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## Conjuring a Universe: James Wan, Creepy Dolls and Demon Nuns

Laura Mee 

*The Conjuring* (2013) opens with a prologue in which a group of terrified flatmates recount a haunting story to paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson, Vera Farmiga). A porcelain doll, “Annabelle”, has been terrorizing them by inexplicably moving around the apartment and leaving threatening notes. The Warrens explain that Annabelle acts as a conduit for a demon in search of a human host. They take the doll and lock it away in their museum of occult artifacts, a secure room in their home which is blessed each fortnight by a visiting priest. Pre-credit setpieces which introduce characters, story and tone are of course common, and the device is often employed effectively in horror cinema to provide a backstory, an early scare, a first glimpse of a monster or their menace: a young Michael Myers murders his sister in *Halloween* (1978), a highly-billed star is brutally murdered in *Scream* (1996), the zombie apocalypse causes chaos in *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and a woman flees an unseen force in *It Follows* (2014). *The Conjuring*’s opening serves a similar function, but, watching retroactively, it introduces us to the Warrens as the center of the universe eventually spawned from the film, while also teasing its first spin-off, *Annabelle* (2014).

*The Conjuring*’s success resulted in the quick development of this second feature—a stand-alone film exploiting a potential new horror antagonist—soon followed by *The Conjuring 2* (2016), a sequel continuing the story of the Warrens and their work. Both were commercially successful (and the *Conjuring* films—unlike *Annabelle*—were critically well-received), ensuring additional installments. Promotional materials for the subsequent *Annabelle: Creation* (2017) explicitly positioned the film as “the next chapter in *The Conjuring* universe”, and the film’s success tipped the franchise over the \$1billion mark, making it one of the most successful horror series

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of all time and “a full-blown cinematic universe that any studio would envy” (Mendelson 2017). *The Nun* (2018) and the in-development *The Crooked Man*, like *Annabelle*, provide spin-off origin stories to flesh out demons introduced in the *Conjuring* films. *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019) is loosely connected via the character of Father Perez (Tony Amendola), who features in *Annabelle*, and in *La Llorona* recounts his experience with the cursed doll. *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019) brings the doll back to the Warrens, connecting the two series. A second sequel to *The Conjuring*, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021) was released in 2021, a year after its theatrical release was postponed due to the COVID19 pandemic.

At the heart of the series is writer/producer/director James Wan, whose reputation shifted in the 2010s from an arguably misplaced association with “splat pack” horror filmmakers like Rob Zombie and Eli Roth, as a co-creator of the *Saw* series, to a blockbuster horror auteur (Bernard 2015). His particular brand of contemporary Gothic, favoring demonic possessions, jump scares and haunted houses over violence and gore, connects the *Conjuring* franchise to a number of other films Wan directed or produced such as the *Insidious* series, *Dead Silence* (2007), *Demonic* (2015) and *Lights Out* (2016). This association cemented his horror credentials even as he simultaneously branched out to direct major action franchise installments *Furious 7* (2015) and *Aquaman* (2018). This article considers how *The Conjuring* franchise’s interconnected characters and narratives contribute to a worldbuilding model which effectively links a potentially poor-performing spin-off like *Annabelle* to its more popular origins by way of Wan’s horror auteur status. Wan’s position as the creative anchor of *The Conjuring* universe suggests a codependent relationship between brand and creator; the series became successful in part due to its association with Wan, and in turn his status grew as the franchise developed. As a co-producer for all of the installments, and with writing credits on many, but as director of just two *Conjuring* films, Wan pushes the established boundaries of auteurism as a model concerned with a “director’s cinema”, while providing a case study of the filmmaker as brand. The horror universe is, in this case, marketed as a complex, evolving creation weaved by a revered genre auteur, and through this association it is deliberately distanced from the idea of an economically calculated, commercial “franchise”.

## Franchise Worlds

Opening *The Conjuring* with *Annabelle*’s introduction suggested that the doll would prominently feature in the film, as did posters and promotional images that showed her staring dead-eyed at the camera. Relegating her to the Warren’s occult museum instead opened two channels for future

serialization—Annabelle’s own story, and the dozens of further cases investigated by the Warrens. Each of the countless trinkets, masks, statues and pictures lining the walls and shelves of their archives represent an intriguing story to be told (a concept eventually exploited to its maximum potential in *Annabelle Comes Home*, in which several of the pieces spark supernatural events). A music box blamed for much of *The Conjuring*’s demonic activity joins the museum’s artifacts in the film’s closing moments, as does a zoetrope featuring the Crooked Man of *The Conjuring 2*.

