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The Implementation and Emulation of Cult Movie Marketing

Rebekah W. McKendry

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The Implementation and Emulation of Cult Movie Marketing

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

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Cult media is often an area of media studies that is difficult to define. Cult media branches through numerous time periods, genres, and fandom patterns. Cult trends are also constantly evolving over time, changing from word-of-mouth and point-of-sale advertising to social networks and Internet culture. But have the rudimentary basics of how media cults develop and spread their message changed along with the progressing marketing presentation? This dissertation explores the definition of media cults, their history, and marketing styles over time, ultimately exploring the tools utilized to market cult media and examine how these tools are now synthetically applied to many media products in hopes of garnering a passionate cult audience.

Introduction, Rationale, and Methodology

I have always been fascinated by cult media. Even as a child I gravitated less towards mainstream media (like Disney) and more towards lesser-known material (like Japanese anime). As I began college and advanced studies into media, my focal point stayed fixed on counter-culture, transgressive, and cult material. This passion for cult media has stayed with me throughout my educational path and even played heavily into my career choices. Over time, I have become one of the leading experts on horror and exploitation film, and I still consume cult media constantly, both studying the patterns and also fueling my own personal predilection.

Many of my academic colleagues who do not share my fascination with cult media have inquired why on earth I have dedicated so many years of my life to studying this often fringe and disregarded subsector of media, and why I have chosen to focus my dissertation on the topic. What makes this so damn important, not just to me but in the larger sense of research? I had often wondered this myself. Of course, I'm captivated by these films and the legions of devoted fans they garner. And I'm intensely fascinated by how these films and TV shows are presented and advertised to the public, but is this often over-looked sector of paracinema really imperative to larger media studies?[1]

My answer came last year at San Diego Comic Con. Each year, over 400,000 media professionals, celebrities, and dedicated fans all gather at the San Diego Convention Center for the largest media gathering in the world. The five-day event covers comics, movies, TV, magazines, video games, and just about every other media in

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[1] Created by media scholar Jeffrey Sconce, this term is used to refer to film outside of the mainstream movie genre. Sconce notes that this is a "very elastic textual category".

between. Everyone who has an upcoming media product that could potentially draw a cult or "geek" audience spends a fortune to be there. Each year the company I worked for, Fangoria Entertainment, drops roughly $15,000 to be present for the weekend with a rather meager booth.

This past year while taking a short break from our tiny booth, I ran into one of my friends who holds a marketing position at AMC. She was working the booth and doing press for AMC's immensely popular show *The Walking Dead*, a fictional episodic drama about a zombie holocaust.[2] Over coffee, we started chatting about how expensive it is to market a product at San Diego Comic Con. While I had been floored by the $15,000 my company drops every year, AMC alone had spent well over a million dollars to set up an enormous *The Walking Dead* set replica in the middle of the convention floor complete with giant screens showing clips, celebrity appearances, hired zombies wandering the floor scaring unsuspecting attendees, and much more. This was just for one TV show. Multiply this by the hundreds of media companies present at Comic Con, all of who were also spending over a million dollars each to show off their products. Media marketing is prodigious. And if some of the film and TV hits from the past few years have demonstrated anything, it is that the money spent on marketing a film is often larger than the actual cost to make it (ie- *Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious*, *The Conjuring*, and *Oculus* to name just a few). To the corporations and studios spending the money, research is crucial. Statistical data and case studies drive the media industry telling the key players what markets are hot and what advertising operations are most lucrative. It has become commonplace for media to mimic cult marketing patterns in hopes of gaining the same

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[2] *The Walking Dead.* Darabont, Frank. American Movie Channel, 2010- current.

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devoted fan base, but does this emulation work? Do those non-cult media that pursue a synthetic cult marketing style see a cult-like return both in audience devotion and in financials as well?

Specific Aims and Thesis

Very little research has been done in the area of cult film marketing. Actually, limited research has been done on cult films in general. A handful of film theorists have generated concepts about the psychological rationale of why media cults formulate and what motivates their viewer dedication. A larger group of film theorists have created works about specific single texts/films, hypothesizing analytic-based concepts on why certain groups respond to the specific texts and what the potential triggers could be. Examples of this would be the theories that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* attracts young girls with a cult-like fervor because the young ladies feel a connection with the strength of the Buffy character, or that pop culture fans enjoy *The Venture Brothers* because the show is peppered with endless references to outside media which act as pop culture trivia forcing the devoted viewers to "get" all the outside references and jokes.[3][4] But beyond the psychological links that impel cult media devotion and the analytic conjectures of why specific cults ascertain certain groups, the research is highly limited, especially so in the arena of cult movie marketing.

Though I will explore the definition of "cult media" in great detail, I will begin by stating that I believe the term "cult media" is entirely defined by audience reaction. Though certain sub-genres tend to lend themselves to a cultish response (horror, science

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[3] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* Whedon, Joss. Warner Brothers, 1997-2003.

[4] *The Venture Brothers.* Publick, Jackson. Cartoon Network, 2003- current.

fiction, fantasy, westerns, etc.), the label of "cult media" cannot be applied until the audience responds. Therefore, the bulk of my research focused on audience response rather than the specific media genre or the media creator's intention.

I must also state that I am writing this dissertation at a time of great change in the entertainment world. Within the past few years the popular methods for media consumption have shifted to online private viewing platforms like Amazon VOD, iTunes, Netflix, and Hulu. Many of these platforms are now creating their own content and with that, changing the way media is marketed. Production budgets for cult-style projects are in wild fluctuation because the industry is unsure where projects will land and the ultimate fate of cable and theatrical screenings. It is within this changing environment that I feel it is most important to identify the best marketing practices for cult media, examining how these tactics are being preserved and utilized in new spaces as well as the old.

My research is centralized on cult films, specifically in regard to their marketing structures, publicity techniques, and implementations. A sizeable portion of my dissertation is devoted to discerning what cult films are, as opposed to those that merely mimic cult-marketing styles. Most horror films, for example, are treated to cult-style marketing efforts in hopes of garnering a cult response, though they are not cult films, per se. I begin my research by first examining what a cult film is and what traits separate cult media from other forms of media. I then analyze cult marketing throughout history. This has, to the best of my knowledge, never been done before and is a much needed area of research considering the large number of films that now emulate a cult marketing style. My research is broken down into the following format:

- Introduction, Rationale, and Methodology

- Defining a Media Cult

- History of Cult Media

- Cult Media Marketing Prior to 1990

- Contemporary Cult Media Marketing and Case Studies

- Self Study: A Self Reflexive Examination of Cult Media Marketing

- Summations

Preliminary Studies: Literature Review and Primary Sources

The aggregate of my textual sources focuses on trying to discern a clear and precise definition of "cult films." Though the research into cult films and audience devotion to paracinema is rather meager, I believe I have compiled a number of quality texts that not only will guide me to generate my own definition of a "cult film," but also facilitate the navigation of how the definition has mutated over time, shifting from an organically occurring phenomenon to one that filmmakers now attempt to artificially replicate.

Fan Cultures by Matt Hills provides a thorough examination of the "cult fan," breaking down the devotion into several subcategories that different media or fans may fall into.[5] It identifies traits that tend to be common amongst all cult products, spanning across multiple media types and presentations. *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Tastes* edited by Mark Janovich, Antonio Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis is a compilation text that concentrates not only on the analysis

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[5] Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge Press. 2002.

of multiple cult texts but also on the philosophy behind the textual devotions.[6] Several of the passages examine the difficulty in defining the term "cult" and help to formulate various ways to examine the concept. *Film/Genre* by Rick Altman provides excellent theoretical work on how to traverse the sticky topic of genre when approaching cult film.[7] The text acknowledges that genre, by nature, tends to be nearly impossible to define and uses this to build an identifying structure in which to frame and discuss the concept of genre. *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, approaches the differences between cult TV and cult film devotion, and the types marketing overlaps and contours that occur between the two media.[8] Instead of observing fans in a rather clinical manner which is common in some cult media examinations, this book embraces fandom and explores why some media products have the power to inspire the audience to take action. And finally *Desperate Visions: Camp America* by Jack Stevenson provides case studies of multiple cult films, exploring them from their creation to marketing to exhibition to audiences' reception, including in-depth examinations on the work of John Waters, Curt McDowell, and several others.[9]

Cult films are fairly recent phenomena. Though the film industry has been functioning for over a hundred years, the concept and identification of "cult" films did not emerge until the 1970s. This is not to say cult films did not exist prior to this.

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[6] Jancovich, Mark, Antonia Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis. *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2003.

[7] Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: Bfi Publishing. 1999.

[8] Gwenllian-Jones, Sara and Roberta E. Pearson. *Cult Television*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. 2004.

[9] Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: Camp America*. London: Creation Books. 1996.

Certainly people were watching hygiene films, nudie cuties, or even pulp horror well back into the early days of cinema. *Reefer Madness* from 1936 is a great example of this as it was originally presented as a serious anti-drug movie, but it was received and subsequently passed around as a campy comedy.[10] But it was in the 1970s when inklings of "cult films" as a theoretical concept began creeping into the media lexicon, and theorists began to identify the devotions that occur around variable textual sources. That said, a sizeable portion of my research must come from sources that pre-date the identification of "cult films" as a conceptual phenomenon simply because many of the films that were labeled as "cult" in the 1980s launched their marketing campaigns long before that. Decades prior, these films were slowly seeding and growing what would later be termed as cult audiences.

For example, the 1970s were stuffed full of low-budget filmmaking, especially in the horror exploitation realm. These films, often dubbed as Grindhouse films, had a very specific marketing style, a recognizable artwork and poster presentation, and a distinguishable formula used in their trailers. Though audiences attended these films during their primary screenings, the patrons did not become cult fans until a decade later when viewers began to take active roles to seek out the stars and props from these fly-by-night pictures. Because of the break that occurred between initial screening and cult fandom, I must examine the initial marketing campaigns to see what could hook viewers and stick with them for a decade. This will include television ads and trailers that would have run before other features, posters and newspaper ads, and theatrical dressing including lobby cards and marquees.

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[10] *Reefer Madness*. Gasnier, Louis. Motion Picture Ventures, 1936.

Unfortunately, the documentation on many of these often disregarded films was very poor. No could foresee that *Ilsa: She-wolf of the SS* would become a delayed hit ten years later (and perhaps if they had, it would not have garnered the same subverted popularity), so film historians made little effort to document the marketing path that many of these films pursued.[11] Yet, after some searching, I have found several sources/authors that have recovered many of the original marketing materials.

My primary source for investigating original marketing materials is *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* by Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford.[12] This text focuses not only on the marketing campaigns that were implemented by the grindhouse films, but it also surveys another important element of marketing: the timing of releases. Still salient in today's markets, films can sink or sail based on the specific weekend they release. This same thing occurred in the sleazier film markets of the 1970s. The text takes a hard look at what films released at the same time and the importance that timing can play in the success of a film's theatrical run.

To take a further step back in time, *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of Exploitation Film* by Felicia Feaster and Bret Wood highlights the marketing campaigns used by the sex and drug films of the 1960s.[13] Though this book sadly leaves out statistical and financial details of the films' releases, it does provide in-depth discussions

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[11] *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*. Edmonds, Don. Cambist Films, 1975.

[12] Landis, Bill and Michelle Clifford. *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 2002.

[13] Feaster, Felicia and Bret Wood. *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film.* Baltimore, Maryland: Midnight Marque Press. 1999.

on posters, trailers, and even radio marketing campaigns, as well as common marketing trends of the time.

Perhaps my greatest research find to look at film marketing is *For One Week Only: The World of Exploitation Films* by Richard Meyers.[14] Written in 1983 at the end of the Grindhouse era, this is a rare reflection not only on the films and their marketing campaigns, but also on early audience reactions. This is a very important element of my dissertation that I have not able to find in a verifiable research form anywhere else. It often takes time for a film to gain cult status. For example, the campy disco musical *The Apple* was received differently during its early 1980s theatrical release than how its devoted cult fans perceive the film today.[15] In order to document the film's growth into a cult film, it is important to understand the starting point. This book provides detailed feedback of early audience reactions for many grindhouse films, also examining how or what marketing campaigns may have been ineffective.

To examine the contemporary markets and the application of cult film marketing techniques I use current film industry sources such as *Variety*, *Internet Movie Database*, and *Box Office Mojo* in addition to four texts that are respected works in the film marketing industry. *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing Film, TV and Video Content in an Online World* is one of the current basal writings on marketing in the film industry.[16] Written by media executive Jeff Ulin, this book breaks down contemporary

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[14] Meyers, Richard. *For One Week Only: The World of Exploitation Films.* New Jersey: New Century Publishers, Inc. 1983.

[15] *The Apple*. Golan, Menahem. MGM Entertainment, 1980.

[16] Ulin, Jeffrey C. *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing Film, TV, and Video Control in an Online World.* Boston: Focal Press.2010.

marketing techniques, highlighting how studios make decisions about how films will be marketed, especially within the concept of audience selection and demographics. *The Complete Independent Movie Marketing Handbook: Promote, Distribute, and Sell Your Film* by Mark Steven Bosko is a very popular layman's guide to industry marketing.[17] This book is frequently used by independent filmmakers trying to get their movies out into the world. It focuses largely on grass-roots filmmaking and discusses the "how to" of creating a cult of fans online or through trailers. This book is endorsed by many independent filmmakers and was recommended to me by cult film guru/ Troma president Lloyd Kaufman.

Scott Kirsner's book *Fans, Friends, and Followers: Building an Audience and a Digital Career in the Digital Age* provides a fascinating look at how companies (films and media included) have successfully marketed themselves online.[18] Written in 2009, this book is slightly (and surprisingly) outdated as technology progresses much faster than the publishing industry. Yet, even though the book discusses the benefits of social networking through MySpace (Facebook being the currently popular social network comparative), the methods and theories used still apply.

My final primary text for examining current film marketing techniques is *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism* by Greg Taylor.[19] This academic text looks at the role of the spectator, examining each one of the viewers as a

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[17] Boska, Mark Steven. *The Complete Independent Movie Marketing Handbook.* Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Publications. 2003.

[18] Kirsner, Scott. *Fans, Friends, Followers: Building an Audience and a Creative Career in the Digital Age.* Cinetech Books. 2009.

[19] Taylor, Greg. *Artists in the Audience Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1999.

critic and an artist. It provides a salient historical analysis of audiences and responses both as critics and informed consumers.

Methodology

The study of film walks a very unbalanced line between "hard and soft" research, and often plays into the endless debate over what is wrong with research methods as well as a simplistic notion that all research can be placed into one of these two categories. When proposing the basic question of "Does this film have a cult following?" a researcher's first inclination might be to look at the audience reactions to the film. But when examining individual responses and degrees of film dedication, this can become a daunting task. Ultimately, the best way to determine personal vested interest and dedication to a film is just to ask a group of viewers, "Can you tell me why you 'love' this film so much?" This research will consist mostly of personal interviews and case studies. The questions and answers have to be worded delicately as they ask recipients to arrive at a common definition. Careful choices will have to be made to allow recipients to seek out a common definition of what it is to "love" a movie.

The leading cult film theorist, Henry Jenkins, uses this methodology almost exclusively. Rarely does a statistical fact or figure creep into his work.[20] But this has led another group of Film Study researchers to question his methods. What hard figures can be used to prove or disprove his theories? Why would he not employ these as well? Often times, practical application Film Studies academics (like Mark Jankovich, for example)

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[20] Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture: Studies in Culture and Communication.* New York: Routledge Press, 1992.

will critique the lack of "hard data" as a way of disproving Jenkins's theoretical and qualitative approach, but they rarely offer an alternative method. [21]

In this regard, much of my dissertation and work becomes a methodological battleground. Do I lean toward an analytic side where I create my own theories and thoughts? Do I rely on statistics and numbers, or do I focus more on case studies and interviews? Do I generate my own research, or do I utilize the research of others who have come before me? How do I keep a balance and keep all parties of both sides (marketing and film) satisfied with my final result? While I would love to see everyone applauding my epistemology and methodology for consistency and sturdiness, I know someone will disagree. Some group will feel I lean too much on hard data and numbers or too much on soft data and analysis.

Ultimately though, I want to approach this in the most respectful way. I am going to approach with a primary question in mind: What will get me the most accurate and most precise research? So though I do give credence to the respected methodology of each discipline, my goal, first and foremost, is serving my own information needs. Any correlation with a previously established methodological route is incorporated only if it works in tandem with this primary goal.

My methodology is executed through several means of research gathering including the following: case studies, interviews, autobiography, statistical data analysis, and textual analysis and knowledge production.

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[21] Jancovich, Mark. *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Tastes.* England: Manchester University Press, 2003.

Focus Groups and Case Studies

Focus groups are a staple of the entertainment industry. Studios pay large amounts for select groups to screen a given film. The groups are then asked specific questions about the film to determine if they like it and what needs to be changed before a nationwide release. If a production team is trying to artificially create a cult film (generating the same audience devotion and appeal without allowing it to occur naturally), this is an opportune time to do it. Several years ago, I was selected to be in a case study focal group for the movie *The Strangers*.[22] After the film, we were asked questions such as "what we liked or disliked about the movie," "were the characters likeable," and other detail oriented questions that I could tell were designed simply to identify whether or not we had clearly understood the plot. Out of the thirty or so questions we answered, one stood out to me: "Would you ever purchase a *The Strangers* t-shirt or hat?"

At the time, I saw this as a marketing inquiry to determine if products should be made. Now, after spending several years entrenched in the marketing side of film, I see this question as a test to see if there is the potential for a cult audience and a cult-ish devotion to the movie. Out of my group of about fifteen people, three agreed they would in fact purchase a *The Strangers* t-shirt, which translates into a possible 5% cult following. That's not bad. I giggled to myself when later the next year I saw a whole line of *The Strangers* gear in Hot Topic. I guess the case study had been successful and convinced some executive that cult-like merchandising (which is clearly the gist of Hot Topics products) would be successful.

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[22] *The Strangers*. Dir. Bertino, Bryan. Rogue Pictures, 2008.

Case studies/focus groups are a way for me to stay grounded in my work. I became aware early on that a vast amount of research exists on audience response in which the researcher has not actually spoken to a single audience member. It is crucial when writing about cult films and marketing that I also connect with the receivers- the fans. Case studies are a way to do this and also allow for details to emerge. Yes, a group may enjoy a movie, and this can be demonstrated by ticket sales and profits, but the numbers can't tell "why" or "to what level of devotion." This is where case studies become very beneficial. They will allow me a detailed look at *why* these films garner cults and *what* drives the devotion of the fans or repels them away from the media. In *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Shulamit Reinharz notes that case studies primarily do three things: they analyze time over time, they analyze significance, and they analyze relationships among parts of a phenomenon.[23] Not one of these could be represented by book research or statistical data alone.

Case studies are not without problems. Although they allow for a personalized response without doing time-consuming solo interviews, they still have drawbacks. They still have a level of time-consumption.[24] I will still have to find ten or more people who are willing to sit down and talk with me about why they like or dislike a particular movie.[25] This can be expensive, difficult to coordinate, and create a narrative structure that may not be conducive from which to glean broader abstract data. Additionally, in case studies groups of people are usually congregated together for viewing and response.

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[23] Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[24] Ibid.

[25] I have made sure these are industry professionals, film critics, and active industry event participants.

It seems only natural that the interviewees could influence each other. If nine out of the ten viewers discuss that they hate a movie, the tenth person may feel resistant to profess his or her love of the movie out loud. There becomes an element of peer pressure within any group situation that can ultimately taint data. I attempt to overcome possible hurdles by limiting my research to the professionals who already work in the entertainment industry. I also center my line of questioning on studio marketing choices and motivations rather than any personalized opinions.

Interviews

Interviews are one of my most frequently used means of research. I enjoy one-on-one discussions and find this is the most productive way to get the information I need. Additionally, in my job I do interviews every day. I have found that where many of my colleagues are uncomfortable interviewing people they do not know well, I find the simple Q and A approach to be much less nerve-wracking than theory analysis or statistic data reading.

Like all other forms of research, interviews can be problematic. First, I'm the one designing and asking the question that can make it immediately biased. A simple remote control click through political television will demonstrate how certain interviews can be conducted to produce specific answers.[26] It is often difficult to check myself to make sure that I am not skewing the questions one way or another.

Interview Techniques

Perhaps one of the leading questions regarding interviews comes within what form I choose for them. Several years ago, I asked Dr. Isabel Pinedo about some of the

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[26] Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

interview techniques she used on her book *Recreational Terror*.[27] A media studies

professor at Hunter College, Pinedo has published several books on horror films,

specifically regarding feminist viewpoints. In our prior discussion, she brought to light

another rift I had previously failed to address or even identify- the collection method. In

academia, there is a traditional way to "research" that consists of hefty books and hours

spent in dusty libraries peering over forgotten lore. However, like many other disciplines,

much of the media studies world has been completely reshaped by the Internet. No longer

do I need tomes of film statistical data. I have Internet Movie Database. No longer do I

need to find lost newspaper interviews with a film director hoping to get some single

sentence on why he made a specific artistic decision. I can just find him on Facebook and

message him. Though I will be using many texts from the past for certain portions of my

research, accessibility to information will reshape my interview path.

Pinedo mentioned to me how for her first book, *Recreational Terror,* which

focuses on female horror fans, she spoke one-on-one with female horror viewers in an

office style setting and fired questions at them. It was the acceptable way to research in

the 1990s. You were face-to-face with your subjects, and the atmosphere was formal and

strictly maintained. Isabel felt that if she were writing the book now, she would approach

it completely differently. The Internet has opened up channels of communication.

The Internet has somewhat removed the need for clinical style interviews. Though

email and chatting online are more casual, they yield relaxed and truthful answers. I

researched if Internet-based interview methods were commonly accepted by the majority

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[27] Pinedo, Isabel. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Viewing Horror Films*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

of film academics. Academia, in film or otherwise, still largely views the Internet as the back alley black market of information gathering techniques. There is some cool and important stuff going on, but most of it is still rumor, lies, insane people, con artists, and porn. But yet, as fringe media professionals who spend most of our time embroiled in horror, exploitation, and porn, is this back alley not where we should head? Additionally, academia as a whole is slowly creeping towards the Internet as a valuable source of data and research. The Internet, though seedy and full of potential pitfalls, is the pulse point of our academic focus. Though the rift does exist, I have clearly chosen a side, and regardless of opposing perspective, I feel the Internet (including endless self-made web pages, fan blogs, and sleazy chat rooms) is not just a valid source, but also a predominant research tool for interviews and my larger body of work.

