

**“The Laurel Story”: An Industrial Intersection of
Authorship, Cult Film and Independent Cinema in an
American Motion Picture Production Company,
1963-1994**

Submitted by Tom Fallows, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies, January 2019.

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Abstract

This thesis presents the first academic analysis of key US motion picture production company Laurel Entertainment. Established in Pittsburgh by *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) director George A. Romero and his business partner Richard P. Rubinstein, Laurel's geographical and ideological separateness from bicoastal filmic centres was unprecedented. Yet despite being at the forefront of a number of practices that came to shape non-Hollywood production, including synergetic crossovers and diversification, Laurel has been neglected from previous investigations of the independent sector. This study traces Laurel's growth from grassroots subsidiary to publicly-owned enterprise, revealing the strategic and creative thinking that ensured survival on the margins of the industry. Here, an analysis of the firm's infrastructure employs a synthesis of ethnographic research, empirical data and business and economic theory, considering the complex array of stakeholders and changing opportunity structures that fed into and helped dictate output. Scrutiny of Laurel and its co-founders also provides new insight into the cinema of major genre filmmaker George Romero, while shedding light on the under-researched figure of the independent film producer. By looking towards the activities of the Laurel partners, this study offers a revisionist account of auteur filmmaking, cult film and independent cinema from a "real-world," practitioner-level perspective, asking how these strands intersected within the firm and mapping out the innovations, compromises and contradictions of this convergence.

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Laurel Entertainment, Inc. is a motion picture development and production company primarily specializing in moderate budget feature films.

Laurel Entertainment Corporate Profile, 1984

Laurel Timeline

- 1963 Dec. George A. Romero and his partners initiate the Pittsburgh-based motion picture production company Latent Image, Inc.
- 1968 Oct. The Latent Image partners release their debut feature *Night of the Living Dead*, made under the limited partnership Image Ten.
- 1970 9 Dec. Romero applies for a certificate of incorporation for Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania, a subsidiary of Latent Image.
- 1972 2 Mar. Latent Image's *There's Always Vanilla* is released in limited theatres across the US, distributed by Cambist Films.
- May. *Jack's Wife* (aka *Season of the Witch*, aka *Hungry Wives*) screens in New York, distributed by Jack H. Harris Enterprises.
- 1973 23 Mar. *The Crazies* is released theatrically in the US, distributed by Cambist Films.
- Freelance journalist Richard P. Rubinstein interviews Romero for *Filmmakers Newsletter*. Rubinstein agrees to become Romero's business partner at a revived Laurel Productions.
- Laurel begin work on the sports documentary series *The Winners*. Production continues throughout 1974. Released by ABC.
- 1975 25 Feb. The company is formally renamed Laurel Tape & Film, Inc.
- 1976 28 June. Romero is made general partner of J.W. Associates, a limited partnership that moves Laurel into book publishing.

- 1977 The company begins operating under the name the Laurel Group, a subsidiary of Rubinstein's video production firm the Ultimate Mirror.
- May. *Martin* premieres out of competition at the 30th Cannes Film Festival.
- Nov. Production of *Dawn of the Dead* begins in Monroeville, Pennsylvania.
- 1978 May. A cut of *Dawn of the Dead* screens at the 31st Cannes Film Festival.
- Aug. *Martin* screens as part of the first Utah/US Film Festival.
- 2 Sept. The European edit of *Dawn of the Dead* (aka *Zombi*) premieres in Italy.
- 1979 20 Apr. *Dawn of the Dead* is released in US theatres, distributed by UFDC.
- 14 Dec. Laurel Entertainment receives a certificate of incorporation, establishing a new, legally distinct iteration of the firm.
- 1980 31 Mar. Laurel Entertainment begin trading as a publicly-owned company, reporting the sale of 675,000 shares.
- 1981 10 Apr. *Knightriders* receives a limited US theatrical release, distributed by UFDC as the first of a three-picture deal.
- 25 Apr. Laurel enter into a two-year agreement with talent agent Adams, Ray and Rosenberg, Inc. for domestic representation.
- 1982 10 Nov. Warner Bros. release *Creepshow* across US cinemas. Made in collaboration with UFDC.
- 1983 29 Oct. The pilot episode of *Tales from the Darkside* airs.

- 1985 Apr. Mitchell Galin joins as vice president of production.
 19 June. George Romero exits the company.
 July. *Day of the Dead* is released theatrically in the US, distributed by UFDC.
- 1986 9 May. Laurel acquire the assets of California-based limited partnership Angeles Cinema Investors.
- 1987 1 May. *Creepshow 2* is released theatrically in the US, distributed by New World Pictures.
- 1988 24 July. *Tales from the Darkside* ends after four seasons.
 22 Oct. Television series *Monsters* begins its own four-season run.
- 1989 1 Mar. Laurel merge with Spelling Productions and television distributor Worldvision Enterprises to form Spelling Entertainment, Inc.
 21 Apr. *Pet Sematary* is released by Paramount Pictures, produced by Rubinstein and Galin.
- 1990 4 May. *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* is released by Paramount.
- 1991 Apr. *Monsters* ends production after 72 episodes.
 16 July. Short-order series *Golden Years* begins airing on CBS. Written by Stephen King.
- 1993 31 Mar. Blockbuster Entertainment acquires 48% of Spelling's common stock.
 28 Sept. Movie-for-television *Precious Victims* airs on CBS.
- 1994 Jan. Blockbuster merge with transnational media corporation Viacom.

15 Jan. Movie-for-television *The Vernon Johns Story* premieres.

14 Feb. Viacom acquire a controlling interest in Paramount Communications.

25 Mar. Blockbuster's ownership of Spelling's common stock rises to 70.5%.

8 May. Miniseries adaptation of Stephen King's *The Stand* begins airing on ABC.

23 Nov. Viacom closes Laurel Entertainment's offices. Laurel's final programme, *Stephen King's The Langoliers*, premieres on 14 May 1995.

Introduction

George A. Romero cuts a rather curious figure. He is an American commercial director who owns and runs his own production company. So far he has made six feature films but remains unwilling to join the industry, and admits to being constantly “amazed that anything survives the system at all.”

Chris Auty. “The Haunting of Middle America.” 1979. p.28

We [Laurel] tend to operate in more a ‘European style’ in terms of the way we produce and the way George directs in that we tend to follow Sarris’s auteur theory of direction . . . I see my function as a producer in terms of providing George Romero with a brush, palette and canvas. And his creative control is absolute in terms of the film itself, that he’s the scriptwriter, that he is the director and that he is the editor. It’s totally the product of one man’s vision—on a creative level.

Richard P. Rubinstein, speaking in 1978. *Document of the Dead* (1985)

Established by major independent filmmaker George A. Romero and producer-entrepreneur Richard P. Rubinstein, Laurel's ambition to construct a profit-maximising corporate entity around notions of auteurship was audacious. That the firm would do so from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a space geographically and ideologically apart from bicoastal filmic centres, was unprecedented. In Laurel's professed determination to provide a stable, autonomous platform for Romero's artistry, the firm was at the forefront of a number of practices that came to shape non-Hollywood production in the 1970s and beyond, including synergetic crossovers, multinational funding structures, manipulations of ancillary markets and product diversification. Despite this, the company has been entirely overlooked by the academy. Romero is recognised as one of the most culturally significant horror auteurs to emerge from the US, from his directorial debut *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) onwards demonstrating a commitment to politically challenging low-budget genre cinema. His status as a leading cult filmmaker may be assured, but the activities of the small independent production company that facilitated a substantial part of his output has been neglected.

In scrutinising Laurel Entertainment, this thesis offers an intricate, micro-industrial case study of an independent production company on the margins of both the industry and current academic frames of analysis. Delving into the so-called "real-world" activities of the firm provides a unique perspective from which to assess independent filmmaking practices and production cultures, enhancing our understanding of institutional behaviours and creative incentives in this sector. Laurel's remarkable longevity across three decades of production (four when we take into account parent company the Latent Image) traversed divergent periods of American independent cinema, enabling a consideration of

the macro-industrial changes that impacted this small-sized media enterprise. Utilising a media industry studies framework that “perceives culture and cultural production as sites of struggle, contestation, and negotiation between a broad range of stakeholders” (Holt and Perren 5), this thesis presents new insight into the work of George Romero and, not least, the under-researched figure of the independent film producer, revealing the myriad economic, legal and institutional forces that feed into and dictate cultural objects away from Hollywood.

Sitting within this broader study of the firm is an intersection between three distinct fields of media analysis: auteur filmmaking, cult film and American independent cinema. These strands were crucial to Romero’s framing as an important regional director who “redefined the genre film” (Yakir, “Morning” 60), yet this study reviews issues surrounding the auteur, cult and independent cinema in closer relation to industrial parameters, looking at the impact on systems of corporate governance and marketplace strategies. This thesis considers how these fields interacted and were internally organised within the firm, charting the innovations, compromises and contradictions of this infrastructural convergence. Interrogating Laurel’s corporate development expands existing critical materials to consider these branches of academic study from a ground-level perspective, asking what auteurship, cult and independence meant to practitioners, not only artistically, but also in terms of economic and industrial permanence.

Literature Review

No prior scholarship exists on Laurel or its co-founder Richard P. Rubinstein. The firm’s promotional interactions with the trade papers notwithstanding, the

popular press has been almost as disinterested as the academy. Paul A. Gange's *The Zombies That Ate Pittsburgh: The Films of George A. Romero* (1987) is singular in discussing Laurel with any degree of specificity, the attention bestowed upon the firm perhaps unsurprising given the book's status as an official Laurel publication. In a chapter dedicated to Laurel's early development, Gange grants the partners agency to discuss their individual "philosophies" concerning the company. As Romero reiterates his need for "creative control," Rubinstein situates himself as a mediator between the "bad guys" of Hollywood and Romero's artistry, a "decisive" business graduate who gets things done while "refusing to bend to the rules of the Hollywood studio system for financing and distribution" (58, 59). The partners stress that they maintain "autonomous bits of turf" within the firm's corporate governance (57), divided evenly between Rubinstein's business knowhow and Romero's creative leadership.

Critical focus has fallen on Romero himself with more frequency, largely due to the success of the "zombie films" that established his reputation. In a career that encompassed five decades, Romero directed six feature films depicting the walking dead, beginning with *Night of the Living Dead* and culminating in *Survival of the Dead* in 2009. Scenes of explicit violence made *Night* controversial upon its original late-1960s release (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 110), yet the film was quickly redrawn as a "a seminal text in the development of modern horror" (Waller 14). The film's apparent political subtext (the nihilistic ending sees the African American hero shot dead by a redneck posse) is perceived to have "radicalised the low-budget American horror movie, reinstating the marginal genre's potential for putting forward oppositional critiques of the prevailing social order" (J. Russell 73). Critic Kim Newman sees

Night's influence in its immediacy, both geographically (set in a Pennsylvanian farmhouse rather than a Transylvanian crypt)¹ and industrially. “[Romero] brought horror to the heartland,” writes Newman, “and encouraged a 1970s generation of hand-to-mouth auteurs” that included Wes Craven, David Cronenberg, John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper (“American Horror” 134).

The film’s 1978 sequel was equally impactful and the bloody display of cannibalism in *Dawn of the Dead* famously caused *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin to flee the theatre after fifteen minutes (C14). Dave Kehr regarded the “aggressiveness and antisocial stance” as equally shocking, writing that “as an independent film, *Dawn of the Dead* might be too independent—too fierce and original and threatening” (106). Such was *Dawn’s* notoriety that critic Tom Allen predicted “the biggest cult blockbuster of all time” (1), and the film went on to earn an impressive \$55 million at the worldwide box office (“*Dawn of the Dead* (1979) - Financial”).

The widespread portrayal of Romero as a counterculture auteur began in the immediate wake of *Dawn of the Dead’s* US release. In 1979, Romero and Rubinstein were guests at Toronto’s Festival of Festivals, interviewed by organisers Robin Wood, Richard Lippe and Tony Williams as part of a retrospective on horror cinema.² This retrospective, alongside the accompanying *American Nightmare* booklet (written with Andrew Britton), significantly contributed to the study of horror cinema, inaugurating a rich vein of analysis that was readily taken up by subsequent scholars in the field. By incorporating Marxist and Freudian theory, Wood conceptualised horror as a

¹ *Night* stands alongside Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) as one of a trio of 1960s horror movies that removed the traditional distancing devices of the genre, instead relocating their narratives into recognisable American locales—a rural farmhouse, a roadside motel and a Manhattan apartment complex respectively.

² The interview was later published in *Cinema Spectrum* No.1, Spring 1980, pp. 4-7.

vital, transgressive counterpoint to the dominant systems of capitalism and the normative sociocultural constructs validated by Hollywood (“An Introduction” 7). Romero’s films were placed at the heart of this enquiry and Wood concluded that the flesh-eating ghouls in *Dawn of the Dead*, driven by their sole need to consume, were “the logical end-result, the *reductio ad absurdum* and *ad nauseum*, of Capitalism” (“Neglected” 31).

As influential as Wood’s writings may be, his approach has limitations. Wood’s inability to see past a text-centred reading allowed him to punctuate transgressive qualities without considering the conservative role genre might play within an industrial framework, i.e. as a packaged commodity (Holt and Perren 10). In his vehemence to reframe horror as a worthy academic subject, Wood is also somewhat reductive, arranging films and filmmakers on opposite sides of a transgressive vs. regressive battle line. Those that failed to meet Wood’s ethical standards, as with David Cronenberg and Brian De Palma, are subsequently cast aside (“Neglected” 28). Such compartmentalisation also applied to Romero, and within Wood’s advocacy the filmmaker was limited as a specific cultural type—as a horror film auteur. When Romero stepped outside this box, upping the comedic content as he did with *Creepshow* (1982), or setting aside genre entirely as with *Knightriders* (1981), Wood was dismissive. For him, the former comprised “a series of empty anecdotes,” the latter was little more than an “archetypal liberal American movie, with something nice to say about every minority group [and] some pious platitudes” (*Hollywood* 168-69).

Wood’s *American Nightmare* collaborator Tony Williams has also returned to Romero with a degree of frequency, penning *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* in 2003 (updated in 2015) and editing the collection *George A. Romero: Interviews* in 2011. Unlike his colleague, Williams

is admirable in his determination to move past the boundaries of horror and zombies, becoming one of the first Romero scholars to give attention to lesser known works such as *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), *Jack's Wife* (1972) and *Monkey Shines* (1988). Williams draws strong auteurist connections between Romero's films and, like Wood, is single-minded in his focus on textual analysis. The impact of Romero's industry collaborators on these films, such as Russell Streiner at Latent Image or Richard Rubinstein—collaborators who may complicate an auteurist reading of Romero's films—are ignored.

Williams's writing hypothesises a connectedness between Romero and the traditions of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century literary naturalism, drawing parallels between shared displays of a “decaying inner-city environment” and the stylistic and narrative excesses of texts such as *Dawn of the Dead* and Émile Zola's 1873 novel *Le Ventre de Paris* (*Cinema* 10-12). For his part, Romero insists that these similarities are coincidental (“An Interview” 399), leading Williams to infer that such influences must have been appropriated “unconsciously” (*Cinema* 176). Fundamentally, Williams is striving to impart artistic seriousness onto Romero's work via association. Linda Williams observes that genres that revel in the “gross display of the human body” (such as *Dawn of the Dead*) are the lowest in “cultural esteem,” with horror second only to pornography (“Film Bodies” 3). As Harmony H. Wu asserts, horror's “generic imperatives are to produce exactly the kind of ‘visceral intolerance’ in which reviled distaste is firmly rooted,” consequently reiterating “lowbrow” insinuations (86).

Equating Romero to more reputable “high art” works like literary naturalism is one way of justifying the “base forms” that appear elsewhere in his work, if one felt justification were needed. In point of fact, Romero's reputation

has often fallen somewhere between “high” and “low art” value judgements. Rona Murray sees in *Night* an encapsulation of both art and exploitation “in its innovative and artful reinvention of the horror B-movie aesthetic” (45). Joan Hawkins claims that this convergence has proven problematic for those tastemakers who worry over the “erosion of a certain idea about art cinema.” Accordingly, clear distinctions have been made between “culturally superior” art films and debased exploitation fare (“Culture Wars”).

While theorists such as Tony Williams endeavour to resituate Romero within a more respectable critical arena, such distinctions can be seen as vital to the filmmaker’s cult reputation. Jeffrey Sconce’s widely cited essay “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” (1995) defines cult, or paracinema as he calls it, as a celebration of “lowbrow” product, presenting “a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the ‘refined’ sensibility of the parent taste culture” (376). For Sconce, paracinema encompasses

such seemingly disparate subgenres as ‘badfilm,’ splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. (372)

Given the “sheer eclecticism” of these films (Jancovich, “Cult Fictions” 314), Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work on cultural distinction has been repeatedly drawn upon to synthesise cult cinema around issues of reception, fandom and

taste.³ As Bourdieu observes, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classification, distinguished themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (390). For David Chute, cult cinema’s “crucial social function is to overstep the limits of established taste” (“Outlaw Cinema” 10), an oppositional rally cry that neatly summarises paracinema consumption.

Mark Jancovich’s exploration of cult and “audience-screen” relations⁴ proposes that aficionados seek to affirm their identity by rejecting mainstream entertainment and celebrating transgressive materials (“Cult Fictions” 306). From the perspective of cult fandom, viewers of mainstream product become the “moronic victims of mass culture” (“Real Shocker” 25). Absurdly reductive though this definition may be, it is central to oppositional identity constructs (Jancovich et al. 2). Jancovich writes that cult reception rests on “the sense of distinction between that which is defined as the authentic subcultural self and that which is presented as the inauthentic mass cultural other” (“Real Shocker” 29), a process that subsumes industrial strictures into the broader concerns of fan identity-making. Writing with a “fan’s-eye view,” critics V. Vale and Andrea Juno assert that lowbrow/low-budget cult films are more authentic because they are unshackled from the restraints of mainstream production:

They can be transcendent expressions of a single person’s individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest \$20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein. Meetings with lawyers, accountants and corporate boards are what films in Hollywood are all about. (5)

³ See also John Fiske. “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 1992. 30-49.

⁴ The phrase “audience-screen” relations is from Corrigan, “Film and the Culture of Cult” (28).

Industrial parameters, however ill-defined, become little more than an additional means through which to signify mass cultural bankruptcy. But what this reading shrouds is the question of how exactly these cult films are made. What is the production process, and to what extent does this process permit artistic transcendence?

Looking at cult through issues of reception, Elena Gorfinkel argues that the field has shifted “from the ‘death of the author,’ to the (re)birth of the audience” (35). Yet as is apparent from *Vale and Juno*, the “individual vision” of an author has not been entirely discarded. Mathijs and Sexton have detected “a romanticist creed” surrounding the auteur, underpinned by “the idea of a lone, heroic figure battling against the odds to create works that are taken to heart by outsider audiences” (68). In *100 Cult Films* (2011), Mathijs and Mendik pay their own tribute, championing directors they perceive to be “the core of the cult auteur canon”—a list that includes George Romero (Introduction 3).⁵ As a cult figure, Romero’s identity rests on transgression (politically and in taboo displays of violence), his use of debased genres, his auteurist propensities and, not least, his geographical distance “far away from Hollywood” (Spainhower 183). In other words, his independence.

Despite being crowned “king of the independents” by some excitable critics (Keyser 198), Romero’s close association with genre has seen him ignored in academic and critical studies of American independent cinema (see Levy 12; Insdorf 58). This thesis, however, resituates Romero’s work within a

⁵ The other filmmakers joining Romero on this pedestal are Dario Argento, David Cronenberg, Peter Jackson, Terry Gilliam and Alejandro Jodorowsky. To date, Gilliam is the only filmmaker on this list not to try his hand at horror. Indeed, Mathijs and Mendik note the “authority of genre” when it comes to cult cinema and, at least in terms of their own hand-picked selection, confess that qualitatively, horror is the most prominent genre (2-3).

broader study of independent cinema, exploring (in contradiction to issues of cult film reception) the economic and industrial value of cult horror to practitioners and media entities on the margins of the mainstream industry. Indeed, numerous parallels and overlaps between cult and independent cinema will quickly become apparent, yet these strands have developed separately, displaying their own distinct taxonomies based on ideological, industrial and temporal paradigms.

In the introduction to *American Independent Cinema: A Sight & Sound Reader* (2001), Jim Hillier says that “historically, ‘independent’ has always implied work different from the dominant or mainstream, whether this relationship is defined primarily in economic terms (production and distribution) or in aesthetic or stylistic terms” (ix). More than just “different,” in *American Independent Cinema* (2005) Geoff King situates the independent as a “challenge to Hollywood” (1), customarily (though not definitively) laid down through a combination of “ultra-low-budget” filmmaking, a disruptive or unconventional visual style and a direct address to social issues usually avoided by “mainstream Hollywood” (2). King asserts that a “degree of distance, industrially, from the Hollywood studio system often appears to be a necessary condition for substantial formal or sociopolitical departure from the dominant norms” (2). Chris Holmlund writes that the independent label suggests “social engagement and/or aesthetic experimentation—a distinctive visual look, an unusual narrative pattern, a self-reflexive style” (2).

If this already sounds like cult film, writings on the American independent also centre the director-auteur, extolling a medium that fortifies “the personal vision of the filmmakers, who retain complete control over their projects” (Rosen and Hamilton xvii). Thomas Schatz remarks that “this degree of creative control

is exceedingly rare in major studio productions, while it is altogether common—if not taken for granted—in independent filmmaking. In this sense the indie realm is the province of the auteur” (“Film Industry” 50). Emanuel Levy’s *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (1999) also highlights a link between independent cinema and “personal expression,” where “the expectation is for an idiosyncratic mindset, the stamp of truly independent filmmakers like Steven Soderberg, John Sayles, Hal Hartley and Todd Hayes, who stubbornly stick to their eccentric sensibilities. The independent label evokes audacious movies” (2-3).

Analysis of the sector has galvanised around films from the 1980s onward. Independent cinema during this period was habitually identified as a “new phenomenon” (Hillier xv; “The Independent Feature” 57), with Soderberg’s *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) considered a climactic moment. Jennifer Holt reports that *sex, lies, and videotape*’s substantial returns⁶ altered the industrial perception of independent cinema, now viewed as “something that was profitable, viable and appealing to mainstream audiences” (303). *sex*’s reputation was elevated by its inclusion at several high-profile award ceremonies, notably the 1990 Academy Awards (nominated for Best Original Screenplay) and the 42nd Cannes Film Festival, where it won the prestigious Palme d’Or.

By 1989, however, independent cinema was far from the “new phenomenon” advertised. In *Celluloid Mavericks* (2000), Greg Merritt acknowledges a diverse independent sector almost a century old, encompassing everything from silent-era exploitation to 1990s “mini-major” production-distribution houses such as Miramax. Even before *sex*, increasingly

⁶ Earning over \$36 million worldwide on a \$1.2 million budget (“*sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) - Financial”).

available funding opportunities created space for differentiated, low-cost product. In September 1979, New York's Festival of American Independent Feature Films drew sponsorship from the Lincoln Centre and the Film Fund to shed light on non-Hollywood productions. In 1981, *American Film* magazine produced a special report on the independent feature, now expansive enough to be labelled a "movement" (57). Annette Insdorf's article "Ordinary People, European-Style" lauded the "social and moral" vision of "these politically sensitive and geographically rooted directors [who] resist Hollywood's priorities and potential absorption . . . [following a] European tradition that values a leisurely narrative over breakneck, television commercial-style pacing, reflection over action, and a depiction of political realities over sex and violence" (58).

Defining independent cinema was then as much about what it was not as what it was. Insdorf sought to distance "quality" films such as *Gal Young 'Un* (Dir. Nuñez, 1979) and Barbara Kopple's documentary *Harlan County U.S.A* (1976) "from filmmakers like George Romero, Tobe Hooper, John Carpenter, and David Cronenberg, who to one degree or another exist outside the industry orbit, but whose affection for Grand Guignol, violence, and sex has attracted commercial money" (58). Chuck Kleinhans adds that the term "independent" "has to be understood as a relational term—independent in relation to the dominant system—rather than taken as indicating a practice that is totally free-standing and autonomous" ("Independent Features" 308). As Jamie Sexton writes, many independent cinema scholars (and, not least, consumers) have positioned horror as an "abject entity . . . it must be excluded from most definitions and accounts of independent cinema because it contains values which independent cinema denies, yet it must also exist and be tolerated to an extent because its existence helps to bolster the identity of independent cinema

as a particular generic construct” (81).

The critical aggrandisement of certain independents began as a sincere attempt to support emergent filmmakers, pointing to the limited distribution networks, exhibition spaces and pots of money available to the first-timer (Cornwell 63-64, 80, 84). Undoubtedly commendable, this focus downplayed a historical context, reinforcing a narrative that American independent cinema began in the late 1970s/1980s. Additionally, so-called horror or cult filmmakers like Romero were only valued as a counterpoint, overlooking: 1) the fact that genre was far from the financial guarantor proposed; 2) that the use of genre might not preclude artistry and/or a “social and moral” vision; and 3) that these filmmakers might have interests beyond the production of genre films. By considering these factors, this thesis challenges the above narratives on American independent cinema, integrating the rich and diverse production history of Romero and Laurel to present a more holistic overview of developments in this sector from the 1960s to the mid-1990s.

In an academic analysis, attempts to recognise a diverse independent sector have sometimes been seen as disruptive to a wider critical organisation. For King et al., “if the term independent is taken to mean any non-studio production in the history of American cinema, it runs the danger of becoming so inclusive as to be of little value as a specific analytical tool” (2).⁷ In his own determination to add specificity, Levy identifies two distinct ways of classifying independent cinema, in either economic terms or as a “spirit or vision.” In the first, “any film financed outside Hollywood is independent. But the second suggests that it is the fresh perspective, innovative spirit, and personal vision that are the determining factor” (3). Favouring the latter, Levy discounts “B-

⁷ This said, King concedes that the inclusion of genre-producing firms in an examination of independent cinema is “open to debate” (*Indie 2.0* 263).

movies, straight-to-video and genre films, such as broad comedies (*Dumb and Dumber*) and horror flicks, even if they are made by such masters as George Romero” (12).

Indeed, in a critical organisation of independent cinema, economic conditions have often been discarded (Carson 129), or else, as with cult, positioned as another counterpoint. Discussing the so-called “Sundance-Miramax era” (1980s to 2010s), Michael Z. Newman writes, “the autonomy of indie culture is a function of artistic expressivity unconstrained by commercial or institutional pressures and demands.” (“Indie Film” 28). Perceiving mainstream production to be diminished by its overtly commercial agenda, the “indie” cineastes identified by Newman seem to be in alignment with the cult and paracinema audiences of Sconce and Jancovich et al. Yet as with Sexton above, Newman highlights the discordance of such oppositional taste cultures. Just as independent cinema offers subcultural capital through a rejection of “hegemonic mass culture,” it “also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers” (“Indie Culture” 17). Returning to Bourdieu, this independent filmgoer denies the “lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile” pleasure of low-culture to affirm their superior or refined taste palette” (391). Of course, elitist, high-cultural pleasures are exactly what cult film fans purport to reject.⁸ In connection with reception and fan consumption then, cult and independent cinema appear to be fundamentally incompatible.

Also drawing upon taste cultures, Janet Staiger has offered her own distinctions between so-called “authentic” independents and the type of

⁸ Fiske argues that cult films typically appeal to “subordinated formations of people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race” (30). James Monaco, however, strongly refutes such assertions, maintaining that the trash aesthetic of films like *Pink Flamingos* (Dir. Waters, 1972) and *El Topo* (Dir. Jodorowsky, 1970) indulge an educated, self-aware and emotionally distant viewing model. For Monaco, cult, like independent cinema, appeals directly to the “privileged children of the middle class” (66).

expensive, large-scale independent productions that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Carolco's \$102 million *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Dir. Cameron, 1991). Her assertion that independent features "without an intellectual engagement might better be relegated to the traditional classical Hollywood cinema film practice" ("Independent" 24) is problematic, not only in its reinforcement of elitist notions of taste based on class, ethnicity and education, but also in its neglect of those independent producers who have used this "aura of quality" as a marketing tool, deemed particularly useful when selling films without a bankable star or attention-getting visual effects (Merritt 276). A study of Laurel's dual nature, "somewhere between the art house and the mall" (Merritt 268),⁹ moves away from value-laden polemics, harmonising cult and independent cinema through a consideration of the pragmatic, everyday realities (and compromises) of non-Hollywood film production.

For his part, Merritt has also drawn upon independent films and filmmakers typically rejected by Staiger's "conception of quality" ("Independent" 22). Nor is his study "limited to merely 'spirited' arthouse fare. Such genres as ethnic, horror, and pornography are given their fair due" (xiii). Yet despite the industrial framing of his work, Merritt remains in the thrall of the director-auteur and the apparent "freedom to tell one's own story one's own way" available in the independent sector (xv). In his conclusion, Merritt imagines a future where "the next great director—with a small budget and a big dream—calls action!" (411), a statement dislocated from the complex interplay of industrial personnel that facilitates calling "action" in the first place. Chuck Kleinhans is contemptuous of what he calls "the authorship myth" ("Independent Features"

⁹ Although this description was not used in direct reference to Laurel, Merritt was describing similar practitioners who strove to blend "thought-provoking" content with a broader accessibility. He cites L.Q. Jones's post-apocalyptic satire *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) as a primary example (268-269).

310), upholding that “independence is not just a state of mind; it is a set of potentials that can only be realized in a real world situation with real economic institutions and constraints” (326).

The scholarship on independent and cult cinema identified above has been of extreme value to the academy, not least in serving to overcome potentially “slippery” definitions (Hillier ix; King, *American* 9) to organise these strands as specific analytical tools. Textual qualities and issues of taste and reception have risen to the fore, countering the “sheer eclecticism” of these sectors. An auteurist interpretation of George Romero (alongside other horror filmmakers such as Wes Craven and Tobe Hooper), meanwhile, has been crucial to a serious-minded evaluation of horror cinema, with theorists in this field determined to look past the splatter to see the sociocultural, sociopolitical impact of these films and filmmakers. But to gain insight into how these fields were recognised and/or appropriated by individual practitioners and institutions, and, in turn, to ask what a “ground-level” viewpoint can contribute to a broader comprehension of auteur filmmaking, cult film and independent cinema, this enquiry must step outside this theoretical range. Accordingly, I will appropriate a media industry studies framework to explore the real-world practices, belief systems and identity of a single media entity (McDonald 2).

Spicer et al. comment that “the financial side of art has always proved problematic for academics and critics alike, as if fetish objects are somehow sullied by the profit motif” (Introduction 1). Such perceptions are becoming outdated and media industry studies has grown exponentially. Schatz emphasises the way media industry studies “gauges the complex interplay between media production (and media products) and the myriad forces that both shape and, in rare cases, are shaped by that production” (“New

Hollywood” 19). Spicer et al. continue that a focus on economic, technical and political forces can enrich debates surrounding creativity, media historiography, national and transnational media cultures and authorship (Introduction 1, 7).

John Hartley writes that industry studies can exploit “the fuzziness of the boundaries between ‘creative arts’ and ‘cultural industries,’ freedom and comfort, public and private, state-owned and commercial, citizen and consumer, the political and the personal” (18).

Such boundaries are further complicated by the range of stakeholders involved in the production of media goods. Rather than simply the vision of an auteur, media industry studies posits that all media is a negotiation between a number of participants. Michele Hilmes observes that the very “concept of ‘industry’ implies the coming together of a host of interests and efforts around the production of goods or services” (22). From this perspective, John Thornton Caldwell points out that “negotiated and collective authorship is an almost unavoidable and determining reality in contemporary film/television” (199). In terms of production, additional ‘authors’ might include producers, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, production designers, composers, etc. At the financial level, this could be investors, shareholders, a board of directors, distributors, exhibitors, promoters or the marketplace itself. Even if, as Schatz maintains, the significance of the director-auteur in shaping a film cannot be overlooked (“Film Industry” 49), a media industry evaluation places this figure into a wider municipal,¹⁰ calling “into question some of the dominant analytical

¹⁰ James Lyons has applied a “value chain” model to film production, charting the fluctuating importance of key personnel as they traverse various stages of production. This work raises important questions about “creativity and creative power” (197). The “value chain” sees filmmaking as a “process of assembly” (202), situating the director as a function (one of many) whose value diffuses or concentrates depending on the demands of specific stages of production. Lyons writes that “concentrating on directing as a function, rather than director as an entity, can be helpful in correcting the auteurist supposition that, on an independent film, the director does ‘everything’” (200).

frameworks that have shaped not only media scholarship but notions central to humanistic study generally” (Hilmes 30).

A media industries enquiry does not necessitate a total abandonment of textual components. In the introduction to their important edited collection *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (2009), Holt and Perren stress that this is a holistic methodology, one that probes the interrelationship between industry, audience, society and text. As they write, “the textually orientated concerns of film and media studies could be enhanced and enlivened by a broadened base of analysis without threatening the larger commitment to the qualitative, critical work associated with humanist paradigms” (2). Indeed, addressing issues of economy, politics and policy can bring us back to the construction of texts and images, offering additional insight into artistic decisions and meaning-making (2). Hilmes positions the text as the starting point, a “preserved” artefact that remains central and present, the question that sparks the investigation (*An Interview with Professor Michele Hilmes*). Media industries can consequently be of vital use to an enquiry into American independent and cult cinema, extending the scope, while remaining inclusive of the academic work that has come before.

When considering media infrastructures and the products they construct, Holt and Perren insist that political economy is essential to the analysis (8). Gamble et al. outline political economy, at its simplest, as “an understanding of the different political and legal contexts which have shaped the development of the company and of the considerations that should determine its future” (Introduction 20). More precisely, Douglas Kellner says political economy “calls attention to the fact that the production, distribution and reception of culture takes place within a specific economic and political system, constituted by

relations between the state, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations such as the media” (“Media Industries” 101). Economist R.H. Inglis Palgrave emphasised that political economy is about more than the relationship between “the government and governed,” also looking to the activities and interactions of individual practitioners (qtd. in Mosco 23). Such relationships, particularly the interactions (both legal and personal) between the Laurel co-founders, will be crucial to this investigation.

A media industry and political economy framework has already been of value to a study of cult and independent cinema. Cult cinema scholars including Matt Hills and Bruce Kawin are alert to the fact that, even in the low-budget sector, commercial considerations are significant (Hills, “The Question” 443; Kawin 21). Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas’s work on “cult film stardom” also presses this case, perceiving the diametric figure of the so-called cult film star as “a negotiation between industry, management and economic values and notions of the subcultural and offbeat” (7). Mathijs and Mendik in *The Cult Film Reader* (2007)¹¹ recognise that cult exists as “part of an economic premise” as cultural goods produced for profit (“Editorial Introduction” 7) yet insist that “something always goes wrong with cult films—there is always something unplanned intervening in one of the levels of production, promotion or reception” (“Editorial Introduction” 7). The industrial frame of my investigation puts such notions to the test, asking how cult sits within the self-conscious economic activities of a single company.

The business undertakings of horror and exploitation practitioners have received the most attention in regard to cult cinema and industry. Kevin

¹¹ For Mathijs and Mendik, political economy is one part of a four-part taxonomy of cult cinema, included alongside reception, the film’s anatomy (i.e. issues of genre, content and style) and cultural status (“the way in which a cult film fits a time or region”) as qualifiers for inclusion (“Editorial Introduction” 1).

Heffernan's *Ghouls, Gimmicks and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (2004) is a remedial to the privileging of textual analysis in horror film studies, writing that “a cultural or aesthetic account of the horror film unmoored from its economic history seems . . . wholly inadequate” (6). Heffernan brings to the fore issues of technology, distribution, exhibition, marketing, ancillary markets and production in an investigation only limited by its temporal specificity. In the introduction to *Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema* (2014), editor Richard Nowell notes additional value in a media industry investigation, presenting the opportunity to reframe the enquiry around practitioners rather than spectators, to perceive the text not in the manner of what “we collectively believe it to be’ . . . but rather what they collectively believed it to be” (2).

Looking towards the independent sector, Alisa Perren and Yannis Tzioumakis have led the way in instigating an industrial focus. Perren's *Indie, Inc.* (2012) provides a corrective to the numerous polemical writings on this sector, dismissive of the so-called “cult of personality” (11) she found to dominate Peter Biskind's *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (2004). In Perren's own words, *Indie, Inc.* is a “historical analysis of shifting industrial practices and cultural discourses about independence, indie, Indiewood, and Hollywood during the 1990s” (15). Perren charts Miramax's growth from a distributor of concert films and foreign titles to a multi-platform Disney subsidiary, determining the company to be emblematic of a structural reorganisation that took place in Hollywood in the 1990s, particularly as independent films became sought after properties and the so-called

“indiewood” film replaced midrange productions on the studio’s roster.¹²

Tzioumakis’s expansive work in this field has scrutinised industry through the changing discourses of the word “independent,” charting how its fluctuating usage “expands and contracts when socially authorised institutions (filmmakers, industry practitioners, trade publications, academics, film critics and so on) contribute towards its definition at different periods in the history of American cinema” (*American* 11). Though he asserts that independent cinema can be organised into “distinct trends within fairly clearly demarcated periods of time” (“Independent,’ ‘Indie” 30), Tzioumakis recognises that such periods are not absolute and draws upon historian Penelope J. Corfield to acknowledge the “deep continuities” and “slow gradual trends” that can occur over time (“Independent,’ ‘Indie” 30). This said, such organisation enables a historically inclusive, industry-focused examination of these periods, charting the “studio years” of the mid-1920s to the late-1940s (covering the so-called Poverty Row studios), the “transitional years” of the late-1940s to late-1960s (the ramifications of divorcement and the rise of exploitation cinema) and “contemporary American independent cinema,” (itself organised into several sub-phases, including films from the New Hollywood, the mini-majors and the independent as studio subsidiary).

Tzioumakis and Perren’s surveys are wide-ranging, and like Merritt look to films and filmmakers beyond the dominant discourse. Tzioumakis’s edited collection *The Time of Our Lives* (2013), co-edited with Siân Lincoln, discusses the lasting sociocultural and industrial impact of *Dirty Dancing* (Dir. Ardolino,

¹² The term “indiewood” denotes mid-budget, often star-driven mass appeal studio productions that display generic independent elements—namely, marginal characters and/or visual and narrative experimentation (Sexton 71). So-called “indiewood” films include the Coen Brothers’ \$24 million budgeted *No Country for Old Men* (2007) for Miramax, and Paramount Vantage and Steven Soderbergh’s \$48 million *Traffic* (2000), distributed by USA Films. For more on the “indiewood” phenomenon, see Geoff King’s *Indiewood USA* (2009) and Tzioumakis’s *Hollywood’s Indies* (2012).

1987).¹³ Perren's appraisal of production-distribution company Lions Gate, meanwhile, surveys the firm's "adeptness at recognizing openings in the marketplace" ("Last Indie" 109), from in vogue "quality independents" such as *Buffalo '66* (Dir. Gallo, 1998) to films in tested genres, such as the horror film *Saw* (Dir. Wan, 2004). Building upon these evaluations of marginal independents, this thesis presents a rich case study of a small-scale entertainment company whose economic, industrial and geographical autonomy was, to a great extent, uniquely literal. "The Laurel story"—to borrow a phrase used by Rubinstein when writing his annual reports to shareholders (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1987 3*)—can expand the narrative of independent cinema in the US, revealing consistencies and deviations across a broader, more heterogeneous media landscape, adding greater nuance to our ideas about this sector and its "real-world" potentials.

Within this history of the firm, a number of key research questions emerge. What opportunities and limitations existed on the outer fringes of the industry? How did Laurel's regional positioning effect internal production cultures and systems of corporate governance? To what extent did the company change over time and how do these changes speak to a current historiographical understanding of the independent sector at large? In terms of Rubinstein's boast that Laurel operated in "the European style" to support the auteur, what did authorship really mean to the company? Who were the stakeholders that had a say over output and how did their involvement, in the words of Philip Drake, "problematise questions of both authorship and independence" (143)? Further, how does this complicate a textual reading of

¹³ Produced by independent label Vestron Pictures on a budget of \$6 million, the film became a global phenomenon, earning over \$213 million at the international box office ("*Dirty Dancing* (1987) - Financial Information").

Romero's work? Where did cult fit into the firm's strategic agenda and to what extent did cult genre restrict and/or enable creative autonomy? What can this tell us about cult's wider place within an economic history of cinema? Finally, how were issues of authorship, cult and independence hierarchically arranged within the firm? These questions are addressed in this thesis through a diverse and interdisciplinary methodological approach.

Methodology

Schatz observes two distinct levels of media industry analysis, located at either the macro-industrial level, dealing with oligopoly, integration, distribution, etc., or at the micro-industrial level, concerned with individuals, singular production companies and distinct sectors ("Film Industry" 46-51). Allowing that a study of Laurel falls into the latter category, in their essay "The Production of Media Fiction" (2013) Horace Newcomb and Amanda Lotz stress that "different levels of analysis" are crucial to any industrial survey (62). As they advocate, "it is necessary, at some point and in some measure, to acknowledge the extraordinary range of levels of influence, from the broadest structural arrangements to the most particular creative or administrative decisions made" (66). Given that individual media entities do not exist in a vacuum, Newcomb and Lotz's "shifting scales" emphasise the interrelationship between five levels: 1) national and international political economy and policy; 2) specific industrial contexts; 3) particular organisations (studios, production companies, television networks); 4) individual productions; and 5) individual agents (64-66).

With this in mind, Lotz calls for a "mixture of methodologies," one that encompasses a triptych of sociohistorical, industrial and textual analysis ("Industry-Level" 36). Anna Gough-Yates proposes that such an enquiry would

benefit from a synthesis of ethnographic research, the use of hard empirical data and textual analysis (16). Matthew Freeman also endorses a holistic “multimethod approach,” reflecting “the fact that media industries themselves cross disciplinary divides, operating socially, culturally, politically, economically, creatively [and] productively” (196). Crossing these “disciplinary divides” allows us to examine Laurel from a number of angles, collating research on economic strictures, business management, the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape, the behaviours of individual agents and the industry at large to create a holistic portrait of the firm and its output.

Getting to know the inner workings of a firm is not without difficulty (not least given the temporal distance of examining a company that closed its offices over two decades ago) and Lotz and Newcomb stress the importance of corporate papers, including interoffice memorandums, records of shareholder and director meetings, manuals and revised screenplays, etc. As they affirm, these primary historical records “are essential for production research, because the documents contain evidence both of conflicting points of view and of concrete decision-making related to particular media artefacts” (“The Production of Entertainment” 73). At the same time, Lotz and Newcomb recognise that “behind-the-scenes” information is notoriously hard to come by, often due to inadequate archiving or attachment to a still active company (79).

From 1973 to 1979, Laurel was a privately-run firm, and as such its corporate papers are not a matter of public record. From 1980 onwards, however, Laurel transitioned into a publicly-owned company, requiring the submission of detailed reports to US federal agency the *Securities and Exchange Commission* (SEC). The SEC itself no longer has access to Laurel’s government records and tracking them down was a challenge in and of itself.

After extensive searching, I located these documents through a combination of the Hunt Library at Pittsburgh's Carnegie-Mellon University (Romero's alma mater) and the Butler Library at Columbia University in New York. A BAAS Marcus Cunliffe Award in 2016 and a University of Exeter PGR Research Support Fund allowed access to these rare materials, making it the first time they had been appropriated in an academic study.¹⁴

Laurel's SEC reports were produced annually from 1980 to 1988 and each document gave extensive "state-of-the-company" information, typically consisting of an Annual Report to Shareholders (AR) and a Form 10-K. As the SEC's website summarises, the AR usually appears in the form of a letter from the Chief Executive Officer (in this case Richard Rubinstein), outlining financial data, market segment information, a list of acquisitions, subsidiary activities, partnerships (be they with distributors, financiers or creative collaborators), plans for expansion and the development of future projects. The Form 10-K is designed to provide greater transparency through a meticulous cataloguing of the company's financial condition. This includes production financing, details of assets (such as property and subsidiary companies), existing legal proceedings, profiles on executive officers, lists of capital resources and liquidity, comparisons to activities in the previous fiscal year, staff remunerations (including bonus payments, etc.) and stock ownership.

These documents also contain a yearly Financial Statement and an Accountant's Report, permitting scrutiny of balance sheets, revenue from a film's release (not box office information, but rather payments received and/or Laurel's share of the box office), packaging and production costs, lease payments and income tax payments. A Form 8-K meanwhile attaches a number

¹⁴ See "Report from Tom Fallows, BAAS Marcus Cunliffe Award Recipient 2016."

of exhibits, including memorandums, employment agreements (Romero's and Rubinstein's are here in full) and end of contract plans. Laurel's 1984 Form 8-K, for example, is particularly exciting in that it contains Romero's contractual demands as a so-called auteur filmmaker, itemising the creative controls that were available to him. The information held within these previously unexamined records reveals no less than the spine of the company's operations during its key years of activity.

Post-1988, a flurry of merger and acquisitions (M&A) saw Laurel become a subsidiary to a number of larger firms, including Spelling Entertainment, Inc., Blockbuster Entertainment, Viacom and the CBS Corporation. As publicly-owned entities, these firms were also required to submit annual documentation to the SEC. Laurel's progress from here until its closure can be traced through these reports. Not as detailed in the attention given to Laurel, they are no less valuable in illuminating the profound changes to infrastructure and output that occurred during this final period of the company's activities.

In union with these corporate papers, the importance of ethnographical data cannot be overlooked, where observation and interviews offer vital insight into the behaviours and rationales of the firm and its agents. Interviews with Laurel personnel and associates are of benefit in additional ways, helping to interpret and contextualise empirical data and to fill in those gaps in knowledge where no prior data exists. As a consequence, these subjects have been drawn from a diverse sample of personnel, collectively spanning various levels of corporate hierarchy and stages of development, preproduction, production and postproduction across different periods of Laurel's life cycle. All of these participants are speaking for the first time about their specific relationships to the company and all interviews were conducted in collaboration with the

University of Exeter's Ethics Committee.

Of the interview subjects, John A. Russo worked for Laurel's parent company Latent Image and is best known as the co-writer of *Night of the Living Dead*. John Harrison was a significant collaborator from 1974 onward, working for Laurel as an actor, composer, writer and director. Tony Buba is an important independent filmmaker in his own right and was among Laurel's production and post-production crews on *Dawn of the Dead*, *Knightriders* and *Day of the Dead* (Dir. Romero, 1985). Like a number of Laurel collaborators, Tom Dubensky is a skilled multitasker, though he primarily acted as an assistant cameraman when working for the company. Financial advisor Barney Guttman, then of Barney Guttman & Associates, Inc., was the co-head of a consortium of regional investors that financed *Martin*. David Ball is a freelance producer, film accountant and completion guarantor representative who worked on *Creepshow* and *Day of the Dead* as a representative of the financiers. He later worked with Laurel directly as the producer of *Creepshow 2* (Dir. Gornick, 1987). William Teitler remains active as a Hollywood producer, getting his first producing job on Laurel's television series *Tales from the Darkside* (1983-1988). Ed Lammi, meanwhile, recalled his experiences in going from an associate producer on *Day of the Dead* to becoming Executive Vice President of Production for Sony Pictures Television. Mitchell Galin joined Laurel in April 1985 as vice president of production and was a leading figure in taking the company forward, second only to Rubinstein. Finally, and most importantly, George A. Romero was an essential contributor to this thesis and, in an interview conducted in April 2016, provided insight into corporate structure and his personal expectations for the company he co-founded.

This ethnographic data is, of course, not without complications. Mayer et

al. caution that we must be mindful of the self-representations media industry figures make, remembering that “the offscreen production of media is itself a cultural production, mythologized and branded much like the onscreen textual culture that media industries produce” (2). Given the temporal distance of the events discussed, shifting viewpoints, record-setting or lapses in memory must also be considered. Additionally, these subjects are only a representative sample and some leading personnel are notable by their absence. John Mateer has recorded the “closed-door facade of the media industries” (qtd. in Freeman 2), while Freeman notes the industry’s “tendency to often withhold information for commercial advantage” (2). This may have been the case with Rubinstein. To date, he remains active in the industry as founder of the independent production company New Amsterdam Entertainment, Inc. and as president and chief shareholder of the MKR Group, Inc. The principal business of this latter company is to “monetize the value” of a number of Laurel assets (see *Capcom Co., Ltd v. The MKR Group*). Given the continued value of these assets in ancillary markets, it is unsurprising that Rubinstein’s door has remained closed.

To compensate for this absence, additional primary resources, as recommended by Gough-Yates, encompasses textual analysis (with a close inspection of important Laurel productions) and “hard empirical data.” Trade publications such as *Variety*, specialised periodicals, fanzines, the national and regional press (particularly the *New York Times* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) and promotional materials add scope to this investigation. Through these materials, one can find extant interviews with leading personnel (including Rubinstein), industry-focused advertising, box office reports, legal considerations, details on marketplace trends, release patterns and information on funders and external partners, all situating Laurel’s strategies within a

macro-industrial setting.

The interdisciplinary methodology employed here also incorporates significant theoretical concepts from business studies. Laurel was a small business enterprise (in business studies, so-called small and medium-sized enterprises are referred to as SMEs) and parallels between individual firms and internal systems of organisation can be made across industries, with the entertainment industry no exception. For example, Eric Gedajlovic et al.'s findings on the founder-managed firm can tell us much about Laurel's development and corporate identity. Research by Sharon Gifford or Michael Porkorny and John Sedgwick can shed light on risk and entrepreneurial behaviour. Taking into account theories such as David Jobber's articulation of the marketing concept and Ruth Alsop et al.'s ideas of opportunity structures can offer new ways of looking at the independent sector as a whole.¹⁵ With this in mind, it is important to state that this is not an economic study and is not intended to tell businesses how to organise their operations. Instead, this thesis draws upon existing statistical findings from business studies (based on careful samplings and controls) as part of a comprehensive evaluation—one part of a mixed methodology, rather than as a research model in and of itself.

This thesis is only one case study, and while models of business may be utilised across industries and sectors, we cannot assume that Laurel's behaviours were universally applied across production companies in the independent film sector (indeed, part of the value of this study is an emphasis on heterogenous activities). But as economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg

¹⁵ Business theory was not some esoteric concept for Laurel. Richard Rubinstein was himself a business graduate, obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree at the American University in Washington D.C. and an MBA in business administration at Columbia University in 1971. What particular strands of analysis Rubinstein sweated over in the classroom is not known, but it is clear that he left education with a clear-minded and assured sense of how to run a small independent company.

reports, “the advantage of the case study is that it can ‘close-in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice” (114). The interdisciplinary approach of this case study therefore pushes closer to disclosing the everyday behaviours of the firm, taking into account the social interactions, motivations, self-representations and problem-solving that made Laurel Entertainment the company that it was.

Chapters

Chapter One documents the emergence of Laurel’s parent company Latent Image within a wider American film marketplace. Beginning in the late 1950s, just prior to Latent Image’s inception in 1963, this chapter places developing trends in independent cinema under the spotlight, asking how a so-called New York “provincialism” and the manifestos of leading players including John Cassavetes, Jonas Mekas, the New American Cinema Group and the avant-gardists impacted and delimited the sector at large, both geographically and aesthetically. On the west coast, analysis turns to a fragmenting 1960s Hollywood and the changes that led to a reliance on the creative and generational currency of up-and-coming director-auteurs. Aligned to the Hollywood “new wave” in several important ways, Romero instead elected to establish his own production company in Pittsburgh, a space in isolation from recognised centres of industry. The reasons for, and ramifications of, this decision are fundamental to this evaluation.

Shifting to the micro-industrial level, Chapter One presents a comprehensive examination of Latent Image, charting its development from a regional advertising firm into an ambitious, and at that point entirely singular, film production unit. Critical evaluation of Romero’s work has so far overlooked

the company's infrastructure and intent, ignoring the post-Fordist, egalitarian production culture that sat in determined opposition to traditional modes of filmmaking. Taking into account this corporate method for the first time strongly challenges an auteur-centric reading of Romero's early work, particularly *Night of the Living Dead*. Amidst bold experimentation, Latent Image's unique industrial placement tended inevitable obstacles and the company's gradual reliance on exploitation product is considered in the context of a restricted independent marketplace. At the same time, attention to the internal work relations and changing power dynamics uncovers the decision-making that led to the formation of Laurel in 1973. Integrating economic theory such as the marketing concept and leadership management will add nuance to our understanding of the independent and exploitation sectors during this period.

Chapter Two traces Laurel's growth from a subsidiary into a corporate entity in its own right. By inspecting the partnership between Romero and Rubinstein at this formative moment in their alliance, this chapter brings to the fore questions of "real-world" independence and the strategies employed to cultivate this space. Issues of risk, risk management and entrepreneurial behaviour are centralised here, highlighting the link between Rubinstein's knowing offset of risk and Romero's creativity. Paying close attention to Rubinstein's corporate agenda admits a deeper insight into the role of the independent producer/entrepreneur; an awareness of Gary S. Becker's concept of "human capital", meanwhile, appraises Rubinstein's place within the company, gauging the importance of his personal expertise and the canny risk management that was crucial in taking the company forward.

A study of these risk averse strategies draws upon Laurel's manipulation of government policy, gauging the tax loopholes that drove the company into

ancillary markets (television, book publishing and foreign film imports) where product, to a large extent, was designed to fail. Laurel's efforts to manage risk leads to a discussion of corporate identity and branding, looking at the risk-reducing policies behind Romero's reputation as a "cult auteur." Laurel's relationships with overseas agents and distributors can also be equated to risk, becoming an essential part of the company's formative revenue building. In such an arrangement, partnership with an Italian consortium on *Dawn of the Dead* gave away Romero's creative control in international markets. How this contradicts the supposed authorial sanctity of the American independent sector makes for an intriguing appraisal, particularly since this consortium was headed by horror filmmaker Dario Argento, an auteur whose cult reputation eclipsed Romero's in overseas territories.

