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Transnational cult paratexts: exploring audience readings of Tartan's Asia Extreme brand

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on the branding of contemporary cult Asian cinema for western audiences has frequently drawn on Said's seminal treatise *Orientalism* as a means to critique sensationalist marketing materials. Whilst the excessive character of paratexts produced by film distributors such as Tartan clearly facilitates such readings, in this article I argue that this oft-repeated criticism becomes problematic when employed indiscriminately to theorise, by extension, the audiences for these films. Drawing on a recent empirical study of responses to Asian Extreme cinema and its distribution in the UK and North America, I offer an intervention in this debate by constructing a more nuanced interpretation of the ways in which cult audiences articulate their attraction to cinematic representations of cultural difference.

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Introduction

Over the last 10 years, a number of East Asian film scholars including Gary Needham (2006), Dew (2007), Shin (2008, 2009) and Martin (2009, 2015) have presented a series of persuasive critiques of Tartan's Asia Extreme brand. Needham argues that Tartan's promotional materials feed 'many of the typical fantasies of the "Orient" characterised by exoticism, mystery and danger', and suggests that the popularity of Japanese cult films in the West reflects an on-going interest in the 'otherness' of Asian culture (Needham 2006, 9). Further criticisms made of the Tartan brand focus on the way it draws together a disparate group of films under one banner, thus eroding the specificities of generic and cultural difference (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009, 5).

These critiques have, in certain cases, been extended to theorise audience understandings of these films. In his discussion of western audiences of Korean cult cinema, for example, Daniel Martin argues that:

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

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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 2009, 18–19)

Martin suggests that, without prior knowledge of Korean culture, international audiences might misinterpret the films they encounter via the Tartan brand. More crucially, this audience misunderstanding is conceived as a 'celebration of difference'. Similarly, Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano argue that the 'Asia Extreme' brand functions as more than a marketing label: 'It also 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' (2009, 6). Such arguments extend the critique of Tartan's promotional strategies to make claims about the influence cult paratexts have in shaping audiences readings of films. Western fans of the Asia Extreme brand are thus conceptualised as likely to be 'ignorant' and 'misguided'.

While the textual critiques of Tartan offered by Martin and others are convincing, they are also problematic in that they theorise cult film audiences without engaging in any empirical audience research. As with other analyses of this kind, this theory-led approach invariably generates reductive inferences relating to the (in) ability of audiences to read, interpret and challenge promotional texts. This article addresses these issues by exploring empirical data on western audiences of Asian Extreme films collected between 2009 and 2012 (Pett 2013).¹ The study includes films released by Tartan in the UK and North America, along with a number of other films released on other specialist labels, such as Premier Asia, that were closely associated with the category by fans on internet forums such as Snowblood Apple.² Firstly, though, I outline some of the issues arising from the use of Said's *Orientalism* as a theoretical shorthand for critiquing the 'othering' of one culture by another, particularly in cases where a clear power imbalance exists. In revisiting the original text, I highlight some of the difficulties inherent in this interpretation of Said's text, and call for a more considered use of his work within the field of transnational film studies.

Orientalism, othering and cultural difference

Acknowledging that it would be foolish to attempt 'an encyclopaedic narrative history of Orientalism' Said's seminal work considers the specific case of Anglo-French-American relations with 'the Arabs and Islam' from the late seventeenth century until the fall of these three empires in the twentieth century (Said 1978, 17).³ He outlines the geographical and historical limitations of the study, positioning it as an exploration of colonial power relations and their cultural repercussions (Said 1978, 14–15). Since its publication, cultural historians such as J. J. Clarke (1997) have considered the implications of Said's work in a post-colonial context, thus extending it beyond the iteration of a singular discourse located within a specific time and place. Whereas Said's *Orientalism* is preoccupied with the Islamic culture of the Middle East, J. J. Clarke, for example, considers the influence of the philosophical and religious traditions of South-East Asia in the West:

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 explores how 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). Clarke’s conception of an ‘affirmative orientalism’ characterised by a desire to subvert hegemonic power structures offers a more useful approach, I suggest, for analysing the interest cult film audiences have in the ‘cultural difference’ offered by transnational cinemas.

