

James Wan: "Splat Pack" Hero

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This graduation paper is about James Wan, an Australian movie director. He was born in 1977. His parents are Chinese, he was born in Malaysia, his nationality is Australian, and he lives in America (Chaw). As of 2018, he has made 12 movies as a director and 14 movies as a producer ("James"). Saw, the best-known of his movies universe and *Insidious*, one of his original horror series took 4th and 1st places respectively among horror franchises (Lennon). He started co-working with Leigh Whannell, an Australian movie producer in 2003, and Whannell has worked on 17 of the 25 movies in Wan's filmography. They met as students who loved horror films at The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's film school, but their classmates and professors looked down on horror films (Messer). In the *Insidious* series, Whannell is a writer and actor, and in *Insidious: Chapter 3* and *Insidious: The Last Key*, he directs and produces ("Leigh").

Wan's career started in 1999, and he got a high reputation especially for directing movies. He did not intend to make horror movies for such a long time because he likes all kinds movies such as romance and action genre, but 9 of his directed movies

are in the horror genre (Messer). He got 14 awards for five movies, and two awards for himself. This is the second place in the Splat Pack. Splat Pack is a collection of filmmakers who have been making R-rated horror films since 2002 ("The Splat Pack"). Also, he is the second director in history to have two films that were not in the same franchise reach a billion dollars at the box office with *Aquaman* and *Furious 7* ("James Wan"). His directed movies, *Saw*, *The Conjuring*, and *Insidious* are among the "best horror films of all time" whereas the top 10 movies were all made before 1990 ("The Best"). What are the differences between Wan and other directors? Why could he get a higher reputation than the other directors after 2000? These are questions that I will try to answer in this essay. (The movies referenced in this essay are all his directed movies, not produced.)

First, he values story behind the horror, whereas, before 2000's directors do not value story that much, and in his movies, he focuses mostly on family's bond and especially on strong fathers. For example, in *Insidious*, when the child falls asleep because of the devil, the father dives into the child's dream with his skill ("*Insidious*"). In *Saw*, one of the victims, doctor Gordon, is a father, and he tries escaping from the bathroom to help his wife and child even though he must sever his leg to remove the fetter ("*Saw*"). In *Death Sentence*, the main character, Nick, is a father who fights with a gang to revenge his family's murder ("*Death Sentence*"). On the other hand, in most horror movies before 2000, the story was not so focused and to scare the audience, the directors used big sound and close-up insanity face. For example,

one of the best known horror film directors, John Carpenter, uses "cheap scare" - big scary sound which Carpenter named - a lot to highlight the film ("John Carpenter"), and also horror film director, Stanley Kubrick uses "The Glare" - almost equals death glare- to show the character's feeling ("Stanley Kubrick").

Here is the reason why Wan focuses on fathers: his father died when he was 14 years old ("James Wan"). At that time, he had already experienced moving two times in Australia, and as mentioned before, his nationality is complicated, so getting used to new circumstances was normal for him. However, by seeing his movies, we can tell the experience was traumatic for him. As a result of that, six of his movies feature a father. It is interesting that almost all his movies featuring a father show a lonely father. The father in *Saw* is incarcerated by the offender, in *Death Sentence*, he fights the gang alone, in *Insidious Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2*, he fights the devil alone, and in *Aquaman*, he is the only human in the movie and has waited alone for his wife for a long time. Therefore, for Wan, the father is the person who fights for family alone, and family is his power to fight the enemy.

Second, Wan's techniques for shooting movies are not normal compared with other movie directors since 2000. Before 2000, the horror movie directors could make any new genre, so doing what they want was not hard. On the other hand, since 2000, almost all horror movies can be categorized by three types: zombie, exorcism, and remakes. Out of these, making a new iconic character is very difficult. However, Wan made three types of horror

movie characters for exorcism genre: *Saw's* "Jigsaw Killer", *Dead Silence's* "Billy", and *The Conjuring's* "Valac". Especially, the "Jigsaw Killer" is famous to non-horror films fans, so the character is used for pranking a lot on the internet. By using these iconic characters, Wan could get a position unique among other directors. In all his movies, he does not use establishing shots which are used to show where the story takes place or what the characters' personalities are in the very first scene. Wan said "That was part of my aesthetic that I was going for. I wanted to make the film really claustrophobic, and one way I was going to do that was, every time we go to a new location, I'm not going to set it up using an establishing shot. You don't see a house, and then cut to the inside of the house. You cut to inside, to inside, to inside" ("James Wan"). Additionally, Wan uses a "normal" family setting, and "normal" means not wealthy, but happy in his films. Also, he often uses backwards tracking shots, then almost all the audience can watch the films in through the role of the protagonist.

