Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____ _____

Jared Richardson Date

The Horror of "Us": Nihilistic Conceptions of Humanity in *The Cabin in the Woods*

By

Jared Richardson
Master of Arts

Film & Media Studies

_____

Karla Oeler, Ph.D.
Advisor

_____

James Steffen, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____

Daniel Reynolds, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

The Horror of "Us": Nihilistic Conceptions of Humanity in *The Cabin in the Woods*

By

Jared Richardson
B.S., The Ohio State University, 2011

Advisor: Karla Oeler, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film and Media Studies
2015

Abstract

The Horror of "Us": Nihilistic Conceptions of Humanity in *The Cabin in the Woods*

By Jared Richardson

This thesis argues that Drew Goddard's 2012 horror-comedy *The Cabin in the Woods* implicates modes of spectatorship in the horror film genre. Exploring the ways in which the horror genre encourages desensitization to violence, nihilistic fantasy, and most importantly, an acceptance or even enjoyment of these perhaps disturbing effects, the film implicates its viewers for participating in an institution that uses suffering and depravity for entertainment value. Through the use of reflexive narrative strategies and Kantian determining judgments, the film uses its critique to suggest that these problematic modes of complicit spectatorship might be emblematic of an inherent human capacity for indifference towards the suffering of other. This thesis focuses on the film's apocalyptic ending to propose its own version of Eugene Thacker's the *world-without-us* thought experiment in an attempt to outline the limitations of conceiving of, let alone judging, humanity at large.

The Horror of "Us": Nihilistic Conceptions of Humanity in *The Cabin in the Woods*

By

Jared Richardson
B.S., The Ohio State University, 2011

Advisor: Karla Oeler, Ph.D.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film and Media Studies
2015

Table of Contents

Introduction

Humanity's long history of apocalyptic thinking and storytelling has found a particularly powerful narrative vehicle in the cinema. With its ability to give unprecedented life to doomsday fantasies and speculations previously confined to the imagination, film seems unable to resist the temptation to remind us of the myriad threats, however likely or unlikely they may be, to humanity's survival. The end of the world is everyone's problem. This makes it an especially popular plot element in today's increasingly global box office culture in which a film's economic success often hinges upon its reception in international markets. Adding to the universality of the apocalyptic threat itself is the widespread agreement as to the obviousness that it should be challenged. Thomas Ligotti speaks of humanity's collective will to live when he says:

> For millennia, humanity has been the butt of epigrams and tantrums that do not portray it with favor. Nevertheless, the reigning sentiment expressed on the subject more often ranges from qualified approval to loud-mouthed braggadocio. In general, we have given ourselves rather high marks as a form of life and are not chagrined by flattery, especially if it is cleverly devised to forefend our blushing with pride for being the standout guinea pigs in nature's laboratory…History proves that people will change their minds about almost anything, from which god they worship to how they style their hair. An exception to this rule, probably the only one, is that humanity has never seriously doubted its good opinion of itself or the value of its existence.[1]

The general consensus among the human race seems to be that people want to live, that life should be protected, and that therefore, any challenge to that life-drive should be met with staunch resistance. With any suggestion that mankind question its worth effectively culled by the self-validating support of the survival instinct and majority opinion, the prospect of global destruction on-screen often serves as little more than a staging ground

[1] Thomas Ligotti, preface to *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*, 1st ed. (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), 10.

for celebrations of heroism, love, or whatever other virtue is exalted to stand as the proof of humanity's right to exist. The apocalyptic plot's appeal to this collective agreement on mankind's desire and right to survive is a simple and convenient narrative tradition. It is easily related to, easily understood, and not to be questioned.

But some films do just that. Spattered amongst the plethora of films in which the question of whether or not to resist an apocalyptic threat is posed rhetorically (if at all) lies a small contingent of films that do not treat the decision to save the world as an obvious response. This process of deliberation is usually brief, typically doing nothing more than acknowledging the fact that the human condition is less than perfect, only to quickly retreat to the aforementioned human virtues which make any cons negligible. Luc Besson's sci-fi action classic *The Fifth Element* (1997) offers an apt illustration of this coy moral accounting of the human condition in the penultimate scene's debate between rogue protagonist Korben Dallas, and the messianic savior LeeLoo. Having studied the complete course of human history on the internet to make up for millennia of hibernation, LeeLoo is reluctant to adhere to her duty to "protect life" after bearing witness to the atrocities committed by mankind. Thankfully, her apprehensions are quickly dispensed by Korben who, while in agreement that there is indeed evil in the world, asserts that there are also aspects of life worth saving. Citing "love" as his primary example, Korben's point is driven home by a kiss which convinces LeeLoo to abandon all misgivings about the state of the world. A formulaic Hollywood invocation of the "love conquers all" mythos saves humanity from destruction and from rigorous scrutiny. The sanctity of humanity's existence is protected by the admission of it inherent flaws, a confession absolving mankind of its sins and removing any further need to dwell upon

them. It is rare to see serious, extended contemplation as to whether or not humanity is worth saving when it is within mankind's power to affect the outcome of an apocalyptic threat.

For the film in which this dispute receives narrative and thematic prominence, the potential sins of humanity are many. Moral or utilitarian judgments of mankind can attack any number of targets: humanity's unique capacity to wage war (e.g. *On the Beach* [1959]), its destruction of the environment (e.g. *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004]), systemic disregard for the needs of others (e.g. *The End of Evangelion* [1997]), etc. This thesis is about a film that is no less sweeping in its charges against humanity, but which uses an unusual piece of evidence to cast judgment: the kinds of movies we watch.

Drew Goddard's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), co-written and produced by celebrity showrunner and director Joss Whedon, presented itself from the early days of its marketing as a genre redefining horror film. The tagline of the promotional poster, "You think you know the story,"[2] promised something more than the clichés so readily associated with the all too familiar titular concept. With Whedon having established a massive and loyal fanbase from his cult sci-fi/fantasy hits *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), *Firefly* (2002), and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), all known for bearing his signature irreverent humor and self-referential awareness, it was a promise that the film was more than expected to keep. Adding to the confidence that Whedon's influence lent to the film was the comforting knowledge that Goddard cut his teeth as a writer under Whedon on *Buffy* and *Angel*, and the credibility both men had as not merely solicitors of geek fantasy, but as well-versed fans in their own right. Always happy to

[2] Matt Goldberg, "New Teaser Poster for The Cabin in the Woods," Collider, http://collider.com/cabin-in-the-woods-teaser-poster/ (accessed February 20, 2015).

boast of their lifelong adoration of horror movies, Whedon and Goddard aimed to put their own loving stamp on the genre, while simultaneously addressing what they both saw as the disturbing trend of contemporary horror's shift towards "torture porn."[3]

The Cabin in the Woods implicates modes of spectatorship in the horror film genre. Exploring the ways in which the horror genre encourages desensitization to violence, nihilistic fantasy, and most importantly, an acceptance or even enjoyment of these perhaps disturbing effects, the film implicates its viewers for participating in an institution that uses suffering and depravity for entertainment value. But unlike more speculative critique films which can distance the viewer from the social behavior being analyzed, the film does not point an accusatory finger at generally recognized but indistinct follies of the human condition. There is no room for the spectator to say "Hmm, yes, that does happen, doesn't it?" with the internal addendums of "elsewhere" or "with other people." Like a trial in which the jury and the accused are one and the same, *The Cabin in the Woods* employs strategies of reflexive cinema -- films that call attention to their constructedness and to the audience's engagement with the text – to make the case for humanity's evil by showing the audience that it itself is guilty of watching blood-sport. The most damning piece of evidence, and the primary function of reflexivity as it is employed in *The Cabin in the Woods*, is the claim that the spectator is essentially being caught in the act just by watching the film.

[3] Marc Savlov, "The Scare Game: Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon on What Went Wrong with Horror and Where to Go From Here," The Austin Chronicle, http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2012-03-09/the-scare-game/ (accessed April 01, 2015). While Whedon and Goddard regularly cite the rise of "torture porn" films such as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) as causing concern about the depiction of violence in horror, *Cabin's* aesthetic and critique draw more upon the slasher film. This point will be further explored in Chapter 1.

In speaking of what she calls "contra-disavowal" films – movies that seek to challenge the illusionist escape from reality of narrative film – Michele Aaron cites the "complicity" of the filmic spectator.[4] Aaron works from Christian Metz's conception of the dual-complicity of both the spectator and the film itself. In Metz's conception, the film spectator suspends their disbelief of the artifice of the cinematic spectacle, just as the narrative perpetuates this disavowal by performing and boasting of its verisimilitude. In her brief essay, "Looking On: Troubling Spectacles and the Complicitous Spectator," Aaron directs the notion of complicit spectatorship specifically towards films with controversial content. The disavowal at the root of the audience engagement with illusionist narratives serves as a powerful and problematic enabling tool for Aaron. With the goal of challenging "the necessary and necessarily safe distance between the spectator and the dangers suggested by and within the cinematic spectacle, be they emotional, psychological, or even ethical," Aaron aims to investigate films that argue "not simply for the spectator's complicity in [the spectacle's] creation and endurance, but for the spectator's complicity in its often disturbing content."[5]

The Cabin in the Woods is a prime example of this type of contra-disavowal film. The story focuses on a group of teens on a weekend retreat at (you guessed it) a cabin in the woods. As cliché as this plotline may seem given its archetypal status in the horror genre, there are far greater forces at work than simply the contrived threat of a maniacal killer or a monster on a rampage. Unbeknownst to the group, they have become unwilling

[4] Geoff King, ed., *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to "Reality" TV and Beyond* (Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2005).

[5] Ibid.

sacrifices in an ancient ritual to the elder gods[6] of the Earth. Controlling this ritual from behind the scenes in a secret underground facility[7] – operating under the comically familiar setting of a corporate office environment – is an unnamed organization[8] whose sole purpose is to appease the Ancients by offering them the fresh blood of youth. The primary facilitators of the ritual "direct" the flow of the action going on above ground by sending supernatural horrors to terrorize the teens and influencing the environment to put on a satisfactory spectacle of violence to sate the gods' bloodlust. This scathing, and often hilarious, fantasy exposé of what's really going on behind the scenes of horror film scenarios serves as a thought-provoking indictment of the genre. Cleverly combining elements of horror, comedy, and conspiracy theory to deconstruct the genre, *Cabin* aims to stimulate the audience familiarity with the tropes of horror to both celebrate and challenge their existence. In a scene that almost explicitly states this as a central motivation for the film, a new hire at The Organization expresses his astonishment at the presence of the supernatural horrors that constitute the everyday routine around the office. When assured by a senior colleague that "You get used to it," he responds suspiciously with "Should you?" – perhaps the core question of the film.

