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“Something Nightmares Are From”:
Metacommentary in Joss Whedon’s *The Cabin in the
Woods*

In matters of art, and particularly of artistic perception . . . it is wrong to want to decide, to want to resolve a difficulty; what is wanted is a kind of mental procedure which suddenly shifts gears, which throws everything in an inextricable tangle one floor higher, and turns the very problem itself (the obscurity of this sentence) into its own solution (the varieties of Obscurity) by widening its frame in such a way that it now takes in its own mental processes as well as the object of those processes. In the earlier, naive state, we struggle with the object in question: in this heightened and self-conscious one, we observe our own struggles and patiently set about characterizing them.

—Fredric Jameson, “Metacommentary” (9)

[1] The first half of 2012 saw two major films from acclaimed writer-director Joss Whedon released within weeks of each other: his highly anticipated adaptation of Marvel’s perennial superhero comic *The Avengers* and his long-delayed, “secret” horror project *The Cabin in the Woods* (which had been shot in 2009 but delayed for a myriad of reasons following the bankruptcy of MGM). Where *The Avengers* plays the work of adaptation relatively straight, faithfully translating its familiar superhero narrative from the comics medium to blockbuster film in ways that are relatively unsurprising, Whedon and Drew Goddard’s *The Cabin in the Woods* is much more ambitious in its approach to the tradition of cinematic horror that it appropriates and deconstructs.

[2] Reminiscent of another Whedon property from the same year it was shot, *Dollhouse* (in which Amy Acker and Fran Kranz both also star), *The Cabin in the Woods* is a metafictional send-up of all the abuses and excesses

of horror cinema, and of Hollywood more generally, with filmic nightmares ultimately revealed to be sublimated expressions of the actual unspeakable horrors foisted upon victimized young people by a sinister cadre since time immemorial. Indeed, the film's hyperbolic climax sees literally all movie monsters appearing simultaneously within a single narrative, a transtextual "army of nightmares" whose release from their cages results in an unfathomable ocean of blood, viscera, and gore.

[3] The critical practice described by Jameson in "Metacommentary"—the incorporation of higher- and higher-order self-reflexive questions into critique—has its match in the disjunctive multiple plots that make up *Cabin*. Only the proposed spatial organization for this mode of cognition has been altered; instead of moving "one floor higher" we now move one level lower, one level deeper. This is literalized on the level of the film's plot as our young heroes begin to penetrate deeper and deeper into the facility beneath the titular cabin, uncovering the true nature of the conspiracy that has chosen to doom them in the name of saving the world.

[4] The strange result of all these intersecting plotlines is a hopeless collision of receptive registers: we are asked in the "upstairs" plot to partake uncritically in a typically exploitative horror film, only to be confronted in the "downstairs" plot with the clichéd banality and revolting morality of these supposed thrills. But this critical self-reflection is itself highly unstable—both because of the first plot's surprising effectiveness as a thriller, despite itself, and because the second plot unexpectedly collapses into the first when the put-upon victims are able to escape their structuring generic constraints and begin to run amuck within the conspiracy's hidden facility. By the film's quiet dénouement, in the lowest level of the facility, the original valence of the film's critique has completely switched: now "horror" is figured not as a political problem at all, but instead as ahistorical and eternal, a dark mythos somehow essential to human nature as such.

[5] Metacommentary is likewise the structuring principle of the film on the level of form, as *Cabin* shifts its audience away from a familiar horror-movie tableau of blood and corpses to an politico-ethical examination of the appeal and costs of this kind of violence before finally asking us (at its deepest level of metacommentary) just what exactly these sorts of terrible

narratives are supposed to be for in the first place. As Whedon's own afterword to *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion* puts it, the central question left open at the end of the film—the question whose answer “can never be known”—is “Why did we make this movie? Why does anyone tell these stories?” (172)

[6] In Whedon's commentary on the film he seems personally preoccupied by this question. In one of the featurettes on the DVD, Whedon notes that *The Cabin in the Woods* is structurally and thematically of a piece with *Buffy*, because “they're both examinations of the same question: why do these bad things keep happening to these blonde girls?” In *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion*, he similarly names this preoccupation as “the original idea at [Cabin's] core”:

And ultimately, it was a way to pay homage to the movies that I adore, in particular, *The Evil Dead*, the ultimate experience in movie horror, but at the same time, 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? You look at something as ugly, stupid and morally bankrupt as the remake of *Texas Chainsaw* and you go, “Not only do we keep performing this ritual, but it's clearly degenerating.” So why do we keep doing it? Why do we keep returning to it? I'm as fascinated and appalled by it as I am delighted, and so welcome to both. (10-11)

This question may be even more urgent for Whedon than it is for us; Whedon is not only a lifelong fan of the genre but one of its most acclaimed creators, not simply the consumer of these troubling fantasies but their careful and attentive architect.

