DVD LABELS AS TRANSNATIONAL MEDIATORS?: THE CRITERION COLLECTION, CULT-ART FILMS AND JAPANESE HORROR

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Abstract:

This article considers the circulation of Japanese horror titles in the West, focusing on the ways in which this is informed by the increasingly heterogeneous uses of the term 'cult' as a cultural category employed by specialist DVD and Blu-ray companies. The article focuses on the ways in which the celebrated high-end distributor, The Criterion Collection, have framed a number of Japanese horror titles as a kind of cult cinema which can be termed 'cult-art' (Andrews 2013). Through this case study, the article considers how the cultification of East Asian genre films, as they enter Western markets, can impact on the cultural canonisation and elevation of such titles, but in ways that draw productively on their original contexts of production rather than de-contextualising such titles through strategies of othering or exoticisation.

Keywords: Cult-art cinema, DVD companies and cultures, Japanese horror history, Transnational film reception

In two recent articles (2013, 2016), Emma Pett has critically addressed an influential scholarly tradition within film studies, which focuses on the framing strategies of contemporary East Asian cinema distributors in the UK and US. For Pett, at the centre of much of this work (including Needham 2006; Martin 2015) has been an 'orientalist critique', drawing on Edward Said's canonical arguments to explore and illustrate the ways in which 'the cross-cultural flow of Japanese films to the West' has reflected 'an ongoing cult interest in the "otherness" of Asian culture' (2016, 396-397). For Daniel Martin, in his analysis of the marketing and reception of titles distributed by Tartan's Asia Extreme label, the othering and exoticisation of such titles by Tartan has impeded an understanding of their original contexts of production, leading to such films being 'misunderstood by ignorant viewers and celebrated only for their difference' to Western culture (2015, 8), and/or being 'located in [Western] cinematic traditions that had nothing to do with the film's meaning in its original Japanese context' (2015, 22).

Pett convincingly takes issue with such arguments in her research on British audiences for Asia Extreme titles, noting that such approaches 'overlook the ability of fans and wider audiences to read such materials in a complex range of different and sometimes oppositional ways' (2016, 397). However, to extend this persuasive critique, I would argue that such arguments (about the othering of East Asian films as they circulate in the West) also overlooks the increasingly complex ways in which the term cult is being employed to frame film titles from across the globe, in film culture in general but also through the framing strategies of a range of niche, specialist DVD companies who oversee the formal circulation of such titles in Western markets. In much of the scholarship on the Western reception of East Asian Cinema discussed above, it is noted that companies like Tartan aim their promotion of such titles at two separate constituents: the cult audience and the art-house audience (see, for instance, Dew, 2007). However, as Mathijs and Sexton note in a section on DVD companies in their book *Cult Cinema*, there appears to be a 'growing awareness' of 'the overlaps' between these audience groups in terms of the potential appeal(s) of particular titles labelled as cult (2011, 239), an awareness which is evident in the framing of particular titles (both Western and Eastern) as what David Andrews has termed 'cult-art cinema'.

For Andrews, 'a cult-art movie seems to have, or to aspire to, two kinds of distinction: cult value and high-art value. It is thus found in the overlap of cult cinema and art cinema' (2013, 102). In this respect, the discursive category of the cult-art film has much in common with Joan Hawkins' influential work on the framing of particular horror titles in US video catalogues as 'art-horror', which (as Andrews also notes of 'cult-art') has its origins in the ways in which (through exhibition cultures) art cinema and horror and exploitation cinema were framed and consumed together in the late 1950s and 1960s as part of an alternative, niche cinema culture in the US. The focus in Hawkins' account is on the ways in which a category like 'art-horror' can enable horror films like *Peeping Tom* and *Carnival of Souls* to exist in a fluid space between high art and low art (in terms of their cultural status), but, evidently, the 'art-horror' or cult-art discursive categories can be considered as centrally constituted by transnational flows of reception too. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the films that Andrews lists as being key 'cult classics that have been admired culturally or subculturally' for their 'contributions to the art of cinema' (2013, 108) include a broad range of titles (from 1963-2006) from genre and exploitation cinema in the US, Europe and East Asia; from Italian horrors like *Blood and Black Lace* and *Suspiria*, to low-budget American classics like *The Last House on the Left* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, to East Asian horror and action titles like *House*, *The Killer* and *Audition*. In addition, as Hawkins notes when considering the cross-cultural dimensions of the art-horror category, a film like the low-budget US horror *Carnival of Souls* would probably have been considered to be an 'art, or at least art-horror, film' rather than a 'drive-in classic' if it had been made in Europe rather than the US, suggesting, for her, that such 'art-horror' films can 'occupy not only a different generic niche but a different artistic category or "class"' (2000, 27) as they circulate transnationally.

