Distributors, Discs and Disciples: Exploring The Home Media Renaissance

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#dddhmr2015
Thank you all for agreeing to present papers and come along to the symposium today. The initial idea for this research topic was the edited collection first and foremost – after discussing my own research interests with potential publishers. My very first idea was a research project based entirely on Arrow Video – who I will discuss a bit further later on – but publishers were quick to tell me that an overview of more than one distributor would be of interest, in terms of what is currently going on in the home media market.

The trick then was to decide if I was able to study such an overview of the UK home media market on my own, or if it would make more sense to call on the expertise of colleagues and fellow researchers.

Because I am still in the early stages of my academic career, I decided to pursue the latter option by seeing what the response would be to holding an event such as this. I am overwhelmingly happy to say that there was a great response to my call for papers – meaning there are several researchers here today interested in this topic – and not just me. Also, this interest expands beyond the UK and to other countries. Today we have researchers present from the USA, and several papers also focus on media case studies that are non-English language productions.

Furthermore my ostentatious and grandiose title for the symposium is now, I believe, fully justified... (I did not believe that ‘revolution’ or ‘rebirth’ was appropriate, and instead chose ‘renaissance’ in the subtitle – as the home media industry is in a state of flux, but it is also very strong, as I will explain...)

(The book proposal will be finalised after the symposium – Andy Willis has very kindly joined us today, and he has agreed to be co-editor for the publication...) (We also have a Twitter hashtag – please use it as frequently as possible both during and after today...)
But what is the reasoning behind the grandiose title of today’s symposium?

In the last few years – from 2010 onwards (when I began my PhD research) – I have noticed an increasing profile for physical media releases of films on DVD and Blu-Ray. Digital formats have also increased in their presence – whether it is through online streaming or downloading, through rental or subscription services, or through other illegitimate means – such as file-sharing, bit-torrenting, or other forms of digital piracy.

In the face of the rise of these digital formats and platforms, distributors of DVDs and Blu-Rays have become increasingly inventive and proactive with how they market their releases. Live events and travelling campaigns have accompanied UK releases dates for films and TV shows – from The Lego Movie to the latest series of Game of Thrones, to name just a few examples from last year.

Cakes, competitions and other giveaway promotions have also regularly accompanied the home media releases of films and televisions shows – as well as their initial releases in cinemas or on television screens, or even other formats. This has of course been a practice that has been long established – ever since the years of VHS and Betamax, and before. The difference nowadays is that there is an ever-increasing range and variety of these sorts of accompanying texts and artefacts in relation to the releases of both niche and mainstream titles – and some of the papers today will illustrate examples of these.
The Raygun Newsletter (archive)
http://ymlp.com/archive_gejsqwhgjgu.php

Home Media Magazine
http://www.homemediamaagazine.com/
The continued presence of simultaneous DVD and Blu-Ray releases is also of great significance. Blu-Ray has not been the runaway success that DVD was when it was first released, and neither has DVD gone quietly into the night in the face of rival home media formats (unlike VHS). Facts and figures about home media in the UK, and some other countries, make clear both the continuing resilience and popularity of physical media releases – as well as the potential for it to still be a very lucrative market.

One of the first things I did when setting out on my own PhD research on the distribution and marketing of Japanese films was to sign up to a number of electronic newsletters and trade sources – mainly to see if I was barking up the wrong tree or not, in terms of the significance of DVD and Blu-Ray releases.

Thankfully, each year since 2010, has provided me with a range of emails and web-links to news stories and reports that continue to detail the profits that production studios and distributors make from home media releases of films.

I have literally hundreds of these emails – especially since subscribing to Home Media Magazine and The Raygun. I have not had the time to rigorously research and categorise these newsletters (though that could be a potential future research project). Instead, I can pick out some key facts now – which I will think will act as helpful context for many of the papers today.
First, it must be said that these sources both report on developments in digital distribution and piracy as well as the success of physical media releases. The status of existing and new digital subscriptions services and companies, from a variety of countries, are regularly reported on in Home Media Magazine. The UK is the main focus of The Raygun – via its weekly newsletter, in addition to its website and Twitter feed – and it also reports on a large number of digital streaming and downloading providers – as well as the latest arrests and legislation moves against practitioners of piracy.

However, both news sources also regularly report on figures accumulated by institutions such as the British Video Association. The BVA now has a broad definition of video – as they include digital downloads and streams into this term, as well as Blu-Ray and DVD. Nonetheless, it is still these latter two physical formats that still make up the majority of the BVA’s figures and statistics.

For example, at the end of 2014, the UK was listed as the third largest market in the world for home media retail. Consumer spending in this market totalled £2.18 billion. £1.26 billion was spent specifically on purchasing Blu-Rays and DVDs.

Both The Raygun and Home Media Magazine reported on these figures – and Home Media Magazine has also reported on the status of other countries’ home media markets.

