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What's Your Fetish?: The Tortured
Economics of Horror Simulacra in *The Cabin in the
Woods*

"Before the theological caprices of commodities, the consumers become temple slaves. Those who sacrifice themselves can do so here, and here they are fully betrayed" (Adorno 39).

"Fetish. 2. Any object, idea, etc., eliciting unquestioning devotion" ("Fetish" 493).

"You can't disbelieve or the movie falls apart"—Joss Whedon (Goddard and Whedon).

[1] *The Cabin in The Woods* (TCitW) was launched in 2011 on a tidal wave of hype by its distributor, Lionsgate, whose campaign included give-away packages that featured custom movie-themed bongs (Uncle Creepy). Its stature as a product of the teamwork of Joss Whedon (co-writer, producer) and Drew Goddard (co-writer, director) assured it a ready-made audience of dedicated fans who, when Whedon described the project as their unique version of a horror film, "a little more twisted, and maybe a little funnier" (Clevver Movies), would know what he was talking about through familiarity with the pair's previous film and television work in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) and beyond. TCitW was Goddard's directorial debut, and he has often referred to Whedon as an influence and mentor. The pair described their intimate collaboration on the film as "hive mind" and "ids colliding" ("We are Not").

[2] Although the film was written in just three days, it was conceived as a grandly ambitious project. Goddard affirmed that "Whedon [and I] just love horror movies, so we sort of set out to write the ultimate horror movie. . . . We just wanted to make something different, make something that wasn't your same old movie" (Phipps). He adds, "It wasn't like we set out to deconstruct the horror movie" ("Interview: Drew Goddard"). Still, the filmmakers' discourse in interviews and other venues characterizes the film as simultaneously a genuine horror film,

a film that transcends the horror genre, and a critical intervention in contemporary horror: what Whedon termed a “loving hate letter” (Utichi). For Goddard, the movie had to do with morality and social relations, particularly inter-generational dynamics, and violence: “the transition to adulthood, that’s what the soul of the movie is about, in my mind. Why do we feel the need to destroy our own youth?” (Fischer). When asked whether he felt the horror genre was in a “healthy place” right now, Goddard gave a measured response: “I do. I think it’s like any other genre. There are good movies, and there are bad ones out there. Sometimes the bad ones end up getting more press. . . . So I don’t know that the genre’s in a bad place, but I think sometimes the stuff that has financial success ends up being a little lowest-common-denominator” (Phipps).

[3] Compared to Goddard, Whedon seems a more vocal participant in what Steffen Hantke calls the “rhetoric of crisis” that has surrounded American horror films since the mid-late 1990s. Proponents of this rhetoric assert that the contemporary genre appears to have stalled in self-reflexivity and parody, formulaic repetition, and troubling extremes in the portrayals of violence and victim suffering. However, as Hantke notes, American horror cinema remains popular and profitable: “These films never fail to find an audience, but most of them just aren’t any good—or so popular opinion has it” (viii). Whedon’s view of the genre’s apparent slump is both personal and expansive:

The things I don’t like are kids acting like idiots, the devolution of the horror movie into torture porn and into a long series of sadistic comeuppances . . . I did feel like I was seeing a lot of remakes of the old ‘70s movies and a lot of torture porn movies that were taking the rituals that I had loved as a horror viewer and kind of denigrating them, kind of making them less interesting and less human. (“WonderCon”)

[4] Many journalists and media critics accepted TCitW in the terms its makers hoped: as a progressive, probing film that asks deep questions about the nature of society, the meanings of horror cinema, identity and free will. It is “bold stuff” (Ebert), reaching “the story underneath the story, and the reason behind the clichés” (Whitty).

[5] Yet TCitW fails as both effective horror, and as trenchant critique. TCitW is a sort of spectacular “gimmick film” (Leeder) that does not actually fly skeletons or shoot aromas into the theater, but incorporates the representation of such stunts into its diegesis and characters’ experiences. The audience sees images of itself being looked back at and manipulated in ways intended to be

laughed off in the latest, irony-heavy embodiment of the “nonseparation between narrative and trickery” that William Castle explored in the late 1950s (Leeder 779). Its conception as a puzzle for viewers to solve, embodied in the cabin-as-Rubik’s-cube promotional art (the monsters shrunken to the stature of Cracker Jacks prizes), is another form of gimmickry that recalls how *The Simpsons* presented an intertextual pop-culture trivia game for structured consumer decoding (Phillips 170-1). *TCitW* demonstrates the legacy of *Psycho*’s “reinstitution of a postmodern cinema of attractions,” and the loyal avoidance of spoilers among early fan-reviewers proves Hitchcock’s lesson that “greater spectatorial discipline could pay off in the distracted attractions of a postmodern cinema” (Williams 367).

[6] *TCitW* promises liberating hipness, but its heart is corporate: a guided romp through Disneyland’s haunted house celebrating “the existing order of things in the guise of escape from it. . . . For millions of visitors, Disneyland is just like the world, only better” (Sorkin 208, 216). For many fans, *TCitW* is just like horror, only better. This essay will argue that it is worse. Though *TCitW* emerged in an era marked by polarizing anxieties over the nation’s security and economic wellbeing, the film is concerned with genre anxiety, not the human condition, and its politics are business as usual. I begin with a general analysis of problems of apocalypse, nostalgia, and genre in the film, then examine how it conservatively exploits period security fears to boost its credibility as horror. Finally I address consumerism to explore how torture porn, ostensibly absent from the hate letter—one reviewer asks, “where’s the critique?” (Pinkerton)—is evoked as implicitly distasteful within the film’s redeployed *BtVS*-laden value systems, while giving the audience marching orders to carry out a grassroots market-based genre renewal. It is hardly coincidental that the “zombie redneck torture family” is rendered doubly monstrous by a strategic departure from zombie identity—the Buckners do not consume anything, so they really can’t be like us.

