



Buying the Splat Pack

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review of

Bernard, M. (2014) *Selling the Splat Pack: The DVD revolution and the American horror film*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh. (HB/PB, pp 224, £70.00/£19.99, ISBN 978-0748685493)

The final girl... alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay with the killer long enough to be rescued... or to kill him herself. (Clover, 1992: 35)

Horror has changed; the oft-repeated generic convention and plot line of the final girl described by Clover (1992) has been supplanted by a range of newer tropes and situations where nobody (final girl or otherwise) is safe. This change has also resulted in a shift in audiences' perspectives: before we would identify with the final girl at the conclusion of the film and the narrative, but now we identify with the killer and monsters of horror. This shift has introduced new terrors for audiences to explore, and has also brought with it an opportunity to study horror from a different perspective.

Horror, traditionally, has been studied from various perspectives, including expanded philosophical treatise (Carroll, 1990), psychoanalytical evaluations (Clover, 1992), and examination rooted in generic convention and stylistic devices (Cherry, 2009). Bernard, however, positions his analysis against these wider appraisals of horror and instead takes an explicit political economy approach that centres on the business of horror and engages in notions of the horror film as a commodity; a reading which is contrary to the philosophical and

cultural interpretations of horror, and a reading that suggests a tension of sorts between readings of horror-as-art and horror-as-product.

Introducing the Splat Pack

In a post-millennial context, especially in the UK, such debates and tensions over horror as art or as commodity have come to the fore in mainstream media outlets with the release of horror films that actively court controversy. Films such as *Hostel*, *A Serbian Film*, and *Grotesque* have drawn ire from film reviewers and writers over what is seen as excessive violent (and often sexually violent) imagery, leading to renewed calls for a more censorious BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) that would, therefore, take an active approach to censorship and moral guardianship¹ (Jones, 2013). Within the US, a similar tension is present, and David Edelstein (2006), reviewer for the *New York Magazine*, referred to *Hostel* and similar films as torture porn, claiming that the aesthetics of these films represented a porning of horror that glorifies victimhood and violence; exemplifying this for Edelstein was the blood spurts of victims which were filmed and portrayed on screen as if the blood spurts were part of a climaxing 'money shot' from a porn scene. It was not just the films that attracted media attention as the directors of such films were heralded by some as belonging to the Splat Pack – a name evoking the 'swagger' of the 1950s rat pack, and the vitality of the 1980s brat pack (16). This cool group of directors were also viewed, in the mid-late 2000s, as a group of political and socially relevant filmmakers whose collected works were stressed by media publications as being complicated pieces of profound social or political commentary. *Hostel*, for example, is claimed by its director to be 'social commentary masquerading as exploitation' (5) and hence the aesthetics of violence contained in the film harbour a deeper meaning worth contemplating rather than dismissing off-hand. Consequently, Bernard appreciates the ironic position of the US media surrounding its treatment of the Splat Pack: in one sense, they, and their output, is to be ignored on the basis that it is fetishistic and nihilistic violence, whilst a different section of the US media clamour praise upon the Splat Pack and ascertain worthwhile political allegories from what appears to be, at least on the surface, sadistic gore.

It is this paradox that Bernard interrogates, and does so in two parts. The first part of analysis situates horror as a product and Bernard conducts an industry analysis of the production of horror. The second part of the analysis locates how

1 Although beyond the scope of this review, interested readers can read more about the UK context in Jones (2013) dedicated study of the UK reception to extreme films and torture porn.

specific films of the Splat Pack have been received and interpreted, with an overarching focus on how the horror of the Splat Pack has thus been consumed.

Producing horror as commodity

Fundamental to Bernard's analysis is the treatment of the horror film as a commodity, which is advanced in two ways. First, in chapters 1 and 2, the horror film is a product imbued with hyped marketing emerging from a specific industrial and social context, which entails the Splat Pack films to be read, marketed and sold by film studios and producers as social and political commentary. Equally, the efforts of the marketers have also mythologised the Splat Pack as an oppositional group of radical independent directors whose political subversion has located them outside of the mainstream. Films would also be heavily and routinely cut or castigated for their violence and gore, with the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) often acting as antagonists to their art which, reciprocally, ensured an immediate audience for their films, particularly as horror fans may be drawn to the challenging and visceral nature of the films. Crucially, this was also a position invoked by the Splat Pack in media interviews and press releases, as group members such as Rob Zombie and Eli Roth revelled in their ability to unsettle and provoke audiences; for example Zombie professes: 'My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don't want it to be fun' (21). Alongside the marketing campaigns, such sound bites allowed the Splat Pack to make comparisons to vaunted genre directors of the past, and thus to carve out identities as 'auteurs', wherein their attitude, subversion and independence becomes almost as important as the film itself.