Chapter Three surveys a period of maturity and professionalisation, dating from 1979 to 1982. Now a publicly traded and owned enterprise, Laurel faced growing responsibilities to shareholders, becoming legally bound to a transparent system of operations. The influence this exerted on production content, internal infrastructure and commercial agenda is reviewed, paying attention to the restrictions placed on Romero's improvisational production methods. Issues of professionalisation have been underexplored in relation to cult and independent filmmaking, appearing to contradict a rhetoric that situates these fields above corporate and regulatory interests. What these standardised systems of governance meant to Laurel as independent/cult film practitioners is measured in connection with this apparent dichotomy.

Chapter Three can be seen, in part, as a remedial to the ideological perceptions that surround cult and independent cinema. Yet Laurel's professionalisation also sat at odds with its own corporate identity. As Laurel

sought permanence, the company brokered ties to the major studios for the first time, potentially contradicting Romero's anti-establishment persona. In view of this, I evaluate the techniques employed by Laurel to reassert (or reconfigure) an identity of dissent, both through engagement with the press and through its feature films. *Knightriders* is presented as an evocative case study, with the firm's changing structures of governance disclosing an entirely new reading of the film, one that conveys Romero's own apprehensions about this period of maturity and his feelings regarding a so-called "spirit of independence."

As professionalisation gave Laurel industrial credibility and money in the bank to develop new projects, Chapter Four considers a concurrent decline in filmic output. Critical to this stage of enquiry is Laurel's footing as a standalone production and development company only, operating without the resources to finance or release product itself. Beginning in 1981, this chapter evaluates how high-profile external partners such as novelist Stephen King and Marvel Comics pushed the company towards more expensive genre fare, from epic post-apocalyptic science fiction to superhero origin stories. Indeed, the company's plans for an eclectic range of feature films brings into focus the packaging and sale of these objects on national and international film festival circuits, asking to what extent Romero's creative agency was dependent on these and other external marketplace parameters. Laurel's three-film production deal with distributor UFDC is also measured, paying close attention to the compromised production of *Day of the Dead* and how this contributed to Romero's departure from the company in 1985.

Issues of agency are brought to the fore in this chapter, pertaining to leadership roles as much as the marketplace. Initially conceived to facilitate Romero as director-auteur, Laurel's growth meant responsibilities beyond its

creative leader, now beholden to shareholders, a board of directors, external partners and a growing staff of employees. If the independent film producer is often arranged as a counterpoint to director artistry, examination of Rubinstein's agency sheds light on the broad range of players who sought to benefit from his fiscal imperatives. Aside from those with business interests in the company, this extended to an assortment of talent, as the Rubinstein-initiated *Tales from the Darkside* television series sought to manufacture a platform for creative development. This chapter draws upon agency theory as a distinct field of economics, making plain Romero and Rubinstein's roles as corporate leaders and questioning how the individualist demands of the auteur sat in accord (or discord) with the responsibilities of a producer partner.

Chapter Five looks at Laurel's regeneration in the wake of Romero's departure, mapping activity from 1985 to the company's abrupt closure in 1994. This chapter opens by assaying the effect of corporate restructuring, noting the significance of pre-syndicated, cult television shows *Tales from the Darkside* and sister show *Monsters* (1988-1991) to sustainability. Laurel's purchase of a number of externally produced filmic properties that had already been exhausted on the theatrical and home video markets (including Jonathan Demme's 1984 *Swing Shift*) is also surveyed. In Romero's absence, Laurel's self-initiated productions appeared to rely heavily on Stephen King as a new creative figurehead, and the firm collaborated with the author on *Creepshow 2*, *Pet Sematary* (Dir. Lambert, 1989) and television shows *Golden Years* (1991) and *The Stand* (Dir. Garris, 1994). While considering the importance of King to the company's survival, this chapter also offers a closer look at corporate officers such as Mitchell Galin, studying the role senior management played in driving creative decision-making post-Romero.

In 1989, Laurel merged with Aaron Spelling Productions and the global television distribution company Worldvision to form Spelling Entertainment, Inc. An appraisal of the consequences of this merger provides the basis for this chapter, looking at what this meant for the company and what it tells us about M&A trends at the macro-industrial level. As one of the many entertainment companies caught up in so-called “merger mania” (Lubatkin, “Mergers” 218), this review of Laurel moves away from the major players to consider this industry-wide realignment from the standpoint of an SME. We will see what merger meant to Laurel, surveying the subtle, if profound ways it transformed the company. Chapter Five concludes by looking at Spelling’s later merger with corporate giant Viacom, Inc., a pairing over which Laurel had no control and that ultimately resulted in the firm’s closure on 23 November 1994.

Conclusion

In a 1979 interview with Chris Auty, Romero registered his determination to remain independent of Hollywood, expressing amazement that anything survives the studio system at all. Yet survival in the independent sector, a survival that traversed four decades of production, was perhaps even more remarkable. Rubinstein’s suggestion that Laurel did little more than provide an auteur filmmaker with “brush, palette and canvas” is in keeping with ideas of artistry and authorship in the independent sector. But, as the company’s above corporate profile implies, “the Laurel story” was far more than that, the division between creativity and business parameters more complex and intertwined than either Romero or Rubinstein (for numerous conflicting and corresponding reasons) cared to admit. A historical review of the company they founded will make a rich contribution to the study of American independent film production,

shedding light on the industrial practices, corporate partnerships, business methods, creative decision-making and opportunity structures that made survival away from Hollywood possible. Within this study, issues concerning auteur filmmaking, cult film and independent cinema are considered and expanded upon, revealing new ways of thinking about media entities on the margins of both the industry at large and current frames of analysis.

1

“Between Genre and Art”: Industries of Independence, 1963-1973

Named for the official state flower of Pennsylvania,¹⁶ the Laurel media entity began active production in 1973, initiated following a tumultuous period that left co-founder George A. Romero on the verge of bankruptcy. In partnership with Richard P. Rubinstein, Laurel operated under a number of guises, beginning as Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania, rebranding as Laurel Tape & Film, transfiguring into the Laurel Group and settling as Laurel Entertainment, Inc. on 14 December 1979. With a corporate mandate to package and produce “motion pictures primarily for distribution to the theatrical, television and videodisc and video cassette markets” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1984 2*), Rubinstein’s business knowhow provided the capital, creative control and regional autonomy Romero long desired. Prior to this, Romero’s isolated industrial position was precarious. Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania began as a subsidiary of his company the Latent Image, Inc. and, though the parent enjoyed commercial success with its horror feature *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero’s growing determination to produce personal, idiosyncratic work met with underlying

¹⁶ To be precise, the Mountain-laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), a wildflower native to the eastern United States that neatly symbolises the company’s regional specificity and its intent to flourish without external cultivation.

restrictions within the independent sector.

This chapter contextualises Laurel's formation within a transient American film industry,¹⁷ beginning just prior to Latent Image's formation in 1963. By scrutinising what Tzioumakis calls a "prehistory" of independent cinema (*Hollywood's Indies* 6), Laurel's own prehistory is revealed, shedding light on its parent's attempts to cultivate space for off-Hollywood product. At the macro-industrial level, I consider a restricted marketplace, detailing the evolving production, distribution and exhibition parameters of Hollywood, the New York independent/avant-garde and exploitation. Latent Image's complex relationship with these sectors aligns with issues of economic practice, business orientation and the marketing concept. At the micro-industrial level, Latent Image's corporate infrastructure is analysed in detail, particularly its attempts to pioneer a product orientated, democratically organised work method in radical departure from institutional norms. Looking at the firm's ambitions to reconcile independence and industrial permanence, I evaluate the broader limitations that eventually resulted in corporate restructuring.

1.1. Early Alternatives: "Manhattan Provincialism" and Small Screen Innovation

In the late 1950s, George Romero took a traditional first step into film production, working an entry-level position on the second unit of Hollywood pictures *It Happened to Jane* (Dir. Quine) and Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, both released in 1959. That same year saw the completion of John Cassavetes's *Shadows*, often cited as a pivotal moment in the history of American independent cinema (Fine 81). For critic and filmmaker Peter

¹⁷ Justin Wyatt wisely notes that "independent cinema is always in transition" ("Donald Rugoff" 16).

Bogdanovich, “*Shadows* was the first post-Golden-age-of-Hollywood independant [sic] film and it turned its back on all the glossy and bankrupt big movie rules and called for a new honesty, a final abandonment of the American studio formula” (qtd. in Kouvaros 4). Self-financed and shot on location in New York with a cast of non-professionals, Cassavetes affirmed “the very powerful and romantic ideology of the lone and uncompromising filmmaker who works with a dedicated circle of friends and who goes to great lengths to see his distinct vision on the screen” (Tzioumakis, *American* 174).

This notion of an uncompromising filmmaker with a “distinct vision” was the stuff of heady discussion among cineastes and film magazines of the day. In 1948, Alexandre Astruc advocated cinema as a “means of expression, just as all other arts before it, and in particular painting and the novel . . . the filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen” (17, 22). If cinema were to be a legitimate art form, it seemed to demand a legitimate artist at its centre. Expanding on this notion of “la caméra-stylo,” *Cahiers du cinema* writer François Truffaut situated filmmakers Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau and Max Ophuls as more than mere directors, they were “men of the cinema”—*auteurs* (16). Named *la politique des auteurs* by Andre Bazin (in a 1957 *Cahiers* article that actually voiced his misgivings), US critic Andrew Sarris later added three primary qualifiers: 1) technical competence; 2) the distinguishable personality of the director; and 3) interior meaning, the latter signifying nothing less than the “élan of the [director’s] soul” (“Notes” 7).

Sarris’s “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” was published in *Film Culture* magazine and placed “commercial” directors like Hitchcock alongside and equal to so-called “pure” directors like Bresson—with “pure” indicating

filmmakers deemed to make art for art's sake (5). Other commentators were less generous. In the previous year, *Film Culture* founders Jonas and Adolfas Mekas used the pages of their magazine to print "The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group," distancing industrial and marketplace considerations from the authentic creative process, writing, "we believe that cinema is indivisibly a personal expression. We therefore reject the interference of producers, distributors and investors until our work is ready to be projected on the screen" (131).

The New American Cinema Group was inspired by Shirley Clarke's 1958 cooperative Filmmakers Inc. and sought to establish an autocratic space for American Art Cinema from its New York base. While Clarke's Filmmakers Inc. was largely about providing resources (Rabinovitz 110), the Cinema Group was ideologically motivated and auteur-centric. Indicatively, on seeing Cassavetes's *Shadows*, Mekas praised the film for catching "the tones and rhythms of a new America" (qtd. in Macadams 228), awarding it *Film Culture*'s first Annual Independent Film Award. But when Cassavetes channelled additional funds into an extensive reshoot and re-edit to provide a clearer sense of narrative progression, Mekas deemed this second version a betrayal of the independent spirit, no more than "a bad commercial film, with everything that I was praising completely destroyed" (Mekas and Hoberman 241).¹⁸

Cassavetes's traditionalist inclinations distanced him from his independent peers, a disunion augmented when he directed his second feature *Too Late Blues* (1961) for Paramount Pictures. If his directorial dalliances in Hollywood proved short-lived, as an actor his star-status remained profitable

¹⁸ For a detailed exploration of *Shadows* and the film's production background and iterations, the work of Cassavetes biographer Ray Carney provides a rich entry point, see *American Dreaming*, pp. 20-62, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, pp. 48-101 and Carney's BFI release *Shadows*.

and appearances in studio genre films like *Rosemary's Baby* provided a revenue that could be filtered back into independent production. Cassavetes may have set the tone for an independent film aesthetic, but his method of financing was untenable, offering no viable framework for independent filmmakers emerging from without, rather than within, an established system.

Unable to generate substantial monies themselves, the Cinema Group continued to pursue alternatives to the “artistic threat” of mainstream producers and distributors. On 8 January 1962, the Group announced the Film-Maker's Cooperative, a loose network that collated films for rental from a single distribution point.¹⁹ The Cooperative sought “a reformist industrial practice based on the European New Waves . . . a middle ground where thematic seriousness and aesthetic integrity would meet popular accessibility” (James 102, 104). Though initially successful,²⁰ Mekas felt an increasing need to champion the avant-garde after the movement was overlooked at the first New York Film Festival in September 1963. Mekas labelled the Festival “an Enemy of the New Cinema” (qtd. in Decherney 181) and from that point forward pushed the Cooperative towards a more exclusive roster.

If this was prohibitive to independent cinema outside the avant-garde, then so too was an inability to see past New York, or more accurately Manhattan, as a site of activity. David Curtis observes the importance of this space to the New American Cinema Group, seeing a “loosely defined trade association of low-budget feature filmmakers, whose membership was based on personal association” (262). Manhattan's Greenwich Village, a “historic

¹⁹ Under this remit, the Cooperative considered all films equal and, partly in response to Amos and Marcia Vogel's refusal to show Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) at their Cinema 16 film society, Mekas proclaimed that “no film will be rejected from it” (qtd. in Curtis 256).

²⁰ Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966) mixed avant-garde technique, Warhol's sellable name and salacious appeal to become an early success for the Film-Maker's Cooperative, grossing \$300,000 in its first six-months of release.

mecca for bohemians” (Banes 5), was central to this network and the large demographic of educated young people attending Columbia University and NYU also helped sustain a localised avant-garde scene. Despite the presence of other regional cooperatives and film societies in the United States (notably Bruce Ballie’s Canyon Cinema in San Francisco), discourse during this period often treated “New York” as an interchangeable word for “independent”.²¹ In the 1960s, the face of independent cinema was therefore one of provincialism.

The importance of Jonas Mekas et al. to American art film cannot be overlooked, providing sanctuary to a number of important filmmakers during this period, including Warhol, Kenneth Anger and Robert Frank. For all that, their limited resources could not support this movement beyond the avant-garde (Sitney, “New American” 71-72) and numerous filmmakers had to look elsewhere for points of entry into production. Ideas of what independent cinema should be (or should not be) also narrowed, with definitions based on the personal value judgements of these self-appointed guardians of the sector. In turn, such definitions were far from universally agreed upon, often subject to infighting and internal debate (MacDonald 53-54). The exclusivity of these ideologies was matched only by the exclusivity of space, confining production, to a large extent, to established bicoastal centres. In spite of his own New York upbringing, Romero regarded this space as closed off. “I never knew Manhattan; I was a Bronx kid,” he once explained. “I fled before I even knew what New York was about” (Vallan).

What Romero did know about Manhattan was determined by a Bronx gang culture that regarded the borough, in his own words, as “enemy territory” (Vallan). When he did venture southward, his visits were touristic; “I had one

²¹ For an example of this interchangeability, see New American Cinema Group, “Film Unions and the Low-Budget Independent Film Production - An Exploratory Discussion” (134).

aunt and uncle who had a little bit of dough and they would show me Manhattan and take me to shows,” he told interviewer Raymundo Monell. “I think that’s the only way I got a little more cultured.” For Romero, Manhattan was urbane yet other, associated with prosperity, culture and opposition. The bourgeois world shown to him by affluent relatives was far removed from his day-to-day upbringing as the only child of a first-generation Cuban father and a second-generation Lithuanian mother. Romero’s parents emphasised the importance of education and job security, pushing him towards university at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute of Technology (later renamed Carnegie Mellon University). Intriguingly, Romero’s father earned a modest income as a commercial artist and this balance between business-related pragmatism and artistic imperatives would be a source of tension and consolidation in Romero’s career to follow.²²

It was while a student that Romero undertook his Hollywood internship, a process he found wholly disillusioning. As second unit assistant on *North by Northwest*, he recalled never seeing director Hitchcock on set, instead finding a “mechanical” structure of separately operating divisions incongruous with perceptions of an artist-driven medium (Kane 26; Romero, “In Conversation”). Such organisation was common in the late-1950s and A-pictures typically operated under a process of decentralised manufacturing inspired by the automotive industry. Douglas Gomery explains that “the process of actual film production was divided into specialized units. From finding appropriate stories to writing scripts to actual shooting to cutting, workers handled only their own

²² There is no way accurately to measure the influence this had over Romero’s future as an independent filmmaker, though the implications are compelling. Romero was intent enough on emulating his father to train as a commercial artist at university, before dropping out without earning a degree. Gange paints a colourful picture of Romero’s formative years, torn between artistic irreverence (at age 14 he was arrested for throwing a burning mannequin from a rooftop while making an 8mm short film) and a more conservative upbringing. Given Romero’s perceived waywardness, his family sent him to Suffield Academy preparatory school, which in turn led to acceptance at Carnegie Tech (*Zombies* 9-15). These tensions between an artisanal life and stabilising infrastructures seem to have been ever present and unresolved.

tasks. Unionization solidified specific jurisdictions” (“Hollywood” 119). In their original manifesto, the New American Cinema Group raged against the barriers imposed by unionisation, arguing that the restrictions put on non-union members had made Hollywood a “closed shop” (“Film Unions” 137). Romero concurred, feeling that you had to be “born royalty” to progress (Vallan). The mainstream industry was something elitist (overseen by absent kings no less) and his distaste for this infrastructure strongly influenced the organisation of his own company four years later.

Romero’s re-entry into the industry began after abandoning both Hollywood and academia, identifying avenues of progression within Pittsburgh’s emergent television sector. Television’s post-war dispersion through North America was rapid, with 108 television stations in operation by 1952 and over fifty million households with a television set by the mid-1960s (Boddy 51; Rielly 39). Regional centres for television production soon developed and Pittsburgh established its first station WDTV on 11 January 1949. As a bicycle courier for Pittsburgh’s WRS Motion Picture Laboratory, Romero witnessed first-hand 16mm news footage being processed, synchronised, mixed and edited, later remembering how he would sit in “dusty old film labs . . . with the editors, editing newsreels with real glue, smoking cigarettes all the while and gluing the footage together to try and get a coherent news story out of it” (Romero, “In Conversation”). This tactile, hands-on environment (or at least Romero’s perception of it as such) suggested filmmaking as something tangible and, in a working-class milieu, achievable—sitting fiercely at odds with his views on Hollywood and New York at the time.

Romero made additional in-roads after purchasing a 16mm camera with a \$5000 loan from his uncle. On 6 September 1962, the *Pittsburgh Post-*

Gazette reported that “camera crew director” George Romero was supervising a series of films on “how to entertain youngsters in Pittsburgh” for WQWD-TV (“Newest Fun” 37). On 20 December 1963, Romero procured investment from local Roller Palace owner Vincent D. Survinski to initiate Latent Image, a regional advertising firm specialising in industrial and commercial product. Romero was the nominal president and was joined by Lawrence J. Anderson and Russell W. Streiner, serving as vice president and secretary-treasurer respectively. Each was a major shareholder in company stock. According to journalist Mike May, 1960s Pittsburgh was “a nexus for advertising agencies,” thanks largely to its thriving steel industry and status as the nation’s third largest corporate headquarters. For Banks et al., this type of environment is crucial to the success of such small business enterprises, where cultural businesses thrive “in the milieus, networks, clusters, embedded knowledge and informal infrastructures of the city” (454).

In these formative days of television, “in-product advertising,” where a show’s host promoted the product during a live broadcast, was the industry norm. Yet a 1955 issue of trade magazine *Billboard* observed discernible advantages to pre-recorded ads shot on film, listing the benefits of “open-end” syndication (where a filmed product could be resold across a multitude of networks) and the “attention-getting eye appeal” of edited film footage (Plotnik 19). Within a year of incorporation, Latent Image presented itself as a specialist in this field, able to take clients “from initial idea through to the finished product, in color, black and white, sound and what have you” (Allan, “Pittsburgh on Location” 16). The firm gained a reputation for doing “high-quality work on a small budget” (Forget 14) and won awards for its pre-recorded, highly stylised advertisements (Fanning, “Nixon” 51).

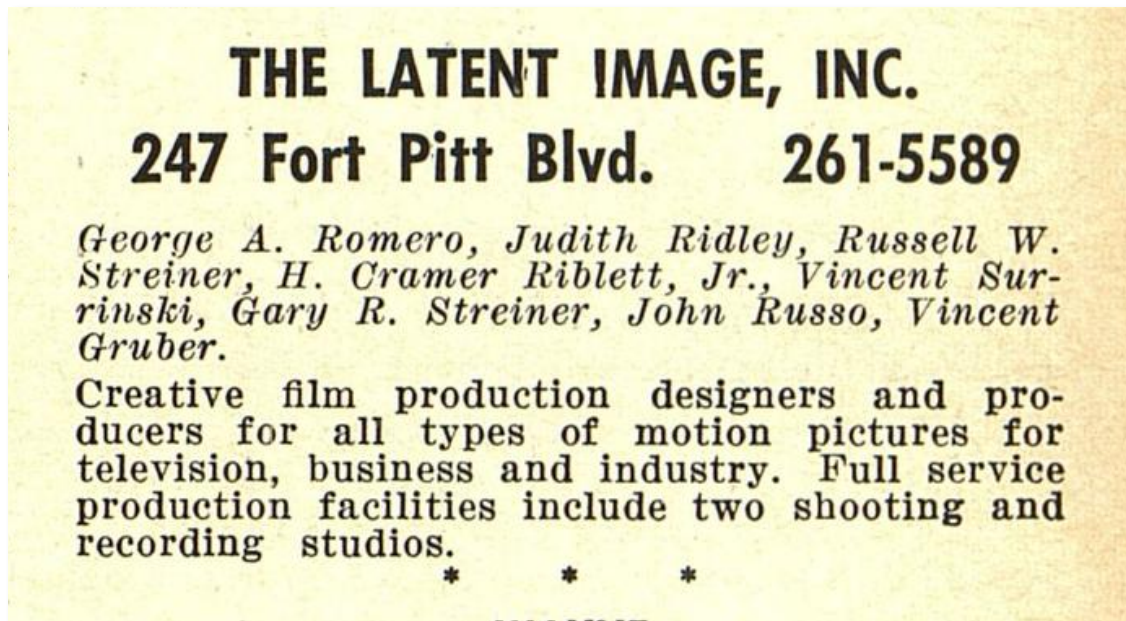


Fig. 1.1. Latent Image Advertisement. "TV/Industrial Film and Tape Directory." *Back Stage*, 1 Dec. 1967, p. 105.

In April 1965, Southwest Pennsylvania credit corporation the Regional Industrial Development Company (RIDC) noted Latent Image's viability and advanced \$40,000 for a studio and new equipment, housed at 247 Fort Pitt Blvd in Downtown Pittsburgh. RIDC president Robert H. Ryan hoped the loan would stimulate the local growth of a fast-developing advertising industry (Allan, "Film Firm" 9) and the investment allowed Latent Image to court higher profile clientele, including H.J. Heinz, Calgon, US Steel and larger advertising firms looking to avoid the high cost of outsourcing to New York, such as Lando, Inc. (Fanning, "A Word" 31). These commissions were reinvested into the company and by 1973 Latent Image boasted three 16mm cameras, a 35mm camera, a Super-8 camera, two Nagra operated sound recorders, 1/4inch record facilities and their own film editing bays (Rubinstein, "Update" 23). As the firm moved into feature films, these "full service production facilities" (fig. 1.1) allowed it to bypass heavy rental fees and union contractors.

Aside from providing fertile ground for industrial growth, the advertising sector had a demonstrable impact on form. Jeremy G. Butler proposes that “stylistic excesses and violations are used by commercials to snap viewers out of their dreamlike connection with television narrative, to shock them out of their television lethargy and make them sit up and take notice of the advertised products” (117). Commercials such as Latent Image’s 1967 *The Calgon Story* (which parodied Richard Fleischer’s 1966 sci-fi film *The Fantastic Voyage*) showcased rapid cuts, harsh edits, whip-pans and crash zooms, all slashed together with an absence of master shots. Romero subsequently transferred this self-labelled “cubist” editing style to the big screen (Block, “Filming” 22),²³ evident in the aggressive close shots of ghouls devouring human flesh in *Night of the Living Dead* and the brutalist editing of military invasiveness in *The Crazies* (Dir. Romero, 1973).²⁴ Here, these films assert impact—impact as part of product differentiation and political engagement.

That this compositional audacity emerged through specific industrial strictures demonstrates a pragmatism in contrast to the ideology of the New American Cinema Group. This said, like Mekas et al., Romero was looking for alternatives to Hollywood, particularly in terms of the decentralised process he identified during his brief internships. Latent Image therefore adopted a post-Fordist infrastructure that accentuated a “new ‘flexibility’ in labour practices and relations” (N. Heffernan 4). For many, post-Fordism, or flexible specialisation, is, in its ideal (or perhaps that should be idealised) form, the solution to the rigid industrial practices of mass or decentralised production, doing away with the

²³ In the 1960s, a number of directors getting their start in small screen production moved into feature film, including Robert Altman, Arthur Penn, Sam Peckinpah and Sidney Lumet. These filmmakers, each in their own way, were part of the changing face of Hollywood production during this period.

²⁴ According to Stew Fyfe, *The Crazies* has an average shot length of around 2.8 seconds. In Hollywood during this period, the average shot length was between six and eight seconds (Bordwell 17).

assembly line “to increase the skill levels and flexibility of the workforce, to provide team work structures, and to seek out specialized niche markets for high quality, high value products and services” (Grint 301).

At Latent Image, staff members (often friends from university such as John A. Russo, or family members such as Russ Streiner’s brother Gary) operated without formalised job classifications, becoming part of a small, hands-on unit skilled in a number of production roles, including direction. Barker and Jane advocate that the purpose of flexible specialisation is to eliminate rigid job demarcation lines and to “create a more horizontal labour organization with an emphasis on worker co-responsibility” (168). Latent Image was to be a “multi-trained, non-hierarchical workforce” (B. Russell 108), reliant on a fluidity that maximised creative freedom and profit potential (Block, “Filming” 23). Romero’s role as company leader was to facilitate knowledge sharing, passing on the technical expertise he had acquired from his informal apprenticeship at WRS. This coordination of skill-levels is evidence of the company’s democratic leadership style, a technique that empowered individuals at all stages and facilitated participatory decision-making (Gastil 953). Such democratic leadership is often associated with fresh ideas and product originality (Goleman 85; Gibb 259).

In the context of industrial films and advertisements this method made sound business sense. As John Russo recalls, Latent Image’s burgeoning roster of clientele and overlapping assignments made having a skilled, independently minded workforce essential (*Complete* 26-27). More surprisingly, as the company began to transition into feature films, this democratised infrastructure remained in place and Romero initially handed directorial control of *Night of the Living Dead* to collaborator Karl Hardman, and then to Russo

(*Complete* 44). Speaking in 1984, Romero stated that his intent was to create a “communal sense of collaboration with creative contributions from all involved” (Gange, *Zombies* 40). Hardman remembers the production as “a democratic group effort” (*Reflections on the Living Dead*) with on-set decisions agreed to through compromise and discussion. Colleague (and onscreen ghoul) Richard Ricci adds that the film was “not [done] the way it was normally done with a strong central authority” (*Affair of the Heart*).²⁵

In his auteurist analysis of Romero, Tony Williams situates *Night of the Living Dead* and its follow-up *There’s Always Vanilla* as products of a singular vision. For Williams, *Night* anticipates counterculture themes that would predominate in Romero’s later work, notably in the film’s attacks on government, the military and the media (*Cinema* 29). *Vanilla* meanwhile is said to contain “several relevant autobiographical elements based upon the director’s experience of filming television commercials” (*Cinema* 33). This may be true, but these films can be more fully understood by considering their collaborative production method, the result of an experimental corporate infrastructure that stressed flexibility of labour and shared decision-making. Thematically, issues tackled by *Night* can also be seen in later work by co-writer John Russo, particularly his 1982 independent horror film *Midnight* that explores the dysfunctional families, domestic abuse, racism and violence at the heart of rural America. Further, the “autobiographical elements” Williams highlights in *Vanilla* belong to the group, not the individual. Streiner and Russo in fact

²⁵ The democratic atmosphere was in-keeping with then popular ideas of communalism, made famous in the mid-1960s by so-called “hippy” communes such as Drop City, Tolstoy Farm and Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters (Miller 74-75). According to Timothy Miller, these communities were often “devoted to radical politics, anarchism, sexual freedom, the sharing of labour, creation of arts and crafts, land development, ethnicity, and a dazzling array of visions of assorted seers and cranks” (75). The Latent Image colleagues shared at least some of these values, most evident in the revolutionary politics of their first feature film *Night of the Living Dead*.

appear onscreen as themselves, seen performing their “day jobs” of directing and producing regional television commercials.

Given that Romero was a key creative member of this collective, it is not surprising that recurrent themes should appear in his later work. In spite of his directorial credit, however, Romero was not the traditional creative authority and did not have final say over content. Romero was the most hands-on technically, typically handling the camera during production (though not always) and almost entirely responsible for the physical task of editing, allowing easier comparisons to be made when looking at the “cubist” montage style of *Night* and later Romero productions. This said, as far as Latent Image’s first feature film is concerned, Streiner recalls that, after a rough cut was assembled, the core creative team gathered to discuss all decisions regarding “what should go and what should stay. In that regard it was committee edited” (Surmacz 24). Latent Image’s initial production method should not be overlooked in the headlong rush to valorise Romero as auteur, especially when what is revealed instead is a deviation from the rigidity of Hollywood practices and the presentation of radical alternatives to traditional production processes.²⁶

Pauline Kael’s 1963 rebuttal of the auteur theory situates film as a collaborative medium, arguing that the role of director is inextricable from “the roles of the front office, the producers, writers, editors, and all the rest of them” (23). Her ire fell especially on Mekas and his independent filmmakers, “already convinced about their importance as the creative figures—the *auteurs*” (24). In the late 1960s, Jean-Luc Godard, a former *Cahiers* writer and pivotal nouvelle vague auteur, grew equally sceptical about notions of creative autocracy,

²⁶ Gary Anthony Surmacz’s article “Anatomy of a Horror Film” in 1975 was an early attempt by Latent Image colleagues Russ Streiner, John Russo and Karl Hardman to restate the collaborative infrastructure behind *Night of the Living Dead*.

initiating the Dziga Vertov Group to explore collective planning. In collaboration with other filmmakers (and numerous militant groups), the production of films such as 1972's *Tout va bien* co-directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin fostered a Marxist agenda, the very infrastructure a challenge to capitalist society's "glorification of the individual" (MacBean 32). As Anthony Chase puts it, Godard drew "a distinction between making political films and making films politically; in the view of a militant director like Godard, genuinely radical films could only be made through a process that broke sharply with conventional film production practices" (142).

Over in Manhattan, Andy Warhol also minimised authorial intervention, refusing to direct actors or, as with *Blow Job* and *Eat* (both 1963), using just one extended shot to eliminate editorial choices (Grudin 128). Unlike Godard, Warhol insisted that he was simply making an asset of limited finances, telling Joseph Gelmis that if you can make films "look better bad, at least they have a look to them. But as soon as you try to make a better movie look good without money, you just can't do it" (69). Latent Image was similarly impoverished, yet strove for a professional veneer that would be sellable on the open market. Flexible specialisation kept costs down, with principal crewmembers performing multiple tasks in front of and behind the camera; Romero for example served as co-writer, editor, actor and director. Figure 1.2 shows a complete budget for *Night of the Living Dead*, divided into four subsections that formally demarcate production roles.

In practice, these roles were loosely adhered to (indeed, no casting director, location manager or production designer are listed in the film's onscreen title sequence, and photography is collectively attributed to "The Latent Image, Inc."). Responsibilities were instead passed between colleagues

as and when required in a collaborative workspace (Surmacz 16).

"Night of the Living Dead" "Night of Anubis" Budget Breakdown	
The Image Ten, Inc. 247 Fort Pitt Blvd. Pittsburgh, PA. 15222	
1. Pre-Production	
a. Casting	
b. Story	
c. Screenplay (scripting)	
d. Location Search	
e. Make-up Testing	
f. Talent Contracts	
g. Production Design	
h. Legal Fees	
	TOTAL: \$14,000.00
2. Actors Fees	
a. Extras	
b. Principles	
	TOTAL: \$20,000.00
3. Production:	
a. Location Fees	
b. Sets	
c. Set Furnishings	
d. Equipment Rentals	
e. Crew	
f. Film Stock	
g. Music	
h. Editing	
i. Sound Effects	
j. Lab Work and Finishing	
k. Titles and Special Effects	
	TOTAL: \$60,000.00
4. Artwork and Advertising:	
a. Pre-sales Exploitation	
b. Miscellaneous Artwork and Ad Layouts	
	TOTAL: \$20,000.00
	BUDGET TOTAL: \$114,000.00
Prepared for Image Ten, Inc. by Russell W. Streiner - Vice President Vincent D. Survinski - Treasurer	

Fig. 1.2. *Night of the Living Dead* budget breakdown. "Stills Photo Gallery." *Night of the Living Dead*. Elite Entertainment, 2002.

In 2010, Baltimore-based filmmaker Matthew Porterfield also referred to his film *Putty Hill* as an egalitarian production, and, like Warhol, embraced budgetary limitations as a deliberate aesthetic. Underlining flexibility, Porterfield rejected “the division of labor and totalitarian authorship characteristic of most film productions, even those made on the smallest scale, still beholden to a model developed off the Pacific coast and commodified in the dead shadows of Manhattan” (Hope). If Porterfield felt this represented a “fresh approach to American regional cinema” (Hope), it had the virtue of already being tested in 1960s Pittsburgh.

Latent Image was inspired by a practical method that had reaped dividends in the advertising sector. In the crossover to film production, the firm utilised a post-Fordist infrastructure to stretch resources as far as possible, saving monies across all areas of production to create a professional and competitive product. Romero and his Latent Image colleagues firmly believed in the artistic potential of democratised filmmaking, putting it to the test on their first feature film. As such, previous readings of *Night of the Living Dead* as the work of a singular auteur are, at the very least, a gross reduction, ignoring the innovative creative process behind its construction. In an understated, workaday manner, Latent Image pushed a creative radicalism that, as with Godard, “broke sharply with conventional film production practices” (Chase 142), even surpassing the auteur-focused Manhattan independents. By subduing the director-leader, Latent Image championed an egalitarian film art unheard of in bicoastal centres. This was both far from Hollywood and the auteurist construct that its Laurel subsidiary would become.

1.2. Independence with Overheads: Post-Fordism and Pragmatic

Radicalism

The radicalism demonstrated in Latent Image's corporate infrastructure was offset by a pragmatic evaluation of the marketplace. This "pragmatic radicalism" was evident in *Night of the Living Dead*, the firm choosing a film in a sellable genre that nevertheless went far beyond permissible boundaries of screen violence. Production was instigated by a limited partnership of ten individuals, comprising Latent Image employees and peers from the advertising sector, including Marilyn Eastman and Karl Hardman from Hardman Associates and attorney David Clipper. The collective was incorporated as Image Ten shortly after and legally separated from Latent Image to protect the parent from financial liabilities. Additional investors from the partner's commercial clientele brought the budget up to \$114,000. These external backers reinforced an obligation to create a product that, at the very least, had the marketplace potential to return investments.

The advertising sector may have afforded a platform for regional production, but acquiring theatrical distribution was more problematic. Tzioumakis observes that in the late 1960s, avenues for distribution were largely limited to the major studios (*American 181*), with exploitation cinema a notable exception. By 1968, exploitation had become associated with "spectacles of sex or violence in quickly, and cheaply made feature length narratives publicly exhibited in legitimate, but often not very respectable movie houses" (L. Williams, *Hard Core* 96).²⁷ Exploitation was frequently defined by an oppositional bravura that promised "something unavailable elsewhere" (J. Ross

²⁷ Dating back to early cinema, exploitation was originally defined by "advertising or promotional techniques that went over or above typical posters, trailers, and newspaper ads" (Schaefer 4). These films relied heavily on ballyhoo and marketing acumen and usually focused on taboo subject matter, such as sex hygiene, unwanted pregnancy and drug abuse.

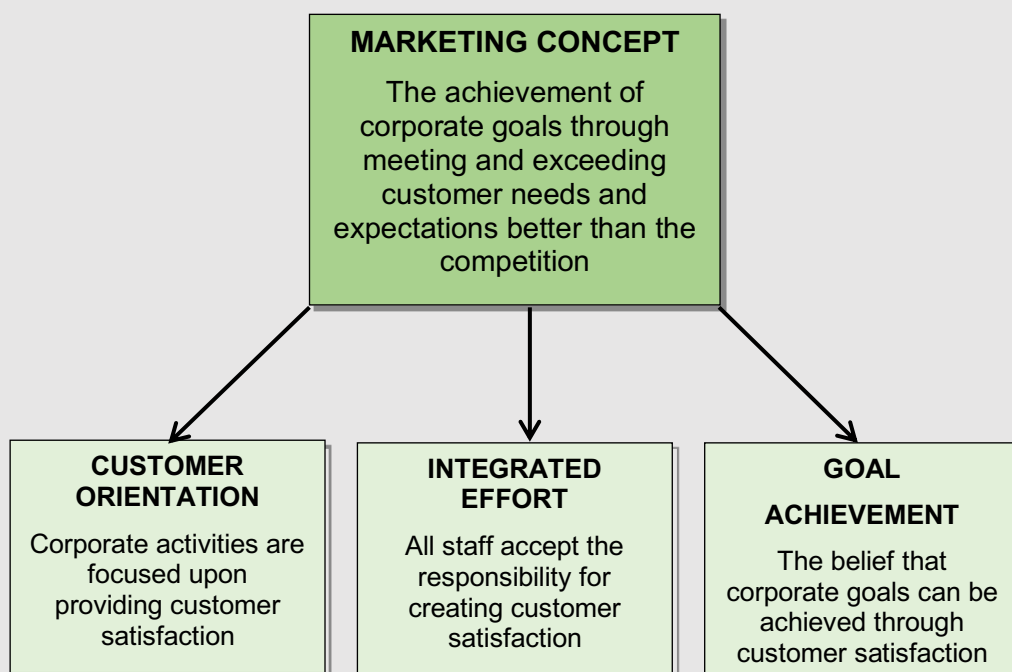
63) and included transgressive cult product such as sexploitation, films about drug use, gang or biker films, Blaxploitation actioners, atomic monster movies and horror.

Part of exploitation cinema's growth came as a result of changing audience demographics. An MPAA survey in March 1968 indicated that sixteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds now made up 48% of box office admissions (qtd. in Bodroghkozy 55). Thomas Doherty records that exploitation companies had been catering to this audience from as early as 1955, narrowing focus to "attract the one group with the requisite income, leisure, and gregariousness to sustain a theatrical business" (2). While, as Doherty suggests, the studios were at the forefront of this shift—MGM's *Blackboard Jungle* (Dir. Brooks, 1955) displaying teen appeal with a rock 'n' roll soundtrack and themes of juvenile rebellion (75-76)—the majors proved slow in abandoning a traditional (and monolithic) family audience. American International Pictures (AIP) co-founder Samuel Z. Arkoff held no such trepidation. "We saw the rebellion coming," he boasted. "But we couldn't predict the extent of it, so we made a rule: no parents, no church or authorities in our films" (qtd. in Seate 23).

In economics, the production of goods to meet the consumer's needs is known as the marketing philosophy, or the marketing concept. Here, "customer orientation is the logical basis for profit planning" (Kotler 11) and rather than find the right customer for the product, it is deemed most beneficial to find the right product for the customer (Kotler et al. 17). The marketing concept asks, "what does the customer want and how can I give it to them?" In Table 1.1, David Jobber illustrates the key elements of the marketing concept, pronouncing customer satisfaction as the backbone to all corporate goals and efforts. To better meet consumer needs, Stanton et al. have explored the difference

between market segmentation and market aggregation. In the former, the total heterogeneous market is divided up into several homogenous segments, while in the latter, it is the goal to attack the mass market and reach as many customers as possible (82). As Hollywood fixated on an aggregated marketplace, AIP espoused a single-segment concentration strategy, directing all of their resources towards a homogenous group of consumers.²⁸

Table 1.1
Key Elements of the Marketing Concept



Source: David Jobber. *Principles and Practice of Marketing*. 6th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2010, p.4.

A strategic movement towards a segmented youth audience was aided by industry wide changes in content regulation. Until 1953, all films produced by

²⁸ Given the use of genre, star and product differentiation, there is an argument that the studios engaged in a softer form of market segmentation, aiming diverse product to a variety of consumer segments. This said, under the PCA, product was at least theoretically open to all and the mass market remained the ideal. In the late 1960s, the implementation of the CARA ratings system saw a stronger focus on segmentation.

the major studios adhered to the Motion Picture Production Code (PCA), a one-size-fits-all censorship mandate founded by Hollywood trade association the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to cater to a unified family audience. In 1953, Otto Preminger's *The Moon is Blue* was successfully released without the Code's Seal of Approval, suggesting, in the words of Peter Lev, that "the Production Code, written in 1929, was no longer a good fit with audience expectations. The PCA responded by being more flexible" (90). Additional abstainers and adjustments followed, permitting exploitation companies greater liberty to produce sensationalist, teen-focused material. The growth of exploitation cinema was well-met by congruent exhibition spaces, including the grindhouses on 42nd Street in Manhattan and the suburban drive-ins that readily took advantage of a trending teenage automobile culture (Medovoi 136).

In 1965, *LIFE* magazine reported that AIP flourished in this environment, its "first 150 releases—none of which cost as much as a million dollars to make and only its later efforts as much as half a million—have brought in a total of \$225 million" (A. Levy 81). Predictably, "the success of AIP influenced other independent producers, providing an example that nearly everyone was willing to follow" (Clark 41). This included Jack H. Harris Enterprises, Cambist Films and Continental Releasing. With the market expanding, horror was a natural choice for Latent Image's move into features. Russell Streiner recalls that with no distribution agreement in place prior to production, "we had to do the kind of picture that we were almost assured of being able to sell" (Surmacz 15). The resulting film *Night of the Living Dead* revelled in scenes of bodily carnage, including decaying flesh, immolation, cannibalism and parricide. An aghast review in *Variety* on 15 October 1968 bewailed:

Until the Supreme Court establishes clear-cut guidelines for the pornography of violence, *Night of the Living Dead* will serve quite nicely as an outer-limit definition by example. In a mere 90-minutes, this horror film (pun intended) casts serious aspersions on the integrity and social responsibility of its Pittsburgh-based makers, distrib Walter Reade, the film industry as a whole, and exhibs who book the pic, as well as raising doubts about the future of the regional cinema movement and about the moral health of filmgoers who cheerfully opt for this unrelieved orgy of sadism. (qtd. in Hervey 16)

As Image Ten eyed a consumable market, the film's nihilism alienated a number of distributors. AIP were apparently squeamish about the downbeat conclusion (Hervey 14), which sees protagonist Ben (Duane Jones) mistaken for one of the undead and gunned down by a redneck posse. Image Ten resisted requests for a happy ending and instead partnered with Continental Releasing, whose parent company Walter Reade was best known for importing high-profile international films such as the UK's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Dir. Reisz, 1961). In 1964, Walter Reade reported annual losses of around \$491,000 (K. Heffernan, "Inner-City" 64), attributed by *Variety* to "disastrous results from artie releases" ("Nice" 7).

Continental looked to offset this decline with a roster of more commercial features and *Night of the Living Dead* neatly fit the bill. The film was sold as an exploitation feature to the inner-cities and drive-ins and advertising played up the violent content, with posters declaring "They keep coming back in a bloodthirsty lust for HUMAN FLESH!" In a gimmick lifted directly from

exploitation producer William Castle's *Macabre* (1958), Continental even issued a joke \$50,000 life insurance policy to anyone who the film "frightened to death." Such techniques contributed to a global box office of around \$30 million (Grant 65).²⁹

Perhaps more provocative than the violence was the apparent political radicalism that lay behind it. Much has been made of the casting of African American actor Duane Jones in the lead, still a rarity in American cinema. Though the Image Ten crew maintain that Jones was simply "the best person for the part" (Russo, *Complete* 75), theorist Adam Lowenstein upholds that the political ramifications of this decision were unavoidable, particularly in Ben's climatic murder by the posse, stating, "you can't not think of lynchings . . . you cannot not think of the kind of freedom marches in the South. You can't not think about the civil rights struggle" (qtd. in Contreras). *Night of the Living Dead's* ghouls meanwhile have remained an open metaphor, representing everything from Nixon's "silent majority to the endless corpses returning home from Vietnam" (Gange, *Zombies* 38). Indeed, Romero's status as a revolutionary sociopolitical commentator galvanised around his *Dead* series. As Romero himself put it, these films illustrate "a new society replacing the old and devouring it—in this case, literally" (Biodrowski). Contrarily, critic Steve Beard is sardonic in regard to this radicalism, writing:

[Romero] started out making commercials for US Steel, Alcoa, Heinz and Duke Beer, outfits similar to those whose mass-produced commodities

²⁹ In the mid-1970s, Image Ten filed litigation against Continental and Walter Reade, accusing them of withholding profits and failing to capitalise on *Night's* "key-run potential" (Russo, *Complete* 101). In January 1980, rights to the film reverted back to Image Ten, with Laurel Entertainment serving as the executive agent ("*Living Dead Now Alive*" 34). Further complications arose when Reade changed the film's title from *Night of Anubis* and omitted the copyright declaration on the new prints, allowing the film to be freely exhibited without fees being paid to Image Ten (Hervey 14).

he would later trash in *Dawn of the Dead*. His production company, Image Ten [sic], was set up in 1963 within earshot of Pittsburgh's declining steel mills, and occupied an ambivalent position in the economic fabric of the town. Parasitic upon the local branches of big Fordist companies for employment, it operated flexible post-Fordist labour practices and was staffed by a small 'family' of highly-skilled workers who treated the office as a home from home. It was within this makeshift environment that *Night of the Living Dead* was conceived, financed, filmed and edited. Schooled in selling corporations a flattering image of themselves, Romero took his revenge by defaming the reputation of the people they served. (31)

This so-called ambivalence between Pittsburgh as a Fordist corporate centre and Latent Image as a post-Fordist entity is intriguing, challenging the extent of the firm's ideological break from mainstream culture. As we have seen, King has positioned American independent cinema as a "challenge to Hollywood" (*American* 1), sitting in direct opposition to a "debased" mass culture (Kellner, "Media" 97). Indeed, in the 1930s, the Frankfurt School³⁰ iterated a perception of American "popular culture" that still echoes in an analysis of independent cinema today, where, "controlled by giant corporations, the cultural industries were organised according to the strictures of mass production, churning out products that generated a highly commercial system of culture, which in turn sold the values, lifestyles and institutions of American capitalism" (Kellner, "Cultural" 204). Through their commercial work, Latent Image was literally selling "the values, lifestyles and institutions of American capitalism," yet its

³⁰ For more on the history of the Frankfurt School, and their importance to the study of media industries, see Kellner's "Cultural Industries," pp. 202-20.

features openly criticised these structures.

The company operated on the fringes of an established system, acceding to corporate commissions to generate space for politically aggressive cinematic work. Even as it focused on theatrical releases, Latent Image never abandoned its commercial work and, by 1972, the advertising department contributed \$150,000 to its annual revenue (Wylie D-12). This subsidised almost all of the firm's day-to-day SME primers such as payroll, utilities, rent, equipment costs, bills and other services. Latent Image's use of horror was equally utilitarian, appropriating a sellable framework on which the firm could showcase its capacity for feature film production. *Night of the Living Dead's* box office suggested to the RIDC the start of a "Hollywood East" and in 1970 they invested \$80,000 into Latent's next feature *There's Always Vanilla*. When added to the financial speculation of local businesses, this totalled to around \$100,000 (Ehrich 1; Crawford 2017). Latent Image's facilities, equipment and services, all purchased through the firm's advertising revenue, were valued at roughly the same amount, bringing the total budget to \$200,000 (Russo, *Complete* 102).

Since there were no clear pathways open to regional film production in the 1960s and 1970s, and a galvanised independent sector had not yet materialised, the firm constructed new in-roads on its own terms, balancing artistic and infrastructural experimentation with a commercially-minded output. For Beard this was hypocrisy; for Latent Image it was pragmatic. In accord with King, Sherry B. Ortner writes, "from very early in the history of the industry, there were challenges to the Hollywood hegemony, with various attempts to create alternative sites of movie-making outside of the big studios" ("Against Hollywood" 1). Rather than a "challenge," Latent Image's ideological opposition

to cultural hegemony was more surreptitious. If the firm's compromises were far from the romantic polemics of the New American Cinema Group or John Cassavetes, Latent Image was nevertheless a "real-world" alternative— independent cinema with an overhead.

With *There's Always Vanilla*, the company took additional risks in terms of content, firmly pressing against the industrial barriers imposed on independent production in the early 1970s. Taking the RIDC at its word, Latent Image contrived *There's Always Vanilla* as an "imitation of a Hollywood film" (Kermode, "Twilight's" 56), citing *The Graduate* (Dir. Nichols, 1967) and *Goodbye, Columbus* (Dir. Peerce, 1969) as influences (Yakir, "Morning" 64). The film was to be "just a fun romp" according to screenwriter Rudolph J. Ricci (Gange, *Zombies* 43), designed to showcase the firm's versatility as artists and as an adaptable workforce.

Vanilla details the relationship between Chris (Ray Laine), a session musician tired of hearing himself "on other people's records," and Lynn (Judith Ridley), a local actress disenfranchised by her work within the local advertising sector. But if *Vanilla* is a film looking at "the American hippie' four or five years from now" as Romero claimed in 1969 (Ork and Abagnalo 22), then it is a caustic examination, slowly exposing the callous centre behind Chris's free-spirited veneer. Despite Ricci's proclamation, the film addresses a number of social issues, including unwanted pregnancy, abandonment and abortion. In the darker second half of the film's narrative, Chris glibly admits that "there must be 150 kids that look like me," a revelation that causes Lynn to hide her pregnancy and search for a solution in a seedy back-alley clinic.

As an emulation of Hollywood product, *There's Always Vanilla* tapped into the same "radicalised and disaffected" youth market (Biskind, *Easy Riders*

20) increasingly targeted by the majors³¹. The \$40 million domestic box office of 33-year-old director Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) had "demonstrated to studio executives that experience was not always as profitable as youthful energy" (Belton 302), both in front of and behind the camera. Studios now turned with frequency to film school graduates, where students were versed in popular theories of the day. As Todd Berliner points out, "journalists, film critics and professors began to rely on the [auteur] theory as the foundation for film analyses" (177-78). Graduate filmmakers adopted this classical notion of the auteur self-consciously (Bernardoni 8), and "auteurist convictions," nurtured in academia, "were practised in earnest in films like Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973)" (Schatz, "General Introduction" 8).

James Bernardoni argues that filmmakers outside of academia were equally, if sometimes indirectly, influenced by the auteur theory, "since auteurist premises informed much of the critical community's commentary on their work" (8). Kleinhans hints that this was also true for the avant-garde, where historiographical reviews, including P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974), favoured those filmmakers who "had access to the organs of publicity" and were thus active in their own extratextual construction as auteurs ("Reading"). It could be said then that the auteur theory was "in the air" during this period, having a direct impact on films and filmmaking across sectors and sites of production. This was no less true in Pittsburgh, where an embrace of the auteur theory would redraw Latent Image's corporate mandate and approaches to leadership.

As the nominal director of *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero was at the forefront of critical interest, singled out in a 1969 issue of *Interview* magazine

³¹ Chris is very much the type of "unmotivated hero" that Thomas Elsaesser sees as prevalent in contemporary Hollywood productions, displaying "an almost physical sense of inconsequential action [speaking of] a radical scepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision [and] drive" (282).

and a 1971 *Newsweek* feature that placed *Night* as a “bona fide cult movie . . . made in and around Pittsburgh by George Romero” (Zimmerman 118). The lack of credit given to his collaborators became a source of resentment and Russo namechecked the *Newsweek* article as a specific annoyance (Surmacz 27). How much this anticipated Romero’s move towards auteurist filmmaking can only be speculated on, but during this period Latent Image’s egalitarian infrastructure faltered. On *There’s Always Vanilla*, Russo recalls “internal arguments over the script, the concept, the cast, the production schedule, and the functions of key production personnel” (*Complete* 105). Romero attributed this to their achievement with *Night*, where individual players, emboldened by success, were no longer willing to accede to their collaborators (T. Allen 45; Rubinstein, “Update” 22). Not least of all Romero himself, who recalled being “frustrated by the compromises, both creative and social, that were forced by our democratic process . . . I came out of it wanting all the controls, wanting to be the auteur” (Kane 94).

Though effective on *Night of the Living Dead*, *There’s Always Vanilla’s* lack of a strong central authority proved the partnership’s undoing. Disagreements over content, coupled with ongoing commercial obligations, saw a planned six-week production schedule expand to over a year (Gange, *Zombies* 44). In his influential essay on leadership, Cecil A. Gibb recognises that “the democratic leader has the complex problem of giving each individual satisfaction as an individual, protecting the group as a whole, and satisfying his own aspirations or benevolent intentions” (259). Romero it seems was no longer able to balance such factors, not least in terms of his own creative aspirations. More so, it was not clear who could now actually claim leadership, democratic or otherwise. Romero had authority as director of the company but had

conceded creative leadership as part of the participatory corporate culture he initiated. Producers Streiner and Russo had vital agency and their shared authority on set led Romero to verbally, if not formally, reject his directorial credit on *Vanilla*, dismissing it as a film that was not a legitimate representation of his work (*Digging up the Dead*).

Given the industry-wide push towards directorial authority, “in which the personal point of view is all important” (Renan 46), the failure of Latent Image’s egalitarian infrastructure is perhaps unsurprising. After the frustrations of *Vanilla*, Latent Image pushed for a clearer hierarchy between departments and company leaders. In this context, Romero recruited Alvin C. Croft as a more formal executive vice president and general manager (“Men and Business” 35), a divisive move that led Russell Streiner to sell his stock and leave the company. Alongside his brother Gary, John Russo and Rudolph Ricci, Streiner formed New American Films, Inc., a regional production unit in direct competition with Latent Image (Russo 2016). Notwithstanding this marketplace rivalry, Romero was timorous about the separation. “I’ve always had a business partner and up until then it was Russ Streiner,” he later explained. “And then all of the sudden I was out on my own” (Romero 2016). His subsequent difficulty in guiding the company from a business perspective, a failure that essentially finished Latent Image as an active film production unit, reinforced his feelings that he needed a partner whose interests extended no further than the bottom line.