[7] In his *Esquire* review, Pinkerton suggests *TCitW* expresses less critique than nostalgia—for the horror cinema of the late 1960s-early 1980s, but also for the brooding fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. Goddard often cites Lovecraft as an influence on the film, but there are too many one-liners for Lovecraftian horror to be achieved here (Phipps). *TCitW* is a rehashing of the whole genre, but particularly the early slasher whose pioneering films it hopes to praise while making parody of the remakes. In that sense it is not a “nostalgia film” that longs

for the past, reconstructing “dead or dismantled forms, genres that are now returned after a period of absence or destruction” (Dika 11). It is the persistence of generic tropes the film enacts and questions, but in a thoroughly contemporary way. To insert the film into history its makers annihilate the historical and social processes that converge to render particular films “classics” of the genre, with Whedon asserting TCitW is an instant “classic” because of the skins it wears: “We had to go down in the cellar. If you don’t go down in the cellar, how can you call yourself a classic horror film?” (Goddard and Whedon).

[8] Horror cinema’s past is objectified in order to be reshuffled, re-dealt. Impressionistic recollections flash by—the menacing gas-station attendant (Texas Chain Saw Massacre [1974]), torture chamber festooned with chains (Hellraiser [1987]), shuffling zombies (Night of the Living Dead [1968]), rustic cabin with an old book and a dreadful secret (Evil Dead [1981]). The stable of monsters below seems to exist mainly to trigger memories of other films (most cartoonishly the merman and the Creature from the Black Lagoon [1954]), whose familiarity and historical testimony provide TCitW with a vampiric gloss of vitality. “It’s not a movie about references,” Goddard asserts (Goddard and Whedon), which seems accurate: it is fully composed of them and without them it would not exist. The visual “skins,” “surfaces,” and “forms” (Holmes 81) of all the other movies it entrains are unmoored and commingled as if in dreamscape. Yet even as TCitW posits the existence of originals distinct from copies—which constitute, in another discursive context, what Hantke calls the “canon” of consensus-classic American horror, “spaces of safety” in the current genre crisis (xix)—these originals are beyond the filmmakers’ grasp, and the copies have affected their (re)deployment of the originals. While TCitW relies on the canon for its own logic and legitimacy, its own authenticity, there is too much slippage within its nested diegesis to maintain the distinction between original and copy. The referents vanish into their own reflections. TCitW asserts the authenticity of the canon while participating in the destruction of its aura: the “tremendous shattering of tradition” (Benjamin 221) which TCitW’s own conclusion hopes will lead to the renewal, if not of mankind, at least of the genre.

[9] The template it works from is Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996): “depending on who you asked, either the best or worst thing to happen to American horror film” (Hantke viii) because its self-aware irony and centripetal genre recycling became the new paradigm. David Johnston distinguishes *Scream* from similar horror films that lacked its “reverence” for the genre:

Scream challenges its viewers to interrogate the slasher genre, their responses to such films, and the roles such films play in their lives. As such, it can claim the status of an autonomous work of cinematic art. Although *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is kitsch to the extent that it reinforces the established conventions of the slasher genre and appeals to mass taste, the camp sensibility can rescue it as viewers make fun out of the slasher film in question. In *Scary Movie*, the filmmakers merely make fun of the other two films. It does not challenge the viewers; it only requires us to join the fun and laugh at the jokes. (241)

[10] Unlike *Scream*, which calls attention to itself as embedded in genre while raising larger questions about relations between mass media and reality (including the meanings of its own audience's familiarity with horror), *TCitW* is helplessly inseparable from its hodgepodge of genre formula, lacking even the grubby editorial attentions performed in a work "derivative" of a particular original. It spins in a loop, asserting the auratic distance of the canon while yearning to approximate it. It has no independent existence, none of its own presence: like an imprisoned ghost, unable to embody the canonical reverence it pledges into a substantial contribution. It circumstantially evokes "resonance" with current events, in particular post-9/11 fears, but does not "violate" audience expectations to create a sense of wonder and unease, as effective horror can (Phillips 6-7). It exists not to "be" horror but to resemble it, rendering itself as art less viable. Its characters are not resurgently humanized but faint double abstractions.

[11] But it is nostalgic, its nostalgia aimed at recycling *BtVS* in atmosphere and theme. Whedon has claimed his original concept for *BtVS* was "High school as a horror movie" (Said). To whatever degree horror was part of that show's evolving mix of fantasy, teen melodrama, and light erotica, by the fourth season its characters had graduated high school and moved on to college (an obvious concession to the accruing physical factor of the actors' ages, since Gellar was already only a month shy of 20 years old when she debuted as 16-year old Buffy in March 1997). With its focus on college-age young adults *TCitW* is not a sequel of the series, not a spinoff, but culminates a kind of palimpsest of ideas and cultural attitudes engineered to appease fans who miss the show while serving as a self-reflexive placeholder extending the Whedon/Goddard empires into new properties. The overwritten palimpsest model is embodied in the very structure of the cabin that overlays the puppeteers' headquarters and monster pens, an idea

which itself seems directly lifted from the Buffy episode "The Initiative" (2.7) in which vampires and demons were housed in laboratory cells beneath a frat house. That is, BtVS provides its own "space of safety" for this new work to fit within.

