10 Seriality between the horror franchise and the horror anthology film

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What distinguishes a film *franchise* from the broader category of the film *series*? Although these terms are becoming increasingly conflated in popular discourse, we might posit the contemporary *franchise* as a multi-film series that not only expands chronologically forward (as with a sequel) or backward (prequel) from an initial filmic text, but also includes a horizontal expansion of ancillary intertexts: from the forking paths and parallel storylines of the *spin-off*, to the reverent *remake* or the corrective *reboot* (Proctor 2012), to the more nebulous realm of official merchandise and unofficial fan-made productions. A franchise, then, has less to do with the sheer longevity of a film series (though that may certainly be a factor) than with a cross-textual proliferation that extends beyond linear development. Hence, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Andy Hardy films (1937–1958) constitute more of a straightforward series than, say, the same studio's James Bond franchise (1962–present). Moreover, the modern (post-1970s) film franchise depends, in part, on a presold property whose initial filmic entry is already designed for potential sequelization and ancillary marketability, should it prove profitable (Henderson 2014, 88). The film series and the film franchise therefore both hinge upon issues of *seriality*—often (but not always) based upon recurrent characters or similar storylines—yet they deploy seriality in different directions, albeit for similar commercial motivations.

Of course, this use of the film franchise as a familiar 'brand name' does not have an especially privileged relationship to the horror genre in particular, for we can easily cite examples of franchises within many popular genres, from comedy (*National Lampoon, American Pie*) and action/adventure (*Indiana Jones, Fast and the Furious, Mission Impossible*) to science fiction (*Star Wars, Star Trek*), fantasy (*Harry Potter*), and superhero movies (*X-Men, The Avengers*). Unlike most of these genres, however, the episodic *anthology film* is one of the most popular and prolific sub-genres of horror cinema—and yet, even when horror anthology films generate sequels, these films are seldom the products of existing horror franchises, nor deemed franchises in their own right. Indeed, the shortage of critical and scholarly attention to horror anthology films is conspicuously disproportionate to these films' actual (and growing) prominence within the horror genre.[1] As Mark Betz argues, such films formalize the 'gaps' between their narrative episodes, even as their critical neglect represents a historiographic gap in its own right (2009, 199).

In this chapter, I will argue that by using the short story form to effectively 'internalize' the seriality that otherwise structures clusters of multiple feature-length films, anthology films constitute an important missing link in how to conceptualize horror franchises and think about their critical reception. The multiple connotations of the term 'anthology' are partly to blame for the scholarly inattention to such films, since the term is sometimes used to describe an omnibus or portmanteau structure (multiple short episodes within the same feature-length film, often joined by a framing story/conceit), while alternately used to describe a series in which each freestanding episode is a self-enclosed story featuring different characters. But those conflicting connotations, when taken together, also evoke the segmented multi-narrativity upon which horror franchises are built. By looking at several historical examples of each anthology tendency, including their roots in media forms beyond feature-length films, we can better understand the horror genre's specific relevance to the franchise form. I will begin by delineating these different connotations in more detail, before then elaborating on the anthology film's special relationship to the horror genre's increasingly self-conscious franchise development.

The multiple uses of 'anthology'

Because few scholars have substantially examined anthology and/or omnibus films, those who have, such as Mark Betz and David Scott Diffrient, tend to deploy different terminologies for distinguishing between different types of episodic cinema. Diffrient, for example, reserves the term *omnibus film* for a collective, multi-director feature that sequentially presents short, self-contained narrative episodes, whereas he deems the *anthology film* a collection of narrative episodes by a single director, and the *portmanteau*, a film broken into two, roughly equal halves (whether by one or more directors) (2014, 3, 14–15).[2] Betz likewise reserves *omnibus film* for the multi-director variant, but dubs the single-director variant an *episode film* (2009, 191); while Shekhar Deshpande instead uses the term *anthology film* as synonymous with the multi-director/episode feature, but confusingly uses the term *omnibus film* to describe a retrospectively assembled compilation of short films that were not originally commissioned as constituent episodes toward the same feature-length project (2010, 3). There is, then, a semantic disjuncture between how scholars often use the term 'omnibus,' and how popular critics and fans typically use the term 'anthology' in a broader way to refer to multi-episode films, regardless of number of directors. Multi-episode films like *Creepshow* (1982) and *Cat's Eye* (1985), for instance, have single directors (George A. Romero and Lewis Teague, respectively) and might derive from stories by the same author/screenwriter (Stephen King), but are still most commonly referred to by fans as 'anthology films.' Such multi-episode films may range from two segments—such as *Two Evil Eyes* (1990)—to as many as 26 short segments—for example, *The ABCs of Death* (2012)—but most average 4–6 episodes within a feature-length duration.

