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Rob Zombie, the Brand: Crafting the Convergence-Era Horror Auteur

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Film Studies

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ROB ZOMBIE, THE BRAND: CRAFTING THE CONVERGENCE-ERA HORROR
AUTEUR

MONOGRAPH

by

Ryan Stam

Graduate Program in Film Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This thesis adopts an industrial approach to auteur study, engaging in a detailed analysis of the extratextual crafting of metal-musician-turned-horror-filmmaker Rob Zombie's auteur image from the year 2000 to the present day. It proposes the existence of a new authorial archetype in the twenty-first century American horror market, the convergence-era horror auteur, whose manufacturing and mobilization is tied explicitly to the niche-oriented marketing efforts of media industries. Positioning Zombie's career as an instructive case study, this thesis ultimately demonstrates how critical discourses of horror auteurism have been co-opted by studios, filmmakers, and other industry parties as (self-)branding strategies designed to confer subcultural prestige upon horror properties and secure the loyalty of horror fans in an increasingly fragmented and diverse media landscape.

Keywords

Rob Zombie, auteur, auteur theory, convergence, film industry, media industries, media branding, cult cinema, horror auteur, horror films, horror fandom, *House of 1000 Corpses*, *The Devil's Rejects*, *Halloween*, *Halloween II*, *The Lords of Salem*, film violence, Splat Pack, franchise reboot, DVD, director's commentary, social media, Lionsgate, Dimension Films, Henry Jenkins

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Joe Wlodarz, without whose incredible insight, patience, guidance, and support this thesis would not exist. Thank you for constantly pushing me to make my work the best it could be and for showing confidence in my abilities even when I did not.

To Jen Tramble, for all your help over the course of this project and the past three years.

To Caitlin Foster, Alex Brundige, Joanna Smith, Sean Volk, and Charlotte Warr, who always made it so that going into the office never felt like going to work.

To Kyle Brunet, for letting me put our ambitions on hold while I pursued this degree, but never letting me lose sight of them.

To Kyle Tabbernor, for the countless phone calls and conversations, for never hanging up on me, and, most of all, for providing constant encouragement throughout the entirety of this graduate program. (I'm still tracking down the Tenth Doctor as a thank you.)

To Brodi Jewell, for standing by me through the most challenging months of this project. Watching you pursue and achieve your dreams has been a constant source of inspiration for me to work harder to achieve my own.

And to my parents, Mike and Cathy Stam, for tirelessly supporting me through all the highs and lows of my academic career, at the graduate level and otherwise, and for teaching me the importance of working hard and pursuing what you love. Words cannot express my gratitude to you both.

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Introduction

Fan culture is...related to the commercial interests of the culture industries... There are thus contradictory functions performed by cultural commodities which on the one hand serve the economic interests of the industry and on the other the cultural interests of the fans.

John Fiske¹

I feel like I'm the most successful cult person ever. I mean, I feel like everything I do is sort of in an underground cult way but has had mainstream success... It's weird. I've always liked underground stuff – underground filmmaking, underground-type bands, underground, just, mentality – but somehow just made it work in the mainstream... It's just that punk-rock way of thinking: I've never wanted to give-in to “the Man,” I want “the Man” to give-in to me.

Rob Zombie²

In the months leading up to the 2005 release of metal-musician-turned-horror-filmmaker Rob Zombie's second cinematic effort, *The Devil's Rejects*, independent studio Lionsgate rolled out an elaborate transmedia marketing campaign aimed at selling the film to an audience of committed horror fans under the auspices of Zombie's authorship. Beyond standard promotional materials, like posters, trailers, and interviews, the campaign also included: trailers and clips played during Zombie's concerts; interactive online materials, such as faux websites for locations from the film and a *Rejects* shoot-'em-up game; and the release of various merchandising tie-ins, such as a Zombie-authored *Rejects* graphic novel, a Zombie-curated *Rejects* soundtrack, and a Zombie-produced album from fictitious, in-film country duo Banjo and Sullivan. The apotheosis of the campaign was reached, however, when *Rejects* became the first film ever to host its premiere at the Mecca of cult and genre fandom: San Diego's Comic-Con International. Hosting the first screening at an event described by *The Washington Post* as “Sundance for fanboys” and “[a] nuclear reactor that generates early buzz for a film” (Booth C01) was a savvy marketing move, bringing the film and its filmmaker in direct contact with some of the most devout members of the cult horror community. Indeed, the premiere was only one element in a broader *Rejects* presence at the convention that

¹ “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 454.

² This quote was taken from an interview conducted with Rob Zombie on web series *Larry King Now* on October 31, 2013.

included panel discussions and meet-and-greets with *Zombie* and the cast, and a free face-painting booth that, as the *Post* noted, essentially turned participants into “walking billboards” by making them up to resemble one of the film’s main characters: a garish clown named Captain Spaulding (Sid Haig) (C01). Overall, by releasing a wide range of cult-friendly synergistic tie-ins and by interacting with and offering unique, film-related experiences to consumers at conventions like Comic-Con, *Zombie* and independent studio Lionsgate slyly promoted their respective brands as ones concerned first and foremost with the interests of fans in ways that could significantly boost *Rejects*’ profit potential.

These promotional machinations surrounding *Rejects*, I argue, are highly demonstrative of how horror auteurism operates in the age of media convergence – an age in which, to quote Henry Jenkins, “every...story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms” (*Convergence* 3). Accordingly, adopting an industrial approach to both horror genre study and auteur study, this thesis engages in a detailed analysis of the extratextual crafting of Rob Zombie’s auteur image from the year 2000 to the present day in order to stage a critical intervention into the relationship between issues of horror authorship, American independent/cult cinema, horror fandom, and corporate/industrial branding in the convergence era. Specifically, *Zombie*’s career is positioned as an instructive case study to examine how critical discourses of horror auteurism have been co-opted by filmmakers and media industries as niche-oriented (self-)branding strategies designed to confer subcultural prestige upon horror properties and thus attract cult consumers in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

Although the importance of including an industrial component in a study of *Zombie*’s work has been clear to me since the outset of this project, it was not my initial plan to have convergence-era industry studies function as the project’s structuring methodological approach. Rather, driven by my own *Zombie* fandom, I originally intended to take a more traditional, textually-focused approach that would simply employ industrial research methods to provide an extra degree of historical specificity often lacking in auteur studies. Classical auteur theory, as made famous in the 1950s and 1960s

by writers for the French *Cahiers du Cinema* and American film critic Andrew Sarris, imagines the auteur filmmaker as an independently minded artist whose films sport a consistent, distinctive style and who treats film as a medium for personal expression. As such, the auteur theory considers the auteur's films to be "chapters" in a unique cinematic oeuvre and, in the words of Sarris, treats "the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value" (562), elevating those films with an identifiable authorial voice to the status of art, while relegating others to the "lower" realm of commercial entertainment.

If the auteur theory was crucial to the critical and academic legitimation of Hollywood cinema as a site of artistically significant filmmaking, it was also central to the legitimation of American horror cinema, a genre often disregarded as particularly vulgar and/or crassly commercial. The marriage of auteur theory and horror genre study is traceable to Robin Wood's seminal book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, in which he engages in a symptomatic analysis³ of what he terms the Golden Age of American horror (70-134). Here, Wood advocates for the now-common idea that some of the most violent, nihilistic, and exploitive horror films of the 1970s postclassical era – such as Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) – were, in fact, auteur films that achieved the status of "authentic art" (93) by way of their oppositional political subtexts and (relative) independence from Hollywood. For Wood, the artistic importance of the majority of these films derives from their status as "incoherent" and "apocalyptic" texts that foreground the untenability of dominant American (i.e. patriarchal, bourgeois) ideology while offering no clear solution to the ideological conflicts they dramatize (70, 84, 128). In doing so, Wood argues, these films capture the zeitgeist of disillusionment and uncertainty that characterized Vietnam-era America. Hence, suggesting that the definitive mark of the auteur is the ability to use genre as a personalized "vehicle for making 'significant statements'" (14), Wood not only sees the postclassical horror films he discusses as on-screen projections of a nation's moment of crisis, but also as intensely personal, anti-establishment statements from

³ Richard Nowell defines a symptomatic approach to horror genre study as one that "tackles scary movies as by-products of psychological and social demons purportedly haunting filmmakers and their homelands – in short, as our collective nightmares" ("Introduction," 3).

radical filmmakers, many of whom self-identified with the 1960s and 1970s youth counterculture.

In certain ways, Zombie shares this auteurist potential, having written and directed five feature films to date: *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *Rejects*, *Halloween* (2007), *Halloween II* (2009), and *The Lords of Salem* (2013).⁴ Akin to the films studied in-depth by Wood, Zombie's films are persistently bleak and nihilistic in tone and – with the exception of his latest film, *Salem* – feature brutally graphic representations of extreme corporeal violence. In fact, as will be discussed in chapter one, some of the key postclassical horror texts discussed by Wood, such as *Last House* and *Texas Chainsaw*, serve as direct influences on Zombie's own cinematic approach. Moreover, Zombie's films have all been released in a post-9/11 context that some symptomatic analyses of twenty-first century American horror, such as Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller's anthology *Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, suggest has proven rich for cinematic allegory. Accordingly, I originally set out to locate in Zombie's work the true hallmark of a Woodian horror auteur: a distinctly critical personal worldview communicated through the syntax and semantics of the horror genre. However, as I began to study the director's films in close detail, I found that although he is an innovative – if somewhat imitative – stylist with an undeniable talent for creating striking compositions, my attempts to excavate any decisive authorial perspective from his work typically led to analytical dead-ends. Indeed, I found that, beneath their visually-enticing surfaces, Zombie's films are confused by a number of both intra- and intertextual ideological contradictions that impede a cogent auteurist reading of his body of work. For instance, while relatively little academic writing has been published on Zombie's work, recent attempts to read *Rejects* as progressive in its class and gender politics (e.g. Bernard 119-141) or as an allegorical critique of the constraints placed on fundamental freedoms in post-9/11 America (e.g. Blake) tend to lose sight of how the film's blatant misogyny and

⁴ Zombie has also directed a direct-to-video, animated horror-comedy film entitled *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* (2009). However, given the lack of industry and media attention that *Superbeasto* received, and that Zombie did not write the film – comedian Tom Papa wrote the screenplay, while Zombie shares a story credit with five others – it will not be discussed further in this thesis.

celebratory approach to outlaw violence serve to uncritically valorize hyperviolent “white trash” males as emblems of a liberatory form of authentic masculinity.⁵

Moreover, even Zombie himself has frequently resisted the idea that his work harnesses any interior personal meaning. For instance, when one interviewer questioned the director about the message he was trying to get across in *Rejects*, he responded by emphatically stating, “It doesn’t really say anything, in a sense. I don’t really want to say anything... I don’t really like being force-fed anyone’s ideas on anything, ever” (Zombie, *AboutFilm*). On one hand, as discussed in chapter three, Zombie’s staunch refusal to intellectualize his own work may be understood as an offshoot of the fannish, subcultural pose that acts as the foundation of his public persona. On the other hand, however, Zombie’s remark demonstrates that while his work might be considered “incoherent,” there is a crucial difference between his films and the incoherent films studied by Wood. Whereas the latter lend themselves to auteur study because they often *want* to be critical but can only amount to irresolvability because they “do not know what they want to say” (47), Zombie’s films are less amenable to an auteurist reading because, in his own words, they “don’t really want to say anything.”

And yet, since Zombie’s cinematic debut with *House of 1000 Corpses*, there has been a persistent impulse on the part of the industry, the press, and horror fans to confer auteur status upon Zombie, regardless of its *textual* untenability. For example, following the release of *Corpses*, *Variety* labelled him a “rocker-turned-shock-auteur” responsible for “the truest reincarnations of the grindhouse,” and placed him in the league of fellow schlock-adoring, film-buff directors Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez (Cohen 4). More recently, in October 2013, the *Hollywood Reporter* included Zombie on its list of “The 20 Masters of Horror.” Overall, then, my early groundwork suggested that a different theoretical paradigm – one that shifts away from textually deterministic modes of auteur study – was necessary to understand the processes underlying Zombie’s canonization as a modern day horror auteur. As such, rather than provide a traditional auteur analysis, this thesis argues that the most illuminating means by which to study Zombie’s cinematic career is through an in-depth examination of the crucial role played

⁵ A more detailed explanation of this reading of *Rejects* follows in chapter one.

by film and media institutions and fan cultures in producing and maintaining his auteur image.

The strongest advocacy for Zombie's auteurism has come from the horror fan community. Perhaps the most overt demonstration of his rise to canonical status came in 2014 when leading horror fanzine *Fangoria* released a limited-edition *Fangoria Legends* issue devoted entirely to Zombie's career – an honour that has, thus far, been bestowed only upon three other accredited cult auteurs: John Carpenter, David Cronenberg, and George A. Romero. That said, while *Fangoria* clearly positioned Zombie among this prestigious company, Mark Jancovich argues that cult film audiences are often less strictly textual in their conceptions of auteurism, instead defining the auteur more loosely in relation to untenably romantic discourses of staunch individualism and independence from the creatively stifling commercial sector of so-called mainstream Hollywood (“Cult,” 314-315). This differs, of course, from a Woodian conception of horror auteurism, as it suggests that while some horror filmmakers may indeed use film as a vehicle for (radical) personal expression, these more traditional textual determinants of auteurism are not *necessary* for filmmakers to be perceived as auteurs by horror fans. Put simply, Jancovich's claim suggests that just as important as what the horror auteur creates is *how* he creates, and what this mode of creation signifies to fans: typically, opposition the commercial mainstream.⁶

This broader conception of auteurism is intimately related to the subcultural ideologies of authenticity and rebellion underpinning horror fandom. Pierre Bourdieu has famously asserted that “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (xxix). In other words, judgements of aesthetic taste function as socially-crafted cultural “distinctions” that distinguish the individuals who make them. Hence, for Bourdieu, it is through a taste for the distinguished or refined over the vulgar or lowbrow that bourgeois cultural elites attempt to affirm their superiority over the masses and thus reproduce existing social hierarchies (xxx). Fandom, however, has been read as a mode of transgressing or

⁶ As Janet Staiger points out, a conception of auteurs as “rebels against the system” (34) was also one of the central myths of classical auteur theory. However, unlike the loosely defined and often extratextual modes of rebellion discussed by Jancovich, the discourses of rebellion discussed by Staiger are still overtly textual, referring to the way in which critics like Andre Bazin and Sarris elevated those Hollywood filmmakers who were able to make their personality shine through despite genre conventions and studio constraints.

resisting against the dominant value system discussed by Bourdieu, as it is “typically associated with cultural forms that... [this] system denigrates” (Fiske 446). More specifically, horror fans constitute one of many alternative taste communities within the broader spectrum of what Jancovich refers to as the “cult movies audience” that generates *subcultural* distinction by rejecting the “mainstream, commercial cinema” (“Cult” 307) and the culture of “normality” that it represents (308). As Jancovich argues, these “struggles for distinction [amongst horror fans] are frequently posed in terms of authenticity” (“Real” 30), and horror fans typically value as authentic those films of graphic violent and/or sexual excess that would be deemed anathema or in bad taste by “prudish” mainstream standards (“Cult” 319; Sconce 376). By celebrating marginal or devalued films and filmmakers that are “not for everyone” (Jancovich, “Cult” 319), fans not only reject the elitist values of cultural tastemakers, but also maintain the exclusivity of authentic horror fandom by separating themselves from the “conformist dupe[s]” of mass culture (312). Hence, in their commitment to ostensibly oppositional reading strategies, horror fans celebrate their imagined status as cultural outsiders or renegades (Mathijs and Mendik, “Editorial” 5). In this respect, so-called authentic horror fandom is as much, if not more, a vaguely defined sensibility characterized by a set of rebellious – that is, anti-commercial, nonconformist, and anti-establishment – dispositions that signify “supposed difference from the ‘mainstream’” (Jancovich, “Cult” 306) as it is a cohesive mode of aesthetic preference.⁷

However, for Jancovich, “the ‘mainstream, commercial cinema’ is one of the most problematic concepts in film studies” (“Cult,” 320). While discussions of cult cinema often perpetuate the longheld illusory division between the realms of the cult and the mainstream, the mainstream is not a naturally-occurring entity but rather a loosely-imagined concept constructed *by* and *within* fan subcultures as an “inauthentic Other”

⁷ My conception of “horror fans” in this thesis does not, of course, capture the diversity of individuals who may self-identify as horror fans. Rather, I use the term specifically in reference to that subset of horror fandom that is most commonly associated, in scholarly work, with constructions of so-called generic authenticity: cult horror fans, or what Matt Hills would refer to as the “pro-subcultural” rather than the “pro-mainstream” faction of the horror audience (98). For more on the heterogeneity of horror fandom and the various ways in which audiences may relate to horror texts, see Hills’s essay “Horror Reception/Audiences” included in Harry M. Benshoff’s recent anthology *A Companion to the Horror Film*.

(306) against which members can define themselves to produce distinction. Indeed, although cult cinema and horror fans see themselves as opposed to the commercial film industry, Jancovich points out that cult movie fandom itself is a phenomenon born and maintained through shifts in the film market, such the creation of niche-targeted repertory or “grindhouse” cinemas in the postwar period and the rise of the home video market in the 1980s (317). For this reason, Jancovich calls for cinema scholars to pay more attention to the industrial and commercial context of cult cinema, proclaiming that “it is the very ideology which insists that [cult film] markets are free from economic criteria which needs to be criticized” (317).

Jancovich’s declaration speaks to a broader shift toward industrially-oriented methodologies in academic case studies on horror cinema published since the mid-2000s. Within the last decade, for instance, Kevin Heffernan has studied how landmark shifts in the American film industry in the 1950s and 1960s influenced the horror market (*Ghouls*); Richard Nowell has examined the commercial logic underlying teen slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s to destabilize the common idea that they were products of independent visions (*Blood*); Sarah Wharton has illustrated how a wave of contemporary “neo-grindhouse” films borrowing the explicit, disreputable aesthetics of 1970s exploitation/trash cinema have functioned as profitable income generators for independent studios trying to compete with Hollywood majors (“Welcome”); and the collection of essays that make up Nowell’s recently edited anthology *Merchants of Menace* all provide different perspectives on the industrial components of the production, promotion, and distribution of horror cinema. This list is only a small sampling of the work produced in the last decade that has afforded greater attention to American horror cinema as an *industry*.

My work in this thesis is not only informed by the emergence of such industrial approaches to horror study, but also by a similar shift toward industry studies in conceptions of authorship. In his 1991 book *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, Timothy Corrigan has written that auteurism has significantly “swerved from its textual centre...[and is] increasingly situated along an extratextual path” (105). For Corrigan, particularly in the context of contemporary Hollywood, the

auteur operates, first and foremost, as a mode of celebrity performance exploited by industry parties for the purposes of film promotion and product differentiation (102-107). Accordingly, the so-called “commercial auteur” (107) – a label Corrigan applies to a wide-range of filmmakers as varied as Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, and Steven Spielberg – is a subject position produced and performed around or outside of the film itself, regardless of whether or not his or her auteur status would hold up in the face of more traditional forms of textual scrutiny (see also Tzioumakis 60-62). Similarly, in his influential study *Production Culture*, John Thornton Caldwell considers such extratextually-granted auteurism to be a form of “critical industrial practice” by which film and television industries reflexively co-opt critical reception discourses and actively integrate them into production and promotional discourse as a means of conferring value upon media properties (4-7, 197-231).

Recent media studies publications suggest that this commercial function of the auteur has intensified in the convergence era. Before elaborating on this point, let us briefly consider how the term convergence itself has been defined and conceptualized. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (3). On one hand, convergence is a theoretical paradigm that refers to the highly diverse and complex ways in which “old and new media collide” (2) and blur into one another. On the other hand, Jenkins asserts that convergence should not be conceived as solely a technological shift, but rather as an ongoing process with important technological, industrial, social, and cultural components. Put simply, Jenkins suggests that we live in a “convergence culture” (2) in which the constant proliferation of media technologies not only has a significant effect on the ways that media industries and audiences operate, but also on the relationship that they share.

From a business perspective, media industries have had to respond to the advent of new technologies that have made habits of consumption become increasingly fragmented, impulsive, mobile, private, and unpredictable. As such, in convergence

culture, the most successful media corporations and cultural producers operate by the logics of synergy and brand extension, endeavouring to maximize consumers' exposure and attachments to their brands by dispersing brand-related content across a plethora of delivery systems (Jenkins, *Convergence* 19, 69). That said, for Jenkins, convergence is not simply a "top-down corporate-driven process" but also a "bottom-up consumer-driven process" (16), and the lynchpin of convergence culture is audience participation (2, 3). In this new media landscape, the longstanding hierarchical relationship between cultural producers and consumers becomes increasingly horizontal with both parties exercising power, albeit to unequal degrees, over the production and circulation of media content (3-4, 18-19).

Accordingly, convergence has had a great effect on the way that fan culture operates, affording audiences more immediate ways to consume, discuss, organize around, and intensify their emotional investments in the objects of their fascination. For instance, if the rise of the home video market helped make once-ephemeral cult movies more readily available, the advent of accessible technologies for grassroots media discourse, such as online discussion boards, fan sites, blogs, and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, has made cult audiences more active, socially connected, and vocal than ever before. Such processes have also spread beyond the contours of the web through "brand fests" (Jenkins, *Convergence* 79) and conventions like ComicCon that bring fans, filmmakers, and industry insiders together. On one hand, then, convergence has opened up cult fandom, blurring distinctions between the cult and the mainstream, helping the industry tap into the cult community as a lucrative niche market, and threatening the very ideologies of oppositionality and exclusivity upon which cult fandom is based (see Jancovich, Rebol, Stringer, and Willis 4). In this respect, convergence culture's facilitation of fan practices may significantly benefit producers and marketers, who increasingly value fan groups as "brand communities" that are loyal and help create powerful buzz by circulating brand information and having brand-related conversations (Jenkins, *Convergence* 4, 79). On the other hand, fans themselves are also afforded greater agency. If media industries do not pay attention and respond to fan tastes, they can now suffer more directly from the backlash of devotees discontented with the content they have been provided (20, 92). Thus, Jenkins does not see convergence

culture as representing the domination of audiences by media monoliths, but instead as a “participatory culture” (2) that operates through *unpredictable* social interactions between producer and consumer. As such, convergence “requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions” (18). In other words, while media industries have had to find new modes of addressing audiences in the age of convergence, they have also increasingly had to find new modes of addressing different audience factions *on their own terms*.

As noted, one of the ways that the film and television industries have adapted to this new environment is through an amplified investment in the figure of the auteur as “the most critical node in the promotion of legitimated culture” (Newman and Levine 56). However, unlike the broadly defined and somewhat amorphous figure of the commercial auteur identified by Corrigan, Michael Z. Newman, Elana Levine, and Suzanne Scott have proposed the existence of various convergence-era authorial archetypes that have been conjured up by media industries for the purposes of promoting projects for specific niches or taste cultures. In their book *Legitimizing Television*, for instance, Newman and Levine illustrate how the figure that they term the “convergence-era showrunner” (39) or “showrunner-auteur” (40) has played a crucial role in elevating contemporary TV programming from the status of lowbrow mass culture to the status of legitimate art amongst niche Quality TV audiences. As the authors point out, discourses surrounding the convergence-era showrunner bring to the discussion of television a number of the tropes of authorship associated with cinematic auteur theory, including the author as a guarantee of artistic integrity, the auteur’s works making up an oeuvre, and the assertion of autonomous, individual authorship over collaborative or industry-mandated production practices (45-57). However, rather than a more traditional artistic visionary or virtuoso, Newman and Levine suggest that the convergence-era showrunner constitutes a marketing and legitimation strategy, a form of “branding to attract a desirable upscale audience to programming constructed as authentically artistic” (42).

On similar grounds, looking at the promoted public image of director Zack Snyder and cult communities of fantasy, science fiction, and comic book fandom, Scott

has identified an auteur figure in convergence culture that she refers to as the “fanboy auteur” (440). As this label suggests, the fanboy auteur is an exclusively male figure uniquely positioned to authenticate projects – usually big-budget adaptations of sacrosanct cult properties – for fans because of his own ostensible membership in the fan community and consequent “reverential approach to genre or source text” (441). Although this “reverence” often comes across textually, insofar as his work tends to “reflect the aesthetic traditions and shared tastes of the fan communit[y] from which [he] emerged and...now seek[s] to court” (445), Scott claims that his real industrial importance lies in his promotional potential as a “relatable... cultural and textual figurehead” (457) for cementing fan investments. As such, the most overt way that the fanboy auteur reflects convergence culture at work lies in the sense of democracy that he embodies: blurring the lines between author and audience, he appears to suggest – albeit from a paradoxically privileged position – that fans hold the potential to transition from passive consumers to active producers, from “misfits” in the world of popular culture to powerful cinematic taste-makers (444, 453). In this respect, Scott concludes that the fanboy auteur can be seen as the epitome of “an evolving vision of the contemporary auteur that thrives between the commercial and the subcultural, the mass and the niche” (457).

Hence, the key question that academics seem to be answering in relation to authorial branding in the age of convergence is not only “Legitimation how?” but “Legitimation how and *for whom?*” To contribute to this growing body of work, this thesis posits the existence of a new authorial identity tailored specifically to the tastes of the horror fan community that I will refer to as the “convergence-era horror auteur.” While I present *Zombie* as an ideal example of this archetype, it is not solely *Zombie*’s domain, but rather could be applied, to varying degrees, to the study of a number of other, notably male,⁸ contemporary horror filmmakers primarily working with independent

⁸ The authorial position of the convergence-era horror auteur is currently one that is occupied exclusively by male directors. For this reason, I use male-gendered pronouns (“he,” “his,” “him”) when discussing the convergence-era horror auteur throughout this thesis. That said, there are indeed recent or upcoming examples of female writer-directors making their debuts with horror films. For instance, in 2014, Jennifer Kent garnered high acclaim with *The Babadook* (2014) and, according to IMDb, Eli Roth is currently producing a horror film, *Lake Mead* (forthcoming), written and directed by first-time filmmaker Jessica Chandler. However, these examples are few and far between, and it remains to be seen whether these two filmmakers will continue working in the horror genre, and, if they do, how they will be positioned and discussed by the industry, the media, and fan cultures. For further discussion of the gendered associations

studios including Eli Roth, Alexandre Aja, James Wan, Adam Wingard, and Ti West. Although some current horror filmmakers may more readily meet the textual criteria of traditional auteur theory than *Zombie*, textual distinction is not a designator of what I consider to be the convergence-era horror auteur. By my definition, the convergence-era horror auteur is a consciously manufactured cult-associated personality whose agency is crafted, performed, and sold across a wide variety of media touchpoints, platforms, and delivery systems. Moreover, this mode of niche-oriented transmedia branding is inextricably bound to corporate bids for product differentiation and attempts to rein in cult consumption in a diffuse entertainment landscape marked by a “proliferation of media options” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 66).

Accordingly, the (self-)promotion of the convergence-era horror auteur generates value and distinction for both his brand and the brands of the independent studios he works with by coupling together subcultural discourses of independence, rebellion, and authenticity with more traditional auteurist discourses of vision and creative control. By addressing horror fans on their own terms, the marketing of the convergence-era horror auteur can be considered a form of what Jenkins refers to as “affective economics,” a model of advertising that aims to enhance consumer attachments by matching a brand’s promotional themes to core consumer emotions and lifestyle values (*Convergence* 61-64). In this sense, the convergence-era horror auteur can also be considered a genre-specific subcategory of Scott’s fanboy auteur, as his significance lies mainly in his profitably liminal, and somewhat conflicted, status as a conduit between subculture and industry, the “underground” and the mainstream. Indeed, like the fanboy auteur, the convergence-era horror auteur’s self-identification as a committed horror fan is promoted as integral to his subcultural appeal, and he is typically presented as being well-versed in the history of cult horror and valuing so-called “real” horror cinema over “the commercialized, sanitized tripe...consumed by moronic victims of mass culture” (Jancovich, “Real” 25). Ultimately, then, like Fiske has argued of cultural commodities in the first epigraph of this thesis, there is an inherently contradictory task carried out by the convergence-era horror auteur as a subcultural celebrity who functions, on one hand, as a

of auteurism and cult cinema, see Scott’s discussion of fanboy auteurs and the relative scarcity of so-called “fangirl auteurs” (“Dawn” 440-442, 457).

guarantor of quality and authenticity for anti-commercial horror fans and, on the other, as a key device in the industry's commodification of alternative taste.

As the above definition suggests, and following the path set out by Corrigan, Newman and Levine, and Scott, I argue that the convergence-era horror auteur is primarily brought to life in extratextual discourse surrounding his work. In *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray has argued that paratexts – that is, the forms of media which circulate around texts themselves and help to create their value and meaning – play a fundamental role in awarding an aura of authorship and authenticity to a text (2, 18-19). Therefore, rather than Zombie's films themselves, various media paratexts surrounding them – including posters, trailers, press releases, interviews, reviews, news articles, DVD bonus tracks, and online fan discussions – constitute the primary research tools in my analysis of his auteurism. Moreover, heeding Yannis Tzioumaki's call for a greater emphasis on economic dimensions such as financing, distribution, and exhibition in industry-focused auteur studies (61), this thesis puts media paratexts in dialogue with other institutional or market-related factors such as cinematic trends, studio release slates, production budgets, distribution strategies, and box-office figures.⁹ In doing so, this thesis can consider the (studio-)specific ends to which Zombie's authorship is mobilized on a film-to-film basis. Ultimately, by examining how Zombie's image has been mediated by paratexts and affected by market shifts, I demonstrate how the values and motives of a number of parties, including studios, marketers, distributors, writers and critics for trade and popular press outlets, fans, and filmmakers themselves, interact to craft the figure of the convergence-era horror auteur. As a final note on methodology, while my analysis of Zombie is not conducted in the complete absence of textual engagement, the brief sections of filmic analysis I periodically provide always function in service of the broader industrial claims made in each chapter.

