common form of transportation and thrill-seeking. Organized crime is omnipresent, and whether it's the yakuza, kang-pae, or triads, they're sure to be around.

These films may be broadly categorized as melodramas or crime thrillers; often a combination of the two. As melodramas, they rely on social problems, such as juvenile delinquency, divorce, homelessness, poverty; doomed romance is another important melodramatic structure the films rely on, especially lovers separated by social class or the criminal activities of the hero. The omnipresence of crime and gangsters, as just mentioned, influences the hero (and sometimes heroine) to engage in criminal activities themselves, especially those who live in marginalized areas of Hong Kong, Tokyo or Seoul. Under the force of genre, the social-problem melodrama often transmutes into the crime thriller, and marginalized, troubled youth turn to crime - petty and/or organized. As we will see below, the force not only of Asian genres, but of a new international genre, easily allows these films to transform from social-problem to action-adventure.

The presence of a youth film is nothing new to Asian cinema, especially the dominant cinemas of Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea. While, as we will see later, the pan-Asian youth film is a relatively new phenomenon, one which shows up in films from other Asian situations (e.g. Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, among others) it is nevertheless

useful and important to rehearse the presence of a youth genre previous to the 1990s explosion of the form.

Perhaps the best known of the Asian youth films emerges from the Japanese cinema. With its long and productive cinematic tradition, the Japanese have worked in numerous genres and dealt with numerous issues and problems. Thus it is no surprise to find a significant tradition of children's cinema. For example, the almost-forgotten Shimizu Hiroshi made his important mark on Japanese cinema with films about children; some of Ozu Yasujiro's most admired works focus on kids e.g. *I Was Born, But…*(1932), *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947) and *Ohayo* (1959). Child stars, whether pre-war phenoms like Takamine Hideko or postwar superstars like Misora Hibari, have a critical importance in Japanese film history. The occasional important film about young children still appears in Japan; most recently *Village of Dreams* (Higashi Yoichi, 1996). Films about teenagers made their mark in the postwar years with stars like Kuga Yoshiko and Wakao Ayako starring in salacious sex melodramas with lurid titles like *Bad Girl*, *Teenager's Sex Manual*, *Virgins' Clinic* and *Bitch* - this some years before the infamous low-budget exploitation films of American International Pictures! But it would be in the middle of the 1950s when Japan experienced a vital cinematic rendering of emerging social problems. These are the so-called *taiyo-zoku*, or suntribe films, focusing on middle-class youth running amok in newly economically resurgent Japan. I have written about the importance of these films elsewhere and won't repeat that here (Desser, 1988). The Japanese New Wave masters, like Oshima, Shinoda, Yoshida, Imamura, and Hani, would build on these films to make more politically cogent attacks on mainstream Japanese society through the use of youthful protagonists who reject their cultural heritage in favor of protest and rebellion. From time to time, following the New Wave, youth would make an important appearance in Japanese cinema, including in such influential films as Morita Yoshimitsu's *Family Game* (1984), Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *The Excitement of the Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girl* (1985) or *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't* (1992), by the now-famous Suo Masayuki.

As for Hong Kong, we must distinguish the tradition that one has in mind, for Hong Kong cinema is both a Chinese cinema and a uniquely local cinema. The youth films that today's Hong Kong builds upon belong to the local tradition, the Cantonese cinema, especially of the postwar era. When a young Bruce Lee became a star in Hong Kong cinema in the postwar era, it was not in the violent kung fu films for which he is best known now, but in family melodramas that called for far more tears than fists. The fists in those days were those of Kwan Tak-hing, making innumerable films as the legendary martial arts master Wong Fei-hung. Melodramas, martial arts, and Cantonese opera largely defined Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and well into the 60s. Social conditions, competition from Mandarin-language films and the availability of two young superstars inaugurated a youth/social problem genre in 1966. *Girls are Flowers* made a star of Chan Po-chu, and in its wake both Chan and Josephine Siao Fong-fong kept Cantonese cinema alive, at least for a little while, with their multi-varied talent and energy. While many of their films are essentially lighthearted musicals or romances, one film entered the fray in a powerful and convincing manner: *The Teddy Girls* (Lung Kong, 1969). A story of juvenile delinquency, the generation gap, divorce, the sex industry, drug addiction, and organized crime, *The Teddy Girls* is not only a compendium of the social problem film of its day, but a prescient prediction of things to come. Surprisingly, one finds little of a youth film in the Hong Kong New Wave; certainly, there is something to be said for Allen Fong's *Father and Son* (1981) or Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* (1990), but these seem more oriented toward young adults. It would take the stirring, perhaps, of a monumental change, the Handover, to fully instantiate a youth film in Hong Kong once again.

The Korean cinema is the most interesting case of all. It relies more centrally than the Hong Kong cinema and the Japanese cinema not necessarily on films with youth-appeal (Hong Kong and Japan rely almost entirely on youth audiences, though the Korean reliance may be even greater), but on films about youth. Indeed, one might say that recent Korean cinema is almost entirely a "young" cinema. The majority of Korean films of recent years are the products of young directors - young people making their first and second feature films. Indeed, one problem of recent Korean cinema oft remarked upon is precisely how many films of any given year are from first-time directors. Korean cinema remains too-little known in the West and it has been only recently that it has made inroads into foreign markets in Asia. During the 1960s and 70s, Korea experienced a Golden Age of film production and exhibition, though it was almost all strictly local. Still, in the middle of the 1960s, Korea ranked third among Asian countries in the total number of films produced, behind only India and Japan. One source lists the number of films produced between 1961 and 1972 as 1, 990, or an average of 166 per year (Park, forthcoming). Few of these films were necessarily youth-oriented, though it does appear that Korea, like much of the developing world, was struck by social problems that found their way into film. Kim Ki-young's *Rebellion of Teenagers* in 1959, for instance, seems remarkably similar in spirit to Japanese *taiyo-zoku* earlier or Hong Kong "teddy girls" later. Mostly, though, films of this Golden Age fall into the genres of melodrama, sleazy comedies, low-budget action film, and anti-Communist tracts (Park, ibid.). It was not until the 1990s that Korea began making films with an eye toward the export market and an eye on the simmering youthful domestic audience.