Because my focus here is on episodic films within the same genre (horror), and less concerned with the transauthorial and transnational variants that most

interest Betz and Diffrient, I will attempt to 'split the difference' between scholarly distinctions and popular-fan usage by retaining *anthology film*, but subdividing it with the somewhat unwieldy compound term *omnibus-anthology film* to describe multi-episode feature films made by one or more directors. Yet, these scholars of omnibus productions tend to ignore the second major category of anthology narrative, which is better known as the anthology *series*, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964, 1985–1989, 2002–2003, 2019–present), *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965, 1995–2002), and *Night Gallery* (1969–1973). Unlike the common cinematic connotation of 'anthology' as synonymous with the omnibus-anthology film, this other usage bears a closer affinity to the regularized broadcast schedules of radio and television; hence, there is a degree of medium specificity behind these different connotations, but this very cross-media confusion demonstrates the relevance of 'anthology' as a missing term for thinking about the franchise as a cross-media, intertextual entity. Whereas the omnibus internalizes its self-contained episodes within the context of a single consumption experience (e.g., a feature-length film), the anthology series spreads its self-contained episodes across a series of weekly or monthly installments (e.g., a broadcast season), sometimes featuring the same host or narrator as a framing device for unifying the overall series as a sort of brand name applied to generically similar narratives.

Omnibus-anthology films have historical antecedents ranging from multi-story literary works with a framing device (such as *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Decameron*) to multi-genre variety performances like vaudeville and burlesque, later popularized in filmic form with multi-story works like *Pippa Passes* (1909) and *Intolerance* (1916). Early examples centred on supernatural horror themes include the German productions *Uncanny Tales* (1919) and *Waxworks* (1924), and the British productions *Friday the Thirteenth* (1933) and *Dead of Night* (1945). The anthology series, however, has roots in the seriality of literary fiction magazines, but especially in published compendiums of short stories (Diffrient 2014). During the early decades of the twentieth century, writers of pulp, detective, and weird fiction specialized in short-form genre productions, bridging the gap between nineteenth-century genre pioneers like Edgar Allan Poe and later television writers like *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery*'s Rod Serling. Indeed, the anthology series largely developed from weekly radio and (later) television programs of self-contained dramatic and mystery narratives, such as *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1941–1952). Inspired by Simon & Schuster's mystery novel imprint of the same name, not only did this series produce over 500 different stories during more than a decade on the radio airwaves, but it also spawned a series of *Inner Sanctum* B-pictures, mostly produced by Universal and starring Lon Chaney, Jr. in different roles from 1943 to 1948, plus a short-lived syndicated television series (1954). Through its cross-media proliferation and combination of mystery and horror elements, *Inner Sanctum* thus represents a notable precursor of the anthology series as horror franchise.

Yet the nexus between the omnibus-anthology and anthology-series formats for the horror genre can perhaps best be found in comic books, since a

particular comic issue might include multiple short narratives, a single bounded narrative featuring recurring characters, or one chapter of an ongoing serial narrative. EC Comics' horror series like *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Vault of Horror* (both 1950–1955) often included multiple short narratives with a macabre but darkly comedic tone, foreshadowing these titles' later adaptation (in 1972 and 1973, respectively) within Amicus Productions' series of omnibus-anthology films—which spanned from *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965) to *From Beyond the Grave* (1974) (see Hutchings 2002; Pirie 2009).

As is well-known, the marketing of these comics to children and young adults created controversy after pop-psychologist Fredric Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* and his testimony that same year to the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (Wertham 1954). Although this scandal effectively killed off 1950s horror comics and led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority as an industrial self-censorship mechanism, the nostalgic legacy of EC Comics can be seen in the omnibus-anthology film *Creepshow*, whose framing story features an abusive father confiscating his son's copy of the eponymous horror comic (for which the son later gets revenge, using a voodoo doll ordered from the comic's advertising pages), while animated effects vignette the discrete live-action segments like comic-book panels. (A *Creepshow* graphic novel, featuring the anthology's five nested stories and the same Bernie Wrightson artwork featured in the intra-filmic comic book, was published by Plume in conjunction with the film.) And unlike the earlier Amicus omnibus version, *Tales from the Crypt* was later adapted as an HBO anthology series (1989–1996) with each half-hour episode containing a discrete story introduced by the skeletal, punning Crypt Keeper, a series which also inspired several feature-length spin-off films, including *Demon Knight* (1995) and *Bordello of Blood* (1996). With its cross-media incarnations (including further spin-off shows, merchandising, etc.), *Tales from the Crypt* is the rare horror anthology series to become a 'proper franchise' in its own right. Yet, its incarnation as both an omnibus text and an anthology series demonstrates the potential interpenetrability of these two meanings of the term 'anthology.'[3] Indeed, Betz notes that, since the 1980s, episodes of anthology television series, especially from 'body genres' like horror and erotica, have often been repackaged as omnibus-anthology features, and typically released direct-to-video since this format allows viewers to selectively access individual segments according to their personal preferences (Betz 2009, 239–240, 242). The omnibus-anthology film's underlying tension between the short and the feature therefore readily allows for both expansions and contractions, from omnibus episodes that spin off into their own freestanding films, such as *Three … Extremes* (2005) and its expanded feature film, *Dumplings* (2006), to multi-episode films cobbled together from several aborted feature films, like *Night Train to Terror* (1985).

