

Aberystwyth University

Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies

**A Contested Category:
British Audiences and Asian Extreme Films**

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Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Statement 1

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Abstract

A Contested Genre: British Audiences and Asian Extreme Films

This thesis explores the reception and fandom of Asian Extreme films in the UK over the last twelve years. It draws on the findings of a research project undertaken in collaboration with the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The twenty-first century has seen an explosion in the popularity of Asian cult cinema in the West; it is within this evolving landscape that, for a number of years, the BBFC encountered difficulties when classifying many Asian Extreme films. This research draws on Annette Kuhn's model of censorship as an on-going and provisional process that arises out of the interaction between a number of institutions, discourses and practices; in this case, the competing discourses generated by Tartan's controversial marketing strategies, the regulatory activity of the BBFC, the response of the British 'mainstream' press and the practices and cultures generated by fan communities have all contributed to the discursive frameworks influencing the reception of these films in the UK.

As a mixed-method, multi-stage research project this thesis combines archival research, a small-scale reception study, a survey of online fan activity, twelve semi-structured interviews and an online quali-quantitative questionnaire. Using these research tools, it sets out to capture a portrait of the pleasures, enjoyments and meanings that British audiences derive from Asian Extreme films. As a contested category, the Asian Extreme genre acts as an important site for investigating a range of academic debates that have evolved in the overlapping fields of film censorship, fan studies, cult cinema, genre studies and East Asian cinema. In these ways, this study contributes to a number of academic debates and, in particular, offers new insights into the practices of film regulation in contemporary British culture.

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Introduction

Asian Extreme Films, the BBFC and Shifting Boundaries of Cultural Taste

Background to the Research Project

This thesis investigates the reception and fandom of Asian Extreme films in the UK by drawing on the findings of a collaborative research project with the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).¹ The project evolved out of a pre-existing relationship between researchers at Aberystwyth University and the BBFC, established through an earlier study exploring audience responses to sexual violence in five films (Barker et al: 2007).² Following on from this, a second project was proposed with the purpose of investigating audiences of 'extreme' films.³ This second development marks the starting point of this thesis. However, in its conception and evolution as a doctoral research project, the nature, purpose and scope of this study differs significantly from most other audience studies commissioned by the BBFC. Therefore, as a preliminary to the thesis, I outline the key differences between the institutional aims of the regulatory body and the research objectives of this study as an academic undertaking. These differences, and their implications, are discussed in the first section of the Introduction; this examines some of the significant changes that have taken place in the BBFC's policies and research strategies between 1999 and 2014.⁴

The original proposal for this study, formulated between Aberystwyth University and the BBFC, identified a number of different examples of 'extreme' cinema and indicated that the research should focus on one of these in particular. The category of Asian Extreme films was chosen for a number of reasons. In the UK, the origins of the Asian Extreme category are closely associated with Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' distribution label, which played a pivotal role in promoting and disseminating these films between 2001 and 2008, when it went into administration.⁵ During this period, and throughout the intervening years, the Asian Extreme category has proliferated within both the niche territories of cult film distribution networks and the commercial space of multiplex cinemas and supermarket shelves. It is a category that has been feted by fans for its 'cutting edge' status and reviled by critics for its 'misogyny, homophobia, annihilation of cultural differences, and generalization of Asian visual cultures' (Xu 2009); it has been hailed in promotional materials as 'the most exciting

and unique of all contemporary genres', and at the same time dismissed by academics as a 'pan-Asian faux-genre' (Pilkington 2004; Rawle 2009: 184).⁶ Its contested status means that the Asian Extreme category acts as an important site for investigating several areas of academic debate. Firstly, it provides a case study for exploring the fluctuating relationship between the niche status of cult film audiences and the 'mainstream' culture they seek to oppose - specifically the BBFC and elements of the 'mainstream' press.⁷ Secondly, and following on from this, Asian Extreme films can be understood in the context of a series of cross-cultural exchanges between East Asia and the West; in this way the category provides a useful site for re-considering the various debates surrounding Orientalism and issues of cultural translation which these interactions have produced. Finally, the contentious nature of the Asian Extreme category makes it a pertinent case for examining negotiations over genre legitimacy, particularly in terms of marketing and distribution practices in the UK. In order to understand the unique position occupied by this category of films, it is necessary to consider the wider reception contexts and discursive frameworks surrounding their British distribution. One such context is the regulatory framework provided by the BBFC.

The BBFC, British Audiences and 'Mainstream' Taste

The rationale behind this research hinges on the BBFC's concept of the 'potential viewer'. The BBFC is required by statute to take account of these 'potential viewers' during the regulatory process; it therefore has an interest in obtaining accurate research knowledge about them. Additionally, in the 2009 guidelines, the BBFC states that a key consideration when implementing its three guiding principles is 'whether the availability of the material, at the age group concerned, is clearly unacceptable to broad public opinion' (BBFC 2009: 4). In this way, the BBFC conceives one aspect of its overall function to be the provision of a 'benchmark for community standards' within 'mainstream' British film culture; this is reflected in the second question it asks in relation to '18' materials [see below].⁸ In order to gauge public opinion and the acceptable boundaries of 'mainstream' British culture the BBFC commissions audience research from a number of different sources, both commercial and academic. The three key questions it raises in relation to '18' rated materials are:

- 1) Is the material in conflict with the law?
- 2) Is the material offensive to the British public in general?
- 3) Does the material run a risk of significant harm? (BBFC 2009a: 4,29)

These questions can be identified in many of the BBFC's research strategies, for example, in the objectives set out in its most recently commissioned research into the 'effects' of sexual violence and sadism on screen (BBFC 2012: 7). In this way, BBFC policies are influenced and informed by the 'effects' tradition of audience research.⁹ This approach to understanding audiences is primarily concerned with fears surrounding the extent to which messages and morals communicated via the mass media influence the thoughts and actions of their recipients - in particular, those of young people [see Chapter 3, pp. 85-88]. Research carried out in the 'effects' tradition played a significant role in shaping the BBFC's 2009 set of guidelines (BBFC 2009a: 4), which are discussed in the following section.

However, unlike other audience surveys conducted or commissioned by the BBFC that are guided by an 'effects' agenda, this project follows the tradition of audience research within the academic field of cultural studies. Rather than undertake a survey of public opinion to gauge the acceptable benchmark of 'mainstream' and acceptable British culture, research in the field of cultural studies seeks to understand audience responses in the context of the discursive frameworks surrounding them. In particular, in relation to issues of film regulation, this project follows in the tradition of research undertaken by Kuhn (1988), Barker et al (2001), Egan (2007) and Cronin (2009) in that it examines the conflicting institutions, discourses and social practices that are all involved in the process of film censorship. Fundamental to this tradition is the use of a very different methodological approach to the type generally favoured by researchers in the 'effects' tradition. This thesis therefore considers audience responses to 'extreme' films, and how these intersect with the fluctuating boundaries of 'mainstream' culture within a set of specific cultural discourses that are particular to contemporary British culture. The questions it asks focus on the various ways in which audiences enjoy watching these films and the individual pleasures and meanings that are derived from them. It also pays close attention to the claims made about audiences for these films – by film critics, cultural commentators, censors, distributors and audiences themselves – and the extent to which these claims inform or reflect the wider public discourses surrounding 'extreme' cinema.

The questions this research seeks to answer are:

1. What are the discursive frameworks currently informing the distribution and reception of 'extreme' films in the UK?
2. What are the particular claims circulating about audiences of Asian Extreme films in the UK, and how can these claims be better understood in the context of these wider discursive frameworks?
3. What are some of the main enjoyments, pleasures and meanings that audiences of Asian Extreme films derive from their interests?
4. What impact have recent technological developments (such as DVDs, file-sharing and distribution networks facilitated by the Internet) had on audiences of Asian Extreme films?

A key approach to investigating the discursive frameworks surrounding 'extreme' films in the UK is a study of the regulatory policies and frameworks that relate to this category of films.

(v) Developments in BBFC Policy, 1999-2014

In 2000 the BBFC published their first set of guidelines.¹⁰ This marked a new phase in their approach to film regulation that was intended to offer 'greater transparency, accountability and consistency' (Hanley 2000: 3). Central to this new direction was their 'contract' with the British public. Robin Duval, who took over from James Ferman as director in 1999, insisted that the BBFC had to justify the classificatory system with evidence generated by large scale public consultation exercises, to be held at regular intervals. The guidelines have since been revised three times, in 2005, 2009 and 2014, on all occasions following research into public opinion in the form of questionnaires and focus groups.¹¹ Alongside these large scale consultations have been a number of smaller pieces of research focussing on specific problem areas for the BBFC examiners, such as TV wrestling (2001), computer games (2008) and sexual violence (2003, 2007 and 2012). This policy review focuses primarily on the first three of these large scale audience consultations, and then considers the specialist research investigating sexual violence in relation to these.

Between 2000 and 2005 there were few significant changes made to the BBFC guidelines. When David Cooke took over as director of the BBFC in late 2004 he remarked in

an interview that the British public had not become either markedly more or less liberal in their attitudes during that period (BBFC 2005b). However, although the guidelines were only slightly adjusted for the 2005 publication, other policy changes were initiated at that time which reflected a distinct shift in the BBFC's ethos; these are explained in their Annual Report of 2005. A key event during this year was the collaborative development of the Board's Vision Statement, published in January 2006. The statement consolidates many of the changes that had occurred over the previous five years and styles the BBFC as a 'trusted guide', whose key characteristics are expertise, experience and specialist knowledge (BBFC 2006b). This Vision Statement marks the beginning of a gradual shift towards assessing and improving its provision of a 'socially useful function' within British society (BBFC 2006b). The 2005 Annual Report also states that their education team had started work on new policies to ensure they retain their position as 'a key player in the field of media education and promoter of media literacy in the UK' and that their regulatory role 'remains consistently useful and effective for both current and future generations' (BBFC 2006a). The inclusion of the phrase 'relevant social purpose' in several documents published in 2006 suggests David Cooke's new emphasis was on developing the future role of the BBFC in ways that might extend beyond that of an independent film regulator (BBFC 2006a: 6; BBFC 2006b: 3).

The publication of the 2009 guidelines saw several key developments in BBFC policy. The Board's 2008 annual report points to the clarificatory benefits of the new guidelines which were revised following an extensive consultation of the British public (BBFC 2008a: 3-4). The most prominent new section in the preliminary part of the guidelines was the introduction of the 'Overarching Factors'. These are clauses which can influence the application of the guidelines, particularly if a film sits on the borderline between two of the age categories. These factors are context (for example, the genre, marketing or historical background to a film), tone and impact (such as levels of fantasy or the prevalence of dark themes) and release format. The flexibility created through the addition of these overarching factors was reinforced by a significant new clause that was added to the preface of the section explaining the guidelines for each category:

Because works from time to time present issues in ways which cannot be anticipated, these criteria will not be applied in an over-literal way if such an interpretation would lead to an outcome which would confound audience expectations (BBFC 2009a: 18).

Having established a level of support with the British public through two previous consultations, and reinforced their status as specialist in the field of regulation in the publication of their Vision Statement, the new clause and overarching factors included in the third set of guidelines indicate that, in 2009, the BBFC began to shift its position to that of a group of experts who *interpret* the guidelines more accurately than those without regulatory expertise. This evolving new stance was reiterated more explicitly in the 2014 guidelines (2014: 3) which state that, in cases involved potential ‘harm’ to audiences, research and expert opinion ‘can be inconclusive or contradictory. In such cases we must rely on our own experience and expertise to make a judgement’ (BBFC 2014: 3).

A further clause added to the 2009 guidelines was an amendment to the eighth point of the introduction. In the 2005 version this simply states that the guidelines are produced in line with legal requirements (outlined in points one to seven) combined with ‘public consultation, research and [the BBFC’s] accumulated experience’ (BBFC 2005a). However, the 2009 guidelines expand on this point by stating that they have ‘particular regard to any changes in public taste, attitudes and concerns’ (BBFC 2009: 3). This was the first time in the BBFC’s history that they acknowledged ‘public taste’ as a factor that can influence the development and implementation of the guidelines. To acknowledge and account for all tastes and attitudes was clearly an ambitious goal; therefore, the publication of the 2009 guidelines raised the issue of whose tastes the BBFC are catering to, and how. The introduction to the 2009 guidelines also added a specific new clause recommending that parents should ‘consider carefully’ the classification and consumer advice offered with a film before allowing a child to view it (BBFC 2009a: 3). This heightened focus on offering advice specifically to parents followed on from the launch of the parents’ website (pbbfc) in 2007 and reinforced the general trend within the BBFC to present itself as a service provider for parents of young children. Again, this trend was more firmly established with the introduction of the 2014 guidelines, in which the guiding principles for classification have been given a significant overhaul. In 2009, the BBFC’s two guiding principles for film classification were:

- that works should be allowed to reach the widest audience that is appropriate for their theme and treatment
- that adults should, as far as possible, be free to choose what they see, provided that it remains within the law and is not potentially harmful (BBFC 2009: 4).

However, in 2014, the guiding principles shifted dramatically away from this focus on freedom of choice, and further developed the BBFC's emphasis on providing a service for parents. The BBFC's current guiding principles are:

- to protect children and vulnerable adults from potentially harmful or otherwise unsuitable media content
- to empower consumers, particularly parents and those with responsibility for children, to make informed viewing decisions (BBFC 2014a: 3)

This key shift towards positioning themselves as a regulatory body that serves to 'protect' audiences from harm can be traced back to changes made to the 2009 guidelines. A significant addition to the 2009 guidelines was the section outlining the BBFC's definition of the 'potential harm' that viewers might experience. Whereas in 2005 this was a brief clause that simply stated works should not be 'potentially harmful to society', the 2009 guidelines provided a lengthy description of every type of harm from physical behaviour to moral harm to psychological trauma. This expanded definition of 'harm' now included 'retarding social and moral development, distorting a viewer's sense of right and wrong, and limiting their capacity for compassion,' as well as the more familiar concepts of desensitisation and anti-social attitudes (BBFC 2009a: 4). The question of proof of harm became critical to the BBFC in 2007 when the BBFC's own Video Appeals Committee (VAC) overruled their decision to reject the computer game *Manhunt 2* because it 'constantly encourages visceral killing' (BBFC 2008a: 96). In the BBFC's 2007 annual report they explain that the VAC had applied the wrong interpretation of 'the harm test' during the *Manhunt 2* case; this was because they had argued that it was the Board's responsibility to prove 'devastating effect' in order to reject it outright. The Board challenged the decision of the VAC, not just because of the *Manhunt 2* case, but because 'such a test would make it virtually impossible to refuse to grant a certificate to any work in the future on VRA grounds alone' (BBFC 2008a: 12). During the appeal the judge corrected the VAC's original statement and said that the correct test is to show 'any harm which may be caused', meaning the possibility of harm (rather than some kind of probability) and therefore the concept of 'potential harm' and not 'actual harm'. The case cemented the Board's right to cut or reject any work on grounds of potential harm, and the wording used during the appeal was thereafter included in the 2009 guidelines as the Board's definitive statement on the harm issue (BBFC 2009a: 4).

These two changes to the preliminary sections of the 2009 guidelines suggested a significant shift in the BBFC's approach to regulation occurred during this period; it appears that their previous emphasis on enabling audiences to make their own choices was superseded by that of 'protecting' audiences. Bearing in mind that even prior to 2009 'film and video releases in Britain [were] amongst the most tightly-regulated in the Western world' (BFI 2003-08), this development raises some significant issues. David Cooke acknowledged and accounted for the policy adjustment in a statement within the BBFC's 2009 press release, in which he attributed their new rationale to a change in public opinion, stating:

You would not expect there to be a massive shift in attitudes since the 2005 Guidelines, and there is sometimes an assumption that public attitudes are becoming more relaxed as time goes on, but that is not always the case (Nayer 2009).

The implication here was that *had* been a shift in public attitudes after 2005, towards a less liberal approach to film regulation, though this was not stated explicitly. This again drew attention to the issue, which is explored throughout this Introduction, of how the BBFC go about gauging public attitudes and the specific ways in which they have shifted during this relatively short period of time. This issue has become increasingly significant following the publication of the 2014 guidelines, which have seen a considerable tightening of the BBFC's regulatory remit. David Cooke begins his preface to the 2014 research report explaining the new guidelines with the following statement: 'In its Vision Statement, the BBFC committed itself to "respond to and reflect changing social attitudes towards media content through proactive public consultations and research" (BBFC 2014b). In other words, he explains the rationale for tightening the guidelines in terms of 'public expectations,' rather than in relation to the findings of research carried out in the 'effects' tradition.

A further development within the 2009 guidelines was the shift in emphasis from creating guidelines that *reflect* the views of the British public to ones that appeared to *shape* the views of the British public. In 2002 Robin Duval justified the relaxation of the R18 guidelines by explaining that his role 'inevitably involves a degree of liberalization because that's the way the British community as a whole has moved' (Duval in Petley, 2001). A close examination of the many changes in wording between the 2005 and 2009 guidelines suggests that this approach of mirroring public opinions and standards was no longer

adopted by the BBFC. For example, the 2005 guidelines for the representation of sexual content at '15' stated that references 'may reflect what is likely to be familiar to most adolescents, but should not go beyond what is suitable for them' (BBFC 2005: 17); however, the 2009 guidelines for the same age group stated that sex references 'should not go beyond what is suitable for young teenagers. Frequent crude references are unlikely to be acceptable' (BBFC 2009a: 25). By removing the concept of reflecting 'what is likely to be familiar' as a guiding principle on this issue, the emphasis was clearly being placed on 'what is suitable'; this implied that content should be decided *on behalf* of the age group rather than gauged *as a suitable reflection of their knowledge*.

In summary, the publication of the BBFC's 2009 guidelines raised two key questions: firstly, with the acknowledgement of 'public taste' as a factor that could influence the implementation of the guidelines, there was the question of whose 'tastes' were being taken into account, and how; and, secondly, there was of question of *how* the BBFC gauged these perceived shifts in public taste. These questions are now considered through an examination of the BBFC's audience research practices, styled as 'public consultations,' carried out between 1999 and 2012.

(vi) The BBFC and 'Public Consultations'

How do the BBFC decide which sections of the British public they should consult? In the 104-page report underpinning the 2009 guidelines, there is a striking anomaly in the selection of samples used for collecting the data. Whereas the 'representatively diverse sample of adults' selected for the quantitative research process is clearly explained and justified, there appears to be an issue with the sample used for the focus groups (BBFC 2009c: 14). Of the twenty-six focus groups conducted, twenty-one (81%) were with parents of children under eighteen. More significantly, if the term 'empty nester' is taken to mean parents with adult children who have left home, then the focus group sample does not include *any* adults over the age of thirty-five without children. This contrasts with the sample used for the quantitative research, where just 32% of participants were parents.¹² Bearing in mind that this second sample claims to represent a diverse selection of British adults, it would follow that the focus group sample is therefore misrepresentative. The way in which the research findings are presented in the report further highlight the skewed sample used for gathering

the qualitative data. While the quantitative research was conducted using a representative sample of British adults, the findings of the survey are integrated with the opinions and comments made by participants of the focus groups. In total, this includes ninety-five opinions from parents with children under the age of eighteen, fifteen views belonging to 'empty nesters' and nine comments made by women (aged thirty or under) without children. There are no comments from men who are not parents included in the report; this indirectly suggests that, in order for the views of a British male to be considered in the BBFC's consultation process, they must have fathered a child.

The explanation given for the rationale behind the focus group sample selection is that parents of young children often have the most to say (BBFC 2009c: 9). However, the response to the BBFC's online questionnaire, where just 32% of participants were parents, seems to directly contradict this rationale. Statistically, there are only just over eleven million children under the age of eighteen in the UK, so parents of this age group form a significant minority of the sixty-one million population (Office for National Statistics 2009: 5). As a result, the qualitative aspect of the 2009 consultation fails to represent the majority of the British general public. Most significantly, it clearly under-represents males who are not parents. It also follows that the report contains a disproportionate number of comments that express parental concern about unsuitable content in films. Whilst this is appropriate in relation to films marketed for children and teenagers, it seems problematic in relation to films aimed at the '18' market.

A final key difference between the 2009 public consultation and the two that preceded it lies in the questions that it asks. The report states that the central objective of the quantitative aspect of the research is to ascertain whether or not the British public feels the BBFC guidelines are fair and effective (BBFC 2009c: 19). This is reflected in the survey questionnaire that has been designed to gather data on how frequently participants disagree with classifications in general; what their opinion is of the overall effectiveness of the BBFC in providing reliable film classifications and advice for consumers; how aware they are of consumer advice provided by the BBFC; and whether they have ever visited the BBFC website or made a complaint to the BBFC. Although the report included a short section on censorship, which all of the focus group participants were opposed to, the quantitative data findings read more as a survey of consumer satisfaction. Unlike the approach developed by

cultural studies researchers, little attempt is made to explore the relationship between the research participants, the films they watch, and the implications this has for policy-making activities.

(vii) Specific Research into Audience Responses to Sexual Violence on Screen

Throughout the fifteen year period under consideration here, the BBFC has consistently reiterated their reliance on United States mass communications research in their approach to regulating sexual violence on screen. This is clearly established in their Annual Report of 2003:

Much of the relevant research into the effects of depictions of sexual violence was undertaken in the USA in the 1980s by researchers such as Donnerstein, Linz, Malamuth, Check, Zillman, Bryant, Berkowitz and Burt. In general it tended to identify three possible harmful effects, particularly when the victim was shown 'enjoying' the sexual violence: the stimulation of aggressive thoughts and fantasies; the cultivation of anti-female attitudes; and more aggressive subsequent behaviour. Of course, like all 'media effects' research, these findings are often hotly disputed but in the view of the Board this is an area in which the evidence supporting the case for possible harm is unusually strong, and the BBFC continues to work on the assumption that particular violent scenes with the potential to trigger sexual arousal may encourage a harmful association between sexual violence and sexual gratification (BBFC 2004: 78)

This statement establishes that, regardless of any on-going debates surrounding the validity of 'media effects' research, the BBFC remain entirely persuaded by it. Theresa Cronin argues that this is indicative of an institutional acceptance of media effects-based models amongst regulatory bodies in the US and UK (Cronin 2009: 8). The research commissioned by the BBFC throughout this period, therefore, tends to be of the type that seeks to ascertain whether or not the general public agree with the BBFC's 'robust' stance.

The first of these projects, undertaken by Guy Cumberbatch in 2003, was conducted in two stages: a quantitative investigation into attitudes towards sexual violence and a series of qualitative focus group discussions. The findings of this project were published as the report *Where do you draw the line?* (2003). Some of the weaknesses of this report are discussed at length by Martin Barker (2005) who draws attention to the way in which Cumberbatch borrows terms such as 'heavy viewers' and 'risky viewers' from George Gerbner's 'cultivation analysis' approach. Most significantly, Barker analyses the way Cumberbatch frames particular questions in problematic ways, for example by presenting

the research participants with a series of interpretations of the 'message' of a particular film, and asking them to respond to each statement. In this way, Cumberbatch's research methodology perpetuates many of the flaws common to research in the 'effects' tradition. Having critiqued Cumberbatch's research at length, Barker (and colleagues at Aberystwyth University) were subsequently invited by the BBFC to conduct their own research into audience responses to films containing scenes of sexual violence (2007). The project focused on responses to five films which the BBFC had found problematic during the classification process, and was conducted in three separate stages: a survey of 243 websites (which had been identified as key sites containing online debates around the films), a quali-quantitative web questionnaire (which elicited responses from 760 individuals, providing in total 1178 comments on the designated films) and twenty focus groups with fifty men and forty-four women. The findings of Barker et al's research revealed audience responses to be complex and unique in relation to each of the five films, suggesting little evidence of an intrinsic interest in screened sexual violence amongst the participants. Furthermore, the research found that

there are considerable tensions surrounding the issue of finding screen representations of sexual violence "arousing". This is understood to be a 'forbidden zone'. Yet there is strong evidence within our study (a) that many – both men and women – do find some such scenes arousing, but (b) that this can associate with *greater* condemnation of the violence because the arousal heightens awareness and involvement, and thus imaginative participation in the implications of the scene (Barker et al 2007: 3)

This finding calls into question the correlation between sexual arousal and the notion of 'harm', which is at the very heart of 'effects' studies research; however, this appears to have had little impact on the BBFC's policies on sexual violence since. In 2011 a literature review of the research into the effects of sexual, sexualised and sadistic violence in the media was undertaken by Cumberbatch on behalf of the BBFC. The report notes that 'astonishingly, the only directly relevant research identified was that commissioned by the BBFC (notably studies by Barker and by Cumberbatch)' (2011: 5). Despite this astonishment, however, it is somewhat perplexing that having identified Barker's 2007 research as being one of only two studies directly relevant to the literature review, the fifty-three page report makes no further reference to it. Clearly, for Cumberbatch and the BBFC, there is a blind spot when it comes to research undertaken in the cultural studies tradition.

Cumberbatch's report (2011) is significant in that it finds that there are clearly grounds for scepticism over the quality of the evidence underpinning 'effects' research to date. He further notes that there is a dearth of reliable and relevant research in this area, and recommends that the BBFC commissions further studies on the 'effects' of sexual violence on screen. Following this recommendation, the BBFC commissioned a new piece of research from Ipsos Mori (2012). This small scale qualitative project, conducted in less than a month, consisted of thirty-five telephone interviews and three small focus groups in different locations. Responses to the report have, since its publication in late 2012, been highly critical (Barker 2014; Skinner 2012). One example of its incompetence which has been singled out several times by critics is that of a focus group moderator who intervened when participants laughed at a clip from *3D Sex and Zen – Extreme Ecstasy*, and then prompted them to instead consider that the scene 'could be harmful' (Ipsos Mori/BBFC 2012: 34). More significantly, the ten clips screened in the focus groups were *not* from the list of films which the participants had seen in full as part of the first stage of the research. The report states that 'it should be noted that participants saw only the selected clip without the context of the rest of the film' (Ipsos Mori/BBFC: 30). This approach seems to be puzzlingly misguided given the significance attributed to context in both the findings of previous research projects (Cumberbatch 2002: 54; Barker et al 2007: 5) and within the BBFC's own guidelines (2009a: 10). The report then goes on to claim that, in the 29-day period during which the qualitative research took place

participants became desensitised from exposure to the films and scenes during the process of the study. This was both noticed by the moderators during the discussion groups and explicitly expressed by many during both the groups and interviews. We would suggest that given this desensitised reaction, the opinions given to the scenes in the discussion groups may be more lenient than it would have been in isolation of watching the three films (Ipsos Mori/BBFC 2012: 38).

The report provides no further evidence to substantiate this major claim. Given that the second stage of the study involved a very different methodological approach to the first stage, and that previous research has already indicated that screening clips of films out of context produces problematic responses amongst viewers, there is reason to cast doubt on these findings.¹³ What is perhaps most troubling about the 2012 research conducted by Ipsos Mori, though, is the way in which it draws its conclusions and provides the BBFC with a

mandate for tightening the regulation of '18' films. The opening comments of the report's conclusions and recommendations section states that:

There was a divide between those who felt that the BBFC had a moral responsibility to protect the public from potentially harmful scenes in movies and those who thought that adults should be free to make their own choice about what they want to watch ... There were also many who struggled to identify a clear opinion one way or the other and blurred the divide (Ipsos Mori/BBFC: 58).

Yet, on the basis of these findings which clearly acknowledge a divided response from the participants, the research concludes that the British public *support* the BBFC's censorship of sexually violent films and recommends it reviews its sexual and sadistic violence policy (Ipsos Mori/BBFC: 59). As a result, in December 2012 the BBFC announced it would be adjusting its policy on sexual and sadistic violence and introducing a number of new factors as grounds for intervention. This new direction, they claimed, is a reflection of 'public opinion'. The way in which 'public opinion' is conceived and discussed in these documents, however, is highly problematic, in that it fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of opinions gathered during the research process.

(viii) Assessment of the Significant Changes

These developments in BBFC policy over the last fifteen years can be understood in a number of ways. Firstly, they can be interpreted as a vindication of Cronin's comments, made in early 2009 before the publication of the third and fourth sets of guidelines, that regulatory bodies in the UK are implementing a gradual tightening of their scope and remit; whether or not this is entirely due to developments in new media technologies remains an unanswered question which would benefit from further research. Secondly, these developments in the BBFC's ethos could be summarised as a reflection of the government's move towards promoting the arts as 'vehicles for social change'. By developing their educational purpose and role as 'experts' in film who can guide the general public with respect to 'community standards', the BBFC are moving beyond the role of regulator; this is a new territory, not yet clearly defined but emerging alongside a discourse surrounding the positioning of culture as part of a governing process (Hye-Kyung 2008: 288). Thirdly, in their efforts to define 'mainstream' or 'community' values, the BBFC has promoted the perspective of parents and families. Again, there is a series of debates developing, primarily in the field of sociological research, around this emergent 'family' discourse (Ajandi 2011;

Harvison Young 1998). The introduction of ‘changes in public taste’ as a factor requiring consideration in the classification process coincides with the BBFC’s heightened focus on family values. Together, these developments could partly account for the stricter approach to the issue of ‘harm’.

The BBFC’s heightened sensitivity towards the ‘harm’ issue has clearly influenced recent classification decisions. For example, they explained their decision to reject the ‘torture porn’ film *Murder Set Pieces* in February 2008 by stating that the release of the film ‘would risk potential harm within the terms of the VRA’ (BBFC 2009b: 97); in particular, that media effects research indicated that the film included depictions that might ‘encourage callousness towards victims, aggressive attitudes, or taking pleasure in pain or humiliation’ (BBFC 2008b). Similarly, the decision to reject *Grotesque* ([Kôji Shiraishi](#), 2009) was taken after considering the ‘risk of harm it potentially posed to a vulnerable audience’; one examiner added that the film seemed ‘to fit the bill for intervention in terms of the newly revised guidelines’ (BBFC: 2009d). In 2010 both *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) and the remake of *I Spit On Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) were cut on grounds of a ‘risk of harm’. The decision to reject *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (Tom Six) in June 2011 (later amended) was, again, taken on the grounds that ‘it is the Board’s conclusion that the explicit presentation of the central character’s obsessive sexually violent fantasies is in breach of its Classification Guidelines and poses a real, as opposed to a fanciful, risk that harm is likely to be caused to potential viewers’ (BBFC: 2011).

It seems fair to conclude, then, that the working apparatus of the BBFC is continuing to dictate which films are acceptable for a ‘mainstream’ British audience, and by logical extension, which are not; the issue of ‘harm’ has played an increasingly significant role in this process of establishing a ‘benchmark of community standards’. Furthermore, current policies indicate that the BBFC’s conception of the ‘mainstream’ appears to focus primarily on families and parents. This preoccupation with establishing a ‘benchmark’ is clearly articulated in the concluding paragraph of Cumberbatch’s 2011 report in which he sets out the key knowledge gaps which need to be addressed by future research:

Drawing the line. Despite some useful research commissioned by the BBFC, a systematic understanding of where people draw the line has yet to be attempted. What factors about a film or an individual determine judgements about acceptability? Is it possible to determine ‘benchmark’ cases which could be used to

help predict audience responses to new material received for classification?
(Cumberbatch 2011: 24).

It is this compulsive need to 'draw the line' and determine 'benchmark' cases that makes the activity of the BBFC, and like-minded research organisations, a significant and under-researched area in the study of the shifting boundaries of 'mainstream' British culture. These shifting boundaries are considered below in the context of the theoretical frameworks derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu and the Discourse Surrounding Taste

Pierre Bourdieu's publication of *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (1984) has been appropriated in a range of different ways by fan and cult film academics. This discourse provides a key theoretical framework throughout the rest of the thesis and is therefore given considerable attention here in a number of different ways. Firstly, there is a review and evaluation of the ways in which Bourdieu's work has been taken up and used in the academic field of fan studies as an approach for theorising taste hierarchies and taste-making practices. Secondly, there is an outline of his understanding of film culture and consumption in relation to notions of middlebrow and lowbrow taste; these observations provide a valuable framework for exploring the discourses surrounding 'mainstream' culture. Thirdly, there is a consideration of social capital and its significance to fans and film audiences in particular. Finally, following this, there is a discussion of different academic interpretations of the term 'mainstream' within film culture, and the implications these have for this research project.

(v) Bourdieu and the Field of Fan Studies

In *Distinction* Bourdieu produces a detailed survey of French culture in the 1960s as a case study to underpin his analysis of cultural taste. His central thesis is that cultural capital is acquired primarily through education and secondarily through social class and upbringing; the possession of this asset then enables an elite minority to respond 'properly' to highbrow art forms, conferring cultural status on the privileged few and functioning to legitimate social difference. The survey of French culture supporting *Distinction* was conducted in 1963 and 1967-8 through a series of questionnaires distributed evenly between participants in

Paris and the provinces; the design of the research was intended to facilitate 'analysis of practices and choices by class fraction' (1986: 509). Bourdieu himself acknowledges some of the limitations of this methodology and notes that when difficulties arose in analysing the data from the questionnaires that it was then supplemented through the practice of observations and interviews. A third complementary source of information was derived from references to existing surveys carried out by independent and state-funded bodies in France.

The earliest school of scholarship examining fan cultures using Bourdieu's ideas proposes that fans can be characterised as a 'popular resistance' that function to oppose the dominant taste of 'bourgeois culture' (Jenkins 1992: 18) or 'official culture' (Fiske 1992: 31). A second group of academics critiques this use of Bourdieu's ideas and argues, instead, that fan culture itself is 'riddled with cultural hierarchies' (Thornton 1995: 3) and 'has its own drive towards hierarchisation' (Williamson 2005: 117). An important aspect of this second theoretical approach, initially developed by Sarah Thornton and later elaborated on by Mark Jancovich and others, is the suggestion that the 'inauthentic Other' of 'mainstream' culture is not a real entity, but has been constructed by fan cultures to 'produce and protect a sense of rarity and exclusivity' (Jancovich 2002: 309). This approach appears to overlook the activity of state-sanctioned institutions, such as the BBFC, in defining the boundaries of 'mainstream' culture. Jancovich's alternative explanation for the development of fan communities and identities is that they have evolved historically, through the emergence of the art-house cinema circuit and film academia, rather than as a response to some form of 'mainstream' or dominant culture.

Key to understanding the variations between these two appropriations of Bourdieu's ideas is a consideration of the difference between fandom and cult fandom. Whereas earlier fan scholars, such as Jenkins, focus on fan activity surrounding popular texts such as *Star Trek*, other scholars, including Jancovich, have instead studied the practices associated with cult fandom. This difference in focus often leads them to form alternative approaches to the conception of the 'mainstream'. Indeed, it has been argued that cult fandom cannot be defined simply by listing the many subcultures and movements that it is composed of; instead, the components of this eclectic and elastic category can only be distinguished through their shared ideology, an opposition to the 'mainstream' (Jancovich et al 2003:1).

Jancovich argues that it is therefore the context of consumption rather than textual characteristics that functions to confer cult status on a text. This theoretical perspective provides an interesting context for the study of British audiences of Asian Extreme films, which over the last twelve years have appealed to both cult and 'mainstream' film audiences alike. However, despite the growing body of work examining the various definitions of 'cult cinema'¹⁴, 'mainstream cinema' is a term that has attracted far less critical analysis, with the possible exceptions of Jancovich and Williamson, which are discussed in the following section.

(vi) 'Mainstream' and Middlebrow

Although *Distinction* has primarily been used by academic analysts of fan culture to explore issues of taste, Bourdieu's specific analysis of film culture is also relevant to other questions which this thesis seeks to address. His overall stratification of French culture classifies the fields of cinema and photography as less legitimate art forms than theatre, opera, fine art and classical music (1986: 32). He elaborates further on this distinction in a later survey focussing on the field of photography, which Bourdieu suggests is a 'middlebrow art' (1990). 'Middlebrow' is a contentious term, historically used as a derogatory expression (Middlebrow Network 2012) and more recently the subject of a revisionist celebration amongst a group of cultural critics (Williams 2010; Coleman 2011). The word 'middlebrow' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'mainstream' and the two terms are similar in that they are often employed by cultural commentators as labels for dismissing the product they are being associated with. As with 'popular' and, in specific reference to cinema, 'Hollywood' (Jancovich 2002: 316), many academics and film critics use these terms as synonyms, particularly in the case of 'mainstream', 'Hollywood' and 'popular' (Horsley, 2005). Thornton, Williamson and others are all careful to point out that these terms are slippery and should be used with caution. However, while the terms are all similar in that they are unstable categories employed for classifying (and often denigrating) specific cultural territories, Herbert Gans notes that what they have in common is their usage; they suggest that 'most people still notice a relationship between culture and class' (1999: 8). For this reason, rather than let the indefinable quality of a term such as 'mainstream' serve as an excuse for dismissing it, this thesis aims to identify *how and why* it is used by fans,

academics and cultural institutions, and *what this says* about the changing boundaries of cultural taste.

Bourdieu's conception of film as a middlebrow art needs to be understood in the historical context of French cinema in the 1960s. The films used in the questionnaire range from the French drama *Le Glaive et la Balance* (1963) to the Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1953); out of the nineteen films included, seven are French language titles and all originate either in Europe or Hollywood. The survey is therefore partly gauging the ways in which French film audiences in the 1960s differentiate between European and Hollywood films, as well as the level of their knowledge about cinema. The questionnaire asks the participants three questions in relation to the field of cinema. These questions require them to identify their three favourite genres, to indicate which films they have watched (from a specified list) and name the directors and actors for each, and to prioritise their main interests in film from a choice of three: the actors, the director or the plot. Bourdieu observes that while the participants' knowledge of actors generally reflects how frequently they go to the cinema, their knowledge of film directors is more closely linked to the possession of cultural capital. What Bourdieu describes as the 'popular aesthetic', or the taste of working class film audiences, is a delight in 'plots that proceed logically and chronologically towards a happy end' and 'simply drawn situations and characters' (1986: 32); these distinctions provide a useful approach for framing the interpretation of empirical data generated in the second half of the study.

In the intervening years since Bourdieu's empirical data was gathered, notions of taste in relation to film culture have clearly evolved and diversified. Furthermore, this thesis examines British cultural distinctions of taste, rather than those of French audiences. However, it is interesting to note that some of characteristics often associated with the taste of cult film fans, such as a detailed knowledge of the director's work, bear a resemblance to Bourdieu's observations of a bourgeois appreciation of cinema. On the other hand, scholars of popular fan culture, such as Henry Jenkins, tend to focus more on the emotional engagement between fans and characters, for instance, through the writing of fan fiction. Although this isn't necessarily a delight in 'simple plots and characters', there is clearly an engagement with characters and a desire to write about them and their back stories, beyond what is provided in the original text. In these ways Jancovich's analysis of

cult fandom aligns it with Bourdieu's understanding of bourgeois taste, while Jenkins' study of popular fandom echoes Bourdieu's conception of the 'popular aesthetic'. As a diverse group that bridges both the cult and popular demographic, audiences of Asian Extreme films therefore provide an interesting case study for exploring these different interpretations of taste derived from Bourdieu's work. The research undertaken here therefore considers the different ways in which the enjoyment and appreciation of Asian Extreme films by British audiences complicate these two different taste distinctions.

(vii) Fan Communities: Social Capital and Specialised Followings

Bourdieu defines social capital as

the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119).

This understanding of social capital, as a resource that is primarily defined by who you know, is perhaps less institutionalized in the twenty-first century than it was in the early 1990s when Bourdieu made his observation. In the world of fan cultures, online social networking and Internet communities provide an arena for generating social capital that is clearly of great significance; academic work exploring this activity offers a valuable starting point for any study of fan communities. A key characteristic of film culture that Bourdieu's study identifies is the importance of both peer groups, and the critics whom they choose to endorse, in playing a central role in the taste-making process of identifying which films are worth watching and, more significantly, how they should be watched (1986: 28). The explanation Bourdieu gives to account for this is that cultural expertise in the field of cinema is not acquired during formal education;¹⁵ he argues, though, that the aesthetic disposition adopted towards film is a reflection of those learnt through other academic disciplines. However, while the acquisition of social capital is of particular relevance to the study of fan hierarchies, in *Distinction* Bourdieu only briefly considers its role within the field of cultural production, and chooses instead to play greatest attention to cultural, economic and symbolic forms of capital. Therefore, although there is an awareness of the influence of social capital in *Distinction*, Bourdieu does not highlight its significance.

Sarah Thornton argues that one of the advantages of Bourdieu's theoretical framework is that he constructs such a complex and flexible model of the cultural field; in particular, she identifies the inclusion of the category of social capital – who you know and who knows you – as being of particular significance (1995: 202). In her influential work *Club Cultures* (1995) Thornton identifies a specific form of social and cultural capital that acts as an extension to Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital'; she coins the term 'subcultural capital' to refer to forms of cultural knowledge and expertise that are not shared by an entire culture but are, in fact, restricted to specific communities or subcultures. Thornton also proposes that one of the critical differences between this concept and Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital is that the media is a 'primary factor governing the circulation' of subcultural capital (1995: 203). This is because, Thornton argues, it functions as a crucial network for defining taste and distributing knowledge, although she does not develop this idea at any length. Milly Williamson also discusses the function and significance of media networks in the subfield of fandom, but frames her discussion with an awareness of the struggle between the poles of commercialism and artistic elitism; her observations are made a decade later and therefore benefit from a consideration of how subcultural capital is exchanged and accrued via online networks. As many of the different versions of the Asian Extreme titles included in this study circulate via the Internet, and are the subject of discussions and recommendations in forums and blogs, the two theoretical approaches outlined by Thornton and Williamson are highly relevant to this thesis. This study will therefore pay critical attention to the role that social capital plays in defining the ways that these films are valued by British audiences.

Williamson also suggests that (cult) fans are not necessarily part of a subordinate or marginalised fraction of society, but form a contradictory group who might just as easily be middle-class as working-class, or male as female. The diverse composition and nature of cult fan communities is also discussed and explored through a range of other studies, such as Nathan Hunt's study of *Star Wars* fans, which investigates the ways in which a popular 'mainstream' text can generate a specialised fan following (2003). Similarly, Matt Hills has explored a range of cult fan audiences that have evolved in relation to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Hills 2006). These arguments emphasise the role of the audience in this debate, and explore what it means to be a cult fan rather than ask what constitutes a cult film. Hills

suggests that the notion of the 'cult blockbuster' should not be conceived as an oddity and that the cult status of a 'mainstream' film can develop through a variety of cult readings of a particular text. He suggests that, in the case of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, a number of specialised cult audiences have formed (such as Peter Jackson fans, Tolkienites and special effects connoisseurs) and concludes that 'this makes the cult blockbuster less of a surprise, perhaps, and more of a plural, nuanced, *residual and emergent* cult(ural) phenomenon, one which calls for case-by-case consideration rather than blanket derision or celebration' (Hills 2006: 169). All of these studies suggest that as fan cultures have become increasingly visible and articulate, their characteristics and relations to cultural categories and taste are becoming progressively more difficult to identify. Hills' argument that a 'mainstream' film can have a cult or specialised following also engenders the question of whether a cult or specialist film can develop a 'mainstream' following; more importantly, it raises the issue of how a 'cult' audience is differentiated from a 'mainstream' one. The Asian Extreme category is particularly pertinent to these debates in the way in which it is perceived to straddle both cult and 'mainstream' distinctions.

(viii) 'Mass Cultural Zombies': Constructions of the 'Mainstream' and its Audiences

Discussions of the 'mainstream' by fan scholars primarily explore the ways in which fans construct this entity in order to validate their own alternative identities. Nathan Hunt examines the way in which the fan magazine SFX focuses on certain elements and readings of *The Phantom Menace* as a strategy to disassociate itself from 'mainstream' fans and assert its expertise and cultural authority (Hunt 2003: 190-192). Here, the implication is that whereas fan culture is characterised by knowledge and expertise, consumers of the 'mainstream' are lacking in this form of cultural capital. Mark Jancovich also observes that as cult fandom has diversified it has transformed into a collection of practices and communities that are unified simply by their supposed difference to the 'mainstream' (2002: 308). Jancovich explores the image of 'mass culture as the inauthentic Other' by studying a selection of fan writing including the generic cult film compilation *Incredibly Strange Films*. He argues that this eclectic collection of interviews, essays and reviews is contradictory in its attitude towards the 'mainstream' in that on one hand it characterises the consumers of popular culture as 'mass cultural zombies', and yet on the other it

attempts to elevate the status of cult films by comparing them with 'legitimate' film culture. Jancovich concludes his investigation into the ways in which fan culture constructs the 'mainstream' by characterising it as '... a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy' (2002: 315). What is interesting here is the breadth of the construction, which suggests that the 'mainstream' arises out of a matrix of private enterprise, class, academia and politics.

Williamson also takes a significant step towards defining the 'mainstream' in her critique of Jenkins. In putting forward the case that he has misinterpreted Bourdieu by suggesting that fans are resisting a 'single monolithic dominant taste' she asserts that central to Bourdieu's analysis of culture is a struggle between the artistic elite (or 'autonomous' pole) and the capitalist bourgeoisie (or 'heteronomous' pole) within the operational sphere of 'dominant taste'; this power struggle within the elite hierarchy, Williamson argues, makes it difficult to hold onto the construction of the fan who resists dominant culture (2005: 95-97). She summarises Bourdieu's explanation of these two competing poles by asserting that 'there is no single homogenous 'dominant culture' or 'mainstream', with one set of values; Bourdieu demonstrates that the competition between the two dominant sets of positions produce contradictory and conflicting values of cultural worth (Williamson 2005: 109). This concept of the 'mainstream', which Williamson derives from Bourdieu, is characterised by a power struggle between these two opposing poles; this struggle produces a taste hierarchy which is constantly fluctuating and undergoing re-negotiation. Interestingly, Williamson goes on to propose that this conflict, between commercially-driven culture and 'culture for its own sake' also creates a hierarchical struggle within fan subcultures which, to a certain extent, mirrors the conflict within dominant culture; just as dominant culture is shaped by those who possess cultural capital, in a similar way, fan culture is shaped by those who possess 'subcultural capital'. I contend that power struggles such as these take place online amongst fans of Asian Extreme films, many of whom complain about the commercial tactics developed by Tartan to promote the films in the UK. This thesis therefore examines the ways in which these power struggles and taste hierarchies play out amongst British audiences, and how this affects the values and pleasures they associate with the films.

A final dimension in the discussion about 'mainstream' culture and taste is that of exhibition and access to the films. Writing in the *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis claims Asian Extreme films are an example of the 'mainstreaming of exploitation' that has occurred over the last ten years. Using the context of exhibition as a defining criterion in her argument, Dargis cites the films of Park Chan-wook to illustrate her point that 'movies that were once relegated to midnight screenings at festivals – and, in an earlier age, grindhouses like those that once enlivened Times Square – are now part of the main event' (Dargis in Hawkins 2010: 126). This adds a further complication to discussions of cult and 'mainstream' taste: in what ways does the exhibition context play a significant role in the value and enjoyment of these films by British audiences? How has their exhibition in multiplex cinemas in the UK affected the way that these films are valued? For this reason, issues relating to where and how Asian Extreme films are viewed in the UK are also of particular significance to this study.

Conclusions

The unstable and fluid concept of 'mainstream' culture is central to this thesis. A key characteristic of academic work on fandom and marginal film cultures to date has been the tendency to address the complex debates surrounding this subject primarily from the perspective (whether celebratory or critical) of the fan communities themselves, rather than by examining the practices and apparatus of 'mainstream' culture which they often seek to oppose. The brief discussions provided by Jancovich and Williamson, above, are the exception rather than the rule; while there is a growing body of work examining the various definitions of 'cult cinema'¹⁶, 'mainstream cinema' is a term that has attracted far less critical analysis. This study of the BBFC's key policy developments over the last fifteen years (and the research underpinning these changes) therefore offers a much-needed insight into the institutional processes involved in shaping 'mainstream' culture; in particular, I reveal the way in which the regulatory body has shifted the focus of its remit to establishing 'a benchmark of community standards' through the implementation of its policies. The most significant of these concern 'public taste' and how it is constituted by the regulatory body. In 2009, the BBFC stated for the first time that their regulatory activity would henceforth be guided, in part, by a 'particular regard to any changes to public taste' (2009a: 3). These

changes, in turn, would be gauged through their public consultations, and by any other research which they chose to commission. However, the assessment presented here identifies three problematic issues surrounding the way in which they establish what precisely constitutes 'public taste'. Firstly, it uncovers the way in which the BBFC pick and choose which research findings they highlight when making adjustments to their policies; there is evidence of an historic bias towards the findings of research carried out in the 'effects' tradition. However, whilst BBFC policies and guidelines are clearly inspired and informed by research carried out in the 'effects' tradition, the BBFC's most recent guidelines state that 'media effects research and expert opinion on issues of suitability and harm can be inconclusive or contradictory. In such cases we must rely on our own experience and expertise to make a judgement' (BBFC 2014a: 3). In this way, the BBFC have developed a dubious regulatory stance that is, on one hand, informed by 'effects' research and yet, on the other hand, positions itself above the need to account for any of its flaws. Considered in this light, there emerges the possibility that an alternative political agenda is guiding the BBFC's rationale in recent renegotiations of their guidelines: that of the need to justify their unique position as a government-sanctioned independent business with statutory powers.

Secondly, there is an issue in terms of *who* is consulted to be representative of British public opinion, with evidence indicating that the BBFC pay greater attention, for example, to the views of parents; in this regard, the BBFC's conception of 'public opinion' actually refers to a very specific taste formation that does not reflect a cross-section of British society. This second issue is particularly problematic with respect to the regulation of '18' materials – which has a special significance for this research project. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there is an issue with the qualitative methods used in the research commissioned by the BBFC. The most recent report published (2012) reveals a distinctive discursive framework in operation during the interviews and group discussions. This discourse, favoured by the *Daily Mail* and other elements of the British press, involves one group of people discussing which films (or other forms of media) they think are suitable for other people to watch. In other words, it is not a discussion of their personal taste; it is a judgement of other peoples' taste. Therefore, this study, conducted between 2010 and 2012, sets out to redress the imbalance created by the BBFC's reliance on the 'effects'

model research; instead, I employ a mixed-method, multi-stage approach [see Chapter 3] to investigate the practices and cultures of actual audiences of Asian Extreme films.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis uses five different forms of research, which have been developed in order to (i) capture an accurate portrait of the pleasures, enjoyments and meanings that British audiences derive from Asian Extreme films and (ii) provide a detailed understanding of the discursive frameworks in which these films have been received; these two objectives are understood to be intrinsically linked together. The five research methods employed in this study are: (i) archival research of BBFC examiners' reports of the films involved in the project; (ii) a small-scale reception study of 295 articles published in the 'mainstream' press (in this context, 'mainstream' refers to national daily and weekly newspapers, in print and online); (iii) a study of online fan activity surrounding some of these films (that considers eleven forums and twenty-three websites and blogs); (iv) a series of interviews with eight fans and four professionals involved in the distribution and reception of Asian Extreme cinema in the UK; and (v) an online quali-quantitative questionnaire which gathered over 700 responses. The scope of the study also necessitates several different literature reviews that cover the fields of (Asian) Extreme cinema, Orientalism, film censorship, fan cultures and cult cinema, as well as an overview of the grey literature published by the BBFC (presented above). In order to facilitate greater clarity and coherence throughout the thesis, these literature reviews are integrated into the chapters that discuss related research findings (the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2), and are not combined together into one single literature review. There now follows a brief summary of the content of each of these chapters:

Chapter 1 outlines the key academic positions that have evolved around the subject of film censorship and regulation, primarily in a British context, with an emphasis on the theoretical framework developed by Annette Kuhn. Following this, it considers how the case study of Asian Extreme films, and their reception in the UK, can be understood in relation to Kuhn's model. This involves two approaches to understanding the productive power of film censorship: firstly, there is a consideration of the part that mainstream film criticism plays during the classification process, drawing on research from the BBFC archives; and,

secondly, there is an exploration of the extent to which censorship activity on the part of the BBFC generates subcultural capital for this group of films, thereby facilitating cult film fandom.

Chapter 2 examines the reception of Asian Extreme cinema in Britain, charting its journey from marginal cult film territory to the commercial sector. An overview of academic literature on the Asian Extreme category is considered alongside examples of fan postings on specialist forums, film reviews, newspaper articles and policy documents. This is followed by a brief reception study examining different uses of the term 'extreme' in a range of specifically British contexts, and how these relate to particular discourses circulating online in relation to the Asian Extreme category.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approaches used to carry out the audience research component of the study, in four parts: (i) an outline of the history, purpose and kinds of work conducted in the field of cultural studies, including a brief overview of the parallel field of reception studies, (ii) a brief introduction to fan studies, including a summary of some of the ways in which it offers a slightly different methodological approach to that of audience research, (iii) an examination of the emergent field of film audience research, including an assessment of the methods which are most relevant in relation to this project, and (iv) a discussion of the main methodological tools used to gather and analyse research data for this project, namely the online questionnaire and the individual in-depth interviews.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a detailed summary of the findings of the online quali-quantitative questionnaire used to gather audience data. **Chapter 4** acts as a preface to the key findings by providing an overview of the questionnaire results and presenting ten profiles of participant responses (two of each of the orientation-types, five male and five female). It then focuses on issues surrounding fandom and, arising out of these, offers a discussion of gendered responses to the questionnaire. It could be argued that, as 72.8% of questionnaire respondents were male and only 27.2% were female, greater attention should be paid to the opinions expressed by the male participants. However, I chose to place equal emphasis on both male and female respondents for two reasons. Firstly, as the findings point to some significant differences between male and female responses, it is necessary to compare them in detail, in order to establish what these differences are; in this respect, the balanced focus

on gender is driven by the research findings themselves. Secondly, the female responses reveal some original findings with respect to two areas of research: the study of gendered responses to sexual violence on screen, and the relatively new academic study of female handicrafting cultures. In these respects, it seems pertinent to highlight the original elements of the research findings (rather than those which merely echo previous research undertaken in this field). Additionally, as a female who frequently watches films including scenes of sexual violence, I also acknowledge a personal interest in exploring these findings. Following this, **Chapter 5** examines the key issues of audience pleasures and the discourses surrounding censorship and orientalism that emerge out of the research findings.

Chapter 6 explores the findings of twelve semi-structured interviews with fans of Asian Extreme films conducted in late 2011. The first eight of these follow through and explore the lines of enquiry established in the analysis of the questionnaire data. The second group of interviews are with British-based figures in the industry who have been involved in the distribution and critical reception of this group of films in the UK. These are considered with a particular emphasis on discussions surrounding genre, censorship and technologies used for accessing the films.

Chapter 1

Film Censorship, Fan Communities and the British Press

Introduction

The empirical research that forms the principle focus of this project investigates audience responses to ten Asian Extreme films.¹⁷ Of the ten films that were selected for the project, five were chosen because they raised issues relating to the censorship, regulation and the illegitimate distribution of extreme cinema within the UK; they had either been cut, rejected or have never been submitted to the BBFC for classification. These films are *Grotesque* (Kôji Shiraishi, 2009), *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001), *The Isle* (Kim Ki-duk, 2000), *Suicide Club* (Sion Sono, 2001) and the *Guinea Pig* series (1985-1997).¹⁸ In this chapter I outline the key academic positions that have evolved in the field of film censorship, focusing primarily on regulation within a British context. In particular, I explore the theoretical approach developed by Annette Kuhn in her ground-breaking book *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality 1909-1925* (1988) in which she critiques the way in which film censorship has often been understood as a prohibitive act on the part of an individual institution. As an alternative, Kuhn proposes a different model for understanding film censorship which draws on Foucault's theory that power is productive in its effects.¹⁹ I begin the chapter by summarising Kuhn's arguments and examining her alternative model of censorship; in particular, I explore her assertion that film regulation is an on-going and provisional process that arises out of the interaction between a number of institutions, discourses and practices. Following this, there is a brief overview of some of the ways in which a small but significant group of academics have made use of Kuhn's own provisional/productive model of censorship, most notably by exploring the relationship between the BBFC, the British mainstream press and British law-making practices.²⁰ Finally, I consider some of the ways in which the case of Asian Extreme films and their reception in the UK can be understood in relation to Kuhn's model. This involves two approaches to understanding the productive power of film censorship. Firstly, I look at the part that mainstream and specialist film criticism plays during the classification process. Secondly, by studying the activities and practices found on fan forums, I consider the extent to which censorship activity on the part of the BBFC generates subcultural capital for this group of films, thereby facilitating cult film

fandom. Finally, I investigate a range of alternative activities, practices and discourses found on the *Snowblood Apple* forum that are produced as a consequence of the censorship process.

Critical Approaches to Film Censorship

Kuhn's research into the censorship of 'propaganda films' between 1909 and 1925 begins with a preface which sets out the limitations of what she identifies as the 'prohibition/institutions' model of film censorship. Kuhn argues that, regardless of whether or not theorists who favour this model adopt a pro- or anti-censorship stance, those who choose to define censorship as a purely prohibitive act fail to take into account the on-going repercussions of regulatory activity, or to appreciate it as being a process embedded within a larger discursive framework generated by local councils, pressure groups and the activity of the national press. Arising out of her critique of this model are two key assertions: that acts of film censorship should not be considered in isolation from their social and historical discursive contexts, and that film censorship is not the activity of one specific institution.

As an alternative, Kuhn argues that film censorship is a process that is in a constant state of negotiation, arising out of the interaction between competing institutions, practices and discourses. Kuhn identifies the key institutions involved in the case of the 'propaganda films' of the early twentieth century as being local cinema licensing authorities, the BBFC, the Home Office, the film trade and the social purity and reform movements of the era. In particular, she argues that it is not possible to understand the controversies surrounding this group of films without first examining the much broader series of debates circulating during this period in relation to female sexuality. Central to Kuhn's productive/provisional model is the assertion that censorship 'is a process, not an object' (Kuhn 1988: 127) that brings with it unintended consequences, such as

resistances, which in turn may provoke further gestures of censorship directed at maintaining the boundaries under challenge. Censorship, then, is an-going activity of definition and boundary-maintenance, produced and re-produced in challenges to, and transgressions of, the very limits it seeks to fix (Kuhn 1988: 128).

Kuhn proposes that by defining the limits of acceptability within film in this way, censorship produces marginalised or 'outlaw' territories which, in turn, license further prohibition. In this way, the processual character of censorship is conceived as an on-going 'cycle of

boundary construction-resistance-prohibition-resistance' (Kuhn 1988: 131). This on-going production and negotiation of boundaries is the principal way in which Kuhn argues that the censorship process is productive in nature.

Although some of the discourses and institutions Kuhn discusses in relation to 'propaganda films' are particular to the early twentieth century historical context of her case studies, others are surprisingly pertinent to current discourses surrounding film censorship in Britain today. Most notably, conflicting ideas and claims are made within some of these discourses and institutions about modes of film consumption. Kuhn argues that these claims situate the audiences for 'propaganda films' at the centre of negotiations within the censorship process; furthermore, she suggests that the elusiveness of these claims has resulted in an intensification of effort applied to the activity of film regulation, and tentatively concludes that 'this, perhaps, would explain why, throughout its history, cinema seems to have attracted more censorship than any pre-existing medium' (Kuhn 1988: 130). From an early stage in this history of film censorship, then, Kuhn argues that the focus of regulatory activity has rested on the potential audience for the medium, rather than on the content or aesthetic qualities of the films themselves.

Since Kuhn's 1988 publication there has been a sustained move away from critiquing film censorship as a repressive and prohibitive act enforced by a single institution. Kuhn's alternative model of censorship, positioning it as a productive force that is both active and acted upon, has been adopted as a starting point for exploring wider sets of cultural practices and discourses that have underpinned a number of censorship case studies. In *British Cinema in Documents* (2000) Sarah Street explores the social, political and economic contexts surrounding the BBFC's rejection of Gaumont Picture's *Love on the Dole* in 1936, and the changing contexts that facilitated its subsequent British release five years later. Here, Street focuses less on the competing forces of specific institutions and more on discourses surrounding class relations and the issue of unemployment, illustrating again the importance of exploring social debates and issues that were in circulation at the time of the original act of censorship. As with Kuhn's earlier study, Street's research also demonstrates on-going concerns about the impact of the film on 'the mass audience which was documented as being primarily working-class' (Street 2000: 31). Although Street does not extend Kuhn's model in any significant way, her conclusions provide another example of the

ways in which claims made about the possible effects of this film on the audience, in this case the working class, are put to use; they are at the heart of competing discourses that both originally facilitated and subsequently diffused the censorship process surrounding the film.

Lee Grieveson's research (2004) bears many similarities to that of Kuhn in that it explores how processes surrounding the evolution of early film censorship in the US shaped the emergent American film industry. In particular, Grieveson examines the series of debates that developed around the emergence of Nickelodeons and the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1914). Like Street, Grieveson considers the impact of social issues such as immigration, class and changing gender roles on the regulatory process. Unlike Street, however, he also explores the broader consequences of these debates in shaping the role of the film industry as being primarily an outlet for 'entertainment', and concludes that 'the emergence of nickelodeons from around 1905 led to a series of investigations into the effects of movie going on children, women and lower-class and immigrant audiences, who were constructed in much of this rhetoric as both vulnerable and dangerous' (Grieveson 2004: 201-202). Kuhn, Grieveson and Street all raise important questions regarding the multiple ways in which claims made about audiences are used by various institutions as part of a set of wider social and political agendas. Therefore, although all three scholars deal with censorship cases from the first half of the twentieth century (which have little in common with this current research project in terms of the political, ideological and technological contexts shaping the censorship process) their work is highly valuable and revealing in that they all provide clear examples of how assumptions made about the audiences for these films were at the centre of censorship activity, and often produced operative discursive frameworks for understanding them.

More recently, Martin Barker, Theresa Cronin, Kate Egan and Julian Petley have all taken Kuhn's provisional/productive censorship model as a starting point for analysing the regulatory processes that have evolved in Britain over the last thirty years. In *The Crash Controversy* (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001) one specific case study is used to investigate issues surrounding film censorship and claims about the audience in considerable detail. Taking the work of Kuhn as a starting point, Barker et al consider the influential role of the *Daily Mail* in the campaign to ban *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1997).

This campaign is understood in the context of its relationship with other competing and collaborating institutions, including the BBFC, local councils, the Video Appeals Committee (VAC) and British law. However, what marks this study out as being significantly different from the work of Kuhn, Street and Grieveson is how Barker et al trace the way claims made by these institutions about ‘figures of the audience’ for this controversial film evolve, and how these claims translate into exaggerated fears and properties associated with the film itself. This process, they argue, begins with the isolation of an example of a particular form of behaviour in the film (such as reckless driving), proceeds to link it to an unrelated example of real behaviour (such as newspaper reports on ram-raiding) and then identifies an easily influenced figure or person who might be encouraged by the film to engage in the real-life behaviour. They summarise that ‘it is important to see that these ‘figures’ must be made up of several components: the powerful message; the viewer, with weaknesses or dangers; and some resultant ‘harm’. Take one element away and even the most intense dislike of *Crash* fades from danger into taste-difference’ (Barker et al 2001: 9). Kuhn’s model is, then, being extended further here, in that having identified these claims about the ‘figures’ of the audience, Barker et al scrutinize them alongside the findings of detailed audience research gathered using focus groups and interviews; these are analysed in considerable detail in order to understand how those people who *actually* watched the film responded to it. Notably, these findings highlight the ways in which *Crash*’s audiences were aware of, and responded to, this ‘figuring’ of the audience. In this way, the work undertaken by Barker et al significantly expands on the critical framework created by Kuhn and, more importantly, sets a precedent for engaging in audience research as a means to explore the claims of cultural distinction and taste made by various parties about the potential audiences for a given film.

Kate Egan’s study of the ‘video nasties’ (2007) develops and extends Kuhn’s work in two ways. Firstly, she considers how competing discourses surrounding the nasties (generated by film reviews, distribution materials and the mainstream press) paved the way for the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (VRA) in 1984. Here, Kuhn’s suggestion that censorship arises out of the tensions between competing institutions is clearly illustrated, in that this was a crusade mounted by a group of moral campaigners, in response to the marketing strategies of video distributors, that combined with the influential power of the

Daily Mail to facilitate the introduction of the VRA and herald a new phase of film censorship in Britain. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly in respect to this research project, Egan explores the productive repercussions of the banning of the 'nasties' in terms of the subcultural and commercial capital which the act of censorship generated, and continues to generate, for this particular category of films.

Unlike Barker et al and Egan, Theresa Cronin and Julian Petley both make more pointed attempts to identify an overarching rationale that has effectively guided the processes surrounding film censorship over the last thirty years. Cronin's article 'Media Effects and the Subjectification of Film Regulation' examines shared characteristics of film censorship in Britain and the US from the 1970s onwards. She argues that technological developments, such as the arrival of video and the Internet, have brought about a 'kind of crisis' in film regulation that has resulted in a slew of legislation. Despite this legislation, however, Cronin chooses to focus on a case study, *Wolf Creek* (Greg Maclean 2005) that has not been subject to direct censorship by the BBFC or other regulatory institutions. Instead, it provides Cronin with an example of how film regulation has become subjectified, and the viewer has been increasingly constructed as 'vulnerable' or 'deviant'. Cronin's interpretation of the productive relationships surrounding film regulation is, therefore, conceived in a more causal way than that put forward by Kuhn. It implies that as developments in technologies for distributing film advance and increase, the apparatus surrounding film censorship will become progressively more wide-reaching and authoritarian. This, she argues, could influence taste-making practices surrounding cult cinema and their opposition to the 'mainstream'. However, even though both the wider contexts and individual cases that Cronin uses are very different to those chosen by Kuhn, Grieveson and Street, her analysis of the internal structures governing this process are remarkably similar:

Calls for regulation within this context are highly unlikely to suggest the cutting or banning of the film and instead focus on stigmatising viewers. The regulation of film in this sense becomes less about the excision or repression of texts and more about the construction of normative categories of spectatorship (Cronin 2007: 5).

The discourses, practices and institutions Cronin focuses on, then, are primarily those of the British press and the law. Julian Petley also concentrates on these two institutions in his introduction to *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (2011). However, in his summary of Kuhn's approach to understanding the operations of film censorship Petley

attempts to pinpoint more comprehensively *all* of the forces and institutions he considers to be significant in shaping the censorship process in Britain. He identifies these as being the law, specifically the Obscene Publications Act (OPA) and VRA, the CPS in relation to these laws, the VAC, the media (particularly the national press), film exhibitors and distributors, pressure groups, local councils and the BBFC. Of these, Petley chooses to examine in greatest detail the role of the British press in the censorship process. He focuses in particular on the activity of the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*, and the relationships these two national newspapers have with Westminster. In this way, the wider frameworks Petley positions the censorship process operating within are primarily ideological and political ones ‘that transcend matters of narrow party policy and are expressive of much wider and deeper ideological shifts which have been taking place in our society over the past thirty years – in other words since the beginnings of the neo-liberal experiment in which we are living.’ (Petley 2011: 13). Puzzlingly, and in sharp contrast to Cronin, Petley does not consider the significance of technological developments or the Internet on film censorship in modern Britain.

