

Whose Canon is it Anyway? Subcultural Capital, Cultural Distinction  
and Value in High Art and Low Culture Film Distribution

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According to figures from the British Film Institute (BFI), the UK has the second largest filmed entertainment market in the world, coming second only to the USA,<sup>1</sup> worth an estimated £3.8 billion (2016, p. 2). How we choose to navigate the sheer volume of films available to us is significantly affected by the circulation of discourse, often related to its visibility, as well as notions of taste. Jonathan Rosenbaum suggests that we can observe a segmentation of the discourse surrounding film—where the mainstream, the industry and academia all reinforce and promote their own agendas (2000). Historically, early film criticism was concerned with legitimising these texts and their study, consequently attempting to align film analysis with that of broader historical approaches established in the analysis of the fine arts. These early valorisations about what might constitute the highest quality representations, and the subsequent formation of the film studies discipline, led to the formation of the first canons.

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Paul Schrader argues that by definition, the film canon is 'based upon criteria that transcend taste' (2006, p. 34). Whether a film appeals to you personally or whether the film was hugely popular are inconsequential considerations, instead, every effort should be made to separate out 'personal favourites from those movies that artistically defined film history' (ibid.). Within this separation lies what Janet Staiger has referred to as the 'politics of inclusion and exclusion', where 'some films are moved to the center of attention; others, to the margins' (1985, p. 8). However, what constitutes that centre is largely a matter of perspective, and while established cinematic canons within academia are reinforced, films which might be considered as canonical outside of the academy are summarily dismissed and moved to the margins with priority being given to another body of film.

Commercially, and mirroring the exclusionary cultural practices highlighted by Staiger, many companies have made an asset of a product that is located outside of a perceived mainstream, consequently attributing a perceived value to it. Though a gamut of companies operate within this market, these marginal offerings can be most easily understood as being located in what has historically been considered opposite ends of the spectrum. First, that of high art: the worthy, canonical films of academia, often art-cinema or films of perceived artistic merit that have been judged to have a significant cinematic value. Second, and at the other end of the spectrum sit low culture, trash or 'B' movies—films perceived as having very little artistic merit which often revel in sex or violence and can collectively be grouped under the umbrella of exploitation or cult movies. Though processes of cultural distinction have historically separated these cinemas based upon preconceived valorisations, in recent years an increased convergence of these markets has been observed. This is largely commercially driven, with distributors reinforcing, extending and challenging traditional notions of what might constitute the canonical film, and consequently further augmenting how ideas of value are constructed for films which fall outside mainstream consumption. This chapter will examine the role that distributors have played in maintaining and extending what, to different groups, are considered to be important and canonical films. It will also examine the active role they play in collapsing prior canonical boundaries, creating what is largely an 'economic canon'. Fundamental to this is an underlying perception of what might constitute 'the quality product', and this chapter will consider how the qualities associated with cinema have been deployed in the home

entertainment market, mobilised as a measure of quality, while exploring how these ideas have merged with the technological expectations of laserdisc, DVD and Blu-ray. In doing so, the chapter aims to further challenge traditional notions of the canon, which is informed as much by the technological capabilities of the medium and the specificities of the modes of distribution as any of the previously understood criteria for canon formation.

### the new media renaissance

The current home entertainment market has partly been shaped by the opportunities afforded by technological innovation and the demands of early adopters in the marketplace—those who Barbara Klinger has referred to as ‘the new media aristocrats’ (2006, p. 17). Klinger suggests that the introduction of digital technology brought with it an impression of quality which has helped to define ‘the home as a site par excellence for media consumption’ (2006, p. 18), which created a distinction between more established analogue technologies, situating them as ‘lowbrow’ in relation to the new ‘highbrow’ experience offered by digital. Indeed, DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) as a technology was explicitly promoted on those terms, with an early trailer heralding its arrival by aligning the technology explicitly with a cinematic experience. The trailer began:

This is DVD ... the picture is twice as sharp as VHS, the sound is infinitely clearer, it looks and sounds as if you are at the movies, but you can experience it at home. Not to mention, you can watch it in widescreen, listen to audio commentary, choose from features like director’s notes, behind the scenes footage, trailers and more ... see how good a movie at home can be (Retro VHS trailers, 1999).

