

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:
HOW EXPLOITATION CINEMA REMADE THE NEW HOLLYWOOD (AND VICE
VERSA)

By

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INTRODUCTION: REVISING THE HISTORY OF EXPLOITATION CINEMA

Writing in 1982 for *Variety*, Todd McCarthy lamented that “much of the fun has gone out of the good old schlocksploitation field.”¹ Over the past several years, McCarthy recounted, the major studios had “started getting in on the act, making their own car crash pictures, gory horror items and occasional sexploitationers with more beautiful girls and glamorous locations than you could ever afford.” McCarthy observed that, since the 1960s, the dynamics between the major studios and independent producers of low-budget genre films had become “significantly more complex and varied.” Independent companies were going bankrupt as the theatrical market for a typical \$500,000 genre film had eroded due to competition with Hollywood studios. The situation McCarthy described begged the question: how did the major studios become unlikely competitors alongside independent companies in the theatrical market for exploitation film?

The study investigates the transformation McCarthy retrospectively described, exploring this shifting dynamic between the majors and independents from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s. It examines the process of differentiation and imitation between the independents and major studios that contributed to what Richard Maltby calls “a time of experimentation” in the 1970s.² It identifies and uncovers the broader industrial influencing factors that shaped this dynamic between the majors and independents.

To this end, the study seeks to answer two main questions. The first question pertains to uncovering the historical record of exploitation cinema during the decade. What was the nature of exploitation cinema from an industrial perspective in the 1970s? Who were the important producers? What were the films like? Where did they play and who saw them? How does this improve our current understanding of exploitation cinema? The second question pertains to the symbiotic dynamic between the majors and independents. What are the influencing factors

underlying this dynamic? Which factors shaped the relationship and how? What relationships guided this set of factors? I contend that the industrial factors, or generative mechanisms that influenced this dynamic included the classification system, the economic recession, the product shortage at drive-ins, and the consolidation of the theatrical market resulting from the blockbuster model of production. The majors and independents alike managed these changes across the cycles through specific strategies of product differentiation and risk management. This symbiotic dynamic improves our understanding of exploitation cinema's economic functions as well as the influencing factors that shaped Hollywood films and business practices throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

By taking the interdependent dynamic between the majors and the independents as the object of inquiry and endeavoring to answer the above questions, this study aims to revise common understandings of exploitation cinema. Exploitation cinema has long been characterized as a peripheral form operating on the fringes of the American film industry, which itself was anchored by the economic and cultural power of the Hollywood studios. Most film histories have shaped and reinforced this view. Conversely, when scholars center exploitation films, they embrace this putatively marginal status as the source of exploitation cinema's cultural transgression. Bill Landis' *Sleazoid Express* and John Cline and Robert G. Weiner's edited collection emphasizes exploitation cinema-as-sensationalism.³ The work of Xavier Mendik and Ernest J. Mathijs also associates exploitation films entirely with transgressive viewing practices.⁴ Other scholars have written about 'bad film' aesthetics.⁵ Practitioners of 'cult studies' approaches espouse this view. Jeffrey Sconce's seminal article "'Trashing' the Academy" is an exemplar of such an approach.⁶ Sconce argues that fans who consume exploitation films constitute a "paracinema" taste public, "a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned

subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus.”⁷ According to Sconce, exploitation films are aligned with paracinema taste because such films disregard the aesthetic, economic, and cultural values of Hollywood and/or ‘elite’ art cinema production.⁸ Invested in disrupting the academic canon, Sconce was committed to an understanding of exploitation cinema as deviating from the aesthetic and economic traditions of mainstream cinema. Sconce was therefore influential in framing exploitation cinema as a form oppositional and even transgressive of Hollywood’s values and norms. While these works have significant value to the field, this scholarship has associated discourse on exploitation cinema with debates about cultural valuation and taste, sidelining questions of industrial history.

This study instead contends that exploitation cinema was crucial to important industrial developments of American cinema in the 1970s. Innovating production and distribution formulas and trends, such films paved the way for the relatively stable conglomerate industrial structure of 1980s Hollywood. I will argue that, in the period of the 1970s, a symbiotic relationship characterized by strategies of adaptation, imitation, and differentiation developed between the major Hollywood studios and exploitation independents, the companies making and releasing low-budget genre films. By focusing on this dynamic instead of one genre or mode, the project revises conventional histories of exploitation cinema and of Hollywood in the 1970s.

Understanding the interdependence between the independents and majors produces new knowledge about the decade. The project shows that the exploitation independents led the way in creating formulas that captured the youth audience that would become the American film industry’s primary audience, and the major studios relied on the independents’ innovation to recover from the industry recession and restore economic dominance over the theatrical market.

Exploitation Cinema

Exploitation cinema and Hollywood have often been viewed as opposites. My discussion of the 1970s will show the ways in which the two sectors of the industry mutually informed, influenced, and shaped each other. To understand the intervention of this study, let us briefly review the literature on both exploitation cinema and Hollywood in the period of the 1970s. This literature review is intended to capture the broader strains of scholarship that is engaged in the bigger conversation of the interactive and dynamic relationship between the two modes of production. (More specific strains of scholarship will be discussed in each chapter).

Exploitation cinema is a film form or mode defined by its low cultural status, targeted selling strategies, and relatively small-scale operations including low budgets, localized distribution, and exhibition in specialized venues. Exploitation as a term first appeared in trade discourse in the early 1930s, though Schaefer has shown that such films were seen as a discrete sub-set of films by the early 1920s. Such films were sometimes called “blues” or “Main Street movies,” a designation for the run down theaters that often played them.⁹ The label comes from the industry term exploitation, which refers to “advertising or promotional techniques that went over and above typical posters, trailers, and newspaper ads.”¹⁰ With none of the codified appeals of mainstream films such as star power, genre, or company brand name, exploitation producers relied on ballyhoo to drive demand for these films. Critics, commentators, and historians have integrated the word exploitation into such cycle categories as sexploitation, blaxploitation, and hicksploitation. These portmanteaux are shorthand labels for the topical and exploitable subject matter taken by such films. In the period of the 1970s, a typical exploitation film would be financed and released by a non-MPAA company, distributed by a set of sub-distributors through regional saturation, and released in second-run venues including drive-ins and indoor downtown

theaters. The project examines in detail the production, distribution, and exhibition patterns of exploitation films in the decade.

Exploitation films are further differentiated by the imagined viewers that filmmakers and distributors had in mind when such films were made and sold. Exploitation films were understood within the industry as having a primary economic motive, made to appeal to popular tastes, particularly for action, adventure, and titillation. In the 1970s, the audience for exploitation films, as constructed in trade press and in marketing materials, were often young viewers and men—not the middle-class family viewers Hollywood imagined itself as targeting. Geared to film preferences not catered to by Hollywood, exploitation films were often met with controversy within the industry and among the wider public, subjected to cuts by exhibitors, protests from citizens group, and even outright bans.

In *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*, Eric Schaefer has provided a foundation for an industrial understanding of the classical exploitation film, or the films made and released by small-time filmmakers outside of the studio system.¹¹ His book has addressed the mode of production, distribution and exhibition, legal and institutional status of the form, and three major cycles. Schaefer terms the film form ‘classical’ because they coexisted with, and largely defined themselves against classical Hollywood cinema’s stable mode of production, as defined by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson.¹² Schaefer has shown that the exploitation companies operating during the studio era had a kind of decentralized, ad-hoc structure. The classical exploitation film’s subaltern position was formalized and codified by the practices of the Hollywood Big Five and Little Three that made up a stable oligopoly. Schaefer’s research revealed that the classical exploitation film was a ‘shadow industry’ to Hollywood during the studio era. The classical exploitation film was

cordoned off from mainstream theaters by virtue of being released via state rights and roadshows. Schaefer writes that “the mainstream industry also depended on the contrast of exploitation to construct its own image as a responsible business and to present its film as wholesome, artistic, and, above all, entertaining.”¹³ The dynamic that Schaefer identifies is one of mutual exclusion, that of Hollywood and the exploiters vying for separate audiences. Indeed, this is how scholars, notably cult studies scholars, typically frame exploitation cinema. They view exploitation cinema as a distinctive paradigm that is antagonistic to the aesthetic norms of Hollywood and its standard ways of doing business.¹⁴

As I noted above, my project contends that influencing factors during the 1970s transformed this dynamic to one of interdependence. The foundations of this change were established after the *Paramount* decision ended vertical integration and required the studios’ divestment of theater holdings. Hollywood’s stable oligopoly ended, as did exploitation cinema’s codified liminal status. While the major studios still maintained economic control, theaters were free to play independent films as the major studios scaled back production.

Several scholars have extended the research on exploitation cinema inaugurated by Schaefer. Examining the horror genre in the 1950s and 1960s, Kevin Heffernan’s *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* looks at the post-*Paramount* years, the period following Schaefer’s account.¹⁵ Heffernan maps aesthetic changes in the horror film to industrial shifts during the 1960s, a time of transformation in the film industry. Heffernan tracks the genre until 1968, the year that *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) represented a turn toward adult horror. While Heffernan focuses on the horror genre, he acknowledges the industrial importance of exploitation cinema more generally, noting that “[t]opical and sensationalist genre films often serve very particular

economic functions within the industry.”¹⁶ In Heffernan’s book, genre provides a frame for charting aesthetic development, comparing and contrasting traditions and tropes. While narrowing the scope of a study to genre has its benefits, it also has limitations. As horror was only one part of AIP’s release strategy in the 1960s, a focus on horror excludes a broader understanding of market participants, production cultures, and industry structure. This study chooses not to focus on a single genre, as prominent exploitation cycles including sexploitation, blaxploitation, and hicksploitation fell outside of traditional generic boundaries.

Elena Gorfinkel’s study of 1960s sexploitation likewise extends Schaefer’s research on the classical exploitation film beyond the studio era.¹⁷ In *Lewd Looks: Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s*, Gorfinkel examines the aesthetics, regulation, and mode of address of sexploitation films. Ending the study in 1970, Gorfinkel positions sexploitation as distinctive from Hollywood production. Heffernan’s book, too, closes right at the industry recession, a period that disrupted the association of ‘low’ genres with independent production. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, twin developments of the industry recession and the classification system made the independent genre films inextricable from Hollywood forms, and most scholarship has not addressed the influence of this development on exploitation cinema.

While Heffernan and Gorfinkel examine the period after the classical exploitation film, Christopher Sieving’s study of black cinema of the 1960s, *Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation*, has a slightly different relationship to literature on exploitation cinema. Sieving extends the study of race movies, a film form, like exploitation cinema, characterized by low-budget aesthetics and a delimited taste culture. Secondly, the prominence of scholarly literature on blaxploitation also resulted in a gap in scholarship of the period leading up to the 1970s that Sieving’s work aimed to fill. Creating a

kind of pre-history of blaxploitation, Sieving's work on the 1960s addressed an omission in exploitation scholarship moving in the opposite direction, toward an earlier period of production. Tackling a very small corpus of films, Sieving's unit of analysis is a single film per chapter, rather than a genre or mode. Sieving also frames his case studies as unique and idiosyncratic films that are able to stand in for larger trends and dynamics.¹⁸ Such an approach would not be appropriate for the study of exploitation cinema, a form this project shows is characterized by the interplay of novelty and familiarity across cycles. No single film can adequately account for film cycles that develop and change. Sieving's work is valuable in its exploration of a phenomenon that was itself characterized by the interplay between Hollywood and independents. But it does not provide a model for examining a large body of films or the contours of an industrial cycle.

While some of the authors above use individual cities to test distribution, there has been little sustained analysis of the distribution of exploitation films. Distribution as a site of industrial power has been too often ignored by film historians irrespective of the period in question. Pertaining to the study of studio-era Hollywood, Maltby has called for "a more detailed understanding of how cinema circulated, of what was shown where, and of how the industry's overarching economic conditions determined the form and manner of those shows."¹⁹ This is doubly true for industrial sectors like independent and exploitation film that have been overlooked in conventional histories for some time. This project presents the findings from a national longitudinal study of the distribution of exploitation films from 1968–1975. No other work has proffered such evidence of exploitation films' distribution. The study posits the "overarching economic conditions" that influenced the circulation of exploitation cycles in key cities and small towns alike.

Surprisingly little scholarship exists on exploitation cinema of the 1970s. When exploitation scholars do consider the 1970s, they tend to focus on more culturally transgressive forms. For example, several recent monographs have examined the development of hard-core pornography during the 1970s.²⁰ The commercially oriented exploitation films that are the object of this study have themselves occupied a liminal position within academic discourse.

Why study exploitation cinema in the 1970s in the first place? A first objective is to correct imbalances in film history. As Schaefer explains, “Just as Hollywood dominated production, it has also dominated the academic study of American film. Looking at questions of industrial practice has expanded the spotlight to include B films and other cinemas given little recognition by the mainstream industry and its critics.”²¹ The project aims to expand notions of what constitutes 1970s Hollywood and media culture beyond the *auteur* films of the Hollywood Renaissance or the super-grossers of the so-called movie brats. In so doing, I join the efforts of other scholars to recuperate the histories of film forms that fall outside of the Hollywood mainstream.

Second, as a period of change that led to many features of contemporary Hollywood, the 1970s merits further study. The project covers the time from the development of the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) in 1968 through the establishment of new and powerful independent players, like New Line Cinema, by 1984. During this 16-year span, the industry underwent significant change including a new classification system that endorsed films geared to adult tastes; an economic downturn for the major studios that eroded barriers for independents; the emergence of the blockbuster model of production; and the growth of video and pay-cable as film markets.

Third, and as the study will show, exploitation films were economically and culturally significant products, as indicated by just a few examples. Blaxploitation became a lightning rod for national debates about race, representation, and production ethics. Roger Corman at AIP and New World Pictures trained some of the most powerful industry figures of the time. A niche cycle like exploitation horror reached franchise status by early 1980s.

Fourth, exploitation films helped fuel the growth of ancillary markets. Throughout the decade, exploitation films influenced what was on television screens and were among the most important products on the video market, navigating format transitions leading into the 1980s. The project charts the transition from theatrical exploitation to exploitation films imagined for private home viewing.

I should also address what exploitation films were not. Hard-core pornography is not a point of focus in the project. In general, exploitation was released in a commercial feature-length 35mm format to a national audience; hard-core pornography typically played in a few urban markets and often in a short film format or in 16mm. Exploitation films in this period were also not 'B' films. 'B' films were a product of double bills in the vertically integrated structure of the studio system. 'B's were released through a flat fee arrangement, a negotiated sales agreement wherein the exhibitor purchases rights to screen a film for a fixed cost irrespective of the gross. While this is true for some exploitation films during the 1970s, exploitation films circulated on single bills independent of 'A' releases. Because production in the 1970s was not organized around 'A' and 'B' films as distinct units as they were in the studio era, exploitation films, even when they did play on dual bills, would not be considered 'B' films.

'New' Hollywood in the 1970s

The project also engages with scholarly discourse on 1970s Hollywood that is itself part of broader historiographic debates about the post-*Paramount* period of film history. Murray Smith has pointed out that many different 'New Hollywoods' have been theorized.²² By arguing for a revisiting of the place of exploitation cinema within the New Hollywood, my study also aligns with this debate. Smith poses the question as to whether the post-studio era of Hollywood, demarcated by the 1948 *Paramount* antitrust ruling, ushered in a fundamentally different era from the Classical Hollywood Cinema identified by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.²³ According to Smith, one viewpoint, most often identified with Bordwell, emphasizes the persistence of some aesthetic features of the classicism of the studio era, including that of genre, continuity principles, formal unity, and narrative structure. This view holds that we are still in a classical period with refreshed storytelling techniques. More commonly, however, scholars have conceptualized the post-studio period as a break from the classical era. Emphasizing the industry's reorganization rather than the films themselves, some view post-studio Hollywood as a post-Fordist industry, as evidenced by the organization of production in a package unit system and the variation in film types, including independent film, during the post-studio era. Smith notes that some have criticized this view as overstating the heterogeneity in a period still dominated by the same major studios of the 1930s and 1940s. Others point to the style and narrative of the films themselves as proof of a postclassical era. In this view, New Hollywood films' putative focus on spectacle violates the formal unity of the studio era. Attempting to bridge both the industrial and aesthetic voices in this debate, Justin Wyatt argues for the interdependence of industrial developments and formal changes. Wyatt contends that the style and story of high-concept films are geared to the conglomerate production and marketing tie-ins

emblematic of post-*Paramount* Hollywood.²⁴ According to Wyatt, high-concept films are created to maximize their marketability across various advertising formats including television commercials, posters, and soundtracks. Wyatt describes the formula of high-concept films as the “hook, look, and the book.”²⁵ The ‘hook’ refers to a common, familiar, or easily graspable story concept that can be summarized by a simple tagline conveyed through advertising copy. The ‘look’ is a slick image, represented in advertising as well as a film’s cinematography and mise-en-scène, that would likewise strike audiences as eye-catching and in step with stylistic trends. Ideally, a high-concept film feels familiar to audiences. To tap into existing consumer trends and appetites, high-concept films can be adaptations of popular books (hence ‘the book’) or simply seem familiar to the premises of other popular films. Wyatt has much to say about production and marketing, but his account tends to ignore distribution and exhibition, which directly affected the shifting supply and demand that informed many production decisions of the period.

The 1970s has played an important role in the classical vs. post-classical debate. The two forms of filmmaking scholars often identify as distinguishing the classical from the post-classical period emerged in the 1970s: the films of the Hollywood Renaissance, which developed coterminous to the industry recession in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the movie brat-led blockbuster films of the mid-1970s. Indeed, the lucidity of such claims about post-classical films’ difference is often compromised by scholars’ varying conceptions of what constitutes the New Hollywood. For Thomas Elsaesser, it is only the movie brat directors and *auteurs* of the Hollywood Renaissance. For Thomas Schatz, it is the Hollywood Renaissance as well as the blockbuster film. In general, scholars have roughly taken the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, encompassing both the Hollywood Renaissance and the blockbuster era, as the

beginning of the New Hollywood period. Scholars have characterized the period of New Hollywood as one of stylistic and narrative experimentation.

Exploitation cinema during the 1970s, too, evinced the kind of heterogeneity and experimentation ascribed to New Hollywood in the latter's incorporation of stylistic modes (e.g. European art cinema, the American avant-garde, genre revisionism).²⁶ Exploitation independents developed new cycles and refreshed pre-existing genres or modes in the context of the New Hollywood. Indeed, as I have noted earlier, the study contends that exploitation cinema influenced New Hollywood through such unacknowledged and complex forms of innovation, differentiation, and imitation. Scholars have acknowledged that blockbuster films have assimilated a narrowly circumscribed set of exploitation strategies, notably saturation booking, but exploitation cinema's more pervasive influence on the New Hollywood (and vice versa) has been overlooked. In elucidating the influencing factors that shaped the relationship between the majors and the independents, the study is also in dialogue with several larger strains of scholarship pertaining to Hollywood in the 1970s. These additional strains of scholarship will be discussed later in the introduction. The next section lays out the conceptual design of the study and discusses the methodological implications of the design.

Conceptualizing the Dynamic Between the Studios and the Exploiters

As mentioned earlier, this project is an industrial history of exploitation cinema whose object is the dynamic between the exploitation independents and the major studios. The conceptual scaffolding, as illustrated in Table 1 (pg. 46), is comprised of three levels or layers: the symbiotic dynamic, the influencing factors, and the specific exploitation cycle. Revealing a crisscrossing set of influences, each chapter brings the three layers together, illustrating the

impact of the influencing factor on the major-independent dynamic through one film cycle. The following section will elaborate further on the three levels further to describe the conceptual approach and some of the methodological and historiographic questions raised by this design.

A Symbiotic Dynamic

The chapters of the study reveal the dynamic between the majors and the independents to be in a state of constant flux. In certain cycles or phases of a cycle, the majors may be innovators; in a different cycle or phase of a cycle, the independents become the leaders. Thus, the interdependent relationship unfolds in a give-and-take within and across the five cycles examined. Each chapter illustrates one stage or phase of this dynamic, which I characterize as a “symbiotic” relationship.

I have selected the metaphor of “symbiosis” to illustrate the dynamic that is the center of this study. Symbiosis is a biological concept coined by German scientist Heinrich Anton de Bary in 1879 “to refer to different organisms living together.”²⁷ Scientists now view symbiosis as an association between two or more different organisms that can include several different relationships. The term is most commonly used to describe mutualism, or a relationship that benefits both organisms. Yet symbiosis also encompasses a commensalistic relationship, an association where only one of the two organisms benefit and the other derives neither harm nor benefit, and a parasitic relationship, or a relationship where one organism exploits the resources of another, the host.²⁸ Some scientists also note that symbiosis can be marked by moments of more directly predatory, antagonistic, or competitive behavior.²⁹ I believe this metaphor is a useful one to illuminate the dynamic exchange between the majors and independents during the 1970s in three respects.

First, the concept symbiosis implies an association or relationship of close proximity between two *unlike* groups. Exploitation independents and the major studios were unlike in many important ways, which the study details. The corporate structure of the major firms' parent companies meant that losses could be absorbed into the broader system; independents had lines of credit through bank loans but not the depth of investments that the majors did. The major distributors had access to national distribution, while most exploitation firms relied on assembling a group of sub-distributors. In sum, the major studios were characterized by financial stability and distribution power. Independents needed only to sustain a profit margin for overhead costs and future production. They were not beholden to the purposes of a broader conglomerate, which gave them some freedom.

Second, the symbiosis metaphor captures the *interdependence* of the dynamic in the decade. In some symbiotic relationships, organisms are reliant on each other. The sense of reliance was particularly germane during the industry recession, which saw major studios imitating the film fads and formulas initiated by indie-led cycles including sexploitation, blaxploitation, hicksploitation, and slasher horror to recapture American viewers. While not necessarily *relying* on independents for distribution strategies, the major studios appropriated independent-innovated distribution methods—saturation advertising, saturation booking, and target selling. While in past decades, the major studios relied on the disrepute of exploitation and 'B' films to shore up their own status as the providers of wholesome 'quality' entertainment, in the 1970s this relationship was inverted. Independents also depended on the major studios' production foibles to drive demand for their low-budget action films. As a niche market sector, exploitation independents were dependent on the majors' failures. The majors' success in the

blockbuster era forced independents to pursue parasitic strategies of blockbuster imitation and new forms of differentiation.

Third, the concept of symbiosis captures the important features of *adaptation* that characterized the decade. Symbiosis shows how organisms adapt to and maximize their evolutionary benefit in inhospitable surroundings. The project details how product differentiation and imitation were two key market strategies both majors and independents employed at different times and in different ways to adapt to a range of shifting unfavorable market circumstances during the decade: the industry recession, product shortages, drive-in decline, playdate scarcity, and market consolidation. Generally speaking, the recession era cycles and hicksploitation followed the dynamic of independent innovation through product differentiation and major appropriation and imitation. The success of the majors' blockbuster production strategy reversed this dynamic resulting in major studio innovation and independent imitation in the Blockbuster Lite film. The project charts a continuity and difference: renewal of the independent innovation-major appropriation with a new set of independent firms and shifting market tactics and strategies as well as the continuation of high-concept market and selling from the blockbuster mode. The concept of adaptation built into symbiosis also captures the fluidity and change that the dynamic underwent in the decade.

This metaphor has some limitations as well. In a capitalist market, market participants are in a relationship of competition. One might argue that symbiosis, a relationship characterized by coexistence and, at times, partnership, is categorically opposed to the realities of the capitalist marketplace. However, the *dynamics of* competition were changing in 1970s, and this fluidity and lack of fixity led to an associational relationship that can be described as symbiosis.

In addition to the biological concept of symbiosis, economic theory and economic approaches to film studies also inform the methodology of this study. The study draws on normative definitions of economic and business principles, including product differentiation, market segmentation, target marketing, supply and demand, profit motive, competition, diversification, risk management, risk avoidance, and risk seeking. Definitions are offered in the project when the concepts appear. The project draws on the writings of several economists who have written about the film industry. Economist Arthur De Vany shows the film industry to be dynamic and unpredictable, since consumers choose among a set of constantly shifting competitors that are each essentially unique.³⁰ Studio executives can make inferences about past consumer choices to guide future production, but the nature of consumer choice makes it difficult to predict demand, which creates a baseline level of uncertainty in the market. As De Vany writes, “Executives are always trying to reduce risk (at least the risk they personally bear). The ‘formula’ for managing risk may differ among executives in how they choose lay off risk to investors or foreign markets, in their preferred financing arrangements, or in the kinds of movies they make.”³¹ The project looks at the forms of risk management, risk seeking, and risk aversion that guided decisions of exploitation independents and major studios alike throughout the decade. Observing that the demand for all creative products is unpredictable, Richard Caves also notes that the large sunk costs involved in film production increase risk in the marketplace. Caves has also underscored the importance of product differentiation in guiding consumer choice. As the study shows, product differentiation was a common strategy for exploitation independents. The project also draws from understandings of ‘niche’ markets as smaller markets, including the market for most exploitation films, which subsist on demand from a smaller

number of viewers.³² The study shows that majors and independents both targeted niche audience segment at different times and for varying purposes.

Influencing Factors

Within each chapter, influencing factors are posited as causes and conditions for the development of the cycle and the shift in symbiotic dynamic. Each chapter discusses how a unique influencing factor structured and revised the symbiotic dynamic between the majors and independents. The specific imprint of the influencing factors on each cycle resulted in a highly variable set of production, distribution, and exhibition strategies.

These influencing factors might also be thought of as “generative mechanisms,” as they are relatively large-scale industrial developments that shaped competitive dynamics including supply and demand, which have a direct influence on film production. In this way, the historiographic methodology of the project is informed by what Robert Allen describes as Realist film history. Allen writes that the object of a Realist film history is “not the historical event in itself, but the generative (causal) mechanisms that brought this event about.”³³ The influencing factors that I identify in this project are predominantly economic or industrial.³⁴ Allen writes that it is the historian’s task to “understand these mechanisms in their complexity rather than to isolate a single ‘cause’ for a given event.”³⁵ However, it should be noted that a history of exploitation cinema poses challenges to Allen’s model. Allen describes the historian’s task as selecting from available facts or events and placing them in a narrative framework. Such an understanding assumes that the discrete events have already been captured, a premise that does not hold for under-studied areas including exploitation cinema. Therefore, data collection about foundational aspects of the industry, including the major companies, film cycles, distribution

methods, and exhibition venues was also a key objective of the project, in addition to the task of identifying the causal mechanisms that constitute a historical narrative.

First, the influencing factors are discussed individually, highlighting how other scholars have understood them and their significance to film history. In a following section, I will seek to explain the influencing factors' relative importance in guiding the shifting relationship between the independents and the majors and in shaping the contours of each exploitation cycle.

The MPAA Classification System

One influencing factor was the MPAA's ratings classification system. The new system did much to initiate the relationship of symbiosis between the major studios and exploitation independents in the beginning of the decade. In introducing restricted ratings, the MPAA classification system acknowledged that Hollywood films were no longer being made with all audiences in mind. This represented a shift in Hollywood's self-image as providers of wholesome entertainment for the entire family. Like the exploitation independents, the majors began targeting audience segments. The critical cultural differences between majors' fare and that of the exploiters were no longer reinforced as strongly on an institutional or industrial level.

Scholars who research film regulation and censorship have gravitated to this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the MPAA ratings system transformed Hollywood's relationship to its audience. The MPAA ratings system – especially the “adult” ratings, namely “X” and “NC-17” -- has been a topic of interest for several scholars. Justin Wyatt, Christie Milliken, and Kevin S. Sandler have all written on Hollywood's seemingly paradoxical embrace of *verboten* subject matter in the 'X' and 'NC-17' ratings.³⁶ Jon Lewis has provided an account of the rating system's economic functions.³⁷ Lewis looks at the industry recession from 1968–

1973 to argue that the MPAA's affordances of adult content enabled Hollywood to capture market territory taken by independents. While I generally agree with Lewis' broadest conclusions, his book does little to support these claims. Instead, Lewis relied on secondary literature and relatively few trade articles (exclusively from *Variety*) to offer an overview of the MPAA ratings system, devoting only a few paragraphs to the history presented in this study. Lewis also says little of the actual films. In contrast, this project mobilizes a range of sources in addition to analysis of individual films to establish the key catalysts that led the major studios to incorporate, imitate, and borrow from exploitation independents' production and selling strategies.

The Industry Recession

The industry recession of 1969–1971 is a second influencing factor. The Hollywood recession of the late 1960s and early 1970s revealed a significant disconnect between the film products the most powerful studios were developing and those preferred by the valuable youth audience. (While the term 'recession' refers more broadly to a wider set of socio-political circumstances, when I use the word 'recession' in this work, I refer to the Hollywood phenomenon). Hollywood's stumbles in this period presented opportunities for independent companies. With the classification system expanding the boundaries of MPAA-sanctioned representation, the major studios looked to independents for successful models of film production, a move that threatened independents' strategy of product differentiation. The industry recession established this early dynamic: independents as innovators and studios as imitators or appropriators. Several scholars, including Yannis Tzioumakis, have mentioned in passing that the industry recession resulted in the Hollywood Renaissance or New Hollywood.³⁸

Tino Balio has written more extensively on the matter, explicating the recession's impact on United Artists.³⁹ Justin Wyatt has also presented a case for the recession's influence on business practices of the 1970s.⁴⁰ The project offers a more extended analysis of the impact of the recession on exploitation cinema.

The Product Shortage

A third influencing factor is the product shortage of the early 1970s. Drive-in theaters struggled to find adequate supply from the exploitation companies that were making sexploitation films for youth audiences or action films for black audiences frequenting urban downtown houses. Major studios likewise maintained a low level of yearly production. Exploitation producers once again experimented with a new film formula, the hicksploitation film, to appeal to the viewers imagined to be drive-ins' core audience. The product shortage at drive-ins spurred innovation that the majors ultimately appropriated by the late 1970s. David Cook devotes a few pages of his history to the product shortage, and Kerry Segrave has written on drive-ins in the 1970s.⁴¹ However, scholars have not identified the implications of the shortage for the drive-in market.

The Blockbuster Strategy

A fourth influencing factor is the blockbuster film. The blockbuster formula represented a shift in the symbiotic dynamic. Major studios used risk-taking strategies to drive demand, which led to a normalization of wide-release and long runs for blockbuster releases. Needing theater dates and screens, majors took over the summer season and even some drive-in venues. The majors' bookings at drive-ins signaled an eradication of the codified forms of indirect

competition that had supported exploitation independents in the first half of the decade. Thus, the blockbuster production strategy put majors and independents in direct competition for playdates.

A group of scholars, including Justin Wyatt, David Cook, Peter Krämer, Geoff King, Sheldon Hall, and Stephen Neale have written about the changes in production, distribution, exhibition, and marketing effected by the blockbuster film.⁴² The significant impact of a blockbuster market on the film industry has led economists, like Arthur De Vany and others, to investigate the Hollywood blockbuster.⁴³ A third strain of scholarship focuses on the narrative, stylistic, and aesthetic strategies of blockbuster films. This latter group includes Thomas Schatz's writing on New Hollywood and recent research including Julie Turnock's work on special effects.⁴⁴

The Fallout of the Blockbuster Era: Playdate Scarcity

A final influencing factor is the marketplace for theatrical cinema in the era of the modern blockbuster. Whereas blockbusters made in previous decades utilized a "roadshow" strategy that kept titles in limited release for several years, the 1970s saw a shift toward wide release of blockbusters that resulted in a paucity of playdates and crowded many established independents out of the theatrical market. The consolidation stemming from the super-grosser formula transformed independents' market strategies. These new strategies included new forms of production differentiation and entirely different business models geared around ancillary market revenue. Major studios also selectively pursued product differentiation to diversify yearly release slates and offset the risks of blockbuster production.

Several scholars have charted changes in exhibition following the ascendance of the blockbuster mode of production. Yannis Tzioumakis, Alisa Perren, and Justin Wyatt have

investigated the changing shape of the independent film industry coming out of the 1970s with the formation of new independent companies, notably New Line Cinema and Miramax Films.⁴⁵ Charles Acland has examined the rise of multiplexes as first-run venues.⁴⁶ Scholarship on home video history and video culture are also situated in this period of time. Frederick Wasser examines the American film industry during the rise of video, and many other scholars have written on other aspects of home video history.⁴⁷ An industrial history of the New Hollywood from the perspective of the exploitation independents, this study engages with many strains of literature on Hollywood cinema.

Structured by Cycles

At the level of the chapter, the study is organized by one cycle per chapter, proceeding cycle by cycle in roughly chronological order. Each chapter reveals a slice of the crisscrossing web of relations among the majors and independents, the market forces acting on the cycle, and the strategies related to the cycle itself. The example films in each chapter illustrate the shape of the cycle and highlight its variable market strategies.

I selected a cycle-based approach because sexploitation, blaxploitation, hicksploitation, and the Blockbuster Lite cycles all fall outside of established genres. For example, blaxploitation encompasses horror, action, comedy, and even documentary. As a framework, cycles also adequately capture the highly iterative, changing, and short-lived production fads that characterized this period. Zoë Wallin writes of cycles:

This grounding in time, manifest both in the increased production of similar films and their circulation through theaters, also highlights the inherently reactive nature of cycles' operations as the two processes of supply and demand feed into one another. The

life of the cycle remains largely dependent on its economic performance and ability to remain attractive to audiences or to carry out its designated industrial function.⁴⁸

Cycles enabled me to capture the reactive processes that shaped the shifting dynamics between the two sectors of the industry. Exploitation cycles emerged over a concentrated period and shifted over a span of months or years in response to an over-supply of similar product or an identifiable demand in a different product. For example, Crown International Pictures' *Superchick* (1973) and *Policewomen* (1974) were exemplars of the 'R'-rated sexploitation cycle that also brought variation to the fad, incorporating kung-fu action elements from an adjacent cycle. A cycle-based approach also provides a set of criteria for identifying individual films for analysis. Because they are released in a concentrated span of time, cycles "hold a traceable outline of initiation, increase, and decline."⁴⁹

To identify the relevant cycles, I developed a corpus of films released in the United States beginning in the mid-1960s through the early 1980s. The primary sources used in the study are examined in greater detail later in the introduction. I placed key information pertaining to each film in a spreadsheet including producer, distributor, filmmaker, and box office numbers, if available. I gathered information on each of the film titles in the spreadsheet and watched as many films as were made available on DVD, VHS, and streaming services. 34 of these films were selected for the distribution study. Using this Excel spreadsheet, I developed a coding system that identified similar plot patterns in the film text and/or plot elements used in selling the film (i.e. in the film title, poster, trailer, and other marketing materials). These elements, along with discourse found in trade reviews and trade press articles, were used to identify the most quantitatively common *and* commercially important cycles. This process led me to identify the following exploitation cycles: the recession-era cycles sexploitation and blaxploitation,

hicksploitation, the Blockbuster Lite cycle, and exploitation horror (both the ‘exploitation’ and the slasher horror sub-cycles).

To qualify as an example film for the cycle case study, the film had to meet one or more of the following criteria: the film needed to 1) influence the initiation of the cycle, which I term a catalyst film; and/or 2) increase or develop the cycle; and/or 3) contribute to the cycle’s decline or transformation; and/or 4) represent a significant intersection or moment of transition that illuminates the ongoing interdependence between the exploitation independents and major studios. Generally speaking, the films that initiated and developed the cycle were commercially successful, which I gauged through information about cost and earnings found in trade journals and archival materials when available.

Methodological Implications of the Design

As I have attempted to describe above, cycles, industry forces, and symbiotic relations are all central to my study. As Table 1 (pg. 46) shows, there are at least three relatively consistent considerations that adhere to each cycle: 1) the cycle and its imagined audience; 2) the particular relationship that the major and independent companies developed around that cycle; and 3) the broad industry developments and/or market forces that flavored the relationship and the cycle. I have organized the study to give form to these three layers or levels of analyses, devoting one cycle to each chapter.

However, this structure begs a question of whether the chapters are built around particular cycles or whether they center on different types of causal forces—which are most critical? I believe that both are important. As a compromise, I have chosen a middle-ground position, insisting on the importance of both while resisting subsuming the importance of one

over the other. The messiness of each cycle and the fluidity of each type of symbiotic relationship mitigates against an argument for a fixed hierarchy that would prioritize the market forces over the cycle or the cycle over the market forces uniformly.

One might ask whether the neat lining up of cycles, market forces, and symbiotic relations chapter by chapter is more a matter of convenience than of accurate historical record. A skeptic may wonder whether the rise and fall of cycles just happened to march in step with the historical influencing factors and responses. Could I have charted a rather different set of cycle-mechanism pairings? I will attempt to address these concerns here by way of digging deeper into the causal factors that I have paired with the cycles.

Thus far, I have introduced five influencing factors: 1) the end of the Production Code and the introduction of the MPAA classification system; 2) the industry recession; 3) the product shortage, particularly at drive-ins; 4) the blockbuster model of production; and 5) the playdate scarcity resulting from the blockbuster model of production. I roughly tie these mechanisms to a specific cycle—sexploitation to the MPAA ratings system; sexploitation and blaxploitation to the industry recession; hicksploitation to the product shortage; the Blockbuster Lite cycle to the blockbuster model; and playdate scarcity to both the Blockbuster Lite cycle and the ‘exploitation’ horror trend.

We can subdivide the influencing factors into two groups. The primary causes are those historical industrial events that played a strong originary role in the development of one of the cycles. To extend the biological metaphor of symbiosis a bit further, these primary causes are the “prime movers” in a cycle’s emergence and the realignment of relations between the majors and the independents. However, primary causes are necessary but not sufficient preconditions for a

cycle's emergence; prime movers motivated a cycle's emergence but did not entirely dictate the form a cycle would take.

There were three primary causal forces. The first was the end of the Production Code, a precondition for the distribution of sexploitation in American theaters. Had the Production Code still been in effect in 1968, the sexploitation boom would not have taken place. Furthermore, the classification system and 'X' rating removed industrial and cultural barriers to adult media's dissemination. The end of the Production Code, of course, was not wholly responsible for the popularity of sexploitation across the US by 1969 or 1970. That is, the causal force or mechanism did not totally determine the cycle. Instead, the cycle's development owed much to companies that capitalized on market demand while managing risk. As it relates to sexploitation, the end of the Production Code was a prime mover, but the cycle's development and popularity cannot be entirely attributed to it.

Another such "prime mover" was the product shortage at drive-ins resulting from community and legal pressures against showing sexploitation in open air theaters. In the study, I contend that this problem in the supply chain drove demand for family-oriented fare that was satisfied by the hicksploitation cycle. The regulatory atmosphere made sexploitation too risky and created the market opportunity for another cycle to take its place. Difficulties exhibiting sexploitation at drive-ins was a necessary condition for the emergence of this new cycle, but it hypothetically could have taken another form. Additional factors, including the wider popularity of country music and the predominance of drive-ins in the Midwest and southeast, also influenced the development of the cycle.

A final primary cause or prime mover was also related to supply and demand. The lack of available bookings at drive-ins was a market constraint that set-in motion the actions of

exploitation independents. As the wide release of major studio films consumed available booking dates, exploitation independents were forced into a kind of direct competition with the major studios for playtime, resulting in the high-stakes production strategies that characterized the Blockbuster Lite cycle. Playdate scarcity did not proscribe the Blockbuster Lite approach, but it did establish the necessary conditions that would motivate the independents to engage in such risk-taking. There was no other incentive for exploitation independents to take such risks absent this difficulty of getting films placed in drive-in theaters.

As described above, the prime movers establish necessary conditions and preconditions for a cycle's emergence. However, other market and consumer trends acted on the cycles as well. The primary causes dictate a circumscribed menu of actions but did not restrict the choices of companies and filmmakers entirely.

The secondary causes are those that were not necessary preconditions; these factors influenced and acted on the cycle but were not as critical in setting in motion its development. The industry recession, for example, had a less direct influence on the exploitation cycles. Exploitation cinema was just one reaction to the industry recession; studios also took risks on films indebted to European art cinema. The industry recession was one cause or factor influencing sexploitation and blaxploitation, lacking the more direct and prescriptive relationship that obtained between the Production Code's decline and sexploitation.

Similarly, the product shortage alone was also not a prime mover, as it did not directly influence the rise of hicksploitation. It was the product shortage in the context of a no-longer-workable sexploitation cycle that set-in motion hicksploitation.

The major studios' blockbuster model of production was also a secondary cause. While the rise of the blockbuster film was undoubtedly a landmark development during the decade, it

was a strategy that the studios had also engaged in during the 1950s without the same effect on low-budget studios. Unlike the 1950s, the wide release component of the blockbuster model resulted in a shortage of theatrical dates that was indeed a primary cause for the independents' appropriation of blockbuster strategies and tactics and, to some extent, the pursuit of product differentiation in 'R' horror cycles.

I have attempted to describe a conceptual design wherein primary causes set cycles in motion and secondary causes, along with additional market forces and strategies, further shape them. What results is a picture of industrial development that looks less like neat pairings and more like a layered, messy, and frequently shifting web of interconnections. The big shifts enacted by the prime movers do not necessarily take place at the precise moment of a cycle's rise and fall. Instead, they occur at broader intervals—with the beginning of the classification system in 1968; with the development of hicksploitation as a reaction to sexploitation in mid-decade; and with the crisis of theatrical date availability at the end of the decade. The specific exploitation cycles are interspersed and positioned among these big shifts or waves. In sum, the historical arena was actually much messier than each chapter's pairing of cycles and influencing factors would initially telegraph; connections between cycles and generative mechanisms formed a denser crisscrossing web of fluctuating configurations.

This study design has limitations, however. First, the history lacks some of the simplicity of industry histories that analyze one film or one director per chapter. The initiation and development of a cycle cannot be conveyed through a close analysis of a single film. That the major studios and independents engaged at different times in these cycles further complicates this history. The study gives shape to the shifting, overlapping, and dynamic aspect of the cycles, but the result is less streamlined than conventional histories of the decade. Moreover, the

archival materials that might enable a historian to extrapolate from one film to a broader cycle or industry sector are not available for exploitation films. Schaefer and Alilunas have similarly noted the historiographic challenges of writing history when traditional sources may be only partially available, a process Schaefer characterizes as a ‘critical mess’ and that Alilunas describes as ‘trace historiography,’ “a method seeking to locate evidence where it seemingly no longer exists.”⁵⁰ Alilunas writes that such a historiographic project “identifies patterns amid chaos to reach conclusions, rather than using predetermined theses and conclusions.”⁵¹ This project similarly charts patterns and proffers modest conclusions from an assemblage of sources, as the next section examines in greater detail.

Arguments and Contribution

Allen reminds us that film historians approach their object of study with “perspective and goals that are historical.”⁵² As an industry history of the 1970s written from the perspective of exploitation cinema, the project aims to correct imbalances in the historical record by illustrating the interplay between the major studios and the exploitation independents in the period. As part of that process, four assertions follow, each a key argument of the study. This section briefly summarizes the major arguments and the implications of these arguments for ongoing scholarly debates about the history of exploitation cinema, 1970s Hollywood, and industry studies.

Exploitation independents innovated strategies of product differentiation that tapped into the industry’s target youth audience.

The interdependent, symbiotic relationship shown in the study reveals that exploitation independents developed strategies of product differentiation that tapped a youth audience, which would become what Maltby refers to as the “newly configured primary audience” in the

American film industry by the beginning of the 1980s.⁵³ The project uncovers how strategies of risk aversion informed independents' marketing of quasi-'adult' material to youth (male) viewers during the summer drive-in season and illustrates how the major studios reached a youth drive-in audience with their blockbuster films. Independents pursued product differentiation in the form of regional saturation and high-concept marketing of the slasher horror film, which brought exploitation horror to young viewers in first-run multiplex theaters, a strategy the major studios imitated. This finding nuances our understanding of what has been characterized as Hollywood's 'juvenile' audience in the decade by examining the distribution strategies and exhibition patterns that independents used to reach young viewers.

Exploitation cinema transformed the spaces and places of moviegoing during the 1970s.

By looking at the strategies used to target a youth audience, the project also tracks the transformation of the spaces of moviegoing. The project illustrates the localized spaces in which sexploitation and blaxploitation were released, revealing blaxploitation to be a cycle with a stable, if narrow, market of indoor theaters in midwestern and northeastern cities. A shortage of 'quality' product at drive-ins propelled the production of hillbilly-oriented films to reach drive-in operators' imagined audience of white working-class patrons. The majors' successful appropriation of hicksploitation brought such films from drive-ins to first run theaters by the end of the decade. The project details the crisis of distribution and exhibition in the film industry as the super-grossers' wide releases and long runs homogenized the theatrical market, leading to a scarcity of theatrical dates that contributed to AIP's decline. The work also charts the migration of horror from grindhouses to first run multiplexes and explores the opportunities provided by television, video, and pay-cable. While exploitation cinema is often associated with outmoded

exhibition venues, the study shows how independents transformed distribution and exhibition practices.

The major studios imitated exploitation independents to offset risk.

I contend that the majors' engagement in exploitation cycles functioned to avoid risk during the industry recession and manage risk in the post-blockbuster era. The project reveals how Hollywood modeled blockbuster strategies on the saturation booking and target selling strategies. Saturation booking and target marketing were ways of increasing demand to offset risk of high sunk production costs. The project explores how the majors diversified release slates through low-risk pick-up deals of black action films. The major studios also appropriated the niche hicksploitation and slasher horror cycles as a form of risk spreading. The studios invested in counter programming to offset risk in blockbusters in such films as *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). The project reveals the influence of independents on majors' strategies of risk management and risk aversion, as decisions related to risk and uncertainty unfolded in a dynamic and interdependent competitive landscape.

The interdependent relationship between the majors and independents suggests new ways of understanding the post-Paramount film industry.

A history of exploitation cinema restages changes in production, distribution, and exhibition in the 1970s as a consequence of symbiosis or interdependence between the majors and independents. In so doing, the study suggests the limitations of current models for conceptualizing the structure of the American film industry post-*Paramount*. Scholars continue to debate the use of the package-unit system and post-Fordism as critical categories. The package-unit system minimizes the power of distribution in the industry. While a post-Fordist

view captures the product differentiation and specialization of the period, it downplays the continued economic prominence of the major studios in the post-divestment period. In his assessment of these debates, Murray Smith raises a third option very briefly, that of industrial dualism:

Indeed, one might well argue that the US film industry is an example not of post-Fordism, but of *industrial dualism*, in which independent production companies act at once as ‘shock absorbers’ and research arms (‘pilot fish’) for the majors, ‘by attracting risk capital and creative talent which the majors can then exploit through their control of distribution.’⁵⁴

This description of industrial dualism is an apt illustration of exploitation independents’ contribution to innovating cycles to capture new audiences. It also points to the exploitation cycles’ utility as risk management for the major studios. Admittedly, the concept of industrial dualism is an imperfect model, as it connotes a kind of stability or equilibrium between the two halves of the industry. However, if understood as a kind of ongoing process of negotiation and competition, industrial dualism might provide a useful way to conceptualize the different *processes* of experimentation, innovation, and variation unfolding simultaneously and over time during periods of industry transition and transformation. The symbiosis that the project charts between the independents and major studios suggests a need for frameworks that capture the heterogeneity of the post-war film industry.

This study of exploitation cinema frames the American film industry as an ongoing historical process that is dynamic in the near term and recurrent or recursive in the longer term. Several themes in the dissertation uncover a recursive quality to exploitation film production, distribution, and exploitation. For instance, the dissertation charts the youth sexploitation film’s

emergence as an independent form, its subsequent retrenchment, and its reappearance as a major studio cycle in the 1980s. Similarly, old forms and methods became new again as supernatural horror returned, paradoxically, as a form of product differentiation in an 'R' horror-saturated market. Regional saturation booking returned as a reliable distribution method for independents in the 1980s. The imitative Blockbuster Lite phenomenon recurred throughout the decade and can be seen in today's direct-to-DVD and streaming mockbusters like *Atlantic Rim* (2013). Thus, the study frames historical development as an ongoing process of continual remaking and recurrence.

Primary Sources

As an industrial history, the project required a range of sources on production, distribution, film selling or marketing, and exhibition. The films themselves as well as the materials used to promote them were also foundational. This project draws on a breadth of sources, chief among them trade publications, original marketing and promotional materials, archival documents, national newspapers, and local newspapers.

Trade Press

The trade press is critical for analyzing the industry structure within which exploitation films circulated. Trade press offered information uniquely relevant to exploitation cinema, namely industry perspectives on obscenity decisions and changes to such institutional bodies as the MPAA's Code and Rating Administration. Trade press also published financial data on an industry-wide and company-specific level. Important film trade publications for my study include *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *The Independent Film Journal* (which became *The Film Journal* in 1979). The project draws heavily from *Boxoffice* and *The Independent Film Journal*, two trade

journals published for independent distributors and exhibitors. In lieu of consulting these two lesser known journals, scholars too often rely on *Variety*, giving short shrift to the discourse in trade press published with independent producers, distributors, and exhibitors in mind. *Screen International*, *Broadcasting*, *Billboard*, and the 1969 final edition of *Film Daily Year Book* were also important trade sources. Relevant features in the trade journals include:

a) Trade reviews

Historians have noted that reviews in *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and *The Independent Film Journal* are crucial to examining films' imagined audiences. This project similarly understands the value of trade reviews to offer a projection of how a film product will be slotted into the available buyers, or exhibitors, and consumers, or moviegoers, in the marketplace. While the project corroborates at great length a film's actual distribution and exhibition with primary data, trade reviews offer insight into the predicted demand for a film. Specifically, such reviews captured characteristics of a film's imagined circulation including the following variables: circulation in either a first-run setting or a second-run setting; a film's predicted performance in urban areas vs. small towns; a film's predicted performance in key cities and outlying areas; a film's predicted programming on a single bill or double bill; a film's predicted performance vis-à-vis audience taste for, or sensitivity to, its textual appeals (i.e. violence, titillation); a film's predicted performance given the film's similarity to other films familiar to audiences. As an example of reviews' assessment, take *Variety*'s reviews of Independent-International's *Satan's Sadists* (1969): "Some will rate it a sickie quickie and its vulgarities are many, but film should find a niche in the sexploitation-action market."⁵⁵ Or *The Independent Film Journal*'s prediction that *Bloody Mama* (1970 "[s]hould make a pile of money at the boxoffice, especially at the drive-ins this summer."⁵⁶ As these examples show, reviews coded distinctions with reference to a

specific market, such as an ‘action market.’ The action market was often used conterminously with ‘exploitation market’ and referred to second-run theaters specializing in genre films. Thus, the distinctions articulated in the trade press evince a complex understanding of the distribution and exhibition *milieu* films circulated in. Reviews are closely analyzed in Chapters Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six.

b) Data and commentary related to companies and production

The Independent Film Journal’s “Distribution and Sub-Distribution Guide,” a resource that has rarely been referenced by scholars, established an overview of the exploitation market landscape. This section of *The Independent Film Journal* “lists in comprehensive detail the name, addresses, personnel, telephone numbers and product of national distributors, both major and independent, along with similar information on the regional exchanges and sub-distributors, together with the national companies they handle.”⁵⁷ “Distribution Guide” provided valuable information about producers and distributors in the mid-1970s, as *Film Daily Year Book* ceased publication in 1969.

Because trade articles about independent producer-distributors are often press releases, the project employs such articles to establish basic information unlikely to have been misrepresented including personnel and personnel changes, year of company founding, number of releases per year, prints in circulation, and projected release pattern. All claims related to run pattern and release date have been corroborated with additional trade sources, notably the “Picture Grosses” and “Barometer” pages discussed below. Whenever, possible, budget figures or costs reported in the trade articles were verified with primary archival sources. More commonly, when original budget sheets were unavailable, I checked cost figures in additional trade or periodical sources. When multiple corroborating sources were unavailable, I relied on

the trade-reported costs as a ballpark measures of production scale and, crucial to this project, a general sense of return on investment. These measures facilitated comparison and contrasts both within and across cycles and companies.

c) Data and commentary related to distribution and exhibition

Variety's "Picture Grosses" pages and *Boxoffice's* "Boxoffice Barometer" were important sources for the project. "Picture Grosses" includes individual names of theaters, theater capacity, ticket price, film distributor, and theater circuit for a key city. "Boxoffice Barometer" pages list a film and the key cities it played in, reporting a score for box office performance. (*Variety's* key cities were slightly different from *Boxoffice's*.) The project used the pages to trace the circulation of the case study films and the sample films throughout the key cities. The theater names listed in the pages were also evidence of theater type (drive-in, hardtop, multiplex) or location (i.e. "River Oaks III" or "Big Sky Drive-In,"). The name of the theater could then be compared with the information found on the *Cinema Treasures* website to validate the theater's location (as downtown or exurban) and theater type, as indoor or outdoor.

In addition to "Picture Grosses" and "Barometer" pages, trade press published commentary on distribution and exhibition deals (i.e. distribution fee and guarantees). *The Independent Film Journal's* "Distribution Guide" reported the location of a company's regional exchanges and/or branches.

d) Data and commentary on the domestic film market

Trade press provided summaries of financial information, including rentals and losses, relevant to both the studios and exploitation independents. Such sources offered crucial information on the macro-level dynamics of the film industry.

e) Commentary on institutions and legal activity

Trade press presented commentary on the changes in the Production Code Administration in the 1950s and 1960s and the development of CARA. Such trade articles also announced the most recent ratings, yet another source, in addition to reviews and marketing materials, that verified the MPAA rating of a film and pointed to a film's imagined audience. Trade press articles also included commentary on the implications of court rulings on the industry.

Marketing and Promotional Materials

Promotional and marketing materials were crucial sources for understanding the films' rhetorical appeals. Promotional one sheets, posters, press kits, and pressbooks illustrated the selling strategies companies used to reach their imagined audiences. The marketing materials were found in archival collections discussed below. The author's own pressbooks were also consulted: *Fanny Hill* (1968), *Superchick* (1973), *The Howling* (1981), and a special edition *AIP Presents 198 and Beyond* (1978). When marketing material could not be accessed archivally or through collectors, the authenticity of promotional images was verified in online archives. When analyzed in detail, images of promotional materials were included in the appendix.

Archival Records

My primary sources also include archival materials chiefly from the Samuel Z. Arkoff Papers located at Loyola Marymount University, papers that have been unmined by film and media studies scholars. The project draws from financial files, organizational files, business correspondence, files related to production planning and distribution, pressbooks, and market

research reports. Additional primary archival sources include a small set of materials found across several collections including the Curtis Harrington papers, the Norman T. Herman papers, the Tom Miller papers, and the James Raker papers, all housed in the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Additional archival sources include original press kits and posters found in the Black Films Collection at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

National Newspapers

As a project investigating films defined in part by their low cultural status, national newspaper reviews in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, or *Chicago Tribune* were an index of the wider culture's perceptions of the merits of the case study films.

Local Newspapers

Chapter One's distribution study followed a sample of films across their bookings in key cities and in select small towns. The pages advertising film showings in local newspapers showed evidence of bookings. Referenced in Chapter Three, Black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* provided important information about perceptions of the films.

Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970)

This government report, along with 1969's *Film Daily Year Book*, was critical in understanding the industrial structure of the American film industry at the beginning of 1970. The report compiled and synthesized empirical sociological research on the various industries related to sexual media and entertainment.

Cinema Treasures (Cinematreasures.org)

Cinema Treasures is a crowd-sourced compendium of current and former theaters. This project used the *Cinema Treasures*' GPS information to identify a theater's proximity to downtown or outlying areas. Photos of theaters on the site verified if a theater was a drive-in or hardtop theater.

Limitations of Sources

The biggest gaps in sources include the internal memoranda and business documents of New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures. While Corman's interviews and biography offered detailed information about operations of the company, the limitations of memory make such information less reliable than the kinds of information offered provided by corporate records. I gleaned Crown International's business operations from trade press primarily, which I checked against other available documentation. There is no doubt, though, that the lack of archival material is a research challenge that has only reinforced the mainstream/marginal divide in historical accounts of the American film industry.

Chapter Organization

Chapter One lays the foundation for the following five chapters by providing an overview of the industrial practices and dynamics that shaped the market for exploitation cinema in the 1970s. The chapter makes use of corporate documents to provide an overview of the exploitation market at the beginning of the decade including the companies involved, mode of production, distribution, advertising, and exhibition. Chapter One also presents a write-up of the distribution

data from a sample of exploitation films from the five cycles discussed in the study: the recession-era cycles of sexploitation and blaxploitation, hicksploitation, the Blockbuster Lite film, and exploitation horror. The analysis demonstrates the baseline distribution patterns for each of the cycles.

Chapters Two through Six each identify an industrial condition, cause, or factor that informs the emergence of an exploitation cycle, which sheds new light on the patterns of influence and symbiotic dynamic between the majors and independents.

Chapter Two and Chapter Three examine sexploitation and blaxploitation respectively as cycles that developed in response to the economic uncertainty of the industry recession. Both chapters uncover how risk avoidance informed both cycles. Chapter Two discusses the legal status of obscene material and reviews the industry's self-regulation mechanisms in the Production Code Administration and the classification system introduced in 1968. The chapter establishes the debates surrounding the 'X' rating that shaped exploitation cycles and Hollywood's response to them. It reviews the influence of 'X'-rated soft-core sexploitation on the industry and compares and contrasts two companies, New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures, who employed strategies of risk management and product differentiation to bring sexploitation outside of the grindhouse and to a youth audience at drive-ins.

Chapter Three shows how blaxploitation emerged from a similar set of market circumstances but resulted in an inversion of the relationship between exploitation independents and the majors. Seeking new product through low-risk investments, the majors propelled black genre films to prominence. My analysis of independents' appropriation and hybridization of the major-released blaxploitation films demonstrates the complex causality of influence and imitation in a cycle commonly considered a straightforward action-oriented exploitation cycle.

Taken together, Chapter Two and Chapter Three improve our understanding of the impact of the industry recession on production and distribution in the US film industry. The chapters establish a new paradigm for understanding majors' relationship to independents in the 1970s.

Chapter Four discusses the hicksploitation cycle as an effect of the product shortage in drive-ins. First, it shows a recession-era state of mixing and hybridity in production more generally. Independents absorbed a host of influences to drive demand for these drive-in-oriented films—textual elements of youth culture films, distribution strategies of 'sleeper' hits like *Billy Jack* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973), and themes of popular country music. In the hicksploitation cycle, independents refined a strategy of targeted selling and distribution that would inform the blockbuster films examined in Chapter Five. Major studio releases popularized hicksploitation on an even wider scale. The chapter also demonstrates the film industry's contribution to the popularization of country and hillbilly-oriented culture in 1970s America.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four looked at exploitation cycles that developed when Hollywood was reacting to successful box office trends that, even in the case of studio-released blaxploitation, were independent-led. Chapter Five focuses on the blockbuster film, which was a crucial turning point in the studio-independent dynamic. The chapter identifies patterns of imitation as independents were now reacting to major studio successes. New World Pictures and AIP sought to cannibalize the majors' blockbuster releases in two Blockbuster Lite cycles: a *Jaws*-ploitation cycle and a slate of *Star Wars* (1977) knockoffs, both of which required raising budgets and taking on financial risk. Chapter Five thus identifies a pattern of close imitation. However, the cycle revealed the difficulties of relying on an imitative strategy in a superstar marketplace. Anchored so closely to the originals, the exploitation imitations performed unsuccessfully as substitutes. Independents were structurally unable to engage in a comparable

form of risk seeking. Chapter Five revises common characterizations of the superstar market, revealing the tensions between independents and majors and the struggle over the summer play season. The Blockbuster Lite film was a turning point that showed exploitation imitations at the level of the blockbuster release was untenable. The blockbuster film required risk seeking at an unprecedented level: high budgets, hundreds of prints, and massive saturation advertising campaigns.

Chapter Six explores the different registers of horror film production in the 1970s. It compares and contrasts the coexisting Hollywood horror and exploitation horror cycles to reveal how exploitation independents used product differentiation in the form of violent ‘R’ horror to capture a coalition of audiences in drive-ins. In a sense, this was a restaging of the recession-era dynamic which saw independents pushing boundaries beyond established norms of violent representations. These parallel paths of horror production converged in the slasher film, a breakthrough cycle that once again reversed the dynamic of influence. *Halloween* (1978) ushered in a new group of independents that found success through a ‘sleeper,’ and quasi-Indiewood approach. A period of imitation and differentiation followed, as Paramount appropriated the slasher film and a new set of independents altered the slasher formula by, paradoxically, incorporating elements of Hollywood horror. The chapter sums up the complex causality of the decade by illustrating the reversals made by both Hollywood and independents in their development of horror film formulas.

¹ Todd McCarthy, “‘Independent’ Producers Bruised As Majors Borrow Their Slants,” *Variety*, June 16, 1982, 22.

² Richard Maltby, “‘Nobody Knows Everything’: Post-Classical Historiographies and Consolidated Entertainment,” *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 31.

³ Bill Landis, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). John Cline and Robert G. Weiner, *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).

⁴ Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, *100 Cult Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

⁵ Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis, *B is for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Value* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014).

⁶ Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36:4 (1995), 371-393.

⁷ Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy," 372.

⁸ Sconce writes that paracinematic audience sees Hollywood as "an economic and artistic institution that represents not just a body of films, but a particular mode of film production and its accompanying signifying practices. Furthermore, the narrative form produced by this institution is seen as somehow 'manipulative' and 'repressive' and linked to dominant interests as a form of cultural coercion" (381).

⁹ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999), 3.

¹⁰ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² David Bordwell, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹³ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 14.

¹⁴ In describing the subversive tastes of 'para-cinema' fans, Sconce positions exploitation films as a kind of "counter-cinema." Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy," 371-393.

¹⁵ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2004).

Blair Davis, Thomas Doherty, and Bradley Schauer have also researched this post-divestment period of exploitation cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. See Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2012); Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Teenagers And Teenpics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Bradley Schauer, *Escape Velocity: American Science Fiction Film, 1950-1982* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 6.

¹⁷ Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 9.

¹⁹ Richard Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Film History* 25, nos. 1-2 (2013): 149.

²⁰ See Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Laura Helen Marks, *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

²¹ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 13.

²² Murray Smith, "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 3-20.

²³ Smith, "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History," 3-20.

²⁴ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

²⁵ Wyatt, *High Concept*, 20.

²⁶ See Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1980-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

- ²⁷ Surindar Paracer and Vernon Ahmadjian, *Symbiosis: An Introduction to Biological Associations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.
- ²⁸ Paracer and Ahmadjian, *Symbiosis*, 6.
- ²⁹ Angela E. Douglas, *The Symbiotic Habit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010), vii.
- ³⁰ De Vany, *Hollywood Economics*, 10-13.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 65.
- ³² Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 2.
- ³³ Robert Clyde Allen, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 16.
- ³⁴ Allen, *Film History*, 20.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 16.
- ³⁶ Justin Wyatt, "The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and the Institution of the MPAA Ratings System," in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, edited by Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Christie Milliken, "Rate It X?: Hollywood Cinema and the End of the Production Code," in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 25-52; Kevin S. Sandler, "The Naked Truth: 'Showgirls' and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating," *Cinema Journal* 40:3 (Spring 2001), 69-93.
- ³⁷ Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).
- ³⁸ Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2006), 171.
- ³⁹ Tino Balio, *United Artists, Volume 2, 1951-1978: The Company That Changed the Film Industry* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).
- ⁴⁰ Justin Wyatt, "From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations," in *The New American Cinema*, edited by Jon Lewis (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998), 64-86.
- ⁴¹ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000), 17-19. Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company), 1992.
- ⁴² Cook, *Lost Illusions*; Sheldon Hall and Steven Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2010); Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005); Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
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- ⁴⁴ Julie A. Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015).
- ⁴⁵ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Justin Wyatt, "The formation of the 'major independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 74-90.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003).
- ⁴⁷ See Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Joshua M. Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Janet Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen* (Oxford, UK: Polity Press, 1994).
- ⁴⁸ Zoë Wallin, *Classical Hollywood Film Cycles* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 15.
- ⁴⁹ Wallin, *Classical Hollywood Film Cycles*.
- ⁵⁰ Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 30; Eric Schaefer, "The Problem With Sexploitation Movies," *Illuminace* 3 (2012): 151.
- ⁵¹ Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 30. Schaefer, "The Problem With Sexploitation Movies," 151.
- ⁵² Allen, *Film History*, 4.

⁵³ Maltby, “‘Nobody Knows Everything,’” 34.

⁵⁴ Smith, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History,’ 9.

⁵⁵ “Film Reviews: Satan’s Sadists,” *Variety*, January 14, 1970, 20, 38.

⁵⁶ “Buying & Booking Guide: Bloody Mama,” *The Independent Film Journal*, April 1, 1970, 1221.

⁵⁷ “Distribution Guide,” *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 69, 9.

Table 1: Summary of Project’s Design and Findings

	Chapter Two	Chapter Three	Chapter Four	Chapter Five	Chapter Six
Influencing Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPAA Ratings System • Industry recession 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPAA Ratings System • Industry recession • Black Arts movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product Shortage at Drive-Ins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blockbuster Film and Superstar Marketplace 	Post-Blockbuster Fallout: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market consolidation • Risk
Exploitation Cycles	Sexploitation	Blaxploitation Sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids	Hicksploitation	Blockbuster Lite	Exploitation Slasher Horror
Symbiotic Dynamic	<u>Sexploitation:</u> Independent innovation, major appropriation. <u>Blaxploitation:</u> Major innovation, independent imitation.	<u>Blaxploitation:</u> Major innovation, independent imitation. <u>Hybrids:</u> Independents’ self-cannibalization (continual churn)	Independent innovation, major appropriation.	Major innovation, independent imitation.	Independent innovation, major appropriation.
Key Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product differentiation • Risk reduction strategies (‘R’ rating) • Targeting niche audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product differentiation • Risk reduction strategies (pick-ups) • Targeting niche audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeting niche taste culture • Distribution outside of key cities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-sold IP • Risk-seeking strategies to drive demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product differentiation • Synthesis of blockbuster sales strategies and target marketing • Risk management

CHAPTER ONE: THE MARKETPLACE FOR EXPLOITATION CINEMA AS OF 1968

The chapter constructs a foundation for understanding exploitation cinema's position in the American film industry. Through a presentation of primary evidence of budgets, marketing materials, distribution patterns, and the processes of distribution, the chapter elucidates how the production, distribution, and exhibition of exploitation films differed from that of the major studio releases. The results of an empirical longitudinal distribution and exhibition study are also presented herein as a means of establishing how such films circulated across the US in key cities and small towns. The findings reveal important influencing factors to a film's run including distributor, film cycle, year of release, regional cultural norms, and the presence of stars. The study also substantiates the common claim that exploitation films were frequently released in the Midwest and the South. Exploring important differences in distribution between major studio releases and the releases of exploitation independents, the chapter establishes a foundation for understanding exploitation films' market position in the late 1960s, against which the transformations charted in Chapters Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six will be measured.

Section I: An Overview of the Exploitation Market In 1968

This section identifies and discusses the core components of the exploitation market. I define a market as a set of systems that govern the exchange of goods or services, or, in the case of the exploitation market, the exchange of a film product between a set of producers and their customers of exhibitors and audiences. Several elements govern market conditions: supply and demand, costs and revenue, the number and characteristics of market entrants, and legal or regulatory considerations. This section discusses the market for exploitation cinema as well as the form's place within the overall American film industry at the time that the dissertation begins, 1968.

The American Film Industry in 1968: General Trends

In 1968, both exploitation films and Hollywood films existed in an industry characterized by stagnating growth and an industry recession (the recession is explored in greater detail in Chapter Two and Chapter Three). Throughout the 1960s, gross box office receipts grew very little, varying only from \$900 million to \$ 1.1 billion during the decade.¹ Film attendance had gradually fallen. In the 1950s, theater admissions fell by 50%, and television sets increased fourfold.² Moviegoing as a percent of recreational activities had decreased during the 1960s and represented only 3% of recreational activities by 1968.³ Weekly attendance had dropped from 1946's high of 80 million to 38 million in 1957. By 1969, weekly film attendance was only about 17–20 million viewers.⁴ As Chapter Two and Chapter Three show, the recession would inform independents' innovation of cycles, which some major studios would imitate.

As attendance stalled, so did production by the major studios. From 1935 to 1945, the Hollywood studios collectively made an average of 528 feature films yearly. In contrast, the MPAA members released 176 releases, or only about 20 films per studio, from May 1969–April 1970.⁵ In that same year, large independents including AIP, Buena Vista, Cinerama Releasing Corporation (CRC), Commonwealth Pictures, Continental Films, and National General Pictures released a total of 83 films that season.⁶ The lowering of production had direct consequences on exploitation cinema in the decade. Early 'event film' hits, including *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), signaled a boom and bust marketplace in which a few films took the lion's share of yearly industry revenue. At the same time, independent productions, which did not slow at the same rate as the majors, disproportionately bore the brunt of the box office failures. I examine this dynamic further in the upcoming chapters, particularly in Chapter Five.

The American Film Industry in 1968: Exploitation Cinema

While exploitation cinema was considered a mode of filmmaking distinct from the general release market in 1968, there were emerging signs of exploitation's overlap with Hollywood films. A government report on the state of sexually oriented media conducted from 1968–1970 -- the *Technical Report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* -- segmented the film marketplace into three groups: the general release market, the art film market, and the exploitation market. The *Report* defined general release films as the Hollywood establishment, or the "heart of the motion pictures business."⁷ It described the art film market as a difficult-to-define group of "foreign language films with subtitles which for aesthetic, intellectual, artistic, or other reasons appeal to a limited audience."⁸ The authors wrote that exploitation was "known in the industry as 'skin flicks'" and described such films as "low-budget sex-oriented movies which are not acceptable to the majority of exhibitors."⁹ It is important to note that the *Report* defined exploitation films as synonymous with sexploitation. This is because the *Report's* authors were tasked with understanding the extent of sexual media production and consumption in the US.¹⁰ Thus, one must note that the *Report's* definition of exploitation is skewed slightly more toward sexploitation.

Even with this narrower definition of exploitation cinema, the *Report* nevertheless observed a growing overlap between Hollywood's general release films and exploitation films. The *Report* observed that two factors—Hollywood's embrace of more adult themes and the emergence of art-sexploitation hybrids—contributed to an erosion of the boundaries between these three markets in recent years.¹¹ Richard S. Randall, film historian and contributing author to the *Report*, elaborated on how Hollywood had begun to take cues from exploitation films in recent years:

The themes attributed to exploitation films are not unique to those movies and have found expression in recent general release motion pictures as well, such as perversion, in *The Damned*; drugs, in *Easy Rider*; orgies, in *Fellini Satyricon*; wife-swapping, in *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*; rape, in *Last Summer*; prostitution, in *Midnight Cowboy*; nymphomania, in *Justine*; promiscuity, in *Joanna*; lesbianism, in *The Killing of Sister George*.¹²

Randall observed that such salacious exploitation “themes” of perversion, drugs, and sexual misbehavior had found their way into even Hollywood releases including youth pictures like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969). (Though a film about 30-something married 30-somethings, *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*’s depiction of extramarital affairs aligned the film with the ‘free love’ ethos of the youth movement.) As such, the *Report* itself articulated the emerging symbiosis between the exploitation independents and the major studios at the beginning of the decade.

While they shared common themes, general release and exploitation films were quite differentiated in their overall market reach and circulation within US theaters. By surveying 20 metropolitan areas and 20 smaller cities, the *Report* collected data on the size of the general release, art film, and exploitation markets. From January through August 1969, general release films accounted for 93% of all playdates.¹³ The exhibition market for general release films was quite large. Nearly 90% of all theaters, or 12,000 of the nation’s 13,750 total theaters, booked general release films.¹⁴ In other words, most theaters booked general release titles, and the total number of potential available playdates for a Hollywood film was very high. The *Report* found that a general release “hit” would end up playing in 5,000 theaters nationally once its run was finished.¹⁵ These numbers reflected a broad market for Hollywood films.

While most theaters were therefore amenable to exhibiting general release films, the same did not hold for art films and exploitation. The *Report* found that an art film hit would play 500–800 theaters across the country. “Skin flicks,” the *Report* found, “usually have a limited exhibition potential of about 500 theaters.”¹⁶ Again, the number of theaters willing to play non-sexploitation exploitation films of 1969 including horror, youth films, biker films, etc., was likely higher than 500. Still, the difference in the number of theaters playing a general release film (12,000) and an exploitation film (500) reflected a striking imbalance of market accessibility and profit potential even if the latter numbers were low estimates. The crisis of theater availability for exploitation films would be a significant influencing factor on the hicksploitation film (discussed in Chapter Four) and the Blockbuster Lite film (examined in Chapter Five).

By 1968, the major studios and independents were beginning to target similar audiences, yet they were doing so from quite different industrial vantage points; the studios had nearly unfettered access to theaters, while the exploitation independents’ distribution reach was much more limited. This relationship, however, would change over the years. The upcoming chapters will explore independents’ efforts to expand their reach beyond the typical venues of indoor hardtops and drive-ins.

The American Film Industry in 1968: MPAA Members

By 1968, the major companies in the American film industry included two groups: the Hollywood studios from the pre-*Paramount* days and larger independents. These groups were roughly synonymous with the MPAA members. Columbia, Fox, MGM, Paramount, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros. comprised the Hollywood studios. As Chapter Four discusses further, these companies were subsidiaries of parent corporations. This status granted

them access to capital that enabled them to weather the substantial losses of the industry recession and to continue production and acquisition. This economic stability gave the major studios a significant advantage over independent studios. When I reference the ‘major studios’ or ‘the studios,’ I am referring to these seven companies. Large independents were also a part of the MPAA. In 1968, MPAA independents included Allied Artists, Avco-Embassy Pictures, Buena Vista, Cinema Center Films, and National General Pictures.¹⁷ Apart from Avco-Embassy Pictures, these companies were not significant players in the development of exploitation film. Chapter Six examines Avco-Embassy Pictures’ contribution to ‘R’ horror. Allied Artists’ release of *The Story of O* (1975) is notable in the history of sexploitation, but this is the only of the firm’s releases that might be considered relevant to the exploitation market. National General stopped production in 1970, and Cinema Center Films, CBS’ production unit, did as well in 1972.

The American Film Industry in 1968: Exploitation Independents

By 1968, dozens of companies released genre films to subsequent-run drive-ins and indoor theaters. I term these companies the ‘exploitation independents.’ These were the companies that produced exploitation films and/or acquired them for release. The *Report* estimated that there were 50–100 such companies operating in the 1969–1970 season. *The Independent Film Journal* ‘s “Distribution Guide” in 1972 showed around 75 such distributors.¹⁸ The scale and scope of the companies’ operations varied greatly. Some made their own films; some only released films; others purchased films made by other companies. AIP and Cinerama Releasing were the only exploitation independents with national distribution.¹⁹ Despite having national branches, industry discourse did not frame AIP or Cinerama Releasing as major

independents. This is likely because AIP and Cinerama's business models were oriented around serving independent exhibitors, not releasing 'A'-tier releases. As such, I group both companies within the category of exploitation independents.

Despite significant variation among exploitation independents, there were patterns in the rise and fall of such companies. Many formed in the 1960s with the emergence of sexploitation. For example, Crown International Pictures was established in 1959, and Jerry Gross founded Cinemation Industries in 1965. Others started in the early years of the recession; Cannon films was formed in 1967, and Sam Sherman began Independent-International in 1968.²⁰ New World Pictures was formed in 1970. Many companies also folded when the blockbuster model of production took hold. Hallmark Releasing, which released *The Last House on the Left*, was not active beyond the late 1970s. Cinemation Industries ceased operation in 1976 when the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.²¹ Bryanston went under in 1977 after Louis Peraino was convicted with six months' jail time and a \$10,000 obscenity conviction fine for *Deep Throat* (1972).²² Several other exploitation independents closed in the early 1980s. AIP merged with Filmways in 1979 and 1980. Sam Sherman moved Independent-International's operations to New Jersey in 1978.²³ Dimension Pictures opened in 1972 and closed its doors in 1981 after filing for bankruptcy.²⁴ (Bob Weinstein's Dimension Films, which released genre films including *Scream* (1996), was likely named after Dimension Pictures but was a completely different entity.) New World Pictures changed ownership in 1984 and stopped film production by the end of the 1980s. Crown International Pictures was perhaps the longest surviving of the exploitation independents. Crown's final releases were *Top Cop* (1990) and the erotic thriller *Night Club* (1990).²⁵

Exploitation independents were differentiated from the major studios through distribution power. Michael Conant has written that there is a “critical minimum size for national distribution.”²⁶ Most distributors of exploitation films never had the capital reserves needed to purchase and operate their own national exchanges nor the volume of releases to justify that fixed cost. Instead, they released films through sub-distribution. Of course, not every independent company that used sub-distributors served the exploitation market, but many did. The *Report*, which, again, focused on sexploitation distribution, found that such companies booked sexploitation titles in less than 5% of total theaters.²⁷ Exploitation independents’ distribution reach was extremely small when compared with that of the majors.

Scale of production budgets also distinguished the exploitation independents from the major studios. At the lowest end of the cost spectrum were films made for a negative cost of \$5,000–\$10,000. Overall, the *Report* categorized exploitation titles’ negative costs into three general budget ranges: \$15,000–\$25,000; around \$40,000; and over \$100,000. When we account for the *Report*’s tendency to conflate sexploitation and exploitation, the ranges shift a bit. At the most expensive range would be a film like AIP’s *Bloody Mama* (1970), starring Shelley Winters and Bruce Dern. Unpublished production documents show *Bloody Mama* went over budget by \$100,000, resulting in a negative cost of \$915,000. Archival correspondence indicated, however, that AIP’s target budget for such an “idea picture” was \$400,000, higher than the initial budgeted amount.²⁸ A budget sheet in the same archival collection showed early blaxploitation film *Blacula* (1972) to have a negative cost of \$376,000.²⁹ Shooting schedules for both *Bloody Mama* and *Blacula* hovered around 22–26 days. David Friedman’s Entertainment Ventures, Inc (EVI) represented the lower end of the budget spectrum. EVI’s sexploitation film *Starlet!* (1969) reportedly cost \$75,000. Friedman claimed *Starlet!* was the company’s most expensive film to

date.³⁰ A more average figure was around \$150,000. Independent-International's *Satan's Sadists*, directed by Al Adamson, was made for a reported \$125,000 and grossed \$1.5 million.³¹ The average negative cost for a Hollywood film was \$1.9 million in 1972.³²

Exploitation films took in smaller earnings. The *Report* found that the best earnings for the sexploitation films at the end of the 1960s was \$150,000–\$200,000, or \$400 a week for 400–500 bookings. \$70,000–\$100,000 was more typical, however.³³ The dissertation shows that grosses in the low millions were common for particularly successful exploitation releases. The rise of the blockbuster film, which returned grosses in the hundreds of millions, would widen the already-significant gap between the profit potential of major releases and independent films. This gap informed the independents' risk-taking in the Blockbuster Lite strategy as well as the aggressive and recurrent tactics of product differentiation pursued in the early 1980s by a new generation of independents, as discussed in Chapter Six.

Modest negative costs coupled with limited distribution translated into small profit margins. Indeed, the *Report* provided an example that highlighted how differently these companies operated from the Hollywood establishment. “[O]ne producer stated that he had made a full-length motion picture for about \$2,000. It took over three years to recover the original investment, and as of December 1969 the profit was less than \$50.”³⁴ Corman describes how New World Pictures managed risk by asking exchanges to finance their earliest films:

The investments [from the exchanges] were gauged by a formula that reflected the size of their territories. The size of their investments wasn't negotiable, but fixed. A franchise holder with, say, a 5 percent territory put up \$10,000 on a \$200,000 film, if all the money came from franchise holders; and \$5,000 if we were putting up half the money. The territorial cuts were generally known within 1 percent. And their return on investments was based accordingly.³⁵

[*The*] *Big Doll House*, for example, cost about \$125,000 and took in \$3 million in rentals. Our distribution fee, if it was 30 percent, came to \$900,000. We shared that with the franchise holders, and after deducting distribution expenses and production costs, we shared the profits with them. After a while, as our confidence and our retained earnings grew, we financed almost all our films ourselves.³⁶

According to Corman, the profit margin on *The Big Doll House* (1971), a successful New World release, was about \$900,000. Sharing those profits with the franchise holders, Corman likely netted only a few hundred thousand. Narrow margins had several implications on exploitation production-distribution, as we will see throughout the study. Small margins were sustainable for producers, distributors, and exhibitors if such margins were consistent. For example, distributors and exhibitors remarked that exploitation returned a *reliable* profit, even if the margins were small. However, the slim margins made upscaling attempts difficult. As the Blockbuster Lite cycle will show, companies subsisting on thin profit margins lacked capital reserves to mitigate the potential losses from riskier productions which could paradoxically be a company's meal ticket.

By 1968, exploitation cinema was a film form that operated at a smaller scale than Hollywood production. With low barriers to enter production, dozens of companies developed low-budget genre films that served audiences at drive-ins and indoor theaters who craved action-oriented and titillating genre films.

Section II: The Distribution of Exploitation Films

This section provides an overview of general strategies and principles of distribution used for exploitation titles through the 1970s. The upcoming chapters of the study will demonstrate

that distribution was integral to exploitation independents' strategies of innovation, imitation, and product differentiation.

Patterns of Distribution: Regional Distribution Methods

As of 1968, the patterns of distribution for exploitation titles were different from those employed by the Hollywood studios. The majors distributed films to a national audience, whereas regional distribution was common for exploitation films. The studios had a powerful network of national exchanges and the financial resources for a national print run. Exploitation independents, on the other hand, often used smaller scale distribution patterns, releasing a film within a given locale before moving on to a new location. Regional saturation booking and four-walling were two prominent methods of regional release.

By 1968, the most common distribution pattern for an exploitation film was regional saturation booking. Regional saturation distribution involved releasing prints in a localized region. Once the viewership in that region was exhausted, the prints moved on to another area. This method was a cost-effective way to maximize viewership as quickly as possible because it required fewer prints than did national release. While regional saturation quickly optimized viewership in a region, it was a process that took longer to reach a national audience. Corman described New World Pictures' use of the method:

We started early with saturation bookings....We would move one hundred prints into a town and then move those prints from market to market. Then we'd send out another one hundred someplace else. It was not unusual, once we got rolling, to have three hundred to four hundred prints working. And we would usually cover the country in four to six months with a release.³⁷

Corman's description suggests that the company engaged in a kind of simultaneous regional distribution: that is, circulating two sets of prints in two different markets. Sam Sherman of Independent-International Pictures said in *The Independent Film Journal* that the company made 75 prints and played them off regionally rather than "breaking a picture at one time" with 400+ prints, as was common with the major studios.³⁸ Regional saturation was the most common release method for exploitation independents in the early 1970s. Chapter Four discusses the strategic uses of regional distribution to reach rural viewers. Chapter Five charts some exploitation independents' endeavors to assemble a national wide release for their Blockbuster Lite films. Chapter Six reveals some independents' return to regional saturation under duress in response to the scarcity of national playdates.

Four-walling was another local distribution method historically used by independents. Four-walling allowed a producer to circumvent more traditional methods of distribution, which were often quite costly. Four-walling eliminated the sub-distributor and required very few prints. *Variety* observed that companies four-walling "pay all promotional costs and retaining all b.o. gross revenues above a predetermined 'nut'" including rent and operating expenses.³⁹ The producer rented out a theater or set of theaters (hence, four-walls) for a flat fee for a limited span of time. The theater played only the four-walled film, and the distributor received *all* earnings from those dates. This method was often used when a distributor expected a strong audience in a specific city that could be exhausted quickly. Similar to regional saturation, it is a method used when a distributor cannot release by scale.

During this period, small companies who had produced or acquired a single film with niche appeal would use four-walling. Utah-based independents American National Enterprises, Sun International, Interwest Film Corp., and Pacific International all released family films,

including wilderness documentaries, via four-walling in the Mountain West during the late-1960s and 1970s.⁴⁰ As Chapter Four shows, hicksploitation catalyst *Billy Jack* (1971) was released through four-walling. Tom Laughlin four-walled *Billy Jack* to achieve a New York City-opening for the film. *Billy Jack* also demonstrated the success of using saturation marketing in tandem with four-walling to build awareness for a film. The success of this strategy influenced major studios to do the same. Universal four-walled the Clint Eastwood film *Breezy* (1973) in Salt Lake City after the film's disappointing run in New York City.⁴¹ Warner Bros., who released *Billy Jack* with Laughlin, also four-walled *The Exorcist* (1973) on a large scale, drawing complaints from exhibitors.⁴² From the theaters' perspective, this practice violated the division of distribution and exhibition enacted by *Paramount*. In 1976, the Justice Department banned Warner Bros. from four-walling for ten years, but some major studios continued to four-wall on a limited scale.⁴³ As Chapters Three and Four mention, four-walling was one distribution method that reflected the relationship of symbiosis: led by independents and imitated by the major studios.

Patterns of Distribution: National Distribution Methods

As the data from the distribution study shows in Table 3 and Table 4 (and which I will discuss later in the chapter), many exploitation titles were booked in a wide range of key city markets. Most commonly, exploitation independents did so through regional saturation release in several different markets at a time. However, some exploitation independents also employed national distribution for certain titles. These examples represented important turning points in independents' strategies, which the chapters will examine in fuller detail. This section introduces the national distribution methods that will be discussed in the upcoming chapters.

In the 1970s, the major studios used platform release quite often, while independents did so on occasion. National platform release was a protracted method of distribution in which a film was tested first in a few markets before being released in a broader number of cities and theaters. Platform release was also used to gauge a film's likely earnings in less favorable markets. The outcome of the playdates would determine the subsequent release pattern. Often platform release was used to generate word-of-mouth or buzz. Platform release was also a key feature of specialty distribution, including the release of art films. Indeed, in the 1970s, platform release was commonly used to distribute art films or 'prestige' films to the intelligentsia or to college students. Critical acclaim generated from the New York market could showcase to exhibitors a film's strength and lead to subsequent bookings. For example, the Academy Award-nominated hicksploitation catalyst *Deliverance* (1972) had a platform release. Platform release can also contribute to a 'sleeper' phenomenon in instances when a film builds word-of-mouth through gradual release. As Chapter Six will show, Compass International made the atypical decision to release 'R' horror title *Halloween* (1978) through platform release. Instead of quick playoff to minimize negative reception, the thinking often guiding the regional saturation release of exploitation films, Compass International correctly bet that positive reception would slowly build a large audience for *Halloween*.

General release refers to the distribution of a film across the nation in roughly the same window of time. As Chapters Five and Six detail, the blockbuster film in the 1970s transformed general release into a system of wide release. Wide release, or national wide saturation release, involved the release of hundreds of prints across the country. National wide release extended the principle of regional saturation—exhausting a market as quickly as possible—to a national scale. Wide release was expensive, requiring significant expenditures on prints, distribution fees, and

overhead. The cost of prints should not be understated. 35mm color prints cost \$.07 a foot; a 90-minute feature cost \$570 in 1969.⁴⁴ Thus, this option was often difficult to achieve for companies short on financial resources. It also required the interest of a wide range of exhibitors.

In this period, independents were much more likely than the Hollywood studios to use the regional distribution methods. Of course, there were important exceptions (as will be examined in the Blockbuster Lite cycle in Chapter Five), but by and large the Hollywood studios released their films on a national basis through general wide release or wide saturation release.

Processes of Distribution: Run System, Prints, and Seasonal Release

Distribution runs are a central focus of the study. Each upcoming chapter charts the case study films' release across markets and venues. This section provides additional context on exploitation films' runs.

In this period, independent and general release films abided by the first-run and subsequent-run models established in the studio system. However, this hierarchy of theaters was not enforced by any zoning or clearance tactics. The *Paramount Decision* had dissolved such statutes. Independents typically released exploitation films in a first wave for roughly four-to-six months. Unlike major releases, exploitation films also tended to be booked for shorter periods of time: for a single week or less.⁴⁵ After the initial run, a film remained in circulation, oftentimes programmed on a double bill at a drive-in, to fill in a program with a first run film, or as a seasonal reissue (discussed in Chapter Six). One distributor said he had acquired 90 exploitation films since 1965 and, by January of 1970, 70 were still in 'active distribution.'⁴⁶ The *Report* observed that an exploitation film's first run could be difficult to identify and not only because a film could circulate in the theatrical marketplace for many years instead of moving to television

release.⁴⁷ As alluded to earlier, exploitation films also played in a distinct set of theaters. The theaters that played exploitation films were typically not the theaters to play studio releases. The wide release strategy of the blockbuster film scrambled this dynamic somewhat in the mid-1970s; Hollywood super-grossers began to play drive-ins, and Blockbuster Lite films vied for first-run playdates.

Many, but not all, exploitation films were rented on different terms than major films: for a flat fee. The flat fee, according to the *Report*, ranged from \$100–\$750. This rate was negotiated between distributors and exhibitors “based on knowledge of past average weekly grosses and conditioned by the relative power of the parties.”⁴⁸ Exhibitors wanted to keep film rentals to a minimum. Sam Sherman of Independent-International said that he made sure his rentals to exhibitors were reasonable: “We would rather get a 25 percent rental from a reliable exhibitor and know there is no knock-down on the gross.”⁴⁹ Corman has said that New World’s distribution fee of the grosses was set at the rather typical rate of 35% for shipping, promotion, and lab costs.⁵⁰ Corman appeared to contract for percentage revenue on films in first run release and a flat fee for subsequent run films, such as the ‘B’ feature on a double bill.⁵¹ Harry J. Essex, writer and director of the New World release *The Cremators* (1973), recounts: “[C]orman would . . . put some of his own pictures as the main feature in a double bill, and put *The Cremators* in as a second. That meant that I’d get a flat fee, \$100 or \$150 a night, while he played his own pictures on top for the percentage!”⁵²

Exploitation independents’ limited market reach when compared to the major studios was reflected in the size of the print runs for exploitation titles. The number of prints struck for an exploitation title varied greatly. AIP likely represented the height of that range. Unpublished AIP documents include “print utilization” forms that list the number of prints struck for 57 films

made from 1974–1977.⁵³ These documents show an average of 314 prints made per film. The lowest print run was just 50 prints (*One Summer Love* (1976) at 50, *Youngblood* at 85), and the highest was 600 prints for *Return to Macon County* (1975) and 845 for *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977). New World Pictures also typically released a few hundred prints for a film. Corman has said that he didn't believe in a large print run for a low-budget film: "Prints can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500. That means \$1 million or more out of the distributor's pocket for prints. We would buy maybe one hundred or two hundred prints at first and spend \$100,000 to \$200,000."⁵⁴ Prints were a substantial cost for independents.

The print runs appeared to increase as exploitation films gained traction during the industry recession, and distributors would expand a print run if they anticipated strong earnings. Crown International Pictures coordinated a small 50-print New England saturation release for a 1967 double bill of *The Wild Rebels* (1967) and *Catalina Caper* (1967). In 1968, Crown International Pictures struck a deal with Pathé labs for a much larger 300–400-print run for an English dubbing of the Swedish *I, A Lover* (1966) for southern states.⁵⁵ In 1972, Crown International Pictures released *Stanley* (1972) in a 250-print run. A 1974 *Boxoffice* article reported that Crown was accustomed to 175 prints for feature films but had struck 225–250 for *Policewomen* (1974) and *The Teacher* (1974).⁵⁶ Crown had 400 prints made for *The Van* (1977).⁵⁷ After the recession, then, the norm for a Crown International Pictures title appeared to be a range of 200–400 prints.

The size of the print run also appeared to correspond to the distribution strategy. Exploitation independents matched the print run with the anticipated size of the audience. Blockbuster Lite films *Meteor* (1979) and *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) reflected the upper range of exploitation independents' print runs, approximately 575 and 400 prints respectively.

This still fell short of the scale of the major studios' wide releases. In comparison, Paramount Pictures opened *Grease* (1980) in over 800 theaters opening weekend. Chapter Six shows how successful independents Compass International, Avco-Embassy, and New Line Cinema pivoted away from wide release to a mixture of platform release and regional saturation. This resulted in slower payoff but was more feasible at a time when playdates were scarce.

Exploitation films tended to be released in the spring or summer months. This is likely unsurprising, given that exploitation cycles apart from blaxploitation were frequently booked in drive-ins. Table 8 shows the release dates of the films in the distribution study (discussed in Section IV) and reveals a lack of any uniform month of release among the sample set. Spring and summer were common months for release. Ten of the films sampled were released in March, April, or May. Eight titles were also released in June, July, and August. More than half of the non-aligned category films were released in the spring or summer months. There were a few blaxploitation and sexploitation winter releases, commensurate with the two cycles' frequent bookings in indoor theaters. Overall, it is fair to extrapolate that exploitation films were skewed toward spring and summer release with some significant exceptions.

Exploitation titles premiered either in major markets, like Los Angeles or New York City, or in a location with an explicit link to the film's target demographic. As seen in Table 8, most of the sampled films premiered in major markets Los Angeles or New York, though there was more variety in the premiere locations than I anticipated and likely much more varied than major studios' premiere locations. Indeed, 13 different cities were represented in the list of premiere locations. Hicksploitation film *Bloody Mama* premiered in Little Rock, Arkansas, which aligned with hicksploitation's targeting of Southern audiences. In addition to New York and Los Angeles, blaxploitation films premiered in areas with significant black populations

including Baltimore, Compton, Oakland, and Atlanta.⁵⁸ Sexploitation's premiere locations and release dates mirrored the non-aligned category. (The non-aligned films are those in the distribution study that do not belong to the primary exploitation cycles examined in this dissertation: sexploitation, blaxploitation, and hicksploitation). The cities in which the non-aligned category films premiered showed great internal variation including a Southern location (Dallas), a Midwest city (Detroit), two West Coast locations (San Francisco and Los Angeles), and New York City. Because exploitation independents often targeted audience subsegments, films premiered frequently outside of Los Angeles or New York and instead in locations representing their target audience.

Marketing and Selling

For the Hollywood studios and the exploitation independents, advertising and promotion was paid for and coordinated by the distributor. Advertising and promotion included the following: theatrical trailers, television (network and local) advertising spots, newspaper listings and advertisements, trade advertisements, one sheets at theaters, and press kits. Trailers were particularly important for selling sexploitation since many newspapers banned 'X' advertisements from newspapers (as Chapter Two discusses in greater detail).⁵⁹

Marketing and promotion were strategically important for exploitation independents as a form of product differentiation. Flipping through newspapers or seeing one sheets at a theater, viewers would peruse exploitation promotion alongside major studio ads. The graphic design and copy of exploitation ads were intended to be eye-catching and differentiated from the studios' promotional materials.⁶⁰

Indeed, exploitation independents frequently touted their prowess at hailing their desired audience. In an article for *The Independent Film Journal*, Jerry Gross boasted of Cinemation Industries' strengths in selling to audience segments. He explained, "There is no one motion picture audience. It is fragmented into six or seven different audiences and very few go over with all audiences or in all sections of the country until they do well in one particular area."⁶¹ Gross also underscored the importance of selling a film even in the film title; evocative Cinemation Industries film titles at the time included *Female Animal* (1970), *Africa Blood and Guts* (1966), and *Grimm's Fairy Tales for Adults Only* (1969).

Exploitation independents also saw themselves as maintaining the art of ballyhoo. The companies often played up their lack of national distribution as an advantage; by this logic, they were able to support individual territories or locales with unique campaigns or improve a promotional campaign mid-run. Sam Sherman explained, "The major companies and most of the independents have given up on merchandising and promoting their film and as a result are winding up with quality features that do well in the big cities but die when they hit the other territories where there's a lot of money to be made."⁶² Sherman said the company could change a campaign "as tastes change, sometimes as many as 10 times on one picture." After the murder of Sharon Tate, Independent-International changed the campaign for *Satan's Sadists* (1969), which was already in release. Sherman reported that many theaters re-booked the film to capitalize on the publicity surrounding the Manson Family murders. *Satan's Sadists* was filmed at the infamous Spahn Ranch.⁶³

Distribution companies, and not sub-distributors, provided advertising that sub-distributors circulated in newspapers and to theaters. A 1968 *Boxoffice* article reported that Crown International Pictures was informing its sub-distributors that television and radio

advertisements had been completed and that “key art” for newspaper ads and lobby promotion would be supplied by Crown as well.⁶⁴ Regarding promotion for *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976), Crown described a promotional campaign “tailored for specialized approaches to hardtop engagements, multiple runs and drive-ins.”⁶⁵ Here and in other trade reports, it was clear that distributors developed the copy and key creative elements for use in theaters.

As the above paragraphs have illustrated, the distribution of exploitation films centered around cost-effective strategies of targeting the desired audience through eye-catching advertisements and by way of delimited distribution strategies.

Section III: The Exhibition of Exploitation Films

This section explores key facets of exhibition including the types of theaters in which exploitation films played and the locations of these theaters.

Key Cities

In addition to processes like print runs and release schedules, the release of films also involved the coordination of prints to theaters through hubs, or exchanges. Exchange offices were located in major markets across the country. These markets are referred to in the industry as key cities. In her study of distribution of westerns in the 1930s, Andrea Comiskey writes of key cities:

The term could also refer to any city that was home to a studio’s distribution exchange office. There was considerable overlap in these senses of “key city” (large urban area; market profiled in *Variety*’s “Picture Grosses”; and distribution/exchange hub). However, they were not identical. Some of the nation’s largest urban areas were not covered in the picture grosses while some

much smaller ones were. In addition, some small cities were home to exchange offices of one or more studios.⁶⁶

These observations hold for the film industry even 30 years later. According to my analysis, the key cities identified by *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, and individual distributors in the late 1960s and early 1970s were not identical, but there was significant overlap. To determine the key cities for exploitation films of the 1970s, I identified the cities *Variety* most often covered in its “Picture Grosses” pages. I also used *Boxoffice*’s reporting on individual markets and their *Boxoffice* “Barometer” pages. Akin to *Variety*’s picture grosses pages, the “Barometer” pages cover the films played in key cities that week. In my list of key cities, I also included the smaller cities like Memphis, New Orleans, Hartford, and New Haven, which *Boxoffice* included among their key cities. Such selection reflects the journal’s orientation toward the markets important to independents and is therefore appropriate to include in a data set comprised predominantly of independent releases. *Variety* covered cities like Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., which *Boxoffice* did not, and these cities are included as well. Both *Variety*’s and *Boxoffice*’s key cities indicate that the industry tracked the release of films throughout a set of 20–30 populous areas that represented a range of regions. Table 2 in the appendix shows the key cities that were reported in *Variety* and *Boxoffice*.

Key cities, however, can also be understood as exchange areas, regions anchored by a city out of which the exchange company or sub-distributor was based. Sub-distributors were local companies that functioned as exchanges for distributors who did not own or operate their own exchanges.⁶⁷ Sub-distributors handled the operations of distribution, including print shipping, within a given territory. These exchange areas or territories were defined differently by different companies, but there was significant overlap as well. Because the dissertation concerns

itself with independent distributors who sub-contracted with regional companies on an ad-hoc basis (as opposed to yearly programs), it was important to understand how the independent distributors themselves organized the marketplace for the purpose of their business. *Boxoffice* and *The Independent Film Journal* reported on the location of the exchanges or sub-distributors for each independent distributor. Various documents in archival holdings also show this, and advertisements for specific films within trade journals often provide a partial view of this information. According to the language used by *The Independent Film Journal*, which I cross-checked with unpublished corporate documents of New World Pictures and AIP, the term exchanges was synonymous with branches that a company owned. AIP operated its own exchanges and therefore had branches.⁶⁸ However, for most independent distributors, the cost of owning branches was prohibitive. Most exploitation independents released their films instead through sub-distributors and not company branches.

I used trade journals and archival materials to identify the location of the key cities, or common exchange or branch locations. Column three of Table 2, "Common Exchange Area," shows the most common exchange areas. This information was gleaned from New World Pictures' and AIP's documents and *The Independent Film Journal's* "Distribution Guide," which listed exchanges for other sub-distributors. Looking at the location of New World Pictures' and AIP's exchanges/sub-distributors prompted me to add the following six locations to the list of key cities: Dallas, Milwaukee, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Charlotte, and New Haven. These were common exchange locations for independents but were not included in *Variety* or *Boxoffice's* key cities. That four out of six of these were southern cities suggests the importance of the southern market to exploitation independents.

In sum, the 31 cities in Table 2 represent the key cities as understood by the trades and as operated by exchanges and branches. These 31 cities, then, were determined to be the “key cities” for the purposes of the distribution study described in Section IV. In Table 2, the key cities are listed on the top row. The films are listed on the furthestmost left column. The rows indicate all the key cities that played each individual film.

Exhibition Trends

In 1968, the exhibition sector consisted of drive-ins and hardtop theaters. Though drive-ins represented an overall smaller percentage of the exhibition sector, they were nevertheless prominent in the marketplace. *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book* showed an estimated 13,600 hardtops and 4,975 drive-ins in the United States.⁶⁹ Conventional hardtop theaters took in the highest percentage of receipts, 75%.⁷⁰ This meant that the approximately 5,000 drive-ins earned 25% of gross receipts. These figures were proportional to drive-ins as a percentage of overall theaters (~27%), indicating that drive-ins maintained a relatively strong position in the marketplace. Hardtops also had greater seating capacity (an average of 830 people) compared with drive-ins (an average of 570 people).⁷¹ Average ticket prices were \$1.02 at hardtops and \$1.26 at drive-ins.⁷² By 1970, drive-ins were not as lucrative as hardtops, but they were also not experiencing the decline they would a decade later. As in the studio era, theaters also existed in a hierarchy. In this period, the hierarchy was a simple one—first-run or subsequent-run. *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book* reported there were 550 first-run theaters “in 95 cities of over 100,000 population,” indicating a numerically large market for non-Hollywood fare.⁷³ In 1968, most exploitation films would have played outside of these 550 theaters and instead in subsequent-run hardtops and drive-ins.

When looking at exhibition on a national scale, there are a few notable patterns associated with exploitation films. First, such titles often played drive-ins and subsequent run hardtops. Second, there was data to suggest correlation between population area and number of theaters playing exploitation. The *Report's* survey of theaters screening sexploitation on at least a part-time basis (which helps correct against the *Report's* conflation of exploitation) revealed that North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Florida, and Georgia had the highest number of such theaters in proportion to the states' overall number of theaters; 15% of these states' theaters played exploitation at least some of the time. California, New York, and Texas had the highest sheer numbers of theaters playing exploitation. High population centers of 500,000 or more had the most total exploitation-playing theaters, while medium-population areas of 100,000–500,000 had the least. Somewhat surprisingly, areas of less than 100,000 were more likely to play exploitation titles than medium-sized cities of 100,000–500,000. The authors summarized: “Regionally, exploitation theaters were disproportionately distributed in the South and under-represented in the North Central and Northeast regions.”⁷⁴ This was a finding also borne out by the distribution study in Section IV; the market for exploitation cinema was heartiest in urban areas and rural areas. This finding was significant, because exploitation's audiences had a direct impact on the types of films produced, as the recession-era and hicksploitation cycles attest.

Theater Types: Grindhouses and Downtown Theaters

In addition to drive-ins, exploitation titles also played in hardtops. The indoor theaters most associated with exploitation cinema were downtown theaters located in entertainment districts and grindhouses. David Church had defined grindhouses as “independently operated theaters located in downtown or inner-city areas, showing double and triple features of

exploitation films at all hours for a low admission price.”⁷⁵ In their industry research, the *Report* determined that sexploitation was played often in “old, shabby, and run-down” theaters with 400–600 seats, fewer seats than big theaters.⁷⁶ While first-run entertainment often played outside urban areas, the authors explained that these theaters stayed afloat by releasing sexploitation:

As the moviegoing public increasingly patronizes outlying theaters in suburban areas, many downtown theaters have become nearly deserted. By specializing in sexually oriented motion pictures not available elsewhere, many of these theaters have been able to continue in business. Because customers are primarily male, many owners feel that surroundings which attract couples are not required.⁷⁷

These downtown conventional theaters were open long hours, and prices varied from \$0.89 in the 42nd Street Times Square houses to several dollars, much more than the drive-in and indoor ticket prices cited above.⁷⁸ Grindhouses were not the only indoor theaters that played exploitation. In every key city, screenings in indoor theaters were common. For instance, many exploitation films played at the New Orleans Orpheum Theatre, at the Hippodrome Theatres in Baltimore, and at the Kentucky Theatre in Louisville, to name only a few.⁷⁹ Based on location information on *Cinematresures.org*, these theaters all appeared to be older theaters located in historic entertainment districts. It is indeed likely that such theaters were viewed in their communities as abandoned theaters in urban locations, but I do not have direct evidence of a theater’s state of disrepair. As the chapters of the dissertation show, indoor theaters were a prominent site for the sexploitation and blaxploitation cycles.

Theater Types: Drive-in Theaters

Drive-in theaters, located in exurban areas including suburban areas and small towns, were a critical component of the exploitation market. When compared to the hardtop theaters, drive-ins were more likely to play a mix of general release and exploitation films.⁸⁰ Drive-ins served a variety of taste cultures, as evidenced in the popularity of sexploitation, hicksploitation, horror, and non-aligned exploitation films at drive-ins. My own analysis of drive-in data (listed in *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book* by town) can be seen in Table 7.⁸¹ It shows the high number of drive-ins in Southern states. Texas, North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Alabama all had more than 100 drive-ins in the state. The Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri also had many drive-ins. New England and low-population Western states like Wyoming had the fewest drive-ins.⁸² The high number of drive-ins in the South and Midwest helps explain the strong ties that existed between these regions and exploitation films, as Section IV will show. Chapter Four also examines the close association between drive-in theaters and the hicksploitation film cycle.

Section IV: An Empirical Study of the Distribution and Exhibition of Exploitation Films

The above sections have identified general features of the distribution and exhibition of exploitation films. I have also offered quantitative data to contextualize the scale of exploitation cinema vis-à-vis Hollywood and examples to illustrate general distribution patterns. However, simply understanding what percentage of theaters were available to exploitation producers or what methods of release were most common does not suffice to show how actual titles moved through the country. To that end, this section presents the findings from a longitudinal distribution study of 34 exploitation films released in the US from 1969–1975. The purpose of

this distribution study is to provide a baseline understanding of the marketplace for exploitation cinema at the beginning of the 1970s. The study reveals patterns in exploitation film distribution associated with location (key city or small town) and film type.

Study Design

I identified a set of 34 films. The 34 films fall into four sample sets—one for each of the prominent exploitation cycles of the period: an 8-film sexploitation sample set, an 8-film blaxploitation sample set, and an 8-film hicksploitation sample set. A fourth sample set also served as a sort of control: a non-aligned category, comprised of 10 exploitation films not belonging to any of the cycles listed above. The non-aligned sample has two additional films to represent marketplace conditions, as non-cycle-specific films were likely to outnumber non-aligned films in any given year. Within each of the four sample sets, films were selected to represent one release for each season from 1969–1975. I selected the films in each group so that they represented larger independent entities like American International Pictures and New World Pictures and smaller companies including Cinemation Industries, Dimension Pictures, Crown International Pictures, and others. Importantly, the films that comprised each sample sets were typical cases, not the prototypes or exemplars presented in the subsequent chapters. The case studies examined in the upcoming chapters indicate major transition points in the relationship between the independents and major studios in a given cycle. The films in this data set, by contrast, were more typical independent releases.

I tracked each of the 34 films' circulation in the key cities, shown in Table 3 and Table 4. I also tracked each film's release in ten non-key city locations, shown in Table 5. The ten locations I selected met the following criteria: 1) they represented a geographical spread across

the United States and 2) they were mid-sized or small towns. The towns Anniston, Alabama (pop. 31,500), and Kingsport, Tennessee (pop. 32,000), represented the Southern region.⁸³ Abilene, Texas (pop. 89,500), and Albuquerque, New Mexico (pop. 244,000), represented the Southwestern region, which I hypothesized as important due to the long drive-in season afforded by warm weather. Twin Falls, Idaho (pop. 22,000), and Billings, Montana (pop. 87,000), were the Western towns sampled. Nashua, New Hampshire (pop. 56,000), and Manchester, Connecticut (pop. 48,000), represented the Northeast. Connellsville, Pennsylvania (11,500), and Cedar Rapids, Iowa (111,000), were the Midwestern towns. I used the collection of historical newspapers available at *NewspaperArchive.com* to track distribution in these smaller markets through theater advertisements pages. Table 5 shows which of the films sampled played in a given small town.

The sexploitation sample includes 'R'-rated sexploitation and soft-core but no hardcore pornography. The sample includes: the self-applied 'X'-rated *Fanny Hill* (1969, Cinemation Industries), the 'R'-rated *Camille 2000* (1969, Audubon Films), the 'X'-rated *Trader Hornee* (1970, Entertainment Ventures, Inc.), the 'R'-rated *Private Duty Nurses* (1971, New World Pictures), the 'R'-rated *The Erotic Adventures of Zorro* (1971, Entertainment Ventures, Inc.), the 'X'-rated *The Cheerleaders* (1973, Cinemation Industries), the 'R'-rated *The Teacher* (1974, Crown International Pictures), and the 'X' and 'R'-rated *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (1975, Cambist Films).⁸⁴ The selection of 'X' and 'R'-rated films was designed to represent the range of booking situations sexploitation films had in hardtops and drive-ins alike, as examined in Chapter Two.

The blaxploitation sample is the only sample set to include films produced and released by the Hollywood studios, reflective of their importance in the development of the cycle, as seen in Chapter Three. The sample includes: *Slaves* (1969, Continental), *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!*

(1970, United Artists), *The Bus Is Coming* (1971, William Thompson International), *Across 110th Street* (1972, United Artists), *The Mack* (1973, Cinerama Releasing Corporation), *TNT Jackson* (1974, New World Pictures), *Dolemite* (1975, Dimension Pictures), and *Sheba, Baby* (1975, AIP).

The hicksploitation sample includes: *Pit Stop* (1969, Distributors International), the ‘X’-rated *Country Cuzzins* (1970, Boxoffice International Pictures), *Bloody Mama* (1970, AIP), *The Year of the Yahoo* (1971), *Stanley* (1972, Crown International Pictures), *Gator Bait* (1973, Dimension Pictures), *Truck Stop Women* (1974, LT Films), and *The Wild McCullochs* (1975, AIP). The sample includes a mix of genres, including horror and sexploitation, that were common within the hicksploitation cycle.

The non-aligned sample featured a mix of cycles and genres. The sample set includes: *Satan’s Sadists* (1969, Independent-International), *Angels Die Hard* (1970, Crown International Pictures), *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971, AIP), *The Last House on the Left* (1972, Hallmark Releasing), *Sweet Sugar* (1972, Dimension Pictures), *Santee* (1973, Crown International Pictures), *Cannibal Girls* (1973, AIP), *Golden Needles* (1974, AIP), *Savage Sisters* (1974, AIP), and *Death Race 2000* (1975, New World Pictures). These films reflect some of the smaller film trends including biker films, kung fu films, horror (further examined in Chapter Six), and sexploitation-inflected action-oriented films (discussed in Chapter Two).

There are several limitations to the distribution study. First, due to the limited historical newspaper coverage of small towns, the distribution study involves a limited sample of locations outside of the key cities. *Variety*’s picture grosses pages and *Boxoffice*’s coverage also presents an incomplete view of the cities and locations in which any given film would play. The sources also do not detail all the different theaters in which a film played in a given region. When

theaters are listed, one must rely on theater titles (i.e. the inclusion of the word drive-in in the theater name) to determine theater type. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this study to identify the types of venues for *all* theaters in which every film played in the locations identified. However, the types of theaters in which exploitation films were commonly booked is a topic examined in all subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Before gathering the data, I hypothesized that the exploitation films might circulate in a similar fashion to the ‘B’ films of the studio era or the exploitation films of the immediate post-studio period. Blair Davis has shown that low-budget films in the 1950s circulated in subsequent-run theaters. Such theaters relied on independent films to provide a change in program.⁸⁵ These theaters were often located outside of the central entertainment districts. Increasingly, drive-ins in rural, exurban, or suburban areas became prominent venues for low-budget films.⁸⁶ I anticipated that small towns would play exploitation titles more frequently than would the key cities. I also anticipated a stronger correlation between blaxploitation and sexploitation with urban locales and hicksploitation with small town locations.

The Exhibition of Exploitation Films in Key Cities

In this section, I will summarize some significant patterns in the data and offer some explanations for these differences. I will start by looking at the programming trends among the key cities before turning to exhibition patterns outside of key cities.

Table 2 identifies the key cities (row 1) that played the sampled films (column 1). An analysis of this data reveals two significant patterns: the blaxploitation films had the highest number of key city bookings while the hicksploitation films had the lowest number of key city bookings. These differences appeared numerically significant. The blaxploitation films had

bookings significantly higher than the non-aligned and the sexploitation samples, while the hicksploitation films had bookings significantly lower than the non-aligned and the sexploitation samples. The non-aligned and the sexploitation samples had a roughly similar number of bookings. A comparison of key cities and small towns shows that blaxploitation was released disproportionately to key cities, while hicksploitation was released more commonly outside of key cities. As Chapter Three and Chapter Four will discuss, both blaxploitation and hicksploitation were sold through targeted selling strategies to segments of viewers. Roughly speaking, the blaxploitation audience was understood as being in large urban areas, most of which were key cities. Conversely, the white hillbilly taste culture targeted by hicksploitation was associated with drive-ins outside of cities.

Key city bookings also pointed to a second pattern; Table 3 and Table 4 show a broad market for sexploitation, on par with the non-aligned films. The “typical” exploitation film, as represented by the non-aligned sample, had many bookings in populous locations and less-populous locations alike. The sexploitation sample skewed slightly more favorably to key city bookings; nevertheless, several of the sexploitation titles were commonly booked across locations, one indication of sexploitation’s broad appeal to distributors and exhibitors during its heyday. As Chapter Two discusses, sexploitation was often booked in drive-ins as well as hardtops, one explanation for the frequency of bookings in key cities and small towns.

There were five films, across the entire sample, that played 90% of the key cities. Among these five were one in the non-aligned category—*Death Race 2000* (dist. New World); three blaxploitation films—*Across 110th Street* (dist. United Artists), *The Mack* (dist. Cinerama/AIP) and *Sheba, Baby* (dist. AIP)—and one sexploitation film, *Fanny Hill* (dist. Cinemation). None of the films in the hicksploitation films played 90% of key cities. These findings further point to the

popularity of blaxploitation in populous locations. These five films also suggest the importance of the distributor. While the films have different distributors, these companies, for the most part, had a robust network of distribution. United Artists had national distribution; AIP had their own ~30 branches; New World Pictures had 17 exchanges in the key cities. Cinemation had only seven exchanges, but they may have been anchors for broader regions: Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Charlotte, Washington D.C., New York City, and San Francisco.⁸⁷

Conversely, among the films that played the fewest number of key cities were two hicksploitation films, *The Year of the Yahoo* and *Country Cuzzins*. These two films played in only about 10% of key cities, and there was no crossover in cities played between the two films. *The Year of the Yahoo* was directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis, who has talked about his predilection for distributing films in small town locations. *Country Cuzzins* was a sexploitation film. It was therefore surprising that the film had so few key city bookings. Distributor Boxoffice International Pictures only operated about 10 exchanges through sub-distributor offices, which may explain why I found that the film played in only four key cities.⁸⁸

Among the key cities tested, two regional patterns emerged.⁸⁹ The three key cities that played the most films were Chicago, New York, and Kansas City. The finding related to New York is unsurprising, as many producer-distributors view it as an essential market. That Chicago and Kansas City are included in the top three indicate the importance of Midwest regions to the exploitation market. The prominence of the Midwest was partly driven numerically by the frequent bookings of blaxploitation films. The two key cities with the fewest bookings were Milwaukee and Charlotte. This can partly be explained by population, as Charlotte was the least populous of the key cities. It is curious why a Midwestern city like Milwaukee would have such low numbers. I surmise that Milwaukee's relative lack of bookings is an effect of trade press

coverage. *Variety*'s "Picture Grosses" do not cover Milwaukee, and therefore the findings for that city may be underestimated.

The key city findings also suggest a regional aversion to blaxploitation in the Southern key cities, which had a significantly lower number of blaxploitation films screened than the key cities in the West, Midwest, or South, where blaxploitation films got many bookings. No other major regional differences among the key cities emerged, suggesting that the most salient differences were between small towns and key cities and not among the key cities themselves.

The Exhibition of Exploitation Films Outside of the Key Cities

After analyzing how all 34 films circulated in the small towns, several conclusions can be drawn. First, there was a strong correlation between region and the number of the 34 films played. The South, Southwest, and Midwest towns all frequently booked exploitation. For the most part, these three regions booked each type of exploitation film at relatively even rates. Despite very different population sizes, Abilene, Texas, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Anniston, Alabama, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, all booked a generally equally high number of films. The prominence of exploitation in the South and Southwest can be explained by the length of the drive-in season and number of drive-ins in the region. As Table 7 shows, Texas led all states in drive-in theaters. Alabama also had a relatively high number of drive-ins. The towns in the West region—Billings and Twin Falls—played the fewest of films, suggesting a smaller market there for exploitation films. I surmise that low population density may be a factor here—there may simply be fewer theaters. *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book* also showed that Idaho had only 36 drive-in theaters. Cultural conservatism may also play a role. Idaho has a large Mormon population, and I found that Twin Falls only played one sexploitation film, the hit *Fanny Hill*.

Third, all the sample sets were booked evenly with the important exception of blaxploitation films. Indeed, three towns played none of the blaxploitation films: Kingsport, Tennessee, Billings, Montana, and Nashua, New Hampshire. Several blaxploitation films only played in one or two of the 10 small-towns: these were the very early films (*Slaves*, *The Bus Is Coming*) and the later ones (*TNT Jackson*, *Sheba*, *Baby*, and *Dolemite*), suggesting an effect of the waning popularity of the cycle.

Indeed, the film sample with the fewest bookings in small towns were the blaxploitation titles. This suggests that small towns were strong markets for many types of exploitation films with the notable exception of blaxploitation. As Chapters Three and Four discuss, blaxploitation titles were shown in drive-ins but at nowhere near the frequency of sexploitation and hicksploitation. This is partly because blaxploitation films were released in theaters with many black filmgoers. The areas generally thought to have high black filmgoing populations were urban areas in the Midwest and North. This may explain the lack of blaxploitation bookings in small towns.

Contrary to what I originally hypothesized, the hicksploitation film was not played significantly more frequently than the sexploitation or non-aligned film sample. Most non-aligned films fared well in the small towns; many hicksploitation films did as well, and a few sexploitation titles played frequently; the specific films that played 90% (9 or more) of small-town bookings were 2 films in the non-aligned category (*The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, *The Last House on the Left*), 0 blaxploitation films, 1 hicksploitation film (*Bloody Mama*), and 1 sexploitation film (*Fanny Hill*). These findings indicate the popularity of horror titles in small towns and in drive-ins. Chapter Six further discusses the perceived popularity of horror at drive-

ins. This also suggests the extent of *Fanny Hill*'s popularity; the film proved to be a hit that spanned key cities and small towns regardless of region.

Exhibition of Different Film Types: The Non-Aligned Sample

As anticipated, the 10 non-aligned films were frequently booked across key cities and small towns. Somewhat surprisingly, the non-aligned films led the other sample sets in small-town bookings, with even greater bookings than the hicksploitation sample set; the 10 films played, on average, 7 out of the 10 small towns. This potentially suggests that, in general, exploitation films were slightly more likely to be booked outside of key cities from 1969–1975. One may hypothesize that this is an effect of population instead of market structure; however, this does not appear to be the case. Table 6 shows a comparison between the 10 most populous cities sampled and the 10 least populous cities sampled. For the non-aligned sample, there is very little difference in number of bookings among the most urban and rural locations, indicating no dramatic differences in non-aligned sample bookings in big cities vs. less populous locations. Instead, the location of drive-ins is a likely explanation for the non-aligned sample's strong showing in small towns.

