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THE MIDNIGHT MOVIE EVENT
IN THE DIGITAL BLOCKBUSTER ERA

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Media Studies
by
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ABSTRACT

The midnight movie became the center of news coverage immediately following the shooting in Aurora, Colorado at a midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in summer 2012. Although the early years of midnight and late night movies are associated with African American film showings in "white" theaters and cult cinema, rowdy teenagers at the drive-in, and cult movies like *Rocky Horror*, Hollywood has co-opted these rogue cultural gatherings for the commercial goals of mainstream, high-profile releases, including such blockbusters as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*. This thesis looks at the emergence of the modern midnight movie release, including its economic and commercial logic and how it is symbolically constructed in industry texts. Though midnight showings have a history, recent technological innovations such as digital cinema have allowed these events to become more widespread and saturated. Along with these midnight premieres come many commercial paratexts both inside and outside the theater.
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INTRODUCTION

Just after midnight on July 20th 2012 James Holmes entered a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado and opened fire on the audience. Killing 12 people and injuring 58 others, this horrible event is the largest mass shooting in U.S. history to date (Follman, Aronsen, & Pan, 2013). The movie patrons had come to enjoy the midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises*, the final installment of Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy. *The Dark Knight Rises* was the most highly anticipated movie of the summer and one of the highest grossing of the year, beaten only by *Marvel’s The Avengers* (Box Office Mojo, 2012 Domestic Grosses). One consequence of this terrible tragedy was that it brought the popular phenomenon of midnight premieres on to the front page.

James Holmes was able to take advantage of an event that drew in a large crowd. Perhaps this also could have happened if the movie were released at the traditional 12 noon, but the fact that it happened at midnight creates an ominous stigma for midnight movie releases. In folklore, the midnight hour is traditionally referred to as the witching hour, a time that evokes an aura of danger and when strange people come out. In this case, it was right.

These unfortunate events directly affected the movie industry. Immediately trailers were pulled and edited for the *Gangster Squad* movie that was being advertised before *The Dark Knight Rises*. These trailers contained a scene from the movie where the gangsters started shooting at the audience from behind a screen in a movie theater. In fact, the director made the decision after the Aurora incident to
cut that scene from the movie entirely and to film a new scene to replace it (Cieply, 2012).

Ticket sales for not only *The Dark Knight* but all movies suffered because people were afraid to go to the movies. Even film producer Rick Schwartz claimed that he couldn’t trust going to the movies in a room of complete strangers (Schwartz, 2012). There was real concern for a copycat and many theaters amped up security. Extra police were called on duty to cover the theaters even as far away from Colorado as New York (Kemp & Connor, 2012). This fear was not an irrational because there was at least one believed copycat attempt in Ohio but police spotted the man and arrested him before he went into the theater (Sangiacomo, 2012).

Not only did the box office numbers suffer, but also the publicity and spectacle of the midnight show was threatened by these events. AMC in particular was covered by the press because of its public announcement to ban certain costume items that would make its patrons uncomfortable (Shyong, 2012).

Even after the initial security and bans, early releases for movies were changed to 9 P.M. or 10 P.M. rather than 12A.M. According to *The Hollywood Reporter* (McClintock, 2012) the rest of the summer’s opening weekend ticket sales suffered, particularly the midnight showings. It wasn’t until *Taken 2* premiered at 10 P.M. in early October that the late night sales started to pick up again. Allowing the 10 P.M. showings to be counted in the opening weekend numbers helped boost the numbers again. Moviegoers who attended at 10 P.M. experienced the same hype as the earlier midnight moviegoers. A few other fall movie releases repeated the same
model, including *Sinister, Paranormal Activity 4,* and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2.*

Gradually, then, the midnight movie returned post-Aurora. For example, *The Hobbit* was released at midnight in December 2012. It actually did quite well with a $13 million midnight opening, a record for December, according to Box Office Mojo (Subers, 2012). The earlier releases, such as those at 9:00 P.M. or 10:00 P.M., have not disappeared, however. *Iron Man 3* premiered at 9:00 P.M., for instance. Patrons are still hyper vigilant while attending movies. One movie theater in Missouri hired actors for the *Iron Man 3* premiere which included men dressed up like S.W.A.T. members with fake guns. This sparked several 9-1-1 calls (Gates, 2013).

Clearly, the midnight premiere has caused quite a stir in the Hollywood industry and the news within the recent past. My interest in the phenomenon of the premiere developed prior to the Aurora incident. The midnight hour in the theater has always proved to be somewhat unpredictable and slightly uncontrollable and rowdy which makes it exciting. The first midnight premiere that I attended was *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I* (2010). I bought tickets for the Lux Level, which allowed me to enjoy the convenience of reserved seats. Lux Level is a 21-plus area at the Showcase Cinemas in Randolph Massachusetts, which eliminates the possibility of being seated near young teens or children whose behavior might impact the experience. The seats in the Lux Level are organized in pairs that are set apart from each other, providing plenty of space around each set of coupled seats, and are situated in a theatre section separated from the larger general admission section. The seats in the Lux Level are larger and much more comfortable than those
in the general admission area and they include a moveable tray to hold food and drinks. Wait staff are available at the push of a button to take orders from a menu that includes full dinners, snacks as well as alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.

Midnight shows tend to attract young adults. So, in this case I shared the Lux Level space with others from my generation who grew up with *Harry Potter*. There was even merchandise tied to the event. To my surprise the theater offered an adult version of butterbeer (a butterscotch beverage from the *Harry Potter* stories). The butterbeer provided something that adults could literally buy into, a more sophisticated way to engage in the story than dressing up or wielding a wand, though some of the adults did this too. This first experience at a midnight premiere is what sparked my interest in the fan experiences and the business aspects of the theater itself, particularly midnight premieres.

Summer 2012 blockbusters and even “niche” blockbusters all had midnight releases. These titles included, but were not limited to, *Marvel's The Avengers, Dark Shadows, The Amazing Spiderman, Men in Black III*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*. This recent surge and consistent pattern of early release is a phenomenon that has both cultural and industrial impact. It has created a new venue for potential interaction between the Hollywood industry and fans, which differs from earlier times when prior midnight movies were more of a social institution -- often involving marginalized films or audiences -- than a corporate controlled event designed to add to spectacular hype.

As will be detailed in later chapters, midnight exhibition is not new to the movie industry, and in earlier incarnations served as a form of racial discrimination,
of teen sanctuary, and of a venue for culturally marginalized films. Chapter one will
discuss the times of segregation in the south when some theater owners opened
their theaters to African Americans at midnight (Bowser & Cram, 1994). As a
discriminatory practice, this community was only allowed to see movies during this
time slot because it was not a desirable time for the white audience and their
families. Even before segregation was over in the 1950s, television changed
everything. Drive-in theaters became a haven for teens that enjoyed watching
campy horror movies. These horror movies, although not always shown at midnight,
are often nicknamed midnight movies. These types of movies were low budget and
were later used on television as fillers for late night programming. Eventually,
underground movies evolved into something else entirely, still referred to as
midnight movies, alluding to their non-mainstream nature, cult films became
popular in the 1970’s. There are also many cult cinema movies that are shown at
midnight. Films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* still have special midnight
showings at small community theaters.

The midnight hour in the instances of exhibition just mentioned served as a
form of marginalization. These crowds of people and their events have been pushed
to an irregular time away from mainstream culture and family life. The cross-
dressing fans of *Rocky Horror* would hardly find their place at a Sunday matinee. But
now Hollywood has taken these instances of controlled and rogue cultural
gatherings and turned the idea into a family friendly occasion and commercialized
endeavor. It is in this manifestation that the midnight movie went from an
exhibition venue designed to squeeze out often-small box office revenue, to a form of publicity and marketing for large-scale releases.

Chapter two will explain the development of the blockbuster movie and the current technology that has allowed midnight movies to become so popular. It is clear that we are still in the age of the blockbuster and that blockbuster directors like Steven Spielberg continue to influence the work of others (Buckland, 2006). The blockbuster is widely discussed in film literature, including everything from the camera angles to the fans. For example, Buckland (2006) looks at the films of Steven Spielberg and his cinematography. He explains the impact of Spielberg's films on the blockbuster film style. Thompson's (2007) *The Frodo Franchise* walks the reader through *The Lord of the Rings* franchise from inception to exhibition and beyond.

