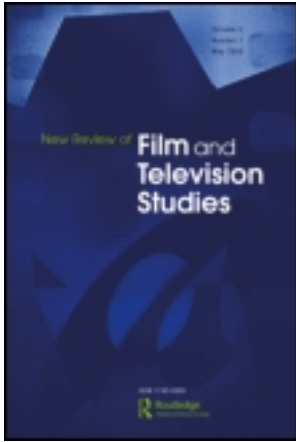


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Ramon Lobato^a & Mark David Ryan^b

^a Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC, 3122, Australia

^b Creative Industries Precinct, Queensland University of Technology, Musk Ave., Kelvin Grove, QLD, 4059, Australia

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking genre studies through distribution analysis: issues in international horror movie circuits

Ramon Lobato^{a*} and Mark David Ryan^b

^a*Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia;* ^b*Creative Industries Precinct, Queensland University of Technology, Musk Ave., Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059, Australia*

The existence of any film genre depends on the effective operation of distribution networks. Contingencies of distribution play an important role in determining the content of individual texts and the characteristics of film genres; they enable new genres to emerge at the same time as they impose limits on generic change. This paper sets out an alternative way of doing genre studies, based on an analysis of distributive circuits rather than film texts or generic categories. Our objective is to provide a conceptual framework that can account for the multiple ways in which distribution networks leave their traces on film texts and audience expectations, with specific reference to international horror networks, and to offer some preliminary suggestions as to how distribution analysis can be integrated into existing genre studies methodologies.

Keywords: distribution; genre studies; horror movies; direct-to-DVD; long tail

Distribution, often considered a neutral technology of transmission linking production and exhibition, is a relatively unpopular topic of research in film studies. Far removed from the drama of the set and the glitz of the red carpet, distribution is imagined as a purely logistical space of transportation, warehousing, inventory, stocktaking and market research. For this reason, it is commonly assumed to be outside the remit of film studies, as though distributors merely facilitate (rather than fundamentally shape) audience–text relations. The lack of interest in distribution as an object of scholarly research is reflected in the scholarship to date: the Library of Congress catalogue lists only 38 publications in the subject heading ‘Motion Pictures – Distribution’, compared to 658 in ‘Motion Pictures – Production and Direction’ and 463 in ‘Motion Pictures – Philosophy’.

Academic studies of distribution tend to be produced by film historians and communications scholars rather than film theorists. Authoritative analyses of the political economy of Hollywood distribution by Wasko (1995, 2003), Garnham

*Email: rlobato@swin.edu.au

(1990), Miller et al. (2005), Guback (1969, 1985), Thompson (1985) and Gomery (1986) have revealed a great deal about the structural organization of the American film industry, the reasons behind US domination of international markets, and the relationship between studios and the state. This body of work demonstrates that distribution is not just a process of content delivery but '*the key locus of power and profit*' within screen industries (Garnham 1990, 162; italics in original). However, intellectual cross-pollination between distribution research and other areas of film studies – especially approaches which take the text as the primary site of analysis – is quite rare. With a few notable exceptions (Acland 2003; Harbord 2002; Heffernan 2004), film studies has been reluctant to integrate distributive knowledge into other, more established forms of film theorization.

The broad aim of this paper is to make a case for the utility of distribution research within the textualist tradition of film studies. We seek to open up a dialogue between work on film aesthetics and work on film industries, between textual theory and theories of cultural circulation, and between formalist and materialist modes of analysis. As we will demonstrate, industrial practices at the point of distribution – and in the name of distribution – inform texts and textual engagements alike. Distribution is not an afterthought in contemporary film industries. Decisions made by distributors, often before the cameras start rolling, work to shape texts in the most profound ways. Analysis of distributive logics and trajectories can therefore be a useful complement to text-centred or audience-centred approaches, and may potentially constitute the basis for new approaches to film theory.

Our focus in this paper is on the complex feedback loops that connect film distribution and film genre. Thinking genre *through* distribution provides a different way of addressing some of the typical concerns of genre studies, such as patterns of generic evolution, aesthetic histories of individual genres/sub-genres, and debates around categorization and canonization. Distribution analysis can help to foreground some of the thoroughly material constraints that enable and constrain generic change, allowing a retheorization of genre as something more than a semiotic compact between producer and audience or the end-product of sublimated social desire. In the first half of the paper, we outline a theoretical framework for the relationship between distribution and genre, with special reference to horror films. The second half of the paper examines how these relations work in practice via a discussion of the releasing patterns of selected horror movies. The horror genre has been chosen as the paper's central focus, not only because the genre is exemplary of how distribution has shaped movies and cycles throughout cinema history, but because it offers wide-ranging insight into issues – including the impacts of disruptions in traditional distribution models – that are central to contemporary relations between audiences and industry in an international context.

