

Battle Royale as a One-Film Franchise: Charting a Commercial Phenomenon Through Cult DVD and Blu-ray Releases

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Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* was first released in Japan in 2000. It was subsequently released in UK cinemas in 2001, and has been re-released several times on DVD and Blu-ray since this date. *Battle Royale* focuses on a class of Japanese high-school students who are forced into a fight for survival in the near future, and is adapted from Koushun Takami's 1999 novel. Juvenile delinquency has hit an all-time high, and the Japanese government decides that one class per year will be picked at random to fight to the death. The students are taken to an island, given weapons, and are forced to do battle amidst booby traps and surveillance. The film is bloody, action-packed and full of black humour. These traits would suggest that the film sits within the niche category of cult Asian horror. While the film does illustrate potential definitions of this category, it also complicates them by the fact that it has regularly been re-released in the UK for over a decade.

Battle Royale became a commercial hit as part of the Tartan Asia Extreme label, and most recently has continued to bring in profits for

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independent distributor Arrow Video. This has not been because of the ‘permanent cult status’ that the film occupies. Instead, the film’s UK distributors show how useful the term cult is for them, as it can be adapted to constantly re-market *Battle Royale*. In addition, adapting cult and other terminology allows distribution labels to re-market their entire film catalogue and distribution practices within the home media market. There is an influential interplay at work between the films and their distributors. A label can become responsible for how a film release is received and disseminated within society and culture, either within one nation or several. At the same time, one film can significantly shape the perceptions of a distribution company within a market such as the UK, as well as other categories such as cult and Asian cinema. Distributors and their treatment of home media releases are key to these patterns of behaviour, and are anything but ‘invisible’, as emphasised within current research (Knight and Thomas, 2011, p. 13; Lobato, 2012, p. 2). The unique history of *Battle Royale* and its UK releases helps to illustrate these trends, as well as demonstrating how fluid and complex perceptions of cult media and Asian films have become since 2000. DVD and Blu-ray releases are central to these developments. At this current time, they are media resources which are in danger of being overlooked, because of a premature emphasis on shifts towards digital media consumption.

Research and publications specific to DVD have been plentiful over the last ten years or so. In 2006, Barbara Klinger charted different forms of film-viewing behaviour in homes, including DVDs. Regarding the discs’ extras, she claims that viewers are exposed to ‘trivia’ and ‘insider knowledge’—but only that which filmmakers and producers want audiences to see (2006, pp. 54–90). John Caldwell has also stressed the commercial lures of DVD extras by charting their origins as electronic press kits (EPKs) (2008, pp. 89–101). Such EPKs were used to disseminate interview material and outtakes to members of the press for the promotion of upcoming film and television shows. Such media have since been absorbed into the format of DVDs, as also demonstrated by Graeme Harper (2005) and Craig Hight (2005). Since these works, further descriptions of the experiences offered by DVD extras have been categorised as ‘the illusion of going backstage’ (Evans, 2010, p. 598) and ‘new smart media pleasures’ (Brereton, 2012, p. 19). These respective terms emphasise the illusions created by special features, which has been key to how this research has helped to develop the field of paratextual studies.

The paratext is not a new concept, though it has been adapted to contemporary media trends by Jonathan Gray (2010), via the work of Gerard Genette (1997). Taking the latter's evidence from literature texts, Gray uses the concept to define DVDs, trailers, advertisements and other promotional media as ancillary texts which are used to gain access and lead consumers to a central filmic text. The dissemination of paratexts online and in experimental forms is the focus of publications such as *Beyond The Screen* (Atkinson, 2014) and *Besides The Screen* (Crisp and Goning, eds., 2015). However, there is an assumption in these works that film-watching and media consumption is trending towards downloading and streaming. While this could be the case in the long-term, the immediate story is different. It can be confidently said that DVDs and Blu-rays are still sold in their millions around the world. The statistics for the UK help illustrate this fact. In both 2014 and 2015, the British Video Association reported that UK consumers spent over £1 billion on DVD and Blu-ray media (Murray, 2015, 2016). This suggests that physical home media releases are much more than just paratexts, as do the origins of the term itself—within the concept of intertextuality.

