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“Universal’s *Frankenstein* Franchise: Sequelization, Re-issues, and Merchandising before the Blockbuster Era”

Abstract: While the methodology for successful blockbuster and franchise films began to fully develop in the eighties, Universal Pictures’ *Frankenstein* films of the thirties and forties serve as a precedent for many of the effective formulas used in modern Hollywood film marketing. Being one of the earliest narratively continuous feature film series of the sound era, Universal’s *Frankenstein* was the first to experiment with complex sequelization, as well as profitable re-issues and large-scale merchandising.

I. Introduction

By the 1980’s, marketing practices in the film industry were becoming more refined in order to capitalize off the concept of synergy, the idea that a film could be promoted and see a profit from ancillary markets and vice versa (Prince, “Brave” 132). Due to the unprecedented success of films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), studios in Hollywood began relying upon blockbusters whose concepts could be reduced into a single marketable image, which was aggressively promoted through saturated advertising campaigns and a wide-scale system of distribution (Cook 40). These wildly popular films would continue to appeal to their audiences

through the release of re-issues, sequels, and popular merchandise. This in turn promoted the creation and perpetuation of massive entertainment franchises, such as the *Marvel* Cinematic Universe and *Star Wars* franchises, which currently dominate revenues in the film market and their ancillaries (Gibbs, “Franchise”). While these marketing techniques were proven financially successful when executed on a large scale beginning in the seventies and beyond, many of these formulas had been previously tested throughout multiple decades with relative degrees of success (Henderson 32). One of the most comprehensive examples of this is Universal Studios series of *Frankenstein* films, which were produced between 1931 and 1945. These films were highly popular upon initial release and saw various revivals in popularity throughout the twentieth century, due to the status of Universal’s iteration of the Frankenstein Monster as a pop culture icon (Prince, “Cruelty” 51, 65). While the *Frankenstein* films set a number of precedents for the narrative guidelines followed by film series’ today, the promising economic possibilities of successful re-issuing and synergistic marketability of films in the series would be explored throughout the fifties and sixties, thereby predating many of the successful blockbuster and franchise formulas developed and capitalized upon in the late seventies, onward.

II. Modern Film Franchise Marketing Practices

A. Sequelization

While sequels and franchises currently dominate the film industry (Johnson, “Media” 67), it was not until the emergence of blockbusters in the seventies that film sequels once again began to be released on an almost continual basis (Cook 27). According to film scholar David A. Cook from 1964 to 1968, sequels and re-issues accounted for 4.4% of all major film product.

This number increased nearly four times ten years later between 1974 and 1978, when sequels and tie-ins accounted for 17.6% of all major product. This large upswing in the production of sequels can be attributed to the studios reliance on formulas and products it already knew were successful and had an established presence in the market (Gibbs, “Franchise”). This had become the norm in Hollywood after the early seventies, when studios realized that pre-sold properties (such as best-selling novels), would be identifiable and familiar to audiences, making their chances of seeing the film more likely. While these blockbusters were highly profitable, many were also identifiable as genre pictures which “were more easily packaged and marketed on a global scale than other kinds of films, and were easier to replicate as sequels, cycles, or series for pre-existing markets” (Cook 27). It was due in part to the prominence of synergy between the film industry and ancillary markets that critically derided genres such as horror (*Jaws*, 1975) and the gangster film (*The Godfather*, 1972) had become popular on a massive scale, in turn motivating the production of strings of sequels and imitations for decades (Cook, “Manufacturing” 27). While genre films may not have always been popular, their association with the sequel dates back long before the blockbuster successes of series such as *Jaws* and *The Exorcist* (1973).

B. The Character Universe

After the blockbuster and well into the franchise era, studios had accurately figured out how to cross-promote certain films and characters through synergy, much as they were doing with ancillary markets such as books and toys (Johnson, “Media” 67). This cross promotion and expansion of character universes is exemplified in modern Hollywood most prominently by the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. This film franchise (featuring such popular comic book characters

as Iron Man, the Hulk, and Captain America) uses a large back catalogue of popular comic book heroes who already have a proven audience and fan base thanks to previous ancillary products (Johnson, “Media” 103). In 2012, Marvel Studios capitalized on the broad appeal of their most popular characters with the release of *The Avengers*. *The Avengers* was a summer blockbuster which was extremely popular with critics and audiences, going on to become the third highest grossing film of all time (unadjusted for inflation) (Johnson, “Media” 98).. A sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, was released three years later in 2015 to similar critical and box office reception (IMDb, “Avengers”). In January 2016, producers of the series confirmed not only that the next film was a two-part sequel, but that the new would feature a total of 67 characters from the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (White, “Avengers”). While the origin of the group dynamic in *The Avengers* series can be found within the preceding comic book franchise, the idea of bringing multiple, commodity characters in one film universe was originated and popularized by the Universal horror films of the forties.

