I. INTRODUCING THE SPLAT PACK

The ‘New Blood’: a Name Catches On

Excitement about the Splat Pack seems to have been ignited with the April 2006 issue of the British film magazine Total Film. The issue featured an article by Alan Jones, entitled ‘The New Blood’. Its title was accentuated by a ‘Parental Advisory: Explicit Content’ label to let readers know they were about to enter forbidden, dangerous territory. Evidently, the local cineplex had been transformed into dangerous territory because ‘a host of bold new horror flicks’, such as Eli Roth’s Hostel and Alexandre Aja’s 2006 remake of Wes Craven’s 1977 shocker The Hills Have Eyes, had assaulted audiences with levels of brutality missing in ‘all those toothless remakes of Asian hits starring Jennifer Connelly, Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar’ (Jones, 2006: 101, 102).

Jones devotes his article to showcasing the young directors who were ‘taking back’ horror from purveyors of ‘watered-down’ genre movies (2006: 102). One of the auteurs in the movement featured in Jones’s article is Eli Roth who positions himself as one of the power players of this movement. Jones’s article features a photo of Roth brandishing a chainsaw, a devilish smirk on his face, surrounded by photos of bloody carnage from Roth’s Hostel, including an image of a man being castrated with a pair of bolt cutters. These grisly visuals imply that Roth can deliver the gory goods. In the article, Roth – a graduate of New York University’s film school whose father and mother are, respectively, a Harvard professor and fine artist – comes across as forcefully as these images
would suggest. Roth declares: ‘Guts and gore are in right now because audiences are fed up with loud bangs substituting for scares and quick cutaways from the money shots’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102).

Roth’s effusive language, which conflates horror and pornography, continues as he claims that he was the one who got this movement started with his 2003 directorial debut, *Cabin Fever*: ‘I don’t want to sound egotistical, but *Cabin Fever* was one of the first of the new distressing rash that didn’t hold back [but instead] put full-frontal gore back on the agenda’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 104). If one considers the numbers, it is not difficult to see why Roth felt that he was at the forefront of a successful cinematic new wave. *Cabin Fever*, the story of a group of young campers infected and destroyed by a gruesome flesh-eating virus, cost only a million-and-a-half dollars but grossed over $30 million worldwide for Lionsgate. His follow-up film *Hostel*, made for under $5 million, had just, in Jones’s words, ‘taken the box office by storm’ in the United States by grossing $47 million (2006: 101). After these gory hits, Roth had emerged as a cinematic celebrity.

Another director on Jones’s list of significant horror directors was already a celebrity before he stepped behind the camera. Rob Zombie was the lead singer of the groove metal group White Zombie that had risen to prominence during the early 1990s thanks to heavy airtime on MTV. After White Zombie disbanded in 1998, Zombie continued to record and tour as a solo act before turning his attention to making horror films, a logical extension of his music which is laden with references and audio samples from horror films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968). Displaying Zombie’s vision of kaleidoscopic carnage, his first film, *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003) resurrected the carnival excesses of the ‘hillbilly horror’ subgenre of the 1960s and 1970s by unfolding, in grisly detail, the exploits of the Firefly family, a clan of white-trash murderers living in the 1970s whose only pleasures in life are the torture and murder of any suburbanites unfortunate enough to cross their path. According to Jones, Zombie’s debut film ‘was no classic but is still a key title in the current neo-nasty movement’ (2006: 103).¹ Jones was not alone in feeling that *Corpses* was notable; even though the film was not a huge box office hit – grossing only around $16 million globally during its cinema run – it garnered enough of a following on video to convince Zombie – (and Lionsgate who picked up the film for distribution after Universal and United Artists passed on it)² – to produce a sequel. Thus followed *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), a gritty epic that pitted fugitive members of the Firefly family against a twisted sheriff in the burned-out, western-style desert of 1970s-era rural Texas.

According to his comments in Jones’s article, the 1970s are, for Zombie, more than an historical backdrop for the narratives of his films; this era also produced films that had an influence on his own. As Zombie puts it: ‘There was a realism and bleakness to 70s genre cinema . . . All the kids blown away
by those 70s shockers are old enough to be making movies themselves, and they want to emulate the same effect’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). The content of Zombie’s films reflect these sentiments, as few genre films in the 1980s or 1990s had been as bleak, merciless and visceral as Zombie’s tales of the Firefly family.


