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## Paratexts and the Commercial Promotion of Film Authorship: James Wan and *Saw*

By Tyson Wils

### Introduction

This article discusses one way Malaysian-Australian James Wan (b. 1977-) (1) can be considered or constructed as an author. Wan is best known for the film *Saw* (2004), which he co-wrote with Leigh Whannell (2). *Saw* was made for around \$US1.2 million but grossed just over \$US103 million worldwide at the box office (3). *Saw* also turned out to be the first instalment in a seven-part series. Wan and Whannell have both claimed that they did not make *Saw* with the intention of producing a sequel, even though at the end of the film the criminal mastermind John Kramer (aka Jigsaw, played by Tobin Bell) escapes leaving one of his victims, Adam Stanheight (Leigh Whannell), locked in an industrial bathroom. In what would become an iconic moment for the film series Kramer turns off the lights and closes the room's large sliding door saying to Stanheight "Game Over" (not only is this scene directly referenced at the end of *Saw: The Final Chapter* [2010], but the idea of playing a "game" is developed in various ways across the series). Whannell explains why the ending of *Saw* was not intended to leave open the possibility for a sequel:

*It wasn't us leaving the door open at all. We thought that was a great ending to the film. The sequels have explored the mythology of Jigsaw and who this person is, and I was involved in writing two of them, the first two sequels, so I've been a part of it. It's been great to explore that, but there is something about that ending of *Saw* we thought was quite final, that door shutting and everything going dark. (4)*

Wan only directed the first *Saw* and merely shares a story credit with Whannell on *Saw* and *Saw III* (2006) (although Wan did also serve as an executive producer on *Saw II* [2005], *Saw III* and *Saw IV* [2007]). Despite his relatively small input into the subsequent *Saw* franchise, Wan is credited, along with Whannell, with launching a popular culture phenomenon. "The *Saw* franchise of films", as James Aston and John Wallis explain,

*is the largest-grossing horror franchise of all time. Over the course of seven films (2003-2010), the series has grossed, as of July 2010, \$872 million at the box office and more than \$30 million on DVD... It has also spawned two video games (*Saw*, 2009; *Saw: Flesh and Blood*, 2010), an amusement ride (*Saw: The Ride* at Thorpe Park Theme Park, Lincolnshire, UK), several mazes, and a comic book (*Saw: Rebirth*, 2005). (5)*

However, Wan is ambivalent about the *Saw* series. For instance, in numerous interviews he corrects interviewers who claim that *Saw* was a bloody and gory film; he suggests that the only reason people think this is because they look back at the first *Saw* film through the filter of the *Saw* sequels. It is the sequels, he says, that were particularly graphic. In an interview for *MakingOf.com* – a behind-the-scenes entertainment industry web portal – an interviewer refers to *Saw* as a film in which there is “blood and guts... flying everywhere”. Wan responds by saying that in the first “*Saw* not much blood was flowing at all... the *Saw* sequels were the ones that... [in] retrospect made everyone think that the *Saw* films are all really violent and gory... the first *Saw* film played more like a psychological thriller.” (6) In another interview for the blog “Goodnight, Neverland!”, Wan claims “There were scary things in the first *Saw* film that people now forget. All they can remember now is all the traps [7] and the blood and guts of the sequels. That was never the focus of the first film.” (8) He has consistently claimed that a major motivation to make the supernatural horror film *Insidious* (2010) was to alter the reputation he had gained from being associated with the *Saw* franchise. He felt he needed to find a way to leave the “splat-pack”. In his own words, he wanted to “craft a really creepy, suspenseful movie” that “felt like an old-fashioned throwback” to classic haunted house films such as *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) and *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963) (9); in other words, he wanted to make a more restrained film than *Saw* and also one that was gore-free. Judging by the following quote he feels that he was successful at doing this:

*Leigh and I will always be very grateful for what the Saw films have done for us, especially the first one. It gave us our start, it allowed us the opportunity to have a career. But it took me a while to get up from underneath its shadow because of what it became – it became this larger than life thing and its own mythology. For better or for worse it became its own brand as well, and I felt it had a lot of baggage going with it. So it definitely took me a while to get out from under it, and it was around the time Saw VII (2010) was finishing off and Insidious was starting when I think people started seeing me, not just as the Saw guy but started seeing me as a film director. (10)*