C. Re-Issues

While blockbusters began to see huge profits from the popularity of series and sequels in the seventies, studios also received a great deal of revenue from re-issues of their popular films during this time. *Jaws* and *Star Wars* were re-issued a year after their respective releases, while *The Exorcist* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were re-issued in three (Cook 30). All of these were already record breaking films at the time of their initial releases (IMDb), however, studios took notice of a demand from audiences to see these films once more and immediately capitalized on the potential profit. Re-releases were in fact utilized by studios to help build film franchises through certain marketing strategies (Cook, “Manufacturing” 30). Because these were

blockbusters, their re-release serves as somewhat of an event screening (Thompson, “American”). Even though audiences knew what to expect (due in part to the trends and cycles these films started), they attended for the sheer spectacle of a marketing phenomenon being touted once again for additional profit. Even today, it is the recognition of this niche market that allowed studios to take advantage of the hype surrounding their films (Lang, “Star”). In the past two decades studios have re-issued films accompanied by monikers such as ‘digitally remastered’ and ‘enhanced’, and even in expensive, immersive formats like IMAX 3D (Bishop). One of the most prominent examples of this was the 1997 wide re-release of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. While being incredibly popular, it also worked synergistically to test and create anticipation for a new trilogy (Cook, “Manufacturing” 30). Despite old product, new modes of viewing often build revenue for previous films, while at the same time building and strengthening the market for sequels and related films.

D. The Home Video Market

While VCR’s were on the market in the seventies, the relatively expensive equipment went through many incarnations and court battles before it became a consumer-friendly phenomenon in the mid-to-late eighties. Much of the legal furor surrounding home video came from the studios, who worried that piracy as a result of VCR recording capabilities would severely threaten their revenue (Prince “Brave” 98). Universal, now under the auspices of business conglomerate MCA, was at the forefront of the court battle against Sony, a proponent of VCR technology. This copyright case dragged on for eight years and went all the way to the Supreme Court before it was decided that home video recording was protected by the constitution (Prince “Brave” 101). However, at the same time, MCA was investing heavily in

ancillary home video technologies, including VHS and digital formats. Stephen Prince states that in the middle of their court battles, studios such as MCA and Disney were “moving aggressively into the home video market that they professed to fear and loathe” (Prince “Brave” 102). By the time the legal case had come to a close in the mid- eighties, videocassette divisions of the major studios had firmly planted themselves within the new ancillary market of home video and began exploring the synergetic opportunities the market had to offer.

E. Syndication Packaging for Television

Before home video catapulted to the top of the industry as the largest source of film revenue during the 1980's, television served as the main non-theatrical ancillary (Prince “Brave” 92). Studios would sell the network rights of certain blockbuster films to the big three networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) for large sums of money and the films would subsequently be marketed as television events. However, once home video began to dominate the market and other ancillaries made headway, little profit came from network television showings (Prince “Brave” 92). One popular ancillary that did emerge during the eighties was the idea of syndication packaging. Syndication packaging allowed studios to sell the rights of a pre-selected group of films to a variety of regional television markets, in turn making large profits. For example, in the late 80's Orion Pictures sold a package of 26 titles to 65 markets and in turn earned \$1 million per title in each market (Prince “Brave” 93). Such high revenues were indicative of the ancillary market practices which have driven Hollywood since the seventies.