Intertextuality was established by Julia Kristeva in 1966, in relation to literature, and it has been adapted to other media ever since. A key aspect of this concept is that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (Kristeva, quoted in Orr, 2003, p. 21). A similar conclusion was drawn by Deborah and Mark Parker following their research on audio commentaries on DVDs. They state that: 'The DVD edition is essentially a reorientation of the film ... the DVD constitutes a new edition, and should be seen in these terms' (Parker and Parker, 2004, p. 14). Therefore, distributors of home media shape film watching and consumer experiences by creating new media texts. These can take the form of physical or digital releases, as well as ancillary media, such as packaging, special features, trailers and websites. The UK release history of *Battle Royale* illustrates the influence of different DVD and Blu-ray releases for one specific film, which has essentially become a franchise. Derek Johnson states that understanding such replication within popular culture requires studying 'the process of media franchising constituted by complex social interactions within the industry structures supporting and driving cultural replication' (2013, p. 3). This approach aligns itself with the views put forward by Klinger—of changing discourses and the historical reception of specific films:

A totalized view necessarily addresses the competing voices involved in a particular film's public signification as a means of attempting to describe its full historicity. It thus avoids arriving at premature, partial, ideological identities for films, that result from imposing a unity between a film and its historical moment at the expense of considering the intricate untidiness of this relationship. (Klinger, 1997, p. 110)

This 'intricate untidiness' is highlighted by *Battle Royale*. The film's UK disc releases have many contrasts and similarities, as demonstrated by the discourse surrounding them. They also illustrate the fluidity and complexity of terms such as cult and Asian cinema. Ernest Mathijs has helped to establish that cult films have 'an active and lively communal following', with 'a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence' (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008, p. 11). In addition, cult film followings are celebrated 'as a form of deviant subculture' (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p. 6). Alternatively, Elena Gorfinkel sees more sense in defining cult 'as a shifting historical category' to account for the different ways it has been used over time (2008, p. 38). Shifting definitions are also applied to Asian films, which are primarily affected by multiple national and transnational identities, both outside of, and within, the cultural communities and national borders of a region (Kim, 2009, pp. 5–8). Charting the history of the disc releases of *Battle Royale* does not just support these discursive conceptual definitions. It helps illustrate how these concepts shift and adapt, as well as demonstrating how influential home media distributors are by generating the discourses that surround these releases.

EXTREME BEGINNINGS: *BATTLE ROYALE* LANDS IN THE UK

Following the film's UK theatrical run in 2001, *Battle Royale* was first released on DVD in the UK in 2002, and then re-released as a special edition in 2004. These were both distributed by the former DVD sub-label Tartan Asia Extreme, which was owned by Tartan Video, and is now owned by Palisades Tartan (Palisades, 2008). Controversy has surrounded the film ever since its theatrical release in Japan and around the world. Tartan used this as the basis of its marketing campaign for *Battle Royale* in the UK, and Daniel Martin found this to have a specific aim:

For the film to achieve its cult status and niche-market recognition, Tartan were determined to position the film as not just 'alternative', but as directly oppositional to mainstream, middle-brow culture. (Martin, 2009, p. 110)

It was the first of several Asian films, by Tartan and other distributors, to be labelled as 'extreme' (Shin, 2008). A consequence of defining such films as 'cult' and 'exotic' was that the whole of Japanese culture was also perceived as 'extreme' (Dew, 2007). These concepts and contexts are important to establish to help understand how *Battle Royale* was initially seen as extreme, and how this influenced the use of terms related to both cult and Asian cinema.