Where *The Cabin in the Woods* differs from other contra-disavowal films – a term which I will henceforth abandon in favor of the more common "self-reflexive" – and what makes it such a fascinating object of study is that its judgment of a filmic social practice takes on an apocalyptic scale. After nearly two hours of thoroughly taking the presumed horror film spectator and its makers to task, the film concludes with the

[6] Henceforth referred to as "The Ancients."

[7] Henceforth referred to as "The Facility."

[8] Henceforth referred to as "The Organization."

complete extinction of the human race. Retaliating against their oppressors, Marty and Dana, the sole survivors of the sacrificial ritual, disturb the established order by refusing to offer up their lives even if it does spell the end of the human race. This act of defiance illustrates one of the major means of judgment under which *The Cabin in the Woods* operates: the subsuming of particulars under universals, a key element of Kant's notion of *determining* judgment.[9] Marty and Dana's decision to die on their own terms is not only an expression of agency, but an act of vengeance directed not at their immediate tormentors in The Organization, but towards humanity at large. The actions of the few who sought to victimize them become regarded as emblematic of a collective evil in the human condition. In the same way, the film itself plays up nihilistic fantasies of cleansing the world of the plague of humanity based upon the limited transgressions of devout horrors fans and filmmakers. In other words, the immediate spectator of the film is merely the nearest example of *The Cabin in the Wood's* sweeping indictment of human nature.

Michael Haneke's controversial *Funny Games* (1997), frequently compared to *The Cabin in the Woods* due to its similar efforts to critique its audience's sadistic want of violent spectacle, stands in stark contrast as a far more pointed critique.[10] Unlike *Cabin* in which Whedon and Goddard acknowledge their own complicity as both horror fans and filmmakers, *Funny Games* sets its sights exclusively on the spectator. This exemption

---

[9] Silke Panse and Dennis Rothermel, eds., *A Critique of Judgment in Film and Television* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6.

[10] See, for example, Dan Schoenbrun, "A Conversation with 'Cabin in the Woods' Director Drew Goddard", Filmmaker Magazine, http://filmmakermagazine.com/43750-a-conversation-with-cabin-in-the-woods-director-drew-goddard/#.VSHIm9zF-So (accessed April 01, 2015); and Laura Kern, "Short Takes: The Cabin in the Woods", Film Comment, http://www.filmcomment.com/article/short-takes-the-cabin-in-the-woods (accessed April 01, 2015).

of the filmmaker as contributing to the proliferation of cinematic violence limits the scope of the film's critique, a point which Tasha Robinson of *The Dissolve* believes makes *Funny Games* the far more accusatory of the two films. As she says:

> There's a smugness and contempt in Haneke's *Funny Games* that assumes much too much about the audience: Who they are, how much gore they crave and are disappointed at not seeing, what they need to be scolded for…*Cabin In The Woods* does have its scoldy side, but it isn't just talking down to the audience; it implicates the puppetmasters as well, for enjoying their work too much, for being dismissive about their responsibility…The creators may think horror-movie audiences are jaded and prurient, but they're willing to acknowledge the same impulses in themselves.[11]

In this sense, *Cabin* is not only a critique, but a confession. Its makers cast themselves into the cleansing apocalyptic fire along with the audience. A vital component of any tenable claim about a universal human nature, this "me too" admission incriminates them as participatory in the sins of their fellow man, the ultimate self-indulgent proof of the rule rather than its equally egocentric exception. Their conception of humanity is reified in their conception of themselves. To question the mechanisms surrounding this dynamic between the Self and sweeping generalizations one's fellow man is the purpose of this thesis.

A recent book, Lisa Zunshine's *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture*, was – despite having little to do with the apocalypse or horror films – of major significance to my decision to undertake this thesis, and greatly influenced how I approached my central question.[12] In the book, Zunshine examines how narrative cinema reinforces speculative readings of human behaviors to

---

[11] Genevieve Koski et al., "The Moviemaker Meta and Moral Conundrums of 'The Cabin in the Woods'," The Dissolve, https://thedissolve.com/features/movie-of-the-week/491-the-moviemaker-meta-and-moral-conundrums-of-the-ca/ (accessed, February 21, 2015).

[12] Lisa Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

draw conclusions as to their potential meanings or motivations. Whether it is in encouraging viewers to attempt at interpreting body language or to read between the lines of the words characters speak, Zunshine explores how the cinema appeals to the false sense of reading people's minds. Simply put, despite whatever illusions of certainty we may harbor, we simply cannot ever really know what is going on inside someone else's head.

As someone with a particularly bad habit of placing too much confidence in my own intuitive readings of the people around me, the book was a powerful lesson. It forced me to consider that perhaps one of the biggest reasons I am drawn to film is that narrative cinema's modes of characterization stroke a certain egotistical desire to believe that I can "figure out" other people. For the perpetual people reader, film is something of a dream medium. Its temporal compressions and omnipresent perspectives create a streamlined, all-access glimpse into the worlds of others. At the same time, it typically withholds enough information to maintain enough distance from the complete inner worlds of others to maintain verisimilitude. Just as in real life, the spectator is not made privy to each and every thought or feeling or influential past experience that might inform the present behavior of whoever is being observed. Instead, the spectator is forced to fill in the gaps with inferences. In doing so, film prompts the viewer to neatly compartmentalize whole people into conjectural personas: a practice which Zunshine states is essential to our everyday interactions with others, but which cinema distills to dangerously delusional concentrations.

For what is the conciliatory nature of "understanding" but an attempt at reconciling the essentially unknowable? What drives our sense of certainty as to the

nature of the object or entity which exists outside ourselves (the Other) beyond a mere calming faith in the proximity of our hypothesis to the truth? And we must remember that proximity is not the same as being truly coterminous. The gap between conceiving of the Other and truly knowing the Other is fundamentally either closed or infinitely vast; there is no crossing the chasm on the partially spanning bridge of understanding. Though Zunshine approaches this problem through the methods of cognitive psychology, she is grappling with the very same issue of the limits of understanding that motivated Emmanuel Levinas in his philosophical attempts at reconciling the relationship between the Self and the Other. How, if at all, can we come to accurately conceive of the Other? Applying this conundrum to conceptions of the human race via *The Cabin in the Woods* is the goal of this thesis.

I am of the belief that most all meaningful research holds a strong personal stake for the researcher. Unpacking my own interest in *The Cabin in the Woods* has most definitely required a degree of soul-searching. Originally, I pursued the project with the primary purpose of cataloguing the various reflexive techniques working to convince the spectator of their own complicity. I was intent on coming to the tacit defense of the film to illustrate its effectiveness in achieving that goal. But reading Zunshine shifted my focus significantly. My concern became the very admissibility of the evidence being levied against humanity. How does one conceive of "humanity" or "the world" in the attempt to pass judgment over such impossibly large and unruly concepts? After all, the critique is only as good as one's understanding of the object of said critique.

What then can one say about a film like *The Cabin in the Woods* which hinges upon an assertion of some "dark truth" of the human condition gleaned from similarly

speculative readings of filmic audiences? How, once acknowledging the fundamental inaccuracy of believing that one fully understands a mere individual, can we seriously entertain any notion of having "figured out" the whole of humanity and deemed it unworthy of existence? What justification remains for passing determining judgments of people when the fallibility of the system upon which such judgments are constructed has been illuminated? I will use *The Cabin in the Woods* to explore the logic behind the process of making sweeping generalizations of others. In doing so, I hope to explain some of the assumptions that enable the kind of nihilistic fantasy both behind and stimulated by the film.

To do so, I will be drawing upon a number of approaches. Chapter 1 will define key terms and concepts which will appear throughout this thesis. The chapter opens with a brief overview of reflexivity as it appears in Western literature and film, and the key reflexive techniques which will govern the close reading of *The Cabin in the Woods*. Among these is the film's interplay of horror and comedy which forces a continual orienting and reorienting of the viewer. This will be explained in the chapter's discussion on the relevance of genre to the film. The chapter then moves on to highlight key ideas surrounding spectator ethics. Focusing upon the precarious separation between the notions of harmless observation and witness disavowal, I will adopt Aaron's conception of complicit spectatorship in investigating the basis for ascribing guilt to the prospective spectator of *The Cabin in the Woods*.

Chapter 2 offers a close reading of *Cabin* with a particular emphasis on reflexive moments that directly address the spectator's act of looking, or that play on popular tropes of the horror genre. The chapter also offers background information on the film's

critical reception as well as background on its two creators – Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard – whose unique participation in the very institution of horror cinema film suggests a perspective that lends itself quite readily to determining judgments.

Chapter 3 will put the film's inferred readings of its imagined audience in dialogue with philosophical conceptions of "the world." Of particular importance will be Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet* which provides a crucial framework for understanding the thought experiment that is constructing a comprehensive understanding of the human race.[13] Reconfiguring Thacker's notions of the *world-for-us*, the *world-in-itself*, and the *world-without-us*, I attempt to map the means by which conceptions of humanity are derived from notions of Self. This in turn is used to suggest that *Cabin* might be far better understood as a contemplation on the limits of conceptualizing of our fellow man than as a strict moral critique.

I would also note the central importance of *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* in providing a window into the scholarly discourse surrounding Joss Whedon and *The Cabin in the Woods*. The special "'We Are Not Who We Are': Critical Reflections on The Cabin in the Woods (2012)" issue of the journal was both a vital source of information and a central framework for the establishing the dialogue around *Cabin* to which this thesis will be contributing.[14]

This project has been taken a number of different paths in ultimately reaching this final form. At all crossroads, it remained a profoundly illuminating experience that

---

[13] Eugene Thacker, *In The Dust of This Planet* (Ropley: Zero, 2011).

[14] Jasie Stokes and Kristofer Woofter, ed. "We Are Not Who We Are: Critical Reflections on 'The Cabin in the Woods' (2012)," special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 10.2/11.1, no. 36-37 (Autumn 2013/Winter 2014) http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage36.htm (accessed February 15, 2015).

challenged my understanding of the world and my place within it. I hope that the reader can gain as much of an appreciation for the precarious basis of judgment in reading this thesis as I did in writing it.

The Woods: Key Terms and Concepts

Like the conspiracy of the film's plot, *Cabin's* critique of complicit horror spectatorship operates on a number of levels. In a complex manipulation of genre trends and narrative structures, the film builds a case for its final sentencing of humanity. It introduces the charges against the accused, attempts to convince them of their guilt, and finally, casts judgment. To do so, *Cabin* draws on ethical critiques of the pleasures of horror film spectatorship and strategies of reflexive narrative.

This first chapter defines the most relevant concepts and terms which inform *Cabin's* critique. Section 1, entitled "On Reflexivity: Projecting the Spectator," will discuss theories of reflexivity with the purpose of offering a working definition for the term, and postulating just how it is that the mere act of seeing positions spectators to be cognizant of the implications of their gaze.