As mentioned above, the non-aligned films were booked frequently in key cities as well. Overall, the 10 non-aligned films were booked in an average of 17 out of the 31 key cities, more than half of all key cities. For key city bookings, this amounted to a little bit less than sexploitation, more than hicksploitation, and less than blaxploitation. Importantly, the non-aligned films were released across a wide spectrum of key cities; most of the 31 key cities played at least four or five out of the 10 non-aligned films sampled. The West and Midwest regions booked the non-aligned sample particularly frequently; Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago,

New York City, and Kansas City, Missouri, had the highest number of bookings. This is not entirely surprising, as it points to a strong correlation in bookings with major film markets, and therefore playdate availability.

The prominence of Kansas City was a somewhat unexpected finding; this research revealed it to be a very common exchange area for exploitation films. Located in the center of the country and near St. Louis, the confluence of the Mississippi River and Ohio River, Kansas City may have been viewed as a central location for print shipping. I surmise this may have led the town to become a popular exchange area. Film exchanges have been located in Kansas City since 1909.⁹⁰ In 1969, Missouri was #10 among all states in number of drive-in theaters; Missouri had 134 total. However, the same holds true for a city like St. Louis. What accounts for Kansas City's status as a popular exchange location for exploitation independents? According to the *1969 Film Daily Year Book*, Kansas City had 10 drive-in theaters, the most for any Missouri city including St. Louis, which had three drive-ins in the city and six in St. Louis County. Kansas City's relatively high white population compared with St. Louis may also explain the film exchange activity there. In 1970, both Kansas City and St. Louis had populations of around 900,000. Kansas City had 100,000 black residents, and St. Louis had 300,000 black residents.

The cities with the lowest frequency of non-aligned exploitation film bookings were Milwaukee and Louisville. This can partly be explained by population. Milwaukee and Louisville were smaller Midwestern cities, ranking at #18 and #28 in population among cities sampled.

The films in the non-aligned sample were commonly played in the small towns sampled. Only Cedar Rapids played all 10 films, while Abilene and Albuquerque played 8 out of 10, indicating the popularity of exploitation titles in small towns in the West and Midwest. My best

guess is that Cedar Rapids' proximity to the larger markets of Des Moines and Chicago may have positioned the town to receive a greater number of titles than it might have otherwise for a town of its size. The small towns that represented the West—Twin Falls, Idaho, and Billings, Montana—were less likely to play the films than the small towns in the other regions. Again, this may have been driven by lower theater density as well as cultural conservatism. All in all, the Midwest emerged as a somewhat surprisingly strong region for the non-aligned exploitation sample, given common discourse on exploitation that emphasizes the South as a critical market.

On the level of the individual films, the distributor once again emerged as an important factor in the number and location of bookings. The most played non-aligned films were AIP's *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, starring Vincent Price, and the New World Pictures release *Death Race 2000*, which featured David Carradine. The least played films were the Al Adamson-directed biker film *Satan's Sadists*, released by Independent-International Pictures, and the Ivan Reitman-directed horror comedy film *Cannibal Girls*, made in Canada and released in the U.S. by AIP. The fact that horror titles rise to the top (*The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, *The Last House on the Left*) and fall to the bottom (*Cannibal Girls*) points to the distributor, and not genre, as the salient influencing factor. Both *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* and *The Last House on the Left* were released through AIP's branches. (Hallmark partnered with AIP for part of *The Last House on the Left*'s release).

Detailed findings pertaining to distribution patterns that adhered to individual cycles—sexploitation, blaxploitation, and hicksploitation—are explored further in Chapter Two, Three, and Four.

Summary of Findings

A few broad conclusions can be drawn from the study. Regardless of cycle, distributor and stars were important influencing factors in a film's booking. A film with a larger distributor was more likely to be booked in a greater number of locations, both key city and small town. The frequency of screenings of *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!* in small towns showed that a star could disrupt the operating pattern of low blaxploitation bookings in such areas. Cultural conservatism in very religious areas, including Mormon strongholds of the West and the Bible Belt regions, could mitigate the screening of sexploitation. Finally, the wide circulation of *Fanny Hill* showed the power of a hit to disrupt the aforementioned patterns. In fact, *Fanny Hill* was the only title to play in 90% of all possible locations, key cities and small towns included. *Fanny Hill* played in every small town and every key city except for Charlotte and Jacksonville.

A few patterns can also be seen among the cycle categories. The study showed blaxploitation to be a significant aberration from the "norm" as defined by the non-aligned category. A specific set of market conditions were associated with blaxploitation bookings; high population key cities not located in the southeast commonly played blaxploitation. Conversely, sexploitation appeared to circulate very closely to the "norm," widely booked in key cities and small towns. This points to sexploitation's wide appeal in the early 1970s and revealed a broader market for sexploitation than I anticipated. Third, the distribution study showed a trend of hicksploitation being booked more commonly in the small-town sample, suggesting a more niche market in effect. Finally, more broadly, the distribution study revealed the Midwest and the South regions to be exploitation's sweet spot. Key cities and small towns in these regions commonly played all the sample sets tested. The Southwestern small towns were also a popular location for exploitation films.

Overall, the distribution study revealed exploitation's audience to be generally located in the middle of the country and outside of Hollywood's strongholds of New York and Los Angeles.

Demographics of the Exploitation Film Audience

The distribution study reveals much about the location of the exploitation film audience, but it says little about other demographic categories, notably age and gender. By 1970, the general moviegoing audience had shifted younger, a favorable development for exploitation producer-distributors.⁹¹ In 1967, 16–24 year-olds made up 48% of adult admissions; 74% of total audience was in the 16–40 year-old demographic.⁹² Moviegoing was also less of a family outing than it had once been. An MPAA survey found that only 20% of viewers attended films with a spouse or with kids. The “most typical moviegoer is an older adolescent or young adult.”⁹³ Frequent moviegoers were also college educated; among the group of filmgoers that went to movies at least once a month, 39% had experience in higher education. Of the least frequent moviegoers surveyed, about the same number, 41%, had less than a high school education.⁹⁴ I surmise that education was a correlate for socio-economic class. The college-educated may be more likely to have disposable income and paid time off from work to spend at the movies, while those without a high school education may have had lower wages and less disposable income.

Various empirical studies of exploitation's film audience suggest that the core audience was male. In a study published in the *Report*, Charles Winick had 100 interviews with adult heterosexual movie patrons across the country. Only men were interviewed, because Winick writes that it was difficult to get anyone outside of the middle-aged white male demographic to answer questions.⁹⁵ (This highlights the problem of self-selection in ethnographic research.)

Researchers in another study published in the *Report* observed patrons of Denver's largest adult movie theater.⁹⁶ Of the 168 people observed during the seven-hour period of observation, 157, or 93.5%, were men. About half of the people observed attended alone. The author summarized the typical demographic characteristics of an adult movie patron:

As a general profile, the modal consumer of sex-oriented materials (based upon in-outlet observations and mail response survey data) emerged as: Caucasian male, from 30 to 45 years old, married, with an income level between \$10,000 and \$15,000 and with at least a high school education and probably some college.⁹⁷

A 1969 *Variety* article interviewed two sexploitation exhibitors. Charles Hodges, a North Carolina exhibitor, described his sexploitation patrons as middle-aged men who come to the theater midday in-between business meetings. William Lemmond, who operated a Charlotte-area drive-in that showed sexploitation, observed civil servants, businessmen, and ministers. Female patrons were rare, Hodges and Lemmond reported. Hodges says that patrons in the sexploitation houses he has seen over the years were men between 40–50 attending alone. *Variety* said, “But the two men said weekends brought some women with their dates or husbands. And carloads of college girls sometimes attend the drive-in to satisfy their curiosity about the celluloid sex, Lemmond said.”⁹⁸ This quote suggests that the college women would attend the drive-in regardless of the sexploitation film playing, and only on the weekends. Given the occasion of the timing of these visits, women's frequenting of sexploitation at drive-ins may have been as much a social occasion as a filmgoing event. This highlights an important point about drive-ins as social spaces. The actual film may not have mattered as much as the viewing experience. One can see why exploitation cinema might be perfect for programming in this scenario—as long as

viewers saw the titillating elements they were expecting, the film needn't be entirely unique or particularly well-constructed to serve its purpose.

The distribution study and the above information construct an image of two exploitation audiences: 1) a group of males located in urban centers in the Midwest and Northeast and 2) a potentially more mixed social group of men and women at drive-ins in small towns and suburbs in the Midwest and South. The blaxploitation cycle aligns closely with the first group, while the hicksploitation cycles conform with the second. The sexploitation and non-aligned cycles appear to target both groups. The distribution study revealed a regionally broad arena for exploitation release, a limited market for blaxploitation, and the power of a hit to transcend usual distribution patterns. The audience for exploitation films did not appear marginal but located in key cities and small towns across the country, and particularly in regions with many drive-ins.

Conclusion

Examining the marketplace for exploitation films that had emerged by 1968, the chapter has revealed the rather small-scale operation of exploitation film production, distribution, and exhibition in the 1960s. In terms of sheer numbers, fewer theaters were open to exploitation films than to general release films, and film budgets were often a fraction of major studio budgets. While fewer in number than general release venues, drive-ins and indoor hardtops playing exploitation represented an economically significant market. Indeed, the distribution study explored above shows that, by 1968, the audience for exploitation films were not a fringe group tied strictly to Times Square grindhouses, as is sometimes suggested. Instead, urban, mid-sized, and small-town locations throughout the country played exploitation films and many, including Midwestern and Southern towns, on a regular basis. This chapter has also suggested

the growing importance of certain film types and trends in the late-1960s. The runaway success of 'X'-rated sexploitation film *Fanny Hill* revealed by the distribution study attests to broader and quickly growing enthusiasm for sexploitation, a phenomenon the next chapter further examines.

¹ Table 1, "Motion Pictures: Trends and Projections, 1960-1970" on pg. 11, Source: Department of Commerce, Business and Defense Services Administration, *U.S. Industrial Outlook, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 438.

² Richard S. Randall, "Classification by the Motion Picture Industry," *Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 3.

³ *U.S. Industrial Outlook, 1970*, op. cit. (Table 1), p. 439; *International Motion Picture Almanac*, 1969 (New York: Quigley Publications, 1969), 58A.

⁴ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 14.

⁵ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970): 13; "Feature Chart," *Boxoffice*, January 1970, 7-9.

⁶ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970): 13; "Feature Chart," *Boxoffice*, January 1970, 7-9.

⁷ "Motion Pictures," *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970): 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Moreover, entirely aligning exploitation with sexploitation was also methodologically expedient. Sexploitation films, when compared to other exploitation cycles or genres released in 1970 (including horror and biker films) was more easily extricable from the general release market.

¹¹ "Motion Pictures," *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970): 5-70. The writer observed: "Until the past year or two, motion pictures distributed in the United States fell rather neatly into three categories: general release, art, and exploitation films."

¹² Randall, "Classification by the Motion Picture Industry," 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Theater numbers found in Department of Commerce, Business and Defense Services Administration, *U.S. Industrial Outlook, 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 437.

¹⁵ "Motion Pictures," *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Allied Artists joined the MPAA in 1947, and Avco Embassy Pictures joined in 1968. "Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1," *Boxoffice*, October 14, 1968, 4.

"Avco-Embassy To Join MPA [sic]; First New Member in 21 Years," *The Independent Film Journal*, October 1, 1968, 14.

Formed in 1966 through an exception to the consent decree, National General Pictures was the production arm of National General Corporation, the third largest theater chain in the country. A.D. Murphy, "First Artists, NGP Library to WB: Boasberg Unit To Be Dissolved," *Variety*, November 28, 1973, 3.

Jack Gold, "C.B.S. Is Dropping Its Theater Films," *New York Times*, January 10, 1972, 6; Robert B. Frederick, "Palmieri: Consent Decree Ban Stands: NGP Filmmaking as 'Experiment'," *Variety*, April 29, 1969, 3, 78.

¹⁸ "Distribution Guide," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972; 69, 9.

¹⁹ *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book Of Motion Pictures* (New York: Film and Television Daily, 1969), 97. Among them, the major studios had around 30-32 exchanges, and AIP was the non-major company with the most exchanges: 28 exchanges in 1968.

²⁰ "Independent-International Adapts To Shifting Scene In Picture Biz," *Variety*, August 28, 1985, 39, 44; <http://www.the-unknown-movies.com/unknownmovies/reviews/independentinternational.html>

²¹ "Handled 55 Films In 11 Years, Cinemation Needs Cash Infusion," *Variety*, March 17, 1976, 6.

- ²² “Peraino, Parisi Form [sic] Bryanston Distributors,” *The Independent Film Journal*, October 30, 1972, 18; “Jail, Fine ‘Deep Throat’ Defendants,” *Variety*, December 16, 1981, 4.
- ²³ “Independent-International Adapts To Shifting Scene In Picture Biz,” *Variety*, August 28, 1985, 39, 44; <http://www.the-unknown-movies.com/unknownmovies/reviews/independentinternational.html>
- ²⁴ “Dimension, Hit By Indie Distrib Slump, Files Chapter VII,” *Variety*, February 18, 1981, 6.
- ²⁵ *Variety*, May 2, 1990, 52-53; <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mark-tenser-dead-was-president-ceo-1970s-indie-powerhouse-crown-international-pictures-1071665>.
- ²⁶ Michael Conant, “The Paramount Decrees Reconsidered,” in *The American Film Industry*, edited by Tino Balio (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 555.
- ²⁷ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 32.
- ²⁸ Draft of “Bloody Mama: Analysis of Budget” dated October 22, 1969, Norman T. Herman papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences. A note, likely from Norman T. Herman, was written in pencil on the document. It read: “In spite of inflationary costs, I think it is still possible to do “idea” pictures at a figure in the \$400,000 category (sic). Starting as we did in the old days with a title and tailor making the product to the budget. However when we get involved in “star” pictures I believe we take one giant step up the budget ladder.”
- ²⁹ “*Blacula* Budget,” Norman T. Herman papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences.
- ³⁰ “Annual report, 1969, Entertainment Ventures, Inc.,” *quoted in Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 33.
- ³¹ “The Story of Independent International Pictures,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1971, 61, 82.
- ³² David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000), 337. I have been unable to find a more direct source for the average negative costs ca. 1970.
- ³³ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 34.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 33.
- ³⁵ Roger Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (New York :Random House, 1990), 182.
- ³⁶ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood*, 183.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*.
- ³⁸ “The Story of Independent International Pictures,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1971, 61, 82.
- ³⁹ Lee Beaupre, “Utah Gospel Of Four-Wall Sell,” *Variety*, November 7, 1973, 5, 36.
- ⁴⁰ Lee Beaupre, “Utah Gospel Of Four-Wall Sell,” 5, 36.
- ⁴¹ “Universal Sets Four-Wall Test on ‘Breezy’ in SLC,” *Boxoffice*, June 10, 1974, W7; “U Revives N.Y. Flop, ‘Breezy,’ For Four-Wall Test In Utah,” *Variety*, May 29, 1974, 4.
- ⁴² “Biggie of 1974, ‘The Exorcist,’ Into 85 Four-Wall Situations,” *Variety*, April 3, 1974, 4.
- ⁴³ Jeffrey Blyth, “Warners Agree To Ten-Year ‘Four Wall’ Ban,” *Screen International*, April 17, 1976, 8.
- ⁴⁴ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 33.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 35, footnote 69.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 33.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 40.
- ⁴⁹ “The Story of Independent International Pictures,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1971, 61, 82.
- ⁵⁰ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood*, 182.
- ⁵¹ Essex describes his experience with New World, “Well, what I had forgotten was that Corman would control it by distributing the thing – he’d put some of his own pictures as the main feature in a double bill, and put The Cremators in as a second. That meant that I’d get a flat fee, \$100 or \$150 a night, while he played his own pictures on top for the percentage!”
- ⁵² Tom Weaver, *Interviews with B Science Fiction and Horror Movie Makers: Writers, Producers, Directors, Actors, Moguls, and Makeup* (West Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988), 152.
- ⁵³ “Print Utilization Reports,” Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount.
- ⁵⁴ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood*, 183.
- ⁵⁵ “‘Red’ Jacobs Discusses Six Crown Releases,” *Boxoffice*, April 1, 1968, 10. Jacobs explained that “in the Southern states, subtitled films are not generally acceptable.”
- ⁵⁶ “Summer of ‘74 Best In Crown’s History,” *Boxoffice*, August 19, 1974, 6.

- ⁵⁷ “400 ‘Van’ Prints Booked June-August by Crown,” May 23, 1977, 4; “Dangers of Non-Major Filming; Drift From ‘Sex’ And ‘Violence,’” *Variety*, June 22, 1977, 5, 46.
- ⁵⁸ James Bock, “A Picture Of Black Baltimore,” *The Baltimore Sun*, August 6, 1995, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1995-08-06-1995218018-story.html>, last accessed March 12, 2020; David Firestone, “The Census Shows Growth In Atlanta’s Population,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/23/us/the-census-shows-growth-in-atlanta-s-population.html>, last accessed March 12, 2020; “City of Oakland,” 1970 Bay Area Census, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland70.htm>, last accessed March 12, 2020; Ayala Feder-Haugabook, “Compton, California (1867-),” *Blackpast.org*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/compton-california-1867/>, last accessed March 12, 2020.
- ⁵⁹ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 30-31.
- ⁶⁰ Eric Schaefer, “Pandering to the ‘Goon Trade’: Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2007), 19-46.
- ⁶¹ “Cinematation: The Go-Go Company,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 2, 1970, 9.
- ⁶² “Pictures: Today’s Majors As Instant No-Guts,” *Variety*, July 21, 1971, 7, 22.
- ⁶³ Peter Stanfield, *Hoodlum Movies: Seriality and the Outlaw Biker Film Cycle, 1966-1972* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018), 115.
- ⁶⁴ “Winchell Kudo to Mansfield In Crown Film Campaign,” *Boxoffice*, July 15, 1968, 10.
- ⁶⁵ Ralph Kaminsky, “Crown Int’l Predicts ‘Pom Pom Girls’ May Become ‘Sleeper of the Year,’” *Boxoffice*, April 26, 1976, 12.
- ⁶⁶ Andrea Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940,” PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015, 75.
- ⁶⁷ John W. Cones, *Film Finance & Distribution* (New York: Silman-James Press, 1992), 497. John W. Cones describes sub-distributors as: “In theatrical releases, distributors who handle a specific, limited geographic territory for a film, i.e., territorial distributors who have contracted to represent an independent distribution company.”
- ⁶⁸ “Comparative Analysis of Branch Operating Expenses Against Collections and Number of Employees for FYE 2/28/76, 2/27/77 and 6 Months Ended 8/27/77,” Series 3, Subseries A, Box 24 and Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University. “New World Pictures Sub-Distributors and Shipping Rooms,” Folder 3, Tom Miller papers Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences; “AMARCORD Playdates,” Folder 3, Tom Miller papers Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.
- ⁶⁹ *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book Of Motion Pictures* (New York: Film and Television Daily, 1969), 99.
- ⁷⁰ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 14-5.
- ⁷¹ “Table 5: Average U.S. Theater: 1963, 1967,” *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 15.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book Of Motion Pictures* (New York: Film and Television Daily, 1969), 99.
- ⁷⁴ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 39.
- ⁷⁵ David Church, “From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films,” *Cinema Journal* 50:4 (Summer 2011), 50.
- ⁷⁶ Charles Winick, “A Study of Consumers of Explicitly Sexual Materials: Some Functions Served by Adult Movies.” Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971); Morris Massey, “A Marketing Analysis of Sex-Oriented Materials in Denver, Colorado,” Technical Reports of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971). *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 36.
- ⁷⁷ Winick, “A Study of Consumers of Explicitly Sexual Materials”; Massey, “A Marketing Analysis of Sex-Oriented Materials in Denver, Colorado,” 36.
- ⁷⁸ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 36.
- ⁷⁹ “Kentucky Theater,” *Cinematreaures.org*, <http://cinematreaures.org/theaters/4411>; “Hippodrome Theatre,” *Cinematreaures.org* <http://cinematreaures.org/theaters/1264>; “Orpheum Theatre,” *Cinematreaures.org*, <http://cinematreaures.org/theaters/1691>, all last accessed March 20, 2020.
- ⁸⁰ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 39.

⁸¹ *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book Of Motion Pictures* (New York: Film and Television Daily, 1969).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Rank of Urbanized Areas in the United States," Table 21, page 1-87, 1970 United States Census.

⁸⁴ As reported in *The Independent Film Journal*, Cambist had 'X' and 'R'-rated prints in circulation. "Sadism Pays Off For Cambist As 'Ilsa' Dominates Exploitation Scene," *The Independent Film Journal*, October 1, 1975, 83.

⁸⁵ Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2012), 67-69.

⁸⁶ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 36-38.

⁸⁷ "Distribution Guide," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 69.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ The regional divisions in the table (i.e. which cities were considered southeast or Midwest) were taken from the unpublished internal AIP documents in the Samuel Z. Arkoff papers. Series 3, Subseries A, Box 24 and Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

⁹⁰ "The Mullins Film Exchange," *The Billboard*, February 27, 1909, 14.

⁹¹ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 11.

⁹² "Table 6: Public Survey Of Moviegoers—1967," *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 16. Reprinted from MPAA's *A Year in Review* (June 1968), 11-12.

⁹³ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Winick, "A Study of Consumers of Explicitly Sexual Materials," 247.

⁹⁶ "Table 20," *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 29.

⁹⁷ Massey, "A Marketing Analysis of Sex-Oriented Materials in Denver, Colorado," 60.

⁹⁸ "Exhibitors' Staple: Salesmen," *Variety*, December 10, 1969, 7.

Table 2: Key Cities by Population

Sources: 1970 U.S. Census, Table 21, Rank of Urbanized Areas in the United States, *Variety* "Pictures Grosses" pages, *Boxoffice* "Barometer" pages.

City (by population)	Variety	Boxoffice	Common Exchange/Branch location
New York City	x	x	x
Los Angeles	x	x	x
Chicago	x	x	x
Philadelphia	x		x
Detroit	x	x	x
San Francisco	x	x	x
Boston	x	x	x
Washington DC	x		x
Cleveland	x	x	x
St. Louis	x	x	x
Pittsburgh	x		x
Minneapolis-St.Paul	x	x	x
Houston	x		
Baltimore	x	x	
Dallas			x
Milwaukee			x
Seattle	x	x	x
Atlanta			x
Cincinnati	x	x	x
Kansas City	x	x	x
Buffalo	x	x	x
Denver	x	x	x
New Orleans		x	x
Portland	x	x	
Louisville	x		
Dayton	x		x
Memphis		x	
Jacksonville			x
Hartford		x	
Charlotte			x
New Haven		x	

Table 3: Bookings in Key Cities: West and Midwest

Sources: *Variety* and *Boxoffice*

Film	US Release Year	Cycle	Distributor	Denver	Los Angeles	Portland	San Francisco	Seattle	Chicago	Cincinnati	Cleveland	Dayton	Detroit	Kansas City	Milwaukee	Minneapolis	St. Louis
				West					Midwest/Central								
<i>Satan's Sadists</i>	1969	Non-aligned	I-I						x			x	x	x			
<i>Angels Die Hard</i>	1970	Non-aligned	NW	x			x		x	x	x	x		x		x	x

<i>The Abominable Dr. Phibes</i>	1971	Non-aligned	AIP	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>The Last House on the Left</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Hallmark Releasing		x	x	x			x		x		x	x	x		x
<i>Sweet Sugar</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Dimension	x	x		x			x					x			
<i>Santee</i>	1973	Non-aligned	Crown	x	x		x	x						x	x		x	x
<i>Cannibal Girls</i>	1973	Non-aligned	AIP		x					x					x			x
<i>Golden Needles</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP	x	x	x	x			x					x	x		x
<i>Savage Sisters</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP		x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x
<i>Death Race 2000</i>	1975	Non-aligned	NW	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x		x
<i>Slaves</i>	1969	Blaxploitation	Continental	x	x		x	x	x	x				x	x			x
<i>They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!</i>	1970	Blaxploitation	United Artists	x	x			x	x					x	x	x		x
<i>The Bus is Coming</i>	1971	Blaxploitation	William Thompson Int'l	x	x		x			x					x	x		
<i>Across 110th Street</i>	1972	Blaxploitation	United Artists	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>The Mack</i>	1973	Blaxploitation	Cinerama	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>TNT Jackson</i>	1974	Blaxploitation	NW	x	x		x			x	x	x			x	x		x
<i>Dolemite</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	Dimension	x	x	x	x	x	x						x	x		x
<i>Sheba, Baby</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	AIP	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x
<i>Pit Stop aka The Winner</i>	1969	Hicksploitation	Distributors Int'l												x	x		
<i>Bloody Mama</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	AIP	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
<i>Country Cuzzins</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	Boxoffice Int'l												x		x	
<i>The Year of the Yahoo</i>	1971	Hicksploitation	Unknown							x		x						
<i>Stanley</i>	1972	Hicksploitation	Crown	x	x	x	x			x						x		x
<i>Gator Bait</i>	1973	Hicksploitation	Dimension		x					x	x					x		
<i>Truck Stop Women</i>	1974	Hicksploitation	LT Films	x	x		x			x					x	x	x	
<i>The Wild McCulloughs</i>	1975	Hicksploitation	AIP	x		x	x			x		x			x		x	x
<i>Fanny Hill</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Cinematation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Camille 2000</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Audubon	x	x	x	x	x	x						x			x
<i>Trader Hornee</i>	1970	Sexploitation	EVI	x	x					x					x	x		
<i>Private Duty Nurses</i>	1971	Sexploitation	NW	x	x					x	x	x			x	x	x	
<i>The Erotic Adventures of Zorro</i>	1972	Sexploitation	EVI													x		x
<i>The Cheerleaders</i>	1973	Sexploitation	Cinematation	x	x										x	x	x	x
<i>The Teacher</i>	1974	Sexploitation	Crown	x	x		x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	
<i>Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS</i>	1975	Sexploitation	Cambist													x	x	x

Table 4: Bookings in Key Cities: South and East
Sources: *Variety* and *Boxoffice*

Film	US Release Year	Cycle	Distributor	Atlanta	Charlotte	Dallas	Houston	Jacksonville	Louisville	Memphis	New Orleans	Baltimore	Boston	Buffalo	Washington D.C	Hartford	New haven	NYC	Philadelphia	Pittsburgh	Total Key City Bookings (all regions)	Avg. no. of bookings (all regions)
				South								East									17.0	
<i>Satan's Sadists</i>	1969	Non-aligned	I-I					x		x						x		x	x		9	
<i>Angels Die Hard</i>	1970	Non-aligned	NW	x	x	x		x		x	x		x					x			17	

<i>The Abominable Dr. Phibes</i>	1971	Non-aligned	AIP	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x		26	
<i>The Last House on the Left</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Hallmark Releasing				x						x		x			x	x	x		16	
<i>Sweet Sugar</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Dimension		x		x			x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x		16	
<i>Santee</i>	1973	Non-aligned	Crown	x		x	x	x		x	x	x									x	16	
<i>Cannibal Girls</i>	1973	Non-aligned	AIP						x						x						x	6	
<i>Golden Needles</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP					x					x					x	x			14	
<i>Savage Sisters</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP		x			x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x		x	21	
<i>Death Race 2000</i>	1975	Non-aligned	NW	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	28	
<i>Slaves</i>	1969	Blaxploitation	Continental	x				x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x		22	22.5
<i>They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!</i>	1970	Blaxploitation	United Artists					x					x	x		x		x	x	x		17	
<i>The Bus is Coming</i>	1971	Blaxploitation	William Thompson Int'l				x						x	x		x		x	x			14	
<i>Across 110th Street</i>	1972	Blaxploitation	United Artists	x			x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	28	
<i>The Mack</i>	1973	Blaxploitation	Cinerama	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	30	
<i>TNT Jackson</i>	1974	Blaxploitation	NW							x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x			18	
<i>Dolemite</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	Dimension	x					x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		22	
<i>Sheba, Baby</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	AIP	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		29	
<i>Pit Stop aka The Winner</i>	1969	Hicksploitation	Distributors Int'l					x						x			x	x			x	7	11.875
<i>Bloody Mama</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	AIP	x	x			x	x	x			x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	25	
<i>Country Cuzzins</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	Boxoffice Int'l													x	x					4	
<i>The Year of the Yahoo</i>	1971	Hicksploitation	Unknown																			2	
<i>Stanley</i>	1972	Hicksploitation	Crown	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	22	
<i>Gator Bait</i>	1973	Hicksploitation	Dimension					x			x	x										7	
<i>Truck Stop Women</i>	1974	Hicksploitation	LT Films	*	x		x						x	x					x			13	
<i>The Wild McCulloughs</i>	1975	Hicksploitation	AIP	x		x		x						x					x		x	15	
<i>Fanny Hill</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Cinemat	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	30	18.25
<i>Camille 2000</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Audubon				x		x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	21	
<i>Trader Hornee</i>	1970	Sexploitation	EVI					x					x	x	x	x				x		12	
<i>Private Duty Nurses</i>	1971	Sexploitation	NW					x		x				x			x	x		x	x	17	
<i>The Erotic Adventures of Zorro</i>	1972	Sexploitation	EVI									x				x				x	x	7	
<i>The Cheerleaders</i>	1973	Sexploitation	Cinemat	x		x		x	x	x				x			x	x	x	x	x	18	
<i>The Teacher</i>	1974	Sexploitation	Crown		x	*		x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	24	
<i>Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS</i>	1975	Sexploitation	Cambist	x		x			x		x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x		17	

Table 5: Bookings in Small Town Markets
Sources: Local newspapers found in *NewspaperArchive.com*

Film Title	Year	Cycle	Distributor	South		Southwest		West		Northeast		Midwest		Total bookings (out of 10)	Average bookings
				Annis ton, AL (31.5k)	Kingsport TN (32k)	Abile ne TX (89.5k)	Albuquer que, NM (244k)	Twin Falls, ID (22k)	Billings , MT (87k)	Nashua, NH (56k)	Manchest er, CT (48k)	Connells ville, PA (11.5k)	Cedar Rapids, IA (111k)		
<i>Satan's Sadists</i>	1969	Non-aligned	I-I	x	x		x				x		x	x	6
<i>Angels Die Hard</i>	1970	Non-aligned	NW	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	8

<i>The Abominable Dr. Phibes</i>	1971	Non-aligned	AIP	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10	
<i>The Last House on the Left</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Hallmark	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	9	
<i>Sweet Sugar</i>	1972	Non-aligned	Dimension	x	x		x			x	x		x		6	
<i>Cannibal Girls</i>	1973	Non-aligned	AIP			x	x		x		x	x	x		6	
<i>Santee</i>	1973	Non-aligned	Crown	x		x	x				x		x		4	
<i>Golden Needles</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP			x							x		2	
<i>Savage Sisters</i>	1974	Non-aligned	AIP	x	x	x			x		x	x	x		7	
<i>Death Race 2000</i>	1975	Non-aligned	NW	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x		8	
<i>Slaves</i>	1969	Blaxploitation	Continental	x			x								2	
<i>They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!</i>	1970	Blaxploitation	United Artists	x		x	x	x			x		x		6	
<i>The Bus is Coming</i>	1971	Blaxploitation	William Thompson International	x											1	
<i>Across 110th Street</i>	1972	Blaxploitation	United Artists	x		x	x				x		x		5	
<i>The Mack</i>	1973	Blaxploitation	Cinerama	x		x	x				x	x			5	
<i>TNT Jackson</i>	1974	Blaxploitation	NW	x							x				2	
<i>Sheba, Baby</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	AIP										x		1	
<i>Dolemite</i>	1975	Blaxploitation	Dimension	x											1	2.875
<i>Pit Stop aka The Winner</i>	1969	Hicksploitation	Distributors Int'l			x	x			x	x	x	x		6	
<i>Bloody Mama</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	AIP	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		9	
<i>Country Cuzzins</i>	1970	Hicksploitation	Boxoffice Int'l Pictures	x	x							x	x		4	
<i>The Year of the Yahoo</i>	1971	Hicksploitation	Unknown				x	x					x		3	
<i>Stanley</i>	1972	Hicksploitation	Crown	x	x	x	x		x			x	x		7	
<i>Gator Bait</i>	1973	Hicksploitation	Dimension	x		x	x		x				x		5	
<i>Truck Stop Women</i>	1974	Hicksploitation	LT Films	x		x	x						x		4	
<i>The Wild McCullochs</i>	1975	Hicksploitation	AIP	x	x	x	x	x			x		x		7	5.625
<i>Fanny Hill</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Cinematic	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10	
<i>Camille 2000</i>	1969	Sexploitation	Audubon			x	x								2	
<i>Trader Hornee</i>	1970	Sexploitation	EVI	x		x	x				x	x			5	
<i>Private Duty Nurses</i>	1971	Sexploitation	NW	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x		8	
<i>The Erotic Adventures of Zorro</i>	1972	Sexploitation	EVI				x				x	x	x		4	
<i>The Cheerleaders</i>	1973	Sexploitation	Cinematic	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x		8	
<i>The Teacher</i>	1974	Sexploitation	Crown	x	x	x	x		x		x		x		7	
<i>Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS</i>	1975	Sexploitation	Cambist												0	5.5

Table 6: Most Populous and Least Populous Cities Sampled

Sources: Rank of Urbanized Areas in the United States, Table 21, 1970 U.S. Census, 1-87.

City	Population
Most Populous	
New York City	16.2m
Los Angeles	8.3m
Chicago	6.7m
Philadelphia	4m

Detroit	3.9m
Least Populous	
Manchester, CT	48k
Kingsport, TN	32k
Anniston, AL	31.5k
Twin Falls, ID	22k
Connellsville, PA	11.5k

Table 7: Drive-Ins By StateSources: *The 1969 Film Daily Year Book*

State	No. of Drive-In Theaters
Texas	429
California	254
Pennsylvania	212
Ohio	207
North Carolina	180
New York	169
Florida	155
Virginia	146
Michigan	136
Missouri	134
Illinois	132
Indiana	132
Tennessee	121
Kentucky	116
Oklahoma	105
Alabama	104
Kansas	102
Massachusetts	89
Minnesota	81
South Carolina	76
West Virginia	76
Wisconsin	73
Washington	71
Louisiana	70
Iowa	68
Colorado	67
Mississippi	66
Oregon	63
Arkansas	59
New Mexico	54
Montana	49
New jersey	46
Maryland	45
Nebraska	45
Arizona	44
Utah	43
Connecticut	40
Maine	40
Idaho	36

South Dakota	32
Wyoming	28
New Hampshire	24
Vermont	24
North Dakota	22
Georgia	17
Nevada	14
Rhode Island	12
Delaware	8
Hawaii	4
DC	3
Alaska	2

Table 8: Release dates and locationsSources: *Boxoffice*, *Variety*, *The Independent Film Journal*

The “-” indicates I was unable to find information related to release date or premiere city.

Cycle	Film Title	Year	Release Date	Premiere Locations
Non-aligned	<i>Satan's Sadists</i>	1969	9/10/1969	Detroit
Non-aligned	<i>Angels Die Hard</i>	1970	7/8/1970	Dallas
Non-aligned	<i>The Abominable Dr. Phibes</i>	1971	5/20/1971	Los Angeles
Non-aligned	<i>The Last House on the Left</i>	1972	10/--/72	
Non-aligned	<i>Sweet Sugar</i>	1972	6/15/1972	Los Angeles
Non-aligned	<i>Santee</i>	1973	12/24/1973	Dallas
Non-aligned	<i>Cannibal Girls</i>	1973	-	-
Non-aligned	<i>Golden Needles</i>	1974	7/17/1974	New York
Non-aligned	<i>Savage Sisters</i>	1974	8/28/1974	New York
Non-aligned	<i>Death Race 2000</i>	1975	4/30/1975	Los Angeles
Blaxploitation	<i>Slaves</i>	1969	5/6/1969	Baltimore
Blaxploitation	<i>They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!</i>	1970	-	-
Blaxploitation	<i>The Bus is Coming</i>	1971	7/9/1971	Compton, CA
Blaxploitation	<i>Across 110th Street</i>	1972	12/15/1972	Los Angeles
Blaxploitation	<i>The Mack</i>	1973	3/--/73	Oakland
Blaxploitation	<i>TNT Jackson</i>	1974	1/29/1975	Los Angeles
Blaxploitation	<i>Dolemite</i>	1975	5/6/1975	Atlanta
Blaxploitation	<i>Sheba, Baby</i>	1975	3/26/1975	Los Angeles/ New York
Hicksploitation	<i>Pit Stop aka The Winner</i>	1969	5/14/1969	San Francisco
Hicksploitation	<i>Bloody Mama</i>	1970	3/24/1970	Little Rock, Arkansas
Hicksploitation	<i>Country Cuzzins</i>	1970	-	-
Hicksploitation	<i>Year of the Yahoo!</i>	1971	8/1/1971	-
Hicksploitation	<i>Stanley</i>	1972	5/24/1972	Los Angeles
Hicksploitation	<i>Gator Bait</i>	1973	-	-
Hicksploitation	<i>Truck Stop Women</i>	1974	11/6/1974	Los Angeles
Hicksploitation	<i>The Wild McCullochs</i>	1975	9/3/1975	New York

Sexploitation	<i>Fanny Hill</i>	1969	9/26/1969	New York
Sexploitation	<i>Camille 2000</i>	1969	7/16/1969	New York
Sexploitation	<i>Trader Hornee</i>	1970	1/1/1970	-
Sexploitation	<i>Private Duty Nurses</i>	1971	10/8/1971	Los Angeles
Sexploitation	<i>The Erotic Adventures of Zorro</i>	1972	8/23/1972	Beaver Falls, PA, San Jose, San Antonio
Sexploitation	<i>The Cheerleaders</i>	1973	1/1/1970	-
Sexploitation	<i>The Teacher</i>	1974	5/8/1974	Los Angeles
Sexploitation	<i>Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS</i>	1975	-	-

CHAPTER TWO: FROM 'X' TO 'R':
THE RECESSION-ERA YOUTH SEXPLOITATION CYCLE, 1969–1974

This chapter and Chapter Three examine two exploitation cycles—sexploitation and blaxploitation—that presented viewers with content that was unthinkable on American screens just a decade prior. While on the surface, sexploitation and blaxploitation appear to be disparate phenomena, the two cycles both emerged in reaction to a single industry development: the industry depression or recession that Hollywood experienced from 1969–1972. Most scholarship has employed cultural, rather than industrial frameworks, to understand sexploitation and blaxploitation's textual and audience appeals. Such perspectives emphasize the cycles' social significance amid the Sexual Revolution and the Black Power movement. Perhaps a more modest yet nevertheless illuminating pursuit, this chapter and the following chapter understand sexploitation and blaxploitation as recession-era film cycles that emerged in response to the majors' economic fragility and to shifting audience tastes. Framing sexploitation and blaxploitation as recession-era cycles reveals how risk and reward strategies informed the development of both. Viewing these two cycles within the broader industry climate of the recession also underscores the ongoing and shifting dynamic between Hollywood and the independents. The Hollywood studios were struggling to maintain their position as the creators of the best film entertainment money could buy even as independents' youth-oriented genre films seemed more aligned, at times, with shifting tastes in the late 1960s.

Employing a method of historical industrial analysis, this chapter on the sexploitation cycle aims to advance scholarly discourse on sexually oriented media. Scholarship on sexploitation and pornography has overwhelmingly privileged hard-core above less explicit forms.¹ For this reason, scholars have positioned sex media as subaltern to mainstream film

outlets. An industry analysis of sexploitation's evolution in the recession-era years shows that sexploitation production was governed by risk and reward strategies just as general release films were. As the fate of soft- and hard-core distributor Sherpix illustrates, 'X'-rated pornography carried great risk outside of urban markets. At the same time, the box office success of *The Stewardesses* (1969) was proof of a broader market for sexually titillating materials. While hard-core was reliant on textual strategies of non-simulated genital display, sexploitation was a more loosely defined product category and could thus be pushed in a tamer direction. New World Pictures' nurse and Crown International Pictures' action-infused sexploitation cycles developed out of similar risk and reward strategies, avoiding the financial and legal risks posed by the 'X' rating while pursuing the reward of a film trend with built-in differentiation from Hollywood.

A view of sexploitation as a recession-era cycle presents a new way of thinking about exploitation cinema—as embedded within the DNA of the larger American film industry, rather than a marginal component of it. Illustrating the complex causality between the major studios and exploitation independents, sexploitation showed a dynamic of exploitation/studio imitation, with independents Sherpix, New World Pictures, and Crown International Pictures as the leaders. This chapter examines the development of the 'R'-rated sexploitation film in the early 1970s pioneered by *The Stewardesses* and adopted by exploitation independents New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures. This chapter aims to present one model of intra-industry influence that reveals how risk and reward strategies can drive generic and cyclic development.

Down But Not Out: Hollywood and the Industry Recession, 1969–1972

Film historians have identified the period of the American film industry between 1969–1972 as a time of industry recession or depression. Yannis Tzioumakis writes that, amid

immense external socio-cultural change, the American film industry experienced a recession due to “financial over-exposure of the majors,” dwindling audience attendance numbers, competition from television theatrical production, and an outdated Production Code. Tzioumakis posits that these problems were particularly intense from 1969–1972.² David Cook similarly cites 1969–1972 as the time of the industry recession.³ It should be noted that film scholars employ the term ‘recession’ in a manner that is atypical from common parlance. Recession is a macroeconomics term commonly applied to the broader US economy rather than to only one area of business. For instance, the National Bureau of Economic Research describes a recession as “a significant decline in economic activity” across the economy that lasts months to a year.⁴ Despite this inconsistency, I will continue to employ the term ‘recession’ or ‘depression’ in a manner consistent with its common usage in the field of film studies.

Hollywood began experiencing significant financial losses and instability a few years earlier, in the mid-1960s. Tino Balio writes that socio-cultural factors put Hollywood on unstable footing:

By the end of the sixties, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War protests, and the cultural upheaval they created had radically altered not only moviegoing habits but also the very constituency of the motion picture audience. This upheaval, from 1969 to 1972, caused a recession in Hollywood that brought several studios, including UA, to the brink of disaster.⁵

Stock prices were impacted by this downturn, and Balio writes that the sectors of the industry hardest hit were the publicly traded conglomerates.⁶ Corporate restructuring during the 1960s affected all the studios. During the decade, MCA purchased Universal in 1962; Gulf & Western Industries bought Paramount in 1966; Transamerica Corporation took over United Artists in

1967; in 1969, the Kinney National Service Corporation bought Warner Bros.; and MGM was sold to Kirk Kerkorian. This instability in Hollywood showed itself in the many significant losses the studios experienced. From 1967–1972, many of the majors' big-budget features flopped, showing a misalignment between Hollywood and American viewers. This misalignment resulted in millions of dollars in losses on 'A' tier releases. In 1967, Fox's *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) earned rentals of \$6.2 million on a cost of \$17 million. Warner Bros.' *Camelot* (1967) cost \$17 million and earned only \$14 million.⁷ In 1968, the situation appeared to worsen, particularly for United Artists, when several films earned rentals that amounted to less than half of their negative cost. These money-losing features included UA's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), UA's *The Battle of Britain* (1969), UA's *Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968) (which took in a measly \$1 million in rentals on a cost of \$12 million), and Fox's *Star!* (1968).⁸ 1969 saw the same trend continuing with expensive flops like UA's *Gaily, Gaily* (1969) and Paramount's *Paint Your Wagon* (1969). The first two years of the 1970s showed the studios continuing to struggle. In 1970, Paramount had five theatrical releases that totaled \$80 million in cost but collectively earned only \$30 million rentals, or less than one half of the negative cost.⁹ MGM reported losses of nearly \$20 million for the fiscal year of 1969 ending August 31.¹⁰ Columbia Pictures reported losses of nearly \$30 million from the fiscal year of July 1970–July 1971 and a net loss of more than \$3 million from July 1971–July 1972.¹¹ These losses were especially significant because they showed the major studios faltering not simply with one flop but with a series of films that failed to earn what was predicted. From 1970–1971, only eight films took in rentals of over \$22.5 million.¹² These included *The French Connection* (Fox, 1971), *Patton* (Fox, 1970), *Billy Jack* (Warner Bros., 1971), *M*A*S*H* (Fox, 1970), *Fiddler on the Roof* (UA/Mirisch, 1971), *Airport* (Universal, 1970), and *Love Story* (1970, Paramount).

During the recession, Hollywood took efforts to avoid future losses on such a scale. First, some of the studios engaged in economic risk-aversion, reducing production costs. In 1970, *Variety* reported that Darryl Zanuck at Fox aimed to cut costs at an annual rate of \$11 million.¹³ In 1971, Fox planned 11 films for release that collectively were budgeted for \$20 million, or at about \$2 million apiece, showing, in the words of *Variety*, a “cost-conscious 20th.”¹⁴ Among the eleven films planned were potentially risky lower-budgeted films such as *Panic in Needle Park* (1971), Russ Meyer’s *The Seven Minutes* (1971), and *The French Connection*, and two pick-ups. In addition to reducing costs, Universal began a policy of charging interest on monies owed by exhibitors in film rentals at a rate of 1.5% per month interest. *Variety* observed that this represented the first time a distributor “attempted to penalize delinquent theatres,” further underscoring how desperately the studios needed revenue.¹⁵ In these ways, the studios attempted to sustain a profit margin by lowering expenditures on production and leveraging their power over exhibitors to increase revenue.

Seeking external aid, Hollywood also looked to Congress during the recession. By the end of 1971, several California congressmen had introduced bills to promote film production. One initiative was to include the film industry in the Proposed Revenue Bill that would “permit a company to take a 7% tax credit on new plant and equipment” to boost the economy and create jobs.¹⁶ Two other measures were proposed to defer taxation on earnings, presumably benefiting the highest earning corporations in the industry: the Revenue Act was designed to spur production by deferring taxes on foreign earnings.¹⁷ Similarly, the Domestic Film Production Incentive Act of 1971 “would authorize the exclusion from taxation of 20% of the gross from a domestically produced film.”¹⁸ US Representative James C. Corman, a Democrat from California, was one of the Californian Congressmen. According to *Variety*, in a speech at the

Hollywood AFL Film Council, Representative Corman said that they faced an uphill battle as, in the words of *Variety*, “film industry problems are of little concern to Congressmen representing Iowa farmers, unemployed aerospace workers and other recession-hurt citizens.”¹⁹ Camille Johnson-Yale writes that MPAA President Jack Valenti and IASTE representative Richard Walsh met with President Nixon about the bill. The Nixon administration, however, was generally apathetic toward these measures and took no action.²⁰

Engaging in forms of risk-seeking, the majors also looked to young, untested talent including filmmakers who would become associated with the Hollywood Renaissance. A ‘mini-major,’ Avco-Embassy released Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate* (1967), which took in \$49 million from 1967–1968 on a cost of only \$3 million.²¹ Warner Bros.’ *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), directed by Arthur Penn, took in \$24 million in rentals on a cost of \$3 million. In 1969, Columbia’s *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) brought in \$14.6 million in rentals on \$2 million.²² The major studios also began to imitate youth-oriented film formulas developed by exploitation companies to reach young audiences, viewed as frequent filmgoers.

Indeed, the success of Columbia’s *Easy Rider* (1969), which returned nearly \$20 million on a negative cost of \$375,000, only highlighted the topsy-turvy industry environment during the recession.²³ *Easy Rider* was essentially an exploitation film; Roger Corman worked with Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Bruce Dern to develop a deal for *Easy Rider* with Samuel Z. Arkoff at AIP.²⁴ While *Easy Rider* was ultimately released by a major—BBS Productions produced the film and released it through Columbia (with Jack Nicholson in Dern’s role)—from a textual standpoint, *Easy Rider* had striking similarities to the youth exploitation cycles of the time. It bore similarities to *The Trip* (1967), another film about a psychedelic drug trip. *The Trip* was made by Roger Corman for AIP, written by Nicholson, and starred Fonda and Hopper. As a road

film, *Easy Rider* also drew on *The Wild Angels* (1966), a biker film directed by Corman and starring Fonda that itself became one of AIP's highest grossing films, grossing \$10 million on a negative cost of \$360,000.²⁵ Fonda wrote of Corman's influence on *Easy Rider*: "The lineage from Roger to [*Easy*] *Rider* was obvious....He taught by example and by sheer disbelief—showing what he could do if given the chance."²⁶ *Easy Rider* showed a lucrative formula: teen exploitation movies intersecting with themes that resonated with the youth counterculture. Cook writes that *Easy Rider* led to more counterculture movies, inspired the formation of new independent companies, and led the major studios to recruit young talent from film schools.²⁷ In short, the recession saw the studios embracing untested filmmakers, unconventional styles of filmmaking, and previously-*verboten* topics to re-capture viewer attention.

Studios' risk-taking efforts to adopt a more youth-oriented production slate did not immediately stave off the recession, which resulted in \$500 million in losses for the majors.²⁸ The majors' relatively slow economic recovery also stood in contrast to independent gains. In 1970, a time when several of the studios were reporting record losses, AIP was calling it their most successful year yet, reporting profits of \$632,000.²⁹ *Billy Jack*, produced independently and released through Warner Bros. after a failed independent run, was #2 in the box office with \$32.5 million in rentals.³⁰ *Deep Throat* (1972) became the #5 film of 1971 in terms of rentals with \$20 million.³¹ Sherpix's *The Stewardesses*, an 'X'-rated 3D film, was #17, with \$7 million in rentals. As the above examples show, exploitation independents in the late 1960s and early 1970s differentiated themselves from démodé Hollywood to reach the youth audience, a strategy a firm like AIP had engaged in for some time.

Tzioumakis writes of independents during the industry recession:

Unlike the majors, who were still searching for their audience, these independents knew exactly which segment of the population their target audience was. For that reason, they continued successfully to supply youth audiences with cheap, generic product, exhibited primarily at the approximately 6,000 drive-in theatres of the country.³²

Tzioumakis characterizes the recession era period to be a time of continuity for exploitation independents, who were already targeting the youth market. However, it was also a time of disruption; the sexploitation film brought explosive change to the American film industry. Virtually all commercial independent distributors exploited the greater permissiveness allowed by the ratings system, while the major studios remained ambivalent about embracing more mature content. New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures strongly pursued product differentiation in the form of 'R'-rated sexploitation films aimed at drive-ins and downtown hard top theaters. These companies capitalized on the growth of sexploitation in the 1960s and 1970s while packaging titillation in a form that was appealing to young, and decidedly male, viewers and acceptable within the ratings system, thus reaching the broadest possible audience. The next section examines sexploitation as a recession-era cycle, a cycle led by the exploitation independents that also brought significant change to the entire American film industry.

Literature Review and Definitions

Scholarship on sexploitation, pornography, and/or sexually oriented media has become increasingly common. Writing in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the so-called anti-porn feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon were among the first to bring pornography into scholarly discussions. Dworkin and MacKinnon viewed pornography as sexual trafficking of women and as categorically abusive to performers.³³ Dworkin argued that

pornography was an instrument of male domination and dehumanized women, leading to violent acts against women. Both Dworkin and MacKinnon's writings were overtly political and aimed to curb the production and distribution of pornography. Circumventing the anti-porn debates of the 1980s by examining pornography as a popular media genre, Linda Williams' 1989 *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* analyzed pornography from the lens of critical theory including Foucauldian, Marxist, and Freudian perspectives. Not advocating for or against pornography, Williams' book was a paradigm-shifting work that legitimated the aesthetic, cultural, and historical study of pornography in the discipline of film studies. Observing that the etymological roots of the word "obscene" means "off scene," Williams coined the influential term "on/scene." The term refers to the wider social and academic enterprise of grappling with sexually explicit media proliferating in the public sphere since the 1970s and the 1973 *Miller v. California* Supreme Court Ruling.³⁴ At the same time, other scholars were using critical theory to investigate queer or non-heteronormative sex media. Thomas Waugh examined pornography from a queer historical lens in *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings To Stonewall*.³⁵ Richard Dyer also wrote about gay pornography.³⁶

Just as Williams brought pornography 'on/scene' within the discipline of film and media studies, Eric Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* made visible Hollywood's shadow industry of exploitation cinema and the roots of the sexploitation film in the nudist and burlesque films of the studio era.³⁷ Unearthing an archive of collector and fan materials, Schaefer's revisionist history of the classical exploitation film de-centered Hollywood and carved out a sub-field devoted to examining the industrial and cultural significance of 'marginal' film and media forms. The dominant approaches to pornography, exploitation, and sexploitation in film studies

have continued the paths charted by Williams and Schaefer, who emphasized critical theory and archival historical research, respectively. More recent works have bridged these two positions, as illustrated in Peter Alilunas' *Smutty Little Movies*, which analyzes technology, industry, and regulation in the development of porn on video, and Elena Gorfinkel's *Lewd Looks*, a study of sexploitation during the 1960s.

Picking up the torch from Schaefer in the first major academic monograph on sexploitation, Gorfinkel's *Lewd Looks* draws from spectatorship theory, Foucault, and historical approaches to investigate the cultural meanings of sexploitation and the form's aesthetic development during the 1960s. Gorfinkel argues that sexploitation films "foreground the conditions of looking at erotic spectacle, making the subject and object of sexual looking the crux of their drives, self-consciously underscoring their own status as cultural artifacts caught in a period of transitioning from restriction to license."³⁸ She convincingly shows how sexploitation films were constructed around "aesthetic strategies of syntactical tease and erotic deferral" that both presented and denied erotic spectacle and thematized such unfulfilled voyeuristic viewing pleasures.³⁹ In *Lewd Looks*, Gorfinkel is less concerned with industrial developments but nevertheless provides a thorough history of the shifting status of censorship law that governed the limitations of sexploitation production during the 1960s. Current advancements in this sub-field, as Alilunas' and Gorfinkel's monographs show, are uncovering historical narratives and filmic texts ignored by traditional film histories.

This section on the youth sexploitation film examines a micro-history that is sandwiched in between the larger alternative histories charted by Alilunas, Gorfinkel, and others. Positioning sexploitation as a recession-era cycle, this micro-history operates at the boundaries between sexploitation on the one hand and Hollywood at the other. The 'R'-rated sexploitation film was

an exploitation film cycle that bridged the textual appeals and visual pleasures of the ‘X’-rated independent sexploitation film with the market scale and industry logics of nationally distributed commercial media. Jon Lewis’ *Hollywood v. Hardcore* shares a similar aspiration; yet, he devotes only 13 pages to “exploitation pictures” and makes no mention of commercial independents like AIP, New World Pictures, or Crown International Pictures.⁴⁰ This chapter shows how the interstitial form of the youth sexploitation film developed as sexploitation moved toward the mainstream (as evidenced by *The Stewardesses*’ success) and as commercial filmmakers began to integrate elements of sexploitation into genre film formulae, illustrated in New World Pictures’ nurse cycle (1970–1975) and Crown International Pictures’ *Superchick* (1973) and *Policewomen* (1974). This youth sexploitation cycle used tamer sexual appeals as a form of risk aversion and product differentiation to target the youth (male) audience while simultaneously avoiding legal difficulties.

Sex Cinema, Sexploitation, Soft-Core, and Hard-Core

Before proceeding further, I would like to lay out some clarifying definitions. I use the terms ‘sexually-oriented media’ and ‘sex films’ to refer to any film text that makes the representation of sexual interaction(s) or nudity a significant component of the film-viewing experience and/or marketing appeals. This expansive category can include any genre or industry category and can encompass a range of representations of nudity, suggestive language or dialogue, and inexplicit or explicit, simulated or non-simulated, sexual behaviors. Sex cinema is made up of a variety of forms with sometimes difficult-to-define labels. In this chapter, I refer to three key categories: sexploitation, soft-core, and hard-core.

First, it should be noted that all varieties of sexually oriented films during the period in question—1968–1973—were banned or pulled from exhibition around the US in different locales. As Section I of this chapter will further explore, there was no uniform federal standard for obscenity either before or after *Miller v. California*. As a result, there was no unassailable rational basis from a judicial perspective that dictated obscenity decisions or that producers could rely on to guide filmmaking. Even soft-core films like *Vixen!* (1968) and *The Stewardesses* were banned in some cities (in Ohio and Louisiana respectively).⁴¹ Therefore, legal status does not serve to differentiate sexploitation from hard-core, for instance. Neither are these three forms differentiated by their status as pornographic or non-pornographic. Whitney Strub writes that the term pornography “merely refers to anything deemed pornographic by a given authority at a given moment.”⁴² I use the terms “soft-core pornography” and “hard-core pornography” not based on my belief that the content is pornographic but rather as a reflection of normative nomenclature and attitudes at the time of a given film’s release. During the period in question, both soft-core and hard-core films were likely to be considered pornographic. MPAA ‘R’-rated sexploitation was less likely to be defined as such. ‘R’-rated films primarily relied on above-the-waist nudity and some sex scenes with items of clothing left on. A 1961 legal precedent pertaining to Doris Wishman’s *Hideout in the Sun* (1960) had found nudity not to be obscene.⁴³ ‘R’-rated films were also given MPAA seals and were therefore offered a degree of institutional protection.

Sexploitation refers to films whose primary market appeal to an intended male audience promised sexual titillation in the form of exclusively female nudity or non-explicit simulated representations of sex acts. In sexploitation, performers simulated and did not actually enact the represented sexual acts. The type of nudity in sexploitation varied within a film from quasi-

cheesecake type posing and photography (i.e. scenes at the beach or pool) to frontal nudity that placed genitals offscreen. Once the MPAA ratings system was in effect, sexploitation could receive an 'R' rating or an 'X' rating. Independent distributors of sexploitation also commonly self-applied the 'X' rating and did not submit the film to the MPAA for ratings. *The Student Nurses* (1970), directed by Stephanie Rothman, is an example of sexploitation. Sexually titillating elements, primarily above-the-waist nudity, and sexually suggestive language are scattered throughout, but the storylines of the nurses could stand alone without these sequences. Scenes of sexual intercourse are simulated and presented from oblique angles that obscure the genitals.

I view soft-'X' films, also termed soft-core pornography, as a sub-set of films within the broader sexploitation category. Soft-core films put greater emphasis—either in regularity or in duration—on simulated sexual acts of intercourse or fellatio versus the nudity in non-sexual scenarios (i.e. showering, sunbathing) that is common in sexploitation. Soft-core films also revealed more of the female form—showing performers' genitals but typically not framed in close-up. While sexploitation often had a narrative structure separate from the sexual exploits depicted, the story and plot in soft-core films tended to focus on a romantic entanglement. Soft-core's more frequent and more explicit representations of sexual display produced a form whose narrative emphasis was on the sexual arousal of a male viewer. While sexploitation was associated in the industry with low-budget production, soft-core was associated with a greater range of production contexts from low-budget to bigger-budget productions. Unlike sexploitation and despite being non-explicit, soft-core was associated with the category of pornography, invoked in the phrase "soft-core pornography." Like hard-core, soft-core made scenes of sexual gratification a structuring element of the narrative, but soft-core avoided close-ups of genitalia

and relied on simulated performances. As David Andrews has shown, soft-core developed a reputation for having a distinctive soft-focus style imported from advertising and fashion photography.⁴⁴ Linda Ruth Williams's definition suggests that the form is often best defined by what it is not. She writes,

One definition of softcore as a spectacle might be that it is any representation of sex which is simulated; less rather than more explicit; which may or may not be there to arouse the viewer; and which is constructed in relation to the limit pitched by mainstream tolerance."⁴⁵

An example of soft-core sexploitation is *Vixen!* (1968), directed by Russ Meyer and starring Erica Gavin. Meyer has said the film was made for \$70,000.⁴⁶ *Vixen* lives with her husband Tom in rural British Columbia. Tom is a pilot who gives wilderness tours. *Vixen* pursues sexual relations with her husband, two of her husband's business clients, and her brother Jedd. The film illustrates some common narrative strategies in soft-core sexploitation. Sex scenes occur at regular intervals; overall, there are six such scenes in a 70-minute film. Unlike the New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures films, where nudity is often motivated by non-sexual events such as nude bathing or showering, nudity in *Vixen!* is depicted in sexual contexts. Characteristic of soft-core, sexual elements are situated in the following sexual settings: *Vixen* and her husband Tom having sex in the woods; *Vixen* in bed with the female client; and *Vixen* engaging in sexual behavior with her brother Jedd in the shower. In these scenes, Gavin is often shown topless from the waist up. In longer shots, her body is sometimes obscured by her lover's body or from behind.

After the arrival of video, soft-core became popular as a retail product in direct-to-video features available on premium cable throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Linda Ruth

Williams has shown how direct-to-video erotic thrillers starring Shannon Tweed and Andrew Stevens were among the most popular and included *Night Eyes II* (1992), *Night Eyes 3* (1993), and *Illicit Dreams* (1994). These films often starred Playmates of the Month, *Playboy* models, and magazine pin-ups.⁴⁷ In addition to the strain of erotic thrillers, soft-core dramas were popular on pay-cable for quite some time. A director and producer who developed a reputation as a soft-core *auteur* after such theatrical films as *9½ Weeks* (1986) and *Two Moon Junction* (1988), Zalman King directed most of the *Red Shoe Diaries*, a Showtime anthology series of erotic dramas that aired from 1992-1997. (King had also played a sadistic biker in Crown International Pictures' youth sexploitation film *Trip with the Teacher* (1975)). *Red Shoe Diaries* would inspire other such series on pay-cable including Cinemax's *Erotic Confessions* (1994-1999). Continuing the 'white coater' tradition, during the 1990s and 2000s, HBO developed a niche in soft-core documentary with *Real Sex* (1990-2009), *Taxicab Confessions* (1995-2006) and *Cat House* (2005-2014). Soft-core would thus continue for years on pay-cable before the dominance of hard-core on DVD in the 2000s and then on streaming sites in our current moment.⁴⁸

Whereas sexploitation and soft-core are non-explicit, hard-‘X’ or hard-core pornography depicted sex acts, notably intercourse and fellatio, in close-ups of genitals. While sex acts in sexploitation and soft-core were generally simulated, in hard-core pornography they were performed by the actors. Jeffrey Escoffier elaborates on the distinction:

As a rule, in softcore pornography the performers are actors, the sex is simulated, and the production is more akin to traditional movie production; in hardcore porn the performers are sex workers and the production of hardcore scenes focuses on embodied sexual functions—on genitalia, erections, and orgasms.⁴⁹

Mona: The Virgin Nymph (dir. Bill Osco, 1970) provides an example of a hard-core film. *Mona* was a Sherpix release that Peter Alilunas describes as “the first hardcore narrative film to play in wide theatrical release.”⁵⁰ *Mona* illustrated the elements that distinguished hard-core and soft-core feature films. *Mona* was a low-budget film with a plot loosely based around a woman’s struggle to preserve her virginity until her wedding day. The film was structured by sequences of sexual acts including fellatio and intercourse. Compared to a film like *The Student Nurses*, *Mona* had fewer but longer scenes, which were all focused on sexual performance. *Mona* was also not shot in continuity; instead, the camera appeared to have been fixed in one location and one set-up while the actors performed various sexual acts on screen. Like *Vixen!* and unlike *The Student Nurses*, *Mona* did not have a B plot and lacked any secondary characters. Instead, the story and plot functioned as a general structuring device for the sex acts.

All released from 1969–1970, in the period of the industry recession and post-MPAA ratings system, *Vixen!*, *Mona*, and *The Student Nurses* illustrate the various forms and levels of explicitness the sexploitation film took in this period and the categories of sexual media that were in nascent forms of development. Underscoring how the boundaries between the mainstream and marginal were in flux during this period, Heffernan writes, “Categories of theatrically released motion pictures and the public taste to which they catered would never again be as unstable as they were in the Hollywood recession of 1968–1969.”⁵¹ The next section illustrates how exploitation independents leveraged this transformational moment to shape a wider audience for sexploitation. The independent sector of the film industry brought the sexploitation trend beyond grindhouses, employing product differentiation in the form of titillating fare to draw in audiences at a time when the majors’ dominance in the marketplace appeared to be slipping. In this way, the independents were far and away the leaders and

innovators of sexploitation in the mainstream film arena. The next section examines the legal and industrial developments that brought down barriers to sexploitation's distribution in the US.

Section I: The Institutions That Widened the Audience for Sexploitation

This section examines the institutions and industrial developments that contributed to the emergence of sexploitation as a sizeable market force in the late 1960s. The most significant such developments were a liberal legal atmosphere pertaining to obscenity and the introduction of the MPAA ratings system, both of which widened the audience for sexploitation.

Liberal Courts Lay the Groundwork for Sexploitation

As many scholars have examined, an influx of product from Europe introduced film audiences to sexually frank content.⁵² The release of European art films in the US prompted watershed obscenity trials and rulings that would increase protections for adult language and sexual content. One of the most important such rulings during was *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952), often called the *Miracle Decision*. Rejecting the banning of Roberto Rossellini's short film "The Miracle" on sacrilegious grounds, the *Miracle Decision* established First Amendment protections for motion pictures for the first time.⁵³ After *Miracle*, films were still subject to obscenity prosecution, as the First Amendment did not protect obscene speech. However, *Miracle* registered a significant shift in legal understanding of film in the public sphere. As a medium for expressing ideas, film could broach topical or controversial subject matter with legal protection.

Several other decisions in the 1950s gradually permitted a greater range of sexual representation. In *Excelsior Pictures Corp. v. Regents of the University of the State of New York*

(1956), the New York Court of Appeals found that the depiction of nudity in nudist sexploitation film *Garden of Eden* (1954) was not adequately erotic or sexualized as to merit the action of prior restraint taken by the New York state censor board.⁵⁴ In 1957, *Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors vs. Times Film Corporation* (1957) found that aboriginal nudity in exploitation film *Naked Amazon* (1954) was not “obscene or pornographic.”⁵⁵ The court determined that nudity extracted from explicitly sexual situations was not indecent or obscene. These rulings would lead to the rise of nudist films and ‘nudie-cuties’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s, like Russ Meyer’s *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959). Nudie-cuties and nudist films showed the naked female form outside of the bedroom in nudist colonies and nude beaches. This strategy of invoking titillation through non-sexual nudity would recur in the ‘R’-rated youth sexploitation cycles examined later in this chapter.

1957’s *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957) was the first major revision of national obscenity doctrine since the Supreme Court’s validation of the British ruling *Regina v. Hicklin* in the 1870s.⁵⁶ It narrowed the definition of obscenity significantly and was a catalyst for the sexploitation boom of the 1960s. Strub calls *Roth* “the case...that somehow *both* opened the cultural gates to a ‘floodtide of filth’ *and* deserves credit or blame each time another citizen stands behind bars for publishing pornography.”⁵⁷ The case concerned Samuel Roth, a New York man who distributed erotic stories and photography through the mail. In a 6-3 decision, the court set forth a new, three-pronged test that strictly defined obscenity. *Roth* established that a work was obscene and not protected speech if “community standards” found prurient interest to be the “dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole.” Importantly, *Roth* defined “community standards” as what an adult might find permissible or impermissible, whereas prior obscenity doctrine found a work indecent if it was seen as unsuitable for children. In addition to the

community standards and dominant theme pieces, *Roth* required a third test: that the work be devoid of socially redeeming value. Instituting a narrower definition of obscenity, *Roth* put significant limits on what constituted unprotected speech and in so doing did much to enable the rise of sexploitation in the 1960s.

Post-*Roth*, many court rulings further opened the door for sexploitation and erotic cinema. Unlike *Roth*, these rulings explicitly pertained to films. In 1959, *Kingsley International Pictures Corp. v. Regents*, 360 U.S. 684 (1959) found that “ideological grounds of defining obscenity was unconstitutional.”⁵⁸ The New York State Board of Regents refused to give a license to distributor Kingsley’s film *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1955) due to its positive portrayal of adultery. The Supreme Court found the film was not obscene because it expressed immoral ideas about adultery but did not incite immoral *behavior*.⁵⁹ As such, the ruling validated filmic depictions of immoral and illegal actions. The Production Code, in contrast, specified that adultery “must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.”⁶⁰ This decision showed the growing gap between the legally permissible and the content prescribed by the Production Code.

Other rulings had direct implications on film distribution. In *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), Justice Brennan overturned the state of Ohio’s obscenity conviction of Louis Malle’s *Les amants* (1958). Brennan found that *Les amants* was not obscene. “Community standards,” Brennan clarified, referred to “society at large” and not an Ohio town. In this ruling, Justice Potter Stewart famously said he believed obscenity was limited to hard-core pornography (“I know it when I see it”).⁶¹ This decision was important for establishing the growing alignment between obscenity and ‘hard-core’ pornography, not inexplicit or soft-core representation.

Moreover, by defining community standards as the society at large, *Jacobellis v. Ohio* anticipated national distribution of sexploitation.

Still other rulings influenced the textual strategies of exploitation films. In *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, 383 U.S. 413 (1966), Brennan overturned Boston's 1821 banning of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Fanny Hill)* because it failed the 3rd *Roth* criteria: it could not be judged utterly without socially redeeming value because it had some literary or historical value.⁶² Sexploitation producers and distributors and, later, producers of 'X' pornography found protection under *Roth* by crafting some semblance of literary, historical, or socially redeeming value. Kevin Heffernan and David Lerner have shown how the earliest hard-core features skirted obscenity laws by framing explicit sexual acts within educational discourses, as was the case with "white coater" sex documentaries like Alex de Renzy's *Pornography in Denmark* (1969).⁶³ This chapter tracks the continuation of 'white coater' strategies in 1970s sexploitation.

As norms of film content were rapidly changing and sexploitation was proliferating, courts began to hear more cases over film seizures and bannings. Several rulings in the late 1960s gave indication that the government could legally be allowed a role, albeit limited, in film censorship. The Supreme Court decision, *Freedman v. Maryland*, 380 U.S. 51 (1965), removed the power of the city and state censor boards. However, the courts did not prohibit the constitutional methods of censorship.⁶⁴ Elena Gorfinkel explains that the "required submission of films to a board in advance of their being screened in public acted as an informal mode of censorship that interfered with the freedom of speech guarantees only recently granted to the cinema in the prior decade." By 1970, only Maryland had a state censorship board though city censor boards, including in Chicago, also remained. According to *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968), the federal government did, however, have the power to regulate advertising or

marketing materials that might incite prurient interest in minors even if such material was not in itself obscene or explicit. *Interstate Circuit, Inc. v. City of Dallas*, 390 U.S. 676 (1968) ruled a Dallas film classification system unconstitutional because it was “too vague and indefinite” concerning the restriction of the United Artists release of Louis Malle’s *Viva Maria!* (1965) starring Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau. Crucially, the ruling found that a *better conceived* government-derived classification plan would not, in concept, be unconstitutional. The ruling therefore affirmed the right of states to restrict minors from material that could not be censored for adults.⁶⁵ Both *Ginsberg* and *Interstate Circuit* indicated the continued legal role of the government in intervening in the selling and showing of sexually explicit material to minors.

High-profile sexploitation increased public interest in and discussion about pornography, illustrating the growing audience for such films. In 1969, the ‘X’-rated *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967) played the typical coastal cities for sexploitation including Boston and Seattle, as well as cities not associated with a hearty sexploitation audience: Buffalo, Denver, Detroit, Houston, and Minneapolis.⁶⁶ *I Am Curious (Yellow)* grossed in the top 10 of all releases during the summer of 1969 and drew much public discussion and attention to the controversial film form.⁶⁷ In 1967, the federal government announced the President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1967 by an act of Congress under President Lyndon B. Johnson. (The study’s findings were published in 1970 during President Richard Nixon’s administration). The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography was formed with the goals of “evaluating and recommending definitions of obscenity and pornography, determining the volume of pornography produced and how it was distributed” and studying the effects of pornography on viewers.⁶⁸ The committee’s appointees, which included lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, clergy, movie executives, and public officials, conducted primary research with moviegoers, book sellers, theater operators,

and with sexploitation producers. Gorfinkel writes, “In a broad sense, the commission represented a full-fledged institutional apparatus for ascertaining the social attitudes and behaviors of a widening swatch of the American population as it pertained to their consumption of sexually explicit products.”⁶⁹ The *Report* confirmed the growing popularity of sexually explicit consumer products, noting that “flashes” of “partial female nudity” was common even among general release films by 1967 and 1968.⁷⁰ It also showed a desire, even among sexploitation producers, for a clearer definition of obscenity. Sexploiteer David Friedman explained:

If, therefore we cannot let pornography run its own course in the United States, let someone in the Federal Government define exactly what is, and what isn't, and make the definition a standard for every village, hamlet, town, city, country, and state. With such a standard definition, those of us in the business of producing adult communications will, at all times, know that which we are doing is legal.⁷¹

Published in 1970, the final report found that exposure to pornography and sexually explicit material did not cause sex crimes. Indeed, the *Report* argued for total decriminalization for adults: that all laws restricting adults' access to erotic materials should be repealed; that the media should create films for different tastes including erotic films; and that products should be clearly labeled to help people select what they want.⁷² This was not the route that the Supreme Court ultimately took, of course, but the Commission revealed public scrutiny of sexually-oriented media and prompted the MPAA to take more structural action to update the Code while fulfilling its original aims of staving off censorship.

The MPAA Classification System Begins

Hollywood faced a growing industry of sexploitation in which they had no financial stake. At the same time, national interest in such fare increased worries about government censorship. The MPAA classification system, introduced in the fall of 1968, appeared to address both of these issues—to enable studios to capitalize on changing tastes and to improve public perception over the industry’s ability to keep minors away from inappropriate material.

The President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography and *Interstate Circuit, Inc. v. City of Dallas* seemed to be the last two straws to galvanize support for an industry-wide classification system, which had been in discussion for some time.⁷³ *Variety* explained that *Interstate Circuit, Inc. v. City of Dallas* put “fear in filmdom that local and state legislatures would move into [the] area unless the industry come up with its own scheme.”⁷⁴ *The Independent Film Journal* similarly explained the impact of recent legal events:

The plan [for a ratings system] began to take shape last January, after MPAA counsel Louis Nizer had argued successfully against the Dallas film classification ordinance before the U.S. Supreme Court. Although the Dallas law was overruled because of its “vagueness,” the Court also recognized a new concept of “variable obscenity,” by which children may be legally protected from exposure to allegedly obscene materials. The voluntary rating program is an attempt to operate within these general guidelines, hopefully as a shield against censorship and pressure groups as well as a public service to parents and a form of protection for children.⁷⁵

MPAA President Jack Valenti officially announced the MPAA ratings system in a press conference in New York City on Friday, October 7, 1968.⁷⁶ Indicating that Code changes were many years in the making, Valenti called it “the announcement of the most announced plan in motion picture history.”⁷⁷ *Boxoffice* called this “voluntary national ratings system” a “first in the

history of the American motion picture industry.”⁷⁸ Louis Nizer, MPAA general counsel, Julian S. Rifkin, president of NATO, and Munio Podhorzer of the IFIDA were also present at the press conference as well.⁷⁹ Valenti framed the classification system first and foremost as an initiative designed to protect children and, secondarily, an effort to avoid censorship by the federal government.⁸⁰ Podhorzer added that it was a matter of the industry being “confronted with a choice of legislation or education.”⁸¹ Valenti also pitched the system to producers as a structure that would enable artistic expression; however the threat of censorship was a primary motivation for the system.⁸²

Rather than acknowledging the Code’s ineffectiveness, Valenti explained that the ratings system was an improvement on the Code. He announced that the new Motion Picture Code and Rating Administration would be run “in conjunction with the present Production Code Administration under Shurlock.”⁸³ Films that were submitted to the MPAA would also receive a “seal,” as they did under the code. Only ‘X’-rated films, assigned by CARA (Classification & Ratings Administration) or through self-applying, would not be given a seal.⁸⁴ A rating of ‘X’ was tantamount to a rejection of a seal.⁸⁵ Films would be assigned one of four codes differentiated by age group. ‘G’ was for general audiences with no restrictions. ‘M,’ which stood for “adults and mature young people,” indicated that “because of their theme, content and treatment, might require more mature judgment by viewers, and about which parents should exercise their discretion.”⁸⁶ ‘R’ was restricted for viewers under 16 unless accompanied with a guardian. ‘X’ was given “because of treatment of sex, violence, crime or profanity.”⁸⁷ Filmmakers could also take on a “non-rating,” which amounted to a self-applied ‘X’ rating.⁸⁸ The MPAA would consider all unrated films as ‘X’-rated; moreover, independents were free to self-apply the ‘X’ rating, the only rating the MPAA did not copyright.⁸⁹ By failing to extend

copyright to the 'X,' the MPAA appeared to envision 'X' as a non-MPAA-approved rating, implying that members were not likely to receive an 'X.'

Though introduced as a 'voluntary' classification system, MPAA members were required to submit their films to CARA for ratings. In 1968, the MPAA consisted of Allied Artists, Avco-Embassy, Columbia, MGM, Paramount, Fox, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros.⁹⁰ (However, this did not close the loophole of using a non-MPAA subsidiary for distribution, as was used for *Blow-up*.) Having secured the cooperation of NATO theaters, the MPAA anticipated the cooperation of 80–85% of exhibitors or 95% of box office.⁹¹ Echoing the enforced cooperation of studio-affiliated theaters in the studio era, exhibitors of NATO agreed to: 1) play only films with a rating; 2) show only trailers suitable for audiences viewing the trailer; and 3) publicize ratings at the box office and through advertisements, trailers, and display materials.⁹² In the case of double bills, the most severe rating would be enforced.⁹³ Independents were not required to submit films to CARA; Valenti said he hoped independents would self-apply the 'X' rating if they did not submit.⁹⁴ However, in its coverage of the ratings system, *The Independent Film Journal* noted that submitting would cost independents a fee calculated with reference to a film's negative cost and eventual gross.⁹⁵ If they chose to submit, independents were also required to provide CARA with all promotional materials including trailers.⁹⁶ These were financial barriers that dis-incentivized independents, particularly producing sexploitation, to skirt the ratings system.

The ratings system was in some respects a containment measure, an effort to recapture audiences Hollywood was losing to films like *I Am Curious Yellow*. It was also a public relations move designed to reassert the MPAA's relevance as an institution to the industry itself, aimed at new Hollywood filmmakers constrained by distribution through the MPAA member companies.

As Hollywood appropriated target selling, the ratings system was also the foundation for the symbiotic dynamic between the majors and independents. The system had major implications on how Hollywood conceived of its audience and, in turn, shifted its relationship to exploitation cinema. The ratings system allowed for product differentiation by segmenting audiences. Obviously, product differentiation had existed through genre and the star system, but the ratings system formalized producers' selling of films to an audience segment aligned with an age bracket. This marked a major shift in Hollywood's relationship to its audience, as Hollywood had historically projected an image of itself as making films for all audiences. It was the independents, like AIP and Allied Artists, and small studios like Columbia, that had targeted young viewers with films like the Beach Party films. Similarly, sexploitation was geared to adult male viewers. The ratings system brought Hollywood into the business of target selling and target marketing to audience segments. If independents had benefited from a willingness to embrace controversial or adult subject matter, the ratings system amounted to a rebranding of Hollywood designed to absorb some level of adult content into the aegis of the establishment.

Symbiosis in Action: The Plight of the 'X'

Just how far filmmakers could go in terms of adult language, representations of violence, and depictions of sexuality remained to be seen. Valenti anticipated disagreement over the 'X' rating in advance of the system's implementation.⁹⁷ Valenti reported in the October 1968 press conference that CARA had conducted a practice run of reviews. Attempting to set expectations with producer-distributors, Valenti predicted that violent westerns might get either an 'R' or an 'X,' while a French drama like *A Man and a Woman* (1966) would get an 'R' because the "erotic scenes" were "done with dignity and artistry."⁹⁸

Valenti, however, failed to provide any criteria for the judgment of an ‘X’ and ‘R’ film. As a result, the ‘X’ rating became a source of considerable confusion for distributors and exhibitors alike. Warner Bros.-Seven Arts’ *The Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968) starring Marianne Faithful and Alain Delon was the first film to receive an ‘X’ rating after submission.⁹⁹ The film was re-cut, re-rated ‘R’, and released under a new title: *Naked Under Leather*.¹⁰⁰ By the end of 1968, with the rating system in effect for two months, six voluntarily submitted films were refused a seal and given an ‘X’ rating: *The Killing of Sister George*, *Birds in Peru* (1968), *The Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968), *Sin With a Stranger* (1968), *Greetings* (1968), and *The Miracle of Love* (1968).¹⁰¹ Thus the ‘X’ rating of MPAA-member films, like *The Girl on a Motorcycle* raised question of the purpose of the ‘X.’ Was it intended to create a market for adult dramas or to reinforce a stigma or market signal around sexploitation as an illegitimate film? The debates over the ‘X’ rating produced a struggle over the cultural status of sexually explicit representation.

Rather than submit their films and marketing materials to the MPAA, exploitation producers were among the first to voluntarily give the ‘X’ to their films. *Variety* reported Russ Meyer immediately applied ‘X’ to *Vixen!* (1968), in release at the time of the ratings system’s announcement.¹⁰² Cinemation Industries also self-applied the ‘X’ when releasing Joseph Sarno’s *Inga* (1968).¹⁰³ By spring 1969, AIP’s sexploitation-focused subsidiary Trans American Films self-applied the ‘X’ to *Succubus* (1969) in preparation for release in the New York market.¹⁰⁴ *Variety* explained that independents aiming for the sexploitation audience saw submitting to the MPAA as “a waste of time and money.” Such companies already knew they were serving an over-16 market; submitting to the MPAA further required providing advertising materials including trailers, which no sexploitation distributor would want to edit. *Variety* wrote that

trailers were “so essential to many sexplicity features.”¹⁰⁵ In addition to requiring a fee, submitting to the MPAA might also force distributors to tame their advertisements, which would only hurt revenue potential in the intended market. Furthermore, a sexploitation distributor could endure the entire process only to receive an MPAA-sanctioned ‘X,’ which they could have self-applied without the additional costs in the first instance.

Exploitation independents’ pragmatic decision to self-apply the ‘X’ contributed to the almost immediate association between the ‘X’ and sexploitation within the industry. After the ratings system had been in operation for four months, *Variety* commented on the growing link between ‘X’ and dirty films, which had producers-distributors balking at such a rating. Byron Stuart of *Variety* summarized the situation:

Somehow, whether intentionally or not, the launching of the X rating in the U.S. has produced an atmosphere in which pix so tagged are considered “dirty.” The ultimate tragedy may lie in fact that the classification system, by providing a method of keeping the kids out, was supposed to make it easier to produce truly adult-themed pix. Is it making it harder?¹⁰⁶

This appeared to be a genuinely unintended consequence of the ratings system. The industry had initially feared viewers might be so drawn to the ‘X’ rating that it would lead distributors to luridly advertise for ‘X’ films, since children would not be admitted. *Variety* reported that these fears had not been realized: “Few were the industryites only four months ago who thought that the opposite problem would develop—a rush to avoid the X tag with the result that a good film which accepts the rating is branded by some elements as a “soiled” item.”¹⁰⁷ Director Robert Aldrich was among the first to raise this issue after his film *The Killing of Sister George* was given an ‘X’ rating. In a letter to the executive, Aldrich accused Valenti of promoting the idea of

‘X’ as “a dirty picture not fit for viewing by anyone” by refusing to take any action against CARA’s ‘X’ rating of *The Killing of Sister George*.¹⁰⁸ The shunning of the ‘X’ rating within the industry was resulting in a feedback loop whereby non-sexploitation films were edited and re-submitted for the ‘R’ rating to avoid that negative association.

By 1970, ‘X’ had become a market signal for sexploitation. This had several consequences for the Hollywood studios and the exploitation independents. Filmmakers like Aldrich argued that the ratings system had failed to achieve one of its main purposes—fostering the production and release of mature and respectable adult dramas by MPAA members. In 1970, the MPAA ultimately responded by raising the threshold of what constituted an ‘X’ film and by reducing the confusion associated with the ‘M’ for “mature” rating, which was replaced by ‘GP’.¹⁰⁹ *Midnight Cowboy*, an ‘X’-rated film that had won Best Picture, was not heralded as a triumph of the rating system or promoted to recuperate the legitimacy of the ‘X’ rating. Instead, the MPAA appeared to relent to this market signal. The organization tightened the definition of what constituted an ‘X’ rating and re-rated *Midnight Cowboy* ‘R’.

Independents began to see CARA as using the ‘X’ rating to marginalize independent production and exploitation. Independent firms complained that the MPAA judged them by a harsher standard and gave restrictive ratings disproportionately to their films.¹¹⁰ In February 1970, *The Independent Film Journal*, which had been voicing the concerns of independent producers, distributors, and exhibitors throughout the rollout of the classification system, published an op-ed titled “Stigmatized ‘X.’” The editorial board argued that ‘X’-rated films, the majority of which were released by independents, were being unfairly protested, boycotted, and targeted by local authorities for obscenity raids.¹¹¹ The trade journal argued that such controversy was only drawing more public interest in sexploitation and pornography. The editors called on

Hollywood to “fight to establish that ‘X’ is not to be equated with obscenity, which varies according to the eye of the beholder.”¹¹² In an official response, the MPAA’s resident psychologist Dr. Aaron Stern defended the ‘X’ rating by repeating the refrain that the ‘X’ rating was not a rating based on quality but based on appropriateness for children and that the market would naturally respond to high-quality films regardless of rating.¹¹³ Whether intended or not, it was quite clear, however, that ‘X’ had become a compelling market signal for pornography and exploitation, and that any distributor who cared not to attract the kind of public and legal attention associated with pornography should do their best to get an ‘R’ rating.

In the early 1970s, the MPAA did little to combat this association, particularly when an independent film was involved. However, on a few rare occasions, they defended the ‘X’ when their reputation was at stake. Newspapers refused to print advertisements for the ‘X’-rated *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), distributed by Warner Bros.¹¹⁴ Valenti mounted a defense of Kubrick’s film that, ironically, reversed his earlier statements about the ‘X’: Valenti claimed, “[B]y its edict flings this film [*A Clockwork Orange*] into the same category with the rawest and cheapest pornographic film. The ratings system never intended this to be the result of its work.”¹¹⁵ Despite the failure of the ‘X’ rating to accommodate adult dramas, Stern and the MPAA counted the ratings system a success. They were resolute that “the MPAA code saved the film industry from revived local and state censorships of the kind common between 1915 and 1952.”¹¹⁶

In sum, the ‘X’ rating produced a struggle over the cultural status of sexually explicit representation beginning in 1968. The ‘X’ rating became a kind of wedge between the majors and independents. It spoke to independents’ ingenuity in self-applying the ‘X’ rating, but the ‘X’ was also leveraged by CARA to delegitimize independent films. The thorniness of the issue, I

argue, is a result of the new relationship that the majors and exploitation independents found themselves in. The two sectors of the industry were vying for the same viewers but with very different ‘brands’ or projected images. The ‘X’ rating became one site of tension between the majors and exploitation independents that pointed to Hollywood’s ambivalence toward sexually-oriented media and independents’ inroads in that arena. The introduction of the MPAA ratings system and confusion over the designation of the ‘X’ rating revealed the majors and independents as competitors for the lucrative youth audience. While the market signal for the ‘X’ rating repelled the major studios for the most part, it provided a form of product differentiation leveraged by independent distributors as we will explore later in this chapter.

The above describes the state of regulation for exploitation filmmakers at the time that this study begins. During the 1970s, national obscenity standards were revised once more in *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973). *Miller v. California* returned standards for adjudicating obscenity to the community and state levels. To be judged obscene, a work also had to lack as a whole “*serious* literary, artistic, political, or scientific value,” which made sexually explicit fare easier to prosecute, placing more burden on the accused.¹¹⁷ The Supreme Court decision reflected a new conservatism in the courts as a result of President Richard Nixon’s appointment of Justice Warren E. Burger. The Supreme Court no longer intervened in the application of obscenity criteria as it did in the 1960s. Instead, debates around obscenity focused on hard-core pornography and restrictions on the local level “through zoning ordinances and other regional forms of regulation.”¹¹⁸ While *Miller v. California* produced a chilling effect among some producers, the rise of ‘porno chic’ and the prominence of ‘R’, soft-‘X’, and hard-core pornography had resulted in a degree of social acceptance of sexually-explicit material that could not be undone.

In 1968, however, the rise of sexploitation was just beginning. The next section examines the impact of a liberal court and new ratings system on independents' production of sexploitation.

Section II: Sherpix's *The Stewardesses* (1969) and Sexploitation's Migration to the Mainstream

In the US, sex cinema largely developed outside of Hollywood. During the 1960s, domestic producers and distributors of European films contributed to the growth of sexploitation in theaters across the country. Major domestic figures included Russ Meyer, Doris Wishman, and Radley Metzger. Metzger's Audubon Films was an important importer of European films.¹¹⁹ Several developments, as mentioned above, during the late 1960s brought greater national attention to sex cinema. Kevin Heffernan writes that *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967)'s release in the US by Grove Press captured national attention by resonating with various types of commercial films—general release, art cinema and exploitation film—at a time when national interest in regulation and censorship was high and when the film presented levels of explicitness to which critics and the public were unaccustomed.¹²⁰ As stated earlier, the *Report* recommended “federal, state and local legislation prohibiting the sale, exhibition or distribution of sexual materials to consenting adults should be repealed.”¹²¹ Thus, the success of independent sexploitation and the government's attention to pornography all showed broader cultural interest in sex cinema in the 1960s.

The updating of the Production Code and eventual development of the MPAA ratings system showed Hollywood trailing behind the independents, European producers, and specialty exhibitors when it came to frank and adult subject matter. The 'X' rating, which the MPAA

attempted to use to separate mainstream films made in good taste from the bad, did little to slow independents' growing influence as they pushed the norms with sex cinema. As noted above, exploiters could continue to self-apply the 'X' rating (the MPAA did not copyright the 'X') and release films to theaters unaffiliated with NATO or receive an MPAA-sanctioned 'X' rating and play films in NATO theaters.¹²² The 3D soft-core *The Stewardesses*, distributed by independent company Sherpix, was one such film that helped bring sex films to mainstream prominence: to a broader range of theaters, to multiple playdates, and to cities across the country. One of the best performing films of the recession era, *The Stewardesses* showed that, with sexploitation, independents could wrest some market share from the majors via product differentiation that took the form of taboo subjects.

The Stewardesses was a feature-length 3D soft-core film financed and released by Sherpix, Louis Sher's distribution company, and produced, written, and directed by Allan Silliphant. *The Stewardesses* began as a series of 16mm soft-core loops directed by Silliphant and shot in Magnavision 3D.¹²³ Two 16mm-sized images were presented side-by-side on one 35mm film strip with a magnetic soundtrack.¹²⁴ The 3D technology required glasses but only one print and one projector, avoiding synchronization problems.¹²⁵ Sherpix also provided viewers with aviator-type glasses.¹²⁶ Theaters rented and installed a special lens and a silver metallic screen.¹²⁷ According to Silliphant and producer Chris Condon, the initial footage was shot in nine days in Burbank, CA, afterhours.¹²⁸

Sher of Art Theatre Guild and Sherpix financed and released the initial cut of the film. Sher was already a prominent show businessman. Sher formed a chain of art cinema theaters, the Art Theatre Guild, in September 1954 when he opened the Bexley Art Theatre in Columbus, Ohio.¹²⁹ By 1972, Art Theater Guild was comprised of 43 theaters and was worth \$6 million.¹³⁰

In fact, Sher's Art Theater Guild chain of theaters became the largest national chain serving the art market.¹³¹ Barbara Wilinsky has shown how Sher's theaters set the standard for creating an 'adult,' sophisticated experience at these art house theaters.¹³² Sher had also started his own distribution company Sherpix, formed to supply his theaters with the racier fare that performed well in the theaters.¹³³ In its early days, Sherpix acquired foreign films, sexploitation films, and soft-core releases for distribution.¹³⁴ *The Independent Film Journal* wrote that Sherpix's philosophy grew out of Art Theatre Guild's "policy to showcase what Sher thought people wanted to see and couldn't (suitable foreign films in those days and adult films in recent days.)"¹³⁵ However, it was Sherpix's release of Warhol films that put the company on the map.¹³⁶ Sherpix released *Flesh* (1968) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) and the Danish *Without a Stitch* (*Uten en trad*, 1968). After runs in New York City, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and Chicago, *Without a Stitch* had rentals over \$1 million by the end of 1970.¹³⁷ Gorfinkel posits that *Without a Stitch* marked a shift between soft-core films to films that "push[ed] the boundaries of depicting the actual sex act."¹³⁸ Addison Verrill at *Variety* wrote that *Without a Stitch* "clear[ed] the way for Alex de Renzy's landmark 'Censorship in Denmark' which brought hardcore stag material into 'respectable' film houses."¹³⁹ Sher's business partner Saul Shiffrin explained Sherpix's focus on sexploitation and soft-core as a strategy of product differentiation: "We want films that mature audiences want to see and can't see somewhere else. You just don't go out and do another 'something.' I'd love to have all the money that's going to be lost by making another 'Love Story.'"¹⁴⁰ Shiffrin characterized Sherpix not so much as a competitor with the majors but as a company capitalizing on the studios' missteps and miscalculations.

In 1969, *The Stewardesses* began playing in only two theaters: San Francisco's Center Theatre and Los Angeles' Cinema Theatre in Hollywood, operated by Sher's Art Theatre

Guild.¹⁴¹ By October 1969, *Boxoffice* reported that the film was showing in 3D at \$5 a ticket for five weeks.¹⁴² By the end of 1969, the film had grossed \$256,000 in San Francisco and Los Angeles. By March of 1970, *Variety* reported *The Stewardesses* had grossed \$400,000 after running for eight months at The Center and seven months at the Cinema.¹⁴³ Sherpix began to develop another cut of the film intended for wider release; by December 1969, Shiffrin said the film was being “improved” with “better 3-D effects and a tighter story” in preparation for national commercial release.¹⁴⁴ *Variety* reported the producers raised costs by \$100,000, shot new sequences, and added scenes iteratively to the film. According to *Variety*, filmgoers would return to see the film, hearing that new scenes had been added or changed. *Variety* described this process as “something akin to producers charging admission to the public to see their rushes.”¹⁴⁵ Silliphant said in *The Stewardesses* DVD feature that they added a secondary story to be defensible under *Roth v. United States* (1957), the landmark obscenity ruling examined in Chapter One, so that it was the “strongest single theme in the movie.”¹⁴⁶ This new version also required a shift in technology. An anamorphic lens was used to optically squeeze the images, leaving room for a soundtrack. The anamorphic lens was then used in projection to un-squeeze the image. Silliphant and Condon recalled that they would go to individual theaters and install the lens and screen and ensure all was working correctly.

Emphasizing the film’s 3D technology, Silliphant and Condon marketed the film with the goal of appealing to a broader audience. Preparing for the wide release of *The Stewardesses*, Sherpix developed marketing materials that portrayed the film as a classy and unique 3D film and downplayed sleazy associations with sexploitation. Silliphant and Condon said they would go to a theater and place a “Stereovision 3D” sign on the marquee.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, the trailer featured “3D” in the opening shot. Silliphant also describes the steps taken to draw in a youth

audience through a ‘class’ approach to marketing. Sherpix used the United Airlines typeface and added credits to give the ads the credibility of Hollywood’s. The black and white line drawings of the campaign were intended to present a sophisticated image to the film as well. At the same time, the radio ads played up the ‘X’ rating to emphasize the titillation the film promised. The ad ends with a woman’s voice saying seductively, “This picture has been rated ‘X’, very very ‘X’.”¹⁴⁸ Promotion of *The Stewardesses* attempted to simultaneously target the typical exploitation audience of male viewers as well as young viewers or those intrigued by the 3D gimmick.

Overall, reviews noted that the sexual elements in the film were quite mild, aligning with the producers’ goal of reaching a broader audience. *Variety* predicted a “broad range of bookings” since the film was “relatively tame” and “exploited with an eye for the youth market...plus the usual skin trade.”¹⁴⁹ *The Independent Film Journal* referred to the film as a “tame sexploitationer” that was “mild compared to the current movie scene.”¹⁵⁰ In addition to being ‘tame,’ *The Stewardesses* was seen as quite formulaic in some respects: *The Independent Film Journal* wrote it showed the “typical cross-section of stereotypes [sic] one finds in sexploitation movies.”¹⁵¹ Despite these disappointing elements, reviews noted that the 3D gimmick could differentiate the film in the marketplace and attract audiences nonetheless. *The Independent Film Journal* noted that the 3D “sex in depth” was “a very exploitable gimmick” for “its intended market,” presumably the sexploitation market.¹⁵² Reviewing *The Stewardesses* for *Variety*, Verrill called the film “substandard” but noted the “depth gimmick” could draw interest.¹⁵³ *The New York Times* and *The Post* reviewed the film unfavorably.¹⁵⁴

The film itself was inexplicit and quite tame by today’s standards as well as the standards of 1970, as the reviews indicated. Sexploitation elements were simulated, and compared with a

film like *Vixen*, much less frequent. In one scene, four naked female roommates are sitting down meditating. They are shown in a wider shot with genitals exposed, but no one is engaged in sexual behavior. Another scene shows a woman in a shower with full frontal nudity, and another shows her masturbating with a lamp. In another masturbation scene, a woman's pubic hair is visible in a medium shot. Wider frontal shots of genitals and some explicit sexual scenarios also push *The Stewardesses* toward soft-core 'X' territory. *The Stewardesses* also has 3D gimmicks when elements move forward and backward along the camera's axis. A few of these moments also coincide with the sexual spectacle in the film. In one such instance, a woman is shown playing billiards and shot only from the waist down, so that the camera presents a view under her skirt. This set-up is edited with shots of the pool playing; the billiards coming toward the camera create a noticeable 3D effect. In one scene, there is a close-up of a woman's feet as she has sex with a man. No nudity is depicted, but we hear her say, "I'm coming," and her feet, shot in 3D, move toward the camera. In another scene, two women are naked and kissing in a bed. The bedposts are in the foreground as a 3D element. *The Stewardesses* integrated the 3D gimmick with the soft-core moments of sexual spectacle and nudity.

The 'work in progress' status of *The Stewardesses*' production is also evident in its construction. There is an 'A' plot about a stewardess, played by Christina Hart, and her love affair with an ad agency man. The film's action comes to a climax when she jumps out of an apartment window after he spurns her. Aside from this linear storyline, the other scenes feel like one-off ideas with only the slightest imposed narrative arc. In the middle of the film, there are episodic sex scenes: an interior scene, two club/party scenes, a sequence shot at a fairground, and scenes of Christina and her lover. The scenes are fragmented and disconnected from one another—it is not difficult to imagine that footage was shot at different times.

In 1970, Sherpix released this 3D 93-minute cut, the first version to be shown on a national basis and the first to be submitted to the MPAA, who gave it an ‘X’ rating in September 1970.¹⁵⁵ This wide release version of *The Stewardesses* was booked beyond the typical exploitation circuit. In the fall of 1970, *The Stewardesses* played Sher’s hardtop theaters: The Bluebird and Vogue in Denver; the Heights Art and Westwood Art in Cleveland.¹⁵⁶ The film also played at The Town in Washington D.C.¹⁵⁷ On September 15, *The Stewardesses* had a 10-theater break in Los Angeles.¹⁵⁸ In 1970, the film played in Manhattan at the exploitation theaters World and Lido East for several weeks.¹⁵⁹ The Lido East had recently shown the Sherpix-released *Censorship in Denmark* (1970), which was undergoing obscenity hearing in the New York Criminal Court.¹⁶⁰ However, *The Stewardesses* fared poorly at the New York City exploitation houses because it was seen as too tame for that crowd.¹⁶¹ So, Sherpix pulled *The Stewardesses* from New York, and moved the film to general release houses rather than exploitation theaters. Sher also assembled a promotional package of billboards, print, television, and radio ads.¹⁶² Perhaps signaling a desire to appeal to ‘hip’ youth sensibilities, the new one sheet read: “A Riot! Something to See! Ultra High Camp!”¹⁶³[Figure 1]. Verrill wrote,

Since the New York disappointment, Sherpix has avoided the usual sex bookings, going instead into class downtown houses where its [sic] been drawing young crowds, usually in couples. Observers of recent trends point out that the sexual content of the film is really quite tame.¹⁶⁴

The Stewardesses was seen as too tame for the exploitation houses in 1971, a time when hard-core features and shorts were available theatrically. *The Stewardesses*’ success in general release hardtop theaters suggested that Sherpix’s strategy of broadening exploitation’s audience was successful.

For the rest of 1971, *The Stewardesses* continued to play in a range of cities—primarily metropolitan areas. The film took in \$95,000 in Chicago in a 10-day period.¹⁶⁵ In Buffalo, the film played the Penthouse.¹⁶⁶ Sher stated that the film would move to 88 situations by the end of April, followed by a run in “showcase” theaters in June 1971.¹⁶⁷ By April 12, 1971, the film grossed \$4 million in 41 situations (a per screen average of \$100,000).¹⁶⁸ In Detroit, it played four theaters through state rights distribution.¹⁶⁹ *The Stewardesses* was the top film in Minneapolis at the Orpheum, where it played for two weeks in May 1971.¹⁷⁰ In Portland, the film played the Laurelhurst for 14 weeks.¹⁷¹ By August 1971, *Variety* reported *The Stewardesses* grossed in excess of \$10 million in 225 domestic dates.” In September 1971, *The Stewardesses* returned to New York City again where it played in 17 “flagship showcase theatres” in New York including the midtown Rivoli, earning \$1 million.¹⁷² *Variety* wrote that in New York City, the film was now playing “‘class’ houses were b.o. was mighty.”¹⁷³ After New York, the film went to a “19-house Chicago multiple” on October 1.¹⁷⁴ It also played in Ben Sack’s Boston Music Hall in a special 70mm version. By November 1971, *The Stewardesses* moved from the Rivoli to the Walter Reade’s Astor Theatre in New York as a part of a 16 theater “UA showcase.”¹⁷⁵ *The Stewardesses* started out as a film for sexploitation houses but found a wider audience in general release theaters. Moreover, *The Stewardesses’* run aligns with the findings of Chapter One, which suggest a strong market for sexploitation among the urban and metropolitan key cities.

Though seen as tame by trade journals and by the sexploitation audiences frequenting New York City grindhouses, *The Stewardesses* encountered legal difficulty in the southeastern United States. The Midtown Cinema in Nashville got a court injunction against *The Stewardesses*, but this was dissolved when the judge saw that no similar precedent had been set

in Memphis, where the film grossed \$100,000 at the Memphis Studio over 20 weeks.¹⁷⁶ In Shreveport, Louisiana, the district attorney upheld an injunction against *The Stewardesses* for being “not only hard core pornography, but...obscene to an extreme degree.”¹⁷⁷ In bigger cities in Ohio, *The Stewardesses* ran for 20 weeks, but in Canton, Ohio, a court injunction was issued against Reinco Theatres and Irving Reinhart, manager of the Plaza.¹⁷⁸ *The Stewardesses*’ run outside of the sexploitation-friendly metropolitan areas of New York, Boston, and Minneapolis highlighted that bringing ‘X’-rated sexploitation to a national general audience carried some risk.

Thus, Sherpix developed an even tamer version of *The Stewardesses* for a youth and/or suburban and small-town audience at drive-ins. In the late summer of 1972, Sherpix released a ‘flat,’ or 2D, version that was ‘R’-rated. Shiffrin said the flat version alone would amount to 3,000 additional bookings for the company at drive-ins which had been unable to play the 3D version due to “inadequate projection lighting.”¹⁷⁹ This new version was also ‘R’-rated. During the early 1970s, many cities and states at the time were developing ordinances that restricted ‘X’-rated films from playing in the open air, as Chapter Four will examine in greater detail.¹⁸⁰ *Variety* reported 17 minutes of edits were made.¹⁸¹ Shiffrin also claimed that these edits made *The Stewardesses* tame enough for sale to television, though I have found no evidence that *The Stewardesses* aired on television.¹⁸² Yet, Shiffrin’s envisioning of sexploitation for television broadcast anticipated the rise of ‘jiggle TV’ by the mid-1970s. That Shiffrin contended *The Stewardesses* could be made appropriate for FCC standards suggested the possibility of such appropriation. In order to resubmit the film to the MPAA, Sherpix pulled the film from distribution for 60 days and resubmitted it. The MPAA reissued an ‘R’ rating for the film in August of 1972.¹⁸³ Sherpix reportedly spent \$100,000 on creating the new print and ad campaign, with \$30,000 going to making flat prints.¹⁸⁴ Shiffrin predicted these additional dates

could translate into an additional \$3 million for the company.¹⁸⁵ Beginning in late September 1972, the company released the 'R'-rated version in a "50-theatre multiple in Michigan" and in several theaters in Texas in October.¹⁸⁶

The Stewardesses' 2D 'R'-rated version was part of Sherpix's company strategy to diversify their slate beyond soft-core or hard-core releases.¹⁸⁷ Some sources report *The Stewardesses* grossed a total of \$25 million across the various releases of the film. Sources also cite the film variably as the #6 or #14 highest performing film released in 1971.¹⁸⁸ However, court cases and legal woes quickly curbed the momentum that *The Stewardesses* gave Sherpix. By 1972, when the 'R' cut of *The Stewardesses* was in release, Sher was embattled in legal fights over *School Girl* (1971) and *Hot Circuit* (1971). With both films, Sher faced obscenity charges for distributing obscene material across state lines.¹⁸⁹ The *School Girl* battle with the Tennessee courts would not be finished until 1979, when *School Girl* was ruled obscene under *Miller v. California*.¹⁹⁰ Sherpix was fined \$10,000 for transporting obscene materials over state lines, and the Art Theatre Guild was fined \$5,000.¹⁹¹ In 1973, Sher was also tried for transporting obscene material, the film *Hot Circuit*, to the Trans-Lux Theatre in Washington D.C. in October and November of 1972.¹⁹² The first trial resulted in a hung jury. In the retrial, Sher was personally found guilty, fined \$6,000, and placed on probation for three years.¹⁹³ After incurring tens of thousands of dollars of court fees and fines, Sherpix ceased operations on March 1, 1974, a company that had developed a reputation as the "top national distribution outlet for 'class' hardcore theatrical features."¹⁹⁴

In short, Sherpix released an array of sexploitation from the soft-core *The Stewardesses* to the hard-core *Mona*, *School Girl*, and *Hot Circuit*. Sher's involvement with Sherpix and the Art Theater Guild facilitated the distribution of sexually explicit fare on a wide-scale national

basis for the first time. The box office success of *The Stewardesses* showed that this strategy came with significant reward, while the prosecution of Sher's films in the 1970s revealed the overwhelming risk when real legal fees, fines, and potential jail time were involved. With *The Stewardesses*, Sher, Condon, and Silliphant more successfully managed risk by dialing down sexual explicitness in an 'R'-rated release, important for distribution in the southeast or beyond major metropolitan areas. In so doing, Sherpix was an innovator in yet another area—the development of 'R'-rated sexploitation for release on a national scale as, at once, a form of differentiation from the Hollywood studios and a form of risk management. *The Stewardesses* showed a model of sexploitation production—adequately explicit to earn an 'X' rating but tame enough to play in mainstream theaters.

The Baggage of 'X': Independents Weigh Risk and Reward

As a national distributor of hard-core theatrical features, Sherpix was uniquely exposed to legal risk, but they were not the only ones in the industry feeling pressure to shift course away from explicit sex films. Verrill observed in 1971 that “Yankee distributors and class independents are shying away from explicit material and opting out of the sex competition” as theater chains and newspapers were increasingly rejecting anything 'X'-rated. Even local distributors or sub-distributors—i.e. those not even attempting a national release—had reason to avoid the 'X' rating because newspapers were an important outlet for promoting showings. Additionally, newspapers banned ads for 'X'-rated films. Copley Papers in Illinois and California, Pulliam Papers in Indiana and Arizona, and others papers in Nevada and Texas refused to carry ads for 'X' or 'R' films as of December 15, 1969.¹⁹⁵ The two dailies in Jacksonville, Florida, *Florida Times-Union* and *Jacksonville Journal*, banned ads for 'X' films

and unrated films; the editor wrote that he hoped “moviemakers will get the message that people want more wholesomeness.”¹⁹⁶ Major newspapers followed as well, including the *Boston Herald Traveler*, as of October 26, 1971.¹⁹⁷ In some markets, such a decision affected multiple media outlets. In Oklahoma City, The Oklahoma Publishing Co. refused ‘X’-rated ads in its two papers, television station, and radio station on October 1972.¹⁹⁸ By 1972, the major city newspapers that either banned ‘X’ film ads or limited the page space for ‘X’ ads included the *Detroit News*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Boston Herald-Traveler*, *Daily Oklahoman*, *Miami Herald*, *Miami News*, *San Diego Union*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.¹⁹⁹

Given legal pressure and limited ad space in some markets, independent producer-distributors were increasingly concerned over the liabilities associated with sex cinema. Indeed, Schaefer has surmised that “theaters unable to advertise X-rated or unrated films would have been forced to turn to mainstream products...in order to remain afloat.”²⁰⁰ Validating Schaefer’s conjecture, in 1972, Howell Raines, amusements editor at the *Atlanta Constitution*, published an article examining local producer-distributors’ shifting viewpoints toward sex films. Stewart Harnell, president of Harnell Independent Productions, estimated soft-‘X’ dropped by 1/4th, citing increased legal pressure. He said, “Many producers who have here-to-fore been making porno films—both hard and soft core—have found the market narrowing down because of legal pressures and politics and what have you.”²⁰¹ Gordon Craddock, an Atlanta Sherpax representative, suggested that recent crackdowns on ‘X’ films, seen in the New York City raids on exhibitors of *Deep Throat*, put distributors somewhere between a rock and a hard place; “We can’t go back to kids’ shows because we can’t compete with television,” Craddock explained.²⁰² Harnell, who had regional distribution rights of *Deep Throat*, explained: “We’re really intimidated; that’s what it amounts to.”²⁰³

The 'X' rating also limited a film's run in the culturally conservative southeast.²⁰⁴ *Deep Throat* wasn't shown in Atlanta or in other Southern cities.²⁰⁵ The distributors interviewed in the *Atlanta Constitution* said they circumvented Southern cities, described as "tight cities," "to avoid expensive and time-consuming litigation." Unclear obscenity standards and varying regional market demand made distribution risky. For instance, a military town like Fayetteville, North Carolina, had a sizeable audience for sexploitation, but nearby Southern markets were also quite litigious.²⁰⁶ A federal grand jury in New Orleans indicted distributors based in Atlanta for shipping porn across state lines into Louisiana.²⁰⁷ Whether a film might be prosecuted in a given market appeared quite unpredictable.

Some distributors were considering moving away from 'X' and toward 'R' sexploitation as a solution. Jack Vaughan of Jack Vaughan Productions explained that independents were "turning toward the general release material because it's much more profitable." Moreover, Vaughn added that 'R' films were now more 'adult' than they had been years earlier; according to Vaughn, "What you see now in an R would have gotten an X just a few years ago."²⁰⁸ Raines cited the success of 'R'-rated sexploitation like *The Big Doll House* (1971) and *Women in Cages* (1971) as further evidence of this phenomenon. Mack Grimes of Jaco Productions, an Atlanta distributor with exchanges in Dallas, Charlotte, and Jacksonville, observed the trend of "more sophisticated X-rated movies" but acknowledged there was no "shortage of 60 to 70-minute exploitation films," perhaps suggesting that, while 'X' films carried risk and reward, independents could still rely on commercial exploitation programmers.

Schaefer writes, "As much as any other factor, the ban on X advertising served to turn back the clock for the adult film business. Producers either worked to cut their films to a solid R-rating or pushed headlong into the increasingly ghettoized production of hard core."²⁰⁹ However,

Schaefer fails to acknowledge a third option: the strategic production of tame ‘R’-rated films expressly suited to the moment of legal uncertainty. According to economist Arthur De Vany’s more general characterization, “With uncertainty the odds are not known and are impossible to measure.”²¹⁰ The perception, as articulated above, of an uncertain legal environment led exploitation independents to develop MPAA-sanctioned ‘R’ releases that could capitalize on the growing market for sexploitation while avoiding the risks of prosecution altogether. Two companies—New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures—developed such ‘R’-rated sexploitation cycles that avoided the pitfalls of the ‘X’ while still offering mild titillation. Their sexploitation cycles arose to fill an audience demand as well as to capture a male youth market up for grabs as the major studios struggled amid the recession.

Section III: The ‘R’-Rated Youth Sexploitation Cycle, 1970–1974:

A Time of Opportunity for Independents

A form of risk avoidance, ‘R’-rated sexploitation proved one solution to the concerns articulated by independent distributors in the *Atlanta Constitution*. The ‘R’ rating showed that the film had been vetted by the MPAA and could be screened by NATO theaters. The distributor could reasonably expect to avoid legal difficulties, no matter the area of the country the film played in. As the following section will show, exploitation independents New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures developed a series of youth-targeted, ‘R’-rated sexploitation comedies, films that merged mild female nudity and non-explicit sexual scenarios with elements of hip youth culture. They leveraged the industry recession through a strategy of product differentiation to capitalize on the majors’ diminished market position at the turn of the decade.

New World Pictures' Nurse Sexploitation Cycle

The 'R'-rated sexploitation cycles—the nurse cycle and women-in-prison cycles—were foundational in New World Picture's early years, as they made up a significant proportion of yearly releases. All together, these two cycles accounted for 11 New World releases from 1970-1974.²¹¹ In 1970, Roger Corman formed New World Pictures with his brother Gene Corman and Larry Woolner, a Louisiana exhibitor and Dimension Pictures executive. By 1970, Corman had produced and directed at AIP and for major studios, making production deals in the 1960s with Columbia and United Artists. Corman had also directed *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*, two movies that propelled the youth culture genre film formula into prominence. By 1970, Corman was ready to start his own distribution company; in his autobiography, Corman says being denied the final cut of *Gas-s-s-s!* (1970) at AIP prompted the move.²¹² Corman recounted: "It was simply that I wanted to turn a profit and maintain greater control. Very few independents control their own distribution and turn out consistently commercial products. I wanted to be one of those who did."²¹³

Corman and Woolner envisioned New World as a small distributor of low-budget films aimed at the youth audience. In June of 1970, Woolner reported that negative costs for pick-ups would range from \$500,000–\$800,000 with a total expenditure of \$3 million in 1970 for five to six releases per year.²¹⁴ New World's films were geared primarily to drive-ins and subsequent-run hard top theaters, with modest print runs of 100–200 prints.²¹⁵ In the films themselves, Corman talked about the importance of a youth-focused formula that included action, titillation, and political resonance. Corman explained:

We discovered a youth-oriented market between fifteen and thirty years of age. Each film had an element that could be advertised or

‘exploited.’ Certainly action and sex sold. Also, the liberal or left-of-center political viewpoint was a third element worth ‘exploiting’ and it made me happy to put some social point of view in.²¹⁶

Corman’s description suggested the company was targeting a youth audience assumed to be male. Corman has said that the political angle of New World films helped attract young ambitious filmmakers to the company.²¹⁷ One such filmmaker, Jonathan Kaplan, who directed *Night Call Nurses* (1972), recounts how Corman prepared him with a formula for the film: “Roger expounded on the formula for me—nudity, action, violence, but not much violence. A humorous nurse plot, a kinky nurse plot, and a socially conscious nurse plot, which was usually the ethnic one.”²¹⁸ Joe Dante has described the formula as “four different girls with four different adventures all of which involve taking clothes off.”²¹⁹ As Kaplan and Dante’s comments indicate, sexploitation geared to young male viewers was a core element of New World’s company identity.

Corman believed in keeping their “action, violence, sex” content to an ‘R’ rating; he elsewhere described the nurse films as “contemporary dramas with a liberal left-wing viewpoint and some R-rated sex and humor.”²²⁰ While the company kept the sex elements primarily to above-the-waist nudity, Corman did hire several professionals with experience in selling and marketing sexploitation. Howard Mahler, who led the New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and New England areas, was a former vice president of Allied Artists and had imported Danish and West German soft-‘X’ films in 1969 under his own company.²²¹ Mahler also worked previously as a consultant with Grove Press, who released *I Am Curious Yellow* (1967) in the US. Frank Moreno, who became New World’s sales director, had ties with both Grove Press and Cambist Films, who released European sexploitation in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²²² Thus,

New World Pictures was staffed with professionals with experience in selling ‘X’-rated exploitation.

‘R’-rated exploitation formed a regular part of the company’s release slate through the mid-1970s. New World Pictures released one nurse film every summer from 1970–1974. These included *The Student Nurses* (1970), *Private Duty Nurses* (1971), *Night Call Nurses* (1972), *The Young Nurses* (1973), and *Candy Stripe Nurses* (1974). The films were not a series; they all starred different actresses and were directed by different filmmakers. Despite this, each film followed a common pattern of 1) a female multiple protagonist structure, 2) brief scenes of simulated sexual intercourse, and 3) countercultural and feminist themes. Aside from the multiple protagonist structure and parallel storylines, the various directors, including Stephanie Rothman and Jonathan Kaplan, often injected the films with youth culture elements. These included rock songs, fashion-influenced soft-focus cinematography, stock youth culture scenarios (e.g. music clubs, motorcycles, group therapy) and youth culture characters types (e.g. damaged Vietnam veterans, Black Panther members, and leftist revolutionaries).

Each nurse film featured moments of sexual titillation comprised of nudity outside of a sexual context and/or non-explicit simulated scenes of intercourse. The earlier nurse films—*The Student Nurses*, *Private Duty Nurses*—had one brief sex scene per nurse character for a total of around five brief scenes or series of shots of either simulated sex or nudity. The later films—*Night Call Nurses*, *The Young Nurses*, and *Candy Stripe Nurses*—had more frequent moments of titillation: around seven or eight brief scenes or shots of simulated sex, rape (in two instances), or nudity outside of a sexual situation, like a physical exam. The scenes were often between a nurse and her lover, sometimes a doctor or patient. They often took place in bed, on the beach, or in a shower. In *The Student Nurses*, the sex scene between hippie Priscilla (Barbara Leigh) and a

biker provides a useful example of how these moments of titillation unfolded. The scene takes place outside in a field as both characters trip on acid. Subjective shots further make this scene reminiscent of *Easy Rider*'s New Orleans graveyard sequence. In this scene both characters are completely naked; the camera lingers on their bodies from the waist up, focusing on Priscilla's breasts. While strategies varied slightly over the five films, the scenes were unsimulated; performers were generally unclothed; and the scenes included zoomed-in medium close-up shots of characters kissing, close-ups of breasts, medium shots of characters embracing, medium long shots of the couple laying on top of one of another, and medium long shots or long shots of the characters' backs and buttocks. *The Young Nurses* also features a medium long shot of a female character from the front that shows her pubic area, but this was avoided in the other films. In general, the naked performers were shot from the front and from the waist up, and from the back in a longer view.