Since midnight releases are such large and distinguished events, they provide the perfect occasion to observe the interaction between the movie industry and fans.

The different tiers now associated with a blockbuster strategy have also influenced the midnight movie. Blockbuster is defined in the traditional sense of a big budget movie with a wide release and significant expected box office income. It is important to note, however, that there are also “niche blockbusters”. I have invented the term niche blockbuster to explain the type of movie that is in between a huge blockbuster success and a total box office flop. Niche blockbusters are movies intended for smaller fan groups or niche audiences. For example, *Paranormal Activity* is marketed to the horror fan niche audience. Niche blockbusters such as *Paranormal Activity* are not necessarily big budget movies and while they may have a fairly wide release, they do not expect as much return from box office sales as
traditional blockbusters. Instead, these movies expect to make money on ancillary products such as sequels and merchandise sold to this same loyal fan group. This is different than a cult movie because a niche blockbuster will cash in on a subgroup of a population immediately following the film, but it may or may not stand the test of time to become a cult classic. The apparent paradox of the niche blockbuster has become clear with the development of the worldwide blockbuster success of recent films such as *The Avengers*. *The Avengers* had no problem gaining its money back from box office alone and it appealed to a wide audience.

The age of the blockbuster has converged with the digital age. It took a long time for digital technology to integrate into the movie industry but now that it has significantly penetrated many, if not all, aspects of the business -- including production, distribution, exhibition and marketing -- there are many prominent effects due to this crossover. This apparent change calls for a new distinction from the age of the blockbuster and for the purposes of this thesis, the latest stage will be referred to as the age of the digital blockbuster.

To understand this discourse it is imperative to look at exactly how digital technology has benefited both the industry and the fans. These benefits are particularly visible in the place of exhibition. In the past, exhibition was a popular topic among film historians, and has more recently been covered by Acland (2003). Acland provides an intricate history of the change in theaters from movie palaces to megaplexes. These changes go hand-in-hand with the changes in technology. Digital projection is a fairly new enterprise that was just beginning to pick up ten years ago. Developments in leisure activities over the years have drawn patrons away from the
theater. Some would say that this has killed the movies altogether. Although it is no longer the golden age of the cinema, the industry has adapted. Going to the movies is now an event, not a mundane everyday occurrence. When movies such as *The Dark Knight Rises* take in $30.6 billion at the midnight opening, according to *Variety* (Stewart, 2012, May 4), the economic significance of the movie event is proven.

In addition to the industrial and technological considerations of the midnight movie event, it’s crucial to consider the fans in attendance at those events. Recent research on fan communities has focused on the area of online fandom (Jenkins, 2006b). While fan communities have a strong presence on the Internet and electronic media in general, there is still existence and distinction in physical gatherings. Prior to the surge of research in Internet fandom, fan research did consider interactions in the theater (Austin, 1981). In this new age of the digital blockbuster it is time to look at the place of the theater again while taking into consideration the realm of electronic media.

Chapter three looks into the paratexts both in the theater and surrounding the movie. When considering the dialogue between the Hollywood industry and fans, an important aspect is “paratexts,” or the ancillary texts -- official and unofficial -- that accompany blockbusters (Gray, 2010). In the case of blockbuster movies the movie itself would be considered the main text and everything else paratexts that comes alongside it. Though ancillary texts may be considered paratexts, these are of secondary importance, such as movie merchandise. However, events like the midnight movie premiere become as important if not more important than the main text itself. A key franchise for developing paratexts in the modern Hollywood
blockbuster era is *Star Wars*, shifting the emphasis of revenue streams and the volume of merchandise, and solidifying the strategy of routine midnight premieres. This exchange of goods and experience between the film business and fans can be observed closely at these midnight events. This is true of midnight DVD releases as well. Each event boasts a one-time-only availability of an experience or merchandise. This is also especially true for movie franchises (ex. Thompson, 2007). The visible presence of paratexts at these premieres, particularly with franchise films, will be examined in this thesis, as well as ideas of commodified fandom in the age of the digital blockbuster.

The purpose of my research is to explore the changes in the movie industry brought about by the digital era. The midnight hour is no longer reserved for marginalized cultures created by grassroots or social needs, instead, Hollywood has turned the midnight movie into a family-friendly occasion and commercialized endeavor. To discuss these changes I will be drawing from literature in film studies, fan culture, and marketing, as well as trade magazines.

In addition to historical and cultural research I will be using my experience as a participant observer of the midnight premieres of many films and, in particular, the blockbusters of spring and summer 2012. The blockbuster midnight showings I attended include *The Hunger Games, Dark Shadows, Men in Black III, The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. As a participant observer I myself attended and was involved in these midnight showings. I did not interact directly with the crowd but rather observed the type of people attending, roughly how many, whether they were wearing any merchandise and their verbal reactions to the
movies. I will also be drawing on my experience as a participant observer for two midnight DVD release parties for *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part I*, and *The Hunger Games*. I will contextualize my experiences using existing theory and research from film, critical cultural studies, and marketing literature.
CHAPTER 1.

History of Midnight Exhibition

The midnight hour is traditionally surrounded by a particular type of lore, including being known as the witching hour. Today the midnight hour doesn’t always involve those same connotations. It has become a commodified endeavor of the movie industry aimed at selling the consumer the experience of being the first to see a movie at a midnight premiere. However, this is a historically recent construction. In the Hollywood industry the midnight hour has not always been associated with such glamorous events. It includes a history of race and age discrimination, and movies outside of the mainstream. This history laid a foundation for a lexicon and strategy that was appropriated by Hollywood in the blockbuster era.

While each of these separate time periods in history has been extensively covered, there has not been exclusive focus on the late night exhibition time. With the exception of Hoberman and Rosenbaum’s book on the cult midnight movies of the 1960s and 70s (1983), all the other sources just mention time of exhibition in passing and don’t focus solely on the aspect of the late night or midnight exhibition. In each separate case it may not seem important but looking at all the different time periods of late night and midnight showings there is a constant theme of public shunning or taboo. Now we can look back and see the gradual build of these events to understand where the midnight movies of today came from. To piece together this explanation I will be using various secondary sources and their mentions of
these events. I will then supplement this with primary sources from various newspapers from the different time periods to support the evidence.

**African American Audiences and Specialized Theaters**

Going to the movies became popular in the early 1900s shortly after its invention. However, not all moviegoing experiences were equal. In the earlier part of the 20th century, movie going was in fact a significant African American pastime because of a lack of access to other forms of entertainment created for the white community. Black and white patrons did not always even have the opportunity to attend the same theater due to segregation laws in certain states and cities. Often times if African Americans were able to gain access to a white theater they had a separate seating area. The only time they could sit in the whites-only area would be if they were taking care of white children (Maltby, 2011).

The separate seating areas were mostly on the balcony, if the theater had one. The balcony was often referred to by derogatory names such as the “buzzard’s roost” or “crows nest” etc. (Maltby, 2007). Some theaters resorted to offering different times for shows for the African American patrons. This is where the midnight showings, or what Bowser and Cram (1994) referred to as the “Midnight Ramble”, started. African Americans were not the only race that was subjected to segregation, for example there were also tri-racial theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina. Here, they decided to let everyone in the same theater and had three separate entrances for the three different races, white, black, and Indian (Maltby, 2007). Rules and laws of segregation even spread outside the United States into adjacent countries such as Canada. In 1946 a traveling African American
saleswoman, Viola Desmond, was criminally charged for sitting in the white-only section of a movie theater. Years later when she was an elderly woman she was relieved of these charges (Doucette, 2010). Having to sit separately is hard but to have segregated races come at a completely different time is most alienating.

Although accurate records cannot be obtained, Richard Maltby (2011) believes that moviegoing was actually a big African American pastime because they did not have access to other forms of entertainment that the white community did. It was not accurately kept track of because some theaters, though predominately white, may have had special sections for the African American population or special days and times that they could come but they didn’t keep track of how many tickets which group of people bought (Maltby, 2011). In some areas African Americans started attending their own theaters, which were usually in their own part of town, contributing further to segregation (Gomery, 1992).

