

Takashi Miike and the Dynamics of Cult Authorship

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Abstract

Since the release of *Audition* in 1999, Takashi Miike has become one of the most visible Japanese directors in Western film culture. This thesis offers an extensive critical history of the reception of Miike and his cinema that has thus far been absent from English-language scholarship on the director. Miike's work has been defined by his prolific rate of production, his protean approach to genre, and the often "extreme" content of some of his titles, yet the enduring framework through which the filmmaker has been negotiated is as a distinctly singular *cult auteur*. Viewed through the specific lens of Miike's reputation as a cult auteur, this study explores notions of cinematic authorship and of cult film in its examination of the many ways in which the director's work has been promoted, presented, and understood. Each chapter traces a distinct phase in the development of Miike's career, centred around the distribution and reception of a number of key releases. In a largely chronological fashion, the chapters map a distinct narrative of the *emergence*, the *discovery*, the *reverence*, and the *internationalisation* of Miike and his cinema, since the very beginning of his filmmaking career. The studies carried out across this thesis demonstrate how Miike's reception in the West has been significantly shaped by his distinct cult authorship, whilst working towards a definition of the concept of a "cult auteur" that considers its function as an important structuring principle in film culture.

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Introduction

Interviewer: In the press notes for *Gozu* you call yourself crazy. Have you ever been to a psychiatrist?

Takashi Miike: [laughs] I go to the dentist not a shrink.

(Epstein 2004)

In a dark living room in Tokyo, a beautiful young woman kneels down to an incapacitated middle-aged man lying lifeless on the floor. With a hypodermic syringe, she injects a paralytic agent directly into his tongue. The man convulses. The woman rolls the man to one side, carefully lays out a white sheet, and returns him back into position. In the following moments, she slowly inserts acupuncture needles into his body in what she explains are the most painful points—his abdomen, his eyelids. After telling the man that true enlightenment can only be achieved through such pain, she delves once more into her leather bag of horrifying instruments. She pulls out a piano wire, which she extends at arm's length. The woman wraps the metal wire around the man's manacled ankle, and, in a steady sawing motion, proceeds to lacerate his flesh. Then his bone. As her action grows more intense, she grins from cheek to cheek as blood pours from the man's severe wound. Eventually, the foot is completely dismembered and the woman unceremoniously tosses it aside. The film ends shortly after. This is the work of director Takashi Miike, a man who claims: 'Me, personally, I'm not a big fan of violent movies, it's not something I like to watch' (Fragoso 2015).

The film in question is *Audition/Ōdishon* (1999), the 31st directorial effort in just under eight years from Japanese filmmaker Miike. Receiving its worldwide premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival on 6th October 1999, it went on

to win two major awards at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January the following year. In 2001, *Audition* was released in cinemas across North America and the United Kingdom. At that time, Miike was virtually unknown in the West, a matter that made the film's arrival all the more shocking. *Audition* was divisive, with mixed, yet invariably fervent, responses from audiences and critics. *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw (2001) described it as 'an intricate torture garden of a film, lovingly maintained and manicured,' and in *The New York Times* Elvis Mitchell (2001) wrote that 'the picture has the formal modesty of a work by Yasujiro Ozu.' *Empire's* Kim Newman argued that *Audition* expertly eschews US horror's tendency to rely on easy thrills, generating a 'deep-seated' terror that 'stays with you after the projector bulb has dimmed' (2000). Others, however, condemned it. *The Evening Standard's* Alexander Walker (2001) derided the film as grim 'exploitation,' and Christopher Tookey (2001) branded it 'revolting' in *The Daily Mail*, taking objection to the British Board of Film Classification's decision to allow it to be passed for release uncut. During its notorious run at the festival in Rotterdam, record numbers of audience members walked out, and there were even reports of viewers fainting and requiring emergency medical attention at a theatre showing in Switzerland.

The lively reception of *Audition* is demonstrative of the immense impact the film and its director would come to have on the wider consumption of contemporary Asian¹ cinema in the West. *Audition* and Miike were at the centre of the Asia Extreme phenomenon, a highly influential 'discursively constructed' category of contemporary Asian titles that gained popularity with multiple Western audience

¹ To clarify, from hereon in I shall use the term "Asia" to refer more precisely to the region of East Asia. Whilst ostensibly reductive in nature, my reason for doing so is not. My use of "Asia/Asian," as opposed to "East Asia/East Asian," is in line with the employment of these terms in the filmic discourse with which I am concerned throughout this thesis. As I shall later discuss, Miike's cinema has commonly been framed by Western notions of Asia as a wide geographical and conceptual construct, incorporating the homogenisation of many far-reaching nations under the umbrella of "Asia." In order to reflect this, and in the interest of consistency, I shall follow this usage throughout.

demographics throughout the 2000s (Dew 2007: 60). Alongside Hideo Nakata's seminal J-horror (Japanese horror) film *Ring/Ringu* (1998) and veteran director Kinji Fukasaku's dystopian *Battle Royale/Batoru rowaiaru* (2000), Miike's *Audition* was a prominent title in what Daniel Martin has identified as 'the vanguard of a new wave of cult film' (2015: 41–42), a group of releases that, remarkably, developed both mainstream and art-house appeal. Leading the way in disseminating these titles was the now-defunct UK-based independent distributor Tartan Films. For its *Asia Extreme*² label, Tartan operated a widely successful marketing campaign that exploited longstanding Western conceptions of Asia and its film culture. Tartan, and other distributors, subjected these titles to a process of displacement, removing them from their domestic context and repackaging them in the West as a series of 'exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills' from the Far East (Needham 2006: 11). Positioned at the forefront of this, Miike's work came to represent, for many Western audiences, an imagined Japanese cinema of otherness—extreme, violent, sadistic, and bizarre.

Since *Audition* first made waves in the early 2000s, Miike has become a leading figure in the increasing international visibility of Japanese cinema. In line with his staggering rate of production, which has seen him produce 100 projects³ in little over 25 years, Miike's body of work is currently one of the most widely distributed in the West of any contemporary Japanese director, with his titles reaching an extensive range of official viewing platforms. Some enter competition in prestigious

² Throughout this thesis, I will refer specifically to Tartan's distribution label as *Asia Extreme* (italicised) and to the wider phenomenon to which it belonged as *Asia Extreme* (non-italicised). As I will outline in chapter two, although Tartan were not the only distributor responsible for releasing such films in the West, their *Asia Extreme* label (and the discourse of the "extreme" that surrounded it) came to represent this broader consumption trend in its entirety. As such, this delineation between the two is necessary in the interest of clarity.

³ As of 8th March 2017, Miike has exactly 100 projects to his name. He has helmed 54 theatrical features, 22 straight-to-video films, seven television movies, an hour-long television special, two television mini-series, and individual episodes of three television series. In addition to his film and television work, he has also directed a documentary short, a music video, a segment of a portmanteau film, a three-part educational film, and two stage plays filmed for video release.

international film festivals, such as those held in Cannes and Venice; others are shown by independent film clubs and campus cinemas; some become subjects of cult midnight screenings; and many see release on home video (reaching even supermarket shelves)⁴ and video-on-demand services. The presence of Miike's releases in the Western film market has grown concomitantly with his increasing commercial influence both home and abroad. Many of his more recent films have been hits at the Japanese box office (with his live-action adaptations of popular manga series performing particularly well), whilst those same films, and others, have made him a mainstay of the global festival scene.

As one of the most prominent Japanese directors of his generation, Miike's cinema has been central to many debates in Western academic discourse concerning the production and circulation of contemporary Japanese film. Scholars have considered Miike in a number of contexts, with his work figuring in discussions of topics including, but not limited to, the horror film (see Hantke 2005, Wee 2014: 180–203), transnationality (see Lee 2011, Rawle 2011, Rawle 2015), distribution practices (see Dew 2007, Rawle 2009, Shin 2009), cinematic violence (see McRoy 2008: 125–133, Hyland 2009, Martin 2015: 41–70), genre (see Stadler 2010, Khoo 2013, Rawle 2014), and wider trends in Japanese cinema (see Williams 2004, Ko 2006, Gerow 2009). The director's work has also been the subject of two books by film critic Tom Mes (2006, 2013),⁵ the former a film-by-film analysis accompanied by a brief discussion of Miike's thematic and stylistic traits, the latter a collection of

⁴ In the UK DVD chart, Miike's *13 Assassins* and *Yakuza Apocalypse* reached numbers 10 and 50, respectively, and both were readily available in supermarket chains such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, and Morrisons. See: <<http://www.officialcharts.com/charts/dvd-chart/20110911/141/>> and <<http://www.officialcharts.com/charts/dvd-chart/20160508/141/>>

⁵ To date, Mes' two texts are the only book-length publications in the English language dedicated to Miike's cinema. Whilst Mes' contributions have undoubtedly been instrumental in establishing Miike as a valuable object of study, his publications are intended for a popular, rather than academic, readership. There has thus far been no published English-language scholarly monograph to focus solely on the director and his work, as I will reiterate in the following pages.

previously published reviews, short articles, DVD liner notes, blog posts, interviews, and some newly written material.

In spite of their scope, scholarly approaches to Miike's cinema tend to fall into one of two camps—textual or industrial. The former is the most populated, with many analyses of the director's work considering his films in relation to certain wider cinematic trends. A major concern across a number of publications is Miike's distinct negotiation of nationality. For instance, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh's (2010) comparative study of the films of Miike and Takeshi Kitano⁶ considers their depictions of the Taiwanese capital city, Taipei, and Felicia Chan (2011) explores representations of cross-cultural encounters in her analysis of Miike's *The Bird People in China/Chūgoku no chōjin* (1998) and Icelandic director Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's *Cold Fever/Á köldum klaka* (1995). More recently, both Jane Stadler (2012) and Olivia Khoo (2013) have discussed Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007) in relation to "bad film," offering analyses of the movie in the exploration of concepts of originality, taste, and affect, and Steven Rawle has approached the director's work on multiple occasions, through frameworks of genre, the extreme, and transnationality (2011, 2014, 2015). Other scholars have considered the industrial contexts of Miike's cinema more closely. Most notably, Miike has figured in studies of the marketing and reception practices associated with Asia Extreme, in which he is positioned as a central figure. Rawle (2009), Martin (2015), Oliver Dew (2007), and Chi Yun-Shin (2009) all discuss the director in their examinations of the phenomenon, with *Audition* appearing as a particularly significant release. Robert Hyland's (2009) close reading of the film further assesses its production, locating it as part of a wider

⁶ Miike and fellow Japanese director Kitano have also been the subject of a book-length comparative study by Argentine journalist Martín Fernández Cruz (2015). Published in the Spanish language, Cruz's text (the title of which translates as *Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano: Violence and Tradition*) offers analysis of the two directors' films. Whilst comparisons between them are not uncommon, I will outline later in this introduction the ways in which the two filmmakers are distinct from one another.

political reaction of a group of filmmakers from Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong in response to the restrictions of their domestic industries.

This thesis is a vital contribution to scholarship on Miike, building upon work already done on the distribution and consumption of the director's films to offer a detailed, career-spanning critical history of his Western reception that has thus far been absent in academic discourse. To date, there exists no English-language scholarly monograph dedicated to Miike and his cinema. As such, this study is of immense value not only in its expansion of existing writing, but in its commitment to an area of investigation that remains unmapped by any book-length publication. Whilst any rigorous study of Miike is important in bolstering thought on the subject, my objective for this thesis is to further open up perspectives on the director and his work by locating them within a specific context. My focused examination will consider the trajectory of Miike's Western reception in relation to what I argue to be one of the defining conceptual frameworks through which promoters, audiences, and critics have negotiated his films—that of the *cult auteur*. In dialogue with two established fields of film theory (those of film authorship and cult cinema), I will explore how the notion of Miike as a cult auteur has been central in shaping his reception. In turn, I will propound that the concept of cult authorship provides a productive lens through which to investigate Miike's cinema academically. It is furthermore my intention that the reception studies carried out across the five chapters of this thesis will lead towards a definition of a "cult auteur," promoting a view to Miike's cinema that is ultimately constructive beyond the remit of its position as an object of study.

Miike's body of work stands as one of the most important, and distinguishable, oeuvres of any Japanese filmmaker working today. The director's distinct approach to filmmaking has played a significant role in informing how his cinema is promoted

and received, and as such it is necessary to appreciate the contexts of its production and recognise its characteristic traits. For the large part of his career, Miike has worked as a “director-for-hire,” taking on projects offered to him by producers as pre-prepared packages, often complete with a screenplay, budget, and cast. Particularly during his early years as a filmmaker (as shall be explored in chapter one), this mode of production enabled Miike to develop his directorial skills in Japan’s thriving straight-to-video market. With the high turnover demanded to cater to the domestic video rental boom of the 1990s, these titles were invariably genre pieces—most commonly *yakuza* (Japanese gangster) and action flicks—manufactured rapidly in a production-line manner to maintain a constant supply of recognisable, and thus marketable, releases. Miike worked almost exclusively in this way throughout the decade, producing up to six titles a year across an array of genres.

Although other current leading Japanese directors also began their career in this way (including Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Shinji Aoyama, and Rokuro Mochizuki), Miike’s filmmaking is extraordinary in that, unlike his contemporaries, he continued to operate within this market even as he became widely recognised as an auteur outside of Japan. Following their international breakthroughs, directors such as Kurosawa and Aoyama largely left straight-to-video production behind in favour of original projects intended for a global audience. What is remarkable about Miike is the fact that, for a significant period, he remained committed to the filmmaking approach he developed during these early years (and, to a great extent, he continues to be known for the films he produced in this way), yet shares the international reputation possessed by other prominent directors who started out in the domestic video market. This is further reflected in his maintaining of a relatively high rate of production. Since the immense success of his 2010 film 13

Assassins/Jūsan-nin no shikaku at international film festivals, Miike has consistently produced two or three titles a year, whilst the period between the releases of other significant filmmakers who began their careers in this market continues to lengthen.

The specificities of the Japanese straight-to-video market (again, discussed in more detail in chapter one) were instrumental in shaping the distinct stylistic and thematic characteristics of Miike's cinema. Whilst the formulaic nature of this mode of production may at first glance appear to offer little in terms of creative opportunities, this is in fact not the case. For the investors in these projects, low budgets meant little risk of seeing no return, and as such it was common for directors to be allowed the freedom to produce the films in their own way. Changes to scripts and shooting style were permitted, providing, as Mes explains, 'the end result features the requisite elements that make the film marketable to an audience as a genre film' (2007: 200). Miike's straight-to-video work is arguably the most illustrative example of the artistic prospects afforded to Japanese directors during this time. Although all his earlier releases seem to fit comfortably within recognisable genres (most notably that of the *yakuza* film), the director gives little attention to these genres' tropes or traditions, opting instead to manipulate the material he is given in his experimentation with film language. As Tony Rayns (one of the director's earliest advocates in the West) has put it, Miike makes 'genre movies [...] with the generic elements left on auto-pilot while the director busies himself with form, rhythm, texture' (2000: 30).

Indeed, Miike's cinema is notable for the presence of a defining, anarchic aesthetic, which is crafted in spite of the potentially limited generic arena within which it operates. The scope of the director's work embraces a wide variety of genres—including those of *yakuza*, horror, comedy, drama, action, samurai, musical,

family, superhero, and martial arts—yet it remains consistent in its unorthodox construction. Miike's films tend to reject the traditions of classical Japanese cinema,⁷ challenging established stylistic and narrative patterns in the propagation of a uniquely nonconformist sensibility.⁸ His approach can be considered improvisational, with the director adapting his material, and the way in which he presents it, in radical ways. For instance, in the final moments of *Ley Lines/Nihon kuroshakai* (1999), an archetypal Miike film, a gradual pull-pack from a long-shot to a panoramic wide shot (taken from a helicopter) is held for a number of minutes as two of the protagonists can be seen drifting aimlessly in a rowing boat amidst a vast ocean. As the closing music accompanies what was evidently intended as the film's credit sequence, the take eventually ends and the credits briefly appear on a single screen in barely legible text.⁹ Another display of Miike's impulsive aesthetic can be found in the opening ten minutes of *Dead or Alive/Dead or Alive: Hanzaisha* (1999). In his précis of Ichirō Ryu's screenplay, Miike condenses several establishing scenes into one kinetic, fast-paced montage, constructed with the liberal use of a handheld camera, flashpans, jump-cuts, and a pulsating rock 'n' roll soundtrack. Shot on location in Kabukichō, one of Tokyo's most popular red-light districts, Miike presents an almost

⁷ In his study of Miike's work, Tony Williams notes how 'he is regarded both at home and abroad as a director of "bad taste" films far removed from the art cinema circuit of his more distinguished predecessors such as Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu.' Miike's rejection of these traditions leads Williams to conclude that his 'films represent a changed world in which the visual overtones of a different type of cinema have expanded and destroyed the former certainties of that once dominant classical Japanese canonical cinema' (2004: 55).

⁸ Rayns' early overview of Miike's filmmaking in *Sight & Sound* mapped out five traits that he considers to define the director's work, namely (1) 'a nonconformist approach to film grammar and narrative structure'; (2) a 'conviction that what goes on below the belt is as interesting as what goes on in the back of the mind'; (3) 'a very open-minded view of the spectrum of human sexuality'; (4) 'a wicked, absurdist sense of humour'; and (5) 'a clear sense that the classical Japanese virtues of modesty, emotional restraint and self-denial [...] need to be balanced by liberating excesses.' These particular virtues, Rayns states, are 'all correct and present to some degree in everything he makes' (2000: 30, emphasis in original).

⁹ Rayns notes how the extended take at the end of *Ley Lines* 'was clearly intended as the background for the closing credits, but Miike liked it so much he kept the shot "clean"' (2000: 32).

mythical world of anarchy, in which the viewer is bombarded with a barrage of arresting images, including, amongst other scenes of mayhem, a drug-induced suicide, a diner's exploding stomach, public assassinations, and police brutality.

Dead or Alive's opening sequence is further illustrative of a central facet of Miike's cinema—his uncompromising treatment of violence. Demonstrated particularly by his earlier work, Miike's cinematic worlds can be pervaded by moments of alarming and grotesque violence. Often sexualised, this violence can make for uncomfortable viewing, yet its presence is rarely without meaning. The horrific acts Miike's characters perpetrate upon one another serve to imbue them, and his narratives, with a sense of hopelessness and nihilism, functioning as a means of articulating his particular thematic concerns.¹⁰ Such scenes also operate as an integral part of the director's radicalisation of genre. For example, one of the most shocking moments in *Dead or Alive* occurs when a gangster drowns a naked woman in a paddling pool filled with her own excrement, after she is intentionally induced into a drug-fuelled coma. Whilst undoubtedly disturbing, this scene reveals a vital objective of Miike's filmmaking—of what Tony Williams (2004: 55) has termed his 'cinema of outrage'—in its deconstruction, and criticism, of genre expectations. Following the chaotic opening sequence, Miike sets up what appears to be a traditional *yakuza* film narrative, fashioning a dramatic plot interspersed with anticipated flashes of action. However, the placement of the aforementioned on-screen death abruptly intrudes upon this course, inciting contemplation in a startling and intentionally shocking way. As Williams argues, although this scene 'appears offensive to the tastes of most audiences, Miike's *modus operandi* in this example of his cinema of outrage involves taking the *yakuza-eiga*'s traditional treatment of

¹⁰ Miike's themes are so apparent, Mes argues, that there are six identifiable issues he interacts with consistently across his films. Mes terms these themes 'the rootless individual'; 'the outcast'; 'the search for happiness'; 'nostalgia'; 'the family unit'; and 'violence' (2006: 23–33).

women to its logical conclusions and confronting his audience with the dark implications of this theme' (2004: 58, emphasis in original).

In spite of such machinations, Miike's releases have often been widely marketed, and subsequently received, in the West as the work of an exploitative director who espouses violence for purely sensationalist means. The violent content of some of his films, coupled with his anarchic style, has seen Miike positioned as a figurehead of a supposedly extreme, scandalous, and trendy Japanese cinema. As Aaron Gerow (2009: 24) has outlined, 'Miike has been sold abroad alongside such directors as Fukasaku Kinji and Kitano Takeshi as the purveyor of a hard-hitting, flamboyant and cool stylistics.'¹¹ Here, Gerow's placing of Miike in relation to Kitano is particularly pertinent in revealing the erroneous nature of this superficial representation. Both Kitano and Miike work across many genres in Japan, yet their work has tended to be packaged by Western distributors within the "extreme" paradigm (most commonly through an association with the *yakuza* genre), a discursive framing that, significantly, has been instrumental in the development of their respective cult reputations. Yet, in both directors' cases, these marketing tactics have contributed to a perception of their cinema that does not truly reflect the versatility of their filmmaking. Whilst their oeuvres undoubtedly play host to many alarmingly violent scenes, they are most certainly not defined by them; many of Miike's and Kitano's films are in no way "extreme" in the manner distributors have presented them, and some of their titles even forgo violent content entirely.

¹¹ In addition to Kitano, veteran director Kinji Fukasaku has also commonly been positioned alongside Miike by Western distributors and critics. This has predominantly circulated around the Asia Extreme discourse, with Miike's work and Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* among some of the most prominent releases to be implicated in Asia Extreme's discursive construction. Whilst discussion of both directors has been central to debates surrounding this phenomenon, the recontextualisation of their cinemas for marketing purposes has operated in rather different ways. For an examination of the particular reframing of Fukasaku's filmmaking by Western distributors, see Daniel Martin's study of *Battle Royale*'s reception (2015: 71–91).

Although the consideration of the two directors in tandem is justifiable in this sense, they are, however, evidently distinct from one another. As Gerow rightfully points out, Miike and Kitano differ in their approach to cruelty and violence (Miike's stylistic excess performs an inherently different function to Kitano's more austere aesthetics), and each filmmaker's cinema is ultimately informed by independent industrial contexts.¹² Furthermore, the sheer expanse of Miike's oeuvre marks him as a particularly extraordinary case in recent trends in the consumption of contemporary Japanese cinema. Having produced 83 feature-length projects in roughly the same timeframe as Kitano's 17, Miike's films have been subjected to the selective acquisition and misrepresentative marketing of Western distributors to an extent that Kitano's have not, with many of Miike's less "extreme" efforts eluding release in the West altogether. What is so significant about the director's reception is the fact that, in spite of the increasing exposure to his work, this paradigm has remained influential in shaping the ways in which his cinema is disseminated and received. Moreover, a discourse of the extreme has been, as we shall see, an integral factor in the construction of Miike's particular reputation as a cult auteur.

It is important to note here that, since the milestone of his international success with *13 Assassins* (explored in chapter five), responses to Miike's films in Western critical discourse have opened up to incorporate a wider range of perspectives. More in line with the eclectic nature of his cinema than has previously been the case, more recent reviews of Miike's releases signal a move beyond

¹² In his discussion of the difficulties of locating Miike's and Kitano's aesthetics within finite traditions and conceptual spheres, Gerow considers the filmmakers to share a 'homelessness of style.' Miike is distinct from Kitano, he asserts, in that '[w]hile Kitano's stylistic homelessness is usually recuperated in visions of the individual artist or the transcendent angel that figures prominently in his recent films [...] Miike's wanderings are rarely elevated to such artistic heights, as his nomadic plain is closer to popular cinema and is shaped significantly by industrial concerns.' He also maintains that whilst 'one could argue a similarity between Miike and Kitano, a director who has honed a style that contrasts moments of stillness with sudden outbursts of violence,' Kitano is ultimately 'much more the minimalist, stripping the *mise-en-scène*, dialogue, and even character expression of excess, thus rendering the abrupt bloodshed even more surprising' (2009: 37–39).

notions of the extreme in negotiating his texts (although they continue to play a highly significant role), giving rise to a broader spectrum of evaluations. For instance, *13 Assassins* was celebrated by some as the ‘remarkably controlled, even restrained’ (Robey 2011) work of an ‘irrepressible auteur’ (Newman 2015). Five years later, his vampire-gangster genre hybrid, *Yakuza Apocalypse/Gokudou daisensou* (2015), appeared as evidence that ‘Miike remains the foremost composer of the off-beat midnight movie’ (Vishnevetsky 2015), with the film being potentially ‘too much, too loud, too violent, too messy, too dumb for some’ (Kiang 2015). Even ordinarily obstinate tabloid reviewer Tookey, a decade after he first reproached *Audition* as ‘a new low in cinematic torture’ (2001), has come to consider Miike in a different light. The director’s film, Tookey now argues, is ‘a masterpiece of horror’ that warrants a score of nine out of ten (2011a), as opposed to the five out of ten he originally offered it.

Taking stock of these critical perspectives, this thesis traces Miike’s trajectory in Western filmic discourse to examine the important contextual shifts that have occurred in his discursive positioning—from the beginning of his career up until the past few years. Given the prolific nature of his production, it may seem surprising that these changes have largely taken place surrounding only a handful of releases. Yet, as this investigation reveals, the nexus around which significant developments in Miike’s reception have circulated can be located as the marketing of, and audience and critical responses to, a few key titles. Descriptions of Miike’s cinema range from ‘haunting, graphic, gruesome and beautiful’ (Coffel 2015) to ‘erratic, jagged [and] messy’ (Yeh 2010: 55). Some consider his work to be ‘offputtingly extreme’ (Rose 2003), whilst others believe it to be ‘meditative, humanistic and even magical’ (Santoni 2014). Although it would first appear that this diversity obstructs a

focused understanding of Miike's reception, a closer study of its scope—embracing tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, magazines, online news sites and blogs, film festival programmes, promotional material, and cinema periodicals—in fact leads to the identification of an underlying perception of the director as a recognisable, singular cult auteur.

Extreme Art: Identifying Takashi Miike as a Cult Auteur

In his article on the North American re-release of *Audition* for its 10th anniversary, Dennis Lim,¹³ past-film editor of the influential alternative newsweekly *Village Voice*, reflected on the last decade of Miike's career. 'The Japanese cult auteur Takashi Miike, whose movies are typically seen by Western audiences at film festivals and on DVD,' he wrote, 'keeps up the speed-demon pace of an old-fashioned grindhouse director' (Lim 2009). Here, Lim's comments embody many of the contexts in which Miike's cinema has been understood in the West. He draws attention to the director's rapid rate of production (his 'speed-demon pace'), the violent content of some of his movies (akin to the exploitation film of the grindhouse), the sites of their distribution (singling out festivals and home video), and his nationality. Certainly, all of these factors have figured, to differing degrees, in shaping the trajectory of Miike's Western reception; yet, significantly, it is the discursive framework of the cult auteur through which they are channelled. A similar framing of Miike's films can be found in many further examples. For instance, popular review site *DVD Verdict* exclaims Miike's

¹³ Lim was the film editor of the *Village Voice* between 2000–2006, and was also a regular contributor to *The New York Times* from 2006–2013. He has also written for *Cinema Scope*, *Artforum*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, and has published a book on David Lynch (2015). He is currently the director of programming at the Film Society of Lincoln Centre in New York, and is a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University.

2001 film *Family* to be '[f]rom the prolific and slightly insane mind of Japanese cult auteur Takashi Miike' (Arseneau 2006); for the DVD release of the director's *Osaka Tough Guys/Naniwa yuukyōden* (1995), distributor Artsmagic posits that it is '[r]egarded as a milestone in cult maestro Takashi Miike's career [...] the bridge between his work as an apprentice director and as an auteur' (*Osaka Tough Guys* 2006); and Todd Brown of the independent film site *Twitch* laments the drawbacks of 'the international success of Japanese cult auteur Takashi Miike's' work (2005).

The qualitative appellation of "cult auteur" employed in these instances imbues the discussion of Miike's position within Western film culture with a host of associations that, in order to be fully explored, need unpacking. As microcosms of the discourses to which they belong—be they popular, promotional, or critical—these references to Miike's particular standing as a cult auteur operate as part of a system of discursive practices that collectively construct a specific way of reading Miike's cinema. To understand the construction, and function, of this reading, I wish to turn to Michel Foucault's notion of the author-function:

[The] "author-function" [...] is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a "realistic" dimension as we speak of an individual's "profundity" or "creative" power, his [or her]¹⁴ intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections [...] of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice.

(1980: 127)

It is, I believe, essential that any examination of Miike's reception takes stock of the

¹⁴ In order to address the gender bias rife in critical writing of this period (and, regrettably, even in more recent discourse), throughout this thesis I shall include the female pronoun in square brackets where necessary.

edifice surrounding Miike as an author—as what Foucault might call a ‘rational entity’—and considers the factors that have contributed to the construction of him as such. I will engage more directly with Foucault’s conceptualisation of the author-function in chapter one, yet my approach to Miike’s reputation as a cult auteur is owing to it throughout this thesis, not least in its structure. I argue that it is most productive to map the trajectory of Miike’s reception in a largely chronological fashion. A survey of Western filmic discourse surrounding the director reveals a particular narrative; one of distinct phases demarcated by significant shifts in the negotiation of his cinema. These phases can be designated as the *emergence* (chapter one), the *discovery* (chapter two), the *reverence* (chapter three), and the *internationalisation* (chapters four and five) of Miike and his films in the West.

I propose that a study of the discursive practices involved in formulating the construct of Miike as a cult auteur can work towards a definition of the “cult auteur” as a concept. The notion of cult authorship is a central organising component of Miike’s reception, and the very frequency with which it appears is indicative of the significant role it plays in discussion of the director and his films. Concepts of cult and authorship habitually shape discursive approaches to Miike’s work, offering as they do their own logic, principles, and histories to which one may actively, or inadvertently, appeal. In his study of Western responses to Miike’s genre hybrid *The Happiness of the Katakuris/Katakuri-ke no kōfuku* (2001), Rawle outlines some of the implications of the positioning of Miike as a cult auteur in critics’ attempts to reconcile a film that is a *mélange* of generic conventions. With reference to Jeffrey Sconce’s influential concept of ‘paracinema,’ and the taste cultures that surround it—those that operate outside the mainstream, challenging its established values and sensibilities—Rawle recognises that the structuring principle of the auteur locates the

text's transgression not with the film itself, but with Miike as an authorial figure. He acknowledges how:

we tend to see Miike offered as the stabilising critical referent, as a means of locating the transgressive pleasure of the film – rather than an ‘unhinged’ film, we find an ‘unhinged’ filmmaker. Reviews often use the term *auteur* in relation to Miike, promoting the authorial interpretation of the work, rather than a generic one. So [...] we tend to have discursively formed cultures of taste around the *auteur*. The ‘calculated strategy of shock and confrontation’ then belongs to Miike, not to this transgressive film, so even though we find the film deviating from conventional notions of genre and style, the cult *auteur* precedes the reception of the film.

(2014: 225–226, emphasis in original)

The fact that the very idea of the cult *auteur* encompasses two wide areas of film theory—those of authorship and cult film—inflects its discursive application with their particular conceptual developments and presence in critical discourse. Whilst I shall trace these histories in more detail later, a brief overview is called for here. Questions of authorship have been appreciably present in writing on cinema since the 1940s, with the debate of *auteurism* playing a pivotal role in establishing film studies as an academic discipline. The formulation of the *auteur* theory propounded a total qualitative approach to the cinema based on the sole authorial artistry of the director; a line that has undergone voluminous attacks, espousals, appropriations, and reformulations. Although the presence of theories of authorship has ebbed and flowed in the collective consciousness of film academia over many decades, they remain a prevalent concern, fading and reappearing as new critical debates emerge and evolve. Whilst wider in its scope and arguably less easily defined, the notion of cult in relation to cinema offers its own extensive critical history. Characterised by a certain conceptual and contextual fluidity, cult film theory has attempted to account for a multitude of film texts, producers, audiences, and distribution practices that

operate outside of, or in opposition to, the perceived mainstream and its associated customs and practices. Arising in earnest in the 1980s, the field itself has in recent years undergone a rigorous process of self-stabilisation. Key publications have contributed to the field in historicising the position of cult cinema in film culture and academia, collectively contextualising a vibrant and multifaceted area of study.

With this in mind, the implications of the phrase “cult auteur” when applied to Miike are, in their broadest sense, twofold. Firstly, to posit Miike as an “auteur,” rather than merely a “director” or “filmmaker,” is to attribute to him a requisite level of individuality that, seemingly, at once sets him apart from others and validates his belonging to an apparent echelon of cinematic creators. The recognition of Miike’s status as an auteur is significant in positioning him as the sole creative impetus behind a vast and diverse body of work. Secondly, the description of Miike as a “cult” filmmaker appears to qualify him as a particular *kind* of filmmaker; or, alternatively, as a director of a particular *kind* of cinema; or, in another sense, as the originator of films which garner a particular *kind* of reception. Furthermore, the qualitative signifier “cult” carries with it a host of assumptions and associations that imbue Miike’s cinema with a wide range of connotations relating to issues including, but not limited to, those of transgression, marginality, minority, intertextuality and exoticism (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 8).

When these two words are conjoined in constructing the notion of the cult auteur, their connotations—their respective meanings, permutations, and histories—are brought upon one another. Accordingly, the discursive usage of the term “cult auteur” in relation to Miike and his cinema is marked by a critical and theoretical complexity that needs to be accounted for. My approach will be to investigate these two conceptual areas *together*, examining overlapping theories of authorship and

cult film in a consideration of the frameworks they have produced, and their existent implications for the trajectory of Miike's career in the West. In other words, I will consider what authorship and cult film theory can tell us about responses to Miike's films, whilst also considering the ways in which Miike's reception can contribute to these theories and lead us to an understanding of a cult auteur. I hope that doing so will yield a productive study that draws from, and contributes to, each field in the capacity that Robin Wood has proposed:

Each theory [of film] has, given its underlying position, its own validity—the validity being dependent upon and restricted by the position. Each can offer insights into different areas of cinema and different aspects of a single film. I [suggest] the desirability for critics—whose aim should always be to see the work as wholly as possible, as it is—to be able to draw on the discoveries and particular perceptions of each theory, each position, without committing themselves exclusively to any one.

(2012: 78)

Film Authorship: The Art of Film — A Theory of Purpose

Before mapping the trajectory of Miike's cult authorship, it is first necessary to trace the histories of the two conceptual spheres in hand. Since ideas of authorship in relation to cinema were first promoted in the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, questions of the role of the author in film production and culture have yielded an entirely new theory—the auteur theory—and have produced what has been, for many audiences, critics, and scholars, a complete approach to film texts and their producers. Auteurism was pivotal in the establishment of film studies as a discipline, characterising a critical campaign to validate the cinema as a worthy subject of intellectual consideration. The auteur theory brought film into literature departments

in American and British universities in the 1960s and '70s by means of the equation of cinema with other well-established art forms. Since film studies truly took up residence as a field of study in higher education institutions, debates about cinematic authorship have given rise to new ideas, have been largely abandoned, and have been reformed and re-appropriated for many different means. Advancing from the passionate celebration of cinematic artistry, theories of authorship have come to consider the complexities of production contexts, the intricate nature of film reception, and, more recently, the economic implications of the authorial figure.

Edward Buscombe notes how '[t]he *auteur* theory was never, in itself, a theory of the cinema, though its originators did not claim it was' (1981: 22, emphasis in original). The originators of whom Buscombe speaks were a collective of writers for the highly influential French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* and its forerunner *La Revue du cinéma*; a group including, but not limited to, François Truffaut, André Bazin, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. Operating on the basis of a largely shared objective of legitimising cinema as art—an aspiration that Robert Stam (2000: 83) has characterised as 'the expression of an existentialist humanism inflected by phenomenology'—these writers generated a polemical discourse with the aim of justifying and expanding their thoughts on the matter (Naremore 1999: 10). The foundations of this common intention lay in the central argument of film critic (and later director) Alexandre Astruc's 1948 essay, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*.' In the piece, Astruc proposed that film was developing into an innovative form of artistic creativity, writing that:

the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the arts have been before it, and in particular painting and the novel. After having been successfully a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, it is

gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his [or her] thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his [or her] obsessions exactly as he [or she] does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of *caméra-stylo*.

(1968: 17, emphasis in original)

Astruc's belief was that *la caméra-stylo*, or the "camera-pen," is the tool with which the film director articulates the language of cinema, much in the same way as a writer pens a novel or a painter uses a brush. What was so radical about this view was its recognition of the filmmaker as *artist*—as a painter is seen as artist, as an author is seen as artist. As Stam notes, Astruc's analogy served to posit the director as 'no longer merely the servant of a pre-existing text [...] but a creative artist in his/her own right' (2000: 83). Adopted by the writers of *Cahiers*, this conviction ushered in a new body of critical discourse that promoted the individual creativity of the director. In 1954, Truffaut's article, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," took Astruc's thoughts further by vehemently attacking what he deemed to be French cinema's tradition of quality. He condemned the popular novel adaptations of screenwriters Pierre Bost and Jean Aurenche, and the films of Marc Allégret, Jean Delannoy, and Claude Autant-Lara, chastising them for being literary in nature and not sincerely cinematic. Truffaut claimed that a filmmaker, given the necessary skills, has the potential to be regarded as an "auteur"—the French term for "author"—a true filmic artist. For Truffaut, an auteur can be regarded as 'one who brings something genuinely personal to his [or her] subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material' (Buscombe 1973: 23).

Central to Truffaut's identification of an auteur was the issue of style, the presence of which he believed the French cinema's tradition of quality to be lacking. Drawing particular attention to the functional role of *mise-en-scène* in the articulation

of personal cinematic expression, Truffaut delineated between the mere visual adaptation of existing material and the veritable manifestation of individualistic creativity. True auteurs, he said, were Robert Bresson, Jean Renoir, and Jean Cocteau. His fellow *Cahiers* contributors reinforced and expanded upon this belief, collectively shaping the concept of *la politique des auteurs*. Intended as a polemical discussion, as opposed to a fully developed theory, Bazin summarised the *politique* as the act 'of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next' (1985: 255). In this line, for one to be considered an auteur, it is essential that one's personality—those experiences, values, and traits that conceive individuality—is evident on-screen, etched into the original work of a singular vision. Significantly, this idea was rooted in one fundamental division:

All the articles by Truffaut, Bazin and Rivette [...] share [a] belief in the absolute distinction between *auteur* and *metteur en scène*, between *cinéaste* and 'confectionneur', and characterise it in terms of the difference between the *auteur's* ability to make a film truly his [or her] own, i.e. a kind of original, and the *metteur en scène's* inability to disguise the fact that the origin of his [or her] film lies somewhere else.

(Buscombe 1973:24, emphasis in original)

It is this distinction between the achievement of the auteur and the failure of the metteur-en-scène, between originality and imitation, that fuelled the elaboration of the discussion of cinematic authorship into the auteur theory. Re-appropriating the ideas developed by the *Cahiers* writers and others throughout the 1950s and into the '60s, American critic Andrew Sarris, in his essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," propagated their transformation into an established theoretical framework. 'Henceforth,' he wrote, 'I will abbreviate *la politique des auteurs* as the *auteur* theory to avoid confusion' (Sarris 2008: 37, emphasis in original). Whilst ostensibly intended

as the clarification of terminology, Sarris' declaration revealed an objective that sought to serve his actual agenda. As Buscombe notes, '[c]onfusion was exactly what followed when the newly christened 'theory' was regarded by many of its supporters and opponents alike as a total explanation of the cinema' (1973: 22). In seeking to venerate the American cinema above all others, Sarris seized the polemic set up by Truffaut, Bazin, and their contemporaries, constructing a qualitative model of assessment that allowed him to do so. Auteurism, as Sarris saw it, was primarily to be employed as a 'critical device for recording the history of the American cinema, the only cinema in the world worth exploring in depth beneath the frosting of a few great directors at the top' (2008: 42).

With the auteur theory, Sarris founded what he believed to be a clear set of principles by which one can gauge a filmmaker's validity as an auteur. Whilst carrying across the *politique's* emphasis on style as creative expression as a core element of its edifice, this qualitative approach left behind its initial objectives in the development of a focused regime for the evaluation of cinema as a whole. For Sarris, the status of auteur can only be achieved via the possession of a meaningful style, uniting the "what" (the material) and the "how" (aesthetics and design) into an individual "personal statement" (Stam 2000: 89). Evidence of a personal statement was, for Sarris, a substantiation of *quality*. He regarded the auteur theory 'as a relatively objective method of evaluating films,' seeing it '[b]etter to analyze the director's personality than the critic's nerve centres or politics' (Sarris 2008: 40). Although questionable for its subjective preference for the American cinema, Sarris' auteurism was significant in its attempt to move the recognition of filmic originality away from critical bias and towards the analytical appraisal of personal creativity. This was evident in the three concentric criteria he proposed for identifying an

auteur: '(1) technical competence; (2) distinguishable personality; and (3) interior meaning arising from tension between personality and material' (Stam 2000: 89). Sarris designated the corresponding positions of the director as 'those of a technician, a stylist, and an *auteur*' (2008: 43, emphasis in original). According to these criteria, an auteur may be considered as one who achieves the true triumph of cinema as an art form, imprinting his or her own sentiments, passions, and perspective onto the screen.

Sarris' auteur theory had a significant impact on film criticism. His qualitative approach encouraged the positioning of directors within a hierarchical system, offering others the opportunity to express and validate individual preferences in cinema by means of an ostensibly objective appraisal. The value he placed on interior meaning also furthered critical discourse on the origin of filmic individuality, helping to address the issue in film theory of developing 'an aesthetic to explain the place of the artist in film art' (Caughie 1981: 10). Nevertheless, Sarris' problematic theoretical framework saw many detractors, not least *The New Yorker's* film critic Pauline Kael. Shortly after Sarris published his initial declaration of the auteur theory, Kael penned a rebuttal that systematically dismantled the theory and its followers from the British periodical *Movie*. Kael questioned the validity of auteurism, arguing that Sarris' influential article merely posited the question of a theory as opposed to offering one. She interrogated the assumptions at the heart of Sarris' argument—that observations on technique necessitate a theory, and that this theory is necessary for evaluation—and acerbically attacked the auteur theory's veneration of popular cinema, in which many auteur critics found what they deemed evidence of authorial consistency. 'These critics work embarrassingly hard trying to give some semblance of intellectual respectability to a preoccupation with mindless, repetitious commercial

products,' she wrote. 'They're not critics; they're inside dopesters' (Kael 1963: 20).

Notwithstanding its theoretical problems, auteurism was extremely influential in promoting intellectual engagement with cinema throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Its postulation of film as art effected the proliferation of film societies in educational institutions, encouraged a modern generation of scholars to write about cinema, and played a vital role in establishing film studies as an academic discipline (Naremore 1999: 16). The authorial association of the term "auteur" saw film enter literature, rather than art or drama, departments in European and American universities. As James Naremore notes, the auteur theory offered literary specialists 'a provisional canon and a program for research into a vast, largely unexplored area of twentieth-century narrative' (1999: 16–17). Yet, it is auteurism's canonisation of cinema that has been one of its most significant pitfalls. Sarris and many of his contemporaries were resolutely dedicated to the American cinema, producing canons that placed Hollywood directors above all others in a hierarchical structure largely ignoring film from outside the States or Europe. In his first detailing of the auteur theory, Sarris presented his top twenty of the pantheon of directors, revealing his bias: Howard Hawks, Max Ophüls, Renoir, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Josef von Sternberg, Sergei Eisenstein, Bresson, Charlie Chaplin, Fritz Lang, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Robert J. Flaherty, Eric von Stroheim, Roberto Rossellini, F. W. Murnau, D. W. Griffith, Jean Vigo, Josef von Sternberg, Luis Buñuel, and, from Japan, Kenji Mizoguchi.

Auteurism was, in itself, built upon the valorisation of Hollywood directors. For this reason, auteurist approaches have historically embodied a critical Western-centrism that, whether intentionally or not, mostly excludes other global film industries, cinemas, and movements. Notably (to return to mind the subject of this

thesis, Japanese director Miike), before the notion of the auteur entered film theory in the West in the 1950s, it was the seemingly less industrial cinemas of Asia and Europe that were principally celebrated by critics (Caughie 1981: 10). The films of Japanese directors such as Akira Kurosawa and Yasujirō Ozu, removed from their industrial contexts via critical distance, offered European and American writers the opportunity to ruminate about cinematic art in the absence of a consideration of the constraints of commercialism. As John Caughie notes, this early interest in non-Hollywood cinema meant that ‘the problem of the apparent contradiction between a commercial industry and art was not fully confronted’ (1981: 10). In those cases where this paradox did appear—which was, of course, in Hollywood, with the work of Griffith, Welles, and Ford—the answer seemed to lie in the recognition of some form of genius. Early Western critics concerned with issues of authorship celebrated filmic art emanating from commercial contexts of which they were unaware (for instance, the studio system of Japan), whilst generating a particular approach to American cinema that seemingly accounted for the films of great directors working within a highly commercialised system. Many critics adopted ‘a compromise position in which, by a combination of exceptional circumstances (a good subject, a good script, a good cast, an artist and freedom), a work of art which was personal might be produced despite the constraints of the industry’ (Caughie 1981: 10).¹⁵

Since Sarris and Kael’s dispute, which lasted decades and produced an ongoing polemic concerning the very nature of auteurism, debates about authorship in the cinema have taken many forms. As will be evident throughout this thesis (most directly in chapters one and three), I believe that more recent formulations of film

¹⁵ Bill Nichols has similarly explained that ‘a frequent tenet of *auteur* criticism is that a tension exists between the artist’s vision and the means at his [or her] disposal for realizing it: studio pressure, genre conventions, star demands, story requirements. These constraints are also seen as a source of strength, imposing discipline and promoting cunning subversions’ (1976: 306, emphasis in original).

authorship are most productive in understanding Miike's particular reputation as a cult auteur. The remarkable nature of Miike's reception in the West leads us to question traditional auteurist views and the role they have played in shaping the director's current status, whilst also considering the implications of newer approaches to authorship. In the early 1970s, the intervention of auteur-structuralism, led predominantly by British scholars such as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Peter Wollen, ushered in a systematic method of recognising patterns of authorship across entire bodies or work. Following this, post-structuralist approaches shattered the very idea of the complete and autonomous filmic author, announcing the death of the author in their appeal to ideology, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. Since the early 1990s, with Timothy Corrigan's vital contribution to the field (discussed in chapter three), questions of authorship in cinema have moved away from the structure of the film text, and towards the conditions of its consumption.

Today, the film author is generally considered less as the omnipotent creative force behind a singular artistic vision, and more as a construct that exists as one of the many ways in which audiences access, view, and respond to films. As Paul Watson has proposed, it is possible to approach the notion of film authorship in a manner that eschews the romanticism¹⁶ of early auteurist approaches in favour of 'a rather more modest and useful *enrichment of our understanding of cinema and our experience of it*' (2012: 156, emphasis in original). Within this vein, I hope that an examination of Miike's reputation in the West as a cult auteur will produce a fruitful understanding of the ways in which notions of the author (and of cult) both shape, and are shaped by, his cinema's reception.

¹⁶ Thomas Schatz (1996: 5) has even gone as far to claim that 'auteurism itself would not be worth bothering with if it hadn't been so influential, effectively stalling film history and criticism in a prolonged stage of adolescent romanticism.'

Cult Film: What It Is and What It Is Not — A Theory of Difference

No one is going to deny it: there's a difference between having an orgasm and just having a pretty good time.

(Harper and Mendik 2000: 7)

Despite the ever-growing presence of cult cinema in academia (a topic of discussion that first surfaced in earnest in the 1980s), it would appear that any rigorous study of the area is obliged to frame itself by means of an immediate explanation of exactly *what* a cult film is (see Harper and Mendik 2000, Jancovich, Rebol, Stringer, and Willis 2003, Mathijs and Mendik 2008, Mathijs and Sexton 2011). For some, even a sexual analogy will suffice. Graeme Harper and Xavier Mendik's provocative, yet fitting, introduction to their edited volume, *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*, posits the distinction between 'having an orgasm' and merely 'having a good time' as akin to 'the essential difference between a film that achieves cult status and one that is simply popular' (2000: 7). Cult films, it would seem, offer audiences something more than those texts that, for some reason or another, are not cult films. Functioning not simply as the means to an end in the frivolous search for fleeting entertainment, cult movies appear to provide their audiences with deeper, and more powerful, physical and emotional connections that transcend simple pleasure, propelling their followers to "orgasmic" levels of involvement (Harper and Mendik 2000: 7). Crucially, vital to this process is the willingness to engage in an interaction with film surpassing that which results in nothing more than a basic fondness for the text. To acquire an intense and meaningful relationship with a movie, the cult cinema devotee must not only watch and enjoy the film, but must also participate in ritualistic practices that affirm and invigorate the almost obsessive bond between text and viewer. The cult film's dialogue must be known and repeated off by heart, its scenes

must be memorised to the smallest details, its characters must be imitated with conviction (Harper and Mendik 2000: 7).

Central to academic approaches to cult cinema is the notion of *difference*. Whilst it may manifest itself in any number of ways, the idea of difference underlines the majority of, if not all, scholarly studies of cult film. When discussed in relation to film form or culture, “cultness” is often identified by means of a measurement of one or more aspects (most commonly pertaining to modes of production, consumption, or reception) against others, no matter how abstract or concrete they may be. For instance, the participatory film-going experience of the midnight movie phenomenon is recognised as cult for its deviation from traditional practices of spectatorship—the passive and solitary experience is compared to that of a much more active and communal cinematic event (see Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991, Samuels 1983). A celebration of “bad” films, of the ineptitude of certain creators and the bad aesthetics and morality of their creations, is identified as cult behaviour in the face of established modes of reading a film—the embracing of incompetence defies accepted notions of quality (see Hoberman 1980, Adams 2010). In these cases, cultness is recognised by means of an assessment of difference, yet what the cult object or phenomenon is different *from* is by no means a fixed, predetermined entity.

Identifying what cult cinema is poses no less challenging a task than locating the supposed entity against which cultness is measured. Cult film theory has worked to address this issue, with varying degrees of clarity. The elasticity of the very notion of cult cinema is testament to the conceptual fluidity that characterises it as a field of study, with a diverse range of definitions having been offered by critics, academics, and audiences. Nevertheless, in the many attempts that have been made to define

cult film¹⁷ there exist certain theoretical consistencies, both in terms of how it is defined and what it is defined against. Some of the more common formulations of cult cinema are marked by the recognition of an opposition to the “mainstream”—and, similarly, to the “norm,” the “ordinary,” the “familiar.” The concept of the mainstream often figures in its standing as that which cult films and phenomena clash against or deviate from, as a central force around which cultness circulates. In many critical approaches, the idea of the mainstream plays such a significant role in the identification of cultness that cult cinema is less defined by means of a set of consolidating criteria common to all cult films, and more by a signifying opposition to the perceived mainstream. As Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis have duly noted:

[T]he ‘cult movie’ is an essentially eclectic category. It is not defined according to some single, unifying feature shared by all cult movies, but rather through a ‘subcultural ideology’ in filmmakers, films or audiences [...] seen as existing in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ [...] In other words, ‘cult’ is largely a matter of the ways in which films are classified in consumption, although it is certainly the case that filmmakers often shared the same ‘subcultural ideology’ as fans and have set out to make self-consciously ‘cult’ materials.

(2003: 1)

The notion of cultness itself is multifaceted, and so too are the signifiers of difference that facilitate its presence in film culture. As a central force in the oppositional ideology of cult films, producers, and audiences, a consideration of the function of the mainstream offers a way into the conceptual scope of cult cinema. As Jancovich *et al.* put forward, the mainstream ‘is not a clearly defined and fixed object, but rather an undefined and vaguely imaged Other,’ an Other that may embody perceptions of commercialism, capitalism, conformity, elitism, political order, hierarchy, taste,

¹⁷ For a range of definitions of cult film, see those offered by Harper and Mendik (2000), Jancovich, Reboll, Stringer, and Willis (2003), Mathijs and Mendik (2008), and Mathijs and Sexton (2011).

cultural capital, or any combination of these, or a multitude of other, issues (2003: 1–2). Cult film theory has generated many different approaches to such topics, in the process establishing a field of study that is characterised by myriad methodologies, potentials, and limitations. It is for this reason that scholarship on cult cinema so often endeavours to offer a definition of the subject, giving rise to a productive theoretical flexibility in the many ways in which the notion of difference is formulated within them. Justin Smith, for instance, asks ‘What is a cult film? What does the adjective mean? Are we talking here about a peculiar kind of film text? Or is the noun itself more important: the film cult? And what might it have in common with other kinds of cult?’ (2010: 1).

The difficulties faced when attempting to define cult cinema are less a sign of its theoretical impracticality, and more an indicator of its richness and depth as an area of academic investigation. Whilst it drives some to dismiss it as an unsubstantiated theory, cult cinema’s multidimensional nature is what ultimately leads others to defend it as a rewarding topic of discussion. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton open their book, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, by tracing the term’s meaning and the persisting complexities surrounding its definition. ‘Cult cinema is a term that is often met with some confusion,’ they contest, as ‘the phrase has been adopted and employed in a variety of ways in its relatively brief lifespan’ (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 1). With reference to the work of linguistics scholar David Lee, they draw attention to the contextual heterogeneity of the word “cult.” As Lee (1992: 16) posits, ‘meaning is not an inherent property of words but is strongly influenced by contexts of use,’ and this goes a long way in explaining why the term “cult cinema,” and, accordingly, its presence as a topic of academic study, is characterised by semantic multiplicity. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definitions:

NOUN

1. A system of religious veneration and devotion directed towards a particular figure or object: *the cult of St Olaf*.
 - a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or as imposing excessive control over members: *a network of Satan-worshipping cult*.
 - a misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular thing: *the cult of the pursuit of money as an end in itself*.
2. a person or thing that is popular or fashionable among a particular group or section of society: *the series has become a bit of a cult in the UK. [as modifier] a cult film*.

ORIGIN early 17th cent. (originally denoting homage paid to a divinity): from French *culte* or Latin *cultus* 'worship', from *cult-* 'inhabited, cultivated, worshipped', from the verb *colere*.

