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Haven't We Been Here Before?: The Cabin in the Woods, the Horror Genre, and Placelessness

[1] The enigmatic tagline “You think you know the story” teased audiences eagerly awaiting the release of Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard’s 2012 film *The Cabin in the Woods*. Other taglines further whetted the appetite of horror fans by cheerfully mocking traditional tropes of the genre. “If an old man warns you not to go there . . . make fun of him.” “Quaint abandoned property . . . sold.” “If the basement door swings open . . . go down there” (IMDb). The taglines reveal Whedon and Goddard’s intentions to construct a film that can serve as both a commentary on and a contribution to the horror genre canon. The taglines, many of which are focused on specific spaces, also speak to one of the film’s statements about horror. With titular attribution to a familiar horror film location, *The Cabin in the Woods* proposes and emphasizes the function and significance of place within the genre. At the same time, the film’s plot and visual rhetoric draw attention to the artificiality of specific horror places and to the characters’ inability to connect with these places. *The Cabin in the Woods*, in addressing the genre’s preoccupation with place, highlights a significant, albeit infrequently analyzed, element within horror: placelessness. Placelessness can be viewed as both an external condition brought about through cultural and global developments as well as an internal response to a personal or social detachment from place. It occurs through the intentional or unintentional eradication or erosion of the diversity, distinctiveness, and identities of a place or places. Often confronting issues connected to globalization, American horror uses placelessness to address cultural fears that America no longer has a unique or easily identifiable “place,” either locally or globally. *The Cabin in the Woods* uses placelessness to address these same fears. Through the (de)construction of traditional horror genre place-tropes as well as the film’s own unique plot twists and developments, *The Cabin in the Woods* concludes with the suggestion—propagated in so many other American horror texts—that placelessness is inevitable, placelessness will produce devastating consequences, and placelessness will ultimately undermine and destroy cultural and individual identities.

[2] Examining the significance of place within horror requires an appreciation of place that extends beyond spatial formations. Tim Cresswell argues that places are “centers of meaning” as much as they are geometrically defined spaces (13). Because humans create emotional, psychological, and physical relationships with places, places are often instrumental in shaping personal and cultural identities. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard suggests the term topoanalysis to describe what he believes is the necessary “systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (8). Topoanalysis demands an acknowledgment of place as a complex construction of both individual and cultural meanings and both material and mental affordances. Edward S. Casey, in his preface to *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, argues that “place has shown itself capable of inspiring complicated and variegated discussions” (xii). Many of these discussions emerge through the topoanalytical readings of horror films provided by scholars such as Carol Clover. In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Clover claims that the “Terrible Place, most often a house or tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves is a venerable element of horror” (30). The Terrible Place is critical for the development of the slasher film’s plot, as it is often the setting for the confrontations between killer and victims. Clover argues, however, that the Terrible Place is more than mere setting. Presentations of the Terrible Place within horror films serve as mechanisms for understanding the genre’s propositions regarding gender and audience identification. Writing how “[d]ecidedly ‘intrauterine’ in quality is the Terrible Place, dark and often damp, in which the killer lives or lurks and when he stages his most terrifying attacks,” Clover draws a connection between traditional representations of this place and the cultural fears of female sexuality often articulated in horror (48).

[3] Clover’s assertions about the Terrible Place are supported by topoanalytical readings of numerous slasher films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978). In creating *The Cabin in the Woods*, Whedon and Goddard openly drew upon what they saw as a generic formula of plot and conventions present within these films and other horror classics (Whedon and Goddard 10). Because of the intentional connection between *The Cabin in the Woods* and its cinematic predecessors, Whedon and Goddard’s film supports many of Clover’s suppositions, especially those regarding the nature of the Terrible Place. Clover states that the Terrible Place found within many slasher films “may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out

quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in" (31). The organization located in the underground Complex has produced the quintessential Terrible Place for the five young adults in *The Cabin in the Woods*. At the start of the film, the five college students view the cabin, the woods, and the lake as an asylum from the pressures of the "real" world. Yet this place is not a sanctuary, but an elaborate trap. When the pain-worshipping, zombified Buckner family penetrates this space, the young adults find that their safe haven has become a prison from which they cannot escape. And, as Clover articulated, the Terrible Place within *The Cabin in the Woods* is "decidedly 'intrauterine'" and "dark and often damp" (48). When the Rambler is driven into the lake, Dana—the film's "virginal" Final Girl, played by Kristin Connolly —struggles to escape the confines of the RV so that she may swim up toward the surface of the lake. The scene is very reminiscent of the birthing process, and Dana's attempt to violently escape the womb-like lake matches the frequent horror genre motif of monstrous female sexuality and motherhood. Her eventual breach also marks a metaphorical rebirth for Dana, as she emerges a stronger, more capable survivor.

