

"There's More Than One Way to Lose Your Heart": The American Film Industry, Early Teen Slasher Films, and Female Youth

by RICHARD NOWELL

Abstract: Whereas scholars have suggested that early teen slasher films like *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980) were made primarily for male youth, this article reveals the extent to which producers and distributors tailored the films and their marketing campaigns to appeal to teenage girls and young women.

Posters advertising the teen slasher film *My Bloody Valentine* (George Mihalka, 1981) pictured youngsters slow dancing beneath decorative hearts and featured the catch phrase "There's more than one way to lose your heart." Releasing the film around Valentine's Day weekend of 1981 with a double-edged tagline and romance iconography, distributor Paramount Pictures sold its tale of young paramours menaced by a maniacal miner as female-friendly horror. Although gender issues have dominated scholarly discussion of early teen slasher films, the ways that marketers attempted to secure a young female audience for the films have not been explored. Instead, it has been claimed that films like *My Bloody Valentine*, *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) were made to feed the fantasies—misogynistic, masochistic, or sadistic—of young men. This position first emerged in late 1980, when movie reviewers Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert used teen slashers as easily identifiable reference points during a crusade against low-budget horror films, a crusade on which they embarked to piggyback debates among cineastes about cinematic femicide that emerged in the wake of the adult thriller *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980).¹ Later, the assumption that teen slashers were fashioned solely for males became entrenched in academic circles after it provided a cornerstone to the 1987 article "Her Body, Himself," in which Carol J. Clover, having applied psychoanalysis to gender representation (and having included numerous examples from adult-centered thrillers like *Dressed to Kill*),

1 Roger Ebert, "Why the Movies Aren't Safe Anymore," *American Film* 6, no. 5 (March 1981): 56; Gene Siskel, "Brutal Attacks on Women: Movies Take a Turn for the Worse," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1980.

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concluded that male viewers identified with the films' supposedly ubiquitous boyish heroines.² "Cross-gender identification" was received as a major contribution to Film Studies, and Clover was cited routinely as the eminent authority on early teen slashers, even though both Vera Dika and Robin Wood had published more meticulous and, I feel, more measured analyses of slasher film content.³

The focus on Clover ensured that Siskel and Ebert's position vis-à-vis the films' target audience proliferated among scholars;⁴ as a result, scholars would later overstate the innovative content of late-1990s teen slashers, innovations which had in fact been exaggerated wildly in promotion and publicity materials so as to differentiate the new films from their "disreputable" predecessors.⁵ Clover's influence extends to the latest teen slasher film scholarship, underwriting Valerie Wee's thesis that the *Scream* movies (Wes Craven, 1996, 1997, 2000) were supremely innovative teen slashers because of their female-youth orientation, a claim which hinges on the supposedly male-youth orientation of earlier entries.⁶ Such scholarship, while correctly highlighting the important role that conceptions of young female audiences played in the assembly and promotion of the *Scream* films and their contemporaries, serves further to obscure the important role that conceptions of female youth played in early teen slasher film production and promotion. Thus, pictures like *My Bloody Valentine* continue to be misrepresented as anomalous to American cinematic horror, which, as several scholars have demonstrated, has been angled consistently toward females for at least eighty years. Cynthia Erb, for example, has detailed how industry professionals attempted to secure a female audience for *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933); both Rhona J. Berenstein and Tim Snelson have demonstrated that, during the classical era, studios commonly made efforts to make horror films appealing to women; and Thomas Austin has explained that more recently this motivation contributed to the production and promotion of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992).⁷

- 2 Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself," in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21–64.
- 3 Vera Dika, "The Stalker Film, 1978–1981," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 86–101; Robin Wood, "Beauty Bests the Beast," *American Film* 8, no. 10 (September 1983): 63–65.
- 4 Gloria Cowan and Margaret O'Brien, "Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis," *Sex Roles* 23, nos. 3–4 (August 1990): 187–196; Justin M. Nolan and Gery W. Ryan, "Fear and Loathing at the Cineplex: Gender Differences and Perceptions of Slasher Films," *Sex Roles* 42, nos. 1–2 (2000): 39–56; Fred Molitor and Barry S. Sapolsky, "Sex, Violence and Victimization in Slasher Films," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 37 (Spring 1993): 233–242.
- 5 Valerie Wee, "The *Scream* Trilogy, 'Hyper-postmodernism' and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film," *Journal of Film and Video* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 44–61; Wee, "Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher: The Case of *Scream*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 50–61.
- 6 Wee, "The *Scream* Trilogy," 44–61; Wee, "Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher," 50–61. For other recent teen slasher scholarship influenced by Clover, see Kelly Connelly, "From Final Girl to Final Woman: Defeating the Male Monster in *Halloween* and *Halloween H2O*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 12–20; Mikel J. Koven, *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 162–168.
- 7 Cynthia Erb, *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 41, 61–62; Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 70–87; Tim Snelson, "'From Grade B

Similarly, via close readings of horror films such as the female-teen-centered home invasion narrative *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1987), the lesbian vampire picture *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971), and the pregnancy- and motherhood-focused *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), other scholars have illuminated the lengths to which filmmakers have evidently gone to address female viewers.⁸

Rather than explaining film content or marketing as a symptom of broader social or cultural changes, this essay seeks to fill a void in American film history by revealing the logic that underwrote, and the strategies that were used to make, early teen slasher films that were marketable and attractive to female youth.⁹ Whereas most scholars have tended to apply interpretive textual analysis to moments of threat and bloodshed, concluding that early teen slashers were male oriented, I focus mainly on the nonviolent content which dominated screen time, content which featured heavily in the films' promotional campaigns and which reveals much about how industry insiders perceived and cultivated the films' mixed-sex target audience.¹⁰ By emphasizing similarities across early teen slashers, scholars have treated the films somewhat ahistorically, rarely acknowledging the profound influence that historically specific industrial developments exerted on teen slasher film production, content, and marketing. However, to gain greater insight into the decision-making processes which shaped early teen slasher content and marketing, it is necessary, as Gregory A. Waller has pointed out, to focus on discontinuities and to examine the ways in which the films intersected with, and were affected by, contemporaneous trends in film production and promotion.¹¹ Therefore, I combine formal content analysis and industrial analysis to show that the extraordinary lengths to which filmmakers and distributors went to make teen slashers attractive to female youth were part of, and bound up with, broader developments taking place across the American film industry. I begin by arguing that early female-youth-friendly slashers were products of their conditions of production and distribution, and of established industry strategies.

Thrillers to Deluxe Chillers': Prestige Horror, Female Audiences, and Allegories of Spectatorship in *The Spiral Staircase* (1946)," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 2 (2009): 173-188; Thomas Austin, "'Gone with the Wind plus Fangs': Genre, Taste and Distinction in the Assembly, Marketing and Reception of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 294-306.

- 8 Patricia Brett Erens, "The Stepfather: Father as Monster in the Contemporary Horror Film," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 352-363; Lucy Fischer, "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*," in Grant, *The Dread of Difference*, 412-432; Bonnie Zimmermann, "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire Film," in Grant, *The Dread of Difference*, 379-387.
- 9 *The Slumber Party Massacre* (Amy Holden Jones, 1982), a film that made little impact commercially when it was released, has since been discussed in some quarters, based primarily on the assumed contributions of screenwriter Rita Mae Brown and director Amy Holden Jones, as, at once, a parody of and a feminist comment on teen slasher conventions. This position generally assumes that earlier teen slashers were made exclusively for male audiences and does not fully reflect the economic and political forces that shaped the film's production, promotion, and critical reception. See Richard Nowell, "'Where Nothing Is Off Limits': Genre, Commercial Revitalization, and the Teen Slasher Film Posters of 1982-1984," *Post Script* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 46-61.
- 10 On the logic and conditions that led teen slasher filmmakers to downplay violence, particularly male-on-female violence, see Richard Nowell, "'Remarkably like a Summer-Time Pepsi-Cola Commercial': The Industrial Logic of Self-Policing Early Teen Slasher Film Violence," unpublished paper.
- 11 Waller, introduction to *American Horrors*, 8-12.

Then, I show how key industry developments led to depictions of female bonding, heterosexual romance, and young female protagonists in teen slashers and their marketing campaigns between fall 1978 and summer 1981, the period in which the teen slasher film became established industrially and culturally (and the period in which those films were released that formed the basis of scholarly assumptions about the teen slasher as a film type, including assumptions about its target audience). The case of the early female-youth-friendly teen slashers provides a timely reminder that accounts of film and marketing content are enriched by consideration of industrial imperatives. At the same time, examination of such films illustrates by example the need for industrial historiography to move beyond canonized films, and the need for the scholarship on horror to move beyond sequences of fear, loathing, threat, and violence.

Teenybopper Horror: The Business of Early Teen Slasher Films. To understand why the businesspeople who made and marketed early teen slasher films strove to make them attractive to female youth, it is essential to recognize the commercial objectives of teen slasher producers and distributors and the logic that governed their conduct. Moreover, as these films were rarely made and released by the same company, it is important to understand the interaction of producers and distributors, for it was out of this interaction that female youth became crucial to industry professionals' goals vis-à-vis early teen slashers.