("cult," *Oxford English Dictionary* 2016, emphasis in original)

The religious connotations of the word "cult" have been central to its attachment to issues of film form and culture within reception and academic discourses. In its broadest sense, religious cultism can be seen as the outward manifestation of a shared belief system by means of the adherence to codes, practices, routines, and rituals, or through the creation of symbolic objects, such as vesture, temples, or altars. For example, the nomenclature of the American white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan has, throughout its various incarnations, enacted a strict hierarchy promoting the veneration of particular individuals—lower-ranked members such as the Night-hawks idolise the transcendental Imperial Wizard. Their principles of white superiority and nationalism are externalised through their infamous attire and practices, with hooded costumes and ritualistic cross-burnings intended to exhibit beliefs (supposedly informed by Christian values) of ethnic purification. Significantly, members of religious cults 'live separated from the "normal" world, sometimes socially [...] and sometimes also spatially' (Jenkins 2000: 4). The former separation is typified by an isolation from society on a cultural or ideological basis, with beliefs that may seem unusual or extreme triggering the estrangement from others; the

latter is an emblematic physical detachment from society that often takes the form of a private residence or compound, as in the notorious cases of the Manson Family's habitation of the Spahn Ranch, or the unaffiliated Westboro Baptist Church's dwelling in Topeka, Kansas.

Given the implications of worship, idolisation, ritual, and seclusion, it is unsurprising that the semantic constitution of the word "cult" has come to be applied to cinema in filmic discourse, and the inclusion of references to cult media in the OED's definition of the word is testament to its established usage. As Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 3) have noted, it was in the 1970s that the terms "cult film" and "cult cinema" began to be commonly used discursively to describe movies that garnered repeat viewings, or audiences who displayed ritualistic spectatorial practices. Crucially, the influential factor in identifying cult film culture (and the adoption of a religious metaphor to describe it) has been the recognition of the unusual nature of this behaviour vis-à-vis existing traditions and conventions. Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley have argued how the cultural distinction between cultist religious groups and established religions lies in 'the specific emphases in their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices – how significantly they differ from those of the dominant culture' (2015: 9). Similarly, cult films and phenomena have been understood in relation to the dominant social, cultural, and ideological practices alongside which they operate. For instance, many early scholarly studies of cult cinema took as their subject the extraordinary consumption practices of the midnight movie phenomenon.¹⁸ These approaches considered the ways in which the specificities of the midnight movie experience—the reciting of dialogue, the adorning of particular attire, and repeat viewings—challenge accepted modes of spectatorship,

¹⁸ For early examinations of the midnight movie, see Hoberman (1980), Siegel (1980), and Austin (1981).

encouraging lively social interaction in a countercultural milieu.

Some critics have attempted to account for the oppositional nature of cult cinema through a consideration of the aesthetics and themes of those texts around which cult reception circulates. Textual approaches analyse cult films in the search for an understanding of the origins of cultness. In his seminal examination of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) in 1984, Umberto Eco mapped the text's multiple meanings, drawing out the many archetypes that Curtiz's film presents to its viewers. These archetypes, Eco argued, are repeatedly featured to such an extent within the film that they produce an excess of interior meanings—the complexity of which particularly engaged audiences (in this case, cult audiences) may deconstruct and find pleasure in. Other studies have similarly recognised the importance of the relationship between text and spectator in the construction of cult cinema. For instance, Barry Keith Grant's 1991 essay, "Science-Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film," furthered Eco's work to argue for cult cinema as a genre marked by aesthetic and ideological transgression. All cult movies, Grant proposes, transgress certain boundaries in a manner that appeals to particular audiences, who engage with them by means of practices that challenge traditional notions of cinema consumption.

In their broadest sense, theories of cult film fall into two categories—ontological and phenomenological. As Mathijs and Mendik have argued, 'ontological approaches to cult cinema are usually essentialist: they try to determine what makes "cult cinema" a certain type of movie' (2008: 15). These are the discussions of cult film that trawl through texts' content, style, and themes in the pursuit of a comprehension of cultness. 'Phenomenological approaches,' on the other hand, 'shift the attention from the text to its appearance in cultural contexts in which it is

produced and received. Such attempts usually see cult cinema as a mode of reception, a way of seeing films' (Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 15). These are the studies that consider the extraordinary trajectories of particular texts, mapping the extratextual elements surrounding their distribution, exhibition, reception, and consumption.¹⁹ In such approaches, the unusual modes of disseminating, accessing, and conversing about films are what mark a text's cultness, and not some set of formal or stylistic qualities that point towards a formula of cult.

My examination of Miike's reputation as a cult auteur proposes that cult cinema should be viewed from a phenomenological, rather than ontological, perspective. The originator of a movie's cultness should not be identified as the film itself—the text as the site of some anarchic or unorthodox anatomical features that automatically generate and maintain a cult status—but should be recognised as a particular set of unique modes in which audiences receive and consume it. Of course, some films have certain qualities that invite cult consumption, yet their very possession of these qualities does not guarantee a cult reputation. In this sense, I suggest that the probing question to be asked of cult cinema is not "*what* is a cult film?" but "*how* does a film become cult?" Indeed, this can be further extended to more productively incorporate contexts and conditions outside of the text itself—in the case of Miike, the concept of the cult director. By taking into account not only Miike's films themselves, but the ways in which distributors, audiences, and critics negotiate them, I hope to reveal the central role played by such bodies in the construction of his cult auteur status, whilst developing a deeper and more rewarding understanding of exactly how cult cinema operates.

¹⁹ For approaches to cult film that emphasise the important of extratextual factors in the construction of a text's cultness, see Hills (2008) and Harper and Mendik (2000) in particular.

Recognising Perspective: The Western-centrism of Authorship/Cult Theory

Before commencing the task of mapping the trajectory of Miike's reputation as a cult auteur, it is crucial that one recognises the inherent Western-centrism of the two theoretical frameworks at hand. Whilst they do embrace cinema and its consumption on a global scale, notions of cinematic authorship and cult film, as they have been developed in academia, favour the perspective of Western criticism and scholarship. As theories, they have emanated predominantly from Europe and America—seminal analyses from outside these regions are rarely, if ever, to be found. The histories of authorship and cult film theory must thus be understood in relation to the contexts of their production. From the initial ruminations of Astruc and the *politique* of the *Cahiers* writers in France, through to Sarris' founding of auteur theory and British scholar Corrigan's examination of the commerce of auteurism, the 'critical study of authors,' as Naremore (2014: 29) puts it, has been a distinctly Western endeavour. Compounding this is the overwhelming focus on American and European directors in approaches to film authorship. Whilst the cinema of Japan has had a mild presence, mainly in the shape of Ozu and Kurosawa, the canonical studies that have driven auteurism forward have historically been Western-centric: Ford, Hawks, Hitchcock, Welles, Ophüls, Douglas Sirk. Cult film theory has, for the most part, obeyed a similar path. The proliferation of scholarship on the topic in the 1980s largely took the form of studies of the British-American co-production *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), was prospered by Italian writer Eco's pivotal analysis of *Casablanca*, and has since been shaped principally by edited collections on cult films and spectatorship published in the UK and the States.

Of course, as I am writing this from the perspective of Western scholarship—

tracing the responses to the cinema of a Japanese director in the West, from within the confines of a British higher education institution—and as my perception is patently limited by my own nationality, this study is inescapably part of these traditions. I make no attempt to claim that I am operating outside the realms of Western academia here, as this investigation is clearly bound by the very nature of its purpose. What I do propose, however, is that an analysis of Miike's reception as a cult auteur within a Western context calls for an acknowledgement that the established theoretical frameworks of cinematic authorship and cult film are *a part of* the broader network of processes that cultivate and maintain such a reputation. One must recognise the stimulus possessed by academic discourse (in tandem with critical and spectatorial responses) in shaping cult authorship, whilst keeping sight of the privileged agency of Western discursive practices in propagating this notion on a more global scale.

The extraordinary construction of Miike's cult auteur status further encourages us to embrace the wider consumption of Asian cinema in Western regions, and his ongoing productivity as a filmmaker prompts a consideration of its future direction. In the 2000s, Asian film's presence in Western markets was arguably greater than it has ever been (Hunt and Leung 2008: 2). Whilst this visibility has plateaued somewhat in more recent years, the transformation of the modes of distribution and reception through which Asian titles pass in reaching Western shores has been significant. As Anne Tereska Ciecko notes, '[a]s Asian films become more prominent in the "West," they pose challenges to Western-centric hegemonic models of global film culture' (2006: 7). The rise in the global popularity of Asian cinema since the turn of the century has led to a proliferation of academic volumes that aim to take stock of these shifts by means of national, transnational, geopolitical, and other

interdisciplinary frameworks.²⁰ An examination of Miike's cult authorship—when situated within the milieu of its discursive development in the West—can contribute to this discussion in offering a valuable narrative; one that considers the implications of notions of authorship and cult for the relationship between Western consumer and Asian cultural product.²¹

²⁰ In particular, see the edited volumes by Ciecko (2006), Hunt and Wing-Fai (2008), and Lee (2011).

²¹ Given the scope of this study, I am aware that my consideration of this relationship possesses certain limitations. Due to the reimits of my examination, it will not be possible to engage at length with issues pertaining to the historical Western interpretation and appropriation of Japanese culture, or to offer an in-depth outline of the cultural specificity of Miike's films. Whilst I fully acknowledge the importance of these areas of investigation, they are not integral to my main objective of mapping the distinct phases of Miike's reception. For a recent study that examines Miike's cinema within these contexts, see Andrew Dorman's 2016 publication *Paradoxical Japaneseness: Cultural Representation in 21st Century Japanese Cinema*, in which he considers the work of Miike, Kitano, and Shinya Tsukamoto in light of shifting patterns of production and consumption both inside, and outside, Japan.

Chapter One — Emergence

The Reluctant Filmmaker: Takashi Miike and the Domestic Context

It wasn't really my intention to make movies quickly – it's more to do with the reality of the Japanese film industry. That's been the only way for me to change my situation; to prove how little time you need to make a good film. I really enjoy working with limitations or restrictions. And if I find a space within the movie to express myself, I'm very happy. I am discovering myself as a director all the time.

—Takashi Miike

(Rose 2003)

Entitled “Blood isn't That Scary,” Steve Rose's interview with Miike in *The Guardian*—published on 2nd June 2003, the day the director's *Ichi the Killer/Koroshiya 1* (2001) was released on DVD in the UK²²—appears to raise as many questions about his approach to filmmaking as it addresses. What *is* the intention behind the speed with which Miike produces his movies? What are the conditions of the Japanese film industry of which he speaks? What does he consider to be a “good” film, and according to what terms does he qualify what is “good”? What is the constitution of his particular cinematic expression, and what paradigms of authorship must we consider in light of this?

We can consider these questions, and the need to answer them, as operating within Foucault's idea of the author-function—the act of ‘construct[ing] the rational entity we call an author’ (1980: 127). Carried out within the realm of cultural discourse, this author-function offers readers a means of negotiating texts as a site

²² UK distributor Medusa released *Ichi the Killer* on DVD via their *Premier Asia* label almost two years after it received its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2001. It appeared at festivals across the West, including Vancouver and the BFI London Film Festival. Audience members were handed promotional “sick bags”—reading “For Viewing Discomfort (After use fold away from you)” —for those of weak constitution. Blood really *is* that scary, it would seem.

of an artist's intentions, inspirations, and opinions, thus facilitating the designation of an individual as author. The discursively constructed authorial figure functions as a lens through which readers may approach their texts. As a dialogue between critic and filmmaker, Rose's interview with Miike activates this author-function. The discussion imparts information about Miike which spectators may interpret and then apply in formulating the "projections" that shape the construction of Miike as the author of his films.

Within this framework, the perceived knowledge of the production conditions of Miike's cinema has very real implications for its reception. Details of the director's filmmaking—that intelligence sought by the questions posed above—are disseminated through filmic discourse and consumed by the author-function. Miike's motivations, his artistic influences, notions of "quality," creative expression, handling of budgets, crew members, and other cinematic elements; this information is seized by audiences and critics, and used to construct Miike's supposedly "real" authorial constitution. The "reality" of the author of Takashi Miike (which will, of course, differ for each person depending on how this information is processed) is in fact a myth. It is a construction formulated by knowledge of the man's life, which is in turn employed as a reference point in the reading of his texts. These readings are then re-presented in their many and varied forms in discourse—in the reviews, articles, fanzines, blogs, interviews, promotional material, and other media that operate as vehicles for the reception of his cinema.

In mapping the edifice surrounding Miike as author, one may turn to what David Bordwell has termed the "biographical legend" (1988: 5). The idea was initially introduced in criticism by the Russian Formalist Boris Tomaševskij, who proposed that '[i]t is sometimes difficult to decide whether literature recreates phenomena from

life or whether the opposite is in fact the case: that the phenomena of life are the result of the penetration of literary clichés into reality' (1971: 51). Bordwell has borrowed and built upon this concept in his seminal studies of directors such as Carl Theodor Dreyer (1981), Yasujirō Ozu (1988),²³ and Sergei Eisenstein (1993). The critical function of the biographical legend is to examine the role of biographical information in shaping audiences' engagements with film. As Casper Tybjerg argues, the biographical legend is 'designed to capture the way the life of an author can become part of his [or her] *oeuvre*' (2005: 50, emphasis in original).

Reading (Cult) Authorship: The Biographical Legend

In his examination of scholarship on director Tod Browning, Matthew Solomon interrogates what he deems to be the critically unproductive usage of the 'biographical construct' of Browning's precinematic life—his life before he began making films. There is an impulse amongst academics, he argues, to draw parallels between Browning's early experiences working in a sideshow and the films he produced later in his career, including *The Unholy Three* (1925), *The Show* (1927), *The Unknown* (1927), and, most famously, *Freaks* (1932), in which the sideshow, circus, or dime museum figures centrally (2003: 235). For Solomon, this focus is just one aspect of the construct of the director's biography that may be employed in the reading of his work. Browning's biographical legend, he proposes, needs to be reframed and '[p]laced within a much larger complex of biographical determinants' that positions his association with the sideshow 'less as a series of straightforward

²³ Ozu has also been the subject of other auteurist approaches, most notably by Paul Schrader (1972) and Donald Richie (1977).

recollections than as a self-conscious strategy for authoring Hollywood films' (2003: 236).

Within academic discourse on Miike, there exists a similar framing of the director's biographical legend. As with scholarship on Browning, critical discussion of Miike's precinematic life contributes to a narrative that reveals a particular authorial strategy. For instance, in his study of the director, Tony Williams emphasises the importance of Miike's working-class routes and multicultural milieu, whilst drawing attention to the fact that filmmaking was not his first choice of career (2004: 54). In *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*, Mes provides a more detailed account of Miike's early life. Mes underscores the significance of the director's childhood surroundings and his family's experience of geographical displacement, again remarking upon his circumstantial entry into the film industry (2006: 15–19). In these cases, the context of Miike's precinematic life—his heritage, his family history, his formative years in Japan—shapes a reading of his oeuvre predicated upon a correlation between text and biographical information. Such readings align with Marxist approaches to art, in which artistic creations are primarily located as products of their time, of a particular social history.²⁴ Whilst Williams and Mes largely avoid the limited focus of scholarship on Browning identified by Solomon, it is essential that Miike's biographical legend is firmly positioned within a wider contextual scope if such an approach is to be of significant value. As Solomon acknowledges of critical readings of Browning's cinema:

The apparent symmetry between Browning's biography and filmography [...] has drawn considerable attention to Browning's early professional life in

²⁴ In his book, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, first published in 1976, Terry Eagleton discusses the relationship between form and ideology in critical approaches to literature. 'Significant developments in literary form [...] result from significant changes in ideology. They embody new ways of perceiving social reality and [...] new relations between artist and audience,' he argues (2003: 23).

itinerant entertainment. The “Browning legend” tends to try to resolve the critical enigmas posed by Browning’s films with select biographical details from Browning’s early professional life. It is these former critical enigmas that demand further—and more nuanced—attention both to Browning’s biography and the form and content of his films.

(2003: 244)

I propose that Miike’s biographical legend—as it exists in discourse—can most productively be framed by the consideration of two contextual spheres pertaining to, on the one hand, personal information, and, on the other, industrial conditions. Together, accounts of Miike’s early life and his negotiation of the Japanese film industry have played a central role in the discursive construction of his authorial persona. The somewhat incidental circumstances of Miike’s entry into filmmaking were largely informed by adolescent anxieties, and his childhood experiences have cultivated a personal outlook on particular aspects of Japanese society that provides impetus to the themes and aesthetics of his cinema. The exchange of such information in critical and spectatorial discourse has been vital in establishing Miike as a recognisable authorial figure. Furthermore, the appropriation of specific facets of Miike’s biographical legend by certain audiences has constructed, and continues to maintain, the director’s cult status. A consideration of these two discursive practices in tandem can begin to account for Miike’s distinct reputation in Western film culture as a cult auteur.

The presence of the Miike biographical legend in Western filmic discourse is indeed integral to sustaining the director’s cult authorship. As Mathijs and Sexton note, ‘[b]iographical information and other types of activities that promote the visibility of a particular figure may be crucial in establishing a cult status’ (2011: 68). Whilst knowledge of Miike’s personal life contributes to his standing as an auteur, the specific conditions of the Japanese industry in which he operated in the earliest

stage of his career have invited a cult reception from audiences who affiliate themselves with what to others may be an unfamiliar mode of production. Miike's path into filmmaking in the early 1990s was facilitated by the contemporaneous domestic advent of the V-Cinema, or straight-to-video, market. The product of a major development in Japan's economic climate, the proliferation of straight-to-video releases offered Miike and many other young, inexperienced filmmakers the opportunity to practice their skills across many genres in a fledgling market of low-budget, rapidly produced titles. As we will see, references to these industrial conditions figured prominently in the first Western critical responses to Miike's work. Discussion of this Japanese context contributed greatly to a burgeoning cult following attracted to the "unconventional" form of production within which the director was operating.

Miike's cult reputation has gained momentum through the critical recognition of his particular position within the Japanese film industry. For the unknown directors who were drafted to quickly turn out its cheap titles, the constraints of the V-Cinema mode of production were endured in exchange for an unusual level of creative freedom. Miike exploited the opportunity, completing a total of 12 films in the four years prior to his first theatrical release, *Shinjuku Triad Society/Shinjuku kuroshakai: Chaina mafia sensō*, in 1995. During his time in the V-Cinema market, the director externalised a disdain for the operations of the mainstream Japanese film industry he had garnered whilst working as a freelancer on film and television sets. He manifested his disillusionment both within his films and later in interviews. 'Most Japanese filmmakers simply aim to make a commercial profit through distribution inside Japan,' he says, going on to claim that '[b]asically, all I want is freedom' (Mottesheard 2002). Such an approach has played a central role in garnering Miike's

cult status in the West. As Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 68) recognise, ‘the celebration of cult auteurs is often underpinned by a romanticist creed: the idea of a lone, heroic figure battling against odds to create works that are taken to heart by outsider audiences.’ The artistic license offered by V-Cinema provided Miike a platform from which to launch his distinct challenges to traditional filmmaking practices, yielding what for many Western audiences has become a palpable, individualistic cult figure.

The Drifting Foreigner: The Origins of Miike’s Biographical Legend

Takashi Miike was born on 24th August 1960 in Yao, a rural town in the Osaka Prefecture of Japan, located just outside the city of Osaka itself. Despite its small size, the working-class town is home to a large immigrant population, most of which are of Korean nationality. Yao’s cultural diversity offered the young Miike an image of Japanese society that very much contrasted with the common Western perception of it as ‘a homogenous world of salarymen and demure wives and daughters’ (Williams 2004: 54). Reflecting this multiculturalism, Miike’s family history is itself one of national and cultural displacement. The Miike family originally hailed from the Kumamoto Prefecture of Kyushu, an island of Japan located southwest of the mainland. However, due to the sociocultural disruption that occurred as a fallout to the Second World War, Miike’s grandparents spent time living in both China and Korea before returning to Japan following the end of the war, finally relocating in Osaka on the Honshu island.

The uprooting of many Japanese during this period has been approached in academia from a predominantly ethnographic standpoint, addressing the crises of

national identity and the distressing experiences of social ostracism brought on by the process of relocation (Ward 2008, Chan 2011). Such investigations demonstrate how the Japanese women and children who were abandoned or stranded in China and its surrounding areas after the war, a group often referred to collectively as the *zanryu-hojin*, experienced great and often traumatic changes to their lives. Rowena Ward (2008: 114) explains how, in finding themselves in foreign regions, the severance of the *zanryu-hojin*—from their biological families, the Japanese traditions they were accustomed to, and their domestic territory—affected their lives profoundly. Such a separation from Japan, Ward outlines, resulted in the stranded women and children living ‘lives that [were] essentially a series of multiple exiles’ (2008: 114).

Although born in Japan, Miike has discussed his feelings of rootlessness on account of his status as belonging to the *zanryu-koji*,²⁵ the term used to refer to the stranded war children either left, or born, in China after the war. ‘I’ve always felt that I’m drifting,’ the director maintains, ‘that I don’t have a home town that I can go back to’ (Sato and Mes 2001). Whilst the term *zanryu-koji* is most commonly used to describe those children born in China who would only later learn of their Japanese ancestry in adulthood (Ward 2008: 99), it may also be employed in cases in which children are born in Japan to parents who themselves were born elsewhere and eventually emigrated back to Japan. Miike’s father was born in Seoul (what is now the capital city of South Korea), and thus Miike’s status as “pure” Japanese may be questioned in relation to his status as a descendant of *zanryu-hojin*. As Ward delineates, the purposeful ideological construction of ‘the myth of homogeneity’ in Japan in the Meiji era relied upon both faith in the intrinsic existence of a hierarchical

²⁵ The term *zanryu-hojin* is used to describe all those Japanese citizens who were left in China after the Second World War, incorporating both the *zanryu-fujin* (stranded war women) and *zanryu-koji* (abandoned war children). See Ward (2008) for a more detailed explanation.

structure and a belief that all Japanese are connected by means of blood relations (2008: 106). In not possessing “true” Japanese blood, a *zanryu-koji* like Miike may never be, at least at a national ideological level, fully accepted in Japanese society and may thus be confined to exist in a state of dislocation in not being able to become fully integrated into the societal structures to which he or she may desire a sense of belonging. Furthermore, in order to be recognised as Japanese in their domestic country, even those *zanryu-hojin* who successfully return to Japan following inhabitation of foreign territory (such as Miike’s grandparents and parents) must prove their national fidelity through the display of an acute understanding of Japanese language and traditions (Ward 2008: 103).

It is this deep knowledge of Miike’s biographical legend, and its presence in critical discourse, that leads us to question notions of authorship. How does one interpret this biographical information? How might it be applied when thinking of the director as an auteur? In tracing the history of what he terms ‘explicatory criticism’ (a sphere of criticism whose principal aim is the prescription of implicit meanings to texts), Bordwell (1989: 43–44) draws particular attention to the critical developments of the 1940s and ‘50s—the period in which the *politique des auteurs* first took root. Promoting the idea of individual authorship, this approach to the cinema, Bordwell argues, ‘celebrated the director as the creative source of meaning [and] it became natural to think of the director’s output as an oeuvre, a repetition and enrichment of characteristic themes and stylistic choices’ (1989: 44). In this form of explicatory criticism, meaning is extrapolated from the thematic and aesthetic traits recurrent across a single director’s body of work. The origin of this meaning is, in turn, allocated to the director as the author of his or her texts, and a cyclical process of meaning-making ensues.

To follow this line, one can find value in the consideration of the thematic concerns evident in Miike's earlier work as a signifier of the development of his authorial individuality, and the meaning of these themes may be extracted from what we know of his biographical legend. Miike's early films present a Japan populated by foreigners—a Japan in which people of non-Japanese descent struggle to find their place within the apparent melting pot that is contemporary Japanese society. His narratives play host to the plight of foreigners searching for a sense of belonging in a culturally diverse country. Whether it be Tatsuhito's battle to come to terms with his Chinese heritage as a Tokyo cop in *Shinjuku Triad Society*, or Chūji's negotiation of his multiracial identity in Yokosuka (a small Japanese town that is home to a US naval base) in *Blues Harp* (1998), Miike's characters are scattered, exiled, lost. These thematic consistencies can be, within the framework of authorship outlined by Bordwell, considered evidence of the director's distinct authorial individuality. In their repeated presence, they are deemed cinematic manifestations of the author's individual experience.

Indeed, the recurrence of foreign characters in Miike's earlier films can be productively understood through an examination of his family's history of displacement, and his own anxieties relating to nationality. The director has discussed his personal lack of a sense of belonging in Japan, explaining that his own struggles in developing a deep connection to Japan as his homeland have informed his cinematic interest in foreign characters. 'The Japanese, even if we live in Japan,' he says, 'we are all drifting. Especially me' (Sato and Mes 2001). Miike goes on to describe how his grandmother's relocation to Korea during the Second World War ended his family's ties to Kumamoto (alluding to a disruption to the family's Japanese nationality), an interruption to the family lineage that he claims has

prevented him from ever truly feeling that Osaka is his hometown. He, and many others like him, are caught in a constant state of drift. This concern for those who fail to ascertain their own place in Japan is borne out in those individuals, plagued by uncertainty, who populate his narrative worlds. 'Portraying such people in my films is very natural for me,' he comments (Sato and Mes 2001), thus seemingly confirming a link between his early works and his precinematic biography.

Many of Miike's characters are drifting. They float both corporeally and psychologically between physical and emotional spaces that seem neither familiar enough to be called home, nor foreign enough to garner a feeling of definitive (dis)placement (see figure 1). In films like *Shinjuku Triad Society*, *Ley Lines*, and *Dead or Alive*, the *zanryu-koji* struggle to reconcile the indeterminate state of being in which their lack of a connection to a true homeland forces them to exist. Miike's fascination with foreign characters is not, however, limited to the plight of the *zanryu-koji*, focusing as he does on a whole host of other mixed-race, multilingual, and multinational groups also. It is for this reason that Mika Ko (2006: 130) has argued



Figure 1 Anonymous figures seen drifting in the wasteland of Miike's *Ley Lines*.

that Miike's body of work is itself somewhat out of place when considered alongside those of his fellow contemporary Japanese filmmakers. Whilst the subject of the position of foreigners in Japanese society has been explored by Japanese filmmakers since the 1980s, when considered as a distinct body of work Miike's earlier films are, for Ko, rare for the continuous presence of foreign characters within them (2006: 130).

It is here that a central argument of early theories of authorship is revealed to be flawed. In order to engage with Ko's reading of Miike's cinema, one must adopt an approach that goes beyond the ostensibly objective, yet superficial, critical analysis of a body of film texts—an approach that takes into account the historical context of the production of that body of work, and considers the ways in which these historical conditions come to bear on both thematic concerns and stylistic design. When he sought to reformulate the *politique* into the auteur theory, Sarris proposed that the appreciation of an auteur's aesthetics can only be achieved at the expense of this contextual milieu. 'If directors cannot be wrenched from their historical environments,' he wrote, 'aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography' (in Katz 1971: 132). For Sarris, and those who follow the auteur theory he developed, auteurism functions as a de-contextualising procedure in which the films of a supposed auteur are mined—within a vacuum that denies their position within history—for evidence of authorial individuality. Aspects of aesthetics that do not comply with what is identified as the distinct style of that auteur are ignored for their deviance, and swept aside. In this sense, auteurism takes on an archaeological framework, in that:

the critic skilled in auteur archaeology roves across the surfaces of a director's work in brushing away the dust of conventionality until aspects of

film style and technique deemed salient are unearthed, aspects which can then be explicated and retroactively strung together into a coherent vision of the director-as-auteur who is positioned behind them as their originator. In other words, the critic's work is that of ferreting out the unique marks, flourishes and touches of a director so that they may be credited back to or projected upon their source: the auteur.

(Watson 2012: 151)

As we have seen with the concept of the biographical legend, a sense of history can illuminate a director's body of work in allowing one to contextualise the themes that are recurrent throughout it. This contextual approach can further be extended to aesthetics. The self-imposed distance of the auteur critic produces a reading of a filmmaker's oeuvre that is, at its heart, artificial. Stripping away the historical and social conditions from a body of texts in the search for authorial unity is to ignore their importance in shaping how, and why, these texts are made. Returning a director back to these environments allows one to approach his or her film style in a manner that attempts to take stock of the complexity of film production.

It is within this vein that Ko (2006: 129) argues that Miike's cinema 'can be read and interpreted in relation to the socio-historical context of contemporary Japan.' For Ko, Miike's use of corporeal metaphors in his films—the body as a site of national anxiety—can be seen as a fundamental and structural element of his oeuvre, in that these metaphors 'suture precisely that relation between the films and their socio-historical context' (2006: 129). This reading of Miike's work locates his fragmented treatment of the cinematic body within the instability of Japan's political structures, proposing that the uncertainty brought about by this disruption is reflected in both Miike's 'breaking open of diegetic homogeneity and narrative integrity' (Ko 2006: 131). Here, as Aaron Gerow has recognised, issues relating to the disintegration of Japan's national polity (the concept of *kokutai*) are seen in relation to the director's recurring themes and aesthetics (2009: 25). For the followers of

auteurism, this reading would not be possible, for a consideration of the socio-historical context within which Miike's films have been produced would contravene the requisite of textual isolation. To claim Miike as an auteur using Sarris' framework, one would have to overlook the very conditions that shape his authorial style.

A further challenge to the auteur theory's de-contextualisation is launched when Miike's aesthetics are positioned within wider trends in contemporary Japanese film. Whilst Ko (2006: 130) is right to distinguish the rarity of Miike's recurrent depiction of foreigners, the director's early work may not seem so out of place when it is located within a certain sphere of Japanese cinema that emanates from shared anxieties relating to the present socio-political problems faced by the country. Williams, for instance, places Miike alongside one of his contemporary filmmakers, Shinya Tsukamoto, as belonging to 'a popular realm of Japanese cinema' that operates within 'a specific cultural context'—that of a rapidly changing, increasingly globalised, postmodern Japan (2004: 54–55). Both Miike and Tsukamoto, who is best known in the West for his trilogy of *Tetsuo* films (1989, 1992, 2009), negotiate the more negative outcomes of such sudden shifts in the cultural landscape of their country, questioning the effects of globalisation by means of their often harsh styles and subversive themes. Tsukamoto's exploration of the cyberpunk genre facilitates a critique of social unrest, particularly through the director's interest in body-horror. In not only the *Tetsuo* films, but also earlier works such as *The Phantom of Regular Size/Futsū saizu no kaijin* (1986) and *The Adventures of Electric Rod Boy/Denchū kozō no bōken* (1987), Tsukamoto's grotesque imagery of bodily mutations—'the human body as a site of cultural and ontological contention,' as Jay McRoy (2008: 196) describes it—symbolises the decay of social order in an abrasive and violent manner (see figure 2).

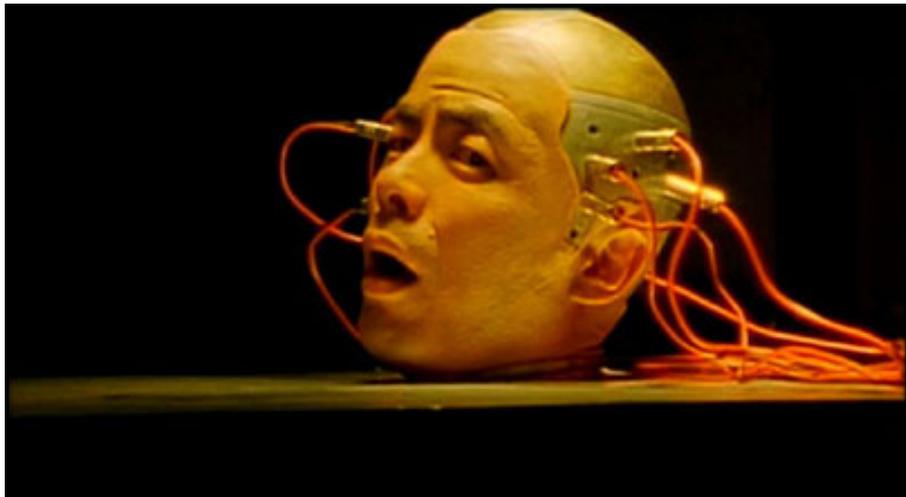


Figure 2 Transforming and fragmented bodies in Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (top) and Miike's *Full Metal Yakuza* (bottom).

Sarris' auteur theory cannot account for such a reading, eschewing as it does important contextual factors in the search for textual unity. A more productive approach, however, may be taken in the form of Peter Wollen's structuralist reframing of auteurism. Wollen moved auteurism away from the designation of the director as the total originator of meaning and towards a reading of the repetitions, differences, and oppositions to be found in a body of work that sees its author as a product of culture. For Wollen, 'the meaning of the films of an *auteur* is constructed a

posteriori; the meaning—semantic, rather than stylistic or expressive—of the films of a *metteur en scène* exists *a priori*' (1972: 78, emphasis in original). Such an approach promotes the analysis of the structural elements of a single oeuvre that acknowledges the role of the viewer in creating meaning. In this case, the recognition of an identifiable structure *produces* authorial individuality, as opposed to *expressing* it. In opposition to Sarris' romantic belief in the appreciation of auteurist interior meaning, the auteur theory, as Wollen conceives it, functions alternatively as 'a kind of decipherment, [a] decryptment' of filmic structure that 'insists that the spectator has to work at reading the text' (1972: 104, 169).

In this sense, the reading of Tsukamoto's grotesque aesthetics as a manifestation of social unrest can be seen as a spectatorial *a posteriori* process of meaning-making that first identifies the distinct structure of the director's films, then looks outside those texts for an explanation for its existence. Similarly, Miike's authorial traits—his recurrent themes, formal elements, and aesthetic design—can be recognised and (alongside Tsukamoto's cinema) subsequently be attributed to a shared cultural consciousness that exists beyond the notion of biographical authorship as the basis for a totality of meaning. For Janet Staiger (2003: 28), this is the purpose of theories of authorship: they are a 'question of causality for the film.' Designating authorship (Miike as author, Tsukamoto as author) offers a framework through which to approach collaboratively produced, mass-media texts. The singular, authorial figure provides a reference point for spectators in coming to terms with the causality of films, as a way of reading films that attempts to account for the process of cinematic creativity by means of an identifiable structuring individual.

This notion of causality reveals one of the key problems inherent in early authorship theories—the supposed total creative power of the auteur. Whilst some

auteurist approaches have since viewed other individuals as the authors of film texts (the screenwriter or the star, for example), the director was the most common configuration of the auteur in the first wave of auteurism, and remains so today. The assumptions here are two-fold. Firstly, it is presumed that, in his or her position as auteur, the creativity of the director takes precedence over all others involved in the collaborative process of film production. The roles played by the cast, the crew, and the studio are overlooked and subsumed into the director's unmitigated input. Secondly, it is supposed that the director, as auteur, has a unique creative vision that is borne out in the final film product. Whether it be Sarris' three concentric criteria of identification (as discussed in the introduction to this thesis), or Wollen's structuralist decryption, the function of earlier auteurist approaches had been to analyse a body of texts (as the product of an auteur) in the pursuit of the isolation of this authorial individuality. Since the structuralist intervention in theories of authorship, many developments have occurred in the effort to reconcile the problem of collaboration. As Berys Gaut (1997: 149) notes, ideas of film authorship have proposed 'that the film author is an actual individual, or a critical construct; that there is not one film author, but several; the claim of film authorship has been held primarily as an evaluative one, or an interpretive one, or simply as the view that there are authors of films as there are authors of literary works.'

With this in mind, it is possible to contribute to these formulations by continuing the narrative of Miike's biographical legend. A consideration of the industrial conditions of the early years of Miike's filmmaking, and the presence of the discussion of these conditions within Western discourse, further allows one to interrogate concepts of authorship in placing the director within a specific production context. Moreover, an examination of Miike's own experiences in the domestic

Japanese film industry, and his responses to it, allows one to put forward a case for his particular cult authorship, in the process challenging the notion that 'auteurism exists largely for the convenience of critics [...] mainly [as] a way of reading movies, not of explaining how they're made' (Rosenbaum 2000: 84).

“Anyone Can Become a Director”: The Biographical Legend Continues

In *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Bordwell discusses the significance of the director's biographical legend in allowing his films 'to come into being, as fulfillments of the legend; and to orient perceivers to them' (1988: 5). The image that spectators conjure of the filmmaker—"Ozu" the author, as opposed to Yasujirō Ozu the actual human being²⁶—is informed by what is known of his biography, functioning as a lens through which his films are viewed and subsequently understood. A construct of discourse, this legend can, according to Bordwell, be produced in two ways:

The film industry can generate a biographical legend [...] or the artist himself [or herself] can provide one through interviews, writings, and public pronouncements [...] In the latter event, the creation of a biographical legend should not be considered a cunningly contrived display; public discourse will necessarily appropriate a filmmaker's words and acts, turning them to particular ends.

(1988: 5–6)

The discursive construction of Ozu's biographical legend is, for Bordwell, one that 'easily slides into the notion of Ozu the Zen artist, the simple toiler who turns out to have the deep secret'—there is 'Ozu the humble craftsman,' 'Ozu [...] the modest

²⁶ One may recall here Wollen's distinction that 'Fuller, or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors, are quite separate from 'Fuller' or 'Hawks' or 'Hitchcock', the structures named after them' (1972: 168).

artisan,' and 'Ozu the stubborn conservative' (1988: 6). Surveying Western filmic discourse, the image that one may conjure of Miike's biographical legend, particularly during the phase of emergence under discussion, is that of a cinematic dilettante—a reluctant filmmaker who appears to make films haphazardly, with speed, and in volume. If Ozu was an artisan who calmly created his films, then Miike appears to be a factotum of rapid production; if Ozu was a devotee to formula, then Miike is an anarchist; Ozu the humble craftsman, Miike the reluctant filmmaker.

This image of Miike is, as it has been for Ozu, constructed by both the industry and Miike himself. Indeed, much of what has become part of the Miike biographical legend has originated from information imparted by the director through interviews, and one element of his filmmaking career that he has been particularly vocal about is his very becoming a director. Despite leaving his home in Osaka at the age of 18 to study at Shōhei Imamura's film school in Yokohama, filmmaking was not a natural early passion for Miike. The path that led him to directing his own films was largely circumstantial, and his own comments on this matter appear to promote the perceived image of him as a somewhat disinclined film creator:

I got into a film school, but it wasn't because I loved movies and wanted to make movies on my own [...] I did not want to become an adult, so I killed time for two years in school [...] After two years I had to graduate and I reluctantly became an assistant director. After five years, I became an assistant director for Mr. Imamura. I do my job, I work hard on the work assigned to me. But I never went out to find work for myself. I was given the position of director. I wasn't really trying to make a career for myself, I was just given projects. It's still the same.

—Takashi Miike

(Axmaker 2015)

Yet, when discussing Miike's biographical legend it is vital that one avoids the pitfall of the assumption of 'a cunningly contrived display' outlined by Bordwell (1988: 6).

Certainly, Miike himself has agency in divulging the details of his biography—his words are, after all, his words—but it would be naïve to overlook the influence that discourse has in shaping how this information is presented, framed, reframed, and consumed. Therefore, when looking to the sources of Miike’s biographical legend it is important that his statements are considered within the context they appear. Mes’ biographical chapter in his book on Miike (2006: 15–19), Kuriko Sato and Mes’ interview with Miike for the specialist Japanese film site *Midnight Eye* (2001), Sean Axmaker’s interview with the director at the 2002 Seattle International Film Festival (2015)—all these sources exist within particular spheres of discourse that perform their own functions and possess their own form of dissemination, their own readerships, and their own impact.

From his family’s history of displacement and his childhood in multicultural Osaka, the Miike biographical legend continues along a path dictated largely by adolescent uncertainty. Throughout his formative years, the young Miike developed and left behind a number of hobbies and pursuits before eventually taking up filmmaking. Having never been an achiever academically, the earliest regular activity Miike became involved in was rugby, which he played for a few years until he reached high school. This sporting endeavour gave way to a keen interest in playing pachinko, a pinball-based game that was developed in Japan in the first quarter of the 20th century as a gambling device comparable to that of the slot machine popularised in the West. Following this, Miike became part of a social group who bonded over a shared passion for racing motorcycles, and he set his sights on shaping a career out of becoming a professional racer. Miike has spoken of his time spent motorcycle racing, admitting that he revelled in the excitement of participating in such a dangerous activity despite losing a number of friends to fatal crashes (Mes

2006: 16). After the highest performing member of the group became a professional racer, Miike accepted that following in his footsteps was an ultimately unachievable goal and intended to get a job as a mechanic in the hope that he could eventually join a racing team. However, unwilling to spend the time studying to acquire the mathematical skills necessary for such an occupation, Miike quickly gave up on his goal. Managing to escape the path taken by many of his friends who joined the *yakuza*, he finished school and was left living with his parents, with no job, at the beginning of adulthood.

Fortuitously, Miike's lack of ambition was to lead him unwittingly towards a prolific career in filmmaking. Miike's upbringing in a working-class area, with a father who spent the majority of his spare time indulging in drink and gambling, was very much devoid of stimulating interactions with culture and the arts (Mes 2006: 16–17). His father, whilst a regular visitor to the cinema himself, only first took Miike to the theatre when he was a teenager; they saw one of Steven Spielberg's earliest films, *Duel* (1971). Whilst searching for a chance to move away from home after finishing school, Miike responded to an advert he heard on the radio promoting the Yokohama Vocational School of Broadcasting and Film (which has since been renamed the Japan Academy of Moving Images). Miike confesses that the advert only caught his attention because it stressed the fact that there were no entrance exams required and that, essentially, anyone who could not get a place at a university could apply for a position at the school. 'It really sounded like the ideal chance to escape home and do nothing,' he explains, and so he applied and at the age of 18 he moved to Yokohama. He rented a small flat, took up a job in a nightclub, and enrolled in the school with the help of his parents partly paying his tuition fees (Mes 2006: 16–17).

Despite the ease with which the unqualified and unambitious Miike entered

the film school in Yokohama, the institution was in fact home to a venerated and internationally renowned director. The school was founded in 1975 by Shōhei Imamura, a leading figure in the Japanese New Wave, who was Dean at the time Miike arrived and would later be honoured with the first of his two prestigious Palme d'Or awards at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, for his epic *The Ballad of Narayama/Narayama bushikō* (1983).²⁷ Miike's attendance was poor, having only been present for the first couple of months of his first year of study and attending just two classes across the entire duration of his second year. Again, however, it was Miike's apathetic state that saw him unintentionally move further into the film industry. During his second year, a representative of a production company visited the school in search of a student who would work as an unpaid assistant on the set of the television series *Black Jack/Kama Puzo no Blackjack* (1981), a live-action adaptation of the Osamu Tezuka manga of the same name. As all of the other students were preoccupied with completing their final-year graduation films, the school put Miike forward for the position with the intention of ensuring that a decent film student was not lost from its alumni.

This early experience of working on a film set significantly shaped Miike's foundational approach to filmmaking, garnering as it did a dissatisfaction with the standard operations of Japanese production companies. Speaking of his days spent on television sets, he says that most of those working on the projects were salaried production company employees; people who were, in Miike's words, 'completely uninteresting' (Mes 2006: 17). As an assistant, Miike's responsibility was to complete the tasks that were left unfinished by the salaried employees clocking off at the end of their shifts, meaning that many of the jobs vital to maintaining tight production

²⁷ Imamura's second Palm d'Or was awarded for his 1997 film, *The Eel*, at that year's Cannes festival.

schedules were often done by Miike and his fellow assistants, for little to no money at unsociable hours. Although he quickly grew to despise such employees and the studios and production companies that supported them, Miike continued to take on jobs out of financial necessity and worked on a number of other television series, including the detective dramas *G-Men* (1977–1982) and *Special Investigation Frontline/Tokusō saizensen* (1977–1987). Central to Miike’s frustration with working in this environment was his belief that many of those who occupied higher positions around him were doing very little with the opportunities they were given. ‘[D]espite the fact they didn’t have any talent,’ he says of the companies and their staff, ‘they were very arrogant’ (Mes 2006: 17). This sentiment was also expressed in a 2001 interview in which Miike (who was, at that time, gaining recognition in the West following the release of *Audition*) claimed ‘I think anyone can become a director, especially if you have the money’²⁸ (Sato and Mes 2001). Subsumed into the biographical legend, Miike’s lack of motivation at film school, coupled with his disillusionment with the practices of the Japanese industry, appears to have informed a rather sceptical perspective on filmmaking—a view that contributes to the image of him as the reluctant filmmaker.

Another important facet of Miike’s formative years working as an assistant in the television industry is one that has shaped a significant element of the Miike biographical legend, namely that of his cinematic fecundity. Seemingly ubiquitous in critical discourse, discussion of the extraordinary rate with which Miike completes projects possesses a highly visible presence. In his coverage of a large retrospective

²⁸ In the interview, Miike expresses a particular distrust of those who make their way into the film industry by financial means. ‘There are so many ways to become a director,’ he maintains, citing in particular the example of Haruki Kadokawa (Sato and Mes 2001). Kadokawa is the president of the hugely successful Kadokawa Shoten publishing house who decided to move into film production in 1976 and has since produced over 70 titles and directed 7 films (with many grossing large sums at the box office), including many directed by Miike.

of the director's work at New York's Film Society Lincoln Centre in 2011²⁹—in which 13 of his films were screened across six days—Mark Vanderwalle simply wrote: 'There's prolific, and then there's Takashi Miike' (2011). Miike's high rate of productivity began during the time he spent working freelance on television sets, taking on dozens of jobs a year with varying responsibilities. The union legislation set in place to regulate suitable working hours for those employees who worked in the industry resulted in many opportunities for younger casual labourers like Miike, and as such he was able to maintain himself for almost a decade by moving from one small job to another.

It was not until he moved into film, however, that Miike began to develop a skill for working on multiple projects simultaneously—a technique that has since enabled him to release up to seven or eight titles a year on a number of occasions. Although he was sceptical of the operations of the film industry throughout his time as a freelancer, after ten years of working in television he decided to move into film production in the hope that he could escape what he saw as the creative vacancy of television dramas. 'In cinema you had the chance to create something particular and unique,' Miike argues, saying that he 'thought it would be an interesting experience to work on a project [...] with a director who was trying to put his [or her] own vision into film' (Mes 2006: 18). The director Miike would first work with on a film set was, coincidentally, Imamura. When Imamura was looking for three assistants to work alongside his crew during the shooting of his 1987 black comedy, *Zegen*, Miike was given the role of third assistant director, and went on to become assistant director to Imamura again for the critically acclaimed *Black Rain/Kuroi ame* (1989). Mike's work in television would benefit him in the years between these two films, as he assumed

²⁹ For more information on the retrospective, see the Film Society Lincoln Centre's site: <<http://www.filmlinc.org/series/shinjuku-outlaw-13-from-takashi-miike/>>

the role of assistant director on a number of projects fronted by directors he had formerly worked for in the arena of television, including Toshio Masuda's *This Story of Love/Kono aino monogatari* (1987) and Kazuo Kuroki's *Tomorrow/Ashita* (1988). By 1991, Miike had worked his way up to the position of first assistant director for Hideo Onchi on his production, *Shimanto River/Shimanto-gawa* (1991).

Having gained experience in this capacity, Miike received his first opportunity to direct his own film as the burgeoning V-Cinema market allowed young and emerging directors to take on projects without previous titles to their name. The Vision Produce company invited Miike to direct a film called *Eyecatch Junction/Toppuu! Minipato tai – Aikyacchi Jankushon* (1991), a female-fronted cop comedy, but two months before shooting was expected to begin they also asked him to replace another director for a project entitled *Lady Hunter/Redi hantaa: Koroshi no pureryuudo* (1991). In being given little time to complete both films, Miike quickly shot *Lady Hunter* in two months during pre-production for *Eyecatch Junction*, and the latter film was completed and released on video before the former. For many years, Miike would maintain this 'speed-demon pace' (Lim 2009), and the discourse surrounding his position within the fledgling V-Cinema market has contributed greatly to his cult following in the West.

Speed-Demon: Miike and the Cultification of the V-Cinema Market

The emergence of Japan's V-Cinema, and the particular modes of production and distribution that it operates within, is significant in its specificity to a certain period of economic growth that began in the country almost three decades ago. Between 1986

and 1991, Japan experienced a *baburu keiki*, or bubble economy. This was a period of vastly inflated asset and stock prices eventually resulting in a financial crisis that would enter the country into an extensive stint of economic stagnation that has only been upturned in more recent years. Prior to the crash, Japan's famous post-war economic miracle saw a surplus of cash that led to overconfidence in the country's markets, which in turn caused a sudden rise in speculative investments in stocks and assets. The outcome of this economic speculation was the increasing willingness of large wealthy companies to invest their money in other businesses in search of quick profits. One arena in which such companies did so was that of film production. In an attempt to take advantage of the burgeoning straight-to-video market, the Japanese film industry was inundated with a flow of financial investment from business corporations that had no previous involvement in, or working knowledge of, filmmaking and its industrial operations.

This injection of cash from outside business essentially led, as Mes (2006: 18–19) has documented,³⁰ to the birth of a market that thrived upon the already growing popularity of video releases amongst Japanese consumers. Although video rental had been a popular format of film consumption in Japan for a number of years, Toei's move to begin releasing movies directly to VHS, and as such bypassing the traditional avenue of theatrical exhibition, facilitated the development a new financially successful practice of the rapid production and distribution of films. Building upon the previous trend of producing features designed specifically for the video market that had been common in animation since the early 1980s, the Toei company, through its subsidiary Toei Video, launched its "V-Cinema" label in 1989, with the release of Toshimichi Okawa's *Crime Hunter/Kuraimuhanta Ikari no Judan*.

³⁰ For a more detailed examination of its legacy, see Mes' two-part history of V-Cinema for *Midnight Eye* (2014a, 2014c).

Without the need to create a presence for the title on the theatrical circuit (which would have usually preceded a video release for live-action cinema prior to this), Toei's strategy of capitalising on the popularity of the home video format immediately flourished. The low-budget action movie was a significant success. Toei Video quickly released further straight-to-video titles that were equally profitable, and many other studios and production companies sought to imitate Toei's success by launching their own lines of home-video products. Nikkatsu labelled its line "V-Feature," Japan Home Video introduced "V-Movie," and Shochiku launched its "Shochiku Home Video" (SHV) brand. Despite the "V-Cinema" label in fact being a registered trademark of Toei specifically, the term V-Cinema is widely used to refer generically to the market of movies intended solely for home-video release. It is, as Jasper Sharp (2011: 127) notes, often employed to describe this market in lieu of other well-known terms, such as OV (Original Video) and Bideo Eiga (Video Film).

The V-Cinema phenomenon is a vital part of Japanese film history. Its specific industrial context shaped the trajectory of an entrance into, and formative development of stylistic traits within, the domestic film industry for not only the inexperienced Miike, but a number of other currently prominent figures also.³¹ Many of the companies that invested in the burgeoning V-Cinema market had no previous experience of the film industry, and as such the decisions they made when dictating the direction of projects often differed to the traditional courses that usually preceded them. One concern that troubled these new investors when assigning roles to straight-to-video projects was a distrust of recognised filmmakers who had already shaped a career in the theatrical arena. 'To these new, inexperienced companies,

³¹ Other notable directors whose early films were produced for the V-Cinema market include Kiyoshi Kurosawa, known for *Cure* (1997), *Pulse* (2001), and *Tokyo Sonata* (2008); Shinji Aoyama, director of *Eureka* (2000), *Tokyo Park* (2011), and *The Backwater* (2013); and Takashi Shimizu of *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002), *Marebito* (2004), and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (2014).

established film directors seemed too arrogant to deal with,' Miike himself says, 'so they would ask assistant directors to direct films for them' (Mes 2006: 19).

Many of the more notable filmmakers who worked in the V-Cinema market before achieving international success with theatrical releases first experimented with, rather than honed, their directorial skills during the straight-to-video boom. For example, Shinji Aoyama, who has been a prominent figure at international film festivals with releases such as *Eureka/Yurika* (2000) and *Tokyo Park/Tōkyō kōen* (2011), amongst others,³² made his first two directorial features on the V-Cinema scene. Having previously worked as an assistant director for Kiyoshi Kurosawa, another internationally renowned Japanese filmmaker who benefitted from the opportunities of the straight-to-video mode of production,³³ Aoyama went on to release his debut, sex comedy *Not in the Textbook!/Kyōkasho ni nai!* (1995), and second film, action flick *A Cop, a Bitch and a Killer/Waga mune ni kyeki ari* (1996), in the V-Cinema market.

Miike's particular trajectory in the straight-to-video business promotes the image of him as the reluctant filmmaker, setting him apart from his contemporaries and inviting cult identification. Like Aoyama, Miike's graduation from assistant on film sets to first experience as director was most certainly expedited by the atypical circumstances of production brought about by the unusual sources of investment in V-Cinema. Yet, a recurrent topic in critical discourse is Miike's explanation that

³² Aoyama's *Helpless* (1996) was his breakthrough on the international film festival stage. Since then, he has also achieved success with *Eureka* (which was nominated for the Palm d'Or at Cannes 2000, and won two awards) and *Tokyo Park* (winner of the Golden Leopard Jury Prize at the 2011 Locarno International Film Festival, honouring both the film and Aoyama's career).

³³ Although he began his directorial career with theatrical releases, Kurosawa has also worked extensively within V-Cinema, with films such as *Yakuza Taxi* (1994) and the six-part *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself!* (1995–1996) series. Kurosawa has spoken of the valuable experience of working in the realm of V-Cinema. 'For me, compared to before the time I started working in V-cinema, I came to handle the subjects as well as the technical aspects of my films better and with more flexibility' (Mes and Sharp 2004: 96).

filmmaking was not a career he was even in pursuit of. 'I just happened to enter this world,' he says, 'I didn't study cinema' (Sato and Mes 2001). Although passing through the route of studying film theory and practice, the image of Miike as the reluctant filmmaker stems from his apparent resistance to film school as a traditional entry into the industry. Significantly, Miike's deviation from the perceived "norm" has drawn the attention of Western cult audiences who identify with a director who appears to work in opposition to the mainstream, both in his apparent lack of interest in the commercial gains of popular cinema and in his rejection of auteurist elitism. Certainly, his inadvertent move into the industry embodies an attitude to cinema that is typified less by an academic understanding of film and its history, and more by a coincidental pragmatism:

[T]here is a lot of stuff I don't know about film history. For me, film is something to bump into by accident. I like the feeling of chance encounters. Why did I meet this person? Why did I stumble across this film? If I started studying film, I would have to be more aggressive about it. So maybe I don't really want to do that. I'd rather just keep bumping into them.
—Takashi Miike

(Macias 2001: 7–8)

In this sense, the image of Miike as the reluctant filmmaker poses a further challenge to auteurism in the rejection of a significant trend in New Hollywood—the 'American *auteur* cinema, which [has] emerged out of university-based film schools' (Marchetti 2010: 148, emphasis in original). Exemplified by a group of scholarly directors to be found in the American mainstream, such as Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, and Oliver Stone, this auteur cinema embodies an educated, cinephilic approach to filmmaking that seems incompatible with the V-Cinema model. Miike's approach to cinema reveals a disposition for embarking on projects across a broad spectrum of genres, budgets, and time constraints, with seemingly little to no criteria for selection.