The aim of this article is to expand on these observations, by considering the ways in which the creation of cult-art canons – by Western cultural gatekeepers such as DVD companies – can be conceived and understood as a form of transnational reception. Andrews' work, on cult-art cinema, places emphasis on what he calls 'legitimate forums like film festivals, museum archives, repertory theaters, and even crossover magazines like *Sight and Sound*' which, for him, have often been among the first forums to promote the canonical value' of particular 'quasi-legitimate' movies at the cultural level (2013: 108). In order to explore how certain East-Asian titles might be culturally elevated in this way, I will focus on the employment of cult discourses by the Western DVD company that could be most persuasively positioned alongside the other legitimate forums identified by Andrews: the US-based specialist home video distributor, The Criterion Collection. As a recent *Guardian* article (heralding the launch of the British arm of the company) noted, the Criterion Collection brand is now a 'byword for a certain kind of home-video perfectionism…with a catalogue boasting more than 800 titles and an army of devotees more than willing to pay top whack for its consistently swish releases' (Lyne 2016). In relation to the previously cited arguments about the absence of context in framings of East Asian titles on DVD, it's also worth noting that that one key component of the Criterion brand that has been consistently acknowledged by scholars and journalists are the lavish booklets and DVD documentaries accompanying each release, which, crucially, provide 'some sense of the art object's initial appearance and reception' (Parker and Parker 2011, 48). Considering the importance of context to the ways in which Criterion has, historically and consistently, presented itself, this article will consider the extent to which the wider 'Criterion ethos' (Parker and Parker 2011, 47), and its celebrated forms of contextualising, might counteract the tendency to exoticise or ‘Other’ Japanese titles marketed as ‘cult’ as they circulate via distribution platforms in the West.

In order consider these issues, I will focus, in detail, on the key discourses and contexts drawn upon in paratextual material accompanying six of the eleven Japanese titles promoted as cult by Criterion: *Jigoku*, *House,* and the four titles in their recent *When Horror Came to Shochiku* boxset. Through the analysis of liner notes and extras produced by Criterion to accompany each title, as well as discussion and debate from key home video forums and review sites online, the article will consider the extent to which Criterion’s contextualising tendencies intersect with the promotion of these titles as a form of cult that can be aligned with ‘cult-art’, and the ways in which Criterion’s status as a home video company indelibly associated with notions of the canon and the archive might impact on the potential international circulation, understanding and appreciation of Japanese cult horror. Throughout, emphasis will be placed on the ways in which Criterion’s contextualisation of such titles foregrounds, firstly, their original, national contexts of production, secondly, their place within the history of horror as a transnational genre, and, thirdly, the ways in which such titles have previously circulated transnationally through what Ramon Labato would term informal circuits of distribution and transnational exchange (Labato 2012).

Japanese Cinema and The Criterion Collection

Over the course of its now thirty-three year history as a specialist purveyor of laserdisc, DVD and Blu-ray releases, and despite the continued rise of digital file-sharing (both formal and informal), the Criterion Collection has remained ‘the gold standard’ distributor of films old and new via digital media (Lyne 2016). As acknowledged by a range of scholars who have identified Criterion's prominent role in contemporary film culture (Kendrick 2001, Schauer 2005, Parker and Parker 2011), key to this reputation is the time and effort put into giving selected film titles the celebrated 'Criterion treatment' (Parker and Parker 2011: 65): finding the best possible prints of a film available, carefully restoring them, and transferring them to the digital format in high definition.

It is the expense and time involved in such work that has given Criterion its key function as an influential archive of film culture, through the release of what it deems to be 'a continuing series of important classic and contemporary films'. As Kendrick notes in his article on the company, 'only a certain number of films' are able to be given the expensive and time-consuming 'Criterion treatment' (2001, 134), and this has meant that, over the years and in a way that aligns it clearly with Andrews 'legitimate forums', the Criterion Collection has 'developed a legitimizing function that empowers it with an ability to affirm what films should be deemed important' in film culture (2001, 126). As Kendrick and Parker and Parker both acknowledge, the Criterion Collection first cemented its reputation by releasing high quality versions of films that had already been 'legitimated as "art" or "cinematic milestones" by film scholars and theorists', including *Citizen Kane*, *The Third Man* and much of the output of established auteurs such as Ingmar Bergman, Jean-luc Godard, Michael Powell and Federico Fellini, meaning that the 'collection's roots rested firmly in the art film tradition of the post-World War II era' (Kendrick 2001, 126-128).

However, to some extent and as acknowledged by Kendrick, the Criterion Collection has, over the course of its history, sought to expand the scope of its product to include 'more eclectic' and 'potentially radical and controversial films' (2001, 126 & 132). Crucially, this has included Criterion's embracing of the term 'cult', which was evident both in the special cult film screenings they organised on the Independent Film Channel in 2002, and a section on their website which identifies those films in their collection which they deem to be cult. This section is headed by a summary, which appears to define their conceptions of cult as being in broad alignment with Andrews conceptions of ‘cult-art’. As the summary notes:

> though many drive ins have been shut down and the practice of screening midnight movies in theaters has waned considerably from its heyday in the early 1970s, the thrill of sharing boundary-testing films in the dark can now be enjoyed just as well while curled up on the couch – no accompanying cult required. From the whiff of exploitation emanating from Roger Vadim’s sensational *And God Created Woman* to the touch of snuff in Michael Powell’s voyeuristic *Peeping Tom*, these films delicately ride the line between pulp and art, always landing firmly in the latter camp…These films stubbornly refuse to be marginalized, lower budgets and lack of Hollywood gloss be damned (https://www.criterion.com/explore/1-cult-movies).