Distribution and generic evolution

Before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which distribution has figured in existing work on film genre in general and on horror in particular. In contemporary film studies it is broadly accepted that movie genres are processes enacted *across* production, distribution, exhibition and consumption: genre functions as a blueprint for industry production, a marketplace label for advertising and distribution, a viewing contract informing audience consumption (Altman 1999, 14), and a critical label for critique and review (Langford 2005). Genre is therefore a complex term for 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject' (Neale 1981, 6). Moreover, genre is understood to construct a movie's 'narrative image' which is communicated by industry to industry before a movie's release (i.e. by the producers or studio to distributors, exhibitors, marketing departments, etc.), to the press and eventually promoted to an audience. As Neale explains:

The indication and circulation of what the industry considers to be the generic framework – or frameworks – most appropriate to the viewing of a film is therefore one of the most important functions performed by advertising copy, and by posters, stills and trailers. In addition, reviews nearly always contain terms indicative of a film's generic status, while posters and trailers often offer verbal generic description – 'The Greatest War Picture Ever Made', 'The Comedy of the Decade' ... – as anchorage for the generically pertinent iconography they almost always also contain. (2000, 39)

In this sense, there has long been awareness of the role of distribution within genre theory. Rick Altman's model of 'genrification' (1998, 1999) – a term he uses to invoke the various processes through which genre is discursively and institutionally constructed – is particularly important here. So too is the small but growing body of work on film cycles – 'groups of films made within a specific and limited time span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes' (Neale 2000, 9) – which rejects the view of genre as a transhistorical constant. Unlike substantive movie genres (horror) or their distinctive sub-genres (vampire, zombie and werewolf movies), which are established and recognized bodies of conventions, iconographies, character types, film cycles are characterized by transient 'topicality' (Lawrence Alloway in Stanfield 2008, 180–1). Robert Spadoni's study (2007) of the first year of the 1931–36 horror cycle that began with Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) takes this approach, tracing the inter-relationships between the generic discourses of horror, patterns of reception, industry activity and the transition to sound cinema. For Altman (1998, 15), film cycles provide studios with 'successful, easily exploitable models'; cycles harness pre-existing generic material combined with or new generic elements or approaches; when market conditions are favourable cycles can under some circumstances become naturalized industry genres.

However, as Mark Jancovich (2007) argues in his critique of contemporary horror movie scholarship, a great deal of academic writing on horror continues to

use a limited theoretical model of genre which is based around analysis of canonical texts, rather than the more nuanced approaches surveyed above. Jancovich identifies three dominant approaches in the current literature: (i) historical narratives of horror's generic and stylistic development; (ii) 'attempts to define the genre theoretically and identify its fundamental characteristics'; and (iii) 'concentrated studies' which explore particular generic aspects in depth – for example, the cinema of John Carpenter and Gothic Horror films in the 1960s. However, commercial pressures on authors to cater for the widest possible readerships perpetuate the publication of broad generic overviews in the vein of the first two modes of study. Consequently,

a lot of writing on horror still continues to discuss the genre in terms that pay little or no attention to contemporary developments in genre theory and replicate what have become canonical accounts of the genre's thematic or stylistic development or its formal or ideological identity. (Jancovich 2007, 261)

The result is a recycling of knowledge, and approaches breaking new ground are less common.