Not all businesses partook in segregation, but some took advantage of the situation. Theater owners saw accommodating the African American community as a business opportunity. As presented in the Philadelphia Tribune in 1937, at the time there were colored theaters in 27 states and the District of Columbia (Reading, 1937). All of these theaters were owned by white people and none by African Americans. There is no presence of the African American in any aspect of the business. It’s not until much later that Hollywood even starts to use African American actors in their mainstream movies. There were 20 million African Americans spending 23 million dollars on movies so it would make sense for Hollywood to take advantage of that market (Philadelphia Tribune, 1965).
Due to the lack or recognition of customer value and lack of detailed records, there was not a lot of material to draw from related to the business aspect of African American movie going. Any trade journals that I had access to completely ignored African Americans as a business possibility. The midnight rambles were mentioned in passing in Bowser and Cram's documentary (1994) but were not the main focus of these works. Still, this stands out in the time period in cinema exhibition to show what was thought of for this time slot. The other instances of segregation further prove that the midnight time slot would have not been desirable for whites if it were reserved for the African American population. Even the term 'midnight ramble' has a mysterious and rowdy connotation to it.

African Americans were the only racial minority group that was consistently forced to have a separate or specialized theater but this was not the only occurrence of specialized theaters (Gomery, 1992). Whether it was for a particular ethnic group or for a particular genre, there were all kinds of theaters that didn’t show the everyday mainstream material. Other theaters include foreign language theaters and art cinema to name a couple. Some theaters played only one particular type of movie, like action. Gimmicks were also used to get audience members to participate in certain showings. Some of them resemble the special release events for midnight movies today. For example, Gomery discusses how Roger Mayer turned Hammerstein's Victoria Theater into an action theater focusing their efforts on only movies from this genre and even decorated the lobby for some film releases like *The Jungle Princess* in 1936. This segmentation of the movie theater would have significance for the historical development of the midnight movie and is similar to
decorating the lobby for today’s movie premieres and offering themed beverages to patrons.

When the exhibition industry started moving to movie palaces, they replaced the nickelodeons in popularity. Nickelodeons were mostly in storefronts and could not compete with the grand and opulent movie palaces that could hold thousands of spectators. These smaller theaters couldn’t afford to have the same movies as the big movie palaces so they developed alternative strategies. For example, many of the theaters in New York on 42nd Street converted into specialized theaters given the dominance of movie palaces like the nearby Paramount and Roxy, which featured both live shows and films. Many of the 42nd Street theaters turned into “grindhouses” that had double-feature burlesque shows. They earned the name “grindhouse” because of the bump and grind dancing present at these burlesque shows. They would stay open later and have cheaper prices than the palaces in order to compete. The later showings in these theaters would include midnight shows and many of them stayed open until 3:30 A.M. (Maltby, 2011). This association with sexually explicit shows is a public taboo and the fact that many of them were shown at midnight further perpetuates the danger of midnight folklore. No longer just a time slot for African American viewers these “grindhouses” accepted all patrons of the night.

**B Horror Movies and the Drive-In**

B-movies generally became popular during the depression because movie production companies couldn’t turn out movies fast enough to fill the theaters. Drive-ins took advantage of the B-movie and double feature because this is mainly
what they could access. Drive-ins were not taken seriously by others in the movie business. In general, production companies would have the headlining movies and then also make a lot of low budget or B-movies to fill the other slots (Anonymous, 1993). Since the B-movies were not the main content of the shows, often times they were overlooked by censors, allowing filmmakers to get away with a lot of sexual and violent content that was not present in the a-list movies. After the 1950’s and the end of the Hollywood studio era B-movies couldn’t go under the radar so easily and there wasn’t as much of a demand to make them (Anonymous, 1993). Many of these B-movies from the 1950’s that were overlooked by critics at the time of their release have since found audiences and some even critical acclaim.

Television was one significant reason for the decline of overall movie attendance in the 1950s and has had an impact on theatrical attendance subsequently as well. Family leisure time changed with seemingly “free” (although ad-supported) televisual entertainment at home, making an evening without having to leave the living room more attractive. This trend also encouraged a shift toward movie going as a popular activity among teenagers. By 1957 just over half of the people who attended movies once a week or more were age 10-19. This was the first time that teenagers had disposable income and movies were one of the things they spent it on. Not that there weren’t plenty of B movies on TV, but it wasn’t about the movies as much as it was about going out and getting out of the house on their own (Heffernan, 2004).

Drive-ins were especially enticing because not only could teenagers get out of the house and away from their families, but they had a space of their own (the
car) away from the peering eyes of other adults or authority figures (Sanders & Sanders, 2003). This was especially popular in towns where “parking” was illegal. In this way, drive-ins became associated with unruly teenage behavior -- often sexualized. Drive-in theaters were even given nicknames such as “the passion pit,” and some hired police to patrol the lot to keep it under control (Segrave, 1992). As an outdoor venue, drive-ins obviously depended upon the dark of night to show movies; this encouraged late-night show times. This marked beginning of the change in audience of late night and midnight movie culture from the lower class to the middle class. At this point with white middle class teenagers beginning to occupy this space in the audience the midnight hour may be considered undesirable and still taboo in some ways but no longer as dangerous.

Drive-ins in the north continued to flourish even in the winter months. They offered much more than just a movie. They had a wide selection of concessions, playgrounds, heaters for the winter, and other small forms of entertainment (Penn, 1959) taking advantage of the variety of needs for families with kids of all ages.

The change in audience demographic was reflected in the content of the films that were being created at the time, including monster movies (Sanders & Sanders, 2003). B movies like *I was a Teenage Werewolf* undermined the drive-in’s reputation as a family friendly business. Samuel Z. Arkoff’s movies for American International Pictures along with Roger Corman make up a fair amount of these low budget horror movies and exploitation cinema. Some drive-ins were having such a hard time that they even resorted to showing adult films (Segrave, 1992). Overall, the popularity of the B-movie horror during this time period was brought about by the
teenagers’ social need. The “passion pit” aspect of the drive-in is what evoked all of the commotion and lure of danger.

While theaters may not have made out so well with the invention of the television, it was not the case for the movie industry in total because there was a great demand for content. There was a rise of color TV and UHF stations and lack of American movies to fill them. Color English-dubbed movies from Europe and Japan filled these slots. Selling to television in syndication is where the money was at for the entertainment business. Many of these movies were monster movies that usually played on Saturday afternoon or Saturday night (Heffernan, 2004), the latter again establishing the idea of late-night movie viewing. Some examples of programs are Double Chiller Theater and Beyond the Limits. Although these B horror movies were not always at midnight, they were associated with the night and the darkness. They provided the mystery and foundation needed to develop the cult midnight movie that would emerge in the late 1960s. Now, these movies have also earned the names cult classic and midnight movies and have found an audience in home video and video on demand networks.

**Cult Midnight Films**

In the 1950s and 60s in New York the movies that were playing in the theaters, like the ones on 42nd street, were referred to as underground (Maltby, 2011). The B movies of the 50s, though, were more of a general movement to accommodate the change in audience to the teenager. In other words, they were low budget quick turn around movies packed with action, horror, and nudity to grab the attention of the younger audience. This shows the industry taking a step towards
the development of the movie event and the midnight movie event in particular. These cult and B movies go against the mainstream culture and “trash” (Mathijs, 2008) traditions of Hollywood (much like people view many blockbuster hits today). What many people thought was just sleaze cinema did get some recognition later. For example, Roger Corman received a lifetime achievement award from the Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Some of these underground films turned into cult films but mainstream movies can also be cult. This is where cult starts to cross the line with movies like Star Wars.

Cult films can have a big following and certain movies play repeatedly at midnight, like Rocky Horror (Hoberman, & Rosenbaum, 1991). In a way this marked the beginning of the commodification of this idea of the midnight showing because nowadays the Rocky Horror shows are more controlled than they were previously. The success of the midnight show for these cult movies like Rocky Horror was not planned. At the beginning of its popularity the crowd would be out of control and it developed into an interactive experience where the audience would dress up and bring props like toilet paper, water guns, rice, newspapers, etc. These earlier audiences were also associated with drugs. Now, Rocky Horror showings are more controlled and have rules about what props you can bring. It had become an institution, although still a cult following.

For what is mainly thought of as today’s traditional midnight movies, El Topo is considered the first. El Topo is a violent and religious low budget Mexican film. It did not have a place in the mainstream audience but found its place in the midnight slot. It debuted in New York City at the Elgin Theater, now known for its role in the
popularity of midnight movies. *El Topo* ended up playing there for two years (Harrington, 1981). After its US debut in New York other cities such as Chicago were excited to receive it (Siskel, 1972). Thus, it began its rounds as a midnight movie. Certainly not everyone agreed with the excitement of the art house and midnight movie crowd. *El Topo* was not for the everyday moviegoer, and held its place well in the midnight circuit but not the regular theater (Lear, 1972).