However, if the crafting of the convergence-era horror auteur is less a one-off phenomenon than a recognizable industrial trend, I have yet to answer one crucial question: why study Rob Zombie specifically? Put simply, Zombie has inarguably

⁹ All budgetary, distribution, and box-office figures throughout this thesis have been obtained from www.boxofficemojo.com, unless otherwise noted. Information on studio release slates has been obtained from www.imdb.com.

achieved, and continues to hold, the highest degree of popular multimedia celebrity of any contemporary horror filmmaker, while also managing to maintain high subcultural standing amongst horror fans and auteur status in the public sphere. From a commercial perspective, Zombie's allure for media industries is clear, as he comes pre-packaged with a devoted fan base and viable avenues for cross-promotion. Indeed, Zombie's film career seems to have bloomed from, or at least have been enabled by, business strategies of synergy and brand extension. Well before his cinematic debut, Zombie had already garnered considerable celebrity and notoriety as an established heavy metal musician. After first finding success in the early-1990s as the front-man of White Zombie, an industrial/groove metal band aptly named after a 1932 Bela Lugosi horror film, Zombie dissolved the group in 1998 to launch an even more decorated solo career which, to date, has seen the release of five studio albums whose aggregate number of copies sold stretches well into the millions. That Zombie produces both metal music and horror cinema is a crucial facet in the allure of his brand to the media institutions he works with, as these genres are often believed to have a crossover appeal to subcultural consumers who see their media preferences as the marker of an alternative identity.¹⁰

From a fan perspective, Zombie's appeal is strengthened by his own self-constructed public and artistic persona. If Corrigan has argued that "in today's commerce, we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act" (*Cinema* 106), Zombie comes across as the stalwart of an authentic subcultural lifestyle anchored in horror fandom. In interviews, for instance, Zombie frequently reflects on his own feelings of growing up as an "outsider," and discusses the importance of cult cinema fandom as formative to his own self-identity. Moreover, his physical appearance, as often noted by the popular press, is steeped in signifiers of "cool": he is heavily tattooed, long haired and bearded, typically clad in 1970s-style denim and/or classic horror tees, and often sports oversized aviator sunglasses (see Figure 1). A "reverential" approach to horror fandom has also infused Zombie's creative output since the beginning of his career. Beyond his films themselves, a distinct mode of horror-inspired bricolage operates in his metal

¹⁰ In this respect, Zombie epitomizes what has long been seen as a metal-horror equation on the basis of both genres' preoccupation with often lurid, obscene, or taboo content and devoted fan subcultures that see their allegiance as a transgressive means of rebelling against a superficial, commercial mainstream (Tompkins, "What's the Deal" 76-79; Bettez-Halnon 443).



FIGURE 1 Rob Zombie at his annual “brand fest,” Rob Zombie’s Great American Nightmare, in October 2014.¹¹

music, for which he frequently pulls titles, lyrics, and audio samples from his own films and a wide-range of others, such as *The Last House on the Left*, *Lady Frankenstein* (1971), and *Nosferatu* (1922). Furthermore, metal music and horror cinema more explicitly converge in his self-directed music videos, which often aesthetically mimic or restage scenes from films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and in his live performances, which are typically set to montage videos that aim for maximum shock value in their purposely tasteless recycling of grotesque film clips and stock footage.

Finally, while Zombie continues to juggle both filmmaking and music, his brand has continued to grow. Over the course of his career, Zombie has developed into a full-fledged, cult media empire, working with various sectors of the entertainment industry to branch out into creative fields including novel and comic book writing, television directing, animation, and theme park haunted attraction design. Unsurprisingly, Zombie’s

¹¹ Image retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rogueshollow/15450825086/in/album-72157648454331136/>

growing stature has also resulted in a proliferation of subculturally-oriented promotional tie-ins and merchandise, ranging from standard products such as posters, action figures, and Halloween masks of characters from his films and of himself to more unique products such as a *Corpses* hot chocolate mix and a line of fair-trade organic coffees branded with Zombie's visage. As a final note, perhaps the ultimate indicator of the still-amassing strength of the Zombie brand as a site where the cult and the commercial meet is the newly-established Rob Zombie's Great American Nightmare, an annual Halloween "brand fest" founded in 2013 that features: immersive walkthrough haunted houses based on a number of his films; a carnival-style midway complete with freak shows and screens looping footage from various horror films; a plethora of Zombie-related merchandise for sale; and nightly metal concerts, occasionally headlined by Zombie himself.

Taken separately, all of the dimensions discussed above serve a number of functions for the Zombie brand: they increase fans' total number of interactions with it; help it "break through the 'clutter'" (Jenkins, *Convergence* 69) of a vast and undifferentiated media landscape; help it "become [more] memorable for consumers" (69); and thus strengthen fan investments in it, both emotional and economic. More importantly, however, Zombie is the quintessential figure through which to analyze the convergence-era horror auteur because of the ideological contradictions embodied, as he puts it in the second epigraph to this thesis, in being able to make "underground" media "work in the mainstream." In other words, it is precisely the industry's efforts to commercialize anti-commercial tastes *and* to mask these efforts by assimilating subcultural values that have enabled him to achieve the self-declared status of "the most successful cult person ever."

During the process of writing this thesis, scholarly work has been published that lends support to my argument that positioning contemporary horror auteurism as an extratextual phenomenon related to industrial conditions, corporate strategy, and developments in media technology is the most revealing fashion in which to study Zombie's authorship. First, in his book *Selling the Splat Pack: The DVD Revolution and the American Horror Film*, published in July 2014, Mark Bernard offers a convincing account of the integral role played by the rise of the DVD market in facilitating the

canonization of the Splat Pack – an unofficial, press-constructed horror collective comprised of Zombie and some of his contemporaries – as modern day horror auteurs. Bernard’s book thus complements the analysis of media portrayals of the Splat Pack that I provide in chapter one, and helps frame my own work on the DVD format in chapter three. Second, my central view of horror auteurism as a mode of brand-name performance that creates value for horror properties is echoed in Joe Tompkins’s essay “Bids for Distinction: The Critical-Industrial Function of the Horror Auteur,” included in Nowell’s 2014 anthology *Merchants of Menace*, in which Tompkins also examines press discourses surrounding the Splat Pack filmmakers (209-212). Finally, complementing some of the arguments I make in chapter three, Tompkins’s October 2014 publication “‘Re-imagining’ the Canon: Examining the Discourse of Contemporary Horror Film Reboots” examines post-theatrical marketing discourses surrounding Zombie’s *Halloween*. However, while my analysis of *Halloween*’s pre-release marketing is focused directly on the selling of Zombie’s authorship, Tompkins’s article instead uses the case of *Halloween* to stage a broader theoretical intervention into the recent trend of horror remakes and reboots.

Therefore, these three pieces of scholarship share with my project recognition of the need for more thorough attention to industrial factors and material conditions in theorizing contemporary horror auteurism. That said, whereas Bernard’s and Tompkins’s works largely treat the re-emergence of horror auteurism in the mid-2000s as a discrete changing of the tides for the horror industry, this thesis is, to my knowledge, the first work to engage in a detailed, chronological analysis of the crafting and *evolution* of a single horror filmmaker’s auteur image in the context of convergence culture. By looking at the development of Zombie’s auteur identity over time, we are not only provided with a better understanding of convergence-era horror auteurism as a mutable or contested terrain that is constantly being (re)negotiated, but also a more complete and historically situated overview of some of the ways in which the film industry has attempted to respond to various market shifts and to key developments in media convergence in the twenty-first century. Simply put, as Jenkins argues of convergence itself, this thesis uses Rob Zombie as an illustrative case study to consider the crafting of the convergence-era

horror auteur as an ongoing and frequently transforming “process, not an endpoint” (*Convergence* 16).

Chapter one of this thesis is focused on the creation of Zombie’s cinematic brand. Specifically, I argue that various industrial machinations and (self-)promotional discourses surrounding the presence of extreme violence in Zombie’s first two films, *Corpses* and *Rejects*, functioned as key factors in creating subcultural distinction for him as horror director. At the same time, I also discuss how Zombie’s status as a convergence-era horror auteur was largely a by-product of independent studio Lionsgate’s own strivings for product differentiation in an era of corporate consolidation. To do so, I situate *Corpses* and *Rejects* as some of the earliest films in what I term the “extreme horror” cycle, a cycle inaugurated at Lionsgate that was comprised of films featuring excessively graphic displays of gore and carnage. Moreover, I examine how various discussions of extreme horror by the popular and trade press helped to consolidate Zombie’s image as an independently minded horror auteur. Alongside these industrial claims, I also briefly consider *Corpses* and *Rejects* textually, looking at the ways in which they self-consciously reflect the tastes and sensibilities of cult horror fandom.

Chapter two analyzes the commercial logic behind the planning, production, and pre-release promotion of Zombie’s *Halloween* in order to demonstrate the industrial significance of the convergence-era horror auteur as a cult legitimation strategy for corporate horror properties. In the first section, I provide a brief industrial history of independent studio Dimension Films to showcase the corporate strategy behind Zombie’s commissioning to helm a high-stakes reboot of the *Halloween* franchise. While producers sold *Halloween* as a product of Zombie’s “unique vision,” I will then argue that certain key elements of Zombie’s approach, such as the implantation of the *Halloween* mythos into the framework of the franchise reboot model, were driven by a blockbuster-style logic aimed at maximizing its crossover appeal. In the third and final section, I show how Zombie’s authorship functioned as the centrepiece of a multi-platform marketing campaign aimed at legitimating *Halloween* for a subcultural audience.

Chapter three examines the crucial role of the DVD delivery format in promoting and dispersing the agency of the convergence-era horror auteur and re-directing the reception of his films beyond the theatrical window. I begin with a brief study of how the extensive array of bonus features included on the DVD releases of *Corpses*, *Rejects*, and *Halloween* have helped to produce Zombie's auteur status. I then shift my focus toward the Unrated Director's Cut release of Zombie's *Halloween II*, closely examining the particular ways in which both the director's cut of the film and the director's commentary included on the DVD function to evoke ideologies of horror auteurism. In doing so, I argue that Zombie uses the director's commentary, specifically, in order to offset the film's negative reception and to prolong its economic life by reclaiming it as an object of cult fascination. The chapter finishes with some general comments about what ancillary releases of Zombie's latest film, *Salem*, can tell us about a current shift in the industry away from physical delivery formats and toward online technologies for film distribution.

As these three chapters ultimately demonstrate, the crafting of the convergence-era horror auteur is a complex and multifaceted process driven by various interactions between market forces, corporate strategies, technological developments, and issues of fan reception. It thus produces an authorial identity that does not remain persistently stable or go uncontested, but rather is constantly in flux. As online venues continue to become key sites of engagement with film content and extratextual film culture, both grassroots and industrial, convergence-era horror auteurs will have to discover new ways to perform their agency, assert their authority, and consolidate their brands in an increasingly immediate but also increasingly participatory media terrain. Therefore, to conclude this thesis, I will explore Zombie's growing Internet presence and the current crowdfunding of his next film, *31* (upcoming), in order to consider some of the new opportunities and new challenges that await convergence-era horror auteurs in the currently developing age of digital and social media.

Chapter 1

Building Rob Zombie's Cinematic Brand: Extreme Violence, Generic Authenticity, and the Origins of a Convergence-Era Horror Auteur

In the late 1990s, the American horror market was dominated by a cycle of low-to-mid budget, revisionist teen slasher films and franchises distributed by the majors or their in-house indie divisions. Deemed “hip horror” by *Variety* (qtd. in Perren, *Indie* 135), franchises such as *Scream* (1996, 1997, 2000), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997, 1998), and *Urban Legend* (1998, 2000) all aimed for maximum pop-cultural relevance by adopting a self-reflexive, tongue-in-cheek approach to the slasher subgenre and featuring casts stacked with popular network television stars (see also Wee 148-150). Although the cycle had largely exhausted itself by the turn of the twenty-first century, it was celebrated within the industry for revitalizing the then-waning horror genre and re-establishing the importance of a largely underserved and highly lucrative teen audience.

And yet, following the 2003 release of his debut feature, *House of 1000 Corpses*, Rob Zombie actively distanced his film from the hip horror cycle, bemoaning that “all of these contemporary horror films really bore me” and declaring *Corpses* “a throwback to when things were nastier” (qtd. in Cleveland G27). Following the 2005 release of his second film, *The Devil's Rejects*, he implicitly reiterated his distaste for hip horror to the *New York Post*, asserting that,

Horror had been watered down to nothing... Horror movies lost all their impact...[Y]ou have to feel like there are no-rules. They're called horror movies for a reason. People tell me, “Oh, when I came out of ‘The Devil's Rejects,’ I felt disgusting. I wanted to take a shower” (qtd. in Tucker 38).

These remarks are less noteworthy for what they directly reveal about Zombie's stance toward hip horror, than they are for what they indirectly demonstrate about the way that he aimed to frame his own work in the public sphere. Recalling Mark Jancovich's assertion that “struggles for distinction are frequently posed in terms of

authenticity” (“Real” 30), Zombie’s comments reveal attempts to court distinction for his own films by reproducing some of the common tropes of presumably authentic horror cinema. Broadly, they reflect a sentiment amongst fans that hip horror was a tame, over-commercialized, and thus inauthentic strain of genre fare lacking the independent, transgressive edge of authentic horror (29). More specifically, they marshal the reception of Zombie’s work in relation to what fans see as the key marker of a “real” horror film: excessive displays of explicit violence that make it “not for everyone” – and certainly not for the mass, and often female,¹² teen audience courted by *Scream*-era slashers (25, 30).

As indicated by the example above, this chapter will focus on the construction of Zombie’s cinematic brand, focusing specifically on the centrality, both textually and extratextually, of extreme violence in generating its subcultural distinction. In the first section, I will demonstrate how Hollywood major Universal’s face-saving dismissal of *Corpses* from its 2001 release slate on the basis of its violence functioned to pre-textually position the film as an object of cult appeal amongst horror fans. In the second section, I will tie the acquisition of *Corpses* by independent studio Lionsgate to Lionsgate’s own efforts to create subcultural distinction and product differentiation in the early 2000s. Here, I will also argue that Lionsgate’s grindhouse-style marketing of *Corpses* and the film’s self-conscious emulation of gore-heavy cult aesthetics functioned to promote the subcultural legitimacy of both the film and Zombie. In the third section, I will bridge textual analysis with concepts of convergence-era marketing to show how Zombie’s follow-up to *Corpses*, *The Devil’s Rejects*, uses extreme violence to narrativize a number of the core values of cult horror fandom and thus strengthen attachments to the Zombie brand. In the fourth and final section, I examine post-*Rejects* representations of Zombie and his work in the mainstream press, focusing in particular on the crucial role played by press discussions of so-called “torture porn” and the “Splat Pack” in the crafting of his

¹² Since “subcultural capital is usually gendered masculine” (Thornton para. in Jancovich, “Real” 29), Jancovich argues that cult fans not only define themselves against a generalized mainstream Other, but also one that is imagined as feminine “through the familiar trope of ‘mass culture as woman’” (citing Huysen in “Real” 29; for more on the association between cult fandom and gender see Hollows). As such, Jancovich suggests that in their commercial success *and* their popularity amongst female teens, hip horror films were seen by horror fans as both “entertainment for morons” and that which was specifically “made for, and consumed by, inauthentic fans: young girls who cannot have the subcultural capital to define what is hip!” (“Real” 30).

image as a horror auteur. Overall, then, this chapter will trace the origins of Zombie's status as a convergence-era horror auteur to a combination of corporate strategy, aesthetic techniques, and press discourse, all related to the element of extreme violence in his first two films.

1.1 “An Uber-Celebration of Depravity”: Hollywood vs. *House of 1000 Corpses*

For a film that would go on to develop a strong cult status amongst a horror fan community distinguished by its disavowal of the commercialized mainstream, *Corpses* had surprisingly standard Hollywood origins.¹³ In 1999, the film was greenlighted for production by Hollywood major Universal as part of a growing and then-lucrative synergistic relationship between the entertainment corporation and Zombie, who had already sold over ten million albums for Universal subsidiary Geffen Records. While Zombie had first conceived of *Corpses* as the structuring concept for a haunted funhouse he was designing for the Halloween Horror Nights event held annually at Universal's theme parks, the studio responded enthusiastically to his idea of turning it into a film as well (see Zombie, “American”). As a popular metal musician, his involvement would allow Universal to target both his pre-established fanbase and a wider teenage audience, as the recent proliferation of teen slasher franchises suggested that that the film could even be franchisable. Most importantly, *Corpses* carried with it a great deal of cross-promotional potential: the haunted attraction Zombie had already been developing could function as an immersive marketing tie-in, and, as Patrick Goldstein of the *Los Angeles Times* noted, the film had “the built-in marketing extra of a director who could promote [it] at his own rock concerts.” Accordingly, by May 2000, production on *Corpses* commenced on Universal's backlot, and by October, both its filming and the construction of the accompanying theme park attraction had been completed. By March 2001, however, Universal had dropped the film from its release slate, with studio-head Stacey Snider publicly slamming it as “an uber-celebration of depravity” (qtd. in Goldstein).

¹³ Although Zombie's established position in the metal circuit would have already lent *Corpses* a certain degree of subcultural appeal, the dismissive stance that some horror fans took toward *Scream* despite its affiliation with Wes Craven, a respected horror auteur, indicates that a director's subcultural credibility is not always seen as sufficient grounds upon which to canonize his or her films within the pantheon of authentic horror (see Jancovich, “Real” 29).

In the introduction to their anthology *The Cult Film Reader*, Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik suggest that “something [often] goes wrong” with films that go on to achieve cult status, and that the specific issues that arise in their production, promotion, and/or reception “help form a basis for their cult(ural) presence” (7). In this respect, industry narratives that recount a film’s chaotic or controversial production history may function as pre-figurative filters directing audiences to receive a film as a cult property. Moreover, in the age of commercial auteurism, in which what Corrigan calls the “commercial drama of a movie’s source” (*Cinema* 118) can do as much to cultivate a director’s auteurist reputation as the film itself, the aforementioned mechanisms of shaping a film’s cult status seem particularly amenable to the production of their filmmakers as cult auteurs. Regarding the release of *Corpses*, something had certainly “gone wrong,” and the way that the “drama” surrounding its dismissal was publicly framed in the press would ultimately function to augment the cult appeal of both the film and *Zombie*.

The completion of *Corpses*’ production in 2000 had coincided closely with the highly publicized conclusion of a 15-month governmental inquiry, conducted by the Federal Trade Commission (henceforth FTC) in the wake of the Columbine shootings, into the entertainment industry’s promotion of violent content to youths. Taking a media-effects approach to pop culture violence, the inquiry produced a report that condemned Hollywood studios for directing the advertising and marketing of violent, R-rated films toward teenage audiences (Perren, *Indie* 212-214). If the commercialization of illicit content such as extreme violence had long been seen as a risky move in Hollywood, the FTC’s inquiry made it even more precarious. For one thing, by shining a spotlight on youth-oriented media violence, it drove a considerable wedge in the longstanding balancing act performed by the majors in which they aimed “to appeal to youth audiences...with sensational material, while avoiding controversy or scandal that could adversely affect the box office and bring bad publicity” (Wharton 202). Hip horror, of course, served as an excellent example of this strategy. Moreover, as an inquiry conducted by a governmental institution, it posed a clear threat to Hollywood’s proven desire, stretching back to the era of the Production Code, to fend off mechanisms of external regulation that would impose outside constraints on corporate decision-making.

Thus, while no official legislative action was taken against the majors,¹⁴ they all responded by swiftly introducing a system of self-regulation that affected not only marketing strategies, but also those regarding production and distribution (Perren, *Indie* 214). For example, due to the reduced viability of violent, R-rated films targeted toward teens, studios largely ceased production of hip horror slashers and shifted toward releasing supernaturally-focused, PG-13 horror fare, including a popular cycle of non-violent Asian horror remakes such as *The Ring* (2002) and *The Grudge* (2004).

Suddenly, Zombie's film, which Universal originally viewed as a relatively risk-free – that is, low-budget and likely high-return – horror property, became a pivotal film in the contentious world of industry politics. And, in accordance with the focus of the FTC inquiry, the film's graphic violence became the key point of conversation. In January 2001, *Wall Street Journal*'s Tom King suggested that Universal's treatment of *Corpses* would constitute a key indicator of the extent of Hollywood's response to the investigation, positing that Rob Zombie's status as a "teen favourite" would likely make it difficult for the studio to market *Corpses* solely to an adult audience (W4). Two months after King's article was published, Universal – likely sensing that the once-appealing project could now drum up enough controversy to tarnish the studio's reputation – made the abrupt decision to drop *Corpses* from its slate of upcoming releases. The decision was an industrial landmark that prompted immediate media attention, with *Daily Variety* pointing out that it marked "the first tim[e] a studio ha[d] publicly distanced itself from a violent film" (Dunkley, "U Drops" 4) since the inquiry.

The breaking point for Universal was allegedly the first test screening of *Corpses*, which, in a case of terribly bad timing, had directly followed studio-head Stacey Snider's return from a congressional hearing related to the FTC's findings (Petridis 6). On one hand, *Corpses* was a hit with the test audience, whose rowdy, celebratory response – a distinctive sign of approval amongst cult fans – was taken as a badge of honour by Zombie. On the other hand, the film and its boisterous reception were met with disgust from disturbed studio executives who had the FTC's concerns about the marketing and

¹⁴ Republican Senators Joseph Lieberman and John McCain initially proposed the Media Violence Labelling Act of 2000, which would have implemented a governmentally-mandated labelling system for excessively violent media, but the bill was not passed (Davies 49).

possible social effects of media violence fresh in their minds. A particular source of unease for the studio was the audience's response to a bold sequence in which Otis (Bill Moseley), the most sadistic yet charismatic member of the film's murderous Firefly family, shoots a police officer in the head at point-blank range. After the officer discovers a barn full of strung-up, mutilated young women, Otis emerges from around a corner with a drawn gun and forces him to his knees. All sound drops out, and *Zombie* cuts to an extreme long shot of Otis holding the gun to the officer's forehead, execution-style. After a lengthy pause, a gunshot shatters the silence, a plume of white smoke bursts through the back of the officer's head, and he collapses to the ground. Filmed in slow-motion, the sequence is pure spectacle, featuring visuals and an interplay of tension/release that explicitly position the denouement as its perverse "money shot." Adding to the studio's unease was the fact that during the long pause, teenagers in the theatre began to yell in excitement, "Kill him! Kill the fucking cop!" (*Zombie* qtd. in Petridis 6). Of course, while the anti-authoritarian bent of what Snider described as "a celebration of the assassination of a [police officer]" (qtd. in Goldstein) appealed to an audience of cult horror fans, the sequence and its reception were far more alarming to a major Hollywood studio currently operating under increased governmental scrutiny.

The test screening solidified the fact that releasing *Corpses* was too risky a proposition for Universal. In statements released to media outlets, Snider made clear that it was the film's violence that had specifically led to its dismissal, claiming that the finished product had "a visceral tone and intensity that [the studio] did not imagine from the printed page" (qtd. in Dunkley, "U Drops" 4). At the same time, however, she was quick to deny that her decision was inspired in any way by the FTC – a mendacious denial, to be sure.¹⁵ Instead, in an interview included in a comprehensive 2001 feature article on the *Corpses* controversy in the *Los Angeles Times*, she publicly accused the film of offending against the studio's own official policies and moral sensibilities. On one hand, she argued that "the best version of the movie would end up getting an NC-17

¹⁵ Universal's corporate priorities were made clear in its decision to keep the *Corpses* funhouse for Halloween Horror Nights, while simply re-branding it with the apt title, "Rob Zombie's American Nightmare." Moreover, the studio's financial motivations could be seen in Snider's decision to sell the rights to *Corpses* back to *Zombie* on the condition that the studio would still be entitled to a percentage of the film's earnings (Beale AR24).

rating [from the MPPA]...that would make the marketing and distribution of the movie impossible for us” (qtd. in Goldstein). This would be disproven, however, by *Zombie*’s eventual securing of an R rating for the film.¹⁶

On the other hand, Snider’s justifications for dropping the film fell back on the familiar trope of “responsible entertainment.” According to James Kendrick, the Hollywood majors have a proven tendency to publicly disavow overly exploitative horror films in order to promote their own image as morally conscientious institutions (136). In keeping with this tendency, Snider glossed over the seemingly knee-jerk nature of *Corpses*’ dismissal and used it instead as an example through which to publicly assert the studio’s own alleged status as something of a self-regulated, moral gatekeeper, calling the decision “overwhelmingly a matter of personal responsibility” (qtd. in Goldstein). A similar stance was adopted by the studio’s head of publicity, Terry Curtain, who also told the *Times*, “I’m not sure where the line is, but it was clear from watching the film that it had crossed it... It’s probably the first time in my career that I felt I’d have trouble working on a movie” (qtd. in Goldstein). Even if these statements were somewhat disingenuous, as the decision to drop *Corpses* seemed less like an exercise of corporate morality than one of face-saving brand management, they helped to inadvertently lay a pre-textual foundation for the cult status of the film and *Zombie*’s reputation as an allegedly subversive, cult-minded horror auteur. The dismissal of *Corpses* as an “uber-celebration of depravity” and the studio’s appeals to “personal responsibility” gave the impression that its core qualities corresponded with the criteria used by fans to distinguish authentic horror: it was apparently anti-commercial, anti-mainstream, and “not for everybody.” In doing so, these justifications indirectly invoked for *Zombie* the aura of the horror auteur, positioning him as an authorial renegade whose penchant for “depraved” carnage was deemed so anathema by the moral standards of mainstream Hollywood that it could not even justify releasing the film.

¹⁶ Like its precursor, the X rating, the NC-17 carries with it a number of untenable economic consequences for films: prominent media outlets may refuse to advertise them, many theatre chains often refuse to exhibit them and, most importantly, it prevents the industry’s most sought after demographic for horror fare, teens under the age of 17, from attending them (Sandler 2-3). For this reason, major studios like Universal typically have in-house policies that prohibit against the release of NC-17 films and contractually obligate filmmakers to deliver an R rated film.

Furthermore, while Universal executives worked hard to distance the studio from the film, Zombie worked just as hard to discursively distance his film from the studio, explaining to the *Times*:

It felt weird from the get-go. Here we were, making this crazy (expletive) horror film, with this big corporate entity behind us. If you look at the history of horror films, the really scary ones, like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, were made by little independent companies, not big corporations (qtd. in Goldstein).

Here, Zombie made bids for his own directorial distinction by implicating *Corpses* in the frequently articulated rhetorical struggle amongst fans between authentic, independent horror and inauthentic, mainstream, commercial horror. He sold his work as an example of the former by disavowing its corporate origins and situating his own authorial vision as one whose “crazy” spirit was more in line with the independent visions behind such fan-approved horror classics as *Texas Chainsaw* than with the “tame” sensibilities of profit-minded Hollywood.

Unsurprisingly, *Corpses* began to accrue a cult following shortly after it was dropped by Universal. This following would be further solidified in early 2002, when the film followed a remarkably similar trajectory of acquisition and subsequent revocation at fellow major MGM.¹⁷ Indeed, Hollywood’s treatment of *Corpses* had imbued the film with three qualities that can assist in the making of a film’s cult reputation: topicality, due to the renewed interest in the possible effects of media violence following the FTC’s investigation; controversy, due to its supposed depravity that proved too much for the majors; and inaccessibility, due to its lack of a distributor (see Mathijs 111; Mathijs and Mendik 7-8). Accordingly, online discussion forums erupted with frustrated horror fans who helped to create distinction for *Corpses* by building hype around its allegedly graphic violence and positioning this feature as a marker of its difference from other contemporaneous horror films released by the majors. A number of comments posted in

¹⁷ Shortly after MGM’s acquisition of the film, *Variety* published tongue-in-cheek comments that Zombie made to actor Ben Affleck during the filming of a segment for MTV: “MGM is going to put [*Corpses*] out... Apparently they have no morals over there. They’re happy for some blood” (qtd. in Bloom 4). Although Zombie’s comments were clearly intended to mock Universal’s disingenuous moralism, they caused MGM to renege on the deal and drop the film (Dunkley, “Lions Gate Goes” 14).