However, much of the scholarship undertaken by East Asian film academics to date bypasses the work which develops Said’s treatise on Orientalism, instead drawing on a singular colonial discourse. One exception to this trend is Susan J. Napier’s study of the anime fan community. 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 and argues for a more heterogeneous and multivalent re-thinking of the ways in which Japan figures in the desires of the western mind (Napier 2007, 10). Similarly, Matthias Frey highlights the problematic assumptions involved in positioning advanced, wealthy countries such as Japan and South Korea within this power binary. Frey argues that ‘by painting Japanese film imports as emanating from a weaker, orientalist culture, Asia Extreme scholars involuntarily perpetuate the myth of Japanese and Asian victimhood’ (2016, 136). Similarly, I contend that the appropriation of Said’s orientalist framework as a theoretical approach for deconstructing the consumption of cultist paratexts circulating within a western context is problematic for a number of reasons: it overlooks the complexities of post-colonial orientalist scholarship, reducing it to a singular discourse characterised by a reductive power binary; it adopts a ‘media effects’ approach to the analysis of promotional paratexts, implying they are consumed within a social and cultural vacuum; and it elides reading strategies that are particular to film genre users (Altman 1999), specifically cultists, and their familiarity with promotional excess, or ‘ballyhoo’ (Schaefer 1999). Such excessive marketing materials, Schaefer argues, often make promises and outrageous claims which they cannot fulfil, ‘a fact the audience evidently recognised and appreciated, and in which they were complicit’ (Schaefer 1999, 111). In these respects, the marketing of Asian Extreme films in an excessive or exaggerated style cult audiences requires a more contextual approach.

Methodology

The findings discussed here are drawn from 12 interviews and over 700 responses to a quali-quantitative questionnaire.⁴ The term ‘Asian Extreme’ is employed in this context to differentiate between the audience-appropriated category, used by fans on websites such as Snowblood Apple, and Tartan’s Asia Extreme brand.⁵ However, in reality, the history, status and different uses of these two categories are closely related and overlap. The relationship between the Asian Extreme category and its audience is complex and has evolved across a 15 year period. While it has been argued that Asian Extreme films have attracted a cult following at festivals and via specialist distribution labels (Dew 2007; Hughes 2016), it

cannot be assumed that all participants in this study are cultists; indeed, as I have discussed elsewhere, 7.4% of the questionnaire respondents identified themselves as ‘casual viewers’ of the category (Pett 2013). The contested status of the Tartan brand is also derived from the promotional strategies developed between 2003 and 2005. These centred on an annual ‘Asia Extreme Roadshow’ in the UK, which 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). Therefore, just as the category of ‘cult’ is itself unstable and dependent upon its contexts of reception (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 8), so too are audience valuations of the Asian Extreme category; these instabilities underscore the need to avoid generalisations about such audiences, and to investigate them bearing these contextual variables in mind.

The empirical stage of the research was preceded by a small-scale reception study of 295 articles published in the British press between 2001 and 2011, and a study of online fan activity across 11 forums and 23 websites and blogs. In total there were 709 responses to the questionnaire, which went online between February 2011 and May 2012. Initially a link to the questionnaire was posted on five Internet forums; subsequently a number of websites published links to the questionnaire, and it was shared 117 times on Facebook and re-tweeted 22 times on Twitter.⁶ Although the sample is not representative of all viewers of this category of films (there is an obvious bias towards online recruitment, for example), a sustained effort was made to attract participants with a range of film interests. The findings therefore offer a snapshot of the complex ways in which the Tartan brand, and the broader category linked to it, is valorised, challenged and critiqued by fans and wider audiences.