Much of the controversy surrounding *Battle Royale* stemmed from the reaction to the film's plot within Japan and other countries. For instance, Fukasaku protested against potential censorship by the Japanese government, though a toned-down special edition was screened in cinemas in 2001, following the success of the theatrical cut (Mes, 2001). The plot is explained on the single-disc Tartan DVD case and film notes, alongside the history of its controversy, as well as a promotional line that states: 'Likened to Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* by many critics, this explosive film shocked a nation with its violent portrayal of a society in ruins'.¹ As with Kubrick's 1971 film, *Battle Royale* is set in a dystopian future. However, in the earlier film, a violent and delinquent youth is forced into a programme of rehabilitation by the government; whereas *Battle Royale* depicts almost the exact opposite scenario. When re-released in 2004, the Tartan DVD case stated that *Battle Royale* was the 'most controversial Japanese film of the millennium'.² Its origins in Japan were used as reasoning behind its violent and 'extreme' content—a discourse that had also been circulated within British press reviews of the film (Martin, 2009, pp. 109–140). Whether critics liked the film or not was immaterial, as Tartan promoted their Asia Extreme releases as 'cultural hand grenades' which aimed to shock and generate both negative and positive publicity (Leader, 2011).

Both of Tartan's disc releases for *Battle Royale* show it heralded an important shift in the label's focus. Tartan Video was established in 1991 as a UK distributor for a variety of films from countries around the world, and not just Asia. The Tartan Asia sub-label became prolific on DVD, though Tartan would become synonymous with the phrase 'Asia Extreme' after that sub-label was launched in the early 2000s (Macnab, 2008; Martin, 2009; Pulver, 2008; Stimpson, 2008). The impetus for that launch came shortly after the release of *Battle Royale*, as well as the success of two other Japanese horror films—*Ring* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) and *Audition* (dir. Takashi Miike, 1999). All three of these films were re-released shortly after the sub-label was established, either as special

editions or as part of a box-set (often incorporating sequels, as in the case of *Ring*). Furthermore, the Asia Extreme brand eventually led to Tartan's expansion of operations into the USA, following the success of Chan-wook Park's 2003 Korean thriller *Oldboy* (Shin, 2008). The only problem was that other UK labels, such as Optimum, Premier Asia and Cine Asia, also launched their own extreme sub-labels, and the market became saturated with violent and horrific Asian films. This is now seen as one of the contributing factors to Tartan's financial collapse in 2008, even though the company continued to facilitate film releases from other countries, with its catalogue occasionally being re-released by Palisades.

From this historical chronology, and the analysis of the packaging for the *Battle Royale* discs, it can be surmised that the promotion and shaping of the Tartan Asia Extreme label was ultimately down to the films themselves. It is quite clear from the descriptions of the films that the marketing focus was on the extreme violent and gory content of these films. Tartan clearly made this the primary selling point of the films—emphasised more than other points, such as the fact that *Battle Royale* was one of the last films by critically acclaimed director Kinji Fukasaku (Mes, 2003). This is perhaps only logical, as this was the emphasis of much of the film's critical reception in the UK, which was also used to promote the film through the DVD packaging. On the rear of the single-disc case, 'Macabre, beguiling and breathtaking' is quoted from *The Face* magazine; then 'Deeply disturbing and utterly gripping' from *The Daily Star* newspaper; before 'Outstanding' from *The Guardian* newspaper. While the latter quote helps indicate one reason for the film's commercial success (meaning its critical praise), the other quotes help to illustrate how the film's controversial content was a major discussion point amongst critics both within and outside Japan. The reputation of the film became so notorious that Tartan removed all quotes from reviews for the two-disc release of the special edition. Instead, the Tartan Asia Extreme brand alluded to the film's content, along with the following line: 'The most controversial Japanese film of the millennium returns in a Special Edition version featuring more violence, more characterisation, and an alternate ending that sheds fresh light on the events of the film'.

