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Where Have All the Youth Gone:

Cruel Youth and Juvenile Crimes in 21st Century “Cruelty of Youth”

Films from Japan and the United States

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Abstract

In recent years, the phrase “cruelty of youth” has gained popularity in describing an understudied subgenre of youth films. Films in this subgenre portray young people’s tragic experiences and the unfolding real problems they face. My project examines and compares four “cruelty of youth” films from the 21st century: *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001) and *The Blue Light* (2003) from Japan, and *Elephant* (2003) and *Mean Creek* (2004) from the United States.

This project examines the need for “cruelty of youth” films, in particular their importance in raising public awareness of and understanding about youth problems in the real world. In other words, films within this genre are not dystopic, speculative fiction, but realist in their depictions of extreme situations facing young people. The term itself, “cruelty of youth,” represents the duality of meaning in both “youth that are cruel” and “the cruelty experienced by youth.” My project explores the characteristics of “youth that are cruel.” These characteristics serve as a key to help adult viewers understand the connection between teenagers’ psychological states and their cruel deeds. In the last section, I will include a close reading to discuss the depictions of murder scenes from these selected films that involve youth. To help the viewers understand youth experiences and the cruelty teenagers inflict on one another, I also investigate these murder cases from the perspectives of the juvenile murderers, the young victims, and the teenage witnesses. I suggest that “cruelty of youth” films may be beneficial for young viewers in that they teach the fragility of life and may encourage young people to engage in discussions about youth cruelty with peers and with their elders.
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Preface: Why “Cruelty of Youth”

Many reasons led me to my interest in the subgenre of “cruelty of youth” films. There are two, more general, less personal reasons. First, “cruelty of youth” films reflect problems that young people face in reality. And, second, these films contribute to a society’s particular understanding of teenagers in that society. My personal experience also plays a crucial part. I believe that watching a film is one way to experience someone else’s life. My transition from youth to adult was smooth and peaceful. My encounter with “cruelty of youth” films has provided me the opportunity to see, live, and better to understand the tragic lives of many young people. For example, I could not understand a child’s hatred toward his or her parents until I watched *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan). Living in a happy family with both parents, and never experiencing violence or abuse of any kind, this film taught me that there are numerous teenagers facing family issues like the film’s depiction of Shuuichi. The even more frightening truth is that of the experience of peers who are facing family issues and perceive that the murder of a parent is the only way to a brief period of peace in the family. Watching “cruelty of youth” films offers audiences not only a sense of the plight of other young people, but also a comparison between a life of relative ease and the life of youth experiencing the particular cruelty that for them is being young and miserable. I care about this subgenre in part because I think these films may help some viewers understand the fragility and preciousness of their own lives.

This type of films also reveals the possible problems and hardships on the transition path from teenage to adulthood. I am thankful that my parents, unlike many parents who think students watching movies is a waste of time, and that films contain too much information and thus are harmful, allowed me to watch the movies I wanted to watch. My first time watching *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan) was when I was 13, almost the same age as the teenage
characters in the film. Other 13-year-olds like I was, only busy dealing with my grades, may never imagine situations like severe bullying, prostitution, and the possibility of murdering a family member or peer without access to stories of such cruelty. Although films like this shocked me at the time, they nevertheless sounded the alarm about problems I might encounter in my growth, and how to avoid the problems, in order to become a better adult. Both to me and to other young audiences, watching “cruelty of youth” films is like living alternative teenage years, as the fictional experiences teach some young viewers the worst that young people can face, and even to have sympathy, or consideration, for such people.

Additionally, I care about “cruelty of youth” films because these films serve as an indirect way for adults to understand the perils young people face in either Japan or the United States. Every adult was once a youth, and these films can help them remember their youth and the feeling of being a teenager. “Cruelty of youth” films present the worst scenarios of youth. Therefore, accepting “cruelty of youth” films may be one approach for adults to understand what issues that are troubling teenagers in this era, and to reflect on what problems are affecting their own children.

Finally, I believe promoting the production and discussion of “cruelty of youth” films may help to keep the conversation about youth and the perils of youth in the public sphere. As Gus Van Sant suggests in his explanation for making the film Elephant (2003, the United States), the film answers the questions “What is happening to young people?” “Why are they so different from the last generation?” and “What can we do to help them?” These questions may not suddenly appear in one movie or be narrated in a documentary about young people. Instead, answers to these questions may emerge from discussions among teenagers about the films, and between youth and adults. “Cruelty of youth” films serve as important materials to trigger the
interests of teenage viewers, while delivering the seemingly complex teen issues that relate to psychology, sociology, and statistics to others in the public in an accessible manner. In this way, “cruelty of youth” films are not only entertainment, or for “enjoyment.” These films may engage teenagers to disclose and discuss, leading to a new approach to solving the problem facing young people in the 21st century.
Introduction

I lived through my teenage years peacefully and happily. There was no bullying, and I did not suffer due to bad performance in school. I experienced no conflicts at home, and I had no difficulties or confusions in the process of exploring my self-identity. During my teenage years, I learned that there are various ways of considering what it means to be a youth by watching films. These include films that illustrate celebrating school life, for instance by joining sports teams and going to school dances, forming lifetime friendships, meeting one’s first love, bonding with adult mentors and preparing to navigate one’s future life. However, not all films focus on depicting the brighter side of living as a youth. There are films that portray teenagers suffering from bullying and isolation in school, encountering violence and indifference at home, and feeling overwhelmed or even fully submerged by psychological or social problems. These young people who struggle through their teenage lives are like children who attempt to cross a river without guidance: they hope to reach the other side of the riverbank to the adult world, but are stumbling in the rushing water.¹ These films suggest that some youth may never reach the other side of the river. Tragedies of “children who attempt to cross the river” are a growing genre in films about youth, and these films are described by an emerging sub-category of youth films, known in writings in Japanese as “cruelty of youth.”

“Youth film” has only been identified as a genre in film studies recently. Youth films produced in the United States, along with teen culture, reached its peak in the 1980s. “Youth Film” was not formally considered a genre until 1993, when Daniel Lopez’s massive compendium Films by Genre: 775 Categories, Styles, Trends, and Movements Defined, with a

Filmography for Each identified films featuring teenagers since the 1950s as in the genre “Teen Movie,” which can be substituted by “‘Juve Movie,” “Teenage Movie,” “Teepic,” and “Youth Picture.” Lopez’s work also further divides the “Teen Movie” into subgenres, including the “Motorcycle Movie,” “Juvenile Delinquency Film,” “High School Films,” etc. (331; Shary, “Generation Multiplex” 16). In 1997, the Motion Picture/Broadcasting/Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress published The Moving Image Genre-Form Guide, which locates and settles on using the term “youth” to describe the film genre. “Youth Film” comprises “fictional work portraying aspects of the trajectory through adolescence, including high school years, peer pressure, first love, beach parties, and initial attempts at adulthood, along with strains in the relationship with family” (Shary, “Generation Multiplex” 17). However, not all films that feature youth fall into the genre of “Youth Film,” and many films about youth can hardly conform to the manufactured sub-categories of youth films. Many films cannot fit into one (sub)generic classification, or they cross over multiple themes and styles (Staiger). Difficulties in categorization led to the use of looser terms to describe many youth films, such as “high school film,” “delinquency film,” “coming-of-age film,” and “rites-of-passage film.” Among various terms of categorizing youth films, there are no phrases that identify movies that portray the struggle of young people in turmoil from the external world and the suffering of their arrogance, naivety, audacity and helplessness in the aftermath of tragedies.

Due to complexities and the underdevelopment of the genre, I will use the label “youth film” to refer to films made about young people. I will use “youth,” “young,” and “young people” interchangeably in my discussion. I may also use “teen” and “teenager” periodically, as a synonym of “youth,” since my discussion will focus on middle-school and high-school

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students. I will use “juvenile” to represent youth in order to examine legal issues, such as in “juvenile crime” or “juvenile offender.” Occasionally, when describing relationships with parents or referencing an event from the aspect of adults, I will use “children” to imply the connection between parents and offspring.

In recent years, the phrase, “cruelty of youth” (残酷青春, both in Japanese and Chinese) has gained popularity in Japanese and Chinese culture, specifically in describing a category of literature and films. “Cruelty of youth” was first introduced by the 1960 Japanese film Cruel Story of Youth (Fig.1, 青春残酷物语, Seishun Zankoku Monogatari), which depicts the violence and romance between two teenage lovers. This film inspired the production of more Japanese youth films and bolstered the formation of pioneer works in “Japanese New Wave.” In the 21st century, a subgenre known as “cruelty of youth” became widely known among Japanese and Chinese speakers as the phrase casually summarizes a particular category of film that features young people’s tragic experiences resulting from their intense passion and confusion, often influenced by the labile psychological states of their age, destructive family structures, and the inadequacy or lack of adult figures in their lives. Due to the actions taken by teenagers, viewers and critics may confuse those films with films dealing with juvenile delinquency or juvenile crime. “Cruelty of youth,” when

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interpreted in Mandarin, represents the duality of youth. In Mandarin, described by the adjective “cruelty (残酷),” the word “youth (青春)” as a noun consists two meanings. “Youth” can be referring people in the age period of puberty, which makes the phrase “cruelty of youth” represent “youth that are cruel.” The word “youth” can also mean the state of being young, and this meaning translates the phrase to “the cruelty experienced by youth.” There are films across cultures that reflect the understandings of “cruelty of youth,” but most of them are categorized under more general subgenres. The importance of recognizing “cruelty of youth” as a subgenre of “Youth Film,” apart from admitting the cruel nature of youth, is that this category of film may help the audience to perceive obstacles that are troubling teenagers. This type of film uses storytelling as a critical media for unfolding real problems faced by young people.

The idea of focusing this project on Japanese youth films emerged from my interest in watching Japanese films and my interest in Japanese styles of youth culture. The Japanese word for youth, “青春,” is a phrase that consists of two characters (kanji) and influences the unique perspective of Japanese filmmakers. The character “青 (ao or sei)” represents the color blue (as for sky) or green (as for leaves and grass) as a noun and the state of being immature or unripe as an adjective, while “春 (haru or shun)” translates to the season of spring and the development state of puberty (jisho.org). The understanding of these kanji characters heavily influences Japanese youth films, as blue and green dominate the lighting color of the film and create the feeling of soaking characters and the fictional world through the camera in early spring. The application of the soft lighting and warm colors attracts audiences visually. The color and lighting schemes form a contrast with the cruelty of the stories. Furthermore, since the 1932 silent film, I Was Born, But…(大人の見る絵本 生れてはみたけれど, Umarete wa mita keredo), Japanese filmmakers have been active in projecting social issues related to youth in
their works. *I Was Born, But...* is a black-and-white silent film by director Yasujiro Ozu. This 100-minute film centers the story on two young brothers, Keiji and Ryoichi who explore the faith of their father. The film portrays the two brothers cutting class from their elementary school, and emphasizes the problem of boyhood truancy that has been and continues to be troubling within Japanese society until today. In recent years, Japanese society has been replete with debates about problems such as child poverty, bullying at schools, suicidal youth, an increasingly conservative public education curriculum, socially withdrawn teenagers, and youth involved in violent crime (Frühstück and Walthall 1). In response to the emerging problems facing young people, many filmmakers depict, in their films, their own answers to the question: “What is happening to our next generation?”