Another facet of Bernard's political economy is presented in chapters 3 and 4, wherein he charts the rise of home viewing and DVD, a format which has enabled the horror film to find new and significant viewership (and film studios have found contributions to revenues and profit margins). Here the horror film becomes infused with extra-textual DVD features which explore how the film was made, and sub-textual analyses are also found on the DVD commentary tracks where the Splat Pack are able to (re)assert their preferred interpretation of their films, strengthening notions that their films are highly complex pieces of social or political commentary, rather than the common mainstream treatment of horror film which views it as exploitation or trash. Being packed with such extra features and marketed as a 'special edition', this ensures that the film is viewed, or at least can be seen, as a collectable commodity.

Additionally, the specific context of the US film industry is also important in ensuring that the films have a prolonged life as commodities on DVD, as the

cinematic version of the films can often be cut or censored, but the DVD releases would have such footage restored and released as ‘uncut’ or ‘director’s cut’ versions, enhancing them for horror fans and again containing an element of collectability. Such practices, for Bernard, are not unique to the films of the Splat Pack as they have become a common practice for mainstream film studios as they seek to supplement their profit margins and revenue streams with additional, special and uncut releases of horror films. This ‘revolution’ in the DVD market is a more important narrative for Bernard in establishing the growth of horror film production than the aura of the Splat Pack and the apparent political content of their films.

Consuming the Splat Pack

Analysis of the Splat Pack then shifts in part two of the book, with treatise on specific films, where Bernard unpicks the sub-and intra-textual meanings of the Splat Pack’s work. Chapter 5 is devoted to Eli Roth’s *Hostel* series, and Chapter 6 details Rob Zombie’s efforts. Chapter 7 re-treads similar ground to chapter 5 in its examination of the *Saw* series, and chapter 8 shifts attention towards international films, namely *Haute Tension* (from France) and *The Descent* (from the UK), in order to shed critical light on the European horror context.

In chapters 5-7, Bernard’s account of the commodity is such that the medium of DVD enabled the Splat Pack to shift more prominently into the mainstream due to the financial success of the DVD versions of their respective films. Bernard also examines the espoused political and social meanings attributed to the films in their respective chapters, finding that the deluge of extra features produces a jarring effect whereby the claimed wider meanings and positive interpretations of the films – as valued social or political commentary – are hacked away by the content of these features and, indeed, the actions and words of the Splat Pack on DVD audio commentaries. Rob Zombie, for instance, is revealed in chapter 6 to revel in the on-screen violence during his audio commentary session for *The Devil’s Rejects*, which underscores the class-based meaning and violence that forms the heart of the plot. The film is based around class violence where characters belonging to the middle class are stripped of power and tortured by lower class ‘white trash’ representing a ‘subversive’ (132) striking out by the underclass. However the DVD special features celebrate hyperviolent and hypermasculine portrayals of ‘white trash’ and reveal a deeper subtextual and ideological contradiction: on the one hand, the film is lauded by critics and commentators for being a progressive examination of class politics. Yet, on the other hand, any element of a class-based analysis of society is stripped away as the DVD, being designed as a collectable, and even bourgeois commodity, is

meant appeal to the same middle class² being chastised on-screen, negating any political meaning to the violence perpetrated against characters that the middle class DVD viewer would readily identify with. Hence consuming the extra features on the horror DVD may devalue any political meaning, and we are left only to appreciate the film as a commodity – any political or social commentary contained within the actual film become eroded by the contradictory meanings and imagery that are assembled in the DVD special features.

However, in chapter 8, the case of *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* is markedly different. Whilst DVD had enabled the Splat Pack to shift from the margins to the mainstream of US cinema, *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* retain a marginal element of opposition to mainstream audiences, owing to both the European and US reception of both films. In the US, Bernard recounts the critical and fan reception of both films and in doing so invokes the cultural politics of fandom: ‘while the *Saw* films are profitable – horror fans may go to see them even though they know the films are ‘laughable’ and ‘dumb’ – they are not valued by real horror aficionados’ (167). Here the mainstream acceptance of the Splat Pack, notably the *Saw* franchise, ensures that a certain element of genre fans will resist viewing, and instead satiate their appetite with more obscure offerings. *Haute Tension* was released, cinematically, as a hybrid subtitled/dubbed film and performed poorly at the box office, but the DVD release featured additional scenes and restored gore effects, as well as other special features designed to appeal to the real horror fan. The release on DVD for both films, given the level of ‘material scars’ from studio tampering, enabled ‘true’ fans and ‘cine-literate’ fans to appreciate the films on different levels, which is not possible with the mainstream-approved Splat Pack, as the metatextuality of the films is simply not present in *Hostel*, *Saw* or *Zombie’s Halloween* remake.