To summarise, this research project seeks to apply Kuhn’s highly influential theoretical framework, together with some of the more significant applications of it that have been developed by Barker et al, Cronin and Egan, in the following ways. Firstly, it explores and understands acts of censorship and regulation that have taken place in relation to the distribution of Asian Extreme cinema in the UK by situating them within the context of wider debates, issues and practices circulating throughout the period of 2000-2012. These include specific concerns about the turn towards a ‘new extremism’ in cinema and also wider discursive contexts surrounding the implications of Internet access amongst the general public, particularly in terms of its possible effects on younger people.²¹ A consideration of these issues and debates is addressed in Chapter 2, which explores the use of the term ‘extreme’ in a range of contexts, and is reflected on further when analysing the empirical results of the research.

Following this, I take up the model established by Barker et al (2001) in their project to identify ‘figures of the audience’ and, in the process of analysing audience responses to a film, assess the significance of these claims. The purpose of identifying these ‘figures’ of the audience is to examine and understand the ways in which these discursive representations

of audiences and fans are reflected in the research participants' responses. Chapter 2 explores a range of assumptions made about audiences for this group of films (by BBFC examiners, the press and other academics) alongside actual research into these audiences; much of this will be addressed in the main body of the thesis. Thirdly, this study also seeks to understand the regulatory activity of the BBFC as being embedded within an on-going negotiation of power relations between competing institutions and practices, most notably the national press and British law; these will be outlined below. Finally, there is an exploration of the productive nature of the censorship process, particularly in terms of the potential subcultural capital acquired by films which have been cut or banned. In the context of this project, this relates specifically to the following films: *Grotesque* (which was rejected by the BBFC in August 2009), *Suicide Club* and the *Guinea Pig* films, all of which have circulated in the UK for long periods of time without legitimate distribution channels; and *Ichi the Killer* and *The Isle* both of which have been cut by the BBFC.²² This aspect of the research will be outlined below and considered throughout the thesis.

The BBFC and the British Press

The relationship between the mainstream press, British law-making practices and film regulation has already been fairly well-documented in terms of how media campaigns have shaped the frameworks of reception for the video nasties (Barker 1984; Egan 2007; Petley 2011), and with respect to the campaign to ban *Crash* (Barker et al 2001; Petley 2011). In his recent discussion of the role of the press within the censorship process Petley argues that

even newspapers as strident as Britain's cannot, all on their own, ignite the fires of moral panic and indignation and then keep them burning bright. What they can do, however, is provide a megaphone for censorious politicians and moral entrepreneurs of one kind or another, and ensure that dissenting voices are not simply ignored in their pages but demonised and marginalised (Petley 2011: 5-6).

Petley's summary acknowledges the influential role of the mainstream British press in the censorship process without exaggerating its significance or overlooking the power wielded by pressure groups, politicians and other invested parties. A similar assessment of the relationship between the press and the regulatory process has been clearly illustrated by the reception research undertaken by Egan on the video nasties (2007) and by Barker et al on *Crash* (2001). However, far less research has been done into the ways in which the

classification process itself is influenced by film reviews published in the mainstream press following the release of a film; this is primarily due to the lack of availability of the relevant documents.²³ While much of the relationship between the press and the regulatory body takes the form of undocumented conversations and discussions at examiners' meetings, this section of the chapter aims to open up and explore some of the ways in which these discussions are referenced in a small number of reports that have been filed on extreme films classified over the last ten years. It considers what can be inferred, from these occasional remarks, about the relationship between these two institutions. Although not all of these films are Asian Extreme, they have all raised censorship issues as a result of particular aspects of their extreme content, and for this reason they can provide relevant insights into the processes of film censorship in the UK.

Barker et al (2001) document the possible reasons for the BBFC's decision, under the guidance of James Ferman, to ignore the *Mail's* campaign to ban *Crash* in 2006/07. Citing political pressure for institutions such as the BBFC to demonstrate greater transparency, coupled with the BBFC's growing insecurity in the face of digital convergence, they suggest that the changes made to the BBFC in the late 1990s resulted from a combination of competing political and technological forces. In many ways this heralded a new approach to film regulation in the UK and a significant effort on the part of the BBFC not to be swayed by the press during the classification process. This continued under the directorship of Robin Duval (1999-2004) and can be further understood by looking at the examiners' reports for *Battle Royale* (2001) and *Ichi the Killer* (2002). During the classification process BBFC examiners frequently consider the potential ways in which the press may respond to their decisions. In the early years of Duval's directorship the BBFC's relationship with the press appears to take the form of an ongoing awareness of the opinions of the mainstream newspapers, rather than press opinion being a serious or overwhelming priority. For example, an examiner's report on *Battle Royale* (2001) describes the film as a 'subtitled Japanese feature which arrives at the Board with a fair amount of advance media attention touting it as the latest challenge to our declared intention to give adults as much freedom to choose their own viewing as possible' (BBFC 2001a). This suggests, first and foremost, that despite the BBFC's intention not to be swayed by the press, there remains a strong awareness of both how key film critics are reviewing films and, more importantly, of how

much negative press attention particular films are generating in relation to censorship issues and the BBFC's potential response to them. In other words, there is a consideration of the extent to which a film might prove to be controversial for the BBFC. This awareness is underlined in a comment by David Cooke in his positive appraisal of Robin Duval's legacy:

Robin had overseen a huge increase in the productivity and efficiency of the Board's decision-making, as well as a significant reduction in the amount of controversy that had attached to the Board's work under the regime of Robin's own predecessor, James Ferman (Cooke 2012: 162).

Reducing the risk of controversy and negative press attention, then, is a key objective for the BBFC, in that it helps to ensure public support for their mandate to continue regulating films in the UK.

In the year following the release of *Battle Royale* the BBFC examiners were divided in their approach to the classification of Takashi Miike's *Ichi the Killer*. The examination process for the theatrical release of the film in the UK was drawn out over eight months, from March to November of 2002, and involved six separate screenings of the film. In May of that year, after the first four screenings had taken place, eight examiners recommended that the film was passed '18' without cuts; seven recommended it was passed '18' with cuts to sexual violence; and one examiner recommended that the board reject the film. One examiner summarises the conundrum faced by the BBFC in their relationship with the press at that time as follows:

Also we have to try to assess what the UK public as a whole is ready to accept and whether a particular work would confound public expectations at any given time. Passing this work uncut for an adult audience will either be seen as a further milestone towards an open and mature society in the wake of the BBFC's "glasnost" (*Sight & Sound*) or further proof that we are a bunch of lazy degenerates (Alexander Walker et al) (BBFC 2002a).

This indicates two of the ways in which the BBFC's relationship with British film critics is made manifest. Firstly, in their desire to please film 'experts' at *Sight and Sound*; this is further reinforced in another report on *Ichi the Killer* which refers to the opinions of Tony Rayns, a journalist who often writes for the magazine: 'Ichi, far from being the strutting, robotic uber-hero of much violent Western generic cinema, is (as described by Asian cinema expert Tony Rayns in the LFF blurb) a self-pitying nerd' (BBFC 2002b). It is clear from this comment and others that the opinions of writers for *Sight and Sound* matter greatly to the

BBFC, and are regularly cited by examiners to form arguments and hypotheses about problematic films. Secondly, the report references 'Alexander Walker et al', indicating an awareness of the censorial opinions expressed in newspapers such as the *Evening Standard* and *Daily Mail*, which often criticise the BBFC for being too liberal in their approach to film regulation.²⁴ Under the direction of Robin Duval, then, the BBFC seemed to be balancing an awareness of these two opposing wings of film journalism (in terms of their views on the BBFC), but at the same time, trying to avoid allowing them too much influence over their classificatory decisions. A further issue revealed by the extract above taken from the report on *Ichi the Killer* is the way in which 'public expectations' are conflated with the opinions of the press. There is an implied assumption here, that by taking into account the response of both wings of the press, which can be loosely categorised as specialist and mainstream, that the BBFC will have considered the opinions of the British public as a whole.²⁵

The way in which the final decision to pass *Ichi the Killer* (with cuts) in 2003 came about reveals some significant aspects of the classification process with respect to problematic films. The BBFC presidents met on May 21st to discuss *Ichi the Killer*. According to minutes of this meeting the then president, Andreas Whittam-Smith, and the two vice-presidents, Janet Lewis-Jones and Lord Taylor of Warwick, were united in their desire to reject the film. However, in the summer of that year Whittam-Smith was replaced by Sir Quentin Thomas as president of the BBFC; Thomas was open to the arguments being put forward by the director, Robin Duval, to make cuts to the film instead of rejecting it, and in November of that year the final version of the film, cut by three minutes and fifteen seconds, was released in the UK.²⁶ It was screened in one UK cinema and closed after a week. The case of *Ichi the Killer* serves to illustrate how influential key personnel associated with the BBFC can be when the examining team are divided in their response to a film. Clearly the more liberal position taken by Quentin Thomas, as incoming president, resulted in a marginal change in the regulatory stance taken by the Board following Whittam-Smith's departure. The case of *Ichi the Killer* illustrates the way in which prohibitive measures are sometimes produced as a result of an imagined or projected controversy, generated in relation to the practices and discourses of the British press, rather than an actual one (as was the case with the video nasties).

Films that have proven to be problematic during the classification process are often those that lead to speculation amongst the BBFC examiners as to how the press and the general public might respond to their decisions. In fact, the discussions of the views of the press made by examiners circa 2001/02 contrast quite sharply with more recent references made to British film critics in the examiners' reports. Cases where a consideration of the reaction of the press has played a part in the classificatory process include *Murder Set Pieces* (Nick Palumbo, rejected in 2007), *Grotesque* (rejected in 2009) and *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, heavily cut in 2010). *Murder Set Pieces* was rejected by the BBFC in February 2008 on the grounds of sexual violence. In particular, the press release explaining the BBFC's decision made the point that 'there is a clear focus on sex or sexual behaviour accompanied by non-consensual pain, injury and humiliation. Young children are among those terrorised and killed' (BBFC 2008b). This reflects comments made in several of the examiners' reports on the film, such as the following:

Given current concerns about child-killers, I wonder what the Press and public will make of this unusually explicit shot of a child being skewered to death with a large blade by a serial killer who has just been taking an unhealthy interest in little girls (BBFC 2008a).

The reference to 'current concerns' made here most likely refers to the on-going media coverage surrounding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann the previous summer. 2008 also saw the introduction of Sarah's Law, following the high profile campaign mounted by the *News of the World*. Wider public concerns, in this instance surrounding the threat of paedophiles in the community, clearly play a significant role in borderline censorship cases when the examiners are unsure as to whether or not they should intervene with 18-rated films (or films that, potentially, could be rated at 18).

The following year the BBFC released Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) uncut. Although they made a significant effort to pre-empt a critical response from the mainstream media, by releasing a statement to explain their decision (an unusual step to take in relation to a film that had *not* been censored by the BBFC in any way), they were still subject to considerable levels of criticism. This came not just from the usual sources, such as a call for tighter censorship laws from Christopher Hart in the *Daily Mail*, but also in the form of a critical article published in the *Sunday Times*:

Antichrist and “harm risk”, however, are the issues here. It may be that mere films cannot harm people, or it may be that people should be free to harm themselves in any way they want. In either case, the BBFC is unnecessary and the law can deal with abuses such as child porn. Yet the existence of the BBFC is generally approved by the people, and therefore there is an institutionalised national conviction that harm can be done, and that people should be protected from it. Now the BBFC has concluded that a blood ejaculation (full, erect penis visible) and an auto-clitoridectomy (fully visible) are not harmful. This raises the question, what the hell is? (Appleyard 2009).

This criticism of the BBFC is perhaps more damaging to the institution than those voiced by the *Daily Mail*, in that it questions the basis of their statutory powers as a regulatory body, and requires them to justify their role by protecting the public more effectively from ‘harmful material’. The media response to the decision not to cut *Antichrist* clearly bothered the BBFC enough for them to publish two separate responses on the situation, firstly in their 2009 *Annual Report*, and secondly an SBBFC webpage. On the SBBFC webpage the description of what happened is as follows:

Antichrist was released in cinemas in the UK in June 2009. Some media commentators called for it to be banned and/or accused the BBFC of failing in its duty in allowing such strong images to be passed uncut. Others defended the decision to pass a niche horror work at the high end of the adult category and criticised those commentators who called for the work to be banned without having seen it (SBBFC 2011).

In fact, of the mainstream press articles that did comment on the BBFC’s decision in their reviews of Antichrist (the Daily Mail, the Sunday Times and the Sun) all were openly critical of the BBFC’s decision. The Daily Telegraph, the Times and the Guardian all opted to sit on the fence and report on the responses made by other parties, such as those made by Mediawatch and by the Conservative MP Julian Brazier, rather than state their own position towards the BBFC’s decision. The commentators who defended the BBFC’s decision tended to be independent reviewers and film critics, mainly operating via the Internet, and very rarely discussed in BBFC examiners’ reports. In sum, the BBFC were trying to put a brave face on the situation, but had to acknowledge that their decision with respect to Antichrist was not well received by the British press.

Less than a month later, on August 19th 2009, the BBFC issued a press release announcing its decision to reject the Japanese ‘torture porn’ film *Grotesque*. This meant it was not issued with a certificate and, under British law, it became illegal to distribute it either online or via conventional retail outlets; in effect, *Grotesque* was banned in the UK.²⁷

Reports on the banning of *Grotesque* invariably mentioned the criticism that the BBFC had received over its decision to pass *Antichrist* uncut. In one BBC report it was noted that ‘the BBFC drew criticism earlier this year for passing Danish horror *Antichrist* uncut, despite its graphic scenes of sex, violence and mutilation’ (BBC 2009). A year later, both the remake of *Spit on your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) and *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) were cut by the BBFC on grounds of sexual violence and a ‘genuine harm risk’ (BBFC 2010b) that they posed to the general public. The decision to cut *A Serbian Film* received considerable press attention, a development that was not unforeseen by the examining team at the BBFC, one of whom wrote:

Over and above examining this work against the Guidelines, there is a political dimension to the decision we arrive at, a factor included in all valid risk assessments. Passing the work uncut will inevitably attract unfavourable attention from the Daily Mail and others, and possibly invitations to the Director to appear on radio and television to defend our position (hopefully when John Humphreys and Jeremy Paxman are around) (BBFC 2010b).

Perhaps more explicitly than in any other report, then, this examiner states quite plainly that the classification process involves more than a straightforward application of the BBFC’s guidelines to any given film: it also has an explicitly political dimension. Furthermore, it seems that in the nine year period between the classification of *Battle Royale* and *A Serbian Film* the possibility of a negative response from the mainstream press became an altogether more threatening and unsettling prospect for the BBFC. The reasons for this can only be speculated on without access to other internal documents. However, what becomes clear, through examining these documents, is that the relationship between the regulatory institution and the British press is complex, far-reaching and involves significantly different attitudes to specific sectors of the British press; in particular, there is evidence of catering to an axis of film criticism that positions *Sight and Sound*/John Humphreys at one end and Alexander Walker/‘mainstream’ national newspapers at the other. This brief analysis of extracts from the examiners’ reports therefore enables a fuller understanding of the processual relationships involved in British film censorship. While the reception research carried out by Egan, Barker et al and others has uncovered the extent to which the mainstream press has pressurised the BBFC into making particular decisions (informed, in some cases, by debates around child abuse, the people and the BBFC’s role in relation to

this) the evidence presented here reveals the way in which potential press responses to classification decisions are firmly embedded within the classification process itself. As Kuhn summarises, film censorship is produced from ‘an ensemble of interrelated institutions, practices and discourses participating in complex and potentially contradictory relations of power’ (Kuhn 1988: 128).

Furthermore, these documents reveal that these productive power relations (between the press and the BBFC) often operate in two particular ways. Firstly, as in the case of *Ichi the Killer*, the relations can be imagined rather than actual; that is, the possibility of controversy and negative press can produce a prohibitive action on the part of the BBFC without it ever being realised, as was the case with *Ichi the Killer*. Furthermore, the case of *Grotesque* and other recent classificatory decisions indicate that prohibitive measures can be influenced by a controversy that relates to another film that has recently generated headlines for the BBFC. Secondly, there is consistent evidence that the BBFC often considers the opinions of two opposing wings of film journalism (the specialist/liberal wing of *Sight and Sound* and the conservative, censorial wing of the *Daily Mail*) and conflates these with public opinion, overlooking an entire spectrum of other possible responses to a film. These findings therefore suggest a variation on Kuhn’s provisional cycle in which the model of ‘boundary construction-resistance-prohibition’ is replaced by ‘boundary construction-imagined controversy-prohibition’. Following this, I now consider the ways in which Kuhn’s observation that ‘prohibition’ is followed by ‘resistance’ is challenged through the celebratory stance developed by some cult film fans in relation to censored films and the subcultural capital they generate.

Censorship, Internet Distribution and Subcultural Capital

In *Trash or Treasure* Kate Egan explores the ways in which the banning of the video nasties ‘solidified their status as artefacts that had been distinguished from legitimate, authorised culture, allowing fans and collectors to slowly build a culture around them’ (Egan 2007: 10-11). In the case of the nasties, the circulation of different versions of the same film amongst fan communities lent itself to the activities of identifying and collecting these different versions, which in turn produced levels of connoisseurship and expertise within the community. While the Asian Extreme category of films have not been subjected to the same

level of censorship or censorship debate as the nasties (with the exception of *Grotesque*) they nevertheless raise questions about the circulation of illegitimate films in the UK and the status such artefacts acquire. The *Guinea Pig* films perhaps exemplify this most clearly, having been circulating illegitimately amongst British fans since the 1980s; and from 2001 until 2011 *Suicide Club* has also circulated widely in the UK without having been submitted to the BBFC for classification. However, the 2009 film *Grotesque* is the only film of the ten listed on the online questionnaire that has actually been rejected outright by the BBFC. As the *Snowblood Apple* website provides the only UK-based forum dedicated to the fandom of Asian Extreme films, these censorship issues are considered through a brief overview of the response to the regulatory issues surrounding each film found on this forum, as well as any other significant factors involving the distribution of different versions of these films in the UK.²⁸ The final section of this chapter aims, therefore, to consider the productive nature of boundary-setting prohibitive practices by examining the ways in which these 'outlaw' films are accorded subcultural value by the Asian Extreme fan community.

If films acquire subcultural capital through the ways in which they are differentiated from mainstream culture via the censorship process, then it follows that *Grotesque* could be highly valued by cult/horror film fans. However, unlike many of the nasty titles, *Grotesque* has been available to buy from mainstream UK retailers from the time of its release in Japan and the United States;²⁹ to date, there have been no cases of retailers being prosecuted for distributing the DVD despite the clear statement made by the BBFC in August 2009 that its rejection 'means that it cannot be legally supplied anywhere in the UK'(BBFC 2009a). The case of *Grotesque* is further complicated by the marketing materials used to promote it. Although these were fairly minimal in the UK, as the film was not formally released, the DVD cover includes the tagline '*Saw* and *Hostel* were just appetisers'. This association is interesting in that neither of these two films were subject to censorship or banning in the UK, and both received mainstream releases. It is possible, then, that those fans who consider themselves to be connoisseurs of Asian cinema might dislike the association being made here by the distributors between a Japanese horror film and popular American 'torture porn' films. On the *Snowblood Apple* forum the news that the BBFC had rejected *Grotesque* only generated thirteen responses on the thread dedicated to it – this compares with over one hundred comments posted on the thread devoted to the discussion of the

cuts made by the BBFC to *Ichi the Killer*. One of the comments made in response to the BBFC's decision that was posted by the website founder, Mandi Apple, sums up the general attitude towards *Grotesque* on the forum:

shrugs It's hardly any great surprise that the BBFC banned it outright - after all, the Guinea Pig movies still aren't easily available over here (I believe they're still banned in the UK...?) so why would this film be any different? I can't really feel sorry for the distributors, they should have realised that that kind of content is deemed completely unacceptable over here - and if splatterman [another forum member] is comparing it to both *Flower of Flesh and Blood* and *Niku Daruma*, it seems pretty stupid on their part if they really thought it would even get passed with cuts...
(Mandi Apple 2009)

This general lack of interest or outrage at the BBFC's decision is matched by an unfavourable opinion of the film itself expressed by a number of posters on the thread. Additionally, there is no formal review of the film listed on the website review index, which reinforces the sense that this is not a film highly valued by fans of Asian Extreme cinema on this particular website. One objective of this research project is, then, to uncover the extent to which *Grotesque* is not widely appreciated or valued by the fan community, and the reasons that lie behind both their lack of interest in the film and their apparent disregard for its status as an unauthorised artefact.

In contrast to the apparent lack of interest in *Grotesque* on the *Snowblood Apple* forums, the *Guinea Pig* films (a series of ten films made between 1985 and 1997) have been reviewed in great length on the website and discussed in over eighty threads on the forum. In particular they have generated long debates surrounding their historical significance, their use of excessive gore and the dated quality of their special effects. Many of these debates include heated arguments as to why the *Guinea Pig* films should continue to be held in high esteem by the fan community, such as the one below:

Maybe by today's standards the effects look fake, and some people are dismissing these movies. Well, stop right there kids. If the *Guinea Pig* series did not exist, would we still have *Ichi*, *Audition* or any other movie made after it? I don't think so. Even if the effects seem fake now, they were before their time in the mid-eighties. Not just for Japan, but the world.

Not just the effects, either. The plots (or lack of), and the lack of humanity in the filming set a new standard, or level, for Japanese horror. I probably did not express myself well here, but kids, we need to appreciate the history of Japanese horror. GP paved the road for most of the j-horror movies we watch today. So, like 'em or hate

'em, we should all bow our heads to this series, and hope our heads don't get chopped off (*Invisible Bunny King*: 2009).

As with *Grotesque*, DVD box sets of the *Guinea Pig* series are currently available to order from mainstream UK-based Internet retailers; however, it should be noted that box sets with English subtitles only became accessible to fans when the US-based distribution company *Unearthed Films* released them in 2005. A factor that further differentiates this series from *Grotesque* are the disagreements over how many films there are in the series, a point which clearly lends itself to the development of specialist knowledge and connoisseurship often associated with fan culture. Additionally, there is a sense that these films are historically significant and valued as precursors/early examples of the Asian Extreme category.

Suicide Club was released in Japan in 2001 but, until September 2011, had not received legitimate distribution within the UK. However, during this ten year period the film has remained a popular title amongst fans of Asian Extreme cinema and, as with *Grotesque* and the *Guinea Pig* series, the US version has been available to order on *amazon.co.uk*. Fans using the *Snowblood Apple* forum rate it as their fourth favourite Asian Extreme film of all time, and it has one of the longest running discussion threads devoted to it, which primarily focuses on analysing the various 'puzzles' contained within the film. One issue the empirical stage of this research project might shed light on, therefore, is the extent to which the exclusivity of the title (in a British context) has heightened fan appreciation of *Suicide Club*.

The most popular Asian Extreme film on the forum, however, is *Ichi the Killer*. The extent to which the value attached to this film is related to its status as a censored film in the UK is difficult to gauge from forum discussion threads on the *Snowblood* site, as much of the discussion here is dedicated to the question of whether or not the film is misogynistic in nature. However, the number of different versions of the film in circulation has clearly facilitated the exchange of expertise and knowledge surrounding *Ichi*, in that references are made to the Japanese, Hong Kong, Dutch, British, American and Canadian versions of the film, sometimes with detailed lists of cuts made to each version. In contrast to the positive forum responses to both *Suicide Club* and *Ichi the Killer*, Kim Ki-duk's *The Isle* does not have a single thread dedicated to it on the *Snowblood* forum, and is even mentioned several times on the 'least favourite Asian Extreme film' thread. The website review of the film

includes the comments 'There's *no* character development, *no* tension, *no* passion, *absolutely nothing* worth getting excited about or even interested in. The more I think about *The Isle*, the less inclined I am to like it' and concludes with the statement '*The Isle* will try to persuade you that you quite fancy it, but once consumed, will still leave a big gaping, empty hole. The world would be a better place if this movie simply did not exist' (Alex Apple: 2004). It is possible that this highly critical review of *The Isle* written by one of the website founders might explain why there is little evidence of interest expressed in the film on the *Snowblood* forum, and no mention of the cuts made to it by the BBFC.

This brief overview of fan responses to these films and their treatment by the BBFC on the specialist *Snowblood* forum suggests that the values assigned to different versions of Asian Extreme films varies greatly in relation to a number of significant factors. The diverse treatment of these films on the forum partly reveals the contested nature of this category; whereas the DPP's list of video nasties provided fans with a relatively well-defined catalogue that allowed collectors to build a culture around it, the origins and implications of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' brand has been widely challenged by both academics and fans. It is possible that these disputes have affected the ways in which fans orient themselves to this group of films, and that this research project will provide some of the answers to this question. What cannot be assumed, however, is that the act of banning a film will necessarily produce subcultural capital surrounding a particular title; a further objective of this research project, then, is to investigate more fully the extent to which this happens in relation to this group of Asian Extreme films, and to identify which factors might facilitate this process.

Perhaps most significantly, though, this brief study reveals how frequently discussions on the *Snowblood Apple* forum turn towards evaluating the history, function and practices of the BBFC. Thirty-five different threads on the boards include lengthy posts relating to the BBFC's regulatory activities, their impact on fan practices and cultures, and their status (or lack of it) within the fan community. One thread titled 'Censorship' includes several long posts critiquing the activity of the BBFC (mainly for the inconsistency of their decisions) and references BBFC judgements in relation to an eclectic range of films including *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989), *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998), *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001), *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes, 2001), *Fudoh* (Takashi Miike, 2006), *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), *The Last Temptation*

of *Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), *The Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979), *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971). The relatively wide range of films referenced here in relation to the BBFC's classificatory decisions suggests that the type of knowledge and expertise being displayed by forum members in this thread is not particular to discourses surrounding horror or cult Asian cinema, but is linked to a much broader discourse surrounding film censorship in the UK. One of the longer posts concludes 'Sorry this is a long post but I feel it may bring up some interesting points, I've always wanted to write something about censorship - I guess this topic became somewhere to start' (Ghevans 2003). The forum co-founder then responds positively to Ghevans' post and makes the provocation 'Are you listening, BBFC, 'cos you should be! 😊 100% agree with this - thanks for a fascinating post too G 😊' (Mandi Apple 2003). This thread reveals that the censorship process is productive within the fan community on several different levels. In addition to generating subcultural capital in relation to different (cut and uncut) versions of films such as *Ichi the Killer*, discussion of the BBFC also acts as a discursive site for developing and exchanging particular forms of expertise and knowledge regarding censorship, as well as facilitating friendship and communal values within the forum. This finding partly echoes Kate Egan's research on fans of the 'video nasties' and her consideration of the use made of the term 'geek shit' by a message-board user to describe information relating to the BBFC:

Firstly, there is the simple fact that these pieces of information, press releases and lists are not seen as 'BBFC shit' but 'geek shit', and that they therefore seem to function, for such nasty enthusiasts, as sources for fan information rather than as documents used and distributed by official bodies. What such an approach therefore suggests is not only that official information is frequently appropriated by fans, but also that, in some ways and because of their investment in the nasties, fans therefore see themselves as owning it – it is their property, to use as they so desire (Egan 2007: 136).

As with the nasty fans, fans of the Asian Extreme category appropriate information relating to the regulatory activity of the BBFC and use it both as a form of expertise and as a means of bonding with other forum members. Furthermore, the use of an open address in Mandi Apple's post suggests that this fan community actively seeks some form of direct dialogue and interaction with the BBFC.

Following this discussion on the 'Censorship' thread, the interaction between the members of the *Snowblood* forum and the BBFC was further intensified by the research project investigating audience responses to extreme cinema undertaken by Aberystwyth University for the BBFC (Barker et al 2007). In the thread 'Extreme Research' (2006) a few of the *Snowblood* forum members discuss whether or not taking part in the research project is worthwhile; in this short debate four posts, including one by co-founder Alex Apple, argue that the research is a good thing, while two others, including one by co-founder Mandi Apple, argue that it is a waste of time. However, in the later thread 'Snowblood mentioned in a BBFC Report!' (2010) forum users express their delight at being referenced in the research report published on the BBFC website, and co-founder Mandi Apple comments 'Good Lord! :-o That's very, very cool - my mom will be proud of us, getting mentioned in an official BBFC report... well, as proud as she can be of her gore/horror loving daughter, anyway :lol:' (Mandi Apple 2010). Another post in the same thread quotes and comments on the report, noting "'An authority within the fan culture.'" That's praise indeed. This is really interesting' (Midori no Saru 2010). This post suggests that (positive) academic intervention and analysis of the fan community has produced an additional form of cultural capital amongst some of the forum members. Considered together, these three threads therefore reveal the complex and highly personal nature of the power relations between this specific fan community, the BBFC and academia. For this reason, an open-ended question regarding the regulatory practices of the BBFC in relation to Asian Extreme films will be included in the online questionnaire, in order to give respondents the opportunity to express their views about the BBFC as fully as possible. However, this brief analysis of the *Snowblood* forum also confirms that academic intervention in the power relations between this particular fan community and the BBFC is now an integral element of these discursive interactions, and has produced a particular set of cultural distinctions amongst forum members; this aspect of the research process is considered further in Chapter 3, which addresses the methodological approaches used in the empirical stage of the project.

Conclusions

This chapter draws on Kuhn's productive/provisional understanding of film regulation, as a process arising out of the interaction between different institutions, discourses and

practices, in a number of key ways. Firstly, it establishes two previously undocumented dimensions of the productive power relations between the press and the BBFC, as they have operated between 2000 and 2012. Through an investigation of examiners' reports on *Ichi the Killer*, it establishes that the relations between these two institutions are, in this case, imagined or projected rather than actual; that is, the possibility of controversy and negative press can produce a prohibitive action on the part of the BBFC without it ever being realised. Secondly, there is consistent evidence that the BBFC often consider the opinions of two opposing wings of film journalism (the specialist/liberal wing of *Sight and Sound* and the conservative, censorious wing of the *Daily Mail*) and conflate these with public opinion, overlooking an entire spectrum of other possible responses to a film. In these ways, this research project draws on archival materials to extend the current academic understanding of the relationship between the media and the BBFC in two significant ways. Knowledge of these two elements of the censorship process reinforces the highly kaleidoscopic, unstable and provisional character of film censorship as identified by Kuhn.

Additionally, this chapter indicates a number of significant ways in which Kuhn's provisional/productive model provides an important starting point for understanding not only the competing forces, practices and institutions at work in the censorship process, but also for investigating the complex ways in which the Asian Extreme fan community interacts with it. Research into fan activity on the *Snowblood* forum reveals the multifaceted and personal relationship this community has with the BBFC, and the productive uses that are made of the censorship discourse – for facilitating social interaction, as a specific site for demonstrating expertise and knowledge and as a means to make bids for cultural distinction. Finally, the application of Kuhn's model will be further employed in this thesis in two ways. Firstly, by exploring the censorship process in relation to Asian Extreme cinema in the UK by situating it within the process of wider debates, issues and practices circulating throughout the period of 2000-2012; and, secondly, by using the model established by Barker et al (2001) in their project to identify 'figures of the audience' to investigate the ways in which audience responses to the films are developed in relation to these discursive constructs.

Chapter 2

A Contested Category:

Asian Extreme Films and Discourses of Extremity

Introduction

This chapter identifies and examines the discursive frameworks which shaped the reception of Asian Extreme cinema in the UK between 2000 and 2012. It takes as a starting point Rick Altman's understanding of film genres as discursive constructs that fluctuate according to their use and context (Altman 1999: 86); this approach is then developed by considering Amanda Ann Klein's study of American film cycles (Klein 2011: 1-24) which focuses on the ways in which films are used and valued by different groups. This chapter therefore sets out to explore the multiple ways in which different user groups mobilise the Asian Extreme category according to their own social interests, cultural identities and taste formations. By considering a range of sources, including newspaper articles, film reviews, online fan discussions, policy documents and academic debates, I identify the key discursive frameworks surrounding the Asian Extreme category and the different uses being made of them. This analysis partly draws on the work of Bourdieu in exploring the different ways in which user groups either embrace or deny the Asian Extreme category in their competing bids for cultural distinction. Some of these distinctions are made apparent by the wide range of terms used (by academics, critics and fans) to describe this group of films: 'Asia Extreme' (Tartan; Dew 2007; Martin 2009); Asian Extreme (British fan communities); Asian horror cinema (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009); New Extreme Cinema (Dargis in Hawkins 2005: 132); 'pan-Asian faux-genre' (Rawle 2009: 167). These distinctions are also considered in relation to the parallel development of the 'torture porn' cycle and the ways in which critical comparisons between these two categories raise questions concerning cultural taste and the boundaries of 'mainstream' culture.

Following this, in the second part of the chapter, I identify and explore two key discursive frameworks which have shaped the reception of these films in the UK. The first of these centres on competing discourses of Orientalism. This section of the chapter examines the powerful effect Said's ground-breaking work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the*

Orient (1978) has had an impact on the reception of Asian Extreme films, particularly within an academic context. This is counterbalanced by a consideration of some alternative approaches to the Orientalist discourse, focusing in particular on the writing of J.J. Clarke. The second discursive framework can be broadly termed the 'extremity' discourse. This section of the chapter considers the topicality of the term 'extreme,' and examines how it has developed a set of specific uses within the wider discursive framework of British culture. It tracks the ways in which the term has been taken up and used in a broad range of social, legal and cultural contexts, and examines the role it plays in contemporary debates surrounding new media technologies, Internet access, censorship and pornography. Finally, throughout each stage of the chapter, particular attention is paid to representations of different audiences for this category of films, with a specific emphasis on the figure of the 'fanboy'; these have implications for interpreting the empirical findings of the research project, particularly in terms of understanding the ways in which fans display a self-reflexive awareness of these discourses, and negotiate their identities in response to them.

Categories of Disrepute: Asian Extreme, 'Torture Porn' and the 'Mainstreaming of Exploitation'

In 2000, Tartan released *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1999) and *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), closely followed by *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) in 2001. The commercial success of these three titles led to the launch of the 'Asia Extreme' brand in 2002. Several academics have already considered the impact of Tartan's marketing campaign on the reception of East Asian cinema in the UK (Dew 2007; Shin 2008; Martin 2009b). Much of their analyses have focused on the ways in which sex and violence were used to market the films 'as exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills' (McAlpine in Pilkington 2004: iv). In common with many film cycles, then, the Asia Extreme brand developed in rapid response to the success of a few key titles, and flourished briefly as a result of its financial viability and use of high-profile promotional materials that 'lured moviegoers into theaters by exploiting their interest in licentious, sensational, or even dangerous imagery' (Klein 2011: 6). Eric Schaefer describes the marketing tactics developed for exploitation film cycles as ballyhoo promotional strategies, and argues that they often make promises and outrageous claims which they cannot fulfil, 'a fact the audience evidently recognized and appreciated and in which they

were complicit' (Schaefer 1999: 111). In this way, Schaefer highlights just one of the many possible reading strategies that audiences develop in their response to sensationalist marketing materials. As a preliminary to analysing the ways in which the research participants involved in this project made sense of Tartan's marketing materials [see Chapters 5 and 6], this chapter considers two key critiques regarding the Tartan label and its audiences. The first of these focuses on issues of genre authenticity and 'mainstream' taste, and the second on the more specific issue of Orientalism and cross-cultural translation.

The promotional strategies developed by Tartan to promote the 'Asia Extreme' label between 2003 and 2005 centred on an annual 'Asia Extreme Roadshow' in the UK. This roadshow travelled between multiplex cinemas and made use of promotional materials such as t-shirts, postcards, umbrellas, beer and scratch cards to market the films. Chi-Yun Shin argues that these tactics, more commonly associated with big-budget studio releases, were examples of a 'mainstream' positioning of Asian Extreme films that clearly 'aimed to reach out to the younger audiences who frequent multiplex rather than art house cinemas' (Shin 2009: 89). As the popularity of the Tartan label grew, many of the films in its catalogue were propelled, albeit briefly, from cultish obscurity into the 'mainstream'. The Tartan roadshows are a particularly interesting case study in film exhibition, then, in that they provided British film audiences with relatively easy access to foreign language horror titles that previously would only have been screened at specialist festivals or art house cinemas. In her analysis of the US distribution of Asian Extreme films such as *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) and *Audition*, Joan Hawkins states 'I have written at length about collecting and home viewing because for those of us who cannot afford to go to prestigious film festivals and who do not live in urban centres, art horror has simply not become mainstream enough' (Hawkins 2010: 129). Whereas US consumers of cult horror films, such as Hawkins, could only access Asian Extreme cinema by ordering DVDs online, attending festivals or art house cinemas, in the UK film audiences could, for a brief period of time, discover films by Takashi Miike and Park Chan-wook at Tartan roadshows held at their local multiplexes. Following the success of these roadshows, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook, 2005) and a small number of other Asian Extreme films were released in 'mainstream' multiplexes in the UK. The British exhibition context for these films is therefore significant and unique.

In her study of American film cycles, Klein argues that 'cycle studies' focus on cinema's use value – the way that filmmakers, audiences, film reviewers, advertisements, and cultural discourses interact with and affect the film text – offers a more pragmatic, localized approach to genre history' (2011: 5). In this way, cycle studies complements and extends Altman's pragmatic approach to the study of film genre (Altman 1999: 211). Some of the uses and features outlined by Klein in relation to American film cycles, such as sensationalist marketing strategies and issues of timeliness and topicality, are worth considering in relation to the Asian Extreme category and its audiences. Film cycles, she argues, value timeliness – or, what the audiences are interested in watching right now (Klein 2011: 9). The point at which the Asian Extreme category transformed from a cult interest into a 'mainstream' one therefore has considerable resonance. The popularity of the 'Asia Extreme' label in the UK between 2002 and 2004 led to the launch of the brand in the US as *Tartan USA*. Other distributors also followed in Tartan's footsteps, such as Art Magic's *Warrior* and *EasternCult* labels, Optimum Releasing's *Optimum Asia*, Columbia Tri-Star's *Eastern Edge* series, Medusa's *Premier Asia*, the Weinstein Company's *Dragon Dynasty* label and Anchor Bay Entertainment's *Dark Asia* brand. The success of these distribution companies was consolidated when 'Asia Extreme' categories were created by DVD retailers in both the US and the UK, usually as sub-divisions of their World Cinema retail sections (Dew 2007: 57). In the UK, former Tartan employee Adam Torel set up Third Windows Films in 2005 to distribute 'quality Asian media' in response to 'the stream of worn-out shock horror vehicles' and 'mindless Hollywood action copies' released by Tartan.³⁰ This development signalled the way in which the category's cult distinction had been eroded by the ready availability of Tartan releases; in 'selling out' to the masses, the Asian Extreme category was no longer appealing to the more discerning connoisseurs of East Asian cinema.

The emergence of new production and distribution cycles around the Asian Extreme category is discussed by Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano in their critique of the Asian Extreme category. Choi and Wada-Marciano point out that Tartan established a canon of diverse films without consistent features under one exportable umbrella, and argue that 'some of the subtle differences in Asian horror and extreme cinema are discernible to the attuned viewers with cultural knowledge, but might be erased when they are exported and lumped together under a homogeneous category 'Asia Extreme', the DVD label launched by

London-based distributor Metro Tartan' (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009: 5). This observation draws a significant distinction between viewers with (and, by implication, without) cultural competencies in relation to this category of films. By ring-fencing those viewers in possession of cultural capital off from the rest, the implication is made that audiences who discover these films as Tartan 'Asia Extreme' releases lack the cultural capital to fully appreciate their subtleties. Choi and Wada-Marciano go on to contend that although 'Asia Extreme' began as a distribution/marketing term rather than a production category it has 'fed back into the production sector' (2009: 5). In this way they reflect a discourse surrounding commercialism and artlessness, which Klein identifies as being characteristic of the way in which many critics and academics dismiss film cycles as 'cultural ephemera cranked out to capitalise on current events, trends, fads, and the success of other films' (Klein 2011: 6).

Additionally, Choi and Wada-Marciano suggest that the Asian Extreme category now functions as a marketing label that

carries a set of cultural assumptions and implications that guides – and sometimes misguides – the viewer in assessing the political and ideological significance of the films. Youth audiences, who would normally be reluctant to watch foreign films with subtitles, are drawn to such films by virtue of their non-mainstream sensibilities and attractions (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009: 6).

The argument that disseminating these films via a successful Western distribution company has somehow compromised their value and exclusivity invites a Bourdieuan reading of Choi and Wada-Marciano's position towards the Tartan brand. As with other exclusive, niche or cult categories of film, they imply that their subcultural capital depends on conserving a sense of those who are 'in the know' separate from the 'mainstream' Tartan audiences; this is complicated by assertion that 'mainstream' is synonymous with youth audiences who, they claim, are reluctant to watch foreign language films. However, this configuration of the audiences for Asian Extreme films is highly problematic, in that even the most cursory glance at a fan website such as the *Snowblood Apple* forum reveals that fandom of the Asian Extreme category involves an enjoyment, appreciation and critical awareness of a highly diverse range of films, distribution labels, and marketing materials. By overlooking the diverse nature of fan cultures and practices surrounding the category – in other words, by

overlooking the study of fan cultures – Choi and Wada-Marciano are drawn into making problematic evaluations of the cultural competencies of audiences for Asian Extreme films.

It is worthwhile noting here that the academics who, to a greater or lesser extent, critique Asian Extreme cinema as a clumsy ‘faux-genre’ arising out of a successful marketing phenomenon choose to adopt the term ‘Asia Extreme’ when referring to this group of films. By adopting the marketing label as a term to describe the film genre they are reinforcing the association between the distribution company and the films themselves. In this way they are consciously highlighting the commercial ‘mainstream’ status of Asian Extreme cinema, despite the fact that these films also appeal to art house audiences and cult horror fans. By way of contrast, many fans of Asian Extreme cinema on the Internet choose to use the term ‘Asian Extreme’ rather than ‘Asia Extreme’, thereby distancing themselves from the Tartan label and constituting the category as a *bona fide* interest.³¹ One of the co-founders of the *Snowblood Apple* website defines the Asian Extreme category as follows:

When we started out, *extreme* was only ever just "weird movies we like, but with a slant towards horror". The best definition of it I ever churned out was the one you can still see on the front page of the forum – “violence, sex (not porn), gore, horror and general weirdness” but the term has come to encompass much more. In terms of this site, it ranges all the way from the nowadays tame *Kwaidan* of 1964, via seventies docs on Japanese biker gangs, through the J-Horror boom to things like Sion Sono's *Love Exposure* - and all things beside. What was extreme some eight or nine years ago now isn't. I don't think Tartan's Asia Extreme label - which started up pretty simultaneously to this site, coincidentally - even runs any more (Alex Apple 2009).

This post on the *Snowblood Apple* forum reveals the way in which some Asian Extreme fans perceive it to be, first and foremost, a fluid, wide-reaching category that is not restricted to Tartan releases, and secondly, a category whose origin is historically distinct from (though related to) the Tartan brand. The references to *Kwaidan* (Masaki Kobayashi, 1964) and *Love Exposure* (Sion Sono, 2009), a film distributed in the UK on Adam Torel's Third Window label, reinforce the way in which British fans constitute themselves as connoisseurs of East Asian cinema. In this way they distance themselves from Tartan's ‘mainstream’ marketing strategies and, instead, choose to highlight their cultural competencies.

It is not just academics who have questioned the cultural prestige associated with the Asian Extreme category. The profile of Asian Extreme cinema in the West was further amplified in 2004 following the critical success of *Oldboy* at the Cannes film festival and, at

this point in its history, debates over its art house status began to emerge. In a review of a Park Chan-Wook retrospective held in New York in 2005, the film critic Manohla Dargis mounted a scathing attack in which she suggested that the acceptance of Park's 'arty exploitation flick' into 'the upper tier of the festival circuit and his embrace by some cinephiles reflects 'a dubious development in recent cinema: the mainstreaming of exploitation' (Dargis 2005: 7). This attack firstly involves slippage, on Dargis' part, between art cinema and the 'mainstream'; it also includes an oblique reference to the emergence of American 'torture porn' films, exemplified by the *Saw* cycle (Lionsgate, 2004-9) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) which also achieved 'mainstream' success at the box office in the US and UK at around the same time. Central to Dargis' argument is the assertion that rarely before have such films entered the physical domain of the multiplex cinema. In her critique of Dargis' review, Joan Hawkins takes issue with what Dargis describes as 'the mainstreaming of exploitation'. Lamenting 'the age old taste-debate,' Hawkins cites historical precedents such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1959), and argues that there have been many examples of exploitation films produced for major theatrical release. The blurring of boundaries between art cinema and popular 'body genre' films is, she concludes, not really such a recent development. Hawkins goes on to suggest that recent developments in film distribution and consumption patterns, most obviously in the form of video and DVD back-catalogues of exploitation films that are available to order online, are more significant factors in the transformation of the 'mainstream' taste of film audiences. This argument is pertinent to the availability of Asian Extreme titles in the UK, and is discussed later in relation to the responses to the online questionnaire [see Chapter 5].

Dargis is not the only critic to draw comparisons between the Asian Extreme category and the 'torture porn' cycle. The relationship between 'torture porn' and Asian Extreme films provides a second factor which further complicates the insecure cultural status of the category within the US and UK markets; its association with the American 'splat-pack' film-makers is regularly referenced in British reviews of Asian Extreme films. Klein argues that one of the distinguishing characteristics of film cycles is their 'often deviant subject matter' and in this respect, the Asian Extreme category is similar to both 'torture porn' and older exploitation film cycles which 'showcased the spectacle of the unknown and

forbidden' (Klein 2011: 7). However, unlike film cycles that are built on 'slavish repetition ... to provide audiences with versions of the same images, characters, and plots they enjoyed in previous films' (Klein 2011: 6), the Asian Extreme category encompasses an eclectic mix of supernatural horror, live-manga adaptations, fast-paced thrillers and disturbing melodramas. In straddling the divide between arthouse cinema and low-budget exploitation, the category therefore disrupts established distinctions between high and low culture and becomes an ambiguous site of cultural dispute. Several film critics (Morrissey 2007; Pulver 2008; Afta: 2009) and academics discuss these two generic developments in relation to each other. In these muddled discussions, the low cultural status of 'torture porn' is frequently perceived as contributing to the de-valuation of Asian Extreme films as a cult interest:

As American horrors turned into sick gore fests, the only bright lights of the genre came from Japan with the so-called J-Horror that saw the arrival of such classics as Hideo Nakata's *Ring* trilogy. The leading exponent was the once formidable Takashi Miike, a director whose output is so prolific he makes Rainer Werner Fassbinder look lethargic. Miike made *Audition*, one of the scariest films I've ever seen, but then seemed to get infected with the torture-porn bug and has never been the same since he went slasher crazy with *Ichi the Killer* in 2001 (Aftab: 2009).

Even though *Ichi the Killer* was released several years before the 'torture porn' cycle began, Miike's association with Roth and Tarantino, including a cameo role in *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) means that the connection between the two groups of films has endured. This retrospective review uses the 'torture porn' cycle to denigrate the value of some Asian Extreme titles by suggesting that it 'infected' Miike's work. Similarly, responses on Asian Extreme fan forum *Snowblood Apple*, and on horror forums such as *Post Apocalypse*, dismiss *Grotesque* by emphasising its low cultural status as 'torture porn'. Often this is done to dignify other Asian horror titles, for example, one poster evaluates the Thai horror *Meat Grinder* (Tiwa Moeithaisong, 2009) with the observation 'I'm not that fond of Thai movies ... but this seems to have more going on than in some empty, gratuitous torture porn like GROTESQUE.'³² Whereas 'mainstream' film critics associate some Asian Extreme titles (particularly Miike's films) with 'torture porn' as a way of devaluing their cultural status, fans of Asian horror cinema use the 'torture porn' category differently, as a means of making value distinctions between 'good' horror from that which is 'empty' and 'gratuitous'. This

practice is similar to the one discussed by Mark Jancovich in his study of taste distinctions made by horror fans in relation to teen movies like *Scream*. Jancovich observes that

horror fans privilege as 'real' and 'authentic' those films of violent 'excess' whose circulation is usually restricted (and often secret and/or illegal), and they do so specifically to define their own opposition to, or distinction from, what they define as inauthentic commercial products of mainstream culture. They adopt the stance of a radicalized subculture or underground to distance themselves from, and define themselves as superior to, others who they construct as inferior and threatening, a mindless and conformist horde associated with mass, middlebrow and legitimate culture (Jancovich 2000: 25-26).

In a similar way, those horror fans considering themselves connoisseurs of Asian Extreme cinema often distance themselves from 'mainstream' torture porn films as a means of constructing their taste and appreciation for the genre as superior to such inauthentic and commercial titles.

Klein argues that the 'torture porn' cycle perfectly illustrates the way in which films cycles are created 'to fit the contours of audience desires' but then easily succumb to a backlash when the market becomes flooded with a range of similar, second-rate products. She concludes 'audiences may fall in love with cycles quickly, but if those same audiences lose interest in a particular cycle, they may become annoyed or frustrated if it continues to be produced for too long' (Klein 2011: 14). In this respect, the lifespan of the 'torture porn' cycle is quite straightforward in a way that the Asian Extreme category is not. Despite its success, or perhaps because of it, Tartan Films went into administration in 2008. It was bought by Palisades Media who quickly re-launched as Palisades Tartan in order to capitalise on the brand name. The fifty-eight titles in the 'Extreme Asia' catalogue continue to be marketed by Palisades Tartan under the same banner.³³ Although it has been argued that the bankruptcy of Tartan Films was caused by a dwindling interest in Asian Extreme films within the US market (Macnab: 2008), sources from within the film industry suggest that it was actually a change in personnel that triggered its collapse. When Tartan's long-term buyer left to set up her own distribution label, her replacement started to acquire films of a 'lower quality' that failed to appeal to Tartan's core cult fan base.³⁴ This, coupled with an increasingly lengthy time lapse between the Japanese and British releases, meant fans started to look elsewhere for films, and sales dropped off. However, interest in the category continues to flourish online in the form of new forums and Facebook groups.³⁵ The longevity

and popularity of the Asian Extreme category with its post-cult 'mainstream' fans makes it a complicated case study that distinguishes it from other film cycles.

This brief diachronic overview of the Asian Extreme category identifies the fluctuating contexts in which it has been used and discarded over a twelve year period, and the ways in which these changing circumstances have facilitated multiple bids for taste distinctions amongst different user groups. Rather than attempt to establish whether or not the Asian Extreme category is an authentic film genre, film cycle or marketing brand, I suggest instead that it is the process of trying to understand the category as a fixed and coherent genre, cycle or brand that produces many of the struggles over the status of the category. The principal issue with Choi and Wada-Marciano's analysis of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' brand, for example, is that they are conceptualising it as a brand, first and foremost, and by extension, as a production cycle; there is very minimal emphasis placed on identifying and analysing the fan cultures and practices that have grown up around the category. This becomes particularly problematic when a hypothetical audience is imagined in direct correlation with critical analysis of the brand/cycle. Rather than consider examples of online fan activity, Choi and Wada-Marciano conceive a 'misguided' and 'ignorant' audience as a means to reinforce their critical stance on Tartan's marketing tactics. What is particularly significant is the way in which the borderline cultural status of the Asian Extreme category acts as a site for performing such a contradictory range of cultural distinctions. Whereas Shin argues that Tartan's marketing tactics were 'mainstream', and thus devalued the subcultural status of the films by attracting non-cult audiences, Choi and Wada-Marciano suggest the promotional strategies promoted the films' 'non-mainstream' qualities, thereby attracting under-informed teenage audiences actively seeking subcultural status. All three academics interpret Tartan's marketing strategies in very different ways, and yet arrive at very similar conclusions about the cultural incompetencies of the audience. This problematic conceptualisation of audiences and fans of the Asian Extreme category has been fortified by discussions centring on the discursive framework of Orientalism.

Distribution and Reception Contexts: Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' Label, Orientalism and the 'Fanboy' Audience

The triumph of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' brand has resulted in a series of academic critiques focused on 'the reductive nature of Tartan's marketing practices' (Shin 2008: 1). Gary Needham interprets the marketing campaign mounted by Tartan as operating along the same lines as the Orientalist discourse identified by Edward Said in his seminal treatise *Orientalism* (1978). Needham accuses Tartan of feeding 'many of the typical fantasies of the 'Orient' characterised by exoticism, mystery and danger' (Needham 2006: 9). He argues that the popularity of Japanese horror films in the West reflects an on-going interest in the 'otherness' of Asian culture. This criticism of Tartan is further echoed by Steven Rawle in his article comparing the films of Miike Takashi and Kim Ki-Duk. Rawle dismisses Asia Extreme as a 'mainstream' category with limitations and argues that films produced by these two directors should be considered outside of and separate from the 'Asia Extreme discourse' (Rawle 2009: 167). He concludes his analysis of the discourses surrounding identity and masculinity explored by Miike and Kim with the following critique of the 'Asia Extreme' label:

The Asia Extreme tag diminishes and confuses these nationally located discourses of masculinity and identity, instead portraying the Otherness of an Asian cinema that seems exotic: unconcerned with western norms of representation, filled with violence, sex, perversion and gore, and, ultimately, lacking in subtlety (Rawle 2009: 182).

Daniel Martin's PhD provides perhaps the most detailed study of the British reception of films released on Tartan's *Asia Extreme* label between 2000 and 2005. The study primarily focuses on the critical response to six films: *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1999), *Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1999), *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000), *A Snake of June* (Shinya Tsukamoto, 2003), *The Isle* (Kim Ki-duk, 2000) and *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003). Additionally, there are chapters that specifically examine the marketing and reception of the 2003 *Asia Extreme* Roadshow and the ways in which Tartan marketed the films of Kim Ki-duk. In his introduction Martin explains that the purpose of his research is to identify the 'debates, assumptions and prejudices that inform the British critical reception of 'cult' cinema from the Far East' (Martin 2009b: 6). The thesis asks three specific questions: how and why the films became so visible in the UK, and how are they understood (Martin 2009b: 12), but does not set out to answer this question using audience research. Instead, the primary objects of analysis are Tartan's promotional materials and the reviews of the films in the

British press.³⁶ Despite the assertion that his research is not interested in audience responses, Martin nonetheless makes several claims about the audiences for these films.

Martin's discussion about Western audiences of Asian cinema is contextualised with a brief summary of the literature surrounding the Western reception of films from Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea and is, more importantly, attributed to other unnamed experts. For example, he discusses Korean cinema and genre classification as follows:

Without knowledge of the domestic context of these films, international audiences are apt to draw conclusions and make generalisations based on what they see. This is one of the most significant, and for many, troubling consequences of Korean cinema's prominence in the *Asia Extreme* brand. Almost all of the Korean films released in cinemas or on DVD in the UK in the last decade have been through Tartan's Asia Extreme brand and have, therefore, been a certain kind of Korean film – violent, sexual, provocative. With many critics assuming that Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk are representative of Korea's domestic commercial industry, experts increasingly feel that these films are being misunderstood by ignorant viewers and celebrated only for their difference' (Martin 2009b: 18-19).

As no critics or academics are clearly referenced in this section of the literature review, it can only be deduced that when Martin is referring to anonymous experts he is, in fact, outlining his own position towards Tartan.³⁷ Martin also claims twice in the Introduction to his thesis that Tartan 'shaped' the way critics and audiences understood these films, and revisits these assertions several times throughout the thesis (Martin 2009b: 6,11). However, in his discussion of the impact that the release of *Audition* in 2002 had on Tartan's marketing strategy, he also documents the way in which the initial reviews for the film, when it was screened at Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2000, shaped the way that Tartan marketed the film, and concludes:

More significant than the international legacy of Miike, however, is the importance of the release of *Audition* for the invention of Tartan's British-based *Asia Extreme* brand. Paul Smith, Tartan's head of Marketing and PR, has admitted that the notion of *Asia Extreme* was inspired, in part, by critical reactions to this film. He suggests that it was when critics started making connections between this film and others released later that the idea to group them under a single banner was born; therefore, there's no doubt that the subsequently-released *Battle Royale* was more significant to the invention of the brand than *Audition*' (Martin 2009b: 103-4).

Here it seems clear that, initially, it was the distribution company who were influenced by the critical reception of the film, rather than Tartan's marketing materials shaping the way that Asian Extreme films were received by the critics. This research finding suggests that, in

his overarching argument, Martin is overstating Tartan's role in developing the 'Asia Extreme' brand. This claim is also one of many examples throughout the thesis where Martin refers to 'audiences and critics', when in fact he is simply discussing the response of film critics (Martin 2009b: 63, 73, 104, 250). In summary, the thesis provides a detailed exploration of Tartan's marketing strategies, and the attendant hierarchies of taste operating within the British press during this period, but falls short of accounting for the development and popularity of Asian Extreme cinema in the UK with its fans and wider audiences.

Oliver Dew provides a more detailed insight into the success of the Asia Extreme label in the UK. His research is grounded in statistical research into UK box office data, interviews with personnel working for Tartan and other distribution companies and analyses of reviews appearing in the UK media (Dew 2007). Dew identifies, through his analysis of the promotional material produced by Tartan during this period, the ways in which discourses surrounding cult film culture, auteurship, anti-censorship and Orientalism were all employed to target and maintain particular kinds of audiences. He suggests that the success of Asia Extreme can be partly explained by the way Tartan targeted a triangle of cult 'fanboy' viewers, art-house patrons and mainstream genre fans. Dew's analysis of the distributors' press releases, packaging and advertising for *Battle Royale* reveals how Tartan exploited their awareness of the cultural competences and repertoires of each audience segment. The cult fan-boy audience was reached by promoting the *yakuza* heritage of the film and references to Beat Takeshi's performance in specialist magazines such as *Bizarre* and *Asian Cult Cinema*; the art-house audience segment was targeted by focusing on the auteurship of Fukasaku Kinja and references to the film's status as a literary adaptation in adverts placed in *Sight & Sound*; and mainstream genre fans were more pursued using established marketing tactics, for example, by highlighting the spectacle of the film as an event movie that will 'shock, grab and disturb' (Dew 2007: 59). Dew concludes that Tartan's marketing strategy led to a blurring of cultural and subcultural capital, which partly accounts for the Hollywood trend for re-making J-Horror titles.

In different ways, then, Needham, Rawle and Martin all highlight what they perceive to be the presence of an Orientalist discourse in either Tartan's marketing strategy or the reviews of Tartan releases by Western film critics. As a key theoretical framework employed

by film academics in their discussion of the 'Asia Extreme' brand, Orientalism therefore merits further discussion. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Orientalism was a relatively neutral term used to describe Western scholarship and arts related to the East. However, following the 1978 publication of Said's ground-breaking book, 'Orientalism' has become intrinsically linked to the unequal power relations between Western civilisation and the Middle East, the 'eradication distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (Said 1978: 42). In the context of the specific discourse surrounding Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' label, Gary Needham argues that 'Orientalism involves the exercise of power operating through a body of knowledge (everyday, common sense and academic) that results in the legitimacy of 'the West' to govern, speak for and to shape the meaning of the "Orient"' (Needham 2006: 8). Similarly, Daniel Martin opens his discussion of Orientalism with the following quote from Said:

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said in Martin 2009: 19).

Both Needham and Martin rightly pinpoint Said's understanding of Orientalism to be characterised by an authoritative, imperialist ideology. However, neither academic pauses to consider the implications of this particular interpretation of Orientalism as an inherently imperialist discourse; in fact, Said's *Orientalism* is one of several historical perspectives and understandings of this discourse. Acknowledging that it would be foolish to attempt 'an encyclopaedic narrative history of Orientalism' (Said 1978: 16), *Orientalism* sets out to consider the specific case of Anglo-French-American relations with 'the Arabs and Islam,' (Said 1978: 17) from the late seventeenth century until the fall of these three empires in the twentieth century. The study concludes with a brief sketch of Orientalism in 1970s American culture. The particular focus and scope of Said's study is made explicit in the introduction to *Orientalism*, in which he defines his approach to the subject matter as follows:

Therefore, I study Orientalism as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires – British, French, American – in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced.

The kind of political questions raised by Orientalism, then, are as follows: What sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography,

history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world? (Said 1978: 14-15).

It is clear, then, that this is a political study of colonial Orientalism, with its own geographical and historical limitations which has, in turn, produced a specifically anti-imperialist discourse.

The issues arising from Said's colonial treatise on Orientalism provide the framework for Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer's anthology *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (1991). While not disregarding the significance of Said's imperialist construction of Orientalism, Breckenridge and van der Veer acknowledge that 'part of the difficulty of the "colonial discourse" mode of entry into the politics of "otherness" is that it locates the otherness of the other wholly (and even solely) in the colonial movement, thus eliding the question of pre- or noncolonial differences of consequence' (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1991: 10).

The anthology goes on to explore the diverse range of ways in which Orientalist discourses continue to operate in India and South Asia in the late twentieth century. Writing in the same volume, Rosane Rocher further critiques Said for creating 'a single discourse, undifferentiated in space and time and across political, social and intellectual identities' (Rocher 2003: 215). A more pointed critique of Said is provided by J. J. Clarke in *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), which sets out to explore Orientalism from a very different perspective. Clarke begins by affirming that the exchange between Asian and Western cultures has existed for over 3000 years, and in that time has taken many forms. Whereas Said's *Orientalism* is preoccupied with the Islamic culture of the Middle East, Clarke chooses instead to consider the influence of the philosophical and religious traditions of South East Asia. He explains the difference between his approach to understanding the encounter between Asian and Western thought and the one adopted by Said in the following way:

Where Said painted orientalism in sombre hues, using it as the basis for a powerful ideological critique of Western liberalism, I shall use it to uncover a wider range of attitudes, both dark and light, and to recover a richer and often more affirmative orientalism, seeking to show that the West has endeavoured to integrate Eastern thought into its own intellectual concerns in a manner which, on the face of it, cannot be fully understood in terms of 'power' and 'domination' (Clarke 1997: 9)

In his endeavour to 'avoid seeing [Orientalism] as simply a mask of racism or as a purely Western construct which serves as a rationalisation of colonial domination' (Clarke 1997: 8-9), Clarke's study sets out to explore the way in which the philosophical traditions of South East Asia have been adopted in the West as 'a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organised one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power' (Clarke 1997: 9). In particular, he examines the ways in which Buddhist and Taoist philosophies that seek to transcend the boundaries of 'self' and 'other' have become increasingly popular in Western countries from the late nineteenth century onwards, and often appeal to those seeking a post-colonial reappraisal of the cultural relationship between East and West. In sum, the study of Orientalism in a contemporary context has produced a complex set of discourses, both critical and celebratory, that explore the interaction between a wide range of cultural activities (political, religious, literary, popular) in Asian, European and American environments.

While Rawle, Martin and Needham argue that the 'Asia Extreme' label elides the differences between films produced in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, their invocation of the Orientalist charge ironically overlooks the complexities and differences inherent within this wide-reaching discourse. All three academics, in different ways, bypass the range of academic work undertaken on Orientalism, and instead choose to adopt Said's 1978 treatise on the subject as the definitive one. Whereas Clarke seeks to avoid interpreting the Orientalist discourse as simply a 'mask for racism', Needham's understanding of Orientalism invariably acts as shorthand for the features that are often associated with racist ideologies, such as 'fantasies, gross misrepresentations and stereotypes' (Needham 2006: 8). The undertones of racial discrimination implied by Needham's interpretation of Orientalist discourses present in Tartan's marketing materials then translate into a negative configuration of the audience for these films on the part of fellow academics, as outlined above.

Similarly, in his analysis of the critical reception of *Audition*, Daniel Martin's discussion reveals the way in which he associates Orientalism with uninformed 'racist' stereotypes found in reviews of Asian Extreme films. For example, in Alexander Walker's review of *Audition* for the *Evening Standard*, he comments that Japanese cinema has long

had a 'fixation' with physical pain. Martin then notes that 'the associations of the Japanese with sadism are common to Orientalist views of the country, and fit with a stereotype that has existed in the West at least since the Second World War' (Martin 2009b: 92). Later in the same chapter, Martin clearly differentiates between expert critics, such as Tony Rayns writing for *Sight and Sound*, who reviews *Audition* in the context of Takashi Miike's other films, and 'non-expert British film critics, whose articles and reviews perpetuated various Orientalist stereotypes of Japan' (Martin 2009b: 97). While it might be fair to argue that Tony Rayns provides a more sophisticated and knowledgeable review of *Audition* than Walker, it is notable that Martin doesn't attempt to consider this review to constitute an alternative aspect of the Orientalist discourse; like Needham, Martin is reconfiguring Orientalism to align it with the use of racial stereotypes.

In her 2007 study of the anime-fan community, Susan J. Napier discusses her experience of teaching a seminar on Said's *Orientalism* at the University of Texas. Although she addresses a different form of Japanese media to the Asian Extreme category, her observations are nonetheless pertinent to the debates surrounding the use of Orientalist discourses in an academic setting. Napier recalls:

Although I was careful to have the students read critiques of, and responses to, Orientalism by a variety of scholars, it was the power and, in certain ways, the simplicity of Said's theory that tended to stick in the students' minds. The paradigm of dominance and submission made the subsequent analyses of our texts seductively easy – perhaps too easy (Napier 2007: 10).

In drawing attention to the way Said's treatise is often reduced to a simple power binary, Napier highlights the issues this can raise when employing this framework for the purpose of analysing media texts. Whilst acknowledging that historical relations between the US and Japan have, in the past, produced grotesque and hateful racist stereotypes, Napier argues the case for a more complex, heterogeneous and multivalent re-thinking of the ways in which Japan figures in the desires, fantasies and dreams of the Western mind. Drawing on the work of J.J. Clarke, Napier shifts the emphasis in understanding the West's fascination with Japan (and East Asia) to notions of pleasure and play, while still acknowledging the subcultural value that many East Asian media texts hold for Western fans.