Despite, then, the idea that youth films from Japan, Hong Kong and Korea may be traced to internal factors - both social and cinematic - the similarities amongst the contemporary pan-Asian youth film are too striking to ignore. I would like to account for the similarities to be found among these films by recourse to a number of linked factors: trans-national distribution of popular culture, understood as no longer simply Hollywood distributing and dispersing American culture to the world (this popular culture includes not only a more open cinematic cross-fertilization, including, for instance, the recent lifting of the ban on Japanese films in Korea, but the transnational distribution of pop music and comic books); a pan-Asian economy with intricate ties among Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Singaporean multi-nationals; the rise of internet and digital media and communication, in particular not only the world wide web, but also video games, cell phones and pagers; the distribution, much of it pirated, of Asian cinema in the cheap VCD format; the increasing importance of Asian film festivals (Tokyo, Hong Kong, Pusan, Singapore); and the shifting generational distinctiveness of today's Asian youth.

**Because They're Young**

Youth is no easy thing to define and a youth film itself may be imagined along two axes: films about youth and films that appeal to youth. One may imagine that films in the first category, films about youth, may have a particular youth appeal (though one can imagine such films geared toward an older audience, I suppose), while films which appeal to youth may not, at least at first glance, seem to be about youth. Given the worldwide demographics of film-going, that it is largely a youth-oriented pastime, filmmakers the world over seek out the youth audience, both by making films about young people and by making films that, in various ways, may or should appeal to youth. This helps account for an increasingly fast-paced, visually layered, complex film style, for instance, one intended to recall music videos and comic books. The interconnections between such forms as MTV, manga and anime are well known, if perhaps still worthy of greater analysis. Thus, for me, "youth" is best

understood along structural lines and less so along chronological ones. That is, one can make a distinction among childhood, adolescence, and youth, where childhood can be defined as the pre-teen years, adolescence along traditional psycho-sociological developmental lines, and youth as encompassing adolescent trials and tribulations while also being characterized by relational aspects not only psychological and physical, but also political and economic. As sociologist Kenneth Keniston did many years ago in *Youth and Dissent*, we might envision youth as "another developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood." (Jon, 1988: 126) At times, one is tempted to define youth by a series of absences: lack of economic and political power; lack of marital bonds and stresses; lack of stability; lack of responsibility. Some of these absences, these lacks, are taken as a positive good and are reflected in the themes and subjects of youth films, where rootlessness, lack of responsibility and lack of material goods translates to freedom of movement, of action, of change. If a characteristic of adolescence is the struggle to define oneself against familial bonds and expectations, then one sees particular uses of the family in youth films. If a characteristic of adolescence is the struggle to define oneself amongst peers and sexual partners, then one sees particular importance placed on friends, romance, and sexuality in youth films. These characteristics of youth are universal and thus themes of youthful restlessness, alienation, wandering, violence and sexuality are characteristics of youth film across both time and national boundaries. What makes the pan-Asian youth film definable as a specific genre is precisely those particularities of the contemporary Asian experience - the specificities of Asian culture, where relationships to parents and to the society at large have a differing series of expectations, at least traditionally, than they do in the West, and the drastic changes wrought by modernization, economic success and shifting generational differences visible in Asia today.

What I want to claim first is the generational distinctiveness of contemporary Asian youth. Both the filmmakers I will deal with and the audience to which their films appeal have distinct generational characteristics compared to their predecessors. That is, while filmmakers are typically one generation older than their audience, both filmmakers and audience share profound demographic and historical markers.

I will be speaking of films directed by such filmmakers as Wong Kar-wai (b.1958), Fruit Chan (b. 1959), Andrew Lau Wai Keung (b. 1960), Jang Sun-woo (b. 1952), Kim Sung-soo (b. 1961), Kim Sang-Jin (b. 1967), Kitano Takeshi (b. 1948), Harada Masato (b. 1949), and Ishii Katsuhito (b. 1966), among others. Note that though as much as twenty years separate the oldest from the youngest of these filmmakers, every single director was born after World War II. Given the fundamental significance of World War II to Asia - Japan's defeat, and the resultant decolonialization of China and Korea - pre-war and postwar occupy a defining timespan for modern Asia. In the case of the Hong Kong Chinese directors, they were all born not simply after World War II, but well after the formation of the PRC (People's Republic of China), another fundamental marker for modern Chinese identity. Similarly, the Korean directors had no first-hand experience of Japanese colonialism, and they were born into a world when the two Koreas, North and South, were a reality - a similarly fundamental moment in modern Korean history. Perhaps even more to the point, the primary audience of these filmmakers are people born well after 1970-economic boom, in Japan, China, and Korea; post-Cultural Revolution for the Chinese directors, and the institutionalization of the student and worker-led pro-Democracy movement in Korea.

