

SELLING THE SPLAT PACK: THE DVD REVOLUTION AND THE AMERICAN HORROR
FILM

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Cynthia Baron, Advisor

In 2006, journalists began writing about the emergence of a group of young filmmakers who specialized in horror films featuring torture and graphic violence. Because of their gory and bloody movies, these directors came to be known as “the Splat Pack,” and they were depicted by the press as subversive outsiders rebelling against the Hollywood machine. However, what many discussions of the Splat Pack ignore is how the success of this group of directors was brought about and enabled by the industrial structure of Hollywood at the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Drawing from political economy methodology, this study seeks to understand and illuminate the industrial changes and realignments that gave rise to the Splat Pack, first by looking at how industrial changes have affected the content of horror films of the past, and secondly by examining how the advent of DVD technology made way for the gory, “Unrated” films of the Splat Pack.

DVD played a major role in the rise of the Splat Pack by changing the way horror films were presented to their potential audiences and by leading to an industry acceptance of “Unrated” films. With this in mind, this study then turns to an analysis of several key films directed by the Splat Pack and uses the commodity form of the DVD as a lens through which to interpret these films. By foregrounding the commodity status of these films, this study resists reading these films as subversive manifestos. Instead, it seeks to use these films as a means of better understanding how commodity form affects content. The ultimate argument is that the films of the Splat Pack are commercial products made particularly salable by the DVD era and must be confronted and understood as such.

For Hope

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is an old saying about no one ever writing a book alone. The same goes for a dissertation. There are so many people who have either contributed to this work or encouraged me along the way that, at times, I wish I could put everybody's name on the title page along with mine. Since convention dictates I not do that, these humble acknowledgements must suffice.

First, I have to thank Dr. Cynthia Baron, my advisor. I met Cynthia when I first came to Bowling Green, and over the years, she has become expert at patiently listening to my half-baked ideas and carefully showing me how to turn these ideas into something feasible. Cynthia has many, many strengths as a scholar and mentor; one of her greatest strengths is striking that perfect balance between healthy skepticism and kind encouragement. It has been my pleasure to get to know Cynthia both as a scholar and a person, and I can say, without a doubt, that she is my role model. Her intelligence and integrity make her the type of scholar that I hope to be one day. Thanks so much, Cynthia.

I must also thank the rest of my excellent committee: Dr. Maisha Wester, Dr. Paul McDonald, and Dr. Scott Magelssen. While doing my graduate coursework, it was my great fortune to take two seminars with Maisha, and I was constantly thrilled with her insights and the challenges they posed. As a reader, she has made key contributions to this dissertation that have been invaluable. Thanks, Maisha. I have to send a special thanks to Paul for agreeing to work with me and taking time out of his busy schedule to read and comment on my draft. Thanks, Paul. Finally, I have to thank Scott. That Scott, someone I already knew and greatly admired, was chosen randomly to be the Graduate College Representative on my committee is evidence that I am, indeed, a very lucky man. Thanks for all your comments and advice, Scott.

By serving on my committee, these excellent scholars oversaw the conclusion of a journey that began many, many years ago with my family. To this end, I must thank my father,

Fred, and my mother, Linda. My father has taught me many things during my lifetime, not the least of these being the value of hard work and dedication. Similarly, my mother taught me about the transformative power of love, compassion, and empathy. My interests were nurtured at a very young age by my father and mother, who were always ready to reward good grades and good behavior with trips to the video store or the comic book store. Together, my father and mother have wholeheartedly supported my efforts and interests, no matter how ridiculous sounding these may have been. For that, I will be eternally grateful.

Another active agent in the early stages of my development was my brother, Greg. Eight years my senior, Greg was able to go to the movies in town before I was allowed to. Greg would always tell me about what he had seen there, and believe me, his descriptions of movies like *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives!*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, and *Predator* were way better than the movies themselves. Greg now has a family of his own, my sister-in-law, Reneé, and my nephew, John, and I have no doubt that his storytelling ability provides them with hours of entertainment.

Thanks go to Greg Simpson, my best friend, who was my constant companion during my teenage years when I began to discover my passion for cinema. Together, Greg and I discovered the work of directors like John Ford, Sam Peckinpah, Stanley Kubrick, and Martin Scorsese. I also have to thank Greg's parents, Judy and Glenn (RIP), who were like my second parents. Greg has a family of his own now, Haley, his wife, and Sterling, his son, who benefit, no doubt, from Greg's immense loyalty, dedication, and robust sense of humor.

My early academic life was shaped by my wonderful experiences with the English Department at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee, my undergraduate institution. There, I fell under the tutelage of wonderful teachers like Dr. Gerald Wood (who introduced me to Film Studies), Dr. Shawn O'Hare, Dr. Susan Underwood, and Dr. Andrew

Hazucha. College is where and when I made friends who would help sustain me for the rest of my life. These friends include Jym Davis, Thom Maurer, Chris McAdoo, Matt McClane, Micah Potts, and Tommy Forrester. During my post-undergraduate years, I was sustained by friendships with James “Bucky” Carter, Chris Smith, and especially Allison and Steve Walker. Thanks to you all.

My time in the American Culture Studies program at BGSU has been filled with so many stimulating relationships – both academic and personal – that it is difficult to know where to start. First, I have to thank Dr. Donald McQuaire, Dr. Phil Terrie, and Gloria Pizãna of the American Culture Studies Program for all of their guidance and assistance. Many thanks go to Dr. Ellen Berry, Dr. Kim Coates, Dr. Donna Nelson-Beene, Dr. Erin Labbie, and Dr. Gary Heba from the Department of English. Thanks also to Dr. Ted Rippey from the Department of German, Russian, and East Asian Languages and to Dr. Ron Shields from the Department of Theatre and Film.

I spent two great years of my graduate career working at the campus Institute for the Study of Culture and Society. For my wonderful time there, I must thank Dr. Vicki Patraha, the Director of ICS, whose sound wisdom and words of advice got me started on this dissertation. I also should thank my co-workers at ICS: Marianne Geisbuhler, Christine Higney, Carol Ann Lewis, and Isaac Vayo, fellow graduate assistant and member of my graduate cohort.

Isaac is the first of many of my fellow graduate students that I would like to thank. First, I would like to thank the rest of the members of my cohort: Rebekah Burchfield, Cheryl Cash, Jeff Geers, Cassandra Jones, Roz Sibielski, and Kelly Watson. Also, I would like to thank Kent Anderson and Dave Moody, my two dissertation workshop partners. I send a special thanks to Justin Philpot and Kevan Feshami who have discussed my research and their projects with me at length and have been two of my best friends in Bowling Green. I would also like to thank the

following colleagues (from both American Culture Studies and the Department of Popular Culture) who have spoke with me about my work at one time or another: Melinda Lewis, Lizabeth Mason, Katie Barak, Beckett Warren, Andy Famigletti, Dr. Cristian Pralea, Mike Lewis, Phil Cunningham, Ora McWilliams, Aisha McGriff, Nick Ware, Dr. Matt Barbee, Dr. Mike Lupro, Dr. Steve Swanson, Megan Adams, Jonathan Bartholomy, James Paasche, Gavin Mueller, Andy Jones, Dr. Rob Prince, and many more I am probably forgetting. Thanks to everybody who has ever participated in The Culture Club. And thanks to all my colleagues in Theatre and Film: JL Murdoch, Stephen Harrick, Timothy Schaffer, Nicole Mancino, Darin Kerr, Heidi Nees, and anybody else I am forgetting.

I want to send a special thanks to Dr. Colin Helb and Carolyn Reinhardt. I never had any idea when I came to Bowling Green that I would make a friend as great as Colin. He and Carolyn are like family to me, and I have missed them every single day since they moved away. Much love to you guys (and Murmur and Nagano!).

Thanks to Alan Jones for coining the term “the Splat Pack” and for corresponding with me and helping me out when this project was in its infancy.

I talked about family at the beginning of my journey, so I suppose it is only fitting to end by talking about family. Over the past three years, I have been blessed with another great set of parents, Bill and Pam Davis, my father-in-law and mother-in-law. Bill has taught me so much about grace, love, and understanding. Pam has taught me how to laugh harder than I ever thought I would be able. Brandon, my brother-in-law, has taught me how to see the world from a completely different perspective. Two Christmases ago, Bill and Pam got me the laptop that this entire dissertation has been written on. Love you guys so much.

Last, but certainly not least, I have to thank Dr. Hope Bernard, my wife and best friend. Hope has, quite simply, given me everything anyone could ever want: love, comfort, laughter,

understanding, confidence . . . the list is virtually endless. There's an old country song that says, "If heaven ain't a lot like Dixie, I don't want to go." Well, if heaven ain't a lot like being with Hope and our cats Spumoni and Giuseppe . . . well, you get the idea. I love you, Hope. This dissertation, like my life, is dedicated to you.

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INTRODUCTION

During Summer 2007, the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens hosted a film series entitled “It’s Only a Movie: Horror Films from the 1970s and Today.” Running from 16 June to 22 July, the series would feature screenings of over twenty-five horror films, mostly those made and released in the 1970s and the 2000s. Although a number of the films were non-American productions, the thrust of the series could be described as predominately American, as evinced by the screening selection for the opening of the series proper: *The American Nightmare* (Adam Simon, 2000), a documentary film that takes its title from noted film scholar Robin Wood’s treatise on American horror films of the 1970s. The documentary describes how American horror films from this turbulent time “reflect” the social turmoil of an era that included the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the counterculture movement, movements for the rights of oppressed people (Women’s Rights, Black Power, Gay Liberation, etc.), and Watergate.

This selection for the opening screening set the tone for the series in a significant way. The curators of this series asked – nay, demanded – that the audience take these films *seriously*, as both reflection of and comments on the times in which they were made. The description of the series on the Museum of the Moving Image’s website make this aim explicit:

Horror films are currently enjoying a resurgence in production, popularity, and inventiveness unparalleled since the rise of the indie horror movement in the 1970s. Today’s “Splat Pack directors,” Eli Roth, Rob Zombie, and Alexandre Aja . . . 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. (“It’s Only a Movie”)

This write-up shows that the museum curators – and, perhaps, audiences as well – have come to expect a great deal from their horror movies. Once considered exploitation or “trash” cinema, in 2007 horror movies were apparently supposed to be “transgressive” and “powerful” and were expected to offer insightful social commentary that just may end up being transformative.

In order to emphasize the horror film’s supposed power to challenge dominant hegemony and the “status quo,” the curators of the series paired horror movies from the aforementioned “Golden Age” of American horror films with horror films from the current historical moment, which, like the late 1960s and early 1970s, is one rife with unrest and upheaval. Tumultuous events of recent years include the attacks of 9/11 and the United States’ subsequent murderous military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and any other country suspected of harboring “terrorists” in the Bush Administration’s ill-defined “War on Terror.” Additionally, relentless governmental deregulation has led both to corporate control of the country and to one of the worst economic meltdowns of recent history. As Jason Zinoman explains in his piece on the film series for the *New York Times*, the series title, “It’s Only a Movie,” was a nod to the “advertising slogan” used in the marketing of Wes Craven’s first film, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) (Zinoman). The poster for Craven’s graphic and brutal story of a married couple who take bloody revenge on the hoodlums who raped and murdered their daughter warned audiences: “To avoid fainting, keep repeating: it’s only a movie, it’s only a movie . . .” However, the title of the series was also obviously meant to have an ironic meaning, with the assumption being that in troubled times, horror movies are anything but “only a movie.” Instead, they are insightful manifestos on the political and social ills of an historical era.

Many events and screenings during the series emphasized this social function that had been hoisted on the shoulders of the horror film. The aforementioned documentary *The American Nightmare* that opened the series adamantly makes the argument that horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s are commentary on that turbulent period. With this opening and by programming current horror films alongside these supposedly subversive and oppositional films of the 1960s and 1970s, the curators implicitly made the argument that current horror films were doing exactly the same thing for the current era. Further, many contemporary horror directors, like those in the “Splat Pack” that the series description mentions, had become quite good at making the case for the social significance of their films.

For about a year before the series, the “Splat Pack” had been getting quite a bit of attention in the press, and a few of the high-profile members of this group of directors were extremely vocal about the political and social significance of their films. In fact, the film series had a special “Series Preview” on 6 June that featured Eli Roth, one of the most vocal and visible of the Splat Packers. Ten days before the beginning of the series proper, the Museum hosted a special advance screening of Roth’s *Hostel: Part II*, the much-anticipated sequel to *Hostel*, his 2006 surprise hit. Not only did Museum of the Moving Image members get the chance to see Roth’s film two days before its nationwide release on 8 June, but they were also treated to a special discussion afterward with director Roth and three members of the *Hostel: Part II* cast: Bijou Philips, Heather Matarazzo, and Roger Bart. Roth’s *Hostel* films had stirred up quite a bit of controversy with their graphic and gory depictions of torture, a hot-button topic during the “War on Terror,” and Roth was always willing to give interviews and make media appearances to “explain” that his films were social commentary dressed up as exploitation. Roth, in many ways, had fashioned an image of himself as an artist provocateur, and the Museum of the

Moving Image's series offered him the perfect platform to present his films as "art" and make the case for how they critique societal ills during the "War on Terror."

The ways in which other films by Roth's cohort in the Splat Pack were pored with established – and subversive – classics supported the often-grandiose claims Roth made for his movies. For instance, on 17 June at two in the afternoon, the series featured a screening of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), a film long celebrated for the ways it calls attention to the evils of capitalism and the exploitation of the working classes. Later, at half past six in the evening, film series attendees were treated to a screening of *The Devil's Rejects*, a 2005 film directed by heavy metal musician-turned director Rob Zombie, another highly visible member of the Splat Pack. Zombie's film and the ways it depicts a clan of "white trash" serial killers unleashing their wrath on the middle-class world were obviously supposed to be seen as a contemporary complement to Hooper's film.

Significantly, nestled in between the afternoon's screening of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and the evening's screening of *The Devil's Rejects* was a panel discussion entitled "Considering Horror." The people on the panel were quite distinguished; it was made up of three New York City-based film critics – Nathan Lee from *The Village Voice*, Maitland McDonagh from *TV Guide*, and Joshua Rothkopf from *Time Out New York* – and an acclaimed academic, Adam Lowenstein, cinema studies professor at the University of Pittsburgh and author of *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. The stated purpose of the panel, according to the Museum's website, was to access and discuss "The aesthetic, cultural, and political implications of contemporary and 1970s horror films" ("It's Only a Movie"). While the panelists' opinions of the films screened were not unanimously positive, there was agreement among the panelists that horror films were significant and offered

deep insights into our culture and society. As Lowenstein explained, “My feeling is that in a lot of ways – the films from the present, I like to think about [them] as a kind of continuously unfolding post-9/11 moment – the films from this series that represent that moment are plugged into their social and historical context in pretty complicated and compelling and moving ways” (“Considering Horror”).

How did this happen? How did a genre often considered to be cheap, trashy, and degraded become art? Where did the assumption that horror movies offer any type of social commentary come from? The Museum of the Moving Image’s “It’s Only a Movie” series forces us to ask these questions. Some of the answers are obvious. Horror movies, as many scholars of many different stripes have argued over the years, can offer provocative glimpses at our culture and society. Simply put, looking at what a culture finds horrifying and depicts as monstrous in its entertainment can reveal a great deal about the predilections and prejudices of a culture. Along these lines, film scholars and critics, both inside and outside academia, have produced readings of how horror films can provide insights into a culture’s multitude of anxieties.

However, the type of commentary provided and promoted by the “It’s Only a Movie” series is problematic in a few important ways that point to certain deficiencies in horror film scholarship in general. Primary among these is a lack of focus on the industry that produces these films. More often than not in film studies, movies are analyzed via close readings of the filmic texts without any consideration of the industrial mechanisms that exist outside of the text, that produce the text, and that make certain that the filmic text gets into the hands of consumers (and scholars). In the study of horror films specifically, the impulse to focus only on the texts of the films when analyzing them is especially tempting, given how well the dark, nightmarish content of horror films seemed to be complemented by psychoanalytic frameworks that have been

instrumental in film studies since it was gaining acceptance in the academy in the 1970s. While psychoanalysis and other text-centered modes of analysis have produced a multitude of valuable work on the horror film, readings of how horror films can be read to uncover significant revelations about the structures of power in our culture and society sometimes transformed into simple praise for horror film's "subversive" or "oppositional" political perspective. Peter Hutchings notes this problem with horror film scholarship when he observes that films which, in their telling, reveal structural inequalities are not "political manifestos bearing a cohesive ideological message" (*Horror* 123).

Indeed, mainstream films, like horror, are not "political manifestos," but rather are commercial commodities, placed on the market with one ultimate goal in mind: to generate profit. Without an eye on the industry, studies that focus only on the filmic text are in danger of losing sight of the basic, but important fact of a film's commodity status. Also unfortunate is how studies of film that do not take industry matters into consideration run the risk of missing how the industry and its various structures and alignments are vitally important to what types of films are made, how they are made, and how audiences encounter them. In regard to the films featured in the "It's Only a Movie" series, while the films from both the 1960s/70s and the 2000s will have some sort of relationship to their historical and cultural context, they came about not merely because of their relationship to history (for example, as reactions or reflections of the Vietnam War or the events of 9/11), but also because of changes and realignments in the film and entertainment business at the time.

Given that consideration, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore connections between horror movies of the 2000s, the Hollywood film industry, technology, and how the interaction between those three poles affects the ways in which audiences encounter and value

these films. I perform this exploration by focusing on the Splat Pack, a name that came to describe a group contemporary horror filmmakers like Eli Roth, Rob Zombie, and others. The line-up of the film series at the Museum of the Moving Image suggests that these Splat Pack directors are at the forefront of making contemporary horror films that offer social commentary on the current historical moment. However, to frame the discussion of the Splat Packers in this manner is to ignore the corporate, industrial structure that gave rise to the Splat Pack and their films. In this dissertation, I will focus on one industrial and technological development that cleared a path for the Splat Pack: the advent of DVD technology and the growth of the DVD market in the late 1990s and early 2000s. DVDs changed the ways in which audiences encountered, interacted with, and understood horror films. They also changed the types of horror films that studios began producing and distributing.

The introduction of DVD technology was very profitable for the Splat Pack. Niche genres such as horror have a built-in audience, and Lionsgate¹, the savvy distributor of many of the Splat Pack's breakthrough films in the United States, took full advantage of horror's loyal fans with their DVD releases of Splat Pack films, spending a great deal of time and attention to make certain that their films on DVD were packed with extra features, such as commentaries, behind-the-scenes featurettes, and, perhaps most significantly, the reinsertion of footage that was supposedly too gory for the films' theatrical release. Lionsgate's efforts won the studio a great deal of financial reward, as their releases of the Splat Pack's were huge moneymakers for the independent distributor.

¹ Lionsgate Entertainment changed its name from "Lions Gate" to "Lionsgate" in late 2005 (McDonald 167). Although this name change took place after the release of several of the films discussed here, I refer to the company as "Lionsgate" throughout this dissertation in the interest of clarity and consistency.

For instance, their DVD release of Eli Roth's *Hostel* in April 2006 (four months after the film's theatrical release in the US) sold a million and a half copies, grossing around twenty-three million dollars or almost fifty percent of the film's theatrical take. Lionsgate responded to these numbers in the same way they responded to other strong-selling DVDs: by releasing another, two-disc edition of *Hostel* the next year with even more extra features. Many Splat Pack films have gotten this "double dip" treatment from Lionsgate: *House of 1,000 Corpses* (Rob Zombie, 2003), *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), *Saw II* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005), and *The Devil's Rejects*. These multiple editions appeal to the hardcore horror fan's collector mentality. Further, some Splat Pack DVDs have sold so well that they have moved into the province of top-selling DVDs, a region of the home video hierarchy once reserved solely for blockbusters and family films. For example, *Saw II* sold an impressive two-point-eight million copies for a home video gross of around forty-four million dollars, while *Saw III* sold three million copies, grossing forty-seven million dollars on home video and landing in the top forty best-selling DVDs of 2007. I would argue that this kind of profit prompted the mid-2000's wave of violent horror films just as much as any national trauma. This point could easily get lost in any analysis of these films that focuses solely on the films' texts and neglects to engage with their commodity status.

To foreground these films as commodities, I utilize a political economy approach in my analysis of the Splat Pack film cycle. In *How Hollywood Works*, her analysis of the structure of contemporary Hollywood, Janet Wasko explains that a political economy approach to film studies recognizes that "profit is the primary driving force and guiding principle for the industry" (3). Additionally, she insists: "The profit motive and the commodity nature of film have implications for the kinds of films that are produced (and not produced), who makes them, how they are distributed, and where/when they are viewed" (4). Accordingly, I approach the films of

the Splat Pack, first and foremost, as commodities. Contextualizing the films of the Splat Pack cycle in the growth of the DVD market is a useful way of considering the industry that produces and distributes these films. It also foregrounds the films' commodity status.

A political economy approach is integral to this study's first section entitled "Selling the 'Splat Pack.'" The first chapter, "Introducing the Splat Pack," is an overview of how these filmmakers were written about and hyped in the mainstream media. Articles about the Splat Pack frame them as independent, subversive filmmakers who operate outside the Hollywood mainstream. One of the ways in which journalists – and, crucially, the Splat Packers themselves – construct the Splat Pack's image of oppositional outsiderdom is by likening them to past horror directors like George Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, and others from the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called "Golden Age" of subversive American horror films.

For this reason, the second chapter, "Politics and the Horror Film: A Political Economy Intervention," turns to an analysis of the often celebrated horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to illustrate how, rather than organically emerging from the progressive ethos of the counterculture movement, these films were commodities well-suited to the changes and realignments taking place in the industry at the time. This chapter begins with a discussion of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1920) to illustrate how the horror film, from its origins, has been read as a dark mirror of societal anxieties, while horror film's commercial aspects, which have profound implications for film content, have been overlooked. This situation has been exacerbated by film studies methodologies that rely on textual analysis without a consideration of the film industry.

As a corrective, this chapter shows how a consideration of the Hollywood film industry is essential to understanding the evolution of the American horror film. "Golden Age" horror films,

which have often been championed as subversive political manifestos, must not be blithely admired, but understood in context of industrial changes that had been taking place in the Hollywood film industry since the Paramount Decree in 1948. These changes include: the studios' transition from production to distribution, the retooling that took place after the advent of television, the studios' willingness to rely on independent production, the use of auteurism as a marketing tool to sell independent productions, and changes in ratings and industry self-regulation that enabled the studios to sell to niche audiences. While this chapter may seem to stray afield from the Splat Pack, it is essential in laying the groundwork for my discussion of the Splat Pack in the following chapters, for I argue that the films of the Splat Pack must also be encountered and understood not as political or cultural "statements," but as commodities made by possible – and profitable – by industrial changes, most specifically, the introduction of DVD technology and the DVD market boom. The films of American horror's "Golden Age" and the films of the Splat Pack are very similar, but not in the rebellious ways in which curators at the Museum of the Moving Image may suspect. Instead, they are similar in ways that, when teased out by a focus on the industry, can illuminate the ways Hollywood does business.

The third and fourth chapters focus on how DVD has changed both attitudes toward the horror film and the types of horror films that can be widely distributed. Chapter Three, "The DVD Revolution and the Horror Film, Take One: From Trash to Art to Collectable," focuses on how DVDs – with their "Special Editions" and "Director's Cuts" versions of films, illusions of permanence, and provocatively-designed sleeves – have transformed once-marginal horror movies into mainstream "art" for collectors. This chapter considers horror's journey from "trash" to "art" in the context of the various ways the film industry has adapted its marketing strategies to the changes in the home video market, from the rental outlets of the VCR era to the "sell

through” pricing mandates of the DVD era. The chapter also looks specifically at how Lionsgate has positioned the films of the Splat Pack as “works of art” produced by cutting-edge auteurs to better sell the films on DVD. Ultimately, the journey of films like *The Devil’s Rejects*, *Hostel*, or *Saw II* to the Museum of the Moving Image makes much more sense when considered alongside how DVD already makes these films museum pieces in the private holdings of DVD collectors.

The fourth chapter, “The DVD Revolution and the Horror Film, Take Two: Rise of the ‘Unrated,’” discusses how DVD led to the mainstreaming of once-marginal “Unrated” movies. Again, a parallel between the “Golden Age” horror films and the films of the Splat Pack becomes apparent, as both groups emerge after an industrial change in ratings policy. This chapter looks at how more relaxed regulatory restrictions on videotapes led to “Unrated” movies surfacing during the VCR era, but the industry’s lack of control over the rental market kept the “Unrated” movie on the margins. However, this changed during the DVD era when the industry’s “sell-through” pricing mandates, coupled with DVD’s ability to add to and take away from the content of a film, led to “Unrated” movies making their way to the mainstream. Thus, the increasing prevalence of gory, graphic, and prolonged violence in films made by the Splat Pack need not and should not be read as reverberations of traumatic aftershocks of 9/11 or the War on Terror, for this bloody brutality can be seen as the film industry taking advantage of a rating system grown lax thanks to DVD technology. After all, theatrical versions of these films need only feature “just enough” gore, blood, and carnage to entice viewers to check out the “Unrated” version on DVD, a product that, the consumer is assured, is “uncut” and unadulterated.

After foregrounding the films’ status as commodities on DVD in Part One, the analysis turns to a discussion of the Splat Pack’s films themselves. This transition is inspired by Janet

Wasko's discussion of how a political economy approach relates to textual analysis in film studies. Wasko insists that a political economy approach and the foregrounding of film's status as commodity are "necessary grounding for ideological readings and cultural analysis of a film's content" (9). In other words, considering the film's commodity status and the industrial structures that produced the film provides the groundwork for an ideological critique of a film's content or assessment of a film's cultural relevance or impact. Following Wasko's model, my analysis of the Splat Pack's films as commodities in Part One leads to an ideological reading of several of those films in Part Two. While my readings of the films engage with evidence from the texts themselves, the films' commodity status as "films-on-DVD" acts as a point of departure for my analysis or as a significant element in assessing the films' ideological stances and how they address their audiences.

For instance, the first chapter in Part Two, "*Hostel*-ity Toward Whiteness: The National Security Subtext of *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*," examines how Eli Roth, the most outspoken of the Splat Pack directors, uses the DVD format as a platform to explain and frame his films for his audiences. While Roth, on the commentary tracks and extra features on the DVDs of his films, makes audacious claims for the subversive and oppositional nature of his films, a close examination of his films reveals that the subversive and oppositional characteristics of his films – and Roth's argument for these aspects on the DVDs' extra features—are glib and surface-level. A close look at the films reveals that they create a cultural imaginary in which white, Western, heterosexuals are in the most danger on the geopolitical stage and whose lives are the most worth grieving when they are lost. Further, the suffering of "Othered" bodies (people of color and homosexuals, for instance) is marginalized, subordinated to white American suffering, or left out altogether. Thus, the *Hostel* films have a deeply conservative and reactionary viewpoint that falls

in line with the United States's National Security policies rather than challenging them, despite what Roth may tell audiences on the DVD extras.

In the next chapter, "The 'White Trash' World of Rob Zombie: DVDs and Slumming Spectators," I turn my attention to an analysis of the films of another of the Splat Pack's celebrity-auteurs, Rob Zombie. Zombie's films follow a long line of horror films that depict underclass monsters violently and horrifically lashing out against the middle class. However, his films are, on a textual level, more subversive than past horror films because of the ways in which Zombie sympathetically depicts his "white trash" monsters and does not offer the middle class any sort of redemption in their clash with the underclass. However, it is difficult to unequivocally champion Zombie's films as oppositional paracinema, those marginal cinematic works that have a "counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility" (Sconce 372), when considering how they are presented on the DVD platform, for in many ways, DVD has enabled a mainstream, middle-class appropriation of paracinema. Indeed, Zombie's films on DVD, available in "Special Edition" and "Collector's Edition" versions, are marketed toward middle-class collectors. Thus, I attempt to trace how Zombie's films on DVD encourage a "cross-class spectatorship," a type of spectatorship that follows in the footsteps of American gold rush narratives and blackface minstrelsy. These past entertainments allowed privileged viewers to "slum it" by fantasizing about being in subordinated social positions. Similarly, Zombie's films allow viewers to "slum it" by vicariously engaging in forbidden behavior by watching and collecting Zombie's "white trash" monsters on DVD.

Buying, collecting, and consuming horror on DVD is also at issue in the seventh chapter, "'If It's Halloween, It Must Be *Saw*': Seriality, Subjectivity, and Consuming the *Saw* Series." This chapter examines the massively successful *Saw* series, which, with six films to date, has

earned millions in box office dollars and DVD sales. Through an examination of how the series represents the serial killer through the eponymous Jigsaw Killer (Tobin Bell), I argue that these films show – often unwittingly – how those privileged because of race, gender, or class are afraid of becoming invisible and unnoticed. Further, these films suggest that through serial killing, which the series conceptualizes through media consumption and media making, these privileged people can make themselves visible and dole out vigilante justice. That serial killing comes from a position of privilege is underscored in the *Saw* films by the failure of Jigsaw’s apprentice, Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith), a woman from the underclass, to become a successful serial killer. Thus, the serial killer is not an oppositional figure, but rather comes to embody dominant ideology. In these ways, the *Saw* films follow a tradition of films that link the act of serial killing with media.

In the case of the *Saw* films, seriality is not only a theme of the films’ text, but is also a significant component in the consumption of the films. Fittingly, the *Saw* films are designed and made to resemble interactive, new media products that encourage audience interaction. They are also made available on a new media platform – the DVD – that enables *Saw* fans to take their interaction with the film to another level, by simply toying with the DVD’s features or, for those more industrious, ripping a digital copy to their computers and creating *Saw* fan videos that they can share with others on *Saw*’s official message boards or YouTube. Thus, the situation surrounding the films mirrors the scenarios within the film, namely with media being utilized to build identity.

The eighth and final chapter, “Euro-Splat Pack: *Haute Tension* and *The Descent*,” examines two key films directed by the Splat Pack’s European contingent, Alexandre Aja from France and Neil Marshall from Great Britain. Unlike Splat Pack superstars like Roth and

Zombie, Aja and Marshall have been marginalized in mainstream coverage of the Splat Pack. However, because of their marginal status and their intertextual, allusion-heavy films, Aja and Marshall have been valorized by “hardcore” horror fans. Adding to their marginal status is how their films were tampered with when released in the United States by Lionsgate, their American distributor: Aja’s French-language *Haute Tension* (released under the title *High Tension*) was given a strange hybrid dubbed-and-subtitled release, while Marshall’s *The Descent* has about a minute shaved from the film’s conclusion and, as a result, was given a significantly different ending. It would seem that these changes would cease being an issue when considering the films on DVD, which restore, to a certain extent, the directors’ original visions and versions of the films, but the DVDs nevertheless retain the evidence of front-office tampering in various ways. However, I argue that the evidence of this tampering is helpful because, working with the metacinematic texts of the two films, it foregrounds the commodity status of the films and encourages interaction with the filmic texts. This activity could lead some viewers to think critically about the films’ representations of femininity, as long as they “get” all of the allusions. Ultimately, Aja’s and Marshall’s films on DVD retain a possibility of oppositionality that the other films of the Splat Pack do not.

One of the foremost goals of this study is to return to the “It’s Only a Movie” title of the Museum of the Moving Image’s film series. In other words, we should not consider the Splat Pack films as political manifestos created independently of markets, material bases, and desire for profit. Instead, we need to consider these films, first and foremost, as commodities made for profit. If we do so, we will not find that these films are unworthy of study; what we will find are complex, contradictory, and obstinate cultural artifacts existing at the violent intersection of art

and commerce. When viewed in this way, these movies can reveal a great deal about the business of fear in American culture.

PART ONE: SELLING THE SPLAT PACK

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCING THE SPLAT PACK

April 2006: The “New Blood”

All the excitement about the Splat Pack seems to have started with the April 2006 issue of the British movie magazine *Total Film*. The issue featured a splashy article by Alan Jones entitled “The New Blood.” Its bold title was accentuated by a “Parental Advisory: Explicit Content” label, just to let the readers know they were about to enter forbidden, even dangerous territory. Evidently, the local cineplex had recently been transformed into dangerous territory because “a host of bold new horror flicks” like Eli Roth’s *Hostel*, Alexandre Aja’s remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, and *Slither* (James Gunn, 2006) had assaulted audiences with levels of brutality and violence missing in what Jones describes as “all those toothless remakes of Asian hits starring Jennifer Connelly, Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar” (101, 102).

Jones devotes his article to showcasing the young director/auteurs behind this “taking back” of the horror genre from the purveyors of these “watered-down” horror movies (102). One of the auteurs in the movement featured prominently in Jones’s article is Eli Roth, a good-looking, clean-shaven young man who looks as if he would be a better fit at a meeting for young business executives than a horror movie convention. Nevertheless, Roth clearly fashions himself as one of the power players of this new movement. Jones’s article includes a two-page spread featuring a photo of Roth brandishing a chainsaw, a devilish smirk on his face. This is surrounded by other photos of bloody carnage from Roth’s *Hostel*, including an image of a man being castrated with a pair of bolt cutters. These visuals imply that Roth, despite his good looks, can deliver the gory goods. In the interview with Jones, Roth, the son of two Harvard professors and a graduate of NYU’s film school, comes across just as forcefully as these images would

suggest. Roth declares: “Guts and gore are in right now because audiences are fed up with loud bangs substituting for scares and quick cutaways from the money shots” (qtd. in Jones 102).

Roth’s effusive language, which conflates horror and pornography, continues as he claims that he was the one who got this movement started with *Cabin Fever*, his 2003 debut film: “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 [but instead] put full-frontal gore back on the agenda” (qtd. in Jones 104). If one considers the numbers, it is not difficult to see why Roth felt that he was at the forefront of a successful cinematic new wave. *Cabin Fever*, the story of a group of young campers infected and destroyed by a gruesome flesh-eating virus, cost only a million and a half dollars, but grossed over thirty million dollars worldwide for independent distributor Lionsgate (“*Cabin Fever*”). His follow-up film *Hostel*, made for just under five million dollars, had just, in Jones’s words, “taken the box office by storm” in the US by grossing forty-seven million dollars (Jones 101, “*Hostel*”). After these gory and bloody hits, Roth had emerged as a cinematic celebrity.

Another director on Jones’s list of up-and-coming, significant horror directors was a celebrity before he even stepped behind a movie camera. Rob Zombie was the lead singer of the horror-metal group White Zombie that had risen to prominence during the early 1990s, thanks to heavy airplay on Beavis-and-Butthead-era MTV. After White Zombie disbanded in 1998, Zombie continued to record and tour as a successful solo act before turning his attention to filmmaking. His first film, *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003), resurrected the “hillbilly horror” genre of 1960s and 1970s drive-in cinema by unfolding, in grisly, sweat-soaked detail, the exploits of the Firefly family, a clan of white trash murderers whose only pleasures in life are the torture and murder of any suburbanites unfortunate enough to cross its path. According to Jones,

Zombie's debut film "was no classic but is still a key title in the current neo-nasty² movement" (103). Jones was not alone in feeling that *House* was notable: the film garnered enough of a following to convince Zombie (and Lionsgate, distributor of the first film) to produce a sequel. Thus followed *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), a gritty epic that pitted fugitive members of the Firefly family against a twisted sheriff in 1970s-era rural Texas.

As evinced by his comments in Jones's article, the 1970s are, for Zombie, more than an historical backdrop for the narratives of his films; this time period also produced films that had a heavy influence on his own. As Zombie puts it, "There was a realism and bleakness to 70s genre cinema . . . 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" (qtd. in Jones 103). The content of Zombie's films certainly reflect these sentiments, as few genre films in the eighties or the nineties had been as bleak and merciless as Zombie's tales of the Firefly family.

Zombie is not the only director showcased by Jones who voices his admiration for the American genre films of the 1970s; he is joined in his admiration by Neil Marshall, a British director heading up what Jones calls "the British vanguard against harmless Hollywood horror" (104). Marshall scored a minor cult hit in the United Kingdom with his campy 2002 "paramilitary versus werewolves" movie *Dog Soldiers*. However, it was with his second film, *The Descent* (released in the United Kingdom in 2005 and in the United States in 2006), a film about female spelunkers pitted against savage, cave-dwelling mutants in a fight for their lives, that Marshall felt that he had "done [his] job properly" by living up to the standards set by 1970s

² "Neo-nasty" is a play on the term "video nasty." This term originated during the early 1980s when in Great Britain, there was moral panic surrounding the release of uncensored and unrated horror films, like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *I Spit on Your Grave*, on videocassette. Tapes of these films came to be known as "video nasties." See McDonald, 89-92.

American cinema (Marshall qtd. in Jones 104). As Marshall explains, “I wanted [the film] to be hard-hitting and back-to-basics brutal because it was the 70s-styled survival picture I’ve always wanted to make . . . The reason why so many titles from that golden period in the 70s have stayed in my memory for so long is they were starkly oppressive, visually stunning and very frightening” (qtd. in Jones 103-04).

Another European filmmaker profiled in Jones’s article who looks to genre cinema of the 1970s for inspiration is French-born filmmaker Alexandre Aja. According to Aja, his 2003 neo-slasher *Haute Tension* (released by Lionsgate in the United States as *High Tension* in 2005) “was [a] self-confessed homage” not only to 1970s genre fare like Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but also brutal, “survivalist classics” from the era like *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) and *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) (qtd. in Jones 103). Aja explains that he “wanted to recreate that atmosphere of savagery with no apparent boundaries” in his films, and even though the audacious *Haute Tension* baffled some audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, the film was successful enough to land him the job of helming a remake of Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* for Fox Searchlight (qtd. in Jones 103). Given that he is such a professed fan of films from this era, Aja was elated by the opportunity to remake Craven’s story about a middle American family stranded in the desert and under siege by vicious clan of cannibals.

Jones emphasizes these new horror filmmakers’ allegiance to horror films of the past, specifically the 1970s, by including a sidebar entitled “The Old Blood,” with the byline “More gore? The new guys on the chop-block have a lot to live up to . . .” This sidebar includes a list of five films accompanied by photos and a brief blurb about each movie. Out of the five films featured, three are films from the much-celebrated era of the 1970s: *Last House on the Left*, *The*

Texas Chain Saw Massacre, and *Shivers* (David Cronenberg, 1975). The other two films on the list – the infamous Italian shocker *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and independently made American slasher film *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981) – are both, at least, chronologically close to the 1970s and are also similar to the 1970s films in that they share the earlier films’ high-violence, high-gore ethos. As Jones’s byline suggests, the “New Blood” directors profiled in his article do have high amounts of violence and brutality to live up to in their filmmaking, and comments from Zombie, Marshall, and Aja suggest they are ready to do just that and take up the unforgiving attitude of filmmakers of the past.

The young horror directors not only share indebtedness to the past. As Jones’s article shows, many of these filmmakers believe they have a very specific relationship to the present as well. Aja positions the films made by his cohort as reactions to the traumatic events of 9/11 (Jones 103). This sentiment is echoed by Eli Roth who argues that in 2006, “Americans feel unsafe in their own country . . . They are scared of an unseen enemy they can’t do anything about. They are so wound up they want to scream” (qtd. in Jones 103). However, the “golden period” of 1970s also influences how these filmmakers react to their current historical moment, for Jones compares their output to how “the 70s spawned one subversive shocker after another (*Shivers*, *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*)” (103). Aja’s comments support this connection as he explains that he had to change very little of Craven’s original film as he and his writing partner were working on their version of *The Hills Have Eyes* because “2006 is so similar to 1977” (qtd. in Jones 103). Aja even seems to insinuate that the situation in Iraq War-era America is more strained, more paranoid, and more intense than in Vietnam-era America; according to Jones, he “shrieks with glee” when he learns that his version of the story was too violent for Wes Craven (Jones 106).

Overall, Jones seems to suggest that this generation of horror filmmakers will produce horror films that are more intense, more graphic, and more subversive than their predecessors from the 1970s. Jones proposes that, if nothing else, the work of these directors represents a unified new wave of horror directors. He underscores this notion in another sidebar wherein he groups together a select number of these directors under the splashy title “The Splat Pack,” a moniker that evokes the hip swagger of the 1950s “Rat Pack” combined with the youth and vitality of the 1980s “Brat Pack.” Although Jones’s article mentions a number of current horror directors – such as James Gunn, writer/director of *Slither*, and David Payne, writer/director of *Reeker* (2005) – only five directors make Jones’s sidebar “Splat Pack” list: Neil Marshall, Eli Roth, Alexandre Aja, Rob Zombie, and Greg McLean, an Australian-born director who scored a minor hit in the United States with *Wolf Creek* (2005), the bleak tale of a savage killer stalking backpackers in the Australian outback.

October 2006: A Name Catches On

Even though Jones’s article includes a bit of hand-wringing worry as Jones wondered whether or not this group of filmmakers was really a revival that was “built to last” or only “a slash in the pan” (100), Jones’s name for the group, the “Splat Pack,” stuck. In late 2006, articles began to appear in the popular press that used Jones’s term for the group and heralded the work of these filmmakers as the next wave of horror cinema. On 22 October, 2006, two articles appeared, one in *Time* magazine and the other in the *New York Post*. Rebecca Winters Keegan, the author of the *Time* article entitled simply “The Splat Pack,” alters Jones’s list of Splat Packers in some interesting ways. First, there is no mention of Greg McLean in Keegan’s article. Second, she adds three new members to the list in his place: James Wan, Leigh Whannell, and Darren Lynn Bousman, the creative minds behind the immensely successful *Saw* franchise.

In 2004, Wan, a director, and Whannell, his writing partner, produced *Saw*, a meagerly budgeted, gory thriller that followed the exploits of Jigsaw, a mastermind serial killer who creates elaborate and sadistic traps for his seemingly unending list of hapless victims. *Saw* became a gruesome blockbuster, grossing over one hundred million dollars worldwide, and the profits continued to roll in as *Saw* became a successful franchise for distributor Lionsgate. *Saw II* and *III* immediately followed in 2005 and 2006, both directed by Bousman. A fresh-faced, spectaclered film school grad new to Hollywood, Bousman was handpicked by Wan and Whannell to helm the continuing adventures of Jigsaw. Bousman took *Saw* to new heights, both viscerally (Jigsaw's traps make more elaborate and victims' deaths more gory) and financially (the second and third *Saw* films both grossed more domestically and worldwide than the original). Interestingly, Keegan's article and Reed Tucker's article in the *New York Post* arrived just in time to promote *Saw III*, which was opening nationwide the following Friday, 27 October.

Just as Jones started a trend with his coinage of the term Splat Pack, Keegan began a trend as well. For American journalists, Splat Pack membership congealed around Roth, Zombie, Marshall, Aja, Wan, Whannell, and Bousman. American journalists rarely mentioned McLean in association with the group after this point, and Keegan admits that even the core seven members of the group are "loose knit," more kindred spirits than partners working shoulder-to-shoulder (Keegan). Keegan does, however, attempt to unify the work of these filmmakers by suggesting the parameters of a Splat Pack genre. According to Keegan, films made by the Splat Pack have in common a "basic plotline [of] people [who] are stuck somewhere and have to endure horrible things – or indeed, do horrible things to each other – to escape" (Keegan).

Despite the darkness and oppressiveness of this basic plot outline, both Keegan's article and Reed Tucker's *New York Post* piece portray the Splat Packers as attractively devious, fun-

loving mischief-makers. Tucker begins his article by detailing a trip Eli Roth took to a California Home Depot to do some “research.” According to Tucker:

while throngs of customers shop for insulation and garden hoses, Eli Roth is prowling the power-tool aisle with a special twinkle in his eye . . . When he takes a shine to particular drills and saws, you can bet the implement won’t end up building a deck. Instead, it’ll turn up drilling into someone’s thigh or power-sanding someone’s eyeball. (Tucker)

Similarly, Keegan’s article begins with an anecdote about Bousman, distressed about trouble with the MPAA over *Saw III*’s rating, calling Rob Zombie to ask for advice. According to the article, Zombie advised Bousman to “Explain why the extreme violence is necessary to tell the story in a way that’s more socially responsible” (qtd. in Keegan). However, Keegan reveals, “When pressed, Zombie admits he doesn’t actually care what’s socially responsible. He just wanted to help out a kindred spirit, another guy who understands the unique beauty of a properly lighted viscera shot” (Keegan). In these articles, the Splat Pack comes across as a rag-tag group of naughty boys, a “gore-happy gang,” that greatly enjoys grossing out audiences and supposedly “pulling a fast one” on the curmudgeonly MPAA (Keegan).

Nevertheless, both Keegan and Tucker respect the Splat Packers’ ability to generate revenue at the box office and on home video. According to Tucker, “Their films have modest budgets but end up earning big bucks for the studios” (Tucker). Likewise, Keegan notes that by keeping their budgets under ten million, Splat Packers “are given almost free reign . . . to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies” that often reap “gruesome profitability” at the box office (Keegan). Thus, along with admiring the Splat Packers’ abilities to make money

with their low-budget films, Keegan's remarks also suggest that the profitability of Splat Pack films affords their makers a certain level of independence from studio interference.

Another similarity between Keegan and Tucker's assessment of the Splat Pack is their opinion that films made by the Splat Packers are an attractive departure from the various horror film trends that preceded them. Like Alan Jones, Tucker bemoans the day before these new filmmakers came along, when "Self-referential horror (*Scream* [Wes Craven, 1996]) and Asian-derived creepiness (*The Ring* [Gore Verbinski, 2002]) ruled the cineplexes" (Tucker). Keegan admits, "it's still too soon to tell" if "there's a nascent Stanley Kubrick or Steven Spielberg in the mix" because "Most of the Splat Packers are on only their second or third film" (Keegan). However, she also gushes that their "innovative filmmaking . . . 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* [Jim Gillespie, 1997]" (Keegan).

Indeed, for all of their mischief and antics, the Splat Packers, as depicted by Keegan and Tucker, displayed flashes of ambition and purpose. For instance, Rob Zombie, when discussing horror films of the recent past, laments, "Horror [movies] had been watered down to nothing [and had] lost all their impact" (Tucker). While Zombie's ambitions seemed to veer more toward terrifying and disgusting audiences to the fullest possible extent, Eli Roth was apparently aiming even higher, toward both shocking audiences and offering social and political critique. In Keegan's article, Roth claims that when people attack him and ask, "How can you put this [violence and gore] out there in the world?" he replies, "Well, it's already out there" (Keegan). To unpack Roth's elliptical statement, Keegan cites an appearance that Roth made on The Fox News Channel's "Your World with Neil Cavuto" in April 2006. While Roth's appearance on the show coincided with – and was clearly meant to hype – the DVD release of *Hostel*, the director

also took the opportunity to defend his films and, by extension, the work of fellow Splat Packers by arguing that their films belong to rich tradition of horror films that are critical of, among other things, the United States's military policies. He explained:

With horror movies, it goes in cycles. In the 70s, with Vietnam, you had films like *Last House on the Left* [1972] and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974] and *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] . . . 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 . . . now, thanks to George Bush, Dick Chaney, and Donald Rumsfeld, there's a whole new wave of horror movies . . . we're in the war now and you feel like it's never gonna end. (“\$cary Profits!”)

Judging by their respective articles, both Keegan and Tucker appear to agree with Roth's assertions that the Splat Packers' films belong to a tradition of horror films of the past – like the “subversive shockers” of the 1970s mentioned in Alan Jones's article – that had been subversively oppositional and politically progressive. Keegan notes, “The Old Guard of horror directors, including Craven and Tobe Hooper, has welcomed the newcomers, inviting them to . . . dinner parties in Hollywood” (Keegan). To punctuate the point further, Tucker ends his article with a brief interview with “Old Guard” horror director John Carpenter, who assesses the films of the Splat Packers and praises, among others, the *Saw* films and films by Rob Zombie, who would go on to remake Carpenter's slasher classic *Halloween* (1978) in 2007.

December 2006: The Stakes Get Higher

Over the next couple of months, the Splat Pack's “movement” seemed to pick up steam, and judging from an article by Pamela McClintock published in *Variety* on 24 December, the stakes were getting higher. Like Keegan and Tucker, McClintock's article entitled “Blood

Brothers: The Splat Pack Support Group Bonds Horror Directors” praises the Splat Packers for producing profitable films on a low budget: “Their films cost next to nothing to make. Yet they mint gold” (McClintock). Also similar are the ways in which she designates how the bloody, gory, and violent films of the Splat Packers are radically better than other horror films in a genre that “has been hijacked by watered down PG-13 fare” (McClintock). However, unlike Keegan who, just two months previous, described the Splat Pack as “loose-knit” (Keegan), McClintock claims that the Pack is “closely knit, young and well-educated” (McClintock). Rather than being kindred spirits, the Splat Pack now sounded like a full-blown movement: according to Roth, “We all have the same agenda: to bring back really violent, horrific movies” (McClintock).

The Splat Pack’s agenda is, as described by McClintock, an independent movement, originating outside of mainstream Hollywood machinery and forcefully working its way in. McClintock writes, “By and large, the fresh-faced and enthusiastic helmers go unrecognized by the press and Hollywood establishment, which has long considered horror the bastard stepchild of the movie business. The men in the group still feel like outcasts as they make their movies for indies like Lionsgate or studio genre labels” (McClintock). Many who wrote about the Splat Pack, like Keegan, Tucker, and Vanessa Juarez, in her article “Sweet Torture” for the 13 October issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, discussed the films of the Splat Pack in conjunction with the wave of horror-movie-remakes that hit the market around the same time as the Splat Packers’ films. For example, Tucker’s article, in addition to interviews with Splat Packers Roth, Zombie, and Bousman, mentioned director Marcus Nispel, who had helmed the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2003. It also featured quotations from Jonathan Liebesman, who directed a prequel to Nispel’s remake, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006). Both of these films were bankrolled and produced by Platinum Dunes, a production company run by

Hollywood insider Michael Bay, director of such action blockbusters as *The Rock* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998). Platinum Dunes is also owned by New Line Cinema, which is, of course, a subsidiary of Hollywood conglomerate Time Warner.

While other journalists bring up directors like Nispel and Liebesman in their assessments of the Splat Pack, McClintock does not mention these directors in her article and thus reinforces her portrayal of the Splat Packers as rebellious Hollywood outsiders who work for independent studios like Lionsgate, which she dubs “the home studio of this group and their films” (McClintock). When McClintock notes that Warner Bros. courted Eli Roth to direct a remake of *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956), she dismisses such a thing ever happening by claiming, “It’s doubtful whether the majors would really go for the jugular and make the kind of movies Roth and his cabal make” (McClintock). To reinforce McClintock’s point, Roth devilishly notes, “[The major studios] wouldn’t know what to do with me” (qtd. in McClintock).

Indeed, in McClintock’s article, the Splat Pack seems to have a more serious attitude toward their films. McClintock, like Keegan and Tucker, includes the story of how Zombie offered advice to Bousman when *Saw III* ran into trouble with the MPAA, but this time around, the story seems less about merely thwarting the ratings board and, instead, is more about rebelling against the system by making films that convey a message and rise above mere exploitation. Bousman says that the situation with the MPAA forced him to defend the film on grounds of artistic expression: “Only a filmmaker can eloquently say why someone is getting tortured or massacred. It’s not just exploitive. Take the scene of a naked woman being tortured [referring to a scene in *Saw III* in which one of Jigsaw’s victims is stripped naked, hung in a freezer, and sprayed with cold water until her body freezes solid]. The rating board just saw torture and nudity, they didn’t see the raw emotion. I, as the filmmaker, could explain that” (qtd.

in McClintock). Zombie, this time around, seems to echo Bousman's sentiments and claims that he wants his films to unsettle audiences, not offer them escapism: "My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don't want it to be fun. [The experience of watching my films] should be horrible and uncomfortable" (McClintock). As the Splat Pack gained momentum, it seemed as if there was something more than exploitation and escapism going on in the torture- and gore-filled narratives of their films.

Perhaps the most audacious claims in McClintock's article come from Eli Roth who, thanks to his television appearances and visibility, was becoming something of a spokesperson and a figurehead for the Splat Pack. Speaking about the films made by his cohort, Roth declares, "These films are very subversive," and he boasts, "*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" (McClintock). Here, Roth's comments are similar to the ones he made during his appearance on Fox News, for he scoffs at the notion that films made by the Splat Pack merely exploit audiences' fear of torture, a hot-button topic since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003 and especially after the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal of 2004. He insists, "People assume these are movies by idiots for idiots. They're not" (McClintock). Roth implies that films by the young, well-educated Splat Packers offered subversive social critique for intelligent, discerning audiences. Regarding the Splat Pack's audiences, McClintock notes that the Splat Pack directors "are heroes among horror fans, who consider the director the star, not the actors, a distinction any auteur craves" (McClintock).