The second section, entitled "Genre and Fandom," discusses the function of genre as it relates to the ethics of *Cabin's* humor and aesthetics of violence. In outlining how the unlikely mixture of horror and comedy is, in fact, a remarkably potent narrative concoction, the section addresses the role of laughter as a reflexive tool contributing to the effectiveness of *Cabin's* various critiques. The humor of *Cabin*, essentially an extended in-joke, reflects assumptions about the spectator's viewing habits and knowledge of the horror genre. The section explains how *Cabin* poses the challenging question of when it is (in)appropriate to laugh in the context of horror spectatorship.

The chapter's final section, entitled "On Spectator Ethics," offers a brief overview of the basic ethical dilemmas surrounding complicit spectatorship. The section posits the notion of sight as undemanding of any ethical stance to then explain how such an ethical

pardon does not apply to the case of horror cinema. It will explore the repercussions of complicit spectatorship, and finally challenge the notion that *Cabin's* status as work of fiction negates any ethical demands it places on the viewer.

On Reflexivity: Projecting the Spectator

Definitions of reflexivity are as varied as the multitude of potential uses for the concept itself. While the term enjoys a presence in fields ranging from philosophy to biology to the study of artificial intelligence[1], it is reflexivity as it applies to the literary narrative tradition that guides this study. Even within this narrowed scope, understandings of reflexivity differ depending upon which of its many functions one chooses to emphasize. In speaking of reflexive fiction's place within the larger context of narrative fiction, Robert Stam describes how reflexivity stands in contrast to the transfixing illusion of narrative continuity.

> All artistic representation can pass itself off as 'reality' or straightforwardly admit its status as representation. Illusionism pretends to be something more than mere artistic production; it presents its characters as real people, its sequence of words or images as real time, and its representations as substantiated fact. Reflexivity, on the other hand, points to its own mask and invites the public to examine and call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs.[2]

In challenging literary devices which seek to conceal the artifice of narrative, reflexive strategies seek to create ruptures between the audience and the immersive experience of narrative reception. These moments of heightened awareness in which the audience recognizes the narrative as a constructed text, and recognizes itself as an active consumer

[1] Steven J. Bartlett and Peter Suber, *Self-Reference: Reflections on Reflexivity* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1987), 11.

[2] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.

of that text, wield considerable potential to alter the roles and responsibilities of the audience. Robert Siegle describes reflexivity as "a way of understanding the semiotic, philosophical, and ideological processes taking place in any narrative alongside those issues our existing poetics equips us to find."[3] Rather than treating reflexivity as a broad starting place for increased conscientiousness of one's engagement with a narrative, Siegle pushes the definition towards specific understandings of the functions of narrative to be gleaned from reflexivity. Siegle's conception implies that not only should reflexivity break the immersion experience, but position the audience to consider the implications of that break as well; it should encourage them to learn something from their shock into consciousness. Stating this even more overtly is Niklas Luhmann's sociological framing of reflexivity in which "reflexivity denotes the ability of the individuals of a social system to reflect on and evaluate both their conception of the system and their role in it and to choose activities from among the available options according to their own personal evaluation."[4] This opens the grounds for reflexivity to serve not only as a catalyst for insight, but tangible action as well.

What we see then in this series of definitions is a formulation of how one's intellectual and ethical obligations might progress with increasing levels of social consciousness. The audience's recognition of its role as a consumer of a constructed text prompts consideration of the mechanisms of that consumption, and the content which is being consumed. The awareness of that content and its modes of transmission raise the issue of its effects on the audience. With the consideration of the narrative's capacity to

---

[3] Robert Siegle, *The Politics of Reflexivity: Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 1.

[4] Rolf. Breuer et al., *Self-Reflexivity in Literature* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 7.

act upon the audience comes the question of "What does one do about it?" In short, reflexivity burdens the audience. It tasks it with the responsibility of deciding what to do with the deeper understanding it instills; it is motivated and intentional. While more generous formulations of reflexivity might consider anything that serves to break the immersion experience (e.g. the awareness of particularly unconvincing special effects) as an example of reflexivity in action, I will only be considering narrative, metatextual, and paratextual elements which directly call attention to spectator modes of reception. The aforementioned conceptions of reflexivity are not only linked, but bear equal significance in this study's analysis of *The Cabin in the Woods* as a reflexive social critique film. I believe *Cabin's* apocalyptic ending to be the final link in the chain: the critique and ultimate judgment of the audience's response to reflexivity's demand for an ethical stance.

Though this is a project about endings – or rather, *the* ultimate ending – careful attention must still be given to beginnings. Worthy as they may be of serious study on their own merit, none of the films, practices, or ideas which constitute the focus of this project exists in isolation. This is especially true of reflexive strategies in Western literature and cinema. While the tradition of reflexivity in Western storytelling is longstanding (e.g. the stories-within-stories of *The Odyssey* or *Don Quixote*), the advent of its contemporary understanding and techniques is typically situated in the rise of Brechtian theatre and post-modernism.[5] More than being merely self-conscious or joining in the modernist silent protest against the inherent partiality of narrative, Brecht's theatre employed reflexivity as a pedagogical method "aimed less at communicating political

[5] Stam, *Reflexivity in Literature*, 1; Ibid, 9.

messages than at teaching the spectator *how to learn*."[6] In this we see the beginnings of reflexivity as a means of critique and of encouraging critique. In the following quote, however, Siegle warns against any temptations to treat the cycles and iterations of reflexivity in literature as progressing teleologically.

> A myth of literature struggling toward a mature self-awareness is implicit in 'conscious' or 'reflective' and thus obscures the fact that reflexivity is a basic capability of narrative exercised in every period…Reflexivity has always been with us and is not just a function of the modern novel's reflection of the breakdown of cultural consensus."[7]

This is a particularly salient point given the topic of this thesis, and it is a temptation which I will (mostly) resist. One of the most intriguing aspects of apocalyptic thought is that it situates one at the ultimate vantage point of the end. It privileges us with the capability of seeing and stating unequivocally what is and what was because it removes all need to consider how they might be altered by what will be. The apocalypse is the one scenario in which teleological thinking is wholly appropriate. The end of the world serves as a poetic staging ground for dismantling the tropes and structures which form the framework of established narrative institutions (genres, literary movements, etc.). What better setting for the end of a narrative practice than the end of the world? What better harbinger of its stagnation than an attempt at a comprehensive final account of all the things that it was? Siegle's warning against claims of the inevitability of reflexivity as an outcome of literary evolution, however, should absolutely be heeded. *Cabin's*

---

[6] Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 9.

[7] Siegle, *The Politics of Reflexivity*, 3.

teleological accuracy applies strictly to the context of its narrative conclusion, not its position within cycles of horror cinema.

Having now defined reflexivity, I will discuss the ways in which the filmic medium utilizes it in positioning spectators to look back at themselves. While discussions of filmic realism and formalism dominated classical film theory, new theories of psychoanalysis and ideology – particularly those of Lacan and Althusser – shifted the focus of film theory in the 1970s to questions of the cinematic apparatus and the role of spectatorial desire within it.[8] Applying Lacan's notion of identification to the cinema, Christian Metz famously posed how the mirror stage analogy might be similarly used to describe the means by which film spectators identify with the onscreen spectacle. Just as the recognition of the Self enables the possibility of empathy for and identification with the Other, Metz claims that it is the filmic spectator's "primary identification" with the camera's act of seeing which makes possible "secondary identification" with the characters and events onscreen. Partnered with the cinema's continuation of the Realist aspirations of the 19th century mimetic novel,[9] the likening of the silver screen to a mirror might seem especially apt. In this light, reflexive applications of the cinema seem almost obvious in considering the effects of viewing an onscreen image that suggests voyeurism, spectating, etc. Such images encourage the spectator to identify with the act of looking, to recognize their primary identification with the camera, and to ultimately identify with themselves as a perceiving spectator in this series of identifications. Cinematic reflexivity deliberately challenges any illusions of reality or mechanisms of escapism that might allow for easy acceptance of the filmic mimesis by making the spectator the spectacle.

[8] Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 9.
[9] Ibid, 10.

Yet it does this without actually reflecting anything. Stam again: "Reflexivity subverts the assumption that art can be a transparent medium of communication, a window on the world, a mirror promenading down a highway."[10] The shortcomings of the filmic mirror metaphor begin to become apparent. Reflexivity, despite the perhaps misleading connotations of the term, refers not to any mirror-like authenticity of an artistic representation, but to the literary and filmic practices which aim to mimic the self-consciousness of the act of looking into a mirror. For the filmic medium, this breaking of the illusion of reality can be especially challenging to maintain.

The ability of film to reflect upon itself and those whose complicity enables the cinematic process is a powerful tool. When consciously employed by a filmmaker who seeks to "hold a mirror" to the audience, to shake them out of the hypnotic lull of passive spectating into the conscious awareness of seeing themselves in the act of spectating, cracks begin to propagate in the illusionist pillars of the narrative film tradition. Even more than in the previously stated example of literature, narrative film has relied upon the masking of its own artifice. Like a puppet show where every effort is taken to mask the strings, film's capacity to create an illusion of reality has been refined as a means of encouraging audience engagement. But as previously pointed out by Stam, it is neither a window nor a mirror that is being held up in front of the audience; at least, not truly. The cinematic mirror of narrative film is always skewed. Restricted by the technological constraints of the medium and the choices of the filmmaker, its reflections are limited and determined. Christian Metz similarly acknowledged this point in positing how the spectator positions himself to identify with and make sense of the uncanny cinematic experience when he said "film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror

[10] Ibid.

in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body."[11] The cinematic mirror held up before the audience, for all its verisimilitude and illusion of autonomy, does not offer an objective reflection, but instead a representation. It situates the spectator to identify with himself from a position or perspective of the filmmaker's choosing. This, however, does not prevent the illusion of a kind of "free will of spectating" that aims to pacify the act and unhinge it from its often troubling implications, a point which will soon be discussed.

I draw on Metz's cinematic mirror analogy in the present discussion of reflexive critique because I believe the two concepts are motivated by the same core dilemma: "How does one see themselves in something else?" Or, to put it in more philosophical terms, "How does one locate the Self within the Other?" Metz makes a useful attempt at explaining the mechanisms of cinematic identification in psychoanalytic terms. What we get then with moments of cinematic reflexivity are visual provocations towards the mind's capacity to project and perceive selfhood.