I want to make it clear that I am speaking about a significantly large film cycle, a veritable boom in youth-oriented films. Though I will focus primarily on six films, two each from Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan, had I sufficient time in my presentation I could just as easily

focus on films from Singapore, such as *That's the Way I Like It* (Glen Goei, 1999), with its twentysomething protagonist, bored with a dead-end job and possessed of a critical father and nagging mother, whose biggest desire in life is to own a motorcycle (a disco dance contest seems to provide a means to this end.) Or I could focus on *Eating Air* (Kevin Tong, Jasmine Ng, 1999) with its motorcycle-riding, disaffected and dissolute young hero pursuing a working-class girl who lives with her divorced mother, while he also comes to the aid of a friend in trouble with a local gangster. Thailand, too, could be included in this mix. *O-Negative* (Pinyo Rutharm, 1998), for instance, with its focus on five university freshmen, or *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), a youthful variation on the Japanese classic *Ugetsu*. And there is also *Beyond Forgivin'* (Manop Udomdej, 1999) a film replete with hitmen, drug dealers, bodyguards and a romance. From Korea, I could just as easily look at *Rush* (Lee Sang-In, 1999), *Attack the Gas Station* (Kim Sang-Jin 1999), *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-Dong,1999), *Die Bad* (Ryoo Seung-Wan, 2000), and *Tears* (Im Sang-Soo, 2000). I would hardly know where to stop were I to include other Hong Kong movies, but I might utilize Fruit Chan's *Little Cheung* (1999), the *Sexy and Dangerous* films (1996-7), and any one of two dozen or so films starring Jordan Chan, besides the one I will focus on. The same is true of Japan, where I might point to the film career of Tsukamoto Shinya (b. 1960): *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), *Tokyo Fist* (1995), *Bullet Ballet* (1998) and *Gemini* (1999); or the career of Sabu (b.1964): *DANGAN Runner* (1996), *Postman Blues* (1997) and *Monday* ((1999). Other obvious ones I could include would be *Hysteric* (Zeze Takahisa, b.1960, 1999), a kind of Japanese version of *Badlands* (Terence Mallick, 1973) or *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994). And I would be remiss not to mention *The City of Lost Souls* (Takashi Miike, 2000), a multi-lingual, hugely violent crime thriller - Bonnie and Clyde for the postmodern era. However, the films I will largely focus on as representative of both commercial and independent filmmaking revolving around youth are *Beat* (Kim Sung-so, 1997, Korea), *Timeless, Bottomless Bad Movie* (Jang Sun-woo, 1997, Korea), *Young and Dangerous* (Andrew Lau Wai-keung, 1996, Hong Kong-China), *Made in Hong Kong* (Fruit Chan Kuo, 1997, Hong Kong-China), *Kids Return* (Beat Takeshi Kitano, 1996, Japan) and *Bounce ko-Gals* (Harada Masato, 1997, Japan).

**Rebels Without Causes**

The American film classic *Rebel Without a Cause* (1954) actually provides a clear and cogent model for today's pan-Asian youth film. The hero type embodied by James Dean - the-jeans-and-leather-jacket-wearing, handsome, but androgynous, sensitive, yet skilled in violence, strangely articulate for one so seemingly inarticulate, young man - is clearly the archetype for stars such as Ekin Cheng (*Young and Dangerous*), Jung Woo-Sun (*Beat*) and Asano Tadanobu (*Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl*). Even diminutive Sam Lee gets into the act as a made-in-Hong Kong James Dean. Male camaraderie, as modeled on the James Dean/Sal Mineo pairing from *Rebel* is no less a factor in these films, with Sam Lee's Moon befriending Li Tung Chuen's Sylvester in *Made in Hong Kong*; the buddy-buddy pairing of Ekin Cheng and Jordan Chan in *Young and Dangerous*; the centrality of the relationship between Shinji (Ando Masanobu) and Masaru (Kaneko Ken) in *Kids Return*; and the no less central male pairing of Min (Jung Woo-sung) and Tae-soo (Yoo Ohsung) in *Beat*. But, as in *Rebel*, heterosexual romance overcomes and/or interferes with the homosocial pairings: Min and Romi in *Beat*; Smartie and Ho Nam in *Young and Dangerous*; and Moon's love for Ping in *Made in Hong Kong*. If I bring in *Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl* to this mix again, I would point to the homosocial pairing of Asano's Samehada with Terajima Susumu's Sawada.

Like *Rebel*, the films focus on youthful alienation, though perhaps with more obvious causes. In the American film, they seemed rebels without causes because they were from middle class households in well-to-do suburban locales. It wasn't poverty that plagued them, or ignorance, or a social system that beat them down; the fault, we learned from Nicholas Ray's timeless classic, rested squarely on the shoulders of their parents. In this respect, Japan's *Bounce ko-Gals* is most reminiscent of *Rebel Without a Cause* - these are middle class girls who have somehow gone wrong. Taught by their culture to prize consumer goods and name brands, they turn themselves into consumer goods and name brands - ko-gals, high school girls, for sale. And, as in *Rebel*, the fault lies with adults - with men, including their own fathers, who are willing to pay these girls for everything from conversations with them, to their freshly worn underwear and uniforms, to sordid films, and, of course, sex. Similarly, Romi in *Beat* has all the advantages of modern Korean urban life. She and her friends have money to spare; they might go slumming in the working class dance clubs favored by Min and his friends, but when it comes time to hit the books, they do not hesitate to do so. Yet here, too, as in *Bounce ko-Gals*, the adult world has led them astray. The pressure to score high on the college entrance exams takes its toll on Romi and her friends. A low score prevents In-Kyung from attending Seoul National University; as a result she throws herself in front of a subway train. Romi eventually enters hospital to recover from the strain - in shame, her parents insist she say she has been abroad. In fact, only three percent of high school seniors in Korea make it into the most prestigious colleges, such as Seoul National, Yonsei, Korea, or Ewha Woman's University (Kim, 1998: 99). Such expectations and pressures placed on students is clearly a social problem that *Beat* wishes to address.

