

Curtis A. Weyant

Exploring Cabins in the Whedonverse Woods



Introduction

[1] In *The Cabin in the Woods* (hereinafter “*Cabin*”), Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard present a scenario familiar to fans of horror as part tribute and part commentary on the horror genre itself. In an interview printed in *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion* to the movie, Whedon says that making *Cabin* “was a way to pay homage to the movies that I adore . . . but at the same time, [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?” (10) The formula Whedon refers to is the response characters tend to have when confronted by terrifying situations and monsters: namely, “doing really stupid things” (11). Although Goddard admits to not hating the stupidity of typical horror characters in quite the same way, he explains, “I feel like, ‘We need to comment on it.’” The commentary they present in *Cabin* is of characters who are manipulated into doing a variety of things they normally would not.

[2] However, character action is not the only piece of the formula. The scenario itself is just as important, because while the choices people make matter, the options available are often determined by their surroundings. Whedon notes that *The Cabin in the Woods* was always intended to be the title: “Even though it’s an odd title in a way, we wanted more than anything to evoke a classical sense of horror” (*Official Visual Companion* 19). Whedon and Goddard explicitly invoke “classical” horror movies like *The Evil Dead* and its sequels through the use of visual references, such as the cabin’s exterior, as well as the very scenario implied by a remote cabin. Not only are cabins in woods a staple of the horror genre, ubiquitously recognizable as an iconic setting, but the visual of a cabin in a woods provides instant recognition of an older theme of terror in the wilderness that has continued down from folklore tales and gothic stories to the modern horror genre. The woods are wild, and they represent both potential and actual dangers, while the cabin is a civilizing force, something to keep out those dangers and provide at least some of the benefits of society. At the same time cabins indicate a desire for separation from society. This paper argues in part that a title like *The Cabin in the Woods* “evoke[s] a classical sense of horror” not

merely because cabins are prevalent in so many horror movies, but because the cabin scenarios inherently describe the ambiguous relationship modern humans have with wilderness. Through this analysis, it will be possible to identify of the elements of the “cabin scenario” and show that they work together to provide a focusing effect that changes the characters who find themselves in such scenarios.

[3] Since *Cabin’s* release, a number of links have been made between it and other Whedonverse stories, such as the high levels of surveillance employed in both *Dollhouse* and *Cabin* (*Official Visual Companion* 19). However, little, if any, analysis has focused on several other cabin scenarios found across the Whedonverses. This paper will consider four specific episodes from Whedon-created shows—“The Target” (*Dollhouse* 1.2), “Homecoming” (*Buffy* 3.5), “Spiral” (*BtVS* 3.5), and “Heart of Gold” (*Firefly* 1.13)—to show how the generic criteria of cabin scenarios apply (or are subverted) and discuss how characters are affected in each scenario.

Beyond Terrible Places: Identifying Cabin Scenarios

[4] Many early horror movies were direct adaptations of popular gothic novels, for which monsters provided cinematic substance, while their gothic settings remained mostly empty dressing. However, with a change in medium also came a change in quality of the monsters themselves. Within gothic novels “the monster is a manifestation of the protagonist or intimately connected with him”; however, in film versions “many different means of connecting the monster with another character were used by . . . filmmakers,” and “the identification of monster and protagonist was seldom as sustained as in the novel” (Bloom 1-2). The gothic monster is “a balancing act between inside/outside, female/male, body/mind,” while contemporary horror movies present a postmodern monstrous surface which “transforms the cavernous monstrosity of Jekyll/Hyde, Dorian Gray, or Dracula into a beast who is all body and no soul” (Halberstam 1). Horror films today “clearly perpetuate the linguistic meaning of the monster . . . but at the same time . . . they generate an important new set of textual meanings” with “a different syntax [that] rapidly equates monstrosity not with the overactive nineteenth-century mind, but with an equally overreactive twentieth-century body” (Altman 15).

[5] This shift in symbolic interpretation of monsters implies that the existence of a monster is more important than the type of monster which exists. *Cabin* acknowledges the

necessity of the monster while casting doubt on the significance of particular monsters in modern horror film. When, in *Cabin*, Truman questions the ethicality of betting on a known outcome, Hadley informs him, "We just get 'em to the cellar," and Sitterson explains, "They have to make the choice of their own free will," implying that such choice requires no special skill, or even awareness, since the only purpose is to kill. As is revealed later by the array of options listed on the whiteboard and the sheer number of monsters imprisoned in the cubes within the facility, even if the ability to make the choice matters, the actual choice made does not. Any monster chosen could have served the purpose of the ritual, and even if the Buckners "are on the one hand . . . the perfect monster for this film; on the other hand, they are only one seemingly random option" (Cooper, par. 13).¹ Although modern horror films continue to preserve the device of the gothic monster, the once pivotal connection between the monster and the characters has been severely diluted, retaining only the most tenuous and trivial relationship. In this context the significance of setting emerges, for if a monster is not in some way the reflection of the protagonist, as it is gothic literature, it may instead be a product of the protagonist's surroundings. In the modern horror movie, the protagonist's central question shifts from "What am I doing to my world?" to "What is my world doing to me?" And the cabin scenario becomes one ideal setting to answer such a question.

