

Chapter Eight

“What Film is Your Film Like”? Negotiating Authenticity in the Distributive Seriality of the *Zombi* Franchise

Mark McKenna

Unlike its archetypal cinematic relatives, the vampire, the werewolf, and even the mummy (the creature to which it is perhaps most indebted), the contemporary zombie has had a relatively short existence. Where early iterations of the cinematic zombie, in films such as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Torneur's *I Walked like a Zombie* (1943) were drawn from Haitian mythology and the undead slaves of voodoo tradition, contemporaneous depictions across popular media like *28 Days Later* (2002), the *Resident Evil* video-games (1996-), and the TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-) have tended to follow the blueprint established by George A. Romero in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the sequels that followed in its wake. Romero's zombie has been widely accepted as an apocalyptic cypher that provides social commentary in times of political unrest, but the allegorical nature of these film's almost came about by accident when *Night of the Living Dead* was released following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King. *Night of the Living Dead* famously concludes with the murder of its lead, the black protagonist Ben, played by theatre actor Duane Jones. It was uncommon at that time for a film to have a black lead actor, and the combination of his death and the images of zombies 'hangin' from the poplar trees', like the 'Strange Fruit' of Billy Holiday's 1939 song, could not help but invoke lynching and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. Romero has famously rejected the idea that film was intended as an explicit political commentary, arguing that Jones was simply the best actor that they knew and that they only learned of the assassination of King after the film was completed on the journey

from Pittsburgh to New York to find a distributor. Nevertheless, these parallels have given the film a political resonance that has only continued, compounded by Romero's appeals to these kinds of political readings in the subsequent entries in the series that are seen to offer commentaries on capitalism, consumerism, gender roles and social media.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, there has been a noticeable rise in the visibility and profitability of the zombie across all media platforms, with many continuing to draw political parallels with the events of September 11th in the United States and July 7th in the United Kingdom (McSweeney, 2010, Wetmore Jr., 2011). Behind the political flexibility of the creature, as well as the potential for progressive ideological readings, also exist economic imperatives. It could be argued that the presence and heightened visibility of the contemporary zombie can be attributed to its potential for commercial success, and this is something that can be seen in the eagerness of distributors worldwide to capitalise on the genre's popularity through a process of retitling and re-releasing narratively unrelated films as sequels to popular releases in promotional strategies that began over two decades before the turn of the twenty-first century.

This chapter will consider the ways in which distributors, first in Italy, and then subsequently in the United Kingdom, Germany, Thailand and the United States, have all contributed to the formation of overlapping, unofficial zombie franchises that has occurred through the practice of retitling films in a way that disingenuously signifies them as 'proper' series instalments which, in fact, are not only disconnected in narrative terms, but also were produced by different production companies. Using this series of unrelated films, I will examine how an expanded understanding of genre that is specific to Italy, and what Stuart Henderson calls 'the conceptual series', that is, films that 'repeat basic narrative situations ... but never carry over characters or continue narrative strands from previous films' (2014, 32), allowed distributors worldwide to adopt and adapt films into the series. In the final section, I

will explore how consumers negotiate the commercially imposed seriality of the unofficial ‘distributive franchise’; by which I mean a kind of ‘corporate authorship’ that is discursively appended not by official producers or legal frameworks, but by distributors seeking to capitalise on the success of an original film that they do not control as intellectual property. Through an exploration of this ‘illegitimate’ series, and in many cases, illegal, it is then possible to illustrate how this kind of outlaw franchising is informed by a sub-cultural adoption of Italy’s expanded notion of genre, through which, in lieu of official copyright, priority is given to other filmic elements as a means of constructing ‘aura’ and ‘authenticity’.

Sequels, Retitling and the Adaptative Practice of European Exploitation

Re-titling is a relatively common practice in the transnational film industry and, from country to country, films will often be given a new title to ensure a greater cultural (and therefore commercial) resonance. Ordinarily, this practice is mobilized to remove nationally-specific associations, as was the case with the Marvel Studios’ film, *Avengers Assemble* (2012), which was retitled for release in the United Kingdom from *The Avengers* to avoid confusion with the 1960s British television series of the same name. Occasionally this process occurs as the result of attempts to ensure a broader cultural appeal, as was likely the case with the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2010), retitled from its original literal Swedish title of *Men Who Hate Women* (2010), in an attempt to side-step some of the feminist leanings of the novel.

