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**The (Bio)political Economy of Bodies,
Culture as Commodification, and the**

**Badiouian Event: Reading Political Allegories in *The Cabin
in the Woods***



[1] In a key moment about one third of the way through *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), Hadley and Sitterson offer their uneasy security guard a justification for betting on the outcome of the cabin scenario by explaining to him that their unwilling participants still “have to make the choice of their own free will, otherwise the system doesn't work . . . yeah, we rig the game as much as we need to, but, in the end, [if] they don't transgress . . . they can't be punished.” There is, of course, an obvious slippage here: a choice cannot really be undertaken freely when the “game”—or, more precisely, the social matrix constituting the field of possible choices one can make—has been “rigged” in advance. It therefore seems that the idea of “free will,” or freedom more generally, functions as nothing more than an ideological justification for the punishment doled out to the film's characters; it is then precisely because they are ostensibly “free” that they can be brutally sacrificed to the Ancient Ones. The film thus invites us to explore this contradictory sense of freedom and how it functions within the ideological prism of the present historical moment. I argue here that *Cabin* can be grasped as a political allegory for the way in which freedom is, under global capitalism, radically overdetermined by mechanisms of ideological, electronic, and biological control that exacerbate inequality and unevenly distribute life itself amongst populations.

[2] I use “allegory” here as a way in which to read the film's manifest generic and narrative content as reflective of the current historical moment's “political unconscious.” Indeed, Fredric Jameson has argued that it is in the age of global capitalism, when representations of the social totality seem impossible, that allegory “stages its historic reappearance” and “allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall” (*Geopolitical* 4-5). Reading the film as allegory then gives us a hermeneutic capable of uncovering the way in which *Cabin* works through, on both conscious and unconscious levels, capitalism's ideological contradictions surrounding the

concept of “freedom.” I find two theoretical concepts particularly useful for exploring *Cabin's* allegorical mode: Louis Althusser's figure of ideology as “interpellation,” or “hailing,” and Michel Foucault's theorization of “biopower,” or the way in which the body becomes inscribed within or produced through relations of power. While I will develop these ideas in more detail below, I want to suggest upfront that both of these concepts are useful for my purposes here because they describe ways in which freedom is contained, not in a crude sense of fascistic control in which freedom is eliminated, but rather through a more sophisticated “setting of limits” on freedom, or, as in Hadley and Sitterson's explanation to the security guard in the film, producing the field of choices in which we can act. It is in this sense that I read the film as a political allegory for how freedom—and indeed, democracy as a whole—is fundamentally constrained within the limits set by the ideological and biopolitical power of global capitalism.

[3] Secondly, the concepts of interpellation and biopower are useful because they approach the question of freedom's limitations at the level of system rather than simple interpersonal relations between individuals—the “system” here being, for my Marxist problematic, always that of global capitalism itself. I trust this conceptualization will be uncontroversial for my use of Althusser, since he is not only a key Marxist theorist, but also associated with “structural Marxism” (Jameson *Political* 23), or the examination of capitalism and its institutions as a structure. Foucault—whose work is often read in opposition to Marxism—might initially appear to be a more difficult case to make, but many recent Marxist theorists have found biopower to be an exceedingly useful tool for conceptualizing global capital's expansive new systems of decentralized control: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for instance, argue that “biopolitical production” helps us to grasp how capitalism produces “not only commodities but also subjectivities” (*Empire* 32).¹ Bringing these two concepts together also gives us a way of exploring the multiple technologies of power used by the corporation in *Cabin*, opening up powerful new lines of flight for the film's allegorical interventions into both political issues—such as the limits of “freedom,” corporate control, and economic exploitation—as well as cultural issues, especially its interrogation of the political valences of the horror film.

[4] There are two fundamental dimensions to the film's allegorical mode: first, the young protagonists in the film are both biopolitically constituted and ideologically interpellated within narrow subject positions—here, as the horror film archetypes of the whore, athlete, scholar, fool, and virgin—and can thus only make decisions (or exert their “freedom”) within these narrow subject positions. It is also from within these subject

positions that their bodies become reified, or transformed into objects for the use of the engineers; indeed, it is precisely the destruction of their bodies and the extraction of their blood through suffering that sate the Ancient Ones, allowing the film's corporate engineers to keep the world (economy) afloat. As Eric Cazdyn points out, "today, the body not only produces capital through its labor, but it is capital itself through its very commodification" (85). The film is thus, when read within this first allegorical mode, a powerful figuration of the way in which human bodies are produced and circulated as objects in a capitalist economy. Of course, these processes of interpellation and biopolitical constitution might alternatively be read as an allegory for the way in which the horror film itself—here understood as a metonymic stand-in for any entertainment commodity—transforms individuals into ideal capitalist subjects. This alternative reading is, above all, suggested by the film's radical self-reflexivity—*Cabin* is quite literally about how subjectivities are produced by a simulated horror film.