Genre and Fandom

With *The Cabin in the Woods,* the classic problem of genre – the always shaky attempt at assigning reductive and confining labels to a text – is somewhat circumvented by the film taking it upon itself to shoulder the burden of presumption. As a film that openly puts itself in dialogue with the horror film genre, the opportunities for subjectivity in (mis)labeling the film are limited. Discarding all regard for scholarly due diligence, the

[11] Christian Metz, "Identification, Mirror," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen , 6th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 822.

film could be described as "a horror movie about horror movies." It is a simple and convenient label which is hardly unfounded, especially given that Whedon himself co-signs. In describing how he and Goddard agreed to collaborate on the film, Whedon says "We're both big horror fans and I basically had had an idea that would let us really write a movie that was about horror movies while *being* a straight-up, good fun, scary movie."[12] Of course, the question of what it means to be a horror movie – "straight-up" or otherwise – or "about" horror movies points us towards the obvious assumptions embedded in such labels. Thankfully, these assumptions are at the very core and forefront of *Cabin's* critique rather than implicitly occupying space beneath the surface. The film is not coy about its presuppositions and judgments, a sentiment that is once again echoed by Whedon, this time along with Goddard. In reference to the film's first killing scene which Whedon describes as "encapsulating" the film's critique of the spectator, Goddard says that *Cabin* is "not about subtle."[13] The film stands as a case in which genre is something to be deduced rather than assigned; a reflection of the filmic traditions the film places itself within, and how it ultimately conceives of those traditions. In other words, it is a matter of ascertaining how the film talks about itself, rather than how one would choose to talk about it.

With this in mind, I would emphasize a few key areas in which genre bears special significance to *Cabin's* mode and object of critique. These considerations will determine how I refer to the film throughout the remainder of this thesis.

---

[12] Clark Collis, "'The Cabin in the Woods': How Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard's 'insane frolic' became the year's must buzzed about fright flick," Entertainment Weekly, http://www.ew.com/article/2012/04/12/the-cabin-in-the-woods-joss-whedon (accessed February 10, 2015)

[13] Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon, *The Cabin in the Woods*, DVD commentary, dir. by Drew Goddard (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Entertainment, 2012).

The first is the unusually prominent role of comedy in the film given its appearance as a "straight-up" horror film. The marriage of comedy to horror, while perhaps seemingly mismatched in principle, has become largely commonplace in contemporary horror cinema. The horror-comedy hybrid itself is hardly a new phenomenon; it traces its roots as far back as the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, as well as to the naturalistic horror shows of the Grand Guignol.[14] On the big screen, horror-comedy and the comic forms it employs have tended to respond to dominant cycles of horror cinema. Rebecca Gordon notes how the "spooky house" films of the silent and early sound eras parodied stage melodramas, as well as how the gross-out horror comedies of the late 1980s and early 1990s responded to the slasher and splatter horror films of the 70s and early 80s.[15] With the contemporary horror-comedy of the last twenty years or so, Steffen Hantke sees an expression of what he calls "the rhetoric of crisis": the pervasive climate of "fatigue or outright dissatisfaction with Hollywood horror these days" coming from fans and critics alike.[16] Jerry Metz notes that, exalting the "classic" horror films of yesteryear as canon, "proponents of this rhetoric assert that the genre appears to have stalled in self-reflexivity and parody, formulaic repetition, and troubling themes in the portrayal of violence and victim suffering."[17] The argument puts the politics

---

[14] William Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-67.

[15] Rebecca Gordon, *Horror-Comedy*, in Oxford Bibliographies, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0077.xml (accessed March 02, 2015).

[16] Steven Hantke, Introduction, *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Steven Hantke, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), vii.

[17] Jerry D. Metz Jr., "What's Your Fetish?: The Tortured Economics of Horror Simulacra in 'The Cabin in the Woods'," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

of canonization in dialogue with teleological theories of genre evolution and fan culture: the suggestion being that, with nowhere left to go, the horror film has resorted to poking fun at its own contrivances.

While this is certainly central to the function of *The Cabin in the Woods*, of greater importance to the focus of this project is the immediate interplay of comedy and horror as they exist in the narrative. For the seasoned Whedon fan, the presence of humor in *Cabin* comes as no surprise. Whedon has made a trademark of finding humor in even the most morbid of scenarios.[18] Still, this does not dismiss that the pairing of laughter and screaming likely registers as counterintuitive. This seeming disparity is often rectified by pointing to the shared emotional core of horror and humor. William Paul cites the common thread of "disruption, an abrupt challenge to the nervous system." He likens the pleasure of horror to that of the fun house in that both capitalize on "an odd pleasure in disorientation, a challenge to the participant's sense of mastery."[19] Just as moments of intense reflexive fear rely on the sudden confrontation with the unexpected, so too does humor base itself in careful manipulation of expectations. Jerry Palmer identifies two potential sources of this comic surprise: "the first is the contradiction of knowledge, or values, or expectations about the outside world…the second is a series of expectations concerning the future course of events on screen that are the product of the narrative up to that point."[20] With *Cabin*, both of these sources are tapped in the film's conception and

---

[18] Joss Whedon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds*, Eurocom, developed by Fox Interactive and Vivendi Universal Games, 2003, unlockable interview. The source of the oft cited "Make it dark, make it grim, make it tough, but then, for the love of God, tell a joke" Whedon quote. Still, the abruptness of the film's opening comedic dialogue remains startling given the opening credit sequence. See Chapter 2.

[19] Paul, *Laughing, Screaming*, 66.

[20] Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd on Film and Television Comedy* (London: BFI Pub, 1987), 44.

execution respectively. The very premise of a horror-comedy is farcically absurd in the incongruity of the two genres, and the film itself regularly utilizes the juxtaposition of jokes and scares to yield comic surprise. For Noel Carroll, the compatibility of humor and horror lies in their very incongruity. As he says:

> The movement from horror to humor or vice-versa that strikes us as so counterintuitive, then, can be explained in terms of what horror and at least one kind of humor – incongruity humor – share. For the categorical interstitiality and transgression that serves as one of the most crucial necessary conditions for the mental state of horror plays a role as part of a sufficient condition for having the mental state of comic amusement, especially of the incongruity variety.[21]

In short, horror and humor can operate as opposite sides of the same coin. And while this incongruity is obviously useful for the purposes of creating a deconstructive horror parody, it is also a remarkably effective combination for reflexive critique.

Recognition of incongruity cannot occur without first identifying the separate incongruous elements; in this case, horror and comedy. Reiterating Goddard's assertion that subtlety was not the aim of *Cabin*, these elements are made blaringly obvious in the film. It makes no secret of its efforts to play up the very tiredness and predictability of the horror tropes it parodies and skewers. The similarity of the parody to the original is essential to its ability to be recognized as parodying in the first place. As Geoff King writes, "It requires some anchorage in the original, which means all aspects of the target are unlikely to be altered at the same time: in other words, parody operates in terms of a system of logical absurdity, with one dimension needed to ensure a logic and another for

---

[21] Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 252.

difference-creating absurdity."[22] With *Cabin*, the aesthetics of the horror film indeed remain unaltered, a point of which Goddard was particularly conscientious in filming. As he says, "Five degrees to the left and we're a comedy; five degrees to the right and we're an exploitation film."[23] It was very much intended that *Cabin* look and feel like the works of classic horror Goddard and Whedon revered rather than a camp exaggeration of their trademark aesthetics. The duo could easily have gone the route of the deliberately bad, over-the-top parody. It would not be an unsound strategy given the obvious reflexive potential in the cringe-inducing imitation. The redeeming qualities of the original are replaced by a self-conscious pity for the shoddiness of the copy, and a newfound embarrassment at having found the original redeeming to begin with. Instead, *Cabin* adds to the formula rather than bastardizes it. The standard horror spectacle is left intact, but speckled with self-referential jokes largely vocalized by the characters. The result is a horror-comedy that does not so much turn the tropes of horror against themselves as much as put those tropes in dialogue with the rhetoric of crisis. A large part of the reflexive potential of this mixing of comedy and horror is that it operates like an echo chamber for the grumblings of the disgruntled but devout horror fan. It reasserts their biting, but secretly loving complaints about the repetitiveness of the genre they adore.

Adding to the recognition of one's own complaints is the knowledge of the specialized experience that informs them. As with all jokes, *Cabin's* self-referential humor is not self-sustaining. Palmer explains the gamble and subjectivity of all attempts at humor when he writes "remarks are not intrinsically humorous, their intention as humor has to be indicated by a para-linguistic marker and their status is then available for

[22] Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London; New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 115.

[23] Drew Goddard, *The Cabin in the Woods*, DVD commentary.

negotiation between interested parties; the outcome of such negotiation may be recognition as humor or the reverse."[24] Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too is humor. And it is the uniqueness of idiosyncratic senses of humor which makes laughter something of a sensitive act. It exposes one's sensibilities as to that which is only to be treated with the utmost seriousness, and that which contains potential for comic pleasure. It can be grounds for chastisement when deemed socially inappropriate. By the same token, the shared experience of collective recognition of a remark as humorous is grounds for kinship; the validation of other people who see in the joke that which you see. This is a basic tenet of deconstructive humor theory in particular with its focus on the ways in which discourse exposes itself and the ludic role of the viewer. Between the comic creator and the viewer/reader is "a state of conspiratorial irony" which is just as important to humorous effect as the actual content of the comedy.[25] It is important to remember, of course, that shared laughter is not necessarily indicative of shared recognition of humor. People can laugh at the same thing for very different reasons, particularly when a joke is universally recognizable. As such, the more esoteric the comedic content, the greater assurance all who are laughing "get it" on the same comedic grounds.

Much of the humor in *The Cabin in the Woods* capitalizes on the insularity of horror fandom to achieve this effect. Sarah Thornton attributes this to the need for "subcultural capital," the means by which members of a subculture lend credence to their own membership status.

> Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder…Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as paintings

[24] Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd on Film and Television Comedy*, 23.

[25] Andrew Horton, ed., *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

> display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections…Just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know,' using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance style.[26]

"Getting" *Cabin's* self-referential humor is an opportunity for obtaining such subcultural capital. It affirms a certain illusion of mastery of the horror genre's tropes, and certifies all in-the-know as part of a privileged elite. And one need not be an active participant in the rhetoric of crisis or a feverish horror film cinephile to achieve this status. It is not necessary that one understand each and every joke or reference the film makes so long as the viewer *feels* that they generally understand the movie's humor. Some jokes are more accessible than others and many jokes work on multiple levels of humor. What is important is that the viewer has the sense that they are in on *Cabin's* ninety minute in-joke about horror movies. In this way, the spectator need not harbor an encyclopedic knowledge of horror cinema to feel like the "fan" the movie critiques; a general familiarity will more than suffice. Instead, *Cabin* confers "fan" status on the spectator on its own terms (i.e. recognition of its humor). It makes its spectators complicit, whether they like it or not, by lowering the bar of horror fandom to include all who laugh at its joke. With Whedon and Goddard as self-identifying lifelong horror fans, it is a clear case of a film that positions itself as for fans and by fans.

