"Where nothing is Off Limits": Genre, Commercial Revitalization, and the Teen Slasher Film Posters of 1982-1984

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The poster with which Artists Releasing Corporation promoted its 1983 teen slasher film promised American youths that *The House on Sorority Row* (Rosman 1983) would be the type of place "[w]here nothing is off limits". Sitting beneath an imposing image of a scantily-clad young woman, which bore little relation to the film's content, this tagline might as well have been an industry in-joke concerning the lengths to which US distributors were going in their attempts to reinvigorate the commercial potential of films about groups of young people being menaced by shadowy maniacs. After having proven highly profitable on the back of the relative commercial success of *Halloween* (1978), *Silent Scream* (Harris 1980), *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham 1980), and *Prom Night* (Lynch 1980), teen slashers had, by 1981, come to be considered box office poison following a series of flops that had included *My Bloody Valentine* (Mihalka 1981), *Hell Night* (DeSimone 1981), and *The Prowler* (Zito 1981). Misrepresenting these light-hearted youth-centered date-movies as what Robin Wood (1987, 79-85) called "violence-against-women movies" was just one of the enterprising ways in which from 1982 to 1984 efforts to reenergize the ticket sales of teen slasher films were engineered, not by creatively-minded filmmakers but by resourceful distributors. Catalyzing this situation, and the prominent role distributors played in it, was the fact that the teen slashers released across these three years had either been made before the 1981 teen slashers were released or soon after – a period of time that witnessed no clear demonstrations of a textually innovative teen slasher securing a large enough audience to encourage filmmakers to replicate its distinctive content.

In spite of cases like the teen slasher films of 1982-84, scholars, like popular writers and industry-insiders, tend to spotlight the conduct and contributions of production personnel rather than that of distributors. In doing so, they are inclined to underestimate or downplay the extent to which marketing practices drive efforts to reinvigorate the box office prowess of once-lucrative types of film. This focus placed on production operations often gives rise to what Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery called the "masterpiece tradition" (67-76), wherein a canon of films is constructed on the back of what is deemed aesthetic achievement (and, to which I would add, on the back of what are perceived to be impressive financial accomplishments). Locating supposedly visionary or astute production personnel at the center of film historiography results

in the bypassing of those commercially unremarkable episodes that scholars such as Peter Stanfield (2001) and Tico Romao (2003) have shown are part of the lifespan of any given type of film. These tendencies have generated highly selective histories that propagate simplified notions of industrial machinery consistently overcoming economic challenges thanks to inventive filmmaking practice.

The foundation of innovation and success that supports much film historiography is arguably nowhere more apparent or unsound than in histories of the tales of youth-in-jeopardy which have been dubbed stalker films (Dika), slasher movies (Clover), or teen slasher films (Wee). Widely accepted in popular and academic circles has been one particular history of the teen slasher film. It begins invariably with discussion of the supposedly visionary drive-in hit *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper 1974) before turning to John Carpenter's supposedly stylish hit *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978). After brief mention is made of the production boom of 1980 and 1981that saw films like *Friday the 13th*, *Graduation Day* (Freed 1981) and *Happy Birthday to Me* (Thompson 1981) saturate American theaters, focus usually shifts to the comparatively money-spinning and visually imaginative *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series of the mid-to-late 1980s (Craven 1984, Sholder 1985, Russell 1987, Harlin 1988, Hopkins 1989). Finally, is spotlighted the high-profile "re-emergence" of teen slasher films in the wake of the surprise or "sleeper" hit *Scream* (Craven 1996); an event often claimed to have marked the advent of the "post-modern slasher"—purported to be the product of an intelligent, witty, and self-conscious mode of filmmaking that deconstructed the supposedly humorless, dumb, and unselfconscious teen slashers of yesteryear (see for example Rockoff; Wee). Within this saga of creative aspiration and commercial reward, little room has evidently existed for complicating notions such as textual continuation, marketing guile, financial disappointment, or for the fact that teen slashers have been made and released almost every year for over three decades. These important points would have come to light had more attention been paid to the films' distributors. Accordingly, a fuller industrial history of the teen slasher film or for that matter other types of film would benefit from taking greater account of distribution operations and from also examining those periods characterized primarily by financial disappointment.

This essay therefore seeks to fill a void in American film historiography, pointing in the process to the necessity to revise the histories of other types of film. It will do so by focusing on a neglected chapter in the history of the American movie business in which, to resuscitate a formerly lucrative type of film, a disparate collection of mostly independent distributors relied heavily on movie posters – the most widely reproduced, widely seen, and, for under-capitalized independent companies, the most affordable marketing tool available in the early-to-mid 1980s. Reinvigorating teen slasher films in the period 1982-84, I argue, was attempted not by significant innovations in film content but by employing film posters to convey a series of discourses that had circulated around earlier teen slashers. The posters framed the new teen slasher films not only as violence-against-women movies, but as youth event pictures, as quality exploitation, and as indeterminate horror films.

