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## Dangerous exchange students: *Battle Royale* and transcultural fans' intertextual gatekeeping

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines transcultural fans of *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000), building on limited empirical audience research into the Japanese cult hit, East Asian horror films, Asia Extreme Cinema, and Hollywood's 'remake ecology'. Analysing how online audiences value *Battle Royale* in relation to mainstream Western cinema, the article highlights fans' complex intertextual readings between films, genres, industries, and cultures. This begins by fans framing the film's violence as an 'ugly concept' that aesthetically and semiotically elevates *Battle Royale* above Hollywood spectacle. However, others draw thematic connections around teen-on-teen violence that revises preexisting East/West cultural binaries. Moreover, clustered within the Asia Extreme cycle, fans are both wary of a US remake of *Battle Royale* and want such industry adaptation to take place. Specifically, audiences discuss how revered North American horror creatives and 'indiewood' filmmakers could fix *Battle Royale*, complicating discourses around remakes as low cultural value rip-offs and cash-ins. Building on this, the article looks at shifting intertextual formations around *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012) as an unacknowledged remake of *Battle Royale*. Anti-fans accuse *Hunger Games*' writer Suzanne Collins of plagiarism while locating it within Hollywood whitewashing practices. Yet, others argue – positively and negatively – that *Hunger Games* blocked an official Western remake of *Battle Royale*. To conceptualise this, the article offers the term prophylactic intertextuality that addresses prototextual suspension. Finally, moving outside of niche circles, the article highlights other audiences' discursive intertextual connections between the films via familial 'gifting' and 'transfandom', undermining subcultural gatekeeping and under-ground/mainstream distinctions that cult cinema studies frequently reproduce.

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In 2000, Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* (hereafter *BR*) was a blockbuster hit in Japan (Schwarzacher 2001). Alongside its popularity, the film stirred up a much-publicised national controversy. Starring 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano, *BR*'s

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graphic depiction of teen-on-teen violence was debated in Japanese parliament with calls to ban it (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 128). This notoriety was used to market *BR* as cult cinema to international audiences (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 239). Indeed, the film has built up a dedicated transcultural fanbase – this article’s sample of over 16,300 social media posts discussing *BR* attests to this. Alongside *Ringu* (Nakata 1998) and *Audition* (Takashi 1999), *BR* formed a trio of Japanese horror films that sparked the transnational wave of East Asian genre vehicles known as ‘Asia Extreme’ cinema. Yet, research into this cycle has predominantly undertaken paratextual analysis of Western distributors’ Orientalist marketing of these films that framed them as excessive, taboo, mysterious, foreign, and binary to mainstream Hollywood cinema. These (para)textual readings have constructed moral economies around imagined audiences and inferred viewer responses; an ongoing issue in horror studies (Rendell 2023, 25). Addressing this scholarly shortcoming, this article employs empirical online audience analysis to explore how fans value *BR*, particularly in relation to popular Western cinema.

Furthermore, previous studies of Western industry framings of East Asian horror/Asia Extreme cinema and its transnational fans have stressed cultural difference as part of their cult distinction strategies (e.g. Martin 2015; Hills 2005). Some *BR* fans in this article evidence similar ‘cult cosmopolitanism’, ‘the cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference through cult reception practices’ (Smith 2017b, 21). However, others demonstrate alternative cross-cultural connections and affinities between the Japanese film and Hollywood. As such, in this article, fan gatekeeping as taste values, knowledge formations, and authenticity signifiers that oscillate ‘between inclusion and exclusion’ (Jancovich 2002, 320) is markedly intertextual. This broadening of audience samples addresses another problem with studies of cult horror cinema: the essentialising of niche film audiences. As Austin-Smith highlights, ‘[w]hether defined primarily as a genre, or as a set of ritualized practices that coalesce around a group of privileged texts, the term “cult film” is one used most often in relation to the cinephilia of young straight, white men’ (2020, 144). These cult viewers routinely position themselves against mainstream young, female audiences (Jancovich 2000), with scholar-fans tending ‘to reproduce versions of subcultural capital in and through their studies’ (Hills 2015, 115). With this, the article utilises purposive sampling to incorporate sample populations from various social media sites to better account for myriad viewers who watch *BR* beyond traditional cult circles. This includes self-defined cult fan spaces such as *Battle Royale Forums*, a Facebook group, blogs, and subreddits; wider film audience sites such as IMDb, Letterboxd, and Twitter/X; and more general online spaces such as Amazon reviews.

Moreover, not only does this expansive audience sample offer a broader audience remit but the archival potential of online research allows this article to adopt a longitudinal approach not seen in previous studies of East Asian

horror audiences. As international distributors continue to promote *BR* as cult (Wroot 2017), fans continue to discuss the film online 24 years after its release. With a sample population comprised over a 22-year period (2001–2023), the article analyses themes and discourse that develop, evolve, and differ over time. One pertinent form of intertextual gatekeeping that fans discuss is Western remakes of *BR*. Notably, the Asia Extreme cycle is characterised by remakes, with a ‘furious transnational exchange between Hollywood [...] [and] “Asian horror film” – a new regionalist appellation less inclusive than it sounds, since it consists primarily of Japanese, South Korean, Hong Kong, and Thai films’ (Lim 2007, 110). Cuelenaere (2021) argues, however, that empirical research of audiences who consume and/or respond to this specific mode of adaptation is underexamined in remake studies. As Mee highlights ‘in the case of the horror remake, audiences, fans and critics [...] have considerable influence in deciding what is culturally *devalued*’ (2017, 194). Responding to this, the article analyses *BR* fans’ discourses around remaking as a Hollywood industry practice. This begins in relation to the trend of other Asia Extreme films being remade in the US where fans anticipate a *BR* remake. The article then examines how online audiences position *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012) (hereafter *HG*) as an unacknowledged or disguised *BR* remake (Greenberg 1991). While some lambast *HG* as inferior plagiarism, others make positive connections between the two films. By accounting for more varied intertextual connections, the article offers more complicated and nuanced understandings that traditional Bourdieusian subcultural genre hierarchies do not account for. I now turn to a review of the literature that addresses the limited study of transnational audiences of Asia Extreme cinema and Hollywood remakes of East Asian horror, before discussing the research’s methodology.