Autobiographical Work

This form of research is perhaps the most troubling for me. I'm not sure why. I have seen autobiographical work used countless times as legitimate research. It just seems strange to be generating my own research out of my own activities, but that is exactly what I'm doing.

Throughout the past few years, I have been shooting several films as part of independent studies. Using an entirely VCU cast and crew, I shot a modern retelling of Nathanial Hawthorne's "Feathertop."[28] The updates include shortening the name to *Feather*, changing the location to a bar, and changing the scarecrow to a corpse. I also directed and shot *The Dump* in the fall of 2011. It is a comedic horror short about two very different serial killers who discover they are using the same dump site for bodies.

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[28] Hawthorne, Nathaniel."Feathertop". *Moses from an Old Manse.* 1852.

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This film has already won multiple awards at festivals and is allowing me to experiment with online cult marketing. I have also shot three films this past year that are currently being marketed towards conventions and film festivals.

The focus of my autobiographical portion is centered on the marketing of these films and exploring different marketing routes, both "real" and virtual. I analyze the artistic creation, implementation, and final fruition of all marketing elements for success, demographic, audience reach, and creativity, while always referencing prior media events, research, and academic analytic work.

I am a filmmaker and a marketing professional. Who better to research film and the marketing of it than someone who is already actively participating in the actions in question? I am including an autobiographical narrative in my dissertation. It may be peppered with facts and figures like how many Facebook friends our film has acquired, but it will largely be my own experiences about working with the film and first-hand statistical data I have collected. This, to me, seems like some of the most personally beneficial research and knowledge creations I could complete.

Statistical Data Analysis

I have already been forewarned about the hazards of using numeric data in my dissertation. While in my working life numeric data is a driving force of meaning, proof, and accepted knowledge, in the liberal arts of academia it has a far different connotation of being suspect, skewed, and potentially hazardous. After speaking with several members of my committee, it became clear that most tended toward a more psychological "how does this make you feel" style of research. However, if I want the work to be taken seriously in the industry, numbers are crucial. That said, I tend to side with my academic

brethren. Numbers are often meaningless. Studies and research can be skewed. I can

show that two million people saw a specific movie on opening weekend. But how many

of them liked the movie? This number wouldn't indicate that the studio gave away over

500,000 free passes for opening weekend or (like *E.T.*) gave out a bonus incentive like t-

shirts or candy.[29] It does not indicate a steady trend or really say much at all about the

popularity and success of the film. Numbers are just numbers. Alone they have no

meaning and can be largely misinterpreted. I'm honestly apprehensive about how to

approach them. I have heard so many academic studies shot down because of the

numbers game. A paper may declare, "This movie made this much money making it one

of the most profitable films of all times." But that research may leave out that the movie

actually cost more to make than it made back or that the bulk of the success occurred in

Japan, which was not the focus of the study. It seems a daunting task to siphon out good

numbers from bad and determine with astute clarity what the numbers actually indicate.

 That said, I'm of course including numbers. It becomes my job as the writer to

discern the good, the bad, and the confusing. It seems like it would be to my benefit to

point out the confusion that occurs within the world of entertainment statistics. Though

my paper is focused on a different subject, it may be the perfect opportunity to point out

flaws in the current system. Somewhere in between readings of Sandra Harding and

Thomas Kuhn, I came to the conclusion that I do not need to fight a bad system.[30] [31] If the

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[29] *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial.* Spielberg, Steven. Universal Studies, 1982.

[30] Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from the Lives of Women.* New York: Cornell University Press, 1991.

[31] Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

current system of research is flawed, I shouldn't use it and will instead create my own. Yes, my own may have issues as well, but it will work best for my own personal project and will also allow me to make brief commentary on the current research methods at play in my chosen industry.

The numbers I do collect will be chosen very carefully. Many consider Amazon and Internet Movie Database to be reputable sites and with solid figures. This is not quite the case. Like Wikipedia, Internet Movie Database is populated and edited largely by the users. Industry professionals (which can be anyone from the President of FOX down to a random bit actor) create an account. These accounts are open to anyone who has ever received a movie credit. After the account is created, that person holds editing power. They can't edit all categories, but they can edit most. Nothing is stopping film "director X" from saying that his film has grossed $4 million. Yes, of course, the fans take great pride in calling people out on this, but most figures on IMDB are considered to be inflated. As far as ticket sales and income are concerned, Box Office Mojo is currently the most respected. It is run by a third party (not affiliated with any studio), and its information comes from the theatres without any studio intervention.

Traditional print sources can also become a bit suspect when it comes to numbers. I had always, throughout my entire school career, been told that books were the best research out there, that the Internet was hit or miss, but that "real" research is done in books. This is not quite the case either. I can name at least ten horror history books with incorrect facts. While there are a number of top-notch books out there, when treading in fresh waters like cult movie marketing, everything I touch is becoming suspect. I'll find

someway to filter the validity, but ultimately, right now it seems that all truth is suspect and this has me on my toes while conducting research.

To discuss statistical data further, I recall a lecture from Heather Hendershot, a former professor of mine at City University of New York Graduate School. Heather is a Media Studies academic who has examined cult development and patterns within media. Some of her research includes *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and kid's television censorship. Heather, in a prior classroom lecture, discussed what would later become one of my core struggles within the Film Studies, specifically within the Cult Studies realm: what counts as knowledge? Heather discussed that for her work and research, some knowledge is gained from observing patterns among fans. For example- a TV show airs, fans develop dedication groups online, the creation of fan fiction and costuming, etc. For some media academics like Heather, these patterns are valid knowledge. But according to many in Film academia they are not.

These knowledge formations cannot readily be measured using standard methods, forcing her to work against the norm and create her own methods. They can be observed, but often only on a single case basis. Heather pointed out that it is easy to look online and find one or two people who devotedly worship just about any given medium. But how does one discern when a few scattered cases blossom into a relevant cult following? As a cult media scholar, I'm inclined to use the same definition to recognize cult formations as I would to recognize porn: I can't specifically define it, but I know it when I see it. For many however, this simple "I know it when I see it" approach does not fly. It is not hard, measurable, and concise. Therefore, though information can potentially be inferred from it, it does not constitute knowledge. So how can one ever define a cult media movement?

There would have to be some measurable event like ticket sales for a fan convention or a number of registered users on a specific media database. Unfortunately, for most cult followings, it is never this clear. How can this be remediated?

According to Thomas Kuhnand Paul Freyeraband, a remediation is not completely necessary.[32] [33] Many theories and discoveries are based on hunches, but do not always have the "hard" knowledge to back them up. This looks phenomenal on paper and sounds very just, but the reason Freyband and Kuhn were so revolutionary is that they work against the system that has been in place for a very long time. Rather secure in its ways, academia most often awards grants, promotions, accolades, and other perks to those who generate concise and measurable data. Here is the problem, and here is measurement of how much I will improve it. As Heather noted, a mere observation and theory about why some immeasurable, innumerable cults are forming around particular media is hardly the subject matter for the faculty MVPs of the year. So, we as film studies academics fake it to a degree.

VOD Quandaries and Online Streaming

There is one area of statistical media gathering that has just within the past year become a hot button issue in the media industry - VOD networks (Video on Demand). While online viewing (streaming movies through Netflix, Amazon, iTunes, etc) has become one of the most lucrative and popular ways to view a movie, the industry has found itself in a bit of a quandry. All VOD platforms are run by third party, private companies who do not release numbers to the public or even industry professionals.

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[32] Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

[33] Freyeraband, Paul. *Against Method: New Edition.* New York: Verso Press, 2010.

Whereas theatres report numbers of ticket sales to companies who make the reports public, VOD networks are not required to report anything. This has lead some companies to use VOD statistical data they supposedly were given in marketing, all of which is very suspect in the eyes of the media industry. A film may include in their marketing campaign "over 100,000 download on iTunes in just one week!" But there is no way to validate this. The 2012 films like *V/H/S* and *ABC's of Death* broke the mold for film releases and were available on VOD for a week prior to releasing theatrical.[34] [35] Both films reported a huge amount of digital downloads and stated that the VOD run was far more lucrative than theatrical. This is highly important because it indicates not only a new form of viewing, but also marketing to a whole new primarily online audience. Both of these films have gotten lumped into a current trend some critics have been loosely referring to as the "VOD Era" which I will discuss at length. But the problems arise in the fact that companies like iTunes or Amazon do not release numbers to anyone outside of the company who owns the media. So any reports of "huge success" stories are coming from the companies themselves and often used in marketing pushes. This makes all the information highly suspect. Yet, VOD marketing is largely pushed online and utilizes many techniques of the early cult films, so it still makes VOD a crucial section of discover and research.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be avoiding studio-generated reports of their VOD successes that again are highly suspect and largely framed as marketing material. Instead, I will be looking at other factors to determine if indeed a film was

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[34] *V/H/S*. Prod. Brad Miska and Gary Binkow. Magnet Releasing, 2012.

[35] *ABC's of Death*. Prod. Ant Timpson. Magnet Releasing, 2012.

successful in its marketing efforts. Both *ABC's of Death* and *V/H/S* were followed up with sequels just a year later. This is an indication that the first films must have performed well. I will also be analyzing fan activity and enthusiasm as a determination of successful marketing. For instance, when the makers of *V/H/S 2* held a panel at a horror convention, it was packed wall-to-wall with fans, all ravenous to see footage from the upcoming sequel. This is a stellar indication that the first film held success with viewers. Granted, it is not quite as concise and clear as statistical viewing patterns, but while the industry bickers over how the numbers are reported or their refusal to report at all, I will press on in my research and find an equally accurate way to demonstrate a film's connection with the fan base.

Textual Analysis and Knowledge Production

A portion of my dissertation will need to be textual analysis. How else will I be able to determine what makes particular movies "cult movies" and others not? This appears to be a daunting task as it becomes difficult to tell "what is knowledge." I think, based on my textual analysis, *Reservoir Dogs* is a cult movie.[36] But ultimately, there is no greater power dictating this as truth. I'm left up to my own devices to make final decisions on what I feel is "cult" and what is not.

In the film studies academic department, much like any other discipline, knowledge is constructed in a variety of ways. It is gained by research and observation. It is gained through historical data. And often times it is gained through repeated knowledge, or it just gets recited as fact so many times people start believing it to be law.

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[36] *Reservoir Dogs*. Tarantino, Quentin. Miramax Films, 1992.

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An example would be the symbolism of the water scenes in *Huckleberry Finn*.[37] The water scenes have long been taught as being allegories for baptisms, and they may well be. But has anyone ever specifically asked Mark Twain if this is the case, and have him confirm with 100% agreement? Most likely not. Thomas Kuhn spoke out against knowledge production like this believing that if we just continue re-teaching the same knowledge that we have been teaching for eons then nothing new will ever be gained from it.[38] The students will continue to walk identical paths and this will ultimately limit further knowledge.

Summation

There is minimal prior research completed on cult films, and much of it lies in the realm of textual analysis. There are only a handful of books written on the elements of cinema that can breed cult followings, but none of these have become the predominantly accepted belief. All are still relatively unknown and un-established. So in a sense, I'm traveling down a fairly uncharted course. But that makes it all the more important to discover and explore.

Many of the concepts involved in my research are difficult to steadfastly define. Terms like "genre", "mass media", "fan", and even "cult" are entirely different depending on the context in which they are presented and often times differ simply by who you ask. The movie *Star Wars* to some is an Action-Adventure movie. To others, it is a Science Fiction film. But some would also say it has nods of a Western knowing that

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[37] Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Charles Webber and Company, 1885.

[38] Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

director George Lucas modeled the plot after standard Western structures. I would venture to say it is all three simultaneously.

Additionally, the term "cult" is entirely different depending on the eye of the beholder. *Star Wars* was a massive blockbuster movie and definitely had mass appeal. But fans have dedicated themselves to the product, so can it also be cult? Let's begin by crafting a skeletal structure by which terms like "cult" and "fan" become more clearly understood.

Defining a Media Cult

Introduction: The Five Facets of Media Cults

Academics, film theorists, and even fans have been trying to define the term "cult media" for decades. Before commencing with a discussion on the marketing techniques used to support its propagation, it seems necessary to reach an understanding of what cult media entails. The term was first applied to fans reflexively, looking back at prior media and re-introducing it in a new light. As research continued, the term "cult" was often used to describe a type of film, not necessarily the affect and effect the film garnered from viewers.[39] "Cult" is not a type of text, rather a post-viewing reception from viewers.

This chapter explores five key points that I consider crucial for a medium to be deemed as cult. I arrived at these five factors through extensive research into cult theory (in large part from Matt Hills), but also first hand research into cult fandom, which I will address shortly. Some of these are in direct response to Hill's own research, and some are them result from my own findings.[40]

- The Connection of Identity

- The Connection of the Extra-textual

- The Connection of Trivia

- The Connection of Possession

- The Connection of Experience

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[39] Mathijs, Ernest and Jamie Sexton. *Cult Cinema.* West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2011.

[40] Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures.* New York: Routledge Press. 2002.

These five elements are necessary to break down the slippage that can occur between what is true "cult" and what is just part of our culture.[41] These five tenets can be applied to a media text to confirm that it indeed garners a cult following. To demonstrate the use of these key points, I examine them against a number of cult texts to show how they function as fluid and yet all-encompassing definitions.

The Importance of Connectivity

Prefacing each component of my explanation of "cult" is the word "connection." Connections are the most basic root of all cult texts. Cults, which in broader terms include the religious variety, are all about making links, specifically creating links to a belief system, figurehead/leader, or fellow members. It is these connections that make the cult so psychologically rewarding and allow it to not only thrive, but also continue to propagate and recruit new members. The cult text (or the marketing technique employed) must, above all, result in the individual making a connection to their own psyche and thus allow the text to link to other areas of his or her being like that of friends, experiences, or choices. In short- it has to contact the viewer in some deeper way than the majority of other texts.

This does not imply that these texts must be viewed in a social setting like a movie theater (though some cult theorists would disagree).[42] This also does not imply that

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[41] It is important to note here that cult theorist Matt Hills also uses the term "cult and culture" in his book *Fan Cultures*. He uses these terms to discuss why media cults should not be compared to religion or religious fervor. I just wanted to clearly make the distinction that my use of these phrases is unrelated, though I will use several of Hills' theories later in this chapter.

[42] Jonathan Rosenbaum has previously implied that cult texts must be viewed in a social setting, though his more recent additions (such as the "cult Film Critical Symposium for *Cineaste*) seem to be leaning toward the notion that in our current viewing patterns, some cult texts are viewed solo with connections being made post-exhibition.

a large group must share the affection for the media. A small group of people can still create ever-powerful and necessary connections, but these relations can occur post-exhibition, meaning people can still view solo and then meet/join the fellow cult members after the viewing. The important component is not the viewing arrangement, only the post connection following the screening. As Chuck Kleinhans notes,

> Cult films are films that are loved, adored, and valued by a self-selecting group of cinephiles. If only one person appreciates a film, we have idiosyncratic fetishism, perhaps rising at most to the level of a 'guilty pleasure'. True cult status requires an assemblage, however small, which validates a work as art, or expression, or statement.[43]

Whether groups are large or small, attending the same screening or watching in different countries and conversing only via internet, it is the affective connections that are being made internally by viewers that are the driving force of any cult media.

In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* the contempotary cult environment is described as "Fandom is Beautiful."[44] In decades past, researchers have examined fans' practices as binary. Either you were a hard-core fan that lived and breathed the chosen text or you fit into a more normative category. Cults, both as a social formation and a film descriptor, were seen as pejorative, either representing a bad text or non-normative traits in viewers.[45] Researchers like myself are now viewing fandom less

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[43] "Cult Film: A Symposium". By David Church, Matt Hills, IQ Hunter, Chuck Kleinhans, Mikel Koven, Ernest Mathijs, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and Jefferey Andrew Weinstock. *Cineaste.* http://www.cineaste.com/articles/cult-film-a-critical-symposium. Online journal.

[44] Gray, Jonathan, Cornel Sandovoss, C. Lee Harrington. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World.* New York: New York University Press, 2007.

[45] Mathijs, Ernest and Jamie Sexton. *Cult Cinema.* West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2011.

as "the other" and more as a larger population. As "geek culture" has increased in popularity, so has the prevalence of cult fans. And, as noted in the book, cult fans are never quiet. They connect with the text and each other, and attempt to facilitate the connection of outsiders to the work.

1- The Connection of Identity

In order for a text to be considered as cult, it must create a connection within the viewer, touching an emotional chord. Certainly this could happen with just about any text. Someone somewhere has watched *Jeopardy* and felt an over-whelming connection to Alex Trebek, but it really has to be more than this. It must affect the spectator mentally and, in a sense, touch their soul. Since "soul-touching" is complicated to gauge, it is beneficial to look at Troma Entertainment to provide an example of this.

<div align="center">

Figure 19- Troma Entertainment Logo

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Somewhere deep in the bowels of New York City, Troma Studio is festering. Now located in one of the seedier areas of Queens, the Troma building stands out from the other well-worn brownstones with its colorful fan art adorning the façade. Once inside the door, it becomes apparent that the exterior matches the interior. The 1970s wood paneling is warped from many years of water leaks and has been covered with decades of ratty horror movie papers. Sagging floors scream out with every step. The setting itself utters a soft moan. However, this office is filled with employees who are more alive than

most people roaming the New York streets. Passion is contagious. These people may not consciously realize it, but they are part of the Troma cult.

During my visit to the Troma office, it became clear that very few of these eager beaver employees are even paid. The majority are volunteers there out of love and dedication—repairing cameras, creating press packets for the upcoming Troma Dance Film Festival, trying to find a way to make pulsating zombie eggs out of latex with an air pump and some green paint. These people are part of a much larger devotion: The Troma Cult. And for them, Tromaville is home. And why is this? Troma makes a very basic connection to their self-identity.

 Matt Hills discusses this concept as "the Self and the Other."[46] When watching a regular film (not Troma) the audience watches "others" and then relates the actions of the others to themselves. This is the way society has been trained to watch movies beginning with a child's first Disney film. The audience is the receiver who watches the film, but is not a part of it, a well-established game of sender (the film or the other) and receiver (the audience or the self). Troma (and other cult media) disrupts this pattern.

Troma fans see themselves in the characters, so much so that it moves them to take action (which will be discussed in further detail). The characters resonate to such a degree that fans find themselves quoting and even emulating the characters. Additionally, Troma's predominant message that resonates through all of their products is one of independence, that Troma is unlike any other media out there. It does not fit into a particular genre or even a familiar plot structure. Within this concept, Troma supports

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[46] Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures.* New York: Routledge Press, 2002. Print.

that their fans are as different and unique as they are. They have been rejected by

corporate America and ridiculed by society. Thus, they make their home in Tromaville.

As Mark Duffett notes in his book *Understanding Fandom,* fans are ultimately in

pursuit of pleasure.[47] Because these texts bring them pleasure, they submerge themselves

in them. This basic and rudimentary connection to self is what will drive the fan to take

action, thus creating costumes, fanfic, artwork, or even traveling to become part of

conventions or in the case of Troma, the movies themselves.[48] This connection to self is

the cornerstone of any cult medium. But this is just the very simple base upon which cult

fandom is built.

2- The Connection to the Extratextual

In *Fan Cultures* Matt Hills discusses the importance of creating a hierarchy within

a media cult. Members subconsciously rank themselves and each other based on

dedication and knowledge. Hills argues that part of the attractiveness of cult media is the

individual awareness of the media that the rest of the population is not receiving.[49] To put

it more clearly, the fans/cult are part of an inside joke that is apparent only to them. A

segment of this "inside knowledge" is not only ascertained from the text itself, but also its

relations and extratextual references to outside texts. The fans have a prior knowledge

about the other media being referenced, and they use this prior knowledge to justify their

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[47] Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. Print.

[48] The colloquial term for "fan fiction". This is comprised of fan written stories, scripts, comics, and art that use a cult text as source materials. For instance, writing a short story using characters from both *Supernatural* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer even* though that these two "worlds" never meet in the real texts.

[49] Ibid.

position in the cult hierarchy, leaving them with a warm and fuzzy sense of belonging. They have the knowledge and are rewarded and justified because of this knowledge. Ultimately, the more outside cult media they know, the more they will understand and be "in" on the joke in regard to future cult media. Thus one can conclude that in order for a text to be cult it must (1)- contain numerous extratextual references and (2)- these must be received and "gotten" by the viewers to not only allow them a deeper understanding of the text but also allow them to feel like the media has let them in on inside jokes others may not get, allocating a stronger and more meaningful union with the text.

The hierarchy is most often determined by knowledge of extratextual links to other media sources. A great example of this comes from the 2004 Comedy/Horror film *Shaun of the Dead*.[50] Though a mass-blockbuster release film, the filmmakers (Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg) inserted copious amounts of extratextual references to bring in the "fanboy" cult crowd, attracting a strong dedication to the film on a cult level.[51] In one scene of this comedic zombie movie, the main characters are discussing how to rescue their friends from the zombie attacks. During the scene, a radio can be heard playing in the background. The song playing is main song from the 1978 horror film *Dawn of the Dead*.[52] Though played for only a few seconds, it is enough time for cult fans of the 1978 movie to "get" the connection and feel rewarded for doing so. In the book, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music,* Susan McClary discusses in her essay, "Rap,

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[50] *Shaun of the Dead.* Dir. Edgar Wright. Universal Pictures: 2004. Film.

[51] The term "fanboy" has recently become common in American language, becoming a popular term in the early 2000s to describe the strong followers of *Star Wars* movies. However, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term actually dates all the way back to 1919. The first documented instance of the term was used to describe comic books fans, and this is why it has been tied closely with cult media.

[52] *Dawn of the Dead.* Dir. George Romero. The Laurel Group: 1978.

Minimalism, and Structure of Tome in the Late Twentieth Century Culture," how

sampling of music has become commonplace in our current audio culture.[53] Although she

discusses sampling in terms of rap music, she identifies that most people have such a sharp

audio ability, in which most are able to recall the audio reference and cite the song or

sound origin almost instantly. Filmmakers use this to create quick auditory hypertexts,

giving an ephemeral reference to text that only cult fans will recognize.