The supernatural horror film *The Conjuring* (2013) also represents for Wan another attempt to reconstruct the image he feels he has had since the success of the *Saw* films. For example, in an interview for the entertainment news website *HitFix* the interviewer suggests to Wan that since *Saw* “there are people that have [had] a certain expectation of your voice in film. I think you have actually gone further and further away from that and come more towards the atmosphere and the character end of things – this [*The Conjuring*] being really the ultimate expression of that.” Wan responds by saying that because of the success of *Saw*, and because his next two features – *Dead Silence* (2007) and *Death Sentence* (2007) – did not get the same recognition as his first film, “for a

long period of my career there people only knew me as the *Saw* guy... but who wants their first film to be the thing that represents them?" He goes on to suggest that his reputation as the king of gore energised him to want to prove to others and to himself that he could make different kinds of films and that both *Insidious* and *The Conjuring* have given him "the chance to show people that I am not just that guy [the *Saw* guy]" (11). What Wan means by other kinds of films here is films that are more low-key, more effective at creating a character-driven plot, and better at slowly building up an overall atmosphere of tension and dread. In terms of *Insidious*, Wan and Whannell have repeatedly suggested that what they are trying to do with the film is create a narrative-based horror film rather than an action-based one – by this they mean to create a horror film that allows spectators to identify, and emotionally connect, with the central characters. They suggest that many contemporary horror films over invest in setting up a stream of visual and aural shocks without first providing sufficient character development. In other words, Wan's attempt to reconstruct his image involves not only distinguishing himself from *Saw*, and the *Saw* franchise more broadly, but also from other horror films in the marketplace. Wan and Whannell aim to make "quality" genre films that stand out from the rest of the pack.

Yet *Saw* has continued to be pivotal to the marketing of Wan's films and to his identity as an author. Moreover, being known as the "Saw guy" has helped Wan work as a director in Hollywood. This article will argue that one way an author-name is attributed to Wan is through the promotional material for his films, particularly the title *Saw*. In order to make and support this argument the official trailers for *Dead Silence*, *Death Sentence*, *Insidious* and *The Conjuring* will be discussed. The official movie poster for *Insidious* will also be referred to, as will a poster for *Death Sentence* made exclusively for Comic-Con International: San Diego; although this poster is now widely available on a host of entertainment related websites and databases promoting the film (as are all the other posters and trailers for Wan's films).

Trailers and movie posters perform a range of functions. Not only do they promote texts, they often also provide narrative and/or genre information to audiences. As Lisa Kernan has said, they also often try to appeal "to the spectator's attraction to well-known stars (or alternatively, directors or author as stars)" (12). In other words, trailers and movie posters are paratexts, materials that surround a film and which, in the words of Jonathan Grey, suggest to spectators "ways of looking at the film... and frames for understanding or engaging with it" (13). What will be demonstrated in this article is that Wan is indirectly or associatively constructed as an author through the trailers and posters for his films; in particular, through the superimposed titles and taglines which utilise the title *Saw* as a promotional device. Furthermore, it will be suggested that the way Wan is constructed

as an author in these paratexts relates to contemporary notions of auteurism discussed by writers such as Timothy Corrigan (14). Corrigan argues that one of the key ways the concept of auteurism survives today is as an industrial and economic strategy for organising how spectators respond to film texts.

### **Paratexts and Contemporary Auteurism**

Looking at authorship from an economic and industrial perspective, including in terms of how an author's name is constructed in paratextual material, is different from other approaches to film authorship. It is different, for example, from the romantic notion of individual creation which developed within classic auteurism (15). Within "classic auteurism" there was a tendency in the work of many of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics and writers such as Andrew Sarris to see the relationship between the work and its creator in basically romantic terms. For instance, while for Sarris the "auteur theory" makes it necessary to take popular and even low-brow genres seriously – as he says: "To resurrect Ford and Hawks, it is necessary also to resurrect the Western" (16) – he also stipulates that for a filmmaker to be classed as an auteur they must be able to achieve personal expression by transcending and, in a certain sense, opposing genre filmmaking and the system of film production and distribution more broadly. He argues that "The auteur theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression. It is as if a few brave spirits had managed to overcome the gravitational pull of the mass of movies." (17) As Edward Buscombe has suggested, this – along with other propositions in such seminal works as "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (18) and *The American Cinema* – is evidence of Sarris' un-reconstituted romanticism, his belief "that individuality and originality are valuable in themselves" (19), and that it is as a result of being subject to historical and material conditions that an artist can truly realise their personal vision by reacting to and rising above such conditions (which, as Buscombe notes, creates the contradictory assertion that historical and material conditions are not, ultimately, that significant in terms of understanding artistic genius). Ultimately, for Sarris, individual expression is the main standard by which a film's value can be judged. In many of his writings, he presupposes that meanings exist which have to do with the personality of the individual filmmaker; furthermore, he assumes that these meanings are inherent within the filmmaker's work. For such reasons, he does not generally analyse external factors that contribute to the construction of authorship. By contrast, a focus on paratextual material addresses how an author's name is ascribed to a film; it does this by examining those discourses and practices that are separate from the film but which also make it available to be received and consumed.