The most common instances of retitling can be seen within the production and distribution of the exploitation film, where films are produced inexpensively for maximum return by routinely ‘piggy-backing’ on the success of another film. Often, this piggybacking takes the form of narratively similar films that are produced to capitalise on the commercial appeal of any given film, a strategy that I.Q. Hunter (2009) has argued can be considered a form of adaptation. Although in broad terms, adaptation usually refers to texts that are translated intermedially, Linda Hutcheon argues that remakes can be considered ‘same-

platform adaptations', arguing that 'not all adaptations involve a shift of medium or mode of engagement, although many do' (2006, 170).

Hunter explores the wave of so-called 'Jawsplotation' films that followed the massive box office success of *Jaws* in 1975. Steven Spielberg's blockbuster stimulated the production of series of inexpensive exploitation films worldwide that riff on the generic tropes established in *Jaws*, firstly in the United States with thrillers such as *Orca* (1977), and *Mako: The Jaws of Death* (1976), *Great White Death* (1981), and porn parody, *Gums* (1976). In Mexico, there was *Tintorera: Killer Shark* (1977), whilst in Italy it reinvigorated interest in related 'creature features' like *Tentacles* (1977), and the more obviously directly inspired *The Shark Hunter* (1979), *The Last Shark* (1981), and *Monster Shark* (1984), and later films like *Deep Blood* (1990) and *Cruel Jaws* (1995), the latter example released in the domestic Italian market as *Jaws 5: Cruel Jaws*. In his study, Hunter observes that 'imitation is, of course, standard practice across all entertainment media [and] Hollywood minimises risk by sticking closely to generic formulae and updating familiar properties in disguised versions' (2009,10). The main difference between Hollywood's approach and these 'mockbusters' is that exploitation cinema is often simply less concerned with disguising the source than it is with capitalising on the success and appeal that the source provides by highlighting it in order to find purchase in the cinematic market.

The way in which these types of films aim to draw attention to their sources becomes explicit through the construction of paratextual associations enacted by the retitling of otherwise unrelated films, as seen with *Jaws 5: Cruel Jaws*. Though less prevalent elsewhere, much of Italy's domestic film production has historically been managed by responding to the box-office appeal of domestic or international film successes by producing their own sequels. For example, a home-grown success like Sergio Corbucci's seminal spaghetti western *Django* (1966) showcases this adaptive process in microcosm. The Spaghetti Western itself was an

industrial response to the enduring commercial appeal of the imported American Western, stimulating a cycle of films that was produced by the Italian studios between 1962 and 1980 that saw the production of almost five hundred films (Fisher 2011, 2). *Django* was an Italian western produced to capitalise on the success of Sergio Leone's 'Dollars trilogy', but when the film proved to be a success, it spawned more than thirty unofficial sequels, with the protagonist portrayed by sixteen different actors, with the only connection typically being signified paratextually by invoking the 'Django' brand in titles such as, for example: *Django Kill...If You Live to Shoot!* (1967), *Django, Prepare a Coffin* (1968), *Django the Bastard* (1969), and many more.

As unusual and illegitimate as this practice might seem to Anglo-American audiences, Italy has a long tradition of promoting films in this manner, and the practice is not limited to domestically-produced films. American imports would often receive similar treatment, with the production of unofficial sequels or unrelated films that are retitled in an attempt to capitalise on the domestic appeal of commercially profitable imports. While these sequels might appear to be cheap 'knock-offs' that disregard international intellectual property rights, they were a vital part of the Italian film industry for a long time. High profile horror film imports like *Alien* (1979), *The Evil Dead* (1982), and the zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) were, to draw from Henderson, 'conceptually serialised' by the Italian film industry through this process (2014, 32). For instance, some films borrowed narrative and generic elements from Ridley Scott's *Alien*, which received the Italian unofficial sequel treatment with Luigi Cozzi's *Alien Contamination* (1980, internationally released as *Contamination*), as well as other films that were retitled to appear as if they were legitimate instalments in the official series, including *Alien Terror* (1980, retitled in Italy to *Alien 2 Sulla Terra / Alien 2: On Earth*). Similarly, the success of both *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *The Evil Dead II* (1987)—released in Italy as *La Casa* and *La Casa 2*—contributed to an unofficial extension to the series with the inclusion of

unrelated Italian films, *La Casa 3* (1988, globally released as *Ghosthouse*; *La Casa 4* [1988]), globally released as *Witchery*; and *La Casa 5* (1990, globally released as *Beyond Darkness*). Perhaps more unusual is that the Italian version of the Evil Dead series culminated with two unrelated American films that were themselves part of a different series, that is, the horror-comedy franchise *House*. Thus, *House II: The Second Story* (1987) and *House III: The Horror Show* (1989) were released in Italy as *La Casa 6* and *La Casa 7* respectively, meaning that the films that make up the *La Casa* franchise ignore the third (official) instalment in the Evil Dead series, *Army of Darkness* (1992), while also demonstrating a willingness in Italy to permit generically associated films entry into a pre-established series that is unlikely to have been accepted elsewhere.