It was distribution executives, not theatergoers, who determined whether teen slasher film production was a profit-making venture. Early teen slashers were independent productions, in the sense that they were made without a major distributor having provided financial backing or a guaranteed route into theaters, and to turn a profit on the \$300 thousand–\$3 million that they invested in production, the entrepreneurs behind early teen slashers needed a company to buy the domestic theatrical distribution rights to their completed films in an arrangement called a “negative pickup” deal. Teen slasher filmmakers did not target small distributors because modest operations like Dimension Pictures, which operated under tight financial constraints, purchased films on terms that were unfavorable to producers.¹² Unable to remit up front the \$1–\$4 million needed to acquire teen slashers, independent distributors could pay filmmakers only after a film generated revenue, which meant that filmmakers lost money if the film failed commercially.¹³ Yet even if the film was a hit, there was no guarantee that its makers would see a dime because, in the time it took producers to receive payments, their profit margins could be erased by the interest they incurred on the bank loans that they had used to fund production.¹⁴ Independent distributors were also notoriously unstable businesses that often folded as the result of a single box-office failure—another scenario that could leave filmmakers empty-handed.¹⁵ Furthermore,

12 See Ed Lowry, “Dimension Pictures: Portrait of a 1970s Independent,” in *Contemporary American Independent Film*, ed. Chris Holmud and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2005), 41–53.

13 Charles Schreger, “Majors Drain Off Theatre Cash, Indie Distributors Now Forced to Upfront Demand: Tenser,” *Variety*, March, 23, 1977, 28; *Variety*, “Majors More Pickup-Prone,” May 7, 1980, 1, 606.

14 *Variety*, “Majors More Pickup-Prone,” 606.

15 *Variety*, “While Majors Fly High, Indie Distributors Go Bust,” February 14, 1979, 5, 40.

many small distributors were thought to be controlled by organized crime syndicates that routinely withheld filmmakers' payments, a concern borne out by reports detailing the court battle of the producers of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) for their share of the film's profits after mob-run distributor Bryanston Distributing filed suddenly for bankruptcy.¹⁶

Under these circumstances, teen slasher producers courted distributors that paid up front for films, which meant targeting the wealthy members of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)—the mini-major Avco Embassy, and the majors Columbia Pictures, MGM/UA, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, and Warner Bros. It was, however, incredibly difficult to negotiate a negative pickup deal with one of these companies, because competition was fierce. Hundreds of films without distribution were being made each year, despite the fact that the MPAA members purchased only a fraction of them.¹⁷ With supply having outstripped demand, MPAA members could afford to be very selective about what films they purchased.

MPAA members, as Jon Lewis has noted, bought films that enabled them to capitalize on lucrative trends more quickly and less expensively than if they bankrolled similar films themselves.¹⁸ They were interested in specific content which, based on recent box-office success, appeared likely to generate sufficient ticket sales to enable them to turn a profit.¹⁹ For instance, in the fall of 1980, MPAA executives drew distinctions between the commercial potential of horror films featuring serial killers and those about supernatural possession, with Avco Embassy's Don Borchers expressing confidence in what he called "knife movies" but warning, "If you spend \$6.5m on a movie starring George C. Scott about a house that's possessed [*The Changeling* (Peter Medak, 1980)], you're not going to make money."²⁰ Teen slasher filmmakers needed to show gatekeepers like Borchers that an MPAA member stood a reasonable chance of making money from their films.

As resourceful, opportunistic entrepreneurs, early teen slasher filmmakers attempted to improve the odds of realizing their commercial objectives by acquiring up-to-date knowledge of industry developments, by monitoring box-office data, and by scrutinizing distribution rosters so as to ascertain what types of films MPAA members had been purchasing. For example, producer Gary Sales revealed that he and his collaborators began production of *Madman* (Joe Giannone, 1981) only after MPAA members had acquired, and enjoyed some commercial success with, similar films. Sales explained to trade paper *Variety* that "we realized that you need a project for which

16 Ellen Farley, "Impresarios of Exploitation Movies," *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1977; Nicholas Gage, "Organised Crime Reaps Huge Profits from Dealing in Pornographic Films," *New York Times*, October 12, 1975.

17 *Variety*, "10 Year Diary of Fast-Fade 'Indie Pix,'" October 8, 1980, 10.

18 Jon Lewis, *Hollywood vs. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved Hollywood* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 224.

19 Domestic theatrical rentals (monies received by distributors from US and Canadian exhibitors) are taken from *Variety's* annual "Big Rental Films" and "All-Time Box Office Champs" charts. Figures will be expressed in the following abbreviated form: *The Exorcist*: \$66.3m (2nd/1974), meaning that *The Exorcist* generated \$66.3 million (US dollars) in domestic rentals to rank second of all the films in circulation in 1974.

20 Quoted in William K. Knoedelseder Jr., "The New Dealmakers: Killing Them at the Box Office," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1980.

there is a ready-made market."²¹ These strategies, while not guaranteeing success, enabled filmmakers to draw informed conclusions about what content would improve their chances of securing an MPAA distribution deal.

While up-to-the-minute knowledge of industry developments provided the basis of research and development for independent teen slasher filmmakers, combining content drawn from several hit films provided the cornerstone of production. Although filmmakers are naturally reticent to admit publicly that their films are derivative, early teen slasher filmmakers' extensive borrowings were pinpointed routinely by journalists. For example, Linda Gross of the *Los Angeles Times* recognized that *Final Exam* (Jimmy Huston, 1981) "vacillate[s] between the college-prank humor of an 'Animal House' [John Landis, 1978] and a killer-thriller like 'Prom Night' [Paul Lynch, 1980]."²² Filmmakers combine elements of hit films, as Rick Altman has argued, to provide distributors with a range of commercially viable material from which to draw when assembling a film's marketing materials—a strategy that affords marketers considerable flexibility, enabling them to spotlight marginal content or downplay prominent material if market conditions indicate that it is desirable, while permitting distributors, as Altman, Lisa Kernan, and Barbara Klinger have demonstrated, to promote a film as offering simultaneously diverse attractions geared toward different taste formations and different audience segments.²³

The segment that filmmakers and distributors recognized to be the prime audience for early teen slashers was youth, which encompassed twelve- to twenty-nine-year-olds of both sexes and a core of fifteen- to twenty-five-year-olds.²⁴ Producer Peter Simpson called *Prom Night* his "teenybopper horror picture," and Martin Antonowsky, Columbia Pictures' president of marketing, noted point blank in discussing *Happy Birthday to Me* (J. Lee Thompson, 1981) that "it's teen-agers . . . that's the market for this picture."²⁵ Teen slasher filmmakers realized that MPAA members valued films with marketing hooks that would attract the film's target audience.²⁶ Among the most valuable hooks were depictions of the target audience itself. This view, which was based on the long-standing belief that spotlighting a demographic in a film and its marketing campaign communicated that the film was intended for that demographic without alienating other demographics, was certainly held by Daniel Grodnik, the writer-producer of the teen slasher film *Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1980). *Terror Train* "involved young

21 Quoted in *Variety*, "Horror Pics a Crowded Path to Boxoffice, but Lucrative," March 3, 1982, 20.

22 Linda Gross, "'Final Exam': Some Answers Missing," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1981.

23 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 129, 54; Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Barbara Klinger, "Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture," *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 4 (Summer 1989), 3–19.

24 A. D. Murphy, "Audience Demographics, Film Future," *Variety*, August 20, 1975, 3, 74; Murphy, "Demographics Favoring Films Future," *Variety*, October 8, 1975, 3, 34.

25 Peter Simpson, quoted in "Canadians Seek 'Any Lessons' in 'Meatballs' and 'Prom Night,'" *Variety*, November 26, 1980, 36; Martin Antonowsky, quoted in Peter J. Boyle, "To Market, to Market to Peddle a Shocker," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1981.

26 For the motives behind, and the conditions which enabled, filmmakers' and marketers' efforts to target early teen slashers to viewers under seventeen, see Richard Nowell, "New Decade. Old Rules: Discursivity, Distribution, and Rebranding the American Teen Slasher Film," *Illuminace* 29 (forthcoming 2012).

people," explained Grodnik, "because that's the market."²⁷ Robert E. Kapsis's production history of the contemporaneous teen-centered horror film *Fear No Evil* (Robert LaLoggia, 1981) shows that MPAA members shared Grodnik's stance, with the film's writer-director revealing that Avco Embassy "found the high school setting the most appealing aspect of the picture."²⁸ It is unsurprising that industry insiders believed that *Fear No Evil* and teen slasher films would be consumed mainly by young people, given that these tales of youth in jeopardy combined teen pics and horror, two types of film that American film industry professionals have, since the 1950s, considered to appeal primarily to young Americans, as Thomas Doherty has explained.²⁹

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it made particular sense for independent producers to offer MPAA members films that were marketable to young people and for MPAA members to target those films toward young people because, at this time, youth was seen as the engine driving the American movie business; market research had shown repeatedly that twelve- to twenty-year-olds accounted for half of US theatrical admissions and that attendance was divided fairly evenly between the sexes.³⁰ Understandings of how gender relations influenced moviegoing choices provided another incentive to make teen slashers marketable to female youth, with many industry professionals believing that young women, like their elder peers, tended to select what films to view with their partners. For example, the Wheat Brothers, writer-producers of the teen slasher *Silent Scream* (Denny Harris, 1980), revealed that—in contrast to Clover's conclusions—they had written a dynamic female lead to appeal to female theatergoers and thus to encourage them to suggest the film to their dates, boyfriends, or husbands. "Women like to see strong women characters," they explained, adding, "[W]omen decide who goes to the movies more than men."³¹ Industry insiders also felt that, if marketed correctly, horror appealed over other types of film to courting youngsters because it provided a socially sanctioned facilitator of heterosexual intimacy. "You can never go wrong with a movie that makes a girl move closer to her date," declared Jere Henshaw, vice president of production for American International Pictures (AIP).³² By making teen slashers marketable to female and male youth, independent filmmakers could offer MPAA members inexpensive films that could be angled toward over half of the theatergoing population of the United States, thus providing distributors with a reasonable chance of offsetting the cost of purchasing the films, promoting them, and delivering them to theaters. In addition to maximizing the potential audience, a teen slasher that could be targeted toward both sexes reflected

27 Quoted in Knoedelseder, "The New Dealmakers."

28 Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 163–164.