*Nobody Knows* (2004) conveys the tragedy of family poverty and child abandonment. The director of the film, Hirokazu Koreeda, tells the heartbreaking story of four children who are abandoned by their mother. After the mother leaves the kids in a small Tokyo apartment, the oldest child, twelve-year-old Akira, takes on the responsibility to care for his younger siblings. Without a legal guardian, and with only a small amount of money, Akira cannot maintain the siblings’ lives and is hopeless in preventing his sister Yuki’s death. The 1996 film, *Kids Return*, reflects on teenagers’ dropping out of school and involvement in Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. The director, Takeshi Kitano, portrays two high-school drops-out, Masaru and Shinji, who choose their distinct paths, one as an up-and-coming boxer and the other as a low-level member in Yakuza. After meeting one another years after they both dropped out of high school, they realize that each of them has paid the price for their mistakes in their teenage years. The internationally known *Battle Royale* (2000) illustrates a future in which a ninth-grade class is randomly selected each year, and students are forced to kill each other under the government’s
revolutionary “Battle Royale” act. As the director, Kinji Fukasaku offers the most exaggerated contemporary Japanese society, and considering the number of pioneer cinematic productions from Japan, I decided to include Japanese Youth Films as a significant part of the project. Japanese filmmakers have contributed greatly through their comprehensive observation of a younger generation. They have been a significant part of a culture that keeps issues facing youth in active conversations across generations.

I will compare two youth films from Japan with two from the United States. My interest in youth culture in the United States began in my undergraduate years when I learned about the high rate and invisibility of school bullying cases and the tragic aftermath resulting from bullying, as well as the growing criminal activities related to young people with firearms. I examined a variety of youth films based in the United States and discovered that teenager delinquency and youth-related crime were popular themes in productions before the 21st century. Recently, however, the film market has produced fewer youth films that involve crime and violence. Establishing the image of troubled youth was significantly downplayed by filmmakers partially due to a series of high-profile schooling killings, particularly the 1999 Columbine High School massacre.

The public has held the idea that the fictional depiction of troubled and violent youth is hazardous to both the society and child development, and fictional tragedies are less harrowing than the reality. In his 2005 essay, Timothy Shary, the leading authority in the United States on the representation of youth in movies, suggests that Hollywood’s avoidance of depicting the problem of violence among boys has “stunted social interest in juvenile delinquency overall” (Shary, “Bad Boys and Hollywood Hype” 23). For this reason, I will at least begin to explore in this project youth films produced in the United States during the early 21st century by
considering the shift of interest, the changes in styles of narration, and the influence of this shift on society and young audiences.

In my project, I will discuss four youth films from the beginning of the 21st century (2000-2010). I will focus on films from this time period because the official, registered crime rate and the documented, publicized severity of youth crimes reached a new height around the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. In the United States, while bullying becomes a significant issue among school-age children, the rate of documented and media-covered campus shootings has risen significantly since 1999, and has resulted in more than 40 campus shootings, with perpetrators charged with Columbine-style plots, some of whom had studied Columbine attack or who were inspired by the two shooters in the killings (Drash). In the meantime, both the economic and social environment surrounding teenagers has gradually changed in Japan by the end of 20th century (“Crime rate in Japan falls for the 11th straight year”). From 1990 to 2000, juveniles committed more than half of the recorded crimes. Brutal juvenile crimes, such as murder and rape, became serious social problems (Nakanishi 34). Seeing a younger generation living in a society of increasing violence and precariousness, I am curious about the reaction and reflection of youth and filmmakers in the era of a growing crime rate.

Among all youth films from Japan and the United States in the 2000s, I will analyze and compare two movies from each culture: All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001) and The Blue Light (2003) from Japan, and Elephant (2003) and Mean Creek (2004) from the United States. I want to use these films to explore how the surrounding world forces youth to take extreme actions and express their confusion, fearlessness, and fragility or, in other words, to perform “cruelty of youth.” I consider murder as a representation of the “extreme action,” and have selected four films in which committing murder or being murdered play significant roles. Unlike Battle Royale
that depicts an oppressive future society or *Picnic* (1996, Japan, directed by Shunji Iwa) that portrays an insane fictional world, my film selections are realistic. They are not dystopias, but instead films that involve realistic depictions of misery or cruelty. I have chosen four movies that represent the worst situations teenagers experienced. This is one reason I do not include films that present gangs or group of friends supporting one another, such as The *Breakfast Club* (1985, the United States, directed by John Hughes), or movies in which adult figures guide young characters to walk through their darkest moments, such as *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* (2002, the United States, directed by Guy Ferland). In other words, by watching the four selected films, viewers are meant to face tragedies that can happen to suffering, unguided youth at any place and any present moment in both cultures.

In this project, I will analyze the following questions:

1) How is the subgenre “cruelty of youth” portrayed in 21st century youth films from Japan and the United States?

2) What characteristics of “cruel youth” are depicted through juvenile crimes, specifically the act of murder and being murdered?

3) To what extent does “cruelty of youth” in films reflect reality, and how do the reflections help audiences to understand youth experiences and the cruelty teenagers inflict on one another?

I will start my project by analyzing the necessity of recognize “cruelty of youth” as a subgenre of “Youth Film.” I will investigate how fictional works such as the selected films reflect on and resonate with social problems in both Japan and United States, and offer a better understanding of issues and policies in the two cultures. In the second chapter, I will discuss the interpretation of “cruelty of youth” as “youth that are cruel” and identify characteristics of youth
and how selective films demonstrate these characteristics. Based on close readings of dialogue, scenes, and song lyrics, this chapter focuses on cruel youth that are naïve, conform to peer groups, lack empathy, and who are isolated and detached from their surroundings. In the last chapter, my focus will shift to the cruel acts and tragic experiences of youth. This chapter is heavily based on a close reading of the four films. I will examine and compare each case of youth crime and murder in each film, and discuss the mindset, motive, and consequences of main characters in each film. Because youth is viewed as a transitional stage of struggle toward adulthood, I will use examples to argue that committing murder or being killed serves, in these films, as an alternative to the transition to adulthood. I will further consider the ramifications of witnessing the death of peers, and, finally, explore the importance of making “cruelty of youth” films available to young people themselves.
Chapter 1  Youth and Youth Crime in Films and in Reality

Ever generation
Blames the one before
And all of their frustrations
Come beating on your door
– Lyrics from “The Living Years,”
by Mike and the Mechanics

Films are fictions. Even when a film is based on a true story, it is still a fictional work. In the case of youth films, especially the “cruelty of youth” films that involve crimes and death, filmmakers almost always create teen characters based on their knowledge of youth from the past generations. In the late 1980s, policymakers were aware of the booming teenage populations of the 1990s and increasing gun violence throughout the 1980s. They, therefore, alerted the society of possible onslaught of the juvenile “superpredator” – the next generation of teens who would commit serious and ruthless crimes such as rape and murder (Nichols and Good 56). This assumption was still haunting at the beginning of the 2000s because, although the rate of youth violent crime rate did decrease considerably through the 1990s, media coverage of severe events and gun-related massacres escalated substantially (Males 10).

On the other side of the globe, Japan was facing a growing number of youth-related crimes and was exposed to more news coverage on serious crimes. Moreover, society started to be aware of emerging teenager-related social issues. The problem of school refusal, “toko kyohi” or “futoko”, came into the public view as youth experienced a documented phobia against attending schools that, unlike simple truancy, was accompanied by psychological roots and physical symptoms (Kawanishi 25). Another severe problem was “kateinai boryoku”, or “intra-family violence.” Different from domestic abuse in the West, which often involves the abuse of
children, this intra-family violence typically refers to a Japanese child beating up his or her parents (Kawanishi 29). Both the news coverage in the United States and the uprising of intractable social problems in Japan seemed to depict youth with dangerous stereotypical characteristics and who were involved in brutal crimes. These characteristics could be reflected in or even influence the perception of youth in the 21st-century. In this chapter, I will analyze “cruelty of youth” films made in the United States and Japan in the 2000s, and how the brutal crimes and cruel deaths in the films exaggerate youth-related crimes in reality. I will further discuss the significance of having these films available to audiences for increasing public awareness on youth issues in the United States and Japan.

**Youth Film as the Exaggeration of Reality**

Popular media has, since the beginning of wide-spread, accessible cinema, magazines, and television, frequently been blamed for exposing young people to violence and making them more uncontrollable. Especially in Asian countries, negative influences are often connected with media and entertainment. In a 2015 research conducted on 1,456 Japanese older adults, while 62% of the participants felt that juvenile crime rate was increasing and another 21% insisted the crime rate had significantly escalated, only 3.7% believed that the youth crime rate was on the decline during the past decade. The reason that a large number of people think youth are becoming more dangerous is because they see more depictions of brutal teenagers from news media coverage, popular publications, and films (Brasor, “Despite what the media says about juvenile crime, the kids are alright”). The reason to blame films, despite the depiction of killings and bloodshed, is that films make juvenile crime seem pervasive and effortless. At the beginning of *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan), the hero, Yuichi Hasumi, goes on a theft trip with
his peers: they wait for the man on the train to fall asleep and casually take away his purse (Fig.2, 00:05:08 – 00:05:23), and steal in a CD store by quickly throwing CDs in their backpacks and running off (Fig.3, 00:05:52 – 00:06:21). The fact that the opening scenes happen in real-life scenarios and the three teenagers demonstrate their stealing skills as experienced, leisurely, and ordinary provides the audience the feeling that crimes are normalized and even popularized among teenagers.

Compared to Japanese fear of films generating more dangerous youth, viewers in the United States express greater unease and anxiety toward the issue of fictional youth films exaggerating real-world juvenile crimes. Youth-related crime is one of the most sensitive topics in the United States media, and it has become more difficult to address since the 1990s, due to real-life violence, numerous campus shootings, and the notorious Columbine massacre. *Elephant* (2003, the United States), the prize-winning film produced after the Columbine shooting, records an ordinary day of a high school like Columbine, a day on which two boys walk into the campus with guns and initiate a massacre like the one that caused 13 people’s death. Besides the cruel act of a campus shooting, the film does not offer any insight on the reason for the perpetrators to kill. Instead, the movie focuses more on the process of planning the attack and the actual killing. This
highlight on the shocking details of the students-caused campus shooting is as wrong as highlighting other juvenile crimes. According to Males, an American sociologist and a senior researcher for the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, highlighting youth crime may shape and sustain dangerous stereotypes of youth:

We are shocked when a young child commits murder because younger kids only rarely kill. Now, how does the press handle the rare murder by an 11-year-old versus the three-a-week murder by a 40-year-old? It turns the picture upside down: the occasional 11-year-old killer is depicted as a symbol of today’s supposedly more violent grade-school generation, while the 40-year-old gunman is treated as an isolated case in no way reflective of ‘mature’ middle-agers. Result: the media have transformed the stereotype of 11-year-olds from ‘innocent’ to ‘murderous’ by making one murderer this prototype. (10-11)

For the same reason, filmmakers may choose to suppress or even dismiss the issues of juvenile crimes and figures of cruel youth rather than risk being blamed for the negative impact on teens and for encouraging violence, or for a related problem of depicting young people as trending toward violence (Shary, “Teen Movies” 90).