The eighty-two titles listed in this section are a distinctly eclectic bunch – from Terry Jones’s *Monty Python’s The Life of Brian* to Vera Chytilová’s Czech art film, *Daisies*, to Russ Meyer’s *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Furthermore, a notable number of these titles – including *The Blob, Fiend without a Face, Carnival of Souls* and *Flesh for Frankenstein* – can broadly be considered as examples of exploitation cinema. However, despite Kendrick noting that Criterion aims to release titles from across the world, the vast majority of the films in Criterion’s cult category are from North America (forty-five titles) or Europe (twenty-five titles), reinforcing the sense that cult film remains, to a significant extent, a category of cinema dominated by productions from the West.

The notable exception to this trend are the eleven Japanese films included, and it is noteworthy that, aside from *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), these titles can be considered primarily horror or fantasy films (made between 1954 and 1978). The titles concerned are as follows (given in their order of release by Criterion):

- the 1960 horror film *Jigoku* (Nobuo Nakagawa, Criterion release date: 2006);
- Nagisa Oshima's infamous explicit art film *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976, Criterion release date: 2009);
- Oshima's follow up film to *In the Realm of the Senses*, the ghost story *Empire of Passion* (1978, Criterion release date: 2009);
- Nobuhiko Obayashi's horror film *House* (1977, Criterion release date: 2009);
- the landmark 1954 monster movie *Godzilla* (Ishiro Honda, Criterion release date: 2012);
- a boxset entitled *When Horror came to Shochiku*, released as part of Criterion's Eclipse range, that includes four titles produced by the Shochiku studio in the late 1960s, *The X from Outer Space*, from 1967, and *Goke The Body Snatcher from Hell*, *Genocide*, and *The Living Skeleton*, all from 1968 (Criterion release date: 2012);
- Toshiya Fujita's action film *Lady Snowblood*, and its follow-up *Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance* (1973 & 1974, Criterion release date: 2016).

The fact that Japan is the only nation from outside the US and Europe that is well-represented here is, in many ways, not that surprising, when considering the international dimensions of Criterion's catalogue as a whole. Of the 700 plus titles included in the catalogue, the third largest number (of 116) come from Japan, with the US in first place (with 278 titles) and France in second place (with 176). Indeed, in a *Velvet Light Trap* interview with Criterion producer Susan Arosteguy, Bradley Schauer refers pointedly to Criterion's consistent privileging of both ‘European and Japanese art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s’ within their roster of releases (Schauer 2005, 32). In line with this, a substantial number of the Japanese titles in the Criterion Collection correspond to the first two of the three stages Daniel Martin identifies as being key moments in ‘Japanese cinema’s journey to the West’, in terms of the landmark moments when Japanese film productions have had heightened impact and public visibility in the US and UK, in particular (2015, 6). The origins of the first stage relate, for Martin, to the Venice Film Festival prize awarded to Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* in 1951, which consolidated the importance and centrality of the work of ‘a specific canon of great directors’ from Japan – namely, Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi – to the celebrated (and otherwise largely European) art cinema tradition of the 1940s and 50s (2015, 5), and, indeed, the work of these three directors is heavily represented in the Criterion catalogue. Martin’s second stage was, crucially, initiated by a title that is included in Criterion’s cult category, Nagisa Oshima’s *In the Realm of the Senses*, whose controversial reception in the West ‘gave birth to a second-wave Western critical appreciation of Japanese cinema’ focused around the ‘new wave’ Japanese art films of the 1960s and 1970s (2015, 6), a movement which has its own section on the Criterion website.

Martin’s ‘third stage’ (which constitutes the central focus of his book, *Extreme Asia*) was, of course, initiated by the critical and commercial impact of Hideo Nakata’s *Ring* in the early 2000s and the subsequent wave of J-horror and ‘Asia extreme’ titles distributed by specialist video labels such as, most prominently, Tartan in the UK and US. For Martin, the visibility and impact of the titles that were distributed in the West through these distribution companies (and which were promoted as ‘cult Asian cinema’) was at its height between 2000 and 2005, just prior to Criterion’s release of *Jigoku* (their first Japanese release categorised as cult) in 2006. Indeed, if *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Godzilla* are put aside as exceptions, then the rest of the Japanese titles in Criterion's cult category (produced between 1960 and 1978) fall between Martin's second and third stages in the transnational flow of Japanese cinema to the West. They are lesser known titles, in most cases making their formal DVD debut in the West via Criterion, and representing, in Martin's terms, examples of 'a long tradition of "marginal" Japanese horror' made parallel to the period of the 'new wave' and a long time prior to the rise of J-horror in the West (Martin 2015, 6). One obvious interpretation of Criterion's decision to distribute these previously marginalised titles was that they were aiming to capitalise on the success of Tartan's strategies by accumulating the rights to earlier forms of Japanese horror cinema, and promoting these as cult titles to their loyal customers of cinephiles and 'home video enthusiasts' (Kendrick 2005, 60) . However, the analysis of such strategies, and their employment within the high-end, canon-sustaining realm of the Criterion collection, adds substantial nuance and detail to the transnational marketing models of cult East Asian Cinema put forward by Martin and others.