29 Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

30 *Variety*, "U.S. Filmgoing Outstrips Rise in Population," October 24, 1979, 1, 120.

31 Interviewed in "Three All-New Featurettes," *Silent Scream*, DVD, directed by Denny Harris (Scorpion Releasing, 2009).

32 Quoted in Bob Thomas, Associated Press, February 27, 1980.

two of New Hollywood's most important, yet often-overlooked, production strategies: MPAA member date movies and female-friendly horror films. Market shifts involving both of these production strategies indicated that the commercial viability of horror and youth films hinged on young females—both on the screen and in front of it.

"A New Kind of Love Story": Hollywood and Date Movies, 1973–1978. As products conceived for and marketed to young people, to the exclusion of other demographics, teen slasher films, in terms of production, content, and marketing, were (as they still are) affected heavily by the American film industry's youth-market operations. Yet, although filmmakers and distributors spoke openly about early teen slasher films' youth target audience, they did not publicly subdivide that audience by sex, class, race, or other characteristics. That teen slashers were rarely discussed publicly by industry personnel as being oriented primarily toward male youth, female youth, or any other sub-demographic is unsurprising given that, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, youth-oriented fare was considered ideally to be made for, marketed to, and attended by a mixed-sex audience, whether the film was a teen romance like *The Blue Lagoon* (Randal Kleiser, 1980), a teen sex comedy like *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981), or a teen slasher like *My Bloody Valentine*.³³ In effect, teen slasher filmmakers and marketers considered themselves to be in the date movie business, meaning, as Geoff King has intimated, that they targeted not just courting couples but also young people of both sexes.³⁴ Because the rise of the New Hollywood date movie took place roughly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, a decade that has been commonly characterized by auteur filmmaking, the advent of the modern blockbuster, nostalgic pastiche, and gory splatter movies, the date movie has, despite being among the most important industrial developments of the mid- to late 1970s, been a victim of the selective traditions that invariably undergird and shape film historiography and criticism. We must therefore revise existing accounts of the period in order to illuminate how this important shift influenced the conduct of industry professionals, including early teen slasher filmmakers and marketers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, AIP-type drive-in movies had sought young viewers on dates, but the more "legitimate" MPAA members' attempts to attract male and female youth with date movies came later, beginning tentatively between late 1973 and late 1976 before increasing considerably thereafter, when MPAA members started targeting most youth-centered films toward young people of both sexes. The commercial potential of this approach was signaled by Universal Pictures' surprise blockbuster *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973).³⁵ Although much has been written about Universal's efforts to attract theatergoers in their late twenties and thirties who were, or were encouraged to be, nostalgic for their teenage years ("Where were you in '62?" inquired marketing materials), *American Graffiti* was, first and foremost, targeted toward male and female youth by way of images of the heterosexual and homosocial

33 Stuart Byron, "Rules of the Game," *Village Voice*, March 16, 1982, 50; Aljean Harmetz, "The Movie No Theatres Thought Worth Seeing," *New York Times*, November 4, 1980.

34 Geoff King, *Film/Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 73.

35 *American Graffiti*: \$10.3m (10th/1973); *American Graffiti*: \$41.2m (14th/all-time). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1973," January 9, 1974, 19; *Variety*, "Updated All-Time Film Champs," January 8, 1975, 26.

interaction of its teenage characters.³⁶ A tagline from the film's theatrical trailer encapsulated Universal's attempts to attract youth of both sexes (and slightly older people): "It's one of those great old movies about romance, racing, and rock 'n' roll," announced a narrator over shots of speeding cars, backseat kisses, and youthful high jinks. *American Graffiti* may have provided a seemingly lucrative textual and marketing blueprint, but—possibly because of Hollywood executives' concerns over depicting youth, which, as Aniko Bodroghkozy explains, emerged in response to the hostile reception of its early-1970s counterculture films—only Columbia Pictures emulated Universal's date movie approach swiftly, by selling *Aloha, Bobby and Rose* (Floyd Mutrux, 1975) as a "new kind of love story, in the world of top 40 and zero-to-sixty."³⁷ Columbia also used posters that featured a young couple dancing as others petted in parked cars to promote *Drive-In* (Rod Amateau, 1976). "There's nothing but action at the drive-in," promised Columbia's poster, which was somewhat ironic given that the other MPAA members' hesitancy had allowed the enterprising yet all-but-forgotten independent producer-distributor Crown International Pictures to carve itself a profitable niche by releasing low-budget films about fun-loving, middle-class youth, which played mainly in drive-ins. The American distribution elites were forced to reconsider their youth-market operations in light of the financial achievements of Crown's light-hearted, sun-soaked teen films, particularly *The Pom Pom Girls* (Joseph Ruben, 1976) and *The Van* (Sam Grossman, 1977).³⁸

Crown's flagship date movies—updates of AIP's beach movies that embedded kinetic, music-laden montages of youth leisure into threadbare narratives in a manner similar to the "high-concept look" that would soon be embraced by MPAA members—were made and marketed with a young mixed-sex audience in mind.³⁹ "Women influence our box-office," explained Crown's vice president of production, Marilyn Tenser. "They're the ones that decide what movie a couple is going to see."⁴⁰ By employing a marketing strategy that executives dubbed "Crownsmanship," Crown presented its films as mildly titillating and dreamily romantic depictions of young people enjoying themselves and each other.⁴¹ Accordingly, promotional posters often combined taglines that addressed male youth directly and imagery that conveyed "female-friendly" themes like courtship or sisterhood (Figure 1). To further emphasize that its films were female friendly, Crown used a soft-spoken actress to narrate trailers—a rarely used

36 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 18–19; Marc Le Sueur, "Theory Number Five: Anatomy of Nostalgia Films: Heritage and Methods," *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 2 (1977): 187–197; David R. Shumway, "Rock 'n' Roll Soundtracks and the Production of Nostalgia," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 36–51.

37 Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (2002): 38–58.

38 Richard Nowell, "Crown International Pictures: The Independent That Changed New Hollywood," in *Directory of World Cinema: American Independent*, vol. 2, ed. John Berra (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

39 Gary Morris, "Beyond the Beach: AIP's Beach Party Movies," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 2–11; Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

40 Quoted in Linda Gross, "A Woman's Place Is in . . . Exploitation Films," *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1978.

41 *Variety*, "Crown Int'l Pitches for Pix via Indies' Marketing Flexibility," February 21, 1977, 49.



Figure 1. "Crownsmanship" in action: Crown presented its films as mildly titillating and dreamily romantic depictions of young people enjoying themselves and each other, as in this promotional poster for *The Pom Pom Girls* (Crown International, 1976).

technique that has, only recently, been appropriated to sell female-oriented films like *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008).

Tactics of this sort briefly transformed Crown from a minor player into a thriving business.⁴² At a time of \$60–\$120 million blockbusters, it is easy to dismiss the \$4.3 million in rentals (monies received by distributors from US and Canadian exhibitors) that *The Pom Pom Girls* generated across 1976 or the \$4.5 million made by *The Van* in 1977; however, these figures were significant because they were earned by a small company operating in a fiercely competitive market in which, as leading industry analyst A. D. Murphy calculated, only 15 percent of the American film industry's total revenue was up for grabs.⁴³ An independent release was deemed a hit, David Cook explains, "if it earned four or five times its negative cost."⁴⁴ With *The Pom Pom Girls* and *The Van* costing only \$750 thousand–\$1 million, Crown's financial achievements were sufficient to serve notice to MPAA members that, with higher production values, more intensive marketing campaigns, and wider releases, similar films could be incredibly lucrative.⁴⁵

MPAA members added youth-centered date movies feverishly to their distribution rosters from late 1976 to early 1977, releasing sixteen youth-centered films between June 1977 and December 1978, a 300 percent increase over the previous two and a half years. With minimal recent experience handling a youth-centered product, MPAA members looked to spread risk and to conduct research and development. "I figured that if we made enough low-budget pictures to appeal to young audiences," explained Columbia Pictures president Frank Price, "we couldn't get too badly hurt on any of them and we'd strike oil on one."⁴⁶ This strategy helped MPAA members determine what material fueled strong ticket sales and therefore could be replicated in subsequent films or could be the measure of a pickup candidate's box-office prospects. Employing their own brand of Crownsmanship, MPAA members angled most of their youth-centered films toward young males and females by way of marketing campaigns

42 Schreger, "Majors Drain," 28.

43 *The Pom Pom Girls*: \$4.3m (46th/1976); *The Van*: \$4.5m (54th/1977). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1976," January 4, 1977, 14; *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1977," January 4, 1978, 21; A. D. Murphy, "300 Indie Films Pace Production: Invest \$100: Mil Outside Majors," *Variety*, June 9, 1976, 1, 32.

