Reviewing distinctive DVD experiences: *NEO* Magazine and the critical reception of Asian media distributors

Jonathan Wroot,
University of Worcester, UK

Abstract:
This article closely analyses the reviews for Asian films from the longest-running UK magazine that specialises in Asian media – *NEO*. The critical reception of Asian films has been investigated before, but what has not been realised is the significance of the DVD distributors in shaping these reviews. As a result of examining how influential the discs’ labels are on the review content, it becomes clear that the critics in *NEO* are assessing more than the film itself. The reviewers are evaluating the entire viewing experience that a home media format, such as DVD, can offer. This is important for Asian media as the *NEO* reviews illustrate how the discs are the primary means of accessing such films for UK audiences. The reviews also suggest that viewers are becoming aware, and have a substantial interest in, how distributors shape their viewing experience.

**Key words:** Asian media, critical reception, distributors, DVD, Japanese films.

DVDs are integral to how Asian media texts, such as Japanese films, are made available to UK consumers. Cinema releases and online outlets (via streaming or downloading) have not been consistently profitable practices for distributors that specialise in Asian films and media. Ever since the popularity of Japanese horror films from 2000 onwards, a steady stream of Asian cinema titles have made their way to the UK via DVD. The importance of this format has also been realised by other distributors of other media exports from Japan, such as anime (animation) and manga (comics). Volumes of manga are often sold alongside DVD releases of Asian films and popular anime TV shows at events such as the London Movies Comics and Media (MCM) Expo. This event has run since 2002, and is now held twice a year, with attendance numbers exceeding 200,000 in 2013. The popularity of these
events has also meant that they have spread to Manchester, Birmingham and Scotland. Distribution companies are central to these activities, as they often announce upcoming DVD releases at Expo events, as well as making others available to purchase. The types of distributors that appear illustrate how high in demand Japanese cultural exports are among UK Asian media consumers. Specialist DVD labels in *anime*, world cinema, and Asian cinema in general, all release Japanese film titles. Such releases then feature regularly in the pages of *NEO* – the longest running UK magazine that is dedicated to Asian media. The content of this publication is similarly focused on Japanese cultural exports, as *anime*, *manga* and films from this country are all featured in the review articles.

The DVDs are central to the critical reception in *NEO*, especially in relation to the films that are reviewed. The aims of the magazine convey how it is a relevant representation of the demand for Asian media in the UK. In 2011 *NEO* began an official Facebook page, which now includes the periodical’s mission statement:

In every issue of the mag, you’ll find features, previews, reviews and guides for the latest anime, manga, Asian movies and games, all written by our team of expert journalists from the UK, the US and Japan. Alongside this exciting line-up you’ll also find profiles on the hottest names in the Asian music world, exclusive interviews and more. Because we’re an independent publication, NEO’s unbiased editorial means that you’ll always get our honest and informed opinions so you know what DVDs, CDs and books are worth spending your money on. So if we think something’s fantastic, we’ll shout it from the rooftops. And if we think something’s bad, we’ll tell it like it is.

The statement shows the magazine has a respect for its readership in the UK, and that its primary focus is Japanese media. The readers of *NEO* consist of a wide range of tastes and media preferences. Experiences and interactions between fans, critics, producers and distributors of Japanese and Asian media are becoming as valued as the DVDs that they purchase. *NEO* magazine emphasises its reviews as the most pertinent content for its readers, through its use of the phrases ‘unbiased editorial’ and ‘honest and informed opinions’. Therefore, the critical perspectives of the reviewers in *NEO* are attuned to their readers’ interests, and are likely to reveal much about UK Asian media audiences when closely analysed. In particular, the reviews demonstrate that specialist distributors of Japanese cinema are given significant attention – both in relation to their films, and the content of the discs on which these titles are released. The *NEO* reviews establish that DVDs are the primary means of purchasing Japanese films in the UK. They also make clear that consumers are concerned with the content of the discs as much as the content of the films. Reviews for the releases of 4Digital Asia and Third Window Films specifically represent these tendencies. The *NEO* critics have reviewed nearly all of their titles, as both companies are UK DVD labels that specialise in Japanese films.
Contexts: Japanese Films, UK DVD Labels, and the Significance of Distribution

4Digital Asia and Third Window have predominantly released Japanese films, which have significantly shaped the UK market for Asian films and media. Tartan Asian Extreme used to be the dominant label for Japanese releases, especially during the years 2000 to 2008. The company concentrated on releasing Asian films through cinema and DVD releases in the UK, and almost all of their titles contained either gruesome or shockingly violent content (Dew, 2007; Shin, 2008; Martin, 2009). This was particularly the case after the critical and commercial success of Japanese films like Ring (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), Audition (dir. Takshi Miike, 1999), and Battle Royale (dir. Kinji Fukasaku). The popularity of these titles led to several other distributors releasing similar films, as well as the overall saturation of the UK home media market with these “extreme” titles. Tartan then went bankrupt in 2008, partially because of its narrow focus on these titles. However, similar releases continue to make their way into the UK market through other distribution companies, such as Manga Entertainment, MVM, and StudioCanal (formerly Optimum) (Leader, 2011). The difference now is that these companies release not only live-action films from Asia and other countries, but also animated releases in the form of either anime TV shows or features films. 4Digital Asia and Third Window are instead unique for only focusing on live-action film releases from Asian countries, and particularly those from Japan. At first glance, it seems these two distributors are following in Tartan’s footsteps, but NEO magazine recognises that these labels offer a lot more than “extreme” content.