Marketing materials put great emphasis on the scenes of mild titillation. Kaplan said that before shooting had even begun, Corman had a marketing strategy for the film:

He [Corman] showed me the poster for the other nurse pictures but the new one had our title and the copy: 'It's always harder at night for the Night Call Nurses.' Why don't numbskulls at the studios think like he did: Why make a movie if you don't have a campaign?²²³

Thus, even the titles of the films themselves were designed to be salacious. *Boxoffice* noted the successful selling elements of *The Student Nurses* in Minneapolis-St. Paul: "It's a provocative title and large newspaper ads played up the sexy side of the yarn."²²⁴ Advertising also employed verbal and visual sexual suggestion. Similar to *The Stewardesses*' radio ads, a radio spot for 1971's *Private Duty Nurses* included voice-over narration that employed broad suggestive

double entendres and medical-themed metaphors—“it goes straight up,” suggesting an erection, “behind the screens,” indicating female nudity, and “it’s what they do off duty that’s really private,” hinting at sexual intercourse. The trailers for the nurse cycle also promised more eroticism than the films delivered. Joe Dante, who worked for Corman and cut the trailer for *Candy Stripe Nurses*, described his approach to cutting trailers for New World:

One of the secrets to making trailers for New World is to fake the footage and juxtapose it in ways that made scenes look that they were about things they really weren’t. The other was to fill it with hyperbole and lots of stuff from the announcer.²²⁵

Indeed, Corman has said it was the company’s trailers that distinguished their films from other independents: “It’s a film’s number one selling tool. We spend a good deal of time preparing them. They’re longer than most, with multiple effects.”²²⁶

The one sheet for *The Student Nurses* also abided by Corman’s formula for the nurse film: to titillate and invoke countercultural elements, however superficially [Figure 2]. The poster for *The Student Nurses* depicts the four female protagonists without clothes on, though their forms were obscured by the staging and framing of the shot. These taglines characterize the women as modern, independent, and empowered. The woman with red hair says, “All you interns are alike—you all have one track minds”—both critiquing sexism in the profession and promising titillation. Another character’s inner monologue reads, “Love-ins bore me...all talk and no action”—an invocation and critique of counter-cultural sexual mores. The tagline next to a third character—“What I do with my body is my business”—registers vaguely with the politics of the sexual revolution. The voiceover in the theatrical trailer for 1973’s *The Young Nurses* likewise explicitly invokes the women’s movement: “Today’s women: liberated, beautiful and ready for action.” The typeface of the film also used the Venus woman sign.

It may be tempting to understand ‘women’s lib’ rhetoric as a genuine effort on the part of New World Pictures to broaden the audience for sexploitation to female viewers or even heterosexual couples. However, this would be a facile understanding of how marketing materials often functioned in the exploitation tradition. As a business in a capitalist system, New World Pictures’ primary concern was their profit margin. The use of progressive political rhetoric and discourse was above all financially motivated. This faux feminist marketing messaging appeared designed to target sexploitation’s core audience of young male viewers while, at the same time, granting some respectability to Corman and New World, who might otherwise be viewed as crassly pandering. This helped them avoid being lumped in with such ‘X’ producers at the time as Sherpix, Cambist, Boxoffice International Pictures, and Cinemation Industries. (Chapter One references the empirical studies that have provided some evidence of sexploitation’s predominantly male viewership.) A socially conscious guise might create a favorable market signal that would elevate New World’s status above that of the purveyors of soft-core or ‘X’-rated sexploitation. A comparison with the one sheet of the popular ‘X’-rated Cinemation Industries release *Fanny Hill* [Figure 4] shows visual similarities in the focus on the female form and double entendre in the text. *The Student Nurses*’ poster appealed to the same male fantasies of female sexual availability as did a film like *Fanny Hill*, while also invoking signifiers of women’s liberation to compensate for such appeals.

New World’s strategy was one that had precedent in the exploitation tradition of ‘white coater’ films. White coaters, mentioned briefly above, were sexploitation films that created an alibi of respectability in order to avoid prosecution under obscenity laws. David Lerner writes that white coaters “functioned as cinematic marriage manuals, educating the viewer on sexual positions and advocating progressive, pleasure-oriented sexual experience.”²²⁷ Heffernan writes

that the Swedish sex education documentary and white coater *Language of Love* (1969) was part of “a recognizable subgenre of ‘white coater’ adult films, which featured on-camera lectures on human sexuality by a ‘doctor’ and which were illustrated with scenes of explicit sex.”²²⁸

Similarly to white coaters, sex documentaries in the late 1960s used an educational premise as legal cover to avoid prosecution. Heffernan writes that the sex documentaries made about Denmark’s abolition of obscenity laws—*Pornography in Denmark: A New Approach* (1970), *Sexual Freedom in Denmark* (1970), and *Wide Open Copenhagen 70* (1970)—“contained sexual explicitness, including on-screen penetration and visible climax, previously unseen in publicly exhibited motion pictures.”²²⁹ White coaters used a sexual education premise, and sex documentaries employed an anthropological frame to provide legal cover in the form of socially redeeming value under *Roth*. Both New World Pictures’ and Crown International Pictures’ exploitation cycles employed a similar strategy of dissimulation with marketing that played to male fantasies under a more socially palatable guise of female empowerment.

While *The Stewardesses*’ 3D gimmick and strong earnings likely drew trade press to review the film, the nurse films were not reviewed in national newspapers and only occasionally in the trade press. Commenting on its success as a sexploitation film, *Variety* said *The Student Nurses* was “surprisingly strong without being crass” and a “good programmer.”²³⁰ Praising Rothman’s direction as “refreshingly straightforward” and lacking the “pastoral interlude claptrap considered chic,” *Variety* suggested that viewers outside of the sexploitation crowd would enjoy the film.²³¹ *Boxoffice* reviewed *Night Call Nurses* and noted the film’s “topicality” in the form of a female black revolutionary leader character, a clear reference to Angela Davis. (The review was published in August 1972, the month *Super Fly* was released and the summer AIP started its blaxploitation cycle.)²³² Davis figured more broadly in the youth culture. The

Rolling Stones wrote “Sweet Black Angel” from 1972’s *Exile on Main St.* about Davis. Despite a review here or there, the trade press’ handling of the nurse films revealed their cultural status: seen as run-of-the-mill drive-in fare or formulaic films for a niche market. Thus, New World’s ‘R’-rated sexploitation cycle was geared to a wider audience than was typical for ‘X’ exploitation, but the nurse films nonetheless registered within the industry as rather forgettable exploitation fare.

With the nurse cycle, New World brought sexploitation to the national exploitation market of drive-ins and hardtops through a typical exploitation distribution strategy: saturation booking by sub-distributors in the key cities. The sub-distributors were contracted by New World Pictures and not owned by Corman.²³³ By 1976, New World operated their own exchanges in the markets of Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Atlanta, and Kansas City only.²³⁴ Only 100–200 prints were struck for each film, presumably to lower costs; Corman estimated that prints cost \$1,000 to \$1,500, so this amounted to an outlay of \$100,000–\$200,000 for a print run, or about the same as the film’s negative cost.²³⁵ An analysis of trade press and newspaper listings shows that New World Pictures’ Nurse films opened in the summer but would often get the bulk of their playdates in the post-Labor Day and pre-Thanksgiving season, a low season for the majors. This regional saturation release in the fallow early fall period was typical for exploitation distribution prior to 1975. According to the AFI Catalog, *The Student Nurses* premiered in New Orleans on August 27, 1970. However, *Variety* printed their review on September 23, 1970, and the earliest appearance of the film in the *Variety* “Picture Grosses” pages was October 25, 1970, when, in Pittsburgh, *The Student Nurses* was slotted in to the Fulton Mini after the district attorney pulled Sherpix’s *Without a Stitch* from release.²³⁶ *The Student Nurses*’ run centered on Midwestern key cities, quite similar to the patterns found in the non-aligned and sexploitation

sample in Chapter One's distribution study. In Dayton, *The Student Nurses* played five drive-ins.²³⁷ In Seattle, *The Student Nurses* played the Blue Mouse Theatre.²³⁸ In Cleveland, the film played the Embassy.²³⁹ In Kansas City, *The Student Nurses* played an eight-theater showcase of six drive-ins and two indoor theaters.²⁴⁰ *The Student Nurses* played in November 1970 in Los Angeles in 19 theaters, bringing in \$161,000.²⁴¹ In Detroit, *The Student Nurses* played at the Adams and State Wayne theaters in what appeared to be a double bill with *All Neat in Black Stockings* (1969).²⁴² Second run in 1971, *The Student Nurses* played a double bill with *The Big Doll House* at the Monroe in Chicago.²⁴³ The above distribution data reveals the film played a mix of drive-ins and hardtops, a typical exploitation run in the early 1970s. With *The Student Nurses*, New World Pictures released an 'R'-rated sexploitation film in a typical exploitation fashion cross the country without prosecution or legal battles.

The subsequent films in the New World Pictures nurse series were booked in a greater proportion of drive-ins than the first film. Released in July 1971, *Private Duty Nurses* played a mix of drive-ins and downtown theaters. Likely due to its earlier seasonal release, *Private Duty Nurses* played in more drive-ins than did *The Student Nurses*. Drive-in dates included San Francisco at the Geneva Drive-In; in Kansas City at five theaters including three drive-ins; and in Dayton with *The Love Doctor* in three drive-ins.²⁴⁴ *Night Call Nurses* played in many drive-ins: four drive-ins in Kansas City; Chattanooga's Marbro Drive-In; Flint, Michigan's Westside Drive-In; and drive-ins in Kentucky, Ohio, and Michigan.²⁴⁵ Released in June 1973, *The Young Nurses* played primarily in September and October at drive-ins.²⁴⁶ Similarly, *Candy Stripe Nurses* was reviewed and given an 'R' by the MPAA in May 1974 and appeared in theaters in August, September, and October of 1974.²⁴⁷ *Candy Stripe Nurses* played in many drive-in situations: at the Metro Drive-In in Palmer, Massachusetts, and at the Lewiston Drive-In, Saco

Drive-In, and Winslow Drive-In in Maine.²⁴⁸ In Kansas City, the film played five drive-ins “triple billed with subruns.”²⁴⁹ The film played four drive-ins situations in Vermont.²⁵⁰ The ‘R’ rating enabled programming at drive-ins across the US. The nurse cycle’s frequent showings in drive-ins and in the Midwest further indicated sexploitation’s migration from the grindhouses of urban centers to the suburban and small-town exploitation market.

As a series, the nurse films supplied exhibitors with features that could be mixed and matched together in subsequent-run programs. Each new nurse release was also booked on double bills with the previously released films in the series. *Private Duty Nurses* was also booked with *The Student Nurses* in St. Louis at the Towne.²⁵¹ In Denver, *Candy Stripe Nurses* played the Thornton with *The Young Nurses*.²⁵² *The Young Nurses* played in New Haven at the Milford Drive-In with *Private Duty Nurses* and in San Antonio at the Majestic with *Private Duty Nurses*.²⁵³ Corman discussed the way in which New World’s films could be re-released as either the ‘A’ or ‘B’ film on a double bill:

[A] picture that had previously been top half will be brought back on the bottom half the second time around, as a second feature. A lot of our films do that. We’ll play *The Student Nurses* as a first feature, then we’ll come up with our sequel, *Private Duty Nurses*, and we’ll bring back *The Student Nurses* as a second feature with *Private Duty Nurses*.²⁵⁴

Corman’s description suggested that he was running New World in a manner modeled on the ‘B’ studios of the 1940s and 1950s, using distribution to guide, if not determine, production choices. A series of films, versus a sequel or films with narrative links, enabled a flexibility in distribution that provided New World with a greater number of booking options. Similar to how an exploitation horror film like *Halloween* (1978) could be ‘re-programmed’ on a yearly basis at

Halloween (discussed in Chapter Six), each nurse film could remain in distribution for years at a time, pairing with each year's new release at drive-ins. The films appeared to gross in the range of \$500,000 – \$1 million, profitable for New World Pictures but by no means nearing *The Stewardesses*' grosses, which rivaled the majors' earnings in the recession period.²⁵⁵ Instead of *The Stewardesses*' breakout success, New World Pictures' nurse cycle created a rather stable and easily-replicated formula that capitalized on the growing popularity of sex media in general: soft-core, hard-core, and tame sexploitation. The non-explicit, 'R'-rated formula was a form of risk avoidance at a time when uncertain legal outcomes could mean major financial losses.

The popularity of sexploitation was also revealed by my distribution study. The eight sexploitation films played frequently in key cities and in small towns alike. Indeed, the 'X'-rated *Fanny Hill* (dist. Cinemation Industries) was one of the most frequently played films across the entire sample, playing all small towns and all but two (Charlotte and Jacksonville) of the key cities. Among the key cities, the sexploitation sample had the most bookings among Eastern key cities and the fewest among the South's key cities. This gave credence to the idea that the southern region was a potentially less lucrative area for sexploitation due to the pervasiveness of conservative Christianity in the Bible Belt. Cities including Boston and Detroit played all the sexploitation titles except for one, suggesting the importance of weighting local factors. Such cities had a longstanding history of playing sexploitation. Boston's Pilgrim Theatre and Center Theatres played sexploitation by the late 1960s.²⁵⁶ By the late 1960s, Detroit also had at least two prominent theaters, the downtown Fox Theatre and the Trans-Lux Krim, which played Russ Meyer's and Audubon Films' releases.²⁵⁷ Individual films with the most key city bookings were Cinemation's *Fanny Hill* with 30 and Crown's *The Teacher* with 24 out of 31 key city bookings. Entertainment Ventures International's *The Erotic Adventures of Zorro* had the lowest number of

bookings in the key cities, with bookings in seven venues in heavily populated Midwestern and Western cities.²⁵⁸ This also suggests a weighting of the distributor. According to *The Independent Film Journal's* "Distribution Guide," EVI had only 13 exchanges. In small towns, sexploitation's bookings (5.6 out of 10) were numerically similar to hicksploitation (5.6) and just below the leader in small towns, the non-aligned sample (6.9). Taking the key cities and small towns together, *Fanny Hill* was the most frequently released sexploitation film. *Fanny Hill's* success across all sites suggests an obvious but important point—the power of a hit to yield exponential viewer interest. Arthur De Vany has shown more generally how hits 'behave' quite differently than non-hits in a marketplace.²⁵⁹ *Fanny Hill* is an example of this. A Swedish film with no bankable star, *Fanny Hill* was also not released by a particularly powerful distributor. New World and Crown's 'R'-rated sexploitation cycles examined here reflect the relatively broad market for sexploitation in the early 1970s.

Crown International Pictures' Action-Sexploitation Formula: Superchick (1973) and Policewomen (1974)

While New World Pictures would develop high-brow aspirations later in the 1970s, Crown International Pictures' action-sexploitation films, which David Andrews terms the 'empowered babe' pictures, became part of the company's DNA and would form the basis for their releases through the 1980s.²⁶⁰ Formed in 1961 by AIP franchisee holder Newton Jacobs, Crown International Pictures was a producer-distributor of low-budget youth pictures in the 1960s, focusing on low-budget horror films.²⁶¹ Crown released three to six films a year, including pick-ups and in-house productions in the \$750,000 – \$1,000,000 range for the drive-in market.²⁶² In the late 1960s, Crown focused efforts on biker films, including *Naked Angels*

(1969) and *Pit Stop* (1969), and sexploitation like *The Babysitter* (1969) and *Weekend with the Babysitter* (1970). Similar to New World Pictures, Crown International Pictures also explicitly targeted a teen or youth market, defined by president Mark Tenser as “the 15-30” age range.²⁶³ This demographic, Tenser explained, “reject[ed] Hollywood’s concept of how they live,” suggesting they were the demographic whom Hollywood failed to target during the recession.²⁶⁴ Like Shiffrin at Sherpax, Tenser emphasized that the company was offering product different from and superior to the majors’ offerings.

In very broad strokes, Tenser’s sexploitation strategy at Crown International Pictures was similar to New World Pictures’—profit from the vogue for ‘adult’ material in the form of sexual suggestion and nudity but avoid the legal and economic risks associated with an ‘X’ rating. In an article in *The Independent Film Journal*, Tenser said that ‘X’ films “present[ed] too many troubles.”²⁶⁵ Tenser added that ‘R’ films with nudity and sex could be quite lucrative, leading to “in depth booking, even saturation in some instances.”²⁶⁶ Tenser continued: “We live in an R rated world. A GP could almost hurt a picture because so many people think GP is watered down life.”²⁶⁷ Marilyn Tenser, Mark’s spouse, Jacobs’ daughter, and an executive producer, also defended the company’s use of the ‘R’ rating over the ‘X’ rating. She said, “We are living in an R-rated world today and that’s the audience I am making my films for. At the present time I’m not living an X-rated life, nor am I living a G-rated life.”²⁶⁸ In essence, Tenser and Jacobs defended ‘R’ as more ‘authentic’ for their target audience of young (and male) viewers. Concerns about product differentiation from both Hollywood and television appeared to underly this rationalization. Marilyn Tenser said she wanted to “give the public something they cannot see on the small screen.”²⁶⁹ Thus, Crown defended their pursuit of ‘R’ ratings as truer to young

life, but such arguments appeared guided by economic motivation in a company competing along with New World Pictures, the major studios, and television for the youth market.

Crown International Pictures developed a string of ‘R’-rated films that capitalized on the youth sexploitation trend. Their cycle was different from New World Pictures’ in two ways: the films were not part of a series and their film formula more heavily involved action and martial arts sequences. Unlike the more passive nurse protagonists, Crown International Pictures’ sexploitation protagonists were often involved in fight scenes, particularly in *Superchick* and *Policewomen*, amid brief moments of nudity and sexual titillation. *Superchick* and *Policewomen* adhered to the same general idea: the professional identities of the women prescribed certain plot choices that provide opportunities for male fantasy-driven nudity and sex scenes, while an action plot kept the story moving. Similar to New World’s nurse cycle, Crown sold male fantasies to an imagined audience of male viewers under the more socially acceptable veneer of female empowerment. (There were other stylistic commonalities, including use of telephoto lens, theme songs in the opening credits, and many scenes of driving).

Superchick depicts stewardess, Tara B. True (Joyce Jillson), who lives a double life as a stewardess on the clock and an ass-kicking independent woman in her off time. True keeps lovers in each of her hub cities: New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. The premise of three different men in three different locales motivates a variety of sexual activity. Tara and her Los Angeles lover, a singer named Davy, have sex in a grand piano of all places (filmed in long shot, their naked bodies conveniently obscured by the piano). In Miami, Tara seduces her boyfriend on his houseboat by wearing only a fishing net. The beach locations in Los Angeles and Miami also provide opportunity for the film to show Tara enjoying the beach in a bikini. The quite episodic romantic plot is structured by the visits to her boyfriends and by an action subplot—her Miami

lover is involved in a mafia-run crime ring. (*Superchick* was a reference point for Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997).) In the film's climax, Tara uses her martial arts skills to beat up the criminals on the plane, resolving the action plot. The romance plot concludes when all three of her lovers visit Tara in the hospital after the fracas. Each asks Tara to commit to him, but Tara remains steadfast in her independent, quasi-sexual liberationist principles: "I will live the life I choose with or without you," she tells the men. As a sexually liberated character, True motivates a variety of sexual spectacle for the film's imagined male audience. With *Superchick*, Crown International Pictures projected an image of the company as 'hip' and progressive while also selling objectified images of women geared to satisfying the fantasies of male viewers.

In the 'R'-rated *Policewomen*, directed by Lee Frost, Crown similarly uses the guise of female empowerment to sell male fantasies. The protagonist's *métier* motivates an entire generic mode: a cop action film. While the opportunities for sexual titillation are perhaps less obvious in a cop action film, there are nevertheless many scenes of sexual spectacle in *Policewomen*. The opening credit sequence (which featured the wide yellow-blocked font that Tarantino would use in *Pulp Fiction* (1994)) shows Sondra Currie as Lacy Bond bending over in a bikini. The film also has a women-in-prison sub-plot. There is a girl gang that escapes from jail and disrobes mid-escape to don catsuits. In later scenes, the escaped gang show a sartorial preference for only wearing bikinis. Besides sexploitation elements, *Policewomen* features several martial arts sequences of fights between members of the girl gang. One scene illustrates how nudity and sexual elements were made 'R'-friendly. When Lacy goes to bed with her romantic interest, she is shown in a master in a long shot as she takes off her nightgown. The camera cuts to a medium shot of her breasts. There is then a reverse angle of the man in the bed and a tilt down as Lacy takes off her nightgown. Their embrace is shot in mobile framing in a medium close-up that

obscures their bodies. Lacy is shown naked briefly from a wider scale before editing shows her nude from the waist up in a shorter scale.

Crown International Pictures' faux female empowerment strategy was also seen in marketing materials, which emphasized the film's action elements and the protagonists' fighting abilities. The press kit for *Superchick* revealed a standard promotional package consisting of a teaser trailer and 20, 30, and 60 second television and radio ads.²⁷⁰ The press kit included headshots and glamour-type photography of actress Jillson in different image sizes. The image in the one sheet showed Joyce Jillson in a partially undone karate robe, fighting three men [Figure 3]. The tag line—"A Super Charged Girl! Always Ready For Action...Of Any Kind!!"—contained the kind of double entendre on the word "action" seen in *The Student Nurses*' one sheet as well. The tag line on the one sheet for *Policewomen* was less suggestive but nevertheless emphasized the character's femininity as incongruous with her métier: "Cold Steel On The Outside...All Woman On The Inside!" *Policewomen* and *The Teacher* were promoted together, shown side by side in an ad that appeared in *Boxoffice*. The tag lines—"She's the Instructor" and "She's the Destructor"—showed the similar production logics (and marketing shortcuts) enabled by this formula.²⁷¹ The images of working women portrayed in the films and in the marketing materials had little to do with actual 1970s labor or gender politics. Instead, they were stock male sexual fantasies sold to an imagined audience of male viewers.

Just as New World Pictures used vaguely sexually progressive language to sell the nurse films to a youth audience, Crown International Pictures used the faux feminist discourse to grant the company and its sexploitation-action fare some respectability. Time and time again, Crown highlighted that *Superchick* and *Policewomen*'s producer, Marilyn Tenser, was a woman. The press kit for *Superchick* featured a promotional piece about Tenser. In addition to sharing her

hobbies and how she “stays in shape” through swimming and skiing, the press release focused on Tenser’s status as a rare woman producer. It read:

Believing that women in films have not had the best possible break in the higher echelons of making films, she decided to acquaint herself with the working end of the camera....She plans on staying in the business and hopes her example will encourage more women to get in on the working—so-called unglamorous—side of the camera.

In interviews and press materials, Tenser also positioned herself as an advocate for female roles.

Tenser said, “I am considering only those scripts where the lead role would be for a woman.”²⁷²

Tenser explained in *The Independent Film Journal*:

To some degree we have to direct our selling toward women. They control the family purse strings, and are the main factor in the home who decides ‘who shall see what.’ It is most important that the ad campaign is appealing to the women of the house.²⁷³

Tenser’s claims about targeting women belied the fact that Crown was selling stock sexual fantasies that most closely corresponded to the images of women an imagined base of young male viewers might hope to see. Committed to the ideological cover of female empowerment, Crown International Pictures took every opportunity to promote Marilyn Tenser’s achievements. The year *Policewomen* was released, three different institutions honored Tenser for her work as a producer. An AFI International Women’s Year Celebration award celebrated *Policewomen* as a “representative example of women’s achievement in motion pictures.”²⁷⁴ NATO later gave Tenser an award in 1976 for “excellence in production.”²⁷⁵ *Boxoffice* reported another accolade given to Tenser by mountain-region exhibitors, who praised Crown’s ‘realistic’ portrayal of

"today's woman."²⁷⁶ However, there is no evidence that these press releases and marketing strategies had any effect on bringing more women to theaters. Similar to how white coat films used educational discourse to avoid obscenity prosecution, Crown used the rhetoric of female empowerment to sell its action-sexploitation hybrids while, at the same time, presenting an image of respectability within the industry.

The Crown International Pictures sexploitation films were received quite similarly to the New World Pictures films: seen as formulaic, marketable to their intended audience. Noting *Superchick*'s kinship to the New World nurse film formula, the *Boxoffice* review called it "sheer escape entertainment with a sprinkling of truth, satire, an honest look at a new type of young womanhood" while observing the film presented "action enough to please all audiences."²⁷⁷ The trade said the film had "something for everybody" and production polish in the sets and on-location shooting in New York, Miami, and Hollywood.²⁷⁸ *Boxoffice*'s review of *Policewomen* commented on the film's differentiating element as an "exciting, offbeat" action film that "puts women in the front line of danger."²⁷⁹ *Variety* did not review any of the three films.

Similar to New World Pictures' nurse cycle, Crown International Pictures' action-sexploitation hybrids were released through an exploitation distribution strategy of summer drive-in and hardtop release. Both *Superchick* and *Policewomen* had strong summer opening dates, each grossing over \$1 million. *Superchick* was released in the summer of 1973, likely with 175–200 prints, a typical print run for Crown and similar to New World's print run for the nurse films.²⁸⁰ *Superchick* was released through Crown-affiliated exchanges; a few were the same exchanges that released New World Pictures' films. In Chicago, William H. Lange & Associates booked *Superchick* in 20 "local and outlying theatres."²⁸¹ Favorite Films, Inc., a distribution company owned by Jacobs, released the film in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, and

Seattle.²⁸² *Superchick* was Crown's biggest opening grosser when it was released in June 1973; in the first week of play, *Superchick* grossed \$508,000 in 129 openings including in Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, Cincinnati, and Denver.²⁸³ *Superchick* also played in many drive-ins including five Dayton-area drive-ins and drive-ins in Des Moines, Hartford, and San Francisco.²⁸⁴ *Superchick* grossed \$1 million in two months.²⁸⁵

Suggesting some success in expanding sexploitation's reach with an action hybrid formula, *Policewomen* was a wider release for Crown, circulating in 225 prints versus the company's more typical 175.²⁸⁶ The film opened over Memorial Day weekend in major cities. That weekend, *Policewomen* grossed \$40,000 in nine theaters in Cleveland; \$77,000 in 16 Chicago theatres; and \$42,000 in nine Detroit theaters.²⁸⁷ Like *Superchick*, *Policewomen* was booked on double bills with kung fu movies; in Detroit, the film played at the Fox with *Kung Fu Mama* (1972).²⁸⁸ Like the nurse films, Crown's sexploitation films were sometimes packaged together on double bills. In Dayton, *Policewomen* played with *Superchick* at three drive-ins.²⁸⁹ Similar to *Superchick*'s earnings, *Policewomen* grossed over \$1 million in a three-month period, and in coordination with *The Teacher* released in early summer 1974, contributed to Crown's highest grossing year. Crown's action-sexploitation formula appeared to be a more lucrative one than the strictly sexploitation plots of the New World nurse films. Crown would continue to rely on a sexploitation-action formula throughout the 1970s in films like *Pick-Up* (1975) and *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976). Crown International brought the martial arts action film and sexploitation film in conversation, creating hybrid type genre films oriented to drive-ins and teen and young adult male viewers.

From Drive-Ins to 'Jiggle TV'

As Mark and Marilyn Tenser feared, television soon encroached on the sexploitation formula. Sexploitation's transmedia migration to television further narrowed exploitation firms' options for product differentiation as sexploitation proliferated across many outlets. There was a growing market for mild sexploitation material on television beginning in 1975. Indeed, now that Americans could enjoy titillating programming on primetime for free, exploitation companies lost the market advantage for their 'R' sexploitation films. 'Jiggle television' refers to the titillating, controversial, and sexually provocative programming in the late 1970s associated with ABC and with TV producer Aaron Spelling (*Charlie's Angels*, *The Love Boat*, *Dynasty*). ABC popularized this programming trend with *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981), *Three's Company* (1976–1984), *The Love Boat* (1977–1987), and *Fantasy Island* (1977–1984). ABC's sexploitation-inflected programming took the network from last in ratings among the three major networks at the beginning of the 1970s to the top of the ratings by the end of the decade. ABC overtook NBC beginning in 1975 and CBS in the 1976–1977 season.

Influenced by ABC's booming popularity, competing broadcast networks developed series around female characters shown in skimpy clothing or suggestive situations. Even CBS, seen as the network with sober and socially progressive programming, followed suit with fluffy and sensational erotic display in such shows as *Wonder Woman* (1975–1979) and *Logan's Run* (1977–1978).²⁹⁰ In their prestige programming as well, CBS shows including *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *M*A*S*H* engaged with issues surrounding shifting cultural attitudes toward monogamy and sexuality. Elana Levine writes about CBS' integration of sexual themes in the sober discourses of their socially conscious programming:

Among the contemporary social issues up for comedic treatment in these shows were the changes inspired by the sexual revolution, including a new openness about homosexuality, a greater acceptance of premarital sex and promiscuity, and a wider awareness of women's sexual desires and needs.²⁹¹

NBC was the last of the three networks to develop sexploitation 'lite' programming. Levine writes that, to stave off ABC's rise, NBC executives adopted a two-pronged strategy, leveling strong moral outrage against them while at the same time adopting programming that was arguably even more sensational. Indeed, it was NBC programming executive Paul Klein who developed the phrases "kid porn" and "jiggle television" concerning ABC. Klein described ABC's 'jiggle television' as "when you have a young, attractive television personality running at top speed wearing a limited amount of underwear."²⁹² Klein's critique, Levine writes, was particularly savvy, as it exploited the then-current discourse about pornography in the US, "tapping into contemporary anxieties about the spread of pornographic culture throughout mainstream America."²⁹³ While critiquing ABC as morally bankrupt, Klein also pursued the development of titillating pilots and TV films. *Charlie's Angels* became a hit in the 1976–1977 season, and NBC picked up a show canceled by ABC, *Bionic Woman*, which facilitated scenes of sexual display, for the 1977–1978 season. NBC also ordered a sexploitation pilot about fashion model spies—1977's *Cover Girls*—and developed two female protagonist series in *The Roller Girls* (1978) and *Legs* (1977). The sensational programming of network television in the late 1970s illustrated the degree to which American popular media culture absorbed sexploitation tropes.

Conclusion

The chapter has detailed how several institutional and industrial changes lowered barriers to exploitation film distribution and contributed to a growing audience for boundary-pushing fare outside of Hollywood's domain. The landmark Supreme Court ruling *Roth v. United States* in 1957 institutionalized a permissive legal understanding of obscenity. Feeling economic pressures at the eve of the industry recession and fearing legal pressures as sexploitation showed no signs of abating, the MPAA introduced the classification system. This represented a sea change in the relationship between exploitation cinema and the major studios. The system formalized strategies of target marketing; put both groups in competition for youth audiences; and brought the majors and independents into a symbiotic dynamic. These strategies were illustrated in the sexploitation film.

The sexploitation film brought product differentiation to exploitation independents during the recession, a time of opportunity when independents might reach the viewers whose tastes were out-of-step with Hollywood films. Sherpix's *The Stewardesses* showed the risks and rewards of 'X' sexploitation and provided a model for the migration of sexploitation from city grindhouses to drive-ins and neighborhood theaters. New World Pictures provided proof of concept of an 'R'-rated sexploitation cycle that could profit on the commercial exploitation marketplace. Not to be mistaken as one of the many 'smut peddlers' of soft-core and hard-core, New World Pictures sold their nurse male fantasies under the guise of women's liberation. Risk avoidance of the legal and financial costs associated with 'X' pushed New World Pictures and Crown International Pictures to develop tame sexploitation films targeted beyond grindhouses to male youth audiences at drive-ins. Crown International Pictures imitated New World's strategy while carving out additional market differentiation in their action-oriented films. With

competition from the titillation provided by soft-‘X’ films, Hollywood, and broadcast television, exploitation companies struggled to chart successful avenues of product differentiation that might distinguish these low-budget films from more expensive or more explicit pictures. In the sexploitation cycle, exploitation companies capitalized on the supply crisis created by the industry recession and the majors’ risk-averse strategies. As such, the dynamics discussed thus far show sexploitation as a cycle led by the exploitation independents and later copied, to some degree, in the odd major release (i.e. *Emmanuelle* (1974)), and by the broadcast networks on television. The next chapter shows a quite different dynamic where major studios are the initial power brokers for the first blaxploitation films arriving on screens.

¹ As Linda Ruth Williams writes, “The unprecedented academic interest in pornography since the 1980s has concerned itself almost totally with hardcore pornography, save the few feminist writers who argued that *all* sexual representations of women are pornographic, therefore exploitative, therefore violent – therefore all pornography amounts to the same thing.” Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh UP, 2005), 270.

See scholarship on pornography published in the last 10 years: Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); David Church, *Disposable Passions: Vintage Pornography and the Material Legacies of Adult Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014); and Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

² Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2006), 169-170.

³ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000) 19, 71.

⁴ “The NBER’s Business Cycle Dating Committee,” *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, <http://www.nber.org/cycles/recessions.html>, accessed November 1, 2019.

⁵ Tino Balio, *United Artists, Volume 2, 1951-1978: The Company That Changed the Film Industry* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 191.

⁶ Balio, *United Artists, Vol. 2*, 318. From 1969-1970, Transamerica’s stock dropped from \$44 to \$12 a share.

⁷ Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century Fox: A Corporate and Financial History* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 162. Quoted in Appendix 10 of Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 496.

⁸ Solomon, *Twentieth Century Fox*, 162.

⁹ These were *The Adventures* (1970), *Catch-22* (1970), *Darling Lili* (1970), *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970).

¹⁰ “Pictures: Tell Metro Losses; Full Figures Due,” *Variety*, July 23, 1969, 5.

¹¹ “Finance: Columbia Pares Its Losses,” *Broadcasting*, October 16, 1972, 64; “Big Weeks At Fox, Versus Its Losses,” *Variety*, September 23, 1970, 3.

Highs and lows for studios were occurring nearly simultaneously. Fox reported second quarter losses of 17 million in 1970. Just months later, the studio reported a one-week high of \$2.6 million in domestic billings for the final

week of August 1970 with a dizzying array of films illustrating Old Hollywood and New Hollywood's convergence: *Patton* (1970), *Hello, Dolly!* (1960), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), *MASH* (1970), *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) and *The Sicilian Clan* (1969).

¹² Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 503. Data found in Appendix 13, "North American Rentals In Excess Of \$22.5 Million, 1970-1980." Appendix sourced from: Joel Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (New York: Crown: 1988), 277-278, *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

¹³ Gene Arneel, "Radical Knife On Fox Costs," *Variety*, August 5, 1970, 3, 23.

¹⁴ Gene Arneel, "Name of New Fox Game: Sane," *Variety*, January 27, 1971, 3.

¹⁵ Gene Arneel, "U Socks Slow-Pay Exhibs," *Variety*, February 25, 1970, 3.

¹⁶ "Film Industry Eyes Pending Laws To Pull Biz Out Of Doldrums," *Back Stage*, December 10, 1971, 15.

¹⁷ "Film Industry Eyes Pending Laws," 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁹ "Pictures: Recession Hurts Too Many Others; See no 'Save Hollywood' Priority," *Variety*, June 23, 1971, 5.

The Blockbuster Lite chapter of this dissertation examines the impact of the tax shelter money on Hollywood production in the mid-1970s. The fact that studios lobbied Congress for help was an index of their desperation in the first years of the 1970s as they struggled to find footing in a cultural landscape that changed seemingly overnight.

²⁰ Camille Johnson-Yale, *A History of Hollywood's Outsourcing Debate: Runaway Production* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 81-82.

²¹ Solomon, *Twentieth Century Fox*, 162.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 71.

²⁴ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 45; Roger Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (New York: De Capo Press Edition, 1998), 156. Biskind and Corman write that AIP had rights to take away the film from Hopper and Fonda if production was delayed. by three days.

By 1973, *Variety* reported *The Wild Angels* had taken in \$6.4 million in rentals. "Pictures: All-Time Boxoffice Champs," *Variety*, January 3, 1973, 32.

²⁵ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 42.

²⁶ Quoted in Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies*, 157.

²⁷ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 71.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 198; "AIP Announces Biggest Product Line-Up History," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 14, 1970, 1, 3.

³⁰ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 498. This is Appendix 12, "Top Twenty Rental Films, 1970-1980," sourced from *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 197.

³³ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1981); Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).

³⁴ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 281. Williams writes that that the Miller Test in its vagueness led to a proliferation of sexual representation in media culture: "[T]he Miller Test, designed to reassure the public that the law could define, and thus keep off/scene the ob/scene, has in actual practice meant that unprecedentedly wide varieties of sexual representations have found their way onto the public scene of representation."

³⁵ Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film From Their Beginnings To Stonewall* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

³⁶ Richard Dyer, "Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms," *Jump Cut* 30 (March 1985), 27-29.

³⁷ Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 290.

³⁸ Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 11.

³⁹ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*.

- ⁴⁰ Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 200), 195-208.
- ⁴¹ “Russ Meyer’s ‘Vixen’ Seized in Cincinnati,” *Boxoffice*, October 6, 1969, ME4; “‘Stewardesses’ Suit,” *Variety*, August 25, 1971, 20.
- ⁴² Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 4.
- ⁴³ “‘Nudity Itself Is Not Obscenity,’” *Variety*, May 24, 1961, 1. Municipal Judge Daniel Handley of Cincinnati acquitted the distributor of Doris Wishman’s *Hideout in the Sun* (1960) of a charge of obscenity. His opinion stated, “Nudity in itself, without lewdness or dirtiness, is not obscenity in law or common sense. The body is not obscene of itself. If it were, we would not have art schools, art museums, private exhibitions or advertisements that exhibit the nude human body.”
- ⁴⁴ David Andrews, *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in its Contexts* (Ohio State UP, 2006), 1-15.
- ⁴⁵ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 266.
- ⁴⁶ Murf, “Film Reviews: Vixen,” *Variety*, October 30, 1968, 6.
- ⁴⁷ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 301.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Jeffrey Escoffier, “Beefcake to Hardcore: Gay Pornography and the Sexual Revolution, in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 320.
- ⁵⁰ Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*, 53.
- ⁵¹ Kevin Heffernan, “Prurient (Dis)Interest: The American Release and Reception of *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 122.
- ⁵² See Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2004); Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- ⁵³ “Text of the Supreme Court’ Opinion in ‘The Miracle’ Case,” *Boxoffice*, May 31, 1952, 11, 14.
- ⁵⁴ “Nudist Film Privately Viewed at Appellate,” *Variety*, October 3, 1956, 30.
- ⁵⁵ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 330.
- ⁵⁶ See footnote 101.
- ⁵⁷ Strub, *Obscenity Rules*, 2. Strub calls *Roth* “the case...that somehow *both* opened the cultural gates to a “floodtide of filth” and deserves credit or blame each time another citizen stands behind bars for publishing pornography.”
- ⁵⁸ Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 39.
- ⁵⁹ *Kinglsey International Pictures Corp. v. Regents*, 360 U.S. 684 (1959), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/360/684>, last accessed March 15, 2020. The Court found that the First Amendment “protects advocacy of the opinion that adultery may sometimes be proper, no less than advocacy of socialism or the single tax.”
- ⁶⁰ The Motion Picture Production Code (as Published 31 March, 1930).
- ⁶¹ Strub, *Obscenity Rules*, 187.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 189.
- ⁶³ David Lerner, “A Taste For Trash: The Persistence of Exploitation In American Cinema, 1960-1975,” PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2012, 16-17, 32; David Lerner writes that white coaters “functioned as cinematic marriage manuals, educating the viewer on sexual positions and advocating progressive, pleasure-oriented sexual experience.” Kevin Heffernan, “Prurient (Dis)Interest: The American Release and Reception of *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 112, 118.
- ⁶⁴ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 66-7. Justice Brennan found that the Maryland state censor board represented a form of prior restraint. The courts considered prior restraint unconstitutional censorship because it put the burden on the defendant and assumed a film was obscene until proven otherwise. Elena Gorfinkel explains that the “required submission of films to a board in advance of their being screened in public acted as an informal mode of censorship that interfered with the freedom of speech guarantees only recently granted to the cinema in the prior decade” (67).

- ⁶⁵ “Dallas Classification Ruled Illegal By Supreme Court,” *Boxoffice*, April 29, 1968, 6. Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 524. David Cook writes that both *Ginsberg v. New York* and *Interstate Circuit v. Dallas* “suggested that communities could establish their own censorship guidelines for minors, so the MPAA set out to beat them to it.”
- ⁶⁶ “‘I Am Curious (Yellow)’ Again Detroit No. 1,” *Boxoffice*, October 13, 1968, ME3; “‘I Am Curious’ High 510 in Minneapolis,” *Boxoffice*, October 27, 1969, NC1; “Gains 25 Barometer Points in 3rd Seattle Week,” *Boxoffice*, January 19, 1970, W4.
- ⁶⁷ Syd Silverman, “Big Pix Cash Flow Up 48%,” *Variety*, July 15, 1970, 5, 23.
- ⁶⁸ Eric Schaefer, “Sex Seen: 1968 and Rise of ‘Public Sex,’” In *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 11.
- ⁶⁹ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 88.
- ⁷⁰ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, vol. 3, The Marketplace: The Industry (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 19.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid*, 93, n.66.
- ⁷² “Repeal Obscenity Laws: President’s Commission,” *The Independent Film Journal*, August 19, 1970, 4, 8.
- ⁷³ By the end of 1966, NATO refused to make a pledge to play MPAA-only films, and IFIDA were planning their own classification system. One member of IFIDA said: “We’ve always admitted—and said so in our ads—that most of our pictures are for grownups; and unlike the majors, we have very few films that depend on an audience of teenagers. If anything, our standards are likely to be tougher than theirs.” “‘Classification’ by Indies?” *Variety*, August 31, 1966, 7, 63.
- ⁷⁴ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” *Variety*, October 9, 1968, 9.
- ⁷⁵ “Film Ratings Begin in November,” *The Independent Film Journal*, October 15, 1968, 4.
- ⁷⁶ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3, 9.
- ⁷⁷ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3, 9.
- ⁷⁸ “Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1,” *Boxoffice*, October 14, 1968, 3-4.
- ⁷⁹ “Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1,” 3-4.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid*. Valenti said, “Our primary concern is children and that concern is the dominant reason for the voluntary film rating program.”
- ⁸¹ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3; “Film Ratings Begin in November,” *The Independent Film Journal*, October 15, 1968, 4, 12.
- ⁸² “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4. “MPAA’s New Code & Rating Rules,” *Variety*, October 9, 1968, 8-9. The MPAA also published documents explaining CARA and the ratings system in *Variety*. In the document, the ratings were framed as a pre-emptive solution to the threat of censorship. The document read: Censorship is an odious enterprise. We oppose censorship and classification by governments because they are alien to the American tradition of freedom. Much of this nation’s strength and purpose is drawn from the premise that the humblest of citizens has the freedom of his own choice. Censorship destroys this freedom of choice.
- ⁸³ “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4, 12.
- ⁸⁴ “Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1,” *Boxoffice*, October 14, 1968, 3-4.
- ⁸⁵ “Ratings’ An All-Things Thing,” *Variety*, September 18, 1967, 3, 17.
- ⁸⁶ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3; “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4, 12.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid*.
- ⁸⁹ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3; “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4, 12.
- ⁹⁰ “Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1,” 4.
- ⁹¹ “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 12.
- ⁹² “Voluntary Rating System On Films Will Start Nov. 1,” 4.
- ⁹³ “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4, 12.
- ⁹⁴ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 3, 9.
- ⁹⁵ “MPAA Readies Rating System,” *The Independent Film Journal*, October 1, 1968, 5.
- ⁹⁶ “Film Ratings Begin in November,” 4, 12.
- ⁹⁷ “Mom-Pop Film Code: G-M-R-X,” 9.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 3, 9.
- ⁹⁹ “Recall & Re-Edit W7’S ‘Motorcycle’; X-Rating Now R,” *Variety*, January 29, 1969, 7.
- ¹⁰⁰ “Recall & Re-Edit W7’S ‘Motorcycle’; X-Rating Now R,” 7.

- ¹⁰¹ "'X' Lesbo 'Sis'; 'R' For 'Rosie': MPAA," *Variety*, December 18, 1968, 20; "First Appeal On 'X' Rating," *Variety*, November 27, 1968, 7. Sigma III was the first distributor to officially appeal the 'X' rating for *Greetings*, directed by Brian De Palma. The MPAA gave the film an 'X' for a scene "involving a stag film."
- ¹⁰² "Film Prods. May Now Self-Apply 'X' Rating," *Variety*, January 22, 1969, 1, 22.
- ¹⁰³ "X Marks the Spot (Self-Interest)," *Variety*, April 23, 1969, 3.
- ¹⁰⁴ "X Marks the Spot (Self-Interest)," 3.
- ¹⁰⁵ "X Marks the Spot (Self-Interest)," 3.
- ¹⁰⁶ Byron Stuart, "Though Unintended, 'X' Still Is Taken as 'Dirty' or Shoddy' [sic]; This Condition a Poser for Valenti," *Variety*, February 26, 1969, 7, 70.
- ¹⁰⁷ Byron Stuart, "Though Unintended, 'X' Still Is Taken as 'Dirty' or Shoddy'" 7, 70.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 70.
- ¹⁰⁹ Robert J. Landry, "X No Badge Of Dishonor," *Variety*, February 25, 1970, 5, 22. According to Dr. Stern, a few bad words, some nudity, and pubic hair or two would not automatically draw X. The "M" rating had also been replaced by the "GP" rating, which indicated a film was suitable for all with parental guidance
- ¹¹⁰ "Goldwurm's Undelivered Speech Sez 'Indies Get Toughest Ratings,'" *Variety*, June 10, 1970, 4.
- ¹¹¹ "Stigmatized 'X'" *The Independent Film Journal*, February 4, 1970, 1,3.
- ¹¹² "Stigmatized 'X'" 1,3.
- ¹¹³ Robert J. Landry, "If You Make An X, Take An X," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 23.
- ¹¹⁴ "Trade Hits Newspaper Ban on X- Rated Films," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 13, 1972, 3, 10, 34.
- ¹¹⁵ "Trade Hits Newspaper Ban on X- Rated Films," 3, 10, 34.
- ¹¹⁶ Landry, "X No Badge Of Dishonor," 5, 22.
- ¹¹⁷ Strub, *Obscenity Rules*, 213.
- ¹¹⁸ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 96.
- ¹¹⁹ For more on 1960s sexploitation, see Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*; *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014); Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal* 41:3 (2002), 3-26.
- ¹²⁰ Heffernan, "Prurient (Dis)Interest," 105-6.
- ¹²¹ Schaefer, "Sex Seen," 12.
- ¹²² Christie Milliken, "Rate It X?: Hollywood Cinema and the End of the Production Code," in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. by Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 30.
- ¹²³ "Kept Re-Casting, Re-Shooting In 3-D; 10 Months After California Showing 'Stewardesses' Hits N.Y. In Fest Week," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 5.
- ¹²⁴ Eric Spilker, "Pictures: What Orgy Pix Need 'Depth'? 3-D, Counted Out 16 Years Ago, Still Stirs," *Variety*, December 10, 1969, 4, 32.
- ¹²⁵ Spilker, "Pictures: What Orgy Pix Need 'Depth'?" 4, 32.
- ¹²⁶ "Kept Re-Casting, Re-Shooting In 3-D; 10 Months After California Showing 'Stewardesses' Hits N.Y. In Fest Week," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 5.
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹²⁸ "The Stewardesses: How It Was Shot & Shown," *The Stewardesses* DVD feature, disc 2, Shout Factory, 2009. DVD.
- ¹²⁹ "Louis K. Sher, 84: Exhibited Foreign Films," *New York Times*, December 21, 1998. Saul Shiffirin, who would become Sher's business partner at Sherpix, joined Sher at Art Theatre Guild in 1961 after working as a distributor with MGM, Columbia, and Astor Pictures. "Sherpix," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 27, 1972, 20-21.
- ¹³⁰ "Sherpix," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 27, 1972, 20-21; "Pictures: Sher Encore Makes 37," *Variety*, August 10, 1966, 17.
- ¹³¹ From 1954-1960, Sher acquired theaters and converted them into art houses in Cleveland, Ohio, Louisville, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Denver, San Francisco, Fresno, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. "Sher-Shulman's 8th in 'Artie Circuit,'" *Variety*, December 5, 1956, 3; "Lou Sher Adds Presidio," *Variety*, November 1, 1961, 78.
- ¹³² Barbara Wilinsky, "'A Thinly Disguised Art Veneer Covering a Filthy Sex Picture': Discourses on Art Houses in the 1950s," *Film History* 8:2 (1996), 143-158; "Sher-Shulman's 8th in 'Artie Circuit,'" 3.
- ¹³³ "Public: No Taste or Voyeurs?" *Variety*, November 4, 1964, 5, 19. In 1964, Sher and ATG Vice President Saul Shiffirin surveyed their theaters to see which titles viewers preferred. The chain-wide survey revealed that the top titles included sexploitation like Russ Meyer's *Lorna* (1964) and racy art cinema such as Louis Malle's *The Lovers* (1958).

- ¹³⁴ "Louis Sher Into Distribution, Too," *Variety*, March 31, 1965, 11, 78. Shiffrin became Sher's film buyer, and the two traveled to Europe to acquire product. Sher picked up *Crazy Paradise* (1962), *No Divorce* (year unknown) and two Italian comedies: Lucio Fulci's *Oh! Those Most Secret Agents* (1964) and *Two Escape from Sing-Sing* (1964).
- ¹³⁵ "Sherpix," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 27, 1972, 20-21.
- ¹³⁶ "Sherpix," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 27, 1972, 20-21.
- ¹³⁷ "'Stitch' in Time of Product Shortage," 3, 71; *Variety*, September 2, 1970, 27. Comparing *Without a Stitch* to *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, VP Saul Shiffrin said: "The Grove film is a real landmark, but its performance is more unusual since word of mouth on it is reportedly poor and yet it's gotten so much notoriety people feel they have to see it. 'Stitch' has no delusions of grandeur. It's a fun sex picture and it's building."
- ¹³⁸ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 225.
- ¹³⁹ Addison Verrill, "Yanks Out-Sexploit Europe," *Variety*, May 12, 1971, 1, 238.
- ¹⁴⁰ "Sherpix," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 27, 1972, 20-21.
- ¹⁴¹ "Kept Re-Casting, Re-Shooting In 3-D; 10 Months After California Showing 'Stewardesses' Hits N.Y. In Fest Week," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 5; Fred Oestreicher, "How Louis Sher Built an Art Theatre Circuit." *Boxoffice*, July 9, 1962, 39. By 1962, the Cinema was part of ATG.
- ¹⁴² "'Easy Rider' 830," *Boxoffice*, October 6, 1969, W4.
- ¹⁴³ "Pictures: Art Chain Operator Sher Muses: Long-Banned Kids, Accented Sex; Owns 50% of 'Without a Stitch,'" *Variety*, March 4, 1970, 5; Spilker, "Pictures: What Orgy Pix Need 'Depth'?" 4, 32.
- ¹⁴⁴ Spilker, "Pictures: What Orgy Pix Need 'Depth'?" 4, 32.
- ¹⁴⁵ "Kept Re-Casting, Re-Shooting In 3-D; 10 Months After California Showing 'Stewardesses' Hits N.Y. In Fest Week," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 5.
- ¹⁴⁶ "How The Stewardesses Took Off," *The Stewardesses* DVD feature, disc 2, Shout Factory, 2009. DVD. Under Roth, the "dominant theme" of a work must be obscene for the entire work to be deemed obscene. Thus, the filmmakers added a romance A plot that recurs throughout the film to protect themselves from prosecution. However, by this point there was widespread confusion about how to interpret Roth and so Silliphant et al. were by no means 'safe' by adding the romance A-plot.
- ¹⁴⁷ "How The Stewardesses Took Off," *The Stewardesses* DVD feature, disc 2, Shout Factory, 2009. DVD.
- ¹⁴⁸ "How The Stewardesses Took Off."
- ¹⁴⁹ "The Stewardesses," *Variety*, September 6, 1970, 24.
- ¹⁵⁰ "Buying & Booking Guide: The Stewardesses," *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1970, 1365.
- ¹⁵¹ "Buying & Booking Guide: The Stewardesses," 1365.
- ¹⁵² Ibid.
- ¹⁵³ "The Stewardesses," *Variety*, September 16, 1970, 24.
- ¹⁵⁴ "Pictures: N.Y. Critics' Opinions," *Variety*, September 23, 1970, 7.
- ¹⁵⁵ "Obscenity Report Compromise," *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1970, 34.
- ¹⁵⁶ "Picture Grosses: 'Tora' Wow \$25,000, Denver," *Variety*, October 21, 1970, 10, 12; "Picture Grosses: 'Flap' Fair 7G, Cleve.; 'Stewardesses' Peak \$68,600 2 Wks., 'Magee' 41/2G," *Variety*, December 2, 1970, 10.
- ¹⁵⁷ "'Stewardesses' Tall 27G, D.C.," *Variety*, November 18, 1970, 10.
- ¹⁵⁸ "'Stewardesses' B.O. \$10-Mil," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 5.
- ¹⁵⁹ Picture Grosses pages, *Variety*, October 21, 1970, 9, 12.
- ¹⁶⁰ "Pictures: 'Denmark' Verdict Sept. 25," *Variety*, September 23, 1970, 5.
- ¹⁶¹ "'Stewardesses' B.O. \$10-Mil," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 5.
- ¹⁶² Addison Verrill, "'Stewardesses' Into Ben Sack's Big One," *Variety*, February 3, 1971, 5; "The Stewardesses," *The Independent Film Journal*, September 30, 1970, 1365.
- ¹⁶³ *The Stewardesses* also went on to play multi-week runs in Chicago and Los Angeles. "Stewardesses B.O. \$10-Mil," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 5.
- ¹⁶⁴ Addison Verrill, "'Stewardesses' Into Ben Sack's Big One," *Variety*, February 3, 1971, 5.
- ¹⁶⁵ "'Stewardesses' Gross Hits \$4,000,000, Sher Reports," *Boxoffice*, April 12, 1971, 8.
- ¹⁶⁶ "'The Stewardesses' Doubles Average 2nd Week in Buffalo," *Boxoffice*, April 5, 1971, E2.
- ¹⁶⁷ "'Stewardesses' Gross Hits \$4,000,000," 8.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁹ "'Stewardesses' Attracts Detroit's Best Boxoffice Support," *Boxoffice*, July 5, 1971, ME1.
- ¹⁷⁰ "'Stewardesses' 350 In Rainy Mill City," *Boxoffice*, May 31, 1971, NC7.
- ¹⁷¹ "'Andromeda,' 'The Stewardesses' Foremost Portland Grossers," *Boxoffice*, June 21, 1971, W4.

- ¹⁷² "'Stewardesses' B.O. \$10-Mil," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 5.
- ¹⁷³ "'Stewardesses' B.O. \$10-Mil," 5.
- ¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷⁵ "Sexy 'Stewardesses': 'Subsequents' Romp," *Variety*, November 3, 1971, 25.
- ¹⁷⁶ "'Stewardesses' Injunction Dissolved in Nashville," *Boxoffice*, April 12, 1971, SE1. *Boxoffice* reported, "The court held that if it is booked again in Nashville that the district attorney must be notified in advance so courts may conduct hearings into the question of whether it's obscene under the Tennessee anti-obscenity law."
- ¹⁷⁷ "Financial: 'Stewardesses' Loses, 4-3, In Louisiana," *Variety*, December 27, 1972, 18.
- ¹⁷⁸ "'The Stewardesses' Grounded in Canton," *Boxoffice*, July 5, 1971, ME3.
- ¹⁷⁹ "'Stewardesses' Fly 'R'-ight To More Playoff; Latest In Re-Rate Game," *Variety*, September 13, 1972, 6.
- ¹⁸⁰ "General Cinema Removes X Movies From Drive-In," *Boxoffice*, April 20, 1970, C1. For example, in 1970, General Cinema theater chain in Griffith, Illinois, refused to play any 'X'-rated films at drive-ins; "X Films Distract Drivers," *Boxoffice*, June 22, 1970, E7. In Jersey City, 'X'-rated drive-in screenings reportedly caused a Sunday night traffic jam, leading to multiple obscenity complaints in the area.
- ¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸³ "Motion Pictures Rated By The Code & Rating Administration," *Boxoffice*, August 14, 1972, 9.
- ¹⁸⁴ "'Stewardesses' Fly 'R'-ight To More Playoff; Latest In Re-Rate Game," *Variety*, September 13, 1972, 6.
- ¹⁸⁵ "'Stewardesses' Fly 'R'-ight," 6.
- ¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸⁷ "Pictures: Sherpix Broadens Sex Policy; British Bible Spoof Co-Prod.; Even some 'Saddle' Sagas Set," *Variety*, September 13, 1972, 5. Sher purchased several non-sexploitation films at the 1972 Cannes Festival.
- ¹⁸⁸ "Many Indie X-Filmmakers Turning To R Films: Atlanta Constitution," *Boxoffice*, November 20, 1972, SE1; Syd Silverman, "351 Films Above \$100,000 Gross," *Variety*, May 3, 1972, 32, 34.
- ¹⁸⁹ "Sher, Craddock Get New Trials; Many Guilty as to 'School Girl,'" *Variety*, August 3, 1977, 3; "No Re-Trial for Louis K. Sher," *Variety*, August 20, 1975, 5.
- ¹⁹⁰ Heffernan, "Prurient (Dis)interest," 122. Heffernan writes that the Memphis district attorney's office that prosecuted *School Girl* would also convict Harry Reems for performing in *Deep Throat*.
- ¹⁹¹ "Sher Personally Free, Sherpix, Art Guild Fined On Obscenity," *Variety*, April 4 1979, 22.
- ¹⁹² "No Re-Trial for Louis K. Sher," *Variety*, August 20, 1975, 5.
- ¹⁹³ *Ibid.* Later, the case was actually dismissed, and Sher's record was expunged.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* See also "Shiffrin Heir ID 'Milder' Sherpix," *Variety*, February 20, 1974, 5.
- ¹⁹⁵ "27 Newspapers Ban 'X' Ads," *The Independent Film Journal*, December 23, 1969, 3.
- ¹⁹⁶ "Only Jacksonville Papers Ban X, Unrated Film Ads," *Boxoffice*, January 26, 1970, SE1.
- ¹⁹⁷ "NATO Convention: Boston Paper X's Out all X Ads," *Variety*, October 27, 1971, 6.
- ¹⁹⁸ Addison Verrill, "Pictures: No X or R in Oklahoma Ads," *Variety*, March 21, 1973, 5, 28.
- ¹⁹⁹ "U.S. Dailies with Policies Re X, R," *Variety*, May 24, 1972, 1.
- ²⁰⁰ Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 39.s
- ²⁰¹ "Many Indie X-Filmmakers Turning To R Films: Atlanta Constitution," *Boxoffice*, November 20, 1972, SE1.
- ²⁰² "Many Indie X-Filmmakers Turning To R Films," SE1.
- ²⁰³ *Ibid.*, SE5.
- ²⁰⁴ "Yanks Out-Sexploit Europe," *Variety*, May 12, 1971, 238.
- ²⁰⁵ "Many Indie X-Filmmakers Turning To R Films: Atlanta Constitution," *Boxoffice*, November 20, 1972, SE5.
- ²⁰⁶ "Laissez-Faire Porn Attitudes Grow; Cite High- Cost, Low Conviction Ratio," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 29, 1974, 5, 18.
- ²⁰⁷ "Pictures: Dixie Porn Shippers Under Fed. Indictment," *Variety*, June 25, 1975, 7.
- ²⁰⁸ "Many Indie X-Filmmakers Turning To R Films: Atlanta Constitution," *Boxoffice*, November 20, 1972, SE1.
- ²⁰⁹ Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 41.
- ²¹⁰ Arthur S. De Vany, *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004), 68.
- ²¹¹ The nurse cycle included *The Student Nurses* (1970, dir. Stephanie Rothman), *Private Duty Nurses* (1971), *Night Call Nurses* (1972), *The Young Nurses* (1973), and *Candy Stripe Nurses* (1974). The women-in-person cycle

included *The Big Doll House* (1971), *Women in Cages* (1971), *The Hot Box* (1971), *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), *The Big Bust Out* (1973), and *Caged Heat* (1974).

²¹² Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies*, 166-167.

²¹³ Ibid, 180. Corman states, "It [formation of New World] was simply that I wanted to turn a profit and maintain greater control. Very few independents control their own distribution and turn out consistently commercial products. I wanted to be one of those who did."

²¹⁴ "New World Pictures Launches Program," *Boxoffice*, June 29, 1970, 5.

²¹⁵ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies*, 183.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 184.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 187-8.

²¹⁹ Joe Dante, "Candy Stripe Nurses," *Trailers From Hell*, last accessed March 1, 2016,

<https://trailersfromhell.com/candy-stripe-nurses/>.

²²⁰ "Corman Formula," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 25, 1972, 35. Corman explained: "I frankly doubt the left-wing bent, or message was crucial to the success of the films we would do. But it was important to the filmmakers and to me that we have something to say within the films." Corman has said that the political elements grant the films a topicality, responding to cultural events and trends at the time.

²²¹ "Howard Mahler in Charge New World Pictures, East," *Boxoffice*, July 6, 1970, 6; Addison Verrill, "Yanks Out-Sexploit Europe," *Variety*, May 12, 1971, 1, 238.

²²² Syd Cassyd, "Roger Corman of New World Is Bullish Over 'Cries and Whispers' Potential," *Boxoffice*, January 22, 1973, 11.

²²³ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies*, 187-8.

²²⁴ "Advent of Spring Ups Minneapolis Grosses," *Boxoffice*, March 29, 1971, NC1.

²²⁵ Dante, "Candy Stripe Nurses."

²²⁶ "Corman Formula," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 25, 1972, 69, 13.

²²⁷ David Lerner, "A Taste For Trash: The Persistence of Exploitation In American Cinema, 1960-1975," PhD Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2012, 16-17, 32.

²²⁸ Heffernan, "Prurient (Dis)Interest," 112.

²²⁹ Ibid, 118.

²³⁰ Murf, "Film Reviews: The Student Nurses," *Variety*, September 23, 1970, 22.

²³¹ Murf, "Film Reviews: The Student Nurses," 22. Murf wrote, "Pic is an exploitation item to be sure, but beyond those angles, general audiences will find a surprising depth."

²³² "Feature Reviews: Night Call Nurses," *Boxoffice*, August 7, 1972, B11.

²³³ "Contact: Blue Ribbon Pictures, Inc.," *Boxoffice*, February 22, 1971, SE3. "Branch and Sub-Distribution Offices," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 23-24, 26, 35-38, 40-46, 48. In 1972, Atco Gibraltar Corp. handled Atlanta; Frontier Amusements handled Buffalo; Galaxy Film Exchange handled Charlotte; William Lange handled Chicago; J.M.G. films handled Cincinnati; Selected Pictures Corp. handled Cleveland; Starline Corp. handled Dallas and Memphis; McCulloch Film Distributing handled Des Moines and Milwaukee; Thomas Film Distributing handled Kansas City; Crest Film Distributors did Los Angeles; Masterpiece Pictures handled New Orleans; Howard Mahler Films handled New York; Alan Pictures handled Philadelphia; and Jerome Sandy, owned by AIP, handled DC.

²³⁴ "New World Pictures Opens Offices in Pittsburgh," *Boxoffice*, March 8, 1976, 9.

²³⁵ Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies*, 183. "Prints can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500. That means \$1 million or more out of the distributor's pocket for prints. We would buy maybe one hundred or two hundred prints at first and spend \$100,000 to \$200,000."

²³⁶ "Pictures Grosses: 'Dreams' Okay \$8,000," *Variety*, October 7, 1970, 8.

²³⁷ "Picture Grosses: 'McCain' Hot 32G, Dayton; 'Joe' 11G," *Variety*, October 21, 1970, 8.

²³⁸ "Picture Grosses: 'Kotch' Sharp \$9,000 In Seattle: 'Nurses' Fair 6G," *Variety*, November 10, 1971, 12, 18.

²³⁹ "Picture Grosses: TOT Dim \$16,800, Cleve.," *Variety*, October 21, 1970, 12.

²⁴⁰ "Picture Grosses: 'Halsy' Nice 10G, K.C.; 'Girl' \$6,000," *Variety*, November 4, 1970, 11.

²⁴¹ "Pictures Grosses: 'Student Nurses' Big \$161,000, LA.," *Variety*, November 25, 1970, 9.

²⁴² "Pictures Grosses: 'Poppa' Loud 15G, Det.; 'Norway' 50G," *Variety*, December 23, 1970, 12.

²⁴³ "Picture Grosses: 'Omega' Wow \$51,000, 'Soul' Record 80G, 'Sex Machine' Hot \$22,000, 'Love Machine' Fat 33G 2d, 'Tent' 12G," *Variety*, Aug 25, 1971, 8.

- ²⁴⁴ "Pictures Grosses: 'Foot' Huge \$13,500, Frisco; 'Nurses' Healthy 12G, 'Deep End' Shallow 3G," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 10, 14; "Pictures Grosses: 'Gun' Modest 7G, K.C.; 'Jump' 10G," *Variety*, September 22, 1971, 8; "Picture Grosses: Tapes' Smooth \$13,700, Dayton; 7 Mins.' Sharp \$32,400, Triday' \$1,700," *Variety*, August 25, 1971, 10.
- ²⁴⁵ "New World Pictures Inc.," *The Independent Film Journal*, August 3, 1972, 23; "'Charleston Blue' Hits 310 In KC Multiple Opener," *Boxoffice*, September 4, 1972, C1.
- ²⁴⁶ "Pictures: 'Crude' Rated PG; 'Fly T.N.T.' is R," *Variety*, June 13, 1973, 20.
- ²⁴⁷ "Pictures: 14 Out of 2 Films Rated R By MPAA," *Variety*, May 8, 1974, 33.
- ²⁴⁸ "'Candy Stripe Nurses' Premiere," *Boxoffice*, August 19, 1974, SE7; "Maine," *Boxoffice*, August 19, 1974, NE7.
- ²⁴⁹ "Pictures Grosses: 'Nurses' Nice 20G, K.C.; 'Streets' 4G," *Variety*, June 5 1974, 8, 18.
- ²⁵⁰ "Vermont," *Boxoffice*, August 19, 1974, NE7.
- ²⁵¹ "Picture Grosses: 'Planet' Wow 38½ St.L. 'Fool's 24G," *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 8.
- ²⁵² "'Frankenstein,' 'Lords of Flatbush' Climb to 250 in Denver," *Boxoffice*, September 2, 1974.
- ²⁵³ "'O Lucky Man' Carries Off New Haven Honors," *Boxoffice*, October 22, 1973; "'San Antonio," *Boxoffice*, August 13, 1973, SW2.
- ²⁵⁴ Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy, *King of the Bs: Working within the Hollywood System* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975).
- ²⁵⁵ Christopher T. Koetting, *Mind Warp! The Fantastic True Story of Roger Corman's New World Pictures* (New York: Hemlock Books, 2009), 18.
- ²⁵⁶ "Picture Grosses: Holiday Lifts Hub," *Variety*, September 6, 1967, 8, 18.
- ²⁵⁷ "Picture Grosses: 'Funny' Grand 35G," *Variety*, October 30, 1968, 9, 11.
- ²⁵⁸ *Boxoffice* reported that *The Erotic Adventures of Zorro* had an atypical world premiere in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, San Jose, California, and San Antonio, Texas. *Boxoffice* noted that the film was slated in drive-ins in these three cities which was "not the usual adult situation." "'Erotic Adventures of Zorro' Premieres in Three Cities," *Boxoffice*, August 21, 1972, 8.
- ²⁵⁹ Arthur De Vany, *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2004), 56. De Vany writes that the length of hits' runs are less standardized and predictable than the runs of non-hits.
- ²⁶⁰ Andrews, *Soft in the Middle*, 73.
- ²⁶¹ "'Red' Jacobs Forms Crown Distributors," *Boxoffice*, November 6, 1961, 22.
- ²⁶² "Crown International Pitches For Pix Via Indies' 'Marketing Flexibility,'" *Variety*, February 21, 1979, 49.
- ²⁶³ "Shrewd Product Selectivity Is Key To Crown's Success," *The Independent Film Journal*, January 6, 1972, 10.
- ²⁶⁴ "Shrewd Product Selectivity," 10.
- ²⁶⁵ "A Company On The Rise With An 'Ear-To-The-Ground,'" *The Independent Film Journal*, October 30, 1970, 12.
- ²⁶⁶ "A Company On The Rise," 12.
- ²⁶⁷ "Shrewd Product Selectivity Is Key To Crown's Success," *The Independent Film Journal*, January 6, 1972, 10.
- ²⁶⁸ "'Trying To Give The Public What They Can't See on TV,'" *The Independent Film Journal*, March 4, 1974, 73.
- ²⁶⁹ "'Trying To Give The Public,'" 73.
- ²⁷⁰ *Superchick* original press kit, author's own purchased on Ebay.
- ²⁷¹ "The Teacher Policewomen," *Boxoffice*, November 25, 1974, SE3.
- ²⁷² "'Trying To Give The Public,'" 73.
- ²⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷⁴ "Marilyn Tenser Film is Featured in AFI Salute," *Boxoffice*, November 24, 1975, 9.
- ²⁷⁵ "Special NATO Award to Marilyn J. Tenser," *Boxoffice*, October 18, 1976, 4.
- ²⁷⁶ "Crown Int'l to Celebrate 15th Anniversary in '74," 5; "Marilyn Tenser Film is Featured in AFI Salute," *Boxoffice*, November 24, 1975, 9.
- ²⁷⁷ "Feature Reviews: Superchick," *Boxoffice*, July 30, 1973, A11.
- ²⁷⁸ "Feature Reviews: Superchick," A11.
- ²⁷⁹ "Feature Reviews: Policewomen," *Boxoffice*, April 22, 1974, A5.
- ²⁸⁰ "Crown Product: Ready, Readying," *Variety*, October 9, 1974, 3, 78; "Crown's Summer Films Heat Up \$1-Mil at B.O.," *Variety*, September 4, 1974.
- ²⁸¹ "Chicago," *Boxoffice*, November 26, 1973, C4.
- ²⁸² "Favorite Films of California, Inc.," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 25, 1973, 49.

²⁸³ "Peak 'Superchick' Grosses Reported by Crown Intl'l," *Boxoffice*, July 2, 1973, 12.

²⁸⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Poppins' Merry \$13,300, Dayton; 'Dillinger' Socko \$7,200, 'Super Chick' 23G," *Variety*, July 25, 1973, 12; "Des Moines," *Boxoffice*, July 8, 1974, NC4; "'Last Tango' Substantial 250 Fourth Week in Hartford," *Boxoffice*, June 25, 1973, NE2; "Picture Grosses: 'Superchick' Sexy 12G, Frisco; 'Coffy' Socko \$31,000, 'River' Good \$43,000," *Variety*, June 13, 1973, 10, 12.

²⁸⁵ "Tenser Calls 'Superchick' Crown's Biggest Grosser," *Boxoffice*, October 8, 1973, 9.

²⁸⁶ "Crown Product: Ready, Ready," *Variety*, October 9, 1974, 3, 78; "Crown's Summer Films Heat Up \$1-Mil at B.O.," *Variety*, September 4, 1974.

²⁸⁷ "'Teacher,' 'Policewomen' Generating Top Grosses," *Boxoffice*, June 10, 1974, 4.

²⁸⁸ "'Gordon' Slick 22G, Det," *Variety*, November 27, 1974, 10, 18.

²⁸⁹ "This Week's N.Y. Showcases," *Variety*, September 18, 1974, 8.

²⁹⁰ Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 226.

²⁹¹ Levine, *Wallowing in Sex*, 226.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

Figure 1: *The Stewardesses* (1969) one sheet



Figure 2: *The Student Nurses* (1970) one sheet

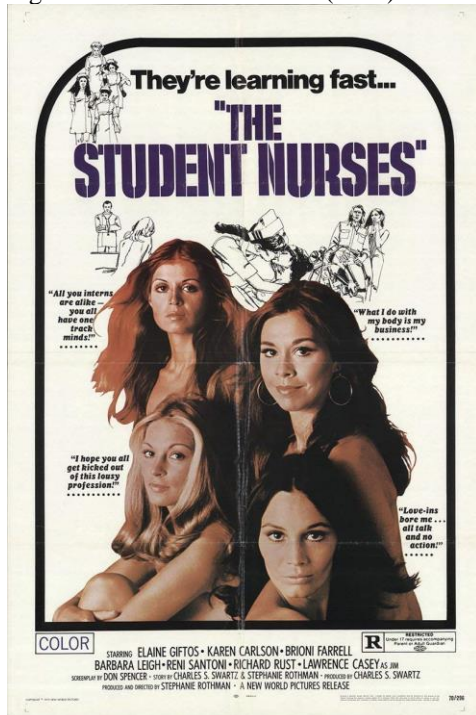
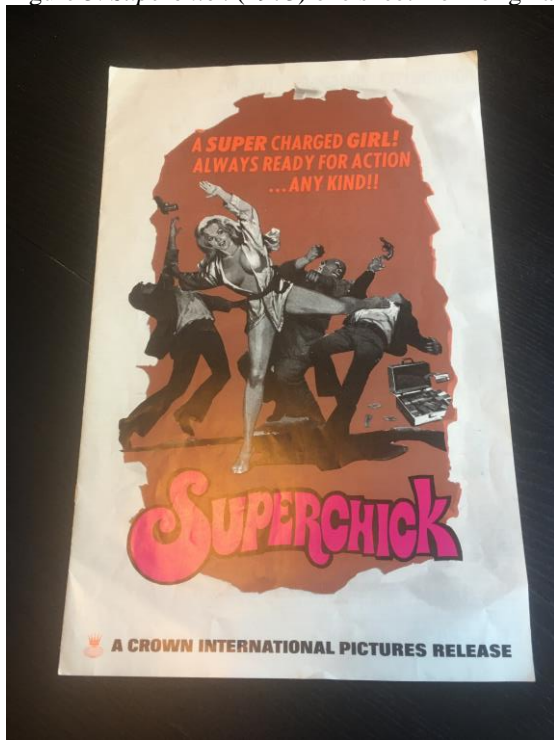


Figure 3: *Superchick* (1973) one sheet from original press kitFigure 4: *Fanny Hill* (1969) one sheet from original press kit

CHAPTER THREE: HOLLYWOOD COMES TO HARLEM: THE BLACK EXPLOITATION FILM, 1971–1976

The black action film, or ‘blaxploitation,’ cycle of the early-to-mid-1970s further complicated the creative and economic exchange among the majors and the independents. While sexploitation revealed a one-way dynamic of innovation and influence, blaxploitation took the form of an interdependent exchange between the majors and independents. Influenced by the civil rights and black power movements, black independent filmmakers drew interest from commercial distributors. Thus, the catalysts of the blaxploitation era—the iconic films that spurred that exploitation cycles at AIP and other companies—were released by major studios in the case of *Super Fly* and produced by the studios, as in the case of *Shaft*. These catalysts spurred the prolific black exploitation cycle at AIP. By 1973 or so, the recession was showing signs of lifting, and the major studios had stopped releasing blaxploitation films, while AIP released several black action films on a yearly basis. The company also attempted to rejuvenate the blaxploitation cycle, following up their action films with a drama like *Cooley High*, which retained elements of blaxploitation but was not sold as an exploitation film. Thus, blaxploitation buoyed some independents’ fortunes, including that of American International Pictures, who participated only rarely in sexploitation.

Scholarship on blaxploitation has often focused on plot and narrative rather than on industry. Through an analysis at the level of production, distribution, and exhibition, this chapter provides new information about blaxploitation and represents a significant contribution to discourse on blaxploitation. First, it reveals a role reversal, as United Artists, MGM, and Warner Bros. made low-risk investments in black action films *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), *Shaft* (1971), and *Super Fly* (1972), becoming innovators of the exploitation cycle. Second, the chapter

offers an in-depth analysis of blaxploitation's theatrical distribution. While scholarship on blaxploitation relies on general assessments of a 'black audience,' the chapter links the watershed blaxploitation films to the locales in which they played. This analysis reveals a stable market for blaxploitation in the Northeast and Midwest with little evidence of crossover effect, an important finding that accounts for the majors' only brief involvement in the cycle.

Blaxploitation: A Recession-Era Cycle

Blaxploitation is seen as a landmark moment in American film when the mainstream film industry acknowledged black viewers for the first time and as a cycle that provided unprecedented opportunity to black writers, directors, and performers. While the sexploitation trend represented a form of product differentiation that the independents almost wholly dominated, the films that first started the blaxploitation cycle were produced and/or released by the major studios. Indeed, exploitation independents' involvement in the blaxploitation cycle was characterized by a form of *imitation* and not product differentiation. Prompted by the industry recession to look beyond their traditional revenue streams, many of the major studios made a calculated decision to attract the black audience they had largely ignored. Hollywood's support of black talent was motivated by economic interest and not any ideological commitment to diversity or inclusivity. In short, major studio involvement in the black action film was brief and economically driven, an effort to capitalize on a market segment while maintaining a risk-averse strategy during the recession. With regard to the blaxploitation film, the major studios behaved as exploiters. Indeed, just as the exploitation independents' development of 'R'-rated sexploitation was a form of risk avoidance, the studios' support of the blaxploitation cycle was also linked to strategies of risk management. Black action films would provide diversification

during a time when Hollywood studios were searching for any film formula that would work. Further illustrating the complex causality between the major studios and exploitation independents, the blaxploitation film cycle imitated Hollywood's negative pick-ups. As the final section of the chapter will reveal, a concurrent cycle of sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrid films, released by AIP and New World Pictures and starring Pam Grier, represented a dynamic of exploitation/exploitation imitation.

Blaxploitation was a cycle begun at the end of the industry recession; from 1970–1972, 51 films with black audience appeal were made.¹ By 1974, *Variety* reported over 100 films with “direct or marginal interest to the black audience.”² Indeed, Keith Corson observes that from 1972–1976, the percentage of black-themed movies was 16%, a greater percentage than the percentage of the US population that was African American, 12–13%.³ Each of the major studios were involved in the cycle. United Artists released such films as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Across 100th Street* (1972). Warner Bros. released *Super Fly* and *Black Belt Jones* (1974). Columbia Pictures released *Watermelon Man* (1970) and *Black Gunn* (1972). Paramount released *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972) and *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973). MGM released *Shaft*. Universal released *Trick Baby* (1972) and *That Man Bolt* (1973). As the chapter will show, after the majors stopped releasing black action films around 1973, the exploitation independents took over, sustaining the cycle through 1975–1976.

Literature Review and Definitions

Blaxploitation was a cycle within the broader black film boom of the 1970s, a movement of black-themed and black-oriented films made by black filmmakers, writers, and craftspeople. The black film boom encompassed dramas, comedies, documentaries, genre films, star vehicles,

and historical dramas. The movement included such diverse releases as high-budget films like *The Wiz* (1978) and micro-budget releases like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). The chapter investigates the place of black exploitation in 1970s black film production. 'Black exploitation' and 'blaxploitation' are used interchangeably in this chapter. The two terms describe a discrete segment of the black film boom that occupied a low cultural status. These films were typically low budget, independently produced (though sometimes major studio pick-ups) and were set in contemporary urban settings populated by black characters. Blaxploitation typically traded on genre film tropes that involved action, stock characters, and racially caricatured representations of prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers, gangs, and 'whitey' police officers. Due to their depiction of violence and representations of sexuality, much of blaxploitation was 'R'-rated. In recent years, the term 'black action' has come to be used in tandem with blaxploitation and black exploitation. This term comes with some disadvantages, as the 'action' component ignores blaxploitation horror films like *Blacula* (1972) or *Abby* (1974) and documentaries like *Wattstax* (1973). In this chapter, I use the labels 'black action,' 'blaxploitation,' and 'black exploitation' interchangeably to refer to the blaxploitation corpus, which encompassed a range of genre films released from 1970–1975 and geared to black viewers.

Critics and scholars have grappled with a central tension, observing the negative reception of blaxploitation among black leaders and artists, on the one hand, and acknowledging the unprecedented representation of black workers in Hollywood and of images of black bodies, on the other. Christopher Sieving has noted that a first generation of critics and scholars reconciled these divergent viewpoints by dismissing blaxploitation as compromised by white studio influence, not truly black, and therefore bereft of aesthetic or cultural merit.⁴ Another

group of scholars bypassed the thorny issue of authorship altogether by analyzing images of black identity onscreen and by placing less emphasis on production context; Donald Bogle's landmark 1973 *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* cataloged racial stereotypes used in Hollywood films since the studio system. Bogle derided blaxploitation for its replication of masculine tropes, including the hypersexual and violent masculine 'black buck' images.⁵ Daniel Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade* (1975) similarly identified the pervasively negative representations that dehumanized and denigrated blackness in American films.⁶ Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) showed how Hollywood's profit motive resulted in the marginalization of black-themed films during the studio and post-studio era.⁷ A new generation of scholars that includes Yvonne Sims, Stephane Dunn, and Mia Mask have analyzed the gendered and racial dimensions of black action films with a focus on the female heroines of the cycle.⁸ Such monographs investigate blaxploitation from an intersectional perspective, paying attention to gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity.

The cultural studies tradition has brought much-needed legitimacy within academe to a corpus of films dismissed by earlier discourses as corrupted by their context of production or as aesthetic detritus. Since 2010, at least two studies have troubled the typical historiographic narrative of blaxploitation as a cycle that emerged quickly and disappeared just as fast.

Christopher Sieving's *Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* presents a compelling industrial history of the often-ignored black-themed features of the 1960s and their influence on the black film boom of the 1970s.⁹ Sieving shows that blaxploitation did not develop out of thin air but resulted from concrete shifts in story development and marketing among major studios after the financial failure of black-themed films of the 1960s. Modeled after Sieving's book, Keith Corson's *Trying to Get Over: African*

American Directors After Blaxploitation, 1977–1986 concerns the period after the black film boom's end.¹⁰ Through an analysis of prominent black-themed *auteurs* ranging from Michael Schultz to Fred Williamson, Corson de-centers 1970s blaxploitation from scholarly considerations of black film production. The work of both Sieving and Corson illustrates renewed historical attention to African American cinema surrounding the black action film.

This chapter examines the blaxploitation cycle through the dual lens of exploitation cycles of the 1970s and of the industry recession. It highlights how the cycle developed in a manner quite different from the sexploitation cycle, while occurring roughly concurrently with sexploitation. Exploitation independents adopted blaxploitation as a method of *imitation* rather than *product differentiation*. Rather than zig where majors zagged (as had been done with sexploitation), independent distributors followed the majors' lead in developing black-themed genre films. Blaxploitation also showed similarities to sexploitation, however. Blaxploitation was a low stakes form of risk-taking that saw the studios pursuing unconventional product through modest investments in pick-up deals. In a sense, the Hollywood establishment were the exploiters of the blaxploitation cycle, capitalizing on underfunded new talent and an audience group the studios had themselves marginalized. Thus, the chapter shows the curious relationship of influence among the major studios and independent distributors and reassesses the common notion that blaxploitation represented a moment of progressivism in Hollywood. Through an analysis of the majors' films that initiated the blaxploitation cycle—*Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, *Super Fly*—and the independent releases that sustained it—*Coffy* (1973) and *Cooley High*—, the chapter highlights the shifting relationship between the majors and independents as the industry recession continued.

Section I: Studio-Sponsored Blaxploitation and the Beginning of Blaxploitation:

Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971)

The majors' development of the blaxploitation cycle was a direct response to their economic frailty during the recession. As noted in Chapter Two, during the industry recession, United Artists had been hemorrhaging money on unsuccessful films made under David Picker, who ran the studio after Transamerica purchased the company in 1967. In 1970, Arthur Krim returned to the studio to discover UA had put films in production with little chance of making back costs. Balio writes that Krim "determined that thirty-five films placed in production in late 1968 or 1969, costing a total of \$80 million, would lose in the neighborhood of \$50 million."¹¹ To claim losses for tax purposes, Krim provided UA's auditors and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) with assessments of the films predicted to lose money. On *The Landlord* (1970), a film directed by Hal Ashby that explores issues of racism and housing discrimination from the perspective of a white male protagonist, Krim wrote:

This is still a type of film we intend to continue to make but at one-quarter the cost. Unfortunately, at the time this film was programmed, unrealistic optimism about the potential audience for this type [sic] film prevailed.¹²

The commercial disappointment of *The Landlord* did not deter United Artists from developing other black-oriented films. UA's pick-up of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* facilitated just this: an opportunity for the company to test the audience for a black-themed film while managing their risk. Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, an adaptation of the 1964 Chester Himes crime novel, is often credited as the first breakout film in the black action cycle. Other black-themed films were released in 1970. These included Melvin Van Peebles' *Watermelon Man* (1970), *The*

Landlord, and *They Call Me Mister Tibbs* (1970). However, unlike these previous films, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was not simply a film about racism but a film made in Harlem with an all-black cast and crew.¹³ *Cotton Comes to Harlem* foregrounded stories about black characters within the frame of the action and crime genre, a formula that would typify the blaxploitation cycle.

Cotton Comes to Harlem was significant in the blaxploitation cycle for many reasons; however, the significance of United Artists' negative pick-up deal is often overlooked. Ed Guerrero, for example, locates the film's importance in its articulation of an emerging black film style and makes no mention of the production deal.¹⁴ Producer Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., produced the film for a reported budget of \$1.2 million; other sources cite a cost of \$2.8 million.¹⁵ United Artists became involved through a negative pick-up deal. A negative pick-up is a business arrangement in which a studio will purchase an already-made film for the price of the negative cost of the film. The studio will take on costs of distribution, including prints and advertising. Jeffrey Ulin characterizes negative pick-up deals as a form of risk aversion.¹⁶ The distributor managed the risk associated with the creative product by viewing some version of the final film before making the deal. In a negative pick-up deal, the costs the distributor will incur are also fixed, as the negative costs have already been sunk. This deal allowed UA to manage risk during the recession in a fixed outlay of costs with a significant return on investment. At the same time, the pick-up deal gave *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, and black action films more generally, the public visibility of a national release. Even if they preempt unexpected cost overruns, negative pick-ups can still be deemed a bad deal or an unsatisfactory return on investment, as the studios' experiences with black action films will reveal.

Cotton Comes to Harlem follows cop partners Gravedigger Jones (Godfrey Cambridge) and Coffin Ed Johnson (Raymond St. Jacques). When conman Reverend Deke O'Malley's (Calvin Lockhart) Back-to-Africa fundraiser is ripped off, Jones and Johnson investigate who pulled off the robbery and where the money is hidden. Ultimately, the money is found in a cotton bale that Uncle Budd (Redd Foxx) purchases and which is featured in a performance in the Apollo Theater. When Jones and Johnson uncover Deke as the swindler at the end of the film, Ed Coffin says to Deke in a scene beat, "When you steal from white folks, that's your business. When you steal from black folks that's my business." Delivered by police officers, the line underscores the themes of black solidarity in a white, corrupt world, a theme that appears influential on the general tone and tenor of other blaxploitation films. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is also striking for placing the film's MacGuffin in a cotton bale, an item with obvious historical racial signification. Himes' source material provided a thematic richness that Davis retains, which links the film strongly to a specific time and place—Harlem in the 1960s.

Certain stylistic features of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* were also influential. First, the film begins with a song in the credits, "Ain't Now But It's Gonna Be," written by Ossie Davis and performed by Melba Moore. The lyrics of the song, "Ain't now but it's gonna be / black enough for me" plays over the credits and delivers a message of black pride. While the theme song was also found in sexploitation at the time, the emphasis on R&B and soul music was a distinguishing characteristic of blaxploitation throughout the cycle.¹⁷ Another feature of the film's opening appeared to be influential on *Super Fly*. The film begins with the camera following O'Malley's gold Cadillac through Harlem using mobile framing that also shows landmarks of Harlem, including the Apollo Theater. Moreover, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* features a quasi-*verité* filmmaking style. The interiors are shot on sets, but many of the exteriors appear

filmed in Harlem. The on-location shooting provides evidence of the film's authenticity as a black film made in Harlem, an approach seen in *Super Fly* and in *Shaft*. Guerrero writes that *Cotton Comes to Harlem* "influenced the pacing and the formal visual-musical elements that would go into the construction of the crime-action-ghetto Blaxploitation features to follow."¹⁸

Cotton Comes to Harlem registered with white and black critics as an 'authentic' representation of black life. *Variety* said the film was an "auspicious" start for first-time director Davis and praised the on-location mise-en-scene and cinematography for "giving Harlem a brazen brawly [*sic*] look that is perfect for the tale told."¹⁹ *Variety* praised Davis for keeping Himes' 'local color' without reverting to stereotype.²⁰ The *Chicago Daily Defender* called it a "fabulous black oriented comedy." The reviewer observed:

It does not dig into our social ills, but neither does the movie permit facts to pass unnoticed. It is the most relevant contemporary film which this columnist has seen filled with jargon of the street and the language of the middle class.²¹

Failing to acknowledge the film's black audience, *Variety* suggested the market for the film was white liberals and black viewers, anticipating it would do well in the 'Liberation of L.B. Jones' market" and predicting "heavy boxoffice response in big cities" and less success in "Dixie."²² *Cotton Comes to Harlem* won several NAACP Image Awards, including those for best script, production, supporting actor, and musical score.²³

The one sheet for *Cotton Comes to Harlem* also provided a template for how black action films could be sold [Figure 5]. Overall, the visually striking one sheet signaled the film's genre, emphasizing action, rather than suggesting any kind of sober investigation of "race issues." The design foregrounds the action elements—the gun—and signifiers of black life including black

bodies and a Cadillac-type car. There are also some sexploitation type elements—with women in little clothing. The overall graphic design is colorful and kaleidoscopic, perhaps influenced by the psychedelia of the time. United Artists' marketing of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* indicated an effort to create commercial packaging that would appeal to black audiences.

Releasing the film at the beginning of the summer season, United Artists booked *Cotton Comes to Harlem* primarily in downtown theaters in urban cities with large black populations. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* premiered in Chicago at the Woods Theatre at the beginning of the summer season right after Memorial Day, on May 27, 1970. At the Woods, the film had record grosses during the first five days of release, earning as much as \$15,000 a day and taking in \$65,000 in five days.²⁴ (Located in the Chicago Loop, the Woods was developing an association for playing black-themed UA-released films; *They Call Me Mister Tibbs* and *Halls of Anger* (1970) both played at the Woods in 1970.²⁵) That same week, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* set an opening day record at the Palms Theatre in Detroit of \$8,500. The film continued to play the Palms for over 10 weeks.²⁶ In June, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* moved to additional cities. It played Baltimore's downtown Hippodrome Theatre.²⁷ In New York, the film played at the Harlem DeMille Theatre and the 86th Street East Theatre to record earnings of over \$100,000 in five days.²⁸ By July, a United Artists ad showed *Cotton Comes to Harlem* had taken in \$3 million in 50 theaters and nine cities.²⁹ In July, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was playing the Crestwood, State, and Village in St. Louis, and in Louisville at the Kentucky.³⁰ Other cities included Seattle, Los Angeles at the Village, and Houston.³¹ The film also played in Cleveland where it had a "record take at the Embassy and mighty coin at the Cedar-Lee and Detroit."³² It also played the Minneapolis State, in three Kansas City theaters, in Washington D.C., and in Denver at two drive-ins.³³ *Cotton Comes to Harlem* stayed on *Variety*'s top grossing chart for

two months in the top five position during the summer of 1970, having taken in rentals of \$2.7 million by that date.³⁴ In September, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* played the Castor and Duchess in Philadelphia, the Pittsburgh Gateway, and San Francisco's Loews.³⁵ The above distribution information reflects what Chapter One's distribution study revealed about blaxploitation: the strong predominance of bookings in metropolitan key cities, particularly in the North and Midwest.

By releasing *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in Midwestern and Northern urban areas, including Chicago, Baltimore, New York City, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C., United Artists was targeting the highest black population areas in the United States. In the First Great Migration from 1910–1940, many black Americans moved out of the South to industrial and manufacturing centers in the North and Midwest. During the Great Migration, New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Louis experienced a significant increase in their black populations.³⁶ In the Second Great Migration, from 1940–1970, black Migrants moved from the South to cities that had been established as destinations during the First Great Migration, resulting in a rise in the black population of the North and Midwest. By 1970, the US' black population was more heavily urban than the country's white population. As the chapter will show, blaxploitation films were distributed in the cities in the Industrial Midwest and Northeast.

A few examples illustrate blaxploitation's disproportionate circulation in indoor theaters. *Across 110th Street* (1972) [a blaxploitation film included in Chapter One's distribution study] opened in December of 1972 and played indoor theaters including the Hippodrome Theatre in Baltimore and the Woods Theatre in Chicago's Loop throughout January and February 1973. Even in Southern locations with many drive-ins like St. Louis, *Across 110th Street* played in

indoor theaters. This may be due to the segregation of St. Louis, with white residents located in the suburban areas likely to house drive-ins. AIP's *Slaughter* (1972) played in a mix of indoor and drive-in theaters likely because the film was released by AIP. Arkoff has explained that in the late 1950s, AIP initiated a then-novel strategy of releasing films concurrently in hardtops and drive-ins in order to offset costs for better advertising and promotion.³⁷ *Slaughter* played in the indoor Orpheum Theatre in Minneapolis; the indoor Orpheum Theater in New Orleans; Baltimore's hardtop New Theatre; in Dallas at the indoor Capri Theatre and King Drive-In; in San Francisco at the indoor Warfield and Geneva Drive-In; and in Louisville at the indoor Kentucky theater.³⁸ In Los Angeles, *Slaughter's* run at the Pacific Theaters' Pantages on Hollywood Boulevard, at the Compton Drive-In, and at the Vermont Drive-In in Gardena reflected the reach of exploitation films during this period.³⁹ As the examples of *Across 110th Street* and *Slaughter* show, it was not strictly true that blaxploitation did not play drive-ins, a fact rarely mentioned in histories of blaxploitation, but it was true that drive-ins were not blaxploitation's primary distribution market.⁴⁰ In 1973, *Variety* observed that, when compared to general release films whose domestic rentals equaled 150-200% of their key city grosses, both blaxploitation films and sexploitation were aberrations in that these films had higher key city grosses than their eventual domestic earnings.⁴¹ In other words, sexploitation and blaxploitation had their biggest audiences outside of rural or small-town areas.

The distribution study also bears out the strong connection between blaxploitation and urban areas. Indeed, the blaxploitation sample had the sharpest differences in frequency of screening in key cities vs. small towns. The blaxploitation films were booked in an average of 22.5 out of the 31 key cities but only 2.8 out of the 10 small towns. The eight films of the blaxploitation set had the highest number of key city bookings among all sample sets; a total of

11 key cities played all eight of the blaxploitation films sampled. These cities included Denver and Los Angeles in the West; Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and St. Louis in the Midwest; and Baltimore, Boston, Washington DC, New York, and Philadelphia in the East. Significantly, nine of these cities represent the 10 highest population areas in the United States. The study also showed a low number of bookings in the South's key cities, perhaps reflecting social attitudes at the time and/or perceptions in the industry about the likelihood of a black-cast film to profit in the southeast.

Blaxploitation films were played much less frequently in small towns, a difference only seen in the blaxploitation sample. On average, blaxploitation films in the sample played in only 2.8 out of 10 of the small towns. In fact, the blaxploitation cycle was the only cycle that saw several small towns not booking *any* of the films. Billings, Montana, Kingsport, Tennessee, and Nashua, New Hampshire, appeared to play none of the 8 films soon after they were released. The larger towns of Cedar Rapids and Albuquerque also played a handful of blaxploitation titles. In small towns, *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!* had the greatest number of small-town showings (in 6 out of the 10 small towns). This was not surprising as *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs!* starred Sidney Poitier, the black star of the sixties white audiences would have found least threatening. As we will see, the distribution pattern of blaxploitation films hewed closely to this pattern: a disproportionate release in hardtops in high-population metropolitan areas.

This release strategy was apparently successful in reaching a sizeable black audience. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* earned \$5 million in rentals, twice the negative cost. United Artists reported that black audiences accounted for 70% of the film's profits; *Variety* claimed, however, that the number was closer to 85% in urban areas.⁴² Ronald Gold of *Variety* wrote that *Cotton Comes to Harlem* demonstrated "that it is now possible to make pictures aimed specifically for

black filmgoers—and expect to make a substantial profit—without worrying too much about what the rest of the public will think.”⁴³ To some in the industry, the high black turnout was an exciting proposition. One “trade observer” likened the market opportunity in the black audience segment to that of the youth market:

In a way, the Negro market is like the youth market. A substantially higher percentage of this group can be counted as regular moviegoers. An if you can find pictures specially geared to their tastes, you can make a pot of money.⁴⁴

The apparently surprising earnings of the earliest blaxploitation films pointed to an enthusiastic audience for black-themed entertainment. Analysts believed *Cotton Comes to Harlem* to perform especially well because it avoided investigation of “race conflict” and treated the characters “just like anybody else.” *Variety* added, “Those who hold this view compare it in style and overall appeal to the James Bond pix, and express the view that its general storyline and pair of swinging detectives ‘could just as well have been white.’”⁴⁵ *Variety* said that UA, however, had the opinion that black filmgoers were most attracted to the “stereotypes” and “ghetto humor” and hoped that the film would catch on outside the cities, like the Bond franchise did.⁴⁶ Just a year later, United Artists canceled plans to release Goldwyn’s sequel, *Come Back, Charleston Blue* (1972, distr. Warner Bros.), also based on Himes’ novel. United Artists was reportedly disappointed with the film’s profit margin (cited in this source as a \$6 million gross on \$1.5 million cost), a figure *Variety* described as “no higher because pic failed to break out in the white market.”⁴⁷ UA’s risk-reward assessment of an adequate box office take illustrated a disconnect between the majors’ expectations for revenue and actual consumer behavior and plausible profit margins for an exploitation title. While UA pursued a negative pick-up of a black-cast film as

part of a risk averse strategy, the company ultimately deemed the reward, or profit margin, insufficient to motivate future investments.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) and the Independent Blaxploitation Film

While *Cotton Comes to Harlem* accommodated the vision of black filmmaker Davis and novelist Himes within a mainstream format, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* resisted the constraints of Hollywood filmmaking. Guerrero has described the film as “a maverick breakthrough movie.”⁴⁸ Melvin Van Peebles’ feature was a defiantly divisive work that brought a radical and rebellious sensibility to blaxploitation. The film is about Sweet Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles), a young man raised in a brothel who performs in a sex show in Los Angeles. Wrongly accused by the LAPD of murdering a black man and taken into custody, Sweetback beats up two police officers with his handcuffs and escapes. Running from the police, Sweetback makes his way to the Mexico border. On his way, he seeks refuge with an old girlfriend and subsequently a group of Hells Angels. The girlfriend and Hells Angels agree to shelter Sweetback in exchange for sex. Sweetback kills two police officers during a police raid of the Hells Angels hideout. The police put out a manhunt for him, but Sweetback manages to escape across the Mexico border.

While much could be said of this rich, complex, and individualistic work, I will focus on the major ways in which the film influenced the blaxploitation cycle. First, it showed a model of blaxploitation filmmaking absent of studio intervention and even hostile to mainstream institutions. Director of *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles was versed in mainstream conventions but chose to reject them. Van Peebles produced, directed, wrote, edited, starred in, and composed the music for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). Some sources cite \$500,000 as the

film's total cost, though Van Peebles quotes a much lower figure.⁴⁹ The film featured a black cast and involved the participation of non-union black craftspeople. Van Peebles shopped his film to several major studios asking for \$1 million and a percentage of the gross. Unsuccessful with the major studios, Van Peebles struck a negative pick-up distribution deal with Jerry Gross of Cinemation Industries, a company known for its sexploitation releases.⁵⁰ Van Peebles also took the MPAA to task when the film received an 'X' rating. Van Peebles publicly accused Valenti and the MPAA of racism.⁵¹ In a letter to Valenti, Van Peebles wrote that he would not 'self-apply' the 'X' "if such a rating is to be applicable to black audiences." Elsewhere in the letter, Van Peebles accused Valenti of "cultural genocide."⁵² Days before *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*'s premiere in March of 1971, Van Peebles organized a press conference in Hollywood where he threatened to sue the MPAA if he was not given a "nonrating."⁵³ In a letter to Van Peebles, Valenti defended the MPAA's judgment as not made "on the basis of race" but "solely on the basis of informing parents about the content of the film—all parents, black and white."⁵⁴ The 'X' rating remained.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song's soundtrack was also influential. It was only the second soundtrack album released by Stax Records; the first was for Jules Dassin's *Uptight* (1968). Stax Records released Melvin Van Peebles' soundtrack and marketed it to cities that played the film.⁵⁵ Just days later after Stax announced *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*'s soundtrack, *Billboard* reported that Stax would be releasing "Isaac Hayes' soundtrack to the MGM film 'Shaft'"⁵⁶ Thus, *Shaft* further popularized one element of the black action formula: a soundtrack featuring a prominent black artist.

Peebles' defiance of mainstream institutions aligned the film in some unexpected ways with exploitation cinema of the 1970s. Acting like an exploiter himself, Van Peebles used this

kerfuffle as promotional fodder in the film's infamous tagline: "Rated 'X' by an all-white jury." Released by a sexploitation distributor, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was also booked in sexploitation-friendly houses. Cinemation Industries gave the film an official world premiere at the Grand Circus in Detroit on March 31, 1971, where the film played for five days and took in \$45,000, a house record.⁵⁷ A few days later, Cinemation also gave the film a Southern premiere at the Coronet Theatre in Atlanta, where the film took in only \$8,000 over three days.⁵⁸ This low gross may be attributable to lack of lead-up time for promotion. Cinemation booked *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* at the Coronet after Danish sexploitation film *Relations* (1971) had been seized by US Marshals, causing the theater to shut down on March 30.⁵⁹ After the world and Southern premieres, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played in major cities all over the country. It played in Broadway, in Harlem, and in the East Village in Manhattan and in larger New Jersey cities: Newark, Paterson, and New Brunswick. In Chicago, it played the Oriental.⁶⁰ In Philadelphia, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played the Fox where it had the "fourth highest four-week gross in the city's history with a resounding \$188,300."⁶¹ In Los Angeles, it played the Baldwin and Holly.⁶² *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* also played in Boston at the Music Hall, in Washington D.C. at the Loews Palace, and in Cleveland at the Hippodrome and in two drive-ins.⁶³ The film played a more limited run in the South, where it appeared to play only in Memphis and New Orleans.⁶⁴ *Boxoffice* reported the film was the top grossing first-run film in both Memphis and New Orleans.⁶⁵ The above distribution information shows that Cinemation released *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* to key cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and the South—a quite typical distribution pattern for a blaxploitation film.

Van Peebles' vision was highly influential but controversial at the time. Many critics found it to be a compelling and brave film. Daniel Leab writes that white critics condemned the

film and “black commentators found more to praise than did their white colleagues.”⁶⁶ Black film critic Clayton Riley described *Sweetback* as a probing critique of racial violence, writing that “[t]hrough the lens of the Van Peebles camera comes a very basic Black America, unadorned by faith, and seething with an eternal violence.”⁶⁷ Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* called the film “a symbol of defiance of mythical proportions.”⁶⁸ Huey P. Newton devoted the June 19, 1971, issue of *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* to the film, calling it “the first truly revolutionary Black film made.”⁶⁹ The film, which includes multiple scenes of police violence and a rape scene, also had its detractors. In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, black writer Loyle Hairston decried the character of Sweetback as the “Super-phallus incarnate.”⁷⁰ The Kuumba Workshop, a Chicago independent theater group, labeled Van Peebles a “degenerate hustler” for reproducing what they saw as “the same old white Western stereotypes and negative distortions of black life.”⁷¹

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song was a *cause célèbre* and became the 23rd highest grossing film of 1971 with approximately \$4 million in rentals.⁷² In fact, Sherpix's *The Stewardesses* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* were the only two non-major releases ranked among the top 25 films of 1971.⁷³ *Variety* called *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* “one of the first pix to break through in a big way in the so-called [*sic*]Black market.”⁷⁴ The film was also Cinemation Industries' most successful release at that time. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*'s run was similar to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*'s, playing to black viewers in urban downtown theaters and revealing a level of audience enthusiasm for black films unanticipated by Hollywood. Yet, Van Peebles' film presented a defiant and idiosyncratic vision that inspired black independent filmmakers but did not become an easily reproducible model of

blaxploitation filmmaking. Instead, *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, discussed in the next section, followed the more mainstream path set by *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.

Section II: The Cycle Solidifies: Black Blockbusters: *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972)

Cotton Comes to Harlem established a commercial model for the blaxploitation film that the success of *Shaft* solidified. The strong male protagonist and popularity of Isaac Hayes' soundtrack contributed to the film's popularity and led to a rise in black action films and what Leab terms "black superhero" films.⁷⁵ Like United Artists, MGM experienced difficult economic times during the industry recession. MGM reported a stunning loss of \$35 million for the fiscal year of 1969. Investor Kirk Kerkorian sold off the backlot and other assets, and new executive and former CBS head James T. Aubrey, Jr. led the company's restructuring.⁷⁶ Balio writes that "Aubrey canceled \$44 million worth of dubious production deals and consolidated the MGM distribution network."⁷⁷ By 1971, the year *Shaft* was released, a company that had been in a \$35 million deficit had profits of \$9 million.⁷⁸ MGM's development of a low-budget black action hero series aligned with Aubrey's leaner production strategy. While United Artists minimized risk with a negative pick-up, *Shaft* was a co-production between MGM and Shaft Productions, an all-white production company comprised of Roger Lewis, writer Sterling Silliphant (brother of *The Stewardesses*' producer Allan Silliphant), and novelist Ernest Tidyman. *Shaft* was an adaptation of Tidyman's 1970 novel *Shaft* by Tidyman himself and screenwriter John D.F. Black. Gordon Parks, Sr. was hired to direct. Parks recently completed his first feature *The Learning Tree* (1969), itself a film adaptation of Parks' 1964 book released by Warner Bros. Urs Furrer was the cinematographer, and Isaac Hayes wrote the score, which earned him an Academy Award.

Shaft is a film about private detective John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) who is hired by Harlem mafia top-dog Bumpy Jonas (Moses Gunn) to find Bumpy's young daughter, who has been kidnapped by the Italian mob. Like Ed Coffin and Gravedigger Jones, *Shaft* is an independent fellow—he does not show fealty to law enforcement or to the black characters, some of whom, like Bumpy, are affiliated with the mob. Shaft is presented as a lone hero who works by his own code. Like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and inspiring future black action films, *Shaft* begins by defining a sense of place through the on-location shooting, establishing New York as a crime-ridden city that requires John Shaft's brand of toughness. The opening credits feature a telephoto zoom lens from a high angle on the marquees of Times Square over the guitar licks of Isaac Hayes' titular song. The cinematography of Urs Furrer is striking; he shoots through windows, uses whip pans, and captures the chill (visible in the breaths of the actors) and winter light of the January shooting days. Production design also provides a gritty feel, as the film is littered with dingy and deteriorating interior environments. The film also has some exploitation elements such as above-the-waist nudity in a simulated sex scene. While *Shaft* was indeed a “commercial vehicle,” as Guerrero notes, Parks brought stylistic elements that gave the film a strong sense of place.⁷⁹

In adapting Tidyman's novel to the screen, screenwriters Tidyman and Black made several changes to Tidyman's novel that appeared designed to demonstrate credibility with black audiences. Unpublished script edits found in the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences showed revisions that added more urban vernacular. An early script dated January 19, 1971, included a “Master Correction List” that advised adding more streetwise slang, such as changing “wiseacre to wiseass” and “keester” to “rump.”⁸⁰ Additionally, *Variety* reported that Parks made changes to the source material to make the Shaft character more sympathetic.⁸¹ Parks

rewrote Shaft's girlfriend as a black character, who was white in Tidyman's book. Commenting on the decision to change the girlfriend character, Parks explained, "If we expect him [Shaft] to emerge as a black hero, we don't want him to lose his black audience right off the bat," suggesting black viewers would be repelled by a white girlfriend.⁸² The screenplay did, however, retain a white lover character that Shaft meets in the Village. The screenwriters also gave the black militants a larger role and added the back story of Shaft's prior history with them.

The screenplay also appeared to be written to less directly confront the racial stereotypes held by white viewers. In the book, Shaft throws a man out of a window to his death; in the film, Shaft merely passively allows the bad guy to fall out of the window. Parks evidently softened Shaft's actions in that scene to avoid playing into white viewers' associations between black men and crime. *Variety* reported:

Ideally, Parks is looking forward to the day when black actors can afford to be just as sloppy or villainous on screen as anybody else, but that day hasn't arrived, in his view. It's still necessary to counteract "all the damage done by Hollywood films for years and years."⁸³

Archival drafts of marketing pitches found in the Tom Miller papers in the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences emphasized Shaft as moving between both white and black worlds:

Cool, slick, smart and dangerous. A hard and handsome breed of Black man spawned amongst the violence and danger of the innards of Harlem in which he now moves with self-assured ease. He's also a cat who moves easily in "Whitey's trough." A kind of Black man too many know too little about.⁸⁴

The screenplay also retained elements of Tidyman's novel that showed Shaft's relationships with white characters, including Lt. Vic Androzzi (Charles Cioffi) and the Italian mafia. In Guerrero's words, *Shaft* "played it much safer and came across as less stridently antiwhite than *Sweet Sweetback*."⁸⁵

When selling the film, MGM also took efforts to appeal to white and black viewers. MGM's unpublished marketing ideas found in the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences indicated that MGM was thinking of the Shaft character as a hard-boiled film noir detective or Bogart type. One drafted marketing pitch read: "Instead of the thirties, it's here and now. And Black. And done in a marvelously funky idiom. And from MGM."⁸⁶ Another pitch compared Shaft to Sam Spade, the detective in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Another idea made a similar comparison: "It has a Black hero; but don't confuse that with a message. Like it was with Bogart—it's for fun."⁸⁷ This seemed to suggest MGM wanted to avoid cueing viewers to think *Shaft* would deal seriously with issues of racism and discrimination. Moreover, using an actor like Bogart as a point-of-reference suggests the company was concerned with expanding Shaft's appeal to white viewers.

To maximize a crossover audience and increase the return on their investment, MGM recruited a black advertising agency, UniWorld, to create promotions for black viewers. The company used their own in-house agency to develop marketing materials aimed at white viewers. The advertising strategy of executive Byron Lewis of UniWorld included emphasizing Parks' credentials as a black filmmaker, conducting pre-screenings in the black community, and selling advertising to black newspapers, radio, and television. Lewis explained that playing up the Italian mob angle was the key to reaching black audiences. According to Lewis, the mafia was "code" for black audiences: "Mention of the Mob gets across the idea of the numbers—a

significant part of black life.”⁸⁸ Several print ads did just that. One read: “The mob wanted Harlem back. They got Shaft...up to here.” UniWorld’s campaign aimed at black viewers underscored John Shaft’s belonging to the black community. Lewis’s campaign described Shaft as “a lone, black Superspade—a man of flair and flamboyance who has fun at the expense of the (white) establishment.”⁸⁹ Preferring to draw parallels with more recent action heroes, MGM’s in-house advertising drew parallels between Shaft and James Bond and Steve McQueen. One MGM ad read: “Hotter than Bond, Cooler than Bullitt.”⁹⁰ Lewis of UniWorld, however, predicted that some white suburban audiences may not be ready for a “Black James Bond” but acknowledged that “crossover elements” in Parks and Hayes abounded.⁹¹

Trade reviews predicted box office success beyond theaters playing predominantly blaxploitation. *Variety* commented on Parks’ strong direction, effective cinematography, and good casting. The trade journal expected the film “may shock some audiences with heavy dose of candid dialog and situation.”⁹² The trade expected strong box office take in “urban black situations” and good prospects elsewhere. *Boxoffice* predicted *Shaft* would prompt “a cycle of Negro private eye pictures if not a couple of sequels.”⁹³ Reviewers of national newspapers had more divergent opinions on the quality of the film. John C. Mahoney of the *Los Angeles Times* described the film as “exploitation” and “liquor store pulp fiction” and “Sam Spade played in blackface.” Mahoney urged future “black pulp fiction” to “define its own form and guidelines and eschew exploitation.”⁹⁴ Mahoney neglected the fact that Chester Himes’ work was its own form of black pulp fiction. Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* praised the film for being a good “Saturday night movie,” a straightforward, affecting, and entertaining movie that many viewers can enjoy. Canby wrote that *Shaft* knew its audience well and brought the “large,

hungry, black movie audience” a film with lots of vitality.⁹⁵ Reviewers predicted a significant audience for the film but doubted if *Shaft* could function as a crossover hit.

MGM opened *Shaft* in the summer season and booked the film in major urban cities. While *Cotton Comes to Harlem* premiered in Chicago and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* premiered in Detroit, *Shaft* did both: opening the week of June 23, 1971, in Chicago at the Roosevelt Theater, a Balaban & Katz Loop theater that would play many blaxploitation films, and at the Detroit Palms. (The Palms was where *Cotton Comes to Harlem* earned record grosses).⁹⁶ The film played additional theaters where *Cotton Comes to Harlem* did well: at the Fox in Philadelphia, *Shaft* brought “the largest summer gross in the Fox Theatre’s history with an estimated \$74,000 for the first week.”⁹⁷ *Shaft* also played the Louisville in Kentucky; the Fulton in Pittsburgh; the Hippodrome in Cleveland; Boston’s Savoy; St. Louis’ Fox, and many other theaters. *Shaft* also played in some southeastern cities: Houston at the Majestic Theatre and Atlanta at the Coronet Theatre, where *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played.⁹⁸ All the theaters appeared to be hardtops. In Denver, however, *Shaft* played four drive-ins in addition to two hardtops.⁹⁹ By early July, *Shaft* was playing 120 cities.¹⁰⁰ *Shaft* played 24-hours a day for the first two days of release in New York over the 4th of July weekend at the Harlem DeMille, Broadway, and 47th Street theaters. *Boxoffice* commented, “The opening of a film on a 24-hour-a-day basis is an unprecedented procedure for Broadway.”¹⁰¹ At the 72nd Street Playhouse on the Upper East Side, *Shaft* played regular hours. This suggested that the grind policy, operating in Harlem and Midtown houses, was aimed primarily to attract black viewers.¹⁰² *Shaft* earned \$100,000 in its first week playing Manhattan.¹⁰³ The above distribution data indicates that *Shaft*’s run aligns with the pattern of blaxploitation distribution discussed in Chapter One. The film was booked in major Midwestern and Northeastern cities in addition to the metropolitan

southeastern markets of Houston and Atlanta. *Shaft*'s success in these markets and in Manhattan indicate that the film did not dramatically perform as a crossover hit but, instead, played to a circuit of theaters likely to be frequented by black viewers. *Shaft* showed that the market for blaxploitation remained quite stable with little evidence of crossover to theaters outside of urban areas.

Thanks to such promotional efforts and Isaac Hayes' hit soundtrack, *Shaft* did indeed perform better than the typical blaxploitation film. *Shaft* earned nearly \$8 million in rentals compared to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*'s \$5 million. According to my figures, *Shaft* was one of the highest grossing films of the black film boom, second only to *Car Wash* (1976).¹⁰⁴ *Shaft* remains to this day among the top-grossing black-themed and black-directed US films, having earned \$7 million in domestic theater rentals on a budget just slightly over \$1 million.¹⁰⁵ Industry analyst A.D. Murphy wrote that while *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was "Hollywood's first attention-getting black market film," 1971's *Shaft* "clinched the hypothesis."¹⁰⁶ However, the film performed best in areas with significant black populations, further suggesting the absence of a true crossover effect. Indeed, *Variety* noted that "as much as 80% of its [*Shaft*'s] audience has been black."¹⁰⁷ *Shaft* performed well in major urban markets including Chicago and Baltimore and was generally well-reviewed, but there was no evidence the bifurcated advertising strategy attracted more white viewers into theaters.

While United Artists deemed the earnings of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* not worth further investment in the sequel, *Shaft*'s box office success prompted MGM to take on a modicum of greater risk, investing in a *Shaft* series in the hopes of greater reward. MGM co-produced two additional sequels with producers Roger Lewis and Stirling Silliphant. Parks returned to direct *Shaft's Big Score* (1972), and Roundtree reprised his role. *Shaft's Big Score* was released a year

later in the summer of 1972, one year after the first film's release.¹⁰⁸ The one sheet for the sequel attempted a harder sell of the 'Black James Bond' parallel with a tagline that read: "'Shaft's Big Score' Is Like An 007 Bond Adventure!" The third film in the series, *Shaft in Africa* (1973) was shot in Ethiopia and Spain, an attempt, according to *Variety*, to extricate the Shaft character from the blaxploitation setting and pivot to an international action/adventure milieu with wider audience appeal and stronger correspondences with James Bond.¹⁰⁹ Illustrating the lack of export appeal of blaxploitation, *Shaft in Africa* made less than \$1.5 million on a budget of over \$2 million.¹¹⁰ There was also a failed attempt to resurrect *Shaft* on television with a short-lived CBS series for which the original feature film served as the pilot.¹¹¹

Despite segregated marketing efforts and a high concept pitch, MGM struggled unsuccessfully to reach an elusive "cross-over" white audience for their blaxploitation blockbuster. As indicated by the diminished returns of the sequels, the 'black James Bond' never took off for Hollywood's majority-white viewership. Sieving writes that by 1971 and 1972 the industry recognized "that black-themed films were of interest almost exclusively to black viewers."¹¹² While *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft* performed well, making back their negative cost and the studios' investment, the films nevertheless failed to capture the kind of cross-demographic audience that a film like *The Exorcist* (1973) would, a film that drew in many black and white viewers.¹¹³ Judging the modest reward of further developing or picking-up black action films not worth the investment, the major studios soon phased out black action production. This was hastened, I contend, by the negative publicity and controversy surrounding the following year's high-profile blaxploitation release, *Super Fly*, discussed in the next section.

Super Fly (1972) and Blaxploitation Backlash

After the success of MGM's *Shaft*, Warner Bros. rushed to acquire a blaxploitation film. The company purchased *Super Fly*, a film made for \$500,000 by producer Sig Shore and director Gordon Parks, Jr.¹¹⁴ After the film was completed, Warner Bros. acquired it for \$800,000 in a negative pick-up deal.¹¹⁵ Eithne Quinn writes that *Super Fly* was funded by a loan from Parks, Sr. and from black investors including a local dentist in Westchester, New York.¹¹⁶ Director of photography James Sigorelli shot the film in the Spring of 1972 on location in Harlem and elsewhere in Manhattan with a non-union black crew. Warner Bros. picked up the 'R'-rated film in the spring of 1972 and released it in August that same year with a New York City premiere.

In story and style, *Super Fly* had strong similarities to *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft* but maintained a distinct quasi-*verité* style. Ron O'Neal starred as Priest, the Harlem drug dealer who seeks to escape the drug trade and ghetto life. *Super Fly* opens nearly identically to *Shaft*, with a high angle telephoto lens and zoom-in on New York City streets as "Freddie's Dead" plays, a song written and performed by Curtis Mayfield. The camera follows two men pursuing a drug deal. Like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft*, *Super Fly* establishes a strong sense of authentic place almost immediately, using a kind of *verité* documentary style. In this opening sequence, two men approach a woman whose surprised facial expression clearly reveals she is not involved in the shoot. The use of the pop song over the image track sets a mood but also fulfills a practical function: not requiring the filmmaker to take sync sound in a difficult-to-control environment. The filmmakers likely lacked the funds or institutional heft to shut down Harlem or Midtown (in the case of *Shaft*) city streets for shooting. Through this *verité* style, Guerrero writes that *Super Fly* "managed subtly and convincingly to visualize the space of the inner-city black world from the decaying, junkie-infested tenements to Priest's tacky

‘penthouse.’”¹¹⁷ Parks, Jr. appears to use real environments that cue a strong documentary sensibility. For instance, some scenes are not shot in continuity style because the locations appear to limit moving the camera around. In the second scene, which shows Priest in bed with a lover, there is only one camera placement and two set-ups (achieved by using different lens lengths, likely). Some scenes, such as one that shows Priest engaging in martial arts practice, feel improvised. The montage comprised of still photos of drug preparing—cutting, weight and packaging—over Mayfield’s “Pusherman” further sets *Super Fly* apart from the more conventional style of both studio-made blaxploitation and AIP’s rather formulaic films. While Guerrero sees *Super Fly* as “the purest formulaic expression of the new genre,” *Super Fly* also had a raw, improvisational, and imaginative quality that was distinctive from the studio-produced blaxploitation films.¹¹⁸

Super Fly received a mixed response. Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* praised the film for letting scenes play out in time, including the bathtub sex scene, which he called “one of the few genuinely tender and erotic sequences on film.”¹¹⁹ (Scholar Mireille Miller-Young has remarked on the scene’s historical importance as “the most significant and explicit representation of intimacy between a black couple on-screen up to that point.”¹²⁰) Roger Greenspun of *The New York Times* forgave the individual scenes the many “blunders” and praised it as “a brilliantly idiomatic film” that avoids moralizing and creates a “balanced” if fatalistic world.¹²¹ Interviewing patrons leaving downtown theaters, *The Chicago Daily Defender* reported that viewers acknowledged they didn’t like everything about the film but found it entertaining.¹²² Trade journals saw *Super Fly* as a more middling black action film. Complaining of plot gaps and misuse of O’Neal’s talents, *The Independent Film Journal* called *Super Fly* one of the “lesser entertainments being offered black audiences.”¹²³ *Boxoffice* wrote that the film “will have

to rely on the black market and action audiences.” The trade also noted that the film’s bathtub love scene “has closeups of Sheila Frazier of the kind usually found in sex pictures.”¹²⁴ Reviews therefore suggest that *Super Fly* was received more as an exploitation film than a major studio release.

