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The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism



[1] Drew Goddard's *The Cabin in the Woods*, co-written by superstar Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003), *Angel* (1999–2004), and *Avengers* (2012) writer/director Joss Whedon, enjoyed or suffered from an extremely long period of pre-release promotion, as studio meltdowns and indecision about whether to give it a 3-D conversion caused considerable delay between the project's 2009 completion and eventual 2012 release. Whispered among Whedon fans for years, the title generically echoes many other films that turn cabins in woods into sites of slaughter: most importantly *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Evil Dead* (1981), but also more obscure titles such as *Don't Go in the Woods* (1981) that resonate directly. The title *The Cabin in the Woods* alone, especially in combination with Whedon's reputation for highly self-conscious manipulations of genre conventions, sets up the expectation that *Cabin in the Woods* will be the antithesis of the formulaic film that the name would seem to indicate. One just has to recall the famous opening scene of Buffy's first TV episode: a man lures a frightened blonde girl into an abandoned school, setting up what seems to be a typical predatory-male scenario, and then she quickly turns into a vampire and kills him ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.1). Such reversals are part of the Whedon brand, and *Cabin in the Woods* is so branded.

[2] The extended ad campaign encouraged associating the Whedon brand with reversals of expectations. The two teaser posters in Figure 1 demonstrate. This genre-savvy, self-conscious advertising implicitly aligns *Cabin in the Woods* with postmodern horror films typical of the 1990s, especially the original *Scream* trilogy (1996–2000), and *Cabin* does continue *Scream*'s tradition of delivering dialogue and imagery so dense with allusions to other films that catching them all in a single viewing is nearly impossible. However, merely to repeat *Scream*-style self-consciousness, smart kids who go around quoting horror movies while some of them actually act them out, would be a story "you"—the target audience, many of whom will have grown up on the *Scream* films—already know. To deliver the promise of the Whedon brand—the promise the advertising proliferated for years—

the twist, reversals, and story had to deliver far more than self-conscious style for its own no-longer-novel deconstructive sake.



Figure 1. The poster on the left emphasizes the “twist” to the typical cabin and reinforces the twisted narrative with the tagline “You think you know the story.” The poster on the right names each character with a genre stereotype (left to right): scholar, athlete, virgin, fool, and whore, setting up those stereotypes for reversal.

This genre-savvy, self-conscious advertising implicitly aligns Cabin in the Woods with postmodern horror films typical of the 1990s, especially the original Scream trilogy (1996–2000), and Cabin does continue Scream’s tradition of delivering dialogue and imagery so dense with allusions to other films that catching them all in a single viewing is nearly impossible. However, merely to repeat Scream-style self-consciousness, smart kids who go around quoting horror movies while some of them actually act them out, would be a story “you”—the target audience, many of whom will have grown up on the Scream films—already know. To deliver the promise of the Whedon brand—the promise the advertising proliferated for years—the twist, reversals, and story had to deliver far more than self-conscious style for its own no-longer-novel deconstructive sake.

[3] Meeting this challenge becomes, perhaps quite naturally, part of the story of The Cabin in the Woods, as the first major twist is that, beneath the cabin where college kids are behaving with increasingly stereotypical fervor, an American government-sanctioned team of scientists and engineers is using drugs

and other stimuli to manipulate the kids' behavior, match them with monsters, and create a horror scenario worthy of some nasty higher powers' desire for creative human sacrifice. In other words, just like Goddard and Whedon, the scientists and engineers are tasked with putting on a good show to please a bloodthirsty audience, but they find that the same old tricks are insufficient. Again like Goddard and Whedon, the murderous scientists and engineers need a story their audiences don't know, both so they can claim their victims and please their bosses; and when the scientists and engineers don't produce such a story, the movie, along with the world within it, comes to a crashing halt. A giant hand rises from the ground to destroy, presumably, everything, and *The Cabin in the Woods* ends with *Nine Inch Nails* singing, "This isn't meant to last."

[4] This essay argues that Goddard and Whedon's film succeeds where the scientists and engineers within the film fail. In fact, *Cabin* succeeds in fulfilling its promise of throwing the genre an unexpected curve precisely because the scientists and engineers fail, and they fail against a global backdrop. The "cabin in the woods" trope is not unique to American films (arguably, *Friday the 13th* lifted it from Italian Mario Bava's *Bay of Blood*, [1971], and ironically, even *US-set Cabin* was filmed in Canada), but it is best known from American films. The cabin trope is therefore the approach the American scientists and engineers take while they monitor progress in other countries, which are making their own movie-like sacrifices in their own cinematic idioms in order to please the same sacrifice-loving higher powers. One by one, other countries fail, but the Americans remain confident that their movie formulae will succeed, just as American films have long dominated global box offices. This essay demonstrates the film's presentation of America's arrogance and presumptuousness about its exceptional place and abilities in the world, and it shows how the film creates an analogy between the unrepresented (and unrepresentable) post-human planet hinted at by the apocalypse with what is, for some Americans, the equally unimaginable idea of a planet beyond American domination. When the Americans fail, too, then, America is reduced to the same level as the rest of the world, and this reduction potentially contradicts exceptionalist elements in core American ideologies. Few things are as polysemous as an apocalypse, so although this essay does not contend that the only reading of *Cabin's* ending relates to the national politics that play out through this American failure to be exceptional on the world stage, to be exempt from the rules and limitations that characterize other countries, it does locate the arrogance of American exceptionalism at the