But it is also very much *about* fans – along with, in this case, Goddard and Whedon as fan-filmmakers – and the implications of their conspiratorial involvement in the joke. In his essay "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong," Aaron Smuts outlines, with the intent of later countering, Robert de Sousa's thoughts on

---

[26] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, 1st U.S. ed, Music/culture (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996).

the manner in which humor might be unethical. De Sousa's model, referred to by Smuts as the Attitudinal Endorsement Theory, argues "that finding a joke with reprehensible content humorous indicates deeply held immoral assumptions on the part of the listener. If [this] is right, then jokes are one of the most powerful tools for character assessment we could ever hope to have."[27] This last remark Smuts makes largely facetiously in preparation for his claim that De Sousa has failed to account for the various ways in which even a joke with reprehensible content might be rendered innocuously humorous. Still, there is merit in De Sousa's claim so long as one confines themselves to the extremely limited case in which it applies. If the listener is finding a joke with reprehensible content or intent humorous in a similarly reprehensible fashion, their laughter is indeed synonymous with co-signing on the validity or harmful effects of the joke. With the moments of laughter in *Cabin* frequently overlapping with its most faithful representations of controversial horror film traditions, laughter becomes prime evidence for scathing ethical critique. To what extent one's laughter is indeed charged by malice or deeply held immoral leanings will be investigated on a case-to-case basis in the following chapter.

Lastly, I now move away from the discussion of comedy to briefly specify a point on the differentiation between the broader "horror" genre classifier and the "slasher" sub-genre as it will appear from this point forward. In the introduction to the special *Cabin* edition of *Slayage*, Kristofer Woofter and Jasie Stokes note that "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

[27] Aaron Smuts, "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13, no. 3 (June 2010), 333-347.

film's obvious targets."[28] Indeed, despite the stated ambition of critiquing horror films at large, *Cabin* is markedly focused on the tropes of slasher films. Its modes of violence and horror spectacle are far more reminiscent of the slasher flicks of the 70s and 80s than any other cycle in the long history of horror cinema. Given the tastes of Whedon and Goddard in particular, this is to be somewhat expected. Whedon claims an appreciation of horror films from virtually every era of its history. He cites inspiration from "the really disturbing stuff of the 70s and early 80s – all the greats of [his] youth" like *Halloween* (1978) and *Nightmare on Elm St.* (1984), as well as the RKO works of Jacques Tourneur and Val Lewton, whereas Goddard expresses clear preference for the gore of splatter and slasher films.[29]

Woofter and Stokes aptly point out the almost strict adherence of *Cabin* to the generic components of the slasher plot famously outlined by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws. Cabin's* title and setting coincide with Clover's notion of The Terrible Place, "most often a house or tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves…a venerable element of horror."[30] The weapons used to terrorize the helpless teens in *Cabin* –saws, spades, and even a bear trap – affirm her assertion that in the slasher, "the preferred weapons of the killer are knives, hammers, axes, ice picks, hypodermic needles, red hot pokers, pitchforks, and the like. Such implements serve well a plot predicated on

[28] Jasie Stokes and Kristofer Woofter, "Once More into the 'Woods': An Introduction and Provocation," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

[29] Ibid, 9.

[30] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.

stealth and unawareness of later victims that the bodies of their friend are accumulating yards away…closeness and tactility are also at issue."[31]

Cabin's group of horny teens embodies Clover's profile of the slasher victim. As she says, "Where once there was one victim, there are now many...Where once the victim was adult, now she is typically in her teens. Where once she was a female, now she is both girl and boy."[32] The increased gender diversity also makes room for the genre staple of post-coital death, to be discussed further in the following chapter. We also see in *Cabin* Clover's famous Final Girl motif embodied in the character of Dana, the intended sole survivor of the ritual whose exemption from the death sentence that befalls her friends is forgiven "so long as she suffers." Clearly then, *Cabin* takes most of its cues from the very distinct slasher subgenre of horror.

With all of this is mind, I will refer to *Cabin* as a "horror film," "horror comedy," and "slasher" interchangeably depending on which generic element of its function is being emphasized. Placing the various functions of the film within their appropriate genre context is both vital, and remarkably helpful in better appreciating *Cabin's* many facets.

On Spectator Ethics

I would do well before proceeding further to clarify the difference between my usage of "spectating" and "spectatorship" as it will appear throughout this project. "Spectating" from this point onwards will refer to the physical act of looking in a directed, motivated, and conscientious fashion. "Spectatorship" will be used in the sense that Judith Mayne uses it, as "not just the relationship that occurs between the viewer and

[31] Ibid., 32.

[32] Ibid, 32-33.

the screen, but also and especially how that relationship lives on once the spectator leaves the theater."[33]

In emphasizing the pivotal contribution of empathy to ethics, Mark Ledbetter makes particular note of the importance of the image in demanding an ethical response. As he says:

> Whether I make [the] choice consciously or unconsciously, my choice to assist in seeing is my implication in what I see. The moment has "looked" back and we are, perhaps, uncomfortably, voyeurs together. If ethics is, its begins here, with seeing. Or as Levinas suggests, when the Other and I are face to face and we see each other, we can begin to ask, "What is the purpose of what I see?"[34]

The primacy of vision in ethical evaluations is of central concern to *Cabin's* critique and of horror cinema at large. Clover suggests that "horror privileges eyes because, more crucially than any other kind of cinema, it is about eyes. More particularly, it is about eyes watching horror."[35] For both the real life spectators in the theater and the diegetic spectators of The Organization, the act of looking is greatly problematized in the context of horror's extreme images. By its nature, the act of spectating carries with it an enduring tension between impunity and culpability. On one hand, to be an observer is to be regarded as non-participatory; to place oneself at an "objective" distance from the subject of one's gaze. This disavowal of ethical responsibility is further enabled when the spectacle is fictitious, as in the case of the narrative horror film; a prime defense against the suggestion of continued viewing of horror films as yielding adverse effects. On the other hand, spectating can be seen as being complicit with the spectacle, either by

---

[33] Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

[34] Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, eds., *Ethics and Images of Pain*, Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies 1 (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[35] Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 167.

neglecting the opportunity for more direct involvement, or by providing the audience upon which an exhibition relies.

The case of the former is a view of spectating which naively seeks to bestow a cloak of invisibility upon the spectator and the act of spectating itself. If the observer treats the act of watching as merely acknowledging the subject of the gaze without interfering with it, then any role in the spectacle's endurance can be effectively denied. The very act of seeing becomes exempt from accusations of encroaching upon the pristine nature of the subject. The ability to do relies heavily on the privileging of vision as our primary and richest means of engaging with our environment. Seeing almost becomes a prerequisite for being, a standard point of ingress for understanding the world around us and our place within it. Seeing is treated not simply as believing or as a means of affirmation; seeing (or being unable to) becomes the standard mode by which we begin to make sense of our surroundings. It is a starting place, one of the most basic, even lowest forms of participating with our environment. Our relationship with and reliance upon it is regarded as an intrinsic part of our status as human beings navigating the world. As such, seeing is ascribed a certain innocence; whether it is the baby opening its eyes for the first time or the man who simply cannot resist sneaking a peek at the beautiful woman who passes him on the sidewalk, the act of "just looking" becomes beyond reproach when it is regarded as fundamental to even beginning to process a situation, let alone mustering any ethical stance or action in response to it.

I, however, do not encourage any sentiments that would aim to anaesthetize the act of looking when it comes to horror films, nor do I believe *Cabin* entertains any such notions. As Frank Moller asserts, "deliberately to watch an image of a crime is an act of

complicity if the crime has been committed in the first place in order to produce images of it. If people are humiliated, abused, tortured, or killed so as to produce images then the viewer, simply by watching these images, becomes an associate of the perpetrators."[36] While Moller is speaking specifically of crimes in the real world, the process he describes shares the same intentionality of documenting and spreading images of suffering that marks the production of a horror film. The horror spectator is engaging with a virtual suffering created for the express purpose of being viewed. It is complicit spectatorship through and through, and the convenient retreat of harmless looking is denied the paying customer of the horror film.

It is also important that we define exactly what it is the complicit spectator is said to be complying with. What is being enabled in the watching of a film? Assuming the case of theater viewing, the most obvious response is that it enables the film itself, and those like it, via the spectator's direct contribution to box office returns. The financial requirements and motivations of film production leave little room for forgiveness for the film that fails to generate a profit. The survival of the brands, careers, and very livelihoods of filmmakers is heavily reliant upon the consumer's investment in their product. If the product does not sell, it does not get made. How a particular film is identified, the traits or classifications it possesses (e.g. genre, who directed it, who stars in it, etc.) which define the product that is being sold, affects where the film's success or failure is assigned. Did the movie flop at the box office because audiences simply have no interest in Westerns, or because the lead actor did not make for a particularly convincing cowboy? Was the movie a hit because of the director's style/vision, or

[36] Frank Moller, "Associates in Crime and Guilt," in Grønstad and Gustafsson, *Ethics and Images of Pain*.

because the script's heavy overtones of heroism resonated with the current cultural climate? The answers to these types of question – the aim of market research – serve to inflect future trends in film production. The continued proliferation of a film's themes, aesthetics, messages, personnel, or any other such qualities embedded within or attached to the movie, relies upon consumer approval in the form of financial support. To buy into a movie as a paying spectator is to buy everything that comes packaged with it. The informed consumer can make more discerning purchases. The consumer who is ignorant to the nature of what they are buying and to the pitfalls of blind support, perpetuates the distribution of a potentially dangerous product because they simply do not know better. With the global reach and powerful influence of the cinematic medium, the film spectator's ticket holds much higher stakes than mere admission to a show; it is a demand for the continued supply of culturally pervasive ideas.

What's more, the potential of film to serve as a purveyor of dangerous ideas has hardly gone unrecognized. As with other forms of popular media such as literature or video games, controversial subject matter in film has regularly met with accusations of having a corrupting influence on those who engage with it. The various attempts and practices of censorship throughout film's history have sought to directly address the issue. The early days of Hollywood saw the shadow of the Motion Picture Production Code looming over and weighing in on the content of films and their moral implications. Echoing America's long tradition of Puritan moral values, anything from depictions of extramarital sex to kisses in excess of eight seconds[37] was grounds for reprimand. In the case of early Soviet cinema, the always vague notion of national security was posited as

[37] A. Dillon-Malone, *Censoring Hollywood: Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), 18.

the justification for censorship. Soviet filmmakers operated under the constant vigil of the Chief Directorate for Literary and Publishing Affairs (the Glavlit), an arm of the Narkompros in constant search of film content which "constituted a secret and [was] not appropriate for promulgation in order to preserve the political and economic interests of the USSR."[38] While the storied international history of censorship in film shows varied and fluid determinations of what constitutes acceptable versus unacceptable content, it also shows a persistent subscription to the idea that there are at least some things which are best not seen.