4Digital Asia and Third Window began releasing Japanese films in the UK at similar times. Though the former no longer operates as a distributor, both 4Digital Asia and Third Window made a significant impact on the UK market. Up until 2010, these DVD labels predominantly focused on Japanese titles. The majority of these had not been available to purchase in the UK before. After 2010, Third Window began to branch out into releasing more films from Hong Kong and South Korea, as well as Japan. 4Digital Asia then ceased operations within its larger parent label, 4Digital Media, but its staff still continue to provide picture transfer and subtitling services for other independent distributors (such as Third Window). This sort of work is what is appreciated in the NEO reviews, alongside the positive and negative attributes of each film. The NEO critics judge all DVD releases by the same standards, as the discs’ content is rated and reviewed in a similar fashion to the films. A variety of other review sources are quoted on the DVD covers and websites of both 4Digital Asia and Third Window, but none of them assess all of the distributors’ Japanese releases as both films and DVDs (Wroot, 2013). Most other distributors broadly specialise in films from a range of countries, or media from a range of sources (for example, animation as well as live action). In contrast, 4Digital Asia and Third Window are often commended by NEO for providing very different Japanese films from other distributors, as the language of the reviews will demonstrate. The critical reception of DVDs in specialist magazines, such as NEO, shows that discs containing more than just a film are highly praised. The reviews in NEO also demonstrate how essential this media format is in shaping the consumption of Asian media in the UK.
In film research, reviews are often found to be highly revealing forms of evidence. Academic studies of them have led to the discussion of opinions and tastes in relation to films and other media texts. Barbara Klinger initially called for materials outside of the film text to be studied in her article ‘Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture’ (1989). A few years later, she emphasised how useful reviews can be as a means of identifying patterns of discourse:

While there is some evidence that reviews influence attendance decisions, we cannot blithely assume that they dictate public response. Their value for reception studies lies rather in their mobilization of terms that attempt to define how a film will be perceived in the culture at large. (Klinger, 1994: 70)

Janet Staiger had also investigated reviews, and other texts and objects related to film and media, in order to understand the history and reception of particular films (1992). Both Staiger and Klinger then re-addressed the potential scope and outcomes of reception studies in later publications (Klinger, 1997; Staiger, 2000). Their influence is evident through the adoption of similar methods by other researchers. Mark Jancovich has recently written several articles about the many canonical opinions and tastes within newspaper reviews, particularly those of the New York Times from the 1940s (2009; 2010a; 2010b). In Jancovich’s own words: ‘Not only was the New York Times the most prestigious and respected newspaper of the period, but [Bosley] Crowther and his fellow film critics were situated within a classic position of cultural legitimacy.’ (2010a: 48) Here, Jancovich has used a similar approach to Staiger and Klinger, and demonstrated the potential findings that can be discovered from interrogating one publication’s reviews. The NEO reviews have been studied similarly, but the content and discussion of the films’ content is not the most compelling finding. Comments made about the DVD labels are highly significant in light of recent academic perspectives on distribution.

While film distribution is an integral process within the filmmaking industry, it has only come under close analytical scrutiny within the last five years. As a result, the following views have emerged:

It is widely recognised by those working in the film and video sector that distribution is the vital link which connects producers to audiences throughout the whole sector, from the commercial film industry to grassroots community initiatives. But to those outside the sector, that link is largely invisible... (Knight and Thomas, 2011: 13)

Distribution plays a crucial role in film culture – it determines what films we see, and when and how we see them; and it also determines what films we do not see. (Lobato, 2012: 2)
Knight and Thomas see distribution as being ‘invisible’, and Lobato’s statement emphasises this preconception. In contrast, the content of the NEO reviews suggests that film distribution is not invisible at all. The DVD labels are integral to how critics form their opinions on the latest UK Japanese home media releases. Thorough analysis of the reviews illustrates that the distributors’ actions influence the categorisation of the films and their viewers, through terms such as “cult”. The assessment of the overall viewing experience on the discs is evident, in reference to the film and the extras, as well as the status of the distributors alongside the Japanese filmmakers. Above all, the DVD labels are visible because they reflect the demands and interests of Japanese media consumers in the UK – in terms of the films released, and how these titles should be presented on DVD.

