What's the Deal with Soundtrack Albums?: Metal Music and the Customized Aesthetics of Contemporary Horror

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What’s the Deal with Soundtrack Albums? Metal Music and the Customized Aesthetics of Contemporary Horror

by JOSEPH TOMPKINS

Abstract: This essay argues that film music functions not only as a cross-promotional medium for marketing movies and licensed recordings, but also as a key site for effectively managing and containing processes of consumption. Heavy metal music is deployed in horror films like Freddy vs. Jason (Ronny Yu, 2003) to interpellate particular niche audiences and taste communities. Thus, soundtrack albums reveal a fundamental assumption within media firms that a manageable relationship between niche formats and consumer tastes exists to be exploited.

In minutes into the 2003 crossover horror film, Freddy vs. Jason (Ronny Yu), the audience is treated to a brief moment of “bite size theory.” Wasting no time in serving up the slaughter, we watch (and hear) as Jason stalks, corners, and impales with his trusty machete yet another unsuspecting, lustful teen—a hapless young girl who just wanted to take a midnight swim in the nude. However, before we resign ourselves to business as usual—Jason’s back again to hunt down pesky adolescents who really ought to know by now that the woods are not a safe place to be at night (didn’t the poor girl hear the menacing string harmonics and Jason’s signature heavy breathing?)—something uncanny happens: the victim comes back to life. Skewered to a tree, the undead girl rehearses a litany of slasher horror film no-nos: “I should have been watching the children; not drinking; not meeting a boy at the lake.” The self-reproach continues as one victim morphs into another: “I deserve to be punished; we all deserve to be punished.” Next, Jason’s mother appears to reassure her son (and the audience) of his trademark

1 I’m borrowing the phrase “bite size theory” from Michael Bérubé; see his essay, “Bite Size Theory: Popularizing Academic Criticism,” Social Text 36 (Autumn, 1993): 84–97. The author wishes to thank Richard Leppert, Mary Douglas Vavrus, Doyle Greene, and Julie Wilson for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this article. He also thanks the editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and suggestions.

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“gift” of imperishability—“no matter what they do to you, you cannot die”—before sending him on his way to Elm Street, where there’s more carnage—and to be sure, more profits—to be had.

In case we needed catching up, this sequence does it for us by way of a savvy plot contrivance that intermixes pop culture with pop theory. Borrowing a *Cliffs Notes* page from Robin Wood, the film crudely rehearses Freudian theories of the slasher killer as superego incarnate in order to reflexively comment on itself, its two ghastly protagonists, and their (rightful) place in the sordid pantheon of horror film baddies. With not a little irony, the film stakes a claim for a Freddy and Jason revival, knowing full well that the audience is in on the game. In fact, one might even say the producers are banking on it.

But something else is going on here as well. Before Jason makes his way to Elm Street to duke it out with Freddy on his home turf, the title credits hack their way through a flesh-colored backdrop (Figure 1). As the title appears, soaked in blood, the dripping noises that hint at the splatter and gore about to ensue give way to the aggressive nu metal riffs of Spineshank’s “Beginning of the End.” The music lasts but a few seconds, just long enough to aurally register the intertextual linkages: metal and horror seem to be a match made in hell (or the executive boardroom). The music cues us to hear the coming together of these two horror franchise heavyweights in a particular way, not only endowing the title sequence with a particular mood or atmosphere, but also lending New Line Cinema’s twin holdings a fresh brand identity.

Put differently, aside from its formal and narrative functions of highlighting the title letters and easing the visual transition from one shot to the next, the soundtrack also works to manage our experience of Freddy and Jason more generally, aurally tagging these two franchises to fit a certain market niche. So, while we enjoy another slice ’em and dice ’em episode in the Freddy and Jason chronicles, we’re encouraged to associate the metal music we hear with the spectacular viewing pleasures of horror; at the same time, the soundtrack becomes the locus for an effective practice of content management, where film and music industries are able to swap their respective properties in order to repurpose extant material and diversify potential markets.
On the whole, the customized *Freddy vs. Jason* metal-infused soundtrack, which intersperses instrumental cues with bits of prerecorded metal music, resonates nicely with the opening tongue-in-cheek sequence. Both amount to shrewd textual devices aimed at a particular taste culture. Whereas the title music forgoes the traditional, somber orchestral score in favor of a rompish, generic metal tune, the opening scene heralds what will be a thoroughly postmodern filmic experience, replete with intertextual slasher film references and astute self-reflexive gestures that reward audience members according to varying levels of pop culture literacy. In short, this is a studio film that knows, in terms of the market, where its bread is buttered.2

Taking a step back to examine recent developments affecting the film and music industries, we might understand the *Freddy vs. Jason* soundtrack as part of a more general corporate strategy that seeks to rationalize consumption in order to mitigate market uncertainty. This practice is not new; film music has long served as a central cross-promotional medium for marketing both movies and motion picture soundtracks.3 However, the current industrial context of conglomeration and concentration significantly extends film music’s promotional reach and commercial functions. In addition to selling soundtrack CDs, film music functions as a site for launching new artists, providing a renewed platform for singles or “leftover” tracks, and, most importantly, organizing consumption patterns by positioning media products according to the imagined tastes, preferences, and habits of idealized target demographics. Therefore, in order to better understand what, exactly, is the deal with the sort of film music deployed in horror films like *Freddy vs. Jason*, one needs to examine the “critical industrial practices” that impinge upon cultural—which is to say, textual—production.4