Finally, the concept of the *anthology series* has more recently acquired an additional meaning in its televisual context: that of the season-long serial narrative, with each season featuring a self-contained narrative with different characters and settings in shows such as *Fargo* (2014–2020) and *True Detective* (2014–2019). Whereas earlier anthology series like *The Twilight Zone* and *Tales from the Crypt* offer discrete narratives in each episode, this more recent usage of 'anthology series' bears far closer affinities to the television miniseries, making each season resemble a long-form film. Compare, for example, a traditional anthology series like *Masters of Horror* (2005–2007), in which each episode is a self-contained short film made by a prominent horror director (see Kooyman 2010), whereas each season of *American Horror Story* (2011–present) may have recurring cast members but the characters/story/setting will 'reset' to a new narrative arc with every new season. In its use of the individual episode as a basic unit, the former is a proper *series* and the latter is a *serial*. [4] Of course, television shows may also combine these strategies, such as *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–2018) and *Hannibal* (2013–2015) featuring more bounded 'monster/killer-of-the-week' episodes amid larger season-long and series-long narrative arcs—which television scholar Robin Nelson (1997) describes as a 'flexi-narrative'—and both of these series also exist as parts of larger cross-media franchises (Scahill 2016, 319). Moreover, most of these latter-day anthology series do not have the same director for the entire season, but rather different directors per episode, collectively working under the guidance of a showrunner. In many respects, this showrunner (often the series creator and/or executive producer) orchestrating multiple directors toward a shared vision is not unlike the omnibus-anthology film's commissioning producer as a creative director for the overall project (Deshpande 2010, 7).[5] However, because the serialized episodes within the season-long anthology series are less episodic in an individually self-contained way, this alternate connotation of 'anthology' is more difficult to square with the episode-specific short form that has allowed the anthology film to flourish within the horror genre.

Why horror?

With this terminological excursus at our disposal, we can now inquire why the horror genre in particular has been so generative of the anthology film in various forms. As Kristin Thompson has observed, the short story's limited duration, narrative/thematic unity, and goal of creating a 'single strong impression' would seem especially conducive to developing feature-length narrative films, in contrast to the tremendous condensation required to adapt novels for the Hollywood screen (Bordwell et al. 1985, 167). Yet, this feature-length expansion of the literary short form is more useful for helping explain the self-enclosed narratives of the anthology series (and the individual entries in a film franchise), whereas omnibus-anthology films cannot help but foreground the sheer brevity of their internalized narrative episodes. The morbid twists that punctuate the ends of most anthology segments have more in common with, say, the sensationalistic 'penny dreadful' than the more austere Gothic novel. Literary scholars have noted, for example, the difficulty in sustaining 'the necessary tension of the ghost story to the required length of a novel' (Gilbert 1998, 69). In this regard, it is not difficult to also see literary horror anthologies as especially generative of (loose) film adaptations, such as the many freestanding films expanded from Stephen King's short-story collections. Among his *Night Shift* (1978) stories, for instance,

is 'Children of the Corn' (1977), which has itself spawned a series of 11 feature-length films (1984–2020) as of this writing; while the 'transfictional' town of Castle Rock, Maine, has featured as a setting in many of his written works, plus various filmic and televisual adaptations, including Hulu's anthology series *Castle Rock* (2018–2019) (see Proctor 2018, 102, 104–106).