For the most part, however, these films focus on the underclass, those left behind in the various economic miracles of the miraculous Asian economies. It is perhaps no surprise that all of the major films I focus on emerge in 1996-1997. This is the height of postwar economic boom and the beginning of the shocking, still-underway economic bust. Put into production before the economic bust, the films are deeply critical of the over-emphasis on materialism, economic success, social status, and over-achievement. Yet their critiques of materialism and economic/social achievement are remarkably prescient. Thus it is no surprise to see that the Korean films, *Beat* and *Bad Movie*, are the most critical of their society and the most insistent on focusing on those left behind. Korea's entry on to the world economic scene is the most recent of the three East Asian nations about which I am speaking. Much as Japan had declared its arrival as a world economic power in the postwar era via the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, so, too, the Seoul Games of 1988 highlighted Korea's assumption of the mantle of modern economic power. Similarly, Fruit Chan's films, especially *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), *Little Cheung* (1999), and *Durian Durian* (2000), focus on the poor in Hong Kong, those perennially left behind or the new underclass, immigrants to Hong Kong from the mainland. *Kids Return*, too, which seems something of the model followed by *Beat*, is a veritable compendium of how and why a marginalized underclass remains in Japan - the failure to attend a prestigious university, the presence of crime and violence, lack of concern on the part of the authorities, the rush to materialism, and concern for pretense over substance.

**International Pulp**

It is easy to see how the films I have been discussing fall into the "youth film" category. Yet many youth films, especially *Beat* and *Young and Dangerous*, along with films I also take to be central to the pan-Asian youth film, like *Sexy and Dangerous* and *Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl*, fall into a category of films I'd like to call "international pulp" - films of

primarily youth appeal, with youthful characters, that derive their structures from combinations of film noir, gangster films and what used to be known as "pulp novels," or hard-boiled, violent thrillers. "International pulp" is a genre, or, better, style, which grew out of the Hollywood blockbuster of the 1980s, appearing as a reaction to it and an extension of it. Many Asian films have attempted their own version of the blockbuster or International Action Film as it might be called, a genre of high-powered explosions, special effects, and high body counts. These are the off-shoots of 1980s Hollywood, the heyday of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis. Korea, for instance, made its economic breakthrough in world cinema with *Shiri*, a pulse-pounding, extraordinarily violent, stylish action-thriller. Hong Kong, too, has entered this fray, with films like *Purple Storm*, *Downtown Torpedoes*, and *Final Alert*. Perhaps John Woo's farewell to Hong Kong, *Hard Boiled* (1992), was the Asian entrée into this genre, culminating the internationalization of action cinema beginning with Howard Hawks, on to Kurosawa Akira, then to Jean-Pierre Melville, back to the U.S. with Sam Peckinpah, and on to Woo.

But Hollywood found a new genre in the 1990s, related to but far different from the blockbuster action spectacle, a mode and style of film most closely association with Quentin Tarantino and his films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *True Romance* (for which he wrote the script for director Tony Scott, 1993) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Neo-noir is one term given to these new films, among which we would also include *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1991), *Romeo is Bleeding* (Peter Medak, 1993), and *Pulp-Fiction* rip-offs too numerous to mention. As it happens, perhaps coincidentally, the early films of Kitano Takeshi, especially *Violent Cop* (1989) and *Boiling Point* (1990) belong to this cycle. The "hero" films of John Woo and Ringo Lam are the implicit models for Tarantino's films. Indeed, it took some time after the success of *Reservoir Dogs* for people to notice that it was essentially a repackaging of Lam's *City on Fire* (1987). It was particularly the smashing economic success of *Pulp Fiction* that saw the genre internationalize. Even where the genre was presaged, as in Kitano and the early films of Wong Kar-wai and Andrew Lau, Tarantino's film introduced elements of cynicism and anarchism that particularly appealed to young audiences. Films like *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) would follow, along with perhaps the best example of what I am calling "international pulp," *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998), which would carry the genre back to Europe. Reviews of this film reveal the way in which this Tarantino influence becomes institutionalized in critical discourse and is a shorthand substitute for analysis and a quick-and-dirty name for the genre. Roger Ebert calls this British comedy, "Tarantino crossed with the Marx Brothers." (Ebert, "Review") Salon Entertainment notes regarding the film, "It took a while, but the Hong Kong action movie has now almost completely circumnavigated the globe. The bullet-and-blood baths formula pioneered by John Woo and company in the late '80s and picked up by Quentin Tarantino in the United States…has, like a seventh-generation Xerox, found its way to Europe." (Williams, "Bad Lads") But while Ebert liked the film and the critic for Salon hated it, a remark Ebert makes later in his review leads to the film's relevance for my talk: "The actors (of *Lock, Stock*..) seem a little young for this milieu; they seem to be playing grown-up." (Ebert, op cit.) *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, along with films like *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) and *Suicide Kings* (Peter O' Fallon, 1997), among others, marks the entry of youth protagonists into the neo-noir /international pulp genre, solidifying both the youth appeal of the genre itself and its relationship to the contemporary youth film.

The best description of the genre I have come across belongs to Manohla Dargis, who describes the genre as "…a world of casual violence and blunt sentiment, one fuelled by a hard-boiled past and fired by a pop-happy present….In this world…the divide between the

normal and the pathological isn't just blurred, it's obsolete." (Dargis, 2000: 117) This is the world brought to film by Beat Takeshi Kitano, as he is best known, though his early films were not released in the U.S. until well after the apotheosis of international pulp. Though his first youth-pulp film, *Boiling Point*, was made in 1990, it was not released into general video distribution in the West until the last year or two; that is, after *Sonatine* (1993) and *Hana-bi* (1997) had legitimized him on the festival circuit (Cannes, in particular), and long after the works of John Woo, Ringo Lam, and other international pulp films achieved their youth-cult status. Interestingly, although Kitano's works focus on gangsters and organized crime, i.e., the world of yakuza, there is nothing in his films resembling the classic *yakuza-eiga*, those memorable male melodramas of loyalty, honor, and brotherhood made famous by stars like Tsuruta Koji and Takakura Ken in films by the likes of Makino Masahiro and Fukasaku Kinji. Indeed, if one were to trace the yakuza film from its origins in pre-war period films to Kitano's transgressions, the turning point would surely be the neo-noir/international pulp films of Suzuki Seijun, in his Nikkatsu period with films like *Tokyo Drifter* (1966) and *Branded to Kill* (1967). Suzuki's films and the works of his colleagues at Nikkatsu perhaps don't get enough credit as the cinematic predecessors of Hong Kong noir and international pulp. In any case, Kitano's influence on Japanese cinema cannot be overestimated, and his introduction of alienated youth into the world of his even more alienated yakuza in the early 1990s is a starting point in understanding how the relationship between youth and international pulp grew and developed. Films like *Chinpira/Two Punks* (Aoyama Shinji, 1996) and *Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl* are directly owed to Kitano's stylistic and thematic inversions of the yakuza film.

