Art of branding: Tartan "Asia Extreme" films

by Chi-Yun Shin

"Asia Extreme" is the first distribution label created to specifically deal with East Asian film titles by Tartan Films, which operated as Metro-Tartan Distribution between 1992 and 2003, before reverting back to the name Tartan Films.[1] Launched in 2001 as the first of its kind, Tartan Asia Extreme has successfully released a number of titles which, to name just a few, include

- Japanese films such as *Ringu* (1998), *Audition* (1999), and *Battle Royale* (2000);

Now with an extensive and ever growing DVD catalogue, which includes the pan-Asian horror omnibus films, *Three … Extremes* (2004) and *Three Extremes 2*, Tartan Asia Extreme has emerged as the most high-profile label amongst the East Asian film providers, playing an instrumental role in promoting and disseminating East Asian films in the West in recent years. It has also launched an U.S. distribution of many of the same titles, although a significant number of the best-known titles are distributed by other firms in North America. [See Appendix II for the list of titles]

Hamish McAlpine, who is the founder and owner of Tartan Films, is in fact responsible for the creation of the Asia Extreme label. The story goes that one weekend at the end of 1999, McAlpine watched two Japanese films on video, and he was “totally blown away by them.” The two films he watched back to back that weekend were Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* and Takashi Miike’s *Audition*. Soon after, he came across Thai and South Korean titles – *Bangkok Dangerous* and *Nowhere to Hide* (Lee Myung-Se, 1999), which were also “outrageously shocking” to him. In an interview, McAlpine emphasised the fact that the films came first:

“When I realised that these films were not one-offs and there was a constant flow of brilliant films coming out of Asia, I decided to brand it and make Asia Extreme.”[2]

And, that’s how the label was born. Since then, as the Tartan Asia Extreme website boasts,

“Asia Extreme has been single-handedly responsible for the groundswell of interest in Asian cinema and the widespread attention that its roster of World class directors, such as Hideo Nakata, Miike Takashi, Kim Ki-duk and Park Chan-wook, have enjoyed.”[3]

It is important to note here that region-free or multi-region DVD players and the proliferation of international mail-order websites (Internet DVD shops) since the end of the 1990s had enabled Asian film fans to purchase titles from abroad.[4] What the Tartan Asia Extreme has achieved, however, is successfully infiltrating into the minds of mainstream audience and shelves of high street shops (such as HMV in Britain) as well as Internet shopping sites such as Amazon and Play.com.

Starting off as a cult phenomenon, targeting the cult “fan-boys” but soon incorporating the art-house audiences (or world cinema patrons) to its niche, the Tartan Asia Extreme label has established itself as an immediately recognisable brand.[5] Subsequently, as McAlpine himself described, with the Asia Extreme label, Tartan

“found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow [by identifying] ‘the next big thing’ ahead of your competitors and becoming the early dominant provider.”[6]

Recent high profile Hollywood remakes of such East Asian titles as *Ringu*, *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Takashi Shimuzu, 2002), *Dark Water* (Hideo Nakata, 2002) and *Infernal Affairs* (the remake of which was directed by Martin Scorsese and re-titled as *Departed*, the film winning the best film award at the 2007 Oscar), as well as Quentin Tarantino’s reported support and endorsement of *OldBoy* at the 2004 Cannes Film festival (where the film won the second prize, Grand Prix du Jury), only raised the interest in, and the profile of, East Asian cinema and the size of “the pot of gold” McAlpine had discovered.

Indeed, it is commendable that Tartan Asia Extreme has carved a viable East Asian film niche, at the same time establishing its name in the industry where distribution labels do not normally make much impact in the market place. Questions, however, are raised as to the reductive nature of Tartan’s marketing practices, which repackages the films “as exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills.”[7] In addition,
the output of the label, and indeed the name of the label itself, invoke and in part rely on the western audiences' perception of the East as weird and wonderful, sublime and grotesque. At the same time, the ways in which Tartan registers and navigates the vagaries of distinct national cultures and different genres gathered under the Asia Extreme banner provide a fascinating site to explore how the West consumes East Asian cinema.

