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Friday the 13th franchise: The myth of Jason Voorhees

“There’s a definite connection between the fast food franchise and Friday the 13th franchise. This is a very successful hamburger.”

David Del Valle – Film Critic

The story of the Friday the 13th franchise is the story of a random, self-made industry of a cult, post-modern popular culture icon, with its roots deep down in the, ‘*Grand Guignol*’, ‘European folklore’, ‘50’s *EC Comics culture*’ and ‘exploitation film’. Friday the 13th films are amongst the initiators of both the ‘slasher genre’ and the ‘splatstick genre’. It’s an industry including 11 films, a TV series, several comic book short-series, books, action figures, masks and various other collectibles. It’s random and self-made because this industry was not meant to exist in the first place, grew with fan interest and relentless exploitation of the producers. It is an industry built on the huge, unexpected success of one independently produced, low-budget, exploitation film on the summer of 1980; *Friday the 13th*.

Capitalising on the notoriety and box office success of *Friday the 13th*, producers immediately delivered a sequel, *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981), which returned equally good results in the box office. In this sequel, producers introduced a psycho killer villain, Jason Voorhees, who was barely in the first film as a young boy. By the year 1989, there were nine Friday the 13th films and Jason Voorhees was a cult icon. Transformed into something completely different with nearly each sequel, the Friday the 13th films gained a post-modern identity and evolved into a myth with a comic book quality.

This essay examines why Friday the 13th films became a successful product and achieved a post-modern cult value, arguing for the franchise’s legitimacy. This is the story of a thought-provoking milestone in the horror cinema (rather a main junction between horror and mainstream friendly gore) and popular culture. From the first H.G. Lewis’ gore flicks to the splatstick genre, from *EC Comics*’ grotesque to Tom Savini’s art, from *House of Dracula* (1945) to *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003); This is the story of a was-not-even-in-the-initial-script character which became a true horror icon and simultaneously transformed into a comical pop-culture icon in an unmatched number of sequels and created a whole franchise of its own.

The roots of the slasher film

If one’s a teenager in the 80’s and 90’s, he/she definitely has watched a group of teenagers slaughtered one by one, by a masked killer with a sharp weapon. Nearly all these scenarios in these years share the same rigid rules and conventions. For a teenager in the 80’s and 90’s, ‘horror film’ is not a serious concept but has rather become a rollercoaster ride in its most respectable description. There’s a particular

reason for that; the emergence and dominance of the slasher film. Being a successful ‘product’ rather than an ‘artwork’, the slasher film was so dominant that for most people it became synonymous with the horror film, and it was interpreted as the death of the horror genre. However, the truth was that, there was a new genre born. Parallel to the censorship in cinema and the power of successful marketing, the slasher genre blurred the lines between horror, gore, exploitation, grindhouse, comedy, popcorn movie and reached a caricature character.

The history of the slasher genre definitely overlaps, to a great extent, with the gore films and the graphic depiction of gore in cinema. The early graphic depictions of gore in cinema are highly relevant due to the fact that the slasher film is, in its purest form, a parade of gory death scenes one by one. It has been present as a form of entertainment since the days of Grand Guignol. Joseph Stefano, the script writer of *Psycho* (1960), draws attention to the two infamous murder scenes in *Psycho* which broke down all the structures of safety in society: “The slasher movie came along because if *Psycho* had two of those scenes, think what would do in the box office if it has three. And next time, four. And pretty soon you have eight kids in the summer camp and they’re all getting killed.”¹

The earliest example of the ‘slasher’ mentality in literature can be traced back to stories about Jack The Ripper and promptly Agatha Christie’s detective novel *Ten Little Indians* (1939) where ten strangers are invited to a mansion and murdered one by one, punished for their sins. In cinema, it is Mario Bava’s *Twitch of the Death Nerve* (*Reazione a catena*) (1971), which gets the recognition as the first ‘body count’ movie. The film is definitely a huge influence on the gore and slasher films of the following decade. However the murders in Mario Bava’s cult black comedy are pieces of a mystery to be solved and the film does not revolve solely around the murders as the slasher films do.

The birth of the pure slasher film happened as a side effect of the true Horror in Hollywood. 1970’s was the beginning of a new golden age of horror in Hollywood with the low-budget classics like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Shivers* (1975) and *Halloween* (1978). Many critics and the architects of this golden age of horror in the 70’s believe that this wave of aggressiveness, terror and sense of attack in cinema was a reaction to the

¹ Abbott, Andrew and Leven, Ruddled (Producer/Director/Writer), *Scream and Scream Again: A History of the Slasher Film*, UK, BBC 2 (2000)