[5] I propose that any political reading of *Cabin* must take both of these possibilities into account and that the film can, in fact, be apprehended as a double allegory: at the immediate political level, the film allegorizes the way in which bodies are circulated as commodities under global capitalism, while at the level of genre and filmic form, *Cabin* self-referentially attends to the way in which the horror film is itself a profitable commodity in late capitalism. My hermeneutic therefore suggests that *Cabin* can be read as an ideological intervention into both the horror film genre and the larger capitalist system in which it is placed. Indeed, I insist that *Cabin* is an intervention rather than simply a reflection of larger economic processes: the film also contains a utopian horizon in which it attempts to imagine a radically different kind of freedom that might be capable of challenging the hegemony of global capitalism and its cultural forms. Towards this end, I conceptualize the film's ostensibly apocalyptic ending as what Alain Badiou calls an "event," or an occurrence capable of rewriting the political possibilities of the historical present in a radical way (*Communist* 242). Marty's decision to seize this opportunity and commit himself to rise of the Ancient Ones then becomes a figuration for the way in which biopower and ideology can never completely foreclose political possibility; there is, in Badiou's terms, always the potential for an event, or a "supplement" to the existing "situation," that "compels us to decide a new way of being" (*Ethics* 41). At least at the allegorical level, then, the film's ending should be read as an explosive negation of capitalism in which the "apocalypse" carries with it all manner of fundamentally utopian fantasies of bringing about a radically different world.

[6] In order to begin developing the contours of *Cabin*'s allegorical mode in more detail, however, we first need to situate the film within the horror film genre as it appears in the early 21st century. This periodization is helpful not only as a way of understanding how *Cabin* functions as a critique of contemporary horror films, but also as a way of mapping narrative similarities between *Cabin* and other entries in the genre that might serve as a basis for a reconstruction of this historical period's ideological contradictions. In fact, I find a considerable thematic overlap between *Cabin* and several recent horror films collectively designated as "torture porn"²—a surprising connection indeed, given both Joss Whedon's public distaste for the subgenre (Cochran para 1.3) and the way in which *Cabin* is commonly read as a *response* to, rather than a part of, the torture porn cycle (Woofter and Stokes para 10). So while *Cabin* is perhaps not "torture porn" as such, it does represent the body as a consumable object within its narrative, which is a key narrative device in the torture porn genre that appears in films such as *Hostel* (2005), *Turistas* (2006), and *Borderland* (2007). The human body functions in the narratives of all of these films as a commodity or as a site of economic exchange within the field of global capital.

[7] The *Hostel* films are the most obvious in this respect: a global corporation called Elite Hunting captures young vacationing tourists and allows wealthy businessmen and women worldwide to bid on the ability to torture and kill them. In *Turistas*, European and American tourists visiting Brazil are captured by a character named Dr. Zamora, who plans to harvest their organs as an act of revenge on wealthy Americans who have purchased black market organs taken from impoverished Brazilians. Finally, like *Cabin*, *Borderlands* uses the horror film trope of the human sacrifice as an allegory for bodily commodification: a group of drug smugglers who worship an ancient god must sacrifice American tourists in order to ensure the safe passage of their cocaine across the American border. Here the body becomes a means to an end, and must be "consumed" to achieve their larger economic goal, perhaps not unlike various "raw materials" used in the manufacture of commodities (Marx 288). We can therefore read all of these films as allegorical figurations of global capitalism's control, commodification, and exploitation of the human body. I suggest that these torture porn films are a response to these larger historical anxieties about the diffuse power structures of multinational capitalism and the way that bodies are circulated as commodities worldwide (the global sex trade or the forced movement of laborers being paradigmatic examples).