We propose that industrial analyses of the horror genre and horror cycles offer a way out of this deadlock. Attention to the circulation of texts as material commodities in cultural markets, and to the structural and economic forces shaping movie genres as textual formations, industrial categories and production templates, can produce new models for genre analysis. Within horror research, scholars including Douglas Gomery (1996) and Joan Hawkins (2002) have already begun this work, offering studies of the distribution and marketing of particular texts and sub-genres. Gomery in particular, provides an overview of the production, distribution and exhibition of North American horror movies from the early 1900s to the advent of sound in the 1930s; the classical Hollywood studio era in the 1930s and 1950s; post-Second World War development to the 1970s; and up to the blockbuster era following the release of *Jaws* in 1975. These approaches also inform the work of Kevin Heffernan (2002, 2004), whose meticulous studies of the distribution circuits of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and other titles from the 1950s and 1960s draw attention to the industrial contingencies that shape the trajectories of films, their availability to diverse audiences and how these forces work to construct the broader category of horror.¹

Another notable contribution to this body of industrial genre analysis is Robert Kapsis' study (2009) of 1980s American horror. First published in 1991, Kapsis' essay argues against the 'reflection of society perspective', which maintains that 'shifts in film content reflect changes in audience taste preferences which are, in turn, linked to major shifts in the structure of society' (3). This reflectionist model assumes that popular movie titles are 'more or less' an 'accurate mirror of social structure, because by choosing the films it attends, the audience reveals its preferences' and Hollywood studios 'passively produce and finance films reflecting audience desires' (3).² On the other hand, the 'production of culture perspective' endorsed by Kapsis acknowledges that cultural products are

embedded within, and thus influenced by, the economic, organizational and industrial contexts from which they emerge. From this perspective, distribution in particular – as the most profitable and arguably the most powerful segment of the value chain – plays a defining role in shaping a final product. Kapsis' sociological research into post-1978 US horror films such as *Halloween II* (1981) is based on interviews with and observation of film workers, and it leads him to argue that the 1983 'bust' which saw horror's box-office share decline dramatically was attributable not to changes in the American social mindset or political landscape but to industrial 'filters' operative at the distribution phase, including 'conflicting perceptions of the audiences' future tastes, other in-house conflicts, and interorganizational decisions regarding expanding and contracting markets' (13).³

This body of work provides helpful coordinates for a critical theorization of distribution, understood here as a process of selective and partial provision of the semiotic content from which genre emerges. We see this process as operating on at least two levels. On the one hand, distribution shapes genre through its capacity to circulate or withhold individual texts and groups of texts. It is distributors who ultimately determine which texts are shown at our cinemas, broadcast on television and sold at DVD stores. If genre is generated through interactions between a set of cultural materials, then it is distribution which determines which of these materials are in play and which are excluded from the processes of selection and recombination that constitute generic change. But as Cubitt (2005) argues, we must focus equally on distributors' power *not* to distribute – to withhold texts from circulation – as this is a central part of their gatekeeper function. Distribution therefore has both positive and negative functions.

There is also a second order of distributive power at work. In any instance of media distribution, sophisticated commercial technologies – ranging from advertising and public relations to price differentiation, release strategy, release timing, and so on – will indirectly regulate degrees of access. It is therefore not just a matter of whether a distributor chooses to release a film or keep it locked in the vault, for release inevitably involves an array of secondary variables: how many screens the film plays on, where these screens are located, the length of its season, the retail price of the DVD, the terms of the TV broadcast, the level of visual merchandising in video stores, whether there will be trailers on YouTube, whether the film will be leaked onto peer-to-peer networks, and so on.⁴ Cumulatively, these variables place limits on the potential impact of any title. By extension, they also set the terms of the interplay between texts and across genres, as the availability and cultural prominence of generic 'ingredients' is contingent upon effective distribution. In contrast to conventional typologies of the film industry which position distribution as a discrete sector linking production and reception, the relationship between the three sectors is therefore characterized by a series of intricate relays and feedback loops.

Distribution beyond the multiplex

Today's distribution landscape has changed dramatically from the 1970s and 1980s, when many of the now-canonical genre studies were written. Among the most significant changes are the increase in the number of ancillary markets and the emergence of digital distribution platforms. The existing scholarship on Hollywood distribution has focused largely on the industrial dynamics of the studio system and the contemporary multiplex economy, to the detriment of ancillary markets which account for the lion's share of audience time and (in most cases) revenues. Gomery (2009, 105) estimates that the theatrical window now accounts for only a sixth of the revenues of a typical Hollywood movie.