44 David Cook, "1974—Movies and Political Trauma," in *American Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007), 132.

45 Nowell, "Crown International."

46 Quoted in Harnetz, "The Movie."

that showcased heterosexual courtship and young females participating in leisure activities: disco dancing in *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), college basketball in *One on One* (Lamont Johnson, 1977), skateboarding in *Skateboard* (George Gage, 1978). *Skateboard*'s poster promised "Love, laughter, good guys, bad guys and America's greatest skateboarders"; similarly, *One on One*'s poster explained, "There comes a time when love stops being a ball and starts being a woman." The commercial achievements of the long-forgotten sleeper hit *One on One*, in conjunction with the blockbuster success of *Saturday Night Fever*, ensured that, by early 1978, just before teen slasher film production started to increase, the youth-centered date movie was firmly established as Hollywood's weapon of choice in its mission to serve its prime audience.⁴⁷ Made at a point when several highly profitable date movies had signaled to independent filmmakers that MPAA members favored youth-oriented films that were marketable to young people of both sexes, early teen slashers emerged when targeting horror to female youth was gaining momentum among MPAA members.

"If Only They Knew She Had the Power": Hollywood and Horror, 1973–1978.

Vivian Sobchack's observation that Hollywood's horror output during the decade that followed the 1968 release of *Rosemary's Baby* was dominated by supernatural domestic melodrama before giving way to youth-centered horror in the late 1970s bespeaks an effect of one of the major economic objectives that shaped what Waller termed the "modern era of the American horror film": attracting first mature women and later female youth to MPAA member horror pictures.⁴⁸ During that period, MPAA members evidently concluded that males could be relied on to attend horror films regardless of the content of the films or their marketing campaigns, and consequently began targeting horror overtly toward female audiences through what Janet Staiger has shown to have been tried-and-true strategies.⁴⁹ Thus, angling horror films toward female youth grew out of one of the most distinctive marketing trends of the 1970s: targeting big-budget chillers toward mature women in ways that differed both from earlier horror marketing and from the marketing campaigns of contemporaneous independently distributed horror films. Largely jettisoned were images of women in jeopardy—partially dressed, cowering, screaming, and vulnerable—and in their place came, for the most part, images of strong, focused female characters.

Much like their tentative response to the blockbuster success of the youth-centered date movie *American Graffiti*, MPAA members moved with jaw-dropping lethargy to capitalize on the commercial achievements of *Rosemary's Baby* through the production of similarly lavish supernatural horror films that focused on thirty-something women and parenthood. This inactivity meant that half a decade passed before the box-office triumph of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) trumpeted the unprecedented financial

47 *Saturday Night Fever*: \$71.4m (10th/all-time); *One on One*: \$13.1m (24th/1977). *Variety*, "All-Time Film Rental Champs," January 3, 1979, 30; *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1977," 21.

48 Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in Grant, *The Dread of Difference*, 143–164; Waller, introduction to *American Horrors*, 1–12.

49 Janet Staiger, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 190–191.

rewards offered by horror films angled to appeal to mature females. As a big-budget, calculated blockbuster, *The Exorcist* required such huge ticket sales to break even that Warner Bros. tailored marketing materials to attract not just males and young people but adult women as well. By spotlighting a working woman and motherhood, the company emphasized that *The Exorcist* addressed issues assumed to be of direct relevance to many mature American women. The presence of this content was conveyed by the film's theatrical trailer, which featured little of the young girl who is possessed or the priests who exorcise her and instead concentrated, like the film itself, on Ellen Burstyn's forty-something character, an actress and single parent who is introduced by way of the mantra "mother, mother, mother." As one of the biggest hits in history, *The Exorcist* influenced the content and marketing of subsequent Hollywood horror films profoundly, a phenomenon demonstrated by the emphasis placed on adult females and issues assumed to affect that demographic in the promotion of three of the MPAA members' four 1976 horror films: *Burnt Offerings* (Dan Curtis, 1976), *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976).⁵⁰ For example, the first half of *The Omen's* trailer focused—again, like the film itself—on a mother's alienation from her child.

Although the blockbuster returns for *The Omen* ensured that MPAA members continued to implement this strategy, signs were already suggesting that orienting horror toward mature females did not guarantee financial success. Nowhere was the decrease in box-office prowess more apparent than in the disappointing performance of *Lipstick*, a glossy rape-revenge film that Paramount Pictures had targeted directly toward women by way of a promotional poster that evoked a *Vogue* cover shot and featured the taglines "She believed she was the weaker sex until the day she was violated" and "The story of a woman's outrage and a woman's revenge." While the commercial failure of *Lipstick* could have been due to accusations of misogyny from several reviewers at mass-circulation newspapers, which may have alienated some of the women that Paramount was targeting, the similarly poor financial performance of United Artists' *Burnt Offerings*, which had been spared such critical hostility, seemed to suggest that the American market had become saturated with horror films targeted toward mature women and that promoting horror to that demographic no longer ensured strong ticket sales. In response to this shift, United Artists angled *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), the year's last MPAA-member horror release, toward younger females, and in doing so effectively introduced Crownsmanship to horror.⁵¹

Later identified by *Variety* as one of the most influential films of the period, *Carrie*—the story of a timid high school senior's struggle with her abusive mother, bullying classmates, romantic yearnings, and telekinesis—marked the high-profile reemergence of the horror date movie and signaled the economic viability of horror films that centered on, and addressed, young females.⁵² As a result of the film's youth-centeredness,

50 *The Exorcist*: \$66.3m (2nd/1974; 5th/all-time). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1974," January 8, 1975, 24; *Variety*, "Updated All-Time Film Champs," January 8, 1975, 26.

51 *The Omen*: \$27.8m (3rd/1976); *Lipstick*: \$4.18m (51st/1976); *Burnt Offerings*: \$1.56m (95th/1976). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1976," 14, 44.

52 Carl., "He Knows You're Alone," *Variety*, August 27, 1980, 20.

United Artists had recognized that *Carrie*'s box-office potential was limited compared to horror films with cross-demographic appeal like *The Exorcist*. But United Artists had also realized that *Carrie*, as a low-cost investment, needed to sell considerably fewer tickets than prestige horror films in order to turn a profit. Thus, the company could reduce the scope of its target audience while still standing to make money, in much the same way as AIP had done in the 1950s with cut-price efforts like *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957).⁵³ *Carrie* lent itself ideally to a youth-oriented marketing campaign because, unlike contemporaneous horror films, it was set in a teenage world of small-town streets, white picket-fenced homes, and high school. Moreover, United Artists could target *Carrie* to young females easily because the film, as William Paul has argued, handled subjects of specific relevance to female youth, including the emotional turmoil of puberty, burgeoning sexuality, and the cruelty of female youth interaction.⁵⁴ United Artists' date movie approach was neatly encapsulated in *Carrie*'s promotional poster, on which Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) appeared as both a radiant prom queen and a blood-drenched specter, and on which were printed two taglines addressing male and female youth separately. "If you've got a taste for terror," it advised young males, "take Carrie to the prom." The second tagline—"If only they knew she had the power"—addressed female viewers by endorsing their perceptions of social dynamics (Figure 2). United Artists' trailer expanded on the approach of its poster. Before gesturing to Carrie's vengeance on her cruel enemies, the trailer focused on her transformation from unhappy outcast to blissful young woman who slow dances with "the best looking boy in the senior class" (as he is described in voiceover), is crowned prom queen, and appears to win the acceptance of her cohort. By mid-1977, *Carrie* had achieved a feat that few teen-centered horror films manage: commercial and critical success.

Robust ticket sales, major Academy Award nominations, and extensive popular press coverage made *Carrie* one of the highest-profile films of its day; few industry insiders could have failed to notice that it had demonstrated the commercial potential of orienting horror toward female youth.⁵⁵ Writer-director Brian De Palma, who a few

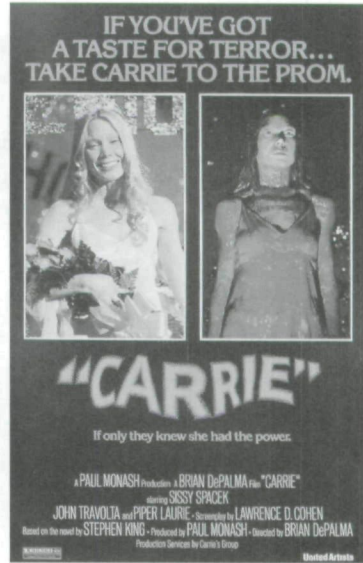


Figure 2. The horror date movie *Carrie* targets both male and female viewers with two taglines (United Artists, 1976).

53 Gary Arnold, "De Palma's Spectacular Sleeper," *Washington Post*, November 21, 1976.

54 William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Comedy and Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 362.