In order to illustrate how the so-called Asia Extreme films are presented, this article will examine Tartan’s marketing strategies for the Asia Extreme brand, especially its horror titles, not only because they have become the most prominent and leading examples of the label, but also because the rise of Asia Extreme coincided with the phenomenal success of "Asian horror" with branches such as "J-Horror" and "K-Horror," which have been celebrated as the most original and innovative horror movies of the last decade. (The notion of horror or what constitutes horror, however, is not the main concern here, but horror films here broadly refer to films that evoke fright, terror and abjection from viewers.) Needless to say, different audiences understand films in different ways, but as Mark Jancovich pointed out,

"Advertising campaigns were designed in part to present a range of possible ways of reading films."[8]

The article will also engage with the critical reception of the most "notorious" Asia Extreme titles – *Audition*, *The Isle* and *Oldboy* — in the U.K. and the U.S. so as to understand the different discourses through which the Asia Extreme films are evaluated and mediated.

Marketing the affect

The Tartan Asia Extreme label was initially promoted through various 'traditional' marketing practices, including radio and television slots, postcards (Fig. 3) and posters as well as what the industry calls 'teaser campaign' by revealing just enough information about a film (mostly in film and life-style magazines) to intrigue the potential audiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly for the 'extreme' label, what is emphasised and promoted in Tartan’s advertising campaigns is the visceral and hyper violent nature as well as the shocking and unexpected aspect of the films, as its widely used promotional material declares:

“If the weird, the wonderful and the dangerous is your thing, then you really don’t want to miss this chance to take a walk on the wild side.”

Similarly, explaining its raison d’être in the introduction to the promotional booklet, *The Tartan Guide to Asia Extreme*, Mark Pilkington contends,

“When Nakata Hideo’s *Ring* and Miike Takashi’s *Audition* were unleashed upon unsuspecting audiences nationwide, it became apparent that the appetite for such outrageous fare was massive and it made sense to let people know where to find it.”[9]

In addition to the more traditional methods listed above, Tartan created novelty merchandises such as the syringe shaped pen created for *Audition* and *Battle Royale* umbrella (Fig. 4) and t-shirts (Fig. 5) to entice particularly younger audiences, who are their main target audience. Indeed, McAlpine may well have borrowed the term "extreme" from extreme sports, which is also an "invented" term to refer to certain activities such as skateboarding, snowboarding and BMX racing that are associated with youth subculture and inducing an adrenaline rush in participants, even though they are not necessarily more inherently dangerous or generate more adrenalin compared to "conventional" sports.[10] From 2003 to 2005, Tartan also organised an annual "Asia Extreme Roadshow," which toured then UGC cinemas (now Cineworld Cinemas) around the U.K. with the programme of films that Tartan considers to be the most daring examples of "extreme cinema." Notably, the roadshows were set in multiplex cinemas, not in art-house cinemas, which have been the traditional outlets for foreign language films in the U.K. Such "mainstream" positioning of the films was clearly aimed to reach out to the younger audiences who frequent multiplex rather than art-house cinemas.

Following the success of the first roadshow in 2003, Tartan obtained sponsorship from the Singaporean beer brand, Tiger Beer and the Japanese fashion label, Evisu for the 2004 roadshow. Keeping the association with the young and cool, for the 2005 roadshow, Tartan teamed up again with Tiger Beer and Cineworld cinemas as well as their new sponsor Sony PSP (games console). In line with the roadshows, Tartan also set up competitions to win a trip to Japan and Singapore in 2004 and 2005 respectively. While the roadshows showcased the selection of films that can take the audience to "a world of extreme adventure, extreme horror and extreme thrills," the competitions provided a chance to go on a real adventure.[11] To win a trip to Singapore, all you needed to do was to visit one of the bars that were running the promotion and get hold of a Tiger Beer Tartan Asia Extreme scratch card! Again, these promotional competitions, which were linked with their sponsors such as Asia House in London and other tourist boards whose interests were to enhance and educate the Asian culture, were high profile events and clearly aimed to attract young people who would frequent the trendy bars (rather than more traditional pubs).

