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***Ijime*. Definition and Images in Contemporary Japanese Cinema and TV Production**

Abstract

The article deals from few thematic fields: sociology, education and cultural studies with a topic that is *ijime* – bullying in Japanese schools. The definitions of the phenomenon, its types and possible causes will be followed by analysis of a few chosen works of Japanese film and television production. I will analyse the way *ijime* is depicted in these works. The following findings are an effect of research conducted during a 6-month scholarship funded by Japan Foundation in Kansai Institute in Japan in the academic year 2013–2014.

Ijime is a significant element of Japanese school reality and one of the main problems still corroding the education system. What I found especially interesting was the regularity with which this motif appeared in various works of Japanese popular culture. It might even seem that if there is a school-themed story or a story about youth/school-children, there is very big chance that there will appear *ijime*. It might be a main theme but usually it is a side topic, e.g. in the form of a retrospective.

Definitions

There is no one definition of bullying. The most general definition states that

Bullying is the use of force, threat, or coercion to abuse, intimidate, or aggressively impose domination over others. The behavior is often repeated and habitual¹.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullying> (accessed 21.07.2014).

An important prerequisite is the perception of an imbalance of social or physical power. Such behaviours can be justified and rationalized by differences of class, race, religion, gender, sexuality, appearance, behavior, body language, personality, etc. There are three main types of bullying – emotional (psychological), verbal and physical. A bullying culture can develop in any context in which human beings interact with each other. This includes school, family, the workplace, home and neighborhoods.

A Japanese sociologist Youji Morita had researched bullying in the 1980 and formulated the definition as:

A type of aggressive behaviour by (which) someone who holds a dominant position in a group-interaction process, by intentional or collective acts, causes mental and/or physical suffering to another inside a group (Morita 1985: 21).

Another researcher, however, claims that the Japanese meaning of *ijime* does not exactly correlate with the English term *bullying*. Maturu Taki claims that the most important element is not the position of physically stronger individual or power imbalance. According to Taki the power comes from the relations within the group, not particular traits of character. This results in the fact that the division of the one bullying and being bullied is not constant and might change within the group. Victims of bullying usually know their perpetrators and are being pulled into a situation of a power imbalance. Taki also stresses that in the Japanese context mental suffering inflicted on weaker individuals is to be more cruel and harder to bear than physical violence. And exactly for this reason this kind of bullying is supposed to be the main goal of Japanese bullies. This also constitutes the main difference between *ijime* and violence (Taki 2003).

Another element of *ijime* definition that according to Taki differs in the Western and Eastern approach is the power imbalance in a group. An often cited Norwegian researcher of bullying Dan Olweus wrote that bullying occurs when a person is “exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons” and when “a person initially inflicts injury or discomfort upon another person, through physical contact, through words or in other ways” (OLWEUS Bullying Prevention Program). But this “power imbalance” is not an enough factor to define certain behaviours as *ijime* because the division of power within a group is not always apparent or stable. It can vary depending on characteristics of persons in the group or a situation. The more the members of a group are unsure of their power, the easier a slight shift in the power division may cause bullying.

Thus, Maki defines *ijime* as following:

Ijime is a mean behaviour or a negative attitude that has clear intention to embarrass or humiliate others who occupy weaker positions in a same group. It is assumed to be a dynamic used to keep or recover one's dignity by aggrieving others. Consequently, its main purpose is to inflict mental suffering on others, regardless of the form such as physical, verbal, psychological and social (Taki 2003: 4).

Moreover, Taki mentions three necessary factors for *ijime* to occur, or more precisely, to categorize certain actions as *ijime*. They are: a relatively small group of members that perceive themselves as equal; imbalance of power and the fluidity of bully – bullied roles; frequency of victimization (Taki 2003: 6).

The above cited definition is the closest to the Japanese bullying and thus will be of most use during following analysis. However, we should bear in mind that this sociological definition will not cover all possible aspects of *ijime* and the necessary factors will not always be fulfilled in various fictional pop-cultural works.

Reasons and Structure

The possible reasons of *ijime* is a wide and complex topic. That is why I will present only one of the theories in this article. The findings I would like to cite here belong to an Australian sociologist of Japanese descent, Tamaki Mino (2006: 1).