As John Caldwell notes, ongoing structural changes—conglomerate, increasing market segmentation, the introduction of new technologies, and the rise of online media—have fundamentally transformed the cultural and economic function of media texts. In particular, what Caldwell terms “critical textual practices” are one way for culture industry managers and professionals to further consolidate their political and economic power by actively intervening in discussions regarding “the formation of culture and the significance of media in that formation.”5 For Caldwell, “critical textual practices” describe the way “ancillary” media texts—like the soundtrack album—have become an integral site where the industry is able to “comment on itself,”


5 Ibid., 102.
or “theorize” its role amid the backdrop of budding cultural forms and new technologies. The goal of such critical industrial practice is to allay crisis by controlling and organizing knowledge about these changes, effectively “teaching the audience” the appropriate way to “read” and consume particular cultural products through textual practices of branding, repurposing, and recirculating specific media content across myriad platforms. Thus, erstwhile “secondary” and “tertiary” texts become a primary means by which the industry might possibly diminish the commercial pressures and inherent risks of a rapidly changing media landscape. Consequently, promotional and marketing activities merge with the aesthetic features of various film and music texts where they become a driving force behind textual innovation. In the case of soundtrack albums, the incorporation and distribution of popular music like heavy metal in contemporary horror films fits comfortably with a prevailing industry logic that seeks to manage an increasingly diversified field of niche media markets through the organization and distribution of various modalities of consumption.

Examining the industrial practices that condition contemporary soundtrack albums, this essay argues that film music functions not only as a cross-promotional medium for marketing movies and licensed recordings, but also as a key site for effectively managing and containing processes of consumption. Focusing specifically on the ways metal music is deployed in horror films like *Freddy vs. Jason* to interpellate particular niche audiences and taste communities, I argue that, more generally, soundtrack albums reveal a fundamental assumption within media firms that a manageable relationship between niche formats and consumer tastes exists to be exploited. Accordingly, consumer activities become an integral component of the production and distribution of film and music texts. In terms of the soundtrack album, film and music industries increasingly “put to work” the reading practices and affective investments of their respective audiences by assimilating consumption habits as a fundamental component of textual practice, thereby obscuring the distinction between consumer activities and the production of so-called “branded” entertainment.

**Horror Soundtracks and Synergy Culture.** Horror films have long been a profitable mainstay for film studios. Beginning as early as the silent period and crystallizing in the 1930s when they served as the bedrock for Universal Studios’ continued success, horror movies have demonstrated a resiliency unmatched by any other film genre, often guaranteeing a steady stream of revenue that is easily compounded in ancillary markets and capable of granting film companies the financial leeway to pursue more risky endeavors, like blockbuster productions.

Today this formula rings truer than ever: over the last three years, as many as seventy-five horror movies have been released theatrically. Of those, seventeen have

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6 Ibid., 102–103.
debuted at number one, including Saw III (Darren Lynn Bousman), which cost an estimated 12 million dollars and garnered more than 33 million solely from its U.S. theatrical release. Meanwhile, the horror DVD market flourishes with straight-to-video releases, along with remade and/or repackaged franchises like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974; Marcus Nispel, 2003), The Hills Have Eyes (Wes Craven, 1977; Alexandre Aja, 2006), Dawn of the Dead (George Romero, 1978; Zack Snyder, 2004), Halloween (John Carpenter, 1978; Rob Zombie, 2007), and of course, A Nightmare on Elm Street (Wes Craven, 1984; Samuel Bayer, 2010) and Friday the 13th (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980; Marcus Nispel, 2009). In fact, horror film DVD sales have tripled in the past five years, establishing the video market as a primary site for horror-heavy distributors like New Line Cinema (Time Warner) and Lions Gate Entertainment.9 The proliferation of commercial outlets like DVD, cable, and, most recently, direct-to-download digital platforms for computers and cell phones, has not only made it easier to recover production and distribution costs, it has also provided parent companies an array of internal revenue sources that allow for the recirculation of the same film, or film franchise, across multiple sectors.10

Of course, record labels are eager to tap the profit potential of horror’s well-established niche market by teaming up with film studios to release compilation soundtrack albums deemed appropriate for horror’s primary audience, typically conceived in terms of the suburban teenage-adolescent male demographic.11 Overwhelmingly, the kind of music that shows up on these albums—and by extension the kind of music imagined to connect with horror film audiences—is heavy metal, or to be more exact, the subgenre “nu metal”12 that emerged during the mid-1990s. In an effort to maintain a clear focus, these soundtrack albums harvest songs from established metal performers, providing record companies the opportunity to parade “leftover” tracks—i.e., preexisting music lifted from earlier recordings that either failed to make it out of the studio or failed to receive an independent release as a single. The movie and music industry engineers behind these soundtrack albums repeatedly exploit a presumed linkage between heavy metal listeners and horror film’s majority audience, which becomes the focus of a customized marketing strategy aimed at amortizing production costs while diversifying markets for a relatively small medley of media products. For example, a piece of promotional film music may appear across a number of diverse

