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Once More into the Woods¹: An
Introduction and Provocation



“The contemporary Horror film knows that you’ve seen it before; it knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know.”

Philip Brophy, “Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films”
(1986: 5)

[1] Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard’s 2012 horror film, *The Cabin in the Woods* (produced 2009), was released to general critical and popular praise, particularly with regard to the film’s critical self-awareness and its apparent use of fan-friendly horror tropes. However, the film also left many critics, fans and scholar-fans divided regarding what they see as the film’s framing of the horror genre as increasingly exploitative, excessively violent, creatively bankrupt, and pandering to an audience that deserves better, though demands little.² *The Cabin in the Woods* (hereafter *Cabin*) is, indeed, a tricky film, both in its conception and reception, and raises key questions regarding its target: Is it a deconstruction of a horror genre in a state of crisis? Is it a fractured film, caught between the auteurist sensibilities of Whedon and the straightforward directorial approach of Goddard? Is it a satire of media excesses and reality TV game shows? Is it a straightforward splatter-comedy? Is it best described as a continuation of the Whedon “brand,” a combination of the genre self-awareness of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the critique of corporatized institutions inherent to Whedon collaborations like *Angel* (1999-2004), with its ubiquitous Wolfram & Hart law firm or *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), with its chilly Rossum Corporation? Or is it a “Whedonesque” movie about horror audiences made exclusively for Whedon audiences? Whatever one thinks of *The Cabin in the Woods*, the film sits at the intersection of current key debates around horror, including the genre’s ostensible 21st-century turn to the excessively spectacular in films of “torture horror” (Aldana Reyes, 2012); the desires and level of critical engagement with the genre by its fandom; and the genre’s complex affective dimension—especially the

pleasure and disgust (not always paradoxically simultaneous) generated by the dread and delivery of monstrous spectacle.

[2] The nine essays in this special issue of *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* generate further discussion around *The Cabin in the Woods* within these and a number of other contexts: historical, cultural, commercial, artistic, generic, thematic, theoretical. In soliciting scholarship for this issue, we especially encouraged essays that take on Cabin's own theoretical pretensions—around the cinematic gaze, media saturation, surveillance, horror fandom, horror genre conventions, Slasher subgenre conventions, horror viewership, monsters and monstrosity, corporatized media, and the Hollywood "dream machine." Some of the contributors also offer illuminating comparisons to recent trends in horror in cinema and on television (not necessarily related to Whedon's or Goddard's other work), as well as to specific films from other eras of horror. Other contributors take on the matter of Whedon's authorship and "brand" when it collides with horror. Considering the questions raised both by the film and the articles found in this special issue, our brief introduction attempts to tease out 1) Cabin's place within current trends in horror cinema (whether it knows it or not), 2) Cabin's centrality to current debates on theoretical approaches to horror, and 3) Cabin's place within the Whedon and Company oeuvre.

[3] Typical of many millennial and post-9/11 horror films, *The Cabin in the Woods* draws its primary anxieties from a pervasive dread of a world gone virtual. Whedon and Goddard's film situates its unwitting players in a hypermediated virtual survival game / reality TV scenario run by an underground organization that combines the cold efficiency of the multinational corporation with the "freedom isn't free" mantra of American democracy (whether Bush- or Obama-driven). In the film's Slasher-derived scenario, five youths are selected by the producers to be part of an elaborate ritual sacrifice, picked off according to tried-and-tested formula, leaving only the proverbial Virgin to die last. Other similar "productions" from around the world (Japan is particularly highlighted) compete with similar broadcast spectacles derived from their own cultural traditions. The intended audience for these elaborate reality productions is a group of eternal couch-potato gods who lie in wait for the most recent deployment of spectacle ritual in which social actors are selected and manipulated into restrictive roles that turn them into media pawns. Media exploitation, panoptic surveillance, government-sanctioned surveillance, and technophobia regarding the 21st-century consumer's nearly unlimited roaming access to information provide some of the

fodder for Cabin's concerns. A sense that the horror genre is in a state of exhaustion and degeneration in every generation provides the rest. Accordingly, the film parallels its eschatological evocation of cultural and political crisis with a reading of 21st-century horror cinema as having reached the final arc of an evolutionary narrative. Ultimately, none of the ritual horror scenarios in the film functions according to plan (in the U.S. production, the Virgin isn't really a virgin and doesn't die last; in the Japanese production, a group of school girls reduce the menacing phantom to an inoffensive toad), resulting in an audience of angry gods, and a full-scale apocalypse. Despite liberal doses of Whedon and Goddard's typically irreverent humor, *The Cabin in the Woods* is a decidedly bleak and bitter work.