Mino claims that the indirect reason of bullying in Japan is its social structure based on collectivism and homogeneity. The group is the superior and most important structure. Social homogeneity lies in the heart of Japanese education, as it provides necessary rules and principles needed to shape certain attitudes and behaviours among children. The training in group life necessitates two essential principles, 'participation' and 'cooperation', which arise in order to enforce and maintain order of group conformity. As Edward Ben-Acri states, "to develop 'normally' a Japanese child *must* be part of a group. She or he *must* participate in group activities [group life] (*shudan seikatsu*)" (Ben-Ari 1997: 45). Attempts are made to ensure that children develop a desire to participate in group activities with others and find enjoyment in that participation. The need for cooperation is also enhanced, and children are trained to become cooperative with others within the group. As tactics to teach children the two princi-

ples, teachers indicate that ‘to behave like everyone else’ is an ideal behaviour, and demonstrate explicit consequences that those who disobey participation or co-operation will be left out of the group.

Trained in group competencies from an early age Japanese learn that a group member who builds and maintains group harmony is a good and respectable person, while someone who is not able to cooperate with others will not be respected and as a result, left alone. This simple dichotomy progresses later when the children enter school. A Japanese junior high or a high-school student can independently take care of group harmony and, if situation demands it, to execute order and balance. However, according to Mino, this is where the dark side of group conformity lies:

What systematically emerges in such a school environment is a certain degree of peer control and peer group pressure involved in social interactions among children, who compete between one another to demonstrate their competence for uniformity. *Ijime* is the manifestation of the excessive zeal for uniformity, reflected as a dark side of group attitudes and behaviour in peer socialisation which requires the elimination of those who are different (Mino 2006: 2).

In a situation when an individual who is not willing or not able to conform to group’s rules, or in any other way “different” from the majority, he or she might be treated as a threat. The students might punish such an individual without teachers’ participation. Such punishment may include ignoring and leaving such a person out of a group which may lead to other forms of bullying.

The structure of *ijime* remains fairly constant. As Mino stresses, it is usually a “group against one” dynamics. *Ijime* occurs when there are more than three people interacting. Usually four groups might be distinguished: the bully, acting as the main perpetrator (*ijimekko*), the victim (*ijimerarekko*) who the target of victimization, the audience encouraging or participating in bullying (*kanshuu*) and the passive bystanders (*boukansha*) who observe or pretend not to see anything.

Analysis

While conducting research in Japan Foundation Kansai Institute it drew my attention that school stories are very common in Japanese popular culture, both in terms of various media and genres and styles. This fact stroke me as especially interesting and this is why I focused on analyzing

three very different works. In the following paragraphs I will briefly introduce them and present findings of my research.

When it comes to methodology, I will use the tools of film analysis. I will focus on a very narrow area presented in the films – acts of bullying. However, the rules of film analysis will come useful as research tools. I will analyse mainly the circumstances and social background of *ijime* phenomenon, that is – the school environment (public or private, elite or common, junior high or high school, etc). Then I will analyse reasons of *ijime* shown and its effects. The information about main characters that will be very important are: sex, age, background, economic and social family status, character, reasons and reactions. As *ijime* is a group phenomenon, group relations will be also interesting to me. Finally, I will look at reactions of teachers and parents.

One should note that the style of the works (cinematography, sound, music, light, etc.) will be of less concern in this analysis. Even more so, as two of the three analysed works are television productions so their aesthetics have a slightly different functions and follow different rules than feature films (Helman 1978: 34–35). The stylistic layer will be a result of the genre and type of the work and sometimes will affect the way that *ijime* is perceived.

“LIFE” TV series (“Raifu, 2007)

The story based on manga by Keiko Suenoby is set in a well-known high school. The main character Ayumu initially is friends with the most popular girl in school, Manami. After a while due to a misunderstanding with Manami’s boyfriend, Katsumi, Ayumu is left out of the circle and ignored. The bullying starts to get more and more serious. The harder Ayumu tries to clear the situation, the worse her position becomes.

The real reason of *ijime* is dominating Manami’s will to maintain absolute power within the school. She is ready to use the most cruel and immoral means to succeed. Manami’s usual tools of maintaining power is manipulation and coercion of weaker students. She rarely, however, gets her hands dirty – she uses loyal members of her circle. She is callous and depraved in her actions and feels she can get away with anything.