10 In October of 2006, for example, Comcast Corporation teamed up with Sony MGM and Lions Gate Studios to launch FEARnet, a multiplatform network providing broadband/video-on-demand feature films from the Sony MGM and Lions Gate Studios’ extensive horror film catalogues. See Anthony Crupi, “The Horror! Comcast Unveils FEARnet .com,” Media Week, October 30, 2006, 6.
12 Nu metal (or “fusio metal”) is a hybrid genre that combines elements of thrash, grunge, rap, and funk. At variance with traditional heavy metal, nu metal relies to a greater extent on rhythm and sound texture over melody and virtuosity, so that, for example, drop-tuned guitars are used to create fuller, “heavier” sounds and percussive rhythms. The first wave of nu metal includes bands like Rage Against the Machine, Korn, Helmet, Coal Chamber, and Deftones.
media outlets, including soundtrack albums, online forums, radio, cable and satellite television, music videos, music charts, advertisements, and entertainment reviews.

Over roughly the last decade, twenty-five horror metal soundtrack albums have been released; of those, the majority can be traced back to one of four major record labels: Warner Music Group, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and EMI. Most notable is Warner Music Group, which leads the list with eight properties, including soundtracks for *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994), *Scream 3* (Wes Craven, 2000), *Valentine* (Jamie Blanks, 2001), *Queen of the Damned* (Michael Rymer, 2002), *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003), *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004), and *House of Wax* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2005). Furthermore, several of the artists who repeatedly appear on these soundtrack albums maintain direct links to recording labels affiliated with Warner Music Group. The resulting chain of value engendered by these and other film-music exchanges extends beyond the purview of the major recording labels to include a select group of film production and distribution companies as well as a small handful of media conglomerates.

At a glance, then, it would appear that a new movie-music monster has arisen with horror metal compilations. Yet it remains unclear whether this monster is merely a corporate creation—the product of conniving film and music industry Dr. Frankensteins—or the inevitable offspring of some deeper subcultural affinity that’s been lurking in the shadows, waiting for just the right moment to emerge into the cinesonic daylight. To answer this question, it is important to begin by noting that the move to further incorporate metal music in horror films is a fairly recent development.

What is more, this move parallels a related series of ongoing alterations that have been taking place in the soundtrack industry for the past decade and a half. For example, ten years ago when Celine Dion’s recording of the blockbuster ballad “My Heart Will Go On” was making waves in the film and music industries, the market for soundtrack albums was reaching a crest. Culminating with the substantial market success of Sony Classical’s soundtrack to the motion picture *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), the 1990s proved, overall, to be an important decade in soundtrack album sales. In response, major and independent labels have gone to remarkable lengths to establish their own soundtrack departments. However, whereas these departments

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13 For a list of horror metal soundtrack albums and their corporate ties see Appendix.
14 These artists include: Coal Chamber, Devil Driver, Fear Factory, Hatebreed, Ill Nino, Killswitch Engage, Machine Head, Slipknot, and Stone Sour (Roadrunner Records); Static-X and Linkin Park (Warner Bros. Records); Disturbed (Reprise Records); and Deftones (Maverick Records).
15 As Randall D. Larson demonstrates, the use of popular music in horror films is overshadowed by an extended history of original scoring practices and the use of stock music. A lightning history of horror film music would include: romantic-symphonic-style underscoring and the use of leitmotiv (predominant in the 1930s and ’40s); avant-garde modern music techniques and experimentation in orchestration and harmonic dissonances (beginning in the 1940s); greater experimentation with unconventional orchestral textures—e.g., string harmonics, brass “stingers” and “crash chords”—and “atonal” scores (1950s); the introduction of pop and folk idioms (1960s and ’70s, beginning with Hammer studios in Britain); and the introduction of electronic instruments and synthesized scores (1970s and ’80s). See Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1985).
16 From 1996 to 1999, an average of twenty-five to thirty soundtrack albums were certified gold or better each year by the Recording Industry Association of America. See Tamara Coniff and Carla Hay, “Labels, Studios Rethink Soundtrack Strategy,” *Billboard*, October 12, 2002, 1.
had, for a brief period, been exclusively geared toward manufacturing hit title songs in the same vein as Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” the “big movie song” approach to pop film scores no longer prevails. Instead, industry managers have shifted gears to refocus their energies on the compilation soundtrack, sidelining the “red-hot anthem” in favor of a more subtle “high-concept” approach to film music. Downplaying the significance of original scores and title songs, movie producers, directors, and music supervisors increasingly look to produce thematically charged compilations of preexisting, prerecorded musical material that will, in turn, become inextricably linked to the experience of viewing a particular film. The promotional benefits of this kind of movie music swing both ways. On the one hand, through the careful selection and arrangement of musical material, film studios are able to import the cultural value associated with a piece of preexisting music in order to create a recognizable “personality” for their product(s). On the other hand, precise cues aimed at establishing intimate connections between the music heard and the overall experience of watching a film afford record labels the capacity to repurpose various musical artists in cinematic terms. Thus, a winning approach to compilation soundtracks involves foregrounding the music to create a memorable, affective link between the identity of a movie and a particular song, the latter serving as a “musical souvenir of a visual pleasure that the consumer wants to cherish.”