While this practice may at first appear disingenuous to Anglo-Americans, it is reliant upon a broader cultural understanding of genre that is specific to Italy. The peculiarity of Italian film culture often destabilises traditional notions of genre and suggests that it may not offer a sufficient framework through which to understand the specificities of the Italian film industry. In his introduction to the Giallo (a subset of the thriller and horror genres particular to Italian literature and film), Gary Needham notes that the Italian concept of *filone* is capable of challenging Anglo-American preconceptions of a fixed 'taxonomic imaginary' (2002). Instead, he suggests that *filone* can be used to describe genres and cycles as well as currents and trends. Mikel J. Koven later frames discussion of the concept through the phrases 'sullo stesso filone' (in the tradition of) or 'seguire il filone' (to follow in the tradition of), adding that the nearest English equivalent would be 'in the vein of' (2006, 5). These definitions provide some perspective on ways in which Italian audiences and producers appeared to embrace what would have otherwise been dismissed as inauthentic in the Anglo-American marketplace. There is little that could be more in the tradition of a film, than a sequel, regardless of whether this is a 'proper' follow-up (at least, in the Italian context).

Adaptation and Narrative Fidelity: Franchising *Dawn of the Dead*

The practice of franchising unrelated zombie films began with Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, the success of which stimulated a cycle of zombie films in Italy from the 1970s onwards that would take the practice of *filone* outside the national borders of the country. Similar to the success of the Spaghetti Western in the 1960s and 1970s, the zombie film was responsible for much of Italy's output during the late 1970s and 1980s, including films like *Nightmare City* (1980), *Zombie Holocaust* (1979), and *Burial Ground: The Nights of Terror* (1981). Although these films are not connected, they have nevertheless been incorporated into the *Zombi* franchise as sequels to either *Zombi* (1978) (*Dawn of the Dead*), or *Zombi 2* (1979) (*Zombie Flesh Eaters*) not only in Italy, but also in Germany, Thailand and the United States.

Though the *Zombi* series begins with *Dawn of the Dead*, Italian involvement in this franchise is more complicated than simply producing cheap 'knock-offs' or pseudo-sequels, as they had done with *Alien Contamination*. Italian horror director Dario Argento had helped George Romero develop the story and had assisted in securing the finance to support the production of *Dawn of the Dead*. In exchange, Argento retained control of the European cut of the film and received international distribution rights. Argento's edit was retitled as *Zombi*, and though it ignored any connection to Romero's first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*, its success ensured the production of an Italian produced sequel the following year. Hence, *Zombi 2* (1979) was neither narratively connected to the first film, nor was it connected to Argento or Romero; it was instead, the work of veteran director Lucio Fulci. The film would be sold globally as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*, becoming the inaugural entry in secondary zombie franchise that would be sold around the world.¹ Indeed, the global success of *Zombie Flesh Eaters* complicates our understanding of the film as neither simply 'official' or 'unofficial'. In Italy at least, the film can be seen as an unofficial sequel to Argento's cut of *Dawn of the Dead*, but

outside of this nationally specific context, the film marks the beginning of another series, and a franchise that exists in a liminal space that problematizes the binary between legitimacy and inauthenticity.

In the special features for the UK release of unofficial Alien sequel *Contamination*, director Luigi Cozzi states: ‘in Italy, when you bring a script to a producer, the first question he asks is not “what is your film like?” but “what film is your film like?” That’s the way it is, we can only make *Zombi 2*, never *Zombi (Dawn of the Dead)*’. However, despite Cozzi’s frustration at the apparent limitations that were imposed upon him under the Italian studio system, *Zombi 2* (or *Zombie Flesh Eaters* as it is more commonly known) is a film that succeeds despite being produced in this system of ‘filoni’, and despite being developed as a pseudo-sequel to *Dawn of the Dead*. While Cozzi mourned the limitations placed on the creativity of the Italian directors, the fact that *Zombie Flesh Eaters* would find worldwide commercial success and mark the beginning of a whole new franchise, suggests that even within this system of imitation there is an opportunity to rebrand these products as authentic in the international marketplace (though often at the expense of the removal of any suggestion of serial connections).