Figure 3 The VHS cover for Miike’s 1997 film *Ambition Without Honour 2*—released on Toei’s V-Cinema label—with the film’s genre elements on full show.

Especially during this earlier period of his career, Miike claims to have never refused an offer to direct. ‘I will always take any kind of job that I’ve been commissioned to make,’ he says (“Insider’s POV...” 2012). As became customary in V-Cinema, genre projects (see figure 3) with a completed script, cast, and budget would be presented to early-career directors as a package, a practice offering inexperienced filmmakers the opportunity to direct features without the need to produce the content themselves. This mode of production allowed Miike, with no directorial experience, to helm a number of projects in a relatively short space of

time, putting into practice the skills he had garnered whilst working as an assistant on television and film sets. Following 1991's *Lady Hunter* and *Eyecatch Junction*, Miike went on to direct, among others, boxing movie *A Human Murder Weapon/Ningen kyōki: Ai to ikari no ringu* and TV film *Last Run/Rasuto ran: Ai to uragiri no hyaku-oku en – shissō Feraari 250 GTO* in 1992, the two *We Are No Angels/Oretachi wa tenshi ja* comedies in 1993, his trilogy of *Bodyguard Kiba/Bodigaado Kiba* action films (1993, 1994, 1995), and gangster movie *Shinjuku Outlaw/Shinjuku autoroo* in 1994.

It is important to note here the significance of the fluidity of Miike's approach to genre and modes of production, which has characterised his filmmaking since the beginning of his career. The manner in which the director traverses generic terrains, and often produces singular works crossing a multitude of genre boundaries, has been discussed at length (Rayns 2000, Gerow 2009, Rawle 2009), yet it is also essential that one considers Miike's ability to negotiate between varied modes of production, including straight-to-video and theatrical releases, television movies and series, documentaries, music videos, and stage productions. Although for the first half of the 1990s the director's work was defined by his V-Cinema titles, throughout his career he has worked in television, including his two *Man, a Natural Girl/Tennen shōjo Man* series (both 1999) and the *Multiple Personality Detective Psycho/Tajuu jinkaku tantei saiko* series (2000), TV movies *Sabu* (2002) and *Negotiator/Kōshōnin* (2003), and episodes in shows such as *Ultraman Max/Urutoraman Makkusu* (2005) and *Q.P.* (2011). He has also produced a behind-the-scenes short documenting a Tsukamoto film, *The Making of 'Gemini'/Tsukamoto Shin'ya ga Ranpo suru* (2000), and a music video, *Pandoora* (2000), for singer Koji Kikkawa, and has conducted stage productions, with *Demon Pond/Yasha-ga-ike* (2005) and *Zatoichi* (2007).

As Williams has noted, Miike welcomes the many opportunities offered by a variety of media, shifting between different formats ‘in a manner inconceivable in the West, where talents are usually confined to a particular area and those who combine multiple artistic aspirations are regarded with suspicion’ (2004: 54–56). Of course, the flexibility of V-Cinema as a mode of production plays a significant role in this, given the fact that the straight-to-video market itself is not treated with the same contempt in Japan as it tends to be in the West. Renowned filmmakers such as Miike, Aoyama, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa have enjoyed success at international film festivals in spite of their straight-to-video work, in a manner that is not so common of directors from Western regions. In fact, in more recent years some critics have even lamented Miike’s current presence on the festival scene for the apparent loss of the high level of creativity displayed during his V-Cinema period:

Before becoming gentrified by major festivals, Miike’s bread and butter was V-Cinema—low-budget, often X-rated direct-to-video gangster pics that allowed the helmer to mash up genres in darkly imaginative ways. Following a recent string of mind-numbing splatter films like “Lesson of the Evil” and “As the Gods Will,” Miike and his production team claimed they wanted to recapture the spirit of his V-Cinema standards, like “Fudoh: The New Generation” [...] and “Full Metal Yakuza.”

(Lee 2015)

In her review in *Variety* magazine of Miike’s recent release, the vampire-gangster hybrid genre movie *Yakuza Apocalypse*, Maggie Lee refers to the days in which the rapidly produced straight-to-video titles he directed for Japan’s V-Cinema market were the director’s ‘bread and butter.’ Published in May 2015, Lee’s review came at a time when Miike had very much become a regular at many prestigious international film festivals such as those in Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and Toronto—a position he continues to hold today. Lee laments the filmmaker’s current state of “gentrification”

and his supposed claim to reignite the essence of his early V-Cinema work with *Yakuza Apocalypse*. The resulting film, she decries, 'is a lazily executed dud padded out with infantile pranks, shambolic plot turns and knockabout action.' Yet, she acknowledges that Miike's movie will most likely find audiences in a particular context which, ironically, seems incongruous with his apparently gentrified circumstances. The violent genre-bending movie is, Lee argues, 'instant ramen for fanboys at rowdy midnight fest sidebars' (2015).

This damning review of *Yakuza Apocalypse* encapsulates the most recent, and ongoing, development in the trajectory of Miike's reception in the West—the internationalism of his involvement in global film festivals and transnational co-productions. Whilst this phase will be explored later in chapters four and five, a consideration of Miike's current standing on the international stage is significant when examining his emergence in Western filmic discourse. As Lee's article demonstrates, the contextual conditions of Miike's earliest films still resonate in the discursive negotiation of significant junctures in the director's career. Knowledge of his history in the domestic straight-to-video market is commonly applied by critics in framing their judgements. Action blockbuster *Shield of Straw/Wara no tate* (2013), Ariston Anderson writes in *Filmmaker Magazine*, is a 'big-budget stunner [that] is a far cry from Miike's early [...] V-cinema releases, low-budget straight-to-video films that taught him how to make the most of a gritty bare-bones production' (2013). The organisers of the Film Society Lincoln Centre's retrospective of the director's work proposed that the domestic release of *The Bird People in China* 'changed the perception of Miike within Japan as merely a V-cinema director and yakuza movie specialist' ("The Bird People in China" 2011). It would appear that, in these instances, Miike's production of V-Cinema titles—a practice he continued, albeit with

decreasing frequency, into the mid-2000s—stands as a benchmark by which the trajectory of the director’s career is measured.

Lee’s review of *Yakuza Apocalypse* is further revealing of the extraordinary nature of Miike’s reputation in the West. Whilst he currently possesses a visible presence at international film festivals, even his most recent releases remain open to cult forms of reception—in this case, the midnight movie. Studies of the midnight movie phenomenon, such as those by James Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1983) and Stuart Samuels (1983), locate it as cult in its deviation from traditional viewing practices, as an active and communal cinematic event. Often, the films that garner repeat viewings at midnight screenings are characterised by shocking subject matter, explicit imagery or idiosyncratic structures—movies like Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *El Topo* (1970) and John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* (1972)—although this is most certainly not always the case. Musicals such as *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) and *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008), for instance, are the subjects of sing-along screenings that endorse lively audience interaction in the recital of lyrics and customs of costume-wearing. *Yakuza Apocalypse*, it would seem, very much resides alongside the former pair of films. Described in *The Telegraph* as ‘foolish, transgressive, and just about the best fun you can have in a cinema’ (Collin 2015), and praised for its featuring of ‘vampires, a smelly turtle-beaked goblin and a furry humanoid frog with fierce martial arts skills’ in *The Los Angeles Times* (Murray 2015), it is perhaps unsurprising that Lee brands it “instant ramen” at such events.

One can begin to account for Miike’s current reputation for producing such titles through a consideration of the V-Cinema market as a fundamental element of his particular cult authorship. The specificity of V-Cinema—as a mode of production, a form of distribution, and a system of consumption—figured centrally in early critical

responses to Miike's work, and to this day features as a vital structuring principle in the director's reception as a cult auteur. Mathijs and Sexton note that 'the mainstream [...] acts as a major framework *against* which the cult auteur is constructed' (2011: 71, emphasis in original). It is important to recognise here that this "mainstream" is a perceived mainstream, inasmuch as it is not a distinct, concrete entity that can be identified and defined, but rather a perceived construct. It is an idea that is permeated in discourse by audiences, critics, and members of the industry. As Mark Jancovich argues, the notion of 'the mainstream, commercial cinema' is 'one of the most problematic concepts within film studies [...] and the ways in which its inconsistent and contradictory uses arise from its function as the Other' must be considered (2002: 320–321). In the context of Miike's cult following in the West, this perceived mainstream would most likely take the form of what is assumed to be the dominant, commercial, popular cinema—or, in its most commonly identified form, Hollywood.

Notwithstanding its problematic conceptualisation, the mainstream is vital in offering a reference point against which cult consumption operates, and, accordingly, against which the cult auteur is measured. As Jancovich (2002: 321) explains, the construction of the mainstream 'allows for the production of distinctions and sense of cultural superiority.' Cult audiences may gather around film texts that emanate from contexts existing outside of, or in opposition to, the dominant cinema; or, the films themselves may display characteristics that challenge what is believed to be acceptable within the mainstream; or, in a further sense, the films may be consumed in ways that are unusual in relation to traditional modes of consumption. It is following this line that Mathijs and Sexton propose three broad models of the cult auteur, namely 'those working outside the mainstream; those vacillating between

independence and commercial work [...] and those who manage to work within the system but who maintain what are viewed as excessive levels of control' (2011: 71).

In the case of Miike's cult authorship, it is possible to position him within all three of these spheres, not least owing to the issues of recontextualisation that are faced when examining the Western reception of this Japanese director. Miike's cult following in the West is facilitated by a process in which, whether consciously or not, the filmmaker and his cinema are stripped from the context of their domestic film industry and transposed elsewhere, pulled from their original environment and placed in another region. During this relocation, the specificities of the particular realm of the Japanese industry in which Miike operates—those factors which may mark it as different from, or perhaps similar to, the mainstream of its new context—can be either lost, misunderstood, or purposefully re-appropriated. It is for this reason that Miike makes a particularly productive case when studying cult authorship. The recontextualisation of his production methods allows him to occupy the multiplicity of positions that are most commonly assumed by cult auteurs, in that the Japanese context poses a range of distinctions from the Western mainstream.

The perception of V-Cinema as an oppositional mode of production has contributed to the development of Miike's cult authorship in its presence in Western filmic discourse. For instance, *UGO* (which describes itself as a 'pop culture comedy site') featured an article entitled "Why Care About Takashi Miike?" in which the "quality" of the domestic straight-to-video market is offered as a reason to engage with Miike's cinema. 'While they share the smaller budgets and heavy focus on genre releases of their American counterparts,' Aubrey Sitterson writes, 'V-Cinema isn't burdened with the same low-quality stigma we have on this side of the Pacific' (2011). Here, a direct comparison is made between the industries of the US and

Japan—an appraisal in which the Japanese mode of production is positioned as superior. Sitterson extends this notion of quality to Miike’s cinema. ‘If you’ve found yourself turning into a Takashi Miike fan,’ he exclaims, ‘welcome to the club!’ (Sitterson 2011). Further examples can be found in more amateur forms of discourse. On his personal blog, *Phil-Zine!*, American actor and writer Phil Kelly proclaims his love for Miike’s cinema, the work of ‘a truly visionary filmmaker.’ Kelly celebrates the occasional ‘elegance’ of Miike’s films, alongside their depiction of ‘grungy and perverse’ sex, painting the director as ‘a master of psychological horror and brutality.’ Significantly, when discussing the context of Miike’s earlier films he makes an important distinction. Kelly refers to what he sees as the ‘straight to DVD [...] genre called V-Cinema,’ a mode of production and distribution he positions vis-à-vis the American market—‘it’s much bigger in Japan than here,’ he claims (2006).

Into the Theatres, Into the Festivals: *Fudoh* and the New Generation

When I made certain films for straight to video I never thought that international film festivals would take the work. When I went to film festivals in foreign countries I was so happy that my movies got to be seen internationally. I myself enjoyed watching my own work with a large audience that appreciated it more than I expected.

—Takashi Miike

(Epstein 2004)

V-Cinema evolved throughout the 1990s, and in the second half of the decade a most significant development occurred. Although intended as straight-to-video releases, a select few of the abundance of hurriedly manufactured titles were chosen for theatrical exhibition. Following the initial boom in the first half of the decade, the market quickly became inundated. As the need for quantity became ever-greater, an

increasing number of titles were being hastily rushed through production with the aim of fulfilling the demand. The oversaturation of the market led to distributors exhibiting a small number of titles on 35mm prints in theatres, in the hope that the opportunity to brandish this achievement on promotional material would set them apart from the surfeit of similar productions. Revealing the rather cynical, profit-driven nature of such a tactic, these theatrical runs would typically last for only one week, on a single screen, in major cities like Tokyo or Osaka (Mes 2014a). It was anticipated that theatrical release status would lend the low-budget, generic fare of V-Cinema a level of credibility—capital that would elevate certain titles to a more prestigious standing and, in promoting the connotations of such a platform of exhibition, possibly appeal to a wider audience.

Significantly, the theatrical exhibition of certain V-Cinema titles was not limited to the domestic market. At the same time that select films were being blown up to 35mm prints³⁴ in Japan, international film festivals—such as those held in Rotterdam, Toronto, and Vancouver, and other festivals like the Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival and Montreal's Fantasia International Film Festival—also began to take up these releases. Directors including Miike, Aoyama, Rokuro Mochizuki, Hisayasu Satō, and Tomoaki Hosoyama, all saw V-Cinema titles shown at festivals between 1995 and 1997.³⁵ Such work exemplified the upsurge of creativity that occurred in V-Cinema in the mid 1990s, propagated by what Mes has described as the industry's 'more outstanding progeny' (2014a). At the beginning of

³⁴ In spite of the low budgets and tight schedules of V-Cinema, these straight-to-video productions were originally shot on celluloid. Prior to the innovation of digital video as a more practical and economical mode of shooting, all early V-Cinema films were, although intended for release on video, initially shot using 16mm or Super 16mm film. The necessity of handling celluloid for such projects formed the basis of, as Sharp has recognised, 'a valuable training ground for newcomers to the industry to work with film and real crews' (2001: 271). Whilst the focus of the V-Cinema companies was always to produce titles as quickly and cheaply as possible, many of the directors involved in these projects used the opportunity to experiment with working with film.

³⁵ See Mes (2014a) and Sharp (2011: 272) for more details on these films.

the decade, attendees at such events had been introduced to the theatrical features of Japanese filmmakers including Tsukamoto and Takeshi Kitano, to much acclaim.³⁶ As the '90s progressed, the increasing commitment of festivals to screening certain straight-to-video titles exposed spectators to the more recent work of other contemporary Japanese directors on an international scale.

One of the most critically acclaimed and popular of these releases was 1996's *Fudoh: The New Generation/Gokudō sengokushi: Fudō* (hereafter *Fudoh*). Based on a manga series by Hitoshi Tanimura, *Fudoh* follows the generational conflict of the *Fudoh yakuza* family through the eyes of the young son, Riki, who witnesses his father brutally murder his brother. Although originally intended for the straight-to-video market, the film's producer, Yoshinori Chiba, was reportedly so impressed by the movie and director Miike that he persuaded his production company to commission a theatrical print and the film debuted in Japanese cinemas in October 1996 (Mes 2006: 93, Mes 2014a). *Fudoh* gained popularity at film festivals, and Miike began to hold a visible presence within the relatively small cohort of V-Cinema directors who made an impact on the international stage during the 1990s. With spells of graphic violence and transgressive sexuality, it is perhaps unsurprising that Miike's film played at a number of "fantastic" film festivals, which are traditionally concerned with the realms of fantasy, science-fiction, horror, and cult movies. *Fudoh* was screened at the Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival, Fantasia International Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival in 1997, and at the 1998 Fantasporto International Film Festival in Portugal, where it won its director

³⁶ Kitano came to prominence on the international festival circuit with releases such as *Boiling Point* (1990) and *Sonatine* (1993), gaining critical acclaim at festivals including the Torino International Festival of Young Cinema, Rotterdam, and Cannes. Tsukamoto also enjoyed success at Rotterdam, the Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival, and the Fantasporto International Film Festival.

a number of accolades.³⁷ Following the reception of the film outside of Japan, America's *TIME* magazine ranked *Fudoh* one of the best films of 1997, and Tokyo Shock's VHS release two years later marked the first time Miike's work was available on home video in the United States.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the contextual conditions of Miike's precinematic life and the beginning stages of his career have played a central role in establishing his current reputation in the West as a cult auteur. Through discourse, the myth of the Miike biographical legend has been constructed and maintained. Reviews, interviews, and spectatorial responses have contributed to the image of Miike as the reluctant filmmaker, a director whose cultural milieu and adolescent anxieties incidentally led him into the film industry. Discussion of his path through the domestic straight-to-video market has been instrumental in developing his cult following in the West. V-Cinema has been promoted as a market that, whilst limited by its specific restrictions as a mode of production, offers non-established directors the opportunity to work outside of the supposed big-budget, studio-controlled mainstream system, with a high level of creative freedom. Its cultural specificity places it in opposition to Western infrastructures of production. Moreover, Miike's particular negotiation of the straight-to-video market—one which saw him benefit greatly from its contemporaneous rise in popularity—has set him apart from countless other directors, marking him as a singular, rebellious cult figure.

³⁷ At the 1998 Fantasporto International Film Festival, *Fudoh* was voted the best live-action film in the "Fantasia Section Award," was nominated for the "International Fantasy Film Award," and tied with Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) for the "International Fantasy Film Special Jury Award."

With the theatrical screenings of a select few V-Cinema titles at international film festivals in the mid-1990s, Western audiences were exposed to the work of a new cohort of Japanese directors. Amongst these young filmmakers, Miike held a particularly prominent position, owing in no small part to the popularity of *Fudoh*. A highly significant title in the director's emergence within Western film culture, *Fudoh* was Miike's first theatrical release in the West, his first to receive critical awards on these shores, and the first of his films to be made available on home video in America. The film's popularity outside of Japan initiated the director's move away from the V-Cinema fare on which he built his career, and into the realm of theatrical production. Two years after *Fudoh's* release, a new transitional phase in the trajectory of Miike's reception would begin. Marked by the notion of the "discovery" of a shocking new Japanese talent, his presence on the international stage would begin in earnest with a film that garnered a particularly notorious reputation at festivals and theatres across the West—1999's *Audition*.

Chapter Two — Discovery

The Shock of the New: Discovering *Audition* and the Cult of Asia Extreme

Rashomon wasn't all that good, I don't think. Yet, when people have said to me that its reception was just a stroke of luck, a fluke, I have answered by saying that they only say these things because the film is, after all, Japanese, and then I wonder: Why do we all think so little of our own things?

—Akira Kurosawa

(Richie 1987: 21, emphasis in original)

Why has it taken the west so long to 'discover' Miike Takashi?

(Rayns 2000: 30)

In his memoirs, *Something Like an Autobiography*, Akira Kurosawa recalls the experience of completing his film *Rashomon/Rashōmon* (1950) for the Daiei studio in Japan. His next project was for rival studio Shochiku, an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 19th century novel, *The Idiot*. The production of Kurosawa's *The Idiot/Hakuchi* (1951) was troubled, with the director clashing with the studio heads bitterly. When the film reached cinemas, the reviews were, Kurosawa writes, scathing—'as if they were a mirror reflection of the studio's attitude toward me' (1983: 187). So disastrous was the response to the director's film that Daiei, for whom he had completed a number of projects, told him that he would not be working for them again. He regales a tale of leaving Daiei's studio in Chōfu and pacing through the streets with that terrible news in his ears, ruminating on his bleak situation as he walked all the way to his home in Komae. 'I concluded,' he remembers, 'that for some time I would have to "eat cold rice" and resigned myself to this fact' (1983: 187). Shortly after, Kurosawa went fishing in the Tamagawa River.

After casting his line, it immediately caught on something and snapped—figuring that this bad luck had all come at once, he returned home, depressed, and tired. Then, he recalls:

Suddenly my wife came bounding out. “Congratulations!” I was unwittingly indignant: “For what?” “*Rashōmon* has won the Grand Prix.” *Rashōmon* had won the Grand Prix at the Venice International Film Festival, and I was spared from having to eat cold rice. [A]n angel had appeared out of nowhere. I did not even know that *Rashōmon* had been submitted to the Venice Film Festival [...] It was like pouring water into the sleeping ears of the Japanese film industry.

(Kurosawa 1983: 187, emphasis in original)

Without his knowledge, *Rashomon* had been recommended to the committee at the 1951 Venice International Film Festival by Giuliana Stramigioli, the Japan representative and then-head of Italiafilm. Kurosawa’s film received the Golden Lion for best entry in competition, in addition to the Italian Film Critics Award. The following year, it was given an honorary prize by the Board of Governors at the 24th Academy Awards in the States as the Best Foreign Language Film, a category which would only be established proper four years later. Donald Richie notes how the critical response to *Rashomon* in Japan was, in fact, poor. It was seen by some as a failure as a cinematic adaptation of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s original stories, criticised by others for its convoluted script, and faced disapproval for containing too much cursing. ‘What perhaps most surprised the Japanese, however,’ Richie explains, ‘was that a historical film [...] should prove acceptable in the West’ (1987: 20). Up until the end of the 1940s, the visibility of Japanese cinema in the West was virtually non-existent. The success of *Rashomon*—set at the end of the Heian Period in 12th century Japan—at Venice and the Oscars led many Japanese commentators to question the motivations of those Western audiences who celebrated it. ‘Japanese

critics insisted that these two prizes were simply reflections of Westerners' curiosity and taste for Oriental exoticism,' Kurosawa says, 'which struck me then, and now, as terrible' (1983: 187).

Kurosawa's disagreement with this Japanese critical perspective is driven by his lamentation of what he sees as the country's lack of faith in its own cultural products. 'Why is it that Japanese people have no confidence in the worth of Japan? Why do they elevate everything foreign and denigrate everything Japanese?' he asks (1983: 187). Indeed, the reverence shown towards *Rashomon* in the West in spite of its dismissal in its home country raises many issues pertaining to such a relationship between Western consumer and Japanese product.³⁸ As Andrew Horvat argues, the awarding of the Golden Lion to Kurosawa for *Rashomon* is a pertinent example of those relatively rare occasions in which 'a work of art is valued significantly more highly in a culture other than the artist's own' (2016: 43). Such an example leads us to question exactly why this happens. What was it about *Rashomon* that attracted Western audiences to the film and its director? Was it, as many Japanese critics have suggested, really 'because *Rashomon* was "exotic" [...] and that foreigners like exoticism' (Richie 1987: 20, emphasis in original)? The same questions also arise when examining Takashi Miike's reputation in the West. If the Western critical admiration for *Rashomon* calls for an interrogation of the complexities of appeal and appropriation, then so too does the reception of Miike's

³⁸ For instance, at the time of *Rashomon*'s release, American director Curtis Harrington argued that the film's 'success [...] in the United States is most interesting, for it reveals, to one who knows how to read between the lines of praise, a *reluctant* acceptance of its obvious excellence. Snobbery will always lead Americans to admire the qualities of a French, English, even Swedish film. But when an Oriental country like Japan, whose customs often shock Americans (as primitive and backward), makes a film which technically and artistically surpasses the best Hollywood productions, then the amazed American critics feel uneasy and seek facile explanations based on external influences' (1987: 141, emphasis in original). Further discussing the issue of nationality, Andrew Horvat notes how Japanese film critic Yuichiro Nishimura's comments on *Rashomon* position the film as 'not the product of the creative genius of an individual Kurosawa who happens to be Japanese but that of his nation as a whole. It is almost as if Kurosawa were an Olympic gold medalist sent out as the representative of his country's national team to bring fame and glory to his people' (2016: 46).

Audition, not least because the discourses surrounding the two releases share a conceptual framework—that of “discovery.”

When *Rashomon* triumphed at Venice in 1951, many Western critics adopted an almost ethnographic approach in extending their discussion of Kurosawa’s film to the Japanese cinema as a whole, and to Japanese culture and history on a wider scale. For example, speaking of Toshiro Mifune’s expressive performance, Donald Kirkley of the *Baltimore Sun* appealed to broad, essentialist stereotypes of the Japanese nation. He proposed that ‘[i]f anyone still regards the Japanese as a phlegmatic, undemonstrative race, he [or she] should take a look at *Rashomon*’ (1952: 16, emphasis in original). Here, Kurosawa’s film becomes an object of the ethnography of Japan. In his study of *Rashomon*’s reception, Greg M. Smith notes that, at the time of its release, very few Western critics would have seen a Japanese film before. Little was known of the film’s production, the traditions of the industry within which it was produced, or the cultural history to which it belonged, and, as such, critics were ‘poorly prepared to comment on it’ (2002). Responses to *Rashomon* were channelled through a belief that it was begetting the revelation of what was perceived to be a previously undiscovered cinema, a cinema foreign to the familiar context of Hollywood. Just as the Western ethnographer observes foreign and “unknown” cultures in the pursuit of unearthing cultural practices, so too did Western critics observe *Rashomon* and extrapolate the arrival of an uncommon Japanese cinema.

Receiving its world premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival on 6th October 1999, a similar discovery was postulated in the reception of Miike’s *Audition*. Whilst the passing of almost half a century had certainly resulted in a rather different landscape for Japanese cinema in the West—*Audition* was one of twelve

titles from the country to be screened at the festival that year—the film was similarly presented as the arrival of an obscure new form of Japanese cinema. Where Kurosawa received praise for *Rashomon* as ‘an artistic achievement of [...] distinct and exotic character’ (Crowther 1951), with *Audition* Miike was made the figurehead of a previously unseen, ‘shocking, dark, and disturbing’ collection of films from Japan, and Asia on a wider scale (Shin 2009: 92).

“You are Sick!”: The Shocking “Discovery” of *Audition*

It’s easy to forget the impact that *Audition* had upon its release. For many, including this writer, the film was an unexpected introduction to one of the most prolific and adventurous directors on the planet. [There was a] sense of shock and surprise that went along with that initial discovery of Takashi Miike’s work.

(Perkins 2009, emphasis in original)

It is fair to say that *Audition*, an adaptation of Ryū Murakami’s novel of the same name, was the first interaction with Miike’s work for the majority of Western audiences. It is equally reasonable to suggest that many of those spectators would most likely have been unaware that the film was in fact the director’s 35th in less than a decade. Of the 100 projects that constitute Miike’s vast oeuvre (to date), *Audition* can certainly be considered, as Rawle contests, his ‘international calling card’ (2009: 170). Although he had been directing in Japan from as early as 1991—with 1995 seeing his first domestic theatrical release, *Shinjuku Triad Society*³⁹—it was not until the release of *Audition* at the turn of the century that Miike was first brought to the wide attention of critics and audiences outside his native country. The film’s

³⁹ Although *The Third Gangster* (1995) was Miike’s first film to be screened theatrically in Japan, it was originally intended as a V-Cinema release. *Shinjuku Triad Society* was his first production to be made specifically for theatrical exhibition.

appearances at festivals and theatres across Europe and the States were accompanied by extraordinary media hype. Rumours and stories of scandal followed it around these sites, producing a discourse that projected the “shock” and “surprise” of the discovery of an unknown, yet exciting, foreign director.

Audition traces the search of Shigeharu Aoyama (played by Ryo Ishibashi) for a new partner following the death of his wife. Encouraged to start seeing women again by his teenage son, Aoyama and his friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura), a film producer, carry out fake casting auditions for a project that is never intended to be made. During the auditions, the two men evaluate the unsuspecting women’s suitability for the role of Aoyama’s new wife. The widower is particularly intrigued by Asami (Eihi Shiina), a beautiful young girl whose demure nature enchants him—Aoyama pursues Asami and the two strike up a seemingly promising relationship. Looking into the girl’s history, Yoshikawa becomes concerned that Asami is not quite what she appears to be. He attempts to track down the music producer for whom Asami claims to have worked in the past, yet he discovers that the man is missing. Undeterred by his friend’s warnings, Aoyama falls deeper for Asami and makes the intention to propose. During a trip to an idyllic hotel by the shore, the two make love for the first time—Asami divulges to Aoyama that she was abused as a child, displaying to him the scars she has been left with. The next morning, Aoyama awakes to find that his potential bride has left without a trace. Over the course of the film’s final third, his search for Asami reveals an increasingly disturbing series of events, and as the boundaries between reality and dream become blurred, Aoyama is left in psychological, and physical, torment (see figure 4).

Following its world premiere at Vancouver, *Audition* made its way to the Netherlands a few months later for its European opening, in January 2000. The film’s



Figure 4 Miike treats us to a voyeuristic view of Asami's retribution in *Audition*.

appearance at that year's International Film Festival Rotterdam is now infamous (Morris 2001, Hantke 2005), and not without good reason. Although shown in conjunction with two other films the director had made in 1999 (*Ley Lines* and *Dead or Alive*), it was the controversy surrounding *Audition's* subversion of audience expectations that was the catalyst to the rapid development of Miike's notoriety. The film's surprising denouement—those horrific scenes of torture that are suddenly thrust upon the viewer (and the reader, in the opening of this thesis)—saw an unprecedented number of Rotterdam audience members walk out of screenings in disgust (Hantke 2005: 55). News of the upset spread quickly in the British media. Reports appeared in *The Guardian* (Romney 2000), *Sight & Sound* (James 2000), and *The Mirror* (Friel 2001), all claiming that one particularly disgruntled woman was so dismayed by Miike's film that, before taking her leave, she made the effort to verbally abuse the director personally. Miike himself recalls how the irritated punter, who was sitting directly behind him during the screening, 'made a point of it' to walk around the theatre and approach him to yell 'You are sick!' directly to his face (Vijn

2012).⁴⁰ Further tales of audience aversion to *Audition* emerged as it continued to tour the festival circuit and later gained theatrical release in areas throughout Europe and the US. Reports claimed that the film had been ‘responsible for throngs of shaken filmgoers staggering out of theaters’ (Mitchell 2001), and even had ‘some viewers vomiting in the aisles’ (Rose 2003). When the film opened at the Irish Film Centre in Dublin in May 2001, managers were forced to place warnings outside the cinema after two people fainted during a screening, and *The Mirror* claimed that up to twenty viewers a night were walking out of screenings (Friel 2001).

Later that year, a notorious run at the Riffraff cinema in Zurich, Switzerland, provided further sensational accounts of intense audience reactions to Miike’s film. *The Guardian* reported that three spectators ‘collapsed and the rest of the audience walked out in protest’ during *Audition*’s premiere, proving so gruesome that ‘a man had to be stretchered away’ from the theatre. Frank Braun, the cinema’s programme director, also revealed that the film’s debut screening was so calamitous that it led him to consider pulling it early on in its run, yet that he later changed his mind ‘after being flooded with requests for tickets’ (“Three collapse...” 2002). The visceral nature of such responses, and those reported from Rotterdam, has even drawn comparisons with the much discussed accounts of audience reactions to the actuality films of cinema’s earliest years. In his assessment of *Audition*, Gary Morris (2001) argues that the ‘feeling of cinema as edge spectacle blurring the line between object and audience’—as in the terror of oncoming movement displayed by the first viewers of the Lumières’ famed *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat/L’arrivée d’un train à La Ciotat* (1896)—‘resurfaces with a vengeance’ in *Audition*.

⁴⁰ This is taken from an interview Ard Vijn conducted with Miike for the specialist film site, *Twitch*. The anecdote Miike relays was corroborated during the interview by Vijn’s translator, Luc van Houten, who was present at that very screening: ‘I was sitting next to him at the time,’ van Houten says, ‘and can testify this really happened’ (Vijn 2012).

In spite of such audience responses, the film was in fact extremely well received by Western critics. It was awarded two critics' prizes at Rotterdam,⁴¹ and received a special mention in the judging of the International Fantasy Film Award at Portugal's Fantasporto Festival in 2001. In the UK, support for *Audition* was displayed by *The Guardian's* film reviewers in particular. Peter Bradshaw (2001) praised the film as 'a modern-day Jacobean revenge nightmare,' whilst Miike was celebrated as 'a master at manipulating audience expectations à la Buñuel and Polanski' (Romney 2000) and compared to Hitchcock and Lynch for 'reeling [viewers] in gently but expertly' (Mackie 2001). In the States, positive critical responses came in the form of reviews in mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *Variety* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Ken Eisner (1999) deemed it a 'lyrically paced' picture of 'haunting beauty,' and Kevin Thomas applauded it as a 'gruesome but skillful' piece of work from 'a compelling filmmaker' (2001).

Significantly, the critical reverence for *Audition* was, even at this early stage, channelled through assumptions of Miike's authorship. He was discussed in the same breath as long-established auteurs such as Hitchcock, Buñuel, Polanski, and Lynch, and labelled a "master" and an "expert" at cinematic manipulation. For those few who were already familiar with his work, Miike was indeed presented as an auteur himself. In his programme notes for *Audition's* premiere at Vancouver, Tony Rayns alluded to Miike's status as such. In not wishing to divulge the film's narrative revelations, he instead lists some of its more transgressive elements, framing them by means of the director's authorial integrity:

⁴¹ *Audition* won both the FIPRESCI Award and the KNF Award at that year's Rotterdam festival. The FIPRESCI Award 'is given to the filmmaker of the best film in the Hivos Tiger Awards Competition by the jury of the Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique.' *Audition* was deemed the best film outside competition for this prize. The KNF Award 'is given to the best feature film in the official selection that does not yet have distribution within the Netherlands. The winner is selected by a jury of the Circle of Dutch Film Journalists.' More information can be found at the festival's site: <<http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/about/awards-and-jury/>>

If I told you any more about the plot of *Audition* it would spoil a number of seriously macabre surprises. So let's just say that this is a Miike film—an extremist psycho-thriller featuring scarred thighs, home addresses which turn out to have been boarded up for years, drugged whisky, acupuncture needles, piano wire and some quite terrifying time-slips.

(Rayns 1999)

'So let's just say that this is a Miike film.' Here, Rayns' comments propose that the description of *Audition* as *belonging* to Miike is enough to warrant its attention. The designation of Miike's authorship carries with it expectations of authorial consistency, much in the same manner that the framing of Hitchcock or Lynch as auteurs shapes the reception of their work. This framing of *Audition* as the product of Miike as an auteur was echoed in many other reviews, and particularly those of its appearances at film festivals. As I shall discuss in chapter five, festivals hold a privileged position within the network of filmic discourse that facilitates the construction of authorial reputations, as sites of the discovery and celebration of artistic creativity. In the case of *Audition*, the film's sudden transition in tone and narrative progression produced a tension that compelled a critical attempt to reconcile the multiplicity of its potential readings. For instance, in his review for *Time Out*, Mike D'Angelo amusingly posited the possible responses to the film amongst two disparate audience groups:

[A]s much as I'd like to recommend *Audition* to everyone without reservation, it's difficult to do so in good conscience. Indeed, it's not entirely clear for whom this brilliant, unforgettable mindfuck is intended. Those lured to the theater solely by the hypodermic-heavy marketing stills may well nod off long before the picture gets to "the good stuff"; genteel biscotti munchers who wander in unawares, and who spend the first couple of reels wondering whether they've discovered the next Rohmer or Ozu, will eventually find their gentle smiles abruptly giving way to guttural shrieks.

(D'Angelo 2001)

As *Rashomon* did for Kurosawa, *Audition*'s success at festivals and in theatres throughout the West introduced Miike to many audiences who felt that they were

witnessing some form of a revelation. *Rashomon*, Stephen Prince (1991: 127) argues, was ‘responsible for the Western world’s belated recognition of the Japanese cinema.’ Fifty years later, in his report of the Rotterdam festival’s 2000 edition, Jonathan Romney proposed that the three-title introduction to Miike’s cinema was ‘the discovery that set the festival on its ears’ (2000). Crucially, these two supposed discoveries—separated by half a century—are as much to do with shifting Western attitudes as they are indicative of trends in Japanese production. Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, with its complexly structured narrative of ambiguous truth, appeared to many critics to challenge what they believed to be the characteristic operations of Japanese thought. *Rashomon*, many reviewers suggested, adhered more to Western ways of thinking. It was ‘analytic, logical, and speculative’ (Richie 1987: 20). In this sense, Kurosawa’s film can be considered the object of a process of appropriation, in which the admiration of Western spectators is fuelled not by the recognition of its apparent Japaneseness, but by the identification of its alignment with contemporary Western standards. As Prince argues, *Rashomon*’s critical success at Venice can partly be accredited to ‘its apparent congruence with then-contemporary currents of European thought, particularly a kind of fashionable existential despair over the instability of truth and value’ (1991: 127).

Audition’s reception can accordingly be located in relation to more recent Western attitudes towards, and perceptions of, Japan and its culture. The film arrived amidst the rise of a wave of Western interest in Japanese cultural goods—the popularity of anime and manga, Japanese videogames, fashion, photography, and food has grown in tandem with an increasing Western curiosity of the nation. Described by some as “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” this upsurge in the Western consumption of Japanese popular culture has even been strong enough to manifest

quite patently in economic terms. By the mid-2000s, the country's export industry had grown to be one of its most significant business sectors, accounting for approximately \$130 billion of Japan's national revenue, a sign of just 'how cool, hip or interesting Japanese popular culture has become' (Simeon 2006: 13).

The success of *Audition* at Rotterdam is a pertinent example of this phenomenon. 2000 marked the anniversary of four centuries of shared cultural heritage between the Netherlands and Japan, a relationship which has seen strong ties between the two countries in areas of trade, art, and diaspora (Klos and Derksen 2015). To commemorate this history, that year's Rotterdam festival was heavily Japanese-themed. The programme included four categories dedicated to Japanese cinema: "No Cherry Blossoms: Visions of Japan" (including 50 titles from the country), a showcase of the films of animator Mamoru Oshii, an extensive retrospective of director Kinji Fukasaku, and "Exploding Cinema: Tech.Pop.Japan," a section covering Japanese new media. Further adhering to the theme, variations of the country's flag were to be found on the programme brochure (see figure 5), large red balloons decorated the Hilton bar, and one of the city's cinemas, the Corso, was transformed into the Tech.Pop.Japan lounge, 'an all-day hangout offering cultural flaneurs a bath in state-of-the-art electro culture' (Romney 2000). So strong was the interest in Japanese pop culture, Romney notes, that early on in the festival many attendees intended to exclusively watch the 15-film Fukasaku retrospective, and that 'many delegates ditched everything else to go Japanese' (2000).

The celebration of Japanese culture displayed at Rotterdam demonstrates a rather different form of Western consumption of Japanese products than that accompanying *Rashomon's* success at Venice in the 1950s. When Kurosawa's film was screened in the West, the interest in Japan was characterised by an intrigue



Figure 5 Programme brochure for the 2000 International Film Festival Rotterdam. The Japanese influence is strong, with permutations of the country's flag and the festival's web address (bottom right) taking the form of game company Nintendo's famous logo.

brought about by a widespread lack of knowledge of the country's history, politics, and culture. As British-American critic Vernon Young wrote in 1955:

Most of us who write about films may as well relax and confess that we know nothing at first hand about Japanese movie production; that all we have as data has come to us from press-sheets, from quick consultations with the nearest Japanese bystander, or [...] whatever we have been able to find useful in the way of analogy and of seeing the "unaccredited" performances of Kabuki.

(1955: 416)

This relationship between Western critic and Japanese film must be understood within the context of relocation, as part of a process in which cultural products are

removed from one country and consumed in another. In the same manner as Kurosawa questioned Japan's lack of interest in its own films, Miike too claims that there is a critical tendency in the country to largely reject certain works. 'What often happens in Japan,' he says, 'is that film critics only appreciate films which conform to their expectations, and react negatively or skeptic towards anything which doesn't' (Vijn 2012). This view, it seems, can also be extended to audiences. In an interview discussing his 1997 release *Young Thugs: Innocent Blood/Kishiwada shōnen gurentai: Chikemuri junjō-hen*, Miike laments the minimal demand in the country for the kind of nostalgic realism that his duo of *Young Thugs* films presents. '[I]n Japan, people believe that good films are something which are entertaining through being something extraordinary,' he claims, '[s]omething they can use to escape from reality.' Yet, the director goes on to point towards the potential reception of such films outside of Japan. 'I believe that films which describe reality in a creative way can convey more and have a greater chance of appealing to an international audience,' he remarks (*Young Thugs: Innocent Blood* 2004).

Certainly, since *Audition* many of Miike's releases have proven popular with audiences at festivals around the world, with Rotterdam holding a particular position as a site of interest. Discussing the release of his 2012 film *Ace Attorney/Gyakuten saiban*, which received its world premiere at that year's festival, Miike recalls the extraordinary response to *Audition* in 2000, stating that 'Rotterdam audiences have always been very friendly towards me' (Vijn 2012). *Audition*'s popularity at Rotterdam in particular can in part be attributed to the festival's reputation for transgressive and experimental films. 'Rotterdam stimulates the kind of see-anything, risk-anything community that few festivals attract these days,' Romney remarked at the time, maintaining that the annual event's programming takes 'outrage in its stride' (2000).

The year before *Audition* appeared at the festival, one of the most successful films was Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), a tale of sexual exploration containing explicit unsimulated sex scenes, starring notorious Italian porn-star Rocco Siffredi. In more recent years, Tiger Awards have been given to films such as *Clip/Klip* (2012), the debut feature by a young female Serbian director, Maja Miloš, which traces the sexual awakening of a 14-year-old girl, and *Fat Shaker/Larzanandeye charbi* (Mohammad Shirvani, 2013), an Iranian film about the abusive relationship between an obese father and his adult deaf-mute son.

Unsurprisingly then, with its violent denouement and disturbing elements of psychological horror, *Audition* proved to be a hit with Rotterdam audiences. So significant was the response to the film at the festival that the discourse surrounding it—one which was inflected by Rotterdam's specific reputation as a site of transgressive cinema—played a central role in framing *Audition*'s reception on a wider scale. Of the three films of Miike's showcased at Rotterdam that year, it certainly made the greatest impression. *Dead or Alive* was 'nothing compared with Miike's real jaw-dropper,' *Audition*, Romney (2000) argued, and *Ley Lines* was hardly discussed. Despite the laid-back pace that it adopts for the majority of its running time, and notwithstanding the general pensiveness of *Ley Lines*, *Audition* came to be considered as representative of Miike's supposed cinema of transgression. Even at this preliminary stage of his discovery in Western film culture, Miike was, by Romney (2000) and many other critics, positioned as the figurehead of a 'new Japanese cinema at its speediest and nastiest.'

As early as May 2000, just four months after *Audition* first appeared at Rotterdam, Tony Rayns wrote a short article for *Sight & Sound* covering Miike's career up to that point, drawing particular attention to the filmmaker's director-for-hire

mode of production in its title, "This Gun for Hire." The day after *Audition* reached UK theatres, an interview with the director himself, conducted by Gavin Rees, was published in *The Guardian*. Focusing on the discontent displayed towards *Audition* by Japanese dating agencies (the film is hardly an endorsement of such a method of love-finding), Rees recognised Miike's 'long pedigree in Japan' in both the straight-to-video and theatrical markets, and even offered a brief analysis of the characters to be found 'trapped in the film world' of his cinema (2001). By 2003, Steve Rose's interview with the director for *The Guardian* called for the wider recognition in the West of his ever-expanding body of work. With reference to the slow emergence of Takeshi Kitano on the international stage in the 1990s, Rose contended that 'the Western world is gradually waking up to Takashi Miike.' Despite the fact that Western critics and audiences were slowly becoming aware of the director's films, Rose rightfully identified that there was a long way to go if the exposure of Miike's work was to equal that of Kitano's. With a total of over 50 titles made in the preceding decade alone, if the dormant state of Miike's cinema in the West was to be fully activated, Rose argued, there was 'a lot more catching up to do' (2003).

The release of *Audition*, it seems, 'opened the doors to a new genre of cinema that had rarely been seen in national cinemas' (Smith 2013). These words are from Paul Smith, who, for eight years, worked as the Press Officer for the now-defunct UK-based distributor Tartan Films. Tartan were responsible for releasing Miike's *Audition*, and many other contemporary titles from Asia, on home video and in theatres across the UK throughout the 2000s. The company did so via its label *Asia Extreme*, a highly influential line of releases that became a brand in its own right, promising to be the 'gateway to visually stunning and jaw-droppingly audacious films from the Far East' ("A Taste of Asia Extreme" 2005).

“A Whole New Wave of Asian Cinema”: The Creation of Asia Extreme

Over the last decade, a recurring topic in Western academic writing on Asian cinema has been a particular phenomenon referred to in the vernacular of critical, fan, and industry discourse as Asia Extreme.⁴² As Robert Hyland (2009) suggests, while one may be faced with little difficulty when attempting to build a canon of texts that could be deemed to belong to Asia Extreme, the task of offering a solid definition of just what the category *is* proves somewhat problematic. Hyland rightfully points out that the general classification seems to be, for the distributors involved at least, a self-evidential one—‘if a film originates from Asia and looks extreme, then it must be exemplary of Asia Extreme’ (2009: 10).

Indeed, a substantial range of titles diverse in both origin and form can be collected together under the umbrella of Asia Extreme, purely on account of their emanating from Asian regions (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand in particular) and display of formal or stylistic elements that could be considered to be, in some way or another, “extreme.” When discussing Asia Extreme, it is likely that one would mention films such as Miike’s *Audition*, South Korean director Park Chan-wook’s *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance/Boksuneun naui geot* (2002), Hong Kong duo Andy Lau and Alan Mak’s *Infernal Affairs/Mou gaan dou* (2002), or Oxide and Danny Pang’s Thai film *Bangkok Dangerous* (1999). This leads one to question: why, specifically, do these titles embody Asia Extreme, and what exactly is it?

The ambiguous nature of the Asia Extreme classification is symptomatic of the manner in which the term itself was created and maintained as a means of categorising a whole spectrum of contemporary films from Asia. As critical writing

⁴² For instance, see Needham (2006), Dew (2007), Shin (2009), Rawle (2009), Hyland (2009), Martin (2015), and Hughes (2016).

has done so much to document, the origins of the term can be traced back to 2001, when the independent UK-based distributor Tartan Films launched its *Asia Extreme* label.⁴³ Conceived as a channel through which to distribute a selection of new Asian titles, both on video and in theatres, *Asia Extreme* was intended to capitalise on what Hamish McAlpine (Tartan's co-founder and owner) and others were reductively referring to as 'a whole New Wave of Asian cinema' (Franklin 2004).

In reality, this so-called "New Wave" consisted of a variety of different genre movies from Asia that had been gaining notoriety in Europe and Britain since the late 1990s. Many of these releases were backed by Tartan, and McAlpine's company found particular success with its Japanese titles. Between 1999 and 2000, Tartan was responsible for festival and industry screenings of a number of contemporary Japanese films that have since become, for many Western audiences, some of the most well-known and recognisable films of modern Japanese cinema. Among these were Miike's *Audition*, Nakata's *Ring*, and Fukasaku's *Battle Royale*, all of which saw release through Tartan in 2001. Although Tartan Films ceased operations in the late 2000s, the story of *Asia Extreme*'s inception and the contextual conditions of its remarkable legacy are integral to understanding Miike's enduring cult reputation in the West. The director, and his film *Audition* in particular, formed a vital part of the *Asia Extreme* campaign.

In his position as head of Tartan, McAlpine played a central role in marketing

⁴³ It is important here not to overlook the participation of other independent UK distributors in the dissemination of contemporary Asian genre films during the 2000s. Although *Asia Extreme* was by far the most high-profile provider of such titles operating in Britain, a number of other small companies established their own imprints dedicated to releasing the type of films Tartan's label became known for. Momentum's *Momentum Asia*, Optimum Releasing's *Optimum Asia*, Medusa's *Premier Asia*, and Artsmagic's *Warrior* and *EasternCult* subsidiaries were all, alongside *Asia Extreme*, key in widening the accessibility of Asian genre cinema in the UK. Whilst the latter label certainly dominated the market, a few significant titles did pass through some of the former distributors. Bong Joon-ho's monster movie *The Host* (2006) and Johnnie To's Triad gangster flick *Election* (2006) were released on *Optimum Asia*, and Thai action blockbuster *Ong-bak* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), Takashi Shimizu's J-horror *Ju-on: The Grudge*, and Miike's *Ichi the Killer* were released on *Premier Asia*.

these titles to British audiences, and he did so by purposefully constructing the *Asia Extreme* label as a brand. He promoted the films as belonging to a wider, seemingly fixed, and easily recognisable category—a category he consciously created and endorsed. As Chi-Yun Shin has noted, it is widely believed that it was McAlpine's personal interest in such films that drove the company's acquisitions and, ultimately, its formation of an identifiable brand through which to sell them. Shin accounts how McAlpine claims to have watched *Audition* and *Ring* back-to-back on video one weekend at the end of 1999, and that he recalls being 'totally blown away by them' (2009: 85–86). Shortly after, he first experienced the Pang Brothers' Thai thriller *Bangkok Dangerous* and South Korean action flick *Nowhere to Hide/Injeong sajeong bol geot eobtda* (Lee Myung-se, 1999), which he described as 'outrageously shocking' (Franklin 2004). McAlpine's strong reactions to the films shaped a belief that they were somehow part of a new genre of "extreme" contemporary Asian cinema, and he took it upon himself to market them collectively as such. '[T]here was a constant flow of brilliant films coming out of Asia,' he declares, and 'I decided to brand it and make Asia Extreme' (Franklin 2004).

What was remarkable about the *Asia Extreme* label was the manner in which it packaged together a wealth of disparate titles according to its own discursively constructed, self-justifying "genre." According to its somewhat tautological principles, the Asia Extreme genre existed because there were "extreme Asian" films, and these films were "extreme" because they belonged to the Asia Extreme genre. Through a focused marketing campaign, Tartan characterised Asia Extreme by the seemingly shocking, violent, or surprising elements of the films that constituted it (see figure 6). The category, as Shin (2009: 98) contests, essentially threw together a multitude of distinct and varying genres (most notably horror, thriller, and action) from regions as

far-reaching as Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Thailand (although the majority of its catalogue consisted of Japanese titles), under the umbrella of extreme.

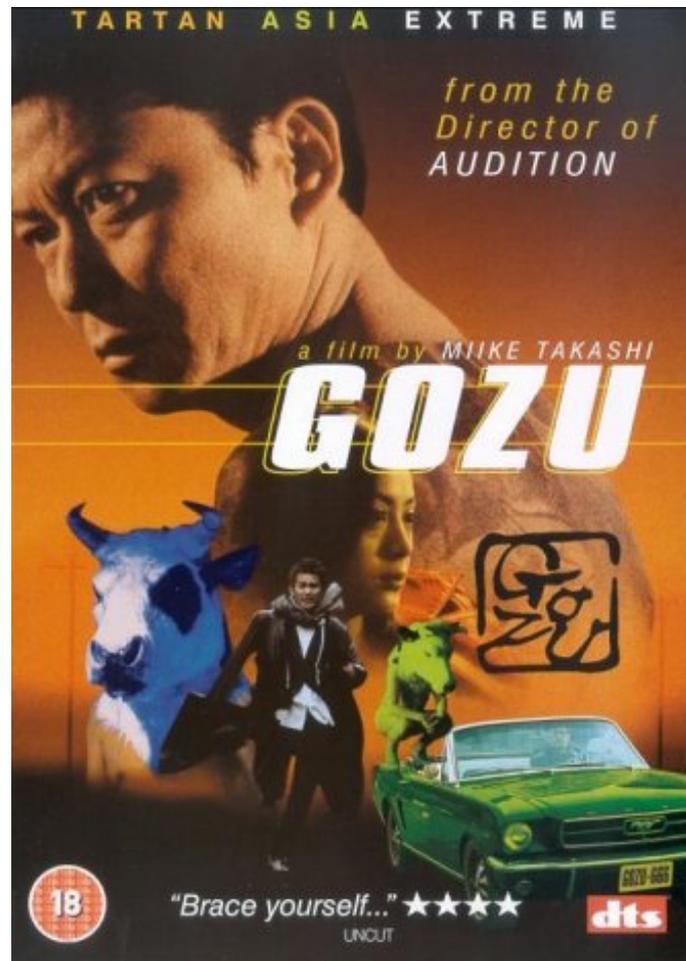


Figure 6 Tartan Asia Extreme's DVD cover for Miike's *Gozu* warns us to brace ourselves...

In essence, Asia Extreme condensed a continent's worth of contemporary filmmaking into a brand image, seemingly wedded by transgression. Yet, as Gary Needham has acknowledged, many of the films gathered under this banner 'could hardly be thought of as extreme' in the ways Tartan's promotional material wanted its customers to imagine (2006: 9). Horrors *Ring*, *Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (Hideo Nakata, 2002), and *The Eye/Gin gwai* (Oxide and Danny Pang, 2002), thrillers *Tell Me Something/Telmisseomding* (Chang Yoon-hyun, 1999), *Sympathy*

for *Mr. Vengeance*, and *Public Enemy/Gonggongui jeog* (Kang Woo-suk, 2002), and action blockbusters *Shiri/Swiri* (Kang Je-gyu, 1999) and Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002–2003) were all united by their very presence as part of the Asia Extreme brand, regardless of their many cultural, linguistic, historical, and stylistic differences. Tartan's marketing campaign effectively homogenised a diverse range of movies in its formation of an ostensibly unified entity. In other words, *Asia Extreme* surpassed being merely a distribution label and became, as McAlpine claimed, 'a genre in itself' (Franklin 2004).

Tartan's marketing enacted what Shin has considered a process of 'genrification' (2009: 97–99) in its pursuit of developing a recognisable brand. Crucially, the construction of Asia Extreme as a genre relied heavily upon a set of cultural and ideological associations that would, rightfully or otherwise, come to serve as its signifiers for many audiences in the UK and the States. Promotional material took advantage of deep-rooted Western perceptions of the East, playing into the West's tendency to homogenise the East as an exotic Other. Tartan's marketing fostered the impression that the more subversive qualities of *Asia Extreme* titles were somehow representative of a mysterious, exciting, yet potentially hazardous Asia. Of all the connotations Tartan invited in its discursive exoticisation, perhaps the most problematic was the promise of *danger*. To recall Needham's argument referred to in the introduction to this thesis, films such as those distributed via the *Asia Extreme* label are subjected to a process of displacement, removing them from their cultural and historical contexts and repackaging in the West 'as exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills' (2006: 11). The evocation of an element of risk proposes that that which is Other—which is unknown, foreign, and strange—is to be feared.