Tartan utilised the roadshow when it expanded its territory by launching a U.S. branch in 2004, which, according to McAlpine, “was very, very logical extension” as

“there was a whole niche that was being ignored by [distributors] in America.”[12]

Tartan USA employed the same marketing campaigns: stand alone theatrical releases for stronger titles (such as *Oldboy*) and a roadshow/cinema tie-in across several major cities in the US. Again, Tiger Beer was the main sponsor for the roadshow in the US. Initial reactions to the theatrical releases were reportedly lukewarm, but the DVD sales of the Asia Extreme titles started to increase, particularly after the DVD release of the South Korean horror film, *A Tale of Two Sisters*. McAlpine explained that it took a while to persuade video retailers that Asia Extreme
Tartan DVD box designs, which utilise striking images from the films, have been very successful in raising the profile of the label in the U.K., and the U.S. box cover designs clearly aim to achieve a similar effect. It is interesting though to note that some of the U.S. DVD box designs retain no resemblance to the U.K. equivalents on the basis that they are operating in the different market. In addition, there are some disparities between the U.K. and U.S. catalogues. For instance, while the so-called Asia Extreme territories have expanded to include horror titles from Singapore – The Maid (Kelvin Tong, 2005) and Taiwan – The Heirloom (Leste Chen, 2005), the American arm has not released titles such as Audition and Battle Royale, the films that helped to establish the extreme label in the U.K. The disparity is mainly to do with the fact that other distributors had acquired certain titles already, but it is also related to the fact that U.S. distributors tend to be more nervous and cautious about the possible legal problems in case of copycat incidents of any violence depicted in films. This however proved to be pertinent to Tartan Films, as I will discuss later.

Having established its brand image and profile through the Asia Extreme roadshows, Tartan is now concentrating on the home entertainment side of the business in the U.K., the revenues from which can be much more lucrative than those from theatrical releases. Moreover, the theatrical release in general is getting harder to achieve as more and more films are competing for the limited number of screens that are reserved for non-Hollywood products. In any case, according to Tartan’s Press and PR Manager, Paul Smith, Asia Extreme titles have always been stronger as DVD rather than theatrical releases. In 2006, half of Tartan’s top 20 titles in terms of revenue were Asia Extreme titles, Park Chan-wook’s Vengeance Trilogy leading the list.[14]

Discourses of extremity

As noted earlier, reflecting their effort to attract to the young (particularly male) audiences, Tartan’s publicity material stresses the subversive and explicit aspect of the titles. This is most evident in the Tartan Video’s official website, which invariably presents the films as shocking, dark and disturbing. For instance, The Isle, which is described as “Asia Extreme cinema at its best”, is “arresting, shocking, visceral and original,” while Battle Royale “shocked a nation with its violent portrayal of a society in ruins.” Similarly Audition, “stylish slice of extreme cinema” and “twisted vision of a hell on earth” takes “a dark and disturbing turn” in the second half, and A Tale of Two Sisters is “stylish and shocking,” while the introduction to Ring Trilogy simply ends with: “watch at your own risk....”[15]

To be sure, some of these titles do include some heart-stopping, gruesome scenes. Kim Ki-duk’s The Isle, for instance, contains the infamous fish mutilation scenes, as well as the scenes described by Tony Rayns as “sexual terrorism” where the male protagonist swallows fishhooks and pulls them back, and the female protagonist inserts fishhooks into her vagina.[16] Takashi Miike’s Audition features a man with no feet or tongue kept in a sack as well as the scenes of sadistic torture that involves piano wire and acupuncture needles. Famously inducing mass walkouts, if not fainting and vomiting, at several film festivals notably in Venice (2000) and Rotterdam (2000), both films have indeed inspired extreme reactions from audiences and critics alike. In his Film Comment article, which is in fact an outright assault on Kim Ki-duk, Tony Rayns argues that the screening of The Isle in Venice was “an archetypal success de scandale,” while speculating about why Venice even chose the film for competition and suggesting that the director is “an instinctive provocateur ... gleefully malicious in his punishment of audiences.”[17] Similarly, Richard Falcon wrote for Sight and Sound:

“The Isle sees itself as ‘defying genre,’ but, like Takashi Miike’s Audition, it’s a gross-out movie in arthouse clothing. The Isle flaunts its imagery as bold surrealism while making sure it delivers its share of hooks ‘n’ hookers horror and sex.”[18]

Both films however elicited much admiration in equal measure and subsequently rendered their directors the cult status, for what Jeffrey Sconce termed “paracinema” or for cult-film aficionados, in particular.[19] According to the Internet site, Classic-Horror’s review, The Isle is “a gem” –

delicate, brooding exploration of the nature of obsessive love and its potentially damaging consequences.