[6] Given *Cabin's* metacommentary on horror movies, "but particularly the early slasher" (Metz par. 7), a reasonable place to begin analysis of the "cabin scenario" is with Carol Clover's identification of the Terrible Place. "[M]ost often a house or tunnel," Clover notes that Terrible Places are terrible partly because of their "Victorian decrepitude," but more significantly due to "the terrible families—murderous, incestuous, cannibalistic—that occupy them" ("Her Body" 197). Terrible Places have an "intrauterine" quality, "dark and often damp," where killers plan their attacks (209) and where victims "survey the visible evidence of the [killer's] human crimes and perversions" and ascertain "their own immediate peril" (197). Insofar as a Terrible Place may initially serve as a "safe haven" for victims, it likewise often prevents victims from escaping, especially after the "pivotal moment" of the "penetration scene" requiring the Final Girl (another Clover identification) to fight back against her attacker (198).

[7] The traits of the Terrible Place apply easily to the structures in *Cabin*. The eponymous cabin has a decrepit exterior, while both the basement and the Black Room provide a "dark and . . . damp" intrauterine feel with disquieted atmospheres of grim history and impending menace. When Dana reads Patience Buckner's diary we, along with the

characters, learn about the “murderous . . . cannibalistic” Buckner family, and the cabin itself (called “the old Buckner place” by Mordecai) provides only temporary sanctuary for Curt, Dana, Holden, and Marty.² The underground facility also serves as a Terrible Place, distinct from the cabin. Although not Victorian, there is a certain decrepitude about the Cold War–era-esque bunker construction. The existence of a deep cavern from which monstrous killers are released (or birthed) provides a distinctly intrauterine feel, and although it is clean and well lit initially, the facility quickly becomes dim and slick with blood after Dana purges the monsters’ cells. The facility’s staff, up to and including the Director, is something of a “terrible famil[y]” that is at least vicariously murderous.

[8] The readiness with which *Cabin* fits the Terrible Place model stems from its intentional and conspicuous allusions to prior films. Joe Lippsett notes the frequency with which *IMDb* reviewers cite movies such as *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1983), *Friday the Thirteenth* (Sean Cunningham, 1980) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), each of which features a cabin as its Terrible Place,³ and he observes that comparisons between *Cabin* and *The Evil Dead* in particular “are logical since the two share a number of characteristics, most predominantly the setting which gives [*Cabin*] its title” (par. 22). Other, “more obscure titles such as *Don’t Go in the Woods* (1981) . . . resonate directly” (Cooper, par. 1) with *Cabin* as well, but the connection between *Cabin* and the *Evil Dead* is distinctive enough that it has been presumed without question by both interviewers and fans of Whedon and Goddard.⁴ Similarities between the two films extend past their cabins’ external appearances and sylvan situations. Specifically, each movie includes a self-opening trap door that leads to a dark, dank (intrauterine) basement where the characters find a creepy book (among other things) containing an old text that should not be read aloud—but which is anyway. This stream of intersecting details demonstrates that, not only are the respective cabins of *The Evil Dead* and *Cabin* both Terrible Places, but the Terrible Placeness of the latter deliberately and meaningfully emulates that of the former.

[9] Perhaps ironically, the linkages between *Cabin* and *The Evil Dead* pull the “cabin scenario” away from the slasher subgenre. For although *The Evil Dead*’s cabin truly is a Terrible Place, the film as a whole does not satisfy the rest of Clover’s slasher formulation: The primary antagonist is supernatural or Lovecraftian (Muir, 1980s 321), not human and male, and it does not seem to be “propelled by psychosexual fury” (Clover, “Her Body” 194);⁵ the victims are young and primarily female, but none seem to be “sexual transgressors” (199);⁶ Clover herself acknowledges that Ash(ley), “the character who dies last,” does not “quite [play] the role” of an “incipient” Final *Boy*, even though his gender-

neutral name “seem[s] to play on the tradition” of the Final Girl (228, note 7).⁷ Since it contains only one primary slasher element,⁸ *The Evil Dead*—and its quintessential “cabin scenario”—appears to exist beyond the bounds of that particular subgenre.

[10] Of course, Clover admits that none of the elements she identifies is original to slasher films (“Her Body” 192), implying that Terrible Places exist across the variegated landscape of the horror genre, and it ought not surprise us if some of those Terrible Places are cabins. Films that prefigure *The Evil Dead*’s (and thus *Cabin*’s) cabin include Kåre Bergstrøm’s *De Dødes Tjern* (*The Lake of the Dead*, 1958), which features “an isolated mountain cabin set in a deep forest” (Normanton 194), and *Equinox* (Jack Woods, 1971), a nano-budget film about a demonologist “who discovers a demonic book, takes it to his remote cabin in the woods, and inadvertently conjures demonic forces” (Muir, 1970s 115).⁹ Among scholars looking at *Cabin*’s antecedents, Cooper suggests that “*Friday the 13th* lifted [the ‘cabin in the woods’ trope] from Italian Mario Bava’s *Bay of Blood*” (par. 4), while Nelson includes *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968)—which Whedon has called “the ur-movie of those being trapped” (*Official Visual Companion* 16)—in a list of movies featuring “the basic [cabin movie] scenario” (par. 15). Drew Goddard has cited John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982) as a major influence on *Cabin* “because it is a small amount of people trapped in one place, which I feel like all great cabin movies . . . are” (Wright). Revenge films such as *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) feature prominent cabin settings. Post-*Evil Dead* horror films with cabin scenarios include *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997 [German/French] and 2007 [English]) and *Cabin Fever* (Eli Roth, 2002), not to mention a bevy of neo-slashers and slasher remakes, reboots, prequels and sequels. Cabin scenarios even crop up in TV thrillers, such as *Terror Stalks the Class Reunion* (Clive Donner, 1992) and *Cabin by the Lake* (Po-Chih Leong, 2000).

