River's Edge (2018) - Movie Analysis

Note: The film covers so many issues that not all could be covered and it did extend the word limit as well.

PART 1 - INTRODUCTION

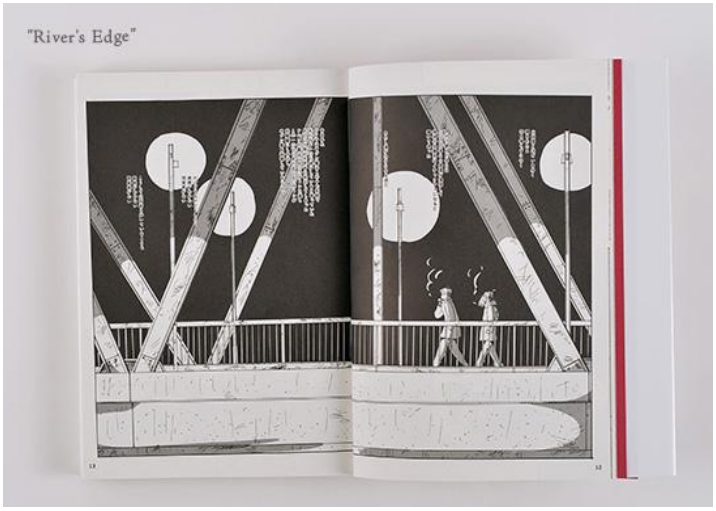
River's Edge is a 2018 Japanese movie directed by Isao Yukisada.



Director Isao Yukisada

This film won the 2018 Panorama FIPRESCI prize at Berlin International Film Festival and the 2019 Award of the Japanese Academy . The story of the film is based on Kyoko

Okazaki's cult manga about Japanese teens in the 1990s Tokyo, showing the darker side of human nature



River's Edge Manga by Kyoko Okazaki

The film has a dark, old fashioned look, shot in a narrow 4:3 ratio. It follows the lives of six high school students disconnected from society who attend a school near a polluted site, where the dirty water, trash and industrial waste symbolise how the pollution is taking over nature. Near the school in a field, there's a decomposed dead body that only a few students know about. Yamada is the first to discover the body by the polluted river bank and these teens begin visiting the body as a place to escape their painful realities. Although it becomes a secret they must keep, as the plot deepens, they end up burying the dead body. The film is unusual, with less focus on plot. Instead, we just watch the characters interact and experience various tragic events.

In just 2 hours, the film explores a range of serious psychological themes and issues relevant to teenage life. Central to the film are the themes of friendship, self-discovery and the emotional complexities they go through during this turbulent stage of life. Key psychological disorders highlighted in the film include bulimia nervosa, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and borderline personality disorder. The characters - Haruna, Yamada, Kozue,

Kannonzaki, Rumi and Tajima Kanna struggle with these issues, developing unhealthy coping mechanisms to manage their internal anxieties and emotions.

PART II - ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEMES

Borderline Personality Disorder

BPD, or Borderline Personality Disorder, is a mental health condition with unstable emotions and impulsive behaviors. It can look different in men and women; men may act out through anger or substance use, while women might struggle with eating disorders. Kannonzaki shows signs of BPD through his fear of losing Haruna, impulsive sexual relationships, mood swings, anger outbursts, unstable relationships with Haruna and Rumi, and self-destructive behavior. Rumi also displays BPD traits, like unstable relationships, impulsive actions, and emotional instability. Her reckless sexual behavior and toxic relationship with her sister show her emotional struggles and disregard for her own well-being.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia nervosa, or bulimia, is a serious mental illness involving cycles of bingeing (eating a lot) and purging (getting rid of the food) through vomiting, laxatives, or excessive exercise. People with bulimia often feel ashamed and try to hide their behavior. They may have a "normal" weight, but it can fluctuate. Bulimia is often linked to anxiety, depression, self-

harm, and suicidal thoughts. Yoshikawa's bulimia is a major issue; she regularly binge-eats junk food and purges, leading to malnutrition and frequent nurse visits.

