‘Asia Extreme’: Japanese cinema and British hype

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Abstract
Can ‘hype’, used by Thomas Austin, Mark Jancovich and Barbara Klinger to describe Hollywood marketing strategies, also help us understand the promotional activities of independent British film distributors who have been promoting mainly Japanese and South Korean genre films under a variety of ‘Extreme Asia’ brands since 2001? This article will examine how these distributors and the print/broadcast media are involved in the process of discursively segmenting a variety of audience taste formations, and then recruiting these niche demographics to build an aggregate audience by generating multiple promises and invitations-to-view, or ‘hype’, around a film text. I will examine the various discourses used to constitute these niches, including those of ‘cult’ subcultural identity, auteurism and other notions of authorship, textual alienation effects and Orientalist cultural essentialism. I will focus on those exceptional texts in which this multiplying process has been particularly successful, in particular Miike Takashi’s Audition (1999).

When is a film Japanese?
‘Hype’ is usually associated with the horizontally and vertically integrated transnational media conglomerates of which the Hollywood studios are part, and is defined as their ability to multiply satellite texts, merchandising and numerous other ‘invitations-to-view’ around their core cinematic product (Austin 2001). It is through this process that films can be constructed as ‘dispersible texts’: Products that can be sold to multiple audience niches. This is now a basic business imperative for Hollywood producers, retailers and exhibitors, as it is the primary means to manage the risk of launching a new title (Austin 2001; Hantke 2005: 55; Jancovich 2002: 315, 318; Ang 1995: 11). By contrast, the ability of small independent distributors to develop such textual polysemy has been presumed to be limited by the smaller number of media outlets that give space to products considered marginal, such as foreign-language cinema. However, in this essay I will argue that the proliferation of media space that the DVD format, digital television and the Internet have opened up in the UK since the end of the 1990s has allowed such companies to ape the majors in distributing films as dispersible texts (Austin 2001: 29; Klinger 1989: 10). Independent distributors have succeeded in doing this in part by building a brand or ‘habit’ of watching films to incorporate those titles with less potential for stand-alone, cross-over appeal, creating ‘a community of people who are

Keywords
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cult
distribution
reception
just interested in, for example *Optimum Asia*, *Asia Extreme*, or *EasternCult* (Henderson 2005). The key audience aggregate that such brands target is the intersection between foreign-language film and ‘cult’ genre film that Jancovich et al. have done so much to map (Jancovich et al. 2003b).

This approach resituates *Asia Extreme* brands away from Japanese supply and the British popular media assumption of a transgressive Japanese pop culture, and towards British demand and the way these films are marketed and consumed. Despite the potential represented by Internet narrowcasting, DVD media with multiple audio and subtitle tracks, and international mail-order websites to bypass traditional nation-state based media, it is still the networks of distributors, exhibitors, retailers, broadcasters and publications that to a large extent determine the films seen in Britain. This is because in addition to being able to dominate traditional shelf-space and column-inches with legally licensed products and create the hype to recruit audiences for those products, they have also effectively expanded into the new media space created by the Internet and the new television channels (Henderson 2005; Miller et al. 2001; Acland 2003; Austin 2001).


Table 1 indicates the most popular films that have been marketed as Japanese at the British box office since 1996. This table does not include the Japan/US co-produced animated films such as *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi and Sakakibara 2001), *Yu-Gi-Oh* (Tsui 2004) and the various films in the *Pokémon* franchise. With Warner Brothers co-producing and distributing the films, Anglicised names for the characters, and an English dub, there is no need for Japanese culture to be explicitly invoked as a marketing angle in the hype surrounding the films. Because they are so easily localised/Americanised, these titles have been very successful at the box-office; the first *Pokémon* film alone admitting over ten times as many paying customers as *Spirited Away/Sen to chihiro no kamikakushi* (Miyazaki 2001) (European Audiovisual Observatory). Even though sources such as *Kinema Jumpō* and *Screen International* class them as Japanese when

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\(^1\) All Japanese names will be given surname first. In the first reference to a film the most widely accepted English title of the film will be given, followed by the Japanese or Korean name if different, the director, and the year of release in its domestic market. Where loan words are used the original spelling will be retained (eg. *Battle Royale*, not *Batoru Rōyāru*). Thereafter the film’s English name will be used.
compiling box office reports, they are excluded from the category of ‘Japanese film’ within marketing discourses.

With the exception of Spirited Away, Shall We Dance?, and Twilight Samurai, ‘Japanese cinema’ in the UK is largely marketed within the ‘extreme’ paradigm: Within the top ten films in Table 1, Battle Royale, Dark Water and Audition are Asia Extreme titles, while Hana-bi, Brother and Zatoichi could loosely be described as genre films directed by and starring Kitano/‘Beat’ Takeshi.

In part the proliferation of Extreme Asia titles and branding can be interpreted as an effect of the phenomenal success of the DVD format in the UK: In 2004, the number of DVDs (legally) sold exceeded the number of cinema tickets for the first time, an increase that independent distributors benefited from. The DVD format, combined with online ‘customers who bought X also bought Y’ database technology, allows for massively greater fragmentation of the market into increasingly specific niches, ‘quite considerably broadening the taste of the public’, so that ‘[t]he share of revenue coming from non-mainstream films has moved from 10% to 30%’ (Pete Buckingham of the UK Film Council, quoted in de Lisle 2005).