Vietnam War and social and political circumstances. John Carpenter, commenting on the Kennedy assassination, says: “I mean we were watching that thing live. I couldn’t believe what I just saw. What?! This can’t happen... in America? We’re America!”² Wes Craven, who collaborated on *The Last House on the Left* and then went on to create *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984) and *Scream* (1996), says: “I think the entire nation was repeatedly traumatized by the events of that time and still is mystified by what the forces were at work during those times also. There were so many mysteries all about those mysteries and assassinations and historical events just left you feeling completely at the mercy of this drunken fate... that had blood in his eye. Year after year”.³ It was true horror. Professor Adam Lowenstein from the University Of Pittsburgh, commenting on the famous tagline ‘It’s Only A Movie’ of the sadistic film *The Last House On The Left*, says that “You do want to say to yourself it’s only a movie. But it’s a moment like this in last *House On The Left* where I really think it’s so painful that you realise what’s going on here isn’t only a movie. What’s going on here has everything to do with things like ‘Kent State’ and ‘Vietnam War’ and that this kind of pain isn’t just a sick isolated episode. This pain I’m watching has everything to do with the world that I live in.”⁴

Not only the political circumstances but also disturbing individual social cases like Manson Family Massacre, Ed Gein, Gacy and Dahmer’s killing sprees created the atmosphere for the 70’s Horror in film. “Only the Devil himself, in the cinematic form of *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976) series, could compete with the new monsters society was helping to create. Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, serial killer machines, were truly frightening because they represented nothing but their own hate and need to destroy. Suddenly, motivation was all but thrown out the window. Filmmakers were now free to portray monsters who killed simply for the sake of killing. We longer needed the trappings of the legend or myth. That much was clear in the successful murder movie *Last House On The Left* (1972), made by Wes Craven - who went on to create Freddy Kruger for *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) – and Sean S. Cunningham, who later created Jason Voorhees.”⁵

² Jalfon, Paula (Producer), Simon, Adam (Director/Writer), *The American Nightmare*, Minerva Pictures, USA (2000)

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ Meyers, Ric., “Keep Telling Yourself It’s Only A Movie”, *Jason vs. Leatherface part 1 of 3*, Topps Comics, Topps Company, New York (1995)

Discovering the contemporary power of the low-budget horror, young producers and directors wanted to get their hands onto this new wave. Hence, just like a mutant creature of a lab experiment gone wrong, the slasher genre was born.

Effect of *Halloween*

Victor Miller, the screenwriter of *Friday The 13th*, recalls himself and Sean Cunningham, at the dawn of their career, looking for a breakthrough in the industry. Miller says: “At that point, everybody was saying ‘what America really needs now is a good family film’. So, Sean and I set out, he got the funding and, God love him we made two wonderful family films... And once again America had lied. It did not want to see good family films... Evidently, America wanted to see *Halloween!*”⁶ *Halloween*'s (1978) impact was huge. “*Halloween* had its American premiere on 31 October 1978. The modestly budgeted quickie went on to earn \$18,500,000 in the domestic market alone, becoming financially one of the most successful independent films of the 1970s.”⁷ Director of *Halloween*, Carpenter, after more than 2 decades, says “I wanted something savage to happen. I don't believe I can do that now. They wouldn't let me do that.”⁸

This was the backdrop in which *Halloween* was born. “*Halloween* was as original as an Italian Western remake of a samurai epic, a Chinese imitation thereof or a private eye film in blackface. Yet, like *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Fist of Fury* and *Shaft*, *Halloween* went down well with the American exploitation movie-going public; the rural drive-in patrons, ethnic ghetto audiences and college kids. ... *Halloween* is the perfect machine movie. Its only message is ‘boo!’ and, seen in the cinema for the first time, with a receptive audience, it really works.”⁹

But when screenwriter Victor Miller and director Sean Cunningham wanted to copy this ‘boo machine’ and purely aim to ‘make money’ with this ‘boo machine’, the result turned out to be the something different than a horror film; they created the first pure slasher film. Film Critic Kim Newman, who is in love with 70's golden age of horror, says in his book: “*Halloween* seems to be set in a conventional, realistic small

⁶ Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *Return to Crystal Lake: Making 'Friday the 13th'*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

⁷ Newman, Kim., *Nightmare Movies, A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, Bloomsbury, London (1988) p.143

⁸ Jalfon, Paula (Producer), Simon, Adam (Director/Writer), *The American Nightmare*, Minerva Pictures, USA (2000)

⁹ Newman, Kim., p.144

town, but actually it takes place in a poetic fantasy world somewhere between a 'B' picture and the fairytale, where different natural laws obtain. The nearest the film comes to the idea is the metamorphosis of Michael into the shape, an unkillable incarnation of the darkest of all childhood myths, the bogeyman. The bogeyman does not have to make sense, all he has to do is be scary... With *Halloween*, Irwin Yablans, John Carpenter and line producer Debra Hill revived this harmless tradition. Then came *Friday the 13th*, and psycho movies started to go nastily wrong."¹⁰

Friday the 13th was primarily a product aimed to get people's attention, scare people, surprise people, make people talk about it and make money. It's very simple and straight forward. The whole project started with Sean Cunningham – after the success of *Halloween* – coming up with a title and marketing it very passionately! "I was playing around with the titles. And one of the titles just came into my head at the time was Friday the 13th. And out of frustration I said 'Friday the 13th! Christ! If I had a picture called Friday the 13th, I could sell that! ... We took this ad in *Variety* that said 'Friday the 13th the most terrifying movie ever made'. It was in great big block letters crashing through a mirror."¹¹ It was an attempt of capitalising on the famous Christian superstition surrounding the events of Knights Templar and the unlucky Friday the 13th; paraskavedekatriaphobia (the phobia of Friday the 13th) – a form of Triskaidekaphobia (the phobia of number 13).