[8] *Cabin*'s narrative, in which the corporation Hadley and Sitterson work for is responsible for sacrificing five teens in order to keep the Ancient Ones from destroying the

world, can be read in similar allegorical terms. The corporate context of this film also helps situate it within the larger allegorical trend I am mapping—the villains here are literally white collar, middle-manager types. Recall too that, as in *Hostel*, the corporation in *Cabin* is explicitly multinational and that there are similar scenarios unfolding all over the globe simultaneously, each one drawing on the specifics of the host nation's horror film culture but serving the same purpose. It is also within this horror film simulacrum created by the engineers that the bodies of the young protagonists are transformed into lifeless objects for the satisfaction of the Ancient Ones. *Cabin's* political allegory is even more complex than this, however, since it also conceptualizes how identity itself is constructed in order to facilitate the reification of the body. It is through its use of the “figurative machinery” of the teen horror film and its formulaic deployment of character archetypes that *Cabin* also allegorizes the way in which identities are formed and “sorted” by both ideology and power. *Cabin* then not only figuratively represents capitalism's transformation of the body into an object, but also attempts to comprehensively map global capital's matrices of power by exploring how it ideologically and biopolitically turns individuals into “subjects” willing and able to carry out its dictates while ostensibly acting of their own free will.

[9] The film first stages this construction of identity through what I shall call an “archetypeification” of the main characters, in which their dominant traits are reduced to mere archetypes—the whore, athlete, scholar, fool, and virgin, which is a fairly accurate representation of the major character archetypes we find in the modern teen horror film. Within the context of the cabin scenario, these are the narrow subject positions from which the five main characters are able to act. It is in this sense that the film can be read as an allegorical figuration of Althusser's concept of interpellation, or the process in which individuals are transformed into “subjects” through ideology. Althusser's account suggests that there is a fundamental and productive ambiguity in the word “subject” that is useful for explaining how ideology functions: he notes that in everyday use “subject” can mean either “a free subjectivity . . . author of and responsible for its actions,” or, alternatively, “a *subjected* being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (182, my emphasis). Since, as Althusser claims, “ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects,” it is only through ideology that one becomes a “subject” (171). While one is able to act freely as a subject, this freedom is always already *subject* to the higher authority of ideology itself. One is free, but only free to do what one has been ideologically constituted to do; or, to return to my reading of the sequence in *Cabin* with which I opened the essay, the subject is only free to act within the field of possible choices allowed within the existing ideological matrix.

[10] Althusser describes this process in which the individual becomes subjectivated through ideology as interpellation. The famous illustration he uses is the figure of the police officer hailing an individual with the phrase “hey, you there;” as the individual turns around to face the police officer, she or he becomes “subject” in both senses of the word (174). In *Cabin*, then, the archetypeification of the characters is the process by which they are interpellated into the subject positions of the whore, athlete, scholar, fool, and virgin. For instance, Kurt is hailed into the subject position of the “athlete” (or the teen film character archetype of the “jock” bully), despite the fact that he is, as Marty reminds Dana, a “sociology major on a full academic scholarship.” It is, of course, only from within these subject positions that the five main characters become useful to the corporation orchestrating the cabin scenario: the “ritual” requires the characters to inhabit these specific subject positions before their bodies can be consumed. We might then read this field of possible subject positions as the production of identities that are useful to capitalism.

[11] Hardt and Negri point out, however, that ideology is by no means global capital's only, or even primary, technology of power within the present history moment—we also need to attend to the material, or biopolitical, production of “needs, social relations, bodies, and minds” (*Empire* 32). Likewise, in *Cabin*, the young protagonists are not only hailed into their respective ideological subject positions, but also subject to precise biological control and manipulation by the lab's engineers. Here I find it useful to draw on Foucault's notion of “biopower” to describe how the biological life of the protagonists becomes subject to power and calculation by the corporate lab orchestrating the scenario. Biopolitical production, like interpellation, is a way in which the characters are subjectivated, or transformed into the ideal subjects for the purposes of the corporation's sacrificial ritual. Foucault argues that biopower is “what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life . . . [It] endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (137). In *Cabin*, the biological life of the young protagonists becomes an object of power primarily through the corporate lab's chemistry department, headed by the scientist Lin. As the cabin scenario plays out, we learn that the chemistry department's close observations and control over the hormone levels of the characters allows them to control the actions of the protagonists: for instance, they slow down Jules's cognition through her hair dye, increase her “libido” by deploying a pheromone mist, and release chemicals that distract the group in order to make them separate from each other. In this scene, biopower is being used explicitly as a form of materialist production that makes the characters conform to their required roles within the ritual. This

precise control at the level of bios is made possible by the intense scrutiny and regulation that characterizes late capitalism's biopolitical regime of power.