This fragmentation may explain the increase in market space for foreign language cinema, but why ‘Asia Extreme’? Explanations in the popular print and broadcast media focus on the supply side: That ‘extreme violence and horror’ are an integral ‘part of modern Japanese cinema but [are] rare in other countries’ (‘Japan film’s . . . ’ 2004) and that these brands merely replicate ‘a level of depravity in Japanese popular culture beyond anything known here’ (Rayns 2001). I would like to shift the explanation away from assumptions about Japanese supply: It is only when cinema is taken out of the wider media context of television, music videos and other screen media, that is to say, the context of ‘Chris Morris, The League of Gentlemen and Eminem’, that Japanese visual culture seems transgressive compared to Britain’s (Rayns 2001). Meanwhile a glance at the most popular Japanese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK release year</th>
<th>Theatrical admissions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Spirited Away (Miyazaki 2001)</td>
<td>2003/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Zatoichi (Kitano 2003)</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Shall We Dance? (Suo 1996)</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
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<td>4 Battle Royale (Fukasaku 2000)</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>5 Hana-bi (Kitano 1997)</td>
<td>1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara (Nakata 2002)</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The Twilight Samurai/Tasogare seibei (Yamada 2002)</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Audition (Miike 1999)</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Brother (Kitano 2001)</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Kikujiro/Kikujiro no natsu (Kitano 1999)</td>
<td>2000</td>
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Table 1: Theatrical admissions for the top ten films marketed as Japanese in the UK, 1996–2004 (collated from European Audiovisual Observatory 2005; ‘U.K. Box Office . . . ’ 2004).
movies in Japan over the same period reveals the same dominance of Pokémon and Studio Ghibli products such as Spirited Away and Howl’s Moving Castle, as well as familiar genres such as weepy romantic dramas (Crying For Love/Sekai no chushin de, ai wo sakebu [Yukisada 2004], Be With You/Ima ni yuki masu [Doi 2004]) and police thrillers (the two Bayside Shakedown films), rather than sexualised ultra-violence (see Table 2).

Supply alone cannot explain Asia Extreme; these brands are not merely a passive expression of Japanese cinematic culture, but are in part constructed by traditions of marketing and watching foreign language film in Anglophone territories.

**Hype and dispersible texts**

Tony Rayns has offered a textbook example of the involvement of distributors, print media and retailers in the construction of a dispersible text:

[Arts Magic’s] major market in Britain is through HMV stores. HMV sells more of their stuff than any other outlet (. . .) so [Mike Mercer, head of Arts Magic] has regular meetings with the buyers and stockists at HMV, and HMV have said to him that [their EasternCult brand films] are doing fine as niche titles, that they sit there on the shelf next to the Tartan Asia Extreme (. . .) but HMV’s advice was, ‘why don’t you try and break into the art-house market, because some of your titles would be quite suitable, and if you could get coverage in Sight and Sound then I think you could expand your audience, and it would be good for us too’. And that’s why he called me up (. . .) he thinks if I help him in some way that somehow this will guide them away from the martial arts section and into the world cinema section (. . .) with presumably a Sight and Sound recommendation on the sleeve (. . .) or me doing a commentary track (Rayns 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year of release</th>
<th>Box office in billions of yen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spirited Away (Miyazaki)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>30.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Howl’s Moving Castle/Howl no ugoku shiro (Miyazaki)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bayside Shakedown 2/Odoru daisōsasen 2 (Motohiro)</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>17.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Princess Mononoke/Mononoke Hime (Miyazaki)</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>11.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Crying for Love in the Centre of the World (Yukisada)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>8.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Cat Returns/Neko no onjaeshi (Morita)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bayside Shakedown/Odoru daisōsasen (Motohiro)</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pokemon 2000/Gekijōban pocket monster kesshōto no teio (Morita)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Be With You (Doi)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pokemon Heroes/Pocket monster advance generation</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2: Top ten Japanese films that earned more than 1 billion yen at the domestic box office, 1996–2004.

*Figures for 1996–1999 show distributors’ receipts only (source: Motion Pictures Producers Association Of Japan 2006).
In the event, the two films involved, Onibi (Mochizuki 1997) and Another Lonely Hitman/Shin kanishiki hitman (Mochizuki 1995), featured a prominently displayed quote from Rayns’ catalogue notes for the 27th Rotterdam festival on their covers. As Rayns notes, HMV and Arts Magic were ‘trying to co-opt me as some kind of brand signalling art-house cinema, as a way of extending [their] market beyond the otaku crowd, the fan-boy crowd’, thereby ‘reaching a different audience (. . .) which would make the overall audience larger’, and hence manage the risk associated with launching a new title (Rayns 2005).