Super Fly became a lightning rod for debates about blaxploitation’s effect on black viewers and the profit white-owned studios stood to make selling such films. As Guerrero writes, “*Superfly* came to be the main target of a collective fury and the prime example of degenerate black images on film.”¹²⁵ The debate reached a public zenith when *Newsweek* published an issue on October 23, 1972, with a cover article: “Black Movies—Renaissance or Ripoff?” Both white and black media outlets spoke out against the film’s violence and depiction of drug selling. The National Catholic Office gave the film a ‘C’, or ‘condemned,’ rating, arguing that *Super Fly* presented an overly realistic view of the “super antics and the conspicuous affluence of black dudes” that “plays upon the gullibility of the film’s intended audience, a fantasy brought to life that is anything but healthy.”¹²⁶ Hollywood NAACP branch president Junius Griffin, blaxploitation’s most vocal critic, called on Warner Bros. to reshoot the film’s ending to punish Priest for his misdeeds.¹²⁷ The NAACP joined with Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to form Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) in August of 1972 soon after *Super Fly* hit theaters.¹²⁸ Around that same time, CORE also accused *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Shaft*, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, and *Super Fly* of propagating “supernigger” stereotypes.¹²⁹ In Washington, BAN (Blacks Against Narcotics) decried *Super Fly*’s representation of drug dealing, calling the film “the latest Hollywood game being run on black people.”¹³⁰ In Chicago, a group called FORUM (Full Opportunity Redirected to Uplift Mankind) had two protests outside the Oriental Theater, a theater that frequently played blaxploitation movies. The *Chicago Defender* wrote

that, in addition to *Super Fly*, the group was also protesting the other black-oriented films in theaters: *Melinda* (1972), *Blacula* (1972), *Slaughter* (1972), and *Shaft's Big Score*.¹³¹ O'Neal, Shore, and Parks, Jr. issued their defenses of the movie, perhaps, I surmise, at the behest of Warner Bros.¹³² Parks defended the film as an implicit critique of institutional racism and economic disparity in the black community, prefiguring later defenses of gangsta rap.¹³³ The *Chicago Defender* published an editorial from a self-identified "concerned mother." She wrote, "White kids have 'superman' and 'Batman,' law abiding heroes out to right all wrong. Now the black kids have a hero, 'Super Fly' a black dope pusher."¹³⁴ Therefore, *Super Fly* showed that the risks associated with blaxploitation were high from a public relations standpoint, while the box office reward appeared to stall, as such films were unable to capture a broader audience.

Super Fly's run further confirmed that the audience for blaxploitation was primarily black and located in urban areas, indicating that Warner Bros.' attempts to reach a crossover white audience had failed. *Super Fly* opened in New York on August 4th and in Chicago at the Oriental Theatre a week later. In New York City, Warner Bros. booked *Super Fly* in one downtown house and in one upper east side location to foster crossover potential from white audiences. Warner Bros.' sales executive Leo Greenfield explained that a white film with *Super Fly's* buzz would expect to gross \$80 million, but that *Super Fly's* ability to match such numbers depended on moving out of the traditional black Times Square houses (such as the DeMille Theatre) and into theaters with more demographic cross-traffic.¹³⁵ The studio spent over \$50,000 on the New York premiere and earned three times that number in the first week of release in New York City in two theaters: the Loews State II and Loews Cine in NYC.¹³⁶ According to *Variety*, the turnout in New York matched the earnings of *The Godfather* (1972) at those same theaters.¹³⁷ Warner Bros.' promotion was apparently only successful in motivating a larger segment of the black

audience but not white viewers. Commenting on *Super Fly*'s success among black viewers in New York City, *Variety* declared that the "heart of Harlem" was now in Times Square, with the concurrent success of *Super Fly* and half-dozen other black-oriented films, such that "the area business is almost entirely given over to black films."¹³⁸ Outside of New York, the film's earnings were strongest in areas with significant black populations. Playing at the Oriental Theatre, the film was the highest grossing in Chicago's Loop for some time.¹³⁹ In Detroit, the film earned \$100,000 in the first week at the downtown Fox, a house record, and \$150,000 in the 2nd week, making *Super Fly* "the hottest b.o. film the Fox has ever screened."¹⁴⁰ In Philadelphia, the film also earned \$100,000 in the first week.¹⁴¹ In Baltimore, *Super Fly* earned \$65,000 at the Hippodrome the first week, a house record, and \$45,000 the second week there.¹⁴² In Washington D.C., *Super Fly* broke a 55-year record at the Palace.¹⁴³ In Minneapolis, *Boxoffice* observed that the film performed below expectations, noting the region's "miniscule" black population.¹⁴⁴ As had *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft*, *Super Fly* did disproportionately well in Northern and Midwestern metropolitan areas. This distribution data revealed a stable market for blaxploitation, as black action films failed to reach the white viewers that major studios were banking on.

Super Fly went on to make \$6.5 million in domestic rentals, much past the \$2–\$2.5 million breakeven point for Warner Bros., and was one of the biggest hits of the black action cycle second only to *Shaft*.¹⁴⁵ But it was a far cry from the \$80 million that Greenfield floated as a possibility. Instead, the film earned over \$6 million in rentals. By exploitation standards, *Super Fly*'s take was excellent. However, Warner Bros.' metrics for gauging adequate return on investment appeared more aligned with major studio releases and not exploitation films. Just one month after the film's release, Shore announced a sequel budgeted for \$750,000; Warner Bros.

was attached to distribute and O'Neal slated to direct.¹⁴⁶ One year later, Warner Bros. pulled out of the distribution deal, and Paramount instead picked up the film.¹⁴⁷ Like United Artists' cancelation of *Come Back, Charleston Blue*, Warner Bros. also eventually distanced themselves from the sequel. Addison Verrill suggested that Warner Bros. had concerns about negative publicity surrounding *Super Fly*, particularly given the studio's stake in the black market with their record division.¹⁴⁸

The cases of *Super Fly* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* illustrated the majors' eagerness in engaging in a modest risk-seeking in their negative pick-ups of films geared to black audiences. Both Warner Bros.' and UA's uninterest in the sequels suggested a rapid reversal of their risk-reward calculations. Even though *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Super Fly* both profited, the return on investment was deemed too low to merit further studio involvement. Moreover, the distribution history of each film revealed the white crossover audience to be a fiction. Black action films behaved like niche products in the marketplace. For the studios, the financial risk in the negative pick-up deal was low, but so was the reward, since black genre films were aimed at a delimited audience segment. Thinner profit margins, low production costs, and a built-in target audience all made blaxploitation a reasonable choice for exploitation firms including American International Pictures.

Section III: AIP's Blaxploitation Cycle: Independents Imitate Hollywood

Chapter Two explored how exploitation independents initiated the recession-era sexploitation cycle, capitalizing on the majors' disadvantaged industry position by making the kinds of films the studios would hesitate to imitate. As evidenced in the previous sections of this chapter, blaxploitation developed in an inverse manner. Investing in low-risk negative pick-ups,

the majors propelled the black action cycle at the time. Only after several films became successful in 1970 and 1971 did exploitation independents react with a similar formula. Once they did, however, independents were quite prolific. Keith Corson writes that independent financing accounted for 67% of black films; studio co-financing (11%) and negative pick-ups (15%) made up only a quarter of the cycle.¹⁴⁹ Notably, AIP was very quick to jump on this trend, signaling a new dynamic in the recession-era exploitation cycles: that of independents' imitation of the studios.

Instead of negative pick-ups, however, exploitation independents devoted substantial resources to producing black action films. From 1972–1976, nearly all of the larger exploitation independents who had previously been pursuing sexploitation had at least one black action release.¹⁵⁰ Despite being 'followers' in the trend, AIP was highly prolific. Indeed, Corson describes AIP as "[t]he most visible producer of blaxploitation films."¹⁵¹ Very quickly after the majors' earliest releases, AIP released *Blacula* and *Slaughter* in the summer season of 1972. An unpublished production budget for *Blacula* found in the Bob Kelljan papers in the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was dated December 22, 1971, showing that AIP began production only a few months after *Shaft*'s 1971 run.¹⁵² AIP was undoubtedly the most prominent producer-distributor of blaxploitation. From 1972–1975, AIP released several blaxploitation films a year. In 1972, they released only two. Yet AIP's investment in blaxploitation increased substantially between 1973 to 1975. For that three-year period, AIP averaged 4–6 blaxploitation releases per year. AIP channeled substantial financial and personnel resources to making black action films. Arkoff predicted that in the summer of 1973 there wouldn't be enough theaters to play all of the black films being made. Arkoff said that audiences were "com[ing] out of the woodwork."¹⁵³

Not dissimilar to New World Pictures' sexploitation cycles, AIP's blaxploitation films followed a general formula that involved 1) action and some titillation; 2) strong selling through eye-catching visual materials; 3) R&B and soul pop songs; and 4) targeted distribution to black viewers. Corson observes that AIP's strategies in making and releasing blaxploitation films were similar to the other cycles or fads they had engaged in. Corson writes, "AIP made its [blaxploitation] films fast and cheap, emphasizing sex and violence to appeal to drive-in and grindhouse audiences."¹⁵⁴ Yet, Corson fails to acknowledge that AIP's blaxploitation films were also influenced by the studios' releases. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, and *Super Fly* also introduced the pop music soundtrack as an important feature of blaxploitation films. AIP's films continued this trend. Billy Preston contributed a theme song, "Slaughter," to the film. James Brown made his first soundtrack for AIP's *Black Caesar* (1973) starring Fred Williamson and Gloria Hendry. Major studio releases also established the hyper-masculine male protagonist as a common narrative component, also seen in AIP's *Slaughter* and sequel *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off* (1973) starring the Cleveland Browns' Jim Brown. In other respects, AIP's blaxploitation cycle had allegiances with exploitation. Just as New World Pictures' and Crown International Pictures' sexploitation cycles were marketed and distributed to a target audience of male viewers at drive-ins and hardtops, so were AIP's films targeted to black viewers in the theaters and locations that the earlier black action films had established as important venues for blaxploitation.

Because AIP produced so many action-oriented 'R'-rated films, the studio encountered negative blowback among the same critics who decried *Super Fly*'s representation of black identities. Leading voices deriding blaxploitation included *The New York Times*' Clayton Riley, who described the black action films as "products of the same Hollywood minds that made

millions while excluding blacks from the industry.”¹⁵⁵ Junius Griffin and Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) announced plans to provide their own film ratings according to a five-point scale: superior, good, acceptable, objectionable, thoroughly objectionable.¹⁵⁶ CAB’s review board was comprised of five members of the NAACP including one white member. CAB had put pressure on Arkoff to use more black crew members in their films, which were largely produced and directed by white filmmakers. Arkoff was critical of CAB, accusing them of paternalism: “I rather resent and I would think blacks resent the implication of this organization that black audiences are somehow not able to recognize something that is degrading to themselves.”¹⁵⁷ In August 1972, (also the month of *Super Fly*’s release), tension came to a head when a suspected arsonist started a fire in the AIP parking lot in Beverly Hills. *The Independent Film Journal* reported:

Meanwhile [sic] it has been rumored that black militants are involved in last week’s mystery blaze in the AIP parking lot in Los Angeles, with talk making the rounds about demands that *Blacula* be withdrawn from release, that 40 percent of the AIP personnel be black, and that the film company deposit 40 percent of its funds with black-owned banks.¹⁵⁸

CAB denounced any such violent action, but it led to an in-person meeting between Arkoff and CAB representatives to discuss the latter’s concerns. After the meeting, Arkoff continued to criticize CAB, accusing them of failing to understand the market exigencies of filmmaking. Arkoff said, “They [black critics] never thought that most pictures lose money.” He also accused CAB of misgauging the demand for black action films. “You can’t give them [black viewers] *Puss ‘n’ Boots* when they want to see *Super Fly*.” He added, “[There is] enough of a belligerent market to go on indefinitely with the *Shafts* and *Slaughters*.”¹⁵⁹ As a prolific producer of black

genre films, AIP came under fire for profiting from racial stereotypes. AIP found blaxploitation to be a financially rewarding venture but a politically risky one.

Cooley High (1975) and the Black Prestige Film

Beginning in 1975, AIP shifted course, representing another development in the dynamic between the major studios and exploitation independents, signaling the complex causality at work in the recession-era cycles. By 1974, Arkoff began to see that the black action film fad was fading. Reporting at Cannes in 1974, *Variety* wrote that AIP “mined veins only as long as they lasted per youthful revolt beach party, motorcyclists, black horror ‘fads.’” Arkoff emphasized that it was important to provide audiences with what they couldn’t see on television.¹⁶⁰ In 1975, Arkoff declared the “‘Shaft’ type of rough action” to be passé and oversaturated in theaters and on television. Instead of continuing to make black action films, Arkoff released a handful of films, notably *Cooley High*, that mirrored the studio-made, black-themed films of the 1960s. In addition to looking back to the prior decade, *Cooley High* was also concurrently a part of a sub-cycle of the black film boom that eschewed the action plots, violence, and inner-city stereotypes of *Super Fly* and *Slaughter*. Yet, the film retained blaxploitation elements including black male protagonists and marketing via black popular music.

In developing *Cooley High*, AIP appeared to draw from two studio-affiliated strains of production: the liberal films of the 1960s and the concurrent ‘prestige’ black dramas. Christopher Sieving has examined a cycle of studio and independently-made black-themed films of the 1960s that approached the subject of racism soberly from a liberal, social problem lens.¹⁶¹ Such films were not industry or cultural breakthroughs as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Shaft* were. Sieving writes that such films, which marginalized black talent, did not register as ‘authentic’ with social

groups. The art cinema bent of such films limited their commercial reach. The ‘prestige’ group of black-themed films of the 1970s more or less updated this kind of cinema. Critics viewed these films as an antidote to the violence and stereotypes of black action films.

This group of films were differentiated from black action films. First, the ‘prestige’ cycle did not avoid grappling with the social realities of black Americans but, unlike black action films, depicted these themes with a universal humanism. *Sounder* (1972), distributed by Fox, was praised for avoiding the trappings of blaxploitation. Writing in 1975, Leab remarked on *Sounder*’s absence of “gratuitous sex or violence.”¹⁶² *Sounder* was nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Writing. A kind of social problem film, *Claudine* dramatized the effects of systemic poverty and racism on a working mother (Diahann Carroll) and her lover (James Earl Jones). The film was also released by Fox. *Claudine* returned a modest profit. Second, some black prestige films were star vehicles. Diana Ross starred in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), based on Holiday’s 1956 autobiography, and *Mahogany* (1975), both produced by Motown Productions and released by Paramount. The two films were tonal and generic departures from the black action films of the early 1970s. Both films engaged with black identity through respected figures including Billie Holiday, Motown founder Berry Gordy, and Ross herself. For the most part, these films’ plots and themes extended beyond the common tropes of the blaxploitation cycle—drug dealers, private eyes, prostitutes, etc. Yet, even in this cycle, salacious elements remained. Heroin use was a prominent part of both Holiday’s book and the film adaptation. *Lady Sings the Blues* also dramatizes Holiday’s childhood trauma in a brothel and her brief stint as a sex worker in scenes that are not explicit but nevertheless construct a milieu of crime, prostitution, and drug use not dissimilar to the diegeses of more typical blaxploitation films.

Drawing from the ‘prestige’ cycle and the black-themed dramas of the 1960s, *Cooley High* was a film that appeared designed to manage the reputational risks associated with AIP’s white production of blaxploitation, potentially re-energizing the cycle. Arkoff declared that the “humor and drama” of *Cooley High* was setting the standard for black films post-*Shaft*.¹⁶³ *Cooley High* was written by black writer Eric Monte and directed by black director Michael Schultz for AIP. Only more recently have commentators on blaxploitation recognized *Cooley High* as an important part of the black film boom. Corson refers to the film as a “key text” that influenced *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and one of few 1970s black-cast films that “articulated the complex humanity of black people beyond the industry’s exploitative formulas and stereotypes.”¹⁶⁴ *Cooley High* is a film about a group of teenage friends attending Edwin G. Cooley Vocational High School in Chicago in the 1965. It follows Preach (Glynn Turman), an aspiring writer, and Cochise (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs), a local basketball star. Preach and Cochise cavort around Lincoln Park, pursue romantic relationships, and grapple with conflict with other high schoolers. The film contains elements typical of blaxploitation films: Preach and Cochise are placed under arrest for riding in a stolen car. Cochise is a victim of gang violence, killed by members of a rival gang. While *Cooley High* includes tropes of blaxploitation—sex work, violence, racism—the film is a coming-of-age story that focuses on the complexities of the two teenagers’ relationships. While the film primarily avoids direct engagement with the politics of the Black Power movement, the screenplay strives for authenticity in capturing a black point-of-view (as seen in dialogue like “You’re busy signifying,” when Cochise and Preach playfully insult each other). Similar to *American Graffiti* (1973), the film takes place in the recent past and also features a pop music score of Motown songs like “Baby Love” by Diana Ross & The Supremes,

“I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch) by the Four Tops, and The Temptations’ “My Girl.”¹⁶⁵

As a black coming-of-age story set to Motown instead of classic rock, *Cooley High* anticipated the Blockbuster Lite film as a kind of imitation of *American Graffiti*. Indeed, *The Chicago Defender* also observed that AIP had been touting *Cooley High* as a “Black American Graffiti.”¹⁶⁶ *Cooley High*’s similarity to the 1973 film was predicted to drive audience demand. Reviewing the film, *Variety* noted the potential for a crossover audience: “The American International release combines elements of tenderness and bawdiness with a good ‘street’ feel. It’s a very human picture which, with a PG rating, merits broad play dates in the general market.” Writing on this crossover potential, the writer explained:

It will be crucial to [the] realization of the film’s potential that audiences are aware that this is no uptight sociological blaxploitation potboiler. Suburban exhibitors in particular ought to give ‘Cooley High’ a fair chance to find the many white audiences that should enjoy it.¹⁶⁷

Promotion for *Cooley High* showed that AIP was indeed attempting to reach beyond the black action market. The *Cooley High* pressbook, found in the Samuel Z. Arkoff Collection at Loyola Marymount, showed that AIP employed three distinct marketing strategies [Figure 6].¹⁶⁸ This was quite unique; of all the blaxploitation pressbooks I viewed in the Samuel Z. Arkoff Collection, at the Margaret Herrick library, or in the Black Films Collection at the Schomburg Center, I did not see another press kit that organized promotional materials by distinct themes of promotion. The press kit read, “There are 3 different styles of ads available for the 3 separate markets—sophisticated, leather jacket and black. Each ad is marked according to its particular market.” The first type of ad was for the “sophisticated” market. The large ad in this category

showed the teenage couple embracing and included many quotations from reviews. The leading review with the largest font was Kevin Thomas' of the *Los Angeles Times*. Echoing *American Graffiti*, the second group was the "Leather Jacket" market, presumably the youth-oriented market. The ads showed two couples hanging out on a street (sans leather jacket) with the tagline, "Meet The Student Welcoming Committee of Cooley High." The third category was the "black market," and included an ad called "Special 'quote' Ad For Black Papers." It showed Cochise and Preach and their girlfriends but with fewer quotes from reviews. The press kit suggests that AIP was clearly targeting several discrete markets: presumably, black viewers, young viewers, and white liberal viewers. As such, AIP was selling *Cooley High* as a crossover film.

Similar to the majors' black action releases, *Cooley High* had a world premiere in Chicago, where the film was shot, at the State Lake Theatre on June 26. The premiere was a benefit for the Community Film Workshop of Chicago.¹⁶⁹ The following day, the film played at the 4,000-seat Chicago Theatre rather than being booked at the conventional blaxploitation houses the Roosevelt Theatre or Oriental Theatre.¹⁷⁰ One month later, *Cooley High* was being "held over indefinitely" at the Chicago Theatre. After the Chicago release, AIP sent *Cooley High* into national distribution with 225 prints, just slightly less than the more action-oriented blaxploitation films.¹⁷¹ In Atlanta, the film started downtown at the Loew's Grand. After some success there, the film moved to Loew's 12 Oaks Theatre in the suburbs.¹⁷² *Cooley High* played in theaters that played blaxploitation including Washington D.C.'s Town Theatre and Baltimore's Hippodrome Theatre.¹⁷³ In Louisville, rather than play the Kentucky, it played the Penthouse and United Artists theaters.¹⁷⁴ In Los Angeles, *Cooley High* played drive-ins: the Century Drive-In and the Compton Drive-In.¹⁷⁵ In Detroit, the film played the Grand Circus and

Mercury. In New York it played the Cinerama and RKO 86th Street 1. In St. Louis, *Cooley High* played the Fox, where *Dolemite* (1975) had played the previous week.¹⁷⁶ Playing at the Orpheum in October, *Cooley High* was the top film in New Orleans that week.¹⁷⁷ As the above shows, like other films in the blaxploitation cycle, *Cooley High* played urban areas but also appeared to migrate to suburban and general release theaters. This was likely partially a result of AIP's branches. The branches were located in key cities across the US and reached many drive-ins, not the typical blaxploitation venues. According to *IMDB*, the film grossed \$13 million on a \$750,000 negative cost. This was similar to *Shaft*'s take.¹⁷⁸

While critics of blaxploitation derided AIP for its action cycles, the firm's prestige releases garnered significant acclaim. In 1976, both *Cooley High* and AIP's *Cornbread, Earl and Me* (1975) were nominated for NAACP Image Awards. *Variety* cited the two films as contributing to a change in 1975 "to less-violent ethnic dramas and comedies."¹⁷⁹ AIP's strategy was part of a broader phasing out of black action production. In 1976, *Variety* noted that while a few low-budget black action films were slated for the year, the previous year marked a rise in crossover efforts including *Let's Do It Again* (1975), *Mahogany*, *Cornbread, Earl and Me*, and *Cooley High*. *Variety* characterized such films as higher-budgeted crossover attempts designed to "reclaim whites alienated by many of the more violent and vitriolic of the exploitation films."¹⁸⁰ With *Cooley High*, Arkoff drew from concurrent and prior Hollywood production trends as well as blaxploitation, an example of the majors' unlikely, and often ignored, influence on the independents' engagement in the blaxploitation cycle.

While AIP managed negative backlash through developing more humanistic portrayals of black Americans, Arkoff did not entirely pivot away from black action films. Indeed, AIP released *Friday Foster* (1975) and *Sheba, Baby* (1975) the same year as *Cooley High*. As the

black action fad lagged, AIP found a form of product differentiation in Pam Grier vehicles. With plots oriented around Grier's physique, such films melded black action tropes with features of New World Pictures' and Crown International Pictures' sexploitation cycles. As exploitation films imitating other exploitation films, these sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids registered a final dynamic of influence among the recession-era cycles.

Section IV: Sexploitation-Blaxploitation Hybrids: Pam Grier as Star and Sex Symbol

AIP's films starring Pam Grier were part of a broader recession-era exploitation cycle of the early 1970s. Similar to Crown's hybridizing of action and sexploitation in *Superchick* and *Policewomen*, both New World Pictures and AIP developed films that melded the titillation of sexploitation and racial stereotyping of blaxploitation. The sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids can be seen in two film series: New World Pictures' women-in-prison cycle and AIP's Pam Grier blaxploitation films. This cycle represented a third development: exploitation/exploitation imitations. These cycles saw New World Pictures and AIP borrowing from each other in films that combined the textual traits of sexploitation and the black action film. The sexploitation-blaxploitation films ran concurrently to Crown International Pictures' sexploitation-action hybrids, showing how both recession-era cycles mutated as time went on. This cycle showed that the logic of the competitive dynamic between the majors and independents had shifted, as the exploitation firms repackaged their own formulae. Moreover, the sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids revealed the synchronicity of exploitation independents' market approach. At the same time as AIP was pursuing a crossover market with *Cooley High*, the company was also developing a film like *Sheba, Baby*.

New World's women-in-prison cycle was the earliest sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrid. These films included *The Big Doll House* (1971), *Women in Cages* (1971), *The Big Bust-Out* (1972), *The Hot Box* (1972), *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), and *Caged Heat* (1974). The women-in-prison cycle featured black actresses. Grier starred in *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*, both directed by Jack Hill. Grier also starred in *Women in Cages*. Black actress Vonetta McGee starred in *The Big Bust-Out*. McGee also starred in black action films *Blacula*, *Hammer* (1972), *Melinda*, and *Shaft in Africa*. Black actress Ella Reid starred in *Caged Heat*. While some of the New World nurse films also had black performers, the sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids capitalized on Grier as a sex symbol.

Unlike the nurse cycle, the women-in-prison cycle brought the sexploitation elements out of a romantic context and into more violent, action-oriented films. The sexploitation elements in the women-in-prison cycle were mostly divorced from simulated sexual acts between characters. Instead, nudity was most common, motivated by stock scenarios: undressing in prison cells, shower scenes, or medical examination scenes. The sexual representation also skewed more violent and less overtly romantic or erotic; both *Women in Cages* and *The Big Doll House*, for instance, featured sadistic sexualized torture scenes that including whipping and flogging of naked inmates.

Coffy (1973) and AIP's Black Film Formula

The most industrially prominent sexploitation-blaxploitation films were AIP's blaxploitation films starring Pam Grier. AIP introduced variation to blaxploitation that the majors' releases had largely lacked in the form of female protagonist films, particularly those starring Pam Grier. As the prior examples make clear, blaxploitation films almost uniformly

starred male leads. After her roles in the New World Pictures women-in-prison films, Grier played a smaller part in MGM's *Cool Breeze* (1972) and a lead role in the MGM pick-up *Hit Man* (1972). From 1972–1975, Grier starred in seven films for AIP: *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973), *Coffy* (1973), *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Sheba, Baby* (1975), *Bucktown* (1975), and *Friday Foster* (1975). Whereas other stars of the blaxploitation cycle were former athletes, like Jim Brown or Fred Williamson, Grier emerged seemingly out of nowhere. *The New York Times* called Pam Grier the “queen of the blaxploitation genre,” a reputation she developed in large part due to her involvement at AIP.¹⁸¹ Mireille Miller-Young writes, “[G]rier not only kicked the asses of the powerful and corrupt while seducing the audience with her stunning physicality and undeniable eroticism, but she also become an important box office commodity.”¹⁸² Young also writes that by 1977 *The Washington Post* declared Grier along with Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli as the most “bankable female stars in Hollywood.”¹⁸³ The sexploitation and blaxploitation cycles merged in Grier’s star persona.

Coffy stars Grier and was written and directed by Jack Hill. Grier plays Coffy, a nurse whose 15-year-old sister has been hospitalized from a heroin addiction. Coffy uses her sex appeal to get close to drug dealers in the city and kill them. Coffy goes undercover as a Bahamian prostitute, Mystique, for pimp King George (Robert DoQui), who is in bed with the mob boss Arturo Vitroni (Allan Arbus). Her councilman boyfriend Howard Brunswick (Booker Bradshaw) is also working for Vitroni, a fact Coffy discovers when she is presented to Vitroni as a prostitute. Coffy escapes and kills Vitroni and her former beau Brunswick. *Coffy* melds typical elements of blaxploitation with titillation found in sexploitation. The film has a theme song of a Mayfield-like scratchy guitar and wah wah pedal, which plays over shots of Coffy driving at night. Other common blaxploitation tropes include grim interior scenes and plot elements

revolving around crime, drug use, and sex work. The racial politics of the film are also muted. The hopeful politician Brunswick gives a pro-Black stump speech, which the film later undermines when he is revealed to be corrupt. As in *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, there are also elements of sexual titillation. An array of women dressed in flashy bikinis and boudoir clothing are featured in the scenes that take place in King George's brothel apartment, and Grier is filmed naked from behind and from the waist up in her scenes as Mystique. In his description of *Foxy Brown*, Yannis Tzioumakis likewise observes the camera's concentration on Grier's body. Tzioumakis writes that "even in unsuspecting scenes," "the camera often lingers on Grier's body, especially her breasts."¹⁸⁴

As was common for AIP's blaxploitation films, *Coffy* was seen as standard and formulaic, geared to a specific market. *Variety* called the film a "violence-ridden meller which should fit patly into today's market."¹⁸⁵ *The Independent Film Journal* called it a "fairly standard black action meller" that "should do well on the action house circuit."¹⁸⁶ Yet, unlike many reviews of black action films that made little mention of individual performers, reviewers pointed out Grier's looks, charisma, and performance talents. *The Independent Film Journal* observed there was "plenty of sex and violence in the film."¹⁸⁷ *Variety* observed that Grier was "a statuesque actress with a body she doesn't hesitate to show."¹⁸⁸ *Variety* also described Grier as "strongly cast" and "conceivably could appear in a folo-up focusing on her talents."¹⁸⁹ In a review of *Friday Foster*, *Variety* writer also summarized the film as "another Pam Grier vehicle" and commented that Grier deserved "a breakthrough major role to come into her own."¹⁹⁰ A *Los Angeles Times* review of *Foxy Brown* described seeing Grier as "show[ing] promise of becoming a sensitive and affecting performer."¹⁹¹

Promotional materials for *Coffy* and other of Grier's films for AIP showcase her as a blaxploitation sex symbol. The one sheet foregrounds Coffy, who stands in a bikini top holding a gun. The copy—"She's the "Godmother" of them all: The baddest One-Chick Hit-Squad that ever hit town!" —highlights the film's female protagonist while also referencing the popularity of *The Godfather*, which was released the year prior [Figure 7]. Tzioumakis observes that *Foxy Brown*'s poster also depicts Grier "in an evening dress and in a suggestive position reaching for her gun."¹⁹² The archival press kit for *Coffy*, found in the Samuel Z. Arkoff collection, includes a suggestion for promotion titled "Black Community Cooperation," which essentially asks exhibitors to promote Grier's fandom among audiences. The blurb reads:

Rapidly becoming a favorite for segments of the country's black community, Pam Grier, who is the cousin of the top pro-footballer Rosie Grier, is of extreme interest to the younger crowds. They avidly follow the careers of black artists in the entertainment industries and are more than willing to watch them perform. Make sure that you reach this eager audience via local black publications, television and radio shows and disc jockeys and community events.¹⁹³

Promotion for Grier's subsequent AIP films focused on her star image. *Friday Foster*'s original press kit illustrates this well. On the front page was an illustration of Grier front and center.

Promotional text included in a font as large as the film title reads: "Wham! Bam! Here comes Pam!"¹⁹⁴ The one sheet for 1975's *Sheba, Baby* referenced past Grier-starring films: "Hotter 'N 'Coffy' / Meaner 'N 'Foxy Brown."¹⁹⁵

Coffy's run further revealed that AIP's blaxploitation films were distributed differently from the majors' black action films. Released in early summer in May 1973, *Coffy* played the major cities where past blaxploitation hits had played: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago at the

Oriental Theatre, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Detroit. But the film also played more southern and southeastern cities than had the majors' releases. *Coffy* grossed \$60,000 in ten days in several Miami theaters.¹⁹⁶ *Coffy* played Columbia, South Carolina, and in New Orleans at the Loew's State.¹⁹⁷ *Coffy* earned \$20,000 in ten days at the Malco Theatre in Memphis.¹⁹⁸ The film also played two drive-in in Dallas, where *Coffy* took in \$30,000 in 12 days.¹⁹⁹ *Coffy* also played the Fox in Atlanta; the Louisville in Kentucky; three indoor theaters and three drive-ins in Kansas City; and in Charlotte, North Carolina.²⁰⁰ However, unlike MGM or Warner Bros., AIP placed *Coffy* on a double bill program.²⁰¹ The double bill of *Coffy* and Cinerama Releasing's *The Mack* (1973) opened on October 31, outside of the typical summer release dates. Months prior, the two films were initially released singly but then placed on a double bill that traveled the country.²⁰² The double bill played at the Majestic in Houston; the Fox in St. Louis; the State Lake in Chicago; the Grand in Atlanta; the Riverside in Milwaukee; and the Fox and Mercury in Detroit.²⁰³ The double bill played 20 theaters in San Francisco and 26 in Chicago.²⁰⁴ In short, AIP's exchanges placed *Coffy* in theaters that would reach black and white viewers in downtown theaters and in small-town drive-ins.

AIP's blaxploitation films were thus distributed with a more typical exploitation pattern of release, geared to drive-in theaters. Arkoff commented on the potential disconnect between the audiences served by AIP's distribution network—drive-ins in small towns and suburbs—and blaxploitation's target audience. In a November 1972 article in *The Independent Film Journal*, Arkoff commented that the company was aware of the question of ““What will North Dakota do with them [black films]?”” Arkoff responded, “We're going to have to take care of our other theatres.”²⁰⁵ Serving their exchanges was a priority; *Coffy*'s distribution in the South, in drive-ins, and on a double bill all show how AIP attempted to reach black viewers in urban areas while

fulfilling their obligations to exhibitors. Perhaps due to Grier's stardom, *Coffy* appeared to be more successful than the typical AIP blaxploitation film.

Indeed, I surmise that the sexploitation elements of the Grier vehicles prompted AIP to adopt a more general exploitation release. AIP reported 350 prints for *Coffy* due to high demand; AIP claimed that 350 was more than was typical.²⁰⁶ The Samuel Z. Arkoff collection shows print numbers that bear this out; *Friday Foster* and *Sheba, Baby* were both released with 250 prints apiece compared to *Coffy*'s 350.²⁰⁷ *Coffy* was one of the studio's highest grossing blaxploitation releases with \$4 million in rentals on a budget of \$500,000. *Foxy Brown* took in \$2–\$3 million in rentals. Grier followed *Coffy* with *Foxy Brown*, *Sheba, Baby*, and *Friday Foster* for AIP. Struggling to transcend her blaxploitation past, Grier starred in the Dino De Laurentiis and UA-distributed plantation film *Drum* (1976) and Warner Bros.' *Greased Lightning* (1977). Grier also played a small role in 1979's *Roots: The Next Generation* miniseries. Despite a high-profile and much beloved role as Jackie Brown in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), Grier was unable to parlay her success at AIP into a longer career as a female lead. Since her days at AIP, Grier has more commonly played supporting player roles, as in her stints in such television shows as *Miami Vice* (1985-1989) and *The L Word* (2004-2009). During the early 1970s, Grier became a sex symbol in a series of sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids that provided subtle product differentiation for New World's sexploitation slate and AIP's black action films.

The Blaxploitation Cycle Fades

Grier's fading career reflected the cycle's relatively rapid waning. Many factors, including cycle fatigue, contributed to blaxploitation's wider decline. The limited export potential of blaxploitation was a challenge. In May of 1974, *Variety* asked foreign sales agents to

comment on the selling of black films abroad, and particularly in Europe. These sales agents noted that with some exceptions, notably *Slaughter*, the films performed poorly outside of the US. The agents, who refused to give their names, suggested that the films failed to do well because audiences in Europe were racist. *Variety*'s conclusion: "Inherent prejudice blends with the relatively small black population in Europe's main burgs to severely limit the market potential for such pix."²⁰⁸ The blaxploitation films were also a difficult sell to TV since many were rated 'R' and fairly violent. Plus, black family sitcoms—*Sanford and Son* (1972–1977), *Good Times* (1974–1979), *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985), and *What's Happening* (1976–1979)—had all begun to air on TV after beginning in the mid-1970s. In 1974, ABC aired *Get Christie Love!* (1974–1975), a made-for-television blaxploitation film and subsequent television series that starred Teresa Graves as a police detective modeled on Grier's characters in *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*. With foreign markets unfriendly to black-themed films and television imitating the imitators, this left the domestic theatrical market. Even the most financially successful of the black action films had difficulty reaching above \$6–7 million in rentals. As the majors recovered from the recession by developing blockbuster films that dominated summer playtime, independents appeared unwilling to rely on the marginal grosses of blaxploitation films to sustain their operations.

Conclusion

The industry recession was a time of opportunity for independents and of risk management for the major studios. in drive-ins. The major studios balanced risk-taking behaviors, namely gambling on a new film cycle, with risk-mitigation strategies in their negative pick-ups of blaxploitation films. The blaxploitation market's stability meant a limited profit

margin, which the major studios judged to be not worth the modest gamble. As the cycle went on, AIP pursued a form of product differentiation that looked back to the studio-made prestige films of the black film boom. For AIP, *Cooley High*'s differentiation from Arkoff's slate of violent black action films helped mitigate the company's reputation as peddlers of negative stereotypes. Finally, AIP's sexploitation/blaxploitation hybrids used the star image of Pam Grier to sell films to drive-ins and blaxploitation-friendly theaters. These hybrids cannibalized existing exploitation trends, revealing a kind of recombinant logic that drove innovation and differentiation in film trends verging on saturation.

Understanding both sexploitation and blaxploitation as recession-era products reveals this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s to be an active time of interplay between the major studios and exploitation independents. Both looked to each other for influence, and the majors' entrée in blaxploitation brought the Hollywood studios and firms like New World Pictures and AIP into close market contact. As a time of 'anything that works,' the recession appeared also to motivate nimble shifts in production strategy, revealed in the complex and shifting causality that showed studio/exploitation imitation in sexploitation, exploitation/studio imitation in blaxploitation, and studio/studio imitation in the sexploitation-blaxploitation hybrids. The recession era exploitation cycles illustrated a dynamic of influence, exchange, and imitation that happened both simultaneously and over time.

¹ "51 Recent Black-Slanted Films," *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Keith Corson, *Trying to Get Over: African American Directors after Blaxploitation, 1977-1986* (Austin: UT Press, 2016), 2.

⁴ Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 5. Sieving writes: "The removal of African American agency from accounts of the production and reception of 1970s black-themed cinema allows the aforementioned scholars to advance the claim that the institutional racism embedded in the American film industry has always mitigated against the expression of a true African American consciousness."

- ⁵ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th edition (New York: Continuum, 2001), 209-240.
- ⁶ Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 5.
- ⁷ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993).
- ⁸ See Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches & Sassy Supermamas": Black Power Action Films* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Mia Mask, *Divas On Screen: Black Women in American Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); and Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006). Foundational books on blaxploitation include: Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003); Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- ⁹ Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Corson, *Trying to Get Over*.
- ¹¹ Tino Balio, *United Artists, Vol. 2* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 313.
- ¹² ABK to John R. Beckett, February 12, 1971. Qtd in Balio, *United Artists*, 314.
- ¹³ "Whodunit in Harlem," *Variety*, May 21, 1969, 30.
- ¹⁴ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 80-81.
- ¹⁵ Ronald Gold, "Director Dared Use Race Humor; 'Soul' As Lure for 'Cotton's' B.O. Bale," *Variety*, September 30, 1970, 62; "Jr. Goldwyn's Next 'Cotton' For WB? Too Costly For UA," *Variety*, February 17, 1971, 3, 24.
- ¹⁶ Jeffrey C. Ulin, *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing Film, TV, and Video Content* (New York: Focal Press, 2014), 115. Ulin writes: "The advantage to the distributor is cash flow and the elimination of risk: nothing is paid until the picture is completed to the satisfaction of stipulated contract terms. The advantage to the producer is a greater measure of independence—the terms of the negative pickup agreement will often impose less creative control than if the studio distributor were directly overseeing production—and the elimination of certain financing charges, such as studio interest."
- ¹⁷ For more on the pop soundtracks in blaxploitation films, see: Christopher Sieving, "Super Sonics: Song Score as Counter-Narration in Super Fly," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13.1 (Winter 2001), 77-91.
- ¹⁸ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 81.
- ¹⁹ Robe, "Film Reviews: Cotton Comes To Harlem," *Variety*, June 10, 1970, 18.
- ²⁰ Ronald Gold, "Director Dared Use Race Humor; 'Soul' As Lure for 'Cotton's' B.O. Bale," *Variety*, September 30, 1970, 1, 62. It should be noted that Melvin Van Peebles' black identity didn't help the reception of *Watermelon Man*.
- ²¹ Earl Calloway, "Cotton Comes To Harlem Is Exceptional Comedy," *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 2, 1970, 11.
- ²² Robe, "Film Reviews: Cotton Comes To Harlem," *Variety*, June 10, 1970, 18.
- ²³ "NAACP 'Oscars' Talent & Shows," *Variety*, November 18, 1970, 1, 84.
- ²⁴ "Cotton Comes to Harlem," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 10, 1970, 16.
- ²⁵ "Halls of Anger' Premier At The Woods Theatre," *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 16, 1970, 12; "Photo Standalone 8," *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 7, 1970, 20.
- ²⁶ "Cotton Comes to Harlem," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 10, 1970, 16; "Pictures Grosses: 'Strawberry' Fair 10G, Det; 'Blood'-'Vampires' Lush 38G, 'Heroes' 4G," *Variety*, August 5, 1970, 13.
- ²⁷ "Cotton Comes to Harlem' 300 at Baltimore Hippodrome," *Boxoffice*, June 29, 1970, E2; "Cotton Comes to Harlem' Runs Up 575 and 450 at Two NY Theatres," *Boxoffice*, June 29, 1970.
- ²⁸ "'Cotton' is Rockin' at B.O.," *Variety*, June 17, 1970, 5.
- ²⁹ "'Cotton Comes to Harlem,'" *Variety*, July 8, 1970: 18-9.
- ³⁰ "Pictures Grosses: Torga Rousing 18G," *Variety*, July 22, 1970, 12; "Picture Grosses: 'Patton' Hot 25G, L'Ville; 'Lili' 12G." *Variety*, July 1, 1970, 10.
- ³¹ "Picture Grosses: 'Harlem' Hotsy \$13,000 in Seattle; 'Cancer' 3½G." *Variety*, July 29, 1970, 8, 10; "Picture Grosses: L.A. Soars for Sixth Week; 'Wagon' Huge 200G; 'Cotton' Big \$28,000; 'Catch' Boff 30G, 5; 'Mash,' 'Mules' both Hot," *Variety*, July 29, 1970, 9; "Pictures Grosses: 'Burglars' Brisk \$5,100, Houston; 'Fuzz' \$7,100," *Variety*, July 19, 1972, 11, 18.
- ³² "Pictures Grosses: 'Harlem' Peak 42½G, Cleve," *Variety*, August 5, 1970, 13.

- ³³ "Pictures Grosses: 'Harlem' Hot 12G, Mpls," *Variety*, August 26, 1970, 14; "Picture Grosses: 'War' Soft \$13,000, K.C.: 'Tibbs' 12G," *Variety*, August 19, 197, 8; "Pictures Grosses: 'Censorship Denmark' Record \$28,481, D.C.; 'Olympics' Fat 7½G 'Day' 16G,2d," *Variety*, August 5, 1970, 13; "Pictures Grosses: 'Night' Warm \$11500 Denver," *Variety*, August 12, 1970, 9, 12.
- ³⁴ "Cotton Comes to Harlem' Big For Third Week in Baltimore," *Boxoffice*, July 13, 1970, E2; "Eight Loop Newcomers Strike Up Fast Pace," *Boxoffice*, July 13, 1970, C1; "50 Top-Grossing Films," *Variety*, July 22, 1970, 11.
- ³⁵ "Picture Grosses: 'Strangers' Sharp 13G, Philly," *Variety*, September 30, 1970, 12; "Picture Grosses: 'Soldier' Brave \$13,000, Pitt," *Variety*, September 9, 1970, 14; "Picture Grosses: 'Harlem' Fat \$22,000, Frisco," *Variety*, August 19, 1970, 10, 12.
- ³⁶ "The Great Migration, 1910-1970," *U.S. Census*, September 13, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/>, last accessed November 1, 2109.
- ³⁷ Linda May Strawn, "Interviews: Samuel Z. Arkoff," in *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, edited by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1975), 262. Arkoff explained, "Over time, some of the new methods were really pioneered by us. For example, we were one of the first to play drive-ins together with hardtops. For a long time, conventional theatres would not play with drive-ins. They would not play the same movie at the same time. Hard-tops wanted an exclusive run on a picture. In order to have a decent advertising campaign and not lose money on the first week, we wanted more theatres. Which would help divide the cost of advertising, in essence" (262).
- ³⁸ "'Slaughter' Tallies 500 in Minneapolis," *Boxoffice*, September 18, 1972; "'Slaughter' Reaches 600 in New Orleans," *Boxoffice*, September 18, 1972; "Pictures: 'Blacula' and 'Slaughter' Pacing American Int'l," *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 4; "'Slaughter' Premiere at 2 Dallas Theatres," *Boxoffice*, August 21, 1972; "Picture Grosses: 'Slaughter' 24½G, Frisco; 'Parts' 4G," *Variety*, September 20, 1972, 9; "Picture Grosses: 'Slaughter' Big 15G, L'ville; 'Sabata' 3½G," *Variety*, September 6, 1972, 9.
- ³⁹ "Hollywood: AIP's 'Slaughter' to Bow in Greater LA August 30," *Boxoffice*, August 7, 1972.
- ⁴⁰ For example, Novotny Lawrence makes no mention of blaxploitation films' circulation in drive-ins. Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- ⁴¹ Lee Beaupre, "Pictures: Analysis of U.S. Boxoffice Trends; 'Outsiders' Role Noted: 'Poseidon' Boff," *Variety*, July 25, 1973, 14.
- ⁴² Robert B. Frederick, "Nothing Can Fail Like Success In Ill-Considered, Rush Sequel: View of Goldwyn Jr. Re 'Cotton' Echo," *Variety*, July 15, 1970, 22; Ronald Gold, "Director Dared Use Race Humor; 'Soul' As Lure for 'Cotton's' B.O. Bale," *Variety*, September 30, 1970, 1, 62.
- ⁴³ Ronald Gold, "Director Dared Use Race Humor; 'Soul' As Lure for 'Cotton's' B.O. Bale," *Variety*, September 30, 1970, 1.
- ⁴⁴ Gold, "Director Dared Use Race Humor," 1.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 62.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 62.
- ⁴⁷ Addison Verrill, "Black Pix and White Market," *Variety*, September 8, 1971, 3, 25.
- ⁴⁸ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 86.
- ⁴⁹ "Black-Slanted Pic Looms Next At Cinemation," *Variety*, March 27, 1974, 4, 18.
- ⁵⁰ "Media and Black Capitalism," *Variety*, June 2, 1971, 3, 6.
- ⁵¹ "Valenti Advises Van Peebles: No Racial Criteria," *Variety*, March 31, 1971, 7. The opening sequence depicting sex between an adult sex worker and Sweetback as a young teenager (performed by 13 or 14-year-old Mario Van Peebles) would, at minimum, flag a NC-17 rating even today. More likely, child pornography laws enacted since the 1980s would likely prevent the scene from finding a distributor at all.
- ⁵² "Sez Pic Code A White Plot and He 'Might Sue' MPAA," *Variety*, March 24, 1971, 5.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁵⁴ "Valenti Advises Van Peebles: No Racial Criteria," *Variety*, March 31, 1971, 7.
- ⁵⁵ "'Sweetback's Song' Released on Stax," *Billboard*, May 29, 1971, A6.
- ⁵⁶ Ed Ochs, "Soul: Soul Sauce," *Billboard*, June 5, 1971, 28.
- ⁵⁷ "Sweet Sweetback's," *Boxoffice*, April 12, 1971, K5.
- ⁵⁸ "Sweet Sweetback's," *Boxoffice*, K5; "Pictures: Cambist 'Relations' in Atlanta Tangle; 'Cool Print' Suit," *Variety*, April 7, 1971, 6. The Coronet was operated by Eastern Federal Corp, a Charlotte-based, 10-theater chain
- ⁵⁹ "Pictures: Cambist 'Relations' in Atlanta Tangle; 'Cool Print' Suit," *Variety*, April 7, 1971, 6.

- ⁶⁰ “‘Sweet Sweetback’ Grosses Over Million in Openers,” *Boxoffice*, June 7, 1971, 6.
- ⁶¹ “Pictures Grosses: ‘Ginger’ Giant \$80,000, Philly; ‘Death’ Splashy \$11,000, ‘Sweetback’ 23G, 4th,” *Variety*, June 16, 1971, 10. It was only topped by ‘Thunderball,’ ‘You Only Live Twice,’ and ‘Love Story’”; “‘Sweet Sweetback’ Grosses Over Million in Openers,” *Boxoffice*, June 7, 1971, 6.
- ⁶² “‘Sweet Sweetback’ Gains 440 Points Fourth Week in Los Angeles Booking,” *Boxoffice*, June 21, 1971.
- ⁶³ “Picture Grosses: ‘Sweetback’ Wow 331/2G St.L,” *Variety*, April 28, 1971, 12, 16.
- ⁶⁴ “‘Sweetback’ With 500 Again Leads Memphis,” *Boxoffice*, June 28, 1971, SE8.
- ⁶⁵ “‘Sweet Sweetback’ Is South’s Top Grosser,” *Boxoffice*, June 21, 1971, SE12.
- ⁶⁶ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, 248.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Thomas also praised Melvin Van Peebles as an important black filmmaker. Thomas wrote: “Only a black man could evoke the vitality, humor, pain, despair and omnipresent fear that is life for so many of his people.” “Ghetto Life Focus of ‘Sweet,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1971, A.
- ⁶⁹ Huey P. Newton, “‘He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*,” *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, June 19, 1971, 1-13.
- ⁷⁰ Loyle Hairston, “Sour on ‘Sweet Sweetback,’” *New York Times*, May 30, 1971, D14.
- ⁷¹ “Black Workshop Charges Racial Sabotage in ‘Sweet,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1971, 22.
- ⁷² “The Top 25 Films of 1971,” *Variety*, May 3, 1972, 33.
- ⁷³ “The Top 25 Films of 1971,” 33.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade* 251, 254.
- ⁷⁶ “MGM Reports Huge Loss In Earnings for 1969,” *Boxoffice*, November 24, 1969, 9.
- ⁷⁷ Balio, *United Artists*, 317.
- ⁷⁸ Balio, *United Artists*, 317.
- ⁷⁹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 92.
- ⁸⁰ *Shaft* Script f.123, “Shaft” Master Correction List dated 1/19/1973, Tom Miller papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
- ⁸¹ Ronald Gold, “‘Black Hero’s Girl Is Black’” *Variety*, March 17, 1971, 3.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ *Shaft* Production notes f.124, Tom Miller papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
- ⁸⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 92.
- ⁸⁶ *Shaft* Production notes f.124, Tom Miller papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ “Black-Owned Ad Agency on ‘Shaft’ Credited For B.O. Boom,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 5.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.
- ⁹⁰ *Shaft* Ads: *Variety*, April 15, 1971, 13-15.
- ⁹¹ “Black-Owned Ad Agency on ‘Shaft,’” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 20.
- ⁹² “Film Reviews: *Shaft*,” *Variety*, June 16, 1971, 15.
- ⁹³ “Feature Reviews: *Shaft*,” *Boxoffice*, July 12, 1971, 11.
- ⁹⁴ John C. Mahoney, “‘Shaft’ Playing at New Fox Theater,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1971, E8.
- ⁹⁵ Vincent Canby, “*Shaft*,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1971, D1.
- ⁹⁶ “‘Shaft’ Debuts June 23 In Chicago and Detroit,” *Boxoffice*, June 28, 1971, 6.
- ⁹⁷ “Picture Grosses: ‘Shaft’ Wow \$74,000, Philadelphia; ‘Carnal’ Record \$45,400; ‘Seven’ 14G,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 12.
- ⁹⁸ “‘Shaft’ Solid \$20,000 In Houston,” *Variety*, July 14, 1971, 14; “Atlanta,” *Boxoffice*, July 5, 1971, SE2, E3.
- ⁹⁹ “Picture Grosses: ‘Shaft’ Tall 38G, Denver; ‘Jake’ 291/2G,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 8.
- ¹⁰⁰ “‘Shaft’ Debuts June 23 In Chicago and Detroit,” *Boxoffice*, June 28, 1971, 6.
- ¹⁰¹ “‘Shaft’ Shown 24 Hours A Day at NY’s DeMille,” *Boxoffice*, July 5, 1971, E2.
- ¹⁰² “‘Shaft’ Shown 24 Hours A Day at NY’s DeMille,” E2.
- ¹⁰³ Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, July 7, 1971, 9, 12.
- ¹⁰⁴ “Top Films By Black Directors,” *Variety*, March 18, 1991, 108.

- ¹⁰⁵ “Top Films By Black Directors,”¹⁰⁸; “Roger Lewis Plans ‘Shaft’ Sequel With Heavy Race Talent,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 4.
- ¹⁰⁶ A.D. Murphy, “50 More Potential Black Theme Films Counted; With Fall-Outs See Maybe 20 Reaching,” *Variety*, September 20, 1972, 7.
- ¹⁰⁷ “Black-Owned Ad Agency On ‘Shaft’ Credited For B.O. Boom, 80% Black,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 5, 20.
- ¹⁰⁸ Producer Roger Lewis’ reasoning for keeping black craftspeople on the sequel smacked of essentialism: “Black audiences have a sixth sense. They know when you are putting something over on them with only black actors up front.” “Roger Lewis Plans ‘Shaft’ Sequel With Heavy Race Talent,” *Variety*, July 28, 1971, 4.
- ¹⁰⁹ “Rome Stopovers of Black Talent,” *Variety*, January 10, 1973, 33; “‘Shaft’ Tests Ghetto-To-Africa Locale; Roger Lewis Fears Skimpy Promotion,” *Variety*, June 27, 1973, 24.
- ¹¹⁰ “Big Rental Films of 1973,” *Variety*, January 9, 1974, p. 60.
- ¹¹¹ “Plan ‘Shaft’ As Series For CBS,” *Variety*, October 18, 1972, 28.
- ¹¹² Sieving, *Soul Searching*, 203.
- ¹¹³ Robert J. Landry, “‘Exorcist’: Smash Hit Backlash,” *Variety*, March 13, 1974, 22; “‘Exorcist’ Is Into 5 of 8 Rugoffs; Miss Black Site,” *Variety*, February 13, 1974, 7. Robert J. Landry wrote that *The Exorcist* held “a peculiar fascination for blacks.”
- ¹¹⁴ Addison Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ A Blackbuster Phenom,” *Variety*, October 4, 1972, 3, 26; Lois Baumel, “Producer and Star of ‘Super Fly’ Are Interviewed in Cleveland,” *Boxoffice*, October 9, 1972, ME-1.
- ¹¹⁵ Addison Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ A Blackbuster Phenom,” *Variety*, October 4, 1972, 3, 26; Lois Baumel, “Producer and Star of ‘Super Fly’ Are Interviewed in Cleveland,” *Boxoffice*, October 9, 1972, ME-1.
- ¹¹⁶ “Harlem Drug Pusher in Warner Bros Pickups,” *Variety*, June 28, 1972, 24; “‘Super Fly’ May Exit Harlem Ghetto Trap,” *Variety*, September 20, 1972, 7. Parks Jr. has said that *Super Fly* was funded by black dentists in Westchester—Ed Allen and Connie Jenkins—and a loan from his father, Gordon Parks Sr. For more on *Super Fly*’s production history, see Eithne Quinn “‘Tryin’ to Get Over’: ‘Super Fly’, Black Politics, and Post-Civil Rights Film Enterprise,” *Cinema Journal* 49:2 (Winter 2010), 86-105.
- ¹¹⁷ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 96.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 95.
- ¹¹⁹ Gene Siskel, “‘Super Fly’: The Scenes are Longer, Feelings Stronger,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1972, B3.
- ¹²⁰ Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 79.
- ¹²¹ Roger Greenspun, “‘Super Fly’: Ron O’Neal Has Lead as Narcotics Dealer,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1972, 14.
- ¹²² Michael L. Culbert, “Films of ‘Hip Black Dudes’: Good or Bad Image?” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 30, 1972, 6.
- ¹²³ “‘Super Fly,’” *The Independent Film Journal*, August 3, 1972, 17.
- ¹²⁴ “Feature Reviews: Super Fly,” *Boxoffice*, August 14, 1972, A9.
- ¹²⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 101.
- ¹²⁶ “Pictures: Catholic Office ‘C’ On WB’s ‘Super Fly,’” *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 4.
- ¹²⁷ “WB, Parks Jr. No Talk On NAACP ‘Super Fly’ Swat.” *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 5.
- ¹²⁸ Steve Toy, “NAACP & CORE Hit Black Capers; Distortion of Race Life-Style; Black Brokers Serve White Cos,” *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 5, 24.
- ¹²⁹ “CORE Supports Fight of Black Exploitation,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 17, 1972, B7.
- ¹³⁰ Washington Black Generate Anger Vs. Warners’ Super Fly,” *Variety*, September 13, 2.
- ¹³¹ Michael L. Culbert, “New Group Joins ‘Super Fly’ Fray,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 7, 1972, 5.
- ¹³² In September of 1972, Parks Jr. took aim at the members of the black elite for “jumping on the bandwagon to get their names in the paper.” Parks said, “We didn’t make ‘Priest’ a hero—but apparently what we say is a true statement, judging by reaction to the film. It is a part of life and certain people are bourgeois about their attitude towards it. This film is about poverty. Black people know it exists and whites identify with it. The film show(sic) that someone who makes it out of a ghetto is a rarity. It so happens that by the time ghetto people reach they don’t have a chance to get out.” “‘Super Fly’ May Exit Harlem Ghetto Trap,” *Variety*, September 20, 1972, 7, 16.
- ¹³³ *Ibid*.
- ¹³⁴ “Swats ‘Super Fly,’” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 24, 1972, 19.
- ¹³⁵ Addison Verrill, “Biggest WB Week & Half-Year,” *Variety*, August 16, 1972, 3, 24.
- ¹³⁶ “‘Super Fly’ Goes Through N.Y. Roof On Black Trade,” *Variety*, August 9, 1972, 5.
- ¹³⁷ “The Screen: ‘Super Fly,’” *Variety*, August 9, 1972, 12-13.

- ¹³⁸ “Black Still Times Square Beautiful...” *Variety*, September 13, 1972, 8.
- ¹³⁹ “‘Super Fly’ Notches Huge 400 Initial Week in Chicago,” *Boxoffice*, August 21, 1972, C2.
- ¹⁴⁰ Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, August 30, 1972, 15; Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, September 6, 1972, 12.
- ¹⁴¹ Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, September 27, 1972, 16.
- ¹⁴² Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, September 6, 1972, 9; Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, September 13, 1972, 14.
- ¹⁴³ Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, September 6, 1972, 8. In smaller cities, including St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Houston, and Louisville, *Super Fly* tended to gross around \$50,000 in the first week of play.
- ¹⁴⁴ “‘Super Fly’ Opening Week Generates 200,” *Boxoffice*, October 9, 1972, NC1.
- ¹⁴⁵ “Top Films By Black Directors,” *Variety*, March 18, 1991, 108; Addison Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ A Blackbuster Phenom,” *Variety*, October 4, 1972, 3, 26.
- ¹⁴⁶ “‘Super Fly’ May Exit Harlem Ghetto Trap,” *Variety*, September 20, 1972, 7.
- ¹⁴⁷ Addison Verrill, “‘Fly’ Sequel Out of WB Park,” *Variety*, May 30, 1973, 3.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁹ Corson, *Trying to Get Over*, 13.
- ¹⁵⁰ New World Pictures made *T.N.T. Jackson* (1974). Crown International Pictures released *Welcome Home, Brother Charles* (1975). Dimension Pictures released *Dolemite* (1975) and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976). Independent International released *Black Heat* (1976).
- ¹⁵¹ Corson, *Trying to Get Over*, 32.
- ¹⁵² *Blacula* cost and budget sheet, Norman T. Herman papers, files 8-13, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.
- ¹⁵³ “AIP Arkoff Urges Dialogue Between Blacks, Hollywood,” *The Independent Film Journal*, November 27, 1972, 27.
- ¹⁵⁴ Corson, *Trying to Get Over*, 32.
- ¹⁵⁵ “Black’lash On Black’busters,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 4, 1972, 5, 22.
- ¹⁵⁶ “Black’lash On Black’busters,” 5, 22.
- ¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁹ “AIP Arkoff Urges Dialogue Between Blacks, Hollywood,” *The Independent Film Journal*, November 27, 1972, 27.
- ¹⁶⁰ “Pictures: AIP’s Arkoff: Get Off Tired Pics,” *Variety*, May 22, 1974, 7.
- ¹⁶¹ Sieving, 204.
- ¹⁶² Leab, 260.
- ¹⁶³ “Pictures: Arkoff: Next Years Healthy, If—‘No Outright 1930s Debacle,’” *Variety*, January 29, 1975, 4, 30.
- ¹⁶⁴ Neither Bogle nor Leab include *Cooley High* within their histories. Corson, *Trying to Get Over*, 32-33.
- ¹⁶⁵ Boyz II Men would record Cooley High’s original song “It’s So Hard To say Goodbye” for 1991’s *Cooleyhighharmony*.
- ¹⁶⁶ “‘Cooley High’ in Benefit for CFWC,” *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1975, 20.
- ¹⁶⁷ “Cooley High,” *Variety*, June 25, 1975, 23.
- ¹⁶⁸ *Cooley High* pressbook, Series 1, Box 5, Folder, 3, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ¹⁶⁹ “Heavy Community Support Backed ‘Cooley’ Debut,” *Boxoffice*, July 7, 1975, C3.
- ¹⁷⁰ “Heavy Community Support,” C3.
- ¹⁷¹ Reports on prints for AIP films, Series 3: Subseries A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ¹⁷² “AIP’s ‘Cooley High’ Adds Suburban Atlanta Run,” *Boxoffice*, August 25, 1975, SE8.
- ¹⁷³ “AIP’s ‘Cooley High’ Gets Impressive Report Card,” *Boxoffice*, August 11, 1975, 7.
- ¹⁷⁴ “Picture Grosses: ‘Inferno’ Hot \$8,000, L’Ville,” *Variety*, July 23, 1975, 12.
- ¹⁷⁵ “AIP’s ‘Cooley High’ Gets Impressive Report Card,” *Boxoffice*, August 11, 1975, 7.
- ¹⁷⁶ “Picture Grosses: ‘Death’ Dandy 28G, St. L.,” *Variety*, July 2, 1975, 8, 30.
- ¹⁷⁷ “‘Cooley High’ Grabs 700 in New Orleans,” *Boxoffice*, October 6, 1975.
- ¹⁷⁸ “Cooley High,” Internet Movie Database, last accessed September 15, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0072820/business>.
- ¹⁷⁹ “More Placid Year for (Black) Image: Pix, Tube, Disk,” *Variety*, January 14, 1976, 38.
- ¹⁸⁰ “Lurid Boom Over, But Black Films Steady On,” *Variety*, January 7, 1976, 16.

- ¹⁸¹ Jill Gerston, "Pam Grier Finally Escapes the 1970s," *New York Times*, December 21, 1997, AR17.
- ¹⁸² Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 80.
- ¹⁸³ *Ibid.* I have been unable to find the original *Washington Post* article, which is not cited in Young.
- ¹⁸⁴ Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 215.
- ¹⁸⁵ Whit, "Coffy," *Variety*, May 16, 1973, 32.
- ¹⁸⁶ "Coffy," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 28, 1973, 26.
- ¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸⁸ Whit, "Coffy," *Variety*, May 16, 1973, 32.
- ¹⁸⁹ Whit, "Coffy," 32.
- ¹⁹⁰ "Friday Foster," *Variety*, December 31, 1975, 14.
- ¹⁹¹ Linda Gross, "Pam on Way Up in 'Foxy,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1974, C19.
- ¹⁹² Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 214.
- ¹⁹³ *Coffy* pressbook, Series 1, Box 4, Folder, 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Friday Foster* advertising slogans, folder 154, James Raker Papers, Margaret Herrick Library.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹⁶ "'Coffy,'" *Variety*, May 30, 1973, 21.
- ¹⁹⁷ "'Coffy,'" *Variety*, 21.
- ¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰¹ "'Coffy'-'Mack' Duo Widely Shown," *Boxoffice*, December 24, 1973, 8.
- ²⁰² "AIP and Cinerama Release 'Coffy' and 'Mack' Jointly," *Boxoffice*, November 5, 1973, 9.
- ²⁰³ "AIP and Cinerama Release 'Coffy' and 'Mack' Jointly," 9.
- ²⁰⁴ "'Coffy'-'Mack' Duo Widely Shown," *Boxoffice*, December 24, 1973, 8.
- ²⁰⁵ "AIP Arkoff Urges Dialogue Between Blacks, Hollywood," *The Independent Film Journal*, November 27, 1972, 27.
- ²⁰⁶ "AIP Orders More Prints For 'Coffy,' 'Little Cigars,'" *Boxoffice*, June 4, 1973, 6.
- ²⁰⁷ Reports on prints for AIP films, Series 3: Subseries A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁰⁸ "U.S. Black Films Failing in Europe," *Variety*, May 8, 1974, 1, 54.

Figure 5: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) one sheet



Figure 6: *Cooley High* (1970) original press kit

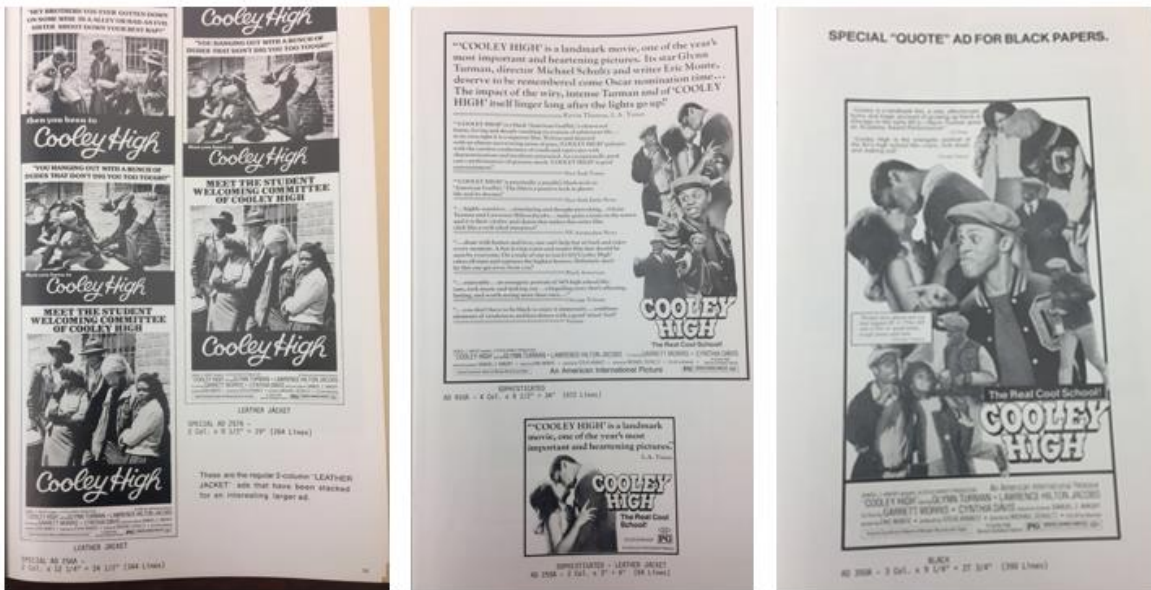
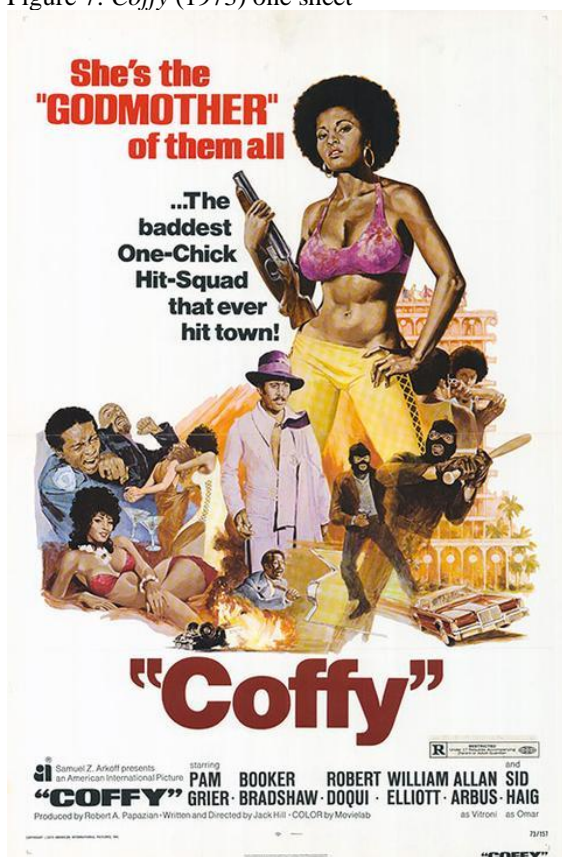


Figure 7: *Coffy* (1973) one sheet

CHAPTER FOUR: HICKSPLOITATION, DRIVE-IN THEATERS, AND THE SOUTHERNIZATION OF POPULAR CULTURE, 1973–1978

At the beginning of the 1975 summer season, *Variety* writer Don Carle Gillette observed that the seven major studios had released only 16 films that year. He found that independents were releasing the bulk of feature films, and AIP led all active 75 independent distributors in yearly releases. Remarking on the box office success of the disproportionately independent film marketplace, Gillette wrote:

It also is worth noting that the indies are coming up with an increasing number of big grossers, as witness Taylor-Laughlin's 'Billy Jack' and 'The Trial of Billy Jack,' BCP's 'Walking Tall' and 'The Reincarnation Of Peter Proud,' Bryanston's 'Return of The Dragon' and 'Frankenstein,' Mulberry Square's 'Benji,' New World's 'Amarcord,' Crown's 'Police Women,' [sic] Cinemation's 'Black Godfather,' and others.¹

Apart from *Policewomen* (1974) and *The Black Godfather* (1974), Gillette's list of examples excluded all sexploitation and blaxploitation films. Notably, the "big grossers" that Gillette cited were films comprising a new exploitation cycle; *Billy Jack* (1971), *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974), and *Walking Tall* (1973) were the early successes that would ultimately propel hicksploitation to prominence in the independent film marketplace.

Amanda Ann Klein writes that cycles "repeat the same images and plots over and over within a relatively short period of time."² Hicksploitation, described by Scott Von Doviak as "the rural American folklore [of the 1970s]," was a cycle that, similar to other exploitation trends, encompassed a range of genres that included horror, drama, comedy, and action.³ Despite this variety, most hicksploitation films contained common plot elements. As the case studies in this chapter attest, these included outlaws, vigilante justice, car chases, moonshine running, rural or

Southern settings, and country music. Most hicksploitation films in the decade were made and released from 1973 through 1978. As this chapter will show, the hicksploitation cycle developed because of growing market deficiencies in sexploitation and blaxploitation. As the 1970s went on, it became evident that neither sexploitation nor blaxploitation's performance in drive-ins would mitigate the growing product shortage at these theaters—theaters that had been crucial to independent film and the exploitation market since the 1950s. As the first section of this chapter will establish, sexploitation exposed exhibitors to greater legal and financial risk, and blaxploitation was viewed as serving an exclusively black audience that was not located in the small-town, suburban, and rural drive-ins that were experiencing the product shortfall. Two catalysts pointed the way to a possible solution. *Deliverance* (1972) demonstrated to producers and distributors an underserved taste for stories generally pertaining to rural or small-town America, and sleeper hit *Billy Jack* revealed that a film with aggressive target marketing behind it could earn windfall profits outside of urban centers and key cities.

After establishing the industrial dynamics that created a demand for hicksploitation, the chapter investigates two strains of hicksploitation, or what I will refer to as sub-cycles: the violent vigilante film and the rural road film. I conceive of the citizens band (“CB”) film as a branch of the rural road film. A more overtly adult exploitation sub-cycle, the violent vigilante film, and especially *Walking Tall*, confirmed the viability of the cycle in small-town drive-ins, and, at the same time, continued some of the counterculture orientation of *Billy Jack*. The violent vigilante film gave way to the rural road sub-cycle, inaugurated by *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974), developed by AIP, and released by Fox. These were relatively straight-forward action films featuring car chases and crash sequences. New World Pictures devoted much of their production resources during mid-decade to this cycle including *Eat My Dust!* (1976). While all

three sub-cycles tapped into an existing audience and market for country music, the CB films leveraged the massive success of the song “Convoy” and the CB fad to elevate hicksploitation to a mainstream market position, culminating in the major-distributed *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) and *Convoy* (1978).

The chapter contends that hicksploitation emerged out of a nexus of industrial factors including product shortage at drive-ins, increased competition in the exhibition sector, and independents’ disillusionment with sexploitation. Reducing production and raising budgets, major studios climbed out of the recession but left drive-in theaters in a perilous condition. Responding to this set of circumstances, the exploitation market broadly speaking—producers, distributors, and exhibitors—turned to ‘PG’-rated movies about small-town or rural America to bring the exploitation audience away from new shopping mall multiplexes and back to drive-ins. These factors, coupled with the popularity of country music and culture, cultivated a taste for hillbilly-oriented films targeted to the core exploitation viewership since the 1950s—white middle-class teens and young adults.

The chapter will show that the hicksploitation cycle illustrated a rather straightforward relationship between the studios and independents: that of independent differentiation and major studio appropriation over time. While Hollywood releases, like *Deliverance*, and Hollywood Renaissance films, like *Easy Rider* (1969), influenced hicksploitation, it was independents that developed the hicksploitation cycle to serve subsequent-run drive-in theaters. Over several years’ time, the major studios and television networks appropriated elements of the cycle. Hicksploitation provided product differentiation from Hollywood and differentiation from existing exploitation cycles. As hillbilly culture reached a mainstream tipping point, the major studios appropriated hicksploitation. Indeed, *Smokey and the Bandit* offered Universal a form of

product differentiation from Fox's *Star Wars* (1977). Such market positioning drove *Smokey and the Bandit* to 'sleeper' status.

The chapter presents two contributions to academic discourse. First, while scholarship typically frames the relationship between drive-ins and exploitation cinema as one of self-evident kinship, the chapter grounds these affinities within the market dynamics of the American film industry including changes in supply and demand and targeted marketing and distribution. This reveals that the relationship between exploitation filmmaking and drive-ins was not at all a 'natural' one. Instead, the association was dynamic and shifting, mitigated by industrial developments. Second, the chapter shows that an industrial consideration offers important nuance that a cult studies approach ignores. A 'high' vs. 'low' cult studies approach to hicksploitation too strongly counterposes rural tastes to establishment tastes. Instead, the chapter contends that hicksploitation, drawing on the popularity of country music and Southern culture more broadly, had purchase across the mainstream and the margins. As such the chapter argues for the inclusion of hicksploitation, not simply in considerations of exploitation cinema, but within histories of 1970s cinema more generally.

Literature Review

Current scholarship that touches on hicksploitation, or sometimes termed 'hixploitation,' has tended to approach the subject from a popular lens. Scott Von Doviak's *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema* presents a history based on common themes and plot elements absent industrial context or any primary documentation aside from the films themselves.⁴ Historians of 1970s cinema have only occasionally discussed hillbilly-oriented films as an important or popular cycle in the decade.⁵ Cult studies scholars have usually made reference to

the broader hicksploitation trend only in passing when discussing exploitation *auteurs* Herschell Gordon Lewis and Russ Meyer.⁶ Some historians of the period have neglected mention of such films altogether.⁷

Other scholars have investigated the intersection of place or region and film. Andrea Comiskey has researched how distribution varied during the studio system in rural areas vs. urban areas.⁸ Scholars writing on the ‘B’ film, including Brian Taves and Blair Davis, have also examined the importance of the place of drive-ins in the run system.⁹ Kerry Segrave’s history of the drive-in characterizes the 1960s and 1970s as a “period of stagnation” and devotes little attention to the 1970s.¹⁰ Even Thomas Doherty in *Teenagers and Teenpics* makes only general reference to drive-ins as an exhibition venue, failing to conceive of drive-ins as a component of a larger system of regional and national distribution.¹¹ This study brings together these two perspectives—discourse on drive-ins and ‘B’ films on the one hand and research on regional distribution on the other—to show how regional audiences and targeted distribution played an imperative function for independents in the hicksploitation cycle. Identifying a regional, niche taste culture that could be reached through targeted selling strategies, exploitation independents supplied drive-ins experiencing a product shortage. The chapter shows how independents developed new exploitation film formulas and honed important distribution strategies for the express purpose of sustaining the drive-in market for independent films.

Section I: A Post-Recession Product Shortage at Drive-Ins

Drive-in theaters—also referred to in the industry trade press as ‘underskyers,’ ‘ozoners,’ and open-air theaters—were a critical component of the 1970s exploitation film market because they connected producer-distributors to a valuable demographic for exploitation films: youth and

teen audiences.¹² Drive-ins also linked exploitation independents to small-town and suburban viewers, as most drive-ins were located outside of urban areas. This symbiotic market dynamic between exploitation independent distributors and drive-in circuits had been developed decades prior. Beginning in the 1950s, the southeastern drive-in circuit and the attendant summer release season forged the market for low-budget genre films.¹³ In 1953, drive-ins accounted for 20% of all film grosses in the US.¹⁴ The earliest exploitation producer-distributors, notably AIP and Allied Artists, leveraged the post-*Paramount* demand for product among drive-in theaters. Drive-ins also operated on a seasonal schedule that forged a useful competitive niche for independent producers. Frederick Wasser explains that the major studios allowed the exploitation independents to corner the summer season and drive-in market because summer “had been written off [by Hollywood] as a time when the mass audience was away on vacation and unavailable to go see movies.”¹⁵ Vacations require a certain degree of financial means and the cost of leisure time or time away from work. Wasser’s observation suggests that Hollywood may have imagined its target audience, correctly or incorrectly, as middle-class. Blair Davis shows how AIP consolidated their teen audience and carved out a successful release season by supplying drive-ins during the fallow summer season.¹⁶ Samuel Arkoff explained their strategy:

Until the late fifties, the major studios shied away from releasing their big pictures in the summer, convinced that people were just too busy vacationing or having backyard barbecues to go to the movies. They just didn’t realize that some drive-ins were capable of grossing \$50,000 or better a week during the summer, which was far better than most hardtops.¹⁷

In short, the drive-in summer release season also created a buffer from direct market competition that secured an important market niche for exploitation films.

While prominent exploitation cycles of the 1970s, sexploitation and blaxploitation were also exhibited outside of the drive-in theater market, drive-ins nevertheless continued to drive demand for the low-budget genre films that made up the majority of AIP's, Crown International Pictures', and other prominent exploitation independents' yearly programs. According to a 1972 advertisement in *The Independent Film Journal*, New World Pictures' *Night Call Nurses* (1972) played in 11 drive-in theaters across North Carolina, Michigan, Ohio, and Kentucky.¹⁸ A 1974 *Variety* advertisement for Crown International Pictures' *The Teacher* (1974) [included within the non-aligned film sample in Chapter One's distribution study] listed 50 engagements that each detailed the theater name, gross amount, and city in which the film played; all but three of these were in drive-in theaters.¹⁹ *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971) [also one of the non-aligned films in Chapter One's distribution study] opened in May and played in drive-ins in Dayton, Ohio, and in Minneapolis.²⁰ As these examples show, during the early 1970s, the drive-in sector and the exploitation independents belonged in the same industrial ecosystem, coexisting in a relationship of interdependence.

From 1970-1975, the drive-in theater sector experienced a number of challenges that together posed a threat to the economic viability of 1970s exploitation cinema. These difficulties ultimately created the market demand for a new kind of exploitation film cycle. The first challenge was drive-ins' decline in number since peaking at over 4,000 theaters in 1958.²¹ By the mid-1970s, 1,000 drive-ins had closed.²² *Boxoffice* reported that rising property values in centrally-located suburban areas prompted drive-in owners to sell their land; the earliest drive-ins were constructed on cheap farm land, areas which had subsequently been built up into suburbs with rising land value.²³ By the 1970s, closures of drive-ins had mostly been completed, and new drive-in construction stalled. Due to the growth of multi-screen hardtops in the decade, drive-ins

as a percentage of overall screens declined, according to data provided by the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO).²⁴ From 1971-1975, hardtops increased each year from 10,300 to 12,168, just shy of a 20% increase, while the number of drive-ins stagnated at around 3,800.²⁵

Second, the construction of multi-screen indoor theaters intensified drive-ins' competition in the exhibition marketplace. The major studios continued their recession era strategy of restricting production. Thus, more theaters were in competition for fewer films. Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros., and Universal's windfall successes in the 1972 and 1973 season signaled a new paradigm of major studio production centering on fewer, higher-budgeted releases. As fewer films profited, the major studios reduced production from 160 features in 1971 to only 80 features by mid-decade.²⁶ From 1970 to 1977, the number of features handled by Columbia, MGM, Paramount, Fox, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros. fell steadily each year from a decade high of 153 features in 1971 to a decade low of 84 features in 1977. From 1973-1975, studio releases declined 15% each year, resulting in a total of only 95 features in 1975.²⁷ This decrease occurred as the studios experienced fewer but bigger hits that led to what *Variety* described as a "boom or bust" marketplace.²⁸ In 1971, a third of films released by major distributors earned less than \$250,000 in domestic rentals.²⁹ At around that same time, several studio releases, notably *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), which I discuss in Chapter Five, took in windfall profits and contributed to a disproportionate share of yearly American box office earnings. In 1972, the seven major distributors collectively reported income of \$58 million compared to the previous year's \$48 million.³⁰ This scarcity strategy was paying off for the major distributors, and there was no indication that production would return to pre-recession levels.

The independent sector of the industry, which drive-ins served, was particularly stressed by the product shortage. Independents released more and more films that failed to turn a profit, while the majors released fewer higher-grossing films.³¹ Dimension Pictures head and Corman colleague Lawrence Woolner conducted his own study and found that independents made 70% of the 480 features released in the 1974-1975 season. *Variety* added that independent regional production was on the rise “with several states aggressively wooing filmmakers and cooperating in [the] erection of studio facilities in their areas.”³² Citing the lack of new product going to television and the shortening window between theatrical and television, Woolner argued that the increased independent production presented a “golden opportunity” to capture a market for film product. Woolner’s comments, however, showed a misunderstanding of the market dynamics at play. Majors’ limited production slate only created opportunity for independents if independents produced and released ‘quality’ product, which was not at all exploitation’s established market niche. While Woolner framed the asymmetric production of indie vs. major features as an opportunity for independents, independents were making more movies but earning less due to the success of the majors’ scarcity paradigm. In other words, the recession “recovery” was primarily a recovery for the major studios. In a boom and bust marketplace, the independent studios that were forced into a ‘quantity’ strategy to match the majors’ scarcity approach stood to take on a good deal of uncertainty and risk.

The Problem of “Second Hand Sex”

The product shortage was a problem particularly felt by drive-in theaters because the two most prominent exploitation film cycles of the early 1970s—blaxploitation and sexploitation—failed to provide a steady supply of ‘quality’ product. With independent production surpassing

major production, one would expect drive-ins to have a stable film supply, since these theaters historically played many independent features.³³ Frederick Wasser writes that the “product famine” resulted in theaters playing fare they might not normally, including cult or art films.³⁴ However, exhibitors still needed to assess a film to be profitable for their patrons, and drive-ins were lamenting lack of *suitable* product. During the years of the product shortage in the early 1970s, blaxploitation was quite popular, but the cycle did little to ameliorate drive-in demand for product. As Chapter Three has shown, blaxploitation was disproportionately booked in large metropolitan areas and less frequently in the suburban or small-town drive-ins that regularly relied on such low-budget action films. Describing the imperiled state of the drive-in market in August of 1973, Don Gottlieb of General Film Corporation claimed that drive-in business was down 35-40%.³⁵ Gottlieb argued that blaxploitation had contributed to this decline because these films took black viewers away from drive-ins: “It’s a bad year for independents. The black audience used to be a big patron to independent films. Now they have their own films,” Gottlieb complained.³⁶ Gottlieb’s assessment was reductionist—of course black viewers presumably frequented more than one kind of independent film. Yet, Chapter Three has shown that it was certainly the case that the blaxploitation films distributed by exploitation independents circulated outside of the suburban drive-in market, with many bookings in downtown indoor theaters.

Sexploitation, too, left independent distributors and exhibitors on shaky ground. Gottlieb opined: “The only pictures in the independent area that have done business are R-rated sexploitation pictures. Now we have to worry about those pictures because of the Supreme Court decision.”³⁷ In the early 1970s, some drive-ins began turning to sexploitation as a salve to the product shortage. In 1972, *The Independent Film Journal* noted that the product shortage, along with failed efforts at luring audiences with “family-friendly” films, propelled drive-ins to book

soft-core 'X' films. The trade journal explained that, with such films, "grosses did not have to build," as they were immediately profitable for theaters.³⁸ Jack McGee, manager of Broadway Drive-In in Boise, Idaho, concurred: "When we run a family movie, it usually doesn't go over very big. But when we show a movie which could be considered a skin flick, we get three or four times the business."³⁹ Such theater operators accepted some amount of legal risk for the likely profitability of sexploitation.

The screening of sexploitation at drive-ins created legal concerns that were characterized in one *Boxoffice* article as "second hand sex."⁴⁰ In this usage, "second hand sex" described the phenomenon of nearby residents or drivers on the highway viewing an 'X'-rated film from an adjacent backyard, house, driveway, or highway. Elena Gorfinkel notes that by the end of the 1960s "[t]he sexploitation market expanded to a wider range of rural, drive-in, and suburban theaters."⁴¹ All over the country, ordinances were being passed to regulate and manage the public nuisance that sexploitation films playing in drive-ins in public view were reportedly causing. Such statutes arose soon after the MPAA ratings system went into effect in 1968 and were common outside of urban areas and specifically in the Midwest, Southwest, and Southeast. In 1970, the General Cinema-owned Ridge Road Drive-In in Griffith, Indiana, instituted a no-'X' policy after the town passed an ordinance that forbade anyone under 18 years-of-age from seeing an 'R' or 'X'-rated film.⁴² That same year, the town of Amarillo, Texas, made it illegal for any theater to show nudity or sexual content that would be visible from a public street or highway.⁴³ In 1971, another Indiana town—this time, Fort Wayne—proposed a law to require drive-ins to seek out a special license that would add another layer of regulation to prevent nudity or sexual situations from being screened.⁴⁴ In 1972, in response to complaints from neighbors, a drive-in operator in Shelbyville, Indiana, was arrested for showing an 'X'-rated film and charged with

possessing and exhibiting an obscene film.⁴⁵ In 1973, a hearing was held in Scott City, Kansas, to determine if 'X'-rated films at drive-ins represented a serious nuisance to the community after a group of 200 community members gathered at a drive-in to protest.⁴⁶ Just prior to that summer's *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973), Supreme Court ruling, *The Independent Film Journal* reported that state legislators in Arizona and Michigan were similarly taking aim at "drive-in theatres showing X-rated or sexually oriented films whose screens can too easily be seen outside the theatre area."⁴⁷ Government and community groups channeled their concerns about sexploitation directly toward drive-in theaters and operators.

The shifting status of US obscenity law during 1972 and 1973 further affected exhibitors' and distributors' perception of legal risk even if a ban on pornography or sexually explicit material never materialized.⁴⁸ In June of 1972, New York State passed a law directed at drive-ins. Extending a pre-existing law of public display, which prohibited the display of posters and signs showcasing "offensive sexual material" in public view, the law banned displays of sexually prurient matter "on a moving picture screen in such a manner that the display is easily visible from a public street, sidewalk or thoroughfare or transportation facility."⁴⁹ *The Independent Film Journal* anticipated that New York drive-ins might be required to erect fences around the screen to comply with the new law. A year in advance of *Miller v. California*, *Rabe v. Washington*, 405 U.S. 313 (1972) was similarly aimed at drive-in theaters. In 1968, theater operator William Rabe was convicted for showing *Carmen, Baby* (1967) in a Washington state drive-in theater where the screen faced out to a public highway. In 1972, the US Supreme Court reversed *Rabe v. Washington* when it ruled that a state cannot hold drive-in theaters to any different standards than those to which indoor theater operators are held.⁵⁰ On the surface, this was good news for drive-in operators, but the ruling opened the door for states to develop their own laws banning or

regulating publicly shown “offensive” content.⁵¹ Anticipating that states might begin writing laws that were legally discriminatory to drive-ins, *The Independent Film Journal* reported that industry analysts saw this ruling as “winning the battle and losing war.”⁵² While I do not have concrete evidence that the New York State law and *Rabe v. Washington* had a direct impact on exhibitors, these two laws contributed to a legal atmosphere that was antagonistic to outdoor sexploitation screening.

Delivered in June 1973, the *Miller v. California* Supreme Court decision failed to change operators’ existing trepidation about showing ‘X’ films in drive-ins, and in some cases, it appeared to increase worry about prosecution.⁵³ *Miller v. California* supported a three-part test to determine obscenity and gave the individual states the power to determine obscenity based on “community standards.”⁵⁴ It offered no definition of obscenity apart from vague guidelines to be judged by state laws or community standards on whether a work 1) “taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest in sex” 2) “portrays, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct” or 3) “taken as a whole, does not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”⁵⁵ Gorfinkel asserts that the decision created a panic among filmmakers and producers who lacked guidelines for what a local jurisdiction might find objectionable. According to Gorfinkel, “*Miller* no doubt impacted producers and exhibitors of X material inordinately, as it redirected the onus of regulation to local authorities and thus put the burden on exhibitors, theater owners, and film producers to handle costs incurred from legal proceedings and arrests.”⁵⁶

Trade journals provided some evidence of a chilling effect. *Variety* wrote that distributors were encountering booking problems after the *Miller v. California* decision. However, these distributors declined to discuss specific films “out of fear that a mention of individual titles would intensify exhib fears and direct them at films already in trouble in some areas.”⁵⁷ *Variety*

also reported exhibitors of soft-core 'X' films were "skittish" about continuing to show sexploitation post-*Miller v. California* and resentful of the MPAA for not fighting the decision in the courts.⁵⁸ The prosecution of prominent distributor Sherpix and Art Theatre Guild owner Louis Sher's obscenity trials discussed in Chapter Two also likely contributed to greater hesitance on the part of both distributors and exhibitors to continue to sell and book sexploitation.

Miller v. California did little to quell the tide of legislation against drive-ins playing 'X'-rated films. There is some evidence that the ruling emboldened authorities (particularly those in states with existing obscenity laws) to prosecute exhibitors whose films violated local statutes. In July of 1973, one month after the *Miller v. California* decision, the state of Idaho rolled out a new obscenity law that drove Boise theater manager Kent Petterborg to cease showing 'X'-rated films. Petterborg explained, "If the obscenity law was revoked, I'd show X-rated moves without any qualms."⁵⁹ In August of 1973, *Variety* reported that drive-in exhibitors felt pressured to stop booking sexploitation features, fearing that passersby might unwillingly view nude scenes and complain to local officials.⁶⁰ In October 1973 in Dayton, Ohio, local authorities served the Miami Cruise-In drive-in theater with a restraining order after receiving complaints from neighbors about the showing of three 'X'-rated films: *The Cheerleaders* (1973), *Fritz the Cat* (1972), and *Fanny Hill* (1968). Prosecutor Lee C. Falke claimed that the films violated the community obscenity standard for Dayton, upheld by *Miller v. California*, which was defined by state laws as anything whose "dominant appeal is prurient interests" and "shows the male or female genitals with less than a full, opaque covering," and "shows natural or unnatural sexual intercourse."⁶¹ Falke said he took legal action against the theater because the screen was visible to a trailer park community adjacent to the theater.⁶² Theater operator John Parker ultimately

relented to community and municipal pressures in an out-of-court settlement, agreeing to stop showing all 'X'-rated films.⁶³ Ohio law did not represent all local opinions on the matter, however. *Boxoffice* noted that one elderly neighbor reported that he had "kind of enjoyed the free shows."⁶⁴ Drive-in theaters were becoming direct targets of legal action, creating a chilling effect among exhibitors showing sexploitation.

Drive-In Theaters Respond to the Product Shortage

Scholars including Randall Clark have framed the relationship between sexploitation and drive-ins as an untroubled one, but sexploitation posed significant financial and legal liabilities and presented barriers to drive-ins' continued operation.⁶⁵ Relenting to the pressures of local community groups and to the uncertain legal environment that pervaded the early 1970s, many operators simply decided to stop playing sexploitation. In 1970, General Cinema Theatres in Detroit pledged to assemble family-friendly programs for drive-ins after complaints in the *Detroit Free Press* about the lack of such films.⁶⁶ That same year in Akron, Ohio, Edward J. Raab of the Ascot Drive-In pledged not to show any 'X' or 'R'-rated films. Raab explained: "I'll try it out for a season. If it doesn't work out, I can change it. But if it doesn't, I don't want anybody complaining to me about it, because I will have given them their chance."⁶⁷ In Griffith, Indiana, a local drive-in known for playing 'X' films pledged to only play family films, starting first with *Peter Pan* (1953), as what the operator called an "experiment" to see if there was an audience for 'G' or 'PG' films.⁶⁸ A suburban drive-in outside of Washington D.C., the Sunset Drive-in Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, closed for good, citing "local pressure over X rated screenings." Manager Basil Kazitoris said that the drive-in was only profitable if it could run 'X' films.⁶⁹

Some drive-ins resisted public pressure, gauging the legal risk to be worth the financial gain. In La Crosse, Wisconsin, North Star Drive-In returned to showing 'X' films in 1973 even after a citizens' group attempted to pass a law banning 'X' films at a town meeting.⁷⁰ In Greenwood, Indiana, complaints from police and residents about 'X' films visible from local housing developments prompted Herb Snow, owner of the Meridian Drive-In, to briefly stop showing 'X' films.⁷¹ Snow refused to pay for a fence himself or to revert to playing 'G' or 'PG' films. Snow claimed 'G' or 'PG' films brought a smaller-than-expected audience and "require[d] larger financial commitments from theatre owners," likely because those films' distributors may extract higher guarantees. Snow settled on playing only 'R'-rated sexploitation films. Snow explained, "Some people might think I'm a dirty old ogre, even if I go to church every Sunday. I don't play these R-rated films because I personally want to watch them. I'm in business for economics. I'm showing them to make a dollar."⁷² For some theater operators, then, the risk of showing sexploitation was likely worth the anticipated profit margin.

Drive-in operators found themselves in a bind. The films that did attract an audience put the theater at risk of closure or the operator at risk of arrest. At the 1972 annual NATO convention, president Roy B. White declared that NATO's "real hope and future security" depended on a supply of "films which do not depend on nude bodies, gutter language or gross violence."⁷³ The supply end of the independent market agreed. In a 1973 *Variety* article, Don Gottlieb of General Film Corporation, who had produced blaxploitation and 'R'-rated sexploitation films, characterized the plight of the independent market as a problem with supply. Gottlieb explained, "The biggest problem we're faced with is what to make."⁷⁴ Citing the liability of screening sexploitation films outdoors, *Variety* noted the problem of supply was creating "slack in drive-in business," compounded further by shopping center theaters that were

taking youth business away from drive-ins.⁷⁵ The failure of existing exploitation product to satisfy market demands created opportunity for a different kind of low-budget independent film, one that carried less legal risk than sexploitation and that connected exploitation films to their core audience of young small-town and suburban families and viewers.

Section II: Hicksploitation and the Southernization of Popular Culture in the 1970s

Drive-ins were facing a loss of ‘quality’ supply and increased competition among non-drive-in theaters for product more generally. Hicksploitation emerged as a solution to both the problem of supply and that of market competition. Hicksploitation was likely viewed within the industry as having particular valence at drive-ins because drive-ins were seen as being frequented by rural or small-town viewers. A census of drive-ins conducted by 20th-Century Fox exchanges found that the greatest number of drive-ins were concentrated in the South. The same census showed that the greatest number of the then-4,000 drive-ins were located in the Dallas territory, followed by the Charlotte, Atlanta, and New Orleans territories. Drive-ins were also concentrated in the Midwest and West. The predominance of drive-ins in these regions is unsurprising when one considers that temperate weather would allow those regions to have the longest drive-in seasons.⁷⁶ With a basis in the actual geographical location of theaters, this link between drive-in theaters and rural moviegoers was also shaped by the industry’s perception of its audiences, or what Timothy Havens has defined as industry lore: “any *interpretation* among industry insiders of the material, social, or historical realities that the media industries face.”⁷⁷ The social-industrial associations between rural Americans and drive-in theaters had historical roots going back to the studio-era ‘B’ film. Poverty Row companies of the 1930s and 1940s such as Producers Releasing Corporation, Republic Pictures, and Monogram Pictures catered to a

rural juvenile demographic.⁷⁸ ‘B’ studios reached this rural target audience by releasing films to subsequent-run theaters, many of which were outside of urban, downtown entertainment districts. Blair Davis writes:

[F]irst-run screenings in major city centers commanded the bulk of a studio’s attention, while last-run screenings in rural towns were an unfortunate consequence of the distribution system: these small-town fourth- or fifth-run screenings generated relatively little profit, but were necessary in order to justify the higher prices charged for first-run films in the bigger cities.⁷⁹

This industry logic exploited the anchoring effect as a cognitive bias, making the first-run prices seem reasonable and the second-run two-for-one program appear to be a steal.⁸⁰ The majors relied on the small theaters to maintain a market segmented by price. Thus, the subsequent run theaters, which would include drive-ins beginning in the 1950s, had long been associated with rural and small-town populations.

Moreover, the populations that frequented these subsequent-run theaters were viewed as having tastes that was not entirely in-step with Hollywood’s first-run offerings. Brian Taves writes that the target spectator for studio-era ‘quickies,’ or ‘B’ films, were “unsophisticated, juvenile or rural, not conditioned to the gloss of studio product.”⁸¹ A 1952 survey of US theater exhibitors found that smaller populations of less than 30,000 preferred action-oriented genres, particularly westerns and adventure films, in comparison to the more populous areas’ preference for comedy and romance.⁸² Poverty Row studios geared their production budgets toward genres and cycles—like cheapie westerns, or ‘oaters,’ mysteries, and action films—that were considered particularly appealing to these small-town audiences. Recalling his time as an executive at Monogram Pictures, Steve Broidy recounts that the subsequent-run theaters would play one of

their films (rented for a flat fee) on Saturdays when “the farmhands and the poorer element” would make their weekly visit to the theater. These theaters would retain the gross above the flat fee rental. Broidy says that these audiences “were more interested in an action picture, such as most of these B pictures represented, than in a bedroom farce or a comedy or a sophisticated picture such as Metro made.”⁸³ Andrea Comiskey’s study of the distribution of B Westerns corroborates this. For theaters that regularly booked westerns, Comiskey writes, “Westerns would be present on all or almost all of its Saturday program.”⁸⁴ Years later, AIP and Allied Artists (formed by Broidy) marketed their films to small-town audiences in another subsequent-run exhibition marketplace considered marginal by the major studios—in suburban drive-in spaces.

Like ‘B’ films, exploitation cinema had a similar kinship to rural and small-town film markets. Though lacking the standardized studio distribution of ‘B’ films, classical exploitation films often circulated in drive-ins in mid-sized and small towns. Eric Schaefer writes that the sex hygiene exploitation film *Dust to Dust* (ca.1940) became a small-town hit in Cleveland and Lancaster, Ohio.⁸⁵ Some classical exploitation films, such as *Mom and Dad* (1945), even gained a second life in drive-ins in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸⁶ Exploitation *auteur* Herschell Gordon Lewis made films depicting a grotesque vision of hillbilly life in *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964) and *Moonshine Mountain* (1964) and distributed those titles to rural audiences. Lewis estimated that 50% of the theaters his films were booked in were drive-ins and in areas of the country where drive-ins were populous.⁸⁷ “If I can’t get my negative cost back out of the South, I’m in trouble,” he explained.⁸⁸ Scott Von Doviak has shown that Russ Meyer was another exploitation *auteur* with links to hicksploitation.⁸⁹ Meyer’s sexploitation films *Lorna* (1964) and *Mudhoney* (1965) evinced an association of unbridled sexual and violent passions with rural, working-class

America. Lewis' and Meyer's 1960s hicksploitation films present an unflattering and grotesque vision of hillbillies, one major thread of hicksploitation that endured into the 1970s.

The connection between drive-in theaters, small-town viewers, and exploitation cinema continued into the 1970s. During the decade, the US population was becoming more Southern and less urban, which corresponded to the area of the US with the greatest number of drive-ins and longest drive-in seasons. From 1970-1978, the population of big cities grew by only 4% whereas small cities grew by 12%.⁹⁰ The percentage of the total population living in suburbs also grew steadily.⁹¹ Moreover, over one million people moved to the South and Sun Belt from 1975-1978.⁹² The Sun Belt is a region considered to include southwestern and southeastern states, as well as southern regions of California and Nevada.⁹³ *Variety* also observed in 1973 that "the film-buying public is paying less attention than in previous years to the edicts of the eastern critical establishment," noting that several of the top-grossing films of the year thus far had received tepid reviews, indicating a disconnect in taste between elite tastemakers and actual US filmgoers.⁹⁴ As the US population began to skew more southern and suburban or rural, it is reasonable to infer that the film industry took note of how these demographic shifts would impact their audience.

I argue that drive-ins' need for viable low-budget films and the established linkages between drive-ins, rural Americans, and independent distribution made the market receptive to hicksploitation film during the early 1970s. However, there were other cultural forces that influenced the "hillbilly" and "redneck" sensibility of 1970s hicksploitation and ultimately contributed to the cycle's spread. Not dissimilar to how blaxploitation films invoked existing socio-cultural imagery and iconography from the black power and civil rights movements, hicksploitation films also mined a set of myths and ideologies about Southern or small-town life

found in country music at the time. Indeed, sociologist Anthony Harkins argues that the hillbilly figure has been discursively positioned as “a white ‘other.’”⁹⁵ Harkins explains that the racial ‘normality’ of whiteness makes the hillbilly appear uncontroversial, invisible, non-confrontational, and apolitical, contributing to the hillbilly’s “longevity in popular media.”⁹⁶ In juxtaposition to the blackness of blaxploitation, which was highly visible, affecting a film like *Super Fly*’s marketing and distribution and incessantly remarked upon in reception, I did not find much mention of the whiteness of 1970s hicksploitation in industry and popular press. Likewise, Harkins also importantly argues that the figure of the hillbilly is not limited to a geographical region. Hicksploitation films represented rednecks across various settings and regions. Some were recognized as Southern or the South (i.e. *Walking Tall* or *Macon County Line*), while other films are set in more regionally ambiguous small towns or rural environments (*Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry*). Instead, Harkins asserts that hillbilly is more so a socio-economic position with shared “cultural traits and values.” As such, hicksploitation belongs to a broader hillbilly or redneck taste culture. Taste cultures, according to sociologist Herbert Gans, reflect shared aesthetic standards held by various taste publics in a society.⁹⁷ Gans’ concept of taste cultures captures how a set of values could be reflected in a range of cultural products including country music, cultural fads like CB radios, and films aimed at a demographic of working class rural white Americans. To supply drive-ins, hicksploitation films were designed to reach hillbilly taste publics, or audience segments, and the chapter investigates the various cultural elements and industrial strategies that the films used to hail these audiences.

Country music was one cultural element that hicksploitation films invoked to reach an audience for hillbilly films. Hicksploitation also had wider cultural resonance in the 1970s due to the growing popularity of cross-over country music recording artists, country music on television

(e.g. *Hee Haw*, CBS, 1969-1971), and country music stars in Hollywood movies during the decade and into the 1980s. During the 1970s, country music and Southern rock crossed over substantially into pop. Throughout the mid-1970s, country music charted high on the *Billboard* Hot 100. John Denver's "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" and Glen Campbell's "Rhinestone Cowboy," are just two examples. *Outlaw*, the 1975 album by Southern rock band The Outlaws peaked at #13 on the *Billboard* Top LPs& Tapes chart. By the late 1970s, country musicians were breaking into the mainstream. Dolly Parton released a pop album, 1977's *Here You Come Again*. That same year Glen Campbell's cover of Allen Toussaint's "Southern Nights" went to #1 on the *Billboard* country, pop, and adult contemporary charts. In 1978, PBS telecast the Grand Ole Opry for the first time. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson's "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" became a big hit. In 1979, Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler" became a crossover hit and went to #12 on the *Billboard* 200.

The characteristics of 1970s rock had a distinctly anti-authoritarian and outlaw flavor, which would be reflected in the hicksploitation cycle. Influenced by the counterculture, country music figures including Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Merle Haggard rebranded themselves as anti-Nashville, inaugurating a new strain of stripped-down, anti-authoritarian country, as Michael Streissguth details.⁹⁸ These artists joined the likes of Kris Kristofferson – the star of 1978's *Convoy* -- Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle, and Johnny Cash as country music's rambling men. The lawlessness and rebellion of outlaw country was also seen in an adjacent musical trend: Southern rock. The Allman Brothers Band, based in Macon, Georgia, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and The Outlaws represented a brand of Southern defiance that mirrored the same spirit in outlaw country music. Even The Rolling Stones spent time at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio in Alabama recording *Sticky Fingers* (1970). These artists popularized Southern culture and

brought it into the mainstream, a trend that fueled the hicksploitation cycle through the end of the decade.

The link between this broader ‘southernization’ of popular culture and hicksploitation can be seen industrially in the country music soundtracks of many hicksploitation films, including those of *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Convoy*. As the case studies in the chapter aim to show, the connection between country music and exploitation was also present in the films on a thematic level. Outlaw country and Southern rock dealt with themes of lone masculinity and rugged individualism that would be seen in hicksploitation in such characters as Billy Jack in the *Billy Jack* series, Sheriff Buford Pusser in *Walking Tall*, the highway outlaws in *Macon County Line* (1974), Bandit in *Smokey and the Bandit*, and Rubber Duck in *Convoy*. Many hicksploitation films tapped into a broader cultural repository of images, ideas, plots, and ideologies espoused in certain strains of country music. Cecilia Tichi writes of country music’s evocation of broader values and ideals endemic to the American mythos of nationhood and patriotism. Tichi writes that country is “emphatically rural.”⁹⁹ Country songs valorize rural family life as more authentic than the city, which is aligned with “materialism, social status, hurdles of hierarchy, and all sorts of false value systems.”¹⁰⁰ Country music offered an archive of ideologies, stories, themes, and characters about small-town American life upon which filmmakers drew, and in doing so, hicksploitation films provided exhibitors with stories that resonated with what their patrons might be hearing on their car radios or record players. The above reveals an important industry strategy for hicksploitation: that of using values and themes associated with country music in developing intellectual property to appeal to drive-in viewers.

Section III: The Hicksploitation Cycle Begins: *Billy Jack* (1971) and *Deliverance* (1972)

This section presents two case studies of films that cultivated audience demand for hicksploitation. The two films also formalized some of the strategies of targeted marketing and distribution that would influence the hicksploitation cycle. Hicksploitation was a cycle that aimed films representing ‘hillbilly’ characters and settings to drive-ins in short supply. The intellectual property of the films, modeled to some degree on stories, characters, and tropes found in country music, were tailored to audiences perceived to frequent drive-ins—small town and suburban Americans.

Billy Jack and *Deliverance* were precursors to the hicksploitation cycle rather than exemplars or prototypes. As precursors, these two films showed a marketplace for what would become the hicksploitation cycle but did not conform to what Amanda Ann Klein calls an “originary” film.¹⁰¹ Unlike the blaxploitation cycle, whose common features were formalized in *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, hicksploitation lacked a blueprint-type film to which successive films in the cycle closely hewed. While neither film provided a neat template for filmmakers to draw upon, each helped to establish a market for the cycle more so than a filmmaking formula. One was an independent film—1971’s *Billy Jack* and the *Billy Jack* series. The other was one of the biggest Hollywood hits of 1972. *Deliverance* was a studio release that grossed \$18 million in rentals and was #2 on *Variety*’s Big Rental Films of 1973 chart.

Billy Jack and the Disruption of National Distribution

Actor Tom Laughlin produced, directed, and starred in four *Billy Jack* films: *The Born Losers* (1967), *Billy Jack*, *The Trial of Billy Jack*, and *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977). Delores Taylor was an actress, collaborator, and Laughlin’s spouse. She also co-wrote and co-

starred in the films. In the film, Native American and Vietnam veteran Billy Jack fights back against the conservative establishment figures in a small Arizona town. Billy Jack protects outcast teenagers, like the sheriff's daughter Barbara, who is shunned for being pregnant. Billy Jack counsels young people at the Freedom School, a commune of sorts headed by Jean (played by Taylor) where hippie young men and women sing and engage in conflict resolution theater. He also employs vigilante justice including lethal force against the immoral townspeople. Billy Jack murders a local man who has been sexually abusing a young Indian girl. After a shootout with the police, Jean persuades Billy Jack to think of the Freedom School children first and model nonviolent resistance. Billy Jack surrenders peacefully in exchange for the authorities' promise to not harass or meddle with the Freedom School members. From a formal and stylistic perspective, *Billy Jack* was idiosyncratic. *Billy Jack* lacked the tight narrative logic of a Hollywood film and espoused countercultural ideals that might seem a difficult sell outside of urban areas. The film had the episodic quality and countercultural ethos of *Easy Rider* (1969). Peter Krämer described *Easy Rider* and the *Billy Jack* films as “contemporary dramas pitting countercultural protagonists against establishment figures.”¹⁰² Like *Easy Rider*, *Billy Jack* featured pop music including a Joan Baez song and Coven's “One Tin Solider.” Tom Laughlin as Billy Jack also performed kung fu, actions that are sometimes depicted in slow-motion. These kung fu scenes aligned *Billy Jack* with exploitation cinema at the time, recalling the martial arts sequences in Crown International Pictures' action-sexploitation hybrid films.

On a formal level, *Billy Jack* offered no clear model for future filmmakers, but Laughlin's release and distribution of the film was highly influential for both exploitation independents and major studios. In a 1971 first run release, Warner Bros. distributed *Billy Jack* to theaters in the US and abroad. Peter Biskind describes the film as Warner Bros.' “money

cow.”¹⁰³ *Billy Jack* performed very well in smaller towns. For instance, the film played in Dayton, Ohio, for over a year, and *The Independent Film Journal* wrote that the majority of the film’s first run earnings, which totaled \$30 million, came from outside of bigger metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, where it played for only a short time.¹⁰⁴ Laughlin, however, was dissatisfied with Warner Bros.’ marketing efforts, claiming the company did not give the film adequate promotion to succeed in these large cities.¹⁰⁵ As a result, Laughlin filed suit against the company for \$17 million.¹⁰⁶ As a settlement, Laughlin and Warner Bros. reached a new agreement whereby the two companies (Warner Bros. and Laughlin’s Taylor-Laughlin distribution company) would reissue the film to these major cities and split costs and profits.

In re-issuing the film, Laughlin used four-walling. ‘Four-walling’ is a distribution method in which the producer or filmmaker rents out the entire operations of the theater for a limited amount of time. As Justin Wyatt explains, “Four wall engagements, in which the independent rented the ‘four walls’ of the theater outright and saturated the airwaves with targeted TV spots, became very successful in the wake of Tom Laughlin’s *Billy Jack*.”¹⁰⁷ Circumventing a traditional distributor, the filmmaker pays a flat rental fee and takes in all earnings from concessions and ticket sales. Prior to the mid-1970s, this method of release was infrequently used for nationally released independent films. Frederick Wasser has shown that four-walling was traditionally used to release religious or family-friendly films in rural areas, notably Utah.¹⁰⁸ At the time of *Billy Jack*’s release, four-walling was frequently associated with American National Enterprises, a company that specialized in nature documentaries or what *Variety* called “wildlife features” aimed at the “hinterlands,” like *Cougar Country* (1970) and *Alaskan Safari* (1968).¹⁰⁹

Prior to *Billy Jack*, four-walling was typically used by very small distributors booking a single film in one or two local theaters. Such small distributors might turn a marginal profit by booking their film over a weekend in a local theater. *Billy Jack*, however, was released through four-walling for saturation purposes, or to exhaust viewer demand in a short period of time. Warner Bros. and Taylor-Laughlin four-walled *Billy Jack* across the country in second-run theaters in suburban and small-town areas and in the urban markets of New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago in this 1973 subsequent-run re-release. The film grossed \$6 million in only two weeks in these four markets.¹¹⁰ *Billy Jack* used a saturation technique for booking, playing four-walled in 170 houses in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.¹¹¹ The film was also four-walled in Southern California in 51 hardtops and 10 drive-ins.¹¹² *Variety* reported that the deals were made with booking offices in theaters, circumventing the circuits to get saturation bookings.¹¹³ Laughlin paid exhibitors an upfront rental sum to cover the theaters' operating expenses for one week at a time. Moviegoers were charged a premium price of \$2.50, and Laughlin and Warner Bros. split all profits.¹¹⁴ *The Independent Film Journal* called the subsequent-run four-wall release of *Billy Jack* a "reversal of customary distributor-exhibitor relations with the distributor renting each theatre from its owners for the engagement of the film."¹¹⁵ Thus, Laughlin and Warner Bros. went directly to the theaters to make four-wall bookings that would amount to a kind of regional saturation on steroids. Ernie Sands, the vice president of sales for Laughlin explained: "We threw out the rule books. We booked twins and theatres around the corner from each other. If the overhead was right and population density justified it, we rented the theatre."¹¹⁶ Laughlin would have been unlikely to achieve this kind of four-wall saturation release without backing from Warner Bros. to supply upfront sums. Laughlin and Warner Bros.' four-walling of *Billy Jack* represented a brief moment of symbiosis,

or of cooperation for mutual gain, between exploitation independents and majors. *Billy Jack* was the kind of youth-oriented ‘sleeper’ film the majors struggled to produce on their own, while Warner Bros. had the clout and financial resources to execute a four-wall saturation.

Presaging *Jaws*’ (1975) wide release and saturation advertising on television, Laughlin mitigated the risk-taking strategy of four-walling by investing in targeted market research and advertising to drive audience demand to local theaters. *Variety* described the advertising in the four-wall areas to be so heavy as to be “coercive” and likened the market research behind the advertising to a “military campaign.”¹¹⁷ Print advertisements for *Billy Jack* targeted multiple discrete demographic segments by emphasizing different narrative elements. Some ads focused on the “love angle, milked the counter-culture, appealed to action fans, karate cultists, youth, the middle-aged, and the nonfilmgoer.”¹¹⁸ As the film continued to perform well in four-wall situations, the marketing materials shifted to capitalize on the film’s unexpected sleeper hit status. One poster for the film included an image of Laughlin as Billy Jack and Taylor as Jean and only the tag line: “The most unusual box office success of all time” [Figure 8]. Laughlin’s practice of market testing continued with 1974’s *The Trial of Billy Jack*, which he released with a saturation wide release with the aid of “detailed demographic charts,” extensive pre-testing, and assessment of “age-group audience potential.”¹¹⁹ Laughlin pioneered the use of targeted selling to drive the desired demographics to theaters at the desired time. The major studios’ blockbusters would adopt this formula at a national scale.

As an unconventional film with an unconventional release, *Billy Jack* had surprising financial success. With a negative cost of \$800,000, *Billy Jack* earned over \$32 million in rentals.¹²⁰ In retrospect, this made the film the second highest grossing film released in 1971, second to *Fiddler on the Roof*’s \$38 million.¹²¹ The reissue alone earned \$8.3 million and was

the 19th highest grossing film of 1973.¹²² The film also influenced 1970s Hollywood in several respects. Wasser credits Laughlin's reissue of *Billy Jack* as the first advertising campaign to employ saturated television advertising to maximum effect.¹²³ Justin Wyatt likewise cites Laughlin's use of saturation booking as an influence on the marketing of the majors' blockbuster films and *Jaws* specifically.¹²⁴ Given its odd textual appeals to the counterculture and its episodic and meandering quality, Jon Lewis writes that *Billy Jack* was a sign of the fracturing and downright unpredictable taste in moviegoing in the early 1970s.¹²⁵ In May of 1973, *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *Billy Jack*, and *Deep Throat* (1972) were all top-10 box office performers. Lewis writes that: "For studio executives trying to get a handle on this new American cinema, it was a difficult pattern to read."¹²⁶ *Billy Jack*'s success in smaller markets showed that Hollywood taste was out-of-step with audiences, or at the very least that audience taste was fracturing into targetable segments.

Laughlin's marketing to the heartland and cities alike drew attention to the former as a viable market and to strategies like aggressive television saturation and regional saturation booking. Indeed, the successful four-walling of *Billy Jack* demonstrated a disconnect between Hollywood's nationally-based, key city-focused platform distribution model and the regional tastes and preferences of Americans living outside of the bigger urban areas.¹²⁷ An outlier in the New Hollywood, *Billy Jack* accomplished what previous rural-oriented independent films could not, which was to show the profitability of regionally-distributed low-budget independent films. Indeed, David Cook calls *Billy Jack* "the only movie to realize Hollywood's post-*Easy Rider* fantasy of huge grosses from a cheaply produced youth-cult film."¹²⁸ An imperfect hicksploitation prototype, *Billy Jack* was successful in identifying and exploiting a sizeable market for independent films in rural and small-town areas of the country. Moreover, Laughlin's

film showed the success of a two-pronged targeted selling approach: saturation of advertising and saturation of playdates. This strategy was used to reach niche audience segments located beyond the traditional circuits of release.

Deliverance and the Hillbilly Hit

Deliverance was an important if unlikely catalyst of the hicksploitation cycle. Historians have tended to view *Deliverance* within the frame of the Hollywood Renaissance tradition and not in terms of exploitation cinema. For example, Jon Lewis groups the film among the “auteur pictures” of 1972.¹²⁹ I argue, however, that *Deliverance* shaped audience demand for hillbilly-oriented intellectual property, laying the groundwork for the hicksploitation cycle.