Movie Posters, Genre, and Industry Logic

Before focusing on how posters framed the teen slasher films of 1982-84, it is advantageous to consider two key developments in genre studies that shed light on how economic logic and commercial strategies underpin the assembly and proliferation of film posters generally. Although, usually associated with film content, the concepts of genre as discourse and generic hybridity are also applicable to examinations of marketing materials.

A significant breakthrough in genre studies came with Rick Altman's distinc-

tion between two concepts that had been (and which continue to be) routinely called "genre". The first concept is primarily discursive in nature and concerns a phenomenon wherein consumers and commentators respond to perceived textual and extra-textual commonalities among films by coining labels, building corpora, and developing discourses about the films (Altman 14-15, 100-142). This essay follows Jason Mittell's (11-18) exploration of Altman's ideas by referring to the sum of these evolving discourses as "a genre". Altman's second concept, which is primarily industrial in nature, emphasizes that the term "genre" is also used widely to refer to "blueprints" (14-15)—which is to say textual models upon which creative personnel draw to help them shape a film's content. For reasons of clarity, this essay refers from this point onwards to textual models such as the one that formed the basis of teen slasher film production as "film-types".

Altman (129), like Janet Staiger (1997) before him, also questioned the validity of notions of generic purity—a position which assumes that films or other cultural products belong to a single category. Both scholars' work ushered in widespread acceptance in the belief that films tend to be produced, consumed, and understood as "hybrid" artifacts that belong to several categories simultaneously. Invoking a range of categories and individual films has been shown to have been a longstanding cornerstone of American film promotion (Staiger 190-5). It is implemented to minimize financial risk, driven as it is by concerns that spotlighting a film's generic credentials can either attract or alienate potential audiences (Altman 113). Marketers, whether the in-house personnel of the small-time distributors that handled the teen slashers films of 1982-84 or employees of the specialist firms with which the Hollywood majors sometimes collaborated in the early 1980s, usually spotlight a range of elements which fragments a film's identity (Klinger 3-19; Austin 27-31). Fashioning marketing materials in this way is thought to increase a film's chances of appealing to and thus attracting different demographics and taste formations within its general target audience. These strategies even undergird so-called high concept posters—the visually arresting and unfussy compositions that Justin Wyatt (112-33) contends were designed to distill a film's identity to a single easily digestible notion. Contrary to Wyatt's conclusions, high concept posters have historically been fashioned to invite a range of associations thus diffusing a film's identity. This phenomenon is made possible by the inter-textual qualities of the components that comprise high concept designs, including their compositions, color-schemes, and styles, as well as by the posters' status as examples of high concept posters that evoke earlier films which themselves were promoted with similar high concept poster designs. To borrow Thomas Austin's term (27), the "dispersible" qualities of high concept film posters are abundantly evident upon consideration of what Wyatt considered to be the quintessential high concept poster—that used to promote *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975). The *Jaws* poster was clearly tailored not only to convey underwater threat, as Wyatt recognized, but also to evoke iconographically and compositionally the promotional poster of the hit thriller *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972) in order that it would encourage potential theatergoers to draw parallels between the two films and increase *Jaws*' chances of capturing the crowds that had made *Deliverance* such a commercial success (see Figure 1).[1]

Although it may appear oxymoronic, hybridity and blueprints are not contradictory concepts, either at the level of film production or promotion. On the contrary, it has been demonstrated that filmmakers routinely complement their self-conscious use of established textual models by extracting elements of content from a range of individual films and other film-types deemed at the time of production to boast significant audience appeal, particularly for the new film's target audience (Nowell *Blood*). Underwriting this strategy is the belief that a film has a better chance of fulfilling its makers' commercial objectives when

it reflects a recognizable category in ways that also reflect a range of up-to-the-minute trends in film and, on occasion, other media (see for example Munby). Some film posters are also made to type, whereby previous films' poster designs provide inter-textual filters through which potential audiences are invited to make connections to earlier films and their associated genres. For instance, the distributors of early-1980s teen sex comedies like *Spring Break* (Cunningham 1983) and *Screwballs* (Zeilinski 1983) used posters that had been modeled on the poster for *Porky's* (Clark 1981), the blockbuster hit upon which both films had been made to capitalize.[2] This conduct resulted in images of undressed female bodies that stretched beyond the borders of the frame and small images of male pursuers becoming an extra-filmic hallmark of the teen sex comedy genre (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Dispersible High Concept—posters evoking posters: Jaws (Universal) and Deliverance (Warner Bros.); Early-1980s Teen Sex Comedy Posters, Porky's (Twentieth Century Fox) and Spring Break (Columbia).

In addition to inviting comparisons to other films, genres, and posters, poster designs often represent the extra-filmic discourses that constitute the genre(s) into which marketers attempt to position the films. Posters are therefore a key component of what Gregory Lucow and Stephen Ricci called the "inter-textual relay" (29); a constantly evolving matrix of informational exchanges that shape understandings of and relationships between films and which ultimately provides the building blocks from which film genres are assembled. The invocation of extra-filmic discourse includes expressing visually, or through advertising copy (taglines), the film's relationships to social, political or cultural currents as well as articulating aspects of the film's popular reception. Jon Kraszewski (48-61) has for example shown that distributors of mid-1970s blaxploitation films targeted audiences with posters that encapsulated tensions relating to how a new black middle-class impacted African-American identities and race-relations.