> I wanted [the film] to be hard-hitting and back-to-basics brutal because it was the 70s-styled survival picture I’ve always wanted to make . . . The reason why so many titles from that golden period in the 70s have stayed in my memory for so long is they were starkly oppressive, visually stunning and very frightening. (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103–4)

Another European film-maker, profiled in Jones’s article, who looks to genre cinema of the 1970s for inspiration is French film-maker Alexandre Aja. According to Aja, his 2003 neo-slasher *Haute Tension* (released by Lionsgate in the United States as *High Tension* in 2005) ‘was [a] self-confessed homage’ not only to 1970s genre fare, such as Craven’s *Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* and Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but also brutal, ‘survivalist classics’ from the era, such as *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971) and *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972) (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Aja explains that he ‘wanted to recreate that atmosphere of savagery with no apparent boundaries’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Even though the audacious twist ending of *Haute Tension* baffled some audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, the film was successful enough to land him the job of helming a remake of Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* for Fox Searchlight. Given that he is such a professed fan of films from this era, Aja was elated by the opportunity to remake Craven’s story about a Midwestern family stranded in the desert and under siege by vicious clan of cannibals.

Jones emphasises these new horror film-makers’ allegiance to horror films of the past, specifically the 1970s, by including a sidebar entitled ‘The Old Blood’, with the byline ‘More gore? The new guys on the chop-block have a lot to live
up to . . .’ (2006: 106). This sidebar includes a list of five films accompanied by photos and a brief blurb about each film. Out of the five films featured, three are films from the much-celebrated era of 1970s horror: *Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Shivers* (Cronenberg, 1975). The other two films on the list – infamous Italian shocker *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980) and American slasher film *The Burning* (Maylam, 1981) – are both chronologically close to the 1970s and also similar in that they share the other films’ high-violence, high-gore ethos.3 As Jones’s byline suggests, the ‘New Blood’ directors profiled in his article have high levels of violence and brutality to live up to in their film-making. Comments from Zombie, Marshall and Aja suggest they are ready to take up this unforgiving attitude in their films.

These young horror directors not only share indebtedness to the past: Jones’s article also shows that many of these film-makers believe that their films have a specific relationship to the present as well. Aja positions the films made by his cohort as reactions to the traumatic events of 9/11 (Jones, 2006: 103). This sentiment is echoed by Eli Roth who argues that, in 2006, ‘Americans feel unsafe in their own country . . . They are scared of an unseen enemy they can’t do anything about. They are so wound up they want to scream’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). The ‘golden period’ of 1970s also influences how these film-makers react to their current historical moment, however; Jones compares their output to how ‘the 70s spawned one subversive shocker after another’ (2006: 103). Aja’s comments support this connection as he explains that he had to change very little of Craven’s original film as he was working on his version of *The Hills Have Eyes* because ‘2006 is so similar to 1977’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Aja even seems to insinuate that the situation in Iraq War-era America is more strained, more paranoid and more intense than in Vietnam-era America; according to Jones, he ‘shrieks with glee’ when he learns that his version of the story was too violent for Craven (2006: 106).

Ultimately, Jones suggests this generation of horror film-makers will produce horror films that are more intense, more graphic and more subversive than their predecessors from the 1970s. At the very least, the work of these directors represents a unified new wave of horror directors. He underscores this notion in another sidebar wherein he groups together a select number of these directors under the catchy moniker ‘The Splat Pack’, an appellation that evokes the hip swagger of the 1950s ‘Rat Pack’ combined with the youth and vitality of the 1980s ‘Brat Pack’, with a splash of gore added. Though Jones’s article mentions a number of current horror directors, only five make Jones’s illustrious ‘Splat Pack’ sidebar: Neil Marshall, Eli Roth, Alexandre Aja, Rob Zombie, and Greg McLean, an Australian-born director who scored a minor hit in the United States with *Wolf Creek* (2005),
the violent tale of a savage killer stalking backpackers in the Australian outback.