It's a horror film... it's an exploitation... it's a product...

It's the first pure slasher film; Friday the 13th

Victor Miller comments on how they tried to structure a horror film now which would live up to their ad in *Variety*: "I went to school basically on the movie *Halloween*, saw it once figured out what a good horror film would need. ... First of all, you have to start with a prior evil. Something happened a long time ago that was really bad. Then you have to have a group of adolescents or slightly close to adolescents who are in an environment in which they can not be helped by adults. The

¹⁰ Newman, Kim., *Nightmare Movies, A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, Bloomsbury, London (1988) p. 144

¹¹ Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *Return to Crystal Lake: Making 'Friday the 13th'*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

other thing I learned from *Halloween*, if you make love you get killed. So I had to figure out a way to do that.”¹²

When Miller and Cunningham structured their ‘product’, they had come up with mainly two exploitation notions; a deliberate simplicity in the story and a passionately graphic depiction of gore. The simplicity of the story put the focus on the gore – the killings, and the gore in the killings became the center of attention as it never did in a major Hollywood film ever. *Friday the 13th* was not a major horror film; it was independently produced low-budget exploitation. However things took a controversial and post-modernistic turn when a major Hollywood distributor, Paramount, gave the film a nation-wide opening. “...the controversy that surrounded the film arose because it was distributed by a major studio rather than one of the usual exploitation outfits.”¹³ What Paramount did created a very post-modernistic turn of events because it was the ultimate introduction of the ‘low culture’, to the popular culture. That’s why the film’s effect on the society – who was exposed to this ‘low culture gore’ for the first time - was intense; “The film takes the nascent community, the one we have assumed through years of similar cinematic experiences must of necessity prevail, and crushes it.”¹⁴ Hence the controversy was inevitable.

The reason why Paramount wanted the distribution of *Friday the 13th* and also the utmost reason the audiences left the theatres in awe is the ‘chair jumper scene’ in the final of the film. There were various gruesome deaths, a twist at the end, a mother character as the killer and the infamous decapitation scene of Betsy Palmer. But it was the ‘chair jumper scene’ of Jason that scared and impressed the audiences. The audiences were thrilled by the death scenes any they were waiting for the next one, and the next one, one after the other... (which went on to construct one of the primary notions of the Jason and the Slasher film) but the final scene comes completely unexpected, without a hint – in contrast with the parade of the death scenes up to that point. Miller recalls that in the Paramount screening, everybody jumped in their seats at the end and that basically sold the movie to Paramount.

¹² Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *Return to Crystal Lake: Making 'Friday the 13th'*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

¹³ Newman, Kim., *Nightmare Movies, A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, Bloomsbury, London (1988) p.147

¹⁴ Jalfon, Paula (Producer), Simon, Adam (Director/Writer), *The American Nightmare*, Minerva Pictures, USA (2000)

Jason the chair-jumper

Sean Cunningham, towards the end of the shooting, simply said they need a chair jumper for the end and Miller went back to his drawing board and borrowed from all the best horror films he has ever seen. Cunningham comments that “the real success of the film has to do with the last 3-4 minutes.” It’s a dream sequence with Adrienne King floating in a row boat and then Jason’s hand coming out of the water. The ghost story’s over, so the audiences can take a breath, turn on the lights. Dawn comes up and the sole survivor, Adrienne King, is on this beautiful, placid lake when suddenly the deformed boy comes up from the bottom of the lake. The deformed boy also comes up musically at a point where it’s totally unexpected. It’s certainly one of the most unexpected and chair jumping finales in the history of cinema – turning the deformed boy into the cult Jason Voorhees.

The circus element

It wasn’t until Tom Savini’s contribution to the project, that *Friday the 13th* maintained the ‘circus element’ that would give the film (and the slasher genre) its main character. The special effect and make-up artist Tom Savini, had just worked with George Romero on the cult classic *Dawn Of The Dead* (1978). Savini was a Vietnam veteran, he had experienced the actual battlefield and was definitely a recognizable force in the ‘horror film’s reaction to social and political surroundings of its time. He explains how his work was affected by the war: “Looking through a camera at this stuff was a separation for me... I mean there was arms lying on the ground that exploded from grenades of Vietcong... but to me, through the camera, it was a special effect. That was a study for me. I was actually able to look at bone and blood and placement and geography... So here I was looking at what I was thinking was f/x – real gore – and actually studying them and seeing enough if I wanted to create that what would I have to do... Foam latex here and take some chunks out there, some bone marrow... and that’s what carries into my work I guess you know. And I think that’s what Vietnam did. It gave me the desire, the sense that if it’s gonna be horrible, it’s gonna be horrible the way I saw it.”¹⁵

Tom Savini describes the killings as fireworks. He says: “When you watch fireworks, you got the one... you wait for the next one you know. Same thing with

¹⁵ Jalfon, Paula (Producer), Simon, Adam (Director/Writer), *The American Nightmare*, Minerva Pictures, USA (2000)

Friday the 13th; Fireworks was; ok, she dies with an axe on her head, this gets cleaved with a machete, this gets his eyeball... It became like fireworks. It's like one effect after the other. But in this case, it's one gory death after the other. I don't think they were really into 'that's a horrible way to die... most like 'yeay what a great way to die... you know what I'm saying.'"¹⁶ It is most accurate to state the fact that Jason is the co-star or the presenter of 'the slasher fireworks'.