1.3. Day of the Director: Auteurist Product, Exploitation Distribution

Romero’s first major responsibility in his reorganised company was to court distribution for *There’s Always Vanilla*. Aware of the narrow inroads for non-

genre product, Romero still felt confident he could sell the film, later citing the success of *David and Lisa* (Dir. Perry, 1962) as precedent, a \$185,000 regional independent that earned around \$2.3 million in rentals (*When Romero Met Del Toro*; “Top Rental” 71). Like *Night of the Living Dead*, *David and Lisa* was released by Continental, but this same distributor was unable to agree terms with Latent Image in regard to the firm’s second film (Russo, *Complete* 101-02). In the meantime, Latent Image attracted monies from a Pittsburgh-based brokerage firm committed to raising \$750,000 for Romero’s next three films (Gange, *Zombies* 49). Romero was undeterred by *Vanilla*’s inability to find distribution and planned the company’s next feature *Jack’s Wife*, his first as authoritative leader, to be another character-focused regional drama.

The film tells the story of Joan (Jan White), a dissatisfied middleclass housewife whose lack of fulfilment leads her to experiment with therapy, drug use, promiscuous sex and, finally, witchcraft. In its critique of bourgeois America, *Jack’s Wife* parallels what Staiger calls “the proto-indie,” an assortment of films made in 1960s New York that in many ways articulated Mekas’s “middle-ground” of accessibility and aesthetic seriousness; films such as Clarke’s *The Connection* (1962), Jim McBride’s *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967), Brian De Palma’s *Greetings* (1969) and Robert Downey’s *Putney Swope* (1969). Staiger observes compelling similarities between these films, based on consistency of themes, subversive politics, stylisation, location and reception (“Proto-Indie” 219-22). In this context, *There’s Always Vanilla* and *Jack’s Wife*, with their own “negative reaction to the contemporary bourgeois world” (“Proto-Indie” 220) seem worthy of recognition. Yet issues of distribution may have played a part in their exclusion from Staiger’s analysis.

The distributor-exhibitors handling Staiger’s “proto-indies” were typically

SMEs that specialised in importing highbrow overseas product, including Sigma III, New Yorker Films, Donald Rugoff's Cinema V and Irvin Shapiro's Films Around the World. Given that production monies had to be sourced elsewhere, non-genre American independent products were still scarce and foreign imports remained central to these firms and their distribution rosters. In 1965, Dennis Hopper expressed his frustration at this lack of opportunity for home grown independents, remarking, "five years ago . . . there were fifty art theatres in the United States, now there are six thousand . . . fifty theatres to six thousand in five years. No American films for six thousand theatres" (qtd. in Ray 269).

As Romero looked to find a home for *There's Always Vanilla*, Russell Streiner's New American Films designed its first (and, as it transpired, only) feature film *The Liberation of Cherry Jankowski* (Dir. Russo) for the burgeoning sexploitation market, a market then thriving thanks to changes in the rating system and a voguish interest in adult film (Wyatt, "Stigma" 254-57). *Cherry Jankowski* remained unreleased until 1976 when Constellation Films re-edited and re-titled it *The Booby Hatch* and added it to their roster of soft-core sex comedies, including *The Naughty Stewardess* (Dir. Adamson, 1974), *The Boob Tube* (Dir. Odin, 1975) and *Game Show Models* (Dir. Gottlieb, 1977). New American Films' calculated approach was understandable, particularly given the successful use of market segmentation with *Night* and the limited number of independent distributors available. Almost concurrently, John Cassavetes was struggling to find a home for his *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and despaired at the lack of supportive outlets, telling Ray Carney:

[The distribution companies] take precautions against failure. They put unrelated violence in just because there is some kind of audience

appetite for it. They'll put action scenes and production values in, things that don't have too much to do with the films that we make. I have to put a rape scene in or a nude scene, or I have to shoot somebody in the face for this film to be "good"! (Cassavetes 356)

Cassavetes used his star cachet and personal wealth to distribute *A Woman Under the Influence* himself, spending eighteen months booking the film around the country and promoting it on popular American talk shows (Fine 304).

Although financially successful, as Carney explains the process was "expensive, time-consuming and discouraging," eventually bringing Cassavetes's total expenditure to more than \$1 million (Cassavetes 360). In 1971, after the impressive box office returns of *Billy Jack* (1971), director Tom Laughlin announced plans to self-distribute seven major films over a two-year period ("Burly" 7), soon finding that his company could not afford for individual releases to underperform at the box office, with each production dependent upon the success of the last (Walker 30). Joe Camp's Mulberry Square Productions also began by successfully self-distributing, in this case the G-rated feature *Benji* (Dir. Camp, 1974). In the 1980s, however, the company strained, passing the release of *Benji the Hunted* (Dir. Camp, 1987) onto Disney's live action subsidiary Buena Vista.

Without reserves of capital, self-distribution was far beyond Latent Image's means and *There's Always Vanilla* wasn't released until 2 March 1972, almost two years after the completion of principal photography. Distributor Lee Hessel and his Cambist Films had profited from the release of domestic and international sexploitation, yet increased competition from 16mm hard-core pushed Hessel to explore other avenues. As he told *Variety* in 1971, "to

compete with the strong 16mm material . . . you have to offer more than rutting bodies. Audiences are tiring of that and are demanding storylines and character interest along with the straight sex” (“Cambist’s Hessel” 7). The acquisition of *Vanilla* was an attempt to variegate, purchased as part of a package deal that included frontend financing on Romero’s next film *The Crazies*. Once outside of its familiar marketplace, however, Cambist seemed unsure of how to sell *Vanilla*, eventually repackaging it as the sexploitation film *The Affair*. The new promotional material obscured the original text and the poster replaced Lynn and Chris with a black and white photograph of an undressed young couple (neither of whom appear in the film) passionately kissing on a brass bed (fig. 1.3 and fig. 1.4).³²

This inability to find sympathetic distribution was echoed in the release of *Jack’s Wife*. Following the promised brokerage firm investment, Romero set aside \$250,000 for the film and secured a \$100,000 bank loan to begin production. Mid-production, the brokerage firm declared bankruptcy, leaving Romero no way of paying back the loan (Gange, *Zombies* 49). According to lead actress Jan White, to entice investors Romero rewrote the screenplay to include explicit sex scenes that he never intended to shoot (*The Secret Life of Jack’s Wife*). This subterfuge attracted exploitation distributor Jack H. Harris Enterprises who later, on seeing the final 130-minute cut of the film, pushed Romero to include more graphic material (Scott 12). When he was unwilling/unable to do so, the film was taken from him, cut by 30-minutes and repackaged as the sexploitation film *Hungry Wives* in Southern states Texas, Ohio, Kentucky and Georgia. The new theatrical trailer foregrounded the film’s

³² For a detailed overview of Cambist Films and its relationship with Romero, see Tom Fallows. “More than Rutting Bodies’: Cambist Films, Quality Independents and the “Lost” Films of George A. Romero” (2018).

few chaste sex scenes and added a sultry voice over that promised “*Hungry Wives*...with an appetite for diversion.”



Fig. 1.3 and Fig. 1.4. Changing US advertising campaigns, *There's Always Vanilla* becomes *The Affair*. “*There's Always Vanilla (1971) Photo Gallery.*” *IMDB*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0166843/mediaviewer/rm3728551680>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2018; “*There's Always Vanilla (aka The Affair) (1972) Original U.S. One Sheet Movie Poster.*” *FFF Movie Posters*. <https://fffmovieposters.com/shop/theres-always-vanilla-aka-the-affair/>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2018.

So limited were the theatrical releases of *There's Always Vanilla* and *Jack's Wife* that Robin Wood would refer to them as Romero's “unknown films” (Lippe et al. 5). Critic Travis Crawford, albeit an admirer of these films, regards Romero as “idealistic and naïve” in thinking he could create an alternative industry in Pittsburgh outside of the horror genre (2017), even though, as we have seen, regional bodies such as the RIDC shared the director's ambitions. In 1972, Alvin Croft determined that there were only two types of feature possible

in the independent sector. The first was what he called an “idea or theme” picture (i.e. non-genre product such as *Jack’s Wife*), which represented a gamble because, as the firm had discovered, such films did not have obviously marketable components. The second type, exploitation, on the other hand was considered economically “safe” because of its apparent built-in audience base (Wylie D-12).

Croft’s comments are telling, implying that for Latent Image to survive, Romero had to subjugate artistic imperatives for a fuller concession to marketplace trends, the antithesis of his motivation behind corporate restructuring in the first place. Now operating under a traditionally organised system of leadership, this move to more sellable product was Romero’s decision to make, indicating his resignation that the marketplace was limited. Insubstantial box office returns seemed to require a corporate rethink and the disastrous production of *Jack’s Wife* left Romero in debt in excess of half a million dollars (Gange, *Zombies* 65). Romero later reflected that *There’s Always Vanilla* and *Jack’s Wife* demonstrated that “the film industry is not going to accept serious little dramas from some upstart in Pittsburgh . . . those two films taught me what the odds were against that kind of small personal film” (Seligson 77).

In line with his reading of the marketplace, Romero redesigned Paul McCollough’s original screenplay for *The Crazies* into a loose reworking of *Night of the Living Dead*, replacing undead ghouls with insane townsfolk and upping the violence. Romero told Dan Yakir that *The Crazies* was designed to go out “into the drive-ins—it’s a potboiler, a B-movie, an action melodrama, at least on the surface” (“Morning” 64). The frontend deal with Cambist also acceded creative control, giving Hessel input into the screenplay and later

allowing him to cut Romero's preferred edit by 15-minutes (64). Romero's self-conscious desire to make more personal films in the independent sector was not institutionally reciprocated, exposing limitations and demanding alternatives. A reliance on exploitation distributors undermined artistic freedom and his films repeatedly fell to the mercy of investors with their own ideas about the market. By 1973, Latent Image's industrial longevity seemed to necessitate a standardisation of product and corporate thinking.

The exploitation sector is, of course, not totally anathematic to auteurism and filmmakers such as Russ Meyer have found parameters equitable to artistic expression.³³ Within production-distribution houses AIP and Roger Corman's New World Pictures, budding New Hollywood auteurs Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Jonathan Demme and Peter Bogdanovich were also allowed room to develop, their "language and aspirations" advantageous in attracting that lucrative teen market (Corman 91-92). Like Romero, Corman had explored a diversified marketplace and in 1962 momentarily put aside drive-in features to initiate more personal, politically-engaged directorial work. Corman self-financed an adaptation of Charles Beaumont's *The Intruder* (1962), a racially charged novel concerning political opportunism and integrationist tensions in the American South. "It was the only film we didn't make any money on," remembers co-financier Gene Corman. "And it was our best film" (*Corman's World*). Roger Corman was more matter-of-fact about this commercial failure, explaining:

³³ Meyer was the writer, director, producer, editor and sometimes distributor of sexploitation fare such as *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959), *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) and *Vixen!* (1968). Referred to in equal parts as an "exploitation auteur" (Fischer 24) and limited fetishist (Briggs 20), Meyer's infatuation with heaving bosoms was sellable. As Chris Chang writes, "it's hard to think of any filmmaker who so carefully integrates public economic livelihood with personal private fantasy" (17).

The public simply didn't want to see that particular kind of film . . . after *The Intruder*, I tried to do a film that would work on two levels. This is really the core of my filmmaking philosophy, without getting too grandiose about it. On the surface level would be an entertainment film, a genre film, an exciting film of a certain type, and on a deeper sub-textual level would be a film that would have some meaning to me.

(Dixon 147)

This "two level" approach was not that dissimilar to Romero's own. *Jack's Wife* openly picked up on Betty Friedan's bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), intended as a serious appraisal of female subjugation as it follows a suburban "housewife-mother" denied a name in both the film's title and the staid cocktail parties she attends with her husband. The film pointedly draws us to themes of middle-class domestic entrapment, beginning with an avant-garde dream-within-a-dream as Joan imagines herself led around on a leash by the domineering Jack. As the film progresses, such dreams become more visceral and Joan has a repeated nightmare in which an omnipotent masked intruder pursues her through her family home. Joan's inner-psyche, her absence of self away from the demands of family, is central to the narrative. In yet another dream, she imagines herself as an eternal consumer, literally introduced to her own life, husband and teenage daughter by a smarmy real estate agent.

Joan's growing obsession with spells and occult paraphernalia (all purchased on her husband's MasterCard) is presented as little more than a bourgeois 1970s fad, in congruence with fondue sets and wife swapping. Nevertheless, Romero felt such lip service to horror tropes (in themes of witchcraft and Joan's nightmares) gave the film a saleable hook. As he told

Tony Scott in 1973, "*Jack's Wife* is an intelligent commentary on what goes on in the mind, yet its commercial enough that I'm sure, in fact I know, that it's going to be released" (13). In accord with Corman's "two levels," Romero claimed to be "trying to walk the line" between marketability and personal expression (13). Even as *The Crazies* offered a fuller compliance with exploitation demands, the film still makes space for sociopolitical commentary, drawing on broadcast images of Vietnam, where, according to Romero, "every day the *Six O'Clock News* showed the pain and mutilation of war in our living rooms" (qtd. in Fallows and Owen 42). The film indirectly places Vietnam at the centre of the text, from scenes of scared kids-as-soldiers invading a rural community to the self-immolation of a priest, the latter an uncomfortably close facsimile of real events in Saigon.

If genre offered a marketable hook for *Jack's Wife* and *The Crazies*, Romero also presented these elements as auteurist choices, insisting that all of his work contains an "acute insight into the darker side of human nature" (Billson 278). Unlike a rhetoric that situates horror as a form of "cultural detritus" (Sconce 372), Romero held no such valuation and in interviews frequently (admittedly somewhat defensively) defended the genre as a legitimate art form (Jones, "George Romero" 35). In this context, Romero's auteurist proclivities seem closely integrated to an economic livelihood. At best, the filmmaker's relationship with genre was ambivalent. Publicly he lauded horror's artistic credibility; professionally he exploited its bankability. Nevertheless, he claims to have been limited by the reductive industrial parameters that forced him repeatedly into this sector. "I'm trapped in a genre that I love" he later conceded (qtd. in Fisher), highlighting a fascinating conundrum for both the company he founded and his future as an independent filmmaker.

For his part, Roger Corman's own acceptance of marketplace restrictions was fuller than he originally intended. In 1970, Corman formed New World Pictures to better control content after numerous fights with his AIP bosses (G. Morris). As president of a company, however, Corman's responsibilities shifted to overseeing feature films that "are marketable within a highly competitive industry" (Corman 91). According to *Night Call Nurses* (1972) director Jonathan Kaplan, Corman imposed a strict working template on his filmmakers that "laid out the requirements of the genre. Exploitation of male sexual fantasy, a comedic subplot, action and violence, and a slightly-to-the-left-of-centre subplot" (Hillier and Lipstadt 44). Rather than demonstrating a committed political agenda, the leftist "subplot" was again aimed at the youth demographic (Hillier and Lipstadt 44), indicating an increased sagaciousness behind Corman's thematics.

This "top down" approach to film production returns us to the marketing concept, where product is carefully developed to meet consumer demands. Brownlie and Saren closely associate the marketing concept with the era of "big business, mass consumer sovereignty, excess supply over demand and ever increasing 'consumption'" (38). As such, other business models have been appropriated based on differing corporate demands and desires. Table 1.2 was compiled by marketing professor Jim Blythe and provides a useful overview of four key business orientations, divided into production, product, selling and marketing.

The methods summarised in each category are not absolute or determinedly separate, bleeding into each other as different strategies are appropriated at different times. This said, the ideas of business orientation, when applied in the context of independent and exploitation film practices for

the first time, can help us understand the corporate thinking behind such production and distribution companies. More so, it underlines important differences between types of independent cinema, where, even within the exploitation sector, there was a divergence in activity, intent and marketplace valuations.

Table 1.2

Business Orientation

Production Orientation	A focus on manufacturing, on improving the process so as to reduce costs and increase efficiency and on making a profit through selling large volumes of goods.
Product Orientation	The focus here is on quality and on product features. Product orientation aims to produce the best possible product with the maximum number of features.
Selling Orientation	The company seeks to use aggressive and sometimes devious selling techniques to move the product. Profit comes from quick turn over and high volume.
Market Orientation	Defining what customers want and ensuring that the company's activities are arranged in a way which will achieve customer satisfaction.

Source: Jim Blythe. *Principles and Practice of Marketing*. 3rd ed., SAGE Publications, 2014, p. 7.

Companies like AIP and New World can be said to be *market orientated*. At New World, common practice indicated that each production would only begin once executives had identified an exploitable subject matter based on its “commercial potential” (Corman 92). This project would then be passed down to a writer/director who would adapt the material within a defined template. New World’s use of the marketing concept was adapted from AIP, who shrewdly

allowed their target audience to dictate content. AIP typically undertook careful market research in schools, colleges and advertising agencies, using feedback to generate a title, a poster and a concept (in that order) before a writer was hired to pen the screenplay (“*Guardian Interview*”). Though such methods did not necessarily produce inferior filmic output, it is important to recognise that AIP and New World’s primary agenda was the manufacture of saleable goods. “We made those pictures because we sensed a trend” explained Arkoff (Strawn 265).

Exploitation producer-distributors including Jack H. Harris Enterprises and Cambist followed suit, carefully watching the marketplace to determine output. If releases failed to attract a sizeable audience, such companies revealed the *selling orientation* at their core, using “devious selling techniques” to resell *There’s Always Vanilla* and *Jack’s Wife* as soft-core or sexploitation. Exploitation producer David E. Friedman argued that this technique was not viable for long term survival, telling David Chute, “the first rule is, you must never continually burn the sucker” (“Wages of Sin, II” 61). Nonetheless, New World also used selling orientation when they felt it was called for, (in)famously adding the same stock footage of an exploding helicopter to any trailer they felt needed livening up. As Corman was fond of saying, “there’s no law that says every scene in a trailer has to be in the picture” (Abrams).

In her examination of the relationship between business orientation and the arts, Simona Botti advocates that “the Artist” must, at the level of creation, be scornful of market considerations, producing “pure” artistic material that does not and should not consider marketing strategy and policies. Only once the work of art is completed can the marketplace be considered (22). This admittedly “romantic” *product orientated* approach runs parallel with the

ideology of the Manhattan avant-garde and the canonical independents that followed. Distinctions have been made between “art for art’s sake” and “utilitarian or crafted objects” that are produced to the specification of external parties, be it a patron or a marketplace (Fillis 32). Elizabeth C. Hirschman takes a broader view, suggesting that there are three potential audiences that the creative person must consider: 1) the public at large; 2) peers and industry professionals; and 3) the self. Hirschman insists that each audience can and will be considered during the creative process. Any prioritisation between the self and the mass “is based upon the value orientation of the creative individual” (47).

What then of the dominating value/business orientation of Romero and *Latent Image*? In print, Romero poured scorn over an industry that prioritised marketplace concerns over aesthetic considerations, telling Edward L. Blank that “the deal is the thing today. The product is usually secondary in the minds of the people creating the package” (“Thrilling” 134). As a creative individual, Romero aspired to start from the bottom up, beginning with an evocative story or concept that allowed room for his unique formal stylisation and sociopolitical concerns. This said, as president of a solvent production company he could not be so single-minded, and each project contained vendible components that could later be teased out or exploited in the marketplace. His attempts to “walk the line” between auteurist self-expression and industrial continuance could be detected on screen, where even his feminist drama *Jack’s Wife* alludes to horror film tropes. As one critic observed, *Jack’s Wife* is “a strange, experimental film . . . torn between genre and art” (Pirie 548).

This push-pull between *product* and *market orientation* was something *Latent Image* never resolved. In 1973, under Alvin Croft’s guidance and

Romero's leadership, Latent Image sought to take fuller advantage of the exploitation market and with *The Crazies* sacrificed creative authority for the financial certainty the project suggested. For all that, Lee Hessel's own optimism for the project was misguided and instead of targeting the drive-in markets and grindhouses, Cambist placed a large billboard in Times Square and on 23 March 1973 released the film simultaneously in three first-run New York theatres. *The Crazies* failed to recoup its budget and Romero was again left with a creatively compromised box office failure. As he told freelance journalist Richard Rubinstein shortly after the film's release "[*The Crazies*] is still not a film I can say is totally mine . . . I'm still looking for that situation where I can do the film myself, which I still have yet to do" ("Update" 23, 24). Fortuitously for Romero, his interviewer was a recent business graduate with his own ideas about independent film production.

Conclusion

While *Night of the Living Dead* used market segmentation to achieve commercial success, Latent Image's subsequent attempts to variegate output exposed a delimited independent sector, suggesting to Romero the economic assurance of cult/genre product. But if American distribution networks in the 1960s and early 1970s were largely restricted to the majors, the avant-garde and exploitation, a study of industry methods, particularly in reference to Latent Image's occupational environment and intent, betrays greater diversity. Latent Image's unique post-Fordist infrastructure initially favoured collaboration and democratic leadership, boasting an egalitarian organisational structure as radical as it was pragmatic and at odds with bicoastal practices (and, indeed, an auteurist reading of the company's early filmic output). Examination of the

marketing concept further demonstrates a multitude of industrial approaches to the production of filmic texts, where output was determined by the value/business orientation of an eclectic array of filmmakers, producers, businesspeople and stakeholders. The tensions between product and market orientation evident within Latent Image positioned the firm somewhere between exploitation and an ideology later consistent with the canonical independents, blurring the boundaries between sectors that have, for the most part, up until now been clearly defined.

2

From Cradle to Grave: The Birth of The Laurel Group and the Cultification of the Living Dead, 1973-1979

On 23 April 1979, three days after the US domestic release of *Dawn of the Dead*, an article on George A. Romero appeared on the front page of the *Village Voice*. Headlined “Knight of the Living Dead” and written by Tom Allen, the profile contained interviews with Romero and Laurel Group co-founder Richard Rubinstein and was lavish in its praise,³⁴ confident that this “truly independent movie will pose the challenge of the decade to the way films are made, rated, and marketed in America. I think it’s going to be the biggest cult blockbuster of all time” (1). Not simply impressed by the film and its writer-director-editor, Allen marvelled at Laurel’s scope, noting that in six years the company had made two feature films, produced seventeen sports and entertainment documentaries for television, imported twenty-three foreign films for domestic distribution and placed thirty-eight books by authors including Anthony Burgess, J.B. Priestly and Dick Gregory with leading publishing houses. Despite the corporate potential this demonstrated, Allen determined that these machinations were all “geared to one simple objective: To turn Romero loose” (45).

³⁴ In fact, so taken was Allen with Laurel that in 1984 he joined the company, serving as script consultant on *Tales from the Darkside* until his sad passing in 1988.

If Laurel's public face was one of deference to an artist-leader, closer inspection of corporate activities suggests a more complex agenda. Covering a period from 1973 to 1979, this chapter investigates the business methods, instigated and led by entrepreneur Richard Rubinstein, that saw Laurel affirm its position within the independent sector. I consider the company's polymorphic funding strategies in relation to production output and corporate agency, particularly Laurel's manipulation of state and federal laws. The firm's attempts at diversification and augmentation through multinational partnerships, the latter of which had profound implications upon the company's auteurist proclamations, is also surveyed. I ask what Laurel's "European style," auteurist infrastructure meant during this period, contextualising this hierarchical remit within the firm's broader business agenda. Issues of risk are central to this discussion. By observing the "real-world" strategies used to maintain independence, this chapter explores risk and risk management to problematise classical notions of independence and authorship, while in the process reconceptualising ideas of the cult filmmaker.

2.1. "Turbulent Environments": Human Capital and Risk Aversion

As *There's Always Vanilla* looked for distribution, on 9 December 1970 attorney John F. Bradley applied for a certificate of incorporation for Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania on his client George Romero's behalf (24). Laurel was to be a subsidiary of Latent Image and a certificate of incorporation set up this new endeavour as a legal body in its own right, entirely separate in law from its parent's shareholders and directors, and vice versa (Needham and Dransfield 100). Ultimately, no projects materialised under this banner and the timing of this application reaffirms the tempestuous atmosphere at Latent Image during

this period. The collapse of the company's egalitarian infrastructure had a toxic effect, resulting in Romero's attempt to cultivate a pocket of autonomy away from the collective. The departure of the Streiners and John Russo et al. made Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania temporarily redundant, putting Romero back in the driver's seat and able to steer the parent company in whichever direction he pleased. But by 1973, following the back-to-back commercial failures of *Vanilla*, *Jack's Wife* and *The Crazies*, Latent Image ostensibly ceased operations as an active production house (Gange, *Zombies* 64-65).³⁵

Partnership with Rubinstein saw a revival of the Laurel brand. Gange indicates (somewhat tritely) that this merely served to bypass the \$500 fee associated with forming a new company (*Zombies* 64). What Laurel actually offered was an opportunity to distance the filmmakers from the string of Latent Image releases that had failed to return monies to investors. Even more significantly, as a subsidiary of Latent Image, Laurel had access to the facilities, personnel and holdings of its parent. And as a legally distinct unit, it shared none of Latent Image's debt or financial obligations (*OECD* 69). Latent Image would now serve as a studio space and house for equipment only, still situated at 247 Fort Pitt Blvd. These facilities were described to Rubinstein in detail during his 1973 interview with Romero for *Filmmakers Newsletter* and this wealth of physical capital seemed to intimate opportunity to the fledgling producer ("Update 22").

Rubinstein's interest in the creative industries dated back to his New York City-based videotape production service the Ultimate Mirror, Ltd., formally registered with the New York Division of Corporations on 24 March 1972. In his own words, Rubinstein was interested "in taking television as I then knew it out

³⁵ Alvin Croft also appears to have left the company during this period, joining the Philadelphia-based advertising and public relations firm The Aitkin-Kynett Company in June 1973.

of the hands of the 'establishment' and into the hands of the people" ("Richard P. Rubinstein").³⁶ At this time, television was controlled by the "big three" networks of NBC, CBS and ABC and "it was difficult, if not impossible, for new suppliers and distributors to enter the marketplace" (Budd et al. 46).³⁷ Instead, Ultimate Mirror began by selling short video documentaries to high schools, colleges "or anyone with an interest in art, sculpture or television" ("VT Program Guide" 49). Projects included a conversation with George Nobel entitled *The Thing About Sculpture* (1971) and *Breathe Deep NYC No Charge* (1972), a video that followed "Post-Minimalist sculptor" Gordon Matta-Clark's efforts to give "canisters of 'clean air'" to passers-by (Roberta Smith E30). In his work with Nobel and Matta-Clark, Rubinstein showcased an attentiveness to fringe artists that would bear fruit in his relationship with Romero.

The attractiveness of Latent Image's physical capital notwithstanding, Rubinstein was primarily investing in the company's founder. Indeed, in 1973, where Latent Image began and Romero ended, was not easy to establish. In their analysis of founder-managed firms, Gedajlovic et al. describe the abiding link between corporate identity and creator-personality, viewing the nascent founder-managed firm as "an incarnation of its founder" (902). Founder agency is said to shape corporate direction, driving decision-making through a "multitude of background (informal) institutional influences, including their upbringing, education, social contacts, cultural heritage and work experience"

³⁶ Rubinstein named the company after philosopher Marshall McLuhan's declaration that television was "the ultimate mirror of society" ("Richard P. Rubinstein"). This intent to democratise television production was aided by the release of lighter, more affordable technology, such as Sony's first handheld video camera the DV-2400 Video Rover Portapak, released in 1967.

³⁷ The major networks may have sourced its programming from independent production companies, but as reported by Mark Alvey, by 1963 independents like Desilu and Filmways "became top suppliers of primetime product, and as producers teamed up with old line majors or powerful agents, the term 'independent' became more and more ambiguous, and sometimes meaningless in any alternative sense" (146).

(902). This often results in an idiosyncratic output that reflects personal objectives rather than the larger corporate interests of the firm (902).

If *Latent Image/Laurel* was George Romero in 1973, then it was far from a guaranteed investment. The box-office success of Romero's filmic output was erratic and his determination to remain independent appeared led by an anti-corporate, anti-establishment agenda that rejected the mainstream out-of-hand. In 1972, Romero told journalist Alex Block that he would rather abandon narrative feature film entirely than conform to industry standards of production ("Filming" 24). Such thinking did not suggest a profit-maximising endeavour and had in fact left Romero nearing bankruptcy.

Even without such caveats, the film industry was fraught with dangers for the would-be investor and as a recent business graduate Rubinstein was no doubt exposed to less irregular career pathways. Creative industries such as film, television and music have been described as turbulent environments where traditional bureaucratic, professional and craft leadership techniques offer no guarantee of financial success (Peterson and Berger 97). For Michael Porkorny and John Sedgwick, the film industry is particularly high-risk, with no "methodology for predicting with any level of accuracy which of the large numbers of films released annually will turn out to be hits" ("Financial" 181). In the creative industries, Mark Banks et al. extend this thinking about risk to include SMEs, where the economic fragility of these start-up companies is especially "embedded in risk," necessitating a need to be "innovative, flexible, creative, ideas driven [and] constantly changing" (453).

In media industry studies, the connotations of risk on film production

have been underexplored.³⁸ Pokorny and Sedgwick have led the way in a sparsely populated field, offering a quantitative analysis of the economic risk associated with classical Hollywood and the blockbuster. They determine that the major studios typically offset risk by producing a “portfolio of films” of divergent content and scale, hoping that successful projects will compensate for the expected losses elsewhere (“Risk Environment” 209; “Financial” 188).

Within this system, the issue of an individual film’s profitability is less important than the overall profits of the collective portfolio. As Pokorny and Sedgwick attend, “relatively small independent studio/distributors will not have the ability to develop sufficiently diversified film portfolios, nor have the financial strength to absorb the losses that any film portfolio will inevitably generate” (“Financial” 188). If one accepts that this portfolio model is unfeasible for a number of independents, an alternative analysis of risk management in this sector has, however, been limited. Since creative and stylistic risk-taking are key to an independent film discourse (Ortner, *Not Hollywood* 32), the concept of risk aversion perhaps presents too inconvenient a juxtaposition—independent films are, after all, supposed to demonstrate “bold moves,” not careful market analysis.

Without the financial capital of the majors, risk and risk management in independent cinema presents an entirely different set of problems for the entrepreneur or small enterprise. Risk was pre-eminent to Rubinstein’s business management, and he applauded collaborator Salah M. Hassanein’s “enlightened sense of risk. He’s aggressive about risk. He and I think very similarly” he told Gange (*Zombies* 62). Anna M. Dempster views this as a

³⁸ Mette Hjort has gone some way to addressing this lack with the edited collection *Film and Risk* (2012). Hjort places risk as “absolutely central to film” (Introduction 4) and the text extends beyond issues of economics to consider risk and performance, style, spectatorship, authorship, physical risk and the environment.

common outlook among entrepreneurs, where risk taking is “a central part of entrepreneurial function and ultimately critical in the creation of economic value and innovation” (152). Sharon Gifford writes that the entrepreneur can only function if their environment is uncertain, since entering into a marketplace with “perfect information” and a guarantee of profit would not necessitate entrepreneurial behaviour to begin with (303). Risk-taking in an uncertain environment is therefore essential. Banks et al. list a number of advantages for entrepreneurs when starting and running a small enterprise, including self-management, control over decision-making, localised industrial support structures and “the relatively low financial risk involved in the start-up of many cultural businesses” (458-59).

This was certainly the case with Laurel. When Rubinstein joined, the company was essentially ready-made, abundant in physical capital and with a knowledgeable workforce rich in experience. Economist Gary S. Becker has labelled worker knowledge an “intangible resource,” stressing the importance of schooling and on-the-job training to future real income and corporate profitability. Becker calls this personal acquisition of skill, information, ability and experience “human capital,”³⁹ which he breaks down into two types: 1) “general,” which proffers a broader, transferable knowledge base usually obtained independently at the worker’s own expense; and 2) “specific,” where learning is facilitated on-the-job by the company and relates to tasks particular to that firm (12-13, 17). For Becker, “on-the-job training is neither completely specific nor completely general but increases productivity more in firms providing it and falls within the definition of specific training” (17).

³⁹ According to *The Economist*, this term has not been without controversy, deemed by some to reduce people to cold, calculated machines. In 2004, a panel of German linguists voted *Humankapital* the most offensive word of the year. See, “Six Big Ideas’: Gary Becker’s Concept of Human Capital.”

Even though Romero's egalitarianism was a thing of the past, Laurel's infrastructure remained relatively loose, offering informal apprenticeships to almost anyone interested in regional film production. In turn, these "trainees" would freelance on Laurel productions in a variety of roles and at a reduced wage, if they received any wage at all (Buba 2016; Dubensky 2016). With an abundance of freelance workers, the number of employees on Latent Image's annual payroll was reduced. Rubinstein was not officially associated with Latent Image's parent company, but nevertheless was given licence to manage staffing levels, telling Gange that he was "ruthless in slashing the staff and overhead back to a manageable level . . . George, in essence, was trying to keep everybody around all the time, and there just wasn't that kind of business to be had. So I became the hatchet man, to some extent" (*Zombies* 65). Indeed, Laurel's growth was about more than just the so-called human capital of its freelance workforce, it was dependent on the personal human capital of its new co-leader Richard Rubinstein and his self-acquired business expertise.

Contrary to his boastings about risk, Rubinstein's "upgrade" from videotape documentarian to co-head of a full-service regional production company necessitated little in the way of personal risk or financial investment. Banks et al. posit that the entrepreneur's "real investment comes from the subjective (personal) knowledge which they are prepared to commit to the project" (458), immediately demonstrated here by Rubinstein's management of company overheads. Before joining Laurel, Rubinstein invested time into his own human capital, through education and personal and professional experience. During two years as a Wall Street brokerage consultant, Rubinstein handled clients investing in feature film production, while his father, an investment banker, had experience in film investment through then lucrative tax

shelter schemes (Gange, *Zombies* 63). Ultimate Mirror provided insight into small-scale media production, and Rubinstein determined to use his amassed knowledge to bypass the production barriers imposed by television's oligarchs. Romero may still have seen himself as a feature film director, but Laurel spent its formative years producing small-screen content only. To reinforce Rubinstein's agency, the company's provincial moniker was renamed Laurel Tape & Film, Inc., formalised on 25 February 1975 (Berkman et al. 17).

2.2. Superstars and Shelter-Shams: Tax Shelters and Ancillary Markets

In April 1975, Rubinstein evidenced his acute understanding of the television industry in an article written for *Filmmakers Newsletter*. Entitled "The Selling of O.J. Simpson: Independent Production for Television," the article focused on ten sports documentaries made by Laurel Tape & Film and sold to ABC. In his appraisal, Rubinstein considers the relationship between audience aggregation, demographics, network affiliate stations and potential profits. This reading was complimented by a knowledge of show pitching and potential gaps in the marketplace. Rubinstein claims that Laurel prospered due to a dramatic increase in the number of sports programmes in the early 1970s. To enter a marketplace dominated by the major networks, he determined product differentiation to be key, achieved through Romero's highly-stylised filmmaking and Laurel's access to a number of leading sports stars of the day, including American footballers O.J. Simpson of the Buffalo Bills and Franco Harris of the Pittsburgh Steelers ("Selling" 28). Harris was the subject of the first produced episode "Good Luck on Sunday," though the Simpson episode "Juice on the Loose" was used as the series pilot.

In this *Filmmakers Newsletter* article, there are a number of details that

Rubinstein omits or skates over. For instance, the decision to base these specials around ten athletes is intriguing, since Rubinstein and Romero shared a general disinterest in sports (30). Even more curious was the decision to produce ten episodes on speculation, instead of just one pilot episode, which was the industry norm. Rubinstein gives no explanation as to why this decision was made, stating only that the company went ahead after receiving monies from clients of a securities broker “seeking high risk/high income potential investments with protection on the downside by a tax-related investment structure” (28).⁴⁰ He also omits how Laurel obtained access to these “superstars” of the sports world. As way of explanation, Rubinstein writes that these documentaries were attractive because they gave the subjects agency, “their chance to say what they wanted” unfiltered by the interpretations of mainstream sports journalists (30).

The series (collectively titled *The Winners*) was in fact initiated based on an informed offset of risk and Rubinstein’s expertise/human capital. On 19 December 1974, George Anderson of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that Romero had received “financial support from Babb Investments” to initiate a series of ten “portraits of sports stars” (“Latent Image” 12). Babb Investors was a subsidiary of the regional insurance broker Babb, Inc., who advertised a professional investment counselling service with expertise in tax shelter investment (“Babb Investments” 25). Principally, a tax shelter offers individuals in high-income brackets the opportunity to generate losses on high-risk investments that offset tax on all of the investor’s collective income, promising

⁴⁰ Rubinstein writes that each episode had a cash budget of around \$100,000, though such valuations should be taken with a pinch of salt. In later life, Rubinstein has candidly admitted to inflating budgets when talking to the press, doing so on *Martin* and *Dawn of the Dead*. As he said in 2004, on *Dawn of the Dead* “I started telling people [the film cost] \$1.5 million . . . if I had made it sound too inexpensive then it hurt my chances to get [additional] money for it.” He claims the budget was actually around \$640,000 (Rubinstein and Martin 2004), although this amount has not been verified.

deductions and credit far in excess of the participant's investment (Little and Dasner 67-68; Williams Jr. 3). As Calvin Johnson put it, "a tax shelter is an investment that is worth more after-tax than before-tax" (qtd. in Braithwaite 17). David Cook records that tax shelter schemes financed 20% of all films produced between 1973 and 1976 and, "in 1975 alone, more than half of the total films in production, completed or released by Columbia, Warners, Paramount, United Artists, American International Pictures, and Allied Artists contained some tax-sheltered funds" (*Lost Illusions* 338).

Rubinstein learned of the relationship between tax shelters and film production from his father's investments and saw Pittsburgh as ideally suited to applying this stratagem. For him, this was a city that understood tax shelters because of the large percentage of high-income executives and businesspersons working and/or living in the region (Gange, *Zombies* 65). Alongside the advice given by Babb Investors, Laurel was aided in tax shelter financing by the Pittsburgh-based law firm Berkman, Ruslander, Pohl, Lieber and Engel, whose clients included a number of regional sports personalities. In point of fact, the firm's managing partner Marvin S. Lieber provided legal representation to both Romero and Franco Harris and just happened to be an expert in taxation.

In 1982, as the IRS looked to disallow a number of these tax shelter write-offs, names of the scheme's high-income beneficiaries became public knowledge. The local press situated Laurel Tape & Film "at the centre of most of [Pittsburgh's] tax court cases" (Kiely 1) and discovered its investors to be a "disparate group of celebrities and old-line Establishment types." This included a department store executive, a former U.S. attorney, baseball star Willie Stargell and Franco Harris and his Steelers teammates L.C. Greenwood and

Rocky Bleier (Kiely 1).⁴¹ “Good Luck on Sunday” was credited to the limited partnership Television Documentary Associates, and in April 1974 Harris and partners of Berkman et al. commissioned Laurel to produce two more sports documentaries through the limited partnership Television Documentary Associates II. Two months later, Television Documentary Associates III was formed to instigate additional content. This was followed by a number of limited partnerships serving the same function: A.J. Associates, J.R. Associates and Front Four Associates (Kiely 1, A18).

The loopholes exploited by these limited partnerships were closed by the Tax Reform Act of 1976. The IRS utilised an “at risk” solution to “make unattractive those shelters sold on a leverage basis” (Surrey 311), as all of Laurel’s initiatives had been. From this point on, investors could only claim against their own “at risk” investments, rather than against promissory notes or non-recourse loans. In the case of investment into “motion pictures and similar productions” the “at risk” solution was backdated to 30 June 1975 (United States, JCS-26-75 15). In 1976, Ed Blank reported on the resultant anxiety in the independent film sector, interviewing regional producer Maurice W. Gable who forecast nothing less than the end of independent film production in the United States. “This is an incredibly high-risk business,” said Gable. “And it’s going to be much tougher to persuade persons to invest” (“Tax Reforms” 8). An unnamed “Latent Image spokesman”⁴² predicted that tax reform would affect financing “less in feature films than in the production of such things as our one-hour sports documentaries” (“Tax Reforms” 8).

⁴¹ All of the aforementioned sports stars appeared in front-of-camera on *The Winners*. The opportunity to set the record straight was perhaps then a lesser incentive than these large, tax avoidance savings.

⁴² This is one of the few occasions where Latent Image was credited as a source of information after the formation of Laurel Tape & Film. Whether this was a typo, a miscommunication, or a distancing move made to protect the subsidiary’s image is unknown.

Rubinstein's knowledge of tax shelter laws was enhanced by his strong relationships with a number of disparate business colleagues and associates, not least his mentor Irvin Shapiro, for whom he had worked as an administrative assistant at Films Around the World. Shapiro's company gained prominence as a leading distributor of foreign language films, including classic titles *Battleship Potemkin* (Dir. Eisenstein, 1925) and *À bout de souffle* (Dir. Godard, 1960) and acted as sales agent for a number of domestic production companies. In this latter capacity, Films Around the World mediated the distribution of US films on the international market, a service they rendered on *The Crazies* in 1973. Rubinstein valued Shapiro's advice and it was on his say-so that he began his association with Romero (Gange, *Zombies* 64). Former Laurel employee Tom Dubensky asserts that it was Shapiro who instructed Laurel to transfer their tax shelter expertise into the acquisition of foreign films, advice that Rubinstein readily followed (Dubensky 2016).

Laurel consequently purchased the US rights to several European co-productions, including *Ten Little Indians* (Dir. Collinson, 1974), *Le Secret* (Dir. Enrico, 1974) and *Where There's Smoke* (Dir. Cayatte, 1973). As with their television product, films were sold to limited partnerships (established and overseen as tax shelters by Laurel themselves) and then sold again to more experienced distributors. On the sale of the Italian *giallo* *Spasmo* (Dir. Lenzi, 1974),⁴³ distributor-buyer Libra Films re-hired Laurel to shoot graphic inserts for the US release. Violence in *giallo* films was typically depicted in "great detail, in a striking visual style" (Willis 109), yet Lenzi designed *Spasmo* as a conscious

⁴³ *Giallo* is an Italian subgenre that takes its name from a series of paperbacks first published by Mondadori in 1929. These stories, bound in striking yellow covers, exhibited "a taste for sensationalist reporting of crimes and sexual violence" (Bertellini 214). In Italian, *giallo* translates to "yellow" and the genre was popularised on film in the 1960s and 1970s by directors Mario Bava and Dario Argento.

break from such iconography (Revokcom, “Part 1”). Under Romero’s direction, additional footage was shot in Latent Image’s first-floor studio space, these new scenes depicting a killer in a leather fetish mask committing graphic acts of murder. This masked killer, admittedly a part of *giallo* iconography, served to disguise the fact that here he was played by a Laurel crewmember and not one of the original Italian cast (Dubensky 2016; Romero 2016).

Such alterations, though common in foreign film acquisitions, rest uneasily alongside Romero’s auteurist proclamations. His initial incentive behind Laurel was to obtain control of material and to safeguard productions against interference (either internal or external). To sustain this space, Romero appeared willing to sacrifice the authorial voice of other filmmakers. Lenzi was incensed when he heard about these changes, disdainful of this process of re-cutting international releases without directorial approval. He regarded Romero’s actions as “reprehensible. He should have refused, or at least he should have notified me. I would never do such a thing . . . I have my ethical code as a director” he exclaimed (Revokcom, “Part 2”).⁴⁴ From 1973-76, as Romero’s filmic expertise was rechannelled to facilitate tax shelter deals, Laurel’s auteurist remit was subsumed. Conceding that working on *Spasmo* was his “most embarrassing moment” (Romero 2016), Romero could at least console himself that these schemes kept him working as a media producer. This said, Rubinstein’s business expertise continued to dictate corporate movements and in 1976, notwithstanding the Tax Reform Act, he expanded the partnership’s shelter schemes even further.

⁴⁴ In his defence, this was something that also happened to Romero when distributor La Superstar International drastically recut his film *Martin* for its 31 May 1979 release in Italy. The film was retitled *Vampyr* and given a new score by Italian prog-rock group Goblin. This was largely done to capitalise on the international success of *Dawn of the Dead*, released in Italy in 1978.

Rubinstein's next tax shelter partnership led Laurel into book publishing and through the brokerage firm Resource Investments, Inc. instigated at least two more limited partnerships, including J.W. Associates and Scorpio '76. A detailed description of these partnerships can be found in the 18 May 1983 Tax Court hearing "Fox v. Commissioner," which sought to determine the extent to which seventeen investors (referred to as petitioners) "may deduct their distributive share of partnership losses" through 1976 and 1977 (974). When petitioners filed a redetermination of tax liability, the court questioned "whether the purported acquisition of book publishing rights by these partnerships was a sham, serving no business purpose and lacking any economic substance" (974).

These limited partnerships were typically overseen by a general partner, usually "an individual (or a corporation) that had expertise in a specific industry" (Windish 614). On 28 June 1976, Romero was made general partner of J.W. Associates, taking on a role that granted "exclusive responsibility and authority in the management of the business and affairs of the limited partnership" (Hammer et al. 91). What expertise Romero demonstrated here is questionable, since he had no experience in book publishing whatsoever. As revealed in "Fox v. Commissioner," Romero did little more than acquiesce in all decisions . . . and sign all necessary papers sent to him by Resource" (979). The focus of J.W. Associates' front-facing activities was the publication of John Wilcock's *An Occult Guide to South America* (1976), a book publicised as "the first comprehensive tour of all the magical, mystical sites in South America" ("An Occult" 108). Rubinstein's Ultimate Mirror served as sales agent⁴⁵ and received

⁴⁵ From the evidence available, it seems that Ultimate Mirror was no longer active as a producer of media content at this time, instead simply serving as a shell or middleman in tax shelter activities.

a 10% fee for connecting the limited partnership to New York publishers Stein & Day, Inc. In turn, Stein & Day charged an excessive 35% distribution fee, higher than usual due to the book's "limited market potential" ("Fox" 982).

In a letter to Resource dated 10 May 1976, Laurel voiced concerns over the impending Tax Reform Act, aware that J.W. Associates was under audit by the IRS. To demonstrate a legitimate "for-profit" motive, Romero signed a two-sentence letter to Stein & Day wondering if a discount might "spur some sales," while on 7 December Irvin Shapiro inquired about the film rights to Wilcock's book ("Fox" 990). Given Shapiro's close relationship with the Laurel co-founders, this was little more than a feeble attempt to throw off the IRS's investigation. Rubinstein was undeterred and on 30 June that same year established Scorpio '76 to purchase six books from Stein & Day, including Dick Gregory's autobiography *Up from Nigger*, Jean Stubbs's crime novel *The Golden Crucible*, pharmacology study *Forbidden Cures* by Steven Friedman, M.D. and *The Virile Man*, a "guide to greater potency" written by Paul G. Neimark and Sheldon L. Fellman. All were released in 1976. Many of these books had already underwhelmed in advance sales, leading the Inland Revenue Commissioner to conclude that "these were not bona fide attempts at profitable book publishing" (1018).

It is important to clarify that "Fox v. Commissioner" was about a redetermination of tax liability, not about prosecuting those involved for tax evasion. The kind of tax avoidance exploited here was strongly criticised, giving wealthy individuals a means to circumvent their "fair share" of tax contribution to public services such as education, physical infrastructure, healthcare and defence (Payne and Raiborn 474). Mark Rowney calls such tax avoidance "the grey area between compliance and evasion," but these measures are not

illegal. Pittsburgh-based filmmaker Tony Buba says that tax shelters actually support regional development, encouraging “investment in something that would be considered high risk in order to promote job growth. A lot of filmmakers and film techs got their start because of the shelter” (Buba 2016). There is a clear ambiguity surrounding the use of tax shelters, yet Buba insists that it was this system that allowed Laurel to thrive, and in turn to instigate a regional base of trained professionals who would continue to work within the industry. “There’s a whole crew base [in Pittsburgh] because of Laurel,” says Buba (Buba 2016).⁴⁶

Romero later recalled his frustration at Rubinstein’s funding strategies, accusing his partner of “always looking for sleazy little deals. I kept saying ‘man, let’s make another movie!’” (Romero 2016). This depiction of Rubinstein as the scheming producer, stereotypically at odds with an artist only concerned with making art, is in keeping with what Spicer et al. refer to as the “grubbiness of bottom-line concerns” (1). Nonetheless, it was Rubinstein’s so-called “human capital” that lead the way, using his business and marketplace knowledge to establish a solvent production company based on degrees of risk and risk aversion. These tax shelter schemes cannily offset risk, producing content where economic failure was not merely an irrelevance, but something actively solicited by high-income investors. And as demonstrated in the *Village Voice*, Laurel’s tax shelter moves into television, distribution and book publishing could later be respun, presenting an expansive, multifaceted entity with broad ranging

⁴⁶ Ethics surrounding tax avoidance remains a fiercely argued subject in both government and society. In April 2016, the so-called “Panama Papers” revealed that “Mossack Fonseca, a Panamanian law firm, had helped 14,000 clients worldwide create offshore accounts to conceal assets or dodge taxes,” including the father of then UK Prime Minister David Cameron. See, Editorial Board. “Panama Papers Point to Tax Evasion” and Ben Riley-Smith and Michael Wilkinson.

capabilities.⁴⁷ Questions arise as to what exactly Romero's auteur status meant within this context; was it the ultimate objective, as Allen suggested, or simply an additional means to offset risk?

2.3. "A New Nightmare": Cult, Branding and George A. Romero's *Martin*

Between 1969 and 1972, the seven major studios reported record losses in excess of \$500 million (Belton 302), resulting in a "phasing out of the New Hollywood in favour of the blockbuster era, a politically conservative, neoclassical style of filmmaking" (Buckland 11) evident in Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977).⁴⁸ Michael Allen notes that this economic downturn also drove the majors towards a more proactive distribution of foreign imports (78). Academy Award Winners such as Italy's *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Dir. Petri, 1970) at Columbia Pictures and France's *Day for Night* (Dir. Truffaut, 1973) at Warner Bros. demonstrated the mainstream viability of overseas titles. In 1981, UA Classics became the first studio division dedicated to the release of "'art' or non-commercial films, generally from abroad" (Slide 213).

As an independent, Ben Barenholtz's Libra Films offset studio competition by promising overseas producers a higher profit against the firm's smaller overheads (Segrave 197). Libra's acquisitions included provocative content like *Sebastiane* (Dir. Humphress and Jarman, 1976), *Maîtresse* (Dir. Schroeder, 1975) and Laurel tax shelter imports *Where There's Smoke, Le Secret* and *Spasmo*. Aside from distribution, Barenholtz also ran the Elgin Theatre in Manhattan and in 1970 instigated the midnight movie craze with the

⁴⁷ If Tom Allen's summation is correct, and that Laurel published around thirty-eight books, then the firm's tax shelter schemes were far more wide-reaching than the endeavours listed here.

⁴⁸ For Tzioumakis, this embrace of more commercial filmmaking saw some audiences turn to the arthouse for their fill of "thought-provoking and intelligent cinema" (*Hollywood's Indies* 26).

exhibition of Alejandro Jodorowsky's psychedelic western *El Topo*. Late night screenings of *Pink Flamingos* (Dir. Waters, 1972) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Dir. Sharman, 1975) followed, cementing the midnight movie's reputation for "radical aesthetics" and "anti-establishment" sensibilities (Mathijs and Sexton 14). Even as this trend spread nationally, the Elgin remained central and J. Hoberman suggests that "by experimenting for several years, Barenholtz developed a sense of what could play well at midnight—what would develop a cult or become a fashionable must-see and what wouldn't" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 314).

Despite this ability to detect the cult potential of a film, Barenholtz argued that "you can't make a cult film intentionally, it doesn't work. It's the audience that creates the cult, it's not the filmmakers" (*Midnight Movies*). As seen in the introduction, this is in keeping with a critical analysis of cult cinema, where fan consumption and subcultural capital are leading organising principles. In writing about cult stardom, Matt Hills says "the processes associated with a star becoming cult are often strongly linked to subcultural audience discernment, recognition and valorisation rather than marketing-led or industry/PR-related constructions of stardom" ("Cult Movies" 22). Closer analysis of Laurel's branding will, however, demonstrate that a self-conscious, market-led utilisation of cult is entirely possible.

Peter Hutchings has explored cult through the reception of the work of Italian filmmaker Dario Argento, identifying paradigms crucial to the filmmaker's subcultural appeal, based on excessiveness (in illicit content and form), transgression and marginalisation, the latter referring to a "location within critically disreputable genres such as horror, or marginal in terms of box office failure" (132). These same paradigms can easily be applied to Romero, visible

in his film's violent excess, stylistic bravado, transgressive sociopolitical themes, use of horror and his difficulty in attracting a mass audience post-*Night of the Living Dead*. *Night* itself had been a sizable box office success, but the sense of taboo generated in contemporary reviews also proffered an underground currency. Romero's specific subcultural appeal was tangible, and, in its review of *Martin*, *Variety* labelled him "a Pittsburgh-based auteur" whose "insistence on bloody and dramatic close-ups" would be eaten up by an identified fanbase (Poll 27). The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, meanwhile, observed "a popular cult director among movie buffs because of the enduring appeal of his first feature film" (Anderson, "Romero's 'Martin'" 14).

This appeal expanded when *Night* hit the midnight circuit in Washington D.C., leading Paul D. Zimmerman to label it a "bona fide cult movie for a burgeoning band of blood-lusting cinema buffs" (118). Jancovich situates the midnight movie as something of a ground zero for cult, a phenomenon that brought together an eclectic assortment of films for consumption by bourgeois audiences:

[Cult fandom] grew out of a series of economic and intellectual developments in the post-war period, a process which created selective film markets that were defined by a sense of distinction from 'mainstream, commercial cinema'. Indeed, it is the very ideology which insists that these markets are free from economic criteria which needs to be criticised. ("Cult Fictions" 317)

Director John Waters sees the midnight movie as an implicitly commercial endeavour, where "the very fact that [a film] was playing at midnight was almost

a brand name, it was a genre" (*Midnight Movies*). Contradicting Barenholtz's above comments, Waters writes that his film *Pink Flamingos* was designed as cult, purposefully delivering shocking content (a singing asshole, cannibalism, vomit, chicken copulation and eating dog faeces) to attract attention (12). If cult status had to be acquired authentically, Waters argues that product could also be self-consciously pointed in that direction.