### ***Battle Royale*, Asia extreme cinema, and transnational audiences**

An adaptation of Koushun Takami’s hit 1999 novel, *BR* tells the story of a near future dystopia where a 42-student ninth-grade class, drawn from a national lottery created by the Japanese government under its ‘Battle Royale’ Act, is sent to an island where they have three days to kill one another. *BR* presents an apocalyptic ‘zero sum’ scenario where only one child can win. Importantly, *BR* is generically hybrid, combining facets of action, comedy, melodrama, thriller, dystopian science fiction, and horror. However, the film was ‘never associated with the horror genre at all with reference to either [...] [its] production or distribution in Japan’, rather it was viewed as a ‘topical’ film (Wada-Marciano 2009, 34). Yet within Western contexts, *BR* has been framed as horror and aligned with other genre vehicles (Wada-Marciano 2009, 34–5). Such categorical slipperiness speaks to intertextual formations and their various processes that mean genres form via discursive ‘textual clustering’ – where the horror genre

and its subgenres/cycles are context-specific as are their ‘meaning and value’ (Mittell 2004, 16–7). Within the UK, Tartan’s ‘Asia Extreme’ banner textually clustered films as a ‘marketing genre’ (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009, 5). Tartan paratextually positioned these ‘Asian films as aberrant and transgressive’ (Frey 2016, 129), marketing them as alternatives ‘to the more familiar, tiresome cycle of mainstream American horror’ (Martin 2015, 3). With *BR*, Tartan amplified the film’s notoriety by marketing it as ‘specifically and uniquely Japanese; the film was viewed as distinctly foreign, even “alien”, with connotations that were positive as often as negative’ (Martin 2015, 73). Stressing cultural distance, ontological difference, and moral incompatibility, it is unsurprising that Tartan’s Asia Extreme label, its (para)textual clustering of Asian cinema generally, and *BR* specifically has led to accusations of Orientalism (Martin 2015, 79; Needham 2006, 11; Frey 2016, 133–4) that ‘misguides’ audiences ‘in assessing the political and ideological significance of the films’ (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009, 6) and the intrinsic ‘nature’ of Asian cultures that produce them (Shin 2009, 86–7). However, whilst Tartan’s Asia Extreme label and other Western distributors warrant charges of Orientalism, issues arise when mapping such assertions onto a monolithic Western audience passively adopting these marketing strategies into their reading schemas, while simultaneously lacking empirical audience data to substantiate such claims. Turning to audience studies of Japanese horror and Asia Extreme cinema raises pertinent lines of thought.

Emma Pett highlights how for transnational fans Asia Extreme is actually ‘a highly contested [category]’ (2013), with many finding Tartan’s branding ‘inherently problematic’ (Pett 2017, 39). Furthermore, while all respondents positioned these movies and their fan identity oppositionally to Hollywood cinema and its audiences (Pett 2013), each fan valorised ‘different aspects of the films’ cultural specificity, identifying factors such as challenging content, creativity, originality, aesthetics and psychological complexity as characteristics they particularly appreciate’ (Pett 2017, 43). Comparable subcultural distinction is evident in Matt Hills’ analysis of *Ringu* fans on the fan forum *Ringworld*. To differentiate themselves from the ‘juvenile’ Hollywood remake (2005, 169), a point I return to later, fans of the original J-horror film situate themselves as ‘early adopters’ embedded within the horror cycle before its mainstreaming. Cult outsiderdom and subcultural capital are also fostered via ‘reading-for-cultural difference’ (Hills 2005, 168). Fans’ culturally specific understandings of *Ringu* centred on the film’s ‘use of “*nensha*” [...] [and] the supernatural in Japanese culture’ (Hills 2005, 168), with those speaking/understanding the Japanese language bestowed the highest status within the forum

(Hills 2005, 168–9). As such, transcultural fans of East Asian horror and Asia Extreme cinema are active and critical of how these texts are marketed to them and can employ culturally contextualised readings of these films much in the way scholars do.

James Rendell's netnographic research further complicates inferred audience responses to Western marketing of East Asian horror. For instance, whilst industry discourse champions Miike Takashi as the auteur *sans pareil* of extreme Asian cinema, embodying the cultural transgressiveness seen within his films<sup>1</sup> (Rendell 2023, 77), some fans of this genre cycle find Miike's work little more than 'hollow shock fodder' (Rendell 2023, 203). This speaks to the heterogeneity of horror fans and that affective adoration is not passively given to genre texts or their creatives despite the promotional push from industry. Moreover, in Rendell's (2021b) study of the Fuji Television adaptation of *Ringu, Ring: Saishusho* (1999), fans' dialogic cult/mainstream audience binaries did not entirely operate along East/West fault lines. Rather, cross-cultural connections were forged with US and European 'genre texts widely heralded as quality/cult TV horror' (2021b, 223), such as *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990–1991) and *The Kingdom/Kingdom Hospital* (DR 1994–1997/ABC 2004). Consequently, not only can fans' textual clusters contrast with industry textual clustering but audiences' intertextual processes, value schemas, and transnational connections can differ from industry practices. This allows for more malleable, porous, and fluid genre constructions.

Indeed, mirroring *BR*'s industry generic hybridity in Japan and internationally, various audiences have viewed the film as both horror and not horror. Aimee Richmond's interviews with Japanese and British audiences found that the former linked the horror genre specifically to Japanese spiritual/supernatural folklore in J-horror texts such as '*Ring* and *Ju-on: The Grudge* as well as titles less well-known in the UK' (2014, 90). Accordingly, domestic viewers found it difficult to deduce *BR*'s genre(s) (Richmond 2014, 89–90). Comparatively, UK audiences constructed Japanese horror as both supernatural *and* body-horror, meaning the violence and gore in *BR*, alongside films such as *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi 2001), coded the film as horror for many transnational respondents (Richmond 2014, 154–60).

Concurrently and pertinent to this study, a number of East Asian horror and horror-adjacent films from this cycle were remade by Hollywood. This phenomenon is not new. As Rendell states, 'horror is a genre that has long retold, remade, reimagined, and remixed tales' (2023, 21). Mee notes that, 'their presence has become stronger post-2000' (2017, 197), where the horror remake serves

as a figurehead for the recycled nature of contemporary popular culture, the perfect 'monster we've already come to know and hate' in mainstream

cinema's propensity toward remaking and self-referencing. For many audiences, critics and scholars, there is no better representation of a worthless textual model produced by an industry constantly repeating itself (Mee 2017, 198).