Even though Jones worried if this group of film-makers was really a revival that was ‘built to last’ or only ‘a slash in the pan’ (2006: 100), Jones’s name for the group definitely stuck. In late 2006, articles began to appear in the American press that used Jones’s term for the group and heralded these filmmakers as the next wave of horror cinema. On 22 October 2006, two articles appeared, one in *Time* magazine and the other in the *New York Post*. Rebecca Winters Keegan, the author of the *Time* article titled simply ‘The Splat Pack’, alters Jones’s list of Splat Packers. There is no mention of Greg McLean and, in his place, she adds three new members to the list: James Wan, Leigh Whannell and Darren Lynn Bousman, the creative minds behind the successful *Saw* franchise.

In 2004, Wan, a director, and Whannell, his writing partner, teamed with independent studio Twisted Pictures to produce *Saw*, a meagrely budgeted, gory thriller that followed the exploits of Jigsaw, a mastermind serial killer who creates elaborate and sadistic traps for his victims. Picked up for distribution by Lionsgate, *Saw* became a gruesome blockbuster, grossing over $100 million worldwide. *Saw* became a successful franchise for Lionsgate, and *Saw II* and *III*, both directed by Bousman, followed in 2005 and 2006. A film school graduate new to Hollywood, Bousman was recruited by Wan and Whannell to lead the continuing adventures of Jigsaw.4 Bousman took *Saw* to new heights, both viscerally – Jigsaw’s traps became more elaborate and victims’ deaths became gorier – and financially, as the second and third *Saw* films both grossed more than the original. Keegan’s article and Reed Tucker’s article in the *New York Post* arrived just in time for the release of *Saw III* which was opening nationwide the following Friday, 27 October.

As Jones started a trend with his coinage of the term Splat Pack, Keegan began a trend as well. For American journalists, Splat Pack membership congealed around Roth, Zombie, Marshall, Aja, Wan, Whannell and Bousman. American journalists rarely mentioned McLean in association with the group after this point, and Keegan admits that even the core seven members of the group are ‘loose knit’, more kindred spirits than partners working shoulder to shoulder (Keegan, 2006). Keegan does, however, attempt to unify the work of these film-makers by identifying the semantics of a Splat Pack genre. According to Keegan, films made by the Splat Pack have in common a ‘basic plotline [of] people [who] are stuck somewhere and have to endure horrible things – or indeed, do horrible things to each other – to escape’ (Keegan, 2006).

Despite the darkness and oppressiveness of this plot outline, both Keegan’s article and Reed Tucker’s *New York Post* piece portray the Splat Packers as attractively devious, fun-loving mischief-makers. Tucker begins his article by detailing Roth’s trip to Home Depot to do some ‘research’:
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... while throngs of customers shop for insulation and garden hoses, Eli Roth is prowling the power-tool aisle with a special twinkle in his eye ... When he takes a shine to particular drills and saws, you can bet the implement won’t end up building a deck. Instead, it’ll turn up drilling into someone’s thigh or power-sanding someone’s eyeball. (Tucker 2006)

Similarly, Keegan’s article begins with an anecdote about Bousman, distressed about trouble with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) over Saw III’s rating, calling Zombie to ask for advice. According to the article, Zombie advised Bousman to ‘Explain why the extreme violence is necessary to tell the story in a way that’s more socially responsible’ (quoted in Keegan, 2006). Keegan reveals, however, ‘When pressed, Zombie admits he doesn’t actually care what’s socially responsible. He just wanted to help out a kindred spirit, another guy who understands the unique beauty of a properly lighted viscera shot’ (Keegan, 2006). In these articles, the Splat Pack comes across as a rag-tag group of naughty boys that enjoys disgusting audiences and ‘pulling a fast one’ on the curmudgeonly MPAA by cloaking their love of gore in the garbs of ‘social responsibility’ (Keegan, 2006).