[4] Clover argues that there is a sense of identification attached to the Final Girl as she emerges the hero of the slasher film: "This is not to say that our attachment to her is exclusive and unremitting, only that it adds up, and that in the closing sequence (which can be quite prolonged) it is very close to absolute" (45). Clover maintains that a potential identification with the Final Girl, often established through scenes set in the Terrible Place, is possible regardless of the viewer's gender. *The Cabin in the Woods* draws attention to this complex identification process. As Dana attempts to fight off Father Buckner's final attack on the dock, the film switches perspectives. The shift from Dana's battle on the dock to the interior of the Control Room in the underground Complex produces a visual reminder about spectatorship and viewer identification. The camera reveals not just those in the Control Room watching Dana, but it also allows audiences to watch people watching Dana's attempt to stay alive in the Terrible Place. *The Cabin in the Woods* forces a sort of recognition on the viewer about the emotional investment of the spectator. Almost as if speaking for the audience, one of the main operators in the Control Room, Steve Hadley (played by Bradley Whitford) voices a short-lived, but heartfelt, compassion for Dana's suffering when he says: "It's so strange. I'm actually rooting for this girl." Hadley's interest in Dana fades with the arrival of hard liquor, but Dana and the Terrible Place remain on the

Control Room's monitors for audiences to witness as they watch the workers in the Complex celebrate.

[5] *The Cabin in the Woods* devotes considerable plot and screen time to the construction of the Terrible Place, making it an ideal subject for a topoanalytical reading based on Clover's ideas. Yet even though the cabin, the woods, and the lake might form the quintessential Terrible Place, this space is artificially produced by those in the Complex. The film, by drawing attention to this artificiality, points to the possible inauthenticity of all such places within horror. The overtly constructed places within *The Cabin in the Woods* help produce a sense of placelessness as the realities and perhaps authenticities of all the places within the film are forcefully disrupted. Edward Relph, in his 1976 *Place and Placelessness*, defines placelessness as "the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places" (6). He argues that placelessness has become a dominant force within modern culture through "mass communications, mass culture, big business, powerful central authority, and the [current] economic system" (90). According to Relph, any relationship developed with a weakened place is inauthentic because such a relationship creates "essentially no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities" (82). For Relph, inauthentic experiences with place disturb the necessary individual and cultural developments of understanding and identity afforded by authentic place-relationships that display a genuine awareness of the complex, multi-layered constructions of place. Relph's use of "authentic" and "inauthentic" are based upon a phenomenological approach to his argument. Nevertheless, the ideas of placelessness can be reframed into more accessible, and potentially less problematic, concepts. Some scholars, like Melanie Smith, argue that placelessness can also be seen as "an emotion or a feeling, an intangible response to one's immediate environment [that] encapsulates the 'could be anywhere' feeling" (99). When an individual, group, or society experiences a disconnection towards or alienation from a place or places, the resultant emotion can be a sense of placelessness. Placelessness is usually viewed as neither a strictly negative or positive state-of-being; however, it is the result of casual, superficial, or partial interactions and experiences with a place or places. Such experiences often create impersonal, inaccurate, or incomplete relationships that hamper both conscious and unconscious efforts to understand, perceive, and appreciate the significance of places, their roles in societal and individual development, and their complex

identities. Placelessness can be linked to other concepts, like Marc Augé's non-places, Homi Bhabha's homelessness, and even Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny.