Multiple disc or special edition releases for films are often associated with special-effects extravaganzas or action-orientated blockbusters, as found in the research of Klinger (2006) and Hight (2005). While *Battle Royale* was a blockbuster in Japan—to the extent that it was re-released in 3D in 2010—the 2001 theatrical run in the UK was essentially

a means of promoting the 2002 DVD release, before the 2004 special edition release. Comparable re-release patterns have been noted with some other DVD titles, such as the films of Dario Argento. However, the theatrical releases of these films were decades earlier, and Raiford Guins states that they have moved from being gore-objects on VHS to art-objects on DVD (2005). *Battle Royale* has already been allocated to both of these categories within Tartan's film catalogue. The single-disc release emphasises the film's harrowing premise and gruesome content, whereas the two-disc release stresses the importance of the film as a cultural landmark in Japanese film history. While the single-disc release includes plenty of DVD extras, the special edition included a booklet, art cards, trailers, as well as a making-of documentary, promotional videos and interviews. Such treatment transgresses the native commercial success of the film and its niche audience in the UK, which is summarised by the quote from *Uncut* magazine, displayed on the front of the single-disc *Battle Royale* case: 'A solid gold cult classic'.

Existing definitions of the uses of cult could be supported here, such as Gorfinkel's claim that it is now more of a commercial term than it used to be. However, the evidence presented is more complex. Tartan recognised the commercial appeal of *Battle Royale*, and attempted to reap more profits from similar titles, by essentially making (or at least emphasising) a cult market for Asian horror films within the UK. This worked to some extent, as Tartan increased its catalogue of 'extreme'. Other UK distributors soon adopted similar terminology—creating a 'continuous market' and a 'long-term public presence' (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008, p. 11). Though this has meant that Asian cinema within the West has become synonymous with the term 'extreme', it is perhaps no longer a financially viable term. Tartan eventually went bankrupt, with other UK labels infrequently releasing Asian horror films (e.g. the Terror-cotta sub-label—Terracotta Distribution, 2011). Tartan's actions did establish a cult status for Asian horror films within the UK, but subsequent distributors such as Arrow have not re-released all of these films. Cult has not completely switched to a commercial marketing term, or it would be used more often than Gorfinkel and other academics claim. Instead, what have become commodified are Tartan's actions as a distributor, which Arrow has subsequently used to emphasise the status of *Battle Royale* as a cult Asian horror film. Following the 2010 re-release of the movie, Arrow went on to emphasise other interpretations of cult in order to facilitate more commercial gains.

ARROW VIDEO: *BATTLE ROYALE*, TARTAN'S HISTORY AND BEYOND

In 2010, Arrow re-released the single-disc version of *Battle Royale*. Quite literally, this involved repackaging the disc and little else. The extra materials remained exactly the same as in the Tartan single-disc release—which included trailers, stills, filmographies and notes written by Mark Wyatt (Haflidason, 2002). This illustrates the commodification of distribution practices, with Tartan's efforts being essentially recycled. However, Arrow did attach the categorisation of 'cult' to the front of their DVD disc, acting as a classification of the film within their catalogue.³ Arrow Films is a UK distributor of films from around the world, offering cinema and home media formats, and has been operating since 1991 ('About Us – Arrow Films', 2012). It was not until 2010 that the Arrow Video sub-label was launched, with its May 2011 catalogue proclaiming that it is the 'world's leading collection of cult films on DVD and Blu-ray' (*Arrow Video Catalogue*, May 2011). *Battle Royale* became part of this brand at the end of 2010, to coincide with the film's cinematic re-release in Japan. Tartan's content was not re-used in this limited edition. Instead, Arrow's own elaborate treatment allowed the label to situate *Battle Royale* in numerous other categories for subsequent re-releases. This provided additional means of marketing and promoting the film, while Arrow also navigated the film and label's position with reference to different historical cycles and definitions of cult cinema.