Jason the slasher

What began as a piece of low-culture exploitation flick suddenly had become a nation-wide social event grossing more than \$30,000,000 in seven weeks. Moreover, Universal Studios got the overseas distribution which led to *Friday the 13th*'s world-wide success. The simplicity of the film's appeal was immediately convenient for a sequel. "We started talking about doing a sequel within days, really, of the initial success." says Sean Cunningham, "And that came directly from Paramount; 'You killed eight people, maybe next year you should kill 12 people'. My friends in Boston (the producers) felt it was really important to bring back this Jason character. Well, I thought that was just the worst idea I ever heard... I was completely wrong."¹⁷

Friday the 13th Part 2 primarily delivered a more menacing evil; a psycho male instead of a middle-aged mother. It is the first 'Jason film'. Interestingly, one may say that *Friday the 13th Part 2* is more of a clone of *Halloween* than Part 1 is. The masked killer Michael Myers of *Halloween* is definitely a source of inspiration for the masked killer Jason Voorhees who makes his debut in this Part 2. Jason wears a burlap sack on his head with a hole cut for the eye, as in David Lynch's *Elephant Man* (1980). Director Steve Miner follows the formulaic structure of the first film and delivers another slasher which is effortlessly similar to the slashers before itself, yet does very well in the box office, plus highly satisfies the fans of the first film. Moreover, the ending is obviously signalling that another sequel is on the way since Jason Voorhees doesn't die but left injured by a machete blow to his shoulder.

While the first film stands out for its post-modern status, simplistic take on the gore and taking down the social barriers, the second film is not worthy of such critical attention. The film begins with the sole survivor of the first film getting murdered in

¹⁶ Abbott, Andrew and Leven, Ruddled (Producer/Director/Writer), *Scream and Scream Again: A History of the Slasher Film*, UK, BBC 2 (2000)

¹⁷ Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *Return to Crystal Lake: Making 'Friday the 13th'*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

sadistic fashion leaving the murderer, Jason, as the main character. Where in the first film the killer is not revealed until the very end, the second film crushes this notion stating that this film is a parade of death scenes and the main character will deliver you these acts of Grand Guignol. It is one of the most famous slasher films due to its improved gore and violence, hence further pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in mainstream cinema.

In *Friday the 13th Part 3*, Steve Minor, yet once more sticks to the identical formula of the first two films not even altering the setting or the type of characters. The film is initially released in 3D following the fashion of its time. This third film is inferior to the first two films both in terms technicality and in terms of Grand Guignol. However, towards the creation of the Jason Voorhees franchise, *Friday the 13th Part 3* shows an important spark. There's a very important change in the character of the film. Dismissed as ridiculous and bad taste by the critics, *Friday the 13th Part 3*, delivers elements of comicality and 'cool'. Where the comicality is truly bad taste and is not mainly appreciated even by the fans of the first two movies, the element of 'cool' does get praise from the fans. Jason gets a hockey mask from one of his victims and this mask becomes the main icon, if not the logo of the Jason Voorhees franchise. (There's also a tribute involved to *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the mask. Tributes to horror genre, too, later become an important notion of the Friday the 13th franchise.) The hockey masked Jason in this film behaves differently than the second film. In one scene Jason shoots his female victim in the eye with a harpoon, tosses the harpoon in a cocky manner and confidently walks towards his next victim in an exaggerated manner. The identity of Jason Voorhees was not apparent in the first movie - is he a psychotic killer who is hard to kill or is he some kind of ghoul? – and the audiences are even left more confused with the Jason they see in *Friday the 13th Part 3*. Jason apparently seems to have this confidence and cockiness when he stalks his victims now. (In later films, this 'slow-stalking' of Jason develops into a trademark trait as he gains a pure bogeyman identity). Confirmed with a new funky soundtrack, comical characters and the 3-D presentation of the film, the Jason film certainly drifts far away from horror. This drift is definitely not appreciated by the critics of its time, furthermore not acknowledged as a character of the slasher genre but rather criticized as bad-filmmaking and blamed for degrading the horror genre.

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1982), the fourth instalment in the series uses the 'hockey mask' on its poster, making it an icon of the franchise. The fourth film goes back to the first film's brutal roots, not really building on the comical tone of the third film. Make-up artist Tom Savini returns to delight the fans with his Grand Guignol parade. *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*, regains the respect of the horror fans and critics. The ambiguity of what Jason is, continues to be a mystery but certainly hints an uncanny identity. With its brutality, simplicity and coherence, *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* brings the Friday the 13th slasher films to a full cycle. The film opens up by stating that Jason has reached a myth status; the climax of the film leaves no doubts that Jason is dead this time (his head gets slashed with a machete and Tommy slashes him over and over again); there's revenge taken; and there's the ultimate death of the villain. And the boy Tommy, who kills Jason, is a make-up special effects wizard kid which gives the movie a very symbolic notion over all; completing the cycle as a perfect package.