Figure 1: NEO magazine review for Fine, Totally Fine.
Cult Distributors: How the Labels are Labelled

In the reviews of NEO magazine, both 4Digital Asia and Third Window are categorised as cult DVD labels. The term appears in two separate issues, and the reviews are written by the same author, Calum Waddell (see Figures 1 and 2). In using ‘cult’ to characterise elements of the DVDs for Fine, Totally Fine (dir. Yosuke Fujita, 2008 – Third Window) and Cyborg She (dir. Jae-young Kwak, 2008 – 4Digital Asia), Waddell refers to both the films and the distributors (Waddell, 2009d; 2009f). The use of cult could summarise the films’ contents –
both are romantic comedies, where the former concerns a love triangle within a group of social misfits, and the latter concerns a young man’s feelings for a female cyborg. However, the term can potentially represent a variety of further connotations, as suggested by recent studies (Gorfinkel, 2008; Martin, 2008; Mathijs and Mendik, 2008: 1-12; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 1-10). Waddell is not the only reviewer in NEO who attaches this label to the distributors or the films they release. Within the pages of NEO, the discussions of the DVD labels and the use of the term ‘cult’ refer to a wide range of tastes and niche markets. This is in relation to Asian media, and the term’s use in NEO highlights the potential interests that such consumers can have in the UK. Analysing the use of cult will therefore reveal what specific connotations are being implied.

The score-boxes, situated separately from the review columns printed in NEO, are particularly indicative of opinions of the labels. In Figures 1 and 2, the images represent one page and half-page reviews, whereas some others can be printed on two pages. In the blue boxes, the films are given a separate star score from the DVD extras included in their UK disc releases (both are scored out of five). The box also includes a critical summation of the film, which is paralleled by an overview of the disc extras. It is in these lines, in the reviews for Fine, Totally Fine and Cyborg She, that opinions on the distributors are expressed, as well as their categorisation as cult DVD labels. In May 2009, Waddell wrote: ‘Kudos to Third Window Films for giving us quality extras on its library of cult eastern insanity. Fine, Totally Fine comes with cast interviews and a theatrical trailer, making for a neat little package.’ (2009d) With Cyborg She, in November 2009, similar inferences are made even though 4Digital Asia is not named by Waddell: ‘Nothing, nothing, nothing… In this current climate it seems fewer DVD labels are splashing the cash on extras.’ (2009f) This line is incorrect because several extras were included on the Cyborg She disc. However, Waddell’s usage of the word ‘cult’ can be interpreted in several ways. The term implies that the films are unusual in comparison to other UK home media releases, both in relation to their content and how they are presented within the DVD format. The reviews’ use of this category is ultimately positive, and it demonstrates what is of value to Asian media consumers in the UK.

Explorations of the history of cult films, and the usage of the term, are widespread within academic studies of cinema. Certain statements help to highlight opinions and views on cult that are shared by other writers, as well as illustrating its complexity – both in general, and in the context of the NEO reviews. In 2008, with Xavier Mendik, Ernest Mathijs charted the many genres and categories of films that cult can encompass (for example, from horror to science-fiction, and their various hybrids and sub-genres). Moreover, cult films are claimed to have ‘an active and lively communal following’ (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008: 11), as well as ‘a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence’ (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 6). However, the term’s use transgresses two other specific meanings, published in 2008, which are illustrated with the following quotes:
Every media consumer is in some sense a ready-made cult viewer – that is, if we accept the identities that media franchises construct for us in advance and use technologies in the ways they are intended. (Gorfinkel, 2008: 38)

The fatal moment for any cult movie is its much-vaunted “crossover” into the mainstream – or at least into a niche market big enough that some scout-representative of the mainstream will be clamouring to get in and colonize it. (Martin, 2008: 40)

‘Cult’ is recognised both as a commercial term that signifies a set of niche tastes that media producers believe they can cater to; and as a category of media that is perceived as separate from mass-produced media texts (specifically, ‘the mainstream’). Respectively, the quoted statements see the two patterns of behaviour as representing different types of cinephilia. Such behaviour is associated with avid fans of films, and has influenced certain media production practices linked to DVD, as found by Barbara Klinger (2008). DVD cinephilia can represent either an aesthetic appreciation of a film, or a desire to know the story of a film’s production and history following its initial release (42-3). Cult can therefore refer to certain generic traits, market perceptions, or media distribution practices. The NEO reviews refer to all of these aspects in the reviews for Fine, Totally Fine and Cyborg She.

Waddell implies both filmic traits and market perceptions with his use of ‘cult eastern insanity’. In making this statement, Japanese cinema is seen to cater to those who prefer films and media located outside of the mainstream, and have a range of characteristics that are broadly seen as out of the ordinary (or, insane). This also appears to be justification for Waddell using terms such as ‘eccentric’, ‘Pinter-esque’ and ‘Reality Bites feel’ to describe Fine, Totally Fine, as well as a reason for suggesting that the potential audience for this film see themselves as preferring cult films and media (2009d). The terms quoted imply both generic and stylistic traits and certain tastes regarding theatre and television, each of which attach a myriad of connotations to one Japanese film. In addition, the cinephilic connotation of cult is applied to both Third Window and 4Digital Asia as DVD labels, in both the Fine, Totally Fine and Cyborg She reviews. Third Window is perceived as a ‘library of cult eastern insanity’ (2009d), and 4Digital Asia is a ‘cult DVD label’ (2009f). Not only does this suggest that they release certain types of films, but it also implies particular expectations for the discs. For both Third Window’s and 4Digital Asia’s releases, the NEO reviews state preference for distributors that add extra content for the benefit of their viewers. The statements infer that the labels attract a cult following because of the treatment of their releases.