Oliver Dew also links the Orientalist discourse to the acquisition of subcultural capital in his analysis of the discourses used to define the audience profiles for both cult and art-

house consumers. He argues that while both audiences share a similar taste for marginal films that require subcultural capital in order to be appreciated, the taste formation of the cult fanboys is significantly different. For them, it is not enough that the film be alternative in terms of its language or other cultural content; it must also be situated within a marginal and critically disreputable genre, and employ sexual or violent excess in its transgression of 'mainstream' aesthetic standards. Dew compares the popularity of Asian Extreme cinema with British audiences in the early twenty-first century with that of European cinema with North American audiences in the 1960s. He interprets the way Asia Extreme marketing materials target the potential fan-boy audience in a very specific way:

Most obviously, the extreme nature of the film texts is emphasised in order to authenticate them as 'outlaw' vis-a-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 (Dew 2007: 60).

In this way, Dew's assessment of the appeal of Asian Extreme cinema seems more akin to Clarke's understanding of Orientalism; these films, he suggests, are appreciated in a subversive, counter-cultural way rather than for the way they exoticize East Asian people and culture.

Another alternative overview of the different and overlapping conceptions of Asian extreme cinema fans has been provided by Leon Hunt (2009: 224). Hunt draws a parallel between Sheng-mei Ma's analysis of Western Asiaphiles' desire to absorb, or blend into, an Asian identity which is 'other', and Quentin Tarantino's appropriation of Asian film genres in his work. This approach interprets the attraction to 'other' more as a means of exploring personal identity, particularly that of the cult film fan. Similarly, Matt Hills suggests that the fan activity of 'reading-for-cultural-difference' has functioned to establish shared, transnational fears rather than emphasise the cultural 'otherness' that Needham claims Tartan have exploited. Hills suggests that 'there is a cultural homology operating here between Japanese and western fears of technologised society, such that cultural differences may become less significant than shared, transnational anxieties over media distortions and corruptions of 'the real' (Hills 2005: 167). Whereas Dew's claims about audiences for Asian Extreme focus on the way the films are valued for their subcultural 'outlaw' status, Hunt and Hills present a more complex picture that suggest fans of the genre experience varying

levels of identification with the characters in the film, and do not necessarily perceive them as an Oriental 'other'.

Rawle picks up on Dew's analysis of Tartan's marketing techniques and argues that the 'promotion and reception' of Miike's films in the West operates along the same 'discursively constructed lines' (Rawle 2009: 170). It is significant here, in terms of a consideration of the 'figure of the audience' for Asian Extreme cinema, that both Dew and Rawle imagine that the figure of the art-house viewer will respond to the extreme content within these films in a 'discursively constructed' manner. Dew argues that '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' (Dew 2007: 66). Although Dew has skilfully identified the way in which the marketing campaign for 'Asia Extreme' targeted a range of different audiences, here he is taking this a step further in assuming that each specific segment of the audience, in this case the art house sector, will decode the text using the framework of the materials provided by the distribution company. Both Dew and Rawle, therefore, interpret the marketing campaign mounted by Tartan as a 'coding' process that leads to 'textually determined' effects on the audience (Dew 2007: 66; Rawle 2009: 172). Neither academic appears to entertain the possibility that either the fans or the 'mainstream' audiences of Asian Extreme cinema might negotiate their own reading of either the marketing material or the actual films themselves.

Discourses surrounding Orientalism and fanboy culture characterise the reception of Asian Extreme films in the UK and form the dominant mode in which the audiences for this category are represented. While analysis of Tartan's marketing techniques that draw on Said tend to position the audience as 'ignorant' (Martin: 18-19), claims made about the fanboy audience profile are far more substantial and detailed. These claims originate, in part, with information provided by employees at Tartan. Dew references an interview with Matt Hamilton, an employee at Tartan Video in 2005, who claims that 'people buying our product are generally the early-adopters, male, 18-30 year old consumers' (Hamilton in Dew: 2007: 61). Another key source for claims surrounding the 'fanboy' audience for Asian Extreme films can be found amongst film reviewers. Most notable of these is Tony Rayns, a critic who often writes film reviews for *Sight and Sound* magazine, and who makes a particular point of

referring to the films of Park Chan-wook as 'fanboy titles' (Rayns 2006: 16). In a 2005 article for *Sight and Sound* Rayns explains his views on the audience for Park's films in further detail:

Park has clearly figured out that archetypes play better in foreign markets than cultural specifics. He has also opted to aim at the overgrown 'lad' audience which gets off on his hyperbolic violence (from the protagonist's attempt to chew a live squid in *Old Boy* to the severing of a woman pianist's fingers in 'Cut') and doesn't much mind the absence of credible psychology or, for instance, the flip treatment of incest in *Old Boy*. His occasional gestures towards cultural sophistication, such as playing Vivaldi over a fight scene, fly right over his audience's heads. (Rayns 2005: 84).

Here Rayns elaborates on his conception of the 'fanboy', firstly by suggesting they are excited or aroused by watching scenes of excessive violence and, secondly, by claiming that they lack cultural sophistication. In an interview with Dew conducted in the same year, Rayns confirms these claims about the 'fanboy' audience by stating that they 'take anything as long as it delivers enough thrills or gore or whatever it's supposed to have to keep them satisfied', and adds 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 in Dew 2007: 57).

Although Dew does not question the validity of Rayns' claims, he provides a slightly different profile of the 'fanboy' audience:

The cult fan-boy is often described by the media as an 'early adopter'; this means that another way in which they can accrue sub-cultural capital within the fraternity 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' (Dew 2007: 61)

Dew goes on to make a convincing argument that the success of the Tartan 'Asia Extreme' label lies in the way it targets both the cult 'fanboy' audience and the 'art house' crowd using marketing materials; however, the assumption that 'fanboys' *are* a primary audience for these films is never questioned. Similarly, in her analysis of branding techniques employed by Tartan, Chi-Yun Shin summarises the history of the brand with a very similar claim: 'Starting off as a cult phenomenon, targeting the cult 'fanboys' but soon incorporating the art-house audiences (or world cinema patrons) to its niche, the Tartan

Asia Extreme label has established itself as an immediately recognisable label' (Shin 2009: 86).

Other academics have also referenced the opinions of Tony Rayns without exploring the validity of his claims. For example, in their introduction to *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film* (2008), Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai reference Rayns' 2005 article in *Sight and Sound* by describing him as a 'British critic and Asian cinema expert' (Hunt and Wing-Fai 2008:4) and use his profile of the audience for *Oldboy* as a shorthand for summarising the typical audience for Asian Extreme films. A clear indication of how ubiquitous and broadly accepted claims surrounding the 'fanboy' audience for Asian Extreme films have become in academic circles is evident in the way they are referenced by some UK university departments. Most notably, the description for an MA module titled 'Japanese Transnational Cinema: From Kurosawa to Asia Extreme and Studio Ghibli' (taught at SOAS, London) includes the following statement: 'On a broader level, [the course] is also concerned with the appropriation of the Japanese aesthetic by international audiences through, for example, the nurturing of a nascent fan-(boy) cult following around the Tartan Video Asia Extreme 'imprint'' (SOAS website, accessed February 2012). Although the word 'boy' is bracketed, the implication in this statement remains fairly unequivocal: that Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' label attracts a 'fanboy' cult following.

This series of claims made about the 'fanboy' audiences for Asian Extreme films can therefore be summarised as follows:

- They are male, aged approximately 18-30
- They are excited and aroused by gore and 'titillating' violence
- They cannot appreciate art house / highbrow culture
- They are 'early adopters' (likely to see films before the 'mainstream Other')
- They invest in their interest (collecting DVDs and ancillary materials)

This specific conception of the 'fanboy' audience for the Asian Extreme category is, once again, constructed in direct relation to the Tartan brand. As with the arguments developed by Rawle, Martin and Choi and Wada-Marciano outlined above, the construction of an ignorant, culturally deficient 'fanboy' rests on the idea that their responses to the films develop within a closed, discursive context. These claims about audiences and fans are produced in dependence on analysis of 'Asia Extreme' as a brand; in contrast, Hunt, Hills and Napier all draw on studies of audience and fan behaviour to produce a more nuanced understanding of the complexities apparent in the relations between Western fans and East Asian media. Whilst this study will clearly draw on empirical findings to develop a more sophisticated understanding of audiences for this category of films, it is important to acknowledge the problematic caricatures of fans that circulate around the Asian Extreme category in order to gauge the influence they exert on the ways in which fans negotiate their own identities.

Discourses of Extremity in Contemporary British Culture

In order to develop a thorough understanding of audiences of Asian Extreme films it is necessary to outline some of the current debates surrounding 'extreme' cinema, alongside the wider discourses surrounding 'extreme' culture that have emerged over the last fifteen years. Whilst it is not possible to provide an exhaustive examination of these debates, I identify here some of the key discursive sites in which it has recently been employed; through this study I argue that there has been a significant shift in what this term has come to represent, within a British context. These discursive frameworks are considered in four separate cultural contexts. Firstly, there is a brief outline of some of the wider social and legal contexts in which the word has most frequently been adopted over the last decade. Secondly, the findings of a small-scale reception study are presented; these examines the ways in which the relatively new term 'extreme content' has been used in the British press over the last twenty years. Thirdly, there is an overview of the way in which the categories 'extreme' and 'extreme cinema' are used in relation to popular film culture on 'mainstream' websites and Internet fan forums. Finally, I specifically consider the ways in which the term is now being employed by the BBFC. All of these contexts contribute towards establishing a broad understanding of how the word 'extreme' functions in a contemporary British context. This, in turn, provides a broader discursive framework in which to consider the

ways in which the category of Asian Extreme cinema has been defined, understood, enjoyed and contested over the last twelve years.

Whereas 'extreme' was once an adjective used in both positive and negative contexts within the English language, it has more recently become a common expression for labelling physical activities (sports, diets, body piercing) that are considered to be in some way dangerous. In these contexts, as with references to the new film genre of 'extreme cinema', the word has started to function less like an adjective, and more like a noun that refers to a particular category. Although the range of cultural spheres that have appropriated the word in this way is relatively broad, the inference in all of these cases is similar: these are contested categories of human activity that produce varying degrees of social anxiety. A second factor that complicates the use of the word 'extreme' has been its specific designation within the British legal system. In this context, the word 'extreme' is now most frequently used in reference to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) which made it an offence to be in the possession of 'extreme' pornography. The Act provides a definition of an 'extreme' pornographic image, which involves a list of specific acts that are considered too extreme to be depicted.³⁸ Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith express a number of concerns about these developments in their discussion of the 'Dangerous Pictures Act' (2010).³⁹ They document the way in which the emergence of new media technologies, in particular distribution networks facilitated by the Internet, has led to an intensification of fears over the circulation of extreme images that 'foreground the physicality of the body, problematize issues of control and consent, and emphasize extreme states of being' (Attwood and Smith 2010: 181). These broad cultural developments have meant that the use of the term 'extreme' has become increasingly loaded with illegitimate connotations in the context of contemporary British culture.

A more specific use of the word 'extreme' has developed in relation to media cultures. Here, 'extreme content' has emerged as a term with which to label various media forms that are deemed to be marginal or specialist in relation to 'mainstream' culture. For example, it is gradually becoming standard for any controversial film distributed in the UK to carry an 'extreme content' warning.⁴⁰ A survey of British newspapers published since 1980 suggests that the term 'extreme content' was only used very rarely in the UK before 2002, and that it is still not commonplace. Of the thirty-seven newspaper articles found that

made specific use of the term in relation to different forms of media, only two were published before 2002.⁴¹ This development is particularly interesting because, in this context, ‘extreme content’ is not a clearly defined legal term, but is being used in reference to a wide range of media forms, such as the Internet, films, computer games and pornographic materials (see Appendix 1), although clearly there is an element of overlap between some of these categories. Furthermore, ‘extreme content’ is an emergent term, not widely adopted and yet already broadly recognised, that is bound up in an on-going process of cultural negotiation and is both provisional and productive in its use by the media industries and cultural commentators.

Year	1995	1996	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
No.	1	1	5	1	4	1	1	2	7	4	2	8

Fig. 1: Number of British newspaper articles referring to media containing ‘extreme content’ (years in which no references were found have been omitted).

Although a number of other terms such as ‘obscene material’ and ‘explicit content’ have previously served a similar cultural purpose, in alerting audiences to the nature of a film (or other form of media), this small survey raises the question as to why the term ‘extreme content’ has been introduced and used with increased frequency over the last seventeen years in the UK. This can be partly understood by considering the contexts in which the term has been appropriated.

One of the key findings of this small-scale survey is that it indicates a link between fears surrounding access to Internet sites and the introduction of the term ‘extreme content’ (see Appendix 1). In several cases the Internet sites that have raised concerns are identified as being pornographic in nature; however, in some of these articles published between 2002 and 2010, the social fears surrounding the Internet remain unidentified. For example, in an article titled ‘IT safety tips for parents’, a man involved in providing a ‘community service’ in Torquay explains the rationale behind the course he is running, aimed at alerting parents to the dangers of the Internet, in the following way: ‘Parents should not assume that their children are safe when connected to the internet. “Unless the correct steps are taken, a youngster can easily stumble across less desirable, or even

extreme content, which can prove upsetting or damaging' (Platt 2002). This article, and others like it, imply a general suspicion developed in the early noughties surrounding the introduction of the Internet and the possible dangers it might produce; in this context, then, the employment of the word 'extreme' provides a conveniently abstract term that facilitates a wider range of possible meanings to be inferred, unlike the other more specific terms previously used, such as 'obscene' and 'explicit'. In relation to the unidentified fears surrounding the use of the Internet, then, the introduction of the term 'extreme content' serves a useful, catch-all purpose that can point to a range of unspecified social fears.

The survey also indicates that films are one of the most common forms of media to be identified as containing extreme content (see Fig. 2). Pornography features so frequently as a category that, for the purpose of this chart, it has been separated out from the other films mentioned. Although many of the other films discussed in the articles may include pornographic or erotic elements, they are treated differently because of their perceived purpose. This different treatment is most clearly established by the fact that pornographic titles are very rarely referenced; they form an amorphous, undifferentiated mass that are ring-fenced off from other film genres. However, the relationship between pornography and the other films referenced is significant. By using a label, 'extreme content', that is closely associated with pornography, a connection is being made between these other films and the 'low culture' category of porn. The range of other films referenced in the articles includes horror films, such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), cult films such as *Citizen Toxie: Toxic Avenger Part IV* (Lloyd Kaufman, 2000) and *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* (Lee Demarbre, 2001), European art house films including *The Pillow Book* (Peter Greenaway, 1996), *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) and the films of Catherine Breillat and Gasper Noe, and, surprisingly, 'mainstream' films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998). Asian cinema is only referenced once, in a short review of the Korean film *The Isle* (Kim Ki-duk, 2004). The range of material referenced in this survey suggests, then, that the precise nature of 'extreme content' is very difficult to define. The elastic character of the term therefore implies that there is no one particular type of film that is extreme, and that it is the context in which the term is used, and the purpose to which it is put, that makes it significant as a cultural development.

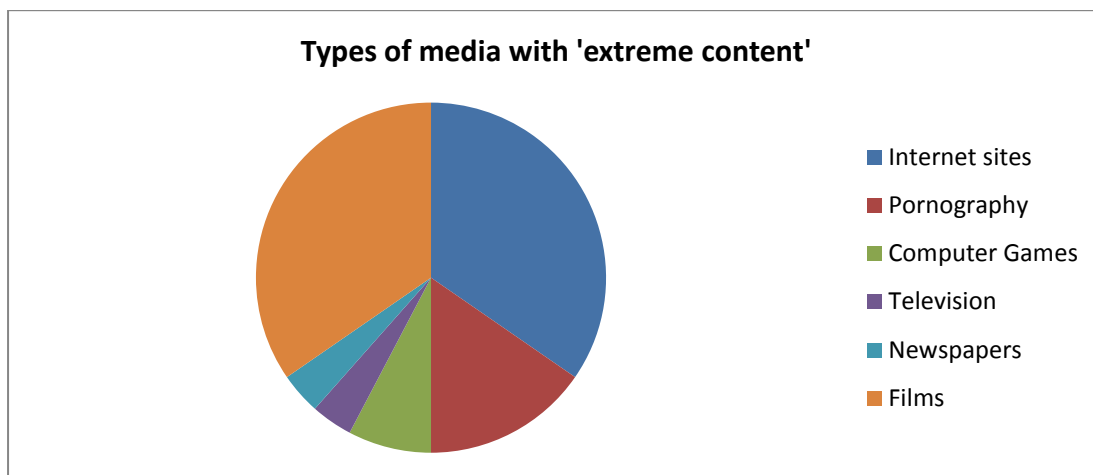


Figure 2: Types of media associated with 'extreme content'

In the context of discourses circulating within academic film culture, 'extreme' cinema, or the 'new extremism', is most frequently positioned as a high culture category. In their discussion of the 'new extremism' in contemporary European filmmaking, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall refer to the category as a 'group of art-house films' (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 1) whilst also acknowledging that they do not see this 'new extremism' as a genre or film movement; conversely, they argue that these films 'often deconstruct a range of generic tropes rather than constituting one collectively (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 5). However, in the broader context of popular film culture on the Internet, the term 'extreme' has a slightly different set of associations. According to an anonymous contributor to Wikipedia, 'extreme cinema is a term typically used to refer to films containing violence, gore and sex of an extreme nature.'⁴² The on-line encyclopaedia lists four Asian directors (Miike Takashi, Park Chan-wook, Tsukamoto Shinya and Kim Ki-duk) as examples of film makers associated with 'extreme' cinema, all of whom are Asian. In this popular filmic context, then, extreme cinema and Asian Extreme appear to be overlapping categories. The association of 'extreme' images with pornography is not as clearly established within the sphere of popular film culture as it is elsewhere. However, the description of an internet thread created for the discussion of Asian Extreme films on *Snowblood Apple*, a UK-based fan forum, suggests there is an awareness that the two are often associated with each other: 'Discussion of Asian movies which have extreme content, ie, violence, sex (not porn), gore, horror and general weirdness.' This echoes the Wikipedia definition, but specifically clarifies that their definition of extreme horror does not include pornography, and extends the description to

include 'general weirdness.' Furthermore, within the *Snowblood* forum a discussion surrounding the meaning of the term 'extreme' posted on the message boards raises other significant factors such as its relationship with (and difference from) mainstream horror films, and the context in which the film is distributed or exhibited as being significant criteria in either confirming or undermining the 'extreme' status of a film (Ambersandparade: 2009).

A further layer of complexity around the use of the word 'extreme' comes from within the sphere of film regulation. The BBFC, in common with the British press, quite often use the term 'extreme' to indicate unacceptable or questionable content, without specifying the nature of the issue involved. For example, the Japanese 'torture porn' film *Grotesque* was described in the 2009 Annual Report as 'an extreme and challenging work' (BBFC 2010: 12). Here, the word 'extreme' is being used as a label for a film that has been deemed unacceptable for British audiences and is now illegal to distribute. However, there are also more specific contexts in which the BBFC have started to use the term 'extreme', one being in relation to extreme pornography. During consultations between the BBFC and the Home Office over the proposals for the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (which were initiated in 2005), the Board raised several key concerns. One of these was the problem they encountered in making a distinction between pornographic and non-pornographic 'extreme' images. The criterion eventually adopted by the BBFC for determining whether an image or sequence is 'extreme' is very different to the one eventually adopted by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act; it hinges primarily on the overall intention of the film, which is partly determined by its tone. For this reason the scope of the BBFC's policies on extreme pornography extend beyond the specific list of acts identified by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act and reflect the historical stance taken by the Board towards representations of sexual violence.

Other uses made by the BBFC of the word 'extreme' are in reference to either 'extreme violence', 'extreme sexual imagery' or 'extreme sexual violence' in non-pornographic films. One specific category identified by the BBFC that can be clearly differentiated from that of pornography is that of 'extreme reality' which they feel 'has many of the characteristics of extreme pornography but which does not appear to have been produced for the purpose of sexual arousal.' The similarities referred to here are

representations of physical and psychological humiliation and, in some cases, scenes of violent torture and execution. It is worthwhile noting that the first use made by the BBFC of the term 'extreme reality' was in a press release issued on May 18th, 2006, entitled 'BBFC President calls for forum to consider new media regulation' (BBFC 2006c). In this press release, David Cooke argues the case for the BBFC to regulate the Internet:

We are putting a good deal of effort into researching, and speaking to others about, the implications of the growth of new media for our system of regulation. We do not argue for regulation except where it is genuinely needed. But effective regulation has clear benefits: the prevention of harm; enabling informed choices; creating a safe environment within which to enjoy creative content. We regularly see and deal with material, whether so-called 'extreme reality', abusive pornography, or simply content which is unsuitable for the age group to whom it is addressed, where our intervention is clearly necessary (BBFC 2006c).

It is significant, then, that the first reference the BBFC makes to 'extreme reality' films (a new category of films that shares many characteristics of extreme pornography) is made in the context of a public call for tighter regulation of the Internet. This echoes the connection already established, in the survey of British newspapers, between the introduction of the term 'extreme content' and the rise of social fears surrounding access to the Internet in the UK. There is, therefore, an implication being made by both the BBFC and the British press that the Internet is somehow responsible for blurring the boundaries between pornographic and non-pornographic material. The use of the elastic term 'extreme' in this context appears to function as a de-stabilising force that upsets traditional cultural boundaries between pornographic and non-pornographic materials, and creates a genre, or category, that reflects growing social fears surrounding Internet access. All of these specific contexts for using the word 'extreme' make it both a slippery and controversial term. While the term 'extreme content' is strongly associated with pornography, it is not synonymous with it. It is, perhaps, the very fact that the word 'extreme' provides an overlap between pornographic and non-pornographic material that makes it so contentious when applied to narrative cinema. This wide range of contexts in which the word 'extreme' is used, and the discourses each context draws on, needs to be born in mind when evaluating the way in which the Asian Extreme category, as it is identified in the West, grew out of the success of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' label.

Conclusions

The two principal critiques levelled at the Tartan label and its marketing practices highlight the key discursive frameworks that have characterised the critical/public reception of the Asian Extreme category in the UK. The first of these critiques focuses on notions of genre authenticity and 'mainstream' taste; the challenges made by academics and critics to Asian Extreme's potential status as a coherent film genre reveal conflicting bids for cultural distinction. I argue that these academic critiques work to create, and then to contest, Asian Extreme cinema as a discrete and coherent film genre, film cycle or marketing brand, rather than approaching it as a discursive construct that is put to different social and cultural uses. Additionally, the unstable cult/mainstream territory which the Asian Extreme category occupies, as a result of both its wide-ranging catalogue of films *and* controversial marketing strategies, makes it a strategic site for negotiating and disputing cultural competencies that centre on genre authenticity. The second set of critiques focuses on the specific issue of Orientalism and cross-cultural translation, and is more attentive to configurations of the audience. Reducing Said's treatise to a simplistic paradigm of domination and submission, these critiques construct a caricature of fan responses which fail to acknowledge the complexity and contradictions inherent in fan responses to the Asian Extreme category.

The range of claims made regarding the audiences and fans of the Asian Extreme category make it a compelling case study for audience research. These claims include the BBFC's construction of the deviant male viewer; the concept of the 'discursively constructed' fan proposed by Dew and Rawle; the culturally 'ignorant' audience (Martin 2009a: 18-19); and the figure of the fanboy (Rayns). Most of these claims rest on critical analyses of Tartan's marketing materials. The problematic inference that these marketing materials produce ignorant audience responses from those who encounter the films via the distribution label is flawed for two key reasons. Firstly, these arguments imply that audiences for Asian Extreme films *only* interact with marketing materials produced by the Tartan label. Bearing in mind that other distribution labels market many of the titles, and that fans inevitably draw on their own wide-ranging cultural competencies and personal histories, this logic is therefore faulty. Secondly, this inference fails to acknowledge the alternative reading strategies that many fans may develop towards sensationalist promotional materials. Circulating amongst these claims about the audience are a number of discourses relating to social fear of the Internet, the regulation of extreme materials, the

changing boundaries of cultural taste and debates about the role of spectacle and excess in particular films. Klein argues that due to their limited lifespan, film cycles can reveal 'the contours, fissures, and complicated patterns of the contemporary moment,' and that by revisiting the sites of their release, promotion and reception we can 'understand how and why these films fell to the margins' (2011: 20). Although the Asian Extreme category is not as straightforward as some film cycles, in that it has occupied both the margins and the 'mainstream' of popular film culture, its British critical and public reception is both informed by, and a reflection of, these broader discourses of extremity.

Researching Audiences: A Mixed-Method, Multi-Stage Approach

Introduction

This research project draws on methodological approaches developed in the intersecting fields of audience research and reception studies. Both of these traditions are more broadly located within the tradition of British cultural studies, the origin of which has a particular significance to the fundamental premise of this research project. For this reason, I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the history, purpose and kinds of work conducted in the field of cultural studies; in particular, I examine some of its contested areas, such as the differences between conflicting disciplines that have evolved for investigating audiences, and consider questions that have been raised over the validity of the 'ethnographic approach'. Alongside this, there is an overview of the parallel field of reception studies, outlining its techniques for investigating audiences and some of its key strengths and weaknesses. Although the two intersecting fields of reception and audience research have sometimes been positioned as conflicting disciplines (Staiger 1986: 21), this summary draws on the work of Austin (2002) and Barker et al (2001; 2007; 2008) to explore some of the ways in which the methodologies developed within these two traditions can complement and enhance each other in relation to this research project.

The second section of the chapter provides a brief outline of fan studies and summarises some of the ways in which it offers different methodological approaches to those used in the field of audience studies. The field of fan studies is particularly relevant to this project in that the study sets out to examine the cultures and practices of Asian Extreme fan communities; here the focus is on two particular issues. Firstly, the concept of 'interpretive communities' as a way of understanding strategies used by fan communities for interpreting and enjoying these films, as well as for displaying knowledge and negotiating hierarchical positions. Secondly, the growing output of research examining changes in the cultures and practices of the Web 2.0 generation of fans relates directly to the culture and practices of Asian Extreme fan communities in the UK. The reception study of Internet fan forums already undertaken [see Chapter 1, pp. 44-50] reveals some of the

key ways in which this generation of fans shapes and influences the community as a whole; in particular, fan-driven distribution labels and the status and influence of Internet-based fan critics are of considerable significance to the way that the community's values have developed. Finally, there is a discussion of the main methodological tools used to gather and analyse research data for the project, namely the online quali-quantitative questionnaire, and the individual in-depth interviews. Preceding this is a consideration of the forms of discourse analysis used to investigate and understand the empirical data generated through using these methodological tools; this includes a discussion of the underlying tensions arising from drawing on the theoretical approaches of Foucault and Bourdieu.

The British Cultural Studies Tradition

Although it is always difficult to pinpoint an absolute starting point for any academic tradition, field or school of thought, it is widely agreed that the development of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University in 1964 was the first institution dedicated to the academic study of popular culture in the UK (Moore 1993: 2; Storey 1994: 24; Schröder et al 2003: 39). Key figures contributing to the establishment and early growth of this fledgling field were Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Paddy Whannel and Richard Hoggart. Williams had already laid the foundation for developing a new approach to the study of British culture in his ground-breaking books *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961); these two books together paved the way for the move to establish popular cultural activities as legitimate objects of academic study. In various ways, and to different degrees, the group of academics associated with the CCCS were responding to traditional distinctions that had been made between 'high' and 'low' culture, and to related concerns surrounding the growth of different forms of mass media in the first half of the twentieth century. Within a British context these were principally espoused by the 'culture and civilization' tradition. This movement, inspired by the work of Matthew Arnold and further developed by F.R. Leavis in the early twentieth century, perceived popular culture, and in particular the 'Americanisation' of British culture, as a threatening and sinister force that had the potential to undermine the fabric of British society. In particular, Leavis ascribed harmful 'dark' powers to Hollywood films that were becoming increasingly popular with British cinema-goers at the time, arguing that

they provide now the main form of recreation in the civilised world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid illusion of actual life (Leavis 1933:7).

One significant aspect of Williams' legacy which is of particular relevance to the fundamental premise of this research project is the way in which he challenged these assumptions being made by Leavis and others about the 'effects' of mass media on its audiences. These anxieties, originating in the 1920s and 1930s, questioned the role of the media in relation to politics and the democratic process. By the 1950s, however, these concerns had developed to encompass fears surrounding the extent to which messages and morals communicated via the mass media influenced the thoughts and actions of their recipients - in particular, those of young people. This approach to understanding media audiences has been broadly termed the 'effects tradition' because it invariably asks the question 'what do the media do to people?' As a response to these views and others like it, the CCCS researchers set out to explore cultural forms and activities in new ways. They combined interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on the fields of sociology and anthropology, and paid particular attention to the study of popular culture and various forms of mass media. Williams argued that the potential value of the analysis of any form of culture is linked to the evidence it can yield about a society as a whole; for this reason, he suggested, the more that research into various cultural activities is considered in terms of the social organisation within which they are embedded, the greater significance that research will have (1961: 63). After conducting his own small-scale observations amongst friends, family and acquaintances Williams concluded that 'I don't believe that the ordinary people in fact resemble the normal description of the masses, low and trivial in taste and habit. I put it another way: there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses' (Williams 1989: 11). One way in which this research project is inspired by Williams' seminal work on popular culture, then, is that it sets out to identify and interrogate the assumptions made about audiences of extreme cinema by a range of critics, academics, censors, cultural commentators and audience members themselves.

The 'effects' approach to understanding audiences continues to inform research carried out in the field of American mass communications studies today, and in its

contemporary form it is often favoured by policy makers in the UK, US and elsewhere. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) remains strongly informed by this tradition, and it played a significant role in shaping 2009 guidelines (BBFC 2009a: 4) and research into responses to 'extreme cinema' (BBFC 2012) [see Introduction pp. 4-16]. Furthermore, it is a perspective that continues to manifest itself strongly in the 'mainstream' British press in relation to the Asian Extreme category of films. One of the most common assertions made about these films is that they encourage 'copycat' violence. Most notably, the *Daily Mail* has published a series of articles such as 'Campus gunman's death video was direct copy of award-winning Korean revenge film'⁴³ and "'Violent movies are to blame for knife crime wave,' blasts Sir Richard Attenborough'⁴⁴. Both of these articles link the Virginia Tech Massacre in 2007 to Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* via a number of broad, unsubstantiated claims. *Daily Mail* journalist Liz Thomas, for example, observes that

there have been a string of murders and attacks in recent years by youngsters with an unhealthy obsession with gruesome films. The worst case was last year when U.S. student Cho Seung-Hui massacred 32 students and teachers at the Virginia Tech university before killing himself. Cho was said to have been repeatedly watching the Korean slasher film *Oldboy* (Thomas 2008).

Similar claims have been echoed by the BBFC; for example, when the decision was made to reject the low budget Japanese 'torture porn' film *Grotesque*, they argued that 'the chief pleasure on offer seems to be in the spectacle of sadism (including sexual sadism) for its own sake' (BBFC 2009d) and that 'to issue a certificate to *Grotesque*, even if statutorily confined to adults, would involve risk of harm within the terms of the Video Recordings Act, would be inconsistent with the Board's Guidelines, and would be unacceptable to the public' (BBFC 2009e).⁴⁵ For this reason, I outline below some of the flaws inherent in the highly influential 'effects' approach to understanding audiences; in this way I explain why its methodologies do not offer a workable option for this current investigation into British audiences of Asian Extreme cinema.

The 'effects' tradition takes a positivist approach to investigating audiences. Put simply, it mainly conducts laboratory-style experiments to measure audience reactions to advertisements, television programmes, popular music and other media.⁴⁶ David Gauntlett argues that the 'effects tradition' approach is inherently faulty because it assumes that the research participants will not alter their behaviour or attitudes as a response to being

observed or questioned in these conditions (Gauntlett 1998: 120-8). However, as many other audience researchers point out, this criticism can also be levelled at techniques such as focus groups, interviews and other qualitative research implements favoured within the cultural studies tradition.⁴⁷ Central to all 'effects' research projects is the notion that the viewers are in some way 'innocent', 'vulnerable' or 'corruptible' before their encounter with the media; this, then, is the direct antithesis of ethnographically-inspired media research that understands 'that individuals have been discursively constructed before their encounter with any concrete media text, and that they therefore 'precede' the media' (Schrøder 2009: 342-3). A further criticism of this 'snapshot' approach to understanding audiences is that it is entirely divorced from the everyday reality of the participants' experience, and fails to take into account any other social, cultural or physical influences on them; in fact, it assumes that these factors can be separated out from each other and measured individually (Winston 1986: 9-10; Gauntlett 1998).⁴⁸

More pointed criticism of 'effects' research focuses on the legitimacy of asking the question 'what do the media do to people?'. Ruddock argues that the danger of phrasing a question in this way is that it suggests that the media can stand apart from other 'social institutions, trends and forces' (Ruddock 2001: 39) in the way it shapes and influences the lives of those who engage with it. Barker and Petley extend this argument further, proposing that the concept of 'media violence' is, in itself, fallacious because it is impossible to pinpoint specific instances of 'violence' in different kinds of media without 'asking where, when, and in what context these are used' (Barker and Petley 1997: 2). Petley also suggests that the arguments of the 'effects tradition' are often a mask for a prejudice against the activities of the working classes (Petley 1997: 170-83); he alleges that this disdain frequently manifests itself as the view that the working-classes are more likely to be adversely affected by media messages than the middle-classes. Whatever agenda is ascribed to researchers in the 'effects' tradition, it remains a highly problematic and widely contested approach to understanding media audiences; even the BBFC acknowledge, in their 2001 annual report, as well as more recently in the 2014 guidelines, that 'research on potentially harmful 'media effects' remains inconclusive' (BBFC 2002: 32). Jonathan Freedman examines the inconclusive nature of 'effects' research and takes this argument a step further; he contends that researchers in the 'effects' tradition of research overvalue positive research and grossly

exaggerate the number of such studies, whilst choosing to ignore or lose the inconclusive cases (2002). This project does not, therefore, ask any of the questions common to the 'effects' tradition; instead, it probes the *impact* which the highly visible 'effects' discourse has had on a range of audiences. Furthermore, as an alternative to the 'effects' approach, it seeks to build up a detailed and nuanced portrait of audiences for these films by examining their preferences, enjoyments, viewing habits and personal views on violence and extreme content.

Although Williams and his immediate contemporaries did not explicitly engage in audience research in the way it is recognised today, nevertheless their work facilitated a shift towards the academic examination of people engaging in various popular cultural activities; this offered an alternative to the traditional text-orientated literary approach to understanding media. More significantly, they refused to accept sweeping generalisations about audiences as mass consumers, and questioned those who did. The differences between these two approaches to investigating audiences continue, to greater or lesser degrees, to this day: whereas audience research following the mass communications model is motivated and guided by the search for a 'vulnerable audience' who encounter 'unsuitable materials', research in the cultural studies tradition takes as its starting point the view that all audiences are rooted in complicated but investigable ways in their history and society. This approach constitutes a second way in which Williams' ground-breaking work establishing the value of studying popular forms of culture provides the methodological starting point for this research project.

Audience and Reception Studies

A number of key early examples of audience research emerged out of the work of the CCCS; these established several of the broader objectives that are still pertinent to audience researchers today, as well as drawing attention to a number of problematic issues that have challenged researchers in the cultural studies tradition. Several of these early studies were heavily influenced by Stuart Hall's seminal essay 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (1980).⁴⁹ Hall rejected passive models of the audience and instead proposed that viewers are active 'decoders' of media texts and can respond to them with either 'dominant', 'negotiated' or 'oppositional' readings. His model of the audience is often

referred to as 'active' in that it acknowledges the agency of the audience in developing their own response to a particular media form. An early example of audience research into popular culture that adopted Hall's model was David Morley's influential study of audience responses to the current affairs programme *Nationwide* (1980). Morley showed two editions of the programme to twenty-nine groups of people and recorded the discussions that followed. Although at the time it was ground-breaking in its ethnographic approach to understanding audiences, *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980) has since been critiqued in many ways: for overlooking the immediate physical and domestic context in which the viewing of the programme would usually take place (Moore: 7); for the contrivance of bringing together a group of otherwise unrelated individuals to form a focus group (Schrøder 2009: 342); for facilitating a search for and 'celebration' of resistant responses; and for only providing a 'snapshot' of audience responses (Barker and Mathijs 2008: 9). Abercrombie and Longhurst have further argued the case that, in the intervening years since Morley's research took place, audience participation and involvement in the production of media texts has increased to the point that the power relations implicit in the encoding/decoding model no longer function in the way they did during the 1970s (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1988: 15-18). However, despite these many weaknesses, it remains an important landmark study in the move to replace textual determinism, in which the text was seen as the source of meaning, with an alternative model that acknowledges that it is the interaction between texts and audiences that serves to create meaning.

Other audience research projects that have followed in Morley's footsteps have investigated different issues, such as popular culture and gender (Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Hermes 1995). What many of these studies share is an attempt to understand the specific ways in which audiences enjoy media texts; Janet Staiger observes that one of the key characteristics of the cultural studies approach to audience research is its sustained consideration of the role of pleasure in audience responses (Staiger 2005: 92). Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* is valuable in that it provides one of the earliest studies of an 'interpretive community'. Her research into the reading habits and pleasures of a group of women in a small American town uses a combination of questionnaires and interviews, including those with the local bookseller 'Dot', who runs a newsletter containing book reviews and recommendations. Radway explores the ways in which the relationship

between Dot and the reading group produces shared preferences within their community, for example in terms of what they expect from the novels by way of plot and character. This approach to understanding audiences reflects aspects of the tradition of 'reader reception theory' that already existed within literary studies. Originating in Germany as 'reception theory', this theoretical approach was further developed by the American literary academic Stanley Fish, who sought to understand how individuals respond to texts in patterned ways, rather than in a purely idiosyncratic manner (Fish 1980).⁵⁰ The concept of 'interpretive communities' is of considerable relevance to this research project, and is discussed in further detail in the section on fan studies below.

In her study of viewers of the American soap *Dallas*, Ien Ang turns to Bourdieu's work on taste and social distinction in order to make sense of audience responses. Analysing forty-two letters sent to her by Dutch viewers, Ang engages in a qualitative interpretation of audiences' engagements and identifications with the programme and observes their shared recognition of a 'tragic structure of feeling' (Ang 1985: 79). Joke Hermes also engages in a survey of naturally occurring audiences. She conducts eighty interviews with men and women who read women's magazines. In her analysis of these interviews Hermes develops a useful framework which involves identifying 'repertoires' that readers draw on to make sense of their reading materials; these 'repertoires' are dependent on the cultural capital of an individual reader. In this way Hermes also draws on the series of debates initiated by Bourdieu (1979) that understand audience taste to be guided by distinctions particular to different social classes; Hermes' emphasis, however, is on gender as a defining characteristic. As well as providing a range of useful approaches for understanding audience responses to different media texts, what all of these studies share are 'ethnographically inspired' methods of investigating 'real' audiences rather than abstract spectators. Already established in other academic fields such as anthropology and sociology, this ethnographic approach seeks to understand a culture from its participants' point of view, following Bronislaw Malinowski's argument that 'culture can only be understood for what it is through the painstaking observation and documentation of everyday life' (Ruddock 2001: 128).

However, the ethnographic turn made by researchers in the cultural studies tradition has inevitably been contested. Criticisms of these early studies focus on the fact that their approach has rarely involved methods common to ethnographic research, such as extended

periods of participant observation and unstructured interviews with members of the culture who are under investigation. Shaun Moores points out that in cultural studies audience research many media 'ethnographies' gather data through short semi-structured interview-style conversations, or other qualitative methods which result in only relatively brief encounters with audience members, rather than the extended periods of participant observation encouraged by Malinowski. Kirsten Drotner forms her critique into a proposal outlining what she sees as the requirements of 'real' ethnographic work: firstly, that people, not the media, are the primary objects of research and are put first; secondly, that the ethnographer spends long periods of time with the participants; and thirdly, that 'ethnography is multi-locational, it engages its informants in a variety of settings (home, school, club, cinema and so on') (Drotner in Schrøder 2009: 341).

Whilst this proposal sounds very robust, and it is *possible* that long-term studies may yield important results for certain types of research, there is an implicit assumption being made here that this is inevitably the case; these assumptions about longitudinal studies preclude the possibility that short-term studies may also yield equally significant results. I argue, instead, that the length of a study cannot be used as a yardstick to ascertain its validity, as this fails to take into account other methodological factors; the way in which the research questions are designed and the 'talk' is analysed, for example, are more important methodological considerations when investigating the particular engagements that audiences have with one specific category of films. In her reflection on the relationship between audience research and discourse analysis, Brigitte Höijer highlights the importance of ensuring that the methodology employed corresponds with the ontology of the research project as a whole (2008). In other words, the driving questions behind the particular project should be aligned with its methodological approach. The kinds of questions I ask about Asian Extreme films – how are they categorised, used and understood by audiences – are not made more answerable by the kind of extended participant involvement that anthropological-style investigations demand.⁵¹ Furthermore, for the purpose of this research project, the media are just as important as the audiences themselves. In this respect, my methodological approach more closely follows that of Austin (2002) and Barker et al. (2001; 2007; 2008); this is discussed in further detail below.

Despite the critiques offered above, Shaun Moores argues that ethnographic audience studies retain enough shared characteristics with anthropological research that they can nonetheless still be called 'ethnographies', arguing that 'there may be a similar concern, for instance, with questions of meaning and social context – and with charting the 'situational embeddedness' of cultural practices' (1993: 4). Len Ang also argues that in so far as media audience researchers attempt to obtain a 'thorough insight into the 'lived experience' of media consumption' the term 'ethnographic' can be justified' (1996: 182). Additionally, Andy Ruddock notes that audience researchers draw on the idea that ethnography places the researcher and researched on a more equal footing than was possible in earlier examples of mass communication research, arguing that 'much of the new audience research was on the side of the viewer, not only in terms of viewing the media from his or her position, but also of representing the larger political views and interests of those who were structurally excluded from the 'electronic public sphere''(Ruddock 2007: 129). Given that cultural studies researchers aim to examine the ways in which audiences make sense of media from particular social and historical positions, the ethnographic approach, which is adopted in this project, can be understood to be characterised by an assumption that context always informs interpretation – both the broader cultural, economic and political contexts and also the local, communal and individual contexts of consumption.

One dimension of these local, communal and individual contexts of consumption is that of specific settings, technologies and media platforms which play a key role in the cultures and practices of audiences for this category of films. Research into audiences of popular culture has included a number of studies that focus more specifically on how people make use of particular forms of media technologies in their everyday lives. This area of audience research has facilitated ethnographic studies of VCR consumption and domestic use (Gray 1992), studies of the use of computers in educational and domestic settings (Seiter 1993) and, more recently, research into the use of camcorders and mobile technology in everyday settings (Buckingham and Willett 2009). Ethnographic studies of daily media consumption are therefore considered as part of the secondary emphasis which this study places on the way in which technologies inform audiences' viewing strategies; these concerns are factored into four questions in the quali-quantitative questionnaire.⁵²

A further key development in the move away from text-orientated forms of media analysis has been the emergence of reception studies. One of the earliest proponents of this approach to understanding the ways in which audiences make sense of media texts was Barbara Klinger. In the late 1980s Klinger identified and discussed a number of the problems emerging from text-centred strategies for analysing film (Klinger 1989). Her discussion of different forms of uninhibited behaviour amongst film audiences aimed to emphasize the social, collective nature of cinema-going. Klinger developed the argument that these audience responses should not be seen as abnormal; instead, they should be understood as reflections of audiences' moments of departure from engrossment in the film, through their use of and reference to a number of 'intertextual frames'. These could include marketing materials, interviews, reviews and so on. Central to this emergent field of reception research, then, has been an acknowledgement of the significance of secondary or ancillary texts; these texts form a discursive framework which can shape and influence the various ways in which audiences respond to different forms of media. One of the main advantages to this approach, Klinger argues, is that in examining the complex way that the reception of a film changes over time a researcher is led to acknowledge the instability of audience interpretations. On the other hand, she contends that

a danger of synchronic research is that researchers can find themselves attempting to settle a film's historical meaning; much like a standard interpretation would fix its textual meaning. Ideally, reception theory influenced by cultural and historical materialism analyses, rather, the discontinuities and differences characterizing the uses of a particular film within and beyond its initial appearance (Klinger 1997: 6)

Klinger (1997) has gone on to suggest that complete histories of films, integrating diachronic and synchronic approaches which take into account everything about them (their production histories, appendages, receptions, interconnections, and so on) should be attempted; she acknowledges, however, that this is a vast, perhaps impossible, endeavour for most researchers.

Reception studies that have, in different ways, adopted this approach include Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning* (1994), a study of the reception of five melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk which reveals the way interpretations of these films have changed over time. The study draws on a range of film reviews which Klinger argues are 'types of social discourse which, like film advertisements, can aid the researcher in ascertaining the

material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments' (Klinger 1994: 69). Klinger concludes from this research that 'historically, there does not appear to be 'the one, true text', but a text continually in the throes of transformation' (Klinger 1994: 161). Another early example of reception research is Cynthia Erb's *Tracking King Kong* (1993), a study of the racial subtexts found in promotional materials surrounding the release of *King Kong* (1933); Erb's study also demonstrates how one of the strengths of this research tradition is that it facilitates the investigation and uncovering of changing historical contexts of film reception.

It is important to acknowledge here, though, that the term 'reception studies' has more than one meaning. In the sense that it contrasts with 'audience studies', reception studies means the study of responses by means of naturally-produced materials; Klinger and Erb both offer specific critiques of audience research because of the dangers of it 'producing what the researcher needs to hear'. However, Janet Staiger's conception of 'reception studies' is as a broader, portmanteau term that embraces the whole orientation to the ways in which meanings are produced out of interactions with a 'text'. Staiger explains this approach to understanding audiences as follows:

Reception studies is not a hermeneutics or truth-finding of the meaning of the text. The enterprise it engages is historical and theoretical. It asks, *how* does a text mean? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changing values over time? Reception studies does not presume a meaning as an essence to be extracted by an insightful critic (Staiger 2005: 2).

Staiger argues that reception research, in its investigation of these discursive frameworks, can 'illuminate the cultural meanings of texts in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers, and ... contribute to discussions about the spectatorial effects of films by moving beyond text-centred analysis' (Staiger 2000: 162).

The reception studies approach to understanding audiences has, however, also been criticised for the way in which it privileges particular forms of reception and ignores the problem of 'who can speak' (Poe 2001). Martin Barker has also pointed out some of the issues that arise when film reviews are favoured over other types of ancillary materials (2004). Barker critiques the way in which the work of Staiger and others tends to focus exclusively on film reviews found in broadsheets. He argues that this leads to a spotlight on 'serious' films that draws attention away from research into popular cinema which, he

suggests, is the sphere most clearly immersed in the phenomenon of ‘publicity gossip and other ancillary materials’ (Barker 2004). This blind spot is addressed through a number of research projects undertaken by Barker and his collaborative colleagues that have combined aspects of reception studies with audience research. Similarly, Thomas Austin proposes a pluralist approach to studying films that attempts a ‘triangulation between film texts, contexts and audiences’ (2002:2) and draws on reception studies, empirical audience research and knowledge of production contexts. Though reception research is not the central component of this research project, it nevertheless plays a highly significant role in establishing the key debates circulating around this category of films, and informs the design of the research questions in a number of significant ways. For this reason these studies will be considered in some depth.

Barker et al have made extensive use of reception research in two particular projects: a study of the reception and controversy surrounding the British release of David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001); and the international research project exploring the reception of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, conducted by Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs, Kate Egan and others (2008). These studies differ from the research carried out by Klinger and Erb in that they combine reception studies with audience research using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. On a similar tangent, the work of academics such as Thomas Austin (2002) on the multiple publicity strategies surrounding films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) has drawn attention to the ways posters, trailers, teasers and the like can provide variable routes into and through a film. More recently, Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts (2010) has led to a parallel interest in this methodological approach developing within the field of fan studies.

Barker outlines a broad range of ancillary materials that are available to researchers attempting to investigate the prefigurative contexts of a film’s reception, and proposes a three-stage mode of enquiry into the reception of any given film. The first stage of the enquiry is, he proposes, a study of the full range of ancillary materials surrounding the film, and the various ways in which they produce key discursive frameworks; the second stage requires a study of how different audiences make use of or are persuaded by these discursive frameworks; and the third stage of the enquiry is a study how the actual

encounter with the film leads to fulfilment of various expectations on the part of the audience. Clearly such an endeavour would require considerable resources, and Barker points out that each stage may be undertaken separately as a valuable study in itself. The scale of a full three-stage enquiry is illustrated by both the *Crash* study and the international *Lord of the Rings* research project (Barker et al: 2008); the methodologies adopted in these studies are highly relevant to this thesis and are therefore considered in some detail in the following section.

Research on Film Audiences

In his summary of the work, purpose and scope of the CCCS, Shaun Moores notes that 'what is strikingly absent from these advances towards an anthropology of consumption is any qualitative empirical work in the public settings of cinema spectatorship' (Moores 1993: 33). In comparison with other forms of media, then, film is a relatively late arrival to the field of empirical audience research. In the context of this research project, the question of the physical space or environment in which audiences encounter each film is a complex one. Each of the films included in the online questionnaire has its own individual distribution and exhibition history. Some have never been formally released in the UK (the *Guinea Pig* series and *Grotesque*) but are easy to source online. Others have only had a DVD release (*Suicide Club*) or, in most of the cases, a limited theatrical release in either art house cinemas or at specialist festivals (*Dumplings*, *Audition*, *Ichu the Killer* and *Visitor Q*). However, three of the films (*Battle Royale*, *Oldboy* and *The Isle*) were the subject of noteworthy marketing campaigns, orchestrated by Tartan, and were screened at several multiplexes in the UK. For this reason it is important to consider the methodologies that have been used for analysing audiences who encounter films at the cinema, on DVD and online.

From the 1980s onwards a small cluster of research projects investigating film audiences began to emerge although, as Moores has observed, they were relatively few in number. Valerie Walkerdine's observational study of a family watching *Rocky II* on video provides one of the earliest examples of a small-scale, qualitative research project that investigates film audiences. However, as Walkerdine states, the purpose here was to undertake 'a psychoanalytical investigation into the dynamics of the domestic setting and the relationship of one specific family to television and video' (Walkerdine 1985: 167). Other

approaches to understanding film audiences that developed out of the cultural studies tradition have used focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Annette Hill's study of audiences of films involving elements of screen violence (1997) investigates the kinds of pleasure that both male and female viewers experience when watching these films. Hill devises the useful concept 'portfolios of experience' to describe the various ways in which viewers use their own past experiences in combination with different forms of cultural knowledge as a method for interpreting the films they watch. Her qualitative study takes the form of six focus groups involving thirty-six participants in total. Hill's research findings present some pertinent and useful signposts for this current project; most notably, the sense in which her research participants were watching violent films as a way of 'testing boundaries' is particularly relevant to discussions about the 'extreme' which are captured in the empirical stage of this study, and are discussed further in Chapter 4. However, in terms of methodology, Hill's approach differs quite markedly from the one developed for the purpose of this study. Although Hill piloted the use of questionnaires and interviews in the early stages of her project, she eventually discarded these research implements in favour of focus groups, as she felt that viewing violence was primarily a social activity, rather than an individual one (2002: 8). The advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires, focus groups and interviews as methodological tools are discussed in the following section, with reference to Hill's arguments. A second key difference between the methodological approach I develop here and the one adopted by Hill is the degree of attention paid to ancillary materials. Whilst Hill acknowledges that 'media hype' is a key reason why her participants chose to watch violent films (2002: 19), her study pays little attention to the actual materials generating this hype, or to the discourses that circulate within them. In contrast, the examination of these materials forms a key stage of this study in that it contributes significantly to the structure and design of the empirical research, as well to the process of analysing 'talk'.

At a similar time to Hill's research, the ESRC awarded Martin Barker funding for an 18-month study of the audiences of *Judge Dredd*; this was a larger and more ambitious attempt to investigate the way in which 'film audiences negotiate the meaning of a film' (Barker and Brooks 1997b: 2). The *Judge Dredd* project collected empirical data by conducting 48 interviews with 132 people, with an additional four interviews received on

audio cassette. The study did not set out to be 'representative' in any way, but instead placed particular emphasis on the importance of recruiting 'naturally-occurring' audiences; that is, groups of friends or people who would naturally watch and discuss films together (rather than artificially constructed focus groups comprised of people that did not previously know each other). In a similar development to Hill's 'portfolios of experience' a specific approach to interpreting the data was developed in order to analyse the research findings; this centred on the concept of a 'viewing strategy', which is explained (in the context of a subsequent research project) as follows:

The concept of a viewing strategy is designed to capture the ways in which the following elements of film viewing are interlinked: people's prior knowledge, and expectations, of a film; their ways of attending to circulating information, images and issues around the film, both from publicity regimes and from other competing (for instance, fan, or sensationalist, or censorious) accounts; their choice of manner of seeing the film (what cinema; with whom; with what kinds of preparation); their ways of attending to the film (accentuating parts, ignoring others, producing a specific kind of narrative account, *et cetera*); their immediate responses (sensuous, emotional, cognitive, *et cetera*); and subsequent work on those responses to turn them into an account of meanings to self and the world. (Barker, Arthurs and Harindrath 2001: 158-9).

This approach invites the researcher to explore the connections between the way and the reasons why participants decide to watch the film, the orientation they adopt while encountering it, and the way they make sense of it afterwards. Although the *Judge Dredd* project did not combine these qualitative research techniques with aspects of reception research, it was significant in that it was one of the first major studies of film audiences.

A third key development in film audience research during this period was the 1998 Commonwealth Fund conference held at University College, London, which took as its primary focus the subject of 'Hollywood and Its Spectators'. This led to the publication of a series of four books that, to a certain extent, mark a turning point in the study of film audiences (Stokes and Maltby, 1999a; 1999b; 2001; 2004), although as an inter-disciplinary venture between the academic fields of American history and film studies, the series tended to have a particular focus. The papers published following the conference covered a range of issues relating to film audiences such as historical and archival research into early film audiences, explorations of Hollywood production strategies from the era of the studio system, and investigations into the reception of Hollywood films by audiences outside of the

United States throughout the twentieth century. As already discussed above, reception studies, most often attributed to Barbara Klinger (1989; 1994) and Janet Staiger (1992; 2000), provided a final emergent approach to film audience research during this period. Over the last decade, then, there has been growing interest in analysing film audiences using a variety of methodologies.

From the late 1990s onwards Martin Barker and his colleagues have been instrumental in integrating together aspects of cultural studies research techniques (focus groups, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) with approaches more common to reception research. The first of these projects began in 1997 when Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath embarked on an ESRC-funded study of the British reception of David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996). Their research proposal for the project incorporated the study of a large collection of secondary texts; this was comprised of a review of over 400 newspaper articles that had been published about *Crash* in the UK, France and the US. The study included materials such as production news, reviews, interviews with directors and actors, teasers, trailers, posters and other publicity materials, details surrounding debates, controversies and classificatory intervention. The collection of these ancillary materials was conceived as the first stage of a three-stage mode of enquiry, outlined above. Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to conduct this type of preliminary research was undertaken with the *Lord of the Rings* project, an international audience research project that assessed the responses of audiences from twelve countries around the world (Barker and Mathijs: 2008). In the UK alone over 2,500 ancillary items were collected and analysed in the first stage of the enquiry.

In a third project conducted in 2006/07, Barker and a group of colleagues based at Aberystwyth University embarked on a project into audience responses to films containing scenes of sexual violence (Barker et al: 2007). This project, which was commissioned and funded by the BBFC, focused on responses to five films that the Board had found to be problematic during the classification process; as a direct precursor to this present research project the 2007 study is of particular significance. As with the *Crash* and *Lord of the Rings* projects, the BBFC project was conducted in three separate stages. The first of these involved a survey of 243 websites, which had been identified as key sites containing online debates around the films. Barker et al offer three reasons to justify the significance of this

aspect of the research. Firstly, that these discursive frameworks may affect decisions made by the audience before encountering the text, such as who to watch it with or when to watch it. Secondly, Barker et al argue that 'talk' about films is 'socially and culturally patterned' and often operates through networks; the analysis of these ancillary materials therefore functions to guide the researcher's interpretation of the audiences' talk. Thirdly, Barker et al suggest that 'there is good reason to think that prefigurative materials will have different degrees of salience for different groups and individuals'. This, again, can only be assessed if the researcher has a good knowledge of these prefigurative materials. Following the completion of the *Crash* project, Barker set out several propositions outlining what this type of audience research project should concern itself with during each stage of the enquiry. The first of these is a consideration of the volume of ancillary materials in order to accurately gauge their impact. He proposes that it is important to observe how these discursive frameworks develop over time, to consider who owns them, to observe the use of particular 'figures of the audience' operating within them, and to deduce what sort of claims they are making.⁵³ Barker also points out the need to consider how aspects of film analysis and practice inform these discourses, and whether these are acknowledged or contested. Finally, he adds, it is helpful to consider the processes that shape the marketing materials.

The second stage of all three projects (on *Crash*, *Lord of the Rings* and the five films including sexual violence) involved the distribution of questionnaires (either online or in person following a screening) followed either by semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups. In this respect these audience research projects encompassed quantitative, qualitative and quali-quantitative approaches to gathering empirical data. Each of these projects, then, generated different volumes and types of research data that to a certain extent reflected whether the study was of audiences of a big-budget Hollywood film or a small, independent or foreign-language film with a controversial reputation. This data then provided the material for a study of how different audiences encounter, make use of, or are persuaded by the discursive frameworks they come across surrounding each particular film.

All three of these projects also included a third stage of enquiry, a study of how the audiences' encounter with the film either fulfilled or confounded their expectations. In this way, these projects understand audience encounters with films not as 'snapshot' experiences that begin and end with the opening and closing credits of the film, but as on-

going processes that often begin long before the film goes into production, and continue after it finishes with reviews, discussions, arguments and so on. In effect, Barker proposes the need for an 'over-arching conceptual and methodological framework which can link the analysis of ancillary materials with a renewed emphasis on how actual, live viewers use them as part of their film-watching' (Barker 2004). One of the advantages of adopting this three-stage mode of enquiry when researching audience responses to a particular film is that it is possible for a researcher, or a team of researchers, to follow a full cycle of interaction between a film and its audiences, from the release of the preliminary marketing materials and snippets of information through to the afterlife it develops following the release. Later reflections following the *Lord of the Rings* project led Barker to revise his three-stage model of audience enquiry and consider a fourth phase, that of the aftermath. In an essay exploring the impact and influence of one character from the film trilogy, Gollum, he proposes a possible extension of any audience research project to include a fourth stage:

The fourth – *symbolisation* – is a conditional extra. It amounts to the *cultural tentacles* that reach to other parts of the cultural or political arena. In principle, this could begin at any point. But given press dependence on topics generated by other formations, it is more likely to begin once a film has reached a determinate level of public attention. It is these that particularly interest me – because they constitute a concrete and empirically verifiable case of the 'influence of film' (Barker 2011: 14).

However, Barker's study of the traces and influences the character of Gollum has had on cultural activity since the release of the film also highlights the many difficulties facing a reception researcher; the scale of material available just as the result of a Google search, for example, makes the study of ancillary materials a daunting task.⁵⁴ Clearly this form of enquiry requires the setting of parameters, particularly when undertaken by a sole researcher. A further complication arises when examining a group of films released and re-released over a period of time; the interactions between different audiences and various aspects of the discursive frameworks surrounding each of the ten films involved in this project take place at many different points throughout an eleven year period. This means that ancillary materials may be encountered by participants before or after their encounter(s) with the film; the extent to which they either shape and prefigure their expectations or moderate and influence their later responses cannot therefore be readily

gauged. The three-stage method of enquiry is, therefore, most effective when it is following a contemporary release rather than as part of an historical study of a film's audience.

Thomas Austin's investigation into the circulation of three Hollywood films (1992) also offers a highly useful methodological framework that bears some important similarities and differences to those developed by Barker et al. Like Barker, Austin draws together audience and reception studies techniques, alongside a consideration of broader discursive contexts; Austin's approach also specifically considers

how patterns of reception are anticipated by the industry and feed back (via market research) into financing, production, and marketing decisions; and how practices of consumption are informed, but never simply determined, by such strategies (Austin 2002: 2).

In this respect, Austin places a slightly stronger emphasis on the role played by economic and industrial factors in the circulation of Hollywood films. Austin also makes a point of asserting the value of the 'internal properties' of texts which, he argues, determine some of the uses to which they are put (2002: 2). The research conducted by Barker et al, by way of contrast, does not emphasize the internal properties of the text at the outset of the study, but instead allows these to emerge (or not, as the case may be) from the research findings. Fundamentally, though, there is a subtle difference between Austin and Barker's overall research focus: whereas Barker et al adopt reception studies techniques as a means to develop a more thorough and sophisticated form of audience research, Austin draws empirical audience research together with reception studies methods and industrial discourses and practices to order to investigate popular film culture *more broadly*. This difference in focus stems from the purpose of Austin's study, which is to facilitate 'an investigation into the significance of popular film, into how and why it matters in contemporary society' (2002: 2). In contrast, the studies conducted by Barker et al are, first and foremost, audience research projects; these may or may not focus on popular films, and will matter culturally in different ways, depending on the remit of each particular study. This research project, then, follows the methodological approach developed by Barker et al. more closely in that it is, primarily, an audience research project. I also contend that, in certain cases like that of *Grotesque*, it is not possible to separate participants' 'talk' about the internal properties of the text from their discursively situated comments about the 'torture porn' category and its reception; in this respect, whilst acknowledging the

importance of internal textual characteristics, I argue these should be understood in conjunction with, and not separate from, the broader discursive frameworks in which they are situated.

However, despite these minor differences, the approaches developed by both Austin and Barker et al offer a methodology well-suited to a researcher in the cultural studies tradition who wishes to develop as thorough as possible an understanding of audiences for these films. In particular, some of the considerations of the four-stage enquiry have proven very useful for the purposes of this study. For example, the volume of ancillary materials surrounding titles such as *Oldboy* and *Battle Royale* far outweighed those surrounding other titles; this correlated with more questionnaire responses about these titles including comments about their expectations for these films, and the extent to which they were or were not realised. The first stage of the enquiry also uncovered the series of debates surrounding the marketing of these films by Tartan that had been explored by film academics and Internet fan reviewers; this discourse influenced many research participants and informed one of the key patterns of response in the questionnaires. If a cultural studies researcher attempts to conduct research into responses to a media text without any consideration of subsidiary and ancillary materials, they clearly run the risk of misinterpreting the participants' responses; the extent to which a full, four-stage enquiry can be conducted, however, is clearly linked to the resources of any given research project. The degree to which this project attempted to consider these materials will be outlined below.

To summarise, the evolving field of cultural studies provides this project with key components of its methodology in two ways. Firstly, it begins its investigation into audience responses to Asian Extreme films by recognising that participants in the research project are historically and culturally rooted in complex ways that need to be taken into account as far as is possible. As this project examines only a relatively recent historical period (the last ten years), this means that current debates circulating around concepts such as extreme cinema, censorship and online communities and social networks will be considered as some of the relevant broader contexts for understanding audience responses, alongside any specific debates about this group of films.⁵⁵ Secondly, unlike research conducted in the 'effects tradition', the project avoids seeking particular responses from participants, or

determining the results of the research by asking questions that aim to prove or disprove a particular theoretical approach. Instead, it makes a concerted attempt to understand the specific ways in which audiences enjoy and make meaning from this group of films and the kind of pleasures associated with them. To this end, the research incorporates ethnographically-inspired techniques with the purpose of producing wide-ranging and diverse responses from the participants, and in order to avoid generating a 'snapshot' set of results.

Fan Studies

Much of the research and theoretical discussion taking place in the field of fan studies explores the position of the fan researcher, or 'aca-fan', in relation to research on their own particular object or objects of fandom; as an audience researcher who is not personally invested in the fandom⁵⁶ of Asian Extreme films, these discussions are not directly relevant to the methodology of this project. However, fan scholarship nevertheless opens up a number of important debates that have contributed to the methodological considerations of this research project. The first of these is the series of discussions relating to the concept of 'interpretive communities'; for the purpose of this chapter I have combined these discussions of 'interpretive communities' within the field of fan studies with those taking place within the wider tradition of audience research. The second key area of research examines changes in the cultures and practices of the Web 2.0 generation of fans. This area of research relates directly to the culture and practices of the Asian Extreme fan community in the UK, in terms of the development of fan-driven distribution labels and the status and influence of Internet-based fan critics.

Recent overviews of fan studies have grouped scholarly work within this field into three distinct waves, or generations (Gray et al. 2007: 1-16). Whilst there is clearly some overlap and continuity between these three waves, they nevertheless offer a helpful framework with which to discuss particular approaches the field can offer to this research project. The first generation of fan scholars emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Key figures contributing to the establishment and early growth of fan studies were Henry Jenkins, John Tulloch, Constance Penley and Camille Bacon-Smith. Early fan scholarship drew on the writing of Michel de Certeau (1984) as a means to interpret fan practices as

strategies employed by disempowered social groups to engage in collective action against the media elites. In *Textual Poachers* Henry Jenkins portrays fans as a 'popular resistance' who voice the concerns that are generally ignored by the dominant bourgeois culture (Jenkins 1992: 25). Jenkins differentiates fans from 'ordinary viewers' by the way they transform their viewing preferences 'into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests' (Jenkins 1988: 88). He argues that fans seek to challenge the idea that there is one author-endorsed or informed meaning of a text; this, in turn, results in fans pitting themselves against producers and directors as 'textual poachers' (1992). From the outset, then, there have been key theoretical approaches explored in fan studies that clearly differentiate it from the broader category of audience research (although there are overlaps, as well). One significant characteristic of fan studies is the emphasis on, and celebration of, the concept of community. Fan researchers are often more fully immersed within this community and its culture than other audience researchers, sometimes for considerable periods of time. Furthermore, they may have strong emotional attachment to their objects of study, and might have already invested a considerable amount of time and resources into various fan activities and practices associated with the particular community. This approach to ethnographically-inspired research brings with it distinct advantages and disadvantages.

