Off-Screen Scares: The Critical-Industrial Practices of Contemporary Horror Cinema

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Richard Leppert, Adviser

January 2013

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the many friends, colleagues, teachers, and family members who provided the necessary support and advice to usher me through both the dissertation writing process and my time as a graduate student.

I am grateful to the members of my dissertation committee: Mary Vavrus, Gil Rodman, John Mowitt and Gary Thomas, for their lasting guidance, scholarly advice, and critical feedback. In particular, this project was hatched in Mary Vavrus's Political Economy of Media seminar, and for that, I'm especially indebted. Also, to Gary Thomas, who taught me, among other things, the power of good, clean prose as well as the radical possibilities of making the classroom into a vitalizing, "heterotopian" space—a rampart against the "mechanical encrustation on the living."

I would also like to convey my sincerest appreciation to my mentor, Richard Leppert, who, since my earliest days as an undergraduate, has been a source of both professional guidance and companionship. Richard is my model—as an educator and a friend.

I would also like to thank Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Robin Brown, Cesare Casarino, Liz Kotz, Keya Ganguly, Timothy Brennan, Siobhan Craig, and Laurie Ouellette for their sage advice during my graduate studies.

Many friends and colleagues provided me intellectual and emotional support throughout the years: Mathew Stoddard, Tony Nadler, Alice Leppert, Manny Wessels, Mark Martinez, Doyle "Mickey" Greene, Kathie Smith, and Eleanor McGough.

I am also grateful to my parents, Bud and Deb Tompkins; my brother Steve; and my Aunt Pat, for their enduring patience and love over the years.

And finally, to Julie—you make all the difference.

This dissertation is dedicated to

Jochen Schulte-Sasse, who taught me about the “structurality of structures”

Abstract

This project examines the marketing and reception discourse of contemporary horror cinema, exploring in particular how Hollywood's "ancillary" media platforms (television, DVD, the Internet, and soundtrack albums) allow for new industrial strategies for mobilizing consumers. It considers how commercial practices of transindustrial synergy, branding, and repurposing affect the circulation and mediation of horror films, and how these practices in turn contribute to a host of new promotional forms (e.g., brand-name auteurs, corporate "re-imaginings," soundtrack albums, conglomerated video-on-demand networks and web 2.0 sites), which are designed to manage an increasingly diversified field of niche markets. Accordingly, the dissertation explores the way the horror genre has increasingly come to function as a transindustrial site for organizing reception and consumer activities across multiple media platforms and entertainment industries. In doing so, it aims to contribute to scholarly understanding of how specific film genres are stabilized and reproduced by institutional discourses (critical, industrial, popular), which are in fact essential to the very existence of commercial-film categories.

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Introduction

Horror Cinema/Synergy

On September 10, 2010, the action horror film *Resident Evil: Afterlife* opened number one at the U.S. box office. The fourth installment in the *Resident Evil* franchise, the film tracks Alice (Milla Jovovich), the series' heroine, as she moves across a post-apocalyptic desert landscape in search of the elusive Umbrella Corporation, a multinational bioengineering company responsible for unleashing a deadly zombie-generating virus that has spread across the globe and infected the bulk of the human population. Protecting a small cohort of survivors while fighting off a new breed of super zombies, Alice remains steadfast in her quest to wrest humanity from the precipice of extinction, while seeking to exact revenge upon the evil, omnipotent corporation whose noxious creation has spread everywhere, beyond the company's control, threatening to consume the world over.

Although the plot to *Resident Evil: Afterlife* merely appears to replicate the standard, formulaic scenario of countless apocalyptic horror film narratives, it might also stand in as an allegory for the media-industrial complex circumscribing the film's release. Much like the mutating, deadly virus at the heart of the *Resident Evil* franchise, the film's "content" had seemingly spread everywhere within the space of a few short weeks leading up to, and immediately following, *Resident Evil: Afterlife*'s box office release, thereby "infecting" a host of non-theatrical multi-media platforms. By the time the movie hit theaters in the fall of 2010, portions of the film—in the form of promotional images, clips, TV spots, director and star interviews, online games, licensed recordings,

theatrical trailers, and "behind the scenes" documentaries—could already be seen and heard circulating across a variety of media outlets (e.g., news and entertainment publications, broadcast network and cable television channels, online websites, soundtrack albums). Furthermore, the subsequent release of the film on DVD and Blu-ray provided additional sites for compounding ancillary revenues, while heightening a relentless viral marketing campaign designed to saturate various media markets and diversify audiences for the *Resident Evil* franchise as a whole. All of this goes without mentioning the eighteen-part *Resident Evil* video game-series upon which the movies are based, and which continues to spur a parallel media franchise of its own, consisting of *Resident Evil*-inspired action figures, animated shorts, novels, and comic books.

All this is to say, then, that if we wish to account for *Resident Evil: Afterlife* as a cultural phenomenon, we must incorporate the wide swath of interactive formats, cross-promotional outlets, and merchandizing tie-ins that encompass the trans-media universe underwriting the *Resident Evil* franchise in its entirety. Situated within the context of media convergence, *Resident Evil: Afterlife* becomes an impressively distended trans-media monster; indeed, given the rapid proliferation of myriad "satellite" texts (Austin, 2002: 24) and discourses surrounding the film, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine where this particular brand of horror cinema ends and where the so-called "ancillary" markets and "secondary" content begins.

My project examines the way such networks of multimedia convergence and auxiliary promotion have impacted contemporary horror cinema, focusing in particular on the institutional relations associated with Hollywood's ancillary media platforms

(television, DVD, the internet, and soundtrack albums) and its more traditional avenue of exhibition: the theatrical release. I argue that these platforms increasingly allow for key industrial strategies of branding, synergy, and repurposing, which are in turn designed to regulate and contain a proliferating field of consumer activities. In other words, these media serve as the "host body" according to which numerous fields of consumer activity and reception practices can be brought into alignment with a studio's "mutating" commodity discourses.[1] These discourses, in turn, serve to regulate not only how, when, and where audiences access movies or the ways in which consumption takes place, but also the general conditions under which horror cinema's ancillary promotions and "satellite" content circulates throughout film and media culture. Thus, I am interested in the ongoing institutional transformations of horror cinema, especially as these exist in relation to emerging media technologies, industries, markets, and audiences, but also how these "critical industrial practices" (Caldwell, 2006a) effectively work to manage and contain an increasingly diversified field of niche media markets through the organization and distribution of various modalities of consumption.

Highlighting the shifting institutional relations that condition contemporary media production and consumption, my project thus engages research in political economy, textual analysis, genre criticism, and media reception studies. My primary concern is with the impact of non-theatrical media formats (TV, DVD, the internet, soundtrack

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[1] John Caldwell has described the "viral future of cinema" as one fundamentally dependent upon a variety of multimedia platforms and ancillary outlets (TV especially, but also DVD and the Internet); moreover, he writes that each of these platforms, and the various promotional content that circulates across them, serve as "the fuel that drives the endless mutation of this content across proprietary host bodies within the conglomerated world" (2005: 95).

albums) on horror cinema, and how these "ancillary" entertainment media have altered processes of film distribution, circulation and reception, effectively rendering feature films like *Resident Evil: Afterlife* a mere node in a vast network of converging entertainment industries, media technologies, and niche media markets. I argue that such developments demand a reconsideration of the analytical frameworks that have dominated horror film criticism—as well as film genre studies more generally—over the last few decades.

Media Convergence and Promotional Film Culture

> …it has also been seen that a film must never end…it must exist…[even] before we enter the cinema—in a kind of englobingly extensive prolongation. The commerce of film depends on this too, recognized in a whole host of epiphenomena from trailers to remakes, from weekly reviews to star magazines, from publicity to memento (rubber sharks, tee shirts). More crucially, since the individual film counts little in its particularity as opposed to the general circulation which guarantees the survival of the industry and in which it is a unit…a film a constant doing over again…
>
> (Stephen Heath, 1976: 33-42)

As Hollywood's ancillary markets continue to outpace the revenues generated at the box office,[2] it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the practice of "cinemagoing" from the non-theatrical, interactive viewing contexts of the home. In the

[2] Since 1987, in fact, and largely coinciding with the processes of media conglomeration and the emergence of synergized home video, cable, and satellite markets, the bulk of profits for most Hollywood films have derived from "residual" or ancillary markets rather than theatrical box office; see Maltby (2000: 24) and Wasser (2008: 126). More recently, McDonald's (2007) study of DVD and video industries shows that by 2004 over half of all consumer spending on motion picture entertainment in the US came from video retail and rental, with DVD accounting for approximately ninety-four percent of the "sell-through market" (p. 144).

current age of “post-cinema,” movie culture becomes increasingly indistinguishable from other forms of media culture like television, home video, popular music, and the Web (Acland, 2003: 55-9). Consequently, film texts—and film spectators—are no longer confined to the technological and formal strictures of the “cinematic apparatus;” instead filmic content is increasingly repurposed and endlessly circulated across any number of media channels where it enters a variegated field of discursive practices, institutional contexts, and exhibition sites. To the extent this conglomerated content relies upon commodified fragments of the original—or “primary”—film text to be dispersed across multiple media platforms, “ancillary” movie experience (via TV, the Internet, DVDs, and soundtracks) may arguably be said to constitute a form of film-related media consumption in its own right (Austin, 2002: 30), or at least a viable mode of *inter-textually* engaging with film culture.[3]

Hence, analyses of film genre must necessarily supplement traditional text-centered approaches, which concentrate primarily on the “semantic/syntactic” parameters of textual meaning (Altman, 1984), with a consideration of the changing political, economic, and cultural contexts that condition the circulation of movie genres in and throughout contemporary media culture. Accordingly, this study focuses less on the formal and thematic structures underpinning contemporary horror film narratives, and

[3] My use of the hyphenated “inter-textuality” derives from previous work on reception, namely Bennett and Woollacott (1987: 45)’s distinction of *intertextuality*—a term they associate with the work of Julia Kristeva, among others, and describe as “the systems of reference to other texts which can be discerned within the internal composition of a specific individual text”—and *inter-textuality*, or “the social organisation of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading.” What I find useful here is their emphasis on the social and institutional *conditions* of reading, as opposed to the “internal” systems of reference that make up a film’s “intertextuality.”

more on the ways in which horror cinema more generally operates as a transindustrial, multimedia category—that is, a form of industrial activity which serves to organize exhibition and consumption practices across any number of delivery platforms and reception cultures. In this context, I suggest that the horror genre functions as a distinct economic and cultural resource that can be utilized by an array of institutions and their constituencies (e.g., critics, fans, producers, marketers, distributors, academics) for the purposes of circulating and delimiting structures of cinematic meaning and experience. As I elaborate below, to engage with horror cinema means engaging with its multimedia manifestations; and these in turn necessitate new and different forms of attention be paid to media convergence.

Particularly when it comes to understanding how film genres operate as a governing principle of commercial activity, for example, studying horror cinema from a transindustrial perspective sheds light on the industrial practices of contemporary Hollywood, and specifically the forms of multimedia convergence that distinguish today's commercial film culture (Caldwell, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Tryon, 2010). In this context, convergence signifies the interrelation of film-related media forms, the technological innovations that propel such relations, and the industrial trends in marketing and cross-promotion which circulate a text—or, as more often is the case, a textualized "brand identity"—across multiple media platforms in order to extend its possible sites of consumption.[4] Indeed as numerous scholars have pointed out, the

[4] In this sense, "media convergence" differs from the concept of "cultural convergence," which Jenkins (2006) defines in terms of fan practices, and using numerous media at the same time.

handful of media conglomerates that presently own the major film companies now organize numerous distribution platforms and subsidiary divisions so as to structurally facilitate the growth of ancillary markets and the delivery of movies throughout various media channels.[5] However, whereas the bulk of this research has tended to focus on "blockbuster" production, and the brand value assigned to big budget, or "tent-pole" feature films, the increasing level of "commercial intertextuality" associated with contemporary Hollywood suggests new criteria for understanding the film industry's institutionalized system of movie genres as well.[6]

For instance, the interdependency of film production, distribution, and marketing (or what is often called "synergy") makes it difficult to distinguish not only the contours that separate film and other entertainment industries (TV, music, publishing, the Internet), but also to understand movies themselves as distinct cultural or "textual" objects (Maltby, 2000: 26). That is to say, from an institutional perspective, "film"

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[5] Wasko (1995), Maltby (2000), and Caldwell (2005) have variously argued that the feature film business no longer exists as an entity in its own right; contemporary Hollywood is now arguably a fully integrated branch of a much larger and tightly diversified "software industry" (Maltby 2000: 23-4).

[6] For instance, Meehan (2000) suggests movies like *Batman* essentially function as "commercial intertexts" for a broader "multimedia, multimarket sales campaign" (p. 24). Similarly, Gomery (2000) argues that feature films begin their marketing life in theaters, but a "true blockbuster" is determined by the millions of dollars generated in ancillary revenue from home video, pay-TV and cable TV. Likewise, Elsaesser (2001: 11) notes that in today's media world, a blockbuster is "merely a billboard stretched out in time, designed to showcase tomorrow's classics in video stores and television reruns." While each of these assessments encapsulate the basic sentiment of blockbuster-oriented scholarship, I would add that practices driving contemporary multimedia film culture also reframe movies in different ways, such that films (and film categories, e.g., horror) which circulate across different media outlets are often made to overlap with different demographic segments, or "taste cultures" that define those outlets. In other words, industrial procedures of shifting modes of cinematic exhibition across multiple media are directly tied to issues of taste and cultural distinction (see Chapter 2 and 4).

functions not so much as a coherent aesthetic or stylistic system, but as a "semiotic cluster bomb" (Caldwell, 2005: 95) intended to reverberate across a constellation of satellite texts and ancillary discourses, the commercial logic of which dictates that multiple "avenues of access"—i.e., pleasures, meanings, and interpretations—be made available to audiences so as to maximize the potential reach of its consumer base (Klinger, 1989: 10; Austin, 2002: 2).

Indeed as Henry Jenkins has observed, "transmedia storytelling"—that is, dispersing content across multiple media platforms—is now the industry norm; here "reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption," and thus serves the interests of the major intellectual property rights holders by "offering new levels of insight and experience [that] refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty" (Jenkins, 2006: 90). In this context, strategies of media convergence not only leverage the expansion of film-related forms of media, but do so in a way that effectively utilizes the horizontal integration of the major conglomerates, propelling audiences further down the ancillary revenue stream: e.g., from film to video to television to the Internet to music soundtracks to video games, and so on. Theorizing the role of genre in this context thus requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of these media systems, and the industrial and cultural practices that both precipitate and prefigure cinema's multimedia distribution, circulation, and reception.

In short, it requires an account of the institutional relations that are currently fueling a reorganization of horror cinema. Within this context, new modes of delivery, coupled with the continued expansion of horror movie culture to include home video and

television markets, as well as digital computer-related technologies, have called into question the economic primacy and overall cultural significance of isolated textual systems. Instead, Hollywood's "dispersible" texts function today as multimedia "assemblages" of converging industrial, marketing, and inter-textual forces (Acland, 2003: 43), which in turn signal a host of heretofore "ancillary" concerns regarding the overall commercial viability of the horror movie industry.[7] Fully understanding the implications of this multimedia strategy, therefore, requires film scholars to abandon decades-long attachment to the concept of an isolatable film "text," but also to take seriously the countless "ancillary discourses" that presently accompany a film's cultural circulation and prefigure its consumption (Barker, 2004). As these discourses help to shape the manner in which audiences attend to and make sense of trends in Hollywood cinema, they necessarily deserve the critical attention of media scholars concerned with the institutional conditions of popular film.

Furthermore, they behoove researchers to jettison any preconceptions about the relative paucity or insignificance of "promotional film culture" and its distinct media forms, and instead reflect on the growing importance of marketing discourse and media

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[7] Indeed, this often to the point where, as John Caldwell has pointed out, many feature films today function as corporate "loss leaders" for the more wide-ranging profits to be recouped in "secondary" markets (pay cable, video-on-demand, satellite, DVDs, music CDs, MP3 downloads, comic books, video games, Webcasting, and so on; see Caldwell 2005: 92-3). This interdependency also extends to the concept of the identifiable or "univocal" film text itself; as Caldwell points out: "far from being a discrete form of art or entertainment, film represents but one strata in a complicated multimedia industrial marketing and consumption strategy" (2005: 95); or, to put it another way, film today essentially presents itself as a "viral marketing scheme" (ibid), the impact of which is felt both vertically and horizontally across multiple media sectors and specialized divisions of the major media conglomerates who now consolidate the lion's share of motion picture distribution and commercial "entertainment."

hype as a means of structuring *meaningful* engagements with cinema—while, of course, motivating film consumption across various platforms. To that end, a handful of scholars, including Barbara Klinger (1989), Martin Barker (2004), and Jonathan Gray (2010), among others, have argued for a systematic study of the promotional contexts animating contemporary film reception—noting, for instance, how techniques of marketing, hype, synergy, publicity, and advertising not only provide the "commercial life-support system for a film" (Klinger, 1989: 5), but also how these contexts constitute the discursive "scaffolding" (Barker, 2004: 8) according to which cinema audiences are invited to make sense of particular movie genres (see also Austin, 2002: 114-52). In this sense, promotional film culture represents both a significant realm of media discourse in its own right as well as a "tenacious inter-textual network of relations that figure into the environment in which the [primary film] text is received" (Klinger, 1989: 9).

Moreover, as this work indicates, a significant feature of a film's public circulation throughout media culture is defined by its aesthetic commodification; that is, its promotional definition as a consumable product. As such, it represents an avenue for critical investigation of the ways in which industrial practices of synergy and marketing dovetail with broader industrial goals of media convergence—and in particular how this process acts vitally on film reception, suggesting more-or-less "appropriate" ways of consuming particular films (and film genres). Put differently, studying promotional film culture means not only paying attention to the commercial incentives underwriting these commodity discourses, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the way in which they help to shape a commercially expanding inter-textual experience of film culture more

generally. It means taking seriously the broad range of promotional and marketing discourses that now constitute cinema's multimedia convergence, and how these serve to more-or-less anticipate "divergent" patterns of audience reception (Klinger 1989).

Thus, whereas the dominant tendency in cinema studies has been to relegate issues of ancillary film consumption to the methodological background—in favor of, say, more or less discrete readings of hypostasized individual texts—this study seeks to integrate approaches which bring together distinctive traditions of political economy, discourse analysis and critical reception studies, in order to more fully address the economic and institutional forces guiding horror cinema's (sub) cultural circulation. In doing so, my aim is to highlight both the way such contexts serve to reproduce a number of ancillary discourses about horror film culture—that in turn feed both critical and popular reception as well as specific industrial practices—but also to draw attention to how broader economic forces, corporate strategies, and specific aesthetic ideologies inflect these practices. In short, my aim is to de-center horror's "on-screen" textual meanings by examining the various "off-screen" practices and *extra*-textual agencies that organize and motivate them.

For this reason, I turn my attention (in later chapters) to the specific institutions involved in circulating meaning *around* horror films, noting various deployments of "brand identity" and patterns of signification. As I will show, horror film culture can now be engaged via any number of institutional discourses and contexts (e.g., the academy, the industry, trade discourse and DVD culture, "post-network" TV and online fan communities, review journalism and "auteur"-based celebrity promotion), and these

do not necessarily "cheapen" the cinematic experience; to the contrary, they often presuppose and reproduce generic "systems of intelligibility" (Klinger, 1994: xvii)—or ways of making sense of and taking pleasure in horror cinema—that necessarily supersedes the work of individual film texts. Accordingly, the dissertation will analyze these discourses as they inevitably shape popular understandings horror cinema more generally (as opposed to horror films in particular).

By engaging in a research project that situates horror cinema in relation to its various extra-textual contexts, this study thus aims to recognize more fully "the extent to which genres appear to be initiated, stabilized, and protected by a series of institutions essential to the very existence of genres" (Altman, 1999: 85). It also aims to follow the admonition of Charles Acland (2003: 23-4), who writes of the "mutability now expected of film commodities"—at the level of both popular cinematic knowledge and industrial practice—as a central criterion for engaging and understanding "the rising centrality of the intermedia migration of texts." In fact, his book, *Screen Traffic*, attempts to position this intermedia "migration" as one of primary conditions by which to intervene in cinema studies. He proposes that

> the problem with film studies has been *film*, that is, the use of the medium in order to designate the boundaries of a discipline. Such a designation assumes a certain stability in what is actually a mutable technological apparatus. A problem ensues when it is apparent that film is not film anymore. It does not make sense—and perhaps it never did—to say that there is a film culture as absolutely distinct from television, video, music, and amusement park cultures. The relationship between them is often not one of conflict but rather symbiosis and relationality. (2003: 46)

Similarly, the problem with *horror* film studies, one might argue, has been an equally narrow focus on film texts "in themselves," to the detriment of their institutional

“relationality” to other media. Thus, while my project necessarily engages recent trends in commercial horror film production, it does so by way of proposing a move beyond the critical analysis of individual film texts (or whatever content appears “on-screen”) so as to systematically consider the various ways in which horror film culture remains implicated in the “off-screen” practices of industrial infrastructure, critical institutions, and the plurality of multimedia platforms.

“Offscreen” Genre Studies: Theories and Method

As may be apparent from these preliminary remarks, this dissertation seeks to offer a model of genre analysis at variance with traditional approaches: engaging a set of generic texts grouped under a distinct generic category, film scholars have long sought to distinguish genre films as a site of formal, narrative and/or aesthetic/ideological critique. Under this approach, genres are conventionally viewed as components of film texts (rather than ancillary discourses) which are then used to ground specific modes of textual analysis. By contrast, this project runs up against more-or-less “text-centered” approaches to film genre, which stem from more-or-less orthodox approaches to film studies (namely, those traditions rooted in literary or art criticism). Rather than engage in conventional procedures of textual analysis, for example, one of the more general aims of this study is to throw into relief the methodological insufficiency of those of traditional forms of genre analysis, which seek to position individual texts as both the source and symptom of a specifiable range of meanings, messages, and ideological effects,

particularly by way of identifying and analyzing the variable discursive and inter-textual contexts through which their media consumption is organized.

For this reason, this project might be viewed as constituting a somewhat practical (rather than theoretical) intervention into ongoing methodological debates over the salience of reigning textual paradigms in cinema studies. Here academic investigations into cinema culture parallel methodological developments in television and media studies, which for quite some time now have identified political economy, audience practice, and promotional discourse as viable fields of study in their own right, having as much (if not more) to do with the sociocultural impact of cinema as any individual grouping of film texts.

Nonetheless, whereas much of this work—at least as it pertains to media studies—revolves around questions involving, among other things: the "public dimension" of moviegoing (Acland, 2003); the cultural import of domestic film consumption and non-theatrical venues like television and DVD (Klinger, 2006); the marketability of Hollywood movies as a fundamental condition of their assembly and commercial design (Wyatt, 1994); the evolving, interrelated media practices of fans, critics, and industry workers in relationship to recent trends in media convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Tryon, 2010; Deuze, 2007)—my aim is not to engage in disputes over the "correct" way of understanding horror film culture in these various contexts; nor, for that matter, is it to spotlight the perceived limitations of extant theoretical models.[8] Rather, I

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[8] Along these lines, Mark Jancovich (2007) has recently argued that a great deal of academic writing on horror continues to remain beholden to a limited model of genre, which is largely based around close, textual analysis of canonical horror films. He

hope to provide an institutional perspective on the current structural and economic forces shaping the social circulation of particular movie genres, such as horror, while paying special attention to how this circulation impacts their cultural status as particular *discursive* formations (Foucault, 1977 and 2002). In the process, I hope to not only how these generic discourses of horror cinema shape industrial practices, but also how industrial practices in turn shape generic discourses—i.e., how the promotional contexts of contemporary horror film converge with various forms of critical industrial "reflexivity" characteristic of today's media culture.[9]

By regarding generic *discourse* (as opposed to generic *texts*) as my primary object of study, I mean to signal my affinity with a tradition of media and cultural studies, which regards processes of generic classification, circulation, and institutionalization as a sufficient means to understand the overall cultural implications and inter-textual nature of generic categories. Most recently, theorists including James Naremore (1995), Steve

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identifies three dominant approaches in the current literature: (1) historical surveys of the horror's aesthetic/stylistic development; (2) attempts to identify the genre's formal and/or ideological identity; and (3) "concentrated studies" which seek to examine particular aspects of the genre (p. 261). While these tendencies indicate a clear penchant for textual analysis, they might also be supplemented by an emerging body of work on the historically specific industrial conditions of horror film production, distribution, marketing, and exhibition; for example, see Heffernan (2004), Nowell (2011), and Lobato and Ryan (2011).

[9] As I elaborate below, the concept of industrial "reflexivity" derives from Caldwell (2005, 2006a, 2009), and furthermore is crucial to thinking about, not only the endless mutations of cinema culture in the contexts of media convergence, but also the "off-screen" critical analyses of scholars, entertainment reporters, media executives, industrial marketing departments, genre filmmakers, and popular audiences alike. Indeed, these forms of critical industrial "reflexivity" largely drive the repurposing of horror film content across multiple platforms, whether it be elite film journals, "behind-the-scenes" featurettes, interactive websites, and/or TV award shows (see Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 2, respectively).

Neale (2000), Rick Altman (1999), Jason Mittell (2004) and Mark Jancovich (2000, 2002a), have argued that genre studies should not be concerned with the identification of the inherent textual properties of a specific genre, but with the role played by different social institutions and reception contexts in the mediation of broader generic discourses. Here terms like "inter-textual relay" refer to those practices of genre criticism, publicity and promotion, which surround Hollywood films (Neale, 2000: 2-3), but also to their popular inflection by different audience groupings and taste cultures (Jancovich 2000, 2001 and Mittell 2004: 94-120). Moreover, this relay cannot be delimited to a series of film texts that share similar formal and stylistic features; rather the significance of film genres emerges in the social processes of classification that attribute to them perceived cultural meanings and values.

In other words, as James Naremore argues, the concept of genre "has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a *loose evolving system of arguments and readings*, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies (quoted in Jancovich, 2002: 1; added emphasis). As such, genres are not something to be found *within* film texts, but rather in those fields adjacent to textual formation; they operate primarily in the discursive practices of critics, scholars, audiences and industries: or those institutions that work collectively—though not always harmoniously—to preserve the field of generic interpretation and evaluation. For this reason, genres should not be viewed as unique properties *of* texts in themselves, or, for that matter, as delimited corpuses of associated textual practices; but rather as indicating particular "discursive formations" that are "characterized by the delimitation of a field of objects [film texts],

the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge [established critical paradigms], and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories [canonical speech]" (Foucault, 1977: 199).

As Jason Mittell (2004: 1-28) has convincingly argued, genres should be analyzed as a cultural process of categorization—which is to say, a property and function of the various media systems, critical and popular discourses, and industrial practices that work to constitute generic definitions, meanings, and interpretations. To wit, genres should be understood as a component of the broader industrial and cultural practices that discursively call them into being; as such, they operate as signposts of the socially constructed meanings and aesthetic frameworks that organize their cultural reception. While these meanings are not inherent to genre categories, they are the product of an institutionalized system of interpretive and evaluative discourses, which are routinely brought to bear upon identifiable genre texts. Thus, while these texts may certainly be perceived to express, more generally, the social conditions of the their production, genres might be said to encapsulate, more pointedly, the aesthetic and ideological concerns, as well as the implicit taste distinctions, of those who produce, mediate, and consume them (see Jancovich, 2002).

Indeed because genres function as convenient cultural shorthand for a range of textual reading practices and aesthetic norms, they should be seen as reflecting not a coherent body of film texts but a host of institutional determinations that escape their semiotic purview; they refer to an *inter-textual* process of discursive formation that can alter radically according to different reception contexts and institutional frameworks (cf.

Mittell 2004 on television). So it is that fans of the horror genre, for instance, iterate discourses of aesthetics and authorship in order to justify their own pleasures (Hills, 2005: 71-105), while academics habitually invoke canonical theories and discourses—of intertextuality, topicality, auteurism, and symptomatic critique—in order to legitimate horror as a valid (theoretical) object of study, and thus normatively display their own scholarly expertise and cultural authority. Consequently, the horror genre has been subject to a variety of theoretical orientations (Marxism, feminism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, etc.), and these in turn have sought to position the genre as fundamental a component of textual analysis. By contrast, discursive approaches to film genre suggest a way around this "textualist assumption" (Mittell, 2004: 7), specifically by addressing the ways in which film genres are constituted at the level of cultural discourse and media industries.

In doing so, they also suggest particular case studies as a way to recuperate the analysis of discourse as an institutional formation of "power-knowledge" (Foucault, 1977: 24, 215). Here the idea that genres work, not through some "deep" ideological structure or hidden allegorical meaning, but rather at the level of "surface manifestations and common articulations" (Mittell, 2004: 13), is especially important if we are to consider the extent to which orthodox textual methods have tended to reduce the concept of discourse to an understanding of the ways in which cultural objects seemingly express or symbolically reflect crucial aspects of "society." Whereas this interpretive approach, by and large, conceives of film genres in terms of what texts "actually mean," or how they relay "repressed" historical meanings beneath the cultural surface (Wood, 2003), the

model of Foucauldian analysis I have in mind here is significantly different, in that it suggests a way of locating genres specifically at the level of disciplinary "regimes" of knowledge and the corresponding social relations of power that sustain them. This allows one to usefully examine the ways in which genre categories, like all formations of knowledge, operate outside the bounds of individual film texts, and according to interrelated discursive practices and institutional contexts.

The "Reflection of Society" Perspective; or, Critical Industrial "Commonsense"

For instance, if horror films are conventionally thought, within academic circles, to be popular cultural "reflections" of society, affording unique insights into their social-allegorical conditions of production (Tudor, 1989; Clover, 1992; Creed, 1993; Humphries, 2002; Wood, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005; Craig and Fradley, 2010; Middleton, 2010), then an inter-textual analysis of this discursive formation might examine the institutional conditions of its reproduction; that is, the systems of interpretation associated with academic film culture, but also the promotional and industrial frameworks that mediate discussion (in newspapers, entertainment magazine, on television, etc.). Indeed as I hope to show in the pages that follow, the prevalence of this discourse (especially at the level of critical reviews, trade press accounts, niche marketing strategies, publicity mechanisms, corporate branding strategies and repurposing), suggests a role for media industries looking to incorporate this "reflection of society perspective" (Kapsis, 2009: 3) into their various industrial practices.

Furthermore, it suggests an elasticity of this discourse, which can be applied (rather loosely, in fact) to a host of contemporary horror films, and across a wide variety of industrial and popular contexts. Thus it might be said that reading horror films for "hidden" allegorical subtexts constitutes not so much a "proper" way of understanding the genre, but a certain type of received, conventional wisdom that runs throughout critical and industrial discourse. As such, it acts vitally on genre reception, without inhering in any identifiable formal, stylistic, or narrative properties; rather it serves as a kind of discursive "scaffolding," which lends credibility and institutional "support" to the genre (Barker, 2004: 8), and hence the notion of interpretive depth configures the horror film as a culturally relevant object of study: It is something that gets applied *to* horror films (rather than interpretively deduced *from* them), and particularly via the ancillary discourses (of critics, audiences, and industries) that repeatedly invoke the same range of concepts, questions, and judgments about it.

Thus, in the chapters that follow, I will examine (among other things) what different institutional organizations and critical and industrial personnel have to "say" about the genre, what terms and conditions influence the circulation of these generic discourses across media platforms, and how specific understandings of "the horror film" contribute to the formation of distinct marketing, distribution, and exhibition strategies. More broadly, I will examine how these discursive practices get inflected by wider cultural assumptions of value, social function, and assumed "target audience," such that horror cinema itself becomes an object of "critical" inquiry within the contexts of the horror movie industry, while operating on behalf of those laboring in, or directly adjacent

to, its promotional activities (directors, marketers, business reporters, publicists, critics, etc.).

Furthermore, I will also show that, despite the widespread insistence that horror films occur "organically" within these contexts—that is, as an inevitable by-product of the myriad social, political, and ideological crises thought to radiate inward (on the intentions genre filmmakers) and outward (on the cultural tastes and preferences of horror movie audiences)—the kind of overtly "oppositional" critique typically identified with horror film scholars (see Chapter One) remains more or less unstated within industrial practices. Nevertheless, the fact that such industrial "theorizing" takes place, and that horror film's generally purported social, allegorical, and political functions remain a topic of discussion *within* the industry, indicates the extent to which the genre itself has become a site of ongoing "critical" industrial practice, unbeholden to elite film circles (i.e., the academy).

Indeed as I will show, readily obtainable, metatextual information *about* horror films is regularly made available throughout numerous "special features" and ancillary discourses; and these discourses in turn provide a sort of industrial "commonsense"[10]

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[10] The idea of an industrial "commonsense" owes much to Charles Acland's (2003) use of Gramsci concept of hegemony to theorize the conjoined industrial and popular discourses about contemporary Hollywood cinema as forms of provisional "truth" that regulate cultural practices of moviegoing. In particular, Acland refers to "the adoption of the language of the film business by popular film culture," which he rightly points out, coincides with changes in the film industry, including "the movement of sites of production and seeking out markets further afield" (p. 9). In this context, industrial commonsense constitutes "an *episteme* of popular entertainment" (p. 14), which inevitably shapes commercial strategies, audience expectations, and cultural policies—or as Acland puts it, "the patchwork of practices and experiences contributing to…ideas about cinematic life" (pp. 20-1).

about the genre, which routinely dovetails with conventions of academic horror film criticism. For this reason, one might argue that both the industry *and* the academy have a role to play in legitimating certain trends in commercial horror film production.[11] Moreover, both the academy and the industry work in similar fashion to legitimate horror as a *critical* category by suggesting ways in which it might have broader links to concepts of cultural value and psycho/social functions.

This is evident, for instance, if we consider the industrial resources now devoted to generating "audience data" and "market research" about horror film consumers.[12] Here the genre owes much of its coherent identity, as a promotional category, to the "critical" work involved in mapping popular tastes and "target audiences" onto broader cultural discourses—which construct the genre's "marketability" across different media platforms (see Chapter Three on DVDs and Chapter Four on horror soundtracks). Not only does these discourses inflect horror's "modular" aesthetic (Wyatt, 1994: 40-4), and thus assure media executives of the market potential of particular film genres; it also provides insight

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[11] By suggesting a role for the film academy in constituting film genres, I do not mean to insinuate their hegemonic consistency with the "knowledge monopoly" of the film industry (Miller et al., 2005: 261)—as if both institutions somehow operated on equal levels of cultural power and authority. Nevertheless, I use the term to signal the degree to which institutional goals of the film academy mirror those of the film industry to the extent they both seek to validate specific reading strategies/positions over others—one to maintain professional status, the other to secure commercially acceptable readings of horror films.

[12] According to Phillip Drake (2008: 63), for example, marketing costs now account for one-third of the total cost of a major studio-released feature film; that is half the "negative cost" of production. In addition, "independent" studio-distributors such as Lionsgate, which has been a major player in the area of horror film production and distribution over the last decade, regularly spend up to two-thirds of their budget on marketing (Friend, 2009: 46; Gray, 2010: 7).

into the kinds of divergent interpretations that "theoretically" guide those decisions, and how these inevitably link up with discourses of a constructed or "imagined" audience.

Alternatively, academic paradigms of interpretation have arguably monopolized the field of horror cinema to such an extent that other possible reading strategies—notably, those which don't openly conform to normative techniques of symptomatic critique and political auteurism (whether associated with horror fans or so-called "ordinary" viewers)—oftentimes appear naïve or "incorrect" when matched against the prevailing interpretive discourse of film scholars (see Chapter One). Accordingly, it might be said that the very concept of "horror film" has been stabilized in such a way as to match the discursive constructions of both critical and industrial practice, to the point where each institution becomes implicated in the "semiotic apparatus" that "connects people to textual objects or processes by means of normative patterns of value and disvalue" (Frow, 2005: 51).

Along these lines, then, let it be said that I am not interested in speculating as to how, why, or to what extent horror film audiences either find meaning or take pleasure in horror films—whether from a textual standpoint or empirical audience perspective. Rather I am concerned with the ways certain institutional sites of power (like the academy and the industry) work in analogous fashion to discursively *construct* an image of that audience (whether defined in terms of target markets, or ideal readers and/or "subject positions") so as to meet the broader institutional goals and theoretical research agendas. Operating to situate horror films (and their audiences) within regimes of institutional power-knowledge, that is, both the academy and the industry work to

articulate a range of cultural assumptions about the cultural meaning and value of horror film texts. My goal is to identify these modes of discursive "enunciation" (Foucault, 2002: 129) as they work to posit more-or-less functional definitions of horror films texts as popular cultural articulations of "deep" social meaning and/or hidden metaphorical subtexts.

In doing so, I suggest a model for understanding the industry's role in constituting film genres as a form of institutional "commonsense" that can be applied to its own creative industrial practices. Thus, and to sum up my argument so far, whereas others have analyzed Hollywood as a producer of generic horror film texts (Gomery, 1996; Heffernan, 2004; Kapsis, 2009; Nowell, 2010; Lobato and Ryan 2010), I will look at the industry as a producer of generic discourses. My purpose is to situate these discourses in the contexts of media convergence, and specifically those industrial trends aimed at mitigating the risks involved in inter-media relations, the fragmentation of cinema audiences, and digitalization of film content. Herein maintaining institutional power rests, in part, on the "productive" aspects of such generic discourse (in the Foucauldian sense), which ultimately seeks to regulate the flow of knowledge and cultural information about horror films. Thus analyzing the way such discourses ultimately get incorporated into the various paratextual dimensions of horror cinema, this dissertation will proceed to take up the question of *industrial* forms of theorizing and critical debate (Caldwell, 2009: 170).

Accordingly, the following chapters will examine the industrial dimensions of horror cinema from a non-*production* standpoint, that is, with minor consideration of the

actual role played by genres as a governing principle of *textual* production. Rather, they will investigate the various non-production practices of media industries that work to articulate generic discourse via techniques of corporate synergy (i.e., how media institutions employ generic categories as means of both commercially segmenting and cross-promoting ancillary content), branding (the ways in which these generic categories are linked to commodity discourses of "lifestyle" and subcultural distinction), repurposing (how these links are then exploited across a range of different media), and target audiences (or subdividing consumer populations into identifiable "taste cultures"). In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which a variety of industrial practices (not directly related to the production of "primary" film texts) work to constitute the field of horror cinema, and how the role of genre cannot be reduced to merely providing "assembly-line" blueprints and aesthetic formula in these contexts (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 94-136; Schatz 1981). In short, the system of movie genres underwriting this dissertation remains inextricable from broader issues of inter-media relations, transindustrialism, and the "migratory" patterns of cinema audiences.

So What's "Critical" About Industrial Practice?

Major inspiration for this project comes from an essay by John Caldwell entitled, "Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, Repurposing, and the Migratory Pattern of Industrial Texts." In the essay Caldwell outlines what he calls an integrated "textual-economic" approach to studying media industry discourse, and in particular those forms of "industrial theorizing" and "critical textual practice" that characterize Hollywood's

proliferating ancillary media formats: e.g., DVD bonus tracks, making of featurettes, behind the scenes interviews and production exercises, audio commentaries, interactive Web sites, downloadable podcasts, and so on. Asserting the centrality of these formats to overall industrial practice, Caldwell builds a case for understanding satellite texts as part of the broader corporate strategy aimed at negotiating and managing institutional change. Specifically, he identifies trends in "critical industrial practice" as one way for media industries to consolidate their economic and institutional power amidst ongoing structural developments, arguing, for example, that

> it is difficult to explain the current world of [media] conglomeration, deregulation, repurposing, and globalization *without* fully acknowledging the extent to which textual production—*and the analysis of texts by industry*—stand simultaneously as corporate strategies, as forms of cultural and economic capital integral to professional communities, and as the means by which contemporary media industries work to rationalize their operations in an era of great institutional instability. (Caldwell, 2006a: 102; emphasis original)

Caldwell draws attention to dimensions of industrial practice that typically go unobserved within both cultural studies and conventional critical political economic research: namely, the ways in which the industry itself produces knowledge about media culture, and how this knowledge, in turn, both gives rise to and reshapes conceptualizations of cinema audiences, texts, genres, and economics.

In fact, as Caldwell demonstrates throughout this essay (and elsewhere), media industries today continue to invest tremendous amount of creative resources in producing knowledge (and critical knowledge, at that) *about* the industry—knowledge that is in turn reflexively managed, circulated, and interrogated within the commercial sphere. Thus while most studies of media industry fail to acknowledge the extent to which their object

of research is also a "critical, research-driven enterprise" (Caldwell, 2006b: 144)—guided, no less, by ritualistic practices of interpretive, critical and cultural analysis—Caldwell's approach suggests a way of mapping these practices through industrial analysis. Specifically, he looks at the way in which cultural industries "embed" forms of critical knowledge within textual practices (i.e., procedures of marketing, branding, promotion, and repurposing), and how these practices, in turn, challenge the conventional paradigms of political economy: namely by forcing scholars to consider how "critical competence" actually has a role to play within industrial practices—albeit in a practical and proprietary way that chafes against scholarly ideals of critical distance and intellectual autonomy.

For instance, Caldwell writes of "the analysis of texts by industry" as one way in which the industry "critically comments on itself even as it steps back to theorize the formation of culture and the significance of media in that formation" (2006a: 102). In this context, a great deal of what gets consumed vis-à-vis film and television "critically mediates or deconstructs other examples of screen content" (2006b: 145); moreover, these forms of "industrial reflexivity" (e.g., behind the scenes featurettes, making ofs, bonus tracks, ancillary digital formats), serve as the fuel that drives an endless mutation and circulation of multimedia content. As Caldwell puts it, "meta-critical textuality" actually facilitates the types of product differentiation and "textual renegotiations" that have become so crucial to realizing key industrial goals, such as multimedia repurposing and corporate re-conglomeration. Thus argues Caldwell, if the media industries have "mastered anything amid recent and rapid changes in delivery and technology, it is in

[their] ability to flood both production *and* viewer cultures with multiple, secondary, and tertiary production texts" (2006a: 106); these texts, in turn, attempt to show audiences and policy makers "that the critical and analytical interrogation of industrial change is being taken care of, and taken care of competently, by those inside the conglomerates" (2006a: 125).

In other words, ancillary discourses provide the basis for critical reflexivity, and this in turn fuels the development of increasingly diversified, multimedia entertainment properties: all those branded media formats that can be seen (as cinema, television, video-on-demand); heard (as soundtracks, podcasts, and MP3 downloads); played (as videogames); and interacted with (as online Web sites and digital media). Thus textual proliferation within this context is driven not simply by the economic need to expand commercial media markets, but by the equally vital institutional imperative to *justify* that expansion in terms of proprietary "critical" discourse; hence one of the main tactics of the media industries is to rationalize consumption by making "critical" sense about it.

In this manner, "critical industrial practices" tend to privilege specific ways of understanding media culture—or more specifically, the industry's role in that culture—while also serving up "master narratives" (Caldwell, 2006b: 147) that constantly reframe, normalize and legitimate its institutional operations (re-conglomeration, repurposing, market segmentation, convergence). Meanwhile, acts of critical industrial "theorization" take several different forms, appearing, for instance, both on screen (via promotional interviews, film reissues, DVD extras, online chat sessions, studio previews, "re-mastered" editions, background stories, marketing campaigns, branded entertainment,

etc.) and off screen (via trade writing, Weblogs, press kits, critical reviews, entertainment news reporting, marketing plans, corporate disclosures, and media synergies). Furthermore, they serve several different cultural functions, the most interesting of which being the pedagogical task of circulating "insider" knowledge about Hollywood's various contextual operations.[13] As Caldwell observes on this point, the idea of "industrial-theoretical competency" is now more than ever a recurrent, "public benchmark of corporate performance" (2006a: 123); that is, "industry professionals know a great deal about the industry, the screen and screen culture, and spend considerable time, money, and effort complicating, elaborating, and commoditizing that industry knowledge for the trade and the public" (2009: 178). As a result, the relative educational value of this knowledge appears skewed by the commercial motives of the major media corporations working to rationalize "the analysis of texts by industry" as newfangled forms of conglomerated marketing, branding, and ancillary content development.

At the same time, the overtly promotional intent of these off screen/on-screen analyses does not, in fact, detract from their potential as "critical industrial practices" with the capacity to inform audience reception, and thus offer "plays of cultural

[13] Similarly, in her book, *Beyond the Multiplex*, Barbara Klinger discusses the appeal of DVD extras and behind the scenes information as examples of the way video collectors are regularly addressed as industry "insiders" that reside in privileged positions vis-à-vis industry personnel, particularly the film director. However, while Klinger argues that such interpellations produce a sense of uncritical identification with the industry, as a source of "marvels brought to the public by film professionals," I would contend that the strategies typically invoked by these industrial practices rely nonetheless on techniques associated with the film academy—e.g., production exercises, the textual analysis of a film's formal elements, a canonical sense of film history. As such, they belie an affinity between academic screen studies and commercial, industrial screen "theorizing," which belies a distinct form of "popular education" specific to film's ancillary media.

competence and critical-theoretical engagement" (Caldwell, 2006a: 105). To the contrary, and as a number of recent scholarship in media studies has demonstrated, audiences are regularly constructed as "savvy" and "critically" informed by the media industries (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; Douglas, 2009); what's more this is often the case where, as Caldwell suggests, "skilled viewership" actually becomes a driving principle of marketing practice and ancillary textual proliferation (2006a: 122). Here "teaching" media audiences the appropriate way to consume certain types of media, for instance, while reassuring them of their abilities to critically "deconstruct" those media, dovetails with recent trends in media convergence. As Caldwell points out, "one of the main tactics of the [television] industry is now to carpet the population with intermediary texts, recombinant 'programs' that manage the meanings of shows, that take on the mantle of critical analysis in order to mediate and contain knowledge about television for the viewer" (2006a: 120). Likewise, a key institutional strategy of the film industry has been a blanket expansion of the various forms of industrial reflexivity and "viral marketing," which are designed to sell and manage critical sophistication as a way of constraining meanings and navigating pleasures for cinema audiences (Caldwell 2005).

