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Trick 'r Treat, The Cabin in the Woods

and the Defense of Horror's Subcultural Capital: A  
Genre in Crisis?



[1] In the introduction to the 2010 anthology *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, titled "They Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To: On the Rhetoric of Crisis and the Current State of American Horror Cinema," Steffen Hantke identifies a paradox in contemporary American horror cinema.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, a survey of responses to recent horror movies reveals the widespread belief that, after the innovations of the 1970s and early 1980s, the genre has grown moribund. Academics decry the creative poverty of contemporary offerings, while online fandom treats many of the popular successes of the past two decades—*Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) being a key work—with either suspicion or outright hostility.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, implicit in this criticism is an acknowledgement that, at least in some ways, the horror film is thriving. From the self-conscious *Scream* films and their neo-slasher brethren, to the "torture porn" of *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005), to the remakes of Asian and earlier American horror films like *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) and *Halloween* (Rob Zombie, 2007), the box office success and sheer number of horror films appears to serve as an obvious retort to the claim that American horror has recently been in a slump.<sup>3</sup> Notes Hantke, "as far as popularity and profitability go, the American horror film [of this period] seems near the top of its game as Hollywood lavishes a steady stream of horror films upon its audiences" (vii).

[2] Little appears to have changed since the publication of Hantke's observations. We can point to, for example, the popular success of the ongoing *Paranormal Activity* series of "found-footage" horror films, which are nevertheless—much like *Scream* and the recent cycle of slasher remakes—received with either apprehension or disdain by horror academics and fans. How exactly, then, is the American horror film perceived by these groups to be in decline? The issue is not profitability or quantity, but quality, and in particular originality.

[3] Consider *Scream*, a slasher movie about a killer who models his activity on killers from slasher movies and whose victims, equally aware of the conventions of the slasher movie, try to avoid their fates by following the supposedly predictable “rules” that govern slasher movies. The film’s self-reflexive quality no doubt contributed to its success, yet, as David Church observes, *Scream* still loyally adheres to the conventions that it foregrounds so self-consciously, like having the resourceful young woman defeat the villains. He writes,

In fact, one ironic source of viewing pleasure derives from the plot’s surprising obedience to the very rules and narrative conventions so explicitly spelled out mid-film; though we may predict that the self-aware film will change the course of its own actions, we are rather pleased to find the rules standing solid after so much play, as self-reflexivity operates to reinforce rather than subvert conventions.

Following this argument, *Scream*’s self-conscious play with horror conventions represented not a critique of or intervention in the genre but rather a continuation of what Church calls the “endless loop of formulaic repetition” that had come to characterize horror in the late 1980s. In the new millennium, this trend continued to play out in ways that suggested to many that American horror had finally run out of ideas.

[4] Church identifies two main manifestations of this desperation, one outward looking and one inward looking. The first is the cycle of remakes of popular Asian horror titles, first from Japan, and then from South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Whereas in the past, American horror films influenced the kinds of horror pictures produced in other countries, the scenario has now reversed, as American producers look abroad for new material. The second manifestation is the turning to American horror of the 1970s and early 1980s for inspiration. This inward trend manifests in two ways: remakes of successful films from the period (*Halloween*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1975], etc.) and “non-remakes” that attempt to “restore all of the suspense, atmosphere, and sadism of 1970s horror by way of direct appeals to exploitation itself” (Church). (Whether any of these films did, indeed, capture the sadism of independent 1970s horror is an open question, but some did succeed in replicating, as we shall see, the controversy

provoked by the originals—in particular films like *House of a 1000 Corpses* [Rob Zombie, 2003], *Hostel*, and *Saw*.) Adding insult to injury, many of these American horror remakes and non-remakes were followed by sequels, responses to which, as Hantke notes, were “overwhelmingly negative” (xi).