The omnibus-anthology film's tendency toward internal fragmentation, genre mixing, and tonal disunity helps explain why this form also proved amenable to the modernist principles of European art cinema. As Betz notes, the omnibus-anthology film experienced its first production peak during the 1960s, when segments featuring major auteurs and sexy female stars (e.g., *Boccaccio '70* [1962]) combined cosmopolitan credentials and sensational genre material into a consistent box-office draw. This was exemplified in the art-horror form with the Franco-Italian coproduction *Spirits of the Dead* (1968), featuring Poe-adapted segments by Federico Fellini, Roger Vadim, and Louis Malle, plus starring performances by Brigitte Bardot and Jane Fonda (Betz 2009, 196, 206, 226–228, 236–237). However, aside from several notable exceptions like *Kwaidan* (1965), most of the 1960s omnibus art films were not inclined toward the horror genre, instead favoring comedic and dramatic segments as their generic repertoire.

Diffrient suggests that horror is one of the few genres in which short stories may be far more effective than longer narratives (2014, 108), but I would also argue that horror's strong connection with the anthology film reflects the genre's cultural disreputability. That is, unlike many other genres, horror film reception often evinces a sort of 'inferiority complex' wherein the genre's supposedly frivolous, sensationalistic, or juvenile qualities are seen as sapping a given horror narrative's potential to contain enough ideas for supporting a feature-length duration. Consider the Halloween theme or setting of so many omnibus-anthology films, such as the aptly named *Trick r' Treat* (2007), as delivering a handful of small-but-sweet bites of self-contained story, not unlike the assortment of 'fun-sized' candy bars given out to excited kids (and the monster, disguised as a trick-or-treater, who serves as *Trick r' Treat*'s unifying figure) during that seasonal tradition. For Diffrient, the common critical complaint against omnibus-anthology films hinges on precisely this sense that, unlike the 'hearty meal' offered by a 'deep' feature-length narrative, anthologies only offer light 'tasters' or 'side dishes.' This denigration is, then, less a defect of the films in their own right than a function of film criticism's failure to adjust evaluative expectations to forms other than the conventional feature, including a failure to understand how active audiences can fill in the gaps between different episodes (2014, 5, 17, 32).

If we extend this food metaphor, it is not difficult to see how franchise horror films, especially those evincing the supposed 'McDonaldization' of 1980s horror franchises (e.g., *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*) (Wells 2000, 94), share many of the same presumed deficits. Like franchise fast food, the consumption of franchise horror films is presumed to be quick, easy, and non-nutritious, perhaps comforting in their familiarity but not a proper diet unto themselves—or, to put it another way, fast-food and horror film franchises both offer pit stops during a journey to a better destination but are seldom considered

worthy destinations in their own right (see the Introduction to this volume). In other words, the frequent critical rejection of even feature-length horror films—especially when those films are part of franchises—strongly echoes the critical saw against the supposed shortcomings of anthology films in general, hence this seemingly natural connection between genre and format.

As Diffrient (2014) notes, all omnibus-anthology films are

> structurally reliant on the coexistence of multiple beginnings and endings, serially sprinkled throughout the text and suggestive of the ways that we, as audiences, 'enter' into and 'depart' from *all* motion-picture experiences, even those that are not *episodic* (that is, those that tell a single story over the course of approximately two hours).
>
> (221)

Moreover, he suggests that anthology films may have a deeper structural relationship to the horror genre because the carnivalesque shift between unnatural death and gallows humor across their episodes offers a 'text of continuous, yet limited, replenishment … allow[ing] the spectator to laugh in the face of death, for the withering away of one story is followed by the blossoming of another (at least until the very end)' (65). Like Scheherazade's survivalist storytelling endeavors in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, mortality and narration exist in productive tension with each other here, but in the more Bakhtinian vein of reversibility between grotesque death and fertile rebirth (Diffrient 2014, 50, 65–66, 128, 131; Diffrient 2002, 295–296, 298–299). Indeed, Diffrient notes that many omnibus-anthology episodes end with the resurrection of a recently deceased person to take revenge on his/her killer—a dynamic that seldom occurs within the franchise horror film (in which victims generally stay dead, though the monster endlessly returns across sequels), but is also echoed when the same actors inhabit different roles across different segments. Corporeal fragmentation and textual fragmentation literalize one another in these films (2002, 289, 291). Yet, I would argue that the tendency for these films' episodic narratives to 'spill over' their containing structure like so much shed blood also signals their affinity with the viewing dynamics of the horror franchise as a multi-narrative corpus that temporally *exceeds beyond* instead of *contracting within* a feature-length duration.