Ironically, this trailer was most frequently screened as an advertisement on VHS cassettes prior to the main feature and was therefore not representative of the actual quality of DVD, but it did help to create clear expectations for anyone engaging with the technology—expectations which clearly aligned DVD with the cinematic space and the cinematic experience. It is then no surprise that DVD became associated with a kind of cinephilia that had previously eluded VHS, and that it is this expectation this has continued to shape the market for DVD, and then subsequently for Blu-ray in the intervening years.

James Kendrick details what he suggests was a battle to legitimise the home theatre experience on DVD in the cineastes' engagement with the films of Stanley Kubrick. Prior to DVD, home theatre enthusiasts had typically opted for laserdiscs, which as Kendrick notes 'were almost always presented in their original aspect ratios, thus aligning the viewing experience at home more closely with the theatrical experience' (2005, p. 60). VHS by comparison, rarely offered widescreen presentations as standard, which often resulted in widescreen-formatted films frequently being adapted to fit the aspect ratio of a standard television screen— utilising the full screen and avoiding the appearance of black bars on the top and bottom of the image.

To achieve this reformatting, distributors typically approached the issue in one of two ways: for films that were recorded in full frame with an aspect ratio of 1.33:1 (the 4:3 aspect ratio of standard televisions), the transition was less problematic employing a process known as open- matte. With the standard aspect ratio of film essentially compatible with that of television, films recorded in this way would undergo a process known as 'soft-matte' for theatrical exhibition, whereby the projection would be masked top and bottom to achieve the familiar widescreen appearance, producing a theatrical aspect ratio of 1.85:1 or 1.66:1. When these films came to be transferred to video, since they already had an aspect ratio of 4:3, and as such were compatible with the native aspect ratio of standard television, distributors simply took the decision to not mask the frame and instead deliver the image as full screen. Though often contentious among cinema aficionados as not representative of directorial intent and therefore not delivering an authentic theatrical experience, the dominant perception from industry was that the average consumer preferred a full-screen presentation over the reduced image size of a widescreen presentation on video. Indeed, so pervasive was this perception, that if a film was not available as an open-matte print, distributors would routinely employ a process developed for broadcast television to facilitate full-screen presentation, a process known as 'pan and scan'. The process took its name from the technique where an editor would select parts of the original widescreen image based upon what they deemed to be important to the shot. They would then copy or *scan* this subsection, and when the point of interest moved to another part of the frame, the editor would then move the scanner based again upon their own perception of what was important. It is this movement that creates the *pan* effect from which the process takes its name.

The benefit of the pan-and-scan process was the removal of the black horizontal bars common to television broadcasts of widescreen presentations, which Steve Neale describes as “re-compos[ing] films made in and for widescreen formats’ [...] ‘by reframing shots, by re-editing sequences and shots, and by altering the pattern of still and moving shots used in the original film’ (1998, p. 131). The process proved to be a hugely contentious one, deemed to be infinitely more problematic than the open-matte approach, but despite this it was a surprisingly common practice before the introduction of DVD and Blu-ray. As Kendrick observes, neither processes were welcomed among home-theatre enthusiasts, many of whom were trying to recreate the theatrical viewing space. Kendrick details what he describes as a conflict between the notion of cinema as an art form and the technological specificities of its presentation, suggesting, that for the majority of home-theatre enthusiasts, ‘the theatrical viewing space is the ultimate arbiter of authenticity, and, therefore, the closer their home environments come to re-creating that space, the more legitimate it becomes as a place to view films properly’ (2005, p. 65).

This desire for theatrical accuracy went as far as to see groups of these enthusiasts challenge directorial decisions over the presentation of particular films, as is the case with the later films of Stanley Kubrick, where ‘films were all shot open-matte with a 1.33:1 aspect ratio but were projected in US theatres in a standard matted 1.85:1 aspect ratio. However, it is well known, Kubrick insisted that the films be shown open-matte on home video in order to fill the television screen, which is why none of these films are available on DVD in their theatrical aspect ratios’ (Bracke cited in Kendrick, 2005, p. 64). Kubrick’s decision to present these later films as full-frame presentations is a cause of considerable criticism, with critics being bold enough to suggest that ‘Kubrick did not fully understand the ramifications of his decision to present his film open-matte on home video and that he died before being able to fully appreciate the development of high-definition televisions that allow for widescreen aspect ratios and still fill the screen’ (ibid.).