Paratextual analysis is also distinct from another approach to authorship common in classic auteurism. In the 1972 edition of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen argues that “Fuller or Hawks or Hitchcock, the directors, are quite separate from ‘Fuller’ or ‘Hawks’ or Hitchcock’, the structures named after them” (20). By these structures Wollen means the “unconscious, unintended meaning[s]” (21) that a viewer can read into a group of texts and which they can trace back to the presence of an individual director on set. What Wollen is suggesting about auteur criticism here is that it involves decoding underlying structures in a group of films and then assigning these structures to the director responsible for the films, who “through the force of his [or her] preoccupations” (22) on set contributes, often unknowingly, to the formation of these structures. This understanding of how auteur theory analyses the work of one director is quite different from how many of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics and scholar-critics like Sarris talk about the work of individual filmmakers. In contrast to these writers, Wollen represents an approach to authorship influenced by structuralism and reception studies. As Barry Keith Grant has suggested, in the late 1960s, early 1970s, Wollen and other English critics, such as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, appropriated the work of structuralist theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and, as a result, “the concept of the author changed from the comparatively naïve and impressionistic romanticism of classic auteurism, in which the director’s world-view was inscribed in the film by force of his (rarely her) personality, to a more rigorous, even ‘scientific’ consideration of the film text” (23). In other words, rather than treat the author as an expressive individual, whose intentions can be extracted from a film or group of films, as Sarris and many of the *Cahiers* critics had done, the British auteur-structuralists treated the author as a textual system or an underlying, unconscious structure. Nonetheless, these structuralists still attended to meanings produced in relation to single texts and their reception rather than to the role played by paratexts and other factors in constructing authorship.

It is important to note that those classic auteurist critics who drew many of their assumptions from romantic theory, did sometimes recognise the restrictions that the industrial system of film production – particularly the Hollywood studio-system – could place upon filmmakers. Buscombe, for example, notes that many of the *Cahiers* critics also produced essays that discussed the industrial and material factors involved in film production, factors to do with “the organisation of the film industry... film genres, and... the technology of the cinema” (24). While these essays could be read as representing a set of ideas in contrast to some of the romantic presuppositions underpinning auteurism – since talk of the organisational and technological conditions necessary to the existence of the film industry may lead to reflections on the historical and social circumstances that curb and modify individual expression – it was often the case that potentially contradictory

ideas were left unresolved. Even Sarris, arguably one of the most romantic of the American auteur critics, acknowledged the limits of individuated artistic expression: “To look at a film as the expression of a director’s vision is not to credit the director with total creativity. All directors, and not just in Hollywood, are imprisoned by the conditions of their craft and their culture.” (25) However, as noted earlier, what Sarris does is turn this proposition into something that strengthens the case for individual expression.

Constraining and altering personal freedom and creativity is only one of the many functions that the industrial system of film production can have. Within its own internal conditions it can also produce meanings to do with authorship. These meanings can, in-turn, be consumed and read by audiences. As Stephen Crofts has argued, there are different ways of conceiving of film authorship and one of these ways involves defining authorship in terms of how a filmmaker’s name is attributed to particular texts (26). Understanding authorship in this sense means analysing how a filmmaker’s name circulates within the marketplace of distribution and exhibition. Certainly Crofts is aware that once a filmmaker’s name is out in the public realm it is subject to a range of historical, economic and cultural factors, factors that will cause different pleasures and meanings to be associated with an author’s name. However, the aim in this section of this article is to provide a close analysis of how authorship is produced in relation to advertising (film posters and trailers in particular). Advertising is an activity that involves selling products. In one sense then the construction of authorship is related to promotion and to the business of creating a commercial commodity. However, as Grey has argued, paratexts such as movie posters and trailers do not simply function to promote films, they also present and frame films in particular ways. In other words, they suggest to spectators ways to understand and engage with films. What is being examined in this article is how paratexts produce meanings to do with authorship.