[7] In interviews, and in the commentary track included on the DVD, Whedon and Goddard vacillate between describing *The Cabin in the Woods* as an adoring homage to the horror film (a “love letter to all horror cinema,” as Goddard puts it on the commentary track) and a very suspicious critique of the genre's politics and aesthetics (making *Cabin* a “very loving hate letter,” as Whedon has told both *TotalFilm* and the audience at the WonderCon Q&A [included on the DVD]).

[8] This tension abounds across the afterlife of *Cabin* as well. The *Official Visual Companion* is a two-hundred-page celebration of the film that luxuriates in its technical artistry and immense gore, while at the same time evincing a deep anxiety about both the eagerness of the audience to view and the eagerness of Whedon and Goddard themselves to craft such a spectacle. Universal Studios included a special *Cabin-in-the-Woods*-themed haunted house at its Orlando, Florida, theme park in October 2013 which allowed visitors to enter the world of the film directly, occupying multiple positions of voyeurism and victimization both in and outside the horror narrative (Goldman); the interactivity of planned video-game tie-in with the *Left 4 Dead* franchise, abandoned during the film's production but leaving traces in its background ephemera,¹ would surely have produced a similarly doubled, ambivalent effect (Conditt).

[9] At times Whedon and Goddard's disparate commentary on *Cabin* even suggests that they may have made different films: Goddard, still at the start of his career as a director, tends to promote *Cabin* primarily as a great horror film, while Whedon, having already established himself, tends to suggest it alternatively as the last horror film—the ultimate one, the very last one you will ever need to watch. One moment in the DVD commentary captures this difference between the duo quite well: when Goddard claims that the mission of the film is novelty (“not doing all the same things, but honoring what has come before”), Whedon immediately corrects him: no, it's “doing all the same things, doing every one of the same things we could do, but wrapping it around our own movie.” The first is a vision of reinvigorating a beloved genre; the second speaks instead to postmodern pastiche of a repetitive and predictable narrative form. Even the back cover of the *Official Visual Companion* seems somewhat unsure what exactly is inside, simultaneously offering up “hundreds of eye-popping photos!” and “the horror film to end all horror films!” to its potential buyer.

[10] This article reads *The Cabin in the Woods* both through the lens of Jameson's “Metacommentary” and as itself a metacommentary, one that demands we come to terms with a horror genre whose bloody spectacle seems as though it ought to be—but curiously isn't—anathema for a 21st century audience (especially a politically progressive, feminist fandom of the sort that has been attracted to Whedon's other work). Using a unique

metafictional form that, Russian-doll-like, continually expands the reach of its plot into new imaginative registers, *The Cabin in the Woods* ultimately seeks to reconcile its creators' ambivalence about a genre they simultaneously love and loathe. The result is a film that paradoxically insists on the moral and political unacceptability of horror fantasy at the same time that it asserts its timeless inescapability, leaving its unsettled audience no choice but to hover quite uncomfortably between these two interpretative poles. This constitutive tension at the heart of *The Cabin in the Woods* is never resolved, and is perhaps irresolvable, insofar as its affirmation and interrogation of the film's spectacular gore both derive, dialectically, from the same singular proposition: all horror movies are the same.

Upstairs/Downstairs

[11] One ambition of *The Cabin in the Woods* is to take horror seriously—to number among the entries (perhaps alongside such contemporary directors as Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier) in a hybrid genre we might call “arthouse horror.” The seeming incompatibility of these two terms points us back to Fredric Jameson's essay referenced in my title, which asks quite deliberately why it is that only certain types of texts seem to call out for commentary:

So that what cries out for explanation above all else is not so much that we interpret novels, but that we do not always feel the need to do so: that there are certain types of novels which, for whatever reasons of internal structure, somehow seem self-justifying and to dispense with external commentary... (12)

The supposed unseriousness of the horror genre—its degraded cultural pedigree, its predictability, its bad politics, its precritical, visceral immediacy—becomes, from this perspective, precisely the problem that is to be solved. And this is indeed the problem that *Cabin* sets itself to solving.

[12] *Cabin* first engages this interpretative problem by setting two interrelated narratives alongside each other; people working on the film referred to these as the “upstairs” and “downstairs” plots (Capone). Upstairs, the first plot is a by-the-numbers horror fantasy—teenagers whose

familiar archetypes we recognize from countless horror films (the jock, the slut, the virgin, the stoner, the nerd)² visit that quintessential horror setting, a Cabin in the Woods— whose inevitable sense of exhausted predictability is foregrounded both within the film itself and in its enigmatic advertising campaign, which insists “you think you know the story” (IMDb). And you do; you’ve already seen it a thousand times.