An ancillary market with a special relationship to horror is direct-to-DVD. Recent research suggests that almost 59% of the features in the US marketplace are direct-to-DVD titles (Elberse and Oberholzer-Gee 2008),⁵ and feedback loops between production and distribution are especially pronounced in this corner of the horror economy. For example, the textual form of direct-to-DVD horror films is linked to their distributive context via the specific financing model(s) used by producers. In titles designed exclusively for nontheatrical markets, a diverse range of financing models is in play, from established Hollywood templates to more specific and localized models. Many direct-to-DVD films are negative pickups, which means the finished film is acquired by a distributor after it has been completed. In all cases, however, the commercial circulation of the film is dependent upon its ability to cater to what distributors perceive as a market.

Many independent horror producers use the presale model, pioneered in the 1970s by Dino de Laurentiis and the Dutch banker Frans Afman. The presale, a key driver of direct-to-DVD/video as a cultural form, typically involves one-off payments from various international buyers on the basis of a pitch for a future film, which are then used as collateral to finance the funding of the film. Distributors acquire exclusive rights for their territory and retain all revenues generated there. Crucially, the presale system of financing requires commitments from distributors *in advance*, based on the cast attached to the project and a pitch of the plot; in this way, distribution actually precedes production, with the desires of distributors built into the project before it has been scripted.

Close analysis of these industrial arrangements complicates the reflectionist model of genre that sees generic form as an end-product of social desire, popular fear or political ideology. While there is always an ideological dimension to cultural production, the dynamic is unpredictable and is mediated by industrial forces which have their own logics and produce their own kinds of textual effects. As noted previously, the content of 1980s horror films was determined more by distributors' whims than authorial innovation or public sentiment (Kapsis 2009).⁶ Attention to the industrial dynamics of genre production and distribution is therefore one of several possible challenges to reflectionism as a mode of analysis.

A further side effect of the fragmentation of nontheatrical horror markets is a diversification of traditional genre categories. Much of this activity is clustered in the far end of what Anderson (2006) dubs the 'long tail', where budgets are low and audiences tiny. This segment of the movie economy has incubated a great deal of horror content since the VHS era and is becoming ever more fractured in an Internet age. Films can now be distributed online to niche audiences via both formal (legal video streaming and download-to-own services) and informal means (BitTorrent, unauthorized YouTube postings, etc.). Revenue streams from these channels are usually slim to non-existent, but long tail distribution circuits are providing an outlet for many films that would not previously have been distributed in any meaningful sense. Long-tail markets are therefore contributing to an increase in the number of films which are commercially (if marginally) released each year and a corresponding expansion of existing generic categories to include ever more films, along with a concomitant increase in the number of genres, sub-genres and extreme niche markets, from nazisploitation to nunsplotation. As a result, it is now increasingly difficult to systematically monitor fluctuations in the horror genre. Analytical omniscience is the first casualty in an age of distributive abundance, and this problem is rendered even more visible in work which approaches horror as a transnational genre (thus rejecting the usual myopic conflation of 'horror' with US or Anglo-American horror). Where do the boundaries of a genre begin and end when potentially thousands of films are produced each year, across several continents and in dozens of languages?

This is a question that genre theory needs to address if it is to remain relevant. One response may be to move beyond thinking about horror as some kind of coherent generic formation and to look instead at the many ways in which it is materially assembled and constructed (Jancovich 2007). If, as Jancovich suggests, the current political economy of scholarly publishing gives rise to genre studies which treat horror as a bounded and stable category to which the analyst has total access, then the current distribution landscape, increasingly vast and fragmented, throws this analytical optic into further doubt.

Distribution as textuality

The textual content of the horror genre has always reflected the demands and affective specificities of its distribution and exhibition contexts. In the late 1960s and 1970s, independent filmmakers produced low-budget exploitation flicks for drive-in circuits – such as Roger Corman's *Queen of Blood* (1966) and *Piranha* (1978) – targeting youth audiences with gore and gratuitous violence. On the other hand, 'Hollywood horrors' like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Jaws* (1975) and *The Exorcist* (1973) targeted much broader audiences and were characterized by far superior production values, 'star name' actors and less schlocky subject matter. So, while there is nothing particularly new about this feedback loop between production and distribution, we want to stress that the

current distribution landscape is shaping contemporary horror production in specific and historically unprecedented ways. Having provided some theoretical propositions for a distribution-centred mode of genre analysis in the previous section, we now offer a survey of work examining selected examples of textual modifications and reframings at the point of distribution.