Similar to the concern of Japanese society, as filmmakers may be wary of focusing and exaggerating violent events in youth films, they are concerned about producing public terror about being targeted by a generation of teens trending toward casual violence. Evidence shows that the chance of being shot in an institution is about one in a million (Reddy et al. 163). However, films that reproduce the shooting scenes are adept at convincing the public that the chance of being involved in a school shooting is more inevitable than odd. Elephant (2003, the United States), instead of creating scenes with stylish visual effects and providing symbolic meanings, is dominated by the quivery views of hand-held cameras and long takes. The application of such cinematic techniques offers the audience a feeling of walking in the high school, hence inducing the audience to feel as if they are in the high school along with the victims of the campus shooting. Moreover, Eric and Alex, the two shooters, purchase guns easily
online (00:51:02 – 00:51:12) and walk into the school building with little suspicion. John is the only person who asks Eric and Alex, “hi, what are you guys doing,” and Alex replies “just fuck off here and don’t come back.” After the brief encounter with John, the camera follows Eric, who wears camo outfits, and Alex, who dressed in all black, as they march to the school building. Each carries bags of weapons, walks steady and fast, and looks determined on the face (Fig.4, 00:21:42 – 00:22:01). The scene provides the feeling that I am just a student who is unaware of Eric and Alex’s difference and who follows them casually into the building. In other words, this immersive film technique offers the impression of that planning and committing a massacre with guns is casual and common for high school students, whether as perpetrators or as victims. After being exposed to films that imitate reality and recreate actual events, the public may perceive a large-scale severe juvenile crime as common, and perhaps even inevitable. This in spite of the fact that mass school shootings are perhaps not so rare anymore.
Youth Film as the Reflection of Reality

If juvenile crimes and the brutal experience of teenagers portrayed in “cruelty of youth” films exaggerate the violence in reality and generate public fear, then is there any value or importance, culturally, for the existence of these films? I suggest that the brutal events and cruel youth figures create awareness for the audiences, by informing them that, even while some teens experience a relatively safe and simple adolescence, the years between childhood and adulthood are, for many, fraught and even cruel. Watching a film may be like looking into a mirror: the reflection changes when you move the mirror towards different angles, but the reflection nevertheless is an image of reality from a particular perspective. Teen characters in “cruelty of youth” films are the same, as they commit or suffer in violent acts of extreme circumstances that the audience often feel are too bizarre and deviate from ordinary life. But the films are the spinning mirror that reflects reality in every possible angle and help the audience to recognize a group of youth and their lives that often has been ignored. Thus, producing films that reflect lives we barely know about and make those films available to the public is crucial.

While many commentators see the negative influences of violence in youth films, fewer recognize that films may provide the reason for a youth to become cruel. One of the most deep-rooted factors is the inadequacy or lack of adult figures. Lack of adult figures in teenage years can be stressful, especially when the teen has to face the sudden loss of a respected figure. In one such “cruelty of youth: film, Mean Creek (2004, the United States), Marty, the high-school-aged leader who plans the prank to punish George, is severely traumatized by his father’s suicide. When George finds out about the prank against him and starts angering everyone off on the boat, he targets Marty, saying:

And speaking of dead fathers… I just remembered why bonehead, white-trash, fucking donkey-dick Marty, got so fucking freaked when I started talking about
his daddy. His Neanderthal drunk dad put a gun in his mouth and splattered his brains all over the wall. … I thought it was sad at first. But, now, I like it. … His daddy splattered his brains all over the wall! All over the wall! (00:47:47 – 00:48:57)

George’s vicious recalling of the death of Marty’s father abuses Marty and is the last straw that breaks the camel’s back, and finally triggering Marty to lose his mind. This leads to the tragic accident of Marty pushing George into the river. The film shows, shockingly, how the sudden loss of a close adult figure can traumatize a young person and lead to further tragedy.

Many “cruelty of youth” films also demonstrate a clear connection, or even causal relationship, between bullying and youth crimes. The public might blame recent youth films for over-emphasizing bullying among youth, but according to Kulwinder Kaur, “bullying is not a pop culture problem; rather, it has been there as one animal desires like any other evil” (Kaur 13). Bullying, as a recently popularized research topic, is defined by researchers as a unique sub-category of aggression, one that is characterized by “intentionality, repetition, and imbalance of power” (Vaillancourt et al. 486). Although the modern notion of bullying seems relatively new and is obscure for the public, the recognition of bullying has long been part of fictional works.

Films that portray bullying behaviors help the audience to recognize actions that are categorized as bullying behaviors. For example, a typical bullying behavior that more frequently occurs among boys is when a stronger teenager beats a smaller peer to the ground. In Mean Creek (2004, the United States), George beating up Sam on the playground when classmates are watching is a good demonstration of bullying behaviors.
based on power differences (Fig. 5, 00:02:12 – 00:02:41). Bullying behaviors among girls are often more covert than those among boys, such as calling names and talking bad behind someone's back. An illustration of the covert bullying behavior is the scene in Elephant (2003, the United States), when a group of girls say that Michelle “was so annoying” and call her “looser” while giggling in the locker room (00:33:01 – 00:33:21).

Japanese “cruelty of youth” films illustrate a wider range of yet more intense behaviors that may be characterized as bullying. All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001, Japan) layers many different scenes that involve bullying, from verbal abuse to physical conflicts, and teenagers in this movie bring their hostility toward each other to another level. A common trope in youth films in Japan is a kind of bulling that is subtle, and mostly verbal. In this film, a group of girls verbally abuses the most popular girl in the class, Yoko Kuno, in the most extreme way. When preparing for the choir competition, the group of girls refuses to sing along to Kuno’s piano. At the point Kuno is called to the front to play piano, the girls in the back of the classroom start to yell “I want to go home.” When the conductor asks the class to stand up, these five girls refuse to stand, and when one says “Kuno should quit the
class activity,” the other four immediately clap their hands in the same beat and repeat “quit!” with their joyful voices. Seeing Kuno’s silent and embarrassed face, the conductor orders the class to start practice. The leader of the girls says “we understand. Please start!” in her bombastic voice as she rolls her eyes and says to the other girls boringly, “let’s go.” Following their leader, the girl gang briskly marches out from the classroom (Fig.6, 01:26:09 – 01:27:21). Later, when the leader of the girls realizes Kuno edited the A cappella version of the song, the furious leader make her friends to punish Kuno by raping her and shaving her long hair (Fig.7, 01:40:03 – 01:49:58).

In the same film, while bullying behaviors among girls are more furtive, the boys make the act more violent and detrimental. Seeing Inubushi tease his friend’s newly dyed hair and threaten to cut it, Hoshino kicks Inubushi off a desk, beats Inubushi to unconsciousness using a chair, cuts off his long hair, and throws him into a mud puddle naked (Fig. 8 and 9, 01:00:35-01:14:30). Calling Inubushi “inu,” which means dog in Japanese, Hoshino demands Inubushi to “swim like a dog,” fetch his bag by mouth, and kicks him on the head and back into the mud after saying “enough, you can get out” (I will discuss this scene in Chapter 2).
The first time I watched the film, I cried out loud in my own head: “how can this possibly happen in a middle school classroom?” “Cruelty of youth” films like All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001, Japan) announce that bullying can lead to violence. Bullying can go bad. Like Kuno who had to go to school boldly after she was humiliated and her hair was shaved by bullies, bullying behaviors traumatize girls as they have to face the taunt and embarrassment when called by bad nicknames or after the bullying behavior damage their physical appearances and even psychological wellbeing. Bullying can also destroy boys’ self-esteem after they are beaten or humiliated in public, and results in the victim refusing to go to school like Inubushi, or even worse.

Teachers play a role in this genre of films. They are, ideally, adults who care about and can influence young people. But they can also function as just another adult who does not understand what is really happening in a classroom or school. Teachers in All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001, Japan) are not aware of the hostility among the students, much like the parents who are reluctant to help Sam after he was badly beaten by George in Mean Creek (2004, the United States). Films that portray bullying events, and the ramification of bullying, may sound the alarm for adults to recognize the bullying behaviors and help victims. “Cruelty of youth” films from both Japan and the United States repeatedly depict bullying behaviors because this is the reason this subgenre exists in the first place: to let the world know the bad things are happening to young people and to make the harming acts recognizable and preventable.

Films that people view in theaters, and that the media covers, may draw attention to perils facing young people in Japan or the United States. These films may also encourage more eyes on magazines and news feeds, capitalizing on violence to scare older people about young people in their own homes and neighborhoods. The subgenre of films I am most interested in drawing
attention to in this project, “cruelty of Youth,” delineate the choice-making and moral debating among teenage characters after brutal events.

*The Blue Light* (2003, Japan) is a story of expiation. 17-year-old Shuuichi Kushimori plans a “perfect crime” to murder his unemployed, alcohol abused, and violent stepfather who refuse to move out from the Kushimori’s after he divorced Shuuichi’s mother. When Shuuichi’s classmate, Ishioka, uncovers the crime and blackmails Shuuichi for money, Shuuichi plans the murder of Ishioka as an accident. After the murders are exposed by the police, Shuuichi confesses: “I think I cannot escape. I want to say a proper good-bye. There will be a lot of trouble if I get arrested, and it will bother mom and Yuko. I don’t want to destroy the rest of their lives because of me” (01:48:27 – 01:49:00). As a way of repaying the innocent lives he had taken and avoiding future troubles for his mother and sister, Shuuichi chooses to ride his racing cycle on the highway and into a truck. Shuuichi rides his racing cycle down to the seaside and against the traffic.
Under the blue summer sky, his face is filled with determination. As a truck hurtling towards Shuuichi, he slightly turns his bike handle and rides into the front of the truck without hesitation (Fig. 10, 11, and 12, 01:49:50 – 01:50:21). Although Shuuichi chooses extreme solutions to the problem with his stepfather, Ishioka, and his arrest, the film nevertheless demonstrates a youth’s braveness in making life-changing choices for the love and guilt for his family.

Films that highlight bullying, violence, and revenge of bullying or violence can tend to reinforce this cycle of violence or revenge. This dynamic, for actual people living through their young lives, may be much more complicated and morally complex. Different from single-minded plots of revenge-driven or defeat-the-villain dramas, filmmakers are discussing moral choice through young people’s perspectives. The simple prank-gone-wrong plot of Mean Creek (2004, the United States) is more influential than predictable for it debates about moral decisions and the hardship of standing up against the pressure of the crowd. When Millie learns about the prank of “stripping George, throwing him in the river, and making him run home naked,” she tries to convince Sam to call it off by saying, “he’s a stupid fat kid. He’s got problems. But he’s obviously –” (00:25:37 – 00:25:42).

I believe Millie is going to say, “he’s obviously not a monster.” In the world dominated by the concept of “either black or white,” two middle-school-aged kids are refuting the simple idea of destroying the bad bully and problems will be solved. Instead, they pause and consider the result of their revenge both on the bully and on themselves, and this is the concept that even many adult dramas fail to convey. However, even through Millie and Sam try to convince the group to stop the plan, they are still responsible for George’s death. When Marty decides to hide the body, each one of the crowd contradicts his idea and decide as a group to confess to George’s mother and the police. According to Roger Ebert, a youth film like this often tells the story of
“kids who would not possibly act by themselves form groups that cannot stop themselves”
(“Mean Creek Movie Review”). Contrary to the simple-minded youth, teens in this film feel
remorse for their cruel, peer-driven actions and consequences, and this is the reason that youth
films are sometimes valuable. Sometimes, it is necessary to represent the cruelty of youth in a
movie, in order to approach the younger generation with the debate on situational ethics and
moral dilemmas.