The production of omnibus-anthology films sharply declined after the 1960s, but since the 1990s these films have become more prolific than ever (Betz 2009, 206; Diffrient 2014, 149). In the world of art cinema, many of these films are now funded by (non-US) governmental and non-governmental agencies to celebrate transnational alliances, but genre-centred omnibus-anthology films—much like the innumerable published anthologies of short horror fiction—may represent a more commercially oriented means of capitalizing on the short form, whose brevity can be creatively generative (especially for upcoming filmmakers) but which is difficult to financially justify in a film industry built upon features (Deshpande 2010, 6, 11; also see Fonseca and Pulliam 1999, 23–31). Moreover, the omnibus art film may still focus on collecting the work of transnationally known auteurs, whereas the

horror omnibus-anthology is more likely a proving ground for lesser-known directors from around the world. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that the post-1960s decline of auteur/star-branded omnibus-anthology films led to an upswing in horror omnibus-anthology films in the 1980s–1990s, since strong generic identification could help compensate for the shortage of those other appeals in potentially profitable ways.

Although far from exhaustive in its scope, Steve Hutchison's 2017 self-published guidebook *Anthologies of Terror* lists an average production of one horror omnibus-anthology film per year from 1962 to 1975, then two every other year from 1983 to 1997 and 2004 to 2006, and finally three or four per year since 2011. As suggested earlier, this recent proliferation is partly due to the rise of a direct-to-video and cable television market for such films—and, I would add, streaming services, since horror anthologies, in both omnibus and series forms, continue to be popular offerings on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Shudder—but it is also notable that this growth roughly coincided with the increased franchising of the horror genre in general. Much as *Creepshow* borrowed not only the EC Comics aesthetic but also allowed viewers to 'recreate' the film's intradiegetic reading experience via the graphic novel adaptation, a more recent omnibus-anthology film like *V/H/S* (2012) uses a framing story about found VHS tapes to justify both a visual aesthetic and a segmented format that foreground home video as the prevailing mode of omnibus-anthology consumption. Meanwhile, popular streaming services have moved into the original production of anthologies, such as Netflix's omnibus-anthology film *Don't Watch This* (2018), Shudder's *Creepshow* (2019–present), and Hulu's *Into the Dark* (2018–present), an anthology series co-produced by Blumhouse, with feature-length episodes released monthly; while the Netflix-produced anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011–) released the feature-length episode 'Bandersnatch' in late 2018, allowing viewers to navigate a branching, 'choose-your-own-adventure' storyline akin to clicking through the Netflix interface itself.

Although Betz argues that viewers of omnibus-anthology films actively evaluate the merits of each episode against one another other in 'a kind of spectatorship qualitatively different from that of the narrative feature film' (2009, 231), I would argue that this comparative assessment is precisely what horror franchise viewers do as well, rooting their valuations in the context of the franchise as a whole, not merely the individual entry. Indeed, for those of us of a certain generation, the amount of space that a popular horror franchise took up on VHS rental shelves suggested the franchise as a compendium of different narratives not unlike the horror anthology film or the stories collected in a literary anthology. Unlike professional film critics, for whom each sequel or spin-off is denigrated as more of the same, a reiteration that should be too flimsy to support a freestanding feature film, genre fans readily judge a horror franchise's different installments as an intertextual web of tenuously connected stories. Omnibus-anthology films, for example, operate via *intratextuality* instead of the horror franchise's *intertextuality*, but both rely on framing devices for their 'endlessly deferred narratives' (Hills 2002, 139–140). In many horror franchises, the monster (whether Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, or Michael Myers) becomes the main recurring character across

the individual films, whereas the other characters and settings often reset from one entry to the next. This use of the monster as a franchise's unifying textual entity also recalls the anthology series' host/narrator character (whether a real authorial presence like Rod Serling or a monstrous avatar like the Crypt Keeper), but differs in the sense that the monster is an agentive force within the diegesis, whereas the anthology series' host/narrator may instead be relegated to an observational or commentating role at the story's bookends, framed less as a puppet-master than an impresario. With its function of supplying viewers with self-conscious 'spectacles of death' (Sconce 1993), the role of the horror monster can therefore blur the thin line between the *representational* and *presentational* storytelling modes respectively occupied by the diegetic character and the quasi-diegetic host/narrator.