LIFE is the most realistic of the three analysed works. Bullying is the main topic of the series and its image is very drastic. Forms of bullying used by schoolgirls include manipulation, coercion, slander and gossip,

threats, denunciation. Physical types include pouring water on somebody, throwing objects, throwing books or desk through the window. The intensity of *ijime* gradually increases from “subtle” things like taking one’s mascot to definitely serious ones, e.g. making someone swallow pins. Manami’s boyfriend Katsumi, who turns out to suffer from sexual deviations, finds pleasure in abusing restrained and abused girls. He threatens Ayumu and uses physical violence – he stabs her with a pair of compasses. We should stress here that almost all of these acts take place at school.

LIFE in a very clear way showcases the mechanism of *ijime* and the delicate structure of power in a class. The leader – popular, pretty, with good grades and from a wealthy family – Manami enjoys total power at school. Manami is a spoiled and corrupt rich girl who uses her charms combined with a ruthless character to reign in school and do what she pleases. Maintaining this power, however, and a stable circle of loyal minions consumes a lot of energy and often reprehensible behaviour. She treats Ayumu’s perseverance to bullying as a challenge and a game. As long as she has her followers, she is strong and self-confident. Her terror lasts long because no one in class is willing to oppose her in fear of being bullied, too. The “differing” individual Ayumu (who is thought to have broken the rule of friendship and date Manami’s boyfriend) is thus excluded from the class and punished.

Creators of the series suggest that the reason of bullying and violence in school lies in pathological family relations and lack of positive role models for students. All the characters are lonely. Manami’s father is a chairman of a company and rarely home, trying to make it up to her with money and presents. Katsumi’s father is Manami’s father’s employee. When Katsumi treats his girlfriend badly, he sets in motion a complicated circle of violence that eventually comes back to him – humiliated and threatened by the chairman, Katsumi’s father regularly beats and abuses his son. Katsumi is blackmailed and cannot end his relationship with Manami. He wears a mask of an arrogant, cool student from a wealthy family but in fact is stressed and scared as everybody else. His bullying Ayumu is just a continuation of the chain of violence. Ayumu’s father is not visible in the series, however the viewer never learns the reason. Ayumu is constantly being compared by her mother to her bright, hard-working younger brother. Her mother is completely unaware of Ayumu’s problems. Her change of behaviour and lower grades are interpreted as lack of engagement and laziness. Teachers tend not to see bullying or choose not to intervene – following the rule that it’s best if students solve their problems among themselves.

This hypocrisy stretches out to the school principal who, to avoid ruining school's reputation, orders to ignore the issue of *ijime*.

There are also other problems depicted in the series, such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, alienation and self-mutilation.

“Boys over Flowers” TV series (“Hana Yori Dango”, 2005)

Boys over Flowers is a comedy romance TV series based on a popular manga under the same title. Even though *ijime* is not the main theme and can be seen only in the first few episodes, it plays an important role in the narrative and has been presented in an interesting way.

The protagonist is poor Makino attending an elite private school for students from wealthy and respected families. The informal leaders of the school are “F4”, or “Flower Four” – a group of young heirs to Japanese fortunes. Their leader is the conceited Tsukasa who acts as tyrant in the school. To kill boredom they randomly choose a victim from within the students and bully him/her. As a result of a misunderstanding, Makino becomes their next target. She is proud to be as strong and persistent as a weed², so she takes *ijime* as a challenge and does not succumb to Tsukasa's bullying. This only makes matters worse. Astonished and furious with her bravado and arrogance, Tsukasa intensifies the bullying. However, with time he comes to appreciate the strange, stubborn girl and even... fall in love with her.

Bullying presented in *Boys over Flowers* emphasizes humiliating the victim in front of a group. Gatherings resemble public lynchings, where the ruler incites the crowd to violence. Rich, trendy and above school rules “F4” treat it as specific “games” to entertain themselves and the masses – the rest of the school community. The students are afraid of the emperor-like Tsukasa and ready to fulfill his wishes or orders.

The comedy form of the series makes the otherwise violent scenes of bullying seem less serious. They encompass the “usual” throwing things, making fun of or placing rubbish in victim's locker. However, when it comes to Makino, the bullying gets much more serious, as in the scene where angry Tsukasa nearly makes her lick his shoes in front of the whole school or when he sends some students to rape her.

There is no doubt that the most interesting and compelling element of the story is the contrast between Makino's and Tsukasa's characters. Her

² Makino's last name, Tsukushi, means „weed” in Japanese.

stubbornness and pride in spite of poverty and his spoiled, over-the-top self-confidence and arrogance make them an unconventional couple and thus, their romance all the more entertaining. Bullying is used as a rather uncommon narrative tool to set off characters' love affair.