F. Wide Release Distribution

Some of the biggest changes that occurred in Hollywood during the seventies and eighties involved new synergistic marketing and merchandising strategies, which were developed

during the seventies and reached maturity during the eighties (Prince, “Brave” 132). In terms of marketing, it was the release of *Jaws* that revolutionized the way in which movies were advertised and sold to the public (Gomery 51). Film scholar Douglas Gomery, in his essay “Hollywood Corporate Business Practice and Periodizing Contemporary Film History,” credits MCA/Universal head Lew Wasserman for the “mass saturated advertising and simultaneous bookings” for *Jaws*. While *Jaws* was the first film to successfully manipulate the wide release strategy (through aggressive advertising and promotion) on a massive scale, it was not the first film to experiment with the strategy (Cook, “Introduction” 2). In the past, wide release was usually reserved for films that were not well received. A wide release strategy allowed the film to make as much money as it could before it was quickly pulled from theaters (Cook, “Manufacturing” 42). The strategy had also been utilized with moderate degrees of success by a few producers before *Jaws*. However, the difference between *Jaws* and other widely released films that preceded it had to do with advertising (Cook, “Manufacturing” 43). Because the film was being produced with the assistance of a major studio, the producers of *Jaws* could afford to saturate multiple ancillary markets with promotions for their film. One of the biggest targets for the marketing machine behind *Jaws* was television advertising (Gomery 51). Because television (as a visual medium) had the ability to reach a large, diverse group of individuals across the country, this helped to promote the wide release system which the producers of *Jaws* were banking on.

G. Licensing and Ancillary Tie-ins

While the film was insured to have a large audience through the synergistic combination of wide release and saturation marketing, another factor in its success was the films easily

marketable concept (Cook, “Manufacturing” 40). *Jaws* and many of the blockbusters that followed came to be known as ‘high concept’ films. Film scholar Stephen A. Cook describes a ‘high concept’ film as one “whose conceptual premise and story is easily reducible to a salient image, which then becomes the basis for an aggressive advertising campaign keyed to merchandising tie-ins and ancillary markets, creating synergy between film, products, and related media.” This ‘high concept’ synergistic formula was a blockbuster phenomenon started by *Jaws* and fully exploited by *Star Wars* two years later (Cook, “Manufacturing” 51). While *Jaws* utilized its iconic imagery to create numerous tie-in products, *Star Wars* capitalized on the appeal of its multifaceted characters to young audiences in order to sell a plethora of toys, books, games, candy, and other merchandise. Cook states that the “most significant phenomenon of *Star Wars* lay in the creation and nurturing of the first true film franchise.” In the past, studios had been simply giving licensing rights away for free publicity due to the fact that film merchandise had little appeal once a film had completed its theatrical run (Cook, “Manufacturing” 51). Because the filmmakers behind *Star Wars* sold licensing rights to various ancillary markets, they were able to control and build *Star Wars* as a brand. The synergistic relationship between films and merchandise as part of the franchise not only promoted maximum revenue potential, but it also ensured a steady, regular output of material which kept the franchise relevant (Cook, “Manufacturing” 51). Indeed, the importance of merchandising proliferated the film industry after the release of *Star Wars* and into the following decades. According to Cook “by the 1990’s, merchandising had risen from the category of ancillary income to become an important studio revenue stream, and all of the majors operated large consumer product divisions.” Merchandising tie-ins continue to be extremely popular as studios capitalize on properties which already have a

specific audience and fan base with novel and film franchises such as the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series' (Mendelson).

H. Cross Promotional Concepts

Another popular synergistic approach, which became very popular in the eighties, was the concept of cross-promotion across multiple ancillary outlets. One of the most prominent examples of this strategy during the eighties was the cross promotion of high concept films with popular music of the time (Prince, "Brave" 133). With the creation of MTV in 1981, popular music had become a prominent visual medium through the regular production of music videos, and was specifically aimed at a young demographic. Studios began to take notice of this and started commissioning popular songs to be placed in such 'high concept' films as *Flashdance*, *Footloose* and *Risky Business* (Prince "Brave" 133). The songs would be released concurrently with the theatrical release, as well as with a music video which in some way or another (through the use of the same actors or props) would promote the film. With music videos running nearly all the time on MTV in the eighties, studios could count on a regular and consistent daily promotion of their films. Seeing the movie would also encourage audiences to go out and buy the film soundtrack or the artist's album (Prince, "Brave" 135). This directly synergistic promotion between both products signals the how far studios were willing to go in order to maximize the possible profit from ancillary sources.