A key strategy Jenkins develops for interpreting fan activities is the concept of 'interpretive communities'. He observes that the long-term members of fan communities act to initiate and guide new members with various pieces of information, explanations of characters and plots and other forms of expertise. This expertise can include not simply information about primary texts (films, television episodes and so on) but also details about ancillary materials, or paratexts, such as interviews with stars or production personnel. This wealth of expertise, in turn, leads to particular readings or interpretations being negotiated and adopted within fan communities. Jenkins draws attention to the way that discussion and shared commentaries amongst community members produces 'mutual self-disclosure' and increases intimacy between fans (Jenkins: 80). This correlates with 'commentary', the first of four kinds of talk identified by Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington in their analysis of fan interactions; the others they recognize are 'speculation', 'request' and 'diffusion' (1995:

85). Of these, they suggest that 'speculation' and 'diffusion' can involve the display and exchange of expertise, while 'request' can act as part of an initiation process into the community. Janet Staiger adds to these a fifth category, 'the use of catch-phrases or insider information that would identify the depth of knowledge that a "true" fan would know, creating a system of marking who does and does not belong to the fan community or establishing degrees of fan knowledge' (Staiger 2005: 108). Like Bielby and Harrington, Staiger tends to interpret group interactions within fan communities as being more complex and varied than Jenkins does. Writing at the same time as Jenkins, John Fiske's understanding of fan culture also notes that fan communities often create their own internal hierarchies that mirror the larger social infrastructure from which they feel excluded, and in this respect his perception of fan culture is less celebratory than that offered by Jenkins (Fiske 1992).

Since the publication of *Textual Poachers* there have been many critiques made of the first wave of fan scholars' work on 'interpretative communities', not least by Jenkins himself.⁵⁷ Eileen R. Meehan offers a critique that borrows the terms 'emic' (the perspective of an insider) and 'etic' (the perspective of an outsider) from anthropological studies in her discussion of fan ethnography. Meehan examines the claim that 'emic ethnographers report that fans fear censure from non-fans ('mundanes') and discrimination by mainstream institutions' (Meehan 2000: 73). Her argument, that only genuine fans can win the trust of the community and the privilege of studying their practices, was also put forward by Jenkins (1992). However, Meehan goes on to question the 'emic' approach, suggesting that fan ethnographers are limited by their insider status and the pressure it carries to portray the community in a positive and flattering light. She argues that they are also more likely to represent debates or disagreements within the community from a biased perspective. The view of Meehan and others has led to a widespread critique of fan ethnographers which suggests that they are merely apologists for fans, or are too celebratory in their approach.

Outside of fan studies, Kim Schrøder also critiques the 'ethnographic turn' in audience research and suggests that the concept of the 'interpretive community' is one of the 'most used and abused in reception research over the last ten years' (Schrøder 2009: 337). He argues that the concept of the 'community' is in urgent need of clarification if it is to continue to be of any constructive use in contemporary audience research. Schrøder

points out that whereas Radway employed the term to refer to a singular interpretative community with shared reading strategies, it is now being used to describe people belonging to multiple interpretative communities, or 'sub-communities' within larger communities, and that this raises a complex set of problems for an audience researcher. Schrøder argues that in order to make sense of the multiple memberships people may hold with various interpretative communities 'it is necessary to adopt a semiotic and discursive approach' (Schrøder: 339). This approach understands interpretative communities to operate not simply by using situational and social networks to produce shared interpretative strategies, but also by drawing on 'discursive formations, or codes' that are triggered by media use and are the cumulative product of a person's social and cultural experience.

Schrøder also critiques Len Ang's argument that the reception studies approach to audiences is too narrow in its scope and fails to acknowledge 'wider sociocultural conditions' audiences are situated in (Ang 1990: 244). He counters Ang's assertion with the argument that although it is difficult to produce complete accounts of audience readings and practices, it is nevertheless still worthwhile attempting to 'produce *incompletely* articulated accounts of audience readings and practices which may, in spite of their (no doubt) multiple shortcomings, provide illuminating insights into the polysemic and polymorphic relationships between media and people in the world we live in' (Schrøder 2009: 341). The way in which he argues this can be achieved, however, is not through the use of group observation; in fact Schrøder highlights the failure of research studies by Morley (1980) and others that bring together a group of otherwise unrelated individuals simply for the purpose of research. Instead, Schrøder suggests that individual interviews in the participants' home can uncover the ways in which they belong to interpretative communities without having to actually observe these communities in practice:

In other words, a research design that privileges the individual reader does not automatically prevent us from exploring the multiple sociocultural discourses that partake in the construction of that individual's readings and uses of television (or other media). This is ultimately an empirical question, we might say, depending on the actual terms we establish with the individual informants and on the questions we ask them (Schrøder: 342)

Schrøder goes on to highlight the need to differentiate between social communities such as the family or neighbourhood that are constituted independently of any media use, and those that are constituted through some form of media use; only the latter, he argues, are

authentic 'interpretative communities'. The former, Schrøder contends, should be known as 'cultural positionings' rather than 'interpretive communities'.

Many of the critiques made of the first generation of fan scholars are addressed by the second wave of academic work on fan practices and cultures, which highlights the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan subcultures [see Introduction, pp. 11-15]; this generation of scholars frequently draw on Bourdieu to explore taste hierarchies amongst fan communities as a continuation or reflection of wider social inequalities (Thornton 1995; Hills 2002; Williamson 2005). Although some previous audience research studies (such as Len Ang's *Watching Dallas* and Joke Hermes' *Reading Women's Magazines*) made use of Bourdieu's work on taste-making practices, it is the second wave of fan studies that develops this approach most fully. However, while this generation of fan scholars acknowledges the usefulness of Bourdieu's *Distinction* as a starting-point for theorising taste hierarchies within fan communities, they also critique its limitations [see Introduction, p. 20]. Hills also problematizes Bourdieu's work for the deterministic nature of its 'professional rationality' which he argues facilitates a limited dominant/subordinate model for interpreting class difference and cultural taste (Hills 2002: 64).

Gray et al identify a third wave of fan studies that has emerged as fan cultures have started to occupy a more prominent and influential cultural position. The development and rapid expansion of many fan communities as they migrated from the marginal spaces of conventions and fanzines to the highly visible and accessible meeting places offered by the Internet has, to a certain extent, transformed their cultural status. Whereas the first and second generation of fan scholars studied fans as members of specialist communities, with their own internal hierarchies and taste distinctions, Gray et al suggest that 'as being a fan has become an ever more common mode of cultural consumption, these approaches based on a model of fans as tightly organized participants in fan- and subcultures did not match the self-description and experience of many audience members who describe themselves as fans' (Gray et al 2007: 7). Instead, they argue that as fans have established themselves as an integral aspect of contemporary cultural life there has been a shift in emphasis amongst fan scholars that suggests 'fandom is no longer an object of study in and of itself. Instead, through investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives, third wave work aims to capture fundamental insights into modern life' (Gray et al 2009: 9). Whilst this third

generation of fan scholarship explores many different avenues of research, it can also be broadly characterised as a move away from studying one specific fan community and towards the study of multiple fandoms and the ways in which they intersect with one another.

However, in identifying a shift in the way fans are perceived, Gray et al overlook a different shift that has occurred over the last decade – the changing meaning of the word ‘fan’. Whilst the argument that the figure of the fan has become more socially acceptable is convincing, it needs to be contextualised by an awareness of the changing usage of the word. For example, until quite recently the ‘like’ option on many Facebook pages was ‘become a fan’; the implication here – and elsewhere – is that, in certain contexts, the phrase ‘I’m a fan of’ has become interchangeable with ‘I like’ and does not necessarily indicate the level of intensity, passion or expertise about a fan object that it once did. This, in turn, has implications for those who *are* intensely engaged in a particular fandom and do not wish to be associated with others who claim to be fans, but whose interests might appear to be more superficial. Ruth Deller argues that there’s

got to be care about how the term ‘fan’ is used and the fact it means different things to different people.... I follow lots of famous people on Twitter who I find interesting but would not say I was a ‘fan’ of their work necessarily. And I think everyone is the same - we have different levels to which we ‘like’ something and whether or not we’d use that word ‘fan’ to describe the liking. My students sometimes feel a bit divided over the term as well - being a fan still implies a level of liking something that goes ‘beyond’ somehow - but what is ‘beyond’? Buying the box set? Discussing something on a forum? (Deller 2013: 304).

Deller identifies the elastic nature the term ‘fan’ has taken on in recent years; discussions about the ‘mainstreaming’ of fandom therefore need to be balanced with an on-going evaluation of the value and use being made of the term ‘fan’ in any given context. Deller’s comments are particularly pertinent to the empirical stage of this study and the disavowal of fandom that it engendered [see Chapter 4].

The opportunity to study fan communities on specific websites, message boards and forums which has emerged over the last twenty years has opened up a further area of discussion surrounding academic approaches to the study of fan cultures. Schrøder et al. suggest that for the media ethnographer, ‘the Internet offers a unique opportunity to overcome the so-called Observer’s Paradox ... according to which we cannot observe in a

sustained manner how people behave when they are not being observed, without observing them, and with the consequence of potentially altering their behaviour' (2003: 371). This approach to observation-based research privileges a hypothetically 'invisible' role on the part of the researcher, and implies that no interaction between the researcher and the research participants is actually necessary. However, Virginia Nightingale contests this approach and argues to the contrary that, for observation-based research to be productive and effective, it relies entirely upon this relationship between researcher and research participants. Although she does not specifically discuss the type of research outlined by Schrøder et al. above, Nightingale's arguments are highly relevant to the study of internet communities and fan interactions. She proposes that the success of this form of audience research depends on a degree of self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher:

In observation-based research, 'exchange' between the researcher and the research subjects is the medium that assists the transformation of ideas and thoughts into the words and activities recorded. Exchange also acts as a corrective to the assumptions inherent in the researcher (his or her predisposition to counter-transference) that might otherwise be projected onto the research subjects (Nightingale 2008: 105-06)

In the same way that researchers who raise the 'observer's paradox' claim that the presence of the researcher affects the outcome of the research process, here Nightingale is making the point that the researcher will *always* affect this process, simply through being the person instigating and directing the research project from the outset; furthermore, she implies that the researcher's exchange with the researched is also an incredibly productive element of the process that requires careful attention. For these reasons, Nightingale argues, it is the degree of openness and transparency in the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the greater the level of self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher, that ensures that the research is carried out to the highest possible standard.

Nightingale goes on to discuss different forms of observation-based research. Acknowledging some of the disadvantages of early forms of participant observation, she explores approaches that involve sharing power with the participants, various forms of collaboration, and the differences between embedded and immersed research practices. Nightingale suggests that power-sharing practices can include, for example, encouraging the participants to become involved with the design stage of the research or involving them in

other stages of co-producing research activities. Collaborative forms of observation can include allowing the participants to document their practices themselves – for example in the case of fan studies it might involve participants producing fan artwork for the research project. Whilst embedded research involves the researcher becoming in some way aligned with the research subjects, while not actually belonging to the group, immersed research, exemplified by fan-academics such as Jenkins, takes place when the researchers are actually members of the community they are documenting. Nightingale summarises that

the immersed researcher is (1) often a member of the group, (2) authorised (either tacitly or explicitly) by the group to undertake the research, and (3) pursues a research task that serves interests the group has identified as important. The knowledge immersed research produces serves a dual purpose: it represents the group to itself and it allows the group to position itself, to pursue action outside the group to achieve group goals. In fan research a group member claims the specialist task of researcher for the group, while in activist research the group controls the research which is defined by the group's needs and history rather than by the interests of the academic community (Nightingale 2008: 128).

These approaches to observation-based research offer a range of possible ways of conducting observational research. They also offer another perspective on the critiques made of Jenkins' celebratory generation of fan studies; Nightingale's view is that the quality of the research depends on the extent to which the researcher acknowledges and interrogates their role, rather than the extent to which they are immersed within the community. Key to Nightingale's argument, then, is the assertion that whichever technique is adopted, it should be active rather than passive; this research activity then needs to be fully acknowledged and scrutinised by the researcher, as it will clearly have an impact on their perspective and view towards the participants, and likewise, on the participants' relationship with the researcher.

In conclusion, the methodological approach to audience research developed through the field of fan studies informs this research project in several ways. Firstly, whilst I do not consider myself to be a fan of Asian Extreme films, I made a concerted attempt to develop an open and productive relationship with these communities over a period of eighteen months; this perhaps can be best described as a period of being temporarily embedded within several fan communities. This approach was partly born out of necessity; as a series of niche communities, the number of British fans that could participate in the research project was relatively small, and therefore to encourage their involvement a certain degree

of interaction with them was necessary. In the case of several of the forums, the discussion threads were not visible without applying for membership, so interaction was required. This provided me with the two options of creating either anonymous or real identities for myself on these forums. Creating an anonymous identity carries with it certain ethical complications, as highlighted by Nightingale, which I felt uncomfortable with. This left me with the alternative of being as open and straightforward as possible about my identity and the purpose of my research, and demonstrating a respectful attitude towards the communities I became embedded within.

Each of these communities responded differently to my presence – their attitudes ranged from being extremely enthusiastic and grateful that I was taking an interest in their activities, to outright hostility and rejection. For example, while members of some communities started to follow me on Twitter, add me as a friend on Facebook or publicise my research on their websites and blogs, other communities banned me from their message boards as soon as they saw the online questionnaire. In some cases this led to a more complex relationship between myself and the research participants who spanned across a number of social networking sites and forums. As I became aware of some of the personal details of the lives of fans who had become my Facebook friends, they too became aware of my personal life, my interaction with family and friends outside of academia and, perhaps more significantly, the moments of frustration that I experienced with the research process. In this way, the boundaries between myself, as a researcher, and some of the participants involved in the project evolved in unexpected ways across a period of eighteen months. In my case, Nightingale's model of the embedded researcher was facilitated by social interaction on multiple websites, and within markedly different social networks and discursive frameworks. This ethnographically-inspired approach to observing fan practices and groups on the Internet revealed quite clearly, then, that there is no singular fan community associated with this group of films, but several overlapping social networks that each have their own particular hierarchies, practices and strategies for discussing and attributing value to Asian Extreme films. Nightingale suggests that participant observation is 'a terrain characterised by insecurity, uncertainty, self-doubt and mistrust by both parties' (Nightingale 2008: 130). In my case, although I experienced some of this hostility first-hand (in my rejection by certain forums) in other ways I managed to navigate the terrain more

successfully and cultivate a relationship of mutual trust; this was fostered by a sense of personal intimacy acquired through friendships developed on 'mainstream' social networking sites.

Discourse Analysis

An important element of any audience research project that involves the collection of qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires is the method used for analysing talk. Put simply, discourse analysis is a set of procedures employed for analysing the social organisation of talk. Through the study of how people talk or write, most discourse analysts believe they can uncover the social assumptions, shared cultural values and communities of response which participants in the talk are involved in. Over the last thirty years discourse analysis has, as an academic field, witnessed rapid expansion; as a result it could now perhaps be best described as an umbrella term that refers to a wide range of theoretical and methodological procedures and approaches for analysing talk.⁵⁸ Some audience researchers place these various approaches within two main categories: conversation analysis and discourse analysis (Schrøder et al: 167). They identify the key difference between the two to be that 'while conversation analysis is mainly focused on the dynamic exchange of utterances, on the interview as *interaction*, discourse analysis is more focused on how people give accounts of the social world through language, on the interview as representation' (Schrøder et al: 167). This implies that while conversation analysis tends to focus on the 'micro' features of communication, discourse analysis is more concerned with the identification of 'macro' structures; however, a closer examination of the field reveals that many approaches to discourse analysis tend to combine elements of both. Another key marker differentiating approaches to discourse analysis is that those which have evolved out of the academic field of psychology tend to adopt techniques that emphasize a far more individualised approach to understanding forms of social interaction. Discourse analysis also raises a number of methodological issues for an audience researcher. Firstly, there is the question of the role the researcher plays in generating the talk, which otherwise might not have occurred in exactly the same way. How can this be taken into account when analysing the talk? Secondly, there is the issue of knowing whether or not a discourse has been correctly identified; under what system, if any, can this be qualified? Thirdly, there is the

question of deciding whether all talk deserves equal attention and analysis, and if not, why not? These questions reveal many of the methodological complications inherent to the process of discourse analysis; in this respect and several others, discourse analysis is a highly contested and much debated sphere of academic activity.

This overview identifies a number of different forms of discourse analysis which are employed, in different ways, to analyse the qualitative research materials gathered in this project; these include Foucauldian discourse analysis, discursive psychology and conversation analysis. These different approaches vary in several ways, most notably in terms of how they conceive of the participant in relation to broader social structures, how they interpret the overall role of language in society, and the extent to which they focus on the minutiae of personal interactions. Early forms of discourse analysis arose out of the field of linguistics, which was dominated in the first half of the twentieth century by the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure argued that language is formed out of an arbitrary system of differences; structuralist approaches to discourse analysis that are strongly influenced by his writing aim to reveal or uncover such systems embedded within language and other cultural forms. One offshoot that has developed out of structuralist approaches to understanding discourse is critical discourse analysis. Pioneered by theorists such as Gunther Kress and Bob Hodge, this field of discourse analysis is aware of the limitations of structuralism; however, it does not abandon semiotics wholesale. Instead, it has developed a form of social semiotics that emphasizes the 'social action, context and use' of signs (Hodge and Kress 1988: 5). This tradition of work has introduced a range of more nuanced concepts such as 'modality claims' into discourse analysis. For Hodge and Kress, analysing modality claims involves considering the significance attached to various aspects of conversation and communication through the use of intonation, gesture and so on, or through the use of 'modal auxiliaries' such as 'may' or 'might' (Hodge and Kress: 121). These are analysed to identify the ways in which different kinds of claims (assertions, opinions, hypotheses and speculations) are made and, in turn, how committed the participants are to these types of claim. Having identified and analysed modality claims, Hodge and Kress then use them as a means to detect broader ideological and political structures referenced within different forms of communication. In this way critical discourse analysis combines the micro

analysis of personal expression and grammatical structure with the macro approach of identifying wider cultural repertoires drawn on in different forms of communication.

Whereas semiotic approaches to discourse analysis tend to identify general cultural structures and resources and their possible connotations, Foucauldian discourse analysis takes as its starting point the notion that discourses are systems which constitute their subjects through institutions and practices. This approach focuses on the availability of conflicting discursive resources within a culture; in recognising these conflicting discourses it rejects any one totalising account or system of interpretation. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourses function to both enable and constrain what can be said, when and by whom. It examines the ways in which discourses are bound up in institutional practices which organise and structure social life, and therefore offer subject positions that, once taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience. Foucauldian discourse analysis tends to ask questions about the relationship between discourses and the way people feel about their material conditions.

Whereas post-structuralist and Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis emphasize, to different degrees, the role of broader cultural and social forces and power structures at work in discourses, discursive psychology is more concerned with interpersonal communication. In this field of research, discourse analysts focus on the ways in which participants make particular choices during their interaction with others. This approach to discourse analysis emphasizes how people use talk to construct their identity or memory. Discursive psychologists often explore how participants orient themselves to, and manage their stake in, any particular discussion; it is concerned with 'how particular versions of reality are manufactured, negotiated and deployed in conversation' (Willig 2008: 8). Discursive psychology therefore understands discourses and identities as being performative, fluid and variable. The key question that guides discursive psychological analysis is often 'What are participants doing with their talk?' (Willig 2008: 164). The researcher examines the talk to look for 'action orientations', for example, they may explore what a group of female participants are trying to achieve by using a mode of speaking in which they refer to themselves as a 'girls' rather than 'women'. In summary, discursive psychology attempts to understand discourses as acts performed within a particular context; it makes no claim to interpret these discourses as indications of wider social

assumptions, shared cultural values and communities of response which participants are involved in. For a discursive psychologist, these spheres of interpretation are not considered to be accessible through language.

Compared with some of these approaches to discourse analysis, conversation analysis (CA) can be seen to be dealing with the micro-processes of social interaction. It developed out of a research project conducted by Harvey Sacks that examined telephone calls made to a suicide prevention centre. It examines language as social action and analyses transcripts of conversations, for example analysing the organisation of turn-taking in a conversation; the central concerns of this approach are the discovery of patterned ways of talking and interacting that form a discourse. Several CA theorists identify an overlap between conversation analysis and other approaches to discourse analysis, in that they often replicate its methodological procedures (Wooffitt 2005: 129). Wooffitt suggests, for example, that 'it is clear that CA is a major resource for discursive psychology' and cites the arguments of Jonathan Potter, who 'identifies Sacks' work, and the form of analysis he began, as one of the most significant influences in the emergence of post-cognitive psychology' (Wooffitt 2005: 140). In particular, Wooffitt suggests that CA bears a resemblance to the methodological approach of discursive psychology in that it focuses on the ways in which the participants actively construct and orientate themselves to the social interaction.

Within the broad field of discourse analysis, however, theorists are divided as to whether or not conversation analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis can be reconciled with one other. In particular, there have been tensions identified between the methodologies developed within the two approaches. On the one hand, CA focuses on the organisation of talk and demonstrates an aversion towards extra-textual theorising; in other words, CA adopts the position that 'structure' should not be viewed as an external constraint on an individual, but rather as a social feature that participants actively orient themselves to. On the other hand, Foucauldian approaches prioritise extra-linguistic, contextual factors, such as culture and political context, as the central means of understanding research participants' behaviour and talk. From this perspective, it is CA's apparent inability to tackle issues surrounding the production of power and social inequalities that is most frequently critiqued. A secondary dispute over methodological

differences also exists with respect to claims of ideological neutrality. Conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff argues that sociological approaches to Foucauldian discourse analysis are in danger of imposing an interpretation on participants' talk and social interaction which reflects their own political orientations. In response, Michael Billig has argued that conversation analysis

conveys a participatory view of the world, in which equal rights of speakership are often assumed. The assumptions of these rhetorical conventions are revealed if they are applied to talk in which direct power is exercised. In this respect, CA is not, as Schegloff suggests, ideologically neutral, but habitually deploys a rhetoric that conveys a contestable view of social order (Billig 1999: 544).

This methodological tit-for-tat, over which approach can make the most authentic claim to ideological neutrality, illustrates clearly that for many theorists in this field, CA and Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis remain very far from being reconciled.

However, Margaret Wetherell develops a slightly different argument, suggesting that although the relationship between post-structuralist Foucauldian approaches and CA need to be reconfigured, the most effective methodological approach to discourse analysis understands one in terms of the other. Focussing on differing conceptions of the subject, Wetherell notes that whilst the agency of the subject is paramount in CA, Foucauldian-inspired approaches over-emphasise discourses as systems which constitute their subjects. Drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe, however, Wetherall proposes instead that social agents are both passive and active. On the one hand, they 'seem to provide the energy required for meaning-making and articulation. On the other hand, as Mouffe argues, the individual subject becomes de-centered, not the author of his/her own discursive activity and not the origin point of discourse' (Wetherall 1998: 12). This understanding of the subject as unstable and plural in nature has implications for the claims made by Billig and Schegloff with respect to ideological neutrality. As Wetherall argues, 'the concept of false consciousness assumes that social agents have real or true identities (as members of the proletariat, for example) and real or true interests which go with those social identities which they may misperceive, simply not recognise, or which can be obscured and invisible' (Wetherall 1998: 13). She proposes that these identities, however, are fluid and do not exist in a fixed manner that would facilitate their being either perceived or misperceived in dependence on adopting a particular methodological ideology. In critiquing what appear to

be opposing conceptions of the subject position, Wetherell concludes by advocating a more eclectic methodological approach that draws on analytic concepts from across these apparently conflicting fields.

The different forms of discourse analysis that are available to a researcher clearly allow for the study of different degrees and levels of social interaction. As Höijer argues, there are benefits and disadvantages to each approach, and some are more suitable for analysing particular types of talk than others. The key questions being posed by this research project centre around the ways in which people enjoy watching and understand Asian Extreme films. While the research explores individual responses to this group of films, it frames these responses in the context of how audiences relate to wider communities, institutions and social practices. Some of these approaches to discourse analysis provide this project with starting points for analysing talk rather than complete methods in themselves; for example, several of the analytical frameworks favoured by social semioticians, such as those for considering the concepts of modality, are integrated into the overall approach for analysing talk. Like Hodge and Kress, I am also interested in the ways in which small changes of tone and gesture relate to what is being said about broader cultural discourses. However, the analytical frameworks used by social semioticians do not acknowledge the influence of larger social and cultural institutions in shaping and producing discourses as fully as I do throughout this project, and in that respect our methodologies differ. Therefore, while some aspects of the semiotic and psychologically-rooted approaches to discourse analysis provide useful tools and starting points for thinking about patterns of social interaction, this project leans instead towards a Foucauldian understanding of discourse analysis. In particular, it considers the extent to which audiences draw on, use or are influenced by the discursive frameworks that arise out of competing institutions, cultures and practices surrounding these films: namely, the BBFC as a regulatory body, institutions involved in distributing (or not distributing) Asian Extreme films in the UK, British film reviewing practices and online fan communities and their cultures.

However, alongside this use of Foucauldian discourse analysis, there is also a sustained use made of Bourdieu's sociological approach to understanding taste-making practices. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of both Foucault and Bourdieu arguably produces certain methodological tensions for any research project. In *The Practice of*

Everyday Life, de Certeau critiques the two scholars' approaches to theorising social relations and notions of agency. His critique of Foucault centres on the argument that his conception of discourse, and the procedures through which it operates, overlook the potential role played by minor practices and procedures; de Certeau argues that 'these techniques, which are also operational, but initially deprived of what gives the others their force, are the "tactics" which I have suggested might furnish a formal index of the ordinary practices of consumption' (de Certeau 1984: 49). Similarly, Bourdieu's work is critiqued for its lack of complexity and inability to account for all of the variables of social action; in this respect, de Certeau argues, his adherence to the particular sociological model he has developed makes his work dogmatic. In his critique of the two scholars, then, de Certeau identifies what they have in common; their theoretical approaches to understanding the mechanisms of power overstate the denial of agency, and overlook the potential for resistance.

Other scholars engage in similar comparisons between the two theorists, though draw different conclusions. In response to what he perceives to be the misapplication and overuse of both theorists by undergraduate students, Staf Callewaert offers a detailed and insightful presentation of Bourdieu's critique of Foucault (2006). Emphasising from the outset the intrinsic differences between the academic fields of philosophy and sociology, Callewaert highlights the problematic use of Foucauldian approaches to power and discourse by British and American academics. Part of this, Callewaert suggests, is because Foucault never wrote about power 'as a social reality in action'; rather, he discussed the way in which power 'is thought of, conceptualised and expressed, placed on stage' (Callewaert 2006: 91). The problem, Callewaert contends, lies in taking Foucault's work on discourse and applying it to the real social world; this, he argues, leads to the misuse of Foucauldian theory to support notions of radical relativism and social constructivism.

Where similarities can be drawn between Foucault and Bourdieu, Callewaert suggests, is in their conception of human social action. Bourdieu positions the social agent as being directed by objective relations, in that 'it is not the agent's own conception of the situation that is guiding action ... but the agent's embodied practical sense with its root in accumulated history' (Callewaert 2006: 94). Similarly, he argues, Foucault understands the

social agent to be aware of their engagement in discourses, but to be unaware of the outcome of these discursive practices. Callewaert summarises that

both point to the same issue, both frame their solution in similar terms. But their point is sharply different. Bourdieu is comprehending both agent and structure, both discourse and action ... and therefore he is not, like Foucault, exposed to the danger of promoting the devastating trend in the social sciences today, where the everlasting need to tone down science, positivism and behaviourism lead to the absurd idea that social practice is nothing but free construction of meaning (Callewaert 2006: 96).

Foucault and Bourdieu therefore share a similar view, in that they both conceive free will to be a misconception, even though a social agent may *feel* themselves to be free to make their own choices in life. Therefore, with respect to understanding and interpreting social action, it is not entirely contradictory to draw on the theoretical perspectives of both Bourdieu and Foucault; however, it should be stressed that, within this research project, neither of these perspectives is appropriated in an absolute way. The methodological approach taken here draws on Bourdieu in certain very specific respects, particularly in its understanding the way in which *some* of the research participants articulate their interests as bids for cultural or subcultural distinction. The concept of subcultural capital is also critiqued through the findings of the thesis [see Conclusions, p. 229]. The thesis draws on Foucault in its broader understanding of discourse and power; that is, as Callewaert suggests, as a means of *conceptualising* discourses surrounding censorship. In particular, it re-considers Kuhn's appropriation of Foucault, and conceptualises an alternative model of the censorship process as one of 'boundary construction-imagined controversy-prohibition' (see chapter 1, p. 44).

Methodological Tools

The principal methodological tools that I developed to gather the empirical data for the project were an online quali-quantitative questionnaire and two types of semi-structured interviews. Additionally, a range of ancillary resources including newspaper, magazine and Internet reviews, marketing materials, interviews, classificatory documents, and debates and discussions on Internet forums and message boards were all examined in order to establish the discursive frameworks in which these films were received, enjoyed and contested by different audiences. In this regard the study employed a mixed-method

approach that operated in a number of key stages: each stage of the research informed the design and scope of the stage that followed it; this facilitated a multi-stage method in which the later (empirical) phases of the research were directed by the preceding ones.

The study began with an investigation into classificatory documents and debates surrounding each of the films. Initially this stage of the research functioned to establish which films to include in the online questionnaire; studying debates in fan forums identified films that were considered to be markers of extreme cinema in this category. Most frequently, the *Guinea Pig* series and *Visitor Q* were used in this context to indicate the most 'extreme' films within the category.⁵⁹ This stage of the research also identified *Ichi the Killer*, *The Isle* and *Grotesque* as films that had either been cut or rejected by the BBFC, making all three highly relevant case studies for exploring the boundaries of extreme cinema. The next stage of the research process involved a survey of fans' favourite Asian Extreme film lists on the Internet. This established *Battle Royale*, *Oldboy*, *Audition* and *Suicide Club* as important films to include in the project in that they were very popular and their inclusion would help to ensure a higher level of participation with the online questionnaire. *Suicide Club* was a potentially interesting case at this point of the research, as it had not been formally released in the UK. Finally, having researched a range of academic and popular definitions of Asian Extreme cinema, it emerged that Fruit Chan was frequently listed as a director associated with this category of films; for this reason *Dumplings* was added to the list of ten films included in the questionnaire.⁶⁰

Following on from this initial overview of some of the ancillary materials, I collected together a further range of film reviews, interviews, Internet articles and forum threads to investigate uses of the term 'extreme'.⁶¹ This stage of the research alerted me to some key aspects of the discursive frameworks surrounding the films, such as debates about the different roles of Internet communities in promoting the films, arguments put forward about Tartan as a distributor drawing on notions of orientalism, connections and discussions made in different contexts between and about extreme cinema and pornography, issues surrounding film censorship in the UK, and a range of claims circulating about various figures of the audience in relation to this group of films. It also highlighted an interesting discrepancy in differences between the value and significance attached to each film title by different groups and sectors of the film review industry, which informed my decision to

interview two professional fans who review Asian Extreme films for online publications. Finally, an additional collection of twelve reviews and articles were gathered around the DVD release of *Suicide Club* in September 2011. These materials were supplemented by academic analyses of marketing materials produced by Tartan (Dew 2007; Martin 2009).

Questionnaires are most commonly used as tools in quantitative audience research; they are often conceived to provide the data and evidence with which to make broad assertions and draw out generalisations about their participants. Although the questionnaire designed for this project is quali-quantitative, and has not been developed as a tool for making broad generalisations about audiences of Asian Extreme films, the process of conducting the questionnaire bears many similarities with the procedures for conducting the operations of a large-scale quantitative questionnaire. Schrøder et al. (2003: 180) propose that quantitative researchers need to pay particular attention to three tasks: operationalization (defining the research questions and developing instruments for gathering and measuring data); generalization (setting the sample size and frame); and inferential analysis (using methods such as cross-tabulation to analyse the results of the survey). In several ways the first steps taken to design and develop the questionnaire were influenced by the 2006/07 research project investigating audience responses to films containing sexual violence (Barker et al, 2008). This project recognised 'the necessity for the BBFC to consider how films may shape audiences' feelings and attitudes beyond the cinema' (Barker et al. 2007: 5). For this reason the online questionnaire designed for this purpose included questions which allowed the research team to examine the ways in which audiences remembered aspects of each of the five films. After the empirical data was gathered and analysed, a five-part classification was devised to categorise the ways in which moments from a film become memorable and meaningful to audiences. For similar reasons, the questionnaire also included questions to encourage participants to recall sections of favourite films (see Appendix 2, Question 1). Other questions aimed to establish the viewing strategies, patterns of enjoyment and ways in which audiences understood the term 'extreme'.

During the first stage of the research project it became clear, through an analysis of activity in online forums, that the Asian Extreme category is a highly contested one. The online forums which most frequently discussed these films were either devoted to Asian

films and media in general, or were more broadly focused on the horror genre; it became apparent quite early on, therefore, that it would be useful to differentiate between these two very different communities on the questionnaire, as a means to evaluate the different pleasures they derived from the films. Although only one forum, Snowblood Apple, described itself as a forum devoted to the discussion of Asian Extreme films, it was decided that one orientation option should be for fans of the category; this was because one the original remits for the research project established in discussions with the BBFC was to study fans of Asian Extreme films. Having identified these three main audience orientations towards the category, I then deliberated over whether or not to create categories to represent the less prominent online film communities (in relation to the category), such as forums dedicated to cult cinema, independent cinema and world cinema. After studying some of forums devoted to these interests (which referenced Asian Extreme films), it became apparent that the category was, for many members of these communities, part of a much broader and discerning interest in film culture. For this reason, I decided that rather than create a number of minor categories for each of these orientations, I would instead create a fourth category that encapsulated this broader range of film interests. Finally, I added an additional category for occasional viewers, to represent the interests of those who might have only seen one or two of the films listed on the questionnaire. As a result, the decision was finally made to offer participants five options on the questionnaire that allowed them to orientate themselves towards the films in a range of ways that reflected these findings (see Appendix 2, Question (d)).

The wording used to define the five orientation categories was developed by studying the descriptions and discussions found used by users of the online forums which were studied. This revealed that forums dedicated to Asian cinema most often used terms such as 'love' and 'passion' to describe their relationship with Asian films, and were reluctant to describe themselves as fan communities. Online horror forums, on the other hand, more frequently described themselves as having an 'interest' in extreme horror. Whilst the choice of wording was difficult to get right, it was essential to mirror these communal expressions of interest as closely as possible, in order to effectively capture the very different key orientations towards Asian Extreme films; in this respect, the wording chosen was deliberate and ethnographically inspired. It could be argued, however, that in

using these descriptive terms (fan/passionate/interest) in conjunction with specific interests (Asian Extreme/Asian Cinema/Extreme Horror), I made it impossible to distinguish precisely what the respondents were affirming: whether it was a particular filmic interest, or their relationship to it. However, had the term 'fan' been used in all three orientation descriptions, this may have led (based on my initial research findings) to a disproportionate number of respondents selecting the fourth orientation-type; the ability to distinguish between (what I projected, at the design stage, to be) the four key orientation types might, as a result, have been blurred or lost entirely. Therefore, whilst the design of this question was difficult to get absolutely right, it was nevertheless developed very carefully, with the clear rationale of establishing, and differentiating between, the distinctive interests of audiences for this category of films.

The orientation categories used on the online questionnaire also formed one of the principal structures for categorising the research participants and identifying some significant patterns of response. Developing categories for interpreting relatively large quantities of data is always tricky and can lead to unhelpful generalisations. It was also true, in this study, that many of the research participants did not *want* to be categorised; their responses indicated that this was linked to the negative stereotyping of audiences for extreme horror films they had encountered prior to taking part in the research. Having established, through the reception study, the extent to which negative stereotyping of Asian Extreme audiences had taken place in both the mainstream and specialist press, it was therefore important that the orientation options offered to the participants were positive affirmations; these then formed the five categories for analysing the findings. Other audience researchers have developed systems to categorise research respondents in dependence on their findings. Barker et al. use the categories 'embracers', 'refusers' and 'ambivalents' to analyse patterns of response to films containing sexual violence (2007: 2); whilst this might be useful when investigating a specific issue (sexual violence on screen), I didn't feel this type of categorisation would be helpful in interpreting the complex responses to the Asian Extreme category. In fan studies, Jonathan Gray has been instrumental in developing the categories 'anti-fan' and 'non-fan' to analyse different types of audience response (2003); whilst useful for contrasting other audience perspectives alongside those of fans, these categories are very broad and could be interpreted by some

research participants as being unnecessarily negative and fan-centric. Having considered some of the different options for categorising the research participants and interpreting their responses, I therefore decided to use the ones they had self-selected on the questionnaire.

The design of the questionnaire provides opportunities to cross-tabulate quantitative and qualitative responses; this allows for qualitative data to be usefully framed by quantitative information, and for interesting findings generated by quantitative data to be clarified and explored using the qualitative information. In this way, it is possible for a questionnaire to generate findings with a level of complexity and depth usually associated with focus groups and interviews, but with a much broader range of respondents. In this regard, a quali-quantitative questionnaire is not subject to the same pitfalls as those identified by Annette Hill in her pilot study for investigating viewer responses to violent films. Hill's conclusion, based on the view the questionnaires can only be used for gathering quantitative data, was that it would be of little use in a small-scale study (Hill 1997: 8); however, as research undertaken by and Cherry (1999) Barker et al has illustrated, quali-quantitative questionnaires can generate complex and in-depth data if designed carefully.

A key issue in designing any form of social survey or questionnaire is sampling. One way to approach this issues is to try to engage in 'probability sampling' which aims to be representative in its scope; however, this is dependent on many other factors such as detailed knowledge of the distribution of a population, and so on, and therefore requires additional expertise and the funding to support it. The other approach is to take 'nonprobability samples' which are constructed with a purpose, to find something out. When constructing the questionnaire for the *Lord of the Rings project*, Barker and Mathijs argued 'the best way to reach quickly the huge target population needed for our research, cheaply and manageably, was to use Internet sampling' (Barker and Mathijs 2008: 222). However, this method still brings issues with it in that there are significantly fewer older Internet users, and therefore the sample is biased towards a younger segment of the population. A further hindrance with Internet sampling is that, as with any indirectly administered research format, 'the defect of self-completed interviews is their low response rate: respondents have little motivation to do the work' (Schrøder et al 2003: 246). The choice of Internet sampling also affects the style of the questionnaire and the amount of

'briefing' that the participants require. In this case, I provided two options: a short introduction that outlined the overall purpose of the project (see Appendix 3) and a longer explanation that provided background information about the project supervisors, the research tradition and so on (see Appendix 4). Schrøder et al point out that the level of disclosure about a project may be a factor that creates a bias in the results, and reference the British Psychological Society's observation that participant responses are often moderated when they know the general purpose of the research project (Schrøder et al.: 247). However, the ethical considerations of my research project meant that it was important to avoid deliberately deceiving participants by withholding information. Therefore, the briefing provided for participants was written with the purpose of being as straightforward and accurate as was possible, and also guaranteed anonymity for those who participated.

In total there were 709 questionnaire responses, of which 660 were submitted online and 49 were paper responses (received primarily at the *Cine-Excess* conference in May 2011, from audience members at a screening of *Audition* in Glasgow in late October 2011, and from people attending the *Abertoir* festival in Aberystwyth in November 2011). The questionnaire went online in February 2011. Initially a link to the questionnaire was posted on five Internet forums dedicated to the fandom of Asian Extreme films, Asian horror films, Asian films, cult films or, simply, horror films. These forums were chosen because the category of Asian Extreme films is a complicated one for reasons already discussed, and does not equate with one particular genre of film. For this reason every effort was made to recruit participants who were fans of Asian cinema and cult cinema as much as those who gravitated towards extreme cinema and the horror genre. Over the course of the following twelve months that the questionnaire remained online, this expanded to include a wider spectrum of sixteen specialist forums, such as one dedicated to horror literature and another that shared horror knitting patterns; it was also posted on message boards attached to mainstream websites such as imdb.com and amazon.co.uk. Furthermore, a small number of Internet magazines and websites also published links to the questionnaire and it was shared 117 times on Facebook and re-tweeted 22 times on Twitter. Seven Internet magazines and websites ran brief news articles about the questionnaire, although it is possible that there were others.⁶² Finally, several film and media departments at UK

universities encouraged their students to take part in the research project in the autumn of 2011. Although it cannot be claimed that the sample is representative of viewers of this category of films (there is an obvious bias towards recruitment via the Internet, for example), a sustained effort was made to attract participants with a range of film interests.

The questionnaire responses were then cross-tabulated in order to identify patterns of responses. Of the seventeen questions included in the questionnaire, nine provided tick-box options and eight provided space for the respondents to write longer answers qualifying their responses to previous answers. The first stage of this process therefore involved thirty-five separate cross-tabulations to establish patterns of responses between the tick box questions. This stage of the analysis established several key patterns of response, such as a strong aversion amongst all participants towards self-identifying as a fan, a tendency for female respondents to self-identify as having an interest in extreme horror, and a tendency for male respondents to self-identify as being passionate about Asian cinema in general. This, in turn, led to a closer investigation of gendered responses to the qualitative questions, and to an in-depth search of key words, and combinations of key words, such as fan, fandom, extreme, censorship and so on.

Initially, I had considered holding focus groups as part of the second stage of the research process. However, this possibility did not develop beyond a tentative proposal for two key reasons. Firstly, as the films had been released in the UK a number of years prior to the project, there was no opportunity to organise focus groups following screenings of the films. This also meant that any focus groups that would be conducted would involve bringing together a disparate group of individuals rather than members of a naturally-occurring audience. Secondly, it became clear through the questionnaire responses that this category of films touched on a number of sensitive issues for some of the respondents and provoked emotions such as embarrassment and shame; these types of responses were important to the project, but might have been difficult to explore in the context of a focus group. As Meyer (2008) points out, the individual interview is also particularly suitable for exploring issues of a sensitive nature, about which people may be too shy to respond in a group context. Schrøder et al. also note that the individual interview 'eliminates the possibility of group pressure' and thus results in a 'higher possibility ... for holding informants individually accountable for specific discursive positions on an issue' (2003: 154).

A semi-structured one-to-one interview offers similar levels of flexibility and informality as a focus group; the interview can generate naturalistic talk and provide opportunities to clarify points with the participant. As with focus groups, the interview remains a non-natural encounter set up for the purposes of research, and can therefore also be susceptible to 'moderator demand' (where the participant modifies their responses in relation to what they think the interviewer wants to hear). There are, however, some key differences between focus group interviews and individual depth interviews. Firstly, while 'moderator demand' is still an issue, the individual interview does not risk the conformity of response that is possible in a focus group. Schrøder et al. also argue that the individual interview is the best way to access 'the whole array of cultural discourses that the individual inhabits – for the simple reason that it does not try to build any of them into the interview situation' (1994: 342). Even when interviewed alone, participants may draw on recalled conversations with others, conceptions of imagined communities, and other factors that display their connection within the wider media culture. For this reason, Schrøder argues that it is a highly productive research implement which can be adapted to uncover reading strategies developed within interpretive communities regardless of the fact that the participant is interviewed on their own (Schrøder 2009: 341).

The interview subjects were recruited during the early stages of publicising the online questionnaire. A request for participants was made on Internet forums that carried links to the questionnaire and respondents were then chosen for two reasons. Firstly, eight of the interviewees were selected with the purpose of capturing a cross-section of different audience types. This meant ensuring that there were participants who represented all of the orientation categories (with the exception of the occasional viewers, of whom none came forward to be interviewed), that there was a reasonable balance between male and female interviewees, and that there was a broad spread of age ranges that reflected the questionnaire population of responses. Initially it was difficult recruiting female participants, and the request for volunteers had to be re-posted on a knitting website to address this deficit. This stage of the recruitment process resulted in five male and three female subjects aged between nineteen and fifty-two being interviewed for the project; the sample comprises two representatives from each of the remaining four orientation categories used in the online questionnaire.

The second rationale for selecting interviewees related to their professional involvement in the distribution and reception of Asian Extreme films in the UK. The four participants who were interviewed for this reason identified themselves as having expertise in this area during the early stages of the research project. Two of these interviewees were film reviewers writing for specialist online film magazines, and two were involved in the distribution of Asian films in the UK. All four of these interviewees were male and aged between twenty-five and fifty-five. The question schedule for the first group of participants was designed to explore particular issues that arose out of responses to the questionnaire, such as questions of genre, marketing, and access to the films (see Appendix 2). A set of additional questions was then produced for the second group of interviewees; these were designed to facilitate a closer exploration of the cross-cultural networks surrounding the distribution of Asian Extreme films in a British context (see Appendix 2, Question 7). The four interviewees with a professional relationship to the category also provided answers to the first schedule of questions. The interviews were then analysed using elements of discourse analysis which have already been discussed.

Conclusions

This chapter has located the project within the broad fields of cultural studies and audience research. Unlike research conducted in the 'effects tradition', I avoid predetermining the results of the research by asking questions that aim to prove or disprove a particular theoretical approach. Instead, my methodological approach makes a concerted attempt to understand the specific ways in which audiences enjoy and respond to this group of films and the kind of pleasures associated with these responses; this understanding then functions to guide the design and multi-stage process of the empirical study. Recognising that the research participants' responses are culturally and discursively framed in complex ways that need to be acknowledged as far as is possible is therefore key to this mixed-method, multi-stage approach. Additionally, the research methodology is influenced by ethnographically-inspired approaches to understanding audiences; these are developed with the purpose of making explicit the relationship between myself as researcher and the research participants as a means to produce a more complex and nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which discourses circulate between audiences, institutions and

academic researchers. This is achieved through the use of particular concepts, such as 'interpretive communities' and 'viewing strategies'. The 'ethnographically inspired' methodological tools frequently used in cultural studies work, such as semi-structured interviews, are appropriate research implements for this project in that they offer opportunities for gaining detailed insights into audiences' understanding and enjoyment of this group of films. The quali-quantitative questionnaire provides an invaluable tool for establishing patterns of responses amongst participants and frameworks for analysing the qualitative data. Finally, the different approaches drawn from within the diverse field of discourse analysis establish my overarching aim of identifying patterns across and within discourses, and situating these within broader institutional and cultural contexts.

Fanboys, Feminists and Horror Knitters

Introduction

A preliminary overview of the questionnaire findings generated four key clusters of findings. This chapter addresses the first two of these, which primarily relate to issues surrounding fandom and gender. These findings are firstly considered in the light of the claims made about the figure of the 'fanboy' cultist by Rayns and other cultural commentators. This analysis partly follows a tradition within fan studies of examining and contesting the ways in which fans are characterised as pathological and excessive by 'mainstream' cultural commentators (Jensen 1992; Jenkins 1992). Discussions of fandom are then further contextualised by an exploration of one of the key findings generated by the questionnaire: that a very high percentage of respondents chose not to align themselves with any particular cinematic passion, fandom or interest, despite displaying high levels of expertise about the films. In particular, I explore how 'anti-mainstream' responses, which have often been understood as characteristic of cult film fandoms (Jancovich 2003), are reconfigured by the research participants to form a different kind of taste distinction. Following this, there is an investigation of the findings relating to gender and female audiences which were brought into focus by examining the claims made about 'fanboy' audiences. This analysis centres on responses relating to the viewing practices revealed by some of the female respondents, and the controversial issue of sexual violence that is often linked to these practices.

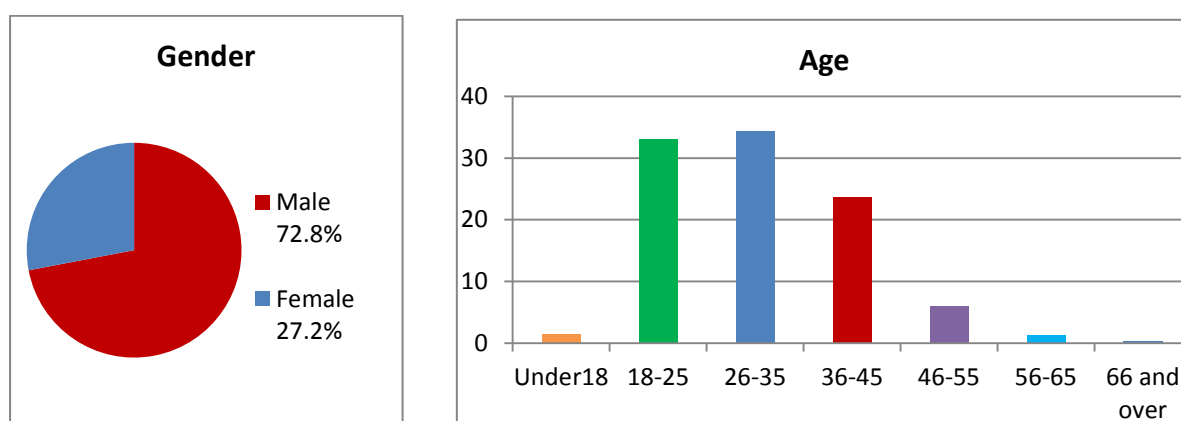
The different ways in which respondents choose to orient themselves towards Asian Extreme films is central to the interpretative strategies used to explore these two clusters of findings. Therefore, this chapter is prefaced by ten profiles of participant responses, two of each orientation-type. The profiles establish some of the competing valuations of the category that are articulated by the research participants; these draw on, use or are influenced by the discursive frameworks identified through the two small reception studies carried out in the initial stages of the project. Although it has been argued that aspects of personal identity such as gender and age may be performed by Internet users (see Turkle 1995: 643; Danet 1998: 130), the approach this research project adopts understands the performative nature of audience responses to be a valuable dimension of their fan

pleasures and practices; these aspects of participant responses reveal the way in which fans position themselves socially, and construct their identities and pleasures in relation to broader cultural discourses. Therefore, the sense in which certain aspects of audience responses captured through the online questionnaire are constructed and performed by the participants does not in any way undermine their value as expressions of fandom.

Background Information:

Age, Gender, Location and Orientation of participants towards the Asian Extreme

Category



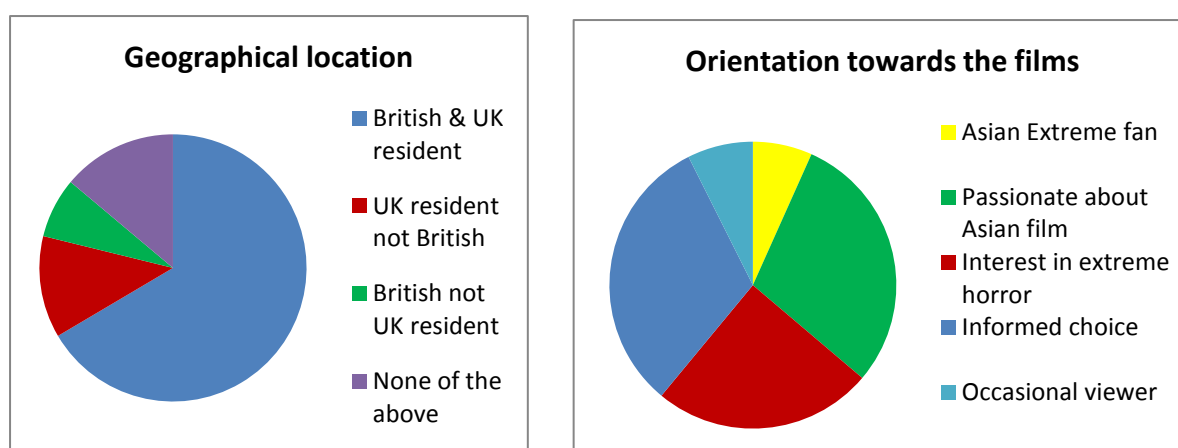
Figs.1 & 2: Gender and age range of all questionnaire participants

In some respects the information regarding the age and gender of the entire population of questionnaire respondents appears to confirm common claims made about audiences for this category of films. The majority of participants are male (72.8%) and are aged between 18 and 45 (90%); this data roughly corresponds with the assumptions made by several film reviewers and academics that Asian Extreme films attract a 'fanboy' audience (Rayns 2006: 16; Hamilton in Dew 2007: 61). Therefore, one avenue explored in this chapter is a consideration of the ways in which the findings query these stereotypical qualities attributed to the figure of the 'fanboy'.

The next two questions provide background information about the research participants' geographical location, and the ways in which they choose to orient themselves towards this category of films. The question that asked respondents to identify their geographical location was included primarily because of the institutional context of the research project, which meant there was a need to establish the percentage of participants that were either British or resident in the UK. Although the data generated by this question

does not have a major impact on the rest of the findings, there are some striking patterns that emerge in relation to geographical location and the issue of fandom, which are discussed below.

The initial aim of the research project was to develop an in-depth understanding of the fan practices and cultures associated with Asian Extreme films in the UK. During the first stage of the research project it became clear that the Asian Extreme category appeals to a number of different groups of fans and types of audiences [see Chapter 3, p. 115-6]. As a result, the questionnaire was constructed to offer participants five options that allowed them to orient themselves towards the films in a range of ways which reflected these overlapping fandoms and competing forms of appreciation for the category.



Figs. 3 & 4: Geographical location of all respondents and their orientation towards the films

The response to the question about orientation revealed that most of the respondents were reluctant to consider themselves to be fans of this category of films; only 6.7% identified themselves as fans of Asian Extreme cinema, which is a smaller percentage of the overall population than those who considered themselves to be occasional viewers (7.4%).

Although links to the questionnaire were posted in online forums developed for and by fans of Asian Extreme cinema, there was clearly a general disinclination amongst audiences of these films to categorise themselves in this way. One possible, though unlikely, explanation for this outcome was that the majority of the respondents were casual viewers with little emotional investment in this category of films. This possibility can be partly considered through an analysis of how many films the research participants had watched. The responses to this question indicate that while occasional viewers have seen considerably fewer of the ten films, respondents selecting each of the other four orientation-types led to

the generation of remarkably similar percentages of figures with respect to which films they have seen. This finding was double-checked by further sub-dividing each of the five orientation-types into those who had seen 1-3 films, those who had seen 4-7 films and those who had seen 8-10 films.

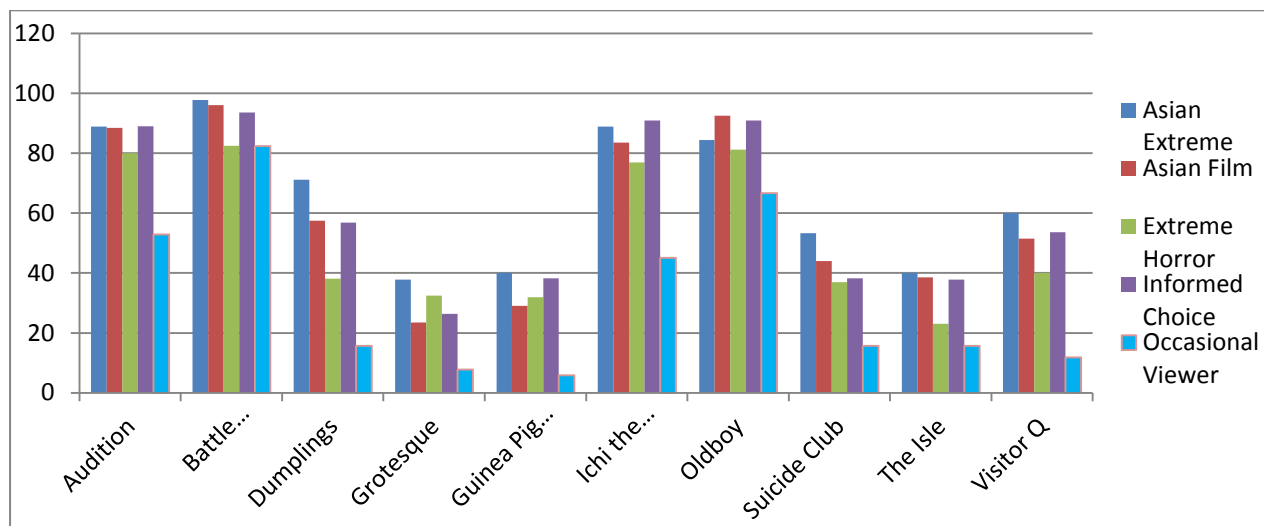


Fig. 5: Graph illustrating how many films seen by respondents of each orientation-type

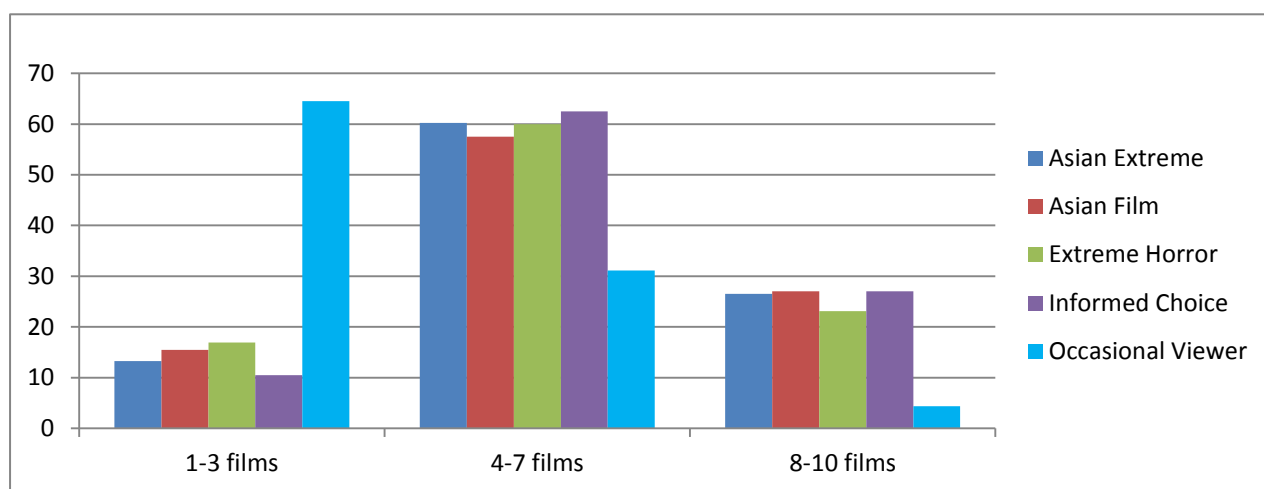


Fig 6: Graph illustrating how many films were seen by respondents (in three broader categories) according to orientation-type.

The graphs above illustrate that, with the exception of occasional viewers, each of the other four categories of orientation-types are as fully invested in their interest in Asian Extreme films as each other; in fact, those respondents who consider themselves to make an informed choice are marginally more likely to have seen four or more films than any of the other orientation-types. It seems fair to conclude, therefore, that the reason why some

respondents have chosen to avoid categorising themselves as fans is *not* because they haven't seen very many of the ten films listed.

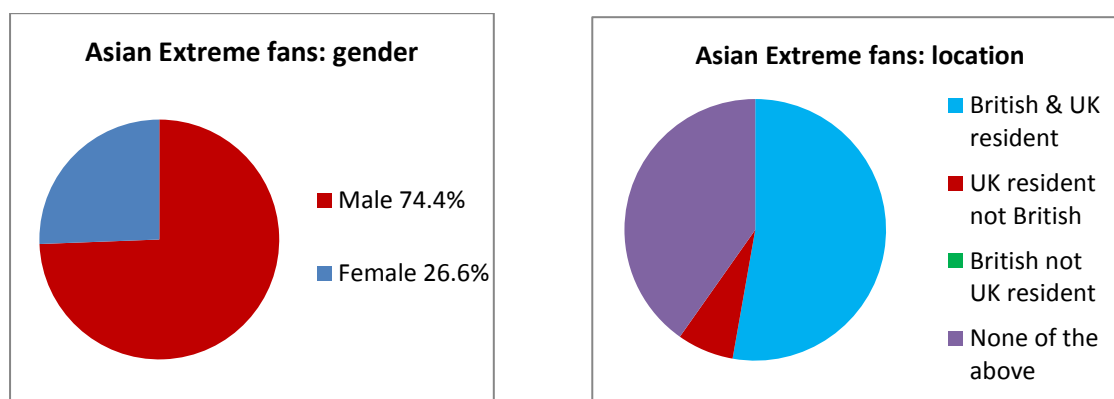
Another possible explanation for this finding is that there might be an aversion to the label 'fan'. This is not an example of anti-fandom as it is understood by Jonathan Gray (2003: 70-74) whereby a strong distaste is expressed for a particular form of media, sport or person; rather, it is an aversion to being *labelled* a fan. In her discussion of the different uses made of labels such as a 'fan' and 'connoisseur', Roberta Pearson argues that the issue of class is key to understanding these uses; she suggests that 'the worthwhile and specialized knowledge accredited to the aficionados/cognoscenti/connoisseurs implies a higher class position than that of the fans/buffs/enthusiasts and devotees' (Pearson 2007: 103). The aversion to adopting the label 'fan' demonstrated by research participants could therefore be indicative of a bid for cultural and social distinction.

A further possibility is that the research participants are responding to the very specific negative stereotyping that audiences associated with this particular category of films attracts, as already identified in the reception study [see Chapter 2, pp. 69-71]. The negative stereotyping of fans has been an on-going focus of research by fan scholars over the last twenty years, who contest the various ways in which fans are characterised as deviant and obsessive by 'mainstream' cultural commentators (Jensen 1992; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2012). Although there have recently been several attempts to re-evaluate the necessity for this type of research, via claims that 'fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption' (Gray et al 2007: 9), this perspective remains contested. Melissa Click, for example, examines negative stereotyping of female fans of the *Twilight* series, and argues that a gendered prejudice against them persists. Click contends that 'fanboys have greater visibility in popular culture because their interests and activities have become an unspoken standard' whereas 'fangirls' interests and strategies, which do not register when positioned against 'fanboys', are ignored—or worse, ridiculed' (Click 2009). Click's research highlights the issue of gender in relation to fan stereotyping. Matt Hills also studies the negative stereotyping of *Twilight* fans and argues that their stigmatization is an example of rivalry between competing fandoms 'whereby one fandom defines itself against and negatively stereotypes another' (Hills 2012: 121). Hills argues that the practice of inter-fandom rivalries often incorporates a disdain for a younger

generation of fans; it therefore hinges not only on gender but also on age as a point of discrimination. These recent studies of negative fan stereotyping offer several possible approaches for interpreting the aversion to the ‘fan’ label demonstrated by the participants in this project, and are considered further throughout the chapter.

The orientation that proved to be most popular amongst research respondents was the statement ‘I watch Asian Extreme films on the basis of the individual film and what I know/hear about it’.⁶³ If the suggestion that making an individual and informed choice is appealing to respondents, this implies that it is important for this group of respondents to construct themselves as discerning viewers, possibly with a wider range of interests in film and other forms of culture; this indicates that the disinclination towards self-identifying as a fan might be part of a wider bid for cultural distinction. A second emergent avenue of exploration in this chapter, therefore, is an investigation into the constructions and disavowals of fandom amongst respondents.

Overview of fans of Asian Extreme films



Figs. 7 & 8: Gender and geographical location of Asian Extreme fans

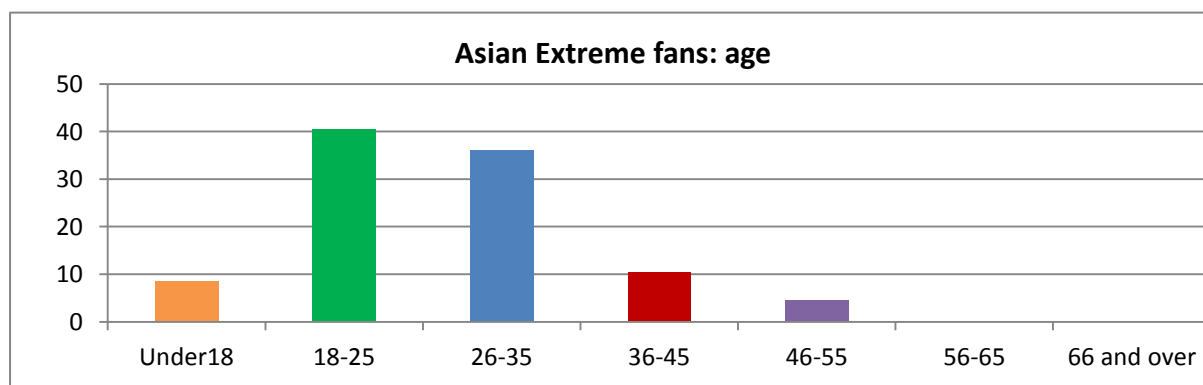


Fig. 9: Age range of all Asian Extreme fans

Figures 7, 8 and 9 indicate several features about the small percentage of respondents who identify themselves as fans of Asian Extreme films. Firstly, they reveal that within this group of participants, 36.5% are not British (many identify themselves as being North American); this compares with just 14.3% of the overall population. In fact, the majority of respondents who identified themselves as 'none of the above' (i.e., not British or resident in the UK) also identified themselves as fans. This could suggest that, particularly amongst North American participants, there is less of a stigma or disinclination attached to identifying oneself as a fan of Asian Extreme films. The tendency amongst the entire questionnaire population to avoid the 'fan' label might therefore be culturally specific to British audiences, and linked to the reception of the films in the UK. The fans of Asian Extreme films are also younger than average, with 48.9% under the age of 25 and 85% under the age of 35, compared with 34.7% (under 25) and 69% (under 35) within the overall population; this indicates that the inclination to categorise oneself as a fan is stronger amongst younger respondents. This is confirmed by the age distribution of respondents amongst the other four orientation-types, discussed below. In terms of gender, however, there is very little that differentiates this group from the overall population; for this reason one male and one female profile for this orientation-type are profiled below, both aged under 35.

First profile of an Asian Extreme Fan: Jeff

Jeff is male, aged 18-25 and non-British (he explains that he is North American, but has also lived in the UK and the United Arab Emirates). He has seen seven of the ten films listed on the online questionnaire, and his favourites are *Oldboy*, *Suicide Club* and *Visitor Q*.⁶⁴ In his explanation of the term 'extreme' Jeff explains that he equates it with 'heightened gore, sexuality, often rape, violence, and all of those transnational taboos meant to, and made to, make you uncomfortable'. In several of his answers to the questionnaire he also makes the point that he thinks there are good and bad films within the Asian Extreme category, as with any other genre; the implication here is that a 'good' film will make him feel uncomfortable in some way, whereas a 'bad' film will be more predictable, and will therefore fail to challenge him. Although Jeff categorises himself as a fan of these films, he also displays an awareness of the discourse surrounding the origin of the category as a marketing strategy and argues that

it would be easy to dismiss a lot of what goes on in Asian Extreme Cinema (which, admittedly, is a false genre) as simply being gory movies from a strange “Other” culture where they come up with wild and wacky things us Westerners just think are crazy, but the fact is you compare this stuff to *Machine Girl* or *The Ring* and you realize that the uncreative extreme stuff is just as predictable as the Western stuff.