Notions of genre as discourse along with the concepts of hybridity and film-types converged as distributors sought for three years to reinvigorate audience interest in teen slasher films following the box office slump of 1981. This process began by framing new teen slashers as youth event pictures.

Youth Event Pictures

Throughout 1982, teen slasher film distributors mobilized *en masse* posters featuring a silhouette of a blade-wielding figure. These designs evoked iconographically and compositionally the artwork with which Paramount Pictures had promoted its 1980 teen slasher hit *Friday the 13th*. They also represented the continuation of an approach that had been used in summer 1981 to promote the commercially unsuccessful teen slasher films *Final Exam* (Huston 1981) and *The Burning* (Maylam 1981) (see Figure

2). Distributors remobilize their immediate predecessors' ineffective strategies when they believe that a film-type's plummeting ticket sales have been caused by local conditions rather than by the prolonged and widespread evaporation of audience interest. Many distributors evidently interpreted the teen slasher film's diminishing box office returns as a short-lived by-product of temporary audience apathy that had been brought about by an unparalleled eight new teen slashers having been released across nine months in 1981.[3] Such conduct suggests that an early response among distributors to a previously lucrative film-type's dwindling commercial viability is the adoption of a "business as usual" mindset. Supporting this conclusion are additional instances of derivative marketing campaigns proliferating long after a film-type has stopped generating hits. Thus, distributors of teen sex comedies aped *Porky's* poster design across the 1980s and into the early 1990s, despite the prolonged absence of a teen sex comedy hit. With regard to the teen slashers of 1982: Picture Media and Jensen Farley Pictures used posters dominated by a blade-wielding silhouette to advertise respectively *Just Before Dawn* (Lieberman 1981) and *Madman* (Giannone 1982) (see Figure 2). Despite the commercial failure of these two films, distributors retained their confidence in blade-wielding silhouettes. As late as August 1982, Paramount Pictures re-mobilized the graphic to promote *Friday the 13th 3: 3D* (see Figure 2), a year after the company had dropped the design from its US posters for *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981). Recalling *Friday the 13th*'s poster enabled distributors to frame their teen slashers as important cinematic events for American youth, for although much subsequent popular and academic discussion has reduced the film to a blood-soaked *Halloween* rip-off (see Hills 227-34), *Friday the 13th* was understood somewhat differently upon its initial release.

Friday the 13th was among other things seen alongside such films as *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977), *Grease* (Kleiser 1978), and *The Blue Lagoon* (Kleiser 1980) as a youth event picture. The youth event picture was a nascent industrial category that was distinguished by efforts to imbue films aimed mainly at young people with the "must-see" qualities of the period's blockbusters. In summer 1980, an innovative release pattern, forward-thinking marketing, and intensive publicity had catapulted *Friday the 13th* to the center of American film culture. These strategies briefly transformed a low-budget teen horror film into something of a cultural phenomenon, which industry-watchers evidently considered to be as newsworthy as the highly anticipated release and subsequent commercial achievements of the sequel to *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner 1980) (See Nowell "*Ambitions*"). *Friday the 13th*'s event picture status was engineered partly by its simultaneous opening at a near-record

Fig. 2. Back-lit, blade-wielding silhouettes: Friday the 13th (Paramount Pictures), *The Burning* (Filmways), *Madman* (Jensen Farley Pictures), *Friday the 13th Part 3: 3D* (Paramount Pictures).

1100 North American theaters ("Box Office Mojo"). This prestigious and attention-grabbing tactic distinguished *Friday the 13th* from other cut-price horror films because it copied the pattern of release that was primarily reserved at the time for calculated blockbusters like *Superman* (Donner 1978) (see Hall and Neale). Marketing materials also framed *Friday the 13th* as an important event for young people. For example, the film's detailed hand-painted poster design invited parallels with the posters of then-recent youth market hits including *Animal House* (Landis 1978) and *Meatballs* (Reitman 1979). *Friday the 13th*'s youth event movie status was cemented by intensive popular press coverage that included rags-to-riches exposés of its producer-director, Sean S. Cunningham, similarly themed columns penned by its screenwriter, Victor Miller, and articles overstating its financial achievements (see Harmetz; Miller; Pollock). By transforming *Friday the 13th* from a moderate economic success for a conglomerate-owned major Hollywood studio into a Cinderella story comparable to that spun around the subsequent semi-independent hit *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick 2002) (see Perren 18-31), journalists on mass circulation American newspapers bolstered Paramount's efforts to make *Friday the 13th* an important cultural event for their significant young readership (Donahue).