Germany’s home media market in 2014 totalled $1 billion. In Japan, physical home media spending totalled $3.9 billion in 2014, which counts for 84% of home media retail spending (and is quite surprising, in a country that heavily taxes home media releases).

In addition, while DVD and Blu-Ray sales have gradually dropped year-on-year, 2014 saw disc sales in the USA still totalling $6.93 billion.
Thursday, April 30, 2015

Home Entertainment Doing Fine Despite Misguided Media Criticisms

The business is evolving, toward a digital distribution model, but if you look at the numbers you’ll find the total amount of money consumers are spending on bringing movies and TV shows into their homes and mobile devices has remained remarkably solid. The media’s cries that home entertainment’s days are numbered have become so frequent, and yet so hollow, that it is a wonder that anyone still takes them seriously.

Read Full Story >>

http://www.homemediamagazine.com/tks-take/home-entertainment-doing-fine-despite-misguided-media-criticisms
This slide shows one of the most recent articles from Home Media Magazine – signifying the disparity between tabloid perceptions of home media, and the reality of the industry...
Home media markets are therefore still some of the most lucrative for film production and distribution companies – and these figures partly help to explain some of the increasingly diverse and unique promotional activities that distributors utilise for marketing and promotion.

They also raise questions, such as:
...are we in an era which will see the last hurrah of physical home media? Will their popularity continue? Are digital formats now truly overtaking from discs, or is something else happening?

There are also a range of theoretical concepts and frameworks that can be applied to the behaviour and activity that will be discussed today – from paratexts to intertexts, and from ancillary media to diegetic portals, as well as the conventions and characteristics of promotional media such as websites and trailers. I hope to debate many of these with the delegates and attendees today, as I have my own views on them, but I am also eager to hear about new perspectives and arguments – following from these publications...
A lot of my PhD research into Japanese films illustrates practices that have been the basis for these theories and concepts. However, I have regularly presented on my PhD case studies at past conferences (namely the DVD labels 4Digital Asia and Third Window). Instead, I wanted to give a brief overview of diverse distribution and marketing practices through another Japanese title that has been regularly released and re-released in the UK over the past 15 years.

My hope in briefly illustrating this case study is also that it will correlate or contrast with other case studies in the delegates’ papers, and that this will help generate discussion and debate following the presentations.

Battle Royale was first released theatrically in the UK by Tartan, not long after its release in Japan in 2000. Along with Ring from 1998, and Audition from 1999, Battle Royale helped to establish the Tartan Asia Extreme sub-label for Tartan Video. This would go on to be a roaring success – mainly by way of releasing East Asian horror films on a regular basis within the UK. However, by 2008, several imitators arose, and Tartan had simply saturated the market with too many gruesome East Asian films – which was one of the reasons that the company went bankrupt in 2008.

Though not strictly a horror, Battle Royale is definitely gruesome. It is a no-holds-barred depiction of a battle to the death between a class of students – who are forced into the situation by a near-future totalitarian government – that provides them both with weapons and explosive collars that restrict their attempts to escape the battle.

Based on an equally successful and blackly comic novel, Battle Royale was a huge success in Japan, and was re-released several times ever since the year 2000. The same has happened in other countries around the world – particularly the UK. Tartan released the theatrical version of the film on DVD in 2001, and then a two-disc extended version with numerous extras shortly afterwards. As with several other Tartan discs, they have now become collector’s items.
It was not until 2010 that another company decided to step in and re-release Battle Royale in the UK. Arrow Video acquired the rights to this in 2010. At first, it re-released the film with a cheap package re-design, and kept the DVD menus and extras exactly the same as they had been on the Tartan DVDs. However, after realising the continuing global popularity of the title (because it has always been released as Region 0 in the UK), Arrow gave the home media release of Battle Royale a major make-over. This coincided with the film’s ten year anniversary, and its cinematic re-release in Japan, which added 3D effects.
No less than 3 discs were included in this release – one for the theatrical cut of the film; one for the extended cut; and another full of special features. Booklets were also included, which contain critical essays about the film, an interview with the director, and even a specially produced comic that acts as a prequel to the film – not to mention posters and postcards. It was made a limited edition release – with 5000 copies available on DVD, and 10,000 copies available on Blu-Ray. For evident reasons, it has now become a collector’s item.
However, this is not the only way that Battle Royale has become profitable for Arrow. They have continued to re-release it in other formats. The discs and extras from the special edition are still available – in both DVD and Blu-Ray – minus the lavish packaging and printed material. A single disc edition is also available, which is coloured blue to distinguish it by genre (blue is for science fiction).

In addition, Battle Royale’s single disc package was re-released by Arrow with extra flames in its artwork – to coincide with the release of The Hunger Games Catching Fire in 2013. If anyone thinks the plot of Battle Royale sounds familiar, then you would perhaps not be surprised to know that it inspired Suzanne Collins’s books, and therefore the successful Hunger Games film franchise.