Kendrick suggests that this conflict over the legitimacy of the presentation of these films is largely an ‘issue of authorial versus technological intent (the director’s artistic vision versus the medium’s technological properties as primary determinant of film form)’ (2005, p. 65). Fundamental to all of these debates is the construction of cinema as an art form, which is therefore imbued with a set of preconceived values and associations, and these in turn dictate the parameters of expectation in the presentation of

these films and then therefore the technological specificities of that presentation. Implicit in all of this is an articulation of the economic, cultural and social capital of those invested in these debates, which partly reiterates Janet Staiger's 'politics of inclusion and exclusion' (1985, p. 8), which, (if not complicating the criteria for inclusion in the canon), certainly applies another layer of evaluative criteria based ostensibly on the technological. It similarly moves some presentations 'to the center of attention', while simultaneously moving 'others, to the margins'—though for very different reasons than those observed by Staiger.

While these arguments over aspect ratios could be seen to confirm Kubrick's auteur status and therefore reinforce traditional notions of what constitutes the canonical film, they are also indicative of the ways in which value has been constructed, firstly on DVD, and then subsequently on Blu-ray, and equally act as markers of the distinctions that have been made between these digital formats and their analogue predecessors. The pan-and-scan approach used in VHS presentations was quickly rendered obsolete by the technological expectations of DVD and digital presentations. While this expectation could be seen to reinforce established ideas around the construction of film canons, and reinforce the perceived value of any director whose work is given this treatment, I suggest that it is also indicative of a shifting sensibility of what might constitute the quality presentation of films across the entire industry and is not limited to canonical perceptions of 'important' directors.

Indeed, these arguments are by no means limited to directors who would be seen as traditionally canonical directors, or even limited to films which may have been deemed to be historically valuable cinematic interventions. One such director is Lucio Fulci—regarded by many to be an important cult director. Noted for the extremity of his films, he is often referred to as 'The Godfather of Gore' and has garnered a significant reputation in cult circles for films like *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1980), *City of the Living Dead* (1980), *The Beyond* (1981) and *The New York Ripper* (1982). However, even within cult circles, he is equally considered by many to be an inept and overrated, talentless hack (Kanada, 2009). Here, although ostensibly in the margins, a hierarchy is constructed which tends to favour directors like Dario Argento or Mario Bava as the auteurs of Italian horror, locating Fulci well outside these valorisations. However, despite his reputation, the UK DVD releases of Fulci's *The Beyond* and *City of the Living Dead* by the distributor VIPCO were marred by the same expectations as those illustrated by Kendrick in

relation to the films of Stanley Kubrick. Though in most cases VIPCO's releases of Fulci's films on the home entertainment market were cut and censored by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), fan responses were typically accepting of these cuts. Instead criticisms focussed on the presentation of the product, including the films' lack of digital restoration, that they had clearly been transferred from VHS masters and displayed damage typical of that associated with videotape, with the most vocal criticism being that the films were pan-and-scan prints, displayed in the incorrect aspect ratio. These elements, especially the latter, were all held as examples that VIPCO was being disrespectful of the films. However, much of this can be attributed to a technological misunderstanding. A blogger named Mattei's Nipple countered the dominant perception of VIPCO as a company that released trimmed, pan-and-scan prints, citing that in actuality, the full-frame presentation was, in most cases, the result of an open matte process and not the result of the pan-and-scan process. However, unlike Kendrick's observation that 'the theatrical viewing space is the ultimate arbiter of authenticity', many of VIPCO's releases, and indeed many cult films more generally, didn't receive an official theatrical release in the UK in the same way that the cinema of Kubrick did, and are for many explicitly associated with their dominant mode of exhibition—the home video cassette recorder. This has not prevented the application of allusions to the cinematic that continue to function as a framing device in the demarcation of cultural value. This is particularly evident in non-mainstream markets, where mass-market appeal is neither guaranteed nor expected, and this is perhaps best illustrated through an examination of two labels that operate at what have historically been understood as opposing ends of the cinematic spectrum: The Criterion Collection, as distributors of 'high-art' quality film, and Arrow Video, as distributors of 'low-culture' exploitation film.