55 By January 1978, *Carrie* had generated \$14.5 million in rentals, an amount that, had it been generated in a calendar year, would have placed the film in the annual top twenty for 1977 or 1978. *Variety*, "All-Time Film Rental Champs," January 4, 1978, 82.

years later would be accused of making misogynist films, received considerable praise from many leading American journalists for his portrayal of female characters. Garnering De Palma the richest accolades of all was his handling of the subject of young love, told from the point of view of a female outsider: awkward, lonely Carrie White and a handsome, athletic male student (William Katt), with whom she has fallen in love, slow dance and kiss at the “love amongst the stars” prom (a scene featured prominently in the film’s theatrical trailer). The *Washington Post*’s Gary Arnold described this scene as “far and away the most romantic interlude achieved in American movies in years.”⁵⁶ The significance of *Carrie*’s content, box-office performance, and marketing campaign was underscored by events that took place across the following eighteen months.

Between mid-1977 and the spring of 1978, targeting female youth emerged as a cost-effective solution to the dwindling appeal and the plummeting profit margins of adult-oriented horror. Some of the films released by MPAA members during this period, including *The Sentinel* (Michael Winner, 1977) and *Audrey Rose* (Robert Wise, 1977), simply generated paltry ticket sales.⁵⁷ Given that most films lost money on their US theatrical runs, these flops could have been written off as a symptom of standard market conditions, were it not for the fact that even those expensive chillers that did attract comparatively large audiences—*Exorcist II: The Heretic* (John Boorman, 1977) and *The Fury* (Brian De Palma, 1978)—stayed in the red, as their earnings were diminished by high production and marketing costs.⁵⁸ The unprofitability of these two fairly strong-performing films indicated that the horror audience was no longer large enough to support costly projects, but that its ranks could turn modestly budgeted films into lucrative ventures. In addition, the healthy ticket sales of the two films appeared, crucially, to confirm that female youth held the key to commercially viable horror. Both films had been sold on poster art that had emphasized the presence of young females: eighteen-year-old Linda Blair in *Exorcist II: The Heretic* and twenty-something Amy Irving in *The Fury*. Thus, with the only three horror films that had, in the previous eighteen months, generated over \$10 million in domestic rentals having been sold on their female-youth-centeredness, with MPAA members placing unprecedented confidence in less frightening youth-centered date movies, and with the much-publicized sleeper hit *Carrie* having demonstrated the commercial potential of uniting the two trends, independent filmmakers started, by early 1978, to target MPAA-member distributors with low-budget horror date movies, particularly teen slasher films.

“Derived from Brian De Palma’s ‘Carrie’”: *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*.

Conceptions of female youth underpinned North American teen slasher film production and distribution from 1978 to 1981, during which time demonstrating marketability to female youth was a key production strategy, and targeting young female theatergoers was a key distribution strategy. Although the depiction of independent female protagonists, heterosexual courtship, and female bonding shifted across this

56 Gary Arnold, “Carrie: Brilliant Hair Raising Horror,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 1976.

57 *The Sentinel*: \$4m (57th/1977); *Audrey Rose*: \$2m (85th/1977). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1977,” 21, 50.

58 *Exorcist II: The Heretic*: \$13.9m (22nd/1977); *The Fury*: \$10m (25th/1978). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1977,” 21; *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1978,” January 3, 1979, 17.

three-year period, as producers and distributors responded to new horror and youth-centered hits, the important role that female-youth-oriented content played with respect to the commercial objectives of teen slasher filmmakers and marketers was already evident from two of the earliest teen slashers, *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*.

The talent behind *Halloween* was intimately familiar with the horror market in general and the mid-to-late-1970s youth market in particular. The film was conceived and produced by Irwin Yablans, whose brother Frank had produced *The Fury*. Further, *Halloween* was co-written, co-produced, and directed by John Carpenter (who had just sold Columbia Pictures a script for a romantic horror film about a clairvoyant career woman that was being made as *Eyes of Laura Mars* [Irvin Kershner, 1978]). Crucially, Debra Hill, who had recently worked on a lighthearted mix of *Carrie* and *The Pom Pom Girls* titled *Satan's Cheerleaders* (Greydon Clark, 1977), scripted dialogue involving *Halloween's* female protagonists, three high school girlfriends—contemplative Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis), happy-go-lucky Lynda (P. J. Soles), and self-confident Annie (Nancy Loomis)—whom industry watchers like Gary Arnold recognized as characters that had been “derived from Brian De Palma’s ‘Carrie.’”⁵⁹ Much of *Halloween* depicted this trio of “fun-loving gum-chewing no-better-than-they-should-be baby-sitters,” as Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* described them, bonding through discussions of homosocial interaction, heterosexual interaction, and minor personal problems relating to prom dates, schoolwork, and babysitting.⁶⁰ This content was deemed so important to *Halloween's* commercial prospects that twenty-seven-year-old Hill was given the task of writing the girls’ dialogue because Carpenter felt that he, as an adult male, could not render female youth plausibly. Like other high-profile women working in independent filmmaking at the time, such as Dimension Pictures’ Stephanie Rothman and the aforementioned Marilyn Tenser at Crown International Pictures, Hill wanted to attract female audiences, confirming that she had tailored the girls’ conversations to make *Halloween* appealing to young women.⁶¹ “Here was a movie,” explained Hill, “that they could go and see, and see themselves.”⁶²

Halloween's distributor, which turned out to be producer Irwin Yablans’s own company, Compass International Films, after MPAA members chose not to purchase the film, employed a marketing campaign that addressed teenage girls and young women by highlighting female-youth-centered content and portrayals of female bonding.⁶³ Publicity shots of virtually unknown twenty-year-old actress Jamie Lee Curtis striking relaxed poses were featured on several lobby cards, and another card showed the film’s three girlfriends posing casually together, with P. J. Soles in the central position. (Because of her scene-stealing role in *Carrie*, Soles was already imbued somewhat with the relaxed, fun-loving, Southern California persona that became a prominent component of the

59 Gary Arnold “‘Halloween’: A Trickle of Treats,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 1978.

60 Vincent Canby, “Chilling Truths about Scaring,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1979.

61 Gross, “A Woman’s Place,” 34; Tony Williams, “Feminism, Fantasy and Violence: An Interview with Stephanie Rothman,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9, no. 2 (1981), 84–90.

62 Debra Hill, “Filmmakers Commentary,” *Halloween*, DVD, directed by John Carpenter, 25th Anniversary Edition (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2003).

63 *Variety*, “Irwin Yablans Hailing ‘Halloween’ Expectancy Calls Boston Crucial,” March 14, 1979, 6.

star image she developed in subsequent roles in the teen films *Breaking Away* [Peter Yates, 1979] and *Rock 'n' Roll High School* [Allan Arkush, 1979] and the hit comedies *Private Benjamin* [Howard Zieff, 1980] and *Stripes* [Ivan Reitman, 1981].) Female protagonists and female friendship—and, by extension, similarities to Crown's drive-in hits, MPAA-member date movies, and *Carrie*—were also highlighted in *Halloween's* trailer, which included an attention-grabbing scene (the only daytime footage featured in the trailer) during which the girls shared a joint and chatted in hip jargon about the “like totally” transgressive possibilities afforded by babysitting. *Halloween's* solid, albeit subsequently exaggerated, box-office performance across late 1978 and early 1979 alerted a small number of independent filmmakers to the commercial potential of tales of youth being harassed by a shadowy killer, ensuring that 1980 witnessed a small increase in the release of teen slashers—all of which had been made for, and marketed to, female youth.⁶⁴

Among the films to follow in *Halloween's* wake in 1980 was *Friday the 13th*. To demonstrate that *Friday the 13th* was marketable to female youth, the filmmaking partnership of producer-director Sean S. Cunningham and screenwriter Victor Miller offered a tough heroine and some romance. The promiscuous teens often described as obsessively pursuing casual liaisons in teen slashers, especially in *Friday the 13th*, were in fact all but absent from *Friday the 13th* and were seldom seen in its contemporaries.⁶⁵ In fact, heterosexual interaction in teen slashers has been routinely mischaracterized, with teen slasher filmmakers, at this stage at least, usually painting sex as an emotionally wrought rite of passage or as a demonstration of affection undertaken by long-term partners or love-struck young people. The makers of *Friday the 13th* emphasized courtship rituals as part of everyday youth interaction, opening with a pair of smitten teenage paramours before introducing Marcie (Jeannine Taylor) and Jack (Kevin Bacon), a young couple very much in love, and Steve (Peter Brouwer) and Alice (Adrienne King), two twenty-somethings with an unresolved romantic history.

The mobilization of moments of teen romance enabled independent filmmakers to capitalize on developments in Hollywood horror and on a red-hot, primarily female-youth-oriented production trend, while sidestepping competition over MPAA-member pickup deals from more illustrious and bankable filmmakers. By the summer of 1979, industry insiders' confidence in teenage love stories was at an all-time high because, in the previous eighteen months, puppy love had become an increasingly prominent part of youth-centered hits and their marketing campaigns. Significantly, young love had been emphasized in Paramount's promotion of *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), the highest-earning youth-centered film ever, and Columbia's less remembered sleeper hit *Ice Castles* (Donald Wyre, 1978) had been advertised as a teen romance: “When tragedy struck, love came to the rescue,” the trailer proclaimed.⁶⁶

As a result of these hits, a surge in the production of similar films was under way, involving some of the industry's most astute producers. For example, Randal Kleiser had

64 Sam Allis, “Spooky Profits for a ‘Cult Film in Reverse,’” *Washington Post*, March 18, 1979.

65 Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 148–149; Wood, “Beauty Bests the Beast.”