Waters's notion of the midnight or cult movie as a genre, or in relation to genre, is an important one in terms of a media industry investigation. While genre is often discussed in terms of semantics or syntax (R. Altman 108), its industrial ramifications are plain to see. Holt and Perren uphold that the use of recognisable genre demonstrates "how industry and textual practices combine to create strategies for reducing risk, ritualising production, managing audience expectations, and codifying marketing practices" (10). Douglas Gomery observes that Hollywood "motion picture entrepreneurs have regularly utilized the profit-maximizing possibilities of horror movies" ("Economics" 49). But as is evident from Chapter One, such calculated, risk reducing strategies extend to the exploitation sector and regional independent film productions such as *Night of the Living Dead*.

Through Latent Image's early commercial failures, Romero came to understand the difficulty of selling films without a clear marketable hook. As such, Laurel's first feature film *Martin* consciously adopted horror film tropes. Originally entitled *Blood* and developed for exploitation distributor Joseph Brenner Associates, the film instead raised its \$85,000 budget through regional investment. *Martin's* financial service provider Barney C. Guttman states that the film was not directly funded by tax shelters and, contrary to the incentives behind tax shelter schemes, the backers all made a healthy profit on their

investments. According to Mr Guttman, “this wasn’t serious money, it was more ‘let’s have some fun with an investment,’” and the backers contributed around \$10,000 each into the production (Guttman 2016).

While a genre framework seemed less economically risky (though not entirely without risk, as the box office failure of *The Crazies* had shown), Romero’s use of horror was far from straightforward. This is most evident in *Martin*’s ambiguous narrative, where the titular protagonist (John Amplas) can be viewed as either an 84-year-old vampire or a teenage boy driven to think he’s a vampire by years of systemic family abuse. Geoff King categorises *Martin* as a “genre-complicating film,” where “expectations are not entirely thwarted, in many cases, but neither are they entirely realized, creating the often-characteristic indie quality of existing in the space between familiar convention and more radical departure” (*American* 167).

Horror film conventions are important to *Martin*. Notwithstanding the numerous Hitchcockian suspense sequences, particularly *Martin*’s breathless cat-and-mouse invasion of a middle-class family home, the film is a dialectic address to classic vampire texts and films. *Martin* is disdainful of traditional vampire tropes, avowing that he is unaffected by garlic and sunlight, and entirely without the hypnotic powers of seduction associated with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Under the alias “the Count,” he calls a late-night radio talk show and confesses that “those movies are crazy.” This deconstruction of genre is established in the opening sequence, as *Martin* boards an overnight train and stalks a female passenger. Picking the lock to her door (a hypodermic needle clutched between his teeth in place of fangs), *Martin* imagines her waiting readily within, her arms outstretched and dressed in a billowing Victorian gown. These black and white fantasies are harshly juxtaposed with her “real-world”

emergence from the toilet in a green face pack. And nor is she willing, instead desperately fighting back as Martin sedates her, rapes her and slashes her vein with a razorblade to drink her blood. “There isn’t any magic,” Martin later reminds us. “Not really.”

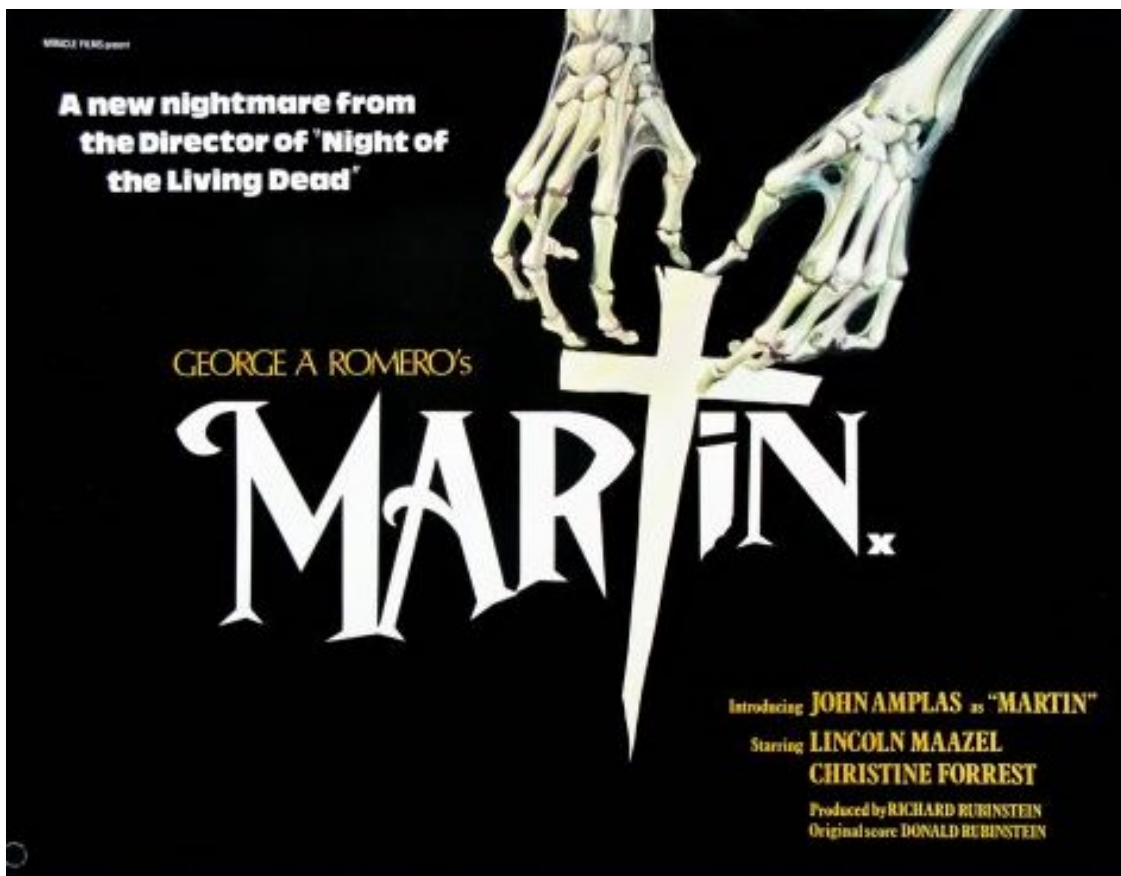


Fig. 2.1. Poster for George A. Romero's *Martin*. “*Martin* (1978) Photo Gallery.” *IMDB*. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077914/mediaindex?ref=tt_pv_mi_sm. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.

When *Martin* was obtained for domestic distribution by Libra Films, the promotional material played up more conventional horror film iconography. Posters featured either glaring vampire fangs dripping blood or skeletal hands reaching down for a crucifix (fig. 2.1). The theatrical trailer also centred on the film’s use of archetypal motifs, such as crosses and a Dracula cape and fangs (the latter seen in the film when Martin dons a costume to make fun of such

tropes). Furthermore, *Martin* contains a number of black and white sequences of a remembered or imagined past (depending on which reading we apply) that appear in the trailer in full colour, downplaying the film's ambiguity to suggest a mystical narrative progression that follows Martin from the 19th century to present day.

Described by Romero as a more personal, human story (Yakir, "Morning" 63), *Martin's* fusion of horror and auteur filmmaking returns us to issues of cult and subcultural reception, where fan communities rely on cultural status for affirmation within peer groups. Jancovich points out the "intrageneric conflicts between fans of a particular genre," where status is earned through internal distinction. Horror fans can demonstrate status within the subculture through a recognition and valorisation of so-called "cult auteurs." These consumers can then position their "discerning" taste values as authoritative, hierarchically above fans whose passions are for more "lightweight" mainstream genre product ("Real Shocker" 28). Fandom surrounding the so-called "cult auteur" allows subcultural capital through the display of knowledge, differentiation and connoisseurship (26).

Rubinstein was well aware of Romero's potential in this context, telling the director in that first 1973 interview that "I can see two separate markets for [*The Crazies*]: the neighborhood drive-ins as an exploitation film, and a second audience of people who know your work from [*Night of the Living Dead*] and are hip to what you're saying about the army and bureaucracy" ("Update" 23). Romero may have utilised horror as a marketable hook, but what Rubinstein recognised was that the cult status of *Night of the Living Dead* (already acknowledged in contemporary reviews such as *Newsweek*) had made Romero himself an even more valuable hook—a brand auteur whose "radical or

transgressive” inclinations were rich in subcultural appeal (Tompkins 207). All Laurel had to do was tap into this. Latent Image's commercial failures had made Romero a risk for investors,⁴⁹ and the Laurel brand offered a degree of distance between founder and company. Now that connection was reaffirmed, turning Romero’s potentially hazardous anti-establishment, anti-corporate posturing into an economically advantageous brand.

Rick Altman writes of the importance of branding to Hollywood studios, comparing marketing strategies to the advertising of household products in a supermarket, where brand-name products promise “fantasy, quality, style and individuality” (115). As the majors underscore “restricted qualities” (star, budget, director, etc.), genre films “can be made and distributed by any producer . . . if the exhibition situation highlights genre, then this may be an acceptable strategy, but even then the producer must compete on equal grounds with all other producers of genre films” (115). Away from Hollywood, Laurel indicates how branding can be utilised in the independent sector. Just as the horror film market offered a reduction of risk, careful branding of Romero’s image meant Laurel did not have to “compete on equal grounds” with other genre practitioners. On *Martin*, Romero’s name appeared on posters as part of the title, promising “a new nightmare from the director of *Night of the Living Dead*.” The trailer meanwhile teased “another kind of terror,” situating auteurist differentiation (i.e. “restricted qualities”) alongside the seemingly diametric quality of genre familiarity to sell the film.

Placing the director’s name in front of (or as a part of) the title would become a common strategy amongst genre filmmakers seeking marketplace

⁴⁹ This is unless their strategy was to lose money through tax shelter schemes, but even here, such losses were carefully planned by the company and therefore successful in fulfilling their original remit.

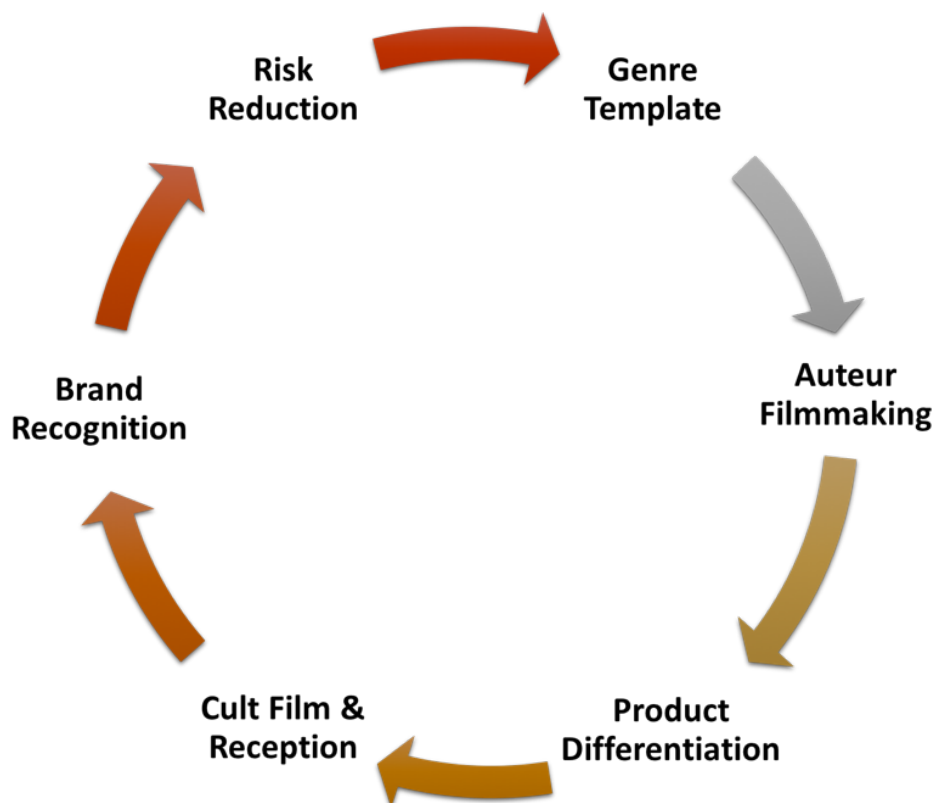
distinction, utilised on John Carpenter's *Halloween*, Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and again on Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. These filmmakers, not uncoincidentally, became the "1970s patriarchs" of horror cinema—its "superstars" (Bernardini 163). In "The Commerce of Auteurism" (1990), Timothy Corrigan deems such marketing an important extratextual component in understanding the film as a whole, creating "a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined" (45). Meaghan Morris concurs, stressing that the extratextual modes of auteur packaging in a film's promotion (including magazine profiles, reviews, trailers, etc.) are "always ready in appropriation as the precondition, and not the postproduction, of meanings" (123). In the case of Romero and the brand name genre directors that followed, cult distinction was not something ascribed in fan reception, it was consciously embedded within the text and reinforced in its extratextual delivery to the marketplace.

Craig Bernardini has marked Romero's active participation in fashioning his "cinematic image," evident in magazine interviews and other forms of self-promotion (165-66, 175). In the late-1970s Laurel hired public relations firm PMK to increase the director's profile across a greater number of platforms. On NBC's *Tomorrow Show* (1973-1983), host Rona Barrett recognised the "sociopolitical message" within Romero's films and together they unpicked the representational value of his zombies. On PBS's *The Dick Cavett Show* (1977-1982), Romero was part of a "masters of horror" panel alongside novelists Stephen King, Ira Levin and Peter Straub—his appearance as the only filmmaker emphasising his vanguard status within the genre. In a 1982 profile in *Film Criticism* magazine, Romero iterated this position by dismissing low-budget

“slasher” competitors such as *Don’t Answer the Phone!* (Dir. Hammer, 1980) and *Friday the 13th* as “bad films made by people that really don’t care about the genre or don’t have any love or respect for it” (Hanners and Kloman 77). Corrigan argues that such interviews allow filmmakers to engage with and disperse their own “organizing agency as auteur” (“Commerce” 54). For Romero, this organisation rested on authority and distinction within a given genre.

Table 2.1

Laurel Business Wheel



The self-conscious utilisation of cult, authorial distinction and its role within the firm can be summarised in the business wheel in Table 2.1, representing a cyclical intersection of objectives and outcomes. On a film like *Martin*, the Laurel partners agreed that to reduce risk, genre presented a sound

framework in which to package auteurist product. In turn, this focus on more offbeat, personal work offered an unusual, “genre-complicating” film that differentiated *Martin* from other products on the market, attracting a “discerning” cult film audience in the process. Romero’s “cult auteur” status could then be co-opted and recycled as a form of branding, framing filmmaker intent and identification for a specified market segment and once again reducing the “high-risk” associated with independent film production. Auteurist demands sit firmly within this business wheel, an integral part, if far from the ultimate outcome.

As an equal partnership built around Romero (or the Romero-brand), Rubinstein’s entrepreneurial drive shaped what Ulrich Witt calls “cognitive commonalities” (167) within the firm, harmonising seemingly disparate business and creative demands to execute a collective agenda. In discussing the “entrepreneurial leader,” Witt explains that

a multi-person firm is an organization with an internal division of labor which serves the purpose of accomplishing jointly the conception which the entrepreneur is unable to realize by her/himself. This purpose is attained if all firm members decide, within their respective area of discretion, in a co-ordinated way, and if their decisions are consistent with the entrepreneur's business conception. To achieve this, the entrepreneur's conception must be transmitted to, and adopted by, the firm members. (167)

Rubinstein's brilliance was to create a company that satisfied the demands of both partners; where providing a platform for Romero’s creative agency (albeit within fixed parameters) was in harmony with a sound business plan. If

Rubinstein regarded Romero as a “creative profit centre” (Harmetz, “From the Cecil” H15), Romero was equally gratified by the partnership. “There’s a way to stay true to your aesthetic and still resolve your business problems,” he told journalist Cynthia Heimel in 1980. “We’ve always been able to negotiate ourselves into a position of freedom. Well, not freedom, but as close as we’re gonna come” (48). The “cognitive commonalities” nurtured by Rubinstein gave Romero the creative freedom he long desired, a creative freedom which in turn could be fed back into the distinct, and highly-competitive corporate identity deemed vital to success in this high-risk industry.

Martin premiered out of competition at the 30th Cannes Film Festival in May 1977, immediately attracting distribution in France, Spain and Australia, while negotiations in the UK and Germany were on going. Romero explained to George Anderson that this quickly put the film “in the black,” marking the first time since *Night of the Living Dead* that a film of his had returned money to its investors (“Romero’s *Martin*” 14). *Martin* was also the midnight hit that Barenholtz intended, playing for 43 consecutive weekend nights, from August 1978 to May 1979 at the Waverley Theatre in New York (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 135). Branding had built a platform for the film’s success and, in sequence, became another building block in the construction of that brand. As Rick Altman observes, branding or a “signature” on a film can “produce not only income but also a supplementary saleable commodity which can in turn be sold” (121). *Martin* re-established Romero's name as a commercial, yet sociopolitical independent horror filmmaker. His next film, however, would cement his reputation as one of the genre’s superstars, giving Laurel additional means for corporate expansion.

2.4. Author, Autori: *Dawn of the Dead*, Overseas Investment and the X-Rating

As the decade drew on, Romero's cult appeal expanded beyond domestic shores, creating space for Laurel's planned sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*. *Night* had impressed at the international box office, generating \$18 million in overseas returns ("*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) - Financial"). R.H.W. Dillard writes that "lines stretched around the block in so unlikely a city as Barcelona, and the *Wall Street Journal* reported that it was the top money-making film in all of Europe in the year of its release" (15).⁵⁰ The walking dead subsequently became a popular fixture in 1970s Euro horror, "born of a desire to imitate *Night of the Living Dead's* worldwide box office performance" (Schlegel 39). Amongst *Night's* successors/imitators were the Spanish-Portuguese co-production *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (Dir. Ossorio, 1972) and the Italian-Spanish *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (Dir. Grau, 1974).

Irvin Shapiro recognised the overseas potential of a *Night of the Living Dead* sequel and in his role as Laurel's foreign distribution agent sent a partially completed screenplay to Italian producer Alfredo Cuomo, who in turn brought in writer-director Dario Argento to raise monies. Like Romero, Argento was an important horror auteur who regarded industrial independence as "one of the most important things in artistic life" (Argento 61). Unable to attract financing for his first feature film *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), Argento and his producer father established the production company Seda Spettacoli to make the film themselves. The film's success established Seda Spettacoli as an

⁵⁰ Dillard's quote has been widely circulated yet given the absence of adequate referencing it is hard to corroborate these claims. This said, anecdotal evidence from *Night* co-writer John Russo also boasts of the film's European success, claiming that the film played for more than a year and a half in cinemas in Madrid and Rome (*Complete* 110). Paul D. Zimmerman in *Newsweek* also reported that the film was playing everywhere from Tokyo to Paris to Madrid (118).

industry player, and throughout the 1970s Argento productions such as *Profondo Rosso/Deep Red* (1975) and *Suspiria* (1977) were regularly among Italy's top-grossing films (Celli and Cottino-Jones 178-81). In 1973, Dario's brother Claudio joined the family business and served as a producer on *Dawn of the Dead*.

Romero and Argento appeared creatively simpatico and Argento regarded *Night of the Living Dead* as one of his favourite horror movies (Shipka 125). More than fannish enthusiasm, investment into the renamed Laurel Group made financial sense.⁵¹ In the mid-to-late-1970s, Argento observed that "the Italian film industry was going through another time of crises and I thought investing overseas would be a good way of keeping the wolf from Seda Spettacoli's door" (Shipka 125). Between 1974 and 1979, the Italian film industry "suffered dramatic losses at the box office and the number of domestically made films fell by almost half" (Rigoletto 7). In 1976, television was in ascendance and, when the monopoly of the state sponsored RAI (Radio Audironi Italiane) was deemed unconstitutional, new broadcasting stations entered the marketplace and the demand for content grew exponentially. Television now presented competition to domestic film production and an additional platform for overseas product. US films and imported television shows dominated small screen programming schedules (Brunetta 247).

In this climate, Dario and Claudio Argento in partnership with Alfredo Cuomo agreed to finance half of *Dawn of the Dead's* budget in return for international distribution rights in all non-English language territories, with the exception of Latin America (Blank "*Living Dead*" N1). The UK was a contested

⁵¹ It is of note that the Laurel Group was in fact an entirely different corporate entity to Laurel Tape & Film, emerging as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Rubinstein's Ultimate Mirror in 1977. Why the partners felt it necessary to create a new business entity is unknown.

territory and split between parties (Rubinstein and Martin 2004). Niepmann and Schmidt-Eisenlohr remind us that “international trade exposes exporters and importers to substantial risks, especially when the trading partner is far away or in a country where contracts are hard to enforce. Firms can mitigate these risks through specialized trade finance products offered by financial intermediaries” (1). The Italian investment arrived as a letter of credit (LC), a form of payment organised through the respective banks that “substitutes the bank’s credit for the buyers and eliminates the seller’s risk” (Cones, *43 Ways* 152). Once again, Rubinstein’s apparent audacity, bypassing American financiers entirely, was balanced by calculated risk management. With half the funds secured, Laurel drew an additional \$325,000 from a consortium of friends, family and investors. Romero and Rubinstein themselves personally invested \$25,000 each (Rubinstein and Martin 2004).

Investment into *Dawn of the Dead* gave Seda Spettacoli considerable creative input. In pre-production, every page of Romero’s screenplay (finished and overseen in Rome) had to be read, approved and initialled by the Italian consortium. Dario Argento even received a script consultant credit on the finished film. More dramatically, in post-production Dario insisted on editing and overseeing his own version for release in European territories. Here, the film was retitled *Zombi* or *Zombies* (or, in the divided United Kingdom release, *Zombies: Dawn of the Dead*). More than simply cutting or trimming scenes, Argento essentially edited Romero’s footage from the ground up, using alternative takes, removing some shots and extending others. In the first seven minutes alone, critic Tim Lucas records “at least 10 subtle variations of montage, including a different presentation of the title onscreen, different music, a reduction of cutaways to the scientist being interviewed on TV, and additional

dialogue” (42).

In Lucas’s opinion, these changes purposefully removed *Dawn*'s satirical focus on a bankrupt, "materialistic society” (42). This is an overstatement, and Romero’s bombastic approach to political commentary makes it hard to nullify totally the ideological concerns (*Dawn* is, after all, a film about mindless consumers as zombies greedily wandering around an American shopping mall). Even so, in the European edit sociopolitical intent is downplayed. After the protagonists find refuge in the mall, the space becomes a bourgeois prison of their own making. They live in a storage unit converted into a luxurious apartment with all mod cons and, as the narrative progresses, the sense of boredom becomes palpable. One scene towards the conclusion watches as they dress in fine clothes, drink expensive whisky, play cards with real (albeit now worthless) money and squabble about whether the TV should remain on or off: “what have we done to ourselves?” asks Fran (Gaylen Ross). This scene was cut entirely from the European edit, indicative of Argento’s decision to extract moments of quietude or pointed annotation. Claudio Argento maintains that Romero’s version was simply “too long” (Shipka 125) and their edit is around eight-minutes shorter than the US release.

One of Argento’s most noticeable changes was to emphasise the music by Goblin (billed here as "The Goblins, in association with Dario Argento"). Romero utilised some of these tracks himself, placed within a more eclectic soundtrack of library music, Muzak and pop. The inclusion of Goblin, however, created an authorial problem for Romero. By 1978, Goblin’s synth-pop scores for *Deep Red* and *Suspiria* had made the group synonymous with Argento. Romero therefore minimised their place on the American soundtrack because of this close association. As he told Lippe et al. “Goblin link with Dario,

unfortunately, because I'm very concerned about my track record" (7). This was, after all, to give the film its full title, *George A. Romero's Dawn of the Dead*—a factor important to Romero's artist-ego and the film's domestic branding.

The LC from the Italian consortium had additional repercussions on Romero's authorial voice. *Dawn of the Dead* camera assistant Tom Dubensky recalls that Argento insisted the film be shot using Technicolor stock, taking advantage of a prearranged deal between Seda Spettacoli and the film processing laboratory that dated back to *Suspiria* (Dubensky 2016). Caetlin Benson-Allott suggests that since the Technicolor dye-transfer laboratories in the US had closed down, processing would have been done in Rome, giving the Italians even more control over the product (221). This is, however, incorrect, and Dubensky and cinematographer Michael Gornick remember completing all processing and colour-timing at Technicolor's East Coast labs in New York—all under Gornick's supervision. The Italians did work on their own cut at Technicolor Italiana, perhaps resulting in Benson-Allott's confusion (Dubensky 2016; Axl and Jscott). Romero was also able to work this contractual obligation to satisfy his own artistry, using the Technicolor process to flatten the image and emphasise the pop art reds, blues and yellows in emulation of the four-colour EC Comics he had adored growing up (fig. 2.2 and 2.3).

In terms of day-to-day production, the Italian consortium remained hands-off. Though they bound Laurel to a delivery date, they were entirely flexible when it came to the filming schedule. As with *Martin*, the regional shooting location allowed Laurel to circumvent union regulations and *Dawn* was shot over a leisurely four-month period, from November 1977 to February 1978. This accommodated a mandatory three-week break over Christmas, during which time Romero decided to emphasise the film's comedic elements. When

shooting recommenced, Romero dropped the downbeat conclusion (in which the last of the survivors commit suicide) to one of escape and went so far as to improvise a custard pie fight, situating the zombies as the literally deadpan recipients of this slapstick standard.



Fig. 2.2 and Fig. 2.3. Four-colour to Technicolor. EC Comics and a still from *Dawn of the Dead*.
“Vault of Horror Vol 1 35.” *Fandom*. http://eccomics.wikia.com/wiki/Vault_of_Horror_Vol_1_35.
Accessed 23 Mar. 2018; Still from *Dawn of the Dead*, featuring David Emge. Anchor Bay, 2004.

The European edit of *Dawn* complicates issues of creative authority and Romero displayed concern when the Goblin score threatened to displace his status as the primary creative figure. This said, on the whole Romero seemed unconcerned as long as the Italian consortium did not interrupt his hands-on creative process. Romero has stressed the importance of on-set improvisational freedoms to his ideas of authorial independence (Romero 2016). For Romero, authorship was largely the art of creating, the process, the invention.

That *Dawn of the Dead* was ultimately the work of multiple filmmakers was extremely rare in American cinema, independent or otherwise. Filmmaker and fan Nicolas Winding Refn called it “the only example of one movie having

two parents” (Bennyx). In many ways, *Dawn’s* production was a unique culmination to the egalitarianism Romero had begun on *Night of the Living Dead*, only here creativity was compartmentalised, divided into equal parts and sent out into separate territories. As a consequence, Romero’s autonomy onset was maintained, even as his creative control in other areas of production and release was rescinded or denied.

Also divided was the very concept of the auteur, split between the classical notion championed by Sarris et al. and the idea of authorship as something commercial. Romero was not naïve about the economic potential of this collaboration, telling *Variety* that each filmmaker was better placed to cater material to their designated markets (Werba 40). As the *Independent Film Journal* observed on 21 March 1978, “with Argento’s reputation abroad, and Romero’s cult status in the States, the paring would seem a commercial certainty” (“Romero and Argento” 12). James Naremore proposes that “in certain American contexts, [auteurism] became useful as a kind of marketing strategy” (11), but he need not have cast his net so narrowly. Notwithstanding *Night of the Living Dead’s* international success, and Romero’s subsequent cult capital in this marketplace, Argento was himself a regular box-office draw on his home turf. His name reinforced *Dawn of the Dead/Zombi’s* Italian heritage for domestic audiences and the Italian promotional material astutely ran under the banner “DARIO ARGENTO presents a film written and directed by GEORGE ROMERO,” allowing both auteur-brands to work side-by-side, with Argento’s taking precedent (fig. 2.4).

On 18 October, *Dawn of the Dead’s* Italian distributor Titanus ran a two-page advertisement in *Variety* proclaiming that “the zombies are eating up [Italian] box office records!” reporting an impressive \$1,220,500 in its first thirty-

six days of release (14-15). The second page reprinted a memo from Titanus head Goffredo Lombardo addressed to Dario Argento, reading, “Opening release of *Zombie* is sensational. Congratulations and thanks to both you and George Romero. Titanus is proud to be distributing this box office giant” (15). This boast of massive, rapidly acquired ticket sales in a North American trade paper had a dual purpose: to bolster the international reputation of all parties involved, and to assist Laurel in attracting a US distributor.

The biggest obstacle in acquiring domestic distribution had been the film’s violent content, certain to receive an X-rating from the MPAA. Romero

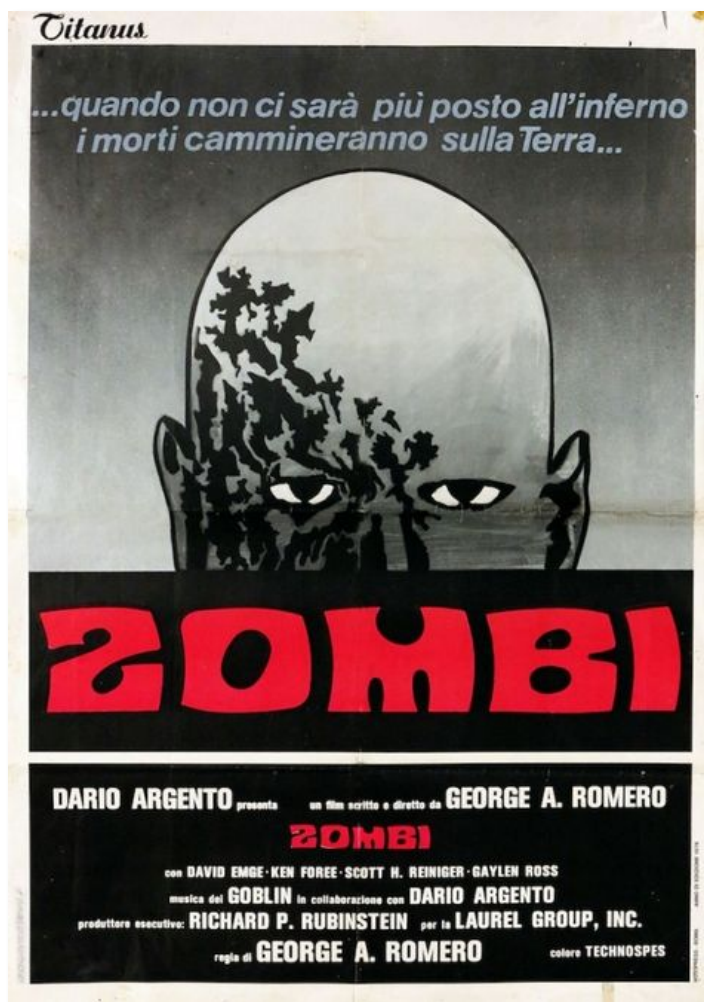


Fig. 2.4. Italian poster for *Dawn of the Dead* (aka *Zombi*). “*Dawn of the Dead* (1978) Photo Gallery.” *IMDB*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077402/mediaviewer/rm86621849>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.

upheld that the violence was crucial to the film’s aesthetic power, “it speaks to our fragility, its shocks you and makes you wake up,” he later said (Porton 5). Unfortunately for Laurel, since its inception the X-rating, as *Night of the Living Dead* distributor Walter Reade told *Variety* in 1969, “for all practical purposes was basically connected with dirty pictures for a large number of the film going US public” (qtd. in Wyatt, “Stigma”

243). Although many distributors were quick to exploit this association ("Stigma" 251), restrictions in terms of audience and exhibition made the X-rating, outside of pornography, relatively uncommon. In 1972, Farber and Changas pointed out that "approximately 50 per cent of US theaters around the country refuse to play any X films . . . and as many as 30 big-city newspapers, along with a number of local television stations, refuse to advertise them" (D15). For many, the X was a "brand of shame," or worse, "box office poison" (D15).

Table 2.2

Leading US Theatre Chains in 1977

THEATRE CHAIN	NO. OF US DOMESTIC SCREENS (approx.)
GENERAL CINEMAS	500
UATC	500
MANN THEATRES	250
COMMONWEALTH	200
ABC THEATRES	185
CINEMETTE	150

Source: Lee Beaupre. "How to Distribute a Film." *Film Comment*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1977, p. 50.

Rubinstein claims that Laurel only received three serious offers for a North American release. The first came from Warner Bros., who proposed \$1 million for an R-rated cut. Filmways Pictures wanted *Dawn* on the same terms, but Warner's offer essentially priced them out (Rubinstein and Martin 2004). The third offer came from Egyptian mogul Salah M. Hassanein and his United

Film Distribution Company (UFDC). Hassanein was then executive vice president of United Artists Theatre Circuit (UATC), formed in 1926 to secure exhibition outlets for United Artists Communications, Inc. (UA), but a separate legal body in its own right (Balio 11). By 1977, UATC was one of the largest theatre chains in the United States (Table 2.2) and UFDC was established to provide an additional stream of content. Overseen by Salah and his son Richard Hassanein, UFDC output was infrequent, and frequently erratic and releases included the West German soft-core porno *The Sinful Bed* (Dir. Gregan, 1973), the Mexican *Jaws* facsimile *Tintorera: Killer Shark* (Dir. Cardona Jr., 1977) and the US feature length sketch-comedy *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (Dir. Landis, 1977).

UFDC was alone in committing to an uncut version of *Dawn*, a fact reflected in its reduced offer of \$500,000, which Laurel willingly accepted. Rather than concede to an X-rating and its association with pornography, Laurel and UFDC planned to release the film unrated. In place of the X, promotional material ran the following warning: "There is no explicit sex in this picture. However there are scenes of violence which may be considered shocking. No one under 17 will be admitted." Throughout the film's first and second run, the Laurel partners continued to do the rounds on the national press circuit, taking any opportunity to restate the film's lack of sexual content, while restating that the film did contain "blood aplenty" (B. Thomas 40). As Rubinstein explained in July 1979 (and not for the first or last time) "no major company will release a film with an X-rating. The flaw in the ratings system is that X carries the connotation of sex. There is no sex in *Dawn of the Dead*. Not even a kiss" (B. Thomas 40).

In *Variety* on 20 June, United Artists called for a new adult grading

distinct from the X, citing the artistic merit of their Pasolini acquisitions *The Canterbury Tales* (1972) and *Arabian Nights* (1974) and UFDC's *Dawn of the Dead* ("UA Argues X" 26). Such public rallying against the X-rating continued in the marketing of independent films well into the 1990s, becoming a key release strategy for Miramax. As Perren details, when a Miramax film such as Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) was given an X-rating, "the company cried foul to the press then used it as a means to gain inexpensive publicity. The company simultaneously exploited the rating by drawing attention to the film's racy content at the same time that it declared the X inappropriate and unfair given the "artsy" nature of the film (*Indie Inc.* 44).

Like Miramax, Laurel's disavowal of the X and its associated "racy content" was eagerly transferred into considerable media attention. By defending the film's more extreme content, Rubinstein was reinforcing the Romero brand, using the director's association with violent horror and *Dawn's* rejection of the ratings system to promise uncensored, licentious thrills; at the same time authenticating the director's anarchic, counterculture persona. If *Dawn of the Dead* were, as Tom Allen predicted, the "biggest cult blockbuster of all time," it was a status carefully nurtured by Rubinstein's shrewd judgement of the marketplace.

Getting an unrated *Dawn of the Dead* onto cinema screens had been a calculated risk for Laurel. From the film's debut at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1978 to its national release, *Dawn* spent nearly a year looking for a US distributor who would protect Romero's directorial vision (domestically at least). On the other hand, Laurel had two legitimate offers for distribution to fall back upon, and Rubinstein contemplated removing some of the film's more graphic material if an R-rated release became their only option (*Document of the Dead*).

Risk was then further offset by partnership with the Hassaneins and UFDC. *Dawn's* lack of a rating threatened restrictions on exhibition and advertising, two factors that drove Warner Bros. and Filmways to demand an R-rating. UFDC on the other hand were a subsidiary of a leading North American cinema chain and had no problem with the film's exhibition. On 20 April, Richard Hassanein opened *Dawn of the Dead* in 200 cinemas across 25 cities, with plans for a saturation release of 500 cinemas depending on the film's initial success ("Italo" 34; Anderson, "Triangle" 16). *Dawn* immediately exceeded expectations and within three weeks flaunted strong box office returns with a reported \$1,490,288, making it the fifth highest grossing film in the week ending 2 May 1979 ("50 Top-Grossing" 45). This bright start convinced other exhibitors to run the film and Rubinstein says that in the end only UATC's major competitor General Cinemas refused to play it (Perry 32). By the final count, *Dawn of the Dead* had a collective worldwide box office of over \$55 million ("*Dawn of the Dead* (1979) - Financial").

In June 1979, Rubinstein claimed "the key to our success is the creative control we've had in the past. I believe that's simply good business" ("Romero-Rubinstein" 26). As he makes explicit, Romero's "creative control" was part of a "good business" plan, one facet of a corporation strongly driven by entrepreneurial acumen and risk management. Although risk management had not yet become an integrated part of business infrastructure in the 1970s,⁵² it nevertheless remained a prerequisite when engaging with any marketplace, particularly a "high-risk" industry such as independent film production. In Sharon Gifford's "Risk and Uncertainty" (2011), she connects risk to Becker's concept of human capital, where "investment in human capital can generate an apparent

⁵² During this period, risk management was mostly associated with insurance buying or hedging financial risk with derivatives (Hunt 289).

increase or decrease in risk aversion, depending on the type of investment made. In either case, those with more knowledge may be apparently willing to take more risks, not because they are less risk averse, but because they have better information” (304). Such "human capital" investment saw Rubinstein take a near-dormant regional production house and transform it into a key player in the independent film sector.

Conclusion

Creative risk-taking is seen as an essential component of independent film production, even if notions of economic risk management in this sector have been underexplored. How typical Laurel's behaviour was during this period remains to be seen, and this chapter calls for additional scholarship in this area. This said, risk did play a crucial part in Laurel's establishment, dictating method and influencing output. Attraction to risk has been seen as a determining factor in the behaviour of the entrepreneur, yet as Laurel's activities from 1973 to 1979 demonstrate, risk-taking was calculated, offset by investment into human capital, knowledge of the marketplace and strategic partnerships with investors at home and abroad. The demands of the independent "cult auteur" sat in accord with such industry navigation, situated within a business plan that emphasised product differentiation and brand appeal. Inside this infrastructure, Romero's creative output was also flexible, exhibited by two very different versions of *Dawn of the Dead*. Far from a simple objective to "turn Romero loose," Laurel was more diverse, guided by entrepreneurial acumen and risk management, rather than total artistic abandonment.

3

“Camelot is a State of Mind”: Professional Product, Independent Spirit, 1979-1982

The financial success of *Dawn of the Dead* at the national and international box office evidenced a skilful cultivation of the George A. Romero brand. The filmmaker's propensity for divergent, auteurist production had been an impediment to parent company the Latent Image's solvency, yet in the hands of entrepreneur Richard Rubinstein it became an integral part of the Laurel Group's differentiated, and now exceedingly profitable corporate identity. Laurel was mutually beneficial to its partners, a space where independent filmmaking could be a means of personal expression and economic prosperity, each propelling the other and stimulating growth. From Rubinstein's point of view, growth meant legitimacy, a self-made business with the capital to meet competitors on a professional level. For Romero, it meant a larger canvas, not just in terms of scale and budget, but also in terms of the authority to produce a broader range of work. This bore fruit in the company's next feature film *Knightriders*, a \$3 million production that abandoned genre entirely in favour of an apparent autobiographical narrative.

Encompassing a period from 1979 to 1982, this chapter details Laurel's transformation from a privately-owned company into the publicly-owned Laurel

Entertainment, Inc., a metamorphosis that, as close scrutiny of SEC documents reveals, dictated a more formal business infrastructure with greater accountability to a range of investors and stakeholders. I consider how these concessions contradicted Romero's anti-establishment persona, inspecting the company's efforts to harmonise diametric entreaties for "anarchic" creativity and professional responsibility. This chapter also survey Laurel's renegotiation of its corporate identity through engagement with the press and Romero's filmic output. In this regard, I analyse *Knightriders'* autobiographical narrative in the context of the firm's corporate evolution for the first time, proffering a clearer understanding of the film and its thematic intent. A study of Laurel's professionalisation provides a unique platform from which to explore seldom discussed issues of non-Hollywood corporate governance and independent filmmaker (self)image-making.

3.1. Independence with Overheads: Sale of Stock and Professionalisation

Laurel Entertainment, Inc. was established on 14 December 1979 in legal distinction from previous holdings bearing the Laurel name. In November, the domestic box office of *Dawn of the Dead* had risen to around \$16.1 million, giving Romero and Rubinstein the capital needed to float the company on the public stock exchange. On 24 April 1980, underwriters Rosenkrantz, Ehrenkrantz, Lyon & Ross, Inc. listed one million shares of Laurel's common stock for sale at \$3.25 per share, with \$2.95 going directly to Laurel. These shares were sold on a "best efforts" basis and Laurel and their investment bank set the minimum sale at 650,000 (Rosenkrantz et al. 1). Stock was then advertised in *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly* ("Laurel Entertainment Sale #1" 30) and the *Wall Street Journal* that same week ("Laurel

Entertainment Sale #2” 36). By 31 March, Laurel were reporting the sale of 675,000 shares, allowing the company to begin trading on the NASDAQ American stock exchange. This sale of common stock realised proceeds of \$1,852,280 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1980 F-6*).

Taking a firm public “typically refers to when a company undertakes its initial public offering, or IPO, by selling shares of stock to the public usually to raise additional capital. After its IPO, the company will be subject to public reporting requirements and its shares often become listed on a stock exchange” (“Companies, Going Public”). Floating a company on the public stock exchange is an expensive procedure and direct costs include legal fees, audit fees, filing fees with a number of government/regulatory bodies, the cost of printing a sale of stock prospectus and, finally, payment of a percentage of the profits to the underwriters (Bragg 7). The total cost of Laurel’s own public offering (which also included stock insurance) was approximately \$341,470, an amount deducted from their total IPO (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1980 F-6*). Given this expense, questions arise as to why the partners felt public trading was necessary, particularly since the monies earned from *Dawn of the Dead* could theoretically be funnelled back into production of another feature film, allowing the company to maintain a clearer sense of autonomy.

Economists identify corporate growth as a fundamental part of a firm’s organic life cycle. An IPO represents a crucial threshold in this development, moving from private, grassroots entity into a larger, more professional enterprise. Aside from the release of additional capital, issues of risk-reduction also play a part. Gedajlovic et al. observe a number of problems facing the privately-owned “founder-managed firm,” where small-scale businesses often struggle to achieve marketplace legitimacy, finding it difficult to initiate

cooperative ties with skilled colleagues and external distributors. The private firm's lack of transparency can also be a deterrent to potential investors, given it restricts their ability to monitor how their investment is being utilised (903-04). Going public reduces risk by tempering these facets. For Yung-Chih Lien and Shaomin Li, the process of professionalisation that follows the IPO adds further currency, facilitating the recruitment of resources, while enhancing "the firm's productivity and competitiveness" (352).

Bharat A. Jain and Omesh Kini ascertain that it is hard to answer definitively why firms go public, especially given the low-rate of success for post-IPO companies, with one third expected to fail outright (1282-83). Success is dependent on a number of variables, based on size, managerial ownership retention, venture capitalist following, the reputation of the investment bank and risk. Jain and Kini argue that "entrepreneurs need to grow their businesses to a certain efficient scale before attempting to go public, thereby increasing the chance of survival. It also follows that the transition to these states will be dependent on risk" (1293). As we have seen, Rubinstein was both drawn to risk and skilled in managing its effects. Speaking to the *New York Times* in 1982, he boasted of his intent to reduce risk by building Laurel into an efficient business with a five-year plan (Harmetz, "From the Cecil" H25). The success of *Dawn of the Dead* presented a window of opportunity to begin this elaboration, the firm now at an "efficient scale" to formalise growth through an IPO.

Laurel preceded this IPO with a flurry of activity and throughout 1979 the company appeared in the trade papers with a degree of frequency. On 9 May, *Variety* announced that Laurel's next film *Knights* (later retitled *Knightriders*) would be part-financed by United Artists' international division through foreign pre-sales ("*Dawn*" 8). Little over a month later, on 27 June *Variety* ran a larger

report on the company, recording, “with *Dawn* maintaining its b.o. levels, and still facing heavy summer playoff, the Laurel Group partners may be closer to that position of power that they once envied [in the majors]” (“Romero-Rubinstein” 6). Alongside *Knights*, the Laurel founders detailed two additional feature films, including a sequel to *Dawn of the Dead* and a “sci-fi spoof” entitled *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Moon* written by Rudolph Ricci. This marketplace activity included a re-release of *Martin*, repackaged to appeal to arthouse audiences (“Romero-Rubinstein” 26), and the sale of the non-theatrical distribution rights of the firm’s back catalogue to Cinema 5, Ltd.’s 16mm division (“Romero’s” 36).

In Laurel’s 1980 *Sale of Common Stock Prospectus*, the company listed a number of additional projects in various stages of development, each identified for aspiring investors within a specific genre. These nine projects included *Knightriders* (dubbed an “action-fantasy”), *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Moon* (“comedy”), *Day of the Dead* (a “horror-action” sequel to *Dawn*), *Creepshow* (an “anthology horror film”) and *Cat People* (“horror”). Also included on this list was *The Stand* (a “thriller-fantasy” adapted from Stephen King’s best-selling novel of 1980), Italian co-production *Necronomicon* (“thriller-fantasy”), *Gunperson* (“action-western/parody”) and *Out of This Furnace*, a “dramatic” adaptation of Thomas Bell’s 1941 novel concerning immigrant communities in Pennsylvania (Rosenkrantz et al. 15). *Creepshow* and *The Stand* showcased a burgeoning relationship with Stephen King and the prospectus logged that King himself would pen the screenplays to both (Rosenkrantz et al. 15).

This flurry of activity extended into ancillary markets. A *Dawn of the Dead* soundtrack album was released by Varèse Sarabande Records in 1979, an officially licensed board game made by Simulations Publications, Inc. came out in 1978 and novelisations of *Dawn of the Dead* and *Martin*, co-written by

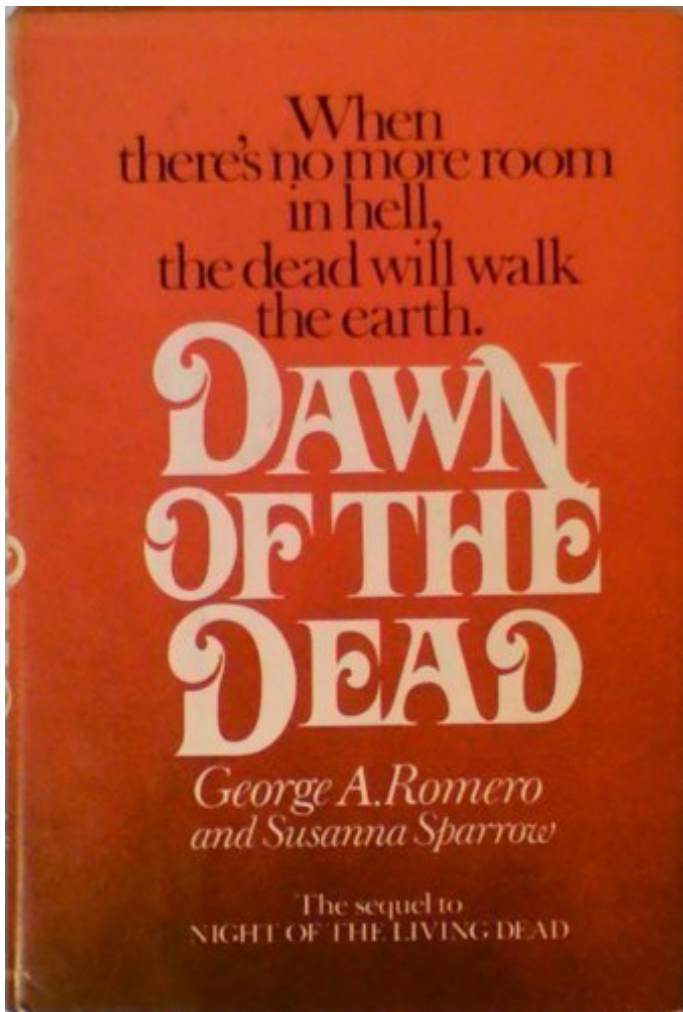


Fig. 3.1. Novelisation of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, published by St Martin's Press. "*Dawn of the Dead*: (1978 Novel)." *Fandom*. [http://zombie.wikia.com/wiki/Dawn_of_the_Dead:\(1978_Novel\)](http://zombie.wikia.com/wiki/Dawn_of_the_Dead:(1978_Novel)). Accessed 26 Mar. 2018.

("The Real Force"). Henry Jenkins records that the successful licensing of *Star Wars* iconography and merchandise re-established the potency of media tie-in products (554). If this could be effective in Hollywood, Laurel proved that the same synergetic augmentation could be applied to the independents.

Ancillary markets would later become a vital revenue for canonical independent filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Kevin Smith. Through his production company View Askew, Smith opened the retail store Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash in 1997, offering a wide selection of tie-in products. Of all

Romero and Susanna Sparrow, were published in 1977 and 1978 respectively (fig. 3.1). George Lucas had famously uncovered the potential of these supplementary markets when he deferred a salary on *Star Wars* in favour of licensing and merchandising rights. According to *The Hollywood Reporter's* Alex B. Block, by the end of 1978, toy manufacturer Kenner had sold more than 40 million officially licensed *Star Wars* action figures for a gross sale of more than \$100 million

people, auteur theorist Andrew Sarris wrote that Smith's "flair for merchandising and recycling the fruits of his labor is one of the reasons I'm betting on him to break out of the low-budget ghetto and into the movie mainstream" ("Kevin Smith"). With his 40 Acres and a Mule production company, Spike Lee cultivated strong-ties with sportswear manufacturer Nike, appearing in and directing several of the corporation's television commercials in the late 1980s. Lee used this association to launch his own retail-clothing store Spike's Joint in August 1990 and *New York Times* reporter Amy Waldman observed "bus loads" of tourists "shelling out serious money for everything from *Mo' Better Blues* memorabilia to leather jackets to *Malcolm X* hats" (620). That Lee would use the Malcolm X quote "by any means necessary" to sell trainers and beanies somehow neatly encapsulates the canonical independent sector as something bold, provocative, political and co-opted.

Aside from additional revenue, in 1979 Laurel's move into ancillary markets, alongside the development of several new projects and the exploitation of its back catalogue, can be seen in the broader context of its IPO. These activities were widely reported on, and as former SEC attorney Robert G. Heim has written, "to successfully sell its shares to the investing public, a new company must have an exciting 'story' to tell investors about why they should turn over their money to the company" (14). Posturing in the trade and regional press was part of a shrewd business strategy. *Dawn of the Dead* demonstrated Laurel's skill at crafting saleable product and the company's expansion across multiple platforms suggested additional sources of remuneration. Pursuant to its 1981 Form 10-K, taking Laurel public gave the company stability and proceeds from the sale of common stock were "sufficient to meet the company's cash requirements at least through June 1982" (8).

Lien and Li assert that “an IPO not only represents a crucial threshold in a firm’s development, but it also creates an impetus for firms to change their corporate governance structures” (347). Briefly, corporate governance pertains to the internal organisation of a firm in terms of a system of practices, decision-making and control (Keasey and Wright 291). Changes to corporate governance structures post-IPO are the culmination of the legal demands of becoming a publicly-run enterprise and those necessitated by the desire to expand. Filatotchev et al. record:

The entrepreneurial firm has a narrow resource base. It is, as a rule, owned and controlled by a tightly knit group of founder-managers and/or family investors, and the level of managerial accountability to external shareholders is low. As the firm grows, it requires access to external resources and expertise that may fuel and support this growth, and it opens up its governance system to external investors . . . at this stage, the balance between resources and accountability starts to shift towards greater transparency and increasing monitoring and control by external providers of resources . . . [an IPO] represents a dramatic shift from an entrepreneurial firm to a “professional” firm with a fully developed governance system. (260)

As a legal requirement of the IPO (and as part of a movement towards increased monitoring, transparency and accountability) all publicly-owned firms must install a board of directors as “the common apex of the decision-control system” (Fama and Jensen 311). This said, Rubinstein and Romero were not about to relinquish control so readily. In the election of Laurel’s board, voting

was done on a noncumulative basis, meaning “a shareholder can only vote up to the number of shares s/he owns for a single candidate during the board elections. The result is that a majority shareholder will elect the entire board of directors” (“Noncumulative”). Romero and Rubinstein owned equal shares of 525,000 (approximately 57.5% combined), giving them majority ownership (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 6*). The voting-in of the board took place at Laurel’s first annual shareholders meeting in 1980 and, in the final count, Romero was elected chairman, Rubinstein became vice president of operations, Michael Gornick was appointed staff director of photography and David E. Vogel became vice president of finance. The board was completed by Alvin Rogel, Lester Rosenkrantz (serving as a designee of the underwriters) and Rubinstein’s father Frank (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 11-15*).

This organisational structure appears to have been fairly typical. In his article “Correlates of Board Empowerment in Small Companies” (2007), Jonas Gabrielsson concludes that small companies usually initiate a skeletal board of between three and seven members, comprising of the owner-manager(s), the owner-manager’s family members and outside directors with a personal-professional relationship to the owner-manager, such as a family attorney, a banker or a close friend (689). This type of board is sometimes referred to as a “paper board” or a “rubber-stamp board” and as Gabrielsson explains, “the paper board is constructed just to meet legal requirements [while] the rubber-stamp board meets only to formally approve what the owner-manager has already decided to do” (689). Though boards in SMEs have been described as passive entities (688), they can nevertheless exhibit agency by proffering expertise and by giving advice to the owner-manager as and when required. In this capacity, the board of directors sits in an “advice providing role” and “the

number of board meetings and the need for these board meetings depends on the need for advice” (Dekker et al. 531).