This auditory extratextuality also occurs in cult mediums with the use of Wilhelm

Scream.[54] "The Wilhelm" is the name that has been given to a specific sound effect

scream that is used over and over again in cult media. First found in the 1951 film *Distant*

Drums, the scream has become a cult indicator, and directors will deliberately place it in

their movies as a nod to cult audiences.[55] Cult audiences are so familiar with the sound of

the scream they can recognize it immediately and create the extratextual connection to

many other media that have previously used it as well. The scream acts as an auditory

nod to the cult fan, establishing a "joke" extratextually between the informed cult fan and

the filmmaker, making the viewing experience much more personal for the fan than just

observing a movie, thus securing the cult's members. The extratextual connection of

using the Wilhelm Scream creates a link between the viewer and filmmaker, as the

filmmaker is subliminally communicating to the viewer that although many people may

not get it, they understand the reference and now share an inside joke. Some of the major

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[53] Cox, Christoph and Daniel Warner (edt). *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music.* New York: Continuum Press: 2008.

[54] Gwenllian-Jones, Sara and Roberta Pearson. *Cult Television.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

[55] *Distant Drums.* Dir Raoul Walsh. Warner Brothers Pictures, 1951.

cult media that utilize the Wilhelm are television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Battlestar Gallatica*, and *Lost* and films like *Star Wars* and *X-Men.* [56] [57]

The extratexts can also occur on a purely visual level as well, giving the audience only a few seconds to make a connection before the image is gone.[58] An example of this can be found in the aforementioned zombie film, *Shaun of the Dead*. In this film, the main characters are employed at a store called Foree Electronics. The shop's sign is seen only for a few seconds before it's gone, and it's never directly addressed. But cult fans will recognize the name and immediately make the connection. A very legendary horror movie actor is named Ken Foree, and this is a direct reference to him. Many of Foree's works are obscure zombie films and known more for inspiring future well-known works than themselves being blockbusters. Serious cult fans know the name and recognize the reference, having a collective satisfying moment of "ah, I get it and few other people do." Though the image is transitory, this extratextual link not only intertextually associates the two zombie works, it also shows that the filmmakers are equally familiar with Ken Foree as they are with the previous example of the Wilhelm Scream. This leads to a larger appreciation of the filmmaker from the cult audience. Not only have the filmmakers justified and supported the cult audience, but they have themselves demonstrated their own knowledge to the cult audience, reasserting themselves as cult fans as well.

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[56] *Battlestar Gallatica.* Creator Glenn Larson. 1978- current.

[57] *X-Men.* Dir. Bryan Singer. 20th Century FOX, 2000.

[58] Landow, George P. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory of New Media and Globalization.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007.

To discuss this element of "knowledge and justification" further, Nathan Hunt's article "The Importance of Trivia: Ownership, Exclusion, and Authority in Science Fiction Fandom" is useful.[59] Fans become obsessed with trivial knowledge to demonstrate their devotion, a concept Hunt calls "textual poaching" (drawing from Henry Jenkins).[60] These seemingly inconsequential facts (or hypertextual connections in this case) become an affirmation for the fans that they truly belong. Fans go to great lengths to point them out, demonstrating devotion and place in the hierarchy. And likewise, filmmakers go to great lengths to support this with hypertextual references, inserting many to see if the cult fans can catch them, creating one big inside joke between the filmmaker and cult fans.

Hunt discusses textual poaching in terms of people borrowing and referencing other well-known media to create new medias.[61] Though he specifically looks at Fan Fiction, the same technique is at work with hypertext on a subtler scale. Instead of taking the entire *Star Trek* series and using the overall knowledge to create a new plot, cult filmmakers create a separate new plot but insert small morsels of knowledge from *Star Trek* and countless other "basal" cult texts.[62] In an attempt to make sense of the endless web of hypertexts in cult media and point them out when they occur, fans have created

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[59] Hunt, Nathan. "The Importance of Trivia: Ownership, Exclusion, and Authority in Science Fiction Fandom". *Defining Cult Cinema: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste.* Manchester University Press, 2003.

[60] Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* New York: Routledge Press, 1992.

[61] Ibid.

[62] *Star Trek.* Creator Gene Rodenberry. National Broadcasting Company (NBC), 1966-1969.

huge maps of the connections. And it is this first step of making lists or even just being aware of extratextual patterns that leads to the next step of cult fandom.

3- The Connection of Trivia

This component of cult media seems best described with a priori explanation. To explore the element of "trivia" or "knowledge" within a fan community, I followed Matt Hills' lead and opted for an ethnographic approach.

Each month, I host a "horror trivia night" at Jumpcut Café in Studio City, CA. Approximately one hundred folks ranging from renowned horror directors to fans compete for top prizes in a match of horror knowledge. A sample question: In the movie *Candyman*, how many times do you have to say Candyman's name before he will arrive?[63] The concept of "trivia" could equate this type of knowledge to the word "trivial." Yet, though trivial to some, retention of these facts is by no means trivial to the one hundred attendees. It determines their reputation as fans and placement within the cult. (The answer is "five times").

Even before the questions begin, there is a battle to get into the event. Dead Right Horror Trivia garners a waiting list with over 100 names on it, meaning there are more folks on the waiting list than can actually attend the event. At each event there are seven winning teams, six round winners and a final grand prize. The physical and monetary rewards are minimal. Teams might win gift cards to a local restaurant or DVDs. The grand prizewinners might receive autographed posters or a new horror movie box set. Most of the prizing falls into the $20-$30 range.

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[63] *Candyman*. Dir. Bernard Rose. Tristar Pictures, 1992.

So, why all the competition to win? There are three very important non-physical rewards that are bestowed upon the winner. First, winning teams have their picture published on the event's Facebook page which links to a number of horror fan sites, thus allowing a significant portion of the nationwide horror fan base to view this team as horror experts. The second biggest reward is the couch. In Jumpcut Café where the event is hosted, there is a ratty old red Victorian couch. I highly doubt this couch has ever been cleaned or even wiped off, but the couch sits up front by the stage. During the following month's event, the previous winning team is allowed to sit on the couch. It is reserved for them as a symbolic throne. Their mental achievements have now been translated into a spatially based hierarchy that promotes them from sitting at a lowly café table to the couch at the front of the room. And the third reward is the peer respect. In the horror world, a vast number of accolades are given to the person who has the most knowledge.

Mental ownership occurs as fans become knowledgeable in particular subject areas. They become "experts" among their peers, thus they take ownership of the subject matter. They have captured all elements they can of a particular text or sub-genre. At the conclusion of last month's event, I asked some of the participants about their experience participating in the trivia events. Mike Mendez responded, "We all have passion for this stuff, and no one wants to be told that they're failing at their passion. It's more than just knowing stuff. It's making our hobby mean something."[64]

During the last horror trivia night, I included a round of questions exclusively focused on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (TV show) specifically for use in my research. I chose to use *Buffy* as a research base because the show tends to be very dichotomizing.

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[64] Mendez, Mike. Post-event interview. 12-20-13.

Either folks have watched every episode and are huge fans, or they never watched a single episode and know little about the show. I wanted to explore how the teams rewarded the members who possessed the most *Buffy* knowledge. As the round of ten questions continued, it became very clear who were the *Buffy* experts in each group. I began over-hearing phrases like "Allen, you freaking rock at this!" and "We would have been screwed without you, Jill!" For team members like Jill and Allen, the respect and accolades from their fellow genre aficionados is mentally rewarding, and this validates their obsession with the media. They will continue to study the horror genre in an attempt at more validation and acceptance, and perhaps a chance to sit on the coveted red couch. Participant John Humphrey later stated, "There was definitely a sense of pride in possessing the knowledge. Our *Buffy* expert certainly seemed quite enthusiastic, and the group as a whole was very congratulatory of her contribution. Needless to say, there was plenty of verbal appreciation, thank yous, and high fives all around!"[65]

I asked several participants about why knowledge plays an important role in their social circles.

In a community where these films are everything, it's easy to feel like a damn fool for having not seen even the most well-known films. –Berlyn Reisenauer[66]

We're a bunch who gathers around and celebrates a specific sort of media, and with that comes the trading of facts and trivia based on the movies and

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[65] Humphrey, John. Post-event interview. 12-20-13.

[66] Reisenauer, Berlyn. Post-event interview. 12-20-13

things we love. The possession of such knowledge en masse can definitely

earn you respect and status within a community like this because it equates

to experience and thus, affords one credibility. Frankly, I'm relatively

green when it comes to the deeper cuts of horror trivia knowledge, but

people seem to be generally accepting of that. In fact, while the lack of

knowledge can lead to feeling self conscious. –John Humphrey[67]

There is definitely an unspoken pressure to be "King". In its simplest

sense, knowledge is power. Therefore, he who possesses said knowledge

controls a certain amount of power. Some people I'm sure, find that notion

within our community (or any recreational or art-based community)

ridiculous and unlikely…It goes beyond simple 'bragging rights'. –

Christopher Jimenez[68]

It is clear from their post-interview feedback that knowledge holds a great place

in maintaining the hierarchy of this particular cult media group. This same effect is

maintained in all other cult-based social settings from friends gathering around to watch

episodes of *South Park*, to a large-scale *Star Trek* convention.

4- The Connection of Possession

Fan consumerism creates an interesting dichotomy. On one side, cult media fans

have long been associated with anti-consumerism. They resist the mainstream media

business model of popular blockbusters and strive to work in retaliation, gravitating

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Jimenez, Christopher. Post-event interview. 12-20-13

toward lesser-known texts. Yet, they still sustain a consumer cycle, buying by box sets, toys, clothes, and attending conventions for their selected alternative text. In actuality, cult fans often become more ravenous and passionate consumers than much of the mainstream they are working against. Matt Hills notes this dichotomy in his book *Fan Cultures*. By positing an alternative look at the academic polemics of Adorno's theories of consumerism, Hills concludes "the best we can hope for is a theoretical approach to fandom which can tolerate contradiction without seeking to close it down prematurely."[69]

Academics aren't the only ones to take interest in this contradiction of buying practices. The studios and merchandise producers noticed long ago. As soon as a cult fandom materialized for *Star Trek*, a plethora of toys, books, t-shirts, and pins emerged for eager fans to purchase. As noted by Jaime Sexton in a cult media symposium for *Cineaste*, "Since 1981 the discursive employment of 'cult' has increased a great deal, and one of the consequences of this is that the mainstream film companies have become alerted to the economic value of this term."[70]

One can't just be a fan of the text. Cult fans seek out tangible objects relating to the text as a way of creating physical ownership. This creates further connection with the material; by owning a mint condition autographed toy, the fan owns part of the text's history and legacy. The concepts of cult merchandise and ownership has already been well teased-out by many of my cult theory predecessors like Henry Jenkins and Mark

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[69] Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge Press, 2002. Print.

[70] "Cult Film: A Symposium". By David Church, Matt Hills, IQ Hunter, Chuck Kleinhans, Mikel Koven, Ernest Mathijs, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and Jefferey Andrew Weinstock. *Cineaste*. www.cineaste.com

Duffett. But both neglect to explore at any length an ever-growing element of fan commerce- that of fan production.

For many cult media texts, the physical ownership and connections are well displayed. Walking down a single aisle at San Diego's Comic Con International will yield hundreds of examples of how large corporations license cult media to merchandise, which is then consumed by voracious fans. This is the consumption model for larger cult texts like *Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or even smaller titles like *My Neighbor Totoro*. But what about the slightly lesser-known titles? Are texts like *Pink Flamingo* or *Santa Sangre* not considered cult texts because there are not Divine dolls or *Santa Sangre* collectible lunchboxes available? Companies find little limited financial gain in creating product lines around them, but that does not exclude them from cult ownership.

Figure 20- *Santa Sangre* nesting dolls

First, I would argue that artifacts from the movie itself and its original distribution (like VHS tapes or film prints) are considered commerce and a connection of ownership. Lobby cards, various region format releases, and even props or autographs would also fall into this realm. But this concept also allows for a discourse on fan producers, people who create their own products. Though this is by no means limited to lesser-known texts,

the trend does seem to flourish there. Many text-fan based conventions feature vendors

and artists who privately create memorabilia. Examples of fan merchandise can also be

found on sites like Etsy or eBay. A quick search of the aforementioned films yielded *Pink*

Flamingos earrings and a *Santa Sangre* set of nesting dolls, both unlicensed fan products.

Figure 21- *Pink Flamingos* **earrings**

The effect of these products is fascinating. Because the item is created by a fellow

cult member instead of a corporation, there is a bigger mental connection associated with

the items. Additionally, as many of these items are one-of-a-kind or individually crafted

by the fan, when another fan purchases the item, they are buying something rare and

created with the same passion that they themselves embodied. The connection of

ownership is circular with zealous fans producing art and making it available to fan

consumers. The production of these fan pieces fall into the same epistemological

gradients as the producing of fanfic, yet this takes it a step further because the producer is

able to provide a service or product to fellow cult members.

5- The Connection of Experience

In order for a text to reach true cult status, its followers must attempt to achieve

some type of experience associated with the film. This can be of a very small nature; for

instance, attending multiple screenings or gathering repeatedly at a friend's house to

watch the movie. Or this can be on a much larger scale like attending a convention or touring the filming locations. These experiences allow the fan to not only feel closer to the text, but it takes on a new role in his or her actual life.

An excellent example of this occurred at Comic Con 2012. Fans of *The Walking Dead* could actually experience the show thanks to an elaborate obstacle course set up all around the Petco Park Stadium. A course had been plotted out and littered with roaming blood-covered zombies. Fans paid seventy dollars to run through the hour-long course, avoiding the zombies. If the fans had blood on them at the end, it meant a zombie had touched them, and they did not survive the course. The winners were to receive a gift card, but in the two hours I observed the course, out of the hundreds people who came through the course not one person survived. Apparently, these were well-trained zombies.

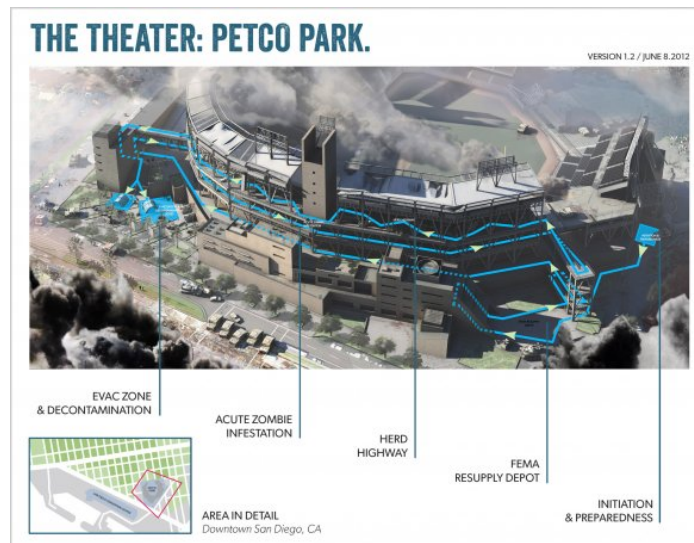**Figure 22- Map of *The Walking Dead* experience in Petco Park**

This experience cost fans seventy dollars, a rather high price in that they were already paying over three hundred dollars for Comic Con tickets. Yet, they sold out of passes for the zombie course in just a few hours. Additionally, it was the talk of the convention with abundant fans complaining they were unable to get a pass. Of course, no

one on the TV show actually spends a full hour straight running from zombies. The actors perform short takes and rarely do their own stunts (like climbing over piles of tires), which was being required on the obstacle course. But that did not matter. The fictional "characters" experience includes copious amounts of zombie dodging, and fans lined up for the opportunity to emulate it. Regardless of the cost, cult fans of *The Walking Dead* wanted to be part of the show. They wanted to feel what the characters feel, even if it meant running for a solid hour and being groped by bloody actors they've never met. For them, this was an experience that would further connect them with their passion. This example demonstrates the importance of "experience" to cult fans. The element of experience can be ascertained on a smaller level by simply attending a screening or convention, but all true "cult texts" must have followers that seek out a related experience.

Summation

Admittedly, these facets will not solve all the complications of identifying cult media. Labeling media as "cult" is just like trying to wedge it into a specific genre, even though it may have traits of another. Slippery slopes and differing opinions abound as much of the data and rationales become qualitative.

There is also a question raised of what size of following can justify a cult and how and if this can be converted into quantifiable data. For the purposes of moving on to exploring the history of cult media and the polemics of the marketing, we can gather that any group of people, no matter the size, who take any dedicated effort to spread the word about a particular media product or labor to take the media beyond its originally intended

scope can be labeled as a media cult. All cults, even religious ones, begin with just a few members and then grow.

Armed with these five facets of cult media, we can begin to discern what historically qualifies as cult media, as well as explore cult media marketing, specifically whether synthetic attempts to create media cults do in fact have successful results.

History of Cult Media

Unstable Beginnings and Early Cults

Armed with a working definition of cult media, we can begin to tease out some of the key moments in cult media history. This will serve as a backbone for theorizing the marketing divergence from cult media's organic roots to current synthetic and manufactured practices. Even with a comprehensive definition of what qualifies as cult media, there is a great deal of quarreling among film historians over what marks the starting point. There is not one concise moment when cult media began, rather a series of important events gradually leading up to the emergence of cult phenomena.

Film theorists often point to Luis Buñuel's *Un Chein Andalou* as the first cult motion picture.[71] A series of set pieces conjoined with a loose plot, this surreal film definitely interrupted the hegemonic manufacturing of the studios at the time. But is this the first cult film? Yes, it is subversive and working against the accepted cinematic patterns, but this film never actually garnered a cult. It was respected as an art film and touted as highbrow cinema by the 1960s. Nevertheless, it never invoked a mass reaction outside of the act of viewing. And as discussed previously, in order to be a cult film there must be an additional action or reaction besides just causal viewing. There has never been a swath of *Un Chein Andalou* t-shirts, and teens were never lining up to buy tickets for Buñuel-Con 2013. Consequently, I struggle to baptize this a cult film.

Film historians also have hyped Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger as the first cult filmmakers. Once again, there is a great deal of slippage between the actual films and the

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[71] "Cult Film: A Symposium" By David Church, Matt Hills, IQ Hunter, Chuck Kleinhans, Mikel Koven, Ernest Mathijs, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and Jefferey Andrew Weinstock. *Cineaste*. http://www.cineaste.com/articles/cult-film-a-critical-symposium. Online journal.

resonance within the audience. Their films are underground, transgressive, and highly influential. However, simply being an influential and underground work does not necessarily denote that a title also garners a cult-esque reception. An example of this theory would be another possible cult film first- the work of Stan Brakage. Though Brakage's work may have been vastly significant to a choice cluster of future film tastemakers, it did not harvest any cult appeal, rather stayed deep-rooted as underground high art which, though important, never gained a cult reaction.

Brakage can, however, be acknowledged in another regard to cult theory. Hyper-textual relations between texts are crucial in cult formation. Cult texts will acknowledge and link to prior texts to show their influences and appreciations. The fans feel rewarded by "getting the reference." *South Park* is one of the purest examples of an organic cult phenomenon. In 1993, the *South Park* creators gave Stan Brakage a cameo role in their movie *Cannibal: The Musical.*[72] This act asserts that he does have some type of cult appeal, most likely more as a cult figure rather than linking to a specific film. This utilizes the theory of infiltrated media recall. A small number of fans that watch *Cannibal* will recognize Brakage in his cameo, and for those select viewers the movie will now take on a different, more rewarding function. They have been let in on an inside joke that would be missed by the pedestrian movie attendee, and thus they have been rewarded for their cult comprehension.

Acknowledgement must also be given to the hygiene films distributed during the 1930s and 1940s. As financial struggles were still rampant across the nation, many folks

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[72] *Cannibal: The Musical*. Dir. Trey Parker. Perf. Trey Parker, Toddy Walters, and Matt Stone. Troma Entertainment, 1993. Film.

found enough money to attend picture shows, and some of the most popular were the hygiene films. In order to skirt moral motion picture restrictions, these movies were presented as educational documentaries, and they did serve a vital purpose in the urban populace. Prior to the urbanization of America, sex education happened at home or on the farm watching rabbits and pigs under natural circumstances. But as America moved to cities and farms became a distant past for many families, sex education was hard to come by and still publically unspoken.[73] So that's where films like *Mom and Dad* (1944) came in. Presenting details about menstruation, the act of sex, possible diseases, and even showing an actual childbirth, *Mom and Dad* and other hygiene films became an acceptable educational standard, regardless of how un-academically sound they were.

Enclosed in conjunction with the majority of these titles was an endless parade of salacious scenes ranging from extreme close-up genitals to body trauma. They were a veritable sea of flesh and carnage. Under a moralistic guise, our nation's first exploitation films were born. These films deserve mentions in "cult" regard because they were some of the first to be "rediscovered" by future fans with a different understanding. To future audiences, these films were not moralistic educational guides, but straight exploitation films utilizing innovative and often hokey tactics to display the human body (both healthy and disturbingly unhealthy) for all to see. These films would eventually become collectors' items.

Though I do not mark these films as the true birth of a cult phenomenon, they should be recognized as an early shudder of cult life. In the late 1970s, people began

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[73] Feaster, Felicia and Bret Wood. *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film*. Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999. Print.

collecting the original 35mm prints and lobby cards which takes the action past that of a simple viewing.[74] By the 1980s, underground screenings of these "educational" films were stirring in major cities. Filmmakers like John Waters and Russ Meyers directly point to these films as a source for their own inspiration.[75] By the 1990s, multiple distributors specializing in restoring and re-releasing these bawdy films had materialized, with Something Weird Video leading the pack.[76]

The hygiene films deserve recognition in the cult realm because they were some of the first films to gain an organic reemergence under an altered reception within audiences. Their affect and effect changed over time as audiences grew more aware of cinematic devices and the clear intentions of the early films. As the original hygiene films were released, other films showing the perils of drug use often accompanied them. These drug films were the first true cult film blossomed.

Made during a government-induced nationwide drug scare of the 1930s, the propaganda film *Reefer Madness* was shot in 1936, largely funded by a church group seeking a manner to explain the dangers of marijuana to impressionable young teens (though it was later argued that the US government also made donations to the film).[77] They hired Louis Gasnier to direct, complete with his long track record of making sinful cinema, mostly of the sexploitation fare. Equipped with a rather unheard of cast, he set

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[74] Schaefer. Eric. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. Print.

[75] Waters, John. *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*. New York: MacMillan Press, 1986. Print.

[76] Something Weird Video. http://www.somethingweird.com/

[77] *Reefer Madness*. Dir. Louis Gasnier. Perf. Dorothy Short and Kenneth Craig. Motion Picture Ventures, 1936. Film.

out to make a moralistic tale of the alleged demon weed. The film earned minor success on the exploitation circuit throughout the 1930s and 1940s before quickly falling off the map.

