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Multiplex Monstrosities: Promotional Jolts and Marketing Mishaps at the Movies¹

Alex Svensson

In June 2015, cinemagoers of all ages settled in for an afternoon showing of Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* at the Danbarry Cinemas in Middletown, OH, where they were greeted not by another heartwarming tearjerker from the "house of mouse," but (supposedly) a ghost story straight from the Blumhouse of horrors—*Insidious: Chapter 3*. As frantic and fearful audience and news reports told it, the fright film was mistakenly projected in place of the anticipated kid's flick—a mishap that didn't exactly go over well with those in attendance; early reports pointed out that the mix-up left parents "furious" and children "spooked" (Han 2015), the accidental digital projection of one film in place of another framed by audiences and the press as not just an honest mistake, but a terrible violation of audience pleasure, safety, and trust. Several news reports out of Middletown wrote breathlessly of "an auditorium full of weeping children" (Shoard 2015) that were egregiously exposed to "a movie full of screams and evil ghosts that murder people and then drag them to the land of the dead" (Shrayber 2015), claims that perhaps paint a more grisly and woeful picture than what truly happened—and importantly, as I will address further in this essay, mistakenly assign blame to *Insidious* when one of its attached trailers (the unsettling, [jump-scare-laden advert for *Sinister 2*](#)) was most likely the cause of such tabloid-ready alarm.

This particular case study is but one of several examples in recent years of *mistakenly screened* and/or *properly projected but poorly received* theatrical horror trailers that have reportedly caused unexpected terror, shock, or distress at the movies; as *Bloody Disgusting's* John Squires (2019) has remarked:

We're not sure why or how it keeps happening, but several theaters in recent years have accidentally shown horror trailers and/or the

¹ This essay is adapted from my dissertation: Alexander Svensson, "Promotional Horror Media: Consent, Control, and Space," PhD diss., (Indiana University, Bloomington, 2019).

beginnings of horror movies to audiences full of children, with the trailers for *Bright Burn* and *Ma* most recently shown to unsuspecting families ahead of *Peppa Pig* in the UK. And it happened again over the weekend, this time in Canada. *ScreenRant*'s Ryan George was in attendance at a theater in Canada the other day for a showing of *Detective Pikachu*, but he knew something was wrong when the trailers playing before the film weren't exactly kid-friendly. The trailers for *Annabelle Comes Home*, *Joker* and *Child's Play* escorted an unexpected showing of *The Curse of La Llorona* onto the screen!

Similar to the above accounts, it was reported in the summer of 2010 that the premiere screenings of soap-operatic teen vampire phenomenon *Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (specifically those that took place at midnight and 3:00 AM in Cinemark theaters across Texas) were marred by the presence of another promotional phantom: [the teaser trailer for *Paranormal Activity 2*](#). According to various news reports, the trailer was supposedly far too frightening—or “2 SCARY” as *Deadline* cheekily reported it (Finke 2010)—for the majority female tween and teen *Twilight* audience, supposedly drawing blood-curdling shrieks from young viewers and complaints from perturbed parents. By all accounts, the trailer was eventually pulled from Texas's Cinemark locations, a move that was both applauded *and* derided across online discourse in the premiere's immediate aftermath.

This essay is—at least in part—about the ways audiences might be unexpectedly moved or manipulated by horror trailers, and the ways those reactions often circulate as tabloid sensationalism; jumps and jolts—the frequently deployed “shock cuts” of horror cinema (Diffrient 2004)—correspond to what Lisa Kernan (2004) describes as the “feel!” motif of movie trailers (22), a promise and indeed demand of physiological response, surprise, and agitation that we see put into relief across these case studies. Both the Danbarry and Cinemark incidents highlight the ways marketers, studios, and entertainment publications turn negative reactions to both planned and accidental screenings of theatrical horror into publicity hype; this is a strategy of carnivalesque “ballyhoo” and exploitation marketing that both fits within and adds new dimensions to the history of horror film advertising, which has long played “on our naturally curious nature by hinting at the awful, terrorizing sights that await us inside the theatre. No matter how they state it, what these horror film advertisements are really saying is, ‘We dare you to see this!’” (Kattelman 2011, 73). I argue that news stories, word of mouth reports, and social media hype about horror trailers supposedly gone awry at the movies perform similar

roles.

