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“Charybdis Tested Well with Teens”:

## The Cabin in the Woods as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences

[1] In “Commentary: The Musical,” which accompanied the DVD release of Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (July 15-20, 2008), Joss Whedon sings that he is “Heart, Broken” by the ways that due to “tie-ins, prequels, games and codes,” the “narrative dies/stretched and torn.” The series finale of Dollhouse (2009-2010) featured programmer Topher Brink (Fran Kranz), whom many viewed as an avatar for Whedon himself (Tesca 2012),<sup>1</sup> “broadcasting” a signal that simultaneously restored humanity to their original selves while killing himself (“Epitaph 2: Return,” 2.13). The Cabin in the Woods features an ultimately failed ritual, managed in a corporate setting, that ends with everyone—maintenance staff, chemists, directors, controllers, and “actors”—viciously torn apart by a large assortment of horror movie monsters, followed by the end of the world.

[2] There is an escalation evident in these three examples, which stretches across three of the main mediums in contemporary culture: internet, television, and film. What all of these examples share is a (somewhat) sardonic critique and sense of weariness with the medium without which, as Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen sing in response to Joss’ complaints, “[he’d] find[his] fame and fanbase gone.” The heartbroken writer, the suicidal programmer, and the total bloodbath of Cabin all offer particular critiques of an increasingly corporatized media. In “Heart, Broken,” it is the exhaustion that comes from the constant maintenance of both his branded properties (Buffy [1997-2003], Angel [1999-2004], Firefly [2002-2003], et al.) and Whedon himself as brand. In Dollhouse, it is the toll of “programming” for “broadcast” that leads to self-immolation. The fact that no one is spared in Cabin, including the unwitting actors (read: sacrifices) as well as those who serve as both producers and audience, offers a biting

critique of corporate media and its audiences while offering little hope for either to break free of its entrenched system of production and consumption.

[3] From *Serenity* (2005) to *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), Joss Whedon has launched a sustained critique of a corporatized media culture that uses bodies, blood, and sacrifice as a way to increase audience share and profits, including his own complicity in it.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it is the repeated trope of manipulation—"puppet theater" in *Serenity*, "Dolls" in the *Dollhouse*, and "puppeteers"<sup>3</sup> in *Cabin*—which offers the most sustained critique of the triad of producer, creator, and audience that comes to its fruition in the final revelations of *The Cabin in the Woods*.

### The Plural of Apocalypse

[4] The series finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended in the way each of the previous seasons ended, with an apocalyptic scenario averted ("Chosen," 7.22). While none of Whedon's series has shied away from the specter of loss and sacrifice, *Buffy* perhaps stood as the most hopeful. Despite the loss of mother, friends, lovers, and home, the final shot is a small smile on *Buffy's* (Sarah Michelle Gellar's) face. *Angel*, while always taking a darker turn, ended as it began, with outmatched heroes continuing to fight the good fight despite the odds ("Not Fade Away," 5.22). *Firefly*, while not given a "real" series finale, nevertheless ended its brief run on network television on a note of togetherness, with the troubled *River Tam* (Summer Glau) seemingly accepted by the erstwhile "family" of the ship *Serenity* ("Objects in Space," 1.14). Even the film *Serenity*, with the loss of *Wash* (Alan Tudyk) and *Book* (Ron Glass), shows that it continues to fly despite the odds. It seems as if the darker turn in Whedon's work<sup>4</sup> starts with *Dollhouse* and reaches its darkest point in *Cabin*.

[5] Yet there is a connective narrative tissue between *Firefly/Serenity*, *Dollhouse*, and *Cabin* that separates them from Whedon's earlier work. The diegesis of all three share the feature of either leading to and beyond an apocalypse, or actually starting the narrative within a post-apocalyptic scenario. In each case, despite the actions of characters both seen and unseen, the world as they know it ends. While this is easy to identify in both *Dollhouse* (the virtual entertainment technology gets out of control and turns the world into a wasteland) and *Cabin* (the old gods do not get their needed