center of the film's depiction of horror-producing bureaucracy. As a result, the end of American exceptionalism is a condition of the apocalypse, and, as a (near) survivor says in the film's final moments, such a radical ending may be necessary in order to "give someone else a chance." The Cabin in the Woods's "apocalypse" is an end to humanity's traditional definitions, and the end begins with America and Americans taking their rightful place in the world: on the same level as everyone else.

The Exhausted Machinery of American Monstrosity (Cubed)

[5] In the 1990s, mainstream American horror showed all the signs of a genre entering a late phase of evolution. As Thomas Schatz demonstrates in *Hollywood Genres*, a genre's evolution tends to follow a pattern of increasing self-consciousness, a "progression from transparency to opacity—from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism [that] involves [the genre's] concerted effort to explain itself, to address and evaluate its very status as a popular form" (463). The *Scream* films, populated by characters who know and self-consciously rehearse the "rules" of the type of horror film in which they reside, are already in part a parodic reflection on the genre in which they participate. Parodies of the *Scream* films, the *Scary Movie* films (2000–2013), which take their titles from the original title of the script for *Scream*, sent 90s horror into such *mise-en-abyme* that it seemed nigh inescapable, and the genre seemed bound for either navel-gazing death or a period of deep dormancy. Hollywood, however, found its way out of the abyss through a series of fads, one of the first and most successful of which was to remake increasingly popular Japanese horror ("J-horror") films, particularly *Ringu*, which was remade and released as *The Ring* (2002) in the US to huge success. The next big fad was arguably what David Edelstein dubbed "torture porn," and the new zombie craze ignited when both *Shaun of the Dead* and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* hit the same year as torture porn's most successful horror-genre outing, *Saw* (2004). Finally, there came the long-lasting resurrection of the "found footage" trick used to great effect by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and repeated through many films, notably in Goddard's own *Cloverfield* (2008), but more pertinently for *Cabin*, through iterations of *Paranormal Activity* (2007–2012), which rely on surveillance cameras set up throughout houses in the hope of capturing few-and-far-between horrific phenomena that then are supposedly "found" and edited together, leaving out the boring bits, to create enjoyable films.

[6] Quite cannily, Cabin creates a dialogue with each of the fads that has kept American horror afloat during the new millennium, and both Goddard and Whedon have been very clear that they have a message to convey about the state of contemporary horror. The April 2012 issue of Fangoria, the fan magazine perhaps best known among the genre's American followers, features Cabin on the cover and an interview with the creative duo in which Whedon comments on the "nastier tone of the sort of last generation of horror movies. . . . So Cabin was a chance to specifically say that we're debasing our culture by turning horror into a formula of 'kill,' 'kill,' 'kill'" (43). The film does not reflect the same moralistic tone of Whedon's comment (and offers plenty of "kill, kill, kill"); nevertheless, the film challenges horror formulae and names the stakes as the relative loftiness or debasedness of "our" (presumably American, as Whedon, Goddard, and the film are all US productions) culture.

[7] Cabin's overall challenge begins immediately: the film makes no attempt to hide that its premise involves unusual bends. First, credits roll with typical horror style and music, only to cut to a boring conversation between conservatively dressed men in lab coats concerned about getting some coffee and figuring out their troubles with women. They discuss some ominous international happenings in a comfortingly casual manner, loud screams flood the soundtrack as the title appears, and the film cuts to the five college-kid protagonists packing up for their trip to the eponymous cabin. The next things-are-not-all-they-seem moment occurs as the protagonists drive off, and the movie camera tilts up, revealing a surveillance camera and a man signaling that things are on track.

[8] This surveillance camera is only the first of many diegetic cameras,



Figure 2. A prurient male audience gawks at a screen showing a feed from a surveillance camera, hoping for a glimpse at a naked breast.

because the cabin, the woods surrounding it, and the expansive base below the cabin where the scientists and engineers operate, all have spy equipment virtually everywhere, so they will miss none of the mayhem manufactured for the pleasure of the sadistic, sacrifice-loving higher powers. While the audience for *Cabin* has the advantage of non-diegetic cameras to experience perspectives and gain information about both the protagonists in the cabin and the scientists and engineers below, the people below only have the surveillance cameras. As they watch their movie of the five protagonists facing off against monsters, like the people who supposedly “find” the footage in the *Paranormal Activity* films, they must assemble it, through their own selective viewing if not through actual editing, from the diegetic footage they have created (figure 2). At one point, the non-diegetic camera passes through one of the scientists’ screens, and a change of visual quality suggests a change of cinematographic ontology—or, more simply put, a change back from the surveillance “found footage” information of the people beneath the cabin to the “live action” information supposedly relayed to the non-diegetic audience.