[11] As might be expected, the further each of these movies is removed from Clover’s slasher formulation, the less their settings resemble the characterization of a Terrible Place. There is nothing initially terrible—no “murderous, incestuous, cannibalistic” families or grim histories—about the farmhouse in *Night of the Living Dead*, the Antarctic research station of *The Thing*, the lakeside vacation home of *Funny Games*, or the retreat cabin of *I Spit on Your Grave*; within each of these movies, the place becomes terrible as events unfold. Nonetheless, all of these movies contain recognizable cabin scenarios that conform to Goddard’s benchmark of “a small amount of people trapped in one place.” Such entrapment has two characteristics, namely, the isolated location of the cabin (or other

structure filling the cabin role) and the active menacing of force(s) keeping the victims in or near it.

[12] Stories about the dread of being trapped and menaced in an isolated area are certainly much older than horror movies. Of the tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “over half the stories (116 out of 210) in the 1857 edition explicitly mention forests as the location of some part of the story, and at least another 26 have very clear forest themes or images” (Maitland 16). Some of the terrors one might encounter in a fairy tale wood include that “witches masquerading as magnanimous mothers are nearly ubiquitous” (Tatar 142) and a hero may “find himself locked in combat with a superhuman opponent armed with supernatural powers” (145)—encounters the likes of which are not altogether unknown in modern horror films. Finn Ballard has drawn a connection between the “road-horror” movie, which “dramatises the potential repercussions of trespassing into an alien environment,” and the *Warnmärchen*, a specific type of folklore tale in which a child is “threatened by an ogre, man-eater, or wild animal in the forest or wilderness.” In road-horror movies, Ballard argues, “the devouring wolf of folklore has been replaced by the murderous, rural-dwelling human.” Such rural-dwelling humans are a “peculiar species” of “hillbillies, rednecks or mountain men” based on stereotypes of “inbreeding, insularity, backwardness, [and] sexual perversion” (Bell 93). Thus, while the fear of the rural killer, whether it be human, animal, or supernatural, is not exclusive to cabin scenarios, it does provide insight into what makes such scenarios terrifying.

[13] The question remains, however, as to what the cabin itself provides in such settings. If wilderness is terrifying, why do people build structures in it? Maitland argues that intense fear of the woods (as opposed to rational awareness of its perils) developed with post-industrial urbanization, yet people still retain an “almost hidden and often bizarrely ignorant love for wildwood [that] comes from the fairy stories” (21). Similarly, Bell identifies the “ambivalent position” of rural communities, which are “cherished as an innocent idyll of bucolic tranquility and communion with nature” where we can “retreat from the ever-quickening pace of urban living,” but also can be considered “positively dystopian” by visiting urbanites who are exposed to the “sick, sordid, malevolent, *nasty* underbelly” of ruralities (91). In *Cabin*, Jules acknowledges the importance of escape, saying to Dana, “We’re girls on the verge of going wild,” and later in the RV, Marty explains his own desires to “get off the grid. No cellphone reception, no markers, no traffic cameras . . . go somewhere for one goddamn weekend where they can’t globally position my ass.” However, even as they are looking to sequester themselves from modern society, *Cabin’s* protagonists

do not seek a complete return to the wilderness: as much as the woods separate them from modern society, the cabin itself is a civilizing force meant to protect them from the dangers of the great outdoors. Thus, the very existence of a remote structure is a recognition of *both* the deep-rooted human desire to reconnect with the idealized forests of our cultural and personal fantasies *and* the reality that we do not fully understand the hazards that such uncultivated places contain.

[14] Having removed the cabin scenario so far from Clover's Terrible Place, we should note that both concepts share one important feature. The Terrible Place "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" ("Her Body" 198), and this is true of the cabin scenario as well, especially since the surrounding wilderness offers no better protection from the killer, whose home is in that wilderness. It is only the desperate, and often doomed, character who will venture out of the dubious safety of the cabin and its immediate vicinity, even after that safety is breached. Upon penetration, the remaining characters (such as a Final Girl) have "at this point no choice but to fight back" (198), and this forced confrontation—the very epitome of a last stand in which the character(s) must choose either to fight or die—provides a focusing effect that strips away all other considerations. Cabin scenarios, like Terrible Places, are generally liminal spaces¹⁰ in which characters must accept the necessity of killing their own would-be killer, a circumstance they would find inconceivable in their formerly urban lifestyle. Other character insights may arise as well, but the universal realization of cabin scenarios is that, ironically, one must become wild in order to survive the wilderness long enough to return to civilization.¹¹

[15] Summarizing the discussion above, it is possible to come up with three generic elements of the cabin scenario: 1) a remote location (such as a woods) that cuts off the character(s) from the rest of society; 2) a man-made construction (such as a cabin) that likewise separates the characters from the wilderness; and 3) a monstrous threat, frequently human, that lives within or originates from the wilderness. Together, these three elements provide a focusing effect that requires the primary protagonist(s) to accept a certain wildness to survive. As with any generic formulations, these elements may become fuzzy or slightly misshapen when applied to specific circumstances. Nonetheless, they offer an informed platform from which to explore cabin scenarios throughout the Whedonverses.