The 12 interviewees (8 males, 4 females) were recruited to represent a cross-section of the questionnaire respondents.⁷ This article focuses primarily on the interview data, and in particular, on responses related to the Tartan brand. Analyses of audience engagement with paratextual materials has produced many important studies of audience and fan cultures (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 2001; Barker and Mathijs 2008; Gray 2010). However, as Jonathan Gray notes, whilst paratexts might provide signposts for audience expectations, they can also be strongly resisted (2010, 48). This study therefore examines discussions of the provocative paratextual materials produced by Tartan in two stages. Firstly, drawing on Stuart Hall’s influential encoding and decoding model (1973), it identifies participants’ dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of the Asia Extreme brand. Secondly, having established this, it explores how participants articulate their attraction to representations of cultural difference offered by these films.

Decoding the Asia Extreme brand

Hall’s encoding/decoding model of communication has been much critiqued as an outdated and ineffective approach for engaging in the analysis of contemporary media consumption. Martin Barker, for example, argues that Hall’s model conceptualises audiences who adopt preferred ideological readings of texts as passive, ahistorical and vulnerable (Barker 2006). Jonathan Gray’s criticisms of Hall focuses on the failure of the encoding/decoding model to address the way audiences re-watch and re-code texts across different viewing cycles (2006, 21).

Feminist media scholars, such as Rosalind Gill, contend that Hall's model overlooks 'the affective realm', and thus privileges how audiences think over how they feel (Gill 2011, 66). These critiques are all important and will be addressed in the analysis that follows. However, grouping the participants together using Hall's three categories (preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings) is useful for the purpose of this article. By firstly establishing the participants' readings of the Asia Extreme brand, a consideration of the ways in which Tartan's marketing strategies have influenced or otherwise informed their engagement with cultural 'otherness' can then be considered within this framework. This approach is not being used to infer that a correlation between audience readings of Tartan's promotional materials and their attraction to a cultural 'other' implies a causal relationship between the two; quite the reverse, it is being used to interrogate and complicate this kind of theoretical hypothesis.

The 12 interviewees' readings of the Asia Extreme brand fall into three broadly distinctive camps. Six offer a dominant reading of the Tartan brand, as an endorsement of 'quality' cinema, a cult label and an indication that the films are a 'bit different'; a further three interviewees offer some similar assessments, but simultaneously question and negotiate their validity, albeit in different ways; and the final three interviewees critique the Tartan brand as inherently problematic. These three groups will now be considered in turn.

The largest group of responses came from those offering a preferred interpretation of Tartan's promotional materials. Warren explains that he first came across the Asia Extreme category when a friend of his recommended he watch *Ichi the Killer* (Miike 2002):

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, 'a good product'. Angus, a male in his early thirties, makes a similar assessment, though positions the brand in a more specific way, stating: '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'. Although Angus articulates the sub-cultural capital of the Tartan brand more explicitly, he makes a similar assessment of it as a guarantor of good quality, concluding his interview with the comment 'I hope they make more of these films'. A third interviewee, 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 specialising in cult or underground cinema, and neither challenge its validity. When asked if they felt that Tartan's marketing of Asian Extreme films promoted negative stereotypes or gross misrepresentations of Asian culture, they all replied 'no'.⁸ Their assessment of Tartan's brand mirrors the way in which a number of academics have analysed Asia Extreme as a successful marketing strategy for targeting a cult film enthusiast/'fanboy' formation (Dew 2007; Mathijs and Sexton 2011).

Another interviewee, Karen, states that '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'. Similarly, Maria also states she was 'drawn to the Tartan label ... because the films are a bit different'. For these interviewees, there is clear evidence, then, of a preferred reading of Tartan as a cult brand, a guarantor of good quality and of 'something different', thus reflecting the encoded meaning within the marketing materials themselves (Pilkington 2004).

Negotiated readings of the brand are articulated in a more diverse set of ways. Ron has previously worked in film distribution, and discusses the question about Tartan's promotion of negative stereotypes of East Asian culture and people in the following way:

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 particular use for and understanding of generic categories and the ways they are promoted. 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. Ron negotiates a position that, while not critical of Tartan, acknowledges what he calls their targeting of 'the lowest common denominator', thus eschewing the 'quality' image of the brand articulated by Warren and Angus. An interviewee based in the US, Jeff, offers another negotiated reading of the brand, dismissing it as a 'false genre' and challenging the assumption that western audiences are attracted to the 'Other-ness' of Asian Extreme films. His critique is mounted by differentiating between creative and 'uncreative' films as a means to diffuse the East/West binary, implying that East Asian films can be just as formulaic as Hollywood cinema.