Therefore, while *BR* has not been officially remade, it is located within a cycle of films where remakes form a salient component of its international ecology that engenders 'additional layers of meaning [...] [which] raises further issues surrounding national and/or ethnic identity and questions of cultural power' (Smith and Verevis 2017, 2). Adopting an industry-focused approach, Hudson (2021) posits a 'remake economy' between Japanese and American industries, whereby within the genre cycle Hollywood would financially incentivise Japanese filmmakers to make culturally distinct horror hits whose rights could also be sold for transnational remakes (see also Mee 2022, 46). In so doing, the remake economy 'demanded firstly Japanese creativity and national specificity, and secondly Hollywood homogenization for a domestic American audience and an international audience' (Hudson 2021, 159). While Hudson's study is useful for illustrating both Hollywood and Japan's role in these national horrors titles and their international remakes in a way that provides a more rigorous understanding of regional cinemas and cultural flows, as with work that draws on textual analysis, meaning within these adaptations and the audiences who consume them are either neglected or inferred.

While Western marketing of East Asian horror films routinely constructed the cycle as antithetical to Hollywood cinema, US remakes were overtly advertised as adaptations of domestically successful horror vehicles with transnational cult followings. Consequently, remaking was a discursively visible industry practice negotiated by audiences. Returning to Hills, online transcultural *Ringu* fans perceived J-horror 'as serious, reflective and less accessible (or not meant for) the American teen market' (2005, 169), and their remakes as poor mainstream fodder produced for profit. Interviewees in Richmond's (2014, 142) study support Hills' findings where American horror – both originals and remakes – is denigrated in relation to Japanese and East Asian genre cinema. Yet, several respondents discussed Hollywood remakes interchangeably with their Japanese source texts. Thus, despite formulating transnational genre hierarchies and taste schemas, transcultural fans still found points of affective overlap between the original Japanese horror movies and their Western adaptations.

While the above audience studies are salient for analysing the constructed parameters of cult cinema, and how intertextual bleeding potentially undermines subcultural distinctions between championed source texts and inauthentic remakes, their methods present a shortcoming in examining transnational horror films: namely, sample demographics that are discursively positioned only *within* cult circles. As Richmond herself understands,



studies of horror tend to ‘focus on those who are the most prominent demographic – the fan audience’ (2014, 168). Western paratextual framings of *BR* and Asia Extreme cinema interpellated world cinema aficionados and cult-fans in opposition to Othered mainstream viewership (Dew 2007, 58). However, such industry focus fails to account for how audiences outside of these niche circles have consumed *BR* and their responses to the film, as do studies of this topic. Hills (2005) sheds light on transcultural *Ringu* fans’ reading practices, but one is left wondering about audiences who enjoyed Gore Verbinski’s 2002 remake of the film and how they engage with the complexities of transnational adaptations. How, Richmond asks, ‘then might we account for a range of viewers, who are not enthusiasts and are perhaps ambivalent [to Japanese horror]? And surely there are variances amongst the fan audience themselves?’ (2014, 169). These questions inform my methodology.

Hills argues that ‘[e]thnographies and interviews pertaining to subcultural capital and fan performance may only cover a “fairly thin slice of time”’ (2015, 101), which cannot account for shifting constructions of cult fandoms and their symbolic systems. Building on this, I add that self-defined niche online fandoms present a thin area of space that also reduces understandings of audience responses and meaning-making schemas. Other social media sites can offer alternative readings and fan performances (e.g. Rendell 2023). It is worth highlighting that *Ringworld*, along with other fan-created sites such as *Snowblood Apple* and *Battle Royale Forums*, are no longer active, yet online users still discuss *Ringu*, J-horror, Hollywood remakes, and *BR*. Moreover, despite these sites’ cessation, social media research can analyse a wide breadth of online activity over extensive timeframes. This study covers a range of social media platforms over a 22-year period (2001–2023), producing a data set of over 16,300 posts.<sup>2</sup> The study analyses responses to *BR* prior to *HG*’s release in 2012, discourse around the films while *HG* became a franchise (2012–2015), and subsequently up to the present day. Employing qualitative thematic discourse analysis, the article identifies the ways in which audiences discuss *BR* in relation to the horror genre’s post-structuralist clustering, the remake economy between Hollywood and Japan at the turn of the twenty-first century, and the intertextual relationships with *HG*. Moreover, by utilising such an extensive sample, the research includes self-defined cult fan spaces (i.e. *Battle Royale Forums* and a *BR* Facebook group), *BR* fan threads with discursive agendas against *HG* (i.e. Reddit, blogs), wider film audience sites (i.e. IMDb, Letterboxd, Twitter/X), and generalised online spaces un beholden to cult fan habitus (i.e. Amazon reviews). Consequently, the article empirically analyses those highly visible and vocal fans emblematic of cult horror studies and wider mainstream audiences without falling back on *a priori* demonisation of the latter by the former. Moreover, while the dataset is in English, several discussants posted



from outside Western non-Anglophonic territories, including Brazil and Sri Lanka. This further highlights the global reach of cult fandom facilitated by social media technologies whilst also complicating West/East binaries of transnational cult cinema. This allows for a more heterogeneous and longitudinal understanding of transcultural *BR* fandom. Given the expansive sample population which includes inactive social media sites, the study's 22-year timeframe, and the fact that the analysis centres on affirmational fan and anti-fan readings, gaining consent from every discussant was deemed unfeasible and unnecessary. However, while audiences are quoted verbatim and timestamped, personal details are anonymised in line with Bore and Hickman's (2013) ethical considerations.