The cinema of Japan in particular played a central role in Tartan's *Asia*

Extreme campaign. This can largely be attributed to Japanese film's standing in the West as the most commonly othered, yet perennially unfamiliar, form of Asian cinema. Tartan's release of films such as *Audition*, *Ring*, and *Battle Royale* under the *Asia Extreme* banner was channelled through a marketing discourse that seized this dual process of othering—one which slowly accrues familiarity through its reverberation, yet maintains unfamiliarity by means of its locating of Japanese cinema as the Other. Ever since *Rashomon*'s reception at Venice, there has existed amongst Western audiences and critics a tendency to position Japanese cinema in such a way. As the reception of *Rashomon* demonstrates, the film was at once singled out for its difference to the dominant film culture (Hollywood and its associated values) and admired for its alignment with contemporaneous modes of Western thought. Today, Japanese films are often subjected to a similar othering process, with Hollywood still commonly operating as the benchmark against which difference is measured. Contemporary Japanese releases are habitually discursively positioned as "exotic" film texts that are produced by, and operate within, an industry other to the commercial American cinema. Notwithstanding the increased Western familiarity with Japanese film since Kurosawa's success at Venice, this othering still occurs, and Tartan's *Asia Extreme* is a pertinent example of this:

Despite the continued fascination with Japanese cinema and Japanese-ness since *Rashomon* [...] its role as the other seems to be hardly waning, with the emergence of a new wave of genre films being imported to Europe and the United States. This new wave of Japanese films is being taken up by a new and younger audience, who are familiar with Kurosawa Kiyoshi rather than Kurosawa Akira, and seek pleasures not found in Hollywood.

(Needham 2006: 9, emphasis in original)

Indeed, as Needham and others (Dew 2007, Shin 2009, Martin 2015), have recognised, Tartan's *Asia Extreme* campaign in many ways harked back to this

historical West–Asia relationship in its foregrounding of key Japanese titles through a discourse of *difference*. This discourse functions in the same manner as that of Orientalism, as outlined by Edward Said. Said’s conceptualisation of Orientalism maps how an inequitable relationship between “the West” and “the Orient” (most commonly Asia) is established by a ‘nexus of knowledge and power,’ operating to justify the former’s ability to control and formulate representations of the latter (2003: 27). What Said is clear about is that this process is one informed by the desire in Western culture to define oneself (“us”) against what one is not (“them”), rather than by a need to define the Orient. As such, “the Orient” has historically been employed by those in the West as a term to signify a Western imaginative construction of the place to which it refers—a site of perennial otherness. The notion of the Orient, and Asia’s place within it, must accordingly be considered as part of an illusory Western paradigm, rather than a true representative of the reality of the East.

Making Japan the Other: Asia Extreme and Orientalism

The field of Orientalism has, of course, been led by the scholarship of Said, and above all his seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism*. The impact of Said’s contribution cannot be overstated, becoming as it has one of the most influential texts in Middle Eastern, and later postcolonial, studies in Western academia.⁴⁴ In effect, Said’s work aided in the development of an entire field of study that takes as its focus the moral and ethical quandaries that lie at the heart of his book. Said defines Orientalism in a number of ways, and although his text has been analysed, critiqued, and

⁴⁴ See Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak (2006) for an analysis of *Orientalism*’s impact on the American academy, including a detailed critique of Said’s text.

summarised on many occasions, it is worth reiterating and working through these descriptions, given that the multifaceted nature of his account is integral to interpreting the polemic it propounds.

Moreover, the axiom of Said's entire thesis, that the ontogenesis of all cultures necessitates the subsistence of an oppositional "Other" culture against which to compete, is particularly pertinent to the matter in hand—the Western consumption of Japanese cultural products. Whilst it would be erroneous for one to consider the reception of Miike's films in the West purely by means of their standing as distinctly "Japanese" texts, it would be equally wrong to ignore the fact that their very being "Japanese" implicates them in a particular relationship that has historically been inscribed by notions of opposition and othering, and which Said's *Orientalism* worked to catalogue. The interface between Western consumer and Japanese (or, more broadly, Asian) product carries with it its own history in this respect, with the distinction between West and East at the centre. And, as Needham has argued, when it comes to the othering of cinema, Japan holds a particularly pivotal position:

[M]ore than any other Asian cinema, Japan has consistently occupied a discursive position of otherness. Japanese cinema has been the object of constant and consistent fascination in Europe and particularly in the United States. Furthermore, the relationship between Japanese cinema and its Western reception, criticism and place within film studies operates upon terms similar to those attributed to the discourse of Orientalism by Edward Said.

(2006: 8)

Fundamental to the reception of Japanese cinema in the West has, at various times throughout history, been the location of its films as the Other—other to Hollywood, other to English-language film, other to the West. It was, as we have seen, one of the first Asian cinemas to penetrate Western regions, with the work of Japanese filmmakers such as Kurosawa and Kenji Mizoguchi being recognised by critics and

audiences in the early 1950s. *Rashomon* and Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu/Saikaku ichidai onna* (1952), in particular, gained much attention at a number of high-profile international film festivals in the West, facilitating the exposure of Japanese cinema to many Western audiences. This early relationship between Western viewer and Japanese text was predicated predominantly upon the stereotyping of Japanese culture via generic associations emphasising notions of otherness, difference, and oddity. The conventions of the *jidaigeki* (historical drama) genre, in which both Kurosawa and Mizoguchi habitually operated, were adopted by Western spectators as visual and thematic signifiers that were, in turn, used to demarcate Japanese culture as an exotic Other. These films seemed to offer Western viewers the privilege of "access" to traditional Japanese clothing, culture, and customs, and thus appeared to provide an insight into the history of Japanese society. Ozu's *gendaigeki* (contemporary drama) genre pieces, most notably *Late Spring/Banshun* (1949), *Early Summer/Bakushū* (1951), and *Tokyo Story/Tōkyō monogatari* (1953), comparably provided audiences a supposedly accurate view of how Japanese people lived contemporaneously. The work of this apparently 'most Japanese of Japanese filmmakers' (Geist, 1983: 234) was identified by its generic principles, and was therefore held by Western audiences to be quintessentially *Japanese* in its portrayal of modern Japanese society.

Of course, an integral part of this othering process is a sense of opposition, and the starting point of Said's arguments in *Orientalism* is exactly one of opposites. The two main definitions of Orientalism he offers are described, and perhaps too conveniently united, by means of an emphasis on their apparent dependence on some form of binary opposition. Firstly, Said contends that Orientalism is 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between

“the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident” (2003: 2). This distinction, he claims, can be traced from the ancient Greek epics of Aeschylus and Homer, to the great French novels and poems of Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo, through to the present day. Said suggests that it is within such literary texts that a structure of preconceived archetypes about the Orient (essentially, for Said, the Middle East) is produced and maintained, a compendium of thoughts and ideas that envisage the myriad cultures, peoples, and geographical areas of the East as fundamentally alike. The function of this system is thus one of power. Through emphasising the apparent superiority of the West over the East—culturally, politically, economically—Western literature, Said argues, has worked to strip the Orient of any power it may have by speaking *for* it; by denying its ability to speak for itself; by establishing and reinforcing an unbalanced exchange between the supreme West and the voiceless East. Essentially, for Said, Orientalism is ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient’ (2003: 3).

In his second definition of Orientalism, Said turns his attention to the academy. Orientalism can be considered a field of academic research whose contributing studies locate as their subject of examination the Orient, be it generally or in more specific, detailed, or nuanced ways. Regardless of whether one adopts an anthropological, sociological, historical, or philological approach to the Orient, for Said, any academic ‘who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient [...] is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism’ (2003: 2). Again, Said proposes that the purpose of such writing is to strengthen the West’s authority over the East, facilitated by a division between “us” (Western academics) and “it” (the Oriental subject). In Said’s eyes, in its quest to dominate and ultimately control the Orient, the West has built up a body of knowledge about, and knowledge of, Orientals—their

'race, character, culture, history, traditions, society, and possibilities'—that serves to assign power to those who possess this knowledge. Knowledge gives power, and more power requires further knowledge (2003: 38).

Given that Said's notion of Orientalism relies so heavily upon the recognition of seemingly concrete divisions (between West and East, between the Occident and the Orient), it is important to understand exactly what he is referring to when using these terms in *Orientalism*. There has been much debate regarding the validity of Said's usage of such terms. When discussing "the West," whether directly or otherwise, what he is really talking about is Europe; and when discussing Europe, he is only really referring to the histories of Britain and France. On his opening page, Said immediately sweeps aside a vast expanse of geographical areas, and with them he eliminates all consideration of any contribution they may have had to his conceptualisation of Orientalism and its development. Unlike the Americans, he claims, the British and French have long been involved in the practice of Orientalism, whilst the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Swiss, Portuguese, and Italians have played a much more minor role (2003: 1). Yet, Said is content with applying his references to examples of British and French literature to Europe (and the West) as a whole, despite the fact that the scope of his study actually only accounts for a small portion of Western literature.

This is one of the many areas in which Said's polemical text has faced criticism, from not only Western, but also Middle Eastern and Oriental, scholars themselves. What Said is ultimately arguing against is what he sees as the inherent essentialism of all Western literature that considers the Orient, a collection of academic, journalistic, and artistic writings that reduces the vast and varied area of the East to an apparently unmoving, unified "Orient." Although he admits that

Orientalism is 'far from a complete history or general account of Orientalism,' and that he hopes future studies examine Italian, Dutch, German, and Swiss forms of Orientalism (2003: 24), Said habitually refers to Europe/the West in his account as if he is indeed covering all these bases. As Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak have argued, if Said were to have taken into account German and Hungarian scholarship on the Middle East, his thesis would have essentially failed. 'The main reason for his ignoring research in these countries,' they contend, 'is that an accurate assessment of it would have undermined his central argument that Orientalism was integrally linked to imperialism as an expression of the nexus between knowledge and power, and therefore that Orientalists wished to gain knowledge of the Orient in order to control it' (2006: 31). Said's oversight here seems cynical, especially considering his claim that Orientalism has long been a tradition predominantly of the *Europeans*, a tradition that functions as:

a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.

(2003: 1–2)

Clearly, for Said, the tradition of the French and the British to appropriate the Orient in this way betokens the actions of the rest of Europe and, by extension, "the West" as a whole. And this is where another major flaw of Said's hypothesis appears. As an expedient part of the construction of its own self-image, Said (2003: 1–3) argues, Europe produced and administered "the Orient" (on both conceptual and material levels) as an antipodal force against which Europe's distinct image could be defined.

One of the necessities of this process has been the conflation of a wealth of different cultures, peoples, and geographical areas into one discursively demarcated entity—the Orient. Rightly, Said contests this essentialising practice for its short-sightedness and reductive nature, yet, as many have indicated, he is guilty of committing similar offences himself on two accounts.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, he makes a string of huge leaps in extending his consideration of Britain and France into Europe, treating Europe as a microcosm of the West, and habitually referring to the West as “the Occident” in a manner that aligns with the construction of the Orient against which he is arguing. These moves have led some scholars to criticise Said for homogenising the West and its scholarship.⁴⁵ Secondly, others have argued that Said succumbs to one of the significant pitfalls to which he works to alert us, essentially embedding at the centre of his approach a contradiction between two fundamental arguments. He maintains that the fact ‘that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourses about it’ (2003: 22). In this case, what Said is suggesting is that there in fact exists no *real* place called the Orient, no geographically, historically, and culturally unified entity that has existed always, unmoving and solid. What the Orient really is, for Said, is a set of representations that have been constructed through time by the Western mind, with a reliance upon its supporting ‘institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding,’ and *not* upon ‘a distant and amorphous Orient’ (2003: 22). Nevertheless, throughout his thesis Said relies on references to the Orient as if it were a real entity, frequently criticising how the West

⁴⁵ For critiques of the flaws of Said’s text, see Aijaz Ahmed (1992) and Ibn Warraq’s *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism* (2007) in particular.

has represented the Orient without sympathy, and how all Orientals have been subjected to the essentialism of the West's interpretation of the Orient.

To return to *Asia Extreme*, then, one can clearly see how Tartan's endorsement of Asia as a producer of exotic and exciting titles prescribed to an Orientalist framework, manifested in its discursive construction of Asian (and, in particular, Japanese) films as products of an unfamiliar genre of otherness. Whilst Tartan's genrification of the *Asia Extreme* label functioned in a manner similar to that which marked the Western reception of Japanese film around 60 years ago, the catalyst in its othering process was patently different. Tartan's popularisation of Japanese genre films in the West, including mostly horror, *yakuza*, action, and thriller titles, is somewhat revealing of how Western audiences' interpretations of cinematic representations of Japanese society are now being shaped. As with the characterisation of 1950s Japanese cinema as "different" through the traditions of *jidaigeki* and *gendaigeki*, today's Japanese film is positioned in the West as oppositional by means of its categorisation into popular entertainment genres. The promotion of the more sensationalist characteristics of these genres, such as the 'ever-intensifying spirals of violence and outlaw behaviour' of *yakuza* movies (Davis 2006: 199), not only sets contemporary Japanese cinema apart from Hollywood, but sets Japanese culture apart from Western society also. In this Western definition of the Japanese Other, the shift from the merely *exotic* to the *extreme* is clear:

Early interest in Kurosawa [...] and Mizoguchi [...] arose not only from their formal differences but also from their status as Japanese cultural products, as being culturally other. The new emphasis for audiences of contemporary Japanese films, like those of Takashi Miike [...] is their subversive and explicit treatment of sex and violence and the multiple ways in which they transgress the norms and expectations of Hollywood cinema.

(Needham 2006: 9)

Indeed, Miike himself has recognised this tendency of Western audiences to approach contemporary Japanese films within the “extreme” paradigm. ‘When you look at how European and American audiences react to Japanese films, or rather Asian films in general,’ he says, ‘you see that they are drawn to the way violence is portrayed in those films because it is something else from what they see in locally produced films.’ Crucially, he identifies that it is the notion of difference that drives this interest in violence. ‘They like Asian films,’ he says of Western audiences, ‘because they see things that are different’ (Vijn 2012).

Oppositional Encounters: The Contexts of Cult Reception

The “discovery” of Miike’s *Audition*, and its centrality to the discursive construction of the Asia Extreme brand, must be understood in relation to the complexities of the relationship between Western consumer and Japanese text. The issue of Orientalism is one way of framing this relationship, yet a further lens through which we can view the reception of Miike’s work in the West is that of cult. Moreover, a consideration of how the two concepts intersect is revealing of the contextual factors that have shaped Miike’s cult reputation, and leads us to examine the processes involved in the engagement between spectator and text. The notion of discovery that accompanied *Audition*’s release in the West—Tartan’s promotion of Miike’s film as a gateway into a previously undiscovered extreme Asian cinema—has invited a cult reception in the offering of oppositional encounters. Functioning as what Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (2000: 267) describes as ‘cultural capital on an international scale,’ the illusion of unearthing a previously undiscovered extreme cinema positions *Audition*,

and Miike and his body of work altogether, as the object of cult desire, as a text around which processes of cultural (and cultist) identification can be enacted.

The construction of social formations and pursuit of self-identification that has acted, and still acts, as the driving force in the trajectory of Miike's cult reputation in the West is indeed one of cultural capital. As Pierre Bourdieu (2011: 83) conceptualised it, cultural capital comprises those symbolic features beyond economic capital which one may acquire 'in the form of what is called culture'—one's education, clothing, possessions, tastes, accent, and skills, for example. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three forms: in the *embodied* state (psychical and physical dispositions, such as one's accent or dialect); in the *objectified* state (cultural goods, such as books, cars, and clothing); and in the *institutionalised* state (the rewards of involvement in institutions, such as occupational credentials or educational qualifications). Over time, and with the necessary expenditure of labour, the accumulation of cultural capital determines one's standing within the social order of the world. Like economic capital, the more cultural capital that one possesses, the more power one holds within the social hierarchy.

It is possible for one to recognise this function of cultural capital and accordingly purposefully contribute to it in the attempt to negotiate the social order. One's desire for a particular position within society can be manifested in the cultural capital one accrues, in the clothes they choose to wear, in the music they choose to listen to and the films they choose to watch, in the bars they frequent, in the way they speak and the words they use. It is for this reason that cultural capital has been recognised in cult cinema scholarship as a fundamental structuring principle. Cult films, directors, and stars, cult followings, cult theatres and festivals, cult DVD labels, cult publications—all these texts, sites, and discourses are marked by the cultist

desire for distinction from that which is deemed to be dominant culture (and, by extension, dominant cultural capital). The need of the cult fan to establish and maintain his or her own individual, and ostensibly unique, identity undeniably shapes the ways in which he or she engages with the cult text. In the search for individuality, modes of accessing, viewing, discussing, celebrating, and sharing a cult film can be as important as, if not more vital than, the content of the text itself. Often, for the cult film enthusiast, what the film seems to represent can work in tandem with the attitudes and values that one may associate with the methods in which the film is consumed. For instance, in the case of Miike's cult following in the West, the nature of his films (their violence, their transgression, their "Japaneseness") may, to the cult Miike fan, be further aligned with the alternative modes of consumption and reception through which they may be negotiated (niche DVD labels, alternative viewing platforms, or dedicated fan sites).

Mark Jancovich has explored the issue of cultural capital in relation to cult cinema and fandom through the employment of the notion of 'subcultural capital.' Building on the work of Bourdieu, and Sara Thornton's writing on club music cultures, Jancovich (2002: 308) notes how 'subcultural ideologies are fundamental to fans cultures because without them fans cannot create the sense of distinction which separates them as 'fans' from what John Fiske (1992: 30) terms 'the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences.' Here, fans oppose the cultural capital of 'normal' audiences (the dominant film culture) in their subcultural capital by producing a distinction which is marked by the different appropriations of those symbolic elements of culture to which Bourdieu referred. Jancovich proposes that cult movie fandom relies upon developing its own sense of distance from two main institutions—those of 'the media' and the academy—but that, as Thornton (1995:

121) outlines, these two spheres are 'instrumental in the congregation of [fans] and the formation of subcultures.' Indeed, as the perceived mainstream is central to the development of oppositional cult taste, so too are the academy and the media prominent sites of subcultural activity. 'Not only are cult audiences produced through the differential distribution of economic and cultural capital in which these institutions operate and which they act to regulate,' Jancovich argues, 'but these institutions also provide the very mechanisms, spaces and systems of communication through which a sense of community is produced and maintained' (2002: 308).

In the case of the cultification of Miike and his films in the West, cult distinction is produced in the negotiation of the relationships, exchanges, and intertwining histories that the interface between Western consumer and Japanese product betoken. Of course, it would be erroneous for one to approach this particular example of Western–Japanese relations as if it existed within some kind of vacuum, as if the consumption of Miike's films in the West operates within its own hermetically sealed, geographically specific context. Be it either on the level of physical or emotional engagement, the connection between the Western fan (the agent) of Miike's films and the films themselves (the object) is in fact marked by a whole range of social, cultural, historical, and political factors. Of course, these stimuli can differ vastly from person to person, inextricably linked as they are to not only mass, but also individual, influences. To move towards an understanding of the particular trajectory of Miike's cult reputation, one must fully consider the framework of contextual conditions that informs and shapes the interaction between agent and object in this case.

Central to the process of cultification are the many and varied ways in which cult audiences choose to engage with the texts around which a dedicated cult

following grows. In order for a cult to develop around a film (or, indeed, for a film to become a cult film, or for a director to become a cult director), its infrastructure of distribution, exhibition, reception, and consumption must be, in some way or another, marked by its exceptionality. Arguably, at the heart of this supporting system lies the audience, fans whose negotiation of the objects of their fandom is marked by the conditions and sites of this negotiation. Alongside other factors, the particular makeup of one's social environment, personal history, and cultural milieu can, in both explicit and implicit ways, ultimately determine the individual path one takes when participating in cult engagement. In the case of the development of Miike's cult status in the West, a number of key questions arise when one takes this into account. What kinds of consumers have contributed to the process of Miike's cultification in the West? How has their involvement in cult practices been forged by the particular contexts within which his films are dispersed and consumed? To what extent does personal disposition and taste drive the cultification of his films here, or, conversely, do the films operate to shape individual cult taste?

It is here that one may productively turn to reception theory. In her work on film reception, Janet Staiger has proposed an alternative set of approaches that one may adopt in the theorisation of the multitude of ways in which audiences respond to the films they watch. Staiger employs, in her own words, 'a historical materialist approach to audiences and media reception' that differs from those methodologies that have so far dominated academic consideration of films and their audiences in American cinema (2000: 1). The crux of her argument lies in the belief that it is within contextual conditions, rather than textual factors, that the driving force behind spectatorial experiences—and the ways in which these experiences are used to negotiate viewers' daily lives—can be found. Staiger searches for an understanding

of how audiences interact with films that transcends the reliance on the triad of 'preferred,' 'negotiated,' and 'oppositional' readings that has characterised much of cultural studies to date. Thus, instead of looking within the text itself (deconstructing its formal and stylistic qualities) for causal explanations of spectatorial responses to it, she closely examines the conditions of its exhibition and consumption. For Staiger, the theatre or the living room is as important as, if not even more influential than, the movie itself in shaping audience reception.

A scholarly focus on the conditions of the film-viewing event can indeed be revealing of the extent to which one's reading of, and continuing engagement with (as is the case with the cult following) a film is so often wrought by factors either partially, or entirely, external to the text in question. Playing an important role in the construction of one's reception is not only the custom of interpreting, evaluating, and discussing with others, what is *seen* on-screen (the story, the style, the actors), but also the *experience* of viewing the film itself. From the significant and customary elements to the minutiae of the movie-going experience (the presence of others, the position of seats, the usher, the 'fire exit' light), the environment within which one watches a film can have a powerful impact on the judgement one makes of that film.

In *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (2000), Staiger's attention in this area lends her approach a distinctly empirical nature, delving deep into the very real conditions in which audiences view films and the effect that these conditions can have on how each particular audience member thinks about the films he or she watches. She draws on numerous examples in which exhibition and reception contexts figure, from Vichel Lindsay's discussion of his altercation with two female audience members in an American movie theatre in 1915, to Kevin L. Carter's examples of African Americans talking to, and about, the screen during

cinema showings of *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996). Most importantly, what her historical materialist framework alerts us to is the fact that the influence on reception of the contextual stimulus of film-viewing is by no means a one-way exchange. Although the significant affective role of particular modes of exhibition is to be recognised, what is also vital to bear in mind, Staiger argues, are the specific personal histories and schemes of interpretation through which each individual spectator channels these experiences. On occasions, these interpretive strategies can be so clearly established and reinforced that entire groups of spectators can be united in their shared use of specific methods of explicating the films they view:

Such an approach considers cognitive and affective activities of spectators in relation to the event of interpretation. A historical materialist approach acknowledges modes of address and exhibition, but it also establishes the identities and interpretive strategies and tactics *brought by spectators to the cinema*. These strategies and tactics are historically constructed by particular historical circumstances. The historical circumstances sometimes create “interpretive communities” or cultural groups such as fans who produce their own conventionalized modes of reception.

(Staiger 2000: 23, emphasis in original)

This acknowledgment of the spectator’s active role in interpretation is especially pertinent to cult. Although Staiger’s objective here is to use direct examples of audience behaviour to challenge and debunk the assumptions that motivate most contemporary reception scholarship, her methodology can also be usefully applied to the theorisation of the process of cultification. For many academics writing on cult film, a particular text’s cultness can often be mapped by a close examination of the unique trajectories of the extratextual elements that surround its distribution, exhibition, reception, and consumption. Essentially, this approach to cult cinema is phenomenological, rather than ontological, in nature. In this instance, the unusual modes of disseminating, accessing, and conversing about films are what mark a

text's cultness, and not some set of formal and stylistic qualities that point towards a formula of cult. For scholars who follow this line on cult cinema, it is the study of the events, activities, and actions that operate around the cult text that supersedes the close analysis of the text itself. In other words, this methodology privileges empirical, rather than textual, sources of information in the understanding of cult films and their fan cultures.

The way in which Staiger traces the contextual factors of film reception raises an important issue that also lies at the heart of many extratextual approaches to cult cinema. For Staiger (2000: 1), the contextual constituents of how audiences think about the films they watch take the shape of 'social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions,' and these elements can be further appropriated in the consideration of cult behaviour. As many cult cinema scholars argue, central to a text's garnering of cult status are the remarkable activities of its audience—the unique ways in which the trajectory of its consumption and reception is shaped by the actions of those who view and revere it. Drawing attention to the 'active and lively communal following' that ubiquitously surrounds cult films, Mathijs and Mendik recognise the 'committed and rebellious' nature of cult film fans, emphasising in particular that the cult text's audience often displays preferences for filmic elements that 'rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics,' and, as a result, 'regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores' (2008: 11). Often, governing the behaviour of the cult film fan is a struggle of identity. The needs and desires that come to the fore when one is embroiled in the pursuit of the construction and affirmation of self-identity can lead to the adoption of certain interpretive strategies, which themselves can come to be seen as representative of that equal. As Mathijs and Sexton explain:

In our view, *cult cinema is a kind of cinema identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have become a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture.*

(2011: 8, emphasis in original)

The construction of social formations and processes of self-identification that Staiger talks of are indeed appropriate here. If one is to follow the line on cult cinema outlined thus far, it becomes clear that the behaviour of many cult film fans can be directly situated within these two areas—the communal and ritualistic activities which contribute to the establishing of particular social formations, and the achievement (or lack thereof) of self-identification via the connection with oppositional or transgressive material. Furthermore, the very instances of reception contexts that Staiger cites ring true with much of what may be considered in the study of cult cinema. Involving ‘intertextual knowledges (including norms of how to interpret sense data from moving images and sounds), personal psychologies, and sociological dynamics,’ she argues, the contexts of film reception are many and varied. The job of a reception theorist, she claims, ‘is to account for [the] events of interpretation and affective experience’ that arise from these many conditions (Staiger 2000: 1), and one may argue that the cult cinema theorist faces a similar task in attempting to account for the complex and multifaceted nature of cult film reception.

Conclusion

The Western reception of Miike’s *Audition* played an integral role in building the groundwork of the director’s reputation, most significantly through a framework of

discovery. In 1951, *Rashomon*'s appearance at Venice exposed Western critics to the work of Kurosawa, to the cinema of Japan, and to a previously unknown, exotic, and intriguing nation. Half a century later, *Audition*'s notorious screenings at festivals and in theatres across Europe and the US introduced spectators to a new Japanese director—the shocking revelation of the figurehead of a contemporary wave of extreme Asian film. With the passage of 50 years' of increasing Western familiarity with Japanese cultural products, the central principle of the de-familiarisation of Japan had shifted from the "exotic" to the "extreme." Distributors such as Tartan, with their *Asia Extreme* label, appealed to existing Orientalist perceptions of the East, exploiting notions of oddity, strangeness, and, most problematically, danger. The popularity of these releases, and the hype accompanying them, led them to function for many Western audiences as representative texts, with Tartan's role as the most prominent distributor of contemporary Asian films seeing its products become the 'essential indicator for East Asian cinema' and Asian cinema as a whole (Shin 2009: 97). Tartan's marketing strategies canonised its own category of Asia Extreme based on the assumption that it was bringing to Western audiences a hitherto hidden collection of the best films Asia had to offer. At the forefront of its campaign were its Japanese titles, and the frontrunner of this cinema was Miike, with *Audition*.

Furthermore, the promotion of these contemporary films appealed to notions of authorship. The early critical lauding of Kurosawa and others as virtuoso filmmakers uncovered by the West resembles Tartan's own glorification of the directors whose work constituted its Asia Extreme brand. Indeed, so confident were Tartan in their role in distributing "the best" of contemporary Asian cinema, their website vaunted in 2008 that *Asia Extreme* had 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' (Shin 2009: 86). As we shall see, the development of Miike's reputation as an auteur would be further fortified in the following years through a practice of cinematic reverence—citations of his filmmaking in key American releases that have contributed greatly to his authorial, and cult, reputation.

Chapter Three — Reverence

Cross-Cult Connections: Takashi Miike, Quentin Tarantino, and Eli Roth

It's a standard staple in Japanese cinema to cut somebody's arm off and have red water hoses for veins, spraying blood everywhere.

—Quentin Tarantino

(Watkins and Mulligan 2015: 24)

Blood doesn't politely trickle in Miike's films: it gushes out in improbable fountains, painting walls and filling up small cars.

(Rose 2003)

In the perpetuation of Takashi Miike's cult auteur reputation, Western discourse has habitually positioned him in relation to another well-established (Western) cult auteur—that of Quentin Tarantino. Miike and American director Tarantino are commonly placed vis-à-vis one another, yet on inspection this comparison reveals a somewhat hierarchical perspective. Tarantino is, more often than not, located as the reference point against which Miike is measured, as though Tarantino's reputation as a cult auteur is superior in its visibility to that of his Japanese counterpart's, as though the strength and expanse of the former's cult auteur reputation outweighs that possessed by the latter. For instance, in her popular publication, *If You Like Quentin Tarantino... Here are Over 200 Films, TV Shows, and Other Oddities That You Will Love*, Katherine Rife offers Miike as a suitable filmmaker for the consumption of the fervent Tarantino fan. 'Unlike Tarantino,' she writes, 'Miike is highly prolific [and] has always operated under a system where he churns out three or four direct-to-video stinkers in order to raise money for his passion projects, which to put it bluntly are some of the weirdest shit you've ever seen in your life' (Rife 2012). Presenting Miike as a transgressive auteur, Rife reconciles a disparity in

productivity (Tarantino has directed just 9 feature films in 23 years) by foregrounding the more outrageous qualities of the Japanese director's cinema. She describes a scene in Miike's *Visitor Q/Bijitā Q* (2001) in which the father of the film's dysfunctional family traps his penis inside a woman's corpse in the throes of rigor mortis, a problem he rectifies with the use of the relaxing properties of heroin. This recognition of Miike's "weird shit" is, it would appear, enough to warrant a connection between the two cult auteurs.

Others depend upon the "extreme" paradigm to unite Miike and Tarantino, in spite of their industrial and cultural differences. Drawing on the discourse surrounding *Audition* and the Asia Extreme phenomenon, the projected affinity between the two filmmakers' cinema most often circulates around the discussion of cinematic violence. For example, *Empire* contributing editor Damon Wise (2011) notes how 'Miike has been described as Japan's Tarantino,' a comparison which he argues 'is slightly odd since he's made approximately ten times as many films as the American auteur in almost the exact same time frame.' Again, reference is made here to Tarantino's comparatively slow rate of production, yet Wise weds the two filmmakers by means of their treatment of violence. Wise proposes that what the analogous relationship between Miike and Tarantino 'really comes down to is [Miike's] propensity for splashy and extreme violence' (2011). In such cases, it is the critical acknowledgement of excess that serves to unite Miike and Tarantino in positioning them, collectively, as proprietors of cinematic transgression.

For some commentators, an association between the two directors serves as a way of qualifying Miike for those who may be unfamiliar with his filmmaking, and thus lack their own reception of his work. For instance, on the independent cinema blog, *Solace in Cinema*, the contributor "culturalelite" proposes that 'Miike is like a

faster (read: slap dash) Japanese version of Tarantino,' in that 'he takes influences from everywhere adds his own brand of weird to it all and then melds [it] into something wonderful' (2007). This description situates Tarantino as a pillar against which the potentially unknown Miike is measured, with the assumption that readers will already be well aware of the American cult auteur's reputation (and what it signifies). The Western perceptions of Japanese cinema which my examination of *Audition's* reception has delineated are, in cases such as this, manifest in the application of Miike's supposed *Japaneseness*—what John Murungi (2009: 316) identifies as 'a view of human being that is a product of Western imagination'—to the existing construction of Tarantino's reputation. Reflecting the marketing practices of certain distributors, Miike is posited as a "weird" and "wonderful" *version* of Tarantino, as a Japanese *version* of an American auteur.

This positioning of Miike in relation to Tarantino further solidifies the former's status as a cult auteur through the very association with the latter. The cultural, or subcultural, capital to be gained from active engagement with Miike's films is transferred from that already emanating from Tarantino's reception. As Daniel Martin has noted, 'Tarantino's cultural impact has long since reached a point where his name functions as a byword for 'cool' cult cinema' (2014: 29). The dualism of Tarantino's particular cult authorship (the product of overlapping spheres of cult fandom and auteur reputation) is brought upon Miike through the discursive patterns that have been produced around Tarantino over the last 25 years or so. This occurs particularly in the positioning of Miike as a Japanese variant of Tarantino, at once suggesting similarity *and* difference. For example, in his detailed analysis of *Audition* in *Film International*, Robin Wood discusses Miike and Tarantino's shared thematic interests and treatment of violence. Miike's departure from Tarantino's approach is,

according to Wood, in his lacking of the American director's supposed self-satisfaction. For Wood, it seems that the consideration of Miike's work in relation to Tarantino's allows us to more clearly understand the former's cinematic excess and, concomitantly, the construction of his cult reputation:

In general, his reputation (or 'cult' status) appears to rest on his readiness to push further and further the boundaries of portrayable violence, 'grossout' cinema, which doubtless has its sociological interest within a civilization (and I don't mean only Japanese) that seems to be in the process of accepting (and rather enjoying, even celebrating) its headlong race towards extinction: a kind of Japanese Tarantino, perhaps marginally less complacent and self-congratulatory.

(2004: 23)

The discursive presence of such comparisons has played a central role in the development of Miike's cult auteur reputation. An examination of these patterns—what I term cross-cult connections—is integral to understanding the next important phase in the trajectory of Miike's reception; the cinematic, and public, display of reverence for his cinema by two prominent Western cult auteurs. Tarantino exhibits a deep respect for Miike and his work that (as we shall see, throughout this chapter and chapter four) exists as part of a remarkable, ongoing reverential relationship between the two directors. Crossing boundaries of production, industry, and cult fandom, this affiliation has manifested both textually and extratextually, in both Tarantino's filmic citations, and public adoration, of Miike's cinema. Significantly, the visibility of this relationship has been accelerated by one of Tarantino's fellow American cult auteurs, the notorious horror filmmaker Eli Roth. Roth offered Miike a cameo role in his second feature film, *Hostel* (2005), a project in which Tarantino was also involved. Bringing Miike into the frame of contemporary Western horror cinema during a significant turning point in its development, *Hostel* stands as a

milestone in Miike's reception as a cult auteur—a moment of reverence that positions him as an influential, and conscious, authorial figure.

Tarantino and Takashi: Miike's Position in a Postmodern Cinema

Tarantino's postmodern cinema incorporates elements from "classic" cult films and genres. It borrows extensively from a wide range of cinematic traditions; it makes references to the tropes, stars, and styles of these traditions; and it constructs interweaving paths of intertextuality. Central to Tarantino's filmmaking is his status as a cinephile, which is communicated across his films and their surrounding discourse. Indeed, as M. Keith Booker has noted, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the director's most celebrated work, 'was overtly (and extremely successfully) marketed as a film about film, and as a film made by a film buff for film buffs' (2007: 89). Whilst his postmodern approach has faced criticism in more recent years, his films remain highly significant in their contribution to the popularity of many marginal cult genres and stars amongst Western audiences.⁴⁶ As Martin (2014: 29) aptly puts it, Tarantino 'is a mainstream figure representing non-mainstream cinema.' For many critics, Tarantino's work is remarkable for its potential to foster the lively spectatorial engagement with texts typical of fandom. David Bordwell, for instance, posits that Tarantino's cinematic references are for the consumption of new popular culture

⁴⁶ Jonathan J. Cavallero argues that Tarantino's films 'work against cultural isolation and allow for cross-cultural influence,' in that they 'expose audiences to a more diverse set of cinematic perspectives' (2011: 145–147, emphasis in original). This has certainly been the case across the director's oeuvre—*Jackie Brown* (1997) brought the blaxploitation films of the 1970s (intended for an urban black market) to contemporary white audiences, with one of the genre's original stars, Pam Grier; *Death Proof* (2007), in conjunction with Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* (2007), took the form of a grindhouse double-bill, yet was produced on a large budget and screened in multiplex cinemas; and *Django Unchained* (2012) reimagined the Italian Spaghetti Western genre with a heightened level of ultra-violence, accompanied by a contemporary American hip-hop soundtrack.

aficionados. The proliferation of sites of fandom (such as fanzines and online communities) dedicated to Tarantino's films has produced what Bordwell terms 'a pop connoisseurship,' a form of reception that 'demands film references as part of the pleasures of moviegoing' (2006: 24–25).

A large part of Tarantino's authorial signature is his particular taste in films, which he articulates via interviews and public appearances. The auteur persona has been theorised by Timothy Corrigan as being central to the commercial value of auteurism in the contemporary film industry (as shall be explored in more detail later in this chapter). Corrigan argues that 'in today's commerce we want to know what our authors or auteurs look like or how they act' (1991: 106), and to this we can add, in the case of Tarantino, what they *watch*. Tarantino's filmic preferences are disseminated in promotional discourse, shaping public perception of him as a knowledgeable cinephile with an idiosyncratic interest in genre, exploitation, and other marginal cinemas.⁴⁷ The information Tarantino shares about his taste is consumed and re-dispersed by his fans in an ongoing exchange that facilitates his cult reception. As Cornel Sandvoss (2005: 10) has noted, for many fans 'the communal context of their fandom, or even their own textual productivity, form the true core of their fandom,' and this is certainly true of Tarantino's fans. For example, the fansite *The Quentin Tarantino Archives*, an amateur endeavour focusing on all things Tarantino-related, hosts the most extensive fan-led collection of readings of the director's films, with many sections dedicated to the sources of their references. In an interview conducted by the sole maintainer of the site, Sebastian Haselbeck, Tarantino even revealed that he is himself a follower of the site—'I think [it's] just

⁴⁷ Certainly, Tarantino's overt declarations of his influences have been instrumental in popularising a particularly eclectic form of cinephilic authorship. As Nikki J. Y. Lee proposes, Tarantino's 'popular auteur status is emblematic of the social acceptance of postmodern auteurs, not merely as creators but also as collectors and mediators of other filmic genres and traditions' (2008: 213).

fucking killer [and] so much fun to read and watch,' he claims (2008).

As a highly visible auteur, Tarantino's demonstration of an understanding of a wide range of genres' histories and traditions, and his involvement in promoting them, has led some to consider his position as a gatekeeper of certain cult cinemas. Whilst he has been responsible for igniting (or reigniting) mainstream interest in many marginal cinemas, he has displayed a particular affection for the genre film of Asia. His work borrows broadly from Hong Kong action cinema, kung fu movies, *wuxia* martial arts films, and Japanese samurai and *yakuza* films, bringing them to the attention of his Western fans keen to unpick his network of references. Leon Hunt accordingly discusses Tarantino as a transnational 'gatekeeper auteur,' as a connoisseur who 'both incorporates aesthetic influences from East Asian action cinema and is referential towards 'cult classics' from (mainly) Japan and Hong Kong.' Throughout his career, Tarantino has built a strong cinephilic relationship with Asian cinema both within and outside his films, cementing what Hunt terms his 'Asiophile fanboy credentials' (2008: 220). Never has he done this more clearly, or more effectively, than with *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004).

As Kenneth Chan has put it, Tarantino's *Kill Bill*⁴⁸ brings 'together a mountain of allusions to and references from various cinemas around the world to build a complex edifice of cinematic citationality' (2009b). Chief amongst the sources of these references is an extensive range of Asian genre cinema—the Shaw Brothers' martial arts movies, Kinji Fukasaku's *yakuza* films, the *Lone Wolf and Cub* samurai series (and Robert Houston's 1980 re-edit, *Shogun Assassin*), Bruce Lee movies, and Japanese monster films all feature in either explicit or tacit ways. As with Tarantino's other work, opinion is divided on the function of this citational approach.

⁴⁸ Henceforth, I wish to follow Chan's (2009a: 212) tactic of employing the title *Kill Bill* to refer to both volumes of the duology in order to avoid confusion and repetition. In cases where I discuss one of the films in particular, I will signal this by using its full title.

Hunt (2008: 220) dismays *Kill Bill*'s 'full-scale pillaging of Hong Kong and Japanese genre cinema,' whereas, for others, his borrowing serves to engender his films with unique cinematic worlds. In his discussion of *Kill Bill*, Bordwell posits that 'Tarantino cobbled together a hermetically sealed universe out of Asian action pictures, Eurotrash exploitation, and Japanese anime,' arguing that the array of '[m]ovie references, instead of ornamenting a freestanding storyline, coalesced into a virtual world' (2006: 60). In this sense, Bordwell suggests, Tarantino created with *Kill Bill* a system of filmic references that collectively generates a postmodern cinematic world in which everything, from the appearance of cult genre actors to a jukebox soundtrack, turns into an homage.

Whilst the origins of many of *Kill Bill*'s references to Japanese film are clear to see (the casting of legendary actor Sonny Chiba, for instance, or Lucy Liu's costume, which is strikingly similar to Meiko Kaji's in Toshiya Fujita's *Lady Snowblood* movies), one of the more opaque citations to be found is of Miike's 2001 release *Ichi the Killer*. Although subtle at first, Tarantino's allusions to Miike's film become, on closer inspection, integral to tracing the narrative of the cross-cult connections between the two directors. In his preface to an interview with the director (with the matter-of-fact title of "Quentin Tarantino Reveals Almost Everything that Inspired *Kill Bill*"), Tomohiro Machiyama notes how 'Tarantino [has] admitted to adding a dash of Miike's ultra-violent *Ichi the Killer* in the blood-drenched climax to *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003: 118).⁴⁹ When further questioned about the possible influence of Miike's *Fudoh: The New Generation*, Tarantino asserts 'I couldn't be a bigger fan of Miike,' but concedes 'I've never seen *Fudoh*' (2003: 122). The link Machiyama posits

⁴⁹ Machiyama also lists *Shogun Assassin*, Hajime Sato's sci-fi horror *Goke, Body Snatcher from Hell* (1968), and *Godzilla* creator Ishirō Honda's giant monster movie *War of the Gargantuans* (1966) as particular influences on Tarantino's first *Kill Bill* film.

between the teenage gangs in Miike's film and *Kill Bill's* "Crazy 88s" is, according to Tarantino, incorrect; he explains that the inspiration was in fact Akihiro Miwa's character in Kinji Fukasaku's *Black Lizard/Kuro tokage* (1968). Despite this misreading, Tarantino goes on to acknowledge his passion for Miike's cinema:

Now while I'm saying that I haven't seen *Fudoh*, I'm not saying that I haven't been influenced by Takashi Miike. My favorite cinema right now is this violent pop cinema coming out of Japan. As far as a group of directors, my favorites are the directors doing those kinds of movies in Japan. I'm talking about Takashi Miike, Takashi Ishii.
—Quentin Tarantino

(Machiyama 2003: 122, emphasis in original)

Tarantino's recognition of the artistic influence of Miike and Takashi Ishii⁵⁰ is indicative of the wider contemporaneous growth of Western interest in Japanese genre film, facilitated not least by distribution labels such as Tartan's *Asia Extreme*. Here, Tarantino's delineation of a 'violent pop cinema coming out of Japan' is indeed akin to Hamish McAlpine's claim of 'a constant flow of brilliant films coming out of Asia' (Franklin 2004). To be fair to Tarantino, however, he is denoting a much narrower group of films and directors, whereas McAlpine's hailing of a "New Wave" of Asian cinema served (as we have seen in chapter two) to homogenise a range of texts in the creation of the Asia Extreme brand. Furthermore, the underlying sentiment of Tarantino's declaration is, undoubtedly, one of appreciation.

Ichi the Killer is, alongside *Audition*, a seminal title in the Asia Extreme canon. Whilst not distributed by Tartan (it was instead acquired by Medusa in the UK for their *Premier Asia* label), the controversy surrounding *Ichi the Killer*

⁵⁰ In addition to Miike, Tarantino cites Takashi Ishii as part of the violent Japanese popular cinema from which he has drawn inspiration. Ishii is best known in the West for his work in the *Angel Guts* series (1988, 1994), his Takeshi Kitano-starring crime film *Gonin* (1995), and the violent rape-revenge tale *Freezer* (2000), the latter of which saw release in the UK by Tartan's *Asia Extreme* and in the US on Media Blasters' *Tokyo Shock* label.

contributed greatly in perpetuating the Asia Extreme discourse. Media coverage hyped the film's highly graphic and sexualised violence,⁵¹ particularly in the UK where it received substantial cuts by the British Board of Film Classification before it was permitted to be released. Its appearance at international film festivals across Europe and North America rapidly gained notoriety, which distributors were complicit in generating (for example, at its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, promotional sick bags were handed out to audience members, warning viewers of the film's potentially nauseating effects). Following *Audition*, the release of *Ichi the Killer* further established Miike as the supposed figurehead of Asia Extreme. Tarantino's citations of Miike's movie in *Kill Bill* are testament to the significant impact this strand of cinema has had in the West, and a consideration of the links between the two films reveals an extensive network of cross-cult connections that has thus far been absent in critical and scholarly discourse.

Killer Connections: Reference and Performance in *Kill Bill* and *Ichi the Killer*

Adapted from Hideo Yamamoto's popular *seinen* (young man)⁵² manga series, Miike's *Ichi the Killer* sees the sadomasochistic *yakuza* member Kakiyama (a mesmerising turn by Tadanobu Asano) and the titular adolescent killer Ichi (played by Nao Ōmori) caught in the middle of a violent gang war. The sexually-repressed

⁵¹ For instance, the BBC's Almar Haflidason (2003) wrote that with the 'blood-soaked' *Ichi the Killer* Miike attempts 'to push and tear at the levels of onscreen violence and take them to a terrifying new level,' whilst Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* proclaimed that the film is an 'ultra-violent' piece of work 'that really can only be viewed from between your fingers, or behind the sofa' (2003).

⁵² The production of manga in Japan is structured around various categories based on gender and age, with the intention of dividing readership. The most popular of these, as Roman Rosenbaum (2013: 3) explains, are *shōjo* (young woman), *shōnen* (boys), *seinen* (young man), *yaoi* (boys' love) and *yuri* (girls' love). Yamamoto's *Ichi the Killer* was targeted at the *seinen* category, which is characterised by violence, sexual scenes, and dark psychological themes.

and psychotic Ichi is manipulated by Jiji (an acting role for Miike's contemporary director, Tsukamoto), an enigmatic old man who aims to incite unrest amongst the Shinjuku crime underworld. Pitting Ichi and Kakihara against one another, Jiji orders Ichi to murder Kakihara's beloved Boss Anjo, with whom he shares a violent homoerotic relationship. The outrageously messy outcome of the hit opens the film. With Jiji and his accomplices expertly eradicating all traces of the killing, Kakihara sets on a torturous path in search for answers in the mistaken belief that his treasured boss is still alive.

Throughout *Ichi the Killer* we learn that Kakihara and Anjo were engaged in an exchange of sadomasochistic desires, with the former reveling in the exceptional levels of pain offered by the cruelty of the latter. Kakihara's face is a topographical embodiment of the tremendous violence enacted in this relationship. He sports three severe overlapping facial scars in a cross stitch pattern, and a striking Glasgow smile (wounds from the corner of the mouth extending to the cheeks).⁵³ In Yamamoto's original manga, these wounds are very much taken to the extreme. Kakihara's gashes from ear-to-mouth are not healed scars but are, in fact, left exposed, allowing their adorer to open his mouth to an alarming degree—the slits in his cheeks are held closed by two metal rings, which he removes on occasion to allow them to gape open. Miike's introduction of Kakihara exploits the nature of these most extraordinary facial disfigurements. The first we see of Kakihara is the bleach-blonde back of his head, as he surveys Boss Anjo's unoccupied apartment. "What the hell happened here?" he asks, taking a draw from a cigarette whilst Karera Musication's frenetic score of polyrhythmic percussion and frenzied vocals sets a most unnerving tone. As

⁵³ This distinctive injury would later be seen in a number of mainstream Hollywood films, such as Heath Ledger's Joker character in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), and in the appearances of Scottish actor Tommy Flanagan—most notably in *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005) and television shows such as *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–2014) and *Gotham* (2015–present)—who bears real-life scars acquired during a mugging in Glasgow.

the mysterious figure exhales, we notice that, strangely, the dispensed smoke billows away from his face in two opposite directions. He slowly turns towards the camera (see figure 7) to reveal his Glasgow smile, takes another drag, and this time exhales in full view. With his mouth closed shut, Kakihara forces the smoke out of his wounds, projecting it through the open slits present on either side of his face.



Figure 7 Tadanobu Asano's Kakihara makes a dramatic entrance in *Ichi the Killer*.

Ichi's appearance is equally memorable, owing to the striking attire given to him by the manipulative Jiji. When sent on his killing missions, Ichi is dressed in a black rubber armoured suit, emblazoned with a bright-yellow "1" (his name, Ichi, signifies "One"), with custom-made boots carrying a concealed blade in each heel. In one particularly harrowing scene, the killer makes use of these blades when confronting a pimp viciously beating and raping a woman. Upon the assailant's questioning of Ichi's presence, the young man's reticence overcomes him. Sobbing and wailing as the pimp grows more irate, the taunt of "You're fucking crying!" pushes Ichi to breaking point. He replies "No, I'm not!" and a close-up divulges his

boot's hidden blade. With one high kick, accompanied by the sound of a metallic "swish," Ichi raises his leg vertically and drives the boot straight through the length of the man's body, with the blade ending wedged in the floor. Shocked by the attack, the victim utters "What the fuck?" in a catatonic state, steps back towards a wall, and his body proceeds to split in two from head to crotch. With the aid of some rather unrealistic CGI,⁵⁴ the pimp's figure splits perfectly down the middle with first his intestines, and then his corpse, collapsing to the floor.

Both Kakihara's unmistakable facial disfigurements and Ichi's disemboweling of the pimp are cited by Tarantino in the violent climax of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*. The *Kill Bill* films chart the revenge of a character known simply as "The Bride" (Tarantino's early muse, Uma Thurman), a member of an assassination squad left for dead at a wedding rehearsal by their leader, and her lover, Bill (David Carradine). Surviving the attack, The Bride traverses the globe, systematically killing each and every one of her past comrades. Near the end of the first installment, she locates O-Ren Ishii (played by Lucy Liu) in a Tokyo nightclub, named the House of Blue Leaves. After The Bride brutally dispatches her bodyguard, the schoolgirl assassin Gogo Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama of *Battle Royale*), O-Ren sets her Crazy 88s gang on her ex-partner. The ensuing battle sees The Bride defeat dozens of enemies in one of *Kill Bill's* most discussed moments, remarkable both for its frenzy of violence⁵⁵ and its embellishment of a wealth of cinematic citations. A complex assembly of references

⁵⁴ Marc Saint-Cyr (2012: 329) notes how 'CGI effects aid Miike in his execution of the most extreme and unrealistic sequences, adding to the overtly-cartoonish quality of the film,' and Mathijs and Mendik comment on the 'dubious pleasure' of *Ichi the Killer's* CGI-aided violent as one of their essential *100 Cult Films* (2011: 119).

⁵⁵ For its international release, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* was cut in 17 scenes and extensively re-worked to comply with classification regulations across the globe (Glogcke 2008). Tarantino's original, un-edited version of the film was released only in Japan. The carnage of the final battle in the House of Blue Leaves was notably treated with a black-and-white filter for the international release, dampening the bright spray of copious amounts of blood. The desired effect here is, as Richard Misek (2010: 104) has noted, to ensure that 'at least part of [the film's] ugliness and horror is left to our imagination.'

to, and borrowings from, cult films from a range of different countries, cultures, and contexts, this climactic sequence manifests what Chan term's *Kill Bill*'s 'cross-cultural citationality' (2009a: 146). It is an amalgamation of moments from movies as diverse as cult fantasy *Highlander* (Russell Mulcahy, 1986), John Woo's Hong Kong action thriller *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the contemporary *jidaigeki* film *Samurai Fiction/SF: One* (Hiroyuki Nakano, 1998), and Lucio Fulci's horror *City of the Living Dead* (1980). Tarantino's appropriation of visual and formal elements from these marginal films constructs a postmodern arrangement as part of the distinct diegetic world presented to mainstream audiences by the director's ceaseless cinematic quotations. As Chan (2009a: 145) puts it, Tarantino's cinema functions in this manner in 'reinventing exploitation aesthetics and re-presenting them as Hollywood blockbusters.'

The citation of *Ichi the Killer* in this scene is a "blink and you'll miss it" momentary call out to Miike's film. Unlike the obtrusive borrowing from other Japanese genre movies, which sees Tarantino makes clear sustained use of visual and aural material,⁵⁶ the references to *Ichi the Killer* are more fleeting. At one point during the frenzied battle, The Bride spectacularly jumps onto an opponent's shoulders, from where she wields her weapon at an oncoming enemy. The first hit clashes with the gang member's sword, the second slices across his face horizontally. We cut to a long shot as the victim recoils from the strike and staggers towards the camera, screaming in agony. For a split-second, the audience sees that the blow has left him with a most unusual facial injury—two gashes that extend from ear-to-mouth on either side (see figure 8). Seconds later, when fending off another advancing enemy, The Bride swings her weapon in a long, arching vertical motion,

⁵⁶ During the battle sequence in the House of Blue Leaves, Tarantino most notably draws heavily on the aesthetics of *Samurai Fiction*, the Sonny Chiba martial arts vehicle *Karate Bullfighter* (Kazuhiko Yamaguchi, 1977), and Seijun Suzuki's seminal gangster film *Tokyo Drifter* (1966).

slicing her opponent in half from his head downwards. We momentarily glimpse the sword drive through the victim's body from behind his back, and as his corpse divides vertically in two we peer at The Bride's expressionless face through a haze of blood splatter (see figure 9). She moves onto her next opponent.