By late 1982, developments in the American film market had resulted in distributors losing faith in the promotion of teen slashers through poster art that evoked that of *Friday the 13th*. Granted, *Friday the 13th Part 3:3D* (Miner 1982) had been a relative commercial success when marketed in this way; however, its solid box office performance did not encourage further use of the strategy because its status as a presold property—the appeal of which hinged mainly on consumption of earlier installments—did little to offset the weak returns that companies had been enduring for almost eighteen months when using posters of blade-wielding silhouettes to frame non-franchise teen slashers as youth event pictures. Consequently, the November 1982 release of New World Pictures' new teen slasher film *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Holden Jones 1982) marked a turning point in teen slasher poster design. New World's poster, as is elucidated below, reduced the once dominant silhouette to a mere framing device for a new kind of attention-grabbing imagery. Conveyed by that imagery was a generic category that had featured prominently in the popular reception of some early teen slashers but which distributors had not previously evoked because they feared that it would alienate the key female youth demographic (see Nowell "*There's*"). That category was the controversial violence-against-women movie.

Violence-Against-Women Movies

By misleadingly portraying teen slasher films as violence-against-women movies, distributors moved away from invoking earlier promotional texts in favor of evoking a more general generic discourse. Such conduct suggests that, once inviting parallels to a recent hit fails to attract audiences, distributors turn to dominant strands of discussion orbiting the film-type. Initially, selling teen slasher films on misogynist content would appear to exemplify standard business practice among independent distributors given that companies handling low-budget, low-status product routinely spotlight their films' more sensational elements (Schaefer 96-135). Following received logic (see Clover 187-228; Prince 351-3), the promotion of supposedly sexist films like teen slashers as misogynist entertainment would provide an additional example of textbook "exploitation" marketing, were it not for the fact that claims of early teen slashers showcasing female victimization are not supported by examinations of the films' content and demonstrate little understanding of the commercial imperatives that shaped teen slasher film production and distribution. In short, prior to 1981, the independent producers who made teen slashers had eschewed or had tightly self-policed misogynist content.

They had engaged in this conduct because they believed that the presence of misogynist material would compromise their ability to sell the films for large sums of money to one of the major studio distributors, which it was felt were prepared to pay quite generous sums of money for teen slashers based on the films' assumed capacity to attract male and female youth audiences and thus return more than the high costs of bankrolling a wide release and a generous marketing budget (see Nowell "*Ambitions*"). The makers of the teen slashers released from 1982 to 1984 also tended to limit depictions of female suffering to the extent that prominent feminists Amy Holden Jones and Rita Mae Brown were recruited by New World Pictures to write and direct *The Slumber Party Massacre*. However, the economic incentive of securing large numbers of female youths exerted little influence on most of the distributors of these new teen slasher films. The companies that distributed most of the teen slashers of 1982 to 1984 had acquired the largely unwanted new films for significantly less money than the distributors of earlier teen slashers. As such, they calculated that they would be able to turn a profit from significantly fewer ticket sales than their predecessors, meaning that they could afford to be less reliant on securing the young female patrons that had been so important to the distributors of previous teen slashers and could thus emphasize misogynist material on promotional posters.

This shift to the promotion of teen slasher films as violence-against-women movies amounted to misleading advertising. In fact promoting teen slashers in this way is comparable to British home video and DVD distributors' transformation into a marketing hook of the term "video nasty"—initially a pejorative coined by British social conservatives (Egan)—to repackage the films in the 1990s and 2000s for self-styled horror connoisseurs and aficionados (*Ibid*. 185-228). Teen slasher distributors sold their films as violence-against-women movies in order to capitalize financially on controversy that had circled adult-centered films about maniacs, but which had subsequently been appropriated by opportunistic journalists decrying teen slasher films before it had, in an ironic turn of events, developed into an oft-used production and marketing category/strategy.

The conditions which gave rise to the violence-against-women movie as both a film-type and as a genre as well as the relationships between violence-against-women and teen slasher films demand levels of enquiry beyond the scope of this essay; however, suffice it to say that the popular belief that violence-against-women movies represented an hysterical response to patriarchal America's rage at increases in female social, sexual, and professional mobility is a woefully inadequate explanation. Such claims fail to account for the contradictory gender-politics articulated across individual films, bypass the mechanisms and rationales that green-light production and which govern the mobilization of film content, and do not explain why violence-against-women movies were evidently made for and marketed to middle-class mature females. While released sporadically throughout the 1970s, tales of psychosexually disturbed loners targeting mature women gained a prominent foothold in American film culture in summer 1980 after some feminist groups protested against, and many cineaste elites debated the relative merits of, the up-market production *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma 1980) (See Sandler 73-82), the box office performance of which was comparable to that of *Friday the 13th*. These critical outpourings were soon piggybacked by Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, two ambitious populist movie reviewers and cable television hosts, who made a bid for national stardom by denouncing teen slasher films as incendiary misogynist propaganda ("Sneak Previews")—despite, or perhaps because of, their having lavished praise on *Dressed to Kill* (Ebert; Siskel). Not letting these apparent contradictions stand in the way of a golden chance to further their media careers, the duo went about constructing a critical category comprised of what had been hitherto seen as two distinct

film-types: obscure violence-against-women movies like *Don't Answer the Phone* (Hammer 1979) and comparatively high-profile youth-centered teen slashers like *Friday the 13th* ("Sneak Previews"). The teen slasher films were important reference points for Siskel and Ebert because, in contrast to the little-known violence-against-women movies that they cited, films such as *Friday the 13th* were recognizable titles that their middle-aged viewers were unlikely to have seen. Teen slashers therefore provided convincing albeit disingenuous evidence of the mainstreaming of sexually violent material (See Nowell *Blood* 225-8).