[4] Cabin's evolutionary take on otherwise complex genre processes fits squarely within what Steffen Hantke (2007) identifies as a "rhetoric of crisis" in scholarly and critical reception of millennial and post-9/11 horror (196). If the film is an act of horror "criticism," as Roger Ebert suggested in his mostly positive review of 11 April, 2012, then it is largely in line with those critical views usually leveled against the genre (Ebert). *The Cabin in the Woods* exists on a cultural and critical faultline that continues to view horror cinema as the illegitimate child of the seventh art, second only to pornography in its visceral aesthetic derived from spectacular excess (whether of bodily presence or haunting absence) and affect—representations of human experience rendered less through appeals to positivism, logic and moral allegory, and more through a desire to see and to feel. Cabin's world is a nightmare of spectacle-generating machinery, evoking Adornian notions of a self-serving culture industry designed to construct and to appease the viewing appetites of distracted consumers who crave (violent, lurid) convention.³ In this respect, the film seems ambivalent about whether its divine viewers sit in the position of producers who oversee the serving-up of horror offerings to demanding consumers, or are meant as stand-ins for the consumers themselves.⁴ In this special issue, Gerry Canavan's "'Something Nightmares Are From': Metacommentary in Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods*" grapples with the filmmakers' marked ambivalence toward the horror genre and its audience by utilizing Frederic Jameson's concept of metacommentary—or "the incorporation of higher- and higher-order self-reflexive questions into critique"—to explore Cabin as a primarily unstable critical self-reflection. In the context offered by Canavan, Cabin simultaneously claims to censure the very genre it seems to venerate—or at the very least the genre it happily exploits in all its joyful carnage—as a kind of

necessity or ritual which audiences and filmmakers are constantly compelled to perform.

[5] The idea of horror-as-ritual is further explored in Andrew P. Nelson's "Trick 'R Treat (2007), The Cabin in the Woods and the Defense of Horror's Subcultural Capital." This essay compares Cabin with Michael Dougherty's direct-to-DVD cult favorite, Trick 'R Treat, arguing that both films act as manifestations of Hantke's "rhetoric of crisis" as they return to the history of horror in order to, as Nelson argues, "affirm the significance of the genre's tropes as social rituals." Nelson demonstrates that, while Whedon and Goddard approach the horror genre with reticent anxiety—though still fully capitalizing on the horror tropes they are apparently critiquing (a "loving hate letter,"⁵ indeed)—Doherty's film more readily and unambiguously utilizes horror tropes, not revealing who stands behind the curtain manipulating the puppets. In this respect, Nelson argues, Cabin's success may be compared to that of *Scream* (1996), a self-reflexive horror film that required of its audience only a cursory experience of horror tropes because it instead drew upon the wider cultural conversation about horror. Nelson contends that Whedon and Goddard are more interested in replicating popular discourses around the horror genre than in engaging with its machinery.

[6] Apropos of Nelson's claims around Whedon and Goddard's tapping into popular discourse around horror, Cabin's argument seems to be that both the genre and its viewership are caught in a tryst of forgetting, leading to once-meaningful ritual becoming empty, manipulative corporate formula.⁶ Cabin presents recent horror as a combination of the video game's promises of viscerality and user agency, reality TV's deployment of spectacularly constructed excess as "real life," and the horror genre's traditional association between epistophilia (love of knowledge) and scopophilia (love of seeing).⁷ Whedon and Goddard delight in permitting viewers "behind-the-scenes" access to the brutal mechanics of the well-oiled phantasmagoria created by the film's show-runners, Hadley (Bradley Whitford) and Sitterson (Richard Jenkins)—and the even greater spectacle of its ultimate demise. Yet they often undercut the provocative potential of Cabin's violence by distancing the viewer from the affective power of spectacle via hypermediated imagery—multiple screens, screens within screens, and characters gazing at each other via monitors and one-way mirrors—that seems intended to place viewers at an emotional remove. In this way, Whedon and Goddard's critique of representations of violence in horror continually sidesteps

any discussion of both the epistophilia that generates horror narratives⁸ and the subversive power of affect essential to the genre.