Keeping in mind the reasons of bullying mentioned in the previous chapter, we need to admit that they find little proof in the case of *Boys over Flowers*. F4 group does not need to worry about losing power or even any sort of imbalance, because they reign the school autonomously. *Ijime* is not a tool to maintain power or to defense mechanism, but a mere game to entertain themselves. When Makino becomes the target, the situation shifts. She is the first one to actively oppose Tsukasa and fight the bullying. The F4 leader punishes her for insolence and to save his face in front of the school community.

“Confessions” (“Kokuhaku”, 2010)

Tatsuya Nakashima's *Confessions* is the most unique work analysed here. It is an awarded feature film based on a best-selling novel by Kanae Minato. It is by far a very ambitious and challenging work. *Ijime* is one of the themes in the film.

A starting pointing for the story is a monologue of Moriguchi in front of her class on the last day of school – and last day of her work. Her daughter has died in in an accident that happened at the school. But Moriguchi has another opinion – she claims that she was murdered by two students from her class, and she knows who did it. Instead of revealing boys' identity straight away, she dubs them “Boy A” and “Boy B” and slowly reveals the horrible and chilling story of her daughter's death.

Pupils have little trouble with identifying the culprits and after an initial shock start to punish the boys in their own, specific way. They ignore and alienate them from the class, gossip and slander them. They retreat to new technologies, badmouthing and encouraging one another to further bullying via mobile messages and Internet forums. They use physical violence, too – they brutally force Boy A and a sympathizing girl to kiss. In result of *ijime* Boy B stops coming to school and suffers from a nervous breakdown. He becomes a *hikikomori*³ and refuses to leave his room. Classmates bully

³ Full term *shakaiteki hikikomori* (jap.) – lit. social withdrawal; a situation of a social withdrawal of a young person when he/she stays in one's room, avoids any human contact and maintains contact with the outside world by means of Internet.

him treacherously even there by camouflaging the sentence “Die, killer!” on a “get well soon” card. Boy B kills his mother in a fury. Mentally stronger and exceptionally smart Boy A does not react to bullying and plans a bitter revenge on the whole school. But he will learn that Moriguchi had perversely caused him the most suffering.

The image of bullying shown in *Confessions* is unique firstly because of its extraordinary structure. The teacher, even though ruthless and wanting revenge, does not harm anyone directly. She instigates the rest of the class with her confessions though and makes them start bullying Boy A and Boy B. *Ijime* is thus a pre-planned side effect natural to the school environment. Many decisions and actions in the film are morally ambivalent. Moriguchi’s actions, despite being driven by pain and loss, are cruel and perverse. She exercises no leniency towards the murderers because of their young age; she manipulates them to achieve what she had planned. The students, terrified that two murderers are amongst them, take teachers words for granted without doubt or second thought. Bullying appears as a natural defense mechanism of majority against a fearful minority as well as a punishment for a serious crime. In this situation the power division seems natural, because it depends on the widely accepted school hierarchy student – teacher. What is shocking though, is the way Moriguchi abuses this power in order to fulfil her revenge – calm, perverse, emotionless.

We never learn the opinion of the majority of the class, shown in *Confessions* as a faceless crowd. The privilege of voicing the titular confessions is reserved to only few characters. Each version of the story, not unlike in Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, influences the way in we perceive and interpret the whole story. It’s no longer obvious whose version is true; can anything be true anyway? Truth is a fleeting and ambiguous notion.

Nakashima’s distinctive, rich style makes for a very intriguing element of the film. Highly aestheticized, deep-blue visuals, attention to detail, theatre-inspired use of light paired with slow motion photography and suggestive, melancholic score by Radiohead create a truly unique viewing experience. Scenes of *ijime* shot in a dark video-clip stylistics are beautiful, but all the more unreal. The whole film seems unreal and too cool. Main characters seem eerily serious and mature. *Confessions* is stylistically satisfying and narratively compelling but these very elements make it difficult for the viewer to fully engage in the story. Moriguchi’s revenge, even though sophisticated and cruel, cannot resonate completely.

Conclusions

The above analysis of three works and viewing of several others has resulted in first conclusions regarding the topic of depiction of *ijime* in contemporary Japanese film and TV production.

It is beyond doubt that it's a very common theme in stories about school and students. There is a wide variety of media and genres – comic, novel, feature film, TV series. It is commonly one of the plots of the narrative and is referred to in dialogues between school students. Thus, it is a constant element of the social landscape of a Japanese school.