[13] The second, “downstairs” plot is Whedon’s first turn-of-the-screw: a bizarre science-fiction/workplace-comedy hybrid that depicts the sinister behind-the-scenes conspiracy that has put the first plot into motion.³ For the whitecoats, the extreme events befalling the teenagers upstairs are just another unpleasant day at the office. The characters of the “downstairs” plot have orchestrated everything that is happening upstairs, from first arranging the rental to manipulating the behavior of the principals through everything from pheromone mists and temperature control to controlling mood lighting to (in the case of the blonde teenager selected to embody the “Whore”) toxic hair dye to make this monogamous and intelligent college student both sluttier and stupider as required by narrative cliché.

[14] The cabin, we further discover, is but the American headquarters of a much larger global operation; throughout the film we see glimpses of the similar projects happening in other locations around the globe, operating according to the narrative and generic conventions of those traditions. At the start of the film, nearly all of these countries have failed to produce an acceptable result to satisfy their corporate mandate—that is, they have failed to produce “footage” that sufficiently conforms to the necessary generic conventions of horror as specified by their local marketplace. At the start of the film, only the United States and Japan remain viable, and the Japanese unit itself soon falls away when its “film” about a ghost terrorizing a room full of schoolchildren unexpectedly turns out to have a happy ending.

[15] Hadley and Sitterson, the lead whitecoats in the American division of the multinational project, carefully manage the preparation of the narrative and the construction of every detail before forcing their unwilling “actors” to play out their assigned parts. They even refer, as in Hollywood parlance, to an unseen Director (a surprise cameo by Sigourney Weaver) who is overseeing the project. In this respect they function as clear stand-ins⁴ for

Whedon and Goddard themselves, in much the same way Fran Kranz's doll-programmer "Topher" (the only character on *Dollhouse* whose dialogue matched the pacing and patterns of Whedon's famous "Buffyspeak") stood in for series creator Whedon on *Dollhouse*. Just as the Dolls stood in for the sexual exploitation of actors (and especially actresses) by a corporate (and predominantly male) Hollywood elite,⁵ the characters of the upstairs plot of *Cabin in the Woods* are preyed upon by their own soulless production studio. It is Whedon and Goddard, after all, who thought all this up; it is Whedon and Goddard who are making all these terrible things happen. As Whedon told *Vulture*, in reference to a question that compared him and Goddard to Hadley and Sitterson:

I'm fine with that analogy. Here's my secret: I kill teenagers. I am the stuff in the basement. And this movie, and all these movies teach you, Don't go down in the basement. Because Drew and Joss are down there, having a meeting. We love horror. Clearly there's something wrong with us, and we celebrate that.

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn

[16] Within the terms of the narrative, the brutal exploitation of the upstairs teenagers by the facility's whitecoats is ultimately justified by the introduction of a second horror fantasy hidden within the "downstairs" plot, the reason Hadley, Sitterson, and the others are doing all these horrible things. The conspiracy exists, we discover, to placate buried ancient horrors, Old Ones, whose terrible, Cthulhu-esque awakening can only be delayed through pitiless, ritualized blood sacrifice. The film thus updates the Cthulhu mythos of H.P. Lovecraft and his successors, beginning from the preoccupation with horrible cosmic secrets that are underneath (often literally downstairs from) the world of direct experience; to the suggestion (in "The Whisperer in Darkness") that there is "some actual historicity" for stories about demons and monsters (206); to the paranoid Truman-Show-Delusion suggestion in the same story that the demonic alien Old Ones are watching us at all times, with spies among us manipulating our lives; to similarities between *Cabin's* woods and the isolated Lovecraftian settings of Arkham and Dunwich!; to the central trope at work in both visions of

sleeping Old Ones, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn [In his house at Ry'leth dread Cthulhu waits dreaming]" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 152). The crucial difference is that in Lovecraft and in most Lovecraft-inspired stories, the cults are typically seeking to wake Cthulhu, while in Whedon and Goddard's much more ethically complicated version, our suited anti-heroes are enacting a kind of preserving magic, trying to keep Him sleeping.

[17] In the commentary track, and in multiple interviews surrounding the promotion of the film, Goddard notes that the aesthetic of the control room originates from Goddard's upbringing in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the smartest men and women in the world were hard at work making bombs to destroy civilization. In an interview at io9 he describes Los Alamos infusing every aspect of the set design in the downstairs plots, from the ubiquitous knobs and switches to the costuming: "I just keep coming back to where I grew up, watching these decent kind suburban men go to work, every day making these weapons of mass destruction" (Woerner). Decent, kind, suburban men, that is, doing indecent, unkind things in the name of stability, order, and survival.