elaborate ritual sacrifice and thus rise and destroy), the world of *Firefly* and *Serenity* also qualifies as post-apocalyptic. The opening narration of *Serenity* explains: "Earth could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many." While it is not explicitly stated in either *Firefly* or *Serenity* when this occurred, the planet was essentially destroyed (or otherwise rendered uninhabitable). While earlier Whedon works (namely, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*) faced supernatural apocalyptic threats (e.g., demons, powerful witches, rogue gods), both *Firefly/Serenity* and *Dollhouse's* apocalyptic scenarios are entirely of human origin.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *Firefly*, overpopulation and depletion of resources (a plausible scenario) seemingly caused an environmental apocalypse. *Serenity* also offers Miranda, a planet of the dead that stands in ironic contrast to the supposed origins of its name, a brave new (drugged and deadly) world. Miranda's destruction was also human-made: in order to make the population "better"—less aggressive, more peaceful—the government mixed a drug into the air processors. The drug, Pax, had the unintended effect of not only sapping Miranda's residents of any will to live (they just laid down and died), but also hyping the aggressive response of a small segment of the population, turning them into the violent, cannibalistic Reavers, who, in River's words, never "lie down."

[6] The dangerous futility of trying to make people "better" through these types of interventions is also exposed within *Dollhouse*. Giving people what they "need," as Los Angeles *Dollhouse* head Adelle DeWitt pitches its services to wealthy clients, through the technological wizardry its sponsor, the Rossum Corporation, specializes in, is precisely what causes the "thought-pocalypse."<sup>6</sup> Eve Bennett argues that the clients' needs are generally influenced by media (a point I'll address below) and that the *Dollhouse* responds to the troubling increase in self-awareness in the Actives (Dolls) by allowing them to play out "closure" scenarios that will return them to Doll state, thereby "play[ing] like an illustration of the way the culture industry deals . . . with the threat of autonomous thought" by an endlessly delayed promise of escape through media's narratives (8).

The Truth of the Signal

[7] The threat in *Cabin* thus fits fairly easily between the “supernatural” threats of early Whedon and the latter Whedon focus on human-made dangers. The film’s opening credit sequence features various artistic scenarios of torture, sacrifice, and death, only to resolve itself into the banal office setting that starts the film. Like many films of the genre, there is little in this scene to indicate that it is a horror film: no killer’s-eye view of future victims, no creaking doors, no off-kilter music. Indeed, not until more than three minutes into the film does the viewer see anyone under the age of 30. Instead, it is two middle-aged men, Steve Hadley (Bradley Whitford) and Gary Sitterson (Richard Jenkins) at a vending machine: Hadley discusses the fertility treatments his wife is undergoing and her reaction to them, while Sitterson makes sardonic remarks. The environment is white, nearly sterile (offering an ironic contrast to the conversation), and certainly bloodless: a corporate setting, an office in which people discuss matters both work-related and personal. The only elements that indicate what is to come are a discussion about the failure of Sweden to deliver, allocating blame for past problems, and whether or not to participate in the office pool. It is only later that the viewer discovers that this corporate setting is the headquarters for a yearly ritualistic sacrifice to satisfy the “old gods,” in which stereotyped (or archetypal) teens are offered up to keep the world from being destroyed. Hadley and Sitterson, among others, can both watch and control the proceedings, from behind glass, as if it is a film or play.

[8] These visual and narrative motifs are not new to the Whedonverses. Their televisual analogue is the series *Dollhouse*, particularly the recurring visual of mastermind Topher Brink’s laboratory and its positioning above the living and sleeping quarters of the blank and manipulated Actives he controls. Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog relegates many of Horrible’s exploits to Billy’s (Neil Patrick Harris’) retelling of them to the viewers of his vlog. It is *Serenity*, however, that more subtly invokes the narrative and visual distance of this positioning by, in a similar style to *Cabin*, starting the film with two separate removes from the main narrative: River Tam’s (potentially implanted) vision of a classroom in which children are learning a biased version of planetary history, and her escape from the

Academy, which itself is a recording viewed by the Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor).<sup>7</sup>