2002 by users of the website *Home Theatre Forum* were indicative of this sort of response. For instance, referencing a scene in the violent, R-rated Universal release *Hannibal* (2001) in which a man is lobotomized and forced to eat a chunk of his own brain, one user (Terrell) stated, “I’ve heard horror stories about some of the things in [*Corpses*]. Stuff that would make the dinner scene in *Hannibal* kids fare.”^{18, 19} Another user (Julie K.) drew a distinction between the serious tone of *Corpses* and the tongue-in-cheek tone of *Scream*-era hip horror slashers, calling the former a film “about real fear and despair” and proclaiming that “mainstream audiences just do not want a horror movie to be anything other than a self-referential comedy... If half of what I’ve heard about *Zombie*’s movie is true, then the surprising thing is that Universal picked it up...and even more surprising is that MGM picked it up later.”²⁰

Moreover, because *Corpses*’ tumultuous industrial history – or, in Corrigan’s terms, the “drama of the movie’s source” – was being mobilized as a marker of its oppositionality, the hypothetical consumption of the film was also being aligned with the foundational affect of cult fandom: rebellion. In another *Corpses*-related discussion, for example, the same user (Julie K.) declared,

[S]howing support for the film [is] a way of thumbing our noses at Universal... Spending the money to see the theatrical version helps to show studio execs that horror fans do want disturbing and horrifying films instead of watered-down ‘Horror 90210’ crap... [I]t would be nice to fight it and start seeing more *real* horror in theatres.²¹

Here, the act of attending *Zombie*’s film upon its prospective release is promoted as a statement of rebellion in itself, an anti-corporate protest against the majors responsible for saturating the market with “watered-down” teen slashers (the label “Horror 90210,”

¹⁸ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses Dropped Yet Again,” *Home Theatre Forum* [23 Jul 2002].

¹⁹ Given that internet posts are often riddled with typographical errors, I have intentionally left these errors intact throughout the thesis. This is not only important for maintaining the integrity of the original comments but also for avoiding the stylistic messiness of correcting each error with brackets or signalling them with (sic).

²⁰ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses Dropped Yet Again,” *Home Theatre Forum* [22 Jul 2002].

²¹ Posted in “Still Another Distributor for House of 1000 Corpses,” *Home Theatre Forum* [29 Aug 2002].

which alludes to Fox teen-drama *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000), is a comical jab at the casting of teen stars from network television shows as leads in hip horror films).

As these responses ultimately make evident, the industrial machinations surrounding mainstream Hollywood's disavowal of *Corpses* began to lay the framework for Zombie's status as a convergence-era horror auteur. Not only did the *Corpses* controversy become a crucial framing device dictating to fans that the film should be received as authentic horror, but it also subculturally legitimized Zombie's authorship prior to, and thus independently of, the film's release by marshalling its reception specifically in relation to the ostensibly subversive element of extreme violence.

1.2 Resurrecting *Corpses*

After spending over a year in distribution limbo, *Corpses* was officially acquired by independent studio Lionsgate (then, Lions Gate Films) in August 2002. Although Lionsgate had been founded in 1997 with the initial goal of cashing in on the recent success of "quality" independent cinema, the acquisition of *Corpses* occurred during a crucial period of transition for the company. While the company found success in the late 1990s with Oscar-winning films like *Affliction* (1997), *The Red Violin* (1998), and *Gods and Monsters* (1998), it soon found that the 'quality' or arthouse market was not as lucrative as it had been earlier in the decade. With the majors' increased investment in purchasing independent companies and developing speciality indie divisions – a strategic movement linked to their own desire to cash-in on the growing popularity of independent cinema and maintain their oligopoly over the film industry in the face of this popularity – market oversaturation was making it extremely difficult for true independents to survive (Perren, "Last" 110). By the summer of 2000, Lionsgate and its main competitor, Artisan Films – which had shattered independent cinema records in the previous year with ultra-low-budget horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – were the only two remaining truly independent film studios operating within the industry (111).²²

²² Artisan was ultimately bought out by Lionsgate in December 2003, making Lionsgate the last fully independent studio operating in Hollywood (Perren, "Last" 111).

Although almost unanimously overlooked in previous academic discussions of Lionsgate (see Perren, *Indie* 223-225; Perren, “Last”) and the rise of extreme horror in the early 2000s (see Wharton), the acquisition of *Corpses* was a watershed moment for both the studio and the film cycle that would come to be known as one of its signature products. Ardently opposed to being bought-out by a major studio, Lionsgate significantly altered its releasing strategy at the turn of the new millennium. As Alisa Perren notes, aiming to differentiate their product in an increasingly cluttered indie marketplace, Lionsgate “went straight for the money...by acquiring content that proved to be ‘just a little too much’...for the majors or their specialty divisions” (“Last” 109). At the same time, the studio also amplified its stake in film production in hopes of developing into a mini-major, a classification that would allow it to become a noticeable yet still self-sufficient force in an industrial era largely defined by corporate consolidation. As part of this new corporate strategy, Lionsgate increased its investment in producing and/or distributing popular yet controversial genre fare. Prior to acquiring *Corpses*, the studio had already achieved moderate success with some notorious, graphically violent films whose sensibilities leaned more toward the arthouse, such as *American Psycho* (2000) and New French Extremism trailblazer *Irreversible* (2002). However, *Corpses* would be the first film the company would use to test the viability of this controversial “extreme” approach with more overtly commercial, exploitation horror fare.

For Lionsgate, everything that originally drove the major studios away from *Corpses* was appealing. Specifically, the film’s macabre and vulgar subject matter would allow the studio to provide the sort of edgy and extreme content not being offered by the major studios. Its disavowal in Hollywood was certainly consistent with the identity Lionsgate was beginning to carve out for itself as “the go-to company for those films perceived to be too controversial for the majors” (Perren, *Indie* 224). As such, the controversy that surrounded the film was not taken as a threat to the studio’s image but rather as a source of free publicity that could court a subcultural audience that places great emphasis on interrelated notions of authenticity and excess in its viewing behaviours. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, both *Corpses*’ growing cult status and its affiliation with the commercially-popular horror genre made it a perfect fit for Lionsgate’s desire, according to then-CEO Tom Ortenberg, to “have it both ways...to

appeal to that independent-minded audience, but also not to alienate a more commercial fan-base” (qtd. in Kaufman A1). *Corpses* was thus an appealing acquisition for Lionsgate as it had the potential to play a significant role in enhancing the company’s stature in a more box-office-friendly market than that offered by the art house or “quality” independent circuit while still generating the sort of lucrative subcultural distinction that was in line with its oppositional corporate strategy.

Accordingly, Lionsgate’s promotional campaign for *Corpses* constructed an aura of independence around both the film and the studio, emphasizing the former’s controversial past and allegedly transgressive edginess, and situating the latter as provider of oppositional and elsewhere “inaccessible” content. In a statement given to *Daily Variety* to announce Lionsgate’s acquisition of *Corpses*, Ortenberg championed the film’s intensity, calling it an “in-your-face, unrelenting horror film experience” (qtd. in Dunkley, “Lions Gate Goes” 14). In the same article, *Zombie*’s manager and *Corpses* co-producer Andy Gould was quoted vaguely applauding the company’s willingness to take on “risky, subversive projects” that feature “provocative, challenging material” (qtd. in Dunkley, “Lions Gate Goes” 14). As examples, he cited three films distributed by Lionsgate that had also been discarded by major studios in the midst of controversy: *American Psycho*, Kevin Smith’s religious satire *Dogma* (1997), and the violent high school drama *O* (2001). In doing so, Gould implicitly positioned mainstream disapproval as the grounds upon which *Zombie*’s debut was to be read as more “risky” or “challenging,” and thus artistically significant, than Hollywood fare, while also elevating the film’s stature by situating it alongside three similarly-controversial, critically-acclaimed independent films.

Although these statements seem to indicate that Ortenberg and Gould were making efforts to sell *Corpses* as something of an elevated or “quality” genre film, the marketing materials that Lionsgate released for the film targeted cult horror fans more directly by borrowing moves straight out of the playbook of exploitation cinema. According to Eric Schaefer, the primary goal of advertisements for exploitation films in the classical era was not to offer coherent narrative images of the films but rather “to promote their difference from mainstream movies” (104) by foregrounding their

investment in “the unusual, the aberrant, and the forbidden” (108). Inspired by this mode of exploitation marketing, advertisements for *Corpses* aimed to distance the film from mainstream Hollywood fare and thus enhance perceptions of its generic authenticity by promoting controversy and extreme violence as its chief selling points. Moreover, they also sold grindhouse – that is, 1960s and 1970s exploitation/cult cinema – nostalgia, appealing to fans’ cinematic tastes through formal and stylistic marketing associations with grindhouse favourites.

For instance, an early theatrical trailer that Lionsgate used to promote the film begins with a set of title cards over a psychedelic backdrop that uses exploitation buzzwords to describe the film: “It’s shocking,” “It’s terrifying,” “It’s hardcore.”²³ These cards are followed by another set that appeal directly to cult audiences’ attitude of rebellion by hyping the film’s once-“forbidden” status: “The movie some didn’t want you to see isn’t being released, it’s being unleashed.” The remainder of the trailer simply consists of an incoherent and lightning-paced montage of violent and/or eerie shock-cuts from the film that, in order to exploit *Zombie*’s synergistic associations, is set to a soundtrack of his own pounding heavy metal. Likewise, *Corpses*’ theatrical poster offers little in the way of a narrative image of the film, instead foregrounding its association with grindhouse cinema by emphasizing gory spectacle. It does so by featuring a grotesque image of a decaying, blood-caked ghoul (who only appears in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it scene in the film) and a banner across the bottom that declares the film to be “The Most Shocking Tale of Carnage Ever Seen.” Along with the primacy of gore, the use of bold red, hand-drawn font and a sensational, violence-focused tagline lends the poster an authentic retro feel by echoing the use of these elements in theatrical posters for such infamous 1970s grindhouse classics as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Texas Chainsaw* (see Figure 2).²⁴

²³ The trailer discussed can be viewed online at www.youtube.com under the following title (Title, User Name of Poster): “House of 1,000 Corpses Official Trailer 2003,” MovieCriticBlog.

²⁴ A number of the promotional items distributed by Lionsgate also drew attention toward the film’s emphasis on gory excess, such as postcards and T-shirts that sported violent images from the film, slogans such as “Everybody Fucking Dies,” and/or enlarged graphics of the film’s MPAA rating, proudly displaying that the film had been rated R for strong sadistic violence/gore, sexuality, and language.

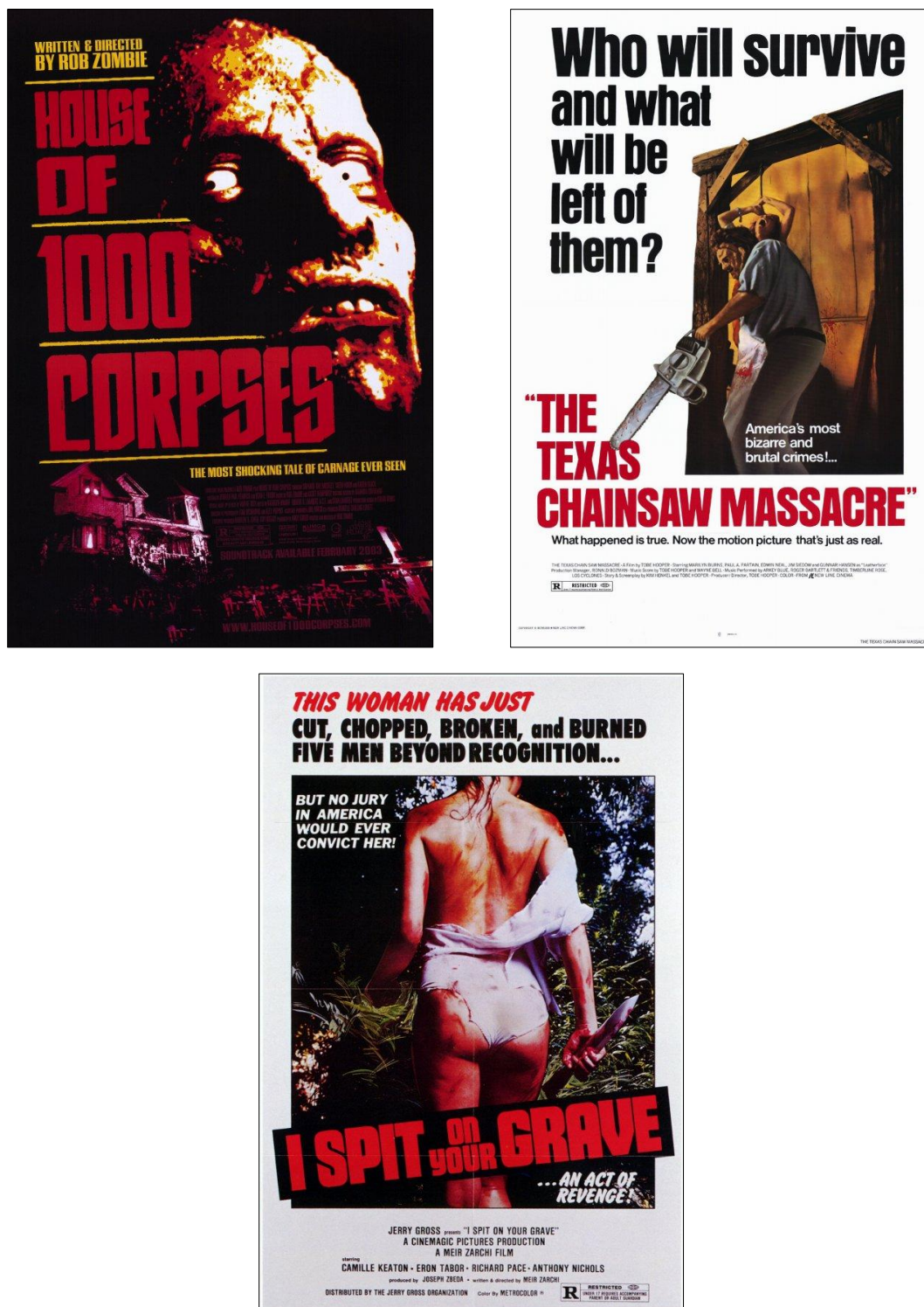


FIGURE 2 Gory images, bold red font, and violent slogans as grindhouse marketing tools: *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003),²⁵ *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974),²⁶ and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).²⁷

²⁵ Image retrieved from: www.impawards.com/2003/house_of_a_thousand_corpses.html

Grindhouse nostalgia was central to the way that *Zombie* sold *Corpses* in interviews with media outlets as well. He asserted to *Variety*, for instance, that his goal was to create “a throwback ‘70s grindhouse movie” (qtd. in Cohen 4), and he told the *New York Times* that the film aimed to recapture the “sleaziness and grittiness” of midnight movie classics such as *Texas Chainsaw*, *The Last House on the Left*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) (qtd. in Beale AR24). Elsewhere, he stated his hopes that *Corpses* would feel like an “unapologetically crazy... lost movie” (qtd. in Kellogg C5) and would have audiences leave the theatre wondering, “What maniac made this film?” (qtd. in Aquilante 60). At the same time, promotional paratexts such as those mentioned above always made it clear which “maniac” had made *Corpses* via marketing that exploited *Zombie*’s existing celebrity by selling *Corpses* as “A Rob Zombie Film.” Besides legitimating *Corpses* by situating it alongside some of the most revered grindhouse films, *Zombie*’s statements of directorial intent also rely upon one of the key self-promotional tropes of convergence-era horror auteurism: his own fandom. In the above statements, *Zombie* indirectly showcases his fandom by aligning his grindhouse-friendly ambitions with the cinematic tastes of cult horror fans who belong, more broadly, to what Jeffery Sconce refers to as the “paracinematic community” (372): a subculture of trash and exploitation fans who share *Zombie*’s appreciation for disposed-of, forgotten, and/or critically-reviled cinematic detritus and the no-rules approach of “maniacal” filmmakers “valued more as ‘eccentrics’ than as artists” (385).

It takes little more than a single viewing to see why the Hollywood majors went to great lengths to distance themselves from *Corpses*, especially while under the watchful eye of the FTC. As *Zombie* indirectly promised, *Corpses* is a gross-out celebration of the lowbrow, a pastiche-laden love letter to the sort of independently-produced grindhouse or drive-in horror films of the 1960s and 1970s that are championed by paracinematic audiences precisely because they would be deemed “bad” by dominant cultural standards (Sconce 372). *Corpses* manufactures its own cult aura on a textual level through its nostalgic, self-aware appropriation of the sort of explicit, vulgar content, bare-bones

²⁶ Image retrieved from: www.impawards.com/1974/texas_chainsaw_massacre.html

²⁷ Image retrieved from: www.impawards.com/1978/i_spit_on_your_grave.html

narrative approach, and representational strategies that distinguished these earlier grindhouse films from more polished Hollywood fare.

Set on Halloween 1977, *Corpses* follows four middle-class twenty-somethings who accept a hitchhiker's offer to take refuge from a rainstorm at her family's rural Texas home after blowing a tire. Once inside, they find themselves being held hostage by its "white trash" denizens, the gleefully sadistic Firefly family, who proceed to torture and kill them in creatively macabre ways as the centre-piece of a deranged, satanic Halloween ritual. While the influences of *Texas Chainsaw* and *Rocky Horror* on this plot are particularly obvious, *Corpses* owes its greatest debt to drive-in splatter films of the 1960s, such as paracinematic favourite Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963) and *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964). Unlike studio-backed Hollywood horror, in which violence traditionally occurs only when and to an extent that is demanded in the context of the narrative (Wharton 202), the splatter film emphasizes violent spectacle and uses narrative, according to Jonathan Crane, "solely as a makeshift contraption that allows the film to lurch forward from one violent set piece to another" (160). As such, *Corpses* most cogently evokes its paracinematic inspirations through an excessive gore aesthetic that favours theatricality over narrative development in carnivalesque scenes of taboo-shattering corporeal violence that function as its primary *raison d'être* (Sconce 373). In fact, this is even a quality about which *Corpses* exhibits a creative self-awareness by having spectators accompany the young travellers on a "Murder Ride," a seedy carnival-style attraction led by the grotesque clown and gas station owner, Captain Spaulding (Sid Haig), that wheels riders between staged, animatronic scenes detailing the crimes of real-life serial killers.

In keeping with its splatter-film inspirations, *Corpses* is rooted heavily in the tradition of gross-out horror, frequently revelling in displays of extreme bodily horror including skinning, mutilation, disembowelment, dismemberment, and human hemophagia, and featuring heavy intimations of such extreme acts of corporeal violation as rape, cannibalism, and necrophilia. As is typical of gross-out, however, the perceived brutality of *Corpses*' violence is also undercut by a darkly comic tone and the over-the-top, Grand Guignol style of its presentation – that is, by an underlying sense of fun (see



FIGURE 3 Zombie’s gore aesthetic: Jerry (Chris Hardwick) undergoes a brutal operation in *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003).²⁸

Paul 67-68). In one particularly repulsive scene, for instance, Otis flays the corpse of the father of one of his abductees and, *à la Texas Chainsaw*, stitches his flesh together into a skin-suit. As Otis proceeds to lick the girl’s face while wearing her father’s face as a mask, this moment is intercut with a series of shots of the Fireflies cheering him on in giddy delight that seem to beckon audience members to join in on the celebration. Adding to this sense of fun is the fact that most of the film’s gore is registered by Zombie in gratuitous close-ups that linger playfully on images of bloody viscera, as when we see one of the family’s victims, Jerry (Chris Hardwick), sitting in an operation chair gurgling up thick streams of blood with his brain fully exposed (see Figure 3).

Beyond its emphasis on gore, *Corpses* also emulates a paracinematic “aesthetic of excess” on a formal level through hyperkinetic and funhouse-like outbursts of “style for style’s sake” (Sconce 380). In many instances, this is achieved via the unmotivated use of such techniques as slow-motion, jump cuts, split-screens, sudden mid-scene oscillations

²⁸ Image retrieved from: *House of 1000 Corpses*. Dir. Rob Zombie. Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

in lighting or color palette, and psychedelic dream sequences that come and go with no explanation. In other instances, *Zombie* stitches various forms of mixed media – such as clips from black-and-white films, title-cards taken from old TV shows, stock footage, and cutaways filmed on low-grade film stock to emulate the effect of home video footage – into the film seemingly at random.²⁹

Upon its release, *Corpses* was panned by critics from mainstream news and industrial trade publications. Frequently, these critics cited the same elements the film lovingly borrows from the paracinematic canon as its main offending qualities: its make-shift or “stale-from-the-crypt” (Pappademas 122) narrative, its “migraine-inducing” (Russell) hyperstylization, and, of course, its “pornographic” (Groen R3) celebration of bloody carnage. However, since cult horror consumption is seen by its fans as a subversive rejection of elitist, middlebrow, or otherwise “legitimate” cinematic taste, it is precisely qualities such as narrative incoherence, formal “badness,” and extreme, stylized violence that, in their critical renunciation, help lend a film like *Corpses* its supposedly subversive charm. Thus, despite, and perhaps also because of, *Corpses*’ critical dismissal, horror fans were quick to admit it into the closely-guarded pantheon of fan-legitimated, authentic horror cinema, calling it “a spit in the face of the trendy Hollywood horror of recent years” (pizowell)³⁰ and emphasizing that it was intended “for true horror fans only. Everyone else just won’t get it” (CassandraM).³¹

Fans often celebrated *Corpses* for everything its detractors had ridiculed, with a reviewer for popular genre website *Arrow in the Head*, for instance, writing, “Blood, guts, hot dames, sadism, LSD-inspired images, sets and costumes wilder than those ‘Girls Gone Wild’ videos... I’m SOLD!” (Fallon). Unsurprisingly, the film’s extreme violence was specifically foregrounded in many of these reviews, which often sported titles such as “grotesque” (blind487)³² and “Beautifully depraved!” (HarryWarden).³³ In this

²⁹ In *Selling the Splat Pack*, Mark Bernard frames *Zombie*’s use of such techniques as part of what he refers to as *Corpses*’ “white trash aesthetic” (123-124).

³⁰ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses – User Reviews,” *IMDb* [1 Apr 2003].

³¹ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses Reviews – Audience,” *Rotten Tomatoes* [18 Jul 2007].

³² Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses – User Reviews,” *IMDb* [12 Apr 2003].

³³ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses – User Reviews,” *IMDb* [1 Apr 2003].

respect, the sentiments of a fan (NikkiA), who gave *Corpses* a perfect score because “everything is so graphic and the torture is so endless,”³⁴ offer a particularly telling contrast to those of a *Los Angeles Times* critic, who lambasted it for its “endless gore and violence [that] make the [viewing] experience torturous – and not just for the movie’s victims” (Thomas).

There is, however, something of a paradox underlying fans’ willing incorporation of *Corpses* – or any other self-consciously cult film, for that matter – into the pantheon of authentic horror. While the film does sport a number of specific formal and representational qualities that cult fans traditionally use as *post-facto* criteria upon which to grant certain films their anti-commercial aura, the self-aware appropriation of these qualities as a production strategy paradoxically results in their commercialization. Furthermore, although Universal’s disavowal of *Corpses* made it easy for Lionsgate to package the film as an indicator of the company’s commitment to “risky, subversive” artistic visions, this approach was just as much a function of corporate branding strategy as was Universal’s decision to drop the film in the first place. Put simply, one would think that the transmutation of cult status from a mode of reception to a niche-oriented production and marketing protocol would render a film like *Corpses* somewhat inauthentic or disingenuous. Indeed, this maneuver seems to mainstream cult cinema by collapsing the subcultural ideology of rebellion underlying its reception into the dominant ideology of commercial or consumer culture that its reception aims to disavow.

At the same time, this process also acts as a powerful niche-targeted promotional strategy, as evidenced by online discussions of *Corpses* that showed that fans were receiving it as a genuinely subcultural text. The following excerpt from a web editorial, posted on horror site *Brutal as Hell* in 2013 to commemorate the film’s tenth anniversary, provides an instructive example:

Corpses was... Rob Zombie’s first movie... [T]o me and my friends at the time that simple statement meant the world... [T]his was something of OURS; something from our own rejected, despised, outsider subculture... getting loose in

³⁴ Posted in “House of 1000 Corpses – User Reviews,” *Metacritic* [15 Jun 2003].

the (comparative, anyway) mainstream... [I]t's a carnival madhouse of a film whose director wasn't afraid to fill it to the brim willy-nilly with everything that he loved and knew his pre-existing fans shared his love for, instead of sacrificing his roots to try and crack a new market (Rathenar).

When this editorial was re-published on *Zombie's* website, it sparked a similar response from a commenter (MTragedy666) who fondly recalled the drama surrounding *Corpses'* release: "There was a feeling that this movie would never come out and all the assholes responsible were people that didn't understand us, the fans AND Rob Zombie... Rob fought hard for his art, and we won the war together!"³⁵

These responses are of interest for two primary reasons. First, they are indicative of the ways in which fans supported and spread amongst themselves the idea of the film's and *Zombie's* anti-commercial oppositionality – an idea that requires a blatant evasion of both Lionsgate's corporate incentives for distributing the film and the fact that *Zombie* was, indeed, trying to "crack a new market" with his brand by transitioning into film in the first place. Specifically, these fans adopt a rhetoric of infiltration, presenting a romantic and untenable image of *Corpses* as a vehicle through which a "rejected" horror community "g[ot] loose" in, rather than was incorporated by, a mainstream industry that "didn't understand" them; more importantly, they position *Zombie* as the leader of this alleged rebellion. Second, the responses reveal the significance and utility of *Zombie's* liminal authorial identity as both fan and filmmaker for securing fan attachments. Here, *Zombie's* fannish approach is presented as an indicator of an affective communion ("something of OURS"; "we won the war together!"; "the fans AND Rob Zombie") between consumer and creator, and thus a marker of authenticity. Overall, then, these decade-later responses demonstrate the vital role that *Corpses* played in helping *Zombie* achieve what is, by Henry Jenkins's definition, one of the most sought after goals of convergence-era brand management: the securing of long-term consumer relationships via the cultivation of deeply felt emotional investments in the *Zombie* brand (*Convergence* 20, 63).

³⁵ Posted in "Happy Birthday: 10 Years of *House of 1000 Corpses*," RobZombie.com [12 Apr 2013].

1.3 *Rejecting the Mainstream*

As a hit with horror fans, *Corpses* proved to be a worthy investment for Lionsgate from a financial standpoint as well, well-exceeding industry expectations by achieving the second highest limited-release opening of 2003. The film generated a modest \$12.6 million at the domestic box office across its theatrical run, but Lionsgate CEO Ortenberg deemed it “a real home run” (qtd. in McIntyre 19) for the studio given the minimal cost of acquiring and marketing the film and its promising future in the genre-friendly DVD market. According to Rick Altman, “By assaying and imitating the money-making qualities of their most lucrative films, studios seek to initiate film cycles that will provide successful, easily exploitable models associated with a single studio” (60). This strategy, in which the striving for inter-studio product differentiation is matched by a certain degree of intra-studio product similarity, is particularly amenable with independent studios’ desires to target niche audience segments. As such, the success of *Corpses* was crucial in shaping Lionsgate’s corporate strategy, proving there was considerable profit to be made in the relatively untapped extreme horror market and playing a key role, according to Ortenberg, in the studio’s decision that it was “definitely in the horror game to stay” (qtd. in Thompson). Hence, less than a month after *Corpses*’ release, Lionsgate announced that Zombie had been commissioned to write and direct a sequel.

The studio’s growing recognition in the early 2000s that the branding of horror filmmakers as cult-minded auteurs could operate as a viable, niche-oriented marketing strategy was indicated by statements made by executives to *Daily Variety* in a May 2003 article announcing the sequel. The article first featured a statement from the Lionsgate president of production, Mike Paseornek, who used vaguely auteurist rhetoric to describe Zombie, stating that he had “established himself as a filmmaker with a passionate artistic vision and an eye for the pop-cultural zeitgeist, judging by the cult status [*Corpses*] is quickly achieving” (qtd. in Dunkley, “Lions Gate Dead” 31). This was immediately followed by a remark from Ortenberg, who noted that because of Zombie’s proven popularity, the sequel “will be ideally positioned to outperform the original and hopefully will confirm it as a franchise for the company” (qtd. in Dunkley, “Lions Gate Dead” 31). Therefore, while Lionsgate executives were eager to champion Zombie’s directorial

talents in public discourse, they clearly conceived of the utility of Zombie's authorship primarily in relation to its economic potential – an approach that deviates considerably from traditionally art-based discourses of auteurism and independent cinema, but is directly representative of the industrial appeal of the convergence-era horror auteur.

However, if Lionsgate's franchise ambitions suggested that they may have been anticipating another pulpy, carnivalesque splatter-fest, the sequel that Zombie turned in, *The Devil's Rejects*, was a film much darker and more nihilistic in tone. Nonetheless, *Rejects* was even more directly targeted toward the cult horror community than its predecessor in a number of ways. While engaging in a detailed analysis of *Rejects* is beyond the aims of this project, a brief look at some of its key features is important to demonstrate how the film operates in service of the Zombie brand. Less of a conventional horror film than a brutally violent road film or neo-Western, the film follows the core members of the Firefly family – Otis (Bill Moseley), Baby (Sheri Moon Zombie), and Captain Spaulding (Sid Haig) – on a sadism-filled journey across the barren backroads of Texas as they flee the clutches of a blood-thirsty sheriff with a penchant for vicious retributive justice. Although the influence of such unremittingly bleak 1970s horror films as *Texas Chainsaw* and *Last House* can be felt at many points throughout *Rejects*, Zombie has often described the film as being more closely related to acclaimed outlaw films of the Hollywood Renaissance, such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), than the schlocky drive-in fare that formed the basis for *Corpses*.