"The Target"

[16] The primary plot of "The Target" revolves around Los Angeles Dollhouse client Richard Connell, who hires Echo (imprinted as "Jenny") for an excursion into an unnamed wilderness. After an adrenaline-filled day of white-water rafting, rock climbing, bow hunting and sex, Richard informs Echo (in a cabin-style tent) of his intent to hunt and kill her, and he gives her a five-minute head start to try to escape. The core cabin scenario begins when, after a harried chase through the woods, Echo stumbles upon a ranger's cabin. Although brief, the cabin scenario fulfills all of the criteria outlined above, and it plays out much like a horror movie. Notably, "The Target" has been identified as containing references to both Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel (St. Louis and Riggs, par. 7), both of which are *Warnmärchen* that Finn Ballard associates as precursors to the road-horror film. This association with "warning tales" holds up thematically as the episode plays with themes about knowing whom to trust, with the seemingly trustworthy lover (Richard) turning barbarous, while the stranger (Boyd) is the one Echo instinctively recognizes as reliable ("I feel like I can trust you") because of the embedded Handler-Active imprint (which, as Topher explains during a flashback, "requires line of sight").¹²

[17] Upon entering the cabin, Echo is as isolated from help as she can possibly get. Hearing radio static, she opens a closet door only to have the corpse of "Ranger Bob" fall on her. After she recovers, Echo tries to raise help on the radio and learns that Richard is the sole person near enough to hear her. Elsewhere, Echo's handler Boyd and an unnamed driver, neither of whom the imprint Jenny is aware of, are incapacitated by an armed man posing as the dead ranger, and the communications link between their van and the L.A. Dollhouse gets severed when a stray bullet hits the console. Nonetheless, Echo is emboldened by her situation in the cabin, which has offered her a moment of respite from the hunt. If Echo did not already fully believe Richard to be a psychopath, the ranger's dead body confirms it for her. When Richard taunts her over the radio ("Prove you're not just an echo"), Echo replies, "You want proof? I'm gonna kill you! Will that prove it?" This is a callback to their previous conversation in which Richard explained his father's "survival of the fittest" philosophy: "If you can bring down something bigger than you with just this [bow], you prove you deserve to eat it. If it gets away, it proved it deserves to live." In the cabin, Echo comes to understand that she cannot "get away"; the only way she can "deserve" to live is by becoming a killer herself. With that understanding, Echo "becomes more than [Richard's] target: she is the assassin and he is her mark" (Perdigao, par. 9).

[18] The subversion of the cabin scenario comes when Echo leaves before Richard can enter the structure, effectively making the "pivotal" penetration scene of kicking

through the door an impotent gesture. Having drunk drugged or poisoned water from a canteen in the cabin, Echo realizes before Richard's arrival that she has no chance, at that moment, of facing him directly. So Echo continues her flight, eventually running into Boyd, who provides Echo with the gun that allows her to face Richard as an equal—as a killer, just like him. Importantly, Echo's conversation with the injured Boyd, in which she states emphatically that "everything's *not* gonna be alright" until she kills Richard, is a reiteration of the threat she gave directly to Richard by radio at the cabin. Now, she has fully accepted Richard's philosophy and uses his words to explain to Boyd, "You don't get to live just because you deserve to, you have to prove it. You have to put your shoulder to the wheel." This acceptance of the perverted view of a Darwinian wild, which Echo must assume to keep herself and Boyd alive, is the culmination of the focus she found in the cabin, and ultimately it saves her and Boyd's lives.

"Homecoming"

[19] While "Homecoming" is host to a number of significant events for the Scoobies in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it primarily concerns the competition between Buffy and Cordelia as they vie for the coveted title of Homecoming Queen. Through a series of unfortunate diversions, the two girls find themselves pursued by participants in Slayerfest '98, an event coordinated by the entrepreneurial vampire Mr. Trick as an attempt to kill Buffy and the second Slayer Faith. Fleeing from their would-be assassins, Buffy and Cordelia manage to take refuge in an abandoned cabin in an isolated area outside Sunnydale known as Miller's Woods. Although not very far from Sunnydale, the woods are remote enough to effectively isolate Buffy and Cordelia from any immediate help, especially after the cabin's phone line is cut. Even so, it provides an initial level of safety from the monsters threatening the main characters, and while the respite is brief, it lets Buffy prepare for the coming onslaught as Cordelia looks for a weapon. However, the cabin ultimately fails to repel the monsters indefinitely. Kulak manages to jump through an unboarded window, and as he fights with Buffy and Cordelia, one of "the Germans" fires an explosive into the cabin—though, fortunately, the two girls are able to escape just before the cabin blows up. Like the cabin scenario in "The Target," the scenario in "Homecoming" is brief but important to character development, both within the episode and beyond it.