[18] Putting all of this together, 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.

[19] At the hinge point in the film at which the violence begins in earnest, Jules, the blonde "Whore" played by Anna Hutchison, is to be murdered; in accordance with horror convention, she must first "sin," so that she can then be "punished." If the teenagers don't "transgress," we are told, they can't be punished—as is the case with mainline horror cinema more generally, the system of violence only works when initiated first by some legitimating failing that makes the victims "deserve" their pain, however arbitrary and unfair those initial moralizing presumptions might be.

[20] This "sinning" is to be signaled by a moment of full frontal nudity that the producers "downstairs" are trying to stimulate for the voyeuristic amusement of the watchers; they can do anything they like to set the mood,

but Jules freely must “choose” to “sin.” All the male characters we have seen working the facility thus far crowd into the production room to gawk, hoping to catch a glimpse of her naked body on the room’s big screens, a self-consciously literal instance of Mulvey’s famous male gaze; finally Hadley and Sitterson chase them disappointedly away, before returning to the scenario with a sleazy pornographers’ injunction to “show us the goods.”⁶ The age of the downstairs characters as they consume and discard Jules becomes inescapable here—for the proposed upstairs/downstairs binary we might as well have substituted kids/adults.

[21] The multiple audiences for Jules’s nudity signal the multiple levels of narration in the film:

- 1. “upstairs”: her boyfriend, Curt, the “Athlete,” to whom she freely chooses to display her nudity;
- 2. “downstairs”: the predominantly male whitecoats, who manipulate Jules to direct that nudity towards one of any number of unseen cameras;
- 3. the watchers: the Cthulhu-esque Old Ones who are being narcotized by this display, standing in for and parodying;
- 4. the film’s actual audience in the cinema.

The film, that is, attacks both the exploitative practices of a Hollywood dominated by older men (“show us the goods”) as well as the spectator in the cinema or at home who has paid to watch this exploitation unfurl (the monstrous other of “we’re not the only ones watching,” the customer who must be kept “satisfied”).⁷

[22] After the two lead whitecoats have witnessed the blonde’s decapitation through their monitors, we finally begin to see the full terms of the necessary ritual sketched out. As we discover, the teenager designated the “Whore” must be killed first. Then the remaining archetypes (The Athlete, the Scholar, the Fool, and the Virgin) can be killed off in any order, provided the Virgin (the customary “final girl” of horror cinema) is the last to be killed (Clover). (And indeed, the Virgin doesn’t technically need to be killed at all; she only has to be made to suffer.)

[23] The formulaic nature of horror cinema is thus revealed to be following a set of rules laid down by a much older, much more disturbing set of myths and rituals around youth, sin, and punishment—leading to the moment that inspires the title of this article, in which Amy Acker’s character explains that what the teenagers in the “upstairs” plot are experiencing is not like “something out of a nightmare” but rather “something nightmares are from.” That is: what they are experiencing now is the true original, of which all our nightmares (and all our horror movies) are but mere copies. The formulaic lifelessness of horror movies is here refashioned as ritual: we need to see the same thing presented to us over and over. If the ritual varies, the magic will fail, and the viewers will revolt. And the essence of that ritual is brutal suffering, particularly the suffering and exploitation of young people, both inside the plots of Hollywood narratives and with respect to their actual material conditions of production and distribution.

[24] We might briefly highlight here the film’s internal citation of the logo for its own distribution company, Lionsgate, as the mechanism of the whitecoats’ infernal machine itself. Especially given the circumstances of the film’s delayed distribution, it is impossible for me to say whether this was a late addition or simply an amusing coincidence, but either way the parallel is quite striking. After Jules is exposed and killed, Hadley must activate a machine to complete the ritual and fill a chamber with blood. The camera pans back to reveal an immense clockwork network of rotating gears—exactly as it had before the start of the film to reveal the nearly identical clockwork Lionsgate’s logo, visually suggesting that the film’s own production apparatus may be a similarly monstrous blood machine.

Tired of the Same Old Story

[25] The banality, repetitiveness, and sheer cinematic exhaustion of these forms is made clear in any number of other ways throughout the film, from explicit dialogue cues, to visual citation of other cinema (like that masterpiece of the Cabin in the Woods genre, *The Evil Dead*, or Whedon’s own *Buffy* and *Firefly/Serenity*, and a dozen others besides); to an otherwise inexplicable set piece involving two-way glass, that serves as a symbolic visual token for the film’s funhouse subversion of the positions of viewer and

viewed, especially after it is inevitably smashed so that characters can pass freely between the two roles; to the lyrics of the REO Speedwagon song that plays over Dana's beating and apparent death at the climax of the Cabin plot, which repeatedly invite us to "turn some pages" and "roll with the changes" if we're "tired of the same old story"; to the presence in the cellar of fetishes and totems that summon ancient evils of an unremarked-upon filmstrip that, in my reading, summons the precise metafictional collapse of codes and registers that we witness in the third act of the film.⁸