[5] Surveying the “rhetoric of crisis” in responses to contemporary American horror, Hantke identifies three common complaints that recur in both scholarly criticism and fan communities, and which are illustrated by the trends identified by Church: sequels, remakes, and foreign imports. Although, on the surface, these may strike us as clear indications that a genre has exhausted itself, Hantke demonstrates how they are in fact part of horror’s *modus operandi*. Sequels have always been the “bread and butter of the horror film”—Universal’s monster pictures of the 1930s and 40s, Hammer horror of the 1960s and 70s, the slasher sequels of the 1980s and 1990s, J-horror (Japanese-horror) franchises, and so on—and are often held in high regard, or even considered superior to the original film, as in the cases of *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) and *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) (Hantke xv). Similarly, remakes are an important part of the horror landscape, from the countless iterations of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* to repeated updates of single stories like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which has received four cinematic treatments (to date). Finally, on the subject of foreign imports, Hantke notes that “Hollywood has always entertained complex yet lively relationships with other national film industries” (xvi). This has involved both remaking foreign films and welcoming foreign talent.

[6] We thus arrive at a broad response to the complaint that the American horror film is in crisis: things have always been this way. Writes Hantke, “Those who tend to see the symptoms of the crisis of the American horror film today—or perhaps even its causes—within [the practices of remakes and sequels] suffer from historic myopia and must, therefore, be wrong” (xvi).

[7] Hantke argues that this myopia tends to manifest most strongly in nostalgia for, and subsequently canonization of, independent horror films of the 1970s and early 80s. This canonization is the product of not only critical and fan discourse, but also subsequent films looking back on and reiterating themes and motifs from these films. Hantke also observes, astutely, that

scholarship about this period in horror movie history has also been canonized through the repeated anthologizing of select academic criticism like Robin Wood's "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 1970s" and Carol Clover's "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," from which what are now popular ideas about horror movies, the "return of the repressed" and the "final girl," originated.

[8] The combination of myopia and nostalgia has resulted in not only antipathy among horror communities to contemporary horror films but also a general resentment of the popularity of the genre, because popularity threatens the cultural cachet so prized by the members of those communities. Drawing on ideas developed by Sarah Thorton in her influential study of American youth cultures in the 1990s, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (1995), Hantke argues that the negative response by academics and fans to American horror cinema of the 1990s and 2000s is a backlash to "subcultural capital" being threatened by mainstream popular culture. Writes Hantke,

Subcultural capital strives to delineate the boundaries of subcultures as they set themselves aside from—or diametrically against—mainstream culture. . . . Just as subcultures require a well-calibrated degree of secrecy, by which they affect mechanisms that balance exclusion and self-perpetuation, subcultural capital, as Thorton reminds us, is essentially "embodied in the form of being in the know." (xxi)

As increasing popularity broadens horror's demographic base, the genre's fans—those "in the know"—must delineate its boundaries more aggressively: by reorienting interest and consumption to more exotic and transgressive foreign films or by "turning away from contemporary productions and returning to canonical horror films and directors" (xxii). The perceived superiority of foreign and canonical horror thus "legitimizes the retreat from the commercial mainstream of the most vocal of all segments of the horror audience" (xxiii).

The genre responds

[9] I submit that filmmakers, being horror fans themselves, are not immune to the rhetoric of crisis about contemporary horror cinema. Consider

this excerpt from an interview with Joss Whedon, co-writer and producer of *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012), in which he is asked, “You’ve called *Cabin in the Woods* a ‘loving hate letter’ to horror films. What tropes particularly annoy you?”

Drew and I are enormous horror fans but we both lamented the trend in torture porn and dumbing down with characters falling more and more into stereotypes. Take the ad campaign for a movie called *Captivity*, where the billboard showed basically kidnap, torture and execution, in that order. That encapsulated the way I felt horror movies were going: they were becoming this extremely nihilistic and misogynist exercise in just trying to upset you, as opposed to trying to scare you. The classics that Drew and I went back to—the [John] Carpenters, the *Nightmares* [on Elm Street]—it seemed they had a different intent: it was not strictly about shock value.

On display are the hallmarks of the rhetoric of crisis detected by Hantke in academic and fan discourse: the disparagement of trends in horror cinema; the valorization of horror of the 1970s and 80s; and the desire to reclaim the qualities that made films of this era classics.