After decades of slumber, *Reefer Madness* was rediscovered and ultimately reborn in the 1970s when the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) found a print of *Reefer Madness* and began screening it all around California. But audiences were no longer receiving it as a moralistic tale; it was now an unintentional comedy.[78] New audiences giggled as Jimmy became a raving maniac after two puffs of the demon weed. They found absurdity in the uncomfortably direct lecture as actors stare unswervingly into the camera demanding that viewers "TELL YOUR CHILDREN."

After hearing that *Reefer Madness* was swiftly becoming a hit with a whole new generation, the then fledging distributor New Line sought out the rights. After purchasing and restoring the film, they began hosting a profusion of nationwide midnight screenings, making *Reefer Madness* one of the first big moneymakers for the infant company. *Reefer* fans began seeking out now aged actors from the film to speak at the screenings and do interviews about the shooting process. By the 1990s, *Reefer Madness* was a standard midnight screening at colleges across America. Books were written about the shooting, interviewing cast and crew. Many t-shirt shops sold *Reefer Madness* movie apparel and dorm room walls were adorned with *Reefer Madness* posters.

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[78] There have been polemics in past stating that *Reefer Madness* is not an "unintentional comedy" because the actors were fully aware they were being over-the-top and hokey in their presentation style. I firmly disagree with this argument. The director had asked them to perform this way to make the film's message and intent clear and accessible to all viewers regardless of educational level. Thus, though the actors may have been aware of the awkward presentational style, the director made the film with the purest intent thus giving it the necessary authenticity to create an unintentional comedy. The director had no goal to make it humorous. He was merely trying to make it moralistically coherent to all viewers.

Figure 23- *Reefer Madness* **t-shirt**

In 1998, Dan Studney and Kevin Murphy created a satirical and self-aware musical version of the film, which garnered success both as an off-Broadway theatrical performance and also as a made-for-television movie created in 2005 for Showtime. *Reefer Madness* is still frequently screened as a midnight movie on college campuses, and now, almost 80 years from its original creation, it is still celebrated as the original cult film.

An Unrecognizable Cult

By the early 1950s the Hays Code that had long set the moral standard for Hollywood had collapsed.[79] Additionally, court rulings disintegrating vertical integration among studios had made room for independent film production houses to flourish. The post-war affluent teens of the 1950s took solace from their suburban lives at drive-ins watching independently made aliens attack the world. Like many other inclusions, these films should be discussed in relation to cult media not so much because of what they were during their original distribution, but for the enduring cults they later formulated. Whereas many cult movies disappear and are later reborn under a cult's rediscovery,

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[79] Skal, David. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror.* New York: Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.

these Sci-Fi b-films of the 1950s never went anywhere. They were received with enthusiasm by loyal fans, many of which then sought out further merchandise and paraphernalia in the form of toys, models, books, and monster magazines.[80]

Additionally during the 1950s and into the early 1960s some of classic monster movies like *Dracula* and *Wolfman* acquired larger cult-like devotions through the growing number of monster magazines and comics.[81] Even some international titles like 1954s *Godzilla* enters the scene with a large-scale fanatical following.[82] Though these were not recognizable as "media cults" at the time, just avid fan bases, the leisurely rise and fervor of their fans' devotion make them principal milestones in cult history.

Today, horror conventions across the world are saturated with toys, books, shirts and even purses devoted to these 1950s Sci-Fi flicks. Surviving cast and crew often make appearances, sign autographs, and talk about the film industry of the past. Fans have rare and often expensive collections of merchandise. The squeaky clean image of these films soon branched into a counter-cult which used these films as a vehicle for more salacious actions.

The Rise of the Midnight Movie

Even back in the 1930s, controversial cinema was usually shown at midnight. Filmmakers like Kenneth Anger often hosted midnight screening parties as a more

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] *Godzilla*. Dir. Ishio Honda. Perf. Akira Takarada, Momoko Kochi, and Akihito Hirata. Toho Studios, 1936. Film.

intimate way to exhibit their movies.[83] The late night scheduling gave the films a certain mystique, and evaded potentially moral critical eyes.

The term "midnight movie" began in the 1950s when TV stations would air low-budget horror films, often accompanied with horror hosts and colorful commentary.[84] The theatrical midnight movie flourished during the early 1970s, and this is what would be essential to cult history. It is thought that the first official midnight movie (meaning it marketed itself as a "midnight movie") was Kenneth Anger's *My Demon Brother,* which screened at New York City's Elgin Theatre in the late 1960s.[85] The Elgin followed this two years later with midnight screenings of Jodorowsky's surrealist western *El Topo*. [86] [87] The New York Times even noted in its 1971 coverage of the film that the midnight screenings had become a "secret rite of some importance in New York City."[88]

Seeing the success of the Kenneth Anger and *El Topo* screenings, the Elgin Theatre began regularly screening films at midnight, touting that they were too extreme for normal day-time audiences to watch, which was mostly done as an advertising gimmick. In actuality, the "too extreme" gimmick had been used for decades by

[83] Hobeman J, and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Midnight Movies.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1983. Print.

[84] Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business 1953-1968.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

[85] *Invocation of My Demon Brother*. Dir. Kenneth Anger. Perf. Speed Hacker, Kenneth Anger, and Mick Jagger. Kenneth Anger, 1969. Film.

[86] *El Topo*. Dir. Alejandro Jodorowsky. Perf. Alejandro Jodorowsky and Brontis Jodorowsky. Producciones Panicas, 1971. Film.

[87] Greenspun, Roger. "*El Topo* Emerges: Jodorowsky's Feature Begins Regular Runs". *New York Times*, 1971. Online.

[88] Ibid.

exploitation cinema to attract audiences, and certainly one could pop just ten blocks up to the Mecca of filmic sin, Times Square, and watch hardcore porn at 2pm on a Tuesday.

In reality, by showing these films at midnight the theatre was adding more ticket sales during a time when they would have otherwise have been closed. The theatre also selected non-mainstream films and played up the element of countercultural viewings. They realized there was something special about seeing a rare and controversial film under the cover of darkness instead of during the day. The aura and charisma of the midnight movie had been established, and within this shared mystical experience there was a certainly cohesiveness among the audience, as if they were part of some rare, extraordinary viewing experience that few others would understand. Consequently, this bonding feeling among cult fans began one of the most crucial elements of generating a cult following; the fans must feel like they belong to something that is larger than themselves.

Other midnight movie titles were older selections being presented for rediscovery among fans. *Reefer Madness* (1936), *Sex Madness* (1938) *Freaks* (1932), and *Blood Feast* (1963) were commonly screened.[89] By the early 1970s a number of other New York City theatres had taken notice of the Elgin's success and began hosting their own midnight screenings. Some notables are the St. Marks Theater which frequently screened late night Luis Buñuel pics, the Waverly which selected titles like *Night of the Living Dead* and *Equinox*, and the Bijou which also screened *Night of the Living Dead* and *Freaks* on rotation. The Waverly set records when it began screening *The Rocky Horror*

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[89] Skal, David. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.

Picture Show in January of 1977.[90] *RHPS* would not only go on to become one of the most well-known cult films, but it has done more midnight screenings than any other film in history. Focusing on the aforementioned Sci-Fi films from the 1950s, *RHPS* also made cult history for the audiences' involvement in the film, calling lines back to the film, acting out the scenes, dancing, and bringing props to use or often throw at other patrons.

Figure 24- Newspaper advertisement for *Blood Feast* at the Elgin Cinema

As midnight movies grew in popularity, many of the New York City post-war audiences clamored for most extreme content. They wanted the midnight movies to actually be too extreme, and campy kitsch fare like *Reefer Madness* and *Freaks* were not meeting the demand. So several theatres turned to the art communities and began displaying debaucheries of all varieties in their midnight slots. Andy Warhol, John Waters, and Jodorowsky became standards. By the early 1980s art films like David Lynch's *Eraserhead* were reaching much larger audiences due in part to the midnight screenings, which had now become a nationwide trend.[91] Even in small towns that did not previous boast a seedy exploitation theatre, patrons could now witness questionable films

[90] Evans, David and Michael Scott. *Rocky Horror: From Conception to Cult*. London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2002.

[91] *Eraserhead*. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Jack Nance and Charlotte Stewart. American Film Institue and Libra Films, 1977.

like *The Evil Dead* or *Liquid Sky* as long as they were willing to view it at midnight, thus increasing the likelihood of the title generating a cult following by creating a feeling of unity among the viewers.[92] [93]

VHS! The Undergrounds vs. the Indies

By the early 1980s, an escalating number of American families owned a VCR. No longer was there a need to attend movie theaters when most movies could now be viewed in the comfort of one's own home. The VCR dramatically changed the nature of cult films. Since a NY or LA midnight theatrical attendance was no longer required, many cult films found themselves on video store shelves in small towns across the nation, allowing the titles to reach a new legion of cult recruits. Numerous single screen movie palaces could not afford to stay in business now that the clientele could watch any movie they wanted from their own couch. As the movie palaces closed down, they were often replaced with giant multiplexes, enormous complexes with multiple screens showing up to eight different films simultaneously. This posed a problem for cult media since instead of independent owners who were happy to show underground films, the multiplexes were owned by corporations that worked mostly with studio pictures. Midnight screenings and art house (often cult) screenings became much harder to come by.

The shape of the entire film industry was changing as well. As President Reagan's anti-trust laws were going into effect, the major movie studios began buying up as many

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[92] *The Evil Dead*. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Bruce Campbell, Ellen Sandweiss, and Betsy Baker. New Line Cinema, 1981.

[93] *Liquid Sky*. Dir. Slava Tsukerman. Perf. Anne Carlisle, Paula Sheppard, and Susan Doukas. Cinevista, 1982.

underground distribution companies as they could get their hands on.[94] In order to sanitize the image of potentially profitable underground films and remove them from their formerly sleazy light, the studios began calling these "independent" instead of "underground" films.

One final spark of cult media making (taste-making) came out of New York City during the early 1980s. A group of artists immersed in punk and industrial music cultures began creating films. Many of these movies lacked a formal plot but asserted heavy amounts of rage and distaste with the current society/government/culture. They were simple, often using single rooms and theatrical-style sets that move depending on the scenes. The common themes were gender issues including menstruation, homosexuality, rape, crime, drug-use, and hedonism all uncomfortably blended with sophomoric humor and musical numbers. One of the filmmakers most central to this movement, Nick Zedd, dubbed these films as the "Cinema of Transgression."[95] Most film historians consider this sub-genre to be one of the last underground cult trends before the shift from film to VHS.[96] Zedd and many of his transgressive troupes are still making varying forms of art, as well as now speaking at numerous cult conventions.

Yet just as it seemed that cult media might no longer have a place to flourish, a new form of organic cult media dispersion arose- VHS swaps. Sure, some cult media was available at your local rental shop. But this largely depended on what type of shop it was

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[94] Skal, David. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror.* New York: Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.

[95] Sargeant, Jack. *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression.* San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995. Print.

[96] Ibid.

and what type of titles the owner chose to carry. For many towns limited to a single corporate Blockbuster storefront, finding offbeat obscure titles could be quite a task. But in cities and on college campuses across America, VHS swapping became a common trend that continued until the Internet made passing a tape obsolete. Often these events were highly organized VHS swap meets where patrons would bring prized rare finds and swap tapes or dub copies for each other.[97]

This is how many cult fans from my generation saw immense amounts of cult media. For example, when I was in high school a single VHS tape of *South Park*'s "Spirit of Christmas" cartoon was passed around from student to student. At this time few people had even heard of *South Park*, and it would still be another three years before Comedy Central would take notice of the growing cult and give the creators a show. At this point in time, the VHS tape being so excitedly passed around held a single cartoon made by a group of unknown amateurs. A cult fan base was brewing as the tape was getting traffic and eyeballs, endless copies being dubbed and then again passed. By the time Hollywood took notice of the cartoon's rhizomatic cult, the tape had been traveling hand-to-hand for over three years. When the *South Park* TV show finally aired on Comedy Central, legions of fans had already been created and were ready to watch.

Borrowing from the Greats

The 1990s ushered a new shift in movie trends. While studio blockbuster films had dominated the 1980s and early 1990s, the late 1990s saw a shift back to independent filmmaking. With the pack being led by Quentin Tarantino and the newly formed Weinstein Company, indie filmmakers were all nodding back to prior films for their

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[97] *Rewind This!* Dir. Josh Johnson. Documentary. Imperial Polyfarm Productions, 2013.

influence, many giving accolades to the Grindhouse, exploitation, and sexploitation films of the 1960s and 1970s. This led masses of hungry film fans to seek out these obscure titles, thus creating cults around particular subgenres of exploitation films. In the most standard cult pattern, fans then began seeking out the filmmakers and actors from these previously disregarded films. Doris Wishman did multiple interviews before her death in which she discussed how for decades no one even knew she had made films, and then seemingly overnight fans began calling her, visiting her house, and writing her letters.[98]

Additionally, the few independent movie houses that had survived the multiplex boom began to revive the midnight movie. Often times these were older films from the earlier midnight movie runs like the works of David Lynch or Jodorowsky. But many theaters screened newer art-house films coming from the now booming independent markets and quirky international titles that would have otherwise been quickly lost in the now widely diverse VHS and DVD distribution markets. Standard cult midnight movie titles from the late 1990s and early 2000s include *But I'm a Cheerleader* (about a gay suburban cheerleader), *Battle Royale* (a modern *Lord of the Flies* tale), and *Trainspotting* (about Scottish heroin addicts).[99] [100] [101] The reemergence of the midnight movies gave

[98] Nastasi, Alison. "She Was An Outsider Artist": Doris Wishman Biographer Michael Bowen on the Sexploitation Filmmaking Queen's Life and Career". *Flavorwire*. June 2, 2016. http://flavorwire.com/578455/she-was-an-outsider-artist-doris-wishman-biographer-michael-bowen-on-the-sexploitation-filmmaking-queens-life-and-career

[99] *But I'm a Cheerleader*. Dir. Jamie Babbit. Perf. Natasha Lyonne, RuPaul, and Mink Stole. Lions Gate Films, 1999. Film.

[100] *Battle Royale*. Dir. Kinji Fukasaka. Perf. Tatsuya Fujiwara and Aki Maeda. Toei Company, 2000. Film.

[101] *Trainspotting*. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Ewen Bremner, and Johnny Lee Miller. Miramax Films, 1996. Film.

cult films a new breeding ground. Once again patrons could gather to watch obscure films in a unified fashion, securing the cult status and emotional rewards.

Synthetically Generating Mass Sub-cultures

As the Internet became a standard in most US homes, websites like YouTube and Facebook quickly became the prime way to spread not just information but cult media. Indie shorts are hyper-linked and passed on to others, Internet cartoons are sent to thousands of people in a single click, and independent micro-budget films have found a grassroots way to reach out to potential cult fans through social marketing. Homemade media like *Chainsaw Sally* has been able to gain legions of followers simply by connecting with fellow cult horror fans on Facebook and Twitter.[102] Cult media had found the ideal way to extend its roots to propagate fans and create (literal) followers.

The studios quickly took notice to the amount of marketing that was taking place. Additionally, as DVD sales have become just as financially lucrative as theatrical runs, studios took note of how ravenous cult fans were about owning merchandise. Being extremely dedicated to the media, these fans were compelled to purchase every version of the film that was released, every action figure, a closet full of branded clothing, and anything else that was stamped with the adored media. Cult media was making a fortune!

By the mid 2000s studios began hiring special marketing teams whose sole job was to create a ravenous cult fan base about new media. This was in stark contrast to the cult media from past which was created and propagated within the fan base. The marketing

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[102] *Chainsaw Sally*. Dir. Jimmy O'Burrill. Perf. April Burrill and Mark Redfield. Forbidden Pictures, 2004-current. Film and Online TV Show.

teams were now searching for ways to synthetically generate cult followings for upcoming movies and TV shows.

Summation

Cult creation (or "fan base formulation" as most marketing firms address it) has become a vital part of the media-making industry. The approach and technique that will be used to create a ravenous fan base is considered long before much of the media is ever created. Often times the "grass roots" marketing offensive will be taking place while the TV show or film is still being filmed.

Though many social networks are free, the large scale to which these are utilized can cost a fortune, which is why often the marketing of a film will cost far more than the actual shooting expense. The recent 2013 film *You're Next* was shot for only $1 million.[103] Lions Gate purchased the film and then spent extra money on marketing efforts, using nationwide posters, billboards, and trailers. At Comic Con 2013, they distributed masks so people were walking around dressed as the characters from the movie. They attended movie events around Los Angeles and New York City and passed out posters and t-shirts. They also created several carefully constructed social media campaigns.

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[103] *You're Next*. Dir. Adam Wingard. Perf. AJ Bowen, Sharni Vinson, and Joe Swanberg. Lionsgate, 2013. Film.

Figure 25- San Diego Comic Con panel attendees wearing *You're Next* promotional masks

The pay-off was uncertain. Though *You're Next* garnered great reviews, it did only $26 million at the box office, which made it one of the moderate grossing horror films of 2013. But still, the film performed well when comparing its gross versus its initial budget, which for a tiny indie film is absolutely stellar and points directly at a successful "cult" marketing campaign. Many other titles, which will be discussed in great detail in other chapters, have found incredible success by synthetically generating fevered cult audiences.

Cult Media Marketing Prior to 1990

Introduction

When asked why they are devoted to a particular movie, many fans tend to respond with answers such as 'the movie embraces a particular idea I adhere to', 'it follows a social concept', 'it creates a fantasy I like', or 'fights against mainstream cinema'.[104] Never once have I heard a fan respond, "I adore this film because I was attracted to the marketing campaign." The underlying point of marketing is to engage fans before they even see the full product, all without them ever fully being aware of it.[105]

Supporting that, this research project examines whether modern day efforts to generate the same "word of mouth" enthusiasm that was utilized by early cult filmmakers is as successful and lasting as previous campaigns. Let's commence by exploring the marketing campaigns that shaped and defined cult media. These campaigns can be divided into several categories of targeted advertising efforts- first theatrical viewings and the VHS viewings, and within these different divisions I will examine point of sale posters/box art and word of mouth. Although vastly different in nature and aim, all of these campaigns had to first find a way to convince the latent fans of one concept- that by viewing the film, they were embracing and supporting a counter-culture movement.

The Simultaneous Celebration and Exploitation of Counterculture

As discussed in Chapter two, the origin of cult films was not so much a monetary decision, but instead created from a counter culture faction. As the Vietnam War was

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[104] Duffet, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

[105] Bosko, Mark Steven. *The Complete Independent Movie Marketing Handbook.* Los Angeles, Michael Wiese Publishing, 2003.

coming to a close, masses were still embracing the spirit of the "hippie" revolution, and film screenings (specifically midnight ones) had become both a polemic and a form of celebration for transgressive interest groups. *Reefer Madness* was one of the first films screened during this time by a group pushing the legalization of marijuana. *Sex Madness* was repurposed and shown under the embracement of sexual freedom. One of the early cult theorists, Danny Peary, states in his 1981 book that in order for a movie to form a cult, it has to have a social viewing component with a group at a midnight screening or campus, thus cementing the group counterculture ideal.[106] This created the first marketing quandary of cult media- how do you advertise and monetize to a counterculture?

Soon after the initial cult fans began embracing old rescreened movies like *Reefer Madness*, theatres and filmmakers began devising ways to capitalize on this movement. Though these viewings originated as a social-political confrontation, the screenings of less mainstream media quickly became a flourishing trade for both the independent film industry and the theatres that were finding innovative ways to exhibit and attract patrons to paracinema.

One could question if a distinction should be established within fan reception between exhibitions that were fighting for a cause (like the *Reefer Madness* screenings) versus ones created purely for profit. There is a valid distinction here on a monetary level, but it does not position itself in reception. To the fans, these films (regardless of profits or marketing methods) still symbolized a fight against the mainstream culture and thus were championed just the same. Yet as money became the predominant motivation, filmmakers such as Herschell Gordon Lewis (who openly admits he made and marketed

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[106] Peary, Danny. *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird and Wonderful.* Delta Press, 1981.

these films solely with the intention of financial gain) became highly skilled at reaching

the jaded alternative and transgressive cultures.[107] Media makers and marketers pioneered

ways to fabricate the notion of "fighting a larger power" even when the outcome was

purely financially motivated. Additionally, they instituted clever systems to push what

would become one of the best methods for cult fan marketing, which is still highly

pervasive today- word of mouth.

The Marketing of a Counterculture

There is an undeniable sub-cultural negotiation that worked in tandem with many

1970s and 1980s underground film-marketing campaigns- how to entice audiences to

spend money while making them feel like this film is somehow fighting a larger system

they perceive as corrupt, be it the more mainstream Hollywood-made movies, ratings

boards, sexual and gender repression, or political groups. There was also a strong

marketing battle launched against the concept of "good taste" as films like *Cannibal*

Holocaust or *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* shocked audiences with blatant atrocities,

misogyny, and racism. Though some cult theorists, now examining them in a post-

classical context, argue that these films should not be celebrated by cult fans because of

their abhorrent subject matter, the cult fan reverence for these questionable films has only

accelerated over the years, substantiating that the initially employed promotional scheme

had a prevailing and durable affect and effect within fans.[108] This is best confirmed in the

verity that almost all contemporaneous horror conventions will feature ample t-shirts and

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[107] Palmer, Randy. *Herschell Gordon Lewis: The Godfather of Gore.* North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2000.

[108] For instance, cult and film theorists like Chuck Kleinhans and Jacinda Read feel these films should be viewed in a more historical context but not celebrated like many cult fans do.

merchandise touting the original marketing campaigns for both *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS.*

It is important to note here that these films both originally served and still today have a social function even if synthetically fictionalized by theatres and filmmakers. Fans still believe they are fighting a corporate media industry by patronizing, purchasing, and buying merchandise from these underground movies.

These films still have a personalized component as well. Cult fans utilize and feed counterculture groups, but if the film does not resonate personally with viewers, it will not be successful. Even disturbing media like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Ilsa* resonate with fans by allowing them to become part of a larger counterculture unit, thus creating a feeling of belonging. Matt Hills notes that for many cult fans, these early films and the cult films of today work as "badges of distinction." They attend and encircle these movies as a statement "fighting for" or "working against" some larger ideal that may or may not be present in the movie. But this ideal is often created entirely through the marketing campaign, even more so in current markets.[109] These films (and their marketing campaigns) allow viewers to personally set themselves apart from the larger masses. Their discussions and devotion to these films allow them to create a personal identity within the counter culture. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses this notion as distinction.[110] While it is clear that we all make aesthetically based decisions every day, the pervasive attraction to less accepted or controversial cinema creates a personal

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[109] Hill, Matt. *Fan Cultures.* New York: Routledge Press, 2002.