Yet, the purpose of these “musical souvenirs” is not necessarily record sales. As Lyor Cohen, chairman and CEO of Warner Music Group, asserts: “We don’t really get into the soundtrack business to primarily sell records; we do it to realign an artist, to bridge albums, to introduce new artists, and to go into the third or fourth single of an album.” In other words, industry executives look to soundtrack albums as a way to deepen the cultural purchase of a particular piece of music by injecting it with a cinematic booster shot. Establishing intertextual links vis-à-vis movie music, film and music companies seek to amass cultural currency for their products by trading and circulating properties across media channels. In this way, soundtrack albums accrue their economic and cultural value.

More generally, as the driving force behind market domination increasingly relies upon these kinds of synergistic practices, the soundtrack album becomes a locus for media firms to further integrate their holdings. As Eileen Meehan has argued, synergy, or “transindustrialism,” no longer functions as a mere distribution strategy but is now the dominant logic of media production. Hence, firms look to assemble

19 For example, the closing credits to Freddy vs. Jason feature the soundtrack album’s only single, “How Can I Live”—written and performed by the nu metal band Ill Niño and the lead title on the band’s 2003 album Confession. Despite the band’s prior history on the metal scene, “How Can I Live” was their first track to appear on the mainstream Billboard rock music charts.
texts that will be able to migrate more easily from one media platform to the next. These traveling texts afford media companies the opportunity to coordinate their activities across multiple sectors of the industry, and thereby neutralize competition and shore up ownership. At the same time, shuffling a handful of properties across a diversified network of media channels allows firms the capacity to mix and match markets. In this context, soundtrack albums take on a renewed significance because of the way they facilitate the continuous recirculation, repackaging, and reversioning of a select few media products. As a locus for orchestrating and harmonizing a cacophony of properties, markets, and industries, soundtrack albums are designed to feed a number of operations in order to direct audiences across a number of media formats. Their primary function is thus to regulate and contain a dynamic field of media outlets and consumption practices. For this reason, soundtrack albums work to cross-promote media audiences at the same time they cross-promote and sell media content.

The Niche Sounds of Horror Metal. Whereas the compilation soundtrack emerged as a way for studios and record labels to maximize potential audiences through mass pop appeal, contemporary soundtrack albums are forced to negotiate an increasingly diversified number of consumer-audience segments that don’t necessarily correspond to the majority demographic categories of yesteryear. With the intention of carving out a “niche” wherein audiences might come to self-identify, music supervisors work closely with representatives at both ends of the film-music spectrum, arranging music for a particular soundtrack album with the explicit aim of both attracting distinct audience segments while purposefully and unreservedly alienating others. As Jeff Smith points out, to a considerable extent, supervisors rely on genre categories as a way of organizing the right movie-music combination. Consolidating soundtrack albums in terms of particular music genres, for example, music supervisors aim to direct listeners in and through Hollywood’s seemingly infinite stream of box-office, DVD, and straight-to-video releases. The assumption is that familiarity with music genre distinctions will provide audiences the navigational wherewithal to “discover” films that might otherwise escape their attention. Balancing the demands of niche marketing with the need to produce a coherent, enjoyable filmic experience, industry executives aim to solicit a coveted audience through deliberate audiovisual strategies,


23 As Jeff Smith points out, the roots of the compilation score extend back to the rock teenpics of the mid-1950s, such as Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brooks, 1955) and Rock Around the Clock (Fred Sears, 1956); however, the tendency to incorporate preexisting, prerecorded popular music in film as part of a cost-effective, cross-promotional corporate strategy did not take firm hold until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Following the success of films like Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), Shaft (Gordon Parks, 1971), American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973), and Mean Streets (Martin Scorsese, 1973), studio and record label executives became convinced that pop-infused compilation scores, which relied on very little (and, in a few cases, no) original music, could serve as the fulcrum of a synergistic strategy aimed at increasing ancillary revenue streams. See Smith, Sounds of Commerce, 156–172. Today’s compilations aim to piece together a more focused arrangement of musical materials that might cater to smaller, more precisely defined market segments.

24 See Smith, “Taking the Music Supervisor Seriously.”

25 Ibid., 136–137.
thereby demonstrating textual compatibility with perceived tastes, attitudes, and consumption habits.  

If we return to *Freddy vs. Jason*, we are presented with a paradigmatic case of niche movie music. Here a particular genre of music—nu metal—is repeatedly deployed to summon a desired target audience. For example, in addition to the nondiegetic music heard during the title sequence, nu metal cues are sprinkled throughout the film in the form of source music. In this capacity, the music serves a number of narrative functions, like staging the mood during a party scene or representing the emotional state of a character in distress. Yet the most notable metal cues arise during the film’s key action sequences. During the climactic showdown between the two lead contenders, the action is overscored by a series of generic nu metal–esque riffs that hearken back to the Spineshank song heard at the beginning of the film. Recalling the title music in this way, these cues do more than merely set the mood for the much-anticipated brawl; they also work to qualitatively shore up consumer attachments and fan appeal. Similar to the way the opening metal cue served to charge the blood-splattered *Freddy vs. Jason* logo with an enthusiastic flavor, the metal music heard during the Freddy and Jason fight sequence builds off the anticipation established therein. The cultivated affect is one of ready eagerness. In case there was any doubt, the music functions to assure horror connoisseurs that “indeed, this is the moment you’ve been waiting for.” Going beyond mere background filler, the music confirms what the film’s title promises: the chance to witness first hand “the ultimate battle of evil vs. evil.” And just as there will be plenty of butchery to go around, so audiences are not the only ones cashing in on this epic movie monster clash.