While the absorption of teen slashers into the category of the violence-against-women movie initiated the enduring misconception that teen slashers showcased misogynist brutality, market developments ensured that promoting teen slashers as violence-against-women movies appeared commercially viable. The box office achievements of *Dressed to Kill* had made violence-against-women movies industrially attractive. Accordingly, once the smoke had cleared following the controversies of 1980, major studios and independent distributors peppered American theaters with actual violence-against-women movies such as *A Stranger is Watching* (Cunningham 1982) and *Visiting Hours* (Lord 1982). These actions ensured that the violence-against-women movie had become so entrenched in American film culture that by 1983 a distributor could promote a film called *Pieces* (Simón 1982) with a poster featuring a chainsaw, a partially clad female corpse, and the tagline "It's exactly what you think it is" (see Figure 3).

Evoking the violence-against-women movie demonstrated more longevity than the other promotional strategies employed to revitalize teen slasher films between 1982 and 1984. As noted above, using posters to promote teen slashers this way began in November 1982 with the release of *The Slumber Party Massacre*, which baffled several industry-watchers who, evidently unable to reconcile feminist production personnel and misogynist marketing, resorted to discussing the film as a parody of early teen slashers (see for example Maslin 1982). Lounging between the legs of a drill-wielding figure on the poster for *The Slumber Party Massacre* were four young women sporting underwear and facial expressions ranging from quizzical to terrified (see Figure 3). Within weeks the ante was upped a notch as a poster combining a negligee-clad young woman and the tagline "Nothing can prepare you for what happens when she fights back" led *The House on Sorority Row* to become the first teen slasher film to be sold explicitly yet misleadingly on the theme of rape and revenge (see Figure 3). This discourse had been used earlier to promote genuine rape-revenge pictures including Paramount's glossy entry *Lipstick* (Johnson 1976) and the notorious drive-in release *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi 1977). The trend in teen slasher film promotion continued the following year when the poster for Independent International Pictures' *Girls Nite Out* (Deubel 1984) featured three partially-clad young women fleeing in terror from an unseen threat and Almi Pictures' poster for *Silent Madness* (Nuchtern 1984) showcased a crazed hatchet-wielding maniac pursuing a hot pants-wearing sorority sister (see Figure 3). The strong commercial performance—by the modest standards of independent distributors—of *The House on Sorority Row* had catalyzed the promotion of teen slasher films on images of female fear, but the failure of subsequent releases marketed this way ensured that the specter of the violence-against-women movie was rarely conjured up to promote subsequent theatrically released teen slashers.

Framing teen slasher films as violence-against-women movies may have been intended to differentiate the films from the largely unsuccessful teen slashers that had been sold as youth event pictures, but it had failed to generate any genuine hit films. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a third marketing approach that was employed in the early-to-mid 1980s sidestepped discourses that had circulated teen slashers released at the dawn of the 1980s; instead it evoked an earlier period in film history, in which the depiction of

Fig. 3. Absorbing teen slashers into the violence-against-women movie: *Pieces* (Artists Releasing Corporation), *The Slumber Party Massacre* (New World Pictures), *The House on Sorority Row* (Artists Releasing Corporation), *Silent Madness* (Almi Pictures Inc.).

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young people being menaced by a shadowy prowler had been briefly associated with flair, vision, and innovation.

Quality Exploitation

In 1983 and 1984, teen slasher film distributors employed posters modeled on an eye-catching design comprising three bold interconnected hand-painted iconographic elements—a jack-o-lantern, a hand, and a large knife—that Compass International Pictures' had used to promote its critically applauded 1978 teen slasher hit *Halloween* (see Figure 4). Replicating the Compass design enabled distributors to invite audiences to anticipate films that belonged to an emergent critical category of North American Cinema: what I call quality exploitation. Quality exploitation was born of a hitherto overlooked shift in the industrial and aesthetic practices of North American filmmakers. It represented a response to Hollywood's much-discussed return to the production and distribution of film-types that were previously associated with B-studios. This conduct had spawned big-budget horror films such as *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973), up-market science fiction epics like *Superman*, glossy teen films a la *Grease* (Schatz 3-86), and star-studded rural-market films including *Smokey and the Bandit* (Needham 1977) (Romao). Hollywood's demonstration of confidence in products of this sort had opened up an opportunity, particularly for market-savvy independent producers, to fashion similar, yet less costly, films that could be sold to major distributors. To do so, filmmakers gentrified their films by increasing their production budgets and emulating the content of Hollywood's lavish contributions (see Nowell "*Ambitions*"). For example, 1979 had seen independently produced dance films like *Roller Boogie* (Lester 1979) modeled on *Saturday Night Fever* and boisterous comedies including *Meatballs* that had been fashioned after *Animal House*. In terms of production values, quality exploitation films occupied a middle-ground between cut-price independently produced pictures and comparatively expensive major studio financed projects; however, occasionally they also blurred prevailing distinctions between what the critical establishment saw as the many workmanlike pot-boilers released each year and those rare films deserving of praise for their supposed advancement of the cinematic art. The exchanges between Hollywood and independent filmmakers of blueprints and content had taken place against a popular critical landscape that had been reshaped by a new American cinema; this was in part characterized by a cohort of mainly film school-educated directors, commonly referred to as the movie brats, who had imbued Hollywood film-types with