[6] Within the horror genre, placelessness is repeatedly manifested through the terrible destruction of cultural and individual identities and bodies. In Sam Raimi's 1981 *The Evil Dead*, for example, the brutal deaths of the young adults are connected to a sense of placelessness. The young adults' perceived sense of the cabin and surrounding woods, as a safe retreat from the realities and repercussions of the world, is destroyed by the reality produced after listening to the incantations from the Naturon Demonto. Audiences likewise encounter a placeless sensation as the isolated cabin reads as if it could be any place or no real place. Placelessness is more transparent in *The Cabin in the Woods* because the film openly examines the constructed nature of places within American horror. The film also explores the relationship between characters' inability to connect to their places and the continued fears expressed about the lack of an American cultural sense of place. Placelessness is experienced in all the places encountered by the young adults in the narrative of *The Cabin in the Woods*. The placeless qualities of the settings within the film are intended to affect both the characters' understandings of self as well as the audiences' interactions with the film.

[7] As the five young adults head in the Rambler toward their weekend retreat at the cabin, there is a marked disruption—both in narrative and visually—of geographical and even temporal indicators. Jules Loudon (played by Anna Hutchinson), who grows increasingly dumb and horny until her brutal death as the "whore," expresses mild concern about the failure to geographically pinpoint the cabin when she says: "It doesn't even show up on the GPS. It is unworthy of global positioning." Marty Mikalski, the "fool" played by Fran Kranz, asks if the point isn't exactly to "get off the grid" for a while. Although they remain very much on the grid established by those in the Complex, the young adults, except perhaps for Marty, feel increasingly dislocated as their centers of meaning are left undefined or unraveling. Their route to the cabin takes them through a wooded area that could be nearly any forested space in America. The gas station heightens the young adults' feelings of disjunction as it appears as if it could be from nearly any decade and found in any region. Marc Augé claims that any place that cannot be defined "as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (78). The gas station becomes a non-place as it fails to present any sort of relational or historical identity that can be understood by the young

adults. Curt Vaughn, the “jock” figure played by Chris Hemsworth, states that the gas station looks too dated to take credit cards, but Marty retorts that he is unsure if the place even knows about the concept of money. Although they joke about the gas station’s nature, this non-place clearly unnerves them. The “scholar” Holden McCrea (played by Jesse Williams), already disturbed by the gas station, is easily startled by the sudden presence of the gas station attendant, Mordecai. Mordecai, the officially labeled Harbinger played by Tim DeZarn, speaks authoritatively about the past of the “Buckner place,” but his knowledge is historically vague and based on his claim that: “Hell, I been here since the war.” Jules’ question about which war is not the result of blind ignorance; Mordecai looks like he could have served in any number of the previous wars in American history since the Vietnam War. His angry retort of “You know damn well which war!” further undermines any clear temporal relationship with the place. Marty mockingly asks: “Would that have been with the blue and some gray? Brother, perhaps fighting against brother in that war?” Marty’s comment, although highly amusing, only further serves to produce a sense of placelessness. In this scene, the gas station proves to be as much a Harbinger as is the attendant. Ominous, vague, and lacking the relational and historical elements needed for a sense of identity to be crafted, the gas station signals the oncoming crescendo of placelessness just as the human Harbinger warns the young adults of their impending doom.

[8] The feelings of placelessness continue with the young adults’ arrival at the cabin. The cabin, like the gas station, is also a non-place lacking any particular historical or relational identity. The out-of-place, out-of-time sensation created in the cabin by the mounted wolf’s head and the disturbing painting are juxtaposed against the more modern sensibilities produced through updated utilities and furniture. The young adults’ perceptions of the cabin and its surrounding area are, of course, being manipulated by workers down in the Complex. In a co-interview with Goddard, Whedon admits to a fascination with the theme of control. Ultimately, he argues, this film is not just about a shadowy Complex controlling a group of kids; it is also about the idea that “we are all controlled, we are all experimented upon, and we are all dying from it” (Whedon and Goddard 19). The young adults are unable to understand the realities of the cabin and its surrounding area largely because of the ways this place is being controlled by those in the Complex. Without a genuine awareness of the complex, multi-layered constructions of this place, however, the young adults are unable to

escape the placelessness of their situation. One of Relph's greatest concerns about placelessness was its negative effect on the development of cultural and individual identities. As the young adults experience greater degrees of the Complex-fabricated placelessness, they begin to lose their original personalities and are no longer able to fully claim their previous identities. The underground organization is manipulating them as fully as it is controlling the nature of the place. The young adults, like the place around them, are experiencing a weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities. In their own way, they are becoming placeless.