If there is one reason for the filmmakers to continue making youth films, especially
“cruelty of youth” films that discuss juvenile crimes and teen violence, it is because brutal
crimes, that committed and experienced by youth, are still happening across cultures. Although
the selected films were made more than a decade ago, events depicted in those films are still
dominating today’s news. The public is still viewing *All about Lily Chou-Chou* as a
representation of school bullying. Similar to the two selected Japanese films, murders between
classmates still shock the country, as for example, when the “Sasebo schoolgirl murder” made
the front page of Japanese news in 2014. In the United States, “prank gone wrong” death cases
often appear on news and social media. In 2013, the Pi Delta Psi “Hazing incidents” occurred
when fraternity members accidentally killed the prospective 19-year-old member in an
unsanctioned pledge and attempted to hide his body. This dreadful fraternity incident reminds the
public of the similar tragedy of a group of unstoppable young people and a dare game in *Mean

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4 The “Sasebo schoolgirl murder” (佐世保女子高生殺害事件 Sasebo Joshikōsei Satsugai jiken) refers
to the murder that happened in Sasebo, Japan on July 26, 2014. A 15-year-old high-school-girl murdered
her classmate, also 15-year-old Aiwa Matsuo (松尾 愛和 Matsuo Aiwa) by beating the victim with a
metal tool, strangled her to death, and partially dismembered and decapitated the victim’s body. See
Shears, Richard. “Schoolgirl, 15 ’beat female classmate to death then confessed to chopping off her head
and hand’ in Japan.” Daily Mail online, Daily Mail, 24 July 2014, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-
Finally, there is no need to mention the numerous campus shooting massacres like the school killing we see in *Elephant*: Red Lake shootings in 2005, Virginia Tech shooting in 2007. Even today, the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that happened on February 14 took 17 lives is still shocking to the nation.6

“Cruelty of youth” films can overemphasize or exaggerate youth violence, but they also reflect on the problems that are often ignored in reality. Through the perspectives of adults, these youth films are amplify problems from the family and peer bullying. Many of the movies also convey the struggles of teens to make moral decisions and do the right thing in dilemmas.

Perhaps, the necessity for “cruelty of youth” to exist and to be seen by a wider audience is that they not only reflecting the story of the past, but also warn the society of the future.

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5 Pi Delta Psi of Baruch College’s hazing incidents happened in December 2013, when 18-year-old prospective member Chun Hsien “Michael” Deng was killed in a pledge to join the fraternity. Deng was ordered to wear 30 lb backpacks filled with sand while the fraternity members tackled him during the ritual called “The Glass Ceiling.” The ritual, which was supposed to represent the struggle of Asian American in the United States, caused Deng’s death from brain trauma during the violently beating and kicking by the other members. After Deng was unconscious, the members of the Pi Delta Psi failed to call for emergency medical help and attempted to cover the incident. See Kingkade, Tyler. “Baruch College Hazing Death: Police Say Brothers Tried To Hide Fraternity Ties.” The Huffington Post, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 15 Dec. 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/15/baruch-college-hazing-death-deng_n_4450369.html.


Chapter 2  The Cruel Youth

SAM: All right, what about this?
MILLIE: What’s that?
SAM: “If you could snap your finger right now, and he would drop dead in his tracks, would you do it?”
MILLIE: It’s totally mean, Sam.

– Mean Creek (2004, the United States)

Living as a teenager can be a contradictory experience, for teenage life is filled with ups and downs, while a person undergoes critical biological transformations and endures enormous pressures from discovering one’s sense of self, fitting into society, and trying to excel in, or at least endure, school. At a time when youth must simultaneously face stress factors from biological, social, and academic settings, their own characteristics become harder for them to interpret. Because of the complexity of defining youth by their characteristics and the fact that almost all films that address young people are produced by adults, the youth figures on screen have always been filtered through adult perspectives and the lens of exaggeration and traditional ways of thinking (Shary, “Generation Multiplex” 2). Even so, young adult and teen characters created by adults are widely presented on screen and influence an audience’s interpretations of youth in reality. Also, based on the belief in the strong connection between personalities and deeds, an audience may assume that the cruelties youth suffer are created by those youth who are, in their character or personality, inherently cruel. In order to find out the common presentation of youth characteristics in films, and to explore whether the characteristics of a particular young person may cause a tragic event or a series of tragedies, this chapter explores the cinematic stereotypical representations of characteristics that contribute to depicting “cruel youth.” These characterizes include naivety, conformity, lack of empathy, and detachment. In
this chapter, I also examine how teenage characteristics particular to the stage of life known as “youth” shape the conceptions of being “cruel youth” through a close reading of selected film scenes. Evidence from these selected films will contribute to answering adults’ question of “Why are the young people so cruel?”

**Naivety**

Naivety is one of the characteristics that may come to mind immediately when mentioning youth, in either Japan or the United States. Unlike some other characteristics of youth, naivety is intrinsically related to this particular psychological, developmental stage. In youth films across these two cultures, there are many young characters’ actions that seem to be unbelievably simple-minded and lacking in foresight or perspective. For most of these naïve actions, teenagers are looking for the most rapid and efficient solutions to the problems they encounter, and they often ignore the consequences of their hasty moves and the potential influences on their surroundings created by their actions.

In *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan), the protagonist, Shuuichi, is a considerate and mature second-year middle school student. Different from the impression Shuuichi offers the viewers, his entire plan of murdering his stepfather and protecting his mother and sister is based on the simple assumption that eliminating the violent and alcoholic stepfather on his own is the best solution to the problem. Shuuichi, like other typical teenagers at his age who wish to document their thoughts in some way, keeps a cassette recorder to document his feelings and plans. When Shuuichi hears his stepfather’s heavy footsteps, and considers the pressure he brings to the family, he says to the recorder,

> Dogs do not have imagination, nor do cats and sheep. They are not like humans, who would hang themselves because of frustration. I will never give up my
imagination. Before I hang myself, there are lots of things to deal with. How can I drive the person away from my family? Should I set fire and burn down the house? Or should I push him down the railroad and make it into an accident? It seems like I need to take time and think about how to protect my family. (00:08:16 – 00:08:58)

As Shuuichi suggests, he uses his imagination to plan a “perfect crime.” Shuuichi’s imagination leads him to access his knowledge of chemistry, as he purchases a drug and injects it into his stepfather’s liquor bottle, and to expand his understanding in electricity, as well as biology, to use an electric shock to administer a lethal heart attack. However, Shuichi’s imagination is limited by his immaturity and naivety. He fails to plan for eventualities, such as one in which someone else discovers his murder plan. When this exact thing happens, he has to continue his killing to cover up the trace. Nor does Shuuichi consider another way out of his turmoil.

Eventually he comes to recognize that the police may come to arrest him. At this point, he could consider an option of going to trial to plead not guilty, or he could possibly even run away. But Shuuichi stubbornly continues in his sense that violence and death are his only remaining options. He sees murder as the only option to keep troubles away from his family, and he seeks no escape except one in which he repays his crimes with his own death. Naivety makes teenagers childish, shortsighted, and stubborn in the way that they believe they are always right and ignore the consequences of their actions. Naivety is not in itself lethal, but it may trap youth in the dilemmas of their own mistakes, and leave them unable to envision an escape that does not lead to tragedy.

Similarly, films from the United States also depict young characters’ seeking quick solutions without considering the cruelty behind their choices. At the beginning of Mean Creek (2004, the United States), Millie asks Sam casually during their lunch break if Sam is considering revenge on George in the way of “if you could snap your fingers right now, and he
would drop dead in his tracks, would you do it?” Sam looks at George from a distance, and he lowers his head in an expression of digesting Millie’s words (00:04:22 – 00:04:35). Later, when Millie discovers the gang’s plan on pranking George, Sam snaps his finger and repeats Millie’s exacts words to explain their motivation (00:25:24 – 00:25:33). The act of Sam using Millie’s word to justify the prank express his belief that George deserves revenge and the revenge was preapproved by Millie during their lunch break together. The fact that Sam absorbs Millie’s joke as an option, and he casually applies the joke to justify the harmful and humiliating plan of stripping George and pushing him into the river confirms his naivety as seeking for the most expedited solution to a problem, but ignoring the possible cruel consequences.

In “cruelty of youth” films from the United States, naivety is often presented as a combination of simple-mindedness and shortsightedness that are correlated to the developmental period of youth. *Elephant* (2003, the United States) portrays one additional aspect of youth’s naivety: overconfidence. Benny, a tall and strong African American student, is depicted as the tragic consequence of overconfidence. In his fewer-than-five-minute presence in the movie, Benny walks in the hallway in the direction that everyone else is fleeing. He helps a female
student to escape through the window and walks back to the hall while a fire burns and gunshots are heard in the background. At the time he finds Eric, one of the two killers who is about to shoot the principal, Benny slows down his steps and approaches the killer from the back. It is at the exact time when a viewer might expect Benny to disrupt the killer, Eric, from the back, in the way that heroes from many major productions would succeed in doing. Instead, Eric instead turns around and shoots Benny in the chest (Fig. 12, 01:08:08 – 01:12:33). When I viewed this film, Benny’s sudden and tragic death shocked me. I asked myself: what is Benny’s motive when he decides to stop the killer instead of fleeing from the campus like everyone else? Although the film does not offer an explanation, here is my best sense of what the writers of the films intended. Perhaps Benny does not fear death. He considers himself too young to die, and he has the confidence that he is strong and brave enough to stop the killer. Perhaps he does not think about the tragic ending at all.

Just as knowing the high risk of smoking does not prevent young people from the future use of tobacco, understanding death would not refrain them from hazardous attempts. They are often not afraid of discussing death, because they think they have a whole lifetime ahead of them, and they may even feel that they are immortal (Nilsson and Emmelin 1). The naïve thoughts on death, and the default mode of optimism in their own luck and abilities lead young people to their tragic endings in the three films.

**Conformity**

Many young people feel confused and fragile at some point of their youth, because youth, as a development stage, is both complex and contradictory. Being a youth is often described as feeling “uncertainty about some aspects of life . . . combined with great certainty about others;
feelings of curiosity and a wish to challenge existing norm systems. . . accompanied by feelings of fear, vulnerability and a need to comply with peer conceptions about attitude and image” (Nilsson and Emmelin 4). In order to mediate the feeling of vulnerability, and in order to build image and identity, teenagers often view conforming to group activities, especially those that imitate adult behaviors such as smoking and drinking, as the shortcut to gain respect and reach social status among peers.

The best way to fit into a teenage crowd is to conform to their activities and follow the older, and seemingly adult-like leader of the group. In Mean Creek (2004, the United States), George is invited to go boating by the crowd and wants to become a part of the group by interrupting others’ conversations with Marty, the oldest of the group, and proving he is capable of doing anything. When Marty hands George the cigarette, George coughs badly after his first smoke. Afterward, George stops smoking and says, “these are really strong.” When Marty asks George in a mocking tone if he is a “cigarette virgin,” George boasts in a flamboyant expression, “naw, I’m not, man. I’ve smoked before. I once caught smoked an entire pack of American Spirit menthols.” After Marty points out that American Spirit does not produce menthols, George insists that he has smoked before, and that he was not lying (Fig. 13, 00:26:39 – 00:27:05). George sees smoking as a shortcut to Marty, the oldest and most experienced in the group, and to receive his trust and favor. Rocky later tells Sam, “the only
reason why he’s being nice to us is because he sees this as an opportunity to get something” (00:27:44 – 00:27:50). Conformity is a way to get closer to peers and to receive things from others. There is perhaps something normal, even inevitable, for young people to deal with their vulnerable period of life by wanting to conform and be part of a group of friends. This “cruelty of youth” subgenre in film depicts ways that this desire may also lead some teens to tell lies and even hurt other people in order to fit in.

Despite the active conforming to groups to build image and gain respect and social status, young characters in “cruelty of youth” films often passively conform to a group for protection or even in order to avoid further bullying by another member. Compared to the character Hoshino, Yuichi in *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan) is quieter and more introverted. Beginning in middle school as Hoshino’s best friend, Yuichi becomes the bullying target of bullying after Hoshino’s tumultuous personality change. After Yuichi is caught stealing a CD from a store, he does not hang out with Hoshino and the gang until Hoshino calls Yuichi on the phone. When Yuichi rides his bike to meet Hoshino, Hoshino orders his gang to destroy Yuichi’s bike, beat him to the ground, dismantle everything in his backpack, and
threatens Yuichi to force him to masturbate in a landfill site, ordering two members of the group to watch (Fig. 14 and 15, 00:25:30 – 00:30:45). Yuichi drops to the ground after Hoshino leaves, but Yuichi is bullied only because he does not follow the gang in their afternoon theft. This scene happens in the night, but the filmmakers, Shunji Iwa, constantly target Yuichi with a strong flush light, emphasizing that Yuichi is the only one who does not conform to Hoshino’s order. The punishment from Hoshino in this scene converts Yuichi into an obedient follower, one who chooses to stay silent even when he notices that what he and Hoshino are doing is both illegal and wrong. Conforming to a group and to the order of a superior peer is sometimes as pathetic in real life as shown in “cruelty of youth films.” The only way a weaker youth may escape from bullying and punishment of the group is through conformity.