### **the perCeption of VaLue in a CinematiC Canon**

It is not without significance that when The Criterion Collection began in 1983, the brand released exclusively on laserdisc, a format which Kendrick details 'were almost always presented in their original aspect ratios, thus aligning the viewing experience at home more closely with the theatrical experience' (2005, p. 60). Laserdisc has come to be seen as the technological forebear of the DVD format, allowing bonus features, production stills, making-of documentaries, audio commentaries,

cut scenes and alternative endings; extras which Criterion were the first to incorporate as the staples of their brand, and features which came to define quality DVD releases. Barry Schauer suggests that laserdisc as a technology appealed to a 'niche audience of cinephiles and academics who were attracted to the format's superior picture and sound as well as its ability to hold special features' (2005, p. 32).

This emphasis on presentation and special features has become the defining characteristic of The Criterion Collection, a brand which Schauer observes 'has come to symbolize quality in home video' (ibid.). Fundamental to that sense of quality is an implicit allusion toward the cinematic, which, in the case of Criterion, comes from the films they have chosen to include in their catalogue. This catalogue, at least in the formative years of the company, was largely the result of their partnership with Janus films—a theatrical distributor responsible for introducing American audiences to many of the classics of world cinema from directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, Sergei Eisenstein, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, François Truffaut and Yasujiro Ozu, and who now licence their catalogue to Criterion. Schauer also observes that 'The Criterion Collection privileges the European and Japanese art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, at the expense of other national cinemas, genres, and eras'. While James Kendrick has convincingly argued that Criterion have demonstrated an eclecticism in their catalogue with releases that have resisted 'restraints of politics, taste, geography, and time,' he concedes that they have nevertheless demonstrated a bias toward established canonical titles and auteurs such as Ingmar Bergman. This concentration on the established luminaries of film reinforces a canon of films that were established in the arthouse cinema of the 1960s and 1970s via the theatrical distributions of Janus Films. Drawing from this, I suggest that acknowledging this connection to theatrical history is equally important in the construction of the quality surrounding these films.

The Arrow Video sub-label is an imprint of Arrow Films, a company that often specialises in theatrical, DVD and Blu-Ray releases of films from all over the world. In contrast, Arrow Video is explicitly defined by their association with the less-prestigious medium of video and the VHS format. Referred to as 'the Criterion of Shit Movies' (Bickel, 2016), Arrow have redesigned the market for cult film in the UK by adopting a similar emphasis to Criterion on the inclusion and variety of special features on their DVD releases. In doing so, they have begun to blur the distinctions observed by Barbara Klinger in relation the perception

of value in analogue and digital by creating a digital product which re-releases and is evocative of, an analogue product. By emphasising quality and the importance of paratextual material, they have carved out a niche releasing films that have then been repositioned as canonical cult, horror and exploitation films. Significantly, the vast majority of Arrow's DVD catalogue was never released in the cinema, only finding an initial audience in the early 1980s through video distribution and exhibition. Despite this, Arrow Video have worked to establish a link with the cinematic format, recently releasing a coffee-table book entitled 'Cult Cinema' (2015), detailing their releases, reprinting liner notes, commissioned essays and artworks for a selection of their most successful releases. Arrow Video's repurposing of 'Cinema' as an umbrella term to describe its releases—many of which were never available theatrically in the UK—is demonstrative of a deliberate attempt to apply a quality distinction to films which have traditionally been considered inferior texts primarily associated with an inferior product (VHS). In doing so, Arrow attempts to reconfigure perceptions of value as they relate to exploitation. The application of the mode of exhibition as a cultural indicator of value, for films which were broadly not available theatrically, may be unique to Arrow, and is indicative of an attempt to capitalise on the increased romanticisation and cultural cache of the grindhouse circuit in the United States, as well as the implicit valorisations we see applied to worthy canonical films arising from 'worthy' cinematic traditions.