This combination, of the cult ‘fan-boy’ audience and art-house/world cinema audience, is by far the most common aggregation for a successful Asian genre film, as many other examples can attest: of Audition, Variety declares that its ‘[lyrical pacing] may allow it to break out of creepfest ghetto [sic]. Some arthouse play is possible, especially in late-night venues’ (Eisner 1999). This division is also evident in the layout of HMV’s Oxford Street store in London, as Rayns describes above. A large ‘World Cinema’ section is augmented by smaller sections for cult Asian genre films: ‘Martial Arts’, ‘Anime’, and ‘Extreme Asia’. The most successful, cross-over titles, the ones that have succeeded in drawing in aggregate audiences, such as Ring and Battle Royale, will appear in both the ‘Extreme Asia’ section (the ‘creepfest ghetto’), and in the larger, more encompassing ‘World Cinema’ section; these titles can ‘stand alone’ outside of the ‘generic East Asian cinema bracket which has a very specific fan base, people who are just into their genre cinema’, and draw on the ‘art house bracket’ (Henderson 2005).

To build an aggregate audience, the audience first of all has to be discursively segmented. This is done by contrasting the presumed readership with other, less desirable formations. These audience labels are not mutually exclusive, internally coherent, hermetically sealed entities; they are discursive categories created and employed by the major media industries to manage risk: They are permeable and constituted by overlapping discourses. I will discuss the triangulation between the cult ‘fan-boy’, the ‘world cinema patron’ and the mainstream viewer, who all have to be separated from one another (Austin 2001: 132). Hence, Asian Cult Cinema marvels that Miike ‘miraculously managed to become the darling of the art crowd set even though many of his films. . . are the epitome of political incorrectness’, casting the ‘art crowd set’ as uptight puritans incapable of merely enjoying a film (Weisser 2002: 4). Conversely, high brow commentators assume that the cult fan will ‘take anything as long as it delivers enough thrills or gore or whatever it’s supposed to have to keep them satisfied’, and that ‘the average fan-boy type is not going to go to the ICA [The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London]. . . It’s just not likely to be on their radar – it says “Art” with a capital “A”’ (Rayns 2005). This ‘art-house’ readership has to be assured that the violence within certain films is legitimate, and not merely titillating.

Although the distributors’ ‘ideal would be to push these titles into Woolworths or Tesco’, as mainstream take-up can double revenues (Hamilton 2005), this only happens with a few titles, as the supermarkets are ‘not very interested in foreign language films’ (Henderson 2005). Consequently,
this wider film-watching public is most frequently invoked as a negative

Other that the cult and art-house audiences have to be differentiated from;
the ‘casual viewer’ is ‘infantilised, feminised and/or banalised’ (Austin
2001: 132), or criminalised as a threatening undifferentiated ‘under-class’
(Acland 2003: 146–149) who consume mainstream products foisted on
them by ‘a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle-class
conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy’
(Jancovich 2002: 315).2 This creates a triangle between cult, art-house
and mainstream.

That the same film text can so often be successfully sold to both genre
fans and foreign language audiences is certainly not as ‘miraculous’ as
Asian Cult Cinema
suggests; indeed this declamatory ‘othering’ should not
be taken at face value. As Jancovich and others have theorised, cult and
art-house film consumption share a common origin in the college film
societies and repertory theatres of postwar American cities. What they
both share is a sub-cultural identity ‘defined against the supposed obscene
accessibility of mass culture’ (Jancovich 2002: 309); this sub-cultural ide-
ology reads consumerism as a form of conformity, and not as being moti-
vated by a ‘desire to distance oneself from the figure of an undifferentiated
mass’ (Jancovich et al. 2003a: 198). In their apparent opposition to the
‘simple conformist dupe’ represented by the ‘average moviegoer’, both cult
and art-house consumers embody ‘a species of bourgeois aesthetics[,] not
a challenge to it’ (Jancovich 2002: 312, 313).

I will now compare the way in which a variety of discourses – including
those of ‘cult’ sub-cultural identity, auteurism and other notions of author-
ship, textual ‘alienation’ effects and Orientalist ‘cultural difference’ – are
suggested in distributors’ press releases, packaging and advertising. Different
segments of this hype are then picked up and amplified by the different
publications in order to ‘discursively construct [recruit and maintain]
like-minded audiences for the film, and (. . .) distinguish the preferences of
these imagined audiences from less “valid” tastes’ (Austin 2001: 128):

both the film’s distributor and the publications in question made assump-
tions about the cultural competences, repertoires and preferences of their dif-
ferent target audiences. As Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, such differences
in cultural taste enforce social distinctions. (Austin 2001: 51)

Distribution companies attempt to reach the cult audience through pop-
ulist cinephile publications such as Empire and Total Film, heterosexual
male lifestyle magazines such as Loaded and FHM, alternative lifestyle
magazines such as Bizarre (the strap-line of which reads ‘sex, death, fetish
and all round weirdness’), as well as specialist fanzines such as the New
York based Asian Cult Cinema. Henderson at Optimum explains:

The good thing about a lot of these East Asian titles is that because the core
audience is so specific and they read certain things it’s very easy to target
them and be quite efficient with your marketing (. . .) so you don’t have to
advertise in The Sun or on TV to reach them because you know they’re
reading Impact or Neo. (Henderson 2005)
By contrast our second discursively constructed demographic, the art-house/world cinema audience, are regarded as being more difficult and expensive to target, involving advertising in outlets that have wide diffusion, such as the national broadsheet newspapers, although there are also niche, 'high-brow' film magazines such as *Sight and Sound* that assume a similar readership.