Once Laurel’s board was in place, its first official responsibility was to hire staff members to manage the day-to-day activities of the firm. Unsurprisingly, Romero and Rubinstein became the “two key employees” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1980 F-7*), with Rubinstein as president and treasurer and Romero as corporate secretary (*Moody’s OTC 1980 1137*).⁵³ Rubinstein and Romero entered into a three-year employment agreement with their company and were paid salaries of \$60,000 in the first year, increasing by \$10,000 in each subsequent year of employment. Laurel also afforded substantial life and disability cover and insurance policies of at least \$250,000 for each partner (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1980 F-7*). By 1984, these employment agreements included annual vacation time of six weeks and, for Romero, “an annual expense allowance of \$5000” for which no accounting was required (“Exhibit 10.5” 8-9).

Laurel’s salaried roster of employees included Michael Gornick and David E. Vogel. Since 1973, Gornick had been a key collaborator, working as post-production supervisor for Latent Image and later becoming Romero’s director of photography on *Martin* and *Dawn of the Dead*. A determined “Jack of all trades,” Gornick was also a director and in 1975 helmed *The Winners* episodes “I’m Back: The Rocky Bleier Story” and “Thank God I’m a Country Boy: Terry Bradshaw.” Vogel joined the firm in 1979, by his own account simply turning up at Laurel’s Fort Pitt Blvd. offices and expressing a desire to “work six-months for free doing whatever they needed him to—sorting mail, answering

⁵³ A corporate secretary “is responsible for assuring the company stays in compliance with both regulatory and statutory requirements.” Duties cover record-keeping, minute-taking, overseeing the orientation of new employees and executing all of the creative and strategic agendas of the board (Weiss).

phones, anything” (E. Cook).

Apocryphal or not, Vogel’s comments recall the relaxed, post-Fordist infrastructure that pre-dated Laurel’s public trading. Tom Dubensky also remembers a *laissez faire* recruitment policy, which required nothing more than a display of willing and knowledge of Laurel’s business address (Dubensky 2016). Over the next decade, as Laurel built strong relationships with a number of regional filmmakers, talent was typically hired film-to-film, rather than on a permanent basis (Harrison 2018).⁵⁴ Such practices were again part of Rubinstein’s canny offset of risk. Each film or television show was delegated to a separate subsidiary company, these “single purpose entities” protecting the parent from liabilities and financial failure and legally accountable for the production as a whole. By 1981, Laurel subsidiaries included Laurel-Knights, Inc., initiated to produce *Knightriders*, Laurel-Show, Inc. to produce *Creepshow* and Laurel-Moon, Inc. for *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Moon* (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 1*).⁵⁵ During a production year, staffing could rise to up to 70 personnel (*Moody’s OTC 1986 1932*), yet responsibility to these employees was limited to a Laurel subsidiary and a fixed-term contract that expired with that production. Gornick and Vogel remained the only permanent members of staff during these formative stages of Laurel’s IPO.

Despite his comments, David Vogel was far more than just another of Laurel’s waifs and strays. Like Rubinstein, he was a Columbia business school

⁵⁴ Laurel frequently employed the regional production services of the Image Works and founders John Harrison, Pasquale Buba and Dusty Nelson worked for Romero and Rubinstein in a number of capacities from *The Winners* onward (Harrison 2018).

⁵⁵ Also incorporated into a separate legal entity was Laurel’s studio space and equipment, officially owned by the subsidiary Laurel-Communications, Inc. In 1981, Laurel-Communications “completed the installation of a new \$150,000 post-production and editing facility” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 1*). Aside from studio space, 247 Fort Pitt Blvd. housed fifth-floor offices, which by 1984 cost the company \$900 on a month-to-month basis. Not included was “the area beneath the stairway at a monthly rental of \$50 [and] the area opposite the utility sink and bathroom at \$50 per month” (“Exhibit 10.10” 2).

graduate and, as Laurel made clear to shareholders, had previously served as a management consultant at Booz, Allen and Hamilton, one of the largest consultancy firms in the US (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981* 15). Vogel was hired as the company's first "professional manager," that is, a high-level employee trained in management rather than in the company's particular product or market (Schein 24-25). The business expertise of the professional manager presents a number of advantages to the firm, bringing a degree of objectivity to decision-making and leading corporate activities for the good of the shareholders, not the personal incentives of the owner-founder (Daily and Dalton 27). This would create tensions between Vogel and Romero in the years to follow.

Vogel's presence allowed Rubinstein opportunity to focus on the numerous film and television packages Laurel was juggling at that point (Gange, *Zombies* 144). Vogel's role soon expanded beyond vice president of finance to include aspects of film production and, by 1984, to the corporate secretary tasks previously governed by Romero. In terms of production, Vogel replaced Rubinstein as the on-set producer (aka the line producer), granting him authority over the day-to-day organisational demands of filming. E.L. Honthamer explains that the line producer is "the budget-scheduling expert who supervises all the administrative, financial and technical details of the production," on set to ensure that the project runs on time and on budget and, if necessary, to mediate the sometimes-conflicting demands of the director, the cast and the crew (2-3). Vogel appeared to welcome such responsibilities, displaying an ambition that by 1993 placed him as president of the Walt Disney Motion Picture Group.

Vogel's supervisory role can be seen as another step in the firm's move

towards a formalised infrastructure based on mainstream industrial standards. *Knightriders* was, in the words of Michael Gornick, the “first of [Laurel’s] big budget films” (Axl and Jscott) and the increased scale brought about an increased scrutiny from outside parties. Employment of professional talent on *Knightriders* meant dealing with Hollywood unions such as the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) for the first time, something Romero had previously avoided to facilitate a looser, more improvisational shooting schedule (Auty 28-29). Janet Wasko recognises Hollywood as a “highly unionized” industry and Laurel now had to contend with strong, potentially prohibitive regulations concerning minimum salary (known as scale), working conditions, hours worked and residual payments, etc. (41-42).⁵⁶ Ironically, *Knightriders*’ principal photography took place during a SAG strike beginning 21 July 1980, and shooting was only allowed to continue because Laurel had not received the sixty-days’ notice required to halt operations. *Knightriders* actress Christine Forrest recalls that a number of SAG members felt uncomfortable working during the industrial action, creating an on-set disharmony incongruous with the family-dynamic typically purported by Laurel crewmembers (Romero et al. 2013).

Away from union concerns, Laurel now had other external partners to consider. In another first for the company, *Knightriders* went into production with a domestic distribution deal already in place, with UFDC stepping in to provide half of the \$3.5 million budget (“AFI Catalog”). This became the first of a three-picture deal with UFDC. According to UFDC president Richard Hassanein, this deal covered the domestic release of *Knightriders*, a second film of Laurel’s

⁵⁶ Ed Lammi says that this system of employing SAG actors was still in place on subsequent Laurel productions. In this case, though all the onscreen talent would have been union, the “below-the-line” employees (i.e. the teamsters, the technical staff and the behind-the-camera crew) would not be. In fact, some of the above-the-line crewmembers, including the director and producer, were also non-union, allowing a degree of freedom in regard to scheduling (Lammi 2018).

choosing and a sequel to the highly-profitable *Dawn of the Dead* (Karr 14). Under these terms, filming for this sequel could begin no later than 18 January 1985 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 2*). Romero would receive \$100,000 for three screenplays, with an additional \$100,000 in director's fee. Richard Rubinstein earned \$100,000 in producing fees. These payments would increase by \$50,000-\$150,000 each if the films received a net profit (Rosenkrantz et al. 18). This investment granted UFDC approval over screenplay, Romero as director and Rubinstein as producer. No project would be given the greenlight unless a representative of UFDC signed off on all three aspects (Rosenkrantz et al. 18).

UFDC was clearly attracted to the sequel rights to *Dawn of the Dead*, but Laurel's professionalisation was another facet when courting such potential investment partnerships. The firm's IPO and its responsibilities to shareholders implied trustworthiness, presenting a serious-minded, fully capable business partner that a distributor such as UFDC could "bet on." Cara Reed writes that a central facet of professionalisation is a firm's "legitimization claims," becoming most useful "as a resource and branding strategy . . . rather than an institutional process by which to govern an occupational domain" (3). Magali Sarfatti Larson notes, "most professions provide intangible goods: their product, in other words, is only formally alienable and inextricably bound to the person and personality of the producer. It follows, therefore, that *the producers themselves have to be produced* if their products or commodities are to be given a distinctive form" (14).

Changes in Laurel's corporate governance presented an industrially legitimate entity with a capacity to do business at the highest level. Kevin James Vella and T.C. Melewar acknowledge that "through a *strong, distinct, inimitable,*

and immediately recognizable identity, firms attain their strategic objectives and gain sustainable competitive advantage over rivals” (8). Drawing on previous data, Simões et al. point to a strong link between “a favourable corporate image or identity and superior business performance. In addition, there are studies on the link between corporate brand and reputation” (153). In these findings, Simões et al. cite the work of Bharadwaji and Menon, who in their empirical testing conclude that a firm’s reputation can simultaneously increase their market share and reduce risk (31). Firms that are in the market of producing “intangible” goods need somehow to “tangibilize” such products in the marketplace. The firm’s reputation/image can act in this capacity, serving as a “proxy for quality and other key buying criteria that cannot be easily evaluated” (Bharadwaji and Menon 23). Laurel’s professionalisation served to enhance its reputation industrially, becoming a strategic tool through which to attract internal shareholders and external investors.

If corporate identity can be defined as “the set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember, and relate to it” (qtd. in Vella and Melewar 9), then Laurel’s own identity was in danger of developing a schism. Attempts to brand the company, and by definition “the personality of the producer,” as a conservative, formally-run entity sat in stark contrast with Romero’s persona as an anti-establishment radical; a persona readily cultivated by the Laurel partners throughout the company’s infancy. More so, as Laurel began this professionalisation, discourse on American independent cinema began to rest upon the sanctification of the amateur. Laurel’s professionalisation placed Romero’s authentic cult status (a status with its own financial restitutions) in jeopardy, and vice versa. Balancing Laurel Entertainment as something both

corporate and anarchic, however incompatible these identities might seem, would require a skilful negotiation by its founders.

3.2. Brand and Anti-Brand: Corporate Partnerships and Identity

Management

Dawn of the Dead's national and international success saw an increased interest in Romero and his work. Reporters applauded his “maverick” status, celebrating a “staunchly independent” filmmaker who refused to “sell out” to corporate Hollywood (Blank, “No Horsing” 10; Honeycutt D23). In keeping with his cult image, in interviews Romero continued to vocalise a mistrust of Hollywood, dismissing it as a quagmire of deal-making and cynical market analysis (Hanners and Kloman 70). For him, the “economic mechanism” of the studios had “nothing to do with movies,” and Romero alleged that real success in Hollywood could only be achieved through a total abandonment of one’s morality (Burke-Block 25). His status as Laurel’s chairman of the board and corporate secretary, where he was beholden to shareholders, professional managers and enjoyed a healthy annual salary with numerous benefits, was not discussed during this period of enhanced engagement with the media.

I do not wish to insinuate that Romero’s distaste for Hollywood was anything other than an accurate reflection of his feelings. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the usefulness such rhetoric had, factual or otherwise, to Laurel Entertainment at that moment in its development. Extratextual engagement not only boosted Laurel’s IPO (another facet in generating an “exciting story to tell investors”), but also granted a platform from which to restate Romero’s brand identity. Laurel’s relationship with public relations firm PMK is further evidence of this self-conscious approach to identity

management. Aside from Romero, PMK possessed an enviable roster of A-list clients, including Woody Allen, Robert Redford, Tom Hanks and Chevy Chase. Michael Cieply of the *Los Angeles Times* regards the PR firm as essential in helping “the client control how his or her image will be affected by the selling of a particular movie” (20). Control in the case of Romero meant separating his valued cult image from the realities of his corporate activities.

This separation was crucial. As Joe Tompkins writes, Romero’s brand situated him as a “vanguard director whose supposedly distinctive countercultural approach revolutionized horror by issuing a radical challenge to society . . . Romero’s reputation promises audiences an authentic cult experience” (207, 208). Romero proudly emphasised authenticity through his regional distancing, frequently painting this space as something prescriptively amateur; his films made by an informal “troupe” of friends whose primary motivation was a shared love of the movies (Yakir, “Knight” 45).

A coalescence of amateurism and authenticity is common in writings on the independent sector, where critics stress the “grassroots” context of filmmaking—the “amateur actors” (Bettendorf 24), the “young Americans” at the helm (Jacobs, “Reports” 59).⁵⁷ Writing in 1981, Austin Lamont observed in independent filmmakers Robert M. Young (*Alambrista!*, 1977), Victor Nuñez (*Gal Young 'Un*), John Hanson and Rob Nilsson (*Northern Lights*, 1978) “a conviction that makes them tenacious in reaching their goals. Filmmaking is not their jobs, it is their need. They do it because they have to” (16). Numerous independent filmmakers have also positioned their work in this manner. Jim

⁵⁷ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, critical focus on the first-time independent filmmaker was often based on a desire to assist growth in the sector. *American Film's* special report and Austin Lamont’s article “Independents Day” (both 1981) paid close attention to the challenges facing the first-time director, mapping out the industrial terrain and pointing towards the state, private and overseas bodies that could offer financial support. This attempt to educate aspiring independent filmmakers dates back to the New American Cinema Group (L. Allen 151).

Jarmusch calls himself “an amateur filmmaker, not a professional, in the sense that ‘amateur’ means love of something, for the form” (Tobias). John Cassavetes, meanwhile, famously referred to himself “as a ‘professional’ actor and an ‘amateur’ director” (qtd. in Jacobs, *Hollywood* 28).

Media educator David Buckingham views this as typical of the arts as a whole; the amateur “seen to enjoy a degree of freedom from commercial imperatives, and hence a degree of creativity, that was less available to the professional” (25). At its most straightforward, a professional-amateur dichotomy is easily defined by payment or non-payment, leading James M. Moran to label the perpetual slippage of the term “amateur” from “descriptive economic category . . . into prescriptive aesthetic and ideological judgement” a misuse (66). In the case of Laurel, this “slippage” was beneficial to the firm and its marketplace agenda, masking potential distasteful corporate realities to restate the “authenticity” of Romero’s cult director image. Theorists must therefore be careful not to take such prescriptive notions of the amateur at face value.

As Romero took to the press to decry a Hollywood run by “dinosaurs” (Gange, “*Creepshow*” 17), behind the scenes Laurel benefited from closer ties to the majors, particularly Warner Bros. The inability to agree to terms on an R-rated *Dawn of the Dead* actually kickstarted a relationship that would continue on into the 1980s, bearing fruit when Warner distributed *Creepshow* in 1982. As per David Cook, Warner’s partnership with such outside production companies was part of “a new industry trend to establish releasing ties with prestigious independent units” (*Lost Illusions* 308). The premature termination of a contract with Francis Ford Coppola’s American Zoetrope⁵⁸ notwithstanding, Warner

⁵⁸ Coppola’s ambition with American Zoetrope was to create an autonomous production unit centred around “talented young people” (qtd. in Chaillet and Vincent 29). This was well-met by

continued this stratagem with a degree of success, evidenced by subsequent partnerships with Orion Pictures and the Ladd Company (*Lost Illusions* 308). If Laurel were not entirely “prestigious,” the company could at least be seen as a reliable partner, well-versed in the production of commercial genre product.

During this period, Warner was particularly interested in the work of horror novelist Stephen King and approached Laurel to adapt his second book *Salem’s Lot* (1975) to the big screen. By the late-1970s, King was boasting six best-selling novels released over a six-year period (Lawson BR11), well on his way to becoming the “popular culture icon and . . . virtual cottage industry” that he is today (Bailey 91). His first novel *Carrie*, published by Doubleday in 1974, was adapted in 1976 by United Artists and director Brian DePalma, generating around \$14.5 million in US rentals (“*Carrie* (1976) - Financial”). Richard Nowell writes that “robust ticket sales, major academy award nominations, and extensive popular press coverage made *Carrie* one of the highest-profile films of its day” (“There’s More” 127). Warner was already awake to this potential and, three months prior to *Carrie* hitting theatres, Executive Vice President in Charge of Production John Calley personally sent the unreleased manuscript for King’s *The Shining* to director Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick’s adaptation was released in 1980.

The *Salem’s Lot* adaptation was ultimately passed to writer-producer Paul Monash at Warner Bros. Television (WBTV), airing as a two-part miniseries on CBS in November 1979 directed by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*’s (1974) Tobe Hooper. In its stead, on 23 January 1980, Warner and

Warner Bros., who agreed to finance a series of films made under Coppola’s supervision (Farber, “George” 5). Zoetrope’s first film under this arrangement was George Lucas’s *THX 1138* (1970), an avant-garde sci-fi experiment that so displeased Warner executives that they cancelled the contract and demanded a total return of their investment (Chaillet and Vincent 30). Despite American Zoetrope’s tumultuous history, it admirably still survives, in some capacity, to this day, remaining an important and influential figure in the history of American independent cinema.

Laurel entered into an agreement to develop *Cat People*, a film based on an original screenplay by Michael Laughlin and Bill Condon⁵⁹ and not a remake of Jacques Tourneur's 1942 film of the same name. That Romero's *Cat People* failed to materialise did not dissuade Warner from entering a bidding war with Universal and Paramount for the domestic rights to *Creepshow* ("WB Has Domestic" 3). *Creepshow* was originally financed by UFDC as part of the three-picture deal with Laurel, yet the Hassaneins, not unwisely, took advantage of studio interest in the hope of a more expansive, and therefore profitable, nationwide release (Martin, "A Casual Chat" 22). Under Warner's charge, *Creepshow* was held back to accommodate a revised ad campaign, and Romero used this time to cut the film by seven minutes and to convert to a Dolby Stereo soundtrack. Warner was confident enough in the film to give it a saturation release and *Creepshow* hit 1042 theatres in the United States and Canada on 10 November 1982 (Reardon 80).

This prolonged courtship with Warner did little to temper Romero's disdain for the majors, instead becoming another vessel through which to exhibit anti-establishment credentials. Discussing *Salem's Lot*, Romero derided the corporate thinking that led Warner to suggest the project in the first place. As he told it, Warner executives came to him after seeing *Martin* at the Utah/US Film Festival in 1978, and "in typical studio fashion they reasoned that *Martin* was about a vampire in a small town, Steve had just written *Salem's Lot*, which was vampires in a small town, so they thought we should meet!" (Fitch). Similarly, in 1981, Romero explained that *Cat People* had been abandoned

⁵⁹ In their collaborations on *Strange Behavior* (Dir. M. Laughlin, 1981) and *Strange Invaders* (Dir. M. Laughlin, 1983) the director-writer partnership of Laughlin and Condon showcased a fondness for genre and 1950s science-fiction pastiche. How *Cat People* fit into this proclivity is unknown. Condon later became famous as the director of *Gods and Monsters* (1998), *Dreamgirls* (2006) and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1* and *Part 2*, released in 2011 and 2012 respectively.

after going “through the typical studio process of a couple of script drafts and blah-blah-blah . . . it became one of those development deals that never happened. So it’s not that I resist studios in the right situation. I don’t need a studio” (Martin, “George Romero” 33). Again, there is no reason to suggest that Romero’s distaste for the studios was inauthentic,⁶⁰ but his independent status was no longer as straightforward as he intimated.

Romero bragged that his independence allowed impunity from Hollywood decision-making, yet Warner’s investment into Laurel strongly stimulated corporate growth. The “pay or play” deal on *Cat People* agreed that Laurel would receive a development fee to “supervise revisions of the existing script by a writer acceptable to them,” payable whether the film went into production or not (Rosenkrantz et al. 18-19). If the film had gone into production, Laurel would have been contracted to receive a total of \$300,000 plus 15% of the net profits (19). The decision not to go ahead meant Laurel only received around \$20,000 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 F-12*). Though this amount might seem minimal, when taken alongside income earned on short-term interest-bearing securities, this was the company’s only source of revenue for the fiscal year ending 31 March 1981 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 8*).

Good relations with Warner Bros. paid off more substantially on *Creepshow*. Aside from the enhancements made to the film’s release (in terms of the scale of distribution, the revised ad campaign, the space made for additional post-production work and the inclusion of a Dolby Stereo soundtrack), Laurel received \$541,577 in a deal that included the sale of cable, cassette and TV rights down the line (“Laurel Entertainment Out” 4; “WB Has Domestic” 32). Deferred until the fiscal year ending 31 March 1983, these

⁶⁰ Bill Condon has corroborated this frustrating repetition of “meetings and schedules” on *Cat People* (Swires 43).

earnings allowed Laurel to report its first year of positive net income since its IPO. This increase in revenue was entirely attributed “to the completion and delivery of the feature film *Creepshow* during the first quarter of fiscal 1983. *Creepshow* was responsible for all of the revenue recognized by the company during fiscal 1983” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1983* 15).

On 7 July 1982, *Variety* reported that Laurel had “accrued additional revenues of \$1,062,500 and corresponding liabilities of \$383,300 in connection with the film,” propelling the company out of the development stage (“Laurel Entertainment Out” 4). A development stage company “is one in which principal operations have not commenced or principal operations have generated an insignificant amount of revenue” (Georgiades 12.01). Such entities are subject to greater scrutiny and disclosure regulations (Posner). Moving out of the development stage is therefore a major step forward in a company’s life-cycle. As Rubinstein told shareholders in 1982, “having withstood the long inventory cycle associated with the making of *Creepshow*, we enter our third year as a public corporation, no longer as a development stage enterprise but as a productive business entity in an industry with exciting profit potential” (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1982* 4). Laurel’s deal with Warner was significant in “enhancing the company’s reputation as a recognized independent producer of quality theatrical motion pictures” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1983* 3).

Equally important to Laurel was Warner’s suggestion to collaborate with Stephen King. Romero derided this proposal as an example of “typical” Hollywood thinking, but King soon became a major partner in their enterprise, penning the screenplay for *Creepshow* and selling the company the film rights to *The Stand*. Rights to the latter were renewed until October 1983 and King himself worked on several drafts of the screenplay (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1982* 2).



Fig. 3.2. Warner Bros. US Poster for *Creepshow*.

“*Creepshow* (1982) Photo Gallery.” *IMDB*.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083767/mediaindex?ref_=t_pv_mi_sm. Accessed 26 Mar. 2018.

combination—with a screenplay and offering them to a financing source in order to enhance the transaction” (80). Apropos of this packaging, *Creepshow* posters and trailers relayed the dual credits of its “masters of terror and the macabre” (fig. 3.2), belaying a growing corporate influence on Romero’s output.

That Romero publicly downplayed the importance of these transactions is not surprising. As discussed in Chapter Two regarding the mythologisation and branding of offscreen production (Mayer et al. 2), Romero used this space

King’s involvement was further indication of the company’s legitimacy and this partnership was encouraged by talent agents Adams, Ray and Rosenberg, Inc. who, on 25 April 1981, entered into a two-year agreement with Laurel for domestic representation (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 5*). The agency specialised in “packaging” talent, which, as co-founder Lee G. Rosenberg explained, is “the process of assembling several creative elements—director or producer or star or any

to affirm shared values with a subcultural audience, something John Caldwell views as equally typical: “‘creatives’ can spike the value of their own personal brand by mocking or dismissing the prestige institutional brands that launched their careers. In this way, creator brands frequently pose as institutional anti-brands” (206). Although mainstream institutions played no part in launching Romero’s career, Caldwell’s reading does reflect the filmmaker’s disavowal of Warner and the studio system. In 1980, Laurel’s professionalisation made this identity-management more complicated. Having used Romero’s “anti-brand” as a way of authenticating cult/counterculture output, Laurel also needed to present a positive, formalised brand image that would be proportionately attractive to external business partners and investors.

To manage these divergent identities, Rubinstein’s visibility in the press increased. Here, a disparity between co-founders was strongly enforced, playing on traditional, stereotypical notions that segregate the creative and the commercial. On 7 November 1982, Aljean Harmetz’s *New York Times* profile piece on Laurel entitled “From the Cecil B. DeMilles of Pittsburgh”⁶¹ depicted the partnership as a kind of marriage of convenience, a union between such different people that they “don’t even like the same films” (H15). Rubinstein, we are told, is a business school graduate with a “five-year” plan, while according to a quote from Michael Gornick, “George’s chief characteristic is anarchy” (H15, H25). This incongruence was also observed in their separate working spaces in Pittsburgh and New York; the former apparently facilitating Romero’s creative autonomy, the latter a strategic corporate headquarters from which Rubinstein could conduct business (H25). Even so, Rubinstein makes it clear

⁶¹ This title is drawn from a quote by Rubinstein and amusingly situates the Laurel partners as two parts of a bodily whole—as if American cinema’s most famous producer-director had been revived, bisected and sent off to work in separate offices on the East Coast.

that their skillsets complement each other, stating, “as a practical matter, I give up my authority in the creative area 100 percent except as regards to budget and George gives up his authority in the business area 100 percent” (H15). Romero’s position as corporate secretary, as one example, contradicts such neat compartmentalisation.

Away from the national and regional newspapers (and, indeed, the trade papers where Rubinstein appeared with a degree of frequency), the producer engaged with a wide array of publications, including specialist magazines with a fannish eye on genre. In an interview with science fiction magazine *Starburst* in 1982, Rubinstein echoed his familiar summation of the partnership, telling Tony Crawley, “we don’t covet what each other does. I don’t tell George how to direct his pictures. He doesn’t tell me how to draw contracts . . . I see my job as providing George with the brush, palette, paint and canvas” (“*Creepshow*” 48). Rubinstein goes on to say that during production he was simply there to “represent the clock ticking away” on set (“*Creepshow*” 48); a responsible hand behind Romero’s artistic impulses.

On the surface, chatter about contract negotiations and book-keeping in fan magazines such as *Starburst* may seem counterproductive, a potentially unappealing context in which to discuss one of the genre’s most lauded cult auteurs. But Rubinstein’s business perspective again served a wider purpose. Broadly speaking, it offered a consistency of their image across medias, affirming Laurel’s corporate identity as a professionally run enterprise that championed artistic risk-taking. Additionally, Rubinstein used fan magazines to showcase his own shared values with Romero and, not least, Romero aficionados. In a second interview with *Starburst*, he joked that “New York is the business office. Pittsburg [sic] is the production office. Hollywood is penance”

(Crawley, "Richard P." 36). Geoff King identifies this self-professed "shared value" as common amongst independent film executives, who stress that their skill in business is lent through a passion for the medium and creative enterprises, not as something "more detached and purely commercially minded" (*Indiewood, USA* 30). In public, the partners repeatedly separated the industrial and creative sides of their infrastructure, at the same time remaining in unison (and ideological superiority) in regard to the authenticity of their independent status.

As we have seen, the production of media goods is determined by a number of economic and creative factors, frequently hard to unpick were one ends and the other begins. Yet Laurel's careful management of its corporate identity demonstrates how useful a clear separation of these factors could be in regard to branding. Rubinstein's media visibility allowed Laurel to present itself as a responsible corporate entity without sacrificing Romero's sellable image as an anti-establishment cult filmmaker. In reality, these "autonomous bits of turf" (Harmetz, "From the Cecil" H15) were not so clear cut. In the press, Romero's business responsibilities were downplayed, while the company's relationship with Warner Bros. was refracted to either affirm Romero's "anti-brand" or to emphasise corporate legitimacy, as and when required. Extratextual engagement by both partners created a holistic corporate identity based on divergent, yet mutually beneficial skills. Selling this identity of "professional independence" was central to Laurel's concerns following its IPO. Done with forthrightness in their engagement with the media, it was also mediated more subtly through artistic work of this period, notably 1981's *Knightriders*.

3.3. Case Study: *Knightriders* and Corporate Identity

Laurel's professionalisation was pivotal to the firm's post-IPO identity. Yet even scholars with an interest in Romero's industrial manoeuvrings tend to overlook the importance of this development. In his otherwise insightful analysis of the American horror auteur, Craig Bernardini recognises the "self-fashioning" that played a large part in Romero's success, marking an appealing display of dissidence and ordinariness, simply a "small businessman" with something to say about his country (176). This blue-collar identity is central to Bernardini's assessment, writing:

[Romero's] legend and legacy are due as much to the success of Laurel, the company he founded with Richard Rubinstein in 1973, as to his films. The financial vicissitudes of being an independent in an age of conglomerates—digging up investors, deferring payments, and all the other seat-of-your pants solutions independents find to get films made—certainly account for the themes that have obsessed Romero throughout his career: his quixotic exuberance for tilting at the windmills of corporate power (a trope best represented by Billy in *Knightriders*). (177)

This colourful overview of the firm may have been true in the days of Laurel Tape & Film and the Laurel Group, but by 1980 Laurel Entertainment was much changed. Following its IPO, the company was now a publicly run enterprise with \$2 million in the bank, responsibilities to shareholders and lucrative partnerships with distributors such as UFDC and Warner Bros.

Romero's identity as a "seat-of your-pants" independent "in an age of conglomerates" continued to serve as a context for his persona and work long

after it was actually the case. As with Bernardini's above summation, this was seen most prominently in the reception of *Knightriders*, a film repeatedly framed as Romero's autobiographical reflection upon his own independent status (Gange, *Zombies* 108). Standing in (onscreen) for a film crew, *Knightriders*' follows an unconventional renaissance fair and their "attempts to resist the lure of commercialism" (Stevens 13). According to *Fangoria*'s Bob Martin (in an interpretation consistent with reviews elsewhere), the troupe's leader, the self-professed King Billy, or Sir William the Knight (Ed Harris), "could be viewed as Romero, the king of independents . . . determined to see things his own way, regardless of the hardships" ("*Knightriders*" 66). At the time, Romero hesitantly admitted to identifying with Billy (Blank, "No Horsing" 10), later proclaiming with more conviction that *Knightriders* is "emotional and a bit autobiographical. It's me saying, 'I won't compromise'" (Alexander 47).

An understanding of Laurel's professionalisation, however, reveals this autobiographical reading to be far from straightforward. By keeping in mind the firm's corporate activities, *Knightriders* becomes less about a dogmatic refusal to compromise (symbolising the bold endeavours of a "determined indie artist vs. the system") and more pointedly about the very nature of compromise in real-world terms. In this context, the film can be seen as either a justification for Laurel's corporate growth or as Romero's attempt to work through and discuss these changes artistically. From either perspective, *Knightriders* seeks to reinforce, or perhaps recontextualise, Romero's authenticity as a counter-culture figure.

To re-orientate the film in this regard, it will be advantageous to first summarise the narrative: *Knightriders* follows a travelling "living history" group whose major selling point is that they perform medieval jousts on motorcycles

rather than on horseback. More than just a show, the troupe is a way of life, a figurative Arthurian roundtable based on an equality of race, class, colour, sexuality and gender unavailable in the mainstream society they have left behind. For Billy, this is a space free from moral or ethical compromise, preferring to live “hand-to-mouth” on the road than accept the corrupt rule of law and commercialism that epitomises his view of the United States. During the film’s opening performance, Billy rejects the advice of Morgan, “the infamous black knight” (Tom Savini), to pay a bribe to a local deputy sheriff threatening foreclosure. As a result, Billy is thrown in jail and made to watch as his friend Bagman (Don Berry) is savagely beaten in the adjacent cell. In spite of the pain, Bagman laughs off this assault, strengthened by the sense of community that awaits their release, a community he regards as an unimpeachable “Camelot” fortified by Billy’s idealism.

This community is, however, on the verge of collapse. Aside from the constant threat of financial destitution, Billy’s rising dogmatism is alienating him from the group. He believes that theirs is a spiritual existence and his most trusted advisor is a magician and former medical doctor called, appropriately enough, Merlin (Brother Blue). After losing in battle in the film’s opening (in the film these jousts are unscripted, though strongly safeguarded and based on principles of fair play), a wounded Billy retires to camp and recalls to Merlin his dream of a “black bird.” For Billy, this bird is a mythical entity that he is sure will lead to his destruction. In the meantime, the visceral, death-defying spectacle of their performances⁶² attracts the attention of the sleazy talent agent Bontempi (Martin Ferrero). Bontempi’s offer of representation is brought to Billy through the troupe’s lawyer Steve (Ken Hixon) and promises to double their income and

⁶² Which in many ways parallels the attention-getting violence that became a Romero trademark in films such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Crazies* and *Dawn of the Dead*.

supply expensive new costumes and cycle equipment. Billy is incensed by this offer and rejects it, leading to the following exchange:

STEVE: It's money, Billy. It's all to do with money. Money makes the world go round, even your world.

BILLY: No, it's just getting too tough. It's tough to live by the code. I mean, it's real hard to live for something that you believe in. People try it and then they get tired of it, like they get tired of their diets. Or exercise. Or their marriage. Or their kids. Or their job, or themselves. Or they get tired of their God. You can keep the money you make off this sick world, lawyer, I don't want any part of it.

If this monologue appears to place Romero's ideological distaste for the mainstream directly into the mouth of his protagonist, it is followed by a clearheaded and compassionate response by Bagman, who argues:

BAGMAN: The way I see it is this: you got two separate fights. The one for truth and justice and the American way of life and all that. That's gotta take a backseat to the one for staying alive. You gotta stay alive! Man, you can have the most beautiful ideals in the whole world, but if you die, your ideals are gonna die with you. The important thing is we gotta stay together, we gotta keep the troupe together. And if keeping the troupe going means that we have to take some of this promoter's money, then I say let's take it and get some sleep.

Unable to shake off these words, later that night Billy burns Bontempi's business card and rouses a startled Bagman from his sleep:

BILLY: There's not two different fights. There can't be two different fights. You got to fight for your ideals, and if you die, your ideals don't die. The code that we're living by is the truth. The truth is our code, I can't let people walk on that idea—I can't!

In a Billy as Romero reading of the film, this rejection of compromise can be seen as further evidence of the independent filmmaker's steadfast determination to do the same. In truth (the opaqueness of Billy's response notwithstanding), this rhetoric is delivered by a character whose commitment to "the code" borders on fanaticism. The film positions Billy as a zealot from the beginning, introduced stripped naked and self-flagellating in devout imitation of the knights he idolises. His behaviour is erratic and contradictory. At one point, he demands that "no one goes anywhere in this outfit without my permission," then later breaks-up an undemocratic group meeting because not all of the troupe are in attendance. As his girlfriend Queen Linet (Amy Ingersoll) tells him, "everybody here made a conscious, adult decision to be here. To be with you. When you go crazy, you force them to rethink that decision," a proclamation that becomes true when Morgan and his crew leave with Bontempi. At his most self-righteous, Billy refuses to give an autograph to a wide-eyed young fan, later screaming at Linet, "I'm not trying to be a hero! I'm fighting the dragon!"

In one of the few reviews to explore the negative aspects of this character, Ed Sikov writes, "the extent to which Romero has taken himself to be

half the subject of the tale is fascinating, for it marks him as a director with profound reservations about his own complicity in the construction of his artist-image . . . *Knightriders* is Romero's reflection on his own role as cult leader" (32, 33). In Billy's pageantry (parading around modern-day Pennsylvania dressed as a mythical king) Romero could be seen to address the artificiality of his standing as "king of the independents," an identity that is faintly absurd and largely self-constructed. The monarchical infrastructure of his onscreen knights also recalls the controls he fought for, and won, at Latent Image. The film's reproach of Billy's dictatorial leadership suggests Romero may not have been entirely reconciled with his evisceration of Latent's egalitarian infrastructure. Asked about this self-criticism, Romero concedes this is "only because of the Ed Harris character. And I felt that way about myself, that I was being too demanding or that I didn't need to stick that closely to a code" (Romero 2016).

As Romero's comments imply, Billy need not be understood as Romero's onscreen avatar in an absolute sense. In its focus on community, *Knightriders* is an ensemble and, unlike their king, the troupe is well aware of the real-world concerns that surround them, knowing that overheads must be paid, bikes maintained and that an ear of corn costs 75¢ each (in contrast, Steve chastises Billy for not knowing how much "gas is selling for, or two-by-fours, or hamburgers or anything else"). They enjoy the freedom the commune offers but treat the mythos with irreverence. Morgan, who accidentally took his name from a female character from Arthurian legend, is the most outspoken, joking that he "was never into this King Arthur crap anyway." And as the film progresses, Morgan moves to the centre of the narrative. Though he is narcissistic, adulterous and ambitious (he openly desires Billy's throne), Morgan the black knight is far from the antagonist of legend, he is simply Billy's opposite, material

as opposed to spiritual and willing to make compromises where necessary.



Fig. 3.3. Morgan the Black Knight. Still from *Knightriders*. Arrow Video, 2013.

It is Billy's extremism and devout suffrage that pushes Morgan to leave the troupe and start a more commercial enterprise with himself as king, rejecting Billy's crown as a "crown of thorns." In Morgan's subsequent career, Romero indulges in an unfiltered attack on mass culture (re Hollywood), reiterating every known stereotype concerning the moral and artistic bankruptcy of the mainstream industry. As a performer, Morgan is decked out in a glittery new armour and made to pose in nothing more than a metal codpiece and black cloak for a degrading photoshoot— "think medieval sex" the photographer yells at him (fig. 3.3). Off camera, Morgan and his followers dive headlong into a world of hedonism: poolside parties, drinking, drugs and motel room groupies. Morgan's relationship with a bourgeois journalist (Amanda Davies) is quickly

revealed as superficial, for her nothing more than a brief interlude until her more affluent partner gets back in town. The shallowness of this existence is erosive, climaxing with in-fighting (“bad craziness” as one-character calls it) and a violent motel room punch up that leaves Morgan morally and spiritually adrift.

At this moment, headlights appear on the highway and Sir Lancelot-proxy Alan (Gary Lahti) rides in from the darkness, come to remind Morgan that “there can only be one king at one time. That’s the law.” Morgan thus returns and is welcomed as a prodigal son, gladly allowed to challenge for the kingship and encouraged by Billy most of all. His ultimate victory is hard fought and, after being crowned king, Morgan rejects the deal with Bontempi, telling the agent, “y’know those contracts? Burn ‘em, baby” (something Romero was unable, or unwilling, to do in reality). Now without a throne, Billy takes to the road, seeking out and humiliating the corrupt cop who beat Bagman and handing his broadsword to the autograph-seeking fan he previously refused. In a final moment of transcendence, Billy imagines himself a real knight errant riding on horseback. Lost in this reverie, he loses sight of the road and collides with an oncoming truck. The film closes with the troupe gathered at Billy’s funeral, saying a final goodbye before being led by Morgan on to another town.

In this conclusion, a singular correlation between Romero and Billy is somewhat confusing. Examined literally, does Billy’s death point towards a future for Laurel Entertainment without Romero’s totemic presence? This is, of course, entirely possible and would in fact come to pass in the mid-1980s. Yet at this early stage in the company’s development, with its IPO reaffirming independence and generating more creative possibilities than ever before (including this, his first non-horror film in almost a decade) this seems an entirely pessimistic disparity. Sikov regards the film’s use of allegory as equally

perplexing, specifically unsure what to make of the “oblique symbolism” of a silent Native American biker with a black bird painted on his armour who becomes Billy’s squire in the second half of the film (33).

Taken in the context of Laurel’s corporate development, Billy’s “last ride” and the presence of the black bird and his squire becomes more lucid. Handing over his crown can be seen as the moving from one stage to the next, the dogmatic idealism once necessary to their independence now replaced by a “new reign of pragmatism and sanity” represented by Morgan (Sikov 32). If it’s easy to see parallels between Morgan and Rubinstein, Morgan is also Romero, a man who has seen first-hand the way the mainstream works (Laurel’s own flirtations with Hollywood and a then active relationship with Warner) and found his determination to remain independent renewed. Although the *Knightriders* troupe is often deemed a stand-in for Romero’s own group of collaborators⁶³ (Stevens 13), their measured response to Billy’s fanaticism allows Romero as screenwriter to discuss and redefine his ideas about independence, written during a time when profound infrastructural changes were taking place at the company he co-founded. In the above exchange between Billy, Steve and Bagman, as Romero’s reservations about growth and professionalisation are made plain, so too is a realist acceptance that this process might be necessary.

Onscreen, the knights can only move forward when zealous leadership has been buried. In this sense, Billy is not Romero, but a representation of something symbolic. This is emphasised by the character’s affinity with magic and the foreshadowing of the black bird. As his physical leadership becomes increasingly problematic, what he represents remains fundamental to the troupe,

⁶³ Adding to this interpretation is the fact that a number of Laurel’s behind-the-camera personnel appear onscreen playing the knights, including John Harrison, Christine Forrest and guru Tom Savini.

a dream to be remembered and kept in-mind, though not to the point of destruction. Merlin reminds us that magic is not something otherworldly or mystical, “magic’s got to do with the soul,” an internalised desire for self-fulfilment and independence that Billy ultimately passes down to the group.

On Billy’s death, his now knighted squire returns to the group, standing amongst the collective as a silent reminder of the former king’s ideals. At this moment, it is tempting to regard Billy as a literal representation of the “independent spirit” critics repeatedly point us to in their analysis of this sector. And how Romero articulates this spirit is fascinating, becoming part of a wider image management and reorganisation of Laurel’s corporate identity.

Knightriders foregrounds authenticity, ridiculing mass culture and presenting an at times genuinely romantic vision of a life apart from everyday compromise. But it is a film about compromise and the way compromise can be made while remaining true to a fundamental principle. As Laurel’s professionalisation threatened to pull them away from Romero’s authentic-independent identity, *Knightriders* became a broader mediation of (or, at the very least, a meditation on) that changing identity. *Knightriders* begins by showing an independent ideology at its most pious and ends with the most radical representative of this creed buried and left behind. The subsequent decision to move forward pragmatically, with Billy’s ethos, or spirit, still in mind, is therefore entirely justified.

Conclusion

By 1982, Laurel was no longer a “seat-of-your-pants” regional independent. The company’s IPO transformed it into a professionalised production unit with a formalised system of corporate governance, demonstrating responsibilities to

shareholders, stronger ties to bicoastal centres and a binding contract with a distributor-exhibitor. Professionalisation offered a base from which to produce auteur-driven, non-genre independent film, yet sat at odds with Romero's image as a cult filmmaker. Rhetoric surrounding cult and the independent auteur is therefore both inadequate and of value, limited in terms of theoretical analysis (where identity is complex and, to a degree, self-consciously managed), while useful for firms or filmmakers looking to craft a saleable (anti)brand. Seen in the context of Laurel's corporate changes, the film *Knightriders* becomes a fascinating articulation on Romero's evolving industry status, relocating his "radical" identity within a pragmatic model for long term survival. However, as we have seen, the film industry, and the independent sector in particular, was far from constant. Though Romero may have made peace with Laurel's need to grow, additional adjustments, both internal and at large, would have profound ramifications on his ideas of agency and his place within the firm.

4

The Once and Future King: Agency and the Limits of Control, 1981-1985

Kris R. Cohen's summary of agency in relation to media studies notes the tendency towards "self-consciously political theories of agency, as these have done the most work to conceptualize what agency is and how it works." Considering issues of society, culture, subjectivity, representation and embodiment, Cohen's online article "agent/agency" proposes that "agency is a theory of power." This brief is shared by Sarah Buss, who writes, "in order to act, one must initiate one's actions. And one cannot initiate one's actions without exercising one's power to do so." Stepping beyond a focus on political sociology, Thomas Schatz calls for an examination of human agency in relation to media industries, specifically asking if there is space for individual authorship amongst the "industrial machinery" and external intermediaries that are increasingly brought to the fore by this critical subfield ("Film Studies" 40). Laurel Entertainment's manifesto to facilitate the auteur may seem like an answer in the affirmative, but as we have seen George A. Romero's auteur status was complex, part of a wider industrial negotiation that included risk management, professionalisation and corporate branding.

Exploring a period from 1981 to 1985, this chapter centralises issues of

agency. This timeline will take us from the release of *Knightriders*, in many ways the zenith of Romero's creative ambitions, to his exit from the company on 19 June 1985, a decision that formally ended the firm's original auteurist mandate. I begin by framing Laurel within a wider institutional context, looking closely at agency in relation to marketplace trends and the implications on the company's project development and ambitions (an examination that traverses a heterogenous 1980s independent sector). The causal delimitations of these changes are measured in regard to the firm's external relationships, contrasting Laurel's agency to that of its distributor-partner UFDC. Against this background, I appraise the material activities that dictated the details of the text, expressly Romero's final film for the company *Day of the Dead*. I conclude by reviewing "agency theory" as a particular principle of economics, allowing a clearer understanding of the "agency relationship" between Laurel's co-founders, not least in terms of the "conflicting objectives of the individual participants" (Jensen and Meckling 307) that culminated in Romero's departure.

4.1. "Achievement of Choice": Portfolios and Project Development

Through their engagement with the press, George Romero and Richard Rubinstein defined Laurel Entertainment as an equal partnership between disparate individuals, projecting a corporate identity of professionalism and anti-establishment cult authenticity, seemingly without contradiction. How this compartmentalisation of creative and commercial interests worked on a practical level is less clear. On paper, Romero was the firm's creative supervisor and in charge of all of Laurel's projects in development. Beyond *Knightriders*, his desire to move away from horror was visible in the diverse itinerary of projects listed in Laurel's *Sale of Common Stock Prospectus*. Most

remarkable on this list was a proposed adaptation of Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace*, "a classic of working-class literature" (Sabatos 75) that follows three generations of "ethnic Slovak" immigrants living in Braddock, Pennsylvania⁶⁴ from 1881 to the 1930s. Laurel optioned *Out of This Furnace* on 19 May 1981, securing the worldwide film and television rights until 1 April 1984 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1981 4*). This option was later renewed for an additional twelve-month period and an unnamed "Emmy award winning writer" was hired to draft the screenplay (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1982 2*).

In the early-1980s, an adaptation of *Out of This Furnace* would have neatly aligned with an emergent independent cinema "movement," placing Romero more firmly within the canonical sector. Diane Jacobs observed that at the 1979 New York Film Festival, of the six new independent films screened, four (*Northern Lights*, *Alambrista!*, *Heartland* and *Gal Young 'Un*) were set in the rural outdoors, and three of those in the past ("Reports" 59). Like *Heartland* and *Gal Young 'Un*, part three of *Out of This Furnace* centres on a female protagonist and explores issues of gender and independence against a developing American landscape. The novel's look at labour organisations and immigration also parallels *Northern Lights*, a film that turned its lens on Scandinavian workers and the formation of a rural worker and farmer alliance in 1915 North Dakota. Independently-made documentaries *Harlan County U.S.A* and *Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists* (Dir. Fischler and Sucher, 1980) also dealt with unionisation and worker rights.

The critical support these films received did not always make them an

⁶⁴Though ostensibly a horror film, Romero's *Martin* is something of an epilogue to *Out of This Furnace*. Also set in Braddock, the film reveals the same immigrant communities some forty years after Bell's novel concludes. In *Martin*, the surrounding steel mills, so central to Bell's text, have now closed and this absence of industry creates the graveyard landscape through which Martin wanders.

easy sell for distributors, emerging in a period where no “clearly defined speciality film market existed” (Rosen and Hamilton 108). As *Northern Lights* co-director John Hanson wrote in *Filmmakers Monthly*, his film “was in black and white, with no sex or violence, had foreign languages with subtitles, and to top it off used a political theme. Either we got negative responses [from distributors] or couldn’t get anyone with power to see the film” (21). Hanson and his associates ultimately distributed the film themselves. On Richard Pearce’s *Heartland*, the absence of star names (either in the cast or behind the camera), onscreen action and “youth appeal” culminated in a lack of interest that allowed distributor Levitt-Pickman to leverage a significant percentage of profits away from the filmmakers (Rosen and Hamilton 112). Rosen and Hamilton write that the *Heartland* filmmakers were “naïve about distribution, trusting that if they made a good film, an advantageous distribution deal would inevitably follow” (108).

The acquisition of *Out of This Furnace* was then highly speculative, yet in keeping with the firm’s creative and commercial schema. On one hand, the project reinforced Romero’s agency as the firm’s creative supervisor, part of a longed for and decisive movement away from the violent cult horror that had made his name. On the other hand, Laurel’s industrial growth allowed them to develop a number of projects simultaneously. *Out of This Furnace* was just one of a number of films in development, including those more firmly rooted in genre. In many ways, this recalls the “portfolio of films” strategy identified by Pokorny and Sedgwick, where the major studios would produce and release an eclectic range of films in the hope that one hit would compensate for the rest. Laurel simply adapted this portfolio strategy to the independent sector on a reduced scale, focusing on project development instead of production.

When projects were not part of a pre-arranged development deal with a distributor (such as *Cat People* with Warner Bros. or *Necronomicon* with Luigi and Aurelio DeLaurentiis), Laurel had to meet development costs themselves, resulting in potential financial losses if these properties did not move into production. Moreover, as a production company only, making films was still Laurel's primary source of income. In 1982, the firm's total nonconcurrent story development costs were approximately \$191,153, falling slightly to \$187,018 in 1983 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1982 12*; *Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1983 F-13*). The \$541,577 initially received from *Creepshow's* sale to Warner demonstrated that if just one of these projects went forward, then it had the potential to offset the development costs of all the other projects combined. Placing a film like *Out of This Furnace* on the books was therefore advantageous to both partners, expanding creative opportunities as they spread risk across a diverse portfolio of projects.

This technique of financing film packages directly through the company was achieved through the capital generated by the IPO and granted greater creative freedom down the line. Rubinstein told Aljean Harmetz:

Taking seed money [from the studios] puts us in an employer-employee relationship . . . if we finance the development ourselves, we can approach the industry later as a partner. We always have three to five projects in development. It makes good business sense, like holding out a deck of cards and asking, "Which one do you want to finance?". ("From the Cecil" H15)

Laurel's diverse range of projects in development solidified independence,

enabling the company to hold off on a deal with financiers, film-to-film, until production requirements had been met, including production budget, payment and final cut. The firm's IPO gave them bargaining power and the capacity to pursue projects under optimal conditions. It gave Laurel the agency to say "no." As an example, producer William Teitler spoke of his disappointment when it came to the Laurel project *Beauty Kills*, recalling an offer of \$2.9 to \$3 million from MGM to produce the film. Rubinstein ultimately held out for \$4 million and the studio passed (Teitler 2018). To date, the film, like a number of Laurel projects from this period, remains unproduced.

By 1983, a number of Laurel packages had fallen by the wayside, including *Necronomicon*, *Cat People*, *Gun Person* and *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be Moon*. Aside from *Day of the Dead*, which was still locked into the production agreement with UFDC, Laurel had *Creepshow 2* (Warner Bros. were at that stage scheduled to distribute worldwide) and renewed options on *Out of This Furnace* and Stephen King's *The Stand*. Added to this roster was an adaptation of Thomas Block's 1979 "suspense novel" *Mayday* (which concerns the survivors of a mid-air disaster trying to land a commercial jetliner), *Calling the Shots* by Lucia Satrina (a drama about a New York City policewoman), *The Match* (a coming-of-age sports drama written by James Sadwith), *Dolls* (a "horror/fairy-tale" mystery by Steve Nelson),⁶⁵ *Imagine That* (a children's fantasy written by John Harrison), an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (written by Romero) and an adaptation of L. Frank Baum's 1902 children's story *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* (Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1983 5-7).

In the press, Rubinstein emphasised Romero's agency as creative leader. In reality, outside of his own directorial projects, Romero was relatively

⁶⁵ Not to be confused with the Charles Band produced *Dolls* released in 1987. Directed by Stuart Gordon and from a screenplay by Ed Naha.

hands-off in constructing this new portfolio. A number of these projects were in fact assembled and sourced by “a core group of four individuals who regularly review and report on unsolicited material submitted to management” (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1982 3*). If the material was deemed suitable, senior management would then decide if they wanted to take out an option, usually on a short-term basis of one or two years with the potential for renewal. Economically, this made sense. Bringing in external properties was a means of rapidly enhancing the portfolio. Buying this option short-term also meant that Laurel could option the property at a reduced premium and, if all sources of investment were exhausted, the company could abandon the project and transfer funds to a new acquisition.

After these properties were acquired and expanded into attractive packages (a screenplay/treatment, indicative poster art and promotional material), Laurel would attempt to sell them at national and international film markets. This included Cannes’ Le Marché du Film, Santa Monica’s American Film Market & Conferences (AFM) and MIFED in Milan. Cannes itself was a tested selling ground for Laurel and each year they joined the hordes of independent producers descending on the French Riviera in search of distribution or a pre-sales agreement. Barry Rehfeld writes, Cannes is “the international playground of the low-budget producers where rights are sold to film, cassette, cable, and syndicated television distributors,” (20). In short, “here is a product in need of marketing; there is marketing in search of a product” (Lebby 76). The Cannon Group’s co-owner Menahem Golan esteemed Cannes as the company’s “Christmas. It’s where we meet distributors from all over the world” (Rehfeld 22).

On 4 May 1983, Laurel advertised all of its projects in development in

Variety's annual Cannes festival special.⁶⁶

Prominent among the firm's nine-page roster was a mysterious single-page illustration (fig. 4.1), later unveiled as

Mongrel: The Legend of

Copperhead, a comic

book adventure film in

co-production with

Marvel Comics. The

screenplay was to follow

a cyborg sheriff in a near-

future Philadelphia and,

as Romero described it,

was a "typical

introduction of a superhero—how he comes into his powers—and will take him through his first series of adventures. It will have some solid social values and a little social satire and there will be a lot of weaponry and vehicles" (Harmetz, "New Film-Comic" C11). Aljean Harmetz wagered that ancillary markets were at the forefront of this enterprise, interpreting that the venture had "less to do with movies than with merchandising [and the] amount of revenue from lunch boxes, animated television series, toys, clothing, video games, and bubble bath" (C11).