As these intertexts suggest, the darker tone of *Rejects* is largely the result of an apparent shift in Zombie's approach to presenting violence. In the late 1960s, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* were at the forefront of a major transition in representations of violence in American cinema, as trailblazers of what Stephen Prince refers to as "ultraviolence," a highly aestheticized mode of depicting graphic violence that was unprecedented in its explicitness and realism (see "Graphic" 6-14). Naturally, as the popularity and perceived social relevance of ultraviolence grew, it found its way into independent horror cinema, with films like Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw* and Craven's *Last House* eschewing the campy excess of mid-60s splatter horror in favour of unflinching

violence and gore that was presented with a disturbing seriousness of purpose. Although ultraviolence had many detractors who saw it as gratuitous and amoral, its use in each of the aforementioned films was as confrontational in its politics as it was in its form. Made by auteur filmmakers who openly associated with the Vietnam-era counterculture, these films all adopted a radical stance toward violence that aimed to expose, in various ways, its troublesome centrality to American history and culture and, more simply, its truly horrific nature (see Prince, “Graphic” 14; Wood 93-94, 126-128).

True to its inspirations, *Rejects* plays its violence straight through extremely graphic sequences of interpersonal brutality. Like Peckinpah’s titular *Wild Bunch* or Craven’s escaped convicts, the *Fireflies* subject anyone unfortunate enough to cross their path to vicious psychological abuse, violent humiliation, rape, and slaughter. Despite its formal similarities, however, *Zombie*’s use of violence significantly lacks the critical resonance of his cinematic precursors, trading out ultraviolence for what B. Ruby Rich terms “neo-violence,” in which the qualities of stylization and aesthetic brutality are elevated over ideological concern (in Kendrick 210). For instance, the film echoes *Last House* in a prolonged sequence involving the horrific sexual assault of the wife of a touring country musician in a decrepit motel room. Like Craven, *Zombie* shows the assault in gut-wrenching detail, using claustrophobic close-ups that refuse to shy away as Otis forces the victim to strip down, sexually violates her with the barrel of a pistol, and makes her perform oral sex at gunpoint. That said, whereas the rapes depicted in *Last House* function in service of Craven’s broader message about humanity’s capacity for violence and the (Vietnam-era, American) viewer’s own complicity in its perpetration, *Rejects*, on the other hand, uses sexual humiliation for the sake of stylistic homage. Here, it acts as little more than an illicit set piece offering yet another example of the *Fireflies*’ ruthless nature – their inhuman lack of remorse is actually miles away from the all-too-human self-disgust felt by *Last House*’s Krug (David Hess) and his gang when they realize that they have gone too far.

Nonetheless, that *Zombie*’s treatment of violence is decidedly uncritical is a notion that not even the director himself would deny. As *Zombie* saw it, his vision for *Rejects* was not shaped by social or political matters, but rather by cinematic nostalgia.

He explained that the directors who inspired him “were a product of [the counterculture] generation... [but] I’m a product of the films that generation created... I’m not influenced now by world events” (qtd. in Tseng). In other words, his proclivity for extreme on-screen violence is intimately tied to his status as a convergence-era horror auteur – that is, a filmmaker whose work is guided by and who courts the respect of fans through his own genre fandom and affectionate, if myopic, appreciation of ultraviolent cinema.

In fact, *Rejects* is infused with, and appeals to, a horror fan sensibility in a number of ways. For one thing, the film trades in *Corpses*’ psychedelic funhouse look for a gritty, handheld aesthetic and worn colour palette of yellows and tans that reflect the dirt and grime of its barren desert locations – an aesthetic shift that serves to further amplify its tonal bleakness and the felt intensity of its violence. As Joan Hawkins notes, this sort of raw aesthetic is typically taken by cult audiences as a “signifier of [a film’s] outlaw status and a guarantor of its authenticity” (qtd. in Hollows 43). Furthermore, the film houses a staunch anti-pop sentiment. In one scene, Sheriff Wydell (William Forsythe) violently lashes out at a pretentious film critic for criticizing Elvis Presley, labelling the critic a “Hollywood-loving pussy.” In another, Otis belittles one of his victims, a touring country musician, for liking a pop song playing on the radio: “You like this top 40 shit?” he laughs, “I thought you were like some true-blue-balls, Ernest Tubb country fucker or somethin’. You’re nothing but a city faggot with a cowboy hat.” In keeping with this anti-pop thematic, the *Rejects* soundtrack is filled with well-known songs from the annals of 70s southern rock – such as Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Freebird” and The Allman Brothers’ “Midnight Rider, – a genre of music that listeners are stereotypically seen as being drawn to on the basis of its “defiant masculine code...and its expression of ideological ‘difference’” (Wells 127n3). Most importantly, the film positions the Fireflies as the main locus of viewer sympathy, valorizing the renegade mentality of, in *Zombie*’s terms, a band of “outcasts [and] misfits who create their own world” (qtd. in *Rejects* Press Notes, *JeremyWalker.com*). Indeed, *Zombie* has stated that he wanted the “white trash” Fireflies to come across as horrible yet “lovable villains” with a “rock’n’roll charisma” (*Zombie, Film Comment* 9), and has noted the centrality of coolness to offsetting their brutality by

asserting, “Cool gets you a long way in life. You can be a real asshole, but as long as you’re cool it buys you a lot of slack” (qtd. in *Rejects Press Notes*, *JeremyWalker.com*).³⁶

Nowhere is *Zombie*’s fan sensibility more apparent than in the film’s epic finale: a highly stylized gun battle, set to Lynyrd Skynyrd’s definitive southern rock rebel-anthem, “Freebird,” that sends the Fireflies out in a blaze of glory (and also undermines any hopes that Lionsgate had of turning *Corpses* into a franchise). Having barely survived a vicious attack at the hands of Sheriff Wydell, the family once again take to the open road. As they drive, *Zombie* films the moment in a mixture of soaring overhead shots and freely mobile tracking shots that move smoothly alongside the car. Eventually, the car comes to a slow stop. In a series of locked-down, ground level shots, we see that the road is blocked off by a barricade of armed police officers. The dynamic that *Zombie* is trying to construct here is obvious: the Fireflies connote a romantic sense of freedom; the police, as representatives of “the Man,” connote oppression and constraint. The family members slowly pull out their guns, the camera once again becomes freely mobile, and the lyrics of “Freebird” (“And this bird you cannot change...”) memorialize their unflinching adherence to their rebellious code. The music’s tempo doubles and Otis hits the gas. As “Freebird”’s adrenaline-pumping guitar solo begins, the Fireflies and the police both open fire (see Figure 4).

At this point, all of *Zombie*’s stylistic influences begin to explode out. The shootout borrows techniques straight from Peckinpah’s formal playbook: hyperkinetic montage editing, jump cuts, slow-motion, and gruesome, close-up inserts of bullets piercing flesh (see Prince, “Aesthetic”). As the Fireflies are struck by gunfire, their writhing movements, which often match the beat of the song, evoke the balletic

³⁶ The interrelated issues of class and gender are also important here. Given that the Fireflies are depicted as working-class “white trash,” Bernard has read the sympathy that the film evokes for them as an indicator of its “progressive or even radical” (127) potential. However, unlike a film such as *Texas Chainsaw*, in which the monstrous family’s class is used to stage a critique of structural violence, *Zombie*’s portrayal of the Fireflies as “white trash” seems more likely to be one aspect of his broader effort to imbue them with “coolness,” a key feature of which Susan Fraiman has identified as an “appeal to...working-class men as embodiments of an authentic, renegade masculinity” (xv). In this respect, *Zombie*’s take on class and gender is not radical but rather is exemplary of a trend in contemporary popular culture in which hypermasculine “white trash” characters are “uncritically valorize[d] [for] the anti-authoritarian aspects to the name and image [of ‘white trash’]” (Hartigan 326). This disposition, of course, is one which jells considerably with the “anti-authoritarian aspects” of cult horror fandom, even despite its apparent ubiquity in American mass/popular culture.



FIGURE 4 The Firefly clan (Sid Haig, Sheri Moon Zombie, Bill Moseley) take one last stand against the law in the blood-soaked finale to *The Devil's Rejects* (2005).³⁷

convulsions of the titular anti-heroes at the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Suddenly, the music cuts out, and, in homage to the finale of revisionist Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the film ends with a close-up freeze frame of each one of the Fireflies and the sound of a barrage of gunfire. It is an incredibly cinematic death reserved for outlaw icons. As the credits begin to roll, Zombie fades back to soaring shots that travel freely along the highway, positioning the spirit of the Fireflies (unlike that of Peckinpah's anachronistic Wild Bunch, for instance) as the eternal spirit of the American backroads – that marginal, frontier-like space between savagery and humanity that, not unlike the cinematic fringes supposedly occupied by the horror fan community, is seen as the stomping ground of true rebels.

Ultimately, then, to borrow Jenkins's words, *Rejects* "blur[s] the lines between entertainment content and brand message" (*Convergence* 20) by *narrativizing* a number of the core elements of cult horror reception and of the Zombie brand: a disavowal of the

³⁷ Image retrieved from: *The Devil's Rejects*. Dir. Rob Zombie. Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.

commercial mainstream as inauthentic; the sense of community fostered amongst a marginal band of so-called “outcasts” or “rejects” perceived to be “cool” in their steadfast refusal to conform to dominant cultural standards; and the celebration of (cinematic) violence as a primary means of disrupting the status quo. Hence, whereas the works of Penn, Peckinpah, Craven, and Hooper reflected and appealed to the sentiments of the counterculture at the time of their release via politically subversive subtexts, *Zombie*’s film reflects and appeals more directly to those of the horror fan community by using extreme violence as the foundational building block of a blood-soaked, rock’n’roll fantasy of anti-establishment outlaw rebellion.

Nonetheless, by publicly aligning *Rejects* with and borrowing key aesthetic strategies from renowned ultraviolent auteur films, *Zombie* also promotes his own status as part of a broader legacy of independent-minded filmmakers for whom extreme violence served as a key marker of their oppositional auteurism. This tendency to bid for a sort of auteurism-by-association was most clearly evidenced when he explained the influence of 1960s and 1970s filmmaking on *Rejects* to online outlet *AV Club* by describing that era as “a time where the director was key...[acting as] the god on set with the vision” and “the last great time where films were being made for the sake of the film and not for the sake of the money” (*Zombie, AV Club*). Thus, by shrouding *Rejects* in a romantic aura of auteurism, *Zombie* elevated his own authorial reputation while simultaneously veiling the corporate incentives that lay behind the commissioning of film as part of a budding, studio-specific cycle of extreme horror films.

Although *Rejects* only generated \$17 million at the domestic box office, it received a glowing response from horror fans, as was clearly indicated when the film took home the trophy for Best Horror Film at Spike TV’s Scream Awards (“Devil’s,” *IMDb*) – a subculturally-oriented awards show described by *Time* magazine as “horror[’s] Golden Globes” (Keegan 50). At the same time, *Zombie*’s shift in stylistic intertexts from paracinematic films to acclaimed auteur films seemed to have a significant effect on his reputation within critical circles as well. When *Corpses* was released, many critics spoke of *Zombie* as if he were the utter antithesis of an auteur, dismissing him as a “no-talent beginner” (Toto) or “a fanboy obsessed with the hobby-kit

monsters of yesteryear” whose only ambitions were “to imitate second-rank [horror] director[s]” (Newman 36). With *Rejects*, oddly enough, *Zombie*’s explicitly violent, fanboy style became the grounds upon which reviewers for a number of top-tier publications engaged in borderline auteurist readings of his work. *Variety*’s Justin Chang, for instance, called *Rejects* “a grind house valentine... brutal, punishing yet mordantly amusing” guided by a “grisly single-mindedness of vision...[and] a menacing clarity of purpose” (62). Likewise, Michael Rechtshaffen of the *Hollywood Reporter* drew connections between *Zombie* and a wide range of violence- or trash-friendly auteurs of yore, declaring, “[*Rejects*] plays like ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ as made by a committee comprised of George Romero, Sam Peckinpah, Tobe Hooper, Sergio Leone and John Waters – but *Zombie* still manages to inject a pervasive flavor all his own.” But if such positive mainstream reception might have threatened to diminish *Rejects*’ subcultural appeal, descriptions of the film as one “guaranteed to satiate [*Zombie*’s] considerable fanbase and sicken just about everyone else” (Chang 62) and for “hardened horror movie fan[s] capable of appreciating...the deliberately disgusting” (Ebert) ensured that it did not by reinforcing the boundaries of authentic horror fandom.

1.4 The Media Branding of *Zombie* as a Horror Auteur

The period following the release of *Rejects* constituted the crucial turning point in the industrial branding of *Zombie* as a horror auteur and the positioning of violence as the cornerstone of his auteurist identity. Before elaborating on this claim, providing some context is important. In the interim between the releases of *Corpses* and *Rejects*, Lionsgate’s investment in extreme horror continued to grow. As Perren notes, the 2004-2005 fiscal year specifically was a major milestone in the studio’s history (“Last” 113). After establishing the commercial viability of extreme horror with Eli Roth’s backwoods splatter-comedy *Cabin Fever* (2003), Lionsgate achieved its greatest success to date in October 2004 with Sundance-pickup *Saw*. If *Corpses* had been the first film to secure extreme horror in Lionsgate’s lineup, *Saw* was the film to loudly confirm its place in mainstream multiplexes. Once the torture-heavy serial killer mystery, produced on a miniscule \$1.2 million budget, had crossed the \$100 million mark at the worldwide box office, it was clear that Lionsgate had tapped into a pop cultural current that was

appealing to both hardcore horror fans and a wider commercial audience. Better yet, with few other indie labels releasing the same kind of product theatrically at the time and the content of the films making them essentially “major-proof,” Lionsgate could dominate the market with little to no direct competition.³⁸

Throughout 2005 and 2006, Lionsgate continued to generate modest yet admirable returns distributing gory films like *High Tension* (2005) and *The Descent* (2006). The studio also struck box office gold with *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), and Eli Roth’s torture-heavy *Hostel* (2006), which, like *Corpses*, had been left without a US distributor when Sony-owned producer Screen Gems got cold feet. As extreme horror proliferated into a profitable film cycle, other studios eventually jumped on the bandwagon, with Dimension Films distributing Australian outback slasher *Wolf Creek* (2005) and Fox Searchlight releasing a popular remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977, original; 2006, remake). That graphic displays of blood-and-guts were becoming the newest trend in the independent horror market did not go unnoticed by the press. News articles on extreme horror abounded, and Zombie was frequently positioned as a director at the forefront of a new wave in genre filmmaking that, in the words of a writer for the *National Post*, was a far cry from “more palatable, less bloody” fare that had been released by the Hollywood majors in the wake of the FTC’s “post-Columbine crackdown” (McConvey B4).

The importance of violence to the crafting of Zombie’s auteur status is most prominently evidenced in discussions of what the press termed “torture porn” and the “Splat Pack.” In February 2006, David Edelstein of *New York* magazine wrote an infamous article in which he declared *Rejects* to be one of the earliest examples of what he contemptuously labelled “torture porn” (63). Although torture porn has largely become synonymous with the films of the extreme horror cycle, Edelstein’s original use of the term referred more broadly to what he saw as an amorphous wave of “viciously nihilistic” (63), post-9/11 films emerging in the wake of the War on Terror and the Abu

³⁸ The main exceptions were 20th Century Fox’s *Wrong Turn* (2003) and Platinum Dunes/New Line Cinema’s remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003). However, though both films were commercial successes, they failed to garner the same degree of respect amongst the fan community as a number of the Lionsgate releases.

Gharib scandal. According to Edelstein, these films – which were as disparate as *Rejects*, *Hostel*, and Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004) – all featured “explicit scenes of torture and mutilation...[with] the prospect of titillating and shocking” (63) as their defining characteristic. If Edelstein’s goal was to condemn torture porn, finding it disconcerting that such extreme violence was being granted a “place of honor” in the multiplexes, his article also inadvertently helped to consolidate the subcultural legitimacy of horror filmmakers in the group by presenting them as resuscitators of an excessively violent and counter-mainstream authentic horror cinema. For instance, citing a scene in *Rejects* in which a woman gets flattened by a semi-truck as an example of the “inherent sadism” of these films, Edelstein asserted that the carnage put on-screen by directors like Zombie and Roth was more of the sort “once confined to [grindhouse theatres like] the old 42nd Street, the Deuce, in gutbucket Italian cannibal pictures” than it was of the sort featured in “eighties hack-’em-ups (or their jokey remakes, like *Scream*)” (63).

Then, in late 2006, Zombie was explicitly granted auteur status when the press deemed him a member of the Splat Pack: an “emerging and collegial band of horror auteurs” comprised of Zombie, Roth, Alexandre Aja (*High Tension*, *The Hills Have Eyes*), James Wan and Leigh Whannell (*Saw*), Darren Lynn Bousman (*Saw II*, *Saw III*), and Neil Marshall (*The Descent*), who were seemingly united in their aim to produce “unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies” (Keegan 48).³⁹ On one hand, the branding of Zombie and his contemporaries as members of a horror collective or “collegial band of horror auteurs” actually undermines the notions of individuality, unique style, and personal expression that act as cornerstones of the auteur theory by reducing their directorial approaches to one shared element of genre semantics: extreme violence. Perhaps the most overt example of this homogenizing impulse was *Time* magazine’s Rebecca Winters Keegan’s suggestion that the Splat Pack’s films all share the same “basic plotline” in which “people are stuck somewhere and have to endure horrible things to escape... [t]he more deviant and repulsive the treatment, the better” (50). On the other hand, media depictions of the Splat Pack, though nowhere near as pejorative in tone as Edelstein’s writings on torture porn, still invoked, for Zombie and his contemporaries,

³⁹ Parts of my analysis of press descriptions of the Splat Pack are echoed in similar analyses conducted in recently published work by Bernard (13-26) and Joe Tompkins (“Bids” 209-213).

the image of the horror auteur by engaging with key tropes of authentic horror such as violence, subversion, and independence.

For one thing, the press drew immediate associations between the Splat Pack and the radical horror auteurs of the 1970s. Keegan, for example, framed the emergence of extreme horror as a passing of the torch, referring to the Splat Pack as a batch of “new blood” not only inspired by but, more importantly, “welcomed” by a celebrated “Old Guard of horror directors, including [Wes] Craven and Tobe Hooper” (51). As such, the Splat Pack was routinely depicted as a “gore-happy gang” (Keegan 50) of nascent auteurs hired exclusively by independent studios – *Variety*’s Pamela McClintock called Lionsgate their “home studio” (34) – to reintroduce a level of artistry to the genre, however twisted and gruesome, that had been lacking since the 1970s. Importantly, this meant rehearsing and perpetuating the idea that the Splat Pack’s films stood apart from the familiar, inauthentic Other of mainstream Hollywood horror. The Splat Pack was credited with reclaiming a genre “which they say has been hijacked by watered down PG-13 fare” with “terror, torture, and depravity” (McClintock 1) and “innovative filmmaking...that rises above the mindless slasher sequels of the ‘80s or such predictable teen-star killfests of the ‘90s as *I Know What You Did Last Summer*” (Keegan 50). McClintock further distanced the Splat Pack from corporate Hollywood by stressing that while many of them were being “approached by major studios to make more mainstream films,” it was “doubtful whether the majors would really go for the jugular and make the kind of films [the Splat Pack] make” (34). Thus, despite fleeting acknowledgements of the industrial appeal of films that “cost next to nothing to make... [yet] mint [box office] gold,” the Splat Pack was positioned as a genuine subculture operating in the fringes of the film industry, specifically described by McClintock as a band of “Blood Brothers” who, despite being “heroes amongst horror fans,” “still feel like outcasts” as they “go unrecognized by the press and Hollywood establishment” (1). Ultimately, centring the conversation on the Splat Pack directors rather than Lionsgate not only secures the cult reputations of these directors as genuine horror auteurs but also avows the authenticity of their films, downplaying the corporate machinations that enabled their production and/or distribution as part of a highly successful film cycle (see also Tompkins, “Bids” 211).

As a final note, features on the Splat Pack also elevated Zombie's legitimacy, however briefly, in ways not afforded to the group's other members. For instance, descriptions of the director as a "tattooed heavy-metal vocalist" (Keegan 48) and a "subversive looking rocker-director" (McClintock 1) gave him an added transgressive edge in comparison to the more "fresh-faced" filmmakers in the bunch, such as Roth, who McClintock described as being the son of a Harvard professor and having "the looks of a leading man" (1). More significantly, Reed Tucker of the *New York Post* seemingly positioned Zombie as the pioneer of the Splat Pack, responsible for saving the genre from its mainstream departures and inaugurating the extreme horror cycle, by stressing that *Corpses* was the first film of the 2000s to "demonstrat[e] that R-rated horror films were viable products...[and that] atmosphere and blood could pack in a crowd just as well as casting some blond star from [teen-focused television network the] WB" (38). As such, Zombie was further canonized due to the interstitial identity he was granted as both a member of and a "mentor" to the Splat Pack – a label that situates him, according to McClintock, in a class of other "mentors" including eminent cult auteur Quentin Tarantino (1). This alleged "mentorship" was evidenced in an anecdote relayed by both McClintock and Keegan pertaining to Zombie's coaching of Bousman through his talks with the MPAA ratings board. After the board had threatened Bousman's *Saw III* with the dreaded NC-17 rating, Zombie supposedly advised him to surprise dismissive board members with an explanation of why the extremity and realism of the violence may make its depiction more "socially responsible" (Zombie qtd. in Keegan 48). However, Keegan also notes that Zombie was quick to clarify that "he doesn't actually care what's socially responsible" (48). The image of Zombie given by the press, then, was that of a genre trailblazer and industry rebel with the personal experience and know-how to help his fellow filmmakers slyly and – as suggested by his ostensible disregard for "responsibility" – recklessly outsmart Hollywood gatekeepers.

The diverse machinations that surrounded Zombie's first two films – from the moment of *Corpses*' dismissal from Universal up to his post-*Rejects* induction into the Splat Pack – have all pointed toward the same core contradiction. On one hand, Zombie's public image as a horror auteur was granted largely on the basis of an aesthetic and industrial stance of rebellion-against-the-mainstream. On the other hand, this aesthetic

and industrial stance itself was tied specifically to the corporate strategies of independent studio Lionsgate and was consistent with the profitable anti-establishment ideology that underlined his pre-existing brand. However, what happens to Zombie's fan-friendly image as an iconoclastic Hollywood "outsider" when, in the face of his increasing market value, he is compelled to move toward modes of filmmaking deemed more mainstream by horror fans? How might this shift toward the so-called mainstream manifest in his own filmmaking practices while also influencing the means by which his identity is dispersed and performed in promotional forums? Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, how can these scenarios contribute to our understanding of the utility of the figure of the horror auteur as a fan-targeted, institutional marketing device in the convergence era? The next chapter will aim to address these questions by examining the planning, production, and pre-release promotion of Zombie's *Halloween*.

Chapter 2

Legitimizing Rob Zombie's *Halloween*: Convergence-Era Horror Auteurism and the Franchise Reboot

In June 2006, some 28 years after the release of John Carpenter's teen slasher classic *Halloween* (1978; henceforth *Halloween* (78)), rumors emerged that Rob Zombie was in talks with independent genre label Dimension Films to write and direct the next entry in the *Halloween* franchise. While *Halloween* (78) had previously spawned seven sequels, the popularity of the series had effectively ground to a halt in 2002 with the abject commercial, critical, and subcultural failure of *Halloween: Resurrection*. Accordingly, horror fans responded enthusiastically, at first, to the idea of Zombie taking the helms. "If Rob takes the project I highly doubt anyone will be let down," wrote a user (Rival11) of *DVDTalk.com*, "We're talking Rob freakin' Zombie here folks, a guy who refuses to give into the typical mainstream BS."⁴⁰ When it was officially announced, however, that Zombie would not be making a sequel, but would be returning to the beginning of the franchise for a new take on *Halloween* (78), fans' enthusiasm turned to outrage. In their eyes, this announcement meant one thing: a remake.

By 2006, the horror remake had become an industrial standard, with modestly budgeted films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *The Hills Have Eyes* generating massive returns at the box office. Yet, "remake" is seen as something of a dirty word in critical and (sub)cultural discourse, often being denied cultural distinction as an indicator of the ultimate triumph of commerce over art (Verevis 4). Horror fans tend to take particular issue with remakes because the economic exploitation of recognizable film brands and pre-sold titles conflicts with subcultural ideologies condemning nakedly commercial cinema (Roche 4). Worse yet, many of the horror films being remade were originally highly regarded texts made by respected auteurs (Roche 9) – a condition that paradoxically encouraged their remaking as much as it discouraged acceptance of their remakes. Accordingly, one fan (Terrell) on

⁴⁰ Posted in "Rob Zombie to write/direct next Halloween movie?" *DVDTalk.com* [03 Jun 2006].

DVDTalk.com colorfully equated remaking *Halloween* to desecrating an artistic masterpiece, lamenting, “This is like me trying to paint a copy of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel... Some films should be left the fuck alone and not remade.”⁴¹ Another (Chad) criticized Zombie directly, exclaiming, “[E]nough with the fucking re-makes already! I’d *much* rather see him direct part 9 than this. I just lost a lot of respect for Mr. Zombie.”⁴²

Dimension’s decision to revive the *Halloween* franchise was, of course, driven primarily by the profit principle. But if the studio wanted to attract the sort of cult audience that was crucial to renewing the longevity of the franchise, and Zombie wanted to protect the subcultural integrity of his own cinematic brand, a direct remake seemed out of the question. Clearly, both parties were faced with the contentious task of maximizing the commercial potential of Zombie’s *Halloween* while ensuring not to alienate devoted, and already skeptical, horror and franchise fans. To navigate this tricky terrain, they would usurp the blueprint of the franchise reboot: an emerging cycle of films and industry-proven production schema for breathing new life into stale cult franchises (Proctor 1). At the same time, the decision to reboot rather than to remake a horror property should not be viewed simply as an indicator of the film industry conning the fan community. William Proctor posits that

if cinemagoers accepted Hollywood product without question or discernment, the film industries could simply spin out sequel after sequel [and remake after remake]... The reboot strategy illustrates that [fans] critically assess the texts they consume and, at times, cause the industry to rethink their tactics... The reboot is [thus] a(nother) complex interplay between spectator and industry, art and commerce (2, 14).

In other words, the reboot is both well-suited to and highly reflective of industrial practice in the convergence era: it is, at once, an indicator of fans’ increasing participation in cultural production, *and* an example of the ways in which contemporary film institutions aim to manage the consumption habits of increasingly active and diverse

⁴¹ Posted in “Rob Zombie to write/direct next Halloween movie?” *DVDTalk.com* [04 Jun 2006].

⁴² Posted in “Rob Zombie to write/direct next Halloween movie?” *DVDTalk.com* [04 Jun 2006].

fan communities. Who better, then, for the industry to insert into the reboot equation than a convergence-era horror auteur with a loyal and devoted fan following?

This chapter will chart a transition in industrial perceptions of Zombie in the years following *Rejects* from a writer-director of original, niche-oriented horror fare to something of a bankable, “auteur”-for-hire whose brand-name authorship could be mobilized to secure the subcultural appeal of wide release horror tentpoles. The first two sections will examine the commercial logic underlying the planning and production of Zombie’s *Halloween*. In section one, I will illustrate how a reboot of *Halloween* with Zombie at the helm was conceptualized by Dimension as a commercially-promising tentpole with which to reboot its own once-lucrative investment in horror production. In section two, I will use Richard Nowell’s concept of “calculated hybridity” (*Blood* 25) to show how Zombie updated *Halloween* and maximized its crossover appeal by wedding the aesthetics of extreme horror with the most successful narrative and stylistic features of the franchise reboot production model. Here, I will also look briefly at the ways in which promotion of the film aimed to elevate its public image by evoking the aura of the reboot cycle’s “Trailblazer Hit”⁴³: Warner Bros.’ *Batman Begins* (2005). The third section will continue this focus on promotion by demonstrating how Zombie’s auteurist image was deployed as a central feature of a multi-platform marketing campaign targeted at building and enhancing fan attachments to *Halloween* prior to its release. In doing so, this chapter will illustrate the commercial significance of the convergence-era horror auteur for subculturally legitimating institutionally-conceived horror properties, such as corporate franchise reboots.

2.1 Rebooting Horror at Dimension Films

Dimension was founded in 1992 by Bob Weinstein, a founder and co-owner, along with his brother Harvey, of the highly influential independent studio Miramax. In response to burgeoning costs and a few costly commercial misfires at Miramax, Dimension was created with the *modus operandi* of releasing low-to-mid level genre

⁴³ Nowell defines a Trailblazer Hit as the first film in a cycle that “is seen to have been commercially successful and which content-wise is seen to differ significantly from contemporaneous hits” (*Blood* 46). The Trailblazer Hit thus “lays the foundation upon which a film cycle is built” (46).

films that would generate extra money to help fund Miramax's more acclaimed auteur-driven, foreign-language, and/or arthouse fare (Schauer 395). Like other low budget genre labels, part of Dimension's business was focused largely on acquiring the production and/or distribution rights of dormant cult-horror franchises and releasing sequels either direct-to-video or theatrically as loss leaders.⁴⁴ Unlike other labels, however, the company also saw the possibility of bringing Miramax's reputation for prestige to the genre circuit and thus worked hard to create a brand identity as, in Weinstein's words, "a smart, artistic label for genre films" (qtd. in Schauer 396). After finding critical and commercial success with original productions such as *The Crow* (1994) and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), Dimension achieved its greatest triumph in 1996 with Wes Craven's *Scream*.