[9] Place is both spatially and socially constructed, and the cabin in the woods has been manipulated on both fronts. Curt and Jules are the first to feel the placelessness produced through an alienation with this place. Trusting in a false sense of security, a security derived in part from their social understandings of their places in the world, they begin to have sex in the woods. Vulnerable and incapable of comprehending the true nature of the place, neither of them is prepared for the Buckners' attack and Jules is murdered. At the same time that this couple is experiencing a placelessness connected to place-as-a-social-construct, Marty is experiencing a sense of placelessness connected to place-as-a-spatial-construct. Having been subconsciously nudged into leaving the "safety" of the cabin, he walks outside and looks up at the sky before remarking to himself: "I thought there'd be stars." Marty pauses for a moment, as if perhaps remembering that humans have long navigated and identified earthly places through the location of stars. Without any heavenly markers to help situate their position, the young adults' spatial understanding is diminished. At the same time, the absence of stars foreshadows that these young adults cannot be guided away from this destination; there is no way out. Although cast as the "fool" by those in the Complex, his next words reinforce his status as, at the very least, a prophetic fool. He whispers: "We are abandoned." Shortly thereafter the remaining four young adults become aware that their inability to perceive the placelessness of their situation will be fatal to them all.

[10] The organization in the Complex is manipulating this place and producing, in the young adults, a sense of placelessness. There is also, however, a degree of manipulation in the film's visual presentation of the cabin that can potentially affect the viewers. Regarding constructing the interior of the cabin set, production designer Martin Whist states: "The other thing I did with the cabin interior was design it maybe ten percent bigger than it should have been. The

main living space was just a little too big, and made [the characters] feel small and a little alone—uncomfortable, almost as though the walls were observing the people inside . . .” (qtd. in *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official* 65). Although the characters never directly comment on the unusual size of the interior of the cabin, the visual maneuvering produces an interesting effect. If only on a subconscious level, audiences may note that their own visual-spatial understandings of the cabin do not properly align with the narrative’s construction of a small, unimposing cabin in the woods. The cabin becomes a site of placelessness as the young adults discover that their attitude toward the place has been built on inauthentic assumptions. Simultaneously, as the audiences’ relationships with the place are problematized by incomplete or inaccurate spatial knowledge, the cabin becomes a source for the viewers’ feelings of placelessness.

[11] The college town, the gas station, and the cabin in the woods could be from nearly any time or place in America. Whist said that he purposely wanted the early scenes in the college town and Dana’s dorm room to feel “predictable and light, comfortable and familiar” (qtd. in *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official* 53). Yet these places are freed not only from temporal-spatial constraints, they also seem unbound by cinematic restraints. Many of the places within *The Cabin in the Woods* intentionally look and feel uncannily familiar to audiences. Horror aficionados are reminded of locations in films like *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), *Cabin Fever* (2002), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Wrong Turn* (2003). In her discussion of placelessness, Melanie Smith argues that when a place feels as if it could be anywhere, one result of such placelessness can be the feeling that a place has become “a kind of nowhere land, home to no one” (99). *The Cabin in the Woods* creates this sense of placelessness by creating feelings of *déjà vu*; audiences feel that the places they are watching in this film could (and do) exist in any number of horror films. There is a certain nostalgia produced in returning to classic horror film locations, but there is also the potentially alienating realization that many of the places in *The Cabin in the Woods* do not really “belong” to this film. And if they do not belong to this film, horror fans are forced to ask themselves whether these places belong to any film.

[12] Eventually Dana and Marty leave behind the traditional Terrible Place and find themselves in the Complex. Yet even when *The Cabin in the Woods* departs from the generically familiar, the film still focuses on questions of place and space. Less than thirty minutes from the conclusion of the film, Marty leads

