

People vs. Humanity: Utilitarianism and Genre Critique in *The Cabin in the Woods*

Jaclyn S. Parrish

[1] From beginning to end, Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) has a complex relationship with the horror genre, alternately hatching parodies of and paying homage to its generic expectations and conventions. Ultimately, however, the film's critique of horror is corrective, rather than condemnatory, and exposes the genre's shortcomings more as misuses of a quality product than as evidence of any essential malevolence in the horror genre. Then, in the film's final scene, *Cabin's* generic critique is suddenly and unexpectedly transposed into a slightly more philosophical key, namely, a critique of the Director's utilitarian worldview. Like any key change, its initial effect might be jarring, but in the end, the same essential strain can be heard in both the philosophical and the generic critique in *Cabin*. For, by utilizing a critique of the horror genre as a carrier for a parallel critique of utilitarianism, Whedon and Goddard are able to simultaneously expose and decry the potential of both to be used to dehumanizing effect.

[2] The Director and her Whitecoat crew are staunch utilitarians in that their "ethical decision-making aims solely at maximizing nonmoral goods such as pleasure, happiness, welfare, and the amelioration of suffering" (Pojman 238). Theirs is a consequentialist stance, which holds that "the locus of value is the

Jaclyn S. Parrish received her Bachelor of Arts in both English and Christian Studies from Dallas Baptist University. She began her Master's work in the College of Charleston and the Citadel's joint Master of Arts in English program, and continues to pursue her graduate studies while working as a social media marketing consultant.

outcome [. . .] of the act,” as opposed to a deontological stance, which places the locus of value in the nature of the act itself (Pojman 238). While a pure deontologist might balk at human sacrifice as an inherently immoral act to be avoided without compromise, the whitecoats weigh instead the consequences of human sacrifice in this instance, and accordingly conclude that the continued survival of the entire human race is an ontological good that outweighs any ethical evil inherent in the regular sacrifice of a few lives. And, from a utilitarian point of view, their position is thoroughly defensible: four (possibly five) people will die excruciating deaths, and as a result, several billion will go on more or less happily living. A great deal of suffering has been ameliorated, and the potential for pleasure and happiness is considerably higher. Indeed, within a utilitarian framework, the moral choice offered Marty (“You can die with them or you can die for them” [01:24:51-57]) practically makes itself.

[3] However, the Director’s very presentation of the film’s final problem (“die with them or for them” [01:24:51-57]) presumes that the whitecoats’ utilitarian conceptualization of the universe is both accurate and complete. As utilitarians, they reject not only a deontological system of ethics but also the possibility that there is a greater essential good than pleasure or happiness to be pursued. They believe themselves to be operating within a closed system and in full possession of all the facts, and hence have no motivation to seek a third alternative to their “die with them or for them” quandary (01:24:51-57), since the possibility of such an alternative could not conceivably exist within their worldview. The Director’s insistence that “there’s no other way” (01:25:26-27) is no ploy, for she and her team truly believe it. Such binary thinking is certainly foreboding in an ethical context where survival of the group is to be preserved at any cost, but it is also ideal ground for the horror genre to take root, for conceptual frameworks which purport to contain within themselves every boundary of possible reality are the very

ones which the horror genre is built (or at least well-adapted) to challenge.

[4] Horror, literary or cinematic, is by its nature transgressive, not only with regard to morality, but in the conceptual sense. In her “Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film,” Isabel Cristina Pinedo points out that horror, both classical and postmodern, “constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world [. . .] transgresses and violates boundaries [and] throws into question the validity of rationality” (90-1). Horror artifacts confront the viewer (or reader, or listener) with a world which does not operate in accordance with the accepted laws of the universe: a serial killer whose bloodthirsty desires refuse to fit into any comprehensible system of causality or motivation, a supernatural being with inexplicable and insurmountable powers, a natural world gone haywire in the form of mutant freaks or freakish meteorology. It confronts the viewer, in short, with monsters.

[5] Stephen T. Asma’s *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* argues for a Wittgensteinian approach to delineating the category of “monster,” which would define the monstrous in terms of “family resemblance” rather than exclusive characteristics (282-3). “One aspect of the monster concept” which he expressly describes is “the breakdown of intelligibility” their presence induces, their inability to “be processed by our rationality” (10). In his *Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll points out that the simple presence of a monster is insufficient to qualify a film as an artifact of the horror genre, since monstrous beings like giants and Wookies are also to be found in myths, fairy tales, and non-horrific science fiction (14-6). For a cultural artifact to qualify as horror, its monsters must be of a certain quality, namely, “horrific.” Similarly to Asma, Carroll argues that what sets horror films apart from the generic pack is the horrific monster’s ability to not only frighten, but also disgust by virtue of their conceptually impossible nature: “They are un-natural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of

nature [. . .] such monsters are in a certain sense challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking" (34). The ghosts, ghouls, fairies, and satyrs of myth, legend, and fantasy are not horrific within their narrative context, for "they can be accommodated by the metaphysics of the cosmology that produced them" (Carroll 16). Nearly Headless Nick is an obliging and well-liked (and very dead) fellow within the walls of Hogwarts, but on an episode of *Supernatural* (2005-2016), a partially decapitated ghost would be an object of terror to be staked, salted, and burned with the utmost alacrity.