[110] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.* Abington, Oxford: Routledge Press, 1984.

distinction that rewards the viewers as individuals (different from the mainstream) and also secures their acceptance into the larger counterculture movement.

The abovementioned filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis has always been savvy with spectacle. Years before he started making films, he worked for an ad agency, and after leaving the film industry he continued his work as a marketing executive. Lewis took note of what countercultures of the time were clamoring for and created it- somewhat on screen but larger in the marketing campaigns- thus creating shock and in return, word of mouth.[111] In the late 1950s, when the sexual revolution was just beginning to gain some mass attention, Lewis was creating bawdy "nudie" movies that were tame (even by 1950s standard), but featured advertising concepts portraying sin like none other. Noting the omnipresent indie horror markets that seemed to be constantly threatening to push the gore or shock envelope without ever actually doing it, Lewis decided to break away from his sexy skin flicks and try a different money venture. In 1963 he changed the face of horror with *Blood Feast.*[112]

Blood Feast became legendary for breaking multiple horror taboos including copious amounts of blood in full color, body parts, and viscera shown up close.[113] It is also rumored that this was the first movie to show people dying with their eyes open. *Blood Feast* was very controversial for the time. Lewis notes, "I get crank letters to this

[111] Peary, Danny. *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird and Wonderful.* Delta Press, 1981.

[112] *Blood Feast*. Gordon, Herschell, Gordon Lewis. Box Office Spectaculars, 1963.

[113] Ibid.

day about my pictures from people who can't understand at all that something like *Blood Feast* could be made by civilized people".[114]

Figure 26- *Blood Feast* marketing poster

Along with Lewis's questionable horror film *Blood Feast* came a form of marketing that was not new. It had been employed in the sexploitation films of many prior decades- daring the audience to view the debauchery and threatening that they may not be able to handle such extreme material.

"The bloodiest, goriest picture you've ever seen!" "Come at your own risk!"[115]

Many ads even promised that a nurse would be on staff to treat those who were not able to endure the mental trauma this film would inflict. Lewis had set what would become a standard of "cult film" marketing for the duration of the late 1960s through the early 1980s. He had utilized the most common forms of motion picture advertising- point of sale posters and newspaper ads, but he had taken it a step further. He had dared people to attend, made it clear this movie was fighting against mainstream cinema and was like

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[114] Palmer, Randy. *Herschell Gordon Lewis, Godfather of Gore: The Films.* North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2000.

[115] *Blood Feast* P and A campaign. 1963.

nothing patrons had ever witnessed before. That got them talking. Though purely

financially motivated, Lewis had invigorated a counterculture hungry for a change in

cinema and convinced them that this would help benefit the change. He and his

production partner even pushed the marketing a step forward and printed *Blood Feast*

novelizations that they passed out prior to some screenings. Was it a brilliantly written

tome of literary greatness? No, not at all (these vintage books now sell for quite a bit to

cult collector markets). But it did get even more fans talking and thus sharing their

disturbing film find with other avid fans.

Cult of "The Grindhouse": Point of Sales Poster and Spoken Hype

"At the time, we never actually called them Grindhouse films." Bob Murawski

told me in an interview on the Killer POV Show I co-host on the Geek Nation

Network.[116] Murawski has become a legend in the world of cult cinema for not only his

editing work on numerous cult films including *Army of Darkness* and winning an

Academy Award for editing, but also for running Grindhouse Releasing, a popular

distribution company that "cleans up" old cult films like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Pieces*,

and not only provides them with a contemporary Blu-ray release, the company hosts

nationwide theatrical screenings in belief that the cult films are viewed best in a social

setting to understand the counter culture communal sentiment of them.[117] [118] Murawski

noted in a Killer POV Podcast interview that grindhouses were what you would call the

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[116] Murawski, Bob. Interview. February 27th, 2015.

[117] Re-graining film prints, re-editing to make sure they are uncut, correcting audio problems, color correction, etc

[118] *Pieces*. Simon, Juan Piquer. Grindhouse Releasing, 1983.

theaters that showed the films. But it was not what they called the movies during the period. That term wasn't commonly applied to the movies themselves until Tarantino and Rodriguez made the movie *Grindhouse* in 2007.[119]

These particular theaters and their counter-culture movies all embodied a feeling of pushing boundaries of taste, morals, and censorship. And with that, they all adhered to a particular marketing style. So in order to keep the types of films I'm addressing clear and concise, I will be referring to the glut of these exploitation/horror/sexploitation films that were released during the 1970s and 1980s under the contemporary and now widely accepted term of "grindhouse" cinema.

Being that these films traverse a wide array of topics, social messages, and often blur genres, it would appear rather daunting to find common links in the advertising effort. Except all these films, though they span several decades, all have one common thread that links them collectively under the grindhouse banner- they all put their atrocities first when it comes to marketing. Plot may be vaguely alluded to on the poster. A few stars may be mentioned, but that was not what was important. The main goal was to proudly display and embellish the atrocities, controversial inclusions, or downright weirdness of the film. Mainstream accolades like story, cast, and competence of the filmmaking were entirely disregarded.

It is important to note here that not all grindhouse movies are "cult" and many did not garner feverous cult reactions, but a surprisingly large number did. Films like *El Topo*, *The Rocky Horror Picture*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, and *Pieces* are even more pertinent and adored today than they were during the original release, and it is not

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[119] Murawski, Bob. Interview on Killer POV Episode 93. "Beyond the Beyond". Geek Nation Network.

because of new and innovative flashy redesigned ad campaigns to capture modern audiences. It is because something enamored cult media susceptible fans into the original screenings, and decades later the cults have spread, transcending decades of time and passing generations. They are still with us being lovingly touted by all new cult fans.

Cult of Postering

In their book *Sleazoid Express*, Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford discuss how advertising meant everything to grindhouse movies.[120] With no stars, no critical acclaim, and no budget for TV commercials, the films relied on posters and trailers that ran before other movies. Herschell Gordon Lewis once told me in an interview that the beauty of the 1960s and 1970s film industry was that one could sell absolute crap, as long as it had a great title and a dynamite poster.[121]

For these theaters, trailers were an easy way to get return clientele. If these patrons had already wandered in to one screening, they would be likely to return for another if they saw a trailer that intrigued them. But most of the grindhouse patrons were "off the street" viewers. That is, they did not specifically set out to go see *Cannibal Holocaust* or whatever sleazy flick was showing. They would be walking past the theater, and the poster alone would draw them in. Times Square was the Mecca of grindhouse theatres and during the 1970s and 1980s, and according to Landis, was postered from one side to another with alluring and intriguing advertising, all daring the viewer to see the movie.[122]

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[120] Landis, Bill and Michelle Clifford. *Sleazoid Express.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.

[121] Lewis, Herschell Gordon. Personal Interview. New York Horror Film Festival. October 22, 2007.

[122] Landis, Bill and Michelle Clifford. *Sleazoid Express.* New York: Simon and Schuster. 2002.

Film theorist Ernest Mathijs discusses how cult movies work as an "ambiguity" while mainstream film often does not.[123] Mainstream film fall into very succinct categories (good, bad, beautiful, ugly, exciting, slow-passed, etc). It is the job of cult films to mix up these conventional boundaries and blur the lines of precise definitions. Cult films do not comfortably fall into categories of genre. They fall into several genres, and often this may change depending on the viewers' own opinions. For example, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a science fiction film, horror, comedy, and a musical. It only makes sense that the most successful marketing campaigns would also be multi-faceted.

Take for example the *Last House on the Left* theatrical poster. It is both telling the audience of how excessive and brutal it is (urging them not to see it), but simultaneously it is creating intrigue (convincing them to see it). The poster became well known for the repeated line "To avoid fainting, keep repeating 'It's only a movie'." [124] This line was in fact used previously in multiple films including the aforementioned filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis's 1964 film *Color Me Blood Red.*[125] But the *Last House* poster went on to be one of the most notorious posters of the grindhouse era. The "keep repeating" concept was again used by other films throughout the decade (*Don't Look in the Basement* for instance), and it is still being heavily used and referenced today. [126] The poster has

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[123] Mathijs, Ernest. "Cult Film: A Critical Symposium." *Cinetaste Magazine.* Online. http://www.cineaste.com/articles/cult-film-a-critical-symposium

[124] Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical, Trauma, National Cinema, and The Modern Horror Film.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

[125] *Color Me Blood Red.* Lewis, Herschell Gordon. Box Office Spectaculars, 1964.

[126] *Don't Look in the Basement* aka *The Forgotten*. Brownrigg, SF. AIP, 1973.

almost developed a cult of its own. But why did this poster become the symbol of cult film marketing? What is it that drew cult fans in?

The explicit marketing campaign also drew in critic Roger Ebert who gave the film a positive review, noting the artful similarity to *Virgin Spring* (the movie's source text), and noted that a lot of these sleazy exploitation movies really did have a lot of artful merit and a lot to say. Commenting on the successful poster Ebert noted, "I've got to admit, I did not expect much after its advertising campaign (Keep repeating- It's only a movie, it's only a movie…"). But you know something weird? At one point I actually did find myself repeating that." [127]

Another advertising trait that continues with the paradox of attracting folks while simultaneously repulsing them in the grindhouse films is that of the list of feats. Not far from the circus barkers listing acts the audiences would witness, horror posters, specifically torture films, frequently provided audiences with a bulleted list of atrocities. Kevin Heffernan called the filmmakers of these three ring horror circuses monstrateurs, describing how they would orchestrate planned audience catching techniques.[128] While this is not new to the 1970s (Arkoff and Castle had been doing this stuff for years), it became more commonplace and more extreme. *The Wizard of Gore* advertisement offers a comprehensive list of the gruesome acts one will see: "See! – the smashing Punch-Press, - the sword

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[127] Ebert, Roger. January 1st, 1972. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/last-house-on-the-left-1972

[128] Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

swallowing trick, - the spike through the brain, the burning tank, - the lady sawed

in half…..as you have never seen them before." [129]

Intrigued by the atrocities, the audience filed in to see the list of acts. Shot for

$60,000 (a decent amount for B-horror of 1970), the film did remarkably well and

became a mainstay on the grindhouse circuit.[130] This may have also been helped along by

rumors that Lewis had inserted subliminal advertising, supposedly flashing frames that

said things like "Buy a hotdog!" Lewis never confirmed or denied this rumor, nor

divulged whether hotdog sales skyrocketed during screenings.[131]

The listing of tortuous acts in a very Grand Guignol type of fashion became

common place in both print advertising and trailers, in both horror as well as

sexploitation films which also have developed ravenous cult followings, not only for

these original clever marketing techniques but also for the element of "camp".[132] As

stated in Doris Wishman's *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965) trailer:

See the boldest and most intimate scenes ever shown on any screen in *Bad*

Girls Go to Hell. See sex without shame! See violence in a story that is

brutally honest! This is a picture with a new kind of raw naked realism. If

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[129] *The Wizard of Gore*. Lewis, Herschell Gordon. Mayflower Pictures, 1970.

[130] Crane, Jonathan. "Scraping the Bottom: Splatter and the Herschell Gordon Lewis Oeuvre". *The Horror Film. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2004.*

[131] June, Andrea, Mark Pauline, and Boyd Rice. "Herschell Gordon Lewis." *ReSearch: Incredibly Strange Films.* San Francisco: V/Search Publications, 1986.

[132] The Grand Guignol was a French Theater open from the late 1800s through the 1960s. The theater became known for lavish stage productions of atrocious, gory acts. Using special effects and theatrical tricks, audiences were treated to an assortment of splatter-filled stunts. Some of the well-known acts including a fake brain surgery, eye gouging with scissors, and disfiguring a victim with acid.

you want to see a film that dares to tell all, that is truly a body and soul

shocker, then you must see *Bad Girls Go to Hell*.[133]

Yet a further duality exists as the trailer seemed to acknowledge these acts as almost educational warnings for the viewer so they do not fall into the same traps. Yet clearly this is not the case.

The voice-over in the trailer acts as a William Castle-like barker listing the sexual scenes to which the audience will be privy. This highlights that the major appeal of the film and the major message of its advertising is not the plot or actors; it is simply the act of seeing. The voiceover is telling the audience to "see." The trailer for *Bad Girls Go to Hell* paints a very muddy picture of what the plot is about and actually makes it seem far more risqué than it really is. But the plot is not important; the audience attends to see the checklist of acts.

The Cult of Grindhouse: Marketing Duality

The first aforementioned duality is created in the concept of shocking people into attending. It lures patrons into watching veritable wagonloads of carnage that, though repugnant, some folks just can't look away from. These were not atrocities one would find in mainstream cinema. This was what set cult films apart and fed the counterculture the feeling they were fighting mainstream, and to a degree by patronizing these films instead on mainstream movies, they were.

Yet, there is another fascinating duality at work in campaigns like the one for *Last House on the Left*. Amidst all the threats of carnage and perversities, some of the *Last*

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[133] *Bad Girls Go to Hell*. Wishman, Doris. Sam Lake Enterprises, 1965.

House campaigns ads touted the fact that the movie was a retelling of Ingmar Bergman's Academy Award winning film *The Virgin Spring*. This creates yet a second ambiguous duality that becomes a relevant trope through the glut of 1970s and 1980s cult movie-artful sleaze. Yes, the movie may be a Grand Guignol-style display of rape, eviscerations, stabbings, and much worse- but it is art! Why did Herschell Gordon Lewis pass out novelizations of a movie that clearly was never a great work of literature? It validates the film and convinces the film attendees that they aren't depraved for enjoying this type of movie- its ok, its art! Theorist Robin Wood has discussed how this merges two kinds of audience-film relationships. Wood states the inclusion of *Virgin Spring* is creating "art by defining seriousness in aesthetic terms implying class superiority" and "exploitation by denying seriousness altogether." [134]

A third duality in the marketing (and production) of cult films from this time period exists with the notion of "the real." Whether their film plots were true or not, a number of filmmakers from the 1970s and early 1980s created ad campaigns (and even pre-roll before their movies played) to convince audiences that their films were in fact based on real stories. The *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is another good example of a cult film playing with "the real." The film opens with a prologue asserting that it is based on "real" events. Although these events (the murders of Ed Gein) very loosely resemble the actual film, the idea is placed into the minds of the audience. Could this really happen? Could this possibly be true? The film is shot in a documentary style using quick, jerky camera movements and grainy film stock. Now, the horror is no longer just contained on screen in the form of fake looking rubber monsters and vampires. The horror is people,

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[134] Wood, Robin. "Neglected Nightmares". *The Horror Film Reader.* New York: Limelight Editions, 2000.

real people, who commit real and horrific acts of violence. The horror does not cease at the end of the movie but rather blurs into our lives. This documentary style is present in many other horror films from this time including *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Deranged,* and *Snuff.* Yet obviously these films are not real, and the viewer is in no real danger. He is sitting in a theatre watching a movie, but the concept of "reality" encapsulates stratagem and dread just enough to hook the viewer a bit more. The viewer now retains the feeling that something is at stake, like there is a lesson to be learned because someday this same thing could happen to us!

A fourth duality exists in the production of many of these exploitation films, and often this element was a key convergence of the promotional pushes- the duality of minimalism vs. excess. This notion has blossomed into one of the more fashionable marketing styles for contemporary movies attempting to gain a cult following so it is important to note the roots back to earlier cult films. When one thinks of Hollywood studio pictures, immoderation tends to be at the forefront - huge concepts, lavish sets, expensive effects, high-priced stars, and highly notable directors/writers/crew. The advertising campaigns are also usually grandiose featuring a nationwide poster promotion, TV trailers (which were just starting to become commonplace during the grindhouse era), magazine covers, and continuous synergy. As previously mentioned, the bulk of "cult cinema" exists outside of this mainstream ideal. Budgets and shooting restrictions are customary, limiting the possibilities across all areas of filmmaking. Many cult films are made for a mere fraction of standard studio movies.

The duality of minimalism vs. excess exists from the very fruition of these films, traveling with them through marketing campaigns. For many exploitation filmmakers

from the time, it was not in their best interest to publically draw attention to their low budgets and lack of notable film veterans (this has changed in modern day cult cinema). They, if anything, were hoping to blend into some of the larger scale films (like *Jaws*, for instance) in hopes that audiences might not notice their films are cheap knock-offs. Nevertheless, some cult filmmakers heavily embraced the fact that they were made outside of the "Hollywood" system, reveling in the fact that their films were fighting the larger corporate powers. Even so, although these films were under budgetary restrictions with limited options, they are all about excess on every other level- excessive gore, nudity, violence, racism, misogyny, and more. As far as dramatic content, these films were over the top and used the excess to their advantage by listing the extreme carnage in posters and trailers. Many filmmakers simultaneously used the restrictions as a way to generate hype as well.

Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* promoted that an African American cast and crew had made the film independently of the corporate "white" studio system.[135] The poster even boasts the notion that the film was "rated X by an all-white jury." In this instance, Peebles (and many other "blackploitation" filmmakers) used the restrictions and minimalism of their films to demonstrate how independent they were. They embraced the freedom and amplified it.

Many posters emphasized and even fêted "restrictions" by augmenting the standard "see the atrocities" ad campaigns with achievements of how often the film had been banned. Whereas Hollywood posters may include accolades like awards won at the top of their ads, grindhouse films included notes about how controversial the flicks were

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[135] Van Peebles, Melvin. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Cinemation Industries, 1971.

to further entice the audience. Was the banning real? Yes, many were, especially in later years as the United Kingdom pushed the notorious "video nasty" list that consisted of films that were illegal.[136] Still many of the films were just heavily edited for international release and used the "banned" headline to further draw hype. Everyone loves controversy. Just as my ninth grade teacher telling the class that *The Catcher in the Rye* had been banned made me want to read it all the more, telling potential audiences that a film had been banned made it all the more desirable.

1976's *Snuff* boasted that it was the "picture they said could never be shown". [137] Who is "they"? Hollywood? Ratings board? Our government? It didn't really matter. Clearly the film was fighting some evil corporate power that was trying to keep viewers from seeing the film/truth because "they" think people could not handle it. Though most people understood that this was a type of marketing ploy, it still intrigued audiences, ultimately playing a long theatrical run upon its initial release and still garnering a dedicated cult following today.

This blurring of the boundaries between good vs. bad taste, attraction vs. repulsion, reality vs. fiction, and minimalism vs. excess further secured a "cult" reception by keeping the films ambiguous and lacking classification. In shifting towards contemporary cult movie marketing in the next chapter, I discuss how cult media like *Repo: The Genetic Opera*, T*he Human Centipede*, *Paranormal Activity*, and *Archer* still utilize these types of duality in their marketing campaigns.

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[136] *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide*. David Gregory. Severin Films, 2010.

[137] *Snuff*. Findlay, Michael and Roberta. 1976.

The Importance of Word of Mouth

In order for something to be a true cult film, there has to be an element of sharing.[138] It might be that the film is "banned" and so the audience feels they have united by viewing something taboo or controversial together. Or perhaps it is like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* where patrons know how to "perform" as audience members, memorizing set lines and dances to perform at specific points in the movie. Or perhaps it is as simple as telling someone about the film- share by word-of-mouth. A friend tells a friend. Then this friend tells two more…and two more… until now a large number of people have heard about this film completely organically. This is the best marketing style cult filmmakers can hope for, and it is what defines a "true cult film." Fans must talk about the media and sharing it with other fans, recruiting new cult members. The marketing is natural and spread rhizomatically through a susceptible crowd with similar viewing tastes.

The only problem for film theorists is that the rhizome-like structure of word-of-mouth is incredibly hard to track and study. Although theorists and filmmakers alike agree of the importance of word of mouth during the 1970s and early 1980s theatrical runs for these movies, it is near impossible to document the degree or power in a case study format. But the importance of word-of-mouth becomes more easily documented as we move into the video markets of the 1980s. It also becomes one of the most desirable forms for pushing a medium as cult in post-internet marketing with large scale studios

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[138] The concept of sharing will become highly important as I discuss the contemporary markets and social networks.

and marketing firms continuously searching for innovative and new ways to encourage fans to "share" their love of a particular cult project.

Video Markets and Cable TV

As VHS became more prevalent in homes in the mid 1980s, the grindhouse theaters quickly began to fall out of fashion, the majority of them closing by the early 2000s. The *Home Video: Producing for the Home Market* guide from 1986 (right at the height of the home video market) gives this advice to would-be video producers,

> A good package will stop 'em in their tracks. With literally hundreds of tapes coming out each month, this importance is underlined. The content, flavor, and promotable elements of a program will in three or four seconds imprint themselves upon the viewer's mind- and hopefully he will decide to buy or rent the tape.[139]

Producer/distributors like Charlie Band from Full Moon and later Empire Releasing ruled the scene providing low rent movies with dynamite box covers. Band even took it a step further and began using big box covers (previously used only for porn videos), allowing customers to see more images from the film and stand out from the sea of VHS tapes.[140] These giant box tapes themselves even developed a cult following as original big box cases and "clamshell cases" now sell for quite a bit on eBay and Amazon. Many contemporary distributors have even decided to capitalize on the modern day VHS cult market and have released current films as a limited VHS run. Within the

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[139] Wiese, Michael. *Home Video: Producing for the Home Market.* Michigan, Braun-Brumfield Publishing, 1986. P. 275

[140] Band, Charlie. Personal Interview. February 10th, 2015.

past two years' new releases like *Almost Human*, *Beyond the Black Rainbow*, and *V/H/S* have all had a limited VHS release in tandem with DVD, Blu-ray, and VOD. The VHS releases of these movies instantly became high priced collector's items.
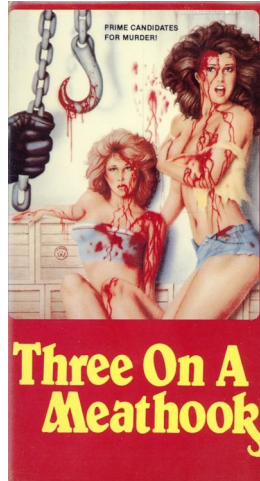
Figure 27- VHS box art for *Three on a Meathook*

A cult following has even emerged for the covers themselves. Many collectors now seek out specific VHS releases of certain movies just because the box art may not be available on subsequent releases. Several books have been releases recently which are just art collections of some of the 1980s most memorable box art from cult films. Books like *Portable Grindhouse: The Lost Art of the VHS Box* by Jacques Boyreau and *Shock! Horror! Astounding Artwork from the Video Nasty Era* by Francis Brewster, Harvey Fenton, and Marc Morris read more like art books than collections of gruesome and bloody VHS box covers, but they show just how these covers resonate inside of the cult fans- like works of art that should be documented and treasured.[141] [142]

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[141] Boyreau, Jacques. *Portable Grindhouse: The Lost Art of the VHS Box*. New York: Fantagraphic Books, 2009.