[10] Similarly, consider the following from an interview with Michael Dougherty, writer-director of the 2007 anthology horror picture *Trick ‘r Treat*, in which he explains why his film ultimately wasn’t selected for theatrical distribution:

I think there was more concern from people on the studio side that didn’t really understand blending horror and comedy. It’s a rare creature these days. We don’t have a lot of movies these days that do it, whereas back in the ‘80s you had “*Poltergeist*”—even “*Nightmare on Elm Street*” is morbidly hilarious. But you look at the remake and it’s not at all. It’s straightforward horror and there’s little to no comedy. “*American Werewolf in London*,” another perfect example. “*Evil Dead*,” “*Evil Dead 2*.” We were more willing, I think, to accept that blend. We’ve kind of lost that over the years, which I think is sad. . . . They got test scores back from the test screening and it said this movie is funny—they would point to that as a flaw. And I’m going, “No,

it's OK. Have you guys seen 'Creepshow'? Have you seen a lot of these classic horror movies that blend horror and comedy?" A lot of those pleas fell on deaf ears.

Contemporary audiences, Dougherty argues—and, by extension, film studios—do not accept comedy in a horror film, whereas classic films of the 1980s, which these parties likely haven't seen, feature comedy as an integral component.

[11] *Trick 'r Treat* and *The Cabin in the Woods* are similar in many respects. Extra-textually speaking, each was produced as something of a favor from a major film and/or television figure to a writing colleague: Whedon to Drew Goddard, who had written scripts for Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004), and Bryan Singer to Dougherty, who co-wrote the screenplays for Singer's *X-Men 2* (2003) and *Superman Returns* (2006). Yet, in spite of those pedigrees, each film languished in post-production for years. *The Cabin in the Woods* was completed in the 2009 but, owing to legal and financial problems at MGM, didn't debut until 2012. *Trick 'r Treat* was completed in 2007, was shown intermittently at festivals in 2008 and 2009, and was finally released on DVD in October 2009.

[12] In different ways, each film attempts to stand apart from contemporary horror cinema by reclaiming celebrated elements from the American horror canon. I would like, therefore, to turn to a comparative analysis of these films as cinematic manifestations of the rhetoric of crisis, where the horror film returns to its own history not to rehash or parody it but to affirm the significance of the genre's tropes as social rituals intended to, in the words of *Trick 'r Treat*'s Principal Wilkins (Dylan Baker), "protect us."

Paeon to the horror gods...or is that horror fans?

[13] Let's begin with *The Cabin in the Woods*, which by all appearances achieved the improbable feat of pleasing both popular audiences and horror fans. When it was finally released—coinciding, perhaps not coincidentally, with Whedon's ascension from cult TV creator to blockbuster superhero-movie director—the film performed respectably at the box office, earning \$42 million on a \$30 million budget according to Box Office Mojo. It currently

holds an impressive 92% positive (or “fresh”) rating on Rotten Tomatoes’ index of movie reviews.

[14] The film also appeared at or near the top of many “best horror films of the year” lists on popular horror and film websites like Bloody Disgusting, Shock ‘Till You Drop, Film School Rejects and Indiewire. These are, admittedly, an imperfect measure of subcultural acceptance, but I can add anecdotally that the message boards and comment threads of these websites do not evidence the kind of broad suspicion or antipathy reported by Mark Jancovich towards a film like *Scream*. Indeed, in an instance of the kind of “boundary patrolling” characteristic of subcultural communities, the most vociferous online reaction was in response not to the film itself but to negative reviews in publications like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Village Voice* which included spoilers of the film’s various plot twists.<sup>3</sup>

[15] *The Cabin in the Woods* is a take on what Whedon and Goddard refer to in interviews as a “cabin movie,” where a group of teens find themselves trapped in a secluded, backwoods location where bad things happen to them. The most famous example of this type of film is *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) but the basic scenario is common to the modern horror genre, from *The Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1975) to *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) up to *Cabin Fever* (Eli Roth, 2002). In *The Cabin in the Woods*, five college students—Curt, Holden, Jules, Marty and Dana—load up an RV and head to the eponymous locale, which we are told is owned by Curt’s cousin. In one of the film’s twists—spoiler alert!—the “cabin in the woods” is in fact an entirely artificial environment being controlled by two technicians, Gary (Richard Jenkins) and Steve (Bradley Whitford), who monitor the teens’ actions via hidden cameras from an underground facility. We later learn that this is all part of an ancient rite designed to placate subterranean gods through the engineered, ritual sacrifice of five teenagers.