Theatrical horror trailers routinely function in these instances as easy targets for ire and blame, and they get centered in ways that elide arguably more pressing concerns across the spaces, technologies, and practices of cinemagoing. I find that the hyperbolically detailed frights of these and similar encounters with theatrical horror trailers situates them within three interrelated discourses of *agitation* that configure the cinema as: (1) a potentially dangerous, unpredictable space; (2) a space of disappointments and failures on the part of cinema staff and modern exhibition technologies; and (3) a space where performances of both youth and female spectatorship are routinely monitored, regulated, and criticized as excessive (with pleasure often conflated with fear and frenzy). Beyond examining the aesthetics, form, and impact of these particular horror trailers and their audience responses, this essay also critically explores the ways these incidents reveal ongoing struggles to manage and make sense of the behaviors of cinema audiences—especially ones often deemed too emotive, expressive, or undisciplined.

Terror in the Aisles

According to nearly all news articles about the incident at Danbarry Cinemas, word started to spread after Jazmyn Moore (who was in the audience at the time) posted on the Facebook page of local Middletown, Ohio-based paper the *Journal-News* after fleeing the botched screening with her kids: “I got our money back but the damage is already done” and “my children are terrified and keep asking questions” about the horrors they saw onscreen (Richter 2015). As explained by *Journal-News* staff writer Ed Richter, Moore was in a frightened panic, and as the horrific images flashed onscreen “she and other adults in the theater scooped up their children and rushed out” of the auditorium as quickly as possible (2015.). Apologizing for the spooky slip-up, the theater manager offered attendees not only refunds, but also a chance to upgrade their tickets to the 3D version of *Inside Out* for free. As complaints grew (which included Moore’s account of disturbing images witnessed onscreen of children being terrorized, bound, and murdered), news of the incident quickly spread, starting in the *Journal-News* and eventually reaching media industry and entertainment-focused publications (*The Hollywood Reporter*, *Entertainment Weekly*), widely read horror blogs (*Dread Central*, *Bloody-Disgusting*), and even the websites of popular publications not typically concerned with such small-town scares (*Cosmopolitan*, *Jezebel*).

Across these publications, it is significant to note *how* the incident was reported and, more importantly, *crafted into clickbait*, with most headlines reading as such: “Whoops: Ohio Theater Accidentally Shows *Insidious 3* Instead of *Inside Out*” (*Cinema Blend*); “Kids expecting ‘*Inside Out*’ get horror movie instead” (*Mashable*); “Children watch *Insidious 3* rather than *Inside Out* after Ohio cinema mix-up” (*The Guardian*); and “Kids Traumatized After Theater Shows *Insidious 3* instead of *Inside Out*” (*Jezebel*).² These headlines and others like them work to emphasize the supposed intensity of the situation, with the latter *Guardian* and *Jezebel* pieces especially making it seem like kids were unexpectedly forced to endure 90 minutes of gruesome, unsettling visions. Such claims correspond to the ways horror has been historically discussed in relationship to children; as Filipa Antunes (2020) reminds us, debates around horror’s suitability for and supposed ill effects on children “tend to follow two strands: moral panic, in which the nefarious effects of horror are discussed; or preoccupations with the cultural legitimacy of horror, where its artistic, philosophical, and political merits are established” (7).

Such discourses on horror and children can often lead to hyperbolic claims; as Angie Han (2015) of *Slash Film* reports, though horror was most certainly onscreen as opposed to kid-friendly Disney fare, these various accounts and the headlines crafted out of them might not function as the best representations of the truth:

[Another] person who claims to have been at the screening dispute[s] Moore’s account. “*Insidious* never started,” Mandy Adkins wrote on Facebook. “The managers caught on to what was happening, and turned the film off right after the opening credits cut off, before any of the actual film played.” [...] Adkins points out, “There are no children murdered anywhere within the entire hour and a half of *Insidious*, so it is pretty clear that this was a gross exaggeration.” Instead, she suggests, Moore was probably referring to the *Sinister 2* trailer.

It should be made clear that the trailer for *Sinister 2* (which follows the haunting exploits of a demon named Bughuul that convinces children to slaughter their families) is arguably unsettling, and easy to understand as unsuitable for little children. It kicks off with the sound of a film projector clicking on, followed by a moment showing children within the diegesis of the film eagerly watching a

² Punctuation of film titles varies across these publications; I have elected to maintain the original punctuation.

home TV broadcast of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) [Fig 1]. From there, Moore's claims about a screen filled with children and parents in peril is not incorrect, as the trailer features several such moments of horror: newspaper clippings about murdered families; homicide scenes and autopsy photos; children having nightmares; and admittedly unsettling home movie footage of families being tied up and, depending on the reel being viewed, electrocuted, drowned, or burned alive.