**Easy Riders**

If I have truly uncovered a "pan-Asian youth film," what are the recurring images, themes and motifs that mark these films beyond their *Rebel Without a Cause* homages and their focus on youthful alienation and neo-noir stylistics? Perhaps the most striking image is the motorcycle. It is the preferred mode of transportation in youth films too numerous to mention, but surely in *Beat*, *Sexy and Dangerous*, *Eating Air*. The motorcycle has long been associated with youthful rebellion, from the time of *The Wild One* (Laszlo Benedek, 1954) where Marlon Brando's Johnny is asked, "What are you rebelling from," and he memorably replies, "Whadda ya got?" Rebellion and its attendant mode of transportation, the motorcycle, reached its apogee in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), that classic anthem to sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. In the Asian context, the motorcycle has frequently appeared as a symbol of freedom of movement for young people - it's far more inexpensive than a car, easier to maneuver through the crowded streets and highways of Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul, and much cheaper to fuel in these places of high gasoline prices. The omnipresence of motor scooters and small motorcycles, especially in Hong Kong and Seoul, is owed to their use as delivery vehicles for restaurants, for instance, and thus there is an implicit association with the working class, something many youth films are at pains to register. This is played for humor, for instance, in *Attack the Gas Station*, when dozens of deliverymen on their motorcycles show up to confront the four protagonists. There is also, of course, an implicit element of danger in riding these things, especially at high speeds. One might point to a whole sub-genre of action films in Hong Kong revolving around motorcycle racing, with Johnnie To's *All About Ah Long* (1989), starring Chow Yun-Fat, a good example. Yee Tung-shing's *Full Throttle* (1995) combines the motorcycle genre with the youth film directly.

The image and function of the motorcycle is best seen in *Beat*. When Tae-soo becomes successful as a gangster, he buys an expensive motorcycle. When he is sent to prison, he

hands it over to Min-lee. Min uses the bike not simply as a means of transportation, but as a means to let off steam when he is angry, as a means to woo and excite Romi. The bike becomes intimately associated with him, defining him as a bad boy with a heart of gold, so much so that it is no surprise to see him ride to his final confrontation with the treacherous gang on his bike, ride into a parking garage, and crash the bike into their midst (in a highly dangerous stunt!). Though the bike is the first thing Tae-soo buys when his criminal career begins to flourish, by the time he is released from prison and becomes even more successful and higher up in the gang, he takes to riding in a luxury car. Min, thus, keeps the bike - a sign of his loner status and continued independence.

The element of the motorcycle as sign and symbol of rebellion, thrills and danger, with an attendant outlaw-ism is seen near the start of *Bad Movie*. Girls hanging out on a busy Seoul street call out to a motorcycle gang, "Give me a ride!" and are asked, "How does it feel to ride a motorcycle?" One replies, "One hundred km an hour, eyes water and nose runs, but it's fun. It's no joke; I become wild and I want to run naked." The police show up and arrest and beat the bikers, which seems to upset the young bystanders. Perhaps these motorcycle gangs are off-shoots of the *boso-zoku*, the infamous Japanese "speed tribes" made famous, in of all places, among others, the anime classic *Akira* (Otomo Katsuhiro, 1987).

*Tears*, perhaps the most intentionally hyperbolic of all the Korean youth films, similarly relies on the motorcycle as sign of youthful freedom of movement and expression and symbol of alienation from the mainstream. The young heroine, Sari, rescued by nice-guy Han at film's start, rides a motorcycle, providing both she and the smitten Han with opportunities to escape their stifling life, if only for a few hours at a time. Her exuberance, symbolized by her bike-riding, tough-girl image, is her strongest characteristic. We are most saddened by the turn of events late in the film, when she is "tamed," marrying the brutal club owner because she has become a drug addict.

Motorcycles are at the center of *Sexy and Dangerous*, an interesting variation on the *Young and Dangerous* series. Both Boh-Ji (known as Marble) and Van are excellent motorcyclists, though they first show their mettle on a video game version of a bike. They ride their bikes into and out of danger throughout the film, whose climax begins when Marble rides her bike into a Chinese restaurant where Brother One is under attack. In *Sexy and Dangerous 2* (which bears no relation to the first except name and motorcycles), the heroine, Nozzle, saves a young child about to be run over by a drunk-driving Prince. That he is driving a van and she riding a bike is certainly an interesting inversion of sex role stereotypes!

**Pinball Wizards**

If one could identify the classic films of the French New Wave by their frequent location in Parisian streets and cafes (just how much coffee and how many cigarettes were consumed by Jean-Pierre Leaud in all those Truffaut and Godard films?), so, too, the pan-Asian youth film finds typical locales for its action. Dance clubs, bars, street corners, and small restaurants abound, to be sure. But one of the most interesting of the recurring locations is the pinball arcade. While youth films about and relying on pinball had a short-lived cycle in the U.S. (perhaps in the wake of The Who's album *Tommy*, and the silly film derived from it), pinball in life and on film, occupies a more central place in Asian youth culture. It was, after all, the Japanese, in particular the Nintendo Corporation, which perfected the contemporary video game. Though invented in the U.S. and initially marketed by companies like Atari and Mattel Toys, it was Nintendo which hit upon the right combination of software and hardware -

Donkey Kong and Mario Bros. and the "My Com" home computer system. The Japanese pachinko parlor has long been a hangout for young and working class men, though most parlors now rely less on the infamous silver balls and more on the video, virtual versions. Video arcades are omnipresent on Korean streets and entertain crowds of young people from mid-morning to late at night. They are the particular province of the young, and the arcade, more even than the home video-gaming system, continues to exert a hold on Asian youth.