### **Distinguishing *Battle Royale's* violence**

Even before *HG's* 2012 release, online discussions about the cultural specificity of *BR* and a remake were extensive. However, whereas transcultural *Ringu* fans explore Japanese spirituality and folklore as a means of distinguishing the film from its Hollywood retelling (Hills 2005), transcultural *BR* fans turn to other modes of cross-cultural distinction:

'Although not for the squeamish, *Battle Royale* is like nothing you'd find in mainstream American cinema. . . .and that's a good thing'. (2002)

'It is obvious no-one would ever think of making this in Hollywood, because the violence is extreme and graphic'. (2003)

'[T]he film is one of the most violent I have ever seen is because we actually see young children get killed; something that never happens in American cinema'. (2012)

'[T]he major reason for my love of this film is because it has the best action sequences of any film I have seen I'm not talking about the big flashy explosions that are done to death in the awful bunch of Hollywood blockbusters but this is grimy and brutal murder of a close friend'. (2004)

As the above comments demonstrate, the types and degrees of violence are read as markedly non-Hollywood. Part of *BR's* extremeness stems from brutal actions taken by, and inflicted upon, children in a graphic manner. Such discourse echoes the transnational paratextual marketing of *BR* and Asian Extreme cinema (Martin 2015), where the film's marginality is reified by its perceived excessiveness 'in terms of (sexual or violent) spectacle [. . .] [and] transgression of social or aesthetic norms' (Dew 2007, 60). Yet, beyond the film's extreme spectacles, *BR's* violence is read as having depth not found in Western mainstream cinema:

'When I see a film like this, it throws the entire American filmmaking engine into sharp focus for me; just how gutless, bottom-line-driven and lowest-common-denominator-based it has become. "*Battle Royale*" presents us with

an incredibly ugly concept, and has the courage to follow through with it'. (2001)

'Another interesting aspect is that it's never as black and white as a typical American movie'. (2002)

'Battle Royale, as everybody has already said, is a movie that would NEVER get made in Hollywood [...] Hollywood's attempt at profundity would be to have all the kids succumb to the bestial, primal urge to kill, and then offset this with some sex scenes. In other words, they would rob the material of its power by trying to make it seem "fun". Kinji Fukusaku is infinitely more subtle'. (2003)

'Though the movie is somewhat violent (i.e. necks being blown out, guy getting stabbed in a place that all men cherish, etc.) it's not focused on the violence like many American and European horror and trash flicks are. Instead the violence is very real. They show things that really can happen'. (2001)

'[P]ersonally, I've never had trouble watching violence in movies, but this film touched me on an emotional level, which is sadly lacking in the majority of American films these days, this is not an easy film to watch - the emotions that are conveyed are so real'. (2002)

While *BR* and Western cinema may both revel in spectacle, for many fans, *BR* comments on violence as, to cite the first audience member, an 'ugly concept' where the perceived verisimilitude of the film's horrors elevates it above profit-driven Hollywood action. Moreover, such graphic imagery is valued for its complexity and emotional depth that is able to emotionally affect viewers in ways that American 'fun' cinema does not. Echoing Frey, much in the way audiences use art and foreign-language films to distinguish themselves from mainstream moviegoers, 'the ability to "appreciate" sex and violence on an aesthetic rather than physiological level becomes a means to establish oneself as part of a discerning taste culture' (2016, 23). Likewise, while sensorial, for fans, *BR*'s graphic imagery is used to provoke rather than merely excite, enriching its violent content (see also Hobbs 2018, 7). However, for others, part of *BR*'s value stems not from national distinction but rather from its transcultural affinities to America:

'Out of all Japanese movies I've seen so far, this is also the one that is the most Americanized. Normally this isn't a very good sign when a "foreign" movie gets made in Hollywood-style but this movie is truly an exception to this. The fact that this movie feels Hollywood like is also a reason why this movie is perfectly watchable and accessible, even for those who aren't at custom with movies from outside of the United States. But however this really doesn't mean that this movie is your average typical Hollywood work. Quite on the contrary. The movie has a quite daring concept, that perhaps also sounds silly and unlikely at first but in the movie gets delivered as a [...] realistic and effective one'. (2009)

'The violence and the gore are strong, but no worse than your average Hollywood flick. Sometimes it seems almost as though the audience is being invited to revel in the carnage, but the truly brave aspect of this film is that it will suck in the violence-happy no-brainer audience with the prospect of schoolkids killing each other, and damn well make them use their brains for once'. (2002)

'It's amazing the book this film was based off of wasn't made by an American. Frankly, I'm ashamed as an American that we couldn't come up with something so feral and nihilistic. Are all of the daily dosages of violence and havoc not helping us? Have we lost our edge? Well, on a more serious note, BR was certainly something that opened my eyes'. (2006)

'Oh how I would love to have seen this movie come from Hollywood! Battle Royale is a brave, exciting and at the same time important movie about war, losing your individuality and the will to survive, even in a terrible, hateful world'. (2004)

Rather than being a hermetically 'foreign' film, these audiences judge *BR* through its cross-cultural overlap with Hollywood in various ways. The first comment offers paradoxical praise to *BR* for its accessibility via its perceived Western style. The fan prefaces their argument that Western adaptations of 'foreign' cinema do not normally work; a common criticism of Hollywood remakes (Verevis 2006, 3; Rendell 2021a). In this case, *BR* does not seem to require the subcultural capital performed by transcultural J-horror fans (Hills 2005). However, the film's premise and its impact are still positioned as beyond typical mainstream Western cinema. Indeed, *BR*'s focus on adolescent violence and its graphic depiction are seen as resonating with US culture as a salient American socio-political thematic. The tackling of this transcultural subject matter is a point of commendation where the imagery is viewed as on a par with Hollywood spectacle, yet the allure of violence as an ugly concept also fosters subtextual richness not found in Western mainstream film. Thus, despite being paratextually framed as dialogically opposed to mainstream Hollywood cinema, audience readings complicate such cultural binaries. Other audiences, as the fifth comment illustrates, go one step further and profess a want for a North American version of *BR*. As previously discussed, many of the films clustered under the Asia Extreme banner were remade by Hollywood. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that even before *HG*'s release, online audiences discussed a potential *BR* remake:

'I just hope the people in Hollywood don't get their hands on it, because they'd kill it, like they did with Ringu, Ring 2, and Ju-On'. (2006)

'Also, there is an American remake coming out in 2008, which many will fear will skip the emotional content of the movie to favor the violence. It will be released by New Line Cinema, and part of the anxiety is the producer, Neal Moritz, who was also behind *Torque* and *XxX 2*. Many feel Moritz will merely make a violence flick, playing up the guns and toning down the real feeling of

the original, adding on to the growing pile of Japanese “rip-off” movies in the last two years. My advice is seeing this movie before the greater public forgets it for the remake’. (2006)