[12] Apocalypse and sacrifice are key linkages. In an essay published in 1996, just before BtVS's debut, Christopher Sharrett traced in the "new conservatism" of recent horror-science fiction such as *Alien* (1979), *Terminator* (1984), and *Predator* (1987) a strong element of apocalypse: "a dimension endemically ahistorical and reactionary that has been part and parcel of American cultural expression since the Puritans, an ideology preferring total annihilation (including self-annihilation) over radical change or even reform" (269). This predicts the finale of TCitW when the united teen buddies, ever Whedon's ideal(ized) protagonists, enact the ultimate resistance to corrupt adult society by allowing its unfair schemes to fail and the world to be destroyed. Continuity is thick with BtVS, whose engagement with the effects and affects of apocalypse have often been the subject of scholarship; clearly apocalypse forms an aesthetic to which Whedon frequently returns, even as stylistic gestures distinct from narrative. The conclusion of TCitW proffers a dose of the cataclysmic familiar (including the pounding rock music score that, as in BtVS, announces histrionically that something significant has just happened) while restaging the show's obsession with how young, pretty people confront the antagonisms of the aged: ancient ones, vampires, the school principal, Mom (Clark and Miller). Whedon and Goddard re-elaborate the late 1970s slasher genre's spite towards parents and families—whose "impotence and failure [compose] an absence that necessitates and structures the violence of the narratives" (Sobchack 150)—while deliberately inverting the previous decade's horror trope of the monstrous, demon child in *The Omen* (1976), *The Exorcist* (1973), and other films (Carroll 209). Youth is paradigmatically virtuous.

[13] Perhaps TCitW's ending provides another instance of the "pleasures of talking back to power" that gratified Buffy the Vampire Slayer fans (Kociemba 7), but here it is more pointless than enabling. Nothing indicates that the gods will not re-impose their sacrificial demands on whatever life-form they encounter next, ad infinitum. This conclusion hardly provides narrative closure, but neither does it destabilize what the viewer conceives he or she "saw" to be true (as in *Mulholland Drive* [2001]) or traumatically uproot systems of meaning altogether (as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974]). Rather, it hints woefully at the prospect of sequels, or a simple return to zero in a future film. After all, did Buffy

not sacrifice herself to save the world as an apocalyptic ritual deadline approached in the BtVS season-five finale "The Gift" (5.22), only to be resurrected for a new season? A distinction should be drawn between apocalypse as the destruction of meaning and subjectivity itself, versus the contained trope of overturning the status quo—a cathartic inversion of the norm that carnivalizes it, perhaps ultimately reconstituting it stronger than before (Carroll 201). TCitW engages in carnivalesque apocalypse as plot device, but it does not operate in the registers of true chaos like Tobe Hooper's original *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, whose destabilizing impulse ruptured the surface of its own images to directly assault the viewer's subjectivity (Dika 75). As a ritual of rebellion, carnival turns the world upside down, symbolically destroying normality, making it appear opposite from its daily, recognizable, "true" nature—a more celebratory form of the factitiousness that lurks etymologically within fetishism. The principal debate about carnival is whether it can offer not merely topical social critique but meaningful utopian glimpses into alternate futures, new potentialities, and pathways. TCitW's apocalyptic ending is a half-baked rebellious gesture of antiestablishment catharsis, proposing no provocative alternatives to (genre or social) reality but merely a winking-and-nodding temporary departure from it.

[14] Whedon states of TCitW "I think of it being connected to Buffy because they're both examinations of the same question: why do these bad things keep happening to blonde girls" ("We are Not"). This is odd in that neither Dana nor Jules appears naturally blonde, so if no girls are blonde, all are; but if the goal is to explore the way blondes are socially constructed into victims (or contrarily monsters, such as in the book and original 1931 film *Frankenstein*), neither is this met. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer's survey of world religious culture, we see that young people have often been sacrificed as representatives of harvest gods, to symbolically "kill" the gods and thus protect them from the decadence of old age (Frazer 457). Such youths were conceived as divine embodiments themselves, not as human sacrifices per se. If young people are being sacrificed in the U.S. and elsewhere today, as TCitW posits, the sacrifice would likely not be to agricultural deities (*Children of the Corn* [1984] notwithstanding). Then to what? Adult jealousy and fear are plausible but insufficient factors, since TCitW's gods are the ones making the demands. Filmed in 2009, TCitW emerged in a period fraught with the legacy of 9/11, and economic instability following the 2007-8 financial meltdowns. It remains a moment of intense political polarization, in which sacrifice is widely evoked in public debate. Does TCitW ask with many Americans whether people must sacrifice privacy to national security? As gun-

control proponents declare, are regular bloody sacrifices an inevitable necessity to maintain the Second Amendment of the Constitution? From the opposite ideological extreme, is the sacrifice of a permanent underclass necessary to shore up a liberal power base? Is stop-and-frisk a legitimate crime-prevention tool, or the ritualized sacrifice of the rights of a determined sector of the American demographic? And so forth. Clearly bad things are afflicting people other than blonde girls alone.

[15] Yet one struggles to square that circle back to progressive interpretations of *TCitW*, in part because its ritual refers explicitly to horror-genre parameters, while the film's irony and action-comedy dimensions prevent it from marshalling anything like the atmospheric power of racial xenophobia and generational turmoil in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Indeed the Whedon trope of victimized blonde girls (or girls that have to be rendered blonde) is a too-blunt analytical instrument to contend with the genre's diverse history. And *TCitW*'s leisure-class, physically attractive youths are not convincing as metaphorical proxies for contemporary society's actual young victims, whether of a racialized war on drugs, the student debt crisis, et cetera; the list of institutionalized tragedies is lengthy.