Nevertheless, both Keegan and Tucker respect the Splat Packers’ ability to generate revenue at the box office and on home video. According to Tucker, ‘Their films have modest budgets but end up earning big bucks for the studios’ (Tucker, 2006). Likewise, Keegan notes that, by keeping their budgets under ten million, Splat Packers ‘are given almost free reign ... to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies’ that reap ‘gruesome profitability’ at the box office (Keegan, 2006). Along with admiring the Splat Packers’ abilities to make money with their low-budget films, Keegan’s remarks also suggest that the profitability of Splat Pack films allows their makers a certain level of independence from studio interference. Another similarity between Keegan’s and Tucker’s assessments of the Splat Pack is their opinion that films made by the Splat Packers are an attractive departure from the various horror film trends that preceded them. Like Alan Jones, Tucker bemoans the day before these new film-makers came along, when ‘Self-referential horror [Scream (Craven, 1996)] and Asian-derived creepiness [The Ring (Verbinski, 2002)] ruled the cineplexes’ (Tucker, 2006). Keegan admits, ‘it’s still too soon to tell’ if ‘there’s a nascent Stanley Kubrick or Steven Spielberg in the mix’ because ‘Most of the Splat Packers are on only their second or third film’ (Keegan, 2006). At the same time, she gushes that their ‘innovative filmmaking ... rises above the mindless slasher sequels of the 80s or such predictable teen-star killfests of the 90s as I Know What You Did Last Summer (Gillespie, 1997)’ (Keegan, 2006).

For all of their mischief and antics, the Splat Packers, as depicted by Keegan and Tucker, display flashes of ambition and purpose. For instance, when discussing horror films of the recent past, Zombie laments, ‘Horror [movies] had
been watered down to nothing [and had] lost all their impact’ (Tucker, 2006). While Zombie’s ambitions seemed to veer more towards terrifying and disgusting audiences to the fullest extent, Roth was apparently aiming even higher, towards both shocking audiences and offering social and political critique. In Keegan’s article, Roth claims that when people attack him and ask, ‘How can you put this [violence and gore] out there in the world?’ he replies, ‘Well, it’s already out there’ (Keegan, 2006). To unpack Roth’s elliptical statement, Keegan cites an appearance that Roth made on the Fox News Channel’s Your World with Neil Cavuto in April 2006. While Roth’s appearance on the show coincided with – and was surely meant to hype – the DVD release of Hostel on 18 April, the director also took the opportunity to defend his films and, by extension, the work of fellow Splat Packers, by arguing that their films belong to a rich tradition of horror films that are critical of, among other things, the United States’s military policies. He explained:

With horror movies, it goes in cycles. In the 70s, with Vietnam, you had films like Last House on the Left and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Dawn of the Dead [Romero, 1978] . . . If you talk to all the horror directors of the 70s, they say that they were making films as a reaction to watching Vietnam on television . . . now, thanks to George Bush, Dick Chaney, and Donald Rumsfeld, there’s a whole new wave of horror movies . . . we’re in the war now and you feel like it’s never gonna end.

Judging by their respective articles, both Keegan and Tucker appear to agree with Roth’s assertion that the Splat Packers’ films continue the mission of horror films of the past – the ‘subversive shockers’ of the 1970s mentioned in Alan Jones’s article – that had been subversively oppositional and politically progressive. Keegan notes, ‘The Old Guard of horror directors, including Craven and Tobe Hooper, has welcomed the newcomers, inviting them to . . . dinner parties in Hollywood’ (Keegan, 2006). To punctuate the point further, Tucker ends his article with a brief interview with ‘Old Guard’ horror director John Carpenter who assesses the films of the Splat Packers and praises, among others, the Saw films and films by Rob Zombie who would go on to remake Carpenter’s slasher classic Halloween (1978) in 2007.

Over the next couple of months, the Splat Pack picked up steam. In an article by Pamela McClintock, published in Variety on 26 December, the stakes seemed to be getting higher. Like Keegan and Tucker, McClintock praises the Splat Packers for producing profitable films on a low budget: ‘Their films cost next to nothing to make. Yet they mint gold’ (2006: 1). Also similar are the ways in which she designates the bloody, gory and violent films of the Splat Packers as radically better than other horror films in a genre that ‘has been hijacked by watered down PG-13 fare’ (2006: 1). Unlike Keegan,
however, who, just two months earlier, described the Splat Pack as ‘loose-knit’ (Keegan 2006), McClintock claims that the Pack is ‘closely knit, young and well-educated’ (2006: 1). Rather than being kindred spirits, the Splat Pack now sounded like a full-blown movement. According to Roth, ‘We all have the same agenda: to bring back really violent, horrific movies’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1).