Understanding authorship in terms of paratexts such as movie posters and trailers is consonant with the contemporary notion of auteurism suggested by Corrigan. Corrigan argues that auteurism plays an increasingly important role today “as a commercial strategy for organising audience reception” (27); although, as he also says, before François Truffaut’s polemical “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema” (1954) partly instigated *la politique des auteurs*, the author had already existed as a critical construction and also been something fashioned by and for commerce (a point that will be discussed in more detail shortly). Contemporary auteurism is not defined so much by certain thinkers or schools of thought but rather exists as *doxa*, as a type of knowledge that is shared by the community at large, which accept it as a normal way of speaking about and representing film and other cultural texts. The form of knowledge that passes for auteurism today is not made-up of all of the same

elements that constituted the ideology and aesthetic of classic auteurism. As Barry Keith Grant argues:

*despite the seismic changes in critical fashion during the past half century, auteurism – at its most basic, the idea that there is an author to a film – has been central to the historical development of both popular film and serious film criticism and theory... aspects of auteurism have overlapped with virtually every subsequent critical theory and paradigm. Considered radical when it was first introduced, the claim that some directors may express an individual vision, a worldview, over a series of films with stylistic and thematic consistency is now simply common wisdom in everyone’s understanding not only of cinema, but also of other art forms of popular culture, from music to sports to comic books. (28)*

However, auteurism does not only survive as a form of knowledge; it also survives as a practice. Corrigan, for example, suggests that authorship is commonly used by the film industry as a way to distinguish texts within the marketplace of distribution and exhibition. Although, by implication, this also extends to audiences, and the cultural sphere more broadly, since the marketing of texts involves addressing audiences; this address, however, is not a one-way act of communication. As Corrigan points out, the meanings that an auteur produces are meanings that can be “reconstructed by an audience” (29). Corrigan also argues that authorship has always been a way for the film industry to take itself seriously and compete with other more “traditional” and established art forms like theatre (and, it should be added, this is not purely related to commercial strategies it is also tied into issues of self-representation for directors, producers, actors and others who may or may not be considered authors [or auteurs] themselves but have the language of authorship available to them to talk about the projects they are working on in terms of art and personal expression). Indeed, Corrigan proposes that it was only in the 1950s and 1960s in the – largely romantic – writings of the French and American critics that authorship first became “disconnected from its marketing and commercial implications” (30), and from its industrial and institutional histories. Obviously, a distinct set of aesthetic and discursive practices to do with authorship came into being once the *cinéma d’auteurs* was established and developed in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the concept of auteurism was taken up by writers such as Sarris.

Corrigan says that the reason auteurism plays an increasingly important role today “as a commercial strategy for organising audience reception” (31) is because of the proliferation of media texts i.e. films, television shows, comic books, computer games, and the increase in publicity and advertising that conditions how consumers read and experience these texts. Drawing on the work of Meghan



Morris, he argues that it has got to the point where the precondition of responding to a film (or other media text) as the work of a particular auteur is heavily bound up with how that film is commercially packaged. In other words, movie posters, trailers, interviews, cross-promotional advertisements, entertainment news scoops, and other paratexts now have so many meanings and pleasures attached to them they have, more-or-less, become ends-in-themselves. It has got to the point, argues Corrigan, that “an auteur film today... [is] capable of being understood and consumed without being seen” (32). Grey has observed something similar. He suggests that not only can paratexts determine what films (or other texts) count as works of art, and assign value to films based on the presence of an author (or a series of authors), paratexts can also sometimes be the only thing consumers engage with. Paratexts can “create an author figure” and insist upon a film’s “uniqueness, value and authenticity” (33); yet, they can also become primary rather than secondary, the sole source of meaning for a would-be viewer who is yet to see the source text. Grey suggests that, given the abundant number of media texts consumers have to choose between, a mode of speculative consumption based upon encountering paratexts is now central to individual life.

Precisely because paratexts help us decide which texts to consume, we often know many texts only at the paratextual level. Everyone consumes many more paratexts than films or programs. When we move onward to the film or program, those paratexts help frame our understanding and consumption; but when we do not move on to the film itself, all we are left with is the paratext. Hence, for instance, when at a multiplex we choose to watch one of the ten films on offer, we not only create an interpretive construction of the film that we saw; but often also speculatively consume many of the other nine. Paratexts, then, become the very stuff upon which much popular interpretation is based (34).

