EUP: You have recently published *Selling the Splat Pack*. What motivated you to explore this area of American film?

**Mark Bernard:** I was motivated to write this book when this cycle of very violent, very gory films emerged in the mid-2000s. The films caught my attention, but what also caught my attention was how the directors of these films were relatively visual and active, popping up on television and in magazines and talking about how their films were ‘reflections’ of ‘War on Terror’-era America. In particular, Eli Roth and Alexandre Aja would make these claims for their films. Being a huge fan of horror film, I was intrigued by these filmmakers’ comments, but as a film studies student, I was dubious about sometimes-reductive claims about how films ‘reflect’ the period in which they are produced and released. So, I was inspired to look into this group of filmmakers and focus on how they sold themselves. Other scholars were doing excellent studies of the ‘torture porn’ debate in which these films became embroiled, so I didn’t want to focus on that so much. I wanted to look at the marketing process.

EUP: In the book you argue that Splat Pack films were products of, rather than reactions against, film-industry policy. What case studies do you draw on to illustrate your main argument here?

**MB:** The book is divided into two parts. I spend most of the first part of the book talking about how the emergence of the DVD market and sell-through pricing created a need for more movie product to sell at big box retailers like Wal-Mart. The need for more movie product ended up creating the need for more genres to be available at sell-through pricing, so horror films were made more readily available at retailers than ever before. Coupled with this was how packaging films for sale on DVD – and especially the way that Lionsgate, distributor for most of the Splat Pack films – framed these films as ‘art’ that has ‘something to say’, if that makes sense. When you add this to the fact that ‘unrated’ DVDs allowed for more gore to be added to a film after its theatrical release, you’ve got the Splat Pack, a group of filmmakers who were talked about in the press as being subversive filmmakers whose movies were both high on gore and high on confrontational content. However, when one
approaches these films and filmmakers from the industrial side – especially using DVD as a conduit – one can see how the outsider status of the Splat Pack was not so much coming from the ‘outside’ as it was something being manufactured.

And it’s important to note that I don’t necessarily mean this in a disparaging way when it comes to the films. I do not want to talk about how all of these films are hollow or dismiss them as creatively bankrupt. There are Splat Pack films that I admire a great deal. But I wanted to look at how their image was shaped and how an industrial and technological change like DVD provided a material base for this image.

After the first part that talks about the role DVDs played in the rise of the Splat Pack, the second part of the book focuses on how DVD frames particular Splat Pack films. There’s a chapter on Eli Roth’s Hostel films and how Roth utilizes DVD extra features to self-fashion an image of himself as a filmmaker. There’s another chapter that talks about Rob Zombie’s first two films – House of 1000 Corpses and The Devil’s Rejects – and how DVDs of these films attempt to shape audiences’ experiences of them in a certain way. Another chapter looks at the Saw series and how these films’ appearance on DVD recalls cinema’s origins – what Tom Gunning has famously termed ‘the Cinema of Attractions’ – and its emphasis on spectacle and salesmanship and its lack of emphasis on plot, realism, and character development. The final chapter looks at Haute Tension (released in the US as High Tension) and The Descent, two Splat Pack films that were released abroad before Lionsgate released them in the US, and how their DVDs document the changes these films underwent when they were released in the US and foreground the reception contexts created by these changes.

**EUP: To what extent do you think the Film Industry is driven by the DVD market? Are highly violent horror films more affected by this than other genres?**

**MB:** Since 1987, home video has accounted for the lion’s share of film profits, so I think a consideration of home video – whether it be VHS, DVD, streaming video, or digital downloads – is immensely important to film industry studies. Many film scholars have noted how significant the home video market is to the way the film industry does business, and one of my goals was to contribute to this line of inquiry. That said, I do think the DVD market drove the film industry for a certain window of time – especially in the late 1990s/early 2000s when DVDs and DVD players became some of the fastest-selling consumer electronics products in history – but home video in general has had a tremendous influence on the film industry since the mid-1980s.

While I obviously feel that horror films on home video are a significant topic for study, I would not say that highly violent horror films are more affected by this format than any other genre. Oddly enough, when one looks at the history of home video, the two genres and/or modes of filmmaking that are on the cutting edge of home video are children’s films
and hardcore pornography. It’s funny – talk about two extremes! But it’s totally true: hardcore pornography was a top-selling genre when videotape emerged in the mid-1970s, and children’s movies led the way with DVD. Any parent will tell you that having something to put on television to occupy the kids’ time is essential! I don’t have kids; I have cats, and luckily, they’ll watch anything.

EUP: Do you think the splat pack directors have had their day or will there be a revival?

MB: That’s a tricky question because the market for genre films is changing so rapidly right now. In the US, the theatrical market for the types of films that the Splat Pack directors were doing from 2004-2007 – edgy, graphic, gory horror films – is almost non-existent today. As I mention in the book’s afterword, a different model for distributing low-budget, independent genre films has emerged: the simultaneous Video On Demand (VOD) and limited theatrical release model practiced by distributors like Magnet and IFC Midnight (the genre arms of Magnolia Pictures and IFC, respectively). It is much more profitable now to give edgy genre movies like the V/H/S films or the Human Centipede films a very limited theatrical release and a simultaneous release on VOD. The limited theatrical release helps these films dodge of the stigma of being a “direct-to-video” movie and helps distributors avoid the costs that add up quickly as they struggle to get their movies onto a number of screens. The VOD release enables many younger viewers to actually see the movie, as going to the movies is basically antithetical to how most younger viewers consume media today. It’s much easier for them to just download or stream the movies.

So, I suppose I’m trying to say that the Splat Pack directors, as they are discussed in the book, have “had their day,” in that the release model practiced by Lionsgate – the theatrical release and then the ballyhooed ‘unrated’ DVD that follows a few months later – is fast becoming outdated. I think we will see Splat Pack directors follow the VOD model, as it is just more profitable, it quickly gets the word out about their films, and it gets their films in front of more eyeballs, period. I think Rob Zombie’s movies could flourish in the VOD market (and, in my opinion, he has grown into a great filmmaker, and his movies just keep getting better and more ambitious with each one he makes). It seems the only Splat Pack director that has flourished in the theatrical market nowadays is James Wan, who has shifted to more ‘PG-13’ supernatural movies with little to no gore. He’s done quite well, and he seems much more comfortable shooting more suggestive, Gothic horror than gore. I believe Eli Roth is committed to the theatrical release model for the films he directs, but I’m not certain how it’s going to work out for him. For instance, his film The Green Inferno premiered at the Toronto Film Festival almost a year ago, but the theatrical release keeps running into delays and other problems. So, a year later, there is still no theatrical release scheduled for the film. I believe that if Roth and the film’s distributors had taken a different tack and gave The Green Inferno (which is reportedly quite violent and gory) a VOD release
shortly after its premiere while people were still buzzing about it, the film could have been quite successful and people would be talking about it like they did when the first Human Centipede came out.

One final note: I should add that the ‘unrated’ DVD was a harbinger for how, over the past few years, gore has migrated to television. Cable programs like The Walking Dead, American Horror Story, and The Strain and some network programs like Hannibal are just as gory as Splat Pack movies! Nowadays, a theatrically released zombie film like World War Z is relatively bloodless while TV’s The Walking Dead features almost as much gore as some of the video nasties from the days of yore.

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