Independence and Subversion: Selling the Splat Pack

The way the Splat Pack's arrival is heralded in these articles offers an intriguing glimpse into how notions of independence, outsider status, and claims of subversion are used to sell films

and the personalities of their directors as well. As Cynthia Baron notes, “the ‘authoritative’ material about films and film stars found in the press can be an important component of what Hans Robert Jauss calls the ‘horizons of expectation’ held by audience members” (19). The “horizons of expectation” established by these journalists’ comments about the Splat Pack tend to involve two discrete but interconnected assumptions about these directors. One, that they are “independent” and operate “outside” of the Hollywood establishment. Second, that their films by virtue of their “independent” nature are subversive interrogations of the politics of their historical moment.

The first point, the assumption of the Splat Pack’s “independence,” manifests itself in several ways. One of these is how the journalists position the Splat Pack as “breaking away” from dominant trends in horror. Jones establishes this notion early on by framing the Splat Pack’s films as a rebellion against “toothless” horror of mainstream Hollywood (102). Every other journalist picked up this notion that the Splat Pack represented a breaking away from the mainstream. McClintock’s *Variety* article especially emphasizes this point as McClintock quotes Roth’s claim that a major studio “wouldn’t know what to do” with a rebel like himself (qtd. in McClintock). Another way journalists and the directors themselves position the Splat Pack as “independent” is by framing their films as a reaction to audience desires. The position is strongly essayed by Roth in Jones’s article: Roth argues that Splat Pack films are popular “because audiences are fed up” with other horror films that neglect to deliver scares and gore (qtd. in Jones 102). Roth even goes so far as to claim that if the success of his film *Hostel* “has proven anything, it’s that audiences absolutely determine taste” (102). According to Roth, Splat Packers are independent and not beholden to any corporate parents; their only “bosses” are the audiences who demand the blood and gore that the Pack delivers.

Quite a few of these claims, however, are disingenuous. For instance, Roth's claims that the Splat Pack films merely serve audiences' demands should be tempered by research by scholars such as Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye, who, in their article "Questioning the Concept of the Audience," piece together a genealogy of the term "audience." They find that the term is "a product of the media industry itself, which uses the term to identify markets and to define a commodity" (42). In light of this, Roth's comments are misleading, for they reflect a specious model of the culture industry. Roth attempts to create a scenario in which an audience democratically votes for what they want to see in movies (in this case, more blood, gore, and carnage) and gets it. However, if the audience itself is a creation of the culture industry, this bottom-up model dissolves, and one can see that the apparent groundswell for violent films has been manufactured by the Hollywood machinery.

Indeed, when considered in this light, the hype surrounding the Splat Pack, rather than seeming like a legitimate, populist movement, actually begins to look like the epitome of Hollywood marketing and advertising. For years, Hollywood and its various public relations administrations have argued that they merely "give the people what they want." For example, the ratings system was supposedly created by the MPAA because parents "wanted" it, when, in actuality, the ratings system was a way for Hollywood to more precisely target audiences and control content in the marketplace. Also, Hollywood has always argued that it delivers "entertainment" instead of "messages" with its movies because audiences "want" to be entertained, not preached to. It is thus interesting that with the Splat Pack, this model has slightly changed, with filmmakers like Roth claiming that their viewers "want" films with both social commentary and an increased amount of brutality that supposedly reflects the harshness and uncertainty of the war-torn world around them.

However, even in their promises of social commentary and more gore and brutality, Splat Pack hype resembles the basics of crass commercialism. One of the foundational mantras of all commercial advertising is the promise that something is “new and improved.” This technique is used to sell everything from crackers to laundry detergent. Journalists writing about the Splat Pack applied this proven commercial strategy to promote the films of the Splat Pack, endlessly promising that these films were more brutal, more violent, and more socially relevant than what had come before. Repeatedly, Splat Pack films were positioned by journalists as “new and improved” horror, not the “safe,” watered-down horror of films like the American remakes of *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004) or *Dark Water* (Walter Salles, 2005). Framed in this fashion, the Splat Pack was not exactly a group of filmmakers operating “outside” of the Hollywood machinery, but rather a part of it, with their outsider status manufactured by media coverage.

Thus, these filmmakers’ relationship to the machinery of corporate Hollywood bears close examination and consideration. McClintock names Lionsgate as “the home studio” of the Splat Pack because the studio has handled distribution for all of Roth’s films, all of the *Saw* films, *Zombie*’s first two films, and the United States releases of Aja’s *Haute Tension* and Marhsall’s *The Descent*. Lionsgate is indeed, according to Janet Wasko, “one of the leading independent companies” currently active in a corporate Hollywood environment wherein “independent distributors are rare” (Wasko 79). Tom Schatz describes Lionsgate as a “powerful Vancouver-based indie producer-distributor that has remained steadfastly independent” (30). However, Schatz is quick to note that Lionsgate “often collaborates with Conglomerate Hollywood, as it did on *Hostel*. Lionsgate handled the domestic (North American) theatrical

release of that film, while Sony Screen Gems handled foreign theatrical and Sony Home Entertainment handled the DVD release” (30).

While this partnership with corporate Hollywood is acknowledged by McClintock in her *Variety* article, she frames the story in a vastly different way. She writes, “Screen Gems, part of the Sony empire, gave *Hostel* to Lionsgate to market and sell, reportedly concerned about content” (McClintock), suggesting that Sony was worried about being associated with the film’s content. However, the situation is a bit more mundane than Sony CEOs being adverse to Roth’s gory torture-fest. Sharing distribution deals as Lionsgate did with Sony on Roth’s *Hostel* is simply a smart way to do business. Thus, Sony profits by distributing overseas a movie that was already a hit in the United States. *Hostel* did a respectable thirty-three million dollars in business overseas compared to the film’s US gross of forty-seven million (“*Hostel*”). Also, Lionsgate gets to enjoy the security of a proven major distributing their film overseas. The security offered by a major distributor is especially important given that, as Roth himself admits, *Hostel* “plays on the xenophobia of a nation where only ten percent of the population has a passport” (qtd. in Jones 103).

Ultimately, the Splat Pack’s claims of being “independent” – not to mention journalists’ claims to their independence – should be qualified and equivocated. As Jon Lewis notes, independent studios have to play by the rules set by the majors if they want to survive or succeed in corporate Hollywood where the major studios “very much govern the way [independent] film moves through the marketplace” (“Those” 29). Given McClintock’s audacious claims for the Splat Pack’s independence, a rather ironic image appears in her article: placed beside a photo of Roth directing actors on the set of *Hostel: Part II* is drawing of a man holding aloft a chainsaw, and the chainsaw’s blade is dripping blood. One might expect this type of drawing to ornament

an article about horror, but what is unexpected is that in this case the man welding the chainsaw is dressed in a suit and tie. While this outfit may seem like strange attire for a maniacal killer, it is perfect for the Splat Pack, for it represents, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, the two contradictions yoked together by violence in their image as cultivated by the media. On one hand, there is the rebellious iconoclast with a mischievous penchant for violence as represented by the chainsaw. On the other, there is the corporation man, as represented by the suit.

Aside from touting the Splat Pack as new and improved horror, the other “horizon of expectation” created by the journalists in their writing on the Splat Pack is that their films are subversive and critical of dominant political ideologies or beliefs. Roth and Aja, in particular, argue that their films are critiques of their current historical moment, a milieu structured and informed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration’s global War on Terror, and global economic recession. They feel that their films bring to light and make visible the brutal, the terrible, the traumatic, and the violent. It is not entirely clear, however, how the Splat Pack’s claims about political subversion squares with the corporate environment that gives rise not only to these films, but also acts as if these films are the result of a populist groundswell.

One of the main ways in which Jones and the other journalists lend credence to the claim that these films “reflect” their historical moment and subversively comment upon it is by comparing these filmmakers to the celebrated horror filmmakers of the 1970s. Jones calls the 1970s an era that “spawned one subversive shocker after another” (103). This connection is taken even further with 2007’s “It’s Only a Movie” film series at the Museum of the Moving Image that places films by the Splat Pack alongside their counterparts from the 1970s. The events of this film series illustrate why this marketing position – depicting horror films from the 1970s and 2000s as oppositional, and the consumption of these films as a subversive act – may

be such a tempting one for journalists to take. During the “Considering Horror” panel discussion that took place during the series, most of the panelists, when asked about their first encounters with horror films, told similar stories: sneaking off to the theater behind their parents’ backs or being allowed by a delinquent babysitter to watch horror movies on video. In other words, these critics associate horror films with a form of disobedience, and by labeling the consumption of horror films from the 1970s and 2000s as subversive, film critics get to become a part of this oppositionality. Ironically, this perspective plays into the entertainment industry’s hands by obscuring the material base of the Splat Pack’s success and how this success ultimately profits the corporations who reap the financial benefits.

The discussion that follows is designed to expose, rather than obscure, the ways that the Splat Pack’s success is tied to a material base. Since the Splat Pack seems to draw so much energy and claims of importance for their own work by evoking the films and filmmakers of horror’s “Golden Age,” it is useful to take a close look at the American horror films of the 1970s. Utilizing a political economy methodology, which emphasizes film as an industry and a business and foregrounds the film product as commodity, I hope to show that, as Aja claims, 1977 and 2006 are indeed “similar” (qtd. in Jones 103), but not in ways he may realize.

CHAPTER II. POLITICS AND THE HORROR FILM: A POLITICAL ECONOMY

INTERVENTION

Revisiting the “Golden Age”

As noted in the previous chapter, the films by directors from the “Golden Age” of horror films set the standard for Splat Pack directors; Splat Packers like Roth, Aja, Zombie, and Marshall have often noted how they admire the films from the 1970s because of their uncompromising ferociousness, bloody gore, and supposedly subversive stance. However, a political economy analysis of the most celebrated and written-about horror movies in film history, the American horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, reveals that they are less subversive when considered in their industrial context. Many scholars have read “Golden Age” horror films as symptoms of a country in trauma after the violence of Vietnam and the disillusionment of Watergate, but these readings are incomplete without an acknowledgement that the success of “politically progressive” fare such as *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* also represented Hollywood’s willingness to rely upon independent productions during a time of transition for Hollywood. While the studios were rebounding from the worst recession that the film industry had ever experienced, Hollywood was also making the transition from a film industry to a horizontal media industry. A key element in this transition was television, a medium that had profound implications for how Hollywood made, packaged, and sold films. Thus, it is important to offer an overview of the economic situation that gave rise to the “Golden Age” of horror films.

The glut of horror films featuring new levels of adult content – violence, gore, sex, etc. – released during the “Golden Age” and the films of the Splat Pack were both facilitated by industry economics and important changes in industry self-regulation. Jack Valenti, then-

president of the Motion Picture Association of American (MPAA), created a new ratings system in 1968 that helped Hollywood to attract audiences into movie theaters. This shift in industry policy eerily foreshadows the flood of “Unrated” movies on DVD that followed in the wake of the “DVD revolution” that facilitated the wave of films from the Splat Pack. Also interesting is how television plays a part in engendering both the films of horror’s “Golden Age” and those of the Splat Pack. Valenti’s ratings system aided the growth of movie multiplexes that imitated the “choices” offered by television, just as the “DVD revolution” was another step in how the Hollywood film industry has, for years, redefined television as an ancillary market for Hollywood product. Understanding that horror films from the “Golden Age” were commodities and well-suited to the changes and realignments taking place in the film industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s makes it possible to see that the films of the Splat Pack are also marketable in the current industrial environment.

Horror’s Origins: Selling *Caligari*

Political economy analysis is generally not a part of horror film discussions. For example, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is widely cited not only as the cornerstone, if not the inaugural, film of the German Expressionist movement, but also as one of the foundational films of the horror genre. One needs not look very far to find numerous claims for *Caligari*’s importance to the establishment of the themes and style of the horror film genre. For example, writing in 1980, Morris Dickstein claims that while the popularity of other genres may wane, “fright and terror” films “have never really been out of style, not since the classic chillers like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*” (65). In other words, for Dickstein, *Caligari* is a high-water mark that horror’s popularity continues (at least) to meet and (at most) to surpass. The title alone of S. S. Prower’s 1980 book *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Terror Tale* seems to suggest that Weine’s

Expressionistic film is solely responsible for spawning the horror genre. David J. Skal, in *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, also cites *Caligari* as a revolutionary, European harbinger of “an enormous westward expansion of horrors” and of “the dark beings that had used the European avant-garde to find a modern expression [that] would soon begin crossing the Atlantic, in film canisters instead of coffins” (60). Similarly, Rick Worland observes that in the history of the horror film, *Caligari* is noteworthy, if only because of “the times it was more or less directly imitated” by American movies like *The Bells* (James Young, 1926) and *The Cat and the Canary* (Paul Leni, 1927) (50).

If being held responsible for spawning the modern horror film is not enough, *Caligari* has also had to bear the burden of acting as a window into the tumultuous cultural and societal anxieties of the historical moment of its production and release. As Thomas Elsaesser explains it, *Caligari* is a film that seems to be “locked into” a particular historical moment and forced into acting both as an allegorical retelling of past events and an oracle foretelling the future (8). For instance, Skal reads the 1919 film’s chaotic vision of the world as a direct response to the horrors of “Modern warfare” introduced by World War I (48). Even more famous is the level of accountability to which Siegfried Kracauer has held the film. In his influential 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Kracauer reads the film as nothing less than a glimpse into the collective soul of postwar, Weimar Germans. According to Kracauer, “*Caligari* exposes the [German collective] soul wavering between tyranny and chaos, and facing a desperate situation” (74). In other words, Kracauer feels that the film represents the anxieties and uncertainties about identity that plagued a defeated Germany after World War I. According to Kracauer, *Caligari* is also the response to these anxieties of the German people, who turned to tyranny for stability. Ultimately, Kracauer argues that *Caligari* offers a potent

political commentary on Weimar culture and foreshadows the rise of Hitler and National Socialism over a decade later.

The many horror films that have followed *Caligari* up to the present day have often been treated similarly, with critics and commentators analyzing the content of the films in order to survey the fears, traumas, and anxieties of a culture or society at a given point in time. As Bruce Kawin explains, “The best horror films are not sexist bloodbaths but unsettling confrontations” with various elements of the psyche, and many horror films “use such confrontations as a base from which to make social and political observations” (104). Of course, Kawin lists *Caligari* among his examples of horror films that make “social and political observations.” Thus, *Caligari* has been seen as setting the standard for horror films not only in terms of generic conventions; commentary about the film has established the view that horror films reflect societal anxieties and political attitudes and thus can be read as political comment.

However, a few significant factors are left out of standard interpretations of *Caligari*. Writing in 2004, Peter Hutchings points out that German Expressionist films such as *Caligari* and *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922) “were neither produced nor originally marketed as horror films but instead as ‘art movies’” and that the labeling of these films as “horror” came later in the 1960s (*Horror* 3). Therefore, *Caligari*’s “designation” as horror film is “retrospective” (Hutchings, *Horror* 3). By looking at how *Caligari* was first sold to audiences, both in Germany and around the world, Hutchings is following the lead of Thomas Elsaesser, who in order to “save” *Caligari* from the historical readings it has been “locked into” by critics like Kracauer, attempts to foreground the film’s status as a commodity, as a salable product. According to Elsaesser, the “Expressionism” that many critics feel exposed Germany’s soul through its films

was, perhaps more significantly, a form of “branding” (26), of differentiating Germany’s products in the global film marketplace.

Further, Elsaesser explains that the “Expressionistic” techniques on display in *Caligari* – the claustrophobic set, the stylized props, all of the elements that supposedly offered a glimpse into the cultural chaos of the historical moment – were attempts to disavow “the cinema’s industrial conditions of production by promoting it as art” (43). Thus, *Caligari* represented an effort on the part of the filmmakers and the studio to offer “a mass-produced object that disguises its technological-industrial origin by reproducing meticulously the forms, textures and attributes of value associated with a unique, hand-crafted or cult object” (Elsaesser 43). In other words, the characteristics of *Caligari* that have convinced many critics and scholars that the film offers a glimpse into the confused souls of the people who made and watched it, the elements that have supposedly conveyed the critique of the society and culture that produced it, stemmed, in part, from an attempt to *sell* the film and make it an attractive commodity. Thus, by foregrounding the film as commodity, Elsaesser constructs a radically new reading of the film: rather than being a howl of torment issuing from a confused collective German soul, perhaps the film is merely about the fashioning of one’s self through consumer choice (45), a process during which the film’s status as commodity is much more significant than its status as historical document.

Considering the Industry: A Political Economy Approach

Elsaesser’s look at *Caligari*’s status as a commodity has a methodological kinship to political economy studies of the media industry. Discussing political economy methodology in *How Hollywood Works*, Wasko explains that a political economy approach to film studies recognizes that “profit is the primary driving force and guiding principle for the industry” (3). Additionally, she insists: “The profit motive and the commodity nature of film have implications

for the kinds of films that are produced (and not produced), who makes them, how they are distributed, and where/when they are viewed” (4). In regards to *Caligari*, Elsaesser’s foregrounding of the film as a commodity and his consideration of the industrial practices that gave rise to the film’s production and marketing give a fuller, richer picture of the film’s possible cultural significance than a mere reading of the textual details of the film offer. As Richard Maltby insists, “movies are products for consumption,” and “it is through a thoroughgoing acknowledgement of their commercial existence, not a denial of it, that their complexity can be most fully examined” (553).

A political economy approach to film and a foregrounding of film as a commodity does not rule out or replace ideological or cultural readings of films. Instead, studies of material factors are “necessary grounding for ideological readings and cultural analysis of a film’s content” (Wasko 9). In other words, only by first considering the film’s commodity status and the industrial structures that produced the film can one lay the groundwork for ideological critique of a film’s content or assessment of a film’s cultural relevance or impact.

If the horror film genre is, indeed, the offspring of *Caligari*, the genre has inherited more than the film’s iconography – in the words of S. S. Prawer, “all those monster-bride confrontations and roof-top chases in the routine horror-movie” (167). The genre has also inherited the tendency to be read as producing allegories of the anxieties and traumas of its particular historical moment without due consideration given to the industrial and technological factors that play a role in what types of films are produced, distributed, and widely seen by audiences. Of course, this interpretive scenario is not unique to analysis of the horror film; as Eric Smoodin explains, the problem extends to all films:

All too commonly, when . . . historians try to talk about a film's relationship to "history," for instance, they do so through the rather useless binary of text versus context; that is, history is "out there," all around a film, and the film in some manner or other 'reflects' it. So, to understand 'history' we need only to interpret the film. (17)

According to Smoodin, the over-dependence on textual and filmic analysis at the expense of film industry analysis is a problem affecting all of film studies.

Moreover, the tendency to interpret horror films based solely on textual evidence is exacerbated by the similarity that horror films' dark and disturbing subject matter shares with nightmares, a similarity that seems to beg for psychoanalytic interpretation. For instance, cultural historian Andre Tutor has described horror films "as a kind of collective dreamworld requiring analysis by methods derived from one or another tradition of psychoanalysis" (2). Also, since psychoanalytic criticism was one of the ways in which film studies disciplinarily found its way into the academy and "legitimat[ed] the academic study of cinema through its insistence on the intellectual complexity of its own activity" (Maltby 553), psychoanalysis became, as Barry Keith Grant puts it, "the most common critical approach to the horror film" ("Introduction" 4). However, this psychoanalytic focus came at the expense of other important methodological approaches such as political economy. Only recently have studies of the film industry, enabled by a political economy approach and attention given to film as a commodity, made their way into studies of the horror film.

Robert Spadoni's recent book, entitled *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre*, is exemplary in this regard and provides an excellent analysis of how technological changes and industrial shifts exert an important influence over the types of

films that Hollywood produces. In his book, Spadoni provides in-depth analysis of *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), two films that inaugurated the sound horror film in the United States. Rather than reading these films through a text-oriented psychoanalytic lens, Spadoni focuses instead on how these films were made, with attention paid to how the then-new technology of sound was used to capitalize on the disorienting effects that early sound films had on audiences who were accustomed to silent films.

These newly “medium-sensitive” viewers alternated between a “heightened awareness of the two-dimensionality of the screen image” and a riveted apprehension of “the potentially frenetic visual intensity of the vocalizing human figure” (Spadoni 26). In other words, the filmmakers, utilizing new technologies, consciously made significant aesthetic decisions so that these films would be more attractive commodities. By this rationale, then, these films’ commodity status and how they relate to industrial and technological changes must factor into reading and interpreting these films. The films should not be considered as merely “reflections” of their historical moment, but as a cluster of aesthetic, cultural, technological, industrial, and capitalistic expressions and impulses. Spadoni’s work also shows that considerations of the film industry, technological changes, and film’s commodity status need not replace psychoanalytic readings and close textual analysis. As the title of his book suggests, Spadoni argues that early sound films had an “uncanny” effect on audiences in that the people – or, in the case of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, the monsters – on screen seemed both more real and more artificial due to new sound technology (6). Thus, a consideration of industrial changes works in concert with more traditional psychoanalytic models of film analysis.

Spadoni’s work can serve as a template an examination of the films of the Splat Pack. Like Browning’s *Dracula* and Whale’s *Frankenstein*, films like Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s*

Rejects or Eli Roth's *Hostel* are products of their industrial and technological contexts. One must take these factors into consideration before attempting to reckon how these films "reflect" their historical moments or, worse still, attempting to interpret these films using only methodologies that may skew toward the ahistorical. A look at the industrial context that gave rise to the "Golden Age" shows how a political economy approach to studying horror films can offer a more complex view of films as commodities, rather than merely considering them as dark, mysterious reflection of historical and cultural anxieties.

The Spirit of 1968 . . . or the Material Consequences of 1948?

The dawn of the "Golden Age" of horror films occurred at around the same time film studies began to be institutionalized in universities as an academic discipline, and these two phenomena are not unrelated. Film studies entered the academy during one of the most politically contentious times in American history – the 1960s – and the events of the time galvanized academics and had a significant effect on the nature of their scholarship. As Richard Maltby explains, 1968 was a particularly important year:

The events of 1968 – the political uprisings in France in May, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August, the outbreak of political violence in Northern Ireland, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the ongoing protests against the Vietnam war – provided a powerful impetus for the political analysis of culture and cultural forms. (531)

While the drive to explore the political dimensions of cinema was a worthwhile endeavor, many scholars saw film as a "quasi-autonomous realm of political struggle" (Stam 133). In other words, political or ideological examinations of cinema were often separated from considerations of cinema's material reality and means of production.

Maltby argues that an ahistorical, ideological view of cinema predominated in part because “the emerging academic subject of film studies resisted the industrial discourses contained in both the trade papers and the professional journals in favor of critical practices drawn from elsewhere in the Academy” (495-96). According to Maltby, “the opportunity for a sustained critical engagement with the industry’s professional practice and history was lost, or at least long postponed” (496). For film studies to officially enter the academy, “it had to develop a set of theoretical concerns recognized by the academy’s established institutional criteria. Only with these concerns in place could study of the movies proceed to the higher ground of the established humanities or social sciences” (501). In other words, film studies had to speak a language that the humanities would recognize and accept, and a study of industrial practices was generally not considered one of these languages.

It was in such an environment that critic-turned-scholar Robin Wood would write that Hollywood cinema underwent a positive change and grew more complex in the late 1960s and early 1970s because of “major eruptions in American culture” like the Vietnam War, Watergate, and “the growing force and cogency of radical protest and liberation movements” such as “black militancy, feminism, gay liberation” (44). In particular, Wood argues the horror film grew more interesting during this period, and he proposes that these films spoke “for the quandary of a civilization” (63). It perhaps should come as no surprise that Wood, a scholar trained in literary analysis and Marxist and feminist informed psychoanalysis, would see the content of Hollywood films shifting to reflect the zeitgeist, without considering how major changes in the American film industry affected the types of films being released at the time.

However, industry scholar Yannis Tzioumakis explains that while “changes in American society and culture played . . . a significant part” in the development of American cinema during

this era, economic factors were also significant (169). Indeed, a look at what was taking place in the film industry at this time will show that it is only reasonable that horror films would flourish, not necessarily because they were transparently reflecting the “politics of the time,” but rather because it made good economic sense given the shape the industry in the late 1960s. Hollywood was on the brink of a crippling recession that, by 1971, would result in “more than \$200 million in losses” (Cook, *Lost* 9), but this economic downturn was simply another example of the instability Hollywood had been experiencing since, in 1948, the Paramount Decree forced the major studios to divest themselves of their sites of exhibition. Giving up monopolistic control of their theaters was an extremely unattractive notion for the studios, especially considering that “94 percent” of their total investment went into their exhibition sites (Cook, *History* 239). Nevertheless, as Maltby explains, “In the period immediately after divorcement, Hollywood retrenched, cutting back severely on production: B-pictures, shorts, cartoons, and newsreels were dropped, and the studios concentrated their efforts on fewer A-pictures” (161). As the studios cut corners and figured out how they were going to operate without vertical integration, B-pictures like horror were one of the first things to get dropped from the studios’ slates.

This does not mean, though, that the B-picture disappeared. Rather, B-pictures transformed into “exploitation pictures,” a name that “came to be . . . loosely applied to the output of independent companies such as American International Pictures (AIP) and Allied Artists, which sought to fill the product shortage for the 8,000 theaters still showing double bills” (Maltby 169). As the studios scaled back on production in response to the Paramount Decree, these independent studios filled in the gap and made the types of pictures the studios were not making, like horror films and other exploitation pictures. Additionally, as Tzioumakis explains, “Away from the shadow of the majors, these low-end independents did not have to adhere to

tested formulas and subject matters that originated during the studio years” (159). Thus, these “independent” studios ostensibly operated “outside” of the Hollywood system, and their pictures may not have been subjected to the stringent standards that studio-made pictures were.

However, it was to the Hollywood studios’ benefit that these independents were allowed to flourish during this time because “Contrary to the intentions of the Paramount decrees, the majors retained their near-monopoly over distribution” (Maltby 161). In other words, since the studios controlled distribution, it benefitted them to allow smaller companies to make exploitation and horror films as outrageous as they wanted because the studios would make money off these films by controlling distribution. In fact, exploitation horror films, like foreign-made Hammer productions *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) and *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958), released in the US as *Horror of Dracula*, and Roger Corman’s Poe adaptations starring Vincent Price, such as *House of Usher* (1960) and *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), were boons to the major studios’ distribution arms, so much so, in fact, that the studios “actually increased their share of box-office income” in the years following the Paramount Decree by maintaining control over distribution (Maltby 161). It is little wonder, then, that film historian Eric Schaefer, in his history of exploitation cinema, cites 1959 as “an endpoint of classical exploitation” films because, among other reasons, this is a time when Hollywood studios begin trading heavily in the distribution of exploitation films (8).

Another material consequence of the Paramount Decree that encouraged Hollywood studios to transition from film producers to media distributors was the development of television throughout the 1940s and 1950s. As Tino Balio notes, the heads of the Hollywood studios were extremely interested in establishing a direct investment in television from the medium’s beginnings, with Paramount, Warner Bros., MGM, and Twentieth Century-Fox all attempting to

set up television stations in the late 1930s and early 1940s (21), but the “FCC created insurmountable barriers to entry” into television production for the studios due to how the Paramount Decree “severely prejudiced the studios’ reputation in the eyes of the FCC” (Balio 21).

However, the FCC’s efforts did not forever banish Hollywood from the television business. Balio explains that in 1947, television began a “commercial expansion,” but encountered a problem: “Local broadcasters had the choice of producing live programming to fill the gaps in their schedules (which was expensive) or of searching out films to lease” (30). Networks turned to the studios for product to fill airtime, but the sale of films to television was adamantly opposed by “craft unions and exhibitors” who wanted, respectively, to negotiate new residual rights contracts and to avoid competing with television for movie viewers (Balio 30-1). Nevertheless, the major studios began selling their back catalog of films to television in 1955, either through purchase or lease agreement (Balio 31). The same year, Hollywood began telefilm production, with Lew Wasserman’s MCA eventually becoming “the unchallenged giant of television production” and “supplying a third of the programs on prime time” (Balio 34). Thus, television became another outlet – an ancillary market – where Hollywood could continue to make money. One finds here a redefinition of the television screen as a “second screen” for movies that prefigures the video era. In this way, Hollywood was able to break into television.

In a matter of speaking, television also “broke into” the movie business during this time, as the medium of television taught Hollywood several significant lessons about the marketing and exhibition of its products. As Balio puts it, “after television, the film industry realized that motion pictures no longer had universal appeal and began targeting audience segments” (28). Targeting different audience segments required the studios to differentiate their product lines to

give audiences the illusion of choice offered to consumers by television, a medium wherein the presence of channels guaranteed choices. One way the film industry offered an illusion of choice was by, throughout the 1960s, modifying conventional distribution to the multiplex model (Balio 29). The multiplex theater offered “consumers a range of motion picture choices under one roof” (Balio 29), a format obviously modeled after the “choices” offered by television via its multiple channels³.

To fill multiplex theaters with different choices for movie-going audiences, the majors would rely on independent production methods to produce profitable films that could defray risk and help them weather tough economic times. As Tzioumakis puts it, the studios turned to “low-budget independent production by (mostly) hyphenate filmmakers that quickly became the model for mainstream Hollywood filmmaking for a short period of time” (170). Tzioumakis explains that the films from this era, often romantically referred to as “The New Hollywood” or “Hollywood Renaissance” (170), were “characterized by the production of stylistically diverse and narratively challenging films that were much more tuned in to the social and political climate of the era” (170). However, this “tuning in” to the “social and political climate” was not exactly the radical break from the “Hollywood system” critics and scholars have often suggested, nor did these films organically emerge from the politics of the time. Rather, as the work of Tzioumakis and others illustrates, the studios’ decision to produce – or, perhaps put more accurately,

³ The multiplex has interesting origins. The first multiplex in the United States opened in Kansas City in 1963 by Stanley Durwood, whose family business would become exhibition juggernaut American Multi-Cinemas (AMC) in 1968 (Acland 103). However, in 1948, Canadian theatre-owner Nat Taylor had “twinned” the operations of his Elgin Theater in Ottawa, meaning that Taylor opened a second, smaller auditorium inside the already-operational Elgin (Acland 103). Taylor would later claim that Durwood stole this multiplex idea from a speech he gave in 1965, even though Durwood’s multiplex had already been operational for two years (Acland 103).

distribute – “Golden Age” horror films was a calculated move to capture audiences with a more desirable commodity.

During the late 1960s, an era marked by significant political upheaval, a more desirable film commodity would, at least, possess a patina of counterculture revolutionary zeal. Fittingly enough, the two films that Tzioumakis notes as landmark examples of this new type of filmmaking – *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) – are key examples of teenpic genres (sex comedies and biker movies, respectively) developed by independents, co-opted by the majors, and shot through with a countercultural attitude that proved to be immensely profitable for their distributors (170-71). Another significant film that fits this “countercultural” profile and was released in the key year of 1968, the year between *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, is George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (NOTLD). While independently distributed, unlike *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, Romero’s film did set the standard for the counterculture exploitation film that was taken up by the Hollywood majors in the years following (Cook, *Lost* 223). As Cook notes, it became a “model” of “subversive” horror films like *Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* to follow (*Lost* 223).

In *NOTLD*, the horror film genre, after being nurtured on the independent, drive-in circuit for the previous two decades, is shot through with social consciousness. The film, a simple story about human survivors fighting against hordes of flesh-eating zombies, not only began a trend of more bloody and apocalyptic horror movies, but has also been embraced by academics for the ways in which it attacks social institutions, from systemic racism to patriarchy to the traditional family. For instance, in *Midnight Movies*, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum praise the film as if it emerged organically from the tumultuous events of 1968. Tony Williams begins *Hearths*

of *Darkness*, his book-length analysis of representations of the family in American horror films, by citing *NOTLD* as the first example of horror films from the “Golden Age” that interrogates the image of the traditional family (13). Similarly, Barry Keith Grant admires Romero’s film – and the ones he made after – for attacking “capitalism as consistently as they do the ideology of masculinity” (“Taking” 207).

Additionally, Grant depicts Romero as a sort of folk hero and describes him as “an independent regional filmmaker” who “has managed to make several progressive and commercially viable features while remaining on the margins of the mainstream” (“Taking” 211). While Romero is, admittedly, an admirable, left-leaning filmmaker, the image of him as iconoclastic auteur supposedly emerging whole cloth from the counterculture to combat all the reactionary ills of society obscures a consideration of the industrial context in which he emerged. Also obscured is how he and the auteurs in his cohort (Tobe Hooper, Larry Cohen, John Carpenter, et al.) were allowed to flourish at a time when it most benefitted Hollywood studios. According to Timothy Corrigan, the notion of auteurism has always “been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies” (“Auteurs” 40). The studios’ embrace of auteurism during this tumultuous time in Hollywood’s history epitomizes Corrigan’s claim, for, as Cook explains, “Auteurism” was, during the recession of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, “a marketing tool” that enabled the studios to hold their ground as they transitioned from the vertical integration of the studio era to the horizontal integration of corporate, blockbuster-era Hollywood (“Auteur Cinema” 35). In other words, the counterculture “auteur” of the Romero stripe did not emerge in opposition to the Hollywood film industry as much as this figure was constructed by the industry for economic reasons.

Indeed, this matrix of influence – industrial and economic– was instrumental in the rise of the auteurist “New Hollywood,” a movement that seemed very much in keeping with the heady times of revolution of the late 1960s. Many critics and commentators, including those Splat Packers who refer admiringly to the old guard horror directors of the “Golden Age,” keep alive the rhetoric of cinematic revolution. However, as has been argued here, the emergence of Golden Age horror films has more to do with the effects of the 1948 Paramount Decree than with the zeitgeist of 1968. The Paramount Decree resulted in independent producers taking up and developing the exploitation film and, rather than working “outside the system,” they made a considerable profit for the majors who still controlled distribution. Further, exploitation films like Romero’s *NOTLD*, which contained just enough counterculture associations to make them appealing to youth audiences, helped Hollywood weather a potentially disastrous recession. A reliance on auteurism as a marketing strategy also helped the studios through this period. After all, 1968 was also the year of *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), which represented a major Hollywood studio (Paramount) investing in an exploitation horror film directed by a star-auteur from Eastern Europe.

Success of a Salesman: Jack Valenti and the Ratings System

Auteurism and counterculture appeal were not the only marketing techniques conjured up by Hollywood studios to make it through tough economic times and retool for the corporate era. As Cook notes, *NOTLD* and *Rosemary’s Baby* were both released during the key year of 1968, when “the MPAA scrapped the Production code in favor of the Code and Rating Administration (CARA) system, whose guidelines allowed for the representation of graphic violence in its R and X categories” (*Lost* 224). Indeed, the CARA rating system, developed by Jack Valenti, then-president of the MPAA, played a major role in diversifying Hollywood’s commodities and

targeting new audiences. Just as it is necessary to consider the industry's dire economic straits when contextualizing the beginnings of the "Golden Age" of American horror films, it is also necessary to pay close attention to how the emergence of "Golden Age" of American horror films coincides with the beginnings of the CARA ratings system.

Also, like the Hollywood film industry's growing willingness to rely on an independent model of production throughout much of the late 1960s, the adoption of the rating system did not reflect the tenor of 1960s counterculture, nor did it represent taboos being overthrown or overcome, as much as it was an attempt to solve economic problems with which Hollywood had been struggling for two decades. These economic problems and the way they related to troubles with industry self-regulation and censorship practices become more intelligible in light of the beginnings of industry self-regulation, how it generally operated during the years leading up to the Paramount Decree, and how it set the standard for censorship to come.

Problems with state censorship and questions about how to regulate film content have plagued film industry's drive for profit since its beginnings. The first committee dedicated to controlling film content, called the National Board of Review (NBR), was formed as early as 1908 (Black 13). However, it was the rulings in two court cases – *Block v. Chicago* in 1909 and *Mutual v. Ohio* in 1915 – that set the tone for film censorship for the next forty years. In both of these pivotal cases, judges ruled that films were not protected under the first amendment and were, as a consequence, subject to censorship (Black 11, 16, 17). These decisions made it possible for local and state censorship boards to edit films before allowing them to play or decide not to screen a film at all.

Both of these options played havoc, of course, with the studios' box office revenues, so in order to protect their investments, Hollywood studios decided to regulate themselves and assure

state censorship boards that all products coming out of Hollywood could pass the social code of even the strictest state censor. The first major effort at self-regulation came in 1922 in the wake of the Fatty Arbuckle scandal and the murder of Famous Players-Lasky head William Desmond Taylor⁴, as the studios established the watchdog organization Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) with former Postmaster General William Hays as the director (Cook, *History* 185-86). Over the next decade, Hays attempted, with varying degrees of success, to make certain that the studios followed “morality” codes, but industry self-regulation during the studio era was not truly solidified until Joseph Breen was appointed chief censor in December 1933. Due to his devout Catholicism and rabid anti-Semitism, Breen, no doubt, tackled the job of head of the newly formed Production Code Administration with a certain amount of sincerity, but more important to the studios was that a movie that was awarded Breen’s seal of approval would most likely not face the opposition of local and state censors of Catholic decency groups and, thus, not lose valuable box office dollars due to censorship or boycott (Black 170-71, 191).

In other words, industry self-regulation in the studio-era was not born out of the desire to make “moral” films. Rather, censorship and the labeling of movies had a primarily economic function. Although Breen and the PCA’s guidelines were legendary for their strictness, studios were willing to follow them because Breen’s approval meant that their films would be free to do business in markets in the United States and other parts of the world. As Jon Lewis points out,

⁴ Fatty Arbuckle was accused of the rape and manslaughter of Virginia Rappe, an aspiring actress, in 1921. He was acquitted in 1923, but the scandal ruined his career beyond repair. The investigation into William Desmond Taylor’s murder revealed that he had been living a decadent life and having affairs with multiple women. Both cases are summarized in Cook, *History* 185-86. For more information on the Arbuckle scandal, see Stoloff. For more information on the Taylor murder, see Higham.

“In Hollywood, content regulation does have its political dimension. But the political is subsumed by or conflated with the economic” (*Hollywood* 7).

The economic imperative of Breen’s censorship is perhaps reflected most in his coinage of the term ‘‘industry policy’ for dealing with those films that, while technically within the moral confines of the code . . . were adjudged ‘dangerous’ to the well-being of the industry’’ (Black 245). It speaks volumes about the importance of corporate profit to Breen and the industry’s self-regulatory ethos that the most dangerous films, those that most fell victim to “industry policy,” were not ones that featured sex and violence, but films that “questioned constituted authority, illustrated labor-management conflicts too vividly, or dealt too directly with controversial topics like racism, poverty, and unemployment” (Black 246). Thus, industry self-regulation was concerned with economics on two levels: as an institution, Hollywood censorship existed both to ensure that the studios’ films accumulated as much capital as possible and to make certain no films challenged or called into question capitalism and its processes. Overall, Breen’s system worked well for the next decade or so, but after World War II, the industry self-regulation process would meet serious challenges. However, Hollywood would emerge from this crisis with even more powerful ways of controlling filmic content and selling it to audiences.

The trouble began in 1946 when box office revenues began to drop off from the spectacular heights they had achieved during World War II (Lewis, *Hollywood* 65). After the Paramount Decree, this situation continued to worsen, as box office revenues steadily declined year after year. Amid this industry malaise, director and producer Otto Preminger, in the early 1950s, decided to adapt for the screen *The Moon Is Blue*, a “moderately risqué Broadway farce,” and as Jon Lewis argues, this decision would prove to be a pivotal moment in motion picture history (Lewis, *Hollywood* 65). In early 1953, PCA head censor Joe Breen made it clear that he

would not grant a seal of approval to an adaptation of this bawdy comedy, but Preminger and United Artists pressed ahead with production anyway, a decision made “Less as a matter of principle than in acknowledgement of just how desperate things had gotten at the box office” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 105, 107). After the film’s completion, United Artists withdrew from the MPAA, released the film without a seal, and the film’s risqué content and the controversy surrounding its production “helped make the film a top twenty box office hit” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 107).

After the success of *The Moon Is Blue* and a spate of other “controversial” and “adult-themed” films during the next couple of years, it was apparent that the PCA and its “morality” code for the movies were hopelessly outdated, not so much because of the ways in which it had “lost touch” with social mores of the times, but rather for the ways in which it was impeding potentially profitable films from reaching interested consumers. Jon Lewis notes, “Market research suggested that a targetable sector of the mid-1950s movie audience – those people still interested in spending their entertainment dollars at the box office – were interested in adult-themed material” (114). After all, by 1953, if audiences wanted sanitized filmed materials, they could stay at home and watch television, the innocuous content of which better suited what Lewis calls the “suburban aesthetics” of those people who had fled the downtown areas of cities all across the US that had been “poisoned by so-called art theaters” (130). These “art theaters” mostly traded in European films that featured liberal doses of titillating nudity, American films like *The Moon Is Blue* or *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) adapted from Broadway plays loaded with psychosexual connotation and denotation, sexy comedies starring former *Playboy* model Marilyn Monroe, and Cecil B. DeMille-inspired epics that featured copious amounts of scantily-clad players.

In its attempt to keep films like *The Moon Is Blue* and similar material from the screen, the PCA was actually “prevent[ing] [the studios] from better exploiting the adult demographic” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 111), a demographic it especially needed to please in the television era. During the mid-to-late 1950s, the Hollywood film industry’s policies evinced the antithesis of good marketing strategy, a conundrum that could only be solved if the industry changed its self-regulatory policies so that “certain films could be profitably marketed to specific segments of the audience,” while the industry still projected the image that regulators were doing their job to protect the public from potentially harmful film content (Lewis, *Hollywood* 133).

A task such as this called for a marketing and public relations expert, and the film industry found one such figure in Jack Valenti, “a former Houston adman” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 135). In 1966, Valenti was appointed president of the MPAA and, like Breen before him, positioned himself as the new moral guardian of the movies as he engineered the MPAA’s new movie rating system that was eventually adopted by the studios in late 1968. According to Jon Lewis, studio heads like Lew Wasserman at Universal pushed for Valenti’s appointment “because [he] was an advertising man” (*Hollywood* 136). Wasserman’s endorsement of Valenti illustrates that the Hollywood studios were not looking for a moral guardian as much as they were looking for a salesman. Nevertheless, Valenti, when constructing the new movie rating system, was careful to stress “parental guidance” and to craft a rating system that seemed, on the surface, to be a handy guide to help parents discern which movies were appropriate for their children and which films were not (Lewis, *Hollywood* 141).

However, these ratings were really put in place for marketing reasons – to help studios “update their product lines” and give these products an “entryway into the marketplace” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 133). The MPAA used the rating system “to better advertise their pictures” and “to

more precisely target audiences” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 141). In the years before Valenti, during the reign of Breen’s PCA, the studios turned out “one product for everyone,” and a particular movie had to be broadly and generally advertised to a heterogeneous movie-going audience as a whole (Lewis, *Hollywood* 133). By comparison, Valenti’s rating system allowed the industry’s marketing forces to be much more precise by offering different products to different audiences.

Ratings and the Horror Film: Selling to New Audiences

Before the ratings system, Hollywood studios often had a difficult time squaring their moral, “squeaky-clean” image with their production and distribution of dark, disturbing horror films. Thus, horror films by mainstream studios flourished most when industry self-regulation was weakened or unfocused. For instance, Tod Browning’s silent mutilation melodramas in the 1920s, like *The Unknown* (1927) starring Lon Chaney, and Universal’s sound monster films in the early 1930s enjoyed success until Breen strengthened the code in early 1934. After that, films like *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) encountered problems from both Breen and local censors until horror film production in Hollywood almost fell off entirely (Lewis, *Hollywood* 103). The second wave of Hollywood horror began around 1939, with another Universal Frankenstein film, *Son of Frankenstein* (Rowland V. Lee, 1939). This return to horror was only after an internal review of the PCA by Francis C. Harmon, chief vice president of the Hays Office, revealed that “the PCA was monitoring a much wider range of issues than those strictly governed by the code” (Vasey 222). As a result, Breen’s heavy-handed censorial tactics that had gotten him his job in the first place began to be seen as “liabilities,” and “Breen’s position was comparatively weakened” (Vasey 223). This shift in power paved the way for more monster pictures from Universal and producer Val Lewton’s suggestive horror-noirs, like *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).

During the late 1950s and 1960s, as Hollywood studios were acting primarily as distributors for independently-produced horror films, the business was in such disarray that censors turned a blind eye to, say, the bloody, dismembered dead bodies of 1957's *Curse of Frankenstein* because distributing these films kept the industry afloat in the years following the Paramount Decree. Further, industry self-regulation had been defanged, no doubt, by the Supreme Court's decision in *Joseph Burstyn v. Wilson, Commissioner of New York*, also known as "*The Miracle Case*," that film was protected under the First Amendment (Draper 187). Also significant was the Supreme Court's 1964 decision in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, a case that began when Nico Jacobellis, a Cleveland movie theater-owner, was arrested after screening *Les Amants* (Louis Malle, 1959) against the wishes and injunctions of local censors (Lewis, *Hollywood* 129). Jacobellis was exonerated by the Court's decision, which signaled a greater willingness, on the Court's part, to protect theater owners accused of exhibiting obscene materials.

One might be led to believe that the *Miracle* decision in 1952, Hollywood filmmakers like Otto Preminger pushing the envelope of filmic content as early as 1953, the decision in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, and the establishment of a rating system in 1968 that allowed release of different types of filmic content were all steps toward freedom of expression in the film world. However, this is not the case. As Jon Lewis unequivocally states, the ratings system established by Valenti "is still a subtle but nonetheless effective form of regulation, not of film content but of participation in the marketplace" (*Hollywood* 150-51). In other words, the new ratings system allowed the major studios to offer "a wide range of product lines" (Lewis, *Hollywood* 150), and one of the new types of product engendered by the new ratings system was "the kind of overtly sensationalist material they had previously left to independents like AIP" (Lewis, *Hollywood* 150; Maltby 179). Of course, one of the "sensationalist" genres taken up by the studios was the

horror film. Wood points out that the horror films of the 1970s became “more gruesome, more violent, more disgusting . . . than ever before in its history,” a transformation that he attributes to ideological confusion and political intent (63). However, this content shift also represents how Hollywood was taking advantage of the new rating system and updating their product lines with more graphic, violent pictures.

Valenti the salesman was certain that ratings would help sell these pictures; after all, if the film was rated “R,” the audience was, more or less, guaranteed a certain level of blood and gore. Thus, when one of the majors wanted to take advantage of the new freedoms offered by the ratings board, they had the comfort of the CARA’s “R” rating to ensure that their film screened in many venues with few problems. An example of this would be Warner Bros.’s *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), which was a blockbuster hit for the studio and grossed just over eighty-nine million dollars at the box office (Cook, *Lost* 226).

However, a key component of Valenti’s system was that not everyone was guaranteed equal opportunity to take advantage of these newfound freedoms of the screen. Lewis points out that when the major studios, all members of the MPAA, agreed to adopt Valenti’s rating system, “the smaller American independent producers and distributors” were among the groups left out of the deal (*Hollywood* 150). As a result, horror films made by independent producers were routinely threatened with an “X,” a rating that was attacked, as early as 1970, for “being used by CARA . . . to ghettoize independently produced and distributed films” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 173). This was the situation of Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left*, a brutally violent film that the MPAA attempted to cut until it was incomprehensible (Craven qtd. in Lewis, *Hollywood* 171). Indeed, the ratings system served a dual purpose for the majors in regards to the independent productions that helped them through the tough economic times of the late 1960s and early

1970s: they could keep up box office numbers by awarding certain independent horror films an “R” and control and limit the market by consigning other independent releases with an “X” rating. Eventually, the independents were brought to heel by the majors. Cook notes that the explosion of independent filmmaking only lasted as long as the major studios needed it, and “by the end of the decade [independent films] had been crowded off American screens by the majors’ saturation-booking tactics and by their invasion of the exploitation field itself” (Cook, *Lost* 19). This invasion of the exploitation field was engendered by Valenti’s new ratings system that allowed a diversification of products and control of the film market.

The major studios’ takeover of the mainstream and exploitation film markets was also abetted by several significant court decisions regarding obscenity laws. As Lewis convincingly argues, the Supreme Court’s decisions in five obscenity cases in 1973, the most significant of these being *Miller v. California*, were “helpful in the studios’ ongoing attempts to regain control of the theatrical marketplace” (*Hollywood* 262). The rulings in these cases “made it difficult to screen hard-core films in all but a few venues nationwide” at a time when hard-core films like *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (Gerard Damiano, 1973) had achieved enough success in mainstream exhibition venues to make the majors nervous (Lewis, *Hollywood* 262). After the Supreme Court’s rulings, hard-core movies “migrated to home video, a technology whose national diffusion was virtually driven by hardcore” (Cook, *Lost* 282), so much so that the Adult Film Association of America estimated that “pornographic films accounted for 70 to 80 percent of all videocassettes sales through 1982” (Cook, *Lost* 283).

Nevertheless, pornography was not the only exploitation genre to migrate to video, as it was joined by scores of blaxploitation, kung fu, and, most significant to our discussion here, horror films. Again, television plays a significant role in this narrative, for as early as 1955, the

studios were working with television's role as an ancillary market for Hollywood fare. In the 1970s, home video was an extension of this line of thinking, and even though independent distributors got there first, the majors eventually caught up. The next two chapters detail how the home video market and the majors' conquest of this market has affected how horror movies are marketed and how audiences receive them in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Against Cinema as Art

The "Golden Age" of American horror films was ushered in by economic necessity just as much as it was by countercultural, revolutionary zeal. While the horror films of the times may have indeed represented codified reactions of disillusionment over Vietnam and later Watergate, they also represented the Hollywood film industry's efforts to broaden its powerful reach by updating products and marketing them to more audiences. These events coincided with the entry of film studies into the academy, and in order for film studies to gain acceptance in this new setting, film studies scholars utilized methodological approaches that the apolitical academy could recognize. Horror films, given their nightmarish content, particularly lent themselves to psychoanalytic analysis. This situation led to ideological readings of horror films often performed with little to no consideration of the material circumstances of their production.

This is unfortunate because industry conditions – whether they are changes in technology or regulatory policies – have enormous influence over filmic content, what types of film get made and distributed, and what types do not. Without considering the industrial conditions that gave rise to the film commodity, critics and scholars run the risk of simply elevating the film to the status of "art" and scrutinizing its ephemeral, filmic details without considering its very material connections to capital. Film scholar Raymond J. Haberski, Jr. laments, "The twin engines of modernism – one driving art into ever more abstract and purer forms, and the other

driving criticism to be more inclusive of popular forms, including those mass produced – ultimately elevated movies to art but undermined the debate that fueled that transition” (6). According to Haberski, moving the movies to the unquestioned status of “art” has had a detrimental effect on “the will to debate the meaning of movies in an era that demands such discussion” (6). Considering both the industrial factors surrounding the production and distribution of films and the commodity status of films is a way of wresting films from the safe haven of “art” and dragging them back into a critical discussion and debate of their relationship with our culture and society.

Due to the adoration of critics and admiring comments of current filmmakers, “Golden Age” horror films are in danger of being sequestered in the realm of “art,” wherein their praises are sung but their historical and industrial context and commodity status are in danger of being ignored. Filmmakers like Eli Roth evoke the sacred texts of American horror’s “Golden Age” in an attempt to lend validity to films made by his cohort and, importantly, to mask their commodity status. In this chapter, I have focused on the industrial context from which the Golden Age horror films emerged in order to demythologize them and show how their content is tied to changes in the film industry that were taking place at the time of their production and distribution. Doing so has also laid the groundwork for the analysis of the films of the Splat Pack that follows, for I believe that the films of these new horror directors emerge from a similar historical moment as Hollywood studios seek to capitalize further on the home video market, benefit from a change in ratings policy, and use technological and industrial changes to cloak the commodity status of their films.