Kapsis' study of 1980s horror is instructive here. As he explains, during a climate of strong market demand for horror movies between the late 1970s and early 1980s (following the success of *Halloween* in 1978), titles that may have naturally fallen under the rubric of 'the thriller', and even genres far removed from horror, were shaped by producers/distributors to appeal to worldwide horror markets. An example is *Fear No Evil* (1981). The film was originally conceived as a 'love story but ended up . . . a horror movie' as producers were influenced by horror's market potential, and the ability to raise investment for a fright flick with relative ease. Following the movie's production, distributor Avco Embassy required director Frank La Loggia to shoot additional footage of

school kids at school because they believed they could sell the film from the exploitative angle of kids in danger. Yet the film's story line had really little to do with kids in jeopardy . . . According to La Loggia, in the film's original form, the high school environment was not central to the story. 'We included that environment because the horror films that were making it theatrically seemed to revolve around high school kids [. . .]' (Kapsis 2009, 8–9)

On the other hand, as market demand for scary movies dwindled by the mid-1980s, Hollywood studios and major distributors stopped producing new horror titles, while independents toned down subject matter and opted for labels such as 'supernatural' or 'suspense-thriller' to promote their films in an attempt to reflect market sentiment (9–13). Here we have an example of the industrial construction of genre at the point of distribution, feeding back into production and textual form.

Further evidence of the market's ability to shape genre in its own image can be found at the other end of the spectrum, within Hollywood blockbuster genres. In recent years there has been a discernible contraction in the range of movie genres studio executives are willing to green-light for production. Central to a 'blockbuster mentality' is the production of movies with the greatest potential for profit maximization, risk minimization, and broad appeal across gender, demographics and cultures. To achieve this, according to De Propris and Hypponen (2008, 275–7), blockbusters are increasingly the products of 'recycled creativity' rather than original ideas. Most typically, a blockbuster originates from the sequelization or remake of highly profitable and well-established franchises, or the adaptation of 'best-seller' cultural products (i.e. books, comics, computer games and so on) such as *Superman* (2006), *Spiderman* (2002, 2004, 2007), *Sin City* (2005), *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003) and *Twilight* (2008, 2009, 2010). Moreover, blockbuster movie genres have recently been characterized by 'two "meta-categories" – comedies and action movies' (277). For De Propris and Hypponen (2008), the rationale is to 'reduce diversity and

variety, and to some extent to avoid audiences spreading themselves too thinly across too many film types' (277). The action film is a prime example. Hollywood action movies of the 1980s revolved around central male characters, action sequences and largely targeted male audiences. Conversely, action films from the 1990s onwards include comedy, subplots involving romance and central female characters to appeal to much broader audiences.

Returning to horror, we note that comparable processes of market-driven textual customization are in play at the bottom end of the spectrum: low-budget independent horror. A recent spate of Australian horror films which have found a modest degree of success in nontheatrical markets overseas illustrates this point. While contemporary Australian horror is best known for mainstream and cult success stories – *Daybreakers* (2010), *Wolf Creek* (2005) and *Undead* (2003) – and perhaps for an earlier wave of Antony I. Ginnane productions – *Patrick* (1978), *Thirst* (1979), *Harlequin* (1980), the latter released overseas as *Dark Forces* – a whole sub-economy of guerilla horror movie production now flies beneath the radar of industry literature, scholarship and policy (Ryan 2008). Most of these low-budget Australian horrors are negative pick-ups. They must therefore cater to distributors' preferences from their inception if they hope to be seen by an international audience, which usually means ramping up the exploitation and gore. As Melbourne-based filmmaker Matthew Scott, the director of indie horrors *In Blood* (2002) and *The Subject* (2006), comments, 'distributors need something they can sell, and sex and violence sells' (Scott 2007). From a niche distributor's perspective, products must differentiate themselves from mainstream titles to capture audiences. As Darrin Ramage, president of the US schlock horror production and distribution studio Brain Damage Films, suggests, horror fans are hooked by 'B and B: blood and boobs. To fill the appetite of the horror fan, you need a whole lot more than what Hollywood can deliver' (Ramage, quoted in Lawless 2007). As this quote suggests, many emerging horror directors are internalizing distributor preferences even in the most undercapitalized sectors of the horror economy.