Described by McClintock, the Splat Pack’s agenda is an independent movement, originating outside mainstream Hollywood machinery:

By and large, the fresh-faced and enthusiastic helmers go unrecognized by the press and Hollywood establishment, which has long considered horror the bastard stepchild of the movie business. The men in the group still feel like outcasts as they make their movies for indies like Lionsgate or studio genre labels. (McClintock, 2006: 1)

Many who reported on the Splat Pack for the popular press, like Keegan, Tucker and Vanessa Juarez (2006), in her article ‘Sweet Torture’ for the 13 October issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, discussed the Splat Pack in conjunction with the wave of horror movie remakes that emerged around the same time as the Splat Packers’ films. For example, in addition to interviews with Splat Packers, Tucker’s article mentioned director Marcus Nispel who directed the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* released in 2003. It also featured quotations from Jonathan Liebesman, who directed a prequel to Nispel’s remake, entitled *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006). Behind the production of these films was Platinum Dunes, a company run by Hollywood insider Michael Bay, director of such action blockbusters as *The Rock* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998). These films were released via New Line Cinema, a subsidiary of Hollywood conglomerate TimeWarner.

While other journalists bring up directors such as Nispel and Liebesman in their assessments of the Splat Pack, McClintock does not mention them and thus cements the Splat Packers as rebellious Hollywood outsiders who work for independent studios like Lionsgate which she dubs ‘the home studio of this group and their films’ (2006: 1). When McClintock notes that Warner Bros. courted Eli Roth to direct a remake of *The Bad Seed* (LeRoy, 1956), she dismisses such a thing ever happening: ‘It’s doubtful whether the majors would really go for the jugular and make the kind of movies Roth and his cabal make’ (2006: 1).

In McClintock’s article, the Splat Packers evince a more serious attitude towards their films. McClintock includes the story of how Zombie offered advice to Bousman when *Saw III* ran into trouble with the MPAA but, this time around, the story seems less about merely thwarting the ratings board but more about rebelling against Hollywood by making films that convey a
message and rise above mere exploitation. Bousman says that the situation with the MPAA forced him to defend the film on grounds of artistic expression:

Only a filmmaker can eloquently say why someone is getting tortured or massacred. It’s not just exploitive. Take the scene of a naked woman being tortured [referring to a scene in Saw III in which one of Jigsaw’s victims is stripped naked, hung in a freezer, and sprayed with cold water until her body freezes solid]. The rating board just saw torture and nudity, they didn’t see the raw emotion. I, as the filmmaker, could explain that. (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1)

This time around, Zombie seems to echo Bousman’s sentiments and claims that he wants his films to unsettle audiences, not offer escapism: ‘My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don’t want it to be fun’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). As the Splat Pack gained momentum, McClintock’s overview of the group suggests something more than exploitation and escapism is going on in the gore-filled narratives of their films.

Perhaps the most audacious claims in McClintock’s article come from Eli Roth who, thanks to his television appearances and visibility, was becoming a spokesperson for the Splat Pack. Speaking about the films made by his cohort, Roth declares, ‘These films are very subversive’ and boasts, ‘Art Forum magazine said that Hostel was the smartest film in terms of being a metaphor for the Iraq war and America’s attitude overseas’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). Roth’s comments are similar to the ones he made during his appearance on Fox News. He scoffs at the notion that films made by the Splat Pack merely exploit audiences’ fear of torture, a controversial topic since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003 and especially after the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal of 2004. He insists, ‘People assume these are movies by idiots for idiots. They’re not’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). Roth implies that films by the young, well-educated Splat Packers offer subversive social critique for intelligent, discerning audiences. Regarding the Splat Pack’s audiences, McClintock notes that the Splat Pack directors ‘are heroes among horror fans, who consider the director the star, not the actors, a distinction any auteur craves’ (2006: 1).

Selling Independence and Subversion

The ways in which these articles herald the Splat Pack’s arrival offer an intriguing glimpse into how notions of independence, outsider status, and claims of subversion are used to sell films and the personalities of their directors. Cynthia Baron notes: ‘the “authoritative” material about films and film stars found in the press can be an important component of what Hans Robert Jauss calls the “horizons of expectation” held by audience members’ (2002: 19).
The ‘horizons of expectation’ established by these journalists’ comments about the Splat Pack tend to involve two assumptions about these directors: they are ‘independent’ and operate ‘outside’ the Hollywood establishment; and their films, by virtue of their ‘independent’ nature, are subversive critiques of their historical moment.