In exhibition, though, the signature of cult was the midnight time slot and the repetitive showings. The popularity of movies like *Rocky Horror* is what differentiates these B-movies from the B-movies of the drive-in era. The drive-in era movies were more of an excuse for teenagers to go out, with the movie being secondary to the social aspect of the experience. *Rocky Horror* is the ultimate example of the midnight cult film because it had such a long run time in theaters. The film made up to $60 million dollars from its weekend showings in its first 10 years (*Chicago Tribune*, 1985). Even in 1990, 15 years after its release, it was doing great. At the 15-year-anniversary of the *Rocky Horror* release, the movie was released on VHS for home viewing. At this point people were still showing up to the midnight movies every week. At Tivoli Theater in University City, Missouri they were getting crowds of 300 people on Saturday night (Futterman, 1990). Some audience members interviewed didn’t see how people could substitute the cinema experience of *Rocky Horror* at home. According to Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991) once home video became more popular and affordable, there was another change in the industry. Repeat runs, like cult movies, didn’t do so well anymore. The people that wanted to watch these movies could now just watch them in the comfort
of their own home whenever they wanted to do so. This change cleared the time slot for midnight in the theater and paved the way for future movies to take its time slot. However, it would take another big leap in technology before the midnight movie would rise in popularity again. This didn’t occur until the invention of digital cinema, more specifically the ability to distribute and project movies digitally rather than with celluloid film.
CHAPTER 2.

Midnight Premieres and Digital Cinema

To understand how we got from the midnight cult movies to today's blockbuster spectacular midnight premieres we’ll have to start with a brief introduction of the blockbuster movie. Tom Schatz (2008) discusses the change in Hollywood from the traditional studio system to conglomerates, or what he refers to as “New Hollywood”, the postwar Hollywood adapting to a hit driven business starting in the 1950’s. As many people already know, the movie that marked this change and is considered the first modern blockbuster, and coined the term, was *Jaws*. The movie had its hardships: Spielberg went way over budget after many difficulties in the process of making the film, for example. Although *Jaws* was a spectacular movie with great characters, what arguably made it so successful was the marketing. *Jaws* successfully used the television to preview the movie to the audience. In addition, releasing it in the summer was the perfect time not only because it was about a killer shark on the beach but also because summer is when people have the most time available to go to the movies. The movies have always been a popular place to go to in the summer time to get out of the heat and into the air-conditioned darkness of the theater. *Jaws* being the must-see movie that it was could be considered the first tentpole movie for the summer time.

*Jaws* has since arguably gained a cult following and has had its own midnight showings but this is not how it came into the market. It was purposely advertised to make money on a large scale. Schatz (2008) discusses *Star Wars* similarly in this role of creating “New Hollywood”. *Star Wars* was the first movie to dethrone *Jaws* in
its top box office gross. Though Star Wars was not originally advertised to be a blockbuster film, according to Schatz it later became the industry model for franchise films and has spanned the entire blockbuster era with more films planned for the future. Midnight showings of blockbuster films also began with Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back in 1980, the second installment of the franchise. Though Jaws was technically the first blockbuster movie, Star Wars is the perfect movie to bridge the gap between cult movies such as The Rocky Horror Picture Show and blockbuster movies. Star Wars is a family friendly franchise that can be enjoyed by people of all ages. Star Wars took advantage of the franchising in marketing all their related consumer goods but it was a sleeper at first.

Matt Hills (2003) discusses the struggle in whether to call Star Wars a blockbuster or a cult film. Hills claims that some scholars associate Star Wars with the economic status of the blockbuster and by doing so it takes away from the cultural value and, therefore, it cannot be a cult movie. Besides the conflicting issues in regard to economic status with blockbusters, Hills claims there is also an argument about the cultural time value of blockbusters. Matt Hills argues that blockbusters do not necessarily disappear after the “eventfulness” of their release, but instead there becomes a lack of recognition of these films by scholars due to their economic status and assumed unimportant cultural stance. It may be especially hard to recognize the cultural value of a film franchise because of the span of time through which it exists. For example Star Wars is such a long on going franchise that there hasn’t been a chance to reflect on it after the fact. Even Harry Potter spanned 10 years. It’s hard to evaluate a franchise when it’s ongoing like that.
There is not agreement among scholars about what exactly a movie like *Star Wars* is but it has scholars arguing for both cult status and blockbuster status. Although *Star Wars* was a sleeper film, originally intended for cultural value, it realized its economic potential quickly and had the first notable blockbuster midnight premiere for *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980. At this point in time it was not a wide release event and this midnight showing was at a film festival in Seattle. But for some hardcore fans it was an event: some traveled from across the country to be the first to experience this new installation of Lucas’ world. Fans waited in line in the rain in order to see the midnight premiere, the 3 A.M., the 6 A.M., and the 9 A.M. just to see it before it was released widely at 12 P.M. (Hardin, 2008). This instance of a midnight movie with fans dressing up and waiting in line at odd hours of the night is reminiscent of the cult film midnight movies such *Rocky Horror* (Austin, 1981). As time went on, the concept of the midnight release spread, and now these films are widely released at midnight.

This wide expansion of midnight releases is a highly commercialized fandom. Wide release is taking away from the small intimate setting of the fans, dissolving the ‘cult’ into the masses and further blurring the line between the two for newer movies. No longer do fans need to travel across the country to see the premiere of a movie 12 hours before it is released. They don’t even have to stand out in the rain or travel to a major city to attend these releases. Buying tickets ahead of time will guarantee a seat but instead of sharing an experience with only other devout fans, you will also be there with the masses of people who are attending for other reasons. For example, I attended the *Dark Shadows* midnight premiere not because I
was a fan of the television show but because I am a fan of the director, Tim Burton, and the main star, Johnny Depp.

Although the experience for these cult fans may not be as visible or as cohesive as their past experiences, these cult fans are still there in the larger audience. This situation can be compared to Hebdige’s (1979) explanation of youth subcultures in Britain. Subcultures such as Punk and Teddy Boys had distinctive clothing styles to represent their particular subculture. These subcultures represented rebellion against society and social norms but their styles were eventually adapted by the mainstream. This is similar to the way that midnight movies used to be reserved for a smaller non-mainstream audience. A need developed by social interactions rather than corporate ones. Simply because the style of the subcultures in Britain were adopted by the mainstream doesn’t mean that there isn’t still social rebellion present. The rebellion and subculture just needs to be shown a different way to be distinctive much like the cult fans, even for blockbuster movies, are still there but going to the midnight movie is no longer a way to distinguish themselves from the rest of the audience, it needs to be done in a different way.

**The Beginning of the Digital Era**

To understand how midnight movie premieres went from a small cultural migration of a few *Star Wars* fans to a widespread blockbuster event we have to consider technological developments, especially digital cinema. It is because of digital cinema technology that midnight premieres were able to grow to be the phenomenon they are today. Entering the discussion of digital cinema brings us
back to *Star Wars* and George Lucas. Not only did *Star Wars* help pave the way for blockbuster films in general but also for the technology that transformed them into the special effects masterpieces they are today. *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) was responsible for the creation of Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound which became an industry standard in many theaters (Belton, 2002). This was followed by *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), which was the first film to be shot completely digitally (McKernan, 2005). The full digital version was only shown on four screens that had digital projectors.

Overall, digital technology has brought many changes to all business aspects of the movie industry from creation to home viewing, including the theatrical experience. Changes include the economics of a movie release, the availability of the movie to the audience, and the variety of movies being shown at any given time.

The first time I realized the possible impact of digital technology was when I attended the midnight showing of *The Hunger Games* in Spring 2012. Fearing that it would be sold out, I purchased my ticket a week in advance, but when I arrived other people were still buying tickets the night of the movie. The theater opened seven screens in their nine-screen complex to show *The Hunger Games*. This type of wide release and saturation is greatly facilitated because of digital technology.