The actual validation for such concerns about film seems to commonly accompany a timely need for a socio-institutional scapegoat. In saying this, I do not at all intend to discount the contribution of film, or any other popular media form, to the shaping of thoughts and/or behavior. I seek merely to identify much of the "proof" against filmic affronts to decency, wholesomeness, public well-being and the likes as reactionary rather than preemptive. In the now all too common case of mass shootings in the United States, it has hardly been atypical to see news outlets citing the killer's penchant towards particularly violent movies in their search for the answer to the resounding question of "Why?" While it is unfortunate that it so often seems that the only time film's powers of persuasion become a part of the public consciousness is when a movie is perceived as wreaking havoc on the moral fabric or stability of society, such intermittent displays of indignation reveal an unusual appreciation of film's ideological, psychological, and behavioral influence on its viewers. However, peacetime attitudes

[38] Daniël Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel, eds., *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship Around the World*, Global Cinema Series (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 99.

towards appreciation of narrative film's very real effects can take the more blasé stance of dismissal due to its very fictitiousness.

When prodded to devote additional thought or consideration to a film beyond the window of its allotted running time, "It's just a movie" tends to be the safe haven retreat of the casual film viewer who desires nothing more than to be entertained for a few hours. Happy to leave the movie at the theater, any suggestion that the realm of escapism be allowed to encroach upon reality is met with dismissive resistance. It is perhaps the most common defense against any suggestion that films can have both profound meanings and repercussions. However, it is important to recognize that this reductive statement about the rhetorical impact of film specifically does not imply a fundamental unwillingness or inability to recognize deeper meaning, purpose, or effect elsewhere. Embedded within the "just a movie" statement is an implicit comparison between "just" movies, and something that is more than that. In summarizing Saussure's groundbreaking contributions to linguistics, Peter Brunette and David Willis write that Saussure shows "that nothing in language is meaningful in and of itself, but only as it *differs* from other elements within the system."[39] This powerful formulation of how meaning arises in language has since been used to suggest grander notions of meaning and identity in general, not as inherent traits reflective of what something is, but instead derived from the myriad relationships of what something is not. The "just a movie" claim, in this case, reduces the potential implications of the filmic medium based not upon any intrinsic insignificance of film, but upon its perceived deficiency relative to some richer, more meaningful, or more "important" point of comparison. In other words, the very use of the

[39] Peter Brunette, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6.

phrase "*just* a movie" implies that the user harbors some answer to the retort, "as opposed to what?"

And while any number of appeals to "higher" narrative forms (e.g. literature, theater, etc.) more readily accepted as vessels of meaning might be offered in response, ultimately, it is film's fictitiousness when compared to the inescapable truth of reality which stands as grounds for its dismissal. Interestingly, the "just a movie" reminder of the filmic illusion gains much of its vitality from film's verisimilitude. Like waking from a nightmare you were so certain was real, it is the relief of the realization that it was "all just a dream" which allows for disengagement. Christian Metz claims that it is the unprecedented sensory involvement of film fooling our senses into registering sights and sounds as we would experience them in the world without their actual presence which makes the cinematic illusion so uncanny. This capacity to offer such an unprecedented vicarious sense of reality makes the "it's not real" claim so powerful with film in comparison to the narrative media forms which preceded it (literature, painting, photography, etc). As Metz says, "the cinema is more *perceptual*, if the phrase is allowable, than many other means of expression; it mobilizes a larger number of the axes of perception."[40] The reading of a book requires one to construct sights and sounds in the mind based on interpretation of the words on a page. It is not offering an experience of reality close enough to the genuine article for the distinction to hold significant rhetorical clout. The imaginary world of a literary narrative does not possess the capacity for tangible sensory engagement like a film does, and therefore, does not really have the ability to trick the senses. A book requires the reader to mentally construct a world, not to perceive one. The fact that it is not real, per se, is too obvious to be worth noting and

[40] Christian Metz, *Film Theory and Criticism*, 820.

therefore stands as a readily accepted vehicle for alternative, non-mimetic purposes (e.g. allegory, expression, etc.). Literature as a media form in which formalized active interpretation (in the form of reading) is at the forefront of the consumption process – as opposed to what is perceived as more passive perception with film – readily invites the search for and assigning of meaning. It is assumed as a nesting ground of ideas and concepts, not just spectacles or emotional stimuli. Metz goes on to say that the cinema:

> …is also 'less perceptual' than others once the status of these perceptions is envisaged rather than their number or diversity; for its perceptions are all in a sense 'false'…The unique position of the cinema lies in this dual character of its signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree, and from the very outset. More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present.[41]

The knowledge that what we are watching is not real is not merely an excuse to conserve the taxing mental energies of actually thinking about what we are watching, but essential to the immersive experience of film spectatorship. It cannot be treated as grounds for disengaging with the functions of the narrative film as it is central to how the spectator engages with those functions in the first place.

With *Cabin,* therefore, we see a film that stages its critique based on self-awareness. It challenges its own genre classifications, its narrative and aesthetic structures, and the sensibilities of its filmmakers and presumed spectators. In a sense, *Cabin's* critique mirrors its apocalyptic ending in that it casts sweeping judgment on itself. All associates in its ethical transgressions, be they people or practices, fall under its critical gaze. Chapter 2 will engage with the film directly to further unpack specific narrative examples of *Cabin's* all-consuming critique.

---

[41] Ibid., 821.

The Cabin: Close Reading of the Film

The Cabin in the Woods is simultaneously a benefactor and a victim of an increasingly sophisticated horror film viewership. After over three years of waiting to make its debut,[1] *The Cabin in the Woods* opened on April 13, 2012 to wide release in North America.[2] The critical response was positive. Aggregate review websites rottentomatoes.com (RT) and metacritic.com register a 92% Tomatometer score and a 72/100 Metascore from a combined total of over 200 professional reviews.[3] A major point of separation between the positive reception and the more negative stances is the degree to which spectators feel they can comfortably classify the film. Despite the promotional poster's tagline, "You think you know the story," warning prospective viewers against harboring presumptions, the film catches some viewers unpleasantly off-guard. Common criticisms against the film, even amidst glowingly positive reviews, include the insistence that it simply is not scary, the seemingly "hodge-podge" nature of its self-reflexive narrative, and even the self-congratulatory showiness of Whedon's and

[1] Brendan Bettinger, "Lionsgate Schedules THE CABIN IN THE WOODS for April 13, 2012," Collider, http://collider.com/the-cabin-in-the-woods-release-date/103740/ (accessed February 20, 2015). The film was originally intended to be released in 2009 but was indefinitely delayed due to MGM's financial woes at the time. Lionsgate rescued it from development purgatory by acquiring distribution rights to the film.

[2] IMDb, "The Cabin in the Woods," http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1259521/ (accessed February 20, 2015).

[3] Rotten Tomatoes, "The Cabin in the Woods," http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_cabin_in_the_woods/ (accessed February 20, 2015); Metacritic, "The Cabin in the Woods," http://www.metacritic.com/movie/the-cabin-in-the-woods (accessed February 20, 2015).

Goddard's knowledge of the horror genre.[4] For many who not only expect, but demand a straightforward horror film, *The Cabin in the Woods* comes up disappointingly short.

The general consensus, however, reflects an audience that is far more open to the film's nontraditional structures. The film has been praised for its inventive narrative which both explains and mockingly acknowledges the contrivance of many of the horror genre's more outlandish staples.[5] With contemporary horror parodies like the *Scream* (1996) and *Scary Movie* (2000) franchises having acclimated audiences to reflexive horror film narratives,[6] and the often self-referential connectivity of the social networking age training a generation in the meta capacities of media, it seems that most viewers feel they can comfortably recognize what *The Cabin in the Woods* is selling. Any perceived lack of scares is forgiven by the understanding – usually reached fairly quickly – that the film's larger aim is to provoke. The deviation from an uncomplicated killing spree plotline is dismissed by the intrigue of deciphering the film's mystery and lore. The RT consensus summary describes the film as "an astonishing meta-feat, capable of being

---

[4] See, for example, David Rooney, "The Cabin in the Woods: Film Review," The Hollywood Reporter, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movie/cabin-woods/review/298129 (accessed February 21, 2015); Kyle Smith, "Just 'Woods' Schlock," New York Post, http://nypost.com/2012/04/13/just-woods-schlock/ (accessed February, 21, 2015); and William Bibbiani, "Second Opinion: The Cabin in the Woods," Crave Online, http://www.craveonline.com/film/reviews/186571-second-opinion-the-cabin-in-the-woods (accessed, February 21, 2015).

[5] See, for example, Stephen Witty, "A jock, a nerd and a virgin walk into a 'Cabin in the Woods'…," NJ, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/movies/index.ssf/2012/04/the_cabin_in_the_woods_review.html (accessed February 21, 2015); and Tom Charity, "Review: 'Cabin in the Woods' is Sheer Horror Heaven," CNN, http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/13/showbiz/movies/cabin-in-the-woods-review/index.html (accessed February 21, 2015).

[6] The film is frequently put in dialogue with these two franchises in somewhat reductive attempts at locating an illustrative point of comparison. See Smith, "Just 'Woods' Schlock," and Witty, "A jock, a nerd…" for examples.

funny, strange, and scary – frequently all at the same time."[7] It is clear that audiences and critics are widely perceptive of its ingenious play on the tropes of the genre. However, there is a tendency to see it as little more than a clever and funny deconstruction of horror film archetypes. The film seems to be generally regarded as an inspired example of a now somewhat uninspired ambition: deft enough in execution to intrigue, but essentially falling under the convenient umbrella of deconstructive horror-comedy. L. Andrew Cooper notes in *Slayage* the high expectations leading up to *Cabin's* release that the film offer a fresh take on the horror genre. "To deliver the promise of the Whedon brand – the promise the advertising proliferated for years – the twist, reversals, and story had to deliver far more than self-conscious style for its own no-longer-novel deconstructive stake."[8] Reflexivity is now an all too recognizable narrative maneuver for the well-read horror film spectator and for members of the cult of Whedon. It makes associative readings of the film the primary, and in many cases, the sole avenue for interpretation. In other words, the very same familiarity with horror-comedy hybrids and metatextual reflexivity that makes *Cabin* readily accessible also makes it all too easy to ignore anything else the film might be doing.

However, peppered among those who limit their appreciation of the film to its extended punch line about the horror film genre are those who locate some less than amusing assertions about the roles of fan and filmmaker in the culture of horror cinema. Laura Kern aptly notes that, like *Funny Games* before it, *The Cabin in the Woods* "explores why we – sicko viewers – take pleasure in the suffering of others. Give the

[7] Rotten Tomatoes, "The Cabin in the Woods."