[12] However, this level of micro-biopolitical control of the individual body is only one pole of biopower: Foucault also writes of a larger "biopolitics of the population," or "interventions and regulatory controls" aimed at control and calculation at the level of the species (139). It is here that technologies of biopower determine the kinds of life that are livable and which are not, or as Foucault puts it, where power can "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (138). Power can, in other words, distribute life itself amongst populations. In these calculations, power deploys death not for its own sake, but rather as a "safeguard of society" (138). For instance, Foucault reads the death penalty as a way in which societies can frame the putting to death of an individual as a way of protecting life—the life of those to whom the condemned individual represents a threat (138). We can clearly see the way in which the corporation orchestrating the sacrificial ritual is deploying power over life to justify the death of the protagonists: as the director explains to Marty and Dana at the film's conclusion, the death of these young people is required so that the rest of the world may continue to live. *Cabin* is then trying to grasp and represent a biopower of capital that extends from life to death, enmeshing the entire social totality and leaving no external standpoint untouched by its field of domination. Ultimately, *Cabin* suggests the ways in which biopower and interpellation name limits to the conception of freedom put forth by western democratic powers as an alibi for their pervasive and deadly quest to extract the maximum amount of surplus value possible from the world's populations.

[13] So far, however, I have only been attentive to the most basic level of *Cabin's* engagement with global capitalism and its allegorical figuration of the way in which bodies are hailed, sorted, and transformed into objects. To raise the film to the allegorical second power, we need to momentarily leave the "horror film" narrative and attend to the way in which the scenario is framed as a horror film by the corporate lab orchestrating the scenario. The key turning point in the film is the sequence in which Hadley remarks "we aren't the only ones watching" while Jules and Kirk have sex onscreen. This line of dialogue suggests a way in which the film can be read as self-referential or "postmodern" (in the popular sense of the word), but I want to suggest that there is also something else going on here. As Jameson argues, "autoreferentiality" also describes "the way in which culture acts out its own commodification" (*Geopolitical* 5). By gesturing at its own status as a film the audience has paid to see, in other words, *Cabin* also foregrounds the fact that it is itself a commodity. The film thus becomes an allegory for its own status as a commodity within the

world system of capitalism. This second allegorical reading radically expands my analysis in the previous section: for instance, we might now read its representation of interpellation as a deeper figuration for the ways in which mainstream commercial cinema—specifically the “teen” film—hails its young consumers, interpellating them into subject positions that will leave them subject to capital.

[14] Even more provocatively, however, *Cabin* invites us to examine the way in which mainstream film not only represents, but also engages in its own commodification of (sexed) bodies. It is no accident that the scene in which Hadley explicitly remarks on the film's self-reflexivity also contains *Cabin's* only sex scene. By crosscutting between Jules' nude breasts and Hadley and Sitterson watching, *Cabin* both invites a prurient heterosexual male gaze *and* undermines it through its estranging self-reflexivity, demonstrating a fundamental ambivalence about mainstream film's commodification of the female body. Indeed, this entire sequence betrays its constructedness: the brief sex scene is prefaced with the lab's deployment of a pheromone mist, demonstrating the way in which biopower has produced the body that is about to become objectified twice: first as a sexual object for the heterosexual male gaze and then as a literal object to be sacrificed to the Ancient Ones. What is most interesting about this sequence, however, is that the film does actually, as Sitterson bluntly puts it, “[satisfy] the customer” by revealing Jules' breasts. By allowing the heterosexual male gaze to be both satisfied and then estranged, the film more fully implicates itself within the commodification it examines, once again foregrounding its own status as a commodity. After all, if Whedon and Goddard simply wanted to deconstruct the heterosexual male gaze, they easily could have done so without actually showing Jules topless.

[15] Indeed, I would suggest that this is precisely what the film does in the earlier sequence in which Holden discovers the one-way mirror that allows him to peer into Dana's room. In this scene, the audience is invited to identify with Holden's gaze through a shot/reverse shot pattern that alternates between him gazing at Dana and a point of view shot from his perspective in which Dana undresses. Right before she removes her shirt, however, Holden alerts her to his presence and ends the voyeuristic fantasy. Here the film forces the audience to confront their complicity with the voyeurism of cinema itself and draws attention to the standard Hollywood gender binary in which men look and women are looked at (Mulvey 715). In fact, a later portion of the sequence even allows for a temporary reversal of these positions: after they switch rooms, Dana is momentarily tempted by the sight of Holden undressing, allowing the camera to display his muscular upper body for the

pleasure of her gaze. Crucially, the shot pattern here is a repetition of the earlier one, cutting between shots of her looking and a point of view shot from her perspective of Holden undressing. The film thus temporarily troubles hegemonic codes of gender representation and suggests the potential for commercial cinema to maintain reciprocity of the gaze. This reciprocity does not last, however: as the camera pulls back from the shot of Dana covering the mirror, the image transforms into security camera footage being watched by Sitterson, thus reinstating the connection of the male gaze and the camera as the ultimate determinant of the film's gender coding.