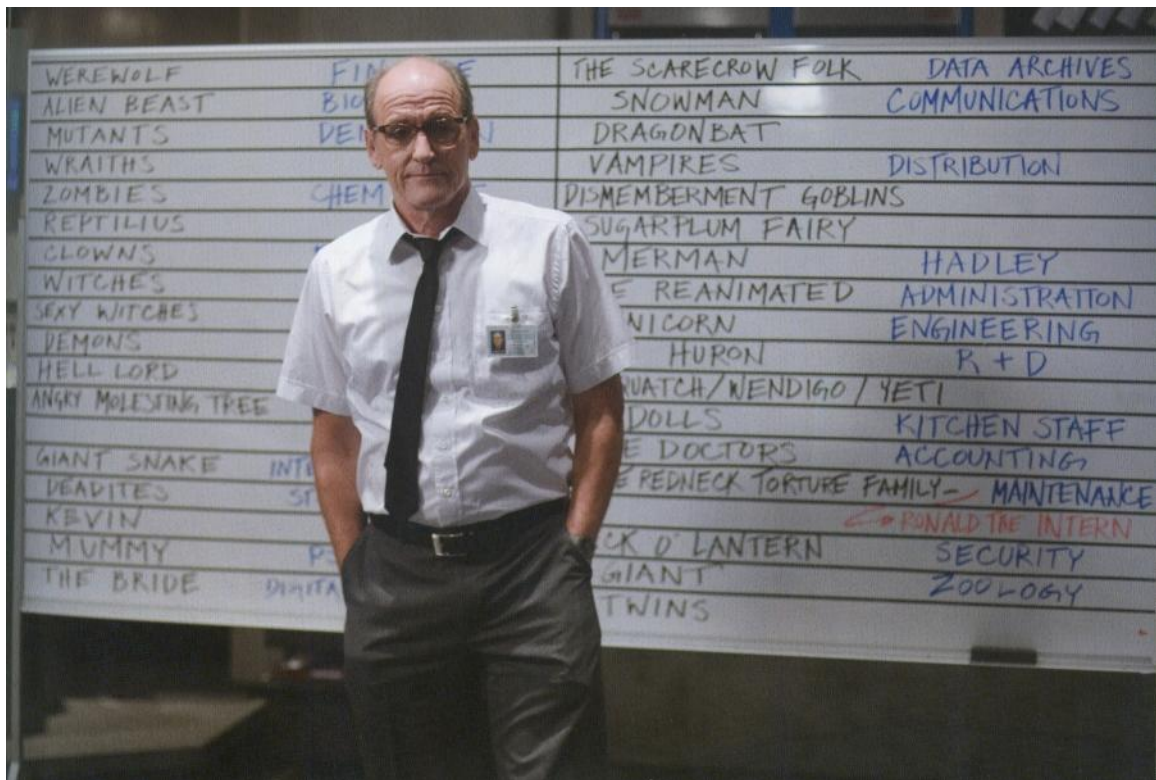


Figure 1

[26] Indeed, the plot we see in the film, involving a "zombie redneck torture family," is only one of dozens of basically identical ancient evils the kids upstairs might have summoned to destroy them, anything from werewolves to Aliens to clowns to dragonbats to a sinister something known only as "Kevin." (Figure 1 shows the whitecoats betting on which horror it will be; the one that is ultimately selected, the Buckners, is considered a boring but reliable standard). The horror genre is shown here to generate a wide multiplicity of form that ultimately makes no genuine difference; in the

end the same events will happen at roughly the same time, indeed, hitting their beats in more or less the exact same three-act structure: the spooky unheeded warning, then boundless murder of the secondary characters, then the triumph or defeat of the final girl.

[27] In *Cabin* we see this structure play out in both levels of the plot: both the teenagers and the whitecoats ignore Mordecai's warning, which triggers a mass slaughter that culminates in the life or death struggle of the final girl (Dana, for the *Cabin* plot; Sigourney Weaver's "Director," for the facility plot). Mordecai's warning to the whitecoats is buried within the humorous speakerphone scene and so many viewers may miss its importance on first viewing. But he enacts precisely the same "harbinger" function of willfully unheeded warning to the people of the facility that he does to the teenagers of the *Cabin* plot: "Don't take this lightly, boy. It wasn't all by your 'numbers'; the Fool nearly derailed the invocation with his insolence. Your futures are murky; you'd do well to heed my—I'm still on speakerphone, aren't I?" The whitecoats' deaths (as in so many teen slasher films) likewise comes quickly on their heels of their ecstatic drunken celebration following Dana's false death at the hands of the Buckners—their own arbitrary moral transgression, for which they shall now be punished.