Fans are quick to cite other Western remakes of Japanese horror that evidence consistent and/or historical violence towards a national genre cinema by Hollywood. Remake-as-textual-violation discourse is often validated by focusing on the ‘perceived industrial political economy of the remake [...] [where] the financial impetus of Hollywood’s high-concept remake is vilified’ (Rendell 2021a, 183), as are personnel attached to the project (Rendell 2021a, 184). With this, paratextually visible industry players are often scrutinised, while others involved remain unscathed by such discourse (Warner and Rendell 2021). In this case, the transnational ‘remake economy’ (Hudson 2021) does not form part of viewer discussions; rather, the focus is on New Line Cinema and producer Neal Moritz. Notably, within this discourse, the discussant does not reflect upon New Line Cinema’s longstanding association with the horror genre (Herbert 2024, 9, 49–71). Nor is Moritz assessed for producing horror cinema, specifically his involvement in the 1990s neo-slasher wave. Instead, both are framed around high-octane action cinema to speculate on how violence would no longer be an ugly concept but remade into pure spectacle, ironically more in line with how distributors such as Tartan sold East Asian cinema to Western audiences. This also allows fan gatekeeping to be performed, where the imagined ‘greater public’ are distinguished against for lacking subcultural knowledge linked to shallow genre memory (see also Mee 2022, 42–3). Moreover, while the discussant gives details of this as an official licensed remake, the accusation of this being a ‘rip off’ paradoxically evokes both plagiarism and inferiority (Verevis 2006, 19–20). As such, remaking as Hollywood practice is Othered in relation to ‘failed’ antecedent reiterations within textual clusters, and due to being linked to inauthentic industry players. Equally, however, others suggest or put forward preferred US remakes of *BR*:

‘Were this an Hollywood film, or if it is seemingly re-made then its critical that they do another draft of the script because it clearly needs one. It needs a bit more focus, needs to be tighter otherwise it will get lambasted by the critics and the general public’. (2004)

‘Someone should remake this in America without sappy-ing up the story or turning it into a gorefest’. (2006)

‘Very interesting I did enjoy the movie though, but can’t help but think that if the Americans remade this with the cream of young talent and a director of David Finchers calibre it would not only be an improvement but maybe push the premise into that cult status’. (2005)

‘Like “Ring”, this is one Japanese film that could actually be remade very effectively in the US, though it would need to be \*lengthened\* to accommodate

more character development. All you need then is a courageous casting agent, a director with his/her heart on his/her sleeve and a studio with the guts to cop an NC-17 from the lackeys at the MPAA, withstand fire from the usual hypocrites (the religious right and pro-gun activists and their political allies, in particular, who will froth and rail against the killing of children in this film but gloss over if not deny the killing of real children and other innocents at home due to gun availability), and who knows? An authentic American classic might be the result. So how about it, George Romero? Paul Verhoeven? Or even you, John Carpenter!'. (2003)

'Tarantino, make a BR movie, please!'. (2014)

Far from bastardising sacrosanct culturally-specific fan objects, genre pioneers and Hollywood directors are viewed as film fixers of *BR*. Not only does this highlight a more critical transcultural fanbase (see Rendell 2023), but in addition, remaking becomes a desired practice for revising *BR* that meets fans' wants from the film, as the first comment exemplifies. Whereas 'a remake automatically pushes itself toward denigration as the "worthless rip-off" of a much-loved genre classic' that further canonises the hypotext (Mee 2017, 204), for these audiences, *BR* is both beloved hypotext and discursive prototext 'which serves as an object of inter-textual continuity' (Popovič 1976, 226). In short, these fans want a *BR* remake but are cautious of this since these types of adaptation are perceived as overexaggerating a film's emotional pull in a way that makes the remake 'sappy' or reduces its ugly violent imagery to shallow gore. Alternatively, it is argued Western creatives need to push back against the US film industry and vocal conservative viewers in order to produce an authentic remake. While previously *Ringu* was 'killed' by Hollywood, here the remake is used as an instance of an effective Western remake of Japanese horror. Moreover, contrasted to anti-fan discourse that blames industry personnel for derivative remakes, the above comments spotlight creatives that would subculturally legitimise a Hollywood version of *BR*. Notably, these are all white male filmmakers, but includes revered horror directors who predominantly worked within the genre (George A. Romero, John Carpenter) and directors who have produced horror, horror-adjacent, noir thrillers, and generically-hybrid films (Paul Verhoeven, David Fincher, Quentin Tarantino). That this Anglophonic remake of *BR* would fit within such creatives' bodies of work, echoes how *BR* has been positioned as a horror film and as generically myriad (Wada-Marciano 2009; Richmond 2014). Moreover, citing Tarantino and Fincher further complicates East/West binaries. Notably, both filmmakers have been instrumental in 'a new strand of Hollywood cinema in the 1990s' that Gormley (2005, 8) terms the 'new brutality' film. These movies signified 'a new aesthetic direction in Hollywood film [...] attempt[ing] to renegotiate and reanimate the immediacy and affective qualities of the cinematic experience within commercial Hollywood'

(Gormley 2005, 8). Using popular A-list actors alongside textual layering that supported cinephilia (Mathijs and Mendik 2008, 5–6), these directors' films reflected a change in mainstream Western moviemaking that employed imagery traditionally linked to niche cinema, resulting in commercial successes and producing cult fandoms (Mathijs and Sexton 2011). From an industrial viewpoint, both filmmakers' stylized authorship can be located within the 'indiewood' movement of the same period, where North American independent cinema increasingly had ties to major Hollywood studios via their subsidiary speciality labels (King 2005; Schatz 2013). Moreover, 'Tarantino's public persona embraces his Asiaphile fanboy credentials, which have been evident throughout his career, culminating in *Kill Bill's* full-scale pillaging of Hong Kong and Japanese cinema' (Hunt 2008, 220). Consequently, Tarantino metatextually aligns himself with cult fans via performing subcultural capital in his films. Such intertextuality can then be used by said fans in their own cult cineliteracy. Linking *BR* to these US filmmakers, rather than to 'tiresome' 1990s Hollywood horror which the transnational popularity of East Asian horror films was seen as an alternative to (Martin 2015, 3), complexifies discourses surrounding Anglophonic remakes of East Asian genre cinema where fans perform transnationally-inflected subcultural capital as they make cross-cultural connections between *BR* and violent indiewood (Rendell 2021b, 223). Similarly, these connections undermine simplistic and reductive cult/mainstream binaries. Such myriad responses are developed further upon *HG's* release in 2012.