Further evidence of this is illustrated in three favourable reviews that specifically assess the distributors’ actions within one issue of NEO. In issue 54, Waddell reviews the teenage comedy drama from Third Window, Kamikaze Girls (dir. Tetsuya Nakashima, 2004); and the fast-moving horror from 4Digital Asia, X-Cross (dir. Kenta Fukasaku, 2007); while David A. McIntee reviews the Third Window release of the tragic but colourful Memories of
Matsuko (dir. Tetsuya Nakashima, 2006). In this latter review, McIntee confirms that a variety of DVD special features are appreciated, with the statement that both a making-of and a storyboard-to-film comparison are ‘not bad at all!’ (2009). However, in the Kamikaze Girls review, it is not just the DVD extras that are evaluated alongside the film. Waddell says that the packaging is ‘gnarly’, in addition to the disc containing ‘slender, but worthwhile’ extras (2009a). Aesthetic appraisal is not limited to the film text itself, but extends to the packaging, the menus and special features. In the second review by Waddell, he states that ‘4Digital Asia has blessed X-Cross with a solid DVD presentation – with extra features that include cast and crew interviews, and a making-of documentary.’ (2009b) Here, the DVD extras are seen as bonus content that accompanies the ‘solid’ presentation of the film’s visuals, and the well-received films. 4Digital Asia and Third Window are seen as exemplary labels because of how they ‘bless’ their DVDs with ‘gnarly’ packaging and extras. The reviews imply that this treatment matches the diverse traits and qualities that can be found in the films released by these distributors. The critics make it clear that Japanese film fans in the UK expect extra material as part of their home viewing experience.

The NEO reviews illustrate how the DVD labels can appeal to many niche (or cult) tastes through their releases for the UK market. The reviews state the qualities of the films that can potentially appeal to existing markets. They outline how DVD media and extras represent a niche market, suggesting that this highlights another cult following of consumer interest. Essentially, the cult Japanese film fan seeks out unique Japanese films – in terms of their contents and traits, and their presentation on DVD. This is in sharp contrast to the promotional strategies of other labels, such as Tartan Asia Extreme, where the characteristics of the films were often emphasised more than the features of the discs (Dew, 2007; Shin, 2008; Martin, 2009). Therefore, the NEO reviews imply that the interests of UK consumers of Asian media have moved on from shocking imagery and violence. They now seek out films with various characteristics, as well as a viewing experience that makes full use of the DVD format. Further examples of critical reception within NEO also illustrate that consumers want extra material to supplement the specific characteristics of the films.

What’s in a Disc?: Critical Assessments of the DVD Experience
The reviews in NEO place strong emphasis on the DVD format for film-viewing, which reflects their readers’ interests. This is perhaps most evident in the reviews’ presentation in the magazine, as the discs’ extras are assessed separately from the films. However, there is more to the emphasis of the DVD format than these segregated elements. The NEO reviewers manage to see the films before their official release in the UK. The DVD could potentially be viewed with the extras on it; or they may not yet be available; or the film may be screened theatrically before its DVD release. The reviews for the 20th Century Boys films (dir. Yukihiko Tsutsumi, 2008–2009 – 4Digital Asia) illustrate these different means of viewing the films by the critics in NEO. In addition, the reviews signify a prominent pattern, which is a preference for the DVD format over other means of film-viewing. The reviews assess the contents of the discs, and often praise them as an ideal means for UK audiences.
to watch the films released by 4Digital Asia and Third Window. These patterns imply that Asian media consumers ultimately desire the DVD release over other media formats.

DVD studies help to highlight the benefits of the format that the NEO reviews refer to, and in turn illustrate how DVD media adds to the film-viewing experience. Most studies of discs of films and television shows do argue this, but for different reasons. Researchers such as Craig Hight have attempted to demonstrate how DVDs create opportunities for interaction for their viewers. His case study leads to him to conclude that they mostly provide commercial opportunities for filmmakers and production companies to market the films and related products (Hight, 2005: 12-14). However, Martin Barker and Kate Egan also investigated the same discs used in Hight’s case study – the extended-edition DVDs of the Lord of the Rings films (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001-2003). They found that both readers of the books and viewers of the films valued the DVDs and their extra content, as it allowed for reflection on the filmmakers’ adaptation of a well-known story (Egan and Barker, 2008). These findings show that viewers with interests in both film and literature find the DVD format to be the most rewarding, because these various contexts can be addressed within the discs’ extra material. Within the NEO reviews, the DVD releases are praised for similar reasons.

Other writers have similarly claimed that the wide range of interactions offered by DVD can create diverse meanings and pleasures for viewers. Aaron Barlow (2005) argues that the medium has fundamentally changed the film-watching experience, and it appeals to a broad spectrum of viewers. He argues this frequently throughout his book, as these excerpts show:

It is unlikely, however, that the DVD will disappear as a discrete item, replaced by Internet access to movies... This is a technology where the medium is certainly changing the message it conveys... (27)

Most people hunger to be more than passive viewers. The “couch potato” cliché never really captured the whole of what was being experienced or desired, as the explosion of the interactive Internet has shown. (159)

Though compared to online media, DVD is seen as a separate medium that offers unique ways of interacting with films and other media texts. This perspective is paralleled within NEO magazine. The reviews promote the benefits and possibilities of the DVD format, and even suggest that it is superior to other means of film-viewing. Furthermore, they address how the DVD releases can satisfy niche consumer interests in Japanese cinema and Asian media.