The assumption of the Splat Pack’s ‘independence’ manifests itself in several ways. For many, the term ‘independent’ evokes film-making by ‘young filmmakers with a strong personal vision away from the influence and pressure of the few major conglomerates that control tightly the American film industry’ (Tzioumakis, 2006: 1). Journalists cater to this idea by crafting an image of Splat Pack directors as mavericks ‘breaking away’ from dominant trends in horror. Jones establishes this notion by framing the Splat Pack’s films as a rebellion against ‘toothless’ horror of mainstream Hollywood (2006: 102). Other journalists took up the notion that the Splat Pack represented a departure from the mainstream. McClintock’s Variety article especially emphasises this point as McClintock quotes Roth’s claim that a major studio ‘wouldn’t know what to do’ with a rebel like himself (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1).

Another way in which journalists and the directors themselves position the Splat Pack as ‘independent’ is by framing their films as a reaction to audience desires. Roth argues that Splat Pack films are popular ‘because audiences are fed up’ with other horror films that fail to deliver scares and gore (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102). He even goes so far as to claim that, if the success of Hostel ‘has proven anything, it’s that audiences absolutely determine taste’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102). According to Roth, Splat Packers are not beholden to any corporate parents; their only ‘bosses’ are the audiences who demand the blood and gore that the Pack delivers.

These claims, however, should be carefully qualified. Scholars who have researched the genealogy of the term ‘audience’ would temper Roth’s argument that the Splat Pack merely serves audiences’ demands. Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye find that the ‘audience’ is ‘a product of the media industry itself, which uses the term to identify markets and to define a commodity’ (2000: 42). Thus, Roth’s comments reflect a specious model of the culture industry. Roth attempts to create a scenario in which an audience democratically votes for what they want to see in movies and gets it. If the audience itself is a creation of the culture industry, however, this bottom-up model dissolves, and one can see that the apparent groundswell for violent films has been manufactured by the Hollywood machinery. These film-makers’ relationship to the machinery of corporate Hollywood bears examination. McClintock cites Lionsgate as ‘the home studio’ of the Splat Pack, though ‘home distributor’ would be a better description. Lionsgate has handled distribution for all Roth’s films, all of the Saw films, Zombie’s first two films, and the United States releases of Aja’s Haute Tension and Marshall’s The Descent. Lionsgate
is ‘one of the leading independent companies’ currently active in a corporate
Hollywood environment wherein ‘independent distributors are rare’ (Wasko,
2003: 79). Tom Schatz describes Lionsgate as a ‘powerful Vancouver-based
indie producer–distributor that has remained steadfastly independent’ (2008:
30). Schatz is quick to note, however, that Lionsgate ‘often collaborates with
Conglomerate Hollywood, as it did on Hostel. Lionsgate handled the domes-
tic (North American) theatrical release of that film, while Sony Screen Gems
handled foreign theatrical and Sony Home Entertainment handled the DVD
release’ (2008: 30).

While McClintock acknowledges this partnership in her article, she frames
the relationship in a more sensationalist manner. She writes, ‘Screen Gems,
part of the Sony empire, gave Hostel to Lionsgate to market and sell, report-
edly concerned about content’ (2006: 1), suggesting that Sony was worried
about being associated with the film’s content. Sharing distribution deals as
Lionsgate did with Sony on Roth’s Hostel, however, is simply a smart way to
do business. Thus, Sony profits by distributing overseas a film that was already
a hit in the United States; Lionsgate gets to enjoy the security of a major
distributing their film overseas. This security in overseas territories which
is offered by a major distributor is especially important given that, as Roth
himself admits, Hostel ‘plays on the xenophobia of a nation where only ten
percent of the population has a passport’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103).

Ultimately, the Splat Pack’s claims of being ‘independent’ – not to mention
journalists’ claims of their independence – should be equivocated. According
to Yannis Tzioumakis, the term ‘American independent cinema’ operates as
da discourse that ‘connote[s] a particular brand of quality that [is] perceived
as absent from the considerably more refined (and expensive) but impersonal
mainstream Hollywood productions’ (2006: 13). With these connotations, the
term ‘independent’ often becomes a ‘marketing category’ (Tzioumakis, 2006:
13). In this light, the hype surrounding the Splat Pack, rather than seeming like
a populist movement, actually begins to look like Hollywood marketing and
advertising. One of the foundational mantras of all commercial advertising
is the promise that something is ‘new and improved’. Repeatedly, journal-
ists positioned Splat Pack films as ‘new and improved’ horror, not the ‘safe’,
watered-down horror of films such as the American remakes of The Grudge
(Shimizu, 2004) or Dark Water (Salles, 2005).