Cult in Context? Criterion's Framing of Japanese Horror

Despite the emphasis (in Criterion's website definition of cult) on drive-in screening contexts, exploitation-related themes, 'lower budgets and lack of Hollywood gloss', it is fair to say that overtly-generic titles such as *Jigoku* and the four films on the Shochiku boxset were not greeted, by users on the Criterion website and on *Criterionforum.org*, as typical Criterion product, on their releases in 2006 and 2012 respectively. The release of *Jigoku*, for instance, was seen, by one user as the company's attempt to 'lure Criterion customers into a less highbrow realm' (*Criterionforum.org*, Narshty, 2/11/14), while, on the release of the Shochiku boxset, a user on the Criterion website remarked that 'It's safe to say I did not see this coming. *The X from Outer Space* and *Goke The Body Snatcher from Hell* in the Criterion

Collection? Somebody pinch me!' (Craig J. Clark, n.d.). However, it could be argued that these releases, and the ways in which they were framed by Criterion as cult titles, was very much in keeping with the evolving ethos of the Criterion Collection and the means through which it selected titles for release. As Kendrick notes in his article on Criterion:

> the Criterion of the title is not simply an aesthetic principle or legitimization of art status. Rather, the Criterion is *that which makes a film into a cultural artifact*: the fact that it was produced in a specific sociohistorical juncture and its textual and extratextual elements allow us … to get under the skin of that specific time and place. If a film is important enough to be included in the Criterion Collection, that importance is related only to the extent to which that film offers us a particular viewpoint – *a means of knowing something larger than the film itself*. Each and every film included in the collection is a piece of culture – that is the Criterion (2001, 138, my italics).

The Shochiku boxset, released on Criterion's spin-off Eclipse label, provides a particularly explicit example of Criterion's evaluation of a film based on its production 'in a specific sociohistorical juncture'. As outlined and explained in Chuck Stevens' accompanying liner notes, Shochiku is one of the oldest film companies in Japan, founded in 1924, and the studio is perhaps most famous for being the home of some of Japan's most famous and celebrated directors, including Ozu (who worked for the studio for his entire career) as well as Mizoguchi and Oshima. However, in 1963, after Ozu's death, the company went into a period of financial turmoil and, for a short stretch between 1967-68, decided to join some of the other Japanese studios by replicating the monster movie and horror formulas that had been certified box office successes for, in particular, Toho studios with their *Godzilla* franchise. So, as back of the DVD cover notes, the studio moved for a short time from Ozu's melodramas and Oshima’s radical cinema to ‘four certifiably batty, low-budget fantasies, tales haunted by watery ghosts, plagued by angry insects, and stalked by aliens – including one in the form of a giant chicken-lizard’ (Criterion Collection, 2012).

In relation to the fact that this Shochiku set is framed, by Criterion, as a set of cult titles from Japan, this focus on a ‘specific time and place’ and ‘that which makes a film into a cultural artifact’ can be seen to shield it from some of the criticisms that have been made of the release and promotion, in the West, of more contemporary film titles from East Asia. Stevens begins his liner notes by framing the four Shochiku horror titles as primarily products of a studio, embarking on a particular industrial strategy, in relation to other domestic studios’ output, during a particular time period. As a consequence, this enables Criterion to foreground not only the domestic cultural and industrial contexts that inform these productions, but also to illustrate, in Kendrick’s terms, the aspects of these films that make them ‘important’ artifacts and pieces of culture and thus worthy Criterion releases. Indeed, user comments on Criterion’s website, and on other specialist DVD review sites, reflect this emphasis – despite their low budgets and flawed special effects – on perceiving and assessing these films in relation to their production context. As a review on the *DVD Beaver* website notes, these films ‘can get downright goofy but remain highly amusing. The quality is not stellar but this may also be a reflection of the source and meagreness of the productions’ (Gary W. Tooze, n.d., www.dvdbeaver.com), while on the *hometheaterforum.com* website the reviewer notes of *The X from Outer Space* that ‘it’s all innocent fun from a much earlier time and easy enough to excuse as the studio’s first effort at doing something different’ (Matt Hough, 18/11/12).

The importance of the production contexts in which these films were made, and their relationship to the cultural worth and value of the films concerned, is also foregrounded in the liner notes and DVD documentaries accompanying the Criterion releases of *Jigoku* and *House*, but in ways that appear to relate less to excusing low quality aspects of the films concerned and much more to the Criterion website's definition of cult and its focus on films that 'delicately ride the line between pulp and art' and 'refuse to be marginalized'. These films are presented, like the Shochiku titles, as being made during difficult times and in difficult production circumstances. In the case of *Jigoku*, Chuck Stevens' liner notes and commentators in the DVD documentary, *Building the Inferno*, place the film squarely in the context of both the studio in which it was made, Shintoho, and the role of this studio in director Nabuo Nakagawa's career. As Stevens explains, Nakagawa moved, after service in World War Two, from a career making slapstick comedies at Toho to its 'splinter studio' Shintoho after Toho was 'rocked by labor strikes'. During this period, Shintoho (rather like Shochiku) had moved from 'producing prestige pictures' for the likes of Kurosawa and Ozu to having to 'slim down operating costs and sex up the studio's box-office receipts' in order to compete against their more successful Japanese studio competitors. For Stevens, it is in this context that the studio's turn to horror led Nakagawa to make a 'succession of Shintoho spine-tinglers', including *Jigoku* in 1960 (Stevens, 2006, Criterion Collection).