[8] L. Andrew Cooper, "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

audience what they want – and then some. And as much as we think we may be in on it, the joke is always still on us."[9] What is revealed in Kern's assessment of the film is an awareness of its unsettling intersection of horror and comedy. Rather than fixating on how *Cabin* is "not scary enough" to be pure horror or how it takes itself too seriously to be pure spoof, Kern welcomes the cumulative effect of putting the two together. She sees the interplay of comedy and horror as reflexively disparate; a mixture of complementary opposites that begs the question "If there is something horrific about this, then what are you laughing at?" She is not alone in her efforts to illustrate this larger function of the film. Whether in attempts to "enlighten" the ignorant masses to *Cabin's* thematic brilliance in particular,[10] or simply to show that even the most seemingly unassuming films can warrant serious discussion,[11] *Cabin* has effectively garnered a vocal contingent of followers who have praised the film as a prime critique of the horror film audience. These readings of the film continue to build momentum in broadening the collective understanding of *The Cabin in the Woods*.

In this chapter, I will conduct a reading of the film that outlines the moments of reflexive critique. In particular, I will focus on the scenes that inform the apocalyptic cleansing of humanity chosen by Marty and Dana at the film's conclusion. Contrary to statements like those of *The Dissolve's* Tasha Robinson who believes that "the whole film is metaphorical, and it ends the way it does not to make a big statement about

---

[9] Laura Kern, "Short Takes: The Cabin in the Woods," Film Comment, http://www.filmcomment.com/article/short-takes-the-cabin-in-the-woods (accessed February 20, 2015).

[10] Jamie Frevele, "People Can't Figure Out Why *The Cabin in the Woods* Is So Awesome, So Here Are A Few Solid Reasons For You [Spoilers]," http://www.themarysue.com/why-cabin-in-the-woods-is-awesome/ (accessed February 21, 2015).

[11] Genevieve Koski et al., The Dissolve.

society, but for drama and excitement,"[12] I believe the ending to be the very locus of the film's potential meanings. To dismiss it as a mere shock value plot device is to negate the narrative path that leads to it, and to fail to appreciate the full ideological repercussions inherent to an apocalypse. This latter point will be the focus of the third and final chapter of this thesis.

Plot Overview

The basic setup for *The Cabin in the Woods* is typical horror fare. As the title suggests, five teenage friends travel to a log cabin in the woods in hopes of enjoying a long weekend of fun and debauchery: Dana, "the virgin," the female lead who has recently ended a dicey affair with her professor and is hardly in the mood to take part in the weekend's festivities; Jules, "the whore," Dana's best friend whose eagerness to get the party started and lift Dana out of the doldrums fuels her persistent disregard of Dana's protestations against accompanying the group; Curt, "the athlete," star football player and Jules' boyfriend whose cousin owns the cabin; Holden, "the scholar," a teammate of Curt's that has been invited by Curt and Jules in hopes of pairing him up with Dana; and Marty, "the fool," the stoner burnout and comic relief.

One need possess only a bare minimum of familiarity with horror films to deduce that their plans of a sun-soaked weekend of fun will go awry in falling victim to whatever monster, psychotic killer, or supernatural horror picks them as its prey. But the film is nowhere near as formulaic as this basic premise suggests. There are greater forces lurking beneath the surface, both literally and figuratively, than mere genre convention.

[12] Ibid.

Unbeknownst to the group, they have been chosen by an unnamed secret organization to participate in an ancient ritual: a sacrifice to the elder gods of the earth. To sate the bloodlust of the gods and ensure their continued slumber deep beneath the surface of the earth, The Organization offers up the lives of unwilling participants in a performed display of terror and death. From a control room in an underground facility, the principal architects of the ritual, Gary Sitterson and Steve Hadley, direct the events unfolding above ground. Occupying the room with Hadley and Sitterson are Truman, a security officer on his first day on the job, and Lin, the head of the Chemistry Department.

Offering a clever meta explanation for many of the more tired clichés of the genre, the underground facilitators pull the strings and direct every aspect of the action on the surface (e.g. closing off the only roadway out of the woods, pumping psychotropic gases into the environment to slow the teens' cognition and inhibit their judgment, etc.) to guarantee the deaths of the sacrifices. Whatever powers of persuasion or methods of manipulation are necessary to get the job done are permissible, but they must stop short of directly killing the sacrifice. The ritual is a punishment, and its success is contingent upon the teens' willing participation in the various transgressions that are deemed punishable by death. From a basement full of relics that if tampered with can summon any number of potential horrors, the teens read a diary which awakens the long dead but now zombified Buckner family. The Buckners wreak havoc on the group ultimately killing all except for Dana and Marty, the two members that have been the most acutely aware that something is amiss about the whole situation, and who have grown increasingly suspicious that there are shadow forces actively working to ensure that they don't make it out of the woods alive. Dana's virginal Final Girl status makes her survival

an acceptable outcome of the ritual; so long as she is the sole survivor and she has suffered in the fight for her life, the ritual can still be deemed a success.

Marty's reappearance at the beginning of the third act after having been presumed dead, however, jeopardizes the success of the ritual and the fate of humanity in turn. Turning the tables on their oppressors, Marty and Dana manage to confirm their suspicions that there is indeed a plot against them, and make their way into The Facility where both The Organization and the monsters they control reside. Together, they unleash the entire vault of horrors on The Organization giving them a taste of their own medicine, and killing Hadley and Sitterson in the process.

In the final scene of the film, Marty and Dana arrive at the innermost part of the facility, an ancient sacrificial chamber. There they meet the facility's Director, played by Sigourney Weaver, who explains the origins, details, and high stakes of the ritual. She begs Dana to complete the ritual by killing Marty before it is too late, briefly swaying Dana's loyalties to Marty and inciting a struggle. The Director is killed in the altercation and Dana and Marty finally sit back in a moment of reprieve to take in the situation. Dana apologizes to Marty for briefly considering killing him and the two conclude that if this is what it takes for humanity to survive then it is not worth saving. Resigning themselves and the rest of the world to their fate, the two smile as the hand of one of The Ancients bursts forth from underground and overtakes the screen, thus ending the film and signaling the end of the world.

Reflexive Groundwork

From the very beginning, *The Cabin in the Woods* is quick to let anyone under the impression that they are in for "just another horror movie" know that their presuppositions are misguided. The brief opening credit sequence – foreshadowing the film's ultimate plot reveal by depicting ancient paintings of ritual sacrifices doused in dripping blood – sets the macabre tone one might expect of a horror film. However, before any sense of dark foreboding can effectively take hold in preparing the viewer for the horrors to come, the credits cease and the sequence is interrupted. A smash cut takes us to the far more placid image of Sitterson and Hadley standing around an office water cooler discussing, of all things, Hadley's apprehensions about his wife's pregnancy and the proper procedure for baby-proofing a house. The light workspace banter is almost startlingly casual. It is a conversation between two colleagues finding a spare moment in their busy schedules to make small talk about their personal lives, but it is also disarmingly intimate in its subject matter. Hadley's obvious comfort with discussing his prenatal planning concerns is matched by Sitterson's blasé, but courteous attitude towards his gripes. It is clear that the conversation is not some awkward social episode in which an overly familiar stranger has cornered a polite victim into listening to the uncomfortably forthright details of their personal affairs. Hadley and Sitterson are close friends, and it is not difficult to imagine them having held many similar such conversations in the past. This point is confirmed as they make their way through the hallways of The Facility where the conversation maintains its jovial tone even as they are informed of the ritual's failure by their counterparts at The Organization's Stockholm

branch. Confident that they will succeed where Stockholm has failed, they resume their discussion of personal matters as Hadley invites Sitterson over to his house in hopes of enlisting a helping hand in his baby-proofing efforts. Sitterson pretends not to hear Hadley's invitation in hopes of dodging this inconvenient social responsibility, which Hadley quickly calls him on. Thankfully for Sitterson, the scene is cut short by a jarring freeze frame and the sudden appearance of the film's title in gigantic blood-soaked typeface, all accompanied by a cacophony of non-diegetic screams of terror.

The opening scene simultaneously challenges genre conventions and the expectations the film itself induces within the viewer. The pervasive sense of discord which marks the scene is not so much between the opening of *The Cabin in the Woods* and those of other horror films, but between what is presently on-screen and what directly preceded it. How did we get from bloody paintings of ritual sacrifices to two men loafing around the office? Why the classic horror aesthetic of the title card or the overbearing scream sound effect when the casual walk-and-talk of Sitterson and Hadley hardly seems to have earned such a dreadful crescendo? It is a prime example of the film in a somewhat schizophrenic dialogue with itself, rather than with the tradition from which it stems. Even if the viewer does not harbor any preconditioned notions of how a horror film is "supposed" to begin, the abrupt tonal and aesthetic shifts of the scene remain jarring. If, in fact, one does assume that the film will open by whetting the audience's thirst for blood or by setting the appropriate mood for the horrors to come, the playful defiance of these expectations is both shocking and intriguing. Either way, the effect is disorienting. Goddard comments in reference to this scene that he wanted the spectator to

think "Uh, did I walk into the wrong movie?"[13] If the combination of light-hearted comedy with the seemingly mundane events of the scene begs such a question, the overt horror film stylizations of the credit sequence and the title card assure the spectator that they are watching the correct movie. However, it is the palpable clashing of these opposing sensibilities that begs far more important questions as to the function of such discord. Is it "random"? Yes. Is it supposed to be that way? Double yes. The opening is a primer for the film's larger purpose of reflexive critique. It is not yet pointing a finger at the spectator or the horror genre, but its clear divergence from the norms of both genre and narrative convention serve to prompt inquiry into whether or not the film is in possession of some ulterior motive. The opening scene of *The Cabin in the Woods* vehemently declares that the film does not intend to adhere to any preconceived notions of what it is "supposed" to be doing in order to prompt the spectator to think critically about what it is actually doing. It is the cornerstone upon which the reception and the effectiveness of the film's own critique rests.

Fans, Fan-Filmmakers, and Film

It is commonly suggested that The Ancients are a metaphor for the consumer/theater audience.[14] The rationale is hardly unsound; like the devout horror spectator, they must be appeased by theatrical displays of violence. I, however, feel that

[13] Drew Goddard, *The Cabin in the Woods*, DVD commentary.

[14] See, for example, Justin Mikkelsen, "The Cabin in the Woods Analysis: The Most Important Horror Film in Years," What Culture, http://whatculture.com/film/the-cabin-in-the-woods-analysis-the-most-important-horror-film-in-years.php (accessed 04/02/15); and Mike Starr, "Whedon's Great Glass Elevator: Space, Liminality, and Intertext in 'Cabin in the Woods," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association.*

as obvious and well-substantiated as this analogy may be, it is too imprecise. What it lacks is an appreciation for the range of behaviors and motivations embodied in complicit spectatorship. The Ancients exist in the film as an amorphous shadow force. They lurk unseen beneath the surface of the Earth and in the recesses of the imagination. To be truly analogous to the highly visible and intimately familiar theater audience, The Ancients would need to be far more representative of the gamut of spectatorship practices that *Cabin* critiques. I would argue instead that The Ancients are a manifestation of that unintelligible element of the human condition – call it "bloodlust," "evil," "the darkness in the hearts of man" – that the film's apocalyptic judgment presumes to have effectively exorcized and put on display. The limits of envisioning this unknowable quotient of human nature will be explored in the third and final chapter.