CHAPTER III. THE DVD REVOLUTION AND THE HORROR FILM, TAKE ONE: FROM TRASH TO ART TO COLLECTABLE

A difficult day of filming on the set of Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* led to an interesting behind-the-scenes story. On this day, Zombie and his cast were shooting sequences on a set dressed to look like the interior of a sleazy, 1970s-era motel room. The scenes they were shooting depicted Otis (Bill Moseley) and Baby (Sherri Moon Zombie), two members of the monstrous, white-trash Firefly family, holding two married couples hostage. During this sequence, Otis and Baby alternatively threaten, torture, and humiliate the couples in various ways. Their cruelty reaches a particularly perverse crescendo as Otis forces one of the women (Priscilla Barnes) to fellate him while holding a gun to her head as her husband (Geoffrey Lewis) watches helplessly.

Acting in a horrendous and violent manner was nothing new for Moseley. When he played Chop-Top, a fan-favorite villain from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), he gleefully depicted his character savagely bludgeoning a man (Lou Perryman) to death by repeatedly hitting him in the head with a hammer. In his previous outing as Otis Driftwood in *House of 1000 Corpses*, the first part of Zombie's Firefly family epic, he had killed a man (Harrison Young), flayed him, and donned the skin in order to taunt the dead man's daughter (Erin Daniels). By the time *The Devil's Rejects* rolled around, Moseley had ample experience with acting in a horrifying and terrible manner.

Nevertheless, having to shoot this particular scene for *The Devil's Rejects* bothered him. Moseley later explained to an interviewer that performing the level of violence and cruelty required for this scene was "very frightening" for him and "really bummed [him] out." Zombie noticed Moseley's discomfort and took him aside before filming to try and encourage him to get

through the scene. Moseley said that after he explained his discomfort to Zombie, the musician-turned-director stated with emphasis three words: “Art isn’t safe.” Moseley later claimed that these words inspired him and instilled him with the confidence to get through the scenes, even as, according to Zombie, people on the crew who were watching “had tears coming down their faces” because the scene was “very powerful” and “very real.”

This anecdote has been repeated several times in several different forums, mostly in the context of praising Zombie as an iconoclastic director who exhibits immense bravery in the pursuit of his vision. In fact, the story appears as many as three times on the DVD release of *The Devil’s Rejects*: Zombie recalls it on his director’s commentary track, Moseley and Sherri Moon Zombie recount it on the actor’s commentary track, and all three of them discuss the story in “30 Days in Hell: The Making of *The Devil’s Rejects*,” an extensive and in-depth documentary on the making of the film that is included on the DVD release’s second disc.

What may be more interesting about the anecdote, however, is the assumption on Zombie’s part that the film he is making is “art.” While the notion of “film as art” is certainly nothing new, *The Devil’s Rejects* is not exactly what comes to mind when one thinks of “art house” cinema. But Zombie’s claim suggests that definitions of art cinema have changed to include horror films – even the most distasteful ones – under the umbrella of art, as long as there is a guiding intelligence, like Zombie’s directorial vision, behind them. While there are many discursive elements that have led to horror movies being considered as art, there are material aspects that have aided in this change as well. One of these material conditions has been the emergence of the DVD market, which has definite connections with the rise of Splat Pack directors like Zombie.

This chapter explores those connections as I look at how the DVD market has changed the ways in which certain audiences perceive horror films. As Greg Taylor explains, many art critics and arbiters of taste believed that “American culture’s class mobility . . . opened it to a marked fluidity of taste cultures” and hoped that “most ‘cultural straddling’ . . . would be upward, with the socially disadvantaged gaining access to a rich high culture of which had been deprived” (32). However, Taylor explains that “the last fifty years have been marked with as much *downward* straddling, with the former emerging as something of a marginal highbrow response to the latter” (32). In other words, rather than bearing witness to how high culture may be disseminated in order to “enlighten” the deprived classes, American culture has seen much more evidence of the highbrow middle class embracing “trash” culture, as evidenced in the writings of outspoken critics like Manny Farber.

In terms of the horror film, the DVD market mirrors these larger movements regarding taste and class in American culture. Horror films, especially those of a graphic nature, were once marginalized as crass exploitation and disposable entertainment. However, the introduction of “Collector’s Edition,” “Special Edition,” and “Director’s Cut” DVDs have turned once-marginal and ephemeral horror movies into “art” for collectors. This movement toward horror films as collectables has been embraced by Lionsgate, the distributor for a majority of the Splat Pack’s films. Lionsgate has often released these films with elaborate artwork, packaging, and other “extras” that, with their “collector’s item” uniqueness, not only turn “trash” into “art,” but also represent an attempt to dissuade consumers from downloading pirated copies of their films.

Renting, Not Selling: The VHS Era

Proposing, as I have here, that the rise of the Splat Pack is dependant upon the emergence of the DVD market and the “Unrated” movies made possible by the DVD market may lead one

to wonder why this change in horror film content would accompany DVD and not VHS, which was, of course, the preceding revolution in home video technology. This change did not take place during the VHS era for several reasons. Most significant were the difficulties that the Hollywood film industry initially encountered with the arrival of home video technology in the form of the VHS videocassette, the positions that Hollywood studios took toward video rental versus ownership, and how these positions significantly differed during the advent of DVD.

In the mid-1970s, two significant home video formats debuted. Sony's Betamax machines debuted in Japan in 1975 and were made available to American consumers the following year (McDonald 33). Also in 1976, JVC debuted their Video Home System (VHS) format (McDonald 34). The years following the introduction of these two videotape cassette formats were marked by a bitter rivalry and format war, as Sony and JVC both worked to secure their product as the home video format of choice. Eventually, the VHS format overtook the Betamax format, and Sony discontinued the format in the late 1980s (Wasser 121). One of the early appeals of either format was that it offered customers the ability to "time shift," that is, to record a television program and watch it at a later time (Wasser 121). As Frederick Wasser explains, "It is important to note that the VCR [video cassette recorder] was not initially viewed as a new market for theatrical movies. The development of a market for pre-recorded video movies was not sought out by Hollywood or the VCR manufacturers but arose, without much forethought, as the market reached a critical mass" (121). In other words, the production and release of Hollywood movies on videotape was not a calculated move on the part of the studios after the introduction of the VHS tape, but rather it was an afterthought that followed behind the introduction of the technology.

Before the Hollywood studios arrived at the afterthought of movies on video, however, their reaction to home video technology ranged from hostility toward the new format to confusion over the best way to profit from it. While studios like Universal and Disney were waging court cases in an attempt to prevent the circulation of videotaped copies of their films, studios did not attempt to set up their own video distribution arms for a multitude of reasons (Wasser 122). As mentioned in the previous chapter, home video was, at this time, largely the province of hard-core adult films, an industry from which the major studios had taken great pains to distance themselves. Also, the studios were not in charge of broadcast television and thus were not in a position to profit from the VCR's ability to "time shift." Further, the major studios had no structure in place for maintaining and controlling the home rental market. It was not until an independent entrepreneur named Andre Blay, head of a Michigan-based company named Magnetic Video, took a chance on licensing previously-released Hollywood studio films. After he began transferring them to videotape in 1977, the studios started establishing home video divisions (Wasser 122-23). Enormously successful, Blay's business was eventually bought out by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1979, and by 1981, all the studios had video distribution divisions (Wasser 123).

After the studios embraced home video, they had to figure out how best to profit from this new technology. One way to make certain that movies on videotape were profitable was to mark up the prices and make videotapes very expensive. The high price of videotapes, which averaged over fifty dollars apiece, placed videotapes out of the range of most buyers, with most tapes being purchased by stores that rented the tapes to customers (Wasser 122-23). These rental stores had been going strong since Blay's introduction of pre-recorded videotapes in 1977 (Wasser 121), but in 1982, Paramount decided to explore the possibility of making videotapes

more affordable for sale to customers (Wasser 123). When venturing into this new frontier, Paramount played it safe with their film selection and offered *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer, 1982), a successful sequel in a franchise with immense name recognition, at a lower price of forty dollars (Wasser 123).

The video release of *Star Trek II* at this lower price was enough of a success for the studios to adopt “sell-through” prices (Wasser 124). However, the studios again proceeded with caution and did not lower prices to “sell-through” for all titles. According to Wasser, “Studios had to decide whether films would attract high enough volume sales outside the usual rental stores,” and accordingly, the studio only “released the biggest films and children’s titles . . . at the lower sell-through prices while most films, even very popular ones, were released at the higher prices and were bought predominantly by the rental stores” (Wasser 124). Thus, the movies available that were priced to own on video consisted mainly of big-budget blockbusters, mega-moneymakers, or children’s movies, while high prices “ranging over \$70” were reserved for all other movies (Wasser 127). These high prices restricted the purchase of most movies on tape to video rental stores and well-to-do collectors who could afford to pay high prices for tapes.

Working in this manner, the studios were able to make the home video market one of their biggest sources of revenue. The studios’ distribution arms received at least forty percent of the retail price for videotapes, and by 1987 “videocassettes provided the single largest market for films, contributing . . . 43 percent of worldwide revenues for US films and surpassing the theatrical, cable, and broadcast television segments” (Wasser 123, 126). Additionally, home video allowed the studios to further contain and control the film market: as Wasser explains, “on the retail and wholesaling market, [the video business’s] structure favored oligopoly” with

massive chain stores like Wal-Mart and Blockbuster creating an environment in which “no independent producer/distributor tries to enter without forming alliances with a Hollywood studio that has the clout to deal with such retailers” (127). Although it took the Hollywood studios a few years to adapt, home video quickly became an immensely lucrative boon for them.

Not surprisingly, the Hollywood studios were calculatedly prepared for the next major trend in home video, which ended up being the Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc, better known as DVD. This format was the result of several years of experimentation with trying to create a digital platform for home video. As early as 1969, Lew Wasserman, the head of media juggernaut MCA, was interested in the development of a videodisc format, and his interest in developing this technology grew throughout the 1970s as videotape became a contested terrain; as Paul McDonald explains, “MCA developed videodisc as a read-only medium to protect against copyright infringement, which, they argued, was possible with Betamax” (44). Wasserman’s vision would eventually come to fruition, for as Joshua Greenberg describes it, the “DVD represents an attempt by Hollywood studios to reclaim the control of their products that they lost to mediators and consumers in the 1980s” (157).

Over the next two decades, after several formats like Laserdisc, CD-Interactive, and Video CD (VCD) failed to catch on due to their cost and image reproduction problems, DVD arrived on the marketplace in 1996 (McDonald 53-5, 1). As McDonald describes it, the DVD was a revolutionary consumer product:

DVD not only replaced the VCRs and videocassettes but also introduced a new media object. Videocassettes had always remained a linear medium, working along the single plane of record, play, rewind and fast-forward. DVD, however, provided access to many different sources of content via menus. DVDs increased

the storage capacity of video software units, providing space for the inclusion of other types of content beyond the main programme. (1)

This new type of media product took the market by storm. According to Janet Wakso, a “DVD revolution” began in 1997 and peaked at the end of 2002 when DVDs and DVD players “represented the fastest selling consumer electronic product ever” (133).

In many ways, the launch of DVD was the culmination of several decades during which the Hollywood studios learned to embrace the notion of home theater. At first, during the 1950s, the studios attempted to compete with television by offering widescreen, Technicolor spectacles to entice audiences back to theaters. Throughout the 1960s, however, the studios learned to better – and more profitably – coexist with television by selling or leasing their film libraries to television, moving into telefilm production, and establishing a ratings system that helped differentiate films for theatrical release from their more tame telefilm counterparts. In effect, the industry learned to produce both for the theater and for television, and this programming for multi-media only increased throughout the 1970s, as Hollywood was more fully absorbed into synergistic practices of corporate conglomerates that bought out the studios. During this decade, Hollywood not only learned how to use television commercials to sell movies (Balio 30), but also learned how to use movies to sell home theater products made by electronics manufacturers, like Sony, that existed under the same corporate umbrellas as the studios.

Further, the rapidity with which DVDs caught on with consumers was planned by a film industry that, thanks to the VHS era, knew the potential profitability of home video. Although the new DVD format had some brief – and weak – competition from Digital Video Express or Divx (McDonald 145-49), the overwhelming sentiment among Hollywood studios was to “[build] upon the lessons learned from the VCR launch” and endorse “cooperation between the

manufacturers and the film studios” (Wasser 128). As a result, the studios dodged “the competition which plagued the launch of the VCR” (McDonald 55). After learning how much profit could be reaped from the home video market and now having in place a structure for dealing with home video profit, the studios gave the DVD launch a huge promotional push that videocassettes did not receive. McDonald offers a quick comparison between the launch of videotape and the launch of DVD when he notes that in Western Europe DVD players reached over fifty percent penetration in six years after their launch, whereas it took VCRs 12 years to figure fifty percent penetration (59).

The VCR launch not only taught the studios about the value of standard formatting; it also taught them the value of “sell through” pricing, and the studios took full advantage of this lesson during the DVD launch. The studios only selected a relatively small amount of movies (blockbusters and family films) for priced-to-own prices on VHS, but after the home video market proved to be an extremely profitable – if not the most profitable – ancillary market for movies, the studios took a drastically different tack with DVD pricing: “To encourage the establishment and growth of a large retail market for DVD, the Hollywood majors immediately started pricing DVD releases at comparatively low prices . . . which appealed to consumers” (McDonald 150). With studios being able “to earn 58-60 percent of the DVD wholesale price,” it was mandated that all DVDs be priced at sell-through prices to maximize profitability (Wasser 128).

From Trash to Art to Collectable: Horror Movies on DVD

The sell-through pricing mandate changed the home video market in two ways, and both of these changes had profound effects on the horror film. First, this mandate opened up shelf space for a wider variety of product to be offered for sale on video. Because of retailers like Wal-

Mart, which became “the biggest sell-through outlet for videos and DVDs,” DVD sales skyrocketed from around two hundred million a year in 2000 to over one billion in 2005 (Wasser 126, McDonald 151). The amount of films available on DVD also skyrocketed; Anne Friedberg reports that “In 1997, in the United States, 900 titles were available on DVD; in 1998, 3,000. By the end of 2000 there were over 10,000 titles available on DVD in the United States” (38). These vastly growing numbers demanded more product and more product lines. As Raiford Guins points out, “The sheer availability of older titles being rereleased and remediated on DVD, as well as out-of-print, restored, and debuting titles . . . prompted new sections to be housed in media superstores” (“Blood” 25). Independent distributors like Lionsgate, with their profitable ties to majors like Sony, were more than ready to fill the horror section demand with more horror films for sale on DVD, which, as Tom Schatz points out, became “a major revenue generator” for Lionsgate properties like *Saw* and *Hostel* (30).

During the VHS era, violent, gory, and relatively low-budget horror were rarely for sale at major retailers. Videotapes of studio horror films like Paramount’s *Friday the 13th* franchise or New Line’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* series might eventually be on retailers’ selves, but for the most part, horror films, like all other movies that were not blockbusters or children’s fare, were relegated to rental outlets. However, after DVD, a wide variety of horror films with more “extreme” violence and gore made their way onto the shelves of major retailers and were for sale at affordable prices. Additionally, the types of horror titles available for sale appealed to what McDonald calls “the niche logic of the specialty market” that boasts “a relatively small but loyal set of fan consumers” (154). During the DVD era, this marginal, cultish behavior was brought into the mainstream by the release of more horror films on DVD.

In fact, the mainstreaming of this cultish behavior leads to the second significant way in which the sell-through pricing mandate changed home video and affected the horror film. As Barbara Klinger observes, “the ascendancy of DVD” is intimately linked with “the increasing importance of the sell-through market” (59). In other words, with all DVD releases priced at sell-through, the emphasis is on owning films, as opposed to merely watching or renting them. While this may seem like a simple observation, it has profound implications for how films are bought and sold. For Klinger, the impulse toward buying rather than renting DVDs encouraged by the studios “tap[s] into a middle-class consciousness about the superiority of ownership” (62). Paul McDonald takes a somewhat wider view and argues, “DVD has spread the practice of privately amassing discs beyond the dedicated collector to a wider body of consumers . . . With the introduction of DVD, video collecting has therefore become a more generalized practice which exceeds the realm of the elitist collector” (69, 70). In other words, sell-through prices for DVD made everyone a potential “collector” who must be offered something “worth buying.”

McDonald explains that, along with the promise of perfect digital quality, the presence of extra materials was a feature that “differentiated the [DVD] medium from the VCR and videocassette” and made the DVD “an attractive product for consumers” (59). Since the DVD’s status as an attractive product is so intimately bound to its special features, the studios began putting a massive effort into offering a film on DVD with numerous “extra features” like:

scene access menus, theatrical trailers, deleted scenes or outtakes, on-screen biographies of the performers and other creative personnel involved with making the film, short “making-of” featurettes and other documentaries, music videos for songs from the soundtracks of films, galleries of production stills, options for subtitles and a choice of language tracks. (McDonald 64)

McDonald notes that the studios looked to the laserdisc releases issued by specialty and art house distributor the Criterion Collection for models of how to properly package a film for release on DVD and how to strategically choose special features for films (63-4). Another strategy adopted by the studios in the production and release of DVDs was to highlight these extra features by labeling a release of a movie on DVD as a “Special Edition” or “Collector’s Edition.”

Accordingly, these DVDs are often packaged in such a way to make them look like a unique work of art.

This remaking or remediation of a film on DVD as a work of art becomes particularly interesting when considering how marginal fare such as horror and other exploitation films is handled when released on DVD. If the sell-through mandate mainstreamed the type of collecting behavior normally reserved for “cultish” audiences, it also mainstreamed some marginal genres and turned these products into “art-objects.” In *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Joan Hawkins challenges “the binary opposition of prestige cinema . . . and popular culture” and points out how “high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture” (3). In particular, Hawkins looks at the ways in which avant-garde cinema and horror cinema intersect, overlap, and inform each other. If, as Hawkins persuasively argues, the lines between elite, art house cinema and trash horror films are more difficult to discern than one may initially think, these boundaries became even more blurred with the rise of the DVD market because art house distributor Criterion was not the only model for how to package and market a “special edition” DVD; horror and exploitation distributor Anchor Bay also had a profound influence.

Anchor Bay began as a modest distribution house for videotape releases of licensed titles. During the videotape era, the distributor catered to the niche collectors’ crowd by releasing

“uncut” versions of certain horror films like *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) and Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* films (1981, 1987). Like Criterion’s laserdiscs, Anchor Bay’s videotapes (and, to a lesser degree, their laserdiscs) pioneered the practice of including extra materials with a movie’s release that would become an industry standard after the advent of DVD. When DVDs were first introduced in 1996, Anchor Bay was one of the first distributors, along with Criterion, to take full advantage of DVD’s storage capacities. It began offering titles that were digitally remastered for full picture and sound quality, complete with restored scenes that may have been cut by censors or distributors, and extra features like in-depth “making of” documentaries and on-screen talent bios. Also included were essays or liner notes discussing the film’s history and significance.

While Criterion focused their efforts on supplying these types of DVD releases for art house and prestige fare, Anchor Bay continued in the tradition of their videotape releases and offered marginal cinema – what Jeffery Sconce has called “paracinema” (372) – deluxe treatment on DVD. Today, Anchor Bay has been bought by Starz Media and is part of the corporate media conglomerate Liberty Media Corporation. Nevertheless, Anchor Bay is still handling the DVD distribution of many horror films. A testament to the volume of the distributor’s horror titles is the number of horror-themed “Collections” they have released. These product lines include: the “Bruce Campbell Collection,” which features films starring the affable cult star of Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* films; the “Cult Classics of Horror Collection,” a selection of popular horror films from the 1970s and 80s; the “Midnight Movies/Grindhouse Collection,” which features cult films; the “Hollywood Legends Collection,” which, according to Anchor Bay’s website, features the work of “some of the best Horror Directors in the business”; and “The Dario Argento Collection,” featuring films by the infamous Italian horror director.

This last collection is of particular interest, for it is the subject of an insightful article by Raiford Guins in which he lays out the complex ways in which previously marginalized films are “remediated” on DVD in the age of digital media. Using Italian horror films from directors like Mario Bava and Dario Argento as case studies, Guins argues that the DVD format and the discursive practices that surround these films’ release on DVD “produce knowledge about, and define, Italian horror within U.S. cinema culture” (“Blood” 17). According to Guins, Italian horror films first reached American audiences as films on videotape, and these videotape copies which were cut by censors and poorly dubbed “positioned” these films as “object[s] of low quality, low value, and . . . removed from any claim of authorial intentions” (“Blood” 21). Nevertheless, “fan discourses” surrounding these films, according to Guins, valorized them for their high quantity of blood and gore effects and thus positioned the films as “gore-objects,” filmic texts valuable only for their capacity to offer more blood and gore than the average American horror films (“Blood” 24).

However, Guins explains that the value of these films changed significantly with the discursive practices that surrounded their release on DVD. According to Guins, the status of these films once considered merely as gore-objects “has shifted. A set of meanings has been refashioned through DVD technology and the aesthetics of its new design (packaging, liner notes, booklets, etc)” (“Blood” 27). Similar to how critics like Manny Farber attempted to elevate “trash” popular culture through their “eccentric passion for detail” (Taylor 82), releases like Anchor Bay’s “Dario Argento Collection” transform these once-disparaged films into art-objects in various ways. One way in which the DVD releases effect this transformation is by stressing the status of the director: “Directors like . . . Argento are hailed as ‘auteurs’ and ‘masters’ of their respected works” (“Blood” 26). Guins describes the packaging of *Deep Red*

(Dario Argento, 1975), one of the films in Anchor Bay's "Dario Argento Collection." He notes, "the title *Deep Red* is introduced as a 'film by Dario Argento.' The back cover continues to sing Argento's praises. His name appears six times and the synopsis begins with 'Dario Argento's Masterpiece'" ("Blood" 26). Other ways in which DVD distributors like Anchor Bay remediate these films through their DVD release are by painstakingly designing the DVD's packaging with high-quality photographs and artwork from the film's original release and including notes and essays from film critics.

All of these discursive practices surrounding the DVD-release-as-art-object are anchored by the DVD itself. As McDonald notes, one of the attractions that made DVDs successful commodities was the promise that the DVD contains a perfect, permanent copy of the film; McDonald calls this the "Aura of DVD Quality" (59). Although these claims to perfection are not necessarily true, they were taken as true by many consumers, and as Guins points out, "The sense of permanence attributed to a disc . . . elevates the disc as an object that is . . . a 'self-contained art work'" ("Blood" 27).

Ultimately, Guins posits that even though these Italian horror films have been made into art-objects by their DVD release, they still contain their subversive power. Noting Jeffery Scone's and Joan Hawkins's assessments of paracinema's tone of "'opposition' and/or 'reaction against' the doldrums of mainstream Hollywood product," Guins believes that "The Italian horror film as art-object can also double as a reactionary-object" ("Blood" 29). He points out that Italian horror films began arriving on DVD during the late 1990s, a period which "also marked a commercial high point for U.S. horror films, such as *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), *Scream 3* (2000), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997, sequel 1998), [and] *The Faculty* (1998)" ("Blood" 29). According to Guins, the audiences consuming Italian horror films on DVD make

up a subversive shadow of the “younger audience snacking low-cal on the banal pastiche of clean-teen horror” like the *Scream* films (“Blood” 29). These were the films that journalists like Reed Tucker and Pamela McClintock claimed were improved upon by the films of the Splat Pack, a “new and improved” type of horror film that emerged to speak to the brutal first decade of the twenty-first century.

However, Guins’s assessment differs significantly from those of journalists like Tucker and McClintock in that Guins’s work foregrounds how industrial and technological changes play an important part in determining the types of films that are made and how they are distributed and marketed. While the Splat Packers and many journalists writing about them might posit that the Splat Packers’ films are political reactions to post-9/11, War on Terror-era America, Guins’s work suggests that the Splat Pack’s films may have come about at this particular point in time for reasons much less glamorous than the popular media would lead one to believe. In other words, American horror films did not transform from the “low-cal,” lightweight, low-gore films of the late 1990s to the darker, more “serious,” blood-and-gore-soaked films of the Splat Pack just because terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center or the United States entered two disastrous wars; the historical moment of the Splat Pack’s emergence also coincided with the arrival of new media that was remediating and drastically changing the ways in which films – in particular, horror films – were viewed and received by their various audiences.

Commercial Works of Art: The Splat Pack on DVD

The techniques utilized by distributors like Anchor Bay that transformed once-marginal horror movies into art-objects did not go unnoticed by mainstream producers and distributors. Lionsgate, the unofficial “home” of the Splat Pack, adopted many of Anchor Bay’s techniques in DVD production when they began packaging and selling DVDs of films by Splat Pack directors.

Thus, mainstream horror, once strictly the province of “low-cal” horror, was remade in the image of the marginal, subversive paracinema. Description and discussion of several key titles by Splat Pack directors released on DVD by Lionsgate will demonstrate how Lionsgate appropriated some of the same techniques utilized by Anchor Bay. Lionsgate even pioneered a few techniques beyond Anchor Bay’s to make their DVD releases true works of art and offer highly desirable experiences for the home video consumer.

In fact, one of Lionsgate’s most audacious DVD releases was the first Splat Pack film they put out on DVD: Rob Zombie’s 2003 film *House of 1000 Corpses*. The cover for the DVD is pretty basic. Against a black backdrop, it features a close-up of one of the many undead corpses that emerges in the film’s final sequences. This ghastly face is framed on the left by the title “Rob Zombie’s *House of 1000 Corpses*.” One could chalk up the presence of Zombie’s name here as an appeal to auteurism, but with Zombie’s already-established celebrity as a musician, it was a given that his name would be featured prominently on the cover. Under the title of the film is a blurb touting it as “The Most Shocking Tale of Carnage Ever!” and under this blurb is another, this time from *Los Angeles Times* critic Kevin Thomas, touting the film as “Demonic Brilliance!” The cover is embellished along the bottom with a shot of the eponymous house, home of the mass-murdering Firefly family and setting for most of the film, and a shot of an eerie graveyard, subtly promising that the film will live up to the high body count promised by the title.

While this is a visually striking cover, what really sets this DVD apart is its content. Included on the DVD are additional features that can usually be found on DVD releases such as director’s commentary, behind-the-scenes documentaries about the making of the movie, and additional interviews with key players in the film. However, the most elaborate and interesting

extra features included are the menus. For these, Lionsgate took interactive menus to a next level by having actors Sid Haig, Bill Moseley, and Sheri Moon Zombie appear as their characters – the demented Captain Spaulding, the murderous Otis Driftwood, and the childish Baby, respectively – in live-action footage shot especially for the DVD menus.

For example, when the main menu loads, its backdrop looks like Captain Spaulding's Fried Chicken and Gasoline, a seedy, run-down roadside attraction run by Haig's character in the movie. A prompt appears, instructing viewers to "ring the bell for service" by punching the "Select" button on their DVD remotes. When one rings the bell, Captain Spaulding actually enters from a door in the background and directly addresses the viewer, letting loose with jokes, obscenities, taunts, and threats such as, "If ya'll don't stop doin' the asshole shuffle and pick one of these features [from the DVD menu], I'm-a come over there and put my boot up your ass." When the viewer finally picks an option, Spaulding makes another wisecrack – for instance, if the viewer picks "Scene Selections," Spaulding shrugs and says, "Well, there ain't a whole lotta shit you can do with Scene Selections, is they?" – and the viewer is whisked away to another menu hosted by another character: Otis hosts the "Scene Selections" menu, Baby does "Special Features," and they both share duties on the "Set Up" menu.

The elaborate nature of the *Corpses* DVD suggests a few things. First, it seems as if this DVD represents an acknowledgement on Lionsgate's part that this film would encounter a majority of its audience on DVD. However, the immense amount of work put into the creation of the *Corpses* DVD – calling back the actors, shooting new segments with them, and so forth – begins to look less like a basic desire for profit (profit, it should be noted, that is virtually guaranteed when a low-budget horror film is released on video) and more like an attempt at making the consumer's encounter with this DVD a customizable experience. The care taken to

construct this DVD clearly echoes the efforts of distributors like Anchor Bay when they reposition once-marginal cinema as art-objects.

While other Zombie releases were less elaborate in terms of their menus, they nonetheless borrowed other techniques that construct films on DVD as art-objects. Paramount among these techniques was an attempt at making the DVD look and feel like what Guins calls an “authored original” (“Blood” 29). Guins explains that distributors practicing this technique “place their directors on the market as auteurs in order to invoke value statements that valorize the director’s work as an art-object” (“Blood” 29).

Accordingly, the DVD release of Zombie’s next film, *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), sports a cover with a banner at the top proclaiming that this release is the “Two-Disc Director’s Cut.” Zombie’s authorship is further emphasized by the words “Written and Directed by Rob Zombie” that appear on the DVD’s cover directly under the film’s title and the inclusion, on the release’s second disc, of a feature-length documentary entitled, “30 Days in Hell: The Making of *The Devil’s Rejects*,” that features extensive behind-the-scenes footage of Zombie conceptualizing and filming the movie. To capitalize on the theatrical release of Zombie’s remake of *Halloween*, Lionsgate continued to sell Zombie the auteur when they issued, two years later in summer 2007, the “Rob Zombie 3-Disc Collector’s Set.” This set is a reissue of Lionsgate’s earlier releases of *Corpses* and the two-disc *Rejects*, only this time Zombie’s name is featured more prominently on the cover than the titles of the two films. There is little doubt in this case that Zombie’s auteurism is being sold just as much as the films, and this emphasis on auteurism is emblematic of Lionsgate’s attempts to sell these films not as exploitation, but as an “authored original” or as art.

Issues of art, auteurism, and DVDs converge even more interestingly in the case of Eli Roth. Using auteurism to sell films – and, more specifically, to sell films on DVD – has been a factor in Roth’s career since its beginnings. While the DVD release of Roth’s first film, *Cabin Fever*, does not feature Roth’s name anywhere on the cover, it does feature the name of another bankable auteur: above a striking photo of a cabin in the woods that has been ominously tinted red, there is a quote from Peter Jackson proclaiming that *Cabin Fever* is “An unrelenting, gruesomely funny bloodbath. I loved it!” Jackson, who was, at the time, riding high on the global success of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), has a unique appeal as an auteur: not only is he a recognizable name to the general public due to his involvement in the big-budget, blockbuster *Rings* movies, but he also possesses a certain amount of “cred” in horror circles for his earlier work, made up of gory and over-the-top titles like *Bad Taste* (1987), *Meet the Feebles* (1989), and *Braindead* (1992). In early publicity, Roth was often linked to another notable auteur, as it was often cited that after he graduated from NYU’s film school, he had interned for David Lynch. By connecting Roth to auteurs like Lynch and Jackson, figures that, between them, run the gamut between art house acclaim, cult appeal, and mainstream success, the discourses surrounding Roth seem to position him as a celebrity director with the power to appeal to popular, cult, and art house audiences.

When moving on to make his *Hostel* films, Roth became attached to an even splashier personality, Quentin Tarantino, whom Timothy Corrigan feels “is in many ways the quintessential 1990s’ American auteur” (“Auteurs” 39). Corrigan bestows this dubious distinction on Tarantino for the ways in which the infamously motor-mouthed director illustrates how “the artistic expression of contemporary directors is fully bound up with the celebrity industry of Hollywood” (“Auteurs” 38-9). Also, according to Corrigan, auteurism has “from its

inception . . . been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies” (“Auteurs” 40). Corrigan argues that one of the industrial and technological factors in the 1990s that engendered the success of an auteur like Tarantino was the full penetration of home video technology (in the form of the VCR) that has “recuperated” auteurs “as promotional stars” who share their films in a seemingly direct manner through the medium of video (“Auteurs” 50).

The marketing and promotion of Roth’s *Hostel* films emulate this model and make it clear that Roth has found a fitting mentor in the media-and-marketing-savvy Tarantino, who acted as an executive producer on the films. In the case of the *Hostel* films, Lionsgate can doubly appeal to auteurism to sell these films because both Tarantino’s and Roth’s names are featured prominently on the posters. Their names quite literally frame the title: above the title reads “QUENTIN TARANTINO Presents,” and below is “Written and Directed By ELI ROTH.” Corrigan explains that Tarantino’s image is one of “a confrontational individual succeeding in Hollywood despite an uncompromising trash-art vision” (“Auteurs” 39). Attaching Roth’s name to his in this manner throughout the theatrical release of the *Hostel* films assures audiences that Roth is similarly confrontational and uncompromising.

However, it is with the films’ release on DVD that Lionsgate’s marketing gives the media consumer the promise that they are finally and truly being given access to the renegade vision of these two auteurs. Four months after the January 2006 theatrical release of *Hostel*, Lionsgate released the film on DVD in April. Identical to the film’s theatrical release posters, the DVD box cover prominently features the names of Tarantino and Roth framing the title, but this time, there is a red banner above their names that announces that this DVD release contains the “Unrated Widescreen Cut” of the film. The illicit nature of this version of the film is further emphasized

by a graphic that appears next to the image of the gnarled metal hook that dominates the box cover: this graphic makes it look as if someone has rubber stamped the words “Sick and Twisted Unrated” on the cover.

As if this is not enough to let consumers know that they are in for a traumatic experience when watching this film, it has been made to look like someone has handwritten on the stamp. The letters “ER” have been scratched in above the end of the word sick, transforming the word “Sick” into “Sicker.” Similarly, the word “MORE” has been scrawled in above the word “Twisted,” enhancing the single word “Twisted” into the phrase “More Twisted.” The insinuation is that the scratched-in additions to the stamp on the DVD cover are from the authors’ or auteurs’ hands and that these words are a guarantee to consumers that Tarantino and Roth, these two “confrontational” and “uncompromising” auteurs, are delivering to them an authentically horrifying experience. This pact is made possible by the intimate venue of home video, where, supposedly, the auteur’s “true” vision is allowed to flourish. These techniques clearly represent Lionsgate’s attempts to replicate the feel of the “authored original” that Guins claims is present in DVD’s remediation of paracinema, positioning DVDs of *Hostel* as art-objects.

It may seem paradoxical to argue that the mass-produced objects like DVDs are intended to be received as art-objects, but in case of Lionsgate, this seemingly contradictory scenario begins to make more sense when one takes a closer look at the curious career of Tim Palen, art photographer and Co-President of Theatrical Marketing at Lionsgate. Palen has overseen the marketing and promotion of key Splat Pack films like Aja’s *Haute Tension* and the *Saw* films. In her *Variety* article on the Splat Pack, Pamela McClintock describes Palen as not just a corporate Hollywood “suit,” but as “an accomplished photographer” who has “turned the selling of horror

pics into an artform” (McClintock). Palen’s photographs and designs have gained him enough notoriety that in 2007 he released a coffee table book of his grotesque artwork, entitled simply *GUTS*. This book is quite the art-object in its design. The cover is a close-up photograph of raw meat (an image that Palen shot for a *Hostel: Part II* promotional poster), and the photo makes the book look like a slab of meat. The book sits on an absorbent paper towel and is shrink-wrapped onto a white, Styrofoam tray so that the whole item looks like meat packaged for sale at a grocery store.

GUTS offers a tantalizing glimpse of Palen’s handiwork and reproduces his work in beautiful, high-quality photographs. But even more interesting are the ways in which the book reveals that horror films by “visionary” Splat Pack directors are meant to be approached as works of “art.” Eli Roth provides a written introduction to the book that is brief, but extremely illuminating. In praise of Palen’s work, Roth writes:

His artistic eye not only shapes the way people see a subject but he shapes the way they see my movies before they even walk into the theater. Tim’s artwork tells the public that my films are disturbing, scary, and violent, yet done with an artistic eye. He says all of this with one image, and he has had a massive impact on how the public views my work, and views me personally. (Palen 5)

Roth’s comments reveal a great deal about how his films are sold and how they are meant to be received by audiences. Palen’s approach to selling these films emphasizes the familiar elements of exploitation cinema present in films like Roth’s (that the films are “disturbing, scary, and violent”), but Palen’s embellishment of these films through his well-designed posters and DVD covers assures consumers that they are encountering an “artistic” vision of a true auteur when they watch films like *Hostel*. Roth includes himself when discussing how Palen’s artwork sells

his films (Palen's work affects how the public "views [him] personally"), and these comments offer an example of how the image of the "renegade" auteur is sold along with the auteur's films. Fittingly, Roth himself is the subject of Palen's camera in several of the photographs in *GUTS*. His introduction to Palen's book is printed alongside a photo of Roth dressed in a black suit, gloves, and sunglasses, standing in a ruined, gutted house in the middle of the desert and looking very much the part of, say, a gangster in one of Tarantino's crime epics.

GUTS is introduced, on its title page, by a quote from Tarantino. Again, Tarantino's hype is fascinating, for he proclaims that Palen's work is "The perfect blend of SPLATTER, PORN, and Diane Arbus" (Palen 3). In 2007, the two most provocative elements of this blend most likely would have been the first two, especially considering the controversial debate that erupted over the success of the *Saw* films and *Hostel* when outraged *New York Magazine* critic David Edelstein dismissed these films as "torture porn." Tarantino's usage of the words here, emphasized with all capital letters, represents a "taking back" of this term in the name of "art." This point is embellished by Tarantino's mention of photographer Diane Arbus, a figure whose famous work resides in the liminal space between horror-as-exploitation and horror-as-avant-garde.

In her book *Cutting Edge*, Joan Hawkins argues that the worlds of exploitation and art overlap to a point where the two are almost indistinguishable, especially in the field of horror. One of the points where the two seemingly separate worlds of art and exploitation began to overlap is when *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), a film that was "Initially made as a mainstream horror film at MGM" and "pulled from mainstream distribution shortly after its initial release," was leased out to infamous exploitation distributor Dwain Esper who re-released the film on the exploitation circuit (Hawkins 25). However, the film later ended up on the art house circuit

where it found one of its most “avid fans” in Arbus (Hawkins 165). Hawkins explains that Browning’s film inspired Arbus to undertake a “systematic exploration of freak culture” as she began frequenting and photographing performers at “one of the last remaining freak shows in North America, Hubert’s Museum on Forty-second street” (166). While Arbus produced “unforgiving and brutally matter-of-fact” portraits of “‘freak’ performers,” she was also inspired to take photos “of ‘normal’ people” that were “downright freakish” (Hawkins 166).

Eventually, these photos “were displayed, as part of a major retrospective of the photographer’s work, at the New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1972,” and for Hawkins, this is a key moment when the boundaries between horror exploitation and horror art become irrecoverably blurred (Hawkins 167). As Hawkins explains, “Tod Browning’s *Freaks* started as a mainstream horror film that migrated into the exploitation arena before being finally recuperated as an avant-garde or art project” (167). With Arbus’s photos displayed in the Museum of Modern Art and described by Susan Sontag as “horror,” the notion of horror had come “full circle,” from the mainstream to exploitation to art (qtd. in Hawkins 167, Hawkins 167).

Tarantino’s invocation of Arbus in a coffee-table book of Palen’s commercial art suggests that horror has again come full circle. This time, however, horror has moved in a reverse trajectory, from art to exploitation back into the mainstream as Palen adorns mass-produced DVDs with his promotional materials that promise consumers that they are in for both a horrifying *and* artistic experience. This promise of films-on-DVD as an “artistic experience” converges with the film industry’s sell-through pricing imperatives and positions the DVD as a collectable art-object of permanence. The selling, on DVD, of these Splat Pack horror titles and the personalities that have produced them has led to the emergence of the Splat Pack at this given

historical moment just as much, if not more, than any sort of populist groundswell or cultural influence.

The initial hype of the Splat Pack discussed in Chapter One illustrates how effective Lionsgate has been in selling the directors in their “stable” (in other words, directors whose films they are distributing) as “artists,” and the effect of Lionsgate’s role as a distributor should not be minimized. When Alan Jones initially grouped together a cluster of young horror directors, his list included people like Greg McLean, James Gunn, and Dave Payne alongside auteur-celebs like Zombie and Roth. However, when the Splat Pack moniker migrated to the United States, directors like McLean and Gunn were mentioned less and less while membership congealed around those directors whose key films were being distributed in the United States by Lionsgate. McClintock’s *Variety* article even identifies Lionsgate as the Splat Pack’s “home studio” (McClintock). Thus, the Splat Pack looks less like a legitimate “movement” than an example of Lionsgate’s marketing muscle, a key aspect of which is packaging and selling these films on DVDs.

The DVD market, with its sell-through pricing and appeal to collectability, has led to mainstream studios like Lionsgate adopting the methods of specialty dealers when it comes to packaging and selling their horror titles. Tracing the Splat Pack’s emergence through the DVD market shows how mainstream studios were able to appropriate specialty dealers’ methods of selling paracinema. Thus, horror-films on DVD were works of “art” created by “artists.” However, the ways in which the DVD market affected the rating system enabled the studios to appropriate more than methods of selling paracinema; they were able to appropriate some of the extreme content of paracinema as well. The next chapter will trace how the DVD format enabled

more gore and more violence in horror films by the Splat Pack by moving “Unrated” movies into the mainstream.

CHAPTER IV. THE DVD REVOLUTION AND THE HORROR FILM, TAKE TWO: RISE OF THE “UNRATED”

One imperative in creating an appreciation for a work of “art,” especially in an industrial system, is making certain that one has access to the artist’s *entire* vision. Accordingly, DVDs not only make it possible for films to be positioned and sold as art-objects, they also give studios the opportunity to assure consumers that they are experiencing the entire film. In the case of the horror film, this is done by releasing the film “Unrated.” This label promises consumers that no ratings boards or any other censorious organizations have gotten between them and the complete, unadulterated film. As Guins points out, this label is intimately linked to a film-on-DVD’s status as art-object. He explains, “Even the ‘Not Rated’ classification accompanying paracinema on DVD today is closer to a category of exemption attributed to art than the outlawed ‘NC-17’ or nostalgic ‘X’ afforded to filmic licentiousness” (“Blood” 28-9). The film-on-DVD as art-object and collectable is one factor that has helped bring about the emergence of the Splat Pack. Working in concert with this factor is the studios’ decision to regularly release “Unrated” films on DVD, another material change in film industry policy that facilitated the emergence of the Splat Pack.

Before all the hype about the Splat Pack and before all the talk about how their films were an investigation into or interrogation of the politics of War-on-Terror-era America, there were a few comments about ratings at the beginning of Alan Jones’s article on the Splat Pack. These few provocative quotations are not from a member of the Splat Pack, but from another highly visible auteur of contemporary Hollywood, Quentin Tarantino. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Tarantino had poised himself as something of a mentor to the Splat Pack directors, especially Roth, whom Tarantino would later put in front of the camera as an actor in *Death*

Proof (Quentin Tarantino, 2007) and *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009). Not content to sit on the sidelines as a mentor, Tarantino had gotten into the act himself. At the time of his comments to Jones, he was taking a break from working on *Death Proof*, an homage to classic slasher films that would play alongside another film, *Planet Terror* (Robert Rodriguez, 2007), as the combination film *Grindhouse* in April 2007.

Jones begins his article with Tarantino proclaiming: “No question – this is a fantastic time to be making *real* horror movies” (qtd. in Jones 101). As Tarantino continues “in his trademark motormouth fashion” (Jones 101), he identifies the reason for this horror renaissance; he states, “Ratings systems have drastically changed Censor boards like the MPAA in America have finally realized horror movies with extreme gore and horrendous violence are clearly marked. Audiences want to see them because they *are* so bloody and brutal. That’s the whole point!” (qtd. in Jones 101). Although Tarantino’s hype is often misleading, his – albeit brief – willingness to connect the origins of this filmmaking “movement” with changes in industry policy is astute. However, throughout most of the journalistic writing on the Splat Pack, this attention to the industry was generally drowned out by discussion – both by journalists and the filmmakers themselves – about how their films were reactions to the aftermath of 9/11 and/or the War on Terror.

The issue of ratings does come up again in the *New York Post* article when Eli Roth admits to Reed Tucker that the introduction of the “unrated DVD changed everything” (qtd. in Tucker). Roth continues to explain: “When a [horror] movie is released unrated, it probably triples the audience. *Hostel* came out and it was outselling [*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Adam Adamson, 2005)] at Wal-Mart. So for *Hostel: Part II*, Lionsgate is saying, ‘Go nuts. We don’t want to even do an R-rated DVD’” (qtd. in Tucker).

This instance, in which Roth brags out his films' profitability and how this profitability is tied to the DVD format, finds Roth being significantly less disingenuous than when he repeatedly argues that his films and the films of the Splat Pack are critiques and interrogations of their historical moment or when he discusses their films as the result of a populist groundswell crying for more graphic horror films.

While it is certainly tempting to note that the emergence of the violent Splat Pack films coincide chronologically with such geopolitical events as the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War and to begin an analysis of the Splat Pack's films from there, to do so runs the risk of ignoring that the DVD market enabled, for the first time, mainstream Hollywood studios (now part of diversified corporate conglomerates) to release "Unrated" films. Officially releasing a film without an MPAA-sanctioned "G," "PG," or "R" rating – with the additional ratings "PG-13" and "NC-17" added in 1984 and 1990 respectively – used to be an uncommon practice for the studios due to the public relations hassle it created. However, DVD made this practice more common due to, among other reasons, the format's interactivity and because major retailers like Blockbuster agreed to sell and rent "Unrated" movies on DVD. While this change has affected the distribution of all genres, it has significantly affected the production and release of horror films, a genre that has a history of being a contested terrain in terms of censorship.

Jack's Rules: The Ratings System and the Stigma of "X"

This adaptation of the studios' philosophy concerning ratings policy warrants a closer examination. As discussed in Chapter Two, it was a change in industry self-regulation that contributed to the release of films from American horror's "Golden Age," in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While these then-graphic films may be read – by critics, academics, and Splat Packers – as subversive critiques of, among many other things, the United States's involvement

in Vietnam, these films also represented how the then-restructuring studios were taking advantage of Jack Valenti's new ratings system to get audiences into movie theaters to see provocative content they could not see at home on television. In other words, the "subversive" content of these films was largely a by-product of Hollywood's desire to regain ground after a recession and losing audiences to television.

Interesting, then, that the Splat Packers like Roth and Zombie should so often cite the horror filmmakers of the 1970s as an influence on their own supposedly subversive films, for there is certainly a connection between these two groups of filmmakers, but a less flashy and less rebellious one than they lead consumers to believe. Put simply, the strongest resemblance between the horror directors of the 1970s and the Splat Packers is that they both emerge from an industrial change in ratings policy. However, the trajectories of audience manipulation in these two instances move in reverse directions: if the ratings system adopted in 1968 had as one of its missions to draw adult audiences out of their homes and back into theaters, the "Unrated" DVD suggests that in order to see a film completely and properly, one has to see it at home. Before considering the rise of the "Unrated" DVD, it is necessary to briefly consider the history of ratings such as "X" and "NC-17" and how these ratings, like the ratings system itself, do not represent greater freedom for filmmakers, but instead represent the industry's greater control over the film marketplace.

When Valenti created the ratings system, he copyrighted the ratings of "G," "PG," and "R," but neglected to copyright the "X" rating. Valenti's public relations pitch for not copyrighting this rating was grounded in terms of opening up the market and allowing filmmakers' freedom of expression. Valenti explained: "We didn't copyright the X rating from a legal standpoint. It had to be open-ended so that if somebody doesn't want to submit a picture,

they can use the X. Otherwise, we could be challenged on First Amendment grounds” (qtd. in Wyatt 241). In other words, Valenti claimed that the “X” rating was in place to give filmmakers the option of not submitting their films to be reviewed by the CARA. If filmmakers chose to make use of this “freedom,” they could simply label their films with an “X” rating and release them in the marketplace.

However, if any filmmakers attempted to take this tack, they faced significant, if not insurmountable, obstacles in the movie marketplace. As Justin Wyatt explains, “approximately 50 percent of theaters across the country refused to play X films, and as many as thirty large city newspapers, along with many television and radio stations, refused to advertise them” (244). Thus, any film released with an “X” rating or without a rating – in other words, any film that attempted to circumvent CARA and MPAA standards that were controlled and set by the major studios – were extremely marginalized in the marketplace and had next to no hope of economic success.

As “the X rating became synonymous with stronger adult (later pornographic) content” (Wyatt 244), this rating did obtain cache as a marketing tool for the hardcore film industry, but this brief period of success was ended by key pieces of legislation that favored the studio members of the MPAA. Wyatt and Jon Lewis both cite the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Miller v. California* as perhaps the most significant piece of legislation in this regard. In this case, the Supreme Court “relinquished power over deciding on obscene media to the individual states and localities” (Wyatt 254). Wyatt notes, “The implications for the porno market were far-reaching – suddenly producers and distributors of both hard- and soft-core feared that their market faced erosion through possible prosecution on a market-by-market basis across the country” (254). The implications reached farther than just hard- and soft-core filmmakers and

distributors. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the decision in *Miller v. California* (1973), coupled with decisions in the cases *Paris Adult Theater I v. Slaton*, *United States v. 12 200' Reels of Super 8 mm Film*, and *United States v. Orito*, “gave the MPAA exclusive access to the theatrical marketplace” (Lewis, *Hollywood* 263). In other words, Valenti’s ratings system made it so that only pictures with CARA-approved ratings (“G,” “PG,” “R,” and later “PG-13”) would be guaranteed easy passage through theatrical distribution and exhibition circuits. Films without a CARA-approved rating would get little to no advertisement and, worse still, “were fair game for local prosecution” (Lewis 273).

The system set in place for theatrical distribution and exhibition by Valenti’s rating system still holds today for the most part. Theatrical chains, many of which are now back in the hands of the studios (or, more specifically, the corporate conglomerates that own the studios) after the decision in the 1985 case *United States v. Capital Service*⁵, will not screen “X” or “Unrated” films (Lewis, *Hollywood* 70). Even when CARA added the “NC-17” rating in 1990, the designation did not significantly alter the landscape of how films were theatrically distributed or exhibited. The “NC-17” label was drawn up by MPAA members to test the waters and discover how profitable distribution and exhibition of more adult-themed materials would be. The answer, after the lukewarm-to-hostile reception of such films as *Henry and June* (Philip Kaufman, 1990) and *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoven, 1995), seemed to be resoundingly negative, as the studios learned that:

NC-17-rated films face significant industrial obstacles. They don’t play in most mall theaters (where leasing agreements prohibit such fare) or at many multiplexes (for fear of folks sneaking in after paying to see another title). None

⁵ For more on the distributors’ takeover of exhibition after 1985, see Lewis, “Following” 86 and Acland, 90-106.

of the premium pay-channels . . . screen NC-17 films. Blockbuster Video and Kmart won't shelve NC-17-rated videos. (Lewis, "Those" 26)

Perhaps memories of the taboo "X" rating loomed so large in the media marketplace that NC-17 never stood much of a chance. Additionally, from the beginning, Valenti had argued that the "primary objective" of the ratings system was to protect children from potentially harmful or pornographic materials (qtd. in Lewis, *Hollywood* 141). After years of pitching the ratings system as a way to protect children, it was undoubtedly difficult for the MPAA to sell NC-17 films like *Henry and June* and *Showgirls* that looked a great deal like soft-core pornography. On the other hand, after home video had been established as the primary venue for hard-core pornography, it was difficult to entice porn audiences away from the home, where they could enjoy hard-core pornography on their VCRs in the privacy of their homes, to pay to see soft-core in the theater and run the risk of public embarrassment of being seen at a "dirty movie."

Given that NC-17 was not a good fit for either the family-friendly crowd or the hard-core crowd, it simply was not worth the risk of producing and distributing NC-17, especially given the increasingly global reach of corporate Hollywood. As Lewis explains, the primary purpose of the film industry's self-regulatory policies is to make certain that Hollywood creates "a product that won't have *problems* in the marketplace," in other words, a film that will offend as few people as possible, encounter little to no resistance at the local level, and have the ability to play without problems in as many media markets as possible (*Hollywood* 7).

Home Video and Ratings

However, this economy of film content and ratings has been mostly restricted to theatrical exhibition sites and has not affected home video. As McDonald explains, "Unlike television or radio systems, the activities of the global video market were not dependent on

government license or large-scale capital investment in the institutional conditions of production and dissemination. The porous trade in video hardware and software therefore could operate outside systems of regulation and control” (85). Rating rules and policies from the distribution of feature films on video were certainly different from Hollywood’s policies on theatrically-exhibited films, as films on videotape did not necessarily have to adhere to the MPAA-sanctioned ratings of “G,” “PG,” “PG-13,” or “R.” Instead, films on videotape were routinely released as “Unrated,” a label that escaped the pornographic stigma of the “X” rating. While “Unrated” films had an extremely difficult time playing in theaters, “Unrated” versions of theatrical releases released on videotape did not, for the most part, encounter the same obstacles.