House is presented in similar terms in its liner notes (again penned by Stevens) and in the DVD's accompanying documentary, *Constructing a 'House'*. In Stevens' notes and in the documentary's interviews with the film's charismatic director, Nobuhiko Obayashi, the economic difficulties in the Japanese film industry from the 1960s onwards are foregrounded as key contexts for fully understanding and appreciating *House*'s status as a culturally significant film. From the very opening of *Constructing a 'House'*, Obayashi immediately lays the contextual groundwork for the film, locating its genesis in the fact that the Japanese industry had 'lost its audience in the 1960s', and going on, from this contextual springboard, to outline how Toho's consequent ailing fortunes throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s – exacerbated, as Stevens notes, by the 'ongoing onslaught of Tokyo-box-office-topping New Hollywood hits from Messrs. Spielberg and Lucas' – led them to take a chance on Obayashi (a director of commercials) to produce 'a homegrown *Jaws*', which would subsequently become *House* (Stevens, 2009, Criterion Collection).

It's in relation to these contexts that both the cultural value (and, crucially, the potential cult value) of these films is emphasised, with this particularly benefitting the directors, Nakagawa and Obayashi. As Jim Barratt argues, in his analysis of the production stories that have circulated around Peter Jackson's low-budget cult film, *Bad Taste*, 'the elements given prominence' in such production stories, as they continue to circulate in the years after the film's initial release, tend to be 'those most likely to foster cult interest in the film…emphasising its marginal status (ultra low-budget, initiated by industry outsiders)' and 'valorising its achievement in the face of adversity' (2008, 27). Through the contextual background outlined in Criterion's paratextual materials, such elements are here foregrounded in relation to *Jigoku* and *House*. Most prominently, the difficult production circumstances within which the film's makers had to work are highlighted. In *Building the Inferno*, for instance, Nakagawa collaborator, Chiho Katsura, and contemporary J-horror director, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, emphasise the low budgets with which Shintoho were working at the time, leading actors to have to dig the pits in which they stood during *Jigoku*'s climatic scenes, and to the film's lack of cultural and commercial impact on its initial Japanese release. As Katsura notes:

> Some critics praised it profusely, others said we rushed it into production because the company was folding. They called it a half-baked oddity. Because it was made right before the distribution system of the company collapsed, box office revenue was not substantial (2006, Criterion Collection).

Meanwhile, as Obayashi explains in *Constructing a 'House'*, *House* took a number of years to produce because, as he wasn't contracted to the studio, Toho wouldn't initially allow Obayashi to direct the film. This meant that, as he notes, 'it was kind of a scandal' that 'an outsider' like him was finally permitted to make the film on Toho's soundstage (2009, Criterion Collection).

While this focus on studio collapse, rushed productions and breached studio contracts illustrates the adversity faced by these directors, what is also emphasised (as indicated by the focus on Obayashi as an 'outsider' within the system) is the maverick, innovative status of Nakagawa and Obayashi, who are presented here as breaking ground within a resolutely studio-based context, and an adverse and difficult one at that. It is notable, for instance, that the chapter title of the documentary section where Obayashi discusses his outsider status is entitled 'Bucking the System'. Furthermore, Stevens' liner notes argument that 'it was Nakagawa's talent for turning formula assignments into such distinctly personal forays…that separated him from the pack' (2006, Criterion Collection) is echoed in comments from reviewers and users on *DVD Beaver* and *Criterionforum.org*. Users note, for instance, that *Jigoku* is 'a far step above' what might be expected from Shintoho studios (Gary W. Tooze, n.d., *www.dvdbeaver.com*), that the film proves how 'daring Nakagawa was for its time' and that, while Shintoho might have become 'famous for their exploitation films', 'Nakagawa's contribution was far from cheap' because 'it never for one second struck me that I was seeing anything other than a great unspoken master at work' (Lino, 26/9/06, *Criterionforum.org*).