To date, the franchise has branched off in three main directions. Firstly, *The Conjuring* and *The Conjuring 2* focus on the Warrens as they investigate major cases of demonic hauntings. In the first film, set in 1971, the Perron family are tormented by the spirit of a witch, Bathsheba, who eventually possesses mother Carolyn (Lili Taylor). In the sequel, set in 1977, the Hodgson family home is seemingly haunted by a former resident, whose spirit is controlled by a demonic nun, Valak (Bonnie Aarons). Secondly, *Annabelle* and *Annabelle: Creation* offer two prequels to the doll’s story before it comes to be in the Warrens’ possession, each delving further (and more complexly) into its past. In 1967, John Form (Ward Horton) gives the doll as a gift to his pregnant wife Mia (Annabelle Wallis). During a home invasion by their neighbour’s estranged daughter and cult member Annabelle, it becomes a tool in her ritualistic suicide. The doll and its inhabitant follow the family to their new home and attempt to possess their new born baby. In a final scene, Annabelle is discovered in an antique shop by a woman who buys it as a gift for her daughter, a nurse—setting up the opening scene of *The Conjuring*. *Creation* opens with a toymaker crafting the doll before his daughter dies in a car accident; he and his wife unwittingly make a pact with a demon which moves in to the doll, later tormenting a group of orphan girls staying in their home. It possesses one of the girls, Janice (Talitha Bateman), who flees the orphanage, renames herself Annabelle, and is ultimately adopted by the Forms’ neighbors—*Creation* ends with the home invasion seen early in *Annabelle*. *Annabelle Comes Home* connects the strands of the *Conjuring* world back together, opening with a recap of *The Conjuring*’s pre-credits scene in which the unfortunate owners of the doll hand her over to the Warrens, who secure her in a glass case in their home museum. Lorraine warns Ed that Annabelle is “a beacon for other spirits”. Sure enough, while they are away, Annabelle is inadvertently released, activating much of the other supernatural paraphernalia in the house, a premise described by Wan as “*Night at the Museum with Annabelle*” (in Crow 2018). Finally, *The Nun* provides an origin story for the demon Valak first introduced in *The Conjuring 2*. The Vatican sends Father Burke (Demián Bichir) and Sister Irene (Taissa Farmiga), a postulant nun yet to take her vows, to investigate an abbey in

Romania after a nun takes her own life in suspicious circumstances. They discover the abbey stands atop a gateway to hell, through which Valak enters and takes the form of a nun to deceive and hide among the others. The pair defeat Valak and close the gate with the help of a villager, Frenchie (Jonas Bloquet), who tells Irene his real name, Maurice. *The Nun*'s final scene is a reprise of one from *The Conjuring*: in a lecture two decades later, the Warrens screen footage of their exorcism on a man now revealed as Frenchie—a key scene which connects the two films, but also shows the moment Lorraine first sees Valak, tying together the *Conjuring* universe's various strands.

As David Church (2021) argues, the contemporary film franchise (in horror, as elsewhere) does not consist solely of serial features which contribute to an ever-unfolding linear narrative, but instead is often formed of intertextual installments—sequels or prequels, spin-offs, remakes and reboots, with merchandise and fan-made videos offering additional content. *The Conjuring* franchise is made up of a number of these interconnected “multiplicities” (Klein and Palmer 2016): *The Conjuring 2* is a sequel to *The Conjuring*, *Annabelle: Creation* is a prequel to *Annabelle*, itself a prequel to *The Conjuring*, *The Nun* functions as a prequel to *The Conjuring 2* by outlining an origin story for its antagonist, *Annabelle Comes Home* is both a third *Annabelle* film and a sequel to *The Conjuring*, while *Annabelle* and *The Nun* (and the mooted *The Crooked Man*) are also spin-offs from *The Conjuring* and its sequel. While linking to other installments through the appearance of characters, and tying together narratives in pre-credits, mid- or post-credit and closing scenes, each film also functions as a standalone feature with a self-contained plot. I have argued elsewhere (Mee 2017) that increasingly, various forms of adaptive serialization often defy neat categorization, or may form multiple roles simultaneously (e.g. prequel and spin-off) due to the intertextual nature of contemporary franchise filmmaking. Rather than attempting to precisely define and categorize such franchise installments, it is more productive to consider how, in dialogue with one another, the films within a franchise expand that narrative world, each offering a branch to its wider universe and a connection to other installments, opening avenues for audience experience that are further enriched by paratexts and fan interaction. Franchises are enhanced by each of their overlapping, interconnecting texts, and the connections between installments are arguably just as significant as the films themselves. New series releases can be characterized as both “an emergent singularity and a part of what has gone before, as an entity for but not entirely in itself, as a textualization that is sufficiently insufficient, never hermetic, but instead always open to extension” (Klein and Barton Palmer 2016, 5).

We can, of course, understand franchise storytelling in this way as symptomatic of the age of media convergence, as per Henry Jenkins's model of transmedia (2006). Jenkins popularized the idea that contemporary media franchises are often dependent on creating and populating new worlds across different spaces and platforms with space for interrelated characters and narratives. Within the context of world building, we can think of *The Conjuring*, *Annabelle* and *The Nun*'s stories and characters as separate yet connected, woven together by a series of narrative "threads" and "braids" (Wolf 2014) which may run concurrently for a time before splitting, connecting with new characters or new stories to form a new part of the fabric from which a larger world is stitched.