To take *Battle Royale* as a typical example of this process, Tartan’s press release contains multiple possible readings of the film. First, the director Fukasaku Kinji is described as an auteur of international standing and influence with his own oeuvre, ‘acknowledged by Quentin Tarantino and John Woo as a key influence and ( . . . ) responsible for some of Japan’s best post-WWII yakuza films’. *Battle Royale* is hence a cinematic mediation of Fukasaku’s personal concerns, in this instance the fact that ‘[a]t the age of 15 [he] was confronted with the death of his class mates during a bombing raid’. Additional notions of individual authorship are attached through reference to the novel’s author, Takami Koshun, and to ‘Beat’ Takeshi’s performance in the film. However, a contrasting reading of the film within the same press release highlights the film’s status as a spectacular event movie that will ‘shock, grab and disturb’ (*Battle Royale [press release]’ 2002).

This press release was then disseminated across the media spectrum, along with a variety of other satellite texts including print adverts, both in the national and regional press and in the ‘specialist film, lifestyle and Asian press’; a postcard campaign targeting university students; a poster campaign in London, Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham; and a ‘high profile theatrical campaign and release’ which would guarantee ‘eager anticipation for the DVD and video’ (*Battle Royale [press release]’ 2002). This in turn led to a host of reviews, interviews with directors, features on ‘the new wave of Extreme Asian cinema’ (*Battle Royale [press release]’ 2002), and other satellite texts across the entire media spectrum. Crucially these different media texts chose to accentuate different elements from within Tartan’s polysemic ‘sell’: ‘high-brow’ publications that maintain an ‘imagined community’ of discerning world-cinema patrons, such as *The Guardian* or *Sight and Sound*, emphasized the literary and auteurist reading of the film when they described it as a ‘cross between *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lord of the Flies*’ (*Battle Royale [press release]’ 2002). By contrast, populist film and male lifestyle magazines such as *Total Film* and *FHM* focussed on the film’s ability to deliver thrills, describing it as a ‘film that’ll nail gun you to your seat, gasping in shock’ (*Battle Royale [press release]’ 2002). What then are the discourses used to delineate the cult and art-house groups?

**Adopting transgression**

As theorised by Jancovich et al., neither ‘cult’ nor ‘art-house’ can be defined exclusively by either their textual or extra-textual properties, but rather by the complex interplay between textual elements (transgressive excess), and extra-textual characteristics (the sub-cultural capital and identity to be gleaned from cult consumption) (Jancovich et al. 2003b). Cult celebrates the marginal, that which is ‘unwatchable and/or
unobtainable’ and considered ‘unpleasurable or inaccessible to most viewers’ (Jancovich 2002: 309); in many English speaking territories foreign-language cinema is often marginalised in such a way and so is ideally placed for cult appropriation (see also Hills 2005: 161). However, the cult taste formation ensures that this marginality is ‘thickened’: It is not enough that the film be marginal in terms of its language or other cultural content; it must also be marginal by dint of its location in a critically disreputable genre, and by its excess, in terms of (sexual or violent) spectacle, or its transgression of social or aesthetic norms. This heightened marginality then necessitates a response ‘more devoted, more dedicated, more obsessive’; a response upon which a sub-cultural identity can be founded (Hutchings 2003: 132, 133). From a film distributor’s point of view, this thickening also lends itself to a polysemic sell: A foreign-language horror film can be sold to a world cinema audience as well as to a genre-film audience, in a way that an American horror film or a common or garden foreign-language art house film cannot be.

Consequently, since the 1960s foreign-language films in the United States and Britain have often carried an expectation of nudity or violence (Betz 2003: 205). Successive decades have seen Japanese films such as Odd Obsession/Kagi (Ichikawa 1959), Woman of the Dunes/Suna no onna (Teshigahara 1964), Onibaba (Shindo 1964) and In the Realm of the Senses/Ai no Corrida (Oshima 1976), as well as Italian, Spanish and Hong Kong genre cinema constructed either as ‘beyond the pale’, smashing the taboos of Hollywood morality; or as camp, on account of their dated regimes of realism (see Rayns 2001; Willis 2003; Hutchings 2003; Roberts 2005).

Several discourses are mobilised to sell Japanese films to this discursively constructed demographic. Most obviously, the extreme nature of the film texts is emphasised in order to authenticate them as ‘outlaw’ vis-à-vis mainstream taste, and literally dangerous in terms of their potential for inspiring copy-cat behaviour or inducing extreme physiological reactions such as vomiting or passing out. Throughout the media coverage of Audition in Britain, tales of the visceral effects that the film had on audiences proliferated, with The Guardian and Sight and Sound both reporting audience members walking out of the Rotterdam screenings, hissing ‘you’re sick’ at Miike (Romney 2000; James 2000), and an article in The Mirror that reported two people passing out and upwards of twenty walk-outs a night at the film’s Dublin run (Friel 2001; see also Rose 2003). The Daily Mail branded it ‘revolting ( . . .) a new low in cinematic torture and amputation’ (Tookey 2001), and The Evening Standard called it ‘the grimmest exploitation of sadistic violence I have seen in months’ (Walker 2001). Later that year, organisers of the Toronto Film Festival sought to capitalise on Miike’s infamy by distributing sick bags to the audience attending the screening of Ichi the Killer/Koroshiya ichi (Miike 2001), branded with the film’s logo (Mes 2003: 333, 334). This hype prompted Empire to ask, ‘is this the world’s most dangerous film-maker?’ (Bowyer 2003).