In line with Criterion's claim that these titles 'refuse to be marginalized', these contextual framings of *Jigoku* and *House* therefore allow Criterion to culturally elevate these films and their directors in relation to (rather than separating them from) the industrial and 'sociohistorical' contexts in which their films were made. By presenting, through these contexts, these films and filmmakers as misunderstood, underappreciated and ahead of their time, Criterion are able to usher them into the Criterion cult-art canon through a cult framing that presents them as hidden gems. In accordance with Kendrick's argument, Criterion here presents all these titles from 'a particular viewpoint' that enables us to know 'something larger than the film itself', but which still allows such titles to receive a 'legitimization of art status' through the category of cult. For instance, while *House*'s genesis is located, by Obayashi and Stevens, within distinctly mainstream production strategies (the need for Toho to produce their own blockbuster hit to rival the success of *Jaws*), Obayashi's production background in experimental filmmaking is emphasised in Stevens' liner notes. This is further foregrounded by Criterion through, firstly, the inclusion on the *House* disc of the director's 1966 experimental film *Emotion*, which, as stated on the disc menu text, 'exhibits the bravura visual style and unique approach to horror' evident in *House*, and, secondly, through a 'video appreciation' extra with Ti West, the contemporary American director of such low-budget horrors as *House of the Devil* and *The Innkeepers*, who emphasises *House*'s status as an 'art horror film' that 'challenges an audience' ((2009, Criterion Collection). Furthermore, while *House*, because of its manic visual trickery and bizarre, surreal storyline, is frequently considered by online users to be (to cite one of innumerable examples) 'just about the most insane film I've ever seen' (Grethiwha, n.d., www.criterion.com/films/27523-house) , all three films are also frequently praised for their beautiful, surreal and extraordinary visuals, making them appropriate films – despite low budgets and exploitation origins – to be given the 'Criterion treatment'. Indeed, the extent to which Criterion's expansion of its catalogue through cult is a key aspect of their distribution strategy is illustrated by the fanfare around *House*'s release by Criterion (its first ever in the US), which was preceded by a wide theatrical release of Criterion's restored version across US cinemas, including two screenings at the 2009 New York Asian Film Festival and positive reviews in a number of major US newspapers including the *New York Times*.

Responding to news of this high-profile release, users on the Criterion website noted approvingly that 'Criterion did the world of cinema a favor by saving this insane film from obscurity' and that '*House* is a wonderful treasure that Criterion dug out of history' (Cody_U and Kiefer, n.d., www.criterion.com/films/27523-house). Drawing on this archival and archaeological terminology, and acknowledging Criterion's impact on 'the world of cinema', users here illustrate how the release of a title like *House* can be canonised through associations with cult obscurity and notions of being 'dug out of history', while still adhering to the Criterion ethos through the provision of extra material which, as one online reviewer notes, gives 'some background and context to the movie's madness' (Patrick Bromley, 22/10/10, www.dvdverdict.com). However, while this emphasis on production contexts serves to retain a sense of these films' origins in the wider industrial histories of Japanese cinema, other, more transnationally-orientated, meanings and histories are also drawn on and emphasised in the materials accompanying these Criterion releases, and in their reception by Criterion's primary audience.

Criterion, Transnational Flows and Horror History

In his book *Extreme Asia*, Daniel Martin considers ‘the strategies employed to confer meaning and value’ within the marketing and reception of the wave of East Asian titles that were distributed in the UK between 2000 and 2005 (2015, 4). While, for him, Japanese horror films released in the UK were ‘generally promoted on their foreign credentials; their Otherness’, he also outlines, in detail, how the reception of *Ring* in the UK was promoted using a complementary strategy of ‘familiarisation’ in which:

> While the Japanese identity of the text was virtually ignored, the film was defined by its relation to a cycle of American horror films popular at the time. *Ring* was [here] frequently presented as an alternative to [this…] dominant Hollywood cycle of horror films (Martin 2015, 22).

The potential for Western distributors to ‘reframe’ titles from non-English language speaking nations in this way has also been explored and acknowledged by Labato and Ryan (2011, 198), in an article which considers the importance of film distribution strategies to the shifting meanings of film genres. When considering the Western circulation of Italian giallo films on VHS and DVD, they note, for instance, that such re-framings can lead to ‘their putative Italianness’ being ‘in great flux as the films move through distribution networks’ (2011, 197).

On one level, such processes are also evident in the paratextual materials and online reception for my six case study films. The ways in which Criterion’s release of *House* is framed and received, for instance, is to a certain extent informed by such discourses of ‘familiarisation and Othering' (Martin 2015, 4) with the text on the back of the DVD box heralding the film via a series of bombastic, rhetorical questions:

> How to describe Nobuhiko Obayashi's indescribable 1977 movie *House*? As a psychedelic ghost tale? A stream-of-consciousness bedtime story? An episode of *Scooby-Doo* as directed by Mario Bava? [...] Equally absurd and nightmarish, *House* might have been beamed to Earth from some other planet (2009, Criterion Collection).

In addition, some of the user comments on the Criterion website also categorise and thus perceive the film through a series of strikingly eclectic Western reference points, with one noting, for instance that, *House* is a 'bizarre Japanese film that's a cross between *Scooby-Doo* and *Suspiria*' and another commenting that 'I can only think of it as a mixture of *The Monkees*, *Willy Wonka*, and *Evil Dead*' (Johnathan Rodriguez and Jared, n.d., www.criterion.com/films/27523-house). However, despite this evidence of the familiarising of *House* in ways that, in Martin's words, seem to locate the film 'in various cinematic traditions' that have 'nothing to do with the film's meaning in its original Japanese context', I would argue that the predominant approaches adopted in Criterion's marketing (and its reception by Criterion enthusiasts) are more nuanced than these examples suggest. Three prominent tendencies are evident across the framing and reception of *Jigoku* and *House*, in particular.