Aside from more lenient regulatory policies, home video was a viable avenue for the release of “Unrated” movies for several other reasons. One reason for more leniency is greater responsibility being shifted to the media consumer and away from the media producer, distributor, or retailer. If, as Lewis notes, shopping mall theaters will not show films beyond an “R” because of leasing agreements, these agreements do not extend to the home. Similarly, with home video, there is no movie theater manager who has to worry about children paying to see “PG” rated films and sneaking into an “Unrated” film. If an adult rents an “Unrated” videotape, brings it into his/her home, and a child in the home views the tape without permission, it would be next to impossible for the adult to blame the distributor of the videotape.

For these reasons, among others, home video, from the 1970s forward, provided a realm wherein “Unrated” films posed minimal risk for their producers and distributors. Predictably, many films issued as “Unrated” on videotape were horror films from independent producers and mini-majors that had to have some scenes of violence or gore heavily edited in order to obtain an “R” rating. Frederick Wasser explains that after the advent of the VCR, “Independent producers

and mini-major studios such as Orion, Vestron, DeLaurentiis, Carolco (allied with LIVE), and Cannon did not have big libraries [that they could re-issue on video] and therefore expanded their production through the mid-1980s in anticipation that the global video market would pay for more new movies” (124). These independents and mini-majors often focused their energies on producing exploitation features with familiar formulas that would draw predictable profits. They also pioneered the possibilities of the home video market by offering their horror films, which necessarily had to be rated “R” in order to safely play in theaters, as “Unrated” on videotape by reinstating footage (sometimes only amounting to a few seconds) that had to be cut from the film in order to obtain an “R” rating for theatrical release.

Even though the home video market for VHS set a precedent for the release of “Unrated” movies, the “Unrated” horror movie on videotape did not bring about the sea change for the horror film that the “Unrated” DVD did in the late 1990s and 2000s. There are several reasons the “Unrated” movie on videotape failed to bring about this change. One is that the majors neglected to fully utilize the economic possibilities of “Unrated” videotape. A brief look at how Paramount has handled the various releases of its lucrative *Friday the 13th* franchise offers an illuminating case study of the majors’ reluctance to venture into “Unrated” territory during the VCR era.

Paramount, *Friday the 13th*, the VCR Era, and Ratings

Friday the 13th (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) was a financial triumph for Paramount Pictures when it was released in 1980. Shot on a minuscule budget of just over half a million dollars, the independently-produced slasher film was a sleeper hit for distributor Paramount, grossing almost forty million dollars in the United States (Bracke 314). It perhaps should not have come as a surprise that *Friday the 13th* was a massive hit, for the film’s plot closely

followed the successful formula of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, a sleeper hit two years earlier. After all, one of the keys to success in Hollywood is to offer up a film that is similar to a previous hit, but just different enough to establish its own identity and to convince people who paid to see the earlier film that they are not paying to see the *exact* same thing again. One of the ways in which *Friday the 13th* differentiated itself from *Halloween* was having a higher body count; the trailer for *Friday the 13th*, true to the film's title, promised thirteen victims.

Another way in which *Friday the 13th* differentiated itself from *Halloween* was by promising its audiences graphic kills with plenty of blood and gore, which had not been central to the more suspense-oriented *Halloween*. As director Cunningham explains, "*Halloween* was a real artistic piece of work, but I knew that *Friday* was going to be very gory" (qtd. in Grove 16). To this end, Cunningham hired Tom Savini, a special effects artist who specialized in gore and was riding high after the success of George Romero's 1978 "Unrated" zombie epic *Dawn of the Dead*, for which Savini supplied gore effects. Savini's work on *Friday the 13th* did not disappoint, and several moments – like one victim (Kevin Bacon) being killed by an arrow shoved through his throat, another victim (Jeannine Taylor) receiving an axe blow to the face, and the killer (Betsy Palmer) being bloodily bested when the film's "Final Girl" (Andrienne King) decapitates her with a machete – became notorious and well-known set pieces among horror fans.

Despite the graphic and gory kills, *Friday the 13th* had relatively few problems when Paramount submitted it to the CARA. According to Peter Bracke, "after only two submissions, the MPAA requested a mere nine seconds of deletions from the film's graphic murder sequences before granting it an R classification" (40). Bracke finds it surprising that *Friday the 13th* was required to cut so little from its running time because it is, as he proclaims, a film that "revel[s]

in the kind of lurid, sadistic violence that tested not only the standards of the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings board, but all manner of good taste, propriety and social responsibility" (40). However, if one considers the structure of the Hollywood film industry established by Valenti's ratings system, the decision to pass *Friday the 13th* with as few cuts as possible makes complete sense: since Paramount is a member of the MPAA, it is in the MPAA's best financial interests that Paramount's films play in as many venues as possible, something that obtaining one of Valenti's copyrighted ratings assures. Additionally, if violence and gore is an element that differentiates *Friday the 13th* as a product, then it is in both Paramount's and the MPAA's best interests that the film retain as much gore as possible to draw curious customers into the theater, but not so much that the film would cause public relations problems.

It is significant to note, however, that after *Friday the 13th* concluded its immensely profitable theatrical release, Paramount neglected to restore the nine seconds cut from the theatrical release to the film and issue *Friday the 13th* on home video as "Unrated." Several factors account for this decision. Paramount had been purchased by zinc-and-sugar giant Gulf + Western in 1966. Thus, the studio was no stranger to the rules that made global corporate conglomeration work. Valenti had placed a stigma on "X" or "Unrated," and this stigma remained in 1980. Even though the "uniqueness" of a film like *Friday the 13th* depended upon the presence of graphic violence, the potential public relations problems releasing an "Unrated" version of *Friday the 13th* could cause corporate parent Paramount were not worth the risk⁶. Simply put, in 1980 "Unrated" was simply too close to the stigma of "X."

⁶ Warner Bros. was more adventurous. They had obtained rights to distribute *Friday the 13th* in the United Kingdom, and they issued an "Unrated" version, complete with the cut nine seconds, on videotape in the UK in the early 1980s (Grove 64). Until 2009, this was the only official "Unrated" release of the film on video.

The economic and public relations problems that dealing in “X” or “Unrated” fare could cause Paramount were brought to life on 23 October 1980 when popular critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert devoted an entire episode of their television program to starting a campaign of moral outrage against “slasher” films, a cycle that both critics blamed *Friday the 13th* for starting (Bracke 45). Even worse, a “vast majority of national critics” joined Siskel and Ebert’s campaign (Bracke 45). This backlash put Paramount in a difficult position. Of course, they wanted to make more money by first exploiting what was now a marketable title and then producing more *Friday the 13th* films. However, they also had to worry about including too much gore and graphic violence in the series and getting stuck with an “X” rating. This conundrum placed Paramount in a situation where they had to provide just enough violence to please the audiences for these films, but not enough to get an “X” rating and encounter difficulties in the media marketplace.

Paramount’s approach to the sequels to *Friday the 13th* predictably left some fans disappointed. This disappointment is evident both in Chas. Balun’s *The Gore Score*, published in 1987, and in John McCarty’s *The Official Splatter Movie Guide*, published in 1989. Balun’s book was published by FantaCo Enterprises, a company that catered to fans by publishing horror-related books and comics and hosting fan conventions, but both books are geared toward the gore-and-splatter-hungry fan’s perspective.

A telling example of this fan approach is Balun’s system for *The Gore Score*: in the preface, he explains his two rating systems:

Besides employing the customary one to four star (skull) rating system in assessing the relative merits of each film, I have added a second numerical rating that deals with elements totally unrelated to whatever artistic or aesthetic virtues the film may possess. This numerical appraisal based on a scale from one to ten,

is . . . **The Gore Score**. This evaluation, then, deals with nothing but the quantity of blood, brains, guts, and assorted previous bodily fluids, spilled during the course of the film. (9)

Balun hopes that “both the serious student of contemporary horror as well as the totally indiscriminating, bloodthirsty, sociopathic gorehound” will find his dual-rating system valuable (9). He concludes by admitting with a wink, “I know which drawer I fall into. That’s why I thought the splatter rating was of such fundamental importance” (9). McCarty’s approach to evaluating films is similarly gore-and-splatter happy in its approach. Raiford Guins cites Balun and McCarty as “definitive voice[s]” in the fan discourses surrounding gore and splatter films in the 1980s (“Blood” 22). Accordingly, their growing disenchantment with the *Friday the 13th* films as the series continued throughout the decade offers a glimpse into the sometimes ambivalent relationship horror fans had with the *Friday the 13th* franchise.

Like many fans, Balun and McCarty admire the first film. Awarding the film three and a half skulls out of four, Balun praises the first *Friday* as “fast paced and graphic” with “Imaginative murders” and “great effects work by Tom Savini,” and he gives the film a seven out of ten on the all-important “gore score” scale (27). Later, in a 1990 issue of *The Gore Zone*, Balun cites the film as one of his top ten favorite films of all time. McCarty likewise praises the first film as “the controversial box-office smash that propelled the independent, low-budget splatter movie into the big time” (54).

Balun and McCarty begin to display a bit of wariness, however, in their reviews of the second film, *Friday the 13th Part 2* (Steve Miner, 1981). McCarty grumbles, “In this and most subsequent *Friday the 13th* flicks, the MPAA insisted on cuts and Paramount agreed to avoid an X rating” (55). Although McCarty is disappointed about there being less gore in this sequel, he

shrugs it off and ends his review by admitting that the film is “Still fairly splattery, though” (55). Balun, on the other hand, has no words of praise for the film: “Heavily cut by censors, this sequel is definitely the weakest of the lot . . . An infuriating . . . waste of time” (27).

As the *Friday the 13th* series wore on, Balun’s fury over the lack of gore in these films, presumably the result of Paramount bending to the will of the MPAA, reaches a fever pitch. For instance, when reviewing the fifth film in the series, *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* (Danny Steinmann, 1985), Balun complains that the film “blows it by having the relatively bloodless murders happen OFF screen” (28). Balun makes his rage personal when reviewing the next film in the series, *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives!* (Tom McLoughlin, 1986); not content with merely pointing out, again, that “almost all the signature killings happen OFF screen” (28), Balun accuses Tom McLoughlin of directing the film with a “bloodless and wimpy hand” (28). Similarly, McCarty’s disenchantment with the series also develops into outright hostility as McCarty begins his review of *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood* (John Buechler, 1988) with a rant:

This latest installment in the long-running series contains no surprises. In fact, even the gore is less explicit, due to more stringent controls from the ratings board. The filmmakers have the killings down to a science. The camera cuts away at exactly the right moment so that we think we’ve seen more than what is really shown (in fact, so tightly timed are these shots that if you happen to blink at just the right moment, you may end up thinking you’ve seen much *less* than is actually shown). (56)

These comments from Balun’s and McCarty’s reviews are illuminating for several reasons. If, as Guins suggests, Balun and McCarty can be seen as representative of fan discourse

surrounding the *Friday the 13th* series, one may ascertain three things. First, there was immense fan interest in seeing *Friday the 13th* films with a large amount of gore. Secondly, the fans were hungry for more gore than image-conscious, MPAA-member, corporate-owned Paramount was willing to offer in the “R” rated theatrical cuts of their films. Third, Paramount failed to capitalize on the less-restrictive format of videotape as an avenue of delivering these customers what they wanted. In short, releasing these films in an “Unrated” format apparently was not an option for Paramount. Since fans were clamoring for more gore in their *Friday the 13th* films, gore that would be allowable in an “Unrated” cut of the film on home video, releasing these films “Unrated” on home video could have been profitable for Paramount, but perhaps the stigma that Valenti’s restructuring of the rating system placed upon the “X” or “Unrated” film still held sway over a decade after its creation and simply made it not worth the trouble Paramount could get into with moral guardians or unpredictable media markets.

It is also possible that it simply did not occur to Paramount to release alternative versions on home video because of the format. As mentioned in the previous chapter, DVD was drastically different from the home video formats that had come before in how it stressed interactivity and changeability. In contrast, the videocassette was, like film, “a linear medium, working along the single plane of record, play, rewind and fast-forward” (McDonald 1). The linearity of the videotape format perhaps encouraged studio executives to view their feature films as set, stable objects, not as something that could be added to or taken away from after being prepared for theatrical release. Along these lines, the movie-on-videocassette was supposed to replicate the theatrical experience, not deviate from it. Also, retaining the “R” rating that a film obtained for its theatrical release set it apart from other films, like hard-core pornography, that were released direct-to-video in an “Unrated” form. Whatever the reason, Paramount chose not

to make their horror films available in “Unrated” versions on videocassette, even when fans were clamoring for them.

“Unrated” Videotapes: From Margin to Center

Paramount’s reluctance to venture into “Unrated” home video territory was shared by many of the major studios, and the “Unrated” videotape was not widely pursued as an avenue for more profit, even though, judging from the reactions of people like Balun and McCarty, the market for this type of material was definitely there. Or was it? While the looming specter “X” and its pornographic stigma no doubt led the majors to carefully consider the public relations implications of getting into the “Unrated” videotape business, another reason for the studios not fully embracing the release of “Unrated” movies could have been that releasing films in an “Unrated” form might not have paid off as handsomely for the majors due to the structure of the home video market.

As discussed in the last chapter, sell through pricing for videotapes was only tentatively adopted by the majors, and even when it was finally adopted, studios, for the most part, priced only blockbusters and family films at sell-through, a plan that left out marginal fare like horror films. As a result, a majority of the dollars made from horror films on videotape would have been made from the rental, rather than the sale, of these tapes, and rental stores, not the studios, would collect this money. This scenario gave studio little incentive to release more than one version – that is, to release both an “R” rated and “X” or “Unrated” copy – of a particular title because the rented object would just get rented more often while the studio would not move that many more units. For instance, if Paramount released both an “R” rated copy of *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (Joseph Zito, 1984) and an “Unrated” version, there was a good chance that rental outlets would purchase only one of these versions and ignore the other. Even if the rental

outlet purchased both versions, the rental outlet, not the studios, would be making the real money. Given the potential hassle associated with non-MPAA-sanctioned ratings and lack of capital to be gained from releasing multiple versions to a renter's market, "Unrated" videotapes were not that widespread.

Price also marginalized the "Unrated" videotape. Since the market for potential consumers not just renting, but also buying horror films on VHS was so small, studios and releasing houses increased the prices for videotapes of films from genres like horror so their risk in producing and distributing these products was significantly defrayed. Tracking pricing trends for horror movies on videotape reveals just how much the prices for these niche items were marked up. When it comes to "Unrated" videotapes, the prices increase even more, and these high prices, like the majors' reluctance to adopt the "Unrated" videotape as a viable format, kept the "Unrated" format from having much of an impact on the ways that films, and, in particular, horror films, were made during the VCR era.

One of the best ways to track pricing trends for horror movies on videotape during the VCR is to survey video sellers' ads in *Fangoria* magazine, a horror film magazine that enjoyed great success during the videotape-happy 1980s and became a print meeting ground for horror fans. Hoping to capitalize on *Fangoria*'s base of horror fans, several video-by-mail specialty dealers, like Michigan's Marshall Discount Video Service, Sacramento's Dickens Video By Mail, and the aforementioned horror publisher FantaCo, which also dealt in hard-to-find horror videos, took out advertisements in nearly every issue of *Fangoria* to publicize their wares. These advertisements reveal the remarkable extent to which prices of horror videotapes were marked up, even years after the institution of sell through pricing. For instance, in the June 1987 issue, one dealer was offering classic titles from Universal's horror canon, such as the famous 1931

versions of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, for the sizeable fee of \$59.95 apiece. These high prices, five years after the introduction of sell through pricing, indicate that studios felt that these types of films for sale on videotape appealed only to niche audiences, and prices had to be marked up to make selling to this limited audience profitable.

If the audience for horror movies on videotape was niche, the audience for “Unrated” horror movies on videotape was even smaller. This is reflected in the prices of “Unrated” videotapes that are even more expensive than the classic horror films on videotape going for around sixty dollars. Even after more time passed and VHS penetration increased, prices of horror titles began to get closer to sell through prices, but the prices for “Unrated” fare remained high. For instance, in the July 1990 issue of *Fangoria*, Dickens Video by Mail took out a rather large ad advertising “Uncut” and “Unrated” titles for prices that would leave even the most well-to-do gorehound’s pocketbook in pain. Available for \$59.95 are “Uncut” versions of such titles as the notorious rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* aka *Day of the Woman* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and the epic Italian-zombie-gorefest *Zombie* aka *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979). Amazingly, \$59.95 is not even the highest pricing tier, as Dickens has two pricing tiers that are even more expensive: \$79.95 and \$89.95.

A glance at the movies available on “Uncut” and “Unrated” video shows that it was mostly the independents and mini-major distributors who were taking advantage of the “Unrated” video format. For instance, two films that Dickens was selling “Unrated” for \$79.95 are *Bad Taste* (Peter Jackson, 1987) and *Nail Gun Massacre* (Bill Leslie and Terry Lifton, 1985), both of which were distributed on video in the United States by Magnum Entertainment, a fly-by-night distributor specializing in low-budget exploitation. Even further up the price range, Dickens’s list of videos on sale for \$89.95 showcases a parade of titles from the 1980s most

prolific independents and mini-majors: *The Carpenter* (David Wellington, 1988) and *Night of the Demons* (Kevin Tenney, 1988), both distributed on VHS by Republic Pictures Home Video, *Waxwork* (Anthony Hickox, 1988), distributed by Vestron, and *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (Tony Randel, 1988), distributed by New World Pictures.

These advertisements for “Unrated” movies on videotape reveal several significant factors that kept the “Unrated” video from having much of an impact on mainstream consumption habits during the VCR era. First, the high cost of “Unrated” videos, marked up to defray financial risks for producers and distributors, kept “Unrated” materials from ever having any sort of support from mainstream movie watchers. Instead, these high-priced “Unrated” films on VHS attracted cult enthusiasts with the interest and the financial means to “collect” these objects. While the “Unrated,” collectors-item film did not, at this historical moment, enter the mainstream, these videotapes did, at least, set a precedent for the “Unrated,” “Collector’s Edition” DVDs that would follow later, when the DVD market aimed to make collectors out of every customer. At this time, though, the extremely high prices for some of the “Unrated” videotapes (a few of the titles on Dickens’s list would be near one hundred dollars once shipping and handling costs were added) would have kept them out of the price range even for some videotape collectors. Another strike against “Unrated” videotapes ever catching on and, thus, affecting the way that Hollywood does business was the major studios’ challenge to offer their products as “Unrated” on home video and maintain good public relations. In other words, the major studios would have to figure out how to seek profit in the “Unrated” business while not ruining their profits in major markets with bad public relations.

However, just as these advertisements reveal both the high cost of “Unrated” videotapes and the majors’ reluctance to get involved in the “Unrated” business, they also show that things

were beginning to change and that the “Unrated” video was slowly making its way to the mainstream. Although Dickens Video by Mail sold a substantial amount of “Unrated” videos for astronomical prices like \$59.95, \$79.95, and \$89.95, they also offered a few titles at the sell through, consumer-friendly prices of \$19.95 and \$14.95. Predictably, most of the titles offered at sell through were independent productions like Empire Pictures’s irreverent horror-comedy *Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985) and Wes Craven’s infamous *Last House on the Left*, which was being distributed on videotape at the time by Vestron.

The fact that these “Unrated” films were offered at the same sell through prices as Hollywood blockbusters and family movies was a sign of things to come. Another was the majors’ gradual warming to the “Unrated” format, represented on this list, in part, by a couple of titles offered for the sell through price of \$14.95. Listed at this price were “Uncut” versions of Warner Bros.’s cult classic *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and Tri-Star’s supernatural thriller *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker, 1987). Again, it is clear that the majors were still playing it safe when it came to home video and “Unrated” material in specific, for these two choices for “Uncut” release possessed a certain air of respectability. A dud at the box office, Scott’s *Blade Runner* had, by 1990, been reassessed in many circles as an unfairly maligned masterpiece from a visionary director. Similarly, Alan Parker, with films like *Midnight Express* (1978), *Pink Floyd The Wall* (1982), and *Birdy* (1984), had established himself as an “artistic” director. As a consequence, after he famously clashed with the ratings board over having to remove approximately ten seconds from a lovemaking scene between actors Mickey Rourke and Lisa Bonet in *Angel Heart*, the inclusion of these lost seconds for an “Unrated” release on home video could easily be framed by Tri-Star as the restoration of an “artist’s vision.”

This appeal to “artistic” credibility could likely not be cited, however, by New Line Cinema when they decided to release an “Unrated” version of *A Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Child* (Stephen Hopkins, 1989), the fifth installment in their immensely profitable *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Nevertheless, in the same advertisement for Dickens Video by Mail, New Line, through Media Home Entertainment, their home video distributor, was offering an “Unrated” version of this film for the princely sum of \$89.95. While, at this point in their history, it would be inaccurate to call New Line a “major,” they certainly were not marginal. Although the company had started in the late 1960s and early 70s as a distributor for underground fare like *Reefer Madness* (Louis Gasnier, 1936) and John Waters’s early films, it had achieved mainstream success with the *Nightmare* films, which, by 1989, had grossed a total of just over one hundred-seventy million dollars at the box office, not to mention revenue from home video, merchandising, and other tie-ins. New Line “officially” became a part of corporate Hollywood in 1996 when it was acquired by Turner Broadcasting, which was, in turn, acquired by conglomerate giant Time Warner later that year. However, it had been a major player for at least a decade before these acquisitions, due, in no small part, to their success with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series.

New Line’s decision to release an “Unrated” version of *A Nightmare on Elm Street: A Dream Child*, a horror franchise film with little to no “artistic” credibility, represents a major step toward mainstreaming the distribution of “Unrated” exploitation films. Unlike the more conservative Paramount, which, as of late 1990, was offering its *Friday the 13th* films at sell through prices but only in “R” rated versions, by 1989, New Line seemed to be responding to fan audiences, like those represented by Balun’s and McCarty’s writings, who were demanding more gore in franchise horror films. It is important to note, however, that this decision to issue

“Unrated” horror on videotape does not represent a daring move or a commitment to artistic integrity on New Line’s part. Rather, their decision to put out this installment of the *Nightmare* series in an “Unrated” version on videotape likely represents an attempt to cultivate a new avenue of revenue for a film series that had reached a point of saturation that was harming its value as a franchise.

The *Nightmare on Elm Street* series had been a financial boon for New Line, so much so that head of production Robert Shaye has often been cited as referring to the studio as “the house that Freddy built,” in reference, of course, to Freddy Krueger, the wise-cracking antihero of the *Elm Street* series. The first *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) was a massive hit for New Line, grossing over twenty-five million dollars against a budget that was just under two million. The grosses from *Elm Street* films continued to climb until *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Renny Harlin, 1988) grossed a series-high of forty-nine million. The growing success of these films encouraged New Line to develop a series of spin-offs in various media markets, including toys, comic books, and a syndicated horror anthology television show, entitled *Freddy’s Nightmares*. However, the franchise’s fortunes took a dramatic turn for the worse in the summer of 1989 when the next film in the series, *The Dream Child*, grossed only twenty-two million, less than half of its predecessor, and became the lowest-grossing film of the series.

When considered in this light, New Line’s decision to issue the film “Unrated” on videotape seems like an attempt to revitalize a franchise that had reached the deadly point of over saturation. Just as Freddy had reached the mainstream and began to appear “too safe” for the gore-hungry types of fans represented by Balun and McCarty, New Line made the financially sound decision of appealing to these audiences by reinserting a minute or so of gory special

effects that had been cut from the “R” rated theatrical release. Due both to more lenient rating restrictions on videotapes and to responsibility for content being shifted from distributor to consumer during the video era, this decision was not objected to by the MPAA.

Issuing the fifth *Elm Street* film in an “Unrated” version on videotape evidently paid off for New Line, for they employed a similar strategy when they acquired the rights to the *Friday the 13th* franchise from Paramount and attempted to revitalize the property with *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (Adam Marcus, 1993). After *Jason Goes to Hell* failed to find much of an audience at the box office, New Line issued an “Unrated” version of the film on videotape. Significantly, this videotape was issued in a box that bears a label proclaiming that this videotape is a “Special Collector’s Edition” of the film, and the inclusion of this label is an early example of the mainstreaming of sales strategies that were once used to appeal to only the most cultish movie fans. New Line’s forays into offering “Unrated” exploitation movies available at sell through pricing are a clear precursor of what would become an industry norm during the DVD era.

“Unrated” Explosion: Transitioning into the DVD Era

While cultish consumption was mainstreamed fairly quickly after DVDs were introduced to the consumer market due to the sell through pricing mandate, it took the “Unrated” DVD available at sell-through pricing a little longer to catch on. While horror movies, specifically neo-slasher movies, underwent a mini-boom in the late 1990s after the surprise success of *Scream*, the distributors of these films did not release these films on DVD in “Unrated” versions. Instead, Dimension (then subsidiary of Disney) issued *Scream* and its sequels, *Scream 2* (Wes Craven, 1997) and *Scream 3* (Wes Craven, 2000), on DVD in boxes with covers that were blandly designed, and they prominently featured the then-popular actors and actresses featured in the

films. While Dimension was appealing to a collector's sensibilities (the covers for all three discs feature a matching banner at the top that reads "Dimension Collector's Series"), they certainly were not – with their boxes adorned with the visages of mainstream-TV-stars like Courtney Cox and Neve Campbell – attempting to appeal to marginal, cultish collectors. As mentioned previously, Raiford Guins identifies these films as the mainstream opposite of the Italian horror paracinema being made available on DVD at the same time ("Blood" 29).

Similar to the situation with VHS, "Unrated" versions of films began to make their way into the mainstream during the DVD era mostly when celebrated, respectable directors supposedly encountered trouble with MPAA and had to cut minutes or even seconds from their films to achieve an "R" rating for theatrical release, but were able to restore "lost" footage to the film on DVD. This was the situation with director Stanley Kubrick's last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, released by Warner Bros. in 1999. Quite a bit of controversy surrounded Kubrick's film before its release when "In order to obtain an R rating from the CARA board, Kubrick supervised the addition of computer-generated figures to obstruct [the audience's] view of the action during a long and wholly unerotic orgy scene" (Lewis, "Those" 23). Examining this controversy in his provocatively titled article, "Those Who Disagree Can Kiss Jack Valenti's Ass," Jon Lewis reports that "a number of well-known film reviewers complained about the computer graphics" that had been inserted into Kubrick's film (24). In response, Terry Semel, a cochairman at Warner Bros., explained their decision to insert the figures and secure an "R" rating for the film: "We're not in the NC-17 business. NC-17 is a whole industry. It includes triple-X-rated porno films. So to us that's just not a business that we're in" (qtd. in Lewis, "Those" 24). Lewis sees Semel's comment as "disingenuous" and points out that "The NC-17 cut of the Warner Brothers

film, released without the computer gimmick, was in theaters in Europe at the very moment Semel made his remark” (24).

Lewis also finds the comments disingenuous because of the enormous possibilities for revenue that the home video market had opened up to the studios. As Lewis explains, “In 2001, Warner Brothers released the ‘director’s cut’ [of *Eyes Wide Shut*] on video and DVD. From the very start the plan at Warner Brothers was to cash in a second time on a film that really isn’t very good the first time you see it. And that’s fine with the MPAA, Semel, and the executives and shareholders at Time Warner” (“Those” 24). Clearly, by this point, the major studios had begun to see the profitability in the “Unrated” movie on video. With the institution of sell through pricing for DVDs, it was imperative that DVDs be attractive commodities and appear to be worth the dollars it took for consumers to purchase them. By comparison, it had not been worth the trouble for the studios to invest in “Unrated” in the VCR era. The practice of renting movies on VHS rather than owning movies assured that independently-owned rental outlets would enjoy the lion’s share of the revenues, so the studios did not focus on making VHS tapes attractive commodities for purchase. With DVDs, however, the more attractive these commodities could appear to potential buyers the better. After “Special Features” and “Deleted Scenes” were adopted as standards featured on many DVDs, it was not much of a jump to include scenes that were “too much” for theaters and supposedly cut at the behest of the CARA.

Still, the studios seemed to proceed with caution when issuing “Unrated” movies on DVD. As discussed above, issuing *Eyes Wide Shut* as “Unrated” was not a risky move for Warner Bros. because the film was directed by one of world cinema’s most respected and acclaimed directors, starred Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, two of America’s most popular actors, and was the center of a *cause célèbre*. This was similar to the case of another film issued

in an “Unrated” version by a major distributor in 2001, MGM’s DVD release of *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980). This DVD gave the consumer the option of viewing either an “R” rated, theatrical cut of the film or an “Unrated” cut. Like *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Dressed to Kill* was a film by an established, critically acclaimed director who had gotten into a very public tussle with the CARA over the erotic – and, in De Palma’s case, violent – content of his film.

The first time that De Palma submitted his film to the CARA board, he received an “X” rating. As Jon Lewis explains it, Samuel Z. Arkoff, a “legendary B movie producer” and coordinator of the “promotion and distribution” of *Dressed to Kill*, was actually happy with this news:

When the CARA board initially indicated that *Dressed to Kill* receive an X rating, most mainstream industry executives would have panicked. But Arkoff understood that the preliminary rating was mostly good news. So long as De Palma could somehow cut the film to suit CARA – and he had to in order to cash Arkoff’s check – the R-rated version of the film would be immediately notorious and easily exploitable. (*Hollywood* 277)

Arkoff’s shrewd business plan found new life during the DVD era, as studios and distributors could potentially double their profit from controversy. If a film clashes with the MPAA and has to have footage removed for the theatrical release of the film, audiences may be tempted to go to the theater to see what the fuss is about. If the audience is still intrigued, they have the promise that the offending footage might be reinserted or, at least, made available as an extra feature for the film’s DVD release.

As “Unrated” films slowly became more prevalent on DVD in the early 2000s, their growth and acceptability in the mainstream media market was aided and abetted by Blockbuster

Inc, one of the most powerful outlets in the home video market. As Raiford Guins explains, Blockbuster is not “a neutral space and benign service provider for the distribution of prerecorded media for home consumption,” but rather should be considered as “a control technology” for determining what is acceptable and what is not acceptable on the home video market (*Edited* 98). From its inception, Blockbuster has helped the MPAA and the CARA control the movie market by only stocking titles with MPAA-approved ratings, and it has justified this decision under the banner of being family friendly. As former CEO Wayne Huizenga once proclaimed, “Our philosophy is family and kids” (qtd. in Guins, *Edited* 98-9).

While Blockbuster followed through on its philosophy and commitment to providing only family-friendly entertainment by refusing to stock “X”-rated and even MPAA-approved “NC-17” films, the corporation made an interesting decision when it came to “Unrated” DVDs. Rather than refuse to carry them, Blockbuster stocked “Unrated” films and made them readily available on the shelf next to a “Rated” option (Guins, *Edited* 99). Considering that the Viacom-owned Blockbuster is an important component of the infrastructure of corporate Hollywood, the video chain’s decision to stock “Unrated” titles represents a significant sea change in Hollywood’s self-regulatory policies. As Guins puts it:

Blockbuster’s access to the home through its channels of cable television, Internet rentals, and, soon to pass into obsolescence, video stores provides ways for its “philosophy” to affect viewing in the home. Its policy governs access through these circuits of distribution. And these hold influence over Hollywood production on account of Blockbuster’s conglomerate ties to the industry. (*Edited* 100)

Simply put, Blockbuster's decisions have implications for the types of films that Hollywood makes and the types of films that audiences see, and their decision to stock "Unrated" titles can be read as both the "Unrated" DVD's entryway into the mainstream and an invitation to exploit this new rating possibility.

Blockbuster's acceptance of "Unrated" DVDs is comparable to New Line's attempts to revise their dying *Elm Street* franchise in 1989 with an "Unrated" VHS release. Since around 2003, Blockbuster had been in financial decline, due to its failure to adapt successfully to the DVD sell-through market. Writing in 2004, Daniel Gross explains that Blockbuster's profit margins were designed for renting videos, not selling them: "it is three and half times more profitable for Blockbuster to rent than sell" (Gross). Interestingly, Blockbuster's aggressively expansive plans to open more stores in order to both rent and sell more DVDs proved to be disastrous; by 2010, the company was on the brink of bankruptcy (Frommer). As Blockbuster went into decline, it was eclipsed by Netflix, the Internet rental business that ended up taking much of Blockbuster's business (Gross). Significantly, Netflix had no qualms with renting "Unrated" materials, especially after Blockbuster had given them the industry's blessing.

An article in *Variety* written by Dana Harris and posted in September 2004 shows that Lionsgate was ready to profit from the industry's acceptance of "Unrated." As Harris explains it, the studio found itself "on top of the indie heap" partly because of its "relatively inexpensive pickup" of Eli Roth's *Cabin Fever*, which ended up grossing twenty-one million dollars in Fall 2003 (Harris). Further, Harris remarks that Lionsgate was laying plans to remain on top by repeating the success of Roth's low-on-budget, high-on-gore hit: "Look for the company to turn away from the bigger budgets in favor of low-cost, high-return properties such as Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects*, a sequel to distrib's 2003 hit *House of 1000 Corpses*" (Harris). Mentioned in

passing at the conclusion of Harris's article is Lionsgate's January 2004 acquisition of *Saw*, the spectacular success of which would further solidify Lionsgate's reliance on low-budget, gory horror films for a reliable stream of revenue.

Another reason for Lionsgate to focus its attention on gory films of this stripe is that the industry's acceptance of "Unrated" DVD meant that they could make low-cost horror films more gory, violent, and sleazy than horror films that had come before, a move that allowed Hollywood to compete with the racy content of cable television and the Internet. Lionsgate's turn toward "grindhouse" horror was addressed in a *Variety* article by David S. Cohen published almost a year after Harris's article. According to Cohen, Harris's prediction that Lionsgate would turn toward low-budget, violent horror had come true, with Rob Zombie leading the way. As Cohen notes, "The truest reincarnations of the grindhouse . . . have come from rocker-turned-shock auteur Rob Zombie" (Cohen).

Along these lines, Lionsgate took advantage of the "Unrated" format with their DVD release of *The Devil's Rejects*, the sequel to Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses*, as the DVD format allowed them to add a few extra seconds of sex and gore that had to be cut for theatrical release. "Unrated" DVDs also allowed Lionsgate to continue to up the ante for the films in their *Saw* series: not only did 2006's *Saw III* become the highest grossing film of the series, pulling in just over eighty million dollars at the domestic box office, but an "Unrated" version (with just under a minute of gore restored) on DVD sold nearly three million copies and earned over forty-five and a half million dollars, over half of its theatrical take, in DVD sales. It is also worth mentioning that the *Saw III* DVD was the best-selling horror DVD of 2007, Lionsgate's best-selling release of a feature film on DVD in 2007, and the thirty-eighth best-selling DVD of 2007 ("Top Selling DVDs of 2007").

Interestingly enough, when box office numbers for the *Saw* series began to slip, Lionsgate increased the amount of restored footage to the DVD versions of the films, a move that resembles New Line's decision to release an "Unrated" VHS version of the fifth *Nightmare on Elm Street* after that film underperformed at the box office. While under a minute of footage was restored for the "Unrated" version of the top-grossing *Saw III*, much more was added to the fourth and fifth films. For instance, when the grosses of *Saw IV* fell from the third film's gross of eighty million dollars to sixty-three million dollars, the DVD release of *Saw IV* beefed up the film's running time from ninety-two minutes to ninety-five minutes. Something similar happened with *Saw V*. Again, box office grosses dropped – this time to fifty-six million dollars – and the "Unrated" DVD version extended the film's running time by four minutes, changing its running time from ninety-two minutes to ninety-six minutes. While not all of the material added to the films consists of gore, the implication of the "Unrated" label is that the material being reinserted into the film is in some way "forbidden." The strategy worked: like the *Saw III* DVD, the DVD releases of *Saw IV* and *Saw V* were immensely profitable, with the fourth film charting thirty-ninth and the fifth charting fifty-fourth place during their respective years of release ("Top Selling DVDs of 2008," "Top Selling DVDs of 2009").

Ultimately, "Unrated" *Saw* DVDs have generated major sales for Lionsgate that put these DVDs in the same league as family films and mainstream blockbuster releases. For instance, *Saw III* sold about one hundred-fifty thousand more copies than the family-oriented film *Flicka* (Michael Mayer, 2006) during 2007. Figures like these, coupled with Eli Roth bragging about the DVD release of *Hostel* dethroning *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as the best-selling DVD at Wal-Mart, illustrate just how much the landscape of the home video market has changed since the VHS era when blockbusters and family films

dominated the sales charts and “Unrated” videos were relegated to collectors and sold for nearly a hundred dollars apiece. Now, issuing “Unrated” cuts of films on DVD is commonplace.

Perhaps the best example of this is when, in early 2009, Paramount finally issued an official release of the “Unrated” cut of the first *Friday the 13th* film with the “offending” nine seconds restored to the film at last.

Conclusion

It would be incorrect to say that the advent of DVD created the films of the Splat Pack or caused these films to happen. More precisely, a confluence of factors – the DVD market, wider availability and marketability of “Unrated” movies, and changes in Blockbuster’s policies, to name a few – made possible a media marketplace in which the Splat Pack films could be released, receive wide attention, and attain high levels of financial success. As such, the Splat Pack does not exactly represent an independent-minded rebellion against the Hollywood establishment, even though it is often depicted as such.

For instance, Pamela McClintock’s article from *Variety* was copied and re-presented on the popular horror movie news website Bloody-Disgusting.com a few days after its first appearance. Her article presented the Splat Packers as outsiders “taking on” the Hollywood system. Bloody- Disgusting.com took this idea even further by running McClintock’s article under the title “‘The Splat Pack’ takes on the MPAA One By One . . .”, a title which unequivocally touts the outsider nature of the Splat Pack’s movement. However, the Splat Pack is not operating “outside” or “against” the MPAA and the ratings system inasmuch as they are working *alongside* them to create a “novel” commodity. In their case, the “novelty” is including “forbidden” visuals that audiences have not been able to see in a theater or a horror film before.

The marketing impulses that have manifested themselves in the journalistic hype surrounding the Splat Pack and in the material changes in the film industry that have enabled their success reveal the need to consider the commodity status of the Splat Pack's films before delving into a cultural or ideological analysis of the films. In the case of the Splat Pack, the films' commodity status is inextricably bound up in the DVD-fueled home video market that gave rise to their success. Thus, the films of the Splat Pack can and should be read specifically as "films-on-DVD." Regarding "films-on-DVD," Barbara Klinger argues, "Special collector's editions are . . . suggestive for textual study" because "As feature films appear in new cuts with added footage, their definition as texts becomes unstable" (72). A useful methodology for approaching the "unstable" texts of movies-on-DVD is posited by popular culture scholar Harold E. Hinds, Jr. According to Hinds, the "texts" of popular culture, like movies, almost always:

come with a lot of accessory baggage, and thus form what has been termed an "encrusted" text. The "primary" text is encrusted within a sublevel of texts which are produced by the cultural industry to promote it: these consist of such items as ads, criticism and comments, gossip columns, and fan magazines. The original and encrusting text(s) together form a 'super' text, the appropriate text for study. (168)

In the case of "Unrated," "Special Edition," and "Collector's Edition" DVDs, the "primary" text (the film) is yoked together and encrusted with the culture industry's "sublevel" of texts (commentaries, "making of" documentaries, etc.), thus making them especially rich objects of study. In the following chapters, I will consider the films of the Splat Pack as "unstable" and "encrusted" texts by reading them through the matrix of their commodification on DVD.

PART TWO: FILMS OF THE SPLAT PACK

CHAPTER V. *HOSTEL*-ITY TOWARD WHITENESS: THE NATIONAL SECURITYSUBTEXT OF *HOSTEL* AND *HOSTEL: PART II*

For many reasons, Eli Roth's two *Hostel* films are perfect to begin a discussion of the selling of the Splat Pack, their films, and their films on DVDs. As discussed previously, Roth positioned himself as a kind of spokesperson for the Splat Pack: in interviews, he readily spoke at length about himself, his films, and the films of his cohort. Significantly, Roth also regularly made the most audacious claims about the subversive political content of the Splat Pack's films. It is likely that Roth was eager to bring politics into the discussion because his films are among those from the Splat Pack that deal most directly with the controversial issue of torture on the geopolitical stage as he followed up *Cabin Fever*, his debut feature, with the controversial *Hostel* films.

The first *Hostel* tells the story of two young American men backpacking through Europe who are captured by Elite Hunting, an underground business that uses a Slovakian youth hostel as a front to kidnap travelers and auction them off to be tortured and killed by wealthy and sadistic people. The sequel tells a similar story, but switches the gender of the protagonists to three traveling female college students who run afoul of Elite Hunting and their deadly Slovakian hostel. The releases of both *Hostel* films were splashy and significant. The first film was a surprise box office hit when it opened in the United States in January 2006. It eventually grossed over forty-seven million dollars ("*Hostel*") and prompted *New York Magazine* critic David Edelstein to coin the term "torture porn" to describe the films of Roth and some of his Splat Pack cohort. During the ensuing months, torture porn became a buzzword in the debate over current horror films featuring torture, not the least of which included Roth's follow-up *Hostel: Part II*, released in June 2007. The sequel was not quite the theatrical hit that the original was and

grossed only around seventeen million (“*Hostel: Part II*”). Regardless, the film managed to stir up much controversy – again, for its graphic depiction of torture and, this time around, for Roth touting the film as “feminist.” After the release of the second *Hostel*, critics and commentators were divided into two groups: those who found his films irresponsible and reprehensible and those who felt Roth’s films were subversive attacks on the Bush-era “war on terror.”

From this controversy, Roth emerged as a provocateur, and his image as a celebrity-auteur was aided and abetted by Lionsgate’s marketing arm. As discussed in Chapter Three, designer and marketing guru Tim Palen capitalized upon the controversy surrounding Roth’s films by constructing his image as a rebellious artist who deftly combines exploitation and the avant-garde in his filmmaking. Roth’s image as an artist/provocateur was buttressed by Palen’s cutting-edge design for the *Hostel* films’ posters and, most important to our discussion here, DVD box covers and labels.

Roth himself has noted that the DVD release of his films is of particular importance to him and that he sees DVDs as an important platform. For instance, he begins the “Director’s Commentary” track on the 2007 release of *Hostel* (the second release of the film on DVD following the 2006 release discussed in Chapter Three) by stating: “The first question you might have is why are there, you know, four or five different commentary tracks on this DVD, and I’ll tell you: I’ve got a lot to say. It’s hard to shut me up, especially when I’m talking about horror movies, and I feel like I can’t fit it all into ninety minutes” (“Director’s Commentary”). Comments such as these seem to suggest that, for Roth, the DVD extras are of equal, if not greater importance, than the feature film that anchors them.

Accordingly, the DVD releases of Roth’s *Hostel* films are ideal examples of films-as-DVD as “encrusted texts,” for in addition to the media attention that Roth and his films have

garnered, the amount of extra features grafted onto Roth's *Hostel* films on DVD is staggering. For instance, the 2007 DVD release of *Hostel* contains three audio commentaries along with Roth's "Director's Commentary," a three-part featurette on the making of the film, an international television special on the making of the film, three more featurettes focusing specifically on the film's sound design, set design, and special effects, a radio interview that Roth did with critic Elvis Mitchell for his show *The Treatment*, and more. The DVD release for the sequel is similarly smothered, with three audio commentaries, multiple featurettes on the making of the film, another radio interview with Mitchell, and an international television special that even features appearances from Roth's father and mother, respectively, a professor of psychology at Harvard and an artist, who discuss their son's films from psychoanalytic perspectives and as works of art.

Indeed, the various special features included on the DVDs of the *Hostel* films seem to take the films' "artistic" and "subversive" status as a given. For instance, in the television special, there is a piece sandwiched between his father's and his mother's musings in which Roth claims that American horror films have throughout history "always had social commentary" and insists that his films continue in this tradition ("*Hostel: Part II: A Legacy of Torture*"). Similarly, Elvis Mitchell and Roth discuss the films as "social commentary." In these cases, Roth and company are trading on what Peter Hutchings claims is a common mistake of horror film scholarship: to too easily insist that horror films dealing with sensitive or timely issues are "political manifestos bearing a cohesive ideological message" that contain "a political or even oppositional subtext" (*Horror* 123, 120). However, looking at Roth's *Hostel* films through the lens of political economy and considering them as home video commodities brings into focus

how in the DVD-era, the “oppositional subtext” has become content, in other words, an abundantly obvious commodity like gore or nudity that is sold right to the DVD consumer.

Notably, while Roth’s films are marketed as politically subversive commodities, they have a deeply conservative subtext that leads them to endorse, rather than critique, current United States policies. This chapter examines the films’ conservative subtext to show that current debates surrounding films like Roth’s labeled as “torture porn” are missing a larger point. Rather than assuming that Roth’s films are comments on current events such as the war in Iraq and the Abu Ghraib scandal and evaluating Roth’s capacity at social commentary, I find that Roth’s films create a context in which audiences, for better or worse, perceive and understand geopolitical events. To this end, Roth’s films create a “hierarchy of grief” that places white, Western, heterosexual bodies at the top of the list of lives that are in the most danger and most worth protecting, grieving, and mourning.

The impact of the *Hostel* films can be so visceral, so terrifying, and so overwhelming that one might not stop to contemplate that these films, which are supposedly responses to Abu Ghraib, predominately feature *Americans* in the roles of the victimized and tormented, not Iraqis. However, the subtext of Roth’s *Hostel* films is that “normative,” white, Western bodies are the ones under attack and worth saving, and that sentiment is in line with, rather than against, the United States’s current policies. Before turning to this point, however, it is useful to take a brief glance at the debate surrounding “torture porn,” Roth’s role in this debate, and how his comments – and his films – push the allegedly subversive subtextual commentary to the explicit and thus marketable level. By interpreting his own films, Roth practices a style of salesmanship that creates a spin that keeps the reactionary elements of his films hidden.

The “Torture Porn” Debate, Eli Roth, and Subtext as Text

In his article “Now Playing at Your Local Megaplex: Torture Porn,” Edelstein claims that while he has grown to admire horror films of the past, he is “baffled by how far this new stuff goes – and by why America seems so nuts these days about torture” (Edelstein). What troubles Edelstein about the films that he dubs “torture porn” – besides the amount of screen time that the films devote to torture and violence – is that, while the victims in these films are “decent people with recognizable human emotions” (Edelstein), the directors of these films, he argues, still encourage the spectator to find the villains and torturers appealing and to “identify with their power” (Edelstein). For Edelstein, “torture porn” is morally bankrupt and appeals to depraved audiences who are gratified by watching the tormentors torturing people who seem “real” due to the way the films’ narratives endow them with “recognizable human emotions.” Edelstein also finds these films doubly reprehensible in a “post 9/11” world in which people are “engaged in a national debate about the morality of torture” (Edelstein). If these films position the spectator to identify with the torturers, as Edelstein suggests, then it seems like the only logical conclusion is that these films are encouraging spectators to see the torture of another human being as not only acceptable, but gratifying.

Despite attacks by Edelstein and others, however, some critics have defended recent torture-oriented horror films. For instance, critic Luke Y. Thompson’s article for *LA Weekly* entitled “Why Torture Porn Isn’t” is nearly a blow-by-blow refutation of Edelstein’s indictment of these films. Instead of arguing, as Edelstein does, that these films endorse violence and torture, Thompson asserts that these films continue in a tradition of horror films that interrogate and critique significant social issues: “Horror movies allow us to confront our fears in a safe setting, and many of the best have reflected the biggest threats of their time. The giant monster movies of the 1950s were rooted in phobias of nuclear power; zombie movies frequently satirize

consumer culture and the military” (Thompson). All the while, Eli Roth and his *Hostel* films remain at the center of the debate: while Edelstein’s article is a bitter reaction against the box office success of the first *Hostel* film, Thompson’s is meant, in part, to act as a corrective to “all the howls of contempt *Hostel: Part II* has received” since its release in June 2007 (Thompson). For Thompson, Roth’s *Hostel: Part II*, with its story of hyper-masculine businessmen who travel to Slovakia to kill helpless women, is a successful “satire of the military mindset in Iraq” (Thompson).

One of the reasons that Roth and his *Hostel* films have remained at the center of debates about recent horror film depicting torture is that Roth has been an extremely viable media presence. The director has granted numerous interviews about his films to television, magazine, and Internet reporters and has been always willing to defend and “explain” his films to the media. For instance, Roth, in one interview, argues that violent movies, like the ones he makes, render visible violent atrocities that the United States performs in other countries that the news media attempt to keep invisible (Jensen). Thus, rather than sitting out the critical debate over “torture porn,” Roth himself has entered the conversation, defending his films as being critical of both the United States’s current military policies in Iraq and its approval of torture as a legitimate means to counter terrorism.

As mentioned earlier, it is significant that much of Roth’s commentary on and explanation of his films is attached to his films as extra content on the DVD. For instance, he defends the first *Hostel* film by claiming that it is a reaction to and interrogation of the “images of Abu Ghraib” that so (in)famously depicted American military personnel torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners (“*Hostel: Part II: A Legacy of Torture*”). In addition, Roth, throughout the extra features included on the *Hostel: Part II*, claims that the second film is

“feminist”; this is a claim he makes several times during the producers’ commentary with Quentin Tarantino and his brother Gabriel Roth.

The very fact that Roth and others are making these claims for subversion of dominant ideological positions should give one pause when considering if his films are critical of the United States’s current policies or embrace a progressive cause like feminism. That is because when Roth compares his films to older films like *Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* that were critical of the United States’s involvement in Vietnam, Roth overlooks something crucial: the war in Vietnam is a *subtext* in many of these films, something that is rarely, if ever, alluded to specifically in the films. Robin Wood, in his famous essays on horror films from the Vietnam era, sees a connection between “the impingement of Vietnam on the national consciousness” and “the astonishing evolution of the horror film,” but nevertheless is quick to warn that “One must avoid any simple suggestion of cause-and-effect” in this situation (44). In other words, these horror films of the 70s were not, on a textual level, obvious critiques of or responses to the Vietnam War that Roth makes them out to be, but rather these films were *informed* and *structured* by Vietnam on a subtextual level.

By placing his films alongside these films from the 70s while, at the same time, claiming that his films perform a similar function by responding to the United States’s war in Iraq, Roth is pushing the subtextual to the textual level in his films and not with the best of results. In her book *Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, Annalee Newitz briefly considers Jonathan Demme’s 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs* as an excellent example of what happens – and what is neglected – in a horror film when the subtextual is made textual. According to Newitz, issues of sexuality and gender difference that are usually relegated to the level of subtext in past horror films are made into a “splash[y] narrative about gender and the art

of violence” in *Silence* while “questions about social class and economic mobility” brought up by the characters of Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) and Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine) “are safely contained as subtext” (*Pretend* 4). Newitz’s analysis seems to suggest that when one subtextual element is brought to the surface, others are ignored, which can cause even a film like *Silence*, which appears to be progressive due the presence of a strong female protagonist and Demme, a “director/auteur . . . well known for his thoughtful, critical films about U.S. culture” (*Pretend* 4), to reinscribe some of societal conditions that it supposedly interrogates.

A similar shift occurs in Roth’s *Hostel* films. Rather than merely being informed and structured by the Iraqi War and Abu Ghraib, Roth overtly rips infamous images from these geopolitical events, such as those of hooded Iraqi torture victims being terrorized at Abu Ghraib, and blatantly uses them in his films. The use of these images, due to the weight they carry in this particular historical moment, foregrounds the Iraqi War as text rather than subtext, denotation rather than connotation. However, when the hoods are pulled back in the *Hostel* films and the victims are revealed, there is, more often than not, the face of a white Westerner underneath. Thus, this image acts as a useful metaphor: if one pulls back the text of the *Hostel* films, the subtext underneath is the myth that white Westerners are the people in the most danger because they are the victims on the geopolitical stage.