Bullying and its effects

Bullying occurs when someone repeatedly hurts or intimidates others who can't easily defend themselves. This behavior is driven by a desire for control and creates fear, affecting everyone involved. Victims may feel isolated, anxious, or depressed, avoid school, and struggle academically. They often have trouble trusting others and low self-esteem. In severe cases, bullying can lead to suicidal thoughts, but suicide is never a solution. People who bully often have difficulty forming healthy relationships and may struggle later in life. Yamada has faced severe bullying since grade school. In high school, Kannonzaki and other classmates bully him both physically and emotionally. He fantasizes about revenge but appears stoic. This abuse has deeply impacted his mental health, causing feelings of alienation and pain.

Depression

William Styron described depression as "the grey drizzle of horror." This mood disorder can appear suddenly or after a loss, leading to feelings of sadness, worthlessness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities. People may feel tired, irritable, and have trouble concentrating, with some thinking about death or suicide. Haruna shows signs of depression, including emotional detachment, low mood, and lack of motivation. Yamada also exhibits symptoms like social withdrawal, loneliness, and possibly anhedonia, which is the loss of interest in things he once enjoyed, like being with Tajima. His only comfort comes from a dead

body, reflecting a bleak view of life. Both characters display signs of depression, likely linked to deeper issues of trauma and identity.

Emotional Neglect

Emotional neglect occurs when a child doesn't receive enough love, attention, or care from their parents. Unlike physical neglect, emotional neglect is harder to notice. In the film, the characters aren't physically neglected, but their parents fail to provide the emotional support they need, often due to their own struggles. This type of neglect can be very harmful and lead to trauma, like PTSD or Complex PTSD, causing symptoms such as feeling on edge, helpless, and having trouble forming relationships. Haruna's mother, while friendly, is a single parent who is unaware of Haruna's school problems due to financial stress, leaving Haruna to cope alone. Yamada's parents are also emotionally absent, as he hides on the roof to escape their concern.

Identity Crisis

An identity crisis occurs when someone questions their beliefs, values, and sense of self. It often happens during major life changes but can occur at any time. Depression and anxiety are common during this time, especially for teens dealing with stress, decisions, and uncertainty about their careers, relationships, and values. Yamada experiences an identity crisis by hiding his homosexuality while dating a girl, Tajima, and struggling with his sexual orientation. Yoshikawa also feels insecure about her place in the world.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD is a mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a very distressing event, such as violence or accidents. Rumi goes through multiple traumatic events, including sexual assault, teen pregnancy and miscarriage, being violently attacked by

her sister, and emotional manipulation in her relationships. She may experience flashbacks or intrusive thoughts about these traumas, such as memories of being stabbed or her near-death experiences. After these events, Rumi might avoid discussing them, like her pregnancy or her sister's attack. Her view of relationships and trust could change significantly, and she may feel worthless, guilty, or ashamed because of what she has endured. These experiences may lead to PTSD, characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and avoidance of triggers related to her trauma.

Risky Sexual Behaviour and Teenage Pregnancy

Risky sexual behavior includes unprotected sex, starting sexual activity young, having multiple partners, or engaging in sex work. This increases the risk of STDs, unplanned pregnancies, and unhealthy relationships. Teens from difficult family situations, like divorce, conflict, or low support, as well as those facing peer pressure and low self-esteem, are more likely to take these risks. Teen mothers often experience higher rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and PTSD, especially if they've faced past trauma or miscarriage. Rumi engages in casual, unprotected sex with Kannonzaki, leading to a secret pregnancy that causes emotional conflict and near-fatal violence.

Substance abuse

Substance use poses serious risks for teens, as their brains are still developing and more vulnerable to long-term damage from drugs. It involves impulsive actions and compulsive behaviors, like feeling anxious until they use the drug. Drugs can disrupt brain development and impact mental and physical health into adulthood. Cocaine provides a short high followed by a crash, which worsens impulsive decisions. Teens with depression or anxiety are more likely to smoke, often using it to cope. While smoking may distract from negative feelings,

withdrawal makes quitting hard. Haruna and Yoshikawa drink alcohol and smoke frequently. Kannonzaki uses cocaine to cope with his emotions, but this behavior, along with his use of sex and violence, worsens his struggles. Rumi's cocaine use also raises concerns.