[7] Considering Whedon and Goddard's recent creative output, it comes as no surprise that *Cabin* might critique horror's affective preoccupation with the pleasures and torments of gazing, via the eschatological technophobia characteristic of some millennial and post-9/11 horror films. Each of the two seasons of Whedon's *Dollhouse* television series ends with episodes that project viewers into a horrific post-apocalyptic future where the mind-altering technology used to create the series' titular "dolls" has become a weapon that has rewritten reality. Entitled "Epitaph One" (1.13) and "Epitaph Two: Return" (2.13), these episodes act as thematic capstones, following the show's implications around technologies of pleasure run amok to catastrophic conclusions requiring sacrificial redemption. And Goddard's script for the fake-found-footage horror film, *Cloverfield* (2008), addresses particularly post-9/11 anxieties around the impossibility of capturing the horrific visual and emotional scope of a massive (and pervasively televised) cultural catastrophe. Like *Cabin*, *Cloverfield* ends with two characters awaiting annihilation, at which point they turn their digital camera on themselves to state their names, inscribing themselves onto the visual record as witnesses to (and recorders / distributors of) the horrors they have experienced. As in other fake-found-footage horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), their lives "end" when the camera stops recording. Characters in *Cloverfield* confront their conflicts through the camera in much the same way as players of a video game do—via a first-person perspective and identification with the camera which substitutes for their embodiment within a pre-programmed event. Like the characters in *Cabin*, who play out their conflicts in a virtual scenario that is once-removed from reality, the characters in fake-found-footage horror become dis-embodied by the digital image. In video game scenarios, players perform in a carefully constructed environment meant to offer the illusion of agency, and *Cabin*'s ironic conflation of ancient ritual and genre formula is meant to place its characters in a similar virtual scenario, suggesting the severely limited impact they can have on the outcome of their plight. The cynicism that attends the illusion of agency in *Cabin*'s gaming-scenario-derived narrative also can be found in the television series *Lost* (2004-2010), to which Goddard contributed as a writer and producer. Here, characters negotiate a reality (and viewers negotiate a narrative) almost entirely through the solving of multiple enigmas that can lead them astray, rendering them "lost" in an ontological conundrum. There is in both *Lost* and *Cabin* a narrative logic that offers only an

illusory sort of agency in negotiating virtual space, where all choices lead to predetermined solutions, and all sense of the actual becomes ungraspable. Two essays in this special issue are related to this problem of ontological slippage in *Cabin*. Both Mike Starr's "Whedon's Great Glass Elevator: Space, Liminality and Intertext in *The Cabin in the Woods*" and Katie Wagner's "Haven't We Been Here Before?: *The Cabin in the Woods*' Take on Placelessness and the Horror Genre," discuss the issue of interstitiality and "placelessness" in the film. Starr takes on the extended elevator sequence in the latter part of the film, suggesting that it corresponds to horror's transformative space of Foucauldian "heterotopia" and Kristevan "abjection"—spaces where rules, boundaries and other cultural distinctions collapse into a realm of confrontation, subversion and evaluation. Through the concept of "placelessness," the eradication of the distinctiveness of a place, Wagner explores how *Cabin* utilizes horror spaces and terrible places as a warning against modern globalized society's seemingly inevitable loss of cultural and local identity.

[8] Two other papers in the special issue, Erin Giannini's "Charybdis tested well with teens": *The Cabin in the Woods* as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences" and L. Andrew Cooper's "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism" situate the self-reflexivity of the film further outside the horror genre. In Giannini's assessment, the film is about Whedon's relationship to his own name and work as a brand, and to his awareness of the expectations of his fandom. Both Giannini and Cooper suggest that *Cabin* may be a part of a multiverse that connects to other Whedon products. Cooper ties the film to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* in its generation of a cosmic apocalypse; Giannini to *Firefly* (2002-3) and *Serenity* (2005) via highlighting the post-apocalyptic scenarios in their framing stories. Here, the apocalypse is that of corporate media producers rendering an illusory world to be lived and consumed blindly, thus framed in terms of Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, which offers only a false sense of individuality, autonomy and "escape" from the illusions it promises. In Cooper's formulation, both horror and the U.S. suffer from deployment of convention that constitute not much more than "endless navel-gazing." Accordingly, argues Cooper, the film involves surveillance, images of corporate types gazing at victims they are manipulating, and investigations of the "tired machinery" of American monster-making. Global equates to cosmic in Cooper's assessment, suggesting that the collapse of U.S. domination of the market, culture and politics of the world is imminent—something that the

apocalyptic and spectacular fail of Hadley and Sitterson's massive-scale production in Cabin signals.

