

Confessions (Kokuhaku)

It's hard to believe that children could act the way that they do in *Confessions* in real life. It's a film replete with children killing their parents, students murdering toddlers for fun, a young girl poisoning her family and tracking their symptoms, and a duo who plot to kill a homeroom facilitator they don't like. It's not as if the adults are saints in this world either, however. We have a teacher supposedly adding HIV-positive blood to her students' drinks, a mother physically and verbally abusing her son, and another mother attempting double suicide when she feels she's failed as a parent. The fact that we see all of this happen within a single film one after the other can make it seem forced and campy rather than compelling by the time we reach the end. Despite this misgiving, however, the most "ridiculous" thing about the film is the quantity of the actions in such a short period of time, rather than the nature and motivation of the actions themselves. It's an exaggeration that's perhaps necessary for drama, but what it highlights are undeniably real themes and issues that plague modern Japan.

A girl slashes the throat of another girl for calling her fat, a boy molests a toddler, and a schoolboy shears the head off of a friend and tells the police that "murder is [his] greatest pleasure"¹. All of these, done by and to people under 15. This may seem like more exaggerations that belong solely on the silver screen, but this is a reality in a country where juveniles are involved in over half of felony arrests². Like the film, it's not only children that are the culprits, however. A mother strangles her 11-year-old son with a belt, a teacher knifes his 12-year-old student in a prestigious university, a woman murders two of her daughter's 5-year-old friends when she feels pressured to conform to the wishes of other moms at her kindergarten group³. All real life, unmediated by a screenwriter's pen. *Confessions* is a film that is aware of these issues, and the social issues that they spring from. There is much justifiable blame to be placed on parents who raise children in abusive or broken households, but even these deficiencies have much of its roots in a postwar system based on efficiency, discipline, and rote learning that no longer functions like it should. John Nathan says that

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-child-killings-that-have-shocked-japan-1.1144742>

² <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-child-killings-that-have-shocked-japan-1.1144742>

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/07/200849143912832276.html>

trust, intimacy, and personal fulfillment have long been sacrificed for economic growth and material prosperity, and that Japan is merely paying the price for this set-up no longer being viable after the changes wrought by the bubble collapse of the 1990s. He says that "violent juvenile crime is only one extreme aspect of a broader crisis of anger, confusion and loss of self that is currently afflicting Japanese youth."⁴ Toshiko Marks, a professor at Shumei University, also attributes these disturbing trends to significant and adverse changes affecting modern Japanese society. Village community and close knit familial ties (what some would say are the root of Japanese identity and sense of belonging) have been replaced by absentee households and apartment blocks filled with strangers. "The family unit is breaking down and I fear it will be impossible to rebuild that. The local community in modern, urban Japan no longer is the support group that it used to be and people will always have economic problems," she says⁵.

We see these social issues play out within the film. Take Shuuya Watanabe, for example. We may revile him as a psychopathic character without a trace of empathy or selflessness (and rightfully so), but consider his background. A mother forced to abandon her promising career in science to raise a child (itself hearkening to issues of gender employment and the M-curve) comes to regret her decision. She takes out her frustration on her child, abusing him and forcing him to become a scientific genius, perhaps so she can live out her dreams through him. As a result, he becomes extremely scientific minded, lacking a moral compass (he says that "nobody taught him it was wrong to kill"), and incredibly focused solely on doing anything for his mother to notice him. What do we see here? We see the effects of economic pressure on the household (in his mother's focus on her career), we see absenteeism both implied (in his lack of a moral education) and realized (in his abandonment), and we see the results of a broken family. Rather than a community of support, what surrounds all of the characters is a social climate that seems hell bent on ostracization and on pushing individuals like Shuuya, Naoki, and Mizuki to increasingly dark and desperate ends. It's an image of Japan that's far from the peaceful and orderly picture it likes to present, but it's a relevant one. Contemporary Japan is replete with social tensions and

⁴ John Nathan, Japan Unbound (qtd. in <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-child-killings-that-have-shocked-japan-1.1144742>)

⁵ (qtd. in <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/07/200849143912832276.html>)

issues that are symptoms of the “Japan Inc.” system shattering. Words like *hikikomori*, *kireru*, *karoshi*, and *jinshin-jiko* have become prevalent (and some of these are even seen within the film), resulting in a sense of society that’s become upended and turned over, with no clear order in sight.