[16] An examination of the film as a whole likewise reveals a stark contrast between the way in which male and female bodies are staged for the camera. For instance, Jerry Metz points out in his powerful critique of *Cabin* that the mirror scene is itself a repetition of the very beginning of the film, but, in this first iteration, the audience are “denied the option of nobility and rendered voyeurs when the opening displays Dana half-naked” (para 18). Indeed, the first shot following the title card is a crane shot in which the camera voyeuristically rises upwards to the open upstairs window of Dana's house, revealing her standing alone in her underwear. Metz thus argues that Whedon and Goddard's ostensible “critique [of] the objectification of women in other films . . . is again effaced by their own gratuitous presentation of Dana's curves as an object of male desire” (para 18). This insightful critique reveals how *Cabin* wants to have it both ways: to both revel in and critique the genre conventions of the horror film, a contradiction that I have suggested we can also apprehend in the sex scene discussed above. These sequences therefore remind us that global capitalism's objectification of bodies is fundamentally gendered and that, as a piece of mass culture, *Cabin's* critique of this objectification must be performed within the signifying field of commercial cinema itself.

[17] To further this analysis, I would like to return to Metz, who also extends his critique of Whedon and Goddard's disingenuous gender politics to the film as a whole, suggesting that *Cabin's* overall “critique” of torture porn films depends upon a “consumerist ethics”: the film's true message, he argues, is that “consumers must transform the genre away from [torture porn] using their 'free will' and grassroots market power” (para 31). Metz thus persuasively unmasks the film's apparent critique of torture porn as little more than a marketing strategy to increase its own shares in the horror film market (para 32). In a perverse dialectical twist, however, I want to argue that this consumerist ideology and self-commodification might alternatively be read as one of the film's virtues, insofar as *Cabin* thus explicitly rejects the ideological fantasy that there could be a work of art under

late capitalism that is not first and foremost a commodity. The film is so theoretically productive precisely because it foregrounds its own set of internal contradictions: it is both a critique of the contemporary horror film as well as an exemplary example of the genre, it both critiques and participates in the consumption of the female body, and it both critically examines the production of ideal capitalist subjects while simultaneously engaging in precisely this production itself. These contradictions then produce within the film a fundamental and irresolvable tension or ambivalence that is useful as a way of diagnosing the critical limitations of a commercial film trying to stage a critique of its own form.

[18] Indeed, the film's uneasy position as both a commodity and a critique of the commodifying practices of capitalism might also be clarified through a brief analysis of its connections with *Dollhouse*, a work that shares a great deal of thematic and ideological content with the later film. We might first approach this connection by reading *Cabin's* representation of various monsters tucked away in an "elaborate filing system" (Woofter and Stokes para 9) as a repetition of the dolls awaiting activation in the dollhouse. Woofter and Stokes argue that "the film's monsters . . . ultimately stand as avatars of an exhausted and entirely commodified pre-packaging, stacked and ready to be picked at random off the shelves of the factory archive by producers thinking only of the bottom line" (para 9). The dolls in the dollhouse likewise function as commodities ready and waiting to be deployed in the service of the cliché sexual or action-movie fantasies of the dollhouse's wealthy clients. Both *Dollhouse* and *Cabin* are thus allegorizing the way in which mass culture deploys the same banal fantasies again and again in the service of corporate profit. This reading also suggests that the "system purge" in *Cabin* and the final moments of *Dollhouse* in which all the dolls have their memories returned to them open up political possibilities for a radically different mode of existence.

[19] *Cabin* and *Dollhouse* can therefore be read as representations of the "culture industry" of late capitalism and as a challenge to its hegemony. Eve Bennett notes that, like Horkheimer and Adorno's famous theorization of the "culture industry," *Dollhouse* "highlights the interconnection of the entertainment industry with other branches of the Western capitalist infrastructure" (para 11). I want to propose that *Cabin* extends *Dollhouse's* exploration of this thematic by staging its self-referential commentary on the teen horror film in a way that foregrounds, as the real villain, a large corporation like the one responsible for distributing these films. The indistinction between film production and the larger apparatuses of capital can best be grasped through the figure of the "director"—her character's title cleverly suggests both a film director and a corporate director. She is, after

all, in control of both the corporate lab as well as the horror film simulacrum in which our protagonists must act out the plot of the standard teen horror film. The director's symbolic overdetermination suggests that *Cabin* is once again attempting to come to terms with its status as a commodity. The final sequence in which Marty and Dana confront the director is also an explicit revelation of both of the allegories structuring the film: not only do we learn that the ritual's purpose is to sort and consume the bodies of five young people, but the "doubled" presence of the director also figuratively suggests the film's deeper allegorization of its own commodity-status. This sequence is then the moment in which the film's double allegory collapses into a single figure (the director), perhaps inviting us to imagine that a challenge to her power might allegorically signify a utopian desire for alternatives to both the cruel processes of capitalism *and* the film forms that embody its ideology.