[6] And indeed, by linking monstrosity with the embattlement of a culture's established framework for reality, these contemporary critics more than half echo the work of the horror genre's "dark and baroque prince," Howard Phillips Lovecraft. According to the inimitable Lovecraft, "the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (12), and the "most terrible conception of the human brain [is] a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space" (15). Apparently, horrific monsters horrify, not because they present a threat of bodily harm, but rather because they represent an assault upon those frameworks of reality that allow humans to function as sane beings.

[7] In short, while Asma is certainly academically responsible to resist any definition of horrific monstrosity which claims to be exclusive and all-encompassing, the horror genre's unique ability to challenge accepted conceptual frameworks can be accepted as at least one essential aspect of the horror genre, if not necessarily the only or even the primary one. Horrific monstrosity certainly can and does possess other distinctives, but a film must possess at least this paradigm-shifting characteristic in order to qualify as an artifact of the horror genre. Additionally, conceptual frameworks and recognized universal realities will certainly vary over time and space

and from culture to culture, and so obviously no individual work of horror need be required to shatter every known conceptual framework, but rather simply some of the ones accepted and prevalent within the culture and era in which they are created and presented. Given this essential aspect of the genre, horror would seem the ideal means of critiquing unduly confident worldviews, but some critics would argue that all is not well in the realm of Dark Prince Lovecraft.

[8] As Steffen Hantke reports in his introduction to *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, the horror genre is currently subject to a prevailing “rhetoric of crisis” which claims that, despite the genre’s undeniable ability to turn a considerable profit, “there is a sense of fatigue or outright dissatisfaction with Hollywood horror these days” (vii-viii). “Popular opinion has it,” he notes, that though contemporary horror films “never fail to find an audience [. . .] most of them just aren’t any good” (viii). In his “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Rick Altman suggests that the language and structure of generic films and film genres is determined by the intersection between that content which affirms the “preferences and beliefs” of the public and that which serves “the business and political interests of Hollywood” (555, 559). Thomas Schatz makes a parallel argument in “From Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and the Genre Film,” arguing that “the genre exists as a sort of tacit ‘contract’ between filmmakers and audience, [and] the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract” (564). Accepting, then, the premise that horror films must necessarily present some kind of challenge to accepted conceptual frameworks, the rhetoricians of crisis would insist that one party or another in this transaction has ceased to honor their end of the deal, arguing that horror films are becoming increasingly banal and redundant, and indeed that the “contemporary genre appears to have stalled in self-reflexivity and parody, [and] formulaic repetition” (Metz 97). Seemingly, the

genre's horrific monsters have themselves solidified into their own unyielding conceptual framework, manifesting rather to affirm their own recognized paradigms than to challenge any others.

[9] Hantke ultimately concludes that the reports of the genre's demise have been greatly exaggerated, both in academic and popular circles of conversation, but *The Cabin in the Woods* nevertheless exists in conversation with these rhetoricians of crisis, and many critics have noted in *Cabin* a distinct sympathy for those who would decry the current qualitative state of the horror film genre. (Editor's note: See Kristopher Karl Woofter, especially pages 270-73, for an in-depth discussion of this academic conversation.) In his observance of the Whitecoat Sitterson and Hadley's "directing" in *Cabin*, Ben Kooyman notes that Goddard and Whedon's work "depicts the genre as offering a finite number of prescribed formulas that directors must service" (111). And indeed, the film's recasting of the horror genre's conventions as an intricate, prescribed ritual of human sacrifice performed annually ("as it ever was" [00:34:30-33]) is certainly as blatant an indictment of generic standardization as can be conjured. But hope remains, if Schatz is to be believed, for he claims that "individual genre films seem to have the capacity to affect the genre" (566), and that is just what *The Cabin in the Woods* sets out to do.

[10] *Cabin's* attempt at a general redress of the horror genre is rooted in its specific examination of the slasher sub-genre, whose artificiality it mocks by systematically setting up the slasher's formulas only to strike them down. This leaves the film, as previously noted, in complex and tense relationship with the horror genre, placing it somewhere between satire, parody, homage, and horror film proper, an extraordinary space arguably already pioneered by works such as Wes Craven's *Scream* enterprise (1996), which also makes explicit narrative use of the slasher formulas and stereotypes. Although *Cabin's* writers and director claim no particular influence from the work, Carol J. Clover's seminal *Men*,

Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film nevertheless might as well have provided the duo with a step-by-step handbook for deconstructing slasher films, no doubt due rather to her own extensive research than to Goddard and Whedon's.¹