Splat Pack as commodity

For horror scholarship, the book makes an important contribution, in that Bernard rejects the views of wider philosophical, psychoanalytical and cultural interpretations of horror, and chooses to focus on horror as commodity and thus broadens understanding of contemporary extreme cinema. In the book's introduction, Bernard makes the claim that a cinematic (or DVD) experience with horror is popularly linked, by media commentators and those inside the film

2 In this chapter, Bernard (132-4) also notes that film studios attempted to market DVD as a middle class consumer commodity designed to cash-in on the home cinema revolution – target consumers for DVD were the same consumers with high disposable income that also purchase high-end consumer goods, such as plasma screen televisions.

industry, to political outcomes, and the horror film can become successful in posing some form of political challenge against – quite often – Western hegemony and demonstrates the horror of social oppression and injustice. It is somehow bizarre to assert that by squirming through a viewing of *Hostel* one is learning about the injustices of torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which is asserted in the assemblage of media that accompanied the film's release (cinematically and on DVD). In rejecting this view, Bernard's analysis goes beyond traditional perspectives of horror scholarship, and instead focuses on the modes of horror production, consequently making a strong contribution that resists coding affect as participation in a political act. Instead, the affective experience is negotiated by confronting various strategic messages designed to sell a film, a DVD, and the auteurship of the Splat Pack.

However, despite this, what I do find problematic in Bernard's analysis, especially in chapter 8, is evocation of genre cultural politics presented in the dialectic between 'true' aficionados of horror and general fans or mainstream consumers, because this denies the pleasure of horror that may transcend (sub-)cultural positions (cf. Hills, 2005). I also object to this divide because 'true' fans can be as susceptible to marketing and studio schemes as non-true fans or mainstream consumers – anecdotally, I consider myself a 'true' horror fan but I also own four different versions of the film *Re-Animator* (a UK cut version on VHS, a US uncut DVD version, a UK uncut DVD special edition version, and a UK special anniversary Blu Ray version) – which denies the power of marketing rhetoric that Bernard has asserted in the preceding chapters. It also suggests that true fans possess a resistance that others do not, and thus privileges the position of the true fan in this analysis. To be sure, consumption can transcend cultural positions, in that 'true' or sub-cultural fans may be even more susceptible to invest in the marketing schemes that advertise unique or collectible experiences of horror.

For those interested in the politics of organisation and organising, the book is also of note in that it develops an understanding of the production and consumption of extreme cinema, and hence locates a concern for contemporary marketing, accounting and business scholarship. Given the recent controversies and ostensive moral panics, particularly in the UK, regarding the release of post-millennial extreme cinema and extreme horror, the book invites a reflection on how controversy can be used as a marketing strategy, as well as how controversy can act as a means of authenticating the claims of political or cultural opposition (cf. Thornton, 1995). That Bernard postulates that these films are made for profit also suggests that there is scope for further interrogation on how horror can be seen as both art and commerce, rather than dismissed outright as an immoral commodity. Such a position can also be taken to disrupt the populist claims of

moral guardianship that horror, and extreme cinema – as commodity and art – is symptomatic of a wider social decay, especially when the aesthetics, marketing strategies and modes of production utilised by the Splat Pack have been active in creating such a view.

In this sense, the text can also provide a lucid framework to understand how business decisions can shape cultural and social interactions – in that business decisions in the horror industry can determine what is consumed, and how marketing acts as an active force in determining or shaping attitudes towards horror, and extreme cinema. Hence the frenzy of moral panic and even the attachment of socio-political relevance is as much a function of marketing communications and studio interactions as the opinions and experiences of critics, censors, fans and academics. To be sure, pre- (Barker et al., 2001) and post-theatrical (Tompkins, 2014) marketing discourses have embraced controversy and encoded this as part of the film, or cinematic, experience for audiences – that audiences are not only watching an extreme film, but they are consuming political critique, and in some cases transgression. Equally the converse applies: business and marketing materials can prefigure reception across contexts and can be active in stimulating moral panic surrounding consumption of a particular commodity.

Aside from the potential for marketing scholars, within this position there is also an appeal to organisation studies scholars, as discursive forms of power also become a relevant area of study within such moves by studios and their marketers to court controversy and use this as a base to shape consumption. Additionally, the contradictory meanings of the films explored by Bernard may also interest organisation studies researchers, as there are certain industrial discourses and mechanisms of power that seek to assert and normalise an authoritative meaning of the Splat Pack and their respective films, despite the presence of alternative and contradictory interpretations.

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