All these releases not only illustrate the release strategies of Arrow Video, but also (I would argue) other distributors of home media – in the following ways...
Arrow has released several films as part of its Arrow Academy sub-label – which is for films that have won major awards in past decades, or been heralded as masterpieces by film critics (such as Bicycle Thieves). Though Battle Royale does not fit into this category (a fact which I would dare to argue with), its limited edition release shares several similarities with Arrow Academy titles – especially in terms of elaborate packaging, and numerous extra features.

Multiple extra materials accompany many of the Arrow Video releases, which are now also released in dual format Blu-Ray and DVD packages. Many of these are also promoted through trailers that specifically advertise the features of the discs – from the packaging to the discs’ special features. These trailers are released through YouTube, and are categorised as Arrow Video Stories.

Many of Arrow’s films are also released through its ArrowDrome sub-label, which celebrates cult films, but also recognises that this category of cinema is made up of multiple genres – from westerns and samurai films, to horror, giallo, action and erotica (to name a few – each are distinguished by their own colour).

Arrow are also not above commercial exploitation – as is clear through Battle Royale, but also through another title it is re-releasing in June – the 1959 Hammer Studios’ adaptation of The Hound of the Baskervilles, starring Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. In a year that is seeing Hammer films continue its new roster of film productions; there is also the cinematic depiction of an elderly Sherlock Holmes by Ian McKellen; and the continued broadcasting of the TV series Sherlock and Elementary. This means you do not have to be a detective to see that Arrow is easily cashing in one of the most enduring and continuously popular literary characters.
I briefly now want to move back to Battle Royale, as it also continues to be popular through other formats.

Battle Royale has been shown often on streaming services such as MUBI, Film4 on demand, and other popular platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. It has even been broadcast several times on TV in the UK – especially on late night slots on Film 4.

Despite my own interests in physical media releases – which are shared by many of the delegates presenting today – it is important to remember these other formats and platforms. DVDs and Blu-Rays exist in tandem with these alternatives in today’s media environment, and do not just compete with them.

I believe that some of today’s papers will illustrate this co-existence of different media formats – as well as explore many different aspects of certain case studies – as illustrated through today’s panels...
Panel One – The current home media market
Chair: Dr Mikel Koven

Shane O'Sullivan, Kingston University
‘Documentaries and The UK Home Video Market’

Ksenia Malykh, University of East Anglia
‘“To own or not to own?..” Video on demand, DVD and family everyday viewing and consumption practices’

Roderik Smits, University of York
‘The Distribution Business: sales agents, gatekeepers, and digital platforms’
Panel Two – Case Studies, Companies and Their Means of Distribution
Chair: Dr Felicia Chan

Paul Elliott, University of Worcester
‘Moving Images: The London Filmmaker's Co-operative and Lux Films’

Elliott Nikdel, University of Southampton
‘Online Distribution and the Relocation of Non-Mainstream Cinema: The Release of A Field in England and the Erosion of Traditional Distribution and Exhibition Patterns’

Lee Broughton, University of Leeds
‘Restoration, restoration, restoration: charting the changing appearance of The Good, The Bad and The Ugly on British home video’

Fraser Elliott, University of Manchester
‘Practising Nostalgia: An Exploration of the Continued Success of In The Mood For Love in British Film Culture’
Panel Three – Mainstream Studios and their Discs
Chair: Dr Paul Elliott

James Mason, University of Leeds
‘Disney Distribution, Or: How Mickey Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Home Media’

Christopher Holliday, King’s College London
‘Combining Nemo: Pixar Home Media and the DVD of narrative integration’

Jennifer Gillan, Bentley University, Boston, USA
‘From Sony to Shout! Factory: Distributing TV on DVD’
Panel Four – Niche Distribution Practices  
Chair: Dr Jonathan Wroot

Oliver Carter, Birmingham City University  
‘A Labour of Love: Fantrepreneurship in Home Video Media Distribution’

Matthew Freeman, Birmingham City University  
‘Continuity vs. Multiplicity: The Shifting Roles of Home Media Formats as Transmedia Storytelling’

Mark McKenna, University of Sunderland  
‘Exploitation 2.0: A Case Study of the Video Label “VIPCO” ’
NOTE: Sadly, on the day of the symposium, Matthew Freeman and Mark McKenna were unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances.

In the afternoon, Oliver Carter agreed to give his paper as part of the third panel, and I stepped in as chair. This left time later in the day for more post-presentation discussion, and the consumption of tea, coffee, and cake!
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I have gone on for long enough now – and my wish has not been to bore you before these exciting papers begin. I do however, intend to present a bit more information about the papers and presenters as the day continues.

I am genuinely thrilled to be able to hear about this research in the upcoming panels, and I thoroughly look forward to the resulting discussions and research activities that I hope they will lead to.

Again, thank you to all of you for agreeing to attend and present today.