Somewhere wrapped up in this reassuring wink and nod to the audience is the ultimate horror metal money shot—the audio-visual confirmation that these two sordid discourses belong together, and that they do in fact share a similar “personality.” In this way, *Freddy vs. Jason* makes possible an affective movie music configuration that increases in strict proportion to the appropriate audience blend of pop-cultural capital. This is why nu metal is arranged throughout *Freddy vs. Jason* according to the principle of noticeability. The music is strategically placed during those moments in the film, like the beginning and end title sequences, as well as spectacular action scenes such as the final battle between Freddy and Jason, which effectively sideline the narrative. Accordingly, the music is given free rein to enter the audiovisual foreground. This not

26 In keeping with the industry line, *Billboard* magazine asserts: “The watchword is ‘genre.’ With rare exception, the past year’s best sellers have been those with identifiable market niches.” Gerrie Lim, “Film Soundtracks Focus on Specific Audiences, Succeed in Varied Genres,” *Billboard*, April 29, 1995, 47.


29 Smith argues that the commercial imperatives driving the use of popular music in film often effect an inversion of the conventional image and sound hierarchy, so that filmmakers will often “halt the film’s narrative flow” in order to, essentially, sell the score. See *The Sounds of Commerce*, 131, 146.
only permits Roadrunner Records a chance to showcase certain compilation tracks from the soundtrack album, but also carries the effect of creating strong associational links—such as those between Freddy, Jason, and nu metal in particular, but also between the experience of horror and the experience of metal more generally.

In turn, the uncanny horror-metal connection forged here—and in many other contemporary horror soundtracks—takes on a kind of cultural currency that is not limited to the movie theater. That is, the horror-metal association becomes part of heavy metal culture’s “visual media economy.” Hence the film contributes to an extended cultural history of imagining metal music that includes, but also extends beyond, the cinema. (The visual economy of heavy metal would also include live performances, music videos, album covers, band posters and photos, Web sites, and concert merchandise.) In this particular case, however, the seizing hold of metal’s visual economy by movie music managers becomes a way to channel audience tastes and pleasures. Having identified the desired audience for their product—an amalgamation of horror and metal fans—industry professionals are equipped to align these two genres in a cinematic package aimed at a specific marketplace identity. Horror film music thus becomes a vehicle for enticing identification, not necessarily with a particular character or spectator position, but with a particular cinematic format, one that includes just the right blend of graphic violence, preternatural villains, and headbanging beats.

Extrapolating from the Freddy vs. Jason example, we might better understand the aesthetics of contemporary horror soundtracks—as well as the contemporary soundtrack album more generally—in terms of what media scholar Joseph Turow calls “lifestyle segregation.” Parallel to the way soundtracks function to direct audience engagements with film and music texts, lifestyle segregation describes a broader transindustrial strategy involving the creation and circulation of distinct media formats that are designed to resonate with particular target audiences. Intended to serve as a vehicle of identification, these formats are configured to anticipate the attitudes and preferences of distinct consumer groups, or “lifestyle” clusters. The goal is to divide and corral audiences into manageable segments that would then willingly affiliate with corporate-administered taste communities. Accordingly, media producers work closely with market researchers and advertisers to tailor their products to particular market segments via a “customized” aesthetic package meant to correspond with the imagined tastes, values, and interests of their intended audience. By “arranging materials—songs, articles, programs—into a package that people in a target audience would see as reflecting their identity,” media producers operate with the intention of “signaling” their “targets,” while providing them the necessary cultural materials for establishing and reinforcing a consumer-based lifestyle.


32 Ibid., 92.
The end result is what Turow calls “branded formats,” or “narrow clusters of media” that emphasize “divisions rather than overlap in preferences and styles.”

Branded formats aim to perpetuate lifestyle segregation and reinforce consumer allegiances around particular media products by catering to audience patterns, habits, and preferences, as these are mapped out by consumer research agencies. In this way, consumer research allows media firms to more tightly integrate pertinent audience activities into the production process. Mobilizing the cultural values that derive from audience engagements with media texts, branded formats seek to capitalize on consumers’ affective investments in, and everyday relationships to, media culture. Thus firms are better able to organize consumer practices by putting to work different forms of audience (inter)activity. By delineating the limits and categories of consumption according to a logic of customized aesthetics, audiences are positioned to experience media products according to the terms mapped out by consumer research industries.

The niche sounds of horror film soundtracks adhere to the logic of branded formats in the way they encourage associations and experiences of popular music that dovetail with the organizing principle of stratification. Essentially, what is promoted by horror movie music—that is, in addition to soundtrack albums—is a type of listening practice in sync with culture industry standards. Just as, following the logic of branded formats, horror metal is designed to objectify the imagined aesthetic tastes and cultural values of its target audience, this music is also specifically geared to mobilize a type of listener in sync with the industry’s lifestyle categories. So while we’re watching Freddy and Jason hack each other apart to the sounds of nu metal, we’re also invited to become members of a “branded” community of self-identified horror metal enthusiasts. Here individuals are encouraged to identify not as consumers per se, but as participatory devotees that form a part of a larger mediatized taste community organized around a customized aesthetic experience.