Three of the interviewees, Michael, Sarah and Sean, adopt an overtly oppositional interpretation of the Tartan label. 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 these 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, in singling out two of the more obscure titles from the Tartan catalogue to make his point, Michael demonstrates his detailed knowledge of the Asia Extreme brand. As well as questioning Tartan's marketing of these films, he also articulates a taste judgement about one of the films being 'bad'. Likewise, Sarah states that the Tartan brand is 'problematic in the way it frames these films, some of which are thrillers, comedies and quirky independent

films with absolutely no “extreme” content whatsoever’. In many ways this third reading of the Tartan brand mirrors the academic critiques of Wada-Marciano and Martin. Such negotiations over genre classification could be interpreted as an attempt by respondents to assert their expertise within the film community. As Mark Jancovich has argued, 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). Sean evaluates the Tartan label in a similar way, describing it as ‘a pretty lousy, plastic kind of category’. Michael 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 problematise 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’. Additionally, the number of different countries that the films originate from is also pinpointed as a reason as to why the brand is problematic. Their comments reflect the academic discourse surrounding Tartan’s marketing strategies (Martin 2009, 2015; Shin 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). This perspective suggests that, within the context of discussions around transnational cinema, questions of national specificity remain significant. 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 [the box office] is 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 its easily graspable.

Evidence of these three reading strategies thus clearly complicate the argument that Tartan’s Asia Extreme brand informs and influences audience responses to the films in a straightforward or uniform way.

Other or different? Audience valuations of Asian Extreme cinema

Having established that the interviewees’ evaluations of the Tartan label fall into three broad groups, I now consider the ways in which these three groups explain their attraction to the ‘otherness’ of Asian Extreme films. Most of the interviewees who articulated a positive valuation of the Tartan brand also mentioned a preference for films that were ‘a bit different’.

Later in the interviews I returned to these statements, and asked the interviewees if they could explain in more depth what they meant by 'different'. Karen was immediately able to articulate what she meant by this:

Different in respect of my wanting to see something that is outside mainstream cinema and that may relate to a different philosophy or culture, I think it is very important that a film meets that criteria. However, that does not mean that it is important to me that the film is necessarily violent. In the case of violence I prefer any violent content to be contained within a narrative, I am not, for instance, at all interested in films such as *Guinea Pig* that have no discernible context. However, I also like films that really tackle things that are difficult to watch, I'm not so interested in ones that avoid showing something because it might offend someone. I would even go as far as to say I think it's important to show this stuff in films to demonstrate how terrible something is, to show it in detail, even if the detail is really disturbing, that makes it a better film. So ..., I think that's what I'm looking for when I look for something 'different', content you don't get in Hollywood films, content that really challenges you ...

Karen's appreciation of Asian Extreme films, whilst in part being oppositional to 'Hollywood films', is also preoccupied with screen violence. It is important to her that this is not gratuitous violence, and is situated within a meaningful context.⁹ Karen associates this meaningfulness with a desire to view representations of 'terrible' aspects of human behaviour that are 'difficult to watch'. Her affective response, which involves being disturbed and challenged by the films, is thus a self-regulated, integral element of her appreciation of Asian Extreme cinema; Karen is not, as Gill suggests in her critique of Hall's model and other agentic theories of media consumption, a figure who 'appears peculiarly affectless and a-social or a-cultural, operating in some pure realm that makes them totally immune from culture' (Gill 2011, 66). In fact, I argue the opposite: rather than being 'immune' to the representations of violence, Karen's affective response coexists with and informs her agentic analysis of the films.