Unrequited Love and Obsession with one person

When you're obsessed with someone, it's often more about your feelings than the person themselves. You may not know them well, but your imagination creates fantasies about them. This obsession can trap you and consume your thoughts, distracting you from what truly matters. Signs of obsession include constantly thinking about the person, feeling intense attraction, low self-esteem, jealousy, trying to control them, and needing constant reassurance. Obsession can stem from childhood experiences, leading to clinginess and insecurity. People who are obsessed may stalk or try to control who their partner talks to, which is draining for both parties. Unrequited love happens when you have strong feelings for someone who doesn't feel the same way. This one-sided love can cause pain, sadness, and shame. If you're always reaching out while the other person doesn't respond, it's a sign your love isn't returned. Those who reject love may feel guilty, while those who are rejected might see the other person as perfect, ignoring their flaws. Unrequited love can lead to stress and emotional pain. Tajima is obsessed with Yamada, even though he doesn't return her feelings, leading to her tragic end.

Violence and Aggression

Violent behavior includes angry outbursts, physical aggression, fighting, making threats, being cruel to animals, setting fires, and vandalism. Several factors can increase the risk of violence in teens, such as past violence, abuse, exposure to violence at home or in the community, being bullied, genetics, watching violent media, using drugs or alcohol, and family stress. In Yukisada's film, teen angst is a central theme shown through a Japanese perspective. The characters feel rejected by society and act out, with violence that feels real and harsh. The

sex scenes are not romantic but animalistic. Kannonzaki is defined by violent impulses; he bullies Yamada and later strangles Rumi in a fit of rage. His bullying, violence toward Rumi, and need to control Haruna highlight his struggles with anger and impulses.

PART III - LIFESPAN DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE



Adolescence Stage

Adolescence is the period when people transition from childhood to adulthood wherein individuals take on responsibilities like marriage or work. It involves rapid physical growth and sexual development. In Japan, adolescence usually begins around ages 12 or 13, when children move from elementary school to junior high. They gain more social freedom, and friendships become very important. However, they are also expected to follow cultural values like hard work, respect for elders, and discipline.

Director Yukisada set the film in Tokyo in 1994, capturing the tense atmosphere before Japan faced major struggles, like the subway sarin gas attack. During the 1990s, Japan

experienced an economic downturn known as the "Lost Decade." Many young salarymen lost their jobs, and by 1998, only 66% of university graduates found employment. This led to disappointment among young people, increased school violence, and rising teenage crime, as Japan's demanding work culture left little time for family life. Child poverty grew, and parents put more pressure on their children to succeed in an increasingly competitive education system. Technology became more available, with video games and early mobile phones changing how teens interacted. As the economy collapsed, many young people faced uncertain futures, leading to feelings of isolation, seen in the rise of "hikikomori." Additionally, young women were pressured to conform to strict beauty standards, while young men faced expectations to be aggressive, affecting their self-image and relationships.

The film explores what it means to be young and face the challenges of early adulthood, capturing experiences like sex, drugs, and love amid the chaos of adolescence. It depicts deep loneliness, often linked to school, where many first become aware of their appearance and face emotional wounds that can last a long time. The film highlights the harsh realities of being a teenager, where bullying and violence are common, challenging the idea that school days are the best time in life.

The story begins when Haruna sneaks into school to save Yamada from being locked in a locker by Kannonzaki and his friends. Kannonzaki claims to be Haruna's boyfriend after they sleep together once, even though she dislikes him. Haruna feels responsible for Yamada, who is bullied by Kannonzaki. Yamada, though dating Tajima, is actually gay and endures bullying partly for excitement. Kannonzaki expresses his struggles through sex and violence. Yoshikawa has an eating disorder and secretly binge-eats and purges. Kozue deals with neglect from her wealthy parents and struggles with bulimia and a fascination with death. Yamada hides his true self while leading Tajima on to cover his feelings. Rumi worries about being pregnant and

keeps track of her sexual partners, seeking validation from older men. What makes this film unique is its realistic portrayal of growing up without romanticizing the experience.

Director Yukisada reminds the audience that these harsh experiences could reflect their own teenage years. Most adults are absent from the story, which focuses on high schoolers dealing with their problems. The students don't think about the future, spending their time fighting and hooking up. Nearby factories release black smoke, highlighting the tough environment these teens grow up in. The film doesn't emphasize character development, suggesting that most characters are too caught up in their own issues. Any growth is mainly seen in Kannonzaki, who learns a lesson and calms down by the end. The other characters continue their lives, showing that despite their struggles, life goes on. They show some growth but also regress at times.