Beyond that, however, the types of theoretical inquiry and reflexive cultural analysis generated by the industry (about the industry) are, surprisingly enough, demonstrably consistent with critical norms; indeed they quite often replicate the types of practical-theoretical know-how and critical discourse germane to academic film studies. For instance, the "insider" information gleaned from DVD commentary and supplements, which is typically offered as clear indication of industry trade discourse, is also regularly

couched in the language of cinema studies. This is to the point where, as many articles in the popular press have commented, DVD reissues and extras are now characterized as a viable alternative to formal film study.[14] In common parlance, DVDs present "film school in a box," an instructional brand of home entertainment, which, as the *New York Times* highlighted, can "illuminate and explain…bring[ing] the medium close to a scholarly edition of a book" (Nichols, 2000). Along these lines, then, DVD extras are regularly marketed as educational content, and complied by media distributors so as to play up their ostensibly pedagogical materials—including, for example, elucidations of canonical film histories, formal and generic analysis, and audio commentaries featuring "above-the-line" industry personnel (directors, producers, writers, composers, etc.) as well as famed scholar-critics.[15] Accordingly, these forms of meta-critical analyses both hype and sell critical competency as a key facet of home movie entertainment; in doing so, they lend pseudo-scholastic legitimacy to the medium, while promoting DVD "home

[14] In an article celebrating the do-it-yourself ethos of digital home entertainment, the *New York Times* describes certain book-and-DVD combination programs in film education, such as "Film School in a Box" and "Make Your Own Damn Movie, as part of an "irreversible trend" in the digital democratization of cinema. The value attached to such courses includes easy accessibility to consumers with "no formal training" as well as practical instruction in the medium, its history and distribution method (Peters 2007). Meanwhile, online retailers like Amazon and webzines like PopMatters compile reviews and customized shopping lists under the same moniker, "Film School in a Box," promising DVD collections such as "American Classics" and "The American Nightmare: A Celebration of Films from Hollywood's Golden Age of Fright" as synonymous with "Cinema History on DVD."

[15] As Alison Trope (2008: 363) documents, audio commentaries provided by well established professors of film studies and independent scholars include the likes of David Bordwell, Dana Polan, Tom Gunning, Laura Mulvey, Jim Kitses, Donald Richie, Peter Cowie, Charles Musser, Robert Sklar, and Jim Kitses. She also notes that much of this content appears on cable movie channels like AMC and TCM, as well as other historical programming on A&E and the History Channel.

schooling" as more or less synonymous with learned techniques of evaluation and interpretation of a film's stylistic, generic, and textual properties (see Trope, 2008: 359-69).

Meanwhile, these same critical discourses are regularly espoused and acted upon by media industry workers, particularly those seeking to make critical sense of their own industrial practices. This is evident, for example, in both trade publications and entertainment journalism, which frequently elicit storied confessions and topical accounts among filmmakers, writers, and media producers of the various contextual and social issues that animate their work; however, it is also present, as Caldwell suggests, in the workaday worlds of corporate promotion, branding, and "content development." For instance, far from operating in a streamlined environment of top-down, assembly-line production, media practitioners and industry personnel "daily employ textual and screen analysis (critical practice) and more generalizable interrogations of methods, purposes, and meanings, (theorizing practice) as integral components of their production and management strategies" (Caldwell, 2006a: 108). Furthermore, they employ these practices as part of the institutionalized marketing and publicity discourses noted above, as these sites are used to showcase outward displays of aesthetic sophistication and cultural capital as "critical proof" of a project's worth.[16] In turn, these critical-theoretical practices become fodder for the various ancillary materials and repurposed content that recurrently churns around other media texts. As Caldwell points out, "these 'para-texts'

[16] As Caldwell notes with respect to interviews with "above-the-line" production professionals: these essentially function as "sanctioned" forms of commercial marketing, and, as such, should be regarded as "scripted performances and stylized industrial 'texts'—objects that require considerable subsequent textual analysis" (2009: 172).

or ‘ephemeral texts’ do not simply represent systematic [brand] extensions and permutations of the featured text; they also function as explicit critical interrogations—albeit staged and overdetermined ones—of the primary text (2009: 177). As such, they operate more or less as “scripted acts of cultural-industrial interpretation” (ibid: 171), which intersect both production *and* reception cultures to the point of making critical discourse a conventional aspect of media convergence.

Indeed, while it might be tempting to view these practices with some cynicism, as if critical industrial theorizing were simply another name for “bastardized forms of deconstruction or illegitimate forms of theory or a CliffsNotes brand of intellectualism” (Caldwell, 2006a: 125), my inclination here is to view them less judgmentally—that is, to regard critical industrial practices as determining, revelatory, and significant in their own right, rather than as phenomenon that should be measured against the normative ideals of high “theory.”[17] From this perspective, critical industrial practices should not be judged

[17] Cf. Caldwell (2006a: 108) on the distinction between “theory” as “an autonomous something that intellectuals do” (or at least imagine themselves doing), and critical theorizing “practices,” as a routine activity that is grounded in the daily working routines and ideological assumptions of particular disciplinary fields. Indeed, while academics may envision “theory” as something which escapes the demands of more practical, instrumentalist thinking, (as something which is fundamentally “disinterested” and skeptical), the history of theoretical discourse as a modern philosophical ideal of “critical” subjectivity indicates otherwise; as Michael Warner suggests, “the normative program of critical reading has allowed literature departments [among others in the humanities] to sell themselves as providing a basic element of education,” and thus to legitimate the profession. Moreover, normative stances (of critical distance, reflexivity, irony, and subversiveness) have offered readers the conventional intellectual boundaries of their own discipline (2004: 14, 25). In short, “critical reading” practices vis-à-vis theoretical discourse carries an inherently *practical* dimension, insofar as they afford intellectuals the chance to argue for, and construct, their own “critical” authority and agency as textual experts. Cf. Bordwell (1989) for a related argument regarding the discipline of film studies.

as failed or inadequate instances of “suspicious” cultural critique (Felski, 2012), but as a type of social discourse that can aid the researcher in ascertaining the conditions under which generic discourses of interpretation are formed. Thus, rather than lament the ostensible “co-optation” of critical language by the cultural industries, I move to examine their contingent institutional functions: that is, following Caldwell, their role in legitimating and explaining industrial change; their value as “critical proofs” used to verify (culturally and commercially) the topical relevance of particular industrial trends; and their prescriptive quality as part of “staged” or “convention-driven” media performances designed to showcase industry professionals as agents of “critical” expertise, aesthetic sophistication and cultural capital (Caldwell, 2006a: 124).

Underlying this framework, then, is the assumption that both culture industry workers and media audiences are capable of being “critical,” and that ancillary materials which circulate apart from screen texts are no less capable of offering up opportunities for analytical debate and cultural dialogue: whether around relevant issues of production histories and screen technologies, star personae and creative personnel, or a film’s formal mechanics and/or reflective relationship to the broader culture. Indeed as such forms become more prevalent to industrial discourse and the “cultural migrations of industrial texts” (Caldwell 2006a: 106), the task of media industry scholars is to reconsider their object of study, as it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish “the industry” from its seemingly endless layers of critical, cultural and institutional mediation.[18]

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[18] As Caldwell suggests a problem exists with the myth of an ontological “inside” or entirely coherent Hollywood film industry: “one can only grapple with the seemingly endless layers of cultural and institutional mediations that manage movement from the

Consequently, my intention here is to elaborate the implications of these trends for the contemporary horror movie industry, looking at how the genre crosses over and interacts with other media forms specifically in terms of habituated acts of "critical" interpretation. Doing so, I hope to build on the industrial frameworks provided by Caldwell, considering, for instance, not only how commercial horror cinema "makes sense of itself to itself" via ancillary discourses, but also the extent to which these discourses appear to justify the proliferation of multiple media platforms. For, as Caldwell suggests, what is most "critical" about these platforms is not the way they open up new markets for conglomerated content (which they certainly do), but rather how they afford media industries the opportunity to reflexively "comment" on that content in ways that further validate the expansion of commercial markets. A close examination of this practice will thus have to account for both diversified forms of horror film-related entertainment, as well as the various forms of "critical competence" they underwrite.

Chapter Breakdown

This project is divided into two parts. The first part examines the different ways horror films have been conceptualized and theorized in academic film studies, while drawing connections to the institutionalization of horror film criticism as a "critical practice" operating within both film scholarship and media industries. In particular it calls attention to the critical-industrial function of the horror auteur, and the ways in which this figure has served to legitimate (aesthetically *and* politically) certain trends in

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'outside' to the 'centre'. It is, in any event, entirely unclear whether such a centre actually exists: arguably the mediating layers *are* the industry" (2009: 179).

commercial horror filmmaking. My aim here is not so much to reiterate the way questions of film authorship are inexorably inflected by questions of genre, but to reconsider and reevaluate the theoretical underpinnings and discursive frameworks that infuse horror film criticism, especially as these center on the figure of the horror auteur, in light of their continued industrial "utility"—that is, their appropriation, circulation, and strategic deployment by various media industries for the purpose of prefiguring critical and popular reception.

To that end, Chapter One proceeds by examining horror film criticism as a social practice with a specific institutional politics. It does so by way of highlighting the various inter-textual mechanisms that horror scholars have used to justify their own reading strategies and interpretive discourse. Suggesting that these mechanisms constitute, in effect, an identifiable critical "reading formation" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987), this chapter points out how techniques of political auteurism, canonical recycling, and symptomatic interpretation, in particular, serve a critical-institutional function within the film academy, not only securing academic legitimacy for the genre, but also shoring up cultural and political distinctions specific to elite modes of analysis. I argue that this critical reading formation ultimately conditions the appropriation of horror film texts as legitimate "objects-to-be-read," and thus sustains discursive power relations between scholastically credentialed and "non-expert" reading subjects.

Chapter Two examines how this reading formation has thus been incorporated into the contemporary horror movie industry vis-à-vis the canonical figure of the horror auteur. Using George Romero's appearance at the 2009 Spike TV Scream Awards as a

preliminary case study, the chapter opens with a preamble suggesting that horror auteurism remains viable in today's media culture primarily as a form of promotional and marketing discourse, through which various industries (film, but also television and DVD) might in turn organize audience reception across different media platforms. To further substantiate this argument, the chapter then moves on to examine the promotional and popular reception contexts surrounding an emergent cycle of ultra-violent horror films—pejoratively dubbed "torture porn" by film critic David Edelstein—in order to gauge the extent to which these "ancillary discourses" are effectively geared toward broader industrial strategies of auteur packaging, branding and repurposing. Specifically the chapter looks at how a number of so-called "the Splat Pack" filmmakers (e.g., Eli Roth, Rob Zombie, and Darren Lynn Bousman) have successfully employed auteurist discourses of horror cinema in order to legitimate their own position as "authors," while self-reflexively appealing to the figure of the horror auteur so as to re-contextualize and articulate their own work in terms of an already established canon of auteur-luminaries. In doing so, these directors not only seek to capitalize on the accrued cultural and institutional value of the horror auteur, but also to forestall attempts at censorship by maintaining their own commercial auteur status. Thus my overall concern in both of these chapters will be to trace the institutional trajectory of the horror auteur as it moves from the academy to the industry, noting how this initially "critical" figure has been repurposed—as, for example, a politically subversive "artist," an object of cult fascination, and a commercially viable auteur persona—along the way.

The second part of the dissertation consists of a series of case studies intended to elaborate the political economy of horror movie consumption vis-à-vis its principal ancillary markets. Chapter Three focuses the DVD market, examining the growing importance of "home entertainment" for horror film culture. Here I am particularly concerned with the ways in which "behind the scenes" extras and "special features" play a role in constructing an unofficial horror film canon, which effectively consecrates a particular style of horror filmmaking and encourages a particular brand of horror film literacy consistent with the "reflection of society" perspective outlined above. Additionally I argue that such features serve a legitimizing function for horror film directors, critics, and fan-audiences interested in validating and reconciling recent trends in genre "reimagining" (or remakes) in terms of established critical paradigms and assumptions. Indeed studio marketing techniques will often proclaim DVD a "critical" site for new or "reinvented" versions of an original film text; however this trend can also be seen to parallel industrial shifts in horror film production, which are now largely centered around "reimgaining" branded properties and movie franchises for a digital age.

Similarly, Chapter Four focuses on the industrial practices that condition contemporary soundtrack albums, arguing that, in the case of horror cinema, compiled film music functions not only as a cross-promotional medium for marketing licensed recordings, but also as a key site for effectively managing and containing processes of consumption. Looking in particular at the way in which heavy metal music is deployed in horror films like *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003) to interpellate particular niche audiences and taste communities, this chapter considers the extent to which the cross-

promotional platforms like soundtrack albums reveal a “critical” assumption within the major media firms that a manageable relationship exists to be exploited between niche formats and consumer tastes. Indeed within this context, consumer activities become an integral component of the production and distribution of horror film-related music texts, as both film and music industries “put to work” the reading practices and affective investments of their respective audiences by assimilating consumption habits as a fundamental component of textual practice and so-called “branded entertainment.”

Finally, Chapter Five concentrates on the proliferating online sites of horror movie fandom, with an eye toward the horror industry’s strategic mobilization of Web content and digital distribution models as a promotional tool. Specifically, it examines the emergence of the conglomerated digital delivery system FEARnet, a joint cable “channel” owned by Comcast, Lions Gate, and Sony Pictures Entertainment, and argues that the site, which features horror films from the Sony/MGM library and includes a host of “interactive” marketing practices (games, message boards, chat rooms), not only illustrates the changing impact of new media technologies on the commercial film exhibition, but also the growing industrial utility of social networking and digital distribution for both cable companies and the major studio-distributors. Indeed by relying on subcultural practices and discourses specific to horror fandom, for example, digital services like FEARnet act as branded media conduits for the markets and commerce that sustain niche-oriented categories like horror film as a commodified experience. At the same time, online fan forums afford horror audiences an “interactive” means of participation in the definition, interpretation, and valuation of horror cinema.

These online venues simultaneously function as a pseudo-“grassroots” form of viral marketing wherein industry personal are able to both generate buzz and collect valuable market data. Hence, this chapter explores how the “unruly pleasures” of horror fans are, again, “put to work” in the new media landscape.

Throughout these chapters, then, I attempt to expand upon current research into contemporary media industries, and particularly work by Caldwell, which understands the power of media to lie not necessarily with what appears on screen, as a matter of textual practice, but also with the various institutional contexts and discursive fields associated with the ancillary circulation and consumption of (horror) film texts. These include both critical and industrial sites of academia, review journalism, studio publicity and ancillary promotion, as well as convergent platforms of digital distribution and exhibition. Indeed, it is here, within these latter “off-screen” spaces, I argue, that media industries attempt to produce a “critical” knowledge of the genre by reflexively showcasing their own industrial practices. Thus whereas traditional political-economic studies of media industries mostly concentrate on macro-level issues of production, regulation, ownership, and the motivations of capital interests, my aim is to emphasize a “critical media industry studies” approach (Havens et al., 2009), which entails a close analysis of how certain institutional conventions of horror movie producers, distributors, marketers, and directors attempt to wed discourses of commerce and reception. Most importantly, then, I argue that media industries themselves play a key role in both organizing knowledge about the horror genre and purveying a cultural “commonsense” of its aesthetic import. As a result, I hope to fill a research-gap in the present understanding

of the culturally discursive character of film-genre categories, and how these operate within broader inst[19]itutional relations of power.

Chapter One

The Canonical Reading Formation (or the Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism)

> Genre theoreticians and other practitioners are generally loath to recognize (and build into their theories) the institutional character of their own generic practice. Though regularly touting 'proper' approaches to genre, theorists rarely analyze the cultural stakes involved in identifying certain approaches as 'improper.' Yet genres are never entirely neutral categories. They—and their critics and theorists—always participate in and further the work of various institutions.
>
> (Altman, 1999: 12)

> I am beyond critics…If I were to make a picture for critics, the public would not go. That is because most critics look for elements about which they can write and show off their interpretive skills.
>
> (Herschell Gordon Lewis, Director of *Blood Feast*; quoted in Mendik, 2002: 191)

In a recent article for *Cineaste* magazine, Christopher Sharrett (2009) notes a problem with contemporary horror films. Specifically, he identifies a "reactionary tendency" in the so-called torture porn cycle and singles out films like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel II* (2007) for essentially "jettisoning the horror film's most progressive aspects." These films are remarkable, according to Sharrett, not least for their "disregard of the psychological content and social criticism of the horror film at its height," but also for their "intellectual bankruptcy and retrograde politics." Indeed, any "attempt to evaluate these films seriously provokes doubt about such a project's worth," as their chief draw seems to be shocking viewers through "excruciating forms of torture and free-form bloodletting" (2009: 32). While films in the *Saw* series, for example, represent the most lucrative horror movie franchise in history (*BBC Mobile*, 2010), they are worthy of consideration only insofar as they indicate a further "diminishing" of the genre:

> The numerous gory tableaux of *Saw* tend to make one see them as further indicators of a brain-dead culture rather than inextricably linked to the political reaction and cynicism that pervades the cycle, making *Saw* a perfect emblem of the era's rightist ideology. Most important, the cycle is part of a tendency that jettisons the horror film's most progressive aspects, a project visible over the last thirty years. (Sharrett, 2009: 32)

In short, "the horror film has fallen on hard times," and it has done so, according to Sharrett, largely because of the failure of latter-day filmmakers to live up to their Golden Age predecessors. To be sure, if "the Sixties saw the emergence of the horror genre as a subversive form," with Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963), Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) establishing the genre as "keenly critical of middle-class life and all its supporting institutions, particularly the patriarchal nuclear family," then the historically radical aesthetic and corresponding political movements associated with the Sixties horror film effectively "faded with the cooptation of Sixties resistance movements" (Sharrett 2009: 32). In consequence, any attempt to recuperate the historically progressive potential of the genre, at least in its current manifestations, seems doomed by comparison, as a handful of canonical (in some cases, overtly political) auteurs are made to bear the weight of horror's transgressive possibilities, while standing in as the ideological prototype against which all subsequent efforts are measured and evaluated.

> Indeed, if *Saw* is an indicator, the lessons about screen violence taught by Penn, Peckinpah, Aldrich, Siegel, Scorsese, or master horror directors such as George A. Romero, seem lost on the current generation of filmmakers and audiences. But the franchise is important, at the symptomatic level, as a measure of the possible defeat by the contemporary film industry of one of the most contentious and subversive genres. (Sharrett 2009: 32)

Thus, the supposed collapse of horror's subversive agenda can, at least partially, be blamed on contemporary filmmakers—particularly those who, in their blind quest for visceral gore and graphically violent material, appear to have squandered the genre's more ideologically riveting aspects.

Meanwhile, the apparent "problem" with contemporary horror movies is not that they lack a "cutting edge" but that they go all in; that is, they appear to trade social criticism and psychological themes for excessive violence and extreme gore, and thus diminish the genre's otherwise radical potential to "comment" on such violence in the form of social-allegorical critique. For this reason, it is up to the "serious" genre critic (Sharrett, in this case) to risk credibility and to make readers understand that these films do in fact have something to "say" about contemporary society, despite having the appearance of merely capitalizing on the most cynical, infantile, and "regressive" aspects of the contemporary movie industry.

To do this, however, it is also necessary to assert a more worthy comparison—namely, the "lessons" of feted auteur directors Penn, Peckinpah, Aldrich, Siegel, Scorsese, Hitchcock, Polanski, and, of course, "master" horror directors like George Romero—each of whose ostensibly subversive contributions to the genre are here (and elsewhere) paraded as categorical examples of "Sixties radicalism"—not to mention horror film's (largely theoretical) capacity to act as a subversive cultural form during times of social and ideological crisis. Indeed, if contemporary filmmakers dare to go low (as in "splatter" low), and therefore transgress the very boundaries of acceptable interpretation, then the genre's canonical "masters" behoove us (as critics) to reaffirm the

courage of our convictions in taking seriously the political and cultural merits of an oft-degraded form, particularly as these manifest at "the symptomatic level." As Sharrett concludes: only by doing so might "fans of the horror film…be prepared to make distinctions, and say clearly why *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] is a significant work of the genre while *Saw* is relative rubbish except as a symptom of the state of culture" (2009: 37).

Taking issue with this notion that (1) the field of contemporary horror somehow avoids or lacks discrimination, and (2) that generic history might itself serve as the inherent basis for making such evaluations, this essay argues that discourses of evaluative selection are actually quite common to horror film reception. In fact, "making distinctions" is one of the more conventional things that horror film critics (and fans) do[1]—that is, in addition to generating interpretations that seek to identify "repressed" cultural meanings and/or progressive/regressive ideological effects. Particularly when it comes to the consecrated figure of the horror auteur, the critic—in this case, the vanguardist scholar-critic of lowbrow popular cinema—functions to "make distinctions" in the Bourdieuian sense of differentiating between various modes of textual enjoyment and more "legitimate ways of appropriating [film] culture and works of art" (Bourdieu, 1984: 2).

And yet as Herrnstein Smith (1983) reminds us, cultural debates over what constitutes "significant work" in a given genre cannot simply proceed as if aesthetic

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[1] This chapter is principally concerned with the academic reception of horror films; by contrast, other studies have examined the role of fan discourse in producing genre distinctions. See, for example, David Sanjek (1990), Mark Jancovich (2000), Brigid Cherry (2002), and Matt Hills (2005).

judgments remain free of institutional constraints and other evaluative "contingencies"; rather, canonical debates need to be contextualized in terms of competing taste formations, socially conditioned patterns of legitimate discourse, and political struggles over cultural power and authority (cf. Staiger, 1985). Indeed, while these may seem like foundational gestures within a (post-) modern film academy, they are, in fact, less often carried out in practice; as Jeffrey Sconce (2007: 113) suggests, "the inclination to dissolve media objects—their histories of production, reception, and analysis—into socially situated fields of discourse is a strategy associated more with television studies, [although] there is of course no reason to avoid such approaches in film (other than memory, tradition, and vanity)." Particularly when it comes to analyzing questions of taste and value as a function of competing power relations and evaluative traditions, such advances often take a backseat to more hallowed institutional practices of dividing film texts among "legitimate and illegitimate approaches, proper and improper perspectives, moral and amoral cinema" (Sconce, 2007: 114).

Hence it might be said that, within horror film studies, "not only a canon of films exists but also a canon of literature *about* film and a canon of film methodologies" (Staiger, 1985: 18)—methodologies which, in turn, serve to underwrite the cultural hierarchies and regimes of value that are used to distinguish "significant work" from "relative rubbish." Less often as the case may be, however, such distinctions become the focus of academic inquiry itself: a point of critical (self-) reflection among those directly

involved in institutions of evaluative authority.[2] It is thus my intention in this chapter to trace these distinctions as they play out across the field of academic horror film reception, doing so in order to spotlight their institutional function as part of a broader "reading formation."

The Politics of Taste in the Film Academy

While a number of writers have used the term reading formation to describe the processes by which film genres are socially and institutionally constructed (see Altman, 1999 and Cobley, 2000), my concern here has more to do with the specific inter-textual mechanisms and discursive frameworks that bear in upon, and ultimately determine, critical practices of evaluation and interpretation. Whereas previous studies have analyzed the way different film cycles become codified through a process of "generification," for example—i.e., through a standardization of critical practice and industrial activity[3]—my own work examines the problematic of textual reading itself as an institutionally circumscribed process bound to a determinant set of reading protocols, or "habits of meaning" (Klinger, 1994: xvii). In this sense, it draws on an (admittedly small) body of discursive analyses of scholarly practices, such as Barbara Klinger's *Meaning and Melodrama*, which describes the conventions of academic discourse as

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[2] Since the mid-1980s, for example, a concentration on "independent, oppositional cinema" has allowed horror movie scholarship to become a valid area of film studies (Grant and Sharrett, 2004: x); however, it is also the case that much work *continues* to be organized around such cultural distinctions—particularly, as I suggest below, the association of horror with a certain type of progressive textual politics, which has proven instrumental in establishing the genre's legitimacy within academic culture vis-à-vis its purported social-allegorical function.
[3] As regards the horror film, see for example, Jancovich (2009) and Nowell (2011).

being “radically dependent on the positions and needs of those involved in institutions of evaluative authority,” and thereby regards the interpretive claims of the film academy “as a *particular kind* of meaning-production, rather than as the definitive locus of textual ‘truth’” (1994: 2, xviii).

Within horror research, scholars including Jeffrey Sconce (1995) and Matt Hills (2007) have already begun this work, drawing attention to the way particular taste discourses operate within the film academy to both “legitimate” certain types of horror film while devaluing others. Sconce in particular provides an overview of the way films deemed “trash” by official film culture find revaluation within academic discourse by way of conventional aesthetic norms such as stylistic deviance, complexity, and film authorship (see also Hills, 2007: 221). For instance, Sconce describes Herschell Gordon Lewis’ 1963 “splatter flick” *Blood Feast* as the embodiment of both a “paracinematic aesthetic” that emphasizes stylistic excess and “gore” as well as the “confrontational tastes” of the academic film community (Sconce, 1995: 373). Along these same lines, William Paul has suggested that hierarchies of taste and cultural value inform critical assessments of the horror genre particularly at the level of “lower-class forms” such as the “gross out” movie. In his book *Laughing Screaming*, he writes:

> From the high perch of an elitist view, the negative definition of the lower works would have it that they are less subtle than higher genres. More positively, it could be said that they are more direct. Where lower forms are explicit, higher forms tend to operate more by indirection. Because of this indirection the higher forms are often regarded as being more metaphorical, and consequently more resonant, more open to the exegetical analyses of the academic industry. (1994: 32)

This largely concurs with Sconce's definition of paracinema as a "reading protocol" that is essentially "devoted to all manner of cultural detritus," and thus more open making an aesthetic virtue out of "lower" forms of commercial entertainment (Sconce, 1995: 372). However, one might also identify a problem with these views in the way they position horror as a valid object of study on the basis of its supposed opposition to "elitist views" of culture. In particular, the terms of opposition are usually negotiated through a prism of film "art," which, in turn, justifies the move to critical appropriation.

Thus, whereas Paul begins his treatise on the "disreputable art" of 1980s horror movies by acknowledging the "venerable vulgarity" of such lower forms, he later falls back on the more "serious" pleasures of academic discourse—for instance, seeking out deeper meaning, interpretability and metaphorical significance, or, in Paul's (1994: x) words, finding "very cerebral ways of thinking about very noncerebral materials." Similarly, Joan Hawkins has described an affinity between "low horror" and high art films on the basis of shared audience pleasures, and specifically the way these challenge "the official ideology." In particular, she outlines a "politics of taste" that portrays the apparent "stake both avant-garde and low-body cultures have traditionally had in challenging the formally constructed notion of mainstream good taste" (Hawkins, 2000: 30). However, in doing so she also displays an antipathy toward "the mainstream" as a fundamental condition for horror's aesthetic valorization. In effect, horror becomes a "legitimate" area of study precisely because it can be *interpreted* at the level of avant-garde aesthetics.

In this way, scholarly self-awareness of horror's generally "low" cultural status is often seized upon as a way to elevate the genre's supposedly radical cultural politics. However, rather than simply overturn the codes of aesthetic judgment, as these accounts suggest, the transvaluation of horror's cultural value becomes a way for critics to both enshrine their own interpretive authority and ensure their cultural power. As Bourdieu (1984: 5) explains, "nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are [perceived as] banal or even 'common.'" Hence academic film criticism has established its own reading strategies for producing distinction and conferring authority on horror films, which largely dovetail with the politics of oppositional taste operating within the film academy.[4]

In what follows, then, I want to explore this dimension of horror movie scholarship by examining the particular "habits" of meaning-production that serve to guarantee "appropriate" methods for interpreting (and indeed championing) certain types of horror films. In doing so, I want to consider the functions of academic film criticism more generally as a social practice that has political implications. To that end, I invoke the concept of reading formation, not only as a way of highlighting (as countless others have done) the contingent nature of textual interpretation, but also, and more pointedly, to underscore the cultural stratifications that take shape as a result of this process; that is, to underscore the way unequal distributions of cultural capital and interpretive competency work to sustain academic legitimacy in the name of more "valid" reading strategies.

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[4] For a discussion on the cultivation of oppositional taste as a function of cultural-political distinction within academic film culture, see Sconce (1995: 380-3) and Hills (2007: 233-4).

As Bennett and Woollacott (1987: 64) define the term, reading formation describes: "the inter-textual relations which prevail in a particular context, thereby activating a given body of texts by ordering the relations between them in a specific way such that their reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those "texts themselves" as entities separable from such relations." Thus the concept of reading formation obliges researchers to consider both how particular texts (or entire genres, for that matter) get activated as "objects-to-be-read" within a specific institutional context, but also how "reading subjects of particular types" (e.g., "critical" readers) are constituted in that process of pinning down "appropriate" models of interpretation (Bennett, 1985: 7); to wit, it requires an examination of the social practice of reading itself, such that texts, readers, and the relations between them are considered equally subject to political struggles over cultural authority and power which inevitably take shape in and through the appropriation of popular texts. As these texts "constitute sites around which the pre-eminently social affair of the struggle for the production of meaning is conducted," so too do the bids for cultural distinction that seek to determine "which system of inter-textual co-ordinates should be granted an effective social role in organising reading practices" (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987: 59-60). In short, reading formations are *not* inherent to a particular reception context; rather they need to be explained vis-à-vis a particular set of inter-textual associations (cf. Couldry, 2000: 82).

For instance, whereas the dominant orientation of most sociological and historical studies of horror film assume they in some way mirror or "reflect" society (Kapsis, 2009: 3), this perspective might also be considered *practically*, in terms of the way it organizes

the field of horror film reception, thereby “cueing” readers to the inter-textual co-ordinates of symptomatic interpretation. Rather than take this discourse for granted, in other words, as if horror film texts inherently “express in accessible and entertaining popular cultural terms the characteristic fears of their time” (Tudor, 2002: 52), the purpose of this chapter is to unpack these terms and concepts as they have been applied *to* horror film texts, doing so in order to point up their institutional character; that is, their operative function within a professionalized field of discourse.

To that end, the ensuing pages proceed by charting three discursive mechanisms that together make up “the system of inter-textual coordinates” commonly used to confer value and status upon horror film texts—and hence ensure their “schooled” interpretation. These coordinates include discourses of “canonical recycling” (Klinger, 1994: 29), political auteurism, and symptomatic interpretation.[5] It is my contention that these coordinates not only condition the critical appropriation of horror film texts as legitimate “objects-to-be-read,” but also reinforce “proper” modes of aesthetic evaluation alongside established reading positions. That is, they motivate critical interest in the genre by way of securing academic legitimacy in the field—for making professional interpretive claims *about* horror films while also shoring up cultural and political distinctions conducive to

[5] David Bordwell (1989) defines “symptomatic criticism” as the general practice of reading movies for “hidden” cultural meanings. It should be noted, however, that Louis Althusser first coined the term “symptomatic reading” to describe a psychoanalytic strategy for interpreting Marxist theoretical texts. Nonetheless, this approach has developed into an all-purpose reading strategy for uncovering “repressed” meanings and hidden cultural-ideological structures. As Timothy Dean (2007: 21) points out, “it qualifies as a contemporary critical norm…[a] methodological protocol [that] remains in place whether one inhabits critical perspectives as ostensibly disparate as historicist, materialist, or psychoanalytic modes of thinking.”

the film academy. Hence they often wind up "freezing" the terms of meaning so as to establish hierarchical relations between different reading practices (cf. Klinger, 1994: 26-35, on melodrama).

Put another way, because different groups of people appropriate film culture in different ways (Hall, 1980), and because "institutions of evaluative authority will [therefore] be called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and procedures that validate the community's established tastes and preferences" (Herrnstein Smith, 1983: 18), the canonical validation of horror film texts inevitably takes the form of privileging one set of text-reader relations above others—namely, the critic's own construction of "deep" socio-cultural meaning—with the effect of standardizing, or universalizing, an otherwise provisional value system. In effect, the power of critical argument rests on the interpretive assumptions of those claiming "real" insight into the social system. Meanwhile, those assumptions inevitably work to sustain discursive power relationships between scholastically credentialed and "non-expert" reading subjects.

Canonical Recycling: The Golden Age of Horror

As part of the broader institutional attempt to stabilize horror films as legitimate "objects-to-be-read," canonical recycling has proven especially conducive to horror film scholars interested in enhancing the genre's overall claims to social relevance and cultural value. Particularly when it comes to the so-called "golden age" of American horror—a period dating from the late 1960s through the mid 1970s, when developments in low budget exploitation led to a surge in American independent horror film production

(see Wood, 2003: 70-134; Hutchings, 2004: 169-91)—the practice of reading for "key works" in the genre emerges as central project for preserving generic value and defining "critical topicality" (Mathijs, 2003: 116). Indeed, this era of filmmaking, according to Robin Wood, demonstrated "the most despised and ridiculed of genres was in fact worthy serious attention," and moreover, that horror's formal "evolution [was] strongly influenced by cultural-political evolution" (2004: xiii). As such, films like *Night of the Living Dead, Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) have come to find positive critical evaluation as "progressive/subversive" genre texts (Klinger, 2003: 78).

What is more, their political canonical status continues to be echoed throughout popular and industrial discourse, which oftentimes recycles critical arguments about "deep" symptomatic meaning in relation to horror films and the broader culture. For instance, a *New York Times* article on this period informs its readers that such "horror films reflect, or even caricature, society's collective anxieties," and furthermore that "films of the late '60s and '70s…deserve [serious] study as important social artifacts…as a way people process the terrors of real life" (Dewan, 2000: B11). Similarly, a *National Review* column alleges "there's something about rising gas prices, apocalyptic anxieties, and unpopular foreign wars…that makes filmmakers turn to brutal, nihilistic gore." This is nowhere more evident than "the gorefests of the 1970s [which] terrified a nation that was coming home from Vietnam: they were about the darkness waiting in the heartland's heart" (Douthat, 2007: 54). In this way, popular assessments of the genre (at both ends of the political spectrum) continue to align broader canonical ideals with issues of aesthetic

realism and cultural relevance, both glimpsed here as the product of a certain kind of nostalgic auteurism. Indeed, as one trade press notes, the apparent desire to "say" something about society, and the refusal to insulate viewers from the "nightmarish realities of the Vietnam era," supposedly distinguishes the work of seventies horror auteurs more generally as being culturally significant within the modern horror tradition: "Not only did these directors [i.e., Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, George Romero] bring to the genre a kind of realistic brutality that still resonates in modern filmic vocabulary, they also laid the foundation for independent cinema with dynamic, profitable ventures that spoke to the upheavals going on around them" (McIntyre, 2000; see also Nelson, 2007, DeKinder, 2007). As such, these canonical perspectives continue to inform the way both scholars and popular critics perceive the genre's supposed "radical challenge to society," as well as its topical relevance to national culture(s) more generally.[6]

And yet the dominant tendency to equate the Golden Age of American horror film with a sub-set of 1970s exploitation films raises questions about the genre's continuing viability as a cultural form. As Steffen Hantke (2010) points out, the inclination to view contemporary horror films through the lens of generic "crisis" or permanent decline stems from the fact that critics of the genre will habitually reify the generational accomplishments of seventies horror directors as a basis for making generic evaluations.

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[6] Allowances should be made here for divergences in national context. For instance, Ernest Mathijs (2005) has argued that Belgian film criticism has tended to ignore the horrific altogether in favor of more traditional references to aesthetics and ethics over issues of cultural relevance. However, the fact that Mathijs identifies "the tradition of horror interpretation" with issues of cultural relevance—and, specifically, with the interpretive practices "linking a film to the culture from which it came"—only furthers the notion that horror film criticism, as a category unto itself, accords with the reading formation outlined above (pp. 326-31).

That is, they tend to identify the core "essence" of the genre with auteurist perspectives and symptomatic interpretations that define this period (see Jancovich, 2002: 8-9). As a result, the canonical audience for these films (i.e., those trained in the interpretive conventions of the film academy) will often dictate a provisional demand be made for "cultural-political legibility" on behalf of those films seeking to recuperate horror's "progressive" potential (Hills, 2005: 53). Most often, this happens through apposite reading strategies of social-allegorical critique (see, for example, Lowenstein, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Craig and Fradley, 2010; Middleton, 2010). Here canonical references to horror's "golden age" become, if not *the* cornerstone for discursively securing thematic depth and critical legitimacy, then an excuse for scholars to indulge in horror's supposedly radical potential.

As Hantke points out, this sort of institutionalized historiography "makes perfect sense as a rhetorical move that reinforces, by way of repetition, the idea that tribute must be paid to canonical texts" (2010: xix). However, a considerable portion of this research continues to seek answers for horror's popular appeal and political mystique vis-à-vis canonical works of the 1970s, and this despite the fact that horror film criticism has by and large been an accepted area of film studies since the mid-1980s. As Hantke writes, this tendency toward legitimization is partly a way to account for the perceived "slump" in socially relevant horror film production:

> Within academic criticism, the 1970s neo-horror has already been safely integrated into postwar American cultural history. It is when measured against this criteria of its canonization—transgressiveness coupled with the mystique of rebellion and political subversiveness—that contemporary horror films, with their mainstream credentials, fall short. It is important to be historically precise in the discussion of this canonization [however, as]…it 'remains a largely romanticized

> period.' In other words, 1970s neo-horror had already been canonized before the 1990s, so that the current rhetoric of crisis most likely constitutes a reiteration, a confirmation, and, most important, an instrumentalization of this canonization. (2010: xviii)

In other words, the discourse of canonization works to exclude certain types of horror film as "mainstream" while bolstering a "largely romanticized period" of politically subversive genre production. Meanwhile, the idea of horror film as an "independent, oppositional cinema" holds special attractiveness for academics looking to authenticate their own professional canonical expertise, as the discursive procedures of canonicity itself—which arguably make up the bulk of academic writing on horror film today (cf. Jancovich, 2007)—perform a decidedly institutional function: namely they "give [genre] historians the opportunity to legitimize their interest in their topic, or their enthusiasm for it, or their confidence that it will remain a vital form of expression relevant to the culture at large" (Hantke, 2010: xv).

As a result, even while there may be no actual critical consensus as to whether or not contemporary horror films are, for example, "progressive/subversive" genre texts in the tradition of so-called neo-horror "masters," the very fact that aesthetic judgments continue to be made according to this criterion belies the extent to which critical discourse itself remains hamstrung by the very procedures of canonization. As Hantke observes, "the instrumentalization of this past"—in the form of historical narratives, textual reading strategies and theoretical paradigms which discursively privilege low-budget 1970s horror films as a source of canonical legitimacy—effectively furnishes scholar-critics with a "repository of aesthetic and political positions" (2010: xxvii), instrumental to the (often quarrelsome) ranks of critical analysis. Thus, the "golden age"

of horror film (and the canonical texts that this label is meant to evoke) functions both as discursive shorthand for critics looking to demarcate and distinguish an ostensibly radical period of horror film production, but also as a way to endow critical discourse with a certain mystique of its own—buttressed, of course, by the authoritative distinctions handed down over the years by “major” critics of the genre and the prevailing institutional apparatuses.

Symptomatic Interpretation: Pre-evaluating the Field

As a result, just as most horror films (whether classic or contemporary) inevitably fall outside the Golden Age canon of American horror, they nevertheless arrive already pre-classified or “pre-evaluated” to use Herrnstein Smith’s term (1983: 23) according to the 1970s ideal postulated by critical discourse. Given their implicit (and oftentimes imperfect) relation to that ideal, however, the bulk of non-canonical works remain significant nonetheless as second-rate fixtures within the “official” reading formation; that is, as proper generic foils by which to discursively validate canonical expertise and critical authority.

Hence a recurring trope recurs throughout academic writing on horror, and particularly throughout the canonically-informed readers and critical anthologies which often elicit a rather portentous, gloomy nostalgia for “the projected fears” and allegorical “nightmares” of horror’s Golden Age. For instance, one finds in the general introductory texts of Paul Wells (2000), Reynold Humphries (2002), and Kendall Phillips (2005) a mutual disdain for contemporary trends which either fail to engage “real world contexts”

or betray their roots in erstwhile “classics” that “operate with high[er] social relevance (Wells, 2000: 20). In particular, Wells deplores the overwhelming “McDonaldisation of horror”—a commercial tendency which he sees plaguing latter-day franchise films like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997)—texts which, according to the author, display a keen awareness of the genre’s codes and conventions, yet “speak only limitedly about the culture that produces them” (2000: 97). Similarly, Humphries remarks upon the “failure” of contemporary horror movie directors to live up to their Golden Age predecessors, noting how “the political thrust of the 70s” is missing, and that “it is patent that we shall see no more films of the caliber of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974], which represents for the present writer everything that a horror movie can and should be” (2002: 195). In the same vein, Phillips undertakes a critical examination of “the recent trend of unremarkable and ineffective remakes,” only to propose a more symptomatic explanation: “In a climate racked with fears, some justified and some not, and where ‘terror’ has become a point of great political energy, manipulation, and contention, perhaps allegorical terrors cannot suffice. The fears at large in the real world have been so magnified and intensified that for the time being Americans prefer their projected fears to be more tame and predictable” (2005: 196).

In each case, symptomatic reading strategies are called upon to effectively shore up “cultural-political bids for cultural distinction” (Hills, 2007: 233), while at the same time, canonical tastes and preferences are discursively validated through extra-textual reference to broader political ideologies and popular fears. In this way, a critical elite

trained in the art of "veiled significance" is able to ensure that canonically relevant texts are able to perform the necessary social function of concealing their "true" meaning; meanwhile the subversive implications of these texts are called upon to proffer a model of "the horror text" itself which, on the one hand, conforms to canonical accounts of the genre's epistemological function as a harbinger of "repressed" social meanings, and, on the other, effectively devalues "untutored" readings that ostensibly fail to observe horror's social-allegorical function. Wells (2000: 24) provides the clearest example of this tendency when he writes: "The horror film makes us confront our worst fears, our more perverse feelings and desires, our legitimately complex 'darker' agendas, and in this it serves an important function as a progressive and sometimes radical genre, in the face of increasingly reactionary stances." In this way, proper "critical perspectives" are maintained so as to deploy a hidden "depth dimension" (Kellner, 1995: 114) to horror films, which condemn "reactionary stances" that overlook horror's "darker agendas." Conceiving of horror films in terms of "our worst fears," therefore, presents scholars with an opportunity to enact their own cultural-political distinction, while at the same time performing acts of critical one-upmanship through strategic reference to horror's non-obvious meanings.

Making ideological sense of the genre, for example, appears to correspond with a blanket suspicion of horror film texts *and* their audiences, as more "ordinary" viewers appear to lack the hermeneutic wherewithal to discern hidden political agendas and radical social meanings at work in horror film texts. As a result, they are oftentimes

belittled through the patronizing rhetoric of ideological criticism. As one reputable critic puts it:

> The wide range and popularity of post-1970s Hollywood horror films suggests that something is profoundly wrong with U.S. society…The broad panorama of popular horror films attests to a resurgence of the occult in contemporary society which suggests that individuals are no longer in control of their everyday life…Consequently, during eras of socio-economic crisis when individuals have difficulty coping with social reality, the occult becomes an efficacious ideological mode which helps explain unpleasant circumstances or incomprehensible events with the aid of religious or supernatural mythologies. (Kellner, 1995: 126)

Whereas the attraction of horror films is attributed to "unpleasant" social realities—with the "real" social undercurrents of the genre proving too "difficult" for individuals to handle—any pleasure afforded by this model becomes suspect: "a deceptive veneer behind which ideology works" (Hutchings, 2004: 184). And hence any engagement that fails take into consideration the genre's alleged socially allegorical meanings becomes susceptible to charges of ideological naiveté. In effect, "those audiences who thought they were going to see horror films just for the purposes of entertainment are revealed as being unaware of the real reasons for their behaviour, as being in effect the dupes of ideology" (Hutchings, 2004: 184).

Thus, it seems incumbent upon genre critics to not only "discover"—or more accurately, construct—potentially subversive hidden meanings behind horror film texts, but also to reassert a more properly social-allegorical dimension. In this way, horror film criticism not only demands "a hierarchical ordering of the relations between different reading practices such that some are conceived as more valid—and therefore more worthwhile, more objective, more deserving of analysis—than others" (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987: 68); it also relies upon the specialized techniques of the film academy

to do so—that is, to effectively "bully" other interpretations off the field (Bennett, 1983: 15).

Remarkably, this appears to be the case even amongst those writings that openly identify more visibly "popular" modes of reception. For example, Ken Gelder's editorial introduction to *The Horror Reader*, which purports to complicate the field of horror by juxtaposing predominant critical dispositions with countervailing subcultural tendencies, nonetheless winds up devaluing non-canonical reception strategies. Referring to the "video nasties" debate of the 1980s, for instance, Gelder describes "the cultural production of *illegitimacy*" which effectively kept the genre "downtrodden and free from complexities: as if a horror text, like pornography (to which it is often compared), is a simple matter of cause and effect, arousing, nauseating or inciting, as the case may be" (2000: 5). In response, Gelder moves to distinguish the academic study of horror from those models of reception (popular or otherwise) that presumably find genre films "entirely bereft of meaning:"

> The academic readings included in this Reader…take the opposite view. They see horror texts as signifying systems: their approach is primarily semiotic. A number of contributions draw on the "revealing," decoding methodologies of psychoanalysis. These and other essays thus provide "deep" readings of a genre that may, to the unsympathetic, seem either superficial or incomprehensible. (2000: 5)

Gelder follows up this editorial assertion with a telling juxtaposition of scholarly and vernacular approaches—noting how, for instance, "we might contrast this kind of [academic] reading to the practice of horror fanzines and genre guides, which instead lay out the field of horror 'horizontally': processing vast numbers of films and novels, often providing the most minor or idiosyncratic particulars about directors, writers, stars,

special effects, and so on" (2000: 5). However, rather than treat this practice as self-sufficient, Gelder instead draws a correlation with traditional academic protocol—i.e., historiographical research "which demonstrates an extensive knowledge of horror genealogies and networks" (2000: 6)—the implication being that subcultural capital of horror fans remains valuable insofar as it yields institutionally approved interpretive results.

A more nuanced view, perhaps, is offered by readings of horror that emerge from queer theory, and particularly work by Harry Benshoff (1997), which situates the metaphorical and connotative meanings of the putative horror film "monster" alongside the identifications and pleasures of queer spectators.[7] While such readings indeed tend to foreground the allegorical significance of horror film as the sine qua non of "queer space" in the genre, they do so in a way that fundamentally opens up, rather than closes down, the potential for multiple readings and reading positions (Benshoff, 1997: 15). In other words, they recognize the possibility of multiple interpretations that do not necessarily hew to predominant critical dispositions, while at the same time emphasizing queer discourse as a source of pleasure and entertainment. As a result, while multiple social and historical meanings have been articulated to "the monster queer," primarily as a form of metaphorical expression, these have largely served to validate a popular reception practice that derives its meaning from the identificatory pleasures of fan discourse and subcultural audiences.

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[7] And here "queer" implies not so much interpretations derived from gay or lesbian readers, but a reception practice that fosters a fluidity of reading positions, including those which disrupt binary definitions of gender and sexual identity (Benshoff, 1997: 5).