Firstly, and in line with Criterion's emphasis on the innovative qualities of these films and their makers, emphasis is placed on the extent to which these films served to innovate, shift or subvert aspects of established narrative traditions within Japan. *Jigoku*, for instance, is presented by Stevens as a film that draws on plotlines from Western crime/thriller narratives to ‘fearlessly extend the ero-guro-nansensu (erotic-grotesque-nonsense) ingredients beloved by Japanese filmmakers since the silent heyday of Yasujiro Ozu’ (2006, Criterion Collection). Furthermore, Stevens’ liner notes for *House* explore the ways in which Obayashi ‘transforms…traditional elements’ of ‘well-worn… Japanese folklore and horror movie’ narratives, which, for Stevens, is central to the ways in which the film seems still ‘fresh and utterly new’ (2009, Criterion Collection).

Secondly, a number of these titles are presented (in a way that corresponds to their status as underappreciated or previously marginalised) as pioneering films in the post-World War Two Japanese horror film tradition that have had profound influences on the more contemporary wave of Japanese horror that has become popular in the West. This is particularly marked in the ways in which Nakagawa is presented in Criterion’s framing materials. The text on the back of the *Jigoku* DVD box, for instance, proclaims the film to be ‘the most innovative creation from Nobuo Nakagawa, the father of the Japanese horror film’ (2006, Criterion Collection), while the inclusion of the key J-horror filmmaker, Kiyoshi Kurosawa (director of key J-horror titles such as *Cure* and *Kairo*) in the *Building the Inferno* documentary seems explicitly designed to emphasise Nakagawa’s status as an underappreciated pioneer of Japanese horror. Here, Kurosawa notes, for instance, that ‘I think the way ghosts are presented in Japanese film was established mainly by Nakagawa’ and that ‘I think he's yet to receive full critical appreciation. Even in Japan, Nakagawa is just beginning to be truly appreciated I'd say’ (2006, Criterion Collection). This leads, in turn, to a number of users on *Criterionforum.org* identifying and discussing the range of ways in which *Jigoku* and Nakagawa’s other work can be seen to have influenced specific moments and sequences in some of Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s films.

Thirdly, while Criterion audiences online frequently make reference to a range of Western horror films when discussing all of these titles (from Val Lewton's 1940s horror films, to 1950s science fiction films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Them!*, to Italian giallo, to the films of Romero, Carpenter, Raimi and Dante), many of these references seem designed less to pigeonhole these films within categories entirely determined by Western cultural forms – or to present them as distinct alternatives to Western horror – and more to connect Criterion releases to a global map of past and present horror movies that are seen to have influenced or to have been influenced by Western examples. As Criterion producer Susan Arosteguy notes, in her interview in *The Velvet Light Trap*, 'it's important to explore all the influences of film culture, even in the lesser known films, to be able to bring it to a wider audience, especially one that is familiar with the Criterion canon' (Schauer 2005, 34). In the sense that the Criterion liner notes and documentaries accompanying these releases highlight a string of Western films and other cultural texts that influenced the filmmakers concerned (from Hitchcock in the case of Nakagawa, to British writer Walter de la Mare, the French New Wave and Spielberg's *Jaws* in the case of House's director and screenwriter), online audiences' attempts to identify Western films that may have, in turn, been influenced by these titles seem designed (in the same spirit) to place these films within a historical map of transnational flows of influence rather than to pigeonhole them into pre-defined Western cultural categories.

This leads one Criterion website user to note, for instance, that 'My favorite aspect of *Jigoku* is the rich colour palette. I wonder if it inspired *Suspiria*' (Danon Hennessey, n.d., www.criterion.com/films/797-jigoku), for a *DVD Drive-In* reviewer and a number of other online commentators to confidently contend that the Shochiku title *The Living Skeleton* is 'pretty obviously the inspiration for John Carpenter's *The Fog*' (Paul Tabili, n.d., www.dvddrive-in.com), and for a *Criterionforum.org* user to note that while '*House* is like the demented grindhouse cousin of *Evil Dead 2* and *Happiness of the Kutakuris*', 'it has more creativity and energy than those two movies combined times 100' (dad1153, 16/4/09). As the references to both an American and a Japanese horror movie in this comment illustrate, the approaches adopted here by Criterion and its followers is to perceive and assess these titles from the perspective of horror as an inherently transnational genre, both now and in the past. Indeed, this also seems to inform Stevens' presentation of *Jigoku* as a film that influenced both later Japanese titles like *Onibaba* and *Gate of Flesh* and Roger Corman's US-based Edgar Allan Poe adaptations, and which therefore can be located with 'other prescient world-cinema contemporaries – including Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Mario Bava's *Black Sunday*, and Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* – in a seemingly universal campaign to find new, modern modes of inducing matinee-packing dread' (2006, Criterion Collection). This is an approach, which, as Labato and Ryan note, can encourage the rejection of 'the usual myopic conflation of 'horror' with US or Anglo-American horror', and allow Criterion and its primary customers 'to reframe and recanonize' these Japanese horror titles on this basis (2011, 194 & 198).

Conclusion: Making 'cobweb collectors' 'available to all'?