Conversely, the repeated articulation of horror and metal inadvertently discloses something about the film and music industries. In particular, the ways film and music genres are paired together reflect certain industry assumptions, not only concerning who they think is listening, but also why people listen and enjoy certain types of music in the first place. In the case of horror metal, horror film images are strategically designed to correspond with and illustrate metal music’s presumed cultural value. Matched with images of violence, madness, obscenity, aggression, torture, and monstrosity, metalheads are given the chance to witness their favorite music come

33 Ibid.
34 Ostensibly, consumer research industries allow for greater “interactivity” between consumers and producers of media products. Through questionnaires, focus groups, customer loyalty programs, and, more insidiously, advanced consumer-surveillance technologies found in much of the new digital-based media, consumers are afforded greater “participation” in shaping media content. In actuality, cultural industries are exploiting people’s use of media texts by transforming acts of interpretation, identification, and audience pleasure into valuable, exchangeable information. Thus what is outwardly treated as a collaborative interaction is actually a lopsided power relationship where both public and personal information is extracted from unacknowledged informational labor pools, privatized, and placed in the hands of industry executives in order to further mitigate market uncertainty. See Turow, Breaking Up America, 125–157; see also Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurry, Richard Maxwell, and Ting Wang, Global Hollywood 2 (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 282–294; Shawn Shimpach, “Working Watching: The Creative and Cultural Labor of Media Audiences,” Social Semiotics 15, no. 3 (2005): 343–360; and Mark Andrejevic, iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).
to life on screen. Similarly, horror fans are pushed to associate their favorite horror movies, characters, and concepts with the heavy metal sounds of chunky, distorted guitars and pounding double bass drums. In either case, this horror metal universe is underscored by a commercially driven practice of musical pedagogy, a movie music education aimed at structuring listener competencies and arranging viewing pleasures in order to contain and direct popular tastes according to market imperatives and imagined demographic identities. Horror soundtrack albums thus afford audiences a medium through which to experience and make sense of their own (branded) cultural identities. Meanwhile, the industrial logic of branded media formats effectively circumscribes horror metal’s symbolic and affective value, as institutional and economic pressures work to represent horror metal listeners (and their cultural tastes) as deviant, perverse, and abnormal.

Buying Into the Affinity Between Metal Music and Horror Film. The convergence character of horror soundtrack albums affords media firms the opportunity to manage consumption practices. By strategically circulating specific content across media to create a branded lifestyle format, media firms are able to “put to work” consumer tastes, allegiances, and affective investments in horror and metal, thus capitalizing on the immaterial labor of horror metal audiences. Yet ownership patterns, niche marketing, and branded entertainment tell only half the story behind these recurring alignments. To adequately account for the persistent linking together of horror films and metal music at the corporate level, it is necessary to examine what, if any, cultural resonances exist between these two relatively exclusive popular genres. At first glance, the combination of metal and horror may seem quite appropriate, a commercially viable marriage between two relatively infamous cultural phenomena. However, the presumed affinity of metal and horror rests on their continued discursive articulation to deviant, oftentimes criminal, cultural practices and marginalized identity formations.

On the surface, both genres appear to share a propensity for violence and an inclination for lurid obscenity. This relation manifests itself in the degree to which monstrousty, grotesquery, and Satanism (or at least Satanic imagery) are foregrounded in both metal music and horror films as prominent tropes reiterated to express repressed social attitudes and represent the return of society’s various Others—other people, other sexualities, other cultures, other ethnicities, other political and social ideologies. In fact, this overt fascination with otherness figures so prominently in both genres that metal performers (and sometimes their fans) regularly appear as animated replicas of the monsters we see on screen. Likewise, metal performances often seem to invoke the apocalyptic mise-en-scène typically confined to the cineplex. Thus it’s not hard to imagine Marilyn Manson showing up in Clive Barker’s Hellraiser series, or the disfigured alien creatures of GWAR making a guest appearance in an early Sam Raimi film, or the costumed members of Slipknot hanging out with Leatherface (Figures 2–3). Nor does one have to strain one’s ears to hear in the guttural rumblings of metal vocalists

35 See Lazzarato; Arvidsson.
the raspy demoniac voice of Regan from the *Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) as she channels hell and spews bile while delivering acerbic invectives.

Beyond the apparent aesthetic and stylistic similarities, however, another explanation exists for the continued association of metal and horror: their shared extratextual history of unsettling the social order. Both have been subjects of scrutiny in recent years, stirring controversy among conservative elites who decry heavy metal and horror films for assaulting traditional values and mores. Targeted by government officials and derided by the nominal “experts,” metal and horror remain bound, despite their differences, through their discursive positioning as targets of moral panic. Consequently, popular discourses continue to mobilize stereotypical definitions of metal and horror that bracket issues of historical context, textual specificity, and variations in audience reception. Ultimately, both have been, and continue to be, positioned as threats to the “general public” through a crude reductionism.