Conversely, Stephen Prince (2004) has noted the "trivializing" effect of the "all-too-plentiful splatter films," which are often associated with cult horror films and their fans, while bemoaning the subcultural sensibilities that would "equate horror with gore" as a way to elevate the more "fantastic and film art." Accordingly, in his editorial introduction to *The Horror Film*, Prince makes a bid for greater legitimacy on behalf of those films that are said to "swing away from gore and back to the psychological and suggestive elements of horror." Crucially, however, this attempt to qualify scholarly discontent with contemporary "gross-out special effects" takes the form of more-or-less "proper" modes of aesthetic appropriation. As Prince explains, "Today it is relatively rare to find the genre mined with serious artistry…The turn toward graphic violence often has entailed a forfeiture of the genre's artistic credentials. Horror is ultimately about, and poses, philosophical, metaphysical, or ontological issues…and gore is merely a pathway toward these" (p. 9). Hence graphic violence is treated as a mere pretext to horror's more pertinent—i.e., philosophical, metaphysical, or ontological—subtexts. In this way, Prince moves to appropriate the genre in terms of the sort of intellectual pleasures that horror film (and its audience) is typically said to lack, while transmuting the genre's otherwise sensational properties into a medium for "deep" philosophical speculation.[8]

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[8] Interestingly, the philosophical/cognitive approach advocated by Prince proclaims stark opposition to the kind of psychoanalytic and cultural-ideological perspectives discussed above (cf. Carroll, 1990). However, his stated focus on "more fundamental questions of human nature" and "the anxiety at the heart of the genre" nevertheless resonates with methods of interpretation characteristically associated with "psychological" and socio-historical approaches. As a result, Prince's self-styled notion of a "social theory of horror" winds up obscuring what might otherwise be striking equivalencies in *methods* of interpretation.

In this way, techniques of (self-) legitimization are carried out at the expense of non-canonical works *and* non-canonical audiences alike. At the same time, academic discourse on horror continues to reify a model of "the horror film audience" as either hopelessly naïve (in terms of ideology) or passively enthralled (in terms of the genre's "mindless" special effects). As Matt Hills (2005) has argued, this trope is especially prevalent throughout debates over the genre's pleasures, which are all too frequently assume some sort of "paradox" that critics can heroically resolve; whether this takes the form of symptomatic reading or media effects models, theorists of horror tend to assume that they "can actively explain horror texts while its audiences are passively and emotionally subjected to the genre's products" (Hills, 2005: 90). Such assumptions go a considerable way toward explaining how "ordinary" viewers can be relegated to the position of textual dupe, while horror's textual pleasures are "written into, and disciplined within, a specific cultural-political framework" (ibid: 51): that of the film academy.

The Horror Auteur Function

As a principle of classification that works to sustain and privilege the power of critical authority, the horror auteur operates in much the same way as Foucault's "author-function"—as an inter-textual mechanism that accompanies the selective appropriation of some horror film texts (and not others). As Foucault (1979) points out, texts do not obtain authors spontaneously, but rather acquire authorship credentials through a complex series of discursive rules and operations; it is these rules which, in turn, govern the construction of particular types of authors, as well as the operative procedures

through which certain types of discourse can be viewed and valued as authored. Likewise, the figure of the horror auteur persists as a rhetorical function of established reading protocol: it serves to uphold not only a canon of "great" horror films and their directors, but also an equally canonical assortment of film-critical methodologies. As such, the practice horror auteurism relies on a conventional set of analytical procedures to govern the discursive construction of horror film authorship and validate certain received meanings above others.

In one sense, then, it provides the key reference point for establishing textual "truth" in relation to canonical works, while also providing a way to critique those films that fall outside the canon. Consider, for example, Wells' assessment of "postmodern era" filmmakers, and particularly those films "about film-making" which are "predicated on the understanding that horror fans are versed in the appeal of mechanistic formulas and the artifice of special effects" (2000: 35). While these films are said to merely "play out of adolescent issues and pre-occupations…the horror text that remains 'adult,'" in Wells' account, "still carries with it the complex psychological, emotional, physical and ideological charges of ancient folklore, fairytale and myth. In illustrating and commenting upon the deep-seated anxieties of its time, the horror film thus performs a necessary social function, for to challenge and disturb is to insist upon a liberal democratic process that both reflects and critiques its socio-cultural moment" (ibid).

In this way, so-called postmodern auteurs are roundly disparaged, not only for "bringing irony and pastiche to the genre for an increasingly 'knowing' audience (Wells 2000: 35), but also for their supposed preoccupation with "adolescent issues" (i.e., shock

and special effects), which, again, are said to blind "ordinary" spectators to the genre's otherwise redeeming social merits and "complex" ideological issues. Meanwhile, the dual fates of audiences and (postmodern) filmmakers are discursively conjoined, as both appear woefully ignorant of the genre's social functions and subversive effects.

In this manner, David Sanjek (2000) claims that American horror films of the 1990s evince little in the way of "the most prolific and thought-provoking practitioners of these forms" (p. 112). To wit, he argues that contemporary genre films "rarely if ever incorporate an overt radical or revolutionary agenda" (p. 114), and hence, just as "auteur theory has long fallen out of favor" (p. 112) "audience members are more interested in observing the genre rearticulate itself rather than call attention to the social, cultural, and ideological fissures and fault lines that the form represents (p. 114). More cautiously, David Church (2006) summarizes "the post-*Scream* era" of "creative void" and "uninspired" remakes as one in which "critics and audiences accustomed to the 1970s horror renaissance are simply facing a growing generation gap in horror consumption as a younger generation of moviegoers becomes the primary horror audience—an audience unable to truly appreciate what made those earlier films so groundbreaking and terrifying." In both cases, divergences in audience taste and subcultural competency are clearly acknowledged; however, this is done so only to rearticulate, more forcefully, bids for cultural-political legibility.

Meanwhile, questions of authorial intention can, with good conscience, be wholly sidelined, as it is the "collective dreams" of audiences and filmmakers that supposedly constitute the genre's thematic core. To quote one of the genre's foremost auteurist

critics, "one might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (Wood, 2003: 68); accordingly, these films "respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their directors and the collective dreams of their audiences, the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology" (ibid: 70). As such, the practice of symptomatic reading becomes the principal mediator through which both cinematic meaning *and* film authorship credentials are realized. And thus the task of interpreting horror films "seriously and responsibly" requires critics to identity authorial works that at once exhibit an extraordinary "symptomatic interest," while revealing their "repressed" meanings through specialized techniques of interpretation.

Hence we might say that a director's sole function *as* a horror auteur boils down to his or her capacity to essentially serve as a cultural conduit—or "unconscious mediator"—of radical social forces embedded deep within genre materials. As Reynold Humprhies explains in his chapter on "Directors and Directions:" "The directors discussed here are George Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, Larry Cohen, and Joe Dante…The films chosen for analysis testify to a certain homogeneity in theme and outlook conducive to the psychoanalytical and ideological approach to class, gender, and politics I have adopted from the outset" (2002: 113). A group of films is thus pre-selected (and pre-evaluated) in terms of "radical" textual approaches, which openly favor "progressive/subversive" ideological readings as a way to reaffirm canonical legitimacy. The value of these films is such that they oblige readers to consider "great" horror films as symptomatic expressions of their time; and insofar as there is any "subversive" or

"radical" potential to be recovered here, it is something that has to be ascertained through attentive close reading.

Thus, emphasis shifts in these (and other) auteurist accounts of the genre (see, e.g., Williams, 2003; Royer and Royer, 2005; Beard, 2006; Browning, 2007; and Bernardini, 2010), away from how horror movies get made to how they're interpreted, and from the act of creative inspiration toward the practice of critical reading. And hence the tendency to equate authorship with a film's non-obvious meanings provides discursive cover for an interpretive practice bent on evaluating horror films in terms of their socially "repressed" material. Meanwhile, political auteurism serves not least as an indication of a director's ability to disclose—in a more-or-less "unconscious" manner—"all that society represses or oppresses;" it also serves as a way to effectively foreground the critic's own discursive mastery over those meanings and effects which seemingly occur unbeknownst to the author. In effect, "significant works of the genre" are hailed to provide normative aesthetic criteria for exceptionally "deep" acts of interpretation.

The Cultural Politics of (Horror) Film Criticism

> For the horror cognoscenti, blood and the broken flesh screen and obscure secret truths. Only the unlettered amateur is moved by what appears on the surface.
> (Lake Crane, 2004: 153)

Taking up horror thus presents a distinct hermeneutic challenge to the would-be "serious" critic, as the only way to neutralize horror's seemingly toxic pleasures is to unmask some latently insidious ideological intention. While this may afford

opportunities to perform "a reasoned understanding of what horror film is 'really' about" (Hutchings, 2004: 186), it also works to denigrate the more literally affective pleasures of the genre as insufficiently allegorical, and even politically dubious. In contrast, less "resistive" approaches, such as those associated with horror film audiences, are distinguished from the procedures of symptomatic interpretation on the basis of the latter's ability to recognize "deep" cultural meaning within the genre. The result is a branch of criticism that becomes synonymous with imposing hard-and-fast cultural-political distinctions. As Douglas Kellner writes:

> If one wishes to maintain a critical perspective, one must also make difficult normative discriminations as to whether the resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience or artifact is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive. Critical practice must seek norms of critique and make critical discriminations in appraising the nature and effects of cultural artifacts and practices. (1995: 39-40)

Therefore, while canonical discourse makes possible the uniform identification of potentially "emancipatory or destructive" effects, it is also identifies the practice of criticism with the power to make such distinctions. In other words, criticism is distinguished as a cultural practice of normatively prescribing proper ways of reading horror films, while its cultural power rests on the ability to decipher hidden meanings and/or veiled ideological agendas—systems of value and disvalue that can be used to discredit "improper" approaches. Critics thus respond to the genre by cutting through "mindless" gore and "scare tactics" to reveal some "deeper" meaning looming just beneath the surface. In doing so, they affirm their own vaunted status as "renegade critics" (Lake Crane, 2004: 164 n. 6), while distancing themselves from the more naïve pleasures of less "active" readers.

As Lake Crane puts it: "the genre is at last worthy of careful attention because of the analytical genius brought to bear by the leading lights of the critical community…In illuminating the hidden meaning that lies behind the blood and gore, the analyst alleviates the deadly sting of the genre and mitigates any baleful attack committed against beleaguered funhouse protagonists and a defenseless, terrified audience" (2004: 151, 154). In this sense, disreputable cultural objects once deemed "beyond" interpretation are legitimated through the intellectualizing discourse of scholar-critics who are perpetually on hand "to offer some valuable and transcendent nugget that lies unseen—masked by bloody, but permeable, scrim" (ibid: 154). Under these auspices, the critic not only maintains exclusive capacity to transform a culturally disreputable genre into something more socially and politically "meaningful;" they also establish "criteria of validity in relation to which other readings can be found wanting" (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987: 65).

It is in this sense, then, that social-allegorical criticism might be considered a "normative approach" to reading horror films, "whereby the cultural values which animate reading practices of dominant social groups [in this case, academic film culture] are habitually reified and presented as properties of "texts themselves" (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987: 66). However, as the next chapter demonstrates, such frameworks have increasingly been taken up and assimilated by institutions outside the film academy; specifically, modes of symptomatic criticism now circulate within and across the industrial and promotional contexts of contemporary horror cinema where aspiring commercial auteurs frequently allude to the social-allegorical significance of their films

as a way of cuing preferred interpretations. In addition to advancing customary assumptions about horror's "deeper" meaning, for example, such frameworks afford up-and-coming horror film directors the practical-interpretive wherewithal to bring their films into alignment with paradigms of critical respectability.

In particular, so-called Splat Pack filmmakers like Eli Roth and Rob Zombie are well positioned to activate "serious" meaning behind their work by calling attention to already established reading practices: that is, the ways of understanding and valuing horror cinema as the "repressed" of mainstream filmmaking. In doing so, they supply cultural relevance and aesthetic value to the genre's latest "new wave" of commercial horror film production while also cementing their own institutional status as identifiable horror "auteurs." The idea that horror films might somehow reflect society's basic nightmares thus functions, here, at least for these (and other directors) versed in the appropriate canonical reading protocol, as an indispensable means of establishing cultural relevance and legitimacy, while affording the opportunity to retain appropriate levels of subcultural distinction and critical interest.

Chapter Two

Auteurs of Commerce: The Business of Performing Horror Authorship

"Heart-stopping violence. Explosive bloodshed. Undead flesh-eaters and dismembered ghouls. That's right. I'm talking about all the shit we love in film, and all the finer things in this goddamn life. One man is responsible for all this. And that man is George A. Romero." Such was the fulsome introduction Romero received at the hands of Quentin Tarantino at the 2009 Spike TV Scream Awards. The show, which claims to "celebrate the best in fantasy, sci-fi, comics and horror," presents itself as a populist, if not entirely parodisitic, alternative to the more prestigious, mainline Academy Awards (the tagline reads: "They have the Oscars, you have Scream").[1]

Tarantino was there to present Romero with a substantial tribute: the honorary Discretionary Mastermind Award, which ostensibly celebrates those filmmakers whose "unique vision of horror, sci-fi, and/or fantasy is both critically acclaimed and culturally significant." That Tarantino, perhaps the quintessential Hollywood auteur-celebrity, could be considered the right person for the job of bestowing Romero a quasi-lifetime achievement award for his seminal contribution to "all the shit we love in film" goes without saying. After all, Tarantino himself had been honored with the same award three years prior, alongside Robert Rodriguez, for their double-feature film *Grindhouse*—a big-budget homage to the kind of cheap, low-budget exploitation cinema that originally

[1] Upholding traditional award show categories such as best actor, best actress, and best director, while also putting its own decidedly irreverent spin on the things by intermixing rather unorthodox categories like Best Villain, Most Memorable Mutilation, Holy S***! Scene of the Year, and The Ultimate Scream.

spawned films like Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). However, as was the case with *Grindhouse*, the purpose of the award presentation seemed to be less about paying homage to a "master" progenitor of low-budget splatter horror and more about drawing a direct lineage from one cinematically inglorious bastard to another. As Taratino would remark during his fawning tribute: "I'm here tonight to stand up for one of the coolest, the craziest, the scariest, and [one of] America's greatest regional moviemakers of all time. I owe this man a huge debt, and so does every filmmaker who ever dared to declare their own independence, because George Romero did it first, and he did it with more guts and more gore than anybody."

Superlatives aside, we might take the occasion of this *televisual* celebration of a cult *movie* "mastermind" to ask a more general, but no less pointed question: namely, what business does America's "greatest regional moviemaker" have appearing on U.S. basic cable's premier action network?[2] Or better yet, what business does Spike TV—a channel that specializes in UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) reruns and *Ren and Stimpy* cartoons—have in showcasing Romero, a notoriously political auteur who was once described by Robin Wood (2008: 29) as "the most radical of all horror directors"? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the increasingly cozy institutional relationships between Hollywood and its various "ancillary" media markets (most notably, television, video and DVD, but also the internet and video games), and how these allow for

[2] The Spike network (formerly The National Network, or TNN) has undergone a spate of brand makeovers in recent years. Most notably, the adoption of the "Get More Action" tagline in 2006, which functions as a double entendre, alluding at once to the network's high concentration of syndicated action programming and the target audience of heterosexual men presumed to enjoy such fare.

industrial strategies (of branding, synergy, repurposing) designed to regulate and contain a proliferating field of consumer activities. In particular, programming events like Scream highlight just how much ancillary media (cable television, in this case) stand to gain through an association with Hollywood's more established forms of (cult) film distinction.[3]

At the same time, they invite speculation as to how and why the figure of the *horror* auteur, in particular, remains commercially and culturally viable in today's convergent media landscape. As Timothy Corrigan (2003: 98) has argued, for example, the "survival—and, in fact, increasing importance—of the auteur" owes much to its continued "industrial utility" as a promotional category;[4] its overall function is that of a branded media persona which can be repurposed across media for the reason of organizing audience reception. Moreover, as Corrigan points out, whereas the auteur initially arose "in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies"—only to be later "absorbed as a phantom presence within the text…he or she has rematerialized in [the present day]…as a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur*" (ibid: 98), and hence as a potential means of marketing film content (and film culture) to certain audience fractions. Rather than standing in romanticized

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[3] Media scholars have recently begun to consider the impact of media convergence on cult movie fandom. See, for example, Corrigan (1991: 80-98), Hills (2002: 172-82), Jancovich et al. (2003: 4-5), and Klinger (2010).

[4] Corrigan describes the "industrial utility of auteurism" as the means by which Hollywood came to rationalize its operations following the waning of the Hollywood studio system and the rise of network television in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Similarly changes in industrial practices and marketing strategies endemic to our own period of media convergence prompt reflection on the continuing usefulness of film authorship as an industrial category that resurfaces during times of great institutional volatility.

opposition to the commercialized logics of the film industry, in other words, the discourse of auteurism is readily incorporated within industrial strategies of distribution, media promotion and publicity.

One consequence of this reemergence, then, is to have fundamentally transformed the greater institutional value and significance of the genre-film director, whose assigned role (as "author") within the production system now extends beyond the immediate, practical tasks of filmmaking itself to encompass those various promotional strategies and marketing discourses that were once the chief province of Hollywood publicists and producers. Within this context, the director literally assumes the role of publicity and advertisement, as his or her authorial agency remains "bound," as Corrigan puts it, by the "distribution and marketing aims that identify and address the potential cult status of an auteur" (2003: 98). Such developments thus culminate in commercially useful situations such as Romero's lauded appearance at the 2009 Scream Awards, in which famed auteur-directors are aggressively self-promoted—or "performatively called into being," as it were—as a kind of "brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined" in advance, and whose stardom "is meaningful primarily as a promotion or a recovery of a movie or a group of movies" (ibid: 100).

In this sense, the "commerce of auteurism" provides greater access to the kinds of auteurist narratives, reception practices, and promotional strategies through which audiences come to know, understand, and evaluate the work of particular directors. Aided by increasing degrees of media exposure, contemporary filmmakers now engage in myriad forms of "film and auteur packaging" (Megan Morris, quoted in Corrigan 2003:

97), which in turn create new routes to commercial identification. What's more, the ever-increasing amount of paratextual material now constituting film culture makes available an impressive battery of promotional technologies through which to render the actual viewing of an auteur film tautological, if not to say entirely obsolete. As Catherine Grant (2008: 102) argues: "We can quite satisfactorily, indeed lovingly and pleasurably, 'consume' the director-auteur, or indulge our authorial-contextual awareness of particular forms of cinema, simply by reading or viewing directorial interviews or press commentaries on their work, along with other related ancillary discourse and media forms." Thus, while such discourses inevitably condition the production of authorship as a marketing strategy, they also serve as the principal means by which authorial identities are shaped and negotiated for the purposes of ancillary consumption.[5]

Within these contexts, then, programming events like Scream take care to highlight not only a director's auteur *stardom* (i.e., their commercial biography and media celebrity) but also their remarkable ability to distend and grow the promotional life of Hollywood's key artistic players. Indeed one finds in these performative undertakings, "less a critical subversion of auteurism as a production strategy than an exploitation of auteurism as a category for reception" (Corrigan, 1990: 44), and thereby, a viable

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[5] Here a director's name is useful not only as a commercial strategy but as a form of "extratextual" agency (Corrigan, 2003: 102) which self-consciously operates according to precise institutional needs—for example, as a signifier of "intentional and authorial agency" (ibid: 97), the auteur-director plays a key role in sustaining high-art aesthetic ideologies of "personal vision," while also managing their own commodified status as auteur-stars through a range of savvy self-promotional tactics. Hence proliferating networks of ancillary media provide both highly visible access to distinctly commercial forms of film authorship, as well as a means to explain the increasingly complex relationship between commodity discourses and auteurist reception.

industrial practice of utilizing the author—or more accurately, the author function—as a specific type of media performance geared toward securing the allegiance of delimited target audience segments. In particular, one finds a strategic way to appeal to—and thus more effectively target—specific sub-cultural taste formations via the transindustrial attempt to piggyback on the perceived viewing preferences and brand-name loyalties of target audiences in related media markets. Through an association with "America's greatest regional moviemaker," for example, Spike TV attempts to constitute its audience (as well as its core brand identity) in terms of a relatively exclusive taste culture (i.e., people who evidently like "heart-stopping violence, explosive bloodshed, and dismembered ghouls"); in doing so, the channel ends up cultivating additional media outlets through which to articulate the commerce of auteurism to a host of preexisting generic values, discourses and cultural hierarchies: as "the best in sci-fi, fantasy, comics, and horror" is represented here in the figure of Romero, so too are the canonical values used to reproduce such generic distinctions.

At the same time, the dual invocation of cult *horror* auteurism and oppositional taste culture works here to simultaneously shore up putatively held generic assumptions about the overall cultural significance of the genre (as, for example, one of the more "disreputable," and hence subversive, forms of popular culture), as well as to consolidate the authorial reputation of "one of the coolest, the craziest, [and] scariest" of American filmmakers. Here it is Romero's reputation as a "rebel" horror auteur that functions, rather methodically, to guarantee a more authentic type of cult film encounter. However, it is also the case that Romero's transgressive iconicity—that is, his reputation for being

"the most radical of all horror film directors"—bleeds rather comfortably into his commercial auteur status as the celebrity director most responsible for "all the shit we love in film." Thus, while the name George A Romero cues audiences to engage in the sort of sub-cultural distinctions typically associated with cult film fans (Jancovich, 2002), it also works to reproduce forms of aesthetic discrimination that effectively cut across taste cultures and interpretive communities.

Indeed, as a consummate symbol of the "progressive potentialities of the horror film" (Wood, 2003: 108), Romero persists as an institutional fixture for all of those "serious" critics looking to champion an erstwhile strain of politically subversive horror filmmaking—a camp we might identify with more ostensibly legitimate (read: academic) forms of ideological criticism. On the one hand, this is due largely to the perceived social critique readily assumed to lie at the heart of Romero's Dead/zombie films (e.g., lumbering zombies represent mindless consumers). On the other hand, those same "oppositional" qualities are just as easily equated with cult film sensibilities, such that struggles for distinction that occur both within academic and fan cultures dovetail quite nicely with the promotional narratives of the movie industry—which continually seek to position horror in terms of a distinct counter-aesthetic. Nonetheless, it would appear that, for those Spike TV fans who arrived at the award ceremony dressed as their favorite "dismembered ghoul," Romero persists as *the* quintessential horror auteur, not because his films contain some radical challenge to the social order, but because he seems to embody (and openly embrace) all of those features which correspond with a genuine cult cinema. In the words of Tarantino, not only did Romero do it first, he did it "with more

guts and gore than anybody." The result is an acute marketing strategy that is effectively geared toward the industrial appropriation of distinct "subcultural ideologies."[6]

All this is to suggest that what makes Romero "one of the coolest, the craziest, [and] scariest" of American filmmakers is not so much his artistic independence, nor his allegedly radical political agenda, but rather his role as an institutional fixture for a whole legion of fans, critics, and directors looking to cement their own relationship to a well-established tradition of disreputable, seemingly uninhibited genre cinema. In this capacity, the name George A. Romero persists as a commercially reputable brand name vision—a commodified public image whose commercial agency and extra-textual authority remains viable insofar as it gets reworked and appropriated as both marketing strategy *and* interpretive position. However, as I will discuss below, the name also functions a critical reference point for media producers seeking to gain economic and cultural capital by showcasing an overt allegiance to brand-name forms of oppositional film culture.

Specifically, for directors like Tarantino, who appear constantly on the lookout for new ways to cement their own reputation within a critically acclaimed and culturally

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[6] As Jancovich et al. (2003) define the term, subcultural ideology refers to the process by which certain forms of media and popular culture are perceived in opposition to the "mainstream"— in subcultural defiance of broader taste formations, aesthetic values, and "inauthentic" commercial sensibilities. Crucially, these distinctions are themselves the product of socially constructed taste formations which confer value and status upon particular (academic and fan) cultures; however, they are also discursively *constructed* categories that allow for both a sense of "difference" from the mainstream as well as superior displays of subcultural capital. As such, they tend to coalesce around specific objects of "cult" fascination; for instance, "unwatchable" or "unobtainable" genre films (such as horror), but also canonical works by specific cult horror auteurs (Romero being perhaps among the most notable).

significant tradition of lowbrow filmmaking, the figure of George A. Romero functions as a valuable intertextual resource for establishing cult relevance: through an association with Romero's particular brand of auteur-celebrity, Tarantino is able to maximize his own distinctiveness by re-contextualizing his own brand name image in terms of an established canon of auteur-luminaries. Meanwhile, Romero's own institutional value gets reworked and rebooted to encompass broader networks of industrial and commercial exchange, which ultimately guarantee the transmission of cultural authority from one auteur-director to the next. In effect, aspiring cult "masters" like Tarantino are in a better position to capitalize on the transgressive iconicity of figures like Romero through the strategic deployment of various extra-textual associations.

For this reason, it's hard not to mistake in Tarantino's own prideful endorsement of Romero a tiny hint of self-congratulation, and why not? The ceremony did, after all, provide the director—and self-proclaimed cult horror aficionado—further opportunity to heighten his own commercial auteur status by once more insinuating himself (if anachronistically) within exploitation film history. Never mind the fact that, as an industrio-economic category, regionally produced exploitation movies of the Romero ilk effectively met their end in the early 1980s, when low-budget genre cinema began to operate increasingly under the umbrella of a shrinking number of multinational media conglomerates (see Heffernan, 2004); the purpose of this trademarked media tribute to a cult movie "mastermind" had more to do with convincing a "post-theatrical film culture" (Benson-Allott, 2008: 20) that a certain underground exploitation community still exists, the growing obsolescence of repertory cinemas and drive-in movie theaters

notwithstanding. And here's where the branded media showcasing of figures like Romero (and Tarantino) takes on new meaning. Particularly, as the cultural geography of cult movie fandom becomes more diffuse, or less dependent on place (Jancovich et al., 2003: 4), cult movie audiences take on the significance of a potentially powerful market force. Thus, events like Scream prove indispensable for entertainment moguls and cult film fans alike, as both appear eager to maintain sufficient levels of subcultural capital and distinction amidst the ongoing mainstreaming of cult phenomena (Klinger, 2010).

At the same time, commercial performances such as Romero and Tarantino at Scream demonstrate not only the degree to which orchestrations of promotional film culture continue to utilize the figure of the horror auteur as a potential form of niche marketing; they also suggest how this figure increasingly functions as a self-explanatory label for all those vaguely defined, supposedly radical (aesthetic and political) meanings commonly associated with horror film culture. To paraphrase Corrigan, if the horror auteur emerged in the 1970s as a criterion of progressive/subversive evaluation, it has since rematerialized in the age of "post-cinema" as *the business of being a horror auteur*, and hence persists as both saleable attraction and authorial position: not simply a marketing strategy imposed on directors, but a modality of performance which is to be utilized on behalf of those genre practitioners seeking to either attain or maintain commercial auteur status. As such, the notion of the horror auteur survives—and in fact openly thrives—in today's cinematic discourse as a fixture of brand-name currency and "front stage" (Goffman, 1999) media performance.

The Critical Industrial "Utility" of Horror Auteurism

Bearing this in mind, the following sections will seek to demonstrate not only the continuing relevance of Romero's highly adaptable brand of auteur-celebrity, but also the extent to which such discourses effectively condition the possibility for *new* forms of auteur identity to emerge and flourish within the context of the contemporary horror movie industry. Accordingly, they will examine what I call (following Corrigan) the critical and industrial *utility* of the horror auteur, particularly as regards the intertextual zones and media paratexts that now structure promotional film culture. My contention is that the figure of the horror auteur serves an important critical-industrial function within these contexts, mediating twin discursive demands specific to the genre: namely, subcultural distinction (i.e., authenticity, nonconformity, and the celebration of cult or deviant tastes) and topicality (or establishing interpretive frames of reference and critical vocabularies through which to understand horror movies as allegorical expressions of socially conscious filmmakers). Thus, in what follows I will offer a brief sketch of the discursive frameworks that underpin contemporary horror auteurism, while also reassessing these frameworks in light of their continued industrial utility; that is, their ongoing commercial appropriation and strategic deployment by a group of media-savvy directors for the purpose of shaping and prefiguring popular reception.

Specifically, I will address the marketing activities and press commentary surrounding a so-called new wave of American horror filmmakers (unofficially known as the Splat Pack), while also pointing out how these discourses work to legitimate (aesthetically and politically) recent trends in commercial horror film production. Thus

surveying a range of media, publicity and promotional materials, I will highlight the way directors such as Eli Roth (*Hostel, Hostel 2*), Darren Lynn Bousman (*Saw II*, *III,* & *IV*), and Rob Zombie (*Devil's Rejects*), among others, frequently and self-reflexively appeal to the figure of the horror auteur by contextualizing and articulating their work in terms of an already established generic canon of auteur luminaries. In doing so, these directors, I will show, seek to establish their own auteur status (and notoriety), capitalizing on the accrued cultural, institutional, and promotional value of the horror auteur so as to exploit the *extra-textual* agency of this position in order to forestall attempts at censorship and assert a desired position of authorship.

Auteurism as Performance

Before proceeding with these arguments, however, I want to first reiterate the role of performativity in this overall process, especially since my understanding of authorship as an *extratextual* media performance conditions the treatment that follows. In particular, the degree to which authorship can be said to function as a mode of self-fashioning, which is germane to industrial trends in contemporary Hollywood, might be assessed through reference to a recent strand of auteur criticism emphasizing the work of directors in responding to social, cultural, and discursive contexts. Janet Staiger, for example, has argued that authorship can be identified as "a technique of the self" whereby individuals demonstrably and reflexively author themselves by "duplicating recipes and exercises of authorship within a cultural and institutional context that understands such acts as agency and repetition of such acts as signs of individuality" (2004: 2). According to this view,

directors actively make themselves into authors by enacting socially constructed discourses of auteurist production, marketing and reception. An important research task is thus to trace the public exchange between author and the audience (in the form of interviews, promotional materials, publicity and press coverage) in order to identify a director's favored authoring practices—those reiterative techniques of self-presentation and rhetorical performance that can be utilized by directors to relate a pertinent artistic persona.

Crucially, these "performatives of authorship," as Staiger calls them, not only shed light on the predominant conceptions of film authorship which underwrite specific forms of creative authority; they also permit individuals to "act in manners we label as authoring" by conforming to the dominant scripts of film directing itself (2004: 1). That is, they afford critical insight into the cultural and discursive constraints that impinge upon authorial identities, while at the same time "granting limited [social] agency through speech acts which do have effects of producing statements our culture recognizes as authorship" (ibid: 2). Such reflexive techniques, as Staiger argues, justify a revised conception of authorial agency, which in turn regards the "work" of a particular director in terms of the auteurist persona he or she negotiates through the extratextual practices of publicity and promotion. Thus, rather than "look for patterns and motifs within texts signed by an individual with the authority to exert agency" (ibid: 16), critical media scholars are obliged to follow Staiger's model in considering how contemporary film directors reflexively make themselves into authors by enacting certain discourses of auteurist marketing and reception. As Staiger puts it, these recipes of authorship are

practiced (unwittingly or not) "because they have credibility in the broader culture to indicate authoring and because they have worked" (ibid: 15). As such, they constitute the principal means by which directors at once recognize themselves and are recognized as legitimate authors.[7]

Similarly, Catherine Grant (2000) has shown how circulating discourses of promotional and directorial film culture not only contribute to the reputations of contemporary film directors, but also to the "identificatory pleasures" and "cultural fantasies" that organize the field of auteur reception. In particular, Grant identifies "the kinds of stories we want film directors to tell us in promotional interviews and profiles, as well as the specific stories we require of particular kinds of directors" (ibid: 107), and how these relate to structural and technological changes now taking shape in the film industry. As part of a reflexive cultural practice of auteurist consumption, for example, Grant examines the proliferation of ancillary discourses and media forms (such as those found within DVD extras, making-of documentaries, fan websites, official homepages) as having multiplied access to film authorship, thus allowing directors further opportunity to commercially dramatize their own extra-textual agency as auteurs (see also Tzioumakis, 2006: 60-2). For instance, DVD featurettes allow directors the mutually beneficial relationship of not only enhancing authorial status with respect to a given film but also

[7] It should be noted that Staiger's theory of performative authorship is aimed at recuperating the discourse of authorial expression on behalf of directors located in explicitly "minority" subject-positions. For example, she discusses the authoring "tactics" of Gus Van Sant as "performative incursions" into the prevailing aesthetic discourses of the dominant heterosexual culture. As a result, she tends to privilege authorship as a fundamentally subversive category of performance; whereas I wish to emphasize the commercial "strategies" of authorship involved in recycling the dominant formulas of promotional auteurism.

increasing the role that inter-textual materials (e.g., commentary tracks, interviews, bonus materials) play in both mediating and facilitating that auteur image. Indeed, they afford a much deeper level of engagement with auteurist discourse, while also permitting a certain degree of selective maintenance and promotion of a director's so-called personalized vision (Grant, 2008).

At the same time, since these positions are not simply textually determined, but rather assigned and negotiated inter-textually across any number of ancillary media platforms, they potentially detract from conventional notions of authorship as "the exertion of self-expressive artistic control" (Grant, 2000: 102). Instead authorship becomes a matter of demonstrating the appropriate competencies and dispositions, which might be said to resonate with both cults of fans and critical viewers alike; in short, it becomes a question of monitoring and reworking "the institutional manipulations of the auteurist position within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry (Corrigan, 2003: 101). Theorizing agency in this context, therefore, requires a close examination of what Grant calls the "reiterative or re-articulatory practice" of authoring discourse, a practice that is both inter-subjective and intrinsic to the contemporary auteurist position. As Grant writes:

> While directors (as agents) make or direct films, by choosing, doing and saying (sometimes) original things, as individuals what they cannot make or 'direct' is the discursive or conceptual frameworks of 'directing' itself. In order to be seen as directors (and as particular kinds of directors), they can therefore only 're-make' or 're-direct,' or, cite or repeatedly perform, the kind of work that is socially and discursively constructed as being that of a 'director,' the kind of work that we, the audience, want from directors. (Grant 2008: 113 n. 4)

Thus, while models of agency—or "frameworks of directing"—are constructed and realized across diverse forms of commercial "infotainment" and directorial film culture, the kind of work that we expect of individual auteur-directors, particularly as they enter into institutionally defined positions of film authorship, remains tightly circumscribed. At the same time, they suggest alternative ways of engaging with the utility value of auteurism as a function of changing "industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies" (Corrigan, 2003: 96). Here questions of hype, synergy, marketability, taste differentials, and target markets exert a profound influence on the sorts of auteur personae constructed in promotional platforms. In the same manner, critical discourse on authorship tends to establish the appropriate protocols of reading and interpretation needed to be in place in order to "find" an author (King and Miller, 2007: 475); as such they wield considerable authority in establishing the inter-textual conditions of auteurist performance and reception.

The Production of Auteurs

In both cases, the linkages between ancillary materials (critical reviews, mechanisms of publicity, etc.) and claims to agency (on behalf of filmmakers seeking to mold a public image) reflect changes in the sorts of institutional contexts and discourses that have enabled different sorts of auteur identity to emerge and flourish. In particular, the cultural and economic forces associated with the continued circulation of distinct brand-name forms of auteurism (including Romero's auteur stardom, as discussed above) compel attention to "the increasingly complicated relation between audiences and film-

related forms of media…through which a celebrity director is aggressively (self)-promoted" (Tzioumakis, 2006: 60). Meanwhile, convergent media forms do more than simply advantage already established commercial auteurs; as Grant writes, they also engender "different, more comprehensive forms of auteurism than were previously possible. These include, on occasion, *the actual 'production' of auteurs*, that is, the brining into discursive existence commercially- and critically-defined 'significant directors,' where before not all would have been construed as discursively or commercially necessary." To wit, these newly emergent forms of "paratextual auteurism" condition what Grant calls an "authorial-contextual awareness of cinema" which secure—for some directors and not others—the commercial status of film authorship, while also distinguishing particular types of film culture (2008: 103, 101).

Indeed, this is no doubt true of the field of contemporary horror cinema, where, as one trade publication puts it, fans of the genre are more likely to "consider the director the star, not the actors" (McClintock, 2006), and hence dutifully extol the work of renowned auteur-directors (or so-called masters of horror) as a way to justify *creatively*, the highly commercial decisions to engage in marketing-rich strategies of authorial branding and repurposing.[8] However, whereas others have demonstrated the way such packaging works to cement the artistic and commercial reputations of canonical horror filmmakers (see, e.g., Hendershot, 2009 and Kooyman, 2010), the value of self-

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[8] See, for example, Hollywood's recent attempt to "reinvent" established horror movie franchises such as Friday the 13th and Halloween by awarding them auteur credentials; or conversely, the efforts of cable television producers to cultivate brand-name forms of prestige through generic associations with the horror's more canonical filmmakers (e.g., Showtime's "Masters of Horror" series).

fashioning for up-and-coming directors lies in the way they too are able to evoke the horror auteur label as a means of eliciting genre-specific modes of audience identification. Here, what is most interesting about the production of significant directors is the degree to which the genre itself impinges upon a filmmaker's bid for authorial agency.

As Grant explains it, this process of cultivating agency depends not only on a reflexive cultural practice of negotiating discursive and institutional conditions of authorship, but also on the public invocation of preferred meanings and cultural values associated with particular kinds of directors. In this light, the *horror* director operates as a particular kind of media performance: an extra-textual agency that inevitably must conform to certain types of auteurist narratives and codified exercises of authorship. The performance of horror film authorship can therefore be analyzed in terms of the auteurist media persona that materialize in the process of critical and popular reception; for it is here, as Grant (2008: 113 n. 4) points out, that "the kinds of stories we want film directors to tell us in promotional interviews and profiles, as well as the specific stories we require from particular kinds of directors" emerge and become codified.

Particularly, as these frameworks work to construct auteurist narratives and star images that are more or less consistent with the critical orthodoxies and subcultural practices of horror movie fandom,[9] they also shed light on the prevailing conceptions of

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[9] Craig Bernardini (2010) has argued, for example, that cult film publications like *Fangoria* played an important role in constructing the "horror auteur" for a genre audience during the 1980s, particularly devoting "an ever-increasing amount of space to a small cadre of visionary directors" (e.g., Romero, Craven, Cronenberg). As a result, "the horror fan, moreso than other moviegoers, is predisposed to understand horror as a

authorship that underwrite specific forms of creative subjectivity; in terms of horror film authorship, they draw attention to the techniques of self-presentation and promotion that permit individuals to "act in manners we label as authoring" by conforming to the dominant scripts of horror film "directing" itself (Staiger, 2004: 2). At the same time, they assemble frames of reference that are at once designed to be accessible to the non-horror fan but also evoke strands of critical and popular reception, which are associated with horror film as a generic category. For instance, because it is now virtually conventional wisdom that horror films "channel the horrors of history" (Dewan, 2000), it is likewise *de rigueur* that aspiring genre filmmakers articulate their personal vision in terms this more general generic discourse, that is, in terms of social and political allegory. To do this, however, it is also necessary to "engage directly and progressively with social issues" (Wood, 2003: 115), and hence to mobilize institutionalized reading protocols which favor horror films as symptomatic expressions of social, political, or cultural currents. Indeed this rhetorical strategy, which is aimed at eliciting distinct patterns of critical recognition and audience reception, more or less requires horror film directors to enact the kinds of stories we (as critics, fans, and/or ordinary viewers) expect, and even desire, of horror movie directors, especially as this modality assumes the genre's capacity to mediate society's collective nightmares.

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director's cinema" (p. 186 n. 2). Indeed this practice, which originated during the latter half of the 1970s, and now extends beyond the world of niche horror fandom to include the machinations of the contemporary horror movie industry, has obvious repercussions for the commerce of horror auteurism. As Bernardinini explains: "Today, a director who makes one or two moderately interesting horror films is quickly labeled a 'horror auteur'…and compared to the 1970s patriarchs. This is at once a fine instance of the marketing of auteur nostalgia, and a further indication that the contemporary horror director's auteur status remains circumscribed by genre" (p. 163).

More broadly, though, it requires the "emphatic media presence of commercially- and critically-defined 'significant directors'" (Grant, 2008: 103) who appear at once wholeheartedly committed to the genre—as, for example, a suitable vehicle for social critique and self-conscious artistic expression—and are thus able to articulate that commitment across interviews, reviews, magazine profiles, publicity campaigns and other forms of ancillary media promotion (on the use of this model in 1970s horror auteurism, see Hutchings, 2004: 180-2). Indeed, as I discuss in the next section, these conditions have led to the emergence and (admittedly lukewarm) critical reception of a so-called new wave of American horror filmmakers, who are celebrated both for their dedication to the genre and overt willingness to put forth "unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies" (Keegan, 2006). However, this performative strategy did not originate with these directors; rather, it can be traced back, as Hutchings has shown, to the original—now canonical—efforts of a group of 1970s horror auteurs, for whom screen violence and social realism became a hallmark distinguishing their own work in the historical context of what Gregory Waller has called "the modern era of horror" (1987: 1-12).

Indeed, as Hutchings illustrates, the canonization of these auteurist horror films enabled not only a visionary understanding of genre—as, for example, the product of creative innovation and artistic intelligence—but it also provided grounds for interpreting horror films as artistically ambitious and socially engaged (2004: 169-91); that is, it functioned more-or-less to sustain ideological accounts of the genre, which have their roots in intellectual concerns of this period: namely, constructions of the Hollywood

Renaissance (of the late 1960s and early 1970s) as taboo-breaking and socially progressive (see Nowell, 2011: 60). Hence the impulse to classify certain horror films (and their directors) as ideologically progressive/subversive (Klinger 2003) within this context, and hence worthy of serious academic study, tends to reinforce standard critical assumptions about the *inventional* role of few major directors, while sidestepping the issue of commercial imperatives and market forces. In short, it privileges artistry and intelligence over economic institutions and cultural industries.[10]

[10] This is clearly evident if we look at the critical discourse surrounding the original—now canonical—horror auteurs of the 1970s. Here, the likes of Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, Larry Cohen, and George Romero are usually represented as having inaugurated the so-called "golden age" of horror cinema (Britton et al., 1979), in which the topic of horror was placed firmly within the context of modern American society. Accordingly, these films have often been praised as transforming the genre in significant ways, mostly having to do with their directors' ability to connect horror's "apocalyptic" themes to contemporaneous social institutions (e.g., the family, the military, state capitalism); however, they have also attracted political interpretations that make a great deal of horror's supposed "radical challenge to society" (Grant and Sharrett, 2004: xi). For this reason, films like *Night of the Living Dead*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Last House on the Left*, among others, are often credited with "revolutionizing" the genre in the direction of greater "realistic brutality" (McIntyre, 2000) and "dystopic visions of society" (Humphries, 2002: 138).

However, less often discussed is the degree to which seventies horror film directors themselves played a crucial role in this process of genre redefinition, particularly occupying positions that allowed them to inflect the marketing and reception of their films. As Hutchings notes, for example, "one of the ways in which horror got serious in the 1970s…was through its association with directors such as these who were wholeheartedly committed to the genre as a suitable vehicle for the expression of ideas and were willing to articulate this commitment in interviews and publicity materials" (2004: 181). The focus on grim social reality thus provided grounds for interpreting horror film as visionary and progressive. However, a more modest claim might be that contemporaneous commercial conditions encouraged these films' taboo-breaking stylistic features, including, for example, a kind of "shock aesthetic" (Hutchings 2004: 173) that developed during the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of a widespread industrial attempt to capitalize on the low-budget, exploitation sector.

In this context, independent distributors specializing in exploitation horror films turned to hyper-explicit, graphically violent material as a way to differentiate their

As a result, “cutting edge” horror films of the 1970s are understood as a form of social commentary on the Vietnam era, with their auteur-directors having captured (or imaginatively transformed) the cultural pessimism and apocalyptic despair of that era through “an insightful blend of terror and serious commentary” (McIntyre, 2000). To the extent torture porn filmmakers exhibit a similar negativity in their attitude and relationship to “the upheaval going on around them,” their work might be equally judged as having “tapped into the social turmoil of an era” (see below). Indeed, it might even be said that these films “examine deep psychological issues, and comment on the social and political issues of the day,” *precisely because* they contain startling scenes of torture.

A Recipe For Authorship

During summer of 2007, the Museum of the Moving Image (MMI) in Astoria, Queens held a five-weekend film series entitled, “It’s Only a Movie: Horror Films from the 1970s and Today,” the ostensible purpose of which was to explore the renewed linkages between two outstandingly significant periods of horror film history. Through a selection of features and shorts hailing mostly from the 1970s and the 2000s, the series

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products from “prestige” films (e.g., *The Exorcist* [1972] and *The Omen* [1973]) of the major studios (Heffernan 2004: 203-19). Likewise, filmmakers looking to tap this new exploitation market could emphasize increased violence and gore as a function of a film’s marketability (cf. Szulkin 1997 on *Last House on the Left* and Heffernan 2004: 215, on *Night of the Living Dead*). A key development here is thus a greater reliance on “shock value” as a means of distinguishing the low-budget horror film (Hutchings 2004: 173-4), but also the sub-cultural distinctions that go along with these trends. Simply put, these films’ taboo-breaking, stylistic innovations can just as easily be interpreted as a response to new market conditions, particularly the creation of “selective film markets that were defined by a sense of distinction from ‘mainstream, commercial cinema’” (Jancovich 2002: 317), as they can broader, more abstract cultural structures (e.g., patriarchy, capitalism, the bourgeois family, etc.).

paired classic and contemporary entries in the genre by way of an evidently illuminating historical comparison. Situating works by renowned genre masters alongside contemporary horror movie directors, the program outlined a clear aesthetic lineage for the newly emergent batch of ultraviolent horror films. The festival press release read:

> Horror films are currently enjoying a resurgence in production, popularity, and inventiveness unparalleled since the rise of the independent horror movement in the 1970s. Today's "Splat Pack directors," Eli Roth (*Hostel*), Rob Zombie (*The Devil's Rejects*), and Alexandre Aja (*High Tension*) among them, draw direct inspiration from the earlier generation's masters, including John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and George A. Romero. Then and now, the best horror movies are transgressive and powerful, challenging taboos and offering social commentary while delving deeply into our darkest desires and fears. (MMI 2007)

As if to demonstrate further the cultural respectability of these so-called Splat Pack films, festival curators opened the series with a screening of Adam Simon's 2000 documentary *The American Nightmare*, a film which openly boosts its title from a 1979 horror retrospective of the same name[11] and dutifully extols the work of seventies genre masters as politically and culturally relevant. In doing so, it emphasizes the unique parallels between issues of violence, national culture, and the possibility of horror film renaissance.[12] As curator Livia Bloom summed up in a *New York Times* press description of the event: "The filmmakers in this series use the horror genre as a commercial

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[11] Andrew Britton, Robin Wood and Richard Lippe famously organized a retrospective of mostly American horror films at the 1979 Toronto International Film Festival, the culmination of which was the publication of their original—now canonical—critical anthology *The American Nightmare*.

[12] Specifically, the documentary posits a connection between the era's radical politics and the genre debuts of a few noteworthy horror film directors, characterizing such landmark films as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* as "reflections" the social turmoil from which they emerged. In the process, it constructs seventies American horror as an important legacy of national culture, suggesting an intrinsic relationship between issues of graphic violence and the "real-life horrors" of the Vietnam era.

framework to make smart, often subversive films. Their work examines deep psychological concerns, and comments on the social and political issues of the day. Current movies like *Hostel* and *Saw* include startling scenes of torture—reflections of a life during a time of war and turmoil" (Zinoman, 2007).