Here, Jeff challenges the idea that fans of Asian Extreme films are attracted to their Asian ‘Other-ness’ with the observation that, for him, not all of the films within this category hold the same appeal, and by providing two examples of ‘uncreative’ examples of the genre. This comment reiterates how important it is to Jeff that these films are provocative rather than predictable; his attraction to this category lies in their ability to make him feel uncomfortable, rather than in their provenance. Jeff also explains how he views the successful marketing techniques developed by Tartan as a positive and productive phenomenon:

I used to work in a DVD rental store and I have to say Asian Extreme movies were very useful to me in pushing and promoting foreign film in general. You’d get some guy coming in asking for something like *Hostel* or *Inglourious Basterds*, you point them towards *Inglourious Bastards* and *Gozu*. Once they see *Gozu*, you show them some *Man Bites Dog*, if they get that far they’re ready to watch *Onibaba* or *Eyes without a Face*. And so on. That’s why J-horror and K-horror eventually got the attention of the West ultimately. The remakes of the tamer stuff helped immensely but people kept staying around because of the flashiness of the Extreme label--the violence, gore, and sex you “could not get from American films” which you could, but only for low budget usually direct-to-DVD. It explains how I got interested in Asian Extreme and how I got others interested in it. Asian Extreme, in the end, isn’t really a unique trend or genre, but its good marketing.

This approach, which celebrates the success of Tartan’s marketing tactics as a means of introducing like-minded people to a more specialist area of cinema, is echoed by several other research participants who concede that the label has served a useful purpose in the promotion of Asian films in English-speaking countries. Therefore, although Jeff acknowledges the inauthenticity of the category, as a ‘false genre’, he simultaneously uses it to construct a position of expertise within the film community, describing his role as a sort of gatekeeper. In this respect, his reading of Tartan’s marketing strategies reflects the arguments made by Eric Schaeffer in relation to fans of exploitation films [see Chapter 2, p. 52], in that Jeff is complicit in recognising and promoting the ‘ballyhoo’ nature of the promotional materials.

As with most questionnaire respondents who categorised themselves as fans of Asian Extreme films, it is extremely important for Jeff to see the uncut versions of the films. He describes himself as 'one of those 100% anti-censorship people' and, even though he is not British, his longest response is given in answer to the question about the BBFC's approach to the issue of 'harm' (1134 words). Here, he goes to significant length to explain why an interest in these films does not make him in any way deviant or more likely to engage in acts of sexual violence; in this way he is responding to discourses circulating in mainstream contexts about extreme cinema and its 'effects' on audiences. He also displays extensive knowledge of censorship practices and cases in the US, UK and other countries. In answer to the final question on the questionnaire Jeff writes:

All of the films on the list that you have provided that I have seen are "about something." The movies that really disturb me in a way that causes me to feel ill are the ones that use the tactics of extreme cinema without the point. Movies like *Hostage* with Bruce Willis, *Taken* with Liam Neeson, and *300* with Gerard Butler are a thousand times more disturbing to me for the fact that they get accepted and embraced, despite no significant overall message and a variety of darker subtexts.

This response is similar to those made by many other research participants in that Jeff favourably compares Asian Extreme films to Hollywood movies. Specifically, he makes the argument that Asian Extreme films have a 'point' and are 'about something', unlike many Hollywood films that lack an 'overall message'. In this way Jeff asserts the category's 'anti-mainstream' status to make a bid for subcultural distinction; this 'anti-mainstream' discourse is echoed by many of the other respondents to the online questionnaire and is considered in further detail below.

Second profile of an Asian Extreme fan: Lauren

Lauren is female, aged 26-35 and British. She has seen seven of the questionnaire's ten films, her favourites being *Audition*, *Dumplings* and the *Guinea Pig* series.⁶⁵ She collects the films and usually buys DVDs online, although sometimes she downloads them. Lauren's understanding of 'extreme' in this context is films that are 'inaccessible' and that 'seek to elicit a strong response'; she later goes on to explain that this is 'extremely important' to her. Lauren frames her discussion of these films in a very thoughtful and personal way. Before answering several of the questions she makes the point that she has spent a significant period of time thinking through her responses; in answer to Question 3, for

example, Lauren says she will say more on the subject in answer to Questions 4 and 6, clearly indicating that she has read through the questionnaire and planned her answers carefully in advance before filling it in. In her discussion of specific scenes from the *Guinea Pig* films, Lauren explains that part of their attraction is that they make her 'feel slightly on edge and slightly filthy for watching it and on some level I really enjoy that.' She goes on to explain this in more detail when discussing the importance of 'extreme-ness' in her response to the films:

It is extremely important to me. I have a strong dislike for safe, mainstream forms of entertainment, especially when it comes to film. I have a very short attention span. I have thought long and hard about it and I put it largely down to the fact that I find it really difficult to relate to the world around me – for example, I watch Hollywood films and I just can't connect with what's happening on the screen. Most of it passes me completely by, I feel nothing for anyone in the film. They bore me. I just can't identify with mainstream cinema – I feel very strongly that they are just not designed for people like me, like I am watching something very alien to me. I watch a film like *Audition*, or *Flowers of Flesh And Blood*, or *Grotesque*, or *Splatter: Naked Blood*, or *Evil Dead Trap*, and I really feel a very strong connection to the films. I feel someone is speaking to me on my level. I think it is my inability to relate and to connect with the world and with human beings that really draws me to extreme forms of entertainment as I need very strong images, sounds, sensations, etc. to be able to connect to them. It is almost a form of therapy for me in a way as, speaking not purely about Asian Extreme, but I'd say through extreme horror in general I have worked through a lot of negative emotions and learnt to accept and embrace my inner darkness and as a result am a lot happier with myself. Without that extreme element I think that couldn't have happened.

The cathartic nature of Lauren's engagement with Asian Extreme films is not unusual amongst female respondents to the questionnaire; it is linked to her personal identity, her engagement with broader cultural and social values and the disaffection she feels towards 'mainstream' culture. She also identifies a visceral quality that these films hold for her which, although difficult to articulate, is highly significant in her enjoyment of them. As with many other questionnaire respondents, this response is framed by a comparison with Hollywood films, which is later continued in answer to Question 11 (about the BBFC):

Whenever I hear the phrase sexual violence in relation to film censorship I feel annoyed. On a strictly personal level, I feel angry that as a woman I am somehow supposed to be offended by scenes that really don't offend me in the slightest. I feel way, way more offended by the depiction of women as mindless shoe-obsessed fools who fall helplessly in love in 90% of all films aimed at a female market than I do watching women being raped, tortured or humiliated

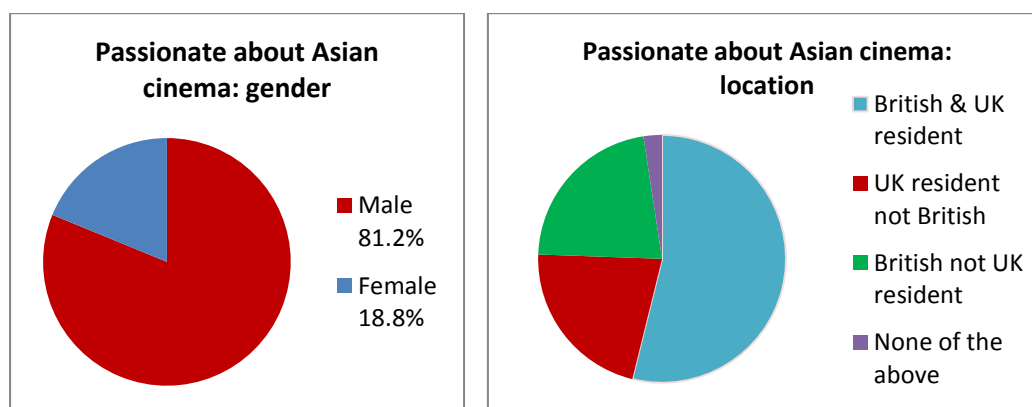
Although not all female respondents raise the issue of sexual violence, those that do often frame their discussion in a similar way, arguing that the representation of women in Hollywood films is more offensive than it is in Asian Extreme films; this feminist perspective is frequently linked to a dislike for rom-coms and the way that their narratives position women as somehow inadequate if they are not in a relationship with a man.⁶⁶ Interestingly, there is a link being made in Lauren's responses between the words 'safe', 'mainstream', 'Hollywood' and 'aimed at a female market'; the type of discourse she articulates therefore makes a bid for subcultural distinction in opposition to 'mainstream' or Hollywood conceptions of femininity. Like Jeff, Lauren's answer to Question 11 is the longest response that she provides, but in contrast to Jeff she frames her rejection of the BBFC's policy in a personal discussion of her response 'as a woman', rather than a more general discussion of issues surrounding film censorship and the notion of 'harm'.

The profiles of Jeff and Lauren reveal a number of significant patterns that are common to those who categorise themselves as fans of Asian Extreme films. They both value 'extreme-ness' very highly, and explore what this means to them through comparisons with different Hollywood films; they are both strongly anti-censorship and write extensively on this subject; and they both have a clear awareness of how audiences for Asian Extreme films are perceived and (mis-)understood. However, Jeff's fandom is framed in a less personal way, and one that relates to a wider community of film-goers; he positions himself as a gatekeeper. Lauren's responses are, in contrast, more confessional and revelatory in nature. In particular, Lauren uses the phrase 'as a woman' in three of her answers, which points to the significance of gender identity amongst female respondents; this forms an emergent pattern in participant responses. Whilst this study did not set out to examine gendered responses to Asian Extreme films, the preliminary questionnaire findings indicated that this is a dimension of the study that should not be overlooked; therefore, issues surrounding the role of gender in audience responses form an avenue of investigation explored throughout the rest of this chapter.⁶⁷

Overview of those who are passionate about Asian Cinema in general

In contrast with the fan respondents, those audiences who categorise themselves as being passionate about Asian Cinema are far more likely to be British, with only 2.9% ticking the

‘none of the above’ option in this group. They are also more likely to be male than any of the other audience types; 81.2% of this orientation group are male, a figure that is nearly 10% higher than the percentage of males in the overall population; for this reason, both of the profiles provided for this orientation-type are male. Furthermore, just over a quarter of this audience grouping are 36 and over (28.7%), a figure which is, again, marginally higher than in the overall sample (25.1%), and is reflected in the profiles chosen to represent this category.



Figs. 10 & 11: Gender and geographical location of respondents passionate about Asian Cinema

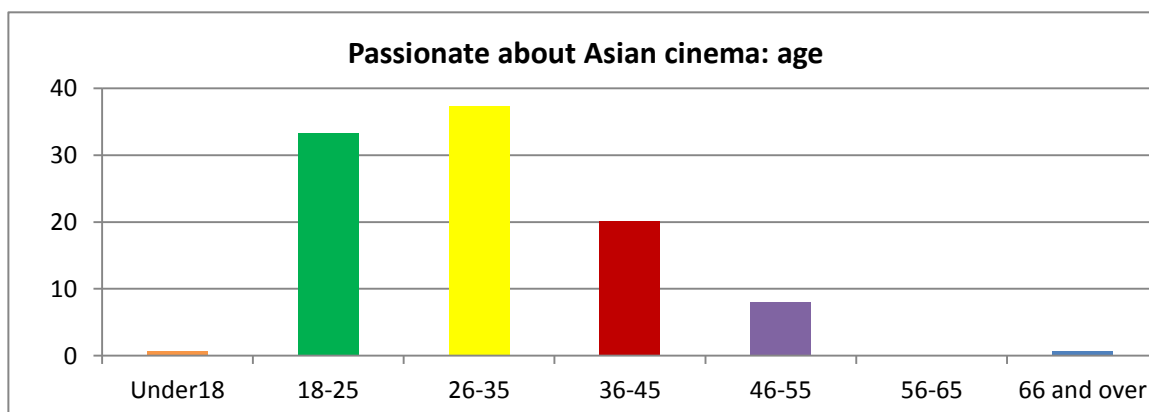


Fig. 12: Age range of respondents passionate about Asian Cinema

First profile of Asian Cinema respondent: Will

Will is male, aged 36-45 and British. He has seen nine of the questionnaire’s chosen films (all except for *Grotesque*) and his favourite titles are *Oldboy* and *The Isle*. He collects Asian Extreme films, buying Blu-ray copies in stores or online, and discusses the importance of watching them in high definition; these responses establish that Will values the films greatly and invests in them in order to maximise his enjoyment. In answer to the final question, Will

states that he speaks Japanese and has a long-standing interest in Japanese culture. Throughout his responses to the questionnaire Will's discussions of the films reveal a highly informed knowledge of Japanese and Korean cinema, for example, he refers to characters by their full names and frequently references the name of the actor playing them. All of these aspects of Will's responses indicate that he has a specialised knowledge of Asian Cinema that has developed over a considerable period of time. As with many of the questionnaire respondents, Will's understanding of 'extreme' films involves a comparison with Hollywood cinema:

There are different types of extremeness, but I guess in this context, it is about defining aspects of oriental cinema as rejecting the safeness of Hollywood, about a form of cinema that goes places American films don't go (except perhaps, occasionally in niche art-house or horror films).

However, unlike the fans of Asian Extreme films, Will does not rate 'extreme-ness' as being very significant to his enjoyment of these films; other elements, such as the narrative and character developments are identified as aspects of the films that provide him with the highest levels of pleasure. However, like Lauren, he associates Hollywood with 'safeness'. There is one aspect of Will's responses, though, that shares a common pattern with Jeff and Lauren, in that it is highly important for him to watch uncut versions of the films. Like them, his longest response is, again, in answer to Question 12:

I can understand this to a degree. In Japan the emergence of the ero-gurotesuku writers (and artists) in the early 20th century blurred the line between the erotic and the horrific. So a 70s Nikkatsu SM eiga starring Naomi Tani can be viewed as a horror film (the horror coming from the torture and sadism) or as a soft-core porn film. However, the "some viewers" is pretty vague. The whole BBFC 'rejection' would be fine if we were in the US, as this would keep it out of 'family' stores, and allow the uncut version to be sold online/ in specialist stores. Unfortunately this is not the US, and we do not have a constitutionally guaranteed right to 'freedom of speech'. Even when it's possible that a person could be affected in some ways by any kind of media I don't think that censorship is the right way to act about it. It's such a complex topic to look around and just blame it on the visual violence. If that was the case then we should hear of more cases of violent reactions in Asia where the public are more 'exposed' to it.

There are parallels here with Jeff's earlier discussion of censorship in different national contexts; what differentiates Will's answer to this question is the degree of his specialist knowledge about Japanese cinema and the way in which he establishes his connoisseurship of East Asian cinema through in-depth knowledge about actors, genres and specific forms of

Japanese culture. He is also more sympathetic to the BBFC's arguments, though ultimately argues that their policies don't fully convince him in the way that US regulatory policies do.

Second profile of Asian Cinema respondent: Oliver

Oliver is male, aged 36-45 and British. He has seen six of the questionnaire's ten titles and his favourite films are *Ichi the Killer*, *Oldboy* and *The Isle*. As with Will, Oliver is a high-end collector and owns many of these titles on Blu-ray, buying them either in stores or online. The concept of 'extreme-ness' is not all that important to Oliver, and he frames his discussion of it in terms of Tartan's marketing strategies:

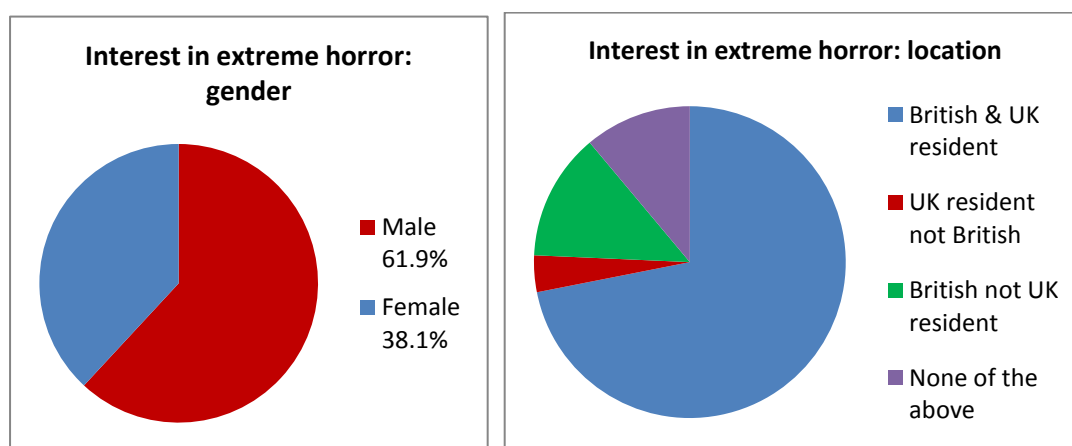
I think it is a sensational marketing tool. *Kill Bill* isn't marketed as "extreme" so why should these films be marketed as such? *Audition* has serious ties to *Misery*. I think that extreme has a lot to do with depictions of sexuality, namely rape, BDSM, incest, and other morally reprehensible behaviour. However, where then do films like *A Tale of Two Sisters* fit in?

The discourse surrounding Tartan's marketing strategies clearly plays a part in Oliver's evaluation of the category. As with other respondents, Oliver draws comparisons with Hollywood films and, more specifically, a reference is made here to a Tarantino film. In answer to the final question Oliver expands on this theme again and questions the term 'Asia Extreme', arguing 'We've had something around seven *Saw* films, three *Hostels*, umpteen Slasher flicks (where underage sex is depicted), so what is so shocking?' The comparison drawn here between Asian Extreme films and 'torture porn' titles is a frequently made one, with a distinction in taste forming around the assertion that Asian Extreme films are less 'gratuitous' than 'torture porn' titles. In particular, the discussion of films directed by Tarantino is an emergent point of reference amongst research participants; Tarantino's connection with Asian Extreme cinema as a 'gatekeeper auteur' has been explored at some length by Leon Hunt (2008: 222-225), and for some respondents he is clearly significant as being representative of a type of American filmmaker whose work *isn't* 'torture porn', (despite his associations with *Hostel* and Eli Roth); in this respect, Tarantino's work represents a form of artistic status that makes it somehow comparable to the Asian Extreme category. Oliver's discussion of the issues surrounding censorship is not as extensive as those produced by many of the other research participants; however, in line with many other respondents, he registers that it is very important for him to watch the uncut version

of a film. Here, Oliver offers the frequently made argument that this is due to the artistic merit associated with watching the films ‘as the director intended’.

Will and Oliver share many similarities with Jeff, then, in the way they frame their discussions of Asian Extreme films around debates surrounding marketing strategies, censorship issues and their connoisseurship of Asian Cinema. Both respondents make bids for cultural distinction in the way they elevate this category of films above ‘torture porn’ titles such as *Hostel* or the *Saw* franchise. What differentiates them from both Jeff and Lauren is that they are less inclined to value these films for their ability to disturb or provoke them in some way; in fact, the ‘torture porn’ category, which is synonymous with provocative and sexually violent imagery, is derided by this group of respondents. Instead, they value Asian Extreme films for their artistic merit and association with auteur directors, and are more inclined to see their provenance as a marker of quality.

Overview of those with an interest in Extreme Horror



Figs. 13 and 14: Gender and geographical location of respondents with an interest in Extreme Horror

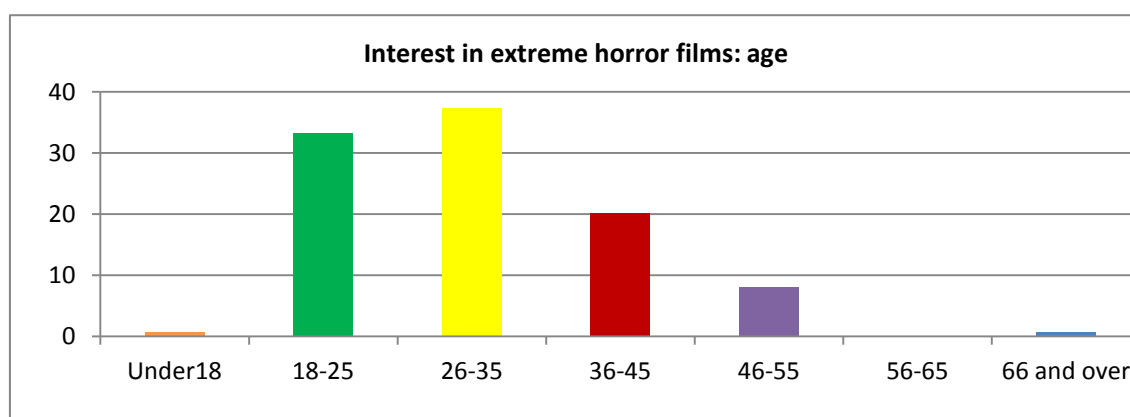


Fig.15: Age range of respondents with an interest in Extreme Horror

The most striking characteristic of the respondents who declare an interest in Extreme Horror is the high percentage of female respondents. 38.1% of respondents were female, a figure more than 10% higher than the percentage of females in the overall population. This raises some particularly interesting questions. Previous studies of female audiences of horror films have suggested that while there is a very significant interest in the horror genre amongst women, their preference is for vampire films, or for the gothic and the supernatural. One of the key findings of Brigid Cherry's research into female audiences of horror films was that 'there was general agreement over the types of horror preferred, films with haunting or tense atmospheres were preferred to those with explicit gore and violence' (Cherry 1999a: 71). Elsewhere, Cherry notes that 'tension and suspense were preferred over *shock and revulsion*.' (Cherry 2002: 173, my italics). However, as Lauren's response [above] indicates, some female viewers *do* like to feel 'filthy' and repulsed by what they see on screen. Cherry's research also revealed that approximately half of most audiences for horror films were female, so the fact that only 27.2% of respondents to this questionnaire were female could, in part, be explained by the fact that many Asian Extreme films contain extremely gory and violent scenes and therefore appeal to less female viewers. However, whilst this may be the case, it remains the case that a significant minority of females *do* enjoy these films; not only do they enjoy them, but they are *more likely* to identify themselves as fans of Extreme Horror than their male counterparts. This initial finding highlights the issue then, that female audiences of Asian Extreme films are more likely to declare an interest in Extreme Horror than male participants; for this reason, both of the profiles included in this section of the chapter are of female respondents. In terms of age and geographical location, there is very little that differentiates this group from the overall questionnaire population, other than there are slightly fewer UK residents who are not British than there are in the entire population.

First profile of Extreme Horror respondent: Amy

Amy is female, aged 26-35 and British. She has seen five of the films, her favourite being *Battle Royale*. The 'extreme-ness' of the films is a highly significant factor in her enjoyment of them. She explains that, for her, this means both a 'complex, strange narrative' and the intensely gory content of the films, which she enjoys because 'instead of shying away from

it, Asian Extreme cinema concentrates on [it] and zooms in so the audience have to engage in its extreme content.’ However, even though Amy appreciates the way in which Asian films include extreme content, she contextualises this personal preference in her next answer; here, it is clear that this pleasure is part of a more general enjoyment of extreme cinema, rather than an exclusive interest in Asian films that include extreme content: ‘It’s a self-preference. I love Asian Extreme cinema, in fact any extreme cinema – a favourite of mine is French extreme cinema. I love studying the films to see what audiences deem as extreme.’ As with Asian Extreme fan Jeff, Amy’s interest in these films is not tied to their value as Asian films, but to their significance as examples of extreme cinema and her curiosity about them. However, even though it is the ‘extreme-ness’ that Amy values, like Jeff, this is something that she never entirely separates from the Asian provenance of the films:

Asian Extreme films tackle sexual violence head on, which I prefer. My friends think it’s a bit odd that I like them, it’s not that I’m pro-rape or anything weird like that. For me, a lot of Hollywood films sanitise the female body, there’s so much airbrushing of female body parts, it’s completely detached from reality. I like the mess of Asian cinema, the blood and guts, that’s real, that’s what human bodies are made of. *Dumplings* is a great film like that, it breaks all these taboos and it challenges stereotypical perceptions surrounding femininity and fertility.

Like Lauren, Amy’s interest in some Asian Extreme titles lies in the alternative representations of femininity they offer which she feels can’t be found in Hollywood cinema. The anti-mainstream discourse articulated by both Lauren and Amy, then, is very specifically linked to forms of gendered identity and a disaffected view of the representation of women in Hollywood films.

In general, Amy accesses the films through an online rental website or downloads them, as she likes watching them at home on her own. She explains ‘I like watching them on my own on my laptop as a lot of my friends can’t understand the extreme nature of Asian cinema and find it vulgar, whereas I see it almost like an art form.’ This viewing preference is one that is expressed more commonly by female respondents than by males, and suggests that, for some female audiences, they enjoy watching the films in a private, domestic context. Amy frames this in terms of the inability of her friends to appreciate the films, rather than as something she is ashamed about, thus turning her viewing practice into a form of connoisseurship. Like Oliver, Amy also prefers to watch the uncut version of a film

because it is the version of the film that ‘the director intended’, thus invoking a similar discourse that valorises the director as an auteur. In his study of cultural practices and tastes in 1960s France, Bourdieu observed that an awareness of film directors, rather than stars, was a key indicator of the possession of cultural capital (1986: 27). In the intervening period a broad range of cultural shifts have occurred that have led to the valorisation of different forms of expertise and knowledge in the cultural field of cinema. However, in his analysis of the discursive frameworks shaping UK film policy under New Labour, John Hill argues that it continues to be the case that ‘the demonstration of the director as the key creative personality involved in film making’ is still evident (Hill 2010: 31). Similarly, Matt Hills observes, in his study of horror fandom, that ‘fan practices of aestheticization – indicating a desire for horror to be taken seriously as art – have repeatedly worked to frame horror’s pleasures within discourses of fan agency, discrimination and expertise’ (Hills 2005a: 89). Amy’s responses therefore illustrate several ways in which fans of Extreme Horror make bids for cultural distinction by valorising the directors as artists and the films as ‘art forms’.

Second profile of Extreme Horror respondent: Ruth

Ruth is female, aged 46-55 and British. She has seen four of the questionnaire’s listed films, her favourites being *Battle Royale* and *Oldboy*. Ruth’s preferred way of accessing Asian Extreme films is through an online rental service rather than at the cinema; she qualifies this by stating ‘I don’t like watching these films with audiences who see them as simply more torture porn, which you get in the cinema. But I prefer to see them before buying as sometimes they ARE just torture porn.’ Ruth goes on to explain that she belongs to a very specific group of horror fans that discuss their enjoyment of these films in the safe environment of a members-only forum:

I know a lot of people from many walks of life who are fans - in fact, I’m a member of an online forum for knitting and crochet enthusiasts which has several horror sub-groups, and amongst the (largely middle-aged, female mums) community a large percentage enjoy Asian Extreme films. There might be people who use them as pornography, but most of the fans I know are intelligent and ‘normal’ people who want a film that tells them a story and makes them think, and Asian Extreme does that.

For Ruth, it is important that she views and discusses these films with other like-minded, intelligent people who want to watch films that ‘make them think’. Ruth’s aversion to

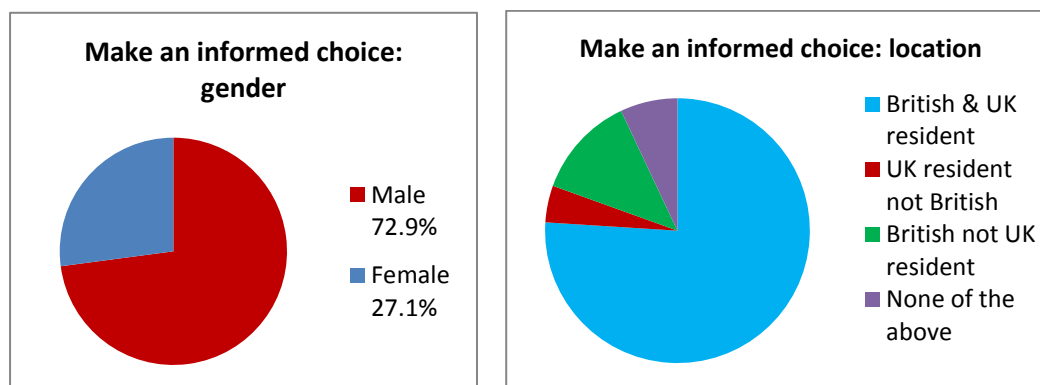
'torture porn', a category of films that is often derided in the mainstream British press on the grounds that those who make and watch the films are 'sadists', could also be evidence of concerns surrounding these public conceptions of horror fans. She adds, in answer to the final question 'I don't know if it is all that significant, but I am a person who is actively involved in the world, not just my own tiny part of it', again reinforcing her identity as a 'normal' person. Ruth's acknowledgement that there might be people who derive some form of sexual or sadistic pleasure from the films evidences an awareness of the way horror fans are often stereotyped by cultural commentators and mainstream film critics. This normalising discourse is particularly interesting in that, rather than constructing her taste as specialist, she argues that these are simply films that 'normal' intelligent people can enjoy, thereby making a straightforward bid for cultural capital.

Ruth's enjoyment of Asian Extreme films is partly captured in her explanation of what 'extreme' cinema means to her as 'not limited by conventional views of what is or is not acceptable to portray in film; violence, sexual subjects, 'sick' and 'deviant' behaviour.' She indicates that freedom to go beyond the boundaries of conventional, mainstream culture is reasonably important to her because:

I like a film not to flinch from something because it is a 'sensitive' subject such as child on child violence, incest etc. And I think it can be necessary to truly demonstrate how terrible something is, to show it in detail, even if the detail is appalling. But I don't search out films just for 'extremeness', there has to be something in the way of a plot and a meaning to it - a pointless string of horrific and sick imagery is not of interest to me.

Her appreciation of the category therefore seems linked to a desire to face 'terrible' aspects of human existence. Lauren, Amy, and to a certain extent, Ruth, share an enjoyment of Asian Extreme films that in some way reflects their gendered identity; furthermore, the films offer them something that they cannot find in Hollywood cinema. However, while Lauren and Amy seem to celebrate the alternative quality of the films, Ruth adopts a different position in that she tries to normalise her enjoyment as an active member of society. Ruth's responses also echo the point made by Jeff that his appreciation of Asian Extreme films is derived from his view that they are 'about something'. Integral to the comparison of this category with 'torture porn', then, is the assertion made by several questionnaire respondents that their employment of sexual violence and other 'extreme' themes or images is *not gratuitous*, but has 'meaning'.

Overview of those who make an Informed Choice



Figs. 16 & 17: Gender and geographical location of respondents who make an Informed Choice

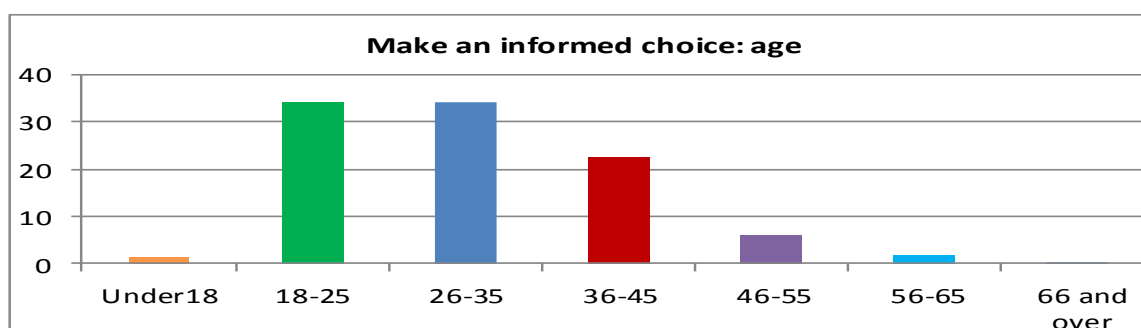


Fig. 18: Age range of respondents who make an Informed Choice

The research participants categorising themselves as those who make an Informed Choice includes the highest percentage of British respondents, and the lowest of the ‘other’ responses (7%). These results confirm that British audiences of Asian Extreme films are less comfortable identifying themselves as fans than are audiences from other parts of the world, particularly those from the US. Although there are not overly marked differences between the ways that respondents from each of the seven age categories orient themselves towards the films, there are fewer respondents in the 26-35 category of ‘informed viewers’ (22%) than there are of those passionate about Asian Cinema or interested in Extreme Horror. It is also worth emphasising that the majority of all respondents (95.1%) are aged between 18 and 45, so small differentiations between each of the three categories within this age range might be of possible significance. In terms of gender, this orientation-type is not markedly different to the overall population of responses sample; for these reasons, profiles of a male and a female from the older age categories will be used to illustrate this orientation-type.

First profile of an Informed Choice respondent: Natalie

Natalie is female, aged 36-45 and British, and has seen all ten of the questionnaire's selected titles. She identifies her favourite films from the list as *Audition*, *Oldboy* and *Suicide Club*. Natalie explains her understanding of the category with the observation 'I think extreme here means very intense; something particularly intense, a deep feeling that remains with you for a long time'. As with female respondents from the other orientation-types, Natalie has a tendency to discuss the films in terms of how they make her feel, or how they lead her to think about the characters' motivations in relation to her conception of human nature. However, this becomes more complex when she discusses her favourite film:

My favourite film is not listed here, but what usually sticks in my mind is how regular people can turn into psychotic murderers in the blink of an eye. How sorrow and resentment can affect you so deeply that makes you want to destroy the one you love the most. Perhaps we all fit into that category.

It is interesting that Natalie asserts her status and expertise by referencing a film not on the list (which, slightly enigmatically, she doesn't identify), rather than discussing a scene from one of her three favourite films from the list; she then moves on to make a reflective comment about the films *in general* rather than discuss specific elements of them that she enjoys. This inclination to generalise is reinforced by her discussion of the significance of 'extreme-ness', which she considers to be very important because 'Asian horror movies have to be intense so that I can relate to them in a certain way'. Her viewing strategy is again referenced in her final answer, where she states 'I'm just a regular person who tries to understand the human mind and heart a bit more deeply, and uses films to accomplish that goal.' There is a sense with Natalie, then, that although she has seen all of the films listed on the questionnaire, and recognises their 'intense' qualities, she adopts a reflective, almost philosophical distance from them which involves avoiding discussion of any form of textual detail, or even, in the case of her favourite film, identifying the title. As with Ruth, Natalie constructs herself as a 'regular person' and tries to normalise her enjoyment of the films.

Natalie prefers either to buy the films from an online retailer, or to download them. She states 'I like to buy the films and watch them at home with my friends. We should support the filmmakers by buying their films and it's always nice to share opinions and thoughts with friends while watching them.' Here she demonstrates a more general

principle, about supporting film-makers, rather than a specific desire to see extreme films in their uncut form. As with many of the other respondents to the questionnaire, Natalie's longest answer is in response to the statement from the BBFC (133 words). Here she stresses that people learn what is wrong or right as they are growing up, and that films cannot be held responsible for the violence that occurs in the world.

Second profile of an Informed Choice respondent: Gareth

Gareth is male, aged 36-45 and British. He has seen eight of the questionnaire's ten listed films, his favourites being *Battle Royale*, *Dumplings* and *Ichi the Killer*. Like many of the other respondents within this orientation-type, Gareth is a self-confessed cinephile and has an academic background, which he highlights in his answer to the final question: 'I have a doctorate-level education and a strong interest in film. My personal library consists of over 4000 DVDs, along with two shelves of books on film (OK, I'm obsessed about film.) I can find something to enjoy in almost any film, from Godzilla to Citizen Kane.' His preferred way of accessing the films is to buy them from online retailers, and owning a hard copy of the films is important to Gareth; he also states that he prefers watching the films in the comfort of his own home.

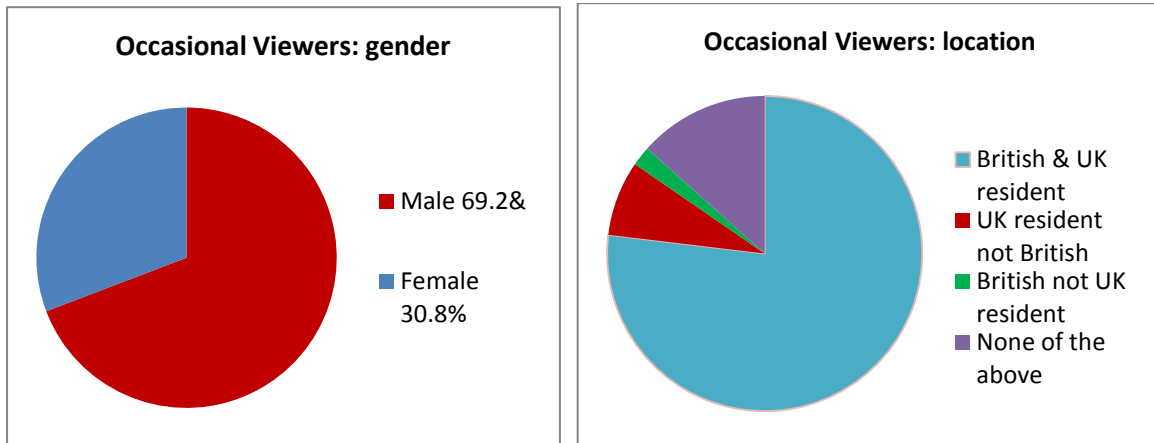
Gareth's understanding of an extreme film is framed in terms of his own practice of self-censorship; he describes 'crossing the boundaries of complacent viewing to the point right before I feel compelled to turn off the film lest I suffer permanent emotional scarring.' This response indicates that he has given the 'harm' issue some considerable thought and practises a form of self-censorship. However, this type of film is not particularly important to him, as he states 'the presence of extreme-ness is not a prerequisite to watching a film. I enjoy Powell and Pressburger and Takashi Miike, just for different reasons'. Here, he again reinforces the point that he enjoys an eclectic range of different films. Like Natalie, Gareth discusses his favourite scenes from the films in a generalised way, stating simply that they are memorable because of the 'acute emotional discomfort from watching transgressive behaviour.' The responses of both Natalie and Gareth indicate that research participants who classify themselves as making an informed choice differ from those who are passionate about Asian Cinema in some significant ways. Although they have, on the whole, seen as many of the films listed on the questionnaire, the Informed Choice viewers are less likely to

recall specific scenes in detail, mention the names of actors or characters, or display any in-depth knowledge about East Asian culture. There is a sense that, despite their prolific viewing habits, they have not invested as deeply in Asian Extreme films as respondents from the other three orientation-types.

Although the inclusion of extreme content within a film is not overly important to Gareth, he still considers the freedom to watch the director's version of a film to be highly significant: 'More important than uncut is the director's preferred version. I do not have to see every bit of snipped footage that was meant for the trash, but I do want to see what the filmmaker meant for me to see.' This is significant in that he particularly emphasises the value attributed to the director and his or her vision of the film; here, there is a sense that Gareth is aware that films are cut for a range of different reasons, so therefore feels the need to specify precisely in which context cutting a film is not acceptable. His knowledge as a cinephile, film collector and academic is further reinforced when he declines to discuss the arguments presented by the BBFC, instead simply stating 'I do have thoughts on this, but it's a long-winded diatribe.' Like Natalie, Gareth has a tendency to make short, oblique responses to several of the questions, and withholds more of his personal opinions than respondents from the other orientation categories. His twelve word answer to the question regarding the BBFC provides a stark contrast to the responses to this question that have already been discussed, and suggests that while he may possibly be knowledgeable on this subject, he is not as passionate about it as many of the other respondents.

Natalie and Gareth are similar in being cinephiles and prolific viewers of Asian Extreme films. However, although they both have strong principles about the film industry in general (supporting film-makers, collecting films, watching the director's cut of a film and so on) they are less likely to be passionate about this group of films *in particular*; they construct their passion, as cinephiles, for cinema *in general* rather than for this one specific genre. Natalie also has the same viewing habits as Amy and Ruth in that she prefers to watch the films at home, either because other friends don't enjoy them (Amy) or because they can then be watched with like-minded friends (Natalie); this reinforces an emergent pattern of behaviour amongst female research participants that is also observed by Cherry (1999a: 70) and is investigated further below.

Overview of Occasional Viewers



Figs. 19 & 20: Gender and geographical location of Occasional Viewers

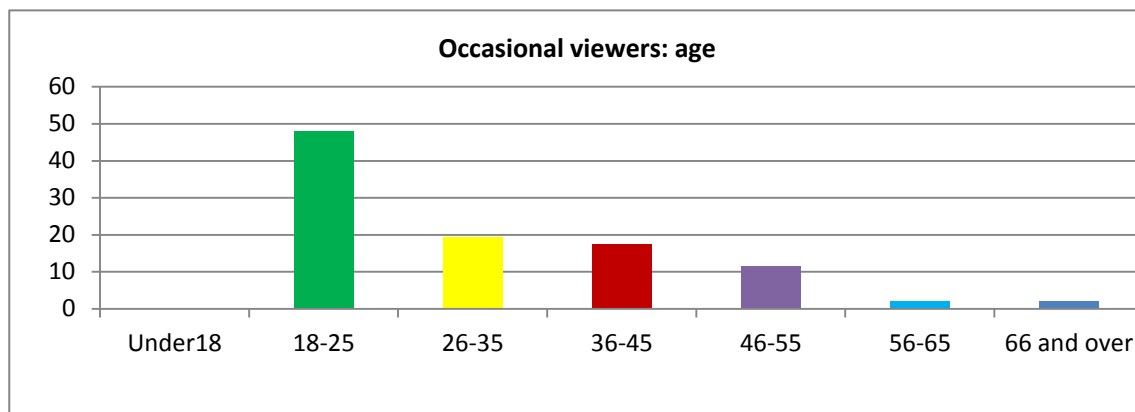


Fig. 21: Age range of Occasional viewers

Those respondents categorising themselves as occasional viewers are the second smallest group of participants (7.6%) after the fans of Asian Extreme cinema. A very high percentage of them are aged 18-30 and this might partly be explained by considering how many of them claim to be students (57% compared with 42% of the overall sample); it is therefore quite probable that a high percentage of them have seen one or two titles as part of their university course and have been directed towards the questionnaire by a university lecturer. There is little to differentiate the gender balance between this group from the overall sample; the profiles chosen to represent these occasional viewers will therefore be one male and one female from the 18-25 age category.

First profile of an Occasional Viewer: Jack

Jack is male, aged 18-25 and British. He has seen three of the questionnaire's listed films, *Battle Royale*, *Oldboy* and *Ichi the Killer*, and rates all three as favourites. Jack identifies himself as a film student, and in response to the final question states:

I have a broad taste and interest in films, I feel that 'Asian Extreme' is a vital part of film education as it in itself is a genre of its own. I also feel that the majority of censorship is petty and I find it quite insulting that a select group of people have 'the right' to decide what is appropriate for me to watch.

Jack's assertion that Asian Extreme is a 'genre of its own' is quite unusual amongst research participants, who more frequently argue exactly the opposite. As with several of the participants from this age category, Jack is of the opinion that the films included within the questionnaire are 'not that extreme' and, tellingly, his explanation of what 'extreme' means to him is 'people overreacting about graphic content in film'; this suggests that he understands 'extreme' to be partially linked to the reception of the films. He goes on to explain that extreme content is not particularly important to him:

For me the gore in 'Extreme' Asian film is not the most important. It's the creativeness and the narrative that Hollywood cinema is lacking or is afraid to express. The prospect of the possible Hollywood remake of *Oldboy* is very concerning to me, as they have a habit of taking away the essence of what makes the films good in the first place.

Jack usually borrows the films from friends or buys them online, but is of the view that he doesn't mind where he watches a film, as long as it is good. As with the majority of respondents, Jack feels it is very important to see the uncut version of a film and provides a relatively long answer critiquing the arguments of the BBFC (84 words). His view of the kinds of person likely to watch Asian Extreme films is that 'from my experience these films have quite a wide audience. I personally got into them through Manga and an interest in Asian culture. The friend who first gave me *Oldboy* to watch was just a general film fan and we were swapping films the other would not have seen'.

Second profile of an Occasional Viewer: Holly

Holly is female, aged 18-25 and British. She has seen two of the films, *Audition* and *Battle Royale*, and rates them both as favourites. Like Jack, Holly is a film student and doesn't view these films as being part of a specialist interest; she also thinks that it is important to study the role controversial films play in a wider cultural context. For Holly, the 'extreme' tag is

something that 'sets up expectations of gore and even camp elements within the genre, but many films I've seen under the banner have also been clever and not mindless.' However, she does not rate 'extreme-ness' as being very important to her and explains that the story is much more significant in terms of her enjoyment of a film. This does not mean, though, that she dismisses gory content; Holly states that 'Not all gore or controversial material is for shock value - some moments have genuine impact'.

Holly prefers to buy the films, either online or in high street stores, so that she can watch them at home, and sometimes re-watch certain parts of them. She is against cutting sexually violent scenes from extreme films and thinks that the 18 certificate provides a clear enough guideline that the films are only suitable for adults. Both Jack and Holly imply that, for their generation, these films are not particularly extreme or shocking. Their responses differ quite markedly from those outlined in the previous eight profiles, and indicate that, for a younger generation, these films are more likely to be part of a broad interest in cinema rather than a specialist one.

The ten profiles examined above suggest several key patterns emerging in relation to the way research participants orient themselves towards the Asian Extreme category. Firstly, there is a distinct awareness of *how they are perceived* by those who don't share their interest in these films. Secondly, there is a marked difference in the pleasures articulated by those who are fans of Asian Extreme or Extreme Horror films in comparison with the responses given by the other orientation-types. These two groups focus more specifically on the experience of feeling uncomfortable, sickened or shocked as part of their enjoyment of the films. In comparison, the respondents who are passionate about Asian Cinema in general are more likely to display expertise and knowledge about these films, and also about Asian culture in general. In contrast with these respondents, there is very little specialist knowledge demonstrated by those who claim to make an Informed Choices; this category of participants are more likely to make generalised statements concerning the wider role that film plays in their lives. Finally, there is a marked difference between those respondents who celebrate the cultural difference of the films, and position them as an alternative to Hollywood cinema, and those who engage in a normalising discourse, and argue that the films form part of a 'regular' film-watching experience.

The Figure of the 'Fanboy'

As already established [see Chapter 2, pp. 71-73], the series of claims made about ‘fanboy’ audiences for Asian Extreme films by film critics and academics can be summarised as follows:

- They are male, aged approximately 18-30
- They are excited and aroused by gore and ‘titillating’ violence
- They cannot appreciate art house / highbrow culture
- They are ‘early adopters’ (likely to see films before the ‘mainstream Other’)
- They invest in their interest (collecting DVDs and ancillary materials)

One of the key claims about the ‘fanboy’ audience relates to their age and gender, so the first stage of this discussion is simply a comparison of male and female respondents according to age. While the majority of participants in the research project are male, the female respondents nevertheless form a sizable minority. One variable here is that although the construct of the ‘fanboy’ is generally conceived as a young male, the specific age range varies according to different sources; this is often related to the genre or media that is the object of their fandom. According to Tartan, the age range is 18-30 (Hamilton in Dew: 2007), although there would clearly be an agenda for not acknowledging the under -eighteen market when the films distributed on the label all have 18 certificates. The age categories provided in the questionnaire did not include an 18-30 category, so while the under 25 and 18-25 categories have been considered to most closely parallel the figure of the ‘fanboy’, the 25-35 age category is also given some consideration here; this also allows for the fact that questionnaire respondents may have first encountered Asian Extreme films approximately 7-8 years before the research project began.

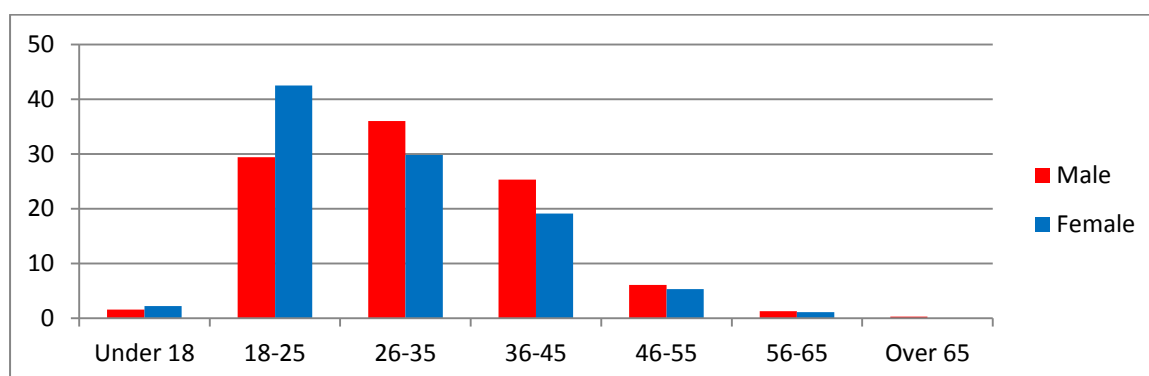


Fig. 22: Age range of all respondents differentiated by gender

The charts above represent the age differences between male and female respondents. This comparison reveals that while 31% of male respondents are aged 25 and under, a larger percentage of female respondents, 44.7%, falls within this age category. If the 25-35 age category is included in these figures, then 67% of male respondents are aged 35 or under compared with 74.5% of female respondents. The questionnaire data firstly suggests, then, that female audiences of Asian Extreme films are more likely to fall within the ‘fanboy’ demographic than their male counterparts; the figure of the ‘fangirl’ is just as much a possibility as that of the ‘fanboy’. Secondly, the charts expose the high percentage of older male viewers (aged over 45) that are attracted to this category of films (33%); this compares with a meagre 6.4% of female respondents in the same age category. While these results do not preclude the possibility that some of the respondents might embody the characteristics of the figure of the ‘fanboy’, they certainly de-stabilise the notion that the ‘overgrown lad’ with a taste for ‘hyperbolic violence’ is somehow representative or typical of audiences for this category of films. If the age categories are divided into three broader segments (under 25, 25-35 and over 36) then the comparison between male and female respondents reveals more clearly the gender differences.

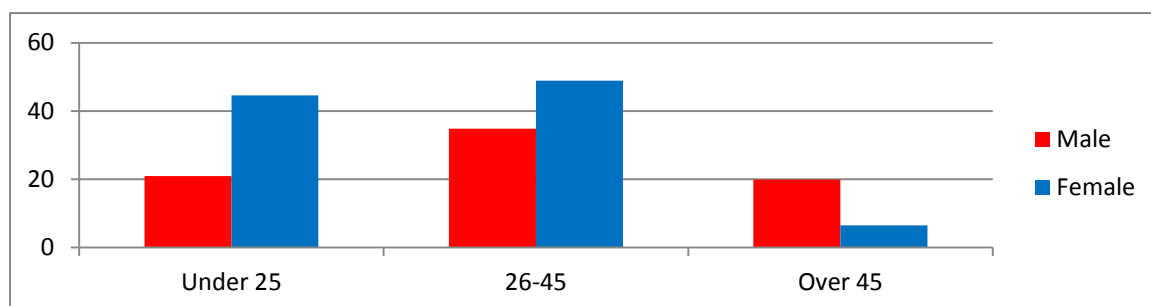


Fig. 23: Age range of all respondents reduced to three broader categories and differentiated by gender
 In terms of age and gender, then, the claims made about the figure of the ‘fanboy’ seem to be slightly exaggerated. The charts below show differences between male and female respondents according to orientation:

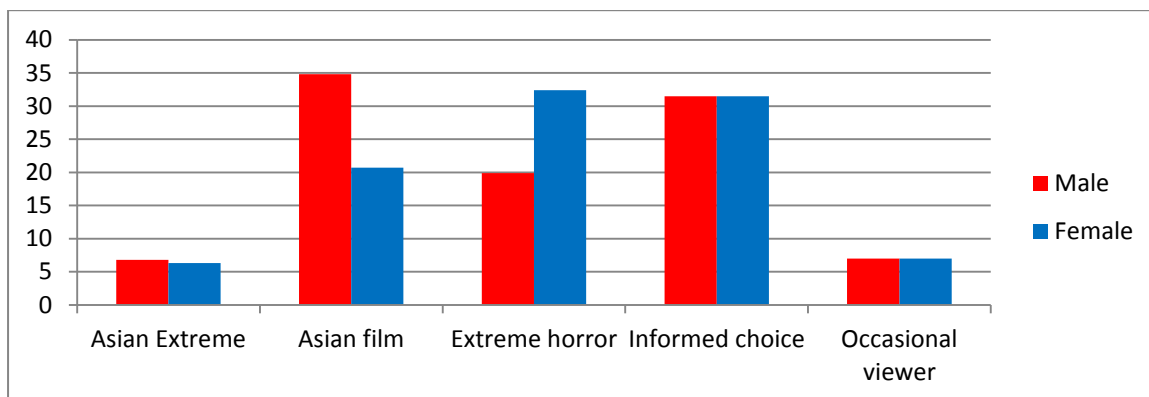


Fig. 24: Orientation of all respondents differentiated by gender

As has already been discussed, these results reveal that very few respondents of either gender categorise themselves as ‘fans’. However, as will be explored in further detail below, the respondents categorising themselves as either being (a) passionate about Asian Cinema (b) interested in Extreme Horror or (c) viewers who make Informed Choices about what they watch have *all* invested as fully in this category of films as those who describe themselves as fans of Asian Extreme films.⁶⁸ Therefore, this confirms the argument that it is the associations with the figure of the fan that respondents are keen to avoid. Secondly, this data confirms that while male respondents are more likely to declare themselves to be passionate about Asian Cinema in general (32.8%), female respondents are more likely to categorise themselves as fans of Extreme Horror (34.5%). Again, this challenges the idea of the young male purposefully seeking gore or extreme imagery; in fact, in reverse, it suggests that female audiences of these films are more likely to be attracted by the promise of extreme or horrific content.

The tendency for female respondents to demonstrate a greater interest in extreme content is further illustrated by examining the responses to the question which asked participants to evaluate how important a part ‘extreme-ness’ plays in their response to a film. Although this very much depends on the way in which the individual respondent has defined what ‘extreme’ means to them it nevertheless still provides a preliminary gauge for assessing the significance of this concept for each gender.

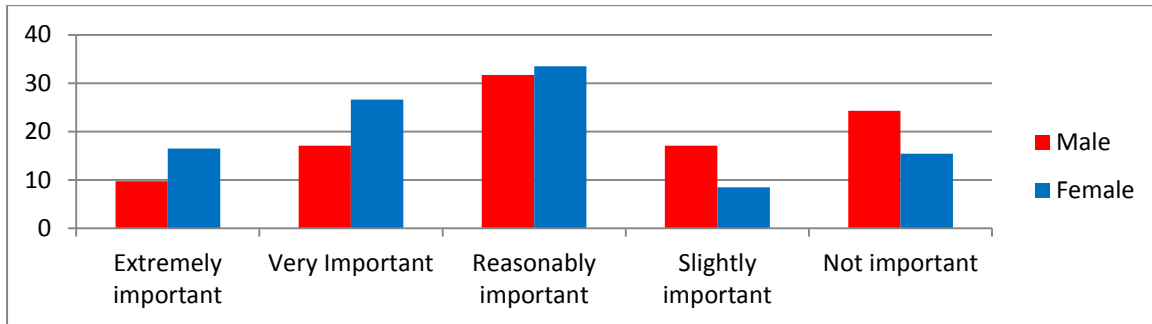


Fig. 25: Significance of extreme-ness for all respondents differentiated by gender

The results indicate that while both male and female respondents are more inclined to choose a moderate response, a significantly higher percentage of female participants consider ‘extreme-ness’ to be either extremely or very important – 43.1% compared to 26.8% of male respondents. Conversely, 41.4% of males thought ‘extreme-ness’ was either slightly or not at all significant, compared with 23.1% of females.

Some of the other claims made about the characteristics of ‘fanboys’, such as their tendency to access films online before ‘mainstream’ viewers, and their predisposition to collect DVDS and ancillary materials, can be partially assessed by looking at respondents’ answers to Question 9, which asked how respondents normally watch Asian Extreme films (the response allowed up to two answers, so percentages are not cumulative.) The responses reveal that, among the under-35s, collectability and ownership of DVDs are still more important than the desire to be an ‘early adopter’. While 36.4% of males and 36.9% of females said they downloaded films, 42.8% of males and 100% of females indicated that they bought DVDs in a store. Buying a copy of a film in a shop remains the most popular option for both males and females; however, female respondents are more likely to obtain a film in this way. The graph below illustrates the gender differences on this issue:

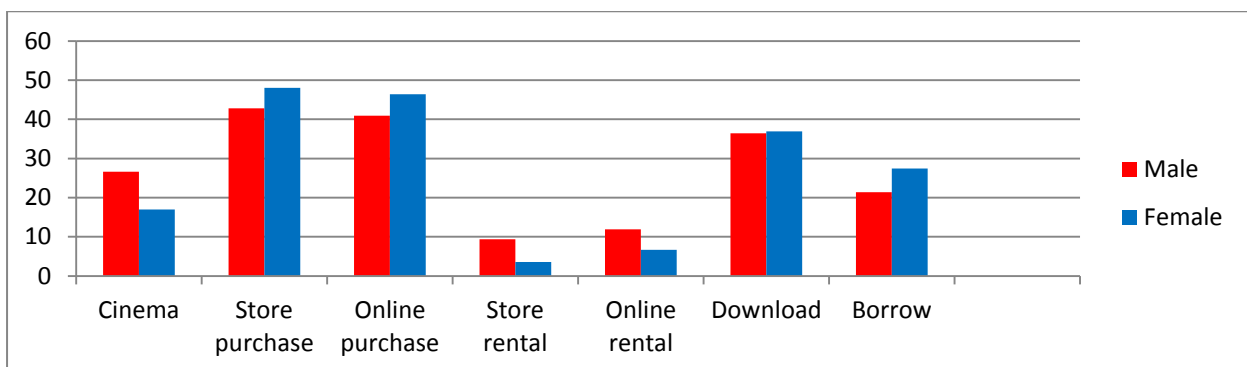


Fig. 26: Method of watching films differentiated by gender

A surprising result that emerged from the data is that a slightly higher percentage of female respondents had bought copies of the films at stores or online than had male respondents; this finding questions the accepted understanding that the practice of collecting DVDs is primarily a male occupation. It is possible that this result could be misrepresentative in that more of the female respondents ticked two options rather than one option; however, it is still a reflection of the extent to which female respondents have invested in their interest. In total 71% of females said they purchased films either at stores or online, compared to 63% of males. These figures could suggest something particular about female fans of *this specific genre*; the chart below illustrates the orientation of these female collectors towards the genre of Asian Extreme. This is compared alongside a chart illustrating the orientation of male collectors.⁶⁹

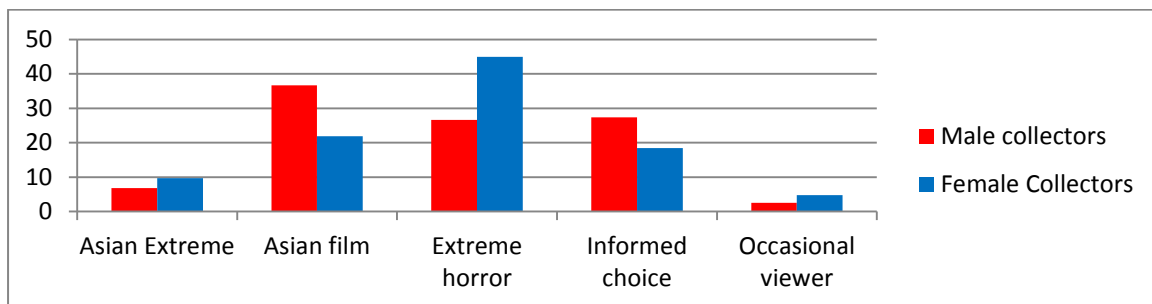


Fig. 27 Respondents who are also collectors, differentiated by orientation and gender

This data illustrates several significant patterns emerging amongst the respondents who are DVD collectors. Firstly, it reveals that amongst both male and female respondents, those who describe themselves as viewers making an Informed Choice about the films they watch are less likely to buy DVDs than either with an interest in Asian Cinema or Extreme Horror. While 31.5% of males and 31.9% of females orient themselves this way in the overall population of respondents, only 18.4% of female collectors and 27.4% of male collectors orient themselves this way. In contrast, 44.9% of female collectors are Extreme Horror fans, and 36.7% of male collectors are passionate about Asian Cinema. So while those who make an Informed Choice have seen fractionally more of the films than the other two audience types (see analysis below), this investment is not matched by a tendency amongst this group of respondents to purchase or collect the films.

All of these findings again reinforce the emerging pattern that there is no evidence to suggest that audiences for Asian Extreme films are predominantly young males who are

excited or aroused by images of gore and extreme violence, or who are 'early adopters' that download the film online. In this respect, it seems fair to suggest that the figure of the 'fanboy' cultist painted by Tony Rayns is, at best, mistaken in its claims relating to gender; whether his claims surrounding their lack of cultural sophistication are another element of the exaggerated caricature of 'fanboy' audiences for this category of films will be considered when analysing qualitative responses to the questionnaire.

British Audiences of Asian Extreme films and the Resistance of Fandom

In order to examine the resistance towards fandom amongst British audiences I firstly consider the responses to Question 12; this asked participants what kinds of people they thought were fans of Asian Extreme films. The question was designed to encourage fans to reflect on how they constructed their identity in relation to the films. Responses were particularly varied and frequently expressed a level of discomfort or displeasure at being asked the question; for example, one respondent expressed the view that this was 'a dangerous question. Censorious people like to group people who like extreme movies as amoral or worse. If we try to define who likes them we just help out the enemy' (Male, Informed Choice). This comment reveals the extent to which many of the participants display an awareness of the way they are perceived by mainstream film critics and others, who are classed by this respondent as 'the enemy'.

Common answers to the question are represented in Figure 28; in keeping with their general discomfort at being asked this question, the largest group of respondents (46%) suggested that all types of people could be fans of Asian Extreme films. A typical response along these lines was 'all types, a vast diverse group coming from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, and different ages' (Female, Asian Cinema).

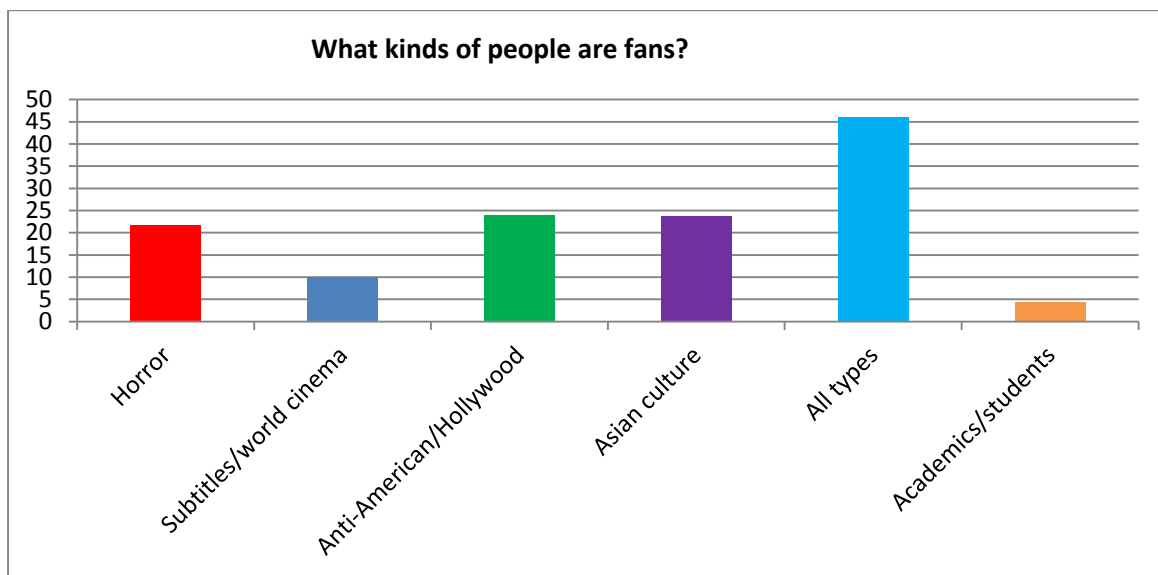


Fig. 28: Most common responses to Question 12.

A slightly more detailed response came from a male fan of Extreme Cinema, who opined that ‘this question already tries to put people in a box, that they are some sort of sick group or share a perverted trait or gene between them. I think any kind of person could potentially be a fan of it.’ This respondent then goes on to provide further information about himself (in the final question):

I was raised in a Christian family, and still am Christian. I’ve lived my entire life in China, though I’m not Chinese. My brothers aren’t into extreme stuff or films, just me. I don’t have any fetishes and am not into kinky stuff. I guess what I’m trying to say is someone can be fascinated by this stuff without being actually “into it”, or maybe I’m a rare case. I think one reason I’m into everything extreme (for example, gore) is because so many people have such a problem with it, and I just want to go against them. Gore is just our own bodies turned inside out pretty much. When there is a gory accident, everyone is curious and wants to see the body, so I think it’s a lot of self-denial and hypocrisy bullshit when people are so against gore and stuff like that. I’m done. Sorry for being so long-winded.

This additional information suggests that this Extreme Horror respondent has encountered a lot of people who ‘are so against gore’ and perhaps this has led him to adopt a slightly defensive stance about his interest; this echoes the way that the other respondent (referenced above) refers to ‘censorious people’ and ‘the enemy’. Although there is no definitive evidence here, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that respondents who are uncomfortable with this question might have experienced prejudice in relation to their interest in these films and, as a result, have perhaps become averse to the prospect of being put ‘in a box’. The ‘any kind of person’ response could also be understood as a further

expression of the normalising discourse, articulated by Ruth [above]. In making the point that anyone can be a fan, there is a sense that many of the respondents are attempting to blur, or transcend, the distinction between 'fans' and 'non-fans'; seen in this light, the avoidance of the label 'fan' can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to avoid categorising people in general.

There were two other phrases or groups of words that featured prominently in answers to this question (although it should be noted that there was a significant overlap with some of these categories). One of these phrases was 'Asian culture', which was referenced by 23.6% of respondents. A female fan of Asian Cinema wrote:

A wide variety. I think a lot are media and film students, some are general art house or world cinema goers, some are people with an interest in Asian film culture or general Asian culture, some watch them through word of mouth and some are cinema fans who want to watch something different.