[16] Tom Gunning suggests that "The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality . . . its energy moves outward toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative" (qtd. in Lowenstein 44). The makers of *TCitW* want to humanize their teens out of being formulaic victims, but Goddard's seeming lack of interest in guiding his actors to offer nuanced performances keeps them two-dimensional. Whedon and Goddard's *TCitW* DVD commentary admits that the characters' "transitions" into stereotypes were too rushed and too early—e.g., Jules's suddenly blonde hair—for it to be clear that they were supposed to be gradually changing under external influence (Goddard and Whedon). Similarly, Kurt is supposed to be getting transformed into an athlete, yet Holder the scholar catches his football pass with nonchalance (and is shown to have a sculpted physique), further blurring the distinctions. But the weakness is also in conviction. *TCitW* strains between social allegory and genre metatext because of its own ambivalence over portraying its pretty heroes as socially legible victims, abject, the un-ideal. It wants to demonstrate for critique the systems (symbolic and otherwise) that oppress and manipulate its teen heroes, but cannot bring

itself to depict their suffering outside of quick, garish death throes. It also resists showing its characters as succumbing to the manipulated stereotypes—except, to a degree, in the case of Jules, who becomes the blonde “whore.” The filmmakers’ acknowledgement of *Scream* is explicit in Marty’s examination of a roll of film in the cellar, which presages his comprehension of the “plot,” and soon the film veers into a nightmarish Stanislavski session with the kids standing up to the authoritarian Director to be who they really are. The film thus insinuates a topicality and relevance to genuinely disturbing issues of subjectivity and power in lived experience, but eases the tension by narrowing its horizons back to horror formula.

[17] In the case of Jules, the viewer who takes pleasure in her lasciviously filmed dance will be punished for watching when she grotesquely kisses a taxidermically-preserved wolf’s head. The illicitness of watching and enjoying violence, earlier signaled by Holder’s grim reaction to the painting featuring a hidden witness to the slaughter in a hunting scene, here reaches its conclusion: soon after Jules kisses the wolf’s head in front of the gang, in a state of distracted foreplay with Kurt she will lose her own head. It is returned to the cabin, symbolizing her own objectification as equivalent to the wolf’s. The film’s audience is supposed to be disturbed, especially in observing the mirror-image audience of puppeteers staring avidly into monitors. Goddard stated that one of *TCitW*’s central themes was “What is it about watching kids get killed that we as a people enjoy” (“We are Not”)? For the puppeteers it is a professional requirement. But if *TCitW* critiques the trope of killing blondes, it must be looked at in order to do so; and the scene’s critical message does not transcend the aestheticization of violence it relies on and indulges in. As Stephen Prince has noted, “The filmmaker who wishes to use graphic violence in order to instruct or make a statement against violence pursues an elusive goal” because of the nature of the cinematic medium and the inability to control audience response (32). Excess also has a numbing effect. Before the movie is through, Jules’s demise will be overwhelmed with gallons of gore, and the computer-generated visual wizardry cannot help but diminish the reality effect of her violent passing.

[18] Similarly, when the Psycho-like travelling camera catches Dana partially unclothed, she seems self-unaware, innocent of seductive power: boyish, a theoretical “final girl.” But if the filmmakers hope to critique the objectification of women in other films, the critical tone is again effaced by their own gratuitous presentation of Dana’s curves as an object of male desire. Later, when Holder

begins to strip after reversing the two-way mirror, he is aware that Dana could watch; she demurs, paralleling his act of giving up his gaze on her. Yet the audience is denied the option of nobility and rendered voyeurs when the opening displays Dana half-naked, soon to be embarrassed by Kurt. If Dana's refusal to be a conventional final girl is so consequential it destroys the planet, TCitW cannot forget that Dana is cute—and as with Buffy, connects physical beauty to heroism. For a film ostensibly informed by Whedon's flavor of feminism—he has proclaimed "Everybody knows there is a little girl inside of Joss" (Said)—its unclothing of Dana seems a retrenchment in traditional masculine scopic satisfaction, especially when scholars are reconsidering Carol Clover's prototype of the final girl along feminist lines. Kyle Christensen finds Laurie of *Halloween* (1978) to be "antifeminist," embodying the values of the oppressive nineteenth-century "cult of the new womanhood," while the under-appreciated Nancy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) presents a progressive contrast by rejecting both masculine violence and, significantly, the masculine gaze "when she turns around and [doesn't let Freddy Krueger] look her in the face" (29, 41). If Whedon has a penchant for pretty final girls, perhaps Dana the heroine is simply another facet of his blonde muse, in this case the worldly and sexual Jules, who needed to be dispatched according to the horror conventions he dislikes but, through Dana, gets to determine the movie's outcome.

[19] In its characterization of preparedness for a threat detached from human (especially American) control and responsibility, TCitW takes advantage of resonance with recent traumatic events. The film also makes global claims about how the status quo of peace through divine appeasement relies on the sacrificial victimization of youth from Japan to Argentina and Sweden, a nod to contemporary horror cinema's transnationalization—even though it is specifically American horror, not any "foreign" horror, that is presently seen as in crisis (Hantke). The plot thus acknowledges other countries' traditions but remains self-absorbed with the American milieu, a sort of genre isolationism patterned in the deliberately exotic, fulgent excess of the Whedon-directed Japanese Ring-esque sub-scene.