As part of an extended canonical tradition of auteurist horror cinema, "torture porn"[13] films thus earn their generic credentials through a combination of extra-filmic discourses vis-à-vis the prevailing sociocultural anxieties (i.e., the "War on Terror") and textual features which recall the "realistic brutality" and "dark cynicism" of seventies era horror films (see McIntyre, 2000; Hollyfield, 2009). In turn, they invite comparison to a Golden Age past in which the genre's canonical filmmakers purportedly displayed "a radical and revolutionary position in relation to dominant ideological norms and the institutions that embody them" (Wood, 2003: 63, 91). For this reason, MMI festival curators intended to play up the transgressive and powerful aspects of torture movies like *Saw* and *Hostel* as a direct consequence of their generic heritage. In doing so, they would also articulate a critical vocabulary through which to build and justify interpretations of

[13] As Jason Middleton points out, the term "torture porn" it itself contentious, "with different artists and critics having articulated a variety of often opposing positions on the term's meaning and its usefulness in describing and categorizing this recent cycle of horror cinema" (2010: 2). Nonetheless, I use it here tendentiously, as a signifier of the supposed sociocultural anxieties of the "war on terror," which are characteristically offered up (by both critics and filmmakers) as a way to justify this emergent production trend. It should be noted, however, that while the term itself is meant to designate a historically specific group of films, "that construct scenes of torture as elaborate set pieces, or 'numbers,' intended to serve as focal points for the viewer's visual pleasure" (Middleton 2010: 2), it has been used (e.g., Edelstein, 2005) as a descriptor of the sort of brutality previously associated with exploitation horror films such as the Italian "cannibal" cycle; also *Variety* excoriated Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 for hawking "a pornography of violence" (see Heffernan, 2004: 203).

these films in terms of cultural relevance, while also upgrading their filmmakers' perceived critical and industrial value.

Indeed, as "reflections" of the current historical moment, torture porn movies are said to hold considerable aesthetic and cultural interest, not only for their "startling scenes of torture," which purportedly engage in cinematic dialogue with national culture, but also for the ways in which these (and other) representations of screen violence supposedly speak to the "collective nightmares" of their audience (Wood, 2003: 70; see also Lowenstein, 2005). It follows, then, that if Splat Pack filmmakers—as the nominal purveyors of torture porn—wish to see their films institutionally sanctioned as serious works of art, they too must organize their authorial personae in ways that openly square with prevailing aesthetic standards and established reading protocol; that is, they must conceive of their work not simply as authored, but in line with broader social, historical, political and cultural trends. For, as the MMI press release indicates, only in making movies that clearly and overtly respond to key "social and political issues of the day" do horror film directors achieve both public prominence and reputation as legitimate artists.

Meanwhile, the reputation for serious artistry is as much indebted to extratextual discourses of the art world (Kapsis, 1987) as it is the perceived merits of a director's textual oeuvre. Because public authorization demands a media performance in which authors "'re-make' or 're-direct,' or, cite or repeatedly perform, the kind of work that is socially constructed as being that of a 'director'" (Grant, 2008: 113 n. 4), the category of authorship itself becomes a relay for a host of circulating discourses, or recipes for authorship, which convey the dominant scripts of reputation building. Hence, canonical

figures like Romero and Craven might be said to embody the very institutional systems of meaning and value that determine what counts as legitimate authorship. At the same time, because not all discourses are considered as authored, and because "the reputation of an artist is frequently tied to the genre or medium in which he or she works" (Kapsis, 1987: 5), the conditions of public authorization necessarily hinge upon a series of prior evaluations and interpretations. Hence the question of what it actually means to be a horror film director inextricably turns on the prevailing critical attitudes and popular consensus as to whether or not "serious work can be done in that mode" (ibid).

In other words, and to paraphrase Andrew Sarris, in order to resurrect the horror genre, it is also necessary to resurrect its major canonized figures, among them, the 1970s "masters of horror": Romero, Craven, and Tobe Hooper. As Hutchings (2004: 180-2) points out, it was these directors who first assumed the mantle of horror film authorship, and consequently it was their films that first established the genre as worthy of serious (i.e., academic) study. However, it was also their imputed presence, both within the production process but also in the way their films were marketed and received by critics (Hutchings, 2004: 181), which effectively set the terms by which institutions of the art world would subsequently discover serious artists at work in the genre. Particularly owing to the perceived combination of graphic violence, apocalyptic themes, and radical social commentary, critics like Robin Wood and Andrew Britton would champion "major" horror film directors on the basis of their ability to "stand against the flow of his [sic] period (with the concomitant dangers of isolation, of becoming fixed in an embattled position)" (Wood, 2003: 84). As a result, the canonical discourse which has taken shape

around these auteur-directors has transpired to at once cement their commercial and artistic reputations as "rebel" filmmakers, while also streamlining academic-interpretive consensus around the principles of the so-called "modern" horror film. As Hutchings explains:

> According to most histories of horror…it was not until the 1970s that the transition from old or "classic" to something more modern was finally clinched. It was the 1970s that saw the proliferation and consolidation of new attitudes and approaches which seemed more aggressive and ruthless but also more artistically ambitious and socially engaged than what had gone before in the genre. No wonder then that some horror critics and historians have come to view the 1970s as a 'golden age' of horror production, as a period when the genre acquired—if only for a while and only intermittently—some maturity and artistic integrity as well as a sense of social responsibility. (2004: 170)

In this sense, critical discourse surrounding torture porn—as a moment of resurgence and "unparalleled inventiveness"—recapitulates some of the very same reception mechanisms as seventies horror auteurism itself, conventionally defined as the "golden age" period when the genre witnessed an equally sustained and productive phase of creativity and ferment and subsequently acquired its own "customized 'movie brats'" (Hutchings, 2004: 181).

On the other hand, these canonical statements also afford publicists, distributors, and genre critics alike the chance to advance broader rhetorical claims about the overall cultural and political significance of horror films, while also providing ideological assessments of the genre that compare and contrast earlier cycles with contemporary trends. Thus, if 1970s horror films are said to constitute a subversive political response

to the cultural and ideological situation of the Vietnam/Watergate era,[14] present-day torture movies are likewise claimed to present a similar type of social commentary—on the prevalence of global terrorist violence and the American media's fascination with that violence (e.g., Edelstein, 2006; Gordon, 2006); the increased public knowledge of images of torture vis-à-vis Abu Ghraib (Murray, 2008); the imperial anxieties and anticipated blowback stemming from the so-called war on terror (Douthat, 2007; Liden and Rimanelli, 2006); or, more generally, as an allegorical moment "designed to assault the target audience's aesthetic tastes and political belief systems" (Lowenstein, 2011; see also Hollyfield, 2009; Middleton, 2010). Here, intertextual references to the previous cycle of "transgressive and powerful" horror of the 1970s are offered up as viable justification, not only for the increasing levels of "extreme gore and horrendous violence" in contemporary horror films (Jones, 2006), but also for their progenitors as "an emerging and collegial band of horror auteurs—unofficially known as the Splat Pack—who are given almost free rein and usually more than $10 million by studios or producers to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies" (Keegan, 2006). Indeed, if they get it right, "there's a fervid fan base, composed mostly of people far too young to take death seriously, who will send those movies into almost gruesome profitability" (ibid).

[14] This sentiment is best encapsulated by Robin Wood (2003: 118), who writes: "The great period of the American horror film was the period of Watergate and Vietnam: the genre required a moment of ideological crisis for its full significance to emerge, the immediate cultural breakdown calling into question far more than a temporary political situation."

Accordingly, these trends, which are by and large market-driven, and thus motivated by changes in industrial organization and distributor packaging,[15] demonstrate both the usefulness and star potential of horror auteurism as a critical and commercial strategy. Meanwhile, they can also be viewed as part of a concerted effort on behalf of emergent filmmakers looking to respond to, and manage, potentially problematic discourses surrounding their horror-exploitation films; as Darren Lynn Bousman, fellow Splat Pack member and director *Saw II* and *Saw III*, explained to *Variety*: "Only a filmmaker can eloquently say why someone is getting tortured or massacred. It's no just exploitative" (quoted in McClintock, 2006). Bousman was attempting to explain his authorial rationale to the MPAA ratings board, which was prepared to ticket his film *Saw II* with an NC-17 rating for a set piece which, as Bousman himself admits, was deliberately over-the-top: "Take the scene of a naked woman being tortured. The ratings board just saw torture and nudity, they didn't see raw emotion. I, as the filmmaker, could explain that. At the end of the day, they agreed" (quoted in ibid). Indeed, *Saw II* would go on to earn box office distinction as one of the most brutally violent entries in what is now regarded as most lucrative franchise in horror movie history (*BBC Mobile*, 2010). Accordingly, discourses of authorship serve, in these contexts, as a means of legitimating a film's more "disturbing" qualities, while at the same time authenticating these qualities on the basis of perceived artistic merits and social allegorical dimensions.

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[15] For instance, the horror DVD market (on which more below) readily encourages the idea that "more gore" is a useful mode of product differentiation and sub-cultural distinction (Tucker, 2006).

Strategies of Authentication

The Zeitgeist Made 'Em Do It!

(Nelson, 2007)

Andrew Tudor has remarked upon this tendency to align specific genre periods with socially allegorical concerns, noting how, for instance, "the simplest and most frequent claims [made about horror films] are those which focus on clearly apparent thematic features…treating them as articulations of felt social concerns of their time." For Tudor, thematic links to cultural context provide the basis for understanding not only what horror films "mean" but how different cycles may or may not appeal to different historical audiences: because horror affords its users the opportunity to come to grips with socially specific "landscapes of fear," it is incumbent upon critics to ask "in what sorts of social circumstances this material could be made to make sense by its consumers" (2002: 52-3). Along these lines, Peter Hutchings describes the entertainment value of horror films in terms of "the imaginative work done by the filmmakers" who seek to make horror attractive to an audience, and therefore must "address what they perceive to be the lived experiences, fears and anxieties of that audience, with the terms of that engagement both aesthetic and ideological" (2002: 121). In both of these formulations, authorial status dovetails with socially specific allegorical concerns, as critical nuances of thematic reading and social context play a role in outlining a director's cinematic vision.

For so-called Splat Pack films, this means attaining cultural significance on the basis of the political and social upheavals going on around them. Indeed it is important

to see that these social allegorical dimensions get articulated to cement both broader political and ideological readings of the genre as well as the particular brand of nostalgic auteurism that supports it. In other words, they function as strategies of authentication, which demonstrate the "inter-textual relay" (Neale 2000: 2) of horror film authorship and critical perspectives. Indeed, because the critical investiture of horror film authorship is directly tied to the cultural politics of oppositional taste and its associative aesthetics of transgression (Jancovich et al., 2003: 1-3), which seeks to push the boundaries of graphic representation in the pursuit of "deeper" meaning, self-styled Splat Pack auteurs might be most effectively positioned as culturally significant authors to the extent they can be said to utilize generic materials to tap into our deepest anxieties.[16]

At this point, it is useful to recall Eli Roth and his films (*Cabin Fever* [2002] *Hostel* [2005] and *Hostel: Part II* [2007]), which are not only credited with initiating the torture cycle (Jones, 2006), but also earning the director himself significant notoriety as the public figurehead of the Splat Pack. As such, Roth becomes an ideal example of horror auteurism's critical and industrial utility. Indeed, partly as a result of the director's relationship with independent distributor Lionsgate, which is the brand behind Roth's two *Hostel* movies, and whose prior acquisition of *Cabin Fever* in 2002 led the studio to significantly expand its commercial territory while specializing in extreme American horror films (Boucher, 2007), both Lionsgate and Roth have been able to transform the business of selling ultraviolent horror movies into an art form all its own. As one former

[16] As MMI Chief Curator David Schwartz explained, "The proliferation and popularity of horror films make it clear this is a genre worth taking seriously…these films contain disturbing, often shocking images, but they are powerful precisely because they tap into our deepest anxieties."

Lionsgate executive put it, “Good horror movies don’t need stars, and they don’t need special effects. They earn their scares through intelligent writing and great up-and-coming directors” (Ortenberg, quoted in Keegan, 2006). Consequently, Lionsgate has taken measures to utilize Roth and other Splat Pack members (most notably, Rob Zombie) in their self claims to film authorship, as an industrial category by which to increase brand name cache and market value.

At the same time, these two figures (Roth and Zombie), both auteurs of commerce in Corrigan’s sense of term, illustrate the particular brand of social agency that accompanies horror film authorship as a distinct category of critical and popular reception. To wit, these directors are defined by their “attempts to monitor and rework the institutional manipulations of the [horror] auteurist position within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry,” and hence their authorial logic runs up against the conventional idea of “expressive coherency” or singular auteurist vision (Corrigan, 2003: 101) as a commanding feature of horror film renaissance. At the same time, these filmmakers are constrained by the strategies of authentication that, at least partly, regulate their individual performances of horror film authorship. In other words, these directors occupy a position that encompasses myriad auteur personae: for example, there is evidence within these director’s public performance of an entrepreneurial or business-oriented self; a socially engaged mode of horror film authorship; a progressive, visionary self; a radical and transgressive artistic persona; and, finally, a populist, fan-motivated agency that is reflected in discourses of sub-cultural distinction. In short, horror film authorship gets splintered in these contexts insofar as it permits different agencies (ibid:

110 n. 6) to emerge and take form under the horror auteur category. Taken together, however, these different agencies make it possible to not only focus on the shared similarities of horror film authorship but also their performative differences, insofar as these differences mark the institutional manipulations of the horror auteurist position.

My choice of these two figure thus turns on each one's discourse about himself as an auteur-director; that is, their articulations of motivation, desire, and historical influence, which are frequently dramatized in television and press interviews, film reviews and magazine profiles, studio publicity and DVD extras, and which are mobilized in strategic ways in order to create a distinct authorial persona. However, as these two case studies will show, while both directors rely a great deal upon intertextual references to the 1970s in order to make themselves into "real" horror film directors, the manifestation of that agency ultimately diverges in how these references are invoked so to authenticate different techniques of authorship: in the case of Roth, a self-styled master of the genre, who takes great inspiration from the "realistic brutality" and social commitments of seventies horror auteurs; in the case of Zombie, a subversive shock rocker turned splatter-gore enthusiast who proclaims no interest being socially responsible other than to his regular customers of hardcore horror-exploitation fans. In both cases, though, auteurist accounts demonstrate not only the need to portray these and other Splat Pack directors' authorial interventions and performance as culturally significant, but also as particularly cogent instances of canonically inspired radicalism and authenticity; that is, as attempts to "revive the intensity of the genre as it was at its most powerful in the '70s" (Alexandre Aja, quoted in McIntyre, 2009).

“A Gore Merchant Isn’t Born, He’s Made:” The Case of Eli Roth

> The new films are very similar to those in the 1970s in that they are merciless with the audience. I think they are a cultural way of coming to terms with the horrible realities of everyday life.
>
> Wes Craven (quoted in Zinoman, 2007)

> People say, ‘How can you put that stuff out there in the world?’ Well, it’s already out there.
>
> Eli Roth (quoted in Keegan, 2006)

Perhaps more than any other member of the Splat Pack, Eli Roth has served as the promotional mouthpiece of the next generation of horror directors insofar as they are represented as the rightful inheritors of the horrific legacy of the seventies American Nightmare. Likewise, Roth’s professed view of horror film’s therapeutic value serves equally well in shoring up the legacy of great horror films and their directors, who not only “delve deeply into our darkest fears and desires” but also respond critically on the level of socially allegorical concerns. Indeed, Wes Craven’s idea that graphically violent horror films elicit real-world fears and anxieties, while also simultaneously alleviating those anxieties vis-à-vis the “horrible realities of everyday life,” is echoed throughout countless interviews with Roth, in which he tirelessly proclaims “I think these films help people deal with the real world” (quoted in Boucher, 2007).

At the same time, and despite his public denials to the contrary, Roth has made a name for himself by rehashing the inventional role of the torture porn aesthetic; as Roth told British movie critic Alan Jones in an early profile of the new wave horror directors: “I don’t want to sound egotistical, but *Cabin Fever* was one of the first of the new

distressing rash that didn't hold back and put full-frontal gore back on the agenda" (quoted in Jones, 2006: 104). The result, as Roth puts it, "has been fucking bloody, full-on stories where nice people die" (ibid). Indeed, if there's one thing that unites Roth and his fellow Splat Packers, it is the idea that hyper-explicit violence and unsmiling gore constitutes the essence of the genre: "None of us think it's necessary to make our characters jerks before killing them off like in your typical Hollywood product. Our movies are dark and grim; they're not trying to be funny or self-referential" (ibid). Hence Roth's efforts to reshape his marketable image as "gore-teur" among serious film critics becomes complicated in light of his outspoken commercial motivations: "I try to make the films as layered as possible by incorporating my own social commentary…But at the end of the day I know that what people are paying for are those kill scenes. They have to get their money's worth…those scenes are the reason I'm making the movie" (quoted in Mitchell, 2007: 46).

Thus, two—not altogether contradictory—strategies can be identified in Roth's auteur persona: on the one hand, his desire to negotiate a position among elite viewers, which seeks to highlight the "genuine trauma" of horror movie violence as an indicator of social significance and generic heritage; while on the other hand, his commercially motivated efforts to market films to a particular taste demographic of gore-hungry consumers, which leads to broader rhetorical claims regarding horror as a distinct taste culture. In both cases, the strategies of Roth's auteurist performance involve both making and marketing films that simultaneously present "pitch-black grittiness" and hardcore violence as a function of self-consciously artistic concerns. For this reason,

Roth's authentication strategies provide an intriguing case study of how "a gore merchant isn't born, he's made" (Boucher, 2007), and the forces that influence that process of critical and industrial positioning.

The first of these strategies (i.e., emphasizing the real world impact of graphic violence) seeks to address Roth's auteur credentials as a legitimate filmmaker, usually through canonical citation of political auteur forerunners, but also through reference to seventies horror movies as a form of political commentary more generally, which explicitly seeks to emphasize the real world impact of graphic violence as a form of social critique. On the one hand, this strategy involves reference to auteurism as a remnant of progressive genre filmmaking. As Roth explained to cult horror aficionado and film scholar Xavier Mendik (2003) during the press tour for his directorial debut *Cabin Fever*:

> When I was writing this movie I kept a statement in front of me that read that 'All of my heroes have failed me.' What I really meant by that is that all the best horror directors either left the genre, or the ones that remained really seemed to lose their direction. It's really depressing to see so many of my favourite directors from the seventies making movies that are so out of touch with anything that is scary or that modern audiences can relate to.

On the other hand, Roth's authorial logic turns on the notion that extreme violence and gore is not simply about stylistic innovation and dedication to the genre, but that groundbreaking despair and brutality can also be interpreted for their radical political meanings. This gesture ultimately positions Roth's films as radical and progressive insofar as their "total negativity" (Wood, 2003: 82) cannot be recuperated into the dominant ideology.

In other words, Roth's authorial logic as a socially responsible filmmaker turns on narratives of authentication that construe the horror film as a conscious aesthetic reaction to the political moment; partly, this involves staking a claim for horror films as a source of vicarious and visceral pleasure, and partly it involves organizing that pleasure so as to remain at odds with the dominant media representations. Here is Roth in a television interview with Fox News' Neil Cavuto:

> Roth: The truth of the matter is in times of terror people want to be terrified but in a safe environment. Cause with all the things that are going on in the world—certainly with the war in Iraq and the horrible, horrible aftermath of Hurricane Katrina where our government did nothing to help anybody—you want to scream. And there really is no place in society where you can just go and scream at the top of your lungs and get it out of your system. And horror movies really provide that safe environment to do that.
>
> Cavuto: You're making a bit of a leap, Eli, to associate some political motives here, right?
>
> Roth: Oh no, there's no leap here whatsoever. I mean, if you talk to all the horror directors of the 70s, they say that they were making films as a reaction to watching Vietnam on television. And I can tell you right now, that Americans feel like their security is their army and their money. And we're in this war now, and you feel like it's never going to end, and the people we're fighting don't care about our money, they're going to cut your head off. Everybody's clicked on the Internet and seen those videos of people being decapitated, and it's really terrifying. And our army, which used to be so strong and so powerful—you feel like it's really disorganized right now; it really feels like a bunch of scared kids who just want to go home. And you can see all these generals that are coming out now that are saying, "Get Rumsfeld the hell out of there." And I think that the horror movies that are being made are definitely a reaction to this fear. (*You're World with Neil Cavuto*, 2006)

What is evident here is that canonical accounts of the genre's socially meaningful violence can also be used to substantiate claims as to the social impact and ideological usefulness of the genre as a form of vicarious pleasure. Indeed, as Roth is fond of pointing out, "Horror movies are the only place you can go and scream at the top of your

lungs;" however, this claim only becomes *politically* significant when considered in light of preexisting canonical frameworks: "Americans aren't scared of the guy with the hockey mask and chain saw…torture is on everyone's mind because of the Iraq War and terrorism. It's the same sort of thing that was said about previous generations of horror—that these movies are a projection of our collective unconscious" (quoted in Roston, 2007). In this sense, the process of authorization rests on the assumption that great horror films emerge and take form in direct response to periods of social and national crisis

However, establishing the authenticity of horror films in terms of heightened graphic violence also becomes, at the same time, a way to affirm a professed authorial relationship to a vaunted heritage of 1970s horror cinema, as well as a director's avowed commitment "to bring back really violent, bloody, disgusting, and sick horror movies" (quoted in Horowitz, 2007). This can be viewed as an attempt to win cultural legitimacy on behalf of both serious film critics and horror fans alike, as the act of genre-recognition (i.e., of identifying "bloody, disgusting, and sick movies") is transformed into a conventional process of drawing distinctions between different types of horrorific violence, and in particular those genre films that are socially meaningful and complex, and those that are relatively simplistic and socially meaningless:

> What was so important about 1970s horror was the fact that the horrors of real life provided the motivation [for] its most terrifying and controversial films…At the core of these films was always the most basic and disturbing question: what is scary? There was never any jokes or humour in these movies, because there was nothing funny about Vietnam, there was nothing funny about race riots, and there was nothing funny about death or violence. (Roth, quoted in Mendik, 2003)

The reference to jokes and humor and their being "nothing funny about death or violence" introduces Roth's second strategy of authentication, the construction of horror film audiences as a particular oppositional taste culture: that is to say, in Roth's words, "horror fans want their movies horrific, not safe and PG-13" (Roth, 2007), and hence focusing on more graphically violent aspects in all their seriousness becomes a way to establish a rapport and identification with audiences as self-aware, while enacting that rapport through techniques of personal testimony: "I know that when fans go to see a film like 'Hostel,' they want [to see] the hardcore scenes that your parents don't want you to see. I too want the film to be very scary, and very violent, but without going overboard. I learned very early on that if you have too much gore, suddenly your film turns into a comedy" (Roth, 2007). Here Roth's insistence that too much gore can undercut genuine scares (and thus turn comedic) is an important part of the way in which he and other Splat Pack directors work to construct, and distinguish, their films from previous cycles. In particular, the fundamental point that horror movie audiences "want their movies unapologetically horrific" (Roth, quoted in Jones, 2006: 103) can be read as an attempt to differentiate Splat Pack films from less sophisticated approaches to gore and other explicit modes of horror film narrative: "There's far too much terror-lite around simply reliant on CGI blood and sound effects. That's too easy," explains Roth's Splat Pack associate Neil Marshall (*The Descent* [2005]). "The hard part is maintaining the tension, containing it and making you care about the characters" (quoted in Jones, 2006: 104).

More generally, though, the emphasis on graphic violence as a strategy of cultural distinction operates to construct and maintain hierarchies of horror in two ways: First, privileging films of violent excess becomes a way to define the genre (and its taste culture) in contra-distinction to the supposedly mainstream, inauthentic forms of commercialized violence associated with the post-Scream slasher cycle (cf. Jancovich, 2000): those films which, as Roth puts it, "reduce horror to nothing more than parody or punch lines" (quoted in Mendik, 2003). Here the valorization of horror as a sophisticated, thought-provoking and intelligent genre turns on a strategy which seeks to identify the weaknesses of the postmodern teen slasher cycle on the basis of its perceived humor and tongue-in-cheek irony; by contrast, films associated with the subsequent torture porn cycle identify the value and significance of horror movie violence in using generic materials as a form of social criticism.

This in turn becomes a way of injecting commercial horror film trends with renewed interest and a veneer of radicalism, especially at the level of popular reception; as *Newsweek* summed up in a 2006 article on the Splat Pack, for example, "Every decade or so, horror gets hot in Hollywood. This latest shockwave, though, is larger—and much more grotesque. You could sew together a whole new person from all the severed body parts in the 'Saw' movies, 'Hostel' and Fox Searchlight's remake of Wes Craven's 'The Hills Have Eyes.' It's not jokey violence, either" (Gordon, 2006). Here an emphasis on graphic violence serves to effectively distinguish the torture porn cycle from prior entries in the genre, while at the same time working to elevate torture porn's altogether

"grotesque" style of genre filmmaking above and beyond the slickly produced features associated with "the last horror fad in 1996" (i.e., the *Scream* franchise).

Meanwhile, implicit in some of these reviews is also the idea that the latest shockwave has managed to succeed in differentiating realist horror cinema from exploitation movies, chiefly through the former's ability to effectively distance viewers from depictions of violence and gore, and thus *comment* on that violence in a manner that transcends generic norms. Consequently, if earlier trends in the genre are said to have used gore primarily as a way "to freak out audiences" (Roston, 2007), the "next generation of horror directors [purportedly] hose down the genre with lashings of old-school carnage" (Jones, 2006); to wit, they "take horror back to its transgressive roots" (McIntyre, 2009), drawing violence back to "the dark cynicism that came out of films like *Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*" (Russell, 2003); and in doing so, they also purportedly "help us deal with the blood of the real world" (Boucher, 2007) via "innovative filmmaking…that rises above the mindless slasher sequels of the '80s or such predictable teen-star killfests of the '90s as *I Know What You Did Last Summer*" (Keegan, 2006).

As a result, these and other instances of auteurist marketing and reception demonstrate the promotional role of Splat Pack films, not only in distinguishing emergent commercial trends, but also in potentially elevating the splatter gore sub-genre beyond the standards of aesthetic discrimination and critical distaste. Indeed, they indicate the extent to which the concerted efforts of Roth and other Splat Pack members might attune popular and critical reception to the preferred aesthetic norms of social realism in order to

shun the label of exploitation, and thus position horrific violence of the Splat Pack in such a way that it cannot be read as being merely gratuitous or pleasure-seeking. As Roth told *The Independent* in 2007: "The style of violence I go for is very realistic. Even in the *Saw* movies, there's still an element of fantasy in those films…But the thing about *Hostel* [Roth's follow-up to *Cabin Fever*] is that it's made in a much more realistic way" (quoted in Mottram, 2007). Similarly, in conversation with film critic Elvis Mitchell for *Interview* magazine, Roth explained his penchant for realistic brutality as a means of "using the format of exploitation to make movies that are smarter than exploitation," and thus using exploitation-level violence as a mere pretext for advancing an altogether more significant and socially meaningful commentary: "*Hostel* was disguised as an exploitation film, but it was really more a film about the way people exploit each other." When pressed by Mitchell to admit that this stratagem of tying social concerns to a horror plot might in itself be perceived as a "classic" exploitation tactic, Roth countered by saying:

> I think if you make a pure exploitation movie, you have to have more than just exploitation. There has to be some other level that people connect with. That's what happened with *Hostel*: I'd set out to make a scary, sick movie, and it wound up hitting different chords, like American's fear of other cultures and its feelings of superiority, as well as people's need to control. So in a way I think it actually does the film a disservice to call it pure exploitation. (quoted in Mitchell, 2007: 48)

Indeed, in describing his films as more than just exploitation, Roth stakes a claim for authorship status on the basis of favorable critical reception, and notably his auteurist positioning within the art world as a filmmaker "engaging in a national debate about the morality of torture" (Liden and Rimanelli, 2006). As Roth commented to *Variety*

magazine in a trade industry report of the torture porn trend: “I find the whole notion of torture porn insulting. People assume these are movies made by idiots for idiots. They’re not. These films are very subversive. *Art Forum* magazine said that ‘Hostel’ was the smartest film in terms of being a metaphor for the Iraq war and America’s attitude overseas” (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 34). Thus, Roth’s strategies of authentication bring into relief the tensions involved in Roth’s auteur persona itself: for example, as both “gore merchant” and self-affirmed “socially responsible” filmmaker (Boucher, 2007), Roth’s public performance of authorship seek to address a relatively strict cultural distinction that is rather common within horror film culture, namely, between commercial-exploitation cinema and auteurist-culturally relevant cinema (cf. Mathijs, 2005). In doing so, Roth forwards an image of himself that aspires to bridge these two camps, mainly identifying himself as a popular commercial filmmaker who recognizes, on the one hand, that “audiences absolutely determine taste [and] right now they want their horror movies unapologetically horrific” (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103), while at the same time improving his reputation as a reputable, serious artist among film critics and journalists.

This dual auteur marketing and reception framework, as we see, has significantly shaped critical and popular reactions to Roth’s films; however, it is within the context of public debates over torture porn that the perceived cultural relevance of these films becomes especially evident, as it remains the principal criterion upon which Roth’s films are judged, regardless of the critic’s overall stated endorsements or reservations. Indeed, in one sense or another, Roth’s films are always already prefigured as “cutting edge”

reflections of the times, and hence the graphic nature of his movies can either be recuperated according to preferred aesthetic norms and frameworks of social realism or faulted on the basis of a director's failed allegorical vision (e.g., Douthat, 2007; Lee, 2006 and 2007; Murray, 2008; Hollyfield, 2009; McIntyre, 2009; Middleton, 2010; Lowenstein, 2011).

Either way, however, this type of authorial self-fashioning that guides Roth's self-representations (i.e., what Roth says he actually has to do in order to be an author) invariably informs the review aesthetics of publications like the *New York Times*, which proclaims that "Mr. Roth's gory spectacles are too calculated to deliver the transgressive jolts they so obviously seek (Lee, 2006). In such cases, critical denunciation hinges on the idea that Roth's films are too self-consciously aware, affected and pretentious to achieve political and cultural relevance as viable instances of aesthetic transgression. That is to say, they tend to treat "low" genre materials in too lofty a manner, and hence end up draining their "transgressive jolts." Accordingly, unfavorable critics of Roth's films will often spotlight their "stark realism" (Roston, 2007), "prosthetic virtuosity" (Holcomb, 2006), "pioneering nastiness" (Patterson, 2007), and "nasty, misanthropic imagery" (Cochrane, 2007) at the expense of their more social allegorical and political readings. Meanwhile, the problem of pretension in horror films, which, as Jancovich (2010) has argued, goes back at least as far as the 1940s cycle of psychological or "quality" horror films, and can be seen to illustrate broader questions of taste and cultural capital, also inevitably inflect issues of horror film authorship. Put another way, if seriousness is often seen as a problem in relation to horror films, and if this is due to

middlebrow associations with pretension—that is, with “an aspiration to cultural authority that threatens to disturb cultural categories [of legitimate taste] rather than as authentic engagement with social concerns” (ibid: 64)—then we would do well to consider Roth’s point that “the term ‘torture porn’ genuinely says more about the critic [in their] limited understanding of horror movies” (quoted in Capone, 2007) than it does about the inherent meanings and values of so-called torture porn films themselves.

However, the fact that these films can also be positioned in ways that privilege extreme violence and gore as authentic examples of the genre, which are supposedly opposed to the “inauthentic” commercialized products of mainstream culture, suggests that filmmakers might also self-consciously adopt the stance of a radicalized subculture in order to position themselves within these struggles over social significance and between different taste formations. Indeed, they might utilize authorship status as a way to emphasize gory spectacle and graphic forms of torture as a way to refresh the genre in accordance with cult film sensibilities (cf. Kendrick, 2009: 153-63). As a result, whereas Splat Pack filmmakers like Roth often present themselves in direct opposition to the machinations of the industry—at least as far as its exploitation heritage is concerned—other directors such as Rob Zombie predicate their authorial discourse on tapping into this remerging horror-exploitation market, insofar it invites the sort of paracinematic mode of horror film authorship associated with the social performance of subcultural distinction (see Sconce, 1995; Jancovich, 2002).

"Art is Not Safe:"[17] The Case of Rob Zombie

Jeffery Sconce has argued that violent excess and gore is a key element in the paracinematic aesthetic, and that, in particular, "paracinematic culture celebrates excess as a product of cultural as well as aesthetic deviance" (1995: 373, 392). By paracinema, Sconce means to indicate not only the "confrontational tastes" of "a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history" (ibid: 372), but also the reading protocol that underpins this "aesthetic of vocal confrontation" (ibid: 374). In other words, this account sets up a struggle for distinction between the deviant aesthetic values associated with "trash" or cult film audiences and the mainstream, commercial cinema: "cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy, explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents" (ibid: 381). Paracinema and its reading protocol thus depends on the production of cultural distinctions through oppositional taste, including the notion of authenticity, which as Jancovich (2002) points out, is used to confer value upon the subcultural leanings of paracinematic audiences and the films around which they congregate.

[17] This is reportedly what Zombie told an actor on the set of his film, *The Devil's Rejects*, after the actor became so traumatized by one of the film's torture scenarios that he threatened to quit the production (see Edelstein, 2006; see also "30 Days in Hell: The Making of the Devil's Rejects"). Whether fact or mythological fiction, as I will show, it remains a telling maxim used to describe Zombie's auteurist image as both radical "shock auteur" and "modern American horror's most eccentric and surprising filmmaker" (Seitz, 2007).

This line of thought, then, is useful in considering Zombie's authorial performance and construction as "the director of undead excess" (Elliot, 2011). Indeed, even though Zombie's auteur-stardom is due partly to his critically acclaimed directorial debut *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003)—an avowed homage to 1970s horror/exploitation films—and critical and commercial follow-up success, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), he has also acquired public prominence as the most visible member of the Splat Pack, directing not only a slew of torture porn features and horror franchise remakes (e.g., *Halloween* [2007], *Halloween II* [2009], and *The Blob* [in development]), but also regularly appearing across a host of transindustrial ancillary media venues (e.g., late night talk shows, cult TV programs, video games, comic books, action sporting events, and, of course, rock music videos). Additionally, Zombie is only one of a growing number of contemporary auteur-directors active in the world of television and commercial advertising; and though his contemporaries may be loath to admit the fact, placing one's stamp in a historically devalued medium like television evidently enhances one's auteur status as a horror director with a signature "edge" (Kinon, 2010). Indeed, Zombie's trans-media presence, like other Splat Pack members, effectively works to consolidate the authenticity of his constructed authorial persona as a brand unto itself, thus suggesting his inscription within what Sconce refers to as mainstream US culture.

And yet the fact that Zombie's authorial logic turns on discourses of paracinematic distinction and subcultural authenticity (i.e., an overt and publicly recognized artistic persona that is "darker, spookier, scarier, and more dangerous with a lot more edge" [Kinon, 2010]) suggests that the mainstreaming of horror film authorship,

in this sense, *amplifies*, rather than diminishes, its salience as a subcultural category. That is, "addressing the potential cult status of an auteur" as a commercial strategy (Corrigan, 2003: 98) takes on renewed critical and cultural significance in the authorial context of Rob Zombie, who is himself a brand, and who is continually reflecting on his authorial persona as one that does not conform to dominant commercial styles: "juggling the mainstream with the cultish world has always been where I'm at" (Jabcuga, 2005). This is a contradictory notion only insofar as one mistakenly assumes the antagonistic relationship between "authentic" subcultures and commercial culture is one of actual independence and autonomy. However, whereas media culture now allows for a host of music, movies, and other media forms that ostensibly deviate from the commercial mainstream, while at the same time injecting that market with alternative, "cutting-edge" lifestyle appeal, authorial brand-names like Zombie remain central in crafting horror's subcultural appeal to a niche market ripe for exploitation.

A brief consideration of Zombie's auteur persona, therefore, can demonstrate the critical and industrial utility of categories like subcultural authenticity and distinction, insofar as these concepts remain a function of cult or deviant tastes, but also as they preserve the construction of horror film culture more generally as something disreputable and subversive. Indeed, as Sconce's (1995: 371) work indicates, drawing on Bourdieu, "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others." Accordingly, one might say that paracinematic culture is at once a subcultural formation, opposing commercial Hollywood and the mass culture that ostensibly supports it, but also a site for exercising multiple taste distinctions

along the lines of rarity and exclusivity—cultural materials that are ostensibly not for everybody (Jancovich, 2002: 309, 319).

Thus, it is a reading protocol that depends on multiple exclusions, including exclusions *within* a particular genre; for instance, "fans of trash horror other and devalue slasher-cycle horror as overly commercial or nonunderground. What counts as 'real' or 'authentic' horror for these paracinema fans is defined against 'mainstream' horror, but this latter category is a profoundly mobile signifier" (Hills, 2007: 220, 224). Hence, the difference between real or authentic horror and mainstream, commercial (and "inauthentic") horror manifests itself in struggles for cultural distinction between and among fans of the genre. Not only are these distinctions, then, a product of selective film markets, which are themselves defined by a sense of difference from, and opposition to, the mainstream commercial cinema (Jancovich, 2002: 317); they are also simultaneously based on deeply contradictory conceptions of the horror genre—as, for example, taboo-breaking and subversive, while also tending toward "commercialized, sanitized tripe" (Jancovich, 2000: 25). The oppositions between supposedly mainstream and cult horror films are, therefore, crucial moves in the game of subcultural distinction.

Nonetheless, whereas adherents like Zombie often privilege extreme gore movies "that aren't for everybody" (quoted in Keegan, 2006), and hence more authentic than "the mindless slasher sequels of the '80s or…predictable teen-star killfests of the '90s" (ibid), they also rely on notions of film art and authorship to identify and define the supposedly authentic versions of the horror genre they discuss. Furthermore, the ostensibly oppositional stance that supposedly defines horror film culture as a product of "intelligent

writing and great up-and-coming directors" (ibid), is not only key to its status as a form of counter-cinema, but also operates as a means by which genre filmmakers themselves attempt to distinguish their thoroughly commercial work as Other to the mainstream (Jancovich, 2002). In this sense, then, Zombie's iconic status as "rocker-turned-shock-auteur" seeks to authenticate the horror film genre as a category that is both radical and transgressive, while also being artistically distinct and aesthetically valuable.

However, unlike other Splat Pack filmmakers, such as Eli Roth—who, as we saw, also tended to favor films of violent excess and realistic brutality as a form of artistic and cultural distinction—Zombie's authorship status and auteurist performance involves an altogether more open, opportune engagement with horror movies as a category of exploitation cinema, which is first and foremost about shock value, as opposed to meaningful social commentary.

For example, in response to hot button issues of sexualized violence in horror movies, which are the frequent target of MPAA ratings board censure, and which, therefore, have become precious as indicators of subcultural extremity and authenticity, Zombie told *Variety* in 2006: "My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don't want it to be fun. When they [the MPAA] would suggest certain cuts, I said, 'Look, are you trying to make it OK by making it less horrible. It should be horrible and uncomfortable" (quoted in McClintock, 2006). This is echoed in an anecdote relayed by *Time* magazine, which describes Zombie's approach to offering advice and managing controversy vis-à-vis other Splat Pack filmmakers in order to pass muster with the MPAA: "I tell them to talk to the MPAA as a filmmaker…Explain why the extreme

violence is necessary to tell the story in a way that's more socially responsible" (quoted in Keegan 2006). However, in the next sentence, it is revealed that "he doesn't actually care what's socially responsible" (ibid); and elsewhere, he responds to an interviewer's question about what his film *The Devil's Rejects* "says about violence in society:" "It doesn't really say anything, in a sense. I don't really want to say anything because I like leaving movies up to everyone's interpretation" (quoted in Cavagna, 2005).

Accordingly, Zombie's authorship strategies construe a different artistic persona than Roth's, one that is predicated equally on ostensibly pushing the boundaries of the genre, but in the name of cult pleasures and great art rather than authentic engagement with social concerns. This is reflected, for example, in the discourse surrounding Zombie's historical pedigree and generic heritage an auteur-director "operating under the influence of '70s drive-in cinema" (quoted in Tobias, 2006); in his representation as a genre filmmaker who understands the "unique beauty of a properly lighted viscera shot" (quoted in Keegan, 2006); and in his self-portrayal as a rebel auteur that has been misunderstood (and routinely dismissed) by the major Hollywood studios, only to be subsequently incorporated: "They don't know what to do with me" (quoted in McClintock, 2006). At the same time, his performance consistently shuttles between these two poles of artistic and commercial distinction.

Thus, while Zombie's authorial logic is, on the one hand, often identified with "the flat-out nasty horror films of the 1970s" (McDonagh, 2003), his perceived undue affection for that period is at the same time presented, not as a strategy of political commitment, but one of artistic devotion and auteurist nostalgia:

> I think what sets that decade apart for me is that those movies were made in a time where the director was key. The director was the god on set with the vision. And I think as the '80s crept in, it became more about actors and gimmicks and studios…I still think the '70s was the last great time where films were being made for the sake of film and not for the sake of money. Even though, of course, people were always trying to make money, it seemed like art was still important. And I think now that's what sets those films apart, no matter what type of film we're taking about. (quoted in Tobias 2005)

This reiterates the first main strategy that I identify with Zombie's mode of auteurist performance: his attempt to qualify his own work by placing it in direct inter-textual proximity to legitimate film culture vis-à-vis a demonstration of his compatibility with it. Crucially, this takes the form distinguishing the cult pleasures of horror through an association with films already deemed aesthetically and legitimately valuable *regardless* of genre affiliations. Unlike Roth, then, whose auteur persona remains indebted to critical debates over the perceived social significance exclusively of *horror* film violence, Zombie qualifies his predilections in terms of conventional aesthetic norms that transcend the genre's radical political status and auteur canon:

> There was a realism and bleakness to '70s genre cinema…with the nihilism of *Taxi Driver* and the exploitation elements of *Jaws*. When violence is done right it's troubling to watch, which is the way it should be. All the kids blown away by those '70s shockers are old enough to be making movies themselves, and they want to emulate the same effect for today's audiences that those movies had on them. (quoted in Jones 2006: 103)

On the one hand, this strategy is useful for anticipating and preempting critical denunciation: indeed because "these types of movies always seem to get looked upon favorably as they age," the auteur-director is able to employ references to other works by "major" Hollywood filmmakers so as to create his own aesthetic heritage via the sophisticated operations of cultural capital: "Even shit like 'The Wild Bunch' and

'Bonnie and Clyde,' stuff that'll always be on the Top 100 Best Movies of All Time list, got crucified by the critics…But now, it's, like, 'Oh my god, the classic genius of Fill-In-The-Blank!' (quoted in Harris, 2007). For this reason, Zombie's inter-textual references tend to extend beyond Roth's in encompassing "Fill-In-The-Blank" filmmakers who are markedly located outside the modern American horror canon.

On the other hand, Zombie's insistence on violence "done right" emphasizes artistic craftsmanship and agency in a manner that appears to echo the generational aspirations and aesthetic agendas of Roth and other Splat Pack filmmakers ("all the kids blown away by those '70s shockers…old enough to be making movies themselves"), who similarly view horror film violence as a way of refreshing the genre through cycles of graphic intensity. At the same time, however, this intensity becomes a way of conferring agency upon a group of emergent filmmakers eager to make their mark; as Roth put it, "we're all just trying to bring back really bloody, violent, disgusting, sick horror movies" (quoted in Horowitz, 2007). Similarly, Zombie has referred to the cycle of teen slasher films, in particular, as the impetus for his auteurist decision to make horror films a lot grittier and nastier:

> Horror had been watered down to nothing. Studios were just like, 'Oh we'll take fresh-faced teens off TV shows and put them in peril. But not too much peril.' Horror movies had lost all their impact. The movies we're making, you have to feel there are no rules. They're called horror movies for a reason. (quoted in Tucker, 2006)

Again, this corresponds with a paracinematic reading protocol that works to construct teen slasher films as both "a convenient doormat…to compare other, more 'worthy' horror films to (Sconce 1993: 104), but also as a point of contrast for genre fans operating

within a relevant subcultural taste formation (Hills, 2007: 226). In other words, it creates an "intra-generic conflict" (Jancovich, 2000: 28) that works to produce a clear sense of distinction between an authentic subcultural self (i.e., the director) and the inauthentic commercial mainstream interloper (i.e., the studio).

And this opposition, in turn, introduces Zombie's second strategy of authentication: a reiteration of the classic auteur persona defined against the commercial pressures of the Hollywood system. These pressures include, more generally, studio constraints, but also particular genre conventions, target markets, and star requirements. For instance, it is common for Spat Pack directors to assert the legitimacy of their brand in opposition to the teenage audience associated with mainstream horror and network television. As Zombie told the *New York Post* in authenticating his directorial debut *House of 1000 Corpses*: "The film was hugely successful and demonstrated that R-rated horror films were viable products. Atmosphere and blood could pack in a crowd just as well as casting some blonde star from the WB" (Tucker, 2006). Indeed, this latter reference (to "casting some blonde star from the WB") is meant to indicate, not only a form of commercial "selling out," but also to imply the inauthenticity of the previous teen slasher cycle on the basis of its proximity to an overtly mainstream medium.

Furthermore, it suggests an association with the essentially feminized pleasures of "safe" or "watered down" horror films via their articulation to culturally devalued, gendered discourses of stardom and television. Indeed, for directors like Zombie, "real" horror films are implicitly distinguished through gendered ideas of authorship and taste: "I see trailers for movies like (romantic weepies) *The Lake House*, and I think, I would

have to rip my eyes out of my head to sit through that. But that's somebody's favorite movie" (quoted in Keegan, 2006).[18] This raises the issue of whether, and to what extent, horror film authorship is itself an ideologically masculinized subculture. For instance, in their ostensible defiance of commercial, mainstream norms, Splat Pack directors will frequently refer to the "competition for more gore" in expressly gendered terms (as, for example, "a pissing match" [Tucker, 2006] between fan boys) and the studio's attempts to constrain their tendencies for graphic violence as effectively "neutering" their work (Jones, 2006).

Meanwhile, Splat Pack filmmakers will often present themselves in direct opposition to the machinations of the industry, even though the characteristically masculinized, subcultural features of their films are intimately related to commercial trends in genre production. For instance, whereas *Variety* describes the "fresh-faced and enthusiastic helmers" as basically outcasts who "make their movies for indies like Lionsgate or studio genre labels," it also points out that "their films cost next to nothing to make. Yet they mint gold." In short, "they're good investments" (McClintock, 2006). A case in point might be Zombie's first feature film, *House of 1000 Corpses*, which was funded by Universal Studios, shelved for two years (purportedly due to a publicity risk over the film's violence), and finally picked up and distributed by Lionsgate, where it enjoyed commercial success and a healthy afterlife on DVD (Tobias, 2005). Such

[18] Likewise, Roth has declared his of fellow Splat Packers: "Greg McLean, Neil Marshall, Darren Lynn Bousman: these are writer-directors that really have balls" (quoted in Jones, 2006); meanwhile, Bousman has said, "If you get people offended, that's great. That's good news for me. We're doing a horror movie here. This is not Mary Poppins or Kramer vs. Kramer" (quoted in Tucker, 2006).

narratives indicate not only that cult distinction arises from the privileging of ostensibly banned, "unwatchable and/or unobtainable" materials, but also that these distinctions are useful for marketers and the commercial motivations of distributors (Jancovich, 2002: 309, 319).