[20] Beyond the generic criteria, "Homecoming" shares several interesting points of comparison with *Cabin*. In both cases, the monsters are guided by remote handlers. In

"Homecoming," Mr. Trick assembles the Slayerfest assassins and sets up a ruse to bring Buffy and Cordelia to their hunting grounds, whereas the monsters of *Cabin* are blunt tools operated by an unnamed quasi-governmental bureaucracy, who also lure their victims to a remote location to conduct a sacrificial killing. Likewise, the victims in each scenario are targeted for specific attributes. In "Homecoming," the two girls are believed to be Slayers, while in *Cabin*, the victims are chosen to fit horror movie stereotypes. Ironically, in neither case does it matter whether the victims actually possess the trait(s) that single them out; it only matters that the aggressors *believe* the victims satisfy those traits. In "Homecoming," Cordelia repeatedly tries to tell the creatures hunting her that she is not a Slayer, to no avail, and in *Cabin*, none of the characters really fits the stereotype they are chosen to represent, requiring the Facility staff to use artificial manipulation ("We work with what we have," the Director tells Dana and Marty). Finally, the seclusion of the respective cabins works to the advantage of the antagonists. *Cabin's* cabin must be remote to prevent the victims from escaping as well as to inhibit knowledge about the ritual from filtering back to mainstream society. In "Homecoming," Mr. Trick chooses the remoteness of Miller's Woods for Slayerfest '98 so that his clients will have ample privacy to conduct their hunt without outside interference—and to discourage non-ticket-holders from joining in the fun without paying.

[21] Looking closer at "Homecoming," it is clear that the Miller's Woods cabin acts as a point of focus for the characters, who are drawn to the safety represented and provided by the cabin and who flee (or attempt to flee) only when it becomes obvious that the cabin itself is no longer a viable form of protection. The two girls use their time alone in the cabin to finally have the conversation about their respective desires and fears that they were unable have around their friends. This seclusion gives them an opportunity to interact in ways that they otherwise would not or could not, and it draws out information and characteristics that otherwise would not manifest. Because the cabin scenario focuses Buffy's and Cordelia's attention by removing other distractions and bringing them face to face with their own mortality, the two girls ultimately come to a closer understanding of each other's motives and frustrations, resulting in something closer to respect, if not exactly friendship.

"Spiral"

[22] The setup for the cabin scenario in "Spiral" is somewhat different than the prior examples. Buffy and the Scoobies actively flee Sunnydale, and Glory, in an RV, eventually finding themselves trapped in a secluded, abandoned desert gas station with an injured Giles, a captured General Gregor and a frustrated battalion of the Knights of Byzantium encompassing their makeshift stronghold. It should be acknowledged up front that this scenario strongly resembles the "last stand" scenario of Western or war genre movies, especially those involving embattled fortresses of some type.¹³ As noted above, cabin scenarios (like *Terrible Places*) frequently contain a last stand component, so the comparison may be expected. Furthermore, the ratio of Knights (many) to Scoobies (few) seems typical of prominent last stand scenarios from Westerns like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969) to war movies like *Zulu* (Cy Endfield, 1964), including hybrids such as *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960). Although the last stand may be a staple of Western and war films, last stand scenarios crop up in other genres as well, such as fantasy movies like *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) or *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006). The primary thread prevailing throughout typical last-stand movies is that in each case the smaller group of protagonists are trained, or at least experienced, fighters defending themselves against a larger army. While the Scoobies have varying degrees of fighting experience, in "Spiral" they act more representatively like (mostly) young, frightened horror victims than military personnel. Finally, even if the scenario of "Spiral" does constitute a last stand, it does not necessarily mean that it cannot also be a cabin scenario, especially considering the frequent genre-blending of narratives in *Buffy*.

[23] As it turns out, "Spiral" holds up very well to the generic cabin scenario criteria. As established by a variety of camera shots, the gas station is the only structure visible for miles around. The desert has cut them off from any reliable help; when Buffy says they need to keep moving, Xander asks simply, "Where?" to which she replies, "I don't know." Like the cabins in *Cabin*, "The Target," and "Homecoming," the abandoned gas station is the only viable shelter in an otherwise dangerous and unknown wilderness filled with eager killers. Characteristically of cabin scenarios, the Knights are also creatures of the wild, appearing primarily in an unnamed wooded area ("Spiral" and "Blood Ties" 5.13) or in the desert ("Spiral"). The few times the Knights enter Sunnydale proper — attacking Buffy in full armor ("Checkpoint" 5.12), taken captive by Glory ("Blood Ties"), and "undercover" at the hospital ("Spiral") — they are few in number and seem out of place. Furthermore, the gas station (bolstered by Willow's shield spell) provides safety from the surrounding environment, as well as the Knights, failing only when Ben is invited inside and transforms into Glory.