Dana into the faux-grave/releasing area above the Buckners' elevator-transported holding cell. Dana's question is simple: "What is this place?" Dana's demand to know the details of that place echoes the viewer's own questions about the Complex. Until Dana and Marty head down in the elevator, it is unclear where exactly the Complex is located. It, like all the other locations in the film, could be anywhere and from any number of decades. The office pool, the trite discussions in the break room, the mixture of old-school and top-of-the-line technology, and the feelings of routine work-life all reinforce the vague feelings of placelessness associated with the Complex. Even the shockingly unique machine used to transfer blood from the containers in the Control Room down to the Chamber fails to present any sort of relational or historical markers that would allow an accurate understanding of the place. The not-strictly vertical journey of Dana and Marty's elevator reveals a warren of monster-holding cells that seem to defy all logic. The holding cells seem too countless, too much in flux, and too varied to be able to occupy any space, let alone the same space. The rest of the Complex is equally spatially indefinable; the monitors reveal an unprecedented number and variety of rooms and locations that seem impossible to fit within one Complex. When the familiar voice of the Director (played by Sigourney Weaver) sounds over the intercom, she apologizes to Dana and Marty for their troubles before telling them: "You shouldn't be here." The vagueness of the pronoun "here" matches the placelessness of the Complex felt first by Dana and Marty (and the audience) and eventually shared by most of the characters in the film.

[14] The external condition of placelessness in the Complex brought on by the ambiguously defined spaces of the Complex, the unleashing of the monsters, and the rising of the Ancient Ones is matched by the characters' internal feelings of placelessness as they experience a disconnect from this place. For most of the Complex workers, placelessness results from their discovery that the reality of their workplace (as the location of their demise) does not match their formerly constructed identities as typical workers in a typical work place. The truth of the Complex intrudes upon Dana and Marty's belief that they might find below ground some respite from their suffering. Even the Director's sense of the place and her role within that place—as the protector of humanity who remains safe within her work environment—is shattered at the end of the film, first by Dana and Marty's refusal to be sacrificed and then finally by Patience Buckner's axe. Ultimately, no character in the film is left without some sense of placelessness.

[15] The conclusion of *The Cabin in the Woods*, with the hand of an ancient god emerging from the Earth's center to destroy the cabin, is perhaps the most literal manifestation of placelessness in the film. Yet this end is also tied to the film's larger discourse on globalization and place(lessness). In his *Dictionary of Globalization*, Andrew Jones suggests that, at its most basic level, globalization can be defined as "the growing interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all aspects of society" (2). Although he argues that it is not a new process in human history, Jones suggests that globalization has become an unmistakable force since the mid-twentieth century (2). This definition of interconnectedness and interrelatedness seems far removed from the impersonal, inaccurate, and incomplete understandings of place created by placelessness. Yet as Mike Featherstone suggests:

If one of the characteristics associated with postmodernism is the loss of a sense of a common historical past and the flattening out and spatialization of long-established symbolic hierarchies . . . then the process of globalization, the emergence of the sense that the world is a single place, may have directly contributed to this perspective through bringing about a greater interchange and clashing of different images of global order and historical narratives. (88)

Featherstone's observations about the often contentious nature of globalization account for the struggles of many nation-states, cultures, and individuals to locate and understand their sense of "place" within an evolving global landscape. Viewing the world as a single place can suppress belief in the diversity or distinctiveness of places. If such an experience creates a sense of alienation from certain places, the consequence of globalization may be feelings of placelessness. Places are centers of meaning. Therefore impaired relationships with place, caused by placelessness, may produce altered meanings and incomplete cultural or individual identities. Although many have long equated globalization with Americanization or American imperialism, placelessness due to globalization can be experienced as fully within the American psyche and cultural landscape as it can be within any other global identities.

[16] Cresswell argues that regarding understandings of place, the "social and the spatial are so thoroughly imbued with each other's presence that their analytical separation quickly becomes a misleading exercise" (11). The geographical position of the nation may not be affected by a shifting global landscape or problematic views on Americanization. Nevertheless, the American

cultural sense of place is certainly affected by how Americans, and others in the world, view America's place in the larger global community. Recent views of globalization recognize that the shifting structures of the world no longer exclusively prioritize American, or even Western, sensibilities (Featherstone 88-89). The modern acknowledgement of a plurality of histories and particularities undermines previously held hierarchical and imperial viewings of the world. For some, these questions about America's place in the world weakens, or at least significantly changes, understandings of cultural identities. Even without these recent developments in global thinking, some scholars posit that the idea of Americanization should only be viewed as a discursive construct. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto claims that it is critical to view globalization not as the consumption of the world by Americanization, but rather to view how the often contradictory images of "America" are communicated to other global sets of images and constructions of identities (108). In "the globalized space of image," not everything American can be equated or assumed as inherently joined to American nationalism because "the notion and/or critique of Americanization can even be a manifestation of other kinds of imperialist enterprise in disguise" (Yoshimoto 108). Yoshimoto's argument is particularly applicable to the treatment of globalization in *The Cabin in the Woods*. The film concludes with the realization that American imperialism is not the driving global force. Rather there is another, quite unexpected, imperialist enterprise in disguise pulling the strings.