Indeed, as Roth explained to the *New York Post*, the cult of the Splat Pack is intimately related to the rise of the unrated DVD format: "The unrated DVD changed everything. When a movie is released unrated, it probably triples the audience" (Tucker, 2006). Hence it is the commercial conditions of these films that account for many of their supposedly radical auteurist features; as Roth continued: "'Hostel' came out and it was outselling 'Narnia' at Wal-Mart. So for 'Hostel 2,' Lionsgate is saying, 'Go nuts. We don't want to even do an R-rated DVD" (ibid). Accordingly, subcultural authenticity is maintained here and in other discourses of horror film authorship as a deliberate function of the commercial strategies and marketing logics that aim to underpin these filmmakers' outsider status, as well as their concomitant auteurist intentions to "reinvent the grammar of the genre" (Aja, quoted in McIntyre, 2009).

As a result, these intentions, which claim to run against the desires of studio executives and commercial distributors, can hardly be said to have grown spontaneously out of a shared commitment and/or affinity for making brutally violent horror movies—and they certainly did not develop in opposition to the commercial mainstream; rather, this extreme sub-genre developed out of critical industrial practices of marketing, publicity, and distribution that acted as gatekeepers, serving to classify and distinguish these films in both advertising and public promotion as simultaneously "the hottest (and

most hated) thing in Hollywood" (Brodesser-Akner, 2007). In other words, they grew out of a series of economic and corporate developments, which proved favorable to "an emerging and collegial band of horror auteurs…given almost free rein…by studios or producers to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies" (Keegan, 2006). To the extent these discourses afford directors the opportunity to bid for increased cultural and authorial legitimacy, however, they likewise underscore utility value of horror film authorship as a function of radically ultraviolent filmmaking. However, to the extent authorial agency is *restricted* to this model, the mythos of the horror auteur will remain indebted to the perception that major horror filmmakers are those who rework and amplify genre conventions of violence so as to give their own imprimatur, and thus distinguish themselves in line with the genre's putative masters.

Chapter Three

"Reimagining" the Canon: The Franchise Reboot, DVD Culture, and the Discourse of Contemporary Horror Film Remakes

> The practice [of horror remakes] speaks more to the entertainment industry's artistic laziness and penchant for pre-sold product than to any particular devotion to [genre].
>
> (*Cinefantastique*; quoted in Kermode, 2003: 14)

> Horror cinema devours and regurgitates its own entrails like a hungry cannibal.
>
> (Kermode, 2003: 13)

Indeed, it is arguable the horror genre "abounds with more examples of sequels, prequels, and remakes than any other popular film genre in the history of cinema" (Hand and McRoy, 2007: 1), and that, accordingly, the practice of remaking "in the age of new media and the megapicture is hardly unique in its propensity to revisit previous success" (Heffernan, 2012). However, it is also true that the practice of remaking has emerged as "one of the dominant trends in contemporary Hollywood" (ibid), and that this trend clearly takes on a new valence in the context of the horror movie franchise reboot. Over the last decade, for example, as many as forty-five horror movie remakes have been produced and released theatrically within the United States; this compared to approximately ten remake titles produced and distributed in the same market over the preceding two decades (*Box Office Mojo*, 2012). Moreover, among the most prominent of these titles include a whole slew of studio remakes of (potential) franchise films hailing from the genre's canonical period during the 1970s.[1] As a number of critics have

[1] For a complete list of horror film remakes, 1982-present, see *Box Office Mojo* (2012).

pointed out, these reboots generally arise as a function of brand recognition, wherein studio-distributors look to recycle "little gems" in their corporate libraries as a way to capitalize on a "pre-sold" product (Proctor, 2012: 1; see also Arnett, 2009). In this sense, horror movie remakes are regularly interpreted as by-products of an essentially conservative production environment: formulaic outcomes of a degenerative creative process underwriting the contemporary horror movie industry at large, a condition which is usually defined in terms of self-"cannibalization" and "artistic laziness."

However, as William Proctor (2012: 2) has argued, the "reboot, is essentially, a franchise-specific concept," which is to say that it "seeks to forge a *series* of films, to begin a franchise anew from the ashes of an old or failed property." In this formulation, a film remake is considered a reinterpretation of one specific film, whereas a franchise reboot seeks to undertake a more ambitious process, effectively "re-starting" a whole series of films according to various discursive and inter-textual re-branding strategies (ibid: 4). In short, reboots look to capitalize on the previous (cult) successes of two or more films, while also (and more importantly) mobilizing the more general brand identity and discursive regimes of cultural value and fan attachments that are associated with a given franchise. What is more, reboots apparently seek to disavow any direct narrative and/or stylistic correlation with the franchise in its previous textual iterations; that is, they look to incorporate well-known brand iconography within a new storyline, while also developing certain narrative and mythological components as a way to "invite" new audiences into the fold.

In some cases, reboots even conceive an altogether new series of character and/or plot developments so as to effectively rewrite the history of the franchise itself; as Proctor points out, the recent action-hero cycle of reboots, including films such as *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), *The Amazing Spiderman* (Marc Webb, 2012), *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006), *Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), and even the new James Bond series (*Casino Royale* [Martin Campbell, 2006] and *Quantum of Solace* [Marc Forster, 2008]), essentially seek to respond to previous commercial and/or critical disappointments by "wiping the slate clean," and thus "beginning from year one" with a never-told origin story that seeks to "nullify history and disconnect stagnant or failed product from a new, cinematic experiment" (2012: 1). As a result, properties that typically receive the reboot treatment are those constituting instantly recognizable *brands*, that is, market-tested properties that carry the potential to "revitalize, reinvent, and recycle textual forms" (ibid: 15).

Thus, the reboot is primarily a *discursive* format that aspires to transform (and thereby rejuvenate) a given series of films or an individual franchise by drawing upon multiple inter-textual connections to an original source identity; at the same time, reboots attempt to exert their own autonomy as a function of the *extra-textual* practices of branding and value-generation. In effect, reboots afford their creators (producer-distributors, marketers, directors) the chance to "stamp their mark" on iconic film properties (Proctor, 2012: 7) via the strategic mobilization of specific economic and promotional discourses: which is to say, through the invocation of a given set of industry and reception practices.

Nonetheless, rebooting does not necessarily entail a process of complete aesthetic negation, nor an inter-textual break or discursive challenge to the "aura" of the original brand (pace Arnett, 2009: 3 and to some degree Proctor). On the contrary, as this chapter will show, the anatomy of the contemporary horror film reboot suggests an altogether more "symbiotic" (Verevis, 2006: 17) relationship to its original source material, such that, as regards the case of the *Halloween* franchise for example, critics, fans, and industry personnel often draw attention to earlier canonical versions so as to, in effect, discursively police and uphold equally canonical reading strategies. Within this context, film reboots are neither a "perversion" nor an aesthetic disavowal of some original brand identity, but rather a discursive opportunity to breathe new life into a critically acclaimed property. This practice is in keeping with the logic of film remakes more generally, which as Constantine Verevis (2006) argues, typically invoke the idea of "the original" as a way to augment brand value and relay cultural status; however, as I will argue here, the practice of remaking/rebooting also affords producers and marketers the opportunity to reflexively draw upon concomitant aesthetic frameworks and hierarchies of cultural value that underwrite cinematic competence in a given field (i.e., the horror genre). As a result, remakes work to reflexively incorporate more-or-less "critical" attitudes of canonical literacy, audience connoisseurship and cultural distinction as a way to maintain consumer ties and enhance brand loyalty.

Furthermore, the discourse of horror movie reboots encompasses the presumed generic experience of textual precursors ("the original") *as well as* (and perhaps more significantly) the extra-textual circulation of various canonical frameworks within

specific reception contexts. In the case of *Halloween*, for instance, procedures of canonization and subcultural distinction are clearly at work in the both promotional and audience discourses surrounding the reboot: not only do producers, fans, marketers, and creative personnel share an abiding concern for upholding the canonical legacy and/or authenticity of "the original" as a way of maintaining critical authority and positions of generic expertise; they also locate this appeal according to discursive categories of historical and aesthetic value, which is to say, according to the "generally circulated cultural memory" of its iconic brand-name elements (Verevis, 2006: 144). These discourses in turn underwrite extra-textual practices of marketing, exhibition and reception, which typically frame horror movie remakes as some combination of "updated" genre texts, production cycles, and auteur/star vehicles.

Thus whereas promotional and marketing discourses seek to avow the credentials of the *Halloween* reboot, for instance, in accordance with the values of an alleged "classic" horror film text, the value of the franchise itself, for most fans and critics, appears to reside in "one of the most iconic slasher movie characters of all time in Michael Myers" (Harrington, 2007). Indeed, much like the "rebooted" superheroes of recent action films, Myers furnishes the key reference point for organizing the *Halloween* brand, and, as such, it is his "star image" that arguably serves to negotiate (discursively) the various proprietary and authorial revisions of the *Halloween* franchise. To quote *Halloween* (2007) director Rob Zombie, who explains his rationale in rebooting the series: "I was not really keen on the idea of making a remake…[So] I started envisioning how you could do this. I looked at it and thought Michael Myers is a great character. He's

one of the few modern day iconic monsters. There's only about 4 or 5 modern day monsters. They very rarely pop up and present themselves in a classic way. So, I thought, 'shit I *have* to do this movie'" (*Icons of Fright*, 2007). In this way, the creative personnel behind the *Halloween* reboot sought to not only distance themselves from the tainted cultural connotations of the "remake" as a degraded category, but also to utilize the former label as a means of "re-envisioning" Myers, and thus reactivating the *Halloween* franchise.

By the same logic, the creators of the *Halloween* reboot sought to mobilize the brand within a corporate context defined by the blockbuster superhero franchise (cf. Arnett, 2009). As Zombie explained in a telling comparison with the recent *Batman* films: "Make it different but retain classic elements. The best way I can describe it [i.e., the *Halloween* reboot] is that it's like *Batman Begins*. You're keeping Wayne Manor. You're keeping Batman. You want the Bat suit. You're probably going to have Alfred as the butler. You're going to keep some of the classic things, but the way you want to represent it is completely different" (*Icons of Fright,* 2007). In rebooting the *Halloween* franchise, then, Zombie arguably retains "classic" elements of the original while also repositioning the franchise by evoking a narrative structure that closely resembles superhero franchise reboots. For this reason, the iconic monster's back-story—his "becoming" (Arnett, 2009: 4), as it were—dominates the first half of the film, while at the same time activating a narrative schema that betokens further installments (including Zombie's 2009 follow-up *Halloween II*). In other words, the film purportedly undertakes "a new chapter in the Michael Myers saga" by providing a never-told back story for the

movie's arch-killer; and in doing so, it belies a promotional strategy that explicitly draws upon the canonical (i.e., "classic") status of the original so as to emphasize its "modern-day" alterations at the hands of a bona fide commercial horror auteur. Hence, the *Halloween* reboot entails a process so-called corporate "re-imagining," an industry buzzword, which, for my purposes here, will be defined in terms of what John Caldwell (2006a) has usefully phrased "critical industrial practices."

Rebooting as a Critical Industrial Practice

According to Caldwell, critical industrial practices are those forms of "analysis of texts by industry" which reflexively interrogate media properties so as to mediate and contain knowledge about those properties in accordance with the political economies and brand-valuing strategies of conglomerated Hollywood (2006a: 102). Hence they constitute distinct forms of cultural capital and institutionally sanctioned knowledge "that work to constrain meanings and navigate pleasures for viewers and consumers of electronic culture" (ibid: 105). Herein practices of (what have variously been called) cinematic repurposing, remixing, reinventing, re-launching, rebooting, re-envisioning, or re-imagining occur alongside a wide range of ancillary materials and multimedia paratexts, which in turn perpetuate "the endless mutation of [screen] content across proprietary host bodies within the conglomerated world" (Caldwell, 2005: 95; see also Gray, 2010). Furthermore, such proprietary "host bodies" (e.g., DVDs, websites, "making-of" specials and "behind the scenes" documentaries) ostensibly afford audiences the critical and hermeneutic wherewithal to interpret these films as culturally

"meaningful" products; that is, they serve as the primary institutional context through which the industry might, in fact, "re-present" itself to audiences, and thus cultivate notions of aesthetic distinction and "critical-theoretical" capacity in viewers by positioning the cultural status of a given film (or an entire franchise, for that matter) according to the logic of media brands. In short, horror movie reboots operate as a form of "critical industrial practice" to the extent they attempt to discursively reframe, revalue and reconstruct the overall commercial, aesthetic, and cultural worth of a given franchise and its audience.

As a function of broader corporate logics and marketing imperatives of "endless mutation," then, reboots stimulate a range of critical activities that can be translated into industrial practice; certainly there is a crucial interaction here between extra-textual practices of critical revaluation, subcultural distinction and commercial "re-imagining" (or re-branding). However, it is also my contention that such interactions not only provide the institutional context for discursively conferring value and aesthetic distinction upon certain franchises/films, but also the catalyst for *extra-textually performing* that distinction at the level of both industrial practice and audience reception. In other words, reboots work to support canonical readings of franchise films (vis-à-vis fan and critical interpretations), but also to parlay these reading strategies in ways that are congruent with the "critical" agendas of media producers and distributors. In this sense, media industries attempt to shape the consumption of horror cinema by collapsing critical activities of fans and critics as part of contemporary industrial practice; as a result, popular discourses of

cultural distinction may be—unwittingly or otherwise—drawn into commercial complicity with industrial business plans and marketing strategies.

Most notably, here, for our purposes are references to inter-textual frameworks of "original"/canonical films, iconic movie monsters, auteur-directors and artistic "visions," each of which occur not just within but alongside a remake's perceived textual structures—that is, in conjunction with extra-textual features of film publicity and promotion (e.g., DVD releases and their accompanying "bonus tracks," commentaries, making-of documentaries, collector's supplements, etc.). These tracks in turn strive to educate viewers with "promotable facts" and behind-the-scenes narratives that help to maintain key institutional relationships not only among fans, but also between fans and media producers (Klinger, 2006: 73-4). As such, they effectively work to cultivate notions of aesthetic distinction and cultural capital, while also deploying forms of interpretive competency, which may or may not be deemed appropriate to the franchise. As Barbara Klinger writes, for instance, DVDs have an "instant built-in and changeable intertextual surround that enter into [a film's] meaning and significance for viewers" (2006: 72); as a result, they occasion a range of analytical discourses and inter-textual frameworks through which to organize critical reading practice—and thus reactivate bids for cultural value. Thus whereas franchise reboots strive to recall the cultural memory of a previous work, their "ancillary" circulation and release on DVD, for instance, provide further critical-industrial opportunities to "theorize" such values in terms of potential artistic, social, and cultural significance (Caldwell, 2009).

To put it another way, remakes/reboots are not naturally occurring textual entities, but rather a function of proliferating economic and promotional discourses—and these discourses in turn strategically seek to align specific institutional practices of critical and popular reception with industrial practices of marketing and repurposing. As such, they represent reflexive forms of cultural production and consumer marketing that help to explain the complex relationship between critical activity, popular reception, and critical-industrial theorizing. Thus whereas traditional approaches to horror film remakes have mostly considered analytic issues of textual authority, fidelity and originality to be of principal (hermeneutic) importance in determining their overall cultural significance and value,[2] this chapter will instead adopt a wider approach to horror film remakes (or "re-imaginings") which views the trend primarily as a way of *discursively* intervening in broader social constructions of taste and institutional procedures of canonization. Remaking, in this sense, will not be viewed as a crudely reductive, cynical marketing strategy, but rather as an operation of critical activity and industrial discourse that serves to effectively reproduce specific forms of generic competency and horror movie expertise.

[2] See, e.g., Lizardi (2010) and Roche (2011). These essays generally hew to the predominant academic tendency, which treats film remaking not simply as a textual category to be interpreted, but an inter-textual process that should be held in strict accordance with the prevailing criteria of authenticity, originality, and canonicity (see also Horton and McDougal, 1998; Forrest and Koos, 2002; Hand and McRoy, 2007; Lukas and Marmysz, 2009). While this approach may in fact yield worthwhile insights into a film's perceived aesthetic and ideological value, it often does so by way of minimizing the corporate logics and institutional significance that underwrite these productions, and, in effect, works to "disembody and deindustrialize meanings, ideology, and power" (Caldwell, 2003: 133).

This is in keeping with recent developments in film theory, which, again, recognize the practice of film remaking as an extra-textual, discursive construction that is both dependent upon the mobilization of particular economic/promotional discourses as well as the circulation of distinct forms of cultural competency and "critical-theoretical engagement." As Constantine Verevis (2006: 2) describes this relationship: "film-remaking is both enabled and limited by a series of historically specific institutional factors, such as copyright law, canon formation and film reviewing which are essential to the existence and maintenance—to the discursivisation—of the film remake. In these ways, *film remaking is not simply a quality of texts or viewers, but a 'by-product' or the secondary result of broader discursive activity* [emphasis added]." In the same vein, an approach to horror film remakes as "critical industrial practice" holds the virtue of shifting academic discussion away from issues of textual fidelity and originality and toward questions of institutional context and broader discursive fields. At the same time, it takes into account the importance of ancillary materials and multimedia paratexts as attempts to legislate (hermeneutically) issues of textual authority and authenticity. In short, this approach acknowledges "the vital role that media paratexts play in communicating a film's status as a remake, and also in invoking an intertextual framework within which to comprehend and evaluate the new film" (ibid: 130). Accordingly, the discourse of horror film remakes can be understood as an extra-textual function of both producers and consumers—as the "by-product" of various user-groups who alternatively work to construct and identify a particular film's cultural status as a remake (or "re-imagining"), and hence produce meaning and value for the brand.

To address these arguments, the following sections will examine several broad interrelated themes. The first section explores the institutional logic of reboots as a function of discursive canonicity and genre classicism, analyzing in particular the ways publicity and reception around *Halloween* (2007) served to underscore the value of the earlier text as a cult classic, while also suggesting a pointed contrast with the reboot. This reception also had the effect of inviting viewers to further ascribe cultural value to the original, while also restricting critical attention to particular (canonical) elements as a means of reiterating certain (canonized) reading protocol. The second section moves to extend these arguments in terms of 1970s horror films more generally, while the third section considers how this reading formation inevitably plays itself out in accordance with the ancillary discourses of genre reboots. The key point here is that, while critical and popular hierarchies work to sustain discourses of aesthetic value and cultural distinction around these films and their franchises, they also work underpin industrial bids for generic canonization and brand value. Furthermore, just as horror movie remakes might themselves be viewed as a means of establishing promotional "filters" through which to interpret and evaluate the brands that they hype (Gray, 2010: 3), so too do their own accompanying media paratexts "not simply represent systematic extensions and permutations of the featured screen texts [but] also explicit critical interrogations—albeit staged and over-determined ones"—of branded film content (Caldwell, 2009: 177). Thus, the fourth and final section moves to examine how these interactions play out within the promotional contexts of the DVD medium; in particular, it suggests that incessant backgrounding of these productions via DVD bonus tracks,

making-of documentaries, and voice-over commentaries parallel broader discourses of critical appropriation and textual re/valuation of reboots. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the political economy of horror movie consumption, as defined by extra-textual structures of canonicity, authenticity, authorial control, brand value and (sub-) cultural distinction.

Remaking and Discourses of Canonicity

> Rob Zombie hacks away at 'Halloween' [a] horror classic.
>
> (Mathews 2007)

> I have the privilege of re-imagining 'Halloween' for a new generation of audiences.
>
> (Rob Zombie, quoted in *Business Wire* 2006)

Despite overt parallels to the "golden age" of horror auteurism, and the 1970s cycle of "American Nightmare" horror films which constitute the genre's canonical reading formation, much of the critical and popular response to Rob Zombie's 2007 remake—or re-imagining—of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) centered, quite predictably, on the perceived failure of the former to improve upon the iconic status of the latter; the prevailing tone among reviewers and fans was righteous indignation toward the high-concept ruination of a beloved genre classic. Critics and reviewers writing for major market newspapers and trade publications, for example, were equally bemused and irritated at what they took to be an unnecessary (at best) or cynical attempt (at worse) to reboot a prominent horror movie franchise. Dennis Harvey (2007) of *Variety* magazine ruefully noted the impact of marketability on the film's content vis-à-vis the twenty-first

century horror movie audience—one schooled, as it were, in the *au courant* stylistic excesses of torture porn and increasingly violent spectacle: "in contrast to that spare, suggestive genre classic, this bloodier, higher-body count version leaves nothing to the imagination…[the] end result is a hectic, professionally assembled pic that just about cancels itself out on every level."[3] Meanwhile, fans of the genre were similarly scornful of the director's attempt to re-imagine the franchise through the never-told back-story of the movie's arch-killer, Michael Myers; as one devotee brusquely put it, "Rob Zombie completely misses the point of Michael Myers. Not knowing what makes him tick IS WHAT MAKES HIM SCARY!" Thus reviewers and fans were in agreement over Zombie's two principal mistakes in remaking the film: the first was to have undertaken a "gory bastardization of a horror classic," an ostensibly canonical work "that "DID NOT need to be remade…[because] it was absolutely perfect in every aspect;"[4] and second to have done so by way of devising a new-fangled origin myth for "one of the greatest psychopaths of cinema" (Nemiroff, 2009). As a result, the film was roundly dismissed as a derivative failure: not simply a botched authorial re-envisioning, but an inferior—if

[3] Cf. *Los Angeles Times* movie critic Tasha Robinson (2007), who observed a disingenuous "bait-and-switch" tactic driving the film's marketing campaign: "Director Rob Zombie pulls a clever sort of bait-and-switch with his 're-imagining' of John Carpenter's seminal 1978 horror hit 'Halloween'…It's a more polished, high-fidelity version of a story that's played out on screen many times since 1978, but once Zombie runs out of subtext, he's right back to the same old slasher text: 'Blood. Guts. The end.'" In other words, critics of various stripes were both hostile and dubious of the much-ballyhooed attempt to "re-envision" *Halloween* as a landmark source to text—whether through stylistic innovation or genuine auteurist commentary. See also: Kit 2007; Harvey 2007; Mathews 2007; Covert 2007; DeMara 2007; Robinson 2007; and Fox 2007.
[4] These and other fan comments were taken from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) user reviews; at the time of this writing, *Halloween* (2007) had been reviewed by 980 users and rated by 53, 557 users, with an average score of 6.0 out of 10. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373883/reviews. Retrieved July 3, 2012.

relatively high budget and professionally stylized—effort to commercially exploit a genre landmark.

Nonetheless, these reactions to Zombie's film are remarkable for what they suggest about the discourse of horror film remakes more generally, as well as for what they reveal about the variety of film-related institutions and whole series of user-groups (critics, fans, directors, and marketers) who work to preserve and stabilize generic categories, canons, and reading strategies (see Altman, 1999). As is the case with the vast majority of film remakes, for instance, critical and popular accounts of *Halloween* tended to privilege the original over the remake; however, they did so largely by way of establishing the (lesser) value of the remake vis-à-vis the supposedly inherent (and superior) virtues of its canonical predecessor. What is more, not only did these contrasting valuations seek to distinguish the original on the basis of canonicity and authenticity—as a "classic" instance of horror—they also relied upon broader critical attitudes and interpretive categories underwriting the genre's canonical reading formation. That is, reviewers often staked a claim for the genre by invoking, in particular, the 1970s horror film as the fulcrum of artistic innovation and social relevance in the genre—and hence canonical value; as evidenced in the following commentary by *Sight and Sound* movie critic Kim Newman, for example, the contemporary horror movie remake is, by contrast, considered a symptomatic indication of horror cinema's more general commercial sterilization and ongoing political failure:

> This is not an era that cares for films which are 'about' anything…Messages tend to be blunt, simply and unlovely. The 'message' of horror in the 1970s tended to be that there was something seriously wrong with society; the 'message' of 2000s is that Other People Are Shit. This may well be a sincerely held position, though

> any sense that film-makers might mean anything by their films tends to dwindle when they sign up to remake something for a Hollywood studio. (2009: 38)

Accordingly, whereas existing interpretations of canonical horror films, such as those which seek to validate the genre on the basis of its supposedly progressive formal-ideological identity during the 1970s, are invariably mobilized to secure the value of horror in its entirety, the discourse of contemporary horror film remakes, with their Hollywood studio credentials, typically falls short in positioning these films as, for example, "less violently confrontational than those of the 1970s…and quite literally producing cheap thrills and gross-outs…[in a way that is] neither as effective or intelligent as the original" (Roche, 2011). As a result, whereas critical reviewers and fans of the genre habitually distinguish the canon of 1970s horror films as politically engaged, culturally significant and socially relevant, contemporary remakes are routinely dismissed as artistically bereft and socially meaningless—which is to say, lacking in the pointed allegorical subtexts and socio-political undercurrents that (allegedly) infuse their originals (e.g., Kermode, 2003; Hantke, 2010; Lizardi, 2010; Roche, 2011).

It is arguable, however, that this reductive (if not to say, altogether tendentious) historical-interpretive reading strategy is also one that encourages viewers to understand the practice of remaking "as itself a one-way process: a movement from authenticity to imitation, from the superior self-identity of the original to the debased resemblance of the copy" (Verevis, 2006: 58). That is, the discourse of horror film remakes seems to encourage a reception framework that is not inherent to the films themselves but rather a by-product of a specific institutionalized reading protocol and aesthetic ideologies—which view all remakes as anything less than genuine artistic productions, as

fundamentally parasitical forms of “pure borrowing” (Lukas and Marmysz, 2009: 3), as “generic and thematic mutations” (Hand and McRoy, 2007) that are “not worth any critical consideration outside a political and economic evaluation of Hollywood’s commercial filmmaking process” (Forrest and Koos, 2002: 3).

Thus, whereas contemporary horror film remakes might enjoy a fruitful inter-textual relationship with earlier canonical texts—with publicity and reviews often drawing attention to the aura of the original as a cult classic, while (possibly) infusing the remake with a greater sense of aesthetic, commercial and cultural value—the discourse of remaking itself invariably turns on entrenched institutional procedures and reading strategies; and these procedures ultimately work to reproduce specific generic hierarchies, values, and distinctions that set up the original as *the* standard of cinematic excellence and aesthetic quality which few succeeding films are able to meet. In this way, the discourse of film remakes inevitably sets up a canonizing function for the source text, which not only isolates the original in a manner that suggests its inherent cultural value and authenticity, but also promotes a way of critically understanding this relationship in terms that isolate and delimit available frameworks for interpreting and/or devaluing associative texts. In other words, while reviewers and fans of the horror film will typically appeal to the original not simply as a way to “establish the (greater or lesser) worth of the remake, but also to secure the value of the film medium itself [i.e., the genre] by relating it to deeply established precursors (the canon)” (Verevis, 2006: 28), the corresponding value of horror film reboots is such that they allow different user-

groups to discursively position the genre according to canonical interpretations and critical orthodoxy.

As Mark Kermode put it with reference to "the current vogue for 1970s horror" remakes:

> Contrasting the profoundly political subtexts of *Night of the Living Dead* (racism and civil unrest) and *The Last House on the Left* (televised violence in the wake of Vietnam) with the frothy mainstream sensibilities of populist slasher hits that followed the success of *Halloween* (1978)…[one might see how] the radical potential of gore cinema that flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s was effectively squandered by films…which repackaged the underground appeal of genuinely edgy horror into saleable, multiplex-friendly fodder—in much the same way that [today's Hollywood producers] now repackage and reposition [films like] *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for the lucrative modern teen market. (2003: 15)

In this way, the discourse of horror film remakes dovetails quite nicely with the discourses of canonicity, as both are enlisted in the service of broader institutional goals, such as buttressing essentialist theories of generic identity, canonical authority, stylistic authenticity, and cultural ideology. Moreover, the genre is itself characterized by way of a historiographical trope that pays little attention to the broader social histories of horror movie production, reception, and analysis, but instead reiterates a rather conventional historical narrative that is painted in broad brush strokes: an interminable disaster story of generic decline, ideological crisis, and political regression, purportedly ongoing since the 1970s (cf. Jancovich, 2000: 8-9; Hantke, 2010). As such, the practice of horror film remaking can be regarded as an occasion for critical discourse to justify and secure its own cultural authority; indeed, as a specific tool of critical evaluation and interpretation, the category of remaking serves to institutionalize established hierarchies and discourses of cultural value and "genrification" (Altman, 1999: 62).

Remaking and the 1970s Horror Film

This practice of genrification is most evident in the case of contemporary horror remakes of canonical 1970s films. Herein the resurgence of landmark movies such as *Halloween*—but also *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974/2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978/2004), *The Last House on the Left* (1972/2009), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977/2005), to name the most prominent—seem to invite authoritative critical accounts of the genre on the basis of a certain canonized reading protocol; however, they also seem to encourage attitudes of (sub-) cultural distinction on the basis of what counts as "real" or "authentic" horror (see Jancovich 2000).

Consider, for example, the following IMDb fan review of the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*:

> I know an awful lot of genre fans rail against remakes, but like the update of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003), this version of Dawn of the Dead is so good that we should instead be clamoring for more… Hardly five minutes into the film we're already into hardcore, high-tension, gore-filled horror material…[It's] as good as the original, with exciting new directions and room for a sequel!

Now compare this with Roger Ebert's (2004) review of the same film:

> The contrast between this new version of 'Dawn of the Dead' and the 1979 George Romero original is instructive in the ways that Hollywood has grown more skillful and less daring over the years. For a technical point of view, the new 'Dawn' is slicker and more polished, and the acting is better, too. But it lacks the mordant humor of the Romero version, and although both films are mostly set inside a shopping mall, only Romero uses that as an occasion for satirical jabs at a consumer society…All of this is not to say that the new 'Dawn of the Dead' doesn't do an efficient job of delivering the goods…My only complaint is that the plot flatlines compared to the 1979 version, which was trickier, wittier, and smarter.

Although fan and critical reviews differ here in terms of what actually counts as real or authentic horror (i.e., "gore-filled" cinema versus "daring" social commentary), these distinct modes of cultural analysis and generic competency nonetheless dovetail insofar as they share a critical preoccupation with determining the aesthetic and commercial value of the remake by virtue of a comparison with the putative canonical status of the original. Moreover, whereas Ebert's review rehearses a rather commonplace perspective of 1970s horror films—and Romero's work in particular—which identifies "smart" and "intelligent" horror films with the aesthetic norms of critical-interpretive communities (i.e., social allegory, auteurism, originality), this in turn leads reviewers to typically devalue the category of horror film remakes altogether, and in similar terms, such as high production values ("slicker and more polished") as well as more recent innovations in horror movie aesthetics ("the general speed up in modern Hollywood," "new-issue Zombies that run fast," "the shock shot," and altogether more "gore and blood").

In other words, critics are predisposed to associate the contemporary horror movie remake with discourses of mainstream commercial appropriation, and this in turn leads to a juxtaposition of the former as anathema to more "authentic" horror films of the Romero ilk (typically characterized as low-budget, socially allegorical and potentially subversive). As a result, whereas contemporary horror movie remakes not only invite critical distinctions at the level of socio-cultural analysis, but also in terms of dominant review aesthetics (i.e., authorship, originality, intelligence, subtext), they also invite trans-textual reading strategies that, in effect, compel viewers to seek out reencounters with an original film property.

Thus the rhetoric of contemporary horror movie remakes belies their greater institutional functions as both indirect marketing opportunities and activators of a recurring condition of spectatorship, a condition that is both integral to commercial strategies of repurposing and recycling, but also viewer distinction. To wit, these discourses seem to reward critical distinction in consumers who fancy themselves as *repeat* viewers of a genre, and who therefore base that distinction on the normative assumptions and canonical readings of knowledgeable interpretive communities (i.e., critics and fans). Moreover, the discourse of remakes also encourages viewers to adopt a discriminating foreknowledge of the genre—a perspective that inevitably gets incorporated within industrial marketing and exhibition strategies. To return to the *Dawn of the Dead* example, for instance, one finds in the film's publicity materials a means of negotiating canonical value and authenticity, while at the same time reiterating the appeal of viewer distinction and historical knowledge as a source of critical/cultural pleasure. Indeed, press notes for the film take care to assuage what Thomas Leitch (2002) has elsewhere referred to as the "paradoxical problem" of remaking as an inter-textual category. He writes:

> Although remakes by definition base an important part of their appeal on the demonstrated ability of a preexisting story to attract an audience, they are often competing with the very films they invoke…The audience for the remake is [thus] responding to the paradoxical promise that the film will be just like the original, only better. The fundamental rhetorical problem of remakes is to mediate between two apparently irreconcilable claims: that the remake is *just like* its model, and that it's *better*. (2002: 44)

As a way to distinguish both the remake and its original, then, contemporary horror film reboots must find a way to amend this problem, but without diminishing canonical status

and cult value. In a sense, the practice of remaking can be viewed as a form of critical-industrial "theorizing" (Caldwell 2009), which seeks to self-reflexively organize the "paradoxical promise" of critical and popular reception so as to integrate the two spheres within the promotional discourses and commercial strategies of marketing and branding. As the official website for the *Dawn of the Dead* remake puts it:

> 'This is a re-envisioning of a classic. There was not, is not, a valid reason to "remake" *Dawn of the Dead*. That's not what we set out to do, not what any of us wanted. There are some amazing updates on some great films…[John] Carpenter's *The Thing*, [David] Cronenberg's *The Fly*. They're great movies that add to rather than diminish their original films. We really saw this as a chance to continue the zombie genre for a new audience,' offers [producer Eric] Newman […]
>
> [Director Zack] Snyder echoes the producers when he explains, 'I had no desire to remake the picture. A remake, to me, is you take the script and you shoot it again. And that can be cool, but you don't mess with it. A re-filming of the original version was so not needed. Reinterpretation is what we wanted to do. Re-envision it. We put some steroids into it. I don't want to have this film compared to any other—our *Dawn* is its own thing with its own personality, voice and experience. (quoted in Verevis, 2006: 134)

Accordingly, such promotional discourses move to resolve the "paradoxical problem" of horror-movie remaking by effectively reconfiguring the latter in terms of "re-envisioning"—a process that seeks to both acknowledge forerunning canonical status while at the same time distancing the practice of remaking itself from modern innovations and generic "updates." Thus comments by producer Eric Newman and director Zach Snyder strongly echo the promotional strategies of contemporary horror movie remakes more generally, as some earlier (valorized) original is mobilized so as to critically activate and sustain (canonical) discourses of aesthetic and cultural value. Meanwhile, promotional discourses of re-envisioning provide further opportunity to not

only shape a film/franchise's relationship to the genre's canonical past but also to incite new attitudes which might, in turn, accord with contemporary taste markets and critical categories of authenticity. In effect, production cultures respond to the practice of remaking in much the same way as consumer cultures: that is, by invoking the same language and using the same evaluative frameworks as critics and fans.

Indeed as Constantine Verevis argues, these frameworks inevitably attest to a "desire to retain the *aura* of the cult classic, while reviving and resurrecting the (dead) franchise as a digitally-boosted, big-budget genre movie" (2006: 135). However, whereas the above statements indicate some point of contrast between the remake and the updated re-envisioning, this contrast does not, in fact, extend to the actual film texts themselves (pace Leitch). Rather, these are *promotional* categories that work to effectively negotiate and re-position the franchise in accordance with a series of "updated" commercial and generic inter-texts (e.g., "the zombie genre," a "new audience," the "reinterpretations" of an up-and-coming horror auteur). Hence, these inter-texts serve to mediate (or more accurately, disown) the claim to be "just like" or "better" than the original, while at the same time reiterating canonical systems of value and interpretation. Far from "competing" with the original films they invoke, then, contemporary horror remakes actually reproduce the latter's authoritative status as a means of reestablishing marketable continuities with sellable high points of the past. In doing so, they afford current producers and directors the chance to "remake" classic texts of their own.

It is in this sense that the critical function of corporate "re-imagining" relies on *extra-textual* practices of publicity and promotion to motivate specific forms of horror movie expertise and generic competency. While such practices ultimately seek to conjoin industrial discourses with reception practices, they can certainly engender skepticism as regards a film's cultural status as a remake—for example, as a legitimate case of artistic "reinterpretation" and authorial re-imagining, or conversely, a commercially motivated repetition that merely seeks to capitalize on a "re-filming of the original version." Nonetheless, in either case, the discourse of contemporary remakes indicates that, among other things, the normative aesthetic judgments of reviewers and fans often resonate just as much (if not more) with the commercial interests of producers and directors, and that these personnel maintain an equal (if not greater) institutional stake in recognizing and enshrining the (commercial and aesthetic) value of genre "classics" by way of their contemporary remakes.

Furthermore, one might add that reflexive critical and popular negotiations of these films—as either devalued or revalued cultural objects—afford viewers the opportunity to not only deepen their investment in the franchise, but also contribute to its social circulation as a point of affective brand attachment. Indeed to the extent critical and fan distinctions occur alongside—as opposed to in stark contrast with—the economic/promotional discourses of the industry, the discourse of horror movie re-imaginings works to instill a particular type of generic competency, which ultimately serves to redirect viewers back to the franchise, particularly through discourses of authorship, canonicity, and cult engagement. In a sense, the promotional and commercial

mechanisms of horror movie remaking are at least in partial alignment with the critical and popular reception practices of horror film culture, in that both evince considerable theoretical and critical effort in isolating and distinguishing what are considered to be more or less "appropriate" frameworks for evaluating these films—as re-envisioned products that are essentially derivative of canonical generic touchstones. Hence the practice of horror movie remaking becomes a way for industry managers to reflexively comment on, and hence "reboot," an already established brand name product in the hope of culturally revitalizing an erstwhile artistically and commercially valued franchise.

Remaking and Discourses of Industrial Reflexivity

Thus, while remakes of 1970s horror films may promote a view of the genre that equates "daring" and/or "authentic" horror films with the aesthetic norms of critical-interpretive and fan communities, they also sync up quite well with the various attempts by media industry producers to secure a position for these films in accordance with canonical discourses of aesthetic value and cultural authenticity. In turn, these discourses can be pressed into the service of brand name products, as efforts to "re-imagine" (or re-brand) the genre in terms of 1970s classics inevitably afford franchise marketers and producers the chance to reactivate preexisting discourses of (sub-) cultural distinction. Again, this is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the case of *Halloween*, and specifically the figure of Michael Myers, who, as I have already indicated, remains the iconic centerpiece of the *Halloween* franchise, despite having been corporately "re-imagined" for the current marketplace. Nonetheless, as we shall see, it is his presence

that ultimately guarantees the continued circulation and commercial expansion of the franchise, not to mention a whole series of renewed cultish attachments, whether to the newly "re-envisioned" Myers or the original psychotic monster. However, whereas these attachments occur in conjunction with an industrial context that is marked by increasing multimedia proliferation and conglomeration, they also contribute to a collapsing distinction between practices of re-branding, marketing, and screen "theorizing."

As Caldwell argues, "screen theorizing fuels industrial practice" (2009: 171); and this includes, one might add, practices of horror movie rebooting, which afford industry managers the opportunity to both reflexively comment on, and hence "re-imagine," an established brand name product, specifically by (re-) circulating knowledge about that product via institutionally sanctioned discourses of marketing, publicity and promotion. As we shall see in the next section, however, the promotional inter-texts at work around the *Halloween* reboot cycle evince not only a series of critical industrial practices for activating generic competency and audience interest, but also a discursive framework that works to "theorize" cultural value by constraining meanings around the franchise in accordance with ancillary discourses of DVD culture. Before moving ahead, though, it is important to recognize that these promotional and industrial discourses operate within a greater institutional context of corporate uncertainty; and it is this uncertainty which in turn motivates predominant strategies of re-branding, value-generation, and industrial reflexivity. As Caldwell (2006a: 105, 107) usefully summarizes these strategies:

> Many current textual formats [e.g., cinematic reboots] are, in fact, overt and explicit institutional performances of context, and [moreover]…industrial discourses [of branding, repurposing, and extra-textual commentary] can also be viewed as plays of cultural competence and critical-theoretical

> engagement…[Here] the circulation of critical-theoretical icons and texts by the industrial participants is…a fundamental component of the way the industry makes sense of itself to itself and thus navigates corporate uncertainty.

In other words, the aesthetic canonization of texts (via the discourse of genre "re-imaginings") is not simply a blueprint for industry production and corporate assembly; nor is it a fashionable marketplace label for distribution and circulation. Rather, the primary function of horror movie rebooting corresponds with the media industries' ongoing attempts to shape narrative film consumption in the age of corporate uncertainty—by way of exploiting and constructing (sub-) cultural distinction for titles through "plays of cultural competence and critical-theoretical engagement." Herein one of the main tactics of the industry is to "mutate critical analysis and industrial reflexivity as business plans" (Caldwell, 2008: 168), and hence deploy interpretive competencies and generic expertise as a way to negotiate brand value. In short, horror movie reboots constitute an industrial performance of critical distinction.

For instance, the practice of horror movie remaking might itself be examined as an apparatus of film acculturation (cf. Trope, 2008), a means by which media industries are able to discursively intervene in broader cultural struggles taking shape over generic status, cultural value and aesthetic canonization. Certainly, these debates occur within a variety of (sub-) cultural contexts that exceed industry constraints (cf. Jancovich, 2000 and 2002; Hills, 2005 on fan culture); however, it is also the case that these discourses occur rhetorically (as opposed to organically) as a function of the industry's greater attempts to both valorize and canonize horror film remakes in accordance with broader strategies of critical-industrial theorizing and promotional synergy (Caldwell, 2009). Put

simply, the pre-scripted forms of critical analysis and on-screen theorizing (found within and alongside horror movie reboots) represent one of the most effective means of brand theorizing and consumer marketing available; hence, they work to stimulate a range of critical activities and ancillary discourses that reflexively call attention to a film's status as a modern "re-envisioning."

Accordingly, it is not simply enough to acknowledge the outwardly "critical" nature of these practices, but to underscore their material contingency within a broader political economy. That is, discourses of industrial reflexivity (via horror movie reboots) serve greater institutional functions, and these functions occur within a context of recurring media synergies and viral marketing opportunities that ultimately make critical analysis and screen theorizing both highly profitable and reproducible. As Caldwell notes: "screen studies are, in effect, analyzing a production environment that already obsessively analyzes itself. But we seldom consider this, nor consider the opportunities that this analysis of analysis might provide" (2009: 175). In the case of horror movie reboots, for example, the analysis of industry by industry not only contributes to the formation of particular genres as discursive categories, but also to the formation of distinct modes of sub-cultural capital and generic competency that underwrite viewer distinction and popular theorizations of aesthetic value. Considering remakes as a distinct form of industrial "theorizing" thus concentrates attention on the various commercial and promotional inter-texts that define the media industries' attempts to self-reflexively produce meaning and value for their brands, by wedding cultures of production and reception (Caldwell, 2006a: 120-5; 2008; see also Klinger, 1989). As we

shall see below, contemporary horror film reboots generate a whole series of ancillary discourses that inevitably feed into the industry's conceptualization of the genre and its audience.

In terms of the *Halloween* franchise, a variety of ancillary materials—most notably, the DVD and its "bonus tracks"—communicate a canonical system of values and orientations that govern how the film is promoted and impressed upon viewers in terms of generic status and cultural value. Whereas institutional discourses of remaking are thus more and more dispersed among home video cultures (cf. Hawkins, 2000; Guins 2005), these ancillary materials provide an indication of what the industry itself considers to be more-or-less "appropriate" (generic, artistic, interpretive) frameworks for viewing the franchise. In effect, they cultivate brand autonomy for the reboot without challenging the aura of the original.

Remaking and the Discourses of DVD Culture

The DVD for the *Halloween* remake includes a host of "bonus tracks" and "behind-the-scenes" featurettes that both replicate and extend the sort of cultural competence and critical-theoretical engagement evinced in the publicity materials and critical reviews cited above, but also include a range of authorial commentaries and interviews that work to further append aura and authenticity to the franchise. Most fittingly, the DVD extras announce a key distinction in the franchise by way of a two separate making-of documentaries, titled "Re-Imagining Halloween" and "The Many Masks of Michael Myers," both of which effectively serve to construct distinction and

authenticity for the franchise and its fans, while also inviting newcomers to enjoy an "insider" perspective on the production process—mostly through background stories that supply behind-the-scenes information and commentary about the making of the film as well as its iconic brand-name stars: Michael Myers and Rob Zombie. Moreover, as part of the "unrated director's cut," these documentaries reinforce discourses of auteurism and cultural authority with a promise of unvarnished, paratextual access to the stated intentions of the film's director and production team. In doing so, they lay discursive claim to the real "authentic" version of the text, while also playing into audience expectations for reliable information regarding the reboot question (most notably, "What artistic motivations can possibly underwrite rebooting a film like *Halloween*?"). In effect, DVD viewers are afforded a sense of having direct access to, and knowledgeable appreciation of, the franchise, in addition to its purported canonical legacy, authorship credentials, and underlying fan community.

The first documentary, "Re-Imagining Halloween," crystallizes most explicitly the different forms of industrial "theorizing" that go into re-imagining a successful horror movie franchise. Beyond mere cross-promotion, that is, the various contents and structure of this DVD "bonus track" suggests four institutional strategies for asserting the reboot's claim to autonomy and authenticity. First, and most obviously, "Re-Imagining Halloween" sets out to construct unique meaning and value for the reboot in accordance with codes and conventions of the making-of documentary. Thus it provides extensive background footage of production sets, costume design, artwork, and special effects (SFX), alongside backstage interactions among cast and crew members; furthermore, the

documentary intercuts these different field scenes—along with promotional excerpts taken from the primary text—with interviews and discussions with chief creative figures and production personnel, including director Rob Zombie, producer Andy Gould, production designer Anthony Tremblay, SFX/makeup artist Wayne Toth, and actors Tyler Mane and Daeg Faerch (the "old" and "young" Michael Myers, respectively), among others. As such, the "Re-Imagining" video effectively supplies DVD viewers with a professional-theoretical justification for "reinventing" the franchise, wherein crew members are on hand to offer personal testimony to the sorts of artistic intentions, creative rationale, and production choices that, for all practical purposes, go into rebooting "the ultimate slasher classic" (as one DVD reviewer blurb put it).

In the process, audience members are made privy to the sorts of critical industrial knowledge and reflexivity that not only feed into the reboot process but also define the DVD format. As Barbara Klinger (2006: 73) writes of this exposé style: "Far from demystifying the production process, these revelations produce a sense of the film industry's magisterial control of appearances…[and thus] vividly confirm Hollywood as a place of marvels brought to the public by talented film professionals." Indeed, the "Re-Imagining" documentary supplies viewers with a host of "talented professionals" and producerly "revelations" which ultimately lend support to the idea that, as Zombie puts it, *Halloween* (2007) aims for a "totally different experience" than the John Carpenter original. Interestingly, these distinctions are made largely through reference to Zombie's authorship credentials, as cast and crew repeatedly marvel at how the director was able to inject his own artistic "vision" into the filmmaking process—and this despite the

canonical weight of the Carpenter legacy bearing down on the reboot production. As Zombie admits early on in the film, for instance: "It would have been very easy to watch *Halloween* and copy it shot for shot…but that would be completely pointless." In the same breath, Zombie recounts the pressure from studio executives, who were continually on hand to insist that the director "make it [the film] more Rob Zombie," and hence establish its brand-name distinction from the original.