[20] If Guillermo del Toro's sci-fi whimsy *Pacific Rim* (2013) applies comic-book sensibilities to a conflict construed almost romantically as global, the world facing an evil alien Other (through evocation of films like *Godzilla* [1954], *War of the Worlds* [1953] and *Star Wars* [1977]), it still presents a coherent allegory of global warming—coastal cities wracked by perils as atmospheric change allows

alien dinosaurs to return to earth through a portal beneath the sea. In this case a multiracial, multicultural rebel force unites to save humanity from monsters it helped create. TCitW proclaims its crisis is universal, but each “culture” has to configure its own containment strategy for determining young scapegoat-victim types. This delivers clichés upholding cultural diversity (and, oddly, essentialism), while advancing a non-interventionist attitude to international relations: we see militarized national units engage the ritual separately, but not intervene beyond informing each other of success or failure. This indexes the prevailing American ennui after years of expensive, unpopular foreign wars and soul-searching over torture, although TCitW evades any specific reference to that painful context.

[21] In TCitW the black-clad troops of the “puppeteers” represent the polymorphous military-industrial complex, and they are figuratively equated to monsters when the Director says to Marty and Dana over the loudspeaker, “You’ve seen horrible things, an army of nightmare creatures,” while their image swarms over a monitor screen. But their efficacy is lampooned as one of them is overpowered by Marty (with help from a dismembered zombie), and the released beasts attack the puppeteers in revenge for their captivity, all to further assert the teens’ moral high ground over hapless adults. More problematically, the presence of the ancient ones, powerful gods ultimately in control—a situation known apparently only to the puppeteer-leaders and their troops—seems to imply that civil society itself is but a pawn of stronger actors who restrict information and formulate grave decisions in hidden-away places. The premise recalls *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), which we know was an influence on this film. In an essay on the horror genre, Bruce Kavin places *Dr. Strangelove* alongside *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *The Last Wave* (1977) as films in which the impulse is not to “exorcise the demon and save the community” (e.g. *Jaws* [1975]) but rather to ratify that the community is “rightfully destroyed” (474). But any horror potential is eviscerated by the comforting corollary to apocalypse at work here that events are completely out of average people’s hands, reform is impossible, politics is irrelevant, and society is not directly responsible for the ills it suffers and need not resolve them.

[22] The ignorant, false innocence this fosters is what bolder films will confront—not just in the earnest environmentalism of *Pacific Rim*, but regarding torture or capitalism itself. Mainstream society is shown as complicit in the systemic violence that supports its way of life. But claiming that distant all-powerful gods demand youthful sacrificial victims dislocates evil away from

tangible systems of power (ideological, bureaucratic, economic, even simian à la King Kong), relying instead on a supernatural vagueness that provided haunting community justification for murder in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" but here is ludicrous in its visuality.

[23] How might a more substantive horror film explore TCitW's premise of the persistence of ritual sacrifice in contemporary urban society? We have an example in *Craze* (Freddie Francis, 1974), which follows the mind and subjectivity of Neal Mottram as they collapse under the schizophrenic pressures of postmodernity and late capitalism. Fredric Jameson called these vast coalescing forces, facilitated through globalizing technological systems, the "hysterical sublime . . . a network of power and control difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (37). Beneath his failing London store full of imported knickknacks and native handicrafts, Mottram tries to psychologically flee this dimly-perceived reality by plunging into perverted forms of traditionalism. A secret cult leader, he sacrifices women to the wooden idol Chuku—an Ibo deity linked to myths of creation, but which Mottram worships as a provider of material wealth after a chance bloodletting seems to lead to the discovery of gold coins. In Noël Carroll's framework *Craze's* horror plot would be "fantastic-marvelous" (150), since the film takes no position on whether naturalistic or supernatural explanations best explain what Mottram perceives as Chuku's interventions; instead it pursues his dissolving psyche with dispassion.

[24] Director Freddie Francis (1917-2007) had a diverse background of which horror, including several 1960s films for Hammer Films and the 1972 *Tales from the Crypt*, was just one part. He would become better known as a cinematographer for films such as *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Dune* (1984), and *Glory* (1989). In *Craze*, he is to an extent paying homage to *Psycho* (1960), with its female-killing sociopath. One scene makes this clear: during the reading of Mottram's Aunt Louise's will, Francis uses Chuku to replicate (without much subtlety, but with macabre good humor) the famous glimpse of the skull on Norman Bates's face. Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is also implied through the consistent hint of homosexual tension underlying the shared conspiracy to murder and deception between the older, hypermasculine Mottram and his clingy and fretful shop assistant Ronnie; Mottram's seductions of women are not passionate but pragmatic, means to an end. But a spiraling detachment from history prevails in *Craze* at the level of the individual (Mottram and his assistant-lover flee personal pasts) and the national (embarrassed by their imperial past, no Brits

patronize his shop, which instead attracts a few post-colonials searching out their cultural detritus). In this British film the figure of Mottram explicitly embodies "the whole new de-centered global network of the third stage of capital itself. . . . the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson 37-8), in that he is portrayed by the American actor Jack Palance. But postmodernity's puzzling juxtapositions are built into the film itself, since the terse and swaggering Palance never attempts a British accent and it is not clear he is intended to be British at all. If his character is supposed to be an American living in London, that too is never explained; the film merely presents its tableau, another gesture suggesting the effacement of history. Familiar categories collapse and places interpenetrate through the hysterical sublime, and the world of *Craze* is thus located not narrowly in London, but the urban West in general.