Here, we can usefully contrast the largely failed attempts to officially anthologize the big-three 1980s slasher franchises: *Halloween, Friday the 13th*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Whereas *Halloween II* (1981) immediately picks up where its predecessor left off, with Michael Myers continuing to stalk Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) during the second half of the same Halloween night from the 1978 film,[6] the series' third installment, *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), attempted to turn the franchise into an annual anthology series of unrelated feature-length stories released under the *Halloween* brand name. Without a slasher narrative and no appearance of the franchise's iconic killer (aside from several brief clips from the first film glimpsed on television sets), the film instead features the convoluted story of a mad toymaker who, disgusted that Halloween has become a commercialized holiday divorced from its pagan roots, invents a line of Halloween masks programmed to kill their young wearers after the masks are remotely activated by a televised 'giveaway' announcement on Halloween night. Driven by Universal's misleading advertising, which did not clearly signal the film's shift away from slasher tropes toward an original concept, *Halloween III* proved a box-office disappointment. Initially rejected by fans for failing to deliver another episode in the Michael Myers vein, the film did however receive mixed praise from professional critics who lauded its inventive plot as a welcome digression from the then-controversial slasher movie cycle. In more recent years, horror fans have gradually reassessed the film on its own merits, albeit with the seemingly obligatory caveat that it not be judged against the Myers' films to which the franchise would return in its subsequent entries.

Against this background, Martin Harris and Kathryn Conner Bennett read *Halloween III*'s anti-consumerist message (popular masks as lethal weapons, dangerously false advertising, robotically programmed consumers) as ironically converging in the film's own failed attempt to reboot the franchise as a feature-length anthology series. Within the film, even the first *Halloween* becomes reduced to yet another piece of televisual content abutted by commercials for the trigger signal's broadcast, implicating the series' earlier entries as part of the problem (Harris and Bennett 2004, 100–102, 105–106). And, ironically, the man who unravels the evil conspiracy is played by Tom Atkins, who also played the comic-confiscating father in *Creepshow*'s (1982) framing story, hence reprising an anti-consumerist stance (albeit here in a heroic mode). If franchise horror

films are often critically derided as 'bad objects' for their repetition and redundancy, we might surmise that anthology-style outliers would be championed for their originality, yet *Halloween III* as a temporary aberration within an otherwise identifiable franchise demonstrates how that is clearly not always the case.

Likewise, the Canadian television anthology *Friday the 13th: The Series* (1987–1990) failed due to its marked difference from Paramount's prolific slasher series. Frank Mancuso, Jr., a Paramount executive who controlled the rights to the film franchise, merely applied the franchise title to an unrelated anthology series originally slated to be called *The 13th Hour*. Lacking any reference to the Jason Voorhees character, the show instead uses the framing device of an antique shop filled with cursed items (a conceit previously seen in Amicus' *From Beyond the Grave*), not unlike the room of cursed objects that *The Conjuring* franchise (2013–present) frames as Ed and Lorraine Warren's keepsakes from their various demonological cases. The television anthology series *Freddy's Nightmares* (1988–1990) was, however, more successful, since Krueger plays a more central role and the series shares the films' transfictional setting of Springwood, Illinois. Krueger features as a character within some episodes, but the shared setting also implies that his supernatural influence is somehow behind even those episodes that do not directly reference him.[7] Likewise, his morbid trickster persona easily carries over from the previous films to his Crypt Keeper-like epilogues for every episode. Unlike the attempts to anthologize *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, then, *Freddy's Nightmares* foregrounds the monster's role as the key element of its franchise, using that character to frame the individual episodes as not only the anthology series' narrator/host, but also the active diegetic character already known from the films. Unlike a franchise developed from an existing anthology format (such as *Inner Sanctum* as an anthology series or *Tales from the Crypt* as an omnibus anthology), then, these examples demonstrate how the gap-filled anthology film's status as a 'gap' in conceptualizing horror film franchises partly derives from its potentially yawning disjuncture from fidelity to the expectations shaped by an existing feature-film franchise.

Toward franchise self-consciousness

The aforementioned 1980s slasher series loom large in the history of horror film franchises, though their pre-reboot use of sequelization as a linear chain of texts better fits an older model of film franchises than the more horizontally dispersed intertexts seen in newer franchises.[8] Whereas some horror franchises like *Phantasm* (1979–2016) and *Insidious* (2010–present) have used their supernatural premises about ghostly alternate dimensions to build backward and outward via overlapping timelines, other franchises, like *The Conjuring*, have more organically spawned anthology-type entries, in which any one cursed object in the Warrens' artefact room might initiate a further *Conjuring* 'chapter' or its own forking paths into spin-off films including *Annabelle* (2014), *The Nun* (2018), and *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), not unlike the Disney-era *Star Wars* franchise's alternation between official 'episode' films and the spin-offs/prequels about particular

characters like Han Solo. Unlike the 1980s slasher sequels' tendency toward largely 'resetting' the killing spree with each new entry (though gradually fleshing out a backstory or mythology for their monsters by later entries), the operative principle here is the 'shared universe,' a marketing cliché with which Universal latterly flirted for its now largely abandoned 'Dark Universe', a planned series of 1930s monster movie reboots, as well as a throwback to the studio's earlier 'monster mash' films like *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945), and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Following the highly profitable example of Marvel's *Avengers* saga, shared-universe sequels might also serve as franchise crossover films—as more recently used in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003) and *Alien vs. Predator* (2004)—but at the risk of feeling more like mere gimmicks or fan service than as organic world-building developments.