In this co-production, Laurel was to package and produce *Mongrel* as a

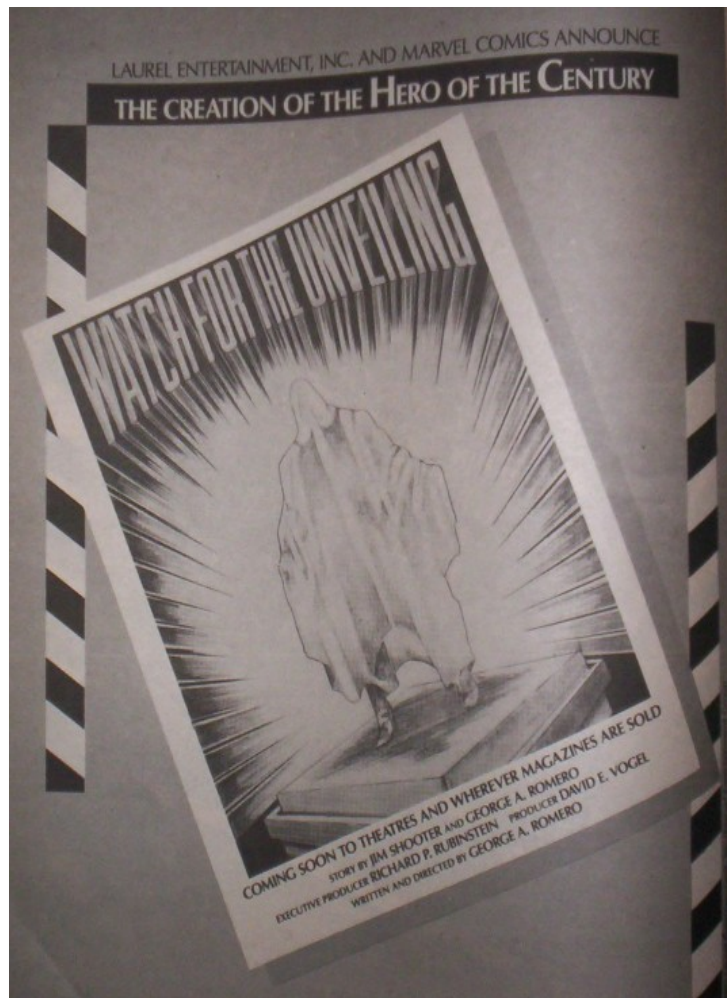


Fig. 4.1. Collaboration with Marvel Comics. "Laurel Entertainment, Inc. Advertisement." *Variety* 26th International Film Annual for Cannes 1983, 4 May 1983, p. 62.

⁶⁶ This bumper issue also served as a catalogue of product on sale and included the hotel addresses and contact numbers for those producers in attendance.

motion picture. At the same time, Marvel would pursue “the publishing and merchandising aspects of the project” (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1983 3*). Laurel had been after a Marvel property for some time, frequently outpriced when it came to more popular characters such as *The Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*. Indicatively, in the mid-1980s, the Cannon Group purchased the theatrical rights to Marvel’s *The Amazing Spider-Man* for a reported \$225,000 plus a percentage of gross revenues (Hiltzik, “Spidey’s”). This roughly equalled Laurel’s collected story development costs for fiscal 1984 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1984 F-13*). Laurel instead decided to create an original character developed in collaboration with artists drawn from Marvel’s famous bullpen (Harmetz, “New Film-Comic” C11).

Far from the multiplatform Disney subsidiary it is today,⁶⁷ in 1983, Marvel was still the largest worldwide publisher of comic books, selling a reported “5.5 million copies of 30 different books each month in the United States and Canada” alone (Harmetz, “New Film-Comic” C11). Despite this identified audience and, more to the point, the box office success of DC Comics’ *Superman: The Movie* (Dir. Donner, 1978) and *Superman II* (Dir. Lester, 1981), Marvel had thus far been unsuccessful in transferring its core properties to the big screen. In 1983, *The Human Torch* at Columbia Pictures, *Spider-Man* with Roger Corman and a live-action *X-Men* film by Canadian company Nelvana Ltd. all stalled, causing Marvel Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter to situate *Mongrel* as their most fully developed filmic project (Best). The following year, Shooter handed *Mongrel* to artist Bob Layton, who illustrated 48-pages of concept art, character design and storyboard/comic book panels (fig. 4.2). These designs suggested an epic scale, depicting vast technological palaces, gigantic killer

⁶⁷ In 1983, Marvel was a subsidiary of the conglomerate Cadence Industries, before being acquired by New World Pictures in November 1986.

robots, flying cars, violent scenes of warfare and a copper-plated hero not unlike Robocop. For Layton, *Mongrel* was to be “Romero’s *Star Wars*” (Burlingame).

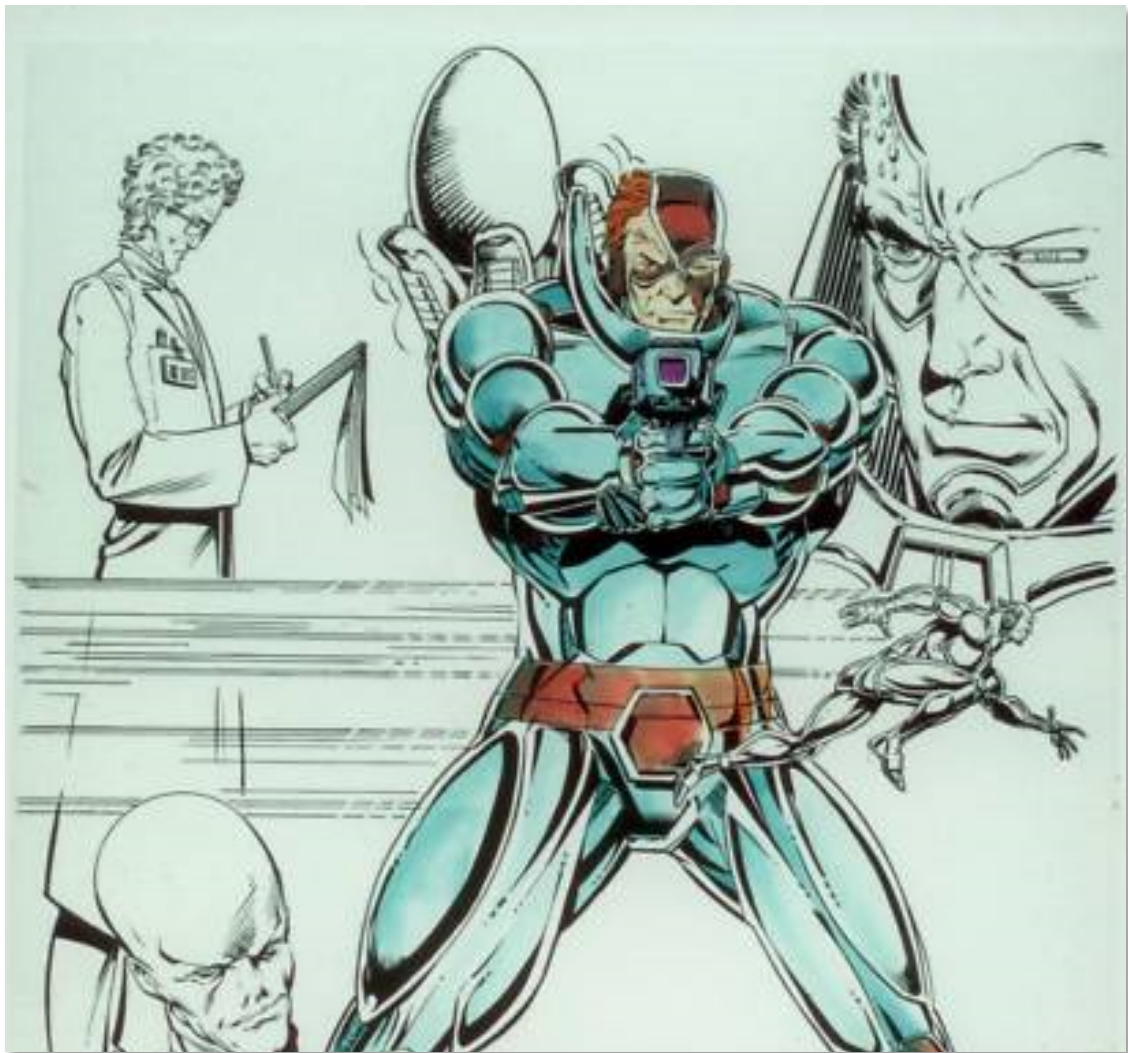


Fig. 4.2. Bob Layton’s character design for *Mongrel: The Legend of Copperhead*. Russ Burlingame. “Celebrated Iron Man Writer Bob Layton Shares Plans for a George Romero/Marvel Collaboration in the ‘80s.” *comicbook*. 12 Aug. 2014. <https://comicbook.com/blog/2014/08/13/NA/>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2018.

If this were not ambitious enough, Laurel’s *The Stand* was based on an 823-page novel that dealt with nothing short of the end of the world. In King’s story, a weaponised virus disseminates 99.4% of earth’s human population,

drawing together a sparse collection of survivors in a mystical battle of good versus evil. *The Stand* takes place over dozens of post-apocalyptic locations, from an abandoned freeway that has become a vehicle graveyard, to a Las Vegas that is eventually annihilated by a nuclear warhead. The novel's massive length caused obvious difficulties in adapting to film and Romero joked that "nobody really wanted to do *The Stand* because they were looking at it sideways" (Gange, "Creepshow" 20). King and Romero planned to split the novel into two, making Rubinstein's search for financing doubly hard. King then began scaling his screenplay back to a single feature of around three hours in length and this version was budgeted at between \$15 to \$25 million (Gange, "Creepshow" 34).

On the surface, acquisition of such largescale fantasy projects seemed overly ambitious and out-of-step with movements in the independent sector. As titles including Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) and Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* (1982) began to exhibit the growing commercial appeal surrounding speciality independents, emergent distributors and major subsidiaries such as UA Classics, Universal Classics and Orion Classics stepped in to provide an additional platform for advancement (Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies* 3). By 1982, however, despite having *Out of This Furnace* on their roster, Romero had come to feel that rising production costs made the chances for success on a small speciality film like John Sayles's *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979) "very, very slim" (Hanners and Kloman 75). Verifying Romero's estimation, Stephen Prince reports that in the early-1980s, inflationary forces such as a 45% increase in the price of colour film stock, alongside "the studios' willingness to fund expensive effects-driven pictures, helped produce the steady escalation in production costs" (20). According to

Prince's data, the average cost of a production rose from \$5 million per picture in 1979 to \$11 million in 1981. This was up to \$12 million by 1982 (20).

In terms of these "effects-driven pictures," Prince reports that, "without question, the decade's most popular genre was science fiction and fantasy, furnishing more blockbusters during the period than any other genre" (288). This he attributes to the massive success of *Star Wars* in 1977. Henceforth, money was lavished on productions such as Columbia's *Krull* (Dir. Yates, 1983), which cost \$47 million, and mid-range films including Paramount's \$17 million *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (Dir. Nimoy, 1984) and Universal/Lorimar's \$15 million *The Last Starfighter* (Dir. Castle, 1984). Notwithstanding the expense, and a demonstrable growth in speciality independent film production, focus on science fiction and fantasy was not restricted to studio blockbusters and in the lower budget and independent arena existed films like MGM's *The Beastmaster* (Dir. Coscarelli, 1982) at \$8 million, Cannon's \$6 million *Hercules* (Dir. Cozzi, 1983) and New World Pictures' \$2 million *Battle Beyond the Stars* (Dir. Murakami, 1980).⁶⁸

Production of such material by Cannon and New World et al. recalls the market-orientated exploitation practices of the 1960s and 1970s, "defining what customers want and ensuring that the company's activities are arranged in a way which will achieve customer satisfaction" (Blythe 7). If science fiction and fantasy films were in the 1980s what biker and sexploitation films used to be, then this product was now placed within a more eclectic production roster. In *Variety's* 1983 Cannes special issue, independent producer-distributors Cannon, New World, Carolco Pictures, Lorimar and Hemdale Film Corporation

⁶⁸ *Battle Beyond the Stars* was, in fact, written by *Return of the Secaucus Seven* director John Sayles, demonstrating a further connectedness between genre and the speciality independent sector.

all showcased diversity. Cannon, in particular, led the way with a mammoth 42-page, eager-to-please spread that seemingly had it all. Alongside fantasy fare like *Hercules*, the firm boasted major 80s movie stars (from Charles Bronson to Roger Moore), exploitation sequels such as *Exterminator 2* (Dir. Buntzman, 1984), horror in *House of Long Shadows* (Dir. Walker, 1983), erotica (personified by *Emmanuel* star Sylvia Kristel) and even speciality independents, notably John Cassavetes's 1984 *Love Streams* ("The Cannon Group" 17-59).

In 1987, Todd McCarthy in *Variety* disclosed that the number of independent films released in a twelve-month period ending 31 May was "up a whopping 44% from last year's 193, which itself represented a 6-year high in indie volume" ("Indies Releasing" 3). Of the 277 independents made during this period, Cannon and New World led the way, releasing 42 and 28 films respectively, which combined to just over 25% of the overall total ("Indies Releasing" 3, 34).

Table 4.1 on the following page shows Atlantic Releasing, Shapiro Entertainment, Vestron Pictures, Concorde Pictures and Charles Band's Empire Pictures in near proximity, each focusing output on exploitation, horror, genre fare, mass-appeal features and the occasional speciality or so-called "quality" indie. The independent sector recognised by the trades was deeply heterogeneous and speciality distributors stood alongside their market-orientated peers. As so-called "quality" films began to prove profitable, they were placed on the roster of both types of distributor; in the latter type of distributor, they were part of an expansive portfolio that catered to a diverse range of audiences and markets. In this context, Cannon and canon sat happily side-by-side.

Table 4.1

“Recent Primary Sources of Independent Films.”

Recent Primary Sources of Independent Films								
<i>(Based on three or more film ratings issued by the Classification & Rating Administration during the period 1 June 1986 - 31 May 1987)</i>								
Volume Rank	Rank Last Year (& # Of Pix)	Company	Ratings					
			G	PG	PG-13	R	X	Total
1	1. (27)	Cannon	2	10	3	27	0	42
2	2. (23)	New World	0	5	3	20	0	28
3	3. (12)	Atlantic Rel	1	1	3	5	0	10
3	6. (5)	Shapiro Ent.	0	1	2	7	0	10
3	-	Vestron	0	1	2	7	0	10
4	-	Concorde	0	1	1	7	0	9
4	4. (8)	Empire	0	0	0	9	0	9
5	-	Island	0	0	3	5	0	8
6	8. (3)	Hemdale	0	2	0	5	0	7
7	-	Cinetel	0	1	0	5	0	6
7	-	New Century/Vista	0	1	2	3	0	6
7	7. (4)	Skouras	0	2	2	2	0	6
7	7. (4)	Troma	0	1	0	5	0	6
8	-	Embassy Home Ent.	0	1	0	4	0	5
8	-	Intl. Film Marketing	0	1	1	3	0	5
9	-	Academy Home Ent.	0	1	1	2	0	4
9	-	Cinema Group	0	1	1	2	0	4
9	-	Cineplex Odeon	0	0	0	4	0	4
9	4. (8)	Samuel Goldwyn	1	0	0	3	0	4
9	-	Trans World Ent.	0	0	2	2	0	4
10	-	Circle Releasing	0	1	0	2	0	3
10	-	Crown Intl.	0	1	0	2	0	3
10	-	Miramax	0	1	1	1	0	3
10	-	The Movie Store (TMS)	0	0	0	3	0	3
10	8. (3)	New Line	0	0	1	2	0	3
10	-	Platinum	0	0	0	3	0	3
10	-	Seymour Borde & Associates	0	0	1	2	0	3
		Total, above companies	4	33	29	146	0	212
		Total, all other indie* sources	1	9	14	41	0	65
		Overall indie total*	5	42	43	187	0	277
		Grand total, all sources***	7	81	74	256	1	491

Notes: * - Separately identifiable companies, not affiliated with MPAA member companies nor Orion (Filmways/AIP)
 ** - Includes all indie product plus that from MPAA companies and affiliated producing units plus Orion (Filmways/AIP)
 *** - Since last year's chart, Island Alive has split into two separate distribution entities, as has Concorde/Cinema Group

Source: *Variety*, 17 Jun. 1987, p. 34.

For Laurel, the decision-making behind the firm's choice of products was part of a manifold internal and external agency. As the professed creative-leader, Romero pushed for a diversity of product that would expand his efficiency beyond the low-budget horror genre in which he felt “trapped.” This portfolio of products, often identified by a story acquisitions department answering to Romero and Rubinstein, also served to spread risk across a range of projects. Largescale endeavours such as *Mongrel* and *The Stand* showcased

professionalism and enhanced capabilities.⁶⁹ High-profile partnerships with external parties such as Marvel and Stephen King were also attention getting (both projects featured in *New York Times* profiles) and exhibited legitimacy to potential investors and shareholders (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1983 3*). Most importantly, Laurel recognised the agency of the marketplace above all else, allowing inflated negative costs and zeitgeist trends to dictate their choice of projects.

In *Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation* (2006)

Ruth Alsop et al. write that while a person or group may be able to choose options, the effective realisation of these choices is largely determined by the institutional context, or “opportunity structures” within which they live or work.⁷⁰

Formal institutions such as the rules of law, regulatory frameworks, private organisation and the marketplace dictate the success or failure of these choices (13). For Alsop et al., there are three principal indicators of empowerment or agency:

1. Whether an opportunity to make a choice exists (existence of choice).
2. Whether a person or group actually uses the opportunity to choose (use of choice).
3. Whether the choice brings about the desired result (achievement of choice). (17)

⁶⁹ The proposed budgets for these films matched the mid-range productions of films like *Star Trek III*, revealing Laurel's (unrealised) ambitions to become a larger corporate entity.

⁷⁰ In keeping with the diverse range of scholarship drawn upon in this investigation, Alsop et al.'s text was published by the World Bank and addresses issues of global poverty and developmental intervention. This text hypothesises that “interventions to improve agency and enhance opportunity structures can increase people's capacity to make effective choices, and that this in turn can bring about other development outcomes” (1). Though the opportunity structures addressed in this work are apart from those in film production, the framework for analysis is applicable.

The Laurel partners may have established a shared agency when it came to their portfolio of films, but in the final count they were disempowered by the formal institutions that surrounded them. “Achievement of choice” was often far beyond their control.

Of the twelve films Laurel advertised in *Variety*'s 1983 Cannes special, only three went into production. And of these projects, *Day of the Dead* was already scheduled as part of a deal with UFDC, while *The Stand* and *Creepshow 2* were made after Romero's departure. Why the majority of these films failed to attract investment is due to a multitude of factors, including the insignificant financial returns of *Knightriders* and *Creepshow* (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 6*), the scope of their ambitions with *The Stand* and *Mongrel*, the company's own agency to reject an unfavourable deal, changing marketplace trends⁷¹ and so on. As Rubinstein justified to shareholders in the wake of these disappointments, “it is entertainment industry experience that only a small percentage of projects that enter the development stage are subsequently produced, and Laurel cannot predict which, if any, of its projects in development will come to fruition” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 7*). Largely restricted by institutional “opportunity structures,” other external intermediaries would soon encroach upon Romero's on-set sovereignty, alienating him from the company he co-founded.

4.2. “Inside the Box”: UFDC, Method and Restrictions

Retrospectively, it is tempting to position *Knightriders* as the zenith of Romero's

⁷¹ Laurel's deal with Marvel may have come slightly too late in terms of marketplace trends. Michael A. Hiltzik of the *Los Angeles Times* reports that by 1985 “Hollywood was bored with superheroes” (“Untangling” 3). This was later epitomised by the disappointing domestic box office gross of *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Dir. Furie, 1987), which earned little over \$15 million on a \$17 million production budget (“*Superman IV* (1987) - Domestic Gross”). Cannon, New World and Carolco all struggled to attract monies for their own Marvel projects in the mid-1980s.

agency as company co-founder. *Dawn of the Dead*'s box office seemed to unlock a space of unlimited creative potential, emboldening Romero to write and direct a 146-minute semi-autobiographical non-genre film on which he retained final cut. Tony Williams views this as a common industrial practice that permits stars and directors to “engage in their most cherished projects after box-office success.” He cites Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974), made in the immediate wake of *The Godfather* (1972), and Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), which followed his Paul Newman vehicle *The Color of Money* (1986), as evidence of this pattern. To Williams, these films “represent projects in which individual talents attempt to break away from generic and star vehicles to produce creative statements free from economic constraints” (*Cinema* 99).

In terms of production, *Knightriders* was typical of Laurel’s reported creative practices in that Rubinstein remained hands-off. Even with David Vogel acting as line producer, Romero’s on-set creative control was apparently absolute. This is supported by John Harrison, who later directed the television mini-series *Dune* (2000) for Rubinstein’s New Amsterdam Entertainment.

Harrison recalls:

[Rubinstein] would never sit down with George and tell him how to write a scene or how to shoot a scene or how to cut the movie. He protected George . . . what he used to say to all of us was, “I’ve been able to build the box. What you do inside the box is okay. But you can’t get outside the box.” In other words, “I’ve got the money, I’ve set up the production, I’ve got the distribution in place, now go off and make the movie. Don’t come back with a movie that costs 10% more than it was supposed to”

. . . He wanted to provide the resources and then he would let the filmmaker go ahead and do it. (Harrison 2018)

Ed Lammi covered the majority of the organisational production tasks on *Day of the Dead* and also noticed this permissive approach to filmmaking, recalling that Rubinstein only appeared on set once a week to check on progress and authorise spending (Lammi 2018). It is in this sense that Laurel followed “Sarris’s auteur theory of direction,” providing a supportive platform for creative autonomy.

As Laurel prepared an adaptation of Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* in 1985, Romero and Rubinstein co-signed a memorandum that laid out the particulars of the former’s directorial contract, detailing financial terms (payment fees, options, profit participation etc.), his credit (“as appropriate and customary”) and “creative matters” (fig. 4.3). The memorandum provides a fascinating insight into the way Romero’s agency was expressed in legal terms. Clauses deemed essential to the so-called auteur were formalised and the contract safeguarded Romero’s (referred to as GAR on the document) on-set independence,⁷² his choice of collaborators and final cut.

These terms were dependent on the running time, an MPAA rating and, most intriguingly, were “subject to any rights of completion guarantor and Stephen King’s rights of approval” (“Exhibit 10.13” 2). King’s rights appear to supersede Romero’s here, divulging the novelist’s growing importance to Laurel as “a substantial creative and financial partner” (Harmetz, “*Pet Film*” C10). On paper, King had power to undermine Romero’s decision-making, though there

⁷² In reference to post-production, the memo states, “If he desires, GAR may supervise post-production (but without additional compensation).” The contract also gave him final say on the “principal post production personnel” (“Exhibit 10.13” 2-3).

is no evidence that this was ever wielded. That the rights of a completion guarantor are also foregrounded is telling, suggesting an additional non-creative intrusion into Romero's sacrosanct space on set.

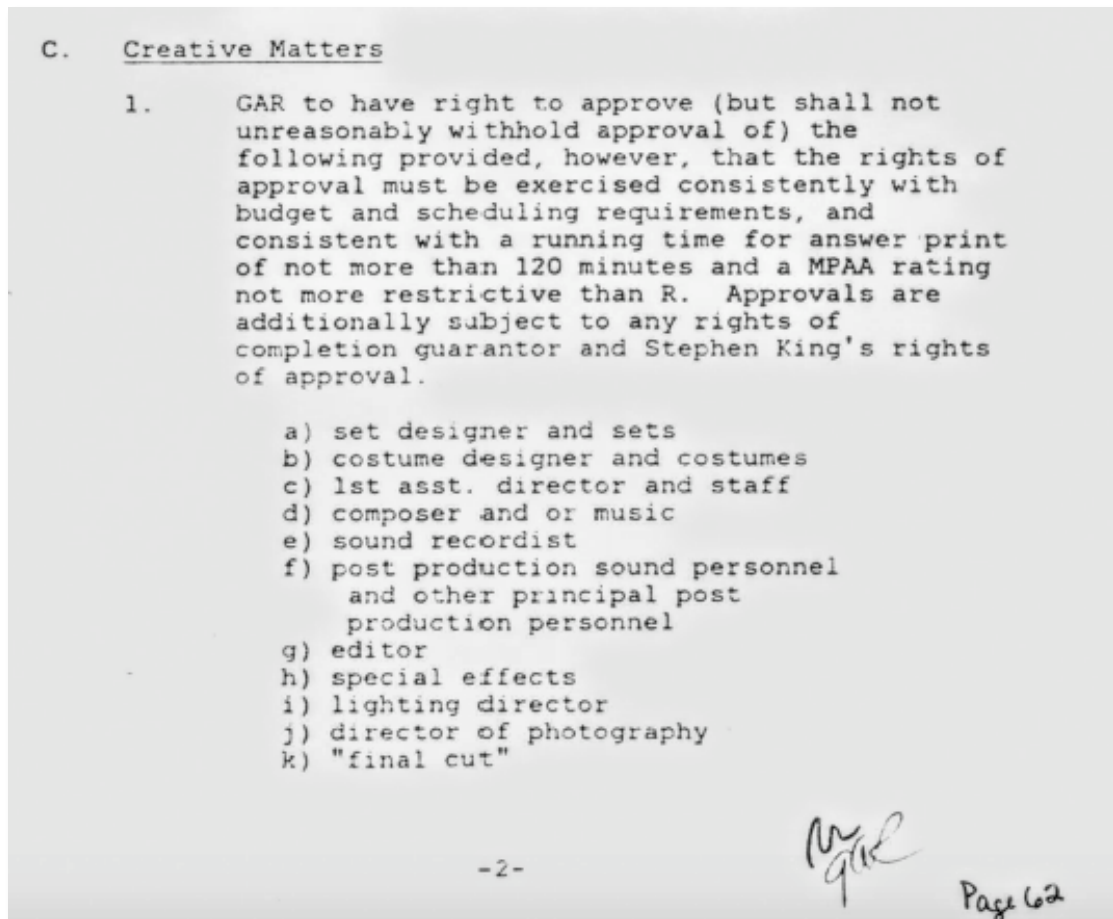


Fig. 4.3. Extract of Romero's directorial demands for *Pet Sematary*, initialled by Romero and Rubinstein. "Exhibit 10.13: Memorandum of Agreement Between the Company and George A. Romero Dated March 20, 1985." *Laurel Entertainment, Inc. Form 8-K for Fiscal Year Ended 31 March 1985*. Securities and Exchange Commission, 1985, p. 2.

On *Knightriders*, Romero's on-set freedom was supported by partners UA Corporation and UFDC, both of whom allowed Laurel to proceed independently once the screenplay and key creative personnel had been agreed upon. Former UA Senior Vice-President and Head of Worldwide Productions Stephen Bach records that once UA executives signed off, the

production partner became responsible for delivering the project on time and on budget. The production would then operate without direct supervision from UA, allowing “independent production in an atmosphere of autonomy and creative freedom” (49). UA built a reputation as a patron of the auteur filmmaker, exemplified by Woody Allen’s multi-picture deal with the company. As Allen told *Fortune* magazine, “they see the picture when I’m ready to give it to them” (Schuyten 131). Balio observes that “despite all the legal safeguards built into the financing-distribution contracts, the company bet on the person, the integrity of the producer to make the picture as mutually agreed. UA’s producers, with few exceptions, had the right to final cut” (345-46).

This may have worked (thus far) for UA, but on *Knightriders* UFDC was far from pleased with the final result. Romero claimed *Knightriders* was “to be a commercial picture,” humorously adding “which is why we have stunts” (Yakir, “Knight” 45). At the same time, prior to release he could not identify a target audience, claiming “it’s not yet defined and demographics don’t always apply” (Burke-Block 25). Although initial reviews were favourable, UFDC was unconvinced about the film’s profit potential and decided on a limited release in New York, Florida and California in spring 1981, before poor returns saw it withdrawn entirely (Anderson, “On the Set” 28). UFDC was equally stung by a troubled production which saw adverse weather conditions and a threatened SAG strike take *Knightriders* 30% over schedule and 5% over budget (Harmetz, “From the Cecil” H25).

Production problems on *Knightriders* unfortunately came at a time of broader industrial change, where studios were increasingly concerned about the so-called “maverick auteurs” in charge of production. Shortly after announcing the company’s partnership with Laurel, UA began reshoots on

Heaven's Gate (Dir. Cimino, 1980) and, as Jack Kroll writes, “everyone knows about Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate*—pulled from its one theater after a week’s run, the biggest fiasco in film history, dollar for dollar, shooting day for shooting day, length of run for length of run . . . ego for ego” (58). By 1985, Cimino’s film had earned only \$2 million in rentals on a cost of \$36 million (Thompson 50). In his own post-mortem, journalist Michael Dempsey attributes *Heaven’s Gate*’s failure to a series of mitigating factors, including declining ticket sales and corporate mismanagement, adding that Cimino’s rampant ego presented studio hierarchy an opportunity to “overthrow” the “director as filmmaking’s linchpin” (53).⁷³

Reports indicate that *Heaven’s Gate*’s production was problematic, slowed to a lethargic pace by Cimino’s perfectionism and the inexperience of producer Joann Carelli. As filming dragged on from 16 April to 4 October 1979 (with reshoots in April and June 1980), UA inserted its own production manager Derek Kavanagh to oversee filming, a move antithetical to the distributor’s traditional hands-off approach (*Final Cut*). As reports of Cimino’s hubris played out in the press (particularly Les Gapay’s “Unauthorized Progress Report” in the *Los Angeles Times* and a *Today Show* interview that attacked Cimino for the film’s spiralling budget) the studios took collective measures to safeguard against a repeat of this so-called “fiasco.” Legal expert Mark C. Phillips writes that, as a consequence, completion guarantees “gained attention in Hollywood in the 1980s with the sudden proliferation of independent production companies and the desire of backers to avoid repeating such notable flops as *Heaven’s*

⁷³ Like Romero and *Knightriders*, Cimino was fresh off the biggest hit of his career, in this case 1978’s multi-Oscar winner *The Deer Hunter*. In yet another parallel, *Knightriders* premiered at the Los Angeles International Film Exposition in April 1981, only to be overshadowed by the rerelease of *Heaven’s Gate* at the same festival. Now drastically reduced in length, Cimino’s new edit did little to alleviate the critical derision.

Gate” (109). A completion guarantee, as Steve Mangel of UniFi tells us,

assures whoever is financing the production, whether it’s a bank or an individual, that the film will be made and delivered within the time period specified; that it won’t cost them anymore than the original investment and that in a worst case scenario—production is shut down—it’s a guarantee that they can get their money back . . . knowing what goes on—on a day-to-day basis—is the key to monitoring. (Boyle)

A completion guarantee is now common in independent film production (Gates 106; Cones, *Dictionary* 80), typically provided by a third-party bonding company who place a representative on set to undertake the monitoring identified by Mangel. This representative, or guarantor, will “assure backers that the independent will comply with the script and financing agreement. The representative must approve every phase of production until the distributor accepts the finished product” (Phillips 112). Most studios have the capital to self-bond and provide this service internally (Lammi 2018). The higher risk associated with independent production, however, frequently necessitates additional third-party supervision.

According to Michael Gornick, UFDC only “became concerned” about Laurel after the box office disappointment of *Knightriders* (Axl and Jscott). Nevertheless, the concurrent fallout of *Heaven’s Gate* indicates that this nervousness was part of a wider industrial shift. Laurel cannot have been helped by a *Variety* review on 8 April 1981 that called *Knightriders* “the most egregious case of auteurist self-indulgence since *Heaven’s Gate*” (Cart 20). Regardless of the scheduling and cost overruns on this film, UFDC were slow to

place a completion guarantor on its next Laurel co-venture. *Creepshow* was instead to be Laurel's first fully unionised production and the distributors trusted that this greater formalisation would provide the required assurances.

To guide the production, Laurel, through its Laurel-Show subsidiary, hired professional first assistant director⁷⁴ Richard Hawley to work alongside Romero. Once on set, the AD's formal orthodoxy was found to be incompatible with Romero's improvisational style. Hawley was replaced by second assistant director Carl Clifford, who was then also deemed unsuitable for the same reason. Finally, Rubinstein surmised that an internal colleague familiar with Romero's methods would be better suited and he placed Harrison in the role (Harrison 2018). In spite of Harrison's best efforts (and those of other unit and production managers), *Creepshow* began to drift overschedule and UFDC insisted that Laurel employ external manager David Ball to monitor production. Ball was, and is, a self-titled "bondable" producer, film accountant and freelance representative for completion guarantors. He had previously worked for the Hassaneins as production manager on *Cattle Anne and Little Britches* (Dir. Johnson, 1981) and has a self-declared "mad passion for moviemaking and an even madder passion for tidy accounting and tidy production" (Karr 57).

Ed Lammi says that on *Creepshow* (and then later on *Day of the Dead*), Ball was there to watch the "hot costs"—that is the unplanned components that can cause the budget to "swing," such as overtime hours, additional transportation, catering, number of extras, etc. (Lammi 2018). Ball was credited as co-producer on *Day of the Dead* but was for all intents and purposes a completion guarantor representative, keeping the film on schedule, on budget

⁷⁴ The first assistant director (aka the first AD) is on hand to coordinate the logistical side of directing and to communicate these requirements to the rest of the crew. It is their responsibility to keep filming on schedule and to control on-set discipline.

and with the power to take over production if necessary. Ball remembers Romero's frustration at having "Salah's man" on set and, in turn, Ball was unimpressed by Laurel's lax organisational skills. "When they went into the proper world of filmmaking, they had to learn discipline," he stated. "It was my unenviable task of having to teach it to them" (Ball 2016). Mark C. Phillips writes that this tension is typical of a relationship between the independent filmmaker and the guarantor, where "one seeks artistic freedom, while the other attempts to keep that freedom within the bounds of fiscal propriety" (98). Once Ball took over governance of the set, Romero's improvisational shooting style essentially became a thing of the past.

In a *Cinefantastique* article that coincided with *Creepshow's* release, Paul Gange wrote, "Romero's crew is still basically a group of neighborhood friends having fun together; no one watches the time clock, no studio chief peers over Romero's shoulder" (17). This is essentially a fiction. In the wake of the overruns on *Knightriders* and wider institutional changes, UFDC demanded tighter controls over production, limiting Romero's agency and on-set decision-making. Even as Rubinstein endeavoured to remain hands-off, from a business perspective he had no other choice than to allow external intermediaries a say in Laurel's production method. In point of fact, Rubinstein appreciated David Ball's organisational skills and later rehired him independently of UFDC to produce *Creepshow 2*. Though the completion guarantor is oft-neglected in the study of independent film production, the presence of this figure in relation to Laurel Entertainment, both on set and within Romero's contractual terms (where the guarantors approval rights superseded that of even the director), indicates the institutional significance of this intermediary between filmmaker and financier.

If Romero resented the creative interference of UFDC and its representatives, Laurel's partnership with the distributor was also lacking financially. As part of the equity agreement⁷⁵ between firms, on each production UFDC was entitled to a distribution fee, recovery of distribution expenses and a recoupment of negative costs, all taken from the distribution income of that particular film. Laurel were to receive 50% of the remaining net profits, unless the previous film in this contract, as was the case with *Knightriders*, failed to recoup enough revenue to cover these distribution costs. As Laurel's financial statement made clear, the *Knightriders* deficit, as of 31 March 1983, resulted in a reduction of the firm's net profit participation on *Day of the Dead* to 25% of the first \$5.5 million (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1983 F-12*).

Romero later blamed UFDC for *Knightriders*' box office failure, claiming the distributor was more interested in its \$35 million production *Lion of the Desert* (Dir. Akkad, 1980)—released almost concurrently on 17 April 1981—than it was his independent drama about the troubles of a Pennsylvanian renaissance fair (Romero 2016). In fairness to UFDC, *Knightriders* was a difficult sell. The film's abandonment of genre rendered Romero's valued identity as an "indie horror" auteur redundant and, lest the film be misunderstood as horror, the advertising made no mention whatever of *Dawn of the Dead* or any of his previous films. A revised poster only went as far as to add "from the master of action and suspense" to the campaign. At best, Romero's carefully constructed brand image was an inconvenience, at worst, it was a perceived liability. By breaking the business wheel that had been so successful on *Martin* and *Dawn* (which carefully balanced genre, authorship

⁷⁵ Mark C. Phillips explains the difference between equity and non-equity backers: "equity backers share financially in a project's ups and downs, enjoying the profits and paying out to creditors on losses. Non-equity backers, by contrast, do not share in a film's profits and losses; they only want a return on their investment" (102).

and cult to create an attractive marketplace brand) Laurel appeared far from a fiscal guarantee and UFDC became visibly skittish about future collaborations.

The Laurel-UFDC co-production intended to follow *Knightriders* was the science fiction comedy *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Moon*. According to Gornick, the project was “like a 50s monster film; it has elements of the movies we grew up with. There are special effects involving spaceships and aliens” (Blank, “Romero Turns” 53). Tom Dubensky remembers artists constructing a scale model of the film’s alien antagonist, designed to look like a pile of spaghetti and complete with a retractable penis, this appendage part of the screenplay’s ribald humour (Dubensky 2016).⁷⁶ Unwilling or unable to finance the film, in 1981 UFDC took the project to Cannes, placing a two-page advertisement in *Variety* that integrated a crudely illustrated poster of the film. The image depicted a gaggle of high school stereotypes, including cheerleaders, jocks, greasers and sweethearts, all gazing skyward to an equally archetypal flying saucer. Behind them, a banner reads “Class of ’54” and the setting, time period and teenage characters evoked recent box office hits such as *Animal House* (Dir. Landis, 1978) and *Grease* (Dir. Kleiser, 1978).

UFDC’s efforts to raise the necessary funds were ultimately futile (Dubensky 2016). In Laurel’s fiscal 1981 annual report to shareholders, Rubinstein conveyed that *Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Moon* was postponed (3) and by 1982 the distributor had withdrawn entirely, leaving Laurel to seek financing elsewhere (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1982* 14). The company’s fiscal 1982 report stated, “in the event that new financing is found, [Laurel] must arrange to refund to the distributor, with interest, the production advances, which the Company has received with respect to the project which amount is \$137,873,

⁷⁶ The film was later retitled *Invasion of the Spaghetti Monsters* in view of the alien’s outward appearance.

excluding interest” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1982* 14). New financing never materialised and by 1983 *Shoo-Be-Do-Be-Moon* was no longer on Laurel’s development portfolio. For UFDC, *Creepshow* represented a far safer bet because of the clearer brand association with genre and the “talent packaging” of Romero and Stephen King. As journalist Deborah Caulfield exclaimed, “Stephen King and George Romero—what a team. Thinking of the them brings to mind other combinations: vampires and bats, witches and broomsticks, werewolves and full moons, graveyards and ghosts” (“Author” 76).

Indeed, Romero’s brand identity as a cult horror filmmaker remained of primary importance to UFDC. In a 1985 article in *Screen International* entitled “UFD’s Hassanein Interested only in Commercial Feature Films,” UFDC advertising executive Terry Powers stated, “the appeal of a horror film such as [*Day of the Dead*] becomes vastly increased the minute the name George Romero appears in the opening credits” (172). Still locked into an 18 January 1985 production start date, UFDC and Romero could not come to an agreement on *Day of the Dead*’s budget. Romero envisioned an epic conclusion to his zombie trilogy, featuring a huge cast of protagonists (living and dead) fighting for survival above and below ground on a tropical island compound. An early draft of the screenplay begins on the streets of a post-apocalyptic Florida (as a ragtag group of survivors dodge zombies and engage in a dramatic gunfight with pirates)⁷⁷ and ends with the entire island destroyed in a massive explosion. “The first script was like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with zombies,” recalled special make-up effects technician Tom Savini (Daniel 7).

Determined to top *Dawn of the Dead* in terms of action and violence, Romero pushed for an unrated feature that would deliver the onscreen

⁷⁷ This Florida opening remained in the finished film, albeit on a reduced scale.

bloodshed anticipated by his brand identity. In one self-conscious passage of the original screenplay, as the undead descend upon their victims, Romero gleefully intones, “this is it, gore fans. The gross finale. The intestine-tugger. THE ZOMBIES GET THEIR SUPPER. THEY FEAST . . . like Romans at an orgy” (Romero 82-83). When the budget for this version was estimated at around \$9 million, UFDC balked. According to Richard Hassanein, “by *Day of the Dead* it became more and more difficult for theaters to play movies that were not rated, so we couldn’t gamble our money on not getting an R-rating” (Karr 19). Laurel held firm to produce Romero’s vision, agreeing to scale back to around \$7 million. UFDC still refused to budge, instead offering half that amount.

Associate producer Ed Lammi was hired in June 1984 for a mooted October start date and was surprised by the lengthily pre-production schedule. Lammi soon understood that this was because of the unresolved discrepancies between the screenplay and budget, telling Richard Rubinstein something he already knew, “you’re not going to make this picture for that budget” (Lammi 2018). Lammi says that he and Romero spent the summer of 1984 scaling the film down, at one point making a final plea to Salah Hassanein for a \$7 million budget. Salah agreed, providing the film was rated R, to which Romero refused, telling Hassanein, “if I scale back to an R-rated movie my fans would abandon me.” As Lammi observes, “Salah knew his market” and Romero felt he knew where his cult appeal rested, resulting in an entirely new version of *Day of the Dead* written for a top-to-bottom budget of \$3.6 million (Lammi 2018).

Even with these compromises, *Day of the Dead* was not the box office success hoped for. As Laurel’s fiscal 1986 10-K report told shareholders, “although *Day of the Dead* remains to be exploited in a number of markets,

Laurel does not expect any potential profits to be material.” Indeed, profit shares from all of Laurel’s films with UFDC after *Dawn of the Dead* had “not been substantial” (6). Laurel’s relationship with UFDC, despite resulting in three completed feature films, was something of a disappointment. The partnership steadily encroached upon Romero’s sovereign production space, denying him agency to fulfil his creative ambitions, and for little financial reward. If anything, UFDC reaffirmed the limits of control available in the independent sector, agency ultimately dictated to by the marketplace and external intermediates and partners. Romero’s frustrations were heaped onto the shoulders of Laurel and Richard Rubinstein, where he deemed the company’s professionalisation a failure. Speaking to *Fangoria*’s R.H. Martin in a colourful interview conducted in 1985 shortly after his partnership with Laurel was terminated, Romero said:

I found that, within Laurel, I couldn’t take as many chances . . . I sat on my ass for three years between *Creepshow* and *Day of the Dead*. And I think that, had I been an individual facing the problems that faced me with the first script for *Day of the Dead*, I would have told them to shove it. Because of the responsibility that I had to Laurel’s shareholders, I wasn’t able to do that, couldn’t take that kind of chance. I want to be able to do my own projects, take my own risks, without that kind of fiscal responsibility. What I’m doing [by leaving] is buying myself a certain amount of freedom. (47)

4.3. *Tales from the Darkside*: Agency Theory, Self Interest and Divorce

Laurel Productions of Pennsylvania began as a single-purpose platform for George Romero’s creative agency. As the company transformed into Laurel

Tape & Film and the Laurel Group, Richard Rubinstein's plans appeared in alignment with these interests. By 1985, this schema had failed. When the company expanded to become the publicly-run Laurel Entertainment, the firm's objectives shifted, now aligned to the demands of shareholders and the day-to-day necessities of running a profitable enterprise with responsibilities to a permanent staff of employees. During this period, Romero made the decision to step back from the minutia of running the company, declining re-election as chairman of the board and resigning as secretary in 1983 to focus on the firm's creative output. Officially, Romero was still a majority shareholder and retained joint ownership of the company. In practice, he acceded managerial control to his more business savvy cohort. This separation of ownership and control can create "agency problems in the decision process" of the firm (Fama and Jensen 321) and in this case prompted Romero's departure.

Agency theory has become a key system of analysis in business studies, shedding light on corporate governance and the control and management of the firm. Stephen A. Ross writes, "we will say that an agency relationship has arisen between two (or more) parties when one, designated as the agent, acts for, on behalf of, or as representative for the other, designated the principal, in a particular domain of decision problems" (134). More pointedly, agency theory argues that these managers (agents) tend to act self-interestedly, pursuing their own short-term goals (be it financial or in terms of career advancement, etc.) that are not necessarily aligned with the interests of the principal (Dekker et al. 518). For Michael C. Jensen, agency theory is based on the "simple tautology [that] cooperative behavior between human beings is viewed as a contracting problem among self-interested individuals with divergent interests" (331).

Issues of agency theory are far from straightforward and Kathleen M.

Eisenhardt recognises “differences in interpretation” when it comes to a theoretical formula (57). Her own research draws a distinction between “positive agency theory” and “principal agent research.” The former is a “less mathematical” approach that focuses on “identifying situations in which the principal and agent are likely to have conflicting goals and then describing the governance mechanisms that limit the agent's self-serving behaviour” (59). The latter looks for a more formal theory regarding the principal-agent paradigm based on logical deductions and mathematical proof (60). Jensen and Meckling, though likewise focused on positive agency theory, add normative agency theory to the mix, an area of analysis that prescribes how contracts and corporate incentives can be structured to ensure that the agent behaves in a manner that will benefit the principal's welfare (309-10). Notwithstanding these discrepancies in approach and method, Eisenhardt understands that at “the heart of agency theory is the goal conflict inherent when individuals with differing preferences engage in cooperative effort” (63).

Even without these discrepancies, agency theory is an imperfect model in the context of this investigation. The relationship between Romero and Rubinstein was not, strictly speaking, a contractual one between a principal and an agent. Rather, it was a partnership between two principals with equal shares in the company they co-founded—that is, in its final form, Laurel Entertainment. The intricacies of principal-agent research and the applied methods that proliferate this field also surpass the range of this humanities-focused enquiry. Keeping this in mind, Laurel's hierarchal valuation of the so-called auteur nevertheless brings issues of agency to the fore. Equal partner though he may have been, Rubinstein repeatedly proclaimed to “believe in the auteur, the captain of the ship” (McCarthy, “Laurel Sked” 31), self-consciously positioning

himself as an agent in the service of Romero's creative principal. But was this really the case, or was there a "goal conflict" at the centre of Laurel's dual leadership organisation?

As has been made clear, Laurel's production output was limited by the opportunity structures dictated by external forces. A number of economic theorists measure agency through "a person's scope for achieving that person's valued goal" (Drydyk 251), suggesting that agency theory is about more than just control and self-interested behaviour, it is about an individual's ability to implement a desired outcome (Alkire 14). An agent's inability to reach set goals suggests a lack of power, and a lack of power is antithetical to individual agency. Agency is therefore only quantifiable through the successful achievement of choice (Alsop et al. 18). In terms of film production, the Laurel partners were disempowered from realising their goals by larger institutional forces.

This said, Alsop et al. write that "empowerment is based on tackling the differences in capabilities that deny actors the capacity to make transforming choices" (15). Rubinstein's capabilities, his human capital, had been developed through television production, and in 1983, with his partner taking a backseat in regard to wider leadership responsibilities, he had sufficient control to move the company back in this direction.

Rubinstein's entrepreneurial interest in television began with Ultimate Mirror, an SME through which he expressed a desire to democratise small screen production. Immediately after forming Laurel Tape & Film, Rubinstein again pursued this interest, leading the company to produce the tax shelter funded series *The Winners* from 1973 to 1975. In 1983, as Laurel looked to obtain financing for big screen fantasy projects, Rubinstein turned once more to

television with the series *Tales from the Darkside*. The series was intended as a spin-off from *Creepshow*, until rights issues with UFDC and Warner Bros. pushed Laurel to create an original entity. Like *Creepshow*, *Tales from the Darkside* was an example of anthology storytelling, in this case emulating the science fiction/horror format of popular network shows *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965) and *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964). Each *Darkside* episode was fabricated as a self-contained story often based on the work of a high-profile writer, including Harlan Ellison, Frederik Pohl, John Cheever, Clive Barker, Robert Bloch and, of course, Stephen King.⁷⁸

Typically for Rubinstein, the series was atypical of traditional approaches to television production, sidestepping the national broadcast networks in favour of first-run syndication. In first-run syndication, programs are offered directly to local television stations and “produced at a lower cost per-hour than network programs because of the high license fees required for the latter” (Albarran 173). *Darkside* was developed with TV producer Jerry Golod and financed by Lexington Broadcast Services (LBS) and Tribune Broadcasting Company. Each episode cost approximately \$124,000 and this amount never altered throughout its five-year run (Teitler 2018). In view of the minimal budget set aside for production, David Vogel declined control over the series and the project was instead overseen by up-and-coming producer William Teitler, whose background included commercial work and feature documentaries.⁷⁹ According to Teitler, Rubinstein told him that “because you’ve worked on commercials then you know what quality is, and because you’ve worked on documentaries

⁷⁸ Laurel was, in fact, at the forefront of a return to anthology storytelling in the 1980s and 1990s. The show was followed by Steven Spielberg’s *Amazing Stories* (1985-1987) for NBC and new iterations of *The Twilight Zone* (1985-1989) and *The Outer Limits* (1995-2002). As can be seen, Laurel not only followed trends during this period; they were also instrumental in establishing them.

⁷⁹ Vogel amended this when he left Laurel in 1985 to produce *Amazing Stories*, which boasted a massive budget of around \$800,000 to \$1 million per half-hour episode (O’Connor H25).

then you know how to do things inexpensively” (Teitler 2018). Rubinstein further maximised the show’s output by splitting production between New York and Los Angeles and this canny, cost-effective management placed *Darkside* well within Laurel’s capabilities.

For Romero’s part, after penning the 1983 pilot “Trick or Treat” (Dir. Babalan), he was relatively uninvolved when *Tales from the Darkside* went to series, contributing only three additional teleplays. The 1990 feature film *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (Dir. Harrison) also had a segment written by Romero, entitled “The Cat from Hell” and based on an original story by Stephen King. However, this was simply a leftover story from *Creepshow 2* and Romero otherwise had nothing to do with this feature.⁸⁰ In terms of the series specifically, creative development was passed on to Teitler and the show’s story consultant Tom Allen. Romero later expressed annoyance at the show’s cheapness, finding it an unworthy distraction to Laurel’s primary agenda. “I wanted to continue to make films,” he stated, “Richard just wanted to go TV. He just wanted to do whatever he could to try and boost stock. It was hopeless” (Romero 2016).

Rubinstein and his *Tales from the Darkside* partners were unconcerned about Romero’s lack of interest in the series, accepting that his brand identity was perhaps the most essential contribution he could make. On 20 July 1983, Laurel took out a one-page ad for the pilot in *Variety*, emphasising Romero as executive producer and writing in the banner, “the modern master of the macabre who packed movie theatres with *The Night of the Living Dead* [sic], *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Creepshow*, is bringing his talent for terror to television”

⁸⁰His most lasting legacy on *Tales from the Darkside* was the spooky opening narration that started every episode: “man lives in the sunlit world of what he believes to be reality. BUT there is unseen by most an underworld, a place that is just as real but not as brightly lit—a dark side!”

(97). In Romero's employment agreement with Laurel dated 19 June 1983, the importance of his brand value was made clear, formally acknowledging the rights of distributor LBS to add "George Romero Presents" to the *Tales from the Darkside* title if they so requested ("Exhibit 10.5" 2).

Romero's contract also stressed that if the pilot went to series, and Romero was no longer an employee of Laurel Entertainment, then the company would still be entitled to use his name in connection to the show, granting Romero 5% of the net proceeds "regardless of whether or not he is acting as Executive Producer" (14). Since this contract was written while the pilot was in production, it was assumed that Romero would act as the story editor and the agreement bestowed upon him approval rights over directors, writers and scripts, "subject to budgetary limitations and to contractual delivery obligations" (2). He ultimately declined these responsibilities, leaving *Darkside's* overall management to Rubinstein.

Laurel's division of creative and economic responsibilities was therefore complex. Rubinstein and Romero publicly accentuated this disparity as a means of establishing a clear yet multifaceted corporate identity. A closer look at their employment contracts also proves that they were legally bound to these roles. For his part, Romero was contracted to "participate in and supervise" the creative aspects of the company's business ("Exhibit 10.5" 2). Rubinstein, meanwhile, had "such authorities, duties and responsibilities in respect of the conduct of the business and operation of the company as are provided in the by-laws of the company" ("Exhibit 10.6" 2).

Returning to Jensen and Meckling's definition of normative agency theory, if these contracts seemed to benefit Romero's artistry and his welfare as the principal, they also provided a means through which Rubinstein could

control all of the company's activities. As business leader, Rubinstein was charged with finalising agreements between all of Laurel's creative and technical personnel, be they professional advisors, producers, writers, directors, performing artists, distributors or others ("Exhibit 10.6" 3). Rubinstein overruled his partner's concerns about a move back into television and Laurel's activities during this period strongly reinforced his agency. Apparently self-interested in returning to a medium in which he displayed both passion and expertise (human capital), *Darkside's* five-year run exhibited Rubinstein's control in determining creative output. In accord with Alsop et al.'s indicators of empowerment, Rubinstein's management of *Darkside* displayed the existence of choice (in his exclusive decision to move into television production), the use of choice (based on the talent available and economic capabilities) and an overall achievement of choice (production of a financially viable product). These factors were apparently unavailable to Romero, on this production and more widely speaking.

Rubinstein's decision to push forward on *Tales from the Darkside* without Romero's full endorsement had additional negative ramifications for his partner. In *Variety* on 3 June 1981, Rubinstein discussed plans to encompass a more dynamic range of creative personnel, telling reporter Stephen Klain that the company was actively on the lookout for "newer talents, or writers who might be more recognized from other media" (6). If this seemed to refer to screenwriters and partners such as Stephen King, Rubinstein later told *Variety* that Laurel was "starting to acquire material that is not exclusively for George . . . we're not looking for financing strictly contingent on George directing" (McCarthy, "Laurel Sked" 6). The article goes on to mention that while Romero intended to direct *The Sisterhood*, he may not have time, and that *Imagine That* would be directed

by screenwriter Harrison on a budget of under \$2 million (31).