[11] If quintessential slasher killers are indeed “emphatic misfits and outsiders” who are “propelled by psychosexual fury” (Clover 27-30), then the “zombie redneck torture family” (00:33:27-29) who attack the college students at the Buckner cabin fit that bill perfectly: a troop of vaguely religious, backwoods sadomasochists whose patriarch not only apparently tortured his wife to death, but whose eldest son achieves a “husband’s bulge” by “cutting the flesh” (00:31:28-32). As perfectly as they fill their role, however, the film consistently exposes that role as profoundly artificial and ultimately mechanically subservient to the puppeteers below. The Buckners are, after all, merely one tool in a set of innumerable monsters that might be randomly chosen to complete the necessary sacrifice, listed blandly alongside “The Scarecrow Folk” and an “Angry Molesting Tree” (00:33:30). Terrifying as the Buckners might be, the film is careful to emphasize that their stylized and sexualized violence is but one perfunctory arm of the dumpy corporate cultists who nonchalantly drawl for Jules to “show us the goods” (00:40:36-7) in order to “keep the customer satisfied” (00:40:42-44).

[12] The Buckners also perfectly fit the mold of the “terrible families” which inhabit the “terrible places” where horror films necessarily transpire (Clover 30-1), and their family home even comes complete with its own fully-stocked, subterranean torture chamber. *Cabin* even dutifully recreates the obligatory reversal which occurs when “the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become [. . .] the walls that hold the victim in” (Clover 31) when Curt retreats to the cabin after his girlfriend’s death and orders everyone to split up and hide in their rooms as the Buckners hack their way inside. By the film’s conclusion, however, the audience is well aware that it is not actually the crumbling walls of

the Buckner cabin that entrap Dana and her friends, but rather the puppeteers' invisible electrified fence surrounding the woods, in addition to a set of explosives rigged to shut off their escape through the tunnel. The eponymous Cabin is merely one of the worst confines in the puppeteers' vast prison. And, with its Rubik's Cube vault of monsters, *Cabin* also undermines the notion of the existence of any particular "terrible place" by insinuating that, as long as the whitecoats serve the Ancient Ones, all the world is a terrible place.

[13] With the exception of the whitecoats under siege, the heroes and villains of *Cabin* also follow proper slasher protocol regarding weapons, shunning firearms in favor of "pretechnological" weapons like knives, saws, trowels, and swingable bear traps on chains (Clover 31-2). The Whitecoats' machine guns and hand grenades also conform to the slasher standard and "fail in a pinch" (Clover 31), proving impotent against the "System Purge" (01:14:51). But even this formula is slyly mocked when Marty successfully repels his zombie redneck attackers by wielding his coffee thermos bong as a club. The visceral tools which are meant to "bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (Clover 32) are drained of their disturbing power and phallic undertones by the Fool, transformed rather into a source of slapstick humor, pun intended. What's more, by unleashing the monsters on the puppeteers, Dana and Marty effectively convert the horror genre's killers into their own weapons, viciously dismantling the established slasher formulae (and the puppeteers too, for that matter).

[14] "Killing those who seek or engage in unauthorized sex amounts to a generic imperative of the slasher film" (Clover 34), and *Cabin* makes a special point to bow to that imperative while exposing its artificiality. The aforementioned sex/death scene is executed, on its "upstairs" level, according to textbook slasher protocol, with Curt and Jules' foreplay climaxing in a full-frontal

nude shot of Jules and concluding in her punishment by decapitation. Downstairs in the Whitecoat vaults, however, Goddard and Whedon are careful to point out that this behavior is not characteristic of the “Athlete” and the “Whore” (01:23:30-25), but rather the result of psychological and even chemical manipulation, with electric moonlight caressing the forest floor and clouds of pheromones accelerating the characters’ libidos. In addition, when a newb Whitecoat questions the necessity of these machinations, Sitterson explains that sexual transgression is an indispensable step in the ritual, for “if they don't transgress, they can't be punished” (00:24:02-04).

[15] Whedon and Goddard also make an especial point to both utilize and refute the “Final Girl” archetype in *Cabin*. Dana is indeed “boyish,” even sporting a gender-neutral name in the tradition of the genre’s other Final Girls: “Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max” (Clover 40). She fulfills the roles of “investigator” and “rescuer” (Clover 40) by catching onto the puppeteers’ devices ahead of everyone save for the insightful Marty and fighting off zombies with pluck, sharp objects, and witty banter (“You like pain? How’s that work for you?” [00:53:26-32]). Like Jules’ sexual transgression and bloody demise, however, *Cabin* is careful to expose the Final Girl trope as a prescribed element of the sacrificial ritual, with the whitecoats calmly explaining that “the Virgin’s death is optional, so long as she dies last. The important thing is that she suffers” (01:02:25-31). Of course, Goddard and Whedon also deconstruct the Final Girl rhetoric by scrambling the order of death in *Cabin*, first by equipping their film with a Final Girl and Boy (Marty, the Fool), and then by breaking rank with the slasher protocol for virgin survival and (we are led to believe) unrepentantly killing off their Final Girl, along with the rest of humanity. (The film does not display Dana or Marty’s death.) Even Clover’s observation that the audience is meant to identify with the Final Girl as the slasher film’s hero is undermined when Hadley

interrupts his own brief, touching monologue about finding himself unintentionally “rooting for this girl” (01:02:39-40) with an irreverent cry of “tequila is my lady!”² (01:02:39-46-48) as soon as the ritual’s after-party kicks off.