Figure 1: The children of *Sinister 2*, drawn to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) on TV (Assembled Screenshots)

The *Paranormal Activity 2* trailer is far less grisly, though filled with plentiful scares of its own [Fig 2]. A black screen and silence lead to what sounds like heavy, steadily approaching footsteps, the total darkness of the frame interrupted twice by sudden bursts of static. Without warning, the darkness immediately gives way to a jump scare—a loud boom and a body being launched towards the camera, knocking it over. This footage—the hurtling body, the bedroom setting, blue tint, mobile camera, and grainy digital image—might look familiar to some viewers: this is the ending of *Paranormal Activity* (2009). The trailer oscillates between this footage, more lashes of static, and the now-expected green night vision footage of a preview audience anxiously watching the very trailer being screened. Another shock cut lacerates the frame—a demonic face causing the diegetic cinema audience to shriek in terror (and presumably the live audience, too).



Figure 2: Haunted found footage in the *Paranormal Activity 2* trailer (Assembled Screenshots)

The remainder of the trailer excels in building even more tension, flashing between more digital distortion and seemingly banal scenes from a home security camera system: a child’s bedroom with a baby in a crib and a dog sleeping on the floor; a serene back patio, a sleepy kitchen. Towards the end of the trailer, the baby’s room is disturbingly graced by a shadowy figure looming near the crib—the child and dog now eerily missing from the shot. The title card flashes onscreen, followed by the franchise’s official web address. Just as the trailer appears to be at an end, it offers one more unsettling moment as the footage begins to slowly rewind by itself; in revisiting the previous horrors in reverse, the promo seems to playfully question: who is in control of the projection? Is the space of the diegetic movie theater similarly plagued as the one onscreen?

As a genre given to disturbances of all sorts, horror trailers—like the feature films they are cut from and anticipate—can shock bodies and spaces into flux as much as they can confirm and amplify the fact that bodies and spaces are always already fluctuating, impermanent, porous things. Horror often revels in “forbidden, shocking, or astonishing spectacle” (Heffernan 2004, 10)—agitating jolts of image and sound that Diffrient (2004) refers to as the “unpredictable assaults” of the genre (50). For him, horror “short-circuits reason and provokes emotional as well as physical reactions” (50) that can mobilize and ultimately enmesh the body into the shocking world of the fictive horrors on display. Jay McRoy (2004) echoes and adds to this when he argues

that horror is “informed by a disruptive aesthetic,” and that “horrific images *horrify* because they disrupt audience assumptions of what is and is not ‘fixed’ or ‘normal’” (197)—a notion we can certainly apply to the cinema screens certain audiences begrudgingly find playing host to unexpected or undesired horror trailers.

Such reactions are evident in further anecdotes of spectatorial reception of the *Paranormal Activity 2* trailer, this time from Portland, Oregon. Though by all accounts it wasn’t removed from Portland theaters as was claimed for Texas Cinemark theaters, *CinemaBlend*’s Josh Tyler (2010) observed a similar response to the found footage hauntings in the Lone Star State:

Sitting next to me during *Eclipse* was a mother with her very cute, very polite daughter of around age ten or so. Before the movie started they talked happily, and excitedly about the movie. I watched their seats for them while they went, hand in hand, to get popcorn. The lights went down and the little girl squealed with excitement and hugged her mom. Then the trailer for *Paranormal Activity 2* started. Within mere moments, that happy little girl was reduced to horrible, uncontrollable, sobs of terror. Throughout the trailer she kept crying to her mom “make it stop, make it stop” while her mom hugged her close and tried desperately to cover her eyes telling her “it’s ok, it’s ok, it’s just a commercial it’s not the *Twilight* movie. It’ll be over in a second, just don’t look.” The little girl kept sobbing.

Steffan Hantke (2002) has argued that, “we are supposed to experience [horror] as a loud, crass, and almost instinctual sensation [...]. Horror, here, means bodily exertion: to shudder, to sweat, to squirm in our seats” (2). Such reactions to theatrical horror, however, are often marked by pleasure, performativity, and *consent*—something Tyler seems to indicate was compromised in the above anecdote.