[17] From the start of the film, *The Cabin in the Woods* draws attention to a global picture. The film starts with a brief montage in which a blood-like substance reveals artwork from various cultures, times, and locations. Images representing ancient Egyptian, Aztec, early Christian, and other cultural art are linked together by their themes of human suffering. The scene is short and very stylistically different from the majority of the film; however, this opening scene foreshadows the globularity inherent to this film. With both narrative strands—the plot in the Complex and the story with the young adults aboveground—*The Cabin in the Woods* introduces multiple characters for the first time by showing them engaged in a conversation that starts domestic and localized and eventually shifts into an awareness of global concerns and identity constructions. The first interaction in the Complex between Hadley and Gary Sitterson (played by Richard Jenkins) starts with talk about child-proofing the home. As the conversation expands, Hadley and Sitterson move from the small break room to the larger spaces that comprise the Complex. They are approached by their colleague Wendy

Lin (played by Amy Acker). She informs them that "Stockholm went South." This is the first, but not the last time that the Complex is situated as but one player on a larger global stage. The majority of the global themes in *The Cabin in the Woods* occur down in the Complex. Nevertheless, even the young adults in the film are aware of globalization's effects on their world and their identities. The opening conversation between Dana and Jules also begins with more domestic concerns: a failed relationship and a new hair color. Yet as with Hadley and Sitterson's conversation, the topic of the two young women's dialogue eventually shifts to global matters. Despite Jules's protests, Dana has packed books on Soviet economic structures in case she gets bored while on their trip to the cabin in the woods. The topic of the books is further pursued with the arrival of Curt. A sociology major before he becomes jockified, Curt makes some further reading recommendations to Dana. It is a short scene in the film, but in a film as tightly constructed as is *The Cabin in the Woods*, the focus on these books and their topics—however brief—should not be ignored. Overall, the film devotes, in one form or another, considerable screen time to issues of globalization.

[18] Much of the interplay on globalization in the film is focused on exploring the interconnectedness of a global community and the frequent tensions that can emerge with vying cultural power sources. Those in the Complex are deeply invested in debating and acknowledging a global ranking system. Lin informs Hadley and Sitterson that without Stockholm, it is down to just Japan—"Japan and us." Sitterson attempts to reassure her that "Japan has a perfect record." Hadley quips afterward: "And we're number two; we try harder." This exchange reveals a global framework in which the West and America are clearly not the only players, or even the most authoritative ones, shaping the global landscape. Hadley's remark that America is number two does suggest a sense of place-fullness; America has a clear position, and subsequent identity, in this scenario. Yet this casually offered remark about America's lack of status as the global top-dog also contrasts with a still popular (mis)conception that America is the global force with which to reckon. As the film progresses, the scenes within the Complex serve to regularly question and problematize America's global place and the cultural identities tied into this sense of place. Although Hadley suggests he would not mind seeing Japan falter just once, Sitterson reacts in horror to even the idea of such a situation. As he reminds his co-worker that "There's too much riding on this," the camera reveals a bank of monitors showing various locations around the world, including, in the center of the visible monitors, Kyoto.

Japan's place in the center of the equation is visually reinforced as the shot zooms into a scene of screaming Japanese girls, and the monitors on either side (revealing failed sites around the world) disappear out of the frame.