[16] The “shock” elements of *Cabin* are, for the first half of the film, on perfect par with the slasher sub-genre’s guidelines, both encouraging the audience to tense up and hold their breath in stalking scenes, as well as causing them to “express uproarious disgust” (Clover 41-2) when severed heads fall into characters’ hands, bear traps snatch victims off their feet, and iron hooks splat through students’ throats. The viewer is able to “see heads squashed and eyes popped out, faces flayed, limbs dismembered, eyes penetrated by needles in close up, and so on” (Clover 41), as per usual. With the “System Purge” (01:14:51), however, Goddard and Whedon gorge the viewer to the point of gut-splitting satiation. *Cabin*’s “army of nightmare creatures” (01:14:10-13) becomes a super-sized sampler of the horror genre’s violent buffet, an effect heightened by the presence of such iconic horror staples as killer clowns, cenobites, “zombie redneck torture families” (00:33:27-29), and werewolves. In terms of audience response, the remorseless barrage of torture, death, dismemberment, blood, brains, and bags of guts, by this point in the storyline, smacks not a little of Dana’s challenge for her undead hillbilly attacker: “You like pain? How’s that work for you?” (00:53:26-32)

[17] But the trope Goddard and Whedon seem to take the most delight in honoring while ridiculing is the flatness and stereotypicality of the characters inhabiting the landscape of the slasher flick. *Cabin* dutifully assembles its ill-fated Breakfast Club of transgressive youths and punctiliously shoehorns them into the ritualized roles of Whore, Fool, Athlete, Scholar, and Virgin, but even as they settle into these simple terms, these convenient definitions, the film consistently foregrounds the artificiality of the roles these characters are expected to play. “Far from being a whore

or a slut, [Jules] is in what appears to be a stable and loving relationship with Curt,” the Athlete (Lockett 132), and the uncharacteristic “celebu-tard” (00:37:08) behavior of this pre-med student is, like her love scene with Curt, largely due to cognition-slowing chemicals placed in her blonde hair dye by the whitecoats, for this “dumb blonde” (00:19:38-39) is truly a highly intelligent brunette.

[18] Dubbing Marty the “Fool” (01:23:41) is a gross misnomer, for he is the only character whose mind remains unclouded by the whitecoats’ chemicals, thanks to the “womb of reefer” (00:25:26-28) he continuously inhabits. He consistently challenges his friends’ hackneyed horror flick behavior, pointing out that the wind could not possibly have blown the cellar door open, that reading Latin from a creepy ancient diary is an inadvisable course of action, and that splitting up to explore the cabin is a patently irrational plan. He also is clearly aware that the other students’ behavior seems canned and out of character, pointing out to Dana that Jules’ I.Q. is normally much higher and that Curt’s dumb jock routine is not in keeping with the customary deportment of this sociology major attending college on a full academic scholarship.

[19] Curt’s lecherous alpha dog act is also undermined by his introductory scene, in which he not only offers Dana insightful academic advice, but also refers to Holden as a “sweet guy” (00:04:58-00:05:00), utilizing an emotionally sensitive term the true Athlete would deride. Moreover, this ostensible ladies’ man manages to so sensibly discuss academics and dating in the course of this scene that Dana forgets she is not wearing pants, for Curt never slides his eyes down to her crotch in the course of their conversation and offers no licentious comment on her partial nudity.

[20] Holden, far from being a weakling “egg-head” Scholar (00:36:23-25), is actually a competent football player with “the best

hands on the team” (00:04:55-58) according to the sober version of Curt. What’s more, his own topless shot reveals a physique far too svelte to belong to the stereotypical nerdling, with a body better suited for an Athlete than a Scholar.³ And Dana, the Virgin, is introduced as being no such innocent thing, but rather guilty of more extensive sexual transgression than the monogamous Jules, for she has apparently recently shared an ill-fated affair with one of her professors. Even the Director acknowledges that Dana’s virginity is a sham in the film’s final scene, admitting with a shrug, “We work with what we have” (01:24:02-05).

[21] But the five students are not the only individuals forced to go through the motions of a false personality in order to satisfy the Ancient Ones (and the audience), for even Mordecai, the creepy Harbinger who dutifully sends the vanload of youths down their doomed road, is revealed as a performer in his phone conversation with Hadley and Sitterson. His trite prophecies of divine wrath (“Cleanse them. Cleanse the world of their ignorance and sin. Bathe them in the crimson of—” [00:20:33-39]) are comically interrupted when he breaks character and snaps, “Am I on speakerphone? [. . .] That's rude. I don't know who's in the room” (00:20:39-55) much to the hilarity of his coworkers. As with Marty and his bong-club, the Harbinger’s forebodings dissolve in their own artificiality into humor and blatant mockery.