[28] As Whedon notes in the commentary track on the DVD, a key monster here is the "Huron," the spirit of a wronged Native American seeking revenge on the white settlers who destroyed his people and stole his land—a narrative of divine retribution upon the guilty which he suggests is perhaps the true Ur-text of all the rest. In figure 1 above we can note how the angle of Sitterson's elbow points subtly at the Huron, and the way the words have been shifted and rewritten so as to call attention to it in the shot; little wonder that the Huron is the favorite monster of the conspiracy's R&D department. In the Huron narrative, the stakes of the "divine punishment" trope that structures the horror finally seem organic rather than arbitrary. Crucially, it is the facility plot, and not the *Cabin* plot, that best mirrors this logic of divine retribution within the terms of the film; both the teenagers of the upstairs plot and the enslaved monsters in the facility's Rubix's-Cube-like prison level have a legitimate grievance with the whitecoats, to put it mildly.

[29] While the climactic underground battle at the climax of the film was kept secret during the initial promotion of the film, it became a focal point of advertising for the film on DVD and Blu-ray (figure 2).

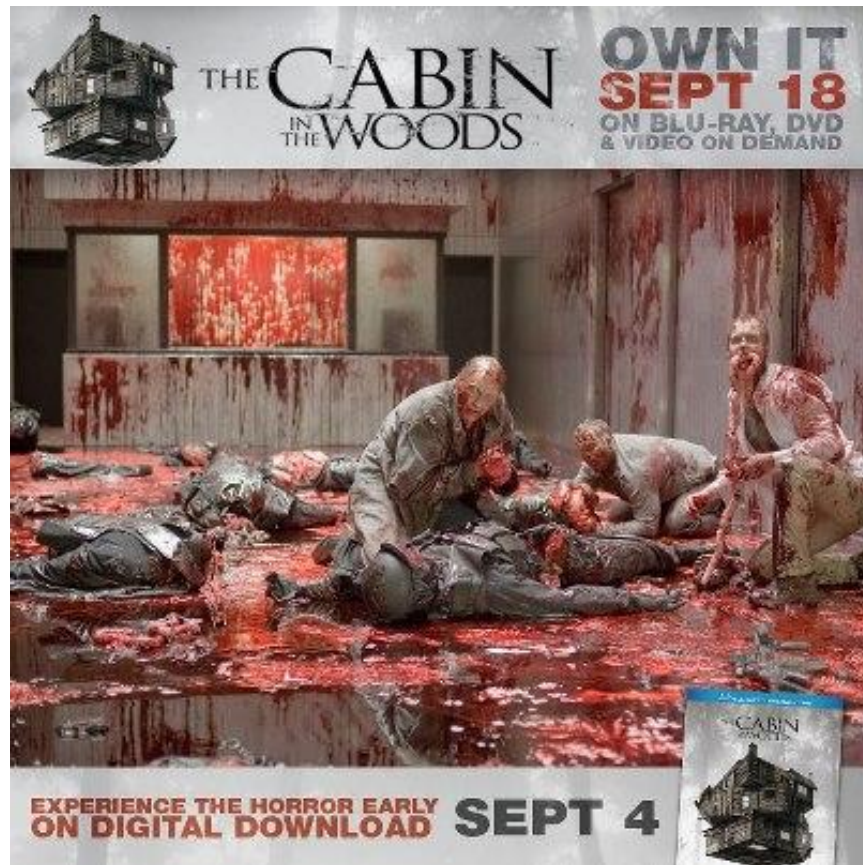


Figure 2

The advertising campaign is yet another wonderful token of the conflicted politics at the heart of Cabin: Own it! This horrible mess of blood and gore is what you want to buy and watch again and again! Breaking the fourth wall, the viewer of the ad locks eyes with the ravenous zombies; it is unclear if we have interrupted their feast, or if they recognize us. Perhaps they think we'd also like a bite.