[9] The various layers that are evident in *Cabin*—the “staged” setting, from the moment Curt (Chris Hemsworth), Dana (Kristen Connelly), Holden (Jesse Williams), Marty (Fran Kranz), and Jules (Anna Hutchinson) get into the RV, the potential storylines inscribed in each of the objects in the basement, environmental controls in the forms of hormones and other drugs piped into the environment, even the dialogue—seemingly serve as a culmination of a continuing exploration of the power of the image; most importantly, how that image is manipulated. When Holden kisses Dana for the first time, she says, “I don’t wanna, I mean, I never . . . .” She stops mid-sentence not out of embarrassment at a lack of experience (the final girl [see *Clover*] is almost always virginal), but because the words are wrong; they are not her own.<sup>8</sup>

[10] There is more at play within the film than a metafictional jab at the tendency toward narrative redundancy in contemporary horror films, akin to Wes Craven’s *Scream* franchise. While *Scream* attempted to subvert generic conventions by pointing out the “rules” of horror films, as well as allowing Sydney Prescott (Neve Campbell) to undermine the cliché that sex equals death within the context of the genre, *Cabin* peels back all the layers to expose not just redundancy, but the lack of narrative cohesion and characterization required to make the plots of these films work. After Jules is decapitated by pain-worshipping zombies and Curt returns to the house, he defies one of the rules of the genre by suggesting that they stick together to search the house. One of the controllers, Hadley, slumps in disappointment when he hears Curt say this, but Sitterson rescues the moment by releasing a chemical into the air that makes Curt change his mind. “Watch the master at work,” Sitterson says.

[11] It could be argued that by making Jules, Curt, Holden, Dana, and Marty into stereotypes, *Cabin* in fact does nothing to undermine the clichés and redundancies in the horror genre. As Adorno and Horkheimer write of the culture industry, “the individual is an illusion” (41), and in that respect, *Cabin* does little to subvert that particular assumption. “Pseudo-individuality is the prerequisite for comprehending tragedy and removing its poison . . .

because individuals have ceased to be themselves and are now merely centres where the general tendencies meet" (Adorno and Horkheimer 40-41). In other words, they are reduced to labels such as scholar, jock, whore, virgin, and fool.

[12] There are two elements, however, that work against this assumption. First there is the particular Whedon trope of killing beloved characters if it serves the story ("Anyone Can Die"). The forced cliché-ness of the cabin's inhabitants does not allow the audience to "love" or connect with them, therefore making their deaths less narratively and emotionally traumatic. By illuminating that particular callousness, the narrative can serve to question it. Second, the characters that are more rounded—Hadley and Sitterson in particular—are also not spared.

[13] Indeed, the audience sees none of the workers survive. Even the Director (Sigourney Weaver) is killed by Patience Buckner (Jodelle Ferland) at the end of the film. Dana is the one who expresses the subtext of the ritual: "They don't just wanna see us killed. They want to see us punished." Dana is speaking not just of the old gods or the Facility's employees. As they watch the cabin, so do we, the audience. Indeed, there are numerous instances of "watching" within Cabin. There are the old gods watching humanity. There are the Facility's employees watching (and manipulating) the action on screen. Even within the cabin itself, there is the double objectification of Holden watching Dana through the one-way glass as she starts to undress; when he alerts her to his presence before she can fully undress and offers to switch rooms, we then have Dana watching Holden undress before putting a blanket over the glass.<sup>9</sup> Finally, there are the boxed-in creatures within the facility, scrolling past Dana and Marty like menu options on a DVD.

[14] Dollhouse addresses similar questions on the necessarily larger canvas that a television series can offer. The series is about a corporation that is largely funded by underground operations known as "Dollhouses," in which individuals are divested of their personalities and reduced to a child-like state so they can be "imprinted" with new ones at the behest of wealthy clientele. As in Cabin, the individual personalities are supposed to be suited only to the specifications of those who hire these individuals.<sup>10</sup> While Adelle