flourishes drawn from what was widely received in the US as European art cinema (see Cook). On occasion these two currents had intersected, giving rise to inexpensive "genre films" that were lauded in critical circles for their apparently exceptional stylistic characteristics. Among these celebrated films had been George Lucas' 1973 coming-of-age drama *American Graffiti*, Brian De Palma's teen horror movie *Carrie* (1976), and crucially John Carpenter's teen slasher film *Halloween*. In general terms, the promotion of teen slashers as quality exploitation suggests that once distributors recognize that a film-type's commercial potential is not energized by inviting similarities to a recent hit or by mobilizing a topical critical discourse, they turn to evoking a critically applauded film. This strategy appears to be based on the assumption that critical success can be sometimes indicative of a film having been enjoyed by a significant percentage of its audience, a quality that is not necessarily reflected solely by strong box office performance which, under certain circumstances, can suggest initial audience interest prior to consumption while not ruling out the possibility of widespread audience disappointment during and after consumption.

The rise to prominence of quality exploitation provided distributors with a method of suggesting the superiority of their films, whether in terms of their production values or their stylistic/thematic sophistication. Recalling *Halloween*'s poster was particularly attractive because *Halloween* was, despite initial ambivalence, embraced by American film critics after it received glowing re-appraisals from powerful cultural arbiters like Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* magazine (see Kapsis 159-62). Throughout 1979, journalists reiterated *Halloween*'s supposed aesthetic qualities and thereafter it was distinguished routinely from subsequent teen slashers by virtue of the exceptional flare with which John Carpenter had supposedly directed the film (Nowell *Blood* 109). Nowhere was the exceptional status afforded *Halloween* more apparent than in the ongoing endorsements it was given by the teen slasher's most ardent and outspoken critics: Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert ("Sneak Previews").

Belated confirmation of *Halloween*'s box office performance also suggested that the film was well-liked by "regular" theatergoers. Reliable notice of *Halloween*'s US ticket sales did not become publicly available until 1982 when the trade paper *Variety* showed that *Halloween* had surpassed *Friday the 13th* to become a major hit among independently released films and a solid earner by Hollywood's more exacting standards (Anon 1982, 54). *Halloween*'s commercial accomplishments were significant because they had been achieved through steady ticket sales being generated across several releases in small numbers of theaters; by contrast, *Friday the 13th*'s comparable returns had been generated quickly due to its having been released simultaneously on a huge quantity of screens. *Friday the 13th*'s ticket sales had therefore been mostly accumulated before, as a *Variety* writer had predicted (Step), negative word-of-mouth stood to decimate the appeal of the film. In the context of the disappointing performances in 1981of all teen slasher films, including *Friday the 13th Part II*, this pattern of ticket sales indicated that many viewers of *Friday the 13th* had been letdown by the film and were therefore likely to avoid films promoted as being similar – a point that had been made by young moviegoers that American journalists interviewed at the time (see Garner; Caulfield and Garner). In contrast, most of *Halloween*'s ticket sales had been accrued via re-releases in the falls of 1979, 1980, and 1981, i.e. after sufficient time had passed for word-of-mouth to spread. The continued appeal of *Halloween* therefore indicated that audience feedback had probably been quite positive. A surprising aspect of the recalling of *Halloween* through references to its poster is that this tactic did not emerge sooner or was not employed with greater regularity.

Evocation of the bold three-part design of the *Halloween* poster continued from late 1983 to late 1984, comprising the promotion of four teen slasher films. The principles of fun and horror captured in the iconography

and style of *Halloween*'s poster—the non-traumatizing roller-coaster experience that Isobel Cristina Pinedo (40) called "recreational terror"—were followed in the poster used by United Film Distribution Company to promote *Sleepaway Camp* (Hiltzik 1983). This design retained the large knife and hand that had featured on *Halloween*'s poster but replaced the jack-o-lantern with a tennis shoe (see Figure 4). Similarly, the posters that advertised New World Pictures' *The Initiation* (Stewart 1984) and Media Home Entertainment's home video release of *Fatal Games* (Elliot 1984) both preserved the image of a hand, but with a female-shaped candle and an eye replacing the knife and jack-o-lantern on *The Initiation*'s poster, and with *Fatal Games*' poster showing a blood-dripping medal and a ribbon instead (see Figure 4).