Another example will perhaps make even clearer how Roth, in the *Hostel* films, pushes the subtextual to the textual level and, as a result, creates another subtext. At the conclusion of *Hostel: Part II*, Beth (Lauren German), one of the tormented American girls, turns the tables on her torturer, American businessman Stuart (Roger Bart), and cuts off his penis with a pair of garden shears. This provocative scene will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. The graphic imagery in the scene is part of the reason that Roth claims that *Hostel: Part II* is a

“feminist film” (“Commentary”). However, what Roth does not acknowledge here is that the gender politics made explicit in his horror film (the female victim become phallic by feminizing or castrating her male tormentor) are not very different from the gender politics that Carol Clover, in her widely influential essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” has argued are implicit at the conclusion of nearly every slasher movie made in the late 1970s and early 80s (“Her Body” 94). Thus, as this subtext of the slasher film is made explicit and transformed into text in Roth’s film, another subtext is created: this drama of gender violence is played out in a torture chamber between two white Americans, while those subjected most often to torture on the geopolitical stage are left out altogether. The shifting strata of text and subtext in Roth’s *Hostel* films are significant when considering the context for understanding that the films create.

Films, Not *In* a Context, but *As* a Context

Paula Rabinowitz’s approach to studying film noir in her 2002 book *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism* provides a useful framework for analyzing recent horror films that are preoccupied with scenes of torture. In the introduction to her book, Rabinowitz differentiates her work from that of film scholar James Naremore who seeks to study “film noir in its contexts” (qtd in Rabinowitz 14), meaning in terms of how it reflects and responds to cultural and social events of the first half of the twentieth century, such as the two World Wars, urbanization, and industrialization. Rabinowitz explains that her approach to studying film noir is quite different and “is less about film noir as a subject of study than as a leitmotif running [through] mid-twentieth-century American culture” (14). She writes: “I view film noir *as* the context; its plot structure and visual iconography make sense of America’s landscape and history” (14). According to Rabinowitz, “film noir, rather than reflecting [social and cultural]

changes . . . prefigures them, encodes them, and makes them intelligible” to postwar American audiences (16).

Ultimately, Rabinowitz’s approach, rather than examining noir films as *products of* a culture that reflect and/or question the values upon which American culture is based, posits that cultural texts like noir films *produce* meanings and offer frameworks through which the world, at a particular historical and cultural moment, can be understood. More specifically, Rabinowitz claims that “the changing racial and class makeup of urban America” that was taking place during the 1940s and 1950s, the peak years of noir’s mainstream success, were not necessarily commented upon or questioned by noir films, but rather were framed and understood by the viewing public through these films (16). Specifically, “the contradiction of slaveholding in a democracy and the suppression of working-class organizing” (18), what Rabinowitz calls the “two submerged aspects of American modernity” were framed and understood through film noir (18). In other words, the filmmakers who produced noir films did not shy away from and make completely invisible issues of race and class in mid-twentieth century America, but their films necessarily did not, as commercial products meant to be consumed by the masses, make radical statements about race and class. Instead, noir filmmakers drew upon these timely – and controversial – topics to draw audiences into theaters. Since the movie theater was one of the few places where some audiences would confront issues of race and class, these films dictated how many audiences understood these issues.

Adapting Rabinowitz’s formulation, I would argue that torture-oriented horror films provide a frame through which contemporary American audiences make sense of the world. Both the critics who attack these films and those who defend them seem to use similar rhetoric that neglects to see films like Roth’s *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* as anything but a commentary or

reaction, be it positive or negative, to the United States's current geopolitical situations. For instance, Thompson reads Roth's film as a sly commentary on the United States's military campaign in Iraq (Thompson).

However, not many critics and commentators have attempted to come to terms with Roth's films *as* a context. Like the Hollywood directors producing film noirs in the 1940s and 50s, Roth also attracts people into movie theaters and entices people to pick up video releases of his films by drawing from timely and topical subject matter, such as torture, and reproducing images from instances like Abu Ghraib in his films. In a video interview included on the DVD release of *Hostel: Part II*, Roth reveals his savvy filmmaking strategies when he remarks, "if somehow a [horror] film can strike a chord and synch up with the fears of the moment in our country, the film's an incredible success . . . At the time of making *Hostel*, the universal fear was torture . . . images of Abu Ghraib" (*Hostel: Part II: A Legacy of Torture*). This revelation of Roth's strategies reveals that he is not exactly interrogating United States's geopolitical policies (as some of his other comments seem to suggest), but rather is pulling images from the headlines to draw an audience and to create a financially successful film. While Roth's strategies may seem mercenary and while he may not deal with the particulars of a situation such as the Abu Ghraib scandal in any meaningful way, his films do create a context in which many audiences come into contact with questions about torture and violence. As a consequence, the films create a vision of the world in our current historical moment.

One of the few commentators who has attempted to consider Roth's films not merely in a context, but as a context is artist and essayist Stephen Bissette. In a review of *Hostel: Part II* posted on his blog a week after the film's release, Bissette writes:

Sadly, [a majority of] Americans -- particularly those more likely to end up serving in Iraq and/or Afghanistan than their older compatriots less likely to serve -- vicariously toyed with these hot-button issues (*to torture or not to torture?*) this week via the wide theatrical opening of Eli Roth's *Hostel: Part II*. In the best of all worlds, these increasingly pressing real-world issues would be hotly debated in public venues all Americans would be tuned in to, and books [about the United States's use of torture in Iraq] would be reaching more voting citizens than *Hostel: Part II*, but that's la-la land, folks. Let's face facts. Television and movies reach far, far more eyes and ears than books ever will in 2007, and *Hostel: Part II* will no doubt comprise the deepest thinking on torture most Americans will ever give the subject. (Bissette)

Bissette's comments bluntly illustrate how Roth's *Hostel* films create a context, a cultural imaginary, in which global issues such as the Iraqi war, Abu Ghraib, and torture are considered and understood by the films' audiences. Interestingly, even after making these provocative comments, Bissette shies away from considering Roth's films as a context for seeing the world, electing instead to "talk about [*Hostel: Part II*] as a movie, period, and on its own terms" (Bissette). The question of what sort of context these films provide for understanding the world remains relatively unexplored.

Scenarios of Torture and American Vulnerability

The work of Diana Taylor provides a way to tease out just how the content of these films provide a frame for understanding (or *mis*understanding) America's current historical moment. In doing so, it is crucial to note that recent horror films are definitely *not* the only current forms of popular culture that deal with and depict scenes of torture. In her article "Double-Blind: The

Torture Case,” Taylor notes that the topic of torture has insidiously made its way into many forms of popular entertainments, more often than not in the form of the scenario (713). For Taylor, the scenario “activates and stages cultural imaginaries – the ways societies envision themselves and their conflicts, which might or might not have taken place” (727). Taylor explains that throughout American popular culture, scenarios such as the “ticking bomb” (a bomb is about to detonate and the only way to stop it is by using torture to get the information) “[encourage] us only to buy into the need for extraordinary measures” (729), such as torture.

However, this type of torture scenario, while ubiquitous in action adventure thrillers dealing with national security matters, is mostly absent in recent horror films depicting torture. The tormentors in these films are not trying to get any sort of information from their victims and have no overt political motives; instead, they seemingly just want to torment and humiliate their victims before killing them for the sheer thrill of it. Even David Edelstein, in his aforementioned denunciation of “torture porn,” notes that horror films such as *Hostel* are remarkably different from “propaganda like the TV series *24*, which devoted an entire season to justifying torture in the name of an immanent threat: a nuclear missile en route to a major city” (Edelstein).

The different representations (or scenarios) of torture offered up by horror films such as *Hostel* encourage us to ask: are these films, by accentuating the horrifying nature of torture and violence, actually critiquing torture and, by extension, United States military policy? Are they, as Roth himself has suggested (Jensen), attempting to render visible, for mainstream film-going audiences in the United States, atrocious acts performed by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of “freedom” that have been covered up and made invisible?

Due to how Roth’s films differ from television shows like *24* and other media that unequivocally justify torture in the name of national security, it could possibly be argued that the

Hostel movies, with their numerous scenes of people being tortured in various horrible and brutal ways, are subversive because they show Americans vulnerable at a time when the United States is trying to posit itself as invulnerable. In her 2004 book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler argues that after the events of 9/11, embracing grief and feelings of vulnerability could have been an opportunity for citizens of the United States to see themselves as relational beings in a global context – that is, not to consider their pain as an isolated, special incident, but rather to put their pain in context with suffering that regularly takes place all over the world. This vulnerability could have offered “the basis of claims for non-military political solutions” to national and international situations (29). However, as Butler notes, unfortunately “President Bush announced on September 21 that we [had] finished grieving and that *now* it [was] time for resolute action to take the place of grief” (29). That proclamation led to a “denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) [that fueled] the instruments of war” (29). Thus, the last decade of military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the result of the United States denying its vulnerability and attempting to assert its mastery over the world.

Roth’s *Hostel* films, along with the recent spate of torture-oriented horror films, seem to be one of the few venues in popular culture for a depiction of American bodies as vulnerable and under severe attack. Returning to Rabinowitz’s formulation, the context of understanding world events that the *Hostel* films create for their audiences could possibly be read as antithetical to the United States’s current global policies because these films depict Americans as incredibly vulnerable, even relational beings in a global context. The American victims in Roth’s films aggressively and confidently travel into an Eastern European environment with a sense of bravado and entitlement, only to later find themselves in the clutches of ruthless tormentors and

murderers who dismantle the victims' world and destroy their subjectivity. Taylor claims that torture "attacks personhood, suspends the rules, and unmakes the world of the victim by turning it into a strange and terrifying place" (710). That description sounds like an extreme version of Butler's definition of grieving as "the moments in which one undergoes something outside one's control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself" (28). Read in this way, Roth's *Hostel* films may be seen as offering their American audiences a site of mourning that President Bush's mandates and policies have denied them.

Hierarchies of Grief: The National Security Subtext of the *Hostel* films

However, a closer look at Butler's *Precarious Life* and an acknowledgement of how subtext becomes text in Roth's films open up the possibility that the message of the *Hostel* films and the context of understanding they create for their audiences may not be one worth endorsing. While Butler claims that a more prolonged period of grieving could have been beneficial for the United States following the events of 9/11, she also feels that Americans' process of grieving and the designation of which lives should be grieved both need to be significantly revised. As Butler explains it, there is a definite "hierarchy of grief" that exists in our current moment (32), with the lives of white Westerners sitting comfortably atop this list of lives worth mourning. She notes that "we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults" (32).

These same hierarchies of grief are abundantly present in the *Hostel* films. While the films do, admittedly, show the vulnerability of American lives, the problem is that these films posit and create the worldview that American lives are the *only* lives that are vulnerable and are the ones in the *most* danger. While Roth may repeatedly claim that the *Hostel* films are a

response to Abu Ghraib, he and the film's defenders seem not to notice that he has replaced the real Iraqis who were being beaten, tortured, and humiliated by American soldiers and mercenaries in the Abu Ghraib photographs with Americans cast in the role of the victims. Roth's comments on a television special filmed around the time of the first *Hostel*'s release (and added as an extra on the film's second DVD release in 2007) speak to, perhaps unwittingly, this hierarchy of grief created by his films: "I used to have this feeling that everyone loved Americans. We were very popular. People loved our movies. They loved us. We helped everybody out . . . Then, suddenly, with George Bush in office, everything's changed. You feel like people really hate us . . . Americans feel like everyone wants to kill them, and *Hostel* plays into that fear" ("*Hostel* Dismembered"). While Roth's comments display a lack of knowledge about the United States's historically less-than-benevolent role in world politics ("They loved us. We helped everybody out"), they also suggest that in the context of understanding that his films create, Americans, not the numerous Iraqis or Afghan people who have been killed in the United States's murderous military campaigns, are the true victims and the ones in danger in our current geopolitical situation.

The fact that Roth creates a context in which American lives are the ones in danger from a threat outside the United States's borders causes his films to fall in line with what Jean-Michel Valantin, in his 2005 book *Hollywood, the Pentagon, and Washington*, calls "national security cinema" (xi). Valantin explains that the United States's defense strategy is predicated on the idea of threat, seldom real and almost always imagined, coming from outside the United States's borders; according to Valantin, "This near-obsessive perception of threat, where others might simply see differences or natural obstacles, is specific to the US national security system and at

the heart of the production of strategy” (xi). Valantin argues that the United States’s “production of strategy” is significantly bolstered by Hollywood cinema:

The production of threat is made possible through a combination of political discourse and its presentation on screen . . . All these threats circulating in the world justify the production of strategy and military power, whose projections onto the outside world allow the imposition of American order and without which the US thinks there is no security . . . The notion of threat cannot be strictly conceptual. To be effective and meaningful, it has to have an emotional dimension, to provoke genuine feelings of collective concern, even fear and horror, at the idea that destructive forces, underscored by a malevolent political ideology or will, could overturn American daily life, and wipe out its people. (5)

Envisioning American lives as the ones in the most danger and, thus, the most grievable when they are destroyed, the scenarios that Roth creates in the *Hostel* films, while different than the more overt and recognizably propagandistic “ticking-bomb” scenarios in other popular media, still serve to endorse rather than question national security policies.

Even more insidiously, Roth’s scenarios reinforce the hierarchies of grief established by the invisibility of the real victims of the war on terror. These include, among many others, Iraqis, Afghans, and the working-class and people of color in the United States who are targeted by enlistment departments of the Armed Forces. Instead, the *Hostel* films position privileged, white, male, heterosexual bodies as being in the most danger and the most grievable of the visible bodies on screen. Non-normative bodies – those of women, people of color, and homosexuals – are either subordinated to white, male suffering or variously vilified by the films’ narratives.

“Look at me! I’m not fucking American!”: Hierarchies of Grievable Bodies in *Hostel*

Hostel focuses primarily on the torture of three characters: Josh (Derek Richardson), Kana (Jennifer Lim), and Paxton (Jay Hernandez). True, there are numerous other characters who are captured by Elite Hunting and tortured by their clients, but many of these victims are non-Americans and, tellingly, their deaths take place off-screen. For instance, Oli (Eythor Gudjonsson), a freewheeling Icelandic man with whom Josh and Paxton travel to Slovakia, is the first to be murdered, and the audience sees very little of his demise. Correspondingly, there is also a clear hierarchy of grievable bodies among these characters that are tortured or killed onscreen. At one point during his ultimately successful escape from his captors, Paxton finds an Elite Hunting business card with prices written on the back. This reveals that American lives cost the most, for it costs twenty five thousand dollars to torture and kill an American compared to five thousand for a Russian or ten thousand for someone from elsewhere in Europe. American lives are the most desired and thus the most in danger (a common theme in national security cinema) and are, perhaps most significantly, *worth* the most. Josh, as a white, Western, heterosexual, male body sits atop this list of grievable bodies, of lives that are worth something. Kana, as a nonwhite, Eastern, female body is at the bottom of the list of lives worth mourning. Paxton, who occupies an ambivalent space because he is both “normative” (Western, male, heterosexual) and a person of color (he is Hispanic) occupies a liminal, ambivalent space between the bodies worth mourning and the bodies that are neglected and forgotten.

Several key factors in the film position Josh as the life most worth mourning. Throughout the film’s opening scenes, he is depicted as the most shy, timid, and decent of the group. While the guys are cavorting around Amsterdam, Josh is hesitant to indulge at a hash bar and suggests that they go to a museum instead. When they visit the red light district, Josh resists the pressure to visit a prostitute and says, “Paying to go into a room and do whatever you want to someone

isn't exactly a turn-on." Accordingly, when the trio journey to Slovakia and Josh is captured, the scene of his torture and murder is presented as the most intimate, graphic, prolonged, and disturbing in the entire film; the spectator stays with Josh from the time he gains consciousness in the torture chamber – the first moments of the sequence, as Josh slowly becomes aware, are shot from Josh's point of view, peering through a hole in the black hood that has been placed over his head (shades of Abu Ghraib) – right up until the moment when Josh dies as his tormentor slits his throat. The torture and destruction of Josh's "normalized" white body occur exactly mid-way into the film and cast a shadow over the entire narrative.

Josh's body is further normalized – and his death made more grotesque and lamentable – in relation to the "queerness" of his killer, the Dutch businessman (Jan Vlasák). Indeed, homophobia and homosexual dread inform much of *Hostel's* narrative. Many times in the film, Paxton and Josh use the word "gay" in order to describe things in a derogatory way (for instance, Paxton, noting the television in the Slovakian hostel's lobby, remarks, "How the hell are we supposed to understand this without subtitles? Fucking gay."). However, the film's homophobia finds its fullest expression in the character of the Dutch businessman. Paxton and Josh first encounter him on the train to Slovakia. During the course of their conversation, the businessman refers to Josh as a "handsome American." This draws uncomfortable laughter from Paxton, but the situation turns hostile when the businessman places his hand on Josh's thigh and asks, "What is your nature?" Josh screams, "Don't touch! Don't fucking touch me!", and the trio rebukes the businessman and chases him from their car. When the businessman later reappears as Josh's torturer and murderer, he resumes his "courtship" of Josh whilst torturing him, touching Josh's thigh again after he drills holes in his chest and legs with a power drill (penetrating him) and slicing through the tendons of his heels so he cannot walk (castrating him). Thus, Josh's body is

made more heterosexual, more normative, and, by extension, more grievable when contrasted to the monstrosity of his “queer” – and foreign – killer.

If Josh’s life is positioned as the most grievable in the film, Kana, as a nonwhite, Eastern, female body, is positioned as the least valuable. Kana’s torture and death are certainly just as bloody and gory as Josh’s, but Roth frames her suffering and death in a remarkably different way. While the spectator is forced to witness Josh’s torture and death through Josh’s eyes and experience his torment from his perspective from beginning to end, the audience does not see Kana’s torture from the beginning, but instead, first encounters it from Paxton’s perspective as a distant scream that he hears as he is trying to escape. When Paxton comes back for her, killing her tormentor and freeing her, Kana’s horror and pain remain firmly framed by Paxton’s experience of her pain, not hers. In other words, the torture of Kana, a Japanese female, is hideous – one side of her face has been completely destroyed by a blowtorch – but is made meaningful only by folding it into the larger story of Paxton, an American, attempting to “save” her and escape from Elite Hunting’s clutches. Likewise, Kana’s death, unlike Josh’s, is so grandiosely depicted that it borders on black humor. When Kana sees her disfigured face and commits suicide by jumping in front of a train, her bloods sprays all over screaming bystanders and onlookers in a moment tinged with levity, rather than horror. As a female body from the East, Kana is simply not depicted as worth mourning or grieving.

Somewhere in between the two poles lies Paxton. As mentioned previously, Paxton often seems to be both American and Other. Paxton’s ability to speak several languages is highlighted throughout the film, and it sets him apart from Josh. For instance, when he and Josh are locked out of their hostel in Amsterdam, he tries to reason with the manager by speaking Dutch. A more extreme example of this occurs when Paxton is being tortured and attempts to reason with his

German torturer by speaking to him in German. More dramatically, Paxton is set apart from Josh by his skin color, which is referred to only once during the film's narrative. When Paxton is first kidnapped and ascertains that being American makes him a more desirable object for torture, Paxton screams at his capturers, "Look at me! I'm not fucking American!", referring to the color of his skin and, significantly, equating Americaness with whiteness. Paxton's liminal status makes him both American and Other, both grievable and not grievable. Significantly, Paxton is the only one of the trio who turns the tables on his tormentors and eventually escapes.

When Paxton catches up with the Dutch businessman in a train station bathroom at the film's conclusion, his vengeance is remarkably excessive. He chops off a couple of the businessman's fingers, repeatedly slams his head into a toilet, and then slits his throat, killing him in exactly the same manner the businessman had killed Josh. The insinuation here is that Paxton has become as violent as *Elite Hunting's* demented clients, and due to the ways in which the film sets him apart racially, combined with the problematic hierarchies of bodies that the film creates, it is quite possible that the film is implying that Paxton is able to act in such a despicable manner due to his racial otherness. However, his violence is justified because he is acting on behalf of whiteness to "avenge" Josh's death.

Hostel: Part II: Castrating Bitches and Sympathetic (American) Killers

This reading of Paxton may seem like a bit of a stretch. However, a look at the economy of bodies in *Hostel: Part II* reveals the hierarchy of grievable lives established in the first film. In the sequel, a trio of college-aged women – Beth (Lauren German), Whitney (Bijou Phillips), and Lorna (Heather Matarazzo) – travel to the deadly Slovakian hostel. Although the gender of the protagonists changes in *Hostel: Part II*, the hierarchy of bodies is still remarkably similar. Lorna and Whitney are excellent examples of this, as both of them are captured while they are in

the thrall of heterosexual romantic pursuit. Lorna is kidnapped by an employee of Elite Hunting (Roman Janecka) who is posing as someone who is trying to seduce her, and Whitney is taken when she and a man staying at the hostel (Stanislav Ianevski) steal away to a steam room for some amorous activity. Predictably, the deaths of these women are truly terrible. Lorna is hung upside down naked and slashed with a scythe until she bleeds to death, and Whitney has a power saw shoved into her face. As in the first film, *Hostel: Part II* constructs a distinct hierarchy of bodies, with white, Western, heterosexuals topping the list of bodies worth grieving and worrying over.

Also similar to the first film is how the lone survivor of the group, this time Beth, is set apart from the other members of the group by her difference. However, while racial and ethnic difference set Paxton apart from his companions, Beth's sexuality makes her different. Although the film never explicitly states that Beth is a lesbian, her sexual difference is insinuated throughout. Unlike Lorna and Whitney, whose pursuits of men put them in danger, Beth shows no romantic interest in any men during the course of the film. The only person with whom she gets physically close is Axelle (Vera Jordanova), the woman who insidiously leads Beth and her friends to the deadly hostel. An extremely telling scene in the film occurs when the employees of Elite Hunting make their first attempt to capture Beth. Analogous to how Lorna and Whitney are kidnapped during their pursuits of heterosexual desire, Elite Hunting strikes when Axelle caresses Beth's body and kisses her neck while they both are relaxing in a hot spring.

Accordingly, Beth, like Paxton, is able to survive her ordeal because of her otherness. Following the stereotype of lesbians as women who desire to be men, she is a phallic woman who is able to torture and murder just as savagely as the men in *Hostel: Part II*. When in the torture chamber, Beth is able to overpower Stuart, her tormentor, who also happens to be an

American (more on the American “villains” of *Hostel: Part II* later). However, Beth’s ability to outmaneuver Stuart – which involves “penetrating” him with a needle into his eardrum – does not guarantee her freedom, as she comes face-to-face with Sasha (Milan Knazko), the Slovakian man who owns and operates Elite Hunting. After Beth offers to pay her way out of the torture chamber with the millions she has inherited from her deceased mother (Beth’s financial power is another phallic aspect of her personality), Sasha informs her that her money is not enough and that if she enters into a contract with Elite Hunting, she must kill before she can leave. This provision does not prove to be a problem for Beth, for she immediately cuts off Stuart’s penis with a pair of garden shears, tosses his penis to some guard dogs that greedily consume the amputated appendage, and walks out the door, pronouncing, “Let him bleed to death.” This climatic scene literalizes the trope of the “castrating bitch” and illustrates that Beth is able to survive because she is a phallic woman, a body that does not need to be grieved, mourned, or worried over considering that it is just as monstrous as the things that threaten it.

In an interesting move, Roth transforms those who threaten in *Hostel: Part II*, namely Elite Hunting’s clients who pay to torture and murder people, from the foreigners seen in the first film, like the Dutch businessman, to Americans. This time around, a great deal of screen time is devoted to following Stuart and his friend Todd (Richard Burgi) as they journey to Slovakia to indulge in the ultimate forbidden behavior: killing another human being. At first, Roth’s choice to feature Americans as the primary villains of *Hostel: Part II* seems to go against the grain of the xenophobia of the first film and its depiction of those outside the United States’s borders as savage murderers hostile to the livelihood of Americans. Additionally, the casting of Americans in the role of the torturers also seems to disrupt previously established hierarchies of bodies that place white, Western males at the top of the list of lives in danger and worth mourning.

However, the ways in which Roth unfolds the stories of Stuart and Todd ironically makes these privileged men just as much victims of torture and bodily violence as the women in the film.

For instance, Todd initially comes across as hyper-masculine when he pays a large sum of money to kill Whitney and looks forward to the event with relish. However, after he runs a power saw into her face, he loses his nerve and refuses to kill her. Afterward, he rushes out of the room, collapses and weeps in an elevator, and is ripped to shreds by Elite's guard dogs. Likewise, Stuart's attempts to regain the potency and masculinity that he feels his wife has taken away from him lead only to his literal castration at Beth's hands. That Roth attempts to portray these men as victims is made clear by the way in which he chooses to depict their journey to the torture warehouse to kill their intended victims. During an extended sequence, the men are shown picking out their weapons, putting on their slaughter suits, and entering into the torture chambers while mournful, violin-heavy music plays over the soundtrack. The suggestion is that the hierarchy of grievable bodies remains unchallenged in *Hostel: Part II* as white, Western heterosexuals remain the ultimate victims on the geopolitical stage, even when they torture.

A Website in Thailand: Some Concluding Thoughts

Just as DVD extras try to position Roth's films as subversive, they also contain materials that deconstruct and "undoes" their claims to subversion or oppositionality. In the international television special included on the *Hostel* DVD, Roth shares an extremely telling anecdote about how he supposedly got the idea for *Hostel* as a horror movie. He recollects that film critic Harry Knowles shared with him a website for an underground business in Thailand that allowed impoverished people to sell themselves to be killed by wealthy people seeking a thrill. Half of the money would go to the family of the deceased and allow them to struggle by for a little while longer ("*Hostel* Dismembered"). Roth says that the story haunted him and that he wanted to

make a movie about it. He explains that when he met with producers Mike Fleiss and Chris Briggs, they wanted to do a horror movie about terrible things that befall a group of backpacking Americans in Europe, and that he finally saw a way to make a movie about “that place in Thailand” (“*Hostel* Dismembered”). All he needed to do was substitute Slovakia for Thailand and privileged American college students (white Westerners) under threat and held against their will for the impoverished people from Thailand (Easterners) who would offer their lives so that their families could survive.

The story of *Hostel*'s journey to the screen is instructive, for it contains one of the primary rules of Hollywood: impoverished people are the first element of the story to be deleted, and real victims of injustice in the world, more often than not, remain invisible in mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. An interesting film to compare the *Hostel* films with is *The Brave* (1997), a film written and directed by megastar Johnny Depp and starring Depp and Hollywood legend Marlon Brando. Depp's film tells the story of a Native American man (Depp) who sells himself to be killed in a snuff film (directed by Brando's character) so his impoverished family will receive fifty thousand dollars. Despite the presence of such box-office draws and Hollywood power players as Depp and Brando, *The Brave* never found a distributor and was never released commercially in the United States. On the other hand, the *Hostel* films have enjoyed wide theatrical releases and are widely available on DVD at major retail outlets such as Blockbuster and Wal-Mart. One does not need to be much of a cynic to speculate that Depp's film was deemed unreleasable by the major studios and distributors because it attempts to make visible the impoverished people who are the actual victims of violence in our society. Films like *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*, which posit Americans as the victims of imaginary violence, are ideally suited to the marketplace.

Thus, the *Hostel* films provide a function in our current historical moment that is not antithetical to the United States's defense policies in Afghanistan and Iraq, for these films create a context of understanding for their viewers that posits Americans as hated by the world and as the victims of horrific violence on a global scale, the very things that defensive strategists want Americans to believe. Current debates over whether or not films like Roth's *Hostel* movies are "torture porn," if they invite their audiences to identify with the victims or the victimizers, are largely beside the point: in the end, the victims, if the spectator identifies with them or not, are all Americans. Afghans, Iraqis, and all of the people who are currently being victimized by the United States's government and military forces, persons of color and working-class people living in the United States who are targeted by military enlistment boards, and homosexuals and transgender persons who are the victims of hate crimes, all remain invisible – or are demonized – in the cultural imaginary created by these movies. White, Western, heterosexual bodies are the most important, most "normal" bodies in these films.

Despite the claims that Roth makes for his films, their implicit message is far from critique. The DVD format does offer Roth a format in which to cloak his films in the robes of oppositionality, but the content of his films do not follow through on the promise of subversion because they promote a hierarchy of bodies that adheres to normative standards. Nevertheless, considering the DVD format is important to conducting a reading of these films because they encounter a significant amount of their audiences as a film-on-DVD. Even if a majority of the films' audiences only watch the movie and do not bother with any of the DVD's special features, it is imperative that film scholars engage with these materials and, more importantly, not take the filmmakers (and the extra features) at their word when interpreting the film, but instead interpret

these films holistically as encrusted texts, keeping in mind that the “extras” joined to the text can be as complex – and misleading – as the text itself.

CHAPTER VI. THE “WHITE TRASH” WORLD OF ROB ZOMBIE: DVDS AND SLUMMING SPECTATORS

In the case of Eli Roth and his *Hostel* films, the types of extra features enabled by the DVD platform – commentaries, “making-of” featurettes, and so forth – position the films as subversive works of art. A close analysis of the films reveals that they do not follow through on this promise, but rather endorse the National Security policies they purport to critique. Put bluntly, the DVDs of Roth’s films make promises that the films do not follow through with. However, this scenario begs the question: what if the content of the film *was* subversive? Would the DVD platform and the corporate structure that surrounds it undermine – or, at least, complicate – the subversive nature of the film? One way to consider this question is to turn to an analysis of films directed by Rob Zombie, another celeb-auteur in the Splat Pack cohort.

In terms of celebrity, Rob Zombie, born Robert Cummings, is a rarity: a successful musician who has become an equally successful film writer and director. Zombie initially rose to stardom as the front man of the heavy metal group White Zombie. As the band’s name implies, White Zombie’s songs were loaded with references to horror films and other ephemera of “trash” popular culture such as comic books, Russ Meyer films, and carnival side shows, all materials that would influence and factor into his filmmaking career. After White Zombie disbanded in 1998, Zombie successfully continued recording and touring as a solo artist, and soon thereafter forayed into filmmaking by writing and directing his feature-length debut, a horror film entitled *House of 1000 Corpses*.

The film, which is set in 1977 and tells the story of four unsuspecting suburbanite kids being kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the mass-murdering Firefly family in rural Texas, was shot on the Universal lot during 1999 and 2000, but Universal, after learning that the film would

probably get an NC-17 rating, eventually dropped the film from its 2001 release schedule (“Universal Kills Zombie”). After MGM reportedly considered releasing the film but passed on it (Nigro), *Corpses* finally found a home at Lionsgate and was given a theatrical release in April 2003. The film eventually grossed a little over twelve million dollars domestically during its theatrical run (“*House of 1000 Corpses*”).

Corpses also reached a wide and devoted audience on DVD and engendered a fan following with merchandising tie-ins such as action figures and tee shirts. The success of this film was enough to warrant a sequel, also written and directed by Zombie, entitled *The Devil’s Rejects*, which was released by Lionsgate in July 2005. Set in 1978, one year after the events of the first film, *Rejects* follows the exploits of three members of the murderous Firefly family, Captain Spaulding (Sid Haig), Otis (Bill Moseley), and Baby (Sheri Moon Zombie), as they flee from the police led by vengeful sheriff John Wydell (William Forsythe), the brother of one of the Fireflies’ victims in the first film. After the success of *Rejects* (again, fueled by merchandising, plus an “Unrated Director’s Cut” DVD), Zombie moved to the Weinsteins’ Dimension Pictures to direct a remake of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Although many horror fans cried foul at Zombie’s “re-imagining” of a beloved horror classic and how much his plans for the film differed from Carpenter’s original, Zombie’s *Halloween* opened on Labor Day weekend of 2007, breaking box office records for that weekend (Gray, “*Halloween*”). Inspired, no doubt, by the success of his remake of *Halloween*, Zombie again paired with Dimension to write and direct a sequel, *Halloween II*, released in the US in late August 2009.

Zombie’s four feature films to date all belong to a subgenre of the horror film that feature murderous members of the underclass attacking and murdering victims from the middle class. The Firefly family from *Corpses* and *Rejects* hail from an excessively “white trash” milieu, and

Zombie's remaking of the iconic slasher/monster Michael Myers as a vengeful abused child from a white trash family in his version of *Halloween* was a radical departure from Carpenter's original film. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray claim that the "white trash" stereotype in popular media serves to demean white people from lower economic strata by portraying them as "poor, dirty, drunken, criminally minded, and sexually perverse people" (2). Zombie's lead characters – from the Firefly family to his version of Michael Myers – certainly fit these criteria.

It could be argued that the ferocity of Zombie's murderous denizens of the underclass is meant to horrify middle class audiences and to demonize members of lower social classes. After all, as Newitz and Wray point out, the basic function of the "white trash stereotype" is to "[serve] as a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor. The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority" (1). Elsewhere, Newitz observes that when there is an (often violent) encounter between "middle-class whites" and "lower-class whites" in film and other media, "Lower-class whites get racialized, and demeaned, because they fit into the primitive/civilized binary as primitives" ("White" 134).

However, this stereotypical scenario is not present in Zombie's films because they elicit sympathy for the underclass monsters and contempt for the middle class victims to a surprising degree. Often, Zombie's favoritism of his white trash monsters is quite pronounced, so much so that Owen Gleiberman, in his *Entertainment Weekly* review of *Rejects*, expressed his shock at how "Zombie doesn't pretend to be on the side of the [Firefly family's] victims. He makes no bones about his identification with the sexy outlaw serial killers" (Gleiberman). Indeed, many textual details of Zombie's films suggest that he encourages the spectator to feel sympathy for and to side with his white trash murderers, not the middle-class victims.

This unabashed sympathy for white trash monsters and the critique of middle-class culture that it can offer may tempt one to celebrate Zombie's films as radical, oppositional, or subversive. However, foregrounding the commodity status of his films and considering them as products made possible by the "DVD revolution" tells a different story. In fact, the issue of class in Zombie's films makes a discussion of DVDs especially germane because the proliferation of "Collector's Edition" DVDs that followed in the wake of the "DVD revolution" represents a mainstream, middle-class appropriation of paracinema. In this light, the ideology of Zombie's films seems significantly less subversive because it offers middle-class audiences the opportunity to "slum it" through cross-class spectatorship.

Rob Zombie's "White Trash World"

The issue of class materializes in Zombie's films through the presence of a "white trash aesthetic." According to Gael Sweeney, white trash aesthetic is "an aesthetic of the flashy, the inappropriate, the garish" preferred by "a rural-based under-class of poor whites" that has been "marginalized socially, racially, and culturally" (249). Further, Sweeney explains that white trash aesthetic is one "of bricolage, of random experimentation with the bits and pieces of culture, but especially the out-of-style, the tasteless, the rejects of mainstream society . . . it privileges details, brightness, presentation" (250).

This aesthetic is apparent in Zombie's directorial approach, especially in *Corpses*, his debut feature. In this film, Zombie assaults the audience not only with a narrative filled with violence and torture, but also with a palette of loud neon colors, random cut-aways to bizarre, negative-image footage that illogically interrupts the narrative, and obtrusive spilt-screen shots. Additionally, Zombie fills his compositions with excessive detail and popular culture detritus. For instance, the scenes that take place in Captain Spaulding's Fried Chicken and Gasoline, a

dingy roadside attraction owned by Spaulding, are filled to bursting with “white trash” ephemera: there are velvet portraits of celebrities, photographs of freak show attractions, fried chicken, and even a “Murder Ride,” a scare-house, carnival-style attraction devoted to serial killers. If all this is not enough, the film begins with Spaulding and a customer (Michael J. Pollard) hanging out at Spaulding’s establishment and talking about an acquaintance of theirs who was caught masturbating with a *Planet of the Apes* action figure lodged in his rectum.

Sweeney explains that the excessiveness of the white trash aesthetic gives the illusion of plentitude where there is scarcity. She calls it a “castrated aesthetic” (250). The practitioners of the white trash aesthetic are those who lack a number of things: capital, education, social status, political power, and so forth. Thus, the excessiveness of white trash aesthetic, according to Sweeney, “fills a lack, covering every empty space with stuff and effect” (250). By this token, the murderous members of the Firefly family replace what they lack in social status by accumulating “stuff.” For instance, the Firefly family’s run-down, rural house is so ornamented with Christmas and Halloween decorations and littered with toys, clothing, and garbage that it causes an investigating police officer (Walton Goggins) to exclaim: “God damn! These packrats throw anything away? . . . You’d think these sons of bitches would have a yard sale.” The Fireflies are different, however, from the rural poor whites whom Sweeney describes as “powerless to do anything but collect junk and show it off” (250). The Fireflies’ “collecting” habits become their agency as they extend their habits to kidnapping and murdering people. The white trash aesthetic remains as their crimes are staggeringly excessive. They prolong the agony of their victims by torturing and humiliating them, and by the film’s conclusion, it is intimated that the number of their victims reaches into the thousands, hence the film’s title.

Although Zombie, in his subsequent films, has toned down the more wild, psychedelic aspects of his visual approach, mostly jettisoning the flashy editing techniques of *Corpses*, he has retained his interest in white trash characters and aesthetics of excess. In fact, Zombie's more realistic approach in *Rejects*, with its washed-out colors and dirty, bleak desert landscapes, serves to make the film's violence, sex, and profanity seem even more excessive and in bad taste. When adapting other people's work, as he did with his next film, a "re-imagining" of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, Zombie's concern with white trash aesthetics did not disappear, but rather became even more pronounced. Carpenter's original film hints that the killer Michael Myers is, as Robin Wood puts it, the typical "product of the nuclear family and the small-town environment" (170); in other words, he is a middle-class kid. Conversely, in his remake, Zombie rips Michael's origins from their middle-class, bourgeois trappings and inserts them into a white trash setting, complete with a foul-mouthed, stripper mother and an even fouler-mouthed, abusive, disability-check-drawing stepfather. Zombie even costumes young Michael (Daeg Faerch) in a Kiss t-shirt and gives him a pet rat named Elvis, decorative choices that recall both Sweeney's assertions that "White Trash has heroes and is not afraid to iconize them" and Elvis Presley's status as "an icon of White Trash Culture" (Sweeney 251). The prevalence of white trash culture in Zombie's films leads one to consider what cultural and ideological significance these images of the underclass may have for the films' spectators.

Horror Film and the Question of Class

In his essays from the late 1970s, film theorist Robin Wood, adapting Freud, offers a psychoanalytic model for approaching the American horror film that is useful for doing insightful ideological readings of them. According to Wood, "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence

dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression” (68). Wood attempts an exhaustive catalog of all the things and ideas that our civilization represses that return, in the form of the monster, in the horror film. Wood’s list of the repressed includes “Female sexuality,” “The proletariat,” “Other cultures,” “Ethnic groups,” “Alternative ideologies,” and “Homosexuality and bisexuality” (68-9).

Writing in 1985, around six years after the publication of Wood’s taxonomy, Lester D. Friedman praises Wood’s ideas as “strikingly original” and claims that Wood’s “premises . . . open up some fertile areas of examination within this genre” (126). According to Friedman, Wood’s ideas are useful to an examination of the horror film because they “fuse psychology, politics, and sociology” and thus engender an engagement with political, cultural, and social issues through the examination of horror films (126). Friedman points out that Wood’s formula can be adapted to discuss a plethora of social issues. He demonstrates this point by asserting that Wood’s model “need not be restricted to the realms of Freudian psychology, sexual politics, and familiar sociology” (127). Instead, Friedman uses Wood’s formulation to discuss race and ethnicity in the horror film, a logical move considering that “other cultures” and “ethnic groups” appear on Wood’s list of “repressed and oppressed.”

However, Barry Keith Grant’s introduction to 1996 anthology *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* suggests that, in the years since the introduction of Wood’s schema, much of the “fertile ground” that Friedman claims is opened up by Wood’s framework may remain relatively unexplored, for psychoanalytic scholars have focused mainly on issues of gender and sexual politics when it comes to the horror film. Grant identifies Wood as someone “who has been so influential in defining the terms by which we have come to understand the

horror film” and notes that “Psychoanalysis has provided the most common critical approach to the horror film, as well as having proven thus far the most profitable” (“Introduction” 4). Grant’s introduction leads one to believe that the reason for the prevalence – and value – of the psychoanalytic approach in scholarship on the horror film is psychoanalysis’s ability to speak about gender, an issue on which, Grant claims, the horror genre has a “marked emphasis” with its preponderance of “gender-specific monsters” (“Introduction” 1).

Throughout Grant’s introduction, he alludes to other approaches and other concerns in horror film scholarship, but nevertheless insists on the centrality of gender in the horror film. For instance, Grant acknowledges that “issues of race – another kind of difference – are becoming increasingly important in horror” (“Introduction” 10), but he ultimately concludes that race “emerges as a theme in the genre only occasionally” and remains “a decidedly marginal issue” (“Introduction” 10). Grant similarly alludes to scholars like James Twitchell and Mark Jancovich who “have persuasively linked the development of horror to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the dialectic of class” (“Introduction” 6), but he nonetheless returns to the conclusion that “issues of gender remain central to the genre” (“Introduction” 7). This marginalization of class issues in the horror film leads Natasha Patterson, writing in 2008, over a decade after Grant’s comments, to observe that while “Analyses of horror film have flourished over the years . . . most studies remain dominated by psychoanalytic and feminist theories, to the detriment of other issues like class” (Patterson).

Even though, as Patterson notes, the issue of class has often been marginalized in favor of gender and sexual politics in studies of the horror film, it would be misleading to insist that examinations of class have been entirely absent from horror films studies. For instance, although Wood devotes a majority of his energy to discussing sexual politics when it comes to the horror

film, he does offer provocative insights into class issues. When he comes to “the proletariat” on his list of “repressed and oppressed,” Wood briefly discusses class issues in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) and alludes to the cannibal family of Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), the “underprivileged devil-worshippers” of Jack Starrett’s *Race with the Devil* (1975), and the insurgents from John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) during his discussion of “the proletariat” as monster (68). Additionally, his article ends with an analysis of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976) that often alludes to class concerns in these two very different apocalyptic horror films (78-84). Even if Wood concentrates more on sexual politics in his work on the horror film, a concern with class issues is also present. After all, Wood’s approach is not just influenced by Freud, but Marx as well (Wood 4-5).

Wood’s essay is far from being the only example of scholarship on class in the horror film. James Twitchell, in *Dreadful Pleasures*, his expansive study of the evolution of horror published in 1985, discusses the role of class in the genre’s development; he cites Marx as one of the great thinkers whose ideas made horror “not just possible, but unavoidable” (22). In his own overview of the history of horror published in 1992, Mark Jancovich persuasively argues that American horror films from the Cold War era evince an anxiety about the rigidity of class and other social structures under “corporate or ‘Fordist’ modes of social organization” (62). According to Jancovich, this focus on social institutions when studying the horror film is a necessary addition to Freudian, psychoanalytic approaches, such as Wood’s, which tend to overemphasize the individual and the family without adequately considering how they “are related to other social institutions and processes” in the horror film (82). Another horror film

scholar who effectively combines Freudian psychoanalysis with an awareness of class issues is Carol Clover.

In her landmark 1992 book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Clover argues that in “urbanoia” films like John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972) and Meir Zarchi’s infamous *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), “two sets of politics come into play and are played off against one another: the politics of gender and the politics of the urban/rural social class” (*Men* 160). According to Clover, these films, which feature well-to-do, middle-class characters from the city beset by monstrous members of the underclass from the country, depict “a confrontation between have and have-nots, or even more directly, between exploiters and their victims” (*Men* 126). Further, Clover explains that the monstrousness of the underclass “rednecks” in these films proves that they are guilty for causing their own poverty (*Men* 135), and the excessiveness of their monstrosity works “to justify the annihilation of country people by their guilty city cousins” (*Men* 160). Also, the “redneck” of many modern horror films is, Clover argues, a racialized figure, an updated version of the “savage Indian” from so many Western narratives (*Men* 136).

Clover’s analysis of urbanoia films, a subgenre that depicts “civilized” middle-class characters under peril from monstrously “uncivilized” denizens of the underclass, points to a major strength in her work, for she understands what George Lipsitz calls “the interconnectedness of oppressions” (120). Her analysis takes into consideration how gender, class, and racial oppression all work in concert with each other in many film narratives, and it demonstrates how the study of gender and the study of class in the horror film need not be mutually exclusive. However, Clover ultimately privileges a focus on sexual politics in her analysis. According to Clover, the narrative played out in many urbanoia films “is an economic

story, but it is one that is repeatedly told as a gender story and even, indirectly or directly, as a ‘rape’ story” (*Men* 162). It makes sense that Clover would come to this conclusion given that rape and gender conflict are central aspects of many of the urbanoia films that she discusses. Nevertheless, Clover’s emphasis on gender and sexuality sometimes takes away from her attention to class issues and critical race studies.

It is fitting, then, that Annalee Newitz, in her 1997 essay “White Savagery and Humiliation, or A New Racial Consciousness in the Media,” grounds her analysis of urbanoia films in critical class and race studies and draws specifically from whiteness studies. According to Newitz, films like James Landis’s *The Sadist* (1963) and Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), in which “privileged whites are ambushed by low-class, monstrous whites” and “the privileged lose their social power when they are tortured and some of their number killed” (“White” 139), represent “fantasies about whites resolving their racial problems without ever having to deal with people of color” (“White” 139). The primary problem being dealt with in these films is, Newitz explains, white, middle-class “guilt over having ever exercised power unfairly or with prejudice” (“White” 139).

Newitz’s approach offers a valuable framework for undertaking an analysis of Rob Zombie’s films for several reasons. One reason that Newitz’s approach works better than Clover’s is Newitz focuses more clearly on class rather than gender. In Zombie’s films, class is, beyond gender and race, the most notable marker of difference. For instance, his Firefly family contains both a strong patriarchal figure in Captain Spaulding and a strong matriarchal figure in Mother Firefly (played in the first film by Karen Black and in the second film by Leslie Easterbrook), and both Otis and Baby take leadership of the family in equal measures. Simply put, the Firefly family’s gender dynamics are more varied than the “country dwellers” that are

“disproportionately represented by adult males” that populate the films discussed by Clover (*Men* 125).

The Firefly family is also heterogeneous in terms of race. In *The Devil's Rejects*, it is revealed that Captain Spaulding (who is played by Armenian Sid Haig) has an African American brother named Charlie Altamont (Ken Foree). The Firefly family's miscegenation historically ties them to the origin of the term “white trash.” This term, according to Newitz and Matt Wray, spawned from eugenic studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that deemed “rural poor whites” as “genetic defectives” often because there was “a person of mixed blood” in their genealogies (Newitz and Wray 2). This connection also demonstrates why Newitz's class-and-race-studies framework works best for analyzing Zombie's films, for the main marker of difference between the Fireflies and their victims is class, more specifically, the Fireflies' racialized status as “white trash.”

Another reason that Newitz's framework is useful for analyzing Zombie's films is that Newitz couches the pleasure that viewers may receive from viewing these films in terms of class. In other words, Newitz argues that films depicting underclass violence against middle-class victims who are “forced” to defend themselves by becoming violent themselves performs two functions for middle-class audiences. They depict middle-class characters being “drained of social power and subsequently given it back” after being absolved through victimization of their “elitist corruption” (“White” 143). The films also offer the “perfect excuse for the middle classes to behave in outrageously cruel ways toward the lower classes” (“White” 144). Newitz's theorization of middle-class audiences' possible responses to these films throws into sharp relief how different Zombie's films are from class-based horror films of the past like *The Sadist* and *The Hills Have Eyes*. In these films, middle-class victims ultimately succeed against their

underclass tormentors and, in the process, are absolved of abusing their middle-class privilege. However, *Zombie's* films are quite different with no absolution is offered to the middle-class characters, who are presented as fully deserving the suffering they experience. This points to the need to theorize exactly what type of pleasure middle-class audiences can obtain from *Zombie's* films.

Another scholar who has written intelligently about class in the horror film with a careful eye toward class-based horror films' intended effects on their audiences is Peter Hutchings. In a way, Hutchings's consideration of horror film and class in his 2004 book *The Horror Film* bring this discussion full circle, for he returns to Robin Wood's "Return of the Repressed" thesis in his analysis. Hutchings praises Wood's "development of the idea that horror has an ideological dimension" and cites Wood as a "seminal" influence on horror film scholarship (*Horror* 218). Hutchings does, however, take issue Wood's "influential" notion that films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* have "in some way a political or even oppositional subtext" or are "political manifestos bearing a cohesive ideological message" (*Horror* 120, 123).

Focusing on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, Hutchings turns to a careful explanation of why these films fall short of being the progressive political texts that Wood claims they are, and in doing so, he provides a useful framework for approaching *Zombie's* films. According to Hutchings, these films cannot be described as cohesively oppositional because "neither the monstrous family in *The Texas Chainsaw* [sic] *Massacre* nor the one in *The Hills Have Eyes* is portrayed in a positive or sympathetic light" (*Horror* 121). In other words, the proletariat in these films is simply monstrous and made to be "as appalling, grotesque, and nasty as possible" (*Horror* 124). Conversely, the middle-class victims in these films, Hutchings argues, "tend to be offered to us as 'ordinary' people undeserving of their fate"

(*Horror* 121). While they may be depicted as having flaws, “the remarkable violence directed against them . . . seems . . . a disproportionate response to these flaws” (*Horror* 121). Ultimately, Hutchings concludes that while these films “reveal the shortcomings of the middle classes” and “their values and their lifestyles” (*Horror* 124), they do not do so “in a manner that encourages much sympathy with or understanding of the oppressed ones themselves” (*Horror* 124).

Hutchings’s work is useful for an analysis of Zombie’s films for several reasons. First, in acting as a corrective to those who may be too quick to describe the 1970s horror films as oppositional, he offers a succinct summation of how both underclass and middle-class characters in these 1970s films are usually depicted. This observation will prove useful in discussing Zombie’s films because both his underclass killers and his middle-class victims deviate from regular depictions of underclass violence against the middle-classes. In this way, Hutchings’s framework, like Newitz’s, will help foreground how Zombie’s films are strikingly different from class-based horror films of the 1970s. Although his films liberally borrow from many past horror films, Zombie’s “White Trash World” does not play by the rules set these films, but instead veers off in its own directions.

Sympathetic White Trash Killers, Despicable Middle Class Victims

If, as Hutchings argues, the underclass, oppressed monsters in 1970s horror films are rarely “portrayed in a positive or sympathetic light” or “in a manner that encourages much sympathy with or understanding of the oppressed ones themselves” (*Horror* 121, 124), Zombie’s films often deviate from these conventions. More specifically, his version of *Halloween* and his depiction of Michael Myers, the film’s iconic killer, offer some clear examples of just how much Zombie’s films often elicit sympathy for the underclass monster. The prologue of Carpenter’s original film does not depict any of Michael’s childhood before he murders his sister and offers

no clear reasons for this murder or for his killing spree as an adult after he escapes from a mental hospital. Dr. Sam Loomis (Donald Pleasance), Michael's psychologist and later his pursuer, repeatedly explains that Michael is an embodiment of a metaphysical "pure evil," and the audience is given very little reason to doubt his diagnosis. However, Zombie's version of Michael is very different. Instead of presenting the audience, as Carpenter does, with a blank-faced child with, in Loomis's words, "the devil's eyes," Zombie depicts Michael as a sensitive, wounded child from an abusive home.

Although young Michael's murderous deeds are undeniably horrible – in Zombie's version, he kills not only his sister (Hanna Hall), but also his pet rat, a school bully (Daryl Sabara), his sister's boyfriend (Adam Weisman), and his abusive stepfather, Ronnie (William Forsythe) – the film makes it clear that his behavior is a reaction to the abuse that he has suffered due to his socio-economic background. For instance, during one of the film's opening scenes, Michael's mother, Deborah (Sherri Moon Zombie), attempts to prepare breakfast for the family while being constantly berated, threatened, and verbally abused by Ronnie, who is wearing a cast on one of his arms and has to walk with crutches, due, presumably, to a work-related injury. When the subject of Michael comes up, Ronnie complains about the child:

RONNIE: That freak of yours, he needs some serious discipline. I mean, he runs around like a little bitch!

DEBORAH: You leave him alone. Keep your hands off him.

RONNIE: Give me a fucking break! He's probably a queer. He's gonna grow up, end up cutting his dick and balls off, and changing his name to Michelle!