[9] Cabin's most unsettling conceit may come in its being constructed as a live broadcast, a "special presentation," of the decomposition of a reality that has become a phantasmagoric fabrication. In his book *Mazes of the Serpent* (2002), Roger B. Salomon discusses the "crucial role of witnessing" so central to horror narratives (76). Hadley and Sitterson and company try to construct such a narrative, but eventually become witnesses to the decomposition of their own elaborate fabrication. The illusion that they maintain—the paean to ritualized convention that undergirds the survival of their world—is ultimately undermined, giving way to an apocalyptic ending. Different paradigms of ontological illusion collapse in Cabin: the "illusion" of reality inhabited by the young protagonists, the "illusion" of control maintained by the control room show-runners, and, finally, the wholesale sham that is existence under the guidance of the "gods." The film posits two realities: that which is based upon overwhelming Baudrillardian simulacrum, and that constituted by hitting the "reset" button, resulting in a shattering return to a primordial void. Even the film's monsters—usually horror's most powerful representations of individual and collective fears⁹—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. When the film's final two hapless pawns, Dana and Marty, descend into Hadley and Sitterson's production lair, they find that their mode of descent is less an elevator than a monster-containment vessel, one of thousands of glass boxes that can be shuffled up, down and sideways like an elaborate filing system. If it wasn't clear before in Cabin's take on the horror genre that it never mattered which monster was deployed in the ritual destruction of this group of youths, it certainly is clear when we witness this mass of sardonic badness—from generic zombies and werewolves, to allusive approximations of iconic horror staples,¹⁰ to vagina-dentata-faced ballerinas and killer unicorns. Cabin has as difficult a time framing its real monsters as it does framing its viewership. Monstrosity in the film is spread across a multitude of sites for analysis: the producers of the sham, the genre or medium that allows for it, the viewers who buy it. This ambivalence may be a strength, or a weakness. The über-monsters of Cabin—not its pre-packaged ones, or even human ones like Hadley and Sitterson, but the gods themselves—come off as a combination of the executive producers who demand more of what worked the first time, and the ultimate distracted, fickle, and difficult-to-embod

horror viewer to whom Hadley and Sitterson (and Whedon and Goddard) seem to feel horror must always defer. According to Rick McDonald's article in this special issue, "Sacred Violence and The Cabin in the Woods," such a shifting of sites of identification of monstrosity and empathy in the film "becomes ethically troubling." McDonald uses the film's ethical ambiguities, along with its evocations of "sacred violence," to enact a refreshing re-evaluation of horror's relationship to ritual violence that resists viewing horror fandom as attracted by only the palliative effects of catharsis. On the specific level of fan discourse analysis, Joe Lipsett's article in this issue, "'One for the Horror Fans' vs. 'An Insult to the Horror Genre': Negotiating Reading Strategies in IMDb Reviews of The Cabin in the Woods" attempts to get at the relationship of the horror fan to the film via outlining particular viewing strategies evident in IMDb audience reviews. Lipsett demonstrates how key ambiguities in Cabin find their way into audience reviews of the film, and notes the relative success Cabin's self-reflexivity has with audiences who self-identify as horror fans.