[20] Indeed, while *Cabin* allegorizes and reenacts the limits of freedom within the capitalist system, the film never lapses into a complacent defeatism or belief that the world cannot be changed. Instead, the film powerfully invites us to think through the slippages and moments in which this power is not total and can never truly be total—it is within these spaces that the film allows us to imagine the possibility of radical alternatives that cannot be accounted for within capital's matrix of power. Ultimately it is Marty that seems to consistently elude power: he survives when he should have died, manages to hack into the lab's electrical wiring, releases the monsters back into the lab, and, finally, stops the completion of the scenario and "ends the world." But, most importantly for my reading here, Marty is an example of the way in which capital can be subverted imminently—that is, from within its own ideological field—allowing us to mount resistance from within rather than requiring an outside standpoint, which, at least in the era of global capital, no longer exists. Marty is never "outside" ideology or power and is thus never "free" as such, but is nonetheless still able to fight back, both physically and, perhaps more importantly, ideologically. These slippages will open up a potentially revolutionary break within the system during Marty's confrontation with the director—a break which the film will "resolve" in a truly radical way.

[21] Indeed, since my argument here suggests that all of these contemporary horror films dealing with the commodification of the body—*Cabin* and torture porn alike—are, in some way or another, a response to collective anxieties about the increasing power of global capitalism, it is especially important to examine the conclusions of the films in order to explore how these anxieties are resolved within their narrative structures. Here we find a particularly glaring contrast between *Cabin* and films like *Hostel* and *Turistas*. Unlike *Cabin*,

the endings of the torture porn films are rather predictable: each of them has at least one of the main characters escape the clutches of the torturers and take violent revenge on the person(s) immediately responsible for their capture. These films are thus producing a compensatory revenge fantasy that displaces the systemic issues suggested by the films—including the violence of the commodity structure itself and the immense power of multinationals—onto an individual villain. Within the narrative of the text itself, this solution is not unlike the classic 1980s slasher film plot resolution in which the final girl (to use Carol Clover's famous phrase) turns the tables on the killer in the final minutes of the film (35). The issue with these resolutions in the torture porn films is that they leave the allegorical levels of the film unresolved and each film necessarily ends with the exploitative practices of capitalism unaddressed. *Cabin*, however, is once again more interesting: in the final thirty minutes of the film, Marty and Dana manage to escape the horror film simulation and end up within the corporate headquarters that is producing it. In this respect, we might say they leave the horror film plot as such and enter directly into the allegorical levels of the film. The complete abandonment of the standard horror film narrative within this sequence also demands the allegorical reading protocol I have been advocating here—especially if we are to make sense of the radical, even utopian, possibilities of *Cabin's* ending.

[22] In order to apprehend this radical dimension, I argue that we need to understand the film's apocalyptic conclusion in which the Ancient Ones rise and destroy the world dialectically; as both an end and the possibility of a beginning, or as both catastrophe and utopia simultaneously. Gerry Canavan likewise points out it should be read in a double sense: for him, as both a “utopian break from history's cycle of horrors *and* a nihilistic, irrevocable final judgment on the ultimate moral unsuitability of man” (para 36, emphasis in original). For Canavan, this double reading suggests a fundamental antinomy in a work like *Cabin* that is both denouncing the politically reactionary elements of the horror genre and simultaneously allowing fans to “exult in precisely the ugly power fantasies that seemed to be the objects of the critiques in the first place” (para 38). Here I would like to re-frame his opposition, however, and to set aside the possibility of the “ultimate moral unsuitability of man,” which is a theological frame unsuited to the Marxist problematic I am using here. Indeed, I would suggest that this opposition looks different if we reconceptualize the desires for these “ugly power fantasies” as properly historical ones that are cultivated by the system of capitalism itself. The possibility that “perhaps what we are seeing in these films is precisely what we want to watch” (Canavan para 32) is then not a theological condemnation of the inherent sin of humanity, but rather speaks to the way in which capitalism colonizes our desires—a proposition that leads us back to *Cabin's* own status as a commodity and

the film's attempt to work through this internal contradiction.