To understand how this complex and complicated series developed, it is necessary to first understand how a decision by George Romero in the production of *Dawn of the Dead* helped to stimulate the franchising of numerous unrelated films as sequels to his original series worldwide. *Dawn of the Dead* is a direct sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, and suggests that it takes place in the same story-world, despite making no direct reference to the characters or locales from the first film. Instead, it focuses on a different group of survivors and their struggle against the living dead. While this narrative device allowed Romero to foreground different issues—and contributed to his films being read as responses to racism, capitalism, consumerism, gender roles in society and social media—it also gave space for further

instalments that Romero had no involvement in through its lack of explicit narrative continuity. *Dawn of the Dead* is the official sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, which was followed by *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). This is what we might describe as ‘the Romero series’. As the series does not explicitly obey the logics of narrative continuity, as with a serial, but, rather, maps the survival of the human race and the response to the zombie epidemic over a forty-one year period, then this loosely connected series allows for the insertion of new instalments that were not created or authored by Romero. Tim Lucas describes *Dawn of the Dead* as a ‘non sequitur’ sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, by which he refers to the fact that it ‘shows how a different group of people react when the recently dead revive to satiate their hunger for warm, living flesh’ (quoted in Verevis 2010, 17). Conversely, there are multiple examples of Henderson’s ‘conceptual series’ which predate Romero such as Warner’s *Gold Diggers* (1933-38) and MGM’s *Broadway Melody* (1935-40), film series that ‘repeat basic narrative situations’ yet ‘never carry over characters or continue narrative strands from previous films’ (Henderson 2014, 32). Romero’s Dead films works likewise, a zombie series that lacks serial continuity, but maintains thematic and conceptual continuity, signalled by the temporality of each instalment title, most notably in the first three films (‘Night’, ‘Dawn’ and ‘Day’). I would argue that it is this temporal looseness, this dearth of serialization, that allowed sequels not authored by Romero to be incorporated into an alternative franchise by savvy distributors seeking to capitalise on a fictional association with the success of first film.

Mapping the Genre: ‘The Confusing as Fuck “Zombi” Series’

Zombi 2 was the first of the Italian sequels and was the most successful of these instalments, but to understand both the impact of this film, and the degree to which this practice of retitling and franchising has been adopted worldwide, it is useful to track the series in its various

incarnations by mapping the way in which these entries operate as chapters in several different franchise incarnations and back to Romero's seminal *Night of the Living Dead*, the film that marks the beginning of the official line. Through this process, what emerges is a complex, non-linear, and often overlapping history, that is often difficult to understand, revealingly described as 'the confusing as fuck *Zombi* series' online by fan-blogger Criterionmaster (2009). To assist readers in this, *Figure 1* offers a visual representation of the franchise cartography, essentially mapping the multiple lines in the series and their various intersections, along with the original titles, alternative titles, the country of origin for each film, and the country of origin for each *distributive franchise*.

[Figure 8.]

Since Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* represents the birthplace of the contemporary zombie, it is somewhat appropriate that it is also the point of origin from which all other zombie lines begin. The film was shot, directed and edited by George A. Romero, and was co-written by Romero and John Russo, and unlikely as it might seem nowadays, the film started out primarily as a comedy horror. Over a number of rewrites, the film was refined into something that more closely resembled the post-apocalyptic narrative of Richard Matheson novel *I am Legend* (1954), swapping vampires for the ghoulish undead, and in doing so, adding a contemporary archetypal villain to the horror canon. In 1978, after a clerical error left the film in the public domain, Romero (independent of Russo) returned to the series, and in collaboration with Dario Argento, produced *Dawn of the Dead*. Seven years later, Romero added *Day of the Dead* (1985), and completed what would for many years be a trilogy. However, almost two decades later, Romero returned to the series, adding *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), with plans to extend the series further before his death in 2017. Though there are still ardent fans that give priority to the first three films, referring to the series either as a coherent trilogy, or by dividing the films

into two trilogies, these six films present the official entries into the series, the six films that were written and directed by George A. Romero.

As already discussed, the success of *Dawn of the Dead* on its release in Italy inspired a flurry of creativity, with zombie films soon dominating production. *Dawn of the Dead*, or *Zombi* as it was known in Italy, soon had a sequel directed by veteran Italian exploitation director Lucio Fulcio, a seasoned Italian director who, at that time, was more famous for producing westerns, comedies and giallo films. Despite being unconnected to the Romero series, the importance of Fulci's *Zombi 2* should not be underestimated. Beyond its memorable set-pieces of zombies stumbling over the Brooklyn Bridge, an underwater sequence where a zombie attacks a shark, and the trauma of a wooden splinter being forced into the eye of a screaming Olga Karlatos, the film became successful worldwide, inspiring a further sequel in Italy, *Zombi 3* (1988), and became the first in a succession of films that would become known worldwide as the *Zombi* series.