[24] Like the cabins examined above, the gas station in "Spiral" creates a focusing effect for the characters in the story. However, the "Spiral" cabin scenario becomes more complicated, in part because of the larger cast and intricacies of their assorted relationships. The Scoobies are collectively menaced by the Knights of Byzantium because of Dawn, whose very existence threatens all life in their dimension. On the flip side, although the Knights have much greater numbers and weaponry, they are held in check primarily by Willow's magic, but also by the fact that Buffy takes General Gregor as a prisoner. Upon Ben's arrival, Dawn's life is put in even more acute danger because none of the Scoobies knows about the link between Ben and Glory, and although Glory is repressed at that particular point in time, she becomes threatened by Ben's awareness of Dawn's significance as The Key. The relationships between the motives, desires and hesitations of the parties trapped in the gas station thus become elaborately interweaved in a way they could not have been anywhere else. For example, had the showdown occurred someplace within Sunnydale, rather than at a remote building, it is hard to believe that a battalion of armor-wearing, sword-bearing knights would not draw at least some attention by official authorities. Even if the police themselves did not become involved in such an event, there is still a fair chance of some third (or fourth) party entanglement, such as occurs when Glory is hit by a truck earlier in the same episode.

[25] Perhaps the most significant effect of the cabin scenario in "Spiral" is in the elimination of "fight or flight" responses. The characters find themselves in a sort of Mexican standoff on steroids, and as a result they are forced to repress their instinctual reactions and rely instead on their knowledge, skills, ingenuity, morality, and other aspects of their personalities that often are ignored when the adrenaline begins pumping. Before this point, Buffy had already begun to develop a sense of leadership; however, her conversation with General Gregor highlights her deficiencies and points out several potential areas of improvement. Even though she rejects Gregor's methods, she seems to pay close attention to his ideas about dedication and discipline in fighting against evil — traits that she will cultivate (not always positively) in later seasons. Likewise, Ben's close quarters with Dawn brings into doubt his stated desire to heal rather than harm, an ethical question foreshadowed earlier in the episode by one of Glory's minions. Even Xander finds a modicum of compassion for Spike when he sees the vampire trying to light a cigarette with bandaged hands, momentarily setting aside his usual knee-jerk antipathy. All of these traits can be compared with similar traits revealed in the characters of *Cabin*, at least in kind if not intensity. For example, Holden's decision to disclose the presence of a two-way mirror is just as satisfying, in a socially ethical sort of way, as Ben's choice not to drug Dawn. Curt's

willingness to help his remaining friends by attempting to jump the gap on his motorcycle may be likened to the danger Buffy and Xander face when they leave the safety of the gas station to palaver with the Knights, who are itching for the chance to kill them. There is even some parallel between Dawn, who questions Gregor about her former role as the Key, and Dana and Marty, who delve into the Facility below their cabin in a desperate attempt to learn more about why they and their friends are being hunted. Once again, it is the cabin scenarios in each story, not simply the presence of a monster, that draw out these character traits that might otherwise stay inert.

“Heart of Gold”

[26] The thirteenth episode of *Firefly* presents circumstances significantly different than the cabin scenarios above. Notably, the events of *Firefly* take place in a completely mundane (if high-tech) universe: there are no gods or demons, no magic or monsters, no Hellmouths or higher powers. Indeed, there are not known to be any aliens. The characters in *Firefly* are completely human, and so are their motives. More importantly for the purposes of this analysis, the whorehouse in “Heart of Gold” is not abandoned like any of the other cabins explored so far. Quite the opposite, it is occupied continuously and frequented by a variety of visitors. Furthermore, all of the same points related to last-stand scenarios for “Spiral” apply to “Heart of Gold,” with the additional awareness that at least four of the members of *Serenity’s* crew—Mal, Zoe, Jayne and Book¹⁴—have extensive military training or outlaw experience (or both). The only possible response to this is to test the bounds of this “character-rich sci-fi western comedy-drama” (Nussbaum) to see if it might flex a little further to include the horror setting of a cabin scenario.¹⁵

[27] In light of both its isolation and constant inhabitation, the whorehouse in “Heart of Gold” is fairly self-sufficient, having a solar-power wrap, an underground well, and at least some supply of food and liquor. Even though it is remote, the whorehouse is a place where people live, work, and enjoy themselves on a daily basis, not someplace that is forgotten, discarded or used only a small fraction of the time. That a haunting could occur in a place with continual residency and no supernatural or occult influence seems unlikely. Yet a type of haunting does occur. When Petaline becomes pregnant, Rance Burgess demands a sacrifice from her, first in the form of blood that is used to conduct a DNA test, and then later in the form of giving up her child. Burgess’s methods are just as terrifying, and

potentially just as deadly, as the undead Buckners in *Cabin*, the psychopathic Richard in *Dollhouse*, the cutthroat entrants to Slayerfest '98, or the Knights of Byzantium in *Buffy*.