66 *Grease*: \$83m (1st/1979; 4th/all-time); *Ice Castles*: \$9.5m (38th/1979). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1978,” 17; *Variety*, “All-Time Film Rental Champs [1979],” 30; *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1979,” January 9, 1980, 21.

followed *Grease* with *The Blue Lagoon*; Rastar Pictures, the company behind *Smokey and the Bandit* (Hal Needham, 1977), was filming *Skatetown, U.S.A.* (William A. Levey, 1979); and even *Halloween's* Yablans had invested some of *Halloween's* profits into *Roller Boogie* (Mark L. Lester, 1979).⁶⁷ While the filmmakers behind *Friday the 13th* stood little chance of emerging victorious from head-to-head confrontations with this caliber of opposition, making commercially suicidal the production of an out-and-out teen romance, it seemed possible to capitalize on the trend by incorporating young love into a different type of film, and the conduct of MPAA members and the theatergoing population of the United States indicated that horror was that type of film. Romance, albeit not of the adolescent variety, had been used, with some success, by two MPAA members to reinvigorate ticket sales for prestige horror films, following the aforementioned slump of 1976–1978. “Throughout the ages he has filled the hearts of men with terror,” read Universal’s tagline for *Dracula* (John Badham, 1979), “and the hearts of women with desire.” Similarly, Twentieth Century Fox had billed *Magic* (Richard Attenborough, 1978) as a “terrifying love story.” The solid box office returns of *Dracula* and *Magic* had suggested that romance-inflected horror could secure MPAA-member distribution.

Also designed to provide *Friday the 13th's* makers with a competitive edge in the battle over MPAA-member distribution deals was the film’s masculine heroine, Alice, an element of content that reflected a high-profile innovation that had been used to promote *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). *Alien* had been a MPAA-member release that, together with *Dracula* and *Magic*, opened after *Halloween* (but before *Friday the 13th* was shot); *Alien*, *Magic*, and *Dracula* were all well positioned to out-perform *Halloween*.⁶⁸ As *Friday the 13th* was being scripted, Twentieth Century Fox was targeting *Alien* to female audiences with a trailer in which the confusion, fear, and loathing of male characters was contrasted against shots of the film’s heroine striking focused, determined, and urgent poses. The tagline, “In space no one can hear you scream,” also angled *Alien* toward women by referencing the response to horror that is usually associated with female viewers. Although Clover has since argued that masculine heroines, or “final girls,” were geared toward males, *Alien* indicates that Hollywood had identified the character as an invaluable instrument with which to attract females, on the basis that a projection of female empowerment promised to resonate with female ticket buyers. In fact, the studio was evidently so confident that such a character would appeal to women that *Alien's* heroine had been allocated a prominent role in the astronomical \$16 million marketing campaign being used to promote a film that had been expected to emulate *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) commercially, and that, in order to break even, needed to be among the year’s top earners.⁶⁹ By mining the teen romance trend and by mobilizing a tough heroine à la *Alien*, Cunningham, Miller, and their collaborators provided a prospective distributor with commercially viable content with which to target *Friday the 13th* to female, as well as male, youth.

67 *Variety*, “Film Production,” August 22, 1979, 47.

68 *Magic*: \$12.5m (24th/1979); *Dracula*: \$10.5m (33rd/1979). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1979,” 21.

69 David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 60–61; Jack Pittman, “Fox Gambling on \$8-Mil ‘Alien’ as Another ‘Star Wars’ Smash,” *Variety*, July 26, 1978, 28.



Figure 3. Many promotional images for *Friday the 13th* focused on platonic interaction rather than sex or violence (Paramount, 1980).

Friday the 13th's distributor, Paramount Pictures, to some extent took advantage of the opportunities that the film's makers had provided to appeal to teenage girls and young women by employing lobby cards that highlighted female-youth-oriented material. The lobby cards were part of the \$4.5 million cross-media marketing blitz (a budgetary scale usually reserved for calculated blockbusters) that had been launched by Paramount.⁷⁰ Having profited from mega-hit date movies including *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, the company, particularly its vice president of marketing and distribution, Frank Mancuso Sr., was acutely aware of the financial benefits of angling youth-centered films toward both sexes. Paramount's lobby cards therefore emphasized young characters over moments of horror, with female characters featuring heavily, as romance and female agency were spotlighted over "cheesecake shots." One of the cards showed a pair of young lovers poised to kiss; a second featured two youths sunbathing with their heads resting together intimately. Other lobby cards pictured female youth interacting platonically with males, staring incredulously at a cop in one, greeting a man in another (Figure 3). In one lobby card, a young woman helps to rescue a struggling swimmer. In another, a female youth leaps from a jeep. And in the wryest depiction of female agency of all, one lobby card even recalibrates a clichéd sexist joke, as a female character shows a befuddled young man how to change a light bulb. Taken as a whole, Paramount's lobby cards marked *Friday the 13th* as female-youth-friendly entertainment. By securing MPAA-member distribution, a large audience,

70 *Variety*, "After 'Friday 13th' Windfall, Cunningham Explores New Area," July 9, 1980, 25; Aljean Harmetz, "After 2 Good Summers, Film Business Lags," *New York Times*, June 26, 1980; Harmetz, "Quick End of Low-Budget Horror-Film Cycle Seen," *New York Times*, October 2, 1980.

and a healthy profit, and by signaling that *Halloween* had not been an anomalous box-office success, *Friday the 13th*—the most unexpected hit of summer 1980—cemented the commercial potential of female-friendly teen slashers, thereby ensuring that industry insiders' confidence in teen slashers would swell rapidly and that, in conjunction with parallel developments, the importance of the female youth audience would grow too.⁷¹

"A Special Night in the Lives of All of Us": *Prom Night* and Other Developments. The events of the late summer and early fall of 1980 erased any lingering doubts that the industry might have harbored about the commercial viability of female-youth-friendly teen slashers, as the first public statement was made by an MPAA member regarding the need to target films about maniacs toward young women, as a primarily female-youth-oriented teen slasher generated strong ticket sales, as an MPAA member changed a teen slasher film's marketing campaign to attract teenage girls and young women, and as revelations about the composition of teen slasher audiences were printed in a leading American newspaper.

The Canadian-based filmmakers behind *Prom Night* had spotlighted female protagonists, female bonding, and heterosexual courtship to offer MPAA members the possibility of atoning for underestimating the financial promise of *Halloween*. These opportunists were well aware of the potential rewards of recalibrating the target audience with films that had been modeled on youth-oriented hits because, when *Prom Night* went into production, the Canadian film industry was reverberating, as Peter Urquhart has pointed out, from a landmark event in its financially wretched history.⁷² The long-standing and much-troubled project to deliver what *Variety* dubbed the "made-in-Canada blockbuster" had been realized when MPAA-member distribution and significant box-office success was enjoyed by *Meatballs* (Ivan Reitman, 1979), a teen comedy that, while patterned after Universal's 1978 gross-out comedy blockbuster hit *Animal House*, had been made more accessible to children and younger teenagers through eschewal of the salacious content that had earned *Animal House* an R rating and had, in theory at least, excluded unaccompanied minors from screenings.⁷³ With *Meatballs* still in theaters, the Canadian-based filmmakers responsible for *Prom Night*—along with their countrymen behind *Terror Train* (examined below)—emulated *Meatballs*'s production model by using *Halloween* as a pattern for films which MPAA members could target specifically to teenage girls.⁷⁴

As an exercise in transnational filmmaking, *Prom Night* was also affected by events that had been taking place in the US film industry, events which provided further encouragement to orient a teen slasher film primarily toward female youth. As indicated

71 *Friday the 13th*: \$16.5m (20th/1980). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1980," January 14, 1981, 29; Dennis Boyles, "Hollywood's 'B's Make the Box Office Buzz," *New York Times*, August 3, 1980; Harnetz, "After 2 Good Summers"; Dale Pollock, "2nd Most Successful Film, Scary News: It's 'Friday the 13th,'" *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1980.

72 Peter Urquhart, "You Should Know Something—Anything—about This Movie: You Paid for It," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 64–80.

73 *Variety*, "Made-in-Canada Blockbuster Needed to Buck Up Filmmakers," November 21, 1973, 19; *Variety*, "Pick-ups, TV, Cable for 10 'Canadian Development' Pics Yield \$39,100,000 (So Far)," May 9, 1979, 448, 460.

74 Michael Walsh, "Vancouver: Facts, Fantasy as to 'Hollywood of North,'" *Variety*, November 21, 1979, 48, 70.

above, teenage female protagonists, young love, and female bonding had proven commercially viable. Thus, the filmmakers behind *Prom Night* replicated features of earlier hits that had showcased this content: *Carrie*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Grease*. As several journalists recognized, elements of these films had been combined in *Prom Night*, as a group of schoolgirls participated in the buildup to, and celebrations of, Hamilton High's "disco-madness" senior prom.⁷⁵ *Prom Night* was therefore a female-youth-centered film in which a graduation dance was presented as a female rite of passage for three seniors, Kim, Jude, and Kelly, who each negotiate social challenges arising from the event, and who provide each other emotional support. Whereas lovesick Jude worries about finding a prom date, and Kelly is being pressured by her bullish boyfriend to surrender her virginity, Kim, the film's heroine, is mourning the death of her younger sister and is dealing with a rival who covets her boyfriend and is jealous of the attention she receives as the elected prom queen.