System Purge

[30] It is likely already becoming quite clear, I suspect, the extent to which Cabin in the Woods can be described as Evil Dead fan fiction, or

perhaps horror-movies-in-general fan-fiction—what would happen if Alien fought the Wolfman?—written by two lifelong fans of the genre who are quite uneasy and deeply unsettled about their participation (first as fans and then as creators) in these sorts of disturbing fantasies. The “upstairs” plot plays the horror genre more or less straight, while the “downstairs” plot is a kind of fan commentary, or fan criticism—but the strange result of all these intersecting plotlines and metafictional logics is neither “celebration” nor “subversion” so much as a palpable anxiety about the acceptability of horror spectacle as mass entertainment. The end of the film does little to resolve this paradox but instead leaves us with an unexpected and impossible ethical dilemma: should Dana murder her friend Marty to satisfy the ritual, or allow human civilization to be destroyed? Our protagonists choose the latter, on the bitter grounds that “it’s time to give someone else a chance”—but the human form of the Old One as its massive fist rises of the ground suggests again that these monsters, too, are simply reflections of our own basic monstrosity. In the Wondercon Q&A (included on the Cabin DVD) Whedon and Goddard describe how they debated whether the Old Ones should have tentacles, like Cthulhu, but in the end they decided that it was more important to focus on “the human aspect”—that this will be a “new group of people who will be just as pathetic as us, but in new ways.”

[31] “It’s really a comment on the dark side of the psyche and our society,” Whedon has said of the film. “We do have a need, which I, and everyone else, have always failed to explain, to see these horror things. We have a need in us to delight in the terror of monsters and people in trouble. But then society has dictated more and more specifically that it be young people punished for drugs and sex, and that that is the theme of the classic American horror movie now, and I’m not necessarily on board with that. I feel like that wasn’t part of the original plan” (Visual Companion 42). But this explanation still brackets the crucial question of why this “need” to see horror should exist in human beings at all, regardless of the specific terms involved in its satisfaction. There is nothing anywhere in the film itself to suggest how or why the “original plan” of horror might somehow be recuperated.

[32] We come then at last back to “Metacommentary,” though now with a twist. Where Jameson directs our attention to the utopian possibilities of

this kind of meta-discourse—that we might recognize in unexpected places something vital and important about the unacceptability of our social system being slipped past the “Censor” of ideology in our conscious minds (15)⁹—Whedon’s metafictional adaptation of the horror genre instead emphasizes the possibility that perhaps there really is no censor at all—that perhaps what we are seeing in these films is, in fact, exactly the thing we want to watch.

[33] In horror, perhaps, the manifest content is the latent content—the only screen of “censorship,” such as it is, is the thin veneer of psychic distance offered by the film’s status as a fiction (“He was only pretending to brutalize and decapitate that woman—he didn’t really mean it.”) Whedon and Goddard’s fannish metacommentary, in this way, becomes the precise opposite of Jameson’s; Cabin suggests the censor is not the lie of ideology but rather something like our last remaining shred of decency. And even this tiny shred, as Cabin in the Wood’s bleeding of levels makes clear, may ultimately not be cover enough—either for the directors and production crews, who happily enact these brutal horrors over and over and over again, or for the audiences that seem to eagerly consume them not despite, but because of, their ugly, formulaic viciousness.

[34] Far from “unserious,” then, from this perspective horror becomes the most serious thing there could be: horror bespeaks an existential-theological crisis about the soul of humanity that cries desperately out for some explanation, if not a solution.

[35] “Society needs to crumble,” Marty says near the beginning of the film, before the madness of the Cabin plot has even begun. “We’re all just too chickenshit to let it.” Later in the film he is able to enact a small version of this dream when he and Dana hit a button labeled SYSTEM PURGE that flushes the facility’s prison cells and brings about the end of the world. Whedon echoes this sentiment several times in the Visual Companion, from his claim that “we deserve what we get ... I mean, you want a little bit to tear down these basic assumptions and start again” (42) to his claim in the afterward that our drive for horror may in the end be “why we need to be gotten rid of” (172).

[36] Thus the cataclysmic final scene in the movie—in which the apocalypse is not averted, and in which the two surviving characters decide they would rather just have everyone on earth die (including themselves) than betray each other as the forced-choice logic of the film insists they must—simultaneously suggests the possibility of some Jameson-style utopian break from history's cycle of horrors and a nihilistic, irrevocable final judgment on the ultimate moral unsuitability of man. A giant hand rises up out of the earth, destroys the "downstairs," then the Cabin, then the viewer; cut to black.

[37] What are we to make of Dana's enigmatic smile as she expresses her wish to have seen the "giant, evil gods," to Marty's eager agreement? Why does the idea seem to so energize them, after everything they have been through, indeed, in the moment of their very deaths? Once they have awakened, will the Old Ones butcher each other—or pretend to—for entertainment? Just whose heavy-metal anthem is it that plays over the credits—ours, or Theirs? Is horror a politics, or is it an ontology? Is it a tendency in human beings that might be resisted or transcended, or is it the underlying curse guaranteed to twist and corrupt everything noble we attempt?