**Lack of Empathy**

Empathy, “the ability to recognize the emotions of others and affectively share in them,” has always been emphasized in my own, personal early education, both at home and at school, as an important lesson for cognitive development in youth (definition from Posick et al. 5).

Franciscus de Waal, a Dutch primatologist and ethologist, stated in his 1996 book that empathy, along with sympathy, is a “pillar of human morality” (Posick et al. 7). A 2017 study by van Hazebroek et al. explains the relation between empathy and aggression, noting that a lack of empathetic concern has a greater chance to lead to proactive aggression in youth who desire to be dominant in social situations with peers (210). Many aggressive conflicts in “cruel of youth” films begin with a young character who lacks such empathy.

The final scene of *Elephant* (2003, the United States) delineates one of the most terrifying scenes I have ever seen in youth films. After Alex shoots his partner Eric, he finds
Nathan and his girlfriend hiding in the freezer behind the café. Ignoring their begging voices, Alex raises the gun and starts counting “eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch a tiger by the toe. If he hollers, let him go, eeny, meeny, miny, moe” with a smile on his face. His counting continues until the screen shifts to the ending score, and the film ends without showing the ending of Nathan, his girlfriend, and Alex (Fig. 16, 01:16:09 – 01:17:51). Although the movie does not offer an explanation of what makes the two teenagers become killers, Eric, in his last scene well demonstrates his craziness and lack of empathic feeling. The fact that Eric plays the significant part of planning the massacre and shoots his partner without a glance indicates that Eric desires to be superior to his peers. When facing the last two victims, Alex does not hesitate or feel rushed. Instead, he sings the children’s counting song and pretends that he is giving the victims the order to die. Along with the smile of success on his face and the excitement in his eyes, Eric’s actions convey to the audience that he is not simply killing, and that he does not sense the fear and pain of the victims. Instead, he is enjoying the course of murder, as he views the massacre as his own game. Eric is the representation of this type of teen criminal in some “cruelty of youth” films as well as in reality: they demonstrate their aggression and violence
from the lack of empathy, and they do not care about what happens to the victims and what will happen to themselves even by taking other people’s lives.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 17**

What could be more brutal than violently taking people’s lives? Perhaps it is when a person is physically bullied and emotionally tortured when his or her body is exposed to the public and the self-esteem is damaged, yet this person has to keep living and face the perpetrators every day. This disturbing situation is referring to the bullying scene in *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan). Immediately into the scene, the color of the image shifts from the dim and soft natural light in the classroom to a wired coloration that looks like a cross-processed film or even a mistake in processing the film (Fig. 17 and 18, 01:13:00 – 00:14:30). During the scene of Hoshino standing on the bank, ordering Inubushi to dog-paddle in the mud pit, the sky is in a grey scale, and the field that has always been vividly green in the film is now a withered yellow, while people’s skin is portrayed in purple. After Hoshino kicks Inubushi on the head and Inubushi falls back into the mud pit, Hoshino looks at Inubushi, sitting in the mud naked and scared, and laughs wildly. Hoshino’s wild and uncontrollable laughter becomes more savage.

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7 Cross processing is a technique in film development, referring to the method of intentionally using the wrong chemicals to process films. The aim of cross processing is usually to create interesting and unpredictable color shifts with increased contrast.
under the shifted coloration. The ferocious facial expressions and his purple face under the grey sky combine to create a hallucinatory feeling, almost as if audiences are watching the action of a demon in an altered world. The color shift in the scene delineates Hoshino’s lack of empathetic feeling for his victim as if he is punishing an animal instead of a human. As the turning point of Hoshino’s behaviors, this scene represents Hoshino’s change from an exemplary student to a bully and eventually a criminal, which illustrates how the lack of empathy could alter young people’s personalities and create aggressive and cruel, perhaps even inhuman humans.

**Detachment**

“A youth is like an island. No one would understand the young dreams and persistence.”

In my teenage years, I encountered this sentence that I believed best summarize my life as a youth. As a teenager, I felt neither the adults nor my peers would ever understand me, not even to mention they would have the ability to help me with my troubles. A 2003 research study on the content of prime-time series found that entertainment shows that involve youth in the United States emphasized romantic issues or friendship, and youth’s problems are almost always solved...
easily and without the help of adult figures (Nichols and Good 47). While the popular culture often portrays youth as either simple and carefree or self-absorbed and aggressive, “cruelty of youth” films in both the United States and Japan stand out because these movies depict real youth problems, such as bullying, juvenile crime, and suicide. What makes these films significantly distinct from youth films in other subgenres is that, instead of teen conflicts in popular youth films always easily solved without adults’ help, youth in “cruelty of youth” films often have no one to ask for help because of their lack of trust in adults and detachment from their peer social circles.

Filmmakers of the “cruelty of youth” films from the United States often diminish or even dismiss adults’ roles in order to create detached and helpless youth characters. Mean Creek (2004, the United States) shows minimal adult involvement in youth’s free time both at home and outside. A group of young people gathers in Sam and Rocky’s bedroom to plan the prank on George, and they tell George not to tell his parents about the boating trip. One of the only few scenes with adults present is after George’s death, when Marty visits Sam and Rocky’s house and their father opens the door to tell Marty, “the whole gang’s here. They’re listening to music in the bedroom there” (01:16:21 – 01:16:40). The father’s reaction to Marty’s visit shows that the adults do not know about George’s death and the frustration among the teenagers in the bedroom. Another scene that involves an adult figure is when the gang confesses to George’s mother. Similar to the former scene, after the knock, the light in the house is turned up, and George’s mother opens the door in her pajamas and robe. She is confused for the late-night visit, but when she sees the silence of the group and their sad and painful faces, her eyes grow wide, and she freezes in shock (Fig. 19, 01:21:47 – 01:22:07). In both scenes, the adult figures’ only
function is to open the door and receive minimal information from the youth. The adults are ignorant of their children’s activities outside of home along with the evil plan, the accidental death of George, and the children’s misery after his death. Moreover, when the gang arrives at George’s house, George’s mother already has turned off the light, has changed into her pajamas, and is ready to sleep. The details once again confirm the parents’ ignorance of their children: seeing her son is not returning to home so late, his mother does not call the police or ask around the neighborhood, but instead prepares to go to bed. The minimal involvement of adults portrayed in Mean Creek (2004, the United States) speaks for many parents in reality. These parents do not know what is happening to their children and what their children are thinking. This sense of alienation between the adults and their children results in the passive detachment of teenagers from their family and enhances the belief that adults cannot recognize when the children are facing their own problems.

In Elephant (2003, the United States), the filmmaker, Gus Van Sant, delineates adults as outsiders in teenagers’ lives. The two shooters, Eric and Alex, plan their attack and purchase the firearms in Alex’s bedroom, a separate living space in the basement isolated from his parents’ lives upstairs. Additionally, Van Sant plans the mise-en-scene and deliberately places the adults as the background and the setting in the film. The only scene that presents Eric’s parents is

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8 *Mise en scene*, in the original French, means “putting into the scene.” The field of film direction uses this term to signify the director’s control over what appears in the frame. *Mise en scene* includes aspects
when Alex and Eric are having breakfast at Alex’s, as his mother is cooking in the kitchen behind the table where Alex and Eric are sitting, and his father walks by the kitchen and the dining room. The parents exchange only few words with the two boys. Throughout the scene, the viewers never see the faces of Alex’s parents because their heads are purposely cut off by the camera (Fig. 20, 00:53:35 – 00:54:29). By not include the parents’ faces in the frame and only focusing on the faces of Eric and Alex, the director announces to the audiences that the adult figures play no role in the school attack: the parents know nothing about the boys’ plan, and are not even playing a significant role in the teenagers’ lives. By omitting the individualism of adults, placing them in the background, the filmmaker highlights the invisible wall between adults and youth and affirms the detachment and estrangement of teens’ lives from their parents.

While “cruelty of youth” films in the United States demonstrates the detachment of youth from adult figures, Japanese productions focus more on youth’s estrangement from not only adults, but also society and even peers. In *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan), although Shuuichi does not live in the house with his mother and sister and occupies the backyard storage as his room, he has more interactions with adult characters than many young people in the selected films from the United States. Even Shuuichi’s interactions with his mother cannot mediate his frustration of film such as setting, lighting, costume, and the behavior of the characters. In other words, the film director “stage the event” for the camera to add elements to the plot. See Bordwell, David, et al. *Film art: an introduction*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2017. Information on Mise en Scene is in Chapter Three: Film Style.
with the stepfather, and Shuuichi’s helpless feeling is portrayed by the use of the fish tank in Shuuichi’s bedroom, which represents youth’s relationship with the outside world. The fish tank appears many times throughout the movie, starting from the opening scene, when Shuuichi wakes up in the fish tank (00:00:24 – 00:01:05). The fish tank appears again after the murder of his stepfather, when Shuuichi returns home one day and notices his sister, Haruka, is sleeping in the fish tank. Awakened by the light, Haruka asks Shuuichi, “did you really killed that person?” As Shuuichi replies uneasily, “Yes, I did kill him,” Haroka says peacefully, “so it is like what I thought” (01:11:29 – 01:12:38). The transparent cube-shaped fish tank that accommodates only one teenage-sized person symbolizes the shelter for youth. Shuuichi wakes up in the fish tank because he is troubled by the real situation of what to do to get rid of his stepfather, and Haruka sleeps in the fish tank because she wants to escape from thinking about her brother as the murderer. The uncapacious fish tank offers enough room for youth to curl up like a carefree baby, while the transparent glass walls allowed them to see the outside world and protects them from the harm of reality. Shuuichi’s fish tank is the objectification of his will to escape from reality and his attempt to avoid the harms caused by adults.

The fish tank also appears in the scene when Shuuichi takes the heroine, Noriko Fukuhara, to his room. After Noriko tells the story about her dog’s death and sees the parts of a racing cycle hanging from the roof, Shuuichi makes a joke, saying, “it looks like hanging the racing cycle on the gallows.” Seeing Noriko’s serious face, Shuuichi suddenly becomes angry, grasps Noriko’s wrist, and wants her to stay with him. Because of Noriko’s repeated rejections, Shuuichi shouts, “you are afraid of me? Then tell me!” He throws Noriko’s bag into the yard and orders her to leave. When Shuuichi drops into the bed and starts to touch the fish tank beside his bed, he notices that Noriko is on the other side of the fish tank. She strokes the other glass wall
and smiles at him. Many times, Shuuichi raises his sight and seems to want to say something to Noriko, but he says nothing and bangs his head on the glass wall silently (Fig. 21, 01:30:10 – 01:33:35). This scene is far less striking than scenes of murder, but it functions as a turning point in the film: Noriko was already suspecting Shuuichi of killing his stepfather and their classmate, Ishioka, and she confirms her thought after Shuuichi’s rage. But Noriko, instead of questioning Shuuichi like Haruka did, comes back and wants Shuuichi to confess and to understand that she is here to support him. Both Shuuichi and Noriko touch the cold glass walls in front of them and look at each other across the empty fish tank. The glass walls are like the thin films surrounding a new-born mammal, protecting the organism while isolating it from the harm of the world. The fact that Shuuichi and Noriko are looking at each other through the fish tank symbolizes that they can see each other’s problems and they want to help each other, but are helpless because they are independent living beings, and they can never break the wall that separates them.
Youth’s detachment in *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan) is in a more common and acceptable form: idol worship. Jon Lewis, the author of *The Road to Romance + Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* explains, “celebrity may function as the only real antidote to the boredom and directionless of teen life” (14). Indeed, the name of the film implies that *All About Lily Chou-Chou* is a film about the popular fictional singer Lily Chou-Chou, or rather Yuichi’s escape to the music world created by Lily Chou-Chou. This idol never presents herself in the film, and the audiences only learns about her through her music videos and fragmented messages in an online chatroom. Lily Chou-Chou is the trigger to almost every event that involves Yuichi. Yuichi steals a CD because it is Lily Chou-Chou’s newly released CD that he has no money to buy (00:14:07 – 00:15:35). Yuichi enters an online chatroom as “Philia” and later becomes friend with “Blue Cat,” who later proves to be Hoshino, because of his love for or obsession with Lily Chou-Chou. In the end, Yuichi stabs Hoshino because Hoshino tears apart Yuichi’s ticket to Lily Chou-Chou’s concert (02:07:30 – 02:14:38). Lily Chou-Chou’s presence occupies Yuichi’s life, as all his life-changing events are associated with his idol, and going back to her music and posting about her online are his entire life and the life that neither his peers nor his parents would understand.