Laurel's fiscal 1985 Form 10-K makes clear that *Tales from the Darkside* was intended to encourage, nurture and develop relationships with new writers and directors. In the first season alone, the company employed thirteen directors and seventeen writers (5). Of those directors listed, a number were drawn from Romero's production team, including Harrison, Gornick, Warner Shook (an actor who had appeared in *Knightriders* and *Creepshow*) and Tom Savini. This was all "part of Laurel's growing plans to bring new talent up through the ranks" (Gange, "Trick" 14). In the case of Gornick, his ambitions to surpass his role as staff director of photography created disharmony. After directing two episodes from *Darkside's* 1984 first season (notably "The Word Processor of the Gods" based on a story by King), Gornick found he enjoyed the responsibilities associated with being on-set creative leader. In turn, he was reluctant to join the production of *Day of the Dead* in his customary role as DP, only taking the position because his employers demanded it (Karr 60).

From the days of Latent Image, Romero's open-door policy provided a training ground for regional creative talent (Buba 2016; Harrison 2018). Such development, however, appeared conditional and Gornick suggests that Romero resented the aspirations of his DP, ultimately feeling that *Darkside's* talent farming interfered with, rather than facilitated, Romero's own creative process (Karr 60). On the other hand, Rubinstein felt that encouraging personnel to reach their maximum potential made good business sense. He understood that, at this juncture, Laurel's survival depended on the production of motion pictures. To make profits, the company needed to reach the retail market more often, a factor made more likely with a wider stable of in-house creative talent (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1984 2-3*). *Tales from the Darkside* employed

approximately 70 additional individuals during production (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1985 9*), creating strength in depth and moving Laurel closer to producing, as intended by Rubinstein, “more than one motion picture simultaneously” (“Laurel’s First” 8).

In the meantime, as Romero’s feature film projects stalled, during fiscal year 1984 company revenue “consisted primarily of license fees earned for the television pilot of *Tales from the Darkside*” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1984 16*).⁸¹ The decision to extend *Darkside* into a series created additional income and LBS paid a reported \$2.4 million for the first season. This was a healthy amount, even if a large percentage was undoubtedly fed back into production. By 31 March 1985, Laurel had received partial payment of \$902,000 of the total license fees for season two. In January of the same year, Laurel entered into an agreement with Embassy Telecommunications, Inc. for the foreign television rights to the first season of *Darkside*. From this deal alone, Laurel “recorded accounts receivable of approximately \$394,000 and accrued liabilities of approximately \$245,000” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1985 F-12*). Rubinstein’s motivation for moving back into television, self-interested or not, concerned the economic wellbeing and long-term survival of the firm as a whole.

Jocelyn J-Y. Desroches et al., in an empirical analysis of SMEs in relation to growth, draw upon the work of J.C. Laufer to state, “owner-managers and innovators accept and encourage the growth of their firm and are concerned mainly with self-accomplishment . . . the artisans, on the other hand, do not want their firm to grow, and are extremely concerned with maintaining their personal autonomy” (16). How true this sounds of Rubinstein and Romero. Building a company around Romero’s creativity may have been, at the outset,

⁸¹ Significant revenue also came from licensing the domestic video cassette rights to *Creepshow* (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1984 16*).

convenient for each partner, yet as the company expanded, their individual interests moved out of alignment. Once again, this is not uncommon in business practices, and economists have noted that the value of an original founder can diminish over time (Jayaraman et al. 1222). This is often the case when wider corporate demands and obligations to stakeholders move away from the founder's intentions. As growth occurs, the "founders' opportunism and entrenchment" amplifies, often requiring a transference of control. Zahra and Filatotchev write that, in this instance, "a robust system of governance and accountability is needed to put a 'straitjacket' on founders' opportunism" (895).

Romero's employment contract for 1983 attempted to do just that. A pivotal clause stated that, "except as otherwise herein provided, Romero shall devote to the performance of his obligations under this agreement such time, energy and attention as is reasonably necessary of a full-time employee in his position, and he shall use his best efforts for the profit, benefit and advantage of the Company" ("Exhibit 10.5" 5). However noble his dogged pursuit of auteurist filmmaking, by 1985 it did not appear to fulfil this part of his contract. Agency theory assumes that all parties in a business transaction are fundamentally self-interested, an agent seen to put her or his own incentives ahead of the firm. If we accept that all parties in a business endeavour behave in this manner, then Rubinstein's self-accomplishing endeavours at least catered to stakeholders at every level, including himself, his shareholders, the firm's employees, external business partners and his founder-partner. Romero's self-interests, for the most part, looked no further than his own creativity.

As stated, though agency theory is an imperfect model when applied to Laurel, this perspective allows us to consider self-interested behaviour in relation to Laurel's corporate activities. The Laurel principals differed in their

fundamental responsibilities to the holistic corporate entity they had formed; Rubinstein was interested in collective growth, Romero in individual accomplishment. Romero's agency problem was that he lacked the opportunity structures or level of control to achieve his primary goal. When this became apparent, he retreated from the company. Rubinstein later conceded that focusing business activities around his partner's creative output alone was no way to run a business (Rubinstein and Martin 2004), made less practical as the company continued to expand while Romero's self-determined incentives remained entrenched.

After declining to renew his contract terminating 19 June 1985, Romero was immediately re-contracted by Laurel as a creative advisor, if and when requested, on a non-exclusive basis, and as the director of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1985 31). In this sense, the company's agency problem was resolved. Control was transferred to Rubinstein in a more complete sense, empowering him to act as the company's sole principal. In the end, it is unclear if Romero was ever utilised in the capacity of creative advisor and *Pet Sematary*, as we shall see, was eventually passed to another filmmaker. Either way, Romero's new contract of employment essentially made him little more than another agent working for the company, his self-interested behaviour now carefully tempered and managed. Understandably, Romero's departure had a dramatic impact on Laurel's corporate identity and future business relations. Although Rubinstein was now free to lead the company in whichever direction he pleased, the massive waves of consolidation about to hit both Hollywood and a wider industry at large would have additional, unexpected consequences for Laurel Entertainment.

Conclusion

An investigation into agency and agency theory from a sociopolitical and economic perspective considers the multifaceted interactions and institutional levels of control that impact, and to a large degree dictate, auteurist activities in the independent sector. Externally, issues of creative agency are a result of constant negotiations between stakeholders, where, simply put, financial success appears the best means of sustaining total autonomy. Industry trends also play a part and the demands of the marketplace typically have the final say in determining output. Laurel's strategy of developing a portfolio of films-in-development for an array of markets was shrewd, if of limited success. Finally, a consideration of agency theory and issues of self-interest challenges the uncritical valorisation of the auteur filmmaker in independent cinema analysis. As seen in this close evaluation of Laurel's growth, Rubinstein's careful nurturing of a multitude of internal talent strengthened the firm's infrastructure and economic potential, in the process supporting a diverse array of creative practitioners in the independent sector. Romero on the other hand wanted Laurel to remain focused on his own creative agency. After all, if agency theory is about self-interest then, fittingly, so too is the politics of the auteur.

5

New Dawn Fades: Mergers, Acquisitions and the Small Business Enterprise, 1985-1994

“Mention Laurel Entertainment,” wrote journalist Ron Weiskind in October 1984, “and one name comes to mind—George Romero” (W23). This may have been so, but as we have seen Laurel’s success owed as much to Richard Rubinstein’s stratagem as it did his partner’s auteurist output. With the company’s totemic figure now absent, Laurel faced a period of change and reorganisation in which the firm’s corporate identity and production output would need to be redrawn. “Change” defined Laurel’s activities from Romero’s departure onward, augmented, as now seems familiar, by large-scale industrial goings-on as much as internal adjustments. Stephen Prince points out that in the 1980s a series of Hollywood mergers and buyouts “transformed the industry” (47), part of a larger global business trend dubbed “merger mania” by marketplace analysts (Lubatkin, “Mergers” 218). In the late-1980s, a first wave of industry-wide mergers and acquisitions (M&A) offered the solidity Laurel long desired. A second wave, coming in the early 1990s, resulted in dissolution.

An examination of M&A in relation to the media traditionally falls upon top-level machinations, exploring the moguls, conglomerates and major players who instigate change and, at some level, dictate the fate of the industry at large.

A subjacent analysis of Laurel Entertainment offers instead a ground level perspective from which to scrutinise these developments, providing a rare case study of one of the many small to medium business enterprises swept up (or swept away) by these waves of consolidation. Divided into three sections, this chapter begins by examining Laurel in its pre-merger phase, asking how attempts to readjust after the departure of Romero contributed (directly or otherwise) to merger with Spelling Entertainment in 1989. The following section looks at the impact this merger had on Laurel's output and corporate identity. This is then followed by a close analysis of the limitations subsequently imposed by this merger, paying attention to the 1990s M&A wave and Viacom's purchase of Spelling in 1994, a transaction that rendered Laurel obsolete and resulted in the firm's closure.

5.1. Quantity before Quality: Pre-Merger, Syndication and Library Assets

From the company's first feature film in the mid-1970s, Laurel's identity hinged on Romero's auteurist output and cult image. After his exit from the company in 1985, on the surface little appeared to change. Advertising material for *Creepshow 2* and *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* continued to foreground Romero's involvement. Indeed, *Creepshow 2* posters emphasised the value of writers King and Romero as "masters of the macabre," presenting an image of a ghoulish figure pointing directly toward their above-the-title names. (fig. 5.1). Romero's termination of contract agreement made clear the importance of his brand name, ensuring its indefinite usage in the marketing of the *Tales from the Darkside* television series. In 1987, Romero was still contracted as a creative consultant and had begun preparation to direct *Pet Sematary*, affirming his lingering significance to the company's identity.



Fig. 5.1. UK poster for *Creepshow 2*. “*Creepshow 2* - Original Vintage Film Poster.” *Original Poster*. <http://www.originalposter.co.uk/fulldetails.asp?rid=3698>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.

Even when accounting for Romero’s name value, attracting production monies remained a challenge. Warner Bros. retained first refusal rights on *Creepshow 2* as late as 31 March 1986 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 9*), finally placing the project into turnaround where it was picked up by Roger Corman’s New World Pictures on a reduced budget. At around the same time, development of *The Stand* was delayed to focus on *Pet Sematary*, avoiding the potential hazard of having two Stephen King adaptations in direct competition with each other on the marketplace (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1985 2*).

Pet Sematary’s more modest scale (though effects heavy, it did not go as far as to drop a nuclear bomb on Las Vegas) made financing for this film more likely, though monies were still far from forthcoming and Laurel eventually

allowed Paramount to option the project outright (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1988* 5). In this instance, Rubinstein stayed on to produce and Paramount honoured King's agreement to write the screenplay and to allow production to take place in his hometown of Maine, New England. Otherwise, this was not formally a Laurel production. The company received no credit on the final print (beyond individual credits for Rubinstein and Mitchell Galin) and Paramount's inhouse producer Ralph S. Singleton oversaw the day-to-day responsibilities of production. Paramount's scheduling also clashed with Romero's reshoots on *Monkey Shines* for Orion Pictures and he was replaced by up-and-coming director Mary Lambert.⁸² Romero felt betrayed by this decision to move ahead without him and vowed never to work with Rubinstein again (Jones, "George A. Romero Speaks" 19).

Released in April 1989, *Pet Sematary* received lukewarm reviews in the press (Canby 16),⁸³ as did Harrison's *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie*, the latter "lacking in a unifying vision" according to critic Mark Kermode ("Video" 58). *Creepshow 2* was more universally derided, and Michael Gornick's direction compared unfavourably to Romero's work on the first film. As Richard Harrington wrote in his review for the *Washington Post*, "King and Romero—the horror genre's equivalent of the daily double—are back on the storyboard for 2, but with director Michael Gornick in charge, 2 goes nowhere slowly" (B6). Nigel

⁸² Gornick claims the decision to go ahead with Mary Lambert at the helm was made because Romero "wasn't sellable as the director of this project" (Axl and Jscott). The accuracy of this is not known and Romero's rights of first-refusal on the project go some way towards disproving Gornick's remarks. This said, Romero's diminishing box office appeal probably resulted in few sleepless nights at Paramount when he proved unavailable.

⁸³ Rubinstein was not about to let such negativity go unchecked and wrote an angry retort to Vincent Canby's review, published in the *New York Times*' letters pages on 21 May 1989: "the major problem here is that [Canby] incorrectly labels the picture as a thriller. *Pet Sematary* is a horror movie, and it is a genre convention that horror movies telegraph their plot way ahead and the characters aren't smart enough to stay out of trouble. This approach hasn't seemed to bother the fans" ("*Pet Sematary*" H3). Rubinstein's justification for the failings of the plot may be dubious, but it is intriguing to see him reinforce the importance of Laurel's identity in connection to horror and horror fandom so plainly.

Floyd of *Monthly Film Bulletin* also criticised Gornick's direction, finding it wanting in narrative structure, pace and suspense (14).

Anthony Kaufman reminds us of the importance of "artistry" when it comes to canonical independent cinema, forming for him one of three key points of reference alongside financing and production contexts (qtd. in Nikolic 3). With Romero absent, it can be argued that Laurel never reached the same level of artistry that it had under its co-founder. Such value judgements are, of course, entirely subjective (Romero was himself no stranger to scathing reviews in the press), and it is not the intent of this thesis to organise Laurel's pre- and post-Romero phases into good art vs. bad art paradigms. What we can say with a little more certainty (and even here there is contention) is that the filmmakers who stepped into Romero's shoes lacked his penchant for auteurist filmmaking, either from the classical Sarris model (despite showing technical competence, *Creepshow 2*, *Pet Sematary* and *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* lack the "distinguishable identity" of their directors) or from a commercial perspective.

In the defence of these filmmakers, the firm positioned them as peripheral figures. Deference to King's artistry was evident in his deal on *Pet Sematary*, while interviews with *Creepshow 2* producer David Ball and Laurel's creative director Mitchell Galin reveal an almost awe-like admiration for the novelist (Ball 2016; Galin 2018). King's agency was picked up on by Vincent Canby in his review of *Pet Sematary*, referring to the novelist/screenwriter as "the film's auteur as well as author" (16). Directors Harrison, Lambert and Gornick were essentially employed to translate a blueprint of a script (already written without their input) to the big screen. More so, Gornick and Harrison were inhouse collaborators, chosen as much for their reliability as their artistic talents. From a commercial stand point, Laurel had Romero and King as the

firm's "masters of horror," or "auteur-as-commodity" (A. Martin 96). This was to the frustration of Gornick, who worried he was being "hidden in the background" on *Creepshow 2* because his name lacked marquee value (Gross 41). Granting that these filmmakers were allowed a degree of creative latitude on set (Harrison 2018), their artistic worth was only a secondary consideration in terms of the company's wider endeavours.

After the departure of Romero and David Vogel in the mid-1980s, Laurel's creative governance was handed to former television producer Mitchell Galin, who joined the company as vice president of production in April 1985. On paper, he shared this title with Gornick, yet soon became a company leader second only to Rubinstein. Galin had previously served as director of development and production supervisor for Robert Halmi, the famed "miniseries king" and so-called "biggest TV movie producer in the world" (Rutenberg). Under Galin's tenure, Robert Halmi, Inc. (which sold to Hallmark Cards in 1994) produced such lavish television movies as *The Phantom of the Opera* (Dir. Markowitz, 1983) and *China Rose* (Dir. Day, 1983), both for CBS.

By 1986, Laurel's executive corporate officers were therefore as follows: Rubinstein remained president and treasurer, Virginia M. McGuire was controller of the company and vice president of finance and secretary and Gornick and Galin were vice presidents of production (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 15*). On 29 July 1987, McGuire, Gornick and Galin were promoted to senior management level and Diane Vilagi was promoted to vice president of production administration ("Executives in Turnaround" 6). That same year, Charles Jeffrey Caiman rounded off the group of corporate officers as vice president of television and Laurel listed 15 members of staff employed on a year-round basis (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1987 11, 24-25*).

Galin's immediate responsibility on joining Laurel was to oversee production of *Tales from the Darkside*, which remained the company's most reliable source of revenue. *Darkside* was now being broadcast on a reported 125 local stations across the US, mostly programmed in late-night timeslots. According to Rubinstein, this was when "horror buffs are most likely to watch and when there is less original programming to compete for viewer's attention" (Farber, "Success" C22). The series had continued to grow in value well after the production of the pilot episode and in fiscal 1984 television licence fees accounted for 60% of Laurel's revenue. By fiscal 1986, these license fees accounted for approximately 85% of the revenue (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 F-19*). On 24 June 1987, George Anderson reported that Laurel's net income was approximately \$1.5 million, the main source of which was *Tales from the Darkside* ("The Tattler" 30).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, much of the revenue from the series went back into production, but the program did at least generate a more reliable source of monies than Laurel's feature film output. *Darkside* further benefited from its economical approach to production, and William Teitler recalls an "inherently organised . . . automobile-style assembly line." Production encompassed exactly four days (consisting of no more than 90 shots) and ran concurrently with pre-production on the following episode. Post-production was overseen by two editors and usually spanned little more than a week (Teitler 2018). Given that the show was a "lean operation with small overheads," a decision was made to produce series three and four consecutively, bypassing the start-up costs associated with yearly renewal (Teitler 2018). With the crew already in place, and studio space in New York and Los Angeles rented, Laurel pressed forward to complete both series (totalling 42 episodes) in a five to six-

month period. After which, the firm's commitment to syndicators LBS and Tribune was finished, and the show broadcast its last episode in July 1988 (Teitler 2018).

This push to generate more episodes was about more than licensing fees and saving on start-up costs. Todd Gitlin records that in television "the real money was in syndication," where a series moves beyond its singular network home to run repeatedly on multiple channels for an unlimited period of time (57).⁸⁴ *Darkside* was pre-syndicated, but additional episodes still equalled additional revenue. Famed television producer Aaron Spelling, the man behind hit shows *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989), proffered that a minimum of 66 episodes was required for "successful domestic repeat syndication of network or first-run syndication programming" (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-K 1989* 10). Former media executive Jeffrey C. Ulin says this number "allows a station to run a program five days per week ('stripping') for 13 weeks, corresponding to half of a network season (e.g. September-December); with repeats, this quantity provides adequate episodes to run a series daily throughout the entire broadcast year" (239). Most network shows move into syndication once this number is reached, often trimming the length of each episode to permit more commercial time (Gitlin 57-58). As a first-run syndicated package, *Darkside* was ready made for such distribution. It was "syndication fodder," as Teitler put it (Teitler 2018).

With this so-called "magic number" (Ulin 239) for repeat syndication reached, it made little sense to renew *Darkside* after series four (bringing the total number of episodes to 90). Laurel then determined to produce a second

⁸⁴ One of television's most famous syndicated shows is perhaps NBC's *Seinfeld* (1989-1998). After ending its original network run, by 2013 *Seinfeld* had earned a reported \$3.1 billion in syndication revenue (Garrahan).

anthology program that could repeat the trajectory of its older sibling and, in 1987, fashioned two pilots for first-run syndication in collaboration with LBS and Tribune. The first, *Moment of Fear*, intended to downplay the supernatural in favour of Hitchcockian suspense. The second, *Night Rose*, focused on eroticism and was picked-up on an exclusive basis by premium cable service HBO, who then lost interest when executives deemed John Harrison's pilot "too pornographic" (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1987 4*; Harrison 2018). With neither show attracting much attention, Galin edited together a "scissor reel" of *Darkside's* most iconic monsters and pitched it to Tribune as a new anthology horror series that placed such creatures at the forefront (Galin 2018). *Monsters*, as it was later called, displayed an identical model to *Darkside* and Tribune immediately fast tracked it into production, placing it on the air the same calendar year that *Darkside* concluded. The show spanned three series and 72 syndicated episodes.

Aside from these financial incentives, Laurel "benefited from its involvement in television series production as a result of the opportunity to develop relationships with many writers and directors in both New York and Los Angeles" (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1988 4*). As a consequence of this focus on bicoastal television production, Laurel's Fort Pitt Blvd. base became surplus to requirements.⁸⁵ Rubinstein had maintained offices in New York from Laurel's inception and all of the firm's corporate officers would now join him there. The creative staff were also relocated to New York and, since this space was "suitable and adequate for its present needs," Laurel ended the lease on their Pittsburgh offices in July 1987 (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1987 12*). If Romero's exit formally ended the company's auteurist focus, Laurel's status as a thriving

⁸⁵ *Creepshow 2* was also shot outside of Pennsylvania (Timpone, "One the Road" 26).

regional film base away from bicoastal centres was now also a thing of the past.

The demise of Laurel's regional status was a profound change for a firm whose geographic location had been key to its formative identity. Yet this shift was unnoticed in the press and, given the gradual relocation to New York, made little difference in terms of the company's productivity. Pittsburgh had made sense for a number of reasons, based on its knowledge of tax shelter schemes, distance from Hollywood unions, informal locus of eager (and therefore cheap) talent and the facilities accumulated by Romero and Latent Image. For Romero, Pittsburgh had been a separation from mainstream modes of production, literal and figurative. Now this was at an end. In some ways, relocation to New York was itself an ideological shift towards a more standardised corporate governance, a shift that had begun with the firm's IPO in 1979. As Laurel grew, the firm sought closer relations with the mainstream and a commitment to regional production now made little sense. Though ties to Pittsburgh were, for all intents and purposes, severed, the firm left behind an infrastructure of trained professionals that would later become intrinsic to media production in the region.⁸⁶

Laurel's focus on television production was another shift in the firm's identity, yet this change in output unlocked significant additional revenue. Since production began, *Darkside* had been licenced to numerous foreign territories and in 1986 the video cassette rights for the first 24 episodes were licenced to overseas and domestic distributors, including International Video Entertainment and Embassy Home Entertainment (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 4*). Geoff King notes the "astronomical" growth of the home video market in the 1980s

⁸⁶ In 1990, the newly formed Pittsburgh Film Office began a determined push to attract "runaway" Hollywood productions into the city, quickly becoming an "industry leader." This was achieved thanks to both Pennsylvania's film tax credits and the regional talent base established by Laurel and public broadcaster WQED ("Inside the Pittsburgh"; Buba 2016).

(*American Independent 22*), rapidly becoming a “global culture industry” (Yip 91). Indicatively, Frederick Wasser charts 2500 video rental stores in the US in 1980. By 1986, this had grown to 25,000 (*Veni 101*). That same year, the home video market was returning as much money to producers as the theatrical market (Wasser, “Vestron” 32). Blockbuster Entertainment soon became a marketplace leader, opening its first store in Dallas, Texas in 1985. Laurel’s back catalogue, of course, included feature films, and in 1986 the company reported that 25% of its revenue came from the licencing of domestic cassette rights to “a single motion picture distributor” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 F-19*).

Feature films were therefore not entirely put to one side and, as the \$450,000 in fees received for *Creepshow 2* demonstrated, could still generate a respectable income (*Laurel Entmt. AR 1987 5*). On 9 May 1986, Laurel acquired the assets of the California-based limited partnerships Angeles Cinema Investors 81 and Angeles Cinema Investors 82. These assets consisted of cash, four feature films and the “amounts due or to become due” in respect to these films in the future. The four films acquired were *Blue Skies Again* (Dir. Michaels, 1983), *Irreconcilable Differences* (Dir. Shyer, 1984), *Scandalous* (Dir. R. Cohen, 1984) and *Swing Shift*, this latter film starring Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell and Ed Harris. Laurel’s report to shareholders made it clear that the domestic theatrical release of all four had been “completed” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 10-11*) and, with the exception of *Irreconcilable Differences*, had all been box office disappointments. The worst offender was the sports-comedy *Blue Skies Again*, which returned a paltry \$46,603 at the domestic box office (“*Blue Skies Again (1983) - Financial*”).

Scanning over this acquisition, the question arises as to the identity of

Angeles Cinema Investors and why Laurel would purchase four films it knew to be played out theatrically. To answer the second question first, from this deal Laurel received approximately \$4.4 million in cash, of which \$1 million was immediately paid back to the two partnerships. Approximately \$700,000 was used to pay the expenses of each entity and \$225,000 was allocated to partners of Angeles Cinema, leaving Laurel with approximately \$2,475,000. Laurel was also entitled to 25% of the next \$4.6 million of future collections (if any) and 100% thereafter. Monies from this transaction were poured back into development activities, which Laurel foresaw would enhance the chance of future projects reaching production (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986* 11).

Distinct from the limited partnerships of Laurel's 1970s tax shelter projects, Angeles Cinema Investors was one of a number of venture capital vehicles investing in feature films in the early-1980s, including Silver Screen Partners, Delphi Film Associates and FilmDallas. Unlike tax shelters, investors here were looking for a profit. As investment banker Jeff Barbakow warned, "if the films don't work, the deal doesn't work" (Harris E1). FilmDallas managing general partner Sam L. Grogg noted an "upswing of the booming film industry—cable had matured, new superchannels were leading new markets for movie sales, videocassette rentals were growing at phenomenal rates and the international market was on the rebound" (151). Despite Grogg's optimism, and the occasional success, individual investors did not typically receive more than 10% to 15% annually on their invested capital (H. Vogel 132). A *Los Angeles Times* article from 1983 name-checked Angeles Cinema when reporting the high-risk of such enterprises (Harris E1). In industry speak, it became known as "dumb money," dominated by the folly of "deep-pocketed dentists, oil tycoons and other wealthy individuals eager for a piece of the glamorous, but high-risk,

game of film production” (Kelly).⁸⁷

In keeping with the majority, Angeles Cinema’s \$32.5 million feature film speculation, spread in a mutual fund model between two partnerships across four films (Harris E1), failed to return significant monies to investors. Sale of these assets to Laurel promised at least some returns on an ill-advised business venture. For Laurel, beyond the additional liquidity, the ancillary value of Angeles Cinema’s films was not totally exhausted, and Laurel now identified such markets as key to its industrial growth (*Aaron Spelling Prod. Proxy 1989 77*). More so, acquisition of these properties, when placed alongside the feature films directed by Romero and the *Tales from the Darkside* television series, represented “a significant step towards Laurel’s long-term goal of building a ‘library’ of motion pictures and TV programs with continuing residual values” (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1986 4*). In this transformative stage, what Laurel wanted was quantity. Quality, if not discounted, was, as seen with *Creepshow 2* and *Darkside: The Movie*, far from a leading concern.

Owning “substantial library assets” has long been an integral part of the major studios’ infrastructure (H. Vogel 91), and in the 1980s and 1990s theorists observed a move towards the consolidation of library ownership. In their article “Who Owns the Movies?” (1994), Elliot Forbes and David Pierce write that

Wall Street loves libraries and weighs them heavily in valuing stock; banks and other lending institutions readily accept them as collateral; and the cash flow generated by their exploitation sometimes sustains companies through otherwise tough periods. And with the constant development of new media, film libraries have historically appreciated in

⁸⁷ For a closer look at these limited partnership packages, see Harold L. Vogel’s *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis, 9th edition* (131-33, 164-65).

value over time. (43)

Constructing a substantial library of content was at the root of M&A activity during this period. According to Stephen Prince, media mogul Ted Turner's acquisition of MGM/UA in 1986 hinged on the studio's library of classic films, "providing an outstanding bank of programming in perpetuity" and a steady stream of content for Turner's small screen broadcasting outlets (71-72). Operating on a much-reduced scale, Laurel's acquisition of Angeles Cinema Investors' assets enhanced the firm's marketplace potency across platforms. Given what was to come, one wonders how much of this activity was really about making the company itself an attractive target for acquisition.

The late 1980s had been a particularly turbulent time for independent production companies and small motion picture enterprises. In 1986, an investigation into the Cannon Group by the SEC accused the firm of fraudulent account practices, causing stock to fall and culminating in lawsuits by several shareholders accusing Cannon of misrepresenting its finances (Delugach C1, C8). Competitor De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, Inc. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in August 1988 (Akst 1) and, by 1992, independent companies New World Pictures, Weintraub Entertainment Group, Orion Pictures, Vestron, Skouras and Cinecom were reported "dead" or "barely breathing" (Russell Smith D10). In 1987, the *New York Times* predicted a "tough season" ahead for independents,⁸⁸ attributed to a dissipating enthusiasm around home video and pay television and the continuing rise of production and market costs.

Investment banker Mark Manson, meanwhile, argued that "for the most part it is

⁸⁸ That this "tough season" would coincide with reports of growth in independent film production (see Chapter Four; McCarthy, "Indies Releasing" 3) illustrates the uncertainty and risk/risk-reward that frequently surrounds this sector.

simply impossible to predict what films will succeed and what won't. Simply making a lot of movies helps" (Fabrikant, "Small Studios" L37).

When reviewing Laurel Entertainment for potential acquisition, auditors for Spelling Productions summarised that "as an independent entity, the prospects for Laurel's growth are limited by the increasingly difficult time it, like other small independent entertainment companies, is experiencing in raising capital" (*Aaron Spelling Prod. Proxy 1989 25-26*). By 1988, the problems in financing feature films notwithstanding, Laurel was also facing difficulties with its small screen partners. At some point during the production of *Tales from the Darkside*, relations with Jaygee Productions soured, and on 31 March Jaygee filed a complaint against Laurel for breach of contract. Chief amongst its concerns was a lack of payment on net proceeds, lack of profit participation on the upcoming *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* and a lack of profit share on the sister show *Monsters*, a program Jaygee determined to be a direct spin-off from *Darkside*. Jaygee sought general damages of no less than \$800,000 and punitive damages of no less than \$3 million (*Laurel Entmt. Form 10-K 1988 13-14*).

The above episode reinforced Laurel's financial vulnerability and the need to establish "friendly" partnerships in future enterprises. From an M&A perspective, business professor Robert F. Bruner labels so-called "friendly" companies the "white knight," i.e. buyers who purchase a target and agree not to dismantle the company or lay-off employees. For Bruner, a white knight is "a horizontal or vertical peer of the target firm and is motivated to bid by the prospect of synergies in the combination and/or the desire to preserve a strategic relationship or deny such a relationship to a competitor" (848).

From the evidence at hand, it seems likely that acquisition was, at the

very least, on the company's mind during this period.⁸⁹ Laurel's growing library of assets certainly made it attractive to acquiring firms, while a volatile independent landscape, not to mention the financial threats from former partners, made a protective "white knight" guardian desirable. Actively courted or not, Laurel suddenly had an opportunity to cultivate such a relationship. Rubinstein and Galin were friendly with Jules Haimovitz, a so-called expert in "restructuring the business profile" of entertainment companies (Sharkey and Freeman 20). Haimovitz joined Aaron Spelling Productions in December 1987 and by the middle of 1988 had arranged a merger between the two companies. A third company in this partnership, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc., offered a solution to Laurel's longstanding distribution woes.

5.2. "A Natural Middle Ground": Acquisition, MFTs and Corporate Identity

In the entertainment industry, the 1980s merger wave is said to have begun in earnest when, in 1985, media baron Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp. purchased 20th Century Fox, nothing less than "one of the most important mergers in industry history" according to Schatz ("The Studio System" 22). Bountiful M&A activity followed, culminating in 1989's "year of mega-takeover" (Gold 5) when publisher Time Inc. merged with Warner Communications, and Japanese electronics giant Sony acquired Columbia Pictures. A managing consultant from McKinsey & Company reported that, from 1988 to 1989, \$80

⁸⁹ Companies are often coy about publicising their desire to become an acquisition target, particularly in the independent sector where ideas of autonomy and authenticity are central. Independent production and distribution company A24, the firm behind Oscar-winner *Moonlight* (Dir. Jenkins, 2016) and Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017), has recently undergone a protracted, "will they, won't they" courtship with Apple. Despite A24's status as a provider of "edgy, auteur-driven projects" (Lang), *IndieWire*'s Jenna Marotta reports that the company was started by an investment firm who "considered it likely that they would flip the company within a matter of years after it was founded" ("Apple"). Merger with Apple was strongly denied in March 2018, though in November a non-exclusive partnership was announced in which A24 would provide content for the tech giant (Lang). Whether A24 wishes to retain its autonomy, or is simply playing hard-to-get, remains to be seen.

billion was committed to “big takeovers” in the entertainment industry (Micklethwait 4). The widespread creation of “powerful communications complexes” (Norris 39) created a snowball effect, where M&A became “essential to the competitive survival of American enterprise in the emerging global entertainment communications marketplace” (Gold 5). As *Variety* editor-in-chief Peter Bart wrote, “Sony’s acquisition of Columbia symbolized the globalization of Hollywood. Rupert Murdoch’s purchase of Fox formalized that the studios were becoming mere cogs in global media machines.”

Kalin Kolev et al. identify this as part of a wider trend spanning multiple industries and continents, influenced by permissive legal environments, favourable economic conditions (including recovery from an economic recession) and financial innovations such as junk bonds (23). In this context, economists observe that the stock market tends to negatively value unrelated diversification between joining firms (Shleifer and Vishny 53), while M&A activity between related firms boasts a higher success rate (Trautwein 285). The Reagan administration’s “hands off” approach to same industry mergers was also significant and, with the challenge from anti-trust authorities diminished, the number of such synergies grew exponentially (Shleifer and Vishny 53). For Michael Lubatkin, this confidence in same industry mergers fits a so-called merger contingency framework, where “the better the strategic fit between the acquiring and the acquired firm (that is, the more the respective environments of the two firms have unifying features) the greater the potential value created by the merger” (“Merger Strategies” 40). Synergy between firms has become part of a sound strategic plan, bringing together complementary resources that facilitate more effective operations (Lubatkin, “Mergers” 218).

Prince situates the entertainment industry within this macroeconomic

trend, as largescale conglomerates began “divesting unrelated market segments in order to concentrate on related areas of operation” (60). Prior to the 1980s M&A wave, the owners of the major studios typically had “no experience of—and little interest in—media entertainment” (Schatz, “The Studio System” 18). This is epitomised by Gulf and Western’s (a conglomerate that began by specialising in clothing, auto parts and manufacturing, etc.) purchase of Paramount in 1966. Prince calls the industry’s movement away from such unrelated couplings “deconglomeration” (60).

Table 5.1

Types of Merger

Horizontal Mergers	Between companies producing one or more of the same, or closely related, products.
Vertical Mergers	Between companies having a buyer-seller relationship before the merger.
Conglomerate Mergers – Product Extension	When products of the acquiring/acquired companies are functionally related in production or distribution, but do not compete with one another.
Conglomerate Mergers – Market Extension	When the acquiring and acquired companies manufacture the same products, but sell them in different geographic markets.
Pure Conglomerate Mergers	Between firms that are functionally unrelated.

Source: Yakov Amihud and Baruch Lev. “Risk Reduction as a Managerial Motive for Conglomerate Mergers.” *The Bell Journal of Economics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1981, p. 610.

Looking at what makes an effective same industry synergy, economists begin with a simple question: “what problems does this [merger] solve, or why

do we need it?” (I. Altman). Frequently broken into distinct types (see Table 5.1), the 1980s entertainment industry often combined vertical and horizontal integration. This granted firms ownership and control over “adjacent stages” of production, distribution and sales output, simultaneously allowing them to sell product across different media platforms—film, television shows, books, music, videogames, toys, etc. (Fan and Goyal 877; Micklethwait 6). Smaller business enterprises also hoped to ride this wave, fearing that failure to do so would see them cut adrift. In 1988, the Hollywood-based production company Heritage Entertainment, Inc. acquired Landmark Theatre Corp.’s chain of domestic theatres, admitting to shareholders that the wider trend of consolidation was behind this purchase. Heritage cited Aaron Spelling’s acquisition of Laurel Entertainment as a precedent that its shareholders would be wise to follow (*Heritage Entmt. Proxy 1989 32*).

In a 1989 proxy statement to shareholders,⁹⁰ Aaron Spelling Productions recorded that Laurel’s east coast concentration “on the lower budget, first-run television syndication market as well as on feature films” would horizontally compliment the firm’s own production of prime-time network television on the west coast, providing “significant flexibility in producing programming in all budget ranges” (ix). Aside from this market extension, Laurel’s growing, if modest, portfolio of content matched Spelling’s objective to expand significantly its library of entertainment programming (*Spelling Entmt. AR 1990 2*). What these SEC reports left out was that Spelling’s future was uncertain. The company had recently ended a 17-year exclusive contract with ABC television

⁹⁰ A proxy statement (sometimes known as a Form-14A) is a mandatory SEC document that all public firms must produce when shareholder voting is required. These documents provide comprehensive information on the topic at hand (be it a change of the board of directors or a proposed M&A) and are intended to facilitate an informed and knowledgeable voting process (see “SEC Form DEF 14A”).

(“*Dynasty* Producer” 50), prompting the *Wall Street Journal* to call Spelling a “lacklustre performer . . . no longer a major power in prime-time television” (Rundle 1).

The acquisition of Laurel was only one part of Spelling’s grander attempt to strengthen its position. In July 1988, while being written-off by the *Wall Street Journal*, Spelling announced merger with Great American Communications Company (GACC), combining Spelling Productions with GACC’s Worldvision Enterprises, Inc. under the organisational framework (or holding company) Spelling Entertainment, Inc. Worldvision was then a leading television distributor with an extensive library of international and domestic programming, including Hanna-Barbera’s range of children’s animation “rich in proven franchise cartoon characters,” from Fred Flintstone to Yogi Bear (“Great American” 74). As future Spelling president Peter Bachmann stated, Worldvision’s library “generates a very stable cash flow that helps underwrite its operations and new productions” (Littleton, “Supplier” 54). More importantly, it gave Spelling a guaranteed distribution outlet. The deal was worth a reported \$65.4 million in cash, plus stock options of around \$118 million for GACC owner Carl Lindner Jr., granting him a 49% controlling interest in the company (Drew 27). Partnership with Worldvision allowed Spelling to “control [its] own destiny” (Littleton, “Helpful” 54), and Laurel would provide another source of programming to be distributed through this network.

From a media producer SME perspective, Worldvision could “generate revenues internally” (Cohn 13), meaning Laurel no longer had to worry about sourcing distribution for its small screen output. With these incentives in mind, and Laurel’s reported losses of \$211,000 on sales of \$3.5 million in fiscal 1988 (Segal 26), the company agreed to become a wholly-owned subsidiary of

Spelling Entertainment. The deal was finalised on 1 March 1989 at a total purchase price of “approximately \$12 million [consisting] of \$7.1 million in cash including related expenses and approximately 734,000 shares of Class A Common Stock with a market value on that date of approximately \$4.9 million” (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-Q 1989 5*). For Laurel’s 2,600,847 shares of common stock, former shareholders received a combination of \$1.70 in cash per share and approximately .282 of a share of Spelling stock (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-Q 1989 6*).

Though the benefits were clear, this merger definitively ended Laurel’s fifteen-year tenure as an autonomous production company. As with its exit from Pittsburgh, Laurel’s evolving identity made this transition relatively unproblematic for the firm. The self-conscious desire to cultivate an oppositional, anti-establishment brand left with Romero, going with him those notional ideas of “autonomy, authenticity, and distinction” (M. Newman, “Indie Culture” 34) so important to both the canonical sector and Romero’s own “cult auteur” image.⁹¹ In 1989, Laurel’s identity, as confirmed by Spelling’s report to its shareholders, was simply that of an east coast producer of low-cost television and film product. As far as the company’s growth was concerned, legitimising cultural notions of autonomy-authenticity were now irrelevant. Maintaining the firm’s autonomy in terms of “real-world” working practices was of greater urgency.

As a wholly-owned subsidiary of Spelling Entertainment, Laurel’s board of directors was disbanded and replaced by one consisting of Aaron Spelling,

⁹¹ Michael Z. Newman reminds us that ideas of independent autonomy-authenticity have never been as absolute as consumers might like, particularly as the 1980s and 1990s M&A waves saw the majors increasingly enter this market. Newman proposes that “today’s media conglomerates offer their own alternatives to themselves, bringing in even those consumers who might be contemptuous of their very existence” (“Indie Culture” 17).

Jules Haimovitz, Ronald Lightstone and Rubinstein (*Aaron Spelling Prod. Proxy 1989* 29). Senior management remained unchanged and Rubinstein entered a five-year employment contract that guaranteed his services as president and chief officer until March 1994. This contract promised a yearly salary of \$300,000 (to increase by \$25,000 each year) and numerous benefits and stock options (xi). Rubinstein was happy that a large part of his corporate responsibilities had come to an end, now feeling freer to return to the minutia of day-to-day production activities (Cohn 13). Although Laurel was now irrevocably beholden to a parent company, the firm was otherwise independent and self-driving. Galin claims that Spelling was entirely hands off when it came to its east coast unit, granting Laurel the freedom to initiate its own productions provided “the [financial] numbers made sense.” According to Galin, Laurel still “had the authority to make the deal” (Galin 2018).

But what deals were Laurel now attempting to make? Film production was still on the agenda and Spelling was impressed with the \$57 million box office on *Pet Sematary*, on which Laurel retained profit participation (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-K 1989* 12, 13). A sequel to *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* was also in the works, alongside an adaptation of Stephen King’s *Thinner*, originally published under his pseudonym Richard Bachman in 1984. In November 1990, Spelling initiated Spelling Films International, a fourth wholly-owned subsidiary under CEO Ian Jessel.⁹² This unit was added “to acquire and distribute feature films for international theatrical, television and home video release” (*Spelling Entmt. AR 1990* 1) and in 1992 contributed to the financing and international release of indie films *The Player* (Dir. Altman),

⁹² Jessel’s tenure ended eighteen months later on 30 April 1992. He subsequently sued the company for wrongful dismissal and in June that same year was appointed president of Miramax’s international arm (Hazelton 3; “Jessel Sues” 17; Brown and Klady 2).

Storyville (Dir. Frost) and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (Dir. Lynch).

Rather than a boon to the Laurel partners, Spelling Films reported that only one or two of the films on their roster would be made in-house, with the rest sourced from third party co-ventures (“Spelling Ent. Forms Intl.” 50). Once again, this was about library building, emphasised in September 1993 when Worldvision acquired 150 movies from the struggling Carolco Pictures. Properties in this deal included blockbusters *Total Recall* (Dir. Verhoeven, 1990), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (Dir. Cameron, 1991), *Basic Instinct* (Dir. Verhoeven, 1992) and the *Rambo* trilogy (1982-1988) (*Spelling Entmt. 10-K 1992* 1). As for Laurel, if the firm wanted to continue to make feature films, it still had to source third party financing independently. Even under this new corporate umbrella, money for features was difficult to obtain and the firm’s agency, in regard to an unencumbered existence of choice, remained limited to surrounding opportunity structures.

Tales from the Darkside: The Movie was initiated before the Spelling merger and was once again optioned by Paramount Pictures, again with Rubinstein and Galin producing. *Thinner* was not completed until well after Laurel’s closure, and the firm made no other theatrical features in the interim. Instead, Worldvision gave them a direct line of access into television. Spelling also encouraged activity on the small screen, readily introducing Rubinstein and Galin to network executives as a new “potential supplier” (Galin 2018). Early 1990s television seemed like fertile ground and Amanda Lotz reports that new technologies (remote control, video recorders and analogue cable systems) and a growth in the number of channels “expanded viewers’ choice and control,” combining to facilitate an “explosion of content providers” (*Television* 12, 14). As these factors created further opportunities for independent television

producers, another fortuitous development was about to make Laurel's transition into small screen production even more attractive.

In November 1990, ABC had a sizable hit with the \$12 million miniseries adaptation of *Stephen King's It*, produced by WBTV and directed by Tommy Lee Wallace (after original director George A. Romero withdrew). According to the A.C. Nielsen Co. ratings, *It: Part One* received an 18.4 audience share (watched in an aggregate of 17.2 million homes) and *Part Two* enjoyed a 20.6 share (19.2 million homes), making it the second most watched program on US television that week (Hastings, "TV Movies" 12; Hastings, "ABC Posts" 10). King remained a sizable asset to Laurel and, in turn, he found Rubinstein to be a sympathetic partner. Through the single purpose entity Laurel-King, Inc., the firm still held options on a number of King's stories and frequently granted the author the right of first refusal to adapt his own material.

Serendipitously, King had become interested in writing for television. Although not directly involved in the production of *It*, he was impressed with ABC's cult series *Twin Peaks*, which began airing in April of that same year. King became convinced that *Twin Peaks* had opened the door to more offbeat and adult modes of small screen address (Applebome H25) and began working on an original teleplay called *Golden Years*. Given Laurel's increasing agency in small screen production, the company made a natural partner and *Golden Years* went ahead with monies provided by distributor Worldvision and CBS, giving Laurel its first ever network co-production.

Golden Years began with a short-order first series of seven episodes and fully intended to run into a second year if successful. Since a second series was not picked up, *Golden Years'* has subsequently been mislabelled as a miniseries with a finite number of episodes. This confusion was compounded by

the fact that Laurel's next two Stephen King adaptations *were* miniseries, beginning with the eight-hour/four-part *The Stand* (Dir. Garris) in 1994 (made in collaboration with ABC and WBTV) and followed by Stephen King's *The Langoliers* (Dir. Holland) for ABC, released in two-parts the following year⁹³. After *Golden Years* and *Monsters* ended their respective runs, Laurel focused exclusively on either miniseries or movies-for-television (MFT). As Spelling Entertainment told shareholders in its 1990 annual report, "Laurel believes this is a logical area of expansion; television movies occupy a natural middle ground between Laurel's theatrical motion picture and television series businesses" (9). Given his significant experience in MFT production at Robert Halmi, Galin was well-equipped to lead the company in this direction.

In terms of financing, Galin says that on *The Stand* ABC provided a "very healthy license fee" (Galín 2018), going some way to covering the \$28 million production budget (Laurel's largest to that point, bankrolling an eight-hour program shot over 100 days with 125 speaking roles).⁹⁴ The network intended to recoup monies through advertising sold at \$150,000 per 30-second spot, and ABC's senior Vice President Judd Parkin was confident of a hit due to King's brand name appeal (Goldman B1). Laurel raised additional monies through Worldvision's foreign pre-sales, or, more accurately, a projection of what foreign pre-sales would be. Galin claims these pre-sales far exceeded initial expectations (Galín 2018). *The Stand* appeared in the UK on Sky television in September 1995 and was then released on a double VHS set by Warner Home

⁹³ *The Langoliers* was the last production to bear the Laurel name, premiering on ABC on the 14 May 1995, some six months after Laurel began closing down its offices.

⁹⁴ Rubinstein boasted that the company did not use deficit financing on these network projects (McClellan 74), although it appears that significant monies were in fact sourced in this way. In deficit financing, the network usually provides only a percentage of the license fee, meaning programs would be made by the production company at a loss. The remaining percentage would typically be sourced through secondary markets, national and international, including overseas broadcast rights and home video, etc. (see Bielby and Harrington 25-27; Lotz, *Television* 82-90).

Video. Indeed, Spelling Entertainment's annual report highlighted that, in fiscal year 1992, Worldvision released thirteen titles to the rental market, including *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Golden Years* and *Tales from the Darkside* (7).

The agreement with CBS on *Golden Years* stipulated that the network was "required to order from Laurel an MFT by a date certain or pay a penalty of \$100,000" (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-K 1991* 4). Accordingly, CBS commissioned Laurel's "true-life" drama *Precious Victims* (Dir. Levin, 1993), based on a double-kidnapping of two new-born babies in Jersey County, Illinois in the 1980s. On the small screen, production beget production and, with Spelling and Worldvision's patronage, from 1991 to 1994 Laurel entered into an unprecedented period of activity, producing *Golden Years*, *Precious Victims*, *The Stand* and *The Vernon Johns Story* (Dir. Fink, 1994). More so, in *Precious Victims* and *Vernon Johns*, Laurel finally moved beyond "things that go bump in the night" (McClellan 74), able actively to "broaden its focus" to produce a diversified production slate (*Spelling Entmt. AR 1990* 8). Despite the aspirations of its co-founders, this was something the firm had struggled to achieve under Romero's creative leadership.

MFTs such as *Precious Victims* and *Vernon Johns* were hardly groundbreaking fare and topical telefilms, in their "recreation of 'real' events, people, and places" had long been an MFT staple (Edgerton 221). Contemporary reviews of *Victims* dismissed it as by-numbers (Willman B9) and *Variety* mischievously placed it in the "baby suspense genre," ridiculing "all the kidnapping and child custody battles collecting on primetime's doorstep" (Loynd). Rote though they may have been, Galin says that of all his work for the company, he is proudest of *Vernon Johns*, claiming its civil rights story of a

minister (played by James Earl Jones) preaching equality in 1950s segregationist Alabama was close to his heart (Galín 2018). Aside from expanding Laurel's brand, *Vernon Johns* revealed Galín's own creative agency, acquiring projects for which he had an affinity and producing them in a medium in which he had considerable human capital. Laurel's senior vice president of production had not only successfully taken over the reins from Romero, but was, in many ways, the perfect partner for this period of change and consolidation.

In Laurel's focused production of network television, the firm's identity, already seen to be transitional, was increasingly becoming a mirror of its parent. Above, we have seen how corporate leaders and economists favour M&A synergies between related companies, stressing the importance of sameness and a merger contingency framework. But such partnerships still hinged on difference. In Laurel, Spelling had identified three areas of divergence that could expand its marketplace reach, based on: 1) geographical separateness; 2) specialisation in "high quality yet cost-effective production of fantasy and horror projects"; and 3) the production of first-run syndicated television that could be rapidly mass produced (*Spelling Entmt. AR 1990 8*). De Bernardis and Giustiniano's work on organisational identities⁹⁵ after an M&A event argues that, accepting that corporate ambiguity in the marketplace is detrimental, holding firms can manage "multiple identities under a shared group identity" to achieve success in multiple markets (351). Nonetheless, Laurel's identity quickly began to collate with that of its parent.

Laurel's business offices remained on the east coast, yet other "areas of divergence" began to dissipate. Fantasy and horror product was no longer

⁹⁵ Simplified, the "organizational identity" of a firm comprises those "central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations" (Whetten 220).

centralised, while the production of first-run syndicated programming became a thing of the past. Sameness between corporations may be a leading instigator in pursuing a merger, but in Laurel's case this facsimile continued to develop after the event, demonstrating a moving together of identities as the firm's began operating in tandem. In fact, the term "moving together" is inexact. For Spelling, merger was about consolidation and library building, its programming continuing much as it had before post-merger. Change was therefore primarily identifiable in the subsidiary and not the parent.

To a large extent, Laurel's transformation was organic, and Galin's agency as creative leader made a movement into network television a natural progression. Laurel benefited from television production long before it merged with Spelling and a sustained engagement with this medium revealed a savvy recognition of "strategic momentum," i.e. "the tendency to maintain or expand the emphasis and direction of prior strategic action in current strategic behaviour" (Amburgey and Miner 335). Yet by the early 1990s, Laurel was not the same firm Spelling had acquired. The use of shared resources played a part in this transformation. Singh and Montgomery discern the value creation behind the "combination of human capital (specialized) and physical assets" post-merger (378). Worldvision and Spelling's resources made Laurel's appropriation of network programming the path of least resistance, augmenting the parallels between the parent and its subsidiary.

Laurel is, of course, just one case study and further empirical work needs to be done to see how common this pattern is of subsidiaries taking on the characteristics of a parent post-merger. With this in mind, analysis of independent cinema does volunteer further examples of this behaviour. In the 1990s, the major studios began to acquire a number of independent production-

distribution companies, notably Disney's procurement of Miramax in December 1993 and Ted Turner's purchase of New Line Cinema the following January. For these acquiring media conglomerates, this was about reaching new market segments (Tzioumakis, "American Independent" 64) or, in the case of Turner, of continuing to expand the library of programming for his television networks (Wyatt, "The Formation" 84). Like Laurel, New Line and Miramax's internal governance remained autonomous. Justin Wyatt observes that "the most impressive difference [post-merger] given their new affiliation was a greater access to funds and more latitude in production decisions" ("The Formation" 84).

Change was actually more dramatic than this. In *Indie, Inc.*, Perren looks closely at Miramax in its pre- and post-Disney phases, finding that this latter era facilitated greater control over development, access to the parent's marketing/distribution resources and an ability to control and nurture talent (stars, producers and directors)—behaviour not dissimilar to that of a major (91-92). At both companies, mass appeal, star-driven properties such as *The English Patient* (Dir. Minghella, 1996) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Dir. Jackson, 2001-2003) now sat alongside so-called "edgy" fare with greater frequency. Perren writes that after the Disney takeover, Miramax became "hybrid" in nature" (92). Wyatt, meanwhile, dubs these amalgamations "major independents" ("The Formation" 86-87). "Hybrid" Miramax projects like *Pulp Fiction* were thus celebrated at Hollywood ceremonies such as the Academy Awards, while concurrently appearing at supposed counterpoint events such as the Independent Spirit Awards, demonstrating an expansive marketplace reach (Perren, *Indie, Inc.* 92). Post-merger, the portmanteau term "indiewood" was used to best describe Miramax and New Line's transformed identities.

The extent of Miramax's emulation of Disney went even further and on 16 September 1993 the Weinstein brothers launched the subdivision Miramax Family Films. Miramax planned to produce low-cost (around \$6 million per film) fantasy films with an eye towards the family market. As Bob Weinstein told the *New York Times*, "we have the best parent company in the world when it comes to marketing family films, so we'd be crazy not to take advantage of that" (Eller B9). Films released under this corporate banner included *Into the West* (Dir. Newell, 1992), *The Neverending Story III: Escape from Fantasia* (Dir. MacDonald, 1994) and the talking-pig movie *Gordy* (Dir. Lewis, 1995). According to Perren, Miramax Family Films was closed when it provided "too much overlap with Disney product" (*Indie, Inc.* 104).

In Laurel's case, the merger was not with a large entertainment conglomerate. Yet like Miramax, Laurel was driven by a pragmatic utilisation of wider available resources, logical decision-making, human capital and strategic movement to mirror the behaviour of its parent. De Bernardis and Giustiniano suggest that a firm's identity is most salient during periods of change, growth or retrenchment, citing the loss of a sustaining element or the effects of M&A (336-37). In 1985, Laurel had change forced upon it, instigated by the departure of its co-founder/creative leader. The firm consequently allowed its identity to move in line with the capabilities of its new parent, facilitating a more diverse range of output than ever before. From this point forward, Rubinstein told journalists that Laurel's "primary business is TV" (Cohn 13). However, as the 1990s progressed, this corporate conversion did not protect the firm from wider industrial changes amassing on the horizon. Laurel may have ridden the storm, but another wave was about to hit.

