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DVD NEWS

Region-free DVDs open world of previously unavailable titles

By Joshua Klein
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Each year, DVD shelves grow more swollen. Search online, and the number of available titles leaps exponentially. But if you dare look outside North America, the selection of DVDs becomes overwhelming.

"Probably the biggest evolution was when we all got region-free DVD players, and that allowed us to remove the blinders and see everything that was available in the world for DVD purchase," says Gary Tooze, a Toronto-based film buff who runs (with the contributions of fellow cineastes) DVDBeaver.com, a site dedicated to tracking and comparing DVDs released around the globe, from the emerging Asian market to classics from Russia, France and the rest of Europe.

First, a little more background, for anyone who has yet to pry open this particular Pandora's box. DVDs are generally encoded for one of six different regions that need a corresponding player to operate properly (plus multiregion discs that can play in any DVD player). North America, for

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example, is coded region 1. But modified region-free DVD players that will play discs from any country are readily available for sale online and elsewhere, opening doors to titles either not distributed in the U.S. or titles available in other regions in slightly different configurations. In fact, within DVDBeaver's massive and ever-expanding databases are comparisons of some titles available in two, three, four and sometimes even more versions, each varying region by region in picture quality, subtitles, packaging or special features.

Yet discovering foreign or even domestically released cult films, from friends or especially via the Internet, was always the relatively easy part. Short of traveling, actually finding them on DVD often proved trickier, but a few enterprising Web sites and services have come to the rescue when Amazon.com and its international outposts aren't good enough. In 1997, Joseph Gervasi began programming cult films in Philadelphia.

"We found that we had a captive audience there, people who didn't really buy popcorn, so we started to bring in videotapes and DVDs, once they became more popular," recalls Gervasi, "and from there we started Diabolik DVD."

DiabolikDVD.com serves as a one-stop location for cult, specialty, foreign and other DVDs somewhat off the beaten path, from horror flicks to art films.

"I really think the popularity of the format did it for us, and the fact that people became aware that amazing films were being released all around the world, and they couldn't access them," says Gervasi. "They knew that they were there--or maybe they didn't--but there were so few companies importing them.

"For the collector, it's problematic to order these titles from each respective country," he notes. "The postage alone is a nightmare. We came from doing that ourselves, just trying to keep up with all of it. We found that if you bring them all into one place, people will come and buy stuff from all around the world." HKFlix began on a very small scale back in 2000, selling mostly hard to obtain Asian films starring the likes of Jet Li and Jackie Chan on eBay, and taking advantage of the new interest spurred by such critically acclaimed films as "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

"Our Web site is the most sophisticated Web site of all specialty retailers," boasts Jeff Stockton, VP of Marketing at HKFlix.com. "It has detailed information regarding each DVD, including viewer comments, reviews, technical notes and detailed specs. We also have a 'compare' engine that allows users to compare different versions of the same movies to find the DVD that works best for them."



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In order to remain competitive, HKFlix has also expanded into cult and European films, but still only, stresses Stockton, "anything that is not mainstream."

"When it comes to Asian, we basically get everything in that is available," Stockton says. "With European movies, we are more selective. If it's a stinker, we try not to get it. We don't have time to research every title, so we try to order light at first, then adjust our desired inventory level once we determine how well it sells."

Sometimes even self-professed experts like the folks at HKFlix are taken by surprise by demand for certain titles, as was the case with the controversial Italian horror film "Cannibal Holocaust," which was limited to 11,111 copies. But HKFlix's main concern right now is staying one step ahead at a time when many American studios are scraping the bottom of their catalogs for new titles to release, and turning to many cult and foreign films in the process.

"Business is increasing, but so is competition," says Stockton. "Right now, U.S. studios are rapidly releasing everything they can on DVD, so many more titles are becoming available on domestic DVD. That is why we've continued to expand our catalog from Asian films to European and basically anything not commonly available from mainstream American distributors."

The downside of being the first collector on the block to own many of these international or specialty DVDs is, of course, the cost, often exacerbated by currency exchange rates. To that end, Nicheflix stumbled upon a smart solution: renting these hard to find multiregion titles. Following Netflix's lead, Nicheflix charges a monthly fee for international DVD rentals, a far cheaper proposition than a virtual 'round the world shopping spree.

"It all started with an obsession of my husband--foreign movies and the difficulty finding them," says Heidi Wilson of Nicheflix.com. "He figured there had to be more people out there like him, so we started Nicheflix. There's definitely a market for people interested in these types of movies, but are unable to find them, to purchase them, or don't have the resources, time or wherewithal."

Nicheflix monitors its discussion forums to gauge demand for various titles, and invites requests for specific DVDs it may not carry. The site also just initiated a pay-per-rental "a la carte" service for what Wilson calls "exceptionally hard to get or expensive" DVDs.

"I think it's serving less and less of a purpose," Wilson says of the region

codes that keep thousands of movies from being more widely seen and purchased, "because the world is getting smaller, so to speak. People are finding ways around the coding. It's getting to the point that it's easier to search for a title and find it in China, or Japan. You don't have to shop at just Best Buy or Amazon. Last year I bought a region-free player at Target for my parents so they could subscribe to Nicheflix."

"It's such a powerful thing that I think we take for granted," says DVDBeaver's Tooze of the instant availability of most DVDs, especially those from other continents. "It used to be that you had to travel around the world to see these films that we can now have sent right to our door from everywhere."

"The trouble with DVD is you can only watch so much in your lifetime!" Tooze jokes. "One of our guys in New York has about 8,000 DVDs, and he even says, 'I know in my lifetime I will not be able to watch all of these films--but what I like is the choice.'"

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