[22] The irony amidst all this gleeful deconstruction is that Goddard and Whedon are still able to fulfill the horror genre’s prerogative of conceptual disorientation, not only in spite of, but actually by means of revealing and even reveling in the ritualized predictability of the slasher formula. “Horror,” Pinedo emphasizes, “violates our assumption that we live in a predictable, routinized world [. . .], by demanding a reason to trust in the taken-for-granted realm of ‘ordered normality’” (91). *Cabin*, therefore, holds up the “ordered normality” of the slasher formula as the particular “routinized world” to be violated, leaving the viewer adrift in a

universe where they cannot depend even upon the tried-and-true rituals of slasher films. Furthermore, Goddard, Whedon, and *Cabin* are preoccupied with not only the horror genre's (at least perceived) aesthetic shortcomings, but also with its perceived descent into sadistic voyeurism.

[23] No few hands have been vigorously wrung over the “troubling extremes in the portrayals of violence and victim suffering” (Metz 97) in contemporary horror films, as well as what the increasing prevalence of those extremes might suggest about horror audiences. Examining *Cabin* in the context of films like *Hostel* (2005), *The Human Centipede* (2010), *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), and the *Saw* franchise, Bridget McGovern rants, “Are we that burned out, as a culture, that it takes some dank combination of sexual torture, self-mutilation, [. . .] to even get worked up any more?” Gerry Canavan's delvings into the “metacommentary” of *The Cabin in the Woods* unearths a similar anxiety in *Cabin's* creators, for he interprets the film's Lovecraftian “Ancient Ones” (01:24:14-15) as directly symbolic of contemporary horror audiences:

[. . .] the whitecoats downstairs act as the production crew for the horror film in the cabin unfurling upstairs, in order to keep their world safe from a sedated audience of incomprehensible monsters who exist beyond the world of the film and whose inscrutable lusts are what drive all this violence—we ourselves, the film's viewers. (par. 18)

If, as Clover claims, the “modern slasher film” is essentially a “hero plot, revolving around the main character's struggle with and eventual triumph over evil” (40-1), then these critics and artists are convinced, or at least concerned, that audiences are becoming more fascinated by and invested in the Final Girl's torture than her triumph.

[24] The creators of *The Cabin in the Woods* go to great lengths to foreground not only the audience's complicity with the

atrocities unfolding on-screen, but also with the inhumanity inherent in being entertained purely by human suffering and exploitation. The audience is repeatedly reminded of their own implicit presence with ominous lines from the puppeteers such as, “We’re not the only ones watching” (00:40:41-42) and “Gotta keep the customer satisfied” (00:40:42-44), which allude to both “the bloodthirsty and libidinous entities they are sacrificing these characters to and the bloodthirsty and libidinous horror fanbase demanding titillation amidst bloodshed” (Kooyman 112). Viewers are forced to see themselves symbolized, not only in the ravenous Ancient Ones, but also in the cold, corporate conglomeration of whitecoats who drink, dance, and party beneath giant screens depicting Dana’s brutalization at the hands of a Buckner zombie, her screams drowned out by the din of celebration. Truly, when one of the lead puppeteers herds his disappointed team away from Jules’ impending nip-slip with a brusque, “Your basic human needs disgust me” (00:39:25-28), the viewer’s humanity suffers no small indictment, as well.

[25] The viewer is also condemned by the behavior of the college students themselves, which more than once is drawn in direct contrast with that of the lecherous and sadistic audience of Ancient Ones. When Jules, under the influence of her hypnotic hair dye, performs like a stripper in front of the fireplace, the audience views the proceedings at a camera angle low enough to make even Michael Bay proud, teasing just enough of Anna Hutchison’s rump and inner thighs to excite without sliding into NC-17 territory. The show is interrupted, however, by a businesslike, eye-level shot of the seated Holden and Dana, whose expressions are confused, vaguely disapproving, and not remotely aroused. And, when Curt responds to Marty’s sarcastic appreciation of the routine with a snide “Like you wouldn’t want a piece of that” (00:35:42-44), the upstanding pothead quickly retorts, “Can we not talk about people in pieces anymore tonight?” (00:35:45-48), pointing out that both

the Whore's performance and the grisly Buckner diary are inherently dehumanizing in their objectification of the human body as merely a source of pleasure, be it sexual or sadistic.

[26] Additionally, Dana's and Holden's navigation of the two-way mirror exemplifies an intentionally incongruous response to the offer of bodily objectification prevalent in many contemporary horror films. Faced with an excessively gruesome painting of hunters and dogs gleefully dismembering their prey, Holden rejects the opportunity to partake in sadistically viewing the scene as entertainment and removes the painting from the wall, only to be offered the far more enviable opportunity to watch Dana undress with impunity. But before she even has her shirt properly off, this "sweet guy" (00:04:58-00:05:00) pounds on the wall to stop her and reveals to her and the rest of his friends the threat to her modesty. What's more, far from relishing the scopophilic power the mirror gives him, he willingly elects to shield Dana from his own gaze by taking her place behind the mirror. She, like Holden, is also granted the opportunity to watch him undress, but likewise respects his personhood and forgoes scopophilic diversion by hanging the painting back up to hide him from her sight. Confronted herself with the freedom to partake in death and dismemberment for pleasure, she sets aside that privilege, as well, and hangs a sheet over the picture, effectively finding her own way to reject sexual exploitation and violence as sources of amusement, just as her gentlemanly suitor has. How patent an indictment on an audience who has admittedly paid good money to sit in a dark room and watch teenagers make out and be tortured to death (preferably in that order).