Figure 8 *Kakihara's distinctive facial scars in Ichi the Killer (top) and similar injuries on the face of a masked assailant in Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (bottom).*

These two instances of violent bodily disfigurement are clear references to *Ichi the Killer*, with Tarantino himself divulging that Miike's film had an influence on

the sequence (Machiyama 2003: 18). Whilst they are indeed fleeting moments that one will likely miss upon first viewing, the close proximity of these references to one another simply cannot be ignored—moreover, the very opacity of their presence invites cult reception. In a kinetic and blood-soaked sequence of excess in which virtually dozens of enemies are dispatched, for Tarantino to momentarily dwell on these two particular means of injury is to foreground his reverence for *Ichi the Killer's* cinematic violence. Here, Tarantino cultivates references which he is aware some viewers will identify and, in turn, the recognition of these conscientiously placed citations by his viewers produce cross-cult connections. The cultist desire for knowledge about texts (a form of consumption particularly pertinent to Tarantino's postmodern cinema) circulates around such citations. *Kill Bill's* transient visual references to Miike's *Ichi the Killer* are woven into (to again use Chan's term) the film's cinematic citationality, lying dormant for the cult fan to unpick and identify accordingly. For example, *The Quentin Tarantino Archives* includes a "Kill Bill References Guide," a list of films believed to have inspired *Kill Bill*, compiled by Haselbeck, Pete Roberts, and other members of the online community. The introduction to the guide is clear in outlining its purpose:

Kill Bill has often been described as a movie geek's movie i.e. a movie for people who know all the various genres and films that are referenced. A movie for people who'll shout out in excitement "Ah, that shot's from a Leone film! did you see that?!". Of course Kill Bill is entertaining for everybody regardless. But you definitely get the movie-encyclopedic kick out of it if you know what's behind Kill Bill.

(Haselbeck 2015, emphasis in original)

This particular mode of cult consumption is significant in its acknowledgement of its own cultist agenda. The forum offers its users the pleasures of noticing the unnoticed, naming the unnamed, and sharing these experiences with others in a



Figure 9 *The grotesque and spectacular splitting of bodies by blades in Ichi the Killer (top) and Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (bottom).*

virtual community—a practice activated by Tarantino’s citational approach. Here, the heightened citationality of Tarantino’s cinema motivates his cult fans to *reflect* the aficionado status of the director, in pursuit of that ultimate “movie-encyclopaedic kick.” The structure of the reference guides available on *The Quentin Tarantino Archives* echoes Tarantino’s wide knowledge of marginal and genre cinemas, with *Kill Bill’s* guide divided into multiple categories detailing the origins of the sources

identified.⁵⁷ Residing in a lengthy section dedicated to Japanese cinema, *Ichi the Killer* is awarded its own entry, complete with stills and short descriptions of the significance of each reference. Mathijs and Sexton recognise how the cultist 'eagerness to know more, or to "master" a film, manifests itself not merely through repeat viewings, but also through gaining knowledge of films in other ways, so that films become much more than just specific viewing encounters and feed into the cultist's broader cultural life in a variety of ways' (2011: 5). The collective effort of a dedicated online community, this reference guide is a pertinent example of how such a process can operate. It is at once the *by-product* of Tarantino fandom (in its collation of citations identified by spectators) and the *object* of this fandom (as the origin of cultist pleasure).

The cross-cult connections between *Kill Bill* and *Ichi the Killer* extend further, beyond the former's visual citation of the latter and into the realm of performance. As Tarantino has done so throughout his career, he cast in *Kill Bill* a number of stars of the marginal and exploitation genres to which his postmodern cinema is indebted. Manifesting his cult connoisseurship, Tarantino's selection of actors demonstrates a particularly wide knowledge and appreciation of the stars of Japanese genre traditions, incorporating *yakuza*, samurai, and martial arts movies. In *Kill Bill* can be found Sonny Chiba (a stalwart of the action cinema of Japan since the 1970s), stuntman and actor Kenji Ohba (star of the long-running popular *Space Sheriff Gavan/Uchū keiji Gyaban* superhero television series, which began in 1982), Chiaki Kuriyama (who has appeared in J-horror classics and *Battle Royale*), and, importantly, a handful of Japanese actors who have worked regularly with Miike

⁵⁷ The guide to *Kill Bill*'s references is categorised according to those made to "Western Movies (American & Italian)," "Horror and Thriller Films," "American and European Cinema (Mainstream and Exploitation)," "Japanese Cinema," "Chinese Cinema," "TV shows, Comics, Cartoons & Anime," and other "Tarantino Films."

across his oeuvre. Remarkably, these casting choices include a total of five crew members who were involved in *Ichi the Killer*—Jun Kunimura, Yuki Kazamatsuri, Yoshiyuki Morishita, Shun Sugata, and Sakichi Satō—and the context of each individual's casting is essential to unpacking the significance of the established cross-cult connections between Miike and Tarantino.

Prolific actor Jun Kunimura has worked with some of the most recognisable names in contemporary Japanese cinema, including Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Hideo Nakata, Sogo Ishii, and Hirokazu Koreeda. Kunimura has appeared in a number of Miike's films, including *Audition*, *Ichi the Killer*, 2008's *God's Puzzle/Kamisama no pazuru*, and the upcoming release *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Diamond is Unbreakable – Chapter 1/JoJo no kimyô na bôken: Daiyamondo wa kudakenai - dai-isshô* (2017). In *Ichi the Killer*, Kunimura plays Boss Funaki, leader of the *yakuza* group embroiled in a bitter war with the Anjo gang. Although Kunimura has relatively little screen time, as head of the group Kakiyama believes to be responsible for the disappearance of his beloved boss, Funaki is present during some of the film's most notorious moments. These include the infamous spectacle of Kakiyama torturing a Funaki member with the aid of meat-hooks, razor-sharp needles, and boiling oil (see figure 10), and the ensuing scene in which he slices off his own tongue in an act of apology for his severe interrogative actions.

The casting of Kunimura in *Kill Bill* is significant in revealing Tarantino's reverence for *Ichi the Killer*, and an accompanying production tale has been vital in implicating Miike's cinema in Tarantino's network of citations to be decoded by the cult fan. In *Kill Bill*, Kunimura is offered a role similar to that he played in Miike's film. He is cast as Boss Tanaka, a senior member of Tokyo's Crime Council with which O-Ren Ishii is also associated. When O-Ren assumes power, there is division amongst



Figure 10 Boss Funaki (Jun Kunimura) is less than impressed with Kakhara's questionable methods of interrogation in *Ichi the Killer*.

the ranks; Tanaka in particular opposes her appointment and, referring to her mixed heritage, insults her by calling her a “Chinese Jap-American half-breed bitch.” Unimpressed by his comments, O-Ren dashes across the room and decapitates Tanaka with one strike. Whilst the other Crime Council leaders reel in shock, she picks up Tanaka’s head and displays it to the room, spouting a warning of comparable treatment for further dissent (see figure 11). Although never publicly confirmed by the director, fan sites and other online sources⁵⁸ have perpetuated a story that Tarantino selected Kunimura for the role after seeing him scream in Miike’s film (in the torture scene shown in figure 10, in which Funaki chastises Kakhara for his ferocious interrogation of one of his members). In expressing Tanaka’s outrage in

⁵⁸ The *Quentin Tarantino Archives* includes an entry on *Kill Bill* entitled “Kill Bill References Guide,” including a “Japanese” section that details the films’ citations of Japanese cinema. *Ichi the Killer* has its own entry, in which it is claimed that ‘Quentin Tarantino chose actor Jun Kunimura to be Boss Tanaka after seeing him scream in this movie.’ See the site for details: <[http://wiki.tarantino.info/index.php/ Kill Bill References Guide/japanese](http://wiki.tarantino.info/index.php/Kill_Bill_References_Guide/japanese)> The same information is also included in the trivia section of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*’s page on *IMDb*: <<http://m.imdb.com/title/tt0266697/trivia>>



Figure 11 "Now, if any of you sons of bitches got anything else to say, now's the fucking time!" O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu) presents the decapitated head of Boss Tanaka (Jun Kunimura) Kill Bill: Vol. 1.

Kill Bill, Kunimura is certainly allowed an opportunity to project his commanding voice, screaming stridently as he slams his fist onto a table in anger. The veracity of this production tale is, to a large extent, incidental, as it is the very act of sharing such stories about Tarantino's casting choices that marks both his, and Miike's, cult reception. As D. K. Holm argues, Tarantino's 'casting is seemingly eccentric but finely considered,' and his films thus 'demand careful attention because they were made with endless attention to detail' (2004: 13). The perpetuation of such trivia sees both Tarantino's and Miike's followers sharing obscure production information that, in the process, unites their cult reputation—fortifying Tarantino's persona as a knowledgeable cinephile, whilst locating Miike as an object of cult fandom.

The second casting connection between *Kill Bill* and *Ichi the Killer* is that of Yuki Kazamatsuri. In the early part of her career, Kazamatsuri starred in a number of films by legendary *pinku eiga* (pink film)⁵⁹ directors, including Kōyū Ohara, Masaru

⁵⁹ Jasper Sharp comments that 'the *pinku eiga*, or pink film, [is a] genre of low-budget softcore sex movies that has graced specialist adult cinema screens across the Japanese nation, sometimes even playing further afield, since the early '60s.' He continues to explain that '[t]he basic definition of the pink film is an independently-produced movie, shot on 35mm film by professional or semi-professional casts and crews, whose main lure is its sexual content' (2008: 9, emphasis in original).

Konuma, and Shōgorō Nishimura. In *Ichi the Killer*, she plays a drug dealer to whom Kakehara pays a visit; forcibly entering the apartment of Kazamatsuri's nameless character (she is credited only as "Yakuza Girl"), Kakehara tortures her for information as to Jiji's whereabouts. Kazamatsuri was cast in *Kill Bill* as the proprietor of the House of Blue Leaves, a joyful woman who enthusiastically, yet anxiously, welcomes O-Ren and her gang as they take up residence in her nightclub. Here, Tarantino's choice of Kazamatsuri functions as part of his fanboy appreciation of a particular category of Japanese sex cinema, namely the *roman porno* ("Roman Porno")⁶⁰ films produced by Nikkatsu in the 1970s and '80s. Working with some of the subgenre's most renowned directors, Kazamatsuri starred in almost a score of titles for the studio. Tarantino's selection of the actress for *Kill Bill* communicates his admiration for these films, with the director publicly professing his love for this erotic cinema and enthusiastically celebrating Kazamatsuri's role within it:

I'm quite enamored with [...] the whole Nikkatsu (studio) *roman porno* thing [...] I almost can't believe that that existed in cinema! The way they did it in the '70s, where they're real movies with real actors. The woman who played the proprietor in "Kill Bill" (Yuki Kazamatsuri), she was a roman porno actress. I saw a couple of her films and I thought they were fantastic!
—Quentin Tarantino

(Fazio 2007, emphasis in original)

The third casting link between *Kill Bill* and *Ichi the Killer* is that of character actor Yoshiyuki Morishita. Known for his trademark grin (a smile that reveals an unfortunate set of poorly-aligned teeth), the prolific Morishita is often cast in comedic roles exploiting his unique appearance. Much of Morishita's work in Japan is as a bit-

⁶⁰ As the 1960s came to a close, the major studios in Japan recognised the commercial potential of movies containing sexual scenes, and many of them launched their own lines for such productions. The leader in this was Nikkatsu, with their *roman porno* label. Sharp notes how '[i]t is often claimed that the label is a contraction of the words 'Romantic Pornography,' yet '[a] more convincing explanation is that it was derived from the French term *roman pornographique*, or 'pornographic novel', used to describe erotic fictional' writings (2008: 121, emphasis in original).

part actor,⁶¹ appearing fleetingly in films and television shows for largely the same purpose—an amusing character providing comic relief whilst functioning as a tool for narrative development. He has briefly appeared as a secondary figure in a number of Miike's films, including as a bizarre man in a wig in 2007's *Like a Dragon/Ryū ga gotoku: Gekijō-ban*, as a bumbling policeman in *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, and as a gambling-addicted teacher in *Yakuza Apocalypse*. In *Ichi the Killer*, Morishita fulfils his expository function in a scene set in a club in which the central character of Karen (Alien Sun) is introduced. Credited only as "Pub Patron," Morishita's punter sits with hostess Karen as she regales to him a tale that immediately establishes her as a volatile figure. She recalls having a dog in elementary school; her neighbour owned a German shepherd, she explains, and he used to make fun of Karen and her pet incessantly. The neighbour tormented her so much, she reveals, that she finally snapped and strangled his dog to death. Suitably, the punter's reaction is one of disturbance, spitting out his drink in shock before covering his mouth with his hands in mortification.

Morishita appears in a remarkably similar scene in *Kill Bill* (see figure 12), in which Gogo Yubari is introduced. The Bride's voice-over narration explains to the audience that, whilst only seventeen-years-of-age, Gogo is extremely dangerous. She says that "Gogo may be young, but what she lacks in age she makes up for in madness..." and we cut to a shot of her talking to a man in a bar. The man is played by Morishita, credited as "Tokyo Business Man." As the young girl swigs from a bottle of wine, the man makes a thinly veiled attempt to flirt with her. To his surprise,

⁶¹ Morishita began his career with small parts in films directed by Kitano, with his first acting credits in *Sonatine*, *Kids Return* (1996), and *Fireworks* (1997), and later with three separate roles in the director's surrealist autobiography film, *Takeshis'* (2005). Morishita has also appeared in a number of seminal J-horror films, such as Takashi Shimizu's original 2002 *Ju-on* and the final installment of the *Ringu* trilogy, *Ring 0* (Norio Tsuruta, 2000), and has played recurring characters in television shows, including *Kamen Rider Ghost* (2015–2016) and *Welcome to the El Palacio* (2011–2013).

Gogo suddenly asks the businessman “Do you want to screw me, yes or no?” He raises his hand to his mouth as he chuckles with embarrassment, whilst a champagne flute containing a fluorescent green drink sits on the bar between them. His answer of “Yes” to Gogo’s question displeases her. She drives a sword into his abdomen, asking “Do you still want to penetrate me? Or is it I, who has penetrated you?” as she locks eyes with him and twists her blade. The schoolgirl assassin drags her sword through the man’s body, gutting him in the process.

That Morishita performs the same function in *Ichi the Killer* and *Kill Bill*, and does so in such strikingly similar scenes, illustrates Tarantino’s awareness of the bit-part actor’s remit in Miike’s film (and in Japanese cinema more broadly). Morishita’s fleeting appearances can further be considered part of his character actor cult stardom. In her study of cult character actors in Hollywood, Sarah Thomas notes how ‘[t]he strangeness of their characters and their obvious side-lining as plot functions and cultural stereotypes encourage perceptions of them as expressions of marginality,’ with the ‘potentially subcultural and subversive iconography’ produced by such readings offering spectators opportunities of cultist engagement (2013: 39). Within this vein, the very recognition of Morishita’s performances by Western audiences positions him as a subject of marginalisation.⁶² The cult viewer’s identification of Morishita in *Kill Bill* or *Ichi the Killer* renders him an outside figure, foregrounding his evident function as a secondary character in a manner that reveals the workings of cinematic texts that are usually unseen or ignored.

⁶² For example, in a feature for *Twitch*—entitled “Yoshiyuki Morishita is ready for his extreme close-up!”—Ard Vijn (2010) explains that whilst watching a Japanese film he ‘was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of a supporting character which I’ve seen pop up all over the place.’ This was Morishita, whom Vijn describes as ‘a skinny little guy with incredibly bad teeth, and he is always used for comic effect. Or so I thought...’ Vijn goes on to state that this realisation led him to discover that Morishita is in fact a prolific actor who has appeared in many films he has watched, without even noticing him. ‘I apparently have seen scores and scores of films with him in it!’ he writes. Morishita’s position as an outsider is further emphasised by a quiz in which the aim is to identify the movies he has appeared in, with five images of Morishita in films (including one of Miike’s) for readers to recognise and discuss.



Figure 12 Yoshuyuki Morishita performing his expository function in two strikingly similar scenes in *Ichi the Killer* (top) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (bottom).

The fourth casting connection between the two films is that of veteran actor Shun Sugata. Sugata has worked with Miike on a number of occasions, including a brief appearance in *Izo* (2004), and small roles as a cop in *Ley Lines* and a gangster in *Graveyard of Honour/Shin Jingi no Hakaba* (2002), a remake of Kinji Fukasaku's 1975 *yakuza* movie of the same name. In *Ichi the Killer*, Sugata stars as Takayama, an Anjo member who, alongside the timid Kaneko (played by director SABU, also

known as Hiroyuki Tanaka), remains by Kakehara's side throughout his rampage. Tarantino cast Sugata in *Kill Bill* as Boss Benta of the Crime Council. As leaders of the same organisation, Sugata and Kunimura share the scene in which O-Ren decapitates Boss Tanaka. Following Tanaka's protest, Benta angrily demands he apologise for his display of disrespect—this sentiment is shared by Boss Ozawah, who is played by Akaji Maro,⁶³ an actor who has worked with Sion Sono, SABU, Takeshi Kitano, and indeed Miike, with roles in *The City of Lost Souls/Hyōrū-gai* (2000) and *Shangri-La/Kin'yū hametsu Nippon: Tōgenkyo no hito-bito* (2002). Tarantino's selection of Kunimura, Sugata, and Maro as the leaders of Tokyo's criminal underworld reflects the director's knowledge, and appreciation, of Japanese crime film. All three actors are well known in Japan for their roles as *yakuza* gangsters, and their casting in *Kill Bill* is in keeping with these traditions, feeding into Tarantino's reputation as a connoisseur of Asian genre cinema.

The fifth, and perhaps most obscure, link between *Kill Bill* and *Ichi the Killer* is the appearance of actor, director, and screenwriter Sakichi Satō. Satō worked closely with Miike on *Ichi the Killer* and his 2003 release *Gozu/Gokudō kyōfu dai-gekijō: Gozu*, writing the screenplays for, and performing a cameo role in, both films. In *Gozu*, he is the cross-dressing manager of a coffee shop, and *Ichi the Killer* sees him as the owner of the restaurant where Ichi works. Satō has appeared in other films by significant contemporary Japanese directors,⁶⁴ in addition to writing and directing a number of features himself, including *Tokyo Zombie/Tōkyō zonbi* (2005),

⁶³ Maro also happens to be the father of both Nao Ōmori, who stars as the titular murder in *Ichi the Killer*, and Tatsushi Ōmori, director of films such as *A Crowd of Three* (2010) and *The Ravine of Goodbye* (2013).

⁶⁴ Satō can be seen as the manager of a recycling shop in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Bright Future* (2003), a *yakuza* member in Pen-ek Ratanarung's *Last Life in the Universe* (2003), and in Natsuya Nakashima's *Memories of Matsuko* (2006). Notably, Miike also had a cameo role in Pen-ek's *Last Life in the Universe* as a *yakuza* member. I will discuss the significance of Miike's cameo appearance in another film later in this chapter.

a comedy-horror starring Miike regular Shō Aikawa and *Ichi the Killer's* Kakehara, Tadanobu Asano. Tarantino cast Satō in *Kill Bill* as the husband of Kazamatsuri's character, the proprietor of the House of Blue Leaves. The pair act opposite one another as the couple who nervously cater for O-Ren and her masked gang (see figure 13). Satō's character is dressed in a bright orange kimono, secured around his waist by a sash adorning a jagged black pattern. In one scene, a Crazy 88s member quizzically asks the man "Who do you remind me of?" Moments later, he makes a realisation, "Ah, Charlie Brown!" Indeed, in the film Satō's appearance—with his bald head and distinctive garments—bears a clear resemblance to Charlie Brown, the character from Charles Schulz's popular *Peanuts* comic strip.⁶⁵



Figure 13 Sakichi Satō and Yuki Kazamatsuri in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* as "Charlie Brown" and his wife, proprietors of the House of Blue Leaves.

Tarantino's *Kill Bill* establishes rich cross-cult connections between the director and Miike's cinema. Visual references to *Ichi the Killer's* violent excess, and the incorporation of five of its actors, manifest an admiration for Miike's filmmaking,

⁶⁵ This scene is replete with Tarantino's cross-cultural references. He has Satō, a Japanese actor and filmmaker, resembling a character from an American comic strip whilst taking orders from a masked gang of assassins ordering pepperoni pizza. The convivial atmosphere is abruptly interrupted when Uma Thurman, an American actor, calls out (in Japanese) a challenge to fight O-Ren Ishii, played by Chinese-American actor Lucy Liu, who resembles Meiko Kaji's assassin in the Japanese *Lady Snowblood* movies.

promoting a shared knowledge between Tarantino and his audiences that draws out, and contributes to, Miike's cult reception. As Bordwell (2006: 60) has noted, the sources of Tarantino's citations are signaled 'in order to tease pop connoisseurs into a new level of engagement.' As part of this citationality, both *Ichi the Killer* and its director are subsumed by the particular mode of cult consumption Tarantino's cinema encourages. The presence of Miike's work in *Kill Bill* invites readings by those cult fans who occupy themselves with extracting Tarantino's references. As a pertinent example of this, *The Quentin Tarantino Archives'* community forum includes a thread, entitled "Ichi the Killer actors in Kill Bill," in which members discuss the shared casting choices they have identified. The user "JoeBanana" explains how, whilst watching *Ichi the Killer*, a character screamed and 'I thought, "Geeze, that's Boss Tanaka!"' Solidifying Tarantino's reputation as a genre film connoisseur, the user proceeds to list the other casting similarities he or she has discovered, channelling the influential director's celebration of Miike's violent *yakuza* film:

I doubt it's coincidence, I mean, the weird looking guy [Yoshiyuki Morishita] was the same type of guy in both movies, Jun [Kunimura] had the exact same angry look in both, and why else would a screenwriter [Sakichi Satō] who did a small cameo in his film be given a part in a Hollywood movie? Quentin loves Ichi so I guess he was hooking them up. Pretty cool, [if] you ask me.
(“JoeBanana” 2004)

Takashi Miike in Eli Roth's *Hostel*: Bringing a Cult Auteur into the Frame

The cross-cult connections between Miike and Tarantino do not end with *Ichi the Killer* and *Kill Bill*. There exists a deeper link to be examined (both here and in chapter four) that further, and even more clearly, illuminates their intertwining cult

receptions. Since *Kill Bill*, the two directors have performed in each other's work, signifying an industrial relationship that extends beyond mere citation. From within the interstices of this relationship's performative connections has emerged another cult auteur reputation that fortifies this affiliation—that possessed by the controversial horror filmmaker Eli Roth. Roth has been central in facilitating this exchange, offering Miike a cameo role in his second feature film, *Hostel*, for which Tarantino acted as Executive Producer and "Presenter." As one of the key titles of what became known as the "torture porn" horror subgenre, *Hostel* is often credited for bringing a new level of violence into Western mainstream cinema. The film is in fact greatly indebted to the earlier Asia Extreme phenomenon, with Miike's cameo embodying the significant influence of this strand of cinema on Roth's own extreme horror filmmaking. An examination of the context of Miike's appearance in Roth's *Hostel*—incorporating debates surrounding the commercial implications of authorship and the torture porn canon—reveals an exchange of influence between these three cult auteurs that has been instrumental in shaping Miike's reception in the West.

Roth's career as a filmmaker is, to a large extent, itself a product of the commercial and artistic power of Tarantino's particular brand of cult authorship. In a 2006 Q&A with the two directors, Logan Hill revealed how Roth's earliest filmmaking efforts were driven by his fanboy appreciation of Tarantino's cinema. Attending the Tisch School of Arts at New York University, his thesis film—entitled *Restaurant Dogs* (1994)—was a 12-minute violent black comedy homage to Tarantino's debut feature, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). A re-imagining of the movie's iconic title sequence with characters dressed as fast food chain mascots, Roth's film received a Student Academy Award, yet some of his tutors were so offended by its violence that they

protested against it.⁶⁶ After graduating, Roth spent six years working on a script for *Cabin Fever* (2002), his first feature. The film follows a group of college friends who contract a deadly flesh-eating virus while on spring break vacation at a cabin in the woods. A popular release both at the box office and on home video, *Cabin Fever* was a commercial success.⁶⁷ It came with the public endorsement of none other than Roth's newly acquired fan, and future collaborator, Tarantino, who proclaimed in a 2004 interview that Roth's debut was his current favourite movie, labelling the director 'the future of horror' (Enk 2010). The pair's working relationship began in earnest with Roth's next project. Following his support for *Cabin Fever*, Tarantino began advising the young director on his creative endeavours. It was whilst enjoying a swim in Tarantino's pool, Roth claims, that the matter of making *Hostel*—a low-budget, extremely violent horror film—was first discussed:

I was getting offered remakes, but one day Quentin says, "What are your ideas?" I told him about this one movie that would be really cheap, \$2 or \$3 million, and completely sick. He said, "That's the sickest fucking idea—make *that* movie."

—Eli Roth

(Hill 2006, emphasis in original)

Produced on a budget of just \$4.5 million, *Hostel* went on to earn \$80 million at the box office and \$21 million in DVD sales worldwide (Egan 2007). Whilst Roth's tale of its inception may appear to be a throwaway anecdote, it is in fact part of a narrative that moves us to consider the very real economic implications of the film author in

⁶⁶ One disgruntled tutor called it 'sophomoric, overtly offensive, and gratuitously violent.' Tarantino has seen Roth's parody of his own film, remarking that '[i]t's really funny. And to win that award and have professors mad at you? For a horror director, that's perfect' (Hill 2006).

⁶⁷ Recruiting investors and loaning money from his father's retirement fund, Roth produced *Cabin Fever* on a budget of just \$1.5 million. The film was well received by audiences at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival, and a bidding war between distributors ensued. Eventually, Roth sold the rights to Lionsgate Entertainment Corporation for \$3.5 million plus \$12 million for prints and advertising (Egan 2007), and the release went on to earn Lionsgate \$100 million in box office and DVD sales.

the sphere of reception. Beyond his mentoring, Tarantino was directly involved in *Hostel's* production as Executive Producer—a role that saw the film widely billed in promotional material as “Quentin Tarantino Presents... *Hostel*” (see figure 14). Such a marketing tactic evokes alternative scholarly perspectives on cinematic authorship, in which emphasis is placed on the role of the auteur in film culture. Critical approaches to the film author have seen the position of the auteur shift remarkably from the romanticism of the *politique*, through Sarris’ qualitative auteur theory, via

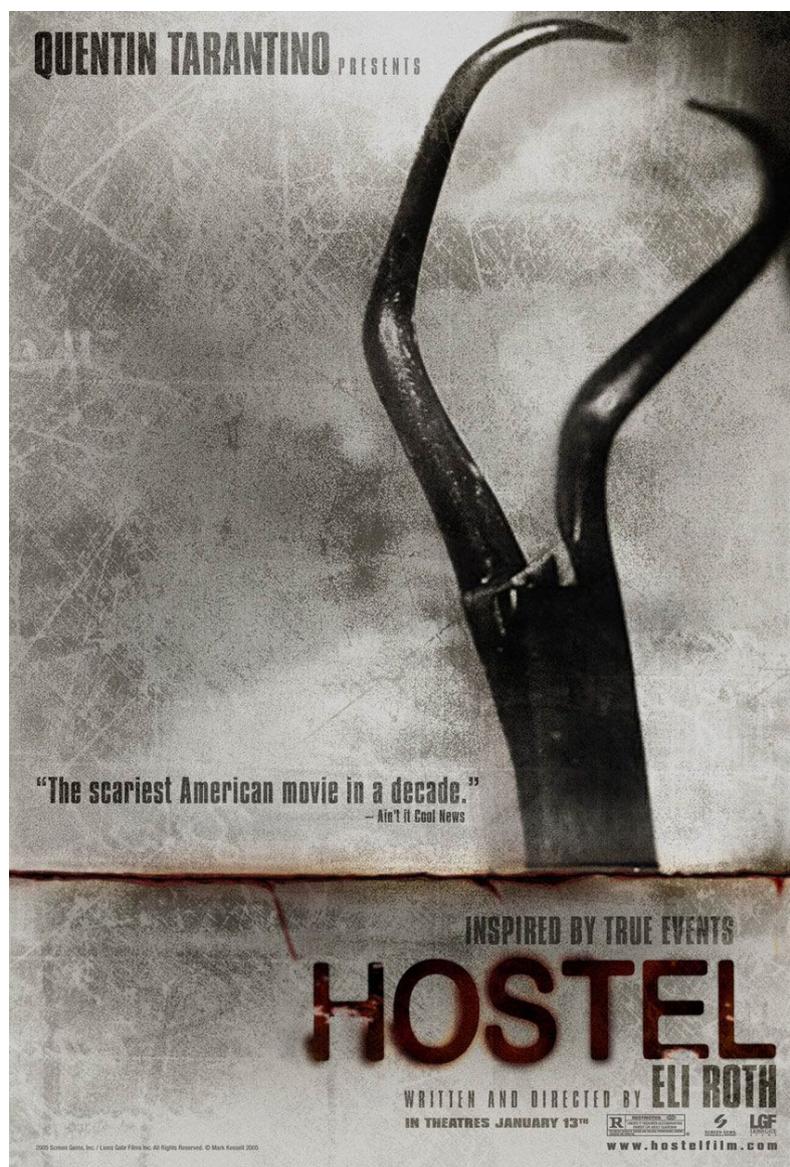


Figure 14 "Quentin Tarantino Presents..." The Tarantino author/brand name brandished on a US poster for Eli Roth's *Hostel*.

auteur-structuralism, and into the commercial realm of the contemporary cinema industry. An important intervention, the notion of the commerce of the auteur has been led by Timothy Corrigan. Arguing that the central significance of the auteur has moved away from artistic expression and towards economic value, Corrigan's focus on the auteur as a discursive concept recognises the 'increasing importance [...] of the auteur as a commercial strategy' (1990: 46). His departure has been in forgoing the critical tendency to consider auteurs textually, turning his attention instead to their extratextual function.

Crucially, Corrigan's critical approach to auteurs maintains that 'their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs' (1990: 48). A label such as "Quentin Tarantino Presents..." is part of this function, operating as a means of organising and interpreting texts in a saturated film market. There is, as many scholars have noted (Hitchcock 2007: 226–227, Lee 2008: 212, Martin 2014: 28–32), a Tarantino "brand," a kind of product to be expected when Tarantino is associated with a release. Central to securing this association in the marketing of titles such as *Hostel* is, of course, Tarantino's *name* itself. Indeed, as Steve Neale has argued, the film author's name can 'function as a 'brand name', a means of labelling and selling a film and of orientating expectation and channelling meaning and pleasure' (1981: 36). Stephen Crofts has further explored the significance of the "author-name" in this taxonomical operation. With reference to Foucault, Crofts argues that the author-name functions as a 'way of regulating the circulation of texts [...] as a means of distinction of certain texts from unauthored ones' (1998: 319). In the case of *Hostel's* promotion, the presence of the Tarantino name capitalises on his fully-established, discursively constructed auteur brand. Lending the film Tarantino's authorial approval, the "Quentin Tarantino Presents..." imprimatur suggests to potential

viewers that, with *Hostel*, they can expect the same kind of violent, pop culture-conscious cinema that is consistently produced by the auteur endorsing it.⁶⁸

Yet, the Tarantino name—and brand—has not been alone in shaping *Hostel's* reception in this way. More than a stamp of approval circulated in promotional discourse, Miike's cameo in *Hostel* sees the Japanese director's own distinct author-name/brand imprinted on the film, rendering his authorial presence visible *on-screen*. Corrigan suggests that auteurist marketing garners 'a relationship between audience and movie in which an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision that precedes and succeeds the film, the way that movie is seen and received' (1991: 102). Miike's transient cameo role in *Hostel* very much functions by these means. A fleeting appearance by a recognisable figure, the cameo performance is distinct from that of the lead actors around which it emerges. It presents a transitory disruption to the narrative flow, temporarily pausing progression in its separation from the overarching structure. In essence, the cameo appearance of a recognisable figure, such as Miike, is an intentional intervention in the filmic structure that is disruptive precisely *because of* the performer's recognisability.

The context of Miike's cameo in *Hostel* is important in unpacking its significance. The film follows a group of young backpackers—Americans Paxton (Jay Hernandez) and Josh (Derek Richardson), and their Icelandic friend Óli (Eypór Guðjónsson)—as they travel across Europe. Whilst in Amsterdam, the three hear of a hostel in Slovakia where beautiful local girls, who happen to have a liking for foreign men, reside. They hastily make their way to Bratislava, where they meet

⁶⁸ Similarly, Tarantino has lent his name to the distribution of many significant Asian titles in the West. He was producer and presenter of the first ever US home video and theatrical release of Yuen Woo-Ping's seminal Hong Kong martial arts movie, *Iron Monkey* (1993), which became one of the highest-grossing foreign-language releases ever in the country. He also had a hand in the US distribution of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), and was responsible for selecting and promoting titles for The Weinstein Company's "Dragon Dynasty" project, which included an entire series of martial arts films under the banner "Quentin Tarantino Presents The Shaw Brothers Collection."

Natalya (Barbara Nedeljková) and Svetlana (Jana Kadeábková), two beautiful, young, single women. After sleeping with the girls that evening, Paxton and Josh awake to find Óli missing, along with a female Japanese backpacker staying at the same hostel. Unbeknownst to the boys, Óli and the girl have been tortured, and likely murdered, in a dungeon-like room by a mysterious masked man. Josh will later suffer the same fate. In the search for his absent friends, Paxton is deceptively informed by Natalya and Svetlana that they are simply attending an art exhibition. Natalya agrees to take Paxton to the show. The two arrive at a remote abandoned factory where, in place of critics and spectators, Paxton sees groups of tough-looking thugs in leather jackets and men in suits—they all appear to be waiting for something. In the background, out of focus, a businessman can be glimpsed leaving the building. Paxton stops the man, and the two engage in a short conversation:

Paxton: Excuse me, I uh... Excuse me. How is it in there?

Businessman: Be careful...

Paxton: Why's that?

Businessman: You can spend... *all* your money... in there.

The businessman is played by Takashi Miike, delivering his lines in slow, rehearsed English.⁶⁹ His ominous warning of monetary indulgence sees him gesticulate directly at Paxton (and at us, the audience), before pointing towards the derelict factory and walking off screen with a knowing grin. The director is on-screen for a total of just 20 seconds, yet his appearance marks a pivotal turning point in the film's depiction of cruelty and violence. Upon entering the building, Paxton learns of the true purpose of the place—unwitting tourists are kidnapped from the local area and held prisoner there, for wealthy clients to pay for the privilege of torturing, mutilating, and killing.

⁶⁹ The Japanese director is not proficient in English, so he learned his lines phonetically (Musetto 2006). Miike's stilted conveyance draws particular attention to his dialogue, which he delivers in a careful, yet patently awkward, manner.

With this knowledge, we ascertain that the Japanese businessman seen moments earlier has just been enjoying the heinous services offered inside the killing factory. In this scene, Miike's words work to shape audience expectation in a manner similar to the "Quentin Tarantino Presents..." endorsement, signposting to viewers the kind of violent spectacle to follow. The man's admission that "You can spend... *all* your money... in there" demarcates him as one who enjoys (as a character within Roth's film) and purveys (as a filmmaker) the dubious pleasures of extreme violence. To knowing spectators—those who are familiar with Miike's cinema and its reputation for the extreme—an assumption can be made that, with Miike's approval, what Roth has in store must be *equally* gruesome.

Central to the structuring power of Miike's cameo is his status as a star. As Daniel Martin (2014: 28–32) has argued of Tarantino, Miike can be considered a star director, and his cameo in *Hostel* is an important part of his stardom. The star is a myth; an object of commodification constructed by industry; a commercially valuable yet illusory entity existing outside, but designed to sell, texts. A star's construction depends upon both the texts within which they appear, and a system of subsidiary media (magazines, advertising, the internet, television). 'A star is an image not a real person,' Richard Dyer writes, 'that is constructed (as any other aspect of fiction is) out of a range of materials' (1979: 12). An essential element of a star's presence is exactly his or her *image*, an image that exists not just within the fiction of film texts, but within the public sphere also. Whether in their most common form (the actor) or otherwise (the director, the producer, the animator, and so on), how stars look, what they say, and what they do, all contributes to the star image.

Takashi Miike has a recognisable star director image. His public presence—at festivals, in interviews, and promotional material—constructs for audiences an image

that inflects the interpretation of the texts of which he is designated author, or to which he is attached. Of course, central to this is Miike's appearance, that is, his physical attributes and attire. The way he looks and carries himself (or, at least, the way these qualities are presented by the industry) imbues Miike, the star director, with a particular personality. Miike's distinctive visual facets—the sunglasses, the jacket, the leather trousers, the ubiquitous cigarette—become, through their repetition and consistency across a range of media, integral to his stardom. As Gary Bettinson writes of Wong Kar-wai, another prominent Asian star director who shares Miike's penchant for spectacles, '[a]s a personality he is iconic, the omnipresent sunglasses an indelible trademark' (2015: 1). These "trademarks" are signs that gesture towards, and grow to be synonymous with, the construct of the star and those meanings, associations, and expectations of which it is constituted. In Miike's case, discussion of his appearance in filmic discourse often posits an interrelation between these recognisable traits and his status as an auteur.⁷⁰ His distinct appearance at once *represents* and *is* his star director image—his look is thus a vital part of his authorial signature.

Miike's cameo in *Hostel* must accordingly be understood as contributing to his stardom, in that it belongs to the discourse that supports the proliferation of his star director image. 'The cameo performance has a peculiar function in the spatial organization of stardom,' Simon Dixon notes, as '[t]he peculiar purpose of the star cameo is to *warp attentional space*, so that the minor becomes uncannily major'

⁷⁰ Meeting the director for an interview, Steve Rose (2003) writes how, '[i]n his trademark bug-eyed sunglasses, shaven-headed, chain-smoking, Miike cuts an impressively cool figure.' In her coverage of the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, Jane Dupont (2011) proposes that 'Mr. Miike, at 50, looks very much the cult auteur,' and remarks that, '[s]itting in the shade on Majestic Beach with ruffled hair, an oilskin jacket, and leather pants and boots, he could almost be French.' On the official website of underground drag artist Peaches Christ, Michael Varrati (2010) features Miike as one of the "Cult Filmmakers You Should Know," describing him as 'a small, affable Asian man with smartly spiked hair and sunglasses that would rival Bono's.'

(2008: 290, emphasis in original). In the brief 20 seconds he is on-screen, Roth has Miike foregrounded not as a character within the diegesis of the film, but as himself, or at least a *version* of himself—the performance is credited as “Takashi Miike” playing “Miike Takashi,” signalling the referential nature of his appearance. Explicit in its presentation of Miike not as *actor* but as *filmmaker*, the cameo indicates an awareness by both Miike and Roth of the artifice of the former’s star image. Indeed, what is so significant about the version of himself Miike plays is its correlation to the star director image disseminated in filmic discourse. Miike literally appears as “Miike.” Adorning a long brown trench coat, black t-shirt, and dark sunglasses, he closely resembles the star figure to be found in interviews, television promos, and magazines (see figure 15). No attempt at disguise is made; no endeavour to make him less recognisable; no effort to shape him as a rounded fictional character in *Hostel*’s diegetic universe.

This conscious presentation of Miike as director is also significant in solidifying his status as a cult auteur. The particular pleasures to be derived from the consumption of his cameo emanate from his standing as an auteur, eliciting response in the cultist spectator aware of his reputation as such. Providing a pertinent way of framing Miike’s performance in *Hostel*, Ernest Mathijs’ mapping of David Cronenberg’s appearances in films and television shows considers the cameo in a cult context.⁷¹ Acknowledging that the recognisability of those who perform cameos confounds the acceptance of performer as character (it is the public persona that is more likely to take precedence in the mind of the viewer), Mathijs argues that ‘[I]ike

⁷¹ Mathijs proposes that cameos can largely be understood within two contexts, namely those of the “homage cameo” and the “intra-industry cameo.” The former, he argues, ‘is essentially a wink to the legacy of cinema,’ a means of referencing film history and drawing attention to the impact of previous films; the latter, which often takes the form of ‘a guest appearance by a peer or mentor,’ tends to be performed by figures whose public status is limited by familiarity, recognisable precisely to only ‘peers, mentors and dedicated followers – cult fans.’ A cameo appearance by a director lies somewhere between these two types, Mathijs suggests (2013: 146).

star personae, cameos therefore add pleasurable intertextual and reflexive dimensions to a movie' (2013: 144). Indeed, the cameo's impetus in stimulating cult engagement is very much in its disruptive properties. Cameos are, as Mathijs writes, an 'odd moment, hanging in time, pausing the progress of the story and inviting the viewer to ponder some tangential implications of the story's consequences' (2013: 146). The cameo appearance of directors—film creators—in their own movies, and in those directed by others, unsettles the conventional invisibility of the film author's persona on-screen. Director cameos foreground the role of the filmmaker, conjuring the extratextual discourses orbiting their public image; their personality, history, and cultural significance.



Figure 15 Takashi Miike as star director in a promotional still (top) and in *Hostel* (bottom).

The cult reception invited by such appearances circulates both within, and outside, the texts that play host to them. As mentioned above, Miike's auteur status is acknowledged by Roth and Miike in *Hostel* by means of symbolic dialogue and reflection of the latter's star image, yet it is further signified outside the cinematic frame in the discourse surrounding the film. A conscious nod to their reputations as purveyors of extreme cinematic violence, the directors can be seen in *Hostel's* promotional images wielding bloodied chainsaws on set, in the factory where most of the gory action takes place (see figure 16). In a similar move, Roth appeared on the red carpet at the world premiere of *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* dressed in *Reservoir Dogs* getup, complete with a bloodstained shirt mimicking the wounds of Mr. Orange, the character who bleeds profusely throughout Tarantino's film (again, see figure 16). Such instances of metatextual reference, which serve to bolster audience interest in the films being promoted, rely on, and activate, spectators' previous knowledge. The overt allusion to existing films and the reputations of their directors enacts a process of identification, offering the cult fan the pleasure of successfully decoding the sources of these references and sharing this with fellow members of the community.

An examination of Miike's cameo in *Hostel* also leads us to consider the role of his cinema, and the concomitant Asia Extreme phenomenon, in the development of an entire subgenre of contemporary mainstream horror. The short conversation between Paxton and Miike communicates a theme that runs throughout Roth's text; the moral implications of the consumption, and *enjoyment*, of extreme scenes of sex and violence. This issue, and Roth's film itself, would become central to the torture porn discourse. The phrase "torture porn" was coined by *New York Magazine* critic David Edelstein (2004) in his discussion of a cycle of modern horror films—including *Hostel*, James Wan's *Saw* (2004), Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* (2005), and Rob



Figure 16 Miike and Roth in the killing factory in a promotional image for *Hostel* (left), and Roth and Tarantino reference *Reservoir Dogs* at the *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* world premiere (right).

Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005)—in which he likened their graphic and extended scenes of violent torture to the act of sexual gratification incited by pornography.⁷² Although its presence has since waned, torture porn was an important intervention in popular cinema. Roth and his contemporaries were responsible for moving violence in mainstream horror cinema away from low-budget B-movie shock fare, towards higher-budget, profitable releases.⁷³ Certainly, what was so striking about the torture porn canon was its popularisation of high levels of gore and extended scenes of torture, the likes of which had never before been widely seen in multiplexes in the West.

Whilst many of the most discussed and commercially successful torture porn titles have been directed by American filmmakers, it is important to acknowledge that the subgenre in fact possesses a wider, international reach in its political

⁷² Interestingly, the impact of *Hostel* was wide enough to warrant a gay pornographic parody of it, entitled *Hostile* (Roland Dane, 2007), two years after its release. The picture was filmed and set in Budapest, and recycled the plot of Roth's film to include four hardcore sex scenes ("Gay Video Review: *Hostile*" 2007).

⁷³ Taking a director salary of just \$10,000 (Enk 2010), Roth was able to spend as much money as he could on ensuring the gore in *Hostel* was as well-produced as possible. As he puts it, his intention was to 'keep the costs low to keep the gore high' (Hill 2006).

motivations.⁷⁴ As Steve Jones has recognised of the torture porn discourse, there has been a tendency to focus on the violent images produced by US filmmakers in their critiques of the country's political upheaval, overlooking the 'images of torture and humiliation [that] have also flourished in horror cinema from France, the UK, Australia, Korea, Japan and Thailand.' The transnational nature of the sociopolitical concerns expressed across these films, Jones argues, calls for the consideration of torture porn as 'a globalized genre' (2012: 195–196). Similarly, Lindsay Hallam has noted how examples of torture porn films from Europe and other regions⁷⁵ demonstrates that the subgenre is not solely a product of Hollywood, and is in fact 'closely linked to streams of new 'extreme' cinema which has been coming out of Asia and France' (2010: 233).

Pertinently, two films Hallam singles out as belonging to this extreme cinema are Miike's *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*. The Asia Extreme phenomenon of the early 2000s can be considered a precursor to the torture porn subgenre, and, as one of its leading figures, Miike's cinema is often credited—by both critics and filmmakers—as having been particularly influential. The impact of Miike's films on the development of torture porn was professed by Tarantino when he discussed *Hostel* as part of a 'kind of new horror film [happening] right now: ultraviolent, get-under-your-skin movies' (Hill 2006). Speaking at the start of January 2006, the director was referring to the

⁷⁴ Torture porn has been widely theorised as a collective reaction amongst horror filmmakers to the political climate of the early 2000s. Lindsay Hallam's critical approach to the canon applies trauma theory in considering the films within a post-9/11 context. She concludes that, through such a framework, 'we can see that the trauma resulting from recent events is being played out, but in a way that is also asking questions about how we came to this point, and the responsibilities that come with working through it' (2010: 235). Jason Middleton has also viewed the subgenre in relation to the geopolitical context of George W. Bush's administration, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular (2010).

⁷⁵ Hallam notes the Australian *Wolf Creek*, the New French Extremity films *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), *High Tension* (Alexandre Aja, 2003), *Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007), and *Frontier(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007), and the Belgian *The Ordeal* (Fabrice Du Welz, 2004) as significant examples (2010: 233).

as-then unnamed torture porn subgenre that Edelstein would label, and criticise, later that month. Tarantino claimed that the movement of films to which Roth's work belonged was the first true new wave of horror movies since the slashers of the 1970s and '80s. When questioned as to from where this new strand of violent horror was emanating, Tarantino was characteristically direct and enthusiastic in delivering his response:

Man, it all started with Takashi Miike. He's the godfather. And Seijun Suzuki,⁷⁶ and of course Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale*. It really heated up in Japan about six years ago, and America has been warming up to it.
—Quentin Tarantino

(Hill 2006, emphasis in original)

Here, Tarantino locates the torture porn corpus in relation to a wider canon of Japanese genre films, placing Miike at its centre. Although not explicitly stated, from the timeline he provides (the turn of the century onwards) one can assume that Tarantino is referring predominantly to Asia Extreme. Prefiguring the fledgling torture porn discourse, he goes on to posit that the shift in attitudes towards violence in American film culture occurred as a direct result of the increased availability of more “extreme” Japanese releases on home video in the West. Whilst *Hostel's* ‘level of intensity would [once] have pushed people away,’ he says, the visibility of such films has led to a situation where ‘audiences have made it mainstream’ (Hill 2006). The heralding of Miike as the “godfather” of this cinema is further reflected in Roth's expression of his admiration for the director and his Asia Extreme contemporaries. He has stated that an important influence on *Hostel* was what he sees as an ‘ultraviolent, no-holds-barred’ subgenre of Asian horror, a type of film of which he

⁷⁶ For an examination of Suzuki within an auteurist framework, see Dudley Andrew's discussion of how shifting conceptualisations of film authorship have shaped the ways in which Suzuki's cinema has been negotiated in the West (1993: 79–81).

claims Miike to be the frontrunner (Gilchrist 2006). Roth's consumption of these movies had a significant impact on his vision for *Hostel*. 'I'd seen all these films on the festival circuit like *Audition*, *Ichi the Killer*, *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, and I said, this is the kind of movie I want to make. Something that's sick, and disturbing, and fucked-up... [but] I wanted it also to be a fun ride' (Danielson, 2007).⁷⁷ Again, the corpus of films that Roth is referring to here is unmistakably Asia Extreme. Whilst his enthusiasm for these films is evident, the descriptive language he uses shares the same problematic associations of the extreme paradigm exploited in its discursive construction. He groups Miike's films and Park's *Sympathy Mr. Vengeance* as "sick," "disturbing," "fucked-up," and "a fun ride," depicting a cinema unified by its transgressive, yet entertaining, qualities. Nevertheless, like Tarantino, Roth clearly reveres Miike's approach to cinema:

When a director like Miike is making a film like *Audition* or *Ichi the Killer*, he doesn't think "I can't do this because it might offend people or turn some people off." He says, "this is what this movie is about, it's for a specific audience and I'm not holding back. If it scares me and disturbs me then I'm going to film it and make it part of the movie."

—Eli Roth

(Gilchrist 2006, emphasis in original)

Miike's cameo in *Hostel* is the crux of Asia Extreme's influence on Roth and his contemporaries, bringing its leading authorial figure into the frame of mainstream horror cinema in the West. As a significant moment in one of the titles that introduced a heightened level of violence to popular film, Miike's cameo has unsurprisingly been the subject of some critical reading. In his book, *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film from the 1950s to the 21st*

⁷⁷ Roth's comments in Shane Danielson's article are taken from an extensive interview with Roth and actress Barbara Nedeljková for the horror movie site *Pit of Horror* (Gray 2005), in which they discuss *Hostel*'s inspirations, production, and reception.

Century,⁷⁸ Charles Derry does not look kindly upon Roth and his fellow torture porn filmmakers. He condemns *Hostel* as 'artlessly exploitative,' arguing that the film's 'horror is in part an excuse to show bare-breasted women; and for our own amusement, human beings are attacked, drilled, chainsawed, mutilated, sliced, operated on, and given amputations.' Derry follows this line of *Hostel's* trivialisation of violence as entertainment to his reading of Miike's cameo. He draws attention to Miike's warning of "You can spend... *all* your money... in there," a sentiment he finds disturbing. 'In other words,' he argues, 'killing is fun' (2009: 193). In a somewhat cynical move, he then sensationally parallels Miike's appearance in *Hostel* with the Virginia Tech shootings. Occurring on 16 April 2007, a year-and-a-half after *Hostel's* release, the massacre saw Cho Seung-Hui, a South Korean-born senior student at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, shoot 60 people (with 32 fatalities) in a rampage that was until very recently the largest mass shooting in American history. In his argument that Miike's cameo encourages that 'killing is fun,' Derry goes on to posit '[a]s perhaps it was for Seung-Hui Cho' (2009: 410).

Here, Derry's linking of Miike and the Virginia Tech massacre sees him make a similarly preposterous leap to that made by the American media following the tragedy. Before committing the atrocity, Cho sent a package to the NBC network, including a printed message, videos, and photographs. Two of the images were, as many reported, reminiscent of scenes in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, including one in which Cho wields a hammer in a manner similar to Choi Min-sik's protagonist, and another where he is seen holding a pistol to his head, reflecting a further image from the film. Days after the event, news coverage began to posit a link between the

⁷⁸ Published in 2009, this is an update of Derry's 1977 book *Dark Dreams*. He revises his study of the modern horror film with the addition of a weighty second part to his original text entitled "Millennial Nightmares," including chapters on the current state of US horror, directors Guillermo del Toro and David Cronenberg, and what he terms "Asian Millennial Horror."

killer's actions and the movie. As Robert L. Cagle has argued, this correlation was built upon a 'decidedly tenuous logic that transformed Park's film into Cho's motivation,' and was highly problematic in its emphasis on nationality. 'Like virtually all coverage of the case,' Cagle notes, 'stories linking Cho to Park's film insistently characterized Cho as *Korean*, despite the fact that he had lived in the U.S. for nearly fifteen years' (2009: 123–124, emphasis in original). Strikingly, none of the reports could confirm that Cho had actually seen *Oldboy* or that his actions were inspired by the film's scenes of violence. Simply put, the link between screen and real-world events could not be evidenced, as is also the case with Derry's association of Miike with Cho—two instances of unfounded correlation that are guilty of a short-sighted and damaging reduction of Asian nationality and extreme behaviour.

Conclusion

By the time of *Hostel's* release in 2005, Miike's reputation in the West as a cinematic provocateur was well circulated, with the growing discourse surrounding the Asia Extreme phenomenon establishing him as its figurehead. The discursive positioning of Miike in relation to Tarantino and Roth—two American filmmakers who are themselves considered leaders of specific brands of violent cinema—further strengthened his status as a cult auteur. Their referential, and reverential, treatment of the director and his work has developed a network of cross-cult connections between the three filmmakers that has manifested both textually and extratextually. *Kill Bill's* visual citations of *Ichi the Killer* realised the influence of Miike's aesthetics of excess, whilst the extensive casting choices shared by the two films further

demonstrated Tarantino's connoisseurship of Asian genre cinema. Following this, Miike's cameo appearance in Roth's *Hostel* (itself a product of Tarantino's author-brand) saw this reverence embodied on-screen. Imprinting Miike's distinct authorial image onto one of the seminal titles of the torture porn subgenre, this fleeting appearance marks a significant turning point in the recognition of Miike as an identifiable cult auteur in the West, and, crucially, in the director's consciousness of his reception as such.

The cross-cult connections established between Miike, Tarantino, and Roth are illustrative of a significant development in the trajectory of Miike's career. After Tarantino's citing of *Ichi the Killer* in his high-profile *Kill Bill*, Miike's appearance in *Hostel* further increased the Japanese director's visibility in mainstream Western cinema. Discussing his encounter with Miike, Roth exclaimed 'I was so excited and he was so friendly,' gushing about how Miike caught a nine-hour flight from Japan to Prague just to appear in his movie. Yet, Roth also suggests that it was not only the case that he felt privileged to have the Japanese auteur in his film, but that Miike in turn was honoured to be appearing in the work of a director from the States. 'He was totally blown away,' Roth claims, 'and couldn't believe that some American director wanted to put him in his movie' (Musetto 2006). In the years following *Hostel's* release, Miike's international presence would grow exponentially with the release of three films in particular—*Imprint*, his entry in US television network Showtime's *Masters of Horror* series in 2006, his Tarantino-starring Japanese Western, *Sukiyaki Western Django*, in 2007, and *One Missed Call*, the American remake of his original horror film produced for the international market in 2008.

Chapter Four — Internationalisation (Part I)

Horror Shows and Japanese Cowboys: Miike Goes Global

I think what's nice about US fans is they don't tend to judge the movie saying whether it's well made or poorly made or in a sense doesn't matter. They tend to enjoy the movie as a tool or a toy or something to be enjoyed. Japanese audiences, [their] appreciation for movies maybe [isn't] that developed. In fact, most people in Japan don't necessarily want originality in a movie.

—Takashi Miike

(Kirk 2011)

The second half of the 2000s saw an important shift in the development of Miike's reputation in the West. In the wake of Tarantino and Roth's referential, and reverential, treatment of Miike and his cinema, the Japanese director's global reach grew as his films began to cross boundaries in their production, distribution, and reception. Although his current standing as an international cult auteur would not be fully realised until the release of *13 Assassins* in 2010 (discussed in detail in chapter five), his international visibility was first heightened—in both a discursive and a pragmatic sense—by three significant productions between 2005 and 2008.