Ironically, Lily Chou-Chou, in one of her song named “Experiments of Love,” sings, “I see you, you see me/ (seeing far)/ You see me, I see you/ (far far away).” Although “see” is the key word that she repeats in the song, the audience never see Lily Chou-Chou. Similarly, every character from the film never sees through Yuichi and his real self hidden in his shelter of Lily Chou-Chou’s music. Ultimately, the film demonstrates that sometimes youth worship idols only because they need to detach from reality and hide their real selves in a perfect fictional world.
Naïve, always following in groups, lacking empathy, and detached from their surroundings. . . These shared characteristics are common in “cruelty of youth” films both from the United States and Japan, and each film has a character that resembles some features of the constellation of problems. Although youth figures in the selected Japanese films are more centralized and portrayed with more complexity, the features of youth are common in the two cultures. None of the characteristics is inherently cruel, but with the limitations of youth, and temperaments that are uncontrollable, they become the cruel youth that would harm others and even themselves.
Chapter 3

Cruel Experience, Brutal Deeds, and the Alternative Transition to Adulthood

*Through the long, winding passages we came to here*
*And after this, we have to still go on*
*Only time quietly registers all*
*When we grow up, we give up*
*Inside the heart*
*We find so many mirrors*

—Lyricas from “Resonance (Hollow Stone) /共鳴（空虚な石）,” by Lily Chou-Chou

Cruel youth are hard to be identified because they are not confined by list of common characteristics. Not every teenager who exhibits some of the traits named as cruel would harm others. But the brutal deeds in the films I am describing are easy to recognize. Within only four selected youth films, there are scenes depicting juvenile crimes as a recognizable and obvious displays of juvenile rebellion: theft, intimidation, robbery, physical harm, and bullying. These crimes are not unfamiliar to the audience, because some of them must have happened to viewers at some point in their teenage years. Among all types of youth crimes, one category of the extremely serious crimes has been presented in all selected “cruelty of youth” films – murder. Nearly every possible aspect of murder is performed in these four “cruelty of youth” films. There are murders which are intentionally planned or unintentional (accidental), an individual killing or a massacre, the trigger of an incident or the aftermath of a conflict, and murders that succeeded or fail. All the murders in these selected films direct a viewer to a question: Why do I consider murders committed by youth, or killings of youth, as the representation of all the cruelties that can ever happen to young people? The answer to this question is that murder is not only actively taking others’ lives, but also stealing away both the killers’ and victims’ futures, shutting off all
possibilities. I will use this chapter to explore the influences of murder in the selected films and examine the filmmakers’ purposes of projecting cruelty experienced by youth. Moreover, I will discuss how “cruelty of youth” films could substitute the brutality suffered by youth in reality and teach the lesson of death and the fragility of life.

Youth is fragmentary and fleeting, and the period of being a youth is transitional and transitory (Lewis 1). In the time of transiting to adulthood, the cruel events that are committed by or that happen to teenagers will skew their life trajectory unexpectedly and tremendously. In this chapter, I will discuss how young people, whether they are the victims or the perpetrators, suffer from cruel events related to murders. I will examine the idea that the involvement in death is the alternative path of the transition to adulthood for the murderers, victims, and the outsiders who witness the death of a peer. This chapter also demonstrates that “cruelty of youth” films are invaluable educational sources for young viewers to engage in active discussions about helping to end youth cruelty.

**Youth Who Kill**

While viewing the killings in “cruelty of youth” films, I often ask myself, what makes murders done by juveniles so distinct from those by adults? Perhaps it is because juveniles have a limited ability to reason and respond responsibly to conflicts (Brislin and Inoue 5). Apart from this explanation, children as a group have not until recently been identified as “real people” rather than the attachment of adults (Rosenstand 303). Since youth have long been viewed not as independent people, they were excluded from rights, hence responsibilities. Nowadays, because the public still views murder as an “adult crime” and youth are limited by their physical ability and psychological underdevelopment, most cases of youth who commit “adult crimes” are
judged differently within the justice systems in both Japan and the United States. Compared to the judicial process for adult criminals, juveniles often receive less adversarial processes and less severe punishment (Brislin and Inoue 5). Moreover, Japanese Juvenile Law prevents teenage offenders’ identities from being publicized and concentrates more on rehabilitation of the offender instead of punishment (Oka 3106). For the above reasons, juvenile crimes may be less detrimental to the young offenders. Reflecting and responding to this, many filmmakers consider teenage murders as a possible solution to get rid of an unwanted person and incorporate murder as the only solution to the turmoil in their lives.

Compared to “cruelty of youth” films in the United States, Japanese filmmakers are more likely to utilize murder as the ultimate solution to the stress in a young person’s life. *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan) portrays Shuuichi’s murder of his alcoholic stepfather to save his mother and sister from the stepfather’s extortion and violence. Shuuichi tests his tools for the planned murder, an electrode and acupuncture needles as eclectic conductors, on a raw chicken. Seeing the raw chicken light up and burn from the inside, Shuuichi rests assured and records his thoughts on the recorder. He says to the recorder,

No one knows these are the tools for killing, they all look very normal. Their normal appearances will keep them from being noticed… This time I need to win with my imagination. Should I just do it? … Maybe from tomorrow until the day I die, I will struggle in an unescapable nightmare…. There are things in this world that I cannot simply laugh and move on. (00:38:33 – 00:40:53)

Shuuichi uses the phrase “until the day I die” to express the impact of his planned murder on his life. This scene happens before Shuuichi commits murder, and Shuuichi thinks childishly that his remorse and regret will last for his entire life. With the foreseeable result of facing lifetime guilt, Shuuichi still chooses to kill as the solution. The phrase “until the day I die” indicates Shuuichi’s shortsightedness and stubbornness, perceiving murder as his only feasible way to fight against
the pressure of the adult world. This scene also reveals the naivety and over-confidence in believing that no one will uncover his crime and that he will have a long life to live with his sin. At this moment, murder, to him, is not a bloody crime but a promising pass to prepare him for becoming a better adult who can withstand the challenge of the adult world.

After Shuuichi’s successful murder, instead of feeling nervous, guilty, or worried, he rolls in his bed and cannot stop laughing. This scene depicts the happiest vision of Shuuichi in the entire film. This happiness is close to madness, when he laughs so hard that he has to curl up his body into a fetal position and bury his face in the pillow, so that his laughter will not be heard outside of his room (Fig. 22, 00:57:14 – 00:57:28). Contrary to his feeling of remorse before carrying out the crime, Shuuichi immerses himself in pure happiness and thrill when watching the death of his stepfather. At this moment, Shuuichi ignores the fact that killing is unreasonable and unacceptable, but rather is inundated with the belief that the unforgivable murder is the shortcut for solving life-threatening problems, such as the escape from his intimidating stepfather and ridding himself of Ishioka, the classmate who threatens to reveal Shuuichi’s murder of the stepfather. The same explanation for the existential killers in teen films, “once you start fighting, you’re always defending yourself” (Lewis 14), can also explain Shuuichi’s intention of using another murder to cover the previous murder. The filmmakers of The Blue Light (2003, Japan) claims that, Shuuichi symbolizes how youth in
“cruelty of youth” films are refined by psychologically underdeveloped and often fail to recognize the impacts of killings on their transitions to adulthood.

Before Shuuichi murders his stepfather, he fails to protect his sister from the stepfather’s violence. As Shuuichi runs back to his room and cries for his inability to protect his loved ones, he heard the words from the TV science program saying, “…this is called a ‘critical point.’ … This Cherenkov radiation projects a blue glow… Radiation can generate fear in people, but radiation can occur in nature and even within the human body and release great energy…” (00:32:58 – 00:33:38). When Shuuichi’s eyes reflect the blue light from the TV screen and think about murdering his stepfather, does he feel the fear? As the title “The Blue Light” suggests, young murders are like the blue light created by the radiation that generates fear of the surroundings. Nevertheless, the cruel deeds demonstrate that, like radiations that can occur within human bodies, young people are capable of violence in given circumstances.

Brutal crime does not always require a plan because youth can become harmful after a sudden snap. In All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001, Japan), unstoppable bullying and a life of unrepentance generate Yuichi’s unexpected killing of Hoshino. Hoshino’s final bullying acts are tearing up Yuichi’s Lily Chou-Chou concert ticket and throwing the ticket away in a perfect arc, leaving Yuichi at the gate to watch everyone else entering the concert. Yuichi stands at the empty entrance, watching Lily Chou-Chou in her MV drop a heavy stone on the floor in front of a somber and overgrown debris and sing,

When we group up, we give up
Insider the heart, we find so many mirrors
The rapture of meeting you, is even more excruciating than the pain of seeing you Because in my heart, there still lies a hollow stone (Resonance (Hollow)/ 共鳴（空虚な石）)
Yuichi watches Hoshino coming out of the concert, and Hoshino asks Yuichi, “why are you still here?” Yuichi stares at Hoshino’s back as Hoshino walks away and leaves him on the spot. That is the moment Yuichi starts to shout, “look, is Lily, Lily is over there!” As the crowd looks for Lily Chou-Chou and pushes and shoves to get back into the concert hall, Yuichi bursts through the boisterous crowd in the opposite direction. He approaches Hoshino and hits him hard from the back, and when their eyes meet briefly, Yuichi flees, and Hoshino drops to the ground. Yuichi escapes from the crowd, and when he is far away, he takes out the green apple that Hoshino gave him before the concert, and pulls the bloody knife out from the apple (Fig. 23, 02:07:29 – 02:14:38). Yuichi’s action demonstrates that he did not plan to kill Hoshino before he came to the concert. He did not even expect to meet Hoshino. On the contrary, Yuichi’s killing is purely one of spontaneous revenge, resulting from Hoshino’s brutal acts targeting Yuichi and people he cares about, culminating in the unforgivable bullying on the day of the concert. The director, Shunji Iwa, uses Yuichi’s murder scene to deliver the message that youth are easy to
bend and teenagers are capable of becoming killers, using killing to escape from the pressure once that pressure reaches an unbearable threshold.