The first sequence of *Sexy and Dangerous* finds many of its main characters at an arcade in Wanchai. Indeed, George (Francis Ng) who fancies himself a player in the triads, runs the arcade. But, in fact, his association with pinball is precisely not only what makes him a youthful figure, but is what makes him innocent and sympathetic.

The playing of video games, at home and in arcades, is seen as much more sinister in *Bad Movie*. The director is at pains to show how video-gaming, with a certain realistic or virtual presence, threatens to reduce human contact and communication and threatens to become a model for youthful behavior. In the sub-section entitled "Thieves" we see a video game display of a robbery, which substitutes for an actual robbery. Much like the way in which one of the young men desultorily watches pornography, which leads to casual, passionless sex with whatever girl happens to be nearby, so, too, video games threaten to dehumanize human relationships.

The video game, manga and anime provide a linked textual system on which many of the films rely. *Young and Dangerous*, for instance, is based on a comic book series. Within the film there are moments when the action freezes, the color drains from the picture, and the image takes on the look of a comic book panel. Exaggerated colors, particularly in the Hong Kong films, but also in films like *Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl* and, for that matter, in some of the films of Kitano Takeshi, are likely drawn from comic books. Similarly, the dense visual layering and the fast pacing of the films, along with a stylistic tendency toward choppy editing, seem the province of the comic book and the video game. Exaggerated violence, costuming and minimal characterizations also betray origins in the aesthetics of manga, anime, and the video game.

**Water Business**

Ever since the youth film met the exploitation film in the late 1950s, the association between teens and sex has been a cinematic standard. Yet what is most interesting, shocking I suppose, and intentionally so, is how sex has been seemingly institutionalized in the pan-Asian youth film. I don't mean the prevalence of sex: Hong Kong films are pretty tame stuff, even their Category 3 films, none of which I deal with; Japanese cinema has, happily, passed through its nothing-but-sex phase with the decline of the pink film and *roman poruno* (that sort of thing is all video now and outside the scope of this talk); while Korean cinema is in the midst of a sex-wave, affecting all its genres (e.g. *301/302* [1995]; *Lies* [2000]; *The Virgin Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors* [2000], etc.). No, what I mean is the prevalence of what might be, and is, called the "sex industry" in almost all the films under discussion. Obviously, *Bounce ko-Gals* is the central film here, with its focus on four high school girls who trade sex or the promise of sex for money. But the sex industry makes its way into *Beat*, *Bad Movie*, *Tears*, *Young and Dangerous*, *Sexy and Dangerous*, even *Made in Hong Kong*. In the latter, for instance, Ping casually offers to sleep with Moon to pay off her mother's debt. I don't know how seriously we are to take her offer; Moon is essentially a nice guy and wouldn't

accept the offer even if genuine. Yet when another group of loansharks threaten the mother and insist they will take Ping in repayment, we are more genuinely afraid for her.

The sex industry, and its attendant exploitation of women, begins to appear in the 1950s in a group of Japanese films I have termed "bar hostess" films. That title is pretty self-explanatory and the bar hostess is by now a well-known phenomenon. It is apparently prevalent in Korea and Hong Kong, too, judging by the films. In *Tears*, Ran works as a bar hostess and a prostitute. Her boyfriend, Chang, is all too willing to exploit her and live off of her sordid earnings. The sad character of Whan in Beat loves Sunny, an attractive bar hostess in love with Min. When Min sleeps with Sunny because he has been too cowardly to have sex with Romi, it is the beginning of a potential downfall for him. The film intercuts his sex scene with Sunny with a montage of his transformation into a gangster - sunglasses, expensive leather jacket - and scenes of him fighting on behalf of Tae-soo's gang. This association of loveless sex with criminal activities is a common trope in the contemporary pan-Asian youth films. Heroes, like Ho Nam in *Young and Dangerous* or Brother One in *Sexy and Dangerous*, or Moon in *Made in Hong Kong*, only sleep with women they love; when Chicken, in *Young and Dangerous*, abandons his girlfriend for a night of sport-sex in Macao, bad things happen to his buddies. The women stars in *Young and Dangerous* and *Sexy and Dangerous* work as bar hostesses, though they seem relatively untouched by the potentially sordid activities associated with this lifestyle.

The castigation of the men who are willing to sleep with teenage girls is not only a major motif in *Bounce ko-Gals*, but it also appears in *Bad Movie*. In the section "Give Me More One Chance," Birdbrain goes with older, more experienced girls to serve drinks and dance with older men. The men treat them badly and force dispirited sex on them. Birdbrain regrets getting started in the whole business, but says she needs the money. This kind of treatment of women and the casual sex so obviously available, is what leads to the film's most shocking and sad sequence - the serial rape of a girl whom they get extremely drunk by three of the film's ostensible heroes. Yet it is in *Bounce ko-Gals* where the exploitation of young women by the sex industry is most thoroughly documented and castigated.