### **Shifting intertextual relation between *Battle Royale* and *The Hunger Games***

Set in a dystopian future, Hollywood franchise *The Hunger Games* follows 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who lives in the poverty-stricken District 12. To save her younger sister, Katniss volunteers to take part in the 74th Hunger Games, a state-organised yearly televised fight between combatants from 12 districts where there can be only one winner. However, many *BR* fans were quick to vilify *HG* and/or deny any transcultural thematic connection between the two films. These *BR* fans are simultaneously *HG* anti-fans, 'those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel' (Gray 2003, 70). Yet, various anti-fan language shifts the metatextual and intertextual relationship of *BR* and *HG*. For some, *HG* is a remake of *BR*, albeit a poor transnational imitation:

'I think there IS an American *BR* remake, called the *Hunger Games*. And I have doubts I could get into that'. (2012)

'The hunger games was from a Japanese movie called Battle Royale. It's an American remake from it'. (2021)

'[H]unger games is a remake of a Japanese movie. Battle Royale watch it. It's brutal'. (2023)

'People forget about Battle Royale...also how Hunger Games is basically a family friendly remake of it'. (2020)

'I've always thought the original Hunger Games was a poor remake of Battle Royale. Certainly not "the worst ever remake", but definitely upstaged by the original concept'. (2020)

'I love the Hunger Games, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a white remake of Battle Royale'. (2021)

The above anti-fan discourse explicitly posits that *HG* is a remake of *BR*, where the former is viewed 'as a specific (institutionalised) aspect of [...] broader and more open-ended intertextuality' (Verevis 2006, 21). However, *HG* is not, nor was it ever officially advertised as, a remake of *BR*; unlike the paratextual marketing of previous Hollywood remakes of East Asian horror that frequently signposted these acts of re-creation (Hudson 2021). Furthermore, *The Hunger Games* films are adaptations of a series of novels (Collins 2008-). Hence, much in the way that 'the unofficial remake [...] complicates theories of remaking and translation' (Evans 2019, 168), audiences' intertextual, intratextual, and intersemiotic readings between texts complexify theories of remaking and adaptation since extratextual referentiality of the unacknowledged remake is not institutional (Verevis 2006, 22), but subcultural. Situating *HG* as an American Hollywood prototext of *BR* as Japanese hypotext serves to concurrently vilify the former and exalt the latter, where points of degradation are signposted between the two films. Notably, violence continues to be a marker of textual difference and transformation where *BR*'s brutality serves to demarcate it as serious, cult, and adult against popular Western cinema. Contrastingly, *HG* is devalued as more readily accessible via its 'family friendly' framing where its mainstream sensibility appeals to broader audiences. While others perform more negotiated responses, they still present a critical reading of *HG* as an American remake of *BR* via racial discourse. Specifically, the sixth comment argues that part of *HG*'s retelling involves whitewashing *BR*. Routinely viewed as a Hollywood practice when remaking Asian cinema (Rendell 2021a), whitewashing is the symbolic and material erasure of non-white actors/characters in favour of centralising whiteness as the dominant hegemonic norm. Addressing Asian representation, Oh (2022, 2–6) argues this includes: casting white actors in non-white roles or replacing non-white characters, white actors playing non-white characters as an act of yellowface, and focusing on white subjectivity in Asian worlds. *HG* anti-fans simultaneously criticise Jennifer Lawrence as the



main star of the *Hunger Games* franchise, foregrounding her whiteness as a corporeal indicator of remaking inauthenticity, and Hollywood as ‘the wider institution that has perpetuated the white dominance of star roles and representations’ (Rendell 2021a, 188). Others’ more vehement condemnations of *HG* are aimed at Suzanne Collins (writer of the books and films) who is accused of ripping-off *BR*:

‘Shame on Hollywood, and Shame on you, Suzanne Collins! Best Japanese and one of the best movies of 2000’s worldwide I’ve ever watched. . .No exaggeration at all. “Hunger Games” (book and movie) was literally copied from this movie (book)’. (2016)

‘I want to know how she didn’t get sued for plagiarism’. (2015)

‘[T]he *HG* author’s shameless lying particularly’. (2022)

‘[I’m] so sick of people pretending she didn’t rip off *BR*. it is not just that it’s teens fighting to the death. it is SO many plot points and mechanisms that are identical. it’s OK that she was “inspired” by *BR* [...] but it’s NOT ok that she pretends to have never heard of it. it’s just not possible imo that so many things are identical if she never heard abt the book or read it. I think she just thought western audiences wouldn’t notice’. (2023)

‘Even if Suzanne Collins had somehow never heard of *Battle Royale* and it also somehow never came up in any of her years of research, there were a bunch of editors, publishers etc that worked in the novels who would have been well aware of *BR* as a well-loved classic of the genre. It was whitewashing plain and simple, been going on forever’. (2023)

Contrasted to Tarantino’s fanboy identity celebrated for freely poaching from cult cinemas that make him a desired filmmaker for retelling *BR*, anti-fan moral economy views Collins’ adaptation as blatant copying and plagiarism. Collins has repeatedly stated she had never heard of the *Battle Royale* novel or its author Koushun Takami, instead noting that Thesus and Greek mythology inspired *HG* (Mooney 2020). However, unlike Tarantino’s bilingualism where he ‘speak[s] the promotional language of both visionary auteur and faithful fanboy’ (Scott 2013, 440), Collins’ monolingual discussions of intertextual inspiration and professed lack of subcultural capital are sceptically viewed as inauthentic in a way that further devalues *HG*. Moreover, accusations of whitewashing are again aimed at *HG* where the refusal of intertextual connections between *HG* and *BR* by Collins is contextualised within wider industry circles as a means to debunk her naivety. The failure to cite *BR* is viewed as an instance of Asian erasure that racialises and Others Collins’ whiteness that, again, locates *HG* within Hollywood’s longstanding history of whitewashing. Therefore, whitewashing discourse validates the *BR* hypotext, discredits the *HG* prototext, and metatextualises mainstream Hollywood cinema as a site of racial marginalisation. Yet, while

anti-fan discourse oscillates between remake and rip-off, other audiences form alternative intertextual connections between *BR* and *HG*. Interestingly, some contend *HG* saved *BR* from a Hollywood reimagining:

‘If it wasn’t for Hunger Games, Battle Royale would definitely have had a shit American remake by now’. (2019)

‘While I don’t care for the Hunger Games series, I can at least be happy that because it exists, the chance of Battle Royale getting a terrible Hollywood remake is now slim’. (2020)

‘One of the reasons I think fondly of The Hunger Games is because it absolutely killed stone dead the planned US remake of Battle Royale’. (2021)

Whereas previous (anti-)fans lament Hollywood remakes as a violent or contaminating act upon East Asian cinema that *HG* continues, the above comments do not locate *HG* within remaking as an industry practice. Instead, it is viewed as textually, thematically, and semiotically proximate to *BR* (see also Johnson 2019) but still viewed as inferior to its Japanese counterpart in a way that allows fans to perform superiority over *HG*. Yet, such dialogic hierarchical clustering is read positively since it prevents official prototypical Western remakes of *BR*. In this case, *HG* fosters, what I term, prophylactic intertextuality. Intertextuality is traditionally bestowed with an ‘infinite ambit’ (Baron 2020, 20). However, prophylactic intertextuality considers moments of prototextual suspension and stoppage. This is viewed by some as protecting *BR*, yet others present negative affect towards this prophylactic intertextuality, including confusion, disappointment, and anger:

‘Why did the Hunger Games have to kill off the Chances of a Battle Royale Remake’. (2018)

‘Battle Royale is one amazing movie, sadly the American remake got cancelled thanks to The Hunger Games ugh’. (2021)

‘I actually felt a touch of rage when I found out that the Americans won’t remake battle royale because they fear most of their audience will just label it as a rip off of the hunger games. But they would probably change too much of it anyway’. (2022)

Like previous transcultural fans, a Western remake of *BR* is still wanted. Yet, prophylactic intertextuality between *HG* and *BR*, which continues to position the latter over the former, is understood as preventing fans’ desires. A horror cycle’s growing popularity is often mapped onto a saturation of (sub)genre works that become increasingly derivative as industry carpetbagging attempts to profit from the trend (Nowell 2011). Relatedly, horror remakes are also often condemned as ‘cash-ins’ of previous original works. However, *HG* becomes an anti-fan object not only for its inauthenticity compared to

*BR* and its mainstream popularity, but because these two factors combined are seen as blocking desired prototexts. Dislike is not just about the text but the perceived wider ramifications of its existence and commerciality. If prophylactic intertextual connections stop other instances of intertextuality that revise theories of adaptation and translation, I want to finally explore experiential connections made between *HG* and *BR* that challenge existing cult parameters, habitus, and binaries with mainstream cinema.

### **Affective links between *Battle Royale* and *The Hunger Games***

Up until this point, transcultural fans have performed textual distinction between the cult, artistic, extreme, international Japanese horror-hybrid *BR* and the mainstream, glossy, sanitised, family-friendly Hollywood *HG* that maps onto preexisting Bourdieusian subcultural genre hierarchies (e.g. Sconce 1995; Jancovich 2002; Bode 2010). Yet, the desire for a Hollywood remake complicates rigid East/West binaries. Further to this, while DVD markets have supported the global flow of film that engenders cult and cinephile sensibilities central to the Asia Extreme wave (Dew 2007; Martin 2015), home formatting alongside the rise of streaming services have made once hard to access international horror readily accessible to broader audience demographics (Rendell 2023). To this point, *BR* has been available on Netflix and Amazon Prime as well as UK Freeview channel Film4. Turning to generalised online spaces outside of cult-fan parameters offers alternative intertextual relationships between *BR* and *HG* that challenge traditional cult distinctions and Bourdieusian frameworks (see also Gray 2021):

‘Bought this for one of our daughters who had seen *The Hunger Games* and like the genre. ... We watched *Battle Royale* together and needless to say, she was “well impressed!”’. (2015)

‘A must see for fans of the hunger games, world cinema, extreme horror and film lovers in general’. (2013)

‘I believe if you are a fan on the *Hunger Games* Trilogy, you will enjoy *Battle Royale* as well!’. (2012)

‘If you are a fan on the *Hunger Games* Trilogy, you will enjoy *Battle Royale* [...] Both novels center on youths in a fight-to-the-death at the demand of the local government in charge in order to repress the spirit/fight of the populace’. (2012)

Whereas ‘family-friendly’ is typically used pejoratively within cult fan circles since it characterises broad, safe, mass appeal, the first comment evidences parental ‘gifting’ of *BR* to a daughter ‘as a sharing of the filmic experience’ (Barker et al. 2016, 44). Noting that their daughter was already a fan of *HG* and the ‘genre’, the parent’s gift-giving of *BR* creates the

intertextual connections between the two films and broader discursive clustering born out of their child's textual pleasures. Such grouping is also imbued with (auto)biographical affective social connections since parent and child watch the film together. Here, 'the exchange of give/receive/reciprocate fuels familial cohesion, transposing [...] social fan cultures to a domestic, familial setting' (Barker et al. 2016, 45–6), which also disrupts the previously discussed siloing of *BR* and *HG*. Indeed, these fans welcome thematic connections between the two films as they perform *BR/HG* 'transfandom', 'viewers' intersubjective interpretation of 'affinity' (Morimoto 2018, 79). Best demonstrated by the second discussant, *BR* is valued for appealing to high culture cinephiles and genre gorehounds in line with the film's marketing in the West (Dew 2007) but also mainstream audiences such as general 'film lovers' and *HG* franchise fans. Supporting Richmond (2014) and Pett's (2013) research, this data also challenges the construction of cult cinema as solely under the purview of 'white, straight, privileged males' (Sexton 2017, 16) as female fans clearly enjoy *BR* too.