[9] As Carol Clover and many others have argued, voyeurism has been a central concern of horror film for a very long time, perhaps since its inception, so that *Cabin in the Woods* would feature onscreen audiences that raise questions about the ethical positions of offscreen audiences—ought we really to watch the exploitation of these people?—is hardly surprising. However, *Cabin* poses its questions about voyeurism (which a mind drenched in the works of Alfred Hitchcock or Brian DePalma might take to be a human constant too powerful to resist), by juxtaposing the omnipresent surveillance of some found footage horror films with protagonists willing to put one another’s right to privacy ahead of their own voyeuristic pleasure. When Holden, the member of the group of five cabin dwellers eventually reduced to the “scholar” stereotype, discovers that behind a creepy painting in his bedroom is a one-way mirror through which he can watch Dana, the supposed “virgin” of the group, undress, instead of taking advantage, he warns her and trades rooms. She, about to enjoy watching him undress, then returns the favor by covering up the mirror. Compared to their victims, the scientists and engineers look prurient and shallow. The surveillance camera—and the fad of “found footage” horror attached to it—appears as a debasement in this contrast between noble young protagonists and ignoble, lecherous bureaucrats.

[10] Holden, Dana, Jules, Curt, and Marty—the five friends in the cabin whom the bureaucrats would sacrifice to higher powers by inventing a scheme

typical of American horror—must, according to the higher powers' rules, choose their fate. On a practical level, that means they have to go into the cabin's creepy basement, and when they fidget long enough with the wrong creepy item, they inadvertently select the monster(s) that come(s) after them. Their choice, however random (or not) within the diegesis, synthesizes two of the current millennium's biggest fads and manages to bring in at least a few others. Because Dana reads from a strange diary, she and her friends "choose" the Buckners, or what the scientists and engineers call the "zombie redneck torture family," who worshipped pain while alive and return from the dead (zombies) to administer more pain in excessively gruesome ways (torture porn). So torture porn and the zombie craze get tagged directly by the protagonists' convenient choice, a choice that annoys some of the people down below, because they've seen it too many times before, and cheers up others, because the Buckners have a perfect record of successful shows.

[11] He acknowledges the Buckners' past effectiveness, but the leader of the team beneath the cabin, Sitterson, also refers to them as "zombified pain-worshipping backwoods idiots." While the zombie and torture aspects of the Buckners' monstrous identities might be key to understanding how they reflect on recent horror trends, the remaining descriptors—redneck, family, backwoods, and idiots—are central for understanding how they present a contrast with what Sitterson and his team consider to be the only other major world player on the sacrifice-providing stage, the country that also provided the other major horror fad of the current millennium: Japan. As Dana reads from the diary of Patience Buckner, inadvertently choosing the Buckners as the cabin-dwellers' monstrous foes, she finds a story of a family secluded from society and terrorized by a father with sexually repressive (signaled by the term "husband bulge," which becomes a running joke) religious motives. Religious mania gripping families and small towns, particularly of a sort labeled "backwoods" and "redneck" (an American slur usually aimed at lower-class families), especially if "idiots" might be a nudge at the possibility of inbreeding, is a staple of American horror that may have distant cousins in other national traditions but no direct kin. From *Deliverance* (1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1975) to *Wrong Turn* (2003) and *Cabin Fever* (2002) to iterations of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977, 2006) to much of Stephen King's oeuvre, redneck families of religious idiots are special fare of American horror.

[12] The Buckners, then, are good old American horror engineering, what America would use to save the world from sacrifice-hungry higher powers and prove that the US of A is still number one. Like the American leadership during the brief period leading up to the US's most recent invasion of the Middle East, Sitterson and his team are not immediately confident that they can handle things alone, so they are receptive to other countries joining the effort. During the opening credits, before the premise is clear, Lin, a chemical engineer, warns Sitterson and his co-worker Hadley that "Stockholm went south," and Hadley replies, "Everyone knows you can't trust the Swedes," which could be a nod to Sweden's refusal to support the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Lin replies to Hadley, "That means there's just Japan. Japan and us." Sitterson comments, "Japan has a perfect record," and Hadley jokes, "We're number two; we try harder." Later in the film, their surveillance cameras reveal the direness of the situation (figure 3).