The complexities of the horror market also result in interesting configurations of national identity and national branding within these films. Australia is increasingly recognized among international horror fans as a source of distinctive cult titles, and many low-budget films actively play to this fact by emphasizing national idiosyncrasies at the level of plot, characterization and *mise-en-scène*. In the slasher film *Wolf Creek*, the otherness of the Australian landscape is stressed by the dramatic cinematography, becoming an effective means of product differentiation in a crowded marketplace. *Undead*, a typical zombie film, is full of recognizably Australian character types – laconic country folk, larrikins, 'yobbos'. *Schooner of Blood* (2009) explores Australian drinking culture as an allegorical backdrop for abject violence.⁷ Yet Australian horror films like *Safety in Numbers* (2005), *Cubbyhouse* (2001) and the UK–Australian co-production *Voodoo Lagoon* (2006), which all downplay their cultural specificity, have been less successful.

These examples suggest that the success of the Australian horror 'brand' in long-tail markets allows national specificity to operate as a marker of difference. This tendency seems to contradict frequently cited theories of cultural economics, such as the 'cultural discount' model which insists that texts 'rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere' (Hoskins and Mirus 1988, 500). The flourishing of distinctively local content is one unlikely by-product of an increasingly globalized and digitized distribution landscape which affords Australian producers easier access to international long-tail markets. The questions raised by these new configurations of globalized localism in long-tail markets should constitute interesting food for thought for film policymakers charged with supporting national identity formation and the dissemination of national narratives (see Ryan 2009).

This brings us to the question of international distributor–audience relations and the capacity of marketing to re-engineer genre in its own image. As the work of Hawkins (2002) and Guins (2005) illustrates, the horror genre is especially vulnerable to textual reconfiguration at the point of cross-border distribution. Guins' essay on the nontheatrical circulation of *giallo* films (via VHS and DVD) tracks the active construction of marketable difference in their US circulation. As he notes, 'distinct ways of knowing Italian horror' (Guins 2005, 17) are produced at the point of distribution: in the numerous textual modifications (dubbing, retitling, re-editing) which facilitated the de-contextualization and subsequent re-contextualization of the *giallo*, but also in the materiality of the medium of the video-cassette (which, it is argued, encouraged the reconfiguration of Italian horror as 'gore-object') and, in a different way, the DVD (which has fostered new modes of cult-connoisseurship: Italian horror as 'art-object'). Notwithstanding the fact that many *gialli* were international co-productions to begin with, their putative Italianness is in great flux as the films move through distribution networks.

In the 2000s it is arguably Asian horror which has captured the imagination of Western markets, in the wake of breakthrough titles like Japan's *Ringu* (*The Ring*, 1998) and *Ju-On* (*The Grudge*, 2000–2003), and *The Eye* (2002) by Hong Kong/Thailand-based brothers Danny and Oxide Pang. Distributors such as the British company Tartan have expertly marketed Asian horror acquisitions by setting up specialty labels (Tartan Asia Extreme) to tap into long-tail horror buff markets while also catering to traditional arthouse markets (Dew 2007). In Australia, the DVD distributor Madman has adopted a similar approach, releasing its East Asian horror titles under the Eastern Eye imprint. As Dew's analysis of the UK market for Japanese films suggests, most Japanese films released theatrically in the UK are extreme genre titles. As a result, consumers are presented with a very selective image of what Japanese cinema is (extreme horror and action being only a small proportion of Japan's national cinema output). Is it any wonder then that fanboy publications like *Asia Shock: Horror and Dark Cinema from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand* can claim, with no

apparent irony, that 'if *Se7en* had been made in Japan, Korea, or China, you'd have seen Gwyneth Paltrow's head in that box' (Galloway 2006, 14)? Our point here is that common misunderstandings of the generic diversity of East Asian cinemas are by-products of distributors' selective acquisition and releasing strategies. What distributors choose to release has implications for how Western audiences interpret and understand Asian cinemas and, by extension, Asian cultures.