DeWitt uses the term “fantasy” as part of her sales pitch to clients, the series itself interrogates this concept throughout its run, shifting genres from romance to suspense to action to horror as required by both the client and the narrative itself. As Bennett writes in her analysis of Dollhouse’s focus on fantasy and corporate manipulation, the Dollhouse serves as a handy metaphor for Hollywood as “dream factory,” pointing out the numerous instances within the series that the fantasies of Dollhouse clients are directly influenced by popular media, including the Natural Born Killers (1994) scenario in “Omega” (1.12) and client Matt Cargill’s various romantic comedy fantasies for which he hires Echo (“Ghost,” 1.1; “Echoes,” 1.7). Yet the episode “The Attic” (2.9), with its filmic “dream” sequences, exposes the “dream factory” for what it really is:

“The Attic” seems to suggest that for all Hollywood’s image as a dream factory, it should really be viewed as a place of nightmares. The entertainment industry is fueled by the imaginations of the creative people who work within it, not to mention the imaginations of the audiences who consume their output. However, anyone who believes that they enjoy playing a part in this system is deluding themselves, because ultimately they are nothing more than cogs in a vast corporate-capitalist machine from which there is no escape. (Bennett 16)

[15] The Attic is the threat hanging over both Actives and Rossum employees, a place in which the individual is kept in an adrenaline-induced fear state in order to power the corporation’s mainframe. As Bennett further argues, the fact that both “broken” Actives and disgraced employees reside in the Attic suggests that “audiences, producers, and networks are all bound together in a complex structure of interdependence within the culture industry” (24).

[16] The Cabin in the Woods takes this concept to its logical extreme. Whereas the Actives within Dollhouse are said to have “consented” (i.e., agreed to a contract when they were vulnerable and felt they were out of options), and River even “begged” to attend the Academy that ultimately attempted to surgically manipulate her brain in order to turn her into a

psychic assassin ("Serenity," 1.1), the question of consent of Dana, Marty, Jules, Holden, and Curt is clear: they have not consented to be a part of the ritual. They are unwitting "cogs" in a "vast" machine that seems to operate as a stand-in for the corporatized media for which Whedon produces films and television series. The only choice they are given is how they'll die: murderous mermen, a Pinhead-esque monster, or the eventual "choice": The Buckners, a family cult of pain-worshipping zombies. Each element is carefully scripted and controlled, even before the group leaves for the cabin: Jules' hair-dye is treated with a chemical to decrease intelligence and raise libido, and Marty's marijuana is tampered with to make him less observant and more susceptible to suggestion. As the RV pulls away from Dana's apartment, we see a man on the roof of Dana's building, confirming to the Facility their departure and thus beginning the ritual. When Marty and Dana enter the Facility itself, they are faced with any number of potential horrific scenarios they could have chosen, all of which have some analogue within the horror genre.

[17] While it is the "old gods" that require the yearly sacrifice, it is the humans who have, in essence, industrialized it. From behind glass, technology, and a bank of monitors, they control the environment of the cabin, as well as its inhabitants. This work is undertaken with dedication and seeming pleasure, with the notable exception of security guard Daniel Truman (Brian White), who seems disturbed at the behavior of his coworkers, which includes betting on which threat the teens will face and throwing a raucous party when the job seems to be completed.<sup>11</sup>

[18] But who are the old gods? The film does not make this clear, which leaves viewers to make their own determination. It is arguable that the "gods" that need to be appeased are none other than the audience. Test screenings and ticket sales determine whether any film will be a success or failure. The taloned hand that crushes the cabin at the end is an apt metaphor for the fate of a box-office failure, particularly for a genre that seemingly runs on franchises and sequels, while the narrative itself seems to close down the possibility for a Cabin in the Woods 2.<sup>12</sup>

[19] In *Serenity*, the main plot rests on information that River Tam may have psychically gleaned while undergoing experimental procedures to



turn her into a psychic assassin. The series *Firefly's* antagonists include two blue-gloved men who are nominally linked to the Blue Sun Corporation, particularly given River's reactions to the Blue Sun logo, including slicing through its representation on a t-shirt worn by crew member Jayne Cobb (Adam Baldwin), making it "red" instead of blue ("Ariel," 1.08) and tearing labels off of Blue Sun products ("Shindig," 1.04). The graphic novels that were positioned narratively between the series and the film make this connection explicit as well as the connection between the Blue Sun Corporation and the Alliance government. Since the corporation could not contain River Tam, the government intervened in the form of a government agent known only as the Operative to track down and contain River (Matthews and Whedon).