In *The Conjuring* series, *Annabelle*'s story begins entwined with the Warrens', before these two threads split to enable them to run parallel. Further threads including the nun Valak's also separate, occasionally meeting and interweaving before being pulled back together for the most recent films. These narrative threads rely on "transfictionality"—the interconnection of characters and events in a shared narrative space (Saint-Gelais 2005)—and the variation of textual forms within the franchise. As Mark J.P. Wolf argues:

Series of sequels advance the overarching story of a world, but quite often this story grows into both the future and the past as more and more backstories and stories of origins are developed to explain characters, places, and conflicts (207).

Wolf's work, like much on worldbuilding, focuses on the expansive, imagined realms more common to science fiction and fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones* or *Star Wars* (see also Harvey 2015; Boni 2017; Scolari, Freeman, and Bertetti 2014), or story worlds which are connected to our own but feature fantastic additions, such as the Marvel cinematic universe. By comparison, *The Conjuring* world is modest—a handful of films, set in real-world locations, partly based on real-life characters—but nonetheless it occupies an ever-expanding horror-fantasy universe haunted by supernatural monsters and demons who interact with each other, and connected by key protagonists.

Beyond its films, a franchise's various paratexts—trailers, promotion, merchandising—have further "considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning" (Gray 2010, 46) to existing texts and the worlds which they occupy. *The Conjuring*'s posters centralize *Annabelle*, cueing expectation of her prominence in the film and legitimizing the spin-off, and Valak is featured in a post-credit teaser for *The Nun* at the end of *Annabelle: Creation*. These additions not only work as advertisements for future installments, but also strengthen the connections and interactions between the films. This "commodity braiding" (Freeman 2014) functions similarly to Wolf's "narrative braiding", intertwining ancillary material with

narrative threads. VR or 360 degree videos for *The Conjuring 2*, *Annabelle: Creation*, *The Nun* and *Annabelle Comes Home*, released by distributor Warner Bros. during promotion, encourage further engagement by inviting audiences to explore their respective haunted houses, as does merchandise including *Annabelle* and *Valak* collectible dolls. A competition launched by *Creation*'s producers offered fans the chance to win a trip to LA to meet New Line producers in exchange for creating their own *Annabelle*-inspired short film—the winner, *The Nurse* (2017) introduces a new monster to the universe—and *Annabelle: Creation*, *Annabelle Comes Home* and *The Nun* websites and social media feeds share fan art. Audience contribution to and interaction with the *Conjuring* world is actively encouraged, and while consideration of the “immaterial labour” (Hassler-Forest 2016) required of their contributions is important, this participation can be understood as part of the “mind games played by the creative and cultural industries to draw us into the serial experience” (Lindner 2014, x).

The result of the *Conjuring*'s transfictionality and commodity braiding is that *The Conjuring* can be marketed as a creatively organic, expanding universe, a storyworld with continued opportunities for new installments, evolved and grown in conjunction with its audience. This is an appealing prospect in opposition to the rather structurally rigid idea of a “series” or the commercially-focused “franchise”. As Derek Johnson argues:

Calling something a “franchise” is not a neutral declaration: it prompts us to think about the media in the same terms that we think about McDonald's. There is a recognition of the industrial basis for that culture and its hyper-commercial, systemic mode of multiplication and maintenance over time. Often that comes with an implied critique as well, where acknowledging something as a “franchise” product suggests that its existence is based on market calculation more than creative expression. (in Jenkins 2014)

This issue is potentially more pronounced in horror cinema. The genre already contends with a general consensus of its supposedly low cultural status, but critics and fans alike have further complained about horror's commercialization via seriality, despite the potential for sequels, remakes and reboots to contribute creatively to an existing franchise or point it in a new direction (Mee forthcoming). In his book *Media Franchising*, Johnson suggests that the practice, despite its connotations, is not solely commercial or economic, but instead the product of interaction between audiences, industry and producers, necessarily complex due to contemporary media conglomeration and globalization. Regardless, the commercialism of franchise entertainment “raises the stakes for media workers to position themselves as creative and as different from all the others that use the same idea or premise or property toward this ongoing commercial end”, Johnson argues. This “imperative for differentiation” (quoted in Jenkins 2014) is

evident in *The Conjuring* world as it is in other franchises, and manifests not only via the construction and promotion of a “universe”, but also by retaining an inventor at its center. Story worlds are usually transauthorial, the expansion of imagined universes relying on collaborative effort beyond their originator (Wolf 2014)—but will often continue to refer to the creator of their origins to signpost canonicity. In *The Conjuring* universe, this authorial architect is James Wan.