### Cinema and snobbery

The elevation of cinema as the superior mode of exhibition is by no means a new occurrence and these discussions are usually foreground against a particular type of film. Writing in 1996 for *The New York Times*, Susan Sontag's essay 'The Decay of Cinema' bemoaned the loss of the experiential qualities of cinema, lamenting 'cinema's glorious past' while invoking the icons of its golden age. Consequently, the Lumiere brothers, Melies, Feuillade, D.W. Griffith, Dziga Vertov, Pabst, Murnau, Rossellini and Bertolucci are all presented as the ghosts of cinema's once glorious past, before a systematic industrial decline. While much of Sontag's eulogy is concerned with the tensions between industry and art, or with the nostalgic recollection of 'the feverish age of movie-going' in the 1960s and 1970s the resounding message is what Sontag describes as a waning in 'the distinctive cinephilic love of movies that is not simply love of but a

certain taste in films' (1996). She openly acknowledges that this type of cinephilia may appear 'snobbish' and extends this snobbery beyond mere valorisations of particular types of film to the medium itself stating 'to see a great film only on television isn't to have really seen that film'. Sontag's distinction, perhaps borne out of a life spent in a thriving metropolis where 'worthy' cinema was available theatrically, clearly refuses to acknowledge films which for variety of reasons were never widely exhibited theatrically, and films whose very meaning was constructed by the possibilities made available by the home viewing experience. 'Snobbish' by her own admission, Sontag's premature obituary of cinephilic culture is demonstrative of the hierarchical structure that had dogged video as film's 'poor-relation' since its introduction in the late 1970s.

A year after Sontag's eulogy, the introduction of DVD would further destabilise traditional notions of cinephilia. No doubt farther removed from Sontag's perception, which Mark Betz dismissed as 'privileg[ing] [particular] sites and forms of consumption' in the 'rarified, quasi-religious theatrical experience of the filmic relic' of Sontag's youth, cinephilia's evolution was incremental, and as early as 1991, scholars were introducing terms like 'videophilia' (Tashiro, 1991, p. 7) or 'telephilia' (Price, 2004, p. 36) to account for the increased influence of the small screen on traditional notions of what might constitute the cinephilic experience. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener introduce the concept of 'videosyncrasy' to describe the modern cinephile's ability to move easily between 'different technologies, platforms, and subject positions in a highly idiosyncratic fashion that nevertheless remains connective and flexible enough to allow for the intersubjective exchange of affect, objects and memories' (2005, p. 14). Of course, where videophilia, telephilia or indeed cinephilia might imply a hierarchical structure to technology, with priority given to one specific medium over another, and even though de Valck and Hagener who prefer to see cinephilia as an umbrella term which encompasses all engagement with screen media, they suggest that 'videosyncrasy' might be better suited, as it implies no such hierarchy and allows for a levelling of all media under the umbrella of one all-encompassing category.

Semantic categorisations aside, it is clear that the availability of film on home media technology has destabilised traditional notions of what might constitute the cinephilic tendency, and while this is often intrinsically linked to cultures of collecting, it has also, at least implicitly, impacted on what might be understood as the canonical film. As I have

demonstrated, historically these values have been constructed through an alignment with cinema, but increasingly, and aside from the emphasis on aspect ratio which can be clearly seen to derive from the specifics of theatrical exhibition, a sense of quality and value has been further instilled by the opportunities for paratextual extension available on digital formats and the specifics of Blu-ray and DVD presentations. The aforementioned bonus features—production stills, making-of documentaries, audio commentaries, cut scenes and alternative endings—can all be seen as adding another layer of value, something which Kate Egan has suggested ‘can serve as historical portraits’ (2007, p. 186) framing a film as an important part of cinematic history. Increasingly, the intrinsic functionality of digital media is being applied in a way that reconstructs filmic texts as valuable and imbued with implicit cultural value.

Perhaps the most visible example of this can be observed in the processes of translation required for foreign-language cinema to be understood outside its country of origin. There are, of course, many factors to be considered in the decision of whether a film be subtitled, or dubbed (post-synchronised), not least of which is cost—and with subtitling typically costing between ‘a tenth and a twentieth as much as dubbing’ (Ivarsson, 2009, p. 4), there are obvious economic benefits to subtitling. However, historically, if a film was perceived to have broad demographic appeal then it would be dubbed to ensure that the film generated maximum returns, and if the market was less certain or the film was considered as niche then it would likely be subtitled, thereby reducing production costs and maximising returns.