Additional kudos is given to those films that run into trouble with the censors, as this further authenticates their status as outlaw texts, ‘beyond the pale’ (Austin 2001: 153). Although The Daily Mail and The Evening Standard called for Audition to be banned, the British Board of
Film Classification passed it without cuts. *Ichi the Killer* however was widely reported to be the most cut film in Britain in 'almost a decade' ('Censors . . .' 2002). This focus on the intensity of the violence in the films serves to define cult viewing habits as unpleasurable to the 'average movie-goer'.

Implicit in all of this is ‘the traditional “dare” of horror movie promotion’ (Jancovich 2001: 39). For example, Tartan’s *Ring* poster reproduced a quote from *The News of the World* inviting audiences to ‘see it if you dare’ (*Ring [advert]’ 2001). Marketeers imagine the cult fan-boy as existing within a competitive, homosocial, hierarchical ‘fratriarchy’, a structure that reveals the ‘gaps between the public face of male power and individual male anxieties’ (Austin 2001: 84–86). Within this structure they compete with their ‘siblings’ for social standing by accruing sub-cultural capital. One of the ways in which they can do this is by demonstrating their ‘unshockability’, their borderline-masochistic urge to withstand cinematic ‘torture’ (Hollows 2003: 44). This is an aspect that Tartan and Medusa hype. The advert for *Ichi the Killer* that appeared in *Empire* and other cinephile publications had the tagline ‘explore your fear’, and showed a woman bound to a cinema seat being forced to watch the graphic horrors on screen, like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), with presumably the filmmaker and distributor taking the part of the dominatrix administering this punishment (see Figure 1). This is also evident if we compare the promotional artwork for the Japanese and British releases of *Audition* (see Figures 2 and 3). While the Japanese video cover focuses on Aoyama’s face (and the marquee value of actor Ishibashi Ryo), the British image hypes the promise of Asami as a castrating dominatrix poised to torture the audience, clad in body armour and wielding a hypodermic needle, above the camp, punning strap-line ‘she always gets a part’. In Tartan’s press materials Miike, as the auteur director concocting this vision, is conflated with Asami in this dominatrix role when he is described as the ‘deranged plastic surgeon’ in a ‘sadistic delirium’ operating, presumably, on the audience. Again recalling Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, the press copy asserts that ‘you won’t be able to avert your eyes’ (Pilkington and Hartung 2004: 28, 29).

The cult fan-boy is often described by the media industries as an ‘early adopter’; this means that another way in which they can accrue sub-cultural capital within the fratriarchy is by ‘adopting’ – not merely consuming, but investing in, as the source of their social standing – both new sub-cultural ‘software’, whether that be the filmic texts themselves or websites and magazines such as *Empire* that impart satellite texts; and new hardware technologies, such as the Internet and DVD, that allow them access to these texts before either their peers with whom they are competing, or the imagined mainstream Other can ‘catch up’ (Acland 2003: 76; Hills 2005: 164, 165; Hollows 2003: 41). Tartan’s Matt Hamilton confirms, ‘people buying our product are generally the early adopters, male, 18 to 30-year-old consumers’ (quoted in ‘D is for . . .’ 2005), while Optimum’s Henderson also constructs this audience as being coterminal with ‘the biggest chunk of DVD buyers: male, 18–40’ (Henderson 2005). This taste formation is particularly played to in the case of those Asian titles that have been
remade, or have been purchased for remake, by Hollywood majors, as in the press release for Old Boy (Park 2003), which urged audiences to 'be part of Kool Korean cinema before Hollywood disembowels it' (‘Old Boy [press release]' 2005); to adopt and invest in a text before the imagined mainstream, here Hollywood, banalizes it.

However, the relationship of the remake to sub-cultural identity is more complex than a simple vilification of Hollywood, for while on the one hand

Figure 1: British magazine advert for Ichi the Killer.
Figure 2: British magazine advert for Audition.
remakes represent the mainstream Other, which acts as a foil for the cult identity, the fact that this mainstream does, belatedly, recognise the worth of the film further validates the cult fans’ sub-cultural capital by demonstrating their ear-to-the-ground, trend-spotting ability (Hills 2005: 164).

This conflicted attitude towards the remake reveals the essential contradiction of an anti-consumerist identity that is itself expressed via acts of consumption, of an identity that defines itself through opposition to the media yet ‘is produced and maintained, through the media’ (Jancovich 2002: 318).