This constitutes the second (and related) institutional strategy underpinning the DVD making-of featurette: that is, to offer visible and credible evidence of directorial control and genuine artistic creation at the hands of a bona fide commercial horror auteur—evidence which might, then, go on to justify and communicate the reboot's status as a legitimate aesthetic "re-envisioning" (as opposed to mere commercialized "remake"). As director of photography Phil Parmet insists at the beginning of the "Re-Imagining" documentary, "Rob is an amazing artist; he has strong, vivid imagery in his mind that he wants translated in a very direct way." Indeed, these sentiments are echoed throughout the making-of documentary and across interviews with members of the film's production team, including production designer Anthony Tremblay and editor Glen Garland, both of whom come across as altogether more experienced "below the line" workers, yet nevertheless declare that "it was very easy to work with Rob," particularly given his "strong art and graphics background." As Tremblay insists at one point: "Rob's an inventive director who knows what he wants, yet likes to get a lot of input and see choices…he filters out what he doesn't want." Likewise, producer Andy Gould summarizes the aims of the executive tier: "If we can just allow Rob to realize his vision,

then everyone will be happy." In this way, experienced cast and crew members (as well as DVD producers) are able to ensure that Zombie comes across as competent film director—a more-or-less "talented film professional"—while offering up credible testimony to his authorial control and creative "vision" over the reboot process.

At the same time, not only are we told about the film's authorship credentials, but we are also *shown* visible evidence to back up these claims—that is, backstage performances of Zombie "making choices" about artwork, props, costumes, lighting, set design, and SFX, all the while finding time to consult with various production units and studio brass about seemingly important artistic decisions. This occurs in conjunction with candid B-roll footage (i.e., hand-held documentary images), which record these performances and thus ostensibly provide special access to an otherwise unseen production process. Almost paradoxically, then—and despite the DVD's implicit recognition of the various artists at work "behind-the-scenes" on the film—the reboot process is here *re-presented* to viewers as the product of a singular aesthetic vision—and thereby ordained as the work of a legitimate author. At the same time, distinction is created through extra-textual claims of creative intelligence and auteur status, which are here dramatized in relation to images of the cast and crew at work. With each recurring backstage deployment of the "author-function," then, the DVD is able to ascribe a sense of artistic value and creative intention to the reboot process, while also providing a significant amount of "production literacy" (Gray, 2010: 98) and technical knowledge for DVD viewers. In turn, this sort of "practical instruction" (Trope, 2008: 358) serves to

reflect a presumed audience interest in behind-the-scenes information and expert commentary.

An intertitle to the second chapter of "Re-Imagining," for instance, aims to educate viewers on the various aspects of the *Halloween* production design, including the work of the production designer, Tremblay, who is defined as "a crew member that collaborates with the director to establish the visual feel of the project." Likewise, interviews with other production team members provide an excuse for DVD producers to familiarize the audience with the rather specialized vocabulary and the assigned tasks of editing, costuming, makeup and special effects. However, these interviews nevertheless serve to reiterate and underscore the intentions of the film director, as each crew member is ultimately shown reporting back to, and ultimately serving at the pleasure of, Zombie—the inventive auteur "who knows what he wants." They also serve as testimony to the ability of critical industrial discourse to cultivate spectator fascination with, and knowledgeable appreciation for, the production apparatus itself, vis-à-vis the privileged position of the film director.

As Klinger notes in her discussion of the "special collector's" DVD edition, the principal appeal of these behind-the-scenes intertexts lies not only in their ability to impress upon viewers the work of talented film professionals, but also to address and construct the DVD audience as film industry "insiders"—that is, knowledgeable viewer/consumers who exist as part of an inner circle of genre experts and artistic personnel. According to Klinger, then, viewers do not get "the unvarnished truth about the production process; they are instead presented with 'promotable' facts, behind-the-

scenes information that supports and enhances a sense of the 'movie magic' associated with Hollywood production" (2006: 73). In other words, the artistic and production literacy made available by these DVD features remain skewed by the studios and marketing departments in charge of producing and defining their contents. The same goes for the "unrated director's cut" DVD format, which ostensibly supplies viewers with exclusive access to *Halloween* as Zombie "re-envisioned" it. For this reason, the "Re-Imagining" video supplement tends to reinforce these assumptions of "magisterial control" by focusing on Zombie, the auteur-director, as the ultimate point of artistic collaboration, viewer identification, and extra-textual authority. Consequently, the practical ins-and-outs of the reboot process are dramatized so as to appeal more effectively to the general ideological suppositions of authorial control and creative vision, i.e., the chief means to "update" (or re-brand) the franchise as something altogether "different" than the original.

Meanwhile, the presumed effectiveness of this type of institutional appeal, from the standpoint of critical industrial practice, can be illustrated by the similarity of shared "talking points" (Caldwell 2008: 156) parroted throughout the "Re-Imagining" documentary and other promotional materials. For instance, a (June 4, 2006) press release nicely encapsulates what one might term, following Caldwell, the studios' (i.e., Miramax and Dimension Films') "preemptive theoretical conception" (ibid: 157) of the film, which runs throughout DVD materials:

> Zombie's vision of this film is *an entirely new take on the legend and will satisfy fans of the classic "Halloween" legacy* [emphasis added] while beginning a new chapter in the Michael Myers saga. This new movie will not only appeal to horror

> fans but to a wider movie-going audience as well. It will not be a copycat of any prior films in the "Halloween" franchise. (Official Press Release)

This introduces the third institutional strategy animating the DVD's extra-textual discourse: that is, underscoring the "classic" legacy and subcultural authenticity of the franchise so as to placate genre fans and augment brand value. In one sense, then, the pre-release marketing materials and studio publicity quoted above effectively prefigure the sorts of reflexive industrial knowledge woven into the DVD special features; for, as we have seen, the latter essentially continues the important promotional work of the "preemptive" critical analysis within a post-release context, focusing on the same distinguishing factors of creative talent, cinematic artistry, and authorial control. However, another set of DVD materials also works to remind audiences of the prevailing cultural reputation of the *Halloween* franchise as the foundation of one of horror cinema's most iconic movie monsters. Indeed, both the "Many Masks of Michael Myers" and the theatrical trailer, which is included among the DVD bonus tracks, perform the necessary extra-textual task of discursively *recalling* the John Carpenter original—or at least the canonical memory of it—so as to extend and amplify industry promotion and marketing of the franchise as "a new chapter in the Michael Myers saga."

Thus, on the one hand, the official trailer promises to "unleash" Rob Zombie's "unique vision of a legendary tale" by at once identifying the original and distancing the remake from it, specifically treating viewers to a montage of audiovisual excerpts taken from the reboot, which nevertheless suggest a keen aesthetic parallel with certain iconic features and narrative-stylistic elements associated with the original. For instance, the trailer astutely recycles the iconic score from Carpenter's original, and juxtaposes this

with other familiar setpieces, kill sequences, star characters, and most importantly, the masked-visage of Michael Myers himself. More than that, the trailer also effectively introduces possible newcomers to the franchise with a brief expository black-and-white montage of news clippings and mock crime-scene footage that both recount Myer's origin story as a ten-year-old serial killer-turned unassailable monster and draw vague stylistic comparisons with other prominent horror movie franchises (most notably, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the remake to which similarly opens with a prologue that draws on the same horror movie conceit of "actual" or "found" footage taken from the crime scene of a notorious movie monster). Thus, for those with little or no actual *inter*-textual knowledge of the canonical precursor text, the *Halloween* trailer suffices to provide a number of broadly generic intertexts and iconic reference points for understanding the new version through its reinscription of "classic" horror movie elements. In short, it takes the "cultural memory" of the franchise as the film's "intertextual base," rather than a particular example of it (cf. Verevis, 2006: 146 on a similar reinscription going on in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*).

On the other hand, specific ingredients of the reboot strategy are more explicitly spelled out in the "Many Masks" documentary, which clearly seeks to elevate Zombie's "vision" of the *Halloween* franchise as more-or-less a direct function of Michael Myers' subcultural authenticity and brand value. Whereas the trailer moves to submit the franchise and its canonical legacy as the reboot's revisionary source material, then, the "Many Masks" featurette attempts to ground this process of critical-industrial re/valuation more openly with the signature character of Michael Myers as the de facto

centerpiece of the *Halloween* "legend." Accordingly, industry personnel "theorize" extensively about their own production experience and how it compares to the look and style of the original, while also setting out to distinguish the reboot (under the helm of Zombie) as equally unique and distinctive. Garland (the editor), for instance, suggests that unlike the Carpenter film, Zombie's version of *Halloween* aspires to greater "realism" (as opposed to crude horror movie sensationalism or fantasy), and thus establishes a sense of artistic control, responsibility, and purpose:[5] "Rob's vision is all about keeping things real. If there's too much blood, it's not going to seem real." Likewise, Zombie declares his authorial preference for other filmmaking styles that maintain an altogether "more raw" and "edgy" feel: "I just look at movies that I love…like what would work for *Taxi Driver*; take the same ideas from that and apply it to this…you have characters that you want to watch and that you follow, and situations that are real so they become terrifying or compelling."

Indeed the repeated emphasis on "realism" further serves to create aesthetic distinction and cultural significance for the film reboot, as discourses of "horror-as-art" are drawn into closer alignment with discourses of "legitimate" aesthetics (cf. Hills, 2005: 74 for an interesting take on the same procedure within horror fan cultures). In the

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[5] Indeed, this sentiment comes across most clearly in the behind-the-scenes "revelations" concerning Zombie's "realist" approach to film violence and the corollary execution of SFX. That is, on the one hand, the "Re-Imagining" documentary rehearses the idea, echoed throughout reviews and interviews with the director, that Zombie's version of *Halloween* is at once more graphically violent and bloody than the original, and yet "not overly gory" nor in any way "exploitative"—at least by today's standards (see Harrington, 2007). In fact, as Zombie puts it in one interview: "*Halloween* [2007] is very violent, but it's a different type of violence…The effects in this movie are simple and basic. I wanted it to be real. There's no extreme stuff" (ibid).

same sequence, Parmet (the director of photography) underscores Zombie's auteurist bid for cultural value by placing *Halloween* in extra-textual proximity to films already deemed aesthetically and legitimately valuable: "The films that we [i.e., Zombie and Parmet] talked about, in terms of the look for this film, weren't horror films at all; they were like *21 Grams*, they were like *Amores Perros*, they were like Larry Clark films." Thus, the strategy of name-dropping and historical juxtaposition serves the institutional purpose of, on one level, further removing the *Halloween* reboot from the teenage slasher films associated with Carpenter legacy, while at the same time affording DVD viewers a framework of reference through which to critically interpret and valorize the reboot production within the same tradition as other canonical, auteurist films. This ultimately serves the purpose of underscoring Zombie's "unique vision" vis-à-vis the Carpenter original; as the director remarks on the heels of Parmet's comments: "You know John Carpenter has a very distinctive style—how he shot. It's long, and slow, and smooth. And so I was like what if we shot *Halloween* in the style of *21 Grams* or *The Constant Gardner*, it's immediately a different movie, even if it's the same movie [title]." Ultimately, then, the film is positioned as one more horror entry in the wider canon of celebrated *auteurist* cinema—and this includes Carpenter's "distinctive style."

However, the DVD paratexts also make clear that Zombie's *Halloween* represents not so much a break with the preceding franchise films as an authorial modification to their "look and feel." In turn, this revisionary take on the *Halloween* brand coincides with the quest for greater "realism"—and particularly realistic violence—which is offered as a kind of signifier of aesthetic quality and vitality that ends up delivering more intense

(because all the more "realistic") horror movie scares. As (producer) Andy Gould sums up this approach, "it [the movie] is not an excuse to kill people in more wild and wacky ways; that's not what this movie is. We're trying to get a real intensity to it." Crucially, this bid for greater affective intensity and value is concurrently underwritten by discursive bids for textual valorization and extra-textual reference to other, more distinctly "art house" movies, including films by critically acclaimed auteur-directors Martin Scorsese, Larry Clark, and Alejandro González Iñárritu. As a result, aesthetic significance and value is created for the *Halloween* franchise by virtue of it being placed in an altogether more "artful" paradigm of culturally distinguished filmmaking.

As a slightly different means of canonization, however, the "Many Masks" documentary also serves to underscore the *subcultural* value and authenticity of the reboot—that is, the various attempts to "make it real"—through an emphasis on the psychological realism of the Myers character. In a sense, this particular bonus track can be viewed as one attempt to negotiate the commercial and artistic pressures involved in formulating "an entirely new take on the legend that will satisfy fans of the classic *Halloween* legacy." As cast and crew tirelessly remark throughout the "Many Masks" documentary, the Michael Myers character is the key icon of the *Halloween* mythos, and, as such, his carefully crafted visage is both crucial to establishing the authenticity and credibility of the reboot. As makeup artist Wayne Toth puts it, "Michael's mask was as important as any other visual piece in the movie…it [i.e., the mask] is the main character." Hence, Toth explains to DVD viewers how the original mask, taken from the 1978 film, had long since deteriorated, and how this afforded an opportunity to

essentially “redo” the Myer’s look; however, rather than embark on a radically alternative makeup design, Toth suggests that the most important facet involved in re-creating the mask was fidelity to original: “I had to be really true to what the iconic Michael Myers looks like when I was sculpting…We did a ‘clean’ version [that] Michael has as a child [and] a ‘rotted’ version [for] when he grows up…we painstakingly painted by hand, so every smudge of dirt, everything looked exactly the same.” To that end, the DVD shows viewers behind-the-scenes footage, design workups, and still images attesting to Toth’s scrupulous attention to detail; and these in turn are overlaid with voice-over declarations of cast and crew as regards the subtle artistic variations underwriting Toth’s design, such as when Garland states, “I thought working with the mask would be a huge challenge, but the fact that Wayne created such a great mask that can show so many emotions, it didn’t become a challenge.” Similarly, Zombie makes the point that, “it’s such a weird mask; depending on how you light it, sometimes it would look really scary and cold, and sometimes it would look more sympathetic.”

For his part, Tyler Mane (the actor playing Myers), insists that the mask, combined with his performance, brings something a little more than “a just a walking shape,” and furthermore that “it’s scarier to know a little bit more about what’s going on behind the mask then just the mask.” In effect, cast and crew are on hand to elevate the accomplishments of the production team, while at the same time underlining the central point of the *Halloween* reboot: that is, far from a straight remake, the reboot is in fact a genuine “re-imagining” of the Michael Myers character from the perspective of his never-told origin story, i.e., “what’s going on behind the mask.” Therefore the film

ostensibly sets out to "deepen" Micheael Myers' character beyond just a mere "walking shape," and thus to fundamentally re-establish the pop cultural and cinematic allure of a "once terrifying movie monster," by injecting him with a dose of pseudo-biographical realism. As Zombie puts it: "I always felt that Michael Myers was a great character that had lost his impact. Like Frankenstein, who couldn't have been parodied to death more once you're watching the Munsters! But a great character is always a great character and can always be made scary again…[The *Halloween* reboot] was [thus] more about the characters and the situation, and that's what would make it scary again" (quoted in Harrington, 2007). Such comments suggest an implicit concern with restarting the franchise anew, in particular by reestablishing the overall seriousness of the Myers' character in the face of increasing self-parody and endless sequels, and, moreover, by reestablishing his on-screen presence as a terrifyingly "real" psychopath. Accordingly, Myers' treatment and re-conceptualization at the hands of these "talented film professionals" sets out to all but undo the fantasy depictions of Michael Myers as some chimerical movie monster on yet another implausible, murderous rampage; rather, the film and its accompanying paratexts aim to restore "maturity" to the franchise through a re-presentation of their iconic elements.

Thus the film restarts the series anew from "year one" (Proctor, 2012: 8), in effect bypassing narrative and stylistic continuity, and returning the franchise directly to its canonical predecessor. As Zombie avers at one point in the "Many Masks" documentary: "Really, the only thing that is basically from the original movie is the look of Michael Myers…that's one of the things that attracted me to *Halloween*—the mask never ages,

and so it's as if you're remaking a film, but the star of the original film hasn't aged and you're working with him again…As soon as that mask appeared it's like nothing had changed." Of course, one could easily (and cynically) regard these words as a mere attempt to reinvigorate a pre-sold iconographic property (Myers) in order to further extend the commercial and cinematic life-cycle of the *Halloween* franchise itself; indeed, this is partly the motivation of DVD producers, marketers, and *Halloween* creative personnel. However, it is also possible to take Zombie at his word when he proclaims that his fannish enthusiasm and pop cultural attraction to "working with the star of the original film" led him to undertake the project—for this is a way of both discursively justifying the reboot process as an artistic one, as well as a means of positing the director's own subcultural allegiance, his devotion to the pleasures of connoisseurship and fan distinction (see Hills, 2005: 73-90).

In other words, Zombie's statement functions as an implicit negotiation and appreciation of the Michael Myers character in his importance to genre fans. Indeed, as (makeup artist) Toth recounts of the pressure he felt in "redoing" the Myers look and meeting audience expectations in the process: "there's a whole slew of real fans, like groups of fanatics—there's websites just about Michael Myers and the mask, so I always had that in mind while I was working on it. So, that's where most of the pressure came from. I really had to make sure, basically, that we had the same look [as the original]…For someone like myself, growing up on horror films, it was a big deal to redo the classic Michael Myers mask from *Halloween*." In this way, Toth (much like Zombie) not only signals his awareness of the genre community's high subcultural standards for

Halloween, but also (and more importantly) casts his lot with those seemingly hardcore genre "fanatics," who might likewise consider it "a big deal to redo the classic Michael Myers mask." As a result, rather than shirk off responsibility to the fan community, or casually dismiss the pleasures of horror film consumption as somehow outlandish or pathological, the "Many Masks" documentary instead re-presents cast and crew members, such as Toth, who show great respect for the genre and its fans, and thus move to perform their own subcultural legitimacy for DVD viewers.

In this regard, the documentary performs the fourth institutional strategy of the horror DVD format: the presentation of genre credentials to horror movie fans as a critical-industrial function of the technical and creative practices of horror movie personnel. Hence not only do the film's DVD producers want audiences to believe that the *Halloween* reboot stands above and beyond other films in the franchise (or, at least on canonical par with the original), but also that audiences, too, are involved in something uniquely special in being granted privileged access to the creative team's artistic aspirations and intentions, and specifically its accredited background within the highly specialized field of horror film craftsmanship and SFX technique. For, as Toth states, "there's a whole slew of fans" dedicated to reflexively analyzing the technical practices of horror movie personnel, and this is especially true of horror's "cult" movie fans. As Matt Hills points out, for example, a preoccupation with the reputed artistry and detailed craftsmanship of gore SFX in particular functions as one of the main tactics by which horror film fans are able to discursively perform and construct their own extra-textual agency and genre expertise. For this reason, not only are horror's gory SFX "self-

reflexively used by sections of horror fandom to sustain and generate a reading of horror-as-art" (Hills 2005: 89), they are also mobilized to indicate one's subcultural status, belonging and group identity.

Accordingly, the inclusion of SFX special features as part of the "Many Masks" and "Re-Imagining" documentaries point to DVD producers' awareness of fans' interpretive competency, as well as their more general attachments and strategies of genre and taste distinction. As Hills points out, "fan investments in horror-as-art are not experienced simply in relation to 'the text itself'…they are, rather, layered and reinforced through extra-textual 'floating signifiers' such as SFX images [which are] extracted from their original narrative frames" (2005: 89). Likewise, a similar sort of extra-textual "layering"—or repurposing—of behind-the-scenes footage occurs in the DVD making-of, which ostensibly details industry-trade "secrets" about the production of gore SFX (Klinger, 2006: 72); it therefore seemingly lets viewers in on the production "tricks" (Pinedo, 1997: 57) which are involved in the creative act of depicting screen violence. In this way, special features aim to capitalize on and incorporate the reception practices of horror film culture, while also further striving to "educate" viewers so as to critically organize their consuming pleasures.

For instance, the "Re-Imagining" documentary devotes a whole section to the critical analysis (i.e., production backstory) of the movie's seventeen killing scenes; thus audiences are shown the working methods involved in executing various "blood gags" and the smallest details of makeup SFX. In one of the more gruesome setpieces, we learn how Ronnie, one of Myers' first victims in the film, has his throat slit, and how the

production team craftily utilized a latex-tubing device and a fire extinguisher to pump more than two-and-a-half gallons of fake blood at the point of incision. Meanwhile, the documentary also showcases repetitious footage of actors being alternatively slashed, stabbed, beaten, bludgeoned, and strangled to death by the movie's arch-killer, Myers. All the while, Toth and other FX crew members assure DVD viewers that each kill scene had an overreaching aesthetic imperative: to keep the violence as "realistic" as possible. Thus do these SFX revelations carry inter-textual resonance with Zombie's declared "vision" for the film; they also (and more generally) reward subcultural distinction in viewers who imagine themselves to be as elite possessors, or "connoisseurs," of such highly specialized knowledge (Hills 2005: 85-90). As such, they offer a "feedback loop" that works to sustain and partly reflect a distinguishing feature of fan-interpretive communities, albeit one that remains squarely situated within the industrial-commercial context of DVD culture.[6]

Indeed, as Isabel Pinedo (1997) notes of the subcultural appeal of many fan-oriented commercial publications, such as *Fangoria* and *Cinefantasique*, the central attraction of these magazines lay in the way they discursively negotiate aesthetic tensions between "special effects realism and [fan] awareness of its artifice" (p. 56). Hence, not only do these publications stimulate reader interest in special-effects technology; they

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[6] In a related context, Klinger (2006: 73) argues that this kind of fetishizing appeal to viewers SFX knowledge suggests, on the one hand, "that one of the major foundations of fandom—the accumulation and dissemination of the smallest details involved in the production of media objects—is substantially informed (though not wholly determined) by industry discourse;" on the other hand, the substantial presence of production trivia as part of the DVD format "has become a significant part of the feedback loop between industry and fan, with the industry recognizing the importance of the mastery of obscure details to enthusiasts and dutifully producing mass amounts of this kind of information."

also enact specialized forms of media literacy, which are effectively geared toward cultivating a discussion of SFX professionals and "how they do it." In other words, fan-oriented publications centered on the horror genre are defined by their ability to "yield a discourse that reveals the hidden, behind-the-scenes work" of production; and as a result, they aim to provide a sense of practical instruction that allows more "competent" fan audiences to essentially "distance him or herself from depictions of violence by looking for the trick, e.g., the cut from the actor to the prosthetic device" (ibid). Thus according to Pinedo, this strategy of "looking for the trick"—or what she calls "ruptures in realism"—not only serves to whet viewer appetites concerning the production process; it also addresses audience members as more-or-less discriminating viewers who may, in turn, enjoy the subcultural pleasure of seeing "more fully" the mechanics and aesthetics of horrifying spectacle. In the same way, the special edition *Halloween* DVD allows the more "competent" viewers to distance themselves from the more naïve responses of casual moviegoers by essentially "looking for the trick" involved in creating screen violence. Much like the special effects magazine, then, DVD viewers are encouraged to seek out "ruptures in realism" as a way of disavowing the flows of blood and gory exteriors. At the same time, they are shown "tricks" of the trade which nonetheless aim to heighten the overall realism effect.

Thus, the framing and lighting techniques, which go largely undiscussed in both the "Re-Imagining" and "Many Masks" documentaries, constitute the ultimate "tricks" underwriting the realism of Zombie's approach to horror movie aesthetics. As property ("prop") master John Brunot points out in the "Many Masks" video, the use of retractable

knives during the killing scenes are graphically intensified through a combination of various production technologies: “Obviously, you can’t stab an actor. With a retractable knife, it folds into itself, so it can look totally real—when you add special effects, makeup with Wayne Toth, and we add blood, and you have the right [camera] angle…you cannot tell.” In this way, DVD viewers are treated to specialized access to some of *Halloween*’s more violent stunts (or “tricks”), while at the same time being invited to reflexively ponder the mechanics and aesthetics of horror movie fear production. Indeed, such behind-the-scenes (self-) disclosures accord with discourses of fan subcultural-authenticity in that, as Hills points out, displays of SFX knowledge and production literacy work discursively to frame horror’s more graphic pleasures as a matter of “fan agency, discrimination and expertise” (2005: 89). In the same way, they provide an opportunity for DVD producers to perform subcultural distinction in relation to horror fan audiences—aesthetically “competent viewers” who may in fact pride themselves on being able to recognize the artifice of SFX gore. Privileging knowledge and production literacy over affective/”illiterate” responses to horror movie violence, then, becomes a way for DVD producers to establish credibility with the subcultural community of horror fans. And this in turn becomes a way to instill a sense of cultural distinction and generic community through the presentation of *critical-industrial* knowledge and reflexivity.

“Play it Again”: Toward a Political Economy of Horror Movie Consumption

The *Halloween* DVD thus fosters a sense of intimate knowledge between cast, crew, director and audience, which, for all intents and purposes, works to secure a coherent narrative—in the form of a production background story—for the brand. Specifically, through the analysis of SFX and directorial perspectives, the employment of production literacy and dialogues with creative personnel, and a reflexive acknowledgement of the franchise's canonical status—its iconic, "classic" elements—the DVD extras announce their allegiance to the subcultural community of horror fans. To that end, the DVD features also posit a notion of "the horror film audience" as generically knowing, savvy, and aesthetically attuned. At the same time, the "Re-Imagining" and "Many Masks" documentaries work to construct the DVD audience as discerning aficionados vis-à-vis extra-textual discourses of artistry, authorship, and genre classicism. In this sense, then, they participate in wider industrial attempts to shape horror movie consumption—by catering to "competent" viewers of the genre and its canonical texts, and by addressing spectators in the same language and using the same modes of critical evaluation that are associated with horror fan cultures. Here intimate knowledge and the cultural experience of horror are represented as utterly significant to industrial practice.

However, this is not to suggest that reboots are merely creatures of the market; nor that ancillary discourses of horror movie consumption inevitably lead to the uncritical acceptance of certain franchised properties by movie audiences. To be sure, the *Halloween* example demonstrates that fans and reviewers of the genre are often quite critical of contemporary horror film reboots on the grounds that they not only overtly exploit valued (sub-) cultural materials and fan attachments, but also potentially denigrate

the authenticity of those materials through a process of assimilation with commercial imperatives and mainstream sensibilities. As movie critic Mark Kermode puts it, these films simply "repackage the underground appeal of genuinely edgy horror offerings into saleable, multiplex-friendly fodder" (2003: 15). And hence, as an especially controversial instance of such commercialized "repackaging," the *Halloween* reboot might thus be summarily dismissed as a rather cynical attempt by cultural industries to capitalize on the ostensibly "radical potential of gore cinema that flourished in the 1970s" (ibid). However, this would be to overlook the broader discursive fields that customarily underwrite the genre in its specific institutional practices and strategies of canon formation, ideological criticism, genre distinction, and cinematic authorship; in short, it would be to overlook the specific forms of generic competency and canonical reading that often get "recycled" on the occasion of such corporate repackaging.

Thus, as we have seen, contemporary horror film reboots generate a whole series of ancillary discourses that inevitably feed into the industry's conceptualization of the genre and its audience. In terms of the *Halloween* reboot, ancillary discourses such as the DVD and its special features communicate a canonical system of values and orientations that govern how the horror film reboot is both promoted to audiences and discursively positioned in relation to previous iterations, so as to ultimately construct a (perhaps) inflated sense of generic heritage. Hence both the film and its accompanying media paratexts clearly emphasize a debt to the past—a debt which in turn functions to critically invest the franchise with renewed aesthetic and commercial value. Suggesting brand autonomy for the contemporary reboot, without challenging the aura of earlier canonical

texts, is thus one way for media producers to potentially revitalize "classic" film properties for contemporary taste markets. However, whereas the DVD format therein affords "added value" to the franchise in the form of "bonus tracks" and special features, these extra-textual platforms nonetheless provide a key indication of what the industry itself considers to be appropriate frameworks for engaging with horror film culture. To the extent these frameworks dovetail with the imagined tastes, aesthetic preferences, and consumer habits of the horror film audience, they merit greater attention as critical-industrial strategies. Still, as the next chapter will show, these strategies often extend beyond the realm of horror fan culture, to include other generic groups, such as heavy metal music communities. In these instances, ancillary media texts—like the soundtrack album—become a key site for organizing knowledge about otherwise disparate fan cultures, while also managing and containing (extra-textually) the political-economic and discursive processes of cinematic consumption.

Chapter Four

What's the Deal with the Soundtrack Album? The Customized Aesthetics of the Contemporary Horror Film

Minutes into the 2003 crossover horror film, *Freddy Vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu), the audience is treated to a brief moment of "bite size theory."[1] Wasting no time in serving up the slaughter, we watch (and hear) as Jason stalks, corners, and impales with his trusty machete yet another unsuspecting, lustful teen—a hapless young girl who just wanted to take a midnight swim in the nude. However, before we resign ourselves to business as usual—i.e., Jason's back again to hunt down those pesky adolescents who really ought to know better by now that the woods are not a safe place to be at night (after all, didn't the poor girl hear the menacing string harmonics and Jason's signature heavy breathing?)—something uncanny happens: the victim comes back to life. Skewered to a tree, the undead girl rehearses a litany of slasher horror film no-nos: "I should have been watching the children; not drinking; not meeting a boy at the lake." The self-reproach continues as one victim morphs into another: "I deserve to be punished; we all deserve to be punished." Next Jason's mother appears to reassure her son (and the audience) of his trademark "gift" of imperishability—"no matter what they do to you, you cannot die"—before sending him on his way to Elm Street, where there's more carnage—and to be sure, more profits—to be had.

[1] I'm borrowing the phrase "bite size theory" from Michael Bérubé (1993).

In case we needed catching up, this sequence does it for us by way of a savvy plot contrivance that intermixes pop culture with pop theory. Borrowing a *CliffsNotes* page from Robin Wood, the film crudely reversions Freudian theories of the horror slasher as superego incarnate in order to reflexively comment on itself, its two ghastly protagonists, and their (rightful) place in the sordid pantheon of horror film baddies. With no little irony, the film stakes a claim for a Freddy and Jason revival, knowing full well that the audience is in on the game—in fact, one might even say the producers are banking on it.

But something else is going on here as well. Before Jason makes his way to Elm Street to duke it out with Freddy on his home turf, the title credits hack their way through a flesh colored backdrop. As the title appears, soaked in blood, the dripping noises that hint at the splatter and gore about to ensue give way to the aggressive nu metal riffs of Spineshank's "Beginning of the End." The music lasts but a few seconds, just long enough to aurally register the intertextual linkages: metal and horror seem to be a match made in hell (or the executive boardroom, take your pick). In either case, the music cues us *to hear* the coming together of these two horror franchise heavyweights in a particular way, not only endowing the title sequence with a particular mood or atmosphere, but also lending New Line Cinema's twin holdings a fresh brand identity.[2]

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[2] To date, the *Friday the 13th* franchise—which includes eleven films, a television series, six novels, a comic book series, video games and other merchandise—remains the second highest grossing horror franchise in the United States, topping $564 million. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* ranks fourth on the list, at just over $487 million total gross (see The Top Ten Highest Grossing Horror Movie Franchises 2010). New Line Cinema—a subsidiary of Time Warner—owns the rights to both the *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises.

Put differently, aside from its formal and narrative functions of highlighting the title letters and easing the visual transition from one shot to the next, the soundtrack also works to manage our experience of Freddy and Jason more generally, aurally tagging these two franchises to fit a certain market niche. So, while we enjoy another slice 'em and dice 'em episode in the Freddy and Jason chronicles, we're encouraged to associate the metal music we hear with the spectacular viewing pleasures of horror; at the same time, the soundtrack becomes the locus for an effective practice of content management, where film and music industries are able to swap their respective properties in order to repurpose extant material and diversify potential markets.

On the whole, the customized *Freddy vs. Jason* metal-infused soundtrack, which intersperses instrumental cues with bits of prerecorded metal music, resonates nicely with the opening tongue-in-cheek sequence. Both amount to shrewd textual devices aimed at a particular taste culture. Whereas the title music forgoes the traditional, somber orchestral score in favor of a rompish, generic metal tune, the opening scene heralds what will be a thoroughly postmodern filmic experience, replete with intertextual slasher film references and astute self-reflexive gestures that reward audience members according to varying levels of pop culture literacy. In short, this is a studio film that knows, in terms of the market, where its bread is buttered.[3]

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[3] The obvious financial incentives driving the crossover film lend new meaning to what Linda Schulte-Sasse (2002) dubs the "knowingness" of postmodern horror cinema. Commenting on the highly self-reflexive character of horror film texts, Schulte-Sasse borrows from Philip Brophy's description of modern horror as, essentially, a "genre about a genre." Brophy writes: The contemporary horror film *knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it

Taking a step back to examine recent developments affecting the film and music industries, we might understand the *Freddy vs. Jason* soundtrack as part of a more general corporate strategy that seeks to rationalize processes of consumption in order to mitigate market uncertainty. This practice is not new; film music has long served as a central cross-promotional medium for marketing both movies and motion picture soundtracks (see, e.g., Doty, 1998 and Smith, 1998). However, the current industrial context of conglomeration and concentration significantly extends their promotional reach and commercial functions. In addition to selling soundtrack CDs, film music functions as a site for launching new artists, providing a renewed platform for singles or "leftover" tracks, and, most importantly, organizing consumption patterns by positioning media products according to the imagined tastes, preferences, and habits of idealized target demographics. Therefore, in order to better understand what, exactly, is the deal with the sort of film music deployed in horror films like *Freddy vs. Jason*, one needs to examine the "critical industrial practices" that impinge cultural—which is to say, textual—production.

For instance, as John Caldwell (2006a) notes, on-going structural changes—conglomeration, increasing market segmentation, the introduction of new technologies, and the rise of online media—have fundamentally transformed the cultural and economic function of media texts. In particular, what Caldwell terms "critical textual practices" are one way for culture industry managers and professionals to further consolidate their political and economic power by actively intervening in discussions

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knows you know" (1986: 5). *Freddy vs. Jason* provides a highly explicit example of the ways horror producers seek to exploit such meta-textuality.

regarding "the formation of culture and the significance of media in that formation" (ibid: 102). For Caldwell, "critical textual practices" describe the way "ancillary" media texts—like the soundtrack album—have become an integral site where the industry is able to "comment on itself," or "theorize" its role amid the backdrop of budding cultural forms and new technologies. The goal of such critical industrial practice is to allay crisis by controlling and organizing knowledge about these changes, effectively "teaching the audience" the appropriate way to "read" and consume particular cultural products through textual practices of branding, repurposing, and recirculating specific media content across myriad platforms. Thus erstwhile "secondary" and "tertiary" texts become a primary means by which the industry might possibly diminish the commercial pressures and inherent risks of a rapidly changing media landscape (ibid: 102-3). Consequently, promotional and marketing activities merge with the aesthetic features of various film and music texts where they become a driving force behind textual innovation. In the case of soundtrack albums, the incorporation and distribution of popular music like heavy metal in contemporary horror films fits comfortably with a prevailing industry logic that seeks to manage an increasingly diversified field of niche media markets through the organization and distribution of various modalities of consumption.

Examining the industrial practices that condition contemporary soundtrack albums, this essay argues that film music functions not only as a cross-promotional medium for marketing movies and licensed recordings, but also as a key site for effectively managing and containing processes of consumption. Focusing specifically on the ways metal music is deployed in horror films like *Freddy vs. Jason* to interpellate

particular niche audiences and taste communities, I argue that, more generally, soundtrack albums reveal a fundamental assumption within media firms that a manageable relationship between niche formats and consumer tastes exists to be exploited. Accordingly, consumer activities become an integral component of the production and distribution of film and music texts. In terms of the soundtrack album, film and music industries increasingly "put to work" the reading practices and affective investments of their respective audiences by assimilating consumption habits as a fundamental component of textual practice, thereby obscuring the distinction between consumer activities and the production of so-called "branded" entertainment.[4]

Horror Soundtracks and Synergy Culture

Horror films have long been a profitable mainstay for film studios. Beginning as early as the silent period and crystallizing in the 1930s where they served as the bedrock for Universal Studios' continued success, horror movies have demonstrated a resiliency unmatched by any other film genre, often guaranteeing a steady stream of revenue that is easily compounded in ancillary markets and capable of granting film companies the financial leeway to pursue more risky endeavors, like blockbuster productions.

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[4] Here I have in mind what social theorist Maurizio Lazzarato terms "immaterial labor"—that is, "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity" (2000: 48). This includes popular engagements with cultural texts that infuse cultural products with their "immaterial" (aesthetic, affective, social) qualities. As Adam Arvidsson (2006: 10) puts it, immaterial labor describes a process of "putting to work of communication," along with the cultural activities (of reading, interpretation, affective investment) of human subjects, for the purposes of further accumulating economic value.

Today this formula rings truer than ever: over the last five years, for example, over one hundred horror movies have been released theatrically; of those, twenty-nine debuted at number one, including *Paranormal Activity* (2009), which cost an estimated fifteen thousand dollars to produce and grossed more than one hundred million dollars solely from its U.S. theatrical release, making it reportedly the most profitable film in U.S. box office history (Frankel, 2010). Meanwhile, the horror DVD market flourishes with the straight-to-video releases, along with repackaged and reversioned franchise classics like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974; Marcus Nispel, 2003), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977; Alexandre Aja, 2006), *Dawn of the Dead* (George Romero, 1978; Zack Snyder, 2004), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978; Rob Zombie, 2007) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). In fact, horror film DVD sales have tripled in the last five years, establishing the video market as a primary site for horror-heavy distributors like New Line Cinema (Time Warner) and Lions Gate Entertainment (Pousner, 2006). The proliferation of commercial outlets like DVD, cable, and, most recently, direct-to-download digital platforms for computers and cell phones, have not only made it easier to recover production and distribution costs, they also provide parent companies an array of internal revenue sources that allow for the recirculation of the same film, or film franchise, across multiple sectors.[5]

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[5] In October of 2006, for example, Comcast Corporation teamed up with Sony MGM and Lions Gate Studios to launch FEARnet, a multiplatform network providing broadband/video-on-demand feature films from the Sony MGM and Lions Gate Studios' extensive horror film catalogues. See Chapter Five.

Of course, record labels are eager to tap the profit potential of horror's well-established niche market by teaming up with film studios to release compilation soundtrack albums deemed appropriate for horror's primary audience, typically conceived in terms of the suburban teenage-adolescent male demographic.[6] Overwhelmingly, the kind of music that shows up on these albums—and by extension the kind of music imagined to connect with horror film audiences—is heavy metal, or to be more exact, the sub-genre "nu metal"[7] that emerged during the mid-1990s. In an effort to maintain a clear focus, these soundtrack albums harvest songs from established metal performers, providing record companies the opportunity to parade "leftover," or previously unreleased, tracks—i.e., preexisting music lifted from earlier recordings that either failed to make it out of the studio or failed to receive an independent release as a single. The movie and music industry engineers behind these soundtrack albums repeatedly exploit a presumed linkage between heavy metal listeners and horror film's majority audience, which becomes the focus of a customized marketing strategy aimed at

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[6] The latest variant of the horror target demographic is the more precise (if slightly more perverse) "cuddle" market—i.e., teens looking to escape the supervisory gaze of mom and dad and "cuddle" in the relative privacy of their local, darkly lit multiplex (see Abramowitz and Crabtreee, 2007).

[7] Nu metal (or "fusion metal") is a hybrid genre that combines elements of thrash, grunge, rap, and funk. At variance with traditional heavy metal, nu metal relies to a greater extent on rhythm and sound texture over melody and virtuosity, so that, for example, drop-tuned guitars are used to create fuller, "heavier" sounds and percussive rhythms. The first wave of nu metal would include bands like Rage Against the Machine, Korn, Helmet, Coal Chamber, Deftones, and Limp Biscuit.

amortizing production costs while diversifying markets for a relatively small medley of media products.[8]

Over roughly the last decade, twenty-five horror metal soundtrack albums have been released; of those, the majority can be traced back to one of four major record labels: Warner Music Group, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and EMI (for a list of horror metal soundtrack albums and their specific corporate ties, see Appendix). Most notable is Warner Music Group, which leads the list with eight properties, including soundtracks for *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994), *Scream 3* (Wes Craven, 2000), *Valentine* (Jamie Blanks, 2001), *Queen of the Damned* (Michael Rymer, 2002), *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003), *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004) and *House of Wax* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2005). Furthermore, several of the artists who repeatedly appear on these soundtrack albums maintain direct links to recording labels affiliated with Warner Music Group.[9] The resulting chain of value engendered by these and other film-music exchanges extend beyond the purview of the major recording labels to include a select group of film production and distribution companies as well as a small handful of media conglomerates (see Appendix).

At a glance, then, it would appear that a new movie music monster has arisen with horror metal compilations. Yet it remains unclear whether this monster is merely a

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[8] For example, a piece of promotional film music may appear across a number of diverse media outlets, including soundtrack albums, online forums, radio, cable and satellite television, music videos, music charts, advertisements, and entertainment reviews.
[9] These artists include: Coal Chamber, Devil Driver, Fear Factory, Hatebreed, Il Nino, Killswitch Engage, Machine Head, Slipknot, and Stone Sour (Roadrunner Records); Static-X and Linkin Park (Warner Bros. Records); Disturbed (Reprise Records); and Deftones (Maverick Records).

corporate creation—the product of conniving film and music industry Frankensteins—or the inevitable offspring of some deeper sub-cultural affinity that's been lurking in the shadows, waiting for just the right moment to emerge into the cinesonic daylight. To answer this question, it is important to begin by noting that the move to further incorporate metal music in horror films is a fairly recent development.[10] What is more, this move parallels a related series of on-going alterations that have been taking place in the soundtrack industry for the last decade and a half.

For example, ten years ago when Celine Dion's recording of the blockbuster ballad "My Heart Will Go On" was making waves in the film and music industries, the market for soundtrack albums was reaching a crest. Culminating with the substantial market success of Sony Classical's soundtrack to the motion picture *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), the 1990s proved, overall, to be an important decade in soundtrack album sales.[11] In response, major and independent labels have gone to remarkable lengths to establish their own soundtrack departments. However, whereas these departments had,

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[10] As Randall Larson (1995) demonstrates in his survey of music in horror and science-fiction cinema, the use of popular music in horror films is overshadowed by an extended history of original scoring practices and the use of stock music. A lightening history of horror film music would include the following: a reliance on romantic-symphonic style underscoring and the use of leitmotiv (predominant in the 1930s and '40s); avant-garde modern music techniques and experimentation in orchestration and harmonic dissonances (beginning in 1940s); greater experimentation with unconventional orchestral textures—e.g., string harmonics, brass "stingers" and "crash chords"—and "atonal" scores (1950s); the introduction of pop and folk idioms (1960s and '70s, beginning with Hammer studios in Britain); and the prevelance of electronic instruments and synthesized scores (1970s and 1980s). These divisions are not intended to describe a neat, chronological progression; rather they map points of innovation in horror film scoring practice.

[11] From 1996 to 1999, an average of twenty-five to thirty soundtrack albums were certified gold or better each year by the Recording Industry Association of America (see Coniff and Hay, 2002).

for a brief period, been exclusively geared toward manufacturing hit title songs in the same vein as Dion's "My Heart Will Go On," the "big movie song" approach to pop film scores no longer prevails. Instead, industry managers have shifted gears to re-focus their energies on the compilation soundtrack, sidelining the "red-hot anthem" in favor of a more subtle "high-concept" approach to film music (Sandler, 2006). Downplaying the significance of original scores and title songs, movie producers, directors, and music supervisors increasingly look to produce thematically charged compilations of preexisting, prerecorded musical material that will, in turn, become inextricably linked to the experience of (audio)viewing a particular film.[12] The promotional benefits of this kind of movie music swing both ways. On the one hand, through the careful selection and arrangement of musical material, film studios are able to import the cultural value associated with a piece of preexisting music in order to create a recognizable "personality" for their product(s). On the other hand, precise cues aimed at establishing intimate connections between the music heard and the overall experience of watching a film afford record labels the capacity to repurpose various musical artists in cinematic terms.[13] Thus a winning approach to compilation soundtracks involves foregrounding the

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[12] The soundtrack thus becomes a crucial element in what Justin Wyatt (1994) terms "high concept" movie making. Here popular music functions along with other stylistic features such as character type, star appearances, and art direction to construct identifiable cinematic formats that are then deployed to flag potential filmgoers and, ideally, ensure market success (see also Smith, 2001). Elaborating the pragmatic dimension of the "high concept" approach, Sony Pictures Entertainment music president Lia Vollack proclaims: "As a general rule, absolutely the best soundtracks are those that use music integral to the experience of the film" (quoted in Morris and Parisi 2005: 8).
[13] For example, the closing credits to *Freddy vs. Jason* features the soundtrack album's only single, "How Can I Live"—a full-length track written and performed by the nu metal band Il Niño, which also appears as the lead title on the band's 2003 album

music to create a memorable, affective link between the identity of a movie and a particular song, the latter serving as a "musical souvenir of a visual pleasure that the consumer wants to cherish" (McHugh, 2006: 6).

Yet, the purpose of these "musical souvenirs" is not necessarily record sales. As Lyor Cohen, chairman and CEO of Warner Music Group, asserts: "We don't really get into the soundtrack business to primarily sell records; we do it to realign an artist, to bridge albums, to introduce new artists, and to go into the third or fourth single of an album" (quoted in Coniff and Hay, 2002: 3). In other words, industry executives look to soundtrack albums as a way to deepen the cultural purchase of a particular piece of music by injecting it with a cinematic booster shot. Establishing intertextual links vis-à-vis movie music, film and music companies seek to amass cultural currency for their products by trading and circulating properties across media channels. In this way, soundtrack albums accrue their economic and cultural value.

More generally, as the driving force behind market domination increasingly relies upon these kinds of synergistic practices, the soundtrack album becomes a locus for media firms to further integrate their holdings. As Eileen Meehan (2005) has argued, synergy, or "transindustrialism," no longer functions as a mere distribution strategy but is now *the* dominant logic of media production. Hence firms look to assemble texts that will be able to migrate more easily from one media platform to the next. These traveling texts afford media companies the opportunity to coordinate their activities across multiple

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Confession. Despite the band's prior history on the metal scene, "How Can I Live" was the their first track to appear on the mainstream Billboard rock music charts.

sectors of the industry, and thereby neutralize competition and shore up ownership.[14] At the same time, shuffling a handful of properties across a diversified network of media channels allows firms the capacity to mix and match markets. In this context, soundtrack albums take on a renewed significance because of the way they facilitate the continuous recirculation, repackaging, and reversioning of a select few media products. As a locus for orchestrating and harmonizing a cacophony of properties, markets, and industries, soundtrack albums are designed to feed a number of operations in order to direct audiences across a number of media formats. Their primary function is thus to regulate and contain a dynamic field of media outlets and consumption practices. For this reason, soundtrack albums work to cross-promote media audiences at the same time they cross-promote and sell media content.