Though written for the *HuffPost* within a larger, turgid proposal to ban horror trailers from movie theaters (a desire and demand I explicitly *don’t* agree with), consider Julian Sancton’s (2012) similar discussion about the lack of autonomy (and excess of ill feelings) supposedly brought about by contact with theatrical horror trailers:

The great thing about America is that I can choose not to go see *The Devil Inside*. The terrible thing about America is that I can’t choose not to see the trailer for *The Devil Inside*. [...] There you are at the movies,

slurping the dregs of your Cherry Coke during the endless preamble of trailers when suddenly the screen goes black and you hear a bell toll, a deep rumble, and a child starts singing a nursery rhyme really, really slowly. The fact that you know what's coming doesn't make it any less disagreeable: a blood-curdling shriek accompanied by a flash of some sunken-eyed humanoid. It will cause a reflexive shudder and a rush of horrible-feeling hormones that humans were only designed to secrete in the most life-threatening danger. But you will feel them 20 more times in the next two minutes. God forbid you have a heart condition.

Though framing horror trailers as aberrant, Sancton describes what is in fact a common condition of cinemagoing: that we consent to an experience that *bears the possibility of risk*—from the arguably minor (we risk the chance that a film won't be good according to our tastes and desires, or even that a trailer “breaks” its supposed promotional promises), to the potentially major and more dangerous (we risk the chance that a film or even a trailer might upset us or make us feel ill). As Catherine Clepper (2016) elaborates, cinemagoers “routinely entrust their bodies to the cinematic experience—to the confines of the theater, to the reflexes and reactions evoked by films, and to the sensory conditions of the crowd, space, and atmosphere. For those attending shockers, there are additional corporeal risks understood as generic conventions (e.g., rhythmic suspense) and their physical symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms, racing pulse)” (64). In line with Clepper, Steven Shaviro (1993) argues that film viewing is marked by “bodily agitations, [...] movements of fascination,” and “reactions of attraction and repulsion” (9)—especially in the face of cinematic horror.

Agitated in the Aisles

Cinemagoing—which includes the experience of movie trailers, even mistakenly screened ones of the horror variety—is thus often defined by such “agitations.” For Charles Acland (2003) the term “cinemagoing” speaks broadly to “the physical mobility involved, the necessary negotiation of community space, the process of consumer selection, and the multiple activities that one engages in before, during, and after a film performance” (58); going to the movies is a varied experience—“it is banal, it is erotic, it is civil, it is unruly; it is an everyday site of regulated and unregulated possibility” (58).

Such notions of “possibility” allow us to situate these horror trailer incidents within broader understandings of disappointment and failure at the

movies—the projection mishaps, dirty floors, rowdy patrons, and poor screen conditions that often constitute the spaces and experiences of cinemagoing. These “failures” help to explain at least in part what happened at the Danbarry Cinemas the day that *Sinister 2*'s Bughuul appeared onscreen to (quite literally within the diegetic world of the film) capture and terrorize children, instead of bright, sweet, and endearing CGI animated characters. [Fig 3.]



Figure 3: The haunting failures of film, projected in the trailer for *Sinister 2* (Assembled Screenshots)

As several news reports speculated, the switch-up could have stemmed from a simple mistake in the projection booth that could be attributed to the similar spellings of *Inside Out* and *Insidious* within the digital projection system.

These kinds of mix-ups with film and/or digital projection are not anomalies.³ Projection issues *do* happen, more frequently than one might want to think or admit. Beyond this, we can point to long-standing, historically documented understandings of the cinema as a fraught, unpredictable space whose perils were arguably often far worse than unexpected horror trailers. The history of film exhibition has been filled with potential physical dangers (Rhodes 2012), some related to the elements or poor structural conditions (horrifying storms, floods, natural disasters, falling ceilings), while others were more specifically linked to the cinema and its spectators (slips and spills in the darkened auditorium, unsteady film projection, nitrate film and projector fires, audience fist-fights, robberies, and other forms of violence).

While not exactly dire issues, poor projection quality and lack of attentiveness to both film and audience seemed to pervade the Danbarry Cinemas, where they allegedly made more mistakes than accidentally showing kids a few horror trailers on a lazy summer afternoon. As various local news reports indicated, Danbarry Cinemas went out of business in their Middletown, OH location, replaced by Republic Theatres Cinema 10 in 2018. Apparently, the theater had long-running issues with late or cancelled screening times, cleanliness and maintenance, bad concessions, and poor customer service (Schwartzberg 2018; McCrabe 2018). Such occurrences are as common to cinemagoing as seeing a movie or buying popcorn, and have been so for quite some time. In a 2007 *Chicago Tribune* article titled “It’s horror at the movie theater,” entertainment reporter Mark Caro presented personal anecdotes of supposed “horror stories,” from the movies, where one particular screening of *Waitress* (2007) was plagued by mishaps and odd occurrences in the auditorium, which included (quite fittingly for my purposes) a [trailer for evil child horror film *Josbua* \(2007\)](#) (also known as *The Devil’s Child*) that was mistakenly played *twice*. Caro frames his personal experiences at, and grievances towards, the movies as ones that are frequently shared amongst the cinemagoing community, using a *Tribune* reader poll to back up his claim (though some of the gripes are