Different from the cruelties in Japanese “cruelty of youth” films, films from the United States focus on the group activities instead of murders committed by individuals, and declare that cruelty may not only happen at the time of the killing, but also after the death of the victim. After the gang finds George’s drowned body in Mean Creek (2004, the United States), everyone surrounds the body and debates what they should do. When Rocky, Sam, Millie, and Clyde stand in a circle, and Marty is looking for George’s camera in the water, Sam taunts Marty, saying, “Superman’s gonna fly around Earth and turn back time?” Marty replies seriously and ruthlessly, “No, I don’t think Superman’s going to turn back time. Think we gotta bury the body.” When Clyde nervously walks away from the group and protests, “if we bury the body, it’s gonna look like we did it on purpose.” Marty marches toward Clyde in an intimidating fashion and yells, “if we bury the body, we’re not gonna look like anything. Out of sight, out of mind” (00:58:52 – 00:59:32). If the Japanese “cruelty of youth” films demonstrate teenagers’ cruelty, reflected in use of murder to solve family problems and to take the revenge against bullies, Mean Creek (2004, the United States) proclaims that cowardice and irresponsibility also contribute to youth’s cruelty. Marty insists that burying George’s body is the best, even the only way because “out of sight, out of mind.” This phrase reflects both Marty’s cowardice and his sense of irresponsibility for George’s death. Marty is the person who came up with the idea of a prank on George, insisting on pushing George into the river. However, when he suggests burying George and removing the body “out of sight,” he avoids facing his responsibility for taking George’s life. When Marty refers to the burial of George as “out of sight, out of mind,” he is objectifying George. By viewing ‘s death as a moment that can be buried and removed from his mind easily,
Marty expresses his cowardice. He cannot face the fact that he is a person responsible for killing. He wants to convince everyone that, if they bury George, they will be covering a trace, burying their guilt so that no one will discover their responsibility for George’s death.

*Elephant* (2003, the United States) presents a scenario that is distinct from the other three films. Here the two killers, Eric and Alex, conform to their murderous plan without an explanation of intentions. In the scene during which Eric and Alex walk purposefully to the school building and find no one in the hallway, they pass a man cleaning the floor without even looking at him. They act like they are merely two high school students who are late for a class: Eric seems bored and Alex is nervous and anxious. Their entrance into the library also looks like they are just paying a random visit to the school facility, if only they were not also holding their firearms. Alex loads his gun and produces a clear and crisp sound, making students in the library turn to look at them. While Alex is looking around, he has the look of a predator. Elias, the photographer from the yearbook, holds up his camera and clicks on the shutter as he is capturing something unique and entertaining. When the library assistant, Michelle, murmurs, “hey, you guys…,” Alex shoots her in the face without a blink. As Michelle’s blood splashes all over the books on the shelf, Alex starts his killing by randomly pulling the trigger on anyone in the library. The sound of gunshots ring in calm beats, and Alex does not hesitate to shoot his next victim. His face appears indifferent and effortless, in particular when he shoots a student who is surrendering (Fig. 24, 01:06:23 – 01:07:48).
Teenagers in the other “cruelty of youth” films kill with reasons, but the massacre in *Elephant* (2001, the United States) does not have an explicit reason. The massacre has happened, and that’s that. Although “inspired” by the Columbine massacre, the film does not exaggerate the horror and brutality of the shooting. Michelle’s death by shooting in the face is the bloodiest scene in the film, while the rest of the killing is portrayed by students who are running around to escape from the killers and the brief but continuous gunshots in the background. The filmmakers did not illustrate the massacre to match the audience’s fixed view of terror and chaos, nor did they villainized the two teenage killers. The film does not show Alex’s revenge on the bullies. Eric is depicted merely as involved in a bloodthirsty killing. *Elephant* (2001, the United States) is the filmmaker, Gus Van Sant’s, response to the public’s questioning: Why do young people commit cruel crimes like the Columbine shooting?” Their answer is, according to an interview with Van Sant, “when the kids commit to their idea, the eventuality is they actually do walk down the hall, talk to somebody, and shoot them” (“An Interview with Gus Van Sant”).

The title of the film, *Elephant*, might be the best interpretation of juvenile crimes and murders in these selected “cruelty of youth” films. On the one hand, the killing committed by youth is like “the elephant in the room.” Youth committing an adult crime is a taboo that stares us right in the face, but we dare not acknowledge the fact. On the other hand, *Elephant* reminds me of the ancient tale of “the blind men and an elephant.” Confirmed by Van Sant in an interview, as he states that this parable was in his mind while making the film: “One thinks it's a rope because he has the tail, one thinks it's a tree because he can feel the legs, one thinks it's a wall because he can feel the side of it, and nobody actually has the big picture” (“Simon Hattenstone talks to Gus Van Sant”). This elephant could be the school system, the estrangement of parents, and the young generation that the public does not see. When we ask questions about
the murders committed by youth, we might never receive an answer, because there is not a single answer to the problem. *Elephant* (2003, the United States) and other “cruelty of youth” films remind viewers that there is no acceptable rationalization for the killings committed by youth.

The hateful, spontaneous, irresponsible, and reasonless murders forever alter the transition path for juveniles who commit murders. For Shuuichi from *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan), the guilt of killing his stepfather and classmate, and the responsibility for his family’s future force him into the dead end of committing suicide. By the end of *Elephant* (2003, the United States), there is no evidence showing either an arrest or that Alex commits suicide. The filmmakers choose to leave the ending of *Elephant* (2003, the United States) ambiguous because just as they do not have an answer for the cause of the massacre, they do not have a textbook-like answer for the end of the killer who created the tragedy. Even given this difference, both films convey the idea that there is no future for youth who commit serious crimes like the intentional killing of multiple people. Shuuichi understands his unforgivable deeds will steal his future as an acceptable adult in society after the police discovered his crime. Alex does not bother to care, or begin to think his future of growing up and become a part of society. In both films, there is a common thread. Young people who commit acts are irredeemable, and their ability to become adults is cut short. They cannot make the journey to adulthood.

The transition from teenager to adults would indeed be distorted for Yuichi from *All about Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan). Yuichi stabs Hoshino, but remains undiscovered. The teenagers from *Mean Creek* (2004, the United States) confess to police their involvement in George’s death. Yuichi might receive no condemnation from society, but the fact that he takes away Hoshino’s life will never change. In the end of *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan), a scene shows Yuichi stands on the piano chair and hides his head behind the ceiling screen,
looking like he is about to kick away the chair and hang himself.
In the following scene, Yuichi asks his mother to dye his hair.
When his mother is not around, Yuchi pulls down the perming machine and tries to cover his face (Fig. 25 and 26, 02:15:45 – 02:17:39). The two scenes illustrate Yuichi immersed in his regret about his unforgivable deed to Hoshino. Similarly, even if George’s death is viewed as an accident, and the name of Rocky, Clyde, Sam, and Millie will be forgotten by the public after several years, the evil intention of punishing George would haunt the teenagers for the rest of their lives. Millie shakes her head sadly when Sam mentions they have the future of growing up, going to college, and becoming adults with their own careers (01:15:27 – 01:15:57). Her rejection to Sam’s outlook to the future reflects the gangs’ impossibility of fitting into society like adults they were supposed to become if they had not been involved in the death of George. Compared to their peers, who will grow up careless and free of the guilt of murder, enjoying school life and worrying only about academic performance and interpersonal issues with family and friends, youth who are involved in murders understand mortality at a very young age. The film subgenre “cruelty of youth,” depicts how a stage of life that should involve exploration and adventure can also lead to events that block a person from
entering adulthood, whether through the misery of lifelong guilt, suicide, or incarceration. The very aspects of this stage of life – one’s ability to take risks, and be carefree – can also lead to a tragedy that ends the lives of the protagonist, and other teenagers around them. The cruelty of a murder is like an ugly scar that will never heal: it warns these youth that killing is easy but unforgivable. The filmmakers also show that violence and killing will not solve the problems facing teenager, whether in Japan or in the United States, and, in the cultural context of both countries, a murder will never be forgiven. The responsibility and regret of committing the adult crime of killing forces the murderer to skip youth and suddenly become an adult.

**Youth Who Die**

What does death mean to teenagers? Just as there are youth who are cruel to kill, there are teenagers who die while young. In the four selected films, death is linked to struggles young people face in their teenage years. The death of a young person can be seen as the alternative to the transition to adulthood, not only for the killers, but also for the victims and peers who are witnesses to murder. The “cruelty of youth” films seem to convince the audience that many teenagers lose their lives because of their wrongful deeds and their deviation from the society. In other words, those who die deserve the death. What I have found in viewing “cruelty of youth” films is that almost all of the films in this subgenre, whether produced in Japan or the United States, help audiences to realize that no one deserves to die, and that death is neither the solution nor the end of a young person’s suffering.

George, in *Mean Creek* (2004, the United States) is the obese, impolite, truculent, and arrogant middle-school boy who beats up peers and infuriates everyone on the boat trip with vicious words. Does he deserve to die? At the end of the film, George’s videotape is found and
transferred to the police station. On the screen, George records his image through the mirror, and the images move in his room to the TV screen, floors, the inflatable sofa, and finally, George sitting on the inflatable sofa. He tells the viewer, in a nervous, shy, but gentle voice:

My name is George. And this is the inside of my mind. . . . The inside of my mind has a zillion things about it. But people that don’t see inside my mind don’t know there are a zillion things and. . . . You know, since no one sees inside my mind, no one really knows. But one day people will know. One day people will know ‘cause that’s my master plan. To film it all. To document every aspect of the life that is me. And put it in a time capsule in my back yard. And so that one day, some alien, or some highly evolved species will find it and understand.

George’s film and the movie end as viewers hear the camcorder beeps indicating that George has turned off his camera (01:24:06 – 01:26:25).

George’s final monologue presents a different George to the audience. When I watched the film for the first time, George’s fixed image led me falsely to believe that he is an annoying and violent teenager who intends nothing in the world except to hurt other people around him. I was even convinced that George deserved to die. The filmmakers drew me in, to consider that the other teenagers’ lives would be better without George. On this viewing, George’s confession to the camera that no one understand the fact “there are a zillion things” in his mind came to me as wake-up call. I believe this was their intent, to startle viewers to realize how easily we may deem a young life to be so cruel as to not be worth living, to be not worth life. What *Mean Creek* (2004, the United States) and other “cruelty of youth” films demonstrate is that viewers may be quick to blame young people, that viewers may find ourselves judging whether young victims of cruelty deserve punishment, even death, for their cruelty. What makes this subgenre so important is that the films reconfirm that the death of a young person is the cruelest event. For George, death means that he will never have the opportunity to film everything about his life No one will have the chance to know the zillion beautiful thoughts No one will know the real George. His
sudden death, caused by his peers, ends George’s life and his plan to be understood, preventing the transition to becoming an adult. Death ends all possibilities, and murder is the alternation that throws a youth’s transition to an adult into the void.

While some young lives are cut short, some other youth in “cruelty of youth” films use their lives as the final jetton to challenge an impasse during the transitioning to adulthood. Tsuda from *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001, Japan) chooses to commit suicide as the resistance to her inescapable hopeless situation of being pimped by Hoshino. In the scene that portrays Tsuda walking past a river bank after an ordinary school day, she stops and watches five men flying kites. The five red kites fly in the same direction and hover in the sky as a group, like an orderly flock of birds. Tsuda is amazed and asks if she can try to fly a kite. With instructions from one of the men, Tsuda holds the control strings and pulls hard to make the kite ascend in the sky. With Lily Chou-Chou’s voice singing “now that my wings can no longer fly/ I'll cast them off and when I do/ I'll walk on air and soar in the sky” (“Flightless Wings (飛べない翼)”). Tsuda’s eyes are filled with earnestness, and she bursts into her happiest smile in the film. When the lonely kite falls from the sky and drops on the ground, Tsuda laughs and apologizes to the owner. Then, her smile gradually disappears from her face. Tsuda asks if people can sit on the kite, and she says,
“I want to fly in the sky” while watching two kites chase each other under the pure blue sky. Viewers may also note that they are in front of a pylon, a detail that, on the second view, is subtly menacing. Suddenly, the next scene overlooks the ground around the cable tower, with Tsuda lying face down lifelessly on the ground. Her shoes are missing, and arms are distorted. Her backpack and the CD player with Lily Chou-Chou’s CD scattered around her, her phone hangs on the cable, and blood spread around her head. Her blood dyes the green grass into black (Fig. 27, 28, and 29, 01:55:00 – 01:57:38).