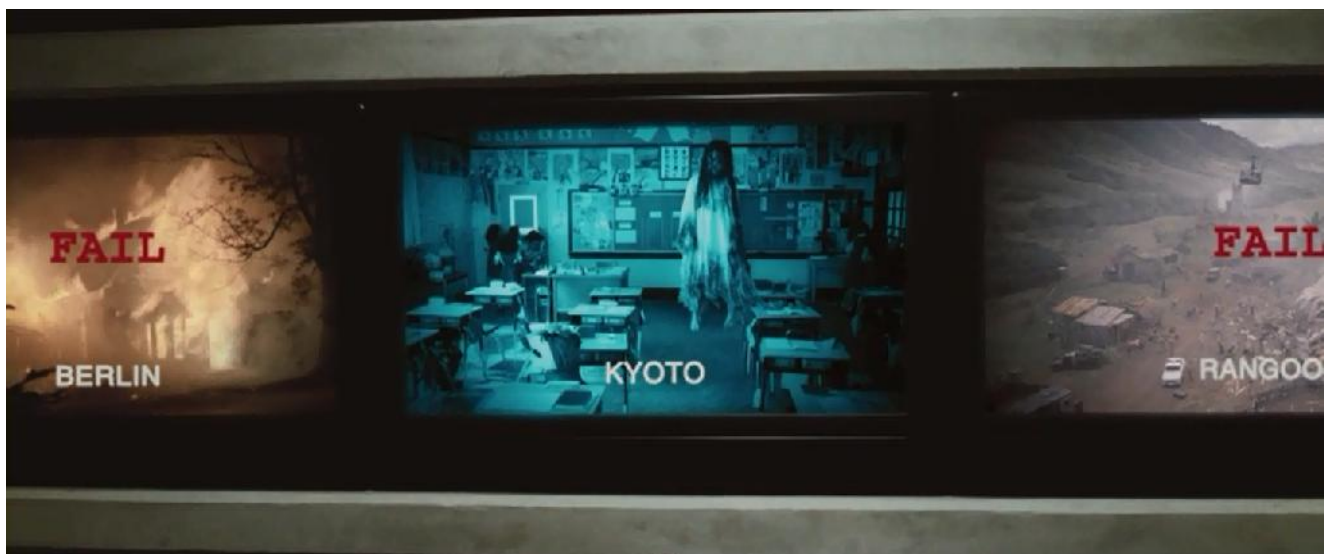


Figure 3 . Sitterson and his team beneath the cabin monitor progress around the world, especially in Japan, where viewers familiar with Ringu or the successful American remake, The Ring, will recognize a rampaging yurei, a vengeful Japanese spirit, which usually does guarantee an unhappy ending for protagonists.

The dialogue among Lin, Sitterson, and Hadley resonates not only with the relationship between Japanese and American horror, as the latter depended heavily on the former for ideas in the early 2000s, but with the history of the cinema in general, during which Japanese cinema has long been one of the US's most significant competitors. As Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell point out in *Film History*, as the American studio system managed to solidify its dominance

over global markets in the 1920s and 1930s, “Japan was virtually the only country in which US films did not overshadow the domestic product,” and Japan’s global prominence as a source of both popular and artistic films has remained strong ever since (226). Later, as Hadley’s confidence in the Buckners swells, so does his competitive spirit as he says, “Should we call Japan? Tell them to take the weekend off?” Sitterson remains reserved until Japan fails, at which point he exclaims, “I’m telling you, you want a good product, you gotta buy American!” The injunction to “buy American” derives most directly from competition between the two nations’ auto industries, but Sitterson transfers it here to the horror-film-scenario context.



Figure 4 . Japan fails to kill off schoolgirl protagonists, who trap the yurei in a happy frog.

Further, the completeness and borderline ridiculousness of the Japanese defeat—a bunch of nine-year-old girls trap a rampaging yurei (vengeful spirit) in a happy frog, taking zero casualties (figure 4)—suggests how very much alone the backwoods American idiots now stand on the world stage.

[13] When Dana and Marty finally escape the Buckners and find their way into the government complex beneath the cabin, the failure of America’s monsters to deliver the required sacrifice inches toward completion. Dana, the supposed virgin, and Marty, the supposed fool, take an elevator into the complex, and they pass by a series of chambers, each containing some sort of monster. Recognizing correlations between the monsters and items in the cabin’s basement, they figure out the nature of the “choice” they made earlier in the film, and a non-diegetic

camera pulls back into imaginary space to reveal the extent of the options they faced (figure 5).