However, other interviewees with a preferred reading of the Tartan brand have different responses. Initially Maria found it difficult to articulate an answer, so we moved on to discuss *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000), which she identified as one of her favourite films. When asked what it is about the film that she particularly liked, Maria responded:

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.

This response again suggests that 'difference' is linked to cultural specificity, here of the film's representation of 'troubled youth' and that this is what makes it so fascinating. This is a characteristic that Maria also attributes to the other films within the category; she values the films as a way of learning about cultural differences. This does not involve 'othering' these cultures within a power binary (she identifies as Mexican, a less wealthy country than Japan) or as exotic or sexualised, but rather in a way that facilitates an insight into another culture, thus illustrating a form of 'affirmative orientalism'. Maria's reading also illustrates the way in which a preferred or dominant reading of the Tartan brand is not necessarily an indication of a vulnerable response. Adopting the encoded ideology of Tartan's promotional texts, as

offering something different and ‘other’, can be read in a culturally active, discriminatory way; it does not necessarily point to an entirely passive audience model, as Barker (2006) has argued in his critique of Hall, or to a reinforcement of racist stereotypes, as Needham and others argue. Owen’s appreciation of Asian Extreme films is similar to Maria’s, in that he explains that ‘part of the interest is that Asian cinema has different taboos and censorship. This difference means that you’re likely to see something in a movie that you’ve not seen before’. Again this is defined in relation to Hollywood cinema, as Owen adds that ‘extreme also means “different”: different from childish, American movies’. Grace also draws on a negative evaluation of Hollywood cinema in her response:

I enjoy Asian cinema because it is derived so clearly from a culture utterly dissimilar to our own. The films are directed using a stylistic palette that’s different and refreshing in comparison to Western (i.e., American) film. There seems to be a vein of creativity that runs through Asian cinema that is always fun to experience. Extreme cinema brings this to play in the arena of the violence it shows, and the ludicrous nature of much of it. It makes me think much more than a Hollywood film does.

Whilst also articulating an attraction to representations of cultural difference, Grace identifies their aesthetics and creativity as key factors in her enjoyment.

A few significant points emerge, then, from considering the ways in which the six interviewees who articulate a dominant reading of the Tartan brand discuss cultural difference. While there is clearly a tendency amongst all interviewees to compare these films favourably to Hollywood cinema, each person valorises different aspects of the films’ cultural specificity, identifying factors such as challenging content, creativity, originality, aesthetics and psychological complexity as characteristics they particularly appreciate.

The three interviewees who negotiated a slightly different reading of the Tartan brand did not make such explicit statements regarding their appreciation of cultural difference in Asian Extreme films, but nevertheless made some pertinent comments. Jeff, who described Asia Extreme as a ‘false genre’ also goes on to reiterate how important it is that the films are provocative rather than predictable. Like Karen, who offered a positive evaluation of the brand, Jeff’s attraction to the category lies in its ability to make him feel uncomfortable, rather than in the provenance or cultural ‘otherness’ of the films. Jeff also explains that he views the successful marketing techniques developed by Tartan as a productive pedagogical 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 *Inglorious 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.

This approach, celebrating the success of Tartan’s marketing tactics as a means of introducing like-minded people to a more specialist form 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 flashy and 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 arguments made by Eric Schaeffer in relation to fans of exploitation films, in that he is complicit in recognising and promoting the cultist or 'ballyhoo' nature of the promotional materials. Likewise, Ron's assessment of Tartan appealing to 'the lowest common denominator' is explained as 'part and parcel of a capitalist assessment of the culture you're selling to, and therefore it seems perfectly logical and reasonable'. The way in which Jeff and Ron interpret Tartan's paratextual materials, then, is clearly distinguished and differentiated from their assessment of the actual films.

Sam, another interviewee with a negotiated reading of the Tartan brand, uses an alternative frame of reference to explain what 'different' means to him, stating

I always enjoy watching something different and original (or just plain bonkers, as in films like *Visitor Q*), but I'm much more likely to be drawn to a film for its aesthetic qualities. Many East Asian films, for example, have a strong style that is visually pleasing, or they juxtapose visual styles in a slightly crazy, kinetic way that makes them really unique.