Developmental Theories

Attachment Theory - Bowlby

Bowlby defined attachment as a strong emotional bond between people, especially between a baby and their caregiver. He believed babies are born with behaviors like crying and cooing to encourage caregivers to respond, which helps ensure their survival. Bowlby believed early attachments shape how children view themselves and their relationships later in life. If a child's bond with a caregiver is broken, it can lead to emotional or social problems. He emphasized that the quality of these relationships matters more than just spending time together.

Erikson's Psychosocial development - Identity vs Role Confusion

The fifth stage of psychosocial development occurs during the teenage years and is important for forming a personal identity. This stage can be challenging as teens try to figure out who they are. If they succeed, they feel confident and true to themselves; if they struggle,

they may feel confused and uncertain about their roles in life. During this time, teens explore their independence and seek to understand themselves. Support and encouragement help them develop a strong sense of self, while uncertainty about beliefs and goals can lead to insecurity. Successfully completing this stage leads to fidelity, meaning the ability to live according to society's rules.

Psychological Development of Characters

Haruna



Haruna's emotions are deeply impacted by her father's death when she was young. Her teddy bear, Kuchan, symbolizes the comfort her father gave, and losing Kuchan in a fire represents losing her father, adding to her sadness and making it hard to form close connections. According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, losing a parent early can lead to insecure attachment, which may cause Haruna to develop avoidant or anxious patterns, making it

difficult for her to trust others. A key moment occurs when Haruna saves Yamada, a boy who feels like an outcast. This act awakens her compassion and helps her connect with others. Their shared loneliness forms a bond, showing her she's not alone. Haruna's relationship with Kannonzaki is more complex, as his chaotic behavior mirrors her inner struggles. At first, Haruna is disconnected from others, but she slowly learns to form real connections. Her first time with her boyfriend was out of curiosity, not love, and the second time was her way of saying "thank you" and "sorry" instead of expressing desire. Her social life is shallow, and skipping school makes her feel more lonely. Financial problems at home and her mother's focus on money add to her stress and low self-esteem. Despite all this, Haruna grows. Connecting

with Yamada helps her face her fears, developing empathy and compassion. Her journey reflects a shift from emotional detachment to connection and personal growth.

Kannonzaki



Kannonzaki's home life is filled with emotional pain due to his parents' troubled relationship, especially his father's affair, and his mother's absence because of her dance school. This leaves him feeling insecure and emotionally neglected, which may explain his impulsive, aggressive behavior to hide his vulnerabilities. He shows signs of anxious attachment, constantly seeking Haruna's approval even when she pushes him away. Kannonzaki pressures her for physical intimacy out of fear of rejection and a need for control. His violent outbursts stem from a deep fear of abandonment and his need to maintain connections. He struggles to manage his emotions, bullying Yamada and using sexual encounters, especially non-consensual ones with Rumi, to fill an emotional void. This behavior is his way of coping, seeking quick relief without addressing deeper issues. His affair with Rumi creates conflict with his feelings

for Haruna, leading to emotional instability. After Rumi's tragic death, Kannonzaki starts to show some self-awareness, feeling guilt and pain. The film suggests hope as he shows remorse and a desire to win Haruna's affection. His focus on his studies hints that he might be taking responsibility for his actions, but it's unclear if his change is genuine or temporary. Despite some remorse, his fears of abandonment and need for affirmation remain unresolved, keeping him in a cycle of instability.

Rumi



Rumi is going through a difficult time trying to figure out who she is. Events in her life, such as non-consensual sex, teen pregnancy, and prostitution, have caused her deep emotional pain. She feels betrayed, scared, and powerless. She uses sex to control or gain attention, but it only leaves her feeling more disconnected and used. The violence she has experienced from Kannonzaki and her sister has caused both physical and emotional harm, which could lead to serious problems like PTSD or emotional detachment in the future. Teen pregnancy, especially due to coercion or assault, can have serious emotional effects. She might feel ashamed, guilty,

and scared about what lies ahead, which could disrupt her education and career plans. Losing her child has been extremely painful for Rumi, and this loss could lead to lasting emotional effects like depression, guilt, or a sense of failure. Without a supportive adult figure in her life, it's harder for her to handle her emotional struggles and face challenges. Rumi may show signs of depression, like feeling very sad, losing interest in things she used to enjoy, and feeling hopeless. Anxiety might also be present – constant worry, fear and avoidance. To cope, she might turn to drugs or alcohol to numb her pain. Body image issues could lead to eating disorders. Rumi's experiences could make it difficult for her to build healthy and trusting relationships later on. The trauma she has gone through might affect her ability to control her emotions and handle stress.