The reviews for the 20th Century Boys films are particularly helpful in illustrating these patterns, as they chart the different formats in which the films could be viewed in the UK (courtesy of 4Digital Asia). The first article on this series of films was a double-page feature (in contrast to Figures 1 and 2). The review in Issue 56 of NEO was printed when the first
film was being screened in several UK cinemas, prior to its DVD release. Because of this, the assessment of the discs’ extras reads as follows:

At the time of writing the final line-up of extra features for the DVD release has yet to be properly nailed down, but expect a two-disc Special Edition with lots of behind the scenes goodies, and a 24 page Book of Prophecies of your very own. From what we at NEO have already seen, this will be a keeper for fans of the flick! (West, 2009b)

The review was then followed up by a shorter one in the next issue, which both claimed that the DVD was ‘packed to the rafters’ with extras and confirmed the above details for the first film’s disc release (Waddell, 2009c). Finally, the entire trilogy was reviewed in Issue 72, following the release of a four-disc box-set containing the films and several extras. Again, the DVD extras were assessed separately:

With an entire disc devoted to bonus features, this generous package boasts four hours’ worth of extras. These include interviews with the cast members, a documentary on the Japanese premiere, extensive behind-the-scenes footage and a lavish 24 page booklet. (West, 2010a)

In all these reviews, the DVD content is regularly praised and emphasised as the most rewarding reason for buying a copy of the film. The assessment of the extras also parallels some of the comments made about the films, suggesting that the experience offered by the films can be extended by the distinctive contents of 4Digital Asia’s discs.

For example, in Issue 56, the film’s release is listed in the review as ‘theatrical’, yet David West still provides a thorough list of the expected extras on the 20th Century Boys DVD (2009b). The review states that Japanese film fans will find that the disc release is worth waiting for, which implies that the extras are highly desired by these viewers. A ‘Book of Prophecies’ booklet is included, which references a key text in the film’s narrative, about former childhood friends trying to stop apocalyptic events. The large amount of behind-the-scenes footage is then labelled as ‘goodies’ (West, 2009b). The follow-up review in Issue 57 then categorises the film as the start of a ‘Lord of the Rings style fantasy trilogy’, and suggests that it is a ‘bum-numbing epic’ for those who watch both the films and the numerous extras (Waddell, 2009c). However, parallels are most evident when comparing West’s assessment of the films and the DVD extras in his final review of the trilogy. In Issue 72, he states that the trilogy is ‘long, complicated, perhaps inevitably patchy due to its size, but 20th Century Boys is unflinchingly faithful to Urasawa’s original epic [in reference to the manga the films are adapted from]. The DVD extras are described as comparably ‘epic’, through the use of the words ‘generous package’ and ‘boasts’ in reference to the four hours of content contained within the special features (West, 2010a). The extras scored 5 stars, suggesting they are everything DVD viewers could wish for, as well as being worthwhile.
material that will appeal to fans of the films. 4Digital Asia is being praised for its actions in distributing the 20th Century Boys films; appropriately supplementing their ‘epic’ content; and acknowledging their roots within other popular Japanese media (e.g. manga).

The NEO reviewers are of the opinion that the DVD release adds to the experience of watching a film. The critics believe that all discs should meet this expectation, in addition to praising discs that do so. For example, several reviews do not simply give a low score to DVDs that include few extras, but state outright dissatisfaction at their minimal contents. Earlier, the review for the science-fiction rom-com Cyborg She was mentioned as discussing 4Digital Asia’s actions as a distributor, and this followed an emphasis that the DVD contained ‘nothing’ (Waddell, 2009f). Similarly, Third Window’s release of the sex-centred comedy drama Lala Pipo (dir. Masayuki Miyano, 2009) is summarised as containing the ‘original theatrical trailer and that’s yer lot’ (Waddell, 2009g). This colloquial phrasing infers that the reviewer was expecting much more than the trailer in the DVD’s contents. However, both these DVDs did contain several special features when they were released.13

The review of the 4Digital Asia disc release of Hidden Fortress: The Last Princess (dir. Shinji Higuchi, 2008) reveals why some reviews are not always able to correctly confirm the content of the DVD extras. In the assessment of the extra content for this action-packed period adventure, Waddell says: ‘Nothing confirmed at time of going to press.’ (2010) This statement does not simply reveal the lack of information that the reviewers sometimes have to contend with before a DVD’s release. An expectation for the disc’s contents is still created, implying that those who wish to seek out the film should keep an eye out for what extras may be contained.