### Horror Auteurs and the James Wan Brand

Wan describes the *Conjuring* world as his own universe (Crow 2018), and has provided an identifiable creative center around which to brand the series. He directed both *Conjuring* films, as well as co-writing and co-producing *The Conjuring 2*, *The Nun*, *Annabelle Comes Home* and *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, and is credited as producer for *Annabelle* and *Annabelle: Creation*. His horror credentials were initially formed with *Saw* (2004), a low-budget project with a screenplay by friend Leigh Whannell, which achieved unanticipated success due to its inclusion in the so-called “torture porn” cycle of the early 2000s and the pair’s initial association with the new American Splat Pack filmmakers like Rob Zombie (*House of 1000 Corpses* 2003) and Eli Roth (*Hostel* 2005). Wan and Whannell have subsequently suggested that they initially imagined *Saw* as a Hitchcockian thriller rather than a gory splatter film, and resented the way the film (and by association, they themselves) became known for its role in initiating the torture porn trend. Constricted by a limited budget and shooting schedule, the production was forced to rely upon violence over suggestion and suspense in order to appeal to audiences (Bernard 2015, 159). The pair distanced themselves from the Splat Pack after *Saw* (while retaining Executive Producer credits throughout the series, and with Whannell writing or co-writing the first two sequels), but continued to work together. Whannell wrote and Wan directed *Dead Silence* before they collaborated with Blumhouse—the low-budget horror studio responsible for the highly successful *Paranormal Activity* series—to make *Insidious* (2010) for a reported \$1.5 million. A haunted-house horror much closer to Wan and Whannell’s interests, *Insidious* proved profitable, spawning its own franchise with three sequels, and introducing the paranormal style that Wan later captured in *The Conjuring*—his first film without Whannell. Wan’s films, and especially the *Insidious* and *Conjuring* series, exemplify a focus on the paranormal in mainstream horror post-2010, a shift from the visceral violence of horror cinema during the prior decade, and demonstrate the reliable nature of this cycle for studios—*The Conjuring* grossed more than 15 times its budget worldwide (boxofficemojo). Moving away



from the torture porn trends with which he was so uncomfortably associated, Wan ultimately became “the most bankable auteur to emerge from the Splat Pack” (Bernard 2015, 196).

Contemporary approaches to auteurism have evolved from analyses of stylistic and thematic patterns across a director’s work (although these remain central, as I will demonstrate), broadening to consider their films in an industry context and to examine the interaction between branding and reception. Using Corrigan and Grant’s models in his study of Wan and the promotion of the *Saw* series, Tyson Wils (2013) argues that auteurism now “exists as doxa, as a type of knowledge that is shared by the community at large, which accept it as a normal way of speaking about and representing film and other cultural texts”. This knowledge is exploited in film marketing: filmmakers (be they directors, producers, or writers) are promoted as an identifiable brand, used to differentiate and distinguish various texts among overcrowded, instantly accessible media platforms. It is further employed in dialogue with audiences, Wils argues; this is evident in the marketing of *The Conjuring* films as discussed earlier, and in sustained promotion for *Saw*, where audiences were encouraged by Wan and Whannell to engage in heated discussion about the film on the Lionsgate studio-owned *House of Jigsaw* website (Bernard 2015, 160).

When it comes to horror, auteurism (or more specifically, the filmmaker as brand) serves a further purpose. Wils suggests that “one dominant motivation is the usefulness of auteurism for negotiating the complicated field of mass *and niche* entertainment” (my emphasis). Similarly, Joe Tompkins argues that “auteurism operates as a form of product differentiation that contributes to the cult status of horror cinema” (2014, 204), identifying a pattern of marketing horror through its association with directors which began with key 1970s figures such as Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper and George Romero, then seen as examples of progressive filmmakers working outside of the mainstream, subverting ideological and formal generic norms. This was of course during a period of American filmmaking which romanticized the concept of the auteur and their “independent” approach to directing. As Tompkins and others have argued, the tendency to enshrine genre films of the 1970s as auteurist, anti-mainstream art ignores both changing practices in production and distribution, as well as a more commercial purpose for the auteur model whereby filmmakers became appealing brand names, their association a promise of “quality” (in whatever subjective form that takes) and an identifiable, marketable selling point. Horror cinema remains a director’s genre, with fans encouraged via horror sites, magazines, conventions and festivals to seek out a filmmaker’s work:

Today, a director who makes one or two moderately interesting horror films is quickly labeled a “horror auteur” [...] this is at once a fine instance of the marketing of auteur nostalgia, and a further indication that the contemporary horror director’s auteur status remains circumscribed by genre’. (Bernadini, in Tompkins 207)