[142] Brewster, Francis, Harvey Fenton, and Marc Morris. *Shock! Horror! Astounding Artwork from the Video Nasty Era*. London: Fab Press, 2005.

The VHS market also allowed a whole new group of people access to cult films, many of them from younger generations. Since many mom-and-pop stores did not age gate or "card" people when they rented films, many younger people suddenly found that they were able to rent and watch just about anything they could sneak past their parents. Offbeat film critics like Chas Balun and Joe Bob Briggs became cultural icons for their love of strange VHS films and supporting cult formations. Additionally, as cable television became accessible in many homes across the nation, networks and shows like *USA Up All-Night*, *Night Flier*, Z-Channel, and *Joe Bob Briggs Drive-in Theater* were easily viewed not only by the current cult movie fans but also by a whole new generation. Media cults were now forming at a record pace, not in theaters, but in homes across the nation!

The video markets also allowed for an interesting documentation of the "word-of-mouth" and rhizome-like structure of how cult film fandom spreads. In prior decades, it had been hard to discern how many people had heard about a cult movie by word-of-mouth. By the 1980s the act of passing and swapping dubbed VHS tapes became synonymous with "cult movies." VHS swap meets were common among cult fans of the 1980s. Groups with similar, more eccentric and counter-culture oriented tastes would gather and swap or buy tapes. These same kinds of counter-culture movies were being passed around at high schools and college campuses. In some major cities, VHS swap meets still occur occasionally and are largely attended by cult collectors who still cherish the VHS world and box art. I attended a recent VHS Swap in Los Angeles and was able to ask some of the patrons about the cult films they were passed in the 1980s through the mid 1990s. One patron stated,

I remember the tape of *Jesco White the Dancing Outlaw*.[143] We

passed this fourth generation tape of it all over my dorm. Sometimes we

would watch together, but by the end of the semester everyone had seen it.

It was like an inside joke for us because we all knew the jokes and few

other people did. Plus, showing the tape to new people became like an

initiation. It was like, 'Aw shit, Joe's never seen Jesco! We gotta watch it

with him![144]

And this was how a great deal of cult media from the late 1980s and early 1990s

was spread- the passing of tapes. *Jesco White* was also passed around my high school.

The video had originally been made as part of the Public Broadcasting Service's

Different Drummer series in 1991. They created several episodes on Jesco White, an

Appalachian mountain dancer and Elvis impersonator from rural West Virginia who had

a penchant for violence and glue sniffing. Jesco's destructive personality and his

impressive dancing abilities were mesmerizing, resulting in VHS dubs of the original TV

broadcast to be continuously copied and passed by growing numbers of Jesco fans. Years

later the MTV network took notice of the bootleg tapes that had now been seen and loved

by thousands, and made a larger movie about Jesco and his equally fascinating family-

The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia.[145]

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[143] "Dancing Outlaw". *Different Drummer*. PBS, 1991.

[144] Anonymous participant. Personal interview. The Bi-Annual VHS Swap, Buy, and Sell. March, 2015.

[145] *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*. Nitzberg, Julien. MTV and Tribecca Films, 2010.

Figure 28- *Jesco White the Dancing Outlaw*

It is important to note that for many of these "passed" films, there was never any type of marketing in place because they were being watched and passed without any type of corporate or moneymaking involvement. But within this non-corporate presentation pattern there was a fervor that developed from seeing something forbidden, something outside the realm of standard media that few others had seen. As the Internet took hold in the late 1990s, the question quickly became how to create this viewing fervor around for-profit projects and create the cult media passion and mentality for projects that may not be true "cult," even creating the cult before the film or TV show is released.

Summation

By the mid to late 1990s, VHS was waning and giving way to the new and high quality DVD (which did not allow for at home dubbing yet). Additionally, by the end of the decade most homes across America had a personal computer. The access to the Internet seemingly changed the way fans passed cult media. Now let's examine how it changed the outcome and success of cult media.

Contemporary Cult Media Marketing and Case Studies

Introduction: An Overview of Contemporary Cult Media Marketing

Within the past two decades, the advent and widespread availability of the Internet has changed media marketing profoundly. As fans found havens online, new communities and environments were created. And the more fans that flocked to these online worlds, the more advertisers saw the importance of being there as well. Mark Duffett notes in his book *Understanding Fandom* that in the earliest days of the internet, media cults and fandom reigned as people created bulletin boards about particular TV shows or discussion boards for like-minded film fans, even filling pages with pictures of specific actors, creating giant virtual shrines that they could share with the world.[146] And as more fans congregated, the marketing companies journeyed towards that direction as well. It began in the late 1990s when movies started using banner ads online to try to reach audiences in a different manner. Now in 2016, most of the major studios and even indie films spend the bulk of their advertising in the online space.

The choice of online ads has expanded well past just banner ads and website re-skins. Many films now hire Social Media Managers whose sole jobs are to give the project an online presence through many social media platforms. They know what will attract particular types of fans and specific demographics. They know the research and statistics on how often to post and what hashtag will garner the most impressions. And most of all, they know the particular algorithms of how each social network works and how to use it to generate the most attention to their product.

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[146] Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

I spoke with John Humphrey, the Social Media Manager for Blumhouse Productions. John stated,

It is all about playing the system and knowing each program and the changes they make. Did you know that Facebook will actually decrease the amount of time your posts will appear in fans' article feeds if you post too much? So you have to find the perfect formula for how much to post without having them decrease your impressions. But each social platform is different, so you learn the tricks for each of them. [147]

Though the online world now reigns supreme, especially within cult and "geek" media, most companies still do utilize some of the older advertising practices as well, just in a much smaller capacity.[148] The giant studios will still "poster" the country, covering billboards and bus stops from sea to sea. And the image for these are still key. Not much has changed in this regard from the early days of cult cinema. And it is still possible to sell an entire movie based just on an image. In 2012, posters and billboards for a horror film called *The Devil Inside* appeared across America.[149] Featuring a single image of a nun with demonic eyes, that image became iconic. Little else was known about the movie. There were now press screenings and very little information was released online. The most anyone knew about the film was that evil nun image.

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[147] Humphrey, John. Personal Interview. July 10, 2016.

[148] The term "geek media" has, within the past five years, come to replace the term "cult media". The trend began with the surge of comic book movies, but increasingly now all superhero, science fiction, fantasy, and horror products are loosely filed under "geek culture".

[149] *The Devil Inside*. Dir. William Brent Bell. Paramount Pictures: 2012. Film.

Figure 29- *The Devil Inside* **marketing poster**

Audiences packed the theaters on opening weekend, making the film an instant box office smash (grossing over $100 million to date).[150] But, the movie didn't live up to the hype, not even giving an ending to the events but instead cutting during the climax and telling fans that for more info they should visit www.therossifiles.com. Critics panned it, and fans took to online platforms to tear the film apart. The producers even started getting angry letters. The ticket sales dropped sharply and were non-existent by the following weekend. But it did not matter, and the reviews were inconsequential. Because of the clever marketing poster and that intriguing image, within the first weekend the film had made $35 million dollars, and it had only cost $250,000 to make.[151] The bulk of the success was because of that single evil nun image.

All films still consider a trailer to be one of the most important parts of the marketing campaign, and a good trailer can make or break the project. There is even a series of awards in Los Angeles that gives accolades to the best edited trailers each year.[152] But whereas it used to be crucial for a trailer to receive both TV play and run

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[150] "*The Devil Inside*". Box Office Mojo. Accessed August 1st, 2016. www,boxofficemojo.com

[151] Ibid.

[152] The Golden Trailer Awards. www.goldentrailer.com

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before theatrical screenings, both of these now fail in comparison to having an explosive

launch online. The web is where audiences watch trailers and learn about other movies.

According to *Forbes Magazine,* in just the second quarter of 2015, people watched 38.2

billion videos online with about a quarter of them being media trailers.[153] Facebook,

YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat are the places that film marketers now take into

consideration when creating a trailer. And because the films are hyped and shared by fans

during the trailer's initial release online, most production studios now create multiple

trailers for the same project, allowing them to have several separate trailer releases for the

same film in an attempt to keep the hype spreading.

For example, the recent horror/action film *The Green Room* released multiple

trailers and even a few clips from the movie. [154] The press team also released a "Red

Band" trailer which is also commonplace now. A Red Band trailer is a trailer that can

only be played before an R-rated movie under the pretense that the audience can handle

the more extreme or adult material. Red Band trailers are immensely popular with fans,

and most films that can muster up enough controversial material to stuff into 15 second

reel will now release a Red Band trailer.

Additionally, trailers are no longer limited to the filmmakers. Fans not only have

taken ownership of media products; they also have technology to help them recreate

them. There is now a massive surge in fan-made trailers with copyright debates

surrounding them. The popular social network Reddit and other sites even give out

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[153] Trautman, Erika. "5 Online Video Trends to Look for in 2015". *Forbes Magazine* Website. Accessed July 8, 2016. http://www.forbes.com/sites/groupthink/2014/12/08/5-online-video-trends-to-look-for-in-2015/3/#31811da92041

[154] *The Green Room*. Dir. Jeremy Saulnier. Broad Green Pictures, 2015. Film.

accolades to the best fan-made trailers.[155] Sometimes the fans will include scenes of their

own creation using computer animation. This acts as a form of "fan fiction" where

devotees leave their own creative mark on the media. In the book *Fan Fiction and Fan*

Communities in the Age of the Internet, scholars Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson

discuss how this is not only a way for fans to show devotion to a project, but it also

allows them to take ownership, enacting a form of control over the media.[156] Though

some filmmakers take offense to their work being recut, the general consensus in the

entertainment industry is that it would be impossible to police all of the online activity. [157]

Many acknowledge that fans are creating these out of passion and devotion for the

original product, and they are still promoting the film or show to other potential devotees.

Yet for most filmmakers, the best way to reach people online is Facebook. There

are over 1.5 billion people currently on Facebook.[158] The site is designed to automatically

connect people who have similar interests, thus literally delivering potential fans to a

product they are likely to enjoy, creating a network. This type of exposure is invaluable

in marketing, and Facebook offers it for free.[159] But there is a delicate balance of posting

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[155] https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTrailers/

[156] Busse, Kristina and Karen Hellekson. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. MacFarland Press. North Carolina, 2006.

[157] Henry Jenkins notes in his book *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* that some fans and media makers consider the act of fan fiction to be "character rape", a forceful distortion overriding the author's original intentional for the creation.

[158] Kerby, Justin. "Here's How Many People are on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Other Big Social Networks". *Adweek Network*. Accessed August 1st, 2016. http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/heres-how-many-people-are-on-facebook-instagram-twitter-other-big-social-networks/637205

[159] There are, of course, paid advertising options available on Facebook, but the basic platform and pages are free.

schedule, content, pictures vs. text, where to seek out followers, and endless other variables. So Social Media Managers are hired to corral the fans and provide an assortment of content, both for the actual product and non-directly related content that will garner hits and followers. It is a careful and clever dance.

It is important to encourage discussions on each project's Facebook page, thus providing followers a form of validation that someone from the media is listening and participating. Often media project Facebook pages will host contests or ask fans to submit their own creations surrounding the project with homemade commercials or pictures. This serves multiple purposes. It gives the fans a vested interest in the project which they will likely now share and promote on their own. It also provides project-based content for the Facebook page and keep the discussion going (and network growing) as these fan-made items get shared. Henry Jenkins notes that marketing professionals have mastered how to serialize the fans, turning them into creators of text themselves, taking what is clearly fan behavior and relabeling it "user generated content".[160]

Twitter is another popular free social network for media marketers to target. John Humphrey states, "Twitter is also crucial for marketing, but it's a lot harder to get a lot of movement there. You have to work a lot harder for big results because everything moves so quick."[161] *[sic]*

Because the tweets scroll so rapidly on most people's pages, they for the most part have to be looking at their screen right when a tweet is posted in order to see it. A lot

[160] Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York: New York University Press, 2008.

[161] Humphrey, John. Personal Interview. July 10th, 2016.

of it just gets lost in the excess. The benefit of Twitter is the numbers of followers- how many followers can you get, how many retweets, etc. Humphrey continued, "One of the best things you can hope for is a retweet from a celeb with a ton of followers. Their fans will listen to them, so if they retweet something, you will see a lot of new follows on your own page."

"Trending" is also crucial for large films and something that smaller films strive for.[162] Most cult projects now try to create entirely unique hashtags allowing people to talk about the project online without confusion. This in turn helps trending because it gives everyone one word or phrase to use when discussing the film or show. For instance, for the 2016 horror movie *The Darkness* the marketing team selected the hashtag #followthedarkness. [163] This unique moniker allowed fans to discuss the film without it being confused with other similarly titled projects like the band The Darkness.

A clever hashtag is everything, and these are heavily promoted on all marketing materials so that fans know how to properly discuss/promote the film online. Look at any contemporary movie or TV ad. There is almost always a #hashtag there.

There are endless other social media platforms surging in popularity now, far more than I could possibly discuss in a single dissertation or even a single book for that matter. Instagram has become an equally important marketing tool garnering over 400 million users by September 2015.[164] Snapchat has become a crucial technique for

[162] This is a term used to describe particular news items, search terms, or hashtagged words and phrases that are being used a great deal online.

[163] *The Darkness*. Dir. Greg McLean. Blumhouse Productions, 2016. Film.

[164] Kharpal, Arjun. "Facebooks Instagram Hits 400 Million Users, Beats Twitter". CNBC Online. Accessed July 28th, 2016. http://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/23/instagram-hits-400-million-users-beating-twitter.html

reaching younger fans. YouTube is immensely important for trailer views and other viral content. Cult film marketers have even found ways to utilize smaller more niche social networks like Chat Roulette and Pinterest. And with each new social site they seek to find a way to maximize fan exposure and reach, often giving the fans a way to continue sharing, thus allowing the cult to propagate. It may not be direct word-of-mouth anymore, but social media is an extremely similar interpersonal phenomenon that reaches more people than most of the early cult filmmakers could ever have dreamed.

The Structures and Paradigms of Social Media as Organic vs. Synthetic

Social media allows marketing professionals to mirror the effects of early word-of-mouth publicity on a much larger scale and with a lot less effort. With mere clicks of a button, PR teams can get information about their projects out to millions. And with a single share or like, those millions can send the message to millions more. Social networking perfectly emulates the rhizome-like person-to-person structure that enabled early cult films to generate their cults.

It is the aim of most marketing professionals to reach as many people as possible and create an extreme fervor amongst the fans. They are tasked with the job of replicating a cult following. In order to do so they first examine what elements the media contains that may mirror prior cult projects. For example, the media may be similar in tone to another cult film or use an actor that may already have a devoted fan base. That element should become the focal point of the marketing campaign, attempting to lure fans over from a previously created hype.

Publicity teams will try to create interactive online applications that involve the fan in the actual media. An example of this would be *South Park*'s "South Park Me"

game which allowed fans to create an avatar in the *South Park* animation style. Thus the fans see themselves as characters and become part of the show. They have taken ownership and become part of the universe. They share their creation, not only spreading the hype of *South Park* but also encouraging others to partake in the application as well. Though a synthetic marketing tool, it allows fans to engage with the media directly and drive a fervor that inspires them to share the artwork further.

Synthetic cult fandom is also created on social networks through encouraged discussion and debate. Fans are passionate. So how can one synthetically create that passion? Give the fans something to argue about, thus connecting their passion to a particular project or belief system. And if there is one thing people love to do on the internet it is argue with each other. Before a new horror video is released, the social media managers may engage potential fans to discuss the scariest game they have ever played and why. Thus, all media become sectors of hermeneutics, opening everything as a source of discussion and debate.

Why do you prefer this slasher over that one? Were the spaceships better on Babylon 5 or Firefly? Would you rather live in the universe of Star Trek or Star Wars?

The discussions are endless. The projects are in a sense sacred, much like arguing a doctrine or symbolic religious text, creating affirmations that participants are part of something larger, fighting for a film or show instead of just viewing it.

But even with an Internet full of marketing staff, all trying to find cunning new ways to get viewers to engage with their projects, organic cults do still develop through a natural fan-to-fan contact. The most common example of this is YouTube and viral videos. There is often no rhyme or reason as to which videos will go viral. But it seems to

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be the most enclosed encapsulated example of purely rhizomatic fan activity. Most of the homemade videos on YouTube do not have larger companies promoting them, yet somehow people find the videos and share. Before you know it the kid in the "Best Dub Step Dancer in the World" video (which just features a guy dancing in front of a barren brick building) has over 5 million views, and performer is known around the world. No large company was promoting him and no marketing team was planning up means for audience engagement. The 5 million views were pure, just people watching and then sharing.

So can fans tell the difference between the synthetically generated cults or the natural ones? Of course! Fans realize that the FB page for *The Walking Dead* is likely run by a *The Walking Dead's* Social Media Manager, but most don't care one bit. And, of course, people realize that the South Park Me app was created as a marketing tool which explains why the final picture comes complete with tags about the upcoming season of the show. But they don't care. It's a neat program and fun to share with friends.

Media professionals understand the appeal for fans to discover something on their own accord. But more and more the end results of fandom are similar, regardless whether it came about naturally or was masterminded by a marketing team.

Case Studies: Organic vs. Synthetic Marketing

Let's examine two cult movie case studies. One features a synthetic cult following that was engineered for the film *Paranormal Activity*, and the second is an organic cult that developed for the film *The Battery*. I will mention that it was incredibly difficult to select two projects to actively compare in a case study. This was because of the vast differences between the types of projects that are given full synthetic cult campaigns

versus the ones that acquire them organically. Most projects with massive marketing teams have large budgets to back the efforts. They can afford to hire a staff whose sole purpose is to drum up fans. These projects boast multimillion dollar budgets. Yet, the movies that usually generate organic cults tend to be of an entirely different ilk. They are much smaller with minimal budgets, no marketing plans, and no one helping drive the word except for the natural fan base. By trying to compare the outcomes of two different marketing strategies, it seems necessary to find a control quality within the film's budgets and scope. I finally decided the best two projects to examine are *Paranormal Activity* from 2007 and *The Battery* from 2012.

Paranormal Activity was shot with a budget of about $15,000, and *The Battery* was made for about $7000, both made for under $20,000 which places them in what the industry calls "ultra low budget" category.[165] So they both started at the same basic budgetary point. Yet, while *Paranormal Activity* was then picked up by a major studio which gave the project a giant press campaign with ample examples of purposeful cult creation, *The Battery* was self-distributed by the filmmaker, who sold it for a few bucks each on his own website, all while a strong natural cult following grew around his tiny film. They began at similar places. Let's explore how their marketing campaigns and creation of cults changed their outcomes, thus observing if there is a distinct difference between the cults that were created by a marketing team versus the cults who unknowingly stumble on a small film project and begin singing the praises of their own accord.

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[165] Box Office Mojo. "*Paranormal Activity*" and "*The Battery*". Accessed July 20th, 2016. www.boxofficemojo.com

Case Study: *Paranormal Activity*

Oren Peli made *Paranormal Activity* for just $15,000, and it became one of the most profitable movies in history, making a 1,286,566% return.[166] But the film did not actually cost just $15,000 start to finish. A lot more money and work was used to create a lavish marketing campaign. The film might have been quite inexpensive to make, but a great deal of consideration and dollars went into generating buzz about the movie and synthetically creating a cult-like fervor.

In 2009, horror tended to be fast-moving, intense, and very heavy on special effects. Films like *The Descent 2*, *Drag Me to Hell*, *Jennifer's Body*, and Rob Zombie's *Halloween 2* filled the screens with carnage and heavy action. But what on earth was *Paranormal Activity*? It was virtually impossible to tell from the marketing campaigns which featured only night-vision scenes of screaming theater audiences. What were they screaming at?

Oren Peli had shot *Paranormal Activity* several years prior for the aforementioned budget of $15,000. Featuring only two actors and one location, it was easy to see why the film was so affordable. The film was also shot using a "found footage" style via characters setting up cameras around their home and often times filming each other. This meant less money had to be spent on fancy equipment (it was supposed to look like consumer grade cameras) or heavy lighting effects. Plus, there are no monsters or gore. The terror is largely situational or often built out of finding objects or events that happen off-camera. It was a smart way to film what boiled down to a fairly standard haunted

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[166] Richardson, Jancy. "The 22 Most Successful Blumhouse Movies Tell Us a Lot About What Horror Fans Like to Watch". Movie Pilot. http://moviepilot.com/posts/4021223

house story. By placing the camera in the hands of the characters, the film not only

gained a more personal feel, it also meant they did not have to show every "scare" in full,

only to the extent that the characters were able to see the scares. This resulted in off-

camera noises and events that were not always captured by the stationary camera which

the characters fixed atop a tripod for the bulk of the movie. It was smart, effective, and
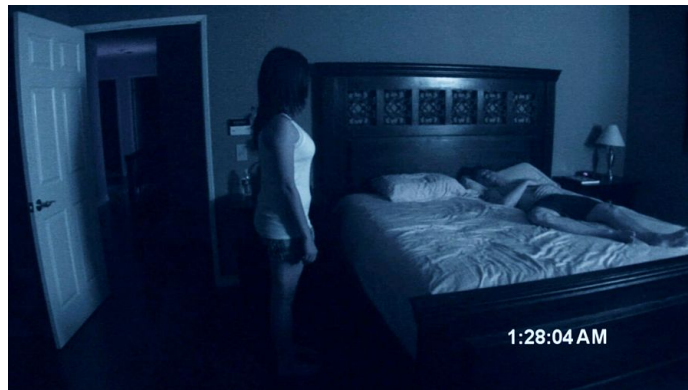
cheap.

Figure 30- Still from *Paranormal Activity*

After screening the film for several distributors, many agreed there was something

charming and downright chilling about the movie, and the simplicity with with it was

made seemed to make the scares more terrifying and the characters more relatable.