The 2010 limited edition release of *Battle Royale* became a basis for many of Arrow's future re-releases.⁴ Five fold-out cases were provided in the box-set, which was limited to 5000 DVD copies and 10,000 Blu-rays. Three of these contained discs, for the theatrical cut of the film, the special edition and then a compilation of special features. The other cases contained posters, postcards and booklets that included essays, interviews with crew members, and a comic that acted as a prequel to the film's narrative. All of this was accompanied by new artwork commissioned specifically for the release, which extended to the DVD menus, where character profiles of the students literally dripped with blood from wounds and weapons—with parallel images in the fold-out cases. The film itself was described as 'the cult Japanese movie that defines twisted action and sickening violence'; one that 'helped to define extreme Asian cinema in the 21st century'; and directed 'by the master of 70s yakuza thrillers Kinji Fukasaku'. These same points were then emphasised

in Arrow's May 2011 catalogue. The reference to 'extreme Asian cinema' is clearly a reference to the film's previous releases through Tartan, as also illustrated by the attention given to the action and violent content. However, Arrow also emphasised the film's critical reputation and stressed the significance of the director. This is evident on the box-set packaging, and through essays written by Tom Mes and Jay McRoy—the respective authors of *The Midnight Eye Guide to Japanese Film* (2004) and *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema* (2007).

Details like these mean the release was marketed towards the 'cinephile', a dedicated film viewer and collector, particularly significant in the consumer market for special edition DVDs (Klinger, 2008). Adrian Martin (2008) sees cinephilia as a similar manifestation of film fandom in relation to cult cinema. Following the limited edition release of *Battle Royale*, Arrow continued to cater to dedicated cinephiles through similar releases. Another one of their sub-labels is the Arrow Academy, where much older films are given similarly lavish treatment in the form of new packaging and extras. In 2011, *Bicycle Thieves* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948) was released on DVD and Blu-ray with a new audio commentary, documentary features and booklets containing new essays. Though this release came after *Battle Royale*, the similarities between the two physical releases are very clear. One of the pinnacles of 'extreme Asian cinema' is being praised and positioned similarly to films that are regarded as classics or masterpieces. Moreover, Arrow suggests that the critical acclaim and admiration associated with such classics is no different to the cult fandom and reputations linked to *Battle Royale* and similar Asian or cult horror films. Arrow's continuance of its Academy and Video sub-labels suggests that this universal treatment for its films has been successful. It seems the company has broadened its market appeal by appealing to different niches that it believes have similar demands and tastes—for instance, both cult film fans and cinephiles desire elaborate DVD or Blu-ray packages.

Nevertheless, Arrow re-packaged and re-released *Battle Royale* twice after 2010. If the film had just remained as part of the Arrow Video catalogue after 2010, the label's associations between cinephilia and cult, in order to make commercial gains, would have been concluded. However, Arrow showed an awareness of other potential associations that could be made with both *Battle Royale* and the term cult, demonstrating more than just a commercial drive to monetise re-releases of films. Johnson claims that franchising plays:

... an imaginative role in the media industries, framing their responses to other economic, technological, and sociocultural shifts in a specific set of cultural terms ... By considering how the shared use of cultural resources in highly industrial contexts exceeds the precise prescriptions of intellectual property law and ownership, we can start theorizing franchising beyond the business terms of contracts to look to the cultural realms of discourse, affect, and creativity. (Johnson, 2013, pp. 6–8)

Arrow essentially turned *Battle Royale* into a franchise for their label, rather than extending the film franchise that already existed. *Battle Royale II* (dir. Kenta Fukasaku and Kinji Fukasaku, 2003) was released by Tartan in 2004, but Arrow never re-released it. However, *Battle Royale* has been used to establish another sub-label, ArrowDrome, as well as to link contemporary Hollywood blockbusters to the narrative content of the film. Through these acts, Arrow is not just seeking to gain continuous profits. It is also establishing particular historical uses of the term cult, as well as contemporary ones, and how *Battle Royale* can be situated within them. This means the label has a cultural impact, as well as a commercial one, following on from Johnson's views.