Janet Wasko (1994) claims that it’s a myth that those in Hollywood fear technology; she argues that they, in fact, embrace it. This doesn’t mean that technology doesn’t bring about large-scale and even disruptive changes to the industry, however. Comparing the change from film to digital technology to the transition of silent films to sound films is tempting, but unlike sound, digital
technology has yet to completely saturate the film industry. Douglas Gomery (1985) describes the diffusion of sound as taking place quickly and smoothly. It was a planned effort because of the realized profit potential. The profit potential for digital film was not realized right away so it took longer for it to catch on. Some theaters still use only film projection, and some directors only shoot with film. Even these film users will have to convert eventually or they will go out of business.

While larger multiplexes may not have a problem converting to digital projection, it’s a problem for smaller theaters. According to Variety (Lisanti, 2013) as the industry switches over to digital, further consolidation in business is expected and the theaters that don’t transfer to digital will be expected to pay the extra costs for the film. Long-time film user Martin Scorsese has even decided to convert to digital because there’s just too much pressure to move away from film. Film is difficult to preserve and the theaters that did convert their equipment want to be able to use it to its full potential (Clark, 2012). Smaller theaters like the Rowland Theater in Philipsburg, PA are put in a tough position. The cost to The Rowland Theatre to restore the historic landmark replacing the marquee outside is $40,000. In addition to that cost they also need to upgrade their equipment to digital in order to stay open, which will cost another $75,000. Combined, this is a large burden for a small company (Falce, 2013).

Digital technology first entered the cinema through sound, not projection. Digital surround sound was fueled by Dolby Digital 5.1 in Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace (Belton, 2002). The surge in popularity of surround sound for home markets was consumer driven. Due to the expense, digital projection did not
immediately follow digital sound. It would cost a movie exhibitor about $100,000 per screen to change over to digital projection (Belton, 2002). There was a slow uptake in the change over due to the cost. Many people in the industry also argued that 35mm film was of better quality than digital projection. Aesthetics aside, there are advantages to digital cinema. The cost of film is prohibitive, whereas directors store digital images and endless takes with ease. Digital files are durable and allow the exhibitor to copy and play them repeatedly, unlike film. Exhibitors have to predict how many copies of a movie are needed for a release. With the high cost of film the distributors and exhibitors take a gamble when predicting the number.

Even with all these advantages, the $100,000 cost prevented theaters from investing in digital technology right away. In 2002 when digital projection began to enter the market, only 38 screens in the country had digital projectors, and just a handful of movies were available in this format (Belton, 2002). At the time, Belton argued that it was a hard sell because digital technology was not a revolutionary change in experience for the audience. To the audience, watching a movie digitally was the same as watching 35mm film. The switch initially did not lead to increased revenue. Digital projection did not bring additional customers in to offset the cost of the digital technology. As 3D films became popular throughout the 2000’s starting with Polar Express in 2004 (Belton, 2012), 3D technology gave digital that extra push it needed and more and more theaters invested in digital equipment. As Belton puts it, this was the “novelty” of digital cinema.

Now, there are many more theaters with digital projectors. The industry creates some movies exclusively for digital projection. The widespread availability
of digital projection has changed the ability of release patterns, which allowed for the rise of midnight and early release movie events. The possibilities that digital technology presents have brought the audience back to the theaters. According to Screen Digest, at the end of 2012 there were 89,341 digital screens worldwide, 25,516 of which were added that year. This brings the North America total to about 36,000, or about 40% of the world total (Jones, 2013).

**The Bottom Line**

Digital distribution and projection have enabled widespread release and saturation at just a fraction of what it would have cost to do so with film. A 35mm film costs $1200 - $1500 dollars whereas a digital print costs just $150 (Litwak, 2012). According to Box Office Mojo (n.d.) the top ten widest releases have been within the last five years. The widest release to date is *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* in 2010 with 4,468 screens, closely followed by *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* with 4,455 screens, and *The Dark Knight Rises* with 4,404 screens.

This new pattern of wide releases has changed the prior pattern of platform release that Acland discussed in 2003. No longer do movies, especially blockbusters, have a second release at smaller theaters before making their way to home video and TV. There is no scarcity of the film for the audience to want to attend at second run theaters. Digital technology has also extended into the home video market itself, making it easier to get a copy of the movie earlier pirated, or not, forcing studios to release faster to avoid piracy. Though the wider releases seem to be good for the distribution companies and the fans wishing to see movies quickly, it is not necessarily good for the small theaters. These small theaters were not only part of
the platform release but many were also art-house cinemas or places where independent films were shown. Some of these small theaters may, for example, still show *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. So, essentially the new midnight premieres are taking the spot of the cult midnight movie.

These commodified midnight movies give the production and distribution companies a bigger return on their movies more quickly. The increased industry importance of the opening weekend adds to the hypertextualization of the event film. Money is poured into advertising to entice as many viewers as possible for opening weekend. Events such as the midnight movies are created.

The box office is not where the majority of the money is made for the returns on any particular movie although the theatrical exhibition does set the tone for the rest of the platforms (Wasko, 2003). The opening weekend and the events and news coverage that go along with it are all about publicity. If a film does not do well during the first week, it’s most likely that the publicity didn’t work and it is not likely to stick around to gain momentum. In fact, distribution companies would prefer to get all the viewing up front and that the movie not stay in the theater too long because of the box office split. During the first few weeks of film exhibition the studio can get up to 90% of the profits, the longer the movie stays in the theater the more of that revenue goes to the exhibitors rather than the studios (PBS, 2001). For this reason, and to help prevent piracy, distributors would prefer to move to DVD or on-demand more quickly.

Even with the possibility of fast turnover, the risk in renting films is reduced for exhibitors with digital projection because it is cheaper to obtain a digital copy
than a reel. If the movie does not do well, the theaters won’t lose as much money due to reduced expenses. The theater can quickly replace the less desirable film with another or fill multiple theaters at once with a single successful movie.

The event movie, and more specifically the midnight show, adds to the opening weekend box office numbers. In 2012 *The Avengers* took in $18.7 million at its midnight opening (Stewart, 2012, May 6). These midnight releases add to the hype of the event, allowing the company to use it to their advantage with commercial tags such as “The Number One Movie in America!” Widespread midnight releases were not feasible before digital distribution and projection. The midnight or late-night showings play at times that other movies are not being played, providing no competition for these event movies. With film, one or two screens would be dedicated to a movie because there were only one or two reels. Now, everyone can see the same movie at once.

Another advantage to a midnight showing is that at that particular time the movie is most likely not going to have any competition or what people in the industry might refer to as the opportunity for spillover. Spillover is what happens when a moviegoer tries to see a movie that’s sold out so instead they attend a different movie playing at the same time. However, there is a cultural cost to this exclusivity. No audience overflow leaves little room for independent films. With smaller theaters also going out of business, independent films needed to find another venue. Many independent films are adapting to digital distribution through Video On Demand (VOD) networks and websites prior to going to the theater. This allows enough hype to be generated for them to have a decent run in the theater.
before being pushed out. This new use of VOD impacts the distribution of film
reorganizes the release pattern or film value chain (Acland, 2003).

**The Event Movie**

The terms blockbuster and event movie are used interchangeably throughout
most literature. However, for my purposes I am defining a blockbuster in the
traditional sense, as a movie that is economically successful within a short period of
time whether it was marketed that way or it was a sleeper. I am defining an event
movie as a blockbuster movie that would be marketed as such and could not be a
sleeper. In other words, an event movie is a blockbuster but a blockbuster does not
have to be an event movie. To further illustrate, *Jaws* was the first blockbuster due
in large part to its successful primetime TV marketing but it was not an event movie,
again *Star Wars* would be considered the first here (PBS, 2001). *Star Wars: The
Empire Strikes Back* (1980) would be the first movie to be marketed as an event
movie and have a midnight release.

While the earlier midnight movies in African American cinema and cult films
were representations of marginalized culture, *Star Wars* marked the beginning of
the cross over to a commercialized endeavor. The types of cinema exhibition that
had surrounded the midnight hour before were created due to grassroots needs or
social needs of the society (whether good or bad) and then these movies turned into
events and midnight premieres used as publicity for the movie company, not
because of and social needs. While *Star Wars* may have had a legitimate scarcity in
its midnight showings, there were plenty of consumer goods to go along with the
movie. Today’s midnight premieres are so saturated that they have become
commodified. Benjamin (2008) discusses the reproduction of art in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he says that by recreating the work of art it loses aura. While this may be true of film and television anyway because the viewer is not seeing the original work of art, it is even more so when there are multiple showings at the same time. What used to be a special and legitimately scarce event, the midnight movie, is now a mass-produced event, not an original.