Paramount Studios had planned to buy the movie in order to give it a big budget remake.

While Paramount was passing it around to potential filmmakers, Steven Spielberg

watched it and reported back to the studio that it scared the heck out of him. He felt they

should release it as is. Stuart Ford, the agent who first purchased the international rights,

noted what a risky film venture it was. "No production values, no recognizable cast, no

pedigree at all, other than there was something very scary, very unique about the film.

We thought: this has the potential to be a cult favorite."[167]

Knowing that it would take a lot to convince international buyers of the film's

worth, Stuart Ford invited 300 teenagers to the buyers' screening. His effort worked. The

teens all were scared to death and loved the movie. The international rights were all

promptly sold.

Figure 31- Still from *Paranormal Activity* trailer

Realizing they had a potential cult hit, Paramount went to work trying to craft a

way to create a cult-like fervor and demand for the movie long before it released. But

because a film featuring no-name actors lacking a recognizable plot was such a financial

risk, they had to create a marketing campaign that would cost very little, just in case the

movie was a flop. The marketing folks began by creating branded Facebook and Twitter

pages which were filled with "reaction videos" of people watching the movie and being

frightened. Long before the movie ever came out, the studio had convinced followers that

it would be the scariest experience ever.

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[167] Shone, Tom. "*Paranormal Activity* and the Myth of the Shoestring Shocker". *The Guardian*. 11-25-2009. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/nov/25/paranormal-activity-box-office-profit

The reaction videos were shared online, many going viral, being passed from person to person, all of whom were now excited to see what looked to be the scariest movie ever made. Just to up the ante even more, Paramount began inserting a "based on true events" tagline onto some of the marketing materials, thus making the film seem all the more real and intriguing.

Then to increase the demand for the movie, Paramount teased the opening. They created "DEMAND" buttons on social networking pages so fans could request the movie come to their town, and they also encourage fans to create online petitions, in a sense forcing them to fight to see the movie. Fans felt like they had a lot at stake here! This was possibly the scariest movie of all time, and they had to create petitions for the right to see it! Thus, demand and avid enthusiasts (cult followers) were taking action before the film had even released.

Even though Hollywood portrayed this film as being an untouched diamond they simply found and put out into the world, quite a bit of test screening was done before the release. They also reshot the ending which did not test well with early audiences.[168]

The rather engineered marketing tactics did not matter in the least. Fans had taken hold of the film and had become part of the marketing. Fans began posting their own experiences watching the movie and sharing their own reaction videos. Paramount had synthetically and rather cheaply created a massive cult following for a $15,000 movie.

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[168] Goss, William. "So What Was '*Paranormal Activity*'s' Original Ending?". *Movie Fone.* http://www.moviefone.com/2009/10/11/so-what-was-paranormal-activitys-original-ending/

According to *AdAge Online Magazine*:

> Paramount was expected to have exceeded another goal, having
> announced on Oct. 5 that the film would receive a wide release once it hits
> 1 million demands on its Eventful page. The "Demand" ticker had
> surpassed 860,000 by mid-afternoon Friday, nearly triple the amount of
> demands logged 72 hours prior, with "*Paranormal Activity*" becoming a
> recurring trending topic on Twitter during the midnight hour for several
> consecutive weeknights. A sponsored Twitter account,
> @TweetYourScream, already has over 4,700 followers, and a Facebook
> page currently reaches more than 47,000 fans who've been uploading their
> video reactions to the film.[169]

Paramount had succeeded in synthetically creating a cult following, largely for
little to no money. By letting the consumers dictate the distribution and fight to get the
film screenings in their hometown, fans felt like they had something at stake in the film.
They had a vested interest and had taken action to help others see the film as well.
Paramount also used grassroots styles by talking directly to the fans. They encouraged
fans to take action and become part of the film's online legacy by posting their own
videos, which of course fans would then share with their own friends thus recruiting more
fans.

And it is important to note here (just as adage.com did in the article "How
Paranormal Activity Hit It Big"), that Paramount may have concocted a clever marketing

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[169] Hampp, Andrew. "How *Paranormal Activity* Hit It Big". *Ad Age.* 10-12-2009.
http://adage.com/article/madisonvine-news/low-budget-movie-marketing-paranormal-activity/139588/

campaign to create a cult-like fervor among fans, but the hype was real. [170] Whereas a similar style of film, *The Blair Witch Project*, had created a fictional story about the footage being real and the characters actually being missing, *Paranormal Activity* never once tried to play itself as real. Nor did they falsely engineer fake audiences screaming in terror. They used real audiences and real fans. Though Paramount had carefully researched, planned and implemented a meticulous campaign, it was ultimately the fans who took control, demanding the film be shown.

Did this well-constructed tactic to manufacture a media cult pay off? Most definitely, yes! Though made for just $15,000 and marketed for an undisclosed but likely low amount (they would not have spent huge amounts because of the risky nature of the film), *Paranormal Activity* so far (as of 2016) has grossed over $190 million worldwide, making it one of the most profitable movies in history. [171]

Case Study: *The Battery*

In 2012, zombies were all the rage! *The Walking Dead* was the one of the most popular shows on TV, and filmmakers across the country were rushing to churn out brain-hungry monsters. Many of these were cheaply made and had the same basic plot: group of college students do something (go camping, have a party, attend a wedding) and then a zombie outbreak occurs. Then there was *The Battery*. Shot over the span of two weeks for just $6000, *The Battery* looks at two minor league baseball players as they

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[170] Ibid.

[171] Box Office Mojo. "*Paranormal Activity*". Accessed 5-9-2016.
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=paranormalactivity.htm

travel together through a zombie wasteland. But it's not about the zombies.[172] There are, of course, ample zombies, but the movie is more about the duo's relationship, their past lives, what they miss the most and what keeps them fighting to stay alive. It is much more than a zombie movie. The camera often forgoes zombie-action in lieu of the characters' small victories like finding toothpaste or listening to a song they used to like. It becomes clear there was some talent and consideration put into the project.

The Battery was filmmaker Jeremy Gardner's first film. The concept came from a short film he had made several years prior, a first person perceptive monologue of someone describing their day-today activities in a zombie apocalypse. His crew/cast for the feature consisted of seven people, all of whom preformed multiple duties. Gardner not only directed the film, he also starred in it, wrote, and produced it. Needing a score, he turned to local New England music artists who allowed him to use their tunes for the exposure. The result is a heartfelt and homespun tale that often takes on terrifying concepts of isolation and desperation.

Figure 32- Still from *The Battery*

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[172] *The Battery* Homepage. Accessed July 28th 2016. http://watch.thebatterymovie.com/

After the film's completion, Jeremy was unsure of the next step. He entered the movie into a few festivals and then began selling digital copies on his website for a few dollars each. But then something started happening. Word slowly began spreading about the film. While it had played only a handful of festivals, people began recommending it online. I personally heard about the film from horror actor AJ Bowen who messaged my Killer POV podcast co-hosts about the movie, stating that it was amazing and that we had to get the filmmaker on the show. We downloaded the movie and loved it! We, like many other media companies, began singing the praises of this little self-distributed zombie flick to anyone who would listen. Fans also began to rally, creating online blogs about the undiscovered gem.

The fans and following continued to grow, and eventually became quite loud. *The Battery* was able to secure VOD network releases through sites like Amazon. Now, with more exposure, the fans gathered even more rapidly and ravenously, questioning why this title never had any acclaim or a proper release.

In a complete grassroots fashion, fans pushed the film, not just to other fans but also gaining the attention of filmmakers and distributors. Before long, Gardner had an offer to release the film to Blu-ray. And though acclaim and eventual prestige is incredibly well deserved, it was the fans and the rhizomatic networks of the praises that allowed the unknown movie to gain momentum and attention.

Because *The Battery*'s initial distribution was through self-distribution, followed by multiple private VOD channels, and eventually the Scream Factory Blu-ray release, it is difficult to determine how much money was actually netted by the film. So in this case, we can determine success by the movie's reception, which was immense both with fans

and critics alike. Furthermore, director Jeremy Gardner soon found additional work not only as a director, but also as an actor, with many people noting the amazing performance he gave in *The Battery*.

Jeremy has since released his second film, *Tex Montana Will Survive*!, which is a comedy about the host of a "wilderness survival TV show" who is completely inept at actually surviving in the wilderness. Seeing how the *The Battery*'s original online self-distribution model greatly benefited the film, Gardner decided to try something equally unconventional with *Tex Montana*. He launched a crowd-funding campaign for the exact cost of the movie in advance of making it, and then he gave the entire movie away for free, releasing to YouTube and Vimeo for anyone to watch.[173] The movie opens by stating- "This movie has been released entirely free under a Creative Commons license. Steam it, burn it, share it!" And the fan hype is already spreading. Critics are also directing attention towards the movie by discussing Gardner's unique free distribution model and questioning if this could be the future of movies. Once again, the film is relying heavily on the person-to-person endorsements, ultimately creating two movies that were largely marketed by the fans' word-of-mouth and their formation of a 100% organic cult following.

Though this financial model has not yet become common in any capacity, it is very alarming for Hollywood, and they are definitely paying close attention. The industry has existed for over a century exercising a concrete profit model. The idea of filmmakers changing the foundation and giving films away "at cost" presents a scary new economy.

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[173] "*Tex Montana Will Survive* Kickstarter Page." Accessed July 28th, 2016.
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/265932231/tex-montana-will-survive-worldwide-release

The Successful Creation of an Inorganic Cult and Summations

Through my research and close examination of many organic and synthetic cult products, I have identified five key factors that must be present in order to create a cult, whether natural or contrived. As has been established throughout my research, there is a way to master and feed a synthetic cult, often getting it to be as successful, if not more so, than naturally formulating followings. The five elements that I feel must be present to create a cult are elements of the unconventional and resistance, feelings of privilege, a community creation and ownership, personalized voice, and self expression. By seeding and germinating these five aspects of a media product, a company can possibly create a media cult where one may not have occurred otherwise. It won't work every time obviously. But I feel these are the necessary elements to build a framework that allows a cult to flourish, and though it may begin with an engineered campaign, ultimately, like occurred with *Paranormal Activity*, the cult will transition to a natural one.

As discussed previously, media passions often ignite around products that are off the beaten path. Instead of a standard sit-com, cult fans may head to quirkier programing like *Rick and Morty* which is a cartoon about a reckless, alcoholic mad scientist who takes his adolescent nephew on insane and often deadly quests.[174] The first tenet of creating a cult following is to market the product as being different from the mainstream. Make it stand out and look unique. *The Walking Dead* highlighted the excessive use of gore in the early advertising campaigns, establishing itself as far more extreme than most other television programs. Another example is *Pushing Daisies* (a musical TV show about a pie maker who could bring dead things back to life with a single touch) which

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[174] *Rick and Morty*. Adult Swim Network. 2013- Current.

played up the hyper-real and caricature-like nature of the show.[175] This allows the fans to feel like they are breaking the mainstream by taking part in the product. They become the resistance fighting the norm. Passions and beliefs become activated, and often these feelings are created before the product is ever released because of the marketing campaign, thus making them a form of priori knowledge.

Next comes the element of privilege, and this can take several forms. The viewer may feel privilege for seeing the show over someone who has not, sharing "insider" information with those who have seen the product, while those around them may be clueless as to the context. It creates a form of secret club. The privilege may also come in the form of rewards for the dedicated viewership: understanding jokes from the show, comprehending related internet memes, "getting" a t-shirt that references the product, or being supplied bonus footage or interviews on the Facebook page. All of these create pragmatic means by which the viewer develops positive reinforcement for viewing the product and the knowledge gained therein. Simply by watching, they have achieved something over those that have not.

Social media has opened the gates for the creation of synthetic media cults, most often by creating a community. Looking at the aforementioned *Paranormal Activity*, over 20 million people have "followed" this movie on Facebook, and the page shows a variety of posts from the product, all trying to generate reaction from the followers. It encourages discussion, personal reflections, and interactions. The marketing professionals are hoping to create a sense of community, involvement, and belonging for the particular movie. And it has worked. The page is a flurry of fan interaction not only discussing the prior

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[175] *Pushing Daises*. American Broadcast Network. 2007-2009.

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Paranormal Activity movies, but also sharing personal ghost stories, discussing their love of scares, and waxing on possible future franchise inclusions and concepts. The studio created the community and feeds it, continuing to support its growth and nurture a sense of belonging.

By participating in these communities, the fans also gain a sense of voice. As is apparent on the *Paranormal Activity* page, the media product must acknowledge the cult fan base, interact, and talk back to them. An example of this is the recent *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* TV show.[176] Though intended for children, the show also became a hit with young adults who formed a cult around the cartoon. The adult fans hold conventions, wear costumes, create fan fiction, and more. During one of the early shows, a supposed animation glitch caused one of the background ponies to appear with crossed-eyes. The adult fans noticed this odd background character and took to the Internet to discuss. Before long, the cult fans had lovingly labeled this pony "Derpy Hooves." The show's crew quickly discovered the love that the cult fans were giving to this background pony, creating memes about her and discussing how they wish she would appear in more episodes.

Figure 33- Derpy Hooves pony

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[176] *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Hasbro Studios. 2010- present.

At Comic Con 2011, the fans got their wish. Promotional *My Little Pony* posters were being handed out at the Hasbro booth and standing in the background of the ponies was Derpy. The show's marketers had heard the voices of the cult fans and acknowledged them. Before long, Derpy became a regular character on the show, still appearing with the crossed-eyes that made her famous. The element of voice fuels fandom. The viewers feel like they have power over what is usually unobtainable and untouchable. They themselves become part of the media creation process.

The final element in successful media cult formulation is expression. Part of the primary aim in creating a cult frenzy is to get your followers to spread the word themselves, and this is best achieved through self-expression. *Express your love for the show, and share the trailer. Express yourself, and post this meme from this movie.* In the social networking universe, what we post on our timeline pages becomes our key form of self-expression. Sharing a love for a media product not only creates a personal identity in the online sphere, it also helps to spread the cult and allows followers to identify each other, reinforcing the element of community as well.

Again, not every media product can create a cult following, and ultimately a lot of it can boil down to the quality of the project and how it resonates with the viewers. There must be a quality and reason for them to continue following. But these five elements are the keys for any strong cult media, be it organic, synthetic, or somewhere in between.

Self Study: A Self Reflective Examination of Cult Media Marketing

In addition to my academic research into contemporary film markets, I have also spent an equal amount of my study creating my own films and experimenting with different marketing techniques and styles. This has been incredibly helpful because I could create film based on what type of marketing campaign I wanted to explore, allowing me to see results first hand.

Throughout the course of my Doctoral Studies, my husband and I have created six horror and fantasy shorts under our production company, Evil Squared Productions (aptly named after the address of our first house- 6662 Denny Ave). These shorts vary wildly in style, plot, tone, and appeal. And within that, we were able to create and implement a large number of marketing tactics. Although we conceived and applied many marketing techniques for all of these films across the board, with each film we focused on one particular marketing method, be it festivals, conventions, social networking, or graphics. As the marketing campaign for each film got underway, I would closely examine the response, not just to the film but also how the viewers reacted to the campaign, what type of audiences we were gaining and their demographics, and their likelihood to tell friends about the film.

Variables such as skill levels, locations, and established reputation must be addressed before I venture into the self-exploration of my work. It is nearly impossible to do any type of research entirely in a void separated from outside influences and secondary factors. This is especially true with self-reflexive research. As we completed one project and began a new one, we began to notice a phenomenon we had not previously accounted for when planning out the research and marketing techniques- we were becoming much better

filmmakers. While as *Feather* (our first short, shot in Spring of 2009) is rather clunky and was a very rough production riddled with technical issues, by the next film we knew what possible issues to anticipate.

The same improvements occurred with the crew we selected. On our first few films, we employed crew members with a variety of skill levels and backgrounds. By the time we got to our fourth film, we had amassed a set crew that possessed the specific skills we were looking for. Now, being mid-way through a feature film, the same crew has been working with us for a number of projects. Because of this, our later shoots, such as *Found* and *All the Creatures Were Stirring,* ran like well-oiled machines. Whereas our first short took ten days to shoot, *Found* and *Witch's Brew* were only one-day shoots and are technically much better films.

We must include this as a variable because it safe to believe that part of our growing audiences came not from the different marketing tactics employed, but rather because we were making better movies. With *Feather*, we struggled to get it into just a handful of film festivals. But now, if we announce we have completed a new short, we actually get calls almost immediately from very reputable film fests asking if we would like to debut it at their event. And obviously the better the film, the better the response, and the more prestigious the film festival at which we debut, then the more eyeballs that will watch it and the bigger the hype it creates. I try my best to account for our own improvement as filmmakers and the improvement in our final product as I explore the marketing options we utilized.

There is also the variable of "filming location" that I must address. Along with our own self-improvement during our filmmaking journey, we also noticed a sharp difference

in our films from when we were making projects in Virginia to those in Los Angeles. This is not to say it is impossible to make good films outside of Los Angeles; people do it all the time. But with the budget range in which we were working, there were some important factors at play. In Virginia when we sought out workers skilled in the technical aspects of film such as a lighting, audio, and set dressing, we largely recruited folks who for the most part practiced their trade occasionally on small film shoots and for community theaters. Additionally, it was difficult to find access to proper film equipment in Virginia. Jibs, dollies, and complex lighting rigs were hard to come by, so we did not incorporate any of these into our initial shorts simply based on their scarcity.

Upon relocating to Los Angeles, we found ourselves in the center of the filmmaking universe. Everyone we worked with had equipment – much of which would be lent for free. I was shocked to find out my next door neighbor in our first LA apartment had a steady cam rig and full dolly tracks that he gladly loaned us to shoot *The Barista*. Also, the type of crews we had access to changed drastically. Although the folks we worked with in Virginia were considerably talented and devoted to the craft, we were suddenly in a sea of working professionals who do lighting and audio work every day of their lives. They came equipped with the latest gear ready to help us achieve a cinematic vision. A director is only as good as the crew he or she works with, and though it is entirely possibly to make films with minimal tech gear, it definitely makes for a more interesting spectacle when you have ample access to skilled craftsmen with the latest tools.

Finally, I want to address the concept of "prior reputation" and fan followers. This has become one of the biggest factors in my marketing research, and it is not one I accounted for when I began this journey. When we made *Feather*, no one knew what Evil

Squared Productions was. But by the time we began pre-production on *All the Corpses Were Stirring*, the company had grown considerably, so much so that the film's announcement was covered in *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and several other major media news outfits.[177] We'd had several films that played in major festivals like London's FrightFest and Los Angeles's Scream Fest. During this time, I amassed over 10,000 "friends" on Facebook and 5,000 followers on Twitter. Most of these folks are "fans" of our prior projects. We did not anticipate a growing and evolving fan base that would continue to seek out our new projects.

Additionally, there is the concept of "character" and "style" which I will address shortly. Over time, we discovered some patterns emerge in our films. Though we never intended this from the start, the fans took notice that the bulk of our films fell into the category of horror-comedies, usually with some type of social satire included in the plot. *The Dump* pokes fun at serial killer profiling. *The Barista* profiles Death as a coffee shop employee on his day off, *Found* takes a swipe at the over-used "found footage" sub-genre. Within the first few films it became clear that Dave and I had a writing and filmmaking aesthetic. Fans began to chatter on our Facebook and Twitter pages about how much they liked our horror-comedies. This is what we became known for and what audiences began to expect. In my marketing research, I will discuss this style and how we sometimes choose to market towards it.

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[177] McNary, Dave. Constance Wu and Johnathan Kite to Star in Horror-Comedy 'All The Creatures Were Stirring'". *Variety*. December 15th, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/film/news/jonathan-kite-constance-wu-all-the-creatures-were-stirring-1201661699/

I will be examining each of our prominent film projects in conjunction with the marketing tactic or style that I chose to utilize on each film (links to the shorts are also included):

1- *Feather* and High Concepts

2- *The Dump* and Festivals (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF_3m7hFeJI)

3- *The Barista* and Stars (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3DFQr0OMto)

4- *Witch's Brew* and Network Affiliations

   (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJj053v-afY)

5- *Found* and the Power of the Convention

   (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rizBXsptfuc)

6- Approaching *All the Creatures Were Stirring* and the One Trick Pony

   Sales trailer (https://vimeo.com/175965818 pw: fallback)

7- Features and the Marketing of a Filmmaker

Feather and High Concepts

When my partner Dave and I first began trying to determine what type of film we thought we could actively market and sell, many ideas came to mind. It should be sexy, gory, have loud music, and a unique filming style. With all these concepts swirling in our heads, we found ourselves struggling for a plot. We knew what type of film we wanted to make, but had no story to lead us there. So we did what many first time (and even expert) artists do- we borrowed a plot from another work. We had both always been fond of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Feathertop", the story of a witch who takes revenge on a wealthy girl by enchanting a scarecrow so he appears to her to be a very handsome man. When the time is right, the witch lifts the curse, and the handsome beau turns back into a

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scarecrow, thus frightening the girl. This revenge tale seemed rather tame by today's

standards, so we converted it into an extremely high concept short script. Set in a modern

strip club (complete with live band), the strippers battle each other for center stage. Two

witches (we made them sisters) approach one of the dancers and help her to reanimate a

corpse. He appears as a gorgeous high-roller club patron and seduces the lead dancer.

When the time is right, he is turned back into a corpse, and the lead dancer goes insane.

AND…. the whole thing has a rockabilly sheen to it including a scene with a girl dancing

on a motorcycle. I wish someone had told me to start simple. But I probably would not

have listened anyway.

At this point, Dave and I had directed a number of TV promos and press reels, but

never anything with an extended narrative structure. Yet still (likely because of our

greenness at making films), the high concept of *Feather* did not seem daunting to us.

Now having made ten major shorts, if someone approached me with this high of a

concept and plot, I would immediately budget the short at around $10,000. But with little

understanding of how film budgets are conceived, we set out to make *Feather* for just

$1,000.

Feather came in over budget, but surprisingly not by much. We called in endless

favors from friends and colleagues, borrowed equipment, and often cooked the cast and

crews on-set meals ourselves the night before each shoot. After *Feather* was completed,

we found we had a 20-minute-long complicated and chaotic mess. But we were still

proud of it! Now came time to market the film, and show it to the masses.

We were shocked when we started getting rejection letters from film festivals. We

had just poured our hearts and souls out onto the screen. We were much too enchanted by

the simple act of completing the project to see the glaring flaws such as poor sound mixing and color matching. Still, we persisted.