The review however categorically warns that the film is “not for the squeamish, feminists, the politically correct or animal activists,” and it then claims that

“all you horror addicts who get their fixes from your local art-houses will find this extraordinary movie extremely rewarding.”[20]

From a more reserved position, the Chicago Sun-Times film critic, Roger Ebert describes The Isle as “the most gruesome and quease-inducing film you are likely to have seen,” while encouraging the readers to be more open-minded because

“to limit ourselves to the familiar is a crime against our minds.”[21]

For Audition, the Classic-Horror review remarks, “Miike’s enigmatic allegory of a self-tormenting soul leaves its bloody imprint on the viewer’s consciousness,” before rating it as

“a meditative, melancholic masterpiece that is not for the squeamish.”[22]

Writing for The Japan Times, Mark Schilling also praised the film as providing “a jolt of pure, unrefined terror, while reminding us, with skin-crawling starkness, that actions have consequences,” while

“most Hollywood films about the dark side are little more than effects-driven melodramas without a practice of conviction behind them.”[23]
Another awestruck Internet review titled “Gore Galore” commented that *Audition* “pushes the gore and grue to a limit rarely seen outside the cheesy cinematic bloodbaths of 1960s schlocksters,” by which of course the reviewer is paying compliments to the film.[24]

Another extreme title that has been the subject of admiration and admonishment, if not sheer astonishment, is Park Chan-Wook’s *Oldboy*. For instance, Peter Bradshaw, who seems to be quite shaken up by the film, wrote for the *Guardian* that *Oldboy* “open[ed] up a whole new sicko frontier of exotic horror” and ended the review by declaring that,

“this is cinema that holds an edge of cold steel against your throat.”[25]

For Harry Knowles of * Ain’t It Cool News*, *Oldboy* is “an engaging, flawless film that successfully pushes all the right buttons,” and its director Park is a genius; “the films coming from Korea are exceptional” and

“light years better than any contemporary set film in the U.S. this year or...for many years.”[26]

Although not so enthusiastic as Knowles, Michael Atkinson at the *Village Voice* says that

“whatever its oversteps and excesses... *Oldboy* has the bulldozing nerve and full-blooded passion of a classic.”[27]

Similarly, Carina Chocano of the *Los Angeles Times* claims:

“it says something when you came out of a film as weird and fantastic as *Oldboy* and feel that you’ve experienced something truly authentic.”[28]

*Oldboy* also attracted no less critical condemnation. As Grady Hendrix puts it, the film

“became a critical scratching post for even the most timid magazine writers, who fired off all the insults they’d been saving for a rainy day.”[29]

Most noteworthy came from New York-based newspapers. Introducing the film as “the frenzied Korean thriller,” Manohla Dargis commented in the *New York Times*:

“The fact that *Oldboy* is embraced by some cinephiles is symptomatic of a bankrupt, reductive postmodernism: one that promotes a spurious aesthetic relativism (it’s all good) and finds its crudest expression in the hermetically sealed world of fan boys.”[30]

Rex Reed at the *New York Observer* asserted that the film is “sewage” and sarcastically questioned:

“What else can you expect from a nation weaned on kimchi, a mix of raw garlic and cabbage buried underground until it rots, dug up from the grave and then served in earthenware pots sold at the Seoul airport as souvenirs?”

Reed’s hostile and rather reductive response sparked many online protests, including from the AAJA (Asian American Justice Centre) Media Watch group, that the review has since been removed from the *New York Observer* website.[31].