James Wan’s work is comparatively more mainstream than the filmmakers in Tompkins’s case study of the splat pack, whose packaging as genre “auteurs” he likens to Romero et al—Zombie, Roth, and Alexandre Aja are included here, but notably Wan is not, supporting Bernard’s description of the filmmaker’s association with the group as an “uncomfortable” one. Regardless, Wan’s genre reputation grew following *Saw*, *Insidious*, and especially *The Conjuring*, and he has proven himself a both a reliable industry figure and a key figure in genre filmmaking for audiences and studios alike. On the one hand, he has garnered a reputation for making suspenseful supernatural films that are popular with horror fans, broader audiences and critics. Simultaneously, he is a dependable box office draw—helming three commercial horror series featuring profitable releases, and since directing major Hollywood action films. The launch of his own sci-fi and horror production company Atomic Monster Productions, responsible for all the *Conjuring* franchise entries aside from the original film, plus additional paranormal horror like *Lights Out* and *The Curse of La Llorona*, a *Swamp Thing* (2019) television series, recent films including Wan’s own *Malignant* (2021) and a roster of in-development titles including new adaptations of ‘*Salem’s Lot*, *The Tommyknockers* and *Arachnophobia*, further cement his genre status. Deals with studios including New Line and the Chinese company Starlight Media demonstrate commercial shrewdness and the potential for Wan’s horror brand’s success both domestically and globally (Ford 2016).

Wan’s growing status in horror cinema over the last fifteen years—and how this was ultimately tied to a growing *Conjuring* universe—is exemplified in promotional materials. Despite the aesthetic and thematic shifts between the films, *Saw* was used as a selling point in marketing paratexts for *Dead Silence* and *Death Sentence* (2007), their posters and trailers announcing “from the director of *Saw*”—linking the films to suggest a brand appeal even before Wan’s name was commonly known (and notably, excluding Whannell as writer, thus centralizing the brand of the director). Promotion for *Insidious* made a further connection, “from the makers of *Paranormal Activity* and *Saw 2*”, linking a new franchise with two existing, hugely successful horror series (Wils 2013). By the time of *The Conjuring*’s release, *Insidious* had proved successful enough in its own right to be used alongside *Saw* in promotion (“from the director of *Insidious* and *Saw*”), before *Saw* was dropped completely in marketing for *The Conjuring 2* (“from the

director of *Insidious* and *The Conjuring*”), the association now clearly with Wan’s supernatural style. When it came to promotion for *Annabelle*—not directed by Wan—the angle of association changed, dropping the reference to filmmakers and instead explicitly positioning the film as a prequel: “before *The Conjuring*, there was *Annabelle*”. Later additions to the franchise explicitly connect the films to their wider story world: *Annabelle: Creation* was announced as “the next chapter in *The Conjuring* universe”, while promotion for *The Nun* invited viewers to “witness the darkest chapter in *The Conjuring* universe”, and *Annabelle Comes Home* reaffirms the universe’s narrative focus on the Warrens: “Welcome to the home of *The Conjuring* universe”. Even the *Annabelle*-adjacent *The Curse of La Llorona* is marketed via its relationship: “From the producers of *The Conjuring* universe”. Wan’s self-described universe took over as its own selling point, and promotion centers on the expansion of that universe, but this strategy can be clearly traced back to promoting Wan at the helm of the franchise.

*The Conjuring* universe stretches the accepted definition of director-as-auteur. As director, (co-)writer, and (co-)producer, Wan provides an authorial, reliable anchor at its center, a recognizable creative touchstone around which the films can be located. Despite only directing a handful of its titles, the world is clearly cued as Wan’s, and his involvement shaped this brand appeal. His position as director was used a selling point for *The Conjuring* through connection with his earlier horror films, rather than his name, and linking the *Annabelle* films and *The Nun* explicitly to *The Conjuring* “universe” avoids using the “producer” label in instances where he did not direct, promoting and associating the films as part of a creative universe as opposed to a commercial franchise (*The Curse of La Llorona*’s promotional connection to the “producers of *The Conjuring* universe” is perhaps an acceptable anomaly due to its position on the periphery of the universe, where its potential to be seen as a cash-in arguably matters less). While Wan’s significant success in the contemporary horror film industry is apparent, and shaped the success of *The Conjuring* series, promotional strategies appear to foreground the coherence of the universe through a series of textual, as opposed to industrial, connections. In this way, although industry contexts clearly remain significant when considering auteurs as marketable brands, the traditional focus of auteurism—the stylistic and thematic patterns in a filmmaker’s work—are of equal importance. Analyzing these connections in the *Conjuring* films can tell us a great deal more about the way in which the franchise became a universe.