The film focuses on four girls: Lisa, a sixteen year old alienated from her parents, who desires nothing so much as to get on a plane bound for New York where she intends to live. She has a ticket, but little money. The film intercuts her attempts to gather money by selling her panties, her uniform, making a video, with the lives of three other teenage girls who work in the Tokyo sex industry. Their leader is Jonko, who never sleeps with clients, but often tricks them or robs them; another girl is Maru, who too often sleeps with men and is often beaten or cheated out of her money; a third is Raku, a street dancer who has fallen out with Jonko over the latter's methods. Jonko, Maru and Raku are high school girls; the film constantly focuses on their uniforms - both to remind us of their tender age and to insist upon how these uniforms have become fetish objects. The girls are well aware of their status as fetish objects, and they spend much time discussing their attitudes toward the men who are so willing and eager to trade money for sex. The film indicts contemporary Japan for its hypocrisy: Jonko's father may disapprove of her actions, but he solicits high school girls himself; one girl says she is never the subject of male advances because she looks Chinese; Lisa is accosted by a businessman at Shibuya station, who gets angry and hostile when she refuses his advances - she is saved from his threats when he gets a call from his wife on his cell phone and he gets obsequious while talking to her; all the girls say they are constantly groped on subway and commuter trains. There are two sympathetic male characters; one is Oshima, played by the ubiquitous Yakusho Koji. He asks Jonko to stop her business high

school girls compete with his girls at a phone club he runs. Obviously, director Harada is aware of the irony when he has a yakuza who runs a sleazy club as his most trustworthy and honorable male character. Another sympathetic, but also pathetic, male is Sap, who fancies himself a "talent scout," searching the Shibuya streets for pretty young girls to work in videos or as escorts. He falls for Lisa and acts as protector and friend, though he is far less capable of providing either than the yakuza, Oshima. The film builds its drama by the attempts of Jonko and Raku to help Lisa get money for her New York trip at the same time that Jonko has promised Oshima that she will quit the business.

Sexual perversion - a bureaucrat who gets his kicks making the girls clean a public restroom; the old professor, whom we learn was a procurer for comfort women in the war, who will pay hundreds of thousands of yen just to talk to a high school girl; the presence of *buruseras*, shops that sell school uniforms and used panties - abounds. But the deeply rooted sexism and infantilism of Japanese society is not the only thing Harada blames; consumer culture is no less to blame. The young women in *Bad Movie*, *Beat* or *Tears* turn to prostitution only as a mean to an end - left behind in their country's rush to economic miracles, the ones who can't make it in school, come from poor or broken families, fall under the influence of unscrupulous men, may seem to have little choice in their sad lives. But Gucci and Prada, not survival on the mean streets, motivate the young women in *Bounce ko-Gals*. They want brand names and are not ashamed to trade on their own desirability as consumer products. Though *Bounce ko-Gals* is essentially an old-fashioned melodrama - Maru loses an eye when she and her male friends attack a john who is a karate expert, Jonko is redeemed from her life by Oshima, Lisa gets her money - it is a far cry from the weepies of the bar hostess films of the 1950s.

**Apocalyptic Now**

A striking feature of the youth film has always been what I call its tendency toward "apocalyptic" endings, by which I mean mainly the death of one or more of the protagonists. It is a characteristic of youth either to feel invincible - to take physical risks such as motorcycle joy-riding, recreational use of drugs (another motif, perhaps surprising, in the pan-Asian youth film, especially glue-sniffing, marijuana-smoking, and alcohol abuse) - or to imagine oneself as dead. "Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse." I take this notion of an apocalyptic ending from *Rebel Without a Cause*, which toys with the notion that youth are alienated by a sense of nihilism stemming from the possibility of either nuclear annihilation or an aura of meaninglessness in the face of the vastness of the universe. It's no coincidence that an early scene of the film is set in the Planetarium at Griffith Park - no coincidence, either, that it ends there. The death of Plato, a meaningless, absurd death, casts a pall over the end of the film, aided by the off-screen events of James Dean's death not long after the film's release.

This apocalyptic sense is seen best in *Beat* and *Made in Hong Kong*, but is no less true of *Memento Mori*, where a suicide sets the plot in motion, in *Die Bad*, in *Eating Air*, *Bullet Ballet*, *Hysteric*, and *Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl*. I think it underlies the current controversy in Japan over *Battle Royale*, a more drastically cynical version of *Lord of the Flies*. The plot is described as taking place in a fictional Japan. "Junior high school students regarded as running too wild are sent to a desert island where they are told to kill each other. Only the last one alive is allowed to go home." (See Takada, "Japan Politicians") I suspect it isn't the level of violence that critics and politicians are reacting to. Just look at almost any of the Japanese films on my list. Rather, I think it is the overwhelming sense of nihilism, of

meaningless violence and death, and it proceeds directly out of the growth and development of the contemporary youth film. In *Beat*, just as Min and Romi get back together and consummate their relationship, Tae-soo is betrayed by Scorpio and Min feels obligated to help. By the time he gets to the club, Tae-soo is dying. Min takes him out for one last motorcycle ride. When his friend dies, Min heads back to confront the gang. He is beaten, stabbed, and left for dead at the side of a road. The sound of Romi paging him, his dying last voice-over and a series of flashbacks are the last things we see and hear.

Similarly, in *Made in Hong Kong*, a young girl's suicide hangs over the film's characters. The hero, Moon, obsesses over her. He lives in a world of casual violence; schoolboys constantly bully his friend Sylvester. There is an eerie, or perhaps deliberate, repetition of schoolyard bullying in *Made in Hong Kong* that recalls the opening scene of *Young and Dangerous*. Schoolboy bullying is also a major motif in *Kids Return*. When a boxer whom his victims have hired to prevent him from bullying them beats up Masaru, he and Shinji take up boxing. This kind of casual violence is seen throughout Kitano's films and in *Made in Hong Kong* and is rampant through the genre. Perhaps no scene is more disturbing for its casual yet shocking violence than when Moon, angry at his father's abandonment of his mother, sees his anger reflected later in the film when another boy attacks his own father in a bathroom, chopping off one of his arms. In the film's final scenes, Moon recovers from his vicious stabbing attack, only to learn that Sylvester has been killed by their mob boss and Ping has died from the kidney ailment that plagues her throughout the film. Moon takes his revenge of the gang boss, but is himself mortally shot sometime later. He goes to the cemetery where earlier they had found Susan's grave and lays there dying. A group of young children poke and prod his body, perhaps recalling an early scene in *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) - casual violence and death seem everywhere, in Tokyo, Seoul and Hong Kong. Perhaps the best way of dealing with it is to turn to comedy, like the schoolboy friends of Shinji who, like Beat Takeshi Kitano himself, become comedians in the flashback structure of *Kids Return*, in order to escape a world that seems to care little for them.