Nevertheless, this tension between repetition and gimmickry indicates the generic self-consciousness that horror franchises can increasingly foster as they shift their tone or generic register in ways more akin to different anthology segments. Consider, for instance, horror sequels that largely repeat the same narrative beats of earlier films but veer closer to comedy, such as *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives* (1986) or *Evil Dead II* (1987). Diffrient argues that the generic, stylistic, and qualitative disunity among the various episodes in omnibus-anthology films makes them a 'meta-genre,' since this variance not only involves appeals to different generic tastes, but also encourages viewers to evaluate the respective merits of each segment by reflecting upon genre distinctions in miniature (Diffrient 2014, 65, 107, 210).

In effect, this is what film franchises as multi-entry, cross-media 'supertexts' do as well, and this dynamic has been amplified by a growing tendency toward franchises that signal their self-consciousness *as franchises*. Ian Conrich, for instance, identifies the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise as 'post-slasher' in its blurring of reality and fantasy worlds and its humorous monster-as-entertainer; whereas he deems the *Scream* franchise (1996–2011) as 'neo-slasher' in its self-referential return to older slasher tropes that are bent but not wholly broken (Conrich 2015, 111–113). Caetlin Benson-Allott also describes how horror series become seen as franchises around the third or fourth entry, which is often when these films begin self-consciously hailing the viewer as the franchise's privileged subject—someone who has 'survived' enough films to be knowledgably superior to the interchangeable victims, yet who still requires enough novelty mixed with the now-familiar pleasures of predictability (Benson-Allott 2013, 20–21, 25–26). There is a gradual shift, then, from sequels in which characters lack horror genre literacy (no one uses the word 'zombie,' for example, or knows the 'rules' of the slasher sub-genre) to sequels that begin internalizing the viewer's own ironic distance by offering more than merely the compensatory sadism of watching stupid teens predictably die *ad nauseum*. *Halloween III*, for instance, depicts a television advertisement for the first *Halloween*'s broadcast, demonstrating that the *Halloween* franchise also exists as a work of cinema within this anthology entry. Further, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) takes a

more meta-generic turn with writer/director Craven, New Line Cinema president Robert Shaye, and original *Elm Street* stars Heather Langenkamp and Robert Englund all playing themselves in a film that explains how *Elm Street*'s sequelization was actually a means of ritually containing an ancient evil entity that merely took Freddy Krueger as its modern incarnation across the franchise—another example of storytelling as a means of ensuring 'narrative mortality.' As she becomes sucked into Krueger's dream realm, Heather finds her 'real life' increasingly intertwined with the very film we are watching, even to the point of finding *New Nightmare*'s own script within Krueger's lair and reading from the very moment that the actual film depicts.

In such franchise entries, in other words, there is enough tonal variance and presentational aesthetic at play to signal these films as more than just another repetitive link in a linear chain of sequels, but rather as generic paths not taken by other films in their respective series; and it is this *intertextual* variation that ties the horror franchise to the *intratextual* variation of horror anthologies. As a more consistent example of this franchise self-consciousness, we can consider the *Final Destination* (2000–2011) series, which spawned five films and a line of spin-off novels and comic books, whose conceit involves teens who have cheated death by surreptitiously avoiding a mass-casualty event (e.g., an airplane, roller-coaster, or bridge disaster), but are now destined to die as Death gradually catches up with each of them in elaborate set-pieces involving a plethora of everyday objects that interact like Rube Goldberg contraptions to produce grotesque 'accidental' fatalities. Rather than depicting a Grim Reaper-type personification of death, these films instead figure Death as an invisible but inescapable force, with each ridiculously elaborate and drawn-out set-piece building up suspense and dread by showing a variety of potentially dangerous objects, creating a guessing game for the viewer to imagine whether any or all of them will combine to render the victim asunder. In my estimation, the fact that these films lack the sort of monster figure that typically unifies a horror franchise, but arrange their narratives as a series of potentially rearrangeable set-pieces—the *Final Destination 3* (2006) DVD even allows the viewer to make interactive choices with his/her remote control as the film plays, altering the order and style of the characters' deaths (see Sperb 2009)—makes this franchise resemble omnibus-anthology films like *The ABCs of Death* and its sequels, whose segments may or may not feature monsters but are arranged as simply so many different (and frequently outlandish) ways to die, one for each alphabet letter ('A is for Apocalypse,' 'B is for Bigfoot,' et al.). Moreover, without a diegetically figured monster, Death operates in the *Final Destination* franchise much like the narrator/host of anthology films, albeit with more intradiegetic agency than simply an observing role. Indeed, these films are so self-conscious because viewers can reflect upon how 'Death's design' is actually the *filmmakers'* creative design, the set-pieces serving as 'presentational, not representational' segments whose endless re-designability and recombination becomes 'the aesthetic force of possibility in the franchise' itself (Brinkema 2015, 301, 307; also see Benson-Allott 2013, 22–26).