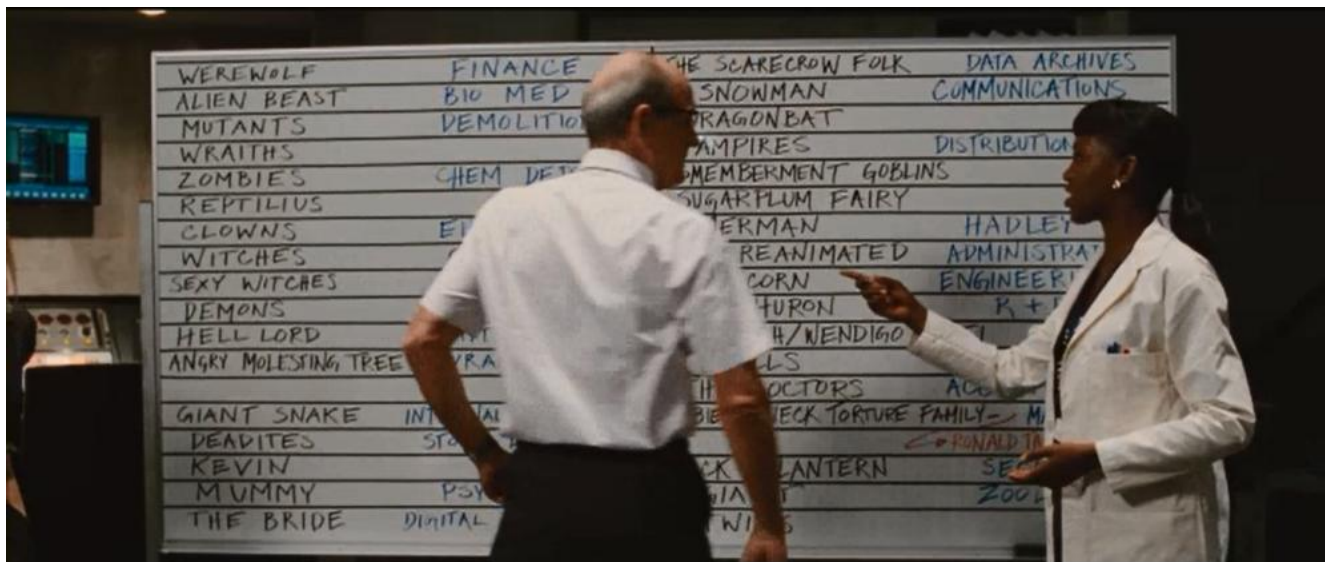


Figure 5 . Marty and Dana discover that the complex beneath the cabin is a giant cube of shifting cells, each containing a monster they might have unleashed.

The Buckners, then, are on the one hand a synthesis of zombies, torture porn, and American-specific tropes, making them the perfect monster for this film; on the other hand, they are only one seemingly random option that the moving cells of this giant cube (which recalls the underappreciated film *Cube*, 1997) make literally interchangeable. As the elevator takes Dana and Marty past one super-monster after another, the parade of nightmares becomes more like an assembly line—and the assembly line is an American invention, a model of dehumanized, modern efficiency, a description that a critic who reduces recent horror to “kill, kill, kill” might apply to the entire American horror genre, especially “body count” films in the *Friday the 13th* tradition, in which so many teenagers get killed in so many cabins in so many woods.

[14] The banality of America's "stable" of monsters, which Lin describes as not "something from a nightmare" but "something nightmares are from . . . remnant of the Old World," appears nowhere more clearly than in the banal attitude that Sitterson, Hadley, and others on their team take toward their wards. First, they run a gambling pool on which monsters the victims in the cabin will choose, treating the monsters like horses at a track (figure 6).

Figure 6 Sitterson (center) and his team treat the selection of murderous



monsters as something as banal as picking a horse at a racetrack.

Lin and the team's newest recruit, the appropriately-named Truman, view the betting with some disdain, although Lin, the more experienced of the two, participates nevertheless. The imagery of gambling becomes even more intense as

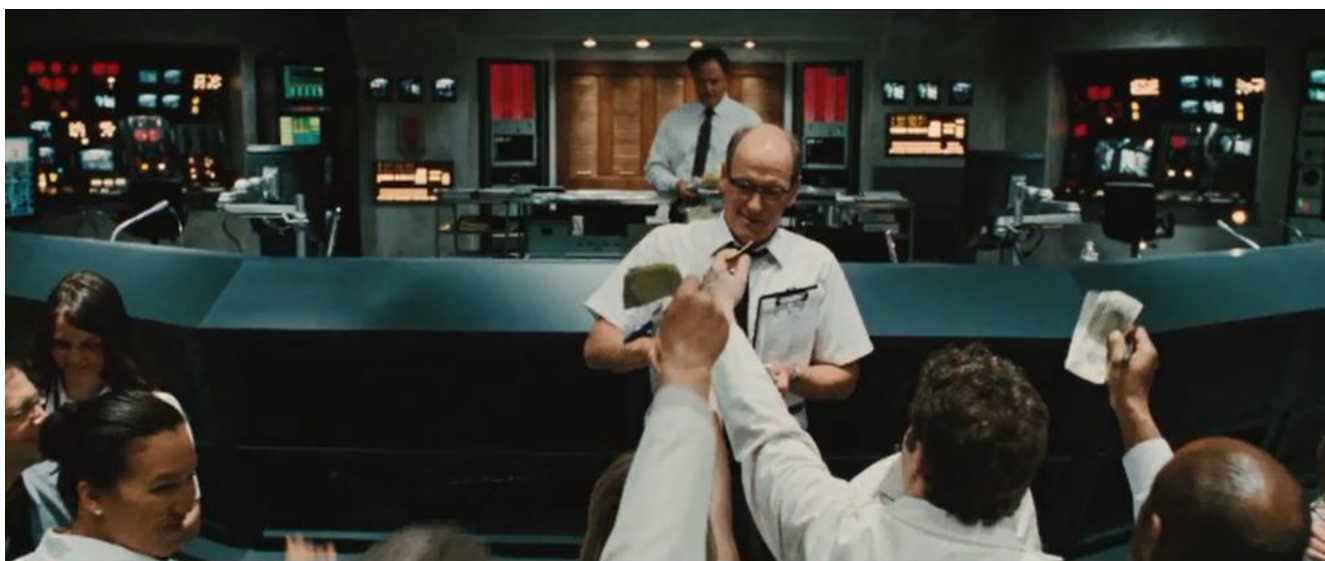


Figure 7 . Gambling on monstrosities: Vegas or Wall Street?