The consistent anxiety about ‘selling-out’, literally, selling to outsiders,
demonstrates that by disseminating cult knowledge, the ‘precious emblem of insider status’, the media simultaneously defines and threatens to undermine a sub-cultural identity that is founded on exclusivity (Jancovich 2002: 319). In this sense the cult fan is pre-mainstream rather than anti-mainstream (Hills 2005: 165).

The quest to accrue sub-cultural knowledge manifests itself as a completist urge to consume a director’s entire body of output, with the ‘uncut’ form the most highly prized. Those scenes that are cut from the film are further fetishised as forbidden images: Asian Cult Cinema’s Miike special obsessively catalogues each and every one of the thirty cuts taken from the Hong Kong release of *Ichi the Killer* (Weisser 2002), while Mes’s *Agitator* reproduces four stills from a torture sequence cut from the British release of the film with the stated intention of demonstrating the rather prosaic point that the actress involved did not actually have this violence inflicted on her (Mes 2003). Wu has termed this obsessive cataloguing of a ‘mental checklist’ of spectacles ‘archaeological cinephilia’ (Wu 2003: 98).

The archaeological cinephile also seeks to collect the satellite texts surrounding the films. The (carefully policed) ‘insider industry secrets’ revealed in the DVD extras and magazines such as *Empire* allow the cult consumer the illusion that he is ‘a film industry “insider”, privy to a secret world of information about film-making’ (Klinger 2001: 139). This represents a ‘fantasy of production’ whereby the audience is allowed to imagine himself, not merely as a consumer, but as a producer of hip new cultural products (Klinger 2001: 139–147); he is not just watching, he is ‘part of Kool Korean cinema’ [added emphasis]. That the DVD format is uniquely suited to cinephile adoption is demonstrated by the fact that in contrast to the increasing popularity of DVD sales, combined video and DVD rentals continue to decline from their 1989 peak, indicating a preference for ownership (Dyja 2004: 55–57).

**Authorship**

As *Variety* and HMV noted above, the art-house appetite for films such as *Audition* could potentially be huge, and many of the elements described above, such as the sub-cultural capital to be gained from completism, early adoption, and consuming that which is assumed to be unpleasurable for the general viewer, are also mobilised to recruit this demographic. However, for this to happen, a slightly different set of promises and invitations has to be constructed around the films. Most importantly of all, the art-house audience has to be discursively delineated and distanced from the presumed sado-masochistic voyeurism of the cult film fan, in order that the potentially problematic violence of the films can be legitimated. It is not simply enough to catalogue the atrocities represented on screen, or to attempt a ‘dare’ sell. Rather, the violence in these films is described in a textually deterministic way, of having the effect of deconstructing and transcending conservative social mores, narrative forms and genres. Hence *Ichi the Killer* and *Audition* are not merely violent, they have to be about violence (Mathijs 2003). Throughout the literature surrounding these films this legitimising process frequently references Grand Guignol and Bertold Brecht (see for instance Hamish McAlpine’s ‘mission statement’ for
the brand: Pilkington and Hartung 2004; and also James 2000). This discourse argues that the ‘excess’ in these films, not just in terms of content but in terms of style, functions in Brechtian terms: it breaks down ‘the supposedly naïve acceptance of illusionist mass culture’ and forces the audience to adopt a distanced and ironic awareness of the ideological functions of film form (Jancovich 2002: 310; Sconce 2003: 21). A good example is this description of the scene in Dead or Alive (Miike 1999) where a woman is drowned in a tub of her own excrement:

Miike then ‘appears’ to offer his unsuspecting viewer traditional generic fare (...). Although this appears offensive to the tastes of most audiences, Miike’s modus operandi in this example of his cinema of outrage involves taking the yakuza-eiga’s traditional treatment of women to its logical conclusion and confronting the audience with the dark implications of this theme. (Williams 2004: 58)

By coding the excess within extreme cinema as having a textually determined, politically progressive effect on ‘the audience’, cinematic violence can be legitimated as serving a social purpose. This discourse also serves ‘to detach the film[s] from the horror genre’s associations with voyeurism, misogyny and formulaic simplicity’ and to distinguish the motivation behind the art-house audience’s appetite for violence from the vulgar, voyeuristic titillation of the ‘conscience-free (...) gorehounds and career masochists’ of whom the cult audience is supposedly composed (Jancovich 2001: 42; Falcon 2001). In some cases however this reading is partially blocked by the nature of certain scenes in the films, as when Sight and Sound’s generally favourable review of Audition admits that the ‘sado-erotic flashback’ to Asami being abused as a child is ‘somewhat reprehensible’ (Falcon 2001).

Perhaps the most significant discourse mobilised in the art-house hype that serves to raise the films from potential ‘schlock’ genre hack-work to the status of art-cinema is that which constructs the films as being the works of an ‘auteur’, the individual originator of a unified oeuvre within which ‘all differences have to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence’ (Foucault 1980: 151). Like Foucault’s ‘author function’, this is a classification system that allows the ‘authentication of some texts by the use of others’ (Foucault 1980: 147), and which in marketing terms is signalled by the ubiquitous ‘from the director of . . .’ handle. Association with other ‘high art’ notions of authorship, such as discussions of the cinematography, or of the Murakami Ryū source novel for Audition, can have a similar legitimizing effect (see for example Pilkington and Hartung 2004: 29).