Other answers referencing Asian culture mentioned manga, anime and other culturally related interests they think fans might have. Respondents who mentioned horror fans in this answer were similarly cautious in pinpointing one particular kind of fan; these accounted for 21.6% of responses:

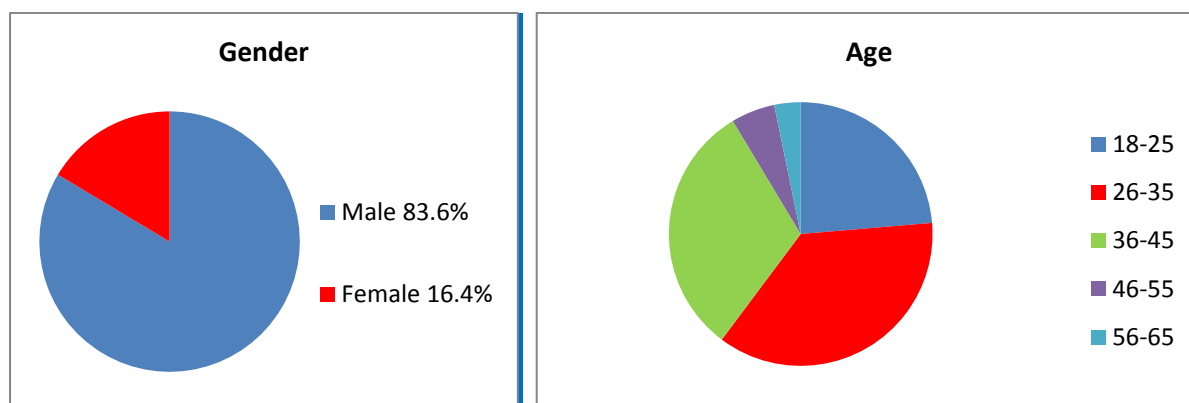
A lot of general horror fans are into these films but I don't think you can easily pigeon hole what kind of person likes anything in general. While many people would probably label fans of these films as being into 'alternative' lifestyles (Heavy Metal fans etc), I don't consider myself alternative in any way, and none of my friends who like these films are either. We're just film enthusiasts who enjoy horror films as much as any other genre (Male, Asian Cinema).

Again, as with the response from Ruth, this participant is keen to normalise his interest in the category and reinforce his taste in films as 'mainstream' rather than alternative. However, although this type of response is relatively common, a high percentage of participants articulated a taste distinction that has more frequently been associated with cult film fandom; this group of respondents defined fans in opposition to mainstream taste.

'People who DON'T like fluffy-kitten Hollywood plastic': Anti-Mainstream Responses

One distinctive group of answers to this question came from those who referenced Hollywood, 'mainstream' or Western cinema as a means to define the kind of films audiences of Asian Extreme were *not* fans of. This type of response was characterised by a very dismissive attitude to 'mainstream' cinema. Comments made using this framework

were often short and pithy put-downs, such as ‘People who DON’T like fluffy-kitten Hollywood plastic’ (Female, Informed Choice); and ‘Those who are bored of the mainstream, identikit Hollywood films’ (Male, Informed Choice). Unlike the other groups of responses to this question, there are very distinctive patterns about this anti-mainstream group of participants when their demographic data is analysed, as is illustrated in the charts below:



Figs. 29 and 30: Gender and age of respondents who define interests in relation to Hollywood/'mainstream' films

These charts reveal that those respondents likely to make comments about Hollywood or 'mainstream' cinema in their answers to Question 12 were more likely to be male (83.6%, compared with 72.8% in the overall population). A high percentage of respondents were aged 36 or over (37%, compared with 31% of the overall population). Thirdly, a significant number were participants who identified themselves as making an Informed Choice or being passionate about Asian Cinema (69%, compared with 61% of the overall population). These results help to clarify that there is a particular pattern of taste recurrent amongst participants who are male, older than average and are either a fan of Asian Cinema or like to make an Informed Choice; this taste formation hinges on an interest in Asian Extreme films using Hollywood or 'mainstream' films as an 'Other' to form a bid for cultural distinction.

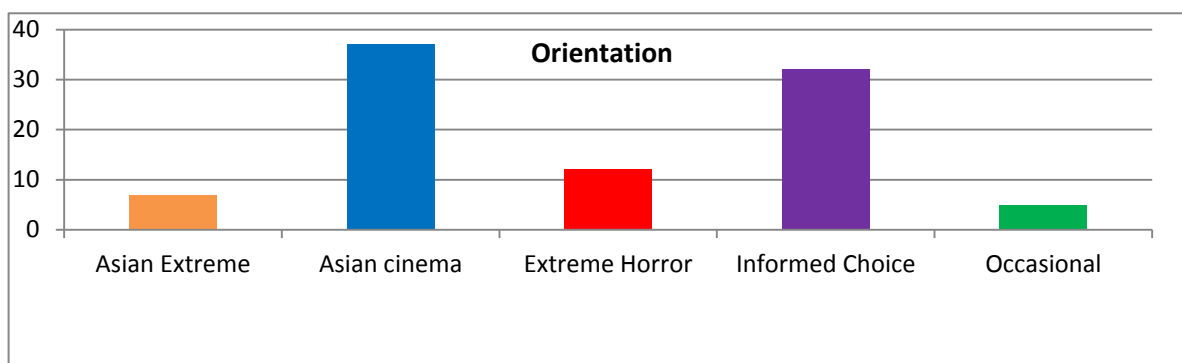


Fig. 31: Orientation of anti-mainstream respondents

There were also two smaller clusters of words that were used by respondents to this question. The first, 'world cinema' and 'subtitles' relates to issues surrounding 'mainstream' films, but makes a slightly different and specific point, that is exemplified in the answer 'cult film lovers, cineastes with adventurous tastes, smart people -- the average person hates subtitles, after all' (Male, Extreme Horror) or 'Smart people who can bother reading subtitles' (Female, Extreme Horror). This group of responses makes a direct connection between the use of subtitles and the intellect of the audience. The findings generated by Question 12 suggest, then, that respondents to the study articulate many of the taste distinctions long associated with cult film fandom; many define their interests in relation and opposition to conceptions of 'mainstream' taste (Jancovich 2003). These findings suggest, then, that the term 'fan of Asian Extreme films' does not, for the majority of respondents, represent this taste distinction. This again raises the question of the role of Tartan's marketing campaign in discursively shaping this taste distinction. Some of the responses to the final question, which asked participants if they wished to provide any further information about themselves, were quite revealing in this respect; many reference Tartan's marketing strategies. If these are examined according to orientation-type then a significant pattern emerges:

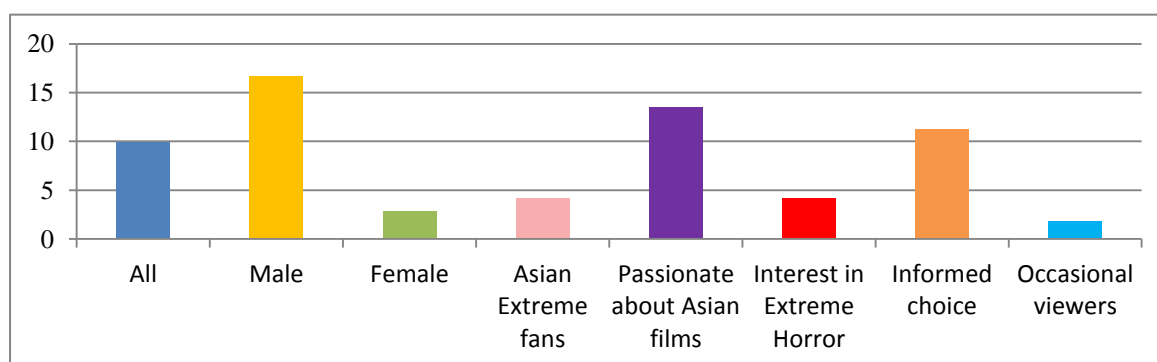


Fig. 32: References made to Tartan's marketing strategies in the final question

Here, the variation in the relevance of this discourse amongst different groups of respondents is quite marked. Firstly, the chart reveals that relatively few females (2.8%) mentioned Tartan in their responses. The biggest percentage of respondents who raise the discourse of Tartan and orientalism are those with a passion for Asian Cinema (13.5%). Some of these responses are more overtly critical of the marketing label than others, for example, one respondent writes:

As a lecturer in Japanese Cinema I find the term rather reductive and offensive. Asia produces many excellent films a year and I find the need to produce such a label as ridiculous. Also reductive as 'Asia' in many ways is as much as manufactured an idea as the 'West'. How about the Asia-Non Extreme Range?

The degree of offence articulated by this respondent reveals the level of antagonism many 'experts' in East Asian cinema hold in relation to the Tartan label. Ironically, there is an implication here that, despite Tartan's populist marketing campaign to promote these films, a significant portion of their audience are cinephiles who find the commercial branding of films to be distasteful. The respondents who identify themselves as male, and as being passionate about Asian Cinema in general, are most likely to dismiss the term 'Asia Extreme' as a marketing strategy; in several cases their critique of the term is linked to claims of expertise and connoisseurship about Asian cinema in general, for example: 'I've been watching and studying these films for over two decades now, and I find the 'extreme' label reductive and insulting. It's for people who don't really appreciate Asian culture'. The answers to this question suggest that audiences of Asian Extreme films tend to be acutely aware of how their filmic interests are perceived in 'mainstream' contexts. For some, this sense of difference is celebrated as a form of subcultural capital; for others, it becomes a point of contestation that requires them to disprove the claims that are made about them. These findings also complexify the argument that the 'Asia Extreme' brand informs and influences audience responses to the films in a straightforward way. Having explored some of the reasons behind participants' reluctance to categorise themselves as fans, consideration will now turn what these findings reveal about female audiences of the Asian Extreme category.

The Invisible Audience: Fangirls, Feminists and Horror Knitters

The analysis of both the ten audience profiles and the claims made about the 'fanboy' audience throw into sharp relief some significant differences in responses according to gender that merit further attention. Only 17% of females specify that they usually watch these films at the cinema, compared with 32% of males. Overall, the low figures for cinema attendance probably reflect the fact that not many UK cinemas screen Asian Extreme films. However, the information provided by female respondents suggests there are other factors involved in their preference for watching the films at home. One of these is the inclination to view these films with friends or like-minded people. 22% of female respondents cite this as a significant factor in their answer to Question 10; this compares with just 6% of male participants answering the same question. The profiles of Amy and Ruth illustrate this preference in slightly different ways; while Amy watches Asian extreme films on her laptop because she feels that her friends won't understand them, Ruth uses an online rental service to avoid crossing paths with cinema audiences who might be 'into torture porn'. Another female fan writes that she likes to watch the films 'at the cinema with like-minded people, preferably a festival crowd. Because I like the big screen experience but don't like popcorn munchers who talk during the film' (Female, Informed Choice). This response most closely matches those identified by Cherry in her study of female horror fans in the late 1990s; Cherry observed that women didn't like watching films in the cinema because of the 'behaviour of other viewers' (Cherry 1999a: 70). A further factor that emerges from investigating female responses to Question 10 is that they feel awkward or embarrassed watching these films in public or with strangers; 9% of female respondents discussed the issue of embarrassment, compared with less than 1% of males.⁷⁰ One female participant explained why she would rather not watch the films at the cinema in the following way:

I would prefer to watch these films at home with friends who also want to watch it. I say this because these films are radical, and people have very different opinions about them. When you go and watch a romantic comedy, it follows a generic pattern for the genre, but with 'Asian extreme' films they could go anyway. So if you were watching it for the first time on the big screen with loads of other strangers, you are probably going to get mixed reactions, some emphatic, some disgusted, others laughing. The very nature of these 'extreme' films is that they are irregular, and with that irregularity I would expect to see opinions different to my own, making cinema viewing an awkward experience. Imagine if you were made uncomfortable by the film, when there is a guy in front of you excitedly pointing out where you just saw that guy 'stick that thing'. Therefore I think 'extreme' cinema is too unpredictable to watch en-masse.

This viewing preference is clearly linked to issues surrounding sexual violence, which often forms a more prominent textual feature of Asian Extreme films than many supernatural or gothic horror films. Another female respondent discussed the advantages of group viewing in the context of her experiences as a film student, stating 'my preferred way of watching is with one of my like-minded friends. We sit, chill out and discuss the film as it plays. In that respect I also like being in a classroom environment and studying it more intensively' (Female, Asian Cinema). The fact that female respondents are more likely to watch these films at home, and that some of them might be embarrassed about being seen watching them in the public space of a cinema, could also explain the common perception that the majority of audiences for Asian Extreme films are male. This again chimes with the results of Cherry's research (1999: 132), which found that women were often an 'invisible' audience who did not enter the predominantly male-oriented world of fan conferences and festivals, and kept their viewing practices confined to a safe, domestic space.

The responses elicited from the members of a handicrafting social network site provide one example of a less informal, yet predominantly female group of fans who enjoy watching extreme horror films and discussing them together online. Within this large members-only social networking site (Ravelry.com) there are many smaller, niche-interest forums for handicraft enthusiasts with an interest in the horror genre; for example, there are over forty different discussion groups focussed on vampire films and fiction. This community has also been studied by Cherry (2011), whose research focuses on the gendered aspect of this fan practice. Cherry discusses the horror knitting culture more broadly in the context of the 'significantly female demographic' of vampire fandom, arguing that:

It therefore follows that the associated fan communities will include activities that are accessible and attractive to female fans ... many female vampire and Gothic fans who express their identity through their dress and appearance, or take part in cosplay, make their own clothing and accessories, With handicrafting still regarded, for the most part, as a feminine activity, it is little wonder that female fandom and knitting have come together (Cherry 2011: 140-41).

However, the responses to the Asian Extreme questionnaire came from a group dedicated to the discussing films, books and other media related to the horror genre in general, but with a taste for extreme cinema. As well as exchanging knitting and crocheting patterns for the purpose of creating characters from horror films (such as Frankenstein and Dracula, or

more specific *Twilight*-inspired patterns) they also produce patterns for creatures of their own creation, such as 'zombie slugs'. In this respect, notions of expertise are demonstrated within the forum through the members' creative skills; this creative impulse, rather than their gender, appears to be the key driver for their fan activities. It is via displays of personal innovation, dexterity and imagination that the members acquire status within their subculture; in this way, a form of *creative* subcultural capital circulates within the community, offering opportunities for members to make bids for distinction by posting imaginative and outlandish patterns on the boards.

The way in which Asian Extreme films are discussed on the Ravelry message boards tends to take the form of reviews of the latest films they've seen; these are often framed in terms of considerations about characters, evaluations of plots and emotional responses to the films. The members rarely exchange knowledge and expertise in the ways that are common to other horror forums, such as Snowblood Apple; in this respect, a sense of connoisseurship doesn't emerge as the 'master trope' in their bids for subcultural distinction (Hills 2005a: 74). Whilst many online forums thrive on the pleasures of connoisseurship, horror film festivals and conventions offer participants a form of subcultural capital that is derived from notions of participation and exclusivity. Here, the opportunities to attend premieres, witness special guest appearances and exchange memorabilia and merchandise offer fans a set of unique experiences that sets them apart from 'mainstream' horror consumers; as Hills argues, 'a horror fan's convention/festival attendance becomes one 'authentic' marker of 'insider status' (Hills 2010: 99).

In contrast to these very visible horror communities and networks that thrive on notions of 'insider status' (and, by implication, the outsider's lack of status), horror knitting networks champion a different form of exclusivity that recognises communal values and mutual pleasures. Cherry argues that 'the fan spaces provided within the Ravelry community could be seen as a refuge from the competitiveness of male fan communities' (Cherry 2011: 152). Genevieve Miller, author of pattern book *Vampire Knits*, describes the formation of one such community as follows: 'We fans of mysterious, brooding and sexy vampires shared ideas and inspirations with one another, creating patterns inspired by beloved immortal characters. And so the idea for this book was born' (Miller 2010: 3). Though sole-authored, there is a clear acknowledgement here of the collective and

reciprocal pleasures involved in producing this collection of patterns. The recent growth of horror handicraft subcultures, and responses from the *Ravelry* knitters to this study, therefore implies that some female horror fans do not share the same values and forms of cultural distinction that are celebrated in more visible and established horror fan networks; it is perhaps for this reason that they have hitherto remained a less visible dimension of horror fandom. However, the gendering of the horror handicraft community should not preclude the acknowledgment of male handicraft enthusiasts, or imply that female horror fans do not engage in the more widely recognised fan practices of attending festivals or collecting DVDs.

The practice of collecting films is also linked to the issue of home viewing. One female with an interest in Extreme Horror writes:

DVD releases are probably my personal preference. With regard to the films on the Tartan label, I am interested in their collectability as cult objects (the original catalogue of films becoming an important list). And with films that have been banned or heavily censored (*Grotesque* and *Ichi the Killer*), DVD remains the only way to see these films uncut and also have a tangible copy of these films (as opposed to Internet downloads or streaming websites).

As has already been mentioned, more female participants indicated that they bought copies of the films on DVD than males. Another female respondent indicates:

I would prefer to buy it in a store. I have so many versions of *Battle Royale* on multiple formats (VCD, DVD and Blu-ray) as well as multiple manga and novels. The Asian movie *Ring* is also a favourite of mine and I had to import versions from Korea and Japan just so I had the complete collection not available in the UK. So I prefer to physically own the film but again if it is cut by the BBFC I will stream it online first and if I like it import from another country (Female, Asian Extreme).

This range of responses indicates that issues of tangibility and ownership are as important to some female fans as they are to their male counterparts. The reference made here to the 'original catalogue' echoes the fan practices associated with the 'video nasties' documented by Kate Egan (2003; 2007); here, Egan observed in her study of 'nasty' fan sites that 'every single site that I visited always has one central and identical staple - the Director of Public Prosecutions' (DPP) list of "video nasties" (or, more specifically, the list of videos that, in the early 1980s, were deemed liable for prosecution under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act) (Egan 2003: 5). However, there is again a sense here that female fans of Asian Extreme films engage in different fan practices to those documented amongst female horror fans by

Cherry, who observed that many women reported 'not being interested in horror fandom and publishing because of other aspects of fan culture, particularly the obsessive attention to trivial details' (Cherry 1999: 203). In terms of their interest in Extreme Horror and practices of collecting and acquiring knowledge, then, the respondents in this survey differ significantly from the female horror fans studied by Cherry. One dimension of this variance in female fan behaviour lies in their attitudes to the representation of sexual violence on screen. Whereas the respondents to Cherry's survey expressed a preference for 'feminine forms' of the genre and an aversion to gore and sexual violence (1999: 203), the participants in this research project demonstrated a different set of taste preferences and values.

Female respondents of all orientation-types raised the issue of sexual violence; this took a number of complex and contradictory forms. The following response came from a female who categorised herself as a fan of Asian Extreme cinema:

I guess the term extreme whether I'm thinking of film or music or whatever has to mean something that is pushing the boundaries; it doesn't play it safe and it seeks to elicit a strong response be it to be shocked, repulsed or disturbed by what is on the screen. There are two of the *Guinea Pig* films that represent that very well in my opinion that is *Flowers of Flesh And Blood* and *Mermaid In A Manhole*. *Flowers...* strips everything down to a prolonged scene of a woman being dismembered which is designed to appear as a snuff movie. It is a purely brutal piece of cinema with no other purpose I'd say but to really put the viewer through a really uncomfortable experience – there is nothing funny about it, I wouldn't call it entertaining – it is one of the few films that does make me feel slightly on edge and slightly filthy for watching it and on some level I really enjoy that. *Mermaid In A Manhole* elicited a strong response in a very different way – with this one it was a pure gross-out factor. Pus and gore galore and this is the main spectacle of this film – it is much more I'd say cartoon-like than the brutal realism of *Flowers*, but very in-your-face and it tries its hardest to throw at the viewer effects that will make them feel repulsed. I think it made me feel slightly sick the first time I watched it which is an extremely rare occurrence for me (Female, Asian Extreme).

Like the response above, several female participants acknowledged that part of the *attraction* to this category lay in the representations of sexual violence; they wanted to feel sickened, repulsed and 'slightly filthy'. These discussions of different types of violence and the range of affects they induce reveal that some female respondents seek out 'brutal' cinema in order to experience a level of discomfort; in these ways, then, some female respondents are positioning themselves as connoisseurs of violence. However, in relation to notions of the sexual violence, other females articulated a slightly different perspective:

I think story is the main part for me, but also how the characters act or react to each other. What I like about Asian cinema is they don't rely on sex (*Visitor Q* censors any penis/vagina shot). It's also the situation the characters are put in. But I also like that the 'Asian Extreme' category don't actually have ANY limits if they didn't want them (Female, Extreme Horror).

Here, while the respondent acknowledges an enjoyment of character construction alongside a pleasure taken in the boundary-breaking characteristics of the category, she also highlights the fact that she appreciates the 'censoring' of any 'penis/vagina shot'. This perspective on sexual violence is echoed by a small number of female responses to Question 11, regarding censorship and the 'harm' debate. Three female respondents partially supported the BBFC's statement on 'harm', and a further four expressed concerns about the representation of rape or other forms of sexual violence, but didn't feel that it warranted cutting or banning a film. For example, one wrote:

I'm personally against rape being shown in detail in film, and avoid films where I know this happens (I think it's tasteless and insulting to rape victims especially when it's done to titillate the audience). I don't think showing scenes such as these will make people rapists or violent though. At worst it will confuse and upset some people, if they're aroused while watching a violent and disturbing scene (Female, Informed Choice)

Here the respondent articulates her view that rape scenes can be 'tasteless and insulting' and should avoid 'detail', (though argues that this will lead to a confused or emotional response on the part of the aroused viewer, rather than a 'harmful response'). What emerges from some female discussions of sexual violence, then, is that while many express a liking for watching these boundary-breaking films that can induce levels of discomfort and repulsion, there is also a distaste for the kind of 'detail' that is associated with pornography. In other words, these female horror fans articulate a taste preference for extreme films that explore and represent brutal, subversive and sickening sexual themes, but without an excessive level of explicit sexual detail. However, this was not the case with all of the female participants; Lauren, a fan of Asian Extreme films, articulated annoyance with the BBFC for assuming she would be offended by scenes of sexual violence; it cannot be generalised, then, that all female audiences are uncomfortable with this kind of content.

Conclusions

Common perceptions amongst cultural commentators and film academics tend to claim that audiences for Asian Extreme films are predominantly 'fanboys': young males with an unhealthy interest in sex and violence. However, these assumptions overlook some key characteristics that have emerged from this study. Most significantly, that male audiences demonstrate less of an interest in Extreme Horror than their female counterparts, and that females are just as likely as male fans to be high-end collectors. Furthermore, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that audiences for Asian Extreme films are young males who are excited or aroused by images of gore and extreme violence. The findings reveal, then, that the figure of the 'fanboy' cultist is highly exaggerated; in reality, the figure of the fangirl is an equally valid possibility. This study also uncovers some significant new perspectives on the issue of fandom, in that a very high percentage of respondents choose not to align themselves with any particular cinematic passion or interest, despite showing tendencies towards cinephilia. This can be understood in a number of ways: firstly, as a response to negative stereotyping of audiences for Asian Extreme films in a specifically British context; secondly, as a means for some respondents to critique the marketing tactics employed by Tartan; and thirdly, as an expression of resistance towards being categorised in general, reflecting participants' own negative experiences as fans on the receiving end of prejudicial remarks. All three of these articulations characterise the way in which audiences for this category of films display their connoisseurship and make bids for subcultural distinction. Geographical information provided by the respondents suggests that the discursive frameworks informing this taste formation are distinctly British in character. Linked to this, the questionnaire findings also indicate that all respondents have a keen interest in censorship debates; this will be explored more fully in Chapter 5. Their interest in these regulatory issues also involves the performance of cultural expertise, through the valorisation of film directors as artists and the distinction frequently drawn between gratuitous 'torture porn' and 'meaningful' Asian Extreme films.

Finally, the questionnaire findings also produced an audience-led exploration of gendered responses; this highlighted the issue of invisible female audiences.⁷¹ Female participants reveal a preference for domestic and educational viewing contexts which could have contributed to the widespread notion of a predominantly young, male audience for this category of films. The viewing practices described by female respondents can also be

understood as a response to the stigma attached to watching films that include scenes of sexual violence. This issue is discussed in a number of contradictory ways by female respondents. One emergent pattern in these responses is a distaste for the way in which women are often represented in Hollywood films, particularly in rom-coms; instead, this category of films offers a range of alternative female roles that are not only diverse but also, in the case of *Audition*, extremely violent. One of the ways that female respondents interpret scenes of sexual violence, then, is as a form of resistance to 'mainstream' representations of women. Across these two clusters of findings (focused on issues of fandom and gender) similar patterns also emerge in the way that respondents construct their interest in the category as being either 'alternative' or 'normal'. This could be a reflection the way in which the Asian Extreme category has occupied both marginal and 'mainstream' distribution and exhibition spaces; this will be explored more fully in Chapter 6.

Censorship, Cult Connoisseurship and the Pleasures of Asian Extreme Films

Introduction

This chapter addresses two key lines of enquiry generated by a preliminary analysis of the qualitative responses to the online questionnaire. The first of these centres on discourses surrounding censorship; in particular, I investigate why the question relating to the BBFC and the 'harm' debate (see Appendix 2, Question 11) elicited longer answers than any of the other qualitative questions (36, 720 words in total). Similarly, the question regarding the importance of watching uncut versions of films elicited the second longest set of answers (24, 745 words in total). Several film scholars have already explored the role of censorship in forging the cult reception of a range of different films (Egan 2007: 229-251; Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 46-50). Kate Egan investigates the ways in which information produced by the BBFC and other state-sanctioned institutions is reclaimed as a teaching resource on specialist forums used by 'video nasty' fans (Egan 2007: 141). Whilst there is evidence of this kind of fan activity on the *Snowblood* forums [see Chapter 1, pp. 42-48], the online questionnaire provides a different context for evaluating the uses being made of censorship knowledge by fans of the Asian Extreme category; the first section of this chapter therefore investigates the different kinds of values attached to expertise on film censorship, and the uses that are being made of it. Alongside this, I interrogate the symbiotic relationship between audiences of Asian Extreme films and the regulatory activity of the BBFC; this involves a consideration of how this interaction has been facilitated and complicated by a series of on-going academic interventions, thereby creating a wholly different dynamic to the case of fan-censor relations exemplified by the 'video nasty' connoisseurs.

The second line of enquiry generated by the qualitative responses takes the form of a broader exploration of the different types of pleasure and meaning this category of films offers to its audiences. Firstly, I consider the multiple ways in which these films are valued; this is achieved by analysing clusters of words used to describe the most memorable scenes identified by the respondents. Following this, a specific line of enquiry is undertaken to shed light on the preference that female participants expressed for Extreme Horror, and which male participants expressed towards Asian Cinema in general; this is accomplished by

examining male participants' responses to *Audition* and female participants' responses to *Battle Royale*. Finally, this chapter concludes with an exploration of some of the different understandings the research participants have regarding the notion of 'extreme-ness', and how these relate to specific bids they make for subcultural capital.

Qualitative Responses: An Overview

The preliminary findings generated by the qualitative data reinforce the earlier study of message boards on fan websites for Asian Extreme films; this revealed how frequently discussions on the *Snowblood Apple* forum turn towards evaluating the history, function and practices of the BBFC. Analysis of these discussion threads established that the censorship process is productive within this fan community in three distinctive ways: in that the censorship of a film can (but does not always) generate subcultural capital in relation to different cut and uncut versions of it; that censorship debates can act as discursive sites for developing and exchanging particular forms of expertise and knowledge regarding censorship, thus facilitating bids for subcultural capital; and that this exchange of knowledge and expertise also performs a social function, fostering friendship and communal values within the forum.

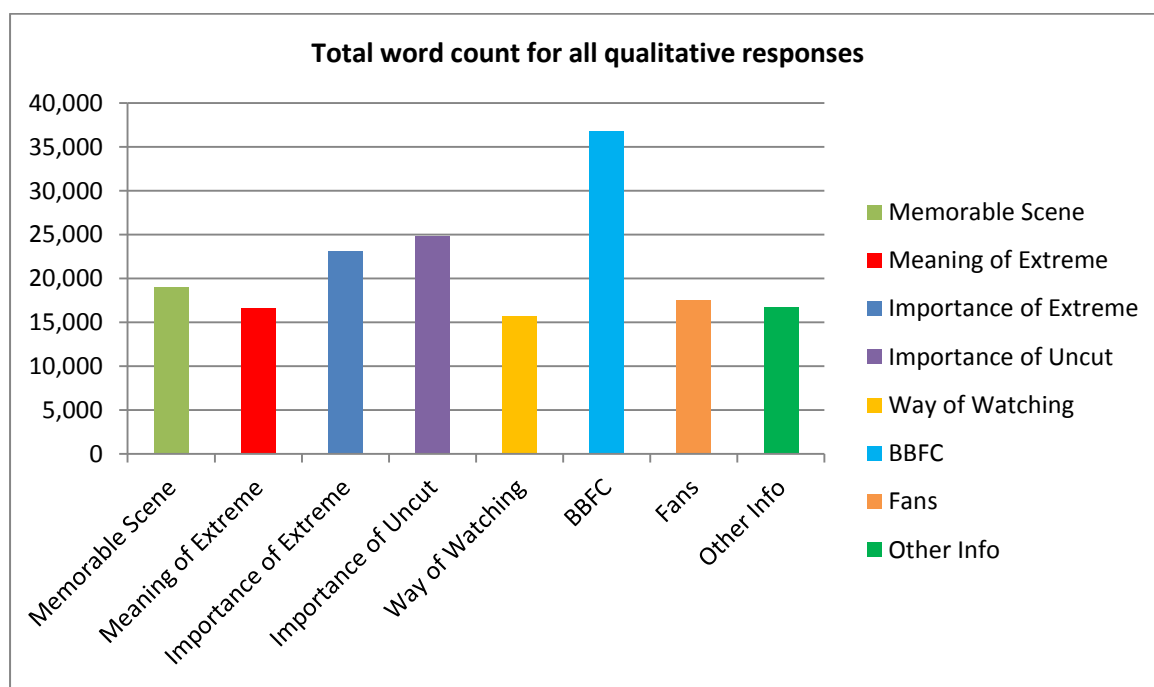


Fig. 1: Word count totals for all qualitative responses

The questionnaire findings further develop this picture by revealing that debates surrounding censorship and the ‘harm’ issue are very important not only to fans on the *Snowblood* forum, but also to the majority of those who responded to the questionnaire. The level of expertise and knowledge demonstrated by the respondents indicates that, on the whole, audiences for Asian Extreme films not only follow developments surrounding film censorship in the UK, but also have a strong awareness of academic research carried out in this field. This knowledge ranges from frequent references to well-known censorship case studies, such as the ‘video nasties’ and *cause célèbres* including *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) and *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996), to a display of more specialist knowledge about Japanese and North American censorship practices and cultures. The timing of the questionnaire going online also meant that there were frequent discussions of the BBFC’s decision to cut *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010) and to reject *The Human Centipede 2* (Tom Six, 2011).

The Significance of Anti-Censorship Discourses

All of the research participants were, with the exception of the Occasional Viewers, more likely to be strongly opposed to the films being cut, as is illustrated in the chart below:

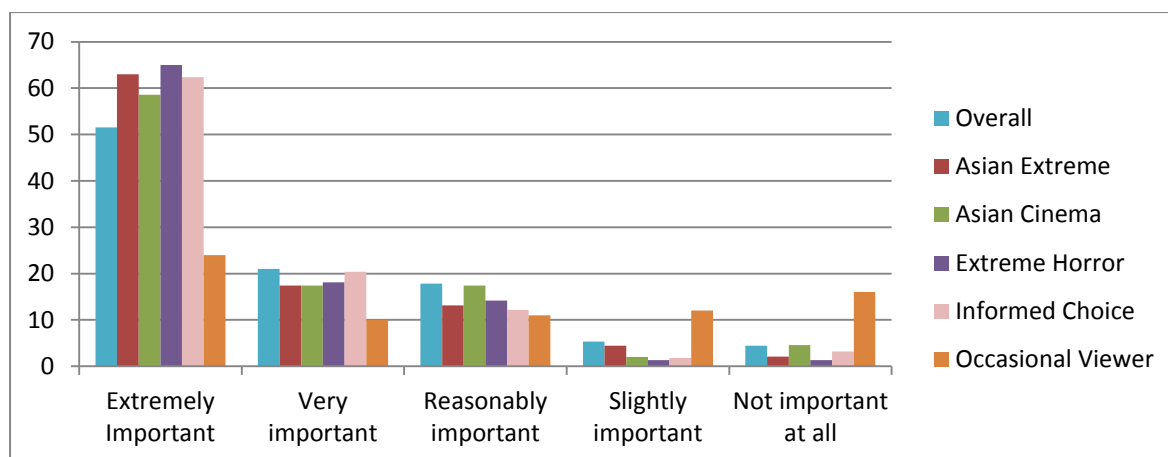


Fig. 2: Graph illustrating the importance of seeing the films uncut according to orientation-type

This further emphasises the earlier finding that, despite only a small percentage of respondents calling themselves fans, the majority of respondents care passionately about this group of films and are deeply invested in their enjoyment of them – to the extent that they will regularly seek out uncut versions of many of the titles.

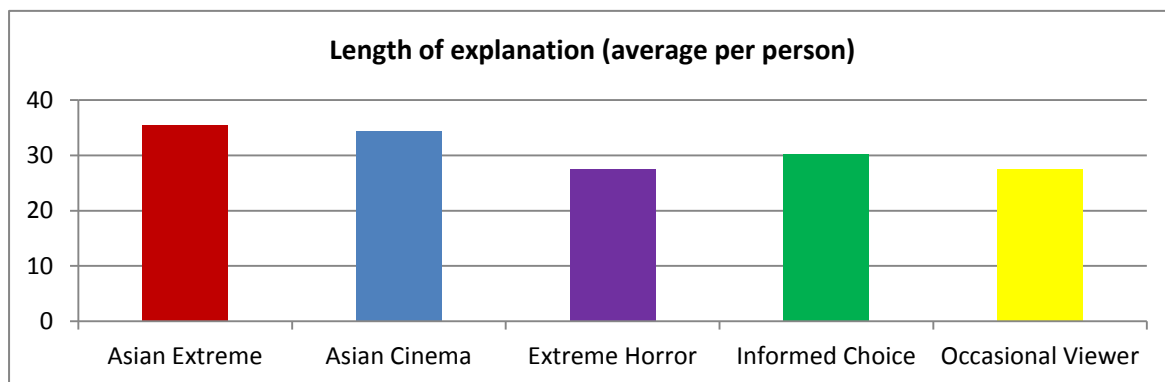


Fig. 3: Length of answers explaining reasons why watching uncut films is important according to orientation-type.

The answers given to Question 8 (which asked respondents to explain their answer to Question 7) were the second longest set of answers given overall; it was only in answer to Question 11, regarding the BBFC and its argument about ‘harm’, that respondents provided longer responses. The length of answers given to Question 8 according to orientation-type again reinforces the fact that, with some minor variations, watching uncut versions of the films is important to nearly all of the respondents. A wide range of issues relating to the practice of cutting films are raised in these responses; amongst these, there are three commonly expressed sentiments. The first of these articulates a desire to watch the film as the director intended it to be seen. As already established [see Chapter 4, pp. 140-141] the discourse of valuing the director’s cut of a film, was expressed significantly more often by male respondents (41%) than by females (29%). In keeping with the views of Natalie and Gareth [see Chapter 4, pp. 143-4] it was the research participants who felt they made an Informed Choice about what they watch that were more likely to discuss cuts made to films in this way, often citing the importance of the director’s creative vision as an artist:

I believe in seeing the director’s vision... I don’t want someone editing a film because they feel that they must “protect” me... I am old enough and responsible enough to make up my own mind... if I’m offended by something it was because I chose to look at what the film maker wanted to show me and I could have looked away or not. It’s the director’s vision that should be shown to audiences... film is still an artwork even if it’s within the horror/terror genre (Female, Informed Choice).

In mobilising discourses surrounding the director as an auteur with a ‘creative vision’ that should be both respected and protected, these research participants were therefore constructing an anti-censorship argument that undermines the BBFC’s position by drawing

attention to its insensitivity towards film as an art form and, by extension, highlighting the regulator's lack of cultural capital.

The second most commonly expressed sentiment was that cutting a film can adversely change its meaning. One male respondent articulated this opinion in the following way:

The violence has to be uncut in any horror film for me to view it. Not just for the sake of viewing the violence either. I have seen cut versions of films but they make no sense. Imagine a version of Mario Bava's *Bloodbath* with every murder cut out. Even watching the uncut version you have to pay attention to follow the story. Removing the violence from some films makes them even more nastier. Many times the violence in a film needs a story for the viewer to accept, enjoy or tolerate the violence. But violence in many films drives the storyline to an acceptable destination. Turn the BBFC's new attitude on its head and remove the revenge scenes from a rape and revenge flick whilst keeping the rape scenes present. The presence of the rape scenes, no matter how unpleasant, justify the revenge scenes. Best to view the entire version of the film and make your own mind up (Male, Extreme Horror).

Several other participants constructed similar anti-censorship arguments that asserted their valuation of the films through an appreciation of a film's narrative structure and the significance of the violence within the overall meaning. This was often couched in terms similar to those used by professional film critics; one participant referenced Mark Kermode's views on film censorship in her response, stating 'I think Mark Kermode hit the nail on the head when he said that cutting violent scenes from a horror film was like removing the punch line from a joke' (Female, Informed Choice). Linked to this argument was the frequently expressed view that their main reason for ordering DVDs online was to get hold of the uncut version. One participant explained that the BBFC's decision to cut a film also led him to purchasing the right kind of DVD player to facilitate his interest in watching uncut versions of films:

I hate censorship - I'm not really a 'gorehound' per se, but the heavy cutting of *Ichi the Killer* actually led me to buying a multi-region player just so I could see it uncut. Maybe it was just curiosity, but at the end of the day, I feel that censorship stands in the way of interesting director's intentions and applications of violence, in general. And also I don't want to be told by somebody else what I can or cannot view. The BBFC behaving like our child-minder is completely ridiculous in my eyes (Male, Asian Cinema).

This type of answer indicates that not only is it common for audiences of these films to seek out uncut versions of them, regardless of their opinion about the rationale behind the cut,

but also that they are prepared to invest in the right equipment to watch them. The respondent also articulates a third commonly expressed point of view in relation to the issue of cutting films: that censorship takes the choice away from an adult viewer and violates human rights.

A small minority of respondents supported the BBFC's right to cut films. One male respondent explained why he was not entirely against cutting films in the following way:

Watching an Asian Extreme film is not, for me, about getting kicks from boundaries being pushed in regards to taste and decency. I'm more interested in the stories that are explored. For example, I'm more interested in the relationship between the two lead characters in *The Isle* than I am the violence (the fish hook scene in particular). The scene that was cut from the theatrical version of *Ichi the Killer* was necessary as that scene would have been uncomfortable for me and it's the only scene where the violence is not portrayed in a fantastical or comic like way (Male, Informed Choice).

However, this participant was in a minority of only 4.4% who didn't mind if films were cut; an overwhelming majority of 90.3% of respondents felt that it was either extremely, very, or reasonably important that they saw the uncut version of a film. In summary, the participants' responses to this question mobilised a number of discourses as a means to construct a range of anti-censorship arguments; these focused primarily on the valorisation of film directors as creative artists and the significance of violence as a narrative component, thus forming bids for cultural distinction; these were qualified by comments such as 'I'm not a gorehound per se' which functioned to disassociate their taste from an untutored pleasure in watching gore. Many responses also aimed to dignify Asian Extreme films in a bid to highlight the category's cultural value and artistic worth; these arguments were extended further in the qualitative responses given in answer to Question 11.

The BBFC, the 'Harm' Issue and Cult Connoisseurship

The longest answers provided by questionnaire respondents related to the issue of 'harm'; 36,720 words were written by participants in response to the statement: 'In the UK, several Asian Extreme films have been cut or rejected (banned) by the BBFC, all on the basis of the argument that the film created an association between sexual arousal and violence, and could therefore produce a "harmful response in some viewers". Do you have any thoughts on this argument?' Not surprisingly for audiences of Asian Extreme films, the answers given were highly critical of the BBFC and the concept of 'harm', with only a small minority of 1.4%

suggesting that there might be some validity to the BBFC's claims. Some of these responses echoed those discussed above in relation to the cutting of Asian Extreme films; most notably many respondents expressed the view that adults should be allowed to make their own choices and censorship was inappropriate for films issued with an '18' certificate.

However, there were also some significant features that characterised the responses given to Question 11. Points raised in opposition to the BBFC's arguments were incredibly detailed and wide-ranging, indicating that this is a subject which many of the respondents have given a considerable thought to; the fact the this question elicited the longest answers also suggests that, for some research participants, the primary reason for filling in the questionnaire was to debate censorship issues. Certain arguments were articulated more frequently than others; for example, issues surrounding access and technology were particularly prominent. These arguments hinged on the view that the BBFC is unrealistic about the reality of illegitimate film distribution via the Internet, and that anyone can download censored films online. Respondents also argued that, because of the availability of rejected material online, banning or cutting a film is irresponsible and counterproductive because it inevitably creates a wider market for it. One male fan of Asian Extreme films argued that

there's the fact that cutting or banning a film is kind of pointless now that we have the Internet. It's not going to prevent people watching it. Even if there isn't a licensed English subtitled version there will likely be a fan-subbed version available online. In fact, banning a film may only increase the interest in it (as I noticed when I glanced at the *imdb.com* comments on *Grotesque*) (Male, Asian Extreme).

This anti-censorship argument often took the form of citing instances on websites where there is evidence to suggest that rejecting *Grotesque* inadvertently created a market for it, such as those found on *imdb.com* and *thestudentroom.co.uk*. A slightly more complex argument was also offered by some participants; this again demonstrated knowledge about forms of film regulation in other countries:

I can understand the argument for cutting in this way but I personally doubt how effective such cutting by the BBFC is. Without having to hand any crime figures I would be interested to see what levels of harm are done by people viewing these films in the many countries where they are available uncut (most Western European countries, Scandinavia, US, Japan etc.). With the BBFC's easing of cutting 18 certificate films (for violence) in general and allowing adult viewers to see what they want has there been a rise in violent crime? If there was then I'm sure we'd have seen the regulations tightened up to the same levels as the Ferman days again but

this hasn't happened. I think that if someone wants to see uncut versions of these films they would have no trouble at all in sourcing them from online retailers abroad and so would be able to get access to them anyway (Male, Asian Cinema)

Here, the respondent combines his awareness about censorship (or the absence of it) in a range of countries with the commonly articulated idea that it is always possible to get hold of uncut versions online.

Particular clusters of words were employed by respondents to formulate their answers to this question; these revealed the discourses which many of the anti-censorship arguments drew on. The discursive framework of American/Hollywood/'mainstream' was, again, the most popular amongst all respondents. In particular, 58.4% of those passionate about Asian Cinema framed their discussion of censorship in these terms. Ubiquitous amongst these ideas was the view that American films were 'worse' than Asian films. One male respondent wrote 'RUBBISH! The same could be said of many Hollywood productions, such as *Sucker Punch*, but as they are from another country and the portrayal maybe slightly different it appears to be more acceptable to cut/ban them.' More commonly, though, these responses referred to the 'torture porn' category. A female fan of Asian Cinema wrote:

Generally I am against censorship as people should be free to express themselves and to show their art works to others. I don't really feel the BBFC has any right to determine which films I am allowed to see any more than I have the right to determine what films they can see. However, I do recognise that there are maladjusted individuals out there, and while I feel that a film is never going to be the deciding factor in whether an individual commits an act of violence or not I do think it is rather difficult to justify the mass distribution of the worst kind of pointless, nihilistic torture porn. Ultimately as I feel censorship is a slippery slope and that society's problems are caused more by the dark parts of the human condition that these films explore than by the films themselves I can't justify the complete banning of a film, but on the other hand I'm not going to object loudly if the BBFC doesn't grant distribution to the new *Human Centipede* movie. Part of the fun of some of these films is the notoriety granted by a BBFC ban anyway (Female, Asian Cinema).

As already established [see Chapter 4, p.141] many participants involved in the research project refer to the 'torture porn' category as being representative of 'pointless' or 'tasteless' violence; additionally, in answer to the final question several respondents articulated the view that they don't like watching 'torture porn' for similar reasons.

A second discursive framework within which many of the research participants positioned their anti-censorship expertise was the broader academic discourse dating back

to the era of the video nasties and on-going public debates about the 'harm' issues. These responses focused on countering the claims put forward by the 'effects' tradition, and argued, in the main, that there is no evidence to back such claims up. However, the range of ways in which these arguments were constructed, and the breadth of films and other media that were referenced in these discussions, vary greatly and illustrate the way in which respondents enacted their claims of agency. One respondent wrote:

I strongly doubt that the "harmful response" that is being suggested is symptomatic to the private lives of Asian Extreme movie fans. As with violent video games, the "harmful response" is restricted to a negligible minority that cannot be used to justify withholding this kind of entertainment to millions of others. Secondly, if there really is a minority that shows such a harmful response, it does not make sense to connect it exclusively to Asian movies. Hollywood also likes to mix sexuality and violence, and understandably so, because they are very similar themes - passionate physical activity that can be used to express domination and power. Recent examples of movies with a potentially disturbing interplay of sex and violence are "A History of Violence", "Shoot 'Em Up" and "Munich". These go quite a bit further than anything I've seen in Asian Extreme films, in the latter case actually suggesting that the main character and hero of the story is aroused by or uses sex to get over the violent deaths of innocent hostages. And he is supposed to be the one we sympathise with. Singling out Asian Extreme films as the one source for perverted associations is stigmatising and thoughtless (Male, Informed Choice).

This considered response, by no means amongst the longest, indicates how important these enactments of agency were for many of the participants when answering Question 11. In making reference to the 'stigmatising' way audiences for these films are often perceived there was, once again, an acknowledgement of, and response to, the way the participant feels the regulatory board perceives audiences for this category of films. The length, coherence and detail of many of these responses suggest that they demand to be taken seriously; these research participants therefore make use of the online questionnaire as a site to construct and perform their expertise, and express their views and feelings, on the subject of film censorship. In this way, I argue that many of the research respondents utilise this communication channel (facilitated by myself as an academic) to make a direct bid to counter the negative stereotyping of audiences for Asian Extreme films; this is accomplished through a demonstration of their connoisseurship of the films, their expertise on the subject of film censorship and, in some cases, their intellectual sophistication.

A further, more complex dimension of this discursive strategy can be identified by references to key academics involved in censorship debates (Martin Barker, Julian Petley

and David Buckingham) or knowledge of previous studies published within the field of censorship studies. One respondent wrote:

I don't give that argument much credence as I can't recall a single case in which someone successfully argued that aggressive sexual behaviour was influenced by a film. The whole 'video nasties' debacle which was subsequently skewered by the likes of Martin Barker has made me very wary of interference by an unelected body whose policies and guidelines seem to be used inconsistently (Male, Extreme Horror).

These responses reveal the way in which many horror fans align themselves with cultural studies academics, as a means to valorise their interests and claim agency over their fandom. Matt Hills argues that, in these cases,

what such audiences are enacting is a discourse, a performance, of critical agency. It should therefore come as no surprise that such a discourse is, in this instance, shared by fan audiences and academics studying censorship debates. However, unlike fans' argumentative positions, academic work at least has the potential of feeding into 'policy recommendations' (Hills 2005a: 95).

Hills highlights the discursive interaction existing between horror fans and academics; this relationship was clearly enacted as a dialogue in many of the responses to the questionnaire. For example, there were frequent references made to the previous report on sexual violence produced by researchers at Aberystwyth University (Barker et al 2007). In some cases, this took the form of participants advising me to read the report; in others, there were more cynical comments offered, such as 'the BBFC paid no attention to the last report so, sadly, I think you're wasting your time' (Female, Informed Choice); others expressed the hope that the BBFC would take account of their views in the future. Clearly, then, the findings of this research project have to be understood as part of an on-going discursive relationship between audiences of (Asian) Extreme cinema and the regulatory board; this relationship has, more importantly, been facilitated by academic research carried out at Aberystwyth University over a period of six years. A further illustration of this fan-censor relationship was provided by the choice of films referenced by some of the participants in their responses; these included *Salò* (Paolo Pasolini, 1975), *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes, 2000), *A Ma Soeur!* (Catherine Breillat, 2001) and *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992). Tellingly, these are the same films referenced by BBFC examiners in their reports on *Ichii the Killer* (BBFC 2002) and referenced in Barker et al's 2007 report on sexual violence; this suggests a very specific articulation of this discursive framework, using

the same films as markers or precedents within the context of censorship debates, circulates amongst horror fans, academics and the film regulators alike.

In summary, the responses to the question about the BBFC produce a number of key findings. Firstly, that the majority of all respondents (with the exception of the Occasional Viewers) engage passionately with this category of films, despite their aversion to the 'fan' label; this is demonstrated by their defence of their interests and their commitment to obtaining uncut copies of the films. The anti-censorship arguments they construct are detailed, knowledgeable and wide-ranging. Many of the responses demonstrate a comprehensive level of expertise regarding previous censorship cases in the UK and instances of censorship in other countries. The discursive framework of American/Hollywood/'mainstream' cinema again provides the most frequently used context for framing the discussion of censorship; Hollywood films, particularly 'torture porn', are often cited as tasteless or pointless films that are passed uncut and, according to participants, reveal a bias against Asian cinema. Finally, an awareness of academic research carried out in the field of censorship studies means that there is an element of the questionnaire population that use Question 11 as a stage to enact their agency; this, I argue, is to counteract the negative stereotyping of the audience that has already taken place.

The Pleasures of Watching Asian Extreme Films

In this section of the chapter I explore the different kinds of pleasure and meaning audiences derive from engaging with Asian Extreme films. In many ways, these findings form the heart of the research project, its primary purpose being to articulate what it is about this category of films that attracts a passionate and devoted following. This is done firstly by considering the memorable scenes identified and discussed by the research participants. The recollection of unforgettable cinematic moments that are particularly striking or treasured in some way can be a useful method for eliciting discussions about the different meanings films hold for their audiences. Victor Burgin argues in *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual* (1996) 'that individuals ...act in accordance with beliefs, values and desires that increasingly are formed and informed, inflected and refracted, through image' (Burgin 1996: 22); the recollection of specific images can therefore solicit insights into how identities and values are formed in relation to films. Requesting the questionnaire participants to identify and discuss memorable moments from their favourite titles was

therefore a strategy for stimulating responses that went beyond simple recollections of what happened in each film. Having elicited these responses, the form of language used to describe these scenes was then examined as a means of identifying the different kinds of values that audiences attribute to these films. This line of enquiry revealed some significant findings in terms of the film literacy of the respondents, the degree of attention they paid to elements such as characterisation and narrative pace, and the way in which pleasures associated with the exotic or 'other' are articulated. Finally, as a follow-up to the findings generated by the quantitative data, these responses were analysed in terms of gendered pleasures; in particular, there was a specific examination of male participants' responses to *Audition* and female participants' responses to *Battle Royale*.

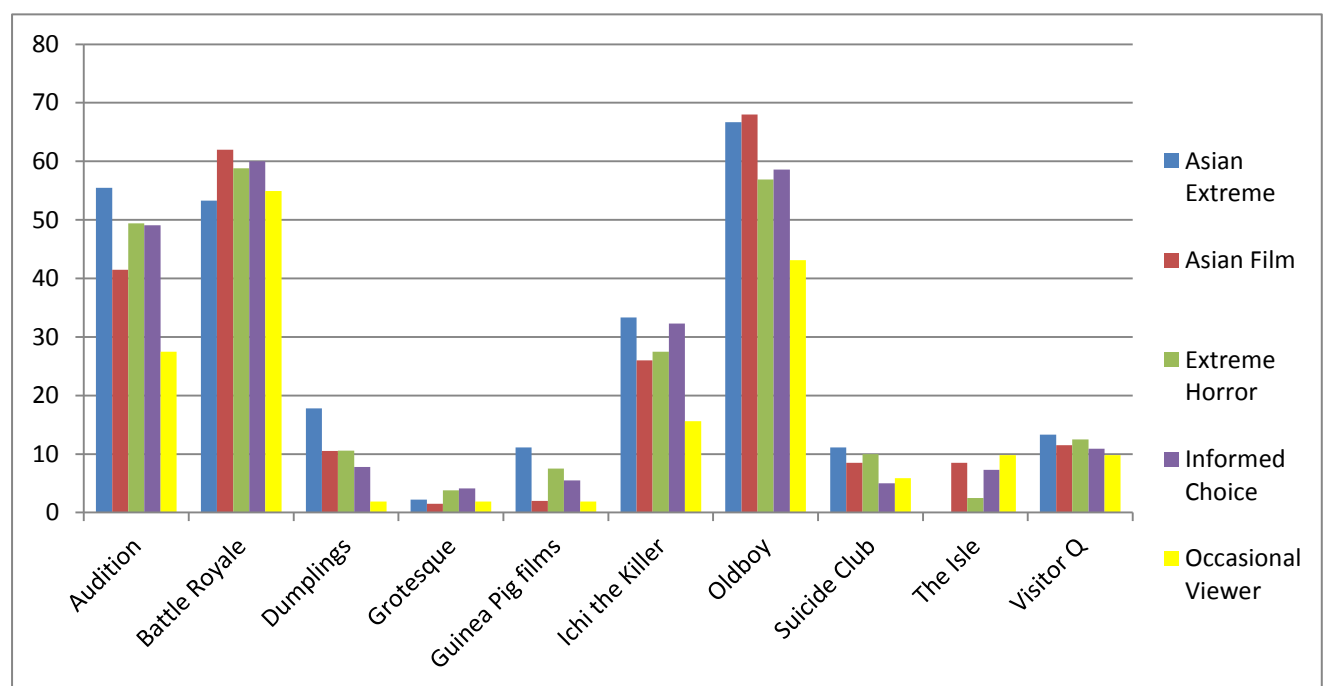


Fig. 4: Graph illustrating respondents' favourite films according to orientation-type

Question 2 asked participants to indicate up to three films from the list which they considered to be favourites; the results are illustrated in Figure 4. With the exception of the Occasional Viewers, who had seen proportionally fewer of the more obscure titles (and therefore had less choice about which films to cite as their favourites), there were again a number of similarities in the choices made by all of the remaining four orientation-types. All four types rated either *Battle Royale* or *Oldboy* as one of their favourite films, and very few respondents rated *Grotesque*; in fact, as discussed in the analysis of fan forums [see Chapter 2, p.14], many respondents made the value judgement that *Grotesque* is not a 'good' film,

and that because of this they didn't mind when the BBFC rejected it in 2009. Although similar numbers of respondents had seen both *Audition* (84.1%) and *Ichii the Killer* (83.7%), *Audition* was a far more popular film with all orientation-types.

There are a couple of notable discrepancies in the overall patterns that emerged in relation to the selection of favourite films. None of those categorising themselves as fans of Asian Extreme films chose *The Isle* as a favourite film, even though 40% of them had seen it. Similarly, very few of the Extreme Horror fans liked this film – but it was significantly more popular with Asian Cinema lovers and Occasional Viewers. This might indicate that respondents who categorised themselves as being passionate about Asian Cinema in general were more likely to enjoy Korean film titles, or art-house titles. This reflects a pattern of taste preferences already established through the reception analysis of British fan communities of Asian Extreme cinema; for example, in a review of *The Isle* on the *Snowblood Apple* website, fan critic Alex Apple dismisses the film as 'art-house exploitation' and advises the *Snowblood* community 'Please, avoid this reprehensible piece of film making. If you want trash, rent a Miike DVD. If you want art, go see a Kurosawa movie' (Apple 2004).

In answer to Question 3, certain scenes from the list of ten films provided were discussed more frequently than others. Below is a graph that includes the most popular choices; not all of the scenes identified by the participants are included here, as some were only mentioned once or twice. This graph reveals that certain films are more memorable with particular audience types. 78% of the respondents passionate about Asian Cinema discussed specific scenes from *Audition*. Scenes from *Battle Royale* were discussed more frequently by fans of Extreme Horror than any other audience type. *The Isle* was, again, most popular with those who categorise themselves as being passionate about Asian Cinema in general. Particular moments from *Oldboy*, most notably the corridor fight sequence and the octopus scene, were mentioned more than any other memorable moments, and were discussed most frequently by respondents who considered themselves to make Informed Choices about their viewing.

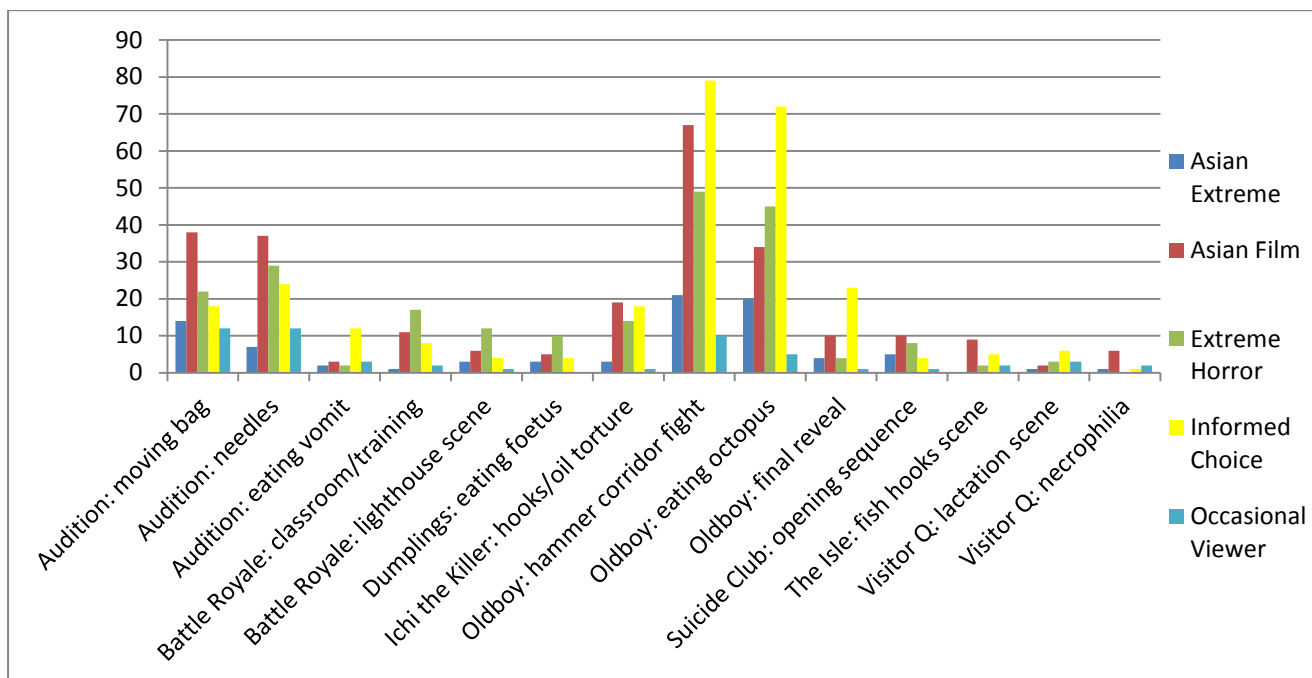


Fig. 5: Graph illustrating most popular memorable scenes according to orientation-type

The multiple ways in which the respondents remembered scenes from the films were markedly different with specific titles. For example, *Oldboy* and *The Isle* had one or two stand-out scenes that were invariably referred to by most of respondents who discussed them; *Audition* and *Battle Royale* elicited more comments about pace, character and concept, which meant that they don't figure so prominently on the graph above (Figure 5). A second approach for interpreting respondents' discussions of their favourite scenes therefore involved looking at groups of words that were often used; these are illustrated in Figure 6.

Oldboy was a favourite film with both male and female respondents and across all orientation-types. Discussion of the corridor fight scene often revolved around qualities associated with the cinematography and editing employed in the sequence. A typical comment from a male respondent identified the scene as being memorable in the following way 'not because of its violence, but the brilliant choreography and cinematography (a single shot on par with the much-lauded tracking shot through the nightclub in *Goodfellas*)' (Male, Informed Choice). Here, the use of specific language by this participant, coupled with the comparative comment likening the shot to a similar one in *Goodfellas*, suggests an academic level of film literacy; this respondent was already familiar with the cultural practice of analysing the use of cinematography across a range of different films.⁷²

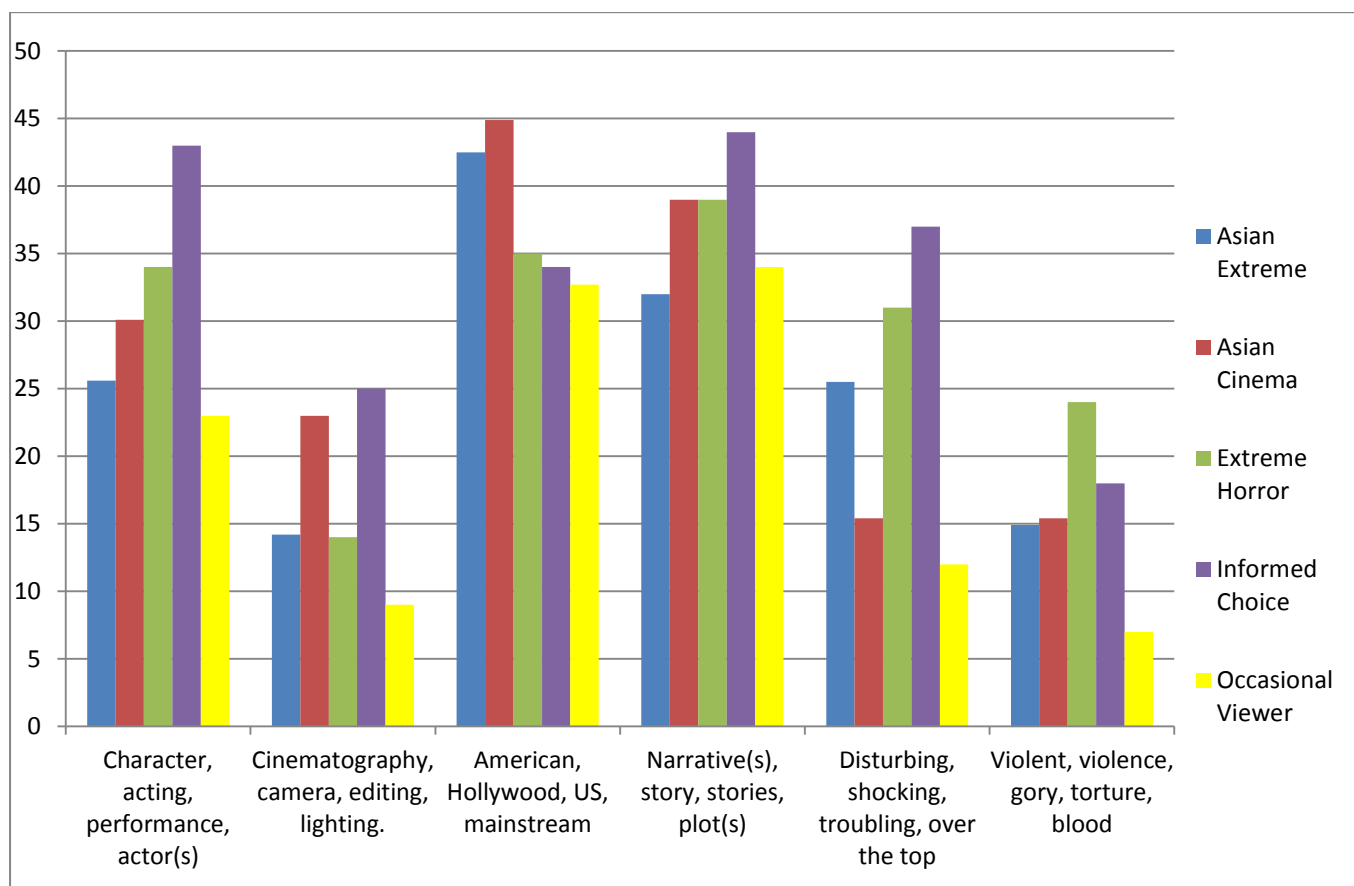


Fig. 6: Graph illustrating how respondents described memorable scenes according to orientation-type

This type of appreciation was also demonstrated by a female respondent of the same orientation-type (Informed Choice) who, likewise, made comparative references to other films:

There is a point in *Oldboy* when the central character is fighting his way down a corridor full of men with sticks. Although his making it all the way to the end is improbable, the actual fighting is satisfyingly scrappy. This is not action fighting. It looks exhausting, painful and unstylish. The strange beauty and indeed the extreme stylishness of the scene is all about the lighting, the very arthousy duration of the longshot and classical scoring. As the scene wears on this enables it to become increasing abstract, a miniature meditation on the inevitability and futility of violence, which reminds me a little of how I feel about Alan Clarke's *Elephant*.

Although this response was more reflective in tone, there are some striking similarities that frequently characterised responses provided by viewers of this orientation-type; firstly, they were more likely to reference filmic terms (such as cinematography, lighting, editing and so on) and, secondly, they were more likely to reference other films outside of the Asian Extreme category. A male respondent passionate about Asian Cinema identified this scene in the following way: 'I particularly like the scene in *Oldboy* in which he fights the mob with

his hammers and the entire scene is shot in one shot horizontally. It's just a visually interesting and exciting scene.' Here, the participant acknowledged that he was excited by the fight, but this excitement was, again, related to filmic factors. In total 233 respondents discussed this scene in relation to some form of technical or textual quality. The way these responses were distributed across the orientation-types is represented in the Figure 7.