³ From my own experience, I can recount several projection mishaps at the movies over the last few decades that didn’t exactly terrify or unsettle, but rather made me either frustrated or mildly amused. One such experience forever baked into my memory happened during an opening week screening of *A Bug’s Life* (1998) on Long Island, NY, where at one point the film (as in the *Sinister 2* trailer) began to tear and burn, revealing jarring strips of light and splotches of fiery corrosion. To many kids it seemed somewhat horrifying, especially since the projection mishap occurred during a very jovial scene featuring the caterpillar character Heimlich (to this then thirteen-year-old, it was kind of neat...). Like with the audience at Danbarry Cinemas, we all immediately received a ticket for another screening.

admittedly minor):

More than 120 readers also chimed in with their own horror stories—tales of inadequate staffing at ticket windows and concession stands, dirty auditoriums, faulty closed-captioning equipment, screaming children taken to R-rated movies, cell-phone answerers, seat-kickers, loud talkers, loud popcorn chewers, smelly-food eaters, smokers, ushers who won't deal with any of the disruptions, ads and trailers that are too loud and numerous, high prices and, inevitably, disappointing movies. (Caro 2007)

Such complaints speak to a host of previously mentioned issues and problems with moviegoing—from the seemingly preventable or fixable (cleanliness) to the more difficult to manage (the perceived quality of a film; the behavior of patrons). This latter aspect is key to consider; consumers of course are just as critical of each other as they are the movies or the theater staff. In the next section, I will examine audience complaints specifically across the *Twilight/Paranormal* case study—complaints which are typically rooted in gendered critiques of youth and female spectatorship, particularly in relation to horror.

Cinema Space, Horror, and Female Spectatorship

As with the discourse surrounding the *Inside Out/Insidious* mishap, the ambiguity of reports coming out of the Texas *Twilight Saga: Eclipse* premiere screenings in many ways help to lend the whole controversy a whiff of insignificance—a non-event turned into spooky, lucrative hype. The primary source cited by the majority of online reports about the trailer's removal is a brief and rather vague article posted to *Variety's* webpage on the afternoon of June 30, 2010—less than a day after the teaser's theatrical premiere at the *Twilight* screenings. The entirety of the article reads as such:

Cinemark is pulling the trailer for Paramount's 'Paranormal Activity 2' from several theaters in Texas after receiving numerous complaints that the promo was too frightening. Trailer debuted during midnight runs of Summit Entertainment's 'Eclipse.' Cinemark has told Paramount it could pull the trailer from more theaters as 'Eclipse' opens nationwide today, should there be additional complaints. (McClintock 2010)

It perhaps goes without saying that this report leaves a great deal to be desired: Who were the moviegoers that were specifically making complaints? What exactly about the teaser was so scary? What Cinemark locations across Texas were the ones supposedly afflicted by these promotional night terrors? What specific representatives from both Cinemark and Paramount are being quoted (or, more aptly, indirectly referenced) here? Furthermore, how did both the cinema chain and the studio react so quickly, when the trailer only screened at midnight and 3:00 AM *that very day*?

With this initial *Variety* blurb used as the common and often sole source, additional reports across the web did nothing to answer these questions. Though a wide array of publications and the sites of various local news stations across the United States picked up the story and spread it around the web from late June into early July, none of them really bothered to dig much deeper than what *Variety* (and author Pamela McClintock) had already provided to the news-and-hype cycle. A day later, McClintock *did* update the *Variety* piece, further emphasizing the fright of young female viewers and adding some more information about Paramount's reaction to Cinemark's removal of the *Paranormal Activity 2* teaser: "Paramount marketers were anything but spooked by the decision, which is certain to fuel interest. 'We respect Cinemark's decision to address their clients' concerns', Paramount vice chair Rob Moore said, adding he doesn't recall another trailer being pulled. 'We think the trailer is engaging, and are certainly surprised by the intensity of the reaction'" (McClintock 2010). Many reporters echoed such skepticism, wondering if the whole thing was one big publicity stunt by Paramount. Writing for *Celluloid Junkie*, J. Sperling Reich (2010) claimed that, "The whole story seems so improbable that it wasn't long before fan boys on the blogosphere pegged it as a publicity stunt in advance of 'Paranormal Activity 2's' October 16th opening. If that is indeed the case, then good for Paramount. It certainly worked. After all, they got me (and dozens of others) to write about the film three months before its release. I suppose then this serves as one of those examples of there being no such thing as bad publicity." Similarly, *Houston Chronicle's* Joe Meyers (2010) observed that the "'controversy' over the 'Paranormal Activity 2' trailer smacks of public relations hype [...] The night I saw 'Eclipse', the trailer for the sequel to the sleeper hit 'Paranormal Activity' didn't cause a ripple in the crowd. Actually, it seemed scarier than funny [sic]⁴—a bit like a parody of the original."