The producers, however, don't seem to be interested in the coherence of the four-film-legacy of Friday the 13th. One year after the fourth film, with the fifth film, the exploitation of the Friday the 13th films reaches a new level. *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985), shamelessly capitalises on the popularity of Jason Voorhees, ruining its dignity. The film is an attempt to make some more money, exploiting on the fans' love for Jason and not even delivering them Jason Voorhees. Throughout the film, there's Jason slashing his way through victims only to be revealed at the final that it wasn't Jason Voorhees but a hockey masked copy cat killer. Pointless and hated by the fans, *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning*, only stands out as a wacky proof for how the exploitation and Horror relentlessly self-devours itself.

Jason the Uncanny

Up until this point, Jason Voorhees was the king of slashers; the unstoppable stalker who is very hard to kill. However his fame as a b-grade horror icon was surpassed by a new horror character. Created by Wes Craven (who shares the same business roots with Sean Cunningham), a new slasher villain -who is not only a killer but also an uncanny monster- has stormed the audiences with *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984). With the disappointing fifth instalment of Friday the 13th films, Freddy Kruger became the new face of the slasher genre. The uncanny element of *A*

Nightmare On Elm Street was soon paralleled by *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986) which is one of the best Friday the 13th films.

The ambiguity about what Jason really is vanishes when Jason rises from the grave in *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986). Jason Voorhees is now officially a monster which further solidifies its cult value. As a text in its own right, the opening sequence of *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* deserves critical attention maybe more than any other sequence in the series. Tommy Jarvis, the boy who killed Jason in the fourth film, is now an adult who spent his years in a mental institution. Infected by the 'hate' of Jason, Tommy escapes the institution to burn Jason's rotten corpse in his grave (which can be interpreted as a sadistic revenge act of a mentally insane person to diminish his hate). Tommy and his friend from the institution open Jason's grave, and Tommy drives a huge metal stick, repeatedly, through Jason's torso. As Tommy steps away from the grave to grab a can of gasoline, thunder strikes on the metal stick and blue electrical charges rush over Jason's body in comic-book fashion. Jason - like Lucio Fulci's maggot infested zombies - rises up from the grave and sticks his hand through Tommy's friend's body. Jason's hand comes out from Tommy's friend's back, with his heart in Jason's hand. As Tommy makes his escape, Jason slowly puts his mask back, picks up the metal stick and makes a sudden turn towards the camera. The camera focuses on Jason's face and then to his eye. In his eyeball opens up a black circle and in the black circle Jason walks in James Bond style, turn towards the camera and cuts the screen with his trademark machete.

The Jason audience were never before introduced to this apparent comic-book style. The comical and funky tone of the third film was an attempt but it lacked the splatter. *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* should be considered a splatstick film (one of the earliest examples of the genre). The film points a finger at Friday the 13th films and caricaturises Jason Voorhees. This brings a self-aware of the cult value to not only the film but the franchise. The film also delivers a considerable amount of gore (splatter) and also qualifies as a slasher film. This merger of the two genres constructs the true character of the Friday the 13th films.

The new comic-book tone of Jason film was very well received by the fans. Jason Voorhees had progressed into a supernatural hero status. In the new film, the producers wanted to put Jason against another post-modern cult horror icon in a modern *House of Dracula* fashion. The best idea would definitely be to put Freddy

Kruger versus Jason Voorhees. However, New Line Cinema and Paramount could not agree on the terms and the project was cancelled. *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood* (1988) did not deliver the most anticipated Freddy versus Jason battle; instead the film introduced a teenage girl with powerful telekinetic abilities who is a tribute to the cult horror film character Carrie. The Carrie vs Jason story had its moments of Grand Guignol but they were heavily cut by MPAA. *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood*, proved out to be a more of a tame ‘supernatural hero/monster clash’ rather than a nasty slasher. The ‘supernatural monster clash’ notion worked fine with the Jason franchise, improving on the comic-book-like persona of Jason; however the decline of the Grand Guignol effect was a major problem.

Jason fits most suitably to the ‘automatism’ category under ‘The Uncanny’; “Automatism can be used when what is human is perceived as merely mechanical: examples of this would be sleepwalking, epileptic fits, trance-states and madness.”¹⁸ Jason Voorhees seems to be the mute evil personification of automatism. Jason gained the ‘monster’ and ‘supernatural’ and ‘comic-book-like’ almost simultaneously. It is this pulp ambience that gave Friday the 13th films even more enfranchisement. “The emphasis in these films is on the body as a package, which can be opened. What we find fills us with awe and horror. Death both repels and rouses, and monster films exploit the ambiguities of repulsion and curiosity. The genre is repetitive precisely because death and malformation have to be presented in rigid conventions, or disgust would overwhelm curiosity.”¹⁹ Jason Voorhees turned the tables as exploiting the sympathy for the monster. Very few films “have totally unsympathetic monsters. In many, the monster is clearly the emotional centre, and much more human than the cardboard representatives of normality.”²⁰ Jason is not human at any level. The truth is, there are not many levels to Jason’s personality; he just kills and kills and kills... in a ‘cool’ way. It is this pure ‘cool’ Jason monster is based upon. A menacing killer described as pure cool and pure evil has never been as blunt and successful as Jason Voorhees. Friday the 13th franchise “repackaged the underground appeal genuinely edgy horror offerings into a saleable multiplex-friendly fodder”²¹.