In its reviews, NEO magazine reveals that it believes that the digital format of DVD is capable of offering viewers more than just a film-viewing experience. The reviews not only reveal the diverse types of Japanese films that are in demand in the UK, but also the ways in which these films should be presented. The magazine’s reviewers explain how the DVD releases do, or do not, add to the generic traits and qualities specific to each film. The appraisal of the extras demonstrates appreciation of the distributors’ practices, in addition to recognising and discussing their actions. The reviews for the 20th Century Boys films have particularly illustrated how the content of the extras can be compared with the characteristics of the films. In other examples, the films’ distinct traits are specifically attributed to the UK distributors as much as the Japanese filmmakers. These comments highlight an underlying trend throughout all of the reviews in NEO magazine.

Authored Expectations: Parallels between Authorship and DVD Labels

Comments concerning authorship are frequently found within the review for the relationship drama Kakera (dir. Momoko Ando, 2009 – released by Third Window). This is in reference to the director, decisions in making the film, as well as the story’s origins as manga.14 Following these points, the DVD extras are stated as providing ‘viewing pleasure’, which implies an appreciation for the effort that Third Window has gone to in putting together the disc release (West, 2010b). This review supports claims made throughout the
article, regarding criticism of the DVD labels as a whole, in addition to the individual films and disc releases. Other examples illustrate similar expectations within the NEO reviews regarding the distributors’ actions and the special features’ content. Kakera is not the only review that refers to a film’s authorship, and a film’s director can even be used as a basis through which to identify characteristics similar to other films. Furthermore, the authorship of the releases is frequently attributed to the distributors, and the critics often praise the DVD label as much as the director.

References to authorship are not only prominent in NEO, but also in previous studies of reviews, which helps to highlight its significance. Opinions and comments that circulate around particular directors have often been examined to chart perceptions of a certain filmmaker as well as their films. For example, Klinger has charted how critical opinions of Douglas Sirk’s films changed over time, signifying how he was first identified as a specialist in a specific genre (particularly melodrama), and later as an established auteur (1992: 69-96). Parallel views have then been found within studies of Asian film directors. Oliver Dew argues that critical perspectives of directors as either genre specialists or artistic auteurs are regularly evident within reviews of films from Asian countries (2007: 53-7). However, analyses of DVD media have revealed other potential authorial influences that affect films. Brookey and Westerfelhaus conclude that Pixar reinforces its brand image as a production company within the content of the extras found on DVDs of its films (2005). Tom Brown later made a similar argument following the study of certain disc releases of Disney films (2008). While brand image and media promotion are the focus of both of these articles, essentially they are referring to the authorship of the DVDs as well as the films. The NEO reviews discuss both the Japanese filmmakers and their UK distributors in several instances. Such comments demonstrate how influential each of these factors can be when assessing a DVD release. The critics’ expectations and preconceptions specific to the authorship of both 4Digital Asia’s and Third Window’s discs are particularly evident.

Authorship, regarding both the film and its DVD, is noted most often within the review of Kakera. At the top of the page, before any other details of the film are mentioned, director Momoko Ando’s family ties to Japanese cinema are explained through the fact that her sister is an actress (Sakura Ando, who stars in another Third Window release, Love Exposure – dir. Sion Sono, 2008). West then integrates several other facts about the film’s crew within the review, before awarding the film four stars:

Shot by veteran cameraman Hirokazu Ishii, Kakera has a very traditional Japanese visual style that brings to mind the films of Yasujiro Ozu. Each frame is meticulously composed, camera movement is selective and sedate, while the colour palette is subdued. This fits the tone perfectly, as does the melancholy score by former Smashing Pumpkins guitarist James Iha. (West, 2010b)

The film is being explained as a collaborative effort, and West sees it as important to identify those responsible for the elements that contribute to the four star score. However,
Ando’s directorial style is the overall focus within the review, which is highly significant. This is Third Window’s first release from a female director, and this is perhaps not surprising, because female film directors are rare in Japan (Blair, 2014). Ando is therefore seen as the unique creative force that successfully brings these various elements together within her directorial debut. The other consequence of this is that her filmmaking skills are compared to acclaimed male Japanese directors, such as Ozu.\(^\text{15}\)

However, significant attention is given to the disc’s other contents, which are appreciated almost as much as the film itself. Three stars are awarded to the DVD extras, and West states:

For your extra viewing pleasure there is a 28 minute conversation between film critic Jasper Sharp and Momoko Ando, plus a 22-minute Q&A session from when the film played at the ICA in London. On top of that you get the theatrical trailer for *Kakera* plus trailers for other Third Window releases. (2010b)

The film’s authorship is central to the extras’ content, in addition to Ando being the focus within the rest of the review for *Kakera*. West is not just utilising this coincidence as a means of linking the film’s characteristics to the DVD’s special features. By claiming that Third Window provides ‘extra viewing pleasure’, he is highlighting the distributor’s efforts in releasing the film on DVD for UK audiences, as well as the extra material they were able to gather for the disc release of *Kakera*. As a result, Third Window is perceived by *NEO* as a distributor that frequently aims to provide UK audiences with unique viewing experiences on their DVDs. They pick out films with distinctive characteristics and package them to reflect these traits. Such judgments of the distributor mean that high expectations subsequently exist for all of the label’s DVD releases. Similar preconceptions are illustrated within other examples of the *NEO* reviews for Third Window’s releases.