As we move further down the industrial hierarchy towards cult and micro-distributors, we find other kinds of distributor-driven attempts to reframe and re-canonicalize international horror. For example, the Chicago-based DVD distributor Panik House frequently releases box-sets such as 'Asian Horror Two-for-One: The Pang Brothers Collection', featuring the low-budget Thai horror films *Bangkok Haunted* (2001) and *Omen* (2003). As is common with long-tail DVD distributors, the marketing is wilfully misleading (neither film is really a Pang Brothers feature), but it represents an example of how distributors are able to link back-catalogue acquisitions to popular cycles, rewriting genre history in the process. The multi-DVD box-sets released by low-budget cult/discount distributors such as Mill Creek Entertainment and Payless Entertainment are also worth considering here. Mill Creek's 10-DVD, 50-DVD and 100-DVD horror box-sets, consisting largely of public-domain material that has fallen out of copyright, offer a fascinating example of generic reauthoring at the point of distribution. Proudly marketed with the taglines of Vincent Price, Jack Palance and Bela Lugosi (although these star-name actors appear only fleetingly in the films), the multi-packs assemble an eccentric range of generic material under the banner of horror. In the *Gore and More* 10-DVD pack, Abel Ferrara's *Driller Killer* (1979) appears alongside Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* (1988) and *The Werewolf vs Vampire Women* (1971). As with the examples cited by Kapsis, these low-end DVD box-sets re-engineer genre for their own purposes, although the feedback loop in this case does not extend right through to production. Rather, genre is constructed at the point of distribution and retailing, from seemingly incompatible ingredients. The way genre is (ab)used here is at odds with an interpretive paradigm that seeks to trace a lineage of 'great moments' or canonical texts: rather, genre emerges as a raw material to be fashioned according to distributor preference, in the name of high-volume, low-cost sales to cult audiences and discount-store shoppers.⁸

A final instance of generic re-engineering at the point of distribution is offered by Indonesian film critic Ekky Imanjaya (2009), whose research into the contemporary circulation of Suharto-era exploitation cinema provides fascinating insights into distributors' capacity to construct meaning and markets alike. As Imanjaya (2009) notes, supernatural horror and exploitation films such as *The Queen of Black Magic* (1981), *Lady Terminator* (1988), *Virgins from Hell* (1986) and *Mystic in Bali* (1980) have long been considered rather embarrassing to Indonesian audiences. However, many of these films are getting a new lease of life in Indonesia and elsewhere, thanks to cult DVD labels like Mondo Macabro,

Troma and Brisbane's Trash Video. These micro-distributors value Indonesian horror for its 'exotic, extreme or unusual content', in the words of Mondo Macabro's Pete Tombs (cited in Imanjaya 2009, 144). As Trash Video founder Andrew Leavold notes, Indonesian genre cinema 'is an area not covered in detail outside of Mondo Macabro and specialist chat groups, and therefore I needed to create a demand for the films rather than tap into an existing market' (146) – a revealing comment which attests to the productivity of distribution, its capacity not merely to circulate content but to create demand and desire that did not previously exist. However, the English-subbed versions released by these cult distributors frequently downplay or cut culturally specific references embedded in the films, including references to Islam.⁹ Furthermore, Imanjaya notes that in Indonesia, Suharto-era exploitation films are also being rediscovered in an affectionate ironic mode by middle-class Indonesian audiences, a development which is linked to their valorization in Western fanboy circles. What we have here is a kind of long-distance textual reconfiguration, and an alternative logic to that at work in the case of Australian horror. International distribution of developing-world horror thus involves all the typical textual reframings involved in cross-border marketing (retitling, selective dubbing, removal of culturally specific content), but it contributes to the emergence of new local fandoms at the same time.

These various examples illustrate the mutability of genre at the point of distribution and its reconstruction across diverse audience formations. Taking a transnational perspective on these dynamics adds a new dimension to existing debates within genre studies, which have focused largely on national reception contexts (see for example Barbara Klinger's work on local genres [1992]). There is little doubt that the production, distribution and reception of horror cinema is increasingly internationalized, and this is equally true at the bottom end of the horror economy where long-tail straight-to-DVD, download services and free video-hosting sites like YouTube are making more content available to international cult audiences than ever before. However, the way this plays out in practice is unpredictable. In some cases, as with the Australian horror films discussed above, internationalization leads to new configurations of localism packaged for international audiences – horror films set in Aussie pubs, cricket-themed films, etc. Elsewhere, as in the circulation of Indonesian exploitation films, certain forms of cultural specificity are downplayed at the same time as a more general otherness (the spectacle of Asian trash cinema) is explicitly valorized.

Conclusion

As the preceding discussion illustrates, foregrounding the role of distribution within genre production generates a rather different model of how screen cultures and industries operate. In contrast to the conventional structural typology *production* → *distribution* → *reception*, a series of feedback loops originating

in distribution and feeding back into production also become visible (Cubitt 2005). Such an approach advances thinking beyond a preoccupation with texts as self-contained outputs towards a better understanding of how a movie's generic identity in relation to its distribution trajectory (actual or desired) influences its content.