Various strategies have been employed in the attempt to reconcile an auteur reading with Miike’s increasingly eclectic output. Firstly, there is the invocation of the Cahiers du cinéma ‘Category E’ theory by Rayns and Mes among others. They argue that genre movie-making provides an opportunity whereby as long as ‘the generic elements [are] left on autopilot’ (Rayns 2000a), leaving enough genre signifiers to ‘fill a two-minute trailer’ (Mes 2003: 22) and satisfy the studio heads, the director will be left
relatively unscrutinised to ‘bus[y] himself with form, rhythm, texture’ (Rayns 2000a). This creates ‘a dislocation ( . . . ) between the starting point’, a genre film, ‘and the finished product’, a piece of ground-breaking cinema (Comolli and Narboni 1977; see also Jancovich 2002: 316, 317). The second technique is to predict his imminent graduation from fledging auteurdom: Miike may be a ‘hired gun’ now, but, as Rayns promises, ‘[s]oon he will be famous enough to pick and choose his projects more selectively and to originate projects of his own’ (Rayns 2000a: 32). Since 2000 however, as this prediction has failed to materialise, an auteur reading of Miike’s films has hinged on an ever more selective sampling of his output. As Miike himself has noted, in the West only his ‘most violent’ films are distributed (Rose 2003). His films aimed with increasing success at the general cinema-goer, such as Ring-derivative horror One Missed Call/Chakushin ari (2003), super-hero spoof Zebraman (2004), and action-adventure August o-bon holiday blockbuster The Great Spook War/Yōkai daisensō (2005), are overlooked.

As far as the cult fans are concerned, although the auteur discourse is equally important, it is employed not to legitimise otherwise problematic violence, but rather to guarantee the delivery of such violence; the auteur as sadistic ‘plastic surgeon’. As Henderson explains regarding Sky High (Kitamura 2003), ‘we think that [the film] will be popular obviously because people like Kitamura but the reason that they like Kitamura is because he’s a very good director of action and martial arts, so again it feed backs to those generic elements’ (Henderson 2005). In a British context that in general lacks a detailed awareness of Japanese film genres and stars, after the Extreme Asia brands themselves, the ‘auteur function’ becomes the principle classificatory system and ‘guarantee of audience satisfaction’, even if this elides the polysemy of the films in question.

Reading for difference, imagining Japan

As Hills has demonstrated, despite the ease with which horror and violence are meant to cross national boundaries, tapping into universal ‘primal’ concerns, reviewers of Japanese horror are often more likely to read for ‘cultural difference’, to invoke Noh and Kabuki, than they are to discuss comparable American horror films such as The Sixth Sense (Shyamalan 1999) or The Blair Witch Project (Myrick and Sanchez 1999) (Hills 2005: 167, 168; see for example Tombs 2000). This discourse of cultural difference codes the films as ‘culturally and aesthetically valuable (requiring audience labour, knowledge and reflection) rather than as disposable or low-cultural’, ostensibly by virtue of their ‘possibilities for provoking cross-cultural understanding’, but also because this ensures that the films require an informed community to interpret them (Hills 2005: 169, 163). American cinema is derided as being characterized by ‘clearly signposted’ morality and plotting (Hills 2005: 169), hence requiring less thought; Japanese cinema, by contrast, with its ambiguous ‘lack of a clear moral commentary’ is enigmatically open to plural readings (Austin 2001: 91). This facilitates the cross-over effect by ‘inviting multiple perspectives on, and investments in, competing characters, in order to maximise the film’s audience’ (Hills 2005; Austin 2001: 91). In the case of Audition,
broadsheets could describe it as a commentary on chauvinism, while horror fans regarded this open-endedness as a device to ratchet up the scare-factor: ‘innocent people are victimised and a lot goes unexplained’ (Bryce 2005).

However, this discourse of ambiguity does also ‘draw implicitly on stereotypes of Japanese “inscrutability”’ (Hills 2005: 169): the stereotype has it that while Japanese society is uniquely and essentially harmonious, Japanese visual culture is excessively violent; this apparent contradiction is explained by asserting that extreme Japanese cinema acts as a ‘safety valve’ for ‘the deeply rooted erotic, violent and sado-masochistic fantasies which lie just beneath the surface of an exceptionally ordered society’ (review quoted in Buruma 2001: back cover). It is not just Western commentators who offer this explanation:

Guardian: Japan has a fraction of the violent crime that we have here in the UK, but films and comics are full of it.

Miike: I suppose film takes up the slack of what is not expressed in society. (Rees 2001)

This quasi-psychoanalytic diagnosis, in describing the repressed ‘violent fantasies of a people forced to be gentle’ (Buruma 2001: 225), resembles the centuries-old Orientalist discourse that essentialises Asian societies as externally inscrutable, internally unreasonable and violent, and therefore schizophrenic, treacherous or amoral in their swings between these two polar opposites (see for instance Benedict 1989: 2). In marketing terms, the media is ‘piggy-backing’ on orientalism: attempting to get free publicity for a film by attaching it to ‘pre-sold’ elements (Austin 2001: 50, 114).