III. Modern Marketing Practices in Universal's *Frankenstein* Series (1931-1947)

A. Sequelization

During the Hollywood studio era of the thirties, forties, and fifties, sequels and series were highly popular, and like sequels of the seventies and beyond, most of these were genre films (Cook 27). The prevalence of film series during this time was due in large part to the double bill system of theatrical distribution, which caused studios to produce numerous low budget films to fill the demand (Henderson 30). Sequels and series were perfect for this model due to the familiarity of their content with the public, as well as their ability to utilize the same casts and sets (Henderson 44). Universal's *Frankenstein* series is one of the earliest after the invention of talkies to feature a large degree of narrative continuity established between films, an aspect mostly ignored in series at the time such as MGM's *Tarzan* and *The Thin Man* (Henderson 37). The first film in the series, titled *Frankenstein* (1931) was produced quickly to capitalize off the success of Universal's *Dracula* (also 1931), which had been the first horror film released in the sound era (Skal 114). *Frankenstein* served as a spiritual sequel to *Dracula* in relation to its horrific content, and the films were produced after successful stage adaptations of the two literary classics had received notoriety in London during the late 1920's (Skal 85). While both were incredibly successful, it was *Frankenstein* who would first receive a sequel after a string of various other successful horror properties had been produced by Universal (Prince "Cruelty" 76). Released in 1935, *The Bride of Frankenstein* was just as successful as its predecessor and is now considered by some critics to be superior to the original (Glut 132). The financial success of *Bride* proved early that audiences would not be offput or bored with content, themes or characters with which they were familiar.

Had *The Bride of Frankenstein* been produced during the franchise era, its critical and commercial success would likely have led to the immediate production of another sequel. However, upon its release, the film created a great deal of controversy due to its horrific and violent content. The Production Code Administration attempted to make numerous cuts and were locked in fierce debates with director James Whale and Universal officials (Skal 187). Scholar Steven Prince states a decline in the popularity of horror films after *Bride* “stems at least in part from the suppression of violence, instigated by the reactions of regional censors to the horror pictures and the PCA's increased scrutiny of the genre.” Prince suggests that the fierce moral and political climate, along with worn genre conventions, was a major reason for a decline in horror films during the mid-thirties (Prince “Cruelty, 83). Another major factor was the overall decline in horror film production in Hollywood after Great Britain banned the import of horror films, due to backlash over what was seen as an increase in the portrayal of violence (Skal 195). However, one of the biggest factor for a reduction in the horror output at Universal specifically was the forced exit of studio founder Carl Laemmle, as well as his son, executive and horror film champion Carl Jr. (Skal 128). Various financial issues caused the Laemmle’s to lose control of the studio to foreclosure from lending agency Standard Capital Corporation, which discontinued the studios horror films for four years (Hirschhorn 55).

It was not until 1939, after successful re-releases of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* in 1938 (Prince, “Cruelty” 61) that the studio began producing horror films once more. The first film to kick off the Universal monster revival of the forties was *Son of Frankenstein*. The film, which had a modest budget, was a financial success and helped mark a new era for Universal horror (Skal 206). However, the productions that followed were much less prestigious than previous

incarnations, with smaller budgets and very much the same cast and crew working on a number of horror themed production over a short period of time (Henderson 44). It was after *Son* that the *Frankenstein* series acquired its status as B –grade with the release of *Ghost of Frankenstein* in 1942, which featured a cast and crew identical to that which worked on the 1941 horror classic *The Wolf Man*. While not universally well received, *Ghost* was enough of a success to warrant the greenlight for a sequel (Skal 216). The connection of the cast and crew of both films would coincidentally predict the latest effort at exploring yet-undiscovered genre formulas.

B. The Character Universe

The first combination of separate fictional film characters into one universe was the result of a joke made by resident Universal horror screenwriter Curt Siodmak, who suggested that Frankenstein’s Monster go to battle with the Wolf Man (Glut, “*Frankenstein*” 160). Executives saw promising marketing possibilities in such a combination and ran with the idea. In 1943, (only a year after *Ghost*, and two after *The Wolf Man*) Universal released *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*. The film, while critically derided for its stilted plot and short run-time, was extremely popular among audiences (Skal 217). Some of the biggest critical complaints involve the plot inconsistencies that appear from the previous films. For example, in *Ghost*, the Frankenstein’s Monster was given a new, clever brain which gave him the ability to speak. However, because of mismatching blood types, the monster becomes blind and is ‘destroyed’ in a fire (Skal 215). While these details were explicitly mentioned and referred to in the script and the finished film by the monster himself, all scenes of the monster talking were removed prior to the release of the film (Glut, “*Frankenstein*” 161). This was apparently due to complaints about the performance of 61 year old Bela Lugosi as Frankenstein Monster, who was criticized for poor delivery of bad

dialogue. Therefore, key references to the ending of the *Ghost* were removed and seemingly ignored by the film makers.