[20] The use of media cuts both ways in *Serenity*. The Operative uses a commercial for Fruity Oaty Bars (which features an animated blue sun) to trigger River's violent abilities and thereby track her through the numerous security feeds across the galaxy. The plot itself hinges on a buried video that implicated the Alliance in the death of millions. The crew of *Serenity*, with the help of a hacker called Mr. Universe (David Krumholtz), use that same media to "broadcast" that video to the entire galaxy, undermining what he calls the "puppet theater the Parliament's jesters foist on the somnambulant public" (*Serenity*) and, it is implied, also weakening the Alliance government itself. There is a hopefulness in its narrative that is mostly absent from *Dollhouse*, and completely missing from *Cabin*. As Norman Cowie writes, regarding the potentiality of media piracy: "In an age when corporations invoke the First Amendment to protect their right to sell anything to anyone in any place at any time, media piracy asks about protection for citizens who wish to speak back using the same language" (320). This is not to imply there was not a cost to this dissemination, including the lives of two crew members and various others who had "sheltered" crew and passengers in the past. Yet the film ends with a tribute to a love of home and created family despite the odds, and the crew has managed to barter the media information they possessed to secure some level of freedom.

[21] In *Dollhouse*, any such victory is pyrrhic. If the Alliance government in *Firefly/Serenity* is in collusion with the corporate sector within its future diegesis, *Dollhouse*, set in the present day, shows an

American government that has wittingly or unwittingly ceded control to that sector. Rossum, the corporate villain in question, has already infiltrated the government by installing "Active architecture" (that is, brain rewiring to accept personality imprints) into a United States senator ("The Public Eye," 2.5), who is being groomed to ("The Left Hand," 2.6), and will eventually become, president (Whedon, "Epitaphs"). Tony (Enver Gjokaj) and Priya (Dichen Lachman), who have managed to fall in love despite being constantly imprinted and then wiped, become estranged because of Tony's love of technological enhancements, which he had only originally started to use to protect his family ("The Hollow Men," 2.12; "Epitaph 2: Return," 2.13). Caroline Farrell (Eliza Dushku), later known as the Active Echo, fulfills her goal to "bring down Rossum" ("Echoes," 1.7) by killing the head of the corporation, Boyd Langton (Harry Lennix) and blowing up the headquarters, only to have the technology she was trying to prevent from going global actually accelerated by her actions and leading to the destruction of society ("The Hollow Men," 2.12). Further, the man she loves (Paul Ballard [Tahmoh Penikett]) is killed just as they are about to reach safety ("Epitaph 2: Return," 2.13).

[22] Yet despite the unhappy circumstances of death and destruction, even Dollhouse offers some narrative relief: Tony and Priya reconcile, Echo uses the imprinting technology to incorporate Paul's personality into hers (thereby fulfilling his need that she "let him in"), and the human population is restored to their original personalities ("Epitaph 2: Return," 2.13). Kristen Noone argues that, "In Whedon's world, even when that world is apocalyptic in nature, hope for humanity can still be found" (25).

[23] No such "save" or hope is evident in Cabin. The "gods" are not appeased and the world appears to be ending as Dana and Marty share a joint. Cabin, therefore, represents a particular narrative endpoint that is, as explicated above, initially explored within Serenity, complicated in Dollhouse, and terminated in Cabin.<sup>13</sup> In Serenity, the corporate- and government-controlled media apparatus is turned on itself by River Tam and the crew of the spaceship, buying them some degree of autonomy. Dollhouse, on the other hand, offers numerous examples of media images, from the vox pop interviews of "Man on the Street" (1.6) (which give the appearance of a news report, but were in fact commissioned by Rossum), the

"video yearbook" interview of Caroline Farrell that is sent by former active Alpha (Alan Tudyk) to Paul Ballard at the FBI ("Ghost," 1.1), and the video "taps" placed in Paul Ballard's apartment that allowed the Dollhouse to monitor him ("Man on the Street," 1.6) (and were later used to trigger the sleeper protocol in the Active named November, to kill him ["The Hollow Men," 2.12]). While Caroline's initial plan to bring down Rossum included videotaping their instances of animal cruelty and posting it online ("Echoes," 1.7), that plan ends with her boyfriend Leo (Josh Cooke) dead and Caroline on the run; the tape itself is lost in the escape. Unlike *Serenity*, *Dollhouse* offers no real outlet to fight against corporate control because media is corporately controlled.