Independent Splat Pack distributor Lionsgate was, no doubt, pleased that
journalists packaged the Splat Pack in this manner because independents need
all the help they can get. Independent studios and distributors have to play
by the rules set by the majors if they want to survive in corporate Hollywood
where the major studios ‘very much govern the way [independent] film moves
through the marketplace’ (Lewis, 2001: 29). Given that independents do not
have the cushion of corporate money to land on if their films are not successful
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at the box office and in ancillary markets, they have to be fiercely competitive. Independents are often forced to utilise ‘saturation releases and other marketing techniques associated with mainstream cinema’ with significantly smaller marketing budgets (Tzioumakis, 2006: 265). If, as the old saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, independents always need to find new ways to market their films.

This necessity may have led Lionsgate and the Splat Pack directors to sell their films in different ways, thus representing a shift in the long history of how films have been sold by Hollywood. Crucially, these different modes of marketing are connected to film ratings and industry self-regulation. During the Hollywood studio era, the Production Code not only regulated film content, it also promised consumers, not to mention ‘the press, religious, educational, and civic groups, and state and national legislatures’, that Hollywood’s output was “‘pure’ entertainment, amusement that was not harmful to its consumers’ (Maltby, 2003: 61). A key component of this notion of ‘harmless entertainment’ was that movies, ostensibly, contained no ‘moral or political intent’, and their ‘producers’ attitude denied responsibility for the meaning of any movie’ (Maltby, 2003: 61). Studio-era Hollywood claimed that it delivered entertainment, instead of messages, with its movies because audiences want to be entertained, not preached at.

With the implementation of the ratings system in 1968, Hollywood shifted its mantra from ‘harmless entertainment’ to ‘responsible entertainment’ (Sandler, 2007: 41). According to Kevin S. Sandler, ‘responsible entertainment’ consisted of a balance of ‘artistic freedom with restraint’ or ‘artistic expression and cultural sensitivity’ (Sandler, 2007: 41). More specifically, the rating system allowed Hollywood film-makers to deal with possibly provocative subjects, such as sex and violence, but one of the board’s sanctioned ratings – G, PG, or R – assured audiences that these taboo subjects would be handled with ‘suitability’ and ‘respectability’ (Sandler, 2007: 44). Sandler details the struggles between film-makers, studios, civic groups, ratings boards and other industry self-regulatory agents to achieve an ‘Incontestable R’ which is ‘a social contract between Hollywood and consumers that guaranteed responsible entertainment to Hollywood’s critics and audiences’ (2007: 9). In the era of ‘responsible entertainment’, film-makers could excite audiences with provocative material, as long as the provocative material was kept to a minimum and presented only in service of telling a socially and morally responsible story.

The discourse surrounding the Splat Pack suggests that Hollywood’s ideas of responsibility, the role of entertainment, and ratings shifted again. In contrast to the ‘harmless entertainment’ model of the studio era, film-makers like Roth claim that viewers ‘want’ films with both social commentary and an increased amount of brutality that reflects the harshness and uncertainty of the war-torn world around them. The other ‘horizon of expectation’ created by the jour-
nalists in their writing on the Splat Pack is that their films are subversive and critical of dominant political ideologies or beliefs. Roth and Aja, in particular, argue that their films are critiques of their current historical moment, a milieu structured and informed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration’s global ‘war on terror’, and global economic recession. They feel that their films make national trauma visible.