Such deliberate inconsistencies, had been going on in sequels for years, especially those in the Universal horror output. Many series at the time, such as those featuring detective characters like Charlie Chan and The Saint, would focus on the same characters while acknowledging few if any events from prior films (Henderson 32). However, narrative inconsistencies in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* present an example of sacrifices made when blending the prior narratives of two seemingly separate entities. In the case of *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, the monster's speech (which had been effectively carried out in *Bride* and the finale of *Ghost*) was not an aspect of the character that blended well with the more aggressive, animal character of the Wolf Man, so it was dropped and ignored. In the blockbuster era and beyond, such deliberate changes to a film are known as retroactive continuity (or ret-conning). Ret-conning is used to explain different interpretations or previously ignored events in many blockbuster franchises today (Henderson 115). This is done in order to streamline narrative events and make certain connections easier for the audience to notice and understand.

The successful release of *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* signaled many changes for Universal's current cycle of horror films. First, it revived the popularity of Universal monsters enough to warrant two monster-rally films in the years following. *House of Frankenstein* (1944) and *House of Dracula* (1945) stretched the concept of multiple monsters to its limit (Henderson 44). *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* also signaled the movement of primary action in the series towards other characters such as the Wolf Man and away from Frankenstein's Monster, who would appear only sparingly until the finale in each film (Skal 206). These later monster-rallies

(as they were known by fans) marked the horizon of the series which had, according to Stephen Prince “grown more juvenile and low budget and become identified with a children’s market” (Prince, “Horror”). Diverse demographic audiences became less interested in Universal’s horror films, which had grown tired and repetitive for most. The multiple-monsters concept was however adored by children and their early interest would serve as an indicator for the kind of market that Universal’s horror films would find in the sixties.

The final nail in the coffin for the popularity and reputation of the Frankenstein Monster was 1947’s *Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein*, in which the monster was used as a prop for the gags of Lou Costello. By this time, the gothic horror genre had completely descended into parody and Universal once again discontinued their horror film series’. Modern film series can often experience such a wane in public popularity due to an exhaustion of their thematic content, some more rapidly than others (Henderson 155). For example, the first *Jaws* was a massive horror-blockbuster and critical success responsible for numerous ancillary and merchandising tie-ins. The latter three films in the series, even featuring some of the same cast and crew that had worked on the first *Jaws*, were critical bombs and paled in box office comparisons to their predecessors (Henderson 120). These latter sequels (like the forties cycle of Universal horror) descended in quality and suffered from ret-conning plot details, reduced budgets, and numerous technical errors. For better or for worse, many common narrative and plot devices present throughout blockbuster/franchise films and their sequels can be traced back to devices developed and initiated by the films in Universal’s Frankenstein series.

C. Re-Issues

While re-issues proved extremely bankable since the seventies, they have always been a staple of theatrical distribution. Indeed, the whole idea that profitable re-issues can spawn sequels and additional products can be traced back to the re-release of the first *Frankenstein* film in 1938, when a desperate Los Angeles exhibitor packaged *Frankenstein* on a double bill with *Dracula* (Skal 204). This proved to be an incredibly popular horror ‘event’ for both children and adults, and *Variety* soon began reporting that the double bill was breaking box office records in key cities across the country (Skal 204). A popular anecdote in scholar David J. Skal’s *The Monster Show* recounts a November 16th, 1938 screening of the double bill in White Plains, New York, which was attended by the Director of Attendance of the White Plains Public School system, Katherine K. Vandervoort. She stated “As soon as school was out, the children arrived in droves. All ages were represented from toddlers who could scarcely mount the stairs of the balcony” (Skal 202). The popularity of these horror films among young children would serve as an early indicator for the type of demographics that would later make horror a commodity (Skal 260). The success of the *Frankenstein* re-release would directly lead to the development of the third film in *Son of Frankenstein* (Skal 205).