[27] However, if Schatz and Altman's genre theories are accurate, then the recent uptick in filmic conventionality and voyeuristic sadism could just as well be sourced in Hollywood's interests as in the public's, and a persuasive argument could no doubt be made for the primary culpability of either. In "Charybdis

Tested Well with Teens': *The Cabin in the Woods* as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences," Erin Giannini argues that the film "implicates creator and audience both" (par. 30), and with good reason. The whitecoats, after all, might not be the judges proclaiming the death penalty, but they are the ones dropping the ax (or swinging the bear trap, as the case may be).

[28] Nevertheless, while Goddard and Whedon's "sustained critique of the triad of producer, creator, and audience" (Giannini par. 2), by no means exempts either the filmmaker or the producer, it does foreground the audience's complicity in the crisis *Cabin's* creators perceive their beloved genre undergoing. Even Giannini emphasizes that "the 'gods' that need to be appeased," whose demands force humanity to seriously grapple with the ethical viability of human sacrifice, could arguably be "none other than the audience" (par. 18). In their joint commentary on the *Cabin* DVD, Whedon and Goddard expound upon their intentional homage to Alfred Hitchcock's legendary ability to "mak[e] you complicit" in the events unfolding on-screen, specifically in relation to Jules' sex/death scene (00:40:29-32). By interrupting the Whore and the Athlete's lovemaking (and the former's impending full-frontal nudity and consequent death) with an uncomfortably comic shot of several dozen male whitecoats' drooling over the proceedings from their underground theater, the filmmakers effectively throw a mirror up to the face of the viewer and leave him or her "feeling the indictment [. . .] not just for the audience but for humanity" (Goddard and Whedon 00:40:16-22). Hadley and Sitterson are as much puppets as they are puppeteers in this transaction, functioning as "hired guns tasked with executing their work as efficiently and anonymously as possible" (Kooyman 111) in order to "keep the customer satisfied" (*Cabin* 00:40:42-44). Whedon and Goddard seem to suggest that the horror genre has calcified into a dehumanizing system that insists, like the Director's utilitarian worldview, that cruelty is necessary for the preservation of the current structure.

Just as the Old Gods' demands for blood have twisted the moral good of self-sacrifice into a murderous farce, the respectable literary devices of the horror genre have been pressganged into the service of mere sadistic voyeurism.

[29] For *Cabin's* redress is not confined to the horror genre or slasher sub-genre exclusively, but rather touches every conceptual framework whose undue rigidity places it in danger of philosophical calcification. By systematically exposing and dismantling the horror genre's present (at least perceived) artificiality and formulaic petrification, Goddard and Whedon imply that artificiality and conceptual rigidity are themselves shortcomings worthy of exposure and mockery, simultaneously teaching the viewer to execrate, not only the present unyielding conceptual framework which the horror genre has become, but any other such framework, as well. This dismantling of conceptual inflexibility manifests itself not only at this deeper, metanarrative layer of meaning, but also at the higher, narrative level, as the film repeatedly throws suspicion on frameworks which self-present as perfectly closed systems with extremely limited options.

[30] The two-way mirror scene examined above is one of the more obvious examples of how *Cabin* reveals the artificiality of systems that present seemingly binary options to those operating within them. Michael J. Blouin is incorrect in asserting that "[w]hat is cast as a choice between violence or voyeurism" in this scene "does not leave room for genuine agency" (89), for Dana and Holden each assert their individual agency by finding and pursuing a third option to the choice offered them between violence and voyeurism: namely, they choose neither. These characters are fully aware of the rock and hard place that seek to crush them, and both simply say, "Yeah, I don't think so" (00:15:29-31, 00:18:31-33) and crush the system by stepping outside of it.

[31] *The Cabin in the Woods* also resists the oversimplification of its own storyline by asserting the humanity of even the

whitecoats in their underground lair, developing them into characters with whom the audience can at least grudgingly sympathize. “You are rooting for both of them,” puppets and puppeteers, throughout much of the film (Goddard and Whedon 00:56:27-29), especially once the stakes of the ritual become clear. Without the deaths of at least four of these youths, after all, the characters will indeed face the “agonizing death of every human soul on the planet” (01:24:45-48). As such, the viewer is not allowed to settle comfortably back into the belief that Sitterson and Hadley are purely and uncompromisingly evil, but rather must accept the paradoxical fact that even the villains of this tale are as much hapless pawns as are its heroes. This breakdown of the binary, good-versus-evil narrative is especially clear in the tunnel scene, just before Curt’s death. The film cuts quickly back and forth between the students and Sitterson, the former barreling through the tunnel toward their escape, and the latter racing to stop them with equal desperation. The shots are clearly meant to present these “upstairs and downstairs” storylines as parallel and complementary, and Sitterson is here starkly equated with Dana and her friends as at least comparably frantic and fearful for his life.