[25] If *Craze* comes to link Mottram's antisocial, psychopathic worldview to his rejection of proper capitalist enterprise for ritual human sacrifice, it effects a Foucaultian inversion suggesting that much as he would like to flee the spiritual void of urban-industrial society for reconstructed traditionalism—the auratic gratification of ritual and faith—he is unable because he has internalized capitalist values too deeply. His fetish worship and ritual practice coexist and interpenetrate with his work as a businessman; hence his escape into the supernatural becomes a distorted reflection of capitalism itself, exposing capitalism's mystical nature and the obscure processes shaping exchange value. Mottram does not want money in order to express a class position, through domination of laborers or conspicuous consumption; he wants only to keep giving offerings to the god and receiving its blessing, an attitude of devotion. Pain and suffering—of others, but also of Mottram, as when he cuts his hand before finding the coins hidden in the desk—are a necessary element of the attainment of wealth, much as Marx suggested, but here in a different manner than the exploitation of proletariat by bourgeoisie. Death and bloodletting are the precondition to profits, but for Mottram those profits should be plowed humbly back into the business through a sort of work ethic, not be sensually enjoyed as Ronnie wishes. And when he sacrifices one woman by burning her in a furnace and throwing her body in the river, Mottram leaves her jewelry untouched, leading the police to observe of the killer, "he's not after loot." Unable to reconcile the conflicting positionalities of postmodern capitalist and devout believer, he pursues authenticity headlong while manipulating it in marketing pitches to customers. Periodically he expresses an objective, rationalizing worldview of culture, perceiving the economic equivalence of all the postcolonial artifact-commodities

in his shop (from East African statues to Indian brass sculptures to so-called “psychedelic shrunken heads”). He says, “It’s my experience that no matter how odd the object there’s a buyer somewhere for it.” A disregard for history, or a disconnect from it in a sort of perpetual present, is clear as Mottram enforces a rule of planned obsolescence with respect even to his own elderly ancestor, Aunt Louise. The tribal mask that he uses to make her faint dead away in fear, before impaling her with a wooden stake as an offering to Chuku, stages the Marxist concept of masking which implicates both the shared masquerading of commodities by buyer and seller, and the use of social character masks to hide destructive economic motives even from family members. The vision of modern society in *Craze* is atomized and desolate, a space of emptiness, alienation and lost meaning. The only exits are insanity or death, and Mottram takes both: after attacking Ronnie for his cowardice and lack of faith in wanting to stop the sacrifices, the raging Mottram battles policemen with an axe before throwing himself onto Chuku’s iron-bladed pitchfork (whispering “Your last sacrifice”) as he bleeds out. Lovecraft would perhaps approve.

[26] That is all too heavy for the faux fatalism of *TCitW*, which riffs on countercultural opposition to the Vietnam War as the puppeteers’ strategy is derailed by plucky youthful agitators saturated in weed-smoke. And the conclusion empties of historical trauma the “burn it down to save it” motif it co-opts. But while its filmmakers want to mock the teen-sacrifice formula, within their narrative its ritual performance actually does prevent global destruction. That is, the military-industrial complex’s threat assessment is correct: external danger exists. This resonance pivots *TCitW* back into the politics of post-9/11 surveillance and national security. It contrasts the creative, deceptive nature of edited film, when the puppeteers and the audience believe Marty was killed, with the perfect drone’s-eye view of the god destroying Earth (pure vision for its “audience” of machines). Marty’s off-camera uncertainty and the premise of the gods’ existence both play on horror’s tendency to make audiences crave corroboration and visual proof (Carroll 156-7), and both receive visual resolution here. But these scenes expose tension between Benjamin’s optimistic hopes for democratic liberation through technology, and the reality that “weapons and armour developed in unison throughout history, so visibility and invisibility begin to evolve together, producing invisible weapons that make things visible . . . technology finally exposes the whole world” (Virilio 71, 88) so we can better see and defend ourselves against it. *TCitW*’s visual storytelling ultimately justifies the vigilant security state because its principal directorial feint is the multiple gazes,

which are spliced into circular collages that we sense are inadequate and exclude information. Only the most distant gaze can capture full, unedited reality. If aura is a “phenomenon of distance,” while the masses crave human-spatial closeness (Benjamin 222-3), in the age of terror drones and satellites become new cult idols whose power derives from seeing while never being seen. TCitW evokes the desire for transcending limited subjectivities by hitchhiking onto post-9/11 anxiety without interrogating the reasons for or nature of that anxiety, leaving those issues cloaked.

[27] Kociemba has analyzed how characters in BtVS had “alternative versions” that evolved along with the series, and it might be noted that TCitW’s distinction between personality “types” imposed or willfully expressed among sympathetic youthful heroes channels the 1997 BtVS episode “Halloween” (2.6). While Sherryl Vint suggests that danger ensues when Buffy loses herself to stereotype in “Halloween,” TCitW reverses that: destruction looms if the teens reject their imposed roles. In “Halloween,” an evil spell causes Buffy, Willow, and Xander to turn into the figures represented by their costumes—an eighteenth-century maiden, a ghost, and a soldier. Buffy becomes a caricature of herself: delicate and helpless, she says she “wasn’t brought up to understand things” but to “look pretty” and wait for marriage. Before the spell, she had dressed Willow in vampish, revealing clothes, but Willow lost her nerve and enclosed herself within her purchased ghost costume. When the spell ensues it is the slinky, sexualized Willow that emerges butterfly-like from the costume—and it is the one that endures at the episode’s resolution, paralleling Buffy’s return back to her “true” fighting self. If the entirety of the episode signals that Willow is beginning to grow in confidence, this ritualistic event solidifies and fortifies it. Buffy’s resurgent strength is supposed to counterbalance Willow’s more complex trajectory into a subject using her agency to become a willing object of the masculine gaze.