However, I struggle like other scholars have in defining this specifically for *Star Wars*. There is a clear dedication by a select group of fans to travel to see this movie (Hardin, 2008), but it is also a blockbuster. For the purpose of *Star Wars* and early event movies that may have had midnight releases I would argue that the midnight showing in particular was still part of a cult-like experience. Only the serious fans would wait or travel to see a movie at a time when there was a legitimate scarcity of the film showing.

It was not until the implementation of digital cinema that this changed. It allowed for a wider opening and the movie to play on more screens in a complex at once. To get people to come to something that it so readily available, however, there must be successful marketing strategies. One thing to consider here is artificial scarcity. Artificial scarcity enhances the perceived value of the product (Lynn, 1991). Any commodity will be desired as long as it’s unavailable. The audience has to believe that coming to see a movie at midnight will somehow give them something different than if they waited. Marketing the event as a must see creates a fear of missing out, people want to be able to participate in the conversation in a social setting or what is referred to as the water cooler effect. Fans also like to be the
first people to see the movie so that no one else can tell them about it and they can experience it for themselves first. Besides the event itself theaters take part in selling special edition drinks and popcorn buckets to the fan, making it a commodified experience. I will discuss this more in the next chapter.

With the potential to fill every single theater in a multiplex with a movie premiere event, it is an experience that is now available to everyone, reaching beyond the fan base. There is no more waiting in line, camping out, or needing to buy the tickets in advance. Digital technology also makes it easy to have early showings for any movie, not just the blockbusters. This is a big step for niche blockbuster fans. Being able to see a movie at midnight so often and easily is the commodity that comes with digital cinema.

It is exciting for the viewer to think about how they’re sitting with hundreds of other people in the theater, thousands at the complex, and even more in other theater complexes across the country, all consuming the same movie at the same time. It gives the illusion of community. (A novel feeling to many considering television broadcasting no longer provides this due to DVRs.) Even though there is no direct interaction in the theater there is the sense of others through laughter, crying, and yelling from the crowd. Many scholars have tried to explain this interaction through theories such as emotional contagion (ex. Coplan, 2006; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993) While no evidence can be found to support the claim of emotional contagion, there is no doubt that the real vs. the virtual audience is a unique experience.
Fans who identify with others in the audience may add the movie experience to their cultural capital. The fan community outside of the theater can be thought of as a brand community. For example, those that are fans of *Twilight* will have consumed other texts of the brand. With respect to brand, community is no longer defined by geography but is “a common understanding of a shared identity” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The problem with the event movie being available to such a wide audience is for those who identify with the brand, those who are not fans penetrate the fans’ sense of community. Before the wide release and saturation of early premieres the community would have been more cohesive. The people that dressed as their favorite characters, for example, would be together in one or two theaters instead of spread out over seven. The understanding of the prior texts would make a more cohesive reaction and understanding feeding the enjoyment for the fans.

These other people that attend are not “legitimate” fans (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). They are not fans of the text itself and are using the brand for the wrong reasons. The industry markets it as such a big event that people who know nothing about the brand want to participate, but this is where Hollywood makes money. Participating in the event allows these other non-fans to have a social experience and be part of an event. The bigger the event, the more people go. Attending first means that no one else can ruin the story for the viewer and they can participate in conversations about the popular subject.

Although it took over a decade, digital technology is now changing the industry’s bottom line by creating new fan experiences and communities. Digital
technology provides novel attractions and interactions for the audience and fans. Whether expanding an audience base or molding a new one, the Hollywood industry does not pass up an opportunity to engage with these audience members and create new communities. Hollywood has been successful with its own adaptations, in sustaining its media platforms, and getting people off the couch and out to the movies.
CHAPTER 3.

Paratexts

In addition to the larger events that go with the blockbuster movie there are also many consumer products both at the events themselves and surrounding the movie. These, along with many other products, by-products, or items in association with the movie can be considered “paratexts.” Although blockbusters have become a popular topic to study in the recent past, these other artifacts are often ignored in studies. Gray (2010) gives one of the most up to date accounts on paratexts or the world of film beyond film. He approaches his research from a case study perspective for specific films.

Adapted from previous works and word root definitions, Gray states that “paratexts are not simply ad-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them.” (p.6) Paratexts often accompany what some might consider “main texts” like films and television shows, and can include a variety of “official” forms (like publicity materials) and “unofficial” (like fan fiction). For the purposes of this paper these paratexts will consist of not only the merchandise available at midnight events but also the event as a whole and the ads or posters that promote the event, including any social media campaigns.

Though the economic goals of the film itself may not outweigh the cultural value that can be found surrounding the text, it is harder to argue that the economic goals of the box office are not outweighed by the sale of merchandise to the fans.

The multiple ways that fans are marketized, including paratextual merchandising,
illustrates the commodification of the industry here and shows the true distinction of the midnight event from the midnight movies of the past.

Matt Hills’ (2003) claim in his cult vs. blockbuster argument for Star Wars fans is that perhaps what makes the movie so commercialized is the successful sale of merchandise to the fans. The fans feed into the franchising due to their love for the metatext, or the main text. Therefore, their love is what drives the commercial success and not the other way around. If fans willingly buy into the products of the franchise, then the controversy is not the purchasing of these paratexts but in how the film and the paratexts are being sold to them, for example through artificial scarcity.

**Promotional Marketing**

One area that generates many paratexts is promotional marketing. Discussing promotional material brings us back to the beginning of the blockbuster era or what Schatz (2008) refers to as the rise of New Hollywood. Jaws was the first movie to have a successful television campaign. This commercial success was continued with Star Wars, the first blockbuster franchise. Batman (1989) was the first movie and franchise to use the total marketing package, “the marketing, the tie-ins, the merchandising, the international.” (Schatz, 2008 p. 28)

Today, blockbusters use all of those things and more. The Internet opens up infinite possibilities for advertising. Some older ways of marketing are even being repurposed. For example, before midnight premieres sometimes there are pre-screenings, screenings of the movie months in advance so the studio can take the audience feedback into consideration before officially releasing the film. Pre-
screenings have existed in Hollywood for decades, and while the studio always received feedback from fans, now they can promote early screenings, like midnight movies, even more successfully. This past December, in 2012, Warm Bodies held early screenings in major U.S. cities. They used the early screenings as a promotional opportunity to encourage people who had seen the movie to post on Twitter about it. According to the Warm Bodies Facebook page, those who posted had a chance to win a chat experience with the cast if they indicated what they thought of the early showing. Over the past year, there have been quite a few early screening campaigns. A notably successful one was for Pitch Perfect. According to Variety, its feedback during the early screening campaign was so positive that the movie had a limited release a week early (Stewart, 2012). These pre-screenings may be reminiscent of the earlier midnight premieres where fans had to travel for the event since these pre-screenings occurred only in major cities. These pre-screenings, like the midnight movie premieres can be considered a paratextual experience themselves, separate from experiencing the actually movie. Given the intentions of the movie industry in these pre-screenings to use the fans in a promotional campaign, however, fans are not only gaining cultural capital but are also being used as a corporate tool.

Not all movies have pre-screenings but regardless of the type of movie or targeted audience, new online strategies have been helpful in creating marketing buzz for movies. According to Variety (Marich, 2012), the online marketing for the movie about a stuffed animal best friend called Ted ---- which included funny Twitter and Facebook postings such as “My Wild Night with Ted” campaign that
allowed users to insert Ted in their photo -- proved beneficial to overall marketing. These campaigns got *Ted* 5.9 million likes on Facebook and 550,000 followers on Twitter.