Fig. 4. Bold designs representing quality exploitation: *Halloween* (Compass International Pictures), *Sleepaway Camp* (United Film Distribution Company), *Fatal Games* (Media Home Entertainment), *The Initiation* (New World Pictures).

Arguably the most significant endorsement of the promotion of teen slashers with posters that recalled *Halloween*'s poster took place in March 1984 when Paramount pre-marketed *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (Zito 1984) with a poster that replicated not the poster designs of earlier installments of the franchise, but the three-part iconography of the *Halloween* poster, albeit not in a hand-painted look. On the poster were a mask and a knife, with *Halloween*'s jack-o-lantern replaced by a pool of blood. To maximize publicity for the *Friday the 13th* franchise's "new-look" poster design—promotion of promotion if you will—Paramount released the poster without having received necessary approval from the industry trade body the Motion Picture Association of America (Anon 1984). This "oversight" ensured that exceptionally large amounts of press coverage were devoted to the film's poster, inviting potential audiences to consider its similarities to *Halloween*'s poster in the hope that they would associate the new *Friday the 13th* film with notions of quality exploitation that had hitherto been absent from the franchise's brand identity.

The employment of gradually more temporally and/or conceptually distant reference points in teen slasher promotion continued as distributors used posters to obscure their films' locations within industry strategy, critical canons, and public sphere discourse. They did this by highlighting one aspect of the films' generic heritage.

Indeterminate Horror Films

In 1983 and 1984, the framing of teen slasher films as indeterminate horror films represented an attempt to distance the films from the teen slasher as a generic category, as well as an attempt to prevent potential theatergoers from drawing connections between new films and the previous teen slashers that ticket sales suggested they had been avoiding since summer 1980. This method of teen slasher film promotion illustrates an as-yet unexplored way in which marketers negotiate the communication of their films' horror

credentials. To date, scholars have shown that distributors adopt strategic stances towards the communication of horror material by also spotlighting elements of romance, mystery, and adventure so as to avoid alienating potential ticket buyers who otherwise would eschew films sold exclusively as horror (see for example Berenstein; Erb 21-121). This is a major concern based on the belief that horror tends to polarize movie-watchers, leading to committed fandom or absolute rejection (Wood 1986 77). Where such findings add empirical weight to Klinger's theory of the commercial logic underwriting hybrid film marketing (3-19) described above, some teen slashers released between 1982 and 1984 demonstrate that, when market forces indicate it could prove to be profitable, distributors will mask the hybrid character of their films by emphasizing a single generic element. Speaking more generally, the promotion of teen slashers as indeterminate horror films indicates that when all else fails, distributors look to obscure their films' immediate industrial and discursive bonds by calling forth a broader sense of the film's relationships to film culture and film history.

Central to the promotion of teen slasher films as indeterminate horror films were efforts to avoid all references to the distinct vision of "normalcy" and "the monster", to use Wood's terms (*ibid.*), which set teen slashers apart from other films. While stressing threat and horror, the posters that promoted Comworld Pictures' *The Final Terror* (Davis 1983) in 1983 and advertised United Film Distribution Company's *Death Screams* (Nelson 1982) a year later avoided mention or depiction of maniacal killers or youths. The *Death Screams* poster featured a close-up of a screaming adult male face beneath the suitably horror-oriented and vague tagline "The last scream you hear…is your own" (see Figure 5). Similarly, the combination of an image of adults fleeing from an unidentified menace, an obelisk-like title font, and the imprecise yet, in context, unequivocally ominous tagline "Without knowing they had released an unknown force", suggested that the backwoods teen slasher film *The Final Terror* concerned an extraterrestrial threat in the vein of *Alien* (1979) or *The Thing* (1982) (see Figure 5). Portraying teen slashers as indeterminate horror films was not as self-evident a choice in 1983 and 1984 as it may seem today.

Although treated in intervening years as a quintessential example of American horror cinema, teen slasher films were initially seen to belong to several generic categories of which horror was but one. When the film-type was becoming established industrially and culturally between 1980 and 1981, industry-watchers had discussed teen slashers not only as horror films, not even just as thrillers (Rubin 161-170), whodunits (Koven 162-8), and teen films (Shary 147-67), but as films that exhibited significant similarities to "melodramas" (Canby), "romances" (Martin), and boisterous teen comedies (Gross). Similarly, in much the same way as Mark Jancovich (34-45) has discussed posters presenting 1940s Sherlock Holmes films as at once horror films, mysteries, and more, industry-insiders had invited comparisons between previous teen slashers and other types of film. In 1981, Filmways poster for *The Burning* had for example combined iconographic features of the posters of *Friday the 13th* and *The Blue Lagoon*, a teen romance. However, in the light of Siskel and Ebert's aforementioned crusade against films featur-

Fig. 5. Teen Slashers as Indeterminate Horror Films: *Death Screams* (United Film Distribution Company); *The Final Terror* (Comworld Pictures and Aquarius Releasing).

ing maniacs, a distillation of the teen slasher film's generic status had been initiated as these tales of youth-in-jeopardy came to be discussed with increasing uniformity in the trade, popular, and fan presses as a new kind of horror film (see for example Maslin 1981; Platman and Steigerwald). With this shift had therefore emerged another opportunity for distributors to revise the identity of teen slasher films at the level of promotion, which, perhaps befitting the sense of desperation that underwrote its mobilization, failed to attract a significant number of theatergoers.