[28] While numerous scholars have analyzed Whedon’s articulations of feminist agency in BtVS, how that feminism correlates with consumerism is relevant here as a partial blueprint for TCitW’s own mindset. When in late 1999 Buffy actress Sarah Michelle Gellar’s celebrity and beauty led to her becoming the face of an award-winning Maybelline initiative to capture the age 18-24 market, Maybelline’s slogan seemed to reference Buffy’s slayer destiny while suggesting to young women that they might buy their way to Gellar’s looks: “Maybe She’s Born With It. Maybe It’s Maybelline.” The “equality” that girls were taught to desire

and purchase was a cosmetic equality with the actress, glowing in the reflected brilliance of the gender equality the show intimated. That message of self-realization through consumption is as blatant as the soft-drink and other product placements throughout *BtVS*, which as Richard Albright notes (but without any critical comment), some scholars actually embrace as helping ground the overwhelmingly fantastic nature of the "Buffyverse" in "authenticity" (Albright, note 5). But it also forms the basis of Willow's transformation from innocuous introvert to bold, sensual adventuress with the purchased Halloween costume that, through the spell, gives birth to her new exciting self: a step she was too shy to take before, even with Buffy's support. It is true that the revealing vamp outfit was borrowed from Buffy, making it closer to Willow's personal history of relationships and experiences than the store-bought costume, and Willow's development over the episode might suggest that the evolution of personal identity entails the assumption and removal of different external layers until some formulation of outward appearance resonates with the character core. A progressive interpretation of this scenario is that the purchased costume represented an artificial layer that, once shed, helped advance Willow on her personal journey. However, that still means that the process of buying the costume was a necessary step towards self-realization, even if the commodity itself proved disposable; the act of purchasing is thus inscribed as a fundamental part of the articulation of self. Most stunningly, Willow did not knowingly buy the product for that reason; it magically exceeded her expectations. Just how corporate that thematic is should be obvious when contrasted with *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), wherein the costumes and "spell" (special television signals affecting microchips in store-bought masks) caused children's heads to disintegrate. Martin Harris shows how that film critiqued not only the American commercialization of Halloween but, more generally, the stultifying social effects of big business, and consumer culture's commingling of representation and reality; and further, how the movie conveys a subtle self-loathing as a sequel to a franchise its filmmakers felt should have been left for dead.

[29] By contrast *BtVS* "repeatedly affirm[ed] consumerism," with an unexplained affluence underwriting Buffy and the gang's victorious "message of prosperity" (Stenger 30, 28). *People* magazine, in their 1998 "50 Most Beautiful People" write-up of Gellar, was both adoring and clear-eyed in their bottom-line assessment of her as the "icon of the mall-cruising generation." Because "branding seeks to erase all boundaries between the sponsor and the sponsored" (Klein 51), Maybelline based its campaign on Gellar-Buffy's "performance

message" as "cool, a "doer" (New York American). BtVS benefitted from publicity convergence when \$100 million was dedicated to "such a pervasive media presence that younger women could not ignore Maybelline" (New York American); and by the time awareness of Gellar-Buffy's "Maybelline face" reached 46% among women 14 to 24 (a major segment of the series audience), BtVS itself had been not just recruited but reconfigured into the zone of marketing. Such boundary collapse calls into question the "primary" versus "secondary" text distinction Vint asserts regarding the series and Gellar's magazine spreads. The shows were not generated in distant, abstract laboratories but in historical time, in mass-mediated contexts steeped in fan culture—and were liable to numerous influences and hybrid readings, including influences exerted on the show itself by fans (Kociemba para. 23), some of whom were likely wearing Maybelline.

[30] Of course I address here the shared consumerist ambitions and strategies of the Buffy and Maybelline enterprises, not the diverse ways audiences received them or redeployed them discursively. The larger point is that there is no contradiction in Whedon's previous work between narrative substance and the normalizing of consumption. TCitW scrupulously avoids issues of class (making a laughingstock out of the rural Harbinger's pretensions), nor will it question BtVS's belief in market-based reinvention and liberation. But where BtVS contained an instructive function, with episodes teaching the audience "to take pleasure in the redemptive power of change" (Kociemba) accessible partly through consumer activity, TCitW directs that urge into a strategy advocating for genre transformation through audience rejection of torture porn—not as ham-fisted as the didactic "slayer activation" series finale that troubled some observers (Spicer), but a call to arms nonetheless.

[31] Yes, it is that obvious: The return-of-the-repressed god's hand is the (in)visible hand of the economy, wiping the slate clean. But its thrust is more Joseph Schumpeter than Karl Marx, more Steve Jobs than Adam Smith. Whedon and Goddard consolidated their careers in the 1990s, when Shiva-like "creative destruction" was the business catchphrase: capitalism would be rejuvenated when new companies decimated old monopolies, and irreverent innovations cast aside tradition. (This philosophy is in harmony with their persistent aggrandizement of youth.) And if the market reflects popular will, it might also be guided by auteur-entrepreneurs like Jobs who perceived that one need not ask customers what they want, but tell them what they want. Here TCitW strategically deploys torture (porn) within a Buffy-derived panorama to heighten its disagreeableness and