[16] Because the teens behave honestly and intelligently, they need to be manipulated in order to behave like, well, characters from a horror movie. In the film’s conclusion this is explained as needing five specific types to carry out the ritual: the athlete, the scholar, the whore, the fool, and the virgin (whose death is optional, so long as she suffers). Because quarterback Curt (Chris Hemsworth), for example, is also a sociology major on full

scholarship, he doesn't begin to "act his part" of dumb jock until under the influence of clandestinely administered psychotropic drugs.

[17] The surveillance/manipulation aspect of the story, in which the characters are remotely observed and, ostensibly, controlled, clearly invokes the torture horror tradition of the *Saw* series, in which "ungrateful" characters are forced to participate in elaborate, gruesome "games" orchestrated by the mastermind Jigsaw. In *The Cabin in the Woods*, when security officer White (Daniel Trueman), after being told the importance of the subjects in the cabin acting according to their own free will, points out that the teens are being influenced in their decision-making, the senior technicians respond:

STEVE: Yeah, we rig the game as much as we need to. But in the end, they don't transgress . . .

GARY: They can't be punished.

Both White's objection and the techs' justification could just as easily have come from characters in the *Saw* universe. *The Cabin in the Woods* even replicates one of that series' favored stylistic devices: the camera pulls back from a scene within the cabin and "dissolves" to a black-and-white image that, as the camera continues backward, is revealed as playing out on a video monitor in Gary and Steve's control room, establishing the relationship of power between observer and subject (a subject I will return to in a moment).

[18] Given Whedon and Goddard's vocal objection to contemporary torture horror as nihilistic and misogynist—on clear display in the interview quoted above (and, it should be noted, many others from around the time of *The Cabin in the Woods*'s release)—it is certainly fair to see some criticism of that trend in the picture. The most obvious example is scene in the control room where Gary and Steve watch dispassionately as Jules (Anna Hutchison) is torn apart by redneck zombies on the monitors before them. The emphasis is not on the graphic destruction of Jules' naked body but on the two technicians' reactions to it: they stare blankly forward, calmly recite a prayer to the gods, and go about their business, while White, noticeably disturbed, looks on. Only at the end of the scene are we given a reverse-shot that shows what is left of Jules on the large monitors at the front of the room. The message is clear: the "audience" has become emotionally



detached from images of horrible suffering, principally those that combine violence and sex (or “torture” and “porn”).

[19] This scene is usefully compared with one earlier in the same sequence, though. Jules and Curt, under the influence of Steve and Gary’s machinations, venture into the woods beyond the cabin to fool around. As things get hot and heavy, the film cuts to inside the control room. From a vantage point at the rear of the room we see the teens displayed on the giant monitors with a large crowd of men in lab coats assembled below, watching. Cut to a reverse-shot of the men looking up at the screens in anticipation. Back in the woods, Curt begins to unbutton Jules’s top, but she resists and moves away. In the control room the men collectively groan their disappointment before Steve clears the room, telling them “Your basic human needs disgust me!” After some more manipulation of the environment—raising the heat, releasing some pheromones—the teens get down to business. Curt unbuttons Jules’s top, revealing her breasts. In the control room the two techs watch with the same disinterest as when Jules is killed, only rather than a prayer Steve gives a laugh-line. “Score,” he says flatly at the sight of Jules’s breasts.

[20] Although Steve and Gary’s detachment is consistent throughout the sequence, it is difficult to read the film’s treatment of sex as comparable to its apparent critique of sexualized violence. Rather than a condemnation of misogynistic voyeurism, the film revels in the display of Jules’s nubile body as a kind of cheeky cliché of horror moviemaking. What are we to make of this, given Whedon’s stated objection to the misogyny of the horror genre? Why is watching the murder of a naked woman misogynist but clandestinely watching her get naked in the first place not?

[21] Here Hantke’s point about historic myopia is helpful in explaining the disconnect between the film’s (and, by extension, its makers’) attitude towards sex, on the one hand, and the combination of sex and violence, on the other. Consider that the scenario which *The Cabin in the Woods* good-naturedly indulges—attractive teens having sex in the woods—is characteristic of the canonical 1970s and 80s horror films that it seeks to imitate and which Hantke argues horror fans long to return to, but not of the recent torture cycle the film seeks to censure, and least of all of the *Saw* films, which are devoid of sex. Taken together, Whedon and Goddard’s

criticisms of contemporary horror and the film they made in response reveal a large measure of ignorance about the development of the horror film. Yet this ignorance has either passed undetected by horror's subculture or has been tacitly forgiven in light of some of the film's other features.