Horror was the first to cause a major public outcry when, during the early 1980s, British government officials were able to incite a wide-scale social panic concerning an influx of horror and pornography video imports into Great Britain. Asserting a link

37 To be sure, one could argue the horror-metal connection extends beyond its articulation in contemporary horror films. For example, Italian horror film auteur Dario Argento includes a number of heavy metal–infused scores, most notably *Deep Red* (1975) and the eye-popping *Opera* (1987). More broadly, one could point to an extended history of heavy metal artists and performers who appear to draw on horror themes, from Alice Cooper to the Norwegian black metal scene. Yet one must be careful not to mistake the visual economy of heavy metal for an essential, organic relationship. Rather “the look” of metal (and the sound of horror) must be historically and culturally situated, so that, for example, an examination of occult rhetoric in Norwegian black metal takes into account the scene’s virulent rejection of a hegemonic Christian theology. Here Satanism, paganism, and practices of bodily mutilation take the form of an oppositional cultural politics, a “visual style” which may or may not coincide with certain horror film tropes.
between real-life violence and the increased exposure to violent images and graphic representations made available by the distribution of foreign (predominantly U.S. and Italian) horror videos, a number of government-led inquiries and reports sought to convince the public that these “video nasties” presented not only a source of moral contamination but a mounting threat to the British way of life. In the face of a general economic recession, coupled with the danger of a transnational network of mostly independent distributors committed to flooding the European market with low-budget films on video, British politicians looked for a way to stave off economic pressure from without by shoring up a national culture within.  

By rhetorically demonizing such low-budget foreign-born successes like *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981)—which was deemed “the number one video nasty”—reform groups worked in tandem with government officials and news organizations to freeze the commercial spread of any material they regarded as inimical to the public good, passing off economic policy as moral improvement. The public was sharply divided: on the one hand, there were “those ‘reasonable’ people” who were grossly offended by such films, and on the other hand, there were those (irrational) individuals who did not share the “common sense” position of moral outrage. Mobilizing tremendous social tensions and positioning horror film audiences as deviant social outcasts, the video nasties debate established an interpretive framework of righteous anger and public suspicion that continues to inform the way horror movies are experienced and consumed.

Similarly, heavy metal received strong condemnation at the hands of the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985, as a small group of “Washington wives,” led by Tipper Gore, set out to challenge the fiendish influence of what they termed “porn rock” on young listeners. Purportedly acting on behalf of concerned parents everywhere, the PMRC singled out heavy metal for the egregious impact such music was believed to have on American youth, supposedly inculcating perverse behavior, sexual deviancy, a pleasure in violence, Satan worship, and a disposition to suicide. Marshaling close political ties and rallying public support through the mass media, the PMRC was able to generate congressional hearings while calling for “voluntary” industry censorship of certain illicit materials deemed inappropriate and obscene. The recording industry took it upon itself to implement a number of precautionary measures in an effort to pacify escalating public indignation and preempt further “outside” interference. To reassure policymakers of their capacity for self-regulation, the industry introduced parental advisory labels for recordings containing “adult” lyrics and content. These included the most commercially viable genre of popular music at the time, heavy metal.

By positioning heavy metal as public enemy number one, congressional leaders and other public officials were effectively able to scapegoat metal music for a catalog of social ills. Faulting artists like Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne for an increase in

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38 A total of seventy-five films, over half of which were US productions, appeared on the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) “video nasty” list between June 1983 and September 1985, when the list was supplanted by the Video Recordings Act. In large part, the widespread criminal prosecution of video nasty distributors and retailers can be attributed to what had been at the time an insufficient national system for regulating a booming transnational video market. See James Kendrick, “A Nasty Situation: Social Panics, Transnationalism, and the Video Nasty,” in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 153–172.

39 Ibid., 165.
teen suicide rates and youth violence, the PMRC censorship campaign turned a blind eye to systemic and institutional forces underlying social malaise, substituting cultural symptoms for their socioeconomic causes.\footnote{For more on the PMRC’s public castigation of heavy metal see Robert Wright, “I’d Sell You Suicide: Pop Music and Moral Panic in the Age of Marilyn Manson,” \textit{Popular Music} 19, no. 3 (2000): 365–385; and Robert Walser, \textit{Running with the Devil}, 143–145.} At the same time, a host of conservative assumptions regarding popular culture, and specifically popular music, were reinforced in the name of moral values.

It is possible that industry managers in charge of putting together horror film soundtracks find further justification for their repeated decisions to combine metal and horror in the dominant cultural history, which positions both genres as objects of popular disgust and moral disdain. Presumably, the results of unrelenting audience research speak to this association and supply empirical evidence for executives, reassuring them of this seemingly inevitable connection. Certainly the metal-equals-horror equation continues to appear in both trade journals and fan literature, not to mention its espousal by iconic metal figures like Ozzy Osbourne, Rob Zombie, Dee Snider, and Marilyn Manson. Moreover, some recent academic studies of horror film audiences duplicate the language found in popular arenas and congressional hearings to describe heavy metal. Audiences are characterized for their cheap “sensation seeking” and “interest in both morbid and sexual events.”\footnote{Marvin Zuckerman, “Sensation Seeking and the Taste for Vicarious Horror,” in \textit{Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions}, ed. James Weaver and Ron Tamborini (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 150.} Studies are made available, offering empirically tested and verifiable proof of the illicit motivations of “young people” (ages 18–22), listing common traits like “rebellion against authority, thrill-seeking arousal, and sadistic gore gratification” to explain an attraction to horror film.\footnote{Patricia Lawrence and Philip Palmgreen, “A Uses and Gratifications Analysis of Horror Film Preference,” in Weaver and Tamborini, 166.} In any case, the pleasures of horror, whether in music or in cinema, are taken to be problematic from the beginning—that is, discursively positioned as pathological pleasures that beg for clarification according to the available disciplinary and theoretical norms of investigation.\footnote{See Matt Hills, \textit{The Pleasures of Horror} (New York: Continuum, 2005).}