But *Oldboy* came under intense debate and controversy when it was suggested that the Virginia Tech killer, Cho Seung-Hui might have been inspired by the film.[32] In the package of materials, consisting of 28 video-clips, 23 page printout message and 43 self-portrait photos that Cho sent to NBC News, one photo shows Cho wielding a hammer in a pose similar to the film’s image, which was widely used in its promotional posters. Another photo shows Cho holding a handgun against his head, which is comparable to the way one of the characters from *Oldboy* poses.[33]. Although Cho did not reference the film in any of his notes or messages, and no one can confirm that he had actually seen the film, the speculation over the possible link generated extensive media coverage and the film became the target of moral panics and denunciation of movie violence. It subsequently prompted some to call for censorship, while others dismissed the connection as ridiculous and unfounded.[34]

**Genre-fication of East Asian cinema**

As Julian Stringer puts it, it is perhaps

“natural for viewers to want to draw conclusions regarding what the films they consume may have to tell them about the society that produced them.”[35]

But it seems the success of Tartan Asia Extreme reveals more about the Western perceptions and obsessions about the East Asian countries rather than what people or societies are like there. It is also notable that the language and approach used in Tartan Asia Extreme’s promotional campaigns, based on the discourses of difference and excess, fit comfortably into the widespread notion about the East. In this respect, Gary Needham argues that

“the promise of danger and of the unexpected is linked with the way in which these films are marketed according to their otherness from Hollywood, and subsequently feeds in to many of the typical fantasies of the ‘Orient’ characterised by exoticism, mystery and danger.”[36]

To similar effect, referring to the fishhook moments in *The Isle*, Grady Hendrix comments how

“art collided with exploitation, distributors heard cash registers ringing and in that single, cringe-inducing moment a whole
More importantly, because the Asia Extreme label became the most prominent and dominant mode of East Asian film canons at least in the U.K. and the U.S., it became an essential indicator for East Asian cinema and came to "represent" Asian cinema as a whole. This explains why Michael Atkinson of the Village Voice confidently proclaims that

"more than any single Korean film as yet released stateside, Park Chan-wook's Oldboy crystallizes the reigning characteristic of its national new wave."[38]

Most Asia Extreme titles, however, did not top the box-office charts in their native countries, and moreover, they are rather marginal within the region's overall output of which are regularly dominated by melodramas, comedies and romances. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Tartan's canonization of the so-called extreme cinema as the "best from East Asia" is not so different from the "discovery" of Japanese film in the 1950s, which started with Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon (1950) winning the Golden Lion at Venice in 1951, although the film was not highly regarded in Japan at the time. Just as the West "discovered" Japanese masters in the films of Kurosawa, Kenji Mizuguchi and Yasujirō Ozu, with the Tartan Asia Extreme label, the world of film in the West "discovered" new master directors: notably Kim Ki-duk, Takashi Miike and Park Chan-wook.

Subsequently, East Asian filmmakers whose works don’t easily fit into the "extreme" label have been habitually left out. Two of the most respected South Korean film directors, Hong Sang-Soo and Lee Chang-Dong are interesting cases in point: Hong’s works have won numerous awards and are widely admired and available in France (and in Italy to a lesser degree) and Lee was awarded La Legion d’Honneur by the French government in 2006, while both of them are virtually unknown and none of their films released theatrically in Britain.[39] (Certainly, Tartan’s Press and PR Manager had never heard of either Hong or Lee.) Similarly, Sunji Iwai, the Japanese filmmaker whose first feature film Love Letter (1995) has been highly inspirational for many East Asian filmmakers, still has a relatively obscure status with a very limited appreciative fan base in the U.K., whereas his compatriot Takashi Miike is highly celebrated as a wonderfully eccentric Japanese maestro, although his works are often intended for the straight-to-video market in Japan.[40]

What is also interesting and perhaps unique about the way in which Tartan presents Asia Extreme is that it refers to the label as a genre. For instance, Tartan Films’ owner McAlpine has referred the label to be a “brand [and] – a genre in itself,” and Tartan’s promotional booklet claims to provide

"the story of the origin and development of the most exciting and unique of all contemporary genres."

Congruently, Tartan USA website promotes the 2007 Asia Extreme Film Festival, saying it will

"bring the up-and-coming genre of extreme Asian films to the United States."[41]

This is 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 (Figs 20-26). One Internet blogger’s rather sarcastic remark that Tartan would “snap up any Asian movie that lingers over a corpse” does pinpoint the extreme label’s antics that contrive to include anything from psychological horror to Hong Kong action thrillers, many of which can hardly be regarded as extreme compared to regular Hollywood thriller or horror flicks with a numerous body count (consider recent titles such as Vacancy, Fracture, and The Invisible).[42]

To be fair to Tartan, generic classification is notoriously problematic. As Mark Jancovich points out,

"Not only can the generic status of an individual film change over time, it can also be the object of intense struggle at a particular moment. A film which, for some, may seem obviously belong to one genre may, for others, clearly belong to another genre altogether."[43]

Moreover, as James Naremore comments, an individual genre has less to do with a group of artefacts than with a discourse – a loose evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.[44] In this respect, Tartan’s classification of Extreme Asia as a genre is neither wrong nor nonsensical. However, such genrification of certain East Asian films should be understood as an integral part of providing illusions of discovery; a way of knowing and classifying East Asian cinema. It should also be considered as a marketing strategy that fronts certain films to sell all other titles, bearing in mind that no one in East Asia would set out to make an "extreme" film.