This exchange between Ronnie and Deborah is revealing for several reasons. First, it clearly demonstrates the extreme level of abuse Michael is subjected to by his stepfather. The

only discernable reason for Ronnie feeling this way toward Michael is Michael's affection for his pet rat Elvis and his infant sister. When Michael comes down to the breakfast table and informs his mother that Elvis has died, Ronnie angrily wonders aloud why anyone "pays money for a fucking rat." When Michael sweetly greets his infant sister, Ronnie mocks him in a high-pitched voice. Ronnie views Michael's behavior as "unmanly" and so is quick to strike out at Michael because his own virility is threatened by his injuries. Fittingly, earlier in the scene when he taunts Deborah by telling her he might cheat on her with another woman, Deborah snidely remarks, "I hope she likes cripples!" Of course, Ronnie responds violently to this challenge to his working-class manhood, and the abuse that he unleashes upon Michael – abuse that causes Michael to replace affection for those he loves with violence – is a clear example of the specific socio-economical reasons Zombie gives for Michael's behavior and the sympathy Zombie offers for the oppressed who become killers.

Zombie's *Halloween* also deviates from the tendencies that Hutchings notices in past horror films dealing with class in the ways that Zombie mounts a subtle critique of middle-class behaviors. If Zombie's reimagining of Michael introduces a new level of sympathy for the underclass monster, his version of Dr. Loomis (Malcolm McDowell) is an example of the middle-class's misunderstanding and exploitation of the underclass. Interestingly, Zombie's depiction of Loomis speaks to issues brought up in Robin Wood's less-than-glowing reading of Carpenter's original version of *Halloween*. For Wood, Carpenter's film is politically reactionary and ultimately unsatisfying precisely because the film refuses to offer a social or psychoanalytical explanation for Michael's behavior and instead portrays him as "evil incarnate" (170). Wood proposes that the film's narrative can be considered politically progressive only by "reading the whole film" as uncovering that "Michael's evil is what his analyst has been

projecting on to him” (172). Wood laments that “this [reading] remains merely a possibility in the material that Carpenter chose not to take up” (172).

Zombie does, however, take up this direction with Loomis’s character and insists that Loomis’s interest in Michael may be somewhat less than benevolent. After young Michael is admitted into a sanitarium, Loomis attempts to work with him and figure out the reasons Michael behaves the way he does; in one scene, Loomis even hugs and comforts Michael when he is crying. However, any good intentions Loomis may evince in his therapy sessions with Michael are undermined, for Zombie intercuts these scenes with scratchy, grainy, black-and-white footage of Michael, shot by Loomis, wherein Michael is presented as a monster⁷. The footage mostly consists of Michael standing against a wall, sometimes in profile, like a mug shot, as Loomis provides a voice-over made up of overwrought purple prose: “Michael’s downward slide into this hellish abyss continues . . . The child christened Michael Myers has become a ghost, a mere shape of a human being.” These sequences imply that the classification of Michael as simply evil or inhuman are constructed and that Loomis is framing him in such a way in order to exploit his sensationalistic, white-trash crimes.

Sure enough, as soon as Loomis gives up Michael’s case after fifteen years of Michael refusing to speak to him, Loomis publishes a book about his experiences with Michael entitled *The Devil’s Eyes: The Story of Michael Myers*. A scene of Loomis giving a lecture about his book at a university suggests that Loomis has found a way to profit from Michael’s misfortune. A telling scene occurs after a grown-up Michael (Tyler Mane) escapes from the sanitarium and Loomis pursues him to his hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois. When Loomis investigates the graves of Michael’s family, Chester (Sid Haig), the caretaker, assists Loomis. As the duo look

⁷ These black-and-white sequences do not appear in the theatrical cut of the film, but are a part of Zombie’s “Unrated Director’s Cut” on DVD.

for the Myers family's graves, Chester, unaware of his audience, says, "And the doctor involved – I think he wrote a book or something . . . fucking blood money," to which Loomis quickly replies, "Yeah, I read that book. It was a masterpiece." Loomis's comment, on one hand, provides a bit of comic relief, but on the other hand, his quick evasion of the possibility that he has exploited these people and their disadvantaged situation suggests his guilt.

Loomis's guilt is finally confirmed near the film's conclusion. After Michael's rampage, Loomis confronts Michael as he is attempting to murder Laurie (Scout Taylor-Compton), his now-teenaged younger sister. Considering that Carpenter's original film concludes with Loomis confirming Michael's status as an inhuman "boogeyman," the words that come from Zombie's Loomis are quite surprising. He gasps, "Look . . . it's not her [Laurie's] fault. Michael, it's my fault. I failed you." This moment is the conclusion toward which Zombie seems to be working throughout the entire film, as Loomis, the film's representative of the middle class, admits that he is guilty of exploiting the underclass, as represented by Michael. Thus, all of Michael's terrible actions (against both white trash and middle-class characters) are explained in terms of his socio-economic background, from the abusive stepfather who takes out his working-class frustrations on Michael to the middle-class psychiatrist who frames him as a monster and exploits him for professional and financial gain.

Zombie's *Halloween* is a logical thematic extension of his earlier work in his movies featuring the murderous Firefly family. While these films do not, as *Halloween* does, offer much of a discernable critique of middle-class culture or the middle class's exploitation of the working class, they do contain an empathy for their white trash monsters that is unnerving for two reasons: one, the unrelenting brutality and cruelty they unleash upon their victims make Michael Myers's murders seem tame by comparison, and two, next to no sympathy is reserved for their

middle-class victims. Zombie's positioning for the Firefly family as the sympathetic protagonists of *The Devil's Rejects* is clear right from the beginning moments of the film, which opens with Sheriff Wydell and his police force performing an armed raid of the Firefly house. As Wydell boasts to his men that they are about to perform a "cleansing of the wicked," the spectator is offered some preliminary glimpses inside the Firefly house, one of which includes a grotesque shot of Otis sleeping soundly in his bed with his arms wrapped around the naked body of a dead woman.

However, the grotesque nature of this scene is markedly counterbalanced by distinctly human moments on the part of the Fireflies, such as a brief exchange between Baby and Mother Firefly (Leslie Easterbrook) that takes place before Wydell's men open fire on the house. As the Fireflies arm themselves and prepare for the firefight, Mother Firefly weeps and says to Baby, "I keep thinking about . . . old times . . . like when you was a fuckin' baby. You looked like an angel." When the police overtake the house, only Otis and Baby get away during a thrilling sequence, set to the Allman Brothers' "Midnight Rider," that depicts them crawling out through a drainage pipe, killing a woman, stealing her car, and making good their escape. This opening sequence makes it clear that Zombie is leading the spectator to identify with and root for the Fireflies, despite their terrible actions.

Indeed, the Fireflies can be quite terrible, but Zombie consistently goes to great lengths to humanize them. After the escaped Otis and Baby connect with Captain Spaulding, there is an extended sequence of the three of them riding in a van and Baby pestering Otis to pull over and let her get some ice cream. When Otis finally relents, Baby and Captain Spaulding enjoy their ice cream (which they playfully refer to as "tutti-fucking-fruity"), Baby rubs some on Otis's nose, and they all have a good laugh. Despite all the violence they create and all the people they kill,

the Fireflies are depicted by Zombie as human characters, full of zest and life. There is no better example of this than the film's concluding sequence. After the Fireflies have vanquished Sheriff Wydell and their other pursuers, the trio drive into the mountains while Lynard Skynard's "Freebird" blares on the soundtrack. As they drive along, bruised, bloody, and battered from their trials and tribulations, they dream and fantasize about each other, smiling, happy, and standing in the sunlight. However, their dreams are shattered when they encounter a police roadblock laying in wait for them. As the song's tempo increases, the Fireflies take up arms and drive full speed toward the roadblock with guns blazing. Thus, the Fireflies meet their death in a mythical manner usually reserved only for illustrious heroes like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and Zombie depicts his white trash villains in a more sympathetic light than horror directors of the past.

Zombie's films also differ from horror films from the 1970s in the ways they depict the middle-class victims of the underclass. As mentioned previously, Hutchings argues that in films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, the victims "might have more money and possessions, and a higher social position [but] they tend to be offered to us as 'ordinary' people undeserving of their fate" (*Horror* 121). While the torments that the middle-class victims are forced to endure in earlier horror films are always "a disproportionate response to [their] faults" (Hutchings, *Horror* 121), one can find many examples of how Zombie depicts his middle-class victims as deserving of their fate in his first film featuring the Fireflies, *House of 1000 Corpses*.

Zombie's wild, psychedelic, and disorienting directorial choices in *Corpses* are perhaps so disorienting that they make it impossible for the spectator to identify or sympathize with any of the film's characters. Nevertheless, the film conveys an obvious disdain for the Fireflies'

victims. The four young suburbanites who find themselves helplessly in the clutches of the Firefly family are obnoxious, cruel to each other, and have a condescending attitude toward those whom they consider underclass. These traits are obvious when, at the beginning of the film, they stop at Captain Spaulding's Fried Chicken and Gasoline. The two men in the group, Bill (Rainn Wilson) and Jerry (Chris Hardwick), jokingly peruse Spaulding's wares, and Bill bombards Spaulding with questions about his establishment while scribbling his answers in a notebook. Bill tells Spaulding that he is "writing this book on off-beat roadside attractions . . . the crazy shit you see when you're driving across the country," to which Spaulding menacingly replies, "I don't drive across country." Bill, oblivious to the class difference implicit in Spaulding's reply, continues his line of questioning, insisting, "But if you did." Ultimately, the middle-class victims of *Corpses* are depicted as callous and willfully not conscious of the fact that their entertainment and amusement are predicated upon class stratification and the exploitation of an underclass. They consider Spaulding's dingy gas station as kitsch, not as a sign of class difference.

Accordingly, these victims are depicted as deserving of their terrible fate. On Captain Spaulding's "Murder Ride," Bill and Jerry, accompanied by their girlfriends and traveling companions, Denise (Erin Daniels) and Mary (Jennifer Jostyn), become obsessed with Dr. Satan, a local serial killer, and, excited about potential material for their book, beg Captain Spaulding to give them directions to the nearby tree where Dr. Satan was supposedly lynched. Following these directions leads the foursome into the clutches of the Fireflies. The rest of the film's running time is occupied by the Fireflies variously torturing and killing these victims. In the process, the Fireflies also murder two police officers (Tom Towles and Walton Goggins), and Denise's father (Harrison Young), who all arrive at the house looking for the missing victims.

In a key scene near the film's conclusion, when the victims are dressed in bunny suits, bound, and gagged, Otis, wearing the skinned face and torso of Denise's father, accosts his victims, screaming, "Maybe it ain't a good idea to be prancing around where you don't belong . . . and you [to Jerry] . . . what was it that you were after? Come on, speak to me, boy! Oh, I remember now. Dr. Satan! Goddammit, everybody got to know about Dr. Satan! Well, I'm going to do you a favor . . . It's all true. The boogeyman is real, and you found him." The implication here is that the victims in this film are asking for what they get when they are tortured and murdered by the Fireflies. None of them escape the Fireflies' compound alive, and due to the suburbanites' obnoxiousness, perhaps no one would particularly want these middle-class victims to survive. Fittingly, one of the most popular *House of 1000 Corpses* tee shirts produced around the time of the film's release featured the film's logo on the front and the simple slogan "Everybody Fucking Dies" on the back.

The "Everybody Fucking Dies" mantra of Zombie's films sets them apart from not only Hutchings's framework for reading class-based horror films, but from Newitz's as well. As noted earlier, Newitz argues that the "victimization of middle-class whites" in films of this type "becomes their redemption" ("White" 140-41). In other words, when the middle-class victims rise up against their white trash tormentors, fight back, and survive, their survival ensures that they are "no longer guilty of white middle-class privilege" because they have been "drained of social power" (Newitz, "White" 143). While Newitz's analysis is sound and certainly speaks to the films that she examines, it is difficult to argue that Zombie's films perform the same function. For instance, in *Rejects*, one of the main confrontations between the murderous underclass and their middle-class victims occurs when Otis and Baby, on the run from the law, hide in dingy motel and wait to connect with Spaulding. While waiting, Otis and Baby capture

two married couples: Adam and Wendy Banjo (Lew Temple and Kate Norby) and Roy and Gloria Sullivan (Geoffrey Lewis and Pricilla Barnes). These two couples make up a country music quartet named Banjo and Sullivan and happen to be staying in this motel while on tour. While these couples' Country-and-Western-style looks and demeanors may suggest that they are from the same social milieu as the white trash Fireflies, this is not the case, as is made clear when Otis forces the two men to drive him out to an isolated spot so he can retrieve some guns he hid there earlier.

As Roy and Adam drive Otis to the location in their van while Otis holds a gun on them, Elvin Bishop's pop-hit "Fooled Around and Fell in Love" plays on the radio. Otis asks Roy if he likes the song, and a dazed Roy responds that he does. His answer prompts Otis to laugh and derisively reply: "You like that Top 40 shit? I thought you were like some kinda true-blue-balls-earnest-kill-'em country fucker. You're nothing but a city faggot with a cowboy hat." Otis's acidic remarks uncover Roy's – and, by extension, his entourage's – middle-class status and, perhaps most significantly, deny them the redemption available to most middle-class victims in other class-based horror films. By reminding his victims of their class status, Otis does not allow them to be drained of their social power; like Zombie's version of Loomis in *Halloween*, they remain guilty and are brutally punished for their trespasses. When they arrive at their destination, Roy and Adam attempt to overpower Otis, but he dispatches them with relative ease. Standing over their bloody, dying bodies, Otis admonishes them, saying, "You know, I was going to take it easy on you boys, but you brought this down on yourself." Before beating Roy to death and skinning Adam's face while he is still alive, Otis ominously intones, "I am the devil, and I am here to do the devil's work," as if Roy and Adam's attempts to resist his white trash fury, rather than redeeming them, have only served to imbue Otis with mythological power. There is little to

no middle-class redemption in Zombie's films, especially his first two featuring the Firefly family who always triumph over their victims until they are shot down in a blaze of police gunfire.

The Commodification of Zombie's "Vision"

Since Zombie's films often encourage their spectators to sympathize or side with the murderous underclass, it could be argued that these films are subversive to some extent. At the very least, they do foreground the often-invisible issue of class in the United States. However, the commodity status of film calls into question the transgressive aspects of Zombie's films, especially in current, corporate-era Hollywood. After all, Hollywood has a long history of marginalizing films with radical content. For instance, Newitz, in her introduction to *Pretend We're Dead: Capital Monsters in American Pop Culture*, briefly alludes to the case of Brian Yunza's *Society* (1989), a horror film that depicts the rich as "repulsive alien monsters" who eat the poor (*Pretend* 3). According to Newitz, the film received no theatrical release in the United States because the film offended the way "Americans view class" and because the film's blatant "depiction of class warfare" made it "too disturbing, too economically horrifying, for a mainstream American audience" (*Pretend* 4).

Although Zombie's first film had some difficulties finding a distributor, since Lionsgate's release of *Corpses* in 2003, Zombie's films certainly have not been marginalized or silenced to the extent of a film like *Society*. Instead, Zombie has become a bankable, "name" director. In fact, the confluence of Zombie's bankability, his critical success, and "the audacity to follow through on his Southern-fried vision" recently led Chris Eggertsen, a writer for the popular horror website Bloody-Disgusting.com, to include Zombie among the twenty-five most influential people in horror entertainment in the last decade (Eggertsen). This distinction is the

culmination of several years of success during which Zombie emerged as an auteur. As early as May 2005, two years after the release of *Corpses*, David S. Cohen, writing for *Variety*, identified Zombie as the standout out of a group of “hip filmmakers” who were turning to exploitation genres for inspiration (Cohen). According to Cohen, Zombie had been responsible for the “truest reincarnations of the grindhouse” and points out that Zombie’s *Corpses* may have been “Made on a shoestring” but “grossed a shocking 17 million in the US and prime Euro territories” (Cohen).

Its sequel, *Rejects*, proved to have similar box office legs and grossed just under seventeen million dollars worldwide (“*The Devil’s Rejects*”), and perhaps more surprisingly, the film found mainstream critical acceptance. For example, Roger Ebert, who is known for not always being favorable about horror films, praised the film for having “an attitude and a subversive sense of humor” (Ebert), and Justin Chang, reviewing the film for *Variety*, described *Rejects* as “a brutal, punishing yet mordantly amusing work that far outpaces its predecessor in its grisly single-mindedness of vision” (Chang).

By the time of the release of Zombie’s remake of *Halloween* two years later, Zombie’s “vision” had been commodified, as Dimension proceeded to sell the film by not only by banking on the familiarity of the *Halloween* franchise’s name, but also on Zombie’s status as an auteur. For instance, in one of the pre-release trailers for the film, the voiceover intones: “This summer Rob Zombie unleashes a unique vision of a legendary tale.” Similarly, a trailer for Zombie’s *Halloween* sequel also trades on this notion of Zombie-as-auteur: “On August 28th, Rob Zombie completes his extreme vision of a terrifying legend.” This commodification of Zombie’s vision has worked well for Dimension. As mentioned previously, Zombie’s *Halloween* set a record for Labor Day weekend grosses when it opened and went on to gross just over fifty-eight million

dollars worldwide (“*Halloween*”) while *Halloween II* grossed a respectable thirty-three million (“*Halloween II*”).

Zombie’s Films on DVD

These box office receipts only tell part of the story of Zombie’s success and bankability. As discussed in Chapter Three, Zombie’s status as a celebrity-auteur as been buttressed by DVD, and Lionsgate traded heavily on his recognizable name with their DVD releases of *Corpses*, *Rejects*, and the “Rob Zombie 3-Disc Collector’s Set,” a re-release containing both films. Dimension emulated Lionsgate’s approach for their home video release of *Halloween* in December 2007, just in time for last-minute Christmas shoppers, and released two editions of the film: an R-rated “Special Edition” and an “Unrated Director’s Cut.” After these editions sold over a million copies, Dimension, in October 2008, released yet another edition of *Halloween*, this time with a “30 Days in Hell”-inspired “making of” documentary, entitled “Michael Lives: The Making of *Halloween*,” the run-time of which is over four hours long, more than double the length of the film itself.

Thus, Zombie’s films have flourished during the DVD era of Hollywood filmmaking, due in no small part to his films’ ability to support a stream of consumer product. Writing in 2001, Christopher Sharrett laments that “fringe cinema” (326), such as underground and independent horror films, “that previously critiqued the mainstream” began endorsing the same ideology as mainstream horror films (326). After the DVD revolution, it seems as if fringe cinema itself has been co-opted to be sold as a collectable commodity. Indeed, Zombie’s films on DVD, loaded with commentaries, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and supposedly forbidden footage, have made ideal “collector’s items” on the home video market. Raiford Guins suggests that whenever the paracinematic object is “officially and legally placed on the market” and is “dependent on

mainstream modes of promotion” (“Blood” 30), the seemingly subversive film may suffer “a loss to the very claim of opposition” (“Blood” 30). Thus, even though Zombie’s films may contain subversive images of the underclass striking out against the middle class, the films’ oppositionality is called into question by their status as collector’s item on DVD, a format that, according to Guins, has much in keeping with bourgeois notions of “art” (“Blood” 28-9).

Indeed, the ways in which Zombie’s films are presented on DVD have class connotations. According to Barbara Klinger, DVDs, with their “sell-through” prices and aura of collectability, appeal to “a middle-class consciousness about the superiority of ownership” (62). Although Paul McDonald argues that the growth of the DVD market suggests that “collecting” habits are no longer practiced solely by the “elitist collector,” but also extend to the indiscriminate buyer (70), Zombie’s films on DVD are clearly marketed primarily to the middle-class DVD consumer, identified by Klinger, whose desire to become “privy to a secret world of information about filmmaking” is fed by the extensive “extra features” (such as “making of” documentaries that run longer than the film itself) featured on the DVDs of Zombie’s films (Klinger 68).

It may be tempting to claim that “behind the scenes” DVD documentaries demystify the movie-making process, that they shatter the hermeneutic world created by the film’s narrative and expose the illusion of the cinematic apparatus. However, according to Klinger, DVD extras do not “[demystify] the production process” as much as they make the text of the film “unstable” (73, 72). Klinger notes that “the notion of the expandable text has become an intimate part of the production process” in the DVD era (72). Indeed, with the plethora of deleted scenes, commentaries, and “behind the scenes” footage on DVDs, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the viewer at home to demarcate where the text of the film ends.

One of the most interesting of “extra features” included on DVDs of Zombie’s films is the “30 Days in Hell” documentary included on *The Devil’s Rejects* DVD. The piece includes cast members like Bill Moseley, Sherri Moon Zombie, and Sid Haig talking about how it was often difficult to play the ferocious members of the Firefly family. One notable example of this difficulty was during the shooting of the infamous scene in which Otis, played by Moseley, violates Gloria Sullivan with a handgun and forces her to fellate him. Considering the unstable and expandable nature of the text of the film-on-DVD, the actors’ discussion of the “performance” of white trash is as integral a part of the movie as the “finished” scene itself for the viewer watching at home. In short, the “performance” of white trash becomes an important textual component of Zombie’s movies as films-on-DVD. Thus, the “unstable” texts of Zombie’s films are not only about a monstrous underclass attacking and killing the middle class; they are also about the crossing of class lines. For the actors in the film, class lines are crossed by their performance of white trash. Similarly, spectators cross class lines by vicariously enjoying forbidden pleasures through the violent actions of Zombie’s white trash monsters. An exploration of the possibilities of cross-class spectatorship will illuminate the possible appeal Zombie’s “revenge of the underclass” horror films may have for the middle-class collectors to which they are marketed on DVD.

“Slumming” Spectators: Fantasies of Disempowerment

Many scholars have attempted to trace horror film traditions back to literary conventions of the nineteenth century. Fred Botting, Laura Wyrick, and other scholars have argued that horror film traditions originate from gothic literary conventions. The reasons are fairly obvious: both genres deal with terror, the uncanny, and fear of the Other in remarkably similar ways. Taking a different tack, Newitz claims that the conventions of many modern horror films,

especially those dealing with class, can be traced back to “late nineteenth century naturalism” (*Pretend* 7). She cites specifically naturalist fiction’s “concern with yoking the surreal extremes of human behavior with socioeconomic status” as an influence on the “capitalist monster tales” she sees in contemporary horror films (*Pretend* 8). However, the reasons why Zombie’s films may appeal to middle-class audiences may be found by tracing horror’s origins to another, less obvious nineteenth-century literary tradition: narratives of the gold rush.

At first, Zombie’s horror films and gold rush narratives seem to have little in common, but upon closer inspection, there are striking continuities in how these two bodies of work illustrate middle-class audiences negotiating, exploring, and expanding the parameters of their identities. In his insightful book *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture*, Brian Roberts begins by debunking the popular image of the California forty-niner as a lone, rugged, uncivilized, primitive, and “lower-class” individual. As Roberts points out, the California forty-niners were, more often than not, “white-collar workers, the new breed of clerks, shopkeepers, and professionals who had emerged with industrialization . . . The eastern forty-niner was often married, usually respectable, and almost always connected to family and community . . . he was rarely a vulgarian” (5). Roberts argues that the popular notion of the forty-niner as an underclass vulgarian was constructed in narratives written by middle-class men to hide how their movement west was their chance to indulge in “forbidden behaviors” that fell outside of the “proper standards of self-control” enforced by middle-class standards (121). These “forbidden behaviors” included “gambling, prostitution, and sometimes violent, more often humorous examples of self-expression” (121).

Ultimately, Roberts concludes, “Perhaps the best term to describe what they were doing in these accounts of western wickedness has a very modern resonance. In effect, these forty-

niners were slumming” (219). For Roberts, “Slumming . . . requires a real movement, a movement out, away from ordinary life, away from the social restraints of the home, along with a movement down, down the social scale, down into the real depths and spaces occupied by lower classes and ethnic others” (219). Further, Roberts explains that “the thrill of slumming comes from the fact that it is only temporary. The slumming individual . . . does not really belong in these depths; if he is thrilled by the ‘darkness’ within them, it is because he knows that he is above this crowd” (219). According to Roberts, middle-class and privileged American men truly learned the joys of “slumming it” during the gold rush era, and this characteristic was essential to the formation of modern American middle-class identity: “In effect, the primary characteristic of the American middle class may be its members’ ability to create a definition for themselves and then deny that they belong in the definition. Thus their greatest privilege, and their greatest source of power, is an ability to declare freedom from themselves” (274).

Although over a century separates the proliferation of gold rush narratives and the release and success of Zombie’s films, Roberts’s notion of middle-class “slumming” provides a useful framework with which to consider the appeal of Zombie’s films for middle-class audiences. While Roberts contends that slumming must involve a “real movement” away from middle-class environments (hence, the forty-niners’ move out west), the centrality of physical movement to notions of “slumming it” were undergoing revision as early as the late nineteenth century. Eric Lott persuasively argues that blackface minstrel shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided a way for white working- and middle-class audiences to “slum it” as spectators by identifying, across racial lines, with blackface performers. According to Lott, white spectatorship of minstrel shows was predicated on “a destabilized structure of fascination” and “a confusion of subject and object. The blackface phenomenon was virtually constituted by such

slippages, positives turning into negatives, selves into others, and back again” (124). The slumming that took place on the part of these white spectators required little movement away from the comforts of hearth and home, aside from a trip to the local theatre; they could slum it, shed their inhibitions, and enjoy transgressing against various social mores constructed along the color line from the comfort of their seats in the audience.

Interestingly enough, in order to theorize this sort of spectatorship at the turn of the century, Lott utilizes scholarship in cinema studies by such theorists as Mark Nash and Carol Clover (Lott 124), both of whom authored significant articles on horror cinema. Nash, in his article “*Vampyr* and the Fantastic,” argues that “a play of pronoun function” takes place in horror cinema (37), whereby the spectator can identify with both the victim and the victimizer. Clover takes these ideas further in order to consider gender and horror spectatorship with her influential essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” which examines the “cross-gender identification” that takes place when male horror fans begin, in the final moments of the typical slasher film, to root for the “Final Girl” (“Her Body” 91), the last remaining person left alive to fight the slasher/monster. In this manner, a loose genealogy can be traced from the slumming middle-class forty-niners who pretended to be underclass when traveling west and writing about their experiences, to the slumming spectators at the minstrel show who, while watching a white body pretending to be black, imagined that they also were black, and to the male slasher film fan who receives a vicarious thrill by projecting himself into the Final Girl’s bruised, battered, bloody, victimized, but ultimately triumphant, body.

Zombie’s films seem to adapt Clover’s “cross-gender identification” to a type of “cross-class identification,” an exchange that enables middle-class audiences, like the middle class forty-niners Roberts describes, to slum it by traveling to the dark, dirty spaces occupied by white

trash monsters such as the Firefly family. However, there is now no need to travel in order to enter and occupy these dark, dirty spaces; this movement can be achieved in the comfort of one's own home. DVD technology and the widespread availability of Zombie's movies at retail outlets enable middle-class spectators to engage in a multitude of "forbidden pleasures" along with the Firefly family: traveling to whore houses, having sex with prostitutes, partying, getting drunk, doing drugs, and – perhaps the ultimate "forbidden pleasure" – engaging in the torture, humiliation, and murder of other people who have "had it easier." Seen from this perspective, Zombie's films about the Fireflies may perform a far different function from earlier horror films depicting an attack of the underclass. Whereas these earlier films, according to Newitz, act as a justification for "the middle classes to behave in outrageously cruel ways toward the lower classes" ("White" 144), Zombie's films may encourage the middle-class spectators to be outrageously cruel, period, by offering them an oppressed subject position and suggesting that this oppression can be solved only by violence against others.

This type of cross-class performance and spectatorship is not particularly unique to Zombie's movies. In fact, one could argue that the thrill of "slumming it" is intimately bound up with the origins of cinema. After all, W. K. L. Dixon and company staged cockfights and rat-baiting contests in front of the Kinetograph for early Edison short subjects to be distributed to Kinetoscope parlors. Another example is the work of John Waters, who has called his films "celebrations of White Trash" (Sweeney 250). However, as Sweeney points out, "Waters' films are examples of a Camp Aesthetic: they are urban, arch, and self-conscious" (250), while a true white trash aesthetic is "sincere" (250). This non-ironic, non-self-reflexive sincerity is one of the things that makes Zombie's iteration of white trash aesthetic unique, even among these other examples of "slumming it."

As evinced by many examples from his films, the white trash aesthetic in Zombie's hands is not only sincere, but also incredibly violent. This violence may appeal to any individuals who feel as if they are "outsiders" despite whatever class, race, or gender privilege they may enjoy. This curious vision of being an "outsider" despite privilege has been noted by sociologist Nancy A. Naples. From 1990 to 1996, Naples conducted "an ethnographic study of two rural Iowa towns" (204, 49), which, for the purposes of her study, she refers to as "Midtown" and "Southtown." When interviewing working class people, people of color, or women from these two towns, Naples found, unsurprisingly, that these people "expressed feelings of isolation and outsidership" (57). More surprising, however, was when Naples's study revealed that "those who were defined by others as insiders, also said they felt like outsiders who would never be accepted" (57). She writes: "Those named as insiders, such as the owners of the food processing plant and the local bankers, also felt like outsiders as they perceived other community residents' resentment of their economic success and political clout" (57). Naples observes that she "often left Midtown and Southtown after a field trip asking: 'Who are the insiders here?'" (57). Naples's findings revealed that nearly everyone in these two middle American towns felt like victims or outsiders, oppressed in some way or another.

According to another sociologist, Stjepan G. Meštrović, feelings of victimhood are widespread and rampant. In his 1997 book, *Postemotional Society*, Meštrović writes, "In general, the 1990s have witnessed a dramatic and highly visible increase in the rhetoric of victimhood" (9). This rhetoric of victimhood, Meštrović argues, makes it possible for "just about *any* phenomenon" to "be attached synthetically to the emotions that used to apply traditionally to very specific events" (9). In other words, if an individual feels alienated and like an outsider, the prevalence of rhetoric of victimhood enables this individual to express her/his feelings with

emotions which, in the past, had been reserved for other, actual victims of oppression. If this “rhetoric of victimhood” still has credence in our current historical moment in the decade following the 1990s, it can be argued that the appeal of Zombie’s films for middle-class audiences, more specifically, for middle-class audience members who feel like alienated outsiders due to age, appearance, or other factors, is that they enable these audiences to speak with a type of rage and a violence usually reserved for, in the popular imagination, scenes of extreme class warfare.

Ultimately, Zombie’s films cater to an American middle-class tradition of slumming it by enabling middle-class spectators to identify with Zombie’s white trash monsters and take part in their lifestyle of debauchery. Also, by vicariously inhabiting the oppressed bodies of Zombie’s white trash characters, middle-class spectators who feel alienated can find a visual, extremely visceral language with which to express their own perceived victimhood. After all, Gael Sweeney warns that as soon as the white trash aesthetic “intrude[s] too far” into “dominant culture” and positions itself as some sort of a threat, dominant culture will “incorporate the Trash discourse into its own and thereby quell that unruly voice by subsuming it” (261). Zombie’s films, to a certain extent, represent this type of recuperation, a recuperation that is intimately bound up with their commodity status as films-on-DVD.

CHAPTER VII. “IF IT’S HALLOWEEN, IT MUST BE SAW”: SERIALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND CONSUMING THE SAW SERIES

As discussed in the first chapter, when the list of “New Blood,” cutting-edge horror directors compiled by Alan Jones in the UK made its way to the US and coalesced into the group that American journalists called the Splat Pack, the group membership changed significantly. Gone were writers/directors like Greg McLean, James Gunn, and David Payne, and in their place were writer/director James Wan, writer/actor Leigh Whannell, and writer/director Darren Lynn Bousman, the creative team behind the *Saw* series. It is not incredibly difficult to figure out why this transformation in Splat Pack membership took place when the discourse made its way to America: by late 2006, the *Saw* series had taken the American box office by storm and spawned the type of underdog, Cinderella story that American entertainment journalists love to write about.

The Cinderella narrative, as told on a “Making of” documentary on the “Uncut Edition” DVD release of *Saw*, goes like this. Young Australian film school graduates James Wan and Leigh Whannell were looking for a way to break into Hollywood, Wan as a director and Whannell as a writer and actor. They had gotten the interest of an agent in Australia based on the strength of a screenplay that they had collaborated on – they both came up with the story and Whannell wrote the screenplay – called *Saw*, a dark and violent thriller about a serial killer who sets intricate, deadly traps for his prey. As horrible and dangerous as Jigsaw’s traps are, however, he always constructs them so that it is possible for his victims to escape and survive if they are willing to do something terrible to themselves or others. Moreover, Jigsaw’s traps are usually intended to teach his victims to appreciate their lives or some other grandiose, existential lesson, provided that they survive the ordeal.

Wan and Whannell's agent shopped around their *Saw* screenplay, which eventually brought them to the attention of Twisted Pictures, a Los Angeles-based production company founded by partners Gregg Hoffman, Oren Koules, and Mark Burg. As A.S. Bergman colorfully explains it, the goal of these three men was to "[churn] out balls-to-the-wall horror films for just a few million dollars each as an alternative to Hollywood's increasingly bland scare fare" (148). Understandably, Wan and Whannell's screenplay, with multiple scenes featuring blood, gore, disembowelment, and dismemberment, appealed to the group at Twisted Pictures, and in mid-2003, they agreed to fly Wan and Whannell to Los Angeles for discussions. Even though this was a promising lead, Wan and Whannell wanted to do something extra to make their screenplay stand out, so they decided to pool their limited resources and make a nine-and-a-half-minute short film adapted from one of the most striking scenes in their screenplay.

The film begins as David (played by Whannell), a young man who has cuts on his face and has obviously been severely traumatized, sits in an interrogation room and is questioned by an unnamed police officer (Paul Moder). As David tells his story, the film flashes back to David leaving his job as a hospital orderly and being kidnapped by an unseen assailant. He wakes up bound to a chair with an elaborate and deadly looking helmet on his head. Via a videotaped message, David's captor speaks through a puppet to tell him that the helmet he is wearing is a "reverse bear trap" that will split his head open if it is not unlocked before a timer goes off. The puppet goes on to tell him that the key to the trap has been placed in the stomach of an unconscious man lying on the floor, and that if David wants to survive, he will have to dig the key out of the man's stomach before the timer expires. David brutally murders the man, retrieves the key, and removes the helmet a split second before the trap is sprung. The puppet then reappears to congratulate David for passing his test and informs him that this test was meant to

teach him to appreciate his life. The film concludes by returning to the interrogation room as the police officer asks a weeping David if he does, indeed, appreciate his life.

In an interview included on the *Saw* DVD, Twisted Pictures's Gregg Hoffman gushes that while he was impressed by Wan and Whannell's screenplay, the short film cinched the deal for the aspiring filmmakers. There is little doubt that, despite its graphic violence, the short film showed commercial potential, perhaps due, in part, to the story's resemblance to *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), a similarly-themed serial killer thriller that was a hit for New Line and made a celeb-auteur out of director David Fincher. Twisted's faith in *Saw* was evidenced by their willingness to make a deal with Wan and Whannell's agent, a deal that was, according to legend, made before their plane had even landed at LAX. Thus, *Saw* was greenlit with a relatively miniscule budget of just over a million dollars.

Twisted's investment in the project paid off handsomely. After the film was completed, Lionsgate quickly acquired distribution rights for the film in January 2004 (Harris), and over the next few months, the distributor generated interest in the soon-to-be-released film with a visually striking ad campaign (with posters designed, of course, by Tim Palen), a well publicized dispute with the MPAA over the film's rating, and a well chosen release date on 29 October, just before Halloween. The film grossed over eighteen million on its opening weekend, the second-highest opening weekend gross in Lionsgate's history and an already handsome return on Twisted's and Lionsgate's investments (Gray, "*Ray*"). Fueled by strong word-of-mouth, the film went on to gross just over fifty-five million dollars in the United States and over forty-seven million dollars abroad. A DVD release of the film followed in February 2005 that sold well enough to warrant a second, two-disc, "Uncut Edition" DVD release.

After this kind of financial success, a sequel was inevitable, and Twisted and Lionsgate moved quickly with hopes of getting a sequel into theaters in time for Halloween 2005. Wan and Whannell, now possessing a bit of industry clout after their overnight success with *Saw*, decided to take more administrative positions with the franchise, both moving to the rank of producer with Whannell agreeing to draft screenplays for the next two installments. With the director's seat vacated, the two went about the job of hand picking a director to continue the series. The job eventually went to Darren Lynn Bousman, a bad-boy up-and-comer whose brutal screenplay entitled *The Desperate* brought him to the attention of Wan and Whannell. Lest anyone worry that the series had been handed over to a dispassionate journeyman director, Bousman quickly established himself as a flamboyant presence behind the camera. His celeb-auteur status was aided when his *Saw II* surprisingly outgrossed the first film at the box office by a significant margin, bringing in over eighty-seven million dollars in the US and sixty million dollars abroad. Also, like the first *Saw* film, the sequel received two releases, one a single-disc rated edition and the other a double-disc "Unrated" cut.

As noted in the first chapter, a few of the articles that began to appear in the United States in October 2006 arrived just in time – or, put more precisely, were calculated – to promote the impending release of Bousman's *Saw III*, which ended up grossing a healthy eighty million domestically and eighty-four million internationally. The media-friendly, sound bite-spouting director made a perfect addition to the Splat Pack, and his high-grossing *Saw* sequels added financial muscle to the group. In the figure of Bousman, the *Saw* franchise engendered another Cinderella story. As legend has it, the down-and-outer was fired from the sets of *The X-Files* and *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (Berman 146). However, he rebounded, and under his tutelage, the *Saw* series became a commercial juggernaut. Even as he vacated the director's chair after

Saw IV, his vision continues to influence the series as his production designer, David Hackl, directed *Saw V* and his editor, Kevin Greutert, directed *Saw VI*.

To date, the *Saw* series has theatrically grossed a total of over seven hundred million dollars worldwide and has become something of an institution. Every year since 2004, Lionsgate has released a *Saw* film for Halloween, and for the release of *Saw IV* in 2007, the studio adopted the slogan, “If it’s Halloween, it must be *Saw*” for trailers, television commercials, and internet ad banners. The franchise has also led to successful DVD releases, a video game released in 2009, a theme park attraction at Thorpe Park in the UK scheduled to open in early 2010, *Scream Queens*, a reality TV show that aired on VH1 in Fall 2008 and featured actresses competing against each other for a role in *Saw VI*, and SAWMANIA, a 2008 convention that featured appearances by members of the films’ casts and crews. Additionally, Twisted Pictures hosts the website The Official *Saw* that contains news about the film series, sells *Saw* merchandise, holds auctions that allow fans to bid on props from the movies, and hosts the massive *Saw* message board, where fans congregate to discuss and argue over the films, from sweeping, over-arching statements about the films’ themes to obsessively detailed discussions of minutiae.

The overwhelming financial and commercial success of the *Saw* series, coupled with the franchise’s surprisingly strong synergistic capacity, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to regard the films as anything else but serially-produced commodities in a media marketplace. Seriality is important to the *Saw* series both inside and outside the texts of the films. Within the text of the films, Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) and his accomplices, Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith) and Mark Hoffman (Costas Mandylor), are serial killers. Audiences of the films shutter with a mix of morbid dread and giddy excitement to see who will be Jigsaw’s next victim, how this victim will be gruesomely dispatched, and what sort of Rube Goldberg torture trap Jigsaw will use on this

victim. After the bloody and gory kill, the process begins all over again. Similarly, *Saw* fans consume the latest *Saw* film when it is released, are teased with the film's open ending that hints toward yet another sequel, and exit the theater (or eject the DVD) to begin the process of waiting for next Halloween and the next *Saw* film. Thus, seriality is not only a theme of the films' text, but is also a significant component in the consumption of the films.

Regardless, the *Saw* films are complex commodities, as their serial nature and their sequels and spin-offs demand that one consider them in context of the media web they inhabit and into which they draw the viewer in their process of meaning-making. Just as seriality is a theme in the *Saw* phenomenon both inside and outside of the films, the intersection between media making, media-consumption, and the construction of identity is also at issue thematically in the text of the *Saw* films and outside of the films as fans interact on the *Saw* forums and create their own *Saw* videos and post them online. Thus, if the *Saw* films, like the other violent films of the Splat Pack, have been brought about by one new media technology, namely DVDs, their consumption, interpretation, and usage in identity-building are facilitated by other new media technologies like the Internet and video sharing sites like YouTube. Accordingly, this chapter looks at issues of seriality, media, and identity in the *Saw* films and then moves to a discussion of how *Saw* fans have used the films and new media technologies as a springboard for their own media and identity projects.

Invisibility and Privilege: The Whiteness of the Jigsaw Killer

Like David Fincher's *Se7en*, a film from which *Saw* borrows liberally, the *Saw* films feature a moralistically motivated killer. *Se7en*'s Jonathan Doe (Kevin Spacey) feels that he is a messenger from God dispensing divine justice on a fallen world, while Jigsaw's goal is to teach those whom he feels have wasted their lives to appreciate them. Both killers construct elaborate

traps for their victims that sometimes lead victims to harm themselves or others. Other similarities are the look and tone of the films: both *Se7en* and the *Saw* films take place in anonymous cities filled with dirt, grime, and crime, and both are relentlessly bleak in their outlook. Although Jonathan Doe claims he is doing God's work, his cycle of murders based on the seven deadly sins only assures trauma and damnation, especially for Detective Mills (Brad Pitt) and his doomed wife (Gwyneth Paltrow). Similarly, most of Jigsaw's traps end of the lives of their victims rather than redeeming them. Even those select few who survive his traps are not made happier by their survival. For instance, Amanda Young, another victim of the "reverse bear trap" helmet in the first film, survives her ordeal and even gets promoted to being Jigsaw's accomplice, but her promotion only causes her more pain and tribulation (her character arc will be discussed in more detail later).

Given the similarities between *Se7en* and the *Saw* series, Richard Dyer's comments on *Se7en* and how it fits into the subgenre of serial killer cinema offer a useful framework for approaching and analyzing the *Saw* films. In his succinct monograph on Fincher's film, Dyer devotes a chapter, entitled "Seriality," to discussing the racial and gender implications of the figure of the serial killer in popular culture and cinema. From the outset of his analysis, Dyer baldly remarks: "Actual serial killing is a statistically unimportant phenomenon. In the USA, much less than 1 per cent of all murders are serial murders, and murder accounts for less than 1 per cent of all causes of death" (37). Serial killer cinema, then, is not about any real or imminent threat to human life. Since the danger of being murdered by a serial killer is so statistically improbable (much less being murdered by a serial killer with the time, resources, and engineering skills that the Jigsaw killer has), we must conclude that serial killer narratives, like

National Security narratives, are really about something other than extinguishing a threat to humanity writ large.

Dyer convincingly argues that serial killer narratives often convey the social anxiety of whiteness. According to Dyer, the character of Doe reflects the statistical facts that “serial killing remains an ostensibly white male phenomenon” and that these serial killers generally “prey specifically on women or socially inferior men (young, black, gay)” (38). While serial killer films tend not to explicitly address issues of race and gender privilege, Dyer feels that, nevertheless, looking at the films can “inadvertently flush out something more often shoved under the carpet, that serial killing is a white thing” (40). Dyer explains that many filmic serial killers, like Doe, occupy a “position of power in everyday life in contemporary society . . . of notional invisibility, seeing but unseen, unmarked by particularities of class, race, or gender, a position that is mostly nearly and readily occupied by white men” (45).

However, serial killers in Hollywood films often feel that their invisibility and anonymity do not bestow upon them power or advantage and interpret their invisibility as a weakness. As a result, they often attempt to make themselves seen and craft an identity and subjectivity for themselves through their murderous actions. As these killers go about the business of serial murder, their desire for mastery over the world is often executed coldly and methodically in a detached manner, thus making them what Dyer calls the “amused, superior, cold geniuses of death, the apotheosis of what has been historically a white masculine ideal” (46). This achievement leads, however, to an irony central to the character of the serial killer. Even though the serial killer often sees himself (masculine pronoun intended) existing outside of mainstream society, the serial killer, in doling out his brand of “justice” or “judgment,” ends up replicating

the values of mainstream society. As Dyer explains it, “far from being against or outside society, as embodied in the law, [serial killers] in fact over-identify with it” (47).

Several of the characteristics of both real and cinematic serial killers that Dyer lays out in his taxonomy of *Se7en*'s Jonathan Doe apply to an even greater degree to the John Kramer, the Jigsaw killer. Like the typical serial killer, Jigsaw is white, male, and middle-aged. Additionally, it is revealed later in the series that before he began his murderous career, he was an upper middle-class engineer and urban planner, a job that places him further into the province of privilege. The only factor that sets Jigsaw apart from the standard, white, middle-age, middle-class male is his illness. One of the catalysts for Jigsaw's crime spree is learning that he has terminal, inoperable cancer. However, Jigsaw's illness, his one marker of difference, causes him to be even more invisible.

For instance, one of Jigsaw's primary victims in the first film is Doctor Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes), who wakes up in a dingy bathroom with his foot shackled to a metal pipe. Jigsaw always leaves a microcassette and a player with instructions for his victims. When Gordon plays his, he learns that in order to escape and save the lives of his wife and daughter – whom, Jigsaw feels, Gordon does not appreciate because he is beginning to undertake an affair with another woman – he must use a hacksaw to saw through his foot. After this, he must crawl over to a gun located in the middle of the room and use that gun to kill another man, Adam (Leigh Whannell), being held captive in the room, before his allotted time runs out. Through flashbacks, the film shows Dr. Gordon nonchalantly and unaffectedly going about this day as a doctor. In a key scene, he describes the condition of a cancer patient on his ward to a group of medical students while an orderly, named Zep (Michael Emerson), toils outside the door. In a brief but telling

exchange, Dr. Gordon repeatedly speaks coldly and clinically about the patient, and Zep interrupts him:

DR. GORDON: Okay. This patient has an inoperable frontal lobe tumor extended across the midline. Started as colon cancer. The patient has come in for a standard checkup by which we are able to monitor the rate at which his condition is declining. The patient had . . .

ZEP (interrupting): His name is John, Dr. Gordon. He's a very interesting person.

DR. GORDON (condescendingly): Thank you for that information, Zep. (to the students) As you can see, our orderlies form very special bonds with the patients.

Continuing on . . .

Initially, it seems that this scene is intended to illustrate Dr. Gordon's callous nature and to establish tension between him and Zep, and later scenes that show Zep holding Gordon's family hostage and suggest that Zep is the Jigsaw killer seem to be an extension of the tension established in this scene. However, it is not until the film flashes back to this scene for a second time that the truly important information comes to the fore: the Jigsaw killer is the cancer patient who is dehumanized by Gordon's clinical language and ignored and unseen by other characters in the film.

However, this invisibility is also a privilege lent to him by his white, "normative" body. Indeed, John/Jigsaw's invisibility places him at a great advantage through the first *Saw* film. None of his victims ever see him – during the time when they are trapped and tested, Jigsaw always delivers his instructions via microcassette or by speaking through a puppet that is broadcast on a television screen – and this invisibility allows him great mobility. In fact, Jigsaw's invisibility enables him to deceive the people hunting him into thinking that Zep is the

Jigsaw killer. While these people are concerned with catching and stopping Zep, who has been forced by Jigsaw to hold Gordon's family hostage, Jigsaw's plans are able to unfold unimpeded. Further, one of the film's final twists is that Jigsaw has been in the dingy bathroom in which Dr. Gordon and Adam have been shackled the entire time. When they first regain consciousness, one of the first things they notice is a (presumably) dead body in the floor between them. The person appears to have committed suicide, but it turns that the dead body is Jigsaw, playing possum. Dramatically, in the film's final moments, he rises, removes some of this make-up, and shuts the door on a screaming Adam. There is no strategic reason for Jigsaw to lie on the floor in the same room with his intended victims, other than to emphasize his invisibility and the point that people never notice him until it is too late.

Regardless of the tremendous advantages afforded him by his invisibility, however, Jigsaw's ire still continues to be raised not, as he constantly claims, by people not appreciating their lives, but rather by his feeling of invisibility, of not being noticed. Jigsaw's anxiety over not being seen continues even after his rise to fame as a notorious serial murderer and criminal mastermind. In *Saw III*, Jigsaw, who is, by this point, extremely sick, instructs Amanda, his once-victim now-accomplice, to kidnap Dr. Lynn Denlon (Bahar Soomekh) and to bring her to his hideout to force her to perform brain surgery on Jigsaw to extend his life. When Amanda delivers the doctor, she and Jigsaw have an extremely telling exchange. Jigsaw mentions that he was once a patient at her hospital and asks if she remembers him, insinuating that she has ignored him like everybody else. When he asks how long he has left, Dr. Denlon gives him a technical answer, which prompts him to ask her: "Why are you speaking to me in that graduate school medical jargon?" When Dr. Denlon drops her head in confusion, he screams: "LOOK AT ME!" She complies, and satisfied, Jigsaw remarks, "Now you look at me," and he proceeds to

explain that Lynn is being tested because, among other reasons, she is “dead inside” and has had “every possible advantage in life, but [has chose] not to advance.” If she fails to keep John alive for an allotted time, an explosive necklace around her neck will detonate.

Even though the audience is never given an extensive look into Dr. Denlon’s background, there are two large problems with Jigsaw’s claims that Dr. Denlon has had “every possible advantage in life.” First, Dr. Denlon is a woman in a world in which women still make less than men and are regularly passed over for promotion in favor of men. Secondly, she is a person of color, the character being played by an Iranian American actress, in a culture and society in which white is still privileged. Although the *Saw* films never explicitly address Jigsaw’s whiteness, it is constantly underscored by pitting him in opposition to characters of color. In this way, the *Saw* films again have a significant thematic element in common with David Fincher’s *Se7en*: Dyer writes that while the narrative of *Se7en* does not make much of Jonathan Doe’s whiteness, it does become important in light of the casting of Morgan Freeman as Detective Somerset, Doe’s ultimate adversary, and “by a number of other, in intention race neutral decisions” (39), such as the casting of iconic blaxsploitation star Richard Roundtree, best known as John Shaft from the *Shaft* films, in a key supporting role as the city’s District Attorney and the usage of music from blaxsploitation film *Trouble Man* (Ivan Dixon, 1972) on the film’s soundtrack.

In a similar manner, Jigsaw’s whiteness becomes more pronounced when considered in opposition to his enemies. Although two of Jigsaw’s most notable adversaries, Detective Eric Matthews (Donnie Wahlberg) and FBI Agent Peter Strahm (Scott Patterson), are white men, a majority of his foes are minorities. For instance, in the first film, Jigsaw is doggedly pursued by Detective David Tapp (Danny Glover), an African American, and Detective Steven Sing (Ken

Leung), a Chinese American. Even though Jigsaw eventually bests these men and causes their deaths, they both prove themselves to be capable police officers. Another of Jigsaw's main antagonists throughout the first three films is Kerry (Dina Meyer), an extremely smart and capable officer who is indentified in *Saw II* as the "Jigsaw expert." In *Saw III*, when Kerry is finally kidnapped and placed in a Jigsaw trap, a device that will rip open her torso and disembowel her unless she fetches a key out of a jar of acid before a timer runs out, she would have passed her test and survived, if not for the fact that Amanda, Jigsaw's accomplice, had rigged Kerry's trap to not unlock.

Another character of color who challenges Jigsaw is Officer Rigg (Lyriq Bent), an African American police officer who assists with key investigations into the Jigsaw murders in *Saw II* and *Saw III* and is subjected to a multi-layered trap in *Saw IV*. The fact that Rigg is an abundantly capable and dedicated police officer is made apparent in the trap that Jigsaw arranges for him: Jigsaw reveals to Rigg that he is holding his friend Eric Matthews captive and that Rigg has "but ninety minutes" to run through a gamut of tests, gather clues, and find Eric. However, Rigg does not realize that Jigsaw's tests were meant to teach him that he has been working *too* diligently at this job and that he needs to save Eric Matthews *after* the ninety minutes have run out rather than saving him before the clock counts down. Rigg's failure to understand the purpose of his test – which was, admittedly, made very unclear by Jigsaw's vague and ambiguous language – leads to his death and Matthews's.