Tajima Kanna



Tajima is attracted to Yamada because he seems mysterious, kind, and shares her love for music. She builds a fantasy about their relationship, even though Yamada doesn't show much affection. Tajima convinces herself it's special and brags to classmates, trying to impress

him by making gifts. As her obsession grows, she becomes jealous of Haruna, fearing she'll steal Yamada away. This jealousy leads to extreme actions, like sending death threats and setting fire to Haruna's apartment. Tajima exaggerates Yamada's appreciation for her gifts to feel validated, but when he doesn't return her feelings, she feels rejected and emotionally drained. Her mental state worsens, and she sets herself on fire and jumps from a building, feeling trapped by her unreturned love. Tajima's actions reflect her deep emotional pain, insecurity, and fear of being abandoned. Her obsession, rejection, and lack of self-worth push her to this tragic end. Tajima's attachment to Yamada shows an insecure, anxious attachment style, where she clings to an idealized version of their relationship, ignoring reality, which leads to her breakdown and death.

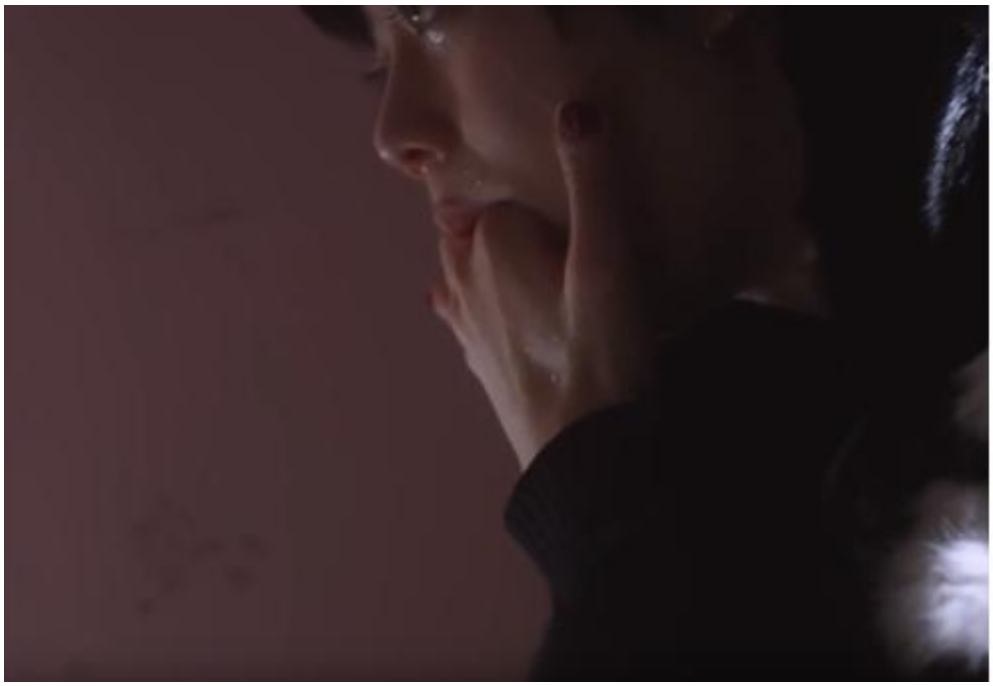
Yamada Ichiro



Yamada has been severely bullied from a young age, leaving him feeling isolated and disconnected from others. One traumatic event, where he was tied up and beaten, affected him deeply, causing him to withdraw and find comfort in being alone. He hides his pain and often retreats to places like the rooftop or near a hidden corpse. The bullying damaged his self-esteem and mental health, making him feel scared and angry. Yamada also struggles with his sexual orientation. He dates Kanna Tajima to hide his romantic feelings for a boy, which causes him

confusion and anxiety. He feels ashamed and like he doesn't belong. His past of bullying and isolation reflects avoidant attachment, where he avoids being vulnerable and has trouble forming healthy relationships. His fascination with death and his attachment to the corpse in the grasslands mirror his feelings of being emotionally "dead" from bullying and loneliness. Yamada also had sexual encounters with older men, which may have been abusive. These experiences likely made him dissociate from his trauma, leaving him feeling ashamed and powerless. Despite his struggles, Yamada connects with Haruna, Yoshikawa, and Tajima, though these relationships are often unhealthy. The loss of Tajima, even though he may have wished for it, could have triggered feelings of guilt and sadness. Yamada copes by isolating himself and using things like UFOs and ghosts to escape his reality. Despite everything, Yamada shows signs of growth and healing. His relationship with Haruna and his openness about his secrets suggest he's slowly overcoming his isolation and finding a sense of belonging.