In the meantime, other distributors joined in developing their own East Asian film labels. For example, another London-based, foreign language films specialist Optimum Releasing set up the Optimum Asia division through which they released Studio Ghibli animations as well as Hong Kong comedy action films Shaolin Soccer and South Korean monster film The Host (2006).[45] Columbia Tri-Star Home Entertainment also started up a new series of Asian films called Eastern Edge, with emphasis on action films, while the Weinstein Company created a home entertainment label Dragon Dynasty, with Genius products, specialising action films from East Asia. In 2003, Medusa Communications & Marketing also launched Premier Asia, a brand dedicated to the cinema of Japan, Korea and Thailand (sister label to Hong Kong Legends label Medusa started in 1999). Anchor Bay Entertainment, the subsidiary of Starz Media, also set up the new label, Dark Asia. Although these new competitors are still catching up with Tartan Asia Extreme in terms of the prestige and profile, and can be regarded as attempts to cash in on the latest trend, these labels do testify the success of the trend set by Tartan.[46]

As in any business, there is a question as to how long Tartan’s success can go on. According to Tartan’s Press and PR Manager, Paul Smith, they increasingly find that the number of films being made in East Asia that can be fit into the Asia Extreme category is shrinking. Tartan already had a dilemma with Kim Ki-duk’s Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter … and Spring (2003), which does not comfortably fit
into the extreme category. In the end, the film was put in the more general Tartan Video category rather than in Asia Extreme. In this context, Tartan may have to look into the wider range of titles that are coming out of East Asia. But for now, it is the ability to shock, most of all, that sells East Asian films in the west.

Notes

My thanks to Sarah Bemand, Clare Brownlee and Paul Smith at Tartan for providing images and being such good sports.

1. Metro-Tartan Distribution was a joint venture with the exhibitor Metro Pictures.


4. The popular sites include kfccinmea.com, hkflix.com, sesasian.com, and asiancult.com.


10. Confident of my analogy, I posed the question to Hamish McAlpine. Disappointingly, McAlpine told me that he actually "pinched" the extreme title from the Channel Four (British TV channel) series as a kind of payback, as Channel Four apparently "stole" the pattern of his Tartan logo! Hamish McAlpine, private conversation with the author on 12 November 2007.


13. Tartan’s Press and PR Manager, Paul Smith told me that *Battle Royale* was not picked up by any U.S. distributors possibly because the film is about school kids killing each other, and there have been real shooting incidents at schools in the United States. Nonetheless, Miramax purchased a remake right to the film. Interview with the author, conducted on 17 January 2007.


15. See Tartanvideo.com


“not a master of psychosexual sophistication. Nor, as it happens, is he a great director of actors or an acute analyst of Korean society, politics, or history. In fact, to be frank, the writer-director you can infer from his films comes across as just a teensy bit naive when it comes to sexual politics, social criticism, and religious inklings.” (50)


19. Paracinema refers to a wide range of film genres out of the mainstream, and by Sconce's own description this is "an extremely elastic textual category." In addition to art film, horror, and science fiction films, "paracinema" catalogues “include entries from such seemingly disparate genres” as badfilms, splatterpunk, mondo films, sword-and-sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach party musicals, and “just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to ... pornography.” See Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* vol. 36 no. 4 (Winter 1995): 372.

Joan Hawkins elaborates upon the term "paracinema" and notes its main characteristics as follows. The operative criterion is "affect": the ability of a film to thrill, frighten, gross out, arouse, or otherwise directly engage the spectator’s body. And it is this emphasis on affect that characterises paracinema as a low cinematic culture. Paracinema catalogues are dominated by what Clover terms "body genre" films, films that, Linda Williams notes, "privilege the sensational." See Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 4.