For midnight movies in particular, the midnight show is advertised after the trailer on TV in the week prior to the release. For example, there might be an add-on at the end of the trailer saying, “midnight showings in select theaters.” Facebook users that were fans of *Twilight* were encouraged to share a status if they bought their midnight tickets to *Breaking Dawn Part II*. An extreme example of midnight promotion is releasing the preview at midnight. During summer 2012 the full-length preview was released for *The Dark Knight Rises*, but fans could only see it at the midnight premiere of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and only in IMAX theaters. There are many instances of this type of promotion. Another example is the revealing of the logo for the next installment of *The Hunger Games* franchise, *Catching Fire*. This was revealed at the midnight premiere of *Breaking Dawn Part II*. However, revealing a logo is not exactly comparable to an extended preview. While it is unlikely that *Hunger Games* fans attended the *Breaking Dawn* premiere just to see the logo, the same cannot be said for other anticipated previews. In the documentary *George Lucas vs. The People* (Philippe, 2010) *Star Wars* fans did just that, during interviews many of them indicated they bought tickets to *Wing Commander* just to see the *Star Wars: Episode I* trailer. The *Wing Commander* example is the perfect way to illustrate the importance of these paratexts. Fans essentially purchased the *Wing Commander* text or mega text for the *Star Wars* paratexts.
Again, looking at the suggestion that fans will promote these things online simply because they love the movie or story seems fine. They can feed into the machine and fuel it. However when the Star Wars movies were first released for the midnight show there was a real scarcity due to the limitations of film.

**In the Theater**

*Harry Potter* is a perfect example of a movie that has almost any possible type of paratext associated with it. It lends itself to costumes, toys, action figures, theme parks, unique trivia, and University Quidditch teams. Movies that are not as fantastical as the wizarding world of *Harry Potter* still lend themselves to paratexts and extra textual experiences, such as the real life town of Forks, Washington for *Twilight* (Deane, 2009). While *Twilight* may not so easily lend itself to a theme park, there's a real life town that can be toured and that's just as good if not better for some fans. Rather than Quidditch teams, there is Team Edward vs. Team Jacob. If someone feels that they are too old to sport their team favorite on their shirt then there's other age-appropriate way to send your message. Those in the 21 plus crowd can order a twist on the long island iced tea and get a red one for Team Jacob or a blue on for Team Edward.

These marketing ploys to entice people into the theater have created the insertion of the hospitality industry (Dixon & Foster, 2011) in the theater including the addition of bars and restaurants in the theater, accompanied by themed movie menus. These enhancements add an additional level of paratext for the fan to buy into. For additional options such as 21 plus sections, this creates a greater pool of prospective audience members with something for an older, wealthier group. The
pleasure that these audience members get when they partake in this VIP experience is more than just enjoyment, it is escapism. These VIP areas provide a way for spectators to ‘differentiate themselves from the masses’ (Yancovich & Stringer, 2003) For the fans to say that they had that unique experience adds to the cultural capital of that fan.

Those who attend the midnight premieres are the ones that get to experience new themes first. The overall experience may not remain unique forever, though. Many theaters are adding on to the concessions in various ways. In fact, ticket prices have not increased over the past few years, but profits have. This is due in part to concessions as well as to advertising and event programming like the Metropolitan Opera (Lisanti, 2013). Theaters are capitalizing on food and drink and taking steps toward the hospitality industry and these event movies are offering the perfect opportunities for them to take advantage of that.

**Home Video**

Just as the movie theater provides all these paratexts for the audience to experience, home video does the same from the initial store release to the bonus feature on a disc or download. Barbara Klinger (2006) writes in her book that it’s a constant back and forth with technology in the movie theater versus home theater. Digital technology not only affected the movie industry in the way films are shown in theaters but also home video, first through the DVD. DVDs are faster, easier, and less expensive to make than VHS. When they were first released, DVDs had no competition and easily took over the market. Because of the ease and cost effectiveness of making DVDs, new movies as well as older remastered movies were
released. Affordability sparked an era of consumer film collecting (Schauer, 2012). DVDs were marketed to the consumer directly. In addition to affordability and easy storage, this new digital platform created a new experience for the viewer allowing them to interact with the DVD. Viewers could move through the video frame by frame, easily skipping around the content. This created a whole new level of intimacy with the text. While Hollywood had to pay more attention in detail due to freeze framing, additional DVD sales boosted profits. Special features and other bonus material are included on the discs for films such as The Lord of the Rings (Thompson, 2007). The success of these bonus materials spawned a new world of paratexts including “making of” specials on HBO (Harries, 2002).

Makers of The Matrix took it a step further: fans bought the movie so they could watch it to access a live online chat with the filmmakers (Proffitt, Tchoi, & McAllister, 2007). The production company profited from the DVDs and created a corporate controlled community, which is similar to the simultaneous viewing today at midnight premieres.

The beginnings of digital technology in the theater coincided with the development of and rise in popularity of the DVD. The DVD became the new home video platform in a VHS dominated market. Unlike the VHS, DVDs did not have any competition. DVD production is faster and less expensive than VHS production. This affordability is reflected in the market (Dixon & Foster, 2011). DVDs allow viewers to move easily through content. They may advance through the film frame by frame (Thompson, 2007). This digital format also presents the potential for bonus content,
providing further interactions with the text and paratexts as a new experience for the audience.

Blu-ray allows for even better quality and greater capacity for bonus material. Special edition DVDs and Blu-rays have been released for old movies with new content. Even second screen apps have enhanced this experience, specifically by Disney Second Screen (Chris, 2011). The release of these event movies on DVD and Blu-ray within store release parties paired with unique merchandise mimic the theater release of event films. Although streaming is now a popular way to obtain new movies, there have not been many attempts to pair this technology with ancillary products and fan communities.

Retailers are cutting down their DVD and Blu-ray stock and now carry mostly new releases (Schauer, 2012). With the option to stream or download movies to electronic devices, DVD sales have waned. The release pattern for DVDs is similar to that of the movie theater in the way the industry measures sales for the opening week or weekend. There is no rush for the fans to buy something that does not have a limited supply. Digital downloads are unlimited to the online buyers.

The industry has developed new marketing strategies to encourage people to buy DVDs and Blu-rays, especially during the first day or week of release. There has been a recent surge of midnight release parties in retail stores, mirroring the midnight movie premiere. The parties are one-time-only events marketed toward the fans of franchises. Big blockbuster event movies reflect the success of their theater runs in their home video releases. Wal-Mart is just one retailer that held a midnight release party for The Hunger Games. At some Wal-Mart locations stars
from *The Hunger Games* movie appeared to meet the fans. Exclusive footage played starting an hour before release and trading cards were given out to the first group of people to purchase the disc with random packs containing stars’ signatures (Bertacchi, 2012). There was also an option to buy a special edition of the DVD/Blu-ray with a plastic Mockingjay pendant replica (Schillaci, 2012).

A similar event was held for *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1* (Hatmaker, 2012). Incentives included exclusive preview footage of *Breaking Dawn Part 2* and a *Twilight* cake. The special wedding edition DVD/Blu-ray included a cloth poster of Edward and Bella. While some locations of these releases were more of a party than others, they still provided an opportunity for fans to interact with other fans in their geographic community.

**A New Fan Market**

There have been many movies and TV shows geared towards the teen audience, but only a couple of movies have reached blockbuster success with the female audience. Aubrey, Walus, and Click (2010) compare *Twilight* to *Titanic* in its success with the teenage and young adult female audiences. *Titanic*, although prized for James Cameron’s cinematography, was none-the-less praised by the fans for their love of Leonardo DiCaprio (Nash & Lahti, 1999). According to Box Office Mojo (n.d), *Titanic* is still one of the highest grossing movies of all time, in 2013 sitting at the number two spot for all time unadjusted domestic grosses and surpassed only by Cameron himself with the technical masterpiece, *Avatar*. Though *Twilight* was not as successful as *Titanic*, the last four installments of the series remain in the top 100 all time unadjusted domestic box office grosses.
Many of the other top grossing movies, such as *Star Wars* and comic book movies, and other movies and genres normally associated with comic-con are fanboy genres. What is unique about *Twilight*, that was not the case with *Titanic*, is a crossover from cult movie fan culture to the mainstream. Monsters lend themselves well to conventions and collector’s items. It was this crossover that enabled *Twilight* to have successfully created the fangirl (Click, Aubrey, & Behm-Morawitz, 2010). As Click et al. discuss, this new fangirl franchise hasn’t been accepted well by critics (who are mostly men) and fanboys dislike the girls encroaching on their territory at events, such as Comic Con. The fangirls’ dedication to *Twilight* has been described with words such as “fever, madness, and hysteria” (Click, Aubrey, & Behm-Morawitz, 2010). Regardless of what people think about it, Summit has successfully created a blockbuster franchise.