imply that consumers must transform the genre away from it—using their “free will” and grassroots market power, even though the filmmakers acknowledge (through the puppeteers’ gimmicks to manipulate the teens) that rational choice is constrained. Torture porn arrives through a “zombie redneck torture family” whose “black room” is the theater where patriarchal society’s horror establishment, in the guise of the decaying Buckner clan, deliberately confuses sadomasochism with enlightenment to the detriment of its audiences (reflected in innocent little Patience) who do not know better. While the zombies are pointedly othered from the metropolitan-chic “Buffy-Cabin-verse” for being old, familial, rural, and poor, the contemporary association of cinematic torture with “porn” makes the fact of their young-girl victim here that much worse. This association has been insightfully disassembled by Adam Lowenstein with his concept of “spectacle horror,” through the example of *Hostel* (2005): explicit horror films rooted in the cinema of attractions that do not necessarily break “ties with narrative development or historical allegory” (44). But here, since *TCitW* is more market-populist fairy tale than horror movie, Patience and Dana, its final-girl change agents, enact the moral by standing up to Weaver’s wicked-witch, tradition-upholding Director to sacrifice themselves (voting with their dollars) for apocalyptic renewal. Boycott torture porn, raze its temples; instead support progressive, cleverer, “better” fare, presumably just like this movie. It is the ultimate act of “antiestablishment,” self-reflective advocacy.

[32] Whedon’s distaste for torture porn appears sincere. It has spurred activism, notably his writing to the U.S. ratings board that the poster series for the film *Captivity* (2007)—depicting stages of a woman’s entrapment, suffering, and demise—“is not only a literal sign of the collapse of humanity, it’s an assault . . . part of a cycle of violence and misogyny” (Cochrane). Yet his ultimate characterization of this subjective “assault” is not moral or philosophical, but jarringly redistributive: it “takes something away from the people who have to see it. It’s like being mugged” (Cochrane). Equating the visual proof of torture porn’s popular success to having his own wallet lifted suggests Whedon’s concerns involve basic competition for market share as much as defending the moral high ground, and it reinforces the transparency of *TCitW* as a vehicle for merely “activating” loyal audiences of fans. In the end, the consumerist ethics and avoidance of genuine horror in *TCitW* find their most harmonic resonance with President Bush’s homily to the reeling American people in late September 2001: “Go shopping; get down to Disney World.” However, this is not to deny the compelling complexity of feminist values Whedon (and his acolytes) have long

espoused, which simultaneously intersect, endorse, and thwart the various theoretical waves of feminism that in real life do not so much supersede each other as coexist tensely. In that light, there is a peculiar resonance between what St. Louis and Riggs (5-6) insightfully raised as the tendency of BtVS to build “its version of empowerment upon the reinstatement of a generational divide and a ‘disidentification’ with older women... treat[ing] the concerns of women as periodized and generational,” and the fundamental generational conflict in TCitW. Goddard stated in the TCitW DVD audio commentary: “That is the difference between youth and adulthood, that is the line, that as you get older you start to understand why we do these things, but that doesn’t make it right, it doesn’t mean that’s why you should do these things” (Goddard and Whedon). This view allows for the existence of some enlightened older people, apparently, but adults are negatively defined by their centrality to maintaining a harmful, unjust status quo. And while TCitW forcefully suggests that to retrograde, traditional society, young female empowerment (as enacted by Dana’s assumption of agency) conveys the threat of revolt, anarchy, and literally the end of the world, the film still characteristically refuses to deliver a distilled or consistent feminist message. Rather, the diffuse nature of the filmmakers’ own takes on feminism is intensified here through a perhaps too hastily written script about a cinematic genre that specializes in exploring (and comingling) gender, sex, and violence in complex ways—a genre Whedon and Goddard profess to simultaneously love and deplore.

[33] If the Buckner elders are Whedon’s and Goddard’s ideological flag-bearing marionettes, what to make of TCitW’s other “monsters”? They are mere fetishes, as Adorno (37) applied the term to popular culture: free-floating elements “torn away from any functions which could give them meaning,” with no relation to the whole. The social, psychological, and historical contexts giving rise to distinct monsters in the history of the horror genre (Wood 158-162) are evacuated, leaving these creatures anonymous and exchangeable. Like commodities for sale, “there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labor” (Marx), in this case simple mayhem. The filmmakers told a WonderCon gathering they hope to see official TCitW monster trading cards for sale (“WonderCon”). Perhaps such souvenirs would explicate, Dungeons & Dragons-style, why these monsters are supposed to be scary. The scenario recalls Craze and Mottram’s shop of decontextualized ethnic trinkets: Ernest van den Haag called such assemblages “frosting on the cake of popular culture; they do not change its nature but intensify its syncretic stylelessness” (527).

[34] A primitive and rough labor force, the monsters also disclose TCitW's view of the working class as beyond recuperation in today's economy, chaotically staging their Animal Farm-style uprising against Weaver's Farmer Jones: a menacing proletariat yet idealized too in their virtuality, in a post-Fordist, Disney way. Disneyland's "Gene Kelly automaton is working for considerably less than scale. The representation goes the 'ideal' one better: entertaining itself has been fully automated" (Sorkin 229). TCitW's conceptual architecture reinstates the geography of Disney's theme parks, suspending "the visitor in a serially realized apparatus of simulation" built above an off-limits "labyrinth of tunnels" for workers and supervisors (Sorkin 228, 230). Back up top, both civil discipline and an illusory sense of free will are "achieved through representations of a natural order that codes information for tourists concerning the boundaries between permitted and forbidden places . . . guests are presented as full members, making free, uncontrolled choices," even as the corporation orients movements and limits options (Wright 308, 314-5). Similarly, visitors to TCitW escape into the familiar, encountering not freedom or innovation but empty visual excesses amplifying the brand.

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