[22] For one, *The Cabin in the Woods* is remarkably like *Scream* in its self-reflexivity: events within each film follow the patterns laid down by earlier horror films and thus each film offers a critical commentary on itself, a process that the viewer, also aware of the genre's conventions, is made a part of. Likewise, negative appraisals of *Scream* are equally applicable to *The Cabin in the Woods*: the film adheres to the conventions it self-consciously foregrounds, from the "whore" dying first to the "virgin," Dana (Kristen Connolly), surviving to the end. Sure, the "fool," Marty (Fran Kranz), also survives, but that was the case in *Scream*. In fact, many of the films of the neo-slasher and slasher remake cycles that followed *Scream* have seen multiple characters survive the final showdown with the killer. And what about Dana, who is not a virgin? Neither was Sydney, the heroine of *Scream*. Nor was the question of Laurie's virginity ever actually raised in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), for that matter. I have argued elsewhere that many of the transformations seen in the 2000s cycle of slasher remakes are a reflection less of familiarity with (and desire to refashion aspects of) the original films than a more nebulous awareness of horror conventions influenced by simplified versions of ideas from horror criticism, like the aforementioned "return of the repressed" and "final girl." For example, whereas the original *Halloween* offers no "backstory," and hence no clear reason, for Michael Myers's murderous actions, the remake explains them as a result of his traumatic childhood—the representation of which makes up the film's first act.<sup>5</sup> What was initially an external interpretation – Wood used psychoanalysis to explain the social significance of the slasher killer in the cultural context of 1970s America—has become accepted as an inherent property of the genre. In a similar fashion, the conventions which *The Cabin in the Woods* treats as horror gospel—the presence of archetypal characters or the cathartic function of ritualized violence—derive not from the films of the 1970s and 80s that Goddard and Whedon revere but from arguments about them.

[23] There is also, again, the issue of Whedon and Goddard's position on torture porn, which is equally problematic from a historical perspective. In 2007, Whedon was a leading proponent of censoring the advertising campaign for the horror film *Captivity* (Roland Joffé, 2007), justifying his position in a letter to the MPAA on the grounds that "the advent of torture-porn and the total dehumanizing not just of women (though they always come first) but of all human beings has made horror a largely unpalatable genre. This ad campaign is part of something dangerous and repulsive, and that act of aggression has to be answered" (qtd. in Soloway). Putting aside the question of whether *Captivity's* advertising was inappropriate for public display, how can any fan of horror not acknowledge the irony of hearing a horror filmmaker lament the nihilism and misogyny of contemporary movies when the older films that he commends—"the *Carpenters*, the *Nightmares*"—were, upon release, widely criticized on the exact same grounds?<sup>6</sup>

[24] Given the degree to which *The Cabin in the Woods* seems ignorant of horror film history, hypocritical in its denunciation of recent horror movies, and relying upon the conventions it sets out to criticize, how are we to account for its general acceptance, even celebration, by the horror subculture? Why does the film's success with mainstream critics and audiences not threaten horror's subcultural capital? If *Scream* is judged the nadir of the evolution of the horror film—a position, I should add, that I don't subscribe to—then what does it say if the exemplar of the genre sixteen years later is so very similar in both aim and construction? What does *The Cabin of the Woods* do that *Scream* did not, or at the very least do differently?

[25] While defending the film from spoiler-laden negative reviews was part of the horror community's response to *The Cabin the Woods*, the most energetic online activity by far was more anthropological in nature.

[26] In the film's third act, Dana and Marty discover an elevator that takes them down below the cabin. There, enclosed in a glass box, they see an unending series of like boxes, each containing a horrifying creature—a veritable menagerie of monsters. She then realizes that her earlier reading of a diary found in the cabin's basement had inadvertently selected the Buckner family of redneck zombies as her and her friends' executioners. "We chose . . ." she whispers.