By 1947, the cost of film production in the United States had doubled since 1941 (Rhodes, 246). The collapse of the studio system during the late 1940’s began with the scaling back of studio B film units, removing the infrastructure which allowed series films to thrive, and with the competitive medium of television gaining prominence, B units were halted altogether (Henderson 28). As financial stability of the film industry was beginning to grow precarious, studios including Universal soon began to realize the revenue potential in their backcatalogue

(Rhodes 246). After Universal became Universal-International through a series of mergers in 1945, new studio head William Goetz halted the production of B and horror films (Hirschhorn 156). He and the heads at Universal took advantage of their vast collection of horror titles and between 1947 and 1949, all the films in the Universal *Frankenstein* series had been reissued through Realart Pictures, who bought theatrical viewing rights to Universal's film library which they held until 1954 when their contract expired (Weaver, "Profile"). Universal would continue to explore a number of ancillary options for their *Frankenstein* series, keeping an eye on the home video market.

D. The Home Video Market

While it was not until the eighties that the concept of home video began to take on life as an economic market, studios had been licensing their films for home viewing decades prior. In the past, home viewing had been done on 8 and 16 millimeter projectors with edited versions of films available to consumers (MacGillivray 3). MCA/ Universal may have aggressively entered the home video market in the eighties, but they had also been a proponent of home video as early as the forties. When Universal became Universal- International after a series of mergers in the late forties, they created the subsidiary United World Films, which would handle ancillary markets for the studio (MacGillivray 6). In 1947, United World Films purchased a majority stake in the home video distributor Castle Films. Castle, which had been in business since 1924, actually started releasing films for home viewing in 1937. This unprecedented acquisition marked the one of the first times that a Hollywood studio would support the non-theatrical market (MacGillivray 6). While United World initially planned on releasing educational and religious films to the non-theatrical market, they eventually focused solely on distribution of the

Universal library (MacGillivray 8). Although United World's merger with Castle occurred in 1947, it was not until 1959 that Castle began releasing Universal's horror films with *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* considered the first (MacGillivray 9). This was followed a year later by *Bride of Frankenstein*. According to historian Ron MacGillivray, Castle's release of Universal's horror films was an instant success and the films were produced (with not a single title discontinued) throughout the sixties, all the way into the late seventies when Castle was transformed into Universal 8 in 1977 (MacGillivray 16).

MCA/ Universal would once again solely handle the rights of the *Frankenstein* series, and with the creation of a Videocassette wing, MCA/Universal immediately began issuing their horror films on VHS, with the original *Frankenstein* being released for the first time on VHS in 1980 ("VHS"). Over a decade later in 1991, well after the VHS market began to dominate revenue in the film industry, MCA/Universal began releasing their entire collection of horror films under the banner of the "Universal Studios Monsters Classic Collection." This kicked off an entirely new synergistic marketing campaign for the Universal monsters which would continue throughout the nineties (Skal 382). While home video did not become popular on a global scale until the eighties, Universal's *Frankenstein* series had been consistently situated within the home video market since the early sixties and helped to prove that older product could still bring in a profit from certain niche audiences.

E. Syndication Packaging for Television

While syndication packaging was still relevant and profitable well into the eighties and beyond, early successes in television syndication packages can be traced back to Universal horror films. After Realart's theatrical rights on the Universal library expired in 1954, it was

once again up to Universal to decide how to handle their very marketable back catalogue of films. In the late fifties, Universal sold the television rights of 600 films to Screen Gems, the television subsidiary of Columbia Pictures (Skal 266). Screen Gems saw the financial potential in the many series produced by Universal, however, they arguably found their greatest success with the packaging of Universal's classic horror films. Screen Gems ultimately compiled 52 horror films, mostly those of Universal, into a syndication package titled *Shock!* (also known as *Shock Theater*), which they began selling to various networks in 1957 (Skal 267). *Shock!* would go on to be picked up by 142 stations (Okudu) and was an instant ratings success. In October of 1957, Billboard magazine released a study of rating measurements in five key markets where *Shock!* premiered. Entitled "Huge Ratings Jumps Show Dialers Flocking to *Shock!*", the article noted how the premier screenings of *Frankenstein* in Los Angeles not only caused station viewership to spike over 300%, but also caused a 142% spike in the number of sets in use in the city ("Huge"). The *Shock!* syndication package proved wildly popular amongst television audiences. It was also profitable for Screen Gems upon the sale of the films, and for the stations that aired them. The Billboard article went on to state "To put it mildly, the figures will have wide ramifications throughout the film industry and may even be a factor in network thinking." It was at this point, with the unpredictably wild success of the *Shock!* syndication package, that Universal's *Frankenstein* series began to take on new life as a franchise (Skal 266). This opened up various synergistic marketing opportunities, which Universal was quick to capitalize on.