The Niche Sounds of Horror Metal

Whereas the compilation soundtrack emerged as a way for studios and record labels to maximize potential audiences through mass pop appeal, contemporary soundtrack albums are forced to negotiate an increasingly diversified number of consumer-audience segments that don't necessarily correspond with the majority

[14] Breaking down the logic of transindustrialism, Meehan describes the way media conglomerates exploit emergent technologies along with vertically integrated production and distribution platforms to create efficient, migrating properties: "First, assemble as many media operations as possible, then run each intellectual property across those operations, recirculating the same product over multiple technologies and deriving 'new product' from the title whenever possible" (2005: 79).

demographic categories of yesteryear.[15] With the intention of carving out a "niche" wherein audiences might come to self-identify, music supervisors work closely with representatives at both ends of the film-music spectrum, arranging music for a particular soundtrack album with the explicit aim of both attracting distinct audience segments while purposely and unreservedly alienating others. As Jeff Smith points out, to a considerable extent, supervisors rely on genre categories as a way of organizing the right movie-music combination. Consolidating soundtrack albums in terms of particular music genres, music supervisors aim to direct listeners in and through Hollywood's seemingly infinite stream of box-office, DVD, and straight-to-video releases. The assumption is that familiarity with music genre distinctions will provide audiences the navigational wherewithal to "discover" films that might otherwise escape their attention (Smith 2001: 136-7). Balancing the demands of niche marketing with the need to produce a coherent, enjoyable filmic experience, industry executives aim to solicit a coveted audience

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[15] As Jeff Smith (1998: 156-72) points out, the roots of the compilation score extend back to the rock teenpics of the mid-1950s, including films like *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955) and *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred Sears, 1956); however, the tendency to incorporate preexisting, prerecorded popular music in film as part of a cost-effective, cross-promotional corporate strategy did not take firm hold until the late 1960s and early1970s. Following the success of films like *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), studio and record label executives became convinced that pop-infused compilation scores, which relied on very little (and, in a few cases, no) original music, could serve as the fulcrum of a synergistic strategy aimed at increasing ancillary revenue streams by exposing a diversified range of media products across an interlocking network of media channels. However, whereas many of these earlier compilation soundtracks included a speckled mix of pop songs and styles in order to appeal to a wider pop audience, today's compilations aim to piece together a more focused arrangement of musical materials that might cater to smaller, more precisely defined market segments.

through deliberate audiovisual strategies, thereby demonstrating textual compatibility with perceived tastes, attitudes, and consumption habits.[16]

If we return to *Freddy vs. Jason*, we are presented a paradigmatic case of niche movie music. Here a particular genre of music—nu metal—is repeatedly deployed to summon a desired target audience. For example, in addition to the non-diegetic music heard during the title sequence, nu metal cues are sprinkled throughout the film in the form of source music. In this capacity, the music serves a number of narrative functions, like staging the mood during a party scene or representing the emotional state of a character in distress. Yet the most notable metal cues arise during the film's key action sequences. During the climactic showdown between the two lead contenders, the action is overscored by a series of generic nu metal-esque riffs that hearken back to the Spineshank song heard at the beginning of the film. Recalling the title music in this way, these cues do more than merely set the mood for the much-anticipated brawl; they also work to qualitatively shore up consumer attachments and fan appeal. Similar to the way the opening metal cue served to charge the blood-splattered *Freddy vs. Jason* logo with an enthusiastic flavor, the metal music heard during the Freddy and Jason fight sequence builds off the anticipation established therein. The cultivated affect is one of ready eagerness. In case there was any doubt, the music functions to assure horror connoisseurs that, "indeed, this is the moment you've been waiting for." Going beyond mere

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[16] Smith references a senior Vice President of marketing at Arista Records (Sony BMG): "The most successful soundtracks have a focus, and to be fully focused you must have a genre of music that's the center of the album." Echoing the industry line, *Billboard* magazine asserts: "The watchword is 'genre.' With rare exception, the past year's best sellers have been those with identifiable market niches" (Lim, 1995: 47).

background filler, the music confirms what the film's title promises: the chance to witness first hand "the ultimate battle of evil vs. evil."[17] And just as there will be plenty of butchery to go around, so audiences are not the only ones cashing in on this epic movie monster clash.

Somewhere wrapped up in this reassuring wink and a nod to the audience is the ultimate horror metal money shot—the audio-visual confirmation that these two sordid discourses belong together, and that they do in fact share a similar "personality." In this way, *Freddy vs. Jason* makes possible an affective movie music configuration that increases in strict proportion to the appropriate audience blend of pop-cultural capital. This is why nu metal is arranged throughout *Freddy vs. Jason* according to the principle of noticeability.[18] The music is strategically placed during those moments in the film, like the beginning and end title sequences, as well as spectacular action scenes such as the final battle between Freddy and Jason, which effectively sideline the narrative.[19] Accordingly, the music is given free reign to enter the audiovisual foreground. This not only permits Roadrunner Records a chance to showcase certain compilation tracks from

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[17] As New Line Cinema's marketing campaign for the film attests, "two titans of terror enter into a horrifying and gruesome showdown" in "the ultimate battle of evil vs. evil;" see http://www.newline.com/properties/freddyvsjason.html (accessed March 17, 2008).
[18] Conspicuousness is typically avoided in movie music and is contrary to traditional underscoring practices that seek to minimize music's potential narrative obtrusiveness. Regarding the ideological and narrative functions of film music's "inaudibility," see Gorbman (1987) and Kalinak (1992). For a riposte see Smith (1996).
[19] Jeff Smith argues that the commercial imperatives driving the use of popular music in film often effect an inversion of the conventional image and sound hierarchy, so that filmmakers will often "halt the film's narrative flow" in order to, essentially, sell the score. Smith explains that through the employment of carefully designed, elaborate setpieces, extended montages, and other "self-contained sequences," music supervisors and film directors look to wed "affective bits of filmed action" to specific pop tunes (1998: 131, 146).

the soundtrack album, but also carries the effect of creating strong associational links—such as those between Freddy, Jason and nu metal in particular, but also between the experience of horror and the experience of metal more generally.

In turn, the uncanny horror-metal connection forged here—and in many other contemporary horror soundtracks—takes on a kind of cultural currency that is not limited to the movie theater. That is, the horror-metal association becomes part of heavy metal culture's "visual media economy,"[20] and in doing so contributes to extended cultural history of imaging metal music, which includes, but also extends beyond, the cinema.[21] In this particular case, however, the seizing hold of metal's visual economy by movie music managers becomes a way to channel audience tastes and pleasures. Having identified the desired audience for their product—an amalgamation of horror and metal fans—industry professionals are equipped to align these two genres in a cinematic package aimed at a specific marketplace identity. Horror film music thus becomes a vehicle for enticing identification, not necessarily with a particular character or spectator position, but with a particular cinematic format, one that includes just the right blend of graphic violence, preternatural villains, and headbangin' beats.

Extrapolating from the *Freddy vs. Jason* example, we might better understand the aesthetics of contemporary horror soundtracks—as well as the contemporary soundtrack album more generally—in terms of what media scholar Joseph Turow calls "lifestyle

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[20] In another context, Lawrence Grossberg (1993: 188) writes: "Rock has always been more than just a soundtrack…Rock has always had its own relations to the larger visual media economy, but the way in which it has been inserted into this economy is different for different rock cultures across time and taste."

[21] The visual economy of heavy metal would also include live performances, music videos, album covers, band posters and photos, websites, and concert merchandise.

segregation." Parallel to the way soundtracks function to direct audience engagements with film and music texts, lifestyle segregation describes a broader transindustrial strategy involving the creation and circulation of distinct media formats that are designed to resonate with particular target audiences. Intended to serve as a vehicle of identification, these formats are configured to anticipate the attitudes and preferences of distinct consumer groups, or "lifestyle" clusters. The goal is to divide and coral audiences into manageable segments that would then willingly affiliate with corporate-administered taste communities (Turow, 1997: 1-7). Accordingly, media producers work closely with market researchers and advertisers to tailor their products to particular market segments via a "customized" aesthetic package meant to correspond with the imagined tastes, values, and interests of their intended audience. By "arranging materials—songs, articles, programs—into a package that people in a target audience would see as reflecting their identity," media producers operate with the intention of "signaling" their "targets," while providing them the necessary cultural materials for establishing and reinforcing a consumer-based lifestyle (ibid: 92).

The end result is what Turow calls "branded formats," or "narrow clusters of media" that emphasize "divisions rather than overlap in preferences and styles" (1997: 92). Branded formats aim to perpetuate lifestyle segregation and reinforce consumer allegiances around particular media products by catering to audience patterns, habits, and preferences, as these are mapped out by consumer research agencies. In this way, consumer research allows media firms to more tightly integrate pertinent audience activities into the production process. Mobilizing the cultural values that derive from

audience engagements with media texts, branded formats seek to capitalize on consumers' affective investments in, and everyday relationships to, media culture. Thus firms are better able to organize consumer practices by putting to work different forms of audience interactivity.[22] By delineating the limits and categories of consumption according to a logic of customized aesthetics, audiences are positioned to experience media products according to the terms mapped out by consumer research industries.

The niche sounds of horror film soundtracks adheres to the logic of branded formats in the way they encourage associations and experiences of popular music that dovetail with the organizing principle of stratification. Essentially, what is promoted by horror movie music—that is, in addition to soundtrack albums—is a type of listening practice in sync with culture industry standards. Just as, following the logic of branded formats, horror metal is designed to objectify the imagined aesthetic tastes and cultural values of its target audience, this music is also specifically geared to mobilize a type of listener conducive to the cultural industries' lifestyle categories. So while we're

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[22] Ostensibly, consumer research industries allow for greater "interactivity" between consumers and producers of media products. Through extended "dialogues" with industry representatives that take place through questionnaires, focus groups, customer loyalty programs, and, more insidiously, advanced consumer-surveillance technologies found in much of the new digital-based media (e.g., TV, satellite, and internet services, as well as licensed computer software), media consumers are afforded greater "participation" in shaping media content. However, far from augmenting consumer influence and participation in the creation of media culture, cultural industries merely exploit people's use of media texts by transforming acts of interpretation, identification, and audience pleasure into valuable, exchangeable information. Thus what is outwardly treated as a collaborative interaction, is actually a lop-sided power relationship where both public and personal information is extracted from unacknowledged informational labor pools, privatized, and placed in the hands of industry executives in order to further mitigate market uncertainty (see Turow 1997: 125-57; see also Miller et al. 2005: 282-94; Shimpach 2005: 343-60; Andrejevic 2002).

watching Freddy and Jason hack each other apart to the sounds of nu metal, we're also invited to become members of a "branded" community of self-identified horror metal enthusiasts. Here individuals are encouraged to identify not as consumers *per se*, but as participatory devotees that form a part of a larger mediatized taste community organized around a customized aesthetic experience.

Conversely, the repeated articulation of horror and metal inadvertently discloses something about the film and music industries. In particular, the ways film and music genres are paired together reflect certain industry assumptions, not only concerning whom they think is listening, but also why people listen and enjoy certain musics in the first place. In the case of horror metal, horror film images are strategically designed to correspond with and illustrate metal music's presumed cultural value. Matched with images of violence, madness, obscenity, aggression, torture, and monstrosity, metalheads are given the chance to witness their favorite music come to life on screen. Similarly, horror fans are pushed to associate their favorite horror movies, characters, and concepts with the quintessential metal sounds of chunky, distorted guitars and pounding double bass drums. In either case, this horror metal universe is underscored by a commercially-driven practice of musical pedagogy, a movie music education aimed at structuring listener competencies and arranging viewing pleasures in order to contain and direct popular tastes according to market imperatives and imagined demographic identities. Horror soundtrack albums thus afford audiences a medium through which to experience and make sense of their own (branded) cultural identities. Meanwhile, the industrial logic of branded media formats effectively circumscribes horror metal's symbolic and

affective value, as institutional and economic pressures work to represent horror metal listeners (and their cultural tastes) as deviant, perverse, and abnormal.

Buying Into the Affinity Between Metal Music and Horror Film

The convergence character of horror soundtrack albums affords media firms the opportunity to manage consumption practices. By strategically circulating specific content across media to create a branded lifestyle format, media firms are able to "put to work" consumer tastes, allegiances, and affective investments in horror and metal, thus capitalizing on the immaterial labor of metal audiences (Terranova, 2000). Yet ownership patterns, niche marketing, and branded entertainment tell only half the story behind these recurring alignments. To adequately account for the persistent linking together of horror films and metal music at the corporate level, it is necessary to examine what, if any, cultural resonances exist between these two relatively exclusive popular genres. At first glance, the combination of metal and horror may seem quite appropriate, a commercially viable marriage between two relatively infamous popular cultural discourses. However, the presumed affinity of metal and horror rests on their continued discursive articulation to deviant, oftentimes criminal, cultural practices and marginalized identity formations.

On the surface, both genres appear to share a propensity for violence and an inclination for lurid obscenity. This relation manifests itself in the degree to which monstrosity, grotesquery, and Satanism are foregrounded in both metal music and horror films as prominent tropes reiterated to express repressed social attitudes and represent the

return of society's various Others—other people, other sexualities, other cultures, other ethnicities, other political and social ideologies (see, for example, Walser, 1993: 137-71; Weinstein, 2000: 39-43; and Wood, 2003: 63-84. In fact, this overt fascination with otherness figures so prominently in both genres that metal performers (and occasionally their fans) regularly appear as animated replicas of the monsters we see on-screen. Likewise, metal performances often seem to invoke the apocalyptic *mise-en-scene* typically confined to the multiplex.

Thus, it's not hard to imagine Marilyn Manson showing up in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* series, or the disfigured alien creatures of GWAR making a guest appearance in an early Sam Raimi film, or the costumed members of Slipknot hanging out with Leatherface. Nor does one have to strain one's ears to hear in the guttural rumblings of metal vocalists the raspy demonic voice of Regan from the *Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) as she channels hell and spews bile while delivering acerbic invectives.[23]

Beyond the apparent aesthetic and stylistic similarities, however, another explanation exists for the continued association of metal and horror: their shared extra-

[23] To be sure, one could argue the horror-metal connection extends beyond its articulation in contemporary U.S. horror films. For example, the work of Italian horror film auteur Dario Argento includes a number of heavy metal-infused scores, most notable among them, the highly influential *Profondo Rosso* (a.k.a., *Deep Red*, 1975), as well as the eye-opening, splatter-filled *Opera* (1987). More broadly, one could point to an extended history of heavy metal artists and performers who appear to draw on horror themes, from Alice Cooper to the Norwegian Black Metal scene. Yet one must be careful not to mistake the visual economy of heavy metal for an essential, organic relationship. Rather "the look" of metal (and the sound of horror) must be historically and culturally situated so that, for example, an examination of occult rhetoric in Norwegian black metal takes into account the scene's virulent rejection of a hegemonic Christian theology. Here Satanism, Paganism, and practices of bodily mutilation take the form of an oppositional cultural practice—a "visual style" which may or may not coincide with certain horror film tropes.

textual history of unsettling the social order. Both have been subjects of scrutiny in recent years, stirring controversy among conservative elites who decry heavy metal and horror films for assailing traditional values and mores. Targeted by government officials and derided by the nominal "experts," metal and horror remain bound, despite their differences, through their discursive positioning as subjects of moral panic. Consequently, popular discourses continue to mobilize stereotypical definitions of metal and horror that bracket issues of historical context, textual specificity, and variations in audience reception. Ultimately, both have been, and continue to be, positioned as threats to the "general public" through a crude reductionism.

Horror was the first to cause a major public outcry when, during the early 1980s, British government officials were able to incite a wide-scale social panic concerning an influx of horror and pornography video imports into Great Britain. Ostensibly linking exposure to violent images and graphic representations made available by the distribution of foreign (predominantly U.S. and Italian) horror videos, a number of government-led inquiries and reports sought to convince the public that these "video nasties" presented not only a source of moral contamination but a mounting threat to the British way of life. In the face of a general economic recession, coupled with the danger of a transnational network of mostly independent distributors committed to flooding the European market with low-budget films on video, British politicians looked for a way to stave off economic pressure from without by shoring up a national culture within.[24] By

[24] A total of seventy-five films, over half of which were U.S. productions, appeared on the Director of Public Prosecutions (DDP) "video nasty" list between June 1983, when the list was first made public, and September 1985, when the list was supplanted by

rhetorically demonizing such low-budget foreign-born successes like *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981)—which was deemed "the number one video nasty"—reform groups worked in tandem with government officials and news organizations to freeze the commercial spread of any material they regarded inimical to the public good, passing off economic policy as moral improvement. The public was sharply divided: on the one hand, there were "those 'reasonable' people" who were grossly offended by such films, and on the other hand, there were those (irrational) individuals who did not share the "common sense" position of moral outrage (see Kendrick, 2004: 165). Mobilizing tremendous social tensions and positioning, at least temporarily, horror films and horror film audiences as deviant social outcasts, the video nasties debate established an interpretive framework of righteous anger and public suspicion that continues to inform the way the horror movies are experienced and consumed.

Similarly, heavy metal received strong condemnation at the hands of the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985, as a small group of "Washington wives," lead by Tipper Gore, set out to challenge the fiendish influence of what they termed "porn rock" on young listeners. Purportedly acting on behalf of concerned parents everywhere, the PMRC singled out heavy metal for the egregious impact such music was believed to have on American youth, supposedly inculcating perverse behavior, sexual deviancy, a pleasure in violence, Satan worship, and a disposition to suicide. Marshalling close political ties and rallying public support through the mass media, the PMRC was able to

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Video Recordings Act. In large part, the widespread criminal prosecution of video nasty distributors and retailers can be attributed to what had been, at the time, an insufficient national system for regulating a booming transnational video market (see Kendrick, 2004).

generate congressional hearings while calling for "voluntary" industry censorship of certain illicit materials deemed inappropriate and obscene.[25] By positioning heavy metal as public enemy number one, congressional leaders and other public officials were effectively able to scapegoat metal music for a catalog of social ills. Faulting artists like Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne for an increase in teen suicide rates and youth violence, the PMRC censorship campaign turned a blind eye to systemic and institutional forces underlying social malaise, substituting cultural symptoms for their socio-economic causes (for more on the PMRC's censorship campaign, see Walser, 1993: 143-5; Chastanger, 1999; and Wright, 2000). At the same time, a host of conservative assumptions regarding popular culture, and specifically popular music, were reinforced in the name of moral values.

It is possible that industry managers in charge of putting together horror film soundtracks find further justification for their repeated decisions to combine metal and horror in the dominant cultural history, which positions both genres as objects of popular disgust and moral disdain. Presumably, the results of unrelenting audience research speak to this association and supply empirical evidence for executives, reassuring them of this seemingly inevitable (and commercially viable) connection. Certainly the image metal=horror continues to appear in both trade journals, fan literature, and niche publications—not to mention its espousal by iconic metal figures like Ozzy Osbourne,

[25] In response to applied pressure from the PMRC, the recording industry took it upon itself to implement a number of precautionary measures in an effort to pacify escalating public indignation and preempt further "outside" interference. In order to reassure policymakers of their capacity for self-regulation, the music industry introduced parental advisory labels for recordings containing "adult" lyrics and content. These included the most commercially viable genre of popular music at the time—heavy metal.

Rob Zombie, Dee Snider, and Marilyn Manson, among others. In addition, one might include here such magazines as *Revolver* (in the U.S.) and *Terrorizer* and *Kerrang* (in the U.K.), which frequently feature horror-related themes, interviews with genre celebrities, and special issues; for instance, the October 21, 2008, "Heavy Metal Horror Issue" of *Revolver* included a list of the "most sick and twisted, and totally metal horror movies of all time," giving pride of place (perhaps unsurprisingly) to the 1963 Italian horror film anthology *Black Sabbath* (dir. Mario Bava).

Moreover, recent academic studies of horror film audiences duplicate the language found in popular arenas and congressional hearings to describe heavy metal. Audiences are characterized for their cheap "sensation seeking" and "interest in both morbid and sexual events" (Zuckerman, 1996: 150). Studies are made available, offering empirically tested and verifiable proof of the illicit motivations of "young people" (ages 18-22), listing common traits like "rebellion against authority, thrill-seeking arousal, and sadistic gore gratification" to explain (away) an attraction to horror film (Lawrence and Palmgreen, 1996: 166). In any case, the pleasures of horror, whether in music or in cinema, are taken to be problematic from the beginning—that is, discursively positioned as pathological pleasures that beg clarification according to the available disciplinary and theoretical norms of investigation (see Hills, 2005).

In each of the above contexts—business reports, consumer surveillance, academic analyses, public indictments—the audience image arrived at is an abstracted figure, torn from the historical conditions of textual production, circulation and reception, where it is situated according to the appropriate ends—whether they be commercial, political, or

professional—in order to ratify particular cultural-political claims. Thus the political economy of taste circumscribing heavy metal and horror extends beyond the purview of the culture industry to include the extant discourses of the state, the academy, public reform groups, genre communities, aesthetes and pop critics. In no case can it be said that "real" audiences are encountered in these pop culture discourses, only their reified alter egos as they are constantly invoked, represented, and traded upon for purposes that escape any direct intervention on the part of those presumably being spoken for. Of course, the culture industry eagerly seizes upon such constructions and remains a primary site of their perpetuation.

However, the elusive and disparate nature of "real" audiences should not discourage an investigation of the economic and institutional practices that condition audience engagements with media texts. While it may not be possible to fully elaborate, explain, or understand the countless ways individuals relate to horror and metal culture, it is possible to describe the conditions under which people encounter and engage with these cultures through various media. This is especially true of horror soundtracks where the combination of discursively constructed identities and market-oriented lifestyle demographics come together for the purpose of commercial exchange. Industry strategists continue to exploit the notion that horror and metal have something in common and persistently invoke this association in their attempt to arrange the field of consumption and facilitate marketplace efficiency.

To the extent that consumers continue to buy into this affinity, the horror-metal connection continues to be a profitable site for commodified dissent (cf. Frank, 1997).

Not only do horror soundtrack albums reaffirm the popular conception that these two genres belong together and are in fact equally reprehensible, they reassure us that non-conformity has its niche too, and that opportunities exist for those eager to showcase their nonconformity through the commercial consumption of noise, violence, and culturally offensive material. Horror metal plays along with this logic of commercialized rebellion by promoting a marketable image of two culturally disreputable genres. In doing so, it reinforces the dominant perception of what it means to associate with, and take pleasure in, these "troubled" forms of entertainment.

In particular, horror film soundtracks provide heavy metal listeners the necessary evidence that their pleasures are, indeed, R-rated, and what is more, that their market choices are tantamount to the seedy behaviors permeating a perverse underworld occupied by demonically possessed children, machete-wielding psychopaths, and homicidal, knife-fingered burn victims. Alternatively, these soundtracks speak to various industry attempts to seize upon metal and horror cultures in order to transcribe popular tastes and experiences for the purposes of commercial gain. Horror metal thus exemplifies an industrial stratagem of selling would-be audiences their own (branded) image while simultaneously pilfering the communities that actively produce and give meaning to these cultural texts and practices

Chapter Five

Horror 2.0 (On Demand): The Digital Convergence of Horror Film Culture

The October 18, 2010, cover of the trade publication *Multichannel News* features an illustration of an outstretched arm surfacing from the underground, imposed against a dark moonlight sky, and grasping what appears to be a rather sophisticated remote control device. In a style evoking the now iconic horror movie cliché of the undead returning to life, the image presents the reader with a host of familiar fright-flick scenarios: among them, the premise of unnatural rebirth and untimely resurrection. The headline reads: "Why Horror Shows Have Come to Life on Cable."

The article goes on to spotlight a handful of original series and programming developments that have occurred in contemporary horror-themed cable TV production and distribution—including, for example, AMC's *The Walking Dead*, HBO's *True Blood*, and FX's *American Horror Story*. Remarkably, it also highlights a number of non-traditional cable services that have sprung up around the genre, such as Comcast's multiplatform brand Fearnet and NBC Universal's twenty-four hour digital cable channel Chiller. The article thus highlights a number of emerging, non-traditional distribution outlets for horror, specifically focusing on the video-on-demand (VOD) services provided by these platforms, and how they potentially benefit cable subscribers. As one executive put it, "horror has a huge following and it's not traditionally super-served by television—I think it's a great form of entertainment that deserves a slightly broader platform than [traditional] TV can provide" (Umstead, 2010a: 21; see also Umstead, 2008

and 2005). Accordingly, infrastructures of digital film delivery and emerging VOD cable services are offered as models for revitalizing a distinct film/genre culture. However, this is not before settling on an equally generic pop cultural truism: that trends in commercial horror entertainment, by and large, reflect or mirror pervasive cultural anxieties. As the article puts it, "TV viewers weary from the real-life horrors of high unemployment numbers, poor economic news and the worries of war are looking for the escapist thrills and chills that the horror genre provides" (Umstead, 2010a: 20).

Due to these changes, the article suggests, audiences are reportedly looking to horror-themed experiments in content distribution within the cable industry as one way to cope with "real-life" fears of economic depression and global terrorism, while cable providers are eager to exploit this symptomatic cultural anxiety in order to distinguish their multiple services: to wit, they are "looking to capitalize on the escapist feeling the genre provides viewers during uncertain socioeconomic times" (Umstead, 2010a: 21). In turn, infrastructures of digital film delivery and emerging VOD channels are offered as models for reviving a distinct film/genre culture. The pay off, the article proposes, is mutually beneficial to both audiences—who, in accordance with the rhetoric of consumer choice, supposedly reveal their cultural preferences through increased subscription rates and specialized niche markets[1]—as well as to media executives who purportedly respond

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[1] For example, an earlier issue of *Multichannel News* emphasizes the prevailing industry logic that consumers are increasingly seeking out "long tail" niche products via multiplatform cable services like Fearnet and Chiller, which aim to steer demand toward genres and sub-genres otherwise neglected by mainstream, broadcast television outlets: "Since viewer expectations aren't quite as high for a niche cable network such as NBCU's 20 million-subscriber Chiller channel, some believe that horror content has more staying power on cable TV" (Umstead, 2008: 14).

to consumer demand by producing content that reflects audiences' (alleged) desire to escape the horrors of real life.

While such dictums inevitably recapitulate the sort of commonsense wisdom, or "reflection of society perspective" described by Robert Kapsis (2009: 3), in which "shifts in film [and media] content are assumed to reflect changes in audience taste preference which are, in turn, linked to major shifts in the structure of society," the rhetoric of consumer choice and media customization surrounding digital cable channels like Fearnet overlooks the broader institutional conditions underwriting such platforms. Rather, these brands represent broader changes in media distribution, as well as concomitant strategies for navigating the digital convergence of film, cable television, and the internet at the corporate level. In other words, multiplatform, on-demand horror channels suggest a strategic response on the part of cable and film industries to mitigate the increasingly fragmented media environment represented by post-network television, wherein viewing habits and consumer practices are progressively more customized and individuated as a function of branded entertainment (Lotz, 2007).

This chapter suggests an alternative explanation for thinking about horror's apparent migration to cable. Specifically, it considers how the emergence of digital cable channels like Fearnet and Chiller reflect not so much an increased appetite for horror-themed content on the part of historically anxious and worried audiences, but rather profound institutional shifts currently taking place across media industries, and affecting

in particular cable's multiple system operators (MSOs)[2] and Hollywood's major studio-distributors.

In particular, multiplatform services like Fearnet, which allow consumers to either download or stream digital content as a function of digital set-top boxes, mobile devices, and/or broadband connections, take on increased value in terms of the way they afford cable companies the opportunity to both innovate and respond to changes taking place in the world of digital media convergence. In addition, VOD services like Fearnet, which feature a rotating slate of licensed horror movie titles and original series taken from the Sony/MGM library (the largest in Hollywood), afford studio-distributors the chance to maintain tight oligopolistic control over the commercial "life-cycle" of feature films whilst also providing the opportunity to permeate new markets. The result, as I argue, is an emerging distribution system for digitalized horror film culture that benefits not only the major studio-distributors and producers of horror-themed content, but also the various cable operators, infrastructural companies, and media conglomerates that maintain a vested interest in the proliferation of ancillary horror film markets.

The following sections will therefore sketch the different industrial strategies and promotional activities that currently underwrite horror's digital media convergence. The goal is to underscore the sorts of economic and institutional convergence happening at the macro level of corporate transindustrialism and overlapping oligopolies (Meehan,

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[2] MSOs are media companies that own, and also typically have a monopoly on, multiple cable systems across geographical markets; the list of top MSOs by number of subscribers in the US includes (in descending order): Comcast Corporation, Time Warner Cable, Cox Communications, Charter Communications, Cablevision Systems Corporation.

2010: 250), while also illustrating some of the particular competitive challenges faced by studio-distributors and cable companies as they attempt to negotiate—and profit from—new forms of digital delivery. To that end, the first section outlines the benefits of such joint ventures to the US cable industry, suggesting that multiplatform brands like Fearnet provide cable operators a way to distinguish their services from competitors in both satellite and telecommunications, as well as the broadband environment more generally, and thus enable market distinction. The second section concentrates on the film industry, and in particular the forms of commercial interactivity and digital film delivery favored by studio-distributors, as these have become increasingly reliant on VOD television services. The crucial point is that while these services have incrementally supplied further revenue to studios, they more importantly provide a viable distribution model for the digital age, and hence function to preserve officially sanctioned channels of digital home movie delivery. Furthermore, these types of strategic alliance across different sectors of the industry underscore the idea that corporate convergence is in fact driving advances within the cable and film industries (Farrell, 2009), and that, in particular, the growth and acceptance of interactive services like VOD represent relatively "safe" spaces for media conglomerates to mount forays into the digital mediascape (cf. Bennett, 2011: 14). As a result, the corporate convergence of cable and film industries illustrates the way established media powers attempt to position themselves against the competition posed by new media forms.

However, as this convergence increasingly takes the form of non-linear digital cable channels and corporate "web 2.0" portals (such as Fearnet.com), the scope of my

analysis will necessarily encompass broader debates over post-network television as an emblematic site of old/new media synergy and emergent models of consumer interactivity. As the third (and final) section argues, emergent VOD services like Fearnet may take on the air of new media, yet they nonetheless function as opportune modes of critical industrial performance (Caldwell, 2003 and 2006a)—that is, as branded media conduits through which the dominant corporate powers attempt to ingratiate themselves within digital media culture via displays of real "interactivity" and distinct types of (sub-) cultural capital. Herein the discourse of web 2.0 becomes crucial to shoring up extant institutional practices and proprietary strategies, enabling the brand management of "user flows" among the major media conglomerates. The chapter concludes by arguing that joint ventures like Fearnet operate chiefly as means of preserving the oligopolistic structure of media industries in a digital age, particularly through enabling the corporate development of digital convergence as an embryonic (yet profitable) system of media distribution vis-à-vis web 2.0 strategies of virtual community and audience labor.

The Benefits to Cable: Joint Ventures and Bundled Services

For little more than a decade, VOD has been hyped as the ultimate corporate/consumer service in interactive television and "living room convergence" (Ulin, 2010: 330); as such, it purportedly remains a cost-effective means of digital delivery for studios, a convenient platform of "time-shifted," interactive television for consumers, and a distinct mode of market leveraging for cable operators. However, as viable mode of ancillary film distribution, VOD initially emerged as a competitive

strategy for media conglomerates looking to navigate the impact of digitization vis-à-vis new media outlets. In fact, as Lucas Hilderbrand (2010: 26) points out, the term "video-on-demand" surfaced in trade and popular press reports in 2000 as a way of re-branding traditional pay-per-view home video services; since then, it has been used to identify two distinct kinds of video offerings: downloadable/streaming web-based video and cable television content.

However, to the extent that cable operators have successfully appropriated this dual meaning as a means to promote their own business model—which strategically seeks to integrate VOD and high-speed internet access in a bundle package with subscription TV "according to the logic that its all a matter of digital delivery" (ibid)—web-based video and online content is now more often understood as instant-play streaming or as (unauthorized or licensed) downloads. As a result, VOD has become the primary preserve of cable and satellite distributors.[3] Nonetheless, according to the accepted trade, marketing and promotional discourse, VOD's rise to prominence has more to do with the competitive advantages it offers dominant cable operators *over* satellite and telecom companies (see, e.g., Dempsey, 2005; Mermigas, 2005b; Grant, 2006; Farrell, 2009). For instance, VOD reportedly offers the kind of product/service differentiation that is typically associated with corporate strategies of media conglomeration—e.g., horizontal and vertical integration, branding and repurposing,

[3] Nonetheless, one might also include here categories such as subscription VOD (e.g., Netflix), advertising supported VOD (e.g., Hulu), transactional VOD (e.g., Amazon or iTunes), internet protocol television (IPTV, e.g., Verizon's FiOS), and non-residential VOD (e.g., airlines). However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is largely through reference to cable "free" on demand that I employ the shorthand category of VOD.

segmented markets and specialty labels, genre tiering according to perceived taste differentials—which, as John Caldwell (2006a) points out, increasingly function to rationalize sites of consumption in order to mitigate institutional change and market instability. In other words, VOD is central to the cable industry's overall branding strategies and institutional performance of market distinction: a way to position their respective conglomerated services within emerging, highly competitive and volatile digital media markets.

In terms of convergence initiatives like Fearnet, then, which is a joint venture of Comcast, Lionsgate and Sony Pictures Entertainment, digital movie service presents renewed opportunities for transindustrial cooperation among the major content providers (studios) and cable's multiple system operators. That is, on the one hand, VOD affords cable companies a way to distinguish their services in terms of the sheer capacity of programming titles that are made available via strategic alliance with major studio-distributors and networks.[4] For instance, Comcast, which now has a majority stake (fifty-one percent) in NBCU, as well as twenty percent share in MGM, has more than quintupled the amount of full-length movies and television shows made available on its VOD platforms—up from approximately 12,000 titles in 2006 to 75,000 in 2012 (Winslow, 2012)—in response to the dual threats posed by satellite and telephone companies, as well as to so-called "over-the-top" providers that seek to bypass the pay

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[4] Due to technological limitations of bandwidth capacity, satellite distributors such as DirecTV and DISH have historically been unable to offer the kinds of extensive, no charge VOD packages that underwrite digital cable channels like Fearnet, which is a signature feature of Comcast's Xfinity digital cable service (see Dempsy, 2005; Reardon, 2006a).

TV model altogether by offering content directly to consumers via internet streaming (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, Amazon on-demand). On the other hand, Comcast has been able to leverage these partnerships in its various attempts to negotiate lower licensing and carriage fees with movie-dependent basic cable networks, such as FX and TBS, on the basis that on-demand rights paid directly to studios for movie rights are substantially less than those paid by cable operators to networks for the right to carry a channel (Dempsey, 2005). This strategy has arguably strengthened the position of dominant MSOs like Comcast and Time Warner Cable, whose biggest expense remains the various carriage fees paid to the cable networks.

In addition, cable operators have sought to entice potential and already existing subscribers to sign up for enhanced digital packages through exploiting their various VOD television services. The promotional value of these services is thus envisaged as a way to either convert analog customers to digital packages or possibly corral the "next generation" of cable subscribers through premiere digital video features (Spangler, 2010; Umstead, 2010b). In this sense, one might suggest that the goal of VOD television service is not so much the increased revenue streams made available via the expansion of digitalized content, nor even the added value of hardware rental/sales associated with digital set-top boxes (on which more below), but the *affective brand attachments* generally imagined to be derived from digitally enhanced cable TV subscription. As Rogers Communication (Canada's largest MSO) executive director David Purdy put it recently at the international On Demand Summit 2.0: "everything we do at Rogers is

about extending the existing customer relationship…offering free VOD is key to sustaining and nurturing our customer relationships" (quoted in Spangler, 2010).

For this reason, cable's "free" (that is to say, no extra charge) VOD television services are increasingly figured as crucial components of industrial practice that concurrently reinforce the overall experiential value of cable subscription while at the same time reducing the overall rate of viewer "churn" (that is, the rate of cancellation for another pay TV service, satellite or internet protocol television; see Lieberman, 2009). As one industry trade report put it, "The goal of Comcast is to keep all the VOD [movie and programming titles]…free and thus make it such a powerful attraction to digital customers that they won't be tempted by the siren calls of satellite TV or phone companies" (Dempsey, 2005: 17). Within this context, the added market pressure of competing with alternative pay TV providers (satellite and telecoms) in a new converged media environment has compelled cable operators to increasingly offer bundled, or so-called "triple-play," services in conjunction with on-demand platforms (Reardon, 2006a and 2006b). The goal of such packages is two-fold: on the one hand, cable companies offer a combination of pay TV, high-speed internet access, and voice/data service in order to aggressively compete with telecom providers (e.g., Verizon and AT&T) who, conversely, seek to leverage their fiber optic systems in order to co-opt the video market, and thus convert their subscriber base as a way to directly compete with other multi-service providers. By contrast, satellite distributors remain at a distinct disadvantage in this equation, given their inability to match the triple-play offer (i.e., phone and internet service); instead they emphasize features such as high-definition programming (HDTV)

and advanced personal video recorders (PVRs), as well as transactional access to "the virtual video store."[5]

On the other hand, cable operators have begun to offer more video programming over "authenticated" online video sites (such as Comcast's Xfinity, Time Warner Cable's Roadrunner service, and Cox Communication's Cox.net) as a way to head off challenges from the broadband video environment. As with the telecom's operating IPTV services, the main strategy here is to preserve established pay tiers from online encroachment through broadband initiatives (such as "TV Everywhere"), which specifically promote a cable providers (and/or programmer's) own proprietary websites via strategies that combine triple-play packaging into single delivery. In this way, the triple-play service is designed to preserve long-standing business practices tied to maintaining exclusive access to media content vis-à-vis cable programmers. Indeed, as media industries scholar Alisa Perren (2010: 74) reminds us, "a cable (or satellite) service's value to subscribers comes in part from its offering programming unavailable elsewhere; however, this service is diminished if an entity such as News Corp.-owned FX opts to stream their programming online for free." Accordingly, while some networks have been able to mitigate the potential issue of "cord-cutting" (or bypassing cable service entirely) by

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[5] For instance, satellite-TV provider Dish Network is now bundling its television service with streaming video from Blockbuster, which it acquired in 2011. More generally, however, cable appears to be winning the battle for triple play. As of the time of this writing, for example, Comcast currently ranks as the third largest residential voice/data provider in the US, whereas the number of US homes wired for cable in 2011 (61.5 million) far outpaces those signed up for satellite TV (32.4 million) and IPTV (8.5 million). Meanwhile, the largest broadband providers in the US are MSOs (at a combined 44.3 million subscribers) followed by telephone companies (at a combined 34.3 million subscribers) (see Leichtman Research Group, 2012).

arguing that streaming merely serves promotional purposes (Perren, 2010), the major MSOs have vociferously objected to *free* streaming of content on the grounds that it not only diminishes their status as exclusive content providers but also jeopardizes the economic value of cable programming itself, which is supposedly based on a networks' proprietary restrictions (Sapan, 2010).

Put another way, if the central worry is that content made available on multiple platforms (via internet streaming) will be more preferable to consumers than content made exclusively available to cable and satellite customers,[6] the key issue surrounding authentication of digital media service seems to be about extending control *over* the online environment vis-à-vis cable's existing pay TV structure and subscription model. Hence the industry has responded to online encroachment in two principal ways: first by developing a subscriber fee structure that aims to incorporate "the convenience and flexibility of the web without sacrificing exclusivity" (Sapan, 2010); that is, by developing authentication technology and convergence initiatives (such as Fearnet, but also more visible examples like HBO Go) which operate principally as a way to verify subscriber status as a condition of internet or mobile viewing.

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[6] Nonetheless, industry reports show that the growing anxiety over cord cutting, which has led the cable industry to heighten its call for authentication of "TV Everywhere" initiatives such as HBO GO, may in fact be overblown. For instance, a January 2, 2012, report in *Multichannel News* indicates that spread of online video and social media actually corresponds to increased levels of television consumption over the past six years; moreover, the heaviest online video viewers were reported as also the heaviest TV viewers, suggesting that the availability of content on multiple platforms and mobile devices actually helps to build the TV audience. Finally, the profile of "cord cutters" suggests that the majority of those who dropped cable subscriptions over the last year were not (as is often supposed) young, affluent, and tech-savvy users, but low-income, less-educated denizens of rural areas (Winslow, 2012).

Second, MSOs like Comcast have been developing their own converged media platforms for carriage on other cable systems; for instance, Fearnet has been at the forefront of licensing deals with Time Warner Cable, Cox, and Insight as part of their ongoing push to entice digital subscribers to the bundled triple-play package. As one analyst explained: "cable operators pay a monthly fee to Fearnet and use the service as a lure to get more subscribers to buy digital boxes;" these boxes in turn function as "portals for new revenue generators such as high-speed internet access, telephone service, and high-definition VOD" (Dempsey, 2008). In other words, digital set-top boxes are configured as the be-all-end-all of programming services like Fearnet, which function *primarily* as a way to resell cable subscribers on the triple play package.[7] As a result, convergence initiatives like Fearnet that combine digital cable and internet access as part of on-demand television service ostensibly allows MSOs like Comcast greater opportunity to pursue their goal of becoming "the nation's largest residential ISP and content developer" (Whitney 2007), all through the vertical integration of digital content and delivery.

The Benefits to the Film Industry: Second-Shift Cinema

Meanwhile, cable companies have also responded to online encroachment by stockpiling free on-demand movies in the hope that promotional and distribution-partnerships with major film studios will not only help to maintain existing customer

[7] Cf. the comparable strategy of utilizing other high-definition niche channels like MonstersHD and Chiller as a similar means to upgrade to digital packages and HD hardware; see Dempsey, 2007.

relationships but also make each of their triple-play services more "sticky"—or less susceptible to viewer churn. Indeed, as John Caldwell writes in this context, the inherent "leakiness" of textual appropriation in a digital age means that media companies not only "try to partner and cobrand [with other entities] in order to steer users to corporations with shared economic interests," but also, and more importantly, that "cable executives now strategize (and program) degrees of 'stickiness' in the second-shift world" [i.e., the world of unstable user-flows and network-website synergies] in order to induce users to stay with a package of services in spite of constantly developing (and potentially volatile) digital media markets (2003: 139). Moreover, as Caldwell points out, "this notion (of diverse packaging/singular delivery) mirrors the ways that branding (in the age of digital) works by producing diversity and difference within a single uber-brand" (ibid). For this reason, cable providers are obliged to adopt "looser" forms of management that correspond with the rising trend in joint ventures and commercial partnerships in order to better manage the "textual dispersals" and "user navigations" that are characteristic of the second-shift mediascape (ibid: 136).

Thus, although new technologies have disrupted traditional distribution patterns and programming strategies, the market for movies on-demand remains a relatively stable, if not to say crucial, foundation for maintaining brand management ("diverse packaging/single delivery") within the existing cable infrastructure. In the same way, film studios have been forced to relinquish traditional notions of movie distribution and textual dispersal, and find new ways of producing revenue and controlling consumption after a film leaves a theater (cf. Tryon, 2011). Here the notion of sequential commercial

release patterns (or "windowing") in the face of online and new media applications such as VOD seems to be at once untenable (if not to say structurally obsolete) as well as crucial to preserving business models and institutional relationships with traditional distributors. Put differently, the goal of digital video distribution, at least in its on-demand capacity, seems to be about preserving the commercial "life-cycle" of feature films vis-à-vis traditional ancillary outlets, while also taking care to enfranchise the market potential of subscription-based digital delivery systems.[8]

At the same time, VOD has become an important distribution platform for studio-distributors and filmed entertainment divisions of the major media conglomerates during a time of transition. As numerous commentators have pointed out, the film industry is not only looking to this medium as a relatively cost-effective mode of film distribution and promotion, but also as an approach to immediate revenue sharing through

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[8] Here it is perhaps useful to recall the system of distribution "windows" that a film must go through in order for studios to maintain control over the consumption process (see Ulin, 2010: 30-6). For example, distributors will protect the rights to show films in various formats in order to strategically maximize revenues from paying customers. The distribution "life-cycle" thus typically consists of a theatrical release followed by DVD or Blu-ray, pay-per-view television and domestic VOD, premium cable, and eventually basic cable and broadcast television. However, since the introduction of digital cable on-demand platforms in 2005, the release "window" between DVD and VOD has begun to narrow considerably. Thus, whereas it used to be the case that VOD service providers had to wait 8 to 12 weeks after movies were made available on DVD; however, as recently as 2009, studios have begun to experiment with "day-and-date" releasing, or making movie titles available simultaneously in both DVD and VOD home markets (Umstead, 2010b). Moreover, in some cases, such as independent video releases (IFC films), distributors have utilized VOD in order to make available simultaneous home video release alongside (or even in advance of) theatrical distribution. Partly, this has been a way for studio-distributors like Twentieth Century Fox and Sony to capitalize on "long tail" niche products associated with specialty film divisions, i.e., those "alternative" films that might not garner a major box office debut (Marich, 2010). However, this release strategy is also a way to protect the overall financial interests of studios who are growing increasingly wary of online piracy and unofficial digital delivery.

simultaneous release with Blu-ray/DVD and in some cases theatrical release (Snider, 2012; Umstead, 2010b; Friedman, 2011; Hilderbrand, 2010). In this context, studios are looking to gain further ancillary revenue for both current theatrical releases and catalog titles by urging cable operators to engage in multimillion dollar marketing campaigns aimed at building awareness of VOD television services (see Umstead 2010c), while at the same time ensuring them alternative, officially sanctioned venues for digital film distribution. In effect, as these industries become increasingly more integrated and engaged in the sorts of "corporate convergence" and strategic alliance associated with digital television (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 262-8), they become further dependent upon each other at the level of shared-revenue agreements, the pooling of rights, and collaborated antitrust behavior.

Thus, while cable systems have been developing joint ventures in marketing and distribution that aim to restrict (rather than open up) when and where certain films are made available to consumers via digital platforms, studios attempting to enter the digitalized cable market are afforded valuable resources for delivering licensed content via cable's proprietary infrastructure. The latter includes everything from technical delivery and marketing awareness, to the decoding software of digital set-top boxes, to physical installation and preexisting market organization, to the critical mass of cable subscribers already cued into the industry's digital access systems.[9] The result has been

[9] As of 2010, more than 52 million households were equipped with VOD television service; furthermore, projections have suggested that by 2015, more than 64 million households will have VOD access and nearly 55 million homes will have a DVR (see On demand landscape 2012). In a related note, *Variety* reports that total VOD movie rentals

increased commercial viability for programming entities like Fearnet, which allows major studio-distributors to regulate more effectively how, when, and where media audiences access their licensed feature films, thereby affording these companies a way to navigate emerging digital media platforms while also maintaining distribution channels and pricing models.