⁴ This should arguably read as "funnier than scary," but is reprinted here as it initially appeared on the *Houston Chronicle's* website.

Truly, it is difficult to think in retrospect that Paramount’s decision to attach a creepy found footage horror promo to a new *Twilight* film *wasn’t* intentional—not only have the *Paranormal Activity* films (and supernatural films more broadly) been attractive to the teen demographic for years, *Twilight’s* young fans are themselves notoriously impassioned. *Twilight* fandom has often been deemed newsworthy because of its intensity, with the 2010 midnight premiere screenings of *Eclipse* receiving significant attention from local and national television news around the United States.⁵ As Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz (2011) points out, such high levels of media attention have been especially common around the theatrical release dates of each film in the *Twilight* franchise—moments when “*Twilight* fan activity is thrust most glaringly into the limelight, and [...] public commentary seems focused on trying to explain the ‘crazy’ fan phenomenon to ‘normal’ outsiders.” In the case of the Texas Cinemark screenings, these disparaging claims about *Twilight’s* female fans were repeated ad nauseum, refracting the excitement and pleasure of a midnight movie premiere into an image of crazed lust and terrifying fervor.

As Kristina Busse (2013) might argue, the discourses of fandom coming out of these particular *Twilight* screenings “are influenced by issues of gender not only in the way female fans are regarded but also in the way certain negatively connoted fannish activities are considered specifically female” (74). Busse expands upon this argument, pointing out that,

Underlying all these analyses is a gender binary that identifies certain behaviors as *masculine* or *feminine*, with the former usually connoting active, intellectual, aggressive, and objective, and the latter, passive, emotional, sensitive, and subjective. While recent gender theory (Butler 1992) has clearly shown these categories to be constructed, not just on the level of culture but on the level of biology, the societal associations linger and become self-reinforcing. When women act according to stereotype, their behaviors get dismissed as feminine; when they act against stereotype, their behaviors get dismissed as aberrant or get reinscribed negatively as feminine nevertheless. In the case of overt sexual expression, for example, male desire for female stars is accepted as healthy virile sexuality, whereas female desire often gets redefined as

⁵ For representative examples of this attention to female fandom, see news reports here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXttHnwjzqQ>), here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyhgAEAi-gE>) and here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoUw0LPGJs8>)

overinvested and hysterical—a term that in its etymology, of course, already shows its genderedness.” (74)

Such extreme assessments and critiques of female spectators are well documented since the early days of cinema. As Mireille Berton (2018) points out, “discourses about the consequences of female (over)presence in projection sites such as nickelodeons reveal a set of fears related to the new visibility of women’s bodies in the public sphere—bodies, as I would like to suggest, that were mainly conceived of as nervous organisms overloaded with contagious stimuli” (221). Though the visibility of women in cinematic exhibition sites has not been “new” since the days of the nickelodeons, their presence, as I will show here, is still greeted with skepticism, contempt, mockery, and a sense of exoticism. Indeed, if “female fans are dismissed more easily, then so are their interests, their spaces, and their primary forms of engagement” (Busse 2013, 75).

Taking these reactions into account, it doesn’t seem like a coincidence that Paramount chose midnight and 3:00 am screenings of a new *Twilight* film to unleash an unsettling preview for their newest found footage fright-fest; Berton’s suggestion that women’s spectatorial bodies were treated as sources of “contagious stimuli” takes on new meaning here in the context of “viral” promotion and the spread of the *Paranormal Activity 2* trailer in the wake of the Texas Cinemark screenings, where “overwrought” female reactions were used to sell the (positive) horrific attributes of the latest Blumhouse found-footage chiller. Interestingly, such audience reactions to the *Twilight* franchise have been so well documented that they were already primed to go viral; as various news reports indicated, the reactions of young girls and women were highly anticipated by film and media sites days prior to the Cinemark screening, when Paramount sent out a press release that the *Paranormal Activity 2* teaser would be attached to *Eclipse* (a headline from *Film School Rejects* summarizes many of these early predictions: “Paranormal Activity 2 Trailer Set to Scare Crap Out of Teen Girls” [Miller 2010]). It reads as highly intentional, then, that Paramount would exploit (1) the already guaranteed screams and cries of its specific test audience, and (2) the often skewed, sexist image of overwrought tween and teen girls (supposedly hyped on caffeine, raging hormones, and ardent fandom) in order to use the deeply impassioned performances associated with *Twilight* fandom as surrogates for the shrieks of viewers shocked and disturbed by onscreen promotional horrors.