¹⁸ Royle, Nicholas., *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, (1995) p.36

¹⁹ Huss, Roy and Ross, T.J., *Focus On Horror Film*, Prentice-Hall Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1972 p.124

²⁰ Grant, Barry Keith., *Planks of Reason: Essays On The Horror Film*, the Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, N.J., and London (1984) p.177

²¹ Kermode, Mark., *Sight and Sound*, Dec. 2003, UK, p.15

Death of the Friday the 13th franchise

With the eighth film, *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan* (1989), the Jason franchise proved to be losing its popularity as well as its dignity. The credits roll, as the audience is introduced to the streets of New York where junkies shoot heroin and thugs rob citizens, juxtaposed with the Statue of Liberty and Empire States shots. However, the film begins in Crystal Lake and it takes more than an hour for Jason to step on Manhattan. Even when Jason arrives at Manhattan, the story takes place in some back alleys, underground stations and sewers. Paramount's distrust on the project and the budget limitations caused the film to be a huge upset. The concept of Jason vs. Manhattan had ultimately failed. Part 7 and Part 8 both were planned to put Jason against another cult icon and both films couldn't be what they were planned to be, which resulted in disappointment for the franchise.

By the end of the decade, Jason Voorhees had been a trademark of 80's pop-culture. However, Friday the 13th films had also completely lost its respectability, to the point that it became a joke. It is the age old rule that goes back to Frankenstein's monster, Dracula and The Mummy that the more popular the monsters get, the less frightening they become. Moreover, not only Friday the 13th films but also the whole slasher genre had become a 'joke'. There were some who refused to accept slasher as a genre of its own and received Friday the 13th and the slasher as degradation for the horror genre (and the Splatstick further didn't help this misconception). Furthermore, most importantly, more people lost respect for Friday the 13th films due to their never-ending self exploitation, lack of discipline and lack of self-respect (especially with the parts 5, 7 and 8).

Jason in New Line

Although Paramount gave a nation-wide distribution to the Friday the 13th, the complaints from parents and critics about the nastiness of the Friday the 13th films were something Paramount did not want on its cabinet. "Paramount did very little to publicize the films. They were ugly step children they could put out there make a quick profit on. But they didn't really care how good or bad the films were."²² By the eighth film, *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*, the profits had

²² Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *The Many Lives of Jason Voorhees*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

become seriously low and the complaints from the parents and critics were still there. It was most suitable to sell the franchise to another distributor.

New Line Cinema took over on the summer of 1993. The Jason myth had virtually died and had been dead for a few years now. Having experience with b-grade action films, monster films and especially with Freddy films, New Line brought a fresh aspect to the Jason Voorhees franchise. The ninth film in the series, *Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday*, is one of the most criticized Jason films due to its attempt to do something completely different (and due to having too little Jason in the film).

In fact, this attempt of trying to bring something completely different should be most appreciated. It was exactly what the franchise needed. Pointing a finger at itself, being aware of what it had become, the Friday the 13th film became, once again, a post-modern caricature work of pastiche. *Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday* begins as just another normal night in Crystal Lake where Jason is on the hunt again. The film doesn't even go into the details of how and why he survived his death at the previous film because the film is aware that Paramount films made a mess of how he dies and how he comes back to life in each sequel. New Line's *Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday* begins by assuming everyone knows that Jason just doesn't die (this includes the audience as well). SWAT team comes down to Crystal Lake, makes a trap for Jason and blows him to smithereens. The involvement of SWAT team can be interpreted as a symbol to take Jason Voorhees seriously. Jason's blown body pieces are taken to morgue. In a bunch of body parts in the body bag, Jason's heart is still intact (in *Mortal Kombat* fashion). His heart possesses the doctor at the morgue, urging him to eat the heart and Jason's spirit becomes transferred to the doctor's body. This demonic possession ability of Jason was something completely new. However, it adds to the evil identity of Jason, in a way explaining what Jason is after all. It furthermore symbolizes that there are no limits to the terror of Jason Voorhees. The possession ability of Jason is reminiscent of *The Hidden* (1987). Also there are tributes in the film to Evil Dead trilogy and Freddy films which gives *Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday* another level of self-awareness. The film's ending reveals that Jason is strongly connected with demonic forces and probably even with the hell itself. Dean Andersson, in his essay *Halloween Chainsaw Hockey*, delivers an interesting hypotheses about what Jason is; "Before *Jason Goes to Hell*, there were various possibilities; a birth defect due to a random genetic mutation, a drug taken while he was in the womb, a mutation caused by his dad being exposed to radiation

tests during World War II. But after *Jason Goes to Hell*, there was only one answer that would do. What happened to Jason was something supernatural! Remember that dust covered book with the ugly face on it in Jason's family's old house in *Jason Goes to Hell*. This was one of those Raimi-brand Necronomicon grimoires if I ever saw one, and I have, as have you, in the Evil Dead films. So is Jason one of the Evil Dead? Is that why nothing kills him? And where's Ash when you need him?"²³

Nearly after a decade long, the tenth film in the series, *Jason X* (2001) and two years later, *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003) were released. These two films gave back the Jason Voorhees myth its full dignity and cool, elevating the Friday the 13th films to a truly cult status.