[10] Despite its interest in critiquing the state of horror cinema, Cabin is positioned at an odd critical distance from recent scholarship on the horror genre—especially so-called "torture porn," one of the film's obvious targets. The film relies on broad parody drawn from some of the more obvious conventions of the Slasher film: its title conjures the "terrible place" conceptualized by Carol Clover (1992), and its chilly control room show-runners, Hadley and Sitterson, construct a sham moral allegory by pitting character stereotypes—"the virgin," "the jock," "the scholar," "the stoner," "the whore"—against a "Zombie Redneck Torture Family," a categorical name obviously meant to target horror's three most popular recent trends (or retreads) since the mid-1990s, amply evidenced by AMC's hugely popular zombie soap-opera, *The Walking Dead* (2010-present); the recent medium-budget remakes of 1970s and 1980s hillbilly horror fare such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977, remake 2006), and *Mother's Day* (1980, remake 2010); and the "torture" aesthetics of immensely popular horror fare like the *Saw* series (2004-2010), and, arguably, *The Passion of Christ* (2005). The idea of the horror genre as newly in crisis (or always in crisis) also has its roots in high-low cultural binaries that see certain types of production linked to the horror aesthetic (e.g., thrillers, films noir, or crime films) as somehow more sophisticated or "legitimate" forms of artistic expression in their apparent appeal to middle-class intellectual sensibilities. Because horror's engagement with the cultural moment is often confrontational and disturbing, the genre's subversive power has often been received as exploitative, a framing that even raises certain

examples of the genre to “legitimate” status (Psycho [1960], Peeping Tom [1960]) over more “disreputable” examples (Maniac [1980, remake 2012], The Beast Within [1982]) that are equally complex in their representations of similar subject matter, but perhaps more straightforwardly brutal in their imagery.

[11] In an interview for the Official Visual Companion (Whedon, et al, 2012) released concurrently with Cabin, one of Whedon’s own statements about the state of the horror genre is tinged by a troubling high-culture / low-culture binary. At the same time, it unintentionally collapses the horror films Whedon sees as “great” into the same kind of films as those he wishes to criticize:

I’ve loved all of the great horror films. I watched Nosferatu many times—the original—as a child, so from the very start, and then the Universals [e.g., Dracula (1931), The Wolf-Man (1941)] and Jacques Tourneur [e.g., Cat People (1942), I Walked with a Zombie (1943), Night of the Demon (1957)] and [RKO producer] Val Lewton [Cat People (1942), The Body Snatcher (1946)] in the Forties and the giant monsters of the Fifties. I watched everything. And of course the really disturbing films of the Seventies and early Eighties—all the greats of my youth, Halloween [1978], A Nightmare on Elm Street [1984], all that stuff. Then I started not to like horror right around the torture porn era. (2012: 9)

To any scholar (and many fans) of horror, the names “Jacques Tourneur” and “Val Lewton” instantly signal the mark of “quality” horror. The poetic films they created (working together and with others) tend towards the shadowy, the non-distinct, the suggestive—stylistic features always linked to the more sophisticated, cerebral brand of artistry that horror can offer. Next in name come those films characteristic of Whedon’s turn to nostalgia for the halcyon days of a horror represented by the Halloweens and Nightmares of his youth. Again, we find here the language of crisis in evolutionary frameworks that see the present as only a pale, degraded, corrupt, or bankrupt version of a purer past. Whedon typically identifies “torture porn”—a hotly debated term by scholars—as a line of demarcation indicating a degenerative downturn in recent horror cinema. Yet, he paradoxically discusses as “classic films” the “really disturbing films of the Seventies and early Eighties” that are certainly prototypical of the “torture porn” aesthetic that scholars have now perhaps more constructively re-termed “spectacle horror” (Lowenstein 2012) or “torture horror” (Reyes 2013).¹¹ The critical double-speak in Whedon’s comment above is in play in Cabin as well, as the film tries to negotiate horror’s always-already reflexive nature (in the words

of Philip Brophy (1986), horror cinema plays a “game” that “it knows that you know it knows you know” well), while also criticizing the genre for having gone off the rails (Brophy 5). In the same interview as above, Whedon struggles in an attempt to frame Cabin’s own tendencies towards excess. With characteristically disarming humor, Whedon betrays a nonetheless problematic sensibility around gore spectacle as the equivalent of pornography, pushing the idea of a moral imperative for gore (and, incidentally, for porn):

Drew [Goddard] is perhaps [a fan of gore] slightly more than me, but always in the service of the movie, not for its own sake, not to become pornographic, not to become just like buckets of blood for their own sake. Drew definitely loves it, but at the same time, he knows there has to be integrity behind it. There is a bloodbath because they tried to off these kids and they are getting payback for that. So neither of us was really going for the gross. And so it’s really a family film (Whedon, et al, 36).