In bringing these horrific elements to light, the Splat Pack is not only willing to go to new levels of cinematic excess, but eager to do so, eschewing the restraint expected of directors during the era of ‘responsible entertainment’. Even a film-maker active during this previous era, like Wes Craven, who often found himself at odds with the guardians of ‘responsible entertainment’ (Lewis, 2000: 178–80), is shocked by the level of violence in Aja’s remake of his *The Hills Have Eyes* (Jones, 2006: 106). Similar to film-making practices during the eras of ‘harmless entertainment’ and ‘responsible entertainment’, the Splat Pack’s ability to push the boundaries of what can be depicted on screen is tied to a change in Hollywood’s policies of self-regulation. More specifically, the DVD market – and the acceptance of widespread release of ‘Unrated’ movies on DVD that followed – facilitated the Splat Pack’s emergence in a range of ways that are detailed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Splat Pack was not exactly a group of film-makers operating ‘outside’ Hollywood machinery but rather a part of it, with their outsider status manufactured by media coverage. Given McClintock’s audacious claims for the Splat Pack’s independence, an ironic image appears in her article. Placed beside a photograph of Roth directing actors on the set of *Hostel: Part II* is a drawing of a man holding aloft a chainsaw with the blade dripping blood. Using this type of drawing to ornament an article about horror is expected but what is unexpected is the man wielding the chainsaw is dressed in a suit and tie. While this outfit may seem like strange attire for a maniacal killer, it is perfect for the Splat Pack, for it represents, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, two contradictions yoked together by violence in the Splat Pack’s media image. On the one hand, there is the rebellious iconoclast with a mischievous penchant for violence represented by the chainsaw. On the other hand, there is the corporation man represented by the suit.

As the sampling of articles in this chapter demonstrates, one of the ways in which Jones and the other journalists tend to obscure the suit and emphasise the chainsaw is to compare the Splat Pack to the celebrated horror film-makers of the 1970s. Jones calls the 1970s an era that ‘spawned one subversive shocker after another’ (2006: 103). This connection is taken even further with 2007’s ‘It’s only a Movie’ film series at the Museum of the Moving Image that places films by the Splat Pack alongside their counterparts from the 1970s.

This marketing position – depicting horror films from the 1970s and 2000s as oppositional, and the consumption of these films as a subversive act – is
tempting for journalists to take. It is especially understandable that Jones, a British journalist writing for a British film magazine, takes this position about consuming horror films. During the ‘video nasties’ moral panic that took place in Britain in the 1980s, many violent and gory horror movies on video were banned by the Video Recordings Act (VRA) which Kate Egan identifies as ‘perhaps the most stringent form of regulation imposed on the media in a western country’ (2007: 1). During the ‘video nasties’ era, the consumption of horror films could be framed as a subversive act. Vipco, a video distribution label in Britain, however, has more recently used the ‘video nasty’ label to sell their products and ‘to create a commercial niche for itself as a historically authentic and nationally specific outlaw company’ (Egan, 2007: 219). Jones evokes the nasties discursively to brand the Splat Pack as ‘authentic outlaws’. When the label travels to the United States, however, where horror films have never been subjected to restrictions such as the VRA, this strategy loses its national specificity and becomes another marketing tool to sell ‘rebellion’ to audiences and to hide the material base of film’s commodity status.

The discussion that follows exposes, rather than obscures, the ways in which the Splat Pack’s success is tied to a material base. Because the Splat Pack draws much energy and many claims of significance by evoking the films and film-makers of horror’s ‘Golden Age’, the next chapter takes a close look at the American horror films of the 1970s. Emphasising film as a business and foregrounding the film product as commodity, this study reveals that Aja’s claims about 1977 and 2006 being ‘similar’ are, indeed, true but not in ways he may realise.

Notes

1. ‘Neo-nasty’ is a play on the term ‘video nasty’. This term originated during the early 1980s when in Britain, there was moral panic surrounding the release of violent and gory horror films on video cassette. Tapes of these films came to be known as ‘video nasties’. Eventually, seventy-two of these titles were banned under the Video Recordings Act (VRA) in 1984. For more on the video nasties controversy, see Barker (1984), Martin (1993) and Egan (2007).

2. *Corpses* was shot on the Universal lot during 1999 and 2000 but Universal, after learning that the film would probably get an NC-17 rating, dropped the film from its 2001 release schedule (anon., 2001). MGM reportedly considered releasing the film but they ultimately passed on it as well (Nigro, 2008).

3. Three of these titles – *Last House on the Left*, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Burning* – were among the seventy-two video nasties banned by the VRA.

4. Wan and Whannell contacted Bousman after they read a script he had written called *The Desperate*. The duo felt that, with a few changes, Bousman’s screenplay would make a good sequel to *Saw*. Bousman agreed to adapt *The Desperate* into *Saw II* only if he could direct the film as well. Twisted Pictures agreed, and *Saw II* was Bousman’s first feature-length film as a director (Berman, 2009: 147–48).