[32] But the most glaringly obvious deconstruction of inflexible conceptual frameworks in *Cabin* is encapsulated in the film’s final scene, when the film’s generic critique transposes into a philosophical critique of utilitarianism. The Director rejects, as previously noted, both a deontological system of ethics and the possibility of a greater essential good than pleasure or happiness to be pursued. In her mind, survival and death are the two only courses open to humanity (“You can die with them, or you can die for them” [01:24:51-57]), and survival of the human race is necessarily the only attainable summum bonum, before which all individual life must ultimately fail as comparably worthless.

[33] But the Fool and the Virgin are able to break down her utilitarian worldview by challenging these two foundational

assumptions. This Final Girl and Boy shatter the Director's binary set of possibilities by finding a third option beyond survival and death: sacrifice, the willing choice to die with the world for the sake of the world. They assert that humanity's survival is indeed not the greatest possible good, and that there are indeed circumstances under which survival is not preferable, for, in Marty's words, "If you've got to kill all my friends to survive [. . .] maybe it's time for a change" (01:24:36-41). Essentially, the human race would be better off dead than dehumanized, and by "letting the world end, Dana and Marty prove [. . .] that their generation may have what they need to create a world order that could break the cycle of needlessly sacrificing youth" (Cooper par. 17). Giannini might claim that "[t]he only choice they are given is how they'll die" (par. 16), but in their final scene, Marty and Dana prove that they do, in fact, possess the power to make a far more powerful moral choice: why they will die. They willingly choose to die as a declaration of the existence of an essential good beyond mere pleasure or happiness. They argue, by their death, that humans can aspire to more than survival. This Final Girl and Boy give their lives as a testament against the utilitarian claim that suffering exists only to be ameliorated. They insist, by their sacrifice, that suffering can have objective value.

[34] The choice offered Marty by the Director is consequently not presented independently of the film's narrative, but rather in the glaring light of Goddard and Whedon's critique of the contemporary horror genre. They deconstruct the scheme within which the Director operates as false, sadistic, and irrationally rigid, for her worldview is the corrupted horror genre itself, extreme utilitarianism ritualized as human sacrifice. Both systems force human beings to conform to empty and inhuman standards of personality and behavior, trapping them in patterns that demand they forfeit their individual worth in order to prop up the very systems that crush them. Both insist that the violence and exploitation necessary for their continuation is supportive of the

greater good of their own survival, but neglect to consider whether survival even has value under such circumstances. And both, by their very slavishly formulaic nature, are to be rejected as incarnations of the unexamined life that, if Socrates is to be believed, is not worth living. In short, if the human race must slaughter its young in order to survive, and if the horror genre must satiate the basest impulses of its audience with narrative torpidity in order to remain financially viable, then perhaps, as Marty claims, it's time for a change, and he and Dana are accordingly vindicated when they refuse to conform to either utilitarianism or generic expectations.

[35] When viewed in this light, therefore, *The Cabin in the Woods* is by no means “self-hatred passing for self-criticism,” as Stephen Daisley condemns it in “Unkind Mankind Onscreen” (par. 9). Whedon, by his own admittance, doesn't “disagree with saving the world” (nor does he, judging by his past work and aforementioned love of horror, disagree with making horror movies) but simply suggests that “if at some point in order to maintain order we have to become [. . .] cruel,” then perhaps order is not worth maintaining (Goddard and Whedon 01:26:13-22). And, given how often Whedon's work has clearly glorified the laudability of sacrificial death,⁴ any assumption that *Cabin's* ending necessarily suggests that one's community is inherently not worth dying for would be inconsistent with the ethos of Whedon's larger body of work. Far from disparaging the worth of the human race, this film elevates it by emphasizing the inherent value of the individuals who comprise it, driving home the belief that, if a culture does not value the human being, it will eventually cease to truly value the human race, for “people,” according to Joss Whedon, “are more important than humanity” (Goddard and Whedon 01:29:23-25).

Works Cited

- Altman, Rick. "Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Literature." *Film Theory & Criticism*. 7th ed., edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 552-63.
- Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- "Bargaining: Part 1." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, written by Marti Noxon, directed by David Grossman, season 6, episode 1, 2 Oct. 2001, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70133828?trackId=14170289&tctx=0%2C0%2Ce3ba8fb8-57f6-44df-97ce-bd8c2c79033e-48405479>.
- Blouin, Michael J. "Research Cluster – 'A Growing Global Darkness': Dialectics of Culture in Goddard's *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Horror Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 83-99, www.horrorstudiesjournal.com.
- The Cabin in the Woods*. Directed by Drew Goddard, written by Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard, performances by Kristen Connolly and Fran Kranz, Lionsgate, 2012.
- Canavan, Gerry. "'Something Nightmares are from': Metacommentary in Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 10, no. 2, and vol. 11, no. 1, 2013-2014, special double issue, "*We Are Not Who We Are*": *Critical Reflections on The Cabin in the Woods (2012)*, edited by Kristopher Karl Woofter and Jasie Stokes, www.whedonstudies.tv.
- Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge, 1990.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton UP, 1992.