Further evidence of these patterns is found within the review for *Funuke, Show Some Love You Losers!* (dir. Daihachi Yoshida, 2007). Waddell sums up his opinion of the film in one sentence: ‘This slice of manga-inspired madness is a tad overlong, but it is still nutty enough to warrant a watch.’ (2009e) In addition, the film is given a score of three stars, and so this statement equates to an appraising recommendation for UK viewers. Despite these comments, the extras are only awarded two stars, and Waddell explains that there is ‘[[just a series of trailers for this and other Third Window films – although, to be fair, there must be an hour’s worth of previews!’ (2009e). Though there are minimal extras, Third Window’s efforts are still appreciated. This parallels the review on the same page of this article, which is for *Fine, Totally Fine*, and is where Waddell calls Third Window’s films a ‘library of cult eastern insanity’ (Waddell, 2009d). The terminology used for the DVD releases does not just characterise the films. It encompasses the whole viewing experience that the DVD labels have constructed.

4Digital Asia’s releases are discussed similarly within *NEO*, both in regards to the directors of the films and the label’s actions as a distributor. One particularly indicative
review is for the film *Starfish Hotel* (dir. John Williams, 2006). It is not favoured by Waddell, as he only awards the film 2 and a half stars, and states that it makes the puzzling films of David Lynch seem simplistic in comparison. However, he does concede that the presentation on the DVD is ‘first class’, both because of the visual quality of the film, and the inclusion of a making-of and interview with the director in the extras (Waddell, 2008).

Waddell shows signs of appreciating and regularly expecting a variety of content within 4Digital Asia’s releases. No matter the quality of the film, the DVD will be visually pleasing, and it is likely to have considerable additional content. This opinion of 4Digital Asia’s releases is especially highlighted by a unique review from 2009.

The review for *Death Note: L Change The World* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2008) has an extreme contrast between the assessment of the film and its DVD extras. West writes that the film ‘[s]ucks like a Dyson on overdrive’ (2009a), and only awards it one star. West then awards the disc’s extras four stars, and decides that they are worth watching out of context from the film. His assessment of the special features supports this conclusion:

> While no amount of extras can compensate for a stinky movie, you cannot fault 4Digital Asia for trying. The two disc set comes with a booklet, an interview with Kenichi Matsuyama [the film’s lead actor], the obligatory ‘Making Of’ documentary and lots of features from the Japanese press campaign. (2009a)

West is aware that UK audiences are unlikely to buy the film for the extras alone, but he still makes the case for the DVD’s content. These comments suggest that interviews with particular actors, and insights into Japanese media promotion, are of particular interest to UK consumers as much as are the Japanese films. The review therefore confirms that a significant factor in the reception of 4Digital Asia’s releases is the package that they put together outside of the film’s content.

Authorship remains to be a recurring trait within the critical reception of films, though this does not only concern the film’s content. The *NEO* reviews demonstrate that the actions of a distributor can be interpreted as an authored trait within a DVD release. Moreover, expectations and preconceptions of the standards of the disc releases have been found alongside discussions of both the film directors and distributors as authors. While this could be argued as a trait that recurs only throughout all the examples discussed in this article, the uniform format of all the critics’ opinions illustrates that this occurs within other reviews in *NEO*. Analysis of these articles has illustrated how much the DVD distributors are an integral factor within the comments about both the films and their disc releases. Both 4Digital Asia and Third Window are stated as responsible for the quality of the films, as well as whether or not the discs meet the expectations that *NEO* has for the DVD format.

**Conclusion**

The *NEO* reviews are very revealing for several reasons. The critical reception of the DVD releases from both 4Digital Asia and Third Window has demonstrated the diverse UK market
that the distributors were catering to from 2008 to 2010. The term cult, regularly used by the NEO reviewers, has a variety of connotations attached to it which signify the various tastes and preferences of UK viewers of Japanese films on DVD. The distributors’ categorisation as cult has been illustrated in addition to their releases being labelled as suited to fans of fantasy epics, romance, science-fiction, stylistic directors, and numerous other niche tastes. These assessments of the films do not just signify the potential markets for these films in the UK, but also the other aspects of the DVD releases. Moreover, NEO demonstrates the wide appeal that the discs’ special features can have for consumers with interests in different types of Asian media.

These patterns have continued in later reviews. Though 4Digital Asia ceased releasing new Japanese films in 2010, Andrew Kirkham and his colleagues maintained their digitising and subtitling work through the companies Japanglish and Silk Purse Enterprises, and launched Cine Du Monde.¹⁷ This name is reflected in the label’s releases, as its current output includes English-language releases as well as Asian films. The English-language titles are not mentioned in NEO, but the label’s Asian releases are reviewed. One example is Re-Cycle from 2006 (dir. Danny Pang and Oxide Pang). Waddell’s review compares the film to Japanese horror cinema, specifically in his summary statement: ‘Goosebumps and silliness in equal measures, Re-Cycle should keep anyone who misses the glory days of J-horror knee-deep in spooks.’ (2012) Furthermore, Waddell is still appreciative of the efforts of the DVD label, as seen in the next few lines: ‘Audio commentary, special effects documentary, footage from the premiere, plenty of cast and crew chit-chat, and more besides. Colour us impressed’. (2012) From these sections of this article, the actions of the distributor are obviously still integral to the reviews in NEO – whether they are specialists in Asian film or not.