Jeff and Sam, then, are the two interviewees who offer the closest approximation to a 'cult colonialist appropriation' of these texts (Tierney 2014, 131), using adjectives such as 'flashy', 'bonkers' and 'crazy' and thus possibly implying a demeaning or unfavourable othering of East Asian culture. What distinguishes their position in relation to the Asia Extreme brand is the way in which they negotiate an ironic, self-reflexive awareness of their own reading strategies, and, in the case of Jeff, the way he tries to rationalise this by adopting the role of a cultural gatekeeper.

Perhaps the most surprising responses, though, come from the interviewees who adopted a critical, oppositional reading of Tartan's marketing strategies. Sean, Sarah and Michael were no less inclined to discuss their attraction to the films in terms of cultural difference than those who offered positive evaluations of the Tartan brand. When asked what it was she particularly valued about Asia Extreme films, Sarah replied that

first of all, I don't think all films released on the Asia Extreme label should be classed as such, for example, *The Happiness of the Katakuris* is not an extreme film, And despite the label, it is usually not the extreme elements that attract me to films like this, I watch them because they are different and imaginative, and I think 'where did they get this idea from?', and 'who else would have thought of this?'. Their cultural specificity accentuates this. They are unique stories.

Like Grace's appreciation of the creativity of Asia Extreme films, Sarah identifies their 'imagination' as being key to their cultural difference. However, she is just as explicit in recognising difference and 'cultural specificity' as elements that attract her to the films as those who evaluate the Tartan category positively. Sean also explains that

what attracted me to these films is how unpredictable and stylish they are ... they're very subversive in a sense, different to what is expected in a Hollywood film where there's a catharsis at the end and you're happy to see someone survive, and that's completely turned on its head in a lot of Asian films, if you look at *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* and *Oldboy*, a lot of these films play with your expectations, that goes for a lot of films that come from that part of the world, and that's what attracted me to them.

Sean's frameworks for evaluating the films are not dissimilar to those articulated by Angus and Grace, who identify aesthetics and narrative construction as two of the key characteristics which they feel differentiates Asia Extreme films from Hollywood cinema. The provenance of the films is, then, just as significant for those with an oppositional reading of

the brand, and like the first group, this manifests as an alternative to Hollywood films, and being creative and unpredictable. Indeed, putting aside their readings of the Tartan brand, the comments offered by these two groups are hard to differentiate. Employing Hall's model as a framework with which to compare qualitative audience responses thus reveals that the extent to which audiences valorise or problematise the Tartan brand does not correlate with the ways in which they articulate their attraction to a cinematic 'other'. Although there are clearly flaws with the encoding/decoding model, not least in the difficulty of using it across an extended period of time to analyse multiple engagements with texts, as Gray has discussed (2006), it remains a useful tool for engaging in comparative analysis of qualitative responses from one data-set.

How, then, can we understand the heightened interest cult film fans take in representations of cultural otherness? Perhaps the most obvious reading strategy emerging from this data is a subcultural taste for films which, in different ways, subvert the audiences' perception of their own mainstream cinema. As Matt Hills notes in his study of US fans of *The Ring*, 'reading-for-cultural-difference works, therefore, as a homologous part of this audience's bid for a subcultural identity opposed to mainstream "American" culture' (Hills 2005, 168). One commonality of this reading strategy is a tendency to describe their interest in cultural difference as seeing 'another point of view' or as something that 'makes me think'. The way cultural difference is valued by these audiences, then, is in terms of its complexity, its potential to make them feel disturbed or challenged, and its intellectual provocation or its ability to generate new ideas or knowledge. The 'exoticism' of Tartan's branding actually features very minimally within this reading strategy. These findings thus illustrate that evaluating the intelligence, comprehension and desires of film audiences on the basis of the paratextual materials they encounter is inherently problematic.