Uber-Jason

Jason X is yet another work of pastiche full of tributes to the horror and slasher genres. After New York and Hell respectively, this time the setting is the 25th century. Once again, New Line definitely brings something new to the table, especially to the most die-hard fans. The pure and only theme of Friday the 13th films which is "boo!" has been transformed into "Jason is back!" since New Line took over. And *Jason X* makes an excellent job to deliver this new theme. It's five hundred years later on, even the earth itself couldn't survive, but "Jason is back!"

Jason X is the only hybrid of the slasher genre and the claustrophobic terror-in-space genre. It is certainly a celebration for the fans of the both genres and highly appealing to 'Forbidden Planet culture'. Talking about tributes, David Cronenberg makes a special appearance in *Jason X*. Cronenberg, which made himself a career of delivering themes about flesh says: "His (Jason's) unique ability to regenerate lost and damaged tissue.. It cries out for more research!" and he's responsible of bringing Jason back and he gets speared by Jason! Towards the end of the film, the audience is introduced to an upgraded evil. In a highly stylish and impressive costume, comes Uber-Jason. He's a slick, shiny super villain, regenerated by one of the devices in the spaceship. Uber-Jason stresses the fact that Jason Voorhees can not be stopped. The more he gets defeated the stronger he becomes. This is also a symbolic cover for the whole Jason Voorhees franchise.

²³ Dean Andersson, "Halloween Chainsaw Hockey", *Jason vs. Leatherface part 1 of 3*, Topps Comics, Topps Company, New York (1995)

The sci-fi elements are quite satisfactory and reminiscent of some of the most popular themes in sci-fi films. The film is qualified as a terror-in-space movie without losing its comic-book-like edge. *Jason X* also has the feeling of a computer game from the late 80's and 90's. It even has a virtual reality sequence where two guys battle a huge monster. The audience, who are unaware that this is a virtual game, are caught on the wrong foot and baffled, going 'what is this monster? What's happening?' It's a very clever piece of circus element in Paul Verhoeven fashion, as used in sci-fi classics like *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*. This circus element is an upgraded version of what the initial *Friday the 13th* delivered. Plethora of computer generated imagery, assisting the latex make-up, satisfies the audience who are in there for the element of circus and also appealing to the post-Matrix generation. All the money spent for the movie is really blazing in the screen which gives the movie an almost block-buster edge, which is a delicious treat for the fans considering the b-movie character of the all Friday the 13th films.

The pinnacle of the Jason Voorhees franchise is definitely *Jason X* and *Freddy vs. Jason*, where in the latter; the long awaited super-cult-villain-clash finally takes place. The storyline of *Freddy vs. Jason* does not make perfect sense but it's celebrated as the *House of Dracula* meets Grand Guignol. (It was also rumoured that 'Pinhead', the evil villain of the cult Hellraiser films would make an appearance but the licence issues prevented it). The body count is at its highest in *Freddy vs. Jason* and the splatstick and the slasher notions are well satisfying. The film doesn't really offer a winner. Jason decapitates Freddy, striking the last blow. As Jason walks towards the camera, with Freddy's head in his hand, Freddy opens his eyes and winks at the audience which makes an excellent finale. It shows that Jason is the ultimate unstoppable killing machine and Freddy is full of tricks, virtually impossible to beat.

After the successful *Jason X* and *Freddy vs. Jason*, focusing on the self-awareness of the franchise, one can fixate that the Friday the 13th film parallels the basic aspects of contemporary art, culture, economics and social conditions that are the result of the unique features of late 20th century and early 21st century life... which is basically what post-modernist art is all about.

“For the filmmakers as well as the audience, full awareness stops at the level of plot action and character in which the most dangerous and subversive implications

can disguise themselves and escape detection. This is why seemingly innocuous genre movies can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of social criticism.”²⁴ Quarter of a century after the drowned kid makes his appearance in *Friday the 13th*, Jason Voorhees, today, is a cult icon; standing tall to slash anyone in the name of the Friday the 13th franchise. Spawning into comics, and collectibles of all kinds, Jason Voorhees action figures and mini-statues are amongst the most popular ones in their industry. The hockey mask became an indispensable item of the Halloween parties. Like Roger Corman films, Friday the 13th films range in quality and some prove to be just bad taste. On the other hand, like Roger Corman films, put together, the Friday the 13th films stand a unique and memorable place both in cinema and popular culture. Involving various elements of the post-modern and the low-culture, with a comic-book series completeness, it may even be legitimate to state that the myth of Jason Voorhees forms a genre of its own.