What these various examples indicate, then, is that the seriality of both film franchises and anthology films (and the points where these categories intersect)

need not depend on a continuing story arc, recurrent characters (including the figure of the monster) or settings, or even sub-generic consistency. Rather, for viewers, the episodic segments of both omnibus- and series-style anthologies bear many of the same functions as the feature-length entries in film franchises, separated less in overall generic kind than in mere running time. Where the horror film franchise extends its more-or-less related series across both feature-length and ancillary texts, the horror anthology film contains its abbreviated narratives within a more-or-less bookended, single-sitting format, yet both filmic categories privilege endings and chapter stops that are merely temporary pauses en route to the next episode.

Much as the formats for disseminating anthologized fictions have long shifted via changing trends in publishing and media venues, we may see anthology storytelling's 'fun-sized' segments become increasingly common in the contemporary transmedia era, even as they also nostalgically call back to traditionally analogue forms like the comic book, the mass-market paperback, and the VHS tape. As major streaming services continue shifting away from the licensing of older filmed content and instead pouring money into the development of proprietary, 'original' productions, horror anthologies will likely remain a promising distribution route for shorter-form narratives by aspiring genre filmmakers, even as such anthologies may serve streaming services as little more than fodder for their regular announcements of 'fresh content.' While franchise storytelling continues to dominate the multiplexes, then, perhaps it only makes sense that its shadow twin ever more haunts our smaller screens. Recalling the oft-repeated Freudian argument about the horror monster as a 'return of the repressed' (Wood 2003), the anthology film is itself a textual form whose generic proliferation is repressed in most considerations of the horror franchise due to its uncanny closeness to the franchise's textual diffusion and popular familiarity. Nevertheless, if we want to understand how franchises unfold within the horror genre, we must properly account for the anthology film as one of this particular genre's most prolific—but critically overlooked—sites for multi-narrative elaboration.

Notes

1 Key exceptions include the excellent articles by Diffrient (2002) and Harrington (2020).
2 Diffrient (2014) further distinguishes between related terms like the *compilation film*, *package film*, and *sketch film*, but these more specific variants are not directly pertinent to this chapter.
3 *The Twilight Zone* is another high-profile example of this overlap between different anthology formats, since it originated as a television anthology series, but was later adapted as the omnibus-anthology *The Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983).
4 At this time of writing, creator Ryan Murphy has announced a spin-off series, *American Horror Stories*, which will narratively consist of self-contained, hour-long episodes—therefore a 'true' anthology *series* in the *Twilight Zone* vein—to air on FX on Hulu in 2021.
5 This comparison only goes so far, however, since the different directors of omnibus-anthology films also tend to have much more creative autonomy for their individual contributions; likewise, an omnibus film's producer controls the sequencing of and

transitions between the differently authored episodes, whereas serialized television episodes tend to follow a clearly defined and logical narrative progression to better maintain viewer comprehension over a season-long arc (Deshpande 2010, 9).

6 Although industrially framed as a corrective reboot to Rob Zombie's 2007 remake of the same title, *Halloween* (2018) is more accurately a belated sequel that 'retcons' away even the 1981 direct sequel's revelation that Laurie is Michael's long-lost sister, instead picking up Laurie's story 40 years later with the clarification that she is no relation to Myers.

7 *Freddy's Nightmares* is additionally interesting as an anthology series because each episode is internally bifurcated into two related storylines, the latter half often focusing on characters who only played a secondary or fleeting role in the first half. With this dramatic shift in narrative focalization, each episode also contains elements of the omnibus (portmanteau) style as well.

8 These series each received reboots, including the near-obligatory origin stories for their monsters, amid a 2000s-era cycle of 1970s–1980s horror remakes: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Halloween* (2007), *Friday the 13th* (2009), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010).

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