F. Wide Release Distribution

Saturation advertising, product tie-ins, and cross promotions were all major marketing strategies for blockbusters and franchises which were developed and exploited by the major

Hollywood studios throughout the seventies, eighties and beyond (Prince, “Brave 140). While these approaches were fine-tuned during this time, their origins can be traced back to techniques utilized to market the Universal *Frankenstein* series when their popularity resurged in the late fifties and early sixties as a result of the *Shock!* television syndication package (Skal 266). As previously stated, the *Shock!* package had been sold to over 100 television stations, and the ratings for the Universal horror films were incredibly high. During this time, there were only 3 major television networks, which severely limited programming options for television audiences during this time. As a result, it was very likely for the average American to stumble upon a film from the *Frankenstein* series late at night if *Shock!* was carried by one their local television affiliates (Hitchcock 230). Because of the limited marketplace of television during this time, Universal horror films experienced a uniform surge in popularity across the country. Television as a medium was, therefore, responsible for nurturing an audience for *Frankenstein* films, as well as promoting related merchandise. This is reminiscent of the type of saturation advertising that became popular after the release of *Jaws*, in which widespread television time promoted interest not only in the film, but in ancillary products as well.

The surge in popularity experienced by the *Frankenstein* series, as a result of showings on television during the late fifties and early sixties, created a fan base for the films that was actively willing to invest in related merchandise. As marketing companies began to notice the emergence of teenagers as their own profitable market segment, horror itself was becoming a popular industry all its own (Skal 255). A 1959 report in an issue of *Playboy* magazine noted that, due to the rise of drive-in’s (which were popular among younger demographics) and low budget productions (produced specifically for drive-in markets), horror would “soon account for

over one third of all US motion picture output” (Skal 260). It did not take long for ancillary markets to pick up on the profitability of a synergistic relationship with Universal horror films.

G. Licensing and Ancillary Tie-Ins

One of the first products to be marketed to the *Frankenstein* fan base were toy model kits, which were manufactured by a variety of companies, the most prominent being Aurora Plastics Corporation (Skal 274). These monster models were the brain child of Aurora Marketing Director Bill Silverstein, who was inspired to create the kits whenever he saw a group of excited children outside of a Saturday matinee re-issue screening for *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (Bruegerman). Because such merchandise for horror films had yet to be produced, Silverstein decided in early 1960 to create a marketing survey “disguised as a contest” which ‘allowed’ consumers to suggest a new type of model for Aurora to make. Survey sheets were placed in boxes for Aurora’s existing models and, after 3 months with almost 3,000 entries submitted, the responses overwhelmingly pointed towards monster models. Still wary of marketing horror-related products to children, Silverstein contacted three child psychologists (Castile, “Aurora”). While one psychologist felt the models could be harmful, the two other psychologists felt that it would be positive way for a child to deal with what some considered to be truly horrific content (Castile, “Aurora”). The idea was approved by Aurora management, and after obtaining licensing rights from Universal (Skal 274), Aurora began producing Frankenstein’s Monster model kits in 1961.

The Frankenstein kits were first released to test the market, and were immediately a hit. Production skyrocketed to the point where Aurora was producing 8,000 kits in a 24 hour day

(Bruegerman). Within six years, 13 different monster kits had been molded and sold to a young fan base which was concurrently watching *Shock!* on television and creating model kits with the same monster at home. The immediate success of the Aurora monster models stimulated the creation of a steady stream of *Frankenstein*-related ancillary products throughout the sixties from masks (Don Post Studios, licensed from Universal in 1963), candy (PEZ, licensed in mid-sixties), and soaps (Colgate/Palmolive, licensed in 1963) (Castile). In a September 1964 issue of Look Magazine dedicated to the monster phenomenon, there were said to be “monster models and games, monster dolls and all manner of monstrous card, rings, by-the-numbers paint sets, costumes, and masks.” The magazine also reported that “toy dealers figure the ghoulish game will pay a clammy \$20 million this year” (“Return”). These tie-ins helped to not only to boost the ratings for films on *Shock!* and sell numerous ancillary products, but they also helped to sell 8mm home video versions from Castle films. All of these product tie-ins worked synergistically throughout the sixties to build and sell the Universal *Frankenstein* series as a pop culture brand and as a popular franchise well after its theatrical potential had waned.