Overtime however, and particularly visible in Western markets, the process of subtitling has increasingly become associated with a particular type of marginal film—the foreign-language drama or the art-film, and perhaps because of this association, the subtitle itself has become imbued with an implicit cultural value which has come to function as a marker or signifier to the inherent value of any given film. Similarly, over time, and in spite of the increased cost associated with the process, dubbing has increasingly become associated with another kind of film; films which are often genre productions, and therefore considered less prestigious, which are then repackaged and dubbed into the destination language for maximum return. Miller suggests that this can be considered as simply a matter of the most appropriate process for a type of film, and that ‘largely narrative or action scenes work well with a dubbed track, while if it’s a more cerebral production subtitling may be better’ (cited in Dean, 1987, p. 38).

However appropriate these processes might be, Miller's delineation between 'action' and 'cerebral' reinforces particular associations and as such assigns particular cultural valorisations.

Implicit in these distinctions is a reliance on the familiar arguments over auteurism where established, foreign-language, canonical titles are frequently presented with subtitled dialogue as the most authentic representation of the director's vision. This of course assumes that there is an absolute translation to the subtitle and does not acknowledge that both the process of subtitling and the process of dubbing are ultimately a negotiation, based upon the constraints of the medium which is inherently flawed as it is fundamentally reliant on a degree of adaptation, something known as *constrained translation*. Jorge Díaz Cintas suggests that constrained translation can be most easily understood as subtitling being subject to the constraints inherent in the 'physical delivery of the written message' which is governed by the 'width of the screen that usually only allows for a total of 35 characters per line in a maximum of two lines' (1999, p. 33). Whereas the primary constraints when dubbing are a need to ensure that 'the target language message' ... 'follow[s] the original movement of the lips' (ibid.). However, in order to ensure that either the subtitled text or audio dub remains in harmony and is synchronised with the visuals appearing on the screen, a process of adaptation must occur since it is unlikely that the language of origin matches the destination language.

The fidelity of this process of adaptation is the subject of much debate. However, often overlooked in this debate is the implicit cultural value attributed to the subtitle, and as a direct result, the perceived lack of value inherent in the dubbed film. Antje Ascheid suggests that when a film becomes considered as 'an artistically valuable "authored original"' (1997, p. 34), then subtitling becomes intertwined with its distinction as high art over a film perceived to be of low cultural value. Indeed, films arising from the tradition of exploitation cinema, which would have historically been understood as being of 'low cultural value' are increasingly being repackaged as 'artistically valuable authored originals' which include options for these valuable films to be dubbed or subbed. While much foreign-language cinema continues to be reappraised in this way, much of the Italian exploitation film market—of which Arrow Video are the largest distributor in the UK—demonstrates no such remediation as these films were not produced in one consistent language. Italian producers famously used post-synchronised audio tracks as standard practice

(cf. Frayling, 2012, p. 68). This meant that location audio was not retained, and usually not even recorded. Actors would record their own language tracks separately and these would then be synched and applied to the visual component as part of the post-production process. The significance of this is that there is no one language to these films, and therefore no authentic 'authored original'. Even the original Italian versions of these films are comprised of multiple dubbed elements, raising interesting questions over how we construct and navigate value in relation to 'popular' foreign-language cinema produced in this way.

Similarly, Laurie Cubbison observed that as East-Asian cinemas major exports, kung fu and anime movies are more likely to be dubbed for international markets. Cubbison also suggests that outside of these genres, most foreign-language films tend to be subtitled and would therefore be marketed as art cinema (2005, p. 46). While I would argue that there is a large body of European foreign-language cinema which is also dubbed and as such have historically sat outside of the category of art-cinema, there is no denying the vast body of work from Asia which is routinely dubbed on its entry into foreign markets. However, digital media has begun to offer a plurality of experience which cinema and then video did not. Recent releases of *Lady Snowblood* (1973) on Arrow Video and Criterion, or even the perennial pseudo 'video nasty' *Shogun Assassin* (1980) on Eureka Entertainment (another label specialising in releasing canonical films) suggest that although these films are indelibly associated with the exploitation market—and if released theatrically would have been presented with dubbed audio tracks to ensure a broad appeal—they are increasingly being presented not only in their 'authentic' dubbed form, but also as valuable subtitled 'authored originals'. This shift in presentation is also representative of a shift in the perceived value of these films, and where earlier debates may have foregrounded obtaining the fullest version of any given film on the basis of the extremity of cut scenes, increasingly, value is attached to the sense of these films being culturally important.