For example, *Insidious*, which is produced, directed, and written by Wan, has a normal family. The family moved to the haunted house and are cursed. Focusing on the very first scene of the movie, the mother and the son are surrounded by piles of cardboard boxes and talking while looking at the mother's old photographs. Then, the scene turns to the family's crowded busy morning routine. In the scene, the audience can see that the family moved recently, and the father is always busy with his work. There is no narration or explanatory text, so the audience is

forced to imagine who the family members are and where the story takes place. In Wan's movies, to be clear who and where things are through the movies, the actors express their feeling with voice and facial expression, so do not need to express their inner voice in narration. To use these technics, Wan stars his favorite actor, Patrick Wilson, a lot. Wilson had used to play in romantic dramas or thriller films and had never played in horror films. However, since Wilson met Wan in *Insidious* in 2010, 10 out of 26 movies in which he acts until 2018 are horror movies and seven of them are related to Wan. Wan said: "You know how Johnny Depp was to Tim Burton, Patrick Wilson is my Johnny Depp", and added "Patrick is so easy and cool and besides being a talented actor as well, he's just so fun to have around on set" (Bowles). According to the interview, Wan loves Wilson and Wilson is something of a class clown on set, too.

Third, Wan makes all the characters in his movies sympathetic to the audience. *Insidious*, a horror movie, and *Aquaman*, a science fiction action movie, illustrate how Wan does this. For example, in *Insidious*, Renai Lambert, the mother of Dalton, the key child in the movie, is the only person who can see the things from "the further" at first. Renai wants her husband, Josh to believe the things that she sees, but they cannot be seen by Josh. On the other hand, from the point of view of Josh, he cares about his children, but works so hard as a teacher, then gradually goes home later after Dalton falls asleep because of the demon. After Elise, the psychic old lady, comes to their house and Josh sees the illustration about dreams which Dalton drew

before he fell asleep, Josh starts believing the demon story, and a fed he is reminded that he also has the ability which Dalton has, he decides to dive into Dalton's dream. From the audiences' point of view, we can see what Renai sees, so we can feel the emotion which she has, and can feel sympathy for Josh because the circumstances which Josh has can be experienced. Wan said "The most successful horror movies that work are the ones that can create characters who you care about and that have characteristics that resonate with you and I think that is highly important, because if you can relate to , to me it makes the scares that much more scarier" (Bowles). Wan created these characters with following his theory, and it works well as seen in his successful movies.

In another example, *Aquaman*, the main character Aquaman is a half-human, half-Atlantean, and his background that he has is like Wan's. As mentioned before, Wan is pure ethnic Chinese but his nationality is mixed. In the movie, Aquaman is abused by human children because of his looks, and he does not have the right to be the king of Atlantis because he is mixed. It means Aquaman does not have the place to live with fellow or friends. Wan said, this is "something I understand as well as an Asian guy born in Malaysia who grew up in Australia" and added "that Aquaman is half-Atlantean, half surface-dweller, gave me a starting-off point for his character and allowed me to take him on this journey to finally accept who he is" ("Malaysian-born"). Also, being of mixed race is not rare in the world, so the audience can feel empathy and Wan wants the audience to

understand through the movie what the blended people feel.

Fourth, Wan's underrated movies affect his way of thinking of creating movies. Wan has brilliant successes of making movies, but some of his movies are not highly evaluated. For example, *Death Sentence*, Wan's third movie after *Saw*, is underrated, whereas, he had huge success with *Saw*. *Death Sentence* is a vigilante action drama film based on the novel by Brian Garfield, and Kevin Bacon stars as the main character. It was the first time for Wan to make film based on someone else's original work and was the only film which could not get high gross at the Box Office and is lower than the budget. Wan said: "Unfortunately, while I think my third one [*Death Sentence*] my most accomplished, no one saw it. And I just took a break for two or three years" (Hendrix). According to the interview, Wan felt frustration about trying to keep making great films, but eight years after making *Death Sentence* in 2018, he also said, "I always love being the underdog. Coming from the horror genre, you're always the underdog" (El-Mahmoud). If Wan gave up after the *Death Sentence* disappointment, he would have never said such positive words. Also, Wan's 2nd movie, *Dead Silence*, is not highly evaluated. It earned \$22 million with a \$20 million budget and takes 2nd place of Wan's worst gross of movies. However, the doll idea of *Dead Silence* affects *The Conjuring* sequence which has Annabelle doll. After Wan succeeded with *Insidious*, *The Conjuring*, and *Furious 7*, he said, "I like to think that with every movie I make, I develop and I evolve as a filmmaker and I'm still growing which I think is a good thing - I definitely did not peak

with my first film!" (Bowles). According to these quotes, Wan's way of thinking about creating films changed after "a break".

Fifth, the use of foreshadowing in Wan's movies is technically accomplished. First, I'll focus on *Insidious Chapter 1* and *Insidious Chapter 2*. In *Chapter 2*, the scenes in *Chapter 1* are shown. For example, in *Chapter 1*, someone knocks on the door in the middle of the night, and Josh opens the door, but no one is there, then the monitor in their baby's room makes noise. Only Renai sees the bad guy attempting to take the baby, and they decided to leave the house and move. In this scene, Josh is shown as a brave and family-minded father. Also, the old lady in the black bridal costume tries to reach child Josh gradually, and it is shown only in the photos. Josh's mother thinks that the thing is lady. Additionally, when Elise, a psychic met child Josh ages ago to help him from the lady in the photos, he talked to someone, even though he was in a hypnotic state, and the red door in his house opened by itself. In this scene, Elise, Josh's mother, and Elise's friend, Carl think the door is opened by the evil. After that, Elise covers up the ability that Josh has, and forces Josh's mother not to take photos of Josh to forget the scary things.