[24] Indeed, by *Cabin*, media has moved along the spectrum from potential savior to active antagonist. In 2007, Whedon posted a message on the internet board WHEDONesque about the beating death of Du'a Khalil Aswad, captured on camera phone and distributed widely across the Internet and news broadcasts, "not to record the horror of the event, but to commemorate it" ("Let's Watch"). Whedon goes on to relate this to the rise in "torture porn," our increasing desensitization to violence, and the intractable myth that women are inferior to men. The horror of the gleeful violence and commemoration of Aswad's death leads Whedon to conclude: "I've always had a bent towards apocalyptic fiction, and I'm beginning to understand why. I look and I see the earth in flames" ("Let's Watch"). While this is followed by a call for his fans to actively participate in making the world a better place for all sexes, he also claims, "I've never had any faith in humanity." This lack of "faith" is clear in the final moments of *Cabin*:

DANA. I'm so sorry I almost shot you. I probably wouldn't have.

MARTY. Hey, hey, no. Shh. No. I totally get it. I'm sorry I let you get attacked by a werewolf and then ended the world.

DANA. No. You were right. Humanity. It's time to give someone else a chance.

[25] *Cabin* could thus be looked at as Whedon's answer to the Du'a Khalil video: that as a culture, as an audience, we require the "honor killing"

of these young people in order to appease ancient and entrenched “gods” of ideas. The filming of Aswad’s death did not result in a stop in the practice of honor killing, nor did it save her life. Alyson Buckman’s analysis of Dr. Horrible’s Sing-along Blog as Whedon’s “self-reflexive deconstruction of [Aswad’s] patriarchal narrative” is equally applicable to Cabin. That being said, while Buckman argues that Dr. Horrible’s “production, distribution, and consumption patterns . . . [emphasize] community in the face of such dehumanization” (Buckman 1), the same cannot be argued about Cabin, except in the brief shared moment between Dana and Marty as the world ends. The fact that the “whore,” according to the Director, must die first strengthens this reading. As Whedon asks in his post on Aswad’s death, why is it that “the act of a free, attractive, self-assertive woman is punishable by torture and death?” Sitterson offers one answer in the lead-up to Jules’ death: “Got to keep the customer satisfied.”

[26] The remove of the Cabin as set and the Facility as studio as in-film filters for the audience thus serves less as a distancing component for the audience and more as an open question: How is the audience implicated within Cabin as voyeuristic? As Jules and Curt run into the lighted grove to have sex, Hadley and Sitterson, much to the horror of Truman, say:

HADLEY. Okay, boobies, boobies . . .

SITTERSON. Show us the goods . . .

[27] What is even more significant is that in one version of the shooting script, Hadley and Sitterson are described as having “the dispassionate focus of porn theater patrons” (“New Scripts”). The script could have easily substituted “horror” for “porn,” as it could also describe the potentially jaded expressions of horror film fans, requiring greater and greater gore from the films they consume, despite any potential social cost. This is not to argue that Whedon, for whom a hybrid form of the horror genre in essence launched his career as television auteur, is arguing that society’s main difficulties are caused by violence in film, television, or video games. Co-writer and director Drew Goddard, in an interview with the A.V. Club, claimed that, “this movie does comment on a horror movie, but that wasn’t our goal. We wanted to comment more on who we are and what part horror plays in us as a people” (qtd. in Phipps). Indeed, if one looks at

Goddard's work in earlier Whedon series, not only do themes of identity emerge ("Selfless," 7.3; "Lineage," 5.7; "Damage," 5.11; "Origin," 5.19), but also a focus on the consequences of exposure to violence and horror ("Damage," 5.11) and the dangers of a reductive and/or desensitized view of others ("Dirty Girls," 7.18; "Selfless," 7.5; "Conversations with Dead People," 7.7<sup>14</sup>).