All this is to suggest, in other words, that just as release windows are closing around motion pictures, the cable industry is playing an increasingly important role in transforming the home video business, specifically to the point where cable activated VOD now serves in many cases as the first home video rental/release window for movies either immediately following or concurrent with a theatrical release (Umstead, 2010b). In this context, studios have been moving ahead to deliver motion pictures through ostensibly "interactive" digital systems that (quite ironically) end up affording the major conglomerates even *more* control over the conditions under which commercial films are made accessible; indeed as we shall see below, on-demand ventures like Fearnet are not only premised on the differential degrees of user access associated with digital delivery and online cinema (see Lobato, 2009), but also compel forms of audience interactivity and lifestyle segmentation that correspond with the commercial imperatives of marketers.

Nonetheless, while joint ventures like Fearnet are in part conditioned by technological developments in digital delivery and interactive television, they more often attract attention in the name of greater consumer choice and technological convenience *at the expense* of cultural and infrastructural politics. To recall the *Multichannel News*

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rose from $23 million globally in 2006 to $259.4 globally in 2010, with 41% of that revenue stemming from the US market (Marich, 2011).

article cited at the opening of this chapter, for example, the rise of multiplatform movie services like Fearnet are typically invoked as testimony to greater consumer convenience via digital delivery; here the idea that "people like to confront their fears in the comfort of their own living room" (Umstead, 2008) is supplemented by the notion that media convergence appeals most strongly to a core group of "millennials"—or eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old "early adopters"—who move fluidly among digital distribution platforms and new media technologies (Umstead, 2010b). Accordingly, while these postulations take care to highlight the promotional value of non-linear programming and user/viewer interactivity for a particular consumer market, they less often take care to stress the more calibrated reasons why cable companies undertake such web 2.0 style innovations in their business models.

To put it another way, whereas the rhetoric of consumer choice and "cutting edge" technological convenience tends to spotlight the promotional value of services like Fearnet as a way of recruiting media "savvy" viewers to cable through corporate strategies of mass customization, the more important insight to draw here might be that cable providers are themselves undergoing significant changes in the way they market and distribute programming, specifically in order to entice new (interactive) media users back to "old" (seemingly outmoded) media systems (i.e., cable). As former president of Fearnet, Diane Robina, explained to *Multichannel News* regarding Comcast's initial decision to forego a twenty-four hour cable network in favor of a combination website and non-linear cable TV service: "Horror fans are picky, choosing what to watch when they want to watch it. They're not interested in a 24/7 program schedule pushed at them

by a network programmer" (quoted in Dempsey, 2007).[10] Accordingly, changing modes of cable distribution are offered as emergent sites of consumer empowerment and user control; yet rather than truly shift the power of cable TV from networks to viewers (as is the claim of "post-network" television), such strategies merely renew the importance of those who own and control the distribution systems upon which viewer choice is both conditional and accessible. What is more, as the next section argues, they also increase the brand value and reputation of the carrier aggregating that content via digital delivery.

Thus, rather than enable a truly interactive engagement with television, digital cable channels like Fearnet reveal a wider industry strategy aimed at harnessing the (sub-) cultural tastes and customized viewer interactions of VOD as a way to potentially "herd and manage user flows across multiple platforms in the service of particular objectives" (Bennett, 2011: 19). In this sense, then, Comcast has not only sought "to engineer the mannerisms of the multichannel universe within the branded walls of the conglomerate" (Caldwell, 2003: 138), but also to distinguish those mannerisms in terms of the commercial logic of interactive television. Indeed, as we shall see, this strategy further includes the pursuit of niche, on-demand viewing audiences as a function of web 2.0 strategies; that is, in attempting incorporate user-generated content and social networking as a means to promote audience interaction and brand management, Fearnet looks to capture the "ethical surplus" or shared communal meanings and values (Arviddson, 2006: 10) of a particular branch of horror film culture. In doing so, it promotes the freedom of "what to watch and when to watch" associated with VOD as a measure of the marketing

[10] The service has since launched a linear, twenty-four hour cable channel.

and commercial imperatives that aim to rationalize the "work" of interactive, online commercial spaces and digital communities (Andrejevic, 2002).

Cable Television 2.0

The move to incorporate interactive platforms as part of the overall television experience is perhaps nowhere more evident than in discourse surrounding "Television 2.0," which is the name given to digital distribution systems that combine television and internet technologies to offer consumers allegedly unprecedented amounts of viewing and listening materials so as to personally customize their viewing habits in terms of individualized taste patterns (see Horowitz et al., 2007). Speaking of these shifts in the context of post-network television, Lisa Parks has described the rise of personalized television in terms of the industrialized practice of "flexible microcasting," wherein audiences are solicited as having greater control and digital access to any number of movies and TV shows via interconnected digital platforms. Specifically, she writes that flexible microcasting is where "computer and television technologies are combined to produce the effect of enhanced viewer choice in the form of a stream of programming carefully tailored to the viewer's preferences, tastes, and desires" (2004: 135). In this way, post-network television utilizes both digital cable and broadband technologies—while also deepening the continuities between film, television, and the internet—so as to cultivate an increasingly fragmented aggregation of niche viewing audiences. As Parks writes: "the personalization of TV is ultimately about developing narrowly defined yet infinitely flexible content that commodifies layers of individual

identity, desire, taste, and preference" (ibid). In turn, these layers of choice and viewer individuation compel new programming entities that are designed to capitalize on "flexible" networks of "micro" distinction and viewer interaction.

In terms of Fearnet, which advertisers "the web's #1 genre site and online horror community," the model of flexible microcasting applies most readily to the host of interactive features associated with the network's website. In line with Park's discussion of commodified taste and lifestyle distinction, for example, Fearnet.com offers users opportunities to customize their own viewing habits and taste preferences in terms of the broader subcultural community. For instance, users are solicited to identify (and interact) according to media groupings that break down according to stylistic and intra-generic categories (e.g., "Supernatural," "Horror Make Up and Effects," "For the love of horror and gore," "horror comedies"), conventional cult figures and monster types (e.g., "ghost hunters," "Zombie Lovers," "Deranged Lunatics," "The Vampire Brotherhood") and popular horror movie franchises and television series (e.g., "Saw lovers," "A Nightmare on Elm Street," "True Blood," "living dead era"). In effect, genre distinctions operate here not so much to designate a fixed class of texts but different categories of user-consumers. In turn these distinctions invite audiences to interact in ways that encourage and facilitate more efficient forms of interactive, digital media consumption.

However, not only are users invited to participate in Feanet's virtual community; they are also interpellated to digitally customize their own user profiles. That is, they are invited to construct viewing queues, subscribe to cross-marketed VOD television services, and screen programming materials according to their own individual member

profile. This interactive design strategy essentially reinforces the overall multiplication of consumption categories, or what Joseph Turow (1997: 7) calls "lifestyle segregation." Furthermore, such tactics are in keeping with broader marketing trends aimed at sustaining narrowly specific groups of consumers according niche-oriented media markets, while further extending the logic of market segmentation down to the individual user/viewer. As Turow explains, the aim of lifestyle marketing is "to package individuals, or groups of people, in ways that make them useful targets for the advertisers of certain products through certain types of media (1997: 1). In other words, not only are consumer tastes and preferences commercially exploited and commodified by post-network television, they are also packaged according to specific *types* of (inter-related) media culture (e.g., horror film culture). This strategy has implications not only for the major studios and cable companies, but also, as Amanda Lotz points out, for a host of other media platforms associated with TV's emerging status as a "subcultural forum." Lotz writes:

> Television operates as a *subcultural forum* when it reproduces a similar experience as the electronic public sphere, but among more narrow groups that share particular cultural affinities and tastes…Importantly, when television operates as a subcultural forum, it is often integrated with the use of other media that similarly reflect subcultural tastes and sensibilities. (2007: 43)

As these developments suggest, then, the notion of contemporary post-network television as a subcultural forum resonates quite nicely with Fearnet's attempts to target and deliver narrowly specific taste demographics according to the logic of media convergence. Conversely, it also appears to resonate with horror film culture's predilection for markets and commerce that openly sustain niche-oriented—or "lifestyle"—categories of cult

distinction (see Jancovich, 2000 and 2002). Indeed, these categories afford members of the online horror community the chance to perform subcultural-like distinctions in their relatively exclusive viewing and media buying habits (cf. Cherry, 2010).

Hence the development of post-network television as "an aggregator of a broad range of niche and on-demand viewing audiences" (Lotz, 2007: 34) holds significant implications for the construction of film/genre communities in a digital age, particularly in the way sites like Fearnet emphasize specific features of that community so as to demarcate certain consumer identities and subcultural traditions. For instance, at the level of intrageneric conflict (Jancovich, 2000: 28) the emphasis on individuated difference is evident in the way the site pits fans of particular sub-genres in relation to broader subcultural hierarchies in order to privilege certain taste preferences as more authentic. Whereas Fearnet stockpiles movies that ostensibly crosscut "horror, thriller, and suspense" categories, for example, it nevertheless favors those films associated with "real" horror subculture (i.e., the graphic horror tradition; see Waller, 1987 and Jancovich, 2000), and thus facilitates the notion that the digital horror community constitutes an alternative taste culture.[11]

More generally, Fearnet's digital media convergence allows Comcast and Sony to exploit differences in horror film culture as a means of connecting circuits of distribution and sites of consumption. For example, web users are invited to choose from a wide stream of horror-related news, reviews, video clips, trailers, music videos, full-length

[11] Perhaps for this reason, the site has found favorable reception among the ostensibly "underground" online horror community, as represented by such independent sites as Bloody-Disgusting.com, Dread Central.com and Horror-movies.ca. (see, e.g., SpookyDan, 2006; Uncle Creepy, 2011).

movie titles and short films as they access studio-licensed content. Furthermore, they are encouraged to buy or rent musical ringtones and background wallpapers for mobile phones; peruse photo galleries and video blogs documenting the latest "behind-the scenes" action and news items taking place on the sets of contemporary horror movie productions; read exclusive interviews with film directors and other genre celebrities; or simply "interact" with the site's many promotional offers, giveaways, commercial sweepstakes, and corporate gifts.

Most recently, Fearnet's 2012 "St. Patty's Day Sweepstakes," invited users to "make your friends green with envy" by registering "once a day, everyday" for the chance to win, among other things, "a pot of DVD gold," including the Final Destination DVD Collection, a product of the Sony/MGM video library. Not only do such marketing events ensure the subcultural experience of Fearnet's user-base, they also provide company executives with more precise techniques for measuring user demographics: for instance, St. Patty's Day Sweepstake participants were required to fill out forms asking not only for basic demographic information (name, age, gender, etc.) but also an approximation of the number of "hours logged" on the site. Such tactics are clearly aligned with the sorts of digital media surveillance documented by Mark Andrejevic (2002), as new media technologies that grant consumers (allegedly) greater choice and customization over the types of programming they are exposed to in exchange for providing detailed information about viewing habits. However, these regimes of "interactive surveillance" unevenly align the interests of media corporations and consumers: as Andrejevic points out, far from offering a more open, dialogic engagement

with media producers, they oblige users to “enter into a relationship of surveillance-based rationalization” as a condition of ostensibly greater convenience and mass customization (ibid: 238). As a result, convergent modes of digital television such as Fearnet entice users to perform the “work” of generating their own demographic information, while corporations and marketers are able to more efficiently catalog and aggregate that information in order to develop custom-tailored niche products and services.[12]

Similarly, the site’s signature “Gift Guide” and “Fear Market” features a wide swath of brand-name merchandise and lifestyle accessories, which are taken from various affiliated commercial and social networking websites—everything from toys, T-shirts, DVDs, and video games, to comic books, soundtrack albums and genre music downloads, which ostensibly represent the “coolest and creepiest gifts on the web.”[13] Indeed, these sorts of digital cross-promotions and merchandising efforts help to foster new modes of flexible microcasting while providing customized access to online markets; in effect they turn the web into “a self-service vending machine of cultural commodities” (Schiller, 2007: 141). However, they also represent cable’s renewed attempts to mobilize branding and niche advertising (via the web) as a way to maintain existing business models; as former president and general manager of Fearnet, Diane

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[12] It should also be noted that MSOs are likewise able to generate a treasure trove of user/viewer data through digital technologies of VOD software and digital set-top boxes in addition to internet content delivery portals (see Splangler, 2011); in this way, cable providers like Comcast operate not only as vertically integrated content providers and distributors, but also as quasi-market research organizations with proprietary access to interactive consumer-database systems.

[13] Predictably, music selections on the site’s music downloads page range from extreme metal to industrial rock music to goth, while the “comics and books” section includes titles ranging from the latest in horror-related fantasy fiction to novelty items such as “The Encyclopedia of Hell.”

Robina, explained to *Forbes* magazine, "it's about finding a more robust ad model for the web. I think that means more creative ads. There's got to be a different type of advertising that caters to this screen that's 12 inches away from you and has a lot of interactivity to it…Really, the biggest keys on the web side are both using social media in an authentic, dynamic way and employing this concept of search engine optimization effectively" (quoted in Rose, 2009). The latter reference (to search engine optimization [SEO]) is particularly telling, for it refers to improving the visibility of a website vis-à-vis algorithmic internet search results. However, as an internet marketing strategy, SEO also involves aspects of website design, including "gift guides" and "shopping carts," which increase the number of backlinks from one site to another via search features associated with a target audience (see Segal, 2011). Hence commercialized modes of audience participation and interactivity are, in this sense, conceived primarily as a way to reinforce the overall market rationalizations of service providers; the goal, as Robina concisely put it, is to "get in places where the target consumer is" (quoted in Rose 2009).

As a result, in addition to these overtly commercialized web attractions, registered users—or "victims," as the Fearnet site appropriately dubs them—are also encouraged to participate directly in the creation and circulation of web content. For example, the site allows users to produce galleries of individual material, to upload videos and mash-ups, and to create and manage custom video playlists as a featured component of online membership. This is partly a way to mimic and internalize unruly fan behaviors (e.g., digital piracy, consumer mash-ups), while also creating buzz around branded entertainment properties; as Robina says of the site's mash-up software, Fearnet can post

copyrighted material and say, “Here’s *Saw III*, so make us a new trailer, and *legally*” (emphasis added; quoted in Moss, 2007). To that end, Fearnet has also taken care to cultivate a virtual online community of horror film fans[14] as part of its overall web 2.0 business model, while also incorporating participatory fan practices as a way to capture increasingly detailed information about audience patterns and digital media use. Thus, whereas on the one hand, the site’s social networking capacity allows Fearnet users to chat in open forums, create their own personalized web pages, tag or remix licensed movie materials, and upload user-generated content (including photos, poems, artwork, and fan fiction) as a function of user sociality, on the other hand, the site’s web 2.0 paradigm fulfills a rather complicated (yet no less essential) marketing task of audience research in a digital age. That is, by combining digital interactivity and VOD content-distribution as a means to improve upon existing audience measurement techniques, Fearnet mobilizes emergent media technologies as a way to enfold user/viewers into the “digital enclosure” (Andrejevic 2002), and thus make audience interactivity and fannish enthusiasm both productive and commercially valuable as something that can be more efficiently managed and recorded.

In this way, the site accomplishes the dual objectives of web 2.0 discourse as a corporate strategy: first, “to capture and harness the creative energies and collective intelligences of their users” (Jenkins, 2010) and, secondly, to go back and sell access to that community via forms of commercial interactivity and paid service. Referring to this

[14] According to *Advertising Age* (2012) and Rentrak, the data-gathering agency that specializes in the VOD market, Fearnet maintains over 270, 000 registered online users and logs an average of 12 million VOD views a month.

type of online fan input and its overall importance for creating a more tailored media experience for the Fearnet brand, Robina said: "We wanted to give the user lots of different ways to communicate with us, and with each other. When you post a video or post a story or photo, people can comment on that, and they'll chat together as well" (quoted in Moss, 2007). Despite the rhetoric of community and collaboration, however, the marketing team at Fearnet continues to define its users primarily in terms of individual consumers whose primary relationship is to the brand that provides them services, as opposed to the broader online horror community. As Robina commented in another context: "The web turns out to be a really great platform…It's very much appealing to our 18-to-34 target viewer who wants to watch what they want when they want to, and it's important to say to our [that is to say, *Fearnet*'s] fans that we are a breathing, live brand that makes content" (quoted in Umstead 2008: 15). Here, a fundamental anxiety about the perceived legitimacy of corporate web 2.0 portals is allayed (paradoxically) through strategies of digital media convergence that seek to capitalize on the authenticity of online brand engagement and audience participation.

It is against this background then, that user/viewer interactivity becomes the crux for justifying a conglomerated entertainment platform. Indeed, according to Adam Arvidsson, one of the most important trends in contemporary media culture is the progressive inclusion of those forms of sociality and community commonly associated with subcultural practice, as these provide the "contexts of consumption" that make possible the production and realization of brand value (2006: 10). For this reason, one might consider Fearnet's user/viewer interactions a form of "free labor" (Terranova,

2000; Arvidsson, 2006: 10), which not only permits companies like Comcast to integrate participatory components into their own convergent business models (and thus better exploit users for profit) but also generates considerable feedback for channel executives and advertisers seeking to court Fearnet's "victims." Furthermore, Fearnet's VOD service is only secondarily concerned (if at all) with granting user/viewers real input into the programming procedure, and more interested in appealing to consumers in a way that maintains corporate control over circuits of film/TV distribution and consumer interactivity. Indeed as a condition of "free" viewing and interactive engagement, user/viewers are asked to submit to the commercial dictates of personalized, post-network television; however, in exchange for this, they are obliged to have their tastes commodified in a manner that is consistent with social network exploitation and the contradictions of user-generated labor: to wit, "users are offered a modicum of control over the product of their creativity in exchange for the work they do in building up online community and sociality upon privately controlled network infrastructures" (Andrejevic, 2011: 94). As such, Fearnet's "victims" facilitate the flexible rationalization and commercialization of digital horror film culture.

Conclusion

When Fearnet launched in 2006, it was hailed by industry-insiders and observers as sound business practice—an example of the kinds of strategic partnerships and transindustrial alliance demanded of major media corporations in a digital age. More exactly, it came to represent a "safer" model of channel creation: that is, a way to avoid

the pitfalls of a traditional startup models while capitalizing on the non-linear advantages of "virtual" networks and digital television (Crupi, 2006; Moss, 2006; Dempsey, 2007). Accordingly, whereas the popular and business rhetoric surrounding Fearnet continues to stress the conveniences of digital television and consumer choice and customization for paying subscribers, the basis for such developments is economic policy, and specifically the vertical integration of digitized content and distribution systems. Thus, Comcast's own video subscription services, including "free" VOD channels like Fearnet, which are seen as emblematic of the company's attempts at "future proofing" the cable industry against the encroachment of both satellite and telecom competitors, (Grant, 2006), are recognized as more broadly representative of the changing corporate strategies and emergent business models that characterize digital cable television. In short, these strategies aim to consolidate power within the cultural industries by emphasizing existing catalogs of licensed entertainment and intellectual property alongside the distribution systems for gaining conditional access to that content. In this context, increasingly competitive pressures from satellite and telephone companies (as well as the broadband environment more generally) have compelled "the industry's attempt to position itself at the heart of digital culture, against the competition posed by new digital media forms" (Bennett, 2011: 6).

Thus the continued importance of Fearnet's multiplatform brand speaks to the major conglomerates' strategies for creating and controlling interactive media users: while it purports to offer the types of niche programming that consumers allegedly want (nay "demand") in a fragmented media environment—specifically by catering to the

individual taste preferences and cultural distinctions of genre fans—it also affords cable systems like Comcast the added value of being able to showcase the consolidation of multiple services (digital cable, internet access, and mobile phone applications) into a single delivery system. Additionally, it remains tightly circumscribed by the various licensing agreements and revenue-sharing deals negotiated by the major studio-distributors involved in "windowing" Fearnet's branded media content. As a result, it is not so much that Fearnet user/viewers are able to choose "what they want to watch when they want to watch it," but rather that they must choose from a menu of acquired movie titles and independent features that are negotiated at the institutional level of joint ventures and corporate partnerships, including specific contract deals and distribution arrangements between copyright holders. In this sense, Fearnet may represent what Amanda Lotz calls "a truly post-network environment"—that is to say, "television without networks," or at least without a centralized networking service that determines (absolutely) the programming, scheduling, and the temporal flow of content (2007: 117). However, this process of assembling distinct genre programming ostensibly at the hands of individual user-consumers is nonetheless predetermined at the macro-level of transindustrial convergence and corporate structure. As a result, the site's custom-tailored commercial interactivity makes clear that the increasing rationalization of niche marketing and programming service in the post-network era is not so much about viewer customization and convenience but marketplace discipline

Conclusion

The Viral Future of Horror Cinema

> A film today is merely a billboard stretched out in time, designed to showcase tomorrow's classics in the video stores and television reruns.
>
> (Elsaesser, 2001: 11)

> Film can be viewed as a viral marketing scheme.
>
> (Caldwell, 2005: 95)

In recent years, two stories within the entertainment press have underscored the ways in which horror cinema is currently being reconfigured in the context of viral media and ongoing transindustrial consolidation: first, and most notably, the release and event-movie marketing of one of the most phenomenally successful horror movies in modern history, *Paranormal Activity* (2007). The film, originally developed as an independent feature for the festival circuit and later granted widespread release in 2009 by Paramount Pictures, can be viewed as a veritable test case in reflexive critical industrial practice. Written and directed by novice filmmaker and erstwhile videogame software programmer Oren Peli, it documents the travails of a young middle-class couple as they anxiously record the supernatural occurrences plaguing their haunted suburban California home. The entire film, shot in the documentary style of homespun "found footage," was reputedly produced in Peli's own home, with unknown actors, on a budget of less than $15,000. Nevertheless, the film grossed nearly $200 million at the international box office in 2009, making it allegedly "the most profitable film ever made" with a 433,900% return on investment (Shone, 2009; Frankel, 2009), far exceeding the previous record-holder (a similar piece of digital horror moviemaking) *The Blair Witch Project* (2001).

The film was hailed as an artistic triumph, which is to say, as evidence of the creative brilliance of a few talented individuals (most notably, Peli but also the film's producers and marketers) in the face of implacable industrial and commercial odds. Moreover, its success was used to confirm a romantic myth perpetuated by the industry and infotainment press—that "taking risks" in a business otherwise defined by overwhelming market failure has the ability to attract not only a widespread audience but also large-scale studio investment. The *Los Angeles Times* put it this way, "hardly any micro-budget movie ever escapes its creator's basement, and to travel all the way to the slate of a studio that releases 'Star Trek' and 'Transformers'—that's beyond exceptional." Indeed the film's against-all-odds reputation was further hyped by the movie's producers, including John Blum, who provided the numerical sums to back up the *LA Times*' putative claims of creative genius: "Once every five years, a guy makes a movie for a nickel that can cross over to a broad audience…there are about 3,000 of these movies made every year, so this film is about one in 15,000" (quoted in Horn, 2009).

Arithmetic aside, the movie's reputation as a micro-budget miracle belies the extent to which this "beyond exceptional" horror film benefited quite tremendously from Paramount's already well-established distribution arm and marketing power. In fact, whereas the film initially was acquired by Dreamworks Studios (then a unit of Paramount) in 2007, with the intention of making it into a big-budget studio remake, the plan was eventually scrapped in favor of a more calculated approach: distributing the original in a staggered release pattern across thirteen college towns in the form late-night (or "midnight") movie screenings in the hope of generating enough *Blair Witch Project*-

like buzz to attract sufficient anticipation for a subsequent nationwide release (see Fritz, 2009). Thus, by gradually increasing venues from thirteen to thirty-three to one-hundred-sixty to, eventually, two thousand theaters, and thereby re-creating the conditions for a tangible cult movie experience (word-of-mouth promotion, low-budget exploitation fare, midnight screenings), the executive team behind *Paranormal Activity* sought, quite effectively, to position the film in the minds of both mainstream and niche-horror movie audiences as always-already a genuine "cult favourite" (Shone, 2009).

What is more, they effectively seized upon the film's "underground" marketability by devising a sophisticated social media initiative designed to cultivate consumer demand in key markets—that is, to treat the film as a viral marketing campaign that could be "stretched out in time." Specifically, internet-savvy marketers at Paramount sponsored a Twitter account and Facebook page where fans were invited not only to post their comments and reactions to the film but also to petition for its wider release by going to the film's official website and hitting a "demand it" button; the ensuing "competition," in the form of a running tally, would then determine which cities, locations, and venues would screen the film next.[1] By the end of the first week, *Paranormal Activity* had become Twitter's most popular trending topic, while the movie's Facebook page had over 125,000 fans and the official website had more than one million hits (Shone, 2009).

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[1] Previously, the eventful.com/"demand it" internet service had been used by popular music fans looking to build word-of-mouth for certain acts, while encouraging the highest tallying bands to play a gig at a particular locale. According to executives at Paramount, the *Paranormal Activity* application for this service was Demand's first for a feature film (see Horn, 2009).

In addition, horror fan websites like Dread Central and Bloody Disgusting.com were petitioning user/viewers on behalf of the film's producers, urging fans to join the Twitterati and Facebook crowd in championing the film's marketing effort. In some cases, the promotional mechanisms of the film's producers were even extolled as a point of identification and pride among fan-audiences, with one website proclaiming, "Every once in a while the stars align and good things happen to this genre we call our own—and to the people who make the movies we love. Case in point: Every single screening of *Paranormal Activity* sold out last night, and the film is looking to rake in $500,000 for the weekend. Hearty congrats to filmmaker Oren Peli and to Paramount, which has executed a textbook successful marketing campaign for the film" (*Dread Central*, 2009). The post ends with a fan solicitation that reads much like a billboard slogan: "Make sure you're part of the phenomenon. DEMAND it for your town too!"

Indeed, while it is easy to recognize the reflexive marketing, entertainment and branding strategies involved this savvy piece of internet promotion, the importance of audience interactivity and collective participation arguably goes beyond mere cross-promotion; that is, the social networking techniques underwriting *Paranormal Activity* as a *viral media* phenomenon indicate not only the degree to which certain new media platforms allow for a more expansive, alternative engagement with horror movie culture, but also the extent to which these broader social activities now function as a crucial element of industrial practice and business plans. For instance, not only did the "demand it" tool serve to lure viewer/users into the film's marketing scheme—thus fanning the flames of internet chatter and providing fan-audiences a sense that their own collective

actions were in fact the catalyst driving commercial success—it also provided studio executives with an expedient way to effectively gauge the extent of potential audience interest, and to make adjustments accordingly.

In other words, the viral schematics of *Paranormal Activity* served to at once justify the ever-deepening surveillance of people's movie-going experience through the rhetoric of populist appeal, while also providing a more-or-less direct link to audiences. As one Paramount executive explained, "If you get enough interest and [the online viral marketing campaign] catches on and really works, you could use Demand for two or three weeks…and then put it [the film] out normally [i.e., in a blanket national release]…It allows us to be really responsive to what is actually happening" (Horn, 2009). Indeed, according to the distribution official in charge of the film's gradual rollout, Don Harris, the rather unconventional release strategy not only paid off in monetary terms but fulfilled the corresponding objectives of the viral marketing scheme, which was to play an effective gatekeeping role for producers and marketers in positioning the film as, on the whole, "newsworthy" (Kapsis, 2009: 5), whilst also supporting the claim that box office receipts were simply a reflection of outstanding consumer demand: "everybody else thought we should be going faster…but I thought we were doing a pretty good job of seeding the ground as we went" (quoted in Frankel, 2009). Hence, producer John Blum was being more than a little frank in suggesting "they're using the movie to sell the movie," the idea being that "you bring it home to yourself, instead of feeling that it's being pushed on you" (quoted in Cieply, 2009). In this way, executives at Paramount sought to capitalize on the explosive popularity of

"peer-to-peer" social networking as a fundamental component of the *Paranormal Activity* experience, making it not simply an add-on feature of the film's promotion and advertising plan but a crucial aspect of engaging horror movie culture itself.

Meanwhile, these same technologies and marketing strategies afforded audiences the chance to maintain a more general experience of collective participation and inter-subjective connection vis-à-vis film culture, an experience often associated with more expansive models of movie consumption as a social *practice* (see Turner, 2006), as opposed to a singular textual experience. In other words, *Paranormal Activity* catalyzed the conditions for cinemagoing as a public event and social activity with repercussions beyond the traditional site of film viewing, the movie theater—and this despite the rise of increasingly fragmented taste markets, audience demographics, and the proliferation of film-delivery platforms. Indeed, as Charles Acland has pointed out in this context, theories of contemporary movie-going abound with images of personalized content, countless niche demographics and marketplace identities—all united under the banner of media convergence and the "post-theatrical" film experience (2003: 24). However, these efforts to niche-market films to specialized markets pale in comparison to the discursive hype that continually surrounds and underwrites a few large-scale cinematic "events," which aim to target the general movie-going population. Indeed these events, such as *Paranormal Activity*, seek to utilize viral marketing technologies as a way to generate a more shared understanding and common experience of networked film culture as a public experience. And in this sense, emphasis lies not with an isolated film text but with the variety of behaviors, practices, and discourses that inform movie consumption.

Among the more prominent of these discourses, Acland points out, is the gesture of "being the know"—that, is possessing up-to-date popular knowledge of the "current cinema" as it fluctuates with various production cycles, commercial release patterns, attendance figures and the conventions of box office reporting. For Acland, the current cinema is a designation of both industrial knowledge and social affiliation; that is, it "establishes a sense of being 'in sync' with the business and with other similarly invested people" (2003: 78). As such, it constitutes one of the more crucial "public dimensions" of contemporary movie consumption, providing an extra-textual discursive connection to the machinations of industry as well as to cinema culture more broadly, as it is enmeshed within the daily rhythms of everyday life (ibid: 76-7). Thus, whereas one of the most common refrains heard among those who lament today's digital movie culture is that digital media technologies increasingly threaten the communal experience and face-to-face interactions of popular film culture as it is practiced in theaters, new social networking media now arguably allow for a renewed sense of shared, collective experience and popular knowledge as regards the *virtual* spaces of commercial movie-going. In brief, they challenge our cultural assumptions about divisions between public and private space, individual film texts and their surrounding media (Acland, 2003: 45-59).

Furthermore, they stipulate an approach that locates film squarely *within* the study of popular culture—that is, in accordance with the cultural contexts of ancillary movie consumption and the institutional contexts of transindustrial movie production, distribution, and circulation. And herein lies the key contribution of my project's

analysis of how various media markets and institutional discourses effectively serve to further distinctions between and among popular film cultures such as horror: that is, in the process of emphasizing certain subcultural traditions and commercial media practices, the assemblage of promotional, marketing, and reception discourse I examine here effectively conditions the broader commercial logic and industrial strategies that contribute to bringing individual horror films (such as *Paranormal Activity*) and specific horror film trends (such as its many imitators) to the screen. At the same time, these discourses are connected to the circuits of distribution and sites of popular film consumption that facilitate the "critical" distinction of horror movies across media.

To be sure, major studios and media conglomerates may also reincorporate these practices and virtual spaces as part of the promotion of commercial films (as in the case of *Paranormal Activity*); however, the success of these "viral" conditions of contemporary movie-going experience lies not simply with the ability of the culture industry to tap into these social activities but also with the fact that they allow for at least the imagined social experience of watching and engaging horror cinema "with the crowd." As one executive put it just prior to the *Paranormal Activity* release, "The movie could be stratospheric, or it could just become a cult favorite" (Horn, 2009); either way, however, the social networking campaign would arguably serve as an attempt to revive the more social aspects of horror movie consumption for a digital age—and thereby establish a genuine sense of subcultural belonging and connection, as well as audiences being "in sync" with the marketing ploys of industrial managers. For this reason, the marketing strategies conjured up for the *Paranormal Activity* release were

intended "not so much to sell the movie as to make people ask for it" (ibid)—and thus to cultivate "ground-level" mystique and interest that might in turn perpetuate a sense that, as one executive put it, this was "more of an event than just a film" (Frankel, 2009). In turn, audience activities and the collective participation of online fans would be used to justify not only a calculated business plan for the film's theatrical release, but also an excuse for further marketing opportunities for additional formats, such as the DVD.[2]

A Thriving Aftermarket

All this is to suggest, then, that the concept of horror cinema, as both an industry *and* a culture, catalyzes a type of social experience in which the actual film itself is but one component in a much larger "viral" media environment, wherein broader institutional, critical, and popular discourses intersect with a vast array of new and old media platforms. Thus, future work in horror cinema needs to be attentive to the questions posed by such "intermedia migration" (Acland 2003: 24) of horror films and the overall "routinization" of horror movie-going as a component of broader industrial and cultural practices. That is, horror film studies needs to consider an analytical approach that emphasizes more broadly the way different film genres effectively cut

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[2] As *Variety* reported in 2009 during the weeks immediately following the film's national release, Paramount was promising to include the names of all fans who registered on the official *Paranormal Activity* website as part of the DVD and Blu-ray credits. The gimmick was similar to one performed by New Line's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which included the names of charter members of the online fan club on the credits of the DVD releases of the three "Rings" films. As Paramount's VP of Interactive Marketing, Amy Powell, explained of the studio's decision: "The success of 'Paranormal Activity' would not have been possible without the million-plus fans who went to the ParanormalMovie.com official website and demanded the movie in their hometown" (Lerman, 2009).

across ostensible media borders, and thus challenge the separation of distinct media cultures. To that end, I have sought with this dissertation to analyze the various media platforms involved in the multimedia circulation, repackaging, and repurposing of horror film culture (television, DVD, VOD, the Internet, and soundtrack albums), and how these platforms inevitably allow for new industrial strategies designed to mobilize consumers.

Additionally, I have borrowed from research into contemporary media industries, and particularly work by John Caldwell, to describe how these marketing and reception discourses work to construct "critical" distinction for the horror genre, according to the various interpretive categories and methods typically associated with popular and academic discourse (authorship, canonization, and symptomatic interpretation). What is more, I have considered how these categories dovetail with commercial practices of branding and specialized taste markets, which not only affect the circulation and mediation of horror film culture but also its host of associated promotional forms (e.g., "re-imaginings"/remakes, auteurism, conglomerated video-on-demand networks and web 2.0 sites, compiled soundtrack albums). In short, I have sought to analyze the way horror cinema now functions as a site for organizing audience reception across multiple media contexts and entertainment industries, as these industries are designed to manage an increasingly diversified field of niche media markets. As a convergent media phenomenon, horror cinema now utilizes the internet (among other "ancillary" media platforms) to not only promote and distribute horror films but to more generally cross over into other popular cultural forms and entertainment structures (e.g., social media, popular music, post-network TV). As such, horror scholars might productively bear in

mind the economic and institutional changes affecting the movie industry at large—changes which, as suggested in the case of *Paranormal Activity*, have somewhat altered the meanings and pleasures made available to horror movie audiences.

At the same time, the parameters of horror cinema, and particularly horror movie consumption, appear a rather elusive figment of prevailing critical and industrial discourses, discourses that ultimately seek to make horror film trends and their audiences both knowable and predictable. As Acland reminds us, attempts to imagine the film audience as a discursive construct in both academic and industrial contexts often dovetail with marketers' efforts to conceptualize films as stable textual objects: "a chief operation of the film apparatus has been to assure and promote this consistency…[as] industry agents, from marketers to cinema designers, have attempted to conceptualize an unwavering text and event, one that suits an image of a standardized and predictable cinema patron" (2003: 47). Therefore, given the inherently slippery, intermedia nature of contemporary movie-going experience, juxtaposed with the discourses that seek to more critically know and interpret that experience for institutional gain, one place to begin an examination of horror cinema's viral future is an analysis of the different ways horror film culture is "made" to seem whole and unique as a function of industry and scholarly proceedings.

As suggested in Chapter One, for example, both the academy and the industry make assumptions about the "nature" of horror films and their audiences in the hope that, ultimately (if rather implicitly), this will ensure their greater institutional power. As a result, horror cinema is alternatively imagined and/or re/valued in these contexts as a

crucial site of critical analysis and cultural theorizing—activities which in turn drive the institutional performance of critics, fans, directors, and other industry gatekeepers. At the same time, assumptions about the horror movie audience serve to perpetuate certain ideas about the genre as a distinct taste culture, and thus to underwrite certain industrial practices which aim to discursively delimit the boundaries of horror movie consumption. These include, as I have suggested, the circulation and overlap of horror cinema with other media formats, and the social engagements that derive therein (e.g., from DVD culture, the internet, cable television, video-on-demand, music CDs and soundtrack albums).

However, they also involve the segmentation of the horror movie audience into distinct "lifestyle" clusters (Turow, 1997), which are made to correspond with the imagined tastes, habits, and consumer preferences of horror film fans. As suggested in chapters Fours and Five, these "branded media communities" (ibid) afford industrial managers the opportunity to not only potentially coordinate and exploit the activities of horror movie audiences across different media sectors, but also to effectively transform ostensibly critical acts of interpretation, identification, and affective fan attachment into sellable information and marketable commodities. At the same time, they allow horror movie audiences the chance to experience and make sense of their own (branded) cultural identities in a manner consistent with "lifestyle segregation" (ibid), the result being a more interactive and "customizable" experience of horror movie culture. Thus, further questions to consider when examining the viral future of horror cinema include both how recent developments in the political economy of film and media industries have been

aimed to accommodate multiple acts of film consumption across different formats and cultural contexts, but also how these formats increasingly look to exploit already existing subcultural distinctions at the level of reception.

To take a second example: many new digital distribution outlets for horror, such as cable television and genre-based VOD (see Chapter Five) privilege a similar type of fan interactivity and cult discourse as a way to further capitalize on viewer/user interactions within the context of digital movie culture. However, these same outlets also afford independent producers a viable business model for getting their films seen—particularly micro-budget horror movies that, unlike *Paranormal Activity*, might not be so fortunate as to acquire a nationwide theatrical release. In fact, these films belong to a growing species of cult horror cinema, catalogued by Lobato and Ryan (2011), which are produced and distributed by non-studio entities, and which offer alternative routes to horror film canonization and authentication.

In the case of a movie like *The Human Centipede* (2010), for instance, which was an independent feature that became yet another viral media phenomenon following its acquisition by IFC Films in 2010 (IFC Films is a sibling company of the cable network Independent Film Channel), the prevailing consensus seems to be that market-driven customization at the level of distribution is most evident at the bottom end of the horror spectrum, and that ultra low-budget horror must not only cater to a non-studio distributor's (in this case a niche cable channel's) preference for films deemed either too "marginal" or "risky" to be of any interest to the major media conglomerates, but also that these films must additionally craft materials in such a way that suits a distributor's

commercial demand for edgy content. Thus, rather than produce films aimed at squarely at the major studio-dominated theatrical market, independent filmmakers are now generating more and more obscure titles designed primarily for non-theatrical aftermarket release. What is more, these films tend to come with their own textual agenda and promotional logic, as much of this activity is clustered around what Chris Anderson (2006) dubs the "long tail" distribution model—that is, the far end of the horror movie economy, where budgets are low and audiences are especially fragmented. Nonetheless, this model has incubated a great number of textual formats (e.g., direct-to-DVD and direct-to-download release) and sub-genre categories (ranging from nazisploitation to shocksploitation), which in turn correspond with fluctuations in distribution context. Long-tail markets are therefore providing an outlet for countless independent horror films that would not previously have been distributed in any meaningful sense, and which furthermore call into question the notion of horror film as a coherent generic category; rather the fragmentation of non-theatrical horror markets has contributed greatly to the diversification of traditional genre categories and marketable demographics (see Lobato and Ryan, 2010: 193-9).

The result is that most horror movies today are not made for horror film audiences per se, but for niche distribution companies, and that these companies must in turn look to capitalize on the discourse of horror cinema as a field inextricably bound up with a politics of sub-cultural difference and distinction. For instance, whereas *The Human Centipede* debuted theatrically in the U.S. in 2010 to lukewarm box office success,[3] it

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[3] The film grossed $181,467 domestically based on limited U.S. theatrical release.

nonetheless achieved a significantly greater accomplishment in the aftermarket, registering nearly two-and-a-half-million U.S. dollars in DVD and Blu-ray sales and VOD rentals, and inspiring throngs of hardcore movie fans to post endless commentary on scores of internet sites. Moreover, while the film achieved nowhere near the viral marketing coup and commercial success of its predecessor, *Paranormal Activity*, it nevertheless earned significant headlines (and cult status) as a result of its gross-out storyline: in particular the movie centers on a crazed German doctor who kidnaps three Anglo tourists and joins them together surgically, mouth to anus, thus forming a "human centipede." Dubbed "the most horrific film ever made" by reviewers in the British and North American entertainment press (see, e.g., Cox, 2010; Collis, 2010), *The Human Centipede*'s public reputation as "exploitative and sickening" (Ordoña, 2010) film no doubt helped to confer upon it the type of counter-mainstream distinction often associated with cult films and fans.[4]

Yet the fact that *The Human Centipede* also benefited greatly from widespread internet buzz, a calculated distribution strategy,[5] and intensive media exposure suggests

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[4] A few more prominent critics even went so far as to draw a correlation between the film's revolting premise and its savvy marketing strategy: Roger Ebert (2010) for instance remarked how *Centipede* is "deliberately intended to inspire incredulity, nausea and hopefully outrage. It's being booked as a midnight movie, and is it ever. Boozy fanboys will treat it like a thrill ride" (Ebert, 2010). Peter Travers (2010) of *Rolling Stone* similarly indicated the effectiveness of this strategy for attracting a narrowly defined target audience: "This horror show will be heaven for devotees of four-star torture porn and zero-star hell for everyone else" (Travers, 2010).

[5] For instance, IFC initially launched the film with no MPAA rating, on a limited theatrical release model (ten cities nationwide), with an added VOD component for IFC subscribers. The distributor then relied on word-of-mouth and the "grassroots" marketing as a means to capitalize on the public discourse generated by critical reviews and limited screenings (see Stewart, 2011).

that the aura of transgression and exclusivity, which is evidently central to cult horror films and audiences (see Jancovich, 2002), owes as much today to the discursive procedures of cult canonization as it does to any inherent stylistic features of low-budget genre filmmaking. That is, the institutional dynamics of cult movie circulation and distribution, not to mention the institutional arrangements of the media themselves into distinct "layers" of access with connotations of "underground" and "mainstream" (cf. Thornton, 1996 on popular music), play a critical role in nourishing the very conditions of possibility for cult identity to emerge and flourish. For this reason, *The Human Centipede* might be taken as an example that highlights the productivity of non-traditional distribution outlets and viral marketing strategies in their capacity to both circulate otherwise marginal or edgy material as well as gin up aftermarket demand for such material. As Lobato and Ryan (2011: 196) argue, for example, with respect to the various distribution networks that underwrite contemporary horror movie consumption, "from a niche distributor's perspective, products must differentiate themselves from mainstream titles to capture audiences." In the case of *The Human Centipede*, the film's infamous reputation and limited accessibility as part of IFC's niche distributive circuits (DVD, cable and satellite, VOD) worked together to not only secure its underground status as "subversive" text, but also to bolster its subcultural difference from mainstream film culture.

Within these contexts, the practice of horror movie consumption is inflected by greater institutional arrangements and industrial practices that extend beyond the realm of ordinary film consumption, yet nevertheless rely on a politics of subcultural distinction.

As demonstrated in this dissertation, these distinctions are reproduced and distributed throughout an array of media networks and ancillary platforms. Here interpretive habits, aesthetic ideologies, and subcultural dispositions appear always already interwoven as crucial aspects of horror movie marketing and consumption. At the same time, the expansion of horror movie culture to include non-theatrical outlets and entertainment industries, such as cable television, DVD, VOD and the internet, have afforded movie producers further opportunity to refine market categories that can used to classify the horror film audience. As in the case of *Centipede*, the prevailing appeal to branded formats and "primary media communities" (Turow, 1997), such as IFC subscribers and indie cult horror fans, allow culture industry managers the chance to potentially establish a better sense of being "in sync" with consumers' overall tastes, affective attachments and everyday experience of media culture—all the while attempting to commercially regulate the boundaries of those attachments via the terrain of popular movie consumption.

Thus, it bears repeating that horror's status as a critical-industrial category complicates the notion of horror film as a genre that exists "in" film texts themselves, that is to say, taken as unified aesthetic objects; rather, as I have sought to illustrate here, with these last few examples, it reveals commercial tactics and objectives that aim to more generally incorporate the cultural practice of movie-going, along with the perspectives of different audience demographics and taste cultures, the escalating role of media hype and the film aftermarket, and the overall viral media activities of genre fans, as a fundamental discursive component of *industrial* business plans. In both cases—*Paranormal Activity*

and *The Human Centipede*—seemingly "popular" cinematic experiences were perceived to have benefited tremendously from greater word-of-mouth buzz and fan participation rather than any calculated marketing and consumption strategy. Nonetheless, both stories illustrate the degree to which institutional practices of horror cinema are currently being redefined in accordance with changing economic, industrial, popular-cultural models of media convergence, and how, conversely, various cultural industries are responding to these changes by becoming increasingly involved in a commercialized effort to regulate access to—and enjoyment of—horror film culture as a viral media experience.

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Appendix:

A list of contemporary horror metal soundtrack compilation albums, along with their company credits.

- *The Crow* (1994): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Atlantic Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Night* (1995): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC); Atlantic Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Tales from the Crypts: Bordello of Blood* (1996): Universal Pictures; PolyGram Records
- *The Crow: City of Angels* (1996): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Hollywood Records (Buena Vista, Disney Music Group)
- *Bride of Chucky* (1998): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC; Sanctuary Records (Universal Music Group)
- *End of Days* (1999): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC); Geffen/Interscope Records (Universal Music Group)
- *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000): Lions Gate Entertainment; Priority Records (EMI)
- *Dracula* (2000): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Columbia Records (Sony BMG)
- *Scream 3* (2000): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Wind Up Records (Sony BMG)
- *Valentine* (2001): Warner Bros. Pictures (Time Warner); Warner Music Group
- *Queen of the Damned* (2002): Warner Bros. Pictures (Time Warner); Reprise Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Resident Evil* (2002): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Roadrunner Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003): New Line Cinema (Time Warner); Roadrunner Records (Warner Music Group)
- *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003): New Line Cinema (Time Warner); Drt Entertainment
- *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Roadrunner Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Alone in the Dark* (2005): Lions Gate Entertainment; Nuclear Blast
- *The Cave* (2005): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *House of Wax* (2005): Warner Bros. Pictures (Time Warner); Maverick Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Masters of Horror* (2005): Showtime Networks (CBS Corp); Immortal Records
- *Saw II* (2005): Lions Gate Entertainment; Image Entertainment
- *Saw III* (2006): Lions Gate Entertainment; Warcon Records
- *Underworld: Evolution* (2006): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (2007): 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment (News Corp); Bulletproof Records

- *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007): Screen Gems (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *Saw IV* (2007): Lions Gate Entertainment; Adrenaline Records
  Saw VI (2009): Lions Gate Entertainment; Trustkill Records