the cabin-dwellers approach their choice (figure7). Petty gambling on the lives and deaths of the young involves well-dressed, predominately (not exclusively) white, middle-aged individuals waving money and other slips of paper around in a pit-like area full of high-tech machines piping in the most current information as the people in charge hurriedly try to record transactions before trading, or gambling, closes. The activity of Sitterson and his crew would not look out of place in Las Vegas, but it would also look quite natural at the New York Stock Exchange, where they are trading the futures of the young (real estate, social security) to continue their own comfortable existences. This particularly banal American evil, at the forefront of people's minds during the 2008–2009 production of the film and still quite relevant around the 2012 release, is part of the same structure as the "stable" of Old-World monsters. When Dana and Marty open the doors on the stable's cells inside the sub-cabin complex, the banalities converge in a slaughter far bloodier than anything the Buckners had to offer. The monsters occupy and destroy the Wall-Street-like establishment that would sacrifice the young to maintain its own comfortable, privileged existence.

[15] Sunken within such banal evil, the cabin, the complex beneath it, the horror genre, and the many facets of American culture for which these elements might stand all come together in one last plea to sustain American exceptionalism and avert the apocalypse. The plea comes from the Director, perfectly cast as Sigourney Weaver, who played one of the archetypal sacrificial "final girls" in 1979's *Alien*. Carol Clover, generally credited with introducing the notion of the final girl into academic discourse, describes this archetypal character common in many of the slasher films *The Cabin in the Woods* directly references:

Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marty, Terri, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. Not only the conception of the hero in *Alien* and *Aliens* but also the surname by which she is called, Ripley, owes a clear debt to slasher tradition. (40)

Beginning with her unisex name, Dana almost fits the final girl profile perfectly, avoiding the flirtations of her male friends, readily showing her intelligence, and demonstrating ingenuity as she fights off the Buckners.

[16] The original *Scream* film, particularly as characters on screen watch the final girl Laurie fight off a killer in the original *Halloween* (1978), articulates a theory of the final girl very similar to Clover's, with one clarification: she must be a virgin, a rule *Scream* then breaks by having its final girl lose her virginity. Dana and Marty's conversation with the Director, held in the sub-cabin complex's deepest sacrificial chamber, reveals a schematic view of humanity—or humanity as represented in horror films—behind the logic of the sacrifice that is very similar to Clover's and *Scream*'s view of the horror film universe. When Dana and Marty enter the room, they immediately recognize it as a sacrificial chamber and identify the transgression-and-punishment formula that drives many slasher films:

DANA: They want to see us punished.

MARTY: Punished for what?

DIRECTOR (entering): For being young. It's different in every culture. It has changed over the years, but it has always required youth. There must be at least five: the whore. She's corrupted. She dies first. The athlete, the scholar, the fool, all suffer and die at the hands of whatever horror they have raised, leaving the last to live or die, as fate decides: the virgin.

DANA: Me? Virgin?

DIRECTOR: We work with what we have.

MARTY: What if you don't pull it off?

DIRECTOR: They rise. . . . The Ancient Ones. . . . But the other rituals have all failed. . . . We're not talking about change. We're talking about the agonizing death of every human soul on the planet. Including you. You can die with them, or you can die for them.

MARTY: Gosh, they're both so enticing.

The Director articulates the typical slasher formula, spelling out the body count procedure that ends with the final girl, and then justifies it as a necessary sacrifice, encouraging Dana and Marty to buy into her logic for the sake of humanity. The rest of the world can't do it, she argues: either you deliver a win for America, or the whole world suffers. The fate of the world lies in the will of young Americans to die so that their leaders can stay on top.

[17] Despite Dana's implication that her virginity is ancient history, and despite the Director's femaleness, Dana almost fulfills the aspect of final girl-ness that would make her a mirror-image of the (usually male) killer: she picks up a gun, temporarily accepting the Director's logic, and contemplates shooting Marty in order to save the world. Luckily, a werewolf interrupts her, she changes her mind, monsters take out the Director, and the world ends instead. Dana's conclusion about giving someone else a chance signals her rejection of the the Director's logic as well as America's last opportunity for exceptionalism. It also echoes a sentiment Marty expresses early in the film, on the way to the cabin: "Society needs to crumble; we're all just too chickenshit to let it." By letting the world end, Dana and Marty prove they are not too chickenshit, that their generation may have what they need to create a world order that could break the cycle of needlessly sacrificing youth. They also assert a logic, contra the Director's, for why society needs to crumble, for, as Marty indicates, the choice between dying with the rest of the world and dying for them is not an attractive choice. Despite the Director's argument that "change" is undesirable, as the Director admits, things have "always" been this way. And the way things are involves bureaucrats who have gotten so blasé about their jobs that they gamble and joke while people die, and directors are forced to "work with what we have" instead of using the right tools to get the job done. In other words, the American labor force is not up to the task anymore, but the people in charge are asking the young to die so that nothing changes. From Marty's perspective, the only real choice, the only option that makes a difference, is to let it all crumble, to summon the bravery to face an unknown world with new masters.