In 2011, the ArrowDrome label was launched and *Battle Royale* was re-released as part of this catalogue.⁵ Arrow's new sub-label aimed to make cheaper DVDs and Blu-rays available to consumers, by limiting them to one disc and minimal extras. The inner booklet for *Battle Royale* contains an essay written by Tom Mes, with the disc containing a making-of feature. A unique selling point was also established by categorising genres according to colour. The ArrowDrome *Battle Royale* packaging is coloured blue for science fiction. In the November Arrow catalogue (2011), the other genre colours are listed: pink for erotic; orange for action; red for horror; etc. The ArrowDrome branding establishes that these genres belong to cult cinema, but a specific type of cult cinema. On the rear of the 2011 DVD case for *Battle Royale* is a slogan for the sub-label that also appears on Arrow's website:

ArrowDrome is a fleapit selected library of cult films; violent, horrific, sleazy, exploitative. To explore step into the cult arena! Every ArrowDrome release includes a reversible sleeve of original artwork and a collector's booklet!

This slogan makes clear allusions to a category of cinema prominent in Britain in the 1980s, before the emergence of Tartan Video.

ArrowDrome is explicitly positioning its films within a cult niche through phrasing that alludes to its products' location within a deviant subculture. Such a view corresponds with opinions about video nasties, circulated by the British press in the 1980s. Kate Egan reports on this press coverage in her book-length study *Trash or Treasure?* (2007), as well as the re-marketing of certain titles that were formerly banned by the Video Recordings Act (VRA) in the 1980s. The memory of the video nasty era is so widespread within the UK that certain companies who re-released these films were seen 'as an anachronistic throwback to the fly-by-night distributors of the pre-VRA world' (Egan, 2007, p. 218). ArrowDrome clearly taps into this retro aesthetic, as several of its releases are of films formerly banned by the VRA. *The Beyond* (dir. Lucio Fulci, 1981), *A Bay of Blood* (dir. Mario Bava, 1971) and *The Funhouse* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1981) are just some of the sub-label's releases that are mentioned on websites which maintain a record of titles formerly banned ('Video Nasties List', *MelonFarmers* website). ArrowDrome is not bluntly suggesting that *Battle Royale* was a product of the video-nasty era. Instead, the distributor has decided that the same attributes and connotations associated to the video nasties can be applied to other films.

The sub-label's DVD cases invoke memories of specific aesthetics and cult niches of films related directly and solely to video nasties. As well as this, the films are promoted as having characteristics that are shared by others made after the video-nasty era. These can be located within various genres, and as other aesthetics and slogans are shared across each individual film's packaging, consumers of films that were formerly banned are now potentially attracted to the whole range of ArrowDrome's releases. This links to Peter Hutchings' view of the DVD medium and its packaging:

The ways in which it articulates genre histories and invokes memories of genre films can help to form an intimate bond with the consumer, a bond through which the consumer can engage with and reflect upon his or her own historical experiences of the genre in question. (Hutchings, 2008, p. 227)

A variety of genre categories are incorporated into ArrowDrome's branding, in addition to its definition of cult cinema. Through the 2011 re-release of *Battle Royale*, Arrow simultaneously defined cult through categories of Asia extreme, acclaimed masterpieces and films with notorious reputations.

Arrow's most recent re-packaging for the film emphasises these categorisations, as well as providing another one. The year 2013 saw the release of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (dir. Francis Lawrence). Flames encircle the film's Mockingjay logo within its promotional posters, DVD cases and other ancillary media. In the same year, Arrow's DVD re-release of *Battle Royale* included flames in its new front cover design, which also includes the following line: 'The original cult classic the critics are comparing to *The Hunger Games*'. *Catching Fire* is the sequel to the first film in the franchise, released in 2012, and the story was completed in 2015 with the fourth instalment. This film series is based on a trilogy of books written by Suzanne Collins, and the narrative concerns a dystopian future where random teenagers from 'districts' are selected to compete in a battle to the death known as The Hunger Games. Similarities to *Battle Royale* are easy to identify, and critics have frequently highlighted them, despite Collins denying she drew inspiration from the Japanese book or film (Billson, 2013; Fujita, 2012). Arrow is clearly using this similarity as an opportunity for the promotion of their *Battle Royale* DVDs and Blu-rays, though there are other interpretations which can be made.