²⁴ Grant, Barry Keith., *Planks of Reason: Essays On The Horror Film*, the Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, N.J., and London (1984) p.174

Notes for the reader

1) **Grand Guignol:** The depiction of gore on stage was already an art form, an entertainment on its own, during the Grand Guignol days in Europe. “As used today, the term 'Grand Guignol' (pronounced Grahn Geen-yol') refers to any dramatic entertainment that deals with macabre subject matter and features ‘over-the-top’ graphic violence. It is derived from *Le Theatre du Grand Guignol*, the name of the Parisian theatre that horrified audiences for over sixty years. The theatre was founded in 1897 by Oscar Metenier, a playwright of the naturalist movement who had previously been associated with André Antoine's *Theatre Libre*.”²⁵ “*Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* was small and intimate, seating no more than 300 people. This intimacy added an extra piquancy to the goings-on on stage, because the theatre's stock-in-trade was special effects made from the by-products of the butcher's shop. The gouged-out eye trick was a perennial favorite²⁶.” The tricks were aimed for discomforting the audience in their chairs. It was the birth of the ‘violence for violence’s sake’ tradition entertainment and may well be interpreted as the grandfather of ‘exploitation gore film’.

2) **Struwwelpeter:** Looking from a social aspect, one can say the Hollywood slasher film has its roots in the European folklore. Slasher film is an overstatement of the fear from the *Struwwelpeter* tales; the cruel Frederick, Harriet and her matches, inky boys and of course the long legged scissor man. *Struwwelpeter* is the name of a world famous German children's poem book by Heinrich Hoffmann. First published in 1845, the poems in *Struwwelpeter* are mainly about naughty kids getting punished. The book involves some of the basic psychoanalytic fears which are common in European folklore and fairy tales. The horror films are contemporary fairy tales. And slasher films capitalised on that; the slasher film is a collection of scenes about the places you’re forbidden to go, the dark room you look into, the doors you don’t open, the rules you don’t break before adolescence. Although Sean Cunningham says: “I’ve never bought into the notion that sex equals death”²⁷, Victor Miller declares “I was certainly raised that if you make love before you get married, you get punished somehow”²⁸

3) **Splatstick:** The term splatstick, rumoured to be coined by Bruce Campbell (the cult actor of *Evil Dead* and *Bubba Ho-Tepp* films), is defined as physical comedy (slapstick) that involves evisceration (making the comic-book sound ‘splat!’). The excessive gore displayed in splatstick films has been a core characteristic of the Jason films. There’s self-conscious approach to destroy the effect of a scene which could truly be a horrific and frightening scene. The excessive gore becomes a comedic element and the splatstick and scene calls attention to itself, in a post-modern way, simply as a work of art. *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* delivered the most appropriate tone as a splatstick film. The post-modernity of the film was a new level for the Jason films, however it wasn’t coherent enough and the film carried a unique comic-book-adaptation-like tone.

²⁵ <http://www.grandguignol.com>

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Guignol

²⁷ Schwarz, Jeffrey (Producer/Director/Writer), *Return to Crystal Lake: Making 'Friday the 13th'*, Automat Pictures, USA, (2003)

²⁸ *ibid*

4) **Forbidden Planet:** Forbidden Planet is a science fiction, fantasy and horror bookshop in London, named after the cult classic film *Forbidden Planet* (1956). The store sells comic books, action figures, mini-statues, posters, videos, DVDs, role-playing games, and a wide variety of cult movie and television merchandise. It is a shrine for the cult fans of franchises like Star Wars, Star Trek, Lord of the Rings, Marvel & DC Heroes, and modern Horror and Science Fiction myths.

5) **House of Dracula:** It's the cult 1945 monster mash film where Dracula, The Wolfman and Frankenstein's monster battle each other.

6) **More proof to the self expansion of the Jason Voorhees myth:** Recently Black Flame publishing has introduced a new line of *Friday the 13th* and *Jason X* novels geared toward a mature audience featuring Jason Voorhees:

Jason X by Pat Cadigan - a much-expanded novelization of the film.

Jason X: The Experiment by Pat Cadigan - The military capture and experiment on Jason to create the ultimate killing machine. But Jason is no lab rat and is soon amok unleashing carnage.

Jason X: Planet of the Beast by Nancy Kilpatrick - Jason is stranded on a distant alien planet and must reap maximum carnage if he is to escape.

Jason X: Death Moon by Alex Johnson - Moon Camp Americana is a finishing school for wayward girls. But there's one hell of a big problem - Jason Voorhees has just crash-landed!

Friday the 13th: Church of the Divine Psychopath by Scott Phillips - A religious cult begin to worship Jason as a tool of holy retribution, oblivious to the carnage that will be unleashed when he escapes.

Friday the 13th: Hell Lake by Paul Woods - Jason crawls out of hell with a group of mass murderers and serial killers in tow. Jason is dangerous enough on his own, so how will anyone survive when he's at the head of a small army?

Friday the 13th: The Jason Strain by Christa Faust - A gory *Battle Royale* style reality TV show, a virus that turns it's victims into murderous Jason-like zombies, a lady mad scientist and a scene where Jason fights a great white shark.

(Information about Black Flame's new novel series taken from official Friday the 13th forum pages <http://www.fridaythe13thforum.com/showthread.php?t=33818>)

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