Old Gods, New Chances

[18] After Dana decides it is time to give someone else a chance, Marty



Figure 8 . The hand of a giant evil god smashes through the cabin, beginning the apocalypse and ending the film.

remarks, "Giant evil gods," and Dana responds, "I wish I could have seen them." "I know!" Marty says. "That would've been a fun weekend!" And then the film provides, in its final image, a mere glimpse of what's to come (figure 8).

Marty's line is, on one level, a tease: at this point *The Cabin in the Woods* has engaged in a game of one-upmanship so extreme that it has not only gone beyond *Scream* in its handling of self-awareness, but it has also built from the *Buckners*, an amalgam of some of horror's leading fads, up to a giant cube containing many of the scariest and best-known monsters of all time. Where else could the film go—how could it one-up on a supreme monster collection? Such a spectacle would indeed be a fun weekend at the box office, but it is something *The Cabin in the Woods* cannot fully deliver. The hand is, at best, a consolation prize.

[19] On another level, Marty's line about the desire to see the someone else who gets a chance once the Americans fail points toward problems both in cinematic representation and in America's historical imagination. The "Ancient Ones" whom the Director, Sitterson, and the others strive to please, denizens of the "Old World" that existed before the time of the humans, seem to be similar to, if not actually to be, the Old Ones, or Elder Gods, from the mythos of American author H.P. Lovecraft, who is perhaps best known for his tentacled creation Cthulhu. But Cthulhu is only one of Lovecraft's many cosmic horrors, ancient aliens who once ruled and battled one another on Earth and across the stars. In his treatise "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927), Lovecraft writes that "the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (105), and he builds on this axiom:

Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse.

With this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear. (107)

Lovecraft's entire mythos, which appears in fragments through short stories and three novels, especially *At the Mountains of Madness*, provides a kind of taxonomy of strange pulsating life from unholy dimensions. Whedon's TV show *Angel*, on which Goddard collaborated significantly toward the end, shows a

particular interest in Lovecraftian mythology as it develops an evil lawfirm, Wolfram and Hart, at the show's center. The lawfirm turns out to have "senior partners" who never appear onscreen (except perhaps in a brief glimpse during the finale), but a time travel storyline reveals that the symbols of Wolf, Ram, and Hart are ancient figures of predation and sacrifice, and the senior partners are ancient demonic entities, powerful beings not unlike those in Lovecraft stories or *The Cabin in the Woods*. The alternative to the sub-cabin cube's exhausted monstrosity, then, might be a return to cosmic horror, not the known monsters of well-mapped national traditions but monstrosities beyond local human concerns. The alternative to races for national exceptionalism might be global minimalization. To think globally, we might have to fear cosmically.

[20] While the talk of "Ancient Ones" may allude to Lovecraft and possibly even to a convergence of the Buffy-Angel-Cabin multiverse, the teasing image of the Ancient One rising at the film's end bears little hint of Lovecraft. It is merely an oversized hand, quite human-looking, with nary a tentacle in view. Rather than Lovecraft's mythos, these Ancient Ones may come from something more classical: they may be Titans, giant humanoid gods who ruled before the time of the Olympians and the humans, according to ancient Greek mythology. Whatever they are, why, if the failure of the sacrifice ends humanity, does a humanoid shape persist?

[21] One answer lies in the problem of representing Lovecraft's visions of cosmic horror, or any other vision of a being that transcends human perception, on film. Countless attempts have been made to adapt Lovecraft's writing directly into film, and with the exception of films such as Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985), which emphasizes gore and laughs usually absent in the Lovecraft source material, they are all generally regarded as miserable failures. (For recent examples, *Pickman's Muse*, 2010, had promise but went horribly awry, and *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, 2006, barely deserves its score of 2.9 on IMDb.) Indirect adaptations such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) have fared better because they capitalize on Lovecraft's key descriptors for cosmic horror. *The Thing*, for example, is about a monster without a shape, similar to the shoggoths of Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, about which Lovecraft writes, "The words reaching the reader can never even suggest the awfulness of the sight itself [, which] crippled our consciousness so completely" (96). To look upon such a "hidden" and "fathomless" creature, to borrow from the already-quoted passage from *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, is to go mad. The creature is beyond

description. It is unspeakable and un-see-able. Contrary to what Marty seems to think, seeing such a thing would not make for a fun weekend. It is not just beyond film: it is beyond human experience.