[28] Considering *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, David Bell writes, "The frontier-myth inversions of the film are . . . a hallmark of the rural slasher," with such inversions including "country people marginalised by the onward march of capitalism" and the "iconography of Cooper, Bret Harte, and Francis Parkman [that] are now transmogrified into yards of dying cattle, abandoned gasoline stations, defiled graveyards, crumbling mansions, and a ramshackle farmhouse of psychotic killers" (97). It is in the context of "notions of a hopelessly corrupt and festering society [and] questions of civilisation and its discontents" (98) that "innocent, young city kids" (96) encounter the menacing Leatherface and his family. Throughout *Firefly*, references are made to the vastly differing situations between the livelihoods of people on the "core" Alliance planets and those in the outer planets. In "Serenity" (1.1), Mal warns, "Wheel never stops turning, Badger," to which Badger replies, "That only matters to the people on the rim," implying that people on the outer planets have much less stable environments. In "The Train Job" (1.2) Sheriff Bourne tells Mal, "Alliance ain't much use to us on the border planets," adding that although Alliance troops ignored their request for help, they were not the ones who stole medicine needed to treat the townsfolk suffering from Bowden's Malady. In "Heart of Gold," the conflict is not between far-away abstractions of "rim" and "Alliance," but between the realities of Rance Burgess's repulsive and parochial patriarchy and the core-planet ideals of sexual freedom and equal rights that Nandi, a trained Companion, has brought with her and is disseminating to the people under her care.

[29] In light of this conflict between "urban" and "rural," or core planets and outer planets, the wilderness that Nandi finds herself in stretches across not just on her present planet, but across *any* outer planet on which she might find herself. Like Buffy in the abandoned "Spiral" gas station, Nandi realizes that there is no place else to which she can flee. Anywhere she goes she would run into the same monstrous patriarchy, the same ignorant brutality that already confronts her—and which she confronts back. Neither can Nandi return to one of the core planets, having eschewed the life of a registered Companion for being "too constricting." Thus, Nandi is cut off from (Alliance) civilization with only her whorehouse-cabin between her and the men who would intrude. When she declares, "I won't let any man take what's mine," Nandi is speaking not only of Burgess and his posse, but of all the Burgesses and their posses across the outer planets, and Nandi's declaration is

analogous to Echo's declaration in "The Target" that she is going to kill Richard so that she can deserve to live.

[30] Having established the warehouse as a cabin scenario, it is easy to see how its focus provokes character action like that in the episodes above. Upon Nandi's decision not to run, the members of *Serenity's* crew begin to demonstrate their various everyday skills in order to bolster their position: Mal asserts his leadership by assessing the company's strategic standpoint and taking charge of their overall preparedness for the oncoming onslaught; Zoe exhibits her skills as a tactician by providing instructions about how to most effectively keep watch; Book offers his carpentry services to fortify the building; Kaylee upgrades the well equipment; and when Petaline goes into labor, Simon does his doctoring with Inara by his side to provide comfort. Notably, these actions begin immediately upon the establishment of the cabin scenario, even before Burgess comes with his men to attack them.

[31] The focus extends beyond the initial declaration, and additional character traits emerge while everyone prepares for the upcoming battle. As he is boarding up a window, Book takes a moment to comfort two women who had been considering their own eulogies, women who previously made him nervous simply by asking him to conduct a prayer meeting. In the midst of setting up exterior defenses to help protect Petaline and her child, Zoë and Wash have a frank discussion about the risks of bringing a child of their own into a violent universe—an argument that is effectively settled when Zoe points out that fear, not danger, is the only thing preventing them from having that child. Most significantly, during that self-confined calm before the assault, Mal manages to have his first completely emotionally vulnerable moment in the series as he takes to bed with Nandi, an event that leads Inara to confront her own vulnerability in private. Even Nandi's character receives focus, as her genuine affection for both Mal and Inara provides insight into, and for, both of them, although ultimately she is unable to share that insight fully with either one. As with the *Cabin*, *Dollhouse*, and *Buffy* scenarios, it is the seclusion of the dwelling and the entrapment that solicits these actions and reactions from the various characters. Furthermore, the events that occur during the scenario have effects beyond it. This is seen in part when Inara announces at the very end of the episode that she is leaving *Serenity*. More significantly, perhaps, it is seen in the transformation of Petaline's character. At the beginning, Petaline is frightened by Burgess and his thugs, but at the end of the episode, she parallels Nandi's declaration, asking of the men who remain after she shoots Burgess dead, "Anyone else wanna try and take what's mine?"

Conclusion

[32] In taking a tour of these various cabins, it is easy to see that in each case the scenario itself helps to elicit unexpected or otherwise unrealized character action. Based on the episodes explored here, it seems possible to come to at least one conclusion. Returning again to the *Official Visual Companion* interview, the key question Whedon raised and which he wanted to explore in *Cabin in the Woods* was, "Why do we keep coming back to this formula?" Essentially, the answer seems to be that the cabin scenario, as it appears in the Whedonverses, demonstrates that human ingenuity and action continue to matter, especially when people are separated from society and all its trappings and even when the odds of surviving are very low. More than simply being threatened by monsters, the combined seclusion from society and the presence of a safe (at least temporarily) structure allows characters to focus their attention and experience thoughts and emotions that they likely would not, perhaps could not, encounter in any other situation. While it would be wrong to imply that such scenarios are the only way to draw out significant character traits, the evidence suggests that cabin scenarios uniquely encourage character attributes by stripping away all other distractions and forcing the characters themselves to confront only the most pressing, immediate concern. Ultimately, this focusing effect is what makes cabin scenarios so compelling to viewers, and it is why we keep revisiting them time and time again.