[28] So what is Cabin saying about us as people? In his analysis of the Doctor Who episodes "Army of Ghosts" (2.12) and "Doomsday" (2.13), recapper Jacob argues that the narrative of the episodes emphasize both the imperialistic attitudes and the humanity of the organization Torchwood, which is responsible for unleashing deadly aliens on the world. "Torchwood is people. That's the beauty and the tragedy both" (Jacob, "Et in Arcadia Ego"). What Cabin does is humanize both the antagonists in the Facility and the victims. The opening montage, in which Hadley discusses the child-proofing in his house and invites Sitterson over to help him remove it bespeaks both the ordinariness of these individuals and the disconnect involved in overseeing a ritual sacrifice over the weekend and following it up with beers and power tools when it's over. When the maintenance of that ordinary life requires such a bloody ritual, however, it undermines the value of that life, something Marty pinpoints at the end:

DIRECTOR. The sun is coming up in eight minutes. If you live to see it, the world will end.

MARTY. Maybe that's the way it should be. If you've got to kill all my friends to survive, maybe it's time for a change.

[29] Marty's reading of the situation at the end reasserts the devaluing of an existence predicated on bloody sacrifice. The opening scene takes on an extra resonance by the end of the film. Hadley talks about essentially jinxing his and his wife's chance to get pregnant by preparing for a baby that has not yet been conceived; this is paralleled later when the entire staff of the Facility start celebrating the success of a ritual that has not actually been completed. I would argue that the true subtext of the opening exchange between Hadley and Sitterson is the basic "sterility" of a humanity whose existence depends not on birth, but on the sacrifice and suffering of youth displayed and managed in a corporate environment.

## Conclusion

[30] About halfway through *Cabin*, Marty retreats to his room to read a “book with pictures” (not unlike the *Dollhouse* Actives, who are seemingly incapable of either reading or retaining knowledge), only to be interrupted and unnerved by a quietly insistent whisper suggesting he “go for a walk.” Marty’s drug-induced altered state means that he is the first to see both the metaphorical narrative strings (Curt’s “alpha male” and Jules’ “celebutard” antics) and the actual strings (the camera in his room) that the “puppeteers” are manipulating. His first conclusion that he and his friends are unwitting reality series participants is not off the mark;<sup>15</sup> in both instances, the film seems to argue, audiences expect certain stereotypes in narrative and characterization to unfold for our pleasure, the “tested well with teens” referenced in Whedon’s song.<sup>16</sup> The reductive nature of the tropes and archetypes across media—whether it is a horror film, a drama, or corporate-managed “puppet theater” news—is exposed throughout Whedon’s oeuvre and implicates creator and audience both.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Whedon, in the commentary for the episode "Vows," mentions the comparisons to Topher, but said that he felt he had more in common with Adelle DeWitt (Olivia Williams), because she had to "[make] the hard choices".

<sup>2</sup> Editors' note: See, for example, Rhonda V. Wilcox, "Echoes of Complicity."

<sup>3</sup> Editors' note: See also Cynthea Masson on the puppeteers of Angel.

<sup>4</sup> It's important to note that both *Dollhouse* and *Cabin* were highly collaborative; in the case of *Dollhouse*, it seemed that Whedon had a less active role than in some of his earlier work. Most importantly for this analysis, Drew Goddard co-wrote and directed *Cabin*. I will examine the ways in which Goddard's aesthetic worked with Whedon's later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Season 6 of *Buffy* does involve three non-supernaturally powered villains—Warren (Adam Busch), Jonathan (Danny Strong), and Andrew (Tom Lenk)—who use a combination of technology and magic to torment Buffy. That being said, while Warren used non-magical means to strike at the Slayer (a gun), his actions precipitated Willow's (Alyson Hannigan's)

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attempt to end the world using magic ("Villains," 6.19), making it an uneasy fit with the non-magical apocalypses mentioned above. Many thanks to Kristopher Woofter for this insight.