As noted in chapter one, *Scream* was nothing short of an industry phenomenon, delivering a towering \$103 million worldwide return on a \$15 million budget and launching a cycle of hip horror films that rejuvenated the genre and rediscovered the teen market. Accordingly, the late 1990s was a high point in the history of Dimension. Similar to the way in which films like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) had built Miramax into a highly respected, "quality" brand, *Scream* consolidated Dimension's image as the industry's leading provider of edgy and superior horror fare (Perren, *Indie* 115). To further elevate its brand image, Dimension adopted a strategy of developing long-term relationships with key creative personnel, such as Craven, *Scream*-scribe Kevin Williamson, and *From Dusk Till Dawn* director Robert Rodriguez (104). In this period, all of their talents, and those of others, would be directed toward making hip horror the company's cornerstone product, with films such as *Scream 2* (1997) and *Scream 3* (2000), *The Faculty* (1998), and *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999).

By the start of the new millennium, however, the hip horror cycle had largely exhausted itself. In fact, the market had become so saturated with teen slashers that, in 2000, Dimension itself produced a parody film, *Scary Movie*, which would become the

⁴⁴ Many low-budget genre films that are granted a theatrical release are considered loss leaders. This means that the primary purpose of the film's theatrical run, during which it will likely run at a loss, is to drum up enough publicity to ensure its success on home video or DVD, which is expected to be the most profitable window of distribution (Schatz, "New Millennium" 23).

highest-grossing film in the company's history. Moreover, *Columbine* and the subsequent FTC inquiry – explored in chapter one – had also raised costly obstacles to Dimension's marketing and distribution of ready-for-release hip horror properties *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, originally titled *Killing Mrs. Tingle*, and *Dracula 2000* (2000), making the continued release of violent teen fare a risky financial proposition (see Perren, *Indie* 214; Welkos). The remarginalization of the teen slasher was succeeded by a Hollywood drive toward supernaturally-oriented, PG-13 rated horror, inspired largely by Oscar-nominated, box office sensation *The Sixth Sense* (1999) (Wee 150). Although Dimension was initially able to cash-in on this trend with the atmospheric period piece *The Others* (2001), further attempts, such as *Darkness* (2002) and *They* (2002), failed to gain traction at the box office. With horror fare producing diminishing returns, Dimension instead shifted its focus toward releasing pre-sold, mass appeal comedies, such as *Scary Movie 3* (2003) and *Starsky and Hutch* (2004).

Horror, however, became an important commodity for Dimension once again in 2005, when the Weinsteins separated from corporate parent Disney, which had purchased Miramax and its holdings in 1993. While Disney retained ownership of Miramax, the brothers held onto Dimension, making it a division of their new independent studio, The Weinstein Company (henceforth, TWC) (Perren, *Indie* 227). As it had done for Miramax in the early 1990s, Dimension amped up genre production to provide financial support to TWC, which was rapidly expanding its corporate holdings beyond filmmaking into a wide variety of entertainment and lifestyle ventures (Wee 151). It is likely that Dimension's renewed interest in horror was also driven, in part, by a competitive incentive. By this time, Lionsgate had positioned itself as the new name in cutting-edge, independent horror and had proven that there was considerable money to be made in the R-rated horror market with the films of the extreme horror cycle.

Early in the year, Dimension was able to benefit from the recent commercial success of mid-level horror remakes by co-distributing a modestly budgeted but high grossing remake of *The Amityville Horror* (2005) with struggling Hollywood major MGM. But 2005 did not end up being a particularly lucrative year for the company in terms of releasing original content. For instance, belated attempts to refresh the once-

profitable but now culturally irrelevant hip horror formula, with the Craven-Williamson collaboration *Cursed* and the Williamson-produced teen slasher *Venom* (2005), fell flat, and extreme horror Sundance-pickup *Wolf Creek* drew in a relatively lacklustre \$16.5 million domestically.⁴⁵ Ultimately, then, while industrial conditions were indicating that the distribution of violent horror fare once again had the potential to be a gainful venture, corporate conditions at Dimension and TWC dictated that it was not the distribution of original content but rather “the resurrection of [Dimension’s] once-lucrative franchises...[that] made good sense from a business standpoint” (Wee 152).

This context is imperative in elucidating how rebooting the *Halloween* franchise was conceived of by Dimension in 2006 as a crucial opportunity by which to reboot its own investment in horror and help produce the capital necessary to smooth the rocky transition from Disney to TWC. That Dimension placed great economic importance on *Zombie’s Halloween* can be seen in its distribution strategy for the film. In the Weinsteins’ later days at Disney, they were criticized for significantly overspending by producing, on a number of occasions, “mid-range films at event film prices” (Perren, *Indie* 226). With *Halloween*, they would attempt to correct this error by aiming to produce a blockbuster event film at a mid-range price. Although only budgeted at a mid-level cost of \$15 million, *Halloween’s* pattern of distribution revealed the film’s positioning as a tentpole for the studio. After recognizing that releasing the film in October, near its titular holiday, would pit the film against the latest entry in the *Saw* franchise, Dimension bumped up its release date to the Friday of the long Labor Day weekend (Kilday, “A Zombie” 9). Its release was thus placed squarely at the end of summer blockbuster season. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, while Labor Day is not usually as big a box office draw as a number of the other summer weekends, it had “proven kind to genre fare” (Kilday, “A Zombie” 9) on multiple occasions. Furthermore, Dimension borrowed the strategy that had made the *Amityville* remake a hit, bringing MGM aboard in a co-distribution agreement that would help extend the film’s theatrical reach. Together, the studios gave *Halloween* a blockbuster-style saturation release,

⁴⁵ Dimension had significant trouble at the box office outside of the horror genre as well, with high-profile failed attempts at launching new auteur-driven, family-oriented franchises, such as Robert Rodriguez’s *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl in 3-D* (2005).

opening it in a whopping 3472 theatres. Not only was this the widest release of an R-rated horror movie in history, it was also the fifth widest release of an R-rated movie in general, topped only by four high-budget, major studio blockbusters: *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), and *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

Moreover, the importance that Dimension placed on *Halloween* as a corporate franchise more generally is evidenced by the fact that this was not the first time the company had engaged in a high-profile, summer re-launch of the franchise to capitalize on a revitalized horror market. In August 1998, amidst the post-*Scream* teen slasher craze, Dimension released *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* to bring the *Halloween* brand to a new generation of teen audiences. With *H20*, the studio closely followed the production blueprint that had made *Scream* a massive success. It hired Williamson as an executive producer and uncredited co-writer to infuse the film with the self-reflexive and postmodern hip horror sensibility; it cast popular teen TV stars such as Joseph Gordon Levitt (3rd *Rock from the Sun* (1996-2001)) and Michelle Williams (*Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003)) as the film's pop-culturally literate high-schoolers in peril; and it switched the franchise's iconic Haddonfield locale for a *Scream*-inspired California setting. At the same time that Dimension used these features to maximize *H20*'s cultural relevance, the studio also aimed to satisfy existing franchise fans by signing on the star of *Halloween* (78), Jamie Lee Curtis, to reprise her role as Final Girl heroine Laurie Strode. Ultimately, *H20* was a commercial hit, earning over \$55 million domestically, and was championed by critics and fans as the best *Halloween* film since Carpenter's original.

Nonetheless, the franchise's reclaimed success was short-lived. Dimension's follow-up to *H20*, *Halloween: Resurrection* not only underperformed at the box office but was also denounced as the worst film in the series. Fans were particularly angered by the franchise's devolution into camp, including a scene in which *Halloween*'s iconic villain Michael Myers – by now, the key reference point and heavily branded “star” of the franchise (Tompkins, “Re-imagining” 5) – engaged in a cheesy kung-fu fight with hip-hop musician Busta Rhymes. Moreover, as the eighth film in the series, critics saw *Resurrection* as nothing more than an uninspired corporate attempt to further exploit the

now-tired teen horror trend, with *Variety* calling it “even more uselessly redundant and shamelessly money-grubbing than most third-rate horror sequels” (Leydon 24).

Therefore, if Dimension wanted to escape the stain of corporatism that had marred the *Halloween* legacy with *Resurrection* and re-legitimize the franchise, it was clear that simply producing another sequel was out of the question. At the same time, as noted in the chapter introduction, (sub)cultural disdain for horror remakes meant that a by-the-book remake of *Halloween* (78) would not do the trick either.

Hence, as Bob Weinstein explained to the *Hollywood Reporter*, “We asked ourselves what would make [a new *Halloween*] unique. So we came up with the idea of re-imagining it, instead of just doing a remake, with a director who has a unique vision” (qtd. in Kilday, “Halloween” 56). Hiring Zombie was not only tied to Dimension’s own aforementioned proclivity for cultivating relationships with emerging genre auteurs, but was also indicative of a broader Hollywood trend of employing indie auteurs to refresh and maximize the profit potential of major franchises (Schatz, “Studio” 35). Attaching Zombie to the franchise stood to benefit Dimension in a number of ways. Commercially, Zombie’s pre-established fanbase and increasing cultural visibility as both a (commercial) horror auteur and a transmedia entertainment brand could significantly extend *Halloween*’s demographic reach.⁴⁶ Moreover, if his association with the booming extreme horror cycle and his hiring fresh off a creative partnership with Lionsgate would help *Halloween* cut through the horror market clutter by asserting its cultural relevance, it would also allow Dimension to compete more directly with its most prominent industry rival. Artistically, Zombie’s established subcultural stature and growing critical acclaim – both recently bolstered by his newly granted membership in the Splat Pack – could help to elevate perceptions of the project’s legitimacy and superiority over other, largely discredited mainstream horror remakes and franchise films. It is also worth noting that Dimension’s attraction to Zombie, specifically, was likely strengthened by direct associations drawn in trade press outlets like *Variety* (e.g. Cohen 4) between his grindhouse homage-laden authorial style and that of Weinstein favourites Tarantino and

⁴⁶ As Constantine Verevis has argued in relation to film remakes, for an audience that has little to no knowledge of or interest in the original text upon which a film is based, “auteurism [can] pla[y] a role in organizing audience reception” (139).

Rodriguez, whose so-called “quality” genre fare had previously brought great critical prestige, cult status, and commercial success to both Miramax and Dimension. Overall, then, it was not simply *Zombie*’s “unique vision” that appealed to Dimension. Instead, it was the industrial relevance of his directorial style and his ability, as an emerging convergence-era horror auteur, to court both mass and niche audience segments that made him the perfect candidate for helming a high-stakes revival of the *Halloween* franchise.

2.2 Rebooting *Halloween*

Even more important than the hiring and distribution strategies employed to turn *Halloween* into a cult blockbuster were the commercial strategies that were used in producing the actual film text. According to Nowell, the commercial logic of “calculated hybridity” dictates that filmmakers and producers “seek to maximize their chances of transforming their investments into financially successful products by combining elements of previous hits and economically viable film-types into new films” (*Blood* 25). Hybridization ultimately allows creative personnel and distributors to target and secure the interest of multiple audiences. Typically, this means attracting fans of a certain genre while avoiding the alienation of a wider commercial audience and/or consumers who dislike the genre (*Blood* 25; see also Altman 128) – an ideal strategy for shaping a film into a cult blockbuster. As noted, Dimension had already employed hybridization to great success once before, adapting elements of Carpenter’s *Halloween* (78) to the framework of hip horror in *H20*. This time around, *Zombie* and Dimension aimed to update their version of *Halloween*, to distance it from the disparaged trend of the horror remake, and to maximize its demographic appeal by implanting the basic iconography of *Halloween* (78) and the aesthetics of extreme horror into the production blueprint of an emerging cycle of Hollywood franchise reboots.

While remakes and reboots both represent a sort of economic safe-play in their reliance on the brand recognition of a pre-sold title, there are significant differences between these two approaches. As Proctor points out, whereas a remake constitutes a singular “reinterpretation of *one* film,” a reboot “attempts to forge a *series* of films, to begin a franchise anew from the ashes of an old or failed property... [by] wip[ing] the

slate clean and begin[ning] the story again from ‘year one’” (4). Thus, whereas a remake aims to repeat the “recognizable narrative units” (Verevis 1) of its original text, a reboot retains only the main character(s) and iconic elements from a franchise while taking an entirely new approach to the franchise mythos than that of its source text (Proctor 6). Typically, as a 2006 article on reboots in *Newsweek* observed, this is done by offering an origin story for the franchise’s branded character(s) and eschewing the fantastical and highly stylized elements of earlier entries in favour of a so-called grittier, more believable approach (Gordon 62-63). Moreover, the reboot is particularly amenable to reviving established cult properties with devoted and vocal fan communities, as it allows studios to keep making money via the release of new adaptations that promise not to diminish the legacy of, or to position themselves as competing versions to, the texts upon which they are based (Proctor 6). At the same time, however, reboots are inherently hybrid texts, inviting “a new [viewer]ship...into the fold” while also ensuring that “old [viewers] and aficionados [will] be re-invited to participate in the dawn of a new universe” (6).

The Trailblazer Hit of the reboot cycle was undoubtedly Warner Bros.’ *Batman Begins*. Following the lambasting of the previous entry in the *Batman* franchise, Joel Schumacher’s *Batman and Robin* (1997), by both critics and fans (see Proctor 7-8), Warner Bros. decided to restart the franchise with Christopher Nolan, an emerging and acclaimed indie auteur, at the helm. Establishing the reboot formula, Nolan returned to the beginning of the *Batman* narrative with an origin story and eliminated Schumacher’s over-the-top camp tones with a more serious, gritty, and “plausible” approach to the franchise mythos. *Batman Begins* was a triumph amongst critics, fans, and mass audiences alike. Ultimately, the film proved that a dark, auteur-driven reboot could become a successful cult blockbuster. That is, the reboot model could help a franchise recover from previous critical and fan failures by appealing to a variety of audience segments and taste formations (Proctor 2), while simultaneously operating as a “‘tent-pole’ event that...[could] ‘support the economy of an entire studio’” (Proctor citing Cuoco 1). Given the dismal reception of *Halloween: Resurrection*, Dimension’s need for a big theatrical hit to increase cash-flow to TWC, and the directorial prestige and bankability that *Batman Begins* brought Nolan, it makes sense that Dimension and *Zombie* chose to approach *Halloween* as a *Batman Begins*-style reboot.

While I will not engage in a full comparative analysis of *Halloween* (78) and *Zombie*'s reboot,⁴⁷ three key differences in *Zombie*'s approach are helpful to demonstrate how the commercial logic of hybridity may have influenced *Halloween*'s production. The basic story of each film is the same: on Halloween night, a young Michael Myers murders his sister Judith (and, in *Zombie*'s version, four others) at their family home in the town of Haddonfield, Illinois. Fifteen years later, an adult Myers escapes from Smith's Grove Sanatorium and returns to Haddonfield to wreak murderous havoc once again. *Zombie*'s reboot also keeps a number of the most recognizable elements from Carpenter's original including: its spare score; the iconic Myers mask; and certain key characters, such as Myers's psychiatrist, Dr. Samuel Loomis (Malcolm McDowell), and teenage babysitter Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton). It also rehashes a number of the same narrative beats, such as the post-coital murder of promiscuous teens Lynda (Kristina Klebe) and Bob (Nick Mennell) and Myers's final showdown with Strode.

The first major difference in *Zombie*'s version, however, and the most overt way in which it models itself after the reboot cycle, is its telling of a character-driven origin story for serial killer Michael Myers. In Carpenter's film, Myers's childhood murder and later escape are shown only in a brief prologue. For the remainder of the film, our point-of-view is Laurie's, and Myers appears only fleetingly as a shadowy, seemingly supernatural entity that silently stalks his victims and kills without warning. In *Zombie*'s *Halloween*, Myers is the main locus of viewer identification, and almost the entire first half of the film is devoted to showing him "in the process of 'becoming'" (Proctor 5). Here, unlike Carpenter who offers no motivation for Myers's killings, *Zombie* humanizes Myers by making him a disturbed product of both nature and nurture. Considerable screen time is spent detailing a young Myers's (Daeg Faerch) traumatic childhood, in which seemingly inborn psychotic and anti-social tendencies are triggered by schoolyard bullies and his abusive white trash family to boil over into murder, as well as his years at Smith's Grove. Although the film's later focus on the adult Myers's (Tyler Mane) escape falls into somewhat rote remake territory – here, many of the narrative beats of the original are clearly repeated – *Zombie* continues to offer psychological motivation for

⁴⁷ For a more detailed comparison of the two films, see David Roche's *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s: Why Don't They Do It Like They Used To?*

Myers. The director grounds Myers's murderous behaviour in both a Freudian compulsion to repeat his childhood trauma and an emotional longing for familial preservation and reunification. He does this specifically through a series of subtle visual and narrative repetitions between each half of the film, and by revealing that Myers's main target, Strode, is actually his once-beloved, long-lost younger sister.⁴⁸ Similar themes of working through childhood trauma, familial loss, and the desire to protect one's family legacy are also, tellingly, structuring themes of the origin story offered by Nolan in *Batman Begins*.

Closely linked to Zombie's pathologizing of Myers is the second difference in his approach: a tendency toward grittiness and ostensible "realism." Elegant, atmospheric, and almost dreamlike, Carpenter's *Halloween* (78) is often heralded as a triumph of cinematic style. Explaining how his vision for *Halloween* differed, Zombie suggested that he "wanted to do something a little more gritty and raw... [by] approach[ing] this like it was a real story, like this was a journey of this person called Michael Myers" (Zombie, *Reelz*). Zombie also claimed that "realism" was an important demand he made of his actors on set, supposedly telling them, "I want you guys to play this as if it's a true story. Deal serious. A real thing" (Zombie, *Icons of Fear*). Besides Myers's disturbing and relatively plausible origin story, the darker tone of the *Halloween* reboot is also crafted through a stripped-down, washed-out, and often handheld aesthetic – even though the use of Super 35mm film stock makes the film somewhat more polished than the Super 16mm aesthetic of Zombie's previous film, *Rejects* (Witmer 20). While Zombie had indeed taken a similar narrative, tonal, and aesthetic approach with *Rejects*, its application to the *Halloween* reboot was particularly fitting given that grit and "realism" are also bankable and critically acclaimed features of the franchise reboot formula.

The third major difference in Zombie's reboot, and another means by which he makes the film "gritty and raw," is the presence of extreme violence. *Halloween* (78) is famously non-explicit in its violence, emphasizing stylization and suspense over graphic displays of bodily harm. As Nowell explains, *Halloween* (78)

⁴⁸ That Laurie Strode is in fact Michael Myers's sister is an established part of the *Halloween* franchise history. However, this narrative detail was not introduced in the original series until the second film, *Halloween II* (1981).

featured only five murders... Each death blow was located outside of the frame, and, with the exception of the opening murder, a single blow sufficed to bring about the victim's death. These deaths were each a silent, clear affair, with victims dying instantaneously and without fear or body-horror being shown (*Blood* 96-97).

In contrast, *Zombie's* take on *Halloween* raises the body count from five to fourteen, and the majority of the film's death scenes are extremely brutal in their depiction of "body-horror," gore, and victim suffering, showcasing both the acts and their aftermaths in excruciating detail. For instance, whereas the original film obscures young Myers's (Will Sandin) murder of his sister Judith (Sandy Johnson) via an aesthetic simulation of his point-of-view through the eyeholes of a Halloween mask, *Zombie* shows young Myers stabbing Judith (Hanna Hall) in the stomach with a close-up of the knife penetrating her torso. Then, as she attempts to crawl away and cry out for help, we watch as Myers follows her down the hallway and repeatedly slashes at her back. Later in *Zombie's* film, a topless and terrified Annie Brackett (Danielle Harris) – whose quick, bloodless death in *Halloween* (78) is obscured by a foggy car window – is savagely beat, sliced at, dragged across the floor, and left bloodied and barely alive at the end of the attack (see Figure 5). Again, while extreme violence is nothing new to *Zombie's* work, its incorporation into the *Halloween* franchise seems driven by a commercial logic: as the definitive feature of both his earlier work and extreme horror – the hottest trend in genre cinema at the time – this is likely the element that excited studio executives the most, and perhaps the one that they were referring to when they repeatedly told him to "make it more Rob *Zombie*" ("Re-Imagining," *Halloween* DVD).

As this brief comparison has aimed to illustrate, while extreme violence, grittiness, and the origin story approach separated *Zombie's Halloween* from Carpenter's original, popular industry trends indicated that they were perhaps valued less as key features of a distinctive authorial signature or, as Weinstein would term it, "unique vision" than as industry-proven narrative and aesthetic formulae for achieving critical, commercial, and cult success. Put simply, by adding in these elements, *Zombie* effectively updated the *Halloween* franchise to match contemporary generic and



FIGURE 5 Incorporating extreme violence into the *Halloween* franchise.

Left: The deaths of Judith Myers (top, Sandy Johnson) and Annie Brackett (bottom, Nancy Kyes) in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978).⁴⁹

Right: The death of Judith Myers (top, Hanna Hall) and the aftermath of Michael Myers’s attack on Annie Brackett (bottom, Danielle Harris) in Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* (2007).⁵⁰

cinematic tastes. Hence, Zombie’s authorship of *Halloween* – or, at the very least, his hiring by Dimension to helm the project – seems to have been guided, in part, by the commercial logic of calculated hybridity.

In order to generate interest in the film, Zombie and its producers frequently relied upon the rhetoric of rebooting in promotional discourse. In a press statement released by Dimension, for instance, the film was described as “an entirely new take on the legend [that] will satisfy fans of the classic ‘Halloween’ legacy while beginning a new chapter in the Michael Myers saga” (“EXCLUSIVE”). Likewise, Zombie called

⁴⁹ Images retrieved from: *Halloween*. Dir. John Carpenter. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1978. DVD.

⁵⁰ Images retrieved from: *Halloween*. Dir. Rob Zombie. Genius Products, 2007. DVD.

Halloween a fresh start that was “100 percent its own animal, but [with] enough of the classic elements to satisfy” (qtd. in Carroll, “Rob Zombie”). Sometimes, Zombie and Dimension aimed to further elevate expectations for the film by explicitly aligning it with *Batman Begins*,⁵¹ such as when the director told one interviewer, “The best way I can describe it for people is that it’s like *Batman Begins*... You’re going to keep some of the classic things, but the way you want to represent it is completely different” (Zombie, *Icons of Fright*).

Halloween’s associations with the reboot cycle were also foregrounded in its marketing. In accordance with Nowell’s observation that the advertisements used to promote the films of a certain film cycle often tend to invite comparisons to that cycle’s earlier hits (*Blood* 94-95), marketing materials for *Halloween* were visibly modelled after those that Warner Bros. had released for *Batman Begins*. First, the theatrical poster



FIGURE 6 Masked crusaders, hometowns, and the dawn of a new franchise: Evoking *Batman Begins* (2005)⁵² in the marketing of *Halloween* (2007).⁵³

⁵¹ This observation is echoed in Joe Tompkins’s recently published article “‘Re-imagining’ the Canon: Examining the Discourse of Contemporary Horror Film Reboots,” 5-6.

⁵² Image retrieved from: http://www.impawards.com/2005/batman_begins_ver6.html

released to promote *Halloween* “echoed compositionally, stylistically, and iconographically” (*Blood* 139) one of the main *Batman Begins* posters (see Figure 6). Each poster centralizes the image of the respective film’s main character, either sporting or holding his mask, with the franchise’s iconic setting – Haddonfield for *Halloween*; Gotham City for *Batman Begins* – behind him. Compositionally, each poster also has a sunburst, or orange to black gradient, colour scheme as a backdrop, suggesting, in accordance with the purpose of the franchise reboot, a new dawn for the characters. Even more so than the *Batman Begins* poster, the *Halloween* poster foregrounds the film’s status as an origin story by showing Michael from behind with his mask in hand rather than on his face. In doing so, it emphasizes Zombie’s effort to make Myers “more realistic” by foregrounding the man behind the mask.

Furthermore, the teaser trailers released for each film also shared some overt similarities that are best illustrated in the following excerpts⁵⁴:

Batman Begins:

[00:05]	Voice-over (VO):	“You travelled the world. Now you must journey inwards. What you really fear is inside you... There is no turning back...”
[00:19]	CUT TO:	<i>Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale) and his mentor Ducard (Liam Neeson) sword-fighting; Bruce Wayne getting hit with bamboo sticks</i>
[00:28]	VO (continued):	“If you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, you become something else entirely.”
[00:41]	CUT TO:	<i>Close-up (CU) insert of the Batman mask</i>

Halloween:

[00:07]	VO:	“Inside of every one of us, there exists a dark side. Most people rise above it, but some are consumed by it...”
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⁵³ Image retrieved from: <http://www.impawards.com/2007/halloween.html>

⁵⁴ The two teasers compared can be viewed online at www.youtube.com under the following titles, respectively: “Batman Begins Teaser Trailer FULL HD 1080p,” ProPatria 97; “Halloween Teaser,” DimensionFilms.

- [00:25] CUT TO: *Young Michael Myers viciously beating Judith's boyfriend with a baseball bat*
- [00:34] VO (continued): "Until there is nothing left but pure evil."
- [00:43] CUT TO: *CU of adult Myers lifting up his iconic mask*

Each teaser thus sells its respective film as an origin story, constructing a character-driven narrative image that positions the main character's interior "darkness," psychological torment, and physical strength as the building blocks for the legendary status that he will ultimately achieve. Overall, then, the poster and teaser trailer for *Halloween* were constructed to generate crossover interest in, and bestow prestige upon, the film by evoking the aura of the reboot cycle's greatest commercial, critical, and (sub)cultural triumph.

2.3 Legitimizing *Halloween*

While the previous sections have illustrated the commercial logic behind the planning and production of *Zombie's Halloween*, its conscious crafting as a horror blockbuster with crossover demographic appeal seems antithetical to the subcultural ideologies of exclusivity and distinction that underpin horror fandom (Jancovich, "Cult" 309). In other words, the status of a franchise reboot like *Halloween* as a product of mass culture may threaten to diminish its perceived legitimacy or authenticity for fans. For Joe Tompkins, this means that the process of rebooting a horror franchise not only involves the textual practice of repeating a successful formula, but also a series of extratextual practices aimed directly at developing and enhancing fan attachments to the rebooted property ("Re-imagining" 7). These practices are often carried out in the form of ancillary materials, either distributed prior to, along with, or after a film's release, that "we[d] cultures of production and reception" (9) by "*discursively intervening* into the social constructions of taste" (7) that underlie cult reading strategies.

A brief note on the way that such ancillary materials operate in accordance with subcultural values helps to flesh out this point. For Jonathan Gray, "entryway paratexts" – ancillary texts, such as press reports, news, interviews, trailers, posters, behind-the-

scenes featurettes, and websites, that are consumed by audiences *prior* to a film itself – can operate as powerful, pre-figurative promotional filters that direct audiences’ expectations for, and advance judgments of, a given film (18, 48). When created or officially sanctioned by a film’s producers, entryway paratexts are often highly performative, affording creative personnel and marketers a vehicle through which to manufacture certain “preferred” readings or pre-conceptions of a film and suggest certain modes of viewing in accordance with industrial aims (Gray 18; see also Barker “News”). Moreover, in their efforts to spread the word about a film’s release, these paratexts tend to circulate the type of exclusive knowledge about the film and its production that cult audiences treat as an important form of subcultural capital (Jancovich, “Cult” 319; Fiske 452). Being in the know serves as a coveted mark of “insider” status in fan communities, as the accumulation of film-related knowledge, Henry Jenkins posits, gives fans the “currency they need in the social interactions [they] have around [a film]” (“Why Spreadable” 5). If this is the case, we can reasonably conclude that fans are perhaps more likely than other audience cohorts to actively search out entryway paratexts, as consuming paratexts can aid in the production of distinction. Accordingly, as Tompkins’s aforementioned work suggests, filmmakers and studios dealing with high-stakes cult properties like reboots may attempt to harness the approval of pre-existing fans by self-consciously shaping early publicity materials and promotional discourse to reflect their tastes and values.

As the figure of the convergence-era horror auteur demonstrates, authorship is a particularly important determinant of the horror fan community’s value judgments and “constructions of taste” – that is, it is a highly valued ground upon which fans assess, deem authentic, and thus bestow distinction upon horror texts. This may explain, for instance, why there was one key element featured in the aforementioned advertisements for *Halloween* that was lacking in those for *Batman Begins*: whereas the latter hedged solely on the cultural iconicity of the character of Batman, the former not only foregrounded Michael Myers but also the film’s star director, selling *Halloween* under the banner, “A Rob Zombie Film.” As a study of a number of other producer-created press, on-screen, and online entryway paratexts will show, the marketing of *Halloween*

specifically sought to legitimate the film for a subcultural audience by appealing to and dispersing *Zombie*'s authorial agency across a variety of media.