Further evidence for this can be found in a later review of a Third Window release. Though the label did begin to release more films from Hong Kong and South Korea after 2010, its Japanese releases still get significant coverage in NEO. This is illustrated by the double-page review for the psychological thriller Shady (dir. Ryohei Watanabe, 2012). Once again, Waddell’s summation of the DVD extras is highly significant: ‘Nothing available on the extras front as we went to press, but we are promised interviews with the director and (most welcomingly) both leading ladies.’ (2014) As indicated by this statement, the film’s two leads are praised highly in the review with the words ‘sterling cast’ and other similar lines: ‘We come to like these girls and to enjoy their company. This element, especially coming from a young male director (just 24 years old when Shady was made), is worthy of applause.’ (2014) But perhaps most importantly, the extras are looked forward to by Waddell as a result of this appraisal, suggesting that viewers should anticipate them. This speaks volumes about the NEO critics’ expectations for disc extras from this specific distributor and, subsequently, its standards for other DVD labels. The potential viewing experience of DVD releases is highly praised within NEO. It is also not seen as a negative when a film is only available in this format (in contrast to Blu-Ray and online streaming). This
was the case for both Re-Cycle and Shady (Waddell, 2012; 2014), which demonstrates how integral DVD is to distributors that target UK consumers of Asian media.

Various types of films have been discussed throughout this article, though most have been labelled ‘cult’, and both 4Digital Asia and Third Window have demonstrated a consistent treatment of them. In addition, the reviews in NEO have illustrated a constant appreciation of the efforts of the DVD label alongside the characteristic traits of the films reviewed (whether they are positive or negative). The majority of the space in the review articles may be dedicated to criticism of the films, but these opinions are closely tied to the assessments of the discs’ packaging and extra contents. Within NEO magazine, the names and reputations of particular distribution labels are used as standards against which other releases can be judged. This is a significant reflection of the interests of UK consumers of Japanese films and other forms of Asian media. Viewers of these titles, and readers of NEO, clearly have an interest in not just the content of the DVD releases, but also the work that makes them available.

Biographical note:
Jonathan Wroot teaches Film Studies classes at the University of Worcester – specifically on Audience Research, Authorship, Cult and Exploitation Cinema, and Film Reviewing. His PhD thesis investigates the distribution and marketing of Japanese films on DVD in the UK – through the packaging, extras, trailers and websites of 4Digital Asia and Third Window (in addition to their reviews in NEO). Some of these findings have been published in the online journal Frames, and other findings have been presented at conferences in Bournemouth, Coventry, London, Manchester and St Andrews. His PhD was awarded by the University of East Anglia. Contact: jlwroot@googlemail.com.

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Notes:
3 NEO magazine was launched in 2004. It is now not the only UK publication dedicated to Asian media, as a new magazine was launched in 2012 called MyM – ‘Home’, MyM Magazine website, http://www.mymags.net/ (accessed 22/04/2014).
4 ‘NEO Magazine – About’, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/neomagazineuk/info (accessed 22/04/2014). This statement was formerly on the NEO website, but the magazine and its webpages were redesigned in 2011.
5 One DVD release from Third Window, Turtles Are Surprisingly Fast Swimmers (dir. Satoshi Miki, 2005), was not reviewed in any issues of NEO from 2008 to 2010 – despite its release date on 23/02/2009. NEO was aware of the film, though, as it mentions the DVD’s release date in Issue 53, January 2009, 22; and also as part of an ‘Asian Movies 2009’ preview feature in Issue 54, February 2009, 36. In the feature article, the film is described as ‘hilarious’, which implies an opinion by the author, David West, though it is not categorised as a review.
9 Cyborg She was released by 4Digital Asia on 26th October 2009. Its special features contained a making-of; a special effects featurette; footage from the film’s showings at the Yubari Film Festival, its premiere, and its official national release day; interviews; and several trailers and TV spots.
10 Harold Pinter is a critically acclaimed playwright, who was awarded a Nobel Prize in 2005, suggesting that his style of drama and writing is unique – ‘Home Page’, Harold Pinter website, http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/index.shtml (accessed 23/04/2014).

11 *Ibid*.

12 West’s mention of Urasawa Naoki is a reference to the original *manga* that the film is based on – which is also explained on the 4Digital Asia website: ‘20th Century Boys: Introduction’, *4Digital Media* website, [http://www.4digitalmedia.com/20cb/](http://www.4digitalmedia.com/20cb/) (accessed 23/04/2014).

13 The extras for *Cyborg She* were explained earlier. *Lala Pipo* was released by Third Window on 8th February 2010. Its extras included a making-of, an interview with the cast, and its trailer.

14 The review explains that the film is an adaption of the manga *Love Vibes* by Sakurazawa Erika.