Indeed, while the analyses of Tartan's promotional strategies offered by Shin, Choi and Wada-Marciano, Martin and others are knowledgeable, they overlook the important way the Tartan brand draws on a tradition of film marketing that, historically, has appealed to both art house and exploitation film fans alike, thus courting a cultist following. Rather than seeing the eclectic range of films released on the Tartan label as inherently problematic, I argue it makes more sense to consider it within this cultural tradition. Joan Hawkins (2010), Jeffrey Sconce (1995) and others identify forms of film production and consumption which, historically, have straddled the high/low culture divide in a number of ways. Drawing on the tradition of avant-garde film-making, niche forms of art horror, trash and exploitation cinema have focused on breaking taboos surrounding the depiction of sex and violence, often motivated by a desire to shock the bourgeoisie (Hawkins 2010, 117). The Asia Extreme brand can, I suggest, be partly understood in a similar way, and this explains the complex and seemingly contradictory way audiences read their paratextual materials. Regardless of whether they take the brand at face value or choose to problematise it intellectually, audiences for these films understand that the excess and hyperbole of the promotional paratexts are indicative of the kind of cultist film that crosses this high/low, art/exploitation divide, and that subverts mainstream cinematic conventions in multiple ways. Thus, as with Clarke's 'affirmative orientalism', they read cultural difference as part of a broader subversive strategy, rooted not in racist ideologies, but within a set of divergent transgressive desires.

Conclusions

There are limits in the extent to which any audience study can offer far-reaching insights into the viewing habits of its participants, and this research is no exception; it does not set out to be representative of all audiences for Asian Extreme films. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that some viewers experience such films, and the way they are marketed, to be offensive or disturbing. However, what the findings of this study offer is a series of insights into the way audiences interact with, negotiate and critique paratextual cult materials; these interpretations, I argue, work to destabilise some of the reductive critiques circulating around the reception and consumption of cult films in the West, particularly in relation to the Asian Extreme category. Furthermore, this research makes visible the necessity for greater discrimination in the scholarly application of Said's *Orientalism* to contemporary instances of transnational media consumption. Finally, this article underscores the importance of empirical audience and fan studies within the broader field of contemporary media scholarship. It demonstrates that an agentic, 'cultural studies' approach to audience research does not overlook the importance of the affective realm, and indeed illustrates how an emotionally disturbed response to media texts can inform a broader, self-regulatory reading strategy. Whilst textual analyses which explicitly challenge racist and misogynist forms of media are to be applauded, care should be taken not to make speculative assumptions about those who engage with transgressive texts and paratexts. Essentialist deconstructions of marketing materials underestimate the media literacy and agency of their audiences, thus allowing ideological objections to such texts to obscure the complex realities of their transcultural contexts of reception.

Notes

1. The study was conducted in collaboration with the BBFC, so the majority of the respondents were British; a significant minority of 27%, however, identified themselves as not being British, and the majority of this 27% were North American. The interview sample was composed of 10 white respondents, 1 black respondent and 1 latino respondent.
2. This forum was located at <http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood/index.html> during the research period (2009–12) but, at the time of writing this article, is currently unavailable online.
3. Said concludes with a brief sketch of Orientalism in 1970s American culture, but this is not the primary focus of his study.
4. The quali-quant questionnaire was designed to gather statistical data from respondents as well as qualitative information from open-ended questions, where they could explain their responses. All participants involved in the research were anonymised and given fictional names.
5. Only 6 of the 10 titles included on the study questionnaire were distributed in the UK by Tartan, and the interviewees frequently reference films that were not distributed on the 'Asia Extreme' label.
6. The online websites and magazines were Electric Sheep, Brutal as Hell, Melon Farmers, Hangul Celluloid, Cult Reels, Cinema-Extreme and Sexgoremutants.
7. The ratio between male and female interviewees reflects that of the questionnaire responses.
8. The final question in the interview schedule was: 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)?

9. It could also be argued that the *Guinea Pig* films *do* have narratives situated within meaningful contexts, and that Karen's evaluation should be understood as a comparative comment; when compared with mainstream or Hollywood narratives, the *Guinea Pig* films do not have such easily recognisable narrative structures.

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