Across the history of horror spectatorship and promotional gimmicks, this reliance on the screams of women to sell the genre and confirm its

effectiveness is nothing new. Writing of the classic horror cinema of the 1930s and 40s, Rhona Berenstein (2002) points out that various “exhibitor efforts” of the time “used women as prototypical viewers, [and] drew upon stereotypes that assumed that female patrons will be frightened by watching horror and invited women to defy those stereotypes as a means of garnering prizes and provoking their prowess as spectators” (142); additionally, female performers would be staged as fake medical personnel, who would occasionally tend to the overwrought patrons. This is a practice that predates the classic Universal Monsters era and exceeds it, having been used to eerie effect in early 20th century Grand Guignol performances and silent era film screenings, as well as by horror gimmick maestro William Castle (see: Skal 1993; Heffernan 2004; Kattelman 2011; Leeder 2011; Swanson 2015; Clepper 2016).

While Berenstein acknowledges that these promotional ploys could indeed be understood as exploiting and reinforcing gender stereotypes about women as weak and easily startled, they were in fact more complex in their understandings of gender and spectatorial performance than such an assessment allows for. Indeed, the key word here is “performance;” as Berenstein argues, if the female audiences of classic horror cinema “were asked over and over again to act out or refuse to act out their fears in front of crowds or to garner prizes, their gender roles—though conventional and promoted—were also highly theatricalized” (2002, 143). To scream might not necessarily indicate an involuntary reaction of fear, but a voluntary performance rooted in spectatorial pleasure and individual control. Indeed, the “act” of losing control is itself a somewhat controlled experience, directly contradicting notions of the movie audience as beholden only to the physical and ideological “agitations” of the cinema.

Such hyperbolic and trivializing language about *Twilight* fandom was also used in concert with the *Paranormal Activity 2* teaser to further an ongoing (and frustratingly reductive) discourse about the supposedly inherent qualities of “real” horror films and fans. According to many online journalists and pop culture commentators, the wild screams of young female “Twihards” at the *Eclipse* premiere screenings somehow “proved” that the teaser for *Paranormal Activity 2* was either a shining example of “real horror” in comparison to *Twilight* (because of its amplified frights, eerie tone, and ability to send moviegoers reeling in their seats), or that it was, conversely, an example of dumbed-down, gimmicky teen-centric horror (due to its conventional jump-scares and supposedly dull passages of either motionless surveilling or shaky found-footage-style camera work). This gendered mindset pervaded the majority of similar commentary posted to news sites and pop culture blogs in the immediate

hours and days following the Cinemark screenings, as evidenced by these excerpts:

Most visitors to this site will have seen this trailer by now, it's no big deal right, pretty bland...and not scary in the slightest, right? Well, apparently it proved that jump scares still frighten people shitless as Deadline reports that Cinemark theater execs in Texas had a number of people (i.e. Twilight fans who were allowed up past their bedtime) who couldn't handle a minute or so of crappy video cam and generic ominous music and they ended up pulling the spot. (Cunninham 2010)

The new Paranormal Activity 2 film has already started to build hype around it. [...] The teaser trailer was attached to the midnight showing of Twilight Eclipse, and after viewing the trailer many fans left the theater demanding a refund. What's wrong, afraid of a dog and a baby? I expected more from a fan-base that goes crazy over Vampires and Werewolves. (Villarreal 2010)

Personally, while I found the *PA2* trailer to be nicely discombobulating, and certainly a hundred times more frightening than the *Tw*-farce that followed it, I can think of several more commercials that in their day unnerved me more, including the ads for *Phantasm*, the *Dawn of the Dead* remake, and most terrifying of all, *The Shining* (Collis 2010).