Central to Miike's growing presence in the West has been the proliferation of a discourse of horror cinema, inflected by the genrification of his work in marketing and reception practices. In a two-and-a-half-year period, Miike would be approached by American television producers to contribute an episode in a horror movie anthology, and would see what is to date the only US remake of one of his films (his most overtly "horror" title) for the international market. In between these two releases, Miike would also continue to build a cross-cultural relationship with Tarantino by offering him a cameo role in his film, a transnational, co-produced Japanese Western genre movie intended for global audiences. Moving beyond

visual citation and shared casting, this instance of reciprocal reverence would embody Miike's increasing awareness of the capital associated with his own brand of cinema—and of his status as a cult auteur—in the international film market.

In 2005, Miike was invited by Showtime, a premium subscription cable television network in the US, to take part in a project entitled *Masters of Horror*. Cable networks such as Showtime (and its biggest competitor, HBO) occupy a particular sector within the landscape of American television, hospitable to recognised film auteurs in offering them a platform to exercise their filmmaking in the realm of television production. As Tony Kelso notes, these premium networks 'focus on risk and quality, "edgy" programming,' and 'content that sparks lively debate among journalists and academics alike' (2008: 54).⁷⁹ Alongside American horror auteurs such as Tobe Hooper, John Carpenter, and Joe Dante, Miike was selected to produce an hour-long film in the 13-episode series, created and executive produced by horror filmmaker Mick Garris. Originally planned to air in early 2006, Miike's entry, *Imprint*, was pulled from the schedule at the eleventh hour after Garris' preview of the piece left him in shock. 'It's definitely the most disturbing film I've ever seen,' he claims (Kehr 2006). Despite edits intended to tone down the troubling content, Showtime refused to air the film and it was only made available in the States on DVD later that year.

When he was approached for the *Masters of Horror* series, Miike's reputation in the West as a horror filmmaker had largely been shaped by the reception of a handful of releases, including *Audition*, *Ichi the Killer*, the surreal *Gozu*, and his segment of the portmanteau film, *Three... Extremes/Saam gang yi* (Takashi Miike, Park Chan-wook, Fruit Chan, 2004). Of these titles, it was the former two that

⁷⁹ For a more in-depth explanation of the specificities of premium subscription television networks, see Kelso's contribution to the edited volume *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era* (2008: 46–64).

predominantly established the perception of him as a horror director—an unusual discernment considering that neither *Audition* nor *Ichi the Killer* satisfy the expectations typical of the Western consumption of Asian horror cinema in the early 2000s. Whilst they are certainly imbued with horror genre elements and contain scenes horrific in nature, the two films do not adhere to the tropes or traditions of Asian horror that Western audiences had, rightfully or wrongfully, come to anticipate. The presence of the assumed key elements of contemporary horror from Asia—what *The Guardian's* Joe Queenan (2008) outlined as ‘water, hair, the trauma of secondary school, ghosts, and most especially creepy little girls’—is lacking in *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*. Nevertheless, they were partly marketed by Western distributors within the discursive frameworks established around the reception of Asian horror (and the J-horror and K-horror subgenres), and as such Miike has come to be understood by many Western within these paradigms.

The one title of Miike's that does in fact meet such expectations is his 2003 release *One Missed Call/Chakushin ari*. As Steven Rawle has recognised, the film shares many of the visual codes and narrative tropes typical of the Asian horror cycles popular amongst Western audiences around the turn of the century—an urban legend, a surprising denouement, vengeful apparitions, the abused child, and menacing technologies (2015: 98–101). Indeed, *One Missed Call* sits appositely alongside the seminal titles of the J-horror and K-horror booms, including Nakata's *Ring* and *Dark Water*, Shimizu's *Ju-on*, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse/Kairo* (2001) from Japan, and Ahn Byeong-ki's *Phone/Pon* (2002), Kim Jee-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters/Janghwa, Hongryeon* (2003), and the *Whispering Corridors* series⁸⁰ from

⁸⁰ The *Whispering Corridors* series began with *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyung, 1998), *Memento Mori* (Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong, 1999), and *Wishing Stairs* (Yun Jae-yeon, 2003). This trilogy gained some popularity in the West during the K-horror boom, and an additional two titles have since been added to the franchise—*Voice* (Equan Choi, 2005) and *A Blood Pledge* (Lee Jong-yong, 2009).

South Korea. Unlike most of these films, however, *One Missed Call* largely eluded the attention of critics and audiences in the West until it was remade by American producers for international release in 2008.

Belonging to the pantheon of Asian horror titles to receive a US remake, *One Missed Call* is precisely significant because its original release went mostly unnoticed in the West. In the UK, the film was not released on home video until *after* the American version hit theatres in the States. This can partly be attributed to the emergence of Miike's film near the end of the J-horror boom. Titles such as *Pulse*, *Dark Water*, and those of the *Ring* and *Ju-on* series had gained popularity amongst Western audiences on DVD a number of years after their original release in Japan. By the mid 2000s, the market for Asian horror had become saturated, with companies such as Tartan distributing a surplus of films of increasingly varying quality and, accordingly, acclaim. As more titles entered the market, the demand for such films declined. *One Missed Call* appeared at the tail end of this trend in Japanese production, and as such struggled to gain traction in the West in the way that its predecessors had.

Similarly, the overwhelmingly negative reception of the American version of Miike's film—which was also titled *One Missed Call* (Eric Valette, 2008)—marks the expiration of the Asian horror remake phenomenon, if not literally (as we shall see), at least commercially. An initially lucrative practice spearheaded by American producer Roy Lee⁸¹ with Gore Verbinski's hugely profitable *The Ring* (2002), the box

⁸¹ The Asian horror remake phenomenon can largely be accredited to Lee, who was involved in almost all of the US remakes produced in the 2000s. Lee was executive producer on *The Ring*, *The Ring Two*, *The Grudge*, *The Grudge 2*, and *The Eye*, and producer on *Dark Water*, *Shutter*, *The Echo*, and *The Uninvited*. He has built much of his career on other American remakes of Asian films, such as *Eight Below* (Frank Marshall, 2006), a remake of Koreyoshi Kurahara's *Antarctica* (1983); *The Lake House* (Alejandro Agresti, 2006), a remake of South Korean director Lee Hyun-seung's *Il Mare* (2000); Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006), a remake of Hong Kong thriller *Infernal Affairs*; *My Sassy Girl* (Yann Samuell, 2008), a remake of Kwak Jae-yong's 2001 film of the same name; and Spike Lee's 2013 remake of Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*.

office success of US remakes of horror films from Asia has all but vanished. With the absence of bankable stars and the growing familiarity with generic conventions, the more recent releases in this phenomenon have failed to capitalise on the popularity of the earlier cycle. Considered together, the *One Missed Call* films are thus highly important in understanding the shifting demands of Western audiences' consumption of Asian genre cinema since the turn of the century.

A Copy of a Copy of a Copy: *One Missed Call* and the Decline of the Asian Horror/Remake Boom

Miike's *One Missed Call* is an adaptation of Yasushi Akimoto's 2003 novel, *Chakushin Ari*. The film follows Yumi (played by Kō Shibasaki), a young university student who spends little time in class in favour of indulging in her busy social life. One evening, she and a group of friends exchange mobile phone numbers over dinner. Yumi's friend Yoko (Anna Nagata) receives a call, yet strangely she does not recognise the ring tone that accompanies it. Choosing not to answer, she later discovers that the mystery caller left a voicemail message, which, inexplicably, was delivered from her own phone number—dated the day after tomorrow. Listening to the message, Yoko is shocked to hear her own voice projected back to her, talking banally of a change in the weather and then suddenly emitting an agonising scream. As two days pass, Yoko and Yumi are chatting idly on the phone. "It's beginning to rain," Yoko says. Precipitously, an invisible force violently tosses her about like a ragdoll before heaving her fatally into the path of a passing train. The next day, Yumi overhears a group of students discussing an urban legend strikingly similar in its

detail to the events which led to her friend's death. She becomes increasingly concerned as two more of Yoko's acquaintances—who both also received calls from her phone following her demise—later die in extremely perturbing ways. Investigating the matter, Yumi comes across a man named Yamashita (Tsutsumi Shinichi), a police detective whose sister met her end in similar mysterious circumstances. Together, Yumi and Yamashita join forces to reveal the origins of the deadly curse, unravelling a tale involving a mother, her two daughters, a horrifying history of abuse, and a vengeful apparition.

One Missed Call performed well at the Japanese box office, earning \$16.2 million⁸² in takings on a budget of just \$1.7 million.⁸³ The film premiered at the Tokyo International Film Festival on 3rd November 2003 and was screened theatrically across Japan in January the following year. It was released on DVD in the States on Media Blasters' *Tokyo Shock* label in September 2005, yet it did not reach the UK until March 2008. Before the Contender Entertainment Group released the film on home video, the American remake had already hit theatres in the US in January earlier that year. Remarkably, the remake's UK theatrical run began just after Miike's original film became available on DVD in the region. These lapses in the release of Miike's *One Missed Call* saw distributors attempt to capitalise on varying contemporaneous trends in their promotional material. For instance, Media Blasters' marketing of Miike's film (which came before the US remake) drew attention to the Japanese director's previously successful "horror" titles, whilst Contender's campaign pitted the film against its American remake in asserting a level of originality worth attention (see figure 17).

⁸² *Chakushin ari* on *Box Office Mojo*: <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/intl/?page=&country=JP&id=fCHAKUSHINARI%28ONE01>>

⁸³ *One Missed Call* on *Toho Kingdom*: <http://www.tohokingdom.com/movies/one_missed_call.htm>



Figure 17 The US (left) and UK (right) DVD covers for Miike's *One Missed Call*.

The film's success led to two feature-length sequels and a spin-off television series, whilst establishing Shibasaki as one of the country's most popular young actresses.⁸⁴ The second entry in the series, *One Missed Call 2/Chakushin ari 2*, was directed by Renpei Tsukamoto and released in Japanese theatres in February 2005. Another profitable venture, the film garnered \$10 million at the box office on a \$3 million budget.⁸⁵ Following the popularity of the first two films, a ten-part series was produced for Asahi TV in late 2005, starring television personality Rei Kikukawa and

⁸⁴ Before *One Missed Call*, Shibasaki had roles in high-profile films by a number of key Japanese directors, including Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* and Tsuruta's horror film *Scarecrow* (2001). After collaborating with Miike, she went on to star in Japanese box office hits such as *Japan Sinks* (Shinji Higuchi, 2006) and *Dororo* (Akihito Shiota, 2007), and more recently appeared in the Keanu Reeves-starring Hollywood flop *47 Ronin* (Carl Rinsch, 2013). Shibasaki has since worked with Miike on one more occasion, as the leading female performer in the play-within-the-film of *Over Your Dead Body* (2014).

⁸⁵ *One Missed Call 2* on Toho Kingdom: <http://www.tohokingdom.com/movies/one_missed_call2.htm>

veteran actor Ken Ishiguro. The last entry in the trilogy, *One Missed Call Final/Chakushin ari final* (Manabu Asō, 2006), hit cinemas in Japan in June the following year.

The American version of *One Missed Call* was directed by French filmmaker Eric Valette, whose career in his domestic market began with comedy shorts and the critically acclaimed fantasy horror, *Maléfique* (2002). The screenplay for Valette's film was written by mystery novelist and screenwriter Andrew Klavan, based on Akimoto's source novel and Miwako Daira's screenplay for Miike's adaptation. Produced and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures, the film stars Shannyn Sossamon and Ed Burns as protagonists Beth Raymond and Detective Jack Andrews, comedian Margaret Cho as Detective Mickey Lee, and *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) star Ray Wise as Ted Summers, a television producer. News of an American remake of Miike's *One Missed Call* first appeared in Western media in 2005, with Warner Bros. officially confirming the project in early 2006. Popular themed news site *SciFi Japan* reported that it was shortly after the release of *One Missed Call 2* in Japanese cinemas that Kadokawa Pictures, the production company behind Miike's film and Tsukamoto's follow-up, announced they would be working with Warner Bros. on a US remake for the international market (Aiken 2007). Valette's version of *One Missed Call* was co-produced by Kadokawa, Equity Pictures, Intermedia, and Alcon Entertainment (a US-based production company sharing a long-term finance and international distribution deal with Warner Bros.).⁸⁶ Although initially planned for

⁸⁶ Prior to *One Missed Call*, together Alcon and Warner Bros. had already produced and distributed a string of remakes for the international market, including Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* (2002), a remake of Erik Skjoldbjærg's 1997 thriller of the same name; *Love Don't Cost a Thing* (Troy Beyern, 2003), a remake of the teen comedy *Can't Buy Me Love* (Steve Rash, 1987); *The Wicker Man* (Neil LaBute, 2006), a remake of Robin Hardy's 1973 original starring Nicholas Cage; and, whilst not officially recognised by the production companies as a remake, *P.S. I Love You* (Richard LaGravenese, 2007) bore striking similarities to the South Korean box office hit *The Letter* (Lee Jung-gook, 1997), on account of parallels between the Korean film and Cecilia Ahern's novel on which LaGravenese's movie is based.

release on 24th August 2007, the *One Missed Call* remake did not reach cinemas until early 2008, a move which made it one of *five* Asian horror remakes released that year. It opened in 2,440 cinemas across the US on 4th January 2008, earning \$5.2 million in its opening day and \$12.5 million in its opening weekend,⁸⁷ reaching number 5 at the North American box office.⁸⁸ The film, produced on a budget of \$20 million, went on to take \$26.9 million in the US, and, together with its takings internationally (including \$2.3 million in the UK), garnered \$45.8 million worldwide.⁸⁹

Valette's version of *One Missed Call* arrived at the point at which the Asian Horror remake trend was in serious decline. The unexpected commercial success of *The Ring* spawned a series of further remakes that attempted to capitalise on the dual popularity of the mostly Japanese originals and their reproduction for the international market, yet did so with increasingly poor results. Following Verbinski's film, Shimizu remade his own *Ju-on* as *The Grudge* (2004); Nakata directed a sequel to the remake of his original with *The Ring Two* (2005); Walter Salles remade Nakata's film with *Dark Water* (2005); Jim Sonzero remade Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film with *Pulse* (2006); Shimizu directed a sequel to his own remake with *The Grudge Two* (2006); David Moreau and Xavier Palud remade The Pang Brothers' film with *The Eye* (2008); Japanese horror director Masayuki Ochiai remade Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom's Thai film with *Shutter* (2008); Filipino director Yam Laranas remade his own film with *The Echo* (2008); New French Extremity director Alexandre Aja remade Kim Sung-ho's 2003 film *Into the Mirror* as

⁸⁷ *One Missed Call* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=onemissedcall.htm>>

⁸⁸ Weekend Box Office (January 4–6, 2008) on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/weekend/chart/?yr=2008&wknd=01&p=.htm>>

⁸⁹ *One Missed Call* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=onemissedcall.htm>>

Mirrors (2008); and The Guard Brothers remade Kim's *A Tale of Two Sisters* as *The Uninvited* (2009).⁹⁰

The extraordinary box office performance of *The Ring* was, for a short while, continued with the first few additional remakes of other J-horror titles. In particular, the presence of marketable stars such as Sarah Michelle Gellar and Naomi Watts saw *The Ring Two* and the pair of *The Grudge* entries make substantial returns in the first half of the 2000s. As the decade wore on, however, so too did the popularity of the remakes (see figure 18 opposite). Whilst Verbinski's *The Ring* garnered \$249.3 million worldwide in 2002, Salles' *Pulse* managed only \$29.9 million on its \$20 million budget four years later, and The Guard Brothers' more recent *The Uninvited* took just \$41.6 million in 2009—a figure that, whilst higher than that achieved by *Pulse*, still pales in comparison to *The Ring*.

Certainly, many critics at the time linked the *One Missed Call* remake to what was by then the very evident decrease in the demand for Asian horror in the West. The exposure to both the original Japanese films and their remakes had contributed to an air of familiarity that came to compromise the audience interest first established in the early 2000s with *Ring* and *The Ring*. In particular, *One Missed Call* presented ideas already introduced to Western audiences—the narrative structure of the *Ring* films, and *Phone*'s technology of choice, for instance—and as such lacked the appeal of the earlier releases in the cycle. Scott Tobias's (2008) scathing review for film site *A.V. Club* indeed saw *One Missed Call* as the breaking point of the Asian horror remake trend, paralleling Miike's original film and its reworking of *Ring*'s ideas

⁹⁰ To this list can be added *The Grudge 3* (Toby Wilkins, 2009), which was not a remake but a further entry in the American *The Grudge* series. It was released direct-to-video and screened on the SyFy channel in the UK. There is yet to appear another American remake of an Asian horror title, however there is still an ongoing trend of Hollywood remaking other genre films from Asia. Notable recent examples include Spike Lee's 2013 version of Park's seminal 2003 film of the same name, *Oldboy*, and Gareth Edwards' continuation of US reworkings of the *Gojira* franchise with *Godzilla* (2014).

with the US thriller *Cellular* (David R. Ellis, 2004) and its updating of the concept of Joel Schumacher's *Phone Booth* (2002). Tobias proposes that both *One Missed Call* and *Cellular* reconfigure the concepts explored in *Ring* and *Phone Booth* with modernised technology. Yet, he argues that the process of remaking Miike's film (which is itself a re-presentation of the formula set out by *Ring*) diminishes the value of Valette's film to an irreconcilable degree:

Instead of a videotape that presaged a person's death, it was now a cell-phone call placed by the spirit world, with the sound of the victim's panicked future voice coming through the receiver. *Ringu* was remade as *The Ring*, one of the few effective J-horror Americanizations, and now Hollywood has remade *One Missed Call* after running the J-horror craze into the ground [...] All of these factors conspire to put *One Missed Call* on the shortlist for least essential movie of the decade, a copy of a copy of a copy that's so worn down, it's about as fresh and vital as a fifth-generation dub of *The Star Wars Holiday Special*.

(Tobias 2008, emphasis in original)

In his reference to Steve Binder's ill-fated 1978 television film, *The Star Wars Holiday Special*,⁹¹ Tobias' rant reflects the malaise of the Asian horror remake trend brought about by the repetition of generic tropes, a repetition itself reverberated by the twofold familiarity of the original/remake exchange. Here, Tobias ridicules Valette's copy (his remake) of Miike's copy (his reworking of *Ring*) of the copy present in Nakata's film (the deadly VHS), describing it as being as relevant as a heavily re-recorded videotape of the highly sought-after failure in the *Star Wars* franchise. Extending his disdain for the American remake to Miike's original, Tobias suggests that the Japanese *One Missed Call* was a commercial endeavour clearly

⁹¹ Originally broadcast on American television in 1978, the musical special featured the cast of George's Lucas's original *Star Wars* (1977) and was so poorly received by both critics and fans that it has never been broadcast since. The limited access to the film, and its notorious reputation, has since garnered it a cult following. There has been a tendency amongst fans to share it via unofficial means (particularly on VHS during the pre-internet age), and it continues to hold a significant place in the cult discourse surrounding the *Star Wars* franchise.

inspired by the success of its predecessors. The film, he claims, is an unusually vacuous effort from the director. ‘Even in 2003,’ he writes, ‘*One Missed Call* seemed like an oddly conventional project for Miike—it was a conventional (though reasonably effective) *Ringu* knockoff that lacked the outré nuttiness that has always separated Miike from the J-horror pack’ (Tobias 2008).

Film	Box Office (North America)	Box Office (Worldwide)
<i>The Ring</i> (2002) ⁹²	\$129,128,133	\$249,348,933
<i>The Grudge</i> (2004) ⁹³	\$110,359,362	\$187,281,115
<i>The Ring Two</i> (2005) ⁹⁴	\$76,231,249	\$85,220,289
<i>Dark Water</i> (2005) ⁹⁵	\$25,473,352	\$49,483,352
<i>Pulse</i> (2006) ⁹⁶	\$20,264,436	\$29,907,685
<i>The Grudge 2</i> (2006) ⁹⁷	\$39,143,839	\$70,711,175
<i>One Missed Call</i> (2008) ⁹⁸	\$26,890,041	\$45,847,751
<i>The Eye</i> (2008) ⁹⁹	\$31,418,697	\$56,964,642
<i>Shutter</i> (2008) ¹⁰⁰	\$25,928,550	\$47,879,860
<i>Mirrors</i> (2008) ¹⁰¹	\$30,691,439	\$77,488,607
<i>The Uninvited</i> (2009) ¹⁰²	\$28,596,818	\$41,624,046

Figure 188 Table showing box office gross of US remakes of Asian horror films in the 2000s.

⁹² *The Ring* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ring.htm>>

⁹³ *The Grudge* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=grudge.htm>>

⁹⁴ *The Ring Two* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ring2.htm>>

⁹⁵ *Dark Water* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=darkwater.htm>>

⁹⁶ *Pulse* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=pulse.htm>>

⁹⁷ *The Grudge 2* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=grudge2.htm>>

⁹⁸ *One Missed Call* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=onemissedcall.htm>>

⁹⁹ *The Eye* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=eye07.htm>>

¹⁰⁰ *Shutter* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=shutter.htm>>

¹⁰¹ *Mirrors* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=mirrors.htm>>

¹⁰² *The Uninvited* on Box Office Mojo: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=uninvited.htm>>

Significantly, this judgement implicates Miike in the derivative nature of Valette's version of *One Missed Call*, demonstrating a disparagement of the original Japanese film uncommon in the reception of those that had come before it. Critical responses to the American remakes were, especially after *Dark Water*, generally negative, yet the Asian titles that inspired them tended to be considered favourably. Valette's *One Missed Call* was almost universally panned, with most reviewers deriding its imitative concept, the poor performances of the cast, and the director's failure to deliver the effective shocks expected for such a mainstream horror title. 'Try as it may to capture the original's success in Japan,' the *Chicago Tribune's* Scott Schueller exclaimed, *One Missed Call* 'ends up a remake better left unmade' (2008). The reception was so poor that the film features as the second worst-rated release of the 2000s on popular review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes, just behind the widely slated thriller *Ballistic: Ecks vs. Sever* (Wych Kaosayananda, 2002).¹⁰³

Many reviewers aimed further criticisms at the remake's Japanese counterpart. For *Slant Magazine*, Nick Schager (2008) derided what he saw as the derivative plot of Miike's film, proclaiming that it 'was second-rate techno-phobic J-horror tripe, meaning that Eric Valette's even lousier American remake is something like the next generation of suck.' In his review for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Richard James Havis lambasted Valette's film (the 'direction is uninspired, acting is lifeless, and the script borders on the inept,' he writes), whilst suggesting that Miike's talent is itself overhyped. 'Miike's films are overrated,' he claims, 'but at least they're peppered with black humor and outrageous doings' (Havis 2008). Furthermore, Steve Biodrowski's review on the *Cinefastique* site put forward the US version of *One Missed Call* as evidence that 'it's time to hang up on these Hollywood remakes

¹⁰³ "Rotten Tomatoes Worst of the Worst (2000–2009)" on *Listal*: <<http://www.listal.com/list/rotten-tomatoes-worst-worst>>

of Japanese horror films.’ By the time Miike made his original, Biodrowski argues, ‘the J-Horror formula was about as predictable as a 12-bar blues progression’ (2008). *One Missed Call* was, to be fair to these reviews, indeed a change in direction for Miike—it is arguably one of his most outwardly commercial works of the 2000s, and was certainly the most mainstream of the six films he directed in 2003.¹⁰⁴

The commercial nature of Miike’s *One Missed Call*, especially in relation to the director’s previous work, did not elude Western critics. In *Entertainment Weekly*, Owen Gleiberman lamented Miike’s entry into J-horror populism. ‘Takashi Miike has the most scandalous imagination of any Japanese director today,’ he wrote, ‘but anyone who thinks that the maker of the sick-joke nightmare *Audition* is too dangerous to go Hollywood should see *One Missed Call*, a thriller that demonstrates that he’s got the facility — and maybe even the desire — to do so.’ Yet, Gleiberman does go on to praise Miike for momentary glimpses of what he considers to be his usual directorial flair, echoing the responses to *Audition* proliferated half a decade earlier. *One Missed Call* is exceedingly ‘unoriginal,’ he argues, yet ‘Miike, for a while at least, stages it with a dread-soaked visual flair that allows you to enjoy being manipulated’ (Gleiberman 2005). *The Philadelphia Inquirer’s* Steven Rea further praised Miike’s approach to such a familiar concept, celebrating his modernisation of the ideas present in the *Ring* series. ‘Miike, whose work usually veers into more surreal, experimental terrain,’ he wrote, ‘uses creepy-crawly juxtaposition, grisly violence, and dark humor to create a nightmare scenario for the text-message generation’ (2008).

Nevertheless, the consensus was that Miike’s *One Missed Call* and its American counterpart marked the demise of the J-horror boom and the trend of US

¹⁰⁴ His other releases that year were *Gozu*, the gangster flick *The Man in White* and its sequel *The Man in White 2: Requiem for the Lion*, his straight-to-video crime film *Yakuza Demon*, and the hostage movie *The Negotiator*.

horror remakes, respectively. 'If one needed proof that the wellspring of creativity that once comprised the Japanese horror scene has run completely dry,' *IGN's* Mike Bracken posited, 'they need look no further than [Miike's] *One Missed Call*' (2005). Certainly, by then the production of the kind of J-horror films that had first gained interest in the West (such as the *Ring* series, the *Ju-on* titles, and *Dark Water*) had curtailed. The increasingly poor reception of the American remakes reflected this decline. Compounded by a decreasing Western interest in the Japanese originals, by the time Valette's *One Missed Call* hit theatres in 2008, many critics were foreseeing, and in some cases hoping for, the termination of the remake trend. 'Remember that period a few years ago where it seemed like every movie at the multiplex was a PG-13 remake of a Japanese horror flick,' asked one reviewer prior to the film's release. 'Well, if you thought that trend was over, you were wrong. DEAD WRONG' (Eric D. Snider 2008).

A "Master of Horror"? Miike's *Imprint* Leaves a Mark on America

The passion project of Mick Garris,¹⁰⁵ who has worked extensively in the horror genre throughout his career, Showtime's *Masters of Horror* was intended to showcase the filmmaking of thirteen contemporary horror directors in a newly commissioned series of hour-long episodes. Inviting both stalwarts of the genre

¹⁰⁵ Garris has directed entries in franchises with *Critters 2* (1988) and *Psycho IV: The Beginning* (1990), as well as episodes of television series such as Wes Craven's *Freddy's Nightmares* (1988–1990), cult favourite *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1886), and *Witches of East End* (2013–2014), an adaptation of Melissa de la Cruz's young-adult novels. He has also written screenplays for *The Fly II* (Chris Walas, 1989), the sequel to David Cronenberg's 1986 body-horror classic, and Kenny Ortega's camp live-action Disney film *Hocus Pocus* (1993), and has acted in Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), John Landis' comedy *The Stupids* (1996), and in the television mini-series adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1997).

(such as Carpenter, Hooper, and Dario Argento) and more contemporary filmmakers (like William Malone and Lucky McKee), the cable television network gave contributors free choice of material and supposedly offered them ‘freedom from corporate censorship’ in return for adhering to tight budgets and schedules (Kehr 2006). The show was billed by producers as an opportunity for audiences to indulge in the nightmarish work of some of contemporary horror cinema’s greatest directors, a promise that was also made by its distributors. ‘Experience terrifying visions from the greatest minds in the genre – these are the masters of horror!’ proclaimed Anchor Bay’s DVD releases of the series (*Masters of Horror: Season 1* 2007).

Imprint, Miike’s entry in the series, stars US actor Billy Drago as Christopher, an American journalist who travels across Japan in search of a past lover, Komono (played by Michie Itō), whom he promised to save from a life of prostitution and bring back to the States. Although the cast is almost entirely Japanese, all dialogue is spoken in English. In order to train the Japanese actors how to deliver their English lines, Miike worked closely with Nadia Venesse and Christian Storms, two Hollywood dialogue coaches.¹⁰⁶ Set in the 19th century, the story follows Christopher’s investigation on a small, remote island populated by working girls and their masters. One evening, he meets a girl with striking facial disfigurements who tells him that she knew Komono—she claims that his lover was the most popular prostitute on the island, driving the other workers to jealousy. She reveals how the jade ring of the

¹⁰⁶ Venesse is a dialect and accent coach who works mainly in Hollywood, coaching actors required to speak in an accent or language other than their own. She worked on Lasse Hallström’s *Chocolat* (2000), *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004), *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), and Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013). Based in Tokyo, Storms has worked as a director, producer, and actor, in addition to his role as a translator and dialogue coach. He has had bit parts in a number of Asian films, including as an extra in Miike’s *Sukiyaki Western Django* and *God’s Puzzle*, for which he also worked as a dialogue coach and a subtitler for the DVD release. Storms has also been a subtitler on a number of other Miike projects, including *Gozu*, *Ace Attorney*, *For Love’s Sake*, and *Shield of Straw*. Both Venesse and Storms worked closely with the cast of *Imprint* in training the Japanese actors how to deliver their English lines, and with Miike in directing the actors and crew. On *Imprint*, Storms was the screenplay translator and on-set interpreter, and Venesse was the dialect coach.

brothel's Madame once went missing, and that Komono was accused as the thief. The Madame and some of the other girls attempted to make Komono confess. They tortured her by restraining her with rope, burning her arms with hot incense sticks, and inserting needles under her fingernails and into her gums (in a moment reminiscent of *Audition's* finale). Komono's grief was so, the girl says, that she later hung herself in shame. Refusing to believe her tale, Christopher pleads with the girl to tell him the truth. Her re-telling of Komono's story, and the narrative of her own tormented life, reveals a series of alarming scenes of further torture, rape, abuse, abortion, and bodily deformity.

Miike's *Masters of Horror* episode was intended to air on cable television on 27th January 2006, yet it was pulled from schedule by Showtime at the last minute. Reports suggested that Garris and the executives at Showtime were simply shocked by *Imprint*, so much so that they believed it to be unsuitable for broadcast. Garris was certainly disturbed by Miike's film. 'I think it's amazing,' he told *The New York Times*, 'but it's even hard for me to watch' (Kehr 2006). After the news broke that *Imprint* would not be shown, Showtime removed all reference to the film on its website, refused to comment further on the matter, and replaced its broadcast slot with John McNaughton's *Haeckel's Tale* (2006), an adaptation of a short story by horror writer Clive Barker (Kehr 2006). Showtime's refusal to air *Imprint* was an important turning point in Miike's career, made all the more significant by its contextual specificity. Cable networks such as Showtime have a reputation for broadcasting challenging material to its paying customers, yet *Imprint* was banned as it was deemed unsuitable for such a market. Considered together, comments from both Executive Producer Garris and Miike indicate what appears to be an incompatibility between what the Japanese director believed to be acceptable for US

audiences and what a cable television network was actually prepared to show. Speaking of the preview stage, Garris explains that concerns were raised about the nature of *Imprint's* content, and that measures were taken to make the film suitable for broadcast:

[A]t the script stage we made comments about the aborted fetuses [...] We made it clear that we were going on American pay cable television, and even though there wasn't as much control over content, there still were concerns. And then when we got the first cut, it was very, very strong stuff, and we made some suggestions on what might help before we showed it to Showtime. The Japanese made the changes they were comfortable with, and eventually we arrived at a film that he was happy with and we're all happy with. But Showtime felt it was not something they were comfortable putting out on the airwaves.

—Mick Garris

(Kehr 2006)

Garris has stated that seven or eight minutes of footage was removed from the version first submitted to him by Miike's team, and that almost all of this content was from the scene in which Komono is tortured (Galluzo and Cucinotta 2008). Despite the efforts made to tone down the content flagged by Garris as potentially problematic, the final version of *Imprint* was rejected by Showtime. It was decided that the film would be more suitable for home video, free from the restrictions of television network policies, being released on DVD by Anchor Bay later in 2006. Garris claims that there was a feeling amongst producers that the film could not be appropriately edited for broadcast. 'It really was, "let's try and not hack this up" [...] Let's all just agree to release it in its complete form on the DVD,' he says, 'and hopefully its audience will be able to find it that way' (Kehr 2006). Speaking with Mark Schilling for *The Japan Times* a few months after it was pulled from broadcast, Miike corroborates this account. He humbly admits that he made somewhat of a misjudgement as to what was permissible on the network:

I like being free, but I don't want my freedom to make trouble for others. I thought that I was right up to the limit of what American television would tolerate. As I was making the film I kept checking to make sure that I wasn't going over the line, but I evidently misestimated. Business-wise, it would have been better to make cuts so the film could have been broadcast, but [the producers] thought the film was interesting as it was. They decided it would be better to screen it without cuts at film festivals and release it on DVD.
—Takashi Miike

(Schilling 2006)

Significantly, *Imprint* found a considerable cult following via its DVD release, facilitated by the controversy that surrounded it as the only banned episode of a horror television show proclaiming itself to be 'a ground-breaking, award-winning series that redefined terror' (*Masters of Horror: Season 1* 2007). Exploiting Miike's reputation in the West as a purveyor of violent and disturbing content, the marketing campaign worked to portray the director's film as too "extreme" for American television (see figure 19). Reflecting the tactics of the distributors involved in the Asia Extreme phenomenon, the promotion of the film emphasised its transgressive and shocking qualities. *Imprint* is 'a tale of extreme cruelty and perverse vengeance,' the DVD release claims, 'an unspeakable orgy of torment and depravity, where the lusts of the damned will inflict wounds that remain forever. This is IMPRINT' (*Masters of Horror: Imprint* 2006).

Certainly, the video release offered cult horror fans the opportunity to view a film that was deemed unacceptable for television broadcast, enticing the cultist desire to indulge in what is deemed impermissible by the perceived mainstream. In an interview with Garris for the horror site, *Icons of Fright*, Rob Galluzo recognises how *Imprint's* troubled distribution has garnered it a dedicated following. '[T]he thing I loved about it was it became the episode that you had to see,' he says. 'Exactly,' replies Garris (Galluzo and Cucinotta 2008). Yet, it is important not to overlook Showtime's own responsibility in cultivating this type of response. As a major



Figure 19 The US DVD cover (left) and promotional poster (right) for *Imprint*. Both label Miike as a "controversial" director, referencing *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*. The DVD cover draws attention to its withholding from broadcast, whereas the poster explains—visually—exactly why it was not shown.

television network invested in the project, there was much to gain from ensuring that *Imprint* was presented in such a way as to maximise its potential audience. In spite of its supposed inappropriateness for broadcast, the DVD release emphasised that it was available for the first time, uncut and unadulterated (again, see figure 19). 'Too strong for cable TV! The sales angle is brilliant! Fans of Miike and his extreme side will rejoice; *Imprint* IS twisted,' one reviewer posited cynically of Showtime's intentions (Rucka 2006).

The designation of Miike as a "master of horror"¹⁰⁷ alongside longstanding

¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting here that many of the directors drafted for the original series of *Masters of Horror* returned for the second series (broadcast between October 2006 and February 2007), however Miike was absent. Of the original directors, Hooper, Argento, Garris, Dante, Carpenter, John Landis, and Stuart Gordon produced a second film, yet Malone, McKee, Don Coscarelli, Larry Cohen, John McNaughton, and Miike did not. In the second series, the final episode was occupied by Norio

auteurs of the genre, such as Carpenter, Hooper, and Argento, is indicative of the lasting impact of the reception of *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer* on his reputation in the West. Particularly compared to a director such as Carpenter, who has helmed some of the most significant horror films in America cinema—including the seminal slasher flick *Halloween* (1978), his alien horror *The Thing* (1982), and the satirical sci-fi/horror *They Live* (1988)—Miike has a relative lack of experience within the genre, yet it forms one of the central structuring principles of the director's position within Western filmic discourse. In fact, Miike does not sit comfortably beside American horror auteurs such as Carpenter and Hooper, nor does he truly share Argento's position as a pioneer of a "foreign" subgenre of horror cinema, with his Italian *giallo* films, such as *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage/L'ucello dale piume di cristallo* (1970), *Deep Red/Profondo rosso* (1975), and *Suspria* (1977). Whilst Miike is known in the West as a horror filmmaker, of his 100 releases to date the genre is certainly not a prominent one. Indeed, even the director himself believes the association to be undeserved. 'Me, a 'Master of Horror'? I'm the guy that made *Salaryman Kintaro!*' Miike has exclaimed (Brown 2006a, emphasis in original).

Referring to his 1999 family film, in which an ex-member of a biker gang makes his way through a series of white-collar jobs to provide for his young son and leave his life of delinquency behind, Miike amusingly casts aside the moniker by pointing towards one of his more accessible and child-friendly works. Yet, Miike's dismissal of his recognition as a "master of horror" is more significant than the

Tsuruta, director of J-horror films *Ringu 0*, *Scarecrow*, and *Premonition* (2004). Tsuruta's short film for the series was called *Dream Cruise* (2007), based on the short story of the same name by Koji Suzuki, with Tsuruta and Naoya Takayama working together on the screenplay. The replacement of Miike with Tsuruta is, arguably, a more logical one. Whilst Miike may have a reputation in the West as a horror filmmaker, as we shall see this perception of him as such is erroneous. Tsuruta, on the other hand, directed some of the key films of the contemporary J-horror genre that blossomed in the 2000s, and continues to work in the horror genre with titles such as *Orochi – Blood* (2008), *P.O.V. – A Cursed Film* (2012), *Talk to the Dead* (2013), and *Z: Hatnaki kibou* (2014).

playfulness of his statement suggests. His unwillingness to be confined by generic conventions—he claims to have ‘a resistance towards being pigeonholed in one genre or category’ (Cook 2015)—is what ultimately shapes *Imprint*, making it an important film both within the *Masters of Horror* series and in the trajectory of Miike’s career internationally. Whilst he had demonstrated with *One Missed Call* that he could produce a film within the landscape of his domestic mainstream horror cinema, *Imprint* is a much crueller, more challenging, and problematic piece that positions its characters in the brothels of Meiji period Japan, yet avoids the Western expectations associated with his J-horror contemporaries. In fact, *Imprint* embodies less the inaccurate perception of Miike as a master of the horror genre (as one may expect, given the context of the production), and more his widespread reputation as a provocateur, as a purveyor of extreme cinematic violence. Rather than feeding into the contemporaneous Western stereotype of Japanese horror as a slow-burning site for ghoulish long-haired female ghosts and deadly cursed technology, *Imprint* further contributes to the director’s notoriety for pushing the boundaries of on-screen violence, in a historic Japanese setting.

Imprint eschews the modern milieu and technologically-centred narratives of modern J-horror in favour of a much older and traditional tale. For his entry in the *Masters of Horror* series, Miike took inspiration from Japan’s long history of storytelling, turning to an old-fashioned scary story set in the Japan of past, yet written by a contemporary author. The short story *Bokkee Kyotee* (which translates in the Okayama dialect as “Really Scary”) was penned in 1999 by Shimako Iwai,¹⁰⁸ a

¹⁰⁸ Iwai is, as William Leung (2009) has put it, somewhat of ‘a cultural celebrity’ in Japan. She began as a writer of *shojo shoosetsu* (young girl’s novels), expanding into novelisations of popular manga, short stories, adult fiction, essays, and newspaper columns, in addition to her work as an actor, producer, and guest or panellist on a number of popular tabloid and talk shows. Her outspoken attitude towards sex has gained her a popular following, and she uses the Japanese media as a platform for discussing a wide range of feminine issues.

female writer and influential figure in contemporary Japanese pop culture. Iwai's story won her the Japan's Horror Writers' Association Grand Prize in 1999, and the Yamamoto Award for Outstanding Writing the following year. Before *Imprint*, the author's horror fiction had previously been dramatised for both television and the cinema. The mini-series, *Fantasma: Noroi no yakata* (2004), was based on a number of her short stories (with Iwai acting as consulting producer), and her most famous novel, *Jiyuu Renai*, was adapted by Masato Harada into *Bluestockings/Jiyū ren'ai* (2005), which was a hit at the Japanese box office. Iwai has claimed that she had always wanted Miike to direct a screen version of *Bokkee Kyotee* ("Imprinting" 2006). Miike's selection of the source material appears to be driven by what he believes to be the universal tradition of telling scary stories, yet his explanation reveals a peculiarly Japanese context:

Japanese horror movies are now being remade by Hollywood—and those are the ones that have a strong image [abroad]. But all countries have their scary stories, not just Japan. Grandpa and grandpa tell stories like that to their grandkids at bedtime. That's the kind of film I wanted to make—like a bedtime story. So the setting is "long, long ago"—about 100 years ago. I imagined a kid asking his grandmother in the next *futon* to tell him a story. But the grandmother wants to go to sleep, so she tells the kid a scary story to shut him up. (laughs).

—Takashi Miike

(Schilling 2006, emphasis in original)

Here, Miike's acknowledgment of the American remake trend leads him to suggest that the Western tendency to correlate Japanese cinema with horror is to some extent unwarranted. All countries, he argues, have their scary stories. In this sense, his choice of *Bokkee Kyotee* as the inspiration for his cinematic scary story can be considered an attempt to shun Western audiences' expectations of Japanese horror film—those stereotypes present in the reception of titles such as *Ring* and *Ju-on*. He

further distances himself from the J-horror phenomenon by proposing that the story is in fact less engendered by horror tropes, and more by Japanese folklore traditions. 'It's a story that could have been told before the horror genre existed,' he says, 'it's more like a *kaidan*—a traditional scary story' (Schilling 2006, emphasis in original).

In locating the story within a specific Japanese context, Miike is further rejecting the designation of him as a “master of horror.” *Kaidan*, a Japanese word consisting of two *kanji* (logographic Chinese characters)—“kai,” meaning “strange, mysterious, rare, or bewitching apparition” and “dan,” denoting “talk” or “recited narrative”—is a form of storytelling that has existed since the earliest beginnings of Japanese literature. In its broadest sense, *kaidan* means “to narrate the strange” (Reider 2000: 266). The term is often erroneously employed in Western culture to describe Japanese horror stories in general, and most commonly to refer to films, animation, or literature that feature ghosts or monsters. English translations often produce an inaccurate correlation between *kaidan* and horror. For instance, as Zack Davisson (2010) has noted, the American version of the popular anime, *Gakkō no Kaidan* (2000), became known as *Ghosts at School* or *Ghost Stories*, both of which lack the historical and cultural nuances of the term.

Kaidan are, in fact, not fundamentally intended to be scary or horrific at all. Noriko T. Reider explains that *kaidan* ‘need not evoke fear in the minds of the audience,’ but rather may embrace tales of weird encounters or peculiar events (2000: 266). Owing to their immense popularity in the Edo period in particular, the use of the term *kaidan* in modern Japan tends to ignite associations with the past, with historic tales of ghosts, apparitions, and strange goings-on. Miike’s alignment with *kaidan* in *Imprint* must thus be understood within this narrative tradition. For an American television series intended to showcase the work of the greatest horror

filmmakers alive today, Miike's entry returns to the roots of a longstanding Japanese form of storytelling that, in essence, has nothing to do with horror as it is known in the West.

In spite of this, the horror paradigm has formed one of the central frameworks within which Miike has been understood in Western filmic discourse. Yet, this is not entirely surprising. With his protean approach to genre posing difficulties for distributors in promoting his films to specific demographics, the categorisation of the director by means of horror (or, as we have seen with *Audition* in chapter two, with reference to the "extreme"), has allowed for a narrower focus of marketability. Particularly during the height of J-horror's popularity in the West, the discursive positioning of Miike within horror genre traditions enabled distributors to exploit a growing and lucrative market. *Audition* was presented as a shocking "discovery" at festivals, in theatres, and on home video, and the explicit violence of *Ichi the Killer*, which saw the film face substantial cuts across the world, appeared to cement his standing as a provocative horror maestro. Whilst the responses to these films played a key role in garnering Miike the opportunity to contribute to the *Masters of Horror* series, the association is, he feels, undue:

Among horror fans overseas, films like *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer* have caused me to be misunderstood as someone who makes "horror-like" films. So I guess they [Showtime] thought: "Let's get the guy who made *Audition*."

—Takashi Miike

(“Imprinting” 2006, emphasis added)

Throughout his career, Miike has been vocal about what he sees as the misconception of his work in the West; a dualistic association with horror and the extreme. ‘In Europe and America,’ he says, ‘my work is limited on the abnormal side of the pendulum, extremely. I have made films that are not so abnormal’ (Major

2004). Here, Miike argues that the perception of him as a director of transgressive cinema is mistaken, alluding to the selective approach taken by distributors with labels such as *Asia Extreme* and *Tokyo Shock*. Indeed, a survey of the availability of Miike's films in the West paints a picture of the director predominantly as a purveyor of sex and violence. Alongside *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*, one may be led to believe that Miike operates exclusively within the realms of brash and violent gangster movies (*Shinjuku Triad Society*, *Dead or Alive*, and 2001's *Agitator/Araburu tamashii-tachi*, to name a few) and taboo-breaking perversion (*Visitor Q* and *Gozu*). At the height of Tartan's mining of the director's oeuvre, much of his less transgressive work was left behind. His contemplative piece of magic realism, *The Bird People in China*, and the commercial pop-group vehicle, *Andromedia*, are yet to receive a UK home video release, whilst his satirical comedy on the state of Japan's economy, *Shangri-la*, has to date never seen an English-subtitled DVD release, and neither has his prison drama *The Guys from Paradise/Tengoku kara kita otoko-tachi* (2000).

Furthermore, the assumption that Miike works mainly within the horror genre is, to put it clearly, simply untrue. Even if one were to place *Audition*, *Ichi the Killer*, and *Gozu* beside *One Missed Call* as "true" horror films, they still constitute only a fraction of Miike's total output, thus negating the perception of him as a predominantly horror director. Moreover, if one were to focus on the percentage of output alone, one would be more persuasive in putting him forward as mainly a producer of *yakuza* fare à la Kinji Fukasaku, or just as easily present him as a director of family-friendly movies, as evidenced by *Salaryman Kintaro/Sarariiman Kintarō*, the *Zeburaman/Zeburāman* (2004) superhero movie and its 2010 sequel, special effects blockbusters *The Great Yokai War/Yōkai daisensō* (2005) and

Yatterman/Yattāman (2009), and the child-friendly *Ninja Kids!!!/Nintama Rantarō* (2011); comedies, such as *Peanuts/Rakkasei Piinattsu* (1996), *Shangri-la*, and *The Mole Song: Undercover Agent Reiji / Mogura no uta – sennyū sōsakan: Reiji* (2013); manga adaptations, like the *Crows Zero/Kurōzu zeri* titles (2007, 2009), *As the Gods Will/Kamisama no iu tori* (2014), and *Terra Formars* (2016); or even musicals, as with *Andromedia*, *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, and *For Love's Sake/Ai to makoto* (2012), as one could do with horror.

The fluidity of Miike's approach to genre has certainly been an issue for distributors who have a vested interest in ensuring that their releases reach specific audiences. His willingness to work across a multitude of genres—from film to film, and, on a number of occasions, *within* a single film—has no doubt contributed to an often erroneous genrification of his cinema in Western regions. As an examination of the reception of *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*, and of *Imprint* and *One Missed Call*, has demonstrated, the two principal ways in which Miike's films are marketed is through frameworks of horror and of the “extreme”—or, in many cases, through a combination of these concepts. As a director, he displays an acute awareness of the artificiality of genre as a discursive practice, rejecting its function as a motivation in his filmmaking. Genre is ‘really the role of the people who watch the movie, the distribution companies, or people trying to sell the movie, right?’ he postulates (Nastasi 2015). Significantly, after the heralding of him as a “master of horror” in 2006, Miike would go on to direct a project the following year that would see him hybridise two seemingly disparate and culturally specific genres, in his part-Western, part-samurai movie—his first major international co-production produced in the English language, *Sukiyaki Western Django*.

East Meets West Meets East: *Sukiyaki Western Django* and Reciprocal Reverence

I want to make a film that will make audiences think 'Japanese are cool!'
—Takashi Miike

(Gray 2006)

Part influenced by the violent Spaghetti Western sub-genre, and part re-telling of the Genpei Wars of feudal era Japan, Miike's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (hereafter *Sukiyaki*) embodies the director's increased consciousness of the global reach of his films, emerging in the latter half of the 2000s. It marks a significant turning point in the filmmaker's career in further opening up his cinema to audiences across the world. *Sukiyaki* is a transnational collaboration that was intended for both local and international distribution. It involved major Japanese companies such as Toei and Sedic International, and distributors like First Look Studios from America and France's Celluloid Dreams. Speaking to Jason Gray of *Screen Daily* during the film's production, Miike was clear in his ambition for the release to lead audiences outside of Japan to consider its people "cool."

The context of the *Sukiyaki*—its production, distribution, and reception—reveal the international intentions of Miike's stated goal. Firstly, the film is, of course, a Western; a genre that has historically emanated from Western regions and the very fabric of which is inextricably linked to American history. Secondly, the cast of *Sukiyaki*, who are almost exclusively Japanese, speak English for the entire duration of the film, thus increasing its potential appeal in English-speaking regions. Finally, the film contains a cameo from a particularly prominent, and marketable, American star director. As one reporter commented, the film is notable for its inclusion of 'an appearance by Quentin f%&king Tarantino' (Brown 2006b).

Sukiyaki is a pertinent example of the filmic and cultural exchange between Japan and America, between East and West. Although set during the battles between the Genji and Heike clans of 12th century Japan, *Sukiyaki* was, prior to its release, presented in European and American filmic discourse ‘as Japan’s first true western’ (Gray 2006). The designation of Miike’s movie as the country’s inaugural “true” Western alludes to an extensive history between Japanese and Western filmmakers working within, and with reference to, the genre—a flow between East and West that is marked by an exchange of influence. The most notable example of this phenomenon is the work of Akira Kurosawa and the Western genre films that informed, and were subsequently inspired by, his cinema. The Westerns of Ford and Hawks, the American proponents of the genre, were a major influence on key Kurosawa releases of the 1950s and ‘60s, namely *Seven Samurai/Shichinin no samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo/Yōjinbō* (1961), and *Sanjuro/Tsubaki Sanjūrō* (1962). In these films, Kurosawa applied the established tropes and traditions of the Western to his Japanese subjects, absorbing the American genre’s iconography, narrative structure, and themes into the historical realm of the *jidaigeki*. In turn, Kurosawa’s work was famously remade in Hollywood, and his Western-inflected samurai films went on to become the progenitor of an entire European sub-genre.

John Sturges’ *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) was a direct remake of *Seven Samurai*, replacing the latter’s band of *ronin* (masterless samurai) with a ragtag group of gunmen. Kurosawa’s narrative and character models mapped suitably onto the conventions of the American genre. As William V. Costanzo has noted, ‘[t]he samurai hero, with his personal code of honor and swift sword, has fascinated Japanese audiences since the early days of cinema much as the Western film hero has captured and sustained popular interest both in the United States and abroad’

(2014: 45). A few years later, Kurosawa's films figured centrally in the development of the Spaghetti Western, a violent sub-genre from Italy led by the work of Sergio Leone. *Yojimbo* was adapted by Leone into *A Fistful of Dollars/Per un pugno di dollari* (1964), the first in his "Man with No Name" trilogy starring Clint Eastwood. In *Yojimbo*, Toshirō Mifune plays a *ronin* who happens upon a town placed in danger by the warring leaders of opposing factions. Seeking protection from one another, the two crime lords solicit the masterless samurai as a bodyguard (a *yojimbō*), yet the nameless *ronin* cunningly pits the rival families against one another, putting an end to their bitter dispute. *A Fistful of Dollars* re-presents this narrative, replacing Mifune with Eastwood, swords with guns, and feudal Japan with the wild West. As Howard Hughes (2006: 3) has suggested, Leone's film 'retained all the major characters intact, adapting them to a 'westernised' (as in 'wild west') version of the Japanese prototypes.' In essence, *A Fistful of Dollars* took the *jidaigeki* traditions of *Yojimbo* and channelled them through the tropes developed by Ford and Hawks—producing a violent contemporary Western that was a reimagining of a Japanese samurai movie that was, in turn, influenced by the American genre's forebearers.

Four decades later, Miike's *Sukiyaki* further contributes to this exchange between East and West. The nonsensical title itself draws attention to this cross-cultural history, eliciting the Spaghetti Western (or, as it is commonly referred to in Japan, the "Macaroni Western") and the titular character of Sergio Corbucci's seminal 1966 film, *Django*, whilst signalling nationality by means of the Japanese hot pot dish. *Sukiyaki*'s title demonstrates Miike's self-aware approach in foregrounding the genres (and their accompanying cultural histories) with which his film engages. This is additionally reinforced in the film's narrative. Current Miike regular, Hideaki Itō, plays a nameless gunslinger in Nevada (although Mount Fuji can inexplicably be

seen on the horizon) who finds himself in a war-torn town plundered by two rival gangs. Guarding an innocent family caught in the middle, the unnamed hero plays the sparring factions against one another in a bid to save a young boy, Heihachi (Ruka Uchida). At the end of the film, the boy is saved and he makes his way to Italy where it is revealed he becomes known by another name—Django.