In the United Kingdom, associations with the Romero series were removed, and the film was released as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*. Two versions of the film were released: a version that had been approved for cinematic screenings by the British Board of Film Censors (latterly the British Board of Film Classification), and later, an uncut version which restored all of the material that had been deemed too problematic for theatrical consumption by the BBFC (due to the fact that there was no regulatory body governing video in the UK at that time). The UK distributor VIPCO became embroiled in the so-called 'video nasties' furore in Britain in the early 1980s, and the film was banned under the Obscene Publications Act, and subsequently removed from the shelves. The categorisation as a 'video nasty' contributed to the film's notoriety (see McKenna 2020), and a decade later in 1992, the distributor VIPCO were able to re-release the film, a release that was later followed by *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2*, an official sequel in the Italian line and the film released in Italy as *Zombi 3*. Partially directed by Lucio

Fulci, and in the vein of Romero's conceptual series, the film was not an explicit narrative continuation, but focused on another pocket of survivors struggling against the zombie hordes. Recognising the trend, VIPCO decided to capitalise by releasing *Oltre la morte* (a.k.a. *After Death*) as *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (1988). These three films can be described as 'the British line'.

The films were then released in Thailand in a series that follows the order of release, with *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*), *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (*Zombi 3*), and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (*Oltre la morte*, a.k.a. *After Death*). However, they also added *Zombie Flesh Eaters 4* (1988) to the series, a previously unrelated film that was oddly retitled from its original title *Killing Birds* (*Uccelli assassin*).

When the series was released in America, the various branches became even more confusing as two different distributors released two different lines. Neither sequence, however, claims connection with Romero's series. Presumably, given the success of the Romero series, any association would have likely contributed to legal action against the distributor. In the absence of an official starting point, the first American series begins with *Zombi 2* (*Zombie Flesh Eaters*), which was anglicised to *Zombie 2* for the US market, with subsequent entries in the series following the lineage of releases in Thailand (though the numbering is changed, whereby number three becomes number four, and number four becomes number five). So, for the US series, *Zombi 3* (*Zombie Flesh Eaters 2*) is retitled to *Zombie 3*; *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (*Oltre la morte*, a.k.a. *After Death*) is retitled to *Zombie 4: After Death*; and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 4* (*Uccelli assassin / Killing Birds*) is retitled to *Zombie 5: Killing Birds*.

As if this wasn't confusing enough, the American experience of these films is further complicated by a second series released by -Z Video (a.k.a. Edde Entertainment) in the 1990s. Again, in the absence of an official starting point, *Zombi 2* was released as both part two, but also, perplexingly, as part one; two releases of the same film seemingly retitled to avoid a break

in numerical continuity. The series then broke away altogether from the established sequence previously seen in the Italian, British and Thai lines, and began to incorporate previously unrelated titles from Italy, Spain and France. *Zombie 3: Return of the Zombies* (1973) was an unrelated Spanish film directed by José Luis Merino and starring Paul Naschy, which was originally titled *The Hanging Woman (La orgía de los muertos)*; *Zombie 4: A Virgin Among the Living Dead* (1973) was a French / Spanish co-production directed by Jess Franco and is a film more widely known as *A Virgin Among the Living Dead (Christina, princesse de l'érotisme)*; *Zombie 5: Revenge in the House of Usher* (1982), again directed by Jess Franco, was an unrelated French release that was originally simply *Revenge in the House of Usher*; while *Zombie 6: Monster Hunter* (1981) was an Italian film directed by Joe D'Amato and originally released as *Absurd*, which was originally a sequel to the film that would be released as *Zombie 7*, Joe D'Amato's *Anthropophagus* (1980).

To add to the confusion related to the American line, the German series initially appears to follow the official trajectory, beginning with Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (retitled to *Zombie*), but the sequence avoids the Italian sequel, Fulci's *Zombi 2* (a film released separately in Germany as *Woodo: The Dread Island of Zombies*). Instead, the series follows the official Romero line, continuing with *Day of the Dead*, albeit retitled to *Zombie 2*, but then adds *Zombi 3*, which since it was the official sequel to *Zombi 2*, would perhaps have better been released in Germany as *Woodoo 2*. This is also further complicated by a secondary line in Germany that begins with *Dawn of the Dead* (retitled *Zombie 1*), and then progresses to *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (retitled to *Zombie 2*), and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* (retitled to *Zombie 3*).