On the one hand, it can be said that certain practices of auteurism are bound up with the commercial forces and strategies that characterise the business of making movies – as Justin Wyatt has argued: “The existence of the “author-name” from a commercial standpoint is most significant: clearly, distributors utilize authorship as one advertising strategy to gain a place within the competitive market for mainstream film” (35). On the other hand, audiences use auteurism to organise their own reception of texts (this use of auteurism cannot be entirely divorced from the way texts are marketed and sold but it is also not entirely reducible to these things either). While there are undoubtedly many factors that motivate audiences to use auteurism to organise how they see (and even respond to) films, it is reasonable to suggest that one dominant motivation is the usefulness of auteurism for negotiating the complicated field of mass and niche entertainment. Selecting certain texts as “expressive organisations”, as “product(s) of an auteur” (36), is a valuable way of cutting through

the cluttered world of media, a world that is full of films, television shows and online videos (e.g. YouTube clips), which are all constantly available and easily accessible via different devices and technologies.

What this relationship between industry, audience and text suggests is that authorship is constructed, first, in terms of how economic factors structure the way cultural texts are produced and, second, in how these texts are received. It is within this context that an analysis will now be undertaken of how James Wan is produced as an author through the advertising material for his films. The aim here is not to deny the possibility that Wan has things to say or that he has personal intentions, but to show that industrial and institutional considerations are pertinent to questions of authorship (not only in relation to Wan but also to contemporary notions of auteurism more generally). Certainly, as pointed out above, the dynamics of audience reception are another important component in understanding how particular meanings and functions can be attributed to a filmmaker's name.

#### **“From the Director of *Saw*”: Brand Images and the Promotion of Auteurism**

In the context of discussing authorship in terms of how a filmmaker's name is attributed to particular texts, it is productive to examine how the promotion of Wan's films contributes to the construction of Wan as an author. For example, the official trailer for *Dead Silence* announces: “From the writers and director of *Saw* comes a new experience on the razor edge of fear”. This superimposed text may give the impression that Wan was a central writer on *Saw*; in fact, he only co-wrote the story for the film. As has already been pointed out, the screenplay was written by Whannell (who also starred in the film). This superimposed text also fails to acknowledge that Whannell was the sole screenplay writer on *Dead Silence* (although a story credit for the film is shared between him and Wan). The official trailer for Wan's next feature, *Death Sentence*, claims: “From the Director of *Saw*”, although the Comic-Con International: San Diego movie poster does announce: “From the Director of *Saw* and the Author of *Death Wish*”. Again, Wan's own name is not mentioned. Rather, his role as director of *Saw* is highlighted; although in the poster for *Death Sentence* this reference is made in the context of the author of the novel *Death Wish* (1972). The fact the author of *Death Wish*, Brian Garfield, is cited is really just a technical point, albeit one that is misleading. While Garfield did do some early work on a screenplay for the film, the job of writing the shooting-script was eventually handed over to Ian Mackenzie Jeffers; moreover, the Jeffers screenplay, and Wan's film, essentially have very little to do with either the novel *Death Wish* or with Garfield's follow up book *Death Sentence* (which is obviously where the title of Wan's subsequent film comes from) (37).

For *Insidious*, the official trailer says “From the makers of *Paranormal Activity* and *Saw*”, which at least implicitly acknowledges the role of Whannell. In the official movie poster there is more information: “From the makers of *Paranormal Activity*, From the director of *Saw*, A James Wan film”. While Wan’s name is finally mentioned, it is printed in smaller font size than the film titles *Saw* and *Paranormal Activity*. Moreover, like the *Death Sentence* poster, the reference to *Saw* is made in the context of another text, this time *Paranormal Activity*. The reason *Paranormal Activity* is mentioned is because a major part of the team responsible for producing *Insidious* were also involved in the production of *Paranormal Activity*: Oren Peli (the writer, director, and co-producer of *Paranormal Activity*); Jason Blum (co-producer of *Paranormal Activity*; Blum’s production company, Blumhouse Productions, is also behind *Insidious: Chapter 2*); and Steven Schneider and Jeanette Brill (also both co-producers of *Paranormal Activity*). The official trailer for Wan’s latest film – *The Conjuring* – announces “From the Director of *Saw* and *Insidious*”. Again *Saw* is mentioned but this time alongside another of Wan’s films. What is suggested by this reference to two pre-existing films is that the advertised work – *The Conjuring* – can be placed in the context of two of Wan’s films rather than one (and thus an emerging body of work).