### **The Conjuring World**

The aesthetic Wan creates in *The Conjuring* and returns to in *The Conjuring 2*—and which Leonetti, Sandberg, Hardy and Dauberman

emulate and expand upon with varying success in the *Annabelle* films and *The Nun*—had already been effectively established in *Insidious*. Although the tone of *The Conjuring* is arguably more serious than Wan's previous film, lacking the comic relief of clairvoyant assistants Specs (Leigh Whannell) and Tucker (Angus Sampson) and the camp excess of the final act's journey into the supernatural realm of the "Further", they are still quite similar in style and theme, and the two share additional connections with the other films. All the films with the exception of *The Nun* are set in haunted family houses, a number in new homes (the Warrens' place is even new for *Annabelle*), and often (expectedly) gloomy, older houses with especially creepy attics, basements or outbuildings. Scares are created through a mix of effective sudden jump shocks juxtaposed with long silences, periods of suspense and subtle, creepy imagery. Patrick Wilson plays protagonists in both *Insidious* and *The Conjuring*, and Joseph Bishara appears as a demon throughout both series, as well as composing scores for *Insidious*, *Annabelle*, *Annabelle Comes Home* and the three *Conjuring* films. Other key crew worked across the two series including John R. Leonetti, who was the cinematographer for *Insidious* and its first sequel before directing *Annabelle* (see Murphy 2015) for further examples of these personnel connections). *Insidious* and *Annabelle* feature additional home moves in an attempt to escape demons (while the family of *The Conjuring* are reminded that this is ineffective). Children are frequently threatened by the films' demons, reducing their parents to desperate wrecks in need of help, which arrives in the shape of kindly mediums—Elise (Lin Shaye) in *Insidious*, and clairvoyant Lorraine and demonologist Ed in *The Conjuring*—along with a team of technical assistants.

Building the *Conjuring* world around the Warrens, a real-life husband and wife investigative team tied to famous cases of alleged hauntings in Amityville and Enfield in the 1970s, trades on the appeal of the "true story" in horror, which has long acted as a genre selling point. From loose inspiration (Ed Gein for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* 1974), dramatization (*The Amityville Horror* 1979) or total fabrications (*The Blair Witch Project* 1999), an association with historical "real events" might be used to ascribe authenticity to an otherwise questionable story, to reassure audience's reservations around seeing a disreputable film, or to excuse narrative or ideological incoherence (Schaefer 1999, see also Jones 2013; Clayton 2015; Leeder 2018, for examples). Immediately following *Annabelle's* opening story in *The Conjuring*, a cut reveals the Warrens speaking to an audience in a lecture hall about the case. There is a fade to black and white and the image changes to resemble halftone newsprint. Scrolling captions identify the characters as real-life paranormal investigators, and the following "true story" taken from their case files, one "so malevolent they've kept it locked

away until now” (not unlike *Chain Saw*, touted as “one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history”, or *The Entity* (1983), which according to its trailer is the “most extraordinary case in the history of psychic research”). While moving away from the Warren case files, *Annabelle’s* Satanism theme references the 1960s media obsession over cult crimes (and very clearly evokes *Rosemary’s Baby* 1968), as well as exploiting the contemporary popularization of true crime stories; Mia watches a news report on the Manson murders on the night *Annabelle* breaks in and attempts to murder her and her unborn child, an act of satanic “violence for violence’s sake”, according to the detective who later interviews her.

*The Conjuring 2* draws from two Warren cases. It opens with a séance at the Amityville household, in which Lorraine envisages herself as Ronnie DeFeo, a teenager who murdered his family, supposedly resulting in them haunting the house’s subsequent occupants, the Lutzés (the focus of *The Amityville Horror*). This scene begins with a shot of the Amityville house’s recognizable windows, made iconic by the 1979 film. At once, the film is aligned with both a real-life event, and a notable horror text. But a further opportunity is taken here. The connection of the real crime to the Amityville haunting, and the Warrens, is then extended by bringing another character into the sequence: still in the midst of a vision, Lorraine makes her way to the basement where she encounters the demon Valak before seeing a premonition of Ed’s violent death. This character continues to haunt Lorraine as they arrive in London to investigate the Enfield poltergeist, seemingly the ghost of a former resident, Bill Wilkins. In the film’s conclusion, Lorraine and Ed realize that Valak is responsible for possessing the man’s spirit. This is a manipulation of two “real-life” hauntings that the Warrens were tied to, which are pulled together through their fabricated connection to the fictional Valak—condemned to return to hell at the end of *The Conjuring 2*, and then the antagonist of *The Nun*. *Annabelle Comes Home* reaffirms the significance of the Warrens’ case file history in its pre-credits scene, as scrolling text reminds viewers “the Warren Artifact Room holds the largest private collection of haunted and cursed objects...while every object has its own terrifying history, there is one artifact that the Warrens deem more malevolent than any other: ANNABELLE comes home”. The film ends with a dedication to Lorraine Warren, who passed away shortly before its release. Most recently, trailers and posters for *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* promoted its “shocking true story” and its basis in the “true case files” of the Warrens.