Not limited to Asian cinema, similar reappraisals are increasingly evident across a wide range of cult film releases. Recently, Arrow Video and Shameless Screen Entertainment have initiated the lengthy process of restoring footage to cult European releases. However, as this footage was usually omitted from English language versions prior to the films being dubbed, these sequences often never received a dubbed English language translation, and since retrospectively dubbing these films would be prohibitively expensive, or often, as is the case with classic films, increasingly

difficult to source the original actors or even impersonators to voice the characters, distributors have begun incorporating these scenes as subtitled sequences in dubbed English-language versions, most visible perhaps in Arrow Video's release of Argento's *Deep Red* (1975). While the experience of viewing subtitled sequences in a film with a dubbed English-language track can often appear jarring, incongruous or disjointed, the decision to incorporate these sequences nevertheless reinforces the increasing movement toward a construction of these films as valuable cinematic entries and positions particular releases as 'authored originals'.

This sense of the 'authored original' is something which would have historically been reserved for worthy canonical art cinema, a form which has been historically resistant to generic categorisation. David Bordwell has convincingly argued that what we understand as 'art cinema' is itself now a 'distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures' (1979, p. 716), and as such could be considered a genre in its own right. Indeed, historically, even films which had explicit genre associations, such as Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) as an action adventure, or Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960) as a rape/revenge narrative, tend to be considered as canonical world cinema or art cinema before the application of any generic associations derived from the narrative. This is significant, as it not only illustrates the elevation of art cinema above everyday traditional generic classification, but also, in doing so, it attempts to reinforce quality distinctions and good/bad binaries.

What is increasingly evident in the distribution practices of Arrow Video and Criterion is that for them at least, these binaries no longer exist. Indeed, in a marketplace which was once defined by cultural distinction, distributors increasingly demonstrate what Joan Hawkins has referred to as a 'levelling of cultural hierarchies and abolition of binary categories' (2000, p. 8). This levelling sees both sectors—as exemplified by Criterion and Arrow—extending their respective catalogues into what would have previously been understood as the others' territory, while still seeking to position these new additions as canonical. So, whilst Criterion will release Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963), they are now equally comfortable releasing 1950s schlock Sci-Fi *The Blob* (1958). Similarly, while Arrow's mainstay is cult and exploitation, releasing the canonical works one would expect from a distributor aligned with that sector, they have introduced Arrow Academy—releasing films that are more traditionally identifiable as canonical works, such as Rainer Werner

Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) or Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

What this does is implicitly assign a cultural value to films by association. Criterion and Arrow are distributors that are both known for releasing important canonical films, albeit from what has historically been understood as different sectors. When they release films which may fall outside of that categorization, these films take on an imprimatur of quality and value because they have been restored and reconstructed with extras that serve as 'historical portraits' to the value of the film; they are presented in their correct aspect ratio, with numerous audio and subtitle options; they include bonus features, production stills, making-of documentaries, audio commentaries, cut scenes and alternative endings. Additionally, because they fall under the banner of labels that have reputations for releasing important films, they will therefore be understood as important films.

As such distributors play a hugely significant role in contributing to the formation of a new 'economic canon'; a canon which is based as much upon the technological properties of the medium, which in turn influence the presentation of the product, as much as any artistic considerations derived from traditional notions of canon formation. Indeed, if we accept that these prestige labels are increasingly functioning as cultural intermediaries and tastemakers, then we need to consider that much of this may be formed from the economic remit of distributors to extend their catalogue, rather than as traditional notions of canon formation, particularly through auteurist status. In his discussion of art cinema, Bordwell challenges us to think about canons differently, although in doing so he continues to draw upon traditional methodologies of categorical distinction: modes of film practice, formal conventions and historical existence. However, beyond this, Bordwell's acknowledgment of art cinema as a genre can also be developed to include its distribution practices.

Where previously, marketing may have foregrounded cultural distinction in order to demonstrate product differentiation, increasingly what is in evidence is how value is constructed in the same way (i.e. no product differentiation) regardless of the target market, with prestige distributors displaying the same emphasis on the technological over the artistic merits of any given film. In this way, any film can be constructed as valuable and significant if the 'historical portraits' are in place to reinforce that perspective, and in this way distributors can be seen to be actively contributing to an ever-evolving canon, rather than simply facilitating our access to film.

## Note

1. Though positive, the report details the expectation that the UK market be overtaken by China within the next four years.

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