In their discussion of the promotion and marketing strategies for *The Hunger Games* films, Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson conclude by stating that: 'the promotional infrastructure positions the movie as an event that is part of a larger and longer immersive experience that can be engaged with across multiple sites and across a variety of ways' (2015, p. 172). In the preceding pages of their study, Grainge and Johnson detail the numerous trailers, television tie-ins and websites that were created in the UK to help the local promotion of the film. This is also similar to processes of film franchising and related marketing strategies, detailed by Johnson (2013, pp. 3–6). Though not commissioned by the film's production company, Lionsgate, Arrow's re-packaging of *Battle Royale* does act as part of the promotional experiences that are linked to the release of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. The success of blockbuster films and their mass-media marketing strategies often leads to similar promotional tie-ins, and even plagiarism through the release of low-budget, but similarly titled, media (Calboli, 2014). Arrow is careful to stress that it is only acting on the critics' comments, and it cannot be accused of plagiarism because *Battle Royale* came before the *Hunger Games* book and film series. Nonetheless, the 2013 re-release does indicate some interesting links between the films.

Arrow's strategy with *Battle Royale* also illustrates how *The Hunger Games* film franchise has 'an active and lively communal following', with 'a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence' (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008, p. 11). Though this is spurred on by Lionsgate's aggressive promotion and marketing, their strategies suggest there is a dedicated audience for this film series, just as there is for *Battle Royale*—and both Lionsgate and Arrow are aiming to expand this consumer base. Cult behaviour, fandom and film traits are therefore becoming increasingly associated with big-budget blockbusters and film franchises, as well as with films associated with niche categories such as extreme Asian horror and exploitation. Moreover, Arrow's re-release helps to emphasise the initial commercial success that *Battle Royale* received in Japan. The film was based on a popular novel and its success quickly led to the production of a sequel, as did *The Hunger Games* (dir. Gary Ross, 2012). Arrow may have stressed the cult reputation of *Battle Royale* in the UK, over several DVD releases, but its most recent re-release acts as a significant reminder of the film's own blockbuster legacy in Japan.

THE INFLUENCE OF HOME MEDIA: CHARTING ONE FILM'S IMPACT

Central to these different locations and perceptions of *Battle Royale* has been its DVD and Blu-ray releases. Without these commercial ventures by Tartan and Arrow, its reputation in the UK would not have been established—as a celebration of a notorious cult film within the categories of Asia extreme, horror and science-fiction; as a masterpiece from a renowned Japanese director; and as a film which exerted influence on a series of Hollywood blockbusters, as well as being a commercial success in Japan. It is also debatable whether the film's appearance in other modes of exhibition and venues would have been possible without these established perceptions. *Battle Royale* is regularly scheduled in late-night showings at the Prince Charles Cinema, a London venue that is famed for showing older and unusual films alongside the latest blockbusters (NeedToConsume, 2015; Gilbey, 2015). Furthermore, it has often appeared in similar late-night slots such as the UK's Freeview channel, Film4. The cult status of *Battle Royale* is reinforced by these modes of exhibition, which Mark Jancovich details as central to historical

definitions of cult cinema (2002). In essence, the reputation of *Battle Royale* is significantly influenced by Tartan and Arrow.

Tartan's influence on the reception of *Battle Royale* in the UK should not be overlooked, but Arrow's treatment of the film highlights the earlier label's impact. As much as cult can refer to the niches of Asia Extreme and director-centred cinephilia, it can also refer to specific historic contexts, like that of the video nasty. However, these connotations do not eclipse one another when a film is re-released at different times. On the rear of the Arrow/Drome *Battle Royale* DVD case, Kinji Fukasaku's name and the term 'extreme Asian cinema' are still used to explain the film's background. The interest around these niches is being used as part of a promotional strategy for the film's re-release, along with the addition of the video nasty aesthetic. The associations and connotations linked to the term cult have therefore shifted with different DVD releases of *Battle Royale* via Tartan and then Arrow. Cult's various meanings are not mutually exclusive in terms of each of the DVD releases of *Battle Royale*. Cult is instead found to be a multi-faceted term that can be attached to a single film for a multitude of reasons. At the same time, the film's commercial links to other contexts, such as its success in Japan and comparisons to Hollywood blockbusters, are emphasised alongside cult characteristics. DVD distributors exhibit an awareness of the numerous connotations between particular films and their cult status. This is in contrast to assuming that the term is used to refer to one particular niche market.