The ‘R’-rated *Deliverance* was directed by British filmmaker John Boorman. Boorman and his casting director went to Atlanta to cast local ‘Southern types,’ though Hollywood actors played the leads.¹³⁰ The film was shot in Clayton, Georgia, near the Chattooga River, a location a *Los Angeles Times* journalist visiting the set called “primitive and foreboding.”¹³¹ Atlanta city-slickers Ed Gentry (Jon Voight), Lewis Medlock (Burt Reynolds), Bobby Trippe (Ned Beatty), and Drew Ballinger (Ronny Cox) take a canoe trip to Northern Georgia to the Cahulawassee River, which will soon be commercialized with the impending construction of a dam. At the start of their trip, the men meet two locals when they stop for gas and pay them to drive their cars to a town further south while they take the canoe downriver. During the trip downriver, two mountain men attack the men, tying up Ed and raping Bobby. Lewis kills the rapist and the toothless mountain man runs away. The next day, Drew falls into the river and drowns. The cause of his death is uncertain, but the men suspect they are being hunted by the toothless man. Ed kills the suspected toothless man who is approaching him. After the toothless man’s death, the men learn that he had been wearing removable false teeth. The friends decide to bury the bodies, and when

they get to Ainty, the sheriff responds skeptically to their story. They continue to Atlanta without Drew, and Ed is still haunted by his own culpability. The film positions the audience's allegiances with the city slickers, as the viewers see the three men hunted and brutalized by the local men. The killings in the film have led some scholars to group *Deliverance* within the horror genre. Indeed, Carol Clover identifies *Deliverance* as a film influencing what she terms an "urbanoia" cycle in horror, which locates terror in the lone degenerate redneck men who, for Clover, represent "patriarchy run amok."¹³² Richard Nowell writes that *Deliverance* also inspired the 'city versus country' horror slasher films *Tourist Trap* (1979), *Survival Run* (1979), and *Motel Hell* (1980).¹³³

While scholars have retrospectively seen *Deliverance* as a quasi-horror film, contemporaneous industry trade journals also identified parallels with exploitation. *Variety* noted that *Deliverance*'s source material, James Dickey's 1970 novel of the same name, was "heavy on sex perversion and violence."¹³⁴ Discussing the brutal material found in the film, *Boxoffice* wrote: "Audiences may be shocked by the 'male-male' rape scene, and language is strictly from the 'street,' but the picture is realistic and it does deliver to the sophisticated market of the '70s."¹³⁵ Arthur "Murf" Murphy's *Variety* review identified a tension between the film's philosophical pretensions and sensational violence he described as characteristic of contemporary exploitation films:

[I]n the depiction of sudden, violent death, there is the rhapsodic wallowing in the deadly beauty of it all: protruding arrows, agonizing expiration, etc. It's the stuff of which slapdash oaters and crime programmers are made these days, but the obvious ambitions of 'Deliverance' are supposed to be on a higher plane.¹³⁶

At the same time, Murphy said the source material was “considered by many to be important, relevant, meaningful and a host of other cocktail-party huzzahs.” *Variety* concluded that “the product can be marketed broadly” with “an outdoor atmosphere to help mask the intellectual shell game” that will only aid in profitability. The film’s depiction of the mountain men as primitive and brutal led to some backlash. Scott Von Doviak has observed that “the Appalachian studies journal *Foxfire*” was highly critical of the film’s representation of Southerners. The journal editors claimed the film “powerfully reinforces a stereotype we have been fighting with *Foxfire* for eight years, that of the hick with his liquor still, ignorant, deprived, stupid.”¹³⁷ However, reviews by mainstream film critics Gene Siskel and Tom Farber noted the striking visual style of Boorman’s direction, Vilmos Zsigmond’s cinematography, and Jon Voight’s performance. *Deliverance* played at the Atlanta Film Festival where it won over *Souder* (1972) for Best of the Festival, Best Director, and several other accolades.¹³⁸

Marketing materials indicated that Warner Bros. pitched *Deliverance*, not to a Southern working-class milieu like that depicted in the film, but to urbane middle-class viewers. The *Deliverance* one sheet, whose tagline reads “this is the weekend they didn’t play golf”—highlighted the class differences between the protagonists and the Georgia natives and hailed the reader from the city slickers’ perspective. Similarly, Warner Bros. made a concerted effort to reach college-educated and professional young people. The company targeted youth in Chicago by giving away advance screening tickets to area college students, to editors at college newspapers, and to college radio deejays. Warner Bros. also provided tickets to young professionals in “airline reservation offices, banks and advertising agencies.”¹³⁹ Warner Bros developed marketing gimmicks related to the hillbilly setting of the film. In Atlanta, for instance, a local radio station held a contest for a canoe similar to the one used in the film.¹⁴⁰

Advertising emphasized violence, suggesting some linkages with exploitation marketing appeals. Similar to the print ads for 1973's *Walking Tall* one year later, an early advertisement for *Deliverance* depicted an image of a menacing rifle aimed at three men by a faceless person, emphasizing violence and fear [Figure 9].¹⁴¹ As critical acclaim mounted, however, *Deliverance* was pitched increasingly as a serious drama. Advertisements shifted focus, as in newspaper advertisements that reprinted positive reviews portraying the film as a quality action-adventure drama rather than a thriller or horror film.¹⁴²

Opening with an initial run in the New York market, *Deliverance*'s platform release was closer to a studio prestige or art film release than to an exploitation film release. As Chapter One shows, exploitation films would often premiere in a non-New York City location. *Deliverance* was released in late summer 1972, first in 21 key cities in the fall and in New York at the Loew's Tower East in July where it grossed \$350,000.¹⁴³ After Christmas, *Deliverance* opened wider. The film played well in the Midwest and in hardtops throughout its run. In Minneapolis, the film was the top grossing title in the area for six weeks, playing at the indoor Skyway II Theatre, which was recently constructed that year and part of the ABC Theaters chain.¹⁴⁴ In Cincinnati, Ohio, *Deliverance* led all first run films for four weeks at the Times Towne Theatre.¹⁴⁵ In Los Angeles, *Deliverance* played seven weeks at the Cinerama.¹⁴⁶ *Deliverance* continued playing subsequent-run into 1973 when it began to make its way to drive-ins as in Dayton, Ohio, where the film played a showcase of six drive-ins.¹⁴⁷ The film performed well in a variety of venues: large markets like New York and Los Angeles and smaller midwestern markets. Overall, however, Warner Bros. appeared to release *Deliverance* to a predominantly metropolitan audience.

Deliverance returned \$21 million in theater rentals and by 1974 was the 30th highest grossing film of all time.¹⁴⁸ It was also nominated for several awards in 1973 including three Academy Awards (Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Film Editing) and several Golden Globes. The film also won a Grammy for Best Country and Western Performance for “Dueling Banjos.” Biskind writes that, as a surprise hit for Warner Bros., *Deliverance* was a success of *auteur* filmmaking.¹⁴⁹

Deliverance's influence on independent and, later, studio-made films oriented around hillbilly themes was also significant and has been often overlooked. *Deliverance*'s financial and critical success was evidence of a broader cultural fascination with the hillbilly figure that went beyond the exploitation market. Indeed, the film aligned viewers with the city slickers and against the Southern folk, a strategy that would not be commonly taken in the hicksploitation cycle. Pitched to an urban ‘sophisticated’ crowd, *Deliverance* established a vogue for hillbilly-themed films in the early 1970s but was not aimed at a hillbilly taste culture. As such, it remained something of an anomaly. Subsequent independent-made hicksploitation would channel such hillbilly themes but market them to small-town viewers using appeals that aligned sentiments with the redneck characters.

Section IV: The Violent Vigilante Film: CRC's *Walking Tall* (1973) and *Macon County Line* (1974)

While *Deliverance* and *Billy Jack* showed a market for hillbilly-oriented films and a robust audience for independent films outside of key cities, 1973's *Walking Tall* was the first true exemplar or epitome of the cycle. As an ‘R’-rated action film, *Walking Tall* extended themes found in *Deliverance* and established plot formulas to which future hicksploitation would hew

closely. Funded by a consortium of southeastern drive-in exhibitors and theater owners, *Walking Tall* was one example of a wider effort among exhibitors to finance, fund, or produce films to be screened at their theaters. In the early 1970s, exhibitors formed production corporations to make the kinds of films they knew from professional experience would perform well in regional theaters, notably drive-ins.¹⁵⁰ As of 1974, exhibitors financing film production included such companies as Sherril C. Corwin, Fuqua Industries, Wometco, UA Theatres, Ted Mann, and Charles Moss.¹⁵¹ *Walking Tall* was made for \$1.5 million, a sum split between Wometco, a diversified media company based in Miami; the Atlanta-based Fuqua Industries, which owned a large chain of southeastern theaters; and Bing Crosby Productions, an Atlanta-based subsidiary of Cox Broadcasting Corporation.¹⁵²

Financers envisioned *Walking Tall* as a corrective to the lack of family entertainment available to their theaters. Citing the gap in family entertainment for their theater holdings, Wometco and Fuqua Industries decided to pursue a co-financing deal with Bing Crosby Productions (BCP) because they believed BCP would “produce what we believe will be excellent family pictures for the motion picture industry and, later, for television.”¹⁵³ These three companies had previously funded BCP’s *Willard* (1971) and *Ben* (1972), two films also aimed for the southeastern and small-town drive-in market.¹⁵⁴ Many of the same talent involved in making *Willard* and *Ben* also worked on *Walking Tall*; for instance, prolific Hollywood and television ‘B’ director Phil Karlson, who had directed *Ben*, directed *Walking Tall*. Additionally, Mort Briskin, who worked as a producer on *Willard* and *Ben*, wrote the screenplay. Cinerama Releasing Corporation (CRC), a subsidiary of Cinerama formed in 1967 to release films of ABC Pictures Corp., released *Walking Tall* and had also distributed *Willard* and *Ben*.¹⁵⁵ Particularly when compared with *Deliverance*’s cultural positioning as an ‘A’ list Hollywood film, *Walking*

Tall's production, directing, and financing all aligned the film with the studio era 'B' film. BCP imagined from the film's conception that *Walking Tall* would suit family tastes and could be sold through to television.

Joe Don Baker, who had primarily held roles in television westerns at this time, starred in this fictionalized account of Tennessee Sheriff Buford Pusser's moral crusade against the corruption in his hometown. Buford, his wife Pauline, and their two young children move back to Buford's hometown of Adamsville, Tennessee. Shortly after arriving, Buford's childhood friend Lutie McVeigh takes him to the town's new den of iniquity, the Lucky Spot, where Buford sees townspeople engaging in drinking, gambling, and sex work. Confronting gamblers who have cheated him out of money he lent Lutie, Buford is assaulted by several men, including a man named Jagers, and left on the side of the road. After the attack, Sheriff Thurman warns Buford to drop charges and not pursue any retribution. Buford, however, returns to the Lucky Spot with a huge stick baton (fashioned at his father's log farm) and assaults the men who attacked him. Buford is arrested and later represents himself at his trial. At the trial, with many townspeople attending, he publicly decries the town's thwarting of justice when he discovers that Lutie, the primary defense witness, has been killed. In the wake of his successful self-defense, Buford's Black friend and farm coworker Obra Eaker convinces Buford to run against Thurman for the office of Sheriff. Sheriff Thurman and Callie, the brothel madame, both unsuccessfully attempt to ruin Buford's candidacy. Buford is elected and hires Eaker as his deputy. Armed with righteous indignation and the power of the state to execute justice, the two proceed to investigate the moonshine poisoning of Black civil rights organizers, but local and state officials repeatedly warn Buford that he is stirring up trouble with the business community. As Buford monitors clubs in the region for illegal alcohol, he discovers an informant in his ranks and violence ensues.

Callie is killed and so is the Pussers' dog. While accompanying an investigation of an illegal still, Buford's wife Pauline is tragically shot and killed by Jagers. Buford is also shot. The film ends with Buford in a neck brace running his car into the Lucky Spot after Pauline's funeral as townspeople set the club on fire.

Both textually and industrially, *Walking Tall* borrowed more from *Billy Jack* than it did *Deliverance*. The character of Buford Pusser mirrors Billy Jack's moral superiority and righteous indignation in the face of similar foes: corruption, greedy corporate interests, and the status quo. Both characters are also vengeful killers who use violence to defend their ideals and enact retribution against past wrongs. Both films depicted small towns as insular, nepotistic, and easily corruptible by the powerful few. However, in *Walking Tall*, small towns were also paradoxically the source of social good—hearth and home—and thus worthy of protecting. In *Billy Jack*, the egalitarian Freedom School similarly represented an ideal social institution that was positioned as an antidote to small-town small-mindedness, greedy businessmen, and power-hungry authorities. Both *Walking Tall* and *Billy Jack* aligned the viewer against the establishment group and positioned violent revenge as viable recourse to oppression.

While *Deliverance* constructed the hillbilly men as “other”—disfigured, inscrutable, and malicious—Karlson has talked in interviews about wanting to combat stereotypical representations of the American South. In *Walking Tall*, the small town is the bastion of social order and stability; in *Deliverance*, rural America is dangerous, duplicitous, savage, dehumanizing (“squeal like a pig”) and brutal. It is something one endures rather than champions. These thematic distinctions highlight the ideological variance among hicksploitation films during the decade. Likely influenced by the popularity of blaxploitation by 1972 and 1973, Karlson has said that he wanted to include the character of Black deputy sheriff Obra Eaker,

whom Karlson claims was the first Black deputy sheriff in the South, to correct for associations with the South and racism.¹⁵⁶ Karlson said, “I tried to show, to the rest of the rednecks in the South, that it’s possible for a redneck to have a change of heart [regarding racism] and admit he’s wrong.”¹⁵⁷

Walking Tall was not particularly critically well-received, but trade journals anticipated a likely audience in drive-ins. *Boxoffice* described the film as “overly violent” but predicted this would satisfy action fans.¹⁵⁸ *The Independent Film Journal* likewise called *Walking Tall* a “violent rehash” of 1950s vigilante films and a film fit “[m]ainly for the small town and drive-in customers.”¹⁵⁹ Noting the similarities to *Dirty Harry* (1971) and to *Billy Jack*, *Variety* said *Walking Tall* “unfortunately wallows in its own bloody exploitation of episodic carnage while dabbling in do-it-yourself police sociology of dubious merit.”¹⁶⁰ The MPAA gave *Walking Tall* an ‘R’ rating, and the Catholic Conference gave the film its harshest ‘C’ rating. Responding to negative press about the film, Karlson said, “[W]e’re so proud of what’s happening with *Walking Tall*, and so proud of *Billy Jack*....[because] in spite of bad exhibition, in spite of a lot of bad advertising and bad-mouthing [they’ve done well].”¹⁶¹ Karlson explained that combatting negative national press was even more difficult in the small towns where these films succeeded. Karlson said, “Where there’s only ten thousand, twenty thousand people, they read the paper from the ads down to everything that’s in it, and it [reviews] becomes important there.”¹⁶² While Karlson suggests that rural and small-towns were not ‘critic proof,’ *Walking Tall*’s success outside of big cities did indicate that viewers were undeterred by negative press from establishment mouthpieces like the Catholic Conference. Similar to *Billy Jack*, *Walking Tall*’s success pointed to a niche audience that was undeterred by negative reviews.

CRC's early promotional materials also emphasized the film's violence. In March of 1973, an advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* showed Pusser standing, grimacing with a baseball bat held threateningly in his hands [Figure 10]. The tagline read: "Slam Bang Impact!"¹⁶³ The same image was used in a one sheet with the line: "Buford Pusser: The Man Who Became a Legend in our Time." Another poster depicted an illustrated image of Pusser holding his wooden baton, a busty woman, a fiery car, and the line: "He was going to give them law and order or die trying." The marketing materials' emphasis on violence and sexual titillation was straightforward exploitation marketing, similar to the selling of sexploitation and blaxploitation.

Supported by this marketing campaign, CRC, who had also handled *Willard* and *Ben*, released *Walking Tall* in 1973 in the US through an exploitation release pattern similar to the non-aligned sample identified in Chapter One: through key cities.¹⁶⁴ In March 1973, *Walking Tall* opened in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston. The film bombed in these major cities; earnings were so low as to fail to cover the prints and advertising costs.¹⁶⁵ The film played well, however, in larger southern cities including Tallahassee, and in smaller locations like Ogden, Utah.¹⁶⁶ The film received a standing ovation in Memphis, Tennessee, when Pusser was in attendance.¹⁶⁷ Given this uneven reception, CRC's advertising chief scrapped the film's initial promotion and distribution strategy. While CRC's marketing for *Walking Tall* emphasized Pusser's outlaw spirit and rugged individualism, themes also touted in popular music at the time, CRC failed to effectively target this rural taste culture.

In response, CRC developed a more targeted marketing and distribution approach aimed at rural and small-town audiences and drive-ins. In a move that mirrored Laughlin's re-release of *Billy Jack* in 1973 and Sherpix's re-release of *The Stewardesses*, CRC pulled *Walking Tall* from

release, retooled advertising, and reconfigured the release pattern, shifting focus from key cities to small-town drive-ins in time for summer release. A 1974 *Boxoffice* advertisement illustrated the importance of drive-ins to *Walking Tall*'s release strategy [Figure 11]. It depicted the earnings from cities and smaller towns atop images of cars in such locations as Dayton, Indianapolis, Louisville, Cleveland, Kansas City, and Edmonton, Canada.¹⁶⁸ With the words "Walking Tall Is Drive-In Tall," this advertisement further emphasized that drive-in operators were an important market for the film. The success of the film at individual drive-ins bore this out. *Walking Tall* played for nearly 30 weeks at two drive-ins in the Knoxville area and set box office records in two drive-ins in Little Rock, Arkansas.¹⁶⁹ The film played for 28 weeks in Knoxville, Tennessee, and for an entire year in Little Rock.¹⁷⁰ In avoiding New York in the early weeks, CRC saved on expensive advertising buys and other promotional costs, which could account for as much as half of a film's total advertising budget.¹⁷¹ All told, *Walking Tall* had its highest grosses in the southeast, where *Variety* noted the film out-performed *The Godfather* and was the highest grossing film in the southeast for a time.¹⁷²

CRC's retooled marketing materials championed the virtues of flouting authority espoused in outlaw country music at the time: "Based on the true story of a young man who wouldn't surrender to the system...and the girl who always stood by him."¹⁷³ With this change in course, CRC's revamped selling strategies emphasized a different set of values, still aligned with patriarchal masculinity. Rather than violent individualism, these advertisements stressed home and family and positioned Pusser as the protector of the nuclear family [Figure 12]. The new one sheet featured an image of Pusser embracing his wife Pauline. Moreover, this new advertising campaign emphasized seeing the film as an act of regional community engagement. One advertisement read:

This year, it's possible that more people will see 'Walking Tall' than any other movie. It hits communities with quiet force—it stays in the mind—it gets talked about. Sooner or later—someone you know will tell you to see it...unless you tell them first.¹⁷⁴

The promotional material given to exhibitors prodded them to play up the non-conformist values of the film by admitting kids to an 'R'-rated film (a clever way to circumvent the MPAA ratings system) and to propagate word of mouth across their communities. In creating materials for *Walking Tall* that emphasized community, family, and non-conformism over violence, CRC appeared to be hailing an 'all-American,' small-town sensibility.

In addition to invoking some of the ideology shared by popular country music, CRC created explicit tie-ins to country music. An RCA 7" single written and recorded by country songwriter Dave Hall called "The Ballad of Buford Pusser" was released in 1973. The song was a narrative ballad that summarized the story of Pusser's crusade against the Lucky Spot Saloon. The song begins by encapsulating Pusser's twin virtues—his individualism and commitment to his family: "Buford Pusser was a family man. He liked living right and being free." As a song featured in the film and as a soundtrack tie-in, "The Ballad of Buford Pusser" explicitly linked the film's representation of vigilante violence to the outlaw figure, a trope also found in country music and country-western imagery at the time.

Importantly, BCP and CRC altered their initial strategy for *Walking Tall* after realizing a standard exploitation selling strategy of emphasizing violence and booking the film in key cities was unsuccessful. Instead, BCP and CRC adjusted marketing and distribution to target a narrower niche of down-home white working-class Americans. In this way, *Walking Tall* fulfilled drive-in operators' wishes for a film to address the shortage—a title differentiated from

both the studio releases and from sexploitation and blaxploitation. As one of the most financially successful exploitation films of the decade, *Walking Tall* also showed an exhibitor-led grassroots production and targeted marketing strategy could be a viable solution to the product shortage. The film earned over \$12 million in rentals and \$23 million worldwide.¹⁷⁵ BCP also sold the film to CBS for \$2 million, as the financiers predicted. An advertisement in *Variety* reported that 45% of television viewers tuned into the film when it first aired.¹⁷⁶

Moreover, *Walking Tall* initiated a successful small franchise for AIP. The film inspired two sequels that starred Bo Svenson as Pusser after Baker declined to appear in the sequels. *Walking Tall, Part 2* (1975) grossed over \$11 million, and *Walking Tall – The Final Chapter* (1977) grossed \$7.5 million.¹⁷⁷ The latter was noted for racking up grosses in small towns; *Boxoffice* reported the film took in record earnings in the first three weeks of play in Lake Charles, Louisiana.¹⁷⁸ Both had theatrical releases through AIP and were sold through to television. AIP released *Walking Tall – The Final Chapter* in a 670-print run, an index of the commercial potential for hicksploitation in the mid-1970s.¹⁷⁹ According to AIP corporate documents, *Walking Tall – The Final Chapter* was the company's biggest print run to date with the exception of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977), which was released with 845 prints.¹⁸⁰ In *Walking Tall*, CRC and BCP exploited popular themes of violent vigilante justice to supply the drive-in market. Applying the lessons of *Billy Jack*, *Walking Tall* found its success through targeted selling and marketing.

Exploitation/Exploitation Imitation: AIP Continues the Violent Vigilante Film

As an exemplar of the hicksploitation cycle, *Walking Tall* inspired other exploitation independents to mimic CRC's success, resulting in a violent vigilante cycle propelled by intra-

exploitation imitations. After *Walking Tall*, AIP and CRC struck a distribution deal that ended CRC's distribution capabilities. Explaining the company's decision to stop distribution in the face of several box office successes, President Joe Sugar cited competition from majors for acquisitions, difficulties with parent company Cinerama, and challenges getting big releases that contributed to CRC's slowing down on acquisitions. Sugar explained: "It became hard for us to get pictures of blockbuster proportions."¹⁸¹ Elaborating further, *Variety* wrote: "CRC's fade from distribution is similar to the total fade of National General Pictures, one of the 'instant majors' which sprang up seven years ago."¹⁸² As of September 1974, AIP became the distribution arm for CRC's library and current slate of releases, which included a handful of BCP-produced films. AIP released CRC's films through their 28 exchanges, thus saving CRC the overhead costs of operating its 11 exchanges.¹⁸³ Just as AIP piggybacked on blaxploitation, a cycle popularized by other studios' releases, Arkoff likewise took advantage of the market terrain left by CRC. AIP continued to release CRC's low-budget films including the *Walking Tall* sequels, *Sunday in the Country* (1974), and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* (1975). AIP also received television syndication rights to the CRC library. While their upscaling efforts with the Blockbuster Lite release *Meteor* (1979) would change their fate, AIP appeared to have the economic stability to weather the shifting terrain in the exploitation market by mid-decade.

While *Walking Tall* inspired many imitators in "redneck violence," the two *Macon County Line* films released by AIP were the most financially successful. Von Doviak describes *Macon County Line* as a "low-budget drive-in smash."¹⁸⁴ After distributing the final two films of the *Walking Tall* series, which grossed over \$30 million, AIP acquired the 'R'-rated *Macon County Line* in a negative pick-up deal from producer Max Baer, Jr. Baer Jr. played Jethro Bodine on CBS' *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971). The very popular television series was

itself a pre-cursor to the 1970s hicksploitation film cycle. Baer's role would associate him with Jethro for decades to come. Baer would leverage this in his efforts to become a hicksploitation mogul, producing several low-budget genre films. AIP acquired the film for \$500,000, though some reports cite a slightly higher number of \$800,000.¹⁸⁵ Richard Compton, who directed New World Pictures' *Angels Die Hard* (1970) and *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1971), directed the film and the sequel.

Macon County Line is a film about the aimless driving of two brothers Chris and Wayne Dixon in 1950s Louisiana two weeks prior to them joining the military. The brothers pick up Jenny, a young hitchhiker. The three run into trouble in Macon County, Georgia, when their car breaks down and requires repairs. The brothers are blamed for the brutal rape and murder of Deputy Morgan's wife Carol. In a disturbing scene staged from the point-of-view of Carol, the film shows the rape committed by two outlaws Lon and Elisha. Deputy Morgan and his young son Luke (played by Leif Garrett who is Pusser's son in *Walking Tall*) hunt for Wayne and Chris. Wayne, Jenny, and Morgan are killed in the fray. Chris picks up the car from the mechanic and drives away at the end of the film. There are similarities to *Walking Tall* in several respects. Like *Walking Tall*, *Macon County Line* was also based on the true story of a sheriff's plot for vengeance. With scenes of grisly violence, both films presented a downbeat and pessimistic view of small-town America as insular, unjust, and capable of a great violence when newcomers disrupt the community.

Deliverance and *Walking Tall* cultivated a wider audience for Southern-themed movies by tapping into fandoms for country music and Southern rock. As the cycle went on, the ties between country music and hicksploitation became more explicit, indicative of strategic synergies on the part of exploitation producer-distributors. Jennifer Holt writes that corporate

synergy “was the foundational principle upon which vertically integrated entertainment conglomerates were built during the 1980s in order to exploit the rapidly collapsing boundaries between film, television, and cable, and between production, distribution, and exhibition outlets.”¹⁸⁶ One example of corporate synergies was *Macon County Line*’s theme song titled “Another Place, Another Time” which was written and performed by country star Bobbie Gentry and published by Max Baer Music.¹⁸⁷ This synergy operated at the level of music publishing; Baer derived benefit from holding the copyright to the song. *Billboard* reported that Brunswick Records had soundtrack album rights to the film.¹⁸⁸ AIP’s press kit for *Macon County Line* indicated that exhibitors could request a single to distribute to local radio deejays for free by mailing or calling AIP’s Wilshire Boulevard address.¹⁸⁹ Gentry’s star had dimmed since the late 1960s, but she enjoyed a brief renaissance with the *Macon County Line* film. She had a brief variety show on CBS during the summer of 1974. The lyrics of “Another Place, Another Time” develop a theme of nostalgia for simpler times and the slow pace of small-town life, ideas that were strangely disconnected from *Macon County Line*’s dour tone.

There was a time when we could do anything
 With a brown paper bag and a piece of string
 Go for a ride, we’d put the car-top down
 Somehow we’d end up in another time
 Funny how things can turn themselves around

Similar to the Gentry song, print advertisements for *Macon County Line* invoked nostalgia for purer times. In the one sheet, however, the specific flavor of nostalgia seemed itself modeled on the appeals of *American Graffiti* (1973), released the year prior. The tagline of one advertisement depicted a country road over which the line read: “It was the Fall of ’54—a time when laughing was easy. And laugh they did, until they crossed the Macon County Line.”¹⁹⁰ AIP

appeared to leverage the popularity of both CRC's *Walking Tall* and Universal's *American Graffiti* in its promotion of *Macon County Line*. Trade journals also picked up on the similarity with *American Graffiti* and suggested the film would find an audience in the exploitation market. *The Independent Film Journal* called *Macon County Line* an "okay combination of 'American Graffiti' and 'Easy Rider' that might disappoint the action audience in focusing more on character than on violence."¹⁹¹ Acknowledging the focus on niche rural audiences, *Variety* noted the film was a "suitable dual bill exploitation item for lesser yahoo situations."¹⁹²

AIP premiered the film in Dallas at the Dallas Film Festival and released *Macon County Line* with a regional saturation print run in the southeast beginning the last week of June, prime summer drive-in time. In the first week of release, *Macon County Line* grossed \$1.7 million on 343 screens in Atlanta, Charlotte, New Orleans, and Washington D.C.¹⁹³ This resulted in a per screen average of around \$5,100 that first week. Among the opening markets, New Orleans had the highest per screen average of around \$6,150. *Macon County Line* was also the top film in New Orleans that weekend.¹⁹⁴ This success appeared a result of saturation booking geared to the Sun Belt, or to southeastern metropolitan areas. There was a total of 421 prints in circulation in late July of 1974.¹⁹⁵ AIP corporate documents show that *Macon County Line*'s print run was above the company's norm at the time.¹⁹⁶ Other 1974 AIP releases had much fewer circulating prints: *Truck Turner* (1974) with 245; *Savages Sisters* (1974) with 156; *Golden Needles* (1974); and *Abby* (1974) with 250.¹⁹⁷ By the second week, the film took in grosses of over \$3.7 million in 352 theaters, including in Dallas.¹⁹⁸ *Variety* reported *Macon County Line* was held over for extended runs in most locations.¹⁹⁹ AIP continued to release the film after the summer season was over. In September, AIP released *Macon County Line* in Southern California across 118 theaters.²⁰⁰ *Boxoffice* also predicted that *Macon County Line* was a prime candidate for a reissue

in the following years given this strong box office performance. In Providence, Rhode Island, the film opened in 12 drive-ins and hardtops.²⁰¹ *Boxoffice* reported that “small-town theatres are experiencing turnaway crowds with this picture about a small town in the South.”²⁰² Heeding the examples of *Billy Jack* and *Walking Tall*, which found more success outside of urban markets, *Macon County Line*’s distribution run centered on a saturation strategy in key cities in the Southern US before moving wider to northern and western markets. Like *Walking Tall*, the film played in a mix of drive-ins and indoor theaters as described above. AIP released *Macon County Line* in a typical exploitation saturation run, with a focus on southeastern markets.

The box office success of *Macon County Line* continued to animate hicksploitation production on the part of AIP and producer Max Baer. By January of 1975, Arkoff declared that *Macon County Line* was the company’s most successful film to date with \$11 million in rentals and grosses of a reported \$24 million.²⁰³ In an article on the booming box office of 1974, which was the highest since 1946, *Variety* indicated that *Macon County Line* was among the highest grossing American films of September 1975.²⁰⁴ AIP posted record profits of just over a \$1 million (indicating the firm’s thin margins) in late 1974 thanks to both *Macon County Line* and the reissue of the first *Billy Jack* movie *The Born Losers*.²⁰⁵ The film’s success also paid dividends in ancillary markets. In 1976 AIP sold *Macon County Line* to pay cable.²⁰⁶ That same year AIP reported strong earnings due to gains in domestic and foreign theatrical film rentals, strong television sales, and Tom Laughlin’s payout to AIP of \$1.36 million. The grosses of two hicksploitation films—*Walking Tall Part 2* and *Return to Macon County*—helped to put AIP substantially in the black, according to the firm’s press releases.²⁰⁷ AIP corporate documents also show that *Return to Macon County* was released with 670 prints; according to this print

utilization document, 670 prints was the biggest print run for any of AIP's 1975 features.²⁰⁸

Hicksploitation was evidently a prominent focus of AIP's at mid-decade.

Macon County Line also propelled producer Max Baer Jr. into producing and directing other hicksploitation films. Max Baer, Jr. was an actor, screenwriter, producer, and director. He was the son of Max Baer, a famous heavyweight boxer. Baer, Jr. was best known for playing Jethro Bodine, the dumb nephew of Jed Clampett. *The Beverly Hillbillies* premiered September 26, 1962, and was ranked No.1 during its first two seasons.²⁰⁹ *The Beverly Hillbillies* produced two network spin-offs: *Petticoat Junction* and *Green Acres*.²¹⁰ CBS canceled the series in 1971 as a part of the network's attempts to "citify" its image. Baer's professional image had become intertwined with hillbilly culture. Baer explained in a 2017 interview, "I couldn't go into a producer's office and say I wanted to play the part of a neurosurgeon or pilot. As soon as I came on screen, people would say, there's Jethro."²¹¹ Unable to get acting work after the cancellation of *The Beverly Hillbillies* because of typecasting, Baer used his redneck celebrity to produce low-budget hicksploitation films. Indeed, his celebrity functioned as a kind of pre-sold element that helped differentiate Baer's films in the marketplace and which gave Baer some amount of clout in the industry to continue hicksploitation production.

Baer Jr., who wrote and produced *Macon County Line* and played the role of Deputy Reed Morgan, also wrote, produced, directed and starred in *The Wild McCullochs* (1975).²¹² The press kit for *The Wild McCullochs* showed marketing ideas that revealed the targeted (if not actual) audience. One "exploitation tip" in the press kit read as follows: "Select a Monday through Thursday night to invite the truck drivers in your city to your theatre as guests. Your invitation may read: 'You pay admission only for your wife or girlfriend. Your own ticket of admission is your union card or other identification verifying you as a truck driver.'" While I

have no evidence that exhibitors put this recommendation into action, it does associate a set of cultural and demographic features with the target audience: male, heterosexual truck drivers.

After *The Wild McCullochs*, Baer Jr. acquired the rights to Bobbie Gentry's 1967 #1 Billboard hit "Ode to Billie Joe," further capitalizing on Gentry's fame. Baer then produced and directed a film based on the song called *Ode to Billy Joe* (1976), which was filmed in Gentry's native Mississippi and released by Warner Bros.²¹³ It took in \$11 million in rentals.²¹⁴ Baer then directed the *American Graffiti* knock-off exploitation film *Hometown U.S.A.* (1979), which was released by Film Ventures International. Throughout the 1980s, Baer had only a few acting credits in television episodes. Baer has since attempted to license the Jethro Bodine character in restaurants, hotels, and casinos. Baer's production company and AIP's *Macon County Line* were evidence of the direct ways that *Walking Tall* influenced the production of other 'R'-rated action films that similarly leveraged themes popular in country music to appeal to audiences at southeastern drive-ins.

The violent vigilante films *Walking Tall* and *Macon County Line* positioned hicksploitation as a niche cycle led by exploitation independents. *Walking Tall* and *Macon County Line* showed the key market strategies to draw in the right demographic groups: 1) driving audience demand through invoking country music and 2) distributing the films to the theaters that served exurban audiences in the Sun Belt in the summer season. Baer, so closely associated with hillbilly media, functioned as a pre-sold element or built-in market signal that conveyed the film's audience to exhibitors. By this moment, exploitation independents were operating in a mode of differentiation from Hollywood, innovating a new film formula in hicksploitation to serve the summer drive-in season, while studios were pursuing blockbuster films for first-run release.

Section V: Rural Road Movies and the End of the Road for Independent Hicksploitation

From around 1974 through the end of the decade, a hicksploitation sub-cycle oriented toward car racing culture emerged. The rural road film cycle was distinctive from the violent vigilante strain of hicksploitation in several respects. The rural road cycle was overwhelmingly ‘PG’-rated. The ‘PG’ rating was driven by two factors: the demand for family films at drive-ins and the growing consideration of television as an ancillary market for exploitation films. In 1975, Jack Rigg, who managed the New World Pictures exchange in Atlanta, explained to *Variety* that suburban theaters and drive-ins were no longer interested in releasing sexploitation. Rigg, whose exchange served 1,200 theaters in the southeast, claimed that audiences wanted “bigger-budget actions, preferably with some marquee names.”²¹⁵ Rigg also recounted that he and other distributors demanded that Corman engineer the hicksploitation melodrama *Crazy Mama* (1975), the sequel to *Bloody Mama* (1970), to get a ‘PG’ rating. Car chases and crashes were a common motif and plot point in the rural road film, allowing for many variations on the theme. Less violent than the vigilante film, the rural road film propelled the broader hicksploitation cycle through the late 1970s.

The rural road cycle was informed by intellectual property that drew on adjacent cultural forms: the citizen’s band radio trend and by themes in country music. Road-racing also intersected with some fads in popular culture including National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and Citizen’s Band radio. According to sound scholar Art M. Blake, CB was at the height of popularity between 1974 and 1978.²¹⁶ Blake writes, “Sales of CB radio sets grew from 2 million in 1974 to a peak of approximately 10 million in 1976.”²¹⁷ By 1978, Blake continues, “radio sales had dropped abruptly, signaling that, for most Americans, the CB craze had definitely waned.”²¹⁸ Themes found in country music at the time were also present in the

rural road films. While violent vigilante films espoused values of outlaw individualism, the rural road cycle celebrated the freedom of the road. For rambling figures like Hank Williams or Merle Haggard, the road embodied rebellion, lawlessness, and freedom from authority and restraint.

Williams sings in “Lost Highway”:

I’m a rollin’ stone all alone and lost
 For a life of sin I have paid the cost
 When I pass by all the people say
 Just another guy on the lost highway

Haggard updates this theme with an outlaw element in the 1960s with “The Fugitive,” in which he sings of a life on the road running from the law:

I’d like to settle down but they won’t let me
 A fugitive must be a rolling stone
 Down every road there’s always one more city
 I’m on the run, the highway is my home

Encapsulating the ethos of the road in country music, Tichi writes: “The road is culture; the home is nature. The first changes; the second never does. And the two can neither meet or mesh.”²¹⁹ While most rural road films did not engage in overt philosophizing about ‘the road’ as a concept, many such films nevertheless drew from the road’s association with outlaw figures and the theme’s historical linkages with country music.²²⁰ While violent vigilante films had links to country music, the rural road cycle had more explicit industrial synergies with country music recording artists. As the following case studies will show, several of these films’ soundtracks featured popular country music, and several films starred country singers.

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry (1974): A Rural Road Prototype

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry is a film about three counterculture outlaw figures ill fit for civil social life who find freedom on the road. As a prototype of the rural road cycle, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* can be seen as a bridge between the counterculture-flavored hicksploitation of *Billy Jack* on the one hand and a film rooted in hillbilly taste like *Smokey and the Bandit* on the other. Based on the 1962 novel *The Chase* by Richard Unekis, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* was produced by James Nicholson and his Academy Pictures production company, formed after Nicholson's departure from AIP in June of 1972.²²¹ *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* was directed by John Hough, who had previously directed low-budget horror including *Twins of Evil* (1971) for Hammer Films.²²² The 'PG'-rated car chase film was released by Fox, which had agreed to release Academy Pictures films that were made after Nicholson's death in December 1972.²²³ Peter Fonda, Susan George, and Adam Roarke were the principal actors. The film starred Fonda as racer Larry and Roarke as his mechanic Deke. Larry and Deke are aspiring NASCAR drivers who rip-off a supermarket to fund their aspirations. As they leave town pursued by the police, Larry and Deke encounter Mary, a woman Larry has been romantically involved with. Mary convinces them to let her ride with them. The film depicts their run from the law in a Chevrolet Impala and ends with their deaths after the three have finally escaped the authorities. The film's appeals were simple: an action film with a heist, car chase, and romantic entanglement. The one sheet highlighted these elements and the visage of Fonda, whose aviator sunglasses recalled his role as Wyatt in *Easy Rider* [Figure 13]. *Easy Rider*, like *Billy Jack* and *American Graffiti*, was a youth-oriented studio release whose influence flavored the hicksploitation cycle.

Critics viewed *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* as derivative, but trade journals saw that the film as tailor-made for drive-in theaters. The *Los Angeles Times* identified *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*

as the “rock bottom of the spectacular chase pictures.”²²⁴ *The Independent Film Journal* observed that the “plot serves only as a peg for well-stunted car chases and an assortment of amusing demolitions.”²²⁵ However, industry analysts anticipated that the film’s focus on action was likely to increase its appeal in certain areas. *The Independent Film Journal* expected *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* to “prove exploitable in quick, rural saturations.” Observing the regional appeal of the cycle, *The Independent Film Journal* predicted good returns specifically “in Western and Midwest areas where stock-car racing has the status that surfing once did on the West Coast.”²²⁶ Furthermore, the trade journal said the film was “the ultimate in made-for-drive-in movies.”²²⁷

Fox gave the film an exploitation release, opening the film similarly to *Macon County Line* with a premiere in Dallas and Houston at the end of April before moving on to other theaters in May.²²⁸ Like the successful small-town release of *Billy Jack* and *Walking Tall*, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* was released in smaller film markets, waiting to play in New York City until July 1974, two months after a Los Angeles premiere. *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* played a mix of drive-ins and first-run multiplex theaters. In Dayton, Ohio, it played a showcase in six drive-ins.²²⁹ In Detroit, it played 27 hardtops and 17 drive-ins.²³⁰ By the time the summer was over, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* had played most of *Boxoffice*’s key cities and, among those, had performed the strongest in Memphis. *Boxoffice*’s scoring system showed that the film took in grosses 10 times that of normal grosses in the Memphis market.²³¹ *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* continued to play in theaters into the fall of 1974. The film took in nearly \$15 million in rentals by 1978, and some sources show a total box office gross of \$28 million.²³² The film’s high box office figures and the influx of car chasing films that followed revealed *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* to be an important prototype for the rural road-racing and car-chasing brand of hicksploitation.

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry showed the cycle's persisting distribution to drive-ins in the southeast. *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, like *Billy Jack*, also illustrated how elements of youth culture films, namely *Easy Rider*, intermingled with hicksploitation, suggesting the unlikely influence of the Hollywood Renaissance road movies on this drive-in-oriented cycle.

Eat My Dust! and New World Pictures' Foray into Hicksploitation

While *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* and the *Macon County Line* films showed AIP engaging in the hicksploitation cycle, *Eat My Dust!* (1976) initiated New World Pictures' focus toward the mid-to-late 1970s on car racing films. These studios' engagement with the cycle signaled its prominence within the arena of independent low-budget filmmaking. *Eat My Dust!* was written and directed by Charles B. Griffith, who had several Corman bona fides. Griffith had written screenplays for several of the late 1950s teensploitation films and for *A Bucket of Blood* (1959). He also wrote *The Wild Angels* (1966) and *Death Race 2000* (1975). Griffith had directed *Forbidden Island* (1959) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960). Similar to *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, *Eat My Dust!* was a rural road action film aimed at drive-ins.

Eat My Dust! was sold like an exploitation film but benefited from the cachet of Ron Howard's starring role in the studio-made *American Graffiti*. At the local speedway in Puckerbuck County, Hoover Neibold (Ron Howard) arrives with his teenage friends. His father, Sheriff Harry Neibold (Warren J. Kemmerling), sits in the stands, disapproving of his son's fast driving and raucous behavior. At the race, Hoover sees a young girl named Darlene (Christopher Norris). Smitten by her, he hits on her by boasting of his copious speeding tickets. Darlene says she wants a ride, and Hoover steals Mabel, the car of Big Bubba Jones, the winning race car driver. Hoover takes Darlene and his friends on a joy ride while the Sheriff Deputy Brookside

takes chase. Pursuing Hoover and Mabel, the sheriff and local authorities leave the town in shambles and crash into the local Chinese restaurant. While Hoover races around with Darlene, the kids' parents angrily congregate at the police station where Harry Neibold presides. When Mabel runs out of gas, Hoover and Darlene stop at an empty farmhouse. Harry convinces Bubba to find Hoover. They arrive at the farmhouse after some delays, and a chase takes place while Harry implores Hoover to give himself up to the law over CB radio. Hoover is not caught; instead, he returns to the speedway. There, Darlene spurns him, and Big Bubba gets in the passenger seat as Hoover takes Mabel around the track.

Reviews in major newspapers and trade press also noted *Eat My Dust*'s debt to the current car-chase fad. The *Los Angeles Times* made a direct comparison with *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*: “[W]ith its ‘nice,’ ‘wholesome’ All-American kids, ‘Eat My Dust!’ is far more disturbing than the similar ‘Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry,’ which, as its title indicates, had people who were at least upfront creeps.”²³³ Describing the film as a “money-making car chase comedy for the youth market,” *Variety* called the film “a tongue-in-cheek mockery of the [car chase] genre.”²³⁴ *The Independent Film Journal* noted the film’s “almost non-stop action.”²³⁵ The *Los Angeles Times* also observed the film’s debt to *American Graffiti*, calling *Eat My Dust!* “a mindless attempt to cross ‘American Graffiti’—with a chase plot.”²³⁶ AIP’s *Macon County Line* and *Eat My Dust!* both invoked elements of the hicksploitation film that would make them appealing to rural or small-town drive-ins. Both films also riffed on elements of *American Graffiti*—for *Macon County Line*, the 1950s setting and radio soundtrack, and for *Eat My Dust!*, the casting of Howard. *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* likewise touted the film’s similarities to *Easy Rider*. While geared to working-class white viewers hailed by *Walking Tall*, the rural road films also spoke to

how shrewdly Arkoff and Corman cross-pollinated the cycle with the popular youth-oriented road movies.

Trade journals viewed *Eat My Dust!* as summer drive-in fare. *Boxoffice* predicted high grosses for the summer release “at drive-ins and action houses.”²³⁷ *The Independent Film Journal* called *Eat My Dust!* “the ideal money-making entry for the summer action-drive-in market.” *The Independent Film Journal* also predicted “its strongest market in rural areas.”²³⁸ Those rosy predictions looked even more likely given that New World Pictures secured a summer release date for *Eat My Dust!* (Only two years later, as Chapter Six details, the majors had nearly completely encroached on the summer release season). *Eat My Dust!* premiered in San Antonio and across Texas in over 100 theaters in late April and early May.²³⁹ The film then moved to Los Angeles on May 5.²⁴⁰ In Denver, it played to “torrid” sales in five hardtops and one drive-in.²⁴¹ In Buffalo, it played two hardtops and four drive-ins.²⁴² In Kansas City, it played 11 indoor theaters and six drive-ins.²⁴³ *Eat My Dust!* also got the highest box office gross in one week for a New World Pictures film when it played in 400 screens across Chicago, Minneapolis, Washington D.C., and Pittsburgh.²⁴⁴ New World followed AIP’s and Fox’s lead, premiering *Eat My Dust!* in Texas theaters, and then booking the film in downtown hardtops and drive-ins throughout the summer season.

Eat My Dust! performed decently but below New World’s expectations. General Sales Manager Robert Rehme (who would become production head at Avco-Embassy in 1978 as discussed in Chapter Six) characterized *Eat My Dust!*’s run as the highest one-week gross for any New World Pictures film and the company’s widest print run.²⁴⁵ Star Ron Howard promoted the film by attending the Indy 500. Despite a strong box office performance by New World’s standards, Rehme rationalized that the film felt short of expectations because exhibitors pulled it

too early in Texas. Rehme claimed that the majors' releases forced *Eat My Dust!* out of theaters unfairly despite audience interest in the film.²⁴⁶ Rehme explained:

Small companies like us don't get lied to by exhibitors. If we've got a bomb, our customers tell us. But when we've got strong product, they tell us that, too. And in Texas and Chicago, we've had customers apologize for cancelling or shortening playdates on grounds that the big distributors are forcing their own product.²⁴⁷

Rehme complained that the majors were adopting the saturation release with their own drive-in-oriented car chase films. Studio-released competitor films were crowding independents for playdates. Rehme cited *Aloha, Bobby and Rose* (1975, Columbia), *W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings* (1975, Fox), and *White Line Fever* (1975, Columbia) as among the major studio competitors that might be booked in place of independent films.²⁴⁸ *Jackson County Jail* (1976), *Nashville Girl* (1976), and *Cannonball* (1976) were ejected from playdates in Chicago and Texas in May of 1976. Rehme explained that small independents depended on every booking to amortize rising advertising and publicity costs. Rehme said: "Where we used to be able to mount a very strong campaign in an area for, say, \$8,000, our customers now are retorting that such and such a (major) company is spending \$15,000 or more for one of their films. It's murder."²⁴⁹ Rehme's concerns pointed to the beginning of a pivot in the independent-studio dynamic, as the major studios began to appropriate the hicksploitation formula and occupy drive-in playdates. By 1976, the major studios were beginning to imitate the exploitation independents. As the next chapter considers more fully, the situation of product shortage in the early 1970s took a different turn after *Jaws* and *Star Wars* transformed the distribution landscape.

Despite such competitive difficulties, after *Eat My Dust!*, New World Pictures developed a niche for road-racing films. *Variety* reported that, when Corman allowed Ron Howard to make

Grand Theft Auto (1977), he required that the film follow a formula: “(1) It be an action comedy centering around a car chase (2) It involve young people on the run (3) It star Ron Howard (4) And it be a project that could be titled “Grand Theft Auto,” a title, like “Eat My Dust,” that had been pre-tested for audience acceptance.”²⁵⁰ Thus, in an increasingly superstar-driven film market, Corman insisted on having a star in even the rural road drive-in films. New World also considered developing another car chase film under the working title of “The Car,” a title that tested poorly. Universal later produced a film of the same name (which prior to that was called “Wheels”).²⁵¹ In 1977, New World Pictures released the aforementioned *Grand Theft Auto* in addition to *Moonshine County Express* (1977) and *Black Oak Conspiracy* (1977). The company’s most successful mid-decade releases were indeed rural road movies; *Death Race 2000* and *Eat My Dust!* both took in around \$5 million in rentals.²⁵²

Hicksploitation Meets Hollywood: The Citizen’s Band Cycle and the Summer of 1977

The rural road film remained popular from catalyst *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* through the mid-decade with New World Pictures’ prolific engagement in the sub-cycle. The rural road films discussed thus far were straightforward action movies made for the drive-in circuit and which also incorporated elements of youth culture. Beginning around 1977, a new strain of rural road film emerged that capitalized more heavily on hillbilly elements: on the pop-cultural citizen’s band trend.

From 1977 through 1980, several citizen band-themed hicksploitation films were released by independent and major studios alike including *Breaker! Breaker!* (1977) starring Chuck Norris; Jonathan Demme’s more nuanced *Citizen’s Band* (aka *Handle with Care*) (1977); *Smokey and the Bandit*, arguably the most successful hicksploitation film; and *Convoy*, based on

a popular country music hit song. The CB films appealed to hicksploitation's base—young viewers in small-town and southern drive-ins—but also showed how hicksploitation had spread more broadly within film culture. Despite the common plot substance or subject matter, each of the four films was quite distinct. *Los Angeles Times* critic Leigh Charlton wrote an article, “CB Films Proliferate,” that assessed the distinctions among the cycle. Charlton described *Citizens Band* (retitled *Handle With Care*) as “dramatiz[ing] the effect of this communication device on the lives of people in a small community” and *Smokey and the Bandit* as “using CBs to liven up a cross-country chase.”²⁵³ Charlton said *Breaker, Breaker!* was “an exploitation film that combines CBs with karate, masochism and heavy doses of violence.”²⁵⁴ The CB rural road films of 1977 also illustrated the growing diversity of hicksploitation releases with films aimed beyond the drive-in crowd.

From Exploitation to Film Festival Fodder: Breaker! Breaker! (1977) and Citizen's Band (1977)

Breaker! Breaker! was the CB film most aligned with exploitation cinema. According to star Chuck Norris, it cost only \$250,000.²⁵⁵ The first of the 1977 CB films to be released to theaters, *Breaker! Breaker!* was directed by Don Hulette, produced by his independent production company Paragon Films, and picked up for release by AIP in November 1976.²⁵⁶ The ‘PG’-rated film starred Norris in one of his earliest leading roles. The film featured several original songs including “Breaker! Breaker!” written by director Hulette and performed by Denny Brooks.²⁵⁷ Acknowledging the film's low-budget status and invocation of recent film fads, the *Los Angeles Times* described the film as “a talky, melodramatic, exploitation hybrid that lumps CB radios, trucking and kung fu into one soggy entity.”²⁵⁸ *Boxoffice* called the film an “inept actioner” about the “citizens band radio craze” and noted Norris' past performance in

Return of the Dragon (1972).²⁵⁹ The film's one sheet made clear *Breaker! Breaker!*'s allegiance to the CB trend: "Don't Muck Around With An 18 Wheel Trucker" and "he's got a CB radio and a hundred friends who just might get mad" [Figure 14].

The film's premiere at a drive-in "no tux, come as you are" gala spoke to the taste culture that it was appealing to and registered an overt awareness of the cultural sphere in which such a film would circulate.²⁶⁰ AIP had 455 prints released of the film, which suggested *Breaker! Breaker!* functioned as a mid-level film for AIP's 1977 year, where the average print run was around 400.²⁶¹ Opening May 6, 1977, *Breaker! Breaker!* premiered in Atlanta at three local drive-ins: Martin's Marbro, Georgia Theater Co.'s Northeast Expressway, and South Starlight.²⁶² It took in record earnings in several Southern California drive-in spots.²⁶³ According to Norris, the film grossed \$12 million. This outstanding return on investment suggested the competitive advantage of being the first of several CB films released in the summer of 1977.²⁶⁴ While not particularly favored among critics, the independent *Breaker! Breaker!* was successful in propagating the trend for CB films and targeting a drive-in audience to do so.

That same summer, *Citizen's Band*, directed by Jonathan Demme, was released by Paramount Pictures. Like *Breaker! Breaker!*, it was another low-budget film that relied prominently on the CB gimmick; however, in most other respects, it was a very different film. Unlike *Breaker! Breaker!* or that year's *Smokey and the Bandit*, *Citizen's Band* was character-centered and not an action movie. The design and messaging of the one sheet also highlighted the more philosophical questions engaged by the movie. "Everybody is Somebody Else in Citizens Band." The one sheet also spoke to the different tonal registers of the film ("The Ultimate Fantasy"; "The Comedy") [Figure 15]. *Citizen's Band* was a network narrative about characters whose lives intersect via CB radio, with every character having a CB *nom de plume*

and radio persona that belies their social identity in the town. The protagonist “Spider,” attempts to reunite with his girlfriend, who unbeknownst to Spider moonlights as her CB personality “Electra,” a CB sex worker of sorts. Enraged about how kids’ goofing around CB channel 9 prevents emergency signals from coming through, Spider begins physically cutting cords of offending amateur radio fans. In a separate storyline, two women learn they are married to the same 18-wheel trucker, who has suffered a serious road accident. The film culminates with a series of disclosures and recognitions as characters’ CB identities are revealed.

As this description suggests, *Citizen’s Band* lacked the action-oriented car chase scenes and stock characters—like the bumbling or corrupt sheriff—that characterized much of hicksploitation. Despite the differences, Paramount attempted to release *Citizen’s Band* like the post-*Billy Jack* and *Walking Tall* release model for hicksploitation, but this was unsuccessful. Despite heavy promotional efforts, including a tie-in with 3500 Radio Shack stores across the country, the film fared poorly after opening in May of 1977 in 200 theaters in 30 cities.²⁶⁵ Indeed, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Paramount abruptly pulled *Citizens Band* from theaters when it failed to attract audiences; the studio reacted by retooling an art cinema-esque release for the film.²⁶⁶ In some ways, this course correction was the opposite of what Laughlin did for *Billy Jack* and CRC for *Walking Tall*. Paramount retitled the film *Handle With Care*, a title that made only implicit reference to the film’s relationship to the existing CB-film trend. “Handle” was CB shorthand for the driver or operator’s nickname. Rather than shift away from the key city-focused distribution pattern, Paramount embraced a typical platform release, putting the film in the New York market and in the film festival circuit.²⁶⁷ The film opened in New York in October 1977 when it played the New York Film Festival and, unlike other CB films, was

positively reviewed by prominent critics.²⁶⁸ Writing for *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin remarked on the film's "intelligence" and called it "so clever that its seams show."²⁶⁹

The structure is thoughtful, and some of the imagery is so calculated it seems chilly; on the other hand, the film's surface is flippant and funny, full of talented performers in whimsical, open-ended roles. It's easy to see why 'Handle With Care' was too scrambled to succeed during its first go-round.²⁷⁰

Handle with Care continued to perform poorly despite the change in release strategy and renaming of the film. With a reported budget of \$5 million, the film lost money, grossing just \$815,000 according to *Box Office Mojo*.²⁷¹ Despite Paramount's best re-branding efforts, *Citizens Band* showed the limitations of selling a CB-themed movie to audiences beyond the drive-in demographic.

Smokey and the Bandit (1977) and the Mainstreaming of Hicksploitation

While the violent vigilante and rural road cycles were made by independents and released primarily to the exploitation market, *Smokey and the Bandit*, released by Universal Pictures, marked the major studios' appropriation of the cycle. *Smokey and the Bandit* spurred two sequels, several rip-offs, and confirmed Burt Reynolds' status as a hicksploitation star and heartthrob. Reynolds had starred in such hicksploitation films as *White Lightning* (1973), *W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings*, and *Gator* (1976). As the section will show, Universal employed many of the strategies seen in the previous case studies to place the film with an audience of white working-class viewers. Unlike the independents' releases, however, Universal had a popular star and greater capital for promotion and distribution. As a kind of blockbuster version

of the hicksploitation film, *Smokey and the Bandit* represented the waning of hicksploitation as an independent exploitation cycle.

Universal imitated the intellectual property that exploitation independents had developed to reach a hillbilly taste culture. The filmmakers quite intentionally engaged in the hicksploitation trend of the moment—the CB rural road film. Addressing the film’s fad status, *Smokey and the Bandit* director and Hollywood stuntman Needham offered, “I didn’t put CBs into the film just to cash in on a fad, but now that they’re more respectable, it sure can’t hurt the film.”²⁷² Resonating with the underlying cowboy and outlaw thematics of the violent vigilante film and of country music of the 1970s, Needham said he also saw the truck driver as emblematic of a deeper American cultural mythos. Needham explained, “The truck driver is the last American cowboy. They dress like cowboys, [sic] they’re an adventurous group of loners and there’s a mystique about them that no one really understands.”²⁷³ Needham himself linked the truck drivers to the outlaw cowboys of westerns, themes that also resonated in country music and popular culture at the time.

Similar to other rural road films including *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry* and *Eat My Dust!*, *Smokey and the Bandit* is a movie built around a series of car chases. Big Enos and Little Enos Burdette—wealthy men of the Texarkana community—challenge Bandit (Burt Reynolds) to transport hundreds of cases of Coors from Texarkana to Georgia within 28-hours for \$3,000 an hour. Bandit knows this is considered a form of bootlegging and thus illegal. Bandit accepts the mission on the condition that Enos give him a new Pontiac Trans AM for the trip. Bandit convinces his friend Cledus “Snowman” Snow (Jerry Reed) to drive a big rig of the beer while Bandit distracts police with the Trans Am. The two steal cases of beer from Coors and set out for Georgia. Bandit picks up runaway bride Carrie (Sally Field) while Sheriff Buford T. Justice

(Jackie Gleason) is in pursuit. Bandit and Cledus team up, avoiding the Texas and local sheriff's chase. Bandit drops off Carrie at a bus headed for New York City, but Carrie stays with Bandit and the two continue to run from the Sheriff while developing a romantic connection. In Alabama, Bandit's friend Sexy Lady and a truck convoy aid Bandit and Carrie in escaping the police's traps. In Georgia, Bandit calls on his friend Hot Pants to recruit some young people to block and distract the Georgia police. As the heat amplifies, Cledus drives through several police cars to pave a way for Bandit and Carrie. The crew make it to the Georgia State Finals Truck Rodeo. Big Enos wagers a double or nothing bet that Bandit accepts—to drive to Boston and back for clam chowder within 18 hours. Bandit accepts and drives off leaving Sheriff Justice in the dust.

Universal's promotion of *Smokey and the Bandit* made clear that they targeted the film to an imagined audience of hillbilly viewers. *Smokey and the Bandit* had tie-ins with country music that linked it to the audience for hicksploitation. "Eastbound and Down" by Dick Feller and Jerry Reed was peppered throughout the film. Jerry Reed starred as Cledus. Reed himself, similar to Baer and to Reynolds, had become a kind of hicksploitation star. Reed was a country musician who parlayed his musical success into acting roles. Released by RCA Records, "Eastbound And Down," spent 16 weeks on the US country music charts and peaked at #1.²⁷⁴ It was one of many ways in which country music and Hollywood intersected throughout the late 1970s and into the early 1980s. During this span, several country singers became movie stars. Kenny Rogers starred in a made-for-TV movie called *The Gambler* (1980); Dolly Parton starred alongside Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin in *9 to 5* (1980). Reed and Reynolds' casting together was also another market signal that hailed hillbilly taste publics. Reed and Reynolds starred together in Fox's *W.W. and the Dixie Dancekings* and United Artists' *Gator*, two films that represented the beginning of

major studios' appropriation of the hicksploitation cycle. Therefore, the casting of Reed and Reynolds together further associated *Smokey and the Bandit* with a hillbilly taste culture and aligned the film with the audience shaped by independent and new studio-released hicksploitation.

Universal's promotion for the film attempted to balance building wide demand for the film while hailing hicksploitation's viewing base. Targeting small-town, white working-class filmgoers, Universal applied some high-concept marketing techniques (discussed further in Chapter Five) to the film's one sheet. Lightning bolts, underscoring the speed of the road, were integrated into the font of the film title. A CB receiver was also embedded within the logo of the film title on the one sheet [Figure 16]. This integration of image and plot conveyed the film's affiliation with the rural road cycle. The other visual elements of the one sheet—the angry sheriff, Burt Reynolds, and an 18-wheeler—also telegraphed plot elements, including car chases and run-ins with the law, that aligned *Smokey and the Bandit* with hicksploitation. The tagline on the one sheet, “What we have here is a total lack of respect of the law,” echoed the outlaw hero themes found in country music at the time and in hicksploitation as well. Universal employed the targeted marketing characteristic of hicksploitation with blockbuster marketing. Other promotional materials quite shrewdly positioned *Smokey and the Bandit* as a kind of anti-establishment Hollywood film. Dismissing elite critical taste while boasting of the film's heartland popularity, one such advertisement even quoted a Vincent Canby review:

What? You've never heard of 'Smokey and The Bandit'? It's not the sort of movie that's talked about at cocktail parties. Yet it did play at the Radio City Music Hall and it does star Burt Reynolds...More important, perhaps, 'Smokey and the Bandit' would appear to be the second most popular American film of

year, topped only by 'Star Wars'...Some attention should be paid.²⁷⁵

The advertisement attested to the film's quality and popularity while lightly mocking the critical authority of big city tastemakers. This strategy was a clever form of product differentiation in a box office period dominated by *Star Wars*.

Critics enjoyed lightly mocking the well-trodden tropes of these films. Citing the film's "down-home gags," *Variety* noted the strong showing in 'dixie' and called it a "good summer saturation comedy" for "sophisticated and unsophisticated audiences." Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* drolly called *Smokey and the Bandit* a movie that "does not contain a car chase but *is* one."²⁷⁶ Their coverage nevertheless suggested the market legitimacy of CB-themed hillbilly movies by 1977. *Boxoffice* predicted the film would be a "hot item" amid the "current wave of action pix concerning citizens band radios."²⁷⁷ Gesturing to the film's potential seasonal appeal in the drive-in summer period, *The Independent Film Journal* characterized the film as "breezy warm weather entertainment with fat prospects."²⁷⁸ Indeed, *Variety* wrote that "the grossing potential of the southern areas is not to be underestimated—at least over time; nor is the market potential of the northern areas to be counted out considering the current trendiness of sunbelt-conscious sociology."²⁷⁹ Trade journals suggested that *Smokey and the Bandit* was poised to profit from the CB trend at the peak of its popularity.

Universal's release of *Smokey and the Bandit* represented a hybrid distribution strategy, a combination of a major studio platform release and an exploitation release. Unlike the openings of the hicksploitation films in Texas cities, Universal opened the film in New York City at Radio City Music Hall at the eve of the summer season, on May 19, 1977.²⁸⁰ *Smokey and the Bandit* was in fact four-walled at Radio City Music Hall with two other Universal releases, *MacArthur*

(1977) and a reissue of *The Sting* (1973).²⁸¹ Obviously, this gave the film a kind of exposure that no exploitation independent could hope to mimic. For the Memorial Day weekend, Universal opened *Smokey and the Bandit* wider in 400 theaters in major Sun Belt metropolitan markets: Charlotte, Atlanta, Jacksonville, New Orleans, Memphis, Dallas, and Oklahoma City.²⁸² Over four weeks in these cities, *Smokey and the Bandit* took in box office grosses of nearly \$12 million.²⁸³ Only after this initial run in the southeast did Universal expand *Smokey and the Bandit*'s reach to northern areas and to Los Angeles in late July. The film also played in Canada.²⁸⁴ Like other hicksploitation films, *Smokey and the Bandit* played a mix of hardtops and drive-ins.²⁸⁵ Mike Dennis, manager of an Akron, Ohio, drive-in said Burt Reynolds and Clint Eastwood were his viewers' favorite stars, and *Smokey and the Bandit* was the current top film at his drive-in in summer of 1978. Echoing Jack Rigg's assessment of his drive-in fare, Dennis explained that his drive-in audience were drawn to these action-oriented films: "Drive-in audiences do demand more action. Our people like the realistic action film now."²⁸⁶ Universal followed the exploitation independents' lead in booking the film first in southeastern drive-ins.

Universal film producer Thom Mount has attributed the sleeper success of *Smokey and the Bandit* to a carefully orchestrated distribution plan.²⁸⁷ Mount recounted that the company let preview screenings in the Sun Belt cities of Denver and Dallas inform what the film's distribution would be. Eventually, Mount said Universal moved the film into the northeast to target college students, betting that students would connect with the outlaw plot of running from the cops. Such a quasi-platform release and regional saturation in the southeast helped push *Smokey and the Bandit* to 'sleeper' status. By August 1977, *Smokey and the Bandit* had grossed \$37 million and was seen as a hit, slowly taking in grosses the same summer that *Star Wars* had quick and unprecedented windfall success.²⁸⁸ While Fox continued to release *Star Wars* in

theaters throughout 1977 and 1978, Universal had what *Variety* described as a “saturation revival” in which the film played “the same seven Dixie exchange areas where it preemed on Memorial Day weekend.”²⁸⁹ *Variety* declared *Smokey and the Bandit* “the sleeper of the year.”²⁹⁰ By the fall of 1977, *Smokey and the Bandit* was the second-highest grossing domestic film of the year, with rentals of \$36 million. Universal made *Smokey and the Bandit* for less than \$5 million. It went on to gross over \$125 million, blowing the profit margins of the independents’ hicksploitation titles out of the water.²⁹¹ *Smokey and the Bandit* was the second highest grossing film of 1977. Two sequels followed, both released by Universal: *Smokey and the Bandit II* (1980) and *Smokey and the Bandit—Part 3* (1983). After a clearance window of two years, *Smokey and the Bandit* debuted on broadcast television on NBC during Thanksgiving week of 1979 and ranked first in the weekly Nielsen ratings.²⁹² *Smokey and the Bandit* fulfilled BCP’s vision for *Walking Tall*: a small-town oriented film for adults that would profit in the summer release season and be an easy sell to television.

Convoy (1978): The End of the Road as Hollywood Embraces Hicksploitation

Sam Peckinpah’s *Convoy*, released by United Artists, further marked Hollywood’s embrace of the CB sub-cycle and was further evidence of the strong link between country music and hicksploitation during the 1970s. Indeed, in 1979, *Billboard* reported that several feature films involving country music were in production or pre-production. The magazine observed that these were top-tier films with expensive soundtrack albums, high budgets, and top casts attached.²⁹³ *Convoy* was based on C.W. McCall’s hit song “Convoy,” which spent six weeks at #1 on the country charts and was *Billboard*’s #1 country track of 1976. The record sold five million copies.²⁹⁴ McCall and cowriters Donald Sears and Chip Davies developed the film along

with producer Robert M. Sherman. *Convoy* was directed by Sam Peckinpah, who had last directed the war film *Cross of Iron* (1977). *Convoy* starred country outlaw heartthrob and musician Kris Kristofferson and Ali MacGraw in her first role since 1972's *The Getaway*. Kristofferson was a movie and music star, having won a Golden Globe two years earlier for his starring role in *A Star is Born* (1976). By 1978, Kristofferson had seven albums reach the *Billboard* Country Radio Music Charts and an eighth album, *Easter Island*, released the same year as *Convoy*'s release in 1978. With such an illustrious cast and filmmaker, it is not surprising that Robert Sherman balked at associating *Convoy* with the CB film trend. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Sherman clarified that *Convoy* was not a CB film but "about truck drivers who happen to use CBs."²⁹⁵ The film was produced by UK company EMI Films. EMI struck a deal with UA, who released the film in the US and Canada.²⁹⁶

Convoy is a trucker chase movie. Three truckers—Rubber Duck (Kris Kristofferson), Pig Pen, and Spider Mike—are on the run from the law after assaulting Sheriff 'Dirty' Lyle Wallace (Ernest Borgnine) in a roadhouse for threatening to extort them. Duck meets Melissa (Ali MacGraw) on the road, and she accompanies him as the truckers drive for the New Mexico state line. The police attempt to shoot the truckers and blockade them but, facing political pressure, the sheriff and police relent their efforts and the convoy arrives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Duck then goes to Texas to help his fellow truck driver Mike, who is jailed there. Duck breaks Mike out by running the truck into the jail, and Duck continues to the Mexico border. The national guard and Sheriff Wallace fire at the truck, which catches fire and tumbles into the water. Duck is presumed dead but later Melissa finds him in a disguise in a school bus after his memorial service.

In line with the other CB-related films, *Convoy* was panned by some critics who compared it to others in the hicksploitation cycle. *The Independent Film Journal* called the film “Sam Peckinpah’s version of Smokey and the Bandit minus most of the laughs.”²⁹⁷ The trade journal also criticized the film’s reach: “Everything in it has been done better and on a smaller scale.”²⁹⁸ *The Independent Film Journal* said Kristofferson “assumes a kind of folk hero posturing similar to a *Billy Jack*.”²⁹⁹ *Boxoffice* wrote that *Convoy* was “not exactly what director Sam Peckinpah has been noted for.”³⁰⁰ While a critical failure, *Convoy* was not an altogether unthinkable choice of Peckinpah’s. He had worked in television production in the 1950s, and, in the 1960s, he directed four feature films that aligned him within the western genre. Beginning with 1969’s breakthrough film *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah had developed a reputation as an artistically serious but controversial director. During the 1970s, Peckinpah directed Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw in *The Getaway* (1972) and Kris Kristofferson and Bob Dylan in *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid* (1973), two experiences that obviously informed his casting of MacGraw and Kristofferson in *Convoy*. During the decade, many of Peckinpah’s films also played into the outlaw hero themes shared by many hicksploitation films. More explicitly, 1972’s *Junior Bonner*, which starred Steve McQueen as rodeo cowboy J.R. Bonner and *Walking Tall*’s Joe Don Baker as his brother Curly, explicitly invoked a southwestern rural milieu similar to those depicted in the hicksploitation cycles.

By the late 1970s, Peckinpah had developed a reputation for regular substance abuse and conflict with producers. *Cross of Iron*’s box office performance in Europe convinced British production company EMI to hire Peckinpah. EMI hoped the road-oriented material of McCall’s song would produce a film similar to *The Getaway*.³⁰¹ Peckinpah was financially strapped and, according to those close to him, had very little in liquid assets at the time. Peckinpah agreed to

direct. He received \$350,000 plus \$2,000 a week and 10% of the gross after breakeven.³⁰² The production of the film in Albuquerque was chaotic. Peckinpah encouraged the leads to improvise, and continuity was made difficult given Peckinpah's reliance on cocaine and the use of five cameras and a helicopter to film the convoy.³⁰³ Shooting cost \$11 million, \$5 million over budget, and Peckinpah took several months more than the five-month editing period that EMI dictated.³⁰⁴ In order to get the film ready for a June release, EMI took final cut away from Peckinpah. They whittled down 800,000 feet of film and Peckinpah's three-hour rough cut to 110 minutes. EMI pre-sold foreign rights based on Peckinpah, Kristofferson, and MacGraw's names. Similar to Universal's promotion of *Smokey and the Bandit*, United Artists Records released a soundtrack featuring C.W. McCall, Kenny Rogers, Glen Campbell, and Merle Haggard. Dell Books released a novelization of the film as well.³⁰⁵

United Artists released *Convoy* in prime playing time: in late-June 1978 in 700 theaters.³⁰⁶ Unlike the violent vigilante films or the rural road cycle, United Artists premiered *Convoy* in the major urban markets of Los Angeles and New York. *Convoy* was released in a mix of outdoor and indoor theaters in Miami and Kansas City.³⁰⁷ In Seattle, it played a showcase in three hardtops.³⁰⁸ In Chicago, *Convoy* played three drive-ins.³⁰⁹ By the end of the summer, *Convoy* had played in the following *Boxoffice* key cities: Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Hartford, Kansas City, Memphis, New Haven, Portland, and San Francisco.³¹⁰ *Convoy* also made its way across the world to Japan and Holland.³¹¹ Overall, United Artists appeared to place *Convoy* in several urban markets, perhaps suggesting a distribution strategy geared to general audiences or urban audiences more familiar with Peckinpah's oeuvre than to the small-town and suburban residents frequenting drive-ins.

Peckinpah biographer David Weddle writes that, despite negative reviews, the film “turned out to be Peckinpah’s highest-grossing picture, the biggest box-office hit of his career. It did outstanding business along the drive-in circuit in the Midwest and South, and in Europe and Japan, grossing \$46.5 million worldwide.”³¹² A late entry in the hicksploitation cycle, *Convoy* signaled the transition of hicksploitation from theaters to television.

Several television series followed the mainstream success of *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978), which starred Clint Eastwood as trucker Philo Beddoe and the orangutan Manis as Clyde, Beddoe’s travel buddy. NBC continued the CB fad in *B.J. and the Bear* (1979–1981), a comedy series about a trucker and his chimpanzee compatriot. The series’ theme song “B.J. and the Bear” was not a hit, but it featured slide guitar that aligned it with hicksploitation’s association with country music taste culture. *Dukes of Hazzard* aired on CBS for seven seasons from 1979–1985. The show was itself developed from a hicksploitation movie, 1975’s *Moonrunners*. Warner Bros. produced the show in collaboration with *Moonrunners*’ creator Gy Waldron and Jerry Rushing. The series maintained the action ambit of much hicksploitation and the jocular tone of *Smokey and the Bandit*. “One Armed Bandits,” the first episode in the series, featured familiar plots, such as the Duke family’s moonshine running, and actions, including the General Lee’s pursuit of Sheriff Rosco Purvis Coltrane. The series was Nielsen’s highest rated show from 1979-1982 across the show’s 2nd, 3rd, and 4th season. *Dukes of Hazzard* peaked at #2 on the Nielsen ratings during the third season. Not dissimilar to sexploitation’s appeals, *Dukes of Hazzard*’s popularity was, in part, an effect of the sex appeal of the leads. John Schneider, who played Bo Duke, regularly appeared on the cover of teen fan magazine *Tiger Beat* in the 1970s. Schneider also had a successful country music career in the 1980s with four songs that went to #1 on the *Billboard* country singles charts: “I’ve Been

Around Enough to Know,” “Country Girls,” “What’s a Memory Like You (Doing in a Love Like This),” and “You’re the Last Thing I Needed Tonight.” Thus, the hicksploitation cycle developed in a similar fashion to sexploitation—migrating to television after the cycle’s mainstream theatrical peak.

Conclusion

When the cycle is considered, scholars often characterize hicksploitation as a marginal fad with an untroubled or seemingly obvious relationship to drive-ins. This view has diminished the continued importance of drive-ins well into the 1970s and has failed to account for the influence of country music and hillbilly taste culture more broadly on independent film production and, eventually, on Hollywood. In contrast, I have argued that the hicksploitation cycle played a critical role in independents’ attempted recovery from the industry recession, one of the most consequential industry transitions of the period. The industry recession, which fostered demand for sexploitation and blaxploitation, began to end as the major studios committed to a scarcity strategy that saw them limiting the number of features produced each year. This shortage of feature films drove demand for hicksploitation, as did drive-in exhibitors’ desire to pivot away from the adult exploitation cycles that were risky in a post-*Miller v. California* regulatory environment. Independent producer-distributors capitalized on cultural phenoms *Deliverance* and *Billy Jack*—films that did not exactly proscribe a blueprint for hicksploitation as much as a constellation of features that would influence the violent vigilante and rural road sub-cycles. These features included a distribution focus outside of the key cities and the textual inclusion of symbols and signifiers of redneck or hillbilly taste culture. Importantly, the concurrent popularity of country music provided themes, sounds, performers,

and industrial synergies that some hicksploitation films leveraged. In effect, the hicksploitation cycle shaped and was shaped by the broader absorption of hillbilly taste into mainstream media outlets.

The hicksploitation film was a post-recession phenomenon, evincing the ongoing power struggle between the independents and the majors. Generally, hicksploitation was an exploitation cycle that the major studios eventually appropriated. In broad terms, the cycle charted a dynamic of independent innovation and major studio appropriation. Still, there were some important nuances in this dynamic of appropriation. First, major studio distribution of *Billy Jack* and *Deliverance* helped to drive audience demand for hillbilly-oriented films and showed the virtues of targeted selling through saturation advertising and drive-in release. These films catalyzed the exploitation independent films that made up the bulk of the violent vigilante and rural road releases. Both cycles nevertheless were flavored with outside influence, as companies traded on the popularity of youth cult films *Easy Rider* and *American Graffiti* in their selling of *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry* and *Eat My Dust!* respectively. Finally, the CB fad resulted in a range of hicksploitation films, including *Smokey and the Bandit*, which brought the hicksploitation to mainstream prominence.

By the end of the cycle, hicksploitation had its share of major-distributed, big-budget releases. Television was once again a fierce competitor for the audience cultivated by hicksploitation. With drive-ins razed for hardtops and the summer season taken over by the majors' tent-pole releases, exploitation producer-distributors once again re-evaluated their strategies. By 1977, exploitation firms found their market approach compromised by competition on both sides of the cultural register, from major studios with greater cultural legitimacy and from free television programming. By the end of the decade, the major studios had contributed

only 1/3rd of films released but earned 90% of grosses.³¹³ In response, exploitation companies played ‘follow the leader,’ imitating the majors’ blockbusters formula by reducing production, investing in big-budget spectacles with rudimentary special effects, and abandoning niche market segments for the mass audience. The next chapter examines in greater detail the major studios’ blockbuster strategy and the exploitation producers’ efforts to imitate these tent-pole releases despite limited resources and weakening distribution networks.

¹ Don Carle Gillette, “New Product At Historic Low, Indies Take Up Slack,” *Variety*, May 7, 1975, 3.

² Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 13.

³ Scott Von Doviak, *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co., 2005), 9.

⁴ Von Doviak, *Hick Flicks*.

⁵ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam: 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 193-197. Cook does not identify “hicksplotation” as a cycle, but he does acknowledge the importance of such films as *Walking Tall*, *Convoy*, and *Smokey and the Bandit*.

⁶ See the chapter on *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964) in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, *100 Cult Films* (London: BFI, 2011), 216.

⁷ Geoff King makes no mention of even the most frequently referenced hicksplotation films, *Walking Tall* or *Smokey and the Bandit*, in King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP), 2002.

⁸ Andrea Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015).

⁹ Brain Taves, “The B Film: Hollywood’s Other Half,” in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 313-350; Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012),

¹⁰ Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1992).

¹¹ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

¹² The connection between exploitation cinema and teen/youth audiences has been much discussed, as in Doherty, *Teenagers And Teenpics*; Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2002); and Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin :University of Texas Press, 2002).

¹³According to Douglas Gomery, the summer of 1956 marked the first time that more viewers attended drive-ins than hardtop theaters. “Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America” in *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam: 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 401.

¹⁴ “Drive-ins Accounted for 20% of Grosses in 1953,” *Motion Picture Daily*, July 2, 1954, 1.

¹⁵ Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁶ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 122-124.

¹⁷ Samuel Arkoff, *Flying Through Hollywood by the Seat of My Pants: From the Man Who Brought You I Was a Teenage Werewolf and Muscle Beach Party* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub. Group, 1992), 87.

¹⁸ Advertisement for *Night Call Nurses* (New World), *Independent Film Journal*, August 3, 1972.

¹⁹ “The Teacher,” *Variety*, June 5, 1974, 19.

²⁰ “Picture Grosses: ‘Summer’ Hot \$14,700, Dayton; Tarade’ Neat \$25,000 ‘Plaza’ \$6,200,” *Variety*, July 7, 1971, 8; “Picture Grosses: ‘Wonka’ Whopping 55G, Mpls.; Thibes’ Robust 27G. ‘Party’ Nice 20G,” *Variety*, August 4, 1971, 12-12, 28.

- ²¹ Harris M. Plotkin, "Protolite Screen: Drive-In Breakthrough?" *Boxoffice*, March 1, 1983, 64-65; "Drive-Ins are Experiencing A 'Renaissance' Across U.S.," *Boxoffice*, September 11, 1978. The article reports a total of 3,000 drive-ins as of 1978 and 12,500 indoor screens as of 1976.
- Harlan Jacobson, "Pictures: Theatre Census, Post-Consent Era: Give Totals Of Hardtops, Drive-Ins," *Variety*; October 6, 1976, 284, 9. Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive pg. 7; "Metropolitan Area Drive-Ins Face Pressure as Value of Land Increases," *Boxoffice*, December 11, 1978, K1.
- ²² "Metropolitan Area Drive-Ins Face Pressure as Value of Land Increases," K1
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Jill Voorhees, "Graph: Number of Theater Screens," *Boxoffice*, May 5, 1980, 12.
- ²⁵ Harlan Jacobson, "Pictures: Theatre Census, Post-Consent Era: Give Totals Of Hardtops, Drive-Ins," *Variety*, October 6, 1976; 284, 9.
- ²⁶ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 14.
- ²⁷ Appendix 6 in Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 492. Cook cites as MPAA as the source for this chart., Columbia, MGM, Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros contributed 150 features in 1970; 153 features in 1971; 142 features in 1972, 131 features in 1973, 109 features in 1974; 95 features in 1975; 97 features in 1976; 84 features in 1977; 93 features in 1978; 107 features in 1979; and 112 features in 1980.
- ²⁸ Lee Beaupre, "Hits Few: Beasts of Burden," *Variety*, November 29, 1972, 5.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ "About 70% of Films Distributed by Independents, Woolner Finds," *Boxoffice*, March 3, 1975, 6; Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 14.
- ³² "About 70% of Films Distributed by Independents," Woolner Finds," 6.
- ³³ For more on independent films at drive-ins see Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 37-39; Anthony Downs, "Where the Drive-in Fits into the Movie Industry, in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, edited by Ina Rae Hark, 123-125 (London: Routledge, 2002); Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2004), 151-152. Anthony Downs writes that "drive-ins were charged [by the major studios] more than conventional theaters for the same films," one reason that drive-ins favored independent films (124).
- ³⁴ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 105.
- ³⁵ "Sexpo Clouded; See Slump Year for Indie Pix," *Variety*, August 22, 1973, 1-1, 40.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ "Sexpo Clouded; See Slump Year for Indie Pix," *Variety*, August 22, 1973, 1, 40.
- ³⁸ "Editor's Column," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 5." "Without exception," the editor observed, "each theatre involved got an immediate boxoffice shot in the arm."
- ³⁹ "Ida. Obscenity Law Cool Exhibition of X Movies," *Boxoffice*, September 2, 1974, W8.
- ⁴⁰ "Ohio Ordinance Limits Drive-In Screen Sex," *Boxoffice*, February 5, 1979, ME2, ME3.
- ⁴¹ Elena Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis :University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 191.
- ⁴² "General Cinema Removes X Movies From Drive-In," *Boxoffice*, April 27, 1970, W5.
- ⁴³ "Drive-In Dilemma: Ratings Vitaly Affect Ozoner Architecture," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 8, 1970, 6.
- ⁴⁴ "Deny Restraint Plea, Sked Trial; Cinecom Fights Anti-Porno Edict; Say Actual Effect Is To Ban All X's," *Variety*, March 24, 1971, 15.
- ⁴⁵ "Ozoner Operator Charged in 'XXX' Film Showing," *Boxoffice*, December 11, 1972 C1.
- ⁴⁶ "Kansas Judge Interested In X Films at Drive-In," *Boxoffice*, July 2, 1973, C2.
- ⁴⁷ "States Proposing Laws That Limit Drive-In Viewing," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 2, 1973, 10.
- ⁴⁸ Whitney Strub, *Perversion For Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 169-174. Strub writes that the courts in the 1970s did become more conservative but did not result in any notable banning. Strub explains: "The new obscenity doctrine of the Burger Court carried great consequences in the abstract, as it created a far more prosecution-friendly legal environment than the Warren Court had allowed, but at least in the 1970s its tangible effects were fairly minimal, as obscenity cases declined in the importance" (169).
- ⁴⁹ "The Censorship Scene: N.Y. Ozoners Vulnerable; Sue To Void 'X' Ad Ban," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 22, 1972, 3-4.
- ⁵⁰ "Key Drive-In Decision Wins Battle; Loses War?" *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 5.

⁵¹ “Editor’s Column,” *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 5.

Chief Justice Warren E. Burger and Justice William H. Rehnquist wrote additionally that the First Amendment allowed “prohibiting such a public display of scenes depicting explicit sexual activities if the state undertook to do so under a statute narrowly drawn to protect the public from potential exposure to such offensive material.”

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “Sexpo Clouded: See Slump Year For Indie Pix,” *Variety*, August 22, 1973, 1.

According to *Variety*, *Miller v. California* was “causing somewhat of a pullback by many indies whose bread and butter fare could generally be considered to come under the umbrella of what the Supreme Court indicated should not be allowed.”

⁵⁴ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 242.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

⁵⁶ Gorfinkel, *Lewd Looks*, 242.

⁵⁷ “Softcore Sex Quakes Like Hardcore,” *Variety*, July 4, 1973, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Ida. Obscenity Law Cool Exhibition of X Movies,” *Boxoffice*, September 2, 1974, W8.

⁶⁰ “Sexploitation Clouded: See Slump Year For Indie Pix,” *Variety*, August 22, 1973, 1, 40.

⁶¹ “Miami Cruise-In Agrees To Halt X-Rated Movies,” *Boxoffice*, October 1, 1973, ME1.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Randall Clark, *At a Theater or Drive-In Near You: The History, Culture, and Politics of the American Exploitation Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 77-100.

⁶⁶ “Aircor Circuit Announces Family-Type Film Policy,” *Boxoffice*, February 9, 1970, ME2, ME3.

⁶⁷ “As Experiment, Drive-In Ducks X and R Ratings,” *Variety*, March 18, 1970, 5.

⁶⁸ “Family Policy Gets Test At Renovated Drive-In,” *Boxoffice*, April 27, 1970, SE8.

⁶⁹ “Pictures: No X, No Profit,” *Variety*, March 20, 1974, 28.

⁷⁰ “Citizens Protest X Films At North Star Drive-In,” *Boxoffice*, October 1, 1973, NC1.

⁷¹ “Drive-In to Continue To Run R-Rated Films,” *Boxoffice*, February 12, 1979, C4.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ John Cocchi, “Expanding and Maintaining Even Flow of Quality Films,” *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1972, 4.

⁷⁴ “Sexpo Clouded: See Slump Year For Indie Pix,” *Variety*, August 22, 1973, 40.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Pictures: 20th’s Own Census of Drive-ins: 4,136,” *Variety*, March 10, 1954, 15.

The lowest counts were in New York and New Haven territories.

⁷⁷ Timothy Havens, “Towards a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries,” in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, edited by Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 50.

⁷⁸ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 75-6.

⁷⁹ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 69-70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Brain Taves, “The B Film: Hollywood’s Other Half,” 313-350.

⁸² “It’s Light Musicals 2 to 1, Panels Find,” *Motion Picture Herald*, January 26, 1952, 18. Qtd in Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, 68-9.

⁸³ Linda May Strawn, “Interviews: Steve Broidy,” in *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, edited by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1975), 270-271.

⁸⁴ Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways,” 235-6.

⁸⁵ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 99, 134, 198, 353.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸⁷ Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, “Interviews: Herschell Gordon Lewis,” in *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, edited by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1975), 357.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Von Doviak, *Hick Flicks*, 67-8.

- ⁹⁰ Morry Roth and Frank Segers, "Pictures: For Foresighted Showmen: Some Tips on 1980 Census," *Variety*, January 9, 1980, 28, Numbers are derived from the 1980 US Census.
- ⁹¹ Mark Baldassare, "Suburban Communities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 475-494.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*
- ⁹³ Bradley R. Rice and Richard M. Bernard, *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 2.
Rice and Bernard identify the following states as Sunbelt states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Southern Nevada, and Southern California.
- ⁹⁴ Lee Beaupre, "Analysis of U.S. Boxoffice Trends," *Variety*, July 25, 1973, 14.
- ⁹⁵ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 4, 8.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁹⁷ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste Revised and Updated* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xi.
- ⁹⁸ Michael Streissguth, *OUTLAW: Waylon, Willie, Kris, And the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: It Books, 2013).
- ⁹⁹ Cecilia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 25.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ¹⁰¹ Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 4. As I note in Chapter Five, Klein defines the originary film as "the film that establishes the images, plot formulas, and themes for the entire cycle."
- ¹⁰² Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 53.
- ¹⁰³ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Roc 'N Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 85.
- ¹⁰⁴ "Billy Jack' Lives!," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 6, 1972, 70, 3; "Billy Jack' Hits Six Million BO in Two Weeks," *The Independent Film Journal*, November 12, 1973, 5.
- ¹⁰⁵ "Billy Jack' Lives!," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 6, 1972, 70, 3.
- ¹⁰⁶ "Laughlin Pair Sue Over 'Billy Jack,'" *Variety*, February 9, 1972, 15.
- ¹⁰⁷ Justin Wyatt, "Revisiting 1970s' Independent Distribution and Marketing Strategies," In *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, editors Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2005), 229-244.
- ¹⁰⁸ Frederick Wasser, "Four Walling Exhibition: Regional Resistance to the Hollywood Film Industry," *Cinema Journal* 34:2 (Winter 1995): 51-65.
- ¹⁰⁹ "Pictures: Wildlife Four-Wall Pioneers into Metropolitan New York Where 'Billy Jack' Preceded," *Variety*, January 2, 1974, 3.
- ¹¹⁰ "Billy Jack' Hits Six Million BO in Two Weeks," *The Independent Film Journal*, November 12, 1973, 5.
- ¹¹¹ "Pictures: 'Billy Jack' Four Walls, 170 Sites in N.Y. Area," *Variety*, October 24, 1973, 4.
- ¹¹² Syd Cassyd, "Hollywood: 'Billy Jack' Scores Million \$ Plus Via 61-Theatre Subrun Saturation," *Boxoffice*, May 21, 1973.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁴ Richard Albarino, "'Billy Jack' Hits Reissue Jackpot," *Variety*, November 7, 1973, 1, 63.
- ¹¹⁵ "'Billy Jack' is Back," *The Independent Film Journal*, October 29, 1973, 18.
- ¹¹⁶ Richard Albarino, "'Billy Jack' Hits Reissue Jackpot," *Variety*, November 7, 1973, 63.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁹ Richard Albarino, "'Billy' Sequel's Grand \$11-Mil Preem," *Variety*, November 20, 1974, 1-1, 61.
- ¹²⁰ "Pictures: All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, 25-25, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 498.
- ¹²² *Ibid.* The reissue of *Mary Poppins* also broke the top 20.
- ¹²³ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 6.
- ¹²⁴ Justin Wyatt, "Revisiting 1970s' Independent Distribution and Marketing Strategies," 229-244.
- ¹²⁵ Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core*, 210; "50 Top Grossing Films," *Variety*, May 23, 1973, 15.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

- ¹²⁷ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 53. In charting the history of four-walling, Wasser writes: “The regional four wallers saw that the studios’ feedback mechanism was breaking down because of its global scale. They positioned themselves as storytellers appealing to a sensibility different from that that responded to either the high-class sophisticated adult fare or the low-brow exploitation of violence coming out of Los Angeles and New York” (53).
- ¹²⁸ David Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 174-5.
- ¹²⁹ Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core*, 195.
- ¹³⁰ “WB Preps Locations for Poet’s ‘Deliverance,’” *Variety*, May 5, 1971, 24.
- ¹³¹ Charles Champlin, “Men Against River,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1972, C1.
- ¹³² Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1991), 125-6.
- ¹³³ Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (London: Continuum, 2011), 116.
- ¹³⁴ “Dickey GA-Bound For ‘Deliverance,’” *Variety*, January 20, 1971, 15.
- ¹³⁵ “Feature reviews: Deliverance,” *Boxoffice*, July 24, 1972, A11.
- ¹³⁶ “Film review: Deliverance,” *Variety*, July 19, 1972, 14.
- ¹³⁷ Von Doviak, *Hick Flicks*, 168. From a bibliography entry in Doviak quoted: “‘He Shouted Loud ‘Hosanna! Deliverance Has Come!’ *Foxfire* 1972.”
- ¹³⁸ “‘Deliverance’ Is Mostest of Bestest At Atlanta,” *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 22.
- ¹³⁹ “‘Deliverance’ Promotion Aimed at Youth Groups,” *Boxoffice*, October 23, 1972.
- ¹⁴⁰ “Canoe Contest Promoting ‘Deliverance’ in Atlanta,” *Boxoffice*, October 2, 1972.
- ¹⁴¹ “Deliverance,” *Variety*, August 9, 1972, 23.
- ¹⁴² Display ad 85, *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1972, F18.
- ¹⁴³ “Deliverance,” *Variety*, August 9, 1972, 23; “Pictures: See ‘Deliverance’ \$15-Mil Rental in U.S. Market,” *Variety*, October 18, 1972, 5.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Cinema Treasures*, “Skyway Theatre,” <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/1483> (accessed April 07, 2019); “‘Deliverance’ Keeps High Grossing Level.” *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1972.
- ¹⁴⁵ “‘Deliverance’ Huge 675 in Cincinnati,” *Boxoffice*, November 13, 1972; Michael Foley, “Times Towne Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5689>, last accessed April 7, 2019.
- ¹⁴⁶ “‘Deliverance’ Clings to 300 Level in LA,” *Boxoffice*, October 9, 1972.
- ¹⁴⁷ “Pictures Grosses: ‘Web’ Dandy \$4,700 in Dayton; ‘Soylent’ Sock \$13,200, ‘Tiger’ \$3,800,” *Variety*, May 2, 1973, 16.
- ¹⁴⁸ “Updated All-Time Film Champs,” *Variety*, January 9, 1974, 23.
- ¹⁴⁹ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 85-6.
- ¹⁵⁰ Howco International, a producer-distributor formed by two southeastern exhibitors, also distributed some hicksploitation and western-themed films that were shot in the South on location, including 1972’s *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, *Bootleggers* (1974), *Timber Tramps* (1975), and *Smokey and the Good Time Outlaws* (1978), a film obviously pandering to the success of *Smokey and the Bandit* a year earlier. Dimension Pictures, formed by former exhibitor Larry Woolner, was a major distributor to the southeastern drive-in market.
- ¹⁵¹ “Distribution Should Really Be In Weaker Position,” *The Independent Film Journal*, January 7, 1974, 15.
- ¹⁵² 50% of *Walking Tall* was financed by BCP and the remaining half was split evenly between Fuqua Industries and Wometco. “Finance: Fuqua is Bullish on Fuqua,” *Broadcasting*, October 30, 1972, 45.
- ¹⁵³ “Fuqua, Wometco, BCP to Produce Features,” *Back Stage*, April 7, 1972, 40.
- ¹⁵⁴ *Willard* grossed \$15 million worldwide. Wometco and Fuqua contributed \$350,000 of *Walking Tall*’s \$1.5 million budget. BCP and Cox contributed one half of the negative cost, or \$750,000. See “Bing’s Theatricals Up to \$4-\$5 Mil In 1973,” *Variety*, August 30, 1972, 5; “Fuqua-Wometco Partner For A Film, ‘Walking Tall’; Aim Is Family Allure,” *Variety*, June 28, 1972, 4.
- ¹⁵⁵ Frank Segers, “Pictures: CRC Goes on, no ‘Merger’; Joe Sugar Remains President; AIP Takes Distribution Burden,” *Variety*, August 7, 1974, 3-3, 21.
- ¹⁵⁶ Todd McCarthy and Richard Thompson, “Interviews: Phil Karlson,” in *King of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, edited by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1975), 338.
- ¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.
- ¹⁵⁸ “Feature Reviews: Walking Tall,” *Boxoffice*, March 12, 1973, B11.
- ¹⁵⁹ “Walking Tall,” *The Independent Film Journal*, March 19, 1973, 15-16.
- ¹⁶⁰ “Film Reviews: Walking Tall,” *Variety*, February 28, 1973, 20.
- ¹⁶¹ McCarthy and Thompson, “Interviews: Phil Karlson,” 334.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ “Display ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1973.

¹⁶⁴ CRC released these two films in mix of hardtops and drive-ins across a fairly conventional set of markets—Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Syracuse Boston, DC), Southeast (Atlanta, Durham), and Midwest (Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, Durham). “‘Willard’ The Wonder Of,” *Variety*, July 14, 1971, 12.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Funt, “For Some Films, It’s No, No, New York!,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1974, 117; Norma Lee Browning, “Sleeper of year now ‘Walking Tall,’” *Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1973, B5.

¹⁶⁶ Frank Segers, “Pictures: ‘Walking Tall’ Fresh Proof A Distrib should Resist ‘Drop-Dead’ Psychology,” *Variety*, August 1, 1973: 16.

¹⁶⁷ “Memphis,” *Boxoffice*, April 2, 1973, SE8.

¹⁶⁸ “Walking Tall Is Drive-In Tall,” *Boxoffice*, June 10, 1974, 9.

¹⁶⁹ “Pictures: ‘Walking Tall’ and Far,” *Variety*, November 7, 1973, 36; “‘Walking Tall’ Combo Sets Record in Arkansas Ainer,” *Boxoffice*, May 24, 1976, 10.

¹⁷⁰ “‘Walking Tall’ And Far,” *Variety*, November 7, 1973, 36; “Praise and Cash His,” *Variety*, May 22, 1974, 16.

¹⁷¹ New York was the most lucrative market but also the riskiest, with expensive news and television advertising costs. In New York, distributors paid full advertising costs, while outside of NY they shared them with exhibitors. Funt, “For Some Films, It’s No, No, New York!,” 117.

¹⁷² Frank Segers, “‘Walking Tall’ Fresh Proof A Distrib Should Resist ‘Drop-Dead’ Psychology,” *Variety*, August 1, 1973, 16.

¹⁷³ “Your Showmanship Campaign for Cinerama’s ‘Walking Tall,’” *Boxoffice*, October 1, 1973, 12-14.

¹⁷⁴ “A BCP Production,” *Variety*, January 23, 1974, 16-7.

¹⁷⁵ “Walking Tall, Worldwide Box Office,” *Worldwide Box Office*. Retrieved January 17, 2012; *Cook, Lost Illusions, 196*; “Big Rental Films of 1973,” *Variety*, January 9, 1974, 19; “Big Film Rentals of 1974,” *Variety*, January 8, 1975, 24; “Big Rental Films of 1975,” *Variety*, January 7, 1976, 18.

¹⁷⁶ “‘Walking Tall’ Grosses: 50 Top-Grossing Cities,” *Variety*, September 12, 1973, 15; “Briskin, Karlson Sue Crosby Prod. On ‘Tall’ TV Deal,” *Variety*, April 23, 1975, 5; TV advertisement, *Variety*, March 26, 1975, 43.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ “‘Walking Tall’ Packs Louisiana Theatre,” *Boxoffice*, August 22, 1977, SE1.

¹⁷⁹ “American International Pictures, Inc. 35mm Print Utilization Report as of May 31, 1978,” Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Frank Segers, “Pictures: CRC Goes on, no ‘Merger’; Joe Sugar Remains President; AIP Takes Distribution Burden,” *Variety*, August 7, 1974, 3-3, 21.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Von Doviak, *Hick Flicks*, 32.

¹⁸⁵ Bill Edwards, “Max Baer, Now Writer-Producer, Finances His Own 500G ‘Macon,’” *Variety*, December 19, 1973, 16.

¹⁸⁶ Jennifer Holt, “In Deregulation We Trust: The Synergy of Politics and Industry in Reagan-Era Hollywood,” *Film Quarterly* 55:2 (Winter 2001), 22.

¹⁸⁷ “Another Place, Another Time,” Bobbie Gentry, *Discogs*, <https://www.discogs.com/Bobbie-Gentry-Another-Place-Another-Time/release/3716746>, accessed March 20, 2019.

¹⁸⁸ “InsideTrack,” *Billboard*, February 15, 1975, 66.

¹⁸⁹ *Macon County Line* press kit, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 12, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

¹⁹⁰ “*Macon County Line*,” *Boxoffice*, April 1, 1974, 3.

¹⁹¹ “Buying & Booking Guide: Macon County Line,” *The Independent Film Journal*, May 29, 1974, 11-12.

¹⁹² “Review: Macon County Line,” *Variety*, April 24, 1974, 22.

¹⁹³ “‘Macon County Line’ \$1.7-Mil From 343,” *Variety*, July 3, 1974, 5.

¹⁹⁴ “‘Macon County Line’ 800; Takes New Orleans Lead,” *Boxoffice*, July 8, 1974, SE1.

¹⁹⁵ AIP print utilization report, Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

- ¹⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁹⁸ "AIP Reports Record Grosses For 'Macon County Line,'" *Boxoffice*, July 22, 1974, 6; "'Macon County Line' \$1.7-Mil From 343," *Variety*, July 3, 1974, 5.
- ¹⁹⁹ "'Macon County' Lots of Holdovers," *Variety*, October 9, 1974, 4.
- ²⁰⁰ "'Macon County Line' Opens 118-Theatre SC Multiple," *Boxoffice*, September 16, 1974, W5; "'Macon County' Set for LA Area Saturation Sept 11," *Boxoffice*, August 12, 1974, W4.
- ²⁰¹ "'Macon County Line' Bows," *Boxoffice*, September 2, 1974, K1.
- ²⁰² "Cheryl Waters Discusses 'Macon County Line' Role," *Boxoffice*, July 1, 1974, W1.
- ²⁰³ "Arkoff: Next Years Healthy, If—'No Outright 1930s Debacle,'" *Variety*, January 29, 1975, 4, 30; "'Macon' Sequel Worth 250G To Georgia Burg," *Variety*, February 12, 1975, 42; "Pictures: All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, 25-25, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90.
- ²⁰⁴ "U.S. Film Biz Nears Best Boxoffice Since Record 1946," *Variety*, October 16, 1974, 7, 22.
- ²⁰⁵ "New Accountancy Favors AIP," *Variety*, October 9, 1974, 4.
- ²⁰⁶ "Distribs Advise NATO Of Pay-Cable Dates," *Variety*, February 4, 1976, 26.
- ²⁰⁷ "Fifth Year of Improvement for AIP," *Variety*, May 19, 1976, 4. Other AIP-distributed hicksploitation included the Canadian-made *Sunday in the Country* (1974), *Dirty O'Neil* (1974), *Truck Stop Women* (1976), *Deranged: Confessions of a Necrophile* (1974), *Sixpack Annie* (1976), *The Wild McCullochs* (1975), *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (1976), *The House by the Lake* (1977), *A Small Town in Texas* (1976), *The Great Scout & Cathouse Thursday* (1976), *Bobbie Jo and the Outlaw* (1976), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), and *Joyride* (1977).
- ²⁰⁸ AIP print utilization report, Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
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- ²¹¹ Simers, "A Gonzo Conversation with Max Baer, Jr.," *FORE Magazine*, October 23, 2017.
- ²¹² *The Independent Film Journal* described the film as "directed like a B-picture" and predicted it would "find best prospects in rural playoff." S, K. "Buying & Booking Guide: The Wild McCullochs," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 11, 1975, 11-12.
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- ²¹⁴ "Pictures: All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, January 04, 1978, 25-25, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90.
- ²¹⁵ "Sex-And-Violence Quickies Fading At Dixie Circuit B.O.," *Variety*, December 10, 1975, 6.
- ²¹⁶ Art M. Blake, "Audible Citizenship and Audiomobility: Race, Technology, and CB Radio," in *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*, edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, 87-110 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2012), 91.
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- ²¹⁸ Ibid.
- ²¹⁹ Tichi, *High Lonesome*, 46.
- ²²⁰ Ibid.
- ²²¹ "James Nicholson Dies; in Industry 40 Years," *Boxoffice*, December 18, 1972, 4
- ²²² "Dirty Mary Crazy Larry," *American Film Institute Catalog*.
- ²²³ "20th-Fox to Release Two James Nicholson Films," *Boxoffice*, January 1, 1973, 6.
- ²²⁴ Thomas, Kevin. "Movie Review," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1974.
- ²²⁵ "Buying & Booking Guide: Dirty Mary Crazy Larry," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 29, 1974, 13.
- ²²⁶ Ibid.
- ²²⁷ Ibid.
- ²²⁸ "'Dirty Mary' Debuts In Dallas, Houston," *Boxoffice*, May 6, 1974, SW1.
- ²²⁹ "Pictures Grosses: 'Larry' Lush \$38,800 in Dayton; 'Claudine' Sock \$4,700, 'Gatsby' \$13,300," *Variety*, Aug 7, 1974, 14.
- ²³⁰ "'Larry' 613½G, Det.; 'Carson' Sock 18G, 'Masters' Potent 45G." *Variety*, July 31, 1974, 12.
- ²³¹ "Boxoffice Barometer," *Boxoffice*, September 16, 1974, 8.
- ²³² "Pictures: All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, 25-25, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90, [Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry, Box Office Information. The Numbers. Retrieved May 22, 2012.](#)
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- ²³⁴ Mack, "Film Reviews: Eat My Dust," *Variety*, April 28, 1976, 30.
- ²³⁵ E, P., "Buying & Booking Guide: Eat My Dust," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 11, 1976, 11.

- 236 K, T., "'Eat My Dust!' is One Big Chase." *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1976.
- 237 "Feature Reviews: Eat My Dust!" *Boxoffice*, June 14, 1976.
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- 239 "New World to Premiere 'Eat My Dust!'" May 7, 1976, *Boxoffice*, April 5, 8.
- 240 Ibid.
- 241 "Picture Grosses: 'Dust' Torrid \$80,000, Denver," *Variety*, August 18, 1976, 8-8, 20.
- 242 "Picture Grosses: 'Omen,' Buffalo, Solid \$26,000; 'Eat Dust' 22G; 'Logan' \$16,000," *Variety*, July 14, 1976, 13.
- 243 "Pictures Grosses: 'Dust' Rousing 80G in K.C.: 'Core' 55G," *Variety*, June 23, 1976, 13.
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- 250 Charles Schreger, "Pictures: Ron Howard's Baptism Under Showmanship Creed of Corman," *Variety*, June 15, 1977, 6.
- 251 "International: Wheels' Now 'the Car'," *Variety*, March 17, 1976, 42.
- 252 "Pictures: All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, 25-25, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90.
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- 254 Ibid.
- 255 Barbara Saltzman, "Noted," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1981.
- 256 "'Breaker-Breaker' Rights are Acquired by AIP," *Boxoffice*, November 22, 1976, 8.
- 257 "Breaker! Breaker!," *American Film Institute Catalog*.
- 258 Linda Gross, "Movie Review," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1977.
- 259 "Feature Reviews: Breaker! Breaker!" *Boxoffice*, May 2, 1977.
- 260 "'Breaker, Breaker' to Bow in Three Atlanta Drive-Ins," *Boxoffice*, March 14, 1977.
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- 274 Joel Whitburn, "Hot Country Songs 1944 to 2008," *Record Research, Inc*, 2008, 343.
- 275 "Smokey and the Bandit," *Variety*, January 4, 1978, 45-7.
- 276 Charles Champlin, "Internally Combusted Slapstick," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1977.
- 277 "Feature Reviews: Smokey and the Bandit," *Boxoffice*, May 23, 1977, A7.
- 278 "Buying & Booking Guide: Smokey and the Bandit," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 27, 1977, 7.
- 279 "Dixie And Sunbelt Potential Notable, Per 'Smokey and Bandit,' *Variety*, September 7, 1977, 32.
- 280 "Pictures: Radio City Sets Four-Wall Deals with Universal on Three Films," *Variety*, March 16, 1977, 4.
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- ²⁸⁵ "Pictures Grosses: 'SMOKEY' SOCK \$95,000, ST. L.; 'SPY' BIG \$80,000," *Variety*, August 3, 1977, 12; "Pictures Grosses: 'Bandit' Classy \$80,000, Cleve.; 'Justice' Frisky 8½G, 'Fox' 12G." *Variety*, September 20, 1978, 22; "Picture Grosses: 'SINBAD' GREAT \$120,000, DENVER: 'SMOKEY' 95G," *Variety*, August 3, 1977, 19.
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- ²⁸⁷ Jeff Smith recounted this information to me. Smith was present at a talk Mount gave.
- ²⁸⁸ "Pictures: Four Smash Films Sustain B.O. Pace; 'Star' at \$102-Mil," *Variety*, August 17, 1977, 3.
- ²⁸⁹ "'Smokey' Rentals Near \$36-Mil As Year's No. 2 Hit," *Variety*, November 23, 1977, 3, 124.
- ²⁹⁰ "'Smokey' Rentals Near \$36-Mil As Year's No. 2 Hit," 3, 124.
- ²⁹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1977; *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1977; and *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1978.
- ²⁹² "'Smokey and the Bandit,' 'Oh, God!' Top Niensens," *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1979, F15.
- ²⁹³ Kip Kirby, "'Hollywood' Going Heavy For Country," *Billboard*, August 25, 1979, 1.
- ²⁹⁴ "'Convoy' to Roll for UA," *Screen International*, April 24, 1976, 20.
- ²⁹⁵ Leigh Charlton, "CB Films Proliferate."
- ²⁹⁶ "Pictures: 'Convoy' Completed," *Variety*, July 27, 1977, 37.
- ²⁹⁷ E, P., "Buying & Booking Guide: Convoy," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 1, 1978, 16.
- ²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰⁰ "Feature Reviews: Convoy," *Boxoffice*, July 03, 1978, a7, a8.
- ³⁰¹ David Weddle, "*If They Move...Kill 'Em!*": *The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 514.
- ³⁰² Weddle, "*If They Move...Kill 'Em!*," 514.
- ³⁰³ *Ibid*, 515.
- ³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 517-18.
- ³⁰⁵ "Convoy," *American Film Institute Catalog*.
- ³⁰⁶ "UA 'Convoy' For 700," *Variety*, May 31, 1978, 17.
- ³⁰⁷ Picture grosses pages, *Variety*, July 12, 1973, 19; "Pictures Grosses: 'Heaven' Lofty 60G, K.C.; 'Convoy' 50G," *Variety*, July 5, 1978, 11-12.
- ³⁰⁸ "Pictures Grosses: 'Heaven' Torrid \$35,000, Seattle; 'Convoy' Strong \$17,500, 'Alive' Mild 5G," *Variety*, July 5, 1978, 10.
- ³⁰⁹ "Pictures Grosses: 'Heaven' Rousing \$245,000, Chi; 'Convoy' 113G, 'Grease' 410G, 3d," *Variety*, July 5, 1978, 10.
- ³¹⁰ "Boxoffice Barometer," *Boxoffice*, August 28, 1978, 18.
- ³¹¹ "Pictures: First EMI Films Out of Hollywood Passing B.O. Test," *Variety*, June 21, 1978, 3-3, 40.
- ³¹² Weddle, "*If They Move...Kill 'Em!*," 518.
- ³¹³ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 335.

Figure 8: *Billy Jack* (1971) one sheet



Figure 9: "Deliverance," *Variety*, August 9, 1972, 23.



Figure 10: Display ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1973.

Walking TALL
 "SLAM-BANG IMPACT!
 Deeply involving."
 Based on a true story.

"WALKING TALL"
 JOE DON BAKER ELIZABETH HARTMAN
 ROSEMARY MURPHY FELTON PERRY

MIRAGE
 NOW PLAYING
 10:00 P.M.
 Mirages Drive-In & Lounge

Figure 11: "Walking Tall is Drive-In Tall," *Boxoffice*, June 10, 1974, 106.

WALKING TALL IS DRIVE-IN TALL

WALKING TALL

DAYTON FIRST WEEK \$8,977	INDIANAPOLIS FIRST 6 DAYS \$26,179	LOUISVILLE FIRST 6 DAYS \$20,676
CLEVELAND FIRST 3 DAYS \$18,763	KANSAS CITY FIRST 2 WEEKS \$56,392	EDMONTON FIRST 2 WEEKS \$40,551

TOTAL BOXOFFICE TO DATE
 For hard tops and first group of drive-ins
\$40,000,000

"WALKING TALL"
 JOE DON BAKER ELIZABETH HARTMAN
 ROSEMARY MURPHY FELTON PERRY

From "BCP"
 through **UNITED ARTISTS** RELEASING

Figure 12: *Walking Tall* (1973) one sheetFigure 13: *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974) one sheet

Figure 14: *Breaker! Breaker!* (1977) one sheetFigure 15: *Citizens Band* (1977) one sheet

Figure 16: *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) one sheet

CHAPTER FIVE: EXPLOITATION CINEMA IN THE BLOCKBUSTER ERA:
THE BLOCKBUSTER LITE CYCLE, 1975–1980

The blockbuster film is undoubtedly one of the most discussed areas of American film. This has been a rich area of study, and scholars have conceptualized the period of the mid-1970s in various ways. David Cook uses the term ‘blockbuster mentality’ and ‘event film’ to characterize the major distributors’ risk-taking production strategies that packaged stars and intellectual property into films that required earnings often in the hundreds of millions to amortize enormous production and marketing costs.¹ Geoff King somewhat similarly characterizes New Hollywood as a time when dominating economic interests took precedence over artistic experimentation, a development he maps onto the rise of the ‘corporate blockbuster’ and the waning of the Hollywood Renaissance. King describes the blockbuster as “a brand of filmmaking almost opposite to that of the Hollywood Renaissance: the Hollywood of giant media conglomerates and expensive blockbuster attractions.”² As a result, King appears to understand the rise of the blockbuster film to be extricable from the films of the Hollywood Renaissance, a somewhat specious view that several counterexamples of *auteur*-driven high-grossing films might dispute: Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* (1974), and William Friedkin’s *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Exorcist* (1973). Other scholars have offered a broader historical contextualization of the 1970s blockbuster film. Tom Schatz has called the 1970s the “era when a single film could salvage a studio, as *The Sound of Music* (1965) and later *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) had for Fox, and as Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) would for Columbia.”³ Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale have understood blockbusters of the 1970s as continuations of the epics of the silent era and the roadshows of the studio system.⁴ Chris Anderson foregrounds the blockbuster film as an effect of a hits-driven marketplace.⁵

The blockbuster film represented a shift in how studios managed risk, an ever-present concern in Hollywood since the end of vertical integration, by manipulating demand. Instead of managing risk by controlling costs, an approach in some ways crystalized by Corman's fastidious cost-cutting as a producer at AIP and New World, the studios manipulated demand. Economist Arthur De Vany has described the movie business as "a business of extremes in the way moviegoers dynamically influence one another."⁶ De Vany writes, "[I]t is the way that the information spreads dynamically that leads to extreme differences among movies—the big hits don't always open big but they do seem to be propelled by a recursive and nonlinear demand dynamic."⁷ In the 1970s, several blockbuster films, notably *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), illustrated the tactics that could drive demand nonlinearly, or exponentially. The tactics discussed in this chapter include: using pre-sold properties in the pre-production phase, marketing a film to a maximum number of viewers in the form of saturation marketing, and making the film available to a maximum number of viewers in the form of wide release. Driving demand meant that film costs skyrocketed for the major studios; still other tactics were used, not to minimize costs, but to minimize losses, an important distinction. As the chapter will show, tax incentives, exhibitor advances, and revenues from ancillary markets were all used to spread risk.

Some historians have also identified seemingly paradoxical similarities between the blockbuster film and exploitation cinema. For example, David Cook characterizes Hollywood in the 1970s as a "turn toward exploitation" during which "...the majors brought the stylistic and marketing practices of exploitation cinema into the mainstream."⁸ Justin Wyatt argues that Columbia's release of *Emmanuelle* (1974) provided the blueprint for Hollywood high-concept advertising.⁹ The influence of exploitation cinema on the blockbuster film is undeniable; as this chapter will show, the lessons of *Billy Jack* (1971)'s saturation marketing and four-wall release

were certainly felt in the blockbuster films of the mid-1970s. There is a tendency, however, to characterize the exchange between exploitation cinema and blockbuster-oriented cinema as one-way appropriation, a view that obscures the exchange between exploitation and the majors during the dawn of the blockbuster era. Maintaining a view of one-way influence or one-way appropriation further exacerbates a common problem of both overstatement and reductionism in American film history. Histories of the 1970s like Jon Lewis' often posit one tradition or mode of filmmaking (i.e. the Hollywood Renaissance, *auteur* cinema, exploitation cinema, pornography) as being wholly eradicated by the blockbuster film, itself often characterized in only the most sweeping terms.¹⁰ The contribution of the chapter's argument is to correct this historical imbalance. After all, the studios experienced big losses and small-scale but significant wins, like *Rocky* (1976). Therefore, what is at stake in insisting upon a mutual, if asymmetric, exchange between independents and majors even during the blockbuster era, a period thought to be characterized by domination and homogeneity, is no less than an understanding of industry history as one shaped by dynamic market forces. These forces are governed by predictable responses (on the consumer and producer side) to risk, but at no point wholly determined by only one factor such as budget, star power, or audience effect (i.e. spectacle), as is sometimes suggested.¹¹

Indeed, the limitations of the exploitation independents' Blockbuster Lite releases show that simply a desirable intellectual property, higher budget, or well-known star does not a blockbuster film make. Some element that produces the superstar marketplace alluded to by De Vany is needed. The chapter shows how exploitation studios engaged in their own forms of appropriation and imitation in two Blockbuster Lite film cycles. This occurred in two Blockbuster Lite sub-cycles both catalyzed by the majors' blockbuster films. The first was the

Jaws-inspired exploitation cycle: *Mako: The Jaws of Death* (1976), *Orca* (1977), and *Piranha* (1978) were closely modeled on *Jaws* (1975) and Universal's release in various ways. These films will illustrate different permutations of the exploitation/studio imitation dynamic. The second was the *Star Wars*-centric Blockbuster Lite film. Special effects-driven sci-fi films *Meteor* (1979) and *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) made explicit attempts to recapture the audience that *Star Wars* (1977) reached. The Blockbuster Lite exploitation cycle aped the topics of the biggest movie hits and piggybacked on the cultural awareness of the majors' super-grossers. The Blockbuster Lite cycle, particularly the *Star Wars* sub-cycle, pushed exploitation independents into higher budget ranges so as to capitalize on the massive film trends that might resurrect exploitation independents' presence in the highly competitive late-1970s theatrical market.

Section I: Post-Recession, Pre-*Jaws*: Industry Precedents to the Blockbuster Era

The first development that set the foundation for the blockbuster film was the major studios' continued reduction of feature film production. As discussed in Chapter Four, the major studios continued a strategy from the recession days: reducing production to manage risk. Reducing production was not an economic requirement for producing a blockbuster film, but it was an important condition of risk management that supported a shift to blockbuster production. It was also a strategy with historical precedence; the studios similarly reduced production throughout the 1950s, as Tino Balio describes.¹² On a macro level, there had been a generally downward trend in production since the *Paramount* decision. The industry recession of the late 1960s and early 1970s further validated that the industry could survive on fewer films; instead of producing more films, the studios channeled additional funds into production costs of individual

films.¹³ For those reasons, A.D. Murphy in a 1976 *Variety* article described the major studios as “being relieved of a traditional (or inherited, or mystical) obligation of providing 12 months of a diversified product line in every year.”¹⁴ That the major studios no longer took on the responsibility of providing a season’s worth of product amounted to a significant change in production planning from the studio era. Independents and exhibitors filled the gap in production that resulted from this shift. In response, exhibitors and exploitation independents like AIP, New World Pictures, and Crown International Pictures financed, funded, and, in some cases, produced features for theaters not playing first-run films or sub-run theaters.¹⁵ As a result, feature film production among independents rose. A.D. Murphy described the general trend:

Over the past five years, totally outside indie filmmaking has grown from about 250 films per year to around 300, then a surge over 1973-74 to the 350-pic level, then dropping back to the 300-level of past two years. Over the same span, production by the major American producer-distributors and their wired-in affiliated producing units has fallen from the neighborhood of 250 to a current steady plateau of approximately 150 features.¹⁶

From 1972 to 1976, independents’ share of production rose rather steadily from 48.6% in 1972 to 67.5% in 1976.¹⁷ Throughout that period, the total number of feature films fell gradually from 557 in 1974 to lows of 449 in 1975 and 462 in 1976. By contrast, the majors averaged only fifteen features per company.¹⁸ In other words, the major studios were engaged in a high-risk and high-reward strategy while the independents, by dint of economic necessity, were seeking more modest gains on a greater number of features.