[23] The dialectic of the final sequence is indeed, as Canavan argues, both utopian and apocalyptic, but I want to neutralize the theological overtones of "apocalyptic" and instead read these historical possibilities as something like Marx and Engel's (in)famous two alternative endings of capitalism: "a revolutionary reconstituting of society at large, or the common ruin of the contending classes" (219). The latter possibility of "common ruin" seems an easy enough proposition to argue for: the world, after all, certainly appears to come to a fiery end at the conclusion of the film as a result of the struggle between Marty and Dana and the director. However, I instead want to contend that it is ultimately a utopian desire for change—or, more properly, a desire for a Badiouian "event" that would produce the possibility for this change—that undergirds the film's ending. This framework also demands that we shift our attention from the "catastrophe" itself to the allegorical resonance of Marty's radical refusal to capitulate to the director's demands.

[24] Indeed, I want to suggest that it might be profitable to read the recent proliferation of apocalyptic narratives within film and literature—of which *Cabin* is surely one of the most interesting—as, at least on some level, engaging collective fantasies about a potentially utopian transformation of the world that are then displaced or disguised within the texts themselves. Textual figurations of apocalypse can, in other words, be apprehended as a purely formal attempt to imagine a historical break that would bring an end to the world as we currently know it. My argument, then, is that these apocalyptic fantasies are unconsciously structured by a properly utopian impulse that desires a wholesale transformation of society. Within the dominant ideological climate of cynicism, however, this utopian desire for change can only be imagined as its opposite number: as a catastrophe or moment of total destruction. One way of conceptualizing this utopian desire is to turn to Jameson's careful separation of the "utopian program," which would include things like literary utopias or actual utopian political praxis, and the much broader "utopian impulse"—a subconscious utopian desire detectable within our present reality in "a variety of covert expressions and practices" (*Archaeologies* 3). Jameson elsewhere argues that, unlike the utopian program, the utopian impulse "does not correspond to a plan or to utopian praxis, it expresses utopian desire and invests it in a variety of unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways" (*Valences* 415). It is precisely this deeply seated utopian impulse that I argue underpins the apocalyptic fantasy concluding *Cabin*. The key to the film's conclusion is then the way in which it denies the closure of the existing system and attempts to inaugurate a new reality; it is, in the final analysis, about the desire for a different world.

[25] The fantasy investment of the apocalyptic narrative is then precisely about the moment of a profound historical break, or the coming of what Alain Badiou calls an "event." For Badiou, an event is "a rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages as it exists for any particular situation" that "paves the way for what . . . is strictly impossible" (*Communist* 242-243). The rising of the Ancient Ones is precisely such an event: it is a radical break within both the film's narrative and, allegorically, the capitalist system the film is attempting to map. The key to this reading in *Cabin* is that the world is not just ending with the rise of the Ancient Ones, but it is also being reborn: Marty says its "time for a change," rather than simply an end, and Dana remarks that "it's time to give someone else a chance." These two statements are crucial because they allow the film to enact what Badiou calls the "real process of a fidelity to an event" (*Ethics* 42). In other words, the importance of the film's conclusion is not the rise of the Ancient Ones per se, but rather the process in which Marty and Dana seize this historical opening and commit themselves to it, remaining "faithful" to the event's possibilities.³ Indeed, Badiou argues that it is fidelity to the event, not merely the event itself, that produces "a real break (both thought and practiced) in the specific order in which the event took place" (*Ethics* 42). The energetic, affective charge of the film's conclusion comes from Marty's radical refusal of the messianic-savior role that would allow the world to continue unchanged. Indeed, Marty's remark that "if you have to kill all my friends to survive, maybe it's time for a change," is an explicit refusal of the status quo—a status-quo in which people are manipulated, controlled, and slaughtered so that corporations can continue to function uninterrupted.