25. Peter Bradshaw, "Oldboy (Review)," Guardian Unlimited (15 October 2004). Available at: http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian Film of the week/0,1327302,00.html.


31. The AAJA Media Watch group complained that the review "reduces an entire people to a backward, "different' lot that's meant to be mocked." See the Internet sit: http://www.aaja.org/news/mediawatch/050408_reed.

32. On 16 April 2007, Cho Seung-Hui, who had history of mental and behavioural problems, killed 32 people before turning the gun on himself on the Virginia Tech campus. Cho was a South Korean but his family had moved to the US when he was eight. He was a senior English major at Virginia Tech.

33. The possible link was spotted by the Virginia Tech professor Paul Harris, who then alerted the authorities.

34. For example, Gerald Kaufman urged filmmakers to exercise self-censorship on the Telegraph website, while filmmaker Bob Cesca described the connection as "the most ridiculous hypothesis yet" writing for the Huffington Post. In defending the film, Grady Hendrix at Slate proclaims "Oldboy bears no more responsibility for the Virginia Tech shootings than American Idol." See the IFC Blog for a roundup of the responses as well as from Tartan Films that issued an official statement that includes the following passages:

"We are extremely proud of Chan-wook Park, Tartan movie Oldboy and the critical praise it has received. To be associated in any way with the tragic events that occurred at Virginia Tech is extremely disturbing and distressing."

Available at: http://ifcblog.ifctv.com/ifc_blog/2007/04/oldboy_joy.html


39. British distributor Third Window has rights for all of Lee Chang-dong films (apart from his latest Secret Sunshine) and they are released on DVD.
40. The impact of Asia Extreme label is also evident in the fate of Kim Jee-woon’s debut feature The Quiet Family (1998), whose later films include popular Tartan Asia Extreme titles such as A Tale of Two Sisters and A Bittersweet Life (2005). The Quiet Family contains many of Kim’s directorial hallmarks, but remains a relatively obscure film in the U.K., mainly because it was picked up by a Hong Kong-based distribution company Tai Seung, whereas its Japanese remake Happiness of the Katakuris (Takashi Miike, 2002) was picked up by Tartan Films and subsequently became much more widely available than the original.
41. See www.Tartanfilmsusa.com
45. Interestingly, Optimum released more arthouse features such as Japanese film All About Lily Chou Chou (Sunji Iwai, 2001) and Chinese title Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Dai Si Jie, 2003) through their "Optimum World" division rather than Optimum Asia.
46. Film distributors are not alone in trying to reap the profit from the success of Extreme label. Book publishers have joined in to produce titles such as Asian Shock: Horror and Dark Cinema from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand and Outlaw Masters of Japanese Films. Patrick Galloway’s Asian Shock almost mimes the Tartan phrase on its back cover:

“Asian Extreme cinema is hot, and this book celebrates all its gory glory.”

Appendix I: Alphabetical index of the film titles cited

Audition (Japan, 1999) Dir: Takashi Miike.
A middle-aged, widowed Aoyama is encouraged by his film producer friend to hold a fake audition for the leading lady to find a new wife, during which Aoyama is besotted by a former ballet dancer Asami. Romance soon blossoms between them, but Asami is not who she seems to be.

A deaf-mute hit man Kong falls in love with innocent pharmacist Fon and sets out on the path of ultimate redemption, but the seedy and brutal underworld prevents him.

As a response to increasingly delinquent youths, the government randomly kidnaps a class of 15 year olds and pits them against each other in armed combat on a remote island from which only one of them will get out alive and any resistance is punished with the ultimate penalty.

Engaged in a bitter custody battle with her ex-husband, recently divorced mother Yoshimi moves into a decrepit apartment building with her young daughter, but she soon encounters an ever-expanding pool of water dripping through her ceiling and the mysterious girl in yellow raincoat.

A blind young woman, Mun wakes from a pioneering eye transplant to find that she can see the souls of the unquiet dead. Plagued by visions, she sets off to find out whose eyes she inherited.

Hard Boiled (Hong Kong, 1992) Dir: John Woo.
A Hong Kong cop wages war against the triad smugglers who killed his partner. Joining forces with an undercover agent, he sets out to stop the maniacal triad boss.