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Notes

¹ Woofter and Stokes also provide a good summary of *Cabin*'s metacommentary on the interchangeability of monsters, as seen in Dana and Marty's ride down the Facility's elevator: "If it wasn't clear before in *Cabin*'s take on the horror genre that it never mattered which monster was deployed in the ritual destruction of this group of youths, it certainly is clear when we witness this mass of sardonic badness—from generic zombies and werewolves, to allusive approximations of iconic horror staples, 10 to vagina-dentata-faced ballerinas and killer unicorns" (par. 9).

² For additional description of *Cabin*'s cabin as a Terrible Place, see Wagner, paragraphs 2-4.

³ Lipsett also indicates that *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* (Craig, 2010) and *Drag Me to Hell* (Raimi, 2009) received a significant number of references in *IMDb* reviews of *Cabin*. Both movies touch on the "cabin scenario"; however, *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* started production after *Cabin*, and in *Drag Me to Hell* the protagonist is killed before ever reaching the promised cabin, making it unlikely that either movie contributed significantly to Whedon and Goddard's conception of the "cabin scenario" in *Cabin*.

⁴ As two examples, see the LionsgateFilmsUK promotional video in which Whedon answers fan questions ("Besides *The Evil Dead*, which scary movies was *The Cabin in the Woods* most influenced by?") and Henderson's interview with Goddard ("I remember when the characters arrived at the cabin thinking, 'That looks exactly like the cabin in *The Evil Dead*.'").

⁵ Certainly there are sexually charged attack sequences in *The Evil Dead*, such as the "Angry Molesting Tree" scene and Deadite Linda's seemingly orgasmic spasms after her decapitation. Throughout the film, the primary intent of the demonic force(s) seems to be assimilation through possession ("Join us!" is a repeated phrase), rather than sexual subjugation.

⁶ It is telling that the voyeuristic force passes over both the romantic couple of Ash and Linda on the couch and the half-dressed couple of Scotty and Shelley in the bedroom, choosing instead to focus its attention on the nonsexually engaged Cheryl.

⁷ Kate Egan distances Ash even further from the Final Girl trope, averring that his status as a man "allows the second half of the film to play out as a distinctly male nightmare" (108, note 23).

⁸ I am omitting discussion about “Weapons” and “Shock” as slasher elements, even though *The Evil Dead* likely clears their low bars, because there are some problems with Clover’s formulations.

With respect to weapons, Clover cites only “marginal examples like *Jaws* and *The Birds*, as well as related werewolf and vampire genres,” along the rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* (which she notes is “not properly speaking a slasher,” 224, [note 30]), as the clearest way to explain the “pretechnological” nature and the “closeness and tactility” of weapons in slasher films (“Her Body” 198).

The only movie Clover references in her paragraphs on “Shock” is *Psycho*, which features “the oblique rendition of physical violence” that Clover sets in opposition to “the extraordinarily credible detail” of slasher-film gore (“Her Body” 205). Clover provides examples of such detail as “a head being stepped on so that the eyes pop out, a face being flayed, a decapitation, a hypodermic needle penetrating an eyeball in closeup,” acknowledging that the “horror genres are the natural repositories of such effects” while claiming that “slashers . . . do it most and worst” (205), without citing any particular films.

It may be that Clover has provided more convincing arguments for these elements elsewhere. In either case, even if there exists a slasher-specific frequency of particular weapons or intensity of shock value as Clover contends, her admissions that these elements also happen frequently outside of slashers (albeit in diluted or muted forms) supports the present goal of situating “cabin scenarios” beyond the bounds of that subgenre.

⁹ Tom Sullivan, who worked on special effects makeup for *The Evil Dead*, acknowledges having seen *Equinox* “at least twice in drive-ins before making *The Evil Dead*.” He calls the similarities between the two films “remarkable” and conjectures that “they come from the low-budget nature of both films . . . a few characters, an isolated, inexpensive location, and ambitious special effects” (qtd. in DeShane).

¹⁰ See Starr for a discussion about liminality in horror film and its applicability to *Cabin*’s elevator, which “functions as a transformative space between states as [Marty and Dana] travel from the diegetic space of the Cabin scenario (the horror movie itself), to the managers’ facility, thus revealing the creative processes behind the scenario construction” (par. 7).

¹¹ It may be that this development replaces the connection between monsters and protagonists in gothic stories, as described by Bloom and discussed above: Rather than the

protagonist realizing she already shares a psychological connection with the monster, a psychological connection comes to be realized through physical confrontation.

¹² The theme of trust is deepened even further when Boyd is injured and Echo reverses the call of “Do you trust me,” necessitating Boyd’s response of “With my life.”

¹³ For the purpose of comparison here, I am intentionally ignoring last stand scenarios that do not involve man-made structures, such as perhaps the most iconic last stand of U.S. history, the Battle of Little Big Horn, commonly known as Custer’s Last Stand and recounted in a variety of visual media.

¹⁴ Although not canonically part of Book’s character when “Heart of Gold” aired, it was later revealed in the graphic novel *Serenity: The Shepherd’s Tale* that Book was formerly a Browncoat operative who went deep undercover in the Alliance military.

¹⁵ Jes Battis notes, “Very few people can agree on just what [*Firefly*] was about. . . . It was a western, a horse opera, a space opera, an action narrative, a coming-of-age show, a horror show, and a comedy. In short, it was the usual Joss Whedon text” (par. 1).