[26] The central utopian impulse of the film is thus not to be found in the actual ending, but rather in its enactment of this "eventual fidelity" that holds out hope for radically new forms of subjectivity. I therefore want to conclude by suggesting that the utopian potential of *Cabin's* ending also gives us another vantage on the concept of freedom: whereas the "freedom" the young protagonists were allowed earlier in the film was fundamentally illusory and overdetermined by interpellation and biopolitical control, the film's conclusion figures a radical act of freedom that might be capable of negating the present in the service of a different future. Slavoj Žižek, drawing on Lenin, suggests that a distinction between two kinds of freedom is useful: whereas a "formal freedom" represents no more than "the freedom of choice within the coordinates of the existing power relations," what he calls "actual freedom" instead "designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates" (544). This distinction can be easily mapped in *Cabin*: while the ostensible "freedom" allowed by the protagonists within the scenario—most fundamentally, the choice between which monster they would have to face—is a purely

ideological version of formal freedom, the radical choice made by Marty and Dana at the end of the film literally undermines the coordinates of the existing power relations by bringing an end to the corporation setting the scenario in motion. A moment of actual freedom is then the utopian break itself, or the action capable of transforming the global field of power relations. Marty and Dana's act of actual freedom is a "pure fidelity to the possibility opened by the event" (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 45), which then creates this moment of profound historical change and openness.

[27] Indeed, this moment of utopian freedom concluding the film even suggests a negation of the commodity form itself. This negation operates on two levels, corresponding to both of the allegorical levels in which I have argued these films represent the commodity form: first, since the bodies of the teens represent the commodity needed to sustain the system (which we might read as an allegorical figuration for the way in which young people are integrated into the labor market), then Marty and Dana are rejecting this commodification of their own bodies and refusing to be "used up" as objects. Even more interestingly, though, the film is depicting its own negation: not only does the gigantic hand smash the titular cabin in the woods, but the film itself immediately ends, unable to project itself onto the new reality it attempts to imagine. The lyrics to the song playing over the end credits—"this wasn't meant to last"—are then utopian in their insistence on the possibility for historical change. So while the film is a potent allegory of the way in which freedom is constrained by the ideological and biopolitical matrix of global capital, it also holds out hope for a utopian rejection of this totality and the transformation of the global system. Moreover, the film also situates the potentiality for an eventual transformation, or the possibility that occasions an act of actual freedom, within the very slippages and contradictions that make up the system itself. What *Cabin* ultimately provides is then a figuration of freedom that is tied neither to the ideological fictions of capital nor to a regressive fantasy of free will, but rather to the potentialities of utopia, or the absolute commitment to bring about another world.

Notes

1) For two other recent theoretical works that powerfully demonstrate the usefulness of Foucault and Marxism for each other, see Leerom Medovoi's "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory" and Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (especially pp. 39-78).

2) Adam Lowenstein has compellingly argued that we should disregard the moniker "torture porn" in favor of "spectacle horror" (42), but I use the former here simply to designate this collection of films as it is most commonly (and notoriously) known. I will suggest, however, that an attempt by James McRoy to theorize the connections between the larger "splatter film" genre and hardcore pornography might actually provide a justification to keep the phrase (provided we could understand "porn" as merely a designation of a certain form or aesthetic rather than a pejorative label). McRoy's essay argues that both pornography and the splatter film are about the "spectacle of bodily disintegration and fragmentation," and suggests parallels between the pornography mise-en-scene's dependence on close ups on the sex organs of the performers and the splatter films' "close-ups of bodily trauma" (197). His Deleuzian reading then inflects both the splatter film and pornography in a positive, transformative direction, arguing that their fragmentation of the body "reveals the artificiality of socio-cultural paradigms informed by modernist myths of organic wholeness" (192). I agree with his reading, but we need to remain dialectical here and insist that pornography, like the horror film, also demonstrates the way in which global capitalism turns representations of the body into a commodity. Indeed, neither pornography nor the horror film can be theorized separately from the exploitative material conditions of capitalism in which they are produced and circulated

3) While the implication here is that the actual "content" of the ending (the rise of evil monsters) is not nearly as important as its allegorical enactment of fidelity or absolute commitment to the possibilities for a transformed world, I would also suggest that the use of monsters as the "figurative raw machinery" (Jameson, *Geopolitical* 5) of the film's allegory is suggestive insofar as what is regarded as "monstrous" in a given historical moment is precisely that which is threatening to the status quo. So for instance, Hardt and Negri use the figure of the "monster" as a way of representing the revolutionary potential of the "multitude" (their famous theorization of a new form of collectivity capable of challenging global capitalism): "the concept of the multitude forces us to enter a new world in which we can only understand ourselves as monsters. . . Today we need new monsters" (194). In their account, then, the rise of monsters is a useful way of imagining what revolutionary transformation might feel like. Indeed, this trope of the potentially revolutionary monster can be found throughout Whedon's work: for instance, see Phillip Wegner's *Life Between Two Deaths*, pp. 196-197 for an extended analysis of Hardt and Negri's call for monsters and their possibilities for radically new forms of kinship in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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