If we can consider Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* to be a Japanese take on the Ford and Hawks Westerns, *A Fistful of Dollars* to be an Italian adaptation of the samurai film *Yojimbo*, and *The Magnificent Seven* to be a direct American remake of *Seven Samurai*, then *Sukiyaki* is a further multifaceted example of the genre's cross-cultural influence. A riotous and at times confusing affair, *Sukiyaki* is, to refer to Rawle's (2011: 91) analysis of the film, a complex instance of 'transnational exchange' (see figure 20). Miike's film incorporates elements from both the samurai and Western genres (from Kurosawa and the films that inspired him), makes references to the Italian Spaghetti Westerns and a host of American movies—including *Rambo: First Blood Part Two* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) and Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film *The Godfather*—crosses and comingles geographical



Figure 20 *The transnational aesthetics of Sukiyaki Western Django, with Mount Fuji seen in the distance in the hot Nevada desert.*

spaces (Nevada's Mount Fuji), and collapses language barriers (he has his Japanese cast speak English). As Rawle suitably suggests, 'Sukiyaki is probably the best analogy [...] for a film that has one pot, and everything in it' (2011: 91). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the uncommon situation of a Japanese filmmaker producing a contemporary Western figured centrally in promotional and critical discourse surrounding the release. Questions were raised as to Miike's motivations for helming such a film. For instance, in First Look Pictures' official production notes for *Sukiyaki*, an interviewer asks the director: 'You're more of a "dragon generation" rather than a "macaroni western generation," aren't you?' Miike responds:

Yes. There weren't many macaroni westerns in the theaters when I was growing up but they used to broadcast two to three of them every week on television... I can't tell you how many times they aired ONE SILVER DOLLAR.¹⁰⁹ My mother used to tell me to go to bed, but I usually stayed up and watched them with my parents. My father loved macaroni westerns and he used to buy me toy guns and pistols [...] So the macaroni western was certainly very familiar to me. But having worked in the movie industry for a long time, I never thought that I would be making something like this as a Japanese film.
—Takashi Miike

(“Takashi Miike's...” 2008)

As Miike has suggested throughout his career, his filmmaking inspirations can most often be traced back to the movies he watched in his youth—'[a]bove all, my cinematic influences stem from my childhood,' he says (Sato and Mes 2001). Miike's contribution to the Western genre can here be considered an overt manifestation of his personal filmic interests, displaying a layering of textual composition and consumption marked by an evolving process of cross-cultural exchange. The director recalls his childhood experiences of watching Westerns, of seeing them on television

¹⁰⁹ Here, Miike draws attention to Giorgio Ferroni's (directing under the name Calvin Jackson Padget) *One Silver Dollar* (1965), the title music to which was used by Tarantino for his World War II film *Inglourious Basterds* in 2009.

with his parents in Japan. In particular, the iconography of the American genre appears to have left an impression on Miike. The generic elements that were present in his real life (the toy guns) have been returned to the screen in his Japanese version of the Western:

When I was a kid, I used to imagine myself growing up to be a wandering gunman. I don't remember the specific stories but I was impressed with such things as the cool posture of the gunman, the intensity right before the shoot-out, and the dramatic effect of the music that starts after someone falls to the ground. Those kinds of things were imprinted on my mind. And I thought that anything a child can create in his imagination, surely a movie can bring to life.
—Takashi Miike

(“Takashi Miike’s...” 2008)

Whilst other Asian filmmakers made Westerns closely preceding and following *Sukiyaki*—most notably *Tears of the Black Tiger/Fah talai jone* (Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000) from Thailand, South Korean Kim Jee-woon’s *The Good, the Bad, the Weird/Joheunnom nabbeunnom isanghannom* (2008), and *Postcards from the Zoo/Kebun binatang* (Edwin, 2012) from Indonesia—Japan’s shared history with the Western genre places the film within an especially significant context of influence. Miike’s directing of a Western picture continues a longstanding cinematic relationship between Japan and America, and the arrival of the film at a particular moment in Miike’s career reveals his shifting position in the international market. ‘To make a film like this,’ says Masao Owaki,¹¹⁰ one of *Sukiyaki*’s producers, ‘has long been a dream for Miike [...] His father was a huge fan of spaghetti westerns and he always wanted to make his own, so now it is his turn’ (“Tarantino set for...” 2006). Again, the director’s personal experiences figure centrally here in his realisation of the project.

¹¹⁰ Owaki co-produced *Sukiyaki* alongside Nobuyuki Tohya. Whilst Owaki’s only credit as a producer goes to *Sukiyaki*, Tohya has worked with directors such as Mamoru Oshii, on his live-action film *Avalon* (2001), and Shin Togashi, on *Oshin* (2013), as well as alongside Miike again as Executive Producer for 2014’s *Over Your Dead Body*.

Yet, in Owaki and Miike's comments lies an underlying assumption that such a production (a Japanese-made Western) had not previously been feasible, as if there has to date existed an incompatibility between the Western genre and the Japanese context of production.

Indeed, it was *Imprint* that played a key role in leading to the conceptualisation and production of *Sukiyaki*. The invitation for Miike to contribute an episode to Showtime's *Masters of Horror* series demonstrated that major American production companies were growing confident in the appeal of his films in the Western market. Aided not least by the controversy surrounding its removal from broadcast, the popularity of *Imprint* on DVD in the States further substantiated this. Additionally, Miike's decision to have his cast speak English throughout the film demonstrated that he was capable of directing in a language other than his own, a matter which made *Sukiyaki* all the more conceivable for both Miike and his producers. 'If I hadn't made IMPRINT,' Miike claims, 'I don't think I would have come up with this idea of a sukiyaki western. Maybe not even the idea of making a western at all.' Alluding to the potential international reach of *Sukiyaki*, the director goes on to suggest that it would not have been possible to realistically propose a Japanese Western to his production company if he had not already had experience working in the US market. 'I wouldn't have been able to pitch it,' he says, but for '[t]he fact that an American producer said "Yes" to IMPRINT encouraged me' ("Takashi Miike's..." 2008). Here, Miike's implication is that the approval of *Imprint* by an American company validated his project, in a commercial sense, for Japanese producers.

Central to the potential global reach of *Sukiyaki* is the issue of language. What is remarkable about the film, and what in many ways sets it apart from the preceding history of exchange between Japanese cinema and American/European Westerns,

is its casting of Japanese actors speaking English for its entire running time. *Screen Daily* reported that the use of an English-speaking Japanese cast was ‘perhaps a first in the Japanese film world’ (Gray 2006),¹¹¹ and much was made in the Western media of the involvement of Hollywood dialect coaches. For *Sukiyaki*, Miike once again drafted Venesse and Storms, who had both previously worked with the director on the production of *Imprint*. The lead actors, including Itō, Kaori Momoi, Yūsuke Iseya, and Masanobu Andō, underwent a month-long intensive training course with Venesse to enable them to learn and deliver their lines, which were translated into English from the Japanese script by Storms (“Takashi Miike’s...” 2008).

As a number of the Japanese cast members speak little to no English, the result is a somewhat unpredictable, yet fascinatingly multidimensional, cross-cultural linguistic exercise. Scattered with colloquial phrases and popular culture quotations, the idiomatic dialogue is largely spoken in a profoundly accented manner, emphasising that this is a distinctly Japanese production global in its influences. Lines such as “Smells like victory,” “We win this time,” and “Let’s not go playing at no yojimbo,” patently draw attention to the international reach of the film’s sources—Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the second *Rambo* film, and Kurosawa’s samurai classic, respectively—whilst retaining the culturally-inflected dialects of the native Japanese speakers. Miike’s decision to have his cast speak English purposefully foregrounds the inherent transnationality of a Japanese Western, in that it deliberately centres the cultural flow of genres through an exploitation of nation. As Jane Stadler succinctly puts it, ‘*Sukiyaki* intentionally speaks the global language of genre cinema with a distinctively Japanese accent’ (2010: 686, emphasis in original).

¹¹¹ Another similar example of an Asian cast speaking English is the earlier *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005), in which the Chinese female leads play Japanese geishas, delivering their lines in English. Song Hwee Lim has considered the film in his exploration of notions of transnationality, noting how the situation of ‘Chinese actresses passing as Japanese geishas re-ignites the nationalistic flame within both China and Japan’ (2007: 40).

A further globalising element of *Sukiyaki*, and one that points towards Miike's current standing as an international cult auteur (discussed in chapter five), is the cameo performance by Tarantino. The appearance of the American director in the film embodies the transnationality of its production, whilst mobilising its international reach. As Olivia Khoo has recognised, the distribution of *Sukiyaki* is distinct from the Western-inflected Japanese films that preceded it, in its targeting of both domestic and international film festival audiences (2013: 85). As outlined in chapter three, Tarantino's standing as a transnational gatekeeper auteur facilitates this objective of global dissemination. Here, the Tarantino brand functions—both in name and in physical, on-screen form—as a means of amplifying *Sukiyaki*'s international visibility. Much like Miike's own appearance in Roth's *Hostel*, Tarantino's cameo contributes to an opening up of *Sukiyaki*'s audiences, on an international scale.¹¹²

In *Sukiyaki*, Tarantino plays an elderly gunman named Piringo (figure 21). In the opening scene, he delivers a monologue outlining the story that is to develop over the course of the film's narrative. With the accompaniment of comic book sounds, crudely painted backdrops, and fluorescent sprays of blood, Piringo can be seen shooting a bird out of the sky—he catches the snake that the fallen animal had trapped in its talons, guts it with a knife to remove an egg, and, moments later, guns down a number of human opponents. Later in the film, when it is revealed that Ruriko (Momoi) is in fact the famous gunslinger known as Bloody Benten, we learn that she was trained by the legendary Piringo. Following a violent gun battle, Ruriko sends her servant, Toshiro, to meet the old man to retrieve some weapons from him.

¹¹² Over five years after starring in Miike's *Sukiyaki*, Tarantino made his own Western. Continuing the sequence of intertextuality, Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained* offered a further entry into the "Django" saga, introducing elements of the blaxploitation genre into his treatment of the Spaghetti Western. On the day of the world premiere of *Django Unchained*, an interview with Miike published by *movieScope* magazine touched upon this relationship. The interviewer noted how Tarantino had claimed that *Sukiyaki* was an influence on his new film, and Miike's response was typically humble: it 'probably has no relation to my own, but I'm looking forward to seeing it' ("Insider's POV..." 2012).

During a conversation between the two, Piringo imparts to Toshiro his history with Benten, revealing that he is in fact the father of her son, Akira.

Prior to *Sukiyaki*'s release, a number of news outlets in the West reported that Tarantino's performance in the film was delivered as some sort of favour for the Japanese director. 'By taking the role,' BBC News stated, Tarantino 'is paying back Miike for his appearance in the horror film *Hostel*, which Tarantino produced' ("Tarantino set for..." 2006). Julian Ryall, a journalist for *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The Telegraph*, further supported this, writing that Miike 'talked close friend Quentin Tarantino into appearing in the English-language movie [...] after Miike made a guest appearance in the Tarantino-produced horror movie "Hostel"' (2006). The following year, the film site *SlashFilm* also drew attention to the two filmmakers' relationship, explaining that 'Tarantino is a friend of Japanese Director Takashi Miike, whom he asked to perform a cameo in Eli Roth's *Hostel*,' and that '[a]s a result of doing so, Tarantino performed in the opening action sequence of Miike's *Django*' (Sciretta 2007, emphasis in original).



Figure 21 Quentin Tarantino's Piringo fires off in *Sukiyaki* Western *Django*.

This discourse institutes a particular dialogue between the two cult auteurs that builds significantly upon the cross-cult connections discussed in chapter three, a display of reciprocal reverence that sees Miike exhibit his admiration for Tarantino. Following *Kill Bill's* homage to *Ichi the Killer* and Miike's appearance in *Hostel*, Tarantino's cameo in *Sukiyaki* is a further act of veneration that crosses cultural, geographical, historical, and linguistic borders. It operates within a long-established exchange between Japanese and American (and European) cinema, and between Eastern and Western film culture. Piringo's opening monologue is delivered in the sparse Nevada landscape, as Mount Fuji overlooks him and the English-speaking Japanese cast. This takes place in a transnational co-production intended for an international audience, a film that is indebted equally to the Western and samurai genres, and their shared history of influence. Tarantino's cameo in Miike's film evokes the latter's appearance in an American movie which was itself inspired by the Japanese director's cinema, bringing the exchange of influence full circle.

If one applies the same logic to Miike's casting of Tarantino in *Sukiyaki* as has been done to Roth's casting of Miike in *Hostel*, it becomes evident that this cameo is a similar display of admiration. 'He's a guy who doesn't play by Hollywood rules,' Miike says of Tarantino, 'so I thought he'd suit this film. I was in his "Hostel" too' (Brown 2006c). Here, Miike identifies Tarantino as a particular *kind* of filmmaker (or, more accurately, defines him by what he is *not*), appealing to his status as a cinephile, a fanboy, a rebel, a provocateur. He affiliates himself with Tarantino's reputation by asserting this recognition as the reason for his decision to include the director in his own work—the suggestion from Miike here is that his film shares a kinship with those of Tarantino's. In positioning him as a challenger to Hollywood, Miike further points towards Tarantino's cult credentials as a director who rejects the

conventions and expectations of mainstream American filmmaking. The reciprocal flow between East and West performed by Miike and Tarantino is intimated in the former's acknowledgment of his appearance in a film produced by the latter. This exchange of performance is an integral part of this cross-cultural phenomenon, and so too is the public declaration the directors' respect for one another (see figure 22).

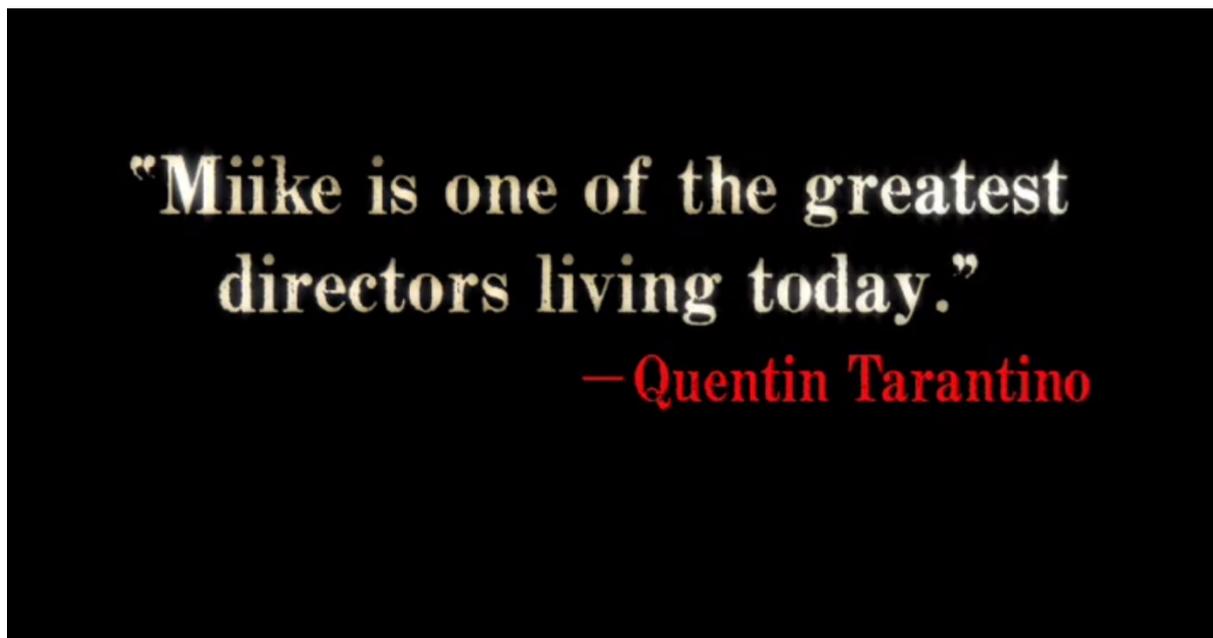


Figure 22 A display of respect in First Look Pictures' trailer for Sukiyaki Western Django, as the Tarantino brand meets the Miike brand.

Conclusion

The period of 2005 to 2008 saw the initial phase in the internationalisation of Miike's filmmaking, with his first forays into co-production with Western producers and his experimentation with English-language projects. Central to Miike securing these opportunities had been the discursive positioning of him in the West as a horror director. By the time of the release of *One Missed Call*, the American remake of

Miike's original 2003 movie, Miike's reputation as a horror filmmaker had been well established. The commercial and critical failure of the remake—one of five US versions of Asian horror films to be released that year—marked the sharp decline of the popularity of J-horror in the West. Emerging near the end of this wave of Japanese horror movies, Miike's *One Missed Call* was largely ignored by Western critics and audiences. For those who were aware of it, the film's re-treading of the themes and tropes introduced by the extraordinary success of *Ring*, *Ju-on*, and their US remakes was proof enough of the genre's increasing irrelevance. Yet, *One Missed Call's* apparent failings did not detract from the perception of Miike as a horror filmmaker previously established by the reception of *Audition* and *Ichii the Killer*. This in turn led to the director's involvement in the *Masters of Horror* series, which saw him placed alongside American auteurs of the genre. Although *Imprint* was withheld from broadcast for its seemingly unacceptable content, Miike's *kaidan*-inspired film gained popularity on DVD and helped build cult interest in the show.

The following year, *Sukiyaki* marked the point at which Miike first significantly demonstrated an understanding of the global reach of his releases. A transnational co-production intended for international distribution, the film brings to the fore the interconnectedness of the trading of influence evident in the Western genre—between Japan and America (and later Europe), between film culture in the East and in the West. As the director himself illuminates, such a project may not have been viable if he had not previously had the experience of working within an American context on *Masters of Horror*. That Miike held off on approaching domestic production companies with his ideas until after *Imprint* is revealing of the capital he attached to the validation of American producers, and the importance of this perceived value in the potential international appeal of the director's brand. Miike's

decisions with *Sukiyaki*—having his Japanese cast speak English, and affording Tarantino a role in an act of reciprocal reverence—reveal his intentions in exercising this global scope.

Since *Sukiyaki*, Miike's releases have been increasingly produced for, and distributed within, the international film market. The frameworks within which he is positioned in audience, critical, and promotional discourse have accordingly evolved to reflect these changing contexts—today, he is considered less a provocative, marginal horror filmmaker, and more an international cult auteur of art-house fare. Central to this transition has been his presence at international film festivals. As global sites of activity, film festivals have heightened the visibility, and availability,¹¹³ of Miike's releases, whilst securing his position as an influential figure in the contemporary global film market. With the high-profile release of *13 Assassins* in 2010, Miike's status as an international cult auteur became fully realised—across spheres of production, distribution, and reception, Miike's cinema has now become truly international in its scope.

¹¹³ Compared to the period prior to *Sukiyaki*, a higher percentage of Miike's films have been distributed officially since its release. In the period between *Audition*'s release in 1999 to *Sukiyaki*'s in 2007, a total of eleven of Miike's films still elude official English-subtitled releases, compared to the two from *Sukiyaki* to 2015's *Yakuza Apocalypse*.

Chapter Five — Internationalisation (Part II)

Enter the Art-House: Takashi Miike, the International Cult Auteur

Since the beginning of the last year [2001], I started attending film festivals overseas. I did not talk much with the people there, but as I looked at them, I asked myself, 'Why am I here?'

—Takashi Miike

(Axmaker 2015)

'Takashi Miike's rise is complete'—so goes the opening line to Mark Schilling's (2010) review in *The Japan Times* of the director's 2010 samurai film *13 Assassins*. Though somewhat dramatic, Schilling's announcement in fact bears more than a kernel of truth in its recognition of the consummation of Miike's reputation as an international cult auteur. Speaking to Sean Axmaker eight years earlier at the 2002 Seattle International Film Festival, Miike's feelings of his then-position within the festival scene were clear. He felt out of place. He says that, whilst observing his fellow filmmakers at the event, he could not align himself with their apparent motivations. 'They are so enthusiastic, they have dreams, and they are very passionate about what they do. I'm completely different from them' (Axmaker 2015). Although two of his films screened at the Seattle festival that year—*Happiness of the Katakuris* and his *yakuza* epic *Agitator*—Miike claims that his main drive for attending was the city's connection to his childhood idol, Bruce Lee. He made a pilgrimage to Lee's grave, and even took the opportunity to indulge in his love of baseball, watching a game with the Seattle Mariners' star player Ichiro Suzuki.

Today, Miike and his films can regularly be found at the most prestigious festivals across the world—the Venice International Film Festival, the Cannes Film Festival, the Berlin International Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film

Festival all habitually play host to the director and his cinema. The ascendance of which Schilling speaks above is the moment at which Miike's releases began to fully occupy such international spaces. Whilst a handful of the director's films had previously been screened at festivals worldwide—most notably *Gozu* between 2003–2004, *Big Bang Love*, *Juvenile A/46-okunen no koi* (2006) between 2006–2008, and *Sukiyaki* between 2007–2008—it was the reception of *13 Assassins* at the end of the decade that enacted a remarkable shift in the critical perception of his cinema. The film, it would appear, marked the completion of Miike's transition from provocative figurehead of Asia Extreme to revered international auteur, signalling his move onto the global film festival stage.

Indeed, *13 Assassins* was framed by both distributors and critics as a new direction for the filmmaker. The big-budget *jidaigeki* samurai film, in which a team of thirteen *ronin* join forces to spectacularly overthrow a ruthless lord terrorising his people, seemed to manifest an extraordinary change in Miike's production. Appearing to shake off his reputation as a purveyor of extreme violence and perverse sexuality, *13 Assassins* was considered a move into more "respectable" art-house fare. Reviewers mentioned Miike in the same breath as the great Akira Kurosawa, with many positing a continuation of the legendary filmmaker's legacy. The action sequences were not gratuitous, explicit, and unnecessary, but rather dramatic, beautiful, and a vital component of the film's searing drama. Promotional material made appeals to the long history of the *chambara* (swordplay) film in Japan, and the genre's seminal texts and iconography. Furthermore, the impression one garners of responses to *13 Assassins* is that, instead of quickly and carelessly pumping out violent gangster flicks and disturbing horror movies, Miike was now taking his time to carefully craft thoughtful, artistic, and masterful pieces of essential

cinema. Yet, as we shall see, this discourse of change is not *entirely* accurate or justified; it has been, however, central to the director's recent transition into the international art-house arena.

Building on the transnational aspects of his work in the second half of the 2000s (discussed in chapter four), this supposed shift in Miike's filmmaking has demonstrably carved out a rather different position for the director within the international film market, and within the festival scene specifically. Considered as constituting what Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong (2011: 1) terms 'vital nodes for global film industries, businesses, institution, and information,' festivals are an integral part of film culture, and as such play a central role in shaping a filmmaker's reception. The ways in which Miike's releases are discussed and presented at these events—the reviews, audience reactions, and promotional material that orbit around his films' appearances at festivals—since *13 Assassins* has ushered in new critical and spectatorial perspectives on the director's cinema. Similarly, Miike's presence on the festival circuit, and his negotiation of its requisite public sphere, demonstrates a heightened awareness of the market for his films, expanding on the consciousness displayed in the production and promotion of *Sukiyaki*. Furthermore, the impact of *13 Assassins* on the *kind* of festivals that Miike's releases occupy has been significant in framing the director's current position within Western film culture.

Auteur Transformation: From Extreme to Art Cinema, Before *13 Assassins*

Schilling's review of *13 Assassins* encapsulates the multifaceted nature of the broadcast of Miike's transition in Western filmic discourse. Written following its world

premiere at the Venice festival on 9th September 2010, Schilling's article is a pertinent illustration of the intertwining contextual spheres within which the director's supposed conversion was seen to be taking place. This transformation appeared to involve a change in both Miike's production and, concomitantly, his reception:

This one-time director of cheapo shock pics—which he churned out like sausages and were beloved by foreign Asian Extreme fans—is now a proven hit-maker and recognized auteur, with his new samurai swashbuckler [*13 Assassins*]. The Miike of old, who trashed formula, while indulging the wilder, naughtier side of his imagination, is still alive and well [...]. But there is also a more mature, legacy-conscious Miike present in [*13 Assassins*]. No longer satisfied with just being the coolest kid in the class, he is matching himself against the Golden Age greats of the samurai genre.

(Schilling 2000)

Central to this discourse of transformation has been a discursive positioning of the “old” Miike vis-à-vis the “new” Miike. The “old” Miike points towards the director's status discussed in chapters two and three, a reputation marked predominantly by notions of the extreme and the horror genre. Tied into this is, as Schilling draws attention to, the industrial conditions of the director's earlier work. The low budgets, speed, and fecundity that defined the first half of his career characterise this “old” Miike. Conversely, the presentation of the “new” Miike eschews such associations in favour of a seemingly more refined approach to cinema, a new reputation shaped by issues of artistic integrity and Japanese genre history. Central to the “new” Miike is an engagement with more traditional art-house material, supposedly leaving behind the extreme and shocking content that previously typified his filmmaking. Running through these two oppositional perspectives has been an acknowledgment of the director's seemingly newfound awareness of his international reception. It would appear that, in tandem with a change in the kind of films he is producing, Miike is consciously attempting to shape how they are received internationally.

Whilst many critics adopt this binary approach to Miike's more recent work, some have challenged it as either a misunderstanding of changes in production, or simply as downright erroneous. Tom Mes, for instance, puts forward the argument that it is less the case that it is Miike's filmmaking approach that is changing, and more that the projects he is offered (and are demanded of him) have shifted. Discussing two recent films of Miike's, 2014's *Over Your Dead Body/Kuime* (an adaptation of an old Japanese ghost story) and 2015's *Yakuza Apocalypse* (a gangster-vampire genre hybrid), Mes notes how many media sources came to 'herald the return of the "old Miike," Japanese cinema's bloodthirsty bad boy.' Yet, he argues that 'there is no such thing as a return of the old Miike, since he never went away in the first place' (Mes 2014b). Certainly, Mes' case is made with good reason. If one were to focus solely on Miike's releases following *13 Assassins*, it would at first appear that the director has left behind the type of "extreme" content that came to define his early cinema. Family-friendly comedy *Ninja Kids!!!*, videogame adaptation *Ace Attorney*, and high school musical *For Love's Sake* all have little to offer in terms of the explicit violence of earlier efforts such as *Dead or Alive* or *Ichi the Killer*. However, by the time the news of *Over Your Dead Body* and *Yakuza Apocalypse* was announced, Miike's gory *Lesson of the Evil/Aku no kyōten* (2012) had already shown that he was willing to once again take on more violent material.

Of course, the question remains as to exactly how characteristic extreme content really *is* of Miike's earlier cinema. As discussed in chapter three, the discursive positioning of Miike in relation to the horror genre was based not on a true representation of trends in his production, but of distributors' commercial desire to capitalise on a lucrative association with wider horror traditions. Similarly, the discourse of the extreme that has circulated around key releases such as *Audition*

and *Ichi the Killer* has unfairly situated the director by means of the violent or sexually explicit content of some of his films, a matter that Tartan's selective acquisition of Miike's work under the *Asia Extreme* banner compounded. In this sense, one can agree with Mes' assertion that the "old" Miike never really went away. If we take the "old" Miike to be the critical construction of the director as the frontrunner of the *Asia Extreme* phenomenon (undoubtedly the most common perception of Miike up until the release of *13 Assassins*), then we can argue that this "old" Miike was never truly representative of the filmmaker's oeuvre in the first place. Rather than assuming that the arrival of a "new" Miike is at the expense of the mistakenly established "old" Miike on account of changes in production (the belief that Miike is no longer making the kind of "extreme" films that have so far defined him), one must consider exactly why this new debate has arisen. As Mes points out, it is not Miike himself that has changed, as '[i]t's mostly the industry around him and the material it prefers to churn out that did the changing for him' (2014b).

In order to examine the validity and impact of this discursive positioning, it is essential that one considers Miike's presence at film festivals before the high-profile release of *13 Assassins*. It would be erroneous to locate the film as the ultimate point at which this "new" Miike (and the perceptions, assumptions, and associations of which it is constituted) came into existence in discourse. The reception of *13 Assassins* can more effectively be understood as the culmination of a series of shifting releases of, and responses to, the director's films internationally following the turn of the century. Since *Audition* first introduced Western audiences to Miike's work on a wide scale, the director's films have progressively occupied more far-reaching spheres. Aided by his increased presence in the global market (ushered in by key titles such as *Imprint* and *Sukiyaki*), Miike's visibility at the largest and most critically

influential international film festivals has grown over the years. In fact, throughout his career Miike has often found success at festivals—what is so significant about the post-*13 Assassins* landscape, however, is the *regularity* with which this success occurs. Thus far, the narrative of the momentum building towards this present situation has largely been absent from critical writing on Miike, yet it is essential that it is mapped if the director's current international reputation is to be fully understood.

The changing nature of the festivals at which Miike's films appear forms a vital part of his reception. As Wong (2011: 16) notes, 'festivals as an annual system demarcate trends and visibility, the shift of gaze that reshapes our reading of "cinema" over time.' Accordingly, the specificities of each festival at which Miike's films are shown imbue them with associated capital. The hierarchical structure of festivals around the world is such that there exists a regulatory body, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF), that passes certain events for accreditation. To date, FIAPF have accredited¹¹⁴ just 12 competitive feature film festivals other than the triumvirate of Cannes, Venice, and Berlin; whilst the organisation offers only accreditation, not ranking, these festivals are generally referred to as the "A" festivals (Wong 2011: 16). With international juries of noted industry members awarding prizes to the films entered into competition, these events offer the value of prestige to the directors, stars, and producers who attend. The festivals that remain unaccredited, and are thus regarded as belonging to a lower rank on the circuit, tend to be events with thematic programmes centred around certain genres or types of films. Such festivals typically draw smaller crowds than their "A" rank counterparts, owing in large part to their more specialised programming and lower levels of funding. The classification of festivals by FIAPF is

¹¹⁴ See FIAPF's site for details on accredited festivals: <http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals_sites.asp>

significant in influencing the prestige attached to each event depending upon its position within the hierarchy. As Wong contests, '[t]he ranking of film festivals dictates the added prestige each film receives through different festivals and awards' (2011: 16).

The first of Miike's films to be screened officially outside of Japan was in 1997, with his violent manga adaptation, *Fudoh*, which also happened to be the first of his releases to be shown at any international film festival worldwide. As discussed in chapter one, *Fudoh* was originally intended as a V-Cinema straight-to-video release, yet the producer's interest in the film led to a limited theatrical run in Japanese theatres. This, in turn, saw the film screened at festivals overseas, owing largely to the increasing Western interest in emerging contemporary Japanese directors. It was shown primarily at themed events, such as the Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival, Fantasia (where Miike has recently received a Lifetime Achievement award), and Fantasporto, garnering it a lively fan following, with its excessive violence and transgressive sexuality aligning comfortably with the traditions of such festivals. *Fudoh* can be considered the precursor to the significant impact of *Audition's* release just three years later. The hype surrounding *Fudoh* contributed to the development of a discourse of the extreme, and its presence at fantastic film festivals facilitated a burgeoning cult following, which the release of Miike's 1999 film would build upon immensely.

Yet, before the breakthrough of *Audition*, the release of another key title in Miike's oeuvre signalled the potential appeal of the director's cinema on the international stage, foreshadowing his ability to occupy both specialised and more mainstream festivals. 1998's *The Bird People in China* (hereafter *Bird People*) saw the director receive wide praise outside the domestic market from not only audiences

(as was largely the case with *Fudoh*), but festival programmers and critics also. Like *Audition*, *Bird People* received its foreign premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival in September 1998; its two screenings proved so popular with attendees that a third showing was added (Anderson 1999). Whilst not the first of his films to be screened at Vancouver, or even the sole release of his to be seen at the festival that year,¹¹⁵ the overwhelmingly positive reaction to *Bird People* marked the first time the director had been the subject of wide critical praise. Up until that point, Miike's work had largely been ignored at film festivals other than Vancouver, despite *Bird People* being his 11th directorial effort since his debut theatrical release, *Shinjuku Triad Society*, and his 24th feature-length film overall.

Bird People's popularity amongst critics (especially compared to the handful of Miike's films that had previously been seen at festivals) can largely be attributed to its deviation from the extreme paradigm first set out by *Fudoh's* reception. The film is a contemplative piece of magic realism predominantly shot in the picturesque landscape of the Yunnan province of China. Sublimely photographed by Hideo Yamamoto and adopting a mostly gentle tone throughout, *Bird People* certainly lacks the gritty violence of *Fudoh* and *Shinjuku Triad Society*. As Felicia Chan has noted, for Miike the film 'marks a change in style – quiet, whimsical and nostalgic for the loss of a simpler era' (2011: 211). Certainly, the critical lauding of *Bird People* at Vancouver eclipsed that of his other two titles appearing there. When Miike himself introduced the final screening, he told the audience, 'I may not look like a compassionate person, but I am very grateful' (Anderson 1999).¹¹⁶ Even at this early

¹¹⁵ *Shinjuku Triad Society* was shown at the festival in 1997, and the *yakuza* pictures *Rainy Dog* (1997) and *Blues Harp* (1998) were also seen there in 1998.

¹¹⁶ Significantly, *Bird People* also piqued the interest of Wayne Wang and Francis Ford Coppola, who invited Miike to direct a film as part of their six-title "Chrome Dragon" project (a joint venture between Wang and Coppola's indie studio, American Zoetrope), which was abandoned following just one

stage of his reception in the West, it appeared that the director possessed an awareness of spectatorial perceptions of him, demonstrating the sense of humour that continues to characterise his public persona today.

Following its popular appearance at Vancouver, *Bird People* became Miike's most widely screened film at festivals up to that point, receiving a number of awards. It was screened at the BFI London Film Festival in November 1998; at the Hawaii International Film Festival the same month, where it received the "Audience Award" for "Best Narrative Feature"; at the Mainichi Film Concours in Japan in February 1999, where lead Masahiro Motoki won the "Best Actor" award; at the Kerala International Film Festival in India in April 1999, where it was nominated for the "Golden Crow Pheasant"; at the San Francisco International Film Festival and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival in May 1999; at the Melbourne International Film Festival in July 1999; at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in November 1999; and at the Nikkan Film Sports Awards in Japan in December 1999, where Motoki once again received a prize for "Best Actor." *Bird People* continued to be selected at festivals a few years after its initial screening at Vancouver, reaching Turkey at the Istanbul Film Festival in April 2001, Germany at the Cologne Cineasia Film Festival in September 2002, and France at the Deauville Asian Film Festival in March 2004.¹¹⁷

Whilst *Bird People* certainly increased Miike's global presence, the first indication of the director's potential to inhabit the echelon of "A" festivals would not come until 2003. Almost seven years after *Fudoh* introduced a small number of

release, Sherwood Hu's *Lanai-Loa* (1998). For more information on the project, see here: <http://variety.com/1998/film/news/coppola-revives-zoetrope-1117478601/> and here: <http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/takashi-miike/>

¹¹⁷ This is not an exhaustive list of *Bird People*'s festival appearances, but an outline of its most notable screenings and awards.

Western audiences to Miike's cinema (and whilst *Bird People* was still being retrospectively programmed at events around the world), another of his films intended for straight-to-video release made it to international festivals. One of six projects he completed that year, Miike's *Gozu* was originally produced for the V-Cinema market,¹¹⁸ yet even before it reached video stores in Japan it was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the 46th Cannes festival—the most prestigious festival in the world—in May that year. A sidebar that runs parallel to the main festival, the Director's Fortnight is programmed by the French Director's Guild. It was established in response to the events of France's May 1968 civil unrest, a period in which protests by young workers and students, involving directors François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, led to the closure of the '68 edition of the Cannes festival. Programming films out of competition, the Directors' Fortnight tends to be, as Wong notes, more open to lesser-known filmmakers, 'with new talents doing innovative works, while the competitions tend to favour established auteurs' (2011: 24). Directors such as Theo Angelopoulos, Werner Herzog, and Youssef Chahine all had films screened at the event before they became established and recognised as auteurs in competition.

Gozu's appearance at the Director's Fortnight was a significant turning point in Miike's reception, marking as it does the moment he was first accepted into the highest rank of festivals. Unlike *Fudoh*, which had the weight of domestic theatrical release behind it, *Gozu* was selected before it had even been released in Japan—an illustration of programmers' confidence in the director's cinema as viable festival fare. Moreover, its inclusion in the Director's Fortnight, rather than in competition,

¹¹⁸ Speaking of *Gozu's* popularity at the time, Mes claimed that '[i]f anyone still had doubts about the merits of V-cinema, they could safely abandon them' (2003). Remarkably, Miike says that he completed production on the film in just 15 days, intending for it to go straight-to-video as he thought it was 'not a suitable film to come out in theatres' ("Gozu Press Conference..." 2003).

presented Miike as an up-and-coming auteur. As was the case with directors like Angelopoulos and Herzog, the inclusion in the sidebar event prefigured the development of Miike's international auteur status, offering a platform from which the recognition of him as such grew. Certainly, *Gozu's* appearance at the Directors' Fortnight facilitated the critical lauding that he would later receive for *13 Assassins*. After receiving its world premiere at Cannes, the film went on to be screened at, amongst many other events, Toronto, Rotterdam, and Spain's Sitges Film Festival, all of which are accredited by FIAPF as non-competitive feature film festivals. *Gozu* also won Miike a number of awards, including a "Special Prize of the Jury" at Sitges, and two prizes at the Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival in Switzerland, namely the "Mad Movies Award" for the "Best Asian Movie," and a "Special Mention" in the "Best Feature Category."

Whilst *Bird People* was celebrated for its beauty, artistry, and restraint, the reception of *Gozu* at events such as Cannes, Toronto, and Rotterdam to a large extent harked back to the discourse that was generated surrounding *Audition's* release just three years earlier. Many reviews referred to one of the film's most notorious moments—the climactic scene in which Shō Aikawa's fully grown male character is reborn via a woman's vagina—and drew attention to further depictions of perverse sexuality and surreal imagery. For instance, in his coverage of the Cannes festival on the independent media site, *IndieWire*, Stephen Garrett described how such scenes were enjoyed by particular audience members, underscoring the alternative reputation of the Directors' Fortnight:

Better known as the more unruly and eclectic venue for Cannes moviegoing, Directors' Fortnight did not disappoint this year, guaranteeing trouble with its inclusion of the anarchically provocative Takashi Miike and his latest film, "Gozu." [...] A mishagoss [*sic*] of recycled themes and ideas from his more

recent movies — including lactating older women, bizarre inn-takers, wild hipster mafiosos, and the most surreal sex act cum childbearing scene ever committed to film, “Gozu” riveted its very particular hardcore audience with equal measures shock and delight.

(2003)

Gozu's release also marked the first time the director had undergone a press tour in the United States (Epstein 2004). Whilst he had previously attended festival screenings of his films, his involvement had been minimal (he spent his time watching baseball during his trip to Seattle and only briefly introduced *Bird People* at Vancouver), and his visibility was largely limited to the events themselves. In 2003, however, he travelled across America to promote *Gozu*, an activity he would continue in a greater capacity as his films began to feature more regularly at festivals. Yet, by the time of *Gozu*'s release, Miike still appeared to be somewhat bemused by the popularity of his work amongst Western audiences, and in particular by the attraction displayed towards what is considered to be his more transgressive work. 'It's very interesting to me that the movies selected by European and American film festivals and critics always seem to be my most violent ones,' he says. 'But if people think I just make one violent movie after another that's OK, because I really enjoy making movies' (Rose 2003).

In the years following *Gozu*'s selection for the Directors' Fortnight, the presence of Miike's films at festivals continued to grow. As Marijke de Valck notes, recurring appearances can allow films and their directors to 'rise to a higher level of cultural status in the festival network and improve their chances of distribution and exhibition in the circuits of art houses and commercial theatres' (2007: 38). Within this line, a few key releases of Miike's gained the director an increased visibility as an auteur, leading him towards the international position ultimately solidified by the reception of *13 Assassins*. On 11th February 2006, the director's homoerotic prison

drama, *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A* (hereafter *Big Bang Love*), received its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival as part of its “Panorama” collection. According to the festival organisers, the “Panorama” programme ‘provides insight on new directions in art house cinema. Traditionally, Auteur Films – movies with an individual signature – form the heart of the programme.’¹¹⁹ Again, the film went on to appear at the international festivals in Hong Kong and Toronto, with screenings at other events including Vancouver, the London Film Festival, and the New York Asian Film Festival. *Big Bang Love* screened widely across the globe, reaching festivals in locations as far afield as Estonia, Morocco, Argentina, Finland, and Greece. Miike’s *Sukiyaki* also appeared at events around the world, including screenings in Canada, Brazil, Serbia, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Philippines. Signalling the shift that would be fully realised with the release of *13 Assassins*, *Sukiyaki* was particularly important for its selection at the 2007 Venice festival to compete for the Golden Lion, the event’s most prestigious award. Headed by revered Chinese director, Zhang Yimou, the jury awarded the prize to Ang Lee for his critically acclaimed erotic thriller, *Lust, Caution/Se, jie* (2007); nevertheless, Miike’s film’s contention for the top accolade was, as we shall see, by no means insignificant.

By the end of the 2000s, Miike’s presence at international film festivals had grown exponentially. Following *Fudoh*’s release in 1997, films such as *Bird People*, *Gozu*, and *Big Bang Love* had increasingly earned the director critical praise at some of the most prestigious festivals in the West, and high-profile releases like *Audition* and *Sukiyaki* had made his films remarkably popular with global audiences. Between 2010 and 2011, *13 Assassins* would go on to screen at ten festivals in North America alone, at the London Film Festival in the UK, and at some of the most highly-

¹¹⁹ More information can be found at the Berlin International Film Festival’s website here: <https://www.berlinale.de/en/das_festival/sektionen_sonderveranstaltungen/panorama/index.html>

attended festivals across Europe and Asia, marking his move into the upper echelons of the international film festival circuit.

Screening Samurai: The International Reception of *13 Assassins*

13 Assassins received its world premiere in September 2010 at the 67th Venice festival,¹²⁰ again selected for competition for the prestigious Golden Lion. The film's reception at the event was an important turning point in Miike's career, building upon the reputation he had developed throughout the 2000s at festivals across the West and his concomitant rise through the circuit's ranks. The critical praise *13 Assassins* received at Venice solidified the director's acceptance into the art-house arena, whilst further establishing his status as an auteur. Although Miike's samurai film lost out to Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* (2010) for the top prize, it received a special mention as part of the "Future Film Festival Digital Award."

Significantly, head of the jury that year was none other than Miike's fellow international cult auteur, Quentin Tarantino. The American director led a panel including Guillermo Arriaga (past collaborator with Alejandro González Iñárritu), composer Danny Elfman, Lithuanian actress Ingeborga Dapkūnaitė, and directors Gabriele Salvatores, Luca Guadagnino, and Arnaud Desplechin. Further interweaving the cross-cult connections between Miike and Tarantino (discussed in chapters three and four), some reviewers drew comparisons between the two in their assessment of *13 Assassins*. Tookey's review for *The Daily Mail* was entitled "Swords at the ready for Japan's Tarantino," with the critic proposing that the film's

¹²⁰ Another of Miike's films, his 2010 Shō Aikawa-starring superhero sequel *Zebroman 2: Attack on Zebra City*, was also screened out of competition.

climax is 'the kind of bloodbath you would expect from Tarantino.' Tookey's verdict on the film was that it is '[v]iolent but classy' (2011b).

Continuing what would be a long run at festivals around the world, *13 Assassins* next appeared at the 2010 Toronto festival on 14 September, receiving its North American premiere. Miike's samurai film was screened at the event as part of the "Masters" section, as opposed to the "Midnight Madness" programme, where up until that point his films had predominantly appeared.¹²¹ Whereas 2010's "Midnight Madness" bill saw late-night screenings of *Saw* director James Wan's horror, *Insidious* (2010), the American superhero black comedy, *Super* (James Gunn, 2010), and the vampire/zombie movie, *Stake Land* (Jim Mickle, 2010), Miike was placed alongside revered directors, appearing on a programme shared by Ken Loach, Jean-Luc Godard, Jia Zhang-ke, Catherine Breillat, Manoel de Oliveira, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.¹²²

Later that month, *13 Assassins* went on general theatrical release in Japan and continued its festival run for the rest of 2010. The reception of the film was further shaped by its positioning within the events at which it appeared; as has happened to Miike's releases throughout his career, *13 Assassins* was presented within a variety of frameworks, ranging from genre to nationality. It screened as the closing film of the Fantastic Fest in Texas, as part of the "Dragons and Tigers" programme at Vancouver, as part of the "A Window on Asian Cinema" collection at the Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea, in the "Film on the Square" collection at the London Film Festival, and under the "World Cinema" category at the

¹²¹ *The City of Lost Souls* was screened as part of "Midnight Madness" in 2000, *Ichii the Killer* in 2001, *Gozu* in 2003, *Zebraman* in 2004, *The Great Yokai War* in 2005, and *Sukiyaki* in 2007.

¹²² Screened alongside *13 Assassins* was Ken Loach's *Route Irish* (2010), Jean-Luc Godard's *Film Socialisme* (2010), Jia Zhang-ke's *I Wish I Knew* (2010), Catherine Breillat's *The Sleeping Beauty* (2010), Manoel de Oliveira's *The Strange Case of Angelica* (2010), and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010).

American Film Institute Fest in California. Appearing at both FIAPF-accredited and non-accredited festivals, at both fantastic and more auteur-centred events, at festivals at the high and the low end of the circuit's ranks, the film demonstrates how, despite suggestions within critical discourse, one may argue that the "old" Miike and the "new" Miike continue to co-exist.

Another notable screening of *13 Assassins* came on 30th March 2011, at the 13th Wisconsin Film Festival. Held by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Arts Institute, the annual event is the largest campus-based film festival in the US. The 2011 edition drew an attendance of almost 36,000, screening 209 films over five days in eight theatres across the University's campus and the State capital, Madison ("The Thirteenth Annual..." 2011, "Wisconsin Film Festival..." 2013). The film chosen to open the festival was *13 Assassins*. It was introduced by Julie Underwood, Dean of the School of Education and an Arts Institute dean, to an opening-night audience of over 700 people ("2010–11 Annual Report" 2011). In a report of the screening for Madison's *The Capital Times*, Rob Thomas questioned whether Miike's violent film was suitable as a festival opener. 'Bloody and richly entertaining, "13 Assassins" seemed like an odd choice to kick off the Wisconsin Film Festival,' he wrote, musing that 'it's probably a bad omen to have the very first scene you show at your film festival be that of someone committing ritual hara-kiri, right?' (2011). However, as Thomas goes on to explain, the festival director, Meg Hamel, said she chose *13 Assassins* to demonstrate the diversity of the festival in showcasing different kinds of releases, in addition to the title's neat reflection of the event's 13th year.

The selection of *13 Assassins* to open the Wisconsin festival, and the reactions to it at the event, is indicative of the significance of the film in solidifying Miike's reputation as an international auteur. Moreover, it illustrates the increasingly

important role played by film festivals in shaping the trajectory of the director's career. As discussed, the duality of the "old" and "new" Miike has become a regular feature in critical responses to the filmmaker's more recent titles—with some critics heralding films such as *Lesson of Evil* and *As the Gods Will* as a return to the "old" Miike, whilst *The Lion Standing in the Wind/Kaze ni tatsu raion* (2015) is presented as the work of the "new" austere Miike—and *13 Assassins* most certainly elicited this response in both audiences and critics. Thomas reported that the film's climactic battle caused a few early walkouts on the opening night at Wisconsin, yet said that the screening was otherwise well-received. Thomas' own response to the film, however, reveals the point at which the underlying earlier perception of Miike as a purveyor of shock and extreme violence rises up and clashes with the newfound confirmation of Miike as an auteur. He draws attention to how 'Miike is known as a master of cringe-inducing violence on-screen,' explaining that 'there's some stomach-churning scenes early on' in *13 Assassins*. The film is, however, akin to the classics of Akira Kurosawa, he maintains. 'Surprisingly, Miike has crafted a pretty traditional and classical samurai tale,' he claims, 'with "Seven Samurai" being the most obvious inspiration' (Thomas 2011).

The underlying assumption here is that the shock of graphic violence and the astuteness of auteurist classicism are mutually exclusive, yet it is precisely between these two spheres that *13 Assassins* places Miike. Although a number of the contemporary auteurs who currently possess a high standing at international film events display moments of cruelty and violence in their work—for instance, Michael Haneke with *The Piano Teacher/La pianiste* (2001) and *Hidden/Caché* (2005), Lars von Trier with *Manderlay* (2005) and *Antichrist* (2009), and Jacques Audiard with *A Prophet/Un prophète* (2009) and *Rust and Bone/De rouille et d'os* (2012)—their

depiction of violence does not tend to eclipse their commendation by critics. Yet, in the case of Miike and *13 Assassins*, there has existed a critical struggle, an attempt to reconcile a reputation for shockingly violent and sexual content with the auteurist restraint displayed in a contemporary *jidaigeki* masterpiece.

For Miike, *13 Assassins* appeared to be an ideal project to manifest his signature as an auteur on an international scale, and the very nature of the production itself is imbued with a specific critical history that has marked the Western reception of Japanese cinema for almost three-quarters of a century. As discussed in chapter two, the perception of Japanese film in the West has historically been auteurist in nature, with figures such as Ozu, Mizoguchi, and Kurosawa dominating the discourse surrounding the nation's cinema. It is the latter of these, Kurosawa, who figured as the benchmark by which Miike's *13 Assassins* was measured, imbuing his film with the associated reverence demonstrated for Kurosawa for over 50 years. Miike's film belongs to the *jidaigeki* genre that Kurosawa and other great Japanese directors, such as Mizoguchi and Masaki Kobayashi, have been associated with by Western audiences, and the film accordingly ignites, and responds to, the genre's longstanding cultural traditions (see figure 23).

13 Assassins is a remake of Eichii Kudō's 1963 film of the same name, in which a group of samurai enact a plot to assassinate a sadistic feudal lord and prevent his ascent in the political ranks. Whilst bearing similarities to Kurosawa's seminal *Seven Samurai*, Kudō's film is a much more violent, pessimistic, and tragic piece of cinema. Relatively unknown in the West prior to Miike's 2010 remake, Kudō's *13 Assassins* was a major release in the post-occupation shift in production by Japan's key studios, with Toei moving away from the *jidaigeki* and towards the *ninkyō yakuza* (chivalrous gangster) genre, whilst Toho were producing a new

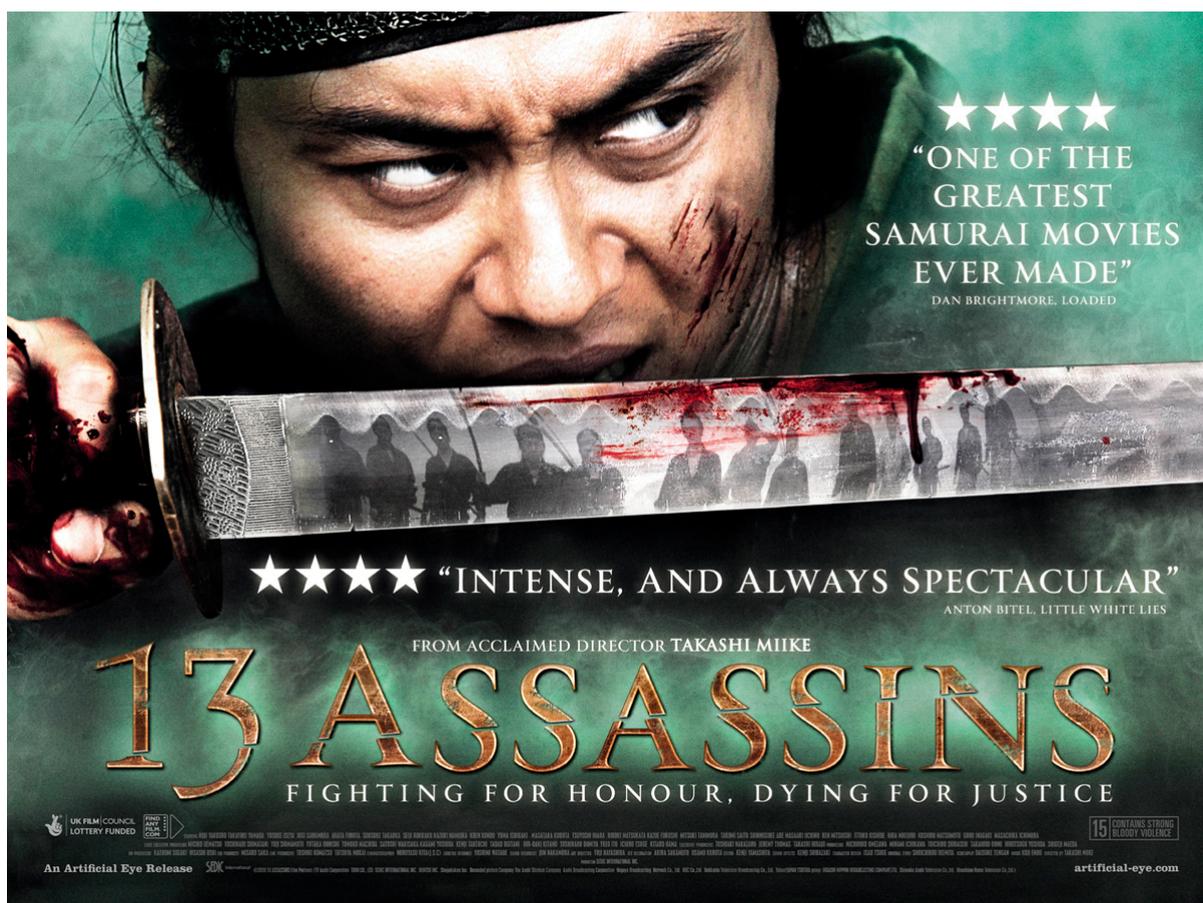


Figure 23 The UK poster for Miike's *13 Assassins* (top) appeals to the long history of the samurai genre, whilst reflecting Kudō's original film (bottom).

subgenre of cruel-*jidaigeki* film. Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* in 1960 and its 1962 sequel, *Sanjuro*, presaged a new phase for Toho, and *13 Assassins* marked Toei's change in focus (Standish 2006: 287, Tsutsui 2000). Although produced by Toei, Kudō's film,

alongside his follow-ups, 1964's *The Great Killing/Dai satsujin* and *Eleven Samurai/Jūichinin no samurai* in 1967 (which came to be known collectively as the "Samurai Revolution" trilogy), characterised the cruel-*jidaigeki* subgenre of the 1960s, a group of films sharing a 'nihilism [...] founded on a transgressive refusal to adhere to the norms of a corrupt society' (Standish 2006: 277). These titles differed to the earlier *chambara* films popular in Japan, which were much more optimistic and light-hearted in tone. Intended to depict the often tragic consequences of the feudal era's codes of loyalty and honour, these works pessimistically criticised societal nefariousness. In films such as Kudō's *13 Assassins*, Kobayashi's 1962 movie *Harakiri/Seppuku* (which Miike would also remake in 2011) and *Samurai Rebellion/Jōi-uchi: Hairyō tsuma shimatsu* (1967), and Kihachi Okamoto's *Samurai Assassins/Samurai* (1965) and *Sword of Doom/Dai-bosatsu tōge* (1966), the protagonists, as Isolde Standish writes, are 'doomed to failure by the sheer magnitude of the corruption of society' (2006: 287).