Casting and characterization suggest that *Prom Night's* producers saw Kim, in particular, as crucial to the film's marketability, recruiting Jamie Lee Curtis for the role, a rising star thanks to *Halloween*, Curtis was presented in interviews as a quick-witted, laid-back, sexually confident "Valley girl" (she had yet to be subjected to the rumors of being intersexed that later complicated gender aspects of her star persona).⁷⁶ It is a common misconception that teen slashers typically featured tomboy heroines, like *Friday the 13th's* Alice.⁷⁷ In reality, protagonists who would be considered "conventionally feminine," by the estimations of those scholars who have written on the subject, were actually more common than their "boyish" counterparts. Whereas in *Halloween* Curtis had famously played a timid babysitter who enjoyed the opposite sex by proxy (through constant discussions with her sexually active friends), in *Prom Night* the Curtis character was transformed into the popular pretty girl, a privileged alpha female who wears the most stylish clothes, is the best disco dancer in the school, dates the most eligible boy, and is crowned prom queen. Director Paul Lynch has since gone on record to explain that he believed that this material made *Prom Night* potentially appealing to young females. "We know the prom to be a wonderful event in teenagers' lives," explained Lynch, an event "that girls . . . look back on like they do their marriage [wedding day]."⁷⁸ The filmmakers responsible for *Prom Night* thus offered a prospective distributor a wealth of material with which to target female youth, and this opportunity was taken up by MPAA member (and youth-market specialist) Avco Embassy in the summer of 1980.

Avco Embassy's marketing campaign for *Prom Night* placed more emphasis on female-youth-oriented material than the promotion of any horror film since *Carrie* almost four years earlier. *Prom Night's* content notwithstanding, this approach was by no means inevitable and was likely catalyzed by the fact that, mere weeks earlier,

75 Gene Siskel, "Prom Night," *Chicago Tribune*, July 21, 1980.

76 See, for example, William K. Knoedelseder Jr., "Jamie Lee Curtis: A Scream Queen Attracts Attention," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1980.

77 Clover, "Her Body, Himself," 35–42.

78 Paul Lynch, interviewed in *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film*, DVD, directed by Jeff McQueen (THINKFilm, 2006).



Figure 4. *Prom Night* was marketed by appealing to girls' fantasies (Avco Embassy, 1980).

MGM/UA had become the first MPAA member to declare publicly its confidence in angling tales of psycho-killers toward girls and young women when it announced that “[p]articular emphasis will be paid to the fifteen-to-twenty-one-year-old female audience” in the promotion of *He Knows You're Alone* (Armand Mastroianni, 1980), an independently produced acquisition about a maniac stalking twenty-something brides-to-be.⁷⁹ The box-office potential of making teenage girls the primary target audience for an R-rated youth film had been trumpeted that spring when Paramount's *Little Darlings* (Ronald F. Maxwell, 1980), a story about two fifteen-year-old girls racing to lose their virginity at summer camp, became a hit on the scale of *Carrie* and *Meatballs*; the film's marketing campaign had emphasized elements of the film that showcased, to use Chuck Kleinhans's description, “white young women bonding, expressing the situation of girls in a group or pair, and showing the world from their perspective.”⁸⁰ Avco Embassy's attempts to secure that same assumed young female audience for *Prom Night* found their fullest expression in audiovisual marketing materials, with *Prom Night's* trailer spotlighting female protagonists, female bonding, and romance. Montages showed teenage girls performing beauty rituals, kissing boys, and disco dancing, and voiceover narration indicated that this material was being angled mainly toward female youth (Figure 4). “There's a special night in the lives of all of us,” announced the narrator, “a night to be beautiful, to be desirable, a night where we can break all the rules and make our own.” This approach invited girls to anticipate a film that bore obvious similarities to *Carrie*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Grease*, as well as to the contemporaneous disco movies *Skatetown, U.S.A.* and *Roller Boogie*. When

79 *Spokesman Review*, “MGM Enters Horror Picture,” July 1, 1980, 15.

80 *Little Darlings*: \$16.7 (19th/1980). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1980,” 29; Chuck Kleinhans, “Girls on the Edge of the Reagan Era,” in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, ed. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 73.

it sold more tickets per screen than *Friday the 13th*, *Prom Night* provided a huge incentive for filmmakers to continue to make teen slashers that were marketable to female youth and for distributors to continue to target the demographic.⁸¹

A second incentive came soon after in the shape of the first public statement about the composition of teen slasher audiences. In early October 1980, respected film industry analyst Aljean Harmetz revealed in the *New York Times* that market research had shown that teen slasher films were attracting large numbers of female youth. The document, she explained, had revealed that 45 percent of tickets for *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* had been sold to under-seventeen-year-olds, 55 percent of whom were girls.⁸² These data were particularly eye-opening because some industry insiders still believed that fifteen- to twenty-five-year-old males dominated horror film attendance.⁸³ Harmetz had thus highlighted a causal link between depictions of female youth, disproportionately high attendance among young females, and box-office success, and in doing so, she appeared to have confirmed what filmmakers and distributors had concluded all along: a female-friendly teen slasher was more likely to become a financially successful teen slasher.⁸⁴

The first tangible sign of the influence of *Prom Night*'s box-office performance and of the revelations about audience composition came when Harmetz's source—no less than Twentieth Century Fox's vice president of advertising and publicity, Robert Cort—revamped *Terror Train*'s marketing materials to make the film more attractive to female youth. Produced by leading Canadian production company Astral Bellevue Pathé at the same time as *Prom Night*, *Terror Train* had also been crafted to enable MPAA members to target female youth, with the film focusing heavily on a conventionally feminine heroine, a sorority sister called Alana (Jamie Lee Curtis), who comes of age when she breaks free from a self-centered boyfriend and takes responsibility for her involvement in a thoughtless initiation ritual that led to a fellow student being institutionalized. However, Fox did not initially use this female-youth-oriented material in its \$5 million promotion of *Terror Train*, as early poster art featured a masked killer brandishing a knife and the tagline "What screams in the night isn't the train. It's the terror at your throat."⁸⁵ But following *Prom Night*'s achievements and the findings of its own market research, Twentieth Century Fox altered *Terror Train*'s marketing materials to emphasize the presence of youth of both sexes. The final version of the film's artwork incorporated an illustration of college students gathering around a bonfire and a new tagline: "The boys and girls of Sigma Pi, some will live and some will die." "Stay with your date," advised *Terror Train*'s theatrical trailer, and lobby cards

81 *Prom Night*'s rentals were lower than those of *Friday the 13th* because Avco Embassy could only afford to print 291 copies of the film, 1,200 copies fewer than Paramount circulated of *Friday the 13th*. *Prom Night*: \$6m (53rd/1980). *Variety*, "Big Rental Films of 1980," July 30, 1980, 24, 29; Laurie Warner, "Horror! It's Getting to Be No Joke!" *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1980.

82 Harmetz, "Quick End."

83 Roger Watkins, "Demented Revenge Hits World Screens," *Variety*, October 15, 1980, 33.

84 Harmetz, "Quick End."

85 David Novak Associates, "75 Theatre Canadian Release Slated by Astral: Twentieth Century Fox Spends \$5 Million to Launch 'Terror Train' in 1000 Theatres across the U.S.A.," news release, September 18, 1980, microfilm, British Film Institute, London; *Variety*, August 13, 1980, 28–29.

highlighted the presence of girls flirting with boys and spotlighted Curtis instead of her male co-stars, Oscar-winner Ben Johnson and heartthrob Hart Bochner. Developments that took place across four months in the second half of 1980 had therefore ensured that filmmakers and distributors would continue to code teen slashers as female-youth-friendly products when, from fall 1980 to summer 1981, the American film industry's investment in teen slashers reached its high-water mark.

"Teen-Age Love-and-Meat-Cleaver Films": The Teen Slasher Films of 1981.

Thanks to MPAA-member pickup deals and consistent commercial success, teen slasher film production skyrocketed in late 1980 as independent businesspeople across North America contributed to what was arguably the most high-profile production trend of its time. To demonstrate that their films were marketable to female as well as male youth, filmmakers balanced content that they had mined from earlier teen slashers with innovations, and distributors often took advantage of these opportunities when promoting the films in 1981.

Most of the new teen slasher films provided prospective distributors with ample opportunity to target female youth. Sequences of teenage girls bonding appeared in teen slashers such as Miramax's *The Burning* (Tony Maylam, 1981), *Happy Birthday to Me*, and *My Bloody Valentine*. Slasher filmmakers also continued to spotlight heterosexual courtship as sexual tension simmered in *The Prowler* (Joseph Zito, 1981) and *Hell Night* (Tony De Simone, 1981), young love blossomed in *Friday the 13th Part II* (Steve Miner, 1981) and *The Burning*, and emotions reached the boiling point in *Graduation Day* (Herb Freed, 1981) and *My Bloody Valentine*. Indeed, romance had become so commonplace in teen slashers that Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* had taken to calling *Happy Birthday to Me* and its contemporaries "teen-age love-and-meat-cleaver films."⁸⁶ Teen slasher filmmakers encouraged the use of such descriptions. For example, fresh from interviewing producer Irwin Yablans and star Linda Blair on the set of their forthcoming film *Hell Night*, *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ellen Farley described the film as "derived from *Halloween* with pop romance overtures."⁸⁷ In addition to mobilizing material that their predecessors had used, the makers of several new teen slashers hit on a novel way of making their films marketable to female youth.