More proof that "Twilight" isn't true genre fare: Previews for actual horror movies are too frightening for Twihards. [...] Genre filmmakers who were hoping to capitalize on the "Twilight" phenomenon should take this as a warning: People who swoon over sparkly vampires who fall in love with personality-less teenage girls aren't actually horror fans. There are vampires ... and then there are vampires who sparkle. (Beck 2010)

Not missing a chance to turn the removed trailer into a marketing moment, Paramount took advantage of the incident and the "masculinized" versus "feminized" discourses over horror spectatorship to fuel social media buzz for their lucrative *Paranormal* franchise. Using the studio's official *Paranormal* franchise Twitter account (@TweetYourScream) to retweet links to articles about the incident, they even went as far as to tweet the following sardonic proclamation: "Twilight moms getting the original Paranormal Activity 2 trailer

taken out of theaters for being too scary! #FlagOnThePlay”—the particular hashtag borrowing from football terminology, implying both a penalty against Paramount and a potentially egregious condemnation of a horror trailer that did its job by, well, *being scary*. By Paramount’s logic, *Twilight*’s primarily adolescent, female fans are ill-suited to handle *real* horror when they actually encounter it—an unfortunate, ignorant assessment of both youth and female spectatorship and the varying, often contradictory pleasures of horror films, their trailers, and the cinema writ large. Drawing from Antunes (2020), such critiques overlap with the ways horror has long been “distanced from child audiences with the suggestion that they cannot comprehend it—or, alternatively, proposed as a genre so infantile it could never truly appeal to any other audience” (7). Here, *children* become (an often unfounded) source of agitation for adult audiences and critics, seemingly more potent than the disruptions and mishaps of the cinema discussed across this essay.

Conclusion

The *Twilight/Paranormal* case study is indicative of the movie theater, like other semipublic spaces, as having thresholds, boundaries, and strict conditions governed by a host of actors—with “implications of violence and exclusion” (Verschaffel 2009, 142) built into their very fabric. When combined with vicious genre gatekeeping and the devaluation of child and female spectatorship, this view of the semipublic spaces and practices of cinemagoing looks rather ugly, even in the playfulness that Paramount and entertainment journalists want to take from the incident and emphasize across promos and editorials. The overt critiques of young female *Twilight* and horror fans in relation to an exciting and jarring horror trailer—and most importantly, the critiques of their impassioned performances of terror, arousal, melodrama, wonder, and glee—in part attempt to erase what the movie theater has long been: “a site where people belonging to groups excluded from the dominant discourse and from positions of power could have access to a new kind of collective experience” (Berton 2018, 222). In many ways, both case studies featured in this essay are about a kind of denial of experience at the movies. Recall the claims reported by Angie Han (2015) of *Slash Film*: that eyewitness accounts (specifically those made by patron Mandy Adkins) from inside the Danbarry Cinemas refuted the ideas that the cinema auditorium was a complete horror zone and that scores of children were left confused, nervous, crying, and traumatized from the *Sinister 2* trailer. On the contrary, Han quotes Adkins as saying that “the children in the theater were all

‘calm and fine,’ and it was actually the parents freaking out” (Han 2015). Interestingly, not all of the news reports about the horror trailer mishap included this information, an absence that only rehashed claims about the (allegedly) harmful, agitating powers of both the horror genre and movies more broadly.

Such misinterpretation or willful ignorance of children’s actual viewing habits (and resistance to children’s potentially pleasurable relationships with horror) have been a constant throughout cinema history; as Catherine Lester (2021) reminds us:

More often than not, moral panics concerning children and horror rarely involve consulting actual children, but instead draw upon an abstracted, symbolic notion of the child as innocent, impressionable and in need of protection by adults at all costs. When children’s experiences and views regarding horror are actually investigated, it is found that [...] many children deliberately seek out and enjoy frightening media (Cantor and Reilly 1982: 92; Buckingham 1996: 112). (4)

So, to print and circulate the idea that the children were *calm* would be to admit that children, like everyone else, possess the ability to feel and perform their (early, developing) spectatorship in complex, contradictory, surprising, and even banal ways. It would mean to admit that kids weren’t only scared, but rather potentially bored, oblivious, attentive to their parent’s phones, talking to their siblings or friends, daydreaming, asleep, or—(Gasp!) most frightening of all for some parents—actually *interested* in the fragments of promotional horror projected in front of them. In this way, the trailers for the *Sinister* and *Paranormal Activity* sequels not only functioned as previews for upcoming horror films, but as a means for adults to project their fears, insecurities, and assumptions onto the bodies and experiences of young audiences coming into their own as they navigate the strange pleasures of cinematic horror.

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