**References:**


Dargis, Manohla (2000) Pulp Instincts, in Jose Arroyo (ed.), *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*. London: British Film Institute, pp. 117-121. Originally published in *Sight and Sound*, May 1994.

Desser, David (1988) *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ebert, Roger (1999) Review of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Online. Suntimes.com/ebert/ebert-reviews/1999/03/03124.html

Fu, Poshek (2000) The 1960s: Modernity,Youth Culture and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema, in Poshek Fu and David Desser (eds.), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 71-89.

Jung Doo-Hung: Action Film Wizard, *Asian Cult Cinema* 29 (winter 2000).

Greenfeld, Karl Taro (1994) *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Jon, Byohng-Je (1988) Republic of Korea, in *Youth in Asia: Viewpoints for the Future*. New Delhi: New Statesman.

Kim, Elaine (1998) Men's Talk: A Korean American View of South Korean Constructions of Women, Gender, and Masculinity, in Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi (eds.), *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. New York: Routledge.

Park, Seung Hyun (forthcoming) Korean Cinema after Liberation: Trends of Film Production, Industry And Political Regulations, in Frances Gateward (ed.) *Made in Korea* (forthcoming).

Rayns, Tony (1998) Cinephile Nation. Online. cinekorea.com/essay/tony01.html. Originally published in *Sight and Sound*, 1998.

Takada, Kazunori (2000) Japan Politicians Break Silence on Violent Movies. Online. http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20001214/re/japan_movie_dc_1.html

Williams, Mary Elizabeth (1999) Bad Lads: Review of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Online. http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/reviews/1999/03/05reviewc.html

**Youth Filmography:**

**Hong Kong**

*Days of Being Wild*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai, 1991.

*Days of Being Dumb*. Dir. Blacky Ko Sau-leung, 1992.

*To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui*. Dir. Andrew Lau Wai-keung, 1994.

*Fallen Angels*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai, 1995.

*Full Throttle*. Dir. Yee Tung-shing, 1995.

*Young and Dangerous*. Dir. Andrew Lau Wai-keung, 1996.

*Sexy and Dangerous*. Dir. Billy Tang Hin-sing, 1996.

*Made in Hong Kong*. Dir. Fruit Chan, 1997.

*Sleepless Town*. Dir. Lee Chi Ngai, 1998.

*Little Cheung*. Dir. Fruit Chan, 1999.

*Gen-X Cops*. Dir. Benny Chan, 1999.

*The Legend of Speed*. Dir. Andrew Lau Wai-keung, 1999.

*Durian Durian*. Dir. Fruit Chan, 2000.

**Japan**

*Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. Dir. Tsukamoto Shinya, 1989.

*Boiling Point*. Dir. Kitano Takeshi, 1990.

*Kids Return*. Dir. Kitano Takeshi, 1996.

*Tokyo Fist*. Dir. Tsukamoto Shinya, 1995.

*Chinpira* (Two Punks). Dir. Aoyama Shinji, 1996.

*DANGAN Runner*. Dir. Sabu, 1996.

*Postman Blues*. Dir. Sabu, 1997.

*Sharkskin Man and Peach Hip Girl*. Dir. Ishii Katsuhito, 1998.

*Bullet Ballet*. Dir. Tsukamoto Shinya, 1998.

*Gemini*. Dir. Tsukamoto Shinya, 1999.

*Monday*. Dir. Sabu, 1999.

*Hysteric*. Dir. Zeze Takahisa, 1999.

*The City of Lost Souls*. Dir. Takashi Miike, 2000.

*Battle Royale*. Dir. Fukasaku Kinji, 2000.

**Korea**

*A Petal*. Dir. Jang Sun-woo, 1995.

*Three Friends*. Dir. Yim Soon Rye, 1996.

*Bad Movie* (Timeless, Bottomless Bad Movie). Dir. Jang Sun-woo, 1997.

*Whispering Corridors*. Dir. Park Ki-Hyung, 1998.

*Yellow Hair*. Dir. Kim Yoo-min, 1998.

*The Foul King*. Dir. Kim Jee-woon, 1999.

*Rush*. Dir. Lee Sang-In, 1999.

*Attack the Gas Station*. Dir. Kim Sang-Jin, 1999.

*Peppermint Candy*. Dir. Lee Chang-Dong, 1999.

*Memento Mori*. Dir. Kim Tae-Yong, Min Kyo-dong, 1999.

*Lies*. Dir. Jang Sun-woo, 2000.

*Die Bad*. Dir. Ryoo Seung-Wan, 2000.

*Tears*. Dir. Im Sang-Soo, 2000.

**Singapore**

*That's the Way I Like It*. Dir. Glen Goei, 1999.

*Eating Air*. Dir. Kevin Tong, Jasmine Ng, 1999.

**Thailand**

*The Dumb Die Fast, The Smart Die Slow*. Dir. Manop Udomdej, 1991.

*O-Negative*. Dir. Pinyo Rutharm, 1998.

*Nang Nak*. Dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999.

*Beyond Forgivin*'. Dir. Manop Udomdej, 1999.