[22] A second explanation for the persistence of humanoid shape in the Ancient One who briefly appears also stems from limits to human perception and imagination, and it relates to the paradox of a human mind conceiving of its own absence, a problem Eugene Thacker tackles quite brilliantly in *In the Dust of this Planet*. As Thacker explains, whenever humans try to think of a world without humans, “the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us. . . . Even though there is something out there that is not the world-for-us, and even though we can name it the world-in-itself, this latter constitutes a horizon for thought, always receding just beyond the bounds of intelligibility” (5). Thacker is considering philosophically what Lovecraft dramatizes through fiction: the truest representation of the completely alien is non-representation, or the best way to fathom what no human can fathom is to call it unfathomable. Short of a cut to black, which follows the rise of Cabin’s giant hand, film has little vocabulary for directly expressing that which cannot be expressed (and indirect expression through pointing at offscreen horrors is a story “you” already know). The hand, as opposed to a tentacled creature from an American writer’s imagination, suggests the imagination approaching its own limit, Thacker’s “horizon for thought,” and the film’s end is the audience’s final collision with that horizon.

[23] Colliding with the ultimate horizon for human thought, much like an apocalypse, is a polysemous event, but considering the collision in terms of the American failure that brings the apocalypse about, it signifies not only a general incapacity to imagine a world without humans, but an American incapacity to imagine a world of the future in which the United States is no longer a global superpower. America’s exceptionalism, its specialness, is deeply intertwined with its core ideologies; arguably, the very idea of the country is rooted in its conception as the Age of Reason’s most radical and successful political offspring. As Donald E. Pease states in *The New American Exceptionalism*, “As a discourse, American exceptionalism includes a complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire” (7). To be American is, practically by definition, to be exceptional; to abandon the fantasy state of this state fantasy (the play on words is Pease’s) might “cripple

[Americans'] consciousness so completely" that they would go mad and start bombing other countries just to prove they still "try harder" (7).

[24] Abandoning such a belief would be traumatic, to say the least (a giant slap in the face?). As Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong note in *The End of Influence*, "the United States is now the world's biggest debtor," and with the loss of financial power, "the end is inevitable: you must become, recognize that you have become, and act like a normal country. For America, this will be a shock: America has not been a normal country for a long, long time" (1, 3). Despite the potential shock being so great that the fantasy of American exceptionalism may be unshakeable, the fantasy nevertheless goes hand-in-hand with what would seem to be an incompatible fantasy about the present state of globalization. As Pankaj Ghemawat notes in *World 3.0*, "many social scientists . . . now agree that we are living in a new age of globalization" (10), a kind of World 2.0, and "[p]roponents of World 2.0 have cited all sorts of globalization apocalypses that are supposed to pave the way for (nearly) complete integration" (23-24). Ghemawat disagrees and argues persuasively that globalization and international integration are far from complete. Both *The End of Influence* and *World 3.0* are themselves, in a way, exercises in imagining a way forward, through globalization and beyond imperial rule by the United States (or other national powers, for that matter), but in the end, like the hand rising in *Cabin*, they are speculative solutions to the crises in state fantasy brought on by recent, potentially apocalyptic international economic and political upheavals. Pease concludes *The New American Exceptionalism* with a critique of President Barack Obama's rhetoric of hope and change, which arguably got Obama elected in 2008 and still played a part in 2012. Pease demonstrates that the rhetoric succeeded "because it was virtually impossible to say ahead of time what the outcome of this hope might be . . . [Obama] inspired the courage to act in the face of all the uncertainty that results from not being able to ascertain the shape of the order such hope might bring about" (213). Obama brought America to the horizon for thought and then saved it from having to contemplate a world-in-itself, not a world-for-US, with the promise of "a new as yet unimagined America that he described as rising up again in the West. Whether that state of fantasy is a sign of the audacity of hope or a symptom of cultural despair"—and whether the unimagined thing rising up looks like a giant hand about to deliver an apocalyptic slap—"is a question that remains to be answered" (213). Proposed solutions to

the current crises of America's fantasy state, like the fads that have been keeping American horror from endless navel-gazing, have not been looking too good.

[25] At least Drew Goddard seems to think so. In the Fangoria interview with him and Joss Whedon about *Cabin*, Goddard muses:

I grew up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, this town that exists only because it's where they set up the lab to design and build the atomic bomb. It's strange. I feel, as much as anything, that seems like *Cabin in the Woods*, particularly the downstairs aspect, because it involves very, very smart people designing weapons that are going to destroy the world. There's something fascinating about that area to me, and every war, at the end of the day, is really just a history of sending kids to be slaughtered. Because that's still going on in our culture, I think that as much as anything influenced *Cabin in the Woods* and where our heads were at. (44)

Together, Goddard and Whedon's comments about their film frame it as an intervention both within the history of American horror and for the sake of Americans' global political future. While the film isn't (and needn't be) entirely consistent with the creators' views of it, these views do help frame *Cabin in the Woods* as more than the story you think you know. As the film's finale approaches the ultimate horizon for thought, the unthinkable absence of humanity, it points toward a more specific unthinkable absence for the film's primary audience, the absence of Americans as the lead players on the world stage. By pressing this audience to think the unthinkable, to confront the possibility of redefining "America" in a way that omits supremacy, *Cabin in the Woods* fulfills its promise and turns the horror genre in new and potentially productive political directions.

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