Tax shelter money enabled the major studios to invest greater resources in fewer films each year. Also known as “tax deferral incentives,” tax shelter funds encouraged outside investment in Hollywood film production by allowing investors to receive tax credit not

contingent on box office performance.¹⁹ *The New York Times* described the appeal of Hollywood tax shelters to wealthy investors as “a tax free loan from other tax payers that can be used to buy tax free municipal bonds or invested elsewhere.”²⁰ Stephen Sharmat, a coordinator of tax shelter deals in Hollywood, estimated that tax shelters financed \$60 million in production monies in 1975 for the major studios and \$15 million for independents.²¹ *Variety* claimed that most of Columbia’s production program in 1974 and 1975, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), had been financed with outside tax shelter money.²² Alan J. Hirschfield, Columbia president from 1973-1978, called tax shelter funding “the single most important occurrence in the recent history of the film industry” and claimed that “[s]ome 40 to 50% of our \$38,000,000 to \$42,000,000 production program has been cofinanced.”²³ Paramount Pictures also used tax shelter money to finance \$1.8 million of the \$6 million budget of *The Great Gatsby* (1974) in a deal that allowed the investor to claim losses of three times his investment.²⁴ Samuel Z. Arkoff also defended tax shelters as supporting production “at a time when motion picture theatre owners are decrying the lack of product to show.”²⁵ MGM was reportedly the one studio that did not finance through tax shelters. Frank E. Rosenfelt of MGM decried tax shelters as “contrary to our philosophy since MGM will not go forward with a project if we feel a necessity to hedge our risk.”²⁶ While tax shelters contributed to the climb in production costs throughout the decade, they were short-lived. Congress voted down tax shelters as a part of the 1976 tax reform.²⁷ *Variety* wrote that such reform was passed in an election year with “concern over aiding pornographic movies, and an overall feeling that tax breaks are not crucial to the nation’s economy.”²⁸ Prior to 1976, tax shelters were used broadly in Hollywood and contributed to the rise of the cost of individual major studio releases.

Social factors, including demographic shifts, resulted in a sizeable audience for theatrical releases throughout the 1970s. Much of the U.S. population were young adults in the 1970s, part of the baby boom generation defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as those born from 1946 to 1964.²⁹ By 1975, the youngest boomers were teenagers and the oldest were nearly 30. The US Department of Labor reported that the demographic of 25-34 year-olds would rise 50% from 1970 to 1980 to a total of 26.8 million people.³⁰ Speaking at the 1976 national NATO convention, MPAA president Jack Valenti shared results from the Opinion Research Corporation that showed that teenagers accounted for only 19% of filmgoers, a drop from 25% in 1973. Filmgoers eighteen and over accounted for 81% of tickets, a new high for the industry.³¹ Frequent filmgoers, which comprised a quarter of the population, made up the bulk of admissions (81%).³² There was also a positive correlation between film attendance and income and education.³³ Overall, the study pointed to a healthy demographic of movie-frequenting 20-30-year-olds, and some in the industry predicted that this population would drive demand for at-home viewing a few years in the future.³⁴ Richard Caves writes that the major studios developed a structural advantage over independents, able to supply the special effects-laden films that would become popular among young audiences.³⁵

Assuming changes in taste would accompany these demographic trends, A.D. Murphy anticipated that boomer taste would reign in Hollywood for years to come. Future generations, he reasoned, would encounter films in a similar path—through universities—and would therefore share a common sensibility.³⁶ Murphy also observed that filmgoers slightly older than baby boomers (i.e. The Silent Generation) had tastes closer to the boomers than to their elders (i.e. The Greatest Generation).³⁷ Murphy predicted, “Out of this greater homogeneity of attitudes (about sex, humor, language, violence, screen candor, etc.) will come...a diminishing of the latter-day

dichotomy between films made strictly for the young and those made for general audiences.”³⁸ As a result of this, Murphy predicted a return to the days of a “truly mass audience” but this time one bifurcated not by taste but by viewing site, with “a paying audience both in theatres and in homes.”³⁹ Generational shifts in taste may be one speculative factor among many others. The latter include the industry-wide adoption of selling techniques like wide release and saturation advertising, which developed concurrently with the studios’ emphasis on the tentpole film—a single feature film with broad demographic appeal.

In addition to the economic and social trends described above, *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) were bellwethers of the blockbuster era. Seen as achieving event film status, they both revealed some approaches to driving audience demand that would influence future blockbusters. For one, both adapted pre-sold properties familiar to a large cross-section of filmgoers. According to Justin Wyatt’s definition, both films were “pre-sold,” based on best-selling novels. Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969) has sold nearly 30 million copies, and William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* (1971) has sold over 13 million copies.⁴⁰ This tactic would influence later blockbusters; Peter Krämer shows that nine out of the 14 “super-hits” from 1967-1976 were adapted from recently published novels.⁴¹

Establishing wide release as an effective formula for ‘A’ studio releases, *The Godfather* also showed that distribution could be manipulated to drive audience demand. Krämer has observed, prior to *The Godfather*, the top-grossing Hollywood films including *Gone With the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* were released through roadshowing.⁴² As Tino Balio has also examined, the business model of roadshowing was based around charging a premium for a special viewing environment.⁴³ Roadshowed films played for weeks at a time in major markets before moving to the next city, and thus grosses were earned over a span of months. *The*

Godfather took in such unprecedented grosses through a different model of release: wide national release.⁴⁴ *The Godfather* was booked in a high volume of theaters over a relatively short period of time. Irwin Yablans at Paramount was responsible for determining *The Godfather*'s method of release. Yablans had established his reputation by selling *Love Story* (1970) exclusively to certain theaters, which played the film for weeks.⁴⁵ Yablans decided to book *The Godfather*, however, in a greater number of local theaters over a smaller window of time—essentially hoping to drive demand with such market signals as theater availability and the bandwagon effect. Cognitive psychology supports the idea that consumers make choices that are familiar to them (bandwagon effect) and may select the option that is most easily recalled (availability heuristic). These underlying behavioral principles were activated with an event film. Yablans offered, “[The] [i]dea was to make an event out of the openings.”⁴⁶ He explained that, in most major cities, the film would play “a minimum of two first-run theaters that generally [were] exclusive runs.”⁴⁷ *Variety* elaborated on the logic behind Paramount’s strategy: “By cutting off after 6-8 weeks and expanding peripheral markets, the snowball potential from the theatres ‘where you couldn’t get in’...achieves a boxoffice availability that might otherwise be denied.”⁴⁸ Yablans’ intention was to drive ticket sales to many different theaters instead of manipulating the market to benefit a more select group of theaters. Maximizing the film’s reach over a shorter period helped to funnel more viewers into theaters for opening weekend, thus driving even more positive word-of-mouth that could benefit a film’s returns exponentially, as De Vany has described.

Creating an event film through wide release meant violating the protectionist logics of the run, zone, and clearance system of the studio era and instead driving competition among theaters.⁴⁹ In New York City, for example, *The Godfather* opened on the same day of March 15

in five Loews theaters. In Los Angeles, *The Godfather* played in both the Loews Hollywood and NG's Village in Westwood.⁵⁰ Yablans bragged that this was the first time two major exhibition circuits in such close proximity had opened the same film simultaneously.⁵¹ Theaters did what they could do to protect themselves from nearby competition. Theaters staggered playtimes of the 1975-minute film to maximize audience attendance at each theater.⁵² A week later, *The Godfather* opened very wide with approximately 340 prints in at least two theaters per major city market and at a 90-10 distributor-exhibitor split with all theaters, a deal that was obviously favorable to the distributor. This non-exclusive first-run release in big markets set a new precedent. In Denver, grosses were slowing at one theater playing the film exclusively. Yablans explained: "Audiences sometimes get tired of seeing the same ad, for the same theatre for a long period of time, and interest sags, no matter how exciting the property."⁵³ As a result, Paramount placed *The Godfather* in two additional theaters.⁵⁴ Yablans believed in stoking audience demand by avoiding over-long runs and instead opening the film in different theaters.

The film's wide release resulted in unprecedented grosses and trickled down to success in ancillary markets as well. On a cost of \$6 million, *The Godfather* earned \$131 million in rentals worldwide, which made it the highest grossing film since *Gone With the Wind* (1939).⁵⁵ *The Godfather* had success on television as well; Frank Yablans at Paramount sold *The Godfather* to NBC for \$7-10 million for a one-time showing.⁵⁶ *Boxoffice* estimated that 90 million viewers (a huge audience by today's standards) tuned in to the November NBC airing.⁵⁷ NBC in turn sold advertising time for a reported \$225,000 per 1-minute increment, or over \$1 million in 2020 dollars.⁵⁸ *The Godfather* was an event film on television as well, evidence that theatrical release led openings across other windows. *The Godfather*'s relatively wide release within individual markets influenced later blockbuster films.

While *The Godfather* illustrated an early use of wide release, *The Exorcist* showed the merits of market saturation. As an 'R'-rated horror film, *The Exorcist* was an unlikely precursor to future blockbuster films. De Vany has shown that 'R'-rated movies are financially riskier endeavors than films with non-restricted ratings.⁵⁹ The risks of releasing a \$10.5 million 'R'-rated horror film were likely mitigated in part by the film's pre-sold quality.⁶⁰ Warner Bros. paid \$600,000 for the book rights.⁶¹ The source material was positioned to drive demand, as was the status of the director. Similar to *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist* was helmed by an up-and-coming director, William Friedkin, who had won the 1971 Academy Award for Best Director for *The French Connection* (1971). Like *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist* was distributed in an atypical fashion after its Manhattan opening on December 26, 1973. Initially, Warner Bros. had planned to replicate Paramount's handling of *The Godfather* in the New York City area.⁶² However, *Variety* reported that the "decision to go four-wall and to wait for summer playoff time was reportedly made at the top of WB, by president Frank Wells and chairman Ted Ashley."⁶³ Instead, *The Exorcist*'s four-wall release was explicitly modeled on hicksploitation pre-cursor *Billy Jack*. *The Exorcist* was the biggest major studio release to be four-walled. *The Exorcist* earned \$7 million net in six weeks of four-walling in 85-90 houses across the New York metropolitan and New Jersey area.⁶⁴ Warner Bros. rolled out an extensive local saturation ad campaign for the four-walled New York-area theaters. Warner Bros. was also engaged in television, radio, newspapers, and other promotional approaches including the mass distribution of 1 million buttons and stickers that read "*The Exorcist*/June 19."⁶⁵ The soundtrack was promoted on radio and at retail outlets.⁶⁶ Despite a significant drop-off after the first few weeks in certain theaters, the six week four-wall in New York City was estimated to earn \$7 million net.⁶⁷ Outside of New York, *The Exorcist* had 24 weeks of exclusive runs in 386 domestic

playdates with gross rentals of \$47 million. *The Exorcist* gave Warner Bros. a record half-year and second quarter results.⁶⁸ Rentals of \$90 million earned Warner Bros. \$40 million.⁶⁹ With \$78.5 million in domestic billing three years after release, *The Exorcist* pushed *The Sound of Music* out of 3rd place behind *Jaws* and *The Godfather*.⁷⁰ *The Exorcist* was also successful in Germany and Italy, showing the traction some blockbusters got overseas.⁷¹ *The Exorcist* was critically acclaimed as the first horror film nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. Echoing Yablans sentiments about *The Godfather*, executive producer Noel Marshall called *The Exorcist* a ‘happening,’ a term that, along with ‘event’ film, was becoming a buzz word to characterize the blockbuster’s seeming cultural pervasiveness.⁷²

The Godfather and *The Exorcist* also showed two common formulas for creating an event film: driving demand by pre-selling the material and, through advertising and theater availability, exposing as many viewers as possible in a market to the film. *The Godfather* illustrated the virtues of national wide release and booking multiple engagements in individual cities. Conversely, *The Exorcist* revealed a path to profitability through the saturation of specific markets (i.e. New York) and complete control over marketing and exhibition through four-walling.⁷³ Crucially, both films relied on a method of release that had more in common with exploitation independents’ distribution practices, as Warner Bros.’ explicit imitation of *Billy Jack* in the saturation booking of *The Exorcist* reveals. Yablan’s release of *The Godfather* transgressed the practice of zoning that still operated informally at some level, which *Jaws* producer David Brown described in 1975.

The old idea was to take a class film...and open it first in New York, probably at an East Side house, then in Westwood, and then let the media percolate to the peasants of the world the word that

it's a great hit. *The Godfather* broke that pattern because of the demand to see it. When Paramount released *The Godfather*, it released it simultaneously in many houses that previously had never played anything but single exclusive engagements.⁷⁴

As the historical method for releasing 'A' releases, roadshowing manipulated supply and price; the scarcity of the film's occurrence drove demand. Conversely, the wide release and saturation release of *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist* were more akin to the regional saturation of exploitation films described in Chapter One.

The Corman School and the Blockbuster Film

Billy Jack's influence on *The Exorcist* illustrated a broader point, which were similarities between the exploitation film tradition and the mid-1970s blockbuster film. The most observed debt to exploitation cinema was the blockbuster film's release via saturation advertising and saturation booking. Winston Wheeler Dixon has likewise described the so-called Corman formula as "book[ing] each film in as many theatres at once as possible to forestall negative word-of-mouth."⁷⁵ James Monaco has similarly argued that Columbia's success with *The Deep* (1977), was due in part to producer Peter Guber's release of the film in 800 theaters on opening day. Monaco writes: "The theory is: get in quick, get the money, and get out before the bad news trickles down."⁷⁶ David Cook explains the blockbuster's appropriation of saturation booking as "simultaneous openings and speedy playoffs within a well-defined region, accompanied by demographically tailored spots."⁷⁷ Importantly, in the blockbuster context, saturation booking meant saturation of the national market. In the exploitation context, where distributors could not

afford large print runs, saturation booking referred to *regional* saturation of a limited number of prints.

To many critics, the parallels between the blockbuster film and exploitation cinema extended beyond sales strategies to storytelling. Peter Krämer has observed that many super-grossers of the 1970s had controversial elements, and most were not rated ‘G,’ characteristics also shared by the late-1960s and early-1970s sexploitation and blaxploitation cycles.⁷⁸ Even the blockbusters with family appeal had similarities to older exploitation films. For instance, commentators often draw parallels between *Jaws* and ‘B’ monster movies on the one hand, and *Star Wars* and Poverty Row action-adventure serials on the other.⁷⁹ Indeed, Spielberg and Lucas have propagated this view, discursively constructing their own legacies as highly film literate ‘movie brats.’⁸⁰ Still others viewed the exploitation mode of film production—and above all the Corman ‘school of filmmaking’ (at AIP and later New World Pictures)—as integral to the DNA of New Hollywood’s cinephilic and auteurist sensibilities.⁸¹ The filmmakers most closely associated with the New Hollywood—notably, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola—worked for Corman and were trained on Corman’s method, which gave filmmakers license to drop in movie references or work within Hollywood genres. Noël Carroll writes, “[C]orman’s cinema came to be built with the notion of two audiences in mind—special grace notes for insiders, appoggiatura for the cognoscenti, and a soaring, action-charged melody for the rest.”⁸² Corman at AIP provided a training ground for the kind of allusionism and cinephilic citations that Carroll argues distinguished Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸³ Other factors, including coming of age during the days of broadcast television, the availability of films at art house theaters, or film school training, contributed to the auteurist bent of New Hollywood. Still, Corman’s contribution to the education of the “movie brats” cannot be underestimated.⁸⁴

As such, the relationship between the blockbuster film and exploitation filmmaking in this period was inherently symbiotic. Corman, the most important exploiteer in American film history, gave voice to the filmmakers, cinematographers, actors, and screenwriters who would make the blockbusters films that would transform Hollywood. Corman's acolytes would in turn pay homage to him by casting him in their films, as Ron Howard did in *Apollo 13* (1995). Jonathan Demme cast Corman in several of his films: *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Philadelphia* (1993), *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), and *Rachel Getting Married* (2008).⁸⁵ Corman trained much of Hollywood's top talent in the 1970s, including filmmakers who participated in the blockbuster film era. (It should be noted, however, that many filmmakers from the Corman School did not make many or any blockbusters. Martin Scorsese's films were profitable, but none, apart from *The Irishman* (2019), would be considered a blockbuster. Francis Ford Coppola made several expensive flops, such as *The Cotton Club* (1984).) As the blockbuster film eroded textual and industrial features that had differentiated exploitation cinema and Hollywood for many years, Corman and other exploitation independents pivoted to a strategy of close imitation in the Blockbuster Lite film cycle.

Section II: Blockbuster Lite and the *Jaws*-ploitation Cycle

Jaws is universally viewed as a turning point in Hollywood, illustrated by Frederick Wasser's claim, "*Jaws* marked the comeback of the major studios."⁸⁶ Released in the United States on June 20, 1975, *Jaws* was directed by Steven Spielberg and produced by Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown, who acquired rights to the story when the Peter Benchley book was still in proofs.⁸⁷ According to Zanuck and Brown, Spielberg was hesitant to direct the film because "he [Spielberg] recognized it would be primarily a commercial movie and not

necessarily a distinguished film.” Spielberg, however, was not the only director in consideration; Universal made Zanuck and Brown consider John Sturges, Dick Richards, and Joseph Sargent.⁸⁸ Zanuck and Brown convinced Spielberg that they could “make a film as well as a movie.”⁸⁹

The production history of *Jaws* has been recounted in great detail in various commercial and scholarly publications.⁹⁰ J. Hoberman, Peter Biskind, and others have described the shooting that was troubled by technical malfunctions, bad weather, and rising costs, which rose to at least \$8 million.⁹¹ The discussion of *Jaws* in this chapter aims to highlight how *Jaws* established a blueprint for blockbuster production based on three features: national saturation booking (aka wide release), extensive advertising (television and print), and a late spring/early summer release date.

Jaws’ wide release in 467 theaters also marked a shift in the distributor-exhibitor dynamic. As noted above, ‘A’ films in Hollywood had traditionally been released through roadshowing. According to Zanuck and Brown, Universal made deals with theaters for long runs, the shortest of which was nine weeks.⁹² Echoing Yablans’ logic for releasing *The Godfather* non-exclusively in major cities, Brown added, “When you have a film like *Jaws*, why make audiences wait six months or a year? Why make them stand in line with no hope of getting in? If you have enough seats for a film, you can probably do as well as or better than the old exclusive engagement pattern.”⁹³ Universal used nontraditional bidding techniques with exhibitors to secure a wide release on the scale of 460+ theaters. For one, Universal changed its rental terms mid-stream, first bidding *Jaws* for nine weeks on a 90-10 deal, similar to the same deal Yablans negotiated for *The Godfather*, with three weeks each of floors at 70%, 60%, and 50%. As the release date neared, in Spring of 1975, Universal also revised the exhibition terms without honoring the initial bidding terms. Universal rejected all of the bids received on those terms and

raised the run time to 12 weeks at the same 90-10 percentage terms.⁹⁴ Such revision of the rental terms represented a tough stance to take with exhibitors, but one that seemed justified. By investing in a national marketing campaign, exhibitors stood to make more money by increased traffic even with a lower percentage of the box office.

In addition to extracting longer runs in the blind bidding process, Universal employed risk management strategies that offset some of the advertising costs to exhibitors, thus minimizing the studios' exposure. Universal charged exhibitors a fee ranging from \$175-\$400 for national television advertising buys in advance of the June 19 opening.⁹⁵ In April of 1975, Universal made buying into national advertising a prerequisite for bidding on the film.⁹⁶ Universal issued the following announcement to exhibitors:

Universal has scheduled an extensive network television spot campaign to air June—in conjunction with the June—opening of 'Jaws.' A share of the cost has been allocated (in proportion) to each tv market. (X%) of this market's share is to be apportioned to the theatre(s) licensing the picture. The amount allocated to your theatre...will be billed to you and is payable by you to Universal. Your bid *must* indicate you will participate in this campaign. This is *in addition to* and *not a part of* any cooperative advertising which may be scheduled by Universal for any individual theatre or group of theatres.

Variety called this “precedential” because it “extend[ed] the practice of the cooperative media buy, for which exhibs usually bear a share of the cost, to national advertising, for which distribs have heretofore paid.”⁹⁷

Exhibitors were angry. By their logic, Universal could afford paying their own advertising bill given the \$68 million in rentals the company took in the year prior with *The*

Sting.⁹⁸ Of course, enforcing a pay-or-play was not unreasonable from Universal's perspective for a highly sought-after property regardless of the studio's fortunes the year prior. Studios' extracting of favorable terms from exhibitors continues today, as with Disney's demand of 65% of box office film rentals from domestic exhibitors playing *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017).⁹⁹ Exhibitors booking *Jaws* were also disgruntled that Universal assigned theaters to a television market, something the theaters were accustomed to doing on their own.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, NATO accused Universal of mixing selling and advertising, which could complicate the house nut such that an exhibitor "will start incurring expenses he can't call expenses, but which become part of his overhead beyond his control."¹⁰¹ The General Sales Manager of Universal defended their decision to ask theater owners to share costs of national television advertising on the basis of the film's wide release. He explained, "The intended broad release pattern of 'Jaws' made it both practical and an economic advantage to make an extensive commitment for national primetime tv spots." He went on to explain that the cost of buying into national television in this atypical manner costs less than buying television advertising time in individual local markets.¹⁰² Theaters typically shared local television buys with Universal, and so the company applied that principle to the new national ad campaign for *Jaws*. Bob Carpenter, Universal General Sales Manager, offered: "Both the exhibitor and Universal will have the benefit of an extraordinarily effective tv buy for virtually the same overall co-op expenditure."¹⁰³

Assured of taking in 30% of advertising costs from exhibitors, Universal frontloaded television advertising just prior to *Jaws*' release, disrupting the typical method wherein a studio would open a film in a limited number of theaters and then reinvest those earnings in promotions in the regional markets.¹⁰⁴ Universal spent \$1.8 million on television advertising in an unprecedented three-network network buy.¹⁰⁵ They purchased 30-second spots on 95% of prime-

time programs on all three television networks, resulting in 200 million viewers.¹⁰⁶ The network buys aired three days leading up to the date of release, June 20th. The journal *Broadcasting* called Universal's television buys the "ultimate move in saturation advertising" and a "campaign that bodes a potential revolution in motion-picture marketing."¹⁰⁷ The journal observed that Tom Laughlin and Warner Bros. had acted similarly in the regional release of *Billy Jack*. *Jaws*' media planning represented a move away from spot advertising, tailored to local markets, and toward mass advertising on a national basis, reflecting the overall wide release method of the film's release. Spot advertising was 30 or 60-second advertisements that were purchased from a local television station. Spot advertisements were often less expensive than national buys, as they reached a narrower audience. Network buys involved purchasing advertising time from a national network to be aired, often, during primetime, to all national syndicates to maximize audience reach. Networks buys were costlier because they reached a mass audience, reflected in NBC's aforementioned terms for *The Godfather*'s broadcast in 1974.¹⁰⁸ Regional network buys, network spots, or national spots could also be purchased; these reached a group or region of ABC affiliates, for instance, rather than the individual market of the spot buys. Charles Warner writes that national spots allow marketers "the flexibility to run schedules in selected markets to cover a specific region of the country, to cover just the top markets, or to cover a number of markets that are strategically important to their business growth."¹⁰⁹

The combination of wide release and television saturation established a successful formula. By the late 1970s, major releases were opening with 800-900 prints.¹¹⁰ By September 1975, *Jaws*' impact on the industry was evident such that *Variety* called it the "biggest and fastest grossing film in the history of the business."¹¹¹ *Jaws* earned \$7 million opening weekend and nearly \$18 million during opening week, setting a global industry record for single-week

theatrical film rentals.¹¹² *Jaws* was making \$10 million a week during the peak summer season between Memorial Day and Labor Day.¹¹³ With only 78 days on the market, *Jaws* had passed *The Godfather*'s earnings with a domestic gross of \$124 million in around 1,000 theaters by Labor Day, and more than half of these theaters were still playing the film.¹¹⁴ *Variety* wrote that "Most of the major situations opened the film on June 20 while the smaller situations have been playing the pic for periods ranging from 17-45 days."¹¹⁵ Thus far, the biggest contributor to the gross had been the New York market, where 50 theaters had earned a gross of \$14 million. However, \$14 million represented only about 12% of the grosses at that time, suggesting that *Jaws*, unlike *The Exorcist*, had wide appeal outside of New York. In Los Angeles, *Jaws* took in a \$7 million gross in 25 theaters, and, in Chicago, the film earned \$3.5 million in five theaters.¹¹⁶ In other key cities—Pittsburgh, Denver, Minneapolis, Louisville, New Orleans, and Kansas City—*Jaws* earned at least \$500,000.¹¹⁷ By January 1976, *Jaws* had rentals of \$104 million domestic, described by A.D. Murphy as "the film medium's greatest film rental grosser."¹¹⁸ In worldwide rentals, *Jaws* made \$132 million compared to *The Godfather*'s \$131 million.¹¹⁹

Jaws showed that one film could not only make a major studio's year but also reverse a studio's middling reputation. A.D. Murphy explained, "Universal's sudden ascent in the past few years follows many decades of being in the lower half of the major leagues throughout its 63-year existence."¹²⁰ While Universal was typically at the bottom of all major distributors in terms of market share, *Jaws* put Universal at the top; Universal's 1975 earnings amounted to a quarter of the North American film market.¹²¹ Moreover, *Jaws* contributed to the "greatest single rental year in the history of the motion picture business" for any single studio, beating the world record set by Warner Bros. in 1974 by 8%.¹²²

Jaws had an important near-term economic impact on the broader American film industry. Over 1974 and 1975, there was a two-year growth of 20%, with key city grosses up 9%.¹²³ 1975 also saw a record total U.S. box office of \$1.9 billion, up 4.5% from 1974 when national box office estimate was around \$1.7 billion.¹²⁴ Describing the industry's year in 1975, *Variety* noted: "This makes two consecutive years of record American b.o., beating the longtime prior peak of \$1,692,000,000 estimated for the industry's golden year of 1946."¹²⁵ The difference in total U.S. boxoffice between 1974 and 1975 was \$150 million, nearly equivalent to *Jaws*' earnings.¹²⁶

Jaws also established the summer as a peak season for major studios. Major studios had traditionally focused on producing films for peak times: Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and Thanksgiving.¹²⁷ As shown in Chapter Four, the summer season had been traditionally seen as a Hollywood off-season that had been occupied by drive-ins and low-budget or sub-run fare. Exploitation films were booked during the summer and during exhibitors' slowest seasons:¹²⁸

- January and February
- before and after Easter
- October through Thanksgiving
- early December.

Jaws, however, took advantage of this off-season and revealed that, with the right films, the majors could dominate the summer. More importantly, the wide release that future blockbuster films required necessitated the open playdates and long runs that the summer season at that time provided. Highlighting *Jaws*' debt to exploitation selling strategies, Wasser explains," [*Jaws*] played during the summer, a season previously reserved for cheap drive-in movies. In content

and marketing practices, it can be argued that *Jaws* combined major studio clout with exploitation thrills.”¹²⁹

As Wasser’s quote illustrates, *Jaws* was a rather straightforward example of the ways in which studios imitated the forms of market differentiation that the exploitation cinema tradition had enjoyed, such as quick play-off through saturation booking and summer release to capture families and youth audiences. However, it should be noted that, for the Hollywood studios, appropriation or imitation was not relegated to borrowing from the exploitation independents. Instead, it was a broader strategy of competition that extended even to other studios such that the studios often engaged in imitation among themselves.

As Peter Stanfield and Balio have shown, during the 1930s several of the Hollywood studios imitated the singing cowboy westerns in which Poverty Row ‘B’ studio Republic Pictures had developed a niche.¹³⁰ Gene Autry’s films for Republic were among the most popular films in the singing cowboy cycle and included *Tumblin’ Tumbleweeds* (1935) and *The Singing Cowboy* (1937). Roy Rogers, Jimmy Wakeley, and Rex Allen also starred as singing cowboys in Republic westerns. Grand National Pictures had their own singing cowboy in Tex Ritter, who made dozens of films for the studio, and small independent studios made black-audience singing cowboy films starring Herbert Jeffries.¹³¹ Dick Foran made similar films for Warner Bros.; 20th Century Fox had Smith Ballew; and Bob Baker starred in several singing cowboy films for Universal Pictures.

The Bond-esque spy films of the 1960s were another example of intra-Hollywood imitation. Throughout the 1960s, spy movies knocking off the British Eon Productions’ Bond films, released by United Artists in the US, proliferated on movie screens. Both independents and Hollywood studios alike participated in the trend. Independents AIP and Embassy Pictures

released *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965) and *Licensed to Kill* (1965) respectively. *A Man Called Dagger* (1968) was shot by Laszlo Kovacs and released by MGM. The British made Secret Agent Harry Palmer series starred Michael Caine and included *The Ipcress File* (1965), *Funeral in Berlin* (1966), and *Billion Dollar Brain* (1967). Donald Hamilton's Matt Helm novels were adapted by Columbia Pictures in four films: *The Silencers* (1966), *Murderers' Row* (1966), *The Ambushers* (1967), and *The Wrecking Crew* (1968). Dean Martin starred as the titular character, a government counteragent. *The Deadly Affair* (1966), an adaptation of John le Carré's *Call for the Dead*, starred James Mason and was released by Columbia. Columbia also released *Casino Royale* (1967), a comedic spoof of Bond starring Peter Sellers. Fox also developed parodies of a Bond-like hero in Derek Flint, starring James Coburn in *Our Man Flint* (1966) and *In Like Flint* (1967). The studio/studio imitations described above illustrate economist Armen Alchian's influential theory. Alchian showed that, in markets characterized by uncertainty and variability, imitation becomes an important survival technique.¹³² Market participants will adopt the decisions in the marketplace that have led to the best outcomes. Alchian's theory accounts for the cycle-based form of evolution in the American film industry.

Finally, *Jaws* raised expectations across the film industry for box office success. Exhibitors were increasingly at the mercy of the major distributors' terms, which included early bidding and long runs, if they wanted to book the most popular film of the year. Exhibitors' increasing dependence on blind bidding far in advance for blockbuster films would increasingly limit the availability of playdates for independent features, as the last section of this chapter examines.

The Blockbuster Lite Film Emerges

In the wake of *Jaws*, independent production continued, but at a small economic scale relative to the majors. In 1976, 300 indie films were made, amounting to a total investment of \$100 million, or, according to *Variety*, “about two major studios’ worth of annual production investment.”¹³³ However, independents appeared to be subdividing their existing share of the market rather than growing their share. Independent production made up two-thirds of all feature films but only 10–15% of the market throughout the 1970s.¹³⁴ This is because only 10% of indie films were picked up by the established distributors and therefore able to be placed in theaters. As a result, *Variety* acknowledged that “the chances for even more recoupment of costs...are still low for the outside filmmaker.”¹³⁵ While varied, budgets for independent films in the mid-1970s were substantially lower than the majors’ budgets. Average studio budgets grew throughout the decade from an estimated \$3.5 million in 1970 to \$8–10 million in 1980.¹³⁶ Conversely, independent films’ budgets ranged from \$100,000 to \$1 million.¹³⁷ According to *Variety* in 1976, there were more independent films being made at a higher-than-typical budget range of \$400,000 - \$750,000. A.D. Murphy estimated that the average cost was around \$250,000.¹³⁸

The advent of the blockbuster meant that a small number of films per year were driving the industry to record-breaking profits and making a studio’s fiscal year. However, independents were still engaging in a business model of releasing more films than the major studios and at smaller budgets. They could not realistically invest the same resources in intellectual property, stars, and wide release. While most independents were unable to compete with the studios’ lavish budgets, they also struggled to create the cultural presence of an event film that dominated, not just movie screens, but also television, newspapers, and consumer merchandising. After the landmark release of *Jaws*, imitation, as opposed to differentiation, became a popular strategy

among exploitation independents for managing risk and eking out a slice of the market. This sort of imitation was not unique to exploitation independents. Indeed, imitation is inherent to the concept of a production cycle. A cycle contains a limited number of elements that are repeated, revised, or hybridized, similar in some ways to a genre. The Blockbuster Lite cycle was a difference in degree. It was imitation based on a single *ur*-text vs. an imitation of, in the words of Amanda Ann Klein, “shared images, characters, settings, plots or themes.”¹³⁹ While Klein notes that an originary film introduces a relative range of possibilities for successive films by “establish[ing] the images, plot formulas, and themes for the entire cycle,” the Blockbuster Lite films were measured against the success of *Jaws* and aspired to be a close substitute for the Spielberg film.¹⁴⁰ Above all, the Blockbuster Lite film was an exploitation cycle that obeyed a simple logic: a low-budget film made as quickly as possible after the blockbuster’s release and which copied and/or mocked the originary film with the goal of siphoning-off some of the audience demand and receptivity to the first film. As the next section will show, the *Jaws*-exploitation sub-cycle was comprised of films that attempted to recapture *Jaws*’ success through various tactics: some through superficial changes and some that revealed a deeper understanding of the market dynamics underlying *Jaws*’ profitability.

The *Jaws*-exploitation sub-cycle permeated the industry, and quickly. Just a month after the Universal film’s release, *Variety* announced that a half-dozen knockoffs were already in pre-production.¹⁴¹ Dino De Laurentiis and Paramount Pictures released 1977’s *Orca*; Universal made a sequel, *Jaws 2* (1978). United Artists released *Sharks’ Treasure* (1975). Independent *Jaws*-exploitation films included a sexploitation film, *Deep Jaws* (1976), distributed by Manuel S. Conde Distribution.¹⁴² There were also low-budget exploitation features *Mako: The Jaws of Death* and *Piranha*.¹⁴³

The *Jaws*-sploitation cycle illustrated the symbiosis that characterized the Blockbuster Lite film. In the selling and release of *Jaws*, Universal borrowed the tactic of saturation booking from the exploitation tradition as well as the eye-catching exploitation advertising that Schaefer has examined.¹⁴⁴ If the major studios imported the marketing tactics used to sell exploitation films, the exploitation independents appropriated the intellectual property of the studio blockbusters. This strategy functioned in several ways. On the one hand, it was a cost and time-savings measure. Exploiteers avoided expenditures on story rights and could short-cut the intellectual labor of creating an original screenplay with a new and appealing concept. Borrowing the stories of major studio hits was also a way to “pre-sell” a film in hopes of getting the viewers who saw the original. As the next section shows, the producer-distributors of *Mako: The Jaws of Death*, *Orca*, and *Piranha* marketed their films to invoke various elements of the *Jaws* formula—(put plainly, a water-bound animal disaster film)—while tweaking others to avoid copyright infringement and offer enough differentiation to appeal to ticket buyers.

Mako: The Jaws of Death (1976): Exploitation/Studio Imitation

Mako: The Jaws of Death was a Blockbuster Lite film that attempted to drive demand by showcasing its likeness to *Jaws* in its paratextual elements only. Financial limitations mitigated against any successful recreation of *Jaws*' market position. The imitation was meant to operate at the level of its sales pitch: to act as a lure for exhibitors and viewers, as evidenced by the film's many titles. The ‘PG’-rated *Mako: The Jaws of Death* was also released variably as *Mako Jaws of Death*, *Mako—Jaws of Death*, and *Shark Killers*.¹⁴⁵ The existence of multiple titles links *Mako* to the classical exploitation tradition of renaming films, which Schaefer writes was a cost-effective way of “extending a film's life by changing a title.”¹⁴⁶ Universal Majestic, Inc. and

Mako Associates produced the film, and the Cannon Group distributed the film. Dennis Friedland and Christopher Dewey formed the New York-based The Cannon Group in 1967 to fill the “art sexploitation” market. They were active in the early 1970s as distributors of independent productions geared to the youth market including *Joe* (1970), *Maid in Sweden* (1971), and *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971).¹⁴⁷ William Grefé produced and directed the film, and Richard Jaeckel, who had starred in Film Ventures International’s animal disaster film *Grizzly* (1976), was the lead.¹⁴⁸ Grefé had several animal-themed exploitation films on his resume. He had directed *Death Curse of Tartu* (1966), which starred an alligator, and *Stanley* (1972), about a pet rattlesnake.¹⁴⁹ Grefé had worked at the Miami-based Ivan Tors Studio, the studio that made *Flipper* (1963), the *Gentle Ben* (1967–1969) television series, and the *Primus* television series.

Like *Jaws*, *Mako: The Jaws of Death* reportedly had a troubled production. According to Grefé, the film was shot in Bimini, Bahamas, with 15 live tiger sharks.¹⁵⁰ Grefé recounted that the sharks hated the noise of the camera and kept attacking the cameraman. A crew member reported that Grefé kicked a shark in the head. In exploitation fashion, Grefé used the chaotic production to his advantage in a title card before the film begins. The title reads: “The Producers Wish To Express Their Sincere Gratitude To The Members Of The Underwater Crew Who Risked Their Lives To Film The Shark Sequences In This Motion Picture Without Benefit Of Cages Or Other Protective Devices.” This title was a kind of inversion of the “square-up” found in classical exploitation films. Eric Schaefer describes square-ups as “a prefatory statement about the social or moral ill the film claimed to combat.”¹⁵¹ *Mako*’s opening title card was designed to capture attention and lurid interest, similar to square-ups in the classical mode, but absent any compensatory moralizing discourse.

Mako: The Jaws of Death is about Floridian diver Sonny Stein who befriends sharks and fights to save them from being hunted by Dr. Whitney, an ichthyologist seeking a shark for his aquarium. Sonny is protected from shark attacks by a medallion given to him years ago by a Filipino shaman. In this digressive narrative, Sonny engages in a flirtatious relationship with Karen, who dances in an aquarium at the Rustin Inn and wants to integrate a shark into her act. Sonny ultimately takes revenge on Whitney and on Karen. He views them both as exploiting sharks for gain. At the end of the film, Sonny is stripped of his medallion in a fight and is subsequently killed by the sharks he loves.

When one watches the film, the exploitation elements are more immediately evident than the similarities to *Jaws*, as illustrated by the title card described above. The exploitation status of the film also shines through in the predominance of indoor locations and lack of outdoor action scenes. The interior scenes look very nondescript. Textual similarities to *Jaws* include the first scene, which have three men fishing on a boat, recalling the *Jaws* shark hunting scenes with Brody, Quint, and Hooper. It includes strange obtrusive music—the sound of repetitive horns—that was perhaps an effort to imitate John Williams' *Jaws* theme. It also features underwater photography that appeared to be taken in a closed-in area, giving the impression of being filmed in a tank or an aquarium. Limited camera placement in the tank results in awkward screen direction in editing. To some degree, this was a potential problem for any production, small or large, necessitating underwater filming. *Jaws* had some pickup shots filmed in editor Verna Fields' swimming pool. *Mako*'s brisk running time of only 91 minutes, compared to *Jaws*' 124 minutes, was another marker of the film's low-budget status harkening back to the B films of the studio era, as Brian Taves has shown.¹⁵²

The clearest similarities to *Jaws* were paratextual, including the film's production company, titled Universal Majestic, Inc./Mako Associates. The promotional materials also showed an affinity to *Jaws*. The *Jaws* one sheet featured a rectangular inset of an illustration of a shark preparing to attack a female swimmer [Figure 17]. The illustration presented an underwater view in blue of a ferocious-looking shark whose size dwarfed that of the unknowing swimmer. The title of the film, "Jaws," was presented in bold block letters in red. The *Mako: The Jaws of Death* one sheet employed the same basic design elements. The film title was shown in a very similar block, but lowercase, red font. In contrast with the shark looking upward in the *Jaws* one sheet, the shark was presented in lateral movement but retained the same ferocious quality due to the rendering of the large teeth. *The Mako* one sheet presented the woman swimmer at a larger scale, which emphasized the terrorized expression on her face. Universal Majestic placed an ad in *Variety* that reconfigured those same basic elements: a shark, a female swimmer, and the film title [Figure 17].¹⁵³ Black and red were the dominant colors, and the figures are presented in simplified shapes of color. The film title "Mako" was in a more stylized font that at once recalled blood and the oceanic setting of the film.

In a review of *Mako: The Jaws of Death*, *Boxoffice* said the film could be considered "an off-shoot of 'Jaws'" if "more into the realm of a horror film."¹⁵⁴ The trade journal predicted strong box office performance given "good publicity and saturation bookings."¹⁵⁵ Despite the Cannon Group's claim that it was doing its largest print order ever for the film, *Mako: The Jaws of Death* was released in a region-by-region distribution pattern that favored the Southern United States, a release strategy that had a greater debt to typical exploitation releases than to *Jaws*.¹⁵⁶ *Mako* was planned to open in Jacksonville, Florida, on June 25 and move to showings in Atlanta, Buffalo, and Albany in the first two weeks of July.¹⁵⁷ It would go south to Charlotte on July 23

and to New Orleans on July 23.¹⁵⁸ *Mako: The Jaws of Death* continued to play in Seattle and Cleveland during the fall of 1976.¹⁵⁹ At the hardtop Embassy Theatre in downtown Cleveland, filmgoers stood in line to see *Mako: Jaws of Death* as well as blaxploitation film *Welcome Home, Brother Charles* (1975).¹⁶⁰ Thus, the towns in which *Mako* played also showed a link with key cities for exploitation film release (as shown in Chapter One's distribution study), including Jacksonville, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Cleveland.

Mako represented a Blockbuster Lite film that was heavy on the "lite," imagined as an exploitation film and circulating as such. *Mako*'s production was nevertheless driven by capitalizing on the massive appeal of *Jaws*, which usefully intersected with the animal disaster exploitation tradition. A director like Grefé, with experience filming dolphins and alligators, was able to make a film with thematic similarity to *Jaws*, secured by the sheer presence of underwater shark photography. Obviously, The Cannon Group did not have the financial means for a 400-print film run; nor was the film made at a quality that could sustain a large audience across many markets. The company could, however, imitate accompanying promotional materials. The Cannon Group packaged the film in one sheets, in newspaper advertising, and in the film's varying titles to tie the film semiotically to *Jaws*. These similarities appeared designed, not to reproduce the character-driven suspense and masterful *découpage* of the original, but rather to present an economic argument for the film's profitability that might be persuasive to drive-in exhibitors or sub-run theater circuits.

Despite being marketed superficially similarly to *Jaws*, *Mako* failed as a true imitation of *Jaws* and in this way performed like a Blockbuster Lite film. The term "lite" in the 1970s was associated with the marketing of Miller Lite Beer, a lower calorie beer introduced by the company in 1975. The Miller Lite advertising slogan, "tastes great, less filling," implied that the

beer was not a bad-tasting diet beer but promised fewer calories with the same great taste.¹⁶¹ The implication was that “Lite” beer didn’t sacrifice taste and was an acceptable substitution for the real thing. However, the “Lite” strategy as applied to movies was flawed. As creative works and not consumer products, films are unique products and highly differentiated.¹⁶² So strongly anchored to *Jaws*, blockbuster “lite” knockoffs like *Mako* failed to live up to the original and were not seen by audiences as acceptable substitutions for the Spielberg film.

Orca (1977): Studio/Studio Imitation

Mako was primarily *marketed*, but not distributed, as a *Jaws* imitation, because exploitation independent The Cannon Group lacked the resources for a wide release. Conversely, the ‘PG’-rated *Orca: The Killer Whale* was produced by Dino De Laurentiis, who ran a well-capitalized distribution company and had some amount of clout in the industry. The year prior, for instance, De Laurentiis had produced *King Kong* (1976), which was released by Paramount in 2,200 theaters, one of the widest releases to date.¹⁶³ With *Orca*, De Laurentiis was in a position to pull powerful levers of audience demand through wide release and ballyhoo that might create another animal disaster blockbuster. In effect, *Orca* was a kind of studio-on-studio Blockbuster Lite imitation.

The film’s on-location filming with respected actors further indicated De Laurentiis’ aspirations to compete head-to-head with the studios for a wide audience. *Orca* was filmed on location in St. John’s Newfoundland, Canada, and directed by Michael Anderson and produced by Luciano Vincenzoni.¹⁶⁴ An Italian crew filmed the shark and killer sequences in Australia. Ennio Morricone composed the score. It was made for a cost of £6 million, though other sources reported \$12 million.¹⁶⁵ Richard Harris and Charlotte Rampling starred in this film about a male

orca's revenge against Captain Nolan (Harris), who killed the Orca's mate and unborn offspring. Rampling plays Dr. Rachel Bedford, a killer whale expert who educates Nolan on orcas' kinship to humans and their similarly motivated behavior.

Orca forecast to audiences its affinity to *Jaws* in marketing materials but in a more differentiated manner than *Mako*. The one sheet maintained the illustration style that *Jaws* had, but the color scheme was distinct—orange and black instead of red and black. It also depicted an action scene—a fight between man and animal—, whereas *Jaws*' one sheet suggested future action, creating more of a suspenseful feeling. *Orca*, like *Mako*, also adopted a one-word four-letter title, like *Jaws*. Unlike *Jaws* or *Mako*, *Orca*'s one sheet featured a great deal of text [Figure 18]. This was reflective of the experience of viewing *Orca*, heavy on exposition and belaboring the analogy at the core of the film: that killer whales are like humans. The tag line of the one sheet also worked to establish the ferocity of a killer whale: “The killer whale, [sic] is one of the most intelligent creatures in the universe. Incredibly, he is the only animal other than man who kills for revenge.” *Orca* also attempted to follow *Jaws*' path through a novelization. The *Orca* novelization written by Arthur Herzog and published six weeks prior to the film's release in June of 1977.¹⁶⁶ However, a novelization did not make *Orca* pre-sold the way *Jaws* was, with Benchley's best-selling source material. Importantly, *Orca* lacked a popular source material to cue the kind of immediate audience familiarity that would drive interest and demand needed to make a blockbuster.

Lack of compelling intellectual property hurt *Orca*'s reviews as well. *Orca*'s solemnity and pretentiousness struck quite a different tone from *Jaws*, violating expectations set by the film's promotion. Reviews of the film noted the film's pedantic quality in addition to its similarity to *Jaws*. *The Independent Film Journal* called it a “patently ludicrous contribution to

the ‘Jaws’ cycle.”¹⁶⁷ *Variety* predicted that the film, with “dumb storytelling” and “man vs. beast nonsense” would “flounder.”¹⁶⁸ The *New York Times*’ review represented a common view that the film was “claptrap.”¹⁶⁹ Both *The Independent Film Journal* and *Variety* made explicit comparisons to *Moby Dick*, suggested also by the film’s one sheet, which depicts a lone, Ahab-esque male figure striking the killer whale with a harpoon. Indeed, *Orca* appeared to misfire. Instead of recalling Benchley’s best seller, the film evoked the Herman Melville classic. Textual similarities to *Jaws* were present but more indirect than those made in *Mako*. The title of the film was a likely reference to Captain Quint’s boat in *Jaws*. *Orca*, like *Mako*, also employed sound in a repetitive manner that recalled the strings in John Williams’ theme from *Jaws*. The opening scene of *Orca* also features a killer whale attacking a great white shark, as if to establish that a killer whale is a creature more formidable than the ‘monster’ in *Jaws*. The film made liberal use of the water or underwater footage. These sequences played dual roles as padding and as moments that attested to the majesty of the wild and nature.

Other elements clearly differentiated *Orca* from *Jaws*, most notably the distinctive continental setting of Newfoundland, particularly when compared to the all-American milieu of Amity Island.¹⁷⁰ Rather than ape the shark-theme of *Jaws* like *Mako* did, *Orca* pursued a slightly more differentiated market strategy. Instead of a terrifying shark, which Spielberg had described as the real star of *Jaws*, the film included a killer whale that the film went to great lengths to establish as predatory and terrifying through extensive exposition.¹⁷¹ The casting and setting of the film in a continental milieu also differentiated *Orca* from the distinctly American setting of *Jaws*. De Laurentiis reportedly sold the film on a pitch of: “We make ‘Jaws,’ except this time the shark is the hero.” However, the close relationship between the two films evoked in the pitch was not executed in the film.¹⁷² Caves writes that, in a superstar market, lower quality performers are

poor substitutes for stars.¹⁷³ Thus, for *Orca* to fail to even register among audiences as a plausible substitute for *Jaws* was troubling. The further *Orca* differentiated itself from the *Jaws* formula, the less the film appeared to be a convincing *Jaws* substitute and the more the film needed to prove itself on its own merits. However, *Orca* anchored viewers to think of *Moby Dick*, an association more congruous in the awards season than in the summer release season.

Orca was released like a blockbuster film: in hundreds of theaters and during prime summer playing season. On July 13, 1977, Paramount opened *Orca* wide in 776 theaters in the US and Canada, underscoring how the threshold of number of screens for a wide release had increased since *Jaws*' opening.¹⁷⁴ In 10 days, the film grossed nearly \$8 million. In the New York area, *Orca* was released somewhat similarly to *The Godfather* with five weeks in 74 select flagship theaters in the New York area during which it grossed \$3 million.¹⁷⁵ *Orca* played in 30 screens in Los Angeles to start.¹⁷⁶ In Italy around the Christmas holidays, *Orca* surpassed *King Kong*'s performance in Italy and did well across 16 cities despite *Star Wars* also playing in the country.¹⁷⁷ In Chicago, it came in #2 on four screens behind *Star Wars* on five screens.¹⁷⁸ In the US, *Orca* played a mix of hardtops including shopping mall screens and drive-ins.¹⁷⁹ From a distribution perspective, *Orca* was released like a blockbuster: in first-run theaters in major markets and with a large print run. According to *Box Office Mojo*, however, *Orca* had a domestic gross of \$14 million, not a dismal number but a far reach from *Jaws*' domestic gross.¹⁸⁰

Orca suggested studio/studio imitations presented a possibility not present in exploitation/studio imitations: national distribution power. However, this appeared a necessary but not sufficient condition for blockbuster imitation. *Orca*'s intellectual property was second-rate in comparison to *Jaws*, lacking the audience familiarity and positive appeal of the Benchley

novel that drove turnout. In anchoring viewers to *Moby Dick* and offering too many elements of differentiation, *Orca* failed as a plausible substitute for *Jaws*.

Piranha (1978): A Jaws Mockbuster

Piranha found a middle ground between exploitation/studio imitation and studio/studio imitation; New World Pictures momentarily overcame financial limitations through a co-production deal with United Artists, and the film itself more closely followed *Jaws*' story and setting. As an 'R'-rated film, *Piranha* also titillated viewers with momentary nudity, bringing differentiation to the cycle that *Jaws*, *Mako*, and *Orca* did not, and which fit within New World Pictures' market niche as an exploitation firm. In this way, *Piranha* was a kind of synthesis of exploitation sensibilities and major studio selling power. By closely following the plot of *Jaws* but also offering titillation and targeting a smaller segment of viewers in its 'R' rating, *Piranha* was a mockbuster of sorts. This narrower market positioning, however, would limit the film's ability to reach *Jaws*-level audiences.

Given Corman's industry status as an exploiter, it is not surprising that New World Pictures would imitate *Jaws*. Schaefer has shown that topicality and timeliness have been longstanding components of exploitation cinema's market appeals and selling strategies.¹⁸¹ *Piranha* was produced by Piranha Productions helmed by Jon Davison, directed by Joe Dante, and written by Richard Robinson and John Sayles. Dante had cut trailers for New World Pictures and co-directed his first film, *Hollywood Boulevard* (1976), with Allan Arkush.¹⁸² *Piranha* starred Bradford Dillman, Heather Menzies, and Barbara Steele. The production involved on-location shoots in San Marcos, Texas, on the Guadalupe River. Interior and underwater shooting,

composites, puppets, and live piranhas were used to create the attack sequences.¹⁸³ The film tells the story of a Vietnam military experiment, Operation Razorteeth, gone awry. While she is looking for missing teenagers on Lost River Lake, journalist Maggie McKeown (Heather Menzies) unwittingly releases a school of piranha into the river that runs by a kids' summer camp and a new resort attracting many tourists. McKeown and surly local hermit Paul Grogan (Bradford Dillman) try to warn the locals before the deadly fish reach the kids' camp, where Grogan's daughter is residing.

Unlike *Mako: The Jaws of Death*, *Piranha* was a Blockbuster Lite film that attempted to replicate the selling strategies of *Jaws*. *Piranha*, co-financed by New World Pictures and United Artists for \$1 million, was made at the high end of typical independent budgets at the time. New World retained domestic release rights, and UA distributed the film internationally.¹⁸⁴ According to *Variety*, this film marked UA's first co-financing venture with an independent.¹⁸⁵ New World also employed MGM's lab for the processing of the film, which *Variety* noted gave the film "a surprising gloss."¹⁸⁶ *Piranha*, like *Jaws*, was released in the summer season. However, it was late in the summer season, which meant it had only a few weeks to profit from this popular moviegoing period before kids went back to school. *Piranha* premiered on August 23, 1978, a week before Labor Day weekend. Though Labor Day often delivered strong box office business, the period after Labor Day was considered one of the most fallow in the year and a time of sharp drop off in attendance, matched only to the period directly after Christmas.¹⁸⁷ For these reasons, distributors often dumped films that were expected to underperform on the market around Labor Day.¹⁸⁸

Piranha was able to transcend drive-in fare status only in some markets. *Piranha* played a mix of drive-ins and indoor theaters, typically with a higher proportion of outdoor dates in each

market. In Chicago, it played at a higher share of outdoor theaters; in comparison, that same weekend in Chicago, Universal's *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) played in 10 indoor and only two outdoor theaters.¹⁸⁹ In Louisville, *Piranha* played on a showcase in four indoor theaters and two drive-ins. This included one drive-in program that consisted of *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), Disney's *The Cat From Outer Space* (1978), and *Star Wars* "all under showcase."¹⁹⁰ In Miami, the film played in 12 theaters—seven indoors and five outdoors—"including some nice returns under the stars," noted *Variety*.¹⁹¹ In Cleveland, Ohio, *Variety* reported the film did "smash \$150,000" in both drive-ins and hardtops.¹⁹² By August 28, the film had grossed \$2 million in 196 theaters.¹⁹³ In Chicago, it played at the Woods Theatre in the Loop and in a showcase comprised of 30 indoor and 27 outdoor theaters. In Dayton, Ohio, *Piranha* was the only new film opening at the end of August and played a showcase at six drive-ins.¹⁹⁴ Likewise, it was the only new release in Denver and played a total of 11 theaters.¹⁹⁵ In St. Louis, *Variety* reported, "Late-summer blahs seem to affect the entire area, though 'Piranha' is strong in opening week, reaching \$46,000 in five houses, primarily drive-ins."¹⁹⁶ *Piranha* performed especially well in Latin America and some areas of Europe, benefiting UA and not New World Pictures.¹⁹⁷

Like *Mako*, *Piranha*'s parasitic relationship with *Jaws* can be seen in marketing materials. From a graphic design perspective, the one sheet of *Piranha* had similarities to the Universal film. Both one sheets have similar graphical layouts with illustrations of the underwater of the ocean taking up the bottom two-thirds of the image and a woman swimming in the ocean on the top third of the one sheet [Figure 19]. The colors red and blue dominated. There were important differences that further underscored New World's exploitation approach to the material. The *Jaws*' one sheet had a strongly graphic quality with merely the suggestion of

violence and sexuality. The *Piranha* one sheet, however, takes that suggestion and makes it explicit while imitating key layout elements. The one sheet kept the same orientation to water, with the fish depicted below a woman. The New World marketing materials, however, depict the woman's body in greater detail and at a larger scale. Justin Wyatt has shown that *Jaws*' marketing successfully boiled down the film to a single image that captured the film's high concept traits: a battle between good and evil.¹⁹⁸ *Piranha*'s one sheet borrowed that success of this image (and audience's corresponding awareness of that marketing campaign), but injected exploitation marketing appeals. *Piranha*'s more explicit rendering of the female form was not a wholesale addition to *Jaws*' one sheet but an amplification of sexual excitement, adventure, and curiosity Schaefer has identified as common to sexploitation film advertising.¹⁹⁹ A *Piranha* trailer, which the industry viewed as so important to exploitation selling, also acknowledged the similarity to *Jaws*.²⁰⁰ The narrator says: "These are the maneaters that go beyond the bite of all other jaws. Sharks come alone, piranha come in thousands." In New World fashion, the trailer also depicted a car chase and an explosion. *Piranha*'s titles looked similar also to *Jaws 2*'s titles in terms of color, font, and general impression [Figure 20].

As an 'R'-rated film made by an exploitation firm, *Piranha* was more titillating than other films of the cycle. *Piranha* offered chills and thrills not dissimilar to those presented in *Jaws* but depicted them more explicitly. Similar to *Jaws*, an early scene in *Piranha* shows a young woman skinny dipping naked. In *Jaws*, the camera primarily focuses on the swimmer's legs, but *Piranha* presents the same action in a racier manner, showing the woman's exposed breasts. Of course, the 'R' rating limited the audience for and profitability of the film as a *Jaws* substitute. The impact of the sea creatures' violence is also more explicitly showcased in *Piranha* in a shot featuring a bloodied head. The film also included some vaguely politically

resonant plot elements, seen also in New World Pictures' nurse sexploitation films, when exposition establishes that the Department of Defense in Operation Razorfish developed the piranhas to destroy the river system of the North Vietnamese. Veteran exploitation actress Barbara Steele, best known for her role in Maria Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960), also starred as marine expert Dr. Mengers. Like *Orca*, *Piranha's* setting is also differentiated from *Jaws*. The film takes place in a wooded rural setting and a teen wilderness camp. Still other elements are like the *Jaws* formula. The Lost River Resort sequence, where the most brutal piranha attack takes place, unfolds in a manner very similar to the Fourth of July Amity Island Beach attack. The packed resort is thrown into chaos when the piranhas begin attacking vacationers on inner tubes. What results is a violent melee that is the film's biggest set piece. Lost River's CEO Buck Gardner, played by character actor Dick Miller, was likely modeled on Amity Island's Mayor Larry Vaughn.

The parasitic approach cut both ways. *Piranha's* similarity to *Jaws* was its major selling point, but this came at a considerable cost for a trend that had been ongoing for several years. *Variety* was skeptical about the film's draw because of the stale subject matter and the low-budget special effects— such as the garish use of red dye to indicate blood and the lack of close up shots of the titular fish.²⁰¹ Despite an appealing “jesting tone” and a slick visual look, *Variety* doubted the market could sustain another sea creature film.²⁰² The review noted, “If there hadn't been a “Jaws,” a “Jaws 2,” a “Shark's Treasure” and a “Tintorera,” then New World Pictures' “Piranha,” might have had more going for it. Given its timing, however, summer action seems limited to ozoners and nabes.”²⁰³ *Variety* also observed that the low budget was evident in *Piranha's* sound effects, especially the fishes' gnawing sounds, which resembled “an air-conditioner on the fritz.” Ultimately, *Variety* called *Piranha* “a rip-off, but an honest one” and

effective in providing some thrills “within its low budget limitations.”²⁰⁴ *Piranha* grossed \$14 million worldwide on a budget of \$1 million.²⁰⁵ If one assumes the film cost \$1.5 million including print and advertising, this was an excellent return on New World’s investment, but the film was publicly considered a flop. As an unambiguous failure by *Jaws* standards, *Piranha* established a market signal that potentially limited the earnings of later entries in the cycle. Though publicly considered a flop, there is some indication that Universal feared *Piranha* would impinge on demand for *Jaws 2* (1978). Joseph McBride writes that Universal wanted to put an injunction on *Piranha* because *Jaws 2* was being released that same year. Spielberg thought *Piranha* was “the best of the *Jaws* ripoffs” and convinced Universal to stop legal action.²⁰⁶

Piranha departed from *Jaws* in ways that aligned it with exploitation cinema; at the same time, scenes appeared closely modeled on *Jaws*, a correspondence not seen in *Mako* or *Orca*. In this way, *Piranha* operated more closely to a kind of ‘mockbuster’ than did *Mako* or *Orca*. In making a mockbuster, New World set up *Jaws* to be the yardstick that *Piranha*’s grosses would be measured against. *Piranha* cannibalized the cultural and economic capital of a *Jaws*—a reversal of Spielberg’s own assimilation of exploitation monster movies. Parodic and light-hearted in tone, *Piranha* mocked the blockbuster while profiting from its established appeal and established a modestly profitable series. A sequel followed a few years later with *Piranha II: The Spawning* (1983), which was James Cameron’s directorial debut. *Piranha 3D* (2010) and *Piranha 3DD* (2012) were also a part of the series.

Section III: Blockbuster Lite and the Low-Budget Space Opera Film

Like *Jaws*, the production history of *Star Wars* has been recounted numerous times.²⁰⁷ As is often noted, Fox did not anticipate a blockbuster hit with *Star Wars*. MCA balked at having

Star Wars be George Lucas' second film option after *American Graffiti*, viewing *Star Wars* as "too far out."²⁰⁸ Fox, who received 60% after the \$40 million distribution fee, also did not control sequel rights.²⁰⁹ The direct cost was \$10,000,000, and a break-even point was initially estimated to be just \$22–25 million.²¹⁰

While Universal's wide releases of *Jaws*, saturation television campaign, and uncommon exhibitor terms were quite innovative, *Star Wars* replicated several of the market strategies used to drive exhibitor and audience demand for *Jaws*. While Universal in some respects initiated the tough stance studios took with exhibitors in the release of blockbusters, *Star Wars* was in a position to fully capitalize on these new precedents. Fox opened *Star Wars* in more playdates than *Jaws* and for longer runs, including a re-issue the following year.²¹¹ *Star Wars* also expanded investment in merchandising. In this sense, *Star Wars* solidified such components of a super-grosser film. As Wasser writes, "Heavy marketing, critical acclaim, and hybrid appeal made *Star Wars* an event film."²¹² Ballantine Books paid upwards of six figures for a paperback, and the novelization sold two million copies by the end of the summer of 1977.²¹³

However, Fox's release also departed from Universal's in important ways. First, *Star Wars* was not 'pre-sold' to the degree that *Jaws* was. Instead, *Star Wars* was Lucas' original intellectual property. As a film with no pre-sold element, exhibitors were not clamoring to release the film. Julie Turnock writes, "*Star Wars* was financed and produced more like a Roger Corman independent exploitation film than a big studio blockbuster."²¹⁴ While it is true *Star Wars* was not pre-sold to the degree *Jaws* was, having a distributor like Fox provided opportunities to scale up bookings once the film took off. Unlike Universal's wide release of *Jaws*, Fox opened *Star Wars* in limited markets. *Star Wars* opened the Wednesday before Memorial Day on May 25, 1977, on a limited basis in approximately 44 theaters in 41 cities. *Star Wars* took in \$2.5

million opening week across 35 playdates on Wednesday and nine on Friday.²¹⁵ Grosses through June 2nd were \$3 million.²¹⁶ As of June 11, *Star Wars* had grossed \$5.2 million, and Fox was projecting \$100–\$200 million in gross rentals.²¹⁷ By this time, the scale of the phenomenon was coming into view. Albert Szabo, manager of the Avco-Embassy Cinema in Westwood said, “I have never seen anything like this. They are filling the theatre for every single performance—six a day. This is not a snowball, it’s an avalanche.”²¹⁸ Szabo also noticed repeat viewers; one woman was standing in line to see the film for the 5th time. As of June 11, 1977, Lucas had also revealed a trilogy was in the works for Spring 1978 release.²¹⁹

Star Wars became a blockbuster by driving demand through unanticipated windfall profits and the buzz surrounding such a surprise box office response. *Star Wars* opened wider throughout that summer. Three hundred playdates were planned on July 4, the fourth weekend of release.²²⁰ By July 6, 1977, *Star Wars* had played in 496 playdates with a total of \$32 million earned. By the fourth weekend of release, Fox assumed *Star Wars* had reached its breakeven point, having taken in \$23 million for domestic rentals.²²¹ By July 27, 1977, the film had taken in \$65 million in 843 playdates with estimated film rentals of \$46 million. Despite having been in release for some time, *Star Wars* took in \$2 million each night of the weekend of July 23, showing accelerating demand for the film. While *Jaws* was bringing in \$10 million each week during peak summer season, *Variety* reported *Star Wars* was slightly ahead of *Jaws* by the end of July, during which time the film was playing in 887 theaters.²²² By July 25, *Star Wars* had \$66 million in box office receipts.²²³

Released throughout the summer of 1977 and into the fall, *Star Wars* showed that a blockbuster needed remarkable “legs” to make super-grosser level of profits. However, as Charles Acland points out, later blockbusters would have a much shorter theatrical life and

would “grow old” in video and pay cable windows.²²⁴ *Star Wars* continued to take in substantial earnings far into the summer with an average weekly box office take of \$7.2 million.²²⁵ By August 10, *Star Wars* grossed \$90 million domestically from 1,044 playdates.²²⁶ *Star Wars* was anticipated to best *Jaws*, since Fox planned to extend the run into the fall in “several long-running deluxe situation runs.”²²⁷ *Star Wars* finally surpassed *Jaws* on November 19, 1977, after six months in theaters; by November 23rd 1977, *Star Wars* had \$120 million in domestic rentals.²²⁸ With such market saturation for such a long period of time, *Star Wars* brought to Fox nearly a year’s worth of earnings, an unprecedented amount. Fox’s domestic rental numbers for 1977 were \$197 million, which was only \$4 million less than Universal’s 1975 record of \$201 million domestic rentals.²²⁹ In January 1978, it was evident that *Star Wars* and Fox were the box office champions of 1977 and that *Star Wars* would make \$300 million. Fox chairman Dennis Stanfill was expected to receive a bonus of a \$1 million.²³⁰ According to Peter Biskind, “*Star Wars* put Fox on the map.”²³¹ Dennis Stanfill, Fox chairman of the board, claimed that *Star Wars* gave Fox “five years of growth in one.” *Star Wars* showed how one film could make (or presumably break) a studio, a lesson United Artists also learned with *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), as Biskind and Caves have recounted.²³² Swimming in money, Fox was planning to further diversify by investing in a “Coca-Cola bottling plant” and a Colorado ski resort.²³³

Star Wars drove exhibitor demand to such an extreme degree that it disrupted theater availability and the sometimes-cozy relationship between competitor studios. Fox’s continued release of *Star Wars* into the fall interfered with Columbia Pictures’ plan to release *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in top theaters in December 1977. Indeed, Fox took Columbia to court over *Star Wars*’ continued run at the United Artists Theatre Circuit. According to *Variety*, “The situation has been brewing for months, ever since the expected post-Labor Day b.o.

tapering on ‘Star Wars’ ...never really occurred.”²³⁴ Fox filed a suit related to the 1,336-seat Coronet Theater in San Francisco.²³⁵ The suit pressured United Artists Theatre Circuit to comply with a contract stipulation that dictated a holdover under certain conditions, namely if box office exceeded \$10,600.”²³⁶ Columbia had also contracted with United Artists for the release of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* at the Coronet on December 14. Fox’s suit was designed to enforce the contract and prevent Columbia from releasing any advertising related to The Coronet.²³⁷ The legal conflict pointed to a reality of the market that was coming into focus: that there were only so many theaters in the U.S. and so many weekends in a release season. That this was a problem for the most powerful studios suggested the multiplied impact on independents, who needed to also convince exhibitors to book their much less profitable films. Earning unprecedented windfall profits, *Star Wars* further raised the stakes of what a successful Hollywood film could make and ushered in the era of the super-grosser.

Exploitation Independents in the Era of the Super-grosser

Rather than voicing the playdate availability concerns that *Star Wars*’ lengthy run foretold, A.D. Murphy of *Variety* took an optimistic stance, arguing that *Star Wars*’ phenomenal profitability was beneficial for all areas of the film industry, a sign of the health of theatrical attendance in the face of television and impending home video. Murphy explained, “[*Star Wars*] b.o. response affirms anew that there are, indeed, people ‘out there,’ willing to go to a theatre. Every couple of years the business needs such a tonic. And since a hit film seems to encourage further filmgoing, everyone in every company is just delighted at the 20th-Fox success story.”²³⁸ By 1978, it was becoming clearer to producers and executives that *Jaws* and *Star Wars* were indeed rapidly transforming the industry. In a 1978 article titled “Hollywood in the Era of the

‘Super-Grosser,’” William Bates referred to such super-grossers as “detonating devices of social phenomena that can go completely out of control—and fling the film’s profit into an undreamed-of orbit.”²³⁹ Ned Tanen of Universal likewise observed that late-1970s hits like the sleeper *Animal House* “start to take on a life of their own.”²⁴⁰ The scale of success had shifted so that producers were searching for a ‘super-grosser’ that would become “a national obsession.”²⁴¹ Michael Eisner of Paramount offered what would become an aphorism for Hollywood more generally: “The only rule is that there are no rules. The super-grossers are things that become cultural phenomena. There is no way you can work out on paper what a cultural phenomenon should be.”²⁴² *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *Animal House* all pointed to how the super-grosser related differently to the superstar market than did a standard star vehicle. In all three films, the intellectual property of the franchise, as opposed to any one actor or actress, appeared to be the star that sold the films.

In addition to the cultural impact, the economic impact of ‘super-grossers’ on individual producers, directors, and studios was becoming difficult to fathom. The market was indeed becoming one of extremes, as De Vany has described. As journalist William Bates wrote in a prominent 1978 article for *The New York Times*, the “scale of the gamble” had changed.²⁴³ Advertising costs of \$5–10 million could double the cost of production. This meant that films needed to reach a much greater threshold, upwards of 2–3 times cost, in order to profit.²⁴⁴ Spielberg has said that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, at a cost of \$19 million, needed to be a blockbuster and earn \$51 million simply to break even.²⁴⁵ The risks associated with such ‘gambling’ were substantial. In 1978, *Variety* showed that one out of five showed profit, and one out of three showed a loss.²⁴⁶ The difficulty of anticipating audience tastes plagued executives, particularly given that relatively low-budget films *Rocky* (1976) and *Animal House* (1978) were

unanticipated high-grossers.²⁴⁷ *Variety* observed that Hollywood executives were pressured by the “need to reap huge, ever-increasing profits and the absence of any body of professional knowledge or skill that can guarantee a hit.”²⁴⁸ Robert Towne characterized the pressure-cooker industry climate at this time: “Fewer and fewer films, more and more pressure to succeed, a few scattered big miracles.”²⁴⁹

To create the immense exposure needed to drive demand, the major studios and their super-grossers increasingly dominated television advertising. In just one year, from 1978 to 1979, there was a 34% increase in expenditures on television advertising, according to the *Broadcast Advertisers Report*.²⁵⁰ In 1979, distributors spent \$175 million over 452 films.²⁵¹ *Variety* reported that the number of films with advertising buys of over \$1 million was going up as budgets continued to rise.²⁵² Independent distributors were either cut out of such deals or unable to foot the bill for these expenses; by 1980, 99% of all network buys were being done by the major distributors, according to the *Broadcast Advertisers Report*.²⁵³ A comparison between *Jaws* and *Star Wars* illustrated that quick shift. For *Jaws*, Universal spent \$1.8 million on spots and nothing on network purchases.²⁵⁴ *Star Wars* seemed to reverse the approach that *Jaws* took. Fox spent \$1.9 million on network buys and nothing on spots.²⁵⁵

Major studios also managed risk, not by altering production or overhead, but by extracting distribution terms, including upfront guarantees, that forced exhibitors to carry risk. As Chapter Two showed, exploitation distributors similarly offset risk of obscenity prosecution to exhibitors. While these examples represented two different types of risk, they nonetheless illustrate that in the 1970s exhibitors were exposed to the economic and social uncertainties of actual moviegoing, reliant on distributors for supply. At this time, blind bidding three features a year was legal, and the majors leveraged this loophole to get exhibitors to bid on their high-

budget features before production was completed.²⁵⁶ The majors defended this practice as an outcome of the seasonal nature of the business; with three periods of peak attendance—Christmas, Easter and summer—release dates were necessarily set in advance.²⁵⁷ Exhibitors, however, complained that the majors were spreading risk to theaters. Unlike ticket buyers, who could make a relatively informed consumer decision based on trailers and reviews, exhibitors asked to bid on a film given only “a three-line description of the film, its stars and its producer.”²⁵⁸ NATO argued that blind bidding enabled major distributors to recoup their costs almost immediately through the blind-bid guarantees paid by the exhibitor. They cited *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as evidence. The film apparently made back its \$19 million budget before appearing on screen.²⁵⁹

The majors’ use of upfront guarantees to amortize costs and to secure favorable terms from exhibitors put independents at a disadvantaged position. They had no similar leverage with which to prompt guarantees from exhibitors, and *Star Wars*’ half-year run was potentially devastating for theatrical distribution in the independent sector. The impact on the independents was seen in the summers of 1978 and 1979. Internal correspondence at AIP revealed difficulty in securing summer dates in the late 1970s. A letter dated January 15, 1978, from Assistant General Sales Manager Robert Steuer to Leon P. Blender, Sales and Distribution Executive Vice President, illustrated this concern:

Our frustration in securing dates is making it almost impossible to firm any summer playtime. The exhibitors are not bidding on our future releases, where normally we would have secure terms and money by now. I’ve received countless calls from General Cinema, AMC, ABC...to name a few, all requesting information on the films, ads, product reels, or anything about the pictures.²⁶⁰

In the past we have been able to set the South with our relationship with the circuits, but this year is different...it is a buyers [sic] market. We will have the dates, I am sure, but as to terms, extended playtime, and guarantees...this is extremely doubtful. Ninety percent of the bids we are receiving are all willing to negotiate, and you know what that means!! The bids we do receive are primarily seven to fourteen days and ridiculous terms.²⁶¹

The letter goes on to show that AIP was able to book dates primarily in drive-ins in the South, including in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Montgomery, Alabama, and in Texas.²⁶² Steuer explained:

We received bids in Charlotte on CALIFORNIA DREAMING, and although there are some guarantees involved, the majority of the theaters are drive-ins. The difficulty in setting our summer releases is becoming critical, and playtime is all but non-existent. These films have too much potential to just hit and miss, but it looks as though we are going to have no other alternative.²⁶³

At the end of the letter, Steuer ended with a “synopsis” of the problem under discussion. Steuer explicitly called out the major studios’ success in booking dates in the summer. He wrote, “Leon, with the exception of *Jaws II*, and *Omen II*, the majors are making ‘special’ summer deals. They are selling because of the abundance of product, with reviews and ‘no firm’ terms, with minimum floors in order to move their product.”²⁶⁴

A March 3, 1978, letter to Blender from Jeff Loper, branch manager of the Pittsburgh exchange, suggested that executives at AIP were laying blame for poor sales on the franchisees.

Loper wrote:

I feel it is about time we in the field stand up against the allegations made against us. Such allegations, as not getting the right theatres, or terms, and in general, doing a poor job with the picture we have had. To that I say – ridiculous. I have talked to

other branch managers and the story is the same. The pictures do not perform.²⁶⁵

This thing about the wrong houses or terms is ridiculous. For example, *STAR WARS*, was just another picture to Fox. The Pittsburgh engagement did not have paper or trailers to promote its initial opening. The feature opened in May to a first week gross of \$46,000....I could site [sic] other examples in regards to other successful features, even *JAWS*, where the sales and publicity departments had very little to do with their success at the box office. If people want to see a feature, they will go to see it.²⁶⁶

In other words, Loper suggested that AIP films were not selling well to exhibitors because the pictures were simply unappealing to audiences. AIP kept internal records of the other studios' release schedule in an intricately drawn schedule of release, as seen in Figure 21. This document illustrated the studios' releases by week from December 22, 1976, to September 14, 1977.²⁶⁷

Arkoff addressed branch managers' growing discontent over summer play in an August 11, 1978 letter. He wrote, "Our summer has not been the success that we had hoped it to be...." Arkoff then laid out the solution: a 25th anniversary slate of features that "will be introducing a new look at AIP."²⁶⁸ These films included *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Force 10 from Navarone* (1978), a sequel to *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *C.H.O.M.P.S.* (1979), a *Benji*-esque comedy produced by Hanna-Barbera, and *Meteor*, the international co-production analyzed below. Announcing that the "company is heading into a new era," Arkoff's letter detailed further: "Here in the Home Office, we are trying to design a line-up of product that is ambitious and, most importantly, will give credibility to the premise of a 'NEW AIP.' We are proud of our past, but today, in order to meet the competition, we realize we cannot continue to follow the formulas of the past."²⁶⁹ Arkoff promised better films but, as the case of *Meteor* will illustrate, it was quite difficult for AIP to compete in the arena of special effects-driven sci-fi.

While distributors were unable to book AIP films in theaters outside of the South during the summer of 1978, New World Pictures experienced a similar situation in the summer of 1979. That summer, New World Pictures was unable to open Peter Bogdanovich's \$2 million *Saint Jack* (1979) in Los Angeles in the desired summer months of July or August. Frank Moreno, General Sales Manager of New World, said that he approached exhibitors for bids in March and even offered to negotiate percentage splits and length of runs.²⁷⁰ However, exhibitors wanted to wait to see how the film performed in New York. *Variety* said the film had "okay reviews" in New York and that *Saint Jack* was able to get multiple engagements in some key cities: Miami, Philadelphia, Columbus, and Indianapolis.²⁷¹ After *Saint Jack's* opening, New World once again approached the Los Angeles exhibitors, who replied that there was no room in the market until October. This was not a workable solution for Frank Moreno, who claimed that films that open in July and August "do 40% more business" than films released in October.²⁷² Moreno complained of the majors' blind bidding that tied up the best play times: "All the quality theatres were already booked for pictures that exhibitors hadn't even seen." *Variety* reflected that it was "surprising" "when the most expensive feature to date of one of the country's leading independent film companies can't get summer bookings in Los Angeles when it has already opened well in several major cities."²⁷³ Avco-Embassy's sports drama *Goldengirl* (1979) and AIP's *The Amityville Horror* were the only independents features to open in a first-run theater in Los Angeles that summer.

While big independent players AIP and New World were unable to book multi-million-dollar films in theaters, even smaller exploitation independents who were *not* vying for prime first-run theaters were pushed out of drive-in dates, as majors were using drive-ins to reissue blockbusters, notably *Star Wars*.²⁷⁴ Independent sub-distributor Mid-America Releasing branch

manager Bob Scarborough, who was a former booker of drive-ins, reported, “A lot of our kind of pictures don’t play well indoors; they need that drive-in audience.”²⁷⁵ Exploitation sub-distributor J.M.G. Films, characterized by *Boxoffice* as “the oldest independent motion picture distributor in the United States and Canada,” also experienced increased competition for drive-in bookings.²⁷⁶ J.M.G. Films appeared to serve Midwest cities, including Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh.²⁷⁷ J.M.G. president Jay Goldberg complained that Fox reissued *Star Wars* three times “knocking fellas like myself out of valuable playing time.”²⁷⁸ Goldberg’s concerns illustrated an important principle of the blockbuster superstar market: that repeat viewing was almost required for the enormous grosses of a *Star Wars* or, later, of a *Titanic* (2007) or *Avatar* (2009).²⁷⁹ Repeat viewing could also be used by Fox as justification in keeping *Star Wars* in the marketplace.

The studios’ blockbusters had so successfully driven demand that it resulted in an oversupply at independent firms. Even audience or exhibitor enthusiasm in an independent film could hardly change the structural limitations in the industry resulting from a fixed number of theaters in the marketplace. Locked out of the summer season and drive-in market critical to their business model, AIP and New World engaged in co-production and co-financing deals to attempt to capitalize on *Star Wars*’ unprecedented success. In *Meteor* and *Battle Beyond the Stars*, both companies invested record amounts in production, promotion, and prints to create an event film that could get summer bookings during 1979 and 1980, respectively. In the case of *Meteor*, AIP extensively promoted the film on television and developed an array of merchandising. With *Battle Beyond the Stars*, New World invested in a special effects studio. Similar to the majors, AIP and New World engaged in risk-seeking strategies in these spectacle-driven, special effects-laden high-budget features that mimicked the selling strategies of blockbusters and textual appeals of *Star Wars*. Commenting on the company’s spending of millions on *Meteor*, Arkoff

offered: “This is the real gambling...At M-G-M, Kerkorian was doing more gambling making movies than he is now as the owner of the Grand Hotel. Hell, at least in Las Vegas, Kerkorian has the odds with him.”²⁸⁰

AIP's Meteor (1979) and the Sci-Fi Disaster Film

Unable to compete for exhibitor bookings with low-budget genre films, *Meteor* (1979) was AIP's last attempt to create a summer family-oriented blockbuster. Throughout the 1970s, AIP had shifted course several times. By 1975 and 1976, the firm was phasing out low-budget blaxploitation production for 'PG'-rated fantasy-adventure films. By mid-decade, the company had also widened its reach to rural working-class white viewers with such films as *Return to Macon County* (1975), *Sixpack Annie* (1975), and *The Wild McCullochs* (1975). After the *Jaws* phenomenon, AIP was positioned to break into mini-major status. Yet, in embodying a post-war mode of exploitation filmmaking, AIP struggled to find a hold in the late-1970s marketplace. In 1978, Arkoff commented on the status of AIP in the super-grosser era. He said, “People ask me if I'm still making exploitation pictures. The nature of this business today is making big exploitation pictures. They all depend on enormous sums of money being spent on newspaper, radio, and television advertising. Today, hype is king, and the biggest, most expensive pictures have the biggest, most expensive hype.”²⁸¹ Distribution chief Joseph M. Sugar explained AIP was taking an ‘aggressive’ stance with these bigger budget films.²⁸² With *Meteor* (1979), AIP attempted to drive blockbuster-level demand through an imitative approach to production and selling that was ultimately unsuccessful in buoying the company in the high-risk, high-reward environment at the time.

Meteor was at once an imitation of the majors early-1970s disaster film formula and an imitation of *Star Wars*. Indeed, *Meteor*, starred Natalie Wood and Sean Connery and was directed by Ronald Neame, who helmed *The Poseidon Adventure* for 20th Century Fox. AIP received a \$10 million line of credit from Bank of America to make *Meteor*.²⁸³ The company spread risk by co-producing the film. As Arkoff explained, “This [*Meteor*] is a deal picture instead of a production picture.”²⁸⁴ Arkoff meant that the company did not independently produce and finance *Meteor* but instead put in a “reasonable investment” in a co-financing and distribution deal. The *Meteor* Production Cost Report dated September 22, 1979, showed AIP contributing only \$1 million to an initial budget of \$13 million with revised final cost of \$16.5 million.²⁸⁵ The negative cost of *Meteor* reached major-studio levels—a feat enabled by a co-production deal with producer Sandy Howard, Gabriel Katzka, and Run Run Shaw. In this agreement, distribution rights were divided. AIP secured North American release rights; Warner Bros. released the film in their international branches; Run Run Shaw handled Southeast Asia; Nippon Herald released in Japan; and Stockholm films released the film in Scandinavia.²⁸⁶ AIP contributed \$3 million for US rights, while Warner Bros. put in \$4.5 million for its territories and Shaw \$4.5 million. Nippon Herald contributed \$1.5 million.²⁸⁷ The stars of the film also made profit participation deals. This complex co-financing arrangement anticipated Warner Bros, Filmways, Tandem Productions, and Run Run Shaw’s deal on *Blade Runner* (1982). Indeed, preselling (or parceling out rights as a method for raising production funds) would become common in the 1980s for independents Cannon Films, Carolco Pictures, and Vestron Video.

In its dual imitation of the disaster cycle and the nascent sci-fi opera cycle, *Meteor* layered its appeals to Hollywood respectability. The casting of Connery added a third layer of imitation—that of James Bond. Indeed, *Moonraker* (1979), which was produced after *Meteor*

was made, had a similar plot. Besides its stars – Connery and Wood – *Meteor* also featured Hollywood veterans Karl Malden and Henry Fonda. Connery plays Dr. Paul Bradley, a retired NASA space scientist who is recruited to stop a meteor that is hurtling toward Earth. Bradley reluctantly works with translator and scientist Tatiana Donskaya (Wood) of the Soviet Union to aim *Hercules*, a nuclear-bomb laden satellite, at the meteor. Before the meteor can be destroyed, pieces of the meteor reach Earth and cause an avalanche, tsunami, and mud slide. *Meteor* bore only superficial similarities to *Star Wars*. The beginning and ending credits, with their bold capitalized gold font moving from foreground to background against a celestial background, were an obvious imitation. Overall, *Meteor* was a serious, adult disaster film interspersed with space animation of an asteroid belt, a meteor hurtling through space, and miniatures of US space missiles sent to destroy the meteor. Disaster sequences were constructed from stock footage of explosions and controlled building explosions. Other disaster scenes included an avalanche in the Swiss Alps, a tsunami in Hong Kong, and a mud slide in the New York City subway system. As the above description shows, *Meteor* bore similarities to *Moonraker*, which itself was seen as a *Star Wars* knockoff. According to the Production Cost Report, *Meteor* was shot from October 11, 1977, to February 3, 1978, while *Moonraker* began shooting several months later in August 1978. Both *Moonraker* and *Meteor* were part and parcel of the same wave of *Star Wars* knockoffs.

Meteor saw Arkoff engaging in what Universal and Fox did—investing in production and marketing costs in hopes of driving exhibitor and audience demand. In a company meeting in November 1978, Arkoff discussed the changing marketplace citing “high costs of picture making, merchandising, spiraling expenditures in virtually every area, from prints to advertising.”²⁸⁸ Some reports indicated that AIP contributed \$6 million to the film’s promotion,

which reportedly cost \$30 million.²⁸⁹ AIP hired TRG Communications Inc. to develop promotional materials for *The Amityville Horror* and *Meteor*.²⁹⁰ Promotional materials positioned *Meteor*, the most expensive release to date, as the crown jewel in AIP's upmarket push in 1978. This was seen in an archival press kit titled "AIP Presents 1978 and Beyond." The silver book featured inserts of that year's releases: *The Amityville Horror*, *Youngblood* (1978), and several others. The press releases in the kit declared *Meteor* "A Major News Event!" [Figure 22]. One article called *Meteor* the company's 25th anniversary film. A second article featured a crowded photograph of the 500-person cast and crew. The article described the crew as "one of the largest and most impressive assemblage of actors and technicians." This elaborate advertising booklet reflected the growing costs associated with creating broad awareness for films.

Promotion for *Meteor* included a deluge of media and consumer saturation intended to capture audience attention and create an event film. In marketing the film, AIP attempted to execute the "extensive national sales-promotion (especially television)" that Richard Caves writes was required for blockbuster films.²⁹¹ The *Meteor* Preliminary Merchandising Report found in the Samuel Z. Arkoff Collections showed that additional promotion included newspaper advertisements beginning a week and a half prior to opening; full page color ads in sci-fi magazines *Omni* and *Starlog*; subway and bus ads in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles; a five-week Jack in the Box store promotion; and merchandising in the form of one sheets, a *Meteor*-themed *Marvel Comics* issue, kites, stickers, rubber balls, costume jewelry, a Warner paperback novel, and a "metal wastepaper basket."²⁹² For television advertising, *Meteor* imitated *Jaws*' approach. Like Universal, AIP spent \$1.5 million on spot buys, which appeared to be predominantly network spot buys.²⁹³ The *Meteor* Preliminary Merchandising Report showed television purchases for the film. Television ads were scheduled in advance of the opening, as

had been done with *Jaws*. Primetime slots were purchased prior to opening only. After release, daytime slots were planned.²⁹⁴

Meteor's biggest debt to *Star Wars* was in its special effects. The special effects team consisted of seasoned veterans, such as Harold Kres, who worked with Neame on *The Poseidon Adventure*; Bill Creber, the production designer on *The Poseidon Adventure*; and visual effects experts William Cruse and Margot Anderson.²⁹⁵ After an initial edit that Henshaw and Neame deemed ineffective, the special effects team reworked 10 minutes of the 110-minute film, focusing on the climax scene depicting the destruction of the meteor.²⁹⁶ Special effects post-production time, which took 85 weeks, more than tripled from the initial projected schedule of 24 weeks and brought the cost of *Meteor* much beyond the initial estimation of \$11 million.²⁹⁷ The Production Cost Report showed an increase to \$16.5 million by September 22, 1979.²⁹⁸ With the budget rising to nearly \$17 million, producers had no choice but to raise money themselves, as the film's initial financing had been secured with a completion guarantor for only \$13 million. The original co-financers, AIP, Warner Bros, Run Run Shaw, and Nippon Herald all contributed additional funds, but archival papers in the Arkoff papers do not indicate how much AIP contributed. At a final cost of nearly \$17 million, an unfathomable number by exploitation standards, *Meteor* cost the equivalent of two dozen or more of the blaxploitation films AIP released in the early 1970s.²⁹⁹ *Meteor* supports Caves' self-described conjecture that cost control in feature films at the level of management only becomes more difficult as costs grow.³⁰⁰

Producers of *Meteor* wagered that investment in quality special effects would pay off in bookings; however, the delay caused by an extended post-production schedule hampered the film's profitability because it pushed *Meteor*'s opening beyond a prime summer date of June 15 to a dismal date of October 19, 1979, a time when filmgoing would be more sporadic.³⁰¹ *Variety*

wrote that the “reason for the delay was confirmed by AI execs to be snafus in the special effects department, a bugaboo in this era of big-budget spectacles.”³⁰² AIP supplied *Love at First Bite* (1979) for the June release date instead.³⁰³ *Love at First Bite* proved effective summer counter-programming, running for 14 weeks and earning \$40 million by mid-July 1979.³⁰⁴ However, *Moonraker*’s 1979 summer release likely took away some of the audience from *Meteor*. United Artists opened *Moonraker* in 900 US dates the weekend preceding the 4th of July holiday. *Moonraker* took in \$10 million over the first four days of release, a record for UA at the time, and would gross \$70 million in the US.³⁰⁵ As we will see, *Moonraker* earned more in four days than *Meteor* would in its entire box office run.

The film’s post-production and release was so troubled, that *Variety* raised the question if an independent like AIP could execute a special effects-heavy blockbuster: “With special effects, post-‘Star Wars’ and ‘Close Encounters,’ back in vogue, the problems encountered on ‘Meteor’ raise the questions of whether a big budget film of this type can be produced independently.”³⁰⁶ Director Neame also criticized the production, opining that only major studios should make special effects films. Doing damage control for Neame, AIP’s production head reported to *Variety* that what Neame really meant was that: “films require a big bankroll for pre-production, in effect, research and development. For the most part, that kind of financing and expertise can be found only at a studio.”³⁰⁷ *Meteor* involved the coordination of multiple investors, the parceling out of distribution rights, and the management of a team of animators. Indeed, Julie Turnock describes how *Star Wars*’ and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*’s focus on special effects during the post-production phase presented challenges for directors and producers who were tasked with overseeing a diverse group of technical specialists as the division between the

“main unit” of production and special effects units become less clear.³⁰⁸ With *Meteor*, AIP struggled to scale up production and, at the same time, manage challenging new workflows.

Meteor received average reviews; the press was little help in driving the positive word-of-mouth the film needed to boost demand. *Variety* observed the visuals were “good, but not great” and praised the “excellent miniature work,” saying of the special effects: “All in all, special effects wizards Glen Robinson and Robert Staples, along with stunt coordinator Roger Greed, got a good workout.”³⁰⁹ Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* characterized *Meteor* as “standard disaster fare” with poor performances that had the actors looking like they were “do[ing] time.”³¹⁰ She said the meteor itself “looks like a big hunk of week-old bread.”³¹¹ Maslin said the film’s scenes of spectacle were satisfactory but delayed by “a lot of time-killing.”³¹² AIP paid for market research for *Meteor*, as seen in the CinemaScore market research report in the Samuel Z. Arkoff collection. The film was given a C+ overall among 363 polled people.³¹³ Self-identified science-fiction fans, which comprised 30% of the audience, scored the film a more favorable ‘B+.’³¹⁴ This suggested that a general audience scored the film even lower than C+. The CinemaScore report concluded quite unconvincingly, “If this film attracts your interest, chances are 55% you will like it.”³¹⁵ With favorable scores from sci-fi fans and low ratings from general audiences, *Meteor* looked poorly positioned to become a blockbuster.

AIP managed a relatively wide release for the film. Opening on October 19, 1979, *Meteor* opened wide in 575–600 theaters, which exceeded AIP’s typical print run.³¹⁶ An internal AIP 1978 print utilization report listed total print orders (domestic and international) for 22 films, revealing an average of 400 prints per film. They ranged from 85 prints for *Youngblood*, a black-cast drama starring Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs of *Cooley High* (1975), to a high of 845 for *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977).³¹⁷ A similar report for the year 1975 showed a stark difference with

an average of just 294 prints per film with a high of 670 for *Return to Macon County*.³¹⁸ *Meteor* opened in 575 theaters for an opening weekend gross of over \$2 million.³¹⁹ However, the film appeared to sharply drop off, as it took in a total of only \$4.2 million in rentals by January 1980.³²⁰ Because the film was a coproduction, AIP was likely only scheduled to receive a portion of these earnings. This undoubtedly was much lower than what AIP was expecting, as evidenced by internal documents which showed projected revenue from *Meteor* of \$2.25 million by the end of 1979 and nearly \$4 million by the end of August 1980.³²¹ Indeed, the projected costs of advertising and distribution for *Meteor* totaled \$3.6 million by the end of 1979.³²² Shortly after the film's release, Ronald Neame wired producer Sandy Howard blaming Howard and AIP's production head Jere Henshaw for the poor opening week. Neame wrote:

I received your disappointing news on U.S. boxoffice. I am not surprised. You and Jere decided that rocket shots and stock shots of buildings being demolished would interest audience more than scenes between human beings. Jere, approved by you, altered balance of story in favor of explosions, and they exploded in the wrong direction. Too bad.³²³

Meteor's run was characterized by a middling first week in several indoor theaters, followed by a steep and quick drop-off. Similar to the model set by *The Godfather*'s release, *Meteor* managed to get multiple simultaneous bookings. In Cleveland, it played as a showcase in five theaters.³²⁴ *Meteor* played in 11 theaters in Detroit, taking in \$65,000 in two weeks, and in five theaters in St. Louis.³²⁵ It took in a decent \$32,000 across seven screens during the first week in Washington DC.³²⁶ As these examples show, *Meteor* performed well in the Midwest, a region historically favorable to exploitation. It also showed signs of failing to extend beyond these markets, particularly in consequential markets like New York and Los Angeles. On the

East Coast, *Meteor* performed less well in only one theater in Boston and one in Philadelphia.³²⁷ In Los Angeles, it took in a “tidy” but “disappointing” \$180,000 in 17 theaters.³²⁸ In New York, *Meteor* opened in 71 local screens and took in only \$371,342. AIP, however, claimed that it earned \$620,000, a fact that the company walked back after that week.³²⁹ *Meteor* also sorely lacked the legs of a blockbuster. In Chicago, *Meteor* played 14 theaters the first week with a “smashy \$200,000,” but ticket sales quickly dropped off the second week with only \$98,000 in these same 14 theaters.³³⁰ *Variety* reported that first week earnings of \$2.25 million over 575 theaters was the “biggest disappointment” of the week: “Biz was reported to be spotty, with New York and Los Angeles registering good numbers, but sparse action in the hinterlands.”³³¹ However, the above numbers show *Meteor* with the biggest per-screen averages in Chicago. It is impossible to say how *Meteor* might have fared in the coastal cities if it were released in the summer as planned. As an off-season release, however, *Meteor* would have likely been a more successful investment for AIP had it been budgeted closer to \$5 million, or nearer the costs of *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), a film that took in windfalls outside of coastal areas.

Meteor took in only \$4.2 million in rentals.³³² By contrast, AIP’s horror counterprogramming *The Amityville Horror* and *Love at First Bite* performed much better with \$35 million and \$18 million in rentals respectively.³³³ In October of 1978, Arkoff mentioned that he was “troubled by a lack of capital” after their upgrading efforts with *Meteor* and *Amityville*.³³⁴ With such a low return on investment, *Meteor* likely contributed to Arkoff’s decision to sell AIP to Filmways.³³⁵ On *Meteor*, Arkoff commented, “I’ve been through 500 pictures with this company, but I don’t think we’ve ever been through a tougher film than this.”³³⁶ As a low-budget high-concept release, *Meteor* was an unsuccessful attempt to replicate the windfall profits of a major studio event film. Bradley Schauer characterizes *Meteor* as a flop that was an effect of a

crowded marketplace for special effects sci-fi.³³⁷ The twin disaster film-*Star Wars* imitation strategy offered a relatively circumscribed template for AIP: it provided the opportunity to recruit stars and to execute special effects sequences, but it also highlighted the organizational difficulties of maneuvering international production and post-production at that scale and showed the immense cost of pushing back a summer playdate to October release. A sci-fi blockbuster with middling special-effects, *Meteor* did not have the compelling intellectual property of a *Star Wars* or the mass exposure from a summer wide release to bring in a mass audience.

Sci-Fi on a Dime: Battle Beyond the Stars and Space Opera Exploitation

In this final phase of the Blockbuster Lite strategy, New World Pictures, like AIP, struggled to adapt to moviegoers' taste for innovative special effects and sci-fi fantasy films after 1977. With *Battle Beyond the Stars*, New World Pictures sought to compete with the major studios for summer play-dates and saturation bookings by upgrading their in-house technology and using special effects to improve production quality. Tom Schatz has claimed that "not until *Star Wars* did the full potential for blockbuster profits from a movie beyond its box office returns really become evident."³³⁸ Unlike *Meteor*, *Battle Beyond the Stars* was a more competently managed Blockbuster Lite film. Like *Meteor*, *Battle Beyond the Stars* revealed the limitations of imitating *Star Wars*, a film successful because of its unique intellectual property. Imitation removed the novelty that was *Star Wars*' selling point. Special effects done on a budget likewise limited Corman's blockbuster aspirations.

Caves identifies a disparity between the independents and major studios with respect to "scopes of distribution and sizes of budgets."³³⁹ The independents' ability to take on post-

production endeavors was yet another disparity that Corman attempted to resolve in the making of *Battle Beyond the Stars*. Corman's development of a special effects studio for New World Pictures was a clear imitation of Lucas' creation of Industrial Light & Magic to execute the special effects in *Star Wars*. *Battle Beyond the Stars* was New World's first family-oriented fantasy film and, according to Corman, their most ambitious and expensive project at a production cost of \$5.5 million.³⁴⁰ Teruaki 'Jimmy' Murakami directed the 'PG'-rated *Battle Beyond the Stars*. Murakami was an animator who had formerly worked for Toei Animation studios and on New World's *Humanoids from the Deep* (1980). Knowing that live shooting and special effects work would likely be done several months apart, Corman said he chose Murakami to direct based on Murakami's experience with storyboarding.³⁴¹ James Horner composed music for the film. George Peppard starred with Richard Thomas, Robert Vaughn, and John Saxon. Thomas and Vaughn were television stars, known for their roles on *The Waltons* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* respectively. John Saxon appeared in low-budget genre films, including *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Moonshine County Express* (1977). With his career on the decline, Peppard had been starring in television during the 1970s; by 1980, Peppard was not the kind of actor who could get ticket buyers in seats simply by starring in the film. Caves observes that independent companies are at a disadvantage due to the major studios' ongoing relationships with top talent through contracts that enable a "first look" at projects or multi-film contracts.³⁴² *Battle Beyond the Stars* lacked a single compelling star with which audiences could connect. In the case of *Star Wars*, compelling intellectual property and charisma of the then-unknown actors drove audience demand. In mimicking much of *Star Wars*, however, *Battle Beyond the Stars*' intellectual property appeared familiar and even stale. The absence of star power, of a pre-sold property, or of compelling original intellectual property was a disadvantage. As Chris Anderson

notes, in a hits-driven or superstar market films need to be, not just good, but superior to other products.³⁴³ *Battle Beyond the Stars* appeared ill equipped to compete in a superstar market.

To finance the film while minimizing potential exposure to loss, Corman entered into a co-production deal in which Orion financed half of the film in exchange for foreign distribution rights.³⁴⁴ New World also pre-sold cable television rights to HBO for \$750,000, leaving Corman with North American release rights only.³⁴⁵ Echoing Arkoff's commentary, Corman was reluctant to engage in risky spending. Corman explained, "We're being forced into the bigger films. You get seduced by the numbers that are being thrown around... The \$5 million we're spending on 'Battle Beyond the Stars' is a major gamble for us." Coproduction deals that spread risk as well as reward mitigated some of Corman's anxiety about gambling on one film. He explained, "I'm reluctant to put all the money I've made in more than 20 years of filmmaking on one picture and say, 'There it goes, fellas! Twenty years of work on the roll of the dice!'" On the idea of selling off rights, Corman said that foreign rights sales were typical for New World, and he was happy to take North American rights and also "pre-sell" to HBO. The pre-sales agreements, he said were reliant on "the script, the actors, and the fact that I've been dealing with HBO for five years." As a result, Corman bragged that he could "do something I couldn't have done 10 years ago—to make a \$5 million film and have at risk less than \$2 million of my own money. I think in the future there's going to be more of a demand for higher budget films."³⁴⁶

In addition to using pre-sales of distribution rights to finance the film, New World also invested in technology and craft expertise rather than use freelance labor as had been done with New World's *Avalanche* (1978).³⁴⁷ In 1990, Corman recounted the process of developing special effects for *Battle Beyond the Stars*:

When I did *Battle Beyond the Stars*, which was a \$2 million picture, I went to a number of special-effects houses, which were giving me quotes of \$2 or \$3 million. I said, “Fellas, that’s larger than the budget for my entire picture.” Then I determined that I could start my own special-effects facility for about \$200,000. My number-one piece of equipment was an Elicon, which won the Academy Award that year for being the most advanced motion-control unit.³⁴⁸

An unprecedented outlay of resources for Corman, New World spent \$1.5 million on a special effects studio. The studio was housed in a converted lumber company building on Main Street in Venice, California, where *Battle Beyond the Stars* was shot for five weeks and had eight months of post-production. A 1980 *Los Angeles Times* article reported that a staff of 20 young people ran the studio including a former personal assistant of Corman’s and a Ph.D. from Caltech.³⁴⁹ New World equipped the studio with a \$200,000 “computer-controlled motion repeat camera mounted on a track,” a 100 x 200-foot sound stage, editing bays, and a model shop, which produced seven different scaled spaceships for the film. Second unit director on New World’s *Galaxy of Terror* (1981), James Cameron worked as a special effects cameraman. All the special effects scenes were storyboarded.³⁵⁰ Corman praised the studio’s technical sophistication: “Only George Lucas, Universal Studios and John Dykstra have better installations....”³⁵¹ Corman’s studio also did the special effects for Avco-Embassy’s *Escape from New York* (1981). Corman boasted: “The quality we put into it puts our picture right up there with ‘The Black Hole’ and somewhat below ‘The Empire Strikes Back.’”³⁵²

Battle Beyond the Stars was a visually flashy and light-hearted space opera with frequent and close similarities to *Star Wars*. In the film, Shad, a young fighter, assembles a team of mercenaries from different species and planets to save the peace-loving people of Akir from the tyrannical Sador, who is targeting the country with his deadly weapon, the Stellar Converter.

While *Meteor* owed more in tone and sensibility to the disaster cycle of the early 1970s, *Battle Beyond the Stars* fit firmly within the sci-fi fantasy genre and offered some of the same appeals as *Star Wars* with its young hero, visually striking mise-en-scene and varied planetary environments, and spiritual motifs. Similarities to *Star Wars* include a credit sequence that appeared to be traveling through space. Suspenseful and swelling theme music scored by James Horner sounds similar to John Williams' famous soundtrack. The design of the miniatures that were the spaceships and space stations were clearly modeled on *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* with its hyperdetailed, gray component parts and tiny lights. Murakami produced beautiful colorful matte paintings. Special effects also include lens flare and motion control. Overall, the art direction and special effects strongly recalled *Star Wars*. In a clever example of allusionism, the wipe transitions in *Battle Beyond the Stars* functioned as references to *Star Wars* and to the director Akira Kurosawa. (Other cinephilic nods included the character Akir and the Varda.) Plot similarities to *Star Wars* include the "stellar convertor," which like the Death Star, was the most powerful weapon in the universe. *Battle Beyond the Stars* also had its own fighters akin to storm troopers. A few New World additions included copious bright colored lighting and Saint-Exmin, a *Barbarella*-styled Valkyrie warrior. And, recalling *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Nell, the spaceship's onboard computers system, is a much-used mouthpiece for exposition.

The illustrated one sheet was similar in layout and design to the original *Star Wars* one sheet [Figure 23]. *Variety* likened the film to *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) but also recognized *Battle Beyond the Stars* as an "ambitious turn" for New World Pictures, acknowledging the film as a technical step up for Corman.¹¹¹ Describing the film's use of motion control technology, the writer observed: "An obviously lavish outing by New World standards, pic boasts of credible special effects—mostly involving miniatures of space vehicles shot in closeup—and a pleasant

sort of brashness resulting from its blending of several pic styles.”³⁵³ Reviews also highlighted *Battle Beyond the Stars*’ obvious debt to *Star Wars*. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* called the film “another ‘Star Wars’ carbon....”³⁵⁴ He predicted that the film was “quite acceptable for youngsters and the less discriminating space freaks” but seemed disappointed in the derivative quality of the film. Addressing Corman’s pedigree, Thomas summarized that “...you count upon him to lead rather than follow.”³⁵⁵ *The New York Times* characterized *Battle Beyond the Stars* as “science fiction inspired by Kurosawa’s ‘Seven Samurai’ and visited by the spirit of a wiseacre Lewis Carroll.”³⁵⁶ The reviewer made light of some of the galactic characters (“a clone in a bedsheet” and “a Valkyrie with a large bust”).³⁵⁷ Thomas’ comment about “youngsters” and the *New York Times*’ Carroll comparison would suggest *Battle Beyond the Stars* was sending a juvenile market signal, obviously not the signal they hoped to send. This is not entirely surprising. Scott Higgins has shown that action adventure serials, which played in theaters and later on television, were a key influence on *Star Wars* and Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).³⁵⁸ Along with Kurosawa films, Carroll’s “The Jabberwocky” and the sci-fi and western genres have also been identified as influences on George Lucas. That *Battle Beyond the Stars* was seen as channeling one of the more juvenile strands of this mélange suggests just how difficult it was to send a market signal that would align the film in all the right ways with *Star Wars*.

Released wide and in many hardtop theaters, *Battle Beyond the Stars*’ distribution was much closer to a blockbuster film than any of the Blockbuster Lite films discussed so far. *Battle Beyond the Stars* opened relatively wide with 400 prints upon release on July 25, 1980, and 600 prints in total.³⁵⁹ New World General Sales Manager Frank Moreno secured a two-week mid-August run for the film with the possibility for holdover if the film did well.³⁶⁰ By August 1,

1980, 430 prints of *Battle Beyond the Stars* were circulating in the U.S, and by the end of August, 610 prints would be in release.³⁶¹ However, having a summer release meant enduring tough competition upon opening weekend; *Battle Beyond the Stars* opened against *The Empire Strikes Back* in Los Angeles to tepid acclaim. *Variety*'s picture grosses pages noted that, in Los Angeles, "neighborhood boxoffices reflect[ed] the dearth of fresh and stimulating product," suggesting that New World's earnings were inferior to Fox's.³⁶² *Battle Beyond the Stars* played in eight screens in the downtown Los Angeles area. In Chicago, it played 46 theaters in the city and suburbs.³⁶³ In Cleveland, *Battle Beyond the Stars* played 12 theaters including the Great Lakes Mall 5, a shopping mall cinema with multiple screens.³⁶⁴ In Portland, *Battle Beyond the Stars* played a showcase at a mix of theaters including a multiplex and downtown indoor theater.³⁶⁵ *Battle Beyond the Stars*' success in the Midwest and lukewarm response in competitive markets like Los Angeles showed the difficulty of transcending New World's exploitation roots. At the same time, New World did manage to get the film booked in (presumably first-run) multiplexes, a sign that the film circulated as a box office leader in many mid-sized areas.

Bookings in first-run theaters could trigger an availability bias in consumers that would lead to higher ticket sales. However, hardtop bookings were, of course, no guarantee that a film would not tank at the box office in the way studio pictures did. According to IMDB, the film grossed \$7.5 million. *Battle Beyond the Stars* took in decent earnings given Corman's \$2 million investment in the film after pre-sales, but it failed to deliver the windfall profits of a blockbuster film that he had hoped for.³⁶⁶ \$7.5 million was also far below any industry-wide metric for blockbuster grosses at the time; *The Empire Strikes Back* grossed over \$200 million domestic by the end of the summer.³⁶⁷ Nevertheless, *Battle Beyond the Stars* contributed to the firm's record

\$19 million in rentals in 1980.³⁶⁸ For \$2 million, New World sold *Battle Beyond the Stars* to NBC, who scheduled the film for a 1982 television airing.³⁶⁹ The following year of 1981, however, presented the same problem that AIP and New World Pictures encountered in the summers of 1978 and 1979. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*'s dominance at the box office resulted in no summer bookings for either Crown International Pictures or New World.¹¹⁷ In response to this dismal state of affairs, New World Pictures made the decision to go public with an IPO that reportedly injected \$15–20 million into the company.³⁷⁰ By the summer of 1981, New World licensed its library to pay cable, and in June of 1981 New World opened a pay television division.³⁷¹ As AIP's *Meteor* and New World Pictures' *Battle Beyond the Stars* show, exploitation firms struggled to capture a mass audience, and both AIP and New World underwent substantial business changes that had both companies pursuing revenue from ancillary markets.

Conclusion

As their blockbuster films took in unprecedented earnings, the major studios continued to extract terms from exhibitors that resulted in fewer open dates for independents. Rising production, promotion, and print costs in a post-*Jaws* and post-*Star Wars* industry landscape increased the risk of all filmmaking, and especially for independents, who lacked the financial backing of any parent companies and did not attract the kind of tax shelter investments that the studios did. The major studios' increasing dominance over both the summer season *and* over drive-in theater playdates threatened to shut out exploitation independents' releases almost entirely. These economic exigencies drove exploitation independents to develop the Blockbuster Lite cycle after the release of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*.

This chapter has shown that the studios employed many tactics of risk management in their blockbusters, as did independents in their production of Blockbuster Lite films. These tactics, importantly, did not revolve around controlling costs as much as around driving audience awareness of a film and thus demand for it. The tactics discussed in this chapter included adapting pre-sold works, marketing a film to a maximum number of viewers through saturation marketing, reaching as many viewers as possible through wide release, and using special effects to create a super-grosser market signal. These were tactics that were extremely difficult for smaller exploitation independents to pull off, unable to recreate the approaches of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* successfully enough to rise to the top in a superstar market.

The films in the *Jaws*-sploitation cycle revealed that the imitative and symbiotic dynamic took several different forms. There were the exploitation/studio imitations, seen in *Mako: Jaws of Death*, a studio/studio imitation, as in *Orca*, and a mockbuster exploitation/studio imitation seen in *Piranha*. These examples showed that imitation could operate on the level of marketing, crafting promotional materials that would trigger comparisons to *Jaws*, as well as market position, attempting to drive massive audience demand through wide release and summer bookings. The *Star Wars*-influenced Blockbuster Lite films encountered a very difficult, ‘super-grosser’ superstar market, nearly impossible for an independent company to break into. *Meteor* and *Battle Beyond the Stars* showed that copying a special effects-driven film required scaling up production and a level of corporate management foreign to exploitation independents’ relatively small operations. The disappointing grosses of both films also revealed an inherent contradiction in imitating a film like *Star Wars* that became massively successful due to unique intellectual property and state-of-the art effects, two elements very difficult to replicate even for a well-capitalized studio. The chapter has argued that the cycles positioned both AIP and New World in

an imitative, dependent relationship with the major studios and their blockbuster event films.

Reflecting on AIP's upmarket attempts late in the decade, Arkoff observed:

It's ironic that a company which owed its origins and quick success to filling a low-budget product void at a time when B pictures and dual programmers were being drastically phased out by bigger budget pics...should now be forced to merge with a bigger corporation as a means of capitalizing increasingly higher budget pictures itself.³⁷²

The Blockbuster Lite cycle was one way that exploitation independents managed this topsy-turvy industry turf. Conversely, some independent producers reacted to the intense competition through aggressive product differentiation, illustrated in the slasher horror cycle discussed in Chapter Six. Richard Nowell writes that the success of lower-budgeted and youth-oriented *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Grease* (1978), and *Animal House* “in contrast to effects-driven chart-toppers like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1978), provided independent filmmakers with production/textual models that they could afford to replicate.”³⁷³ The next chapter examines how exploitation horror, similar to the sexploitation and blaxploitation cycles, represented a return to product differentiation in the blockbuster era. Exploitation independents developed a niche in ‘R’-rated horror, both in ‘exploitation’ and in the slasher horror film, that thrived first in drive-ins and, eventually, in hardtop theaters. The cycles of ‘R’ horror were a brief refuge of market differentiation that sustained exploitation independents amid the difficulties of the post-blockbuster era.

¹ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 1.

² Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3.

- ³ Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry* (New York: UMI Research Press, 1983), 192.
- ⁴ Sheldon Hall and Steven Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2010).
- ⁵ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 1-5.
- ⁶ Arthur De Vany, *Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2003), 210-211.
- ⁷ De Vany, *Hollywood Economics*, 210-211.
- ⁸ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 1; See also Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).
- ⁹ Justin Wyatt, "Selling 'Atrocious Behavior': Revising Sexualities in the Marketplace for Adult Films in the 1960s", in Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (eds), *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 105-31.
- ¹⁰ Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 266.
In asserting misguidedly that *Miller v. California* resulted in the end of theatrical screenings of hard-core theatrical pornography, Jon Lewis relies on sweeping generalizations that are not uncommon in histories of 1970s American cinema: "In 1974 the studios posted record profits. In 1975 Universal released *Jaws* and established a new measure for success in box office and merchandising revenues. In 1977 came *Star Wars*. In the absence of hard core, America rediscovered Hollywood."
- ¹¹ Richard E. Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts Between Art and Commerce* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), 100-1. Caves wrote that *Jaws* "set the notion of a blockbuster film oriented not toward character but toward sensation and special effects."
- ¹² Tino Balio, *The American Film Industry Revised Edition*, edited by Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 118. Balio writes, "The mid- and low-budget pictures were the casualties as the industry swung away from the routine film and toward the blockbuster."
- ¹³ A.D. Murphy, "Pinch Picture Playoff Patterns," *Variety*, March 17, 1976, 1, 34.
- ¹⁴ Murphy, "Playoff Patterns," *Variety*, 1, 34.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* Murphy writes, "Atop the traditional off-season states-rights exploitation type film used in these slow periods (and remember that American International started here), came early in the decade the four-wall wildlife saturation runs. New World and Crown also have established beachheads there now."
- ¹⁶ A.D. Murphy, "300 Indie Films In Production," *Variety*, June 9, 1976, 32.
- ¹⁷ "5-Year Indie Prod'n Surge," *Variety*, June 9, 1976, 32. AIP and Walt Disney Prods, MPAA members, are not counted as independent sources of production. The figures were based on CARA certifications, so non-MPAA reviewed films were not included in these figures.
- ¹⁸ A.D. Murphy, "Playoff Patterns," 1, 34.
- ¹⁹ "Pictures: Columbia Plan for Retaining Advantages from Tax Shelter while Curing Admitted Abuses," *Variety*, November 26, 1975, 3.
- ²⁰ Robert Lindsey, "For Best Performing Shelter," *New York Times*, March 28, 1976, 107.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/28/archives/for-best-performing-shelter-film-investments-earn-tax-breaks-and.html>, accessed May 20, 2019.
- ²¹ Lindsey, "For Best Performing Shelter," 107.
- ²² "Pictures: Columbia Plan," *Variety*, 3; Pictures: Pic Tax Shelter Axed in Congress; Ford may Save it," *Variety*, September 8, 1976, 32.
- ²³ Richard Albarino, "Al Hirschfield: 'Call it Co-Financing,'" *Variety*, August 14, 1974, 5-6.
- ²⁴ Richard Albarino, "Pictures: 'The Great Gatsby' Snug Tax Shelter," *Variety*, June 12, 1974, 3, 21.
- ²⁵ "Pictures: Tax Shelter End Will Hurt Films." *Variety*, October 29, 1975: 3,3, 40.
- ²⁶ "Pictures: MGM Avoids 'Tax Shelter' use," *Variety*, January 21, 1976, 6.
- ²⁷ "Pictures: Pic Tax Shelter Axed in Congress; Ford may Save it," *Variety*, September 8, 1976, 3, 32.
- ²⁸ "Pic Tax Shelter Axed," 3, 32.

²⁹ Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, "The Baby Boom Cohort in the United States: 2012 to 2060," *Current Population Reports*, US Census, Issued May 2014, last accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p25-1141.pdf>.

³⁰ A.D. Murphy, "Pictures: Audience Demographics, Film Future," *Variety*, August 20, 1975, 3, 74.

³¹ A.D. Murphy, "Pictures: Demographics Favoring Films Future," *Variety*, October 8, 1975, 3, 34.

³² Murphy, "Demographics Favoring Films Future," 3, 34.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Murphy, "Demographics Favoring Films Future," 3, 34; Murphy, "Audience Demographics, Film Future," *Variety*, 3, 74.

A.D. Murphy wrote: "[T]he pay-see market will get major impetus from those greater numbers of filmgoing youths who want to enjoy current films in the home; and simultaneously, the film theatre should also benefit from those grownup youths who are not yet mired in domesticity. It's a great double play for the picture business."

³⁵ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 100-101.

³⁶ Murphy, "Audience Demographics, Film Future," 74.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 4, 16, 23, 33. Wyatt writes that a high concept film's marketability "is based upon such factors as stars, the match between a star and a project, a pre-sold premise (such as a remake or adaptation of a best-selling novel), and a concept which taps into a national trend or sentiment" (16).

"What Puzo Godfathered 40 Years Ago," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2009; "William Peter Blatty, Author of 'The Exorcist,' Dies at 89," *New York Times*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/13/books/william-peter-blatty-author-of-the-exorcist-dies-at-89.html>, last accessed March 30, 2020.

⁴¹ Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 10.

⁴² Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, 28.

⁴³ Tino Balio, *The American Film Industry Revised Edition*, edited by Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 207-209.

⁴⁴ Abel Green, "Pictures: 'Godfather': Boon To All Pix," *Variety*, April 5, 1972, 3, 22.

⁴⁵ Michael Cieply, "Frank Yablans, Paramount Executive in Fertile '70s, Dies at 79," *New York Times*, November 28, 2014.

⁴⁶ "Loews' National Share 'Godfather,'" 4.

⁴⁷ "Loews' National Share 'Godfather,'" 26.

⁴⁸ Green, "Godfather': Boon To All Pix," 22.

⁴⁹ For more on the studio system's use of monopolistic run, zone, and clearance distribution policies, see Balio, *The American Film Industry Revised Edition*, 253-284.

⁵⁰ "Loews' National Share 'Godfather,'" 4.

⁵¹ Ibid, 26.

⁵² Green, "Godfather': Boon To All Pix," 3, 22; "Pictures: \$1,000,000-A-Day 'Godfather Pace,'" *Variety*, May 17, 1972, 3.

⁵³ Syd Cassyd, "Paramount Not Sleeping on Laurels, Frank Yablans Tells Tradepress," *Boxoffice*, August 14, 1972, 3-4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "Reprise As To 'Jaws,'" *Variety*, January 21, 1976, 102; "Pictures: Ticket Sale Projection for 'Godfather': U.S., Canada, \$150-Mil; O'Seas, \$80-Mil," *Variety*, July 26, 1972: 4.

⁵⁶ "Yablans Resigns Paramount Posts; Diller Is Chief Executive Officer," *Boxoffice*, November 18, 1974, 4; "The Godfather May Have Had 90 Million Viewers," *Boxoffice*, December 2, 1974, 5.

⁵⁷ "The Godfather May Have Had 90 Million Viewers," *Boxoffice*, December 2, 1974, 5.