2.3.1 Press Strategies

The end of chapter one illustrated that by the time that *Halloween* was in production, the “horror auteur” label was being ascribed liberally to *Zombie* by the press. Using this institutionally-assigned image to their advantage, producers downplayed *Halloween*'s status as a calculated blockbuster or summer tentpole in press materials by means of auteur-centric promotional discourse that authenticated the film by first authenticating its author. One cogent example of this tactic was the aforementioned branding of the film as a “re-imagining” by a filmmaker with a “unique vision.” The term “re-imagining” not only deflects conceptions of *Zombie*'s *Halloween* as a remake, but also masks its status as a corporate reboot by shifting the primary locus of the film's value from the parent franchise to the new artist responsible for its re-invention.⁵⁵ Put simply, “reboot” offers consumers a resettable, and perpetually exploitable, film series; “re-imagining” offers them an author.⁵⁶

The most striking example of producer-created, auteurist promotion, however, can be found in Dimension's official press release for *Halloween*. Distributed first to horror news website *Bloody Disgusting*, the release takes explicit steps to distance the film from the trend of horror remakes, emphasizing that it “will not be a copycat of any prior films in the ‘Halloween’ franchise” but rather a product of *Zombie*'s “spectacular” new vision (“EXCLUSIVE”). Of particular interest, though, is the section of the release entitled “About Rob *Zombie*,” which is structured in such a way as to spur audiences who may be inclined to dismiss the film as an exercise in crass commercialism to rethink their stance. The section begins by romantically portraying *Zombie* as a transmedia iconoclast,

⁵⁵ From a purely semantic standpoint, the word “reboot,” given its origins in computer science, carries with it industrial and mechanical connotations; as Proctor notes, “reboot” is a term that refers specifically to the cinematic “hardware” being restarted – that is, the franchise itself (5). Conversely, the word “re-imagining” conjures up romantic images of creativity and personal expression.

⁵⁶ The calculated use of production terminology as an industrial tactic for shaping the public image of a franchise property is further illustrated in a recent report by the *Hollywood Reporter* that Dimension was branding its newest in-development (and *Zombie*-less) *Halloween* entry as “not a remake, not a reboot, and not a reimagining” but instead a “recalibration” (Kit, “‘Saw’ Writers”).

describing him as “an auteur filmmaker with shrewd insight and creative vision...[who] challenges audiences as he stretches the boundaries of film, music, and publishing.” Interestingly, it then proceeds to detail his success in the music industry from a purely economic standpoint, noting that he “has sold in excess of fifteen million records” and “is currently on a sold-out nationwide tour for his latest gold-selling album.” However, the tone immediately shifts as his success in the film industry is then outlined from a decidedly *artistic* standpoint: *Corpses* is labelled a “cult smash-hit” and *Rejects* is declared the turning point after which Zombie was “hailed by critics and fans as a visionary filmmaker...[with an] uncompromising and wildly inventive exploitive throw-back style.” Overall, then, the press release displaces the commercialism inherent in Zombie’s celebrity onto his music career, and then uses discourses of authorship and critical and subcultural distinction to present and reinforce his credentials as a modern-day horror auteur. In doing so, it ultimately asserts the status of *Halloween* as a quality genre film made by a “visionary” director whose sensibilities align him more with the arthouse (or grindhouse) than the mainstream.

Of course, Zombie was also directly involved in performing and selling his own auteurist identity to pre-existing *Halloween* and horror fans. Articles featuring statements from Zombie frequently demonstrated what Suzanne Scott identifies as a typical strategy employed by fanboy auteurs enlisted to reboot cult properties: the performative declaration of his own “fannish attachment to the property” (“Dawn” 445) as a promissory note that the franchise was in good hands. For instance, the aforementioned press release announcing the *Halloween* reboot quotes Zombie citing his status as a “huge, huge fan of Carpenter’s original” as the primary reason that he “jumped at the chance” to make the film (qtd. in “EXCLUSIVE”). Moreover, that Zombie had secured the approval and support of Carpenter before signing on was an anecdote that he recurrently relayed in interviews as a means of showcasing his respect and appreciation for the original’s canonicity.

Given that remaking or re-adapting a film is always complicated by a tension between the counteracting strategies of fidelity and freedom (Verevis 82), Zombie also invoked his fan identity to prove that he would be able to walk a tightrope between

originality and homage with finesse. The following excerpt from an interview with Zombie offers a telling example:

If I had changed every single thing in [Carpenter's] movie, [the studio] didn't care. In fact, they kept pushing me to change more things. It was my decision to keep the classic Michael Myers mask and make it Haddonfield and keep Dr. Loomis and all these things. I kept trying to think about it as a fan. I was a fan of Halloween and am a fan. So I was like 'What would I want to see?' (Zombie, *Cinema.com*).

Here, Zombie exploits his fan status to two ends. First, he uses his fandom to affirm his intent to protect the franchise from its complete excavation by industry personnel lacking the adequate knowledge or appreciation of the original film. Second, he uses his fandom to validate his own authority to select which elements of *Halloween's* iconography should be considered classic enough to retain, and thus to posit the compatibility of his own vision with fan tastes.

Finally, Zombie's alleged commitment to protecting the essence of Carpenter's original also involved a performative stance of commercial disavowal to assure fans that his main goal was to re-establish the artistic integrity of the *Halloween* brand. In an interview with online horror outlet *Icons of Fright*, for example, he distinguished his take on *Halloween* from films that are "quickly remade for a buck" on the basis of his

passion and intent... [After] watching Michael Myers degenerate through 7 sequels... I really wanted to take that character...and have people go, "Wow. Michael Myers never looked so fucking bad-ass!"... People thought I was only doing it for money. No. I could've went on tour and made 10 times the money (Zombie, *Icons of Fright*).

Elsewhere, Zombie adopted a fan-like disdain for the ways in which various modes of corporate exploitation, such as serialization and merchandising endeavours, had tainted the *Halloween* legacy. Speaking to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Zombie bemoaned the fact that *Halloween's* "scare factor" had been evacuated once "Michael Myers [had] become a

friendly Halloween mask... and you could buy a Michael Myers doll that was cute-looking,” and asserted that his intention was to “make [the franchise] scary again” (qtd. in Kit, “Zombie” 54). Zombie thus framed his film as an exercise in the re-authentication of the *Halloween* legacy, while also drawing attention away from the fact that marketers were actively building profitable buzz by releasing a wide range of merchandising tie-ins that ironically included both Halloween masks *and* action figures updated to reflect Zombie’s characterization of Myers. Nonetheless, in declaring his own commitment to the fan values of franchise fidelity and anti-commercialism, Zombie used press interviews as a platform to authorize his authorship of *Halloween*, repeatedly rehearsing and reproducing his public image as an ostensible subcultural “insider” and Hollywood “outsider.”

2.3.2 On-Screen Strategies

According to Gray, films regularly “offer multiple trailers for different presumed audiences” (51-52) to enhance their crossover potential. Hence, when *Halloween* was promoted in trailers and TV spots, there was not one specific, consistent narrative image offered to prospective viewers. Some advertisements, for instance, targeted youth audiences by emphasizing formulaic slasher conventions, with quick cuts of violence and shots of female teens fleeing Myers in abject terror. Other advertisements aimed at older, more sophisticated audiences sold *Halloween* as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of evil (“Is evil born, or is it raised?”). And others still targeted non-horror fans with a slower, methodical pace and a more suspenseful and mysterious tone (“Every town has its mysteries, every family has its secrets”).⁵⁷ However, despite these varied approaches, the earliest instance of on-screen marketing for the film was carefully conceptualized, strategically placed, and relied heavily on Zombie’s authorship to build awareness and excitement amongst subcultural consumers.

The previously discussed *Halloween* teaser first premiered in April 2007 before screenings of Tarantino and Rodriguez’s *Grindhouse* (2007) – an incredibly gory,

⁵⁷ The advertisements described in this paragraph can be viewed online at www.youtube.com under the following titles: “Halloween,” The Weinstein Company; “Rob Zombie’s HALLOWEEN – Official Tv Spot 1,” andy33123; “Rob Zombies Halloween – Creation (Tv Spot),” shadyjam; “Rob Zombies Halloween – Mysteries (Tv Spot),” shadyjam.

tongue-in-cheek throwback to grindhouse double-features co-produced by Dimension and TWC. Packaging the *Halloween* teaser with *Grindhouse* afforded Dimension the opportunity to first market the film to an audience of Tarantino, Rodriguez, and cult cinema fans that would likely be familiar with, or even fans of, Zombie's previous work and/or Carpenter's *Halloween* (78). The teaser itself is visibly designed to appeal to a subcultural audience, emphasizing classic elements and moments from Carpenter's original, such as the *Halloween* (78) score, multiple shots of Myers and his mask, and Myers's "ghost" costume. Moreover, to further the film's attraction for horror fans, including those who may not have had prior experience with the *Halloween* franchise, the teaser also foregrounds its extreme violence via quick cuts of some of its most brutal scenes. Most importantly, the teaser uses Zombie's authorship to wed these elements together ("This August, Rob Zombie unleashes an extreme vision of terror and re-invents a legend"). The teaser thus presents *Halloween* as both a legitimate "re-imagining" and an auteur-driven genre film by locating Zombie's appropriation of classic elements of *Halloween* (78) within the larger framework of his own "extreme vision" – a term that is tellingly replaced with "unique vision" in the wide-release theatrical trailer.⁵⁸

More unique, however, was the fact that attempts at authenticating Zombie's authorship of *Halloween* did not stop with the teaser, but also operated *within* the text of *Grindhouse* itself. Just prior to commencing production on *Halloween*, Dimension recruited Zombie, along with fellow acclaimed contemporary genre directors Eli Roth and Edgar Wright, to direct one of the three faux exploitation trailers that would be used to segue between *Grindhouse*'s two constituent feature films. While Zombie apparently approached his faux trailer – comically titled *Werewolf Women of the SS* – as a visual and technical rehearsal for *Halloween* (Witmer 21), I would argue that it also functioned as a *viewing rehearsal* for prospective *Halloween* audiences to direct them toward proper (that is, sanctioned) "interpretive strategies and expectations" (Gray 51) for the film.

For one, *Werewolf Women* features cameos from a number of actors, such as Sheri Moon Zombie, Sybil Danning, Tom Towles, and Udo Keir, who fans following

⁵⁸ The teaser and theatrical trailer described in this paragraph can be viewed online at www.youtube.com under the following titles: "Halloween Teaser," DimensionFilms; "Halloween," The Weinstein Company.

online production updates for *Halloween* may recognize as members of its cast. At the same time, horror fans would likely also recognize these actors from Zombie's previous work and/or classic cult horror films. More importantly, though, Zombie's trailer evokes discourses of authorship and "re-imagining" similar to those present in promotional materials for *Halloween* in three specific ways. First, as in the *Halloween* teaser, a voiceover and bold on-screen font brands *Werewolf Women* with the label – or, perhaps more accurately, the *logo* – "Written and Directed by Rob Zombie." Second, as a tongue-in-cheek homage to 1970s nazisploitation films that also packs in references to other exploitation and cult subgenres including women-in-prison films, mad scientist films, and Harry Alan Towers's *Fu Manchu* films (1965-1969), *Werewolf Women* also showcases Zombie's own cult fandom and subcultural capital. Third, and most significantly, *Werewolf Women* is clearly intended to be read as a "re-imagining" of a single text: *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), the most notorious and controversial of the nazisploitation films. Indeed, *Werewolf Women* not only borrows part of its title from *Ilsa*, but also sports similar characters and a similar narrative concept, focusing on a series of bloody medical experiments conducted on female POWs under the directive of sadistic female Nazi soldiers. Therefore, as Zombie promised of *Halloween*, *Werewolf Women* comes across as a faux film that has "enough of the classic elements [of *Ilsa*] to satisfy" but, through its pastiche of various exploitation subgenres, is also "100% its own animal." Overall, then, by packaging the teaser for *Halloween* and the faux trailer for *Werewolf Women* as two elements of the same theatrical experience, Dimension promoted *Halloween* directly to subcultural audiences while also offering them tangible, textual evidence that Zombie could successfully "re-imagine" a cult classic via, as the film's press release termed it, his "exploitive throw-back style."

2.3.3 Online Strategies

If the use of press and theatrical paratexts has long been standard publicity practice within the film industry, Dimension and Zombie's efforts to create buzz for *Halloween* amongst fan constituencies also pointed toward the industry's increasing use of the Internet as a pivotal promotional forum. Like most major contemporary films, *Halloween* had an official website designed to entice consumers and build anticipation

through relatively standard promotional fare such as trailers, clips, information about the cast and crew, downloadable computer wallpapers and screensavers, and official merchandise. However, other instances of online marketing were more specifically fan-targeted, such as a YouTube campaign that exploited Zombie's standing as a metal musician by placing clickable banner advertisements that linked users to the *Halloween* trailer either alongside or directly within heavy metal-related videos ("Halloween Comes Early," YouTube).

That said, the strategies that were perhaps the most astute and reflective of the advantage of the Internet for film promotion did not involve official ad buys, but rather the mobilization of what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green would call "spreadable" marketing strategies.⁵⁹ These often entailed Zombie's personal courting of fans through a variety of cost-free and "alternative," grassroots, or otherwise seemingly less-officiated Internet corridors. Throughout all stages of *Halloween's* production, the Zombie-moderated "Official Rob Zombie Halloween Page" on the social networking site MySpace functioned as the hub of semi-controlled fan activity surrounding the reboot.⁶⁰ Here, Zombie not only posted promotional materials, but also frequently released exclusive news and updates about *Halloween* in a detailed production blog. He also regularly interacted with fans by responding to inquiries in the comments section or in question-and-answer sessions. The content of the MySpace page was positioned for maximum "spreadability." For instance, clickable links were provided that encouraged fans to embed the film's trailer and a behind-the-scenes featurette in their own MySpace profiles, and the first-hand information released in Zombie's blog posts was quickly relayed by writers for online horror news outlets and fans posting in discussion forums. Moreover, the MySpace page was also presented as something of a hub for franchise fandom (and thus helped avow Zombie's own fan credentials) by sporting multiple links

⁵⁹ Jenkins, Ford, and Green define media "spreadability" as "the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content...sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes" (3). While the authors' conception of "spreadable media" is similar to earlier conceptions of so-called "viral media," they assert that the use of the term "viral" carries with it metaphors of infection and self-replication that inadequately account for the importance of consumer agency and participation in the circulation of online media content (16-23).

⁶⁰ Although the page has since been taken down, cached versions can be accessed through *Internet Archive's* Wayback Machine (web.archive.org) by entering the following URL: <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=101946169>



FIGURE 7 Evoking Uncle Sam in the recruitment poster for “The Legion of Michael.”⁶¹

to fan-run *Halloween*/Myers sites and MySpace pages. Overall, Zombie used MySpace to bring himself and fans together as harmonious participants in an online brand community based upon the circulation of *Halloween*-related subcultural capital in the form of “insider” knowledge about the reboot and broader franchise appreciation.

Zombie’s agency, social networking practices, and discourses of *Halloween* fandom and subcultural community-building converged again in a promotional campaign announced by Zombie via MySpace called “The Legion of Michael.” Spearheaded in partnership with four of the most popular horror news websites – *Arrow in the Head*, *Bloody Disgusting*, *Dread Central*, and *Shock Till You Drop*, – the campaign essentially intended to turn fans into living advertisements for the film, an unofficial street-level marketing team, by asking them to attend their local cinemas in full Michael Myers costumes on opening weekend. Themes of fandom and community set the prevailing tone of the campaign. For example, in the original announcement released by Zombie, and disseminated by the partnering horror websites, Zombie promised fans that the “Legion” was not conceived of as “some lame publicity thing...[that was] cheap or exploitive” but

⁶¹ Image retrieved from: www.dreadcentral.com/dev2/wp-content/uploads/lombanfinalb.jpg

rather as a one-off opportunity “created by the fans and for the fans who love this character” to celebrate Myers’s return to theatres (qtd. in Condit). Furthermore, the poster created to publicize the campaign featured ten Myers standing in a row, and borrowed the iconography of the famous Uncle Sam recruiting poster, sporting a red, white, and blue colour scheme and a banner that reads, “The Legion of Michael Wants You!” (see Figure 7). As these examples demonstrate, the maneuvers surrounding the “Legion” aimed to increase its allure to fans by framing it as a genuine underground movement and a unique opportunity for fans to display, commemorate and memorialize their *Halloween* fandom, rather than a “cheap or exploitive” publicity stunt intended to boost the film’s bottom line in its opening weekend.⁶²

Upon *Halloween*’s release, Dimension’s blockbuster hopes were realized, as audiences turned out in droves to see Zombie’s “re-imagining” of the series. The film set the record for the highest grossing Labor Day release ever, taking in \$26.4 million at the US box office in its opening weekend, and eventually went on to amass a total of \$58.3 million (\$80.3 million internationally) across its theatrical run. Although R-rated horror revenues were showing signs of slowing in early 2007, the commercial response to *Halloween* was in fact so strong that, for the second time in just three films, the industry press was referring to Zombie as the genre’s “box office savior” (Karger and Lee). And yet, *Halloween*’s booming commercial success was not exactly matched in its reception. Critics and fans predominantly disparaged the reboot for shoehorning two elements into the mythos of Carpenter’s original that I have argued were incorporated to maximize its marketability: extreme violence and the Myers origin story. For instance, paradigmatic of a number of fan responses posted on the *Official Halloween Message Board* was one incensed franchise enthusiast’s (carrauthers) proclamation that,

[The film] was downright sadistic, with more and more scenes of violence that seemed to have no purpose... [T]hat’s not Halloween. At all. The biggest problem is Michael himself... Someone else on another board said Halloween was always about people *reacting* to [Myers], not about his own inner life, and that’s

⁶² The growing importance, in recent years, of online marketing campaigns and social media platforms to the consolidation of the Zombie brand will be examined in more detail in the conclusion to this thesis.

absolutely correct... [His inner life] has no connection to what this franchise or this cinematic monster is about... I love the franchise, but I'll *never* support this.⁶³

Beyond simply revealing which elements of *Zombie's* film were deemed anathema by fans, such responses ultimately reaffirm Proctor's aforementioned assertion that fans "critically assess the texts that they consume." At the same time, they also demonstrate how increasingly active, networked fan cultures can act as "protectors of brand integrity...and thus critics of the same companies that seek to court their allegiance" (Jenkins, *Convergence* 20). Indeed, the fact that the reviewer above structures part of his or her critique of the film around comments made by "someone else on another board" demonstrates that fans' own opinions and judgments of a film are just as "spreadable" as the promotional materials that are crafted to attract their interest. These responses, therefore, illustrate that regardless of how astute the (commercial) logic behind producers' attempts to mold films to fans' critical assessments prior to their release, none of these pre-release machinations can ever function as infallible modes of guaranteeing positive reception or enduring fan loyalty. Accordingly, in the next chapter, I will shift my attention toward a crucial ancillary technology with which studios and filmmakers have been able to mobilize the agency of the convergence-era horror auteur in order to rejuvenate interest in a film and (re)direct its reception beyond the theatrical window: the DVD.

⁶³ Posted in *Halloween*, "OFFICIAL Review Thread! (Specify Theatrical or Director's Cut)," *Official Halloween Message Board* [31 Aug 2007].

Chapter 3

“Thank God for the Director’s Cut”: Rob Zombie’s *Halloween II* on DVD

In a twist on the tradition of certain movies being vehicles for certain stars, the auteur-star can potentially carry and redeem any sort of textual material through the marvel of its agency. In this sense...the making of a movie, like *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), or its unmaking, like *Twilight Zone* (1983), foreground an agency that forecloses the text itself.

Timothy Corrigan⁶⁴

One week prior to the August 2009 theatrical release of his fourth film, *Halloween II*, Rob Zombie revealed to a roundtable of online film reporters and horror bloggers that there existed “another version of the movie that is very different that will probably be [released on DVD as] the ‘director’s cut’” (Zombie, *Collider*). Despite Dimension Films’ high hopes that *Halloween II* would live up to the record-breaking triumph of Zombie’s *Halloween* reboot, the film disappointed at the box office, opening at number three with a modest \$16.3 million and ultimately generating little more than half (\$33.4 million) of the theatrical gross of its predecessor. If a number of industrial factors, such as a tightened marketing budget due to financial problems at Dimension and the saturation of the R-rated market,⁶⁵ likely contributed to *Halloween II*’s poor theatrical performance, its chances of success were certainly not propelled by much in the way of positive word-of-mouth. The majority of critic and audience responses suggested that *Halloween II* – although stylistically intriguing – was an incoherent, excessively brooding, and unnecessarily gory mess of a film that was simply not worth seeing.⁶⁶ At the same time, however, horror and *Halloween* franchise fans who readily joined in the

⁶⁴ *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, 105-106.

⁶⁵ The opening of *Halloween II* pitted it directly against R-rated, 3D, teen horror franchise film *The Final Destination* (2009), which proved a big draw with horror fans and teen audiences, nabbing the number one spot at the box office. Also competing with *Halloween II* were two already-released violent, R-rated films – Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) – experiencing continued success in the “quality” genre circuit due to high critical acclaim.

⁶⁶ Online critic review aggregator RottenTomatoes lists *Halloween II* as Zombie’s second lowest rated film (above *Corpses*) with only 20% of reviews being certified “Fresh.” General audiences were no kinder; on IMDb, the film has the lowest average user rating (4.9/10) of any of Zombie’s films.

critical bashing of Zombie's film were often quick to put a metaphorical asterisk beside their negative reviews on the basis of a potential director's cut.⁶⁷ For example, one reviewer (AngelDust415) posting on the *Official Halloween Message Board* noted that the theatrical version of *Halloween II* looked like it "was raped in editing," and added, "I am impatiently awaiting a director's cut that can redeem itself... [and] tie up at least a few loose ends."⁶⁸ Likewise, another reviewer (Torgo) added as a coda to his or her criticisms of the film, "I'll wait until the director's cut, much like I did the first time around [i.e. with Zombie's previous *Halloween* film], to truly decide whether or not I liked this movie as a whole."⁶⁹

Fans' decisions to withhold evaluative judgment of *Halloween II* until they had experienced the "whole" film outside of the theatre are illustrative of Jonathan Gray's suggestion that, through Special Edition, Collector's Edition, and Director's Cut releases of films, "DVDs have managed to lay discursive claim to the *real text*" (83, emphasis added) and position themselves as "the Real Work of Art" (101). Indeed, the birth and boom of the DVD at the turn of the twenty-first century radically altered traditional practices of film distribution, exhibition, and consumption, consolidating the shift toward the domestic realm as the primary site of consumer engagement with film culture that had begun in the 1980s with the introduction of earlier home video technologies like VCRs and cable television (Bennett and Brown 1). Accordingly, many Zombie DVD releases make his films seem as if they were specifically designed to be consumed at home, as they often feature an assortment of bonus features and alternate cuts of the films themselves that encourage fans and consumers to (re)experience them beyond the theatrical window.

The remarks above are also noteworthy for what they reveal about the ways that both the industry and fans imagine the importance of releasing a director's cut of a horror

⁶⁷ A brief note on stylization: References to specific DVD editions of a film will be capitalized (i.e. Theatrical Cut or Unrated Director's Cut) while references to the specific version of the filmic text that the DVD includes will not be capitalized (i.e. theatrical cut or director's cut).

⁶⁸ Posted in *Halloween II*, "Official Review Thread (with spoilers)," *Official Halloween Message Board* [28 Aug 2009].

⁶⁹ Posted in *Halloween II*, "Official Review Thread (with spoilers)," *Official Halloween Message Board* [28 Aug 2009].

film on DVD. On one hand, the temporality of Zombie's announcement (coming even before the theatrical release of the film itself) reflects institutional conceptions of a director's cut as an investment to boost a film's financial prospects in the ancillary DVD market – a tactic made all the more important in the case of *Halloween II* by its lackluster theatrical performance. On the other hand, fan discussions of a director's cut imagine it more romantically as being artistically recuperative – that is, as having the ability to “redeem” a film like *Halloween II* by wresting it back from the hands of studio executives mainly concerned with marketability, and restoring it to Zombie's original authorial vision. Even so, what is perhaps more striking than the differences between these two perspectives is what unifies them: the reliance on Zombie's ostensible auteurism – calcified in the label “director's cut” itself – as an essential device for amplifying *Halloween II*'s economic potential beyond the theatrical window and(/by) enhancing its perceived artistic integrity.

Using the Unrated Director's Cut DVD release of *Halloween II* as a primary case study, this chapter will examine the importance of DVD as a post-theatrical platform for producing and promoting Zombie's image as a convergence-era horror auteur. To do so, I will begin the chapter with an overview of scholarly work pertaining to the relationship between commercial auteurism and (horror) DVD culture, using examples from DVD releases of Zombie's earlier films to help illustrate some of my claims. In the next section, I will shift my attention specifically toward the Unrated Director's Cut of *Halloween II*. After briefly explaining how industrial conditions dictated that releasing a more stripped-down DVD release for *Halloween II* made sense from a financial standpoint, I examine the director's cut and the director's commentary included on the DVD as two promotional machinations that exploit the ideology of horror auteurism to boost the film's longevity in both economic and (sub)cultural spheres. Rather than reclaiming the film textually, however, I argue that – in line with Henry Jenkins's notion of affective economics – these two features instead appeal to key values and emotions of horror fandom to create a cult reception framework that supersedes the details of the text itself. I will conclude the chapter with some brief remarks on the current state of the DVD market and the ancillary releases of Zombie's 2013 film *The Lords of Salem*. Overall, I aim to elucidate the industry's dependence on subculturally-accredited

discourses of horror auteurism and industrial rebellion to help sell DVDs to horror fans and to manage increasingly diffuse habits of cult consumption at a transitional moment for ancillary distribution technologies.

3.1 Auteurism at Home: Selling Zombie('s Films) on DVD

In his 1998 essay “Auteurs and the New Hollywood,” Timothy Corrigan directly links the rise of commercial auteurism to the emergence of the home video market. Citing the financial success that MGM/United Artists gleaned from their VHS release of a director’s cut of Michael Cimino’s box office bomb *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) as a key example, Corrigan suggests that industry agencies have actively begun “dispers[ing]...the control of the auteur into the total flow of television monitors” (50) as a way to help mediate or rein in “more individualistic and private” (49) patterns of audience reception. In this sense, Corrigan was one of the first film theorists to acknowledge home video’s crucial role in the resurrection of the figure of the auteur as a promotional star.

As noted, the so-called DVD revolution was a watershed in the history of the entertainment industry. According to James Bennett and Tom Brown, by the mid-2000s, DVD sales and rentals comprised more than half of the revenue gleaned from feature films, and, as such, the theatrical window was often “characterized as a loss-leader or as an elaborate trailer for the more profitable DVD release” (1). DVD offered many technical benefits over VHS tapes that accounted for its popularity, such as higher picture quality, more dynamic sound, and greater durability. Moreover, whereas VHS tapes were priced mainly for rental, DVDs were made available at sell-through prices that encouraged film ownership (1, 3). With the increased importance of offering consumers an enticing product, DVD producers took advantage of the format’s extra storage space and capacity for interactivity by bundling films with various forms of bonus content – such as deleted scenes, behind-the-scenes featurettes, making-of documentaries, and commentary tracks – that would encourage multiple viewings and make DVDs feel like collectable items (6; Bernard 55). For fan cultures, the collectability of DVDs is amplified by the fact that they serve as physical or material emblems of fans’ attachments to a text. For Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, then, it is because of the format’s capacity for bonus material that it has revolutionized not only the home video

industry but also the cultures of film and directorial promotion, acting as “the ultimate example of media-industry synergy, in which the promotion of a media product is collapsed into the product itself” (23).

While Corrigan’s previously discussed essay was published before the so-called DVD revolution, it anticipates a great deal of the notable scholarly work on the relationship between auteurism and the DVD format that has emerged in recent years. In line with the theoretical framework of this thesis, most of this work seems to agree that auteurism on DVD is not to be found in the details of the text itself, but instead is located in the paratextual bonus features packaged along with the film, where it is discursively conjured up for promotional purposes. For instance, Brookey and Westerfelhaus argue that the increased proximity between text and paratext on DVD means that bonus features can “more effectively exploit the ideology of the auteur than...traditional secondary texts” (24), which are typically consumed at a spatio-temporal distance from the film itself. The authors thus emphasize that bonus features such as director’s commentaries and making-of documentaries assert their authority by evoking “Auteuristic Residue” (22) – that is, by exploiting the privileged position of the director to promise viewers insight into the “real” or “correct” way to read a film.

The deployment of auteurism on DVD, however, is not only related to industrial efforts to mold textual interpretation, but also to the simple goal of selling more DVDs. Using the example of New Line’s Extended Cut of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), Gray argues that bonus features can “append aura, author, and authenticity to a text” (84) to elevate its apparent cultural and/or artistic significance and to increase its profit margins. Even though the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was a massive corporate franchise that collectively generated in excess of \$3 billion at the international box office for studio New Line, Gray argues that “the DVD bonus material [included with *Two Towers*] is happy and keen to make the film [itself director Peter] Jackson’s, not New Line’s or [parent conglomerate] Time Warner’s” (101). Gray’s analysis demonstrates how the paratexts included on the *Two Towers* DVD use discourses of auteurism as a promotional tactic to create value and distinction for the film by offering consumers an in-depth (and heavily constructed) look into the “supreme artistry” (92)

that went into the film's production and lionizing Jackson as an uncompromising "visionary" (99-101). On similar grounds, Catherine Grant has gone as far as to refer to DVDs as "*Auteur Machines*," suggesting that the delivery format plays an active role in the actual *production* of auteurs out of filmmakers that may or may not have been labeled as such beyond the purview of institutional marketing goals by discursively converting not only the creative process but also directors themselves into romanticized objects of viewer consumption (103).