What’s interesting is that *Confessions* seems to portray this upending of social order more within its stylistic presentation than in its narrative. Any sense of Western “natural order” or realism is lost in the film’s distinct *presentation*. Consider the beginning in the classroom, when Ms. Moriguchi tells her story to the class. A simple set-up would suffice, and yet we have wide shots, pans, close-ups, moving ceiling shots, slow motion shots, cuts to phone messages and websites, quick frames, held frames and more. Ambient sound is turned up in one shot, only to be silent in the next shot. The tone of one frame is energetic and happy while the other is sad and static. There’s a dissonantly happy soundtrack that fades into unsettling strings as Moriguchi moves forward with her story. Though live-action, the deliberate use of these and several other editing tricks within the movie make it seem like this is anything but “real life” we are seeing. Even chronology is played with, as the film’s *fabula* is diced up and scattered across a series of “confessions” that make up the story’s *syuzhet*. We see several events from different points of view, with some repeated events having new details. The presentation of events and recollections also do not follow any sort of strict linearity, but instead are rendered according to the narration and emotional progression of each character that is telling the story. Take this scene from Naoki’s confession. We follow him from his self-isolation, where he meditates about life (coupled with quick zooming frames showing how disgusting he’s become), then suddenly transition without warning to him staring at himself after his mother cleans him up. We don’t see the clean up happen, because it’s already been shown to us in another confession. Instead, we are seeing it from Naoki’s shocked perspective. In the beginning as well, when Moriguchi reveals what she did to their drinks, we get quick frames of a syringe filled with blood, and a drop spreading within a white fluid that takes up the entire screen. These frames do not correspond to anything she is narrating, however, with the first frame even coming before she hints at what she did to the milk cartons. In fact, if it weren’t for the headings and narration coming from each of the characters, the editing is such that an audience wouldn’t be able to follow the

progression of the events we are shown. We as viewers must instead surrender to the voices and twisted minds leading us through their story, and experience it as they do.

In this way, *Confessions* accomplishes a really interesting actualization of what Richie characterizes as Japanese cinema. Though the techniques used are a far cry from Ozu's still shots, for example, the way in which filmic language is employed in *presenting* reality (rather than just simulating it) remains the same⁶. The composition speaks for itself, focusing on its own aesthetic and the emotions communicated through each unique shot rather than the story itself⁷. When we consider the film as a whole, the "beauty of the patterning"⁸ seems to be the focus rather than the pathos of individual scenes or the natural progression of the narrative (which stretches both forward and backward from the opening scene). We see and feel the weight of Japan's social tensions in general. Richie states that the creation of a mediating atmosphere that *suggests* rather than *states* is what we can consider "Japanese realism"⁹. The director becomes the mediator between us and the raw emotions onscreen.

It's this creative rendering of the story that I love the most about this film. Personally, I enjoy when the possibilities inherent to a medium are used to tell a story, but the extent to which this is done in *Confessions* is incredible and jaw-dropping. The palpable tension that pervades the film is also a stroke of genius, and I adore the use of sound and music along with the almost Snyder-esque slow motion scenes that seem to have no discernible purpose other than aesthetic value. It ends up covering over most of the flaws that I feel the film otherwise has, including the aforementioned campiness of trying to squeeze so much dark material into an hour and forty minutes. *Confessions's* greatest strength is by far how it uses its cinematic language to present its themes and emotions as much as the story it tells with these tools.

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⁶ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 7

⁷ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 8

⁸ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 15

⁹ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 15