[27] Dana's realization is not actually the crux of the sequence, because she is learning something the audience has known for nearly an hour. Where the real interest rests, especially for horror fans, is with the monsters, the majority of which are, shall we say, extremely familiar. After Dana and Marty come face to face with several horrors in adjacent boxes, the camera tracks backward, revealing box upon box upon box of creatures—a kind of "Hollywood Squares" of movie monsters. After reaching the underground facility, Dana and Marty purge the containment system, releasing the creatures upon the staff of the facility.

[28] The entire sequence has undeniable appeal; it almost challenges the horror fan to identify the various monsters—or, more precisely, the monsters for which they are close stand-ins. And horror fans, aided by high-definition Blu-Ray screen captures, have been more than up to the challenge. A simple Internet search for "Cabin in the Woods monsters" leads to hundreds of posts and pages dedicated to the topic. From the IMDb to wikis and message boards to film and pop culture websites, cataloguing the monsters seems to be by far the number one online preoccupation of horror fans when it comes to *The Cabin in the Woods*.<sup>7</sup>

[29] What the film effects is a dual-register: there is the invocation of familiar horror conventions that, as in *Scream*, is done in an obvious manner so as to ensure that even the casual viewer will be in on the joke, and then there is the entreaty directly to the horror fan—no less self-conscious, but more exclusive and self-congratulatory. The film signals that it (and, by extension, its makers) are part of the subculture while the horror fan finds satisfaction in being "in the know": knowing the names of the monsters and knowing that the average viewer won't get these references.

[30] Should the final act of *The Cabin in the Woods* really be enough to compensate for what would surely otherwise be seen—and, to be fair, has been seen by some—as serious deficiencies? I admit surprise at the degree to which criticism has been forestalled by enthusiasm for the concluding paean to the horror gods (by which I mean the cavalcade of creatures, not the movie's sacrificial premise), but Hantke's argument provides a credible explanation. *The Cabin in the Woods*, at least in part, reacts to the rhetoric of crisis by invoking the canon in such a way that horror fans can rest easy, knowing their subcultural capital is safe from the mainstream.

No one really cares

[31] What, then, of *Trick 'r Treat*, a film also held in high—if not higher—esteem by the horror community and which owes its long-delayed release to the positive, grassroots response generated by sites like *Ain't It Cool News*? How does it express, and respond to, the rhetoric of crisis? We can begin by returning to the quotation above from director Michael Dougherty, who accounts for the reluctance of Warner Bros. to release his film as uneasiness with its blend of horror and comedy, even though comedy is a part of many of the best horror films of the 1980s. In the same interview, Dougherty also discusses his decision to make an anthology film—a feature composed of independent episodes (that, in *Trick 'r Treat* at least, take place in the same location on the same night, Halloween)—being influenced by his admiration for earlier films like the 1982 Steven King-George A. Romero collaboration *Creepshow*.

[32] As much as both Dougherty and Whedon and Goddard set out to make particular kinds of horror films, there are important differences. Whereas “cabin movie” suggests a conventional narrative, location, and characters, “anthology film” and “horror comedy” are far less prescriptive, being more about form and tone, respectively. *The Cabin in the Woods* also sets out to comment disapprovingly on recent trends in horror cinema, whereas *Trick 'r Treat* is only reactionary in so far as Dougherty wanted to make a horror film about Halloween, rather than a film set on or around the holiday. This is not to say that that *Trick 'r Treat* isn't as self-aware as *The Cabin in the Woods*—it, too, deliberately and repeatedly invokes horror conventions that the audience is relied upon to recognize. How these conventions are deployed, though, points to a key difference between the two films.

[33] Consider the movie's opening segment. A couple, Emma (Leslie Bibb) and Henry (Tahmoh Penikett), return home after a Halloween party. Emma, exasperated, blows out a jack 'o lantern even after Henry warns against it. Henry, appeased by the promise of sex, goes inside and Emma begins to take down the elaborate decorations on their front lawn. Throughout, the couple is intermittently observed from an unknown third perspective, first from across the street and then, after Henry enters the

house, from the yard. As Emma tears down the decorations she notices a figure across the street, standing perfectly still, wearing black clothes and a white mask with faint red splatters. Emma freezes. Her eyes widen. The music swells . . . .