As previously noted, scholarship published during the process of writing this thesis has also begun to incorporate these ideas into the study of contemporary horror cinema. In *Selling the Splat Pack*, Mark Bernard suggests that while the type of horror fare made by the Splat Pack may be of the sort once marginalized as exploitive, ephemeral "trash," the DVD market has provided a material environment in which the filmmakers of the Splat Pack have been able to gain wider cultural visibility and achieve greater commercial success (48-93). However, while the studios behind low budget, independent horror films usually expect DVD to be the most profitable window of distribution, the widespread availability of countless horror titles, both old and new, on DVD also poses a challenge to their ability to stand out in an immeasurably cluttered rental and retail market. Bernard thus illustrates how independent studios and mini-majors like Lionsgate – the unofficial home of the Splat Pack – have adopted modes of packaging, bundling, and selling cult horror titles that confer upon them "a patina of artistic validity [that] distances them from common everyday [i.e. more commercial] horror films" (69) and instead turns them into "'art' for collectors" (55). Akin to both Gray and Grant, Bernard argues that a paramount technique employed by Lionsgate to sell the Splat Pack's DVDs as unique and original "art objects" is the showcasing of their directors as legitimate auteurs (63). Importantly, at the same time that these appeals to artistry and auteurism help to boost sales by cementing product differentiation, they also help make the DVD "look less like a basic desire for profit" (63) – a sleight of hand that is particularly beneficial when selling to a consumer base as steadfastly opposed to Hollywood profiteering as horror fans.

In line with the ideas presented above, DVD releases of *Corpses*, *Rejects*, and *Halloween* were all bundled with extensive arrays of bonus features to make them feel like collector's items. They also strongly promoted Zombie's authorship as a means by which to create distinction for the DVDs and to bolster the artistic merits of the films themselves. For instance, the DVD cover for the Two-Disc Special Edition of *Halloween* features Zombie's name above the title, bold lettering beneath the title that declares the version of the film included to be the "Unrated Director's Cut," and a review snippet from Matt Zoller Seitz of the *New York Times* asserting that *Halloween* "Re-establishes Mr. Zombie's status as modern American horror's most eccentric and surprising filmmaker." Moreover, beyond featuring the unrated director's cut of the film, the DVD also includes a wide variety of bonus content. Although some of this content is relatively standard press-kit-style fare, like bloopers, auditions, and footage of casting sessions, a number of the more interesting bonus features are explicitly focused on deploying or showcasing Zombie's authorship. These include: a feature-length director's commentary track; deleted scenes and an alternate ending, both with optional commentaries from Zombie on which he explains why this material did not make the final cut; and two behind-the-scenes featurettes – "The Many Masks of Michael Myers" and "Re-Imagining *Halloween*" – that walk viewers through Zombie's creative processes in designing the "look" of Myers and reinventing the franchise mythos.

Beyond brandishing covers that spotlight Zombie's name and featuring commentary tracks and behind-the-scenes material, the DVDs for *Corpses* and *Rejects* also include consumable content that serve the purpose of what Jenkins would call narrative and authorial "world building." For Jenkins, world building refers to the practice of creating "compelling [storytelling] environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or...medium" (*Convergence* 114). Accordingly, the *Corpses* DVD features interactive menus that are hosted by key *Corpses* characters, are set in key *Corpses* locations, and thus turn the diegetic world of the film into an immersive environment for consumers.⁷⁰ Indeed, the DVD case promotes immersion, interactivity, and exploration as the decisive selling points of the menus, offering viewers

⁷⁰ For more on the *Corpses* DVD menus, see Bernard 61.

the opportunity to have “Capt. Spauling, Otis, and Baby take you on a guided murder ride through the special features.” At the same time, the case emphasizes that the menus are “Directed by Rob Zombie,” invoking the aura of auteurism to make them seem less like crass marketing devices than creative exercises in making the *Corpses* world “bigger than the film” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 114). Although lacking the interactivity of the *Corpses* menus, the *Rejects* DVD also includes Zombie-directed material – such as full versions of fictional commercials and a fictional talk show that appear in snippets throughout the diegesis of *Rejects* – that intertextually extends the reach of the storytelling world, and thus of Zombie’s authorship, beyond the bounds of the film itself.

The most elaborate means, however, by which Zombie has used DVD to fashion his authorial image is through the inclusion of painstakingly detailed, feature-length production documentaries on two releases: the Two-Disc Director’s Cut of *The Devil’s Rejects*, which houses the two-and-a-half hour “30 Days in Hell: The Making of *The Devil’s Rejects*,” and the Three-Disc Unrated Collector’s Edition of *Halloween*, which is a reissue of the earlier two-disc set but with an added disc featuring the four-and-a-half hour “Michael Lives: The Making of *Halloween*.” Tellingly, both documentaries are produced and directed by Zombie himself, making them quintessential exercises in auteurist self-promotion. While I do not intend to provide an exhaustive examination of these documentaries, a few examples are helpful to show how they operate.

Comprised entirely of behind-the-scenes footage, each documentary offers a chronological account of the film’s production, from the early stages of pre-production right through the final stages of post-production. Using similar tactics to those identified by Gray in bonus content on the *Two Towers* DVD, both documentaries are strategically crafted to offer viewers a privileged author. As such, the majority of their multi-hour durations are devoted to showcasing Zombie’s “supreme artistry” and absolute control and final say over all facets of the creative process. In the segment of “Michael Lives” labeled “Casting,” for instance, Zombie recounts the high degree of studio resistance to his desire to cast actress Scout Taylor-Compton in the role of Laurie Strode. Discussing this matter, Zombie frames himself as a filmmaker with a unique artistic perspective, explaining, “Nobody saw it the way I saw it, everybody was pointing the finger the other

direction – I mean, *nobody* got it.” Of course, the documentary shows that, after much persistence on *Zombie*’s part, the studio finally caved. The inclusion of video footage of Taylor-Compton’s audition as a bonus feature on disc two of the DVD set also offers viewers evidence to support his decision to cast her, and makes clear the degree to which DVD bonus features can operate together as an integrated entertainment package supporting certain modes of evaluating a film – here, under the umbrella of *Zombie*’s authorship.

While the documentaries showcase the contributions of the actors and the below-the-line workers on-set, it is always very clear that their work is being carried out in service of helping *Zombie* realize his meticulously constructed authorial vision. Accordingly, both documentaries feature numerous moments in which various members of the cast and crew help to elevate *Zombie* to auteur status by marveling at his artistry, focus, and leadership. At one point in “Michael Lives,” for example, special effects artist Wayne Toth, who designed the Myers mask for *Zombie*, states, “Most of the pressure I put on myself [came from] knowing that Rob has a really good eye... Rob himself is a good artist.” Later, Malcolm McDowell, who plays Dr. Loomis in *Zombie*’s *Halloween* films, is shown telling an on-set interviewer that “Rob is up there with the very best [directors] I’ve worked with, no question. If there’s a list of five, he’d be on it.” Throughout his career, McDowell has worked with a number of respected auteurs, being most well known for his leading role as Alex DeLarge in Stanley Kubrick’s acclaimed cult classic *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Given the placement of McDowell’s remark near the end of the documentary and the discursive proximity that it creates between *Zombie* and a filmmaker with the stature of Kubrick, this moment is clearly intended to function as the ultimate affirmation of *Zombie*’s auteurism.

Lastly, just as Bernard argues that the packaging of DVDs as “art objects” is intended to make them look “less like a desire for profit,” the documentaries appeal to *Zombie*’s auteurism in order to frame the films themselves in similar ways. At one point in “30 Days in Hell,” for instance, *Zombie*’s manager and *Rejects* co-producer, Andy Gould, credits him with bringing out a sense of artistic integrity in all of the members of the crew, seemingly by osmosis, proclaiming,

They believed in Rob as a filmmaker, and that's so important, because if the crew don't respect the director, it becomes apparent that they're there for one thing and one thing only, which is a paycheck. This one seemed like, you know, if we went to them and said, 'Hey, look we need to work an extra couple hours here but we don't have any more money,' I actually believe the majority of them would have said, 'Yup. I'm in, man!'

This claim is then validated a short while later when Captain Spaulding actor Sid Haig declares *Zombie* – along with Jack Hill, who directed Haig in the notorious exploitation films *Spider Baby* (1967) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), and Quentin Tarantino, who directed him in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004) – to be a member of his list of “three directors that I would work for any day, anytime, anywhere, for any price.” Not only does Haig's statement once again shift the conversation surrounding *Rejects* from the issue of commerce to art, but – similar to McDowell's comment in “Michael Lives” – it also situates *Zombie* alongside, and within, a wider pantheon of accomplished cult auteurs holding significant clout in both critic and fan circles. By employing various discursive strategies to assert *Zombie*'s authorship, and thus ownership, of his films, these documentaries ultimately provide cardinal examples of how many of *Zombie*'s DVDs have functioned as “*Auteur Machines*,” not passively reflecting upon but rather actively producing and constructing his identity as a modern-day horror auteur.

3.2 *Halloween II*, the Unrated Director's Cut

As Brookey and Westerfelhaus argue, a great deal of the industrial import placed on the evocation of “Auteuristic Residue” in DVD content lies in its rhetorical ability to help offset or counteract critical and/or commercial disappointments (25-26).

Accordingly, if there was one film in *Zombie*'s oeuvre that could benefit from the recuperative potential of DVD paratexts, both artistically and economically, it was *Halloween II*. However, if the production of elaborate extras like interactive menus or multi-hour documentaries requires significant re-investments of time and money into a film after its theatrical release, a number of industrial factors converged to create a climate that undermined the viability of putting together an expensive DVD release of *Halloween II*.

First, leading up to the film's theatrical release, Dimension and corporate parent TWC were already in a far more precarious position than ever before, with reports emerging in early-to-mid 2009 that TWC was essentially "teetering on the edge of financial collapse" (Harris 34). In June, *Deadline Hollywood* revealed that TWC was banking specifically on *Halloween II* to be its economic elixir (Finke). As such, the film's commercial failure was a devastating blow, exacerbating the company's existing economic troubles and decreasing expectations for the film's performance on DVD. Second, although the majority of low-to-mid budget horror films are tailored toward the DVD market from the outset, expectations for *Halloween II*'s success on DVD were further diminished by the fact that its release occurred against an industrial backdrop of sinking DVD sales and rentals. A November 2010 article in the *Guardian* reported that sales of new-release titles had crashed approximately 15% in 2009; and as the headline of the article, "DVD industry in crisis as sales slump," suggests, a rhetoric of disaster was being employed industry-wide to discuss the state of the market (Sherwin). Third, TWC was facing considerable troubles with its own distribution branch. In September 2009, the studio was forced to terminate its ownership of entertainment and distribution company Genius Products after the declining profitability of DVD had persuaded Genius to leave the home video business altogether. As such, *Halloween II* was part of a slate of films that would be temporarily lost in the distribution shuffle until it was finally released in January 2010 as part of a trial agreement between TWC and Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, indicating that its production was, in all likelihood, a fairly rushed affair.

Taken together, these factors – *Halloween II*'s theatrical failure, a waning DVD market, and TWC's abrupt transition from Genius and Sony – help to explain why *Halloween II* received a less impressive DVD release than *Zombie*'s earlier films. The *Halloween II* DVD was made available in two editions, the Theatrical Cut and the Unrated Director's Cut, both of which are similarly bundled and show signs of the studios' tight DVD budget and production window. They are generically packaged one-disc releases that eschew the sort of elaborate, produced-for-DVD extras bundled with *Corpses*, *Rejects*, and *Halloween* in favour of bonus features that could be cheaply cut together from existing footage, such as deleted and extended scenes, a blooper reel, make-up tests, and trailers for other Sony releases.

The Unrated Director's Cut was clearly the edition of *Halloween II* that Sony and Dimension believed would sell the most: it was the only edition to be distributed to major corporate retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Best Buy, and to be released on Sony's then-emerging Blu-ray format.⁷¹ To enhance its marketability, the Unrated Director's Cut included two features not found on the Theatrical Cut: the director's cut of the film and a director's commentary track. What matters here is not the fact that more features were included to turn fans into (re-)paying customers, but rather that both of these features are specifically director-centric. Their inclusion thus suggests the DVD producers' conceptions of fan purchasing behaviours as being inherently linked to auteurist promotional strategies. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how the director's cut of *Halloween II* and *Zombie*'s director's commentary operate together to recuperate the film under notions of authorial vision and cult status. In doing so, these features function as affective, auteur-driven sales tactics that paradoxically play into fans' anti-corporate sentiments in order to increase DVD profits and keep fans invested in the *Zombie* brand.

3.2.1 Affective Sales Tactic 1: The Director's Cut

While special edition releases and reissues of films have become a staple of the DVD marketplace, Unrated (and/or) Director's Cut DVDs are somewhat unique as they offer consumers a competing version of the film itself. Such DVDs significantly lure consumers with the romantic promise "that they are experiencing the entire film...[and gaining] access to the artist's entire vision" (Bernard 70). The "Unrated" label has come to connote a version of a film that contains content deemed too extreme by the MPAA ratings board – even if it may refer to a cut of the film simply containing new content that is inoffensive but was never screened for the board in the first place.⁷² Similarly, the label "Director's Cut" vows to provide audiences a version of the film that, in being

⁷¹ Although one may assume that releasing a more stripped-down DVD may have been a strategy employed by Sony to encourage Blu-ray sales, this was evidently not the case as the Blu-ray was packaged and bundled with exactly the same content as the Unrated Director's Cut DVD.

⁷² Along with the packaging of horror DVDs as "art objects," Bernard identifies the ability of studios to release Unrated versions of films on DVD, where the MPAA ratings system does not hold the same censorial weight, as a key industrial condition responsible for the success of the Splat Pack. For a detailed industrial history of what Bernard terms "The Rise of the Unrated" in the horror home video market and its effects on the Splat Pack, see chapter four of *Selling the Splat Pack* (70-93).

authorially-sanctioned, is thus more legitimate or authentic than the ostensibly compromised version shown in theatres. The Unrated Director's Cut DVD thus puts forth the seemingly subversive notion that it signifies the ultimate triumph of art over commerce. Indeed, the very existence of an Unrated Director's Cut rhetorically materializes struggles over authorship and boils them down to a black-and-white dispute between an auteur with an iconoclastic artistic vision, and the stalwarts of the Hollywood establishment – here, censorious ratings boards and profit-minded studio executives – whose corporate and/or moral agendas may have constrained this vision from developing to its full potential for the theatrical release.

However, in the horror market particularly, such releases often fail to make good on the promise that they offer much in the way of added material, and the labels Unrated and Director's Cut are frequently exploited as little more than provocative marketing tools to increase sales amongst zealous fans with a taste for the shocking, taboo, and anti-commercial. For instance, speaking of his film *Hostel*, *Zombie's* fellow Splat Packer Eli Roth revealed that the studios purposely “save the unrated for the DVD. There was no R-rated *Hostel* DVD... I added a little 20 seconds of extra gore just so they could put ‘Unrated’ [on the DVD]. It wasn't that big of a difference” (qtd. in Guerrasio 70). Even when alternate cuts of films do contain considerably more restored content, it may not add up to much. Dimension's press release for the Unrated Director's Cut DVD of *Zombie's* first *Halloween* film promised fans an abundance of fresh blood and gore, declaring that the DVD would contain “11 additional minutes of gruesome footage” (“digest” 9). Nonetheless, save for a brief and largely off-screen rape scene, the restored eleven minutes are not comprised of extra gore or shocking content – in fact, the body count is lower than in the theatrical version – but rather digressive moments of added dialogue and unmotivated stylization. As these examples suggest, it is rare in the horror DVD market to find releases that actually contain a version of the text that seems to have been substantially revised, recovered, or reinvented.

Since the release of the Unrated Director's Cut of *Halloween II*, however, online film sites have proliferated with defenses of the director's cut from horror fans whose responses suggest that it constitutes a completely different and definitive version of the

film. Typically, these defenses appeal to discourses of auteurism to justify their claims. For example, in an article titled “Why I Love Rob Zombie’s *Halloween II* in the Face of Adversity,” Christopher Jiminez of *Shock Til You Drop* writes,

When I saw Rob Zombie’s *Halloween II* in the theatre, I was mad. I felt it was incoherent, incomplete, and self-indulgent. When it came out...as a Director’s Cut, I, of course, picked it up... Now I look at it from a completely different perspective and am very pleased with what I have in front of me... It’s *not* Carpenter’s vision. This is Rob Zombie’s world and it’s going to be different.

More pointedly, in his review of the Unrated Director’s Cut DVD, Bill Gibron of *PopMatters* stresses that the director’s cut spells out everything about Zombie’s vision for the film “in simple, symbolic terms,” and that, for this reason, “anyone who dismissed *Halloween II* when it was released back in August 2009 needs to revisit it again.”

And yet, even if these reviews seem, at first glance, to propose that the director’s cut of *Halloween II* extensively revises the theatrical cut, making it considerably more “complete” or “coherent,” a direct comparison of the two cuts does not necessarily support such a reading. The storyline of each cut is exactly the same: as Halloween night fast approaches, a thought-to-be dead Michael Myers (Tyler Mane) makes his way back to Haddonfield – guided by surreal hallucinations of his dead mother Deborah (Sheri Moon Zombie), and a ghostly white horse – to terrorize the town and reunite with his younger sister, Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton). All the while, Laurie begins to lose her grip on reality and suffer from similar hallucinations as she is forced to confront her past as a member of the Myers family. Zombie’s “symbolic” preoccupations are also the same in both cuts, as he toys with the basic concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis, expanding upon the character arc he constructed in his previous *Halloween* film by rooting Michael’s murderous behavior in a desire for maternal and familial reunion. Additionally, affixing the label “Unrated” to the director’s cut amounts to nothing more than a sales pitch, as it is no more extreme than that which screened theatrically. Doing so likely made the DVD an easier sell but, by the same logic, Dimension kept every second of the film’s graphic violence in the theatrical version because of its marketability as the

cornerstone of extreme horror. Ultimately, as with *Zombie's* previous *Halloween*, much of the content restored for the director's cut comes in the form of extended scenes and stylized cutaways that may help to remedy the theatrical cut's uneven and overly frantic pace, but that do not narratively or thematically alter the film in any meaningful way.

Even so, there are two main narrative differences between the cuts that may help to create the impression that the director's cut of *Halloween II* is a significantly revised text: *Zombie's* treatment of Laurie Strode and the film's ending. First, while the theatrical cut primarily focuses on Michael Myers, the director's cut makes Laurie a more developed and central character. In both cuts, Laurie experiences lingering night terrors from her previous encounter with Michael, including a lengthy nightmare sequence set in the Haddonfield hospital that is the film's only real tribute to the original *Halloween II* (1981). However, the director's cut transforms the brief bouts of fear and sadness that Laurie manages to cope with in the theatrical cut into a debilitating case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As two extended therapy scenes highlight, her PTSD manifests in an uneasy mixture of survivor's guilt and uncontrollable rage that drive her into a downward spiral of alcoholism and drug addiction. The director's cut also presents Laurie as having an incredibly volatile relationship with her former best friend, Annie Brackett (Danielle Harris), who is dealing with residual trauma of her own. Here, Annie is frequently the target of Laurie's intense outbursts, and their disputes seem to be caused by a conflict between their relative coping mechanisms: Laurie externalizes by partying and lashing out, while Annie has become a closed-off agoraphobic recluse. All of this deviates from the theatrical cut, which mutes the lasting effects of Myers's attacks on both characters, and in which the little screen time they share portrays their relationship as still amicable.

While the final sequence of both cuts focuses on a standoff between police and Michael, who has barricaded himself, Laurie, and Dr. Loomis in a hut in the woods, this scenario also plays out differently in each version. In the more ambiguous ending to the theatrical cut, Michael is killed by a police sniper after he slashes Loomis to death. Laurie then crawls over to Michael's body and stabs him repeatedly. However, as the police (and the film's audience) look in confusion, a blood-soaked Laurie stumbles out of the hut

wearing Michael's mask. A modified version of "Laurie's Theme" from Carpenter's *Halloween* (78) fades in, and the image dissolves to a surrealist, but presumably diegetically real, *Psycho* (1960)-inspired shot of Laurie locked away in a mental institution, smiling as she, too, hallucinates Deborah Myers holding the reins of a white horse. Conversely, the ending of the director's cut offers a greater degree of narrative and franchise closure. Michael is again taken down by a barrage of police after murdering Loomis. However, in this version, a dazed Laurie then emerges from the hut, picks up Michael's knife and is shot by police herself. *Zombie* cuts to an overhead shot of Michael, Laurie, and Loomis lying mortally wounded on the ground. The camera slowly cranes in on Laurie's face, and the sad refrains of a downtempo cover of Nazareth's ballad "Love Hurts" – the song which directly precedes a young Myers's killings in *Zombie*'s previous *Halloween* – imbue this moment with a sense of tragedy lacking in the theatrical cut. Aurally recalling the moment just before the Myers family's violent and traumatic fragmentation, the song works in tandem with the image to complete the franchise's narrative arc by reuniting the Myers family – including surrogate father, Loomis – in death. In this light, the surrealism of the final shots of Laurie sitting in the mental institution makes sense, as the shots are repositioned as her subjective, dying visions.

On one hand, it is clear why the director's cut was not the version of the film released into theatres, as it has a number of qualities that may make it somewhat less marketable as a summer horror tentpole: it has a rather lengthy duration of two hours (as opposed to the 105 minute theatrical running time), it devotes more time to character development, and it has an ending that is obviously not amenable to the studio's desires to extend the newly rebooted franchise in future sequels. That said, even if the director's cut may be a less marketable and somewhat more ambitious cut, this does not necessarily make it feel more "coherent" or "complete." For instance, although the director's cut adds to the theatrical cut's already-present themes of trauma and loss by paying some attention to the psychological states of Myers's victims, it does not offer what I would describe as a classically auteurist meditation on the subjective experience of trauma, as can be found in more purposely incoherent psychological horror films such as Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) or David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997). Rather, even if

the notion of introducing a thematic thread of trauma is an intriguing one, *Zombie*'s treatment of trauma as a mere plot device feels uncritical, unrealistic, and lacks complexity. (I doubt, for example, that Laurie's severe victimization at the hands of a serial killer would lead her to become a reverential fan of cult leader Charles Manson as she does in the film.) The director's cut's attempt to subvert slasher and extreme horror conventions by showcasing the tragic effects of violence is further undercut by its generically formulaic presentation of numerous excessively brutal kills as spectacle, such as when the manager of a strip club has his head repeatedly stomped on by Myers until it collapses. Finally, the director's cut still lacks narrative coherence, as certain key aspects of both cuts of the film, such as Laurie's downfall into psychosis or her own hallucinations, remain unsatisfyingly developed or explained.

This brief analysis, of course, conflicts with fan responses which seem to identify a newfound complexity and restored authorial voice in the director's cut of *Halloween II*. That said, by no means do I intend to claim analytical superiority over fans of the film, nor do I intend to present them cynically as cultural dupes blindly falling victim to the rhetorical influence of the Unrated Director's Cut label. Instead, I would argue that there is a mode of viewing supported by the DVD *other* than simply watching the director's cut itself that more actively encourages consumers to engage in auteurist readings and rethink their previous criticisms of the film. This mode is unlocked by enabling the director's commentary audio track.

3.2.2 Affective Sales Tactic 2: The Director's Commentary

The director's commentary track is paramount among bonus features that aid in the discursive production of the auteur on DVD. According to Brookey and Westerfelhaus, by presenting directors as having "privileged insights" and information regarding a film's meaning and production (23), commentary tracks "evoke the ideological residue of the auteur...in a way that directs the viewers' experiences of the film" (25). As previously noted, proximity to the text itself is a key benefit enjoyed by DVD extras that affords them greater rhetorical power than other forms of paratextual promotion. Of all DVD bonus features, commentary tracks are undoubtedly the most proximate to the text as, to quote Grant, they are experienced "*over* it...[acting as] a

simultaneous and aural ‘re-writing’ of the film...which cannot be accessed autonomously” (104). This suggests that the director featured on a DVD commentary acts as something of a cinematic tour guide, using voice-over narration to help viewers navigate through a text and direct their understanding of his or her auteurism *in real time*. For Grant, it is this seemingly “live and direct” address that makes directors’ commentaries “the most ‘pure’ [and potentially influential] of all the new paratextual forms of DVD auteurism” (103), and thus the most ripe for close analysis. As this section will illustrate, Zombie uses the commentary track included on the Unrated Director’s Cut of *Halloween II* as a key forum in which to reframe fans’ readings of the film and to reinforce his own image as a convergence-era horror auteur.

It is first worth noting that the most standard auteurist strategy Zombie employs to legitimize *Halloween II* is coaching viewers through their readings of the film, by explaining key moments that previously caused audience confusion, such as Michael’s and Laurie’s hallucinations, or by detailing the importance of particular moments that were removed for the theatrical cut. In doing so, the director delegitimizes criticisms of *Halloween II* as incoherent, generically formulaic, and thematically shallow by constructing a discursive framework of coherence, character development, and franchise continuity for the film that is itself legitimized as the “right” way to read the film under the auspices of his artistic intentions. Such discussions are significantly not only authoritative but also argumentative in tone, relying on notions of authorial vision to bid for the superiority and primacy of the director’s cut. For instance, during an extended scene showing one of Laurie’s therapy sessions, Zombie explains her residual trauma and directs attention toward similarities between her burgeoning rage and “tendencies that young Michael [Myers] had [in Zombie’s earlier *Halloween*].” As the scene comes to a close, he proclaims, “Thank god for the director’s cut. We put it all [i.e. the restored material] back in and the movie makes sense again.” He later concludes the commentary on a similarly assertive note, stressing, over of the ending of the director’s cut, that the “[restored] scenes really give you a completely different film. It’s an emotional journey about a character named Laurie Strode, not a slasher movie about Michael Myers. That’s what we set out to make... and that’s why I think this version is much stronger.” On one hand, Zombie’s comments offload the blame for the film’s negative reception onto the

audience's potential misunderstandings or their previous experience with an ostensibly incomplete version of the film, rather than his own possible missteps as a writer/director. On the other hand, his comments evoke auteurist discourses of restored vision to position the Unrated Director's Cut DVD as an alternative means of delivering fans a "completely different" and more authentic version of the film rather than a buyable object intended to boost the film's bottom line.

While this sort of narrative instruction is important to acknowledge, Grant cautions that focusing solely on exposition related to "the story *told by* the film" in the study of commentaries loses sight of the important ends to which they often also tell "the story *of* the film, 'the drama of the movie's source' as Corrigan would put it" (107). As such, she emphasizes that

the kinds of enunciatory performances taking place in DVD commentaries... are not reducible to monological narrational expression, or simply to auteurist disquisitions on... the 'meaning of the story'... Rather, the commentaries... can be seen to provide broader forms of identificatory and dialogic 'infotainment,' ones predicated on authorial and auteurist discourses of vision, control of chance, achievement, and occasionally on the failure or inability to achieve... [In doing so,] they directly turn their authorized, documented, and intimate stories of the filmmaking process into a product... [and] their directors into a product, too (112).

Moreover, because commentaries are usually constructed with a film's target audience in mind, these production narratives are selectively crafted to emphasize certain "promotable" facts" (Klinger, *Beyond* 73) and "selling points of the individual film" that are consistent with the values of a specific "connoisseur community" (Grant 112). For this reason, Mark and Deborah Parker argue that analyses of commentaries should situate these commentaries in relation to the function(s) they are intended to carry out "in a given reception circuit" (74).

As a poorly received, low-to-mid budget slasher film directed by Zombie, *Halloween II* was likely destined to find its primary DVD consumer base in the cult "reception circuit" of horror fandom. In other words, if critics and mass audiences had

largely dismissed *Halloween II* after its theatrical run, gearing the Unrated Director's Cut's content specifically toward subcultural tastes could afford the film its greatest chance of finding new legs in the ancillary market. Accordingly, whereas directors working in arthouse circuits and/or with solidified auteurist reputations will often use commentary tracks to bolster their auteur image through *narratives of vision* that unpack the personal meanings or allegorical subtexts of their work,⁷³ Zombie instead spends most of the *Halloween II* commentary relaying a *narrative of labour* comprised of detailed anecdotes about the film's production. On a general level, this emphasis on providing "infotainment" reflects Zombie's (and perhaps the DVD producers') awareness that the DVD would primarily sell to an audience of horror fans, who – as Barbara Klinger notes of fan cultures in general – tend to view trivia as a "more important and authentic [form of information about a film] than... 'stuffy' intellectual accounts" (*Beyond* 74).⁷⁴ Somewhat paradoxically, then, focusing on production trivia rather than filmic analysis is a discursive strategy that helps to reinforce Zombie's own subcultural reputation as a horror auteur by demonstrating his own loyal, "insider" status in the horror fan community.