Kites flying in the sky are a symbol of freedom. The happiness that Tsuda experiences while trying to fly a kite is symbolic of her yearning for freedom, not only for freedom from the fate of being pimped by Hoshino and sacrificing her body repeatedly, for nothing, but also free from her suffocating, solitary life. These men with kites stand right before her, but she is unable to seek help from anyone. As the scene progresses, viewers note that the moment of flying a kite is probably Tsuda’s freest and happiest time of her life. But freedom is fleeting, as the kite drops to the ground. As her smile gradually disappears from her face, when she sees her kite falling to the ground, viewers may note Tsuda’s understanding of the fate of falling if she tries to escape.
from her life. In the background, Lily Chou-Chou’s song, “Flightless Wings,” also echoes Tsuda’s innermost voice, “I want to fly.” Both the kite and Lily Chou-Chou’s voice whispers “I’ll walk on air and soar in the sky” These are the messages that indicate to viewers Tsuda’s shocking, but understandable, end by committing suicide. Tsuda makes her dream come true by jumping from the pylon. The film only portrays the death of Tsuda, but the audience knows that, for a short period of time, Tsuda did achieve freedom, flying in the sky as she wished. For Tsuda’s young mind, committing suicide is not a way to escape from real life problems, but rather to solve them. When Tsuda faces her hopeless life, death is her last hope of fighting against her desperation and achieving her brief freedom. Tsuda’s suicide is more of alternation to her transition to adulthood than an interruption since she may never have had the chance to grow up. Her suicide is perhaps her defiance, her breaking free, as she battles to alter her future. Even after her attempt fails, she refuses to be destroyed, grasping what she believes is vital to her life, even if only for a moment.

**Youth Who Witness**

I remember my first encounter with a peer's near-death event as a teenager. An afternoon in my second year of middle school, my classmates I were either resting in the classroom after lunch or playing sports on the field. A boy from the class next door rushed to the door, shouting in gasps, “… around the corner, he was hit in the head!” The sudden noise broke the peaceful lunch break, as we all rushed to the corner of the staircase, trying to see what was happening. The excitement of finally seeing something different from the dreary school days ran through me until I reached the scene. Blood. Blood was all over the floor and splashed on the white walls and clear window glass. I have never seen so much blood in real life (I still have never seen that
much blood to this day). I had froze in shock when the teachers pushed us away from the scene, ordered us to go back to the classrooms, and abruptly switched the first class in the afternoon to an individual study class because most of the faculty was called for an emergency meeting. Rumor has it that the incident happened because a boy from our year smashed another boy’s head on the window. Rumor has it that the incident started from an afternoon chase and joke. Rumor also has it that the victim did not survive. Until today, I do not know what exactly happened on that bright and sunny afternoon. Who were the two boys? (Were they boys?) What happened to them afterward? Even today, when I think about the event that many of my classmates may have forgotten, I still wonder about where these two students are now? Did they grow up peacefully? Did this bitter event in their teenage years change them forever?

My questions may be those of every individual who has survived the death of a young person during their own youth, of every person who has escaped from death or experienced the cruel death of a peer. I wonder if the nightmare of death during their youth has shackled them, what in some way? How does this experience shape our own transition to adulthood?

None of the teenagers in *Mean Creek* (2004, the United States) could be entirely responsible for George’s death, and the teenagers will possibly live normally without major crime records, but George’s death nevertheless tremendously disturbs their future passage. Sam comes to Millie’s room and attempts to talk to her about what they should do. Sam looks up to Millie’s lukewarm face, and says hesitantly, “you know, when we graduate high school and go to college, and become doctors and lawyers and all that… What do you think it’d be like?” Millie looks down at Sam with a facial expression as if she is going to cry, and she shakes her head slowly. Her eyes are dull and her face looks desperate (Fig. 30 and 31, 01:15:27 – 01:15:57). Millie’s reaction comes from her deep sense of guilt for George’s death. Although George’s
death was not planned, every member of the group on the boat trip contributed to the prank against George. The responsibility for a peer’s death is so heavy, and the price of stealing another youth’s future is so costly that there is no room left for Sam and Millie to think about their own futures. They might be lucky to be alive and to have avoided harsh punishment. The scene makes clear that, even if one day they complete their educations and become “doctors and lawyers and all that,” the guilt of causing George’s death will always reminds them of what they
did, and all the possibilities they took away from another person during his youth. Those who died become the weight that those who are alive must carry for the rest of their lives.

Accepting the death of a peer, especially a youth that one cares about, is harder than we think. In the last scene of *The Blue Light* (2003, Japan), Noriko is painting a picture of Shuuichi after 30 years. Shuuichi jokes that after 30 years, he would “have fat on both cheeks, wrinkles covering [his] face, and become bold.” The last scene fixes on Noriko, after anticipating Shuuichi’s suicide, listening to Shuuichi’s tape recording about the things he likes and rubbing the blue color on the painting. The camera fixes on Noriko’s sorrowful and obstinate face, as her lips are trembling and her watery eyes are trying to hold back tears (Fig. 32, 01:45:55 – 01:52:04). Indeed, death is a cruel fact, not only when the murderer commits the brutal deed and the victim loses the future of becoming an adult, but also when a youth witness the death of his or her peer. Noriko, who knows about Shuuichi’s crime, attempts to help Shuuichi with her painting and to show Shuuichi that although he committed the unforgivable crime of murder, he can still become an adult and have a future. Being an outsider and seeing Shuuichi leaving the

Fig. 32
room to ride to his death, Noriko’s tears represents both her regrets of not able to save Shuuichi from his impasse and the heartbreak of foreseeing the death of Shuuichi.

Like Noriko, many of us who become adults after viewing the tragedies of youth in “cruelty of youth” films are outsiders. We are neither the killer nor the victim. As an outsider, the wound and death I saw during my own youth are the vivid memories that taught me about death, and the fragility of life. For me, learning about what death was a crucial lesson that helped me to transit into adulthood, with respect for life and an understanding of the value of death. I believe “cruelty of youth” films may serve for young audiences as a substitute for, or a kind of catharsis in midst of, the brutal experiences a teenager goes through in Japan or the United States. The journey of watching fictionalized cruelty on screen, and sympathizing with young characters who are involved in or who witness cruelty among youth may help young viewers to understand the value of life, and the finality of death.
Conclusion

We are at a point in which the film industry, relying upon youth culture and also influential on young people, has chosen to ignore and suppress vital issues of youth cruelty and real-life problems youth are facing. In an era which campus shootings are making front page news more frequently than ever before, youth films that involve violence and juvenile crimes are often blamed for exaggerating youth problems in reality and creating fear against the younger generation. However, “cruelty of youth” films from both cultures are, rather than exaggerations of negative youth images, reflections of real youth issues and brutal juvenile crimes that are still happening today. The film industry is obligated to raise public awareness of problems facing young people, by exploring the concern over youth issues from families, peers, and society, and illustrating youth and their often-ignored problems on the screen.

Many factors contribute to what makes a protagonist of the film the person he or she is, and the most prominent factors are the protagonist’s psychological states. Such states are particularly relevant in analyzing youth behaviors, as the minors are often driven by impulses. This factor can also apply to young characters in “cruelty of youth” films. Young characters in the selected films resemble many common characteristics, such as naivety, conformity, lack of empathy, and detachment. These characteristics contribute to their decisions and, eventually, the tragedies of those cruel youth. Recognizing characteristics of cruel youth is not to stigmatize psychologically underdeveloped teenagers, but rather to help both their peers and adult viewers understand what they suffer, and how to guide them away from potential mistakes in reality.

“Cruelty of youth” films make the discussions of juvenile crimes, particularly murders, more accessible to young audiences. Films from Japan tend to depict a teenage individual’s role in a cruel event of murder, while productions from the United States are more inclined to portray
the decisions and actions of a group of youth. Nevertheless, films from these two cultures demonstrate that the unforgivable act of killing will alter the transition to adulthood for the murderers, the victims, as well as for the peer witnesses. As for the young viewers, cruel events such as the death of peers may never happen in reality. Therefore, understanding young characters in films and watching them dealing with their turmoil serve as the crucial lesson for young audiences to understand the fragility of life.

The ultimate reason for the ongoing productions and screening of “cruelty of youth” films is to engage more young people in discussions of youth issues. During an interview with the director of Elephant (2003, the United States), Van Sant mentioned that actively debating about the younger generation was a hopeful way to find answers to the struggle of youth:

Q: Do you think this film can make things better, and will you be showing it to high school students?
VAN SANT: Yeah, I think it can contribute to the discussion. I think within the discussion you can find answers. Hopefully it will help find answers, I mean, that's sort of the purpose. (“An interview with Gus Van Sant”)

It is important and beneficial for filmmakers and the industry to continue producing “cruelty of youth” films. Movies in this subgenre are invaluable in recognizing and reflecting youth issues and juvenile crimes in reality, identifying and avoiding problematic characterizations of cruel youth, and serving educational purposes to engage young viewers to reveal and discuss reasons for youth cruelty. Like Van Sant notes in the interview, more “cruelty of youth” films should be available among teenagers across cultures, to keep the discussions active. Audiences of all ages may appreciate films within the subgenre of “cruelty of youth,” for these productions may prevent the cruel events depicted in films from happening in the future.
Appendix: Film Synopses

*All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001, Japan)*

Director: Shunji Iwa

Film Synopsis:

“All About Lily Chou-Chou follows two childhood friends, Shusuke Hoshino and Yuichi Hasumi, from the end of their junior high school run until the beginning of high school. The film has a discontinuous storyline, starting midway through the story, just after high school begins, then flashes back to junior high and summer vacation, and then skips back to the present. In
junior high, Hoshino was the best student in school, but was picked on by his classmates. He was skilled at kendo, and had an attractive young mother. Yuichi, on the other hand, was a quieter boy who fell in love with the music of the odd musician Lily Chou-Chou. During a group trip to Okinawa, Hoshino had a traumatic near-death experience and his personality changed from good-natured to dangerous and manipulative. In high school, he takes his place as class bully and shows his newfound power by ruining the lives of his classmates” (Letterboxd).
The Blue Light (2003, Japan)

Director: Yukio Ninagawa

Film Synopsis:

“Shuichi Kushimori is a 17-year-old high school student who lives happily with his mother and stepsister. One day, without warning, his estranged stepfather returns home from a long absence. He quickly falls into a circle of drinking and starts abusing his ex-wife and daughter. When he begins making sexual advances towards Shuichi’s stepsister, Shuichi is compelled to take matters into his own hands” (Letterboxd).
**Elephant** (2003, the United States)

**Film Synopsis:**

“AN ORDINARY HIGH SCHOOL DAY. EXCEPT THAT IT’S NOT.”

“Several ordinary high school students go through their daily routine as two others prepare for something more malevolent. The film chronicles the events surrounding a school shooting” (Letterboxd).
Mean Creek (2004, the United States)

Director: Jacob Aaron Estes

Film Synopsis:

“BENEATH THE SURFACE, EVERYONE HAS A SECRET.”

“Teenagers living in small-town Oregon take a boat trip for a birthday celebration. When they get an idea to play a mean trick on the town bully, it suddenly goes too far. Soon they’re forced to deal with the unexpected consequences of their actions” (Letterboxd).
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