The distribution and marketing of home media illustrates processes and products which are integral to the consumption and reception of films. These releases are texts with their own unique traits, and are not simply a means of viewing or facilitating access to a film. DVD distribution exists as a commercial and creative industry that provides films for particular audiences and can shape film-viewing experiences. Home media releases reveal the intentions of particular distributors and the specific markets that exist for specific films, e.g. in the UK. Tartan, and its continuing legacy (as demonstrated with *Battle Royale*) shows that there is a long-term demand for both films of Asian origin and/or those rooted in the horror genre. Arrow helps to emphasise the continued commercial ventures that are possible because of these cult audience interests, as well as interests in other genres and films by specific directors. Arrow has also emphasised and reiterated the cult status and history of *Battle Royale* several times, something it has done for several

other films. This demonstrates a parallel aim of defining and charting cult cinema, in addition to marketing and promoting it. The numerous home media releases of *Battle Royale* help to illustrate the treatment given to other films in the Arrow sub-labels' catalogues. In addition, the distributor has recently announced it will be publishing a book for the first time—titled *Cult Cinema: An Arrow Video Companion*—which will chart the history of its cult film releases.⁶

Patterns and processes linked to *Battle Royale* help to demonstrate factors that affect understandings of the term cult, and other categorisations of film. Cult cinema is inextricably linked to categories of genre and nation, and perceptions of these other categories in turn influence how cult cinema is understood. *Battle Royale* is a significant film text within these categories as its DVD and Blu-ray releases demonstrate the complex and overlapping relationships and definitions of these terms. Even more significant are the practices and processes of both Tartan and Arrow. Their home media releases demonstrate that a prominent factor in establishing a film's cult status, or other categorisation, is its treatment as a commercial product. This can be further reinforced with reference to Johnson's arguments regarding the franchising of films and media:

Franchising is something with which participants in the media industries have imagined, negotiated, and identified in their attempts to navigate both economies and creativities ... franchising – and the study of it – should remain of significant value to those who want to understand how and why the culture industries reproduce shared culture. (Johnson, 2013, p. 26)

Battle Royale has been turned into a home media franchise whereby home media distributors have continuously re-released and re-packaged a single film. This has relied on the film's initial reputation within Japan and its global reception. Subsequently, Tartan and Arrow have reinforced these aspects and associated *Battle Royale* with new categorisations. DVD and Blu-ray are relatively new formats in film history. Nonetheless, this study suggests commercial practices and processes are central to understanding definitions of cult, in contrast with its associations to practices that are non-commercial and outside of the mainstream (Jancovich, 2002; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Martin, 2008). Currently, and for as long as they exist, home media formats are critically important in establishing how cult cinema is defined and understood.

NOTES

1. *Battle Royale* DVD 2001. *Amazon* website. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B00005UDYA>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).
2. *Battle Royale* Two Disc Special Edition DVD 2001. *Amazon* website. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B00013YQEW>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).
3. *Battle Royale* DVD. *Amazon* website. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B003DKU0BI>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).
4. *Battle Royale* 3 Disc Box Set (Limited Edition). *Amazon* website. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B003ZIZ2HU>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).
5. *Battle Royale* DVD (ArrowDrome). *Amazon* website. Available at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B005IX34EI/>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).
6. *Cult Cinema: An Arrow Video Companion* (Limited Edition) Hardback. *Arrow Films* website. Available at: <http://www.arrowfilms.co.uk/cultcinemabook/>. (Accessed 05/01/2016).

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