Rigg is not the only character of color that suffers at Jigsaw's hand for performing a job too proficiently. In *Saw IV*, Jigsaw's reign of terror becomes such a problem that the FBI is called in, and they send Agent Peter Strahm and his partner, Agent Perez (Athena Karkanis). Agent Strahm proves himself to be the more hotheaded and more inept of the two. He badgers

Jigsaw's ex-wife, Jill Tuck (Betsy Russell), for her alleged involvement in Jigsaw's murders, and while he makes the correct conclusion about Jigsaw having another accomplice besides Amanda Young, he incorrectly identifies Jigsaw's second accomplice as Art Blank (Justin Louis).

Conversely, Agent Perez calmly, assuredly, and competently goes about her job, but Jigsaw plants a particularly nasty trap for her. As she and Strahm investigate a school where a Jigsaw murder took place, they find the by-now familiar sight of one of Jigsaw's dolls with a tape player in its hand. On the tape, Jigsaw welcomes her to "a world she has long studied" (apparently, like Kerry, Perez is a Jigsaw expert), and he cryptically warns her that her next move is "critical." After that, a whisper emanates from the doll, and when Perez leans forward in attempt to hear it, the puppet's face explodes, shooting spikes into her face and throat.

Perez is then rushed to the hospital, presumably to die, and her abrupt departure from the film's narrative gives viewers little time to wonder about her fate. However, if the film is to retain any semblance of thematic consistency, this is probably for the best. For if Jigsaw's intention, as he repeatedly states throughout the series, is to teach people lessons and to make ungrateful people appreciate their lives, the trap left for Perez makes little narrative or thematic sense. This incident, along with others in the series that involve the often arbitrary punishment of characters of color, suggests that race is a larger factor in the Jigsaw murders than it first appears. Jigsaw's frustration is based upon being invisible and unseen, which he perceives as a weakness, not privilege. Interestingly, he often strikes out against those bodies that are visible through racial and gender "difference" and strives to make them invisible through death or mutilation. It is noteworthy that Dr. Denlon's and Kerry's deaths are among the most brutal and harrowing of the series. Or Jigsaw causes these characters to disappear from the narrative, as he does with Perez. If, as Dyer claims, the casting of noted African American actors to play competent,

capable, compassionate, and intelligent characters in *Se7en* “inadvertently flush[es] out something more often shoved under the carpet, that serial killing is a white thing” (40), then Jigsaw’s murders could also be an example of the monstrosity of whiteness no longer being “shoved under the carpet,” but instead brought to light.

To be fair, Jigsaw does not only target characters of color with his traps and mechanisms. The six *Saw* films boast a large body count, and admittedly, these victims are from a wide variety of social strata. Jigsaw’s targets range from the white and privileged (like the aforementioned Dr. Gordon and Art Blank, his lawyer) to well-off upper middle class characters of color (Dr. Denlon and Officer Rigg) to various members of the underclass of a variety of ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds (a group of victims captured and placed in a trap-filled house in *Saw II* are African American, Latino, and Latina). Regardless, it is difficult not to consider his actions and his murders in the context of his whiteness for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which include his anger at the invisibility that his whiteness and privilege afford him and his opposition to and particular malice against characters of color. Two other aspects of the film that foreground how Jigsaw’s murderous motives and methods are grounded in whiteness are the politics behind his reason for killing (which are not revealed until the fourth film) and his choices of accomplices and how their respective careers unfold.

The narratives of the first three *Saw* films insinuate that the sole motive behind Jigsaw’s reign of terror is his discovery that he has terminal cancer and is going to die very soon. In a discussion that takes place in *Saw II*, Jigsaw describes to arresting officer Eric Matthews how he was devastated when he learned he had cancer and had tried to kill himself by driving off of a cliff. According to Jigsaw, after he survived the crash, he had learned something about the value of human life and declared that he was going to devote the rest of his life to “testing the fabric of

human nature.” Supposedly, this is what set Jigsaw on his path of redeeming or killing people with elaborate traps that test their will to live. However, *Saw IV* shows that Jigsaw’s murderous spree has much different, more problematic, origins.

In the fourth film, it is revealed in flashback that Jill Tuck, Jigsaw’s wife, was a doctor who ran an inner-city clinic for the underprivileged, a duty that she continued to fulfill even as she was pregnant with what was to be hers and John’s first child, a son named Gideon. However, a drug-addicted patient named Cecil (Billy Otis) attempts to break into the clinic one night to get methadone, and in the process, he accidentally slams Jill between a door and a wall, causing her to miscarry. After she loses the baby, there is a scene with Jill in her hospital bed with John sitting by her bedside. Referring to her patients at the clinic, Jill despairs, “All I wanted to do was help them.” John coldly replies, “You can’t help them. They have to help themselves.” Thus Jigsaw insinuates that social programs for the underprivileged, whether it be in terms of race, class, or gender, are all doomed to failure and that the solution is put these people in situations where the only two possible outcomes are death or learning to “help themselves.”

Shortly after Jill’s miscarriage, Jigsaw begins enacting his twisted version of social programming on Cecil, kidnapping him and devising for him his first trap. Billy is bolted to a chair, and in order to get free, he must press his face through a rack of knives and press a release button with his forehead, an action that will horribly mutilate his face. Even when he successfully completes the task and gets free, there is no hope for Billy (as it is for most of the underprivileged). In a blind rage, he attacks Jigsaw, but Jigsaw easily sidesteps Billy, who has been blinded by the blood gushing from his face wounds, causing him to rush into a pit of barb wire. The more Billy struggles, the more he becomes ensnared, and he presumably dies in this

barb wire pit, while Jigsaw coldly and methodically looks on, taking notes with a pencil and notepad.

In this regard, Jigsaw truly embodies Dyer's observation that serial killers in cinema often seem like they are the antithesis of "the law," but ironically resemble the protectors of the law because they "over-identify" with them (47). In other words, serial killers, like Jigsaw, rarely offer any oppositionality to the dominant status quo because their actions resemble the oppressive law of dominant society taken to a twisted, but chillingly logical extreme. In his analysis of *Se7en*, Dyer discusses Jonathan Doe's embarrassed admiration for Detective Mills, one of his pursuers, and this admiration eventually leads Doe to attempt to "become" Mills and "lead his life" with his wife Tracy during the "Envy" crime. While *Se7en* explores the surprising kinship between the serial killer and the law in ways that productively explore the connections between whiteness and vigilante justice, Jigsaw's kinship with the law is disturbingly harmonious.

One of the most significant examples of Jigsaw's place being with the law rather than outside of the law is his partnership with Detective Mark Hoffman. As mentioned previously, one of the reasons Jigsaw is such an effective criminal mastermind, able to devise and build elaborate traps and lay out elaborate plans, is by working with two accomplices, Amanda Young and Mark Hoffman. In the second film, it is revealed Jigsaw is working with Amanda, but Jigsaw's partnership with Hoffman is not revealed until the fourth film. Significantly, Hoffman is one of the few white characters on the police force that is trying to catch the murderer, so it makes sense that, in terms of race, Jigsaw and Hoffman would gravitate toward each other in their view of the world. Another similarity between these two men is that their whiteness makes them invisible. While Agents Strahm and Perez conduct their investigation of the police

department in *Saw IV* in attempt to flush out Jigsaw's accomplice, Hoffman is the one character they never suspect. Like Jigsaw in the first film, who "hid in plain sight" at the heart of his most elaborate trap, Hoffman also hides in plain sight, appearing to be a victim in the trap from which Rigg must attempt to save Eric Matthews. The invisibility that their whiteness grants them allows them to hide in this manner, out in the open without fear of being noticed.

Hoffman also shares Jigsaw's desire to embody and enact the law to its most grotesque extremes. In fact, Hoffman's desire to carry out the law in its extreme is what brings him to Jigsaw's attention in the first place. In the fifth film, it is revealed that Hoffman's sister was murdered by a man named Seth Baxter (Joris Jarsky), who was sentenced to life in prison, but released after only five years because of a technicality. After Baxter's release, Hoffman kidnaps him and places him in a Jigsaw-esque trap. In the trap, Baxter is strapped down and stretched out on a slab as a razor-sharp pendulum slowly descends, swinging, above him. In order to stop the pendulum from slicing him in half at his waist, Baxter must destroy his hands, the instruments that have destroyed others, in small hydraulic presses. Amazingly, Baxter is able to carry out the destruction of his hands, but the pendulum does not stop and eventually descends to slice him in half, throwing his entrails all over the room. Hoffman then makes the scene of the crime look like one of the Jigsaw's murders.

Jigsaw eventually hunts down Hoffman, kidnaps him, and takes him back to one of his lairs. There, Jigsaw proceeds to lecture Hoffman about the error of his murderous ways. "Unlike you," Jigsaw says, "I've never killed anyone. I give people a chance." Surprisingly, he offers Hoffman the chance of "redemption" by becoming his accomplice. Jigsaw's partnership with Hoffman explicitly demonstrates the cinematic serial killer's paradoxical affinity with the law and social order. In this case, serial killer and cop both work to achieve the same end: a fascistic

circumvention of due process and the individual's rights and a war against the disenfranchised, underprivileged, and anybody whom they feel does not meet their moral standard.

The situation with Jigsaw's first accomplice, Amanda Young, is significantly different. The fact that Jigsaw has a female accomplice who helps perpetrate many of his crimes may seem, at first, to undermine the claims made here about the connections between serial killers and privileges afforded by whiteness and maleness. However, the ways in which Amanda's story unfolds do not undermine these connections, but rather only serves to strengthen them because, in many senses, Amanda is a failure at being a serial killer and at being a "successful" Jigsaw accomplice. Moreover, her failure is directly tied to how her body is marked by "difference"; her femaleness does not afford her the same invisibility and disconnectedness that makes Jigsaw a successful serial killer. As a result, she fails at this job because she's a woman. Apparently, serial killing is not only a white thing, but it is also, in many ways, a "guy thing."

Amanda is introduced in the first film as the victim of one of Jigsaw's most memorable traps: the reverse bear trap helmet. In fact, the scene that introduces Amanda is the scene that Wan and Whannell shot for the short that so impressed the producers at Twisted Pictures. In *Saw*, the story of Amanda's trap is revealed in flashback as she recounts the story to Detective Tapp. In her flashback, she wakes up in the reverse bear trap, and on a video screen, Jigsaw, through his puppet, explains that since she has spent much of her life as a drug addict, he does not feel that she properly appreciates her life. Thus, her trap is meant to teach her to appreciate her life by being forced to fight for it. As in the short film, she is given a brief amount of time to dig out the key from the stomach of an unconscious person locked in the room with her and unlock the helmet before her time runs out. As her story ends and the film returns to the police station, Tapp confronts Amanda about her troubled history as a drug addict, to which Amanda

tearfully replies, “He . . . helped . . . me,” a response that shocks Tapp and Dr. Gordon, who is looking on from another room.

Amanda returns in *Saw II*, as the ending of that film reveals that since she passed her Jigsaw test, she has been helping Jigsaw as his accomplice. However, it very quickly becomes apparent that Amanda will not be as effective as Jigsaw and Hoffman because of her visibility, which comes from being a woman and a criminal. For example, in *Saw II*, Amanda attempts something that Jigsaw successfully accomplished in the first film and Hoffman successfully accomplished in the fourth film: she tries to put herself in the middle of a trap and remain unseen as its mechanisms unfold. The main trap in *Saw II* is ultimately a test of Detective Eric Matthews, a police officer who has allowed his anger to alienate everyone around him, including his son, Daniel (Erik Knudsen). As his punishment/penance, Jigsaw lures him to his lair and promises that he will turn himself over to the police if Matthews will watch one of Jigsaw’s traps unfold on video monitors. Watching the monitors, Matthews learns to his horror that Jigsaw has kidnapped his son and placed him in a trap-filled house with seven ex-convicts who, as they explore the house, eventually learn two things: one, what they have in common is that Eric Matthews falsified information and planted evidence to get them convicted for their respective crimes, and two, Eric Matthews’s son is also trapped in the house with them.

Jigsaw places Amanda among the seven ex-convicts in the house because she has a history with Eric Matthews, but also to make certain that his mechanisms unfold as planned. However, unlike Jigsaw and Hoffman, she is not invisible, but rather is marked as a criminalized body and noticed almost immediately. When the seven victims wake up in the house, Amanda sticks out in the crowd because of her screaming, hysterical behavior and also because she knows that a microcassette player and tape has to be hidden in the room somewhere to tell them what

the rules and objectives of Jigsaw's game are. Jonas (Glenn Plummer), one of the other prisoners/contestants in Jigsaw's game, asks Amanda how she knew to look for the microcassette player, and Amanda reveals that she has already been Jigsaw's victim and has "played before." However, her screaming, hysterical behavior and appearance set her apart from her companions even before she admits her status. While one could rightly argue that Amanda's screaming hysterics are merely a part of her "act" to convince the others that she is not working with Jigsaw and is just a victim like they are, Amanda's act is so convincing precisely because she is a legitimate victim of societal structures, unlike Jigsaw and Hoffman.

Amanda's victim status and her inability to become "invisible" and "blend in" like Jigsaw and Hoffman are foregrounded later in a particularly grisly scene. At the outset, Jigsaw informs the eight captives that they are breathing in a nerve gas that will kill them if they do not find the antidote that has been hidden in various places in the house before two hours passes. After losing a few of their number to various traps that Jigsaw has rigged throughout the dangerous and dilapidated house and after failing to retrieve any antidote by successfully maneuvering through these traps, the increasingly desperate group reaches a room containing an especially vicious trap. There is a vault in the room with a timer counting down from four minutes and, most horrifically, in the room's center a deep pit filled with dirty, discarded hypodermic needles. A microcassette left behind by Jigsaw informs the group that this game is intended for Xavier (Franky G), a particularly brutal and callous member of the group. On the tape, Jigsaw explains that as a drug dealer, Xavier has offered hope to people in the form of a needle and that this trap has been designed to turn the tables on him. If he wants to have any hope of surviving, he must jump into the pit of hypodermics and retrieve a key that has been hidden that will unlock the vault containing an antidote. "Like finding a needle in a haystack,"

Jigsaw chuckles on the tape. However, if Xavier does not retrieve the key before the time runs out, the vault will seal itself forever.

After hearing the instructions, Xavier proclaims: “Somebody’s going in there.” His simple phrase assures the others that he does not plan to be a victim in this trap, but his predatory instinct has no problem making someone else the victim. As Xavier looks over the faces of his companions, Amanda twitches and seems to shrink away from the needles involuntarily, as they, no doubt, remind her of her past as a drug addict. Sensing this weakness, Xavier lunges for Amanda, picks her up, and throws her into the pit of hypodermic needles. She lands on the needles with a screaming crash, and while the others in the group exclaim and avert their eyes, Amanda, with needles sticking out of her arms, legs, and back at sickening angles, digs through the pit, desperately looking for the key. With seconds to spare, she finds it and hands it to Xavier, but he drops it and does not get it into the lock in time. Quaking with anger and blaming Amanda for failing to open the door in time, Xavier goes for her, screaming, “You fucking bitch!” Only the others holding him back protects Amanda from his rage, and the scenario with this trap perfectly illustrates Amanda’s difference from Jigsaw and Hoffman. Her body has been “marked” – by addiction, by gender, by class – in such a way that she is unable to become invisible in plain sight. Unlike Jigsaw and Hoffman, Amanda is a true victim of systemic violence, and this victimization keeps her from being a cinematic serial killer.

Also contributing to Amanda’s failure as an ideal serial killer is her passion and anger, issues that are explored at length in the next film, *Saw III*. At the beginning of this film, the police, led by Kerry, first figure out that Jigsaw has an accomplice when they investigate the scene of another Jigsaw killing. This time, the victim is a man named Troy (J Larose), who is attached to the walls of a room with chains that are hooked into his flesh at various parts of his

body, his sides, his arms, his legs, and most painfully, through his bottom jaw. On another of his by now familiar videotapes, Jigsaw explains to Troy that since he has spent most of his life in prison, he must enjoy being “in chains.” Again, Jigsaw’s societal views are distorted by white privilege, and the trap is supposed to teach Troy how to break away from his chains. Troy must rip the chains from his body before his timer expires, or a bomb will explode. When investigating the grisly aftermath of the failed “test,” with Troy’s charred and burning flesh scattered about the gutted room, Rigg wonders aloud how Jigsaw, who is “on his deathbed,” could still build such elaborate traps. Kerry observes that, in this case, he did not build this trap because it deviates from his pattern in one significant way: it was rigged. Even if Troy had been able to rip the chains from his flesh before the timer ran out, the door was welded shut, and he would have been unable to leave the room.

Several scenes later in the film, Kerry is abducted and placed into a rigged trap, and it becomes clear that Amanda, because of her anger, is deviating from Jigsaw’s plan of possible, albeit unlikely, redemption for his victims because she is constructing traps from which victims cannot possibly escape. In other words, Amanda’s anger – her anger over being abused, over being a victim of society discriminated against systemically – is getting in the way of her being the perfect cinematic serial killer. Jigsaw can forgive Hoffman this shortcoming due to his unspoken affinity for law; in fact, he invites Hoffman to become his accomplice after Hoffman builds the trap for Seth Baxter that he cannot escape. However, Jigsaw cannot forgive Amanda and constructs yet another, more elaborate trap for her in *Saw III*. When he has Amanda kidnap Dr. Denlon, he has the doctor brought to their hideout to perform an improved brain surgery on the dying Jigsaw and to put Amanda’s ability to overcome her anger to the test.

After Dr. Denlon saves his life by cutting away a piece of his skull so his swollen brain has some relief, a bed-ridden Jigsaw shows the doctor a great deal of affection in Amanda's presence to make Amanda jealous. In one instance, as Jigsaw is kind to Denlon and treats Amanda harshly, Amanda storms out of the room, and Jigsaw explains that "[Amanda's] emotion is . . . her weakness," an observation that shows Amanda falling short of the cold detachment that is the hallmark of the white male serial killer. At the film's conclusion, Dr. Denlon actually passes her test and keeps Jigsaw alive for the prescribed amount of time, but by this point, Amanda is in hysterics because of the emotional abuse she has endured. With tears in her eyes and a trembling voice, she holds a gun on the doctor and threatens to kill her even though she passed her test. When Jigsaw calculatingly tells her that she should not harm Dr. Denlon because their fates are connected in his game, Amanda angrily confronts him and accuses him of hypocrisy, claiming that his games do not work: "[N]obody fucking changes. Nobody is reborn. It's all bullshit. It's all a fucking lie. And I'm just a pawn in your stupid games."

Unbeknownst to Amanda, Jigsaw has arranged for Dr. Denlon's estranged husband, Jeff (Angus Macfadyen), who has just undergone his own series of Jigsaw tests and has been given a loaded handgun, to emerge through a door in the room Jigsaw, Amanda, and Dr. Denlon are standing in. Amanda finally loses her temper, hangs her head in shame, and shoots Dr. Denlon in the back just as her husband enters the room, and Dr. Denlon falls into his arms. In reaction, Jeff shoots Amanda in the throat, and as she falls to the ground, gasping for breath and blood gushing from her throat, Jigsaw reveals his plan to her, that all of this had been a test to see if she could control her emotions and keep Dr. Denlon alive. In short, Amanda's emotions, which stem from

her legitimate status as victim, cause her to become too involved in her interactions and keep her from being the ideal serial killer.

In *Saw VI*, it is revealed that Amanda, in fact, did not kill Dr. Denlon just because she was angry. Instead, Hoffman, without Jigsaw's knowledge, had slipped Amanda a note beforehand, telling her that Dr. Denlon knows that she was present the night Cecil broke into Jill Tuck's clinic and accidentally caused Jill Tuck to miscarry. Hoffman had assured and taunted Amanda that Denlon would share this information with Jigsaw and that, as a result, Jigsaw would blame Amanda for the death of his and Jill's unborn son.

This incident illustrates the impossibility of Amanda becoming the perfect, detached, white, male, middle-class serial killer. Instead of having the privilege of invisibility afforded to the white, male, middle-class serial killer, Amanda is forced to inhabit a body marked by the ravages of drug addiction, gender difference, and difference in social power. In a telling sequence in *Saw III*, Eric Matthews, who has been captured by Jigsaw and chained by his foot to a pipe, brutally breaks his foot with a toilet lid and snaps his foot through the cuff of the shackle to escape. As he drags his broken, limp foot behind him, Eric searches for an escape somewhere in the seemingly endless corridors of Jigsaw's lair. He sees Amanda, who is setting up future traps, and he sneaks up and attacks her. After he slams her head against the wall several times, Amanda outmaneuvers him and kicks his bad foot. As Amanda walks away from him, he screams in frustration and taunts her, yelling "You're not Jigsaw, bitch!" This phrase causes Amanda's composure to crack, and she turns back to inflict more violence on him. Indeed, Eric Matthews is correct: Amanda is not Jigsaw, nor she will ever be able to be because of the visibility and vulnerability cast upon her by her cultural subordination. Ultimately, Amanda is

the exception that proves the rule, as her status as underclass female keeps her from obtaining the invisibility that enables people like Jigsaw and Hoffman to enact their crimes.

“I’ve Seen You on Television”: Serial Killing, Media, and Identity

A central paradox in Jigsaw’s serial-killer ethos is one of the fundamental paradoxes of white, middle class masculinity. White men may feel as if they are invisible, unseen, and unnoticed. Rather than realize that not being seen often reflects a position of privilege and never being victim to profiling, some white men feel threatened by being unnoticed and so decide to become noticed. In cinema, becoming seen often manifests itself in dramatic ways, such as serial killing. For instance, Dyer identifies one of Jonathan Doe’s motives in *Se7en* as reacting against the fear of becoming lost, unnoticed, and unimportant in a large, dirty, unforgiving city. Similarly, Jigsaw’s motives spring from a fear of not being noticed, and his elaborate, repetitive murders are a way of building a recognizable identity for himself. Jigsaw also seems to understand that in order to achieve a certain level of notoriety in our current, highly mediatized culture, one must create an identity or subjectivity through media.

This connection between media and serial killing is not unique to the *Saw* series. In fact, there is a long cinematic history of films that explore the relationship between serial killing and media. For instance, Anton Kaes has observed that media is an important element in Fritz Lang’s German classic *M* (1931), one of the first films to explore the psychology of the serial killer and place the figure of the serial killer within a sociological context. In *M*, the serial murders of Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) are juxtaposed against a mailman delivering of a paper filled with serial narratives; “Another exciting chapter,” he promises a housewife (Kaes 26). Also important in the narrative of *M* are the newspapers, not that different from the ones containing soap operas, that spread the sordid tales of Beckert’s child murders. Lang emphasizes the connection between

murder and media in the famous shot in which Beckert first appears: as a child (Inge Landgut) bounces her rubber ball against a broadside plastered on a pole that warns people in the community of Beckert's presence and past crimes and offers a reward for his capture, Beckert's shadow, in profile, emerges over the text, as if the print medium has conjured him into existence.

Several significant serial killer films have continued to develop this connection. For instance, Robert Siodmak, another German-born director, makes a convincing connection between murder and media in two of his film noirs: *Phantom Lady* (1944), with its sculptor/murder Jack Marlow (Franchot Tone), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1945), the opening scene of which features a serial killer murdering a victim in an upstairs room while downstairs an audience watches a silent film, accompanied by a piano, which drowns out the sounds of the murder above. Another significant example is, of course, Michael Powell's infamous *Peeping Tom* (1960), in which a troubled cameraman (Carl Boehm) murders young women with a blade attached to his camera and films the dying moments of his victims in an attempt to master his own fears. Along these same lines, when screenwriters John McNaughton and Richard Fire adapted events in the life of serial killer Henry Lee Lucas, and his accomplice Otis Toole, into the film, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986), perhaps the most significant deviation they made from the real-life events was having the film versions of Henry (Michael Rooker) and Otis (Tom Towles) record several of their murders with a stolen video camera so that they could watch them later on a VCR. Later notable serial killer films, like *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) and *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), continue this exploration between murder and media.

The *Saw* films belong to a tradition of films in which media and murder are intrinsically linked. Indeed, the identity that Jigsaw creates for himself through serial killing is the product of

the creative use of mixed media. Basic Jigsaw traps reveal the character's multi-media flair. First, the victim wakes up in an elaborate trap of Jigsaw's design, which always evinces his almost artistic talent for construction and engineering. Next, the victim is usually informed about her/his situation, how her/his trap works, and how she/he can survive the ordeal by a puppet with a pale white face, bright red lips and cheeks, stringy black hair, and wearing a small, black tuxedo. Additionally, the puppet appears on a television screen to give the instructions to the victims and speaks in a voice that is Jigsaw's voice, slightly distorted. So, in addition to his construction skills, Jigsaw exhibits a talent for puppetry, camera/video work, and audio manipulation. He also blurs the line between "old" and "new" media with his digital videos of puppets and his voice distorted using analog equipment and magnetic audiotape.

It could even be argued that Jigsaw also utilizes theater in his work. In a scene from *Saw III*, the audience, through a flashback, is presented with an almost "behind-the-scenes" look at the process undertaken by Jigsaw and Amanda in preparing the elaborate trap for Dr. Gordon and Adam seen in the first film. As Amanda pulls Adam's body in on a dolly, Jigsaw, looking in a mirror, prepares his make-up, applying fake blood and a fake wound prosthetic to his head to make it look as if he has been fatally shot. After he and Amanda place all the "props" in their assigned locations, Jigsaw takes his place on the floor, Amanda dramatically shuts the door, and the drama of Jigsaw's work is ready to begin.

In other words, Jigsaw's identity as a serial killer is achieved through a mastery of media, both old and new. Accordingly, most people recognize him as a figure who, like Hans Beckert, is made up entirely of media. Tellingly, when Jigsaw is initially introduced in the first film, it is as a media figure. After the opening fifteen minutes is devoted to Dr. Gordon and Adam panicking and wondering who has put them in this terrible predicament, Dr. Gordon finally comes to a

conclusion: “I think I may know who’s done this to us . . . It’s not someone I know personally. Just someone I know of.” The connotation of Dr. Gordon’s words here is that he only knows of the Jigsaw killer through hearing about him through the media. Jigsaw’s media celebrity is reinforced in the second film, when the eight victims come around and find themselves locked in Jigsaw’s house of traps. When Amanda informs them that Jigsaw put them here, Jonas exclaims, “Who the hell is Jigsaw?” In reply, Addison (Emmanuelle Vaugier), another of the victims, chides him by asking, “You don’t watching the fucking news?”

Ultimately, Jigsaw establishes his identity through media. In the key scene that takes place near the beginning of *Saw III* when Amanda brings Dr. Denlon to Jigsaw to save his life, Jigsaw’s anxiety over being invisible and unseen is highlighted when he insists: “LOOK AT ME.” The scene also reveals the importance of media in creating Jigsaw’s now-visible personality. Jigsaw informs her that he was once a “guest in her hospital” and asks if she remembers him. Dr. Denlon simply replies “I’ve seen you on television.” Her answer makes it clear that the visibility that he desires is attainable only through his manipulation of media. Indeed, Jigsaw’s identity ends up being more powerfully attached to his media objects than it does his own body, a point powerfully demonstrated by the autopsy scenes that bookend *Saw IV*.

At the conclusion of *Saw III*, Jeff, enraged by the death of his wife, Dr. Denlon, violently kills Jigsaw by slicing open his throat with a power saw. Thus, the opening moments of *Saw IV* vividly depict Jigsaw’s autopsy in grisly detail. The viewer is besieged with numerous shots that stress the materiality of Jigsaw’s body: there are shots of his brain being removed, his abdomen being sliced open, and his organs being removed and weighed. While examining the organs, one of the doctors finds a microcassette, and a flashback reveals that Jigsaw swallowed the cassette shortly before his death. The doctors call Hoffman to the examination room, who, after

dismissing the doctors, plays the tape as he stands over Jigsaw's lifeless body. On the tape, Jigsaw's voice ominously intones: "By hearing this tape some will assume that this is over. But I am still among you. You think it's over just because I am dead? It's not over. The games have just begun." Even though Jigsaw lies dead on the metal table in the foreground of the frame, his voice on the tape recorder assures Hoffman (and the audience) that he is a powerful threat whose wishes will continue even in the absence of his living body. As this scene aptly demonstrates, Jigsaw's identity and agency are tied not to his body, but to media objects that he, even beyond death, endlessly disseminates to establish and substantiate his identity.

Commodities-at-Large: Consuming the *Saw* Series

The situation outside of the *Saw* films mirrors the one inside its diegetic world. *Saw* media is, almost literally, everywhere. Visiting the Official *Saw* website (officialsaw.com), owned and maintained by Twisted Pictures, and clicking on the "Store" tab, one is confronted with a veritable flood of product, ranging from the expected – DVDs, clothing and other apparel, autographed, glossy photographs of the films' stars, and stickers – to the downright unexpected – namely, copious amounts of props either for sale or put up for auction on eBay. Collectables available for sale include various pieces of clothing worn by actors in the film; for instance, one can purchase a shirt worn by Tobin Bell in a scene in *Saw III* for \$23.99. It is called a "death shirt" because it is the shirt Jigsaw is wearing when Jeff kills him. More obscure – and significantly pricier – is a "clue card," a small, white index card bearing a clue to surviving one of Jigsaw's traps. This card was used in a scene in *Saw V* and is on sale for the princely sum of \$247.99. On the official *Saw* eBay store, there are numerous items that fans can bid on, ranging from props like clothing, envelopes, and pieces of Jigsaw's traps to behind-the-scenes items like storyboards and shooting scripts signed by actors.

Twisted Pictures's hosting of these online stores and auctions that offer literal "pieces" of the film to fans for a price takes the notion of "consuming" and interacting with the film to new levels. In fact, the content of the films themselves encourage this type of interactivity, as they are very much products of the clickable, multi-tiered, nonlinear film experience offered by the DVD format. In the DVD age, movies are no longer something recorded onto a linear, analog strip, but instead are burned digitally onto a media object that allows access to any scene at any given moment with a mere click of the remote. In this way, movies-on-DVD resemble the experience of exploring the Internet: information and data are all assembled in one virtual "space" that is accessible by clicking. Indeed, the opening moments of the first *Saw* film demonstrate an acute awareness of clickable space, and it responds by integrating these notions into the storytelling. The most obvious example of Internet awareness is Adam's initial panicked belief that he and Dr. Gordon have been kidnapped by people trading human organs on the black market who have kidnapped them in order to remove their kidneys and "sell them on eBay," the same internet auction site that now offers fragments from this movie.

However, the more pervasive influence of virtual, "clickable" culture in these openings scenes is not located in a jokey, throwaway line, but instead, is embedded in how the room in which Dr. Gordon and Adam are trapped is conceptualized. The filthy bathroom is like a piece of digital media and operates in a manner similar to how a DVD menu or a website work. Hidden all about the room are clues to Dr. Gordon's and Adam's predicaments. Imperative to their survival is finding clues and correctly interpreting the meaning hidden beneath the clues. That process is, of course, similar to the way one clicks a hyperlink in a virtual environment to obtain data secured "just beyond" the link. For instance, one of the clues that Jigsaw shares with Dr. Gordon and Adam is the trite-sounding advice: "Follow your heart." The duo notice that on

Adam's side of the room, there is a toilet with a heart painted on the tank. Gordon anxiously implores Adam to look in the toilet bowl, filled with dirty brown water, for a clue. After shifting through the swill and fighting his gag reflex, Adam comes up empty-handed and looks in the tank next. There, he finds what Jigsaw intended: a plastic bag containing two hacksaws. After furiously and futilely trying to saw through their leg shackles, Dr. Gordon finally realizes that they must use to cut through their feet if they want to escape.

Ultimately, in Jigsaw's clue-filled trap for Dr. Gordon and Adam, the two victims must successfully "click on" the evidence and correctly interpret it in order to survive. This pattern continues throughout the film. At one point, Dr. Gordon throws Adam his wallet so Adam can look at pictures of his daughter. Gordon informs him that his favorite photo with his family is tucked beneath the photo Adam is currently looking at. Adam digs to find the photo and, instead, comes up with a chilling clue. In place of the photo is a Polaroid of Gordon's wife (Monica Potter) and daughter (Makenzie Vega), bound, gagged, and wide-eyed, obviously under dire threat. Written on the back of the Polaroid is the clue "X marks the spot," which alludes to a glow-in-the-dark X that Jigsaw has painted on the wall that is visible only in the dark. Beneath this X is a hidden hole in the wall that contains even more perplexing objects and vague clues. Thus, many objects in Jigsaw's trap for Dr. Gordon and Adam are like hyperlinks: when "clicked on" or uncovered, they reveal a seemingly infinite amount of data.

The design of the two-disc *Saw* "Uncut Edition" DVD release shows a definite awareness of this connection. The menus for both the disc containing the film (with optional audio commentaries) and the disc containing the bonus features are designed to resemble the dirty bathroom trap that Gordon and Adam are forced to inhabit for most of the film. For example, the main menu's animation replicates a God's-eye angle on the "dead body" lying in the middle of

the room that Jigsaw plays throughout the film. The viewer is given three options to click on: “Play the Game,” which begins the film, “Pieces of the Puzzle,” which takes the viewer to the scene selections menu, and “Sounds,” which allows the viewer to choose audio options like surround sound, commentaries, or subtitles. The “Sounds” menu in particular is interesting. The animation on this menu looks a lot like Adam’s corner of the room. On the left of the screen, there is the toilet with the painted heart on the tank, and to the left, there are various metal pipes leading here and there, one of which has an empty leg shackle attached to it. If the viewer, using the remote, moves the cursor over to the leg shackle, the object becomes illuminated in red and becomes clickable. Clicking on the link gives the viewer a URL (backofyourmind.net) where, at the time of this DVD’s release, the viewer could receive exclusive spoilers, information, and clues about the upcoming *Saw II*. The extra features disc features several similar hidden links, or “Easter Eggs,” that, when clicked, reveal extra information about the making of the film. Subsequent DVD releases of later films in the *Saw* series continued to include “Easter Eggs” such as these for *Saw* fans and spectators. Thus, these movies, with narrative styles based upon new media-style notions of interactivity, are packaged and sold on new media platforms that replicate the interactivity of the filmic text.

Twisted Pictures clearly acknowledges the importance – and profitability – of maintaining this media interactivity with fans of the *Saw* series by their commitment to establishing a web presence that includes the Official *Saw* website, which offers diehard fans the opportunity to transform their virtual interaction (clicking on Internet and DVD links) into a material interaction by purchasing props featured in the films. Additionally, more virtual interaction is encouraged by the Official *Saw*’s sister website, the Official *Saw* Forum (officialsawforum.com). This massive website hosts a total of ten forums. Three are devoted to

hosting message board posts and threads about the last three movies (parts four, five, and six), and one forum is reserved for discussion, speculation, and the latest news on the upcoming *Saw* VII. Other forums are set aside for discussing older *Saw* films, other films made by *Saw* directors, screenwriters, and other talent, and the psychology and philosophy of Jigsaw's character.

These forums provide *Saw* fans with the opportunity to utilize media in a similar way that Jigsaw does: to create identities for themselves. For instance, one forum is dedicated entirely to collecting *Saw* memorabilia, from official merchandise like DVDs and tee-shirts, to handmade replicas of costumes and even traps from the movies, to actual props and costumes from the films. Other types of interactivity on these websites are less focused on the accumulation of media objects and more concerned with the creation of media. On the "General Discussion" board, fans regularly share *Saw* fan fiction they have written and links to their *Saw* fan fiction housed on fanfiction.net. Other people make *Saw* fan films that they post on YouTube, Vimeo, or other video-sharing sites. Some of these films are "remixes" of the *Saw* films; that is, they take existing footage from past films and reedit them together to create a new video. Popular types of "remixes" associated with *Saw* films include "highlight reels" of traps and kills and "tributes" to particular characters. Amanda is an especially popular character in this regard, as there are dozens of tribute videos to her on YouTube. There are also videos that construct theories on what will happen in the future of the series by editing together and highlighting "clues" from past movies. Other industrious fans create *Saw* fan videos from scratch, writing and shooting their own scripts featuring Jigsaw and their own traps and props.

While the fan production of *Saw*-related materials warrants further exploration, it is outside the purview of this project. What is relevant to this study is that the advent of new

technologies has affected how these films are made, viewed, and experienced, and that the industry has embraced the interactivity offered by new media as a new avenue of generating interest in their products. Tellingly, Twisted Pictures has not enforced strict copyrights on footage or ideas from the *Saw* films and has thus allowed fans to freely create and share *Saw*-related videos on the Internet. This approach is a tacit acknowledgement on the part of Twisted pictures that interactivity is a key component of the *Saw* films. In this industrial context, both the studios and consumers crank out repetitive serial narratives.

The promises of seriality can be comforting for viewers and consumers. In his critique of Reagan-era cinema, Robin Wood complains that franchise cinema caters to a childish desire for “not-quite-endless repetition – the same game played over and over” (145). Wood continues, “When at last [children] begin to weary of exact repetition they demand slight variation: the game still easily recognizable, but not entirely predictable” (145). According to Wood, much of genre cinema now fulfills the same function, with viewers watching Hollywood films in hopes of experiencing “the childish, repetitive pleasures of comic strip and serial” (148). Wood’s description fits the *Saw* films exceedingly well; in fact, Jigsaw’s traps are the epitome of repetitive games with minimal variation. In the case of the *Saw* films, the pleasures of repetition extend to the commodity form of the film-on-DVD. With their similarly designed sleeves and matching artwork, the *Saw* films on DVD exhibit their sameness and promise to fulfill needs that Wood claims are “created and sustained by the dominant ideology of imperialist capitalism” (148), such as the pleasures of unbridled consumerism.

Wood condemns the “mindless and automatic pleasure” of this serial cinema as “extremely reactionary” (146). With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that the content of the *Saw* films and how the films depict issues of power, privilege, whiteness, masculinity, and

class are so troubling. More specifically troubling is how the films portray white, middle-to-upper class men under threat and in danger of “disappearing,” when, in fact, privileged white men *are* the threat. In this way, the *Saw* series resembles Roth’s *Hostel* films. They both position privileged individuals as in danger and, thereby, justify violence against those “Others” – women, people of color, homosexuals, the underclass, non-Americans, etc. – who have put the privileged in danger. Similarly, the DVD format is crucial to the films’ messages and the ways in which they address their audiences. The *Saw* films on DVD, with their promises of interactivity and media consumption and creation, hail audience members who feel similarly to Jigsaw or Hoffman: that they, because of their privilege, are in danger of living life unrecognized and feel they must make themselves seen by purchasing *Saw* DVDs and memorabilia and/or producing *Saw* media like fan fiction or videos. Or it is possible, especially given the character’s popularity on YouTube, that the *Saw* films hail viewers like Amanda, who desire mastery of their world, but due to disadvantages, cannot obtain it.

CHAPTER VIII. EURO-SPLAT PACK: *HAUTE TENSION* AND *THE DESCENT*

Aja and Marshall: The Odd (European) Men Out Are Fan Favorites

Amidst the celeb-auteur bluster of Eli Roth, the rock-star persona of Rob Zombie, and the seemingly endless stream of *Saw* media products, two names that seem to get drowned out in the Splat Pack clamor are Alexandre Aja and Neil Marshall. Ironically, Aja and Marshall loomed large in Alan Jones's original article about hot young horror directors, with just as much ink devoted to Aja's and Marshall's observations on horror and its relationship to the current historical moment as to Roth's and Zombie's. However, when the term "the Splat Pack" migrated to the United States, Aja and Marshall seemed to fade into the background. Their films would be mentioned alongside Roth's, Zombie's, and the *Saw* films, but rarely would much attention be lavished on Aja and Marshall by interviewers or reporters. One fairly obvious reason Aja and Marshall may have gotten lost in the shuffle when the "Splat Pack" articles began to emerge in the United States is that they are the only two non-American members of the Splat Pack, with Aja hailing from France and Marshall from Great Britain.

Interestingly enough, their European origins are not the only similarity that Aja and Marshall share. In Jones's article, both filmmakers profess an admiration for hard-hitting, survivalist horror films of the past, from Craven's *Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* to Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* and Boorman's *Deliverance*. Accordingly, both of their breakthrough films – Aja's *Haute Tension* (released in France in 2003 and in the United States as *High Tension* in 2005) and Marshall's *The Descent* – were self-referential, metacinematic, but not camp exercises in horror filmmaking.

Aja's and Marshall's allusion-heavy films have made them darlings of more film-literate, "hardcore" horror fans, a group of fans that have not necessarily embraced the rest of the Splat

Pack. Indeed, while Roth and Zombie have gotten more mainstream attention and the *Saw* films have made more money, their success has caused them to be held in less esteem than filmmakers like Aja and Marshall. For instance, Roth's auteur-status has been given a boost from Tarantino's mentorship, but Tarantino's tutelage has caused some fans to regard Roth as an attention-hungry hack who is unable to "make it" without Tarantino's help. An example of this attitude can be found on Xixax.com, a website that describes itself as "film talk for cinephiles" and hosts various message boards and forums where "cinephiles" can discuss the work of their favorite directors. A select few directors are given forums of their own (tellingly, Roth is not one of them), and the links to each director's forum gives the director's name, with a short, witty description underneath. For instance, fan-favorite director Paul Thomas Anderson's description is simply "The Master," while Martin Scorsese's reads "Eyebrows. Oscar. Why try harder?" ("Index"). Quentin Tarantino's description is "Still committed to making Eli Roth happen," a barb that summarizes the way that many "cinephiles" feel about Roth, namely, that he is simply a "hanger-on" his marketing mentor is trying to force on the film-going world ("Index").

While these types of barbs have haunted Roth's career from its beginnings, Zombie was once generally accepted among hardcore horror fans. For instance, *The Devil's Rejects* was almost uniformly adored among horror fans. On the fan forums at Bloody-Disgusting.com, a top horror fan website, a fan posted a poll soliciting forum members' opinions of the movie. When the results were tallied, Zombie's film received 426 "thumbs up" votes and only 90 "thumbs down," a resounding victory for the film (*"The Devil's Rejects"* [2005]). However, fans began to turn against Zombie when he remade John Carpenter's *Halloween*, a film much beloved by horror aficionados. Fan dissatisfaction with Zombie is exemplified by a scathing review of the film by "Moriarty," one of the reviewers on Harry Knowles's AintItCool.com, a massive online

hub for movie fans. Moriarty decried Zombie's film as "creatively bankrupt from the start. It's a fairly awful, laden film, regardless of whether it's a remake or a sequel or an original"

(Moriarty). Even though Zombie's *Halloween* went on to be a moneymaker, the fan reaction was poor, as Moriarty's disapproval was echoed in the reader comments on his review, with fans endlessly crying foul over Zombie's reimagining of one of horror cinema's icons.

Similarly, the massive financial success of the *Saw* films virtually guaranteed that the films would not gain serious acceptance among hardcore horror fans. The average horror fan's opinion of the *Saw* films can be seen in a comment made on a discussion thread of Bloody Disgusting's message board entitled "series that have gone on for way too long." In this discussion of horror franchises that have overstayed their welcome, a particular fan shows disdain for the franchises spawned from films like *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker 1987), *The Howling* (Joe Dante, 1981), and *Puppet Master* (David Schmoeller, 1989). However, the fan admits: "I actually have fun watching the saw [sic] movies and look forward to them every year, yeah I know the twists and acting are laughable, I like the dumb cheesiness" ("Series"). This quote illustrates that the *Saw* films are profitable – horror fans go to see them even though they know they are "laughable" and "dumb" – but, at the same time, devalued and not cherished by *real* horror fans.

This is not the case, however, with the works of Aja and Marshall. This can be seen an article posted on 24 October 2006 on the movie website Cinematical by Scott Weinberg. Weinberg's article, pointedly titled "Enough of This 'Splat Pack' Stuff Already," is an extended rant inspired by Keegan's article on the Splat Pack in *Time*. Weinberg angrily claims that there is no reason for this grouping of directors: "But what do these guys have in common, really, other than the fact that they all make horror flicks?" (Weinberg). He continues on to ask: "And why is

it that Neil Marshall never seems to be quoted in these articles? Is he just included because his movies are . . . GOOD?” (Weinberg). The implication is that Marshall’s name is only evoked in articles like Keegan’s to lend validity to the rest of the Splat Pack, whom, predictably, Weinberg is not too fond of. Further, Weinberg’s question insinuates that mainstream journalists, like Keegan, only talk to directors with a lot of hype, like Roth, and overlook the “real” directors that are doing “good work.” Weinberg spends much of his article talking about directors that Keegan overlooked and complains that Keegan “approach[es] horror flicks the same way a prissy schoolmarm would approach some inappropriate comic books” (Weinberg). By Weinberg’s estimation, Keegan is not a “true” fan and thus overlooks the “true” horror of directors like Marshall and Aja.

Indeed, the films of these “hardcore” directors contain many pleasures for the well-versed horror fan. Aja’s *Haute Tension*, which Aja co-wrote with his writing partner Grégory Levasseur, resurrects many of the conventions and tropes of American slasher films from the 1970s and 80s as it tells the story of the peril that befalls two college-age women, Marie (Cécile De France) and Alex (Maïween Le Besco), as they plan to spend a weekend in country studying at the isolated home of Alex’s parents (Andrei Finti and Oana Pellea). In the middle of the night, a mysterious stranger (Philippe Nahon) forces his way into the house, brutally murders Alex’s parents and little brother (Marco Claudiu Pascu), and kidnaps Alex. Marie is able to evade the killer and gives chase when he leaves with Alex bound and gagged in the back of his truck. Marie eventually confronts the killer and is able to overcome him, but when she attempts to free her friend, Alex is, surprisingly, terrified of her. It is then revealed that Marie has a split personality and is, in fact, the murderer of Alex’s family. Apparently, her lesbian desire for Alex drove her to kill Alex’s family, take Alex hostage, and then “save” her. Although this last-minute

plot twist jettisoned the verisimilitude of *Haute Tension*'s narrative, it did seem to suggest that Aja was both familiar with the conventions of the slasher movie and interested in playing with the gender politics of these conventions, especially those discussed by Carol Clover in her influential, "Her Body, Himself" essay.

Neil Marshall's *The Descent* is less audacious than Aja's *Haute Tension*, but the ways in which Marshall's film plays with genre and gender conventions are no less ambitious. The film tells the story of six female outdoors enthusiasts who go on a spelunking adventure in a remote cave in the Appalachian Mountains one year after the unexpected deaths, in an automobile accident, of the husband and daughter of Sarah (Shauna Macdonald), one of the members of the group. Unfortunately for the women, the cave turns out to be the dwelling place for a breed of savage, sub-human predators that begin to ruthlessly kill and consume the women when they get lost in the cave. In an attempt to survive, the women must become as brutal as the subhuman "Crawlers" (as the film's closing credits calls them), with Sarah slipping farther into brutality, and ultimately madness, than the others.

Like Aja, Marshall draws heavily from horror films of the past. For instance, there are clear parallels between *Deliverance* and Marshall's film in that they both deal with a group of urban thrill-seekers being supremely tested in the wilderness. However, the most striking ur-text to Marshall's film is John Carpenter's 1982 remake of *The Thing*. Indeed, *The Descent* and Carpenter's *The Thing* share much in common. An isolated group is faced with a monstrous, undefeatable threat, there is an apocalyptic ending in which no one from the group survives, and the group of protagonists are made up entirely of members of the same sex, men in *The Thing* and women in *The Descent*. Indeed, the work of Aja and Marshall is especially well-suited for

the DVD era, when consumers were encouraged to own films and the well-versed horror fan would have all the films referenced by Aja and Marshall easily at hand on the DVD shelf.

Monstrous Femininity, Frame Stories, and Intertextuality

There are advantages and rewards, beyond mere pleasure, for the hardcore horror fan who can recognize the intertextuality of these films and recognize their allusions, for these films' metacinematic elements are closely connected with how these films explore gender, particularly femininity. Both *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* feature women in leading roles. Moreover, femininity is not incidental to these films' stories, as the potential monstrosity of female desire is a central focus of both films. In *Haute Tension*, Marie's desire for Alex causes the killer to be released from Marie's subconscious. Shortly after the Crawlers besiege the group of female spelunkers in *The Descent*, Sarah learns that before her husband died, he was having an affair with one of her fellow spelunkers, her best friend, Juno (Natalie Mendoza). The Crawlers eventually kill off everyone in the group, leaving only Sarah and Juno. After the duo fight together and kill a group of the savage mutants, Sarah turns on Juno, ripping into her knee with a sharp pick ax and leaving her, alone and wounded, to fend for herself against an oncoming onslaught of Crawlers. Juno is thus punished for violating Sarah's desire with her own.

One could argue that these depictions of female desire are not exactly examples of a progressive prospective. Indeed, both *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* offer representations of female desire that are at times horrendous. However, these depictions of monstrous feminine desire are embedded within metacinematic, intertextual films that, through their citations of other filmic texts, foreground their own constructedness and present their representations as just that: representations. Aja's film does this through the subtle use of a frame story that undermines the verisimilitude of the embedded narrative. Marshall employs an intertextual, allusion-heavy style

that makes his film, at times, resemble ideological parody. The representations of monstrous women in Aja's and Marshall's films draw so heavily and overtly from images of monstrous women from past horror films that their films seem to interrogate, rather than substantiate, the idea of woman-as-monstrous.

This exploration of representation is intimately tied to the commodity status of these films. As metacinematic intertextual films, their status as films is foregrounded. Further, the films' journey through the marketplace as commodities also tells us a great deal about the DVD era. For Aja and Marshall share one final, crucial similarity besides their European origins and their films' concerns with intertextuality and gender: both of their key films faced obstacles and underwent significant changes when Lionsgate brought them to the United States.

The "Tampered-With" Film on DVD: Foregrounding Commodity and Process

The most infuriating front-office decisions were visited upon *Haute Tension*. After the film was released to minor success in France in 2003 and in the United Kingdom in 2004 (where it was released under the title *Switchblade Romance*), Lionsgate acquired rights to distribute it in the United States under the title *High Tension*. Inspired and bolstered, no doubt, by the sleeper successes of horror films like Eli Roth's *Cabin Fever* and James Wan's *Saw*, Lionsgate decided to release Aja's film on 10 June, 2005, right in the middle of the highly competitive summer movie season. Even as Lionsgate made this bold decision, however, they hedged their bets. In order to improve the film's chances for success in the US, they decided to dub a great deal of the film's spoken dialogue, rather than releasing the film in French with English subtitles. According to Aja, Lionsgate was worried that "if the film were released with subtitles, it would only play in art houses" (qtd. in Lamkin). They decided to dub the film's first half and allow the film's later sequences, which are light on dialogue, to be subtitled. This hybridized dubbed/subtitled version

of the film could have caused confusion if audiences had shown up for the film, but they did not. The film grossed only one-point-eight million dollars in its opening weekend and grossed a total of only three-point-six million during its meager three-week theatrical run (“*High Tension*”).

Still, the true *High Tension* release of interest for horror fans was the DVD release, handsomely packaged in Tim Palen’s designs, that followed a few months later in October 2005, just in time for Halloween. The *High Tension* DVD included extras that were, by now, expected and required by fans: feature commentary, a making-of documentary, and, for the DVD’s “Unrated” version, the restoration of over a minute of gore that was reportedly cut from the film’s international version for release in the US. However, the DVD release of *High Tension* differs from other films that had been “restored” on DVD in that it still bears what Timothy Corrigan would call the “material scars” of the film’s confused American release. For instance, the DVD’s main menu features four options: “Play,” “Set Up,” “Scene Selections,” and “Special Features.” If the viewer selects the “Play” option, the DVD defaults to playing the film with the first half dubbed in English, just like the film was presented in theaters in the US. If the viewer wants to watch the film with English subtitles and French audio or with just French audio, the viewer has to select “Set Up” from the main menu and turn off the English dubbing and select the preferred subtitles or audio. Tellingly, the ability to watch the film in either the “Original French Language Director’s Cut Version” or the “U.S. English Language Dubbed Version” is touted on the DVD’s sleeve as a special feature of the DVD. Thus, the film’s aurally circuitous path to release as a commodity in American theaters is also a vital part of the film’s status as a DVD commodity.

The case of Neil Marshall’s *The Descent* is similarly confusing. The film was first released in the United Kingdom in August 2005 to moderate box office and solid reviews. After

the film grossed just under five million dollars in the United Kingdom and enjoyed similar success in other European territories, Lionsgate acquired the rights to distribute it in the United States (“*The Descent*”). Lionsgate did not have a language barrier to overcome with the release of *The Descent*, and perhaps learning a lesson from their release of *High Tension*, they gave the film a better release date than was afforded to *High Tension*. *The Descent* opened in August, a month that falls between the summer movie season and the fall award season and is good for sleeper hits. Predictably, *The Descent* fared much better than *High Tension*: it grossed a solid eight-point-nine million dollars over its opening weekend and went on to gross a respectable twenty-six million dollars during the course of its ten week theatrical run (“*The Descent*”).