Today, only an event like the Superbowl, which totaled 98.2 million viewers in 2019, reaches that kind of television audience. "Super Bowl LIII Draws 98.2 Million TV Viewers," *Nielsen.com*, February 4, 2019, last accessed January

5, 2020, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2019/super-bowl-livii-draws-98-2-million-tv-viewers-32-3-million-social-media-interactions/>.

⁵⁸ “‘The Godfather May Have Had 90 Million Viewers,” 5.

⁵⁹ De Vany, *Hollywood Economics*, 67.

⁶⁰ “Pictures: Friedkin's 'Exorcist' Suit Vs. WB Tests Standard Distrib Pact,” *Variety*, April 2, 1975, 5, 42. Trade reports indicate the film was originally budgeted at \$4 million.

⁶¹ Syd Cassyd, “‘Exorcist' Has Been One 'Happening' After Another-- All Newsworthy,” *Boxoffice*, February 4, 1974.

⁶² “Pictures: Biggie of 1974, 'the Exorcist,' into 85 Four-Wall Situations; Rumbles Rise from Theatres,” *Variety*, April 3, 1974, 4.

⁶³ “Biggie of 1974,” 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*; “Seek To Excise Some Of Exorcist 3 Four Wall Dates?” *The Independent Film Journal*, July 10, 1974, 5.

⁶⁵ “Massive Campaign Slated for 'Exorcist' Multiple,” *Boxoffice*, June 10, 1974.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ “Seek to Excise Some of Exorcist 3 Four Wall Dates?” 5.

⁶⁸ A. D. Murphy, “Pictures: WB Net: \$29-Mil, Half Year; Interest Costs Rise of 76%; 'Exorcist' Boom; Lesser Float.” *Variety*, July 31, 1974, 5, 32.

⁶⁹ “Pictures: Friedkin's 'Exorcist' Suit,” 5, 42.

⁷⁰ “Warners’ ‘Exorcist’ Now No 3 Grossing Picture,” *Boxoffice*, September 20, 1976, 5.

⁷¹ “International: 'Exorcist' Huge German Hit; Long Lines but Mixed Reaction,” *Variety*, October 9, 1974, 39;

“International: 'Exorcist' Openings Boffissimo,” *Variety*, October 2, 1974, 34.

⁷² Cassyd, “‘Exorcist' Has Been One 'Happening.’”

⁷³ Jeffrey Blyth, “Warners Agree To Ten-Year ‘Four Wall’ Ban,” *Screen International*, April 17, 1976, 8; “NATO Seeks Court Action on Warner Four-Walling,” *The Independent Film Journal*, April 15, 1974, 5.

However, the latter proved to be a short-term strategy only. The Department of Justice found Warner Bros.’ four-walling to violate anti-trust regulation, and the studio agreed to a 10-year ban on the practice. The practice of four-walling returned in the early 2000s when filmmakers contracted with distributors in service deals that provided distribution outside of the standard deals done with the major distributors. These four-walled service deals were used to build word-of-mouth for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Monster* (2003), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). See John Anderson and Laura Kim, *What to Do Once You’ve Made That Movie* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publishing, 2006), 77.

⁷⁴ “Dialogue on Film,” *American Film*, October 1, 1975, 42.

⁷⁵ Wheeler Dixon, “In Defense of Roger Corman,” *Velvet Light Trap* 16 (Fall 1976), 13.

⁷⁶ James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), 25.

⁷⁷ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 16.

⁷⁸ Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, 33.

⁷⁹ A.D. Murphy, “Reviews: Star Wars,” *Variety*, May 25, 1977.

⁸⁰ Janet Maslin, “How Old Movie Serials Inspired Lucas and Spielberg,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1981.

⁸¹ Maitland McDonagh, “The Exploitation Generation: Or: How Marginal Movies Came in from the Cold, 107-130; Thomas Elsaesser, “American Auteur Cinema: The Last—or First—Picture Show?” 37-69

⁸² Noel Carroll, “The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And Beyond),” *October* 20 (Spring 1982), 77.

⁸³ Carroll, “The Future of Allusion,” 77-78. Noel Carroll argues that the films of the blockbuster era showed a knowing awareness of Hollywood genres tropes, traditions, cycles, and landmark canonical films [i.e. film noir, 1930s gangster movies, Universal horror of 1950s monster movies, or *Psycho* (1960)]. This canon of films, filmmakers, genres, and tropes were established and developed by French auteur criticism and US critics’ and the Hollywood Renaissance’s subsequent interpolation of these attitudes and opinions. The first film history classes passed down this critical taste to the Movie Brats (55). Carroll says that this education comes out in a two-tiered system of allusion that dominates Hollywood of the 1970s or 1980s. Films of this era can be “read” at two-levels: first, as relatively straightforward genre films and second, as films that “rework” classical genres and restage scenes or even shots of films within the canon (56).

⁸⁴ King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, 88-9. King writes that the Movie Brat generation went to college or film school, whereas prior directors in Hollywood had been trained in theater or in the studio system. King also observes that the first generation of Movie Brats, including Arthur Penn and Robert Altman, worked first in television. The younger generation were film school graduates. King also notes that the end of the studio system brought along repertory and art houses and art cinemas that would introduce the Movie Brats to the directors praised by the *Cahiers du cinema* critics and Andrew Sarris.

⁸⁵ Corman played an uncredited small part in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and Joe Dante's *The Howling* (1981). John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper cast Corman in *Body Bags* (1993).

⁸⁶ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 45.

⁸⁷ Jim Harwood, "Pictures: Anticipated Success Mutes Squawks on Costs, Rental Terms," *Variety*, June 4, 1975, 7, 26; "Pictures: Voracious 'Jaws' Tops 'Godfather,' After 78 Days." *Variety*, September 10, 1975, 3.

⁸⁸ Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 226, 232. Sturges directed *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958) in a studio. McBride describes the film as "exactly the kind of film the producers came to realize they did *not* want to make with *Jaws*." Sargent would instead direct *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974) for United Artists.

⁸⁹ Richard Zanuck, "Dialogue on Film," *American Film*, October 1, 1975, 42.

⁹⁰ See Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-'n'-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 263-285; Wasser, *Veni Vidi Video*; Carl Gottlieb, *The Jaws Log*, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition (New York: Newmarket Press, 2001); J. Hoberman, "Nashville Contra *Jaws*: Or 'The Imagination of Disaster' Revisited," in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004) 193-222.

⁹¹ Harwood, "Anticipated Success Mutes Squawks," 7, 26.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁴ Harlan Jacobson, "U Introing Nat'l Co-Op Ads On 'Jaws,'" *Variety*, April 16, 1975, 34; Harwood, "Anticipated Success Mutes Squawks," 7, 26.

⁹⁵ Jacobson, "U Introing," *Variety*, 3, 34. The fee depended on the number of theaters in the market and potential local earnings for a 12-week run.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Tom Brueggemann, "How Disney is Changing Hollywood Rules with 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi,'" *IndieWire*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/11/disney-star-wars-the-last-jedi-hollywood-rules-exhibitors-theater-owners-1201894552/>, last accessed April 1, 2020; "Why Disney Can Demand 65% of Box Office for 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi,'" *CelluloidJunkie.com*, November 4, 2017, <https://celluloidjunkie.com/2017/11/04/disney-can-demand-65-box-office-star-wars-last-jedi/>, last accessed April 1, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² "U Explains 'Jaws' Ad Policy," *Variety*, April 16, 1975, 3.

¹⁰³ "U Explains 'Jaws' Ad Policy," 3.

¹⁰⁴ "'Jaws' Looks To TV Spots For Clincher," *Broadcasting*, May 12, 1975, 38-39; "'Jaws' Merchandising Proves A Runaway Hit," *The Independent Film Journal*, October 1, 1975, 22.

Universal's promotion of the film also included merchandising. *Jaws* merchandising was licensed by Merchandising Corporation of America, Inc., a subsidiary of Universal. Merchandising included *The Jaws Log* Dell paperback book, the Benchley book, MCA album sales, and a variety of consumer items like t-shirts, shark tooth jewelry, beach towels, blankets, swimwear, and tumblers.

¹⁰⁵ "'Jaws' Looks To TV Spots," 38-9; "Pictures: Million-And-More Per Pic Sell On Tube," *Variety*, March 26, 1980, 5, 42; "'Jaws' Looks to TV Spots for Clincher," *Broadcasting*, May 12, 1975, 38-9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ "'Jaws' Looks to TV Spots for Clincher," *Broadcasting*, May 12, 1975, 38-9.

¹⁰⁸ Jason E. Squire, *The Movie Business Book* (Routledge, 2016), 290; Jim Surmanek, *Media Planning: A Practical Guide* (McGraw Hill Professional, 1996), 117.

¹⁰⁹ Charles Warner, *Media Selling* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

- ¹¹⁰ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 16; King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, 49. *King Kong* opened with 961 prints; *The Deep* opened with 800 prints; *Saturday Night Fever* opened with 800 prints; and *Grease* with 902 prints.
- ¹¹¹ "Pictures: Voracious 'Jaws' Tops 'Godfather,'" After 78 Days," *Variety*, September 10, 1975, 3.
- ¹¹² "Universal and 'Jaws' Post Record Billings," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 9, 1975, 8.
- ¹¹³ "Pictures: 'Star Wars' Hotly Pursues 'Jaws' B.O.," *Variety*, July 27, 1977, 3; A.D. Murphy, "Pictures: 'Star Wars' Beating 'Jaws' Pace At B.O.," *Variety*, August 10, 1977, 3, 30.
- ¹¹⁴ "Voracious 'Jaws' Tops 'Godfather,'" 3.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁸ A.D. Murphy, "Universal Pics Make Film History," *Variety*, January 21, 1976, 1, 102.
- ¹¹⁹ "Reprise As To 'Jaws,'" *Variety*, January 21, 1976, 102.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹²¹ A.D. Murphy, "Universal's Whale of Pix Bi Share," *Variety*, Feb 11, 1976, 1, 34.
- ¹²² Murphy, "Universal Pics Make Film History," 1, 102.
- ¹²³ A.D. Murphy, "1975 Record Film B.O. Near \$1.9 – Bil," *Variety*, January 14, 1976, 1, 86.
- ¹²⁴ Murphy, "1975 Record Film B.O.," 1, 86.
- ¹²⁵ Murphy, "Universal Pics Make Film History," 1, 102.
- ¹²⁶ Murphy, "1975 Record Film B.O.," 1, 86.
- ¹²⁷ A.D. Murphy, "Playoff Patterns," 1, 34.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34. "With the cutbacks in Hollywood production levels, the collective slack period became aggravated. Atop the traditional off-season states-rights exploitation type film used in these slow periods (and remember that American International started here), came early in the decade the four-wall wildlife saturation runs. New World and Crown also have established beachheads there now."
- ¹²⁹ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 45.
- ¹³⁰ For more on the singing cowboys, see Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York: Scribner, 1993).
- ¹³¹ Julia Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 42:1 (Autumn 2002), 46-70.
- ¹³² Armen A. Alchian, "Uncertainty, Evolution, and Economic Theory," *The Journal of Political Economy* 58:3 (June 1950), 211-221.
- ¹³³ A.D. Murphy, "300 Indie Films In Production," *Variety*, June 9, 1976, 32.
- ¹³⁴ Murphy, "300 Indie Films," 32.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁶ "Pictures: Analysts Tie Views on Industry Health to Spiraled Costs," *Variety*, July 9, 1980, 7, 22.
- ¹³⁷ Murphy, "300 Indie Films," 32.
- ¹³⁸ Murphy, "300 Indie Films," 32. Of course, it depends on how one defines an indie film—Murphy excludes AIP and Disney as well as independent producers like Dino De Laurentiis and Joseph E. Levine "who have their own sources of initial seed and production money."
- ¹³⁹ Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 4.
- ¹⁴⁰ Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 4.
- ¹⁴¹ McBride, "More Sharks, Other Killers, Due: 'Jaws' Quickens Monster Spree; Recall Fatal Frogs, Bugs, Bees," *Variety*, July 30, 1975, 7, 32.
- ¹⁴² "'New King Kong,' 'Deep Jaws' And 'Teenage Graffiti' Prompt Title Bouts," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 30, 1976, 7.

The Independent Film Journal's description of *Deep Jaws* suggested the similarities between the two titles didn't go much further than the title. IFJ described it as a "sex-oriented comedy involving mermaids, astronauts and a major studio's bungling efforts to make an X-rated film." The *IFJ* reported that it was premiered at the Loop Theatre in Chicago in April 1976. Universal sent them a letter demanding them to change the name of their films or be sued for

title infringement. Teitel defended the film, saying it was not similar to Universal's film and that the title of the film had been registered in August of 1975 and announced to the press at that time.

¹⁴³ McBride, "More Sharks, Other Killers," 7, 32. The more general category of animal-themed horror films included *Claws* (1977) and *Alligator* (1980).

¹⁴⁴ Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 28-30.

¹⁴⁵ "Mako: Jaws of Death," *AFI Catalog*, last accessed June 1, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 60.

¹⁴⁷ "The Cannon Group, Incorporated," *Variety*, October 27, 1971, 25; "Little Cannon Group Booming; Lists Heavy Production Slate," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 24, 1969, 28.

¹⁴⁸ "Feature Reviews: The Jaws of Death," *Boxoffice*, October 11, 1976, B7, B8.

¹⁴⁹ Mary Fox, "Grefe Goes 'Overboard' As An Action Director," *Back Stage*, March 26, 1976, 35.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 69-70.

¹⁵² Brian Taves writes that some of the poorest producers of 'B' films made five-reel films instead of the typical six reels. Balio, *Grand Design*, 326.

¹⁵³ "Universal Majestic, Inc.," *Variety*, January 28, 1976, 2.

¹⁵⁴ "Feature Reviews: The Jaws of Death," B7, B8.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ "Cannon Announces Major Bows for 'Jaws of Death'," *Boxoffice*, June 28, 1976.

As the distribution study earlier in the dissertation shows, exploitation films tended to move through the country on a regional basis, as this required fewer film prints, which were costly to strike.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ "Picture Grosses: 'Cousine' Record 15G in Seattle; 'Norman' Brawny 17G, 'Offerings' Nifty 10G," *Variety*, October 13, 1976, 10, 12; "Picture Grosses: 'Back' Hep \$22,000, Cleveland; 'Death' Fair \$24,000, 'Hands' 11G," *Variety*, October 6, 1976, 18.

¹⁶⁰ "Theatregoing No Longer Is Casual Seeing A Movie Now Is An 'Event'," *Boxoffice*, November 1, 1976.

¹⁶¹ The slogan also dropped the association with dieting that diet beers had, which was successful in selling diet beer to men for the first time. Livia Gershon, "How Beer Companies Made Light Beer Macho," *JSTOR Daily*, October 22, 2015, last accessed January 22, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/beer-companies-made-light-beer-macho/>.

¹⁶² Caves, *Creative Industries*.

¹⁶³ Addison Verrill, "'Kong' Wants 'Jaws' Boxoffice Crown," *Variety*, December 22, 1976, 1, 107. Despite very high expectations about the film's performing at the box office at a level similar to *Jaws*, *King Kong* bombed.

¹⁶⁴ "'Orca' Filming on Location," *Boxoffice*, August 23, 1976.

¹⁶⁵ David Thomas, "Focus on 'Orca'--a £6m Epic in the Making," *Screen International*, September 4, 1976, 29; "Orca," *American Film Institute Catalog*.

¹⁶⁶ "'Orca' Paperback Published," *Boxoffice*, June 13, 1977, 5.

¹⁶⁷ K.S., "Buying & Booking Guide: ORCA," *The Independent Film Journal*, August 19, 1977, 18.

¹⁶⁸ Murf, "Film Reviews: Orca," *Variety*, July 13, 1977, 18.

¹⁶⁹ "'Orca,' Whale Film, Flounders," *New York Times*, July 16, 1977.

¹⁷⁰ I do not have evidence that Canada provided production incentives for the film. However, Canada's Ministry of Industry & Tourism was promoting the country's scenic beauty and production studios in *Screen International* in 1978. See Natalie Edwards, "Focus On Canada '78: Where To Film In Canada," *Screen International*, April 1, 1978, 28, 30.

¹⁷¹ *Jaws: The Inside Story*, Pangolin Pictures, June 16, 2010, *The Biography Channel*.

¹⁷² Patrick Goldstein, "The Last Swashbuckler," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2001.

¹⁷³ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 73-75.

¹⁷⁴ "Orca," *American Film Institute Catalog*.

¹⁷⁵ "'Orca' Over \$3 Million in NYC Flagship Date," *Boxoffice*, September 5, 1977, 6.

¹⁷⁶ "'Orca' Grosses \$7,757,043 in 10 Days, 776 Theatres," *Boxoffice*, August 1, 1977, 12.

- ¹⁷⁷ "International: 'Star Wars' Socko 815G in 16 Italy Key Cities; 'Orca' 561G," *Variety*, January 11, 1978, 48.
- ¹⁷⁸ "'Orca' Plunges Onto Chicago Screens but can't Topple 'Star Wars' Lead," *Boxoffice*, August 1, 1977.
- ¹⁷⁹ "Picture Grosses: 'Herbie' Rich," *Variety*, August 3, 1977, 8; "Picture Grosses: 'Wars' Smash," *Variety*, July 20, 1977, 24; "Picture Grosses: 'Mac' Bright 35G," *Variety*, August 10, 1977, 11; "Picture Grosses: 'Star Wars' Smash 350G," *Variety*, July 27, 1977, 12.
- ¹⁸⁰ "Orca," *Box Office Mojo*, last accessed June 1, 2019, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=orca.htm>
- ¹⁸¹ Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 114-115. Schaefer shows that publicity surrounding classical exploitation films often emphasized the film's "timeliness" as it related to "topical stories in the news or on editorial pages" (114).
- ¹⁸² "World News: Dante's 'Gremlins' to Open Festival," *Screen International*, November 17, 1984, 12, 25.
- ¹⁸³ "Producers of 'Piranha' Say Nothing Fish About Their Welcome in Texas," *Boxoffice*, April 24, 1978, SW7.
- ¹⁸⁴ "'Piranha' Shocker Co-Financing By UA & New World," *Variety*, November 30, 1977, 4; "Pictures: 20 Pix at \$30,000,000: Is New World A 'Major'?" *Variety*, November 30, 1977, 4, 28.
- ¹⁸⁵ "'Piranha' Shocker Co-Financing," 4.
- ¹⁸⁶ "Film Reviews: Piranha," *Variety*, August 9, 1978, 20.
- ¹⁸⁷ "A U.S. Market Profile of Net Rentals," *Variety*, January 7, 1970, 18-19.
- ¹⁸⁸ "Opening Weekends," *Box Office Mojo*, last modified July 6, 2019, accessed July 6, 2019, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/weekends/>. This period remains unprofitable even today. According to *Boxoffice Mojo*, of the top 100 highest grossing weekends, only two opened in August: *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). These two films were released very early in the month of August, at that. None opened in September.
- ¹⁸⁹ "Picture Grosses: Piranha' Hot 650G, Chi; 'House' Big \$500,000, 'Dogs' Fat 450G," *Variety*, August 30, 1978, 15, 22.
- ¹⁹⁰ "New World's Fish Feature," 8; *Boxoffice*, October 16, 1978, E2; "'Piranha' Slick 30G, L'ville," *Variety*, August 23, 1978, 14.
- ¹⁹¹ "'Piranha' Swift 43G, Miami," *Variety*, September 13, 1978, 12, 28
- ¹⁹² "'Piranha' Wammo 150G, Cleve," *Variety*, August 30, 1978, 18.
- ¹⁹³ "Corman Outfit Milestone Reached With 2 New Films," *Boxoffice*, Aug 28, 1978, 16.
- ¹⁹⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Piranha' Lusty \$48,500, Dayton; 'House' Chipper \$45,200, 2d, 'Feet' 30G," *Variety*, August 30, 1978, 22.
- ¹⁹⁵ "Picture Grosses: 'Piranha' Big \$63,000, Deny.; 'Eyes' 22G, 2D," *Variety*, August 30, 1978, 18, 32.
- ¹⁹⁶ "Picture Grosses: 'Piranha' Neat 46G in St. L.; 'Holly' 9G," *Variety*, August 30, 1978, 18.
- ¹⁹⁷ "'Piranha' Is Clicking In Foreign Playdates," *Boxoffice*, November 20, 1978, 4; "New World's 'Piranha' Is a Hit in Europe," *Boxoffice*, January 8, 1979, 9.
- ¹⁹⁸ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 115.
- ¹⁹⁹ Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 42.
- ²⁰⁰ The importance of trailers to exploitation and sexploitation is discussed in *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 3* (1968-1970), 30-31.
- ²⁰¹ "Film Reviews: Piranha," *Variety*, August 9, 1978, 20.
- ²⁰² "Film Reviews: Piranha," 20.
- ²⁰³ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁰⁵ Clark Collis, "Fishy Business: The Behind-the-Scenes Story of the 'Piranha' Movies (Part II)," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 18, 2019, <https://ew.com/article/2010/08/18/cameron-piranha-3d-dante/>
- ²⁰⁶ McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*, 340.
- ²⁰⁷ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*; Brian Jay Jones, *George Lucas: A Life* (New York: Back Bay Books), 2017; J.W. Rinzler, *The Making of Star Wars: The Definitive Story Behind the Original Film* (New York: Ballantine), 2007; Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise* (New York: Perseus Books), 2014; Larry Weinberg, *Star Wars: The Making of the Movie* (New York: Random House), 1980.

- ²⁰⁸ John Austin, "'Star Wars' Outpaces 'Jaws' In First Week," *Screen International*, June 11, 1977, 4.
- ²⁰⁹ Murphy, "'Star Wars' Best," 1,6; "'Star Wars' Sequel: Lucas Covers Cost; Distribution Via Fox," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 10, 1978, 20.
- ²¹⁰ A.D. Murphy, "'Star Wars' Best Start Since 'Jaws,'" *Variety*, June 1, 1977, 6; Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-'n'-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 339.
- ²¹¹ *Variety* picture grosses pages showed that *Star Wars* was re-issued in many markets, including in Detroit. "Picture Grosses: 'Star Wars' Sizzling 104G, Det," *Variety*, June 1, 1977, 12.
- ²¹² Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 46.
- ²¹³ Austin, "'Star Wars' Outpaces," 4; Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 339; "Showmandiser: Multi-Faceted Promotion for 20th-Fox's "'Star Wars' Features Creatures, Sword Fight and Blimp Ballyhoo," *Boxoffice*, August 15, 1977, 15.
- ²¹⁴ Julie A. Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 114.
- ²¹⁵ A.D. Murphy, "'Star Wars' Best," 6.
- ²¹⁶ Austin, "'Star Wars' Outpaces," 4.
- ²¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²²⁰ Murphy, "'Star Wars' Best," 1, 6.
- ²²¹ "Pictures: 'Star-Wars' Beyond Break-Even; Fox's Other Hit Proves Leggy," *Variety*, July 6, 1977, 5.
- ²²² "Pictures: 'Star Wars' Hotly Pursues "'Jaws' B.O.," *Variety*, July 27, 1977, 3.
- ²²³ "Grosses \$66,000,000 20th-Fox's 'Star Wars,'" *Boxoffice*, August 1, 1977, E7.
- ²²⁴ Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), 65.
- ²²⁵ "'Star Wars' Ousts 'Jaws,'" 125.
- ²²⁶ A.D. Murphy, "Pictures: 'Star Wars' Beating 'Jaws' Pace At B.O.," *Variety*, August 10, 1977, 3, 30.
- ²²⁷ "Pictures: Fox Net On 'Star Wars': Maybe \$180,000,000," *Variety*, August 24, 1977, 3, 17.
- ²²⁸ "'Star Wars' Ousts 'Jaws' As Champ of U.S. Boxoffice," *Variety*, November 23, 1977, 125.
- ²²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²³⁰ "Pictures: 'Star Wars' Sends Fox Net 374% Into Wild Yonder," *Variety*, February 8, 1978, 3, 32.
- ²³¹ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 340.
- ²³² Caves, *Creative Industries*, 139-141. Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 400. Losses from *Heaven's Gate* prompted MGM's Kerkorian to purchase UA from Transamerica.
- ²³³ Jeffrey Blyth, "'Star Wars' Bonus For Fox Share-Holders," *Screen International*, January 28, 1978, 60.
- ²³⁴ "Pictures: Fox Fights To Hold 'Star Wars' Against Col's 'Encounters' Pact," *Variety*, December 7, 1977, 7.
- ²³⁵ "Coronet Theatre," *Cinematreaasures.org*, <http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/1612>.
- ²³⁶ "Pictures: Fox Fights," 7.
- ²³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²³⁸ Murphy, "'Star Wars' Best," 1, 6.
- ²³⁹ William Bates, "Hollywood in The Era of the 'Super-Grosser,'" *New York Times*, December 24, 1978, D1.
- ²⁴⁰ Bates, "Hollywood in The Era of the 'Super-Grosser,'" D1.
Tanen elaborated: "[It] has become this thing where we're having toga parties all around the country, with everybody jumping around. But we didn't start all that. All we did was make a picture about college fraternity life in the 1960's."
- ²⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴² *Ibid.*
- ²⁴³ *Ibid.*, D11.
- ²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Spielberg said: "When I looked that up on the chart, I realized it meant that it had to be one of the 15 biggest films in the world, in history. That's when it got to be really scary."
- ²⁴⁶ Janos, "The Hollywood Game Grows Rich," D15.
- ²⁴⁷ Bates, "Hollywood in The Era of the 'Super-Grosser,'" D1, D11.
- ²⁴⁸ Janos, "The Hollywood Game Grows Rich."

- ²⁴⁹ Leo Janos, "The Hollywood Game Grows Rich—and Desperate," *New York Times*, February 12, 1978, D15.
- ²⁵⁰ "Pictures: Million-And-More Per Pic Sell On Tube," *Variety*, March 26, 1980, 5, 42.
- ²⁵¹ "Pictures: Million-And-More," 5, 42.
- ²⁵² Ibid.
- ²⁵³ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁶ Ron Schaumburg and Gregory G. Tobin, "Exhibition and Distribution Speak Out On Blind Bidding," *Boxoffice*, January 15, 1979, 12-15.
- ²⁵⁷ Schaumburg and Tobin, "Exhibition and Distribution Speak Out," 12-15.
- ²⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁶⁰ Correspondence from Robert B. Steuer to Leon P. Blender dated January 25, 1978, Series 3A, Box 24, Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁶¹ Correspondence from Robert B. Steuer to Leon P. Blender dated January 25, 1978, Series 3A, Box 24, Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁶² Ibid.
- ²⁶³ Ibid.
- ²⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁶⁵ Correspondence from Jeff Loper to Leon P. Blender dated March 3, 1978, Series 3A, Box 24, Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁶⁷ Undated corporate documents, Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁶⁸ Correspondence from Samuel Z. Arkoff dated August 11, 1978, Series 3A, Box 24, Folder 14, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.
- ²⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁷⁰ Steven Ginsberg, "Pictures: 'Saint Jack' Denied Summer Dates in L.A.; Typical of Indie Pix," *Variety*, June 13, 1979, 20.
- ²⁷¹ Ginsberg, "Pictures: 'Saint Jack' Denied Summer Dates in L.A.," 20.
- ²⁷² Ibid.
- ²⁷³ Ibid.
- ²⁷⁴ "J.M.G. Film Co.," *Boxoffice*, June 16, 1975.
- ²⁷⁵ "Subdistributors Agree: Independents Will Survive," *Boxoffice*, January 28, 1980, 12.
- ²⁷⁶ "Subdistributors Agree: Independents Will Survive," 12; "J.M.G. Film Co.," *Boxoffice*, June 16, 1975; "J.M.G. Film Co.," *Boxoffice*, June 16, 1975.
- Sub-distributors like J.M.G. Films released films made by bigger independent distributors in a regional market. For instance, J.M.G. Films sold the Howco International-produced hicksploitation film *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972) throughout the Midwest.
- ²⁷⁷ "J. M. G. Film Company," *Boxoffice*, December 16, 1974; "Distribution Guide," *The Independent Film Journal*, March 30, 1972, 72-80.
- ²⁷⁸ "Subdistributors Agree: Independents Will Survive," 12.
- ²⁷⁹ Up to 20% of *Titanic*'s audience was thought to be repeat viewers compared to a 2% norm, according to Melanie Nash and Martti Lahti in "Titanic, Leonardo DiCaprio, and the Paradoxes of Girls' Fandom," in *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, edited by Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1999), 64. For more on repeat viewing, see: Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 135-160.
- ²⁸⁰ Bates, "Hollywood in The Era of the 'Super-Grosser,'" D1, D11.
- ²⁸¹ Bates, "Hollywood in The Era of the 'Super-Grosser.'"
- ²⁸² Ibid., 20.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ralph Kaminsky, "Arkoff Expecting a Successful Year; Moreau Receives Major Promotion," *Boxoffice*, July 18, 1977, 9.

²⁸⁵ *Meteor* Production Cost Report, September 22, 1979, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

²⁸⁶ "Say \$15,000 In Fact-Scifi 'Meteor,'" *Variety*, September 7, 1977, 36.

²⁸⁷ "Add \$1,250,000 Special Effects To AIP-WB-Shaw-Nippon Film," *Variety*, October 25, 1978, 34.

²⁸⁸ "AIP's Sam Arkoff Sez Company Must Bend To New Marketplace," *Variety*, November 22, 1978, 3.

²⁸⁹ Dale Pollock, "Junket To Crater," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 3, 40.

²⁹⁰ "TRG Lending AIP Hand," 13.

²⁹¹ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 101.

²⁹² *Meteor* Preliminary Merchandising Report, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

²⁹³ Ibid. The Merchandising Report directed television sales to be allocated 25-30% to "PRIME", 5% to "EARLY NEWS," 5% to "LATE NEWS," 30% to "EARLY FRINGE," and 30% to "LATE FRINGE." The definitions of these categories in the report showed that "PRIME," "EARLY FRINGE," "LATE FRINGE," were all network station buys.

²⁹⁴ *Meteor* Preliminary Merchandising Report, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 34.

²⁹⁶ "'Meteor' Hit By Its Special Effects, AIP Delays Bow," *Variety*, February 14, 1979, 5; "Add \$1,250,000 Special Effects To AIP-WB-Shaw-Nippon Film," *Variety*, October 25, 1978, 4.

²⁹⁷ *Meteor* Production Cost Report, September 18, 1979, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

²⁹⁸ *Meteor* Production Cost Report, September 22, 1979, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

²⁹⁹ "Blacula Budget," Norman T. Herman papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences. The negative cost of *Blacula* was a mere \$376,000.

³⁰⁰ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 141. Caves writes: "The more complex and costly the film, the more difficult is the task of the controller, who must contend with the many collaborators whose interdependent decisions affect the project's realized costs."

³⁰¹ "TRG Lending AIP Hand in Promotion Campaigns for 'Amityville', 'Meteor'," *The Independent Film Journal*, April 1, 1979, 13.

³⁰² "'Meteor' Hit By Its Special Effects," 5.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ *Love at First Bite* was a 'PG'-rated horror comedy starring George Hamilton. Its success was due in part to its release date of April 1979—a period in which the film was not in direct competition with summer blockbusters. Generically, too, it was successful counterprogramming and a film that required little-to-no difficult special effects. Star George Hamilton explained that the *Dracula* premise also functioned as a 'pre-sold' element. See "AIP Final Fiscal Report, Pre-Merger," *Variety*, July 18, 1979, 6, 20.

³⁰⁵ "Pictures: 'Moonraker' In Orbit," *Variety*, July 4, 1979, 3; "Moonraker (1979)," *The Numbers*, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Moonraker#tab=summary>, last accessed January 20, 2020.

³⁰⁶ "Add \$1,250,000 Special Effects," 34.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Turnock, *Plastic Reality*, 115-6.

³⁰⁹ "Film Review: Meteor," *Variety*, October 17, 1979, 10.

³¹⁰ Janet Maslin, "Screen: 'Meteor,' a Disaster Tale, Opens: Menace from the Blue," *New York Times*, October 19, 1979, 1.

³¹¹ Maslin, "Screen: 'Meteor,' a Disaster Tale."

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ *Meteor* CinemaScore Market Research Report dated September 25, 1979, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Dale Pollock, "Junket To Crater," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 3, 40.

³¹⁷ AIP 35mm Print Utilization Report dated May 31, 1978, Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³¹⁸ Undated print utilization report, Series 3A, Box 15, Folder 7, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³¹⁹ "Breakdown of U.S. Distrib Candor As Several Releases Stumble In," *Variety*, October 31, 1979, 13.

³²⁰ "Big Rental Films Of 1979," *Variety*, January 9, 1980, 21, 70.

³²¹ Estimated U.S Theatrical Revenue For The Period 11/31/1979 – 8/31/1980 As of November 15, 1979, Series 3A, Box 3, Folder 3, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³²² Summary of Expenses For The Period 11/31/79 – 8/31/80 As of November 15, 1979, Series 3A, Box 3, Folder 3, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³²³ Copy of wire dated and received October 24, 1979, from Ronald Neame to Sandy Howard, Series 3A, Box 13, Folder 5, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

³²⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Force' Mighty \$70,000, Cleve.; 'Meteor' Swift 331/2G, 'Rust' 21G," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 22.

³²⁵ "Picture Grosses: 'Justice' Hot 200G, Det.; 'Meteor' Boffo \$125,000. 'Skatetown' 75G," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 24; "Picture Grosses: 'Field' Exciting \$41,000, St. L.; 'Meteor' Rousing 401/2G, 'Beauty' \$25,000," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 22, 24; "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, November 12, 1979, 12.

³²⁶ "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, November 12, 1979, 12.

³²⁷ "Picture Grosses: 'Justice' Neat 22G, Philly; 'Fury' Good \$20,000, 'Meteor' OK 19G," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 20.

³²⁸ "Picture Grosses: Fresh Films Up L.A.; 'Justice' Wow 220G, 'Meteor' Tidy 180G, 'Skatetown' 135G, 'Express' 60G," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 18.

³²⁹ "Pictures Grosses: 'Halloween,' Cops Witching 850G; 'Justice' Weighs \$173,000, for 6; N.Y. Okay; 'Meteor' Plummets." *Variety*, October 31, 1979, 8-8, 30; "Picture Grosses: Indian Summer Warms N.Y. B.O.; 'Meteor' Comes Crashing in, 620G; Trench Postcards' Ogles \$25,000," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 8, 32.

³³⁰ "Picture Grosses: 'Meteor' Smashy in Chi, 200G; 'Luna' Slow 12½G; 'Legacy.' 190G," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 18, 32; "Pictures Grosses: Chi Takes 164G Count of '10'; 'Stranger' 158G, 'Starting' 130G," *Variety*, October 31, 1979, 10.

³³¹ "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, November 12, 1979, 12.

³³² "Pictures: Big Rental Films of 1979," *Variety*, January 9, 1980, 21, 70.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ AIP, Filmways Merger Talks On Again After Dec. Cutoff," *Variety*, February 14, 1979, 63.

³³⁵ "Arkoffs Pay Scale Under Filmways, And Option To Go Indie," *Variety*, May 23, 1979, 3, 45; "Arkoff, Facing Subsidiary Status, Notes AIP's 'Museum Acclaim,'" *Variety*, April 11, 1979, 5. By May of 1979, Arkoff signed on as CEO/president of Filmways to a five-year contract.

³³⁶ Dale Pollock, "Junket To Crater," *Variety*, October 24, 1979, 3, 40.

³³⁷ Bradley Schauer, *Escape Velocity: American Science Fiction, 1950-1982* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 201), 176.

³³⁸ Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood*, 194.

³³⁹ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 101.

³⁴⁰ Lawrence Cohn, "Fans Appetite For Sci-fi Unsatiated, Per Roger Corman," *Variety*, August 13, 1980: 6, 50.

³⁴¹ Roger Corman, "Filmmaking in Hollywood: The Changing Scene," *Roger Corman Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 106. "[*For Battle Beyond the Stars*] [I] wanted a director who could storyboard the entire film, who could take a close-up of a pilot in a space ship with the camera right in front of him and, at a particular moment, that pilot looks in that direction to match a shot that will be filmed maybe ninety days later of another spaceship coming by. So Jimmy's qualities as an animator and as a director of TV commercials working off of storyboards became very important for that type of work."

³⁴² Caves, *Creative Industries*, 101.

- ³⁴³ Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 39-40.
- ³⁴⁴ Charles F. Rouse, "Corman hopes his vision is just a mirage," *Boxoffice*, October 1, 1979, 3.
- ³⁴⁵ Ralph Kaminsky, "Favorable Clime For Independents Spurs Optimism For New World Film," *Boxoffice* July 14, 1980, 2.
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- ³⁴⁸ Gregory Solman, "Roger Corman: A Mini-Mogul Directs Again," *Millimeter* (May 1990), 111-124.
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- ³⁵¹ Kaminsky, "Favorable Clime," 2.
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- ³⁶³ "Picture Grosses: 'Battle' Galactic \$330,000, Chi; 'Dressed' Wow 325G, 'Rose' 62G," *Variety*, July 30, 1980, 14, 19.
- ³⁶⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Battle' Celestial.," "Great Lakes Stadium 16," *Cinema Treasures*, accessed June 1, 2019, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/7412>.
- ³⁶⁵ "Picture Grosses: 'Guard' Grabs 18G, Port.; 'Battle' 12G," *Variety*, July 30, 1980, 18; "Mall 205 Cinema," *Cinema Treasures*, accessed June 1, 2019, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/20195>.
- ³⁶⁶ "Battle Beyond the Stars," *Internet Movie Database*, last accessed June 1, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080421/business?ref=tt_dt_bus.
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- ³⁶⁸ Lane Maloney, "New World's Biggest Year For Rentals; Corman Restructuring," *Variety*, September 10, 1980, 42.
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- ³⁷⁰ "Corman Shop Expanding Into New Worlds" *Variety*, July 22, 1981, 3.
- ³⁷¹ "Corman Shop Expanding Into New Worlds," 3.
- ³⁷² "Arkoff, Facing Subsidiary Status, Notes AIP's 'Museum Acclaim,'" *Variety*, April 11, 1979, 5.
- ³⁷³ Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 112.

Figure 17: *Jaws* (1975) one sheet and *Mako: The Jaws of Death* (1976) one sheet



Figure 18: *Orca* (1977) one sheet

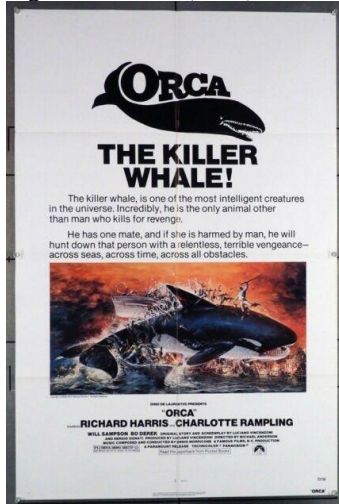


Figure 19: *Jaws* (1975) and *Piranha* (1978) one sheets



Figure 22: *Meteor* (1979) original press kitFigure 23: *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) and *Star Wars* (1977) one-sheets

CHAPTER SIX: MASSACRES, MASKS, AND MARKETS:
HOLLYWOOD HORROR, AXPLOITATION, AND THE SLASHER HORROR CYCLE

This final chapter examines the prominence of independent horror during the 1970s and 1980s to show how exploitation cinema shaped a sizeable market for horror by the mid-1980s. The period of the 1970s was characterized by two concurrent cycles. The first was the major studio-released Hollywood horror cycle, which included *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973), pre-sold adaptations of supernatural horror novels. The second was 'R'-rated exploitation, or grindhouse 'exploitation' horror, inaugurated by *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and which included *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Hollywood horror and exploitation horror developed in parallel, serving different markets and tastes. Exploitation horror was differentiated through intellectual property—by violence and the emphasis on human, not supernatural, terror—and a niche market orientation, aimed at drive-ins. *Halloween* (1978) was a breakthrough for independents. *Halloween* initiated the slasher cycle boom through the mid-1980s, which brought the violence of grindhouse exploitation to first-run theaters. *Halloween* also showed a 'sleeper' approach to be a more successful upmarket formula than the Blockbuster Lite strategy. Revealing independents to be leaders in horror, *Halloween* was a transitional moment in the relationship between the majors and independents. The success of *Halloween*, I will argue, resulted in Paramount Pictures' appropriation of slasher horror production in their pick-up of *Friday the 13th* (1980). This pivot put independents on the defensive once again as *studio*-distributed horror occupied valuable playing time, and the market flooded with undifferentiated low-budget slasher horror. By the mid-1980s, the market for horror had also consolidated, resulting in studio-made family-oriented supernatural horror like *Poltergeist* (1982) and comedic iterations including *Gremlins* (1984) and *Ghostbusters* (1984). To manage the newfound risk of a saturated horror

market, independents returned to principles of product differentiation. Avco-Embassy's *The Fog* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) balanced traditional supernatural horror with slasher elements to thread the needle of imitation and differentiation needed to maintain allegiances with 'R' horror fans while maximizing market reach. Avco-Embassy and New Line Cinema both carved out a middle market position between the exploitation independents and major studios that positioned them for mini-major status.

The chapter will show that, through their production of horror films, the relationship between the majors and independents shifted several times: from a time of coexistence on the parallel paths of Hollywood horror and exploitation; to the breakthrough prominence of *Halloween* and a moment of symbiosis between director John Carpenter and NBC; to Paramount's appropriation of slasher horror for risk mitigation purposes; and to renewed forms of product differentiation and hybridization at Avco-Embassy and New Line Cinema. The dynamics governing each of these shifts in differentiation and appropriation were all slightly different in flavor, but they also all pertained to a core set of strategies—decisions related to intellectual property, to marketing appeals, and, crucially, to distribution. To that end, the chapter provides a wealth of distribution evidence to establish firm grounding for claims about a film's market appeal. At times, I also correlate this distribution evidence with the distribution data of Chapter One. The chapter will show how competition between the majors and independents shaped the different forms the horror genre took throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

The chapter presents two major contributions to current scholarly discourse. First, the chapter attributes some of the most trenchant shifts in the horror film—shift to an 'R' market and extreme violence—to exploitation independents serving the demand of a coalition of audiences in the exploitation market. In so doing, the chapter centers exploitation cinema in histories of

horror, rather than considering it through the common but limiting framework of ‘low’ vs. ‘high’ cultural status. Second, the chapter also links exploitation and independent horror to some of the major market strategies industry scholars have associated with post-blockbuster Hollywood, including ‘Indiewood’ releasing, sleeper films, and high-concept marketing, strategies that emerged out of independents’ competitive conflicts with the major studios. The chapter revises how the 1970s and 1980s have been framed as ‘low’ and troubles exploitation cinema’s omission from accounts of 1980s Hollywood.

Literature Review

In the field of film and media studies, scholars have approached the horror genre from many angles of inquiry. One influential approach has been to use the horror genre as a conduit for ideological and cultural theory and criticism. Scholars who understand films to work out the ideological contradictions and preoccupations of a given socio-cultural moment have been drawn to horror as a genre that represents the darkest of human behaviors: violence, cruelty, sacrilege, and abjection. Film critic Robin Wood is exemplary of this tendency.¹ His writings examined how horror transgresses the patriarchal values of American society as reflected in classical Hollywood film. Using psychoanalytic frameworks, Wood’s work on repression, sexuality, and children in horror has been influential on the discipline of film studies. Writing from a critical feminist perspective, Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* has also examined the ideologies of horror film. Clover’s book was pathfinding in disrupting common understandings of spectatorship and visual pleasure.² Engaging with exploitation horror texts not often considered in scholarly work, Clover argued that the slasher cycle evinced cracks and fissures in identification that positioned the audience for such films—assumed to be cis heterosexual

males—in a feminine, and therefore patriarchally transgressive, position. In so doing, Clover's post-structuralist analysis recuperated exploitation horror, a set of films excoriated by the feminist anti-porn debates, as valuable texts for ideological critique.

While ideological and cultural critique have been influential approaches to horror in recent years, other scholarly traditions also examine horror. One group approaches the genre from a philosophical aesthetics perspective. Noël Carroll has argued that horror texts threaten stable ontological boundaries: of the self and other, the human and inhuman, and the dead and the living.³ Aaron Smuts (a student of Carroll's) has investigated the aesthetics of painful emotional responses associated with the horror film.⁴ Another group studies horror texts' circulation among fans and across registers of cultural value. Analyzing horror fandoms and art-horror hybrids, Joan Hawkins has identified unlikely similarities between horror and the avant-garde and has revealed that the boundaries between 'art' and 'trash' are often tenuous in the films' reception and cultural circulation.⁵ Adam Lowenstein has likewise examined horror that violates 'high' and 'low' borders in articulating national trauma in the wake of the Holocaust.⁶ Other research, which circulates outside the academy, has been done by and for horror fandoms.⁷

In recent years, scholars have turned to investigating the industrial and institutional structures that influence horror filmmaking. Kate Egan has shown how British politics, regulatory law, and moral panics associated with private home viewing led to the banning of the 'video nasties' on home video.⁸ Synthesizing formal analysis with historical research, Kevin Heffernan has offered the first industrial history of horror in his work on the genre in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ Richard Nowell's *Blood Money* is the first industrial history of the slasher horror film.¹⁰ Nowell mobilizes evidence in the form of films, trade journals, and print publications to analyze the major aesthetic tendencies of the slasher film and the most important production

cycles in the US and Canada. Nowell's book is a compelling corrective to the cultural criticism and cultural theory that have predominated scholarship on exploitation horror for some time.¹¹

However, Nowell chiefly understands the slasher cycle as a production cycle and fails to fully examine the role of distribution. While he underscores the importance of producers securing distribution and identifies some film distributors, Nowell relies on secondary literature in his discussion of slasher film distribution.¹² As a result, he fails to provide adequate primary evidence of the markets (i.e. theaters, towns) in which a film circulated or to make any distinction between distribution methods and patterns (i.e. platform, regional, national). Nowell also provides little context concerning the majors' financial interest in the slasher cycle and neglects to examine the important industry dynamics between the majors and independents including the dwindling playdates and distribution seasons open to independents. With the aid of additional primary sources that provide evidence of distribution patterns, this chapter provides an answer to the key omission in Nowell's work, tracing the lineage of independent horror back to the mid-1970s and examining the interplay between studio-led and independent-led horror cycles. The chapter investigates distribution's place within the spreading of 'R'-rated horror from drive-ins and downtown theaters to suburban multiplexes.

Hollywood Horror in the 1970s

In his industrial history of the decade, David Cook writes that horror became a mainstream genre for the first time in the 1970s.¹³ The box office success of several studio-made supernatural horror films from 1968 to 1978 supports such an assessment. For instance, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), produced and released by Paramount, is often seen as a watershed moment for the 'mainstreaming' of horror, as several features of the film's production marked it

as culturally prominent. For one, *Rosemary's Baby* was adapted from a best-selling book, written by Ira Levin.¹⁴ Up-and-coming actress Mia Farrow also starred. Farrow had been nominated for a Golden Globe Award for *Guns at Batasi* (1964) a few years earlier, and Heffernan writes that Farrow had been “voted number 7 in *Motion Picture Herald*’s exhibitors’ poll of ‘most promising new faces of 1966.’”¹⁵ Director Roman Polanski was also a celebrated figure after *Repulsion* (1965) brought him significant acclaim.¹⁶ *Rosemary's Baby* was a financial success; it took in \$15 million in rentals worldwide on a budget of \$3.2 million, making it the seventh most profitable film of 1968.¹⁷ *Rosemary's Baby* also received several Academy Award nominations.¹⁸

Rosemary's Baby was a catalyst of the Hollywood horror cycle, a cycle of mid-to-large-budgeted Hollywood-produced supernatural horror films that featured major actors, were directed by respected filmmakers, and were often adaptations of popular novels. Heffernan notes the influence of *Rosemary's Baby* on low-budget horror as well.¹⁹ After *Rosemary's Baby*, several other studio-released horror films earned several millions in rentals. Universal’s *Frenzy* (1971) and Fox’s *The Other* (1972) all took in under \$10 million, but nonetheless generated modest profits when compared with their negative costs. *The Exorcist* (1973), on the other hand, became a box office sensation and established the prototype for studio-produced horror throughout the seventies.²⁰ Nowell writes, “*The Exorcist* had built upon the box-office achievements of *Rosemary's Baby* to cement perceptions of the unprecedented financial viability of horror films that situated human monsters within everyday American settings.” *The Exorcist* showed that an ‘R’-rated studio film with graphic depictions of demon possession could become an event film. The film’s popularity was further aided by controversy. It was banned in several municipalities, and debates appeared in the press over whether an ‘X’ rating was merited.²¹ Not

only a box office success, *The Exorcist* was also critically acclaimed, leading all films receiving ten Academy Award nominations in 1974, including the category of Best Picture.²² Today, *The Exorcist* remains one of the highest grossing horror movies of all time, with a worldwide box office of \$428 million.²³ From the vantage point of 1980, Lawrence Cohn of *Variety* wrote that *The Exorcist* inaugurated the horror genre boom when it “toted up \$66,300,000 in billings during its first year of release.”²⁴ Peter Hutchings highlights the importance of horror literature on the Hollywood horror cycle, suggesting that the genre’s entry into the mainstream was, in part, an outgrowth of the popularity of horror novels. Hutchings writes, “So far as American horror in the late 1960s and 1970s is concerned, the possession theme generally seen as central to horror cinema during the period was initiated within contemporaneous horror literature....”²⁵ Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* was the first postwar horror novel to land on critics’ lists of the top ten novels of the year.²⁶

Multiple adaptations of mass-market horror novels in addition to *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist* showed the prevalence of pre-sold horror during the early-to-mid 1970s. Popular horror literature was frequently adapted to film in the 1960s and 1970s. Levin’s novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) was adapted in 1975 as a Columbia Pictures film starring Katharine Ross.²⁷ Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) was adapted in 1966 by Francois Truffaut.²⁸ Bradbury’s *The Illustrated Man* (1951), a collection of short stories, was adapted to film in 1969.²⁹ Former actor Thomas Tryon’s horror novel *The Other* (1971) was adapted into a Fox feature film in 1972, and his *Harvest Home* (1973) was adapted into a NBC mini-series *The Dark Secret of Harvest Home* (1978).³⁰ Peter Straub’s *Ghost Story* (1979) was adapted into a film in 1981 starring Fred Astaire.³¹ Richard Matheson’s *Hell House* (1971) was adapted into

The Legend of Hell House (1973).³² Anne Rice published *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976, but the novel was not adapted to film until the 1990s.³³

These novels established Hollywood horror as a cycle dominated by supernatural horror. Subsequent studio-made and studio-distributed horror films in the 1970s adhered to the general formula: supernatural in genre and often adapted from popular novels. Within the supernatural Hollywood horror cycle, several prominent sub-cycles emerged. The largest group were films about demonic possession and Satanic influence. Fox's *The Omen* (1976), which traded on *The Exorcist*'s focus on Catholicism and demonology, grossed \$28 million in rentals and led to sequels including Fox's *Damien: Omen II* (1978) and *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981). Warner Bros.' *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) earned \$14 million in rentals. Universal's *The Sentinel* was similarly about demon possession and Satanism, adapted from a novel by Jeffrey Konvitz.³⁴ A second sub-cycle were ghost stories of house hauntings. United Artists' *Burnt Offerings* (1976), adapted from Robert Marasco's 1973 novel of the same name, was also about a haunted house.³⁵ Telekinesis or supernatural power films included two directed by Brian De Palma: *Carrie* (1976) and *The Fury* (1978). United Artists' *Carrie* was adapted from Stephen King's 1974 novel. *Carrie* took in \$12 million in rentals with a negative cost of only \$1.8 million.³⁶ The film grossed over \$16 million in North America in only eight weeks.³⁷ Released by Fox, *The Fury* was an adaptation of John Farris' 1976 book of the same name. In sum, studio-made Hollywood horror popularized supernatural tropes related to ghosts, demon possession, and haunted houses, which all located the source of the horror in the metaphysical realm. Such was the prominence of these cycles that it led to AIP's attempt to elevate their horror releases with the haunted house film *The Amityville Horror* (1979), which was based on Jay Anson's book about paranormal activity in an old Victorian home.³⁸ Archival records reveal that AIP

spent \$355,000 of the \$4.6 million budget (about 8%) on story rights.³⁹ Upon *The Amityville Horror*'s release in theaters, AIP also reprinted one million copies of the Anson novel in paperback through Bantam Books.⁴⁰ While most independents were pursuing differentiation through non-supernatural horror, *The Amityville Horror* was the exception that proved the rule.

Supernatural horror's prominence in 1970s media culture was reflected on network television as well. *Dark Shadows* ran on ABC from 1966-1971 and was a drama-supernatural horror hybrid that evinced atmospheric expressionist stylistic qualities.⁴¹ NBC competed with ABC with *Night Gallery*, an anthology television series presented by Rod Serling that ran from 1969–1973.⁴² ABC's "monster of the week" supernatural horror series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* was short-lived, running for one season (1974–1975) only.⁴³ From 1969–1975, ABC's Movie of the Week anthology series hosted made-for-TV movies, some of which were in the horror mode. In 1979, CBS aired *Salem's Lot*, a two-part television miniseries about vampirism directed by Tobe Hooper and adapted from the Stephen King novel; five additional hourly episodes were aired exclusively on ABC.⁴⁴ In sum, all three major broadcast networks developed horror genre content during the decade.

Section I: The Rise of 'Exploitation': The Exploitation Horror Cycle, 1968–1978

As the above examples show, horror was a prominent part of mainstream media culture. In the exploitation horror cycle, or what I will subsequently term 'exploitation,' independent producer-distributors employed methods of product differentiation to distinguish their films from the other forms of horror production in theaters and on television. Independent horror in the 1970s was catalyzed by films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), two films that Gregory Waller identifies as ushering in the "modern era of

horror.”⁴⁵ The satanic aspects of *Rosemary’s Baby*, coupled with the film’s pre-sold quality, influenced the Hollywood horror cycle of the 1970s. *Night of the Living Dead* was also a catalyst of exploitation horror. European imports also drove the release of independent horror in the US. Italian studios financing films in the *gialli* mode supplied US independent distributors with horror films in the early 1970s during, in Nowell’s words, “the film-famine of the early 1970s.”⁴⁶ In 1970, for example, among all horror films released in the US, foreign productions totaled 70, and US productions accounted for only 18 horror films that year.⁴⁷

However, the influence of *Night of the Living Dead*’s domestic release was most felt on exploitation horror of the 1970s. Heffernan writes, “*Night of the Living Dead*’s influence on the horror genre was incalculable....Its artistic elements anticipate many trends in the low-budget horror and blaxploitation genres of the seventies.”⁴⁸ Indeed, *Night of the Living Dead* illustrated the divergence of Hollywood horror and exploitation horror. Romero’s film charted a different path from Hollywood horror at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition. Made for a mere \$114,000 or \$125,000, depending on the source, *Night of the Living Dead* had no stars, in contrast to *Rosemary’s Baby*, described above, or as in a film like *The Omen*, which featured studio system star Gregory Peck and Academy Award nominee Lee Remick.⁴⁹ *Night of the Living Dead* was distributed by independent Continental, the distributor of the Walter Reade theater organization, and was also strongly associated with drive-in theaters, venues in which 1970s exploitation horror would circulate for many years. Indeed, Caitlin Benson-Allott argues that *Night of the Living Dead* “was shot with the drive-in market and spectator in mind.”⁵⁰ However, Continental’s release reflected the diversity of the film market for exploitation films in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Heffernan has shown how Continental booked *Night of the Living Dead* in many subsequent-run hardtop and drive-in theaters, all experiencing product

shortage.⁵¹ In addition to distribution, the film's style and tone differentiated *Night of the Living Dead* from the horror films that preceded it. Heffernan explains:

Night of the Living Dead's absence of stars and its marginal place in the network of 1968 horror film production and distribution led screenwriter John Russo and director George Romero to differentiate their approach to the genre by emphasizing graphic violence, bleak social commentary, and a down-beat ending.⁵²

The motif of cannibalism, an action typically not featured in supernatural-oriented plots, also influenced the downbeat tone and gory violence associated with the exploitation horror cycle. Not simply a departure from Hollywood horror, *Night of the Living Dead* also established common motifs that have pervaded horror since that time. Indeed, Robin Wood has identified cannibalism as a core motif of 1970s horror.⁵³

Unlike Hollywood horror, which was released to the first-run market, exploitation horror had been linked for some time with the southeastern drive-in circuit, the same market around which hicksploitation developed. For example, in 1965, the Woolner Bros. Pictures, Inc. announced a regional saturation release of the Italian horror film *Castle of Blood* (1964) and Italian director Mario Bava's *Hercules in the Haunted World* (1961) in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Ohio.⁵⁴ Heffernan has also shown the importance of drive-ins in AIP's horror double bill of Bava's *Black Sabbath* (1963) and *The Evil Eye* (1963).⁵⁵ This association between horror and drive-ins continued into the 1970s. In 1976, independent distributor World Wide Films released eight films in four horror double bills throughout Texas in "saturation drive-in and hardtop situations."⁵⁶ Identifying the mid-1970s exploitation horror cycle as the 'exploitation' trend, Ellen Farley of the *Los Angeles Times* observed that exploitation horror was perceived to be especially popular in rural or small-town drive-ins. Farley wrote: "Though some

individual massacre-terror films have grossed well nationwide, their distributors say that the tidiest and most reliable portion of the genre's return dollar is in drive-ins in the rural South."⁵⁷ A discursive construction in the trade press, the label 'exploitation' highlighted a series of films that may not have dominated the genre but were distinctive in charting a new path that Hollywood tried to appropriate. Independent exploitation horror, including *Night of the Living Dead*, was also booked beyond southeastern or rural settings, transcending typical regional patterns of distribution. In Providence, Rhode Island, for example, *Boxoffice* reported an all-horror program of *Twitch of the Death Nerve* (aka *A Bay of Blood*, 1971) and *Theater of Blood* (1973) at the Lonsdale Twin Drive-In.⁵⁸ In sum, drive-ins were a primary, but not exclusive, market for 'exploitation.'

Similar to hicksploitation, exploitation horror mitigated risk for theater operators who had been playing sexploitation. Both cycles could be slotted into the southeastern drive-ins while avoiding the legal and reputational risks associated with sexploitation. Stephen Brenner of Joseph Brenner Associates, Inc. explained this rationale: "The public has become more selective about sex exploitation films so something had to replace it."⁵⁹ Brandon Chase of distributor Group 1 reiterated a similar theory: "Sex doesn't work like it used to....The drive-in market isn't looking for these more sophisticated films. Violence is attractive there."⁶⁰ Exploitation horror was also seen as appealing to working class patrons of drive-ins *and*, notably, black viewers. (Trade journals' reporting of a high black turnout for *The Exorcist* likely further contributed to this association in the minds of independent producer-distributors.)⁶¹ Chase gestured to the target audience for those films, saying "I don't have demographics on the audience but around here we call them middle Americans."⁶² Indicating he viewed his target audience as working class as well, Brenner explained: "We're concerned about one thing and that is that a picture of ours will

make money. We don't do any college-type research but I can tell you unscientifically who goes....[I]t isn't white-collar workers."⁶³ Peter Locke, producer of the Wes Craven-directed *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), claimed that "black audiences certainly played a big part" in the success of the film.⁶⁴ Thus, among these independent distributors, horror was perceived to be popular with at least two viewing segments—white working class viewers and black viewers. Ed Guerrero writes that trade journals' reporting of a high black turnout for *The Exorcist* likely further contributed to this association.⁶⁵ In sum, exploitation horror was associated not with one distinct group of viewers so much as a coalition of groups: working class white viewers, black viewers, and drive-ins in the southeast and beyond.

The Last House on the Left (1972)

Exploitation horror film *The Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven, illustrated the differences between the Hollywood horror and exploitation horror cycles. Writer and director Craven co-produced *The Last House on the Left* with Sean Cunningham, who would direct the first *Friday the 13th* film. Various online sources cite a budget of \$80,000–\$90,000.⁶⁶ The film was shot on 16mm in Connecticut and New York. Craven claimed he had been inspired to adapt Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), a fact repeated by Roger Ebert in his review of the film.⁶⁷ *The Last House on the Left* is the story of the brutal rape and murder of two teen girls, Mari Collingwood (Sandra Peabody) and her friend Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantham). Attempting to buy marijuana on the way to a concert, Mari and Phyllis encounter a man named Junior. Junior takes Mari and Phyllis up to an apartment where he and a gang of criminals Krug, Weasel, and Sadie trap them. The sadistic gang rapes Phyllis; crosscutting shows that Mari's parents are preparing a surprise 17th birthday party for her. The next day, the gang bring Mari and Phyllis to

the woods where they torture and brutally murder the two girls. The crew of criminals then drive off and coincidentally stop at the Collingwoods' home. The criminals masquerade as traveling salespeople, and the Collingwoods invite the murderers to stay at their home, unaware that these people murdered their daughter. During the night, Mari's parents deduce that Junior, Krug, Sadie, and Weasel are nefarious characters when the mother spots Mari's necklace on Junior. After they overhear the criminals talking about the murder, Mari's parents go to the woods and find Mari's body. They then plot and exact revenge on the gang. This description shows that, as a film commonly considered to belong to the horror genre, *The Last House on the Left* violates some standard definitions of the genre. Carroll, for example, would not consider the film to be horror, as there is no monster in the film that transgresses ontological categories.⁶⁸ Thus, *The Last House on the Left* is notable for locating the film's source of evil and terror in base human impulses of brutality, domination, and revenge, a feature that appears characteristic of much of exploitation horror in the decade.

Reviews indicated the degree to which *The Last House on the Left* thwarted expectations set for horror at the time. Critics were disgusted by the depths of abjectness the film plundered. *The Independent Film Journal* called the film "blatant sadomasochism" and "tasteless exploitation" that was nonetheless "pulling in money with lurid ads."⁶⁹ *The New York Times* reviewer went even further:

When I walked out, after 50 minutes (with 35 to go), one girl had just been dismembered with a machete. They had started in on the other with a slow switchblade. The party who wrote this sickening tripe and also directed the inept actors is Wes Craven. It's at the Penthouse Theater, for anyone interested in paying to see repulsive people and human agony.⁷⁰

Though he would be among the most vocal critics of the teen slasher cycle, Roger Ebert wrote a complimentary review of Craven's film, arguing that the film's grisly exterior belied depth and artistry. Ebert wrote: "It's being advertised as an exploitation movie, but it's more than that. It's a find, one of those rare, unheralded movies that succeeds on a commercial level and still achieves a great deal more."⁷¹ To critics disgusted by the film and those, like Ebert, intrigued by Craven's project, *The Last House on the Left* stood out as a different kind of horror film in its brutal rendering of violence toward the film's protagonist, Mari Collingwood.

The Last House on the Left one sheet reflected the film's exploitation status, as it emphasized the film's grisly violence [Figure 24]. The one sheet showed an image of a girl whose posture, leaning lifeless against a tree, gives the impression of her being dead or unconscious. The layout, block fonts, and black and white design of the one sheet also appeared quite low budget, lacking any kind of advertising flair or polish. A tag line read: "To avoid fainting keep repeating, it's only a movie...it's only a movie." Steven Jay Schneider has found that the tag line was borrowed from promotional pitches for William Castle's *Strait-Jacket* (1964) and Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Color Me Blood Red* (1965).⁷² (Indeed, Lewis' *Blood Feast* (1963) is seen as a catalyst film initiating the Grand Guignol strain of horror that 1970s' exploitation horror developed).

One tagline described *The Last House on the Left* as "Deep Throat with a Twist!" Another read: "It's Just Across the Street from 'Joe'!!"⁷³ This poster made associations between the film, youth audiences, and another cycle associated with abjection: sexploitation. I surmise that this kind of ballyhoo reflected Hallmark's positioning of the film as anathema to mainstream Hollywood by invoking two films that were an affront to MPAA-approved taste. Hallmark

evidently also wanted to align the film with successful exploitation independent releases like *Joe* (1970) and *Deep Throat* (1974).

The Last House on the Left's distribution showed market allegiances with sexploitation, an indication of how far differentiated on the level of distribution exploitation was from Hollywood horror. Producer Sean Cunningham leveraged his connection to Hallmark Releasing to get an 'R' cut of the film released in 1972. Cunningham, described in *Variety* as a "former Broadway legit stage manager," produced and directed *Together* (1971), a self-applied 'X'-rated sexploitation film distributed through Hallmark Releasing.⁷⁴ Boston-based Judson Parker formed Hallmark as a distributor to serve the Esquire Theatre chain that he operated, and the company came to be identified with their sexploitation releases. At some point during *Together*'s release, AIP became involved, releasing the film through their exchanges. *Variety* commented:

One mystery about the New York booking is the involvement of American International. After taking a public stand against the distribution of X-rated films, that company wants to avoid identification with 'Together' though it handled the New York break for Hallmark and is presumably involved in other locations.⁷⁵

For the release of *The Last House on the Left*, Hallmark appeared to take a similar approach, partnering with AIP's exchanges. Hallmark distributed the film for a time, but AIP was also noted as the distributor in ads as early as October 1972.⁷⁶ In other sources, the film was described as being released via state rights.⁷⁷ My surmise is that AIP purchased rights for regional saturation playoff for territories that had not yet been acquired by other sub-distributors. *Together* was released with 160 prints, and I also suspect that *The Last House on the Left* had a similar print run with saturation play-off by region.

Beginning around Labor Day 1972, Hallmark Releasing distributed *The Last House on the Left* in select regions, typically in drive-ins.⁷⁸ Because scholars writing on the industry of horror have often relied on secondary research or the presumption of a film's market in lieu of direct evidence of distribution, I include the data below to support the association of exploitation with drive-ins and downtown indoor theaters.⁷⁹ *The Last House on the Left* played for 22 weeks at the indoor Cinema Mayflower in Oklahoma City.⁸⁰ An ad, which listed Hallmark as "presenting" and AIP as "releasing," showed *The Last House on the Left* playing on a double bill with *Mark of the Devil* (1970). The ad boasted of the cities in which the program had performed well. Nearly all of the bookings listed were drive-in dates. They included: Bel Air Drive-In and Wayne Drive-In in Detroit; Colorado Springs Cinema, an indoor theater; Flint, Michigan's Miracle Twin Drive-in; Pontiac, Michigan's Pontiac Drive-In; Springfield, Massachusetts's Parkway Drive-In; and Boston, Massachusetts's Medford Twin Drive-In.⁸¹ Theater operators also placed exploitation horror on double bills with films that had been in release for some time, as Heffernan shows happened with *Night of the Living Dead*.⁸² In Trenton, New Jersey, *The Last House on the Left* also played on a four-feature bill of *The Shanghai Killers* (1971), *Tomb of the Blind Dead* (1972), and Mario Bava's *Twitch of the Death Nerve* (aka *A Bay of Blood*, 1971) at the Lawrence Drive-In for \$2 per vehicle.⁸³ Drive-ins were a core component of the film's distribution plan.

In addition to drive-ins, the film also played in major urban areas in downtown theaters. By November 1972, Hallmark and AIP had released *The Last House on the Left* at the Chicago Woods Theatre (earning \$80,000 in two weeks); in Boston at the Astor and in the suburbs of Newton, Mass., at the Paramount (earning \$73,000 in three weeks); in Detroit in a "7-theatre multiple" (earning \$85,000 in three weeks); in Washington D.C. at the Town Theatre (earning

\$39,000); and in Pittsburgh at the Stanley Theatre (earning \$31,000 in two weeks).⁸⁴ In early November 1972, the film had also played Buffalo, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Hartford, New Haven, and New Orleans.⁸⁵ During November and December, the film also played in Houston at the Majestic Theatre, in San Francisco at the Baronet Theatre and 900-car Geneva Drive-In, in Kansas City at a multiple-drive-in showcase, and in Memphis.⁸⁶ In New York, Hallmark released the film at the Penthouse, the 59th St. Twin, and the 86th St. Twin I.⁸⁷ As Chapter One's distribution study showed, horror, like sexploitation, circulated commonly in major urban markets as well as in smaller towns, a finding validated by *The Last House on the Left's* release. Hardtop bookings appeared more common in major urban areas, while drive-in bookings appeared likely in smaller cities and towns. This is further evidence that the "exploitation market" was not so easily pinned down to one set of theaters or regions; instead, the market was compromised of a mixture of theater types and a range of locations, which varied, to some degree, by cycle.

The Last House on the Left's circulation much beyond its release date suggests that seasonal recycling and repurposing of existing features was a relatively common part of exploitation distribution. Schaefer has identified recycling techniques, such as the repurposing of footage or the retitling of films, as a feature of classical exploitation.⁸⁸ Chapter One also references an exhibitor whose stock of films was comprised primarily of old releases.⁸⁹ After playing in hardtops, *The Last House on the Left* continued to play in drive-ins throughout the mid-1970s. In 1976, AIP exchanges released it as a midnight movie in late August and early September on the East Coast in Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and Norfolk. The venues included five drive-ins and five hardtops.⁹⁰ In 1979, the film played five drive-ins in the Minneapolis area and a five-week "winter engagement" at the Redwood Drive-In in Salt Lake

City.⁹¹ The ad read: “The Nation’s #1 Cult Movie Never Dies!”⁹² Now Available With A Completely New Campaign!” “Contact your local A.I.P. Exchange for Dates.”⁹³ Online sources report that the film earned \$3 million domestically, or 33 times the negative cost.⁹⁴ The distribution information above shows that *The Last House on the Left* performed strongest in drive-ins and in major urban settings like Chicago and Detroit with large black populations. This is an indication of a coalitional audience not dissimilar to that described earlier by independent distributors.

Moreover, the above information about *The Last House on the Left*’s distribution shows a few key distinctions between exploitation horror, or exploitation, and Hollywood horror. First, *The Last House on the Left* was released in the Hollywood off-season, after Labor Day. By contrast, *The Exorcist* was released a year after *The Last House on the Left* but during a time of high moviegoing: the day after Christmas in 1973. *The Exorcist* also played an entirely different circuit of theaters. Released by Warner Bros., *The Exorcist* played prominent first-run indoor theaters. In Hollywood, *The Exorcist* played in a major entertainment area in Westwood, Hollywood, at Mann’s National Theatre near UCLA.⁹⁵ In Denver, *The Exorcist* played the indoor The Center theater.⁹⁶ In Chicago, it played the UA Cinema 1 and Gateway.⁹⁷ While *The Last House on the Left* moved fairly quickly to drive-ins within the first few months of its release, even in warm weather markets in the southeast, *The Exorcist* played indoor theaters for several months. In Memphis, *The Exorcist* played the Paramount for five weeks; in Raleigh, N.C., it played the Ambassador Theatre; and the film played the Paramount in New Orleans.⁹⁸ In Kansas City, a region with many drive-ins, *The Exorcist* played the Embassy Theatre.⁹⁹ In fact, *The Exorcist* appeared to have been in release for half a year before playing in drive-ins. In July 1974, *The Exorcist* played drive-ins in Louisville and in nearby New Albany, Indiana, and in

eight hardtops and four drive-ins in Philadelphia.¹⁰⁰ *The Exorcist*'s release suggests that Hollywood horror, released by national distributors to first-run indoor theaters, appeared to reach audiences by something closer to a standard one-size-fits-all distribution plan. Independents like Hallmark and AIP, on the other hand, were operating at a small enough scale, presumably, to profit from limited earnings. Discourse from critics and distribution data shows a narrower audience for exploitation horror in pockets all over the country, from southeastern drive-ins to big cities. The AIP distribution network connected Craven's films to drive-ins that could serve pockets of fans of extreme horror fare. Over time, however, slasher films would move upscale, eventually playing the kinds of situations where *The Exorcist* had played.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974)

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre was a critical entry in the exploitation horror, or exploitation, cycle that further illustrated the cycle's core features: niche market appeal due to extreme violence, alliances with sexploitation, controversial reception, and low cultural status. These features provided product differentiation from Hollywood horror. Directed by Tobe Hooper, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was made for about \$300,000 by Austin, Texas-based film students, community theater members, and other locals.¹⁰¹ The film was financed by Bill Parsley, VP of Financial Affairs at Texas Tech University and Warren Skaaren, head of Texas Film Commission.¹⁰² Parsley and Skaaren collectively gave Hooper \$60,000.¹⁰³ Filmed in Round Rock, Texas, the shoot was hot, difficult, and threadbare. The production crew had only two trucks, and none of the actors had second costumes.¹⁰⁴ Editing raised costs beyond the budgeted figures, so Hooper struck a deal with Louis Peraino of Bryanston Pictures for the additional

\$225,000 needed to complete the film. In exchange, Bryanston exacted 30% of the film's box office take, a standard distribution fee.¹⁰⁵

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre married the cannibalism of *Night of the Living Dead* with the brutality of *The Last House on the Left* and continued exploitation's dramatization of human, and not supernatural, monstrosity. Hearing a news story about grave robbing in Texas, Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns), her brother Franklin (Paul A. Partain), and friends Kirk and Pam drive to the cemetery to see if their grandfather's grave has been violated. On the way, they pick up a hitchhiker who behaves bizarrely. He cuts himself with a knife, takes a photo of Franklin, and then burns the Polaroid photo. After kicking the hitchhiker out of the van, the friends drive on to a gas station. Kirk and Pam go off to find a place to swim and inadvertently walk into Leatherface's (Gunnar Hansen) house. One by one, the characters encounter Leatherface's lair, dressed with bones, feathers, and hides. Leatherface captures Sally and forces her to endure a grim family dinner with the hitchhiker, the nearly dead patriarch of the family, and a maniacal brother. As the men attempt to execute her with a hammer, Sally escapes after being pursued by the hitchhiker and Leatherface. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* evinced a strong level of quasi-'realistic' adult material, evoked through disturbing mise-en-scene and grainy 16mm film stock blown up to 35mm.

A strong sense of suspense, foreboding, and horror was achieved through expressive cinematography and editing. For example, in the famous final scene that depicts Sally's escape from the Leatherface family home, the camera is positioned at a low height on what appears to be a dolly track. Following shots of Sally are intercut with the low angle, quasi-canted, low camera height shots that show Leatherface in pursuit. An axial jump cut emphasizes Sally's scream when a truck driver strikes and kills the hitchhiker. The formal elements work to

emphasize Sally's fright and terror and to construct suspense, as the viewer wonders how Sally will escape. While Hooper's style was influential, it was also distinct from the stylistic traits associated with later slasher films. Subsequent films in the slasher cycle brought in techniques not found in Hooper's film, like point-of-view camera set ups and subjective-seeming cinematography, techniques that would become stylistic clichés associated with the slasher film. Hooper's film also featured jarring contrasts in camera height and angle that were not as prominent in the slasher films. Perhaps more importantly, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* located monstrosity in human psychopathology and small-town society rather than in the supernatural or occult, as was common in Hollywood horror. This element would influence the sensibility of later slasher horror films. Like *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* presented extreme depictions of human suffering and brutality—an approach that differentiated exploitation horror from Hollywood horror in the marketplace.

Like *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was released by an independent distributor best known for releasing sexually explicit films. Bryanston Pictures was the distributor of 1972's *Deep Throat* and known also for founder Louis Peraino's purported mafia connections.¹⁰⁶ Bryanston's link with sexploitation mirrored Hallmark's connections to 'X'-rated films; in both instances, these companies appeared to have pivoted away from one form of adult filmmaking to another adult-oriented cycle.¹⁰⁷ Gesturing toward the company's focus on commercial, disreputable markets, Bryanston executive (and former Paramount sales agent) Ted Zephro has said of the company: "For big reviews or an Oscar, forget us."¹⁰⁸ Bryanston leveraged the shocking content of the film in advertising and promotion. For the Dallas premiere in October 1974, Bryanston staged a scene from the film in the Dallas Fairmont Hotel. *Boxoffice* described the scene as a room featuring "furniture made from human flesh and

bones which is in keeping with the movie and the true events on which the film is based.”¹⁰⁹ In November of 1974, Bryanston organized a sneak preview in San Francisco for the audiences of *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974) that was likely intended to create controversy and attract press coverage. While both films were rated ‘R’, *Variety* observed that two ‘R’ ratings “doesn’t mean they [the two films] always appeal to the same audience.”¹¹⁰ Fifty *Pelham* audience members walked out in protest. A city worker in the audience threatened: “There’s a good lawsuit here for intentional inflicting of mental disturbances. People were vomiting.”¹¹¹ In promoting the film, Bryanston did not shy away from courting controversy by sneaking the film with a studio feature.

Similar to *The Last House on the Left*, promotional materials also signaled the brutality depicted in the film. The 1974 one sheet for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* illustrated Sally strung up, with Leatherface standing in front of his victim with a chainsaw [Figure 25]. The taglines emphasized the sensational (“America’s most bizarre and brutal crimes!”) and the story’s loose association with Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein: (“What happened is true. Now the motion picture that’s just as real.”). The main slogan, “Who will survive and what will be left of them?” presaged the shooting gallery plot and ‘final girl’ conventions of the slasher film identified by Kristin Thompson and Clover respectively and described in the section on the slasher film. Both the two-minute theatrical trailer and the 30-second television spot featured images of Leatherface, sounds of high-pitched screams, and a slogan emphasizing the word-of-mouth that Bryanston hoped for: “After you stop screaming, you’ll start talking about it.” Promotion of the film positioned *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a work that pushed existing boundaries for terrifying representation in horror.

Similar to *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* evoked strong but mixed reactions from critics. In the US, the film provoked concern from moral watchdogs including the National Correspondence Group, a group that sent angry letters to TV stations and sponsors showing violent media.¹¹² Roger Ebert praised the craft of the film but concluded that the film had “no apparent purpose, unless the creation of disgust and fright is a purpose.”¹¹³ In British Columbia, the film was not banned but forced to carry the phrase “an extremely gruesome, disgusting picture” on all advertisements.¹¹⁴ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has, like a Hitchcock film, become a topic of much meta-analysis. Geoff King describes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a film associated with “the broad climate of the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras.”¹¹⁵ Wood viewed the film as one of the most scathing critiques of a repressive patriarchal social order that the horror genre produced in the 1970s.¹¹⁶ Nowell, in turn, argues that Woods’ attention to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is responsible for the film’s place in the horror pantheon.¹¹⁷ Wood’s commentary is also evidence of Peter Hutching’s claim that the most critically applauded horror films are those that are perceived as distant “from the commercial imperatives of popular entertainment.”¹¹⁸ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has become a touchstone for critics adopting a variety of critical and theoretical perspectives.

Though occupying a ‘low’ cultural position, trade journals pointed to a commercial demand for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* because it offered audiences something new as a viscerally terrifying film. *The Independent Film Journal* wrote that “there isn’t a film in memory to match [*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*] for sheer brutality and unyielding sadism.”¹¹⁹ The trade journals observed that the commercial prospects of the film were favorable not in spite of, but because of, the film’s extreme violence and disturbing quality.¹²⁰ *The Independent Film Journal* also wrote, “As viscerally unsettling and thoroughly exploitative as the film might be, its

commercial prospects in selected violence-oriented markets are probably very good.” The trade journal added, “With the runaway success of *Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein* and the earlier cult fixation on the black and white horrors of *Night of the Living Dead*, audiences have clearly shown that there’s a distinct place in their innermost gut for the spectacle of large screen carnage.”¹²¹ *Boxoffice* noted that some horror fans “expecting cathartic horror or special effects fakery” would be disappointed but that the film was nevertheless possibly the most scary movie made.¹²² *Variety* praised the film’s production values as better than typical for “an exploiter” and predicted “sanguine [box office] for the screamer trade.”¹²³

Similar to *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* opened during the fallow fall period. However, unlike the Craven film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* appeared to have been booked more strategically to first reach southeastern viewers. In this way, the film intersects with the hicksploitation cycle discussed in Chapter Four. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* opened first in Dallas on October 11, 1974, and in 230 theaters across Texas.¹²⁴ After this opening, the film moved across the country and, like *The Last House on the Left*, played in drive-ins and downtown indoor theaters. In late October, the film played in Oklahoma City at the May Theatre, Yale Theatre, Skyview Drive-In and Riviera Drive-In, and in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at the UA Annex, Airview Drive-In, and Riverside Drive-In.¹²⁵ In November, the film played in Portland in three theaters, and in Philadelphia at the David E. Milgram circuit.¹²⁶ “The sicker the film the higher the profits,” observed Frank Leeper, manager of the Philadelphia Milgram Theater on Market Street. Leeper charged \$3.50 a ticket for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (about \$17 today) and reported grosses in the first week that exceeded *Airport 1975* (1974) by \$10,000.¹²⁷ In Memphis, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* played at the Park Theater, described by *Cinema Treasures* as “an independent neighbourhood theater.”¹²⁸ There, the film tied with

Avco-Embassy's *The Tamarind Seed* (1974) as the leading film the first week of November.¹²⁹ In Chicago, it played at the Chicago Theatre where it tied with *Airport 1975* as the top film in the city that week.¹³⁰ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* played key cities across the West Coast, Midwest, and Northeast.¹³¹ The above information shows that, like *The Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was booked in downtown houses in key cities and in drive-ins. The film performed well in hardtops in Memphis, Chicago, and Philadelphia, another indication of exploitation's appeal in the boonies, drive-in circuits, and beyond.

Earning \$30 million on a budget of less than \$200,000, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* demonstrated a profitable audience for low-budget, violent horror that the slasher cycle would further capitalize on. (Another film made at the same time, *Black Christmas* (1974), is recognized by many fans and scholars as the first crystallization of the slasher form.) A 1980 *Los Angeles Times* article cited *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as the film that inaugurated what the writer termed "the knife movies."¹³² Nowell, however, minimizes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s influence on the slasher cycle, Nowell writes:

Conversely, little incentive existed to produce films like *The Texas Chainsaw* [sic] *Massacre* in the late 1970s and early 1980s because the film, as Suzanne Mary Donahue details, performed only moderately well in the mid 1970s, performed badly at decade's end, and had for legal reasons been withdrawn from distribution from 1979 to mid 1981, before earning most of its revenue in late 1981 and 1982, only after the teen slasher production boom was over.¹³³

Nowell's assessment appears to ignore some important economic factors that hopeful low-budget horror producers and distributors would be weighing: a film's profit margin as well as its potential for gains on the drive-in and second-run market during the decade. Indeed, *The Texas*

Chain Saw Massacre's inexpensive and student-run production illustrated that the barriers to entry were low, and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* continued to take in earnings on the drive-in market during a re-release in the fall of 1976, during which it played drive-ins in Minneapolis, Boston, and London.¹³⁴ *Variety* reported that Bryanston expected only \$2.5 million in rentals from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. By 1975, however, the film had earned \$30 million in domestic grosses, amounting to a cost-to-profit ratio of 200:1.¹³⁵ This was much higher than the earnings of *The Last House on the Left*. Evidently anticipating ongoing profits from the film, New Line Cinema purchased *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in 1980 and re-issued the film on a state rights basis in the southeast and Midwest through 1980 and 1981.¹³⁶

Exploitation films *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Last House on the Left*, and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* carved out a form of product differentiation from Hollywood horror through several strategies. For one, their plots were distinctive for their degree of violence and, often, location of monstrosity in human depravity, likely a source of influence for slasher films. Secondly, exploitation films were targeted and sold to a niche market: to a narrow but varied group of viewing segments anchored to the drive-in market. Throughout this chapter, two co-occurring but divergent cycles have thus far been charted: the pre-sold supernatural Hollywood horror made and released by studios and the gory and gritty 'realistic' exploitation horror made by independents and released to the exploitation market. During this period, from 1968-1978 roughly, the relationship between these two cycles was primarily one of differentiation (though both cycles contributed, as noted earlier, to the genre's wider cultural popularity). 1978's *Halloween* was a breakthrough moment in the relationship between the majors' and independents' horror cycles. *Halloween* was the 'R'-rated horror film that pushed independent horror over the threshold to significant mainstream prominence.

Section II: *Halloween* (1978) and the Transition from Exploitation to the Slasher Film

Based on differences in textual characteristics and patterns of distribution explored in this section, I view exploitation as a cycle that influenced the slasher film cycle but was distinct from it in three respects. First, unlike exploitation, the slasher cycle was sold, through marketing and various distribution methods, *beyond* the exploitation market. Second, the slasher cycle also adhered to a set of consistent plot and stylistic traits that marked it as separate from exploitation. Third, exploitation was entirely aligned with the exploitation independents; the slasher cycle involved exploitation independents and Paramount as well. *Halloween* was the pivot point between the two cycles. Influenced by the grim, gory, and the human horror of exploitation, *Halloween* created a commercial horror formula that I argue became the blueprint for slasher films.

Halloween was produced by Compass International Films, an independent production company formed by the merger of Irwin Yablans and Moustapha Al Akkad's companies in January 1978.¹³⁷ Yablans had worked as a salesman for Warner Bros. in Boston in the early 1960s but in recent years had moved into the exploitation arena, forming the Irwin Yablans Company.¹³⁸ Akkad's company Patty Corporation had made *Mohammad* (1977) for \$14 million.¹³⁹ *Variety* described Compass as "in the novel position of releasing and bankrolling big budget items in the \$15,000,000 to \$20,000,000 range." Yablans' vision for the company, however, was that of a low-budget operation.¹⁴⁰ Compass used regional sub-distributors for domestic release and contracted with independent distributor Manson Releasing for international dates and with Columbia TV for television licensing.¹⁴¹

Originally titled *The Babysitter Murders*, *Halloween* grew out of an idea by Yablans, who acted as executive producer. John Carpenter directed the film and created the film's

electronic score. The earliest trade reports on *Halloween* quoted budget figures of \$500,000-\$750,000, though later articles said the film was made for \$320,000 and shot over only four weeks.¹⁴² Jamie Lee Curtis, the daughter of Hollywood stars Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis, was cast as protagonist Laurie, and she appeared in three subsequent *Halloween* films. (Indeed, Nowell has shown how independent distributors leveraged Curtis' Hollywood background to grant commercial and cultural legitimacy to the low-budget slasher horror films in which the 'scream queen' starred.)¹⁴³ Yablans shopped *Halloween* to several distributors, including major and minor studios, who all turned it down—an underdog narrative he appeared to frequently recount to journalists.¹⁴⁴

Halloween tells the story of deranged killer Michael Myers, who was committed to a sanitarium after murdering his sister as a child. Myers escapes from the sanitarium and goes to Haddonfield, Illinois, the suburb where his mother is buried. Dr. Samuel Loomis (Donald Pleasance) drives to Haddonfield to warn others and find Michael. In Haddonfield, Michael begins stalking Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis). That night, Laurie and her friend Annie are babysitting in two different houses, one right across the street for the other. Michael kills Laurie's friend Annie. Before encountering Laurie, Michael also kills Lynda and Bob after the couple has sex. Laurie runs over to the house where Annie is babysitting and finds Michael. Laurie struggles with Michael and eventually stabs him repeatedly, running across the street back to the Doyle house. Dr. Loomis arrives and shoots Michael several times. However, at the film's end, Michael's body is oddly missing. Nowell has claimed without supporting evidence that the female teen characters in *Halloween* were placed in the script "[t]o enable distributors to target teenage girls and young women."¹⁴⁵ However, the presence of female characters was not new in horror. The protagonists of both *The Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

were female, but there was no indication in the distribution data or marketing materials identified above that this was connected to a market strategy of targeting young girls or women. Clover has offered a very different explanation. Clover understands the imperiled girls and women in 1970s and 1980s horror as representations of male fantasies of domination served up to a predominantly male audience. Clover references empirical studies to support the common understanding of horror fandoms as young men.¹⁴⁶ Yablans did indeed have commercial aspirations beyond a niche horror audience, but the claim that the Laurie Strode character was written to attract teen girls to the theater does not appear to hold much water. I posit, instead, that the influence of exploitation's imperiled female protagonists was a more proximate industrial cause.

Halloween introduced many of the elements that would be seen by critics as definitional to the slasher cycle. In the prototypical slasher films, a male crazed killer stalks and brutally kills white teenage victims often in suburban, middle-class, or otherwise anodyne youth settings such as a summer camp (*Friday the 13th* franchise, *Sleepaway Camp* (1983)), suburban high school (*Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*), or college campus (*Prom Night* (1980), *The House on Sorority Row* (1982)).¹⁴⁷ The narrative structure follows a 'shooting gallery' plot, which Kristin Thompson has defined as a plot pattern structured by the killing-off of characters one-by-one.¹⁴⁸ In slasher films, the body count is often high. The plot of *Halloween* depicts five of Michael's killings. The antagonist typically kills victims in a gruesome and gory manner—not with guns but with brutal instruments such as knives, axes, or chainsaws. Michael kills Laurie's friend Annie by slashing her throat. Boyfriend Bob is impaled through the chest with a knife onto a bedroom door. Babysitter Lynda is strangled with a telephone cord. The climax occurs when the last of the group of teen protagonists, typically a female character, termed by Clover as the 'final

girl,' battles the killer.¹⁴⁹ According to Clover, slasher films position both men and women viewers to identify with the imperiled woman and her eventual triumph over the monster. In *Halloween*, Laurie takes on Michael one-on-one before Loomis arrives on scene. Critics and fans alike also associated specific stylistic traits with the slasher cycle. These include an electronic musical score and subjective sound and image techniques that dramatize the killer's perspective. Mobile framing and handheld cinematography align the viewer with the killer's perceptual experience, as seen in the optical point-of-view shots from young Michael's perspective in *Halloween's* opening prologue. Clover describes the subjective cinematography as "probably the most widely imitated—and widely parodied—cliché of modern horror."¹⁵⁰ (Indeed, Brian De Palma mocks its ubiquity in the opening scene of *Blow Out* [1981].) Narration manages the cross-cutting between the killer's action and that of the unknowing victims to produce suspense and surprise. Scholars have subsequently placed slasher horror in the pantheon of horror classics alongside the Universal films of the 1930s, Hammer horror, and Italian *gialli*. Landmarks of the early slasher film cycle, including *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), have all been developed into multi-film franchises with contemporary reboots.

Halloween used marketing approaches quite similar to those employed in the Blockbuster Lite films of Chapter Five. When compared with the one sheets of *The Last House on the Left* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Halloween's* promotional materials evinced a high concept look that, following Justin Wyatt's definition, developed into a codified set of imagery that has endured throughout the franchise's many films.¹⁵¹ Nowell likewise calls Michael Myers "marketing friendly."¹⁵² The one sheet presents an image that functions to encapsulate the style, genre, and even some plot elements (i.e. the act of killing) of the film. As Figure 26 shows, the poster takes a cohesive approach, with all elements linked to the film's title and the holiday

theme in a graphically simple and striking image. The sickle shape of the knife in a man's hand integrates closely with the jack-o-lantern with a menacing face. The tag line—"The Night *He* Came Home"—links the murdering figure, evoked by the knife, with the specific time setting of the film. Notably, while the promotional materials of *The Last House on the Left* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* depicted the victims and their pain or suffering, the *Halloween* one sheet only alludes to Michael Myers and does not give away the identities of the victims. The high-concept promotional materials of *Halloween* pointed further to the film's more commercial orientation to the marketplace and the influence of Hollywood blockbusters on even the independent horror market.

Halloween was generally well received by critics. A 1980 *Los Angeles Times* article claimed that *Halloween* was instantly seen as 'classic' and was the first of the slasher cycle to be broadly praised by critics and viewers.¹⁵³ Gene Siskel wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* that the film was "beautifully made" and showed Carpenter as "a natural filmmaker and a name worth remembering."¹⁵⁴ Mentioning Carpenter's debt to *Psycho* (1960), *Variety* noted that *Halloween* was competently made with well-timed scares and a "handsome" visual style for such a low budget. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* acknowledged that the film was "well-made" but characterized *Halloween* as "depressing" and a pointless "exercise in unredeemed morbidity."¹⁵⁵ While *Boxoffice* predicted positive word-of-mouth coming out of a screening of *Halloween* at the Chicago Film Festival, *Variety* expressed doubt that such production values would translate into mainstream success, suggesting instead that *Halloween* was positioned "for drive-ins and fast play-off."¹⁵⁶ The trade press also heralded *Halloween* as a feat of independent film marketing—and an exception to the otherwise dour state of indie films. One industry analyst at the eve of 1980 reflected on the problem of independent distribution. He stated that major

studios had co-opted drive-in spaces, and the hard-top playdates were just as difficult to book.

Halloween, however, was the exception that proved the rule—an independent film with bookings in the best theaters at a time when the major studios had come to dominate the summer season.¹⁵⁷

Unlike the Blockbuster Lite films, *Halloween* was released in a platform pattern. Yablans explained Compass International's distribution strategy as “bring[ing] the picture in through the back door,” or in building word-of-mouth and releasing in hardtops once there was positive press behind the film.¹⁵⁸ Yablans appeared unable to get nationwide saturation release for *Halloween* but, in press releases, he framed this as a positive development. Had the film gotten major release, which would have guaranteed a saturation booking pattern, the film, Yablans explained, “would probably have been pegged as an exploitation picture and would have been dead in two weeks.”¹⁵⁹ Yablans appeared to understand the importance of controlling the film's market signal. Nowell has called Yablans' inability to secure major studio distribution a “deterrent.”¹⁶⁰ However, Blockbuster Lite flops like *Meteor* (1979) and *Piranha* (1978) showed that market signals were heuristics used in the industry to interpret profits as flops, sleepers, or successes. A studio distribution deal for *Halloween* may have sent out a Blockbuster Lite market signal, resulting in higher expectations for profitability over a shorter release time, leading to perceptions of a flop. Yablans benefited from the perception of the film as a ‘sleeper.’

Instead of attempting a Blockbuster Lite release, Compass used an independent, and what Yannis Tzioumakis has termed an Indiewood release strategy.¹⁶¹ Yablans explained:

By going very slowly and letting the picture build a reputation—by not going after critics and waving it in their faces, but rather letting the critics react to the reaction of the public—a cult developed. It would have been lost had it gone out to 500 theatres a one time, because it would've smacked of exploitation. As a matter of fact,

many of the critics in New York said, ‘Gee, it’s a better picture than we [Compass] had been talking about.’¹⁶²

Yablans released the film through a gradual platform approach. Compass sub-contracted with approximately 20 sub-distributors, including several New World Pictures exchanges, who released the film throughout a given region.¹⁶³ While *Halloween* was also released in drive-ins, the release strategy targeted more of a mix of downtown venues—notably hardtop downtown theaters, new multiplex hardtops, and drive-ins—than had *The Last House on the Left* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. In contrast to the drive-in strategy employed in the exploitation horror cycle by Group 1, Joseph Brenner, and other independents, Compass first opened *Halloween* in major urban areas beginning October 25, 1978.¹⁶⁴ In its first week of release, *Halloween* grossed \$1.27 million in 198 theaters.¹⁶⁵ Specifically, the film took in \$450,000 in 72 theaters in New York and \$500,000 in 98 theaters in Southern California.¹⁶⁶ In Chicago, *Halloween* was the top film for two weeks in a row in 11 indoor theaters and five outdoor theaters.¹⁶⁷ In New Orleans, *Halloween* was the top film in the city for two weeks, playing at the Lakeside.¹⁶⁸ In St. Louis in December, most exhibitors were relying on holdovers and reissues, which gave *Halloween* space for eight *downtown* theaters.¹⁶⁹ *Halloween* also played in Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Miami, Baltimore, and San Francisco.¹⁷⁰ Unlike exploitation, *Halloween* appeared to perform most strongly in major urban centers and big cities, not, as far as the available data shows, in the small town and suburban areas where most drive-ins were located.

Despite being released in the traditionally slow fall season, *Halloween*’s earnings showed the film performing far beyond *The Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. With grosses of half a million in New York and Southern California as cited above, *Halloween*

was something of a hit. After having been on the market only one month, *Halloween* had earned \$7 million in receipts making it a ‘sleeper’ according to the trade press.¹⁷¹ Importantly, Yablans held *Halloween* back from a wide release approach, allowing positive word-of-mouth and buzz to grow in major markets before booking the film in more dates. By December 1978, for example, *Halloween* had played in a limited number of cities.¹⁷² Four months after opening, *Halloween* had earned a domestic gross of \$10 million in 155 cities. The next month, the film opened in an additional 28 cities.¹⁷³ Warner Bros. International released the film in Germany, Austria, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, France, Denmark and Greece.¹⁷⁴ In avoiding a purely saturation booking approach, Compass’ method aligned the distribution of *Halloween* with the platform and ‘grassroots’ kind of release that would be commonly associated with ‘indie’ releasing in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁷⁵

Through a gradual platform release, Compass strategically built an audience for *Halloween* beyond the existing coalitional niches perceived to be the limited audience for ‘R’ exploitation horror at the time. By the spring of 1979, after buzz had developed around the film, Yablans prepared a special release of *Halloween* in New England and Boston, convinced that *Halloween* would gross \$20 million in what he saw as a crucial market.¹⁷⁶ Yablans claimed that outside of New York and Los Angeles, Boston was the most influential film market. As proof, Yablans cited the headquarters of film financier First National Bank and General Cinema, the largest U.S. theater chain.¹⁷⁷ In a departure from the perceived audience of mid-1970s hillbilly horror, Yablans also observed that New England offered a populous college-aged crowd.¹⁷⁸ This demographic was more closely aligned to the profile of the typical frequent moviegoer discussed in Chapter One. Compass spent \$30,000 on promotion and advertising in Boston alone, and, after one week of play, the film broke records with a take of \$200,000 in “perimeter” theaters in

Boston.¹⁷⁹ The majors would have spent more than twice that in Boston, Yablans boasted, to achieve the same results.

Yablans was able to send a market signal of low market expectations that paradoxically enabled *Halloween* to have a later wide release, after word-of-mouth had built. One year after the film's initial limited release, in October of 1979, *Halloween* had its first national wide release in 600 theaters.¹⁸⁰ Yablans bragged that only a year prior "we were being offered dregs."¹⁸¹ Earning \$7 million in rentals in 1979 alone, *Halloween* made *Variety*'s "All Time Rental Champs" list that year.¹⁸² Similar to the manner in which *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was reissued on a seasonal basis, Yablans discussed similar plans:

[It's] a built-in thing....We'll show the picture on Halloween for years to come....We now see it [*Halloween*] as a perennial, something we can bring back every couple of years and score heavily with.¹⁸³

Boxoffice further reported Compass' plan to keep *Halloween* in the theatrical market by booking it in 500 theaters for the final quarter of every year. The writer explained, "This way, it is hoped, 'Halloween' will become institutionalized as a Halloween fixture and exhibitors will be 'programmed' to book it."¹⁸⁴ While sequels might achieve the same purpose, one can see why reissues were quite appealing for a small-time distributor, requiring very little overhead or outlay of new costs and building brand awareness in preparation for the development of sequels.

Halloween also benefited from ancillary markets, not seen in the exploitation cycle. Compass licensed foreign rights at MIFED (International Market for Cinema and Multimedia) in 1978 for \$1 million in foreign guarantees, striking deals with major studio Warner Bros., who released the film in European territories.¹⁸⁵ In late October 1980, *Halloween* was released on

three formats on the same day; in New York, *Halloween* was booked in 83 area theaters, shown on pay-cable day and date, and also sold on videocassette at retailer Video Shack.¹⁸⁶

Commenting on the possible complications of a reissue, *Variety* observed: “In this case, the multimedia exposure has had a positive rather than diluting effect on boxoffice.”¹⁸⁷ *Halloween*’s revenue in ancillary markets continued for several years. By October 1981, the film had grossed over \$2 million in retail sales of video. Media Home Entertainment, a major VHS distribution company, started by Yablans (and a company that would co-produce *A Nightmare on Elm Street*), controlled the video rights and licensed the television rights to NBC, where the film had its television premiere on Halloween night of 1981.¹⁸⁸ *Halloween*’s success after theatrical release suggested a ‘long tail’ market, theorized by Chris Anderson, was taking effect in the arenas of video and pay-cable. As a well-performing but somewhat niche product, *Halloween* appeared an appealing property for businesses specializing in the post-theatrical market. *Halloween* showed that a Blockbuster Lite release was not the only strategy to effectively drive demand; gradual platform release and word-of-mouth could slowly build demand in ancillary markets.

Halloween’s airing on national television on NBC’s Friday Night at the Movies was an unprecedented opportunity for Yablans and Carpenter to have the kind of mass exposure that would be unthinkable for an ‘R’-rated horror film. *Halloween* aired on NBC on October 31, 1981, the same night *Halloween II* (1981) was released in theaters. Murray Leeder writes that NBC asked Carpenter to fill out the running time to two hours of airtime including commercial breaks.¹⁸⁹ Yablans and Carpenter made many edits and shot additional scenes on the set of *Halloween II*. The televised version has been placed on YouTube, and it highlights some of the edits required for network primetime release. The shots of Laurie lifting a butcher knife and

stabbing Michael are removed from the scene in which Michael attacks Laurie, who is hiding out in the upstairs closet of the Doyle's house. Several of the new scenes provide further set-up of Loomis' clinical care of Michael. Leeder writes that Carpenter views these scenes as "simply filler" and "completely unnecessary."¹⁹⁰ However, Yablans and Carpenter had much to gain from the broadcast. Rick Rosenthal directed *Halloween II*, but Carpenter and Hill wrote the film and were billed as producers, and television airing would have expanded *Halloween's* reach beyond existing horror aficionados and potentially drive video sales. While Carpenter and Yablans forfeited production costs and creative control for a bigger audience, NBC also carried the risk of negative perception among the broadcast channels or of FCC fines. Yet, the network also had much to gain. *Variety* reported that media buyers viewed NBC as the weaker of the three networks in their theatrical titles. The season the *Halloween* aired, NBC had cut back from three movie nights to two movie nights.¹⁹¹ NBC's diminished market position likely led it to consider a riskier purchase. Moreover, by 1981, the slasher cycle was at its peak. By broadcasting *Halloween*, NBC was attempting to remain relevant, responding to the cycle's popularity. NBC presumably valued the kind of product differentiation that *Halloween* offered the network even if the broadcasting of a slasher film on primetime carried risk. More broadly, the network broadcast of *Halloween* was a point of mutual symbiosis between the 'margins' and 'mainstream' of the industry. By symbiosis, I mean a moment of coming together or convergence for mutual purposes and mutual gain. Television networks had rather quickly appropriated elements of the sexploitation, blaxploitation, hicksploitation cycles. However, appropriation of the 'R'-rated slasher cycle was fraught, and NBC's interest attested to the cultural prominence of 'R' horror by 1981. Willing to make the thrills and chills palatable to the FCC, Carpenter and Yablans, in turn, received the kind of sustained, two-hour, exposure that could drive demand for *Halloween II* and

sales of *Halloween* into ancillary markets. *Halloween*'s airing on NBC was thus a moment when the mainstream and marginal ends of the industry worked in tandem for mutual gain.

Independent Horror at the End of the Decade

Halloween's box office success and Yablans' touting of this success in the media did much to jump-start the slasher horror trend. *Variety* wrote that, "In 1978, the initial (holiday tie-in) release of 'Halloween' changed the market potential for horror films by demonstrating that low-budgeters (as in the '50s) could compete with the big boys."¹⁹² *Halloween*'s budget of \$300,000 was substantially lower than *The Exorcist*, which was made for around \$10 million, also coincidentally the average cost of a major studio film by 1980.¹⁹³ *Halloween*'s cost was also far below the average indie horror budget, which *Variety* approximated as around \$2 million.¹⁹⁴ *Halloween*'s box office take revealed low-budget horror to be a lucrative strategy that appeared, in some respects, an antidote to the ongoing high-risk, high-reward approach taken by the majors. *Variety* also noted that *Halloween*'s successful fall opening established the fall season as an exception to the rule that summer was best for youth-oriented films.¹⁹⁵ In that sense, *Halloween* set a precedent for a successful off-season independent release in a situation in which the film's concept was closely tied to a holiday or seasonal marker, an approach also mirrored in Christmas-themed horror released in November and December.¹⁹⁶ Despite the above, Nowell has argued that *Halloween*'s influence on the slasher cycle has been overstated because the film ultimately did not earn blockbuster sums.¹⁹⁷ Nowell's reasoning appears misguided, as very few 'R' horror films have earned "blockbuster" box office grosses. (Only *It* (2017) and *The Exorcist* have done so.) *Halloween*'s cost-to-profit ratio in the theatrical market, its release on video, and its broadcast on national television would, I contend, reasonably motivate independent producer-

distributors to finance a \$500,000 horror film. *Halloween*'s return on investment was appealing to indies and major studios alike, as Paramount's pick-up of *Friday the 13th* (1980) illustrates.

Indeed, I surmise that the slate of 1979 horror releases were further evidence of *Halloween*'s influence on independents and majors. In the wake of *Halloween*, 1979's bounty of horror titles showed the continued popularity of Hollywood horror and independent horror at the box office. Hollywood horror hits included *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), with \$11 million in rentals, and *Alien* (1979), which earned \$40 million. Low-budget horror hits in 1979 included Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), with \$15 million in rentals, and *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), with \$10 million in rentals. Yet, just as, bigger independents, like New World Pictures and AIP, experienced their Blockbuster Lite films being shut out from summer playdates in the late 1970s, there was similar concern that the major studios would imitate independents' horror release strategy. Jo Harrison, president of MYCO Films Inc., an independent sub-distributor of *Halloween*, commented in a 1980 *Boxoffice* article that she was concerned that major studios were "eating up" independent films, with UA recently picking up Compass International's *Roller Boogie* (1979) as its 1979 Christmas film.¹⁹⁸ Harrison said:

The smaller independent's share of that market, however, is dwindling, they say. Less because of foreign competition from local production or protectionist measures that siphon available playing time to naïve fare, than because of increasingly long runs being generated by the U.S. majors. Add the fact that many smaller, successful quality pics—say 'Animal House' or 'Up In Smoke'—that just a few years ago would have lain in the independent's province, are now in the stables of the majors (as are most successful indie producers) and the competitive situation, in terms of both available product and playdate availability is further exacerbated.¹⁹⁹

Harrison articulated the fundamental problem that was plaguing independents: majors' wide release had limited the independent market. Further exacerbating this problem of market retrenchment was the loss of valuable forms of product differentiation. The major studios were picking-up or producing smaller films to diversify their slate of blockbuster films given the extreme economic risk associated with banking on blockbuster films only.

Exploitation horror producer-distributors were in some sense 'followers' of big-budget studio horror, particularly as *The Exorcist* brought 'R'-rated, graphic depictions to the mainstream. The reception of Craven and Hooper's films, seen as offensively disturbing and violent, showed that they had successfully carved out a form of product differentiation in their grim and gritty films from much of Hollywood horror. Reaching a broad array of markets and theaters and taking in major-level earnings, *Halloween* was the mainstream breakthrough for independents. While major studios were betting immense sums on a few blockbuster releases, *Halloween* showed independent Compass International eschewing a Blockbuster Lite strategy for 'sleeper'-level status. Harrison's concerns above, however, articulated yet another inversion of the follow-the-leader dynamic as major studios began to pursue smaller budgeted genre films for diversification and risk management purposes. Paramount's pick-up of *Friday the 13th* (1980) showed the return of appropriation as a strategy to capitalize on independents' successes. If *Halloween* illustrated independents leading the vanguard of adult graphic horror, *Friday the 13th* saw the beginning of Hollywood's appropriation of the slasher cycle and the erosion of the cycle's utility for independents as a form of product differentiation.

Section III: *Friday the 13th* and the Expanding Horror Market, 1980-1982

By 1981, *Variety* cited a whopping 2.8:1 ratio of grosses to negative costs needed for breakeven adding that “big budget pics represent[ed]...[a] mammoth exposure to risk.”²⁰⁰ It was no surprise that the major studios would manage risk by acquiring low-budget horror films for a few million dollars, particularly once a film like *Halloween* had revealed a lucrative audience for such fare. The lower the financial outlay, the lower the absolute costs to reach breakeven. *Friday the 13th* illustrated this phenomenon: a major studio venturing into an ‘R’-rated horror cycle popularized by independents.

Friday the 13th was written and directed by the aforementioned Sean Cunningham, who had collaborated with Wes Craven on *The Last House on the Left*. Cunningham shot *Friday the 13th* in September 1979 in New Jersey for \$500,000. Cunningham went to Los Angeles to find a distributor.²⁰¹ Frank Mancuso at Paramount learned of Cunningham’s project from Phil Scudari, a theater operator and one of the film’s financiers.²⁰² Paramount picked up Cunningham’s film for a \$1.5 million guarantee against residuals.²⁰³ Similar to how the major studios used negative pick-up deals to manage the risk of releasing black action films, Paramount used a pick-up deal to limit their investment in a film with somewhat niche audience appeal. Michael Eisner, head of Paramount, explained the studio’s rationale:

We took a look at the film and though I don’t like violence myself, it has some of the most creative killings I’ve ever seen on screen. It looked like a sure commercial prospect and, most importantly, it only cost us \$1,500,000 to buy. So here we were spending \$10,000,000 here and \$5,000,000 there and what was \$1,500,000?²⁰⁴

Friday the 13th was a ‘safe’ investment and form of diversification for Paramount, and the film, depicting teenagers at a wooded camp, aligned with the studio’s orientation toward the youth audience at the time. Their other releases included *Meatballs* (1979) -- another low-budget investment -- *Urban Cowboy* (1980), and a *Grease* (1978) reissue.²⁰⁵

Friday the 13th tells the story of teenage camp counselors at Camp Crystal Lake who are murdered one by one. The film begins with a prologue set in 1958 where two camp counselors are attacked as they are making out in the woods. The teen protagonist, Alice (Adrienne King) and her fellow teen camp counselors notice something awry when, one by one, their counselor peers begin to disappear. Ultimately, Alice stands alone in the cabin as the final girl. When a Jeep drives up to the cabin, Alice thinks she is saved as Mrs. Vorhees (Betsy Palmer) arrives, who claims to be a friend of camp owner Steve Christy. However, Mrs. Vorhees is revealed to be the killer. She is the mother of Jason Vorhees, who drowned years ago when negligent camp counselors were distracted in an amorous moment. After much struggle, Alice kills Mrs. Vorhees. The film ends with Jason’s waterlogged body jumping out of the lake and trying to pull Alice under, a callback to the final surprise scare in *Carrie*, when Carrie’s bloody arm reaches out from behind her grave to grasp onto her friend Sue. Like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* had a shooting gallery plot. Clover also notes that, like many slasher films, *Friday the 13th* obeys the “generic imperative” of post-coital death, or the tendency for characters to be killed immediately after engaging in sexual activity.²⁰⁶ Characteristic of slasher films, *Friday the 13th* also has a high death count. Mrs. Vorhees is responsible for nine gruesome deaths throughout the film. Annie and Ned are both killed when their throats are slashed with a knife. An axe to the face kills camper Marcie. Counselor Bill also has his throat slashed and is impaled with arrows, and Alice kills Mrs. Vorhees by decapitating her with a machete. Clover observes that Mrs. Vorhees, as the

rare female killer in 1970s and 1980s horror, complicates the position in which the “first person” subjective camerawork places the viewer.²⁰⁷ Similarly, Benson-Allott views the camera’s optical alignment of Vorhees’ perspective as “pathologiz[ing]” of the “viewer’s identification with the cinematic apparatus.”²⁰⁸ An industrial perspective, I contend, offers a potentially more proximate explanation. *Friday the 13th* needed to be similar enough to *Halloween*, as seen in the subjective cinematography, to capitalize on the former film’s audience while different enough, in the form of a surprise killer, to perform adequately on its own merits and drive word-of-mouth.

Perceived as offering shameless and gratuitous violence, *Friday the 13th* received poor reviews. Linda Gross at the *Los Angeles Times* described the film as silly, boring, dumb, and just plain bad.²⁰⁹ Gross found fault in the plausibility of the premise—that a camp with a history of murders would reopen in the first place. Siskel at the *Chicago Tribune* strongly attacked the film. In addition to characterizing it as an inept rip-off comprised of “sickening attack scenes” strung together, Siskel called Cunningham a “despicable creature.”²¹⁰ Siskel also published Paramount Chairman of the Board Charles Bluhdorn’s mailing address and suggested viewers contact Bluhdorn if they were, like Siskel, incensed by the “meat-cleaver-in-the-forehead movie.” Siskel also argued that Paramount undeservedly got an ‘R’ for the film and not an ‘X’ due to CARA’s favoritism toward major studios. Matt Hills has suggested that scholars have reinforced *Friday the 13th*’s negative reception. Hills characterizes *Friday the 13th* as a film that exists in academic and fan purgatory or, as he describes: “resolutely beyond trash revalorization, while also being fixed in many academic accounts as a marker of the ‘low’ and illegitimate slasher film.”²¹¹ However, industrial scholarly accounts, like Nowell’s, have begun to sidestep cultural legitimacy or illegitimacy as standards for inclusion, resulting in a more agnostic perspective of horror history.

Despite negative reviews, critics and trade press saw that the film carried strong box office potential, in part due to its similarity to *Halloween*. Like *Halloween*'s one sheet, the promotional poster for *Friday the 13th* was similarly high concept, an observation also offered by Nowell.²¹² It was graphically bold and focused on a limited number of core elements representing the film's premise: a knife, teens, and the woods setting [Figure 27]. Reviews also noted the film's similarity to *Halloween*. *Boxoffice* said the film "tries very hard to be this season's "Halloween," but can't quite copy the film's style and wit (although it does copy some of its storylines and scenes)."²¹³ *The Film Journal* described the film as "'Halloween' in a summer camp."²¹⁴ *Friday the 13th*'s obvious debt to *Halloween* was both the source of its box office potential and, for some critics, its artistic failure. For instance, *Variety* called *Friday the 13th* "lowbudget in the worst sense": an "inept horror exploitationer" and "another teenager-in-jeopardy[sic] entry, contrived to lure the profitable 'Halloween' audience."²¹⁵ *Variety* predicted quick playoff for a film that could quickly exhaust its core audience.²¹⁶ However, others saw another source of profitability for *Friday the 13th* aside from its likeness to *Halloween*. This was the perception in the industry that such a film would reach a reliable youth audience in the exploitation arena. For example, *Boxoffice* predicted the film "could go on to be the drive-in and action house hit of the summer."²¹⁷ *Boxoffice* wrote, "Picked up by Paramount and released to 1,127 theaters, it took in nearly \$6 million during its first three days. For whatever reasons—whether to wallow in the gore or scare their girlfriends—young, non-discriminating audiences are showing up."²¹⁸

Though similar to *Halloween* in many respects, *Friday the 13th* had a wide release instead of a platform release. In that way, *Friday the 13th*'s distribution underscored its status, unlike Carpenter's film, as a major studio release with access to a national distribution network.

Paramount opened *Friday the 13th* wide in 1,100 theaters on May 9 rather than the fall release of *Halloween*. Over three days, it made \$5.8 million, likely reaching breakeven point in only one weekend.²¹⁹ In Manhattan, the film grossed \$660,000, or roughly equal to the film's negative cost, from just 89 New York area theaters.²²⁰ In Chicago, the film had strong earnings of \$1.3 million in just over a month, playing in first-run theaters in Chicago and in newly-constructed (and therefore likely first-run) multiplexes in suburban areas.²²¹ In Los Angeles, it earned \$220,000 in 30 theaters, and, in Boston, it took in nearly \$80,000 in six theaters.²²² In Cleveland it played six theaters including three drive-ins and suburban multiplex sites like the Avon Lake-4 and Great Lakes Mall-4, both located outside of the city.²²³ In Detroit, *Friday the 13th* played 13 houses including six drive-ins.²²⁴ In Seattle, *Friday the 13th* played three hardtops and two drive-ins.²²⁵ Evidently, drive-ins remained a core component of slasher film release even when distributed by a major studio with access to first-run multiplex theaters. After seven weeks, *Friday the 13th* had a domestic gross of \$33.6 million.

The run described above aligns with *Screen International's* 1980 assessment: "The film continues to play strongly in some 500 theatres across the country and of particular interest during this phase of its release is the strength of the drive-in engagements in metropolitan as well as suburban locations."²²⁶ Not only did the film play in many different theaters per city, including suburban indoor theaters and drive-ins, *Friday the 13th* also played many *screens* in major cities. In Los Angeles, the film played 23 screens including the Mann Westwood and Hollywood.²²⁷ In Washington D.C., the film played 15 screens.²²⁸ In Detroit, *Friday the 13th* played 20 screens.²²⁹ In Minneapolis, *Friday the 13th* played three drive-ins and five hardtops.²³⁰ *Friday the 13th*'s run demonstrated a significant advantage over *Halloween's* release. The May release was an early implementation of what *Variety* termed a "early summer launch" strategy

designed “to maximize distributor’s return from a youth-oriented market.”²³¹ *Friday the 13th* actually fulfilled *Halloween*’s promise of quick and strong earnings with drive-ins as a key venue. However, the speedy grosses were a result of wide release and Paramount’s leverage over hardtops and multiplexes, a kind of saturation likely only facilitated by the major studios.

Variety’s prediction of fast payoff was incorrect. *Friday the 13th* continued to take in earnings several months after release, which I surmise was due, in part, to the early summer release date in May. By July 9, 1980, the film had grossed over \$30 million and would go on to make \$16 million in rentals with a negative cost of only \$500,000.²³² By the end of the 1980 summer season, Paramount had earned record rentals while spending less on marketing costs than ever before. *Friday the 13th* contributed to Paramount’s record year of 1980 during which the studio made profits seven times that of 1977. By the end of July 1980, *Variety* observed that *Friday the 13th* “reaffirmed to the major distribs the value of exploitation films” and “helped to foster the ‘you just need one hit’ dream of most distribs.”²³³

Paramount’s pick-up of *Friday the 13th* was part of Paramount’s broader strategy to manage unpredictable audience tastes and spread risk to a slate of films beyond one or two blockbuster releases.²³⁴ Barry Diller of Paramount noted: “We’ve got expensive pictures, we’ve got negatives at zero cost financed by outside sources and we’ve got pictures in between.”²³⁵ Nowell has acknowledged why Paramount didn’t stand much to lose from *Friday the 13th*, but commentary has ignored what the studio had to *gain*: spreading risk through diversification.²³⁶ As Diller’s statement indicates, Paramount managed the unpredictability of the boom-and-bust blockbuster era film market by spreading risks to a range of different film budgets and genre types, betting that at least one would become a hit. As low-budget horror, *Friday the 13th* fit into this strategy of spreading risk as one of the “in between” films. The film’s audience was

certainly narrower than a *Jaws* or *Star Wars*, but Paramount's financial exposure was relatively low at \$1.5 million plus distribution costs, and a film like *Halloween* had provided compelling evidence of the adult horror audience. Using low-budget genre films to spread risk was a common strategy for studios in the wake of the first big blockbusters. Low budgets diversify a slate and offer the potential for sleeper hits, serving as a hedge against a blockbuster that fails to live up to box office expectations. In contemporary Hollywood, however, the economic logics behind this kind of budget diversification have seemingly inverted. Now, the "in between" films are those that appear to increase exposure to risk rather than hedging against it.²³⁷

The 'long tail' of *Friday the 13th* also proved valuable in pay-cable and home video sales. At the end of 1980, Paramount Homevideo licensed *Airplane!* (1980), *Urban Cowboy*, and *Friday the 13th*.²³⁸ Several months later, Paramount sold a package of their features including *Friday the 13th* to Showtime and HBO.²³⁹ However, the film's 'R' rating and violence was a barrier to syndication on network television; in 1982, the television networks declined to purchase *Friday the 13th*, *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), *Lipstick* (1976), and *The Fan* (1981) because they were deemed too violent for broadcast.²⁴⁰ I surmise that Paramount was unwilling to conduct the edits or reshoots that network broadcast may have required, as indicated by NBC's airing of *Halloween*. As a national distributor, Paramount gave *Friday the 13th* an initial wide release and had less to gain from the national exposure that Carpenter and Yablans sought in a network broadcast. Paramount was also likely more concerned with sales to pay-cable and to home video. These markets were suited for 'R'-horror release because they were not governed by restrictive standards. *Stanley v. Georgia* (1969) granted free speech protections for material watched by adults in the privacy of the home. Video and pay-cable were also lucrative markets for the major studios. By 1980, pay-cable and home video together were a greater revenue source

than network television.²⁴¹ These markets were also growing quickly. From 1980–1982, pay-cable subscriptions more than doubled, from \$9 to \$21 million.²⁴² Few households had VCRs by 1982, but videocassette unit sales had nearly doubled from 1981-1982.²⁴³

Given the theatrical, video, and pay-cable market opportunities for violent horror, Paramount evidently considered the slasher teen cycle a trade-off, but a sufficiently lucrative one. Today, the franchise includes twelve films.²⁴⁴ In 2017, *Forbes* listed the *Friday the 13th* franchise as the 5th highest grossing horror film franchise of all time.²⁴⁵ The 12 films have grossed \$380.64 million, or \$821.41 million adjusted for inflation. *Friday the 13th* was the highest grossing entry, earning \$131.38 million adjusted for inflation.²⁴⁶ I surmise that increased opportunities for ancillaries in home video and pay-cable informed Paramount's continued development of the franchise: the video release of *Friday the 13th* was certified gold by the RIAA (indicating 500,000 units sold), and six films in the franchise later, *Friday the 13th Part VII* (1988) was reported to have had strong pay-cable earnings for Paramount.²⁴⁷ Paramount's appropriation of the low-budget horror formula for risk management purposes was a lucrative and enduring strategy for the company.