Yoshikawa Kozue



Yoshikawa got into showbiz because of her parents, not by choice. As she grew from a child actor to a teenage model, she felt pressured to meet beauty standards, which made her feel

like an object. Even though she's successful, she feels replaceable and unsure of who she really is. The industry's focus on looks has hurt her self-esteem. Despite being admired for her beauty, Yoshikawa struggles with bulimia, binge-eating and purging to feel some control over her life. Even though others praise her, she feels insecure and dislikes seeing her own photos. The pressure to keep a perfect image has affected her both physically and emotionally. She has trouble trusting others and only opens up to a few people, like Yamada and Haruna. She's attracted to Haruna, but her feelings aren't returned, which makes her feel more lonely and confused about her sexual identity. Yoshikawa's cold reactions to things like death show her emotional detachment. She feels numb and invisible, possibly to cope with feelings of worthlessness. Her bulimia and feelings of worthlessness suggest she has a disorganized attachment style.

PART IV - CRITICAL EVALUATION

Yukisada's characters reflect the fears and insecurities we all have yet the film is filled with meaningful, quiet moments that highlight the characters' emotions and situations. For example, when Haruna says goodbye to her ex-boyfriend Kannonzaki, it's cold and awkward. Realising she'll be gone forever once he leaves, Kannonzaki starts running.

The film's simple, natural style comes through in its visuals and music, using violin, guitar, and piano. The cinematography gives the film a raw and realistic feel, focusing on Haruna but really telling the interconnected stories of these teens in the 1990s. The film even uses unsettling sounds like loud chewing to make the audience feel the characters' discomfort. Throughout the film, there are documentary-style interview scenes with the characters, showing

their inner thoughts and social roles. Haruna's final interview talks about her struggle to feel alive. She admits she doesn't feel fully alive but still hopes to find a way to change that.

Yamada and Haruna seem more confident than their peers, many of whom struggle with destructive behaviors. The movie focuses on their deep connection. Yamada admits to Haruna that she's the first "real" person he's ever told about his sexuality. Though he's also shared it with Kozue, he doesn't see her as "real," probably because of the emotional turmoil she's going through. As Haruna reflects on her friendship with Rumi, another girl in their group, she realizes they were never truly close. They just ended up together because of social convenience, and Haruna feels a bit sad that she left without really saying goodbye. By the end, Haruna and Yamada end up isolated, with only memories of their connection.

The phrase "I'll show you my secret treasure" is used often in the movie, symbolizing the hidden parts of everyone's lives. Whether it's their sexuality, a private diary, or their inner thoughts, who they choose to share these with shapes the film's direction. Yamada shows Haruna and Kozue a skeleton by the river, calling it his "treasure," as it strangely comforts him, but Haruna feels nothing. In one scene, Yamada admits to Haruna that he once tried to call a UFO to escape his miserable situation, showing just how desperately he wants a better life. The director uses peaceful scenes, like a grassy field at night, and sets them against graphic moments, like Kannonzaki with Rumi in a love hotel. This contrast highlights the meaninglessness the characters feel in their chaotic teenage lives

This film is not for the general public, it's rated 18+ – there are scenes of nudity, sexual abuse, substance abuse, smoking, alcohol consumption, extreme violence, bullying, suicide , eating disorder and obscene graffitis on the walls and it's not for the soft heart as it can be triggering so viewer's discretion is advised. However, this film can be a great resource for

psychology and sociology students who want to explore the prevalent issues at a deeper, raw level and understand why some young adults behave the way they do.

PART V - CONCLUSION

FILM'S GLIMPSE - Click on this link!

River's Edge explores dark themes but offers small, meaningful connections between characters in their empty world. While it seems unlikely these teens will remain friends as adults, there's hope they'll be okay in the end. Director Yukisada is successful in capturing the confusion, isolation, and complexity of adolescence, prompting the audience to think about life, death, and sexuality.

I would end with an african proverb – "the child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth"

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