Ed and Lorraine form the universe’s center, even when they are not present in its installments. As protagonists in the *Conjuring* films, their relationship and work provides a steady anchor around which the action

takes place. The haunted Perrons and Hodgsons are introduced and developed in parallel with the Warrens' stories, until the couple relocate from their own domestic space to exorcize the troubled family homes of each narrative. In addition to their paranormal expertise, the pair provide calming respite; both films place emphasis on the strength of their partnership, the script earnestly highlights their unwavering love for one another and their daughter, and intense supernatural scenes are juxtaposed with romantic dialogue where the two joke, comfort each other, and remind themselves of their abilities and desire to help others—often couched in a sense of religious duty (“God brought us together for a reason”). In *The Conjuring*, Roger Perron (Ron Livingston) works as a long-distance truck driver, and although concerned for his family, is often away from the house for long periods, leaving wife Carolyn to fend for herself and their five daughters. Carolyn is gradually broken down by the spirit (a witch, Bathsheba) to the point where it easily possesses her once she lets her guard down. In the sequel, Peggy Hodgson (Frances O'Connor) has been left by a husband who “had twins with the woman up the road”, and is also alone with her large family, struggling to cope financially and emotionally. Her two older girls help her take care of the younger boys, but again the stress of the situation and the hauntings leaves a family member, this time daughter Janet (Madison Wolfe), vulnerable to possession. In both cases, the Warrens' arrival brings immediate calm and comfort to the households, often by figuratively healing the fractured family unit—Lorraine maternally protects and builds bonds with the children, and Ed supports or fills the voids left by absent fathers, helping Roger to rebuild a car engine, and leading a sickly Hodgson sing-a-long to Elvis Presley's *Can't Help Falling in Love*. The Warrens are the light to the haunted families' darkness, a very clear marker of good (and God) in the face of all that is evil (and demonic), addressing the trope of the vulnerable and broken family in horror. Bernice M. Murphy (2015) further argues that *The Conjuring*, like other examples of 2010s supernatural horror films focusing on family hauntings including *Insidious* and *Sinister* (2012), offers an allegory for the instability and anxiety faced by many middle-class Americans in the wake of the 2000s economic crises, and that the Warrens' comfortably middle class life is in opposition to that of the struggling Perrons'.

While they do not prominently feature in the other films, the Warrens' existence in the story world is often alluded to, and they cameo in sequences bookending other films. Even though *Annabelle Comes Home* is set in their house, they are absent for much of the film's running time. Annabelle and her cohabitants from the artifact room—a werewolf or “Hellhound”, a possessed wedding gown, a “Ferryman” who transports the souls of the dead, a haunted television—instead torment their daughter Judy (McKenna

Grace) and her babysitter Mary Ellen (Madison Iseman) and friends Daniela (Katie Sarif) and Bob Palmeri (Michael Cimino). But the Warrens return near the film's end and Lorraine helps Daniela connect with her dead father. *The Nun* ends with the Warrens screening footage of Maurice's exorcism, described earlier in this article. *Annabelle* opens with a short clip taken from the beginning of *The Conjuring*, with the flatmates talking to Ed Warren, and later, when Father Perez takes the doll to his church for safekeeping, he tells Mia that he has a connection with a couple who can help. The film ends with a caption confirming the doll was moved to the Warren's safe artifact room, and then a quote from Lorraine: "the threat of evil is ever present ... we can contain it as long as we stay vigilant, but it can never truly be destroyed", suggesting the potential for *Annabelle* to wreak further havoc.

The *Annabelle* films feature intertwined themes of faith and family similar to those of *The Conjuring*. The expectant newlyweds John and Mia are devoutly religious, turning to their priest for advice on the hauntings and seeking support through their church, and *Creation* features a group of orphaned girls who are wards of the Catholic Church, with a nun, Sister Charlotte (Stephanie Sigman) as their guardian. In *The Conjuring*, Ed instructs secular Roger to baptize their children, advising him they'll stand more of a chance against the witch's curse if they embrace faith. Without the religious instruction of the Warrens, the devotion of the Forms and Sister Charlotte instead stands in as the obvious metaphor for religious good in the face of evil. Family units are similarly framed. Just as Lorraine Warren's maternal instincts to protect the Perron and Hodgson children (as well as her own daughter) are tied to her psychic powers and her belief in God, and Valak attempts to possess Janet as a way to "attack [Lorraine's] faith", so too do demons prey on children in *Annabelle* and *Annabelle: Creation*, with families required to pull together despite their broken forms in a display of strength to combat them. Even with the Warrens divided in *Annabelle Comes Home*, Judy promotes the importance of family by defending her mother and father when Daniela seems flippant about their work, and Daniela's motivation for breaking in to the Warrens' occult artifact room (she finds the key hidden behind a framed picture of Jesus) is to attempt to contact her late father. Lorraine later reassures her that he is at peace and does not hold his daughter responsible for the accident that killed him.