These scenes are treated as scary parts in *Chapter 1*, but this changes in *Chapter 2*. First, the door sound is made by Josh, and he wants Renai to notice that a bad guy is trying to reach their baby, Cali. Second, child Josh is spoken to by adult Josh, and child Josh shows where the evil takes place and adult Josh, Elise, and Carl open the red door, but they are in *the further*, so young

Elise, Josh's mother, and Carl cannot see them. Third, the lady who tries to reach child Josh is Parker, who met child Josh at the hospital where Josh's mother worked, and Parker decides to possess Josh to take back Parker's boyhood and committed suicide after meeting Josh. Through *Chapter 2*, the scary parts change to brave parts for Josh.

Wan uses foreshadowing between the two movies and shows the human characters in his movies as humane by showing the dual nature compared with the evil's one nature. Evil is always bad, but human can be good and bad at the same time. By showing Josh's courageous and fragile personality, the evil's badness stands out.

Sixth, Wan makes successes outside of the horror genre, too. Wan made two movies which are not horror genre: *Furious 7* and *Aquaman*. For example, *Furious 7* is a car action film, and earned \$1.5 billion at the box office on a \$190 million budget. Also, *Aquaman* is a superhero film from DC comics, and earned \$1.1 billion at the box office on a \$160 million budget. *Furious 7* is from *the Fast and the Furious* franchise and *Aquaman* is from DC extended universe, but these films which Wan made have the best score of box office of the franchise and the DC extended universe ("Box", Watson). As Wan says "[The horror genre] is definitely the best way to break into the industry. I just became somewhat synonymous with it, so that people had a harder time seeing me for anything else outside of horror. I just wanted to prove that I'm not just a horror filmmaker, I'm a filmmaker, period (El-Mahmoud)". Almost all audience thinks James Wan is

a horror movie director.

In *Aquaman*, a huge octopus appears at the scene which Aquaman fights Aquaman's older brother, Orm Marius / Ocean Master to decide which brother gets to be a king of Atlantis. The octopus plays huge drums, and the drums' sound raises the audience who watches the duel up. The octopus' name is Topo, and Wan loves Topo very much, so he decided to make Topo appear in the movie as an "Easter egg" (Polo). The fans of *Aquaman* movie call it "Easter egg" by quoting Wan's word, and it is fun for the audience to watch the movie again and again. Additionally, *Aquaman* used to be made fun because of the costumes and setting. However, Wan did not change *Aquaman*'s costumes and setting. As Wan said "I did grow up reading comic books, but [Aquaman's] weren't the ones I read. Later, as I got older, it became apparent that people out there were making fun of him Sure, he was somewhat disrespected and made the joke of the superhero world. But I always found him endearing" (Itzkoff). He did not try to make Aquaman cool, but to show how Aquaman is cool. As a result, Wan could make both the fans and the non-fans of *Aquaman* happy. Also, this is the first time for Wan to use CG a lot. Wan does not use it before even when expressing poltergeist in *The Conjuring* franchise because *The Conjuring* is based on a real story. Additionally, Wan is good at showing fighting scenes, so in the fighting scene in the movie, it is clear that which character is on which side. Fighting scenes have a tendency to be complicated, but even if you see *Death Sentence* by Wan, showing a non-complicated fighting scene is

possible.

In conclusion, Wan values stories a lot, was affected by his father, employs rare shooting techniques, creates attractive characters, has underrated movies, uses foreshadowing well, and has had successes outside of the horror genre. As mentioned before, Wan is a big fan of all kinds of movies, so he can challenge other genres including romantic comedy because he is good at showing the inside impression of the characters and has a sense of humor. If Wan tries a different genre, he can use the techniques which he used in his movies before. Also, the new horror film, *Malignant*, will be released in 2020, and it is based on his graphic novel, *Malignant Man*. Recently, Wan married Ingrid Bisu, who is an actress of his produced movie *The Nun*, and she is a co-writer of the movie. Wan has never married before, so this is the first time for him to work with his wife. I'm excited to watch the film, and his unreleased films from now on.

James Wan's Directed Movies (Title / Release Date - Gross / Budget)

Stygian / 23 July 2000

Saw / 19 January 2004 - \$103 million / \$1.2 million

Dead Silence / 16 March 2007 - \$22 million / \$20 million

Death Sentence / 31 August 2007 - \$16 million / \$20 million

Doggie Heaven / 25 November 2008

Insidious / 14 September 2010 - \$97 million / \$1.5 million

The Conjuring / 19 July 2013 - \$319 million / \$20 million

Insidious: Chapter 2 / 13 September 2013 - \$161 million / \$5 million

Furious 7 / 3 April 2015 - \$1.5 billion / \$190 million

The Conjuring 2 / 10 June 2016 - \$320 million / \$40 million

Aquaman / 21 December 2018 - \$1.1 billion / \$160 million

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