Host (South Korea, 2006) Dir: Bong Jun-ho.
In 2000, the American military base of Yongsan releases toxic chemicals down the drain into the Han River. Six years later, a mutant monster emerges and attacks people. A young girl is carried off by the monster and disappears. When her family finds out that she is still alive and kept in a big sewer nearby the river, they join forces trying to find her and rescue her.

Infernal Affairs (Hong Kong, 2002) Dirs: Andrew Lau and Alan Mak.
An under-cover police agent Chan has burrowed his way into a powerful triad cocaine-smuggling operation, while a triad member Lau
has infiltrated into the police. When a bust goes wrong, they find out each other’s existence and the two men home in on each other.

The Isle (South Korea, 2000) Dir: Kim Ki-duk. Mute Hee-jin works at a fishing resort on a remote lake, supplying bait, hooks, drinks and occasional sex to men who hire out the floating huts. She saves Hyun-shik who attempted to kill himself by swallowing several fishhooks and hides him from the police, whereupon their relationship spirals into intensive obsession.

Ju-on: The Grudge (Japan, 2002) Dir: Takashi Shimizu. The volunteer social assistant Rika Nishina is assigned to visit a family, but the house is haunted by vengeful spirits: a mother and child who were brutally murdered there. One by one, anyone who has lived or visited the house experience the supernatural curse.

Nowhere to Hide (South Korea, 1999) Dir: Lee Myung-se. A maverick detective pursues a brutal killer, beating his way through a succession of seedy underworld types until he finally confronts the killer for a showdown.

Oldboy (South Korea, 2003) Dir: Park Chan-wook. Without any explanation, Dae-su is released after fifteen years in a private prison. Back on the streets, his task is to find out why he is imprisoned and indeed take his revenge on who put him there.

Ringu (Japan, 1997) Dir: Hideo Nakata. It begins with an urban legend about videotape; anyone who sees it receives a phone call telling them that they have one week to live. A reporter watches the tape and sets out to track down the source of the curse, and her trail leads to Sadako, a child psychic who has been dead for some thirty years.

Shiri (South Korea, 1999) Dir: Kang Je-gyu. Two South Korean special agents have been tracking a female North Korean assassin who re-appears after suddenly disappearing for a year. Also present is a squad of North Korean renegades who hijack a powerful explosive device. The film climaxes in a spectacular Seoul football stadium showdown.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter…and Spring (South Korea, 2003) Dir: Kim Ki-duk. An old Buddhist monk lives with a young boy in a small floating temple on an isolated lake. Grown to a teenager, he is to be consumed with lust for a young woman who has come to the temple to be cured, and runs away to the outside world. Years later, he returns and journeys towards spiritual enlightenment.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (South Korea, 2001) Dir: Park Chan-wook. Deaf-mute Ryu pays an illegal organ traffickers to obtain a compatible kidney for his sister, but the gang rip him off. In desperation, Ryu and his girlfriend kidnap a well-off industrialist’s daughter but she accidentally drowns, and her father seeks revenge.

A Tale of Two Sisters (South Korea, 2003) Dir: Kim Ji-woon. After being treated in a mental institution, two teenage sisters return home in the countryside. Soon, the sisters are plagued by terrifying nightmares and visions, and there are hints of abuse in the relationship between the younger sister and her stepmother. While the older sister struggles to fight off their stepmother, a picture of trauma and tragedy gradually emerges.

Three...Extremes (2004) Dirs. Fruit Chan, Park Chan-wook and Takashi Miike. Comprising three segments – “Dumplings,” “Cut,” and “Box” from Hong Kong, South Korean and Japanese film directors, the Pan-Asian horror omnibus films present ordinary people capable of doing evil and psychotic things to each other. There is no connection or link between the stories and none of them involves a ghost.

Three Extremes 2 (2002) Dirs: Kim Ji-woon, Nonzee Nimibutr, and Peter Chan. In actuality, the predecessor of the Three...Extremes (its theatrical title was Three), the first horror omnibus is consisted of “Memories”, “The Wheel” and “Going Home” with directors from South Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong: tales of supernatural horror and existential dread.

Appendix II: U.K. and U.S. Tartan Asia Extreme titles

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Wishing Stairs

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