The Expanding Slasher Horror Market

Friday the 13th (1980) was one example among many of a spike in horror film production in 1980 and 1981. In 1980, 76 horror pictures were filmed in the US, Canada, and UK.²⁴⁸ In 1981, the number of horror films made in Anglophone countries rose to 95, the highest number since 1972.²⁴⁹ The number of horror films earning rentals greater than \$1 million jumped from nine in 1978, to 17 in 1979, and 30 in 1980, a 10-year high.²⁵⁰ According to Lawrence Cohn at *Variety*, “nearly all conform[ed] to the R-rated, violent pattern, though a few inevitable comedy

spoofs amplify the totals.”²⁵¹ The rise of horror features compounded the problem of independent playdate availability that, as Chapter Five shows, had been ongoing since 1978. By May 1981, 60 major releases were planned for summer, while 35 indie features were waiting for playdates. *Variety* wrote: “The hope for the indies is that they will get some playdates in the summer, the second most lucrative film marketing period outside of Christmas.”²⁵² With a glut of horror films, distributors were relying increasingly on May release (as Paramount had done with *Friday the 13th*), to reach youth audiences out of school, as well as big breaks on Easter and Christmas Day. *Variety* said May was “considered a ‘soft’ playing time when independents can mount major breaks,” as their entrée into the summer season.²⁵³ Over time May has become a popular month for blockbuster summer releases. May is no longer a ‘soft’ playing time. Instead, the summer season unofficially kicks off the first weekend in May and, if *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)’s release the last week of April is any indication, potentially even earlier in coming years.

Theater availability continued to be a problem for independents. By August 1981, 28 horror films had been released that year, but 50 horror films were still waiting for playdates.²⁵⁴ *Variety* observed that the summer of 1981 had been good for the majors, with releases going into late August, but that the fall release season was starting early, in August, which further crowded indies out of the Labor Day spots, typically a low season for the majors.²⁵⁵ Only Avco-Embassy had managed to cobble together a semi-national run through regional bookings, not nationwide wide release. *Variety* reported:

Combining with ongoing early summer hits such as ‘Raiders Of The Lost Ark,’ the second wave of summer product should tie up theatre space through September. Indie distribs forced out of the marketplace during the highly competitive summer months...face little opportunity at filling the open slots. Avco Embassy Pictures has cleverly “filled in the cracks” with territory-by-territory

bookings of its summer pics, but it too is up against increased competition.²⁵⁶

Likely rationalizing the company's inability to get national wide dates, Bill Shields, Vice President of Distribution and General Sales Manager at Avco-Embassy, claimed the regional saturation was actually a benefit, allowing them to refine marketing as the film moved from city to city.²⁵⁷ Cohn at *Variety* remarked that other indies like Crown International Pictures and New World Pictures were lacking summer playtime.

Despite dozens of unreleased horror product, by the end of the year, horror and sci-fi together made up 40% of domestic rentals in 1981.²⁵⁸ Cohn remarked in 1981 that three years after the release of *Halloween*, the horror film remained strong at the box office, performing less like an exploitation micro-trend and more like a longstanding market niche. Cohn explained:

While the recession, competition from alternate forms of entertainment, and inferiority of current batch of films have been cited for the current b.o. slump, these pics (normally very cheap to make) [indie horror] are bringing audiences into theatres.²⁵⁹

Horror had a strong presence at sales markets too. In 1982, at AFM (American Film Market) in Los Angeles, horror films represented a quarter of all films for sale.²⁶⁰ There were similar reports of "lookalike 'slasher' and gore pictures" at MIFED.²⁶¹ The continued sales of horror and the slow release patterns resulting from majors' crowding of playdates resulted in concerns of market glut.²⁶² Dozens of completed horror films lacked bookings, and even more were being shopped to distributors. Ticket sales also appeared to be slowing for films that were released; many independent horror features were taking in middling \$1 million returns.²⁶³ However, continued success of a sub-set of horror films at the box office throughout the 1980s revealed

that the problem was not so much cycle fatigue as it was competition for playdates, necessitating product differentiation. Cohn at *Variety* remarked that the horror titles in the marketplace from 1980–1982 were all quite similar in approach, marked by “the inclusion of graphic violence and gore.”²⁶⁴ Horror films continued to perform well, but the successes, such as New Line Cinema’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and Avco-Embassy’s *The Fog* (1980) and even Warner Bros.’ *Gremlins* (1984), showed that effective product differentiation was required in the 1980s horror marketplace. As I explore in the next section, Avco-Embassy and New Line Cinema, independent companies with commercial aspirations, successfully managed to vary their horror film formulae by wedding aspects of adult slasher horror, notably the graphic violence and low-budgets, with a more traditional supernatural-themed approach.²⁶⁵

Section IV: Avco-Embassy and New Line Cinema: Strategies of Risk Aversion in the 1980s Horror Market

During a flooded horror market, Avco-Embassy employed product differentiation in the form of horror-sci-fi hybrids that looked backward to the supernatural themes of Hollywood horror. Avco-Embassy is often left out of accounts of 1970s and 1980s horror. I believe this is due, in part, to the company’s liminal industry position between the exploitation independents and major studios. Nowell’s argument relies on a MPAA member vs. non-MPAA member dichotomy, which is perhaps one reason he only briefly addresses Avco-Embassy. Combining traditional horror elements with those from the slasher cycle, Avco-Embassy’s horror releases also lacked the transgressive qualities that have made 1970s and 1980s horror a point of interest among some scholars, including cult studies scholars. Yet, the production decisions made at Avco-Embassy in the early 1980s help explain just how horror remained such an important genre in the 1980s despite difficult conditions of market saturation and expanding wide releases for

blockbusters that narrowed theatrical space available to independents. Executive Robert Rehme did this through product differentiation—refreshing old formulae in a way that brought horror back in contact with its creature feature lineage and a bit further from the tradition of murderous psychopaths initiated by exploitation horror and brought to a theater near you in the slasher cycle.

In January 1982, *Boxoffice* cited Avco-Embassy as the only independent who successfully moved from the ‘indie’ register to become something akin to a major studio.²⁶⁶ In 1978, Robert Rehme left his position as Vice President and General Sales Manager at New World Pictures to join Avco-Embassy as Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.²⁶⁷ Twenty years prior, Joseph H. Levine had formed Embassy Pictures, a distributor of imports.²⁶⁸ The Avco Corporation, a diversified conglomerate with holdings in the airline and manufacturing industries, purchased Embassy Pictures and formed Avco-Embassy. Avco-Embassy rose to prominence with auteur-driven, youth-oriented films including Mike Nichols’ *Carnal Knowledge* (1971).²⁶⁹ With Levine’s departure in 1974, the company pivoted to distributing low-budget genre films. By 1977, Avco-Embassy accounted for just 1% of Avco Corporation’s income, which included holdings in the finance, real estate, and manufacturing sectors.²⁷⁰ In 1979, Rehme announced the company’s re-entry into production with a planned slate of 15-18 films a year. However, the company limited financial contribution to only 30%-50% of any individual film’s costs, aiming to spend no more than \$5 million total that year in financing.²⁷¹ Rehme said his mission at Avco-Embassy was to “initiate production and retain the worldwide distribution rights.”²⁷² Guarding release rights, minimizing financial exposure in the financing phase, and capitalizing opportunities from ancillary sales to television and video appeared his guiding principles.²⁷³

Phantasm (1979) illustrated the beginnings of Rehme's strategies of shifting to a more traditional form of horror as risk management in a saturated horror market where playdates were difficult to come by. *Phantasm* was written and directed by Don Coscarelli, for which Avco-Embassy put in \$200,000 on the \$1 million release.²⁷⁴ The film combined supernatural occult horror, including supernatural fantasy characters, with sci-fi special effects. Following the release pattern of *Halloween*, Rehme developed a distribution strategy emphasizing commercial hardtop theaters over the drive-in horror market.²⁷⁵ The distribution plan included a saturation strategy targeting a "three to one mix of hardtops to drive-ins." *Variety* predicted some hardtops would be possible based on *Halloween*'s success with those theaters but that drive-ins were more likely.²⁷⁶ Perhaps recognizing that getting *Phantasm* booked in many hardtops would require sweetening the pot for exhibitors, Rehme asked exhibitors for guarantees of 50-60%, lower than the 70% that the studios received.²⁷⁷ By offsetting some of exhibitors' financial risk, Rehme also projected confidence in *Phantasm*'s market potential.

Opening in the off-season in something closer to a platform release, *Phantasm*'s distribution suggested independent horror's difficult market position. It premiered on March 28, 1979, in the slow pre-Easter release and opened first in limited regions: in California (with 48 Los Angeles playdates) and Texas.²⁷⁸ *Phantasm* was in 410 theaters by early May in such markets as Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Atlanta, Toledo, and Nashville.²⁷⁹ *Phantasm* grossed \$1 million in New York alone, and made \$6 million in rentals by January 1980, earning the film a place on *Variety*'s "Big Rental Films of 1979" list.²⁸⁰ This pattern of release showed a focus on major cities from coast-to-coast, an indication of Rehme's aspirations as a major national distributor. However, *Variety* indicated that earnings has slowed after the first weeks, suggesting *Phantasm* lacked 'legs.' The company reported a \$10,000 pre-

screen average.²⁸¹ This also showed that it took quite a while for *Phantasm* to collect earnings. Several sequels followed.²⁸²

1980's *The Fog* showed Rehme more successful in achieving product differentiation through Avco-Embassy's close association with John Carpenter. Rehme gave Carpenter special treatment. Breaking company policy, which dictated pursuing only pick-ups and restricting financing to only one-third or one-half of their releases, Rehme convinced Avco to finance the majority of *The Fog*'s \$1.5 million budget.²⁸³ Rehme said he imagined the company developing ongoing relationships with talent: "We (Avemb) like the old United Artists concept of going after talent and fostering a close relationship like they did with Woody Allen. We've begun doing that with John Carpenter."²⁸⁴ Avco-Embassy financed the film through pre-sales of foreign, home video, and television rights.²⁸⁵ Months before the film's release, Avco-Embassy made \$7.5–\$10 million in presales before *The Fog* was even completed.²⁸⁶

With a story centered around a town's haunting, *The Fog* was also a return to a more traditional form of horror-suspense, offering yet another form of market differentiation. Hitchcockian references also tied the film to a pre-exploitation mode of horror. The film's setting in Antonio Bay recalled Bodega Bay, the setting of *The Birds* (1963). Janet Leigh, star of *Psycho*, and her daughter Jamie Lee Curtis were also in the film. *Halloween* likewise referenced Hitchcock. The film starred Curtis, and Donald Pleasence's character Samuel Loomis has the same name as John Gavin's character in *Psycho*. *The Fog* starred Adrienne Barbeau, Hal Holbrook, and Curtis as townspeople of Antonio Bay who observe a strange fog moving inland on the centennial anniversary of the town's founding. The fog is a group of ghosts of fishermen from the *Elizabeth Dane*, a ship that was intentionally destroyed by the six founders of Antonio Bay. Killing six townspeople, the ghosts came to seek vengeance for the sins of the founders. As

this brief description suggests, *The Fog* obeyed the ‘shooting gallery’ plot and group protagonist structure of many of the slasher films. While six people are killed by the fog of ghost sailors on screen, the killings are often shrouded by the colored fog (reminiscent of Mario Bava films) and not gruesome. The presence of the clergy—in the character of Father Malone (Hal Holbrook)—and the revenant sailors align the film with supernatural horror. *The Fog*’s supernatural elements are linked to unexplained phenomenon (similar to Stephen King’s more overtly sci-fi *The Mist*, published in 1980) in a way that differentiated the film from the knife-wielding psychopathic murderers of the slasher cycle.

Rehme’s quasi-traditional supernatural horror approach was also evidenced in *The Howling* (1981), directed by New World Pictures alumni Joe Dante and released by Avco-Embassy. Promotional materials found in the original press kit for *The Howling* (1981) [Figure 28], offer a condensed visual representation of the hybridity that characterized the company’s horror releases under Rehme. The image shows claws or hands ripping through a plastic or rubber surface. The gaps created by the slashes reveal a woman’s red lips open in apparent mid-scream. The title *The Howling* and tagline—“Imagine your worst fear a reality”—anchor the creature responsible for the terror as an otherworldly monster or beast. While the terror in slasher films was made in the hands of deranged serial killers or undead humans, *The Howling*’s return to monsters and *The Fog*’s to ghosts was itself a throwback to earlier studio produced horror cycles of the 1930s (i.e. Universal’s monsters) and the 1970s. Yet, the image retains a link to the fads of the day: the graphically slick and striking image and stylized font aligns the poster with *Halloween*’s one sheet. Thus, *The Howling*’s promotional materials suggest an affinity with slasher film marketing while simultaneously adopting a more traditional generic approach.

Avco-Embassy spent \$3 million, or twice the cost, on North American promotion for *The Fog*. Tactics included pre-sales, market research, and ad campaigns for local television saturation. (*Variety* observed that \$3 million in promotion was high for an indie but small compared to the \$8–\$10 million in promotional costs frequently spent by the majors.)²⁸⁷ Local television campaign spots took up most of the \$3 million advertising budget. According to Avco-Embassy advertising Vice President Herman Kass, local spots were used to “pinpoint the openings” at specific theaters, suggesting Avco-Embassy opted for a targeted approach over a saturation television plan.²⁸⁸ Avco-Embassy also used exploitation gimmicks promoting theatrical release including a “skywriting campaign in Los Angeles” and fog machines installed in theater lobbies.²⁸⁹

Critics recognized *The Fog* as something of a throwback and a departure from the current trend of ultra-violent killer films. Siskel characterized *The Fog* as “a mood piece rather than a ‘Halloween’-style shock show” but said this made the film “more of a snoozer than a scare,” a somewhat surprisingly tepid response given Siskel’s vitriolic response to *Friday the 13th*.²⁹⁰ Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* similarly wrote that the film was “pretty” and a “spooky, comfortable old-fashioned ghost story” but that it never truly integrated the ghost story and sci-fi elements.²⁹¹ Kevin Thomas preferred *The Fog*’s subtlety to the current slasher fad, praising it as “an elegant and scary thriller of the supernatural that’s far more impressive and satisfying than Carpenter’s grisly and pointless (but profitable) ‘Halloween.’”²⁹²

Despite tonal differences between *Halloween* and *The Fog*, trade journals predicted Carpenter’s affiliation with the latter would result in strong earnings. *Variety* likened *The Fog* to Hitchcock and described it as a “well-made suspenser [that] looks to be a good bet to equal or surpass the returns on Carpenter’s sleeper hit, ‘Halloween,’ which should make distrib Avco

Embassy happy.”²⁹³ *The Film Journal* called *The Fog* “everything a fright-seeker could hope for” and declared Carpenter “the master of menace working in film.”²⁹⁴ The trade also described the film as looking much better than its reported \$1.5 million budget.²⁹⁵ *Boxoffice* found the film less successful, calling it “a so-so ghost story” and not as frightening “as one might hope or expect.”²⁹⁶ Both *Boxoffice* and *Screen International* observed that *The Fog* offered thrills that were a bit tamer than the current slate of graphic horror; the film was best for the “skittish,” likely not scary enough for fans of “bloody shockers.”²⁹⁷ Critics seemed to favor Carpenter’s emphasis on mood and atmosphere over the gore of the slasher cycle but acknowledged the latter films were appealing to viewers.

Like their approach to *Phantasm*, Avco-Embassy opened the film in the off-season, on February 1, 1980, and released it with several hundred prints in a range of key cities across the country. *The Fog* earned \$7.2 million in 540 theaters over three weeks in North America.²⁹⁸ *The Fog* played in Europe, opening in Germany in five theaters and playing in three theaters in Rome and 21 in Paris.²⁹⁹ *The Fog* played on the Upper East Side, in Times Square, and in Kips Bay in Manhattan and in a showcase of 18 theaters in Los Angeles including prominent hardtops like the Chinese Theatre and Westwood II.³⁰⁰ *The Fog* played in other major cities: Chicago, Detroit, Washington D.C., Cleveland, Baltimore, and Seattle.³⁰¹ According to my analysis of the *Variety* Picture Grosses pages, the film played in several theaters at a time and primarily in hardtops.³⁰² A notable exception was Seattle, where *The Fog* played in 2 hardtops and 2 drive-ins.³⁰³ The film’s distribution in hardtops was a further indication of a change in horror’s direction toward more traditional market appeals that eschewed exploitation horror’s gore and grit. While Carpenter’s pedigree as the director of *Halloween* likely made bookings easier for Avco-

Embassy, the film's throwback quality—both to monster movies and to Hitchcock's thrillers—shifted its market appeal away from drive-ins and toward more standard venues at the time.

The Fog contributed to a 95% increase in Avco-Embassy's rentals since Rehme's arrival, affirming the horror 'sleeper' strategy as a quite viable one: that one breakthrough hit could increase a company's profitability.³⁰⁴ Carpenter was able to produce another low-budget horror hit *The Fog*, which grossed \$20 million at the domestic box office, or 13 times the film's cost.³⁰⁵ Moreover, *Variety* reported that the success of *The Fog* convinced the Avco Corporation to cease plans to scrap the film division.³⁰⁶ By 1982, Rehme left Avco-Embassy for Universal's newly created position of President of Distribution and Marketing. *Variety* wrote that Universal president Ned Tanen recruited Rehme for the job.³⁰⁷ *Variety* observed that when Rehme began at the company, there was only one film in release, and when he left there were 12 films planned and \$47 million in sales reported in 1980. In 1981, the number nearly doubled to \$82 million.³⁰⁸ By focusing on product differentiation as a form of risk management in the form of a more traditional approach to horror and working with a star director known for sleeper hits, Rehme pushed Avco-Embassy to near-mini-major status by the early 1980s.

Independent Horror in the Early 1980s

By 1982, the horror film market was shifting and showing signs of retrenchment, a further indication that one segment of the horror market was moving in a more traditional, supernatural, and family-friendly direction. 'PG'-rated ghost film *Poltergeist* (1982), directed by Tobe Hooper and produced by Steven Spielberg, grossed \$76 million domestically and was nominated for three Academy Awards. With fewer indie horror entries to compete with, *Poltergeist* contributed about a third to domestic horror films' collective gross of \$227 million.³⁰⁹

Increasingly, the horror market was dominated by franchise installments, such as *Friday the 13th Part III* (1982), *Amityville II: The Possession* (1982), and *Halloween III* (1982). Independent production began to stall as completed films went unreleased. More than half of the films released in 1982 were from 1981, and 14 were left over from 1980.³¹⁰ Cohn explained, “These statistics represent a virtual 50% drop in production from 1981, when 100 horror pics were lensed, or 1980 when production hit 84 titles.”³¹¹ Horror generated a record \$230 million in film rentals in 1982 despite a drop in overall number of releases, suggesting a retrenchment in the horror market.³¹²

As competition for playdates continued in the 1980s, the horror market was further stratifying into bigger-budgeted films with broad appeal, able to get wide release, and slasher ‘R’-rated horror struggling to find distributors and bookings. In 1983, theatrical rentals of horror fell 50%, the worst drop since 1976. While 50 horror films were released that year, most were shelved movies made in 1980 and 1981. Indeed, only three horror films made in 1983 were released in 1983. Even such prominent horror releases like *Amityville 3-D*, *Dead Zone*, and *Christine* were filmed in 1982.³¹³ Essentially predicting the current state of horror film distribution in Hollywood today, Cohn wrote in 1983: “The predominance of leftover product reflects the fact that much of the horror film market consists of bargain-basement pictures which allow an exhibitor to fill in with ‘new’ releases during off-periods between his major bookings.” With this degree of market saturation, even solid bets underperformed: Cohn explained that the cycle had “fallen victim to the law of diminishing returns....” He explained:

While horror films of all types and budgets could reasonably be expected to deliver two good weeks of business in recent years...many of the new films have not had even one solid

weekend in them, playing to empty houses on territorial showcases and racking up losses from their advertising expenditures.³¹⁴

Elsewhere, *Variety* noted that major and indies were “rediscovering” territorial saturation in the form of dividing the country in half and releasing the film in two broad breaks, as Avco-Embassy had done with *Take This Job and Shove It* (1981) and *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* (1981), two late examples of hicksploitation.³¹⁵ Teen sex comedies like Crown International Pictures’ *My Tutor* (1983) and Universal’s *Private School* (1983) were playing saturation in cities outside of New York.³¹⁶ This was essentially regional saturation, the method of distribution long associated with the classical exploitation film and the recession-era exploitation cycles of the early 1970s. Cohn also observed the influence of home video on the theatrical horror market, suggesting that horror’s fate would follow that of pornography and migrate to video.³¹⁷ Financed in part by a home video company, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* would prove to be further evidence of video as an important revenue stream for horror in the early 1980s.

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Despite market retrenchment observed by Cohn, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), released by independent New Line Cinema, showed that the slasher film remained capable of mass appeal, even in the context of a consolidating market. Like Avco-Embassy, New Line Cinema managed to address the consolidation in the horror market by creating product differentiation: *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was an astute amalgamation of slasher and supernatural horror sensibilities. It also showed the horror genre’s potential to achieve the ‘event’ status of studio blockbusters. Indeed, producer-distributor New Line Cinema parlayed the film’s

success into the second most profitable horror franchise of the 1980s replete with merchandising and transmedia spinoffs.³¹⁸

Robert Shaye founded New Line Cinema in 1967. Justin Wyatt writes that in the 1970s, Shaye developed a reputation for distributing youth-oriented exploitation and European art films to university campuses.³¹⁹ Shaye struck up a partnership with director John Waters and released most of his films including *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), and *Female Trouble* (1974). Alisa Perren writes that “[a]s Waters became more mainstream in both style and content, so did New Line.” Perren cites the ‘PG’-rated *Hairspray* (1988), which earned more than \$6 million, as a financial success for both Waters and New Line.³²⁰ *Nightmare on Elm Street* transformed the company, providing economic stability that allowed Shaye to pursue specialty releases, like *Sid and Nancy* (1986) and Waters’ *Hairspray*, as well as features geared to the suburban multiplex teen crowd that *A Nightmare On Elm Street* targeted, like *Critters* (1986) and *Critters 2* (1988). Perren writes that “the regular infusion of cash from the *Nightmare* films sustained New Line through the highs and (mainly) lows encountered by all independents when the video market consolidated.”³²¹ Reflecting on the production of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Wes Craven observed that he made the film at a time when the reputation of slasher horror was at a nadir, after the release of *Friday the 13th*. Coming off of 1982’s *Swamp Thing*, Craven brought a spec script to some of the major studios, who deemed the screenplay “too gory” or “not scary enough.”³²² Shaye, however, agreed to pay Craven \$14,000 for the screenplay and to finance the film for \$1.7 million, a result of co-financing agreements with VTC Productions of London, Yablans’ Media Home Entertainment (receiving VHS rights), and Smart Egg Pictures of Sweden.³²³ Shot in March of 1984, the ‘R’-rated *A Nightmare On Elm Street* was released on November 9, 1984.

A Nightmare on Elm Street is a film about neighborhood teens Nancy (Heather Langenkamp), Glen (Johnny Depp), Tina (Amanda Wyss), and Rod (Nick Corri) who all share similar dreams, encountering Freddy Krueger in their nightmares. When Tina is found brutally murdered in her bed, the teens begin to realize that, though Krueger lives in their dreams, he can still hurt them. After Rod's death, Nancy's mother Marge (Ronee Blakely) becomes concerned and takes Nancy to a sleep specialist. Marge, who numbs her pain with alcohol, tells Nancy that Krueger was a child murderer who was burned alive by the town's parents. After Krueger kills Glen, Nancy and her mother bring Krueger out of the dream into the real world. Nancy believes that Krueger has been burned to death until the final scene reveals the characters are still in a deadly dream that Krueger is engineering.

A Nightmare on Elm Street features graphic gore, disturbing imagery, and an electronic musical score, elements that link it to slasher 'R' horror. Aligning the film with others in the slasher cycle, Clover describes Nancy, who mounts an active defense against Krueger, as the grittiest of all of the final girls.³²⁴ Krueger's scenes marry the gore and violence of the slasher film and the atmospheric supernatural elements of Hollywood horror. Tina's killing has her bloodied and suspended on the ceiling (not dissimilar to the physicality of demon possession depicted in *The Exorcist*). When Krueger pulls Glen into the bed and underworld, effectively killing him, a stream of blood shoots up at the ceiling. The geyser of blood recalls the nightmarish river of blood in *The Shining* (1980) and suggests *A Nightmare on Elm Street's* imitation of studio horror. Craven combines these violent elements with supernatural ones. The nightmare conceit of the film motivates visually compelling dreamscapes and surrealistic moments of transmogrification. Krueger's arms become long hoses and can inhabit everyday elements, like a bedsheet. Furthermore, blue swatches of lighting and lighting in Krueger's

underground industrial lair create atmospheric effects the enhance the supernatural element of the film and elevate those sequences to something approaching a high-concept look. As an undead being, Krueger also conforms to Carroll's more orthodox definition of monstrosity.³²⁵

The slasher-supernatural hybrid approach was reflected in promotional materials. The promotional one sheet seen in Figure 29 had the same graphically bold quality of the early slasher films. Unlike *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th*, the *A Nightmare On Elm Street* poster focused on Tina, the first victim, perhaps suggesting the degree to which this formula had been replicated by 1984. The poster is also somewhat sexually suggestive—the female character is in bed and appears naked underneath the sheets. Krueger's most horrifying trait—his knives as hands—are represented, though the rest of him is abstracted, with much left to the imagination (as was seen in the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* one sheets as well). Similar to the other exploitation and slasher horror one sheets, no noticeable stars are present in the promotional materials.

Likely fatigued by the slasher horror trend by 1984, critics were neither scandalized by or much impressed with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Siskel was bored by *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and criticized the film's interesting elements as derivative of *Repulsion*, *The Exorcist*, and *Carrie*.³²⁶ Canby offered little more than a plot summary in his review, and Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* said it was too bloody and violent to justify the film's stylistic panache and “clever special effects.”³²⁷ *Variety*, however, recognized commercial potential in the hybrid slasher-supernatural elements. *Variety* called the film “highly imaginative” and an “original fright feature [that] should score on intended market.”³²⁸ The trade journal also noted “amirable[sic] special effects work on a low budget” and the film's debt to 1970s big-budget horror.³²⁹ And though, like other slasher films, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was aimed at teens,

the commentator said the actors were “for once believably approximating [*sic*] the look and behavior of young teens.”³³⁰

New Line Cinema did not adopt a wide release approach, which was likely not plausible given the firm’s unproven status in the industry and the difficulty in acquiring playdates (suggested by Avco-Embassy’s success in securing only *regional* saturation release). Instead, New Line Cinema executed more of a specialty distribution approach, releasing the film first to a limited set of theaters before bigger breaks in early 1985, not dissimilar to the plan used by Yablans for *Halloween*. On November 9, 1984, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* opened in 165 theaters in just two cities—Los Angeles and New York City.³³¹ *Variety* described mid-November as a “brief dormant period” prior to the Christmas releases and elsewhere as “the last stanza of that absorbing period between high summer b.o. season and Christmas when distribs actually take a chance and ‘serious’ films paraded in pre-Oscar rituals.”³³² The film earned over \$1 million in New York after the opening weekend.³³³ In Los Angeles, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* led the box office, followed by *Amadeus* (1984), which further suggested *A Nightmare on Elm Street* served as counterprogramming amid dramas vying for Academy Award nominations. In Los Angeles, the film played multi-screen theaters Coronet III and Hollywood Pacific II.³³⁴

A Nightmare on Elm Street, like *The Fog*, played mostly in hardtops and in a few drive-ins as well. The second week of release was a bigger, yet still limited, break; *A Nightmare on Elm Street* went from 165 to 274 situations, opening in four additional cities: Chicago, San Francisco, and San Jose.³³⁵ In Chicago, it played 16 situations including the Loop’s Woods Theatre and suburban theaters—Niles’ Golf Mill II and Norridge IV in Norridge.³³⁶ In San Francisco, the film played one indoor theater and what *Variety* described as “one patch,” or drive-in theater. In San Jose, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* played two indoor and two outdoor

theaters.³³⁷ The third week of release, the film opened in Detroit in 11 indoor theaters and four drive-ins.³³⁸ By December 5, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was only playing seven cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, San Francisco, and San Jose.³³⁹ This collection of cities indicates that New Line Cinema was attempting to build word-of-mouth among big city markets as well as markets in the industrial Midwest, suggesting again the perceived importance of black viewers to the horror market. After the fourth weekend of release, box office had dropped by 40%, likely due to competition from major releases. Still, *Variety* was reporting earnings of \$6.5 million, several times the film's reported negative cost.³⁴⁰ After the new year, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* opened in 11 additional cities including Kansas City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Miami.³⁴¹ A two-page New Line Cinema ad in *Variety* claimed that the film had a total box office gross of \$14.5 million with "only 57% of U.S. market played."³⁴² The second page showed an early promotional image for *A Nightmare On Elm Street: Part II* with the words 'For Delivery October '85.'³⁴³ In May 1985, *Variety* reported that *A Nightmare On Elm Street* had grossed over \$23 million domestically.³⁴⁴ Shaye said of the upcoming sequel, budgeted for \$3 million, "We intend to establish a thriller tradition in the manner of 'Friday the 13th' and 'Halloween.'"³⁴⁵ Video release of *A Nightmare On Elm Street* was planned in June, and Shaye was selling foreign rights for the first film at Cannes. Recognizing an opportunity to build a seasonal franchise and to create buzz for the Craven film, Shaye announced a sequel before the first film had even reached ancillary markets. Shaye's aggressiveness in making a second *A Nightmare On Elm Street* film was not unreasonable considering that other slasher films had produced sequels that eventually become franchises.

The distribution information shows New Line Cinema mimicking Compass' release of *Halloween*: selectively releasing the film to build word-of-mouth. Importantly, New Line

Cinema released the film during a period, not necessarily when majors were inactive, but when the films in theaters were geared to a diametrically opposed (in theory) audience. By releasing the film before Christmas and during the beginning of Oscar season, New Line Cinema capitalized on another form of differentiation: differentiation among the available products filmgoers were choosing among.

By flavoring the niche-audience appeals of the slasher cycle with demonic, supernatural elements of Hollywood horror, New Line Cinema created a film and character in Krueger whose popularity infiltrated mainstream media culture. Importantly, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise had a market advantage in the star of Krueger that the masked Jason of the *Friday the 13th* franchise and Myers of the *Halloween* films lacked. By giving Krueger a personality—snickering and punning at times—Craven created a star in Englund that gave *A Nightmare On Elm Street* purchase in the superstar market. By the late 1980s, New Line had licensed Freddy’s likeness in consumer products including dolls, video games, and computer games, all of which earned the company \$3 million a year.³⁴⁶ New Line Cinema also formed a television division to produce an anthology television series for syndication based on *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Hosted by Krueger himself, Robert Englund, *Freddy’s Nightmares* aired from 1988-1990.³⁴⁷ Mimicking the franchise logic of major blockbusters, like *Batman*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and its sequels developed several revenue streams that all contributed to New Line’s bottom line. A 1989 *New York Times* article claimed that the four *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films that had been released brought in rentals of \$65 million at a cost of only \$16 million for negative cost and \$23 million for prints and advertising.³⁴⁸ By 1992, the franchise had grossed \$500 million. *Variety* aptly described Krueger as “New Line’s sour spirited sugar daddy.”³⁴⁹ The franchise went on to produce four films made in the 1980s, two entries in the 1990s, and two films in the

2000s.³⁵⁰ According to *Forbes*, the nine films of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise have grossed a total of \$700 million (adjusted for inflation), making it the 7th highest grossing horror franchise.³⁵¹

Robert Shaye has described the franchise as providing the kind of financial security that AIP and New World Pictures sorely lacked due to unsuccessful market bids. Shaye explained:

[The *Elm Street* films] taught us how important stability is, to know that we had a solid piece of product we could put through our distribution system for six or seven years, that gave us the foundation to build our business.³⁵²

If measured by industry standing and cultural ubiquity, it would be difficult to accommodate *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to Joan Hawkins' characterization of horror as "a low cinematic genre."³⁵³ Faced with a consolidated horror market, Shaye built a successful low-budget horror franchise through risk management via product differentiation. Differentiation took the form of surrealistic, supernatural elements and Krueger's iconic persona. At the same time, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* retained some slasher components introduced by *Halloween* and that were further popularized in Paramount's *Friday the 13th* franchise: a shooting gallery plot, graphic and disturbing violence, and a crazed deranged killer targeting suburban teens. As such, bigger independents like New Line Cinema and Avco-Embassy carved out a middle industry position that straddled the more niche orientation of exploitation and Paramount's saturation release of *Friday the 13th*. Shaye managed to capture an enduring audience through a delicate balance of imitation and differentiation.

Conclusion

Scholars have often considered 1970s and 1980s horror as a ‘low’ genre, a view that positions horror as subaltern to everyday filmgoing. Quite to the contrary, this chapter has tracked the consistent prominence and, often, popularity of the genre throughout the period. While some scholars, like Wood and King, have attributed the importance of 1970s horror to the breakdown in social institutions, the chapter has proven how market conditions, namely shifting supply and demand (audience demand and theater availability, in particular), influenced creative and business decisions. The chapter has shown that in the exploitation, slasher, and supernatural-slasher hybrid films, independents adjusted their choices related to intellectual property, marketing, and distribution to find an audience. These choices were guided by principles including product differentiation and risk management. In so doing, the chapter reveals ‘R’ horror to be a genre that shaped industry developments much associated with 1980s Hollywood including franchises, sales across release windows, and Indiewood theatrical release.

The chapter also shows that the tensions between the majors and independents were often generative and fluid. The horror cycles examined in the chapter showed the relationship between the majors and independents shifting several times. The majors’ pre-sold horror blockbusters, including *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*, established a broad audience for supernatural adult horror. At the same time, graphic ‘R’-rated exploitation horror films such as *The Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* were pitched to a coalitional audience of drive-in, working class, and black viewers. While exploitation horror was marketed to rural drive-in audiences, horror’s imagined audience broadened with the success of slasher films *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, which brought low-budget ‘R’ horror to a diverse mix of viewing locations including drive-ins, downtown theaters, and new suburban multiplexes. With their engagement

in the horror film, the exploitation independents once again reversed the direction of influence and imitation among the majors and independents. By the early 1980s, *Variety* explained that the major studios were following exploitation's lead in cheap horror films:

The unexpected success story in films this past year has been the boom in low-budget horror features. Though the major studios were late in catching up with the market, they have recently been making solid profits with pickups of indie horror product, and they are also picking up the directors, most of whom have never before worked for majors.³⁵⁴

With *The Fog* and *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, independents Avco-Embassy and New Line Cinema integrated traditional horror elements, including ghosts and supernatural killers, to further differentiate their releases from the glut of independent (and studio) slasher horror films on the market. By the mid-1980s, New Line Cinema and Paramount were relatively equal-footed competitors in the 'R'-rated market. New Line Cinema's ascendance within the industry also signaled a transformation of what the term 'independent' connoted in the 1980s and 1990s as 'mini-majors' released big-budget features indistinguishable from major releases.³⁵⁵ Thus, the mid-1980s saw a return to a kind of mainstream horror that echoed the Hollywood horror of the 1970s; both cycles were adult-oriented and geared to first-run theatrical venues. The horror marketplace was therefore stratified into an upper tier of major, middle tier of mini-major and/or major independent, and a bottom tier of smaller independent releases.

As *Halloween* marked a tipping point between independent exploitation horror and more mainstream slasher horror, so have a handful of low-budget independent horror films to this day achieved sleeper status and pushed horror in different directions. Although a thorough explanation of these films is beyond scope of study, the vogue of recent horror titles that look

back to the 1970s suggests the importance of exploitation cinema within the history of the genre. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) initiated a cycle of found footage horror that another low-budget horror film, *Paranormal Activity* (2007), also released by Paramount, turned into a franchise grossing a total of \$400 million and elevating Blumhouse Productions as a preeminent horror production company.³⁵⁶ *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) reinvigorated exploitation horror by re-energizing the splatter film and so-called ‘torture porn’ cycles of horror that pushed the boundaries of gore. These recent independent horror films have also shown the importance of industry film festivals including Sundance as well as specialty distribution houses like Lionsgate in connecting low-budget horror with wider audiences. Recent horror has also shown the cycling of modern and traditional approaches to horror. The vogue of contemporary found footage horror was followed by James Wan’s *The Conjuring* franchise, which traded on traditional supernatural tropes of demon possession, haunted houses, and haunted dolls. Recent horror films like Universal’s *Happy Death Day* (2017) show studios partnering with Blumhouse in hopes of themselves developing series of low-budget films that can return many times their negative costs. The spectrum of horror films released just in 2019—from Ari Aster’s indie summer season release *Midsommar* (2019); *Doctor Sleep* (2019), an adaptation of Stephen King’s sequel to *The Shining* released by Warner Bros.; Blumhouse’s ‘PG-13’-rated *Black Christmas* (2019), released by Universal; and Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019), also released by Universal—show the variety of product differentiation tactics related to source material, stars, release date, and content rating and the continued interplay between the independents and the major studios within the horror genre.

¹ Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan....And Beyond* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

- ² Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1992.)
- ³ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- ⁴ Aaron Smuts, "The Paradox of Painful Art," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 41:3 (Fall 2007), 59-76.
- ⁵ Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- ⁶ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University, 2005)
- ⁷ Tim Lucas, *Videodrome: Studies in the Horror Film* (Lakewood, Co.: Millipede Press, 2008).
- ⁸ Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- ⁹ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2004).
- ¹⁰ Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2010).
- ¹¹ See Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*; Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).
- ¹² Nowell, *Blood Money*, 27-34. Nowell primarily cites from Suzanne Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).
- ¹³ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 238.
- ¹⁴ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 185. William Castle had secured the film rights for \$150,000 and brought to Paramount.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 190; "Most Promising New Faces of 1966," *Motion Picture Herald*, February 2, 1966, 6. Farrow's marriage to singer Frank Sinatra in 1966 had also placed her in the public eye.
- ¹⁶ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 188.
- ¹⁷ "Rosemary's Baby (1968)," *The Numbers*, last accessed 8/01/2019, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Rosemarys-Baby#tab=summary>; Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix Earn 37% of Rentals," *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 5, 32.
- ¹⁸ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 223.
- ¹⁹ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 201. Heffernan writes, "[T]he motif of the demon child, the contemporary settings, and the downbeat endings would first be wedded to explicit violence in the next wave of low-budget horror films."
- ²⁰ Cohn, "Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix," 32. Nowell, *Blood Money*, 68.
- ²¹ Syd Cassyd, "'Exorcist' has been One 'Happening' After another--all Newsworthy," *Boxoffice* February 4, 1974; "Pictures: Valenti Vexed at D.C.'s 'Police Action' Enforcing 'Exorcist' Ban," *Variety*, February 13, 1974, 4; "Critic Meacham hails 'Exorcist' but scores MPAA for R rating," *Variety*, January 23, 1974, 5; "Informally X in Boston, 'Exorcist' also under criminal complaints," *Variety*, January 30, 1974, 3.
- ²² "Nominations for Oscars Announced," *Boxoffice*, February 25, 1974, 4.
- ²³ "All Time Worldwide Box Office for Horror Movies," *The Numbers*, last accessed August 3, 2019, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/worldwide/all-movies/genres/horror>.
- ²⁴ Cohn, "Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix," 5, 32.
- ²⁵ Peter Hutchings, "By the Book: American Horror Cinema and Horror Literature of the Late 1960s and 1970s," in *Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema*, edited by Richard Nowell (New York: Bloomsbury 2014), 50.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*.
- ²⁷ "Stepford Wives' Filming Begins in Westport, Conn," *Boxoffice*, June 17, 1974, NE6.
- ²⁸ "Bradbury's 'Fahrenheit' for Universal; Same Author's Mars Saga Up In Air," *Variety*, October 20, 1965, 11.
- ²⁹ Murf, "Film Review: The Illustrated Man," *Variety*, February 19, 1969, 6.
- ³⁰ "Tom Tryon," *Variety*, June 21, 1972, 30; "NBC Changes; It's An Event, More Events," *Variety*, December 7, 1977, 54.
- ³¹ "Film Review: Ghost Story," *Variety*, December 16, 1981, 16.
- ³² "Main Events, Cannes: The Legend of Hell House," *Variety*, May 30, 1973, 13.
- ³³ "Novelist Brings Class To 'Vampire' Genre," *Variety*, March 31, 1976, 28.
- ³⁴ "Universal Acquires Rights To 'The Sentinel' Novel," *Boxoffice*, July 29, 1974, 8.

³⁵ “Buying & Booking Guide: Burnt Offerings,” *The Independent Film Journal*, September 3, 1976, 9; “Universal Acquires Rights To ‘The Sentinel’ Novel,” *Boxoffice*, July 29, 1974, 8.

³⁶ Cohn, “Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix,” 5, 32.

While *Carrie* does not feature typical motifs of supernatural horror like ghosts or demons, Carrie’s telekinesis links the film to the metaphysical world.

³⁷ “‘Carrie’ Hits \$16,363,609 In Domestic Engagements,” *Boxoffice*, January 17, 1977, 8.

³⁸ Cohn, “Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix,” 32; “AIP’s ‘Amityville Horror’ Begins Shooting in NJ,” *Boxoffice*, October 30, 1978, 16.

³⁹ *The Amityville Horror* Production Budget dated October 17, 1978, Series 3, Subseries A, Box 13, Folder 2, Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

⁴⁰ Letter dated June 30, 1978 from Milton Moritz to Samuel Z. Arkoff, Series 3, Subseries A, Box 13, Folder 2 Samuel Z. Arkoff papers, 080, Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.

⁴¹ “Television Review: Dark Shadows,” *Variety*, June 29, 1966, 31.

⁴² “Television Reviews: Night Gallery,” *Variety*, October 4, 1972, 39.

⁴³ “Television Reviews: The Night Stalker,” *Variety*, September 18, 1974, 72, 74.

⁴⁴ “Radio-Television: ‘Salem’s Lot’ among Warner Web Pilots,” *Variety*, February 27, 1980: 64, 83.

⁴⁵ Gregory A. Waller, *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern Horror Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 1-12.

⁴⁶ Cohn, “Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix,” 5, 32. Lawrence Cohn of *Variety* wrote: “In the early ’70s, a vast number of horror-terror product was made in Italy, Spain and Britain, gradually dying down later as low budget sex comedies replaced the form in local European markets. Though distributed widely on the action and drive-in film circuits, such imports had only a marginal impact domestically.” Nowell, *Blood Money*, 69.

⁴⁷ “Horror, Sci-Fi Pix: 1970-80 Track Records,” *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 32.

⁴⁸ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 219.

⁴⁹ “Pittsburgh’s Latent Image Makes Second Film: First One, ‘Living Dead’ Cost \$125,000,” *Variety*, December 3, 1969, 4; “Sequel-To-Sequel ‘Living Dead,’” *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 5.

⁵⁰ Caitlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 39.

⁵¹ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 215-216.

⁵² *Ibid*, 215.

⁵³ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film*, edited by Robin Wood, Richard Lippe, Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2018), 99.

⁵⁴ “Woolners Saturation Set For Horror Combination,” *Boxoffice*, June 8, 1964, 12. The Woolner Bros. Pictures, Inc. was Larry Woolner’s first releasing company.

⁵⁵ Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 151-2.

⁵⁶ “World Wide Launches 8 Horror Films in Texas,” *Boxoffice*, March 1, 1976, SW1. The double bills included *Funeral for an Assassin* (1974) and *Warhead* (year unknown); *Sisters of Death* (1976) and *Psycho Sisters* (1972); *House of the Living Dead* (1974) and *Taste of the Savage* (1971).

⁵⁷ Farley, “Impresarios of Exploitation,” O1.

⁵⁸ “‘Silver Dollar Challenge’ At Lonsdale Twin Drive-In,” *Boxoffice*, August 19, 1974, NE7. There was a fright-themed promotion—the operators gave each car a silver dollar and told patrons they could keep the coin if they endured throughout the entire screening.

⁵⁹ Farley, “Impresarios of Exploitation,” O1.

Joseph Brenner Associates, Inc. was formed in 1951 as an independent distributor. In the early 1970s, the company released several sexploitation films *The Abductors* (1972), West Germany’s *The Brutes* (1970), *Ginger* (1971), and *The Love Object* (1970). See John Cocchi, “Joseph Brenner Increasing Releases With \$5 Million Expansion Program,” *Boxoffice*, July 28, 1975, 5.

⁶⁰ Farley, “Impresarios of Exploitation,” O1.

Group 1 was an independent distributor that had been releasing genre films since 1972. Releases included *Girls in Trouble* (unknown), *The Room of Chains* (1970), *Up Your Alley* (1971), and *The Clonus Horror* (1979). See “Brandon Chase Announces Group 1 Films Releases,” *Boxoffice*, September 18, 1972, 4.

⁶¹ Trade journals reported a high black turnout in Chicago for *The Exorcist*. Harlan Jacobson, "White Nabe Invaded By Blacks To See 'Exorcist,'" *Variety*, February 20, 1974, 3, 20; Robert J. Landry, "'Exorcist': Smash Hit Backlash," *Variety*, March 13, 1974, 22.

Landry described the crowds at *The Exorcist*, "[C]rowds tend to be youthful, though not necessarily children. The film also exercises a peculiar fascination for blacks."

⁶² Farley, "Impresarios of Exploitation," O1.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Trade journals reported a high black turnout in Chicago for *The Exorcist*. Harlan Jacobson, "White Nabe Invaded By Blacks To See 'Exorcist,'" *Variety*, February 20, 1974, 3, 20; Robert J. Landry, "'Exorcist': Smash Hit Backlash," *Variety*, March 13, 1974, 22. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image on Film* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 193.

⁶⁶ "Top Ten Low-Budget Films Under \$500,000," *Daily Film Dose*, last accessed 8/01/2019, <http://www.dailyfilmdose.com/2009/02/top-ten-low-budget-films-under-500000.html>; "The Last House on the Left (1972), *The Numbers*, last accessed 8/01/2019, [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Last-House-on-the-Left-The-\(1972\)#more](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Last-House-on-the-Left-The-(1972)#more).

⁶⁷ Roger Ebert, "Last House on the Left," January 1, 1972, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/last-house-on-the-left-1972>.

Wes Craven has said that the Bergman film informed the conception of the film and was not simply a marketing angle used by Hallmark. See David A. Szulkin, *Wes Craven's 'Last House on the Left': The Making of a Cult Classic* (New York: FAB Press, 2007), 35.

⁶⁸ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁶⁹ "Last House on the Left," *The Independent Film Journal*, January 8, 1973, 7.

⁷⁰ Howard Thompson, "Last House on Left," *New York Times*, December 22, 1972, 21.

⁷¹ Roger Ebert, "Last House on the Left," *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 1972. Accessed online: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/last-house-on-the-left-1972>.

⁷² Steven Jay Schneider, "The Legacy of *Last House on the Left*," in *Horror at the Drive-In: Essays in Popular Americana*, edited by Gary D. Rhodes (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 79-96.

⁷³ American International Pictures, *Boxoffice*, June 11, 1973, 13.

⁷⁴ "Pictures: Old Softcore Sexploitation Not Dead; Together' is A Successful Re-Tread; New Marketing; Hallmark Uses A.I.P.," *Variety*, February 9, 1972: 5, 23.

⁷⁵ "Pictures: Old Softcore Sexploitation Not Dead," 5, 23.

⁷⁶ "It's a Winner!" *Variety*, November 8, 1972, 25.

⁷⁷ "Chicago," *Boxoffice*, October 16, 1972.

⁷⁸ "End-Of-Summer MPAA Ratings To 'Newcomer' Distribution Companies," *Variety*, August 23, 1972, 7.

⁷⁹ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 28-42.

⁸⁰ "Oklahoma City," *Boxoffice*, March 19, 1973, SW2. Commentary on Cinema Treasures website indicates the theater turned to sexploitation and/or adult films sometime before its closure in 1991. "Cinema Mayflower," *Cinema Treasures*, last accessed 8/01/2019, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/11076>

⁸¹ "American International Pictures, Inc.," *Boxoffice*, June 11, 1973, 13.

⁸² Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 219.

⁸³ "Aired Offers Carload Price," *Boxoffice*, November 12, 1973, E1.

⁸⁴ "It's A Winner," *Variety*, November 8, 1972, 25.

⁸⁵ "Top Hits-of-the Week," *Boxoffice*, November 13, 1972, 36; "Top Hits-of-the Week," *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1972.

⁸⁶ "Picture Grosses: 'House' Rousing \$8,500, 3d, Houston; 'Trouble' Okay \$9,400, 4th, 'Blues' 1G," *Variety*, December 13, 1972: 10; "Picture Grosses: 'Asylum' Hot 18G, S.F.; 'Raid' 4½G," *Variety*, November 15, 1972, 8; "Picture Grosses: 'House' Okay \$21,000, K.C.; 'Unknown' Soft 10G, 'Cobra'-'Frankenstein' 2½G." *Variety*, December 13, 1972, 14; "'Last House on the Left' Memphis Debut 300," *Boxoffice*, December 18, 1972, SE12.

⁸⁷ "Picture Grosses: Too Many Films in Santa's Bag; 'Poseidon,' 'Kid,' 'Bean,' 'Sandbox' Big; 'Getaway,' in 3, \$100,000, T Aint Tinsel," *Variety*, December 27, 1972, 10.

- ⁸⁸ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999), 56.
- ⁸⁹ *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* 3 (1968-1970), 33.
- ⁹⁰ "Last House on the Left," *Boxoffice*, December 13, 1976.
- ⁹¹ "Last House on the Left," *Boxoffice*, April 30, 1979.
- ⁹² "Last House on the Left," *Boxoffice*, April 30, 1979.
- ⁹³ Ibid.
- ⁹⁴ "The Last House on the Left (1972), *The Numbers*.
- ⁹⁵ "'Exorcist' Throngs Overwhelm Westwood," *Boxoffice*, January 28, 1974, W2.
- ⁹⁶ "'Saddles,' 'Exorcist' Tie For Top Denver Position," *Boxoffice*, April 1, 1974, W5.
- ⁹⁷ "'The Exorcist' Plays At Chicago Top Level," *Boxoffice*, January 28, 1974, C3.
- ⁹⁸ "Memphis Pacesetter Still 'The Exorcist,'" *Boxoffice*, April 15, 1974, SE8; "'The Exorcist' Has Strong Opening in Raleigh," *Boxoffice*, March 18, 1974, SE4; "'Exorcist' Has Another 800 Week in New Orleans," *Boxoffice*, March 25, 1974, SE1.
- ⁹⁹ "Picture Grosses: Busting Sturdy 22G, K.C.," *Variety*, March 20, 1974, 13.
- ¹⁰⁰ "Picture Grosses: L'Ville Wow \$91,500 'Exorcist,'" *Variety*, July 10, 1974, 8, 10; "'Dragon' Record \$85,000, Philly," *Variety*, July 31, 1974, 12.
- ¹⁰¹ "Tobe Hooper, 'Texas chain Saw Massacre' and 'Poltergeist' Director, Dies at 74," *Variety*, August 26, 2017, last accessed 8/01/2019, <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/tobe-hooper-dead-dies-texas-chain-saw-massacre-poltergeist-director-dies-1202539868/>.
- ¹⁰² Skaaren went on to have a career as a prominent Hollywood screenwriter before dying young at the age of 44. He was a screenwriter on *Fire with Fire* (1986), *Beverly Hills Cop II* (1987), *Beetlejuice* (1988), and *Batman* (1989). He was also an associate producer for *Top Gun* (1986).
- ¹⁰³ "William Friedkin, Tobe Hooper Discuss 'The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,'" *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2014, last accessed 8/01/2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-william-friedkin-tobe-hooper-texas-chain-saw-massacre-20140722-story.html>; John Bloom, "They Came. They Sawed," *Texas Monthly*, November 2005, last accessed online 8/01/2019, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/they-came-they-sawed/>.
- ¹⁰⁴ John Bloom, "They Came. They Sawed," *Texas Monthly*, November 2005. Accessed online. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/they-came-they-sawed/>
- ¹⁰⁵ A. D. Murphy, "Distribution and Exhibition: An Overview," in *The Movie Business Book*, edited by Jason E. Square (New York: Fireside, 1983), 275-290.
- ¹⁰⁶ "Peraino On Bryanston, 1976; Watching Budgets With Caution; Slow-Pay Exhibs Still A Vex," *Variety*, December 17, 1975, 3, 67; "Form Bryanston Company To Produce, Distribute," *Boxoffice*, November 6, 1972, 9.
- ¹⁰⁷ Bryanston had also released Joe Sarno's *The Last Porno Flick* (1974, released as *Deep Throat II*), Paul Morrissey's 'X'-rated *Flesh for Frankenstein* (1973), and *Blood For Dracula* (1974). Peraino instead switched the name of the distributor to 'Damiano Films,' though Gerard Damiano had no direct involvement in the film. In a scathing review, Addison Verrill described the film as "in the shoddiest of exploitation film traditions, a depressing fast buck attempt to milk a naïve public." See "Film Reviews: Deep Throat – Part II," *Variety*, February 13, 1974, 18.
- ¹⁰⁸ Richard Albarino, "Year-Old Bryanston: \$20-Mil Rentals," *Variety*, October 30, 1974, 3; 52.
- ¹⁰⁹ "Texas Premiere Launches Bryanston's 'Chain Saw,'" *Boxoffice*, October 7, 1974, 26.
- ¹¹⁰ "Sneak 'Chainsaw' In On 'Pelham,'" *Variety*, November 20, 1974, 22.
- ¹¹¹ "Sneak 'Chainsaw' In On 'Pelham,'" 22.
- ¹¹² John Camper, "Viewpoint," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1976, Q2.
- ¹¹³ Roger Ebert, "The Texas Chain Saw Massacre Review," January 1, 1974, last accessed November 4, 2017, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-1974>
- ¹¹⁴ "Alberta Film Censor Bans 'Texas Massacre,'" *Variety*, April 23, 1975, 4.
- ¹¹⁵ Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 19.
- ¹¹⁶ Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," 93-94.
- ¹¹⁷ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 58-61.
- ¹¹⁸ Hutchings, "By the Book: American Horror Cinema," 46.
- ¹¹⁹ "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," *The Independent Film Journal*, November 13, 1974, 14, 19.
- ¹²⁰ "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," *The Independent Film Journal*, November 13, 1974, 14, 19.

- ¹²¹ "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," 19.
- ¹²² "Feature Reviews: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," *Boxoffice*, October 21, 1974.
- ¹²³ Mack, "Film Reviews: The Texas Chain Saw Massacre," *Variety*, November 6, 1974, 20.
- ¹²⁴ "'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,'" *Boxoffice*, September 9, 1974.
- ¹²⁵ "Oklahoma City," *Boxoffice*, October 28, 1974, SW4.
- ¹²⁶ "Pictures Grosses: 'Massacre' Lofty \$6,000 in Port.; 'Abdication' OK 2½G, 'Odessa' \$7,600, 2d," *Variety*, November 6, 1974, 18; "Philly Fans Get Real Buzz from 'Chainsaw'," *Boxoffice*, November 18, 1974, E6.
- ¹²⁷ "Philly Fans Get Real Buzz From 'Chainsaw,'" *Boxoffice*, November 18, 1974, E6.
- ¹²⁸ "Park Theatre," *Cinematreaasures.org*, <http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/13059>, last accessed February 5, 2020.
- ¹²⁹ "'Tamarind Seed,' 'Massacre' Tied," *Boxoffice*, November 4, 1974, SE1.
- ¹³⁰ "'Scenes from a Marriage' 300 in Opening at Chicago's Carnegie," *Boxoffice*, November 18, 1974, SE1.
- ¹³¹ "'Texas Chainsaw Massacre' 250; 'Dracula' 200 in Hartford," *Boxoffice*, December 9, 1974; "'Earthquake' Rales 500; 'Trial' is 375," *Boxoffice*, December 16, 1974, C1; "'Grizzly Adams' has 225 in Minneapolis," *Boxoffice*, November 25, 1974, NC1; "'Texas Massacre' 225 in Opening; 'Flesh Gordon' Scores 200 Gross," *Boxoffice*, November 18, 1974, NE1; "Pictures Grosses: 'Stones' Neat 25G, D.C.: 'Hornet' 8G," *Variety*, November 27, 1974, 11.
- "Pictures Grosses: 'Adams' Breezy 40G in Balto; 'Chainsaw' Sharp \$14,000, 'Gold' Slow 10G." *Variety*, November 27, 1974, 10; "Picture Grosses: 'Chainsaw' Cuts L.A. into 671/2G; 'Airport' \$46,000; 'Cabaret' 41G; 'Paradise' 30G; 'Porter' \$25,000," *Variety*, November 6, 1974, 8, 18.
- ¹³² William Knoedelseder, "The New Dealmakers: Killing Them at the Box Office," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1980, N3.
- ¹³³ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 59.
- ¹³⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Exorcist' Huge \$110,000, Mpls.; 'Violation' Dismal 8G, 'Rogue' Sharp 24½G." *Variety*, September 1, 1976, 18; "Pictures Grosses: 'Torso'-'Chainsaw' Lusty 200G, Boston; 'Manson' Tidy 6½G, 'Point' \$2,500." *Variety*, June 9, 1976, 15, 30; "'Panther' Wow \$60,398, London; 'Marathon' Hot 49G. 'Ritz' I2V2G." *Variety*, December 29, 1976, 31.
- ¹³⁵ *Variety*, December 17, 1975, 67. I was unable to find information pertaining to lifetime rentals.
- ¹³⁶ "'Texas Chainsaw' To 85 N.Y. Sites," *Variety*, May 20, 1981.
- ¹³⁷ "Irwin Yablans, Moustapha Akkad Unite As Compass Intl. Films," *Variety*, February 1, 1978, 28.
- ¹³⁸ "Irwin Yablans, Moustapha Akkad Unite As Compass Intl. Films," 28.
- ¹³⁹ The release of *Mohammad* was marred by an Islamic terrorist hostage situation at a theater that resulted in the death of a reporter. See "Irwin Yablans, Moustapha Akkad Unite As Compass Intl. Films," *Variety*, February 1, 1978, 28.
- ¹⁴⁰ "Irwin Yablans, Moustapha Akkad Unite," 28.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid.; Ralph Kaminsky, "Compass Films Show New Direction As Yablans, Akkad Merge Talents," *Boxoffice*, March 27, 1978, 10.
- ¹⁴² Ralph Kaminsky, "Compass Films Show New Direction As Yablans, Akkad Merge Talents," 10; Avery Mason, "Yablan's 'Halloween' May Be Biggest Indie," *Boxoffice*, April 9, 1979, 7;
- ¹⁴³ Richard Nowell, "'A Kind of Bacall Quality': Jamie Lee Curtis, Stardom, and Gentrifying Non-Hollywood Horror," in *Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema*, edited by Richard Nowell (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129-146.
- ¹⁴⁴ See Avery Mason, "Yablan's 'Halloween' May Be Biggest Indie," *Boxoffice*, April 9, 1979, 7; Jimmy Summers, "Care, patience spell success in Compass' marketing effort," *Boxoffice*, December 31, 1979, 7.
- ¹⁴⁵ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 83.
- ¹⁴⁶ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 6-7.
- ¹⁴⁷ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 19.
- ¹⁴⁸ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999), 283.
- ¹⁴⁹ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 35-64. Clover writes that the final girl is "abject terror personified." Clover uses the concept of the final girl to argue against commonly held assumptions about horror viewership. Clover argues that the final girl figure opens up a viewing position that is aligned with masochism instead of sadism.
- ¹⁵⁰ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 185-6.

¹⁵¹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 14-18. Wyatt explains: "The abstracted images which are the basis for the extensive marketing campaigns are derived, at least partially, from the unique style of the high concept films. This style becomes codified across successive films, so that one can identify the ways in which the style offers several modifications from the classical Hollywood cinema" (16).

¹⁵² Nowell, *Blood Money*, 93.

¹⁵³ William K. Knoedelseder, Jr., "The New Dealmakers: Killing Them at the Box Office," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1980, N3.

¹⁵⁴ Gene Siskel, "'Halloween': Some Tricks, A Lot of Treats," *Chicago Tribune*, November 22, 1978, B7.

¹⁵⁵ Kevin Thomas, "Slaughter, Fear in Grisly 'Halloween,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1978, F22.

¹⁵⁶ "Feature Reviews: Halloween," *Boxoffice*, November 6, 1978, A7, A8; "Film Reviews: Halloween," *Variety*, October 25, 1978, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Jimmy Summers, "Care, Patience Spell Success in Compass' Marketing Effort," *Boxoffice*, December 31, 1979, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Avery Mason, "Yablan's 'Halloween' May Be Biggest Indie," *Boxoffice*, April 9, 1979, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Jimmy Summers, "Care, Patience Spell Success in Compass' Marketing Effort," *Boxoffice*, December 31, 1979, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 103.

¹⁶¹ Tzioumakis uses "Indiewood" to refer to the independent production and release of films made by heavily capitalized firms like Miramax in the 1990s. Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': towards a periodization of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36-39.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ "Halloween," *Boxoffice*, April 23, 1979, 24-5.

Alan Pictures – Philadelphia; Aquarius Releasing – New York; Astral Films Ltd – Canada; Blue Ribbon Pictures – Memphis, New Orleans; Charlotte Film Co. – Charlotte, N.C.; Clark Film Co. – Atlanta, Jacksonville; Far West Films – Los Angeles, San Francisco; Film Row Distributors – Salt Lake City; Frontier Amusement Corp. – Albany, Buffalo; Lockwood-Friedman Film Corp. – Boston, New Haven; Mid America Releasing – Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Denver; Midwest Entertainment – Minneapolis; Myco Films, Inc – Cincinnati, Indianapolis; New World Pictures – Dallas; New World Pictures – Pittsburgh; Seattle-Portland Film Co – Seattle, Portland; Selected Pictures – Cleveland; Thomas & Shipp Films – Kansas City, Des Moines, St. Louis; Wheeler Film Co. – DC

¹⁶⁴ Ralph Kaminsky, "Nearly 100 Feature Films Scheduled For Release During Next Few Months," *Boxoffice*, October 16, 1978, 13.

¹⁶⁵ "Pictures: 'Halloween,' \$1,270,000." *Variety*, November 8, 1978, 7.

¹⁶⁶ "Pictures: 'Halloween,' \$1,270,000," *Variety*, November 8, 1978, 7.

¹⁶⁷ "Picture Grosses: 'Halloween' Hefty \$180,000, Chi; 'Rings' Wow 150G, 'Violette' 10G," *Variety*, November 22, 1978, 13.

¹⁶⁸ "'Halloween' a Holiday for N. O. Filmgoers," *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1978.

¹⁶⁹ "Picture Grosses: 'Superman' Sizzling 100G, St. L.; 'Story' \$32,000, 'Halloween' 34G," *Variety*, December 20, 1978, 23.

¹⁷⁰ "Picture Grosses: 'Halloween' 40G, Pitt; 'Mouse' 6G." *Variety*, November 29, 1978, 22; "'Halloween' is ... Treat Lor KC Exhibition," *Boxoffice*, November 6, 1978; "Picture Grosses: 'Thataway' Neat \$14,700, Miami; 'Halloween' Pale \$11,921, 'Express' 62G, 3d." *Variety*, November 29, 1978, 13; "Picture Grosses: 'Laserblast' Okay \$4,000 in Balto; 'Halloween' 25G," *Variety*, December 13, 1978, 12, 33; "Picture Grosses: 'Sextette' Sizzling 28G, Frisco; 'Halloween' 19G, 'Duellists' 10G," *Variety*, November 22, 1978, 12.

¹⁷¹ "WB Int'l to Distribute 'Halloween' Overseas," *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1978, 10.

¹⁷² "'Halloween' A Treat," *Variety*, December 6, 1978, 4.

¹⁷³ "Pictures: 'Halloween's' \$10-Mil," *Variety*, February 21, 1979, 4.

¹⁷⁴ "WB Int'l to Distribute 'Halloween' Overseas." *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1978, 10.

¹⁷⁵ Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017), 245, 263. Tzioumakis describes 'grassroots marketing' as a "city-by-city, market-by-market platform release pattern"

associated in the 1980s and 1990s with “cheap ’indie’ film and even non-US art-cinema productions that opened in a small number of theatres in platform releases.”

¹⁷⁶ “Irwin Yablans Hailing ‘Halloween’ Expectancy, Calls Boston Crucial,” *Variety*, March 14, 1979, 6.

¹⁷⁷ “Irwin Yablans Hailing ‘Halloween’ Expectancy,” 6.

¹⁷⁸ Avery Mason, “Yablans’s ‘Halloween’ May Be Biggest Indie,” *Boxoffice*, April 9, 1979, 7.

¹⁷⁹ “‘Norma’ Chipper \$9,650, Boston; ‘Wifemistress’ Sizzling \$5,290,” *Variety*, March 14, 1979, 16.

¹⁸⁰ “‘Roller Boogie’ Is Irwin Yablans’ Pic At Mifed Market,” *Variety*, October 17, 1979, 74.

¹⁸¹ “‘Roller Boogie’ Is Irwin Yablans’ Pic At Mifed Market,” 74.

¹⁸² “‘Halloween’ In 1979,” *Variety*, January 16, 1980, 7.

¹⁸³ Avery Mason, “Yablans’s ‘Halloween’ May Be Biggest Indie,” *Boxoffice*, April 9, 1979, 7.

¹⁸⁴ Jimmy Summers, “Care, Patience Spell Success in Compass’ Marketing Effort,” *Boxoffice*, December 31, 1979, 7.

¹⁸⁵ “WB Int’l to Distribute ‘Halloween’ Overseas,” *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1978, 10.

¹⁸⁶ “‘Halloween’ In N.Y.; 3-Media Day & Date,” *Variety*, November 5, 1980, 7, 36.

¹⁸⁷ “‘Halloween’ In N.Y.; 3-Media Day & Date,” 7, 36.

¹⁸⁸ Morrie Gelman, “Media Home Claims \$2-Mil From ‘Halloween,’” *Variety*, October 7, 1981, 106. Yablans’ home video operation, with 145 films in the library focused on cult, kid vids, ‘R’ films and horror, hoped to cash in on the same low-budget genre fare that used to perform well in theatrical settings.

¹⁸⁹ Murray Leeder, *Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard, England: Auteur, 2014), 33.

¹⁹⁰ Murray Leeder, *Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard, England: Auteur, 2014), 33.

¹⁹¹ “Radio-Television: Buyers Give NBC Weak Pics Rating,” *Variety*, May 20, 1981, 75, 90.

¹⁹² Lawrence Cohn, “Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix Earn 37% of Rentals,” *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 32.

¹⁹³ Cohn, “Pictures: Horror, Sci-Fi Pix Earn 37% of Rentals,” 32.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Lawrence Cohn, “Series Pix Going 1st Class At B.O.,” *Variety*, October 20, 1982, 334. Cohn writes, “The ‘Halloween’ series, a low-budget undertaking, is of course seasonally-aimed at the fall, but is thus far the only exception to the summer rule.”

¹⁹⁶ Yuletide horror films released theatrically in November and December have included *Black Christmas* (1974), *Christmas Evil* (1980), *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984), *Jack Frost* (1997), *Krampus* (2015), and *Black Christmas* (2019).

¹⁹⁷ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 105. Nowell writes, “Moreover, *Halloween*’s financial achievements have been overstated, and its capacity to instantaneously transform the production of films about young people being menaced by knife-wielding maniacs has been exaggerated. In fact, *Halloween* initially performed only moderately well, thanks in large part to strong word-of-mouth and a shrewd marketing strategy that evoked big-budget horror and youth-oriented hits, and, after eighteen weeks on release, its capacity to initiate any independently produced Cash-ins remained inconclusive because it had been turned down by the companies with which most independents aimed to do business.”

¹⁹⁸ “Subdistributors agree: Independents will survive,” *Boxoffice*, January 28, 1980, 12.

¹⁹⁹ “Subdistributors agree: Independents will survive,” 12, 56.

²⁰⁰ Lawrence Cohn, “Pictures: Risky Megabuck Pic Trend Still Ongoing,” *Variety*, December 23, 1981, 3, 34.

²⁰¹ Lawrence Cohn, “Pictures: Sean Cunningham: Enough Already Of Horror Successes,” *Variety*, April 1, 1981, 6, 41.

²⁰² “Pictures: Par’s ‘Friday the 13th’ \$6-Mil 3-Day B.O. Total.” *Variety*, May 14, 1980, 23.

²⁰³ Lane Malone, “Ticket Prices Up 9%,” *Variety*, July 30, 1980, 38.

²⁰⁴ Jim Harwood, “Par’s Eisner Hints Peak Profits,” *Variety*, July 9, 1980, 3; 30. Eisner added that the end titles of *Star Trek* cost the studio more than either *Friday the 13th* or *Airplane*.

²⁰⁵ “Par’s 19 For 1980 Includes Britain’s ‘Breaking Glass’ Pic,” *Variety*, March 26, 1980, 44.

²⁰⁶ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 34.

²⁰⁷ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 29.

²⁰⁸ Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 5.

²⁰⁹ Linda Gross, “‘Friday the 13th’: Encamped in gore,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1980, 17.

²¹⁰ Gene Siskel, “‘Friday the 13th’: More Bad Luck,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1980, A9.

- ²¹¹ Matt Hills, "Para-Paracinema: The *Friday the 13th* Film Series as Other to Trash and Legitimate Film Cultures," 219.
- ²¹² Nowell, *Blood Money*, 139-140.
- ²¹³ "Feature Reviews: Friday the 13th," *Boxoffice*, May 26, 1980, 10.
- ²¹⁴ E, P. "Buying & Booking Guide: FRIDAY THE 13TH," *The Film Journal*, July 1 1980, 10.
- ²¹⁵ Step, "Film Reviews: Friday the 13th," *Variety*, May 14, 1980,14.
- ²¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²¹⁷ "Feature Reviews: Friday the 13th," *Boxoffice*, May 26, 1980, 10.
- ²¹⁸ " Feature Reviews: Friday the 13th," 10.
- ²¹⁹ "Pictures: Par's 'Friday the 13th' \$6-Mil 3-Day B.O. Total." *Variety*, May 14, 1980, 23.
- ²²⁰ "Pictures: Par's 'Friday the 13th' \$6-Mil 3-Day B.O. Total," 23.
- ²²¹ "Chicago's Hi-Grossing Films," *Variety*, July 9, 1980, 25; "Picture Grosses: 'Friday' Meteoric 350G, Chi; 'Bomb' Wild 140G, 'Kill' 160G," *Variety*, May 14, 1980,10, 35. "River Oaks Theater 4," *Cinematreasures.org*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5926>, last accessed February 7, 2020. The film earned \$264,000 in 19 theaters including the downtown State-Lake as well as suburban theaters the Norridge I and the recently constructed suburban River Oaks III located in Calumet City, Illinois. According to *Cinema Treasures*, the River Oaks III was constructed in 1978.
- ²²² "Pictures: Par's 'Friday the 13th' \$6-Mil 3-Day B.O. Total," *Variety*, May 14, 1980, 23.
- ²²³ "Picture Grosses: 'Humanoids' 130G, Cleve; 'Riders' 30G, 'Story' Fine 43 G," *Variety*, May 21, 1980, 10, 30; "Great Lakes Stadium 16," *Cineamtreaasures.org*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/7412>, last accessed February 7, 2020; "Avon Lake Theatre," *Cinematreasures.org*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/18958>, last accessed February 7, 2020.
- ²²⁴ "Picture Grosses: 'Empire' Fantastic 435G, Det.; 'Friday' Scores 200G, 3d," *Variety*, May 28, 1980: 12-3; "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, June 23, 1980, 13.
- ²²⁵ "Picture Grosses: 'Friday' Fat 29G Seattle; 'Bomb' 8G," *Variety*, May 14, 1980, 35.
- ²²⁶ "Shocking Success," *Screen International*, July 5, 1980, 6.
- ²²⁷ "Picture Grosses: L.A. Calm as 'Friday' Pulsates with 260G, 'Bomb' Explodes 236G, 'Floor' Polishes 202G," *Variety*, May 14, 1980: 8; "International Box Office," *Screen International*, May 24, 1980, 31.
- ²²⁸ "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, June 23, 1980, 13.
- ²²⁹ "First Run Report," 13.
- ²³⁰ "Picture Grosses: 'Friday' Tall 61G, Mpls.: 'Bomb' 34G," *Variety*, May 14, 1980, 10, 38.
- ²³¹ Lawrence Cohn, "Series Pix Going 1st Class At B.O.," *Variety*, October 20, 1982, 334.
- ²³² "After 'Friday 13th' Windfall, Cunningham Explores New Area," *Variety*, July 9, 1980, 25; Lawrence Cohn, "Sean Cunningham: Enough Already Of Horror Successes," *Variety*, April 1, 1981, 6.
- ²³³ Lane Malone, "Ticket Prices Up 9%," *Variety*, July 30, 1980, 38.
- ²³⁴ Jim Harwood, "Par's Eisner Hints Peak Profits," *Variety*, July 9, 1980, 3, 30.
- ²³⁵ Stephen Klain, "Par Posts New Rental High," *Variety*, August 6, 1980, 5.
- ²³⁶ Nowell, *Blood Money*, 134-5.
- ²³⁷ Recently, mid-budget comedies like *Long Shot* (2019), which grossed just over \$50 million worldwide with a budget of \$40 million, have struggled to profit (generally thought to be earning back twice their production costs). "Long Shot (2019)," *TheNumbers.com*, [https://m.the-numbers.com/movie/Long-Shot-\(2019\)](https://m.the-numbers.com/movie/Long-Shot-(2019)), last accessed February 7, 2020. *Like a Boss* (2020) has so far grossed only \$20 million on a likely budget of around \$30 million. "Like a Boss (2020)," *The Numbers.com*, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Like-a-Boss#tab=summary>, last accessed February 7, 2020.
- ²³⁸ "Par Pix Blockbusters," *Variety*, December 17, 1980, 54.
- ²³⁹ "Par Feevee Deals With HBO, S'Time," *Variety*, March 18, 1981, 286; "Par Pix Blockbusters," *Variety*, December 17, 1980, 54.
- ²⁴⁰ "Par-TV Lines Up Syndie Batch," *Variety*, January 20, 1982, 96.
- ²⁴¹ Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 92.
- ²⁴² Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, 95-97.
- ²⁴³ Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, 95-97.

²⁴⁴ They include: *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), *Friday the 13th Part III* (1982), *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984), *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* (1985), *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986), *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood* (1988), *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan* (1989), *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), *Jason X* (2002), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), and *Friday the 13th* (2009).

²⁴⁵ Simon Thompson, "The 13 Highest-Grossing Horror Film Franchises of All Time at the U.S. Box Office," *Forbes.com*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonthompson/2017/10/06/the-13-highest-grossing-horror-film-franchises-of-all-time-at-the-u-s-box-office-2/#6fa40ad53e5b>, last accessed February 1, 2020.

²⁴⁶ Thompson, "The 13 Highest-Grossing Horror Film Franchises."

²⁴⁷ "Paramount Strikes RIAA Gold, Platinum," *Billboard*, July 23, 1983, 27; "Par's Operating Income, Revs Rise in Second-Quarter," *Variety*, July 19, 1989, 11.

²⁴⁸ Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Gore Perpetual Fave of Young Film Fans," *Variety*, August 26, 1981, 7, 42.

²⁴⁹ Lawrence Cohn, "Gore Perpetual Fave of Young Film Fans," *Variety*, August 26, 1981, 7, 42.

²⁵⁰ "Horror, Sci-Fi Pix: 1970-80 Track Records," *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 32.

²⁵¹ Cohn, "Gore Perpetual Fave," 42. See also Lawrence Cohn, "Incredible Shrinking Horror Market?" *Variety*, February 16, 1983, 7, 24; Lawrence Cohn, "Fear 'Stalk & Slash' Horror Saturation," *Variety*, May 26, 1982, 7, 36.

²⁵² "Pictures: Indies Face Summer Of 1981: Less Product; Do Majors Gobble Up Available Prime Playdates," *Variety*, May 6, 1981, 3.

²⁵³ Cohn wrote: "The 'Halloween' series, a low-budget undertaking, is of course seasonally-aimed at the fall, but is thus far the only exception to the summer rule. Christmas and Easter represent potential target areas as the marketplace becomes increasingly dominated by this type of product. Timing is not so great an issue overseas, where the same pictures, following their U.S. summer launch, are spaced more evenly over the Christmas and other locally-peak seasons." Lawrence Cohn, "Series Pix Going 1st Class At B.O.," *Variety*, Oct 20, 1982, 1, 334.

²⁵⁴ Cohn, "Pictures: Gore Perpetual Fave of Young Film Fans," 7.

²⁵⁵ Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Majors' Sinewy Boxoffice Films Mark The Summer; Which Hurts Indie Distributors' Playoff Chances," *Variety*, August 26, 1981, 43. "Just as May and the beginning of December have become early starts for the year's big summer and Christmas bookings, August, 1981 marks a new trend in accelerating the beginning of the fall season."

²⁵⁶ Cohn, "Pictures: Majors' Sinewy Boxoffice Films Mark The Summer," 43.

²⁵⁷ "Pictures: Indies Face Summer Of 1981: Less Product; Do Majors Gobble Up Available Prime Playdates," *Variety*, May 6, 1981, 3.

²⁵⁸ Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Fear 'Stalk & Slash' Horror Saturation," *Variety*, May 26, 1982, 36.

²⁵⁹ "'Violent' Or 'Horror' Tag Fits One-Third Of Top-Money Pics," *Variety*, May 27, 1981, 7, 35. Lawrence Cohn also notes that Christmas and Easter were becoming release weekend for big breaks.

²⁶⁰ "Pictures: Fear 'Stalk & Slash' Horror Saturation," 7, 36.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 7, 36.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 36.

Cohn wrote that distribution of all of those films was a cause for concern as "[t]he massive print runs and saturation releases by majors of horror pickups in 1980-81 have been replaced recently by slower, territory-by-territory rollouts of films and a greater participation by indie distributors as Paramount, 20th Century-Fox and Columbia move away from the genre."

²⁶³ "Pictures: Fear 'Stalk & Slash' Horror Saturation," 36. Cohn cited the following films as examples: Columbia's *Silent Rage* (1982); Compass International's *Hell Night* (1981); Embassy's *Parasite* (1982); and Jensen Farley Pictures' *The Boogens* (1981).

²⁶⁴ Cohn, "Gore Perpetual Fave,"

²⁶⁵ Columbia Pictures' *Ghostbusters* (1984) and Warner Bros.' *Gremlins* (1984) were two comedy horror films that used a distinct form of product differentiation as comedic 'creature features' aimed for a broader family audience.

The Evil Dead (1981), made for less than \$500,000, also showed that supernatural horror could be made at a low cost. "'Evil Dead': Blood-soaked Remake Scares Up Mixed Reviews," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-xpm-2013-apr-05-la-et-mn-evil-dead-remake-movie-reviews-critics-20130404-story.html>, last accessed February 7, 2020.

²⁶⁶ Auerbach, "Independent Distributors: The Industry's Dark Horses," *Boxoffice*, January 1, 1982, 14-17.

- ²⁶⁷ "Avco Names Rehme," *Back Stage*, March 3, 1978, 32; "Rehme Named Prez, Chief Exec Officer Of Avco Embassy," *Variety*, November 7, 1979, 3, 37.
- ²⁶⁸ "AVCO Buys Embassy: Diversification In High Gear," *The Independent Film Journal*, May 11, 1968, 4, 30.
- ²⁶⁹ "Carnal Knowledge," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 22, 1971, 28.
- ²⁷⁰ Cook, 324-5; "Avemb Financing Pictures, Also Active In Pick-Ups," *Variety*, January 24, 1979, 7, 40.
- ²⁷¹ "Avemb Financing Pictures, Also Active In Pick-Ups," *Variety*, January 25, 1979, 7, 40.
- ²⁷² "Bob Rehme's Return To Milan," *Variety*, October 15, 1980, 11, 123.
- ²⁷³ Steven Ginsberg, "Avemb Rides 12 Pix On Rising Coin Flow," *Variety*, October 22, 1980, 40. Rehme explained, "You can't build a company by giving up rights. If it's a negative pickup we try to pick up [earnings] on the tv sale. When you only have U.S. rights, if you miss there is no way to cushion the blow."
- ²⁷⁴ "Coscarelli 'Phantasm' Goes To Avco Embassy," *Variety*, February 7, 1979, 38.
- ²⁷⁵ "'Halloween' Hit Induces Avemb To Get On With 'Phantasm,'" *Variety*, March 14, 1979, 6.
- ²⁷⁶ "'Halloween' Hit Induces Avemb," 6.
- ²⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁷⁸ "International: 'Phantasm,' \$4,178,352," *Variety*, May 9, 1979, 10.
- ²⁷⁹ "International: 'Phantasm,' \$4,178,352," 10.
- ²⁸⁰ "Big Rental Films of 1979," *Variety*, January 9, 1980, 21.
- ²⁸¹ Ibid.
- ²⁸² The franchise included: *Phantasm II* (1988), *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* (1994), *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* (1998), and *Phantasm: Ravager* (2016).
- ²⁸³ "Avemb Again Financing Pix," *Variety*, April 30, 1980, 4, 44; Jim Robbins, "'Fog' director-writer unsold on big-budget film bonanza," *Boxoffice*, March 10, 1980, 1, 5.
- ²⁸³ "'Halloween' Hit Induces," 6.
- ²⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁸⁵ "Bob Rehme's Return to Milan; Now Seeking Regional Partners," *Variety*, October 15, 1980, 11, 123.
- ²⁸⁶ Jim Robbins, "'Fog' director-writer unsold on big-budget film bonanza," *Boxoffice*, March 10, 1980, 1, 5.
- ²⁸⁷ "Avemb Promotion of 'Fog': \$3-Million," *Variety*, January 23, 1980, 5, 104.
- ²⁸⁸ Jim Robbins, "'Fog' director-writer unsold on big-budget film bonanza," *Boxoffice*, March 10, 1980, 1, 5.
- ²⁸⁹ "Avemb Promotion of 'Fog': \$3-Million," 5, 104; Robbins, "'Fog' director-writer," 1, 5.
- ²⁹⁰ Gene Siskel, "'Fog' is a Murky Attempt at Horror," *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 1980, A5.
- ²⁹¹ Vincent Canby, "'Fog' Comes in at 3 Theaters: Revenge From the Past," *New York Times*, February 29, 1980, C15.
- ²⁹² Kevin Thomas, "'The Fog': Panic at Point Reyes," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1980, C8.
- ²⁹³ Poll, "Film Review: The Fog," *Variety*, January 16, 1980, 31.
- ²⁹⁴ E. P. "Buying & Booking Guide: THE FOG," *The Film Journal*, February 1, 1980, 16.
- ²⁹⁵ "Buying & Booking Guide: THE FOG," 16.
- ²⁹⁶ Lynn Shumate, "Feature Reviews," *Boxoffice*, February 4, 1980, 20.
- ²⁹⁷ Shumate, "Feature Reviews," 20; "The New Films: The Fog," *Screen International*, November 8, 1980, 17.
- ²⁹⁸ "The New Films: The Fog," *Screen International*, November 8, 1980, 17.
- ²⁹⁹ "International: 'The Fog' in Germany," *Variety*, September 10, 1980, 52; "John Carpenter's The Fog," *Screen International*, April 5, 1980, 3.
- ³⁰⁰ "Picture Grosses: 'Miner' in Manhattan, 112½G; 'Cruising' 125G; 'Simon' \$50,000; 'the Fog' 105G; 'Force' \$60,000," *Variety*, March 12, 1980, 10, 38; "Pictures Grosses: Fresh Fare Perks L.A.; 'Jesus' Mighty \$210,000, 'Gigolo' Zingy \$184,000, 'the Fog' Grand 182G," *Variety*, February 6, 1980, 8.
- ³⁰¹ "Picture Grosses: 'Cruising' Boff 150G, Det.; 'Jazz' Slick \$60,000, 'Fog' Solid 42G," *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 15; "Pictures Grosses: 'being' \$45,000, Del; 'Daughter' 39G, 2d," *Variety*, March 19, 1980, 22, 32; "Picture Grosses: 'Fog' Tall \$59,000, D.C.; 'Jazz' 42G," *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 14, 32; "Picture Grosses: 'Cruising' Zingy \$57,000, Cleve.; 'Chapt, 2' Hotsy 45G, 'Fog' 53G," *Variety*, February 27, 1980, 15; "Picture Grosses: 'Fog' Whammo \$73,500, Balto; 'Cruising' \$54,000, 'Saturn' 32G," *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 24; "First Run Report," *Boxoffice*, April 7, 1980, 17.
- ³⁰² "Picture Grosses: 'Cruising' Boff 150G, Det.; 'Jazz' Slick \$60,000, 'Fog' Solid 42G," *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 15; "Pictures Grosses: 'being' \$45,000, Del; 'Daughter' 39G, 2d," *Variety*, March 19, 1980, 22, 32; "Picture Grosses: 'Fog' Tall \$59,000, D.C.; 'Jazz' 42G," *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 14, 32; "Picture Grosses: 'Cruising' Zingy \$57,000, Cleve.; 'Chapt, 2' Hotsy 45G, 'Fog' 53G," *Variety*, February 27, 1980, 15; "Picture Grosses: 'Fog' Whammo

\$73,500, Balto; 'Cruising' \$54,000, 'Saturn' 32G." *Variety*, February 20, 1980, 24; "First Run Report." *Boxoffice*, April 7, 1980, 17.

³⁰³ "Picture Grosses: 'Coal' Bright \$26,500 in Seattle; 'Career' Big 14G, 'Fantasia' Firm 20G, 2d." *Variety*, March 12, 1980, 15, 38.

³⁰⁴ Steven Ginsberg, "Averb Rides 12 Pix On Rising Coin Flow," *Variety*, October 22, 1980, 7, 40. This was also a lesson learned by Blumhouse Productions, a studio essentially built on one film: *Paranormal Activity* (2009), whose worldwide gross was as unbelievable 431 times its production budget. "Paranormal Activity (2009)," *TheNumbers.com*, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Paranormal-Activity#tab=summary>, last accessed February 7, 2020.

³⁰⁵ Steven Ginsberg, "Averb Rides 12 Pix On Rising Coin Flow," *Variety*, October 22, 1980, 7, 40.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰⁷ "Bob Rehme Moves To U As Prez of Distrib & Market," *Variety*, June 17, 1981, 3, 34.

³⁰⁸ "Capra Taking Averb's Pix To Mifed; Expansion Eyed," *Variety*, October 14, 1981, 11, 148.

³⁰⁹ Lawrence Cohn "Horrid Year for Horror Pix At the B.O.," *Variety*, January 25, 1984, 3.

³¹⁰ Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Incredible Shrinking Horror Market?" *Variety*, Feb 16, 1983, 7, 24.

³¹¹ Cohn, "Pictures: Incredible Shrinking Horror Market?" 7, 24.

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ Cohn "Horrid Year for Horror Pix At the B.O.," 3.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Lawrence Cohn, "Pictures: Gotham Market: Firstrun or Last Stop?" *Variety*, May 18, 1983, 3, 24.

³¹⁶ Cohn, "Pictures: Gotham Market," *Variety*, 3, 24.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.* Cohn writes: "Some of the erosion may be a simple shift from theaters to home use of the films, as violent (and sexploitation) product has finally become available in videocassette and tv form recently" (3). Later, he explains: "Similarly, hardcore porno films are way off at the boxoffice but thriving in homevideo form, while R-rated sex comedies (the fallout of 'Porky's' huge success) are being produced in profusion, but geared mainly for pay-cable usage" (3).

³¹⁸ Simon Thompson, "The 13 Highest-Grossing Horror Film Franchises Of All Time At The U.S. Box Office," *Forbes.com*, October 27, 2016, last accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonthompson/2016/10/27/the-13-highest-grossing-horror-film-franchises-of-all-time-at-the-u-s-box-office/#2e41c02868d1>. As of 2016, the 12-film *Friday the 13th* franchise had grossed \$380 million vs. *A Nightmare on Elm Street's* 9-film franchise, which has grossed \$370 million.

³¹⁹ Justin Wyatt, "The formation of the 'Major' Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 76-77.

³²⁰ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 27-8.

³²¹ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 29.

³²² Chris Mitchell, "New Line: Shrewd Marketing Fuels Freddy Phenomenon," *Variety*, August 10, 1992, 36.

³²³ Tom Bierbaum, "Homevideo: Media Home-E Plunges Into Prod. Arena," *Variety*, August 8, 1984, 33; "US Focus: MHE looks to future expansion," *Screen International*, September 8, 1984, 20; "Letters: Nightmare On Elm Street," *Screen International*, December 21, 1985, 6.

³²⁴ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 38.

³²⁵ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*.

³²⁶ Gene Siskel, "Clichés Take Creeps Out of 'Nightmare,'" *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 1984, E2.

³²⁷ Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Nightmare,'" *New York Times*, November 9, 1984, C10; Kevin Thomas, "Another Craven Film Soaked In Blood," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1984, E4.

³²⁸ "Film Reviews: A Nightmare on Elm Street," *Variety*, November 7, 1984, 18.

³²⁹ "Film Reviews: A Nightmare on Elm Street," 18.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ James Greenberg, "Third 'God' Offering Wins Lead In Slowed-Down Natl. B.O. Race," *Variety*, November 14, 1984, 3, 20.

³³² "Indies Pounce On National B.O.," *Variety*, November 21, 1984, 3; Frank Segers, "'Action' Eventful \$300,000, Chi," *Variety*, November 21, 1984, 12.

³³³ "'Elm' Dreamy \$1.2-Mil in N.Y.," *Variety*, November 14, 1984, 8, 26.

- ³³⁴ “‘God’ Affectionate 227G In L.A.; ‘Terminator’ Robust; ‘Nightmare’ 128G,” *Variety*, November 14, 1984, 8, 12.
- ³³⁵ “Weekend Film Boxoffice Reports,” *Variety*, November 21, 1984, 4; Frank Segers, “‘Action’ Eventful \$300,000, Chi,” *Variety*, November 21, 1984, 12; Herb Michelson, “‘Supergirl’ Snappy 98G By Bay,” *Variety*, November 28, 1984, 18; “‘Impulse’ Mild at \$7,4000 In St. Loo.,” *Variety*, December 5, 1984, 12.
- ³³⁶ Frank Segers, “‘Action’ Eventful \$300,000, Chi,” *Variety*, November 21, 1984, 12; “Golf Mill Theatres 1-2-3,” *Cinematreasures.org*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/4143>, last accessed February 5, 2020; “AMC Norridge 6,” *Cinematreasures.org*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5804>, last accessed February 5, 2020.
- ³³⁷ Herb Michelson, “‘Supergirl’ Snappy 98G By Bay,” *Variety*, November 28, 1984, 18.
- ³³⁸ “‘Action’ Muscular \$145,000, Det.; ‘Nightmare’ Big 125G,” *Variety*, November 28, 1984, 17.
- ³³⁹ “From New Line Cinema,” *Variety*, December 5, 1984, 18-9.
- ³⁴⁰ “Weekend Film Boxoffice Reports,” *Variety*, December 5, 1984, 4.
- ³⁴¹ “50 Top-Grossing Films,” *Variety*, February 6, 1985, 9.
- ³⁴² “A Nightmare On Elm Street,” *Variety*, March 6, 1985, 238-239.
- ³⁴³ “A Nightmare On Elm Street,” *Variety*, March 6, 1985, 238-239. The *II* would also be replaced by a 2 in *A Nightmare On Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (1985).
- ³⁴⁴ “New Line Ready to ‘Elm Street 2’ For June Start,” *Variety*, May 1, 1985, 14.
- ³⁴⁵ “New Line Ready to ‘Elm Street 2’ For June Start,” *Variety*, May 1, 1985, 14.
- ³⁴⁶ Mitchell, “New Line: Shrewd Marketing,” 36.
- ³⁴⁷ Harmetz, “Waking from a New ‘Nightmare’ to New Profits: Waking from ‘Nightmare’ to New Profits,” 2.
- ³⁴⁸ Aljean Harmetz, “Waking from a New ‘Nightmare’ to New Profits: Waking from ‘Nightmare’ to New Profits,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1989, 2.
- ³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵⁰ Films in the franchise included *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (1985), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (1989), *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (1994), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2003).
- ³⁵¹ Simon Thompson, “The 13 Highest-Grossing Horror Film Franchises of All Time at the U.S. Box Office,” *Forbes.com*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonthompson/2017/10/06/the-13-highest-grossing-horror-film-franchises-of-all-time-at-the-u-s-box-office-2/#6fa40ad53e5b>, last accessed February 1, 2020.
- ³⁵² Mitchell, “New Line: Shrewd Marketing,” 36.
- ³⁵³ Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, 7-8.
- ³⁵⁴ “Majors Borrow Horror Success From Indies, Often ‘Outsider,’” *Variety*, November 5, 1980, 30.
- ³⁵⁵ Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 2. Tzioumakis points out that New Line’s three *The Lord of the Rings* films collectively cost \$300 million.
- ³⁵⁶ Thompson, “The 13 Highest-Grossing Horror Film Franchises.”

Figure 24: *The Last House on the Left* (1972) one sheet



Figure 25: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) one sheet



Figure 26: *Halloween* (1978) one sheet



Figure 27: *Friday the 13th* (1980) one sheet



Figure 28: *The Howling* (1981) original press kit

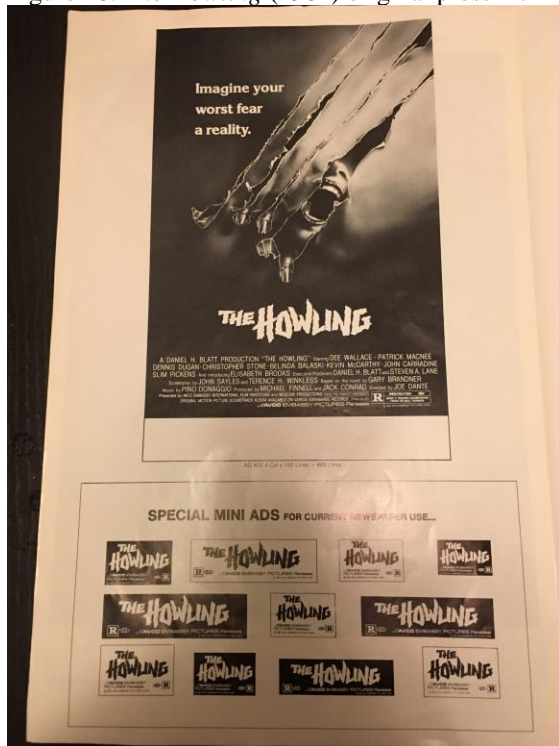


Figure 29: *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984) one sheet



CONCLUSION: INDEPENDENTS IN THE 1980s, THE LEGACY OF 1970s EXPLOITATION, AND A DYNAMIC APPROACH TO INDUSTRY HISTORY

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the influence of the blockbuster model of filmmaking and the rising costs of production and distribution erected barriers for theatrical release beyond what most independents could sustain. Thus, exploitation independents were merged into larger companies or specialized further to serve niche audiences in the theatrical and/or ancillary markets. For AIP and New World Pictures, companies that had attempted upscaling efforts in the 1970s, high-stakes competition with the majors for first-run playdates proved untenable. New companies including Cannon Films entered the high-risk environment through risk-taking tactics including pre-selling ancillary rights to finance production.

Shakeups Among Exploitation Independents

The scarcity of playdates for independent releases and ballooning production, distribution, and marketing costs led to mergers and acquisitions among independents, notably at AIP and New World Pictures. AIP merged with Filmways in 1979 and 1980, and, shortly after, former executives of United Artists who had created Orion Pictures subsequently purchased Filmways. With an extensive library from both AIP and United Artists, Orion also pursued home video sales and made an exclusive release deal with HBO. After being offered a position at Filmways after the merger, Arkoff left Filmways citing lack of autonomy. Arkoff explained in a statement upon resignation:

Since co-founding American International a quarter of a century ago, I have developed my own maverick style of independent operation. My major concern during the merger negotiations was that I might be unable to function under a large corporate umbrella reporting to others. Regretfully, my concern was well founded.¹

The mode of production of both AIP and New World Pictures was based around a kind of unit producer model, which was particularly at odds with the organizational structure of a publicly traded company like Filmways. Corman shared Arkoff's lack of interest in adapting to a corporate studio culture. Corman was reportedly given the chance to run a major studio in the early 1980s but declined when he was not given "complete authority," bemoaning the interference from lawyers, agents, and other executives inherent to theatrical production at a national scale at that time.²

Like Arkoff, Corman also sold New World Pictures to outside entities. In 1983, Corman sold New World to Harry Evans Sloan and Lawrence L. Kuppin. Corman retained the film library and allowed the new New World Pictures to license the home video rights and distribute the films theatrically. After selling New World, Corman started his own distribution company, New Concorde, in 1983. In a 1990 interview, Corman described returning to independent distribution in the 1980s:

When I came back into distribution as Concorde, distribution had changed. It had become much more difficult. The concept of the giant major studio releases of one thousand to two thousand prints simultaneously, with a \$5 million or \$10 million ad campaign, really damaged independent film distribution. . . Cannon, De Laurentiis, New World itself—almost all of these companies had great moments but lost, between them, more than a billion dollars, which is a huge amount of money for independent motion-picture companies. They simply could not compete with that kind of spending and power from the major studios.³

Though he had greater control at New Concorde, the scale of investment required for a theatrical release of any budget presented unprecedented risk to independents.

As Corman alluded to, New World Pictures continued to produce and release films for theatrical distribution under new ownership. In 1984, Robert Rehme, who had worked at New World from 1975–1978 before joining Avco-Embassy and then Universal, purchased controlling investment in New World Pictures. Similar to his approach at Avco-Embassy, Rehme steered New World toward horror and sci-fi including the Stephen King adaptation *Children of Corn* (1984), the sci-fi film *C.H.U.D.* (1984), *Black Moon Rising* (1986) directed by John Carpenter, and the horror franchise *Hellraiser* (1987). The company also released films targeted to youth audiences, such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) and *Heathers* (1989). Rehme re-envisioned New World Pictures to look like Avco-Embassy—a theatrical distributor of a select group of mid-range genre films.

Home video also presented opportunities for some exploitation independents. The Cannon Group Inc. was one example. In 1979, Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus took control of Cannon Films, formed by Christopher Dewey and Dennis Friedland in 1966.⁴ Globus had worked with Roger Corman in the past, and Golan and Globus had produced the Israel teen sex comedy *Lemon Popsicle* (1978). The company acquired financing by selling film titles of yet-to-be-produced films at international sales markets. The new demand for video titles made the pre-selling strategy a successful one for a time. Cannon Films carried on the legacy of AIP and New World Pictures, bringing action films, such as *Missing in Action* (1984), and youth-oriented films, like *Breakin'* (1984), to international sales markets. For a time, Golan and Globus also mimicked New World's dual-pronged exploitation and art cinema focus, releasing John Cassavetes' *Love Streams* (1984) and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987). In sum, Golan and Globus melded the strategies of product differentiation of 1970s exploitation independents with relatively novel risk-seeking financing strategies.

Legacy of Exploitation Cycles on Hollywood

While many of the exploitation independents changed ownership in the 1980s, the legacy of the 1970s exploitation cycles continued through the 1980s and beyond. Crown International Pictures' engagement in 'R' sexploitation of the 1980s represented both a continuation of 1970s exploitation film formulae and a mainstreaming of this trend.

Crown International Pictures: Last Exploitation Independent Standing

While the sale of AIP and New World and the rise of new independents like Cannon Films and New Line Cinema signaled change among independents in the 1980s, Crown International Pictures was the rare exploitation independent of the 1970s to continue in theatrical release throughout the 1980s. As a company that had carried on production of action-sexploitation films throughout the 1970s, Crown was able to take advantage of the vogue for raunchy teen sex comedies in the new decade.

Crown did so in large part by imitating the 'animal comedy' sexploitation cycle. Indeed, the animal comedy cycle of the early 1980s can be seen as a final development of the interdependent dynamic between the major studios and exploitation independents in the 1970s. Bill Paul has defined the animal comedy as "comedies that overtook American screens following the enormous popular success of *Animal House*, comedies that are defined by their raunchiness and an apparent desire to push beyond acceptable bounds of good taste."⁵ Universal Pictures' *Animal House* (1978), produced by college magazine *National Lampoon*, returned \$140 million in domestic gross.⁶ *Animal House* sparked a wave of college-themed sex comedies, often studio-released. These included Fox's *Porky's* (1981), *Porky's II: The Next Day* (1983), *Bachelor Party* (1984), and *Porky's Revenge* (1985). *Animal House* also somewhat oddly linked back to

American Graffiti, a film similarly starring four male protagonists that had been the source of imitation for black prestige film *Cooley High*. *Animal House* spoofed *American Graffiti*'s "where are they now?" credit sequence. *Animal House*'s imitation of *American Graffiti* represented an additional wrinkle in the major-independent dynamic of influence.

A cycle led by major studio releases, the animal comedy represented a kind of inversion of the youth sexploitation cycle discussed in Chapter One in a few respects. While the first wave of youth, 'R'-rated sexploitation in the early 1970s starred female protagonists and used feminist discourse to reach male viewers, both *Animal House* and *Porky's* also appealed to male viewers but without the ideological cover of the former's 'white coater' approach. Instead, their coming-of-age plots focused quite overtly on male fantasies. While the 'R' rated 'empowered babe' youth sexploitation of the early 1970s were made and released by exploitation independents capitalizing on the popularity of sexually explicit media at the time, the animal comedies were developed by the major studios. As such, the animal comedy cycle showed the major studios once again appropriating fare that had predominantly been the domain of independents for years. Like Paramount's pick-up of *Friday the 13th*, these films offered studios risk management and diversification in a post-super grosser marketplace. Crown developed several films that capitalized on the vogue for 1980s teen sexploitation. Crown's *My Tutor* (1983), a film about a high school boy who begins an affair with his French tutor, grossed \$16.3 million, "placing it among the top 40 highest-grossing independently produced and distributed films since 1981," according to *The Hollywood Reporter*.⁷ Crown's films during the 1980s included 'R'-rated male-oriented teen sex comedies with above-the-waist female nudity including *The Beach Girls* (1982), *Cavegirl* (1985), *Jocks* (1986), and *Hunk* (1987). Though it signaled major studio

encroachment, the animal comedy's popularity also helped sustain Crown International Pictures during the 1980s.

Exploitation Cycles in Contemporary Hollywood

In addition to youth sexploitation at local multiplexes, adult-oriented sexploitation films were popular on big and small screens. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, sexploitation geared to more adult audiences developed in the form of the erotic thriller, which had a theatrical resurgence in films like *9 ½ weeks* (1986) and on pay cable. While blaxploitation had an abrupt end in the late 1970s, director Quentin Tarantino's self-fashioning as an exploitation *auteur* in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Django Unchained* (2012) revived interest in blaxploitation. However, in many respects, a film like *Cooley High* had the most influence on independent black filmmaking as evidenced by Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). Discourse around blaxploitation has returned in recent years with the release of Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) and industry discourse on black representation in Hollywood.

Today, the legacy of hicksploitation can be seen in religious films geared to a sort of post-Religious Right hillbilly taste culture. The theatrical success of low-budget Christian films like *God's Not Dead* (2004), with a reported budget of \$2 million, shows the continued success of aggressive target marketing to niche viewers if sunk costs are contained. The Blockbuster Lite film has become quite popular in ancillary markets with direct-to-television, DVD, or streaming 'mockbusters' of recent years, like *Sharknado* (2013) and the common practice of direct-to-video sequels of animated films for the family market.

Independents continue to provide new ‘R’ horror formulae that initiate wider trends, as seen with the Blumhouse-produced and Paramount-released *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and the found footage horror cycle. As in the 1970s, several registers of horror can be found in theaters today including art-horror like *Midsommar* (2019), teen slasher horror like *Happy Death Day* (2017) and bigger budget studio-released horror remakes like *It* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019), both of which look back to Stephen King’s work of the 1970s and 1980s.

A Symbiotic Dynamic

The study has characterized the relationship between the major studios and the independents in the period of the 1970s as one of symbiosis, or of a close interdependent relationship. Relatively large industrial shifts shaped this relationship. I have identified these as influencing factors on the changing relationship. Each of the factors had a slightly different effect on this dynamic, resulting in companies adopting a highly variable set of strategies. The contours of that dynamic played out across cycles, and each cycle illustrates some of the common strategies used.

We have seen how the industry recession fostered some degree of experimentation on both the independents’ and majors’ parts. Independents were trailblazers in the recession-era exploitation cycle. Though the earliest black action films were independently produced, the majors’ negative pick-ups resulted in a highly managed venturousness as firms including United Artists, Warner Bros. and MGM sought film formulas that would register with black and white audiences alike.

The industry recession and the prominence of exploitation created conditions that led those in the industry with a vested interest in drive-ins to develop genre films that would be less

risky in an open air setting and potentially more appealing to the imagined ‘ozoner’ audience of suburban and small-town patrons. To reach a narrow audience segment, independents pioneered strategies of target marketing and selling, which would influence the promotion of blockbuster films. In the context of the broader vogue for country music and hillbilly taste culture in the 1970s more generally, some major studios appropriated the hicksploitation film, resulting in some of the best remembered hicksploitation touchstones of the decade.

The majors’ strategies used to drive demand for blockbuster event films created market conditions that led independents to develop imitations of these unprecedented hits. Without the resources to develop similar intellectual property, independents mimicked the majors’ pre-sold plots and marketing appeals. Backed into a corner with dwindling available playdates in the summer season, the bigger independents also launched upscaling efforts to directly vie for exhibitor attention and viewers’ pocketbooks with thrifty sci-fi films. These Blockbuster Lite films often had modest profits but were perceived in the industry as second-rate, a damning market signal in a superstar market.

The effect of the blockbuster film on distribution and exhibition put independents in a rather permanently disadvantaged position, as Corman articulated above. Wide release limited theatrical availability for independents’ films. In the post-blockbuster market, a new group of independents charted a new path of product differentiation. In the slasher cycle, exploitation independents drove demand, not through upscaling strategies, but through developing word-of-mouth and through near-constant product differentiation of these violent ‘R’ horror films as horror production surged into the 1980s. Independents became the leaders of a national film craze.

Contributions to the Field

As summarized above, the study charted the shifting marketplace for exploitation cinema throughout the decade, highlighting key causes including a playdate shortage, declining drive-ins, and independents' use of highly variable market strategies to ease direct competition with the majors. This history also has many implications on our understanding of the American film industry of the 1970s. The study has illustrated the importance of exploitation cinema in distribution shifts from drive-ins, downtown hardtops, and first-run theaters in the 1970s to an increasingly homogenized theatrical distribution landscape in the early 1980s of first-run multi-screen suburban theaters. The study has also demonstrated how independents created innovative formulas that they released through target marketing to hardtop theaters and drive-ins. The industry's focus on the youth audience continued through the early 1980s, as evidenced by the animal comedy and the "Brat Pack" films released by the major studios in the decade.

The study improves our understanding of both independent filmmaking and Hollywood during the period. The study mapped the ebbs and flows of independent prominence in the industry. While independents capitalized on opportunities presented by the industry recession, upscaling efforts in the Blockbuster Lite films were largely risky and unsuccessful endeavors. The failure of the Blockbuster Lite model resulted in the persistence of two independent paradigms moving into the 1980s: 1) a low-budget, niche market paradigm of independent filmmaking, as evidenced in the success of Compass International in Chapter Six, and 2) a 'major independent' strategy, a rarer feat but one evidenced by New Line Cinema. The study reveals that the middle category, one occupied by the studio-like production of AIP and New World, had difficulty subsisting particularly given the overhead required to operate franchises and exchanges. Neither AIP nor New World Pictures managed to acquire or develop a

blockbuster intellectual property, like New Line's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* films, that could sustain operations.

The study also revises our understanding of Hollywood, uncovering how the major distributors engaged in exploitation cycles at various moments to offset risk during the industry recession and to spread risk when developing blockbuster films. This showed how low-budget genre films, particularly those connected to a popular fad, provided major studios the opportunity to diversify their slate and engage in low risk investments. Forged in the 1970s, this strategy can be seen today in Hollywood. Indeed, the continued strategy of using low-budget investments to diversify a portfolio is an example of the recursiveness of exploitation strategies in contemporary Hollywood. Lacking a franchise on par with Disney's *Star Wars* films, Paramount has continued to invest in low-budget films. In 2019, Paramount Pictures released *Crawl*, an animal disaster film that grossed \$90 million on a cost of \$13.5 million. Universal, too, continues to benefit from their alliance with Blumhouse Productions. Blumhouse's low-budget horror films are continually budgeted to turn a profit and provide product to tie in with Universal's experimentation with streaming platforms. Not all studios today engage in the strategy of low risk investments in high risk portfolios. Disney, on the other hand, appears to be entirely banking on special-effects franchise films and animation, which do not accommodate a low-budget strategy. Some major studios continue to strategically use low-budget genre films, notably horror, as counterprogramming to offset the risk of bigger gambles.

Contributions to Historiographic Approaches

The methodology of the study also offers a contribution to the field. The study shares priorities with film historians including Heffernan, Sieving, and Gorfinkel, who investigate

developments in film forms and moviegoing by examining institutional structures and industrial dynamics. While many industrial histories focus the investigation on a single film cycle or an established genre, this study has adjusted its scope to home in on a somewhat more amorphous object: the interplay, interactions, and exchange between two sectors of the industry. The study illustrates some of the advantages of this model. It shows variation and change to be virtual constants in an industry that makes products, as Caves and others have pointed out, that are unique and that present viewers with a continuously shifting set of options. At the same time, the study indicates the relative consistency of many strategies, most notably target marketing to audiences deemed 'exploitable' and strategies emerging out of various assessments of risk. In each chapter, the contours of each cycle reveal commonalities among the majors' and independents' forays into genre filmmaking including the strategic use of product differentiation to re-energize fads with the goal of optimizing profitability and minimizing losses. Thus, the focus on a dynamic envisions a history of ebbs and flows, which was quite appropriate for exploitation independents, a group of companies in something of a constant churn and threading the needle of product differentiation and imitation to turn a profit. Several threads of the study illustrate the recursive quality: the return of regional saturation as a method of independent release in the 1980s; the return of 'R' sexploitation in the 1980s; the return of Hollywood horror; and the durability of the Blockbuster Lite phenomenon.

By investigating a set of relations characterized by divergence and convergence over time, the study frames historical development in the American film industry as recurrent or recursive. Murray Smith has claimed that macro-level industry histories may emphasize stability over decades and "sideline" more near-term developments.⁸ Writing in the early 1990s, Dirk Eitzen has suggested a potential middle path, an industrial analysis focused on shorter periods

“when the intentions and interventions of both individual and institutional agents—the things that account for the events which force the system either to reorient itself, or collapse—take on more weight than the longer term patterns and constraints.”⁹ In the decades following this discourse, scholars like Heffernan, Schaefer, and Sieving have achieved this goal by constructing smaller industry histories of often-ignored corpuses of work. This study has also aimed to do so, but to also extend the critical focus beyond genre to an intra-industrial dynamic.

Such a move, I contend, represents a modest but significant advancement for the study of exploitation cinema. Explaining the rationale for studying exploitation films, Schaefer has cited Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s assertion that “what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central.”¹⁰ There is little doubt that the classical exploitation film was industrially peripheral, on the fringes of moviegoing during the studio era. In contrast, this study has looked at points of contact to reveal that the histories of exploitation independents and major studios were, to a large degree, intertwined. Focusing on the intersections as well as the divergences, the study circumvents the mainstream/marginal critical dichotomy. At various points in the decade, the majors were the ‘insiders’ and the independents were the ‘outsiders,’ and this relationship shifted several times. By focusing on cycle development, the study aimed to investigate how these positions of major and minor, or dominant and marginal, were tenuous and shifting and at times undercut and restored. The study uncovered the industrial strategies and institutional structures that guided, constrained, or shaped this positioning or repositioning in the industry.

This narrative of continuity and change is no doubt particularly reflective of the 1970s as a time of experimentation. It is beyond the scope of this project to project what a similar investigation of an intra-industrial dynamic might yield in another period or moment in post-*Paramount* American film history. I have offered a starting point for other scholars of so-called

marginal film forms by showing how a study of an unlikely dynamic can improve our understanding of both parties as well as the historical strategies of differentiation and imitation that brought the majors and independents together and shaped American filmgoing during the New Hollywood.

¹ “Arkoff, Noted Producer, Quits Posts at Filmways,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1979.

² Constantine Nasr, “Corman: Godfather of the A’s,” in *Roger Corman: Interviews*, edited by Constantine Nasr (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 218-219.

³ Gregory Solman, “Roger Corman: A Mini-Mogul Directs Again,” in *Roger Corman: Interviews*, edited by Constantine Nasr (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), 166.

⁴ “Cannon's Founders Recall Time when Everything was Possible,” *Variety*, October 5, 1988, 70.

⁵ William Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 86.

⁶ “National Lampoon’s Animal House,” *Box Office Mojo*, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0077975/?ref=bo_rl_ti, last accessed June 1, 2020.

⁷ Kirk Honeycutt, “Crown mines its past for sequels,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 22, 1992, 1, 16.

⁸ Murray Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 15.

⁹ Dirk Eitzen, “Evolution, Functionalism, and the Study of American Cinema,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 28 (Fall 1991), 82-3.

¹⁰ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999), 13.

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- Samuel Z. Arkoff Collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.
- Tom Miller Collection. Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

Filmography

The filmography includes films (**in bold**) that were the major case studies; films (underlined) that made up the distribution study; and exploitation films and Hollywood films that informed the design of the film cycles analyzed in the dissertation and the argument of the study.

9 ½ Weeks (1986)
The Abominable Dr. Phibes (1971)
Across 110th Street (1972)
Alien (1980)
American Graffiti (1973)
The Amityville Horror (1979)
Angels Die Hard (1970)
A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)
A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)
A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987)
A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (1988)
Animal House (1978)
Avalanche (1978)
Battle Beyond the Stars (1980)
Black Belt Jones (1974)
Behind the Green Door (1972)
Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (1970)
The Big Bird Cage (1972)
The Big Bust Out (1972)
The Big Doll House (1971)
Billy Jack (1971)
Blacula (1972)
Blood Feast (1963)
Bloody Mama (1970)
Blow Out (1981)
Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (1969)
Breaker! Breaker! (1977)
Breakin' (1984)
Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo (1984)
The Bus is Coming (1971)
Caged Heat (1974)
Camille 2000 (1969)
Candy Stripe Nurses (1974)
Cannibal Girls (1973)
Carmen, Baby (1967)
Carnal Knowledge (1971)
Carrie (1976)
The Cheerleaders (1973)
Coffy (1973)

Convoy (1978)
Cooley High (1975)
Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970)
Country Cuzzins (1970)
 Cujo (1983)
Death Race 2000 (1975)
 Death Wish (1974)
 Deep Throat (1972)
Deliverance (1972)
Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry (1974)
Dolemite (1975)
 Dressed to Kill (1980)
 Easy Rider (1969)
Eat My Dust! (1976)
 Emmanuelle (1973)
 The Empire Strikes Back (1980)
 Enter the Dragon (1973)
The Erotic Adventures of Zorro (1972)
 Escape from New York (1981)
 Every Which Way But Loose (1978)
 The Evil Dead (1981)
 The Exorcist (1973)
Fanny Hill (1969)
 Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1965)
The Fog (1980)
 Foxy Brown (1975)
Friday the 13th (1980)
 Friday the 13th Part 2 (1981)
 The Funhouse (1981)
'Gator Bait (1974)
 Galaxina (1980)
 The Godfather (1972)
Golden Needles (1974)
Halloween (1978)
 Halloween (2018)
 Halloween II (1981)
Handle with Care (1977)
 The Happy Hooker (1975)
 The Hills Have Eyes (1977)
 I Am Curious (Yellow) (1967)
 I, A Woman (1967)
Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS (1975)
 Inga (1968)
 The Immoral Mr. Teas (1959)
Jaws (1975)

Jaws 2 (1978)
Lady Sings the Blues (1972)
Lady Snowblood (1973)
***The Last House on the Left* (1972)**
Lonesome Cowboys (1968)
Lorna (1964)
The Mack (1973)
***Macon County Line* (1974)**
Mahogany (1975)
***Mako: Jaws of Death* (1976)**
***Meteor* (1979)**
Midnight Cowboy (1969)
Mona (1970)
Ms.45 (1981)
My Tutor (1983)
Night Call Nurses (1972)
Night of the Living Dead (1968)
The Opening of Misty Beethoven (1976)
Orca (1977)
Pick Up (1975)
***Piranha* (1978)**
Piranha 3D (2010)
Pit Stop (1969)
***Policewomen* (1974)**
Poltergeist (1982)
The Pom Pom Girls (1976)
Porky's (1981)
Private Duty Nurses (1971)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)
Return to Macon County (1975)
Rosemary's Baby (1968)
Santee (1972)
Satan's Sadists (1969)
Savage Sisters (1974)
School Girl (1971)
Sheba, Baby (1975)
***Shaft* (1971)**
The Shining (1980)
Slaughter (1972)
Slaves (1969)
***Smokey and the Bandit* (1977)**
Souder (1972)
Stanley (1972)
***Star Wars* (1977)**
Story of O (1975)

Superchick (1973)
Super Fly (1972)
Sweet Sugar (1972)
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)
Therese and Isabelle (1968)
The Stewardesses (1969)
The Student Nurses (1970)
The Teacher (1974)
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974)
The Trip (1967)
They Call Me Mr. Tibbs! (1970)
The Young Nurses (1973)
Thriller: A Cruel Picture (1973)
TNT Jackson (1974)
Trader Hornee (1970)
Trip with Teacher (1975)
Truck Stop Women (1974)
Two Thousand Maniacs! (1964)
Van Nuys Blvd. (1979)
Vixen! (1968)
Walking Tall (1973)
Walking Tall Part 2 (1975)
Walking Tall: Final Chapter (1977)
Wattstax (1973)
Weekend with the Babysitter (1971)
White Line Fever (1975)
The Wild Angels (1966)
The Wild McCullochs (1975)
Without a Stitch (1968)
Year of the Yahoo! (1972)