While Wan’s name is rarely mentioned directly in any of the promotional material described above, his role as director or maker of *Saw* is regularly referred to. It is in this sense that he can be regarded as an author. To put it another way, it is a result of being associated with a pre-sold property – the *Saw* film (or in the case of the promotional material for *The Conjuring* both *Saw* and *Insidious*) – that Wan’s name indirectly circulates in the official advertising spaces that make-up the formal media market of distribution. In other words, Wan is primarily known by the work that he has done, which also means that, rather than having the author name the work, the work names the author.

This form of authorship has a classificatory function. Several films are related to a particular film – *Saw* – and also related implicitly to the name Wan. A relationship is established between these texts as a result of the specific links that they have; moreover, this relationship calls forth into being a particular kind of film-group formation. Put another way, each film being advertised is associated with other texts – each film is associated with *Saw* but, in the case of *Death Sentence*, also the novel/film *Death Wish* and, in the case of *Insidious*, also *Paranormal Activity*. What being associated in this way means is that each film is characterised by its relationship to other texts.

James Wan, the name, is indirectly present within this set of relationships; that is to say, the name Wan is part of a network of paratexts. Moreover, not only do these paratexts refer to source texts,

they also organise and arrange source texts in a particular manner, meaning that the name Wan is also part of a broader system of meaning. Furthermore, this construction of authorship is the function of the circulation of paratexts, for it is via the advertising campaigns created by production companies and distributors that Wan's name is made implicitly present. What all of this suggests is that paratexts can create an "author figure" but do so in a way that does not involve directly referring to the filmmaker's name.

As already noted, this form of authorship exists in the context of promotional material. In this instance, the aim of the promotional material is two-fold: to attempt to popularise a cultural product (a film) and to motivate individuals to consume that cultural product (initially by seeing the film at the cinema and then renting, legally downloading, and/or buying the film once it has been released in the ancillary marketplace). In order to sell the film the promotional material needs a marketing hook and a saleable look or, in other words, a brand image. In the case of most of Wan's films, this brand image is not constructed on the basis of star actors, a star director or a popular book or computer-game. The only exception to this is *Death Sentence* which uses the name Kevin Bacon, who stars as the main character in the film, in the official trailer and in different movie posters. Moreover, and as already mentioned, the novel *Death Wish* gets mentioned in one poster for the film. (Although this book was commercially and critically successful upon its release, most people associate *Death Wish* with the 1974 film directed by Michael Winner and starring Charles Bronson; arguably, therefore, the reference to *Death Wish* is likely to evoke the film rather than the novel.) The brand image for most of Wan's films is built on pre-existing film titles that have a genre and a narrative image (38) strongly identified with them. The genre of horror is, for instance, attached to both *Saw* and *Paranormal Activity*; although, in the case of both films, other subgenres, such as low-budget horror might also be evoked. Boris Trbic, for example, has said that most Australian film critics "placed *Saw* in the context of the rise, crisis and resurrection of low-budget features in the USA and Australia", features such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) and *Open Water* (Chris Kentis, 2003) (39).

From the perspective of industry, the crediting of Wan in the posters and trailers for his films – even if this billing largely happens indirectly (e.g. "From the director of *Saw*") – aims to create some kind of reciprocal relationship between the film being advertised and other texts. In other words, the goal is to make sure the related texts have complementary meanings that can be interchanged. In this sense, matches are created between *Saw* and all the other films that utilise *Saw* as a selling point. Similarly too, a match is created between *Death Sentence* and the *Death Wish* film(s) and/or novel and between *Insidious* and *Paranormal Activity*. Wan has expressed one aspect of the

homogeneity implied by these reciprocal relationships in the following quote. Talking about the use of the tagline “From the Director of *Saw*” in the *Death Sentence* movie poster, Wan claims that “it says from the director of *Saw* and also the author of *Death Wish* so right off the bat you know what you’re going to get. You know what you are in for. The fans that love my films will know this is another James Wan kind of film, but in a different story.” (40) The correspondences between such advertised texts are designed to motivate people, who are part of Hollywood’s large national and international market, to consume the advertised movie; in the process of doing this, however, these paratextual matches also function to address target audiences, since while Hollywood films may end up as part of other screen cultures around the world they are also packaged with particular audiences in mind. These audiences are addressed on the basis of things like genre – which involves the experiences and pleasures spectators expect to get out of viewing films with certain generic characteristics – and narrative image.