Zombie's focus on "the story of the film" also serves a more specific purpose in the case of *Halloween II*. In her comprehensive study of *The Evil Dead* (1981), Kate Egan suggests that production histories can offer a particularly "DVD-friendly" form of

⁷³ The DVD commentary track for Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) provides an instructive example. In the commentary, del Toro draws links to his other films and discusses the film's contemporary cultural relevance. For instance, the director states that *Pan's*, which is set in fascist Spain in 1944, acts as a "sister film" to his earlier film, *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), which is set in 1939 during the Spanish Civil War. Early in the commentary, del Toro eloquently explains, "From 2001 to 2006, in five years the world completely changed, after September 11... So, *Devil's Backbone*, set in 1939, I was also curious to do a movie that was set exactly 5 years later than that... This particular period of time would mirror, in some ways, how much the world had changed then, and how much the world has changed today." In many ways, then, this is the quintessential auteurist commentary, situating *Pan's* as one film in a larger directorial oeuvre and giving viewers insight into del Toro's own cinematically-articulated personal worldview.

⁷⁴ Zombie's refusal to intellectualize his work in promotional discourse is thus not necessarily representative of an actual lack of meaning or complexity. It may indeed be an offshoot of his own fannish appreciation for trivia or, somewhat more cynically, a tactic to further solidify the "cool," subcultural persona that he and the industry have worked to fashion. This latter idea was supported in an interview I conducted with Colin Geddes, curator of the Toronto International Film Festival's (TIFF) Midnight Madness programme. Following the world premiere of Zombie's *The Lords of Salem* at TIFF, Geddes moderated what he found to be an unusually difficult question-and-answer session with Zombie. Speaking of the experience, Geddes told me, "[Zombie] didn't really elaborate much on his decisions ... I couldn't seem to glean, or get him to open up or really talk about the film, or talk about why he made it, or [what] he was trying to channel... [I]n some respects, I felt he was acting a little 'too cool for school.'"

fodder assisting horror filmmakers and producers in the establishment of enduring cult reputations for their films (100). Both *Zombie* and Sony/Dimension would of course stand to benefit considerably from helping *Halloween II* achieve cult status, particularly given that cult films, despite their box office failures, often end up with “a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence” (Mathijs and Mendik, “Editorial” 11). Thus, looking more closely at the content of the commentary, the production anecdotes and tidbits presented function to create cult distinction for the director’s cut of *Halloween II* by evoking familiar ideologies of horror fandom and allowing *Zombie* to occupy rhetorical positions commonly associated with the figure of the horror auteur.

For instance, after acknowledging that he “wanted everything to be completely real,” *Zombie* repeatedly frames *Halloween II*’s alleged “rawness” and realism in ways that implicitly distance the film from the polished and often CGI-heavy aesthetics characteristic of mainstream Hollywood horror fare in the digital era. Telling examples occur when the director voices his preference for the “more raw” Super 16mm look of the film over the “too glossy” appearance of his previous *Halloween* film or draws attention, on a number of occasions, to makeup artist Wayne Toth’s realistic practical gore effects. In these moments, *Zombie* uses the aesthetics of *Halloween II* to position both the film and his directorial approach as models of authentic – that is, non-mainstream, anti-Hollywood – horror filmmaking.

To further legitimate *Halloween II* and his own authorship, *Zombie* mythologizes the film’s production by borrowing strategies from two common genres of trade narratives identified by John Thornton Caldwell: the “‘against-all-odds’ allegory” and the “war story” (40). In such narratives, creative personnel evoke quixotic discourses of self-sacrifice and artistic perseverance, presenting themselves as having the will-power and resolve to overcome even the most trying of creative obstructions or working conditions. On one hand, as “celebrations of work...[rather than] artistic pedigree” (48), these two narrative genres are conventionally associated with below-the-line technical workers. As such, one may reasonably assume that they would do little to bolster a director’s auteurist reputation. On the other hand, they serve important ideological functions in the “reception circuit” of horror fandom, where both auteurism is often vaguely defined on

the basis of a filmmaker's independent spirit and – as chapter one demonstrated in relation to *Corpses* – troubled, chaotic, or frenzied production histories become key determinants of cult appreciation.⁷⁵ Narratives of authorial struggle, frustration, and resistance to a creatively-stifling corporate sector can thus act as markers of subcultural authenticity that help to elevate the cult status of films and filmmakers by addressing fans on the level of *affect* rather than intellect.

As such, the *Halloween II* commentary is framed as an “against-all-odds” story from the outset as less than five minutes into the film, Zombie tells viewers that the cast and crew faced “a million problems” on the first day of shooting alone. Throughout the remainder of the commentary, Zombie goes on to highlight numerous obstacles, such as extreme weather and a strenuous shooting schedule, that conspired to make the production of the film, in his words, one which “started off horrible, and went downhill.” As Zombie explains:

We had a disastrous day where someone X-rayed our film at the airport, and obviously it took place on the worst possible day. . . . It's very disheartening when you find out that 18-20 hours of miserable work was for nothing... you want to kill yourself... Unfortunately, we didn't really get any extra time to re-do. We just had to re-do, and pack it back into our already undoable schedule. But we got it done.

This anecdote, like many others relayed throughout the commentary, serves a number of rhetorical functions. For one, it encourages fans to appreciate *Halloween II* despite its flaws by making it seem miraculous that the film was ever completed in the first place. In doing so, it also helps to offset the damage these flaws may do to Zombie's authorial image by offering audiences specific reasons beyond his control for his possible “failure or [perceived] inability to achieve” (Grant 112) desired results. At the same time, Zombie's use of such emotionally-loaded terms as “disheartening,” “miserable work” and “kill yourself,” evokes images of self-sacrifice that present him as an uncompromising

⁷⁵ Zombie's desire to position *Halloween II*'s production history as an object of cult fascination was further emphasized during a 2013 interview in which he likened the experience of making the film to *Lost in la Mancha* (2002), an acclaimed documentary chronicling cult auteur Terry Gilliam's disastrous attempt to make a Don Quixote film (Zombie, *PopcornTaxi*).

auteur so committed to his work that he will stop at nothing to finish it. To be sure, the director's assertion that he and the crew still "got it done" despite all the hiccups serves as the anecdote's rhetorical pay-off: the ultimate guarantee of his authorial tenacity.

Perhaps the most significant "war story" articulated on the commentary for the purposes of cultivating distinction amongst an audience of horror fans – and one that blurs the lines between narratives of labour and more traditionally auteurist discourses of vision – is the pitting of *Zombie* against the studio. Occasionally, the conflict between *Zombie* and the studio is articulated in terms of physical labour or work, such as in discussions of how "fishy business" on part of the studio created an unsafe and "very dangerous" working environment for the cast and crew. However, even more than the "against-all-odds" anecdotes discussed above, the studio-director "war story" folds discourses of labour into more conventionally auteurist discourses of vision and artistic obstruction to figure the entire production of *Halloween II* as a battle between artistic integrity and commerce-driven corporate ethics. Frequently, *Zombie* makes note of various forms of studio interference, such as sudden cuts of the budget and shooting schedule or "requests to tighten things up too much in the editing process," that compromised his ability to realize his vision for the film. The most lucid examples of this strategy come in the form of *Zombie*'s aforementioned positioning of the director's cut as a "stronger" film that makes "more sense" than the ostensibly studio-mandated theatrical version. By way of such remarks, *Zombie* discursively elevates his own reputation via "a time worn means of canonizing directors: as...rebels who fight to achieve their artistic vision in the face of constraints imposed by the commercial studio system" (Klinger, "DVD" 41).

In this respect, *Zombie* also recounts instances of his own active rebellion against studio orders. Referring to a scene that takes place at a Haddonfield strip club, for example, *Zombie* states, "I got a note from the studio saying, 'Make sure [the stripper] is wearing a bikini' ... So, of course, I went out of my way to make sure she's naked through the whole scene, because that's just kinda my thing: if someone wants to tell me to do something, I'm gonna do the exact opposite to prove a point." This remark demonstrates a particularly interesting and telling rhetorical gambit: *Zombie* re-

narrativizes his use of formulaic generic conventions of the slasher film, such as nudity, as evidence of his own status as something of an *unconventional* cinematic “outsider.” During another similar anecdote, in fact, Zombie even goes as far as to refer to himself and the crew as a band of “renegades.” Ultimately, Zombie’s performative stance of “outsider” or “renegade” rebellion serves once again to consolidate the cult appeal of *Halloween II* and to cement his own auteur image as embodying the spirit of anti-establishment, counter-mainstream rebellion revered by fans as the true marker of authentic horror cinema. Through all of the aforementioned anecdotes, Zombie’s commentary thus imparts a discursive, extratextual framework upon the director’s cut of *Halloween II* that encourages fan audiences to read the text differently and rethink their previous criticisms of the film.

The rhetorical power of Zombie’s commentary is ultimately made clear in reviews of the Unrated Director’s Cut DVD that were posted on film websites and message boards following its release. These reviews often reference the commentary specifically, rehearsing and perpetuating its central discourses of auteurist vision, artistic perseverance, and rebellion. For example, Mike Pereira of *Bloody Disgusting* cites the fact that “Zombie brings up the many issues that came up during the shoot... and his antagonistic relationship with the studio” as a main justification for deeming the audio track, “One of the better commentaries I’ve heard in a while.” Most revealing, however, are remarks from reviewers who wove discourses from the director’s commentary into their readings of the film. One fan (Blood&Guts) writing on the *Official Halloween Message Board* notes that while he had previously watched the director’s cut and “liked some of it,” watching it again “with the commentary... explained everything I was wondering about and made me appreciate Rob’s vision.”⁷⁶ Perhaps the ultimate affirmation of the commentary’s influence over the text is offered by Gibron of *PopMatters*, whose review rehashes notions of conflicted authorship due to crass commercialism to seemingly reclaim *Halloween II* as a compromised auteur film:

⁷⁶ Posted in *Halloween II*, “Why has the ‘love’ for this movie grown so rapidly?,” *Official Halloween Message Board* [28 Sept 2011].

The most insightful element of the new DVD release of *Halloween II: The Unrated Director's Cut* is that Zombie would have delivered another near masterpiece had the powers that be not tried to cram his square peg concepts into the ridiculous round hole of the standard genre type. For them it was all about money and marketing... [The director's cut] represents the true spirit of horror fandom. Zombie has always been the genre's biggest cheerleader. With...the "Director's Cut" of *Halloween II*, viewers can rejoice as well.

Such reviews ultimately demonstrate how the director's cut and the director's commentary function *together* to make the Unrated Director's Cut DVD a cohesive promotional package aimed at elevating fan investments, both financial and emotional, in *Halloween II* and Zombie's authorship. As noted at the end of chapter one, in their branding as members of the Splat Pack, Zombie and his contemporaries were discursively granted auteur status not on the basis of any individual artistic predilections, but rather on the basis of their supposedly marginal status as Hollywood outsiders. As the remarks above demonstrate, the Unrated Director's Cut DVD of *Halloween II* operates in a similar way, appealing to fans by imagining the horror auteur, in a somewhat hackneyed fashion, as an anti-commercial iconoclast – or, in accordance with the logic of affective economics, as the stalwart of an authentic subcultural "spirit."

Although the relatively sparse DVD of *Halloween II* already pointed toward the declining importance of the DVD market for media industries, the years since its release have seen this market become increasingly unstable. One of the major forces behind the DVD's diminishing prosperity has been the proliferation of online platforms for film distribution and consumption, born largely out of the film and television industries' need to counteract illegal and damaging practices of media piracy that have become commonplace in an increasingly participatory media landscape (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 2). Although many hoped that the emergence of Sony's high-definition Blu-ray format could help to reaffirm the importance of physical distribution media, it has not been enough quell the growth of, as the title of a recently published anthology has termed it, an encroaching digital "Distribution Revolution" (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson) defined by the dematerialized – that is, non-physical – circulation of film content. As evidenced by the

case of *Halloween II*, while extensively bundling DVD and Blu-ray releases with added content was once a key tactic to boost ancillary returns, the growth of online distribution venues and subsequent reduction of corporate expenditures on physical releases has resulted in an “unbundling” of media content that has transformed not only the film, but also the television and music industries (see Bennett and Brown 7). As Curtin, Holt, and Sanson point out, in this new media environment, it is not DVD renters and retailers but rather online video-on-demand (VOD) or streaming services like Apple’s iTunes, Amazon Instant, and Netflix⁷⁷ that reign supreme (2).

This shift toward non-physical mediums for personal consumption had a significant effect on the release of Zombie’s most recent film, *The Lords of Salem*. The film, which follows a radio DJ (Sheri Moon Zombie) who receives a mysterious record that summons a centuries-old coven of witches, is a surprisingly non-violent, elegant affair for Zombie, channelling slow-burning arthouse exercises in psychological horror such as Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Tenant* (1976) rather than the schlocky grindhouse fare that inspired much of his previous work. Following its celebrated premiere at the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival, *Salem* was picked up by specialty distributor Anchor Bay Entertainment. The pairing of Zombie and Anchor Bay was fitting: while Anchor Bay only entered the theatrical release market in 2009, the company has a storied history as one of the first and most established distributors of heavily bundled, artfully packaged, and often digitally remastered cult horror DVDs (Bernard 58-59). As such, in accordance with Anchor Bay’s corporate mandate of “focus[ing] on a platform release strategy for its films with an eye toward maximizing their potential across all ancillary platforms” (Anchor Bay Entertainment), *Salem* was given an extremely limited domestic theatrical release as a loss leader, running for only four weeks on a mere 354 screens. Given this context, one may reasonably expect that the *Salem* DVD and Blu-ray would be extravagant products. Even Zombie seemed to have such expectations, remarking immediately following *Salem*’s acquisition, “I have always been a fan of the care and respect that Anchor Bay has put into their genre titles” (qtd. in

⁷⁷ Perhaps one of the most pertinent examples of the ascendancy of online film circulation is Netflix’s transformation from a mail-in DVD rental service to a leading subscription-video-on-demand (SVoD) service, a maneuver which was central to the downfall of movie rental empire Blockbuster.

Anchor Bay Entertainment). However, reflective of the trend of unbundling sweeping through the industry, both the DVD and the Blu-ray are extremely bare-bones productions, sporting the film's theatrical poster as their cover art and including a director's commentary track as their sole bonus feature. Instead, Anchor Bay's distribution was equally geared toward online ancillary platforms, as the film was released simultaneously on Netflix and other VOD services. Even the Blu-ray release – like many other current Blu-ray releases – indicated a shift toward online consumption, symbolically encapsulating the past, present, and future of home video media by including copies of *Salem* in three different formats: DVD, Blu-ray, and UltraViolet, a cloud-based system which allows purchasers to watch a digital copy of the film instantly on any Internet-capable device.

This is not to say that online platforms have replaced physical formats, or will anytime soon; indeed, regardless of their sparseness, physical *Salem* releases have already accumulated over \$4 million on home video, an admirably high return considering the film's \$2.5 million budget (*The Numbers*). However, given that this chapter has argued that DVDs and their paratexts have functioned as one of the most direct and reliable mediums for crafting and dispersing the agency of the convergence-era horror auteur, filmmakers like *Zombie* are clearly being forced to find new ways to adapt as new technologies emerge, as film distribution becomes increasingly unbundled and non-material, and as habits of film consumption become more and more unpredictable. This scenario raises new questions surrounding the stability of the convergence-era horror auteur's identity and the mechanisms at his disposal for performing it. For instance, if convergence-era horror auteurs may use formats like the Director's Cut DVD and the director's commentary to assert their auteur status by exploiting subcultural affect through narratives of labour, resistance, and/or control, how might they do similar extratextual work once these formats have dispersed? The conclusion of this thesis will thus look toward the (digital) future, addressing some of the recent and currently unfolding ways in which *Zombie* has attempted to navigate and disperse his brand in the rapidly growing but largely uncertain territory of online film culture.

Conclusion

Convergence-Era Horror Auteurism in the Age of Social Media

Through an analysis of the evolution of Rob Zombie's cinematic career, this thesis has aimed to demonstrate how the concept of the convergence-era horror auteur can lend us new insights into the contemporary American film industry's attempts to target specialized audiences amidst a techno-cultural backdrop of profound media diversification. It has shown that the convergence-era horror auteur operates as a subculturally-focused film brand whose identity is crafted and performed across various media, both old and new. Moreover, it has argued that this auteur figure serves an important, and notably contradictory, function. On one hand, Zombie's authorial persona – which embodies discourses of horror fandom, artistic authenticity, and industrial rebellion – legitimates and creates distinction for projects amongst cult minded fans who imagine themselves existing outside of, or in opposition to, an ostensibly over-commercialized film industry. On the other hand, Zombie is both a product and an agent of the film industry's efforts to manage and profit from horror fandom by creating transmedia brand communities and thus converting subcultural dispositions like authenticity and rebellion into lucrative saleable commodities.

In the introduction to this thesis, however, I also make the assertion that the crafting of the convergence era auteur should not be conceived of as having a clear endpoint, or final destination, but rather as an ongoing process. Indeed, by limiting their focus to dialogue pertaining to the Splat Pack, recent publications by Mark Bernard – whose *Selling the Splat Pack* only spans the years from 2003 and 2007 – and Joe Tompkins – who concludes his essay on brand-name auteurism with the coming of the Splat Pack in 2006 – tend to treat the resurrection of the figure of the horror auteur in the mid-2000s as a discrete, one-off occurrence inevitably bound to industrial machinations surrounding the extreme horror cycle. To the contrary, while a cycle of low-budget, supernatural horror films inaugurated by the success of *Paranormal Activity* in 2009 largely stole the independent horror market away from the extreme horror cycle, the figure of the convergence-era horror auteur has lived on. This is evidenced, for instance,

by the fact that some of the Splat Packers themselves have been courted to produce non-violent entries in this recent supernatural cycle, with its leading production studio, Blumhouse Productions, commissioning and financing films such as James Wan's *Insidious* (2010) and *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2013) and Zombie's *The Lords of Salem*. In other cases, convergence-era horror auteurs have expanded their authorial halo to include the role of star-producer. Eli Roth's recent endorsement of films like *Aftershock* (2013) and *The Sacrament* (2014), for example, suggests that the figure of the convergence-era horror auteur continues to operate as a brand that can help generate distinction for otherwise marginal horror fare. Such modes of securing a cult reception framework are perhaps becoming even more valuable as the independent studios and distributors responsible for horror properties like *Salem* and *The Sacrament* increasingly turn to digital distribution markets, such as streaming and VOD services, that are more affordable for the industry but, consequently, also more cluttered and competitive.

At the end of chapter three, I alluded to the unbundling of film content and the growing importance of Internet media ventures in film industry conduct. Looking forward, the ascendance of digital and online social media as novel platforms for grassroots communication and the mobilization of audiences presents both new opportunities and new challenges for the convergence-era horror auteur. For one thing, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr may offer filmmakers potentially lucrative new avenues for authorial (self-)promotion and brand maintenance. Zombie's recently amplified presence on Facebook provides some insight into how convergence-era horror auteurs may be attempting to traverse the shift to social media or harness its promotional potential.

While Zombie has profiles on each of the major platforms listed above, his official Facebook profile, which has helped cohere fans into a networked community currently comprising of over 4.9 million "Followers," has become the central hub of brand activity.⁷⁸ Here, the different facets of his brand explicitly co-mingle and converge, as materials pertaining to his various transmedia endeavours are frequently posted in indiscriminate order, including photographs, production updates, news articles, reviews,

⁷⁸ Zombie's Facebook profile can be accessed online at www.facebook.com/RobZombie

film trailers, tour dates, songs and music videos, and links to purchase his DVDs, CDs, concert tickets, and merchandise. Significantly, the architecture of Facebook, which lists recent posts by a user's "Friends" on a centralized newsfeed, itself helps to elevate the frequency and immediacy with which fans interact with this promotional content. Moreover, if the logic of convergence-era branding dictates that fostering more direct connections between consumers and producers can help strengthen consumer attachments, other aspects of the Facebook profile actively invite fans into the Zombie brand. For instance, multiple photo albums are devoted to re-posting images of Zombie-related fan art, tattoos, and collections, and fans are encouraged to share posts with their "Friends" and have discussions in their comments sections. Sometimes, fans are also able to interact with Zombie himself as he often replies to comments or hosts live question-and-answer sessions.

At the same time, Zombie uses the profile as a space in which to manage his own brand image. As Sam Han notes, social media profiles act as key tools for impression management, sites in which individuals "write" their identities and engage in "exercise[s] in self-curating" (57-58). Bridging convergence studies with theories of stardom, Elizabeth Elcessor likewise suggests that such profiles may enable subcultural celebrities to deepen fan investments by engaging in discursive performances of the "real" self as text that – due to social media's apparent "liveness," interactivity, and lack of media gatekeepers – appear more authentic, intimate, and thus convincing than those permitted by earlier promotional formats (48-53). In this sense, Zombie's own activity on the page often functions to avow his ostensibly authentic subcultural persona. For example, Zombie performs something of a detached, "cool" pose in his responses to fans, which rarely amount to more than a few words, are often riddled with typos or grammatical errors, and typically display either a sarcastic sense of humour or, when criticized, a stand-offish "fuck you" attitude.⁷⁹ Similar tactics of presenting behind-the-scenes evidence of Zombie's subcultural lifestyle are employed on his Instagram and Tumblr

⁷⁹ Interestingly, this separates Zombie's posts from the more professionally-worded posts pertaining to merchandise or customer inquiries that sport the signature "Emma (RZs web manager)" or, more recently, "Team 31." Distinguishing between posts by Zombie and the parties responsible for upholding the commerce of his brand serves to further distance Zombie from the corporate workings of media industries and thus affirms the stance of commercial disavowal that he often adopts in more official forms of paratextual discourse.

profiles as well, which feature photos of him mingling with heavy metal and cult film legends and of his own extensive collection of horror film memorabilia.

Furthermore, if I have argued that the identity of the convergence-era horror auteur is shaped by active input from both sides of an increasingly horizontal fan-industry relationship, the use of social media platforms also raises new questions around the politics of fan participation. Suzanne Scott has recently argued that, as online technologies permit audiences greater agency, media industries aim to use the Internet in ways that both “enric[h] fans’ experience... [while] channel[ing] fan participation in ways that best suit the industry’s financial and ideological interests” (“*Battlestar*” 321). Once again, social media manoeuvres around Zombie’s recent work offer instructive examples of how the subcultural celebrity of the convergence-era horror auteur may assist in “channeling” participatory practices. For instance, to help promote *Salem*, web development firm Social Media 180 was hired to design an online and mobile application for *Salem* that drove Facebook “likes” for the film and “shares” of the application by entering participants into a contest with a grand prize that included: a walk-on role in Zombie’s next film, VIP concert tickets including a meet-and-greet with Zombie, the entire collection of Zombie’s DVDs and CDs, and a variety of other merchandise (Social Media 180). The application included a video in which Zombie, speaking to viewers in direct address, framed the contest not as a promotional effort but rather as a unique experience tailored to meet a fundamental fan desire, proclaiming, “I’m here to tell you something that you have all asked me *a million* times. You come up and say, ‘Please let me be in one of your movies,’ and you bug me and you bug me. And now... you... can.”⁸⁰ Thus, while the prize package indicated that the campaign was designed specifically to court Zombie devotees, the contest itself exploited the logic of affective economics to mobilize their participation. Drawing over 51 000 clicks and 7 000 shares of the application, 20 000 contest entrants, and 37 000 fans to the film’s Facebook page, the *Salem* campaign – like the “Legion of Michael” campaign outlined in chapter two – further illustrates the power of social media as a tool for (relatively) cost-free “spreadable” advertising (Social Media 180).

⁸⁰ The video can be viewed online at www.youtube.com under the following title: “A MESSAGE FROM ROB ZOMBIE – WIN A WALK-ON ROLE IN HIS NEXT FILM,” robzombie.com.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of the industry's attempts to control and benefit from fan participation can be seen in the current crowdfunding of Zombie's next feature, *31*, on social commerce platform FanBacked. Amongst Zombie's previous social media ventures, crowdfunding is unique as it provides an alternative mode of financing *31* that proactively converts the emotional investments and participatory energies of his fans into direct *economic* investments in his work. Depending on the amount of money they contribute, fans receive a variety of "rewards." Even more explicitly than the *Salem* contest, the *31* funding site relies upon affective economics to spur contributions.⁸¹ Especially in cases like *31*, in which the film was likely to get financed regardless of fan contributions, part of the allure of crowdfunding for fans seems to come from the sense of symbolic democracy evoked via the illusion of participation in the production process. (I say the illusion of participation, of course, because fans do not actually have input into the creative process, but instead are paying to affirm Zombie's authority.) In this sense, while certain "rewards" amount to official merchandise and rare or signed Zombie memorabilia, others more explicitly appeal to ideologies of participation, such as a \$5 bumper sticker that reads "This Shit Happened Because of Me and RZ" and, at far higher prices, walk-on roles and executive producer credits. The site also plays upon subcultural values of community and exclusivity, offering backers access to a "VIP Room" that features "EXCLUSIVE & BEHIND-THE-SCENES updates straight from Rob!" Most tellingly, however, the page encourages contributions by sporting the message,

This whole crowd funding thing is about us making the type of movie we all wish we could see. Not a mellow PG-13 affair but a hardcore R-rated movie.

Obviously the more contributions and the more contributors the purer we can be in making the film we want to make for you... Gore Hounds unite!

The point is clear: by getting involved – that is, helping fund the project – fans can ostensibly help to ensure that *31* stays as marginal, free from Hollywood meddling, and thus *authentic* as possible. Ironically, then, and highly illustrative of the contradictions embodied in the figure of the convergence-era horror auteur, the *31* campaign operates

⁸¹ The *31* FanBacked website can currently be accessed online at www.rz-31.com

once again to monetize Zombie fandom by appealing directly to fans' taste for the independent and anti-commercial.

Depending on who is analyzing them and on the specific nuances of their creation, industry-sanctioned models of participation, such as those employed with *Salem* and *31*, can be read in both a top-down and a bottom-up fashion. On one hand, they can be seen to demonstrate the industry's recognition that fans themselves hold great promotional potential and that experientializing fan encounters with brands can serve as a powerful means of creating stronger brand attachments. On the other hand, they can be taken as indicators of the industry's recognition of the increasing *need* to offer greater incentives to generate fan awareness and interest amongst the clutter caused by the growing breadth of media options and media windows. The reality, however, is likely less a matter of "either/or" than it is of "both/and."

More generally, it is possible that social media efforts such as those examined above may function as an industrial response to some of the changing market conditions and distribution shifts discussed at the end of chapter three. For example, if the unbundled digital files streamed, rented, or purchased via delivery platforms such as Netflix or iTunes lack the sort of peripheral discursive frameworks like director's commentaries that make DVDs and Blu-rays ideal formats for auteurist self-promotion, we may perhaps conceive of social media sites as offering something of a novel substitute to these more conventional formats. Furthermore, if the DVD market can no longer serve as a guaranteed high-profit generator for independent horror fare, crowdfunding the convergence-era horror auteur's projects via social commerce mediums like FanBacked and Kickstarter may help to offset risk by producing a committed audience and external financial reservoir upfront.

However, as the industry continues its attempts to protect the brand of the convergence-era horror auteur and to use his authority to harness the participatory energies of fans, we should also consider the challenges that this new landscape poses. As new forums for grassroots networking and communication proliferate, online communities continue to develop and grow increasingly diverse, vocal, and

unpredictable. In this context, the position of the convergence-era horror auteur becomes more tenuous, as audiences are afforded more agency to interrogate, scrutinize, and perhaps fracture the very coherence and authenticity of his auteur image. Indeed, this was made evident in a recent Ask Me Anything (AMA) session with Zombie on social networking site reddit that was designed to spread word about the *31* crowdfunding campaign. Almost immediately, the site's members – who are notoriously critical and look for detailed, candid responses from AMA participants – turned on the director for engaging in the same flippant, “cool” posturing he does on his Facebook profile. As one irate respondent (AniGamor) put it,

He put no thought or effort into his crappy 3 word answers. If he's here to plug *31*, it backfired for me, now I just see him as someone without any thoughts or depth. He's not a real person, just some dude who dresses funny trying to sell us a product like a pop star.⁸²

Zombie initially attempted to recover by sarcastically revelling in the backlash, but he later expressly apologized for misunderstanding the community's desires, marginally expanded the length of his answers, and took up reddit vernacular⁸³ to communicate with users on their own terms. However, after Zombie continued to take a verbal lashing, he moved the remainder of the question-and-answer session over to Facebook where fans are likely to be more affirmative of his brand identity.

Ultimately, as the examples discussed in this conclusion indicate, the position that the convergence-era horror auteur currently occupies is a complex one, and it is not yet entirely clear how this contested terrain will be navigated. Nonetheless, as this thesis has aimed to demonstrate, future research should continue to shed light on convergence-era horror auteurism not as a cycle-bound phenomenon but rather as a mutable and somewhat

⁸² Posted in “I am Rob Zombie, writer and director of *31*. Let's do this again. Ask Me Anything!,” *reddit* [1 Oct 2014].

⁸³ For instance, referencing *Rampart* (2011) in AMAs has been a running joke amongst members of the reddit community since actor Woody Harrelson's disastrous session in which he would only answer questions about the film. After taking a brief break from his own contentious AMA, Zombie announced his return by posting, “Back from dinner and ready to Rampart some more questions!”

precarious industrial strategy that is both facilitated and negotiated by changing cinematic trends, market conditions, and developments in media technology.

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