[34] The combination of vague warnings about Halloween customs, sex, subjective camera, and white-masked figure of course bring to mind Halloween. Yet, at the moment the segment reaches its apparent self-reflexive climax, it recedes. A car pulls up. The mysterious figure removes his mask and gets in. The car drives away. Emma sighs and continues her clean up . . . only to be then viciously attacked by a different mysterious figure who slits her throat with a jack 'o lantern-shaped lollipop. Henry eventually emerges from the house and discovers Emma's dead, dismembered body displayed in the yard, the lollipop jammed into her bleeding mouth. The pay-off is gruesome and satisfying, and though the end itself—Emma's death—was never in question, how the film arrived at that end is novel.

[35] *The Cabin in the Woods* accords with horror film clichés and then explains the accordance as a matter of following a predetermined "narrative" that serves a larger purpose: the whore, athlete, scholar and fool must be sacrificed and the virgin suffer so that the gods are placated and humanity survives. *Trick 'r Treat* similarly calls forth conventional scenarios and iconography, but to different ends. The annoying son, whom we suspect may be the killer school principal's next victim, turns out to be an accomplice, helping to "carve the eyes" on the decapitated head of his father's most recent victim. A virgin is stalked by a vampire, but it turns out he is just pretending and she is a werewolf. The film defies, rather than meets, our expectations in nearly every instance. *Trick 'r Treat* is manipulative, to be sure, but unlike *The Cabin in the Woods* (and the *Saw* films, for that matter) that manipulation remains a characteristic of the narration and not of the narrative—that is, the story is told in a way that plays with our knowledge of horror movie conventions, but there is not a character or force within the film who is orchestrating events according to some pre-determined plan.

[36] As I stated above, both *The Cabin in the Woods* and *Trick 'r Treat* assert the importance of the horror genre's tropes as social rituals intended

to keep us safe from harm. As Wilkins explains to ne'er-do-well Charlie (Brett Kelly), who has been smashing pumpkins and stealing candy:

Believe it or not, I used to be just like you when I was a kid. Till my dad set me straight, that is. See, my dad taught me that tonight is about respecting the dead, because this is the one night that the dead and all sorts of other things roam free and pay us a visit. All these traditions, jack 'o lanterns, putting on costumes, handing out treats, they were started to protect us, but nowadays . . . no one really cares.

At this point, Charlie begins to cough. Then choke. Then cough up a mix of blood and chocolate. And then die, poisoned by Wilkins.

[37] The logic of transgression-punishment on display here is comparable to *The Cabin in the Woods*: mortals enacting certain practices in order to appease supernatural forces. Wilkins, however, gets his own comeuppance: consumed by a werewolf, punished for forgetting his place in the grand, All-Hallows'-Eve scheme of things. The order asserts itself independently, in ways that are horrific—werewolves, undead children, and so on—but do not follow a set narrative. The film offers but then withdraws movie references only to draw from a much broader stock of horror archetypes. This is both the trick and the treat of the film.

[38] In its earnestness and wider historical purview *Trick 'r Treat* is a far more satisfying and interesting film than *The Cabin in the Woods*, but those same qualities contributed to it being deemed unsuitable for a wide theatrical release. If a general audience's inability to get their heads around the anthology format and mixture of horror and comedy were impediments in the eyes of Warner Bros., *Trick 'r Treat*'s relative sincerity towards the horror tradition cannot have helped. (Likewise producer Singer's back-to-back directorial disappointments at WB, *Superman Returns* [2006] and *Valkyrie* [2008].) The film features none of the objectionable self-reflexivity the genre inherited from *Scream*, but also none of that film's mainstream popularity. Conversely, *The Cabin in the Woods*, through its self-consciousness and didacticism, ultimately succumbs to trends in contemporary horror that it seeks to subvert, but in doing so becomes a more commercially viable production in the vein of others that preceded it. Though online discourse about *Trick 'r Treat* and *The Cabin the Woods*

routinely refers to each as a “cult classic,” its relatively disingenuous treatment of genre tropes suggests that the latter will have a more difficult time holding onto that title.