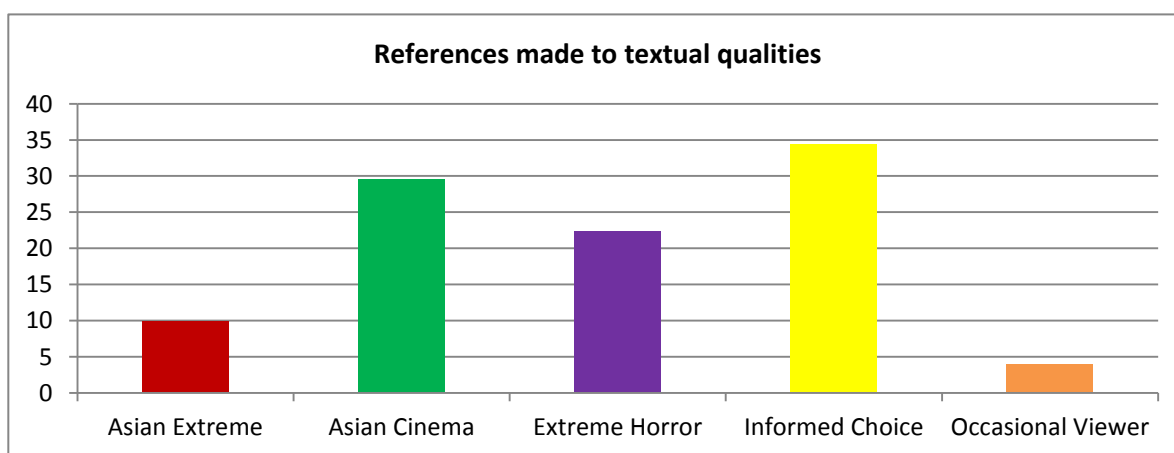


Fig. 7: References to textual qualities according to orientation-type

In order to further investigate the pleasures experienced by audiences of Asian Extreme cinema, the responses to Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5 were also considered in some detail. This stage of the analysis paid particular attention to differences in male and female responses to these questions; in this way it attempted to shed light on the emerging preference female participants expressed for Extreme Horror and male participants demonstrated towards Asian Cinema in general. In terms of favourite films and memorable moments from films, then, there were several ways in which the female respondents differed to the males. The graph below illustrates which films were discussed in response to Question 2:

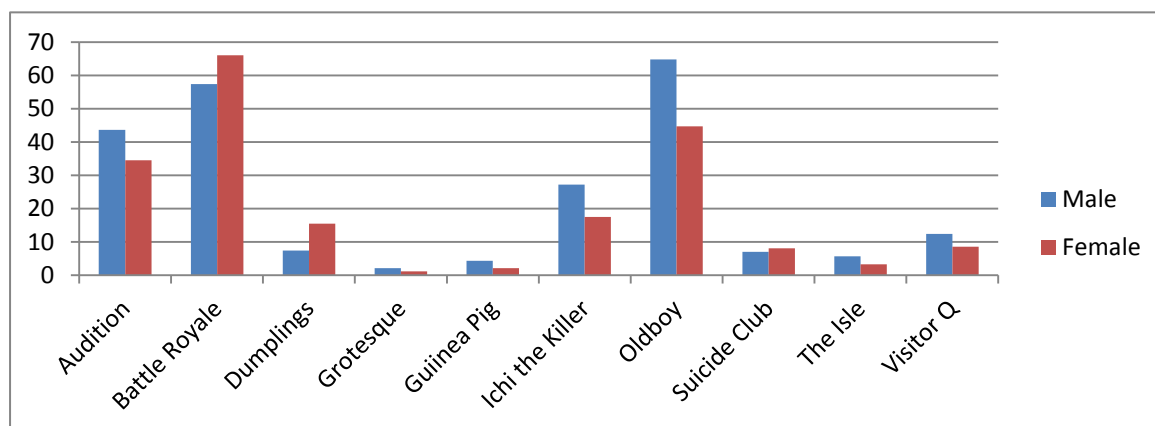


Fig. 8: Discussion of favourite scenes according to gender

There are several significant differences apparent here that indicate some of the alternative pleasures male and female respondents experience when watching these films. Firstly, *Audition*, though a popular film in general, is significantly more popular with male respondents than with females. This is an interesting result in that the narrative features a female character who tortures her male victim. Although popular with female viewers, there was no evidence to support the hypothesis that 'the enjoyment of horror films by female viewers includes a form of feminist revenge fantasy on men', as has been argued by some audience researchers (Cherry 1999a:72). If, as has been argued by theorists who adopt a psychoanalytic approach to understanding horror films, the spectator identifies with the protagonist, then this film might have proved to be uncomfortable and unpopular with a male audience; however, this was not the case, as responses to the questionnaire suggested that there was little evidence to support this claim. In fact, there was more evidence to support Carol Clover's theory that gender identity is 'less a wall than a permeable membrane' for audiences of horror films (Clover 2002: 80) being borne out by the findings of this research. For example, one male participant describes his most memorable moments from *Audition* and *Battle Royale* in the following way:

For me it is the scenes that show more 'honesty' if that makes sense. They show the brutal nature of life without being over the top. For example, the scene in *Battle Royale* where the two children decide to jump off the cliff rather than participate. Or in *Audition* where even though what she does is horrible you can kind of understand her psyche at the time and still feel sorry for her and the same is true of *Oldboy*. Most of the *Guinea Pig* films do away with this element of characterisation and suffer because of it (Male, Informed Choice).

Here the respondent moves fluidly from empathising with a female character to a male one; in fact, this answer illustrates that, for him, the issue of identification is not related to gender but to what he terms the 'element of characterisation'. Other male respondents also made comments that reflected their appreciation of the way in which characters and themes are developed throughout the film:

Audition was the first Asian Extreme film I watched and it contains one of my favourite scenes in cinema. It is at the end of the film when Aoyama is lying on the floor in intense pain, and he listens to Yamazaki's monologue and replies "It's hard to overcome that experience, but, someday you'll feel that life is wonderful. That's life, isn't it?" That moment made me well up with tears; the brutal torture became a metaphor for all the evil in the world, for all the pain he had experienced in losing his wife, and despite the atrocities he faced, Aoyama forgave that evil, he saw

Yamazaki's humanity, he saw the good parts of the world, and he smiled. That is the point when I fell in love with Asian cinema (Male, Asian Cinema).

This male participant not only appreciates the character development in the film, but also acknowledges the significance of *Audition* as 'the first Asian Extreme film I watched'. This aspect of pleasure amongst audiences echoes a survey conducted on the *Snowblood Apple* forum; here, fans of Asian Extreme cinema often selected *Audition* as a favourite film for the reason that it was the first film within the category that they watched (see Chapter 1). Overall, 27.4% of male respondents mention *Audition* in answer to Question 3, and nearly half of these discuss an element of the final sequence involving the torture of the male character, Aoyama, as is illustrated in the chart below:

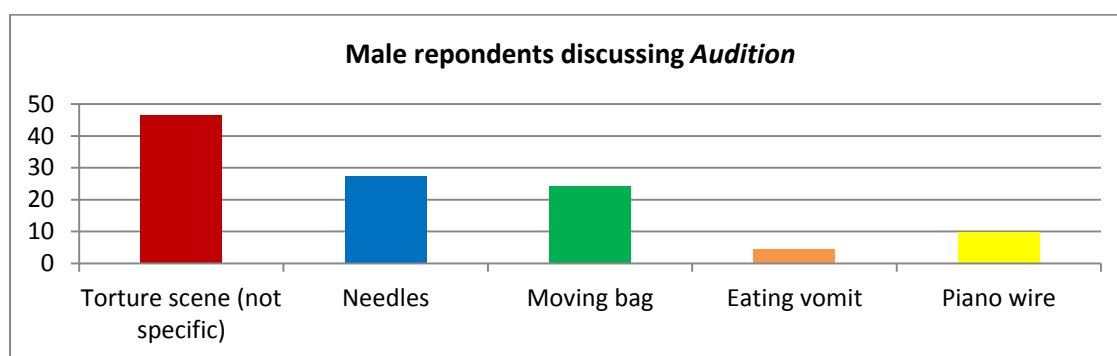


Fig. 9: Scenes identified by male respondents discussing *Audition*

The ways in which these torture scenes are remembered indicates a level of discomfort on the part of the male respondents, rather than excitement or arousal. For example, one participant writes:

The scene in *Audition* where the central character awakens to find himself paralysed and Asami, dressed in a leather apron and showing no emotion, proceeds to stick needles into his body and eyes and cut off his limbs with cheese wire. This scene is excruciating to watch and makes the viewer question why they are watching this for entertainment. It is especially horrific because of its medical overtones, touches of sadomasochism, the relative innocence and total helplessness of the protagonist, and the cold lack of emotion on the part of the torturers. Until this point the film has been fairly tame in terms of the violence it depicts and the sudden and unexpected appearance of this horrifically extreme torture scene adds a great deal to its impact (Male, Informed Choice)

There are several filmic elements mentioned here that contribute to the impact the scene had on the respondent. The most prominent of these relates to character and narrative pace; the fact that the entire sequence was 'sudden and unexpected' seems key to his appreciation of it. Another scene from the film that was frequently discussed by male

participants was 'the phone ringing in *Audition* with the man in the sack in the background. It was unexpected and shocking' (Male, Informed Choice). Again, one of the central pleasures discussed by participants here was the way in which the pace and tone of the narrative shifted. For example, one respondent wrote 'there's a scene in *Audition* in which the film switches from being a romantic comedy to a disturbing surreal nightmare. The man calls the girl to go on another date. In the background of the girls' flat a large sack suddenly makes a growling/gurgling noise and moves across the floor' (Male, Asian Cinema). Overall, elements such as character and narrative construction seemed to resonate most strongly with male respondents discussing *Audition*, and a significant aspect of their appreciation of these elements is derived from the unpredictable quality they have. There is no evidence generated by the responses to this question that suggest male participants are sexually excited by the scenes of torture, or that their spectatorship is masochistic in nature; if any emotions are expressed at all, they tend towards discomfort and the impulse to 'squirm' (mentioned by a small number of male respondents).

These findings also reveal the way in which respondents' identification with different characters is complex and fluid; many questionnaire participants discuss their inclination to empathise first with one character, then another, or with both at the same time and regardless of gender; these findings clearly imply that the issue of identification is not related to gender but to the depth and complexity of characterisation. Murray Smith argues that there are three ways in which audiences engage emotionally with fictional characters; he conceptualises these as recognition, alignment and allegiance, which in combination form a 'structure of sympathy' (Smith 1995: 81). Smith argues that these three forms of engagement account for the multiple ways in which a spectator constructs a character, relates to or identifies with them, and evaluates them morally. He qualifies this framework for understanding audience relations with fictional characters by stating that

neither recognition nor alignment nor allegiance entails that the spectator replicates the traits, or experiences the thoughts or emotions of a character. Recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits and mental states make up the character. With allegiance we go beyond understanding, by evaluating and responding emotionally to the traits and emotions of the character, in the context of the narrative situation (Smith 1995: 85).

Smith's framework for interpreting emotional response draws attention to the complexity of different degrees of sympathy and empathy experienced by a film spectator towards a

character, and the ways in which these are simultaneously moderated and evaluated. This theoretical approach is pertinent to many of the respondents' discussions about their engagement with characters and acts of violence; this can also be observed in the responses provided by female participants to *Battle Royale*, the most popular film with female respondents. Many of the comments made about the film focused on relationships between the central characters. For example, one respondent identified and described their most memorable scene as follows:

In *Battle Royale* where two characters, boy and girl, are hiding, one or both of them is injured. It has been a long time since I have seen the film, but I think one of them dies at this moment. They share a kind of heart to heart, and I think this brings the most humanity to the film, that under all the blood and chaos the trauma of the situation shows the intimacy of a relationship. It is a quiet moment in the film, which is why it sticks out in my mind, but I think this one moment shows the deeper meaning to all the fighting (Female, Extreme Horror).

This discussion of relationships between the characters is often related to the overall 'concept' of the film and how respondent feels they might behave if faced with a similar situation, with many of the respondents discussing the sequence in the lighthouse when a group of friends poison each other in order to survive. Empathy with the characters in the film is clearly evident in many of the responses:

One particular part that sticks out in *Battle Royale* is the sequence with Mitsuko and Kiriya near the end. You hear her voice say "I just didn't want to be a loser anymore" or something along that line, and I felt my stomach drop. Because I knew the history of the character, how men had treated her, I felt pity for her. Another section where I felt a strong reaction is when Kawada explains about his girlfriend, because I felt like I understood his actions. When he protects Noriko and Shuya, I felt like it was because they reminded him of himself and his girlfriend when they were in the program (Female, Asian Film fan).

Again this reflects the fluid way in which respondents identify with different characters, regardless of their gender identity. Brigid Cherry has argued that 'gendered identification for the female viewer may not be as fluid a process as Clover proposes it is for the male viewer' (Cherry 1999b: 176); however, while this may well have been the case with the female respondents to her research, this finding is not borne out by the responses to this study. The nature of the relationship between the female audience and the characters in *Battle Royale* is partly one of curiosity; one aspect of their viewing strategy clearly involved considering the capacity people have for committing 'acts of evil'. For many of the female respondents,

this was framed by comparing aspects of the ‘concept’, ‘storyline’ or ‘idea’ being unique and different to American or ‘mainstream’ cinema; several commented that the representation of children in *Battle Royale* was fascinating simply because it provided such a contrast with the way children were usually presented as vulnerable or innocent in Hollywood films; more female respondents framed their discussion of the film in this way than did their male counterparts.

This finding is also significant in the light of academic debates surrounding Orientalism, which focus on the ‘othering’ of Asian cinema as something exotic and violent; several theorists (Needham 2006: 9; Rawle 2009: 182) have suggested that the attraction to the ‘other’ offered by Asian Extreme films centres around sexualised images of women and excessive violence. On the basis of the findings of this questionnaire population, however, there is little to suggest an overly prurient interest in sexual violence. Conversely, this set of responses indicates instead that it is particular scenarios, elements of characterisation, concepts and themes that provide the audience with the pleasure of encountering something alternative to Hollywood ‘mainstream’ cinema. The subcultural capital associated with this category of films, often expressed by the research participants through a distaste for Hollywood movies, is more akin to J.J. Clarke’s interpretation of Orientalism as an approach in which the philosophical traditions of South East Asia are adopted in the West as ‘a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organised one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm discursive structures’ (Clarke 1997: 9). Clarke’s discussion of Orientalism focuses on the counter-culture movements of the 1970s, rather than the post-colonial contexts explored in the ground breaking work by Edward Said (1978); in this respect, Clarke’s work has greater resonance with the notions of subcultural capital associated with the category of Asian Extreme cinema. The significance of the subcultural capital questionnaire respondents associate with these films becomes increasingly apparent in their responses to Questions 5 and 6.

Subcultural Capital and Notions of ‘Extreme-ness’

Whilst the responses to Questions 1 and 2 revealed audience appreciation for the Asian Extreme category to be complex, and highly literate, other questions were more directly focused on the issue of ‘extreme’ content. Question 5 asked participants ‘What part does

the ‘extreme-ness’ of a film play in your response to it?’, and Question 6 requested them to elaborate on their answer. As has already been discussed [Chapter Four, p. 20], on the whole the female respondents found the notion of ‘extreme-ness’ more important than the males did. The graph below illustrates responses to this question according to orientation-type, and reveals that fans of Asian Extreme films and those with an interest in Extreme Horror valued ‘extreme-ness’ far more highly than those respondents of other orientation-types. 53.1% of Asian Extreme fans indicated that they thought notions of the ‘extreme’ were either extremely or very important to them, and 51.2% of Extreme Horror fans responded in the same way. Conversely, a small minority of only 21.3% of respondents passionate about Asian Cinema also cared similarly about ‘extreme-ness’ and 21.6% of those who made an Informed Choice responded in this way; this suggests that respondents from these two orientation-types were attracted to this category of films for reasons other than ‘extreme’ content; the analysis of their memorable moments (above) suggests that this might be connected to an appreciation of the construction of character and narrative within the films.

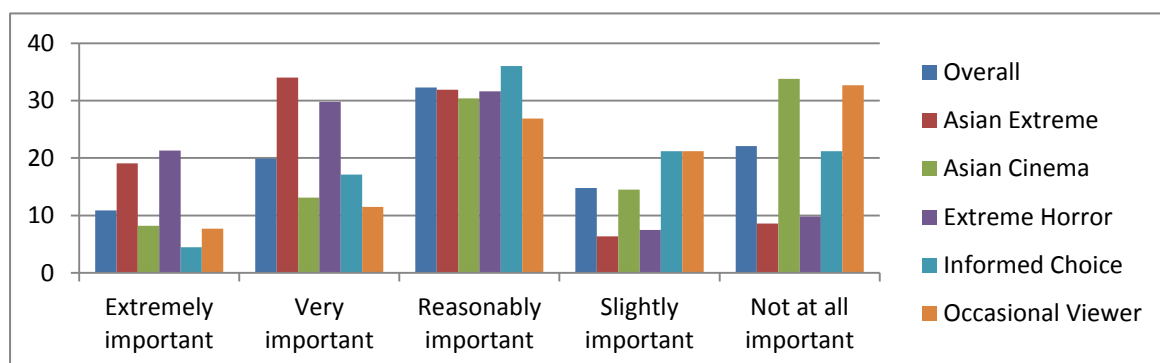


Fig. 10: Importance of ‘extreme-ness’ in participants’ responses to the films

In response to Question 6, many of the respondents had similar ideas about what the word ‘extreme’ meant to them in the expression ‘Asian Extreme’. Commonly repeated phrases in these responses included ‘pushing boundaries’, ‘breaking taboos’, ‘marketing term’ and ‘graphic violence’ (see Fig. 11 below). Notions of ‘extreme-ness’, then, were not linked to

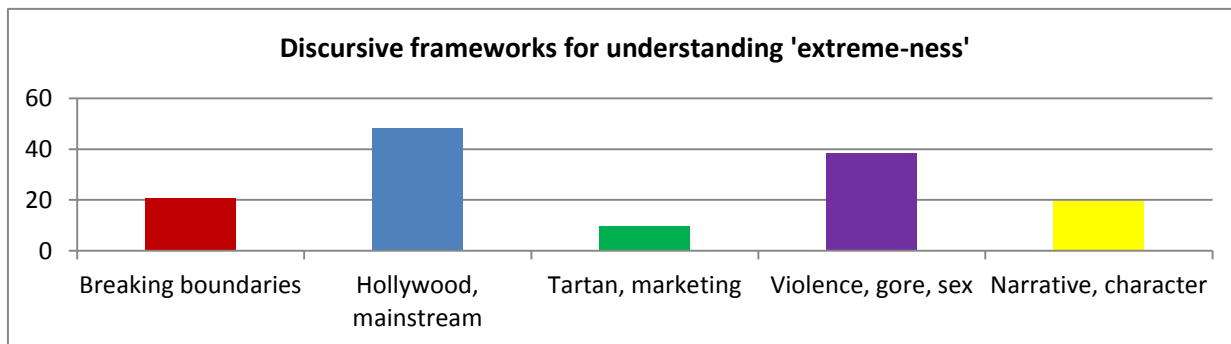


Fig 11: Discursive frameworks for understanding 'extreme-ness'

'memorable moments' in an immediately apparent way; however, a more in-depth analysis of responses to this question suggests that there is one fairly obvious connection.

As with the previous qualitative question regarding memorable moments, many of the respondents framed their understanding of 'extreme' cinema in relation to 'mainstream cinema' or 'Hollywood'; this is the most popular word grouping (48.3% of respondents) and underlines the centrality of discourses surrounding 'mainstream' and 'other' in relation to understanding audiences of these films. The second group of words that were referenced frequently by participants were clustered around different types of violence (violent, sexual, graphic, gory, bloody, OTT), which 38.3% of participants referenced. Slightly less popular, but still significant, were words clustered around the concept of breaking boundaries (boundary, taboo(s), transgressive, breaking), used by 20.5% of respondents and a group of words used by 19.7% of participants to discuss character and narrative (characterisation, plot(s), storyline, story, stories). A final group of words was searched relating to the Tartan's marketing strategies (Tartan, marketing, brand, label), which 9.9% of research participants referenced.

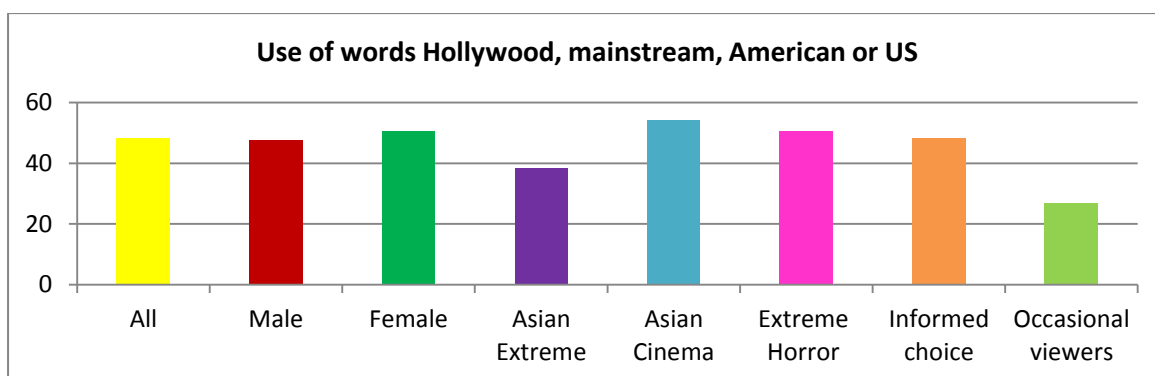


Fig. 12: Use of the words 'Hollywood', 'mainstream', 'American' or 'US' to explain notions of 'extreme-ness'

Figure 12 illustrates how frequently the words 'Hollywood', 'mainstream', 'American' or 'US' are included in answers to Question 6: with the exception of those considering themselves

fans of Asian Extreme films and Occasional Viewers, this discursive framework for understanding the concept of extreme was used by nearly 50% of all respondents, regardless of their orientation-type. It was used marginally more by the category of respondents who identify themselves as being passionate about Asian Cinema. The response below comes from a female passionate about Asian Cinema:

Asian horror cinema revolutionised horror at a time when Western horror was in free fall. Character arcs were being ignored, plots were hackneyed. Part of the appeal of Eastern horror was that it went the extra mile: obviously, as has been seen in recent years, they were in their own ways just as hackneyed (long-haired ghosts, convoluted revenge sagas) but when the wave broke, everything felt so revolutionary. Part and parcel of this was the extreme content - but by no means all and these films also boasted clever plots, great use of suspense, and good performances. The extreme scenes were/are important, in some films more than others, but they don't account for all of the films' appeals (Female, Asian Cinema).

Here the respondent explained her understanding of the relationship between Asian and Western horror films in terms of how the two cultures affect one another. The repetition of the words 'hackneyed' and 'revolutionised'/'revolutionary' indicates how important it was for many fans to experience something new and original when watching Asian Extreme films. For many, the appeal of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' brand was its ability to offer them something alternative to Hollywood horror films; however, in developing what some fans felt was a formula ('long-haired ghosts, convoluted revenge sagas') the brand's subcultural capital was diluted and it waned in popularity almost as quickly as it had gained it. Two key factors many respondents associate this category's originality were the elements of character and plot. One respondent wrote

I have found that the extreme in this instance has meant that the storyline of the films is beyond the realms of Hollywood happy endings and conventional wisdom. Anti-heroes and bad guys stand as much of a chance as the good guy here. Extreme to me, here, Asian 'Alternative' or Asian 'Indie' (Male, Asian Cinema)

A female respondent with an interest in Extreme Horror also made a similar comment:

Extreme to me in Asian extreme cinema means extreme narrative. I think a lot of Asian extreme cinema has a complex, strange narrative, for example, something like *Oldboy*, you wouldn't usually see that kind of narrative within an American film, a man having sex and falling in love with his own daughter (Female, Extreme Horror)

Although participants who valued 'extreme-ness' seemed, on the surface, to enjoy these films in quite a different way to those who claimed not to be interested in extreme content,

on a closer examination, as was illustrated in the two responses above, they were not so dissimilar; narrative and character were as central to notions of the ‘extreme’ as violence and gore. Some of these comments also touched on broader societal differences between British and Japanese culture rather than focusing exclusively on differences in film culture:

For me it means exploring the parts of the psyche that society at large (especially in the U.K) pretends does not exist. The basest of human traits, obsessions etc... They are almost like the European surrealists of the 1920s in this respect. (*I’m a Cyborg* but that’s OK springs to mind here, as do the other two films of Park Chan-wook’s revenge trilogy.)

A second frame of reference, clearly linked to the first which distinguished this category from Hollywood/mainstream films, was that of the marketing strategies used by Tartan to promote some of the films.⁷³ The respondents who identified themselves as being passionate about Asian Cinema in general were more likely to dismiss the term ‘Asia Extreme’ as a marketing strategy and to comment on its ‘Orientalist’ perspective. This is illustrated in the chart below:

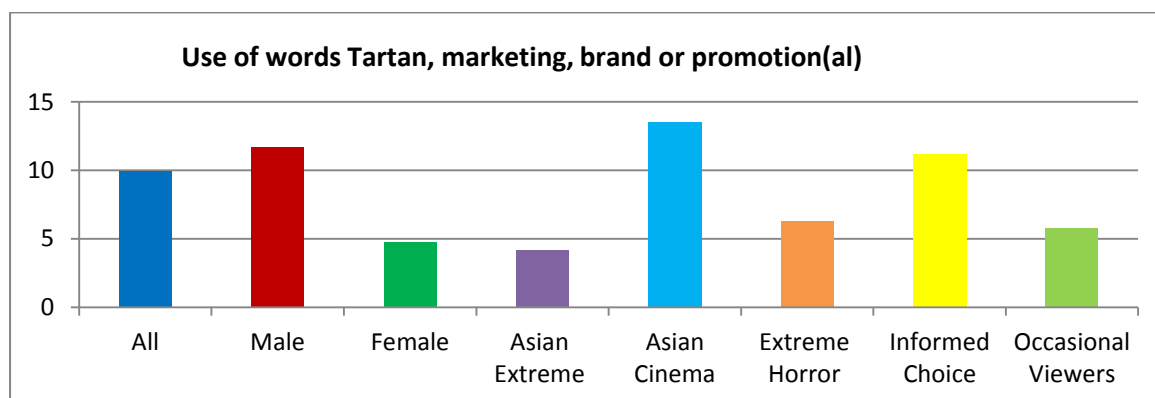


Fig. 13: Use of the words ‘Tartan’, ‘marketing’, ‘brand’ or ‘promotion(al)’ to explain notions of ‘extreme-ness’ Here, the variation in relevance of this discourse between different groups of respondents is quite marked. Firstly, the chart reveals that relatively few females (4.8%) understood the term ‘extreme’ in terms of Tartan’s marketing label. The biggest percentage of respondents who raised the discourse of Tartan and Orientalism were male participants with a passion for Asian Cinema. Members of this group often self-identified as students or academics who had been involved in discussions surrounding the use of the term within an academic context:

I view the extreme label as a marketing tool as well as something coming out of an Orientalist mindset. Our films are just as, if not more ‘extreme’ (see recent French

Horror, or *A Serbian Film*), but they are selling the concept of something foreign and forbidden here. I'm also of the opinion (expressed recently at a panel where we were asked this very question at the Korean Cinema Conference in NYC) that it may be due to the personal nature of violence in films. The lack of guns (usually) in these films negates the distance that the gun allows us from violence and killing. Knives (or piano wires or hammers in your choices here) require close proximity to use. This could be seen as a reason for the brutality or 'extremeness' of these films (Male, Asian Cinema).

A third significant framework for discussing the films centred on violence of different descriptions (sexual, graphic, gory, bloody, excessive, and so on). However, one of the complications in assessing the questionnaire responses relating to violence is that participants were just as likely to be arguing that violence *is* the defining characteristic of Asian Extreme cinema, as they are to be stating that it *is not* a relevant factor, as illustrated in the response above. The graph below illustrates how frequently different groups of viewers referenced these types of violence:

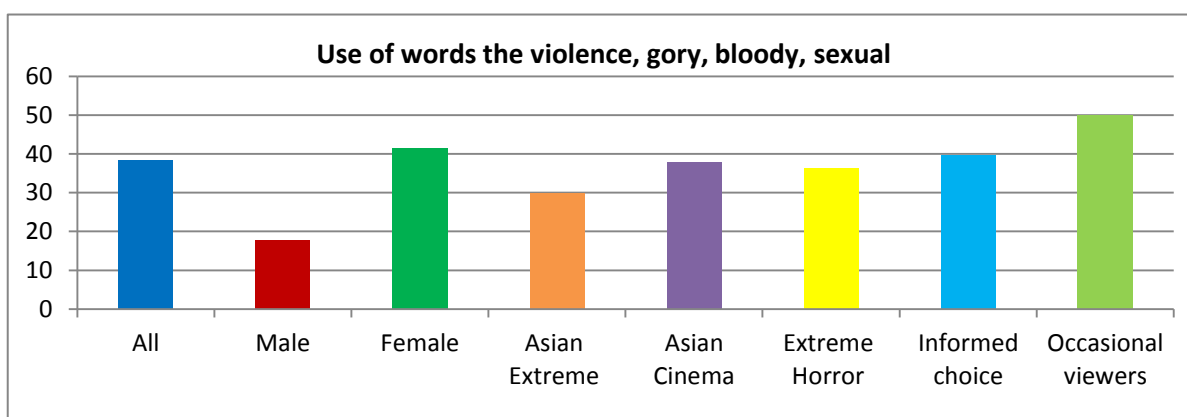


Fig. 14: Use of the words 'violence', 'gory', 'bloody', 'sexual' to explain notions of 'extreme-ness'

The way respondents who discussed issues relating to violence were distributed across the categories was also striking. 41.5% of female participants discussed issues relating to violence, compared with just 17.7% of males. In terms of orientation-type, Occasional Viewers discussed violence the most, and fans of Asian Extreme discussed it the least. Those who considered themselves Occasional Viewers almost unanimously discussed violence in terms of it providing the defining criterion for this category of films.⁷⁴ Answers were generally provided in short sentences (on average 16 words each) and stated their responses in a factual way, in the style of certificate guidelines provided by the BBFC: 'Intense violent and visually graphic - not for children and very sensitive adults' (Male, Occasional Viewer). There is a sense, then, that those who were more likely to comment on

the degree of violence in a film were less likely to engage in more sophisticated analysis of the construction of character, narrative or theme.

Conclusions

As already established by the study of the *Snowblood Apple* forums, the issue of censorship is hugely significant to audiences of Asian Extreme films in a number of ways. The findings generated by the online questionnaire develop this picture in three distinctive directions. Firstly, the strong opposition expressed towards the practice of cutting films confirms that the majority of all respondents are intensely committed to their enjoyment of the Asian Extreme category; this frequently entails seeking out uncut versions of the films and investing in equipment to watch them with. Secondly, the discursive frameworks mobilised in the construction of anti-censorship arguments reveal a symbiotic relationship between audiences of Asian Extreme films and the regulatory activity of the BBFC; this is facilitated and complicated by a series of on-going academic interventions (which include this research project). Thirdly, and following on directly from this acknowledgment, the anti-censorship arguments presented by participants are detailed, knowledgeable and wide-ranging; in this way, they utilise the online questionnaire to claim critical agency and thus counter the negative stereotyping of audiences for Asian Extreme films. This is achieved through a performance of their expertise and connoisseurship with respect to the films and their detailed knowledge regarding film censorship.

The pleasures and meanings derived from watching these films are highly varied and illustrate a considerable degree of film literacy. The most popular film, *Oldboy*, is most frequently discussed in terms of its filmic qualities; the pleasures produced from watching the film indicate that a large percentage of the questionnaire population are highly cine-literate. An examination of two of the most popular films listed on the questionnaire reveals that although torture scenes are the most memorable aspect of *Audition* for male respondents, this is primarily because of the ways in which the narrative and character are constructed. Similarly, while *Battle Royale* is the most popular film with female respondents, their appreciation focuses on character, relationships and the exploration of particular themes. Finally, nearly 50% of all research participants define notions of 'extreme-ness' in relation to Hollywood or 'mainstream' cinema; cultural capital is clearly established through

the position of the Asian Extreme category as an alternative to Hollywood films. However, the nature of audience pleasure and engagement with this group of films suggests that an appreciation of character and narrative figures more predominantly with research participants than do elements of gore or sexual violence; this, together with the widespread employment of filmic language, suggests that the key audience pleasures surrounding the category do *not* primarily lie in the inclusion of scenes of sexual violence.

Battles of Distinction: Genre Users, Social Identity and High-End Collectors

Introduction

This chapter explores the qualitative material generated by twelve interviews that were conducted between October 2011 and January 2012. The interview subjects were recruited during the early stages of publicising the online questionnaire, and respondents were then selected for two reasons [see Chapter 3, pp. 126-127]. They were then analysed using elements of discourse analysis which have already been discussed [see Chapter 3, pp. 112-119]: the findings are organised into three sections. Firstly, there is an exploration of the different ways in which the interviewees discuss the concept of genre in relation to the Asian Extreme category. These focus on questions of authenticity and marketing, with an emphasis on investigating the fan practices of negotiating and policing genre boundaries. Secondly, there is further analysis of the significant role played by censorship discourses amongst British audiences of Asian Extreme films. This develops the findings of the online questionnaire, which revealed that anti-censorship arguments function to demonstrate connoisseurship and act as sites to bids for critical agency; these draw on discursive frameworks relating to Hollywood or 'mainstream' cinema and on an academic discourse about the 'harm' debate. Thirdly, there is an analysis of the ways in which the interviewees discuss and evaluate recent technological changes (such as file-sharing and the online distribution of DVDs) and how these have affected the ways in which they access the films. The interviewees with a professional interest in the category also discuss how these evolving technologies have affected the marketing and reception of Asian Extreme films in a British context.

"A Pretty Lousy, Plastic Kind of Category": Genre Users and their Discursive Frameworks

Chapter 2 provided a brief diachronic overview of the Asian Extreme category; this identified the fluctuating contexts in which it has been used, celebrated and discarded over a twelve year period, and the ways in which these changing circumstances have facilitated multiple bids for taste distinctions amongst different user groups. Rather than attempting to establish whether or not the category is an authentic film genre, cycle or brand, I suggested

instead that it is the process of trying to define the category in one of these ways that produces struggles over its status. Rick Altman argues that genres can be understood not only as discursive categories, but as language that is 'addressed by one party to another, usually for a specific, identifiable purpose' (Altman 1999: 121). The first section of this chapter examines the practice of negotiating genre boundaries through a consideration of the different purposes identified and discursive positions adopted by different parties amongst the research participants, or genre users. This is done with the recognition that these uses may have fluctuated or changed over the period of time in which the interviewees have been familiar with the Asian Extreme category. In some cases, the diachronic dimension of their relationship with the category is acknowledged by the interviewees, and in others it is not; where it goes unacknowledged, the interview functions more as a snapshot of their current relationship with the category. The genre users are divided into two main categories: the interviewees who consider themselves to be audiences or fans of Asian Extreme cinema, and those who also declare a professional relationship to the films (as a critic or distributor). I am assigning the term 'fan-professional' to this second category of research participants, as their passion and enjoyment of these films is one of the key reasons why they have developed careers in the industry. It should also be acknowledged that this second category includes individuals who, in their initial encounter with Asian Extreme films, considered themselves (and in some cases, still consider themselves) to be fanboys.

A wide range of different assessments is made by the interviewees about Tartan as a film distributor; these can be grouped together in three distinctive categories. The first of these perceives the Tartan brand to be an endorsement of good quality films, and reflects a fannish appreciation of the label; the second set of responses understands the Tartan label as a distributor of niche or underground films; and the third type of assessment critiques the Tartan label as flimsy and 'false'. Warren is in his late forties and identifies himself as a fan of Asian Extreme films. He found a link to the questionnaire that had been posted on the Facebook fan page for Tartan Asia Extreme. Warren first came across the Asian Extreme category of films when a friend of his recommended he watch *Ichi the Killer*, and he describes how his interest grew from there:

I started off just looking for films that were by Takashi Miike. I was talking to some friends and they were also recommending films like *A Tale of Two Sisters* and *The Ring* and *The Eye* and *The Grudge* and so I started looking for those, which meant I spent a long time in places like HMV, in the International section. I started noticing Tartan on the spines of some of the DVDs and I then started to realise that if it had Tartan on it that it was worth getting and I then, well, I wouldn't say I stopped looking at other films, but I knew if I was buying something with Tartan on the spine that I was getting a good product.

Warren's perception of the Tartan brand is as an indicator of quality; the label suggests the film will be "a good product". This type of appreciation for the brand is echoed by two of the other interviewees. Karen is in her late forties, is a fan of Extreme Horror and volunteered to be interviewed after seeing a request for female participants on a knitting and crochet forum. Karen states that, for her, 'Tartan always promises something a bit different, challenging ... I might not always like it but I know I won't regret watching it. If it's a Tartan release I'll nearly always watch it, though ... I'm a big fan'. Karen's response is typical of a particular type of research participant that claims to be a fan of Asian Extreme films while simultaneously explaining that she might feel uncomfortable, challenged or sickened while watching them [see Chapter 4, p.161]. Another female interviewee, Grace, is in her late teens and volunteered to be interviewed after finding out about the research project on Imdb.com. Grace looks for 'stuff that grosses most people out, it makes you feel a bit sick, but not in a bad way'. She also considers herself to be a fan of the category, and describes Tartan 'Asia Extreme' films as 'my favourite kind of movies, I love them and I'm trying to watch them all ... they're awesome, definitely the best quality Asian films, in my opinion.' For these three interviewees, the Tartan brand functions as a guarantee of good quality and their fandom of the label is something they are proud of.

A second group of interviewees respond to the Tartan label as being representative of a particular kind of film, but this recognition is not linked so clearly to a value judgement about the category as it is with the Tartan fan responses. Angus is a male in his early thirties who has an MA in Film Studies. He says of the category 'I guess that label, particularly, the Tartan Asia Extreme label, it functions a bit like a, well, it functions exactly like a record label in many cases, in that it specialises in a certain type of underground product.' Angus' understanding of the category illustrates a more reflective approach which considers how the label functions more broadly, as a means to demarcate a particular type of subcultural

category. Owen is in his late twenties and found a link to the online questionnaire on the forum for Far East Films, a website dedicated to the fandom of Asian movies. Like Angus, Owen discusses Tartan as a label that 'introduced me to these films, about ten years ago, and my interest grew from there. To begin with, it stemmed from a general interest in cult stuff, films that were a bit different ... Tartan led the way and represented that kind of film, really... in the UK, anyway'. Angus and Owen both view the Tartan brand as a niche label that specialises in cult or underground cinema. Although they are not as enthusiastic about the label as the fan-orientated interviewees, they do not question its validity as a category, either; Angus concludes his interview with the comment "I hope they make more of these films". This assessment of Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' label as a cult reading formation has also been discussed by a number of academics (Dew 2007; Stringer 2007: 102; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011); it understands Tartan 'Asia Extreme' as a successful marketing strategy that targets cult film enthusiasts and 'fanboys'.

A third group of interviewees adopt a significantly different interpretation of the Tartan label. Michael and Sean are both film reviewers working for different online magazines that specialize in Asian cinema, and they are both passionate about Asian cinema in general; in these two respects they can both be considered to be fan-professionals. When asked what he would expect from an extreme film, Michael responds "I tend to expect something, I guess, that will have a fair amount of graphic violence and sex, and possibly some element that will push against the boundaries of what might be considered good taste." However, as he moves on to discuss the Tartan catalogue, Michael makes it clear that the films released in the UK by the distribution label do not match his expectations:

... it was quite a broad label really, many of the titles that were on there I didn't think particularly fitted that sort of category, there were films that just seemed like, okay, this came from Asia, so let's dub it Asia Extreme. The *Princess Blade* being one of them, or I think *Perth* was on that label and, apart from it being one of the worst movies I've seen in my life, what's extreme about that film? Other than I thought it was extremely bad.

Here, Michael identifies *The Princess Blade* (Shinsuke Sako, 2001), a Japanese manga-inspired action film, and *Perth* (Djiin, 2004), a gangster film from Singapore, as two examples of titles released on the Tartan label that he felt did not match the expectations generated by their 'extreme' branding. In singling out two of the more obscure titles from the Tartan catalogue to make this point, Michael demonstrates his knowledge and expertise

about the 'Asia Extreme' label. As well as questioning Tartan's branding of these films Michael also performs a taste judgement about one of the films being 'bad'. This suggests, as Mark Jancovich has argued, that when film audiences become involved in policing the boundaries of film genres, notions of taste and value are closely involved in the process (Jancovich 2000: 25). These negotiations over genre classification can be understood as an attempt by audiences to assert their social identities; in Michael's case, it is his role as a film critic and expert in Asian culture that is at stake. Another fan-professional, Sean, reviews Asian films for a different online magazine and has a similar agenda to Michael in the way he evaluates the Tartan label, describing it as 'a pretty lousy, plastic kind of category'. Sean goes on to claim that

it's dangerous when you start, like, grouping together films from different countries, and Asia Extreme became a, you know, blanket label for films that were coming out of Japan, Thailand, South Korea and Hong Kong ... I think they were the main countries ... if I remember right. I think I've seen a couple of Indonesian films, *Perth*, and also a Singapore film which I think went under Asia Extreme, so I think you get into a very dangerous categorisation, this happened with the Video Nasties as well, when you start taking films which come from very different cultures and start grouping them together under a single label, er, because each country has a very, very separate culture and a very separate reason for these films to exist, both commercial and contextual, so I think the Asia Extreme label is very flimsy, actually.

Michael and Sean both question the range of titles that were released on Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' label; this activity of policing the boundaries of the Asian Extreme category echoes the way in which several of the questionnaire respondents described the brand as a 'false genre' [see Chapter 4, p. 129]. Additionally, the number of different countries that the films originate from is also pinpointed as a reason as to why the brand is problematic. These comments highlight the academic discourse surrounding Tartan's marketing strategies (Shin 2009; Martin 2009; Rawle 2009) that critiques the brand as 'problematic in the sense that the label in effect lumps together distinct and different genres of horror, action, and thriller films from Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong as well as Thailand under the banner of Asia Extreme' (Shin 2009). Michael further articulates the idea that a 'blanket' marketing term is 'dangerous' because it elides the cultural differences between the films:

The danger is that they give you a very skewed view of what these various film industries are producing, there's more to all of these industries than you'll find within the Asia Extreme label, in Korea one of the films that tops are Korean comedy, but we don't get those over here, we tend to get the genre films because

they're digestible, because you need something where the language barrier isn't going to be a big issue, where nuances aren't going to get lost in translation. If someone's chopping some axe, well, you can understand what's happening. *Battle Royale* isn't about nuances, it's about school kids hacking each other to pieces or blowing each other up and it's easily graspable. So, I wouldn't blame a distributor for going for genre films because obviously they need to sell their product, rather than pick up some obscure thing that no one's going to buy or see, and it has led to some really good films coming out over here, if we hadn't had Asia Extreme we wouldn't have had *Oldboy*, so that's something to be applauded.

Michael and Sean both critique the 'Asia Extreme' category created by Tartan because the wide range of films released on the label does not fulfil their individual expectations of an 'extreme' film; furthermore, Michael argues that the label gives a skewed view of the cinematic output of individual national industries. However, their enactment of this critique hinges on a form of professional interpretation of the films. Both interviewees make value judgements about certain films being 'bad' and provide personal readings of what they think the films are about. For example, Michael's assertion that *Battle Royale* 'isn't about nuances' and, therefore, isn't going to get "lost in translation" reveals how his assessment of Tartan's marketing strategy is founded on a highly normative analysis of this film. As Altman argues, genres are 'sometimes treated as good objects, sometimes as bad objects; this difference may be attributed to differences in genre users and their goals in using genre norms or terminology' (Altman 1999: 122). Here, their roles as film critics and self-appointed experts on Asian cinema are clearly central to the way Michael and Sean perform their evaluations of the films. Sean goes on to indicate how he interprets the Tartan 'Asia Extreme' label:

I think Asia Extreme just became representative of something that just meant Asian genre cinema, because I think a lot of the films that came out, under the Asia Extreme banner, were a lot of the J-Horror titles like *Dark Water* and *Cello* and *Premonition*, and, you know, these films aren't extreme at all, they're actually very subtle, they're ghost stories but they carry the Asia Extreme title and I had to watch and review a lot of these back in my early days ... and I think it's become a bit of a strange title, because it seems to me that it means also, when you say Asia Extreme ... um ... the first thing that comes to my mind, oddly, is *The Grudge*, *Ring* and *Premonition*, which is the first time I saw the title being really marketed, but I think, you know, in its purest sense, in the sense it probably should be known for ... I think it should probably be known for films that really push the boundaries in terms of what we see in screen violence, in *Audition* and stuff like *Ichu the Killer* and stuff like *Oldboy* and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, I think are far more ... if you said that title

to somebody who didn't know what to expect... I think they are far more for what they should be given.

Sean's discussion focuses on the 'ghost story' film, another genre that doesn't fit with the expectations generated by the 'Asia Extreme' brand and his sense of what audiences 'should be given'; more significantly, he argues that the label simply came to represent 'Asian genre cinema'. This viewpoint implies that the notion of 'genre cinema' is a relatively straightforward one, and overlooks the significance of distribution and reception contexts as key factors in producing generic classifications. As Julian Stringer argues in relation to Korean cinema, the very notion of genre is unstable and subject to a constant process of negotiation. Stringer observes that struggles over the generic classification of Korean films originate in a domestic context, and argues that a

consideration of the turf wars that take place over genre classification in Korea should lay to rest once and for all the lazy assumption that Korean films have an essential meaning magically understood by all native spectators. Just like audiences in other commercial market-places, Korean spectators construct distinctions between various types of cinema in order to help assert and validate their own particular identities. Intense struggles therefore take place in the domestic context over which genres should be named and claimed for this or that preferred version of Korean cinema, and for this or that interpretation of the 'cultural character' (Stringer 2007: 96-97).

This perspective challenges the viewpoint that there is a normative way to understand these films, and more importantly, a 'wrong' one that lacks knowledge and cultural expertise. However, this particular argument does not enter the discursive frameworks adopted by the interviewees in the same way that those made by Martin, Shin and Rawle do; Michael and Sean's understanding of these genres is as static categories rather than fluid processes.

The critical assessments of the Asian Extreme category made by Michael and Sean, as film reviewers, contrast quite sharply with the comments articulated by one of the other fan-professionals. Ron works in film distribution, and his answer to Question 13 interprets the Tartan label using a different set of criteria:

Yes, it's a relevant question, it's a relevant topic of discussion, but frankly, from a business point-of-view, we all had that discussion a long time ago, and whether we like it or not, Tartan was founded and run by people who came out of the VHS phase and that was exactly what you did, you went for the lowest common denominator ... and that's how it's always been done [...] Yes, you can level that charge at them but I would maintain that's part and parcel of a capitalist assessment of the culture you're selling to, and therefore it seems perfectly logical and reasonable. [Tartan] found a

particular way of selling things and pushed it that way ... and you know what, all things considered ... I don't think the accusation rings as true as it should, particularly when you look at the covers, the sleeves, the press releases, to me these accusations are made about one or two titles, but when you look across the entire range of that catalogue, and obviously I can say that having worked on it, but also I'm looking at my shelves of discs that I own personally, and other than *A Snake of June*, you know, the first three shelves are more blood and guts than they are sexual content.

As a film distributor, rather than a critic, Ron has a different use for generic categories. From his perspective the marketing tactics employed by Tartan are 'perfectly logical and reasonable', and can be understood in a wider context of marketing techniques (which he dates back to the 1950s). The fan-professionals reinforce the sense that the category of Asian Extreme films is appropriated in a diverse range of ways, as aspects of different discursive frameworks and by a number of different genre users. As Altman suggests, these discursive frameworks employ their own languages which enable them to address specific people with particular purposes in mind. Whereas film critics Michael and Sean use critical terms such as 'bad movie', Ron employs marketing language like 'lowest common denominator' and 'bums on seats', thus invoking a different discursive context.

Only one of the interviewees discusses the Asian Extreme category of films without making any reference to the Tartan label. Maria is female and aged between 26 and 35. She is not British but has lived in the UK for over ten years and works at a British academic institution. She is married and has one child. Maria found a link to the questionnaire on a Tartan Asia Extreme fan page on Facebook, and offered to participate in the interview stage of the research project after completing the questionnaire. Maria identifies *Battle Royale* as one of her favourite films. When asked what it is about the film that encapsulates the essence of Asian Extreme cinema, Maria responds:

It is because ... it is particular to a society... where it comes from, well, the other films as well, definitely. *Audition* as well, I would think, yes, all of them, actually, they are all contextual, it is important for all of them. The troubled youth, the way how it's dealt with, it's a context that's so alien to here... Mexico I'm from... the way things are so different, it would be a way to show people a different point of view on... Japan, for instance, where, because here at least, or in Mexico, we are used to, we have a particular vision of society of how they treat children, through cartoons, for example, anime etc. So it feels like it is different, and I think for me that is why it is different, fascinating.

Whereas Michael's assessment of *Battle Royale* is that it exemplifies a type of violent film that easily crosses geographical boundaries without any need for cultural translation, Maria

appreciates it in quite a different way; for her, it is the cultural specificity of the film's representation of 'troubled youth' that makes it so fascinating and memorable. This is a characteristic that Maria also attributes to the 'other films' within the category. Her understanding of the relationship between the individual title, *Battle Royale*, and the Asian Extreme category as a whole functions very differently to that of the other interviewees; a key feature of this difference is the way in which Maria focuses on the conceptual characteristics of the category, rather than the marketing strategies used by Tartan to promote them.

Question 5 on the interview schedule further interrogates the issue of genre classification by asking the interviewees which films they felt best represented the Asian Extreme category. Surprisingly, despite the frequent references to violence and sex in their discussions about the meaning of 'extreme', many of the interviewees identify supernatural ghost films as being most representative of the category. As Sean points out, this is often connected to early memories of the category: 'when you say Asia Extreme ... um ... the first thing that comes to my mind, oddly, is *The Grudge*, *Ring* and *Premonition*, which is the first time I saw the title being really marketed.' Similarly, Warren identifies:

The Ring, *The Grudge*, *The Eye*, that sort of thing really, it's the girls with the long hair and the fringe and the creaky movements, the sort of ghost films. There are more of them and I think also they are the ones that are more widely known, and the ones that have been re-made in Hollywood, so they're the ones that are being picked up and recognised as being the representatives of that genre.

The immediate connection that some of the interviewees make between the Asian Extreme category and supernatural or ghost films is linked to the distribution context of the films in the UK. It also partly explains the problematic status of the whole cycle of films. It is a specialist brand of films that includes a number of niche interests and has been appropriated by a wide range of genre users: followers of Asian culture and cinema in general, supernatural horror fans, those seeking out extreme forms of transgressive cinema, cult film audiences, world cinema connoisseurs and fans of specific directors such as Park Chan-wook, Takashi Miike and Kim Ki-duk to name a few. The contentious character of the Asian Extreme category can therefore be understood in terms of a number of competing discursive frameworks and cinematic interests employed by a wide range of different genre users.

The spectrum of different ways in which the interviewees evaluate both the Tartan label and the broader category of Asian Extreme films reflect Altman's argument that it reveals the way that genres can be understood as being multi-discursive:

... genres now appear to me to be not just discursive but, because they are mechanisms for co-ordinating diverse users, multi-discursive. Instead of utilizing a single master language, as most previous genre theoreticians would have it, a genre may appropriately be considered multi-coded. Each genre is simultaneously defined by multiple codes, corresponding to the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to 'speak' the genre (Altman: 208).

The multi-discursive nature of the Asian Extreme category also produces its instability. As a category appropriated and challenged by a wide range of groups using different generic codes, it is subject to a stream of definitions and re-definitions. These characteristics make it an ideal site for asserting social identities and challenging the taste and social status of other genre users. Stringer argues it is, in part, this on-going process of genre classification that makes studying the global reception of Korean cinema meaningful:

After all, the eager reception of Hong Kong cinema around the world has previously demonstrated that, when Asian popular cinemas become known, their products become enlisted in a war of distinction between fans and other specialised consumers. One of the most fascinating aspects of the contemporary vogue for New Korean Cinema may therefore be that it provides opportunities to observe these processes in operation (Stringer 2007: 102).

One of the most notable examples of these 'wars of distinction' amongst the interviewees is the way in which fan-professional Sean, who is passionate about Asian film culture, characterizes elements of the horror fan community:

There is a part of the horror fan community ... there's some pretty scary people that exist in that underground, people who you just don't want to meet and who I, unfortunately, have come across, who are really f**king scary people, and they are misogynistic and they are spitting in their mothers' faces, and they are horribly overweight, and this is their view of women, this is their view of sexuality. I think when you pervert things to that extent, I do think it can be quite dangerous and I do think it can allow people to indulge in possible copycat fantasy.

Here, Sean's distaste for the audiences he associates with extreme horror films included in the category extends to a strong vilification of fans of these films; after stigmatising their social status, Sean then moves on to associate their perceived attributes with broader moral concerns and the 'harm' debate. Although Sean's strong opinions about this element of the horror fan community is unusual amongst the interviewees, it illustrates very clearly the

way in which the practice of film reviewing is linked to the kind of value judgements that are regularly made about 'figures of the audience' for this category of films. The role that film critics play in discourses surrounding the 'harm' issue has already been explored in relation to the Video Nasties panic of the 1980s and the *Crash* controversy (Egan 2007; Barker et al 2001). This study of the audiences of Asian Extreme, though, suggests that over the last twelve years there has been a blurring of the boundaries between the audience and the industry and between fans and critics. In many ways this has been facilitated by the growth of Internet communities – all four of the fan-professionals interviewed for this project work in the spheres of Internet magazine sites and online film distribution networks. Mark Jancovich has critiqued Altman's work on genre for overlooking the role that the audience plays in the struggles that take place around generic classification (2001: 35). However, such distinctions between audiences, cultural commentators, critics, distributors and producers are now much harder to define, and Altman's concept of genre users seems to be increasingly relevant. The different, multi-discursive uses to which definitions and re-workings of the Asian Extreme category are put will be explored further in the following sections of the chapter. These focus firstly on the issues of censorship and film regulation and, secondly, on developments in media technologies and patterns of distribution.

Fans, Social Identity and the BBFC: the Pleasures of the Anti-censorship Discourse

The interviews generated a wider range of responses regarding censorship issues than those produced by the questionnaire, thus building on the findings presented in Chapter 5 [pp. 167-175]. Additionally, the interview format facilitated a different form of discourse analysis that allowed for consideration of tone of voice and conversational turns of phrase. As with the questionnaire respondents, many of the interviewees who adopt an anti-censorship stance frame their discussion around broader debates relating to the horror audiences and 'effects'. For example, horror fan Warren argues:

I think people were harming each other long before any audio-visual media was invented, um, and I think they'll continue to do that. You know, I've said several times, if horror films definitely had an effect on everybody then I would be a pathological, homicidal, axe-wielding serial killer by now, I must be ... but I'm the softest guy you'll ever meet, I've never watched a film and thought, yes, brilliant idea, I must go out and do that. Yes, there are crazy, twisted people, but crazy, twisted people exist whether they watch this stuff or not...

Warren's response has several characteristics which typifies the anti-censorship arguments made by some of the interview participants. Firstly, he uses the phrase 'I've said several times', thus implying that his performances of this discourse are familiar, well-rehearsed and integral to his identity as a horror fan. Secondly, the manner in which Warren frames his argument suggests a critical engagement with the way in which horror fans are represented in the mainstream press. Throughout the interview he repeatedly references his own experiences as a horror fan and asserts that watching horror films does not make him a 'crazy, twisted person'. This discursive construction of fan pleasures in relation to biographical information is also clearly evident in the interview with Grace, who states:

Yeah, I've sat through some violent stuff ... things that my friends think is sick, like women's nipples being sliced off and people being tortured, and ... but it has never made me, um, think of doing something violent, you know, in any way... I get more angry watching Hugh Grant in some crappy film, and ... so it definitely doesn't offend me, watching violence in a film. They are just images and I know it's just a film, so I feel like it's a pointless argument ... it's like with *The Human Centipede II*, people watch it just to see how gross it is, and to see what the fuss is all about ... that's why I watched it, so ... I don't really get how can someone assume that you're a sadist or a sicko or whatever if you watch it ... that's crazy, I don't know anyone who watches it and thinks, oh, I'm gonna go and sew a bunch of people together, I mean, how would they do that (laughs) ... it's completely absurd.

Like Warren, Grace's enactment of the 'harm' debate rests on the telling of her own personal experiences as a horror fan. These autobiographical responses to the question about the BBFC echo the findings set out in Chapter 5 and suggest that the construction of anti-censorship debates is, for horror fans, inextricably linked to the performance and negotiation of social identity.

Both Grace and Warren indicate that horror fans have a strong awareness of the ways in which they are characterised by the mainstream press. This further reinforces the productive power of the film regulation process, in that the fans' lengthy responses are often fuelled by the circulation of pro-censorship debates and the 'figures of the audience' that these debates can conjure up [see Chapter 1]. The case involving the regulation of *The Human Centipede Part II* (Tom Six, 2011) is referenced by the majority of the interviewees and is one that provides a clear example of the highly visible discourse that is often associated with the BBFC's decision-making processes. The BBFC's rationale for rejecting *The Human Centipede Part II*, in June 2011, was made on the grounds that it 'poses a real, as

opposed to a fanciful, risk that harm is likely to be caused to potential viewers' (BBFC, 2011a). More specifically, the potential audience for the film was constructed in a very specific way by the BBFC director David Cooke, who stated that 'the chief pleasure on offer seems to be wallowing in the spectacle of sadism (including sexual sadism) for its own sake' (BBFC, 2011a). Despite this, the BBFC reversed their decision four months later and classified the film as an 18, with cuts made on the grounds of a 'possibility of breach of the law relating to obscenity' (BBFC, 2011b). This rapid shift in the rationale behind the regulation of the film triggered further speculation and debate about the validity of the BBFC's use of the 'harm' argument as grounds for rejecting and cutting films. Grace's discussion of the 'harm' debate clearly references the way that the BBFC and several mainstream cultural commentators construed the audience for *the Human Centipede Part II* as sexual sadists (Cooke 2011; Tookey 2011). As with the questionnaire findings, the desire to refute these claims further characterises the autobiographical group of anti-censorship responses observed amongst the interviewees. In this way, the actions of the censors also function to reproduce and reiterate affirmations of social identity amongst horror fans.

Furthermore, Grace's comment that she watched the film 'just to see how gross it is, and to see what the fuss is all about' indicates an additional role that the public censorship debate plays for some horror fans. Films that attract the attention of the censors will also, by default, draw the interest of the anti-censorship lobby. Warren mentions that he watches extreme films 'to see how bad they are' and Maria acknowledges that she likes to test herself by seeking out uncut versions of films. This perspective reiterates the findings of Annette Hill's research on audiences of violent films. Hill found that

testing boundaries is a key factor in why people choose to watch violent movies. Through thresholds and self-censorship, and the roles anticipation and preparation have to play in the process, viewers test their own boundaries while watching violence because it is a safe way of interpreting violence in a fictional setting (Hill 1997: 106-07).

Amongst horror fans, then, there is a strong inclination to watch films that function to test audiences' ability to watch sickening images. *The Human Centipede Part II* was promoted as 'the sickest movie ever made' and director Tom Six was reported to have thanked the BBFC for banning it (O'Hara 2011). The horror fans' interest in these kinds of films clearly stem from their transgressive status as banned titles. Despite the oppositional stance that these

interviewees adopt towards forms of censorship, their transgressive subcultural identity is dependent on the meanings that the censorship and 'effects' debates confer on the extreme horror genre. Matt Hills argues that the one of the pleasures experienced by horror fans lies in their violation of cultural categories; he suggests that 'fan expertise and genre 'literacy' means that fans will tend to display and perform critiques of State institutions that lack such knowledge, thus potentially contributing to public debate, even if fan voices are rarely heard outside of niche, subcultural media' (Hills 2005: 105).⁷⁵

Sam is a male participant in his late thirties who volunteered to be interviewed through the *Frightfest* forum. He considers himself to be a discerning film-goer who chooses what he watches on the basis of what he hears and reads about individual films, stating 'I won't just watch any old horror film, though ... it needs to be creative or interesting in some way, I'm not into, you know, mainstream horror, all of the Hollywood remakes, they really bore the pants off me', In this way he makes a bid for subcultural distinction through distancing himself from 'mainstream' horror fans. Sam's discussion of censorship is focused on a critique of the BBFC's policies:

Well, where to start... I could talk about the BBFC and censorship stuff all day. While I respect how far the BBFC have come ... especially in the last 10 years, things have changed a lot, I can see that ... yet regarding film censorship, you really do have to question their mentality, the logic behind their decisions at times. The main issue that constantly bugs me is that they are censoring films for our apparent protection... but protection from what? Are we not adults who can make our own decisions on what we can and cannot watch? Many of these films are also readily available uncut elsewhere, people can download them or whatever, so it just seems silly preventing or censoring something to try and preserve a harmonic society ... when people can pick it up elsewhere, anyway ... with just a few clicks of a mouse button.

Sam's opening statement, that he can talk about censorship debates 'all day', again reflects the overwhelming interest all research participants have in this subject and their use of censorship debates to negotiate their own social identities . Like Sam, Karen also states that she can talk about censorship 'til the cows come home, my family get tired of me going on about it, but I think it's a really important issue when you live in a democracy like we do'. What comes across more clearly in the interviews than the questionnaire responses is the relish with which the participants articulate the 'harm' discourse. These interviewees suggest, then, that their preoccupation with this subject also stems from the fact that they

find it enjoyable to discuss. The pleasures involved in debating censorship issues is clearly linked to the opportunity it affords them to engage in the activity of exploring and developing their own identities as horror fans.

As horror fans, then, Warren, Grace, Karen and Sam assume an anti-censorship posture that can be characterised in a number of ways. Firstly, they use autobiographical anecdotes in their enactment of the 'harm' discourse; this forms an integral part of the pleasure taken in enacting censorship debates and the way in which they are used to reaffirm social identities. Secondly, particularly in Grace's case, their relationship with censorship debates is revealed to be productive; in demarcating a horror title as transgressive the BBFC effectively establishes the film's subcultural value and appeal for extreme horror fans and facilitates the pleasure of boundary-crossing.

A second type of anti-censorship response focuses more specifically on drawing attention to the inconsistencies of the BBFC's decision-making processes. Maria's discussion of the BBFC's arguments surrounding the issue of 'harm' typifies this approach to the subject:

Well, I'm just, I'm not sure of the grounds for thinking that, which level they can affect audiences, and I don't appreciate the control that exists of what people can or cannot watch, so I try to see it from a moral point of view, but I don't think that there are real, honest grounds for that. Things that have been banned in the past, like there were those films that were banned... when it was? The seventies, eighties? The video nasties? And then you watch them and it's like, really? Come on. How those minds that have moved on or have been modified through the last decades tells me that actually there was no real grounds for the decisions that had been made at the time, and it's just a matter of the mindset of the era. No, I don't have any... no, I don't understand it, really.

Maria's principal critique of the BBFC revolves around the way in which their decisions reflect the 'mindset of the era' and are therefore not grounded with 'honest' evidence that the films are 'harmful'. This historical approach to understanding censorship is one that circulates regularly in public debates about film censorship and regulation (Cole 2012), as well as being the subject of a number of academic studies (Egan 2007).

Interestingly, the interviewees who articulated pro-censorship arguments also demonstrated these two characteristics identified in fan responses: knowledge about censorship cases and a detailed understanding of generic categories. The strongest case in

favour of censorship was put forward by film critic Sean. Like the other interviewees, Sean shows a strong awareness of how censorship debates circulate in the mainstream press:

I do think [censorship] is important, I mean, that's a good question, what is the role of the censorship when you can't censor the Internet ... I don't know ... I mean ... I saw recently that Joanna Yeates' killer was put in prison, and he was obviously watching hard core pornography which involved a lot of real violence. I have a very strong belief that censorship is necessary, and I think it's necessary when it comes to anything involving unsimulated action... even with films I think it can be necessary ...

Unlike the majority of the research participants, however, Sean is persuaded by the argument put forward by Christopher Tookey in the *Daily Mail* linking the murder of Joanna Yeates to both hard core pornography and horror films (Tookey, 2011). Sean goes on to discuss the BBFC's decision to ban *The Bunny Game* in the light of this argument:

... from what I've read of *The Bunny Game* there's a girl in it that's been raped in the past, and the actress felt this role was some kind of catharsis, and she agreed to be branded with a hot iron or something on screen, and you see her being raped and strangled even if she shakes hand with the actor, I still think when you show actual penetration and someone strangling somebody, and then somebody branding somebody or lacerating them or leaving a mark on their body, I think the only reason that that is there is for somebody to masturbate over, and I think that when you have that, it's really up to any kind of society that cares about the rights of people, that cares really about human rights, that cares about whether people should be degraded like that, to say this isn't acceptable and you don't have a right to profit off this, because I think if you allow people to profit off actual pain, I think you're getting into a very, very, very dangerous situation where there's no longer any morality, there's nobody stepping up and saying capitalism can't be that unregulated, you've eventually got to say some things are plain wrong ...

Sean's discussion of film censorship revolves around perceived issues of 'morality'; even though he hasn't seen the film, he feels that it violates the rights of the actress who had agreed to perform the rape scene. However, while he agrees with the BBFC's decision with respect to *The Bunny Game*, Sean is highly critical of their decision to reject *Grotesque* in 2009. He compares this with the more recent decision to pass *Cannibal Holocaust* uncut:

I think if the BBFC are going to have a regulation against the ill treatment of animals, I think to ban *Grotesque*, which is special effects, and although it's gruesome and although it's sexually ... probably will turn some people on ...you know, it's still acting, make-up and latex. I think to ban that but to pass a film in which a really beautiful, endangered turtle is beheaded and chopped to pieces, I think you're getting into a really moral grey area.

Sean's discussion of the BBFC's decision-making processes reveals that although he is pro-censorship in particular circumstances, he is still highly critical of inconsistent decisions made by the regulatory body. This display of expertise functions to establish his social status and taste as different from that of other horror fans; yet still he maintains a status that is in some ways oppositional to the regulatory body and the institutional authority it represents. Although his interpretation of the Asian Extreme category is very different to that of horror fans Grace, Warren, Sam and Karen, then, the uses to which Sean puts his genre literacy are remarkably similar.

Technology, Distribution Labels and High-End Collectors

One of the secondary lines of enquiry the research project set out to explore was the role played by recent technological developments in audiences' interest and enjoyment of Asian Extreme films. Question 2 on the interview schedule was designed to probe further into patterns of distribution and consumption amongst British fans of Asian Extreme cinema. It asked interviewees to consider what part the film format plays in their enjoyment of it, and looked to investigate whether or not patterns of film consumption have changed dramatically as a result of the advent of file-sharing facilities and online distribution networks.

The findings of the online questionnaire established that the majority of participants prefer to own VHS, DVD or Blu-ray copies of the films (87.8% of respondents); only a minority of respondents download them (29.8%), and even fewer rent the films (21.8%). However, the way in which these preferences and viewing practices work in conjunction with each other only becomes clear when the qualitative material from the interviews is considered alongside the quantitative findings. Most of the interviewees reveal that although they like to own hard copies of the films, very often this desire evolves *after* they have already seen the film once; this initial viewing frequently involves watching a rental copy of the particular film. Maria explains that there are three ways in which she usually gets hold of Asian Extreme films: by recording them from the television, or by buying them – either on the high street or using popular online retailers such as Amazon or Play.com; however, the second step of purchasing the film invariably takes place following an initial viewing. She goes on to state that if she is aware that there are different versions of the

same film she will apply considerable effort in tracking down what she describes as the 'original version', that is, the version as it was intended by the director that hasn't been subjected to any cuts. This is because she feels 'it's important to get the view, not that I will understand always, but I see the perception, that I see what the director really wanted as well.' To meet this need, Maria will order films from international online retailers; she has never, however, downloaded a film online or used an 'illegal website'. Similarly, Warren explains that his usual habit is to rent the films first, usually from Lovefilm.com, and then to buy them if they are favourites. Like Maria, Warren will apply effort to get hold of a rarer title or version of a film, and will occasionally download a film 'if it's something that's proving difficult to find. I don't torrent films very often - with movies I'd rather have a DVD so I don't download a lot.' Maria and Warren both prefer to buy DVDs of the films for similar reasons, partly because they are accessible but, more significantly, because they are valued titles that they have seen once and want to own. There is a sense with both fans of Asian Extreme cinema that they are investing in their interest very carefully and with considerable discrimination. The two fans only differ in that whereas Warren is prepared to use illegal websites to get hold of a film if he can't find it elsewhere, Maria is not prepared to take this step.