Conclusion

In summary, where scholars have shown how attempts to re-energize film-types commercially are conducted during production through the recalibration of film content (Stanfield), the case of the teen slasher films of 1982-84 shows the degree to which marketing practices contribute to the process. The extent to which this conduct has occurred is particularly apparent when focus is shifted from highly publicized yet infrequent instances of a film-type performing well financially onto the more numerous occasions in which films prove financially disappointing. This essay has focused on one such case, revealing how promotional posters were used to attempt to resuscitate the appeal of teen slasher films between 1982 and 1984. These affordable marketing tools expressed four strategies, each of which in effect commodified a key way teen slashers had been understood contemporaneously within American film culture. The replication of a blade-wielding silhouette that had dominated posters for *Friday the 13th* enabled distributors to appropriate *Friday the 13th*'s status as a must-see film for young people. Selling the films on images of imperiled females, while a poor reflection of their content, permitted distributors to capitalize on high-profile critical discourse that had orbited teen slashers. Distributors of teen slashers aped *Halloween*'s poster to evoke discourses of quality that had dominated *Halloween*'s popular critical reception and to capitalize on apparent audience fondness for the film. Promoting teen slashers as indeterminate horror films, on the other hand, represented an attempt by distributors to distance the films from individual teen slashers and associated discourses by stressing one aspect of the films' generic heritage.

This essay invites further consideration of both the broader influence and prevalence of the kinds of the marketing strategies examined herein. Writing on the emergence of the medium in the early 20th century, Gary D. Rhodes suggests that film posters can become enduring synecdoches for the films they promote (228). Rhodes' observation holds true for the teen slasher posters of 1982-84, particularly in terms of how the teen slasher film has in later years been considered to be a genre and a film-type. The teen slasher posters of the period contributed to the selective traditions that characterize the teen slasher genre. They have helped to enshrine *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* as the key early teen slashers at the expense of other important films like *Black Christmas* (Clark 1974), *Silent Scream*, and *Prom Night*. In doing so, the posters reinforced the misconception that teen slashers showcased femicide and contributed to teen slashers coming to be seen primarily as horror films.

The strategies employed across 1982-84 also provided a springboard from which American film companies subsequently launched successful bids to reinvigorate the teen slasher film-type commercially. Thus, by adopting the synergetic marketing tactics used for contemporaneous Hollywood blockbusters, New Line Cinema sold its later *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films (1987-91) as youth event pictures. Similarly, Miramax Films' promotion of its *Scream* trilogy (Craven 1996, 1997, 2000) as an intelligent deconstruction of teen slasher film conventions, when its constituent films exhibited few differences from their somewhat self-conscious predecessors, positioned the trilogy as quality exploitation. Meanwhile, the notion that the films being advertised were

indeterminate horror films was a principle that shaped posters for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Nispel 2004), which featured a close-up of a monstrous face. The exception remains the violence-against-women movie, which, although central to the posters of recent torture-based horror films like *Captivity* (Joffé 2007) and *Hostel Part II* (Roth 2007), has yet to be used as a marketing lynchpin for the commercially successful re-launching of the teen slasher film, despite the best efforts of the markets of the box office failure *Sorority Row* (Hendler 2009), posters for which warned audiences that sisters of "Theta Pi must die".

Determining the extent to which the individual marketing strategies that accompanied the 1982-84 teen slashers, as well as the pattern they followed, are representative of the ways distributors attempt to revitalize film-types more generally hinges upon new scholarly enquiry being conducted. Attempts to re-energize teen slasher ticket sales followed for the most part a centrifugal trajectory. They began with evocation of the most recent hit, shifted to reflecting a dominant contemporaneous critical discourse, then recalled an earlier critically respected and (evidently) much-loved example of the film-type, before finally masking the films' status as teen slasher films all together in order to recall a major aspect of what had come to be seen as their broader generic heritage. Only through close examinations of distributors attempting, occasionally successfully but usually unsuccessfully, to renew audience interest in other types of film, during other periods of time, in other national markets, and with respect to other forms of delivery/exhibition, will it become clear if this pattern unfolds generally. We may then discover if, when it comes to attempts to reinvigorate commercially weakened film-types, nothing is off limits.

Notes

[1]For a candid discussion of these issues by leading American film marketing executives of the period, see Yakir.

[2]*Porky's* poster was itself modelled on that used to promote Orion Pictures' *10* (Edwards 1979), a sex comedy hit that featured if not adolescent protagonists then juvenile ones.

[3]Those 1981 films were *My Bloody Valentine* (Mihalka), *Friday the 13th Part II* (Miner), *Graduation Day* (Freed), *Happy Birthday to Me* (Thompson), *The Burning*, *Final Exam* (Maylam), *Hell Night* (DeSimone), and *The Prowler* (Zito).

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