Obviously, the marketing hook and saleable look of promotional material is not limited to what is said about the director, or the makers, of a particular text. Other factors such as how a trailer or poster represents and advertises a film’s tone, genre and/or narrative will also contribute to the construction of a promotional discourse. Nonetheless, based on a reading of some of the superimposed text and taglines used in the advertisements for Wan’s films, it is possible to get a sense of how an “author function” can be ascribed to the director’s name. This “author function” occurs in the context of constructing a brand image, which suggests, as Corrigan argues, that one way auteurism survives today is “as a commercial strategy for organising audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims” (41).

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that one way James Wan is constructed as an author is in terms of the promotional material for his films. Not only does Wan’s name indirectly circulate in distribution channels via some of the superimposed text and taglines used in the trailers and posters for his films, his name also becomes part of a network of paratexts. These paratexts organise and classify source texts; this means that Wan’s name is also inscribed within a broader textual system of meaning. Moreover, in the context of defining authorship in terms of how Wan’s name is attributed to particular films, it has also been shown that he is constructed as an author in terms of the commercial logic of movie advertising and branding. It is for these reasons that Wan fits a “contemporary” notion of authorship discussed by writers such as Timothy Corrigan. For Corrigan, auteurism plays an increasingly important role today in promoting films and structuring how spectators respond to film texts. While audience reception is a dynamic phenomenon, involving

spectators' past textual experiences and knowledge, this article has focused on industry produced texts and the meanings to do with authorship that are produced by these texts. Put another way, this article has examined how authorship can be created by paratextual elements that are separate from the main film text but which make this text available to be received and consumed.

## ENDNOTES

1. James Wan was born in Malaysia but raised in Australia.
2. Leigh Whannell was born in 1977 in Melbourne, Australia. He met Wan while the two of them were studying film in the Media Arts program at RMIT University in the mid-to-late 1990s.
3. Wan has said that the starting budget for *Saw* was \$US700,000. But when the major entertainment company Lionsgate came on board, and agreed to distribute the film, the production budget was increased to around \$US1,000,000. See Haleigh Foutch, "James Wan and Leigh Whannell *Insidious* Interview", *Collider.com*. 2013: <http://collider.com/leigh-whannell-insidious-chapter-2-interview/>.
4. Whannell in Scott Tobias, "Saw creators Leigh Whannell and James Wan", *A.V. Club* 29 October 2010: [www.avclub.com/articles/saw-creators-leigh-whannell-and-james-wan,46975/](http://www.avclub.com/articles/saw-creators-leigh-whannell-and-james-wan,46975/).
5. James Aston and John Walliss, "'I've never murdered anyone in my life. The decisions are up to them': Ethical Guidance and the Turn Toward Cultural Pessimism", *To See the Saw Movies: Essays on Torture Porn and Post-9/11 Horror*, ed. Aston and Walliss, McFarland, London, 2013, p. 13.
6. James Wan, "Director James Wan discusses *Insidious*", *YouTube* 8 August 2011: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXgcdxclkKs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXgcdxclkKs).
7. The traps Wan is referring to here are the mediaeval looking, Rube Goldberg inspired, torture devices used by Jigsaw and his accomplices to "test" their subjects.
8. "Interview – Leigh Whannell/James Wan of *Insidious/Saw*", *Goodnight, Neverland!* November 2011: [www.goodnightneverland.com/?p=535](http://www.goodnightneverland.com/?p=535).
9. See Nigel W. Smith, "*Insidious* Director James Wan: Tired of Torture Porn, 'I Want to Make My Romanic Comedy'", *Indiewire* 31 March 2011: [www.indiewire.com/article/insidious\\_director\\_james\\_wan](http://www.indiewire.com/article/insidious_director_james_wan). However, Wan and Whannell also both acknowledge the obvious influence of *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982) on *Insidious* and, indeed, the film itself pays direct homage to the Hooper/Spielberg collaboration. There are also clear attempts to be David Lynch-like at times in the film, such as when the character Lorraine Lambert (Barbara Hershey) recalls a dream she had about a house late at night. In addition, the way supernatural aspects of the narrative are tied to the film's audiovisual design is reminiscent of proto-blockbuster horror movies such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).