While families are fractured and faith is essential in the *Conjuring* world, the implications of these themes are perhaps more nuanced than they might at first appear. The stability of the nuclear family is undoubtedly privileged, and not just via the idyllic unit of Ed, Lorraine and Judy. The Perrons are reunited in a scene of celebratory bliss after Carolyn is successfully exorcized, but without a patriarch, the Hodgsons are last seen apart—

Peggy talks to neighbors, and Janet sits in the back of an ambulance with Ed as he reiterates Lorraine's earlier advice to the girl about marrying a supportive partner. *Annabelle's* Mia is frustrated with her husband spending so much time away at work away during the pregnancy and the baby's first months. *Creation's* girls long for adoption into family homes, and the Mullins' house is a strange, creepy place following the death of their young daughter. In *Annabelle Comes Home*, Daniela (and especially her younger brother, who bullies Judy at school) are initially presented as troublemakers following the loss of their father. It could be suggested then that the films are somewhat conservative in their surface message—families work better when unified (and preferably nuclear)—but with the exception of *The Conjuring*, in each of the films chosen families and constructed communities provide support. The Hodgson's neighbors offer refuge and play a significant role in solving the haunting, Mia is befriended by Evelyn (Alfre Woodard) who provides comfort and guidance (although Evelyn, an African-American woman who sacrifices herself to save Mia and the baby, is a deeply problematic character archetype) and the Mullins open their broken family home to the girls and their ward. With no family ties in *The Nun* (although casting Vera Farmiga's sister Taissa as the psychic Irene led to speculation that the two characters are perhaps related), connections instead exist in the sisterhood and the three main characters who work together to overcome Valak. Even in *Annabelle Comes Home*, Mary Ellen, Daniela and Bob extend the Warren family to celebrate Judy's birthday at the end of the film. Unified families in the mold of the Warrens are the ideal, but strength is found in other social and community support networks in the *Conjuring* world.

Similarly, while Ed and Lorraine espouse the importance of spiritual devotion, the Church itself is often criticized and, as an institution, fails to sufficiently aid its members through crises. The Church is reluctant to help the secular Perron family, and Ed and Lorraine break convention and risk expulsion by performing an exorcism themselves. The Church has also failed the orphans consigned to the Mullins household in *Creation* after their children's home is closed. The priest of *Annabelle*, despite his best intentions, is unable to help and is overcome by the doll when he tries to lock it in his church. In Janet's room in *The Conjuring 2*, the demon's inversion of countless crucifixes donated by devout neighbors further suggests the impotence of religious paraphernalia. Father Burke of *The Nun* is haunted by visions of a failed exorcism which killed a possessed boy. Finally, Valak is a clear challenge to the piousness of the sisterhood and the effectiveness of religious dedication, and even the most devout nuns cannot defeat the demon. It is implied that Sister Irene is questioning her path, and when she does eventually take her vows it is a necessity, decided swiftly before facing



Valak, taking with her a vial containing the blood of Jesus. She uses this to finally send Valak back to the underworld—but as we discover in the closing scene, even the blood of Christ is not sufficient to prevent Frenchie from being marked and the demon returning from hell.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

The focus on family and faith, the connection of narrative and character to “true stories” and real people, and some shared stylistic tropes, strengthens a sense of thematic and aesthetic unity between the films within *The Conjuring* universe. Combined with paratextual materials and discourse which evolved from direct association with James Wan’s work to a more self-contained form of promotion that nonetheless draws on his established style, the series has been distanced from the idea of the industry-focused “franchise” to an arguably more appealing narrative “universe” branded with a creative authorial focus at its center. Richard Nowell (2014) argues that horror scholarship has often divorced analyses of films and their themes, aesthetics and social contexts from the economic concerns that drive the genre’s production, frequently focusing on either text or industry at the cost of ignoring the other. This article demonstrates one way in which these considerations might be brought together. *The Conjuring* universe provides an ideal case study for connecting texts and context to consider the ways creative choices contribute to commercial strategies by building storyworlds made up of installments in dialogue with one other. The franchise has evolved to embody James Wan’s contemporary gothic brand—a reliably popular contemporary genre staple—providing opportunities for other filmmakers to connect to the series (and to capitalize on Wan’s brand by association) and to develop new stories which find intersections with existing characters and narratives, each installment contributing to its larger whole. The varied supernatural paraphernalia in the Warren’s secure room offers countless opportunities for new threads exploring the pair’s case files, with potential for further spin offs via the various demons, ghosts and monsters they reportedly encountered, while, as *The Nun* demonstrates, creative opportunities exist beyond the occult museum for the universe to keep on growing.

## Note

1. The ethical issues arising from *The Conjuring* films’ claims to be based on the “real life” case files of the Warrens (specifically in relation to their conservative Christianity) are addressed by Alexandra West (2020) in her chapter “Onward Christian Soldiers: Eyes of Believers in *The Conjuring* (2013) and *The Conjuring 2* (2016).”

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