<sup>6</sup> There is some indication that *Firefly/Serenity* and *Dollhouse* occupy the same narrative universe. In a Rossum ad posted on YouTube as part of a viral marketing campaign to save the series, a "blue sun" rises over planet Earth ("November Ad," 2009). Given the narrative similarities between Rossum and the U.S. government's complicity with it in *Dollhouse*, and the implied connection between the Alliance government and the Blue Sun Corporation in *Firefly*, choosing that particular visual underscores the resonances between the two.

<sup>7</sup> Although I would characterize the series *Angel* as early Whedon, a similar visual distancing appears in Season 5 of *Angel*, also set in a corporate environment. During a parasite-induced hallucination, *Angel* (David Boreanaz) finds the Wolfram and Hart lobby has been turned into a concession stand, and his office a movie theater, in which friends and employees munch popcorn while Los Angeles burns. When *Angel* insists they need to get out there and fight, Wesley (Alexis Denisof) insists "Spike will take care of it" ("Soul Purpose," 5.10). While it was a dream, it is germane to this discussion of audiences and producers because of the narrative similarity to *Cabin*'s visual disconnect between producers (Hadley and Sitterson) and text (the action in the cabin).

<sup>8</sup> It is established at the beginning of the film that Dana had an affair with one of her professors.

<sup>9</sup> In an interesting subversion of the usual objectification of the female body across film genres, it is not Dana whom the audience spies shirtless; it is Holden. Indeed, Dana watches Holden undress for a longer time than Holden watches Dana.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Cabin*, obviously they are not hired as much as picked by the Facility and forced to conform to one of five archetypes: the whore, the jock, the scholar, the fool, or the virgin.

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<sup>11</sup> Significantly, one can still see Dana Polk struggling to survive an attack by Matthew Buckner (Dan Payne) on the bank of monitors in the control room, while the workers drink, flirt, and dance.

<sup>12</sup> It also visually recalls the ending of the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* film, in which Freddy Krueger's (Robert Englund's) hand reaches through the window of final girl Nancy Thompson's (Heather Langenkamp's) front door and pulls her mother through (and presumably to her death), while the surviving teens are trapped in a convertible whose top matches the colors of Freddy's soon-to-be iconic sweater. Wes Craven had not originally intended for *Nightmare on Elm Street* to be a franchise (*Never Sleep Again*).

<sup>13</sup> This is not to imply that examinations of corporate behavior and media are limited to Whedon's later works. The first season of *Angel* features an episode ("The Ring," 1.16) that focuses on Octavian demon death battles put on for the amusement of wealthy spectators that arguably shares features with programs such as *Maury* or *Jerry Springer*, particularly the crowd's fervent egging of the contests to administer a "killing blow." Seasons 4 and 5 of *Angel* explore this to a greater extent with the Jasmine storyline, a former higher being who uses the media to enslave and devour humans ("Shiny Happy People," 4.18; "The Magic Bullet," 4.19; "Peace Out," 4.21); Season 5 takes place entirely within the corporate setting of the evil law firm Wolfram and Hart, with the episode "Smile Time" (5.13) dedicated particularly to both the compromises of creating television and to its potentially negative (draining) effects on children.

<sup>14</sup> "Conversations with Dead People" (7.7) offers an interesting take on the idea of collaboration; it is split into four plots, each written by a different individual. Goddard was responsible for the story involving Andrew and Jonathan, who were two-thirds of the "geek trio" that annoyed Buffy in Season 6. It is notable here not only for its collaborative nature mirroring that of *Dollhouse* and *Cabin*, but also for Goddard's segment's focus on re-humanizing; that is, Jonathan, who was labeled a geek and picked on in high school,

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nevertheless refuses to view his former classmates in the reductive manner they viewed him.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the “reality” aspect of *Cabin*, see Woofter (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> See Horne for an analysis of the ways the recent wave of reality television continues to perpetuate damaging ethnic, racial, class, and gender stereotypes; for a specific discussion of “more than a decade” of “stock characters” that exhibit the “hostility” of the reality genre against women, see Pozner.