10. Wan in Drew Turney, "Interview: James Wan for *Insidious Chapter 2*", *Dark Horizons* 12 December 2013: [www.darkhorizons.com/features/1686/james-wan-for-insidious-chapter-2](http://www.darkhorizons.com/features/1686/james-wan-for-insidious-chapter-2).
11. Drew McWeeny, "James Wan Talks About Redefining Himself After *Saw* With *The Conjuring*", *HitFix* 3 April 2013: [www.hitfix.com/motion-captured/james-wan-talks-about-redefining-himself-after-saw-with-the-conjuring#~ojhHmsfAHpxkJ4](http://www.hitfix.com/motion-captured/james-wan-talks-about-redefining-himself-after-saw-with-the-conjuring#~ojhHmsfAHpxkJ4).
12. Lisa Kernan, *A Cinema of (Coming) Attractions: American Movie Trailer Rhetoric*, The University of Texas Press, Austin, 2004, p. 19.
13. Jonathan Grey, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York University Press, New York, 2010, pp. 10-11.
14. Timothy Corrigan, "The Commerce of Auteurism: Coppola, Kluge, Ruiz", *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, Routledge, London, 1991.
15. The category "classic auteurism" is used by Barry Keith Grant in his film reader on auteurs and authorship. See *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, Blackwell, Oxford, 2008.
16. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1968, p. 30.
17. Sarris, p. 31.
18. Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", *Film Culture* no. 27, Winter 1962-63, pp. 1-8.
19. Edward Buscombe, "Ideas of Authorship", *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, p. 80 (essay originally published in 1973).
20. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1972, p. 168.
21. Wollen, pp. 167-168.
22. Wollen, p. 167.
23. Barry Keith Grant, "Introduction", *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, p. 3.
24. Buscombe, p. 79.
25. Sarris, p. 36.
26. Stephen Crofts, "Authorship and Hollywood", *Wide Angle* vol. 5, no.3, 1983.
27. Corrigan, p. 103.
28. Grant, p. 1.
29. Corrigan, p. 105.
30. Corrigan, p. 102.
31. Corrigan, p. 103.
32. Corrigan, p. 106.

33. Grey, p. 82.
34. Grey, p. 26.
35. Justin Wyatt, "Economic Constraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur", *Velvet Light Trap* no. 38, Fall 1996, p. 51.
36. Corrigan, p. 102.
37. Garfield has said that the film *Death Sentence* was never going to be able to be a strict sequel to Winner's *Death Wish* because the film rights for the *Death Sentence* franchise are still owned by somebody else. See Nikki Tranter, "Historian: Interview with Brian Garfield", *Pop Matters* 4 March 2008: [www.popmatters.com/feature/historian-interview-with-brian-garfield](http://www.popmatters.com/feature/historian-interview-with-brian-garfield).
38. See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, Routledge, London, 1982. The "narrative image" of a film relates to how the film functions as a component in public discourse; put another way, it has to do with how cultural knowledge builds up around a film. This relates to not only knowledge about what kind of film it is (say it's generic structure and tone – e.g. a nasty or fun horror film) but also other concepts that help to define the film and differentiate it from other texts in the marketplace. Therefore, the narrative image of a film has to do with the intertextual contexts within which a film can be placed.
39. Boris Trbic, "The Low-Budget Australian Horror Film", *Metro* no. 144, 2005, pp. 143-44.
40. Wan Rebecca Murray, "Exclusive Interview with *Death Sentence* Director James Wan", *Hollywood Movies* 2007: [http://movies.about.com/od/deathsentence/a/deathjw072807\\_2.htm](http://movies.about.com/od/deathsentence/a/deathjw072807_2.htm)
41. Corrigan, p. 103.

### **James Wan Filmography (as director):**

- 2014 *Fast & Furious 7* (Feature) (in production)
- 2013 *Insidious: Chapter 2* (Feature)
- 2013 *The Conjuring* (Feature)
- 2010 *Insidious* (Feature)
- 2008 *Doggie Heaven* (Short Video)
- 2007 *Death Sentence* (Feature)
- 2007 *Dead Silence* (Feature)
- 2004 *Saw* (Feature)
- 2003 *Saw* (Short Film)
- 2000 *Stygian* (co-directed by Shannon Young) (Feature)