At its core, this approach seeks to better understand genre's construction through the industrial dynamics of filmmaking, rather than to disavow it. Producers package movies in various ways, from attaching marquee directors and actors to making generic decisions based on market speculation ('demand for action is weak; demand for horror is strong'), in an attempt to secure wide distribution guarantees, maximize presales and in some cases earn percentages of net royalties. Most importantly, filmmakers package movies within the constraints of budget limitations which in turn influence genre production (although talented filmmakers can work around these limitations to some extent). With limited production budgets, and less rigid – yet still specific – distributor expectations, underground filmmakers often 'fly by the seat of their pants', and tend to fall into the realm of exploitation. Analysis of this dynamic can help to explain the enduring success of exploitation cinemas as a persistent sub-stratum of global cinematic production.

Approaching generic evolution in this way – through the lens of industrial strategy as well as intertextual influence – is important for a more comprehensive understanding of the economic shaping of genre in today's marketplace. It needs to be stressed, however, that the industrial analysis we propose here is not economically determinist. The dynamics mapped in this paper are filters and feedback loops shaping the textual form of movies – but their effect is always uneven, and it is usually unpredictable. The industrial construction of genre clearly takes place alongside, and in dialogue with, intertextual relations.

One possible payoff of an industrial approach to genre would be to increase the number and variety of potential interfaces between film studies and film policy. Policy – understood as mechanisms for the formal and informal governance of culture – tends to figure in cinema studies research as contextual grist for a textual-analytic mill. However, it can also be an important site of intervention. The issue of distribution is again crucial here. Film subvention policies typically focus on production at the expense of distribution, even though the strongest movie will fail at the box office without an equally strong marketing campaign and backing from a capitalized distributor. Film studies through the lens of distribution may change how we understand value within the film industry with implications for how subvention models are conceptualized. It enables us to integrate film studies into a more nuanced mode of analysis which transcends conventional sectoral typologies (production *or* distribution *or* exhibition) in favour of an expanded approach (distribution *as* production, distribution *as* textuality). In this way, such an approach may help to guarantee the ongoing relevance of film studies as a discipline and provide a new set of uses for the formidable arsenal of textual theory which it has at its disposal.

Notes

1. In his book *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, Heffernan places special emphasis on the ‘sometimes confrontational relationship between the exhibition and distribution branches of the industry, for it is this relationship that drove the production end of the industry toward the development of the low-budget genre films [of the 1953–68 period]’ (2004, 8).
2. For influential work on horror from a reflectionist perspective, see Wood 1986 and Clover 1992.
3. Note that Kapsis’ arguments are acknowledged and discussed in Neale 2000.
4. At this point, distribution as a professional sector bleeds into other forms of user-driven circulation which must also be taken into account, especially in a digital context – see, for example, Hilderbrand 2009; Lobato 2009.
5. The data used by Elberse and Oberholzer-Gee is based on a five-year sample from Nielsen Videoscanner, the leading monitoring service for the US video sell-through market. The sample size was 5455 titles. Figures for original release windows were as follows: direct-to-video 59%, theatrical 26%, television 25%. Note that around 15% of titles were released in multiple windows simultaneously (day-and-date releases in all windows, simultaneous cable and video releases, and so forth), which is why the sum of these figures exceeds 100%.
6. Critique of the direct reflectionist model is built into other theoretical approaches to horror – for example, the psychoanalytic model (Creed 1993) – but reflectionism is still a durable feature of contemporary horror scholarship, as a quick scan through any of the numerous anthologies and edited collections on horror will demonstrate.
7. The film was released in the UK as *Slaughtered*, because it was felt that international audiences may confuse a ‘schooner’, referring domestically to a glass of beer, with a boat.
8. Many thanks to Alexandra Heller-Nicholas for advice on this point.
9. ‘In the trailer of *The Warrior* [*Jaka Sembung Sang Penakluk*, 1981] the spiritual Islamic elements are erased. For example, while the father tries to calm Surti down, he says, “I think you underestimate Jaka Sem-bung, Surti.” However in the original version the father says, “please *tawa-kal*, put trust in God, Surti”” (Imanjaya 2009, 151).

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