However, *The Descent* did not achieve this moderate box office success without being subject to a case of front-office tampering. The changes made to *The Descent* mostly had to do with the film’s conclusion. The ending of the film that Marshall wrote, shot, and edited for the UK and European release of the film was extremely downbeat. After Sarah breaks Juno’s knee and leaves her to the Crawlers, Sarah attempts to find an exit from the cave. She slips, falls through a narrow pipe of the cave, falls on a huge pile of bones, and is knocked unconscious. The situation is not as bleak as it seems, however, as a shaft of sunlight illuminates Sarah’s surroundings. She regains consciousness and begins desperately climbing the pile of bones in an attempt to reach the sunlight. After a long, excruciating climb, Sarah, blood-covered and gasping for breath, breaks the surface, as orchestral music swells on the soundtrack. Sarah then runs screaming to one of the SUVs that she and her friends had taken to the cave, jumps in, and drives away at top speed. She eventually pulls over by the side of the road and weeps uncontrollably. After being startled by a passing eighteen-wheeler, Sarah hangs her head out of the driver’s window of the SUV and vomits. When she swings her head back into the SUV, she (and the

audience) is startled by the sight of Juno, pale-skinned and blood coming from her eyes, sitting in the passenger seat.

Sarah screams, and the film cuts back to the cave, just as Sarah is regaining consciousness after her earlier fall. The pile of bones, the sunlight, and Sarah's escape were all merely a dream. Sarah hears the screams of the Crawlers in the distance and begins to rise, but as she does, she is stopped by the sound of her dead daughter whispering, "Mommy." Sarah peers into the darkness and sees, improbably, sitting in front of her in the cave her daughter Jessica, alive and well, and a birthday cake with illuminated candles. At various points throughout the film, Sarah has had visions of Jessica, posed behind this birthday cake and ready to blow out the candles. When Jessica and the cake appear at this point, with a blood-soaked Sarah gazing lovingly at them, it is clear that Sarah has gone insane, retreating completely into her mind to avoid the trauma surrounding her. The point of Sarah's insanity is punctuated by the film's final shot, as Sarah is shown staring off into the darkness of the cave at nothing while the howls of the Crawlers fill the soundtrack, insinuating that they will soon close in on Sarah.

According to Marshall, this was the ending that he had always planned for *The Descent*. Marshall explains that at one point during post-production, he grew frustrated with the difficulty of editing the ending with Sarah back in the cave and, in anger, threatened to end the film with Sarah in the SUV being startled by the ghost of Juno ("DescENDING"). Nevertheless, he solved the editing problems, and the film was released in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe with his intended ending. However, when Lionsgate acquired the distribution rights for the movie in the United States, they held test screenings with both endings: Marshall's original and the truncated version that ends with Sarah seeing Juno's ghost. Ultimately, the truncated version of the ending scored high with audiences, so Lionsgate approached Marshall about releasing the

film in the United States with the ghost ending. Marshall agreed, explaining in a later interview, “We only agreed to [release the film with the shorter ending] on the basis that they were going to give us a wide release” (qtd. in Rotten). While many may expect an auteur like Marshall to be upset about the ending of his film being tampered with in such a substantial manner (in effect, one ending depicts the lead character as surviving whereas the other does not, a rather significant difference in the film’s narrative), Marshall was not troubled by Lionsgate’s mandate, claiming, “From my point of view, I got what I wanted which was to get a maximum release and I knew the other ending was going to be seen on the uncut DVD anyway” (qtd. in Rotten). Marshall’s blasé attitude toward changing the ending of *The Descent* for its theatrical release is a testament to just how much the DVD market had changed attitudes toward “final cut” and the stability of film commodities.

Sure enough, when Lionsgate released *The Descent* on DVD as an “Original Unrated Cut” edition in December 2006, Marshall’s original ending for the film’s initial UK release was restored. However, the changes that the film underwent for its American release remain at issue, as one of the DVD release’s key extra features is a short filmed interview cleverly entitled “DescENDING – Interview with Neil Marshall.” In this interview, Marshall explains the original problems that he had with editing the ending and how Lionsgate suggested that he go with the shorter ending in the United States because it tested higher with audiences. Of course, considering that this DVD is a product of Lionsgate, Marshall is very diplomatic when describing the scenario of the film’s United States release and the test screenings the film underwent. For instance, he says that it was his idea to test the two different endings with American audiences. Additionally, he does not claim that Lionsgate made him change the ending and only remarks that they were “happier to go with the shorter ending because it tested better”

(“DescENDING”). Regardless, similar to the situation with *High Tension*, the “tampering-with” that *The Descent* underwent on its journey to theatrical exhibition in the United States remains a part of the product as a film-on-DVD commodity.

Thus, if *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* are films that, to a certain extent, wear their intertextual references on their sleeves, they have also been forced, due to the circumstances of their American releases, to wear their commodity status on their sleeves as well, both metaphorically and literally in the case of their DVD packaging. After all, the changes made to these films were made in hopes that they would gross more box office dollars. Rather than bemoaning this situation, however, I believe that the ways in which these films exist at the intersection of cinematic “art” and commercial product make them especially useful films to understand issues of power and, in the specific case of these two women-centered films, gender. The type of cinematic bricolage practiced by filmmakers like Aja and Marshall opens up a space to interrogate these representations; their films’ very consciously self-reflexive depiction of women has an alienation effect and opens up a space in which representations can be more easily recognized as representations.

Moreover, these self-reflexive cinematic representations are made available on a material base – the DVD – that further opens up the films to interrogation. Here, it is useful to adduce work by J. P. Telotte and Timothy Corrigan on the appeal of the “cult movie.” According to Telotte:

[the] conditions of production [of many cult films] suggest just the sort of *bricolage* that characterizes these films, a catch-as-catch-can approach toward production that seems more their rule than an exception. Perhaps the forthrightly

‘crude’ look that often results [in cult movies] . . . [makes] us aware of [cinematic] illusion. (10-1)

In other words, Telotte argues that the low budgets, shoddy production values, and amateurish filmmaking of many cult movies make the audience overtly aware that they are watching a movie and invites them to actively engage in the meaning-making of the film. While one would be hard-pressed to call either *Haute Tension* or *The Descent* crude or shoddily made – in fact, both films are slickly and professionally produced and backed by substantial budgets – the changes to which these films were subjected for their theatrical release, changes that are well-documented on their DVD releases, seem to foreground the behind-the-scenes processes it took to produce these films and, especially in the case of the dubbing job done on *High Tension*, could come across as rather crude, thus opening these films up to a more participatory spectatorship than usual.

Similarly, Timothy Corrigan claims that many films that achieve cult status do so because they bear the “material scars” of a less than ideal production (“Film” 30). These material scars can include noticeably fake, cardboard sets, faulty line deliveries by the actors that had to be left in because of a lack of time or budget to do reshoots, continuity errors made for similar reasons, and mismatched wardrobes. Material scars can also, according to Corrigan, include problems with studio interference; a specific example of this offered by Corrigan is Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* and “the harsh cuts and breaks which resulted from the studio’s taking the film’s editing out of Welles’s hands” (“Film” 30). Corrigan feels that these material scars “provide . . . crucial openings” into the film that “let the viewer remake the film as what it might have been” (“Film” 30). In other words, the viewer becomes aware of the cinematic apparatus and is better able to participate in the film’s meaning-making process.

Again, while *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* were decently budgeted films and not necessarily plagued with production problems, they were subjected to changes by their distributors, and as has been argued here, the DVD releases of these films make this tampering a vital part of the product. For instance, if noticing material scars enables one, in Corrigan's words, to "remake the film as what it might have been," then an extra feature like "DescENDING" on the DVD release of *The Descent* provides an extremely obvious example for viewers of how a film's meaning can be interacted with and remade. Thus, I believe that the ability to read these films in ways that highlight how they interrogate the representation of gender in horror is intimately tied to their status as a tampered-with film-commodity-on-DVD.

Haute Tension: Framing Monstrous Feminine Desire

As mentioned previously, Aja's *Haute Tension* seems, at first, to represent female desire – more specifically, homosexual feminine desire – in the worst possible light. Further, the film's representation of feminine desire, as embodied by the character of Marie, appears to follow a problematic tradition of troubling representations in Hollywood film, horror and otherwise. For instance, Linda Williams, in her landmark article, "When the Woman Looks," analyzes some of these depictions of feminine desire in Hollywood cinema. Following Laura Mulvey, Williams notes that "In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire," and then points out that women in classical narrative cinema are often denied mastery of vision and, as a result, the ability to desire (15).

Marie's vision and her desire drive the narrative of *Haute Tension*. This emphasis is clear from the film's beginning. The film opens with a dream sequence (intercut with an opening credits sequence) in which a bruised, battered, and bloodied Marie limps through the woods, presumably pursued by an unseen assailant. When the dream ends, the film cuts to a close-up of

Marie's eye opening, and the narrative proper begins. It is soon revealed that she had been sleeping in the back of the car while Alex takes a shift driving to her parents' house in the country. In other words, the opening of Marie's eye, shown in a close-up that emphasizes the importance of her vision, is what activates the film's narrative. Marie's vision and her power to activate the film's narrative are linked specifically to her desire in a corollary scene that takes place after Marie and Alex arrive at Alex's parents' home. As Alex's parents settle in for bed and the house grows dark and silent, Marie, who has seemed uncomfortable in these surroundings since they arrived, goes outside to smoke a cigarette. She walks a good distance from the house and sits down in a swing (presumably built by Alex's parents for her little brother) that gives her a view of the entire house. From here, she sees Alex in an upstairs window. Alex, unsuspecting of Marie's voyeurism, is naked and taking a shower.

Afterward, Marie comes back in the house, goes to her room, and, still fully clothed, gets into bed. Next, she puts on some headphones and listens to music, and supposedly aroused by the sight of Alex in the shower, she slides her hand down the front of her jeans and begins to masturbate. Her masturbation is intercut with shots of the killer approaching the house in his beat-up, but menacing truck. As Marie begins to reach a climax, the killer arrives at the house to begin his/her killing spree. These early scenes suggest what the big reveal of the film's conclusion make explicit: in this film, the monster is a product of Marie's desire, which is activated through her vision. This is why, Williams argues, women in the cinema who look and desire always "must be punished in the end" (17). As Williams explains it, there is often "a surprising . . . affinity between monster and woman" (18), and in the horror film, the woman's "look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures" (18). In other words, Williams convincingly argues that cinema often both conflates women and monsters and

“demonstrate[s] how monstrous female desire can be” (33). One could argue that *Haute Tension* continues in this tradition as Marie’s vision of Alex in the shower and her desire for Alex combine to unleash the monstrousness that destroys Alex’s family with a bloody ferocity. Moreover, Marie and the monster of *Haute Tension* share more than their “status within patriarchal structures”: they *are* the same person, existing in a state of split subjectivity.

In this way, Marie seems to be the stereotypical female monster when considered in light of Barbara Creed’s feminist framework for approaching the horror film. Like Williams, Creed argues that horror films (and patriarchal culture) have consistently conflated women and monsters and constructed “the maternal figure as the monstrous-feminine” (42). Adapting the work of Julia Kristeva, Creed argues that these maternal, female figures in horror films are abject. She writes: “One of the key features of abjection is the mother who becomes an abject at that moment when the child rejects her for the father who represents the symbolic order” (36). However, when the abject returns in the form of a woman in the horror film, she “threaten[s] a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as ‘whole and proper’” (Creed 43). The threat is often accompanied by “Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, and so forth” that are “central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific” (Creed 43).

One aspect of Marie’s character that makes her an abject figure is her aforementioned spilt subjectivity. If the symbolic order insists that one’s subjectivity be constructed as “whole and proper,” Marie’s fractured subjectivity could be construed as a threat to this order. It is certainly a threat to Alex’s parents, whom Marie murders in particularly gruesome ways. In specific, Alex’s father is slashed in the face with a razor, and after he falls to the floor, she drags him to a staircase and wedges his head between two rails of the staircase’s banister. Then, she forcefully shoves a large, wooden bureau into his trapped head, decapitating him. The murder of

Alex's mother is similarly excessive: her throat is slashed open, and her hand is chopped off for no discernable reason other than sheer cruelty. Significantly, both murders involve dismemberment, a clear indication that Marie is violently casting her fractured subjectivity upon those she sees as standing in the way of the consummation of her desires. Additionally, just as Creed argues that the threat of the abject is usually accompanied by images of abjected fluids like blood, Marie appears early in the film, in the dream sequence mentioned earlier, covered in blood and limping through the woods. Most of the blood is pouring from an open wound in her side, a wound that, it is later revealed, she receives when Alex stabs her in self-defense. Thus, the horrific violence that Marie is about to unleash upon Alex and her family is announced in Marie's prophetic dream, by blood, a disgust-inducing fluid that positions Marie as abject, both victim and killer. In these ways, Marie is depicted as another iteration of the abject monstrous feminine, a construct of patriarchal culture.

Marie's character seems not only to reflect biased depictions of women, but of homosexuals as well. In fact, Aja's film seems to participate in what Kent L. Brintnall terms "Christian rhetorics regarding sexual deviance and the perversity of queer desire" (146). It may, at first, seem odd to find Christian rhetoric in a slasher film, but Brintnall, in his article "Re-Building Sodom and Gomorrah: The Monstrosity of Queer Desire in the Horror Film," convincingly argues that conservative Christian writings and beliefs on homosexuality often overlap with how queer desire is depicted in horror films. This is certainly the case with *Haute Tension*, with Marie's character embodying many of the characteristics Christian rhetoric and horror films ascribe to queer desire. More specifically, Marie's queerness falls in line with Christian rhetoric and horror film convention in her decadence and how her desire is depicted as a threat not just to an individual, but to the social fabric as well.

When she is introduced in the film's opening scenes of Marie and Alex in the car, Marie possesses many of the stereotypical visual markers of lesbianism, such as a short, "butch" haircut and an athletic build, that set her apart from the more "feminine" Alex, who has long hair and talks almost non-stop about a man she hopes to date. Even more interesting, however, is how Marie's and Alex's opinions differ on their destination. While Alex seems to be excited about the prospects of some quiet time out in the country and temporarily leaving behind the pleasures of city and college life, Marie, seemingly dissatisfied, wonders if there are any "cool clubs" they could go to. Here, Marie's fixation on clubbing and partying seems in line with the insistence that Brintall notices in Christian rhetoric that queer desire "is a sexual sin that stems from disordered desire resulting from an excessive attachment to material and bodily pleasures" (148). This belief that queer desire is caused by a combination of excessive love for "material and bodily" pleasure is especially present in the key scene when Marie conjures up the killer by masturbating when listening to music on her headphones. This conjuring is made possible by her "excessive" love of the material (symbolized by her mp3 player and the music it produces) and the bodily (symbolized by her masturbation and her queer desire for Alex).

Marie's queer desire is made further monstrous by the ways in which it is depicted as "dangerous not only to the individual, but to the fate of the larger social order" (Brintall 148). Accordingly, in *Haute Tension*, Marie unleashes a monster with her queer desire that harms not only herself and Alex, but those around her as well. Further, as mentioned previously, the harm that Marie's queer desire unleashes upon others is markedly *excessive*: the deaths of Alex's father and mother are horrendous, gruesome, and gory, and her murder of Alex's little brother is chilling. Accordingly, while Marie's brutal violence against the family can be read as Marie inflicting her fractured sense of self upon the bodies of others, the excessive violence unleashed

by Marie's queer desire for Alex is also apocalyptic and seemingly threatens to end the world by destroying the heterosexual home, an ideological warehouse for generating gender roles in our patriarchal culture.

Indeed, the character of Marie seems to fit negative stereotypes of women and homosexuals, and this preponderance of evidence may understandably lead one to conclude that *Haute Tension* is a horror film of the most misogynistic and homophobic stripe. However, before coming to such a conclusion, one must contend with the film's self-reflexive, intertextual nature. True, while the depiction of Marie in the film may possess many of the hallmarks of negative representations of women in past horror films, this representation is framed as just that: a representation, the constructed nature of which is made apparent not only by clues in the cinematic text, but also the film's status as a commodity, which is emphasized by its DVD release.

Both the beginning and the final moments of *Haute Tension* are extremely significant in discerning the metatextual work at stake in the film in regards to the depiction of Marie's character. The first few moments of the film, before the opening of Marie's eye, with its troublesome ability to see and desire, that begins the narrative proper and before the dream sequence that positions Marie as abjected monster, are deceptively simple, but vitally important. As the credits begin to roll, Marie's voice, repeatedly whispering, "I won't let anyone come between us anymore," can be heard before anything is shown. Next, there is a shot of Marie's hands folded on her lap, as if in prayer. The next image is a tight shot midway up Marie's back, and this shot reveals she is wearing a hospital gown, loosely tied and exposing a great deal of her back. As the frame moves up her back, it is obvious that she has undergone some severe trauma, for her back is ravaged with deep cuts with jagged edges, large, discolored bruises, and

protruding metal staples on one of her wounds. As the frame reaches the back of Marie's head, the viewer can see that there is a camera, blurry in the background, pointed at her. Marie has her head down and is not paying attention to the camera until it makes a noise. The camera's noise prompts her to raise her head, face the camera, and ask, "Are they recording?" The film then dissolves quickly into Marie's dream sequence.

The fact that Marie is being held and observed in a mental hospital is not made explicit in these opening shots because making that obvious would ruin the film's twist ending. But the exact setting is not necessarily significant to the film's thematic. What is significant is that, from the outset, it is made clear that Marie's story is one being told on camera. In other words, her story and the images of her are filmic images constructed for the camera. The conclusion of the film tellingly answers the beginning: it is revealed that Marie has been captured and is being held for observation at an institution. As Marie rocks back and forth on a bed, still repeating the phrase from the film's opening, Alex looks on from the other side of a one-way mirror. Made nervous by the sight of Marie, Alex asks an unseen hospital worker: "She can't see me, right?" Just at that moment, inside the room, Marie turns to the one-way mirror, smiles, and thrusts her open arms toward the mirror, providing the film with a last-minute shock.

With the mirror in this scene acting as a "frame-within-a-frame" that recalls the experience of watching a film on a screen, Marie's character, and the monstrous femininity and homosexuality that her character seems to embody, becomes foregrounded as a construct of the homophobic, patriarchal culture that produced her (and this film). Thomas Elsaesser argues that the cinematic frame tale provides a particularly apt way of telling this type of story and, by extension, making particularly rich observations about culture and society. He writes:

A frame tale . . . produce[s] convolutions in the narration, by withholding and yet underlining information: mechanisms necessitated by the contradictory emotions of remorse, anxiety, and desire attached to the dramatic predicaments . . . They allow simultaneously both affirmation *and* denial, camouflaging what needs to be there but cannot be said out loud or openly endorsed. The framing device acts as a barrier or bar, an instance of narrational self-censorship, becoming the sign of a contradiction that the layered narration is called upon to repair. (87)

In other words, within the jumbled and confused storylines and emotions at play within a framed narrative, the frame can undermine or contradict what the nested narrative attempts to assert. In the case of *Haute Tension*, the frame story depicting Marie as a being conjured up by the cinematic apparatus – cameras, screens, etc. – forces one to pause before coming to any easy conclusions about the film’s main narrative.

Further, the film’s DVD release creates yet another frame around the nested narrative in *Haute Tension*. Not only does the DVD format make it possible to show the extremely bloody murders committed by Marie (reportedly over a minute of the film was cut so it could obtain an “R” rating in the US), but the DVD’s language default settings and selections implicitly tell the story of Lionsgate’s uncertainty of how to release the film to American audiences. This uncertainty of how to market the film further reveals Marie to be a filmic construct, a character in a nervous commodity. Thus, the metacinematic elements of *Haute Tension* meld with the commodity form of the film-on-DVD to make this film an interesting exploration of femininity and how it is often depicted by mainstream media as something monstrous.

Fittingly, media plays an important role in one of the film’s key scenes when it is revealed that Marie is the killer. While Marie is supposedly battling the killer for Alex’s life, the

police arrive at a convenience store where, earlier in the evening, the killer murdered Jimmy (Franck Khalfoun), a clerk who was working the night shift. The audience is initially led to believe that the killer murdered Jimmy by striking him in the chest with an ax. However, when the police captain (Jean-Claude de Goros) reviews the convenience store's security tapes, it is revealed that it was Marie, not her imagined killer, who murdered Jimmy with the ax.

Significantly, the "truth" of the film's surprise "twist" is revealed via videotape played back on a television. Thus, Marie is again "framed," this time by a media screen, as monstrous. In this scene, Aja's film begins to venue into the stylistic territory of *The Descent*, a film that also explores representations of monstrous femininity, not through a frame story but through intertextual allusions and the placement of media within the mise-en-scène.

Playing with Gender and Representation: The Intertextuality of *The Descent*

The intertextual aspects of *The Descent* highlight the often-troubling aspects of how the film represents women and turn these representations into an exploration of how women suffer under patriarchy. Admittedly, like *Haute Tension*, *The Descent* includes some representations of women that are problematic, as the film's narrative is replete with women who variously gaze, desire, and are punished for it. For instance, the film begins with Sarah, Juno, and Beth (Alex Reid) concluding a whitewater-rafting excursion as Sarah's husband, Paul (Oliver Milburn), and her young daughter, Jessie (Molly Kayll), watch from the riverbank. When the three women come ashore, the tension is immediately apparent. As Sarah runs to Jessie and showers her with motherly affection, Paul slowly and lovingly removes Juno's helmet. Beth notes this gesture, and the look on her face signals that she knows that something is going on between Juno and Sarah's husband.

One year later, after the deaths of Paul and Jessie in an automobile accident, Sarah, Juno, Beth, and three other friends embark on the spelunking adventure where they encounter the Crawlers, and their ghastly fates could be read as punishment for their gazing and desiring. After all, it is Sarah's gaze that first brings the Crawlers into the field of vision. Beth, the person whose sight gave her knowledge of Juno's relationship with Sarah's husband, is killed by Juno during an attack by the Crawlers; Juno hears someone approaching her from behind in the darkness and blindly swings around, planting a pick-axe through Beth's throat. Although the strike was an accident, one wonders if the reason Juno slinks off, leaving Beth to die, and tells the others that a Crawler killed her is because Beth knew about her affair with Sarah's husband. More obvious is that Juno is punished for her desire, as Sarah, who learns about the affair from Beth in her dying moments, wounds Juno and leaves her behind to be ripped apart by the Crawler's ragged claws and hungry mouths. Ultimately, there is no shortage of women who see, desire, and are punished for it in *The Descent*.

Further, Creed's theories on abjection, the maternal, and women in horror films are readily applicable to *The Descent*. Marshall clearly evinces his intention to depict these women's journey into the cave as a journey into the womb, and Sarah is nearly a textbook example of the monstrous-feminine that Creed describes in her essay. First, she is a mother who feels rejected and dejected by the untimely demise of her daughter. Secondly, and more importantly, Sarah, more than all the other women, is abject, troubling borders the most; she is the one who falls into the pool of blood, bile, and shit and emerges, covered in this waste, as an abjected feminine monster.

However, while the interpretation made possible by these frameworks offers a useful corrective to reading *The Descent* as unequivocally progressive or feminist, it still does not do

justice to the complexity of Marshall's film, nor does it adequately analyze the ways in which Marshall explores and plays with the issue of gender. To delve further into what the film is saying about gender, it is useful to consider the film's intertextuality and metacinematic nature. While Marshall's film might at first seem rather straightforward in the presentation of its narrative, *The Descent* features a complex intertext that liberally borrows or quotes from other films. These citations ultimately open up a space for the spectator to "see through" the representational apparatus of the film and question the film's representation of femininity.

A consideration of how Marshall chooses to present – and represent – Sarah and Beth's fateful journey into the mountains one year after Sarah's car accident aptly illustrates how Marshall utilizes a filmmaking style dependent upon filmic citations. After *The Descent*'s title card, the camera fades in on an aerial shot of the mountains while a title card reads, "Appalachian Mountains, USA." This aerial shot fades into another image of the mountains and another card that reads "One Year Later," and this shot then fades into third aerial shot of Beth and Sarah's tiny automobile traveling along a deserted mountain road. Marshall notes that these shots are his "little homage to *The Shining* [Stanley Kubrick, 1980]" ("Commentary"), referring, of course, to the celebrated aerial shots depicting the Torrance family's journey into the Rocky Mountains that open Kubrick's film. After these images, the film cuts to inside the automobile, with Beth complaining that the only radio stations in the American South locale are "mud, blood, and beer or sweet Jesus." Beth and Sarah then drive by a sign that reads "Welcome to Chatooga National Park." Chatooga is, as Marshall happily notes on the film's audio commentary, "the name of the river that [Burt] Reynolds and company raft down in *Deliverance*" ("Commentary"). From the start, it seems as if Sarah and her friends are journeying into a veritable "movie land," a landscape made up of a bricologe of filmic texts.

The storytelling techniques that Marshall uses in these scenes, and throughout *The Descent*, resemble the bricolage style that Timothy Corrigan sees in cult movies. For Corrigan, cult filmmakers and audiences are “cultural revisionists. What they do is to wrench representations from their naturalized and centralized positions and create . . . ‘glorious incoherence’” (“Film” 28). Corrigan argues that amidst this incoherence “any sense of legitimacy or true place for the original representations becomes exactly what is under attack” (“Film” 28). In other words, bricolage, with its combinations of already-seen representations, can foreground the constructedness of representation and invite the audience to question the representation. These moments from *The Descent*, with their allusions to *The Shining* and *Deliverance* and the exaggerated notion of the South as a milieu of mud, blood, beer, and Jesus, set up the world of the film as a deliberately phony, meta-textual environment and invite the spectator into the text to interrogate it.

These notions are underscored by the first glimpse that the film offers of the “Welcome to Chatooga National Park” sign. Before cutting to the front of the sign, Marshall first depicts the sign from the back in a close-up shot that only allows the spectator to see it as metal and holes; these holes are apparently the result of someone shooting the moose on the front of the sign with a shotgun. This shot is significant for two reasons. First, by showing the spectator the *back* of the sign, Marshall seems to be letting the audiences *behind* the scenes in order to foreground the film as constructed. Second, the prominence of the holes in the sign is perhaps analogous to the holes in the film’s bricolage that offers the spectator a way into the text and allows the spectator to consider the film’s representations as just that: a representation.

The world underground in the caves is no less intertextual or metacinematic than the world aboveground in *The Descent*. One of the women, Holly (Nora-Jane Noone), brings along a

video camera with which she captures the various sights and sounds that the women encounter in the cave before the attack of the Crawlers. Besides recalling another horror film, *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), Holly's video camera constantly serves as a metacinematic reminder to the spectator that what is being shown is, in fact, a movie, a constructed representation. Tellingly, the first time one of the Crawlers is clearly seen is through the camera's lens when Sarah is using its infrared capabilities to see in the absolute dark of the cave. Later, Sarah, while hiding, sees the Crawlers bloodily and greedily consume Holly's dead body through the lens of the camera. The Crawlers are truly cinematic monsters in the ways they are framed and brought to life on a screen-within-a-screen. Thus, *The Descent* allows the spectator to notice and contemplate not only the constructedness of representation, but also how our culture captures and envisions the monstrous.

A striking instance in which Marshall mediates the construction and cinematic representation of the monstrous is the moment when Sarah falls into the pool of blood and waste in the Crawlers' lair. Sarah's head and face first surface in the pool in a shot that is taken almost directly from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola, 1979), and when she fully emerges, covered in blood, she looks like Sissy Spacek's eponymous character from De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). If one fails to consider the intertextual in this scene, the blood-soaked Sarah can be taken to represent either the breakdown of distinctions between normality and the monstrous or as the ultimate epitome of the abjected monstrous feminine. However, the overt references to two well known moments from two well known films makes obvious this pastiche of textual citations, a bricolage that, as Corrigan argues, interrogates "any sense of legitimacy or true place for the original representations" ("Film" 28). Thus, if De Palma's film is, as Shelly Stamp Lindsey describes it, "a masculine fantasy in which the feminine is constituted as monstrous" (281), then

Marshall's citation of its imagery here questions the legitimacy of this masculine construction of the feminine as monstrous. This sort of interrogation is made possible by *The Descent's* intertextuality.

In this way, *The Descent's* intertextuality resembles the type of ideological parody that Marsha Kinder finds in the films of Wim Winders, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and other directors of the New German Cinema movement. Beginning with Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as "a repetition with a difference [that] can range from scornful ridicule to reventual homage" (qtd in Kinder 73), Kinder describes postmodern ideological parody as a discourse that takes as "its primary target not the artistic works or dead styles being imitated but the ideological inscription they carry" (73). In other words, Marshall's citation of *Carrie* is not merely an homage to De Palma, but within the intertextual play established in the film, an interrogation of the problematic ways in which patriarchal horror films of the past have depicted women as monstrous.

Kinder argues that "ideological parody demonstrates that such stories and genres can be rewritten and revitalized to show how the inscription of patriarchal capitalism constructs subjectivity in individual characters" (73). At the moment when Sarah emerges from the blood pool, her character epitomizes Kinder's claim that in an ideological parody, the characters are often "presented both as victim and embodiment of the destructive ideological forces to be resisted" (74). More precisely, Sarah seems like the monstrous feminine of patriarchal culture, but the film's foregrounding of the representational apparatus makes it apparent that Sarah is actually a victim of the film's signifying system.

However, perhaps the most radical statement, at least in terms of gender, that *The Descent* makes through its intertextuality is how it subverts the signifying system of John

Carpenter's version of *The Thing*. As mentioned previously, *The Descent* and *The Thing* have much in common: a seemingly undefeatable threat, an apocalyptic ending, and a group under threat that is made up entirely of same-gender members, men in *The Thing* and women in *The Descent*. Many commentators have argued that the extraterrestrial monster that threatens the all-male personnel of the Antarctic base in *The Thing* is actually a monstrous woman in disguise. For instance, Anne Billson writes:

One . . . reading of *The Thing* is of the monster as the eternal female. Viewed in this context, the entire film becomes the story of man's desperate attempts to preserve the beleaguered masculine identity that is constantly under siege from predatory women, the female gender being a breed apart, considered as somehow not quite human. (37)

Peter Hutchings concurs with this reading, remarking that "The alien [in *The Thing*] is amorphous, without fixed form, and it multiplies through the physical absorption and incorporation of its male victims. In this, it can be seen as exhibiting characters of the pre-Oedipal, maternal figure" ("Masculinity" 90). Carpenter's *The Thing* is certainly not unlike other horror films in how its monster is depicted as femininity run rampant.

However, unlike many other horror films that are consumed then quickly forgotten, *The Thing*, as Ian Conrich points out, has gained a massive, devoted following and is "precious to many fans" (103). Conrich argues that fans of *The Thing* have a tendency to be "active as consumers and textual poachers" who "[borrow] from the mass media and [construct] new meaning from favored sources of fiction" (103). Marshall, an admitted fan of both Carpenter and *The Thing*, performs a similar "poaching" of *The Thing* in *The Descent* and creates new meaning from the text by inverting and subverting its gender dynamics. More specifically, if the monster

in *The Thing* is the “eternal female” in opposition to the all-male group of victims, then perhaps, since the group of victims in *The Descent* is all-female, the Crawlers represent the “eternal male” or, more specifically, the monstrosity of patriarchy. Marshall’s film gestures toward the possibility of this reading several times throughout the film. For instance, when Sarah first catches a brief glimpse of a Crawler in the dark, she returns to tell the group, and when asked what she saw, she simply says, “A man. I saw a man.” Hence, the first description that the spectator gets of the monsters is one that is decidedly gendered as male.

Perhaps even more striking is the scene in which Sarah kills her first Crawler. After she beats the Crawler to death, a female Crawler with long hair and breasts emerges from the darkness and whimpers over the dead body of what could very well have been her “husband.” Until this point, all of the Crawlers who have been actively hunting and attacking the women have not had long hair or breasts, insinuating that the male Crawlers are the hunter/gatherers while the female Crawlers watch over hearth and home. The moment with Sarah and the female Crawler registers as uncanny because it is both disturbing and familiar, suggesting that the economy of the Crawlers in the caves down below is not so different from the dominant patriarchal economy of people who live above. Unlike the slimy, amorphous, abjected, “feminine” monster of *The Thing*, the Crawlers in *The Descent* have a shape, structure, and order – a distinctly patriarchal order.

This reading of the Crawlers as representing the monstrosity of patriarchy could not come into clear view without considering Marshall’s *The Descent* as a complex intertext and a metacinematic exercise, citing and subverting *The Thing* and *Carrie* among others. By extension, evaluating *The Descent* as intertextual and metacinematic helps to retain the film’s capacity for a progressive political reading while not eliding the problematic connections that that film and our

patriarchal culture make between femininity and monstrosity. In *The Descent*, the female characters appear and act monstrous because patriarchy, as represented by the Crawlers, *forces* them to, just as patriarchal culture has often constructed femininity as monstrous and has rarely been able to understand and represent women's desire as anything other than horrifying. Marshall's radical bricolage in *The Descent* foregrounds the constructedness of representation and allows the spectator to notice these constructions and, perhaps, question them.

The Descent ends in a moment that seems to be "real" and "sincere": Sarah reunited in fantasy with her deceased daughter while the Crawlers encircle her. But this is actually another filmic quotation, this time, as Marshall has noted, "kind of borrowed from Terry Gilliam's original ending for *Brazil* [1985]" ("DescENDING"). However, there is no need for Marshall to fret about his textual quotations or feel that they make his film lack "seriousness"; as argued here, they offer the spectator a way into the text and a space in which the spectator can interrogate the text. While psychoanalytically informed readings of the film can produce insightful interpretations, they simply cannot do justice to the complex interfacing of texts in *The Descent*, nor can they adequately address how the spectator, living in a media-saturated world, may encounter the film as alongside or in dialogue with other films.

Further, the multiple endings of Marshall's films discussed on the film's DVD release emphasize the malleability of this text and its status as a commodity, further adding to the film's obvious constructedness. While other "Special Edition" or "Director's Cut" DVD releases attempt, as Raiford Guins suggests, to look and feel like an "authored original" and to "place their directors on the market as auteurs in order to invoke value statements that valorize the director's work as an art-object" ("Blood" 29), the DVD releases of Aja's *High Tension* and Marshall's *The Descent* restore the "director's vision" on one hand, while also showing how it

was taken away in the first place. The DVD releases of these films do not attempt to place these films in the realm of “art,” and interestingly enough, the American DVD releases of *High Tension* and *The Descent* do not feature the director’s names anywhere on the covers. The descriptions of Aja’s and Marshall’s films on their DVD jackets further deemphasize the directors. For instance, the DVD jacket for Roth’s *Hostel* bears a banner reading “Director’s Cut,” and a banner on the cover of the *Hostel: Part II* DVD reads “Unrated Director’s Cut.” However, in contrast, the front cover of the DVD jacket for *High Tension* only reveals that this is an “Unrated” cut of the film. Similarly, *The Descent*’s DVD cover reads “Original Unrated Cut.” Since these films are not placed on the market as “authored originals,” these films remain closer in tenor to oppositional paracinema rather than the safe “art-object” on DVD.

Beyond DVD being crucial in approaching these films as commodities and stressing their interactivity, *High Tension* and *The Descent*, as highly metacinematic exercises, are definitely products of the DVD era. The American DVD release of *The Descent* even offers the promise of intertextual play on the cover of the “Original Unrated Cut” DVD; the DVD’s cover features a shot of Sarah emerging, bloody and screaming, from the blood pool, an image from the film that, as mentioned earlier, recalls both *Carrie* and *Apocalypse Now*. While the type of postmodern pastiche exhibited in these films is certainly not new, these films are perfectly suited to the era of DVD ownership; their ideal audience is the DVD collector who has readily at hand – and has repeatedly watched – Boorman’s *Deliverance*, De Palma’s *Carrie*, Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, Kubrick’s *The Shining*, and Carpenter’s *The Thing*. Again, issues of class and ownership come into play in a manner similar to Rob Zombie’s films, as Aja’s and Marshall’s work appeals most to the well-to-do white, male horror fan who gets to “slum it” by watching these films about women in peril and, as Carol Clover famously suggests, indulging in cross-gender spectatorship.

Or the metacinematic elements of the films may be enough to disrupt this masochistic fantasy and force the viewer to contemplate the ways women are represented in these movies. However, this type of reading is most likely specific to the “hardcore” horror fan who “gets” all of the allusions and can thus read the films in a specific way. While DVD may have mainstreamed the work of Roth, *Zombie*, and the *Saw* films, Aja’s and Marshall’s work on DVD retains a sliver of oppositionality.

CONCLUSION

The Beginning of the End: Netflix, Redbox, and *Paranormal Activity*

The summer of 2007 seemed, at first, to be a time of celebration for the Splat Pack. Box office grosses had been strong, DVD sales for titles like the *Saw* movies were healthy, and the “It’s Only a Movie” film series at the Museum of the Moving Image seemed to cement the Splat Packers as the premier horror filmmakers of their time. Just as this apex of credibility was attained, however, their position began to erode. The New York premier of Roth’s *Hostel: Part II* may have started the series off with a bang, but the film fizzled at the box office when it was given wide release two days later. Grossing a meager eight-point-two million dollars its opening weekend, the film struggled to gross an underwhelming seventeen and half million dollars domestically during the course of its month-long theatrical run, significantly less than the previous film’s forty-seven million dollar domestic gross. Still, some commentators observed that *Hostel: Part II* was technically a success because it was made on a mere ten million dollar budget. For instance, critics Nathan Lee and Maitland McDonagh were quick to assure people at the “Considering Horror” panel at the film series that the film was, ultimately, a success; McDonagh added that Roth’s film would “clean up on DVD” (“Considering Horror”).

However, there were other signs that the Splat Pack cycle was nearing its end. Even the commercial juggernaut of the *Saw* series began to slow down. That fall’s *Saw IV* grossed just over sixty-three million dollars, which was a healthy take, but only the most optimistic in the industry could ignore that this gross was down almost twenty million dollars from *Saw III*’s eighty million dollar take the previous year (“*Saw IV*”). This decline was also reflected on the DVD sales side, as *Saw IV* sold around one-point-eight million copies on DVD, about a million less than *Saw III*’s two-point-eight million (“Top Selling DVDs of 2008”). As the series wore on,

the numbers continued to decline: in fall 2008, *Saw V*'s box office slouched to a fifty-six million dollar domestic take, and a year later, with the release of *Saw VI*, domestic box office went into a freefall, with the latest film grossing only twenty-seven million dollars ("*Saw V*," "*Saw VI*"). Again, this decline could also be observed on the DVD sales side, as *Saw V* moved one-point-four million units compared to *Saw IV*'s one-point-eight million ("*Top Selling DVDs of 2009*").

If, as I have argued here, the rise of the Splat Pack was directly linked to the DVD revolution, their decline was inextricably bound to DVD's decline. Indeed, 2007 was a difficult year for DVD that brought many significant changes to the home video industry and how viewers watched movies at home. One of the splashiest of these changes was the format war between two new disc-based formats: Toshiba's High Definition DVD (HD DVD) and Blu-ray, a high definition format developed by representatives from nine electronics companies ("*Disclosure of Specifications*"). Both of these formats resembled DVD, but their manufacturers assured consumers that the upgrade from DVD was worth it because of the higher quality picture available on the HD DVD and Blu-ray formats.

Blu-Ray won the format war in early 2008, and the push to sell Blu-Ray players and movie titles on Blu-Ray began in earnest. As retailers attempted to clear their shelves to make room for Blu-Ray product, DVD prices fell. DVD became, in a way, a devalued object, occupying the same dubious position on retailers' shelves VHS used to occupy, a sort of electronics death row with no hope of reprieve. I would not say, however, that the advent of Blu-Ray caused enough of a sea change to overturn the industry trends that I locate as aiding the success of the Splat Pack. After all, Blu-Ray is, ultimately, a glorified DVD. The only difference is a better picture with higher resolution. All of the other trappings of the DVD – being priced to own, the artwork, the extras, the ability to add material for an "Unrated" or "Director's Cut"

edition – are still there. Therefore, the advent of Blu-Ray did not represent a death of DVD inasmuch as it represented an evolution of DVD.

Another event that signaled a larger, more significant change in home video happened in December 2007, when Netflix, the giant online rental company, began experimenting with offering “instant” movies to their customers. Before this, the web-based business had already been chipping away at the characteristics of DVD that the industry attempted to promote for several years. For instance, Netflix was not a DVD retailer; for the most part, they have strictly adhered to a rental-only model, which makes their business model a throwback to the days of VHS and its focus on rental. In this way, Netflix bucked the industry trend of pushing the “priced to own” mandate that the majors set for DVDs. This “rent-only” approach has been mimicked by Redbox, a company launched in 2004 that rents physical DVDs via rental kiosks located at the entrances of grocery stores and retailers like Wal-Mart.

Netflix has initiated a much larger change with their “Watch Instantly” feature. In December 2007, Netflix began testing a service that would allow Netflix subscribers to stream selected movies (about six thousand of the ninety-thousand titles in Netflix’s holdings at the time) on Netflix’s website without having to deal with a physical disc being shipped to their homes (Electronista). Netflix’s “Watch Instantly” feature was a success, with more titles immediately added to their collection of movies available to “Watch Instantly.” Netflix also expanded this program and has started selling devices that consumers can connect to their televisions, Blu-Ray players, DVRs (digital video recorders), or gaming consoles to download movies in their “Watch Instantly” queue onto their televisions. With their “Watch Instantly” features, Netflix made many elements of the DVD market – buying and collecting, packaging, etc.—passé for their ten million customers. The packaging and aura of the DVD collectable are

not emphasized. Also, extra features like director's commentary are not available via Netflix's "Watch Instantly" feature. Thus, the encrusted text of the film-on-DVD becomes less encrusted when streamed online.

The success of businesses like Netflix and Redbox seems to have reversed the "sell-through" mandate that the industry set for DVDs. In an article published in *Variety* in February 2010, Marc Graser observes: "DVD sales continue to decline at a rapid rate, as consumers switch over to rental. Other distribution platforms, especially digital video-on-demand, are emerging as lucrative platforms" (Graser). In other words, the types of DVD consumption promoted by Netflix and Redbox are currently holding sway in the changing home video market, and as businesses like Netflix and Redbox continue to lead the way, they will influence how consumers encounter home video product and how they feel about it. Since neither of these businesses stress the elements of DVD that were instrumental in the Splat Pack's success, it is not surprising that the Splat Pack's stock began to go down as Netflix's and Redbox's increased.

Changes in theatrical exhibition have also conspired to drive down the Splat Pack's status as a hot commodity. In 2007, the United States's economy began to weaken, and Hollywood prepared for the worst and began pushing productions, like 3-D movies with higher ticket prices, that encouraged spectators to travel to the theater rather than wait for video. When the economic meltdown happened in Fall 2008, Hollywood was ready, and box office numbers for that year dropped off only a negligible three-tenths of a percent ("Yearly Box Office"), due mostly to the majors populating the theaters with mega-budgeted spectacles that "had to be seen in the theater." The ultimate example of this type of movie would be James Cameron's much-ballyhooed 3-D spectacular, *Avatar* (2009). In fact, buoyed by *Avatar*, which had already earned four hundred million in box office by the end of 2009, box office receipts for 2009 were up a

massive ten percent from 2008 (“Yearly Box Office”). In other words, in the face of economic crisis, Hollywood pushed big movies for which they could charge higher ticket prices. It thus had little time to focus on low-budget horror movies, like those made by the Splat Pack, which attracted a majority of their audiences with “Unrated” DVDs.

Low-budget horror movies could have, undoubtedly, existed peaceably alongside giant, megabudgeted blockbusters, just as they had in the past. However, the studios’ big-budget, “gotta see it in the theater” approach moved into low-budget horror territory with productions like Paramount’s *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2009). The narrative surrounding *Paranormal Activity* is another Cinderella story: reportedly made for a mere fifteen thousand dollars by filmmaker Oren Peli in 2007, the film tells the supposedly true story of a young couple (Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat) being tormented by a malicious, unseen demon. Paramount acquired distribution rights for the microbudgeted film and, in early fall 2009, began a giant promotional wave for the film that was constructed to look like a small, grassroots campaign. The teaser trailer for the film, released to theaters and the Internet in September 2009, listed the cities where the film would be playing and ended with the words: “*Paranormal Activity* Not Playing in Your Area? Demand It! Bring It to Your City by Visiting Paranormalmovie.com.” It was an ingenious, low-risk venture for Paramount that paid off: *Paranormal Activity* ended up grossing one hundred seven million dollars domestically (“*Paranormal Activity*”).

The “grassroots” campaign to “bring *Paranormal Activity* to your town” was not the only noteworthy aspect of the teaser trailer that Paramount put together for the film. The trailer also featured an audience watching the film in the theater. The trailer begins with a shot of a large group of people standing in line, followed by shots of the crowd entering a movie theater and taking their seats. Some titles inform the viewer that these are shots from a preview screening of

Paranormal Activity that was held in Hollywood in September 2009. As the theater's lights dim and the film begins, the trailer offers night vision shots of the audience watching the film, intercut with the parts of *Paranormal Activity* that they are supposedly watching. As the scenes from the film grow more tense, the audience appears more on edge. Finally, something scary supposedly happens onscreen, and audience members are shown jumping in their seats, emitting loud screams in terror, or hiding their eyes.

What the trailer for *Paranormal Activity* makes clear is that this is a movie meant to be seen with an audience in a theatrical setting. In this way, then, the supposed appeal of a movie like *Paranormal Activity* is not much different than the appeal of Cameron's *Avatar*. Further, the appeal of *Paranormal Activity* is the exact opposite of the appeal of the Splat Pack's movies, which contained graphic violence, some of which the viewer would have to wait for the "Unrated" DVD release to see. Conversely, all the charms of *Paranormal Activity* – the jumps, the sudden scares – can be enjoyed in the theater. Due, no doubt, to the film's ultra-low budget, the film relies mainly on suggestion to scare audiences and features little blood, gore, or graphic violence. Ultimately, the case of *Paranormal Activity* exemplifies two things. First, the "gotta see it at the theater" promotional mentality is used not only to sell megabudgeted, 3-D spectacle-laden blockbusters, but also low-budget horror. Second, the spook-house, scare-by-suggestion philosophy of *Paranormal Activity* is the opposite of the Splat Pack's bloody, gory, wait-for-"Unrated" ethos.

Some Concluding Remarks: Whiteness, Gender, and Torture

In terms of trends in home video and in theatrical exhibition, the era of the Splat Pack was a brief period that has now concluded. While these films do not really seem to fit together into any coherent whole – much less, any coherent "movement," despite what some of the

directors and some journalists attempted to argue – there are some connections that can be made across these films. For instance, the Splat Pack films were certainly violent to a degree that most mainstream horror films never were, but to connect films merely in terms of how much violence they contain seems superficial. After all, horror films have always been violent, to differing points of severity as the industrial situation allowed it. To argue, as I have, that what these films mostly have in common is the importance of DVD seems more fitting, but does not do justice to some other, more subtle connections between the films that bear further investigation.

One of the most promising areas of further investigation has to do with the fact that a majority of the Splat Pack films evince an anxiety about whiteness and white privilege. As argued earlier, Eli Roth's *Hostel* films seem to be, at first, an interrogation of American arrogance and aggression. What the films turn out to be, however, is a lament about the vulnerability of normative white bodies on the global stage. This is the same kind of statement that justifies everything from the War on Terror and National Security policies to arguments against Affirmative Action as reverse racism. In Zombie's films, the spectator is confronted with "white trash," an "Othered" stripe of whiteness that is given free range to strike out at the world in a way that "normal" whiteness cannot. Throughout these films, Zombie, by glamorizing his white trash monsters, justifies violence on the part of any type of whiteness that feels victimized. That idea is especially problematic at a time when films like Roth's are suggesting that whites feel like victims. This portrayal of victimized whiteness is shared by the *Saw* films, which, when read through the lens of race studies, appear more like the extended story of a white man feeling victimized by his invisibility and privilege and attempting to make himself visible at the expense of people of color, disadvantaged members of the underclass, and women.

Indeed, women do not fare well in the films of the Splat Pack. In Chapter Seven, I discussed the problematic portrayal of Amanda in the *Saw* films. Additionally, Roth's so-called "feminist film," *Hostel: Part II*, does not fare much better than the *Saw* films when subjected to the scrutiny of feminist analysis. As Maisha Wester convincingly argues, Roth's films "re-iterate some of the very ideologies they mock" in regards to gender and sexual politics (3). More specifically, whatever "feminist" gestures may be found within Roth's films are "counterbalanced by problematic renderings of queer desire and castrating women" (Wester 2). *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* are guilty of some of the same problematic representations of women as Roth's films, but they are more successful as feminist texts only because of how they use intertextuality and ideological parody to show that patriarchy has often constructs the feminine as monstrous. These two films are the only ones of the Splat Pack's movies that, I feel, contain filmic content that interacts in an interesting, progressive way with the commodity form of the DVD; in other words, the intertextual play that highlights the "phoniness" of the proceedings of both of these films is enhanced by their DVD releases that foreground their commodity status.

The type of intertextuality and parody – albeit sometimes unintentional – on display in *Haute Tension* and *The Descent*, the two "continental" Splat Pack films, could have also been used to productive effect in other Splat Pack movies. Unfortunately, those directors tended to err in the other, more traditionally "realistic" direction, often to the detriment of their films. For instance, Roth, ever the horror fan, loads his *Hostel* films with horror in-jokes – using music from the cult oddity *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) over a lovemaking scene in the first *Hostel*, featuring cameos from J-horror director Takashi Miike in *Hostel* and Italian cannibal film maestro Ruggero Deodato in *Hostel: Part II*. But the ultimate thrust in Roth's films is toward

realism; he once bragged to an audience at a horror convention that his films have trouble with the ratings board not because of gore, but because he can elicit such horrifyingly believable performances from his actors, especially those playing victims. Similarly, while Rob Zombie populates his films with well-known, “cult” actors like Sid Haig, Bill Moseley, and Ken Foree and borrows liberally from his favorite movies, he also orients his films toward “realism.”

During the extensive “30 Days in Hell: The Making of *The Devil’s Rejects*,” Zombie is repeatedly shown on set instructing his actors, stunt people, and stunt coordinators to make everything “more real.”

It is unfortunate, then, that directors like Roth and Zombie veer in this direction because, during the midpoint of the first decade of the twenty-first century, if any topic deserved – nay, demanded – contemplation, it was torture, both the very real type of torture that was legalized and practiced by the United States in its unjust and murderous War on Terror and the fake torture that found its way into many of the films of the Splat Pack. Instead of contemplation, however, audiences of these films were invited to see torture, pain, and suffering as concepts divorced from politics. No one in the Splat Pack films are tortured for overtly political reasons, but instead are tortured for vague, abstract reasons, like the thirst for brutality. Audiences were also taught that the responsibility for torture was something very difficult to assign. As the *Hostel* films depicted Americans who are forced to endure torture and inflict torture in order to save their lives, the real victims of torture – those the United States are responsible for and should answer to – are conveniently absent. In the *Saw* films, responsibility is variously avoided. All the people who torture in these films torture because of circumstances beyond their control; they do it because Jigsaw has forced them to. In other words, they are merely “following orders.” Thus, if one chooses to read these films solely as texts (and avoid the industrial circumstances that gave

rise to them), rather than examining how these films register the residuals of trauma, one would be better off tracing how these films attempt to evade the responsibility of inducing trauma.

This observation illuminates another reason why it is necessary to foreground the commodity status of these films. If there is, as Adam Lowenstein argues, a “continuously unfolding post-9/11 moment” (“Considering Horror”), these films do not interrogate or question the fears of the historical moment, but instead exploit them. I hope to have shown that a look at the DVD revolution sheds light on how the Splat Pack exploited perceived threats to power in America. The only way to fully engage with the ways in which they exploit it is by considering the industrial structures and realignments – changes in technology, industry self-regulation, and methods of delivery – that allow the Hollywood film industry to exploit these fears to their fullest extent.

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