In each of the above contexts—business reports, consumer surveillance, academic analyses, public indictments—the audience image arrived at is an abstracted figure, torn from the historical conditions of textual production, circulation, and reception, where it is situated according to the appropriate ends—whether they be commercial, political, or professional—in order to ratify particular cultural-political claims. Thus the political economy of taste circumscribing heavy metal and horror extends beyond the purview of the culture industry to include the extant discourses of the state, the academy, public reform groups, genre communities, aesthetes, and pop critics. Rarely are “real” audiences encountered in these pop culture discourses, only their reified alter egos, which are constantly invoked, represented, and traded upon for purposes that escape any direct intervention on the part of those presumably being spoken for.
Of course, the culture industry eagerly seizes upon such constructions and remains a primary site of their perpetuation.

However, the elusive and disparate nature of “real” audiences should not discourage an investigation of the economic and institutional practices that condition audience engagements with media texts. While it may not be possible to fully elaborate, explain, or understand the countless ways individuals relate to horror and metal culture, it is possible to describe the conditions under which people encounter and engage with these cultures through various media. This is especially true of horror soundtracks where the combination of discursively constructed identities and market-oriented lifestyle demographics come together for the purpose of commercial exchange. Industry strategists continue to exploit the notion that horror and metal have something in common and persistently invoke this association in their attempt to arrange the field of consumption and facilitate marketplace efficiency.

To the extent that consumers continue to buy into this affinity, the horror-metal connection continues to be a profitable site for commodified dissent. Not only do horror soundtrack albums reaffirm the popular conception that these two genres belong together and are in fact equally reprehensible, they reassure us that nonconformity has its niche too, and that opportunities exist for those eager to showcase their nonconformity through the commercial consumption of noise, violence, and culturally offensive material. Horror metal plays along with this logic of commercialized rebellion by promoting a marketable image of two culturally disreputable genres. In doing so, it reinforces the dominant perception of what it means to associate with, and take pleasure in, these “troubled” forms of entertainment.

In particular, horror film soundtracks provide heavy metal listeners the necessary evidence that their pleasures are indeed R-rated, and what is more, that their market choices are tantamount to the seedy behaviors permeating a perverse underworld occupied by demonically possessed children, machete-wielding psychopaths, and homicidal, knife-fingered burn victims. Alternatively, these soundtracks speak to various industry attempts to seize upon metal and horror cultures in order to transcribe popular tastes and experiences for the purposes of commercial gain. Horror metal thus exemplifies an industrial stratagem of selling would-be audiences their own (branded) image while simultaneously pillaging the communities that actively produce and give meaning to these cultural texts and practices.

Appendix
The following is a list of recent horror metal soundtrack compilations, along with their company credits.

- *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Atlantic Records (Warner Music Group)
- *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Night* (Ernest R. Dickerson and Gilbert Adler, 1995): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC); Atlantic Records (Warner Music Group)

- *The Crow: City of Angels* (Tim Pope, 1996): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Hollywood Records (Buena Vista, Disney Music Group)
- *Bride of Chucky* (Ronny Yu, 1998): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC); Sanctuary Records (Universal Music Group)
- *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999): Universal Pictures (Vivendi/General Electric, NBC); Geffen/Interscope Records (Universal Music Group)
- *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (Joe Berlinger, 2000): Lions Gate Entertainment; Priority Records (EMI)
- *Dracula 2000* (Patrick Lussier, 2000): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Columbia Records (Sony BMG)
- *Scream 3* (Wes Craven, 2000): Dimension/Miramax Films (Disney); Wind Up Records (Sony BMG)
- *Resident Evil* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2002): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Roadrunner Records (Warner Music Group)
- *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Marcus Nispel, 2003): New Line Cinema (Time Warner); DRT Entertainment
- *Alone in the Dark* (Uwe Boll, 2005): Lions Gate Entertainment; Nuclear Blast
- *The Cave* (Bruce Hunt, 2005): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *Masters of Horror* (various, 2005–2007): Showtime Networks (CBS Corp); Immortal Records
- *Saw II* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005): Lions Gate Entertainment; Image Entertainment
- *Saw III* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2006): Lions Gate Entertainment; Warcon Records
- *Underworld: Evolution* (Len Wiseman, 2006): Columbia Tristar (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (Martin Weisz, 2007): 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment (News Corp); Bulletproof Records
- *Resident Evil: Extinction* (Russell Mulcahey, 2007): Screen Gems (Sony); Lakeshore Records
- *Saw IV* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2007): Lions Gate Entertainment; Adrenaline Records