5.3. “Have a Good Holiday, by the Way We’re Shutting You Down”:

Closure

Merger with Aaron Spelling Productions and Worldvision was mutually beneficial for all parties. Under the Spelling Entertainment umbrella, Laurel increased its output, producing a diversified range of small screen material that expanded upon (if, due to a relationship with Stephen King, never entirely abandoned) the firm’s reputation for genre product. Worldvision’s access to national and international markets, not to mention ancillaries such as home video, shored up distribution and unlocked a consistent and repeatable source of income. Having been introduced to network executives, Laurel became a steady supplier of content, much to the satisfaction of its partners. Taken collectively, in fiscal 1989 Spelling Entertainment reported revenues of approximately \$48.2 million (*Form 10-K 1989* 33). In fiscal 1990, the first full year of joint operations, this combined revenue totalled \$134.8 million (*Spelling Entmt. AR 1990* 12).

Behind the scenes, things were less stable. Almost immediately after it was established, Spelling Entertainment was put up for sale. Aaron Spelling’s ABC television shows *Dynasty* and *Heartbeat* (1988-1989) were reportedly “dying” (that is, haemorrhaging viewers) and, in what would later prove an embarrassing comment made to the *Los Angeles Times*, Spelling pronounced, “I can honestly say that I don’t know what the networks want anymore” (Finke 3). Clare L. Drew’s 1990 article “The Selling of Spelling” was ruthless in appraising the firm, writing-off Spelling’s “fumbled attempts at a comeback” and dismissing his company as little more than an “ailing conglomerate” (26). Drew’s article conceded that the firm was in its infancy, and that the acquisition of Laurel and Worldvision promised increased “asset value” and a more consistent

revenue (28). Yet pressure to sell was being applied by major shareholder Carl Linder Jr., owner of Great American Broadcasting and 49% of Spelling Entertainment's stock. Linder Jr. was personally mired in a reported \$1.2 billion debt (27) and selling holdings in Spelling intimated some relief. For Linder Jr., the Spelling shares "were great assets, but not core assets" (P. Thomas B1).

Subsequent activity was rapid. On 6 May 1991, Great American sold 14 million shares of Spelling Entertainment Class A common stock (and 250,000 shares of cumulative preferred stock) to the Charter Company, a Florida-based conglomerate with interests in oil operations, banking and land development. Charter changed its name to Spelling Entertainment Group, Inc. in October of the following year, reflecting "the fact that the company has become an integrated entertainment company following the acquisition of Spelling Entertainment" (Lightstone 1). Charter/Spelling instantly began selling off its non-entertainment-driven assets in an attempt to increase synergy. A reported \$25 million in cash was obtained from its oil operations, which was in turn pumped back into television program development (Heimann 1). In this case, the parent self-consciously merged its identity with that of the subsidiary.

Charter's parentage was short-lived and on 31 March 1993 Blockbuster Entertainment attained 48% of Spelling common stock. Blockbuster then acquired additional common stock from third parties and as of 25 March 1994 owned 70.5% of the company's outstanding stock (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-K 1993* 2). Blockbuster's ascent since opening its first video rental superstore in Dallas had been dramatic, taking advantage of the home video boom to become a formidable entertainment industry player.⁹⁶ From 1989 to 1992,

⁹⁶ Even then there were warning signs that the video rental market might not last forever. Of particular concern was emergent video-on-demand (VOD) technologies that would come to have a dramatic impact on Blockbuster's future and that of the industry at large (see Torres C1; Brown 1).

Blockbuster's revenue tripled, reaching \$1.2 billion. This included \$142 million in earnings in 1992 alone (Ramirez 51). Now an "international powerhouse" with more than 3500 stores globally, under entrepreneur Wayne Huizenga's leadership Blockbuster instigated plans for expansion. Purchase of Spelling Entertainment was high on Huizenga's list of priorities, viewing this acquisition as a major step towards fulfilling his "goal of becoming a content provider as well as a distributor" (Arnold 46).

A month prior to this acquisition, Blockbuster purchased a stake in production-distribution company Republic Pictures Corporation for \$25 million, obtaining its library of 1400 feature films and 3000 television episodes. In September 1993, Blockbuster instigated a merger between Spelling and Republic in a "stock swap" valued at around \$140 million (Grossman and Stern B10; Turner B12). Through Spelling, Blockbuster harboured plans to produce straight-to-video content that would bypass the cinemas and go directly into its stores, a move that led Robert Alexander of Alexander and Associates, Inc. to call Blockbuster "the first modern studio . . . instead of making productions for the big screen, they'll be concentrating on production for the electronic screen at home" (Grossman and Stern B10). This platform would have been ideally suited to Laurel's middle-ground between film and television, but the company was becoming an increasingly small cog in a growing multiplatform machine. What had started as a triptych of companies made of east and west coast production centres (with a distributor in between), now included a film production unit, another production-distribution unit⁹⁷ and its home entertainment-focused parent.

In January 1994, Blockbuster merged with Sumner Redstone's

⁹⁷ In April 1994, Republic and Worldvision merged into one distribution entity (Lichtman 82).

transnational media corporation Viacom Inc., a “corporate empire based on the value of owning well-established broadcast and cable properties” (Gershon and Suri 49). This merger was part of another global propagation of M&A activity in the 1990s, which included Disney’s purchase of Miramax and Ted Turner’s acquisition of New Line. This 1990s M&A wave is often conflated with activities from the previous decade. In terms of the entertainment industry, this placed News Corp.’s acquisition of Fox in 1985 as the start of a wave of industry-wide consolidation that went well into the 1990s (Schatz, “The Studio System” 26-27), culminating with the Paramount-Viacom merger in 1994.

Business scholarship, however, allows us to consider the M&A activity of the 1990s as an entirely separate global cycle from the one preceding it. Kolev et al. define the 1990s M&A wave⁹⁸ through a number of contextual factors, including increased economic globalisation, cross-border acquisitions, a disappearance of hostility and, crucially here, and in stark contrast to the 1980s, an emphasis on stock and stock swapping to complete acquisitions (25). Rappaport and Sirower posit that “in 1988, nearly 60% of the value of large deals—those over \$100 million—was paid for entirely in cash. Less than 2% was paid for in stock.” Little over a decade later, the number of large deals completed using stock swaps had risen to 50%, with only 17% now done with cash (147-48). Although there is a clear through line between M&A waves in the 1980s and 1990s (they both focus on synergy and on couplings between comparable partners), the difference had a pronounced impact on the future of the industry, not least of all in terms of Laurel Entertainment’s longevity.

The Blockbuster-Viacom merger was financed by an exchange of stock

⁹⁸ Kolev et al. point us towards five waves of M&A activity, occurring intermittently from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-2000s. For more information on how these five waves are characteristically differentiated, see “A Review of the Merger and Acquisition Wave Literature: History, Antecedents, Consequences and Future Directions” (2012).

worth \$8.4 billion (Fabrikant, "Viacom Announces" 1) and was actually part of a "complex deal" to finance Viacom's acquisition of Paramount Communications (Wasser, *Veni* 148). In September 1993, Viacom proposed a \$8.1 billion merger agreement with Paramount that followed this "stock-swap" trend and called for just \$1.09 billion in cash to be paid to Paramount shareholders (Quint 112). A stock-swap transaction, rather than an outright purchase with cash, has several disadvantages, leading to an over-valuation of stock while implying that the venture is embedded in risk. Rappaport and Sirower write, "a really confident acquirer would be expected to pay for the acquisition with cash so that its shareholders would not have to give any of the anticipated merger gains to the acquired company's shareholders" (154). Acquiring firms might propose a stock-swap transaction as a way of "hedging their bets" or if they do not have adequate cash resources to make a cash offer (154). This latter consideration was indeed the case with Viacom. Sensing an opportunity, QVC chairman Barry Diller entered a counter offer of \$9.5 billion for Paramount, now placing Viacom's plan in jeopardy.

As QVC and Viacom entered into a bidding war (Noglow, "Viacom-Par" 46; Fabrikant, "Paramount's" D1, D3), Viacom recognised that they needed cash. In September, Blockbuster agreed to invest \$600 million (in exchange for convertible preferred stock) to bolster Viacom's Paramount bid (Fabrikant, "Viacom Gets Help" D1). Bidding against QVC pushed the price to over \$10 billion and Viacom, as a heavily leveraged firm, had trouble borrowing money. Blockbuster, on the other hand, had "strong cash flows and no debt," making them an ideal partner (Fabrikant, "Hints" D1). In January 1994, Viacom's partnership with Blockbuster became merger.

Less than one month later, the Paramount board unanimously voted for

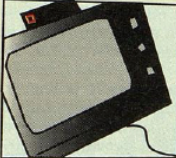
Viacom's latest bid, giving Redstone's firm 50.1% of the company (Noglows, "Diller's Deal" 63). Law professor Clark W. Furlow describes this as a two-step transaction. Since Viacom was only able to raise the cash for a tender offer for just over half of Paramount, this would be followed by a so-called "squeeze out merger" for the remaining shares, exchanged for a mix of Viacom's equity and debt securities. "At the end of the process" writes Furlow, "Paramount's stockholders would have received a mix of cash, debt securities and shares of the combined enterprise" (534).

Journalist Paul Noglows summarised the Viacom-Paramount deal as "one of the longest (10 months), costliest (Paramount cost Viacom about \$10 billion plus \$62 million in advisement fees) and ugliest (the rival suitors bounced in and out of court) takeover battles in U.S. corporate history" ("It's Official" 11). For Viacom, it was worth it. Anthony Ramirez of the *New York Times* listed the combination of Viacom-Blockbuster-Paramount as "the nation's fourth-largest media and entertainment company, behind Capital Cities/ABC, Walt Disney and the biggest media company, Time-Warner" (51). Acquisition of Paramount allowed Viacom, in the words of Peter Bart, to not only "control the destiny of [its] own product in the marketplace, but [its] competitors' as well." As the dust settled, Viacom emerged with a majority interest in a dizzying array of media subsidiaries, including MTV, Nickelodeon, VH-1, Showtime, Paramount Pictures and Paramount Television (fig. 5.2). It was only logical that some of these subsidiaries would now be surplus to requirements.

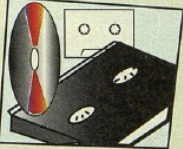
Viacom, via Blockbuster, now owned a majority of Spelling's Common Stock (*Spelling Entmt. Form 10-K 1993* 2) and post-merger with Paramount, the parent began to look over its subsidiary with a critical eye. By this juncture, Spelling may have regained marketplace credibility with the Fox Network's

Beverly Hills 90210, but in 1998 Viacom began “paring the company down,” beginning by closing Spelling Films International. According to Sallie Hofmeister of the *Los Angeles Times*, Viacom considered the Spelling “unit redundant with its Paramount Television operation” and began looking to sell.

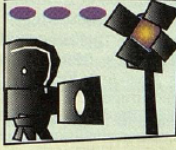
VIACOM-PAR MERGER: WHAT'S IN IT



CABLE NETWORK PROGRAMMING
Viacom
 Networks: MTV, MTV Europe, VH-1, Nickelodeon, Nick at Nite, Showtime, The Movie Channel and FLIX. MTV now reaches more than 251 million homes in 88 territories around the world.
Paramount
 USA Network*, Madison Square Garden Network



VIDEO, MUSIC AND INTERACTIVE RETAIL DISTRIBUTION
Blockbuster
 3,500 video stores in 49 states and nine countries. Sound Warehouse, Music Plus, Super Club music retail chains. Joint venture agreement with Virgin Retail Group.




MOTION PICTURE AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION
Viacom
 8,500-title syndication library, including films “Notorious,” “African Queen,” “Amadeus” and “Superman III”; TV series “Roseanne,” “The Cosby Show,” “A Different World” “I Love Lucy,” “The Twilight Zone” and “Hawaii 5-0.” Programs for broadcast television, such as “Matlock,” “Diagnosis Murder” and “Perry Mason” made-for-TV movies. First-run syndication programs, including “The Montel Williams Show,” “Nick News” and “This Morning’s Business.”

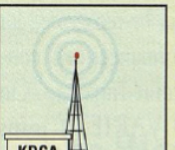
Paramount Pictures
 Motion picture library of approximately 890 films.

Paramount Television
 Network programming, with 1993-1994 season shows “Wings,” “Frasier,” “Big Wave Dave’s,” “Viper,” “The Mommies” and “Sister Sister.” First-run syndication, such as “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” “Deep Space Nine,” “The Untouchables,” “Entertainment Tonight,” “The Maury Povich Show,” “The Arsenio Hall Show” and “Hard Copy.” Library: “Cheers,” “Star Trek,” “Happy Days,” “Laverne & Shirley” and “Taxi.”


Blockbuster
 70.5% ownership of Spelling Entertainment Group and 37% of Republic Pictures Corp. Spelling film library of approximately 12,000 hours includes more than 55 off-network series such as “Little House on the Prairie,” “Dallas,” “Twin Peaks,” and an array of feature films including “Basic Instinct,” “Total Recall,” “Platoon” and the Rambo trilogy. Republic library titles: “The Quiet Man,” “High Noon,” the television series “Bonanza.”



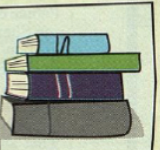
CABLE TELEVISION SYSTEMS
Viacom Cable
 1.1 million subscribers



TELEVISION AND RADIO BROADCASTING
Viacom
 Five network-affiliated television stations (three NBC and two CBS affiliates) and 14 radio stations.
Paramount
 Four independent and three Fox-affiliated stations.



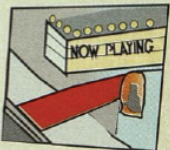
ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS, THEME PARKS AND SPORTS
Paramount
 Five regional theme parks; Madison Square Garden, N.Y. basketball and hockey team franchises, the Knicks and the Rangers.



PUBLISHING
Paramount
 Simon & Schuster, Pocket Books, Silver Burdett Ginn, and Prentice Hall imprints.



INTERACTIVE/MULTI-MEDIA PRODUCTS
Viacom and Paramount (joint)
 Develop and publish interactive software.
Blockbuster
 Largest wholesaler and retailer of interactive homevideo games.



MOTION PICTURE THEATERS
Paramount
 Famous Players chain, with 441 screens in Canada; 341-screen Cinamerica* theater circuit; and 345 screens in nine countries through a joint venture, United Cinemas International*.
Viacom†

* 50% owned by Paramount
 †Viacom's parent company, National Amusement Inc., owns 800 theaters in the U.S. and U.K.

Fig. 5.2. “Viacom-Par Merger: What’s in It.” *Variety*, 21 Feb. 1994, p. 185.

This “paring down” had in fact begun much earlier, when Viacom asked why, in the wake of a “mega-merger” with Paramount, they needed Laurel Entertainment. From Viacom’s perspective, Laurel was nothing more than a minor east coast subsidiary then specialising in unfashionable MFT product (Goldman B1). More than that, Laurel’s sacrosanct autonomy, which extended beyond production to include internal organisational structures (staffing, benefits, work place bonuses, etc.) was deemed ill-suited to a holistic, top-to-bottom business organisation.

Galin remembers Viacom bringing “specific rules about how things were done” and Laurel’s bonus structure proved a particular point of contention (Galin 2018). Viacom wanted restrictions on the type of bonuses Laurel awarded to its employees (something they applied universally across all subsidiaries), while Rubinstein and Galin felt that any economic cap on rewarding success would limit Laurel’s competitiveness in the marketplace. This applied especially to attracting and maintaining high-quality staffing. Laurel’s resistance to its new parent’s management techniques resulted in the company becoming “a square peg in a round hole” according to Galin (2018) or, as Rubinstein apparently once joked, little more than a “rounding error” (Dubensky 2016).

On 23 November 1994, the day before Thanksgiving, the Laurel offices received a fax from Viacom informing them that the company would be closed. As Galin glibly summarised, the fax basically said, “have a good holiday, by the way we’re shutting you down” (Galin 2018). Rubinstein and Galin’s contracts guaranteed a fair settlement, but lengthy legal negotiations were fought to get more than the rudimentary two-weeks redundancy payment offered to its staff (Dubensky 2016). The eventual compensation included a guarantee that Laurel

staff would be hired back by Viacom on later projects on a freelance basis (Galin 2018). As part of the exit plan, the divorcing companies had to determine what to do with those Laurel projects in various stages of development and production. Though the exact details are unclear, it seems that projects already in active production remained at Spelling, such as Stephen King's *Thinner*.⁹⁹ Projects in earlier stages of development left with the Laurel partners (Galin 2018). Syndicated television shows *Monsters* and *Tales from the Darkside* also stayed with Viacom in an agreement that allowed Rubinstein and Galin to keep hold of their projects with Stephen King.

As Laurel began to shut down, Rubinstein and Galin entered into a production deal with ABC to once again produce MFTs and miniseries programming. ABC gave the partners overhead money to establish new offices, though permanent staffing was scaled back to a few assistants. Rubinstein and Galin had to contribute their own money to this reorganisation. Under the terms of the agreement, production was more prescribed and some decision-making needed approval from their patron (Galin 2018). On 20 March 1995, the partnership formalised as New Amsterdam Entertainment, Inc., named after New York's original moniker. Production began on the MFT *Kiss and Tell* (Dir. Wolk) soon after, airing on ABC on 15 January 1996. This was followed with a feature film adaptation of Stephen King's *The Night Flier* (Dir. Pavia 1997), distributed by New Line. As before, feature films remained an aside and Rubinstein told *Variety* that event television would "continue to be a cornerstone of New Amsterdam" ("New Amsterdam" 4). Such was the consistency between Laurel and New Amsterdam's output that writer Frederick C. Szebin thought that Laurel had simply changed its name (31).

⁹⁹ In such cases, Rubinstein and Galin stayed on in the roles of producers or executive producers.

From a macro-industrial viewpoint, closure of Laurel's offices was little more than a by-product of the widespread M&A consolidations of the 1980s and 1990s. The 1990s wave of stock-swap transactions had made Paramount an obtainable goal for Viacom, yet competition with rival corporations increased the price and resulted in "surprise" partnerships (Lippman and Bates) that Redstone and Viacom's board of directors might otherwise have not considered. In Viacom's acquisition of Blockbuster, the latter firm's subsidiaries were barely, if at all, acknowledged and as the Viacom-Paramount media empire emerged, numerous internal SMEs were rendered inconsequential. At a micro-industrial level, Laurel's merger with Spelling initially provided security in a hostile independent landscape, only to later negate the firm's agency in determining its own system of internal governance. After Romero's exit, Rubinstein had to navigate a series of potentially fatal corporate changes, his skill evident in Laurel's consequent growth and the speed (and consistency) in which a second production company emerged when Laurel's survival proved untenable. Indeed, New Amsterdam has continued to operate, in some capacity, to date, and Rubinstein's independence, not to mention his status as the leader of a small media production company, remains intact.

As an interesting endnote, though offices closed in the mid-1990s and production has long ceased, Laurel Entertainment has not quite been buried. After Viacom acquired the CBS Corporation in 1999, and then split with it in 2006, the divorce package passed a large portion of Viacom's television library assets to CBS. Since Laurel was now identified as a TV company (Galín 2018), the firm ended up at CBS as part of this deal. CBS have since released the entire *Tales from the Darkside* series on DVD and in 2015 went as far as to commission a new pilot overseen by Stephen King's son Joe Hill, suggesting a

continuation of Laurel's residual ancillary value. In December 2016, Laurel Entertainment (now an LLC without a registered staff) was itemised as one of CBS's 441 domestic subsidiaries in a list that includes companies both active and dormant. Spelling Entertainment is also accounted for here (*CBS Corp. Form 10-K 2016* 155-173). If the analogy were not so pointed, it would be tempting to say that Laurel, after leading a long and varied life, now counts its self as one of the undead—long deceased, but somehow still living.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a rare glimpse into M&A from the perspective of a small or medium enterprise, nuancing an understanding of such activities in the entertainment industry. Economists and media industry theorists have long been attentive to the importance of sameness between firms when it comes to industry synergy. This ground-level exploration expands this reading to argue that successful mergers can also instigate an additional mirroring between firms, where collated resources and knowhow result in the acquired firm taking on key characteristics of its parent—in the process, narrowing differentiation and altering its corporate identity. Additionally, we have seen how analysis can benefit from the key distinctions between M&A waves already identified by business scholars, in this case those that altered the global business landscape in the 1980s and 1990s. Accepting that there are important overlaps, this was far from one continuous wave and the switch from cash to stock payments resulted in “surprise” mergers that had a lasting impact on the industry at large. Ironically for Laurel, after over twenty years as an independent SME, it was closer ties to the mainstream industry that finally proved the firm's undoing.

Conclusion

In order to “make sense” of current media industry practices and future directions, Paul McDonald argues that researchers must “contextualise these contemporary phenomena, recognizing how the signs of continuity and change witnessed in the media industries of today arise from complex and contested histories” (2). By strongly engaging with a media industry studies framework that scrutinises past developments and contexts, this thesis has contributed to a historical understanding of American film production away from the established bicoastal centres. Laurel Entertainment, Inc. may have been neglected from previous critical accounts, but this close analysis of the firm across four decades has revealed the complex interplay of creative and economic concerns that exist for independent practitioners. Though independent cinema is frequently distilled as “the province of the auteur” (Schatz, “Film Industry” 50), I have shown the numerous mitigating factors that dictate the production of media goods in this sector, from the marketplace to the relationships between individual stakeholders. Placing Laurel and its methods within the broader history of the American film industry offers a fuller comprehension of decision-making, artistic incentives and business planning away from Hollywood.

Through a media industry lens, I have surveyed the real-world business activities of a motion picture production company, considering media producers not simply in relation to the products they make, but also exploring the strategies and systems of organisation that facilitate the making of these

products. In this interdisciplinary investigation, I employed a range of business and economic theory to interpret the firm's behaviour. Accordingly, Chapter One applied a theory of business orientation to independent cinema activities for the first time, shedding light on parent company Latent Image's early attempts to "walk the line" between creative and economic concerns, while highlighting consistencies and deviations between practitioners usually segregated by avant-garde, "speciality" or exploitation paradigms. Chapter Two offered a rare examination of film and risk, applying Sedgwick and Pokorny's analysis of risk management to the independent sector. Here, firms such as Laurel utilised a "portfolio" strategic approach to development rather than production, placing "speciality" or quality films next to cult horror, exploitation and sci-fi fantasy films on an expansive development roster. The films that moved into production was largely dependent on opportunity structures and changing marketplace trends.

Chapter Three called attention to issues of professionalisation, revealing in intricate detail the changes that occurred during Laurel's IPO. Exploring this process of formalisation brought to the fore the firm's skilful management of its corporate identity, demonstrating the self-conscious organisation of Romero's cult auteur persona. Chapter Four moved to analyse issues of agency by placing sociopolitical theories of agency against an economic "theory of agency." This review emphasised the corporate relationships that drove the firm forward, while highlighting the internal and external systems of power (from corporate officers to the marketplace itself) that determined output. Chapter Five examined the impact of M&A activity on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where shared resources and knowledge, etc. can see the acquired firm take on the characteristics of its parent. As these chapters demonstrate, the entertainment industry does not exist in a vacuum; I have

contextualised the activities of a single media producer against measurable patterns of business and economic behaviour. Situating independent media practitioners such as Laurel as SMEs, rather than as “maverick” producers of transgressive art, gets us closer to understanding the everyday opportunities and limitations that exist beyond the mainstream industry.

In this look at the firm’s organisational behaviour, I have also provided a revisionist account of auteur filmmaking, cult film and independent cinema from a unique SME vantage point. Although Romero’s geographical “independence from Hollywood” has been valued as a space free of artistic compromise (K. Newman, “*Monkey Shines*” 46), the firm’s regionality meant different things at different periods in its life cycle. At Latent Image, Romero took advantage of a burgeoning local television and advertising industry to pursue alternative modes of production, using the distance from Hollywood production processes to instigate a post-Fordist, egalitarian work culture. As Latent became Laurel, Richard Rubinstein embraced the commercial opportunities of the region, recognising tax shelter incentives as an integral part of Pittsburgh’s business strategies. Professionalisation through an IPO led to a more conventional infrastructure and, although Laurel encouraged an identity as a “seat-of-your pants” independent (Bernardini 177), the firm developed a robust system of governance that incorporated economic transparency, skilled corporate staffing, product diversification and external partnerships, etc. In the process, Laurel’s Pittsburgh base became an irrelevance, culminating with relocation to New York in the late 1980s. This regional space, though creatively advantageous, was ultimately dependent on its economic efficacy.

Laurel’s use of cult film paradigms was also bound to strategic considerations. Cult and independent cinema have frequently been kept a part

as fields of study, with cult, and horror in particular, previously positioned as either “abject entity” for “indie film” consumers (Sexton 81) or segregated from a critical organisation of independent film because of its apparent commercial priorities (Insdorf 58). Within the firm, however, these strands met in a carefully managed business plan, non-hierarchically arranged to maximise the profit-potential of Romero’s persona (see Chapter Two’s Business Wheel). The filmmaker’s association with transgressive horror cinema and regional autonomy was cultivated into a distinct (anti)brand, helping Laurel overcome low-budget, SME limitations and achieve marketplace recognition. Product differentiation contributed to the massive commercial success of *Dawn of the Dead*, establishing industrial legitimacy and facilitating growth.

Restrictive in some ways (Romero lamented that he was trapped in a genre that he loved), horror contributed to a long-standing creative autonomy. Filmmakers such as Wes Craven and Tobe Hooper also expressed ambivalence in regard to their association with horror (*Scream: The Inside Story*; Caulfield, “Hooper” 7), yet like Romero used their attachment to genre to achieve industrial longevity. Mathijs and Mendik foreground the “unplanned” nature of cult, insisting that a self-conscious production of cult is the exception rather than the rule (“Editorial Introduction” 7). Yet the list of self-styled “masters of horror” is expansive, including figures such as David Cronenberg, John Carpenter, Stuart Gordon and Don Coscarelli, and I have shown the usefulness of cult (and particularly a “cult auteur” personae) to corporate strategy and marketplace positioning away from the majors.¹⁰⁰ Cult can therefore be placed more fully within an economic history of independent cinema, an economic history built on product diversity and identified structures of opportunity.

¹⁰⁰ Ben Kooyman’s “How the Masters of Horror Master Their Personae” (2010) also discusses the value of this personae self-fashioning.

This media industry analysis has included the first academic investigation into the working practices of major American filmmaker George A. Romero, providing a ground-level, practitioner point of view of authorship—not in terms of what “we collectively believe it to be’ . . . but rather what they collectively believed it to be” (Nowell 2). I have explored authorship as “a commercial strategy . . . bound to distribution and marketing aims” (Corrigan, “Commerce” 46), but as with issues of regionality and cult, the company’s attitude to authorship was multifaceted. For Romero, it meant more than simply thematic and stylistic expression, it was a creative process in and of itself. Robin Wood and Tony Williams et al. accentuate the textual consistencies of Romero’s work, yet these identified paradigms were symptomatic of that demand for a working, on-set autonomy, not the cause. As discussed in Chapter Two, this was most evident in the arrangement with the Italian investors on *Dawn of the Dead*, a deal that respected Romero’s on-set sovereignty while, in the release of two distinct versions of the film, contradicted classical notions of authorship and the idea of a single authorial vision.

The extent to which the independent sector can be described as “the province of the auteur” is therefore contestable. Even here, issues of creative freedom are far from absolute, subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation between a broad range of stakeholders over time. Drawing upon new interviews with Laurel collaborators (all of whom were speaking about the firm’s infrastructure for the first time) and rare legal agreements, I have unveiled the mediators and creative partners who problematised Romero’s agency. Romero’s *Pet Sematary* contract, as seen in Chapter Four, granted authority to Stephen King and a completion guarantor, thus limiting Romero’s overall control as creative leader. To date, the completion guarantor remains a consistent

presence on an independent film set, albeit an overlooked one when it comes to analysis of this sector. For Romero, this figure dramatically impinged upon his on-set autonomy, ending his *laissez faire* approach to filmmaking and restricting him to a more formal work culture. Despite claims that Laurel operated in a “European style” at the service of the director, arrangements such as these situated authorship *within* the firm’s strategic operations, rather than as the ultimate function for these operations.

Romero’s authority was also subject to the demands of his partner Richard Rubinstein, and I have shown with rare detail the entrepreneurial activities of an independent film producer. As Spicer et al. observe, perceptions of the “cruel producer” have become “a stalwart of many of the portrayals that inform popular understanding of the producer” (3). This thesis strongly contradicts such portrayals. Rubinstein was indeed a savvy businessperson, determining that his firm’s sustained independence required a flexible system of corporate governance and an ability to react to changing opportunity structures. Gamble et al. suggest that the central question of corporate governance is “to whom should the directors of a company be accountable? Whose interests do they serve? And whose should they serve?” (4). This industrial look at the firm therefore reconsiders traditional art-business ideological valuations. Romero’s auteurist drive may have produced artistically laudable work, but Rubinstein’s tactical approach to production was more encompassing, serving the interests of his company as a collective (which, in turn, through series such as *Tales from the Darkside*, provided a creative outlet for a wider array of personnel), rather than the single-minded goals of an individual.

Though Rubinstein may have seen opportunity in Romero’s artistry (and a base of operations that included corporate offices and a wealth of production

and post-production facilities), he was far from simply an opportunist. Rubinstein was just 26-years-old when the two met and showcased an interest in independent media production that spanned from his *Ultimate Mirror* to the formation of New Amsterdam Entertainment in 1995. Collaborator David Ball stressed that Rubinstein is not a “creative producer” (Ball 2016), seemingly more interested in business management than the composition of the text. While this may be less romantic than ideas surrounding the “maverick indie auteur” (a romanticism of which Rubinstein himself saw the economic benefit), Rubinstein’s desire for autonomy created workable alternatives to a hegemonic film industry. Chuck Kleinhans states that “legendary stories of filmmaking make for interesting reading and daydreaming. But in the long run, an informed audience is a better one for ensuring the lasting position of the independent sector” (“Independent Features” 326). This historical review of Laurel contributes to an understanding of independent cinema and its real-world potentials, determining to show independent cinema as it was, rather than as we would like it to be.

Methodology Review

WALTER: What have you been doing all this time?

THOMPSON: Playing with a jigsaw puzzle.

Citizen Kane (Dir. Welles, 1941)

Following the multimethod, media industry studies approach of scholars Freeman, Gough-Yates, Lotz and Newcomb, I have employed a “mixture of methodologies” to describe the “real-world” activities of an independent motion

picture production company. This said, disclosing such “real-world” activities is far from straightforward. The extent to which one can ever really know the “real-world” behaviours of a firm or a media practitioner is debatable, especially since industry researchers are, in most cases, restricted by an outsider vantage point. In a historical analysis, when the investigation is both temporally and spatially far removed from its subject (in this instance, a regional American firm that ceased operations over two decades ago), direct “participant observation” is further denied.¹⁰¹ Critical objectivity is a clear advantage to this distance, but the lack of direct access casts something of a veil over the firm’s every day, real-world (and real-time) activities.

Additionally, in my early collation of research, I became aware that a sizable percentage of this data could be traced back to the self-representations of the firm itself. Articles on Laurel’s corporate behaviour in the trade papers and regional newspapers (relating to partnerships, new employment agreements and up-coming projects, etc.) were repeatedly taken from the firm’s own statements or press releases. Interviews in film journals and fan magazines, meanwhile, gave Romero and Rubinstein further control over their public image. Even the SEC documents—based on a legally binding principal of transparency—included annual reports in which Rubinstein would spin fiscal losses and unfulfilled projects for the benefit of Laurel’s shareholders.

The control Laurel had over its own story is, as becomes evident, another part of that story, another facet in demonstrating the firm’s strategic organisation of its facing image. This identity management is crucial to our understanding of Laurel, the intersection where authorship, cult and

¹⁰¹ As Jessica Iacono et al. write, “participant observation has its roots in anthropological studies, where researchers would travel to faraway places to study the customs and practices of less known societies. It involves participating in a situation, while, at the same time, recording what is being observed” (39).

independence meet. Yet to reveal a more nuanced picture of the firm, and to compensate for the lack of my own first-hand participant observations, this review has drawn upon a synthesis of ethnographic research, hard empirical data and textual analysis (Gough-Yates 16). As stated, business studies theory has situated Laurel's activities inside measurable organisational behaviours across industries. Legal documents such as the SEC 10-K reports or court documents such as *Fox v. Commissioner* have also taken narrative control out of the hands of the firm. As was the case with Laurel's move into tax shelter production, this "offstage" image sat in contradiction to public boasts of expansion and creative diversity.

Primary amongst this variety of sources has been the ethnographic interviews conducted with Laurel collaborators and employees. Accepting that this data must be carefully interpreted (that contributors may suffer from lapses of memory, or have their own loyalties or scores to settle, etc.), these interviews have nevertheless expanded the view of the company beyond the perspective of its co-founders. In accord with Anna Potter, such "research methods and activities constitute crucial processes of contextualisation, of attempts to understand media industries as both creative and economic endeavours" (163). Ideas of contextualisation, or corroboration, have been key, presenting an opportunity to test data drawn from elsewhere against the experiences of those who worked for the company. This qualitative research method has served to "connect the dots" between findings or, as was the case with Mitchell Galin's description of Laurel's closure, to provide reliable, on-site information where no other data existed.

Writers including Potter, Vicki Mayer and Mark Kermode have drawn our

attention to the challenges inherent in ethnographic research.¹⁰² For scholars considering or about to undertake this type of fieldwork, I can only detail some of the additional difficulties that I faced. As is no doubt apparent, the first obstacle I had to overcome was to attract relevant contributors. So-called gatekeepers such as agents and personal assistants repeatedly denied access, often discarding my request for an interview outright or insisting on final approval over the content of this work (a request I was not willing to grant). In one instance, I came up against an assistant with a frustrating unwillingness either to grant or deny an interview. Speaking to them regularly over a three-year period, they still insist that an interview is possible—they just need to check their client's schedule. Again.

In the age of social media, a growing number of practitioners now maintain an online presence, offering a more direct point of contact. From my own experience, subjects were almost universally amenable to being approached in this manner. More so, I quickly found that one interview beget another, and subjects often spoke in support of this project to their colleagues, some going as far as to provide a list of contacts or a point of introduction. Although others were initially reluctant, afraid of speaking out of turn or betraying a confidence, they relaxed in the knowledge that their peers had already gone on record. It was therefore important to consider which interview subjects to approach first—whose contribution would unlock the most doors later on. As a practical matter, it was beneficial to start at the top of the company and George Romero's early approval encouraged a number of his more hesitant colleagues and former employees to participate.

¹⁰² See Potter, "Managing Productive Academia/Industry Relations: The Interview as Research Method" (2018), Mayer, "Studying up and F**cking up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies" (2008) and Kermode, "The Recalcitrant Interviewee" (2008).

While agents and personal assistants restricted my access, other intermediaries were more sympathetic. After discovering that Romero would be a guest of honour at the Lucca Film Festival in 2016, I resolved to bypass the usual gatekeepers and speak to festival founder Nicola Borrelli directly. In turn, Borrelli pointed me to Paolo Zelati, a journalist who had arranged Romero's participation in the festival. These contacts made it possible to spend considerable time with Romero—Borrelli in an effort to reinforce the pedagogical value of the festival, and Zelati in a demonstration of peer solidarity. Even with this support, gaining access was arduous and Romero's changing schedule and the numerous demands on his time kept me waiting in the wings for almost the duration of the festival. This necessitated that I be persistent to the point of annoyance, sending e-mails throughout each day and repeatedly making phone calls to assure that the interview went ahead.

Since I would have to be ready to go at a moment's notice, and that it was highly likely that this would be my only opportunity to interview Romero (something that is possible in any interview scenario), this experience reinforced the value of good preparation. This interview was entirely opportunistic, quickly put together when I discovered Romero would be relatively close by (some 1115 miles away) and that a point of contact could be arranged. Afterwards, I began to consider the broader timetable of my investigation, asking where such ethnographic fieldwork should be placed in a chronology of research. As stated, the Romero interview took place towards the start of my research and, though it was useful in opening doors to subsequent interviews, without extensive background research it was difficult to tease out the minutia of Laurel's everyday working practices. Indeed, I became concerned that not only was I not asking the right questions, but that I did not yet know what the right questions

were.

More so, as Kermode found when interviewing noted horror auteur David Cronenberg, it can be hard to get a veteran interview subject to “say anything *new*—not because of laziness on his part, but because there are so few aspects of his work that he has not already intelligently considered and discussed elsewhere” (“Recalcitrant” 135). This was true of Romero. Though a gregarious and engaging subject, as I probed towards information specific to Laurel, Romero frequently circled back to familiar, well-tested anecdotes. Mayer points out that learning from your mistakes is key to this ethnographic approach (145-146) and I addressed these problems in subsequent sessions by collating as much primary data as possible beforehand. Knowing what information I was looking for (or what information I lacked) gave specificity to my questions, increasing the overall value of these sessions. In some cases, this additional research was a means to jog the subject’s memory, particularly when discussing events that transpired decades ago. In others, subjects who handled sensitive data, such as *Martin’s* Financial Service Provider Barney Guttman, were reluctant to volunteer new information, more comfortable either confirming or denying the findings that I already had.

In a media industries investigation, McDonald stresses the importance of historical research to our understanding of current approaches and future directions. Laurel’s direct impact on the industry is noted, observable in the growth of Pittsburgh as a regional filmic centre (“Inside the Pittsburgh”; Buba 2016) and namechecked as an important influence by independent genre filmmakers such as Larry Fessenden and Robert Rodriguez (Kohn AR10; *Light*

in Darkness).¹⁰³ More significantly, the interdisciplinary methodology utilised here suggests an expansive model of analysis when it comes to tracing media entities, incorporating a diversity of theories and research, from business and economic theory to ethnographic interviews and academic analysis. At a micro-industrial level, this combination of materials presents a holistic overview of day-to-day production cultures and work methods, offering a viable means through which to further penetrate the “closed-door facade of the media industries” (Freeman 2) in future studies.

As with the reporter Thompson in *Citizen Kane*, who must piece together the life of a man from the contradictory remembrances of those who knew him, the history of a firm can seem like a jigsaw puzzle, one with key pieces still missing.¹⁰⁴ From this heterogenous perspective, a singular, uncontested “real-world” truth may be unknowable. Yet as Michele Hilmes has advised, “the concept of ‘industry’ implies the coming together of a host of interests and efforts around the production of goods or services” (22). The methodological approach of this thesis reflects the fact that the history of a firm is a collective history—one of contradictions, compromises and contested approaches to creative and economic matters. This is something that is as true for the American independent film sector as a whole, as it was for this small entertainment company surviving on the margins of the industry.

¹⁰³ In keeping with Laurel’s overlooked status (and, indeed, a neglect of business parameters as a whole), these practitioners attribute the activities of the firm solely to Romero and his creative demands.

¹⁰⁴ So as not to overwork this analogy any more than necessary, I will avoid comparing Rubinstein’s absence from this thesis to Charles Foster Kane’s childhood sleigh Rosebud.

Filmography

Laurel Theatrical Feature Films

Creepshow. Directed by George A. Romero, UFDC, 1982.

Creepshow 2. Directed by Michael Gornick, New World Pictures, 1987.

Dawn of the Dead. Directed by George A. Romero, UFDC, 1978.

Day of the Dead. Directed by George A. Romero, UFDC, 1985.

Knightriders. Directed by George A. Romero, UFDC, 1981.

Martin. Directed by George A. Romero, Libra Films, 1978.

Pet Sematary. Directed by Mary Lambert, Paramount Pictures, 1989.

Tales from the Darkside: The Movie. Directed by John Harrison, Paramount Pictures, 1990.

Laurel Television Series, Specials, Mini-Series and Movies for Television

"Franco Harris: Good Luck on Sunday." *The Winners*, directed by George A. Romero, Laurel Tape & Film, 1973.

Golden Years. Created by Stephen King, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc./CBS, 1991.

"I'm Back: The Rocky Bleier Story." *The Winners*, directed by Michael Gornick, Laurel Tape & Film, 1975.

Magic at the Roxy. Directed by Mark Gargiulo, Laurel Tape & Film, 1976.

Monsters. Created by Richard P. Rubinstein and Mitchell Galin, Tribune Entertainment, 1988-1990.

"O.J. Simpson: Juice on the Loose." *The Winners*, directed by George A.

Romero, Laurel Tape & Film, 1974.

Precious Victims. Directed by Peter Levin, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc./CBS, 1995.

Stephen King's The Langoliers. Executive Producers Richard P. Rubinstein and Mitchell Galin, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc./ABC, 1995.

Stephen King's The Stand. Directed by Mick Garris, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc./ABC, 1994.

Tales from the Darkside. Executive Producers Richard Rubinstein, George A. Romero and Jerry Golod, Tribune Entertainment, 1983-1988.

"Thank God I'm a Country Boy: Terry Bradshaw." *The Winners*, directed by Michael Gornick, Laurel Tape & Film, 1975.

"Trick or Treat." *Tales from the Darkside*, written by Franco Amurri and George A. Romero, directed by Bob Babalan, Tribune Entertainment, 1983.

The Vernon Johns Story. Directed by Kenneth Fink, Worldvision Enterprises, Inc., 1994.

The Winners. Created by Richard P. Rubinstein and George A. Romero, Laurel Tape & Film, 1973-1975.

"The Word Processor of the Gods." *Tales from the Darkside*, directed by Michael Gornick, Tribune Entertainment, 1984.

Additional Feature Films

À bout de souffle. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Films Georges de Beaugard/Les Films Impéria/Films Around the World, 1960.

Alambrista! Directed by Robert M. Young, PBS/First Run Features, 1977.

Animal House. Directed by John Landis, Universal Pictures, 1978.

Anticipation of the Night. Directed by Stan Brakhage, The Film-Maker's Cooperative, 1958.

Arabian Nights. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, United Artists, 1974.

Bad Lieutenant. Directed by Abel Ferrara, Aries Films, 1992.

Basic Instinct. Directed by Paul Verhoeven, Carolco Pictures, 1992.

Battle Beyond the Stars. Directed by Jimmy T. Murakami, New World Pictures, 1980.

Battleship Potemkin. Directed by Sergei M. Eisenstein, Goskino /Films Around the World, 1925.

The Beastmaster. Directed by Don Coscarelli, MGM, 1982.

Benji. Directed by Joe Camp, Mulberry Square Releasing, 1974.

Benji the Hunted. Directed by Joe Camp, Beuna Vista Pictures, 1987.

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage. Directed by Dario Argento, Titanus, 1970.

Blackboard Jungle. Directed by Richard Brooks, MGM, 1955.

Blow Job. Directed by Andy Warhol, The Factory, 1963.

Blue Skies Again. Directed by Richard Michaels, Warner Bros., 1983.

The Boob Tube. Directed by Christopher Odin, Constellation Films, 1975.

A Boy and His Dog. Directed by L.Q. Jones, LQ/JAF, 1975.

Buffalo '66. Directed by Vincent Gallo, Lions Gate Films, 1998.

The Canterbury Tales. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, United Artists, 1972.

Carrie. Directed by Brian De Palma, United Artists, 1976.

Cattle Anne and Little Britches. Directed by Lamont Johnson, Universal Pictures, 1981.

Chan is Missing. Directed by Wayne Wang, New Yorker Films, 1982.

Chelsea Girls. Directed by Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol, The Film-Maker's Cooperative, 1966.

Citizen Kane. Directed by Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.

The Color of Money. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Touchstone Pictures, 1986.

The Connection. Directed by Shirley Clarke, Films Around the World, 1962.

The Conversation. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1974.

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. Directed by Peter Greenaway, Miramax, 1989.

The Crazies. Directed by George A. Romero, Cambist Films, 1973.

David and Lisa. Directed by Frank Perry, Continental Distributing, 1962.

David Holzman's Diary. Directed by Jim McBride, New Yorker Films, 1967.

Day for Night. Directed by François Truffaut, Warner Bros., 1973.

Dirty Dancing. Directed by Emile Ardolino, Vestron Pictures, 1987.

Dolls. Directed by Stuart Gordon, Empire Pictures, 1987.

Don't Answer the Phone! Directed by Robert Hammer, Crown International Pictures, 1980.

Dreamgirls. Directed by Bill Condon, Paramount Pictures, 2006.

Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Eat. Directed by Andy Warhol, The Factory, 1963.

El Topo. Directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky, Douglas Music Films, 1970.

The English Patient. Directed by Anthony Minghella, Miramax, 1996.

Exterminator 2. Directed by Mark Buntzman, The Cannon Group, 1984.

The Fantastic Voyage. Directed by Richard Fleischer, 20th Century Fox, 1966.

Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! Directed by Russ Meyer, Eve Productions, 1965.

Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists. Directed by Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, The Cinema Guild, 1980.

Friday the 13th. Directed by Sean S. Cunningham, Paramount Pictures, 1980.

Gal Young 'Un. Directed by Victor Nuñez, First Run Features, 1979.

Game Show Models. Directed by David Neil Gottlieb, Constellation Films, 1977.

The Godfather. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Gods and Monsters. Directed by Bill Condon, Lions Gate Films, 1998.

Goodbye, Columbus. Directed by Larry Peerce, Paramount Pictures, 1969.

Gordy. Directed by Mark Lewis, Miramax Family Films, 1995.

The Graduate. Directed by Mike Nichols, Embassy Pictures, 1967.

Grease. Directed by Randal Kleiser, Paramount Pictures, 1978.

Greetings. Directed by Brian De Palma, Sigma III, 1969.

Halloween. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.

Harlan County U.S.A. Directed by Barbara Kopple, PBS, 1976.

Heartland. Directed by Richard Pearce, Levitt-Pickman Film Corporation, 1979.

Heaven's Gate. Dir. Michael Cimino, United Artists, 1980.

Hercules. Directed by Luigi Cozzi, The Cannon Group, 1983.

House of Long Shadows. Directed by Pete Walker, The Cannon Group, 1983.

The Immoral Mr. Teas. Directed by Russ Meyer, Pad-Ram Enterprises, 1959.

Into the West. Directed by Mike Newell, Miramax Family Films, 1992.

The Intruder. Directed by Roger Corman, Astor Pictures Corporation, 1962.

Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion. Directed by Elio Petri, Columbia Pictures, 1970.

Irreconcilable Differences. Directed by Charles Shyer, Warner Bros., 1984.

It Happened to Jane. Directed by Richard Quine, Columbia Pictures, 1959.

Jack's Wife. Directed by George A. Romero, Jack H. Harris Enterprises, 1972.

Jaws. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1975.

The Kentucky Fried Movie. Directed by John Landis, UFDC, 1977.

Krull. Directed by Peter Yates, Columbia Pictures, 1983.

Lady Bird. Directed by Greta Gerwig, A24, 2017.

The Last Starfighter. Directed by Nick Castle, Universal Pictures/Lorimar, 1984.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Universal Pictures, 1988.

The Liberation of Cherry Jankowski. Directed by John Russo, Constellation Films, 1976.

Lion of the Desert. Dir. Moustapha Akkad, UFDC, 1980.

The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue. Directed by Jorge Grau, Ambassador Film Distributors/Hallmark Releasing, 1974.

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Directed by Peter Jackson, New Line Cinema, 2001-2003.

Love Streams. Directed by John Cassavetes, The Cannon Group, 1984.

Macabre. Directed by William Castle, Allied Artists Pictures, 1958.

Maîtresse. Directed by Barbet Schroeder, Gaumont/Libra Films, 1975.

The Man with the Golden Arm. Directed by Otto Preminger, United Artists, 1955.

Mean Streets. Directed by Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 1973.

Monkey Shines. Directed by George A. Romero, Orion Pictures, 1988.

The Moon is Blue. Directed by Otto Preminger, United Artists, 1953.

Moonlight. Directed by Barry Jenkins, A24, 2016.

My Dinner with Andre. Directed by Louis Malle, New Yorker Films, 1981.

The Naughty Stewardess. Directed by Al Adamson, Constellation Films, 1974.

The Neverending Story III: Escape from Fantasia. Directed by Peter MacDonald, Miramax Family Films, 1994.

Night Call Nurses. Directed by Jonathan Kaplan, New World Pictures, 1972.

The Night Flier. Dir. Mark Pavia, New Line Cinema, 1997.

A Nightmare on Elm Street. Directed by Wes Craven, New Line Cinema, 1984.

Night of the Living Dead. Directed by George A. Romero, Image

Ten/Continental Distributing, 1968.

No Country for Old Men. Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, Miramax/Paramount

Vantage, 2007.

North by Northwest. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, MGM, 1959.

Northern Lights. Directed by John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, Cine Manifest

Productions, 1978.

Pink Flamingos. Directed by John Waters, New Line Cinema, 1972.

The Player. Directed by Robert Altman, Fine Line Features, 1992.

Profondo Rosso. Directed by Dario Argento, Cineriz/Howard Mahler Films,

1975.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Paramount Pictures, 1960.

Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino, Miramax, 1994.

Putney Swope. Directed by Robert Downey, Cinema V, 1969.

Putty Hill. Directed by Matthew Porterfield, The Cinema Guild, 2010.

Return of the Secaucus Seven. Directed by John Sayles, Libra Films, 1979.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Directed by Jim Sharman, 20th Century Fox,

1975.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1968.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. Directed by Karel Reisz, British Lion

Films, 1961.

Saw. Directed by James Wan, Lions Gate Films, 2004.

Scandalous. Directed by Rob Cohen, Orion Pictures, 1984.

Sebastiane. Directed by Paul Humfress and Derek Jarman, Libra Films, 1976.

Le Secret. Directed by Robert Enrico, Valoria Films/Cinema National, 1974.

sex, lies, and videotape. Directed by Stephen Soderbergh, Miramax, 1989.

Shadows. Directed by John Cassavetes, Lion International Films, 1958.

She's Gotta Have It. Directed by Spike Lee, Island Pictures, 1986.

The Sinful Bed. Directed by Ralf Gregan, UFDC, 1973.

Spasmo. Directed by Umberto Lenzi, Produzioni Atlas Consorziate/Libra Films International, 1974.

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock. Directed by Leonard Nimoy, Paramount Pictures, 1984.

Star Wars. Directed by George Lucas, 20th Century Fox, 1977.

Storyville. Directed by Mark Frost, 20th Century Fox, 1992.

Strange Behavior. Directed by Michael Laughlin, Hemdale Film Corporation/World-Northal Corporation, 1981.

Strange Invaders. Directed by Michael Laughlin, Orion Pictures, 1983.

Superman: The Movie. Directed by Richard Donner, Warner Bros., 1978.

Superman II. Directed by Richard Lester, Warner Bros., 1981.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace, Dir. Sidney J. Furie, The Cannon Group/Warner Bros., 1987.

Survival of the Dead. Directed by George A. Romero, Magnet Releasing, 2009.

Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento, Produzioni Atlas Consorziate (P.A.C.)/20th Century Fox International Classics, 1977.

Swing Shift. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Warner Bros., 1984.

Ten Little Indians. Directed by Peter Collinson, AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1974.

Terminator 2: Judgement Day. Directed by James Cameron, Carolco Pictures, 1991.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. Directed by Tobe Hooper, Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974.

There's Always Vanilla. Directed by George A. Romero, Cambist Films, 1971.

THX 1138. Directed by George Lucas, Warner Bros., 1970.

Tintorera: Killer Shark. Directed by René Cardona Jr., UFDC, 1977.

Tombs of the Blind Dead. Directed by Amando de Ossorio, Hispamex
Films/Hallmark Releasing, 1972.

Too Late Blues. Directed by John Cassavetes, Paramount Pictures, 1961.

Total Recall. Directed by Paul Verhoeven, Carolco Pictures, 1990.

Tout va bien. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, Gaumont
Film Company, 1972.

Traffic. Directed by Stephen Soderbergh, USA Films, 2000.

The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1. Directed by Bill Condon, Summit
Entertainment, 2011.

The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2. Directed by Bill Condon, Summit
Entertainment, 2012.

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me. Directed by David Lynch, New Line Cinema,
1992.

Vixen! Directed by Russ Meyer, Eve Productions, 1968.

Where There's Smoke. Directed by André Cayatte, Libra Films, 1973.

A Woman Under the Influence. Directed by John Cassavetes, Faces
International, 1974.

Additional Television Series, Mini-Series and Movies for Television

Alfred Hitchcock Presents. Executive Producer Alfred Hitchcock, Revenue
Studios/Universal Television/CBS, 1955-1965.

Amazing Stories. Executive Producer Stephen Spielberg, Amblin
Entertainment/Universal Television/NBC, 1985-1987.

Beverly Hills 90210. Created by Darren Star, Spelling Television/Worldvision Enterprises/Fox, 1990-2000.

Charlie's Angels. Created by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, Spelling-Goldberg Productions/Columbia Pictures Television, 1976-1981.

China Rose. Directed by Robert Day, Robert Halmi, Inc./CBS, 1983.

The Dick Cavett Show. Hosted by Dick Cavett, PBS, 1977-1982.

Dune. Directed by John Harrison, New Amsterdam Entertainment/Sci-Fi Channel, 2000.

Dynasty. Created by Esther Shapiro and Richard Alan Shapiro, Aaron Spelling Productions/ABC, 1981-1989.

Heartbeat. Created by Sara Davidson, Aaron Spelling Productions/ABC, 1988-1989.

Kiss and Tell. Directed by Andy Wolk, New Amsterdam Entertainment/ABC, 1996.

The Outer Limits. Executive Producers Pen Densham, Richard Barton Lewis and John Watson, Showtime, 1995-2002.

The Phantom of the Opera. Directed by Robert Markowitz, Robert Halmi, Inc./CBS, 1983.

Salem's Lot. Directed by Tobe Hooper, Warner Bros. Television/CBS, 1979.

Seinfeld. Created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, West-Shapiro/Castle Rock Entertainment/NBC, 1989-1998.

Stephen King's It. Directed by Tommy Lee Wallace, Warner Bros. Television/ABC, 1990.

The Tomorrow Show. Hosted by Tom Snyder, Executive Producers Pamela Burke, Roger Ailes and Bruce McKay. NBC, 1973-1983.

The Twilight Zone. Created by Rod Serling, CBS 1959-1964, 1985-1989.

Twin Peaks. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, Lynch/Frost Productions/
Propaganda Films/Spelling Entertainment/ABC, 1990-1991.

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