Whedon’s ironic self-awareness aside, statements like this resound like a “shot heard ‘round the world” for scholars of both horror and pornography. As several of the articles in the issue suggest, the notion of Whedon’s productions as the work of a self-aware auteur, or “visionary,” is one of the key discourses in how these productions will be received by viewers. In no small part, this special issue of *Slayage* was borne out of a frustration with negotiating a general respect for Whedon’s (and Goddard’s) work considering what seems to be Whedon’s (and Goddard’s?) essentialist understanding of a complicated genre.

[12] At the source of much praise and criticism of *The Cabin in the Woods*—and certainly key for readers of *Slayage*—is the notion of the film as “Whedonesque,” a product of the self-aware brand or vision of Joss Whedon and his collaborators. Jerry Metz’s article for the special issue, “What’s Your Fetish?: The Tortured Economics of Horror Simulacra in *The Cabin in The Woods*,” argues that Whedon and Goddard’s interest in appeasing fans of the Whedonesque ultimately undermines the film’s anticapitalist leanings. “*The Cabin in the Woods* promises liberating hipness,” he suggests, “but its heart is corporate.” Specifically, this “corporateness,” according to Metz, lies in service of what Erin Giannini refers to in her contribution to the issue (mentioned above) as the “Whedon brand.” Metz sees the film struggling hard to maintain a “nostalgia aimed at recycling *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in atmosphere and theme, [...] a kind of palimpsest of ideas and cultural attitudes engineered to appease fans who miss the show while serving as a self-reflexive placeholder extending the Whedon /

Goddard empires into new properties." Metz regards *Cabin* as a "sort of spectacular 'gimmick film'," citing Murray Leeder's (2011) term for the funhouse aesthetic present in the films of such 50s filmmakers as William Castle, whose films collapsed narrative with trickery and sensory effects that rarely left the level of ludic superficiality, though they were important and influential experiments in generating an interactive experience for horror audiences.

[13] *The Cabin in the Woods* has sparked a wide range of reactions and polemics among horror and Whedon scholars and fans. We hope that the essays in this special issue, "'We Are Not Who We Are': Critical Reflections on *The Cabin in the Woods*," will incite further discussion regarding the state of the horror genre, and Whedon's place in it.¹²

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Notes

¹ The reference is to the extensive interview of Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard by Abbie Bernstein, entitled "Into the Woods: Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard on the Making of the Film," itself a reference to horror's archetypal roots in folklore, particularly fairy tales. There seems also to be an allusion here to the fan-favorite musical episode of Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7), as well as to Stephen Sondheim's phenomenally successful fairy-tale musical *Into the Woods* (first produced in 1986). See Joss Whedon, Drew Goddard, and Abbie Bernstein. 2012. *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion*. London: Titan Books.

² The film's positive and negative reviews respectively emphasized or targeted the film's genre self-consciousness: Peter Debruge's review for *Variety* cites the film's successful "subver[sion of] the expectations that accompany the genre," calling it "a smarter, more self-aware kind of chiller that still delivers the scares" (9 March, 2012); and Roger Ebert likened the film to a "puzzle for horror fans to solve," and a "final exam for fanboys" (11 April, 2012). Contrarily, *Village Voice* critic Mark Olsen, who raised fan hackles by spoiling the film's eschatological ending in the first sentence of his negative review, identifies "an off-putting vibe of cocky self-

confidence" in the film's delivery that undermines any successful identification with the characters or proceedings. Olsen notes that, "[m]ore than anything else, Cabin feels like the endgame of so-called fanboy culture in the way in which it is first and foremost about itself, interested only in a fundamental adherence to rules of its own devising and fenced off from the world at large" (11 April, 2012).

³ Whedon and Goddard may or may not be aware of the Frankfurt School roots of Cabin's media critique. For a suggestion that at least Whedon is, see his comments in the extensive interview in *The Cabin in the Woods: The Official Visual Companion* (2012), especially where Whedon is prompted to compare Cabin to *Dollhouse*: "we are all controlled, we are all experimented upon, and we are all dying from it. And we are all completely unaware of it. We are taught not to be kind. We are taught not to be forward-thinking. We are taught not to be as much as we can be. We are taught to be insecure. We are taught to be subservient. We are taught to be aggressive. And we are taught to buy, buy, buy And these are things that are going on every day, all the time, in everybody's life. So the person [who is] experimented upon is me, it's everyone, and it's constant" (Whedon, Goddard, and Bernstein 2012, 19).