The structure of bullying described by Mino is clearly visible in the analysed examples. The dominant leader encourages a certain behaviour in a group. He/she is usually surrounded by faithful followers (*LIFE, Boys over Flowers*) rather than acts alone (*Confessions*). The leader incites to bully but rarely escapes to violence himself. The followers blindly trust the leader and fulfill his every wish and order (*LIFE*); they are usually the most active ones. The third group in this structure is the co-called “rest of the class” – encouraging or sometimes participating in bullying. Ignoring the victim is usually paired with jokes and gossip whispered or passed around on a piece of paper. Some of the students in this group act this way out of desire to belong and be accepted. On the other hand, they might fear social ostracism and, in turn, being bullied themselves. The last group comprises of few people passively observing the bullying but not participating. They are usually sensitive and shy individuals who see the evil but choose not to react, just like Makino (*Boys over Flowers*) or Sonoda (*LIFE*) in the beginning. In both cases they become the target of *ijime*. In such a power division in a class the victim is left completely alone and has nowhere to seek help from.

Certain character types emerge, too. The victim is usually good, sincere and with a strong system of values. They are intellectually average and not very wealthy, but always represent traits desired by Japanese: diligence, truthfulness, perseverance. Both Makino and Ayumu cannot reconcile themselves to brutal school reality and oppose it. In spite of intensifying acts of *ijime*, they both repeat obstinately “*Makenai!*” (Jap. “I won't be defeated!”). The class leader and at the same time the one motivating others, is often – contrary to what American researchers claim – a straight-A student from good or wealthy families, liked and respected by peers and teachers. In comedic “Boys over Flowers” this high social status is exaggerated and described in a grotesque manner – towards the

F4 leader Tsukasa students show the respect and fear, while girls – fear mixed with admiration. However, both Tsukasa and Manami from “LIFE” are with pampered and arrogant children of rich parents convinced about their power and special position at school.

There are a few effects of bullying in the aforementioned examples – from isolating from a peer group and loss of self-esteem, to depression and psychological problems, to violence and extreme forms of social withdrawal (*hikikomori*). Seemingly harmless stress influences students’ studies and destroys family relations. A more thorough analysis of closer and more distant effects of school abuse requires more extensive sociological-cultural examinations of a greater amount of source materials. Yet, it is possible to formulate some preliminary observations based on the work analysed here.

It can be said without doubt that *ijime* influences negatively the relations between students, as well as between students and adults. One of the most common direct effects is an increased level of stress, mood disorders or depression, as well as withdrawal from the group or class. A good example here can be the taciturn Sonoda from “LIFE” who after traumatic experiences at his previous school prefers to limit contacts with peers to a minimum. In radical cases fear or shame prevent student from having any contacts with peers and they retreat from social life. They become a *hikikomori*, as Boy B (“Confessions”). A frequent effect of *ijime* is violence – both directed towards the weaker children in the form of bullying, as well as towards oneself. Suicide is an extreme case of auto-violence, still collecting a big toll amongst young people in Japan.

When it comes to reactions to the phenomenon of *ijime*, adults very often do not notice or react to signals of students. Teachers do not want to admit that in their class there is such a problem, because it would show lack of pedagogic abilities and respect of pupils. That is why they pretend not see it or choose not to interfere in matters between pupils, like the teacher in “LIFE” series. When the director learns about the bullying, he firmly denies the existence of such a problem and forbids any action. Problem of *ijime* would harm the prestige of the school. On the other side, there are parents of bullying and bullied children. Parents rarely believe that their beloved kids could bully (Manami’s father) or even kill someone, even if there is evidence to it (blinded by maternal love Boy B’s mother). It is not easy for the victims either. Neither Makino, nor Ayumu want to openly admit the fact that they became victims of abuse. Mother of the latter doesn’t notice that something worrying is happening to her daughter;

she sees the cause of her worse school grades in Ayumu's laziness. The lack of the communication and trust on the side of adults make *ijime* victims feel left alone and retreat even more out of social contacts.

The results of this preliminary research clearly show that *ijime* is a common problem in Japanese schools and is often depicted in pop cultural works devoted to the school. There are various genres among them: love stories, social dramas, comedies and horror. Regardless of the genre or kind, however, *ijime* has a significant place in school reality. Even though according to statistics the amount of reported cases of *ijime* is lower than in the nineties (Yoneyama 1999: 158), it still remains a serious social issue and film and television productions reflect this situation – fictionally, but certainly realistically.

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