H. Cross Promotional Concepts

Another popular synergistic strategy employed during the sixties resurgence of the *Frankenstein* series was the idea of cross promotions. Ancillary markets for the Universal horror films discovered after the popularity of the Aurora model kits that old horror films targeted a youth market, which was primarily occupied by children (Skal 274). With this information, much of the marketing for the *Frankenstein* films and related products was done in a manner that would capitalize on the appeal of children. For example, in order to sell their monster kits, Aurora would advertise in comic books (Brugerman). The comic would help sell the model kit,

while buying another comic would give a child the opportunity to buy another kit. Additionally, strictly in terms of promotion for horror films, one of the greatest cross promotion ancillaries for the Universal horror films during the sixties was the creation of the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine in 1958 by publisher James Warren and editor Forrest J. Ackerman (Skal 270). The film fan magazine, circulated monthly, featured extensive, yet humorous articles regarding the production of classic horror films, famous horror icons, and also featured numerous behind the scenes and publicity photographs. Also notable were the striking cover images of Frankenstein's Monster and other Universal monster designed and painted by artist Basil Gogos (Skal 271). *Famous Monsters*, which appeared around the same time that *Shock!* had reached television screens, helped to heavily promote the Frankenstein Monster as a pop culture icon at a time when the films were widely available to audiences (Hitchcock 236). The magazine also helped to unify and stimulate the ancillaries of the *Frankenstein* series by giving them an outlet through which they could reach their fan base; *Famous Monsters* often featured ads for *Frankenstein* related products and merchandise from posters to models and masks (Skal 271).

Another huge unifying factor in the consolidation and rise of the *Frankenstein* franchise was the promotion of the films on television by horror movie hosts. The whole concept of an individual taking on a persona to introduce old horror films was developed in 1954 when Maila Nurmi, under the name Vampira, introduced old poverty row horror films that had been packaged for syndication at the local Los Angeles ABC affiliate (Skal 239-240). While beginning as an idea from program director Hunt Stromberg Jr. to build an audience for late night TV (Skal 240), a similar model would be employed for *Shock!*: bookending the films and commercials with

onscreen hosts (often dressed up in strange clothes), who acted out jokey gags which referred to the film being played that night (“Night”). These very popular local television broadcasters appealed to a regional monster fan base and helped to heavily promote related ancillary products for the *Frankenstein* films, while at the same time cultivating their own unique fan base (Skal 268).

An especially notable example of cross promotion during this time was the premier of the CBS series *The Munsters* in 1964, at the height of Universal monster resurgence. Produced by Universal City Studios, the show capitalized on the popularity of the Frankenstein image, with main character Herman Munster supplanted with all the trademarked features of the Frankenstein Monster (Skal 281). Despite facing competition from the similarly themed ABC series *The Addams Family*, the show garnered respectable ratings and lasted two seasons (Skal 282). While the show was canceled as the Universal monsters began to lose their popularity once more, it served as a great introduction for children and others who were new to the horrific *Frankenstein* series. The films themselves stimulated at least enough interest to get the series produced in the first place. Ultimately, it was the strength of cross-promotion ancillaries such as *Famous Monsters*, local television syndicates, and product spin offs like *The Munsters* which allowed a market and culture for the *Frankenstein* series to build and grow.

IV. Conclusion

While contemporary blockbusters and franchises operate off of synergistic formulas which were proven successful on a massive scale and refined in the seventies and eighties, the roots of these methods lie in classic film series’ of the past, prominently in Universal Studios’

Frankenstein series of the thirties and forties. The series would itself go on to become a franchise following a successful revival of the films during the sixties, which transformed the Frankenstein Monster into a pop culture icon. It's early exploration of sequel possibilities, profitable re-issues, and synergistic marketing strategies pre-dates (on a much smaller scale) the blockbuster mentalities that would take the world by storm with films such as *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. After the monster craze of the sixties came to a close, Universal would attempt at various times to revive an interest in its classic monsters. However, when Universal released all of its classic horror films on VHS in the early nineties, the studio employed many of the large-scale synergistic practices used by most franchises today; from tie-ins with Burger King to the release of Universal monsters Valentine's Day cards. Universal is now in the process of remaking many of their classic horror films as part of a new film universe to rival that of Marvel (Lang, "How"). While the studio continues to adapt the franchise using 'the latest' narrative and marketing techniques, a close examination of their classic franchise could benefit them in finding new ways to appeal to and build a strong, devoted fan base.

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