These forms of framing – slotting titles back into their original production contexts and locating them within historical maps of transnational generic influence – constitute the key ways in which this most celebrated of Western video labels has worked to bring these previously marginalised Japanese horror films into the Criterion fold, through a particular conception of 'cult-art'. Indeed, what such discursive framings illustrate is the range of heterogeneous meanings with which the concept of cult can be associated, and that, consequently and contra Martin’s findings and arguments, the cultification of particular titles from the East need not always involve the straightforward othering or exoticisation of the films concerned. For many home video enthusiasts online, Criterion’s contextual framings have been received positively with, for instance, one *Criterionforum.org* user noting, with regard to Nakagawa’s work, ‘we couldn't hope for a better sponsor of his films in the West’ (Lino, 3/11/04).

However, one aspect of the transnational histories of these titles that is foregrounded in much less detail by the company is the cult status and reputation of such titles prior to their first formal home video release by Criterion. These reputations are informed by fan followings built up over time and, crucially, built on an informal history of transnational exchange of information and video copies of such films, akin to the informal distribution systems identified and discussed in Ramon Labato’s work on the shadow economies of cinema (2012). Chuck Stevens’ liner notes for both *Jigoku* and the *When Horror came to Shochiku* boxset make a number of references to the reputation of these titles prior to their Criterion release, noting, for instance, that *Jigoku* has been, for decades after its initial release, ‘a wildly rumored about but rarely screened phenomenon in international cine-extremist circles’ (2006, Criterion Collection) and that the Shochiku films ‘have become legendary and sought after crucibles of cheaply expressive effects’ and ‘flights of filmmaking fancy’ (2012, Criterion Collection). However, in both cases, Stevens doesn’t elaborate on how this reputation has been maintained beyond the initial Japanese release of these titles in the 1960s, and, in the Shochiku liner notes, he only references one long-term fan of these films by name – Quentin Tarantino. In the case of *House*, a brief reference to prior consumption experiences in the West is given on the Criterion website, where it’s noted that:

> [Curtis] Tsui, who produced our release of this piece of comic-horror absurdity from 1977, discovered the movie for himself in the late nineties, after tracking down a 'battered, tenth-generation, unsubtitled VHS' at the legendary, now defunct Kim's Video in Manhattan's East Village. Now, thanks to Janus Films' theatrical rerelease and Criterion's new Blu-ray and DVD, the former cobweb collector is available to all (5/11/10, www.criterion.com/current/posts/1647-entering-house).

However, beyond this, it is in comments and reviews of these Criterion releases online where much more fulsome details of the long-running consumption and collecting history around these horror titles is given. Firstly, and particularly on *Criterionforum.org* where debate occurs between users from not only the US but also from Europe, Australia and Japan, discussion of these releases is often conducted in relation to user knowledge and experience of the different versions of these titles that have circulated globally, on a formal and informal basis, prior to the Criterion release – from German VHS releases, to European region 2 and Japanese DVD releases, to bootleg copies from US video catalogue companies, to, in the case of Shochiku's *The X from Outer Space*, off-air recordings of an AIP version that many fondly remembered viewing for the first time on US television in the 1970s and 80s.

Secondly, and in the particular case of the Shochiku titles, much debate amongst these online users also focused around knowledge of different dubbed versions of these films. While it should be acknowledged that some of these dubs were clearly enjoyed by fans for their potential comic value, there was some dismay expressed by commentators on these sites that the dubbed versions were not included on the *When Horror came to Shochiku* Criterion discs in order to preserve the full distribution history of these titles (and, in particular, their memories of first encountering *The X from Outer Space* in its AIP dubbed version). Indeed, some discussed the option of adding their own homemade dubs to these releases, and while, as some of these users discovered, a dubbed version produced by Shochiku was actually included on the Criterion release of *The X from Outer Space*, it was not the AIP dub. For one *DVD Drive-In* reviewer, this prevented the title from being, in their terms, 'a definitive release' (Paul Tabili, n.d., www.dvddrive-in.com), and, interestingly, the existence of the Shochiku dub on the disc was not mentioned at all in any of the material accompanying the DVD or even on the DVD case.

This downplaying of dubbed versions seems to illustrate the boundaries of Criterion's archival strategies and adherence to context in the framing of such underappreciated Japanese genre films. Indeed, the foregrounding of subtitled rather than dubbed versions of such titles by Criterion (which are, in many cases, part of these films' original history of circulation and reception) appear to reflect what Mark Betz has identified as the frequent alignment of subtitles with notions of the 'authentic' and the 'artistic' (2009, 85) regardless of the degree to which this reflects the 'authentic' experience of consuming genre titles (rather than more traditional or conventional art cinema titles). This highbrow adherence to subtitled versions is something that Criterion, along with its ethos of taking films back to their original cinematic condition and relocating them in their original production context, seems to consistently and inflexibly adhere to. What this seems to suggest is that, while Criterion are continuing to take an eclectic and context-aware approach to film history through their release of cult titles from Japan, there are potential limits to the ways in which they can preserve and foreground all pertinent contexts and cultural sites associated with these films' histories. As these forum and online review comments illustrate, these contexts and sites – situated in the 'grey zone' between formal and informal distribution (Labato 2012, 6) – have also crucially informed the meaning and status of such films as *cult* artifacts, whose journeys and flows to the West have a longer history than Criterion (as proclaimed Western ‘sponsor’ of such titles) is always willing to admit or to fully explore.

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