As difficult as all of this may be to follow, it is further confused by the fact that there also exists what could be considered as a second official line, produced by *Night of the Living Dead* co-writer, John Russo. Following production of *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero and Russo entered into dispute about the direction that a possible sequel could take. Since the film

had mistakenly fallen into the public domain, this allowed Romero to develop *Dawn of the Dead* independently, in spite of Russo's reservations. This meant that Russo, as co-writer, retained the rights to any titles featuring *Living Dead* and he began developing his own line beginning with *Return of the Living Dead* released in 1985, a situation that shares commonalities with the James Bond series as *Thunderball* (1965) writer Kevin McClory retained the rights to re-adapt the novel that film, which he did so with *Never Say Never Again*, starring an aging Sean Connery in 1983 (which incidentally was released the same year as official Bond franchise instalment, *Octopussy* [1983]). Thus, Russo's *Return of the Living Dead* can be considered a second official sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, which gave rise to four other sequels; *Return of the Living Dead Part II* (1988), *Return of the Living Dead 3* (1993), *Return of the Living Dead: Necropolis* (2005) and *Return of the Living Dead: Rave to the Grave* (2005). To complicate matters further is the fact that Russo produced and co-produced, respectively, a remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), directed by make-up master Tom Savini, on which he collaborated with Romero, and a direct-to-video release called *Children of the Living Dead* (2001). All of this of this does not even consider the American remakes of Romero films that began in 2004 with Zak Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, and includes a remake of *Day of the Dead* (2008), as well as an unofficial prequel, *Day of the Dead 2: Contagion* (2005).

While many fans seem satisfied to accept the legitimacy of both Romero's and Russo's contributions, it would be reductive to simply dismiss the European entries simply as the flagrant attempts of distributors to capitalise upon the success of *Zombi 2* or *Dawn of the Dead* (although they certainly did that as well). Though these lines are clearly motivated by the commercial impulses of the producers and distributors, there are other factors that must be considered in this context. It is significant that, other than in Italy where this practice is a common phenomenon and the *Zombi* franchise originated, distributors worldwide have almost

universally chosen *not* to include *Dawn of the Dead* as the starting point. Outside of Italy, the only country to include *Dawn of the Dead* is Germany, and their series also includes *Day of the Dead*, only adding *Zombi 3* as a conclusion to their series. In an Anglo-American context, this could possibly be attributed to two factors: firstly, the decision in the USA and the UK not to begin the series with *Dawn of the Dead* is most likely indicative of the potential for issues over copyright infringement. Even in the exploitation film market, there are instances where companies have been prosecuted for attempting to capitalise on the success of another bigger budget film.

In the UK, for example, video distributor, World of Video 2000, retitled an old low-budget sci-fi film from *Night Fright* (1967) to *E.T. Nasty* (1983) hoping to capitalise on both the success of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and the notoriety of the ‘video nasties’. This was not without repercussion, however, and when Universal International Pictures threatened legal action, World of Video 2000 were forced to re-call the cassette, only to later re-release it with an amended title and different artwork. While not a big-budget blockbuster like *E.T.*, one might extrapolate that the same may have been true for *Dawn of the Dead* had distributors tried to capitalise on this association in the UK and North America. Secondly, and perhaps the most likely explanation, is that if *Dawn of the Dead* was popular enough to stimulate the production of so many different zombie films, then it is unlikely that these films would have been accepted as sequels to *Dawn of the Dead* in the UK and the US with our limited understanding of genre, at least in comparison with the Italian context. The fact that distributors decided to begin the new series with *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*) suggests that, in the Anglo-American market at least, there is a tipping point, a level of success at which an unrelated sequel will be dismissed as inauthentic, illegitimate, or outright fraudulent. However, this does not account for the many entries into the series worldwide that accepts *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (*Zombi 2*) as their starting point, or the importance that is placed upon this film due to Lucio Fulci’s cultish author

function. After all, this film was the starting point for numerous sequels but these were not challenged in the same way. It could be that the market that grew around the zombie genre is more willing to collectively group Italian produced films together on the basis of a shared ‘trashy’ exploitation aesthetic. This of course begins as marketing strategy on the part of the distributor, but there is no real evidence of resistance to these ‘unofficial’ series on the grounds of continuity. However, the only way to test whether these films are accepted as canonical is to consider the response to these various releases, which I explore in the next section.