As Littlewood has argued, this genre of prurient criticism functions to elide ‘[Western] complicity in the sexual violence’, allowing Japanese cinematic excess to be presented ‘as an example of what the Japanese like, not of what we like’, so that it ‘confirms our prejudices and excuses our indulgences’, allowing us to simultaneously ‘condemn while we enjoy’ (Littlewood 1996: 180, 183). A typical example would be Rated Recommended Product’s assertion that ‘the Japanese can be a sadistic bunch, and they do make very gory horror movies with an emphasis on torture’ (Bryce 2005). Similarly, The Evening Standard’s review of Audition, despite drawing a comparison to a not dissimilar terminal dismemberment sequence in the British film Gangster Number One (McGuigan 2000), goes on to discuss the ‘pornographic’ and ‘violent psychopathology’ of ‘the Far East cinema’s fixation on physical pain’ [added emphasis] (Walker 2001). This often functions to legitimate European male access to Asian women by coding the latter as submissive and/or repressed by the ‘perverted’ Asian male (Littlewood 1996: 180). This is a feature that gets hyped in marketing these films to a presumed heterosexual adolescent male audience: Asian Cult Cinema has a monthly centrefold, while the banner for the Asia Extreme website reproduces the scantily-clad ‘starlets’ from the packaging of Shiri (Kang, 1999) and Bad Guy/Nabbeun namja (Kim, 2001) (‘Asia Extreme’ 2005). This can function to deflect any social criticism the films may contain: Japan is simply ‘other’. Hence Audition is described as ‘a critique of traditional male
Japanese attitudes towards women’ [emphasis added] rather than as a commentary on male chauvinism in general, while the grim suburban setting of *Dark Water* is seen as a commentary on the ‘soul-sappingly relentless architecture’ of modern Japan, rather than that of the advanced capitalist world (Falcon 2001; see also Ide 2001; North 2005).

**Conclusions**

The years since 2000 have witnessed a proliferation of the media space that is available in Britain for the dissemination of films and the surrounding satellite texts that hype and cross-promote them, through outlets such as the Internet, DVDs and cable television channels. This has allowed independent distribution companies selling non-English language cinematic products the media space in which to build a pluralist audience by multiplying the potential readings of their films, sometimes to an extent comparable to the mainstream Hollywood hype machines. ‘To produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make the film resonate as extensively as possible in the social sphere [and] maximise its audience’, promotion ‘fragment[s] rather than assemble[s] the text’ (Klinger 1989: 10). One of the key beneficiaries of these processes has been Asian genre cinema, and in this instance the core audience niche that distributors have drawn on are the cult film fans, who, since the birth of repertory cinemas in post-war Britain and America, have celebrated what is considered to be, or what can be coded as, marginal, using this taste formation to demarcate an exclusive sub-cultural identity. The cult celebration of marginality has however meant that it is not enough for a film merely to be in a language other than English (in Anglophone territories), or to come from an Orient constructed as exotic; the film must also be marginal in terms of its placement within a disreputable genre such as horror or gangster-crime, and by virtue of its ‘excess’ in terms of sexual or violent content and the style in which the content is conveyed. Notions of auteurism here function as a further classificatory handle guaranteeing the delivery of these genre elements. The Extreme Asia brands’ marketing and reading strategies therefore implicitly draw on a lengthy Anglophone tradition of conflating foreign-language cinema with excessive genre films. Foreign genre cinema has allowed independent distributors some stability owing to its saleability to both cult and art-house niches. For the world cinema audience to whom the same film texts have to be successfully sold if cross-over status is to be achieved. this reading has to be adjusted slightly; marginality is celebrated not for its ability to deliver thrills, but for its political role in transcending dominant modes of representation and ethics. Meanwhile auteurism serves to confer artistic legitimacy on the film by presenting it as the work of individual, unfettered creativity.

What can we say about the effects of the British marketing and reading strategies on the consumers’ ‘post-text’ activities, on the construction of an Oriental imaginary? Can this apparent ‘Asia-philia’ deconstruct the ‘logocentric master narratives of European culture’ (Hunt 2003: 13, 14), or should we bear in mind the ‘limits of syncretism’, the sharp discontinuities between aesthetic appreciation and political thought and action (Shohat and Stam 1994: 315)? The apparently transgressive nature of
these titles is often discussed as if it is an integral part of the film text, or worse of Japanese culture itself, rather than being at least partly located in the way in which the films are marketed and consumed in Britain; as an expression of a deep-rooted spiritual malaise that afflicts Japanese society at every level, rather than as the work of certain individual filmmakers operating at the fringes of Japanese society; and as something that the Japanese like, not as something that British consumers might actually themselves be enjoying. Sadly, this popular perception of the Japanese as ‘world-class perversion freaks’ (Crichton’s Rising Sun, quoted in Littlewood 1996: 180) is unlikely to change while film is thought of and sold as the exoticised expression of an essentialised national culture, and while this perception serves as an invaluable pre-sold element upon which a ‘dare sell’ of a Japanese genre film can be effectively piggy-backed.

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