[19] Later in the film, Japan fails in its mission; the Ancient Ones are not properly appeased. Lin flashes onto one of the monitors in the Control Room and sarcastically reminds Hadley and Sitterson about their assumptions of Japan's infallibility. Hadley clicks through a series of images from Berlin, Stockholm, Rangoon, Buenos Aires, and Madrid, all presenting the same basic images of destruction and the giant red letters of the word "FAIL." Hadley, in an attempt to reclaim a sense of place within this situation, declares: "I'm telling you, you want good product, you gotta buy American." This affirmation and attempt to situate America into a new global position (as a returning "king of the hill") momentarily bolsters Sitterson, but it fails to slacken Lin's anxieties. Lin, acting as the film's Harbinger much as Mordecai acted as the Complex's Harbinger, warns her co-workers (and by extension the audience) of the consequences of a false understanding of America's place in the global landscape. Her words serve as a reminder of the inevitability of placelessness within a global framework and of the devastating consequences of being unable to secure a sense of place and identity. Although her warning is cut short, her point proves prophetic. Unable to process quickly enough the reality of their place, of America's place, in the global community of the organization, Hadley and Sitterson are ill-prepared for the actualities of their situations.

[20] After Hadley and Sitterson are murdered, the Director is the only one left in the Complex who can explain to Dana and Marty what their place must be within the larger global picture. She informs the young adults that if humans are to survive, then we must appease them. Her discourse of "we" and "them" ties directly back to the themes of place and globalization stressed throughout the film. Tim Cresswell points out that places are often used to create borders between groups of people, between the "we" and the "them" (153-154). Each time that the film creates a we/them binary it does so through spatial boundaries: the young adults above ground/those in the Complex below ground; the American branch of the organization/the Japanese branch of the organization; the humans on Earth/the Ancient Ones in the Earth. The Director promises them that the world will end if the borders between we/humans and them/Ancient Ones are breached. Yet Marty is unsure of whether such an end is altogether wrong if it will also end the binary of we/his friends and them/a shadowy, controlling

organization. Marty informs the Director: "Maybe that's the way it should be. If you've got to kill all my friends to survive, maybe it's time for a change." Puffing on Marty's last joint while they wait for the rise of the Ancient Ones, Dana tells Marty: "You were right. Humanity It's time to give someone else a chance." Dana is of course speaking in reference to the Ancient Ones, but the film's meta-commentary status suggests larger implications for this final thought. Her comment could also be a reflection on the need to give up cultural perceptions that America has secured a top-place in the global community. Perhaps, like the Ancient Ones, there are other cultures—as historically rich and complex as America—that have long been suppressed in a political and economic slumber and are ready to rise.¹ *The Cabin in the Woods* concludes with a startling and terrifying suggestion that perhaps American cultural fears of placelessness and globalization are based on an inescapable future in which another global force will dominate.

[21] In the co-interview with Goddard, Whedon stated that making *The Cabin in the Woods* was as much an opportunity to pay homage to horror films like *The Evil Dead* as it was an opportunity to "ask the question, not only why do we like to see this, but why do we like to see this exactly? Why do we keep coming back to this formula?" (Whedon and Goddard 10). He and Goddard provided a fictional solution to these questions. In the process of penning and producing the film, however, they also underscore a deeper truth. Elements reoccur within the horror genre when they resonate with larger cultural fears, struggles, and beliefs. The formula of a group of kids going to a remote place is frequently revisited; therefore, there must be something about this equation that addresses important cultural concerns. *The Cabin in the Woods* suggests that, at least in part, this horror-genre formula articulates fears and anxieties associated with placelessness, globalization, and cultural and personal identities shaped by these forces. Within this film, as well as many other texts in American horror, there exists ample opportunity to explore and enact the potentially devastating consequences of losing a sense of America as place. These texts don't just provide an opportunity to confront such issues; they also attempt to cathartically overcome and conquer these fears. Featherstone writes that "[a] sense of home is sustained by collective memory, which itself depends upon ritual performances, bodily practices and commemorative ceremonies" (94). Horror films attempt to sustain a sense of home, of identity, and of place by repeating the ritualized formula highlighted in Whedon and Goddard's film. Yet as *The Cabin in the Woods*

suggests, this ritual is not enough to prevent the sense of home from eroding over time. It is not enough to completely stave off cultural fears about place and identity. The Ancient Ones continue to return and eventually their needs will not be fulfilled. The Cabin in the Woods ends with an Ancient One not only destroying the cabin but smashing down onto the audiences' perspective. The film's final message is clear. No matter how many times we engage in this ceremonial purge, we will never again find our true sense of home. Placelessness is an inevitable and unavoidable reality.

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Notes

1. Editors' note: See also Cooper's "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism" in this issue.