Audience Responses to Retitling the *Zombi* Series

In recent years, scholars of reception studies have veered away from using Amazon reviews as a reliable source of information amid concerns that this data may have been distorted by the brands themselves commissioning bogus reviews that work to skew public perception of their products. Despite these concerns, I have chosen to use the platform for two reasons: firstly, I am not dealing with a huge data set (only 87 responses), so I can scrutinize each review individually and I could dismiss any reviews that are clearly automatically generated or ‘spam’ (though this wasn’t necessary and only one duplicated review was removed). Secondly, and most importantly, the concern over positive bias of web reviews is largely irrelevant to my analysis, since I am only interested in responses to the film as an unofficial entry into an established series. While it is possible that the companies distributing the films would omit this information, it is unlikely, since for anyone familiar with the series (and one would assume someone seeking to purchase part 3 would be), it is common knowledge that they are unrelated as part 2 features a similar lack of fidelity.

To evaluate public responses to distributors releasing unrelated films into the *Zombi* series, I concentrated on *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3*, as this film represents the first real break from the ‘official’ sequence of sequels in the Italian line. To clarify this point, while none of the

films in the series are narratively connected, as with Romero's conceptual series, *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3 (Zombi 4)* is often dismissed because it was not directed by Lucio Fulci, where *Zombie Flesh Eaters (Zombi 2)*, and *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2 (Zombi 3)*, were branded with his imprimatur. Though the second film was only partially directed by Fulci, this association has nevertheless given the film a pedigree that has served to protect it from some of the criticisms typically levelled at *Zombi 3* (a film directed by Bruno Matai, a filmmaker who does not carry associations of cult auteurism like Fulci). Conversely, *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3 (Zombi 4)* is often viewed as inauthentic because it is not directed by Fulci, and the film was retitled by distributors in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Thailand, all hoping to capitalise on the commercial appeal of the *Zombi* brand. This lack of an auteur signature means that *Zombie Flesh Eaters 3* is the most appropriate entry in the series through which to discuss reactions to retitling and the fannish discourses that surround the film. Since this film has been retitled by four different distributors in four different countries, and the online shopping portal Amazon provides nationally specific websites, this provided the most convenient way of collecting information that would otherwise be incredibly difficult to access. Though there is no Thai specific platform for Amazon, the company has a nationally specific platform for the UK, the US, and Germany, Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com and Amazon.de. In lieu of a sustained audience study, it is then possible to view responses to the practice of what I am terming distributive franchising.

Zombi 3 (Zombie Flesh Eaters 4) has generated a total of 87 reviews across the UK, US and German specific portals of the international shopping site. This total is comprised of 13 responses in the UK, 56 responses in the US, and 18 responses in Germany. From this data, I removed one review from the United States and one review from the Germany, as these duplicated reviews that were already present. All respondents have been anonymized. I then

coded the data based on seven recurrent discursive clusters that were visible across all three of the datasets:

- 1) Direct reference to the film or the series being unrelated to each other;
- 2) Referenced the director in their perception of whether or not the film should be considered important;
- 3) Referenced the presentation of gore within the film;
- 4) The overall quality of the presentation was discussed;
- 5) Referred to the film being cut, either historically or in that version;
- 6) Framed the discussion of the film in terms of being a ‘bad movie’, that could primarily be enjoyed by virtue of it being ‘so bad it’s good’;
- 7) Made explicit reference to the narrative throughout the review.

	UK 13 reviews	US 56 reviews*	DE 18 reviews*	Tot al	%
References the series being unconnected	3	8	4	15	17.6
Emphasises the director	5	29	11	45	52.9
Emphasises Gore horror elements	8	17	7	32	37.6
Emphasises the quality of the presentation	12	13	1	26	30.5
Reference the film being cut / restored	0	8	15	23	27
Reviews the narrative	1	9	5	15	17.6
So bad it’s good	6	15	2	23	27

*One review removed from the United States dataset and one review removed from the German dataset to avoid duplication.

The vast majority of reviewers across the three territories chose not to emphasise the fact that the film was narratively unconnected to its predecessor, which implies that this aspect of the film’s lineage is unimportant for these viewers. However, 15 reviews out of 85 usable responses made explicit reference to the fact that the films did not follow the principle of narrative continuity, equating to 17.6% of the reviews, the same respondents who offered any description of the narrative within their review. While this number is significant, over half of the UK and US respondents (a total of 52.9%), were more concerned that the film was not directed by Lucio Fulci, and a similar percentage of the German reviewers noted that it was not directed by George Romero (where the films was released as a sequel to Romero’s series).