It is surprising that the influence of the female audience has not noticeably impacted the box office more often. Summit Entertainment got the system down pat with their marketing of *Twilight*. Summit attempted to use the same formula with *Warm Bodies*. In *Warm Bodies*, they have something unique, a zombie love story. This situation has not been attempted previously in mainstream cinema. The closest thing to it would be *Shaun of the Dead*. While *Shaun of the Dead* may be classified as a romantic zombie comedy or rom zom com for short, in that case it was not the zombie that was the love interest or the protagonist. Finding the story is the first step necessary in the formula for producing another fangirl movie. The story is found easily by taking it from a book and transforming it into a marketable item. Next, they need to advertise the movie. The least expensive way to do this is through
fan labor. Fans, as prosumers, work to promote the movie in various ways on social networks and through word of mouth. Finally, Summit uses one of the oldest tricks in the book; star power. If they do not want to hire a well-known actor to pay top dollar, then they make their own star. This was done in Twilight and it is being attempted again for Warm Bodies.

Fangirls, like any other fans, like to accumulate cultural capital even if the object itself is not unique. Though many people own something like the DVD/Blu-ray it’s a way of showing brand loyalty by adding to their collection. The DVD collector in the digital age is the new cinephile (Klinger, 2006). While one particular item may not be unique, their whole collection or the extent of the collection is what makes them distinct (Schauer, 2012).

The Hunger Games DVD and Blu-ray sets present a challenge to the collector. The special editions released in different stores have different exclusive bonus features and merchandise. In order to have it all, the fan may have to buy multiple different DVD or Blu-ray sets. This is different than a re-release to reboot a series such as The Matrix (Proffitt, Tchoi, & McAllister, 2007).

The DVD releases mimic the theatrical releases in their midnight release parties. While midnight releases have been done for many movies the Hollywood industry has recently been feeding the demands of the fangirls. While the DVD itself could be considered merchandise or a paratext, along with the release party there are additional merchandise/paratexts available with the DVD/Blu-ray release. Target offered limited edition replicas for the fans of The Hunger Games including a 14-carat gold replica of Katniss’ Mockingjay pin of which only 100 were available for
$999 each. There was a leather replica of Katniss’ hunting jacket, with 100 available at $349 each. There were also lithographs autographed by 10 top cast members, including stars Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson and Liam Hemsworth, with 100 available for $699 each (Vieira, 2012). Klinger (2006) says there is a constant back and forth between the theater and home video. Although Klinger was mainly talking about the technology it does not exclude paratexts. As these other products and experiences continue to develop it’s certain that some version of them will be in both the theater and at home.
CONCLUSION

If midnight or early movie releases persist this could further affect movie release patterns, fan experiences, and marketing strategies. According to Variety, *The Avengers* opening weekend gross was an all-time box office record of $200 million (Stewart, 2012, May 6). *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* held the previous record at $169 million. As Stewart points out, this is nearly a 20% jump. If you consider the midnight $18.7 million of *The Avengers* grosses that’s about 10%, an arguable edge against movies that don’t have the opportunity for midnight showings.

As time goes by, the development of the digital era continues and more changes will occur. We may see more convergence in the theater with other media, such as the second screen or video games. There may also be more integration with the hospitality industry, including the bars and restaurants that have already started to emerge within the theaters. Though the event film may change to focus on more than the movie alone, its success does not foreshadow the disappearance of the cinema anytime soon. As for the fan communities that have been saturated with others attending the events, perhaps they will find refuge in movie marathons from a franchise or more comic con type events.

Home video does seem to be heading toward streaming and digital downloads. To ensure the purchase of films, the industry might implement changes to win a trip to Hollywood for the next movie premiere or a similar event if the fan purchases the movie on the first day, for example. The in store parties could be
replaced by online chats. As for the retail stores, they could focus more on the ancillary products in relation to the movie’s release.

Perhaps there will be a way to stream the movie, or part of the movie prior to purchase in the future. For example Justin Timberlake’s album was available to listen to for free on iTunes before anyone could buy it. Although this would not work in the same way with movies, extra long sneak peeks, or partial movies would serve the same purpose.

Libraries have made learning videos available to stream from their databases so this is another possibility for the future of home video. The technology that enables one to rent a streamed movie is already used for on-demand networks so the technology already exists for the libraries to use it as well.

For the fans that like to display their collections, video streaming poses a problem. Virtual movies call for virtual displays. Instead of having all the DVDs in a row, or collections displayed on a shelf perhaps these extras can be integrated into the online communities. There have already been some instances of cultural capital heading in this direction. Facebook added a feature in March 2013 (Darwell, 2013) that allows the user to add movies that they’ve watched, and ones that they want to watch. The user can also do this for books, TV shows and music. There is also a social networking site called Get Glue where the user can check in to different TV shows and movies they are watching among other things. During certain promotional times they would be able to earn a sticker for taking part in that event. The stickers are displayed under the user’s profile, but they gain so many they can also have the actual stickers sent to them in the mail.
The role of social networks may also affect the future of how movies are viewed in the theater. TV shows have had great success building hype with the use of Twitter both before during and after the show. It would not be surprising to see a social network adapted to use during the screening of a movie in the theater.

Since it is no longer a cult fan only experience for the midnight movie premieres, these limited prizes such as trips to the premiere, or even film-induced tourism could be what sets the cult fans apart from the rest of the audience in the future. A Twilight fans journey to Forks, WA could be similarly compared to those that traveled to Seattle for the midnight premiere of The Empire Strikes Back.

The difference now between past fan generations and today’s fan generations is the speed with which the industry churns out the next franchise. There was a balance in the past between cult or grassroots fandom and the blockbuster franchise aspect of the film. As fans stated in the George Lucas vs. The People documentary (Philippe, 2010) and as Matt Hills (2003) suggests, perhaps the fans don’t mind buying into these commodities because they truly enjoy the movie and story world. The Twilight books were only published a few years prior to the movie. The first book was released in 2005 and the first movie in 2008. Compare that to The Lord of the Rings where the books for the trilogy were published in 1954 and 1955 and the first movie didn’t come out until 2001 (Thompson, 2007). There was a lot more time for the fan base to build and grow into a cult. The movie industry is taking away the chance for new stories to become a part of culture on its own and has turned these stories into commodities.
Perhaps even the early 1900’s movie theater gimmicks, such as dishware or decorating the lobby (Gomery, 1992), were a type of commodification, too. The people who went to events like the Star Wars premiere in Seattle had to be serious about wanting to be there. The overall difference between the then and now of the industry is that now they have the technology to mass produce these products and movie-going experiences. Therefore, any scarcity in experience or product is false. That false perception is created by the company, and is not a creation of the grassroots fan experiences.

If these audience experiences are examined over time there is a degree of commodification which is at its highest now. The blockbuster movies are not determined as much from a grassroots following because the industry doesn’t give the fans enough time to establish this on their own. Furthermore, as Gray (2010) suggests, much of our knowledge about a particular text doesn’t even come from the text itself but from all the paratexts such as Internet promotions, and product tie-ins making much of our knowledge about the art of commercial film.
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APPENDIX

Glossary of Terms

Blockbuster – A big budget movie with a wide release and significant expected box office income.

Commodity – A hard to obtain item that is desired because it is not easy to get.

Cult – A dedicated subset of a population. For example Rocky Horror has a cult following of fans that dress up and bring props to showings. They usually participate frequently.

Event movie - A blockbuster movie that would be marketed as such and could not be a sleeper. In other words, an event movie is a blockbuster but a blockbuster does not have to be an event movie.

Niche blockbuster - Intended for smaller fan groups or niche audiences. Niche blockbusters are not necessarily big budget movies and while they may have a fairly wide release, they do not expect as much return from box office sales as traditional blockbusters. Instead, they make money on ancillary products sold to this same loyal fan group. This is different than a cult movie because a niche blockbuster will cash in on a subgroup of a population immediately following the film, but it may or may not stand the test of time to become a cult classic.

Midnight movie – This term has been used in the past to describe different genres but for the purposes of this thesis it is referring to current midnight premieres for anticipated blockbuster movies.

Paratext – Consumer products along with many other products, by-products, or items in association with the movie. “They create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them.” (Gray, 2010)

Sleeper – A movie that was not intended to be a huge blockbuster success but ended up being one.

Tentpole – The movie in a subset of movies, usually during a season, that makes a significant amount more than the rest of the films. Thus symbolizing a tentpole, holding up the rest of the season.