[38] At the Politics of Adaptation conference in Frankfurt, Germany, where I first presented this article, I found myself placed on a panel with papers on Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*. While obviously contingent on the current research interests of the panelists, the pairing was nonetheless quite revealing. What is politically progressive, even utopian, about all three of these texts is the strong invocation to disidentify from their genre: to stop reading superhero comics, to never watch another horror movie, to stop fantasizing about a past of "heroic fantasy" that was in reality predicated on violence, murder, slavery, rape, and boundless brutality. And what is anti-utopian about the texts is precisely the seductive appeal of these works even in the moment of their own self-denunciation, the almost tragic tendency of fans to revel in Rorschach, the Comedian, Westeros, and the Cabin anyway, to exult in precisely the ugly power fantasies that seemed to be the objects of the critiques in the first place.

[39] To put, perhaps, too fine a point on it: Are there horror movies in utopia? Or, conversely, might not horror movies signal instead the latest chain in history's millennia-long proof of utopia's basic impossibility?

[40] *The Cabin in the Woods* of course offers no answers; it only insists upon the question. At the close of the film its unsettled audience (having now been rendered hopelessly complicit in all this monstrosity and ugliness) is left permanently caught between the forward-looking, feminist critique of Hollywood ideology that their better selves might yearn for and the bleakly ecstatic celebration of cruelty, torture, sexual exploitation, and death that they have just happily consumed. It is the final mirror in a film that is filled with them; in the end, when the Old Ones rise to wreak their unfathomable havoc upon the world, there is nothing but our own hands reaching out for us.

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Notes

1. A number of characters from the Left 4 Dead games remain visible in the background as Dana and Marty penetrate the facility, including the witch, zombies, and immense, grotesque monsters called "Tank" and "Boomer."
2. One of the cleverest jokes in Cabin is the way it foregrounds how absolutely arbitrary each of these archetypal designations actually is. Each of the five characters in the "upstairs" plot in Cabin could plausibly have been slotted into at least one of the other slots. The first scene with Curt, the athlete, reveals his intelligence and studiousness, as well as that of the supposed whore, Jules; the virgin, Dana, is emphatically not a virgin, while the stoner, Marty, seems to be; Curt tells us that the scholar, Holden, has "the best hands on the team." Bridget McGovern's Tor.com review of the film draws out the obvious structural and thematic connection to John Hughes's similarly stereotype-busting *The Breakfast Club* in much more detail, ultimately suggesting Cabin as a kind of remake of *The Breakfast Club* with the genre swapped and the stakes significantly raised.
3. The palpable shift in genre between the upstairs and downstairs plots recalls Vivian Sobchack's articulation of the boundary between horror and science fiction. "The horror film," Sobchack says, "is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the science fiction film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other"; later she characterizes this as the distinction between "moral chaos" and social chaos" (30). The shift in scale from an isolated cabin to a world-spanning conspiracy is precisely the shift from horror to science fiction.
4. Hadley and Sitterson's role as proxies extends beyond their structural role in the film to the characters' affect and behavior. "Anybody who thinks Drew and I are not Hadley and Sitterson," Whedon says, "clearly never met us" (*Visual Companion* 13).

5. I develop this metafictional reading of *Dollhouse* in somewhat more detail in my article "Fighting a War You've Already Lost: Zombies and Zombis in *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*" in *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4.2 (Fall 2011).
6. Whedon and Goddard both comment extensively on this moment in the *Visual Companion*; they describe at length their discomfort with enacting a scene they themselves have mandated, using language that suggests this event has somehow been forced upon them and emphasizing Anna Hutchison's own professionalism and enthusiastic participation (22-23). In this way the moment and their response to it functions as a useful token of the ambivalence that characterizes their creation of *Cabin* more generally.
7. Paul Julian Smith has a related but somewhat orthogonal reading of the film's metafiction: he sees it not as an attack on Hollywood so much as "a revenge fantasy from a Hollywood reluctantly in hock to teens." Such a reading, I find, places too little emphasis on Whedon and Goddard's nuanced self-representation as the likeable but ultimately odious Hadley and Sitterson, not to mention the undeniably karmic pleasure with which the film stages the facility staff's eventual evisceration in the film's third act.
8. Recall that it is Marty, after all, the stoner/Fool who is the only character not being successfully manipulated by the whitecoats and the only one to intuit the oddness of their situation, who gravitates towards and examines the filmstrip at length, long before Dana summons the Buckners via the diary.
9. "[The work of art] thereby obeys a double impulse: on the one hand, it preserves the subject's fitful contact with genuine life, and serves as the repository for that mutilated fragment of Experience which is his treasure. And on the other, its mechanisms function as a censorship whose task is to forestall any conscious realization on the part of the subject of his own impoverishment; and to prevent him from drawing any practical conclusions as to the causes for that impoverishment and mutilation, and as to their origin in the social system itself" (Jameson 17).