⁴ For a reading of Cabin's ambivalent framing of horror viewership, see Kristopher Woofter, "Watchers in the Woods: Meta-Horror, Genre Hybridity, and Reality TV Critique in *The Cabin in the Woods*," in *Reading Joss Whedon* (Syracuse University Press, forthcoming 2014). Woofter suggests that Cabin works better as an exploration of the drives and desires of factual television than it does as a critique or state-of-the-union for a horror genre in crisis. This argument draws upon Craig Hight's (2004) claim that films that critique reality TV have trouble figuring their viewership in their narratives because the audiences they address may be reality TV watchers themselves. Hight suggests that the difficulty arises in these films forgetting that reality TV viewership, like horror viewership is "collectively implicated in the development of hybrids" (2004: 248). Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004) compliment this argument, suggesting that reality TV (again, like horror) is a highly reflexive genre, built on (because acutely aware of) its viewer's critical position with respect to the extreme, excessive subject matter. Hight's argument is focused on millennial films like *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Series 7: The Contenders* (2001), but Cabin and recent popular film series like *The Hunger Games* (2012, 2013) are evidence that this ambivalence around how to frame reality TV audiences critically continues to present a dilemma for writers.

⁵ See Whedon's comments in Joe Utichi, "A Buffy-Style Kicking for Torture Porn." *Sunday Times Culture Magazine*, 15 April 2012.

⁶ While in certain cases this critique may hold—remakes of *Prom Night* (1980, 2008) and *House of Wax* (1953, 2005) won't likely win the genre any new fans—there has been a bevy of original, challenging horror films in the first decade of the 21st century, among them Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (France, 2008), Ti West's *House of the Devil* (USA, 2009) and Adam Wingard's *Pop Skull* (USA, 2007) and *A Horrible Way to Die* (USA, 2010).

⁷ Cabin's directness in its critique of the culture industry is not unique to the horror genre. John Carpenter's Reagan-era alien-invasion horror film, *They Live!* (1988) features a central conceit built entirely on a similar culture industry analysis, with working class drifter, "Nada," (Roddy Piper) donning a pair of sunglasses that reveal a world of mass consumption to which he was heretofore blinded: one in which every supposedly differentiated object is merely a mask for a subliminal commands to "conform," "consume," "obey"—to "submit" to the will of consumer culture. Twenty years later, George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (2007) will combine fears of media manipulation with a post-9/11 sense of paranoia, its found-footage conceit addressing a media-saturated environment where notions of public and private experience have collapsed into each other, and multi-screen spectacle, such as one finds on CNN, has become a new form not just of realism, but of reality.

⁸ For an assessment of the horror narrative's complex construction around narratives of "disclosure," see Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990, London: Routledge).

⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) describes the monster's power succinctly: "The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically 'that which reveals', 'that which warns', a glyph that seeks a heirophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (4). See Cohen's 1996 essay, "Monster Theory: Seven Theses" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.) Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

¹⁰ Incidentally, but tellingly, a moment of pause during which Dana stares through the glass at a monster who resembles Hellraiser's (1987) Pinhead even pays a sort of sardonic homage to a poignant moment between human and zombie through the glass of a JC Penney's department store in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979). Though Romero's film prefigures Cabin's own critical concerns around consumption, what in Romero's film is a moment of recognition between the living human and the zombie that she may become, is instead played for the distancing effects of parodic humor in *Cabin*.

¹¹ The critical renaming of David Edelstein's (2006) reactionary term, "torture porn," is not an attempt to de-emphasize the reliance on prolonged spectacle shared by both horror and pornography, but to remove the derogatory sense resulting from both genres (and their viewerships) being smashed together within a negative context. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" (1991. *Film Quarterly* 44(4): 2-13) for a reading of the shared traits in the reception of horror, pornography and the melodrama that similarly works against negative readings of generic excess.

¹² We would like to thank L. Andrew Cooper and Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare for their invaluable editorial comments on this introduction. We would also like to thank the other scholars who dedicated their time to peer review the contributions to this special issue.