The comparison of Miike's *13 Assassins* with the work of Kurosawa figures heavily in the discourse surrounding the film, with critics, festival organisers, distributors, and audiences contributing to a sentiment that the former director is continuing the legacy of the latter. For instance, Roger Ebert likened Miike's screenplay and shot composition to that of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, whilst praising *13 Assassins*' contribution to a longstanding genre. 'Samurai films have a rich history,' he wrote, 'and Miike evokes it elegantly with traditional costumes, idealistic dialogue, sharp characterizations, and a gloriously choreographed fight sequence that must extend in one form or another for 40 minutes' (Ebert 2011). In the official programme to the Wisconsin festival, the description further proposed that *13 Assassins* 'is clearly the heir to the ultimate posse-gather, Akira Kurosawa's

Seven Samurai.’ Here, the notion of Miike inheriting Kurosawa’s position as one of the great Japanese auteurs echoes Schilling’s announcement of Miike’s display of a consciousness of legacy:

A bravura feat of choreography and editing, the bloodletting takes on a mythic grandeur, as if all previous samurai movies have culminated into this one majestic blowout. Although famous for audacious subversions like *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*, cult director Takashi Miike treats the samurai genre with great reverence. Unabashedly classical, *13 Assassins* eschews the high-flying wirework and winking asides that plague most contemporary martial arts extravaganzas. Instead, Miike unleashes an old-school slice-and-dice spectacular, and finds immense satisfaction in tried-and-true swordsmanship.
(“The Thirteenth Annual...” 2011)

Yet, as this description of *13 Assassins* alludes to, the critical appeal to Kurosawa in the reception of Miike’s film represents just one side of the director’s current position in Western filmic discourse. Whilst the notion of Miike continuing the great Japanese filmmaker’s legacy contributes to his authorial status, the location of the film in relation to Miike’s already-established reputation for the extreme further cements his cult reputation. Here, the positioning of *13 Assassins* reflects the reception six years earlier of one of Miike’s Asia Extreme contemporaries, namely South Korean director Park Chan-wook. Park’s *Oldboy*, a seminal film in the Asia Extreme canon (alongside those of his Japanese counterparts Miike, Nakata, and Fukasaku), screened at Cannes in 2004. The film was critically praised, being awarded the festival’s second most prestigious prize, the Grand Prix, with Michael Moore’s documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), receiving the Palm d’Or. Again, the head of the jury that year was Tarantino, who personally lauded Park’s film. As Joan Hawkins has noted, *Oldboy*’s appearance at Cannes contributed to a particular status for its director. Its success ‘solidified Park’s reputation as an international auteur, but the graphic elements and general creepiness in this film, as well as in the

rest of Park's recent work, have also made him a favourite among cult and horror aficionados.' As with Miike's *13 Assassins* (and the earlier reception of *Audition* and the trio of films that appeared widely at festivals throughout the 2000s), *Oldboy* garnered Park a 'dual status as international arthouse auteur and as cult/horror auteur' (Hawkins 2010: 126).

For many, *13 Assassins* problematised the existing perception of Miike as a cult figure, as a provocateur and figurehead of Asia Extreme. The art-house samurai film, which appealed to the genre's long tradition and was framed by the West's historical auteurist approach to Japanese cinema, presented a challenge to the ways in which Miike had previously been understood by Western audiences. The release of *13 Assassins* shocked spectators, but not in the manner that *Audition* did a decade earlier. Whereas *Audition* brought about the supposed discovery of a new extreme Asian cinema and cemented Miike's reputation as its leading figure, *13 Assassins* surprised those who were already familiar with the director's repute for violence in its offering of a more restrained, serious, and artistic piece of work. This sentiment was not only shared amongst critics, but more general audiences also.

Ariel Schudson is a moving image archivist based in the US who explores issues of marginalisation through the preservation and restoration of film. Alongside his professional endeavours, Schudson maintains a blog entitled "Archive-Type: Musings of a Passionate Preservationist" (previously known as "Sinaphile"), for which he posts reviews, essays, news, and other writing on areas he holds an academic interest. Schudson attributes his fondness for Asian cinema to his first viewings of Miike's work, and he has written about the director in a number of posts on his blog. After having viewed *13 Assassins*, Schudson posted a somewhat amusing analysis of the film (which he titled "We Are Nobodies: 13 Assassins and

the Elegance of Miike”) in which, positioning Miike’s film vis-a-vis the historical traditions of the *jidaigeki* genre, he celebrated the director’s supposedly newfound elegance and restraint:

Elegance of Miike?

The hell you say.

The man who gave us *Ichi The Killer*? The man who shocked people’s delicate sensibilities with *Visitor Q*? No, surely no. You must have the wrong guy. You mean to say that he made a film that gestured with grace and style towards the works of Kurosawa? Are you... saying that a Takashi Miike film was... restrained?

Yes. That is precisely what I am saying.

(Schudson 2011, emphasis in original)

Selling Samurai: *13 Assassins* in the Post-Asia Extreme Landscape

The Third Window Films brand was born [...] when its film-loving founders grew bored of the stream of worn-out shock horror vehicles from the Far East.

Third Window Films works hard to bring you the wonderful world beyond long-haired ghost films and mindless Hollywood action copies, sourcing the finest works in new Far Eastern cinema. We strive to represent a rich variety of film genres, be they dramas, comedies, political satires, action or anything else in between. Expect everything from the unknown and cult to the off-beat and even the occasional mainstream masterpiece... or expect nothing but quality Asian cinema!

Let Third Window Films be your window to the East!

(“About Third Window Films” n.d.)

The release of *13 Assassins* in the UK, both in theatres and on home video, presents a pertinent illustration of wider shifts in the demands for contemporary Japanese cinema amongst Western audiences. Miike’s film arrived at a time when the

framework within which new releases from Japan were being sold, and consumed, in the West moved away from the extreme and back towards broader notions of genre and auteurism. The above mission objective from Third Window Films, a UK-based independent distribution company established in 2005, is a fitting embodiment of the current landscape of the circulation of Asian genre cinema in the West. Since the decline of Tartan in the late 2000s, there has been a palpable shift in the types of contemporary Asian films that distributors feel audiences want to see. It would appear, as Third Window's fervent declaration suggests, that the appeal to the extreme that functioned so successfully for Tartan is slipping away, making way for the dissemination of modern Asian genre titles unlike those that have been made available before.

No longer, it would seem, are the 'worn-out shock horror vehicles,' 'long-haired ghost films,' and 'mindless Hollywood action copies' released by companies such as Tartan and Artsmagic what film-loving audiences desire from contemporary Asian cinema. The savvy viewer, Third Window suggests, now looks for more variety in the search for "quality" cinema from the region, and as such he or she is willing to turn to comedies, dramas, action movies, and political satires in the process. Certainly, a survey of Third Window's catalogue goes some way in affirming this stance. Among their releases can be counted a number of titles from current festival darling Sion Sono, including *Love Exposure/Ai no mukidashi* (2008), *Cold Fish/Tsumetai nettaigyo* (2010) and *Himizu* (2011), the comedy musical *Memories of Matsuko/Kiraware Matsuko no isshō* (Tetsuya Nakashima, 2006), and Yoshihiro Nakamura's critically lauded *Fish Story/Fisshu sutōrī* (2009).

As one of the most prominent distributors of contemporary Asian film operating in the UK today, the emergence of Third Window can indeed be seen as a

direct outcome of the oversaturation of the market with the kind of films that typified the Asia Extreme phenomenon throughout the 2000s. In fact, Adam Torel, the founder and Managing Director of the company, worked for Tartan Films for a year before he left to start his new venture. His reason for doing so, he states, was his disillusionment with how Tartan 'and other UK distribution labels were pigeon-holing Asian cinema into the 'Extreme' category' (Hurtado 2010). By the end of *Asia Extreme's* run, the number of critically acclaimed, flagship titles occupying a prominent place in the market had long been dwindling, flooded as it was by a glut of increasingly derivative (and poorly received) releases. For every *Ring* or *Ju-on* there was a *Cello/Chello hongmijoo ilga salinsagan* (Lee Woo-cheol, 2005) or *The Wig/Gabal* (Won Shin-yeon, 2005), hackneyed, shock-tactic horrors featuring possessed objects of increasing absurdity. The excess of such 'low-quality, unoriginal 'by-the-numbers' products,' Torel claims, is what eventually terminated the lively UK market for Asian genre films that had been built up by Tartan with their selection of "quality" titles (such as *Audition*, *Battle Royale*, and John Woo's 1992 action film *Hard Boiled/Lat sau san taam*)—a 'market which they, themselves, helped destroy.' Indeed, Tartan's rising confidence in the faithfulness of their customer base may very well have contributed to their eventual downfall. Torel explains that, during his time at the company, the selection of new acquisitions could be done on the strength of a trailer or even before the film was made, suggesting that Tartan's assurance in choosing which titles suited their *Asia Extreme* line could sometimes literally be judged by their credentials on paper (Hurtado 2010).

Third Window are not the sole notable independent distributor of contemporary Asian titles operating in the UK today. Alongside Torel's company are currently a number of other high-profile labels dedicated to releasing the latest films

from across Japan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, and other Asian regions. The Terracotta Entertainment Group established its *Terracotta Distribution* branch in 2008, and also runs a monthly free film club, exclusive screenings, and the annual Terracotta Far East Film Festival in London. In their own words, Terracotta ‘releases quality Asian Cinema across all platforms, with no stipulation on country or genre.’¹²³ True to their claim, Terracotta’s catalogue of releases includes a wide variety of Asian films from an array of genres, including the notoriously violent South Korean gangster flick *Breathless/Ddongpari* (Yang Ik-joon, 2008), the sex shop-based comedy *Red Light Revolution* (Sam Voutas, 2010), Kim Ki-duk’s self-reflexive documentary *Arirang* (2011), and the spectacularly titled exploitation movie *Big Tits Zombie/Kyonyū doragon: Onsen zonbi vs sutorippā 5* (Takao Nakano, 2010).

Also on the scene, again established in 2008 (the year Tartan folded), is *4Digital Asia*, 4Digital Media’s ‘sub-label specialising in Asian “cult” live-action films in their original language with English subtitles.’¹²⁴ The company has, on the one hand, seen a number of successful, high-profile releases in the UK, namely the three live-action adaptations of the *Death Note/Desu Nōto* manga (2006–2008) and the Japanese blockbuster *20th Century Boys/20-seiki shōnen* trilogy (2008–2009), again re-workings of an original manga series. On the other hand, a considerable portion of *4Digital Asia*’s catalogue consists of gory Japanese exploitation and horror movies that have developed cult followings, most notably *Tokyo Gore Police/Tōkyō zankoku keisatsu* (Yoshihiro Nishimura, 2008), *Meatball Machine/Mītobōru mashin* (Yūdai Yamaguchi and Jun’ichi Yamamoto, 2005), and *Vampire Girl vs. Frankenstein Girl/Kyūketsu Shōjo tai Shōjo Furanken* (Yoshihiro Nishimura and Naoyuki Tomomatsu, 2009).

¹²³ See Terracotta Distribution’s website for more details: <<http://terracottadistribution.com/>>

¹²⁴ See 4Digital Media’s website for more details: <<http://www.4digitalmedia.com/index.php/contact>>

Alongside Third Window, perhaps the most successful distributor currently releasing Asian titles in the UK is Arrow Video. In addition to their *Arrow Academy* label, which focuses on classic auteur-driven cinema (including box sets of films by directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Woody Allen, and Krzysztof Kieślowski), the company has put out a number of cult Japanese titles on their main label. Their recent limited edition set of Kinji Fukasaku's five-film *Battles Without Honour and Humanity/Jingi naki tatakai* series (1973–1974) was the first time the titles had been made available together in the UK, as was the case with their release of Kobayashi's three-part epic, *The Human Condition/Ningen no jōken* (1959–1961). They have also released films by a range of cult Japanese directors, with *Retaliation/Shima wa moratta* (1969) and *Massacre Gun/Minagoroshi no kenjū* (1967) by Yasuharu Hasebe, *Branded to Kill/Koroshi no rakuin* (1967) by Seijun Suzuki, *Blind Woman's Curse/Kaidan nobori ryū* (1970) by Teruo Ishii, Toshiya Fujita's *Lady Snowblood* films, and Fukasaku's *Battle Royale*, in addition to box sets of cult Japanese film series, including *Stray Cat Rock/Nora-neko rokku* (1970–1971) and *Outlaw Gangster: VIP/Burai yori daikanbu* (1968–1969).

During Tartan's demise, the presence of Miike's work in the UK market had been dwindling. This was somewhat unsurprising, considering the sheer rate with which the distributor acquired the director's films for release since its initial success with *Audition*. Throughout its run, *Asia Extreme* saw the release of a staggering 13 different Miike features; ceasing operations in 2008, Tartan's closure put an end to one of the leading supplies of the director's films. Yet, since the arrival of *13 Assassins* in theatres and on home video there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Miike titles being picked up for UK distribution, with no fewer than six different companies turning to the Miike's oeuvre for the first time (see figure 24).

Distributor	Number of releases	Date
Yume Pictures	1	2016
Manga Entertainment	1	2016
Third Window Films	2	2013–2014
MVM Entertainment	2	2012
Revolver Entertainment	1	2012
Eureka! Video	1	2012
Artificial Eye	1	2011
Arrow Video	3	2010–2017
Contender Home Entertainment	2	2008–2009
Starz Home Entertainment	1	2007
Film 2000	6	2005–2006
Artsmagic/Eastern Cult Cinema	5	2003–2004
Premier Asia	1	2003
Tartan Films	13	2001–2007

Figure 24 Table showing the distribution of Miike's films in the UK, including the number of titles released by each distributor.

13 Assassins was released in the UK by Artificial Eye, the distribution branch of the Curzon Artificial Eye company which also runs a number of cinemas across London, calling itself the capital's 'leading art-house cinema chain.'¹²⁵ Artificial Eye's release of *13 Assassins* marked a shift in the tactics employed by distributors in promoting Miike's titles, enacting a marketing campaign built around the director's status as an international cult auteur. For instance, the cover of Artificial Eye's DVD release of *13 Assassins* frames the film in three important ways. It announces that *13 Assassins* comes "From acclaimed director Takashi Miike," whilst also labelling Miike a "cult director," and describing the film as "a bravura assault on the senses

¹²⁵ See Curzon Cinemas' website for more details: <http://www.curzoncinemas.com/about_us/>

that has been compared to the classic samurai films of Akira Kurosawa.” The mention of Miike’s acclaim, and the attention drawn to Kurosawa’s name, appeals to the positioning of Miike as an auteur, whilst he is also located as a cult director, and the film’s climax is described as “a monumental and bloodily violent showdown.” Certainly, the foregrounding of Miike’s auteurist qualities is in keeping with Artificial Eye’s brand of art-house cinema. On their website, they proudly emphasise the fact that they have ‘released more winners of the Cannes Palme d’Or than any other UK distributor,’¹²⁶ and Miike’s film can now be counted alongside titles by contemporary auteurs such as Michael Haneke, Béla Tarr, and Abbas Kiarostami.

The promotion of *13 Assassins* relied heavily upon the film’s critical success at international film festivals and the ensuing discourse positioning Miike as an auteur. Here, the Takashi Miike auteur name can be considered to have truly come into its own. Whereas before it had been qualified by its channelling through other established frameworks (such as the approval of the Quentin Tarantino brand name in the *Sukiyaki* trailer, as discussed in chapter four), the capital of festival success has allowed Miike’s name to stand on its own. The trailers for the film, released in the UK and the US by Artificial and Magnet Releasing, respectively, place Miike front and centre as an auteur, drawing attention to the festival accolades the director has received (see figure 25). Reflecting Miike’s standing at these events, such promotion works to capitalise on the filmmaker’s authorial reputation, foregrounding the awards, prizes, and acclaim received by both the film and its director.

In the releases that have since followed *13 Assassins*, Miike’s auteur name and past achievements have, unsurprisingly, more frequently occupied a central position in the commercial appeal to auteur-driven, art-house audiences. The home

¹²⁶ See the “Artificial Eye” section of Curzon Artificial Eye’s website for more details: <<http://www.curzonae.com/artificial-eye/index.php>>

video releases of the *Crows Zero* films come with a banner exclaiming Miike's authorship ("A TAKASHI MIIKE FILM," the DVD covers announce), with *13 Assassins* and *Ichi the Killer* located as benchmarks of authorial quality. Miike's remake of another classic samurai film, *Hara-Kiri*, is titled both as being "Takashi Miike's..." (thus designating the film as belonging to Miike as auteur) and, in an attempt to capitalise on the success of his previous *jidaigeki* remake, emphasises that *Hara-Kiri* is "From the director of '13 Assassins'." Furthermore, Yume Pictures' DVD release of Miike's more recent *Over Your Dead Body* includes an excerpt from a review claiming it to be "one of the most intriguing, surprising and satisfying films of Miike's long career," whilst drawing attention to the multiple awards it received at London's FrightFest, the UK's largest international genre film festival.



Figure 25 The UK (top) and US (bottom) trailers for *13 Assassins*, positioning Miike as auteur.

The “New” Miike vs. the “Old” Miike: Pace, Producers, and Project Selection

The change in direction for Miike that culminated in the release of *13 Assassins* can predominantly be attributed to three factors that came to characterise the director’s filmmaking in the latter half of the 2000s, and to a large extent still shape his production today. Firstly, there has been a notable slowing of the pace with which Miike produces his films; secondly, there has occurred a shift in the types of projects he selects; and, thirdly, there has been the guidance of an increasingly influential producer and manager.

Since 2001, the year during which he directed six features (including some of his most renowned work, such as *Ichi the Killer*, *Visitor Q*, *Agitator*, and *The Happiness of the Katakuris*) and the first two parts of his *Kumamoto Stories/Kumamoto Monogatari* trilogy (2001–2002) of educational films, Miike has gradually taken on fewer projects. 2002 saw the director helm a remarkable seven features and one music video; he directed six in 2003; three features and his segment for *Three... Extremes* in 2004; one feature, a stage play, and two episodes of the television series *Ultraman Max* in 2005; four features and *Imprint* in 2006; four features and another stage play in 2007; just one feature and an episode of the TV series, *K-tai Investigator 7/Keitai Sosakan 7*, in 2008; two features in 2009; and again just two feature-length films, *13 Assassins* and the *Zebraman* sequel, in 2010. Where he was once releasing six or seven features in a single year, since *13 Assassins* Miike has slowed down considerably and currently settles with just two or three annual projects, with his sci-fi manga adaptation *Terra Formars* and comedy-action sequel, *The Mole Song 2: Hong Kong Capriccio/Mogura no uta: Hong Kong kyôshô-kyoku* (2016), being his only theatrical releases of 2016.

This slowing of pace can partly be understood as a result of increasing budgets and a change in the type of projects that Miike is being offered. Particularly when considered in relation to his days working in the V-Cinema market, Miike's more recent films are produced on much higher budgets, and, as such, longer production schedules are to be expected. Samurai epics like *13 Assassins* and 2011's *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai/Ichimei* (hereafter *Hara-Kiri*) feature lengthy battle sequences, complex choreography, and lavish sets—elements which Miike's V-Cinema productions were not afforded in the interest of cost and time. Also, particularly in more recent years, Miike's films have incorporated extended scenes of computer-generated imagery, which is both costly and time-consuming. One of his most recent releases, the sci-fi action film, *Terra Formars*, is a big-budget visual effects spectacular; *As the Gods Will* employed CGI to achieve its live-action adaptation of the manga source material; and *Yakuza Apocalypse* features extensive use of CGI in its depiction of vampires and its frenetic martial arts action sequences.

Yet, to recall the debate concerning the arrival of a “new” Miike at the expense of the “old” Miike, this change in pace does not necessarily mean that the director has fundamentally altered his approach to filmmaking. Throughout his career, Miike has often worked with relatively large budgets (particularly on CGI-laden visual spectacles, such as *The Great Yokai War* and *Yatterman*), and when he has done so, he has taken much longer to complete the projects than he typically does with his lower-budget productions. Also, his more recent focus on manga adaptations, which generally call for CGI in the realisation of fantastical material, is not an entirely new venture for the director. Miike has habitually turned to manga as the source material for his projects (*Fudoh*, *Ichii the Killer*, and the *Crows Zero* films being notable examples), yet it is the domestic market's current demand for manga adaptations

that has seen a rise in the number of such projects being offered to the director.¹²⁷ In this sense, one can argue that the decrease in Miike's productivity is, to reflect Mes' assertion discussed earlier, a sign less of changes in his filmmaking, and more of shifting industrial conditions. Indeed, the director himself maintains that, despite working with larger budgets and longer schedules, his approach remains the same:

Looking back at the time when I was still only making low-budget films, V-cinema [...] well, it's not much different these days to be honest. The level and scale has changed maybe but the circumstances are still just as challenging. V-cinema also had its own set of rules and limitations, and even THEN I was seen as the odd one out. So these days, even in the current production system, if people ask ME to direct something for them they know what kind of guy they're asking it to [...] When I am approached by producers they expect me to come up with something weird and not to deliver an ordinary film. In that sense I do not feel any pressure to conform. I'm being hired for who I am and people know what they can expect.

—Takashi Miike

(Vijn 2012, emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, despite Miike's claim that producers expect of him "weird" or "extraordinary" films, his move into more traditionally auteurist ventures, such as *13 Assassins* and *Hara-Kiri*, would suggest otherwise. The fact that the director has been offered such films in more recent years is at once driven by, and symptomatic of, a gradual revision of project selection. This, in turn, has developed alongside Miike's negotiation of his position within the domestic industry. The director-for-hire mode of Miike's earlier years—which saw Miike claim 'I don't refuse any offers' (Sato and Mes 2001)—has morphed into a more discriminating and considerate approach to production. As discussed in chapter one, the context of Japan's V-Cinema industry allowed Miike to quickly turn out multiple low-budget genre pieces at a rapid

¹²⁷ The current trend for live-action manga adaptations in Japan has not escaped Western critics. For instance, in his review of Miike's *As the Gods Will* at the 2016 Fantasia festival, Rob Hunter (2016) sarcastically remarks that the film is '[b]ased on a popular manga, as is apparently required by law for filmmakers in Japan.'

rate, offering the largely untrained young director the opportunity to develop his filmmaking skills. Indeed, Miike has admitted that in the beginning of his career his directing lacked any industrial guidelines at all. 'I don't make rules myself,' he says, 'I didn't study enough to be able to make them. I'm too stupid' (Sato and Mes 2001). As he gained recognition in Japan, however, Miike was offered more formally and thematically challenging projects for which he employed an increasingly ascetic approach, one which the creative freedom of his 1990s straight-to-video work had enabled him to cultivate, at his own pace.

Yet, it would appear that the director's more considered project selection is not entirely attributable to himself. Recently, a number of sources have suggested that the involvement of a new producer has led Miike towards those projects that have seen him receive wide critical acclaim at international festivals, with films such as *Gozu*, *13 Assassins*, and *Hara-Kiri*. Throughout his career, patterns in Miike's acceptance of offers have revealed close relationships with particular producers with whom he has worked on a number of occasions. Most notably, his work with Hisao Maki yielded a run of films that, whilst devoid of the critical attention displayed towards his later work, brought about significant developments in Miike's thematic concerns and aesthetics. Maki first worked with Miike on his fourth ever film, *A Human Murder Weapon*, and, among other projects, was involved in his *Bodyguard Kiba* trilogy and *Silver/Shirubaa* (1999), for which he is credited as producer, writer, actor, and action director.

The films Miike and Maki made together were all low-budget action genre pieces, produced quickly for the V-Cinema market. Yet, since 2003 Miike has tended to eschew such projects in favour of films with bigger budgets that have seen increasingly successful box office returns. This, some suggest, is largely due to his

relationship with Misako Saka. As Grady Hendrix (2014) has reported, the producer, who is also Miike's "life partner," established herself as the director's manager during the production of *One Missed Call*. Since then, she has played an increasingly influential role in moving Miike away from low-budget projects and towards more substantial, big-budget productions that have seen him become one of the Japanese industry's leading helmers of box office hits. Mes argues that, 'over the course of the past ten years, [Sako has] shrewdly shepherded the director from the turning point that was *Gozu's* selection for the Director's Fortnight in Cannes, into a mainstream career in the domestic film industry as well as a status as favourite of the highest festival echelon' (2014b).¹²⁸ Certainly, the production contexts of his more recent films are far removed from the straight-to-video projects that characterised his collaboration with Maki. If such a change had not occurred, Mes posits, the alternative route the director would have taken is 'the oblivion in which languish other former hotshots of edgier V-cinema genre fare, some of whom have today given up on filmmaking altogether. Which route would you rather take?' (2014b).

Conclusion

Since the turning point that was *Gozu's* selection for the Directors' Fortnight at the 2003 Cannes festival, Miike's transition from provocative figurehead of Asia Extreme to international cult auteur appears, at first glance, to be complete. The increasing presence of both Miike and his films at international film festivals signals the

¹²⁸ Mes further explains how Sako has exploited industrial conditions to ensure that she works closely with Miike on his films. 'Also worthy of note is how Miike's manager used the much-maligned production committee system to the filmmaker's own creative and financial advantage by becoming a co-producer on nearly all his projects' (Mes 2014b).

director's acceptance into art-house circles, a matter demonstrated by the release and reception of *13 Assassins*. Its distribution in the UK by Artificial Eye, who have developed a reputation for auteur-centric, art-house cinema, helped locate Miike in this new position, capitalising on the film's critical acclaim in its promotional campaign. Artificial Eye's appeal to its particular demographic was further aided by the discourse that developed around Miike's samurai epic, in which appeals were made to the long history of the Japanese genre, to the nation's historical auteurs, and to the legacy of Akira Kurosawa. With *13 Assassins*, it would seem, Miike has transformed. He has left behind extreme violence and sexual perversity, in favour of more thoughtful and artfully executed material. No longer does he produce low-budget genre flicks at a remarkable speed, as he now takes his time on more ambitious projects with bigger budgets. He has traded *yakuza* for samurai.

However, as we have seen, the presentation of this transition—from the supposed “old” Miike to the “new” Miike—in Western filmic discourse is not entirely accurate. Certainly, Miike's pace has slowed somewhat but this has not necessarily resulted in a change in his approach to filmmaking. He still works on a wide range of projects (including those aligning with the “extreme” films of his earlier career), yet his commercial success in the domestic market has inevitably led to offers of films with bigger budgets, and thus more demanding production schedules. Moreover, the influence of Sako, his producer and manager, has moved him away from the kinds of films that typified his reputation up until the middle of the 2000s, and towards a dual position as domestic mainstream director of box office hits and international film festival darling.

Conclusion

This thesis has mapped four distinct phases in the trajectory of Takashi Miike's reception in the West. Since his first release in 1991, Miike has accumulated exactly 100 credits to his name, working across an array of media, including, but not limited to, theatrical and straight-to-video films, television series and movies, music videos, recorded stage plays, portmanteau projects, and documentaries. He has produced films that sit within genres ranging from those of *yakuza*, horror, comedy, musical, action, martial arts, drama, family film, and science-fiction, or any combination of these. From the beginnings of his emergence onto the international film festival scene in the late 1990s, Western audiences, critics, and academics have attempted to take stock of his extraordinary fecundity and protean approach to genre in myriad ways. As this thesis has argued, the framework most commonly applied to Miike's cinema is that of the director as a cult auteur, the formation of which continues to grow and transform with each significant development in his career.

When *Audition* arrived at festivals and in theatres at the turn of the century, many Western critics posited the unearthing of an exciting new talent. Shocking, yet rewarding, the work of this supposedly previously dormant Japanese director came to embody the wider phenomenon of Asia Extreme—a trend which in itself emanated not from Asian production, but from the marketing practices of distributors catering to Western demand. Positioned as the figurehead of this new wave of Asian film, Miike's popularity amongst both cult and art-house audiences grew. Reflecting the historical illusion of the Western discovery of Japanese cinema, Miike's work has been channelled through Orientalist stereotypes and assumptions relating to

Japanese culture, enacting a crucial shift in the process of defamiliarisation, from simply the exotic (as was largely the case with Akira Kurosawa) to the extreme.

As the 2000s wore on, the director's presence in Western filmic discourse was further propagated by displays of cinematic reverence by influential American cult figures. Quentin Tarantino's high-profile release, *Kill Bill*, cited Miike's *Ichi the Killer* in a number of ways, by means of visual references and shared casting choices. This admiration for Miike's work was further demonstrated by Eli Roth in his violent horror movie, *Hostel*, for which Tarantino acted as Executive Producer. Extending beyond citation, the film brought Miike, literally, into the frame of contemporary American horror cinema, with the director's cameo signalling his mounting cult auteur reputation. The relationship between Miike and Tarantino would develop to an even greater extent in an act of reciprocal reverence, with the latter's appearance in the former's *Sukiyaki*. Tarantino's cameo in this Japanese Western saw the exchange between East and West—between Miike and Tarantino, between Japan and the States, between Eastern and Western film culture—come full circle.

As has been the case throughout his career, the discourse surrounding key releases of Miike's has contributed immensely to the ongoing development of his reception in the West. Building on the groundwork laid by responses to *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer*, the acceptance of Miike as a "master of horror" came with *Imprint*, his entry in the US television network Showtime's horror series. Banned from broadcast for its transgression, *Imprint* solidified the director's reputation for the extreme, whilst increasing his global presence as a horror filmmaker in placing him alongside long-established auteurs of the genre. Bookending this project, Miike's *One Missed Call* and its US remake indicated the end of the Western popularity of the J-horror boom and the remake trend, respectively. In an increasingly vapid attempt to capitalise on

the visibility of Asian horror cinema in the first half of the 2000s, the success of the re-presentation of films such as Miike's had waned dramatically, both critically and commercially, as the decade neared its end.

Similarly, the more recent ascent of Miike's work in the art-house arena has been affirmed by one key release in particular. 2010's *13 Assassins* saw the director fully assume his position within the international film market, receiving its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival, and appearing at other prestigious events, including the Toronto International Film Festival, the BFI London Film Festival, and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Since the turning point of the selection of *Gozu* for the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, Miike's films have occupied increasingly global spaces, facilitating the ongoing internationalisation of the director and his cinema. Driving this has been the influence of Misako Saka, Miike's life partner, manager, and regular producer, who has shepherded him towards more ambitious projects with bigger budgets and longer production schedules. Coupled with his increasing awareness of the global reach of his films, the changes in Miike's production have seen him fully habituate to his reputation as an international cult auteur—as both a helmer of box office hits in his domestic market and a popular presence on the global film festival stage.

In mapping these phases of Miike's career, this study has taken as its central focus the director's particular status as a cult auteur. It has demonstrated how an understanding of the distribution of, and responses to, the director's work in Western regions calls for a consideration of two conceptual spheres—those of film authorship and cult cinema—and the ways in which they overlap, working towards a definition of the “cult auteur” as a particular mode of consumption. Miike's career offers an effective platform from which to consider questions of authorship and cult in relation

to cinema, and existing critical approaches to these topics present a valuable framework through which to examine the director and his films.

The mutability of the phrase “cult auteur” within discussion surrounding Miike brings to the fore the richness of the label and its constituent conceptual areas. Miike’s standing as a cult auteur is projected in a wide spectrum of filmic discourse—across a range of promotional material, in audience responses, in both populist and critical reviews, at film festivals, retrospectives, and other events, and in scholarship. Significantly, each instance of the acknowledgement of Miike’s cult authorship is marked by its contextual specificities. For instance, the marketing practices of distributors such as Tartan and Artificial Eye have promoted Miike as a cult director in an attempt to appeal to certain demographics, thus increasing the potential reach of particular film releases. In turn, scholarship that recognises the cult consumption of Miike’s cinema relies on the theoretical frameworks developed in cult film theory. His reputation as an auteur has in part been established by programming selections and accolades at international film festivals, where the celebration of individual artistic creativity remains central. This veneration has been translated into other distribution practices, where Miike is labelled as a “celebrated,” “award-winning,” or “acclaimed” director in trailers, on posters, and on DVD covers.

What is so significant about Miike’s reception is the interconnectedness of notions of authorship and of cult in the ways in which his films are distributed, exhibited, and ultimately received. His particular cult authorship is a pertinent example of the potential for these ideas to come to bear upon one another, both theoretically and pragmatically. As we have seen, issues relating to authorship and cult have had an existent impact on the dissemination of Miike’s films (Tartan’s abundant releases positioning him as figurehead of Asia Extreme), the opportunities

he has been offered (Showtime's verification of him as a horror auteur, and his cameo in *Hostel*), and his position at global film events (his acceptance both as an auteur at festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, and as a cult figure at more specialist festivals). Miike's cult authorship illustrates how these two areas can often depend on one another in distribution and reception practices. As Mathijs and Sexton have noted:

The auteur figure is [...] important to cult cinema: within a mode of film culture and reception contexts very much based around the discovery of idiosyncratic films that differ from the "mainstream" (or at least "discovering" hidden profundities within mainstream texts), and where viewers often seek out information about particular films, the need to locate creative human beings is often an inevitable outcome of such a quest.

(2011: 75)

Yet, it is of course not only the director that can be marked by the "cult" identifier, and as such it is important for one to recognise the limits of focusing solely on the notion of the cult auteur. The very concept of cult cinema is itself an unstable and unpredictable category, having been adopted in a variety of different ways and appearing in many guises throughout the relatively short period in which it has existed in general use. The "cult" marker can be employed to qualify an existing concept, as is the case with the "cult auteur," but it can also be applied in a more concrete manner, in a compound such as "film cult," as if it were a noun. To return to Dennis Lim's report on *Audition's* 10th anniversary, whilst Miike is imbued with the connotations of the "cult auteur" label, Lim also refers to a seemingly more palpable manifestation of cultness in drawing attention to *Audition's* 'early screenings which became the stuff of cult-movie legend' (2009). Here, the term "cult-movie" presents a potentially more stable reference point to be utilised when attempting to understand the context of the film's initial release. Moving away from the question of authorship,

such a description may invoke ideas relating to consumption (particular ways of accessing, viewing, and conversing about films), industrial conditions (for instance, low budgets or troubled productions), or textual elements (such as genre, aesthetics, themes, or form).

Indeed, as Jancovich, Reboll, Stringer, and Willis (2003: 1) propose, the phrase “cult movies” comprises what they deem ‘a multitude of sins,’ an eclectic variety of cinematic sub-genres that exist outside the mainstream industry and challenge traditional viewing practices. Operating beyond the boundaries of conventional relationships between text and viewer (that have developed over cinema’s relatively brief lifetime), cult films and their spectators can find themselves distant to, and often in direct opposition to, the mainstream in almost every possible sense. The willingness of cult audiences to engage with practices that defy what is considered to be “normal” film viewing and reception behaviour sees them drawn to an alternative canon of movies. What binds this categorisation is not textual similarities (in terms of content, form, or style), but a shared marginalisation from “the norm”—the popular, the mainstream, the classical. It is for this reason that films as diverse as Miike’s *Ichi the Killer*, Curtiz’s *Casablanca*, and Sharman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have garnered international cult followings.

So, when discussing titles as disparate as *Audition*, *The Bird People in China*, *Imprint*, *Fudoh: The New Generation*, and *13 Assassins* as part of Miike’s status as a cult auteur, it is vital that one looks outside of the texts themselves. Crucially, the necessity to do so stems from a need to account for not only the conditions of Miike’s cult reception, but of his authorial reputation also—the questions we may ask of cult film we may also ask of authorship. ‘Cult films are not *made*,’ Bruce A. Austin contests, ‘as much as they *happen* or *become*’ (1988: 393, emphasis in original).

The querying of exactly what makes a cult movie inevitably produces a limited understanding of cult cinema informed predominantly, if not exclusively, by the constitution of the text itself. In these cases, the important roles played by distributors, exhibitors, and spectators in the construction of cult film are in danger of being ignored. As we have seen, such oversights also befall purely textual approaches to authorship. The romanticism of auteurism, which positions the director as the sole creator of a singular artistic vision, scours the surface of films in search of individual expression, often bound by a focused, yet ultimately subjective, set of criteria. To view authorship in this manner is to largely overlook its function in consumption and reception. As alternative theories have demonstrated, the film author can be seen to extend beyond the text, to become part of the frameworks through which films are disseminated and negotiated. Essentially, notions of cult and of authorship play a vital role in the distribution of, and interaction with, cinema—as a way of reading, understanding and categorising films, as a way of selling films, and as a way of engaging with films.

In the examination of the trajectory of Miike's cult auteur status, this thesis has identified three main facets of the director's filmmaking that have contributed to the construction of this reputation, namely his astonishingly prolific rate of production, his protean approach to genre, and the provocative nature of his work's content. It has been my intention to consider how these elements have shaped responses to Miike's cinema, paying particular attention to the construction of his cult authorship. I have mapped a distinct narrative of Miike's reception in the West. This critical history has demonstrated how Miike's career has been marked by key releases—by their distribution and the discourses surrounding them—revealing the remarkable path taken by a contemporary Japanese filmmaker within a specifically Western context.

Yet, it is crucial that one considers the alternative narratives that may be traced of Miike and his cinema. Other potential approaches to Miike may be, for example, textual, industrial, cultural, or linguistic in nature, and may consider the director and his films through frameworks that shed light on this topic in ways that the scope this thesis has not. A focus on Miike's reception has necessitated detailed attention to specific concerns and thus lacks extensive consideration of others. For instance, I have been less concerned with the deep analysis of Miike's film texts (their style, aesthetics, and themes), and more motivated by the extraordinary ways in which they have been disseminated and received. This has stemmed from my phenomenological approach to cult film, which views cultness as emanating not from some set of criteria shared by all cult movies, but from the extraordinary forms of interaction with cinema that circulate around certain films.

One approach may be to engage fully with the domestic context of Miike's production, addressing important questions relating to the Japanese film industry. What is so remarkable about Miike as a filmmaker is his capacity to simultaneously direct multiple projects that may share little in terms of genre, budget, or format. His success in the domestic V-Cinema market demanded a quick turnaround of genre pieces with minimal budgets, in the industry's attempt to cater to rapidly growing demand. A close examination of Miike's position within the V-Cinema boom could facilitate a rewarding study of the impact of Japan's economic advancements on conditions of production, distribution, and consumption. Following the country's economic miracle, the speculative investments made by Japanese companies in the burgeoning straight-to-video market led to the involvement of alternative parties in the filmmaking industry. Whilst I have discussed how these circumstances enabled inexperienced directors such as Miike, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Shinji Aoyama, and

Takashi Shimizu to build their careers, a more detailed account of these events could offer further productive insight into a significant period in Japan's industrial and economic history.

Although I have considered the conditions of Miike's production to some extent, a more rigorous study in this area would require a traversal of linguistic barriers that I cannot achieve unaided. As indicated by the writing of Western journalists such as Don Brown (whose translations of reports from Japanese newspapers were referred to in the discussion of *Sukiyaki* in chapter four), there is much material to be found in the Japanese media that is absent from English-language filmic discourse. Major papers in the country, such as *Asahi Shimbun* and *Nikkan Sports*, regularly feature production information pertaining to Miike's films that may provide the basis of important future analyses. Similarly, access to Miike's views on the Japanese film industry (which I have engaged with throughout this thesis) could be opened up further by exploring his comments in not only Japanese discourse, but other non-English-language literature also. An examination informed by such material could allow one to present an alternative commentary on Miike's cinema, and on the Japanese film industry on a wider scale, extending beyond the confines of the specifically Western context of this study.

Additionally, one could turn to non-Anglocentric scholarship and other publications in widening the scope of further research. Some of the earliest essays on Miike's films were published by Japanese writers,¹²⁹ and no doubt there is much to be gained from the more contemporary views on the director's work to be found in Japanese popular, critical, and academic discourse. In particular, taking stock of domestic opinions on Miike's cinema could enhance the analyses of matters of

¹²⁹ In particular, the writings of film critics Tokitoshi Shiota and Kasho Abe, and director and screenwriter Takahisa Zeze, offered early analyses of the themes in Miike's work in the late 1990s.

nationality and societal disruption already explored by Western academics, in offering Japanese perspectives on these distinctly Japanese issues. Also, in more recent years, Miike has been the subject of books written in a variety of European languages, including edited volumes in Italian (Tomasi 2006, Sala and de Fez 2013), German (Spitzer 2008, Prokić 2014), and Spanish (Cruz 2015). Ranging in their focus, scope, and outlook, an analysis of these texts would provide further insight into the growing body of scholarship on Miike, to which this thesis belongs. Pertinently, these publications may even offer constructive angles on some of the topics with which I have been concerned—namely, Miike’s popularity at international film festivals held in Europe, the significance of critical and audience responses to certain releases, and the transnationality of *Sukiyaki*.

As I have expressed, my particular approach to Miike’s reception has not necessitated deep textual analysis of the director’s work, however there is enormous potential for such studies. Miike’s cinema is extraordinary for its capacity to be considered at once diverse and consistent, and the sheer scope of his oeuvre invites many varied responses. As Rawle (2009: 170) has rightly recognised of the marketing tactics of distributors, ‘the promotion of violence in Miike’s work is generally at the expense of his more artistic and modernist [...] qualities,’¹³⁰ and it is important that such a focus does not produce a similar oversight in scholarship—there is far more to Miike than the extreme. Productive textual analyses of Miike’s films have already been done, encompassing issues including, but by no means limited to, the remake (Shin 2014, Rawle 2015), the aesthetics of bad film (Stadler 2010, Khoo 2013), representations of the city (Hillenbrand 2010, Yeh 2010), and cultural otherness (Gerow 2009, Ko 2010). Further contributions could come in the

¹³⁰ Art Black has similarly noted of the director’s films that ‘[t]he surface, the gloss, the astonishingly graphic showmanship [is] so striking [...] that it tends to mask Miike’s subtexts and abiding personal concerns’ (2003: 416).

form of a consideration of ideas pertaining to adaptation (throughout his career Miike has turned to manga adaptations, and continues to do so), film sequels and franchises (Miike has often contributed multiple films to a number of series), and stardom (the repeated collaboration with popular actors such as Shō Aikawa, Riki Takeuchi, and, more recently, Hideaki Itō).

Miike's cinema offers a rich site for addressing a wide range of questions, and an examination of his reception in the West is just one approach that may be taken. It has been my intention with this critical history, which has thus far been absent from English-language scholarship, to interrogate a number of issues are central to the ways in which the director's films have been negotiated. Throughout Miike's career, key releases have enacted significant shifts in responses to his films, producing distinct patterns of reception that have been shaped by notions of authorship and cult. Miike's distinct status as a cult auteur has been constructed through a network of discursive practices, and in turn this reputation has influenced the kinds of films he makes, and the reactions to them. His association with the horror genre led to his first collaboration with American producers; the involvement of Tarantino in his Japanese Western further opened up his cinema to a global audience; and, in recent years, his work with bigger budgets and more traditionally auteurist projects has made him a mainstay of the international film festival circuit. Whilst his rate of production has slowed somewhat, the director continues to produce multiple films each year—as new titles are released, other projects are announced. Future accounts of Miike's reception will be necessary if we are to continue to take stock of further phases in this extraordinary cinematic career, whatever their formation or impact may be.

Filmography

- 13 Assassins / Jūsan-nin no shikaku* — Eiichi Kudō, 1963
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- 20th Century Boys / 20-seiki shōnen* — Various directors, 2008–2009
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A Cop, a Bitch and a Killer / Waga mune ni kyeki ari — Shinji Aoyama, 1996

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Django — Sergio Corbucci, 1966

Django Unchained — Quentin Tarantino, 2012

Dororo — Akihito Shiota, 2007

Dream Cruise — Norio Tsuruta, 2007

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Early Summer / Bakushū — Yasūjiro Ozu, 1951

The Echo / Sigaw — Yam Laranas, 2004

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Election / Hak se wui — Johnnie To, 2006

Eleven Samurai / Jūichinin no samurai — Eiichi Kudō, 1967

Eureka / Yurika — Shinji Aoyama, 2000

The Eye / Gin gwai — Oxide and Danny Pang, 2002

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1991

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Fat Shaker / Larzanandeye charbi — Mohammad Shirvani, 2013

Film Socialisme — Jean-Luc Godard, 2010

Fireworks / Hana-bi — Takeshi Kitano, 1997

Fish Story / Fisshu sutōrī — Yoshihiro Nakamura, 2009

A Fistful of Dollars / Per un pugno di dollari — Sergio Leone, 1964

The Fly II — Chris Walas, 1989

For Love's Sake / Ai to makoto — Takashi Miike, 2012

Funny Games — Michael Haneke, 1997

Freaks — Todd Browning, 1932

Freddy's Nightmare — Television series, 1988–1990

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Insomnia — Erik Skjoldbjærg, 1997

Insomnia — Christopher Nolan, 2002

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Toshiya Fujita, 1974

The Lake House — Alejandro Agresti, 2006

Lanai-Loa — Sherwood Hu, 1998

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Last Run / Rasuto ran: Ai to uragiri no hyaku-oku en – shissô Feraari 250 GTO —
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Late Spring / Banshun — Yasūjiro Ozu, 1949

Lesson of the Evil / Aku no kyôten — Takashi Miike, 2012

The Letter / Siworae — Lee Jung-gook, 1997

Ley Lines / Nihon kuroshakai — Takashi Miike, 1999

The Life of Oharu / Saikaku ichidai onna — Kenji Mizoguchi

Like a Dragon / Ryū ga gotoku: Gekijō-ban — Takashi Miike, 2007

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Lone Wolf and Cub — Various directors, 1972–1980

Love Don't Cost a Thing — Troy Beyern, 2003

Love Exposure / Ai no mukidashi — Sion Sono, 2008

Lust, Caution / Se, jie — Ang Lee, 2007

The Magnificent Seven — John Sturges, 1960

The Making of 'Gemini' / Tsukamoto Shin'ya ga Ranpo suru — Takashi Miike, 2000

Maléfique — Eric Valette, 2002

Mamma Mia! — Phyllida Lloyd, 2008

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Martyrs — Pascal Laugier, 2008

Massacre Gun / Minagoroshi no kenjū — Yasuharu Hasebe, 1967

Masters of Horror — Television series, 2005–2007

Meatball Machine / Mīto bōru mashin — Yūdai Yamaguchi and Jun'ichi Yamamoto,
2005

Memento Mori / Yeogo goedam II — Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong, 1999

Memoirs of a Geisha — Rob Marshall, 2005

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The Notebook — Nick Cassavetes, 2004

Nowhere to Hide / Injeong sajeong bol geot eobtda — Lee Myung-se, 1999

Oldboy / Oldeuboi — Park Chan-wook, 2003

Oldboy — Spike Lee, 2013

One Missed Call — Eric Valette, 2008

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One Silver Dollar / Un dollaro bucato — Calvin Jackson Padget, 1965

Ong-bak — Prachya Pinkaew, 2003

The Ordeal / Calvaire — Fabrice Du Welz, 2004

Orochi – Blood / Orochi — Norio Tsuruta, 2008

Osaka Tough Guys / Naniwa yuukyōden — Takashi Miike, 1995

Oshin — Shin Togashi, 2013

Outlaw Gangster: VIP / Burai yori daikanbu — Various directors, 1968–1969

Over Your Dead Body / Kuime — Takashi Miike, 2014

P.O.V. – A Cursed Film / POV: Norowareta firumu — Norio Tsuruta, 2012

P.S. I Love You — Richard LaGravenese, 2007

Pacific Rim — Guillermo del Toro, 2013

Pandora — Takashi Miike, 2000

Peanuts / Rakkasei Piinattsu — Takashi Miike, 1996

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Phone / Pon — Ahn Byeong-ki, 2002

Phone Booth — Joel Schumacher, 2002

The Piano Teacher / La pianiste — Michael Haneke, 2001

Pink Flamingos — John Waters, 1972

Planet Terror — Robert Rodriguez, 2007

Postcards from the Zoo / Kebun binatang — Edwin, 2012

Premonition / Yogen — Norio Tsuruta, 2004

A Prophet / Un prophète — Jacques Audiard, 2009

Psycho IV: The Beginning — Mick Garris, 1990

Pulp Fiction — Quentin Tarantino, 1994

Pulse / Kairo — Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001

Pulse — Jim Sonzero, 2006

Q.P. — Television series, 2011

The Quick and the Dead — Sam Raimi, 1995

Rainy Dog / Gokudō kuroshakai — Takashi Miike, 1997

Rambo: First Blood Part Two — George P. Cosmatos, 1985

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Red Light Revolution — Sam Voutas, 2010

Reservoir Dogs — Quentin Tarantino, 1992

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Ring / Ringu — Hideo Nakata, 1998

Ring 0 / Ringu 0: Bāsudei — Norio Tsuruta, 2000

The Ring — Gore Verbinski, 2002

The Ring Two — Hideo Nakata, 2005

The Rocky Horror Picture Show — Jim Sharman, 1975

Romance — Catherine Breillat, 1999

Route Irish — Ken Loach, 2010

Rust and Bone / De rouille et d'os — Jacques Audiard, 2012

Sabu — Takashi Miike, 2002

Salaryman Kintaro / Sarariiman Kintarō — Takashi Miike, 1999

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Samurai Fiction / SF: One — Hiroyuki Nakano, 1998

Samurai Rebellion / Jōi-uchi: Hairyō tsuma shimatsu — Masaki Kobayashi, 1967

Sanjuro / Tsubaki Sanjūrō — Akira Kurosawa, 1962

Saw — James Wan, 2004

Saw II — Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005

Scarecrow / Kakashi — Norio Tsuruta, 2001

Seven Samurai / Shichinin no samurai — Akira Kurosawa, 1954

Shangri-La / Kin'yū hametsu Nippon: Tōgenkyo no hito-bito — Takashi Miike, 2002

Shield of Straw / Wara no tate — Takashi Miike, 2013

Shimanto River / Shimanto-gawa — Hideo Onchi, 1991

The Shining — Television series, 1997

Shinjuku Outlaw / Shinjuku autoroo — Takashi Miike, 1994

Shinjuku Triad Society / Shinjuku kuroshakai: Chaina mafia sensō — Takashi Miike,
1995

Shiri / Swiri — Kang Je-gyu, 1999

Shogun Assassin — Robert Houston, 1980

The Show — Todd Browning, 1927

Shutter — Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004

Shutter — Masayuki Ochiai, 2008

Silver / Shirubaa — Takashi Miike, 1999

Sin City — Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005

The Sleeping Beauty / La belle endormie — Catherine Breillat, 2010

Somewhere — Sofia Coppola, 2010

Sonatine — Takeshi Kitano, 1993

Sons of Anarchy — Television series, 2008–2014

The Sound of Music — Robert Wise, 1965

Space Sheriff Gavan / Uchū keiji Gyaban — Television series, 1982–present

Special Investigation Frontline / Tokusō saizensen — Television series, 1977–1987

Stake Land — Jim Mickle, 2010

Star Wars — George Lucas, 1977

The Star Wars Holiday Special — Steve Binder, 1978

The Strange Case of Angelica / O Estranho Caso de Angélica — Manoel de Oliveira, 2010

Stray Cat Rock / Nora-neko rokku — Various directors, 1970–1971

The Stupids — John Landis, 1996

Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself! / Katte ni shiyagare!! — Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1995–1996

Sukiyaki Western Django — Takashi Miike, 2007

Super — James Gunn, 2010

Suspiria — Dario Argento, 1977

Sword of Doom / Dai-bosatsu tōge — Kihachi Okamoto, 1966

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance / Boksuneun naui geot — Park Chan-wook, 2002

Takeshis' — Takeshi Kitano, 2005

A Tale of Two Sisters / Janghwa, Hongryeon — Kim Jee-woon, 2003

Tales from the Crypt — Television series, 1989–1996

Talk to the Dead / Tōku tu za deddo — Norio Tsuruta, 2013

Tears of the Black Tiger / Fah talai jone — Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000

Tell Me Something / Telmisseomding — Chang Yoon-hyun

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Tetsuo II: Body Hammer — Shinya Tsukamoto, 1992

Tetsuo: The Bullet Man — Shinya Tsukamoto, 2009

Tetsuo: The Iron Man / Tetsuo — Shinya Tsukamoto, 1989

They Live — John Carpenter, 1988

The Thing — John Carpenter, 1982

The Third Gangster / Daisan no gokudō — Takashi Miike, 1995

This Story of Love / Kono aino monogatari — Toshio Masuda, 1987

Three... Extremes / Saam gang yi — Fruit Chan, Park Chan-wook, and Takashi Miike, 2004

Tokyo Drifter / Tōkyō nagaremono — Seijun Suzuki, 1966

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Tokyo Park / Tōkyō kōen — Shinji Aoyama, 2011

Tokyo Sonata — Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2008

Tokyo Story / Tōkyō monogatari — Yasūjiro Ozu, 1953

Tomorrow / Ashita — Kazuo Kuroki, 1988

Twin Peaks — Television series, 1990–1991

Ultraman Max / Urutoraman Makkusu — Television series, 2005–2006

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives / Loong Boonmee raleuk chat — Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010

The Unholy Three — Todd Browning, 1925

The Uninvited — The Guard Brothers, 2009

The Unknown — Todd Browning, 1927

Vampire Girl vs. Frankenstein Girl / Kyūketsu Shōjo tai Shōjo Furanken — Yoshihiro Nishimura and Naoyuki Tomomatsu, 2009

Visitor Q / Bijitā Q — Takashi Miike, 2001

Voice / Yeogo goedam 4: Moksori — Equan Choi, 2005

War of the Gargantuans / Furankenshutain no kaijū: Sanda tai Gaira — Ishirō Honda, 1966

We Are No Angels / Oretachi wa tenshi ja — Takashi Miike, 1993

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Welcome to the El Palacio / Koko ga uwasa no Eru parashio — Television series, 2011–2013

Whispering Corridors / Yeogo goedam — Park Ki-hyung, 1998

The Wicker Man — Neil LaBute, 2006

The Wicker Man — Robin Hardy, 1973

The Wig / Gabal — Won Shin-yeon, 2005

Wishing Stairs / Yeogo Goedam 3: Yeowoo gyedan — Yun Jae-yeon, 2003

Witches of East End — Television series, 2013–2014

Wolf Creek — Greg McLean, 2005

Yakuza Apocalypse / Gokudou daisensou — Takashi Miike, 2015

Yakuza Demon / Kikoku — Takashi Miike, 2003

Yakuza Taxi / 893 (Yakuza) takushī — Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1994

Yatterman / Yattāman — Takashi Miike, 2009

Yojimbo / Yōjinbō — Akira Kurosawa, 1961

Young Thugs: Innocent Blood / Kishiwada shōnen gurentai: Chikemuri junjō-hen —
Takashi Miike, 1997

Z: Hatenaki kibou — Norio Tsuruta, 2014

Zatoichi — Takashi Miike, 2007

Zebroman / Zeburāman — Takashi Miike, 2004

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