Owen considers himself to be passionate about Asian Cinema in general, with a particular interest in cultural products originating from Japan. He explains how he usually buys Asian Extreme films:

Well, I suppose in an ideal world I would prefer to buy them in a store, really. I have so many versions of *Battle Royale* on multiple formats - VCD, DVD and Blu-ray - as well as multiple manga and novels ... so I end up importing them, even though it's really expensive. *The Ring* is another favourite movie of mine and, er, I had to import versions from Korea and Japan just so I had the complete collection, they weren't available in the UK. So, I prefer to physically own the film and to buy it in a shop, but the choice on the high street is really limited, so I go online ... but again, if it is cut by the BBFC then I'll stream it online first to get the uncut version and if I like it, then I'll import from another country.

Like Warren, Owen is happy to use an illegal website to stream a film if he can't get hold of it another way; he specifies that if the BBFC cut a film then he will access it in this way, as well as ordering an uncut copy from another country. Of all the interviewees, Owen demonstrates the greatest commitment to the process of collecting different versions of the same film. This is interesting in that, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the questionnaire

findings produced little evidence to clarify whether or not those who didn't consider themselves fans invested as heavily in their interest as those who did self-identify as fans. These interviews suggest that the other orientation-types, particularly those who are passionate about Asian Cinema in general, are *more* committed to the process of collecting DVDs and Blu-ray than are the 'fans'; this reflects notions of cinephilia and connoisseurship which were expressed in the questionnaire responses from this orientation-type.

Angus explains that he also tends to buy the films; however, he links this preference to the way the films are branded and distributed by companies such as Tartan and Artificial Eye:

I bought several of them rather than renting them, because I didn't think it would be possible to rent them, we went through things like Play.com, CD WOW! and Amazon, and the inclination always was to buy, rather than rent or download... I think I thought it was going to be easier to get hold of them like that, and I knew that... I guess from various trips to the video shop, I knew that Tartan were the label, and I think Artificial Eye may have done a few as well, so it was sort of easy to go to a site that sold them and look for those brand names, rather than sort of look through... I've never been someone who's in to peer-to-peer sharing or uploading.

Angus values the labels that Asian films are distributed on in the UK and uses them as markers to explore and expand his personal taste in cinema. Another interviewee, Karen, also demonstrates an interest in distribution labels, and is passionate about the pleasure she derives from collecting the films on DVD and Blu-ray:

I try to get as many of the films on Blu-ray and DVD, if you buy a proper DVD, on a proper label, the quality in most cases is absolutely fantastic ... it's well worth the money. The variety of cult titles, exploitation titles, horror titles, er, the range is amazing now. Many of the films I purchase are not new to me, I might want particular versions that have just been re-released, so yes, I suppose I'm a collector, you could say. I think the quality of Blu-ray titles is fantastic and, I think, it's affordable too, I just hope downloading and streaming doesn't destroy this new format ... what really amazes me is having cinema quality, I've got my own home cinema set up and the great thing is .. you're in your own home and being able to have a glass of wine, that sort of thing, you can stop the film to go to the loo ... or play back the bits you need to watch again.

Karen's appreciation of format, quality and a 'proper label' is characteristic of what Barbara Klinger has termed the 'contemporary cinephile' – film enthusiasts whose pleasure has migrated from the public sphere of the cinema to a domestic setting that produces its 'own kind of connoisseurship' (Klinger 2006: 55). This is characterised, Klinger argues, by a commitment to obtaining 'the best technological standards in playback equipment and

films' and 'the establishment of a home archive' (Klinger 2006: 56). Karen also demonstrates a use of technologies as a means to develop her relationship with the films which reflects observations made by Klinger about the practice of repeat viewing of films. Klinger argues that the ability to manipulate a film at home (by fast-forwarding, rewinding and selecting favourite sequences to re-watch) increases familiarity with and enjoyment of the text (Klinger 2006: 139).

One of the younger interviewees, Grace, states that she tends to download Asian Extreme films because it's "convenient". She adds that 'downloading is cheap, it's easy access, you don't have to wait weeks for something to arrive in the post'. Grace is the only interviewee who discusses the option of downloading films in such a positive context, and she is also the youngest participant involved in the interview stage of the research project. In the context of this project, then, Grace's response is something of an anomaly.

The four fan-professionals discuss some of the issues raised by the interviewees in greater detail, and from different and very specific perspectives. Film critic Michael summarises what he feels the key impact that technological changes to film distribution, such as file-sharing sites, have had on the Asian film industry in the UK:

There's no doubt it's had an impact. There is a group of fans that like to see everything first, and I think they're the ones that will go out of their way to find copies of things online and download them. There's a second group that will happily wait until it comes over here and they can get a decent transfer of it, it's going to be subtitled, which I hope is a larger group than the first group. But there is, especially within the hard core fan communities, a desire to see everything first.

Michael's point of view echoes that of extreme horror fan Karen, who expresses concern about the effect that downloading will have on the DVD industry; Karen is quite unusual in that none of the other fans interviewed expressed this concern, it is one articulated more commonly within the industry than the fan community. Michael's interpretation of the changes wrought by technological advancements focuses on the activity of fans who are motivated by the need to 'see everything first'. Although there is abundant evidence of this kind of activity on various forums dedicated to Asian cinema, none of the other interviewees mentions it as a priority.

Sean also discusses the impact that downloading films has had on the DVD industry; his conclusion is that it has played a major part in bringing down retail prices:

DVD prices have fallen substantially I think, and everything has been driven in no small part by piracy. So they've made them cheaper to make them more attractive. You know, DVDs used to be, particularly with the Asian stuff, with the niche market, would come out and generally be about £20 for a brand new title. And now they're out for a month and they're about £4 on Amazon, or they're a fiver. It's an attempt to keep the audience, and to stop people thinking they'll download it or find it on a file-sharing site.

However, film distributor Ron has a slightly different interpretation of the way that evolving technologies have changed the DVD industry:

They have absolutely wrecked the economic ... they've changed completely the economic model. They've also forced changes on the minimum acceptable quality of what films should look like, in so far as ... the industry now pulls in two directions. You can get away with very low quality standard definition online, it doesn't matter as long as people see it, but then you've got hardcore, monied customers who'll pay for Blu-ray. That lower end would not have been important if the Internet had not come along the way it has, because of the work it takes to rip everything else, what's do-able, download-able ... but for the majority of people you may as well buy the Blu-ray at that point. If you get hard drives, Blu-rays, they're not cheap, though they're cheaper than they were. The reason that's an issue is because that's why the high definition end hasn't come down in cost, because you can do this very, very cheap version online and make some revenue off it, although not a lot, it's still next to impossible to make serious money off the Internet at the moment, and the reason that's important ... and this is where arguments with fans get difficult, is that [film distribution] isn't simply about having a nice luxurious job where you get to do all the parties ... what it's about is having sufficient margins to invest in newer projects, higher spends ... now I work for a company that works in proper archive restoration, it's fantastic, therefore they maintain higher prices and stick to them. The fans complain, but ... there's this thing fans think about big bad companies profiting off us ... these days, peoples' desires exceeds the ability to earn. If you don't earn enough then that's your fault not the distributor's fault. Certain fans would like to own walls of DVDs ...

The final part of Ron's answer is particularly interesting in that he momentarily shifts from the perspective of a distributor to a fan (in the phrase 'profiting off us') and then back again. This is indicative of the multiple identities he has in relation to this category of films; it implies a blurring of traditional boundaries between fan and professional. Ron's discussion of the DVD marketplace also opens up an interesting distinction between high-end and low end products. Klinger has argued that while high-end collectors invest in expensive equipment and focus on building domestic archives of a high quality, low end product fans are not interested in technology, and focus instead on the collection of obscure titles:

For this group, the less pristine the image, the more authentic it seems. The growth of legitimate film purchases coexists with this “shadow” culture of collectors who pursue fringe titles and frequently engage in “illicit” practices, such as dubbing films illegally from pre-recorded tapes or buying bootleg titles, to form their libraries (Klinger 2006: 63).

While it seems evident that this ‘shadow culture’ exists within the business of distributing Asian films in the UK, it does not appear to dominate the distribution culture surrounding this group of films. Although a couple of the interviewees, Warren and Owen, mention seeking out bootleg copies of some of the films, they explain that their motivation in this pursuit is to obtain a title that they couldn’t purchase through legitimate channels; the notion that these illicit copies are somehow ‘more authentic’ than high-end products is not articulated by any of the interviewees or evidenced within the questionnaire responses. In this respect, British audiences of Asian Extreme films appear to be significantly different to other niche film collectors in that they are invariably drawn towards buying and collecting high-end ‘quality’ products. Unlike the nasty fans explored by Egan, the activity of trading in illegitimate copies is not a pleasure in itself; given the choice, they would rather buy uncut copies of the films from a high street retailer. This could imply, then, that for many research participants, the attraction of this category does not primarily lie in its subversive, subcultural status, but more in its cultural capital as a challenging form of subtitled cinema. Another way of interpreting this data, though, would be to acknowledge that illegal downloading and sourcing of films from abroad does not produce the same degree of subcultural capital as nasty collecting once did. This is not surprising, given that levels of prosecution for these kinds of activity are very low in the UK; with ‘banned’ films such as *Grotesque* being available from mainstream Internet retailers such as Amazon, ownership of such titles is highly unlikely to generate any form of subcultural cachet.

Conclusions

The material gathered through these interviews reveals that the contested character of the Asian Extreme category reflects its status as a multi-discursive category appropriated by a range of genre users. This status means that the category is subject to an on-going cycle of definitions and re-interpretations, which makes it an ideal site for challenging the taste and social status of other genre users. However, these genre users are not always easy to

identify and differentiate between; in many ways, the old distinctions between fans and critics, or audiences and producers, have been largely eroded. This blurring of the boundaries between different genre users could also partly explain why the stakes are higher in the activity of defining and policing the boundaries of this category. With traditional social hierarchies in question, there is clearly more to be gained from displays of expertise and knowledge.

The issue of censorship is central to the way genre users contest and enjoy this category. The pleasure involved in debating censorship issues is also linked to the opportunity it affords them to engage in the activity of exploring and developing their own identities as horror fans. The complex ways in which the interviewees enact discussions surrounding film censorship suggests that genre 'literacy' is being put to use in a specifically political context by this group of genre users: it challenges the 'mainstream' institutional hierarchy and authority that the BBFC represents to them. The status of the interviewees as 'contemporary cinephiles' in the way they organise their interests and value high-end DVD and Blu-ray formats also reinforces the notion that the research participants are fully invested in their interest in the Asian Extreme category. Although frequently reluctant to term themselves as fans, they care very deeply about these films. The contested nature of the Asian Extreme genre, then, does not arise in most cases from an inclination to disparage the individual films within this category, but from a competitive desire amongst audiences to prove their knowledge, expertise and personal history in relation to this category of films and the BBFC.

Conclusions

This thesis navigates a number of intersecting academic fields and, as a result, has produced a diverse range of interconnected findings; these contribute to, and in many cases extend, scholarship in the fields of film censorship, audience research (particularly in relation to responses to extreme films), fan studies and cycle studies. The key elements of these findings are summarised below, together with a brief discussion of a few of the methodological challenges that were encountered during the research process; finally, I conclude by identifying some of the unresolved issues the study has uncovered which would benefit from further research.

Film Regulation and ‘Public Taste’

Mathijs and Sexton argue that the twenty-first century has seen an explosion in the popularity of Asian cult cinema in the West (2011: 124). It is within this evolving film landscape that, for a number of years, the BBFC has encountered difficulties when classifying many Asian Extreme films; most notably, with *Ichi the Killer* in 2001. To a large extent, these concerns have now been overtaken by a new anxiety surrounding a ‘new extremism’ in cinema, the ‘torture porn’ category and any films including scenes of sexual violence and sadism. Simultaneously, and partly as a response to these developments, the BBFC have started to incrementally tighten their regulation of ‘18’ certificate titles (BBFC/Ipsos Mori 2012). These changes have been mandated by a succession of research studies which, this thesis contends, are fundamentally flawed; in failing to acknowledge the full spectrum of opinions gathered in the research process [see Introduction, p. 15], they skew their findings and misrepresent what is (misleadingly) described in their press releases as ‘public opinion’ (BBFC 2012). Most recently, this has been apparent in their decision to downplay the ‘divide’ identified by research into audience responses to sexual violence on screen (BBFC/Ipsos Mori 2012: 58); rather than acknowledge the divided opinion amongst their research participants, this inconclusive study has been used as a mandate to tighten the regulation of ‘18’ certificate films.

An overview of recent BBFC policy and research practices [see Introduction, pp.4-15] also indicates that the part played by the regulator has gradually shifted to become a more

culturally significant one over the last five years; the extension of their role to serve a 'socially useful function' by providing 'expertise' within the British film community positions them at the centre of discussions surrounding the changing boundaries of cultural taste. However, in introducing the concept of 'public taste' (BBFC 2009: 3) into their regulatory framework, it should be stressed that the BBFC are not understanding 'taste' to operate in a Bourdieuan sense. Rather, they invoke 'public taste' in the same way they do 'public acceptability', as a means to deal with regulatory cases that are, in some way, sensitive or problematic. More significantly, though, the BBFC fail to adequately consult the *actual* audiences for these films; rather, they canvass views, predominantly from parents, about which films they think are suitable for *other* people to watch. Their references to 'public taste' are, therefore, judgements (and fears) about other peoples' tastes. This is made particularly explicit in their most recent public consultation, which set out primarily to recruit parents and teachers, who were then encouraged them to discuss contentious films (BBFC 2014b: 8-9).⁷⁶ In this respect, the BBFC is now explicitly employing parental opinions to represent the views of the British public as a whole. Arising from the views of this specific audience sector are a number of concerns about sexual violence on screen and 'the potentially harmful impact of such viewing on young, inexperienced men' (BBFC/Ipsos Mori 2012: 59).

Key to understanding this repositioning of the BBFC's role are insights into the productive power relations between the press and the BBFC; these can be gleaned from studying examiners' reports produced between 2000 and 2012. Firstly, analysis of examiners' reports on *Ichi the Killer* establishes that the relations between the press and the BBFC were, in this case, imagined or projected rather than actual; that is, it was the *possibility* of controversy and negative press that produced a prohibitive action on the part of the BBFC. In the case of *Ichi the Killer* this was never realised. Secondly, analysis of these reports uncovers considerable evidence that the BBFC take into account the opinions of two opposing wings of film journalism (the specialist/liberal wing of *Sight and Sound* and the conservative, censorious wing of the *Daily Mail*) and conflate these with public opinion, thereby overlooking an entire spectrum of other possible responses to any given film. In sum, while the BBFC's references to 'public taste' are often judgements gathered about other peoples' tastes, their references to 'public opinion' are frequently derived from the

two opposing spheres of the British film reviewing press. By investigating these two terms and uncovering their (mis)uses, this thesis contributes to current academic understanding of the discursive relationship between the BBFC, the British public and the press.

Cult Film Communities, Censorship and Methodological Challenges

The role played by the censorship process in shaping the evolution of a film's cult reputation has already been explored in relation to the 'video nasties' and a range of other films (Egan 2007; Mathijs and Sexton 2011). Notably, Egan examines the fluid and sometimes contradictory anti-censorship arguments constructed by 'nasty' fans in order to redeem and reframe 'nasty' titles as culturally valuable objects. Through an investigation of the symbiotic relationship between the BBFC and the Asian Extreme fan communities, this research project has uncovered some distinctive ways in which the regulatory body produces new social and cultural practices amongst cult film audiences; these suggest a number of ways in which Kuhn's provisional/productive model of censorship can be re-evaluated and extended. Research into fan activity on the *Snowblood* forum reveals the multifaceted and personal relationship this community has with the BBFC, and the productive uses that are made of the censorship discourse – for facilitating social interaction, as a site for demonstrating expertise and knowledge, and as a means to make bids for cultural distinction. These discussions reflect their unusually intimate relationship with the BBFC; over the course of the last seven years the forum has twice been the subject of research commissioned by the regulatory body, and its message boards frequently reflect this unique relationship in a number of contradictory ways: on one hand, forum members address the BBFC in a confrontational and argumentative manner, and on the other they display a sense of pride at being mentioned in a BBFC report [see Chapter 1, p. 49]. The intricacies of this relationship raised certain methodological challenges for this study [see Chapter 3, p.111].

Questionnaire respondents also constructed many of their anti-censorship arguments in the form of a dialogue with the BBFC. Some of these responses articulated a valorisation of the director as auteur in order to make the point that these films should not be cut. In this way, the respondents drew on a well-established taste distinction, observed by Bourdieu, that while knowledge of actors generally reflects how frequently one goes to

the cinema, knowledge of film directors is more closely linked to the possession of cultural capital. Tellingly, then, the participants perform these cultural competencies *in response* to the arguments put forward by the BBFC; however, when discussing their favourite scenes, participants were far more likely to express a pleasure and appreciation for aspects of narrative and characterisation within the films (than for the director's artistry and skill), thereby displaying what Bourdieu describes as the 'popular aesthetic' approach to culture (1984: 32).

The research findings also complicate post-Bourdieuian approaches to understanding subcultural capital in two ways. This can firstly be understood through a consideration of the alignment of, and blurring of distinctions between, subcultural and cultural capital. Initially, this was revealed by comparing the different perspectives on the Tartan 'Asia Extreme' label offered by academics [see chapter 2, pp.54-62]. While Chi-Yun Shin argues that Tartan's marketing tactics were 'mainstream', and thus devalued the subcultural status of the films by attracting non-cult audiences, Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano contend that Tartan's promotional strategies highlighted the films' 'non-mainstream' qualities, thereby attracting under-informed teenage audiences who were actively seeking subcultural status. While all three academics interpret Tartan's marketing strategies in different ways, they all nevertheless arrive at similar conclusions about the cultural incompetencies of the audience. These different understandings of the Asian Extreme category were also echoed by the research participants themselves [see chapter 5, pp. 194-199; chapter 6, pp 202-212], suggesting that notions of cultural and subcultural capital are highly fluid, temporally restricted and user-generated, rather being defined by the category of films themselves.

A second way in which a post-Bourdieuian understanding of subcultural capital is developed through the thesis is in the discussion of creative cultural capital. This form of cultural expertise complicates Bourdieu's sociological model, in that it cannot be readily aligned with the categories originally developed in *Distinction*. It also highlights the blurring of differences between cultural and subcultural capital. On the one hand, the *Ravelry* community has the characteristics of a specialist, niche fan subculture; it offers a closed, intimate environment which facilitates a very specific set of cultural practices. Yet on the other, Brigid Cherry observes that the lack of connoisseurship and expertise displayed by

many members of the community aligns them more closely with 'casual' horror fans (Cherry 2011: 142). This again points to the instability of these categories, and the way in which their meaning is defined through their use rather than by their textual characteristics.

Genre Users, Cultural Competencies and Battles of Distinction

It is not just in response to arguments put forward by the BBFC that audiences of Asian Extreme films engage in displays of expertise and connoisseurship as a means to negotiate their cultural capital. At every stage of this research project, the Asian Extreme category has been exposed as a site for enacting struggles over cultural competencies and taste distinctions; this is apparent in academic analyses of Tartan, in the writing of film critics and cultural commentators, in the reports produced by film regulators, and in the responses of the research participants themselves. It is the very mutability of the category that produces these on-going battles over cultural distinction; more so, I argue, than the 'torture porn' category which, at least at this point in time, invariably functions (for critics and audiences alike) as a marker of bad taste. While this study reveals that manifestations of taste formations around the Asian Extreme category are varied and manifold, there are two highly visible ways in which the category is used for the purpose of negotiating and contesting cultural distinctions. In 'mainstream' critical evaluations, the 'extreme' category frequently indicates a relatively sophisticated taste distinction; for example, in the opening line of his review of *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), Mark Kermode poses the question: 'Philosophical torture porn or edgy exercise in extreme cinema?' (Kermode 2009). In this way, Kermode neatly articulates the 'great cinematic value divide' that exists in contemporary reviewing practices in relation to the horror genre;⁷⁷ this divide positions 'torture porn' on one side, and 'edgy' extreme cinema on the other. Although Kermode dignifies the 'torture porn' category here with the adjective 'philosophical', the value judgement implied by the question remains: is it a bad film ('torture porn'), or a good film (extreme cinema)? Similar value judgements are frequently expressed by the participants of this research project [see chapter 4, p. 147]. In these cases, audiences are keen not to be tarred with the brush of cultural incompetency associated with the 'torture porn' category. A second way in which the Asian Extreme category is used for the purpose of negotiating

and contesting cultural distinctions operates in reverse. This taste distinction associates the 'extreme' tag with an *inability* to appreciate the nuances of East Asian cinema, and is frequently expressed by academics, both formally (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009: 6) and informally, in the context of responses to this research project [see chapter 4, p. 165].

As well as extending scholarship in the fields of film censorship and cycle studies through these findings and investigations, this thesis also makes an unexpected contribution to research in the field of fan studies. The most surprising and unforeseen finding revealed by the quali-quantitative questionnaire was the fact that the majority of respondents disavowed their fan identity. This response was not in any way linked to how many films they had seen, their status as 'high end' collectors, their enjoyment and knowledge about the category or any other markers of fandom; rather, it reflected an aversion to the label 'fan'. The primary reason this result was not anticipated lies in the frequently-made references to the fanboy audience profile for this category of films; this has been offered, and widely acknowledged, by film critics, cultural commentators, academics and the distribution label themselves (Hamilton in Dew 2007; Rayns 2005, 2006). In this context, the research participants themselves directly challenged the negative stereotyping of them perpetrated by Rayns and others. Further analysis and interpretation of the findings confirmed that the characteristics Rayns associates with the figure of the fanboy were also largely inaccurate. These included the claims that fanboys are young, easily aroused by scenes of sexual violence, and that they lack the cultural competency to recognise the use of music by Vivaldi in *Oldboy*. In several ways, then, this negative stereotype matches the figure of the 'young, inexperienced men' vulnerable to the 'harmful' effects of sexual violence who are discussed in the BBFC/Ipsos Mori report (2012). The repudiation of the 'fan' label by the research participants can partly be explained by this negative stereotyping, perpetrated by Rayns, the BBFC, the *Daily Mail* and others. It might also partly explain the changing usage and value of the label 'fan' amongst cult film audiences of East Asian cinema; in reference to this particular group of films, the 'fanboy' label has acquired a set of undesirable and demeaning characteristics.

The degree of offence articulated by some of the respondents towards the Tartan label exposes a high level of antagonism which many self-styled experts in East Asian cinema (amongst the questionnaire respondents) hold towards the distributor. Ironically, there is an

implication here that, despite Tartan's populist marketing campaign to promote these films, a significant proportion of their audience are cinephiles who find the commercial branding of these films to be hugely distasteful. The research also establishes that, despite concerns articulated by several academics about 'ignorant' audiences being attracted to the films via Tartan's excessive marketing techniques (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009; Martin 2009), the principal way in which the label is discussed by questionnaire respondents is in the form of a disparaging critique: this is primarily put to use, ironically, as a means to *claim* cultural capital. A second reading strategy used to interpret and discuss Tartan's marketing strategies acknowledges their sensationalist tone in a more tolerant way; research participants adopting this stance recognise the lurid undertones of the marketing materials, but appreciate the visibility they give to the category in a Western context [see Chapter 4, p. 168]. A third, slightly less prominent group of respondents see the Tartan label as a marker of quality [see Chapter 6, p.204]. These three distinctive and different ways of reading Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' marketing campaign underline the importance of not assuming that audiences will respond to promotional materials and strategies in predictable and uniform ways. Whilst the study of marketing materials clearly plays an important part in understanding patterns of response amongst film audiences, this relationship should be acknowledged as being complex and highly variable.

The results of the quali-quantitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews also produced some original findings with respect to female audiences of these films; these were initially uncovered when exploring claims about the 'fanboy' audience. The findings revealed that female audiences amongst the population of responses were *more* likely to take an interest in extreme horror than were their male counterparts. However, their responses also uncovered the fact that, for a range of different reasons (linked to embarrassment, shame, social stigma and other factors) they were less inclined to watch these films in public spaces such as a cinema or film festival. This finding presents a very different picture to the one uncovered by Annette Hill in her research into audiences of violent films (2002); this might partly be explained by the passing of time, or by the use of a different set of films within the research process. However, Hill's assertion that watching violent films is an intrinsically social activity is not borne out by this study. For many of the research participants, watching Asian Extreme films is an intensely private activity that can

be deeply cathartic in nature. Additionally, these findings suggest it is possible that the viewing preferences amongst some of the female respondents could account for the scarcity of female viewers at horror film festivals or conventions that cater to audiences with a taste for extreme cinema; this might also have contributed to the widespread notion of there being a predominantly young, male audience for this category of films. The horror handicrafting community also indicates a different form of subcultural capital operating within some horror fan networks. Responses from the *Ravelry* knitters to this study reveal the way in which a predominantly female network of horror fans values a particular type of creative subcultural capital that is accrued through their handicrafting skills. This suggests that some (female) horror fans do not share the same values and forms of cultural distinction as their (predominantly male) counterparts; whereas, in established/visible horror fan communities, subcultural capital is associated with attending horror festivals and premieres, acquiring specialist knowledge and practices of collecting, this is not the case for the horror knitting community. It is perhaps for this reason that they have hitherto remained a partially invisible dimension of horror fandom. The viewing practices described by female respondents can also be understood as a response to the stigma attached to watching films that include scenes of sexual violence. This issue is discussed in a number of contradictory ways by female respondents; one key finding revealed in these responses is a marked distaste for the way in which women are often represented in Hollywood films, particularly in rom-coms.

What many of these research findings have in common is that they illustrate different strategies audiences adopt *in response* to the ways in which they are perceived and stereotyped in broader social contexts; in other words, they form part of a wider on-going cultural discourse that is specifically British in character. Some of these strategies involve bids for cultural competency by invoking discourses valorising film directors as creative artists or by disparaging Tartan's sensationalist marketing materials as being culturally incompetent or deficient. Other strategies involve disavowal (of fandom) and concealment (of female pleasure watching horror and sexual violence); these responses reveal the complex management of pleasure and engagement that takes place when audiences' interests are being culturally circumscribed by a range of influential taste-makers and regulatory institutions. However, it is also important to acknowledge that alongside

these responses to social stigmatisation, many of the research respondents also openly discussed the pleasures and meanings they derived from this category of films, and the ways in which they shared these pleasures with other like-minded audiences.

Gender, Sexual Violence and the Meaning-making Process

Whilst discussions of the representation of sexual violence in the films did not play a key role in the way participants responded to them, they are nevertheless of particular interest to this study. Some of the questionnaire respondents discussed the way in which they found sexually violent scenes to be therapeutic or cathartic and, for that reason, enjoyable; in particular, one female fan of the Asian Extreme category explained that watching the films made her feel 'a lot happier' with herself [see Chapter 4, pp. 170-171]. This finding is significant in that there is an overwhelming assumption made within the 'effects' tradition that if a viewer *enjoys* watching scenes of sexual violence, it is because they are deriving some form of sadistic pleasure from it; this then leads to fears that they will become aroused and act upon this state of excitement. However, this respondent clearly illustrates the way in which engaging with forms of sexual violence on screen can have the opposite effect, that is, they function as a release and result in the viewer developing a happier, more relaxed state of mind.

Other forms of pleasure derived from these films that female viewers articulated relate to notions of authenticity. These vary from an enjoyment derived from viewing authentic representations of the female body, to an appreciation of the realistic and detailed representation of 'child on child violence' and 'incest'. This form of audience pleasure lies in the power of Asian Extreme films to represent these scenarios as being truly horrific, and not to 'airbrush' them; their enjoyment results, then, from the fulfilment of a desire to be horrified. For this reason, the Asian Extreme category offers these viewers a truly horrific experience (rather than a sanitised version of horror) which they feel they cannot obtain elsewhere and therefore value highly.

It is notable that very few male respondents discussed issues relating to sexual violence, and that when they did, it was primarily to assert that this was not the main reason they were attracted to this category of films. The scene most discussed by male respondents was the torture sequence towards the end of *Audition*; several respondents

expressed their discomfort at watching it, whilst other discussed their appreciation for its narrative pace. In some ways, these responses echo Annette Hill's findings about the pleasures of violent films; there was a sense of viewers 'testing boundaries' to see how much they could take. Bearing in mind the negative stereotyping of fanboys of Asian Extreme films, it could also be that male research participants were wary of discussing the subject of sexual violence in case their comments were taken out of context and misinterpreted. However, this does not diminish the finding that females expressed a greater interest in extreme horror, an enjoyment of gory and sexually violent films and, in some cases, a fear or embarrassment about making their interest public.

Characterisation and Issues of Identification

Another key finding of this study is that character and narrative feature most strongly in discussions about favourite films and memorable moments within them. The issue of authenticity or 'honesty' again plays a significant role here; both male and female respondents expressed appreciation for the realistic character development in a number of films. The findings also revealed the way in which identification with different characters was complex and fluid; many questionnaire respondents discussed their inclination to empathise first with one character, then another, or with both at the same time and regardless of gender; these findings clearly imply that the issue of identification is not related to gender but to the depth and complexity of characterisation. As Murray Smith argues,

engagement is not a process in which we vicariously experience the emotions of characters in any simple sense, nor one in which we are 'possessed' wholly by a single character. It is, rather, a complex, heterogeneous set of interacting responses – autonomic, cognitive, affective – to what we know to be fictional entities (Smith 1995: 230).

Smith's tripartite framework offers a helpful structure with which to interpret the range of emotional and philosophical responses demonstrated by the participants; in particular, his acknowledgement of the complexity and range of the different degrees of sympathy and empathy experienced by a film spectator towards a character, and the ways in which these are simultaneously moderated and evaluated, is borne out by this study. These can be observed in the responses discussing violent characters and the degrees of empathy

expressed in respondents' considerations of their acts of 'evil'; these responses involve reflections about what drives people to engage in murder or acts of violence, the extent to which they themselves could undertake acts of violence, or what they might do if they found themselves in similar scenarios [see Chapter 4, p. 176; Chapter 5 pp. 206-7].

These findings establish, then, the fluid way in which audiences identify with a range of characters, and the thoughtfulness with which they consider the implications of scenes containing brutality or sexual violence; they contrast sharply, however, with the way in which the BBFC understands audiences to engage with scenes of sexual or sadistic violence. In the 2012 BBFC/Ipsos Mori report, the definition of sadistic violence is couched in terms of perspective, as follows:

Sadistic violence: this covers all depictions of violence which show enjoyment from the perspective of the perpetrator. This includes films which feature portrayal of violence as a normal solution to problems, heroes who inflict pain and injury, callousness towards victims, the encouragement of aggressive attitudes and content which depicts characters taking pleasure in pain or humiliation (BBFC 2012: 10).

Throughout this report into audience responses to sadistic violence, then, attention is drawn to any scene which is shot from the perspective of the perpetrator as being sadistic and potentially 'harmful'. Audiences are thus conceived by the BBFC to be largely incapable of considering the action from multiple points of view, of reflecting on the nature and purpose of the violence, or of using their own moral judgement to guide them in their interpretation of acts of brutality. It is this issue of perspective and identification, though, which over the last ten years has led the BBFC to reject or cut a number of violent and sexually violent films. For example, an examiner's report on *Grotesque* included the comment that 'the sexual assault in *Grotesque* feels exploitative and shot with a male gaze firmly in mind'; whilst in another report on *A Serbian Film*, an examiner stated that

I accept that the work is intentionally strong and seeks to shock, but at times the pleasure on offer tips into inviting the viewer to enjoy the spectacle of sexual violence and to feel a sense of pleasure from being complicit in it, which is clearly at odds with our guidelines and internal policy on sexual violence (BBFC 2010).

Methodological Reflections

The methodology developed for this study stemmed from an ethnographic approach to audience research. My intention was to develop a transparent and productive relationship

with the online Asian Extreme communities over a period of eighteen months; this can be best described as a period of being temporarily embedded within several fan communities. This methodological approach was facilitated by social interaction on multiple websites, and within markedly different social networks and discursive frameworks. However, in retrospect it might have been useful to set up separate social networking identities for this purpose, so as to avoid becoming too close to the research participants. Whilst it was useful to maintain a certain level of contact with some of the respondents, becoming 'Facebook friends' with them led to unnecessary personal complications, through sharing personal information in this context; for example, I became aware of one research participant's emotional problems, which might inadvertently have affected the way in which I evaluated and framed my analysis of their interview.

One of the unquantifiable findings emerging out of the quali-quantitative questionnaire was that many of the research respondents were highly educated, often working in academic or educational contexts; this became apparent in many of the answers to the final question. However, this could not be ratified as I did not include an option on the questionnaire that requested socio-economic or occupational information; in retrospect, this would have been useful data for cross-tabulating responses and further developing an understanding of the audience profile for this category of films.

Future Research

The findings of this study highlight a number of issues that would benefit from further research. Insights into the socio-economic background of the research participants would be a useful and potentially revealing way to expand the discoveries about British audiences of Asian Extreme films already made; information regarding the class, level of education and occupation of the questionnaire respondents, for example, would clarify and develop the patterns of response already identified. This would be of particular relevance to discussions surrounding taste that draw on Bourdieu's notion of cultural distinction; for example, the finding that many of the respondents could be seen to be high-end collectors of Asian Extreme DVDs suggests that a significant proportion of the participants were relatively high earners. The articulacy and expertise demonstrated by many of the questionnaire

respondents also suggests that they were likely to be educated to a high level, though these two things do not always go hand in hand.

There is also scope for further research into the ways in which the BBFC engages in branding exercises in order to develop and maintain public confidence. The examination of the three large scale public consultations undertaken by the BBFC over the last twelve years [see Introduction, pp. 8-10] indicate that there has been a fundamental shift in the design and objectives of these 'consultations'. The 2009 report states that a central objective of the quantitative aspect of their research was to ascertain whether or not the British public feels the BBFC guidelines are fair and effective (BBFC 2009c: 19); this is reflected in the design of their questionnaire, which is constructed as a survey of consumer satisfaction. Notions of 'public acceptability' and 'public taste' have become increasingly central to the BBFC's regulatory authority; yet to date, no research has been conducted that examines this key shift in the way they exercise their statutory powers. Furthermore, by developing their educational purpose and promoting their expertise in film, the BBFC examining team is no longer conceived as representing a cross-section of the ordinary British public; instead, they are positioning themselves as moral guardians who can guide the general public with regards to 'community standards'. In this respect, the BBFC are developing their status beyond that of the national film regulator; this is a new territory, not yet clearly defined, but reflecting an emergent discourse around the positioning of culture as part of the governing process.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Table indicating the use of the term 'extreme content' in the British press between 1995 and 2012.

Year	Newspaper	Title of article	Subject Matter	Example(s) of 'extreme content' referenced
1995	<i>The Observer</i>	'Crackdown on Green Extremists'	Police raid bookshops to seize newspaper advocating violence in support of the environment.	<i>Green Anarchist</i>
1996	<i>The Guardian</i>	'Framespotting: Bring on the Naked Nuns'	Peter Greenaway's new film, <i>The Pillow Book</i> , causes controversy.	<i>The Pillow Book</i> (1996) <i>Crash</i> (Cronenberg, 1997)
2002	<i>The Scotsman</i>	'Brit Horror Resurrected'	Release of <i>Dog Soldiers</i> and overview of British horror films	<i>The Exorcist</i> (1973)
2002	<i>Herald Express</i>	'IT safety tips for parents'	Regulation of the Internet	The Internet
2002	<i>Leicester Mercury</i>	'D-day for 'adults only' film festival'	Film festival screens low-budget films.	<i>Citizen Toxie: Toxic Avenger Part IV</i> (2000); <i>Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter</i>
2002	<i>Sunday Herald</i>	'Growing tide of porn spam sparks mental health fears'	Complaints about spam emails with sexually explicit content.	Emails with pornographic content
2002	<i>Sunday Herald</i>	'Fishnet Stalking'	How children and other vulnerable people might be affected by the 'sexual online revolution'	The Internet

2004	<i>The Times</i>	N/A	(Film review section)	<i>The Isle</i> (Kim Ki-Duk, 2004)
2005	<i>The Herald</i>	'Plus ça change on the tour of French films'	Current state of French cinema	Unnamed films by Catherine Breillat and Gasper Noe
2005	<i>Daily Mail</i>	N/A	(TV listings section)	<i>Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels</i> (1998)
2005	<i>The Times</i>	'BBC chief joins attack on EU plans for internet regulation'	Mark Thompson says EU attempts to regulate are a waste of time	The Internet
2005	<i>Aberdeen Evening Press</i>	'Time to switch off tasteless TV'	British television programmes are deteriorating in quality.	Japanese television programmes
2006	<i>The Guardian</i>	'Supposing...The mainstream's as mad as it seems to be'	Brutal content entering mainstream culture, including women's magazines.	The Internet 'sicko websites'
2007	<i>Daily Mail</i>	N/A	(TV listings section)	<i>American History X</i>
2008	<i>Daily Post</i>	'Kerstie's Law'	Employees using Internet at work	The Internet
2008	<i>Metro</i>	'Game that's too Wii-vil for families'	Violent computer game released by 'family friendly' label.	<i>Madworld</i> (Nintendo)
2009	<i>The Guardian</i>	'Facebook takes a hit'	'Race-hate' material on Facebook	The Internet - Facebook
2009	<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	'Porn to be wild'	Ireland tops world list for Internet porn searches	The Internet – porn sites
2009	<i>Sunday Times</i>	'The glamour girl of the pictures'	Porn star appears at Edinburgh Festival	Pornography
2009	<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	'Film that outraged Cannes to play uncut in Britain'	BBFC don't cut Lars von Trier's <i>Antichrist</i>	<i>Antichrist</i> (2009)
2009	<i>The Sun</i>	'Fans will see grim & violent film in full'	BBFC don't cut Lars von Trier's <i>Antichrist</i>	<i>Antichrist</i> (2009)
2009	<i>The Times</i>	'Brutal video game to make a killing'	Computer game gives players option to kill civilians in a terrorist attack	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</i> (Infinity Ward)
2009	<i>Times Educational Supplement</i>	'Wikipedia is good for pupils and teachers'	Students should be taught how to differentiate between various sources of information on the Internet.	The Internet 'There is extreme content on the internet, but kids only find it because they go

				looking for it.'
2010	<i>The Guardian</i>	'To protect and surf'	How to strike a balance between 'unleashing the potential of the internet and protecting students from its more extreme content'	The Internet
2010	<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	'Let fantasy into your love life'	Advice on how to improve relationships	Pornography and erotic literature
2011	<i>Daily Mail</i>	'Explicit DVDs sold legally to children'	Concerns that parents don't understand the BBFC's 'E' certificate	Pop music and sport/fitness DVDs.
2011	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	'Pornography made Milly's father first suspect'	Milly Dowler found father's pornography	Pornography
2012	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Black out the freeview porn now, insist parents	Campaign to block pornography on Freeview channels	Pornography/TV
2012	<i>Guardian</i>	Government to end dual ratings system for games.	Only PEGI ratings to be used for games	Games
2012	<i>Sunday Times</i>	If you can bear to look, horror is back	Dominance of horror genre at Irish film festival	Horror films
2012	<i>The Sun</i>	I've dodged bullets in Pakistan, seen a witch hunt in Africa ... but GLASGOW is the toughest	Ross Kemp's TV programme includes violent scenes	TV/violence
2012	<i>The Independent</i>	New age rating rules for video games	Only PEGI ratings to be used for games	Games
2012	<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	New age rating rules for video games	Only PEGI ratings to be used for games	Games
2012	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Quarter of pupils aged 9 and 10 use social networks	Fears about grooming on social networking sites	Internet – social networking sites
2012	<i>The News</i>	Racist gran barred from	OAP sends letters of complaint to various organisations	Letters/racism

		sending offensive letters		
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Appendix 2: Asian Extreme Questionnaire

1. Which of the following Asian Extreme films have you seen?

- Audition Battle Royale Dumplings Grotesque Guinea Pig films
 Ichi the Killer Oldboy Suicide Club The Isle Visitor Q

2. Which of these would you consider to be your favourite Asian Extreme films? (Please choose up to three films)

- Audition Battle Royale Dumplings Grotesque Guinea Pig films
 Ichi the Killer Oldboy Suicide Club The Isle Visitor Q

3. Is there one part of any of your favourite films that most sticks in your mind? What would it be and why?

4. What does the word ‘extreme’ mean to you in the expression ‘Asian Extreme’ films?

5. What part does the ‘extreme-ness’ of a film play in your response to it?

- Extremely important Very important Reasonably Important Slightly important
 Not important at all

6. Could you say a bit more to explain your answer to question 5?

7. How important is it for you to watch the uncut version of an Asian Extreme film?

- Extremely important Very important Reasonably Important Slightly important
 Not important at all

8. Could you say a bit more to explain your answer to question 7?

9. How do you normally get to watch Asian Extreme films? (you can tick up to two options)

At the cinema Store purchase Online purchase Store rental
Online rental Download Borrow from a friend

10. What would be your preferred way of watching? Can you tell us why?

11. In the UK, several Asian Extreme films have been cut or rejected (banned) by the BBFC, all on the basis of the argument that the film created an association between sexual arousal and violence, and could therefore produce a “harmful response in some viewers”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

12. What kinds of people do you think are fans of Asian Extreme films?

Finally, could you tell us a few things about yourself?

(a) Are you: Male Female

(b) Your Age group: Under 18 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 Over 65

(c) Are you: British and living in the UK British but living outside the UK
 Not British but living in the UK None of these options

(d) Which of the following statements would you say comes closest to the way you would describe yourself?

- I am a fan of Asian Extreme cinema and watch as many films as I can
- I am passionate about Asian cinema in general, and watch Asian Extreme films as part of this
- I have an interest in all Extreme Horror films, and watch Asian Extreme films as a part of that
- I watch Asian Extreme films on the basis of the individual film and what I know/hear about it
- I only watch Asian Extreme films occasionally

(e) Finally, is there something about you which you would regard as most important for understanding your response to the film(s) you’ve told us about?

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire.

Appendix Three: Additional Information accompanying the Questionnaire

Welcome

Hello, and thanks for visiting this website.

I want to find out about your experiences and opinions as a viewer of Asian Extreme cinema. Right now there are a lot of claims circulating in the UK about why people watch different forms of 'extreme' cinema, and what this might do to them. These claims often involve assumptions about film audiences that aren't based on any actual research. Through this questionnaire I aim to gather viewers' own understandings of what they enjoy in Asian Extreme films.

The research is the focus of my PhD which I'm conducting at Aberystwyth University, supervised by Professor Martin Barker and Dr Kate Egan. It is part of a collaborative project with the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). This means that I will have the chance to present my research findings to the BBFC, once they are complete. But the actual research is being designed and conducted entirely independently. I also guarantee that anything you tell me will be fully anonymised in everything I say and write.

At the beginning of the questionnaire you'll see I've listed ten Asian Extreme films. I'm aware that there are lots of films I've missed off this list. These ten films have been chosen either because of their popularity, or because of censorship issues they've raised. Sorry if I've missed out your favourite film, but this way I can make sure that my research will be of direct relevance to the BBFC.

If you'd like to read a fuller account of my research, please click [here](#) before proceeding to the questionnaire.

I very much hope you enjoy completing this questionnaire and appreciate the time you are putting aside to do this. Thank you.

Emma Pett

Appendix Four

About this research

Thanks for taking the time to look at this fuller explanation of my research.

This research is the focus of a PhD which I'm conducting at Aberystwyth University, supervised by Professor Martin Barker and Dr Kate Egan, both of whom have researched and written extensively on issues of censorship, the video nasties, and horror films. My research has been funded as part of a collaborative arrangement between the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The idea of these collaborations is to enable high level research to be conducted which is guaranteed to be of a sufficient quality to be of relevance to a public body like the BBFC. This means that I will have the opportunity to present my research findings to a meeting of the examiners at the BBFC, once they are complete. But it also means that the research is being designed and conducted entirely independently, following best research practices. I believe strongly that good research depends upon a clear separation between the interests of the funding bodies and the research itself. This is what we have been promised.

I want to gather your experiences and opinions as a viewer of Asian Extreme films. At the moment there are a lot of claims circulating, especially in the UK's media, about why people choose to watch different forms of 'extreme' cinema, and what this might do to them. These ideas often involve assumptions about film audiences that aren't based on actual research. In fact, there has so far been very little serious research into audiences for any area of horror cinema, let alone anything as specialised as Asian Extreme films. I am hoping my research can begin to fill that serious gap. This questionnaire is one of three main ways that I am using to gather the views and preferences of people who choose to watch these films. I am using many of the same kinds of research methods that my supervisors have used in their own research. The key point is that it aims to provide opportunities for people to present their own understanding of what they enjoy in Asian Extreme cinema.

I have been working for the last year at the BBFC itself, exploring their detailed policies and how decisions are made as a result. Current BBFC guidelines recognise that audiences of horror films like to be frightened and shocked, and for this reason they try to avoid cutting or rejecting extreme horror films which are classified '18'. However, the BBFC argues that this has to be balanced with legal restrictions and in particular with requirements relating to the presentation of sexual violence. The research I have done so far suggests that it is sometimes difficult for them to make a decision about whether or not to cut a scene from an extreme horror film. And this is because they are not sure how the likely audience might respond to it. This is one of the reasons that they have entered into this collaboration – they recognise that they need more detailed knowledge of the audiences for films of this kind as a basis for their decision-making. By taking part in this research project you will not only be making a huge contribution to my research, for which I am very grateful. You will also be enabling me to present the BBFC with valuable evidence about the viewing experiences of the actual audiences of Asian Extreme cinema.

In the questionnaire I ask some detailed questions which I hope you will be willing to answer. It has been agreed on all sides that all the information and evidence I gather will be entirely anonymous. In return for your contribution, I also promise that once I have completed the research I will find ways of making my findings available back to the communities of viewers of Asian Extreme films, so that you can see what I have learnt and what I have told the BBFC.

At the beginning of the questionnaire I've listed ten Asian Extreme films. I'm aware that there are lots of films I've missed off this list. The ten films I've chosen are included either because of their popularity, or because of censorship issues they've raised for the BBFC. I've intentionally not included supernatural/ghost/Kwaidan films, which I know that some people count as Asian Extreme. Sorry if I've missed out your favourite film, but to have made an endless list of all the possibilities would have made it almost impossible to process and analyse the results.

I very much hope you enjoy completing this questionnaire and appreciate the time you are putting aside to do this. Thank you. I am hoping to gather more than 1,000 completed responses to the questionnaire, in order to ensure that the results I present to the BBFC are clearly well-founded. So, if you can persuade others to complete it, I will be very grateful.

A digest of the results of this questionnaire will be available at this address once the research is complete.

If you have any particular questions about this research, I will do my best to answer them. Please email me at the address below.

Emma Pett
Aberystwyth University
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Appendix Five: Schedule of Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

Q1. A few background things first. Can you explain how you first came across Asian Extreme films, and what it was about them that appealed to you? Was it in the context of a broader interest? Was it in a private or professional context? Were you aware of any marketing materials for these films? Is this part of a wider cultural interest – in comics, books, fashion and so on?

Q2. How do you normally get hold of the films? If you order them online, is there a particular site you often use? Can you say what it is about this site that makes it preferable to others? Have you ever considered whether the availability of a film makes it more or less interesting to you? What part do professional / peer reviews make in the choices of films you watch? Are there particular reviewers you pay attention to, and if so, why?

Q3. How do you usually watch these films: As a group? With friends? On your own? How do you *prefer* to watch them? Is there anything significant about the circumstances of watching them, do you think, that affects your response to them?

Q4. Which films would you identify as your favourite examples of Asian Extreme cinema? Are there any particular scenes or aspects of these films that stand out? Can you say *why* these scenes or aspects of the films stand out for you? If you don't feel happy identifying a favourite film/scene, could you say something about your interest in this group of films as a whole?

Q5. Which films would you identify as being representative of Asian Extreme cinema? Can you explain why? Are there particular moments in the films that are significant in this respect? If you think there are no representative films, can you explain why?

Q6. Since the time of your initial interest, how important have these films been in your life? Has this been a consistent interest, or have there been moments when your interest has been stronger or weaker? (for example, is this an old interest that has, in some ways, waned over time?) Has your interest in these films become part of your professional life, or remained a purely personal preoccupation?

(If personal → Q. 8)

Q7a. If you have a professional interest in these films, could you explain what this is, when it began, and how it has evolved over the last x years.

Q7b. How do you think new technologies (the Internet, file-sharing, DVDs and so on) have affected the business you are involved in? Do you think the structures of communication involved in your business have been affected by, or shaped in any way, by these technological changes? Is there anything you'd like to say about how this has evolved over a period of time?

Q7c. In many ways there are large areas of this business that are unregulated (for example, 'banned' films can be ordered on amazon.uk) How do you feel about attempts to regulate this industry? Have you ever been affected by industry regulations, and if so, could you explain a bit about how this happened and what you think about it in retrospect?

Q7d. Finally, as someone involved in this industry, what are your perceptions of audiences for this kind of film? Do you have much interaction with them (online, at festivals and so on)? If you are involved in film distribution, have you ever felt the need to consider how your marketing may affect the people who watch these films? If so, could you say a bit more about this?

Q8. Obviously I am particularly interested in what you think about the 'extreme' scenes in the films. First of all, which scenes would you consider to be 'extreme'? Can you say why you think this? What can you particularly recall about these scenes? How would you describe them, and what did they add to the film? Suppose they had been left out: how would that have changed the film?

Q9. Are there any other films that Asian Extreme films remind you of, or that you would class as being of the same kind? What common features do you think link them together? How would you differentiate them from other films? How do you think this category of films relates to Hollywood/mainstream films?

Q10. How important is it for you to see the uncut version of a film? Do you discuss the differences between cut and uncut versions of Asian Extreme films? With each other? Online? How do you go about getting hold of an uncut version of a film (if you do at all)? Does the format of the film (DVD, Blu-ray) it make a difference to your enjoyment of it? Can you try and explain how?

Q11. We are talking about films that have been given '18' certificates by the BBFC. How much do you discuss film age ratings when you are deciding what to watch? What are your personal views on age-specific ratings? Do you think you might feel differently about any of these films if you weren't aware of the certificate they had?

Q.12. Were you aware of any controversy around any of these films before you watched them? How do you feel about watching scenes of torture that include sexual violence? Can you say what effects, if any, the film had on you physically? Emotionally?

Q13. Some academics have criticised the way these films were marketed and distributed by Tartan because they think they encouraged 'stereotypes and gross misrepresentations' of Asian cinema and culture. Do you think they're right about this? Do you feel the marketing materials you came across affected your response to these films in any way? Can you try and explain how you responded to any marketing material you saw (posters, trailers, DVD covers)?

¹ The term 'Asian Extreme' is being used in this context to refer to the audience-appropriated category used by fans on websites such as *Snowblood Apple* (<http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood>). It is important for the purpose of this project to differentiate the category of Asian Extreme cinema from Tartan's 'Asia Extreme' distribution label, as only six of the titles included on the online questionnaire were distributed in the UK by Tartan. However, in reality these two categories are closely connected to each other and their history, status and different uses are inextricably linked together [see Chapter 2].

² These were *À Ma Soeur* (Catherine Breillat, 2001), *Baise-Moi*, (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), *The House on the Edge of the Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001) and *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2001).

³ The concept of 'extreme' cinema is being referred to here with the acknowledgment that it is an unstable term that carries different meanings in different contexts – these are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

⁴ The main focus of this study, however, is on the period up to 2011; some references are made to developments at the BBFC which occur after 2011, in order to provide a more up-to-date analysis of their policies and research practices.

⁵ Although Tartan went into administration in 2008, their catalogue was bought by Palisades who then re-branded themselves as Tartan Palisades to capitalise on Tartan's reputation; more recently, this catalogue was reported to have been bought by Kino Lorber (Frater 2014). Therefore, the 'Asia Extreme' label still exists and functions as a brand, albeit within a different distribution context.

⁶ The quotation from Mark Pilkington is taken from the back of the jacket of *The Tartan Guide to Asia Extreme* (2004).

⁷ The term 'mainstream' is being referred to with an acknowledgment that it is a fluid and unstable concept, often defined through the context of its use; these different uses that are made of the term are interrogated and discussed throughout the Introduction.

⁸ The term 'benchmark for community standards' is taken from a discussion with the BBFC's Head of Policy, 3rd November 2009. Although BBFC documents do not use the term 'mainstream', I am taking their widely used concepts of 'public acceptability' and 'public taste' to equate with 'mainstream', in that their notion of 'public' is not an inclusive category, but a particular taste formation; this argument is developed throughout the Introduction.

⁹ This Introduction examines the way in which 'effects' research informs the BBFC guidelines and policies, particularly in relation to their treatment of sexual violence. However, in the 2014 guidelines, the BBFC acknowledge that research within the 'effects' tradition is inconclusive and that, for this reason, they now primarily rely upon their own expertise (BBFC 2014a: 3).

¹⁰ Draft versions of these guidelines were in circulation prior to this, but were not available to the public.

¹¹ In 1999 there were also two 'citizen's juries' staged over four days, but these were not considered to be particularly effective; see Hanley 2000: 9.

¹² The report doesn't specify whether their children were under or over eighteen.

¹³ In an email correspondence between myself and the head of qualitative research at Ipsos Mori, on 7th January 2013, the research body claimed that the second stage of the study was conducted in order to establish 'the importance of context when viewing films of a particularly explicit nature', despite this having already been established by previous research commissioned by the BBFC and enshrined in their guidelines. However, this research objective is not stated anywhere in the published report.

¹⁴ For example, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton provide a clear and comprehensive overview of the various definitions of this term in *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (2011: 1-9).

¹⁵ This is not strictly the case in contemporary British culture, where media education has, to a certain extent, been integrated into the mainstream secondary curriculum.

¹⁷ During the course of the research project *Suicide Club* was distributed in the UK by *Cine du Monde*; the *Guinea Pig* cycle is counted as one option on the online questionnaire, when in fact it is a series of films; on *Wikipedia* it states that there are seven films in the cycle, whereas fans on the *Snowblood* forum argue that there are ten.

¹⁸ The other five films were chosen because they featured prominently in fans' lists of favourite Asian Extreme films – see Chapter 3 for a longer explanation of the process involved in designing the questionnaire.

¹⁹ In particular Kuhn references *Power/Knowledge* (Harvester 1980), *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (Penguin 1977) and *The History of Sexuality, part one* (Penguin 1978).

²⁰ Although I have previously argued that term 'mainstream' is a fluid, negotiable term, here I'm using it to refer specifically to national daily newspapers published in the UK.

²¹ Although little has been written yet about the emergence of the category of 'Extreme Cinema' over the last ten years, this phrase is taken from *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (eds. Horeck, Tanya C. & Kendall, Tina) (2011).

²² *Suicide Club* was released in Japan in 2001 (as *Suicide Circle*) and was released on DVD in the UK in September 2011.

²³ This is because, at the time of writing, the BBFC is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and reports filed by examiners over the last twenty years remain highly confidential.

²⁴ It is interesting that Walker in particular is singled out here, which might suggest that the BBFC see him, in some way, as the emblem or spokesperson for these opinion-makers, particularly after his key role in the *Crash* controversy and/or because of his status as a more upmarket critic than, say, Christopher Tookey of the *Daily Mail*.

²⁵ A secondary method often used by the BBFC as a means to gauge public opinion is considering how many letters and emails of complaint they receive about individual films; details of these are generally provided in the BBFC's annual reports.

²⁶ These details come from an examiner's report on the 2009 re-classification of *Ichii the Killer* that include a retrospective summary of the classificatory history of film at the Board.

²⁷ Between August 2009 and January 2010 there was a brief period during which the Video Recordings Act (VRA) was not enforceable due to the discovery of a legal loophole; this situation was rectified by the Digital Economy Act (2010). The BBFC states in their annual report of 2009 that during this period the majority of film distribution companies continued, on a voluntary basis, to submit works to the BBFC for classification prior to their release in the UK.

²⁸ Although *Snowblood Apple* is the only UK-based forum exclusively dedicated to fans of Asian Extreme cinema, it is by no means representative of audiences for these films, and is being discussed here as a starting point for investigating audience responses to these films.

²⁹ Both the US and Japanese versions of *Grotesque* are, at present, (20th February 2014) available to order from Amazon.co.uk.

³⁰ See <http://thirdwindowfilms.com/about>

³¹ For examples, see www.asianextreme.net and the forums found on the *Snowblood Apple* site.

³² Comment made on <http://www.digital-retribution.com/forums/index.php/topic,11319.msg287511.html#msg287511> [visited 12th January 2013].

³³ Recent online reports suggest that distribution rights for the 'Asia Extreme' catalogue have been bought by the North American distributor Kino Lorber (Frater 2014); these reports also state that the 'Asia Extreme' catalogue now includes ninety titles.

³⁴ Information taken from an interview with Hugh K. David (Palisades Tartan) and Adam Torel (Third Windows Films), April 22nd 2010.

³⁵ For example, on www.asian-horror.net and on the Facebook 'Tartan Asia Extreme' page, which has over 1000 followers.

³⁶ Martin's assertion that the thesis was not conceived as a piece of audience research is muddled, however, by the final section of the fourth chapter, which discusses at length an Internet article written by a cult film fan, referred to by Martin as 'Spank'. The article is a review of Tartan's *Asia Extreme* Roadshow written from the perspective of a fan who expresses annoyance that his cult interest in Asian cinema is reaching a wider 'mainstream' audience. There is no explanation provided as to why the perspective of this one fan is discussed in considerable depth, or whether he is seen as being representative of cult film fans in general.

³⁷ There is an implication that these views are attributed to Julian Stringer. However, Martin's review overlooks Stringer's key assertion that Korean film genres are contested in their home market; it should be noted that Stringer makes no references to either the *Asia Extreme* brand or 'ignorant viewers' in the chapter referenced, but instead concludes that a cross-cultural study of audience responses to Korean cinema 'may help reveal its variable and complex nature' (Stringer 2005: 102).

³⁸ See the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) (sec. 63 [6b])

³⁹ See Attwood & Smith (2010) for a discussion of the issues surrounding the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) which made it an offence to be in the possession of 'extreme images'

⁴⁰ For example, the recent DVD release of *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) comes with label 'WARNING: THIS FILM CONTAINS EXTREME CONTENT' (see <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Serbian-Film-Blu-Ray-Srdjan-Spasojevic/dp/B004AG55S2>, accessed March 14th, 2010).

⁴¹ This survey was carried out using the Nexis database. Duplicates of print articles published online (or vice versa) have only been counted once.

⁴² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme_cinema (accessed April 26th, 2010)

⁴³ Daily Mail (2007) 'Campus Gunman's death video direct copy of award winning Korean revenge film'. Found at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-449460/Campus-gunmans-death-video-direct-copy-award-winning-Korean-revenge-film.html#ixzz1yEGH3iXI> [accessed 26th February 2011].

⁴⁴ Thomas, Liz (2008) 'Violent movies are to blame for knife crime wave blasts Sir Richard Attenborough' in the *Daily Mail*. Found at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1038361/Violent-movies-blame-knife-crime-wave-blasts-Sir-Richard-Attenborough.html#ixzz1yEHoHhpC> [accessed 19th May 2012].

⁴⁵ The press release 'BBFC rejects sexually violent Japanese horror DVD' originally issued by the BBFC in 2009 is worded differently to the version currently archived on the BBFC's website; both versions are referenced here.

⁴⁶ Some research in the effects tradition uses other methods for gathering data, such as questionnaires and interviews (see Schrøder et al 2003, chapter 15; Barker and Petley 1997: 1-23).

⁴⁷ In their discussion of the 'Observer's Paradox', Schrøder et al (2003: 16-17) suggest that all audience researchers of audiences face this dilemma in some form, and that it is a problem which cannot be resolved. They argue that being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each method is therefore an essential prerequisite for credible audience research.

⁴⁸ Schrøder et al (2003: 320-321), Ruddock (2001, Chapter 2) and others point out that there have been many significant developments made in this field which have attempted to take on board criticisms of their methodology put forward by cultural studies academics and others.

⁴⁹ Although this essay was published in 1980, it was first presented to the academic community in 1973.

⁵⁰ Hans Robert Jauss coined the term 'reception theory' in 1967, see Drotner (2000: 169) for a longer explanation.

⁵¹ Additionally, there are time restraints involved in a three year doctoral programme of research (that also has to include research training, conducting literature reviews, analysing materials and writing up findings); it would therefore not be possible to extend the length of the time dedicated to the empirical stage of the research in this particular instance.

⁵² These ask respondents to explain the importance of watching uncut films, how they get hold of the films and what thy preferred way of watching them is [see Appendix 2, Questions 7-10].

⁵³ For a discussion of 'figures of the audience' see Chapter 1, pp. 39-40.

⁵⁴ Although many possible avenues and approaches are touched on, Barker focuses in particular on the use of the online press database *Nexis* as a valuable tool for engaging in clearly defined searches of news sources in a wide range of countries. He notes that, if it is accepted as an index rather than a means to gauge levels of

readership or contexts of consumption, then *Nexis* is a useful way to gather and sort information from a particular point in recent history.

⁵⁵ For example, the debate on several film forums about the extent to which Tartan's marketing tactics are 'orientalist' in nature.

⁵⁶ In this context, I am referring to fandom as a community of people who are passionate about a particular form of media, who frequently engage with/create secondary texts in relation to it, practice repeat viewing in relation to it, and so on. Whilst I greatly enjoy these films, I would not consider this to constitute a passion.

⁵⁷ Jenkins argues that the first generation of fan scholarship was, by necessity, celebratory in character in order to counter negative stereotypes and social stigmas that were associated with the figure of the fan at that time. He acknowledges that 'when I was writing *Poachers* I was so frustrated by how badly fans had been written about. As a fan I felt implicated in that writing and I wanted to challenge it; there are passages in the book that are just out-and-out defences of fandom' (Jenkins 2001: 11).

⁵⁸ For a more detailed overview of these developments see Barker (2008) pp.150-154

⁵⁹ Forum contributors often make comments such as 'it's not as bad as *Visitor Q*' or 'the *Guinea Pig* films are the only films I would really describe as extreme' [comments taken from the *Snowblood Apple* forum].

⁶⁰ *Dumplings* is also one of the films in Tartan's 'Three Extremes' trilogy released on DVD in the UK.

⁶¹ This collection of newspaper articles was comprised of 57 articles about *Audition*; 40 articles on *Battle Royale*; 27 articles on *Dumplings*; 29 articles on *Grotesque*; 14 articles on the *Guinea Pig* films; 13 articles on *Ichi the Killer*; 73 articles on *Oldboy*; 27 articles on *The Isle*; 12 articles on *Suicide Club*; and 3 articles on *Visitor Q*. In addition to these 295 newspaper articles I collected 86 Internet reviews, interviews and website articles and read forum threads relating to all of the films on 41 separate sites.

⁶² The online websites and magazines were Electric Sheep, Brutal as Hell, Melon Farmers, Hangul Celluloid, Cult Reels, Cinema-Extreme and Sexgoremutants.

⁶³ For the sake of convenience, this orientation is shortened to Informed Choice throughout the remaining chapters of the thesis. Likewise, the other orientation-types are, for the purpose of categorising the participants, shortened to Asian Extreme, Asian Cinema, Extreme Horror and Occasional Viewer.

⁶⁴ The films Jeff has not seen are *Grotesque*, *The Isle* or the *Guinea Pig* series.

⁶⁵ Lauren is unusual in that she has seen *Grotesque* and the *Guinea Pig* films, none of which have been passed by the BBFC.

⁶⁶ The term 'feminism' is being used throughout this chapter with the acknowledgment that there are many different forms of feminist ideology; this is just one articulation, based on a rejection of 'mainstream' female role models.

⁶⁷ Much research has already been done on female spectatorship of the horror genre (see Cherry 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Clover 2002; Creed 2002; Williams 2002); however, this research has not focused on female responses to *extreme* cinema and, in this respect, the findings of this project provide a new perspective on, as well as a counterpoint to, some of these existing studies.

⁶⁸ In this instance, this is being measured by how many of the films they have seen; data relating to which groups buy and rent the films produces slightly different results.

⁶⁹ Here 'collectors' refers to respondents who buy hard copies of the film, either in high street stores or online.

⁷⁰ These were male respondents who expressed embarrassment about watching these films with their parents.

⁷² This film literacy may well have been developed at secondary school rather than at university; the notable point here is that the research participant had been *taught* how to analyse a film and, more than likely, drew on this analytical framework in his responses.

⁷³ Only six out of the ten titles included in the questionnaire were distributed in the UK by Tartan. *Ichi the Killer* was distributed by Medusa, *Suicide Club* was distributed by Cine du Monde, and the other titles have not received a formal UK release.

⁷⁴ This was also the conclusion of research by Martin Barker into readership of the comic *Action*; see Barker, Martin (1990) *Action – the Story of a Violent Comic*, Titan Books.

⁷⁵ Whilst it is not strictly accurate to refer to the BBFC as a State institution, it nevertheless functions to establish accepted boundaries of 'mainstream' taste which could be interpreted as being in alignment with the State.

⁷⁶ The research report states that ‘the decision to recruit parents in the sample was based on learnings from past BBFC studies. Parents have stronger views about film classification than those without children, particularly younger people without children. In addition, we have found that mothers are using classifications more than fathers and we conducted more focus groups with them as a result. A further four groups of teenagers and two groups of teachers were conducted as part of the research project’ (BBFC 2014b: 8-9). It also states that ‘the sample of films in 2013 deliberately included a proportion of contentious films’ (BBFC 2014b: 11).

⁷⁷ Phrase taken from Roddick, Nick (2009) ‘Another Scary Movie’, published in *Sight & Sound*; his assertion is that, in the context of the horror genre, ‘torture porn’ films belong on the ‘wrong’ side of the ‘great cinematic value divide’.