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Battle Royale in Austin

One middle school girl begins to argue with another. As is commonly the case, this argument is concerning boys. Uncommonly, one of the girls is shot two times in the back while trying to flee from the dispute.

Another girl is ambushed by one of the middle school boys. He tries to force himself on her.

“Come at me,” she says. “Every inch of me will resist you.” And she means it; following up with five quick knife thrusts into her assailant.

Unfortunately for her, a female classmate is listening around the corner. Two bullets later, she joins her friends in death.

“Its six o’clock,” the authoritative voice of their teacher, Mr. Kitano, booms over the intercom. “Here’s the list of goners. Girls #10, Hirono. Boys #16, Niida. Girls #13, Chigusa. A total of three. You’re slacking off. I’m disappointed in you!”

This scene, and another hour and a half like it compose a movie so controversial that two years after its release, it has still not been granted an official American release.

Battle Royale completely shook up the film industry in its native Japan, causing the government to attempt to step in on the censorship issue. Japan’s Education Minister even went so far as to urge theater owners to “voluntarily refrain” from showing the film.

A cross between *Lord of the Flies* and *Survivor*, this movie is based in an alternate Japan, where adults have become fed up with the delinquency of their youth and passed the “B.R. Act.” The act allows for one class to be chosen by random each year and taken to an undisclosed island location. On that island, they are given weapons, and for three days they are to kill each other until there is only one “winner” who will be returned to society.

The obvious correlation between school massacres here in the United States and the events which unfold in *Battle Royale* is what has frightened every American distributor to not even consider distributing the movie.

There is no point in looking through your local Blockbuster or Hollywood Video’s stock. It is not going to be on their list. But if you look hard enough, you can find it.

Only two video rental stores in Austin have been bold enough to carry *Battle Royale*, and both have started doing so just within the last few months. Many requests for the film overwhelmed both Vulcan and I Luv Video when word of mouth and internet reviews began to circulate. *Battle Royale* was screened at a few film festivals throughout the last year and more people wanted the opportunity to see it.

I Luv Video employee, Jeremy Schott, admitted that they might be stepping over some legal lines to provide *Battle Royal* to their customers.

“We bought a legal Video CD of the film, but people will not rent VCDs,” Schott said. “So I made a VHS copy of it and we rent out that. We did legally buy the original from a Hong Kong distributor, so I think we are ok.”

Both video stores had similar results once the film was in stock. They both list the movie as R-Rated, both say it is rented almost completely by men, and both say they cannot keep it in stock.

Robert Johnson of Vulcan Video said a friend of his saw the film in California and brought back a bad quality VHS bootleg of it to share. To be able to use it in the store, they ordered two DVD copies through another Hong Kong distributor.

“We can’t keep it on the shelf,” Johnson said. “We bought two of them about four months ago and any day you walk in, at least one of the copies is going to be out.”

Austin’s own famous film critic, Harry Knowles, of AintItCool.com has gone on record in wild support of *Battle Royale* receiving an official American release. No fewer than seven columns on his website have been devoted to review and commentary concerning the film. Knowles even ranked *Battle Royale* as his number two movie of 2001.

“(The) first 18 minutes educates the viewer that this movie isn’t playing for laughs,” Knowles said. “That this is no low budget work of exploitation thrills. That death isn’t being treated as a jovial act for which the audience will cheer. In fact most likely, given your knowledge about the concept of the film...you become afraid.”

Other reviews of the film have been mostly positive as well. Only those that have not seen it yet have been overly critical. Online reviewer “Hecubus” summed up the controversy about violence in *Battle Royale* by comparing it to recent American films.

“There are some terribly violent and bloody moments in the film, but it’s nothing compared to something like...*Saving Private Ryan*,” Hecubus said. “The violence is shocking, sure, but so is the violence in *Goodfellas* and *Reservoir Dogs* and countless other films. In my opin-

ion, this isn't violence for violence's sake.

“The deaths in *Battle Royale* have true repercussions and are much more potent emotionally as these children are forced to kill their friends and lovers. I kept finding that I was identifying with these kids quite a bit in this movie; wondering what I would do if I were in their situation.”

A review by Lawrence Eng was not quite as positive. Though he was emotionally moved, the realism of this film was too much for him, unlike most over-the-top horror or action movies.

“I just couldn't stomach what I was watching anymore,” Eng said. “I left the room with a distinctly empty feeling in my stomach. Something about the violence in *Battle Royale* was different. It seemed realistic and unglorified, brutal and most of all, sad. That empty feeling I had upon leaving the room was mostly one of sadness.”

With all of the controversy surrounding it, the director of *Battle Royale*, Kinji Fukasaku, said he did not set out to make this film as either a warning or advice to Japan's youth. It was not supposed to be a social commentary as much as a good story.

“I didn't make the film with such strong thoughts in my mind,” Fukasaku said. “This film is a fable. The themes which are included in the film are very much realistic modern issues; youth crime is a very serious issue in Japan. It's not that I'm not concerned or not interested, but those are just the basis of the fable.”