Because of this, all three sets of reviewers felt that the lack of an ‘authentic’ director-figure meant the film should not be considered as legitimately canonical. This directorial emphasis is implicitly linked to the emphasis given over to the gory elements in any given film, with Lucio Fulci often referred to as ‘The Godfather of Gore’ and Romero ‘The Godfather of the Dead’. 37.6% of the reviews were more concerned that the film be gruesome in its depiction, compared with only 17.6% who were concerned that the film be narratively connected, suggesting that serial continuity was less important to these viewers than the affective qualities of the film and that the author functions of both Fulci and Romero had become a signifier of a kind of effective excess. This same emphasis can also be seen in the interest in whether the film was presented in its full uncensored form (27%), a factor that also contributed to 30.5% of reviewers concerned about the overall quality of the presentation of the film.

Reviews that did foreground the lack of continuity are either understated— ‘*Zombie 3* does not really have anything to do with the first two films’—or for the German respondents— ‘this movie is not a 3rd part of George A. Romero's hit zombie trilogy’. Indeed, *Zombie 3*, the first deviation from both the Romero line and the Fulci line, becomes *the* central point of disruption in the series, described as ‘the pseudo-sequel to a genre classic, which was itself a pseudo-sequel to THE genre classic’. Assessing the merits of the film in similar terms, one reviewer explains that:

Fulci's original *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (*Zombi 2*) was an unofficial sequel to Romero's *Zombi* (*Dawn of the Dead*). Not content with releasing *Zombi 3* on us, they are now renaming even worse 80s Italian Zombie movies as unofficial sequels to the unofficial sequel.

What is significant in both these reviews is that while the criterion for inclusion appears to be one of quality, as opposed to the film’s pedigree, both return to the notion of quality being explicitly tied to a cultish author function. They acknowledge that *Zombie Flesh Eaters* is an

unofficial sequel, re-titled to capitalise on the success of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and they appear to acknowledge *Zombie Flesh Eaters 2* (1988) as an official sequel, despite criticising the film's quality. The main problem occurs with *Zombi 3*, a film that is deemed to be of a significantly lesser quality, but that also lacks the pedigree of the lineage of the previous entries, at which point acceptance seems to return to authorial legitimacy as means determining inclusion or exclusion.

Conclusion

Whether these films are actually understood as coherent entries in a franchise is ambivalent. Their commercial acceptance for audiences, however, does raise interesting questions about the ways in which consumers are negotiating films of this nature, and the basis on which they choose to include (or exclude) particular entries in the series as 'good' objects by reifying a cultish author-function (and of course, by rejecting other directorial signatures as 'bad' and unworthy). In her study of film adaptation, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, Christine Geraghty argues that 'faithfulness matters if it matters to the viewer' (2008, 3), and although she was primarily concerned with adaptations of literature into film, this idea of faithfulness, of fidelity, has resonance here through the economically-enforced seriality of what I have called the distributive franchise. Like Romero's conceptual series, the lack of continuity between instalments is not a problem to be navigated inasmuch as fidelity to the tone, tenor and aesthetics of other films helmed by directors with significant subcultural capital. As I.Q Hunter states, 'adaptation, much like genre itself, is a method of standardising production and repackaging the familiar within an economy of sameness and difference' (2009, 9), and these distributive negotiations demonstrate an overt approach to this repackaging of the familiar that offers just enough difference to be accepted as generic serialisation within an

economy of sameness and difference while simultaneously allowing enough diversification to extend the franchise property.

It is significant that the director as an auteur figure is central to over half of the collected responses, although the level of gore also plays a pivotal role in the acceptance of these films. Indeed, this overarching emphasis on gore above all else can be seen to build upon and expand this idea of generic fidelity, incorporating specific tropes through faithfulness to the traditions of the zombie film. This demonstrates an acceptance that these films, while not ‘official’ sequel productions, or at least not authored or branded with Romero’s author function, draw upon tropes and themes that relate to the film that they aim to ‘follow in the tradition of’. The implication here is that in countries without an established tradition of *filone*, audiences nevertheless negotiate ‘distributive franchising’ by establishing connections that work to maintain the authenticity of Fulci’s *Zombi 2*. Rather than simply dismiss these entries as illegitimate, the *Zombi* series teaches us a great deal about the ways in which consumers construct aura and authenticity in the absence of either Fulci’s or Romero’s cultish imprimatur. Ultimately, concepts such as canonicity become sites of negotiation, of refusal, acceptance and celebration. It is therefore necessary for more research in this area of what I have called in this chapter the distributive franchise, with the Italian *filoni* tradition providing a wealth of opportunities with which to do so.

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