[39] This is not to imply that Principal Wilkins’s belief that “no one really cares” is true of *Trick ‘r Treat*, though. If anything, the picture being maligned by the mainstream has increased its cachet among horror fans. Since 2010, horror cable network FEAR.net has broadcast an annual twenty-four-hour marathon of *Trick ‘r Treat* on October 31<sup>st</sup>. In conjunction, Dougherty has produced a series of short films featuring the mischievous, murderous Sam from *Trick ‘r Treat*. Therein lies the rub, though: *Trick ‘r Treat* undoubtedly succeeds as a crowd-pleasing cinematic reaction to the rhetoric of crisis in contemporary horror discourse, but that success is contingent, in part, upon its marginality. The film lives on, but only within the subculture.

[40] Hantke writes that “the rhetoric of crisis tells us more about the audiences than about the films they have been watching” and argues that the combination of nostalgia and myopia among horror academics and fans has led to the unfair treatment of recent American horror (xxiii). Although *The Cabin in the Woods* is by far the more reactionary of the two films analyzed in this essay, and is the clearer cinematic example of the discursive trends Hantke criticizes, we should acknowledge that neither it nor *Trick ‘r Treat* pointed, or is likely to point, the way forward for the genre. Each was the product of unique circumstances and was ultimately limited in its appeal relative to the mainstream of found-footage horror (and, dare I say, teenage vampires and werewolves?). Still, the differences between the pictures are significant. If *The Cabin in the Woods* is a “loving hate letter” to the horror film, *Trick ‘r Treat* is a love letter to horror. And that, I suspect, will be the difference in the long run.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hantke's introduction incorporates and updates ideas from an earlier essay, "Academic Film Criticism, the Rhetoric of Crisis, and the Current State of American Horror Cinema: Thoughts on Canonicity and Academic Anxiety," *College Literature* 34.4 (Fall 2007): 191-202.

<sup>2</sup> Jancovich (2002a) reads the guarded and even hostile responses by horror fans to *Scream*, which included online petitions to "boycott trendy horror," as a reaction to what was perceived as "inauthentic horror...made for, and consumed by, inauthentic fans" (30), and elsewhere posits the low-budget and potentially subversive *Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) as a preferential alternative for this community (2002b, 7). While only a minority of mainstream reviews of the film were negative, within those critical of *Scream* are repeated acknowledgements that, in the words of *Variety* reviewer critic Leonard Klady, "its underlying mockish tone won't please die-hard fans." More recently, discussions of *Scream* are almost entirely absent from recent monographs that offer surveys of the horror genres, including *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (2007) by Rick Worland and *Horror* (2009) by Brigid Cherry. And, anecdotally, I've found students in my horror survey course to be almost universally antipathetic towards the film.

<sup>3</sup> This is to say nothing about contested categories of horror cinema, be it "supernatural thrillers" like *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and countless other ghost/possession films, or "action-horror" movies like *Resident Evil* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002), *Underworld* (Len Wiseman, 2003), *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998) and *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999), all of which feature classic horror movie monsters—zombies, werewolves, vampires, mummies—and were successful enough to spawn multiple sequels.

<sup>4</sup> For a particularly impassioned fan response, see Devin Faraci. For responses from the film's director and stars, see Christopher Rosen.

<sup>5</sup> See Andrew Patrick Nelson, "Traumatic Childhood Now Included."

<sup>6</sup> I should add that nothing Whedon has said about *Captivity* suggests he has actually seen the film, or is terribly familiar with the torture films he is criticizing. This casts him—also ironically, for a horror filmmaker—in the reactionary position of condemning something mainstream media says is offensive but that he has not chosen to understand.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: the FAQ section for IMDb's coverage of the film (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1259521/faq#.2.1.2>); "The Cabin in the Woods Wiki" site (<http://thecabininthewoods.wikia.com/wiki/Monsters>); Fan blogs like Mania.com ([http://www.mania.com/shockorama-complete-guide-to-cabin-woods\\_article\\_134216.html](http://www.mania.com/shockorama-complete-guide-to-cabin-woods_article_134216.html)); and the coverage by fan site, io9 (<http://io9.com/5943390/the-psychotic-cabin-in-the-woods-monsters-you-didnt-see-in-theaters>). The companion book to the film, *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2012), includes a large, glossy section devoted to the conceptualization and design of the film's monsters.