This presents a more fluid relationship between niche and popular media; a reversal of Hills' postulation that 'yesterday's "mainstream" can become today's subcultural "cult"' (2015, 108), *BR* reflects how overtime niche media can migrate into more visible, accessible and commercial media ecologies (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 21). Indeed, industry and the paratextual framing of cinema plays a key role in this. Wroot highlights that, after its initial release in 2002 under Tartan's Asia Extreme label, *BR* was re-released several times, first by Tartan then by Arrow,<sup>3</sup> which offers multifaceted constructions of cult via 'categories of Asia extreme, acclaimed masterpieces and films with notorious reputations' (2017, 21). Yet, Arrow's 2013 re-release makes discursive connections between *BR* and *HG* with the DVD front cover exclaiming 'The original cult classic the critics are comparing with The Hunger Games'. This is visually supported with a black, red, orange, and yellow colour scheme, and the *Battle Royale* emblem in flames that mimics *HG*'s promotional material. Thus, whereas previous marketing strategies sought to stress distinctions from the West – textually, culturally, and demographically – this iteration paratextually clusters the two films. While this aligns with the above audiences who are fans of both *BR* and *HG*, one discussant criticises Arrow at length:

'I already have several editions of *Battle Royale*, but will not be adding this latest Arrow release to my collection. The cover is made to look like the "Hunger Games" poster and to say on the box that "this is the cult original that critics are comparing TO The Hunger Games", is a disgrace. Should it not say that Hunger Games is being compared to *Battle Royale*? It seems to me that this is just a shameless cash-in job . . . Their previous *Battle Royale* release was well done, with a nice booklet. This latest issue, however, is just a rip-off. You

cannot set your label up as a champion of cult films, then produce a DVD release that looks like it's been designed by a Hollywood marketing executive. I suppose the only saving grace is that the cover might entice buyers and therefore *Battle Royale* will be seen by a new audience. I doubt it, however, as the 18 cert. will discourage parents from buying it for teenagers, which was the market that *Hunger Games* was specifically aimed at'. (2013)

The aesthetic and extra-textual value of re-releases 'taps into fans' collecting sensibilities' (Rendell 2023, 172) which the above *BR* fan attests to. However, the fan dislikes the industry strategies and paratextual connections made by Arrow, perceived as at odds with the distributor's cult brand identity. Similar to disdain aimed at film remakes, commercial discourse dislikes re-releases as a specific type of industry practice viewed simply as trying to profit off audiences, undermining notions of fans as completists. In this case, the viewer, rather than the hypotext, is ripped-off. Yet for this fan, the silver-lining of this industry exploitation is that new younger audiences who are *HG* fans may experience *BR*. Thus, while paradoxically rejecting this version for its mainstream commercial logic, the discussant positively concedes that a wider audience may watch the beloved cult film *BR* as a result of it. Whereas young teen female audiences are routinely diametrically opposed to cult fans (Jancovich 2000) or devalued as future viewers (Hills 2015, 104), here they are positioned as welcomed prospective audiences albeit with the caveat of *BR*'s age certification.

## Conclusion

Through its depictions of violence as an ugly concept that provides the film with critical and emotional gravitas, *BR*'s spectacle is positioned as superior to mainstream Hollywood fare. Yet, the film's adolescent conflict thematic fosters transnational dialogue with US culture. Moreover, concerns of a remake are raised when linked to previous J-horror films and/or specific industry personnel are linked to the project that further serves to distinguish *BR* from mainstream Western cinema. However, some fans suggest *BR* could be remedied by a remake when in the hands of brutal, stylized, and/or fanboy creatives. Resultantly, *BR* is both distanced from and synergized with Hollywood, and could be killed or fixed by a remake. Thus, by extending the sample pool and temporal window, the transcultural fans discussed in this article present a far more malleable relationship between Asia Extreme cinema, East Asian horror, *BR*, and the West than previously argued. Moreover, this article avoids essentialising subcultural distinctions performed by certain *BR* fans that reiterate Bourdieusian genre hierarchies between cult and mainstream. This also demonstrates how analysing other social dynamics outside of fan communities can evidence alternative and highly individual intertextual bonds between films. Fandom can foster gate-keeping, ringfencing, and border control. However, being a fan is also about

mapping intertextual pathways, forging clusters, and building connections. By giving credence to those *BR* fans that form affective linkages to *HG*, this article highlights how transfandom can bridge the symbolic gap between media objects.

For some, *HG* was an unacknowledged *BR* remake. This notion of audience as reifiers of remakes, when not acknowledged or even denied by industry and other institutions, presents an interesting area of translation, adaptation, and remake studies that warrants further investigation, as does the concept of prophylactic intertextuality, intertextuality that halts other intertextual connections. Indeed, other case studies go beyond Hollywood. For example, audiences have argued that the Hindi film *Ek Villain* (Suri 2014) is an unacknowledged remake of the graphic South Korean thriller *I Saw the Devil* (Jee-Woon 2010) (D'souza 2023; Shetty 2023). Furthermore, this highlights the need for charting other flows of international retellings and non-Western or non-Anglophonic audiences (Sexton and Mathijs 2020, 3). This includes Hollywood horror blockbusters remade throughout world cinemas (see Smith 2017a), such as *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) in Brazil (*Bacalhau* [Stuart 1975]), an Indian version of *Scream* (Craven 1996) titled *Sssshhh* (Kaul 2003), and *Şeytan* (Erkan 1974) a Turkish shot-for-shot remake of *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973). This also includes remakes of horror films outside the US remade in other non-US regions such as *Oldboy* (Chan-Wook 2003) in India (*Zinda* [Gupta 2006]) and *One Cut of the Dead* (Ueda 2017) in France (*Coupez!* [Hazanavicius 2022]). These examples further complicate understandings of the intrinsic power dynamics at play in film remakes, prompt considerations into how cultural horrors become hybridised and rearticulated when travelling to new regions, and demonstrate how other 'interpretive communities' (Verevis 2006, 24) may respond to remakes.

## Notes

1. In contrast, Miike is viewed as a director-for-hire in Japan.
2. This includes fan-created *Battle Royale Forums* (14,099 posts), Letterboxd (250 posts), Twitter/X (105 posts), a Facebook thread (381 posts), IMDb reviews (732 posts), two Reddit threads (108 posts), two blogs (14 posts), and ten Amazon.co.uk review threads (690 posts).
3. Tartan went into administration in 2008. Its catalogue was sold to Palisade Media Group, forming Palisade Tartan.

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