We began by trying to market the "sexy" idea. The TV show *Madmen* was huge at the time and was using a 1960s mod-ish minimal art campaign as part of the show. Our first poster mimicked this style- a single martini glass with a skull in it. Although we got some attention with the poster, we still were not getting much love on the festival circuits.

Figure 34- Marketing poster for *Feather*

We revamped our marketing efforts and began playing up the big concepts *Feather* held therein- strip clubs, music, rockabilly fashions, and gore. We created a postcard simply showing some stills from the short and the website, and they were passed out at any horror convention we attended. We begged a few fests *not* to run our movie in its entirety (which was way too long as most short films run under 10 minutes), but instead show a music video that we cut using one of the songs alongside some of the most intriguing visuals. We soon found that while people did not love the film as a whole project, they loved the abridged video! The video and the high concept images we employed were pushing folks to seek out the film online and watch the entire thing. We learned a great deal from *Feather,* most importantly that the highest concept of the film can be the best marketing

tool there is. A bland movie creates a marketing quandary, but if you've got strippers and gore, you have a ready-built campaign.

The Dump and Film Festivals

The Dump was the first film I shot in Los Angeles, after I had relocated to the city (to further my film research). It is difficult and dizzying to move to a new city and shoot a new film within only a month of being there. I had very few connections, and connections are, quite frankly, how films get made on an indie micro-budget level. Many roles on a film set are not ones you can simply find in the yellow pages, and if you do you will pay a fortune. It helps immensely to "know" a good lighting or audio person with their own equipment.

The Dump was an incredibly simple concept: two serial killers from different walks of life accidentally bump into each other while dumping bodies in the same patch of woods. They end up chatting about stereotypes, their chosen profession, and how they perceive the world. Dark? Yes! But also *The Dump* was a great vehicle for a statement about horror film slasher tropes.

We elected to shoot *The Dump* the day after Thanksgiving in a local Los Angeles park under the rationale that the place should be deserted on Black Friday since most folks would be with family or shopping. Wow! We were wrong! Since most of LA had the day off from work, many folks flocked to the park, making our shoot in a "desolate wooded area" tricky to maneuver. Additionally, November is one of the hottest months of the year in Los Angeles, a fact I was not aware of having only been in town a few weeks. As the temperature began to reach 105 degrees, we found ourselves having to not only

keep the crew and cast cool, but also having to ice down the camera with cooling packs to keep it from overheating.

Problems aside, the shoot completed, and the film was edited into a final version. For *The Dump*, I knew I wanted to try the festival circuit to experiment with marketing to festival filmgoers. *Feather* had been too long to get into most festivals so we had intentionally kept *The Dump's* length on par with entry requirements. We saved up a few thousand dollars (festival entries are expensive!), and before we knew it, we were playing and often winning at various festivals nationwide, such as the Viscera Film Festival, the Spooky Woods Film Festival, Shriek Fest, and the New Orleans Film Festival.

For these festivals, I varied the marketing campaign from what I might have used to market a slasher film to the general populace. Most slasher films focus the marketing on the killer or the gore. Even looking back through the video box covers of the 1980s, we see an endless array of masked men holding various weapons while leering at scantily clad young co-eds. Instead of approaching from a standard slasher route, I decided to play with and exploit the audience's prior knowledge.

It was safe to assume that most of the folks attending these festivals were fairly savvy about standard horror tropes. *The Dump* screened primarily at art film festivals, many of them catered specifically toward horror films. These films were not playing at a "mall near you" but rather in festivals that gratify film buffs. With that in mind, we took publicity shots showing our two differing slashers- one a yuppie and the other a redneck-style killer. I'd been hoping that audiences might find the slasher vs. slasher angle to be an interesting twist on the well-worn sub-genre formula, and it paid off. We attracted big

crowds and garnered many awards such as "Best Director" at the Viscera Film Fest and "Best Short Film" at the Horrible Imaginings Festival.

Just having a film in these festivals was possibly one of the best marketing tools I could have hoped for. Folks would gather for multi-day events, screening several horror films including *The Dump*. Each festival brought us a new group of fans. As *The Dump* played around the globe, folks would tweet and post on Facebook about how much they loved it. Reviewers wrote articles online praising it, which led more people to seek it out. After screening at the Glasgow Horror Film Festival in Scotland, a critic wrote,

There's also a lot of choice dialogue packed into the 11 minute run time and both actors deliver killer performances (bad pun alert) that ensure maximum laughs are drawn from the sharp script. It almost feels like a protracted but consistently funny skit from a comedy sketch show (minus the annoying canned laughter). At 11 minutes it doesn't come close to outstaying its welcome, and I could easily have spent more time in the company of these two personable maniacs.[178]

Before we knew it, some festivals we hadn't even applied to reached out to see if we would submit our short with the fee waived, all because they had heard about how well it played at other festivals.

Although I was pleased with the results of using a more "film savvy" marketing campaign, we saw much more success by just getting our film screened. And the more festivals that played it, the more that requested the film for additional screenings. *The*

[178] *The Art of Fear Blog*. "Review: *The Dump*". Published December 10, 2012.

Dump played at the Tokyo Film Fest this summer, and it is already four years old. The hype created from the initial screening buzz is still working its way around the globe.

The Barista and Stars

After *The Dump*, there was a large number of festival requests for our films. It was incredibly flattering, but at the same time stressful. Festival after festival emailed and called asking if we had anything new they could program. We were ecstatic people had liked our work; they wanted more! But we also felt a great deal of pressure to get something else completed right away.

Because of the festival hype surrounding *The Dump*, we were given access to more renowned actors, many of whom were desired by festivals because of past works they had done. Looking at what assets we had to put together another film, we realized quickly that our actors were our best commodity. We had no money, as no one gets paid to make short films, so the entire productions were coming from our own pockets. We could scrape together enough spare money for the camera, but marketing elements such as visual effects, production design, or expensive sets were a pipe dream. On a rushed schedule, it was difficult to create a high concept script and take it through multiple drafts, so we needed a low concept that we could do well. And we had no money for locations. Our entire budget was just $1000 and that was entirely eaten up by shooting insurance and the camera rental. We had to use what we had readily available for free. One of our close friends owns a coffee shop in Los Angeles and agreed to let us shoot there at night while the shop was closed in exchange for buying all the "crafts service food" from the café.

The process was getting restrictive- low concept, in a coffee shop, no effects, and it had to showcase acting. Because we had yet to come up with a script, we had labeled the project by the working title of "Coffee Shop of Death," and after weeks of throwing this term around a concept was formulated.

A man enters a coffee shop loudly proclaiming that one of the baristas is in fact Death, and that the world will soon become wise to the fact that no one can die during his shift because he is serving coffee. Realizing that this was not exactly a horror-laden concept, we wrote the script as a dark comedy. Aside from a number of crew who subbed in as coffee shop patrons, the short starred three well-known faces from the horror industry- Amanda Fuller from *Red, White, and Blue* and *Starry Eyes*, Morgan Peter Brown from *Absentia* and *Ouija*, and Chase Williamson who was fresh from *John Dies at the End*. And at 2am on a Wednesday night, we filmed *The Barista*.

Admittedly, *The Barista* was not as strong an audience film as *The Dump*. While *The Dump* was making a social statement about stereotyping through the use of horror devices, *The Barista* had no deeper message. It was simply a quirky little comedy of manners. Yet, it still got a great deal of festival play and started winning awards, including "Best Script" from the New Orleans Horror Film Festival.

From a marketing perspective, the cast sold it, which showed me the importance of attaching prominent people to a film. As a director I had always loved finding unknowns, casting actors who had yet to be noticed in the horror world but would impress audiences with an amazing performance. While marketing *The Barista*, it became clear that our biggest asset was the cast and their prior fan followings. Having Amanda Fuller tweet about the film caused a flurry of excitement and chatter online, and

having Chase Williamson post pictures from the shoot resulted in dozens more Facebook likes.

As I discussed previously, grassroots and rhizomactic marketing is still just as crucial today as it was for the early cult films. By having Chase post pictures, he is in fact starting the rhizomatic structures that will spread from person to person. This is the web equivalent of word-of-mouth. As multiple folks shared the photos, it became impossible to track how far the message had spread. Yes, stars get attention, but stars who have a powerful online presence are invaluable for marketing.

This concept of social marketing is now in practice with large Hollywood movies. It has always been commonplace for film contracts to include a requirement that stars must do a certain amount of press for the movie, in making appearances, attending premieres, giving interviews or doing press junkets, etc. But within the past five years, it has become not unusual to include requirements that stars also do a level of online posting about the film, telling followers about it or releasing personal pictures or stories. Some casting directors seek out actors with large online followings because it opens more marketing avenues.

An example of this would be Matthew Gray Gubler. Matthew, or "Gub" as he known among his fans, is well known for his role as Dr. Spencer Reid on the TV show *Criminal Minds.* But Gubler is also an avid Tweeter, garnering over 1.5 million followers on his network. "Gubler is marketing gold, especially with girls ages 12-16," a Los Angeles casting director once told me. Curious, I began following Gubler on Twitter and noticed that in that particular week, the majority of his tweets were about a small indie

horror film he was in, *Suburban Gothic*. He was tweeting asking his fans to come to the LA screening.

Even more curious, I attended to see just what type of online pull Gubler had on Twitter. Surely 12-year-old girls were not familiar with this director's prior work that was very mature-themed horror films. And young teen girls were definitely not the target audience for this new movie about an adult who, unable to find employment, is forced to move back in with his aging parents. Would they really turn out in droves?

I was the oldest female in the sold-out screening. I sat there surrounded by hundreds of teen girls all screaming for Gubler. Were they there for the movie? Kind of, but not really? They were there for Gubler and his online persona. Word-of-mouth worked, but even more so when it came from a source that the fans respected and enthusiastically supported.

Witch's Brew and Network Affiliations

I got the call on Labor Day weekend. It was the Crave Network, a well known online website network whose companies include Comingsoon.net, Gamerevolution.com, and ShockTillYouDrop.com. The company was contracting filmmakers to create a series of horror shorts to launch on their horror site, ShockTillYouDrop.com. They were looking for a few well-established short filmmakers who could get a Halloween-themed short together quickly. I happily accepted. Somehow this felt like I was finally making it, like others had seen my work and loved it so much they were now asking us for more. It felt good. But I had only three weeks to get a short film completed. *Cringe.*

Dave and I came up with a script entitled *Witch's Brew* about a kid's party where a Halloween game goes horribly wrong. Being pushed for time, we cast actors with

whom we had worked previously. We shot at our own house since we did not have time to secure another location, and three weeks later we delivered a fully completed short. We were certain that having a short film debut on a large online network would be our biggest break yet. It would be seen by thousands immediately…no, millions! The short debuted, and…we got a few hundred views. Then the next week they put up another short, replacing ours, and it too got a few hundred views. What happened? This was supposed to be our huge break! We began examining this from a marketing perspective.

First, Crave Online is an entertainment news website. Fans go there to find out who's been cast in the next Marvel movie and what TV shows have been renewed for another season. They don't go there to watch films. People read the headlines on these sites on lunch breaks, quickly scanning to get updates. Very few visitors were inclined to watch the shorts. It was not a movie-viewing site, thus our fan base target was off. Second, there was little to no promotion done for this. As filmmakers, we were told to keep it quiet so that the releases would be a surprise to the site's visitors. Thus, there was no build or buzz. The films just appeared on the site, and then the promo began afterwards which made it much harder to create fervor.

Slowly over time, *Witch's Brew* received a decent number of views online. But even now, almost a year and a half after its initial release, it has the lowest view ratings and comments of any of our films. It's not because it's a bad film. Actually, it is one of our best for design and camera work. But the marketing was an afterthought, and so it lacked the enthusiasm and intensity we worked to build with marketing our prior films.

Found and the Power of the Convention

After our disappointing online release of *Witch's Brew*, Dave and I decided that our next film needed to heavily play up the horror genre and avid fandom so that we could really experiment with marketing to cult fans. We debated going the film festival route again just because it garnered publicity, but we ended up trying something a little different. For my job at Fangoria Entertainment, I attended eight to ten horror conventions a year. These cons are massive gatherings of avid genre fans. They range in size from Scare LA which is around 10,000 attendees up to Phoenix Comic Con which is over 150,000. I'm often asked to do panels discussing filmmaking and how the fans can make their own shorts. Rather than dropping thousands of dollars applying to more film festivals, we opted to just show our new film as part of my panel circuit.

Once again we had plotted out the venue for exhibition long before we ever came up with concept for the film. This one had to be fun! Conventions are joyous places where fans gather to celebrate their shared love of the genre. It's a happy experience, and I did not want to weigh the convention down with an arduous film.

We also wanted something that would play to horror fans' prior knowledge. It is a rare experience when you can assume that the majority of your audience all shares the same prior knowledge. In this case, it was safe to gather that since these folks were paying a sizeable amount of money to attend a horror convention, they had all seen a decent amount of horror films and would understand if we played with formulaic horror devices.

We agreed that we wanted to make a statement and say something about the horror industry. At the time, the "found footage" style of filmmaking was all the rage in

horror films. A copious number of releases on the indie circuit were shot in a found

footage style simply because it was cheap and gave the filmmakers flexibility with script

writing and concepts. Dave and I had long joked about how it seemed distressing that

someone would spend their entire college career being trained to make narrative films,

only to emerge and find everything that is being released looks like a "selfie" video shot

on a cell phone. We quipped that there should be a school for teaching people how to just

make found footage films. And there it was.

Found was a mockumentary style short about the Found Footage Institute, a

fictional organization that not only retrieved found footage films from haunted locations,

it also employed a team of scientists who created new found footage technology

(footiologists, as we called them), and had a school teaching students how best to

document their fated travels. Since this one would be playing at conventions, we needed

a stellar poster to include in the printed programs. I contacted fellow MATX student

Norberto Gomez and asked him to create a 1950's style ad campaign for a fake found

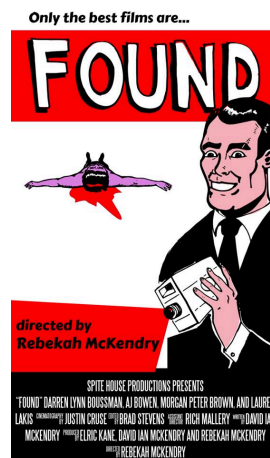footage school. The result was smashingly wonderful!

Figure 35- Marketing poster for *Found*

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During the initial release, we only played one film festival- London Fright Fest which was overseas. Stateside, we focused all efforts on the convention circuit. We opened at Sacramento's Twisted Terror Con to a room of about seventy people (far less than we would usually see at a film festival). They loved it, cheering and laughing throughout the film, but we were nervous that the lower numbers for a debut could later hurt us. We then played SCARE LA, Texas Frightmare, and several others. Eventually word got around and several festivals began asking if they could play the short (waiving the entrance fee). We ended up booking *Found* at a number of film festivals in the United States just based on the convention hype we had created.

Having released films both as festival runs and as convention runs, it is rather fascinating to compare the results we saw and determine which one may be more beneficial in the marketing sense. With film festivals, we obviously got some fan reception, but most of the attention we saw was from other film companies, distributors (like shocktillyoudrop.com) and other festivals looking for programming. This was great to find venues for new films, but we did not reach fans quite like we did at the conventions.

With our convention runs, we were standing in the same room with our fans talking about the filmmaking process. As the viewers enjoyed the film, they remembered us, and when we saw them at later cons, they asked if we were screening any new films. We had made brand-aware viewers, repeat customers, if you will, who enjoyed our brand and wanted to see more products from it. Whereas at a film festival the viewers enjoyed our films, but made little connection to the brand (filmmakers) behind it, at the

convention the viewers saw us more as a label creating a particular type of product that they wanted to see more of.

So which is more beneficial? That would depend on the outcome the filmmaker is hoping for. From a business standpoint, the film festival screenings generated more future business opportunities. But the convention circuit was more lucrative at creating what my dissertation has primarily focused on- avid viewers who are so moved by a film they're inclined to tell others about it. As word of *Found* spread, we were contacted by many other conventions asking us to screen it there as well. The grassroots cult structure created in the early days of cult cinema still worked, and this time it was based almost entirely on a theatrical screening, not a clever Facebook post.

The Beginnings of *All the Creatures Were Stirring* and the One Trick Pony

After a series of successful shorts, some entertainment agencies began to take notice out of work. We got "meetings," or as Dave noted, "the day you visit four different agencies, get four different bottles of water, and have four people ask you how much money your films are making." The response from agencies was overwhelmingly positive, but we heard the same thing echoed by several of them- "beware of becoming a one-trick pony."

The "one-trick-pony" was something that media-makers in Hollywood have long fought to avoid. Because the bulk of a filmmaker's work follows a particular style and tone, many believe that is all he or she is capable of. This was a trap into which we were getting dangerously close of falling into. Having now released five horror-comedy films, we had gained a reputation as a horror-comedy duo. Though some of the agents we spoke with were excited about pitching us for some of the major upcoming horror-comedy

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projects, others felt that we may limit their options as agents if we continued with that path. How could we support the horror-comedies which were gaining acclaim, but also try something different?

We also wanted to experiment. Realizing that this may be the last of our films shot with our own money and under our own control, we wanted to play with the narrative structure. It is rare in Hollywood that you have full control over a project. This happens only at the very bottom and at the very top, and while we were still trying to climb up, we might as well enjoy our control while we have it.

We just recently embarked on *All the Creatures Were Stirring*, our first feature film. The movie is a horror-comedy which is what we are known for at this point, but it is an anthology which has allowed us to include several very scary segments as well. By creating this style of project, we will keep our developed reputation as the horror-comedy duo and use this in the marketing, but we can also show audiences that we are more that just a "one trick pony". We have already developed the teaser trailer (already linked in this chapter) and sales poster for the movie. For the visual design, we wanted to be very coy and allusive about the movie's plot, going with the old cult marketing concept of showing a little, but saying a lot. We should wrap production in late 2016 in hopes of a Christmas 2017 release. We will be utilizing every tactic and tenet of synthesizing a movie cult that I have discussed herein.

Features and Marketing of the Filmmakers

As *All the Creatures Were Stirring* is now well underway and the press has been kind in regards to this feature project, we are finally starting to get some offers from outside investors about funding our projects. Because the act of making a movie is now something anyone can do now with the advent of digital cameras, the market has become saturated with horror filmmakers. Whereas two decades ago, festival winning short filmmakers would quickly be scooped up for big-budget features, it now takes a lot more work and finesse to get attention, not just from fans but also from the industry's financial backers.

Almost every agency meeting Dave and I have had always come back to one thing- it does not always matter if your films follow the popular genre trends or how many awards they win. One of the most important elements is how easy it is to market the filmmakers as characters. A great example of this is the Soska sisters. The Soska twins emerged on the scene a few years ago with their first film *Dead Hooker in a Truck*. Though critically the film was not a success, the Soskas became well known in the genre largely for the fact that they were twin directors who dressed in a very gothic and sexy style. The twins became popular guests at conventions and other genre events. Soon the

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agents noticed their popularity with fans, and the offers came in. They are now slated for several films over the next few years.

We had several agents ask us about our "characters." I was incredibly confused by this. Dave and I rarely give much attention to getting dressed let alone our characters. But in modern day filmmaking, your personal presentation is just as important as the product you're creating. Well-known genre directors like Quentin Tarantino, James Wan, Robert Rodriguez, Eli Roth, and Rob Zombie all have very distinct characters that are recognizable and unique. Most of them, in a sense, have become their own brand.

As Dave and I transition into larger projects and have agencies examining how to make our work marketable, we are now having to consider our public image, how we want to be perceived, and what will best portray our brand and skills. This image must infiltrate every element of our public lives including all Facebook posts, Twitter posts, pictures, etc. As the public is able to peer further into our private lives through social networking, it has become even more important to keep a character and brand cohesive across all media, even if the media feels private and personal.

Summations

In August of 2016, I was invited to guest lecture at UCLA on the subject of media marketing techniques. I presented a three-hour lecture and discussion highlighting many topics from this dissertation, but mostly focusing on contemporary marketing practices within cult sub-genres. During the class discussion, through student observations, I became aware of several other marketing techniques that have become standard among younger generations, many of which have come to successful fruition just in the four years I have been working on this paper.

Newer social networks like Snapchat and Flickr are giving younger generations an escape from Facebook where many students said their parents lurk. Just before the recent *Ghostbusters* movie opened in theaters, the marketing team released a Snapchat filter allowing users to make it look like a ghost was zooming around the screen. Snapchat is becoming a commonly used movie marketing tool, also being utilized for recent releases like *Pitch Perfect 2* and *Ouija*.[179] As the Internet is constantly evolving and expanding, so must the marketing teams, making sure to stay on top of the new technologies and apps and evaluating how they can best be employed to reach possible cult fans.

Additionally, since I began this project, the mass media has lessened the labeling of cult fans as "the other," but instead has shifted to somewhat embracing them. San Diego Comic Con now gains national news coverage as do some of the other large scale cult media phenomena like the movie *The Room* which spawned hundreds of memes,

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[179] *Ghostbusters*. Dir. Paul Feig. Columbia Pictures. 2016. Film

coverage, and a possible remake.[180] Society has embraced the concept of cult media,

now applying the friendlier phrase "geek culture" as a blanket term. Examples of

mainstream cult media include TV shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Games of Thrones*,

as well as popular movie franchises like *Harry Potter*, *The Avengers*, and *The Hungers

Games*. Though each of these garner cult followings, they are massive and widespread,

going far beyond the scope of many prior cult products. Additionally, conventions have

become commonplace. Most states now boast multiple fan conventions and niche film

festivals giving fans in all locations easy access to stars and events full of like-minded

individuals. The cult media pilgrimage has become obtainable by all.

The shape and face of cult fandom is quickly changing because, as Henry Jenkins

notes in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* we have all become

fans.[181] Cult media has become mainstream making it difficult to discern what the

dominant culture is, thus making it more arduous for the counter culture to rally against

it.

Yet, the quest for blockbusters and cult fan dedication continues with an

increasing number of marketing professionals cleverly fighting for audience attention and

dollars. More and more the audiences are playing an active role in not only the marketing

campaigns and the formulation of media cults, but through their own voice and media-

related creations they are now changing the shape of the medium themselves.

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[180] *The Room*. Dir. Tommy Wiseau. Wiseau Films, 2003. Film.

[181] Jenkins, Henry. "Afterword: The Future of Fandom". *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World.* New York: New York University Press, 2007.

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Vita

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