- Cooper, L. Andrew. "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 10, no. 2, and vol. 11, no. 1, 2013-2014, special double issue, "We Are Not Who We Are": *Critical Reflections on The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), edited by Kristopher Karl Woofter and Jasie Stokes, www.whedonstudies.tv.
- Daisley, Stephen. "Unkind Mankind on Screen." *Commentary*, vol. 134, no. 1, 2012, www.commentarymagazine.com.
- Giannini, Erin. "Charybdis Tested Well with Teens": *The Cabin in the Woods* as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 10, no. 2, and vol. 11, no. 1, 2013-2014, special double issue, "We Are Not Who We Are": *Critical Reflections on The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), edited by Kristopher Karl Woofter and Jasie Stokes, www.whedonstudies.tv.
- "The Gift." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created, written, and directed by Joss Whedon, season 5, episode 22, 22 May 2001, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70133827?trackId=14170289&tctx=0%2C21%2C3f4faec7-285f-439f-ae24-cf0acee8a280-47737385>.
- Goddard, Drew, and Joss Whedon. Commentary. *The Cabin in the Woods*. Directed by Drew Goddard, written by Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard, performances by Kristen Connolly and Fran Kranz, Lionsgate, 2012.
- Hantke, Steffen. "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To: On the Rhetoric of Crisis and the Current State of American Horror Cinema." *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*. Google e-book ed., edited by Steffen Hantke, UP of Mississippi, 2010, pp. vii-xxxii.

- Kooyman, Ben. "‘Gotta Keep the Customer Satisfied’: Puppeteers as Director-Surrogates in *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Horror Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2015, pp. 101-119, www.horrorstudiesjournal.com.
- Lockett, Christopher. "‘We are not Who We are’: Lovecraftian Conspiracy and Magical Humanism in *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Horror Studies*, vol. 6, no.1, 2015, pp. 121-139, www.horrorstudiesjournal.com.
- Lovecraft, H[oward] P[hillips]. *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Dover Publications, 1973.
- McGovern, Bridget. "Joss Whedon, John Hughes, and Torture Porn: What *The Cabin in the Woods* Says about the Current State of Pop Culture." *Tor.com*, 23 April 2013, www.tor.com/2012/04/23/joss-whedon-john-hughes-and-torture-porn-what-the-cabin-in-the-woods-says-about-the-current-state-of-pop-culture. Accessed 7 Nov. 2015.
- Metz Jr, Jerry D. "What’s Your Fetish?: The Tortured Economics of Horror Simulacra in *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*, vol. 10, no. 2, and vol. 11, no. 1, 2013-2014, special double issue, "We Are Not Who We Are": *Critical Reflections on The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), edited by Kristopher Karl Woofter and Jasie Stokes, www.whedonstudies.tv.
- Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. "Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film." *The Horror Film*, edited by Steven Prince, Rutgers UP, 2004, pp. 85-117.
- Pojman, Louis P. *Philosophy: The Pursuit of Wisdom*. 5th ed., Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.
- Schatz, Thomas. "From *Hollywood Genres*: Film Genre and the Genre Film." *Film Theory & Criticism*. 7th ed., edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 564-75.

Scream. Directed by Wes Craven, written by Kevin Williamson, performances by Drew Barrymore and Courteney Cox, Dimension Films, 1996.

Supernatural. Created by Eric Kripke. Warner Brothers Television, 2005-2016.

Woofter, Kristopher Karl. "Watchers in the Woods: Meta-Horror, Genre Hybridity, and Reality TV Critique in *The Cabin in the Woods*." *Reading Joss Whedon*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox, Tanya R. Cochran, Cynthia Masson, and David Lavery, Syracuse UP, 2014, pp. 268-79.

Notes

¹ In the DVD commentary, Goddard and Whedon both insist that they did no intentional research on horror films for the creation of *Cabin*, beyond their own lifelong personal experience with and love of the horror genre.

² The irreverence and insensitivity of this scene is intensified with the knowledge that Bradley Whitford's "tequila" line was a bit of whimsy improvised by the actor (Commentary 01:02:45-55).

³ Accusing Goddard and Whedon of simply using Jesse Williams's physique to titillate their audience would be mistaken, since they resisted the urge to do the same with Fran Kranz (Marty), whose "ripped like the Lord Jesus" frame was purposefully and consistently hidden under thick, baggy clothes in order to help him better embody his own bohemian/philosopher character (Commentary 00:22:35-38). Note, for example, that he is wearing a shirt when the friends go swimming in the lake, and the audience is not granted so much as a wet T-shirt shot of Marty. Dana's glance at Holden from behind the two-way mirror is therefore better interpreted as an intentional jab at his "Scholar" (01:23:39) archetype than as a cheap shot of abdominals to keep the audience engaged.

⁴ The title character of his *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* not only died (technically more than once) in order to save her world, but was even resurrected in a most Christological fashion ("The Gift" 5.22 and "Bargaining: Part 1" 6.1).