The most significant point of departure for many of the teen slashers of 1981 was the construction of their heroines, with most of the films being built around a girl who combined the "traditionally" feminine appearance and heterosexual acumen of *Prom Night*'s prom queen protagonist and the masculine aspects of *Friday the 13th*'s tomboy heroine. These characters were essentially younger and less varnished incarnations of the "new woman" heroines which, as Elana Levine shows, had risen to prominence thanks to the heavily publicized hit TV series *Wonder Woman* (CBS, 1976–1977; ABC, 1977–1979) and *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976–1981).⁸⁸ The "new young women" of slasher films controlled their love lives, investigated suspicious activity, and sometimes

86 Vincent Canby, review of *Happy Birthday to Me*, *New York Times*, May 15, 1981.

87 Ellen Farley, "Linda Blair: Erasing the Demon Image," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1981.

88 Elana Levine, "Buffy and the New Girl Order: Defining Feminism and Femininity," in *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, ed. Elana Levine and Lisa Parks (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 168.



Figure 5. By the early 1980s, the protagonists of teen slasher films such as *Hell Night* were essentially younger incarnations of the “new woman” heroines that Elana Levine has identified in *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie’s Angels* (Compass International, 1981).

distributors to stimulate the attendance of female youth who, as children or younger teenagers, had enjoyed their previous work. Although less known female leads did not offer this possibility, they could still be spotlighted by distributors to mark teen slashers as girl-friendly entertainment. The perceived commercial viability of marketing films to female youth based on the presence of young female leads had increased significantly across 1980, thanks largely to the sleeper hits *Little Darlings* and *The Blue Lagoon*, which had been sold primarily on the presence of teenaged stars Tatum O’Neal, Kristy McNichol, and Brooke Shields.⁸⁹ O’Neal, McNichol, and Shields were leading lights among what *Time* journalist John Skow called “Hollywood’s Whiz Kids,” a cohort of photogenic young actresses being nurtured into bankable A-listers by agents, publicity departments, and marketers.⁹⁰ The phenomenon of enabling prospective distributors to capitalize cost-effectively on the hits that had been headlined by the new starlets, and on the notion of the starlet itself, was therefore made possible by the teen slasher heroines.

The marketers of the teen slasher films of 1981 spotlighted female-youth-oriented content consistently. The first of the films to hit theaters was *My Bloody Valentine*, the TV trailer for which, like its poster, spotlighted romance. “In this town on Valentine’s Day,” proclaimed the narrator, “everyone loses their hearts.” *My Bloody Valentine*’s lobby cards communicated romance, as well as sisterhood and female valor, with images of the film’s heroine snubbing a male suitor, ushering a girlfriend to safety, warning others of imminent danger, and preparing to save a male youth from the killer. By the summer, Filmways’ poster for *The Burning* was inviting comparisons to the poster art, and by extension

dispatched the killer. In *Hell Night*, for example, Marti is a capable mechanic and student who, dressed throughout the film in a low-cut evening gown, catches the eye of countless males (Figure 5). Almost two decades before the character type was employed to draw young female audiences to TV series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003) and to films like *Scream*, she was being used to make teen slashers marketable to female youth.

Casting often underscored the economic importance of the female leads, who tended to be played by potential future leading ladies or former child-actors looking to transition to adult stardom. While *Hell Night*’s Marti was played by Linda Blair, who, after starring in *The Exorcist*, had tent-poled *Roller Boogie*, Melissa Sue Anderson, a star of the TV family drama series *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974–1983), headlined *Happy Birthday to Me*. Casting Blair and Anderson enabled prospective

89 *The Blue Lagoon*: \$28.4m (11th/1980). *Variety*, “Big Rental Films of 1980,” 29.

90 John Skow, “Hollywood’s Whiz Kids,” *Time*, August 13, 1979, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,948564,00.html>.

the content, of *The Blue Lagoon* by featuring a sepia-tinted image of young lovers about to kiss in an idyllic setting, and the film's trailer opened with teenage lovers embracing. Female protagonists were emphasized in the promotion of these and other teen slashers as Compass International encouraged audiences to see "Linda Blair in *Hell Night*" and Columbia warned that the disappearances of male students in *Happy Birthday to Me* would mean that there would be "no one left for Virginia's birthday party." The emphasis that distributors placed on female-youth-oriented material may not have reached the dizzy heights of Avco Embassy's promotion of *Prom Night* twelve months earlier, but it remained a key tenet of the marketing campaigns of teen slasher films.

MPAA members eventually stopped offering pickup deals to the independent producers of teen slasher films after market saturation generated weak ticket sales in 1981, thus causing the production of new teen slashers to drop considerably. For a short time between the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, however, industry insiders reaped significant financial rewards from having discovered a lucrative new type of date movie.

Conclusion: "What Makes the Perfect Date Movie?" Contrary to standard thinking, female youth was crucial to the American film industry's commercial objectives vis-à-vis early teen slashers. From 1978 to 1981, independent filmmakers made female-youth-friendly teen slashers to improve their chances of securing a lucrative distribution deal from a reputable company, offering MPAA members material that could be used in marketing campaigns to attract not just young males but also teenage girls and young women, America's second-largest theatergoing demographic. By releasing films that incorporated blade-wielding killers into hit date movies, and by tailoring marketing campaigns to multiple segments of the youth audience, distributors sought to maximize ticket sales. Time after time, independent female protagonists and depictions of female bonding and heterosexual courtship were mobilized to achieve these ends. The emphasis that was placed on these elements evolved as filmmakers and distributors aimed to reflect the evolving content of youth-centered and horror hits, which MPAA members had, from 1973 onward, geared consistently toward female as well as male audiences.

The early teen slasher films demonstrated to the North American film industry the commercial potential of inexpensive horror date movies, and with the establishment of this new film type came the realization that a lucrative relationship existed between horror, teen films, and female youth, a relationship that the industry could ignore only at its peril. The approaches that were employed between 1978 and 1981 formed the foundation on which the American film industry built its conduct with respect to teen slashers for the next thirty years. The structure, conduct, and output of that industry may have changed considerably since the first wave of teen slasher films broke, with, among other factors, the advent of home video and other domestic delivery systems, the rise of "major-independent" studios such as New Line Cinema and Miramax Films, and the reorganization of multinational media conglomerates into various film production and distribution divisions having altered the ways in which films are made, marketed, and released, but one thing that these developments did not change was the importance of female youth to the commercial objectives of the makers and marketers of teen slasher films.

While levels of production and distribution have yet to match the explosion of activity that took place between 1978 and 1981, new female-friendly teen slashers have been made and released almost every year. In 1983, for example, the trailer to *The House on Sorority Row* (Mark Rosman, 1983) opened to a female student applying lipstick, and combined shots of sorority sisters engaging in romance, participating in girly high jinks, and brandishing weapons. “A certain kind of girl joined Pi Theta sorority,” explained the narrator, “a girl who likes to party and likes to get close to her friends; a girl whose extracurricular activities were more daring than most; a girl who could turn her fantasies into reality.” Securing young female theatergoers remained a key objective for the companies behind the *Friday the 13th* (1984–1989) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984–1991) franchises, which dominated teen slasher ticket sales from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. “She’s the only one who can stop it—if she fails, no one will survive,” was how New Line Cinema’s trailer billed the principal protagonist of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), a young woman who confronts dream stalker Freddy Krueger as well as neglectful parents. The high-profile teen slashers of the late 1990s, as Wee has demonstrated, were also angled toward female youth, reaching an apotheosis with *Valentine* (Jamie Blanks, 2001), a film in which a group of wealthy young women contend with male suitors, each other, and a cherub-masked killer. “Why is it that the one day of the year that everyone’s afraid to be alone is Valentine’s Day?” asked its trailer’s female narrator. Because, according to *Valentine*’s tagline, “Love hurts.”

Similar approaches are still being used today, this time to energize ticket sales for “remakes” of the early teen slashers. Thus, Screen Gems, a subsidiary of Sony Pictures, aimed its PG-13-rated “reenvisioning” of *Prom Night* (Nelson McCormick, 2008) squarely at teenage girls, with its trailer’s opening montage chronicling the “preparations,” “celebrations,” and “anticipations” of a “a night to die for” by referencing countless earlier female-youth-centered films, including *Pretty in Pink* (John Hughes, 1986) and *She’s All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999). Less than twelve months later, in 2009, Valentine’s Day weekend saw the release of Warner Bros.’ new version of *Friday the 13th* (Marcus Nispel, 2009). “This year, Saturday the 14th belongs to lovers,” began one of its TV spots. “But,” it concluded, “Friday the 13th belongs to him,” indicating iconic maniac Jason Voorhees. The debut of *Friday the 13th* on Valentine’s weekend may have forced distributor Lionsgate to advance the opening of *My Bloody Valentine 3D* (Patrick Lussier, 2009), so as to avoid a potentially devastating confrontation over the box-office dollar, but it did not stop the company from targeting the film—again about young lovers and a maniacal miner—to female as well as male youth. Whereas Paramount’s promotion of the original *My Bloody Valentine* had, almost three decades earlier, informed young people that “there is more than one way to lose your heart,” Lionsgate’s marketing of *My Bloody Valentine 3D* was even more direct. “What makes the perfect date movie?” one of the film’s TV spots knowingly inquired. “Nothing says ‘date movie,’” advised its theatrical trailer, “like a 3-D ride to hell.” *

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