Far more representative of the manner in which fans engage with and respond to the practices of horror cinema is the behavior of The Facility's employees. Their shifting enjoyment, indifference, and remorse towards the tragedies that befall their victims is far more synchronous with the theater audience's range of emotions than the unseen rumblings of The Ancients. As both the creators of the ritual horror spectacle and one of its key spectator demographics (the other being The Ancients) the employees of The Facility are ideally positioned to illustrate the folly of both producing horror cinema and consuming it in inordinate quantities.

This dual complicity of The Facility's employees may be shared, but the film seems to suggest that it exists in varying degrees. Separating their positions on the spectrum of guilt seems to be the level of remorse they show for their unwitting victims, itself a function of the length of their tenure in the employment of The Organization. The

relaxed jovial banter of Hadley and Sitterson is a clear product of their vast experience in performing their duties, and the comfort level with their environment that has resulted from it. This is suggested in the opening scene when their walk-and-talk is interrupted by Lin's revelation that the Stockholm branch has failed to successfully complete the ritual. Assuring her that they will succeed where Stockholm failed, Hadley reminds Lin that they "haven't had a glitch since '98," and mockingly points out that that particular incident was the fault of Lin's department.

The breadth of Hadley's and Sitterson's experience is further affirmed in the assuredness and skill with which they complete their work. When Curt breaks slasher victim protocol and makes the wise suggestion that the group stick together, Hadley is momentarily flustered that the ritual will be derailed. After all, intelligent thought on the part of the victims is a character trait that neither the tropes of the teen slasher film, nor the contrivances of the ritual can withstand. Sitterson calmly reassures Hadley by telling him "Watch the master work," and proceeds to pump a new psychotropic gas into the environment that quickly dumbs Curt back down to "Let's split up" levels. What's more, they possess a mastery of the ritual's working parts beyond their own immediate duties. When Sitterson discovers that the escape route out of the woods has been left open due to a pyrotechnics glitch, he expertly averts a crisis by fixing the wiring error in the Demolition Department single-handedly.

The Facility is the site of production (a studio) for the horror spectacle of the ritual. The Facility's various department can be read as proxies for the various stages of production (e.g. Demolition = SFX). And overseeing it all are Hadley and Sitterson, both managing the production and making creative decisions (Director/Producer,

Goddard/Whedon).[15] They are the seasoned veterans not only of the production process, but of the viewing of their handiwork as well. The casual air of their "around the water cooler" conversation does not stop there, but continues into the control room and through the motions of their terrible purpose. They are, quite simply, comfortable in the environment with all that The Facility does. They know and accept its purpose, they understand its workings, they know their place within those workings, and most importantly, they know the product they are selling; in this case, classic horror cinema trumped up as an elaborate ritual sacrifice. They, along with the rest of the more established employees, are the embodiment of the desensitized horror fan and filmmaker.

Hadley's and Sitterson's denial of responsibility in the suffering of their victims is of increased importance within this context. For all their comfort with dealing in death on a daily basis, they never confront it directly. As they casually remind Truman, they have never killed anyone; "If [the sacrifices] don't transgress, they can't be punished." Their avoidance of culpability and their indifference to suffering they claim to have no stake in is further reinforced by the vicarious nature of their exposure to their victims. As with the film audience, their view of violent spectacle is mediated through technology. Hadley and Sitterson sit in a control room surrounded by a vast array of monitors capturing the above ground events from all angles. Their focus on Dana and friends is both unyielding and wandering. Like a 24 hour news cycle, there is always something to see, but with constantly shifting focal points to choose from. Ironically, it is a desensitization simultaneously born out of both overexposure and underexposure; the frenzied

[15] Strangely, I have been unable to find any analyses of *Cabin* that draw this comparison. Given what I would call the patently obvious link between the two showrunning duos, I expected it to be a far more commonly cited metaphor. Instead, Hadley and Sitterson are more often than not swept under the rug of "filmmaker," "director," or "corporate media industry.

abundance of mediated images both inures via consistency, and trains the powers of easy disengagement via variety.

In contrast, Truman, the greenhorn on his first day of the job, is taken aback by much of the disturbing routine of his new workplace. This is frequently shown by juxtaposing his reserved professionalism with the casual enjoyment his colleagues derive from their work. If we look at the whiteboard office pool scene we can see the pedantic obsession with details that pays off in subcultural capital within horror film fandom. In the scene, the employees of The Facility place monetary bets on what creature the teens will summon as the instrument of their own destruction. The various potential monsters are depicted on a small office white board including everything from the run-of-the-mill vampire or werewolf to an "angry molesting tree" (a reference to Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* [1981]) and "the reanimated" (a reference to *The Re-Animator* [1985]). When The Buckners are summoned as a result of Dana reading little Patience Buckner's diary, the maintenance department rejoices as the victors of the office pool. But when a disappointed office worker complains to Sitterson that she had picked "zombie" too, he regretfully points out to her that the Buckners are, technically, an example of a "zombie redneck torture family; an entirely different subspecies." The scene shows not only the breadth of horror's imagined forms of the repressed, often to the point of blending or repackaging established tropes, but of the horror fan's obsessive respect for the differences. It is not difficult to imagine a room of seasoned horror fans playing out this very "What monster is it going to be routine?" as an opportunity to reinsert novelty into the viewing of a genre which they can now all but predict, and to gain subcultural capital

by boasting superior skills of spectator prescience. The method of murder is reduced to nothing more than a guessing game.

The group dynamic plays out once again in perhaps the film's most overt showing of indifference to suffering, a scene in which an office celebration is held amidst Dana being attacked on widescreen monitors in the background. Thinking that they have successfully completed the ritual and effectively saved the world, the scene begins with Hadley and Sitterson sitting back to take in the gravity of a job well done. Watching Dana, presumably the lone survivor and Final Girl of the ritual, pull herself onto a dock after her RV's nosedive into a lake, Hadley seems to be on the verge of a true showing of sympathy as he watches Dana, saying that "It's strange, but I'm actually rooting for this girl," only to dismiss the thought mid-sentence when his employees arrive with tequila. The co-workers celebrate with nary a mind to Dana's death unfolding live on the big screen. Truman alone stands in quiet observation silently taking in the absurdity of the scene.

Disturbing as it is, it is also one of the funniest moments of the film: Hadley's heartfelt showing of remorse being tossed aside for overzealous chants of "Tequila is my lady!"; the casual, unaffected banter amongst office workers including unsuccessful attempts at hitting on colleagues and genuine concern as to whether they are receiving overtime for attending the bash. Neither the audience nor the employees of The Facility are laughing at Dana's suffering, mind you. In fact, the latter are almost wholly – with the sole exception of Truman – unaware of it. Instead, it is this very indifference that functions as the scene's source of humor. Returning once more to incongruity, the scene attains a second dimension of humor through its insertion into a scenario in which it

seems grossly inappropriate. That the employees pay no mind to the scene of death unfolding in the very room they are standing registers as obviously shameful, until the spectator realizes that, against their better judgment, they are laughing along. They have been caught in the film's reflexive trappings of making the spectator complicit in the indifference they see the office employees perpetrating.

In the climactic first killing scene, Curt and Jules, heavily under the influence of psychotropic drugs and a pheromone mist, manage to find themselves a private spot in the woods to act on their increasingly uncontrollable sexual desires. Sitterson and Hadley, as well as a large group of aroused male colleagues, are counting on this sexual liaison taking place. When Jules, uncomfortable with the temperature, refuses to remove her blouse, the male onlookers in The Facility express collective disappointment. Hadley and Sitterson dismiss the extraneous personnel from the control room and proceed to make things more comfortable for Jules by raising the temperature above ground and directing romantic moonlight towards an accommodating enclave amongst the trees. Now thoroughly in the mood, Jules removes her top and reveals her breasts, much to the satisfaction of Hadley and Sitterson. When Truman, uncomfortable with his voyeuristic participation, asks why it is so important that the men actually see Jules in the nude, Hadley stringently reminds him that they "are not the only ones watching."

Jules and Curt get further lost in their passion and the heat of the moment, only to be interrupted by the sudden and horrific arrival of the Buckners. In a disturbingly brutal display, the Buckners attack the two lovers, ultimately beheading Jules and seriously injuring Curt. Hadley and Sitterson watch the scene with distant stares, seemingly unaffected by the carnage unfolding before them, as Truman averts his eyes. Together,

Hadley and Sitterson say a prayer to the gods of the ritual offering up Jules as a sacrifice and humbling themselves in fear of the ancient power they seek to appease with blood.

It is a charged scene, to say the least, but the implications are clear. Hadley and Sitterson maintain detachment from the horror of Jules' death, while still going through the trained motions of offering her up regretfully. Truman's reaction, on the other hand, is less practiced. He is uncomfortable bearing witness to *Cabin's* equivalent of the standard teen slasher flick "unnecessary sex" scene. And his recoiling in horror at Jules' death stands in stark contrast to the fixed stares of Hadley and Sitterson, despite it being stated that his position as head of security is bolstered by a military background. One would think that if anyone should be able to stare listlessly at violence it should be him. Instead, it is the two men who have made a career of directing death through the safe distance of a tiny control room full of monitors. The statement about the mediated depiction of violence is candid: the distancing of spectator and spectacle perpetuates a dangerous disavowal of the realities of suffering, and no one is more desensitized, in this case, than Hadley and Sitterson, the most seasoned spectators of the bunch.

Mixed Moralities

And in this regard the "puppeteers" stand in stark contrast to the character of their victims. When Holden uncovers a one-way mirror in his bedroom offering him a free peep show at Dana undressing in the next room over, he only briefly entertains the notion of reveling in such a grand voyeuristic opportunity. He stops her before he sees too much and lets her know that she is being watched. What little hesitation he does show before

alerting her to his assaulting male gaze is also signaled as a product of a heartfelt emotional attraction to her and not just physical lust. Holden's most visible sign of enjoyment at watching Dana is a close-up smile when she stands close to the mirror doing nothing in particular, a clear suggestion of his liking her just the way she is (i.e. with clothes on). Her disrobing flusters him more than it arouses him. Dana returns the favor by averting her gaze when she later finds herself on the opposite side of the mirror staring at Holden undress. Displaying a far greater consideration for the privacy of others than their tormentors, the teens serve as a valuable foil for the invasiveness of The Organization's piercing gaze.

But in many respects, the line between the morality of the members of The Organization and their victims is unclear. The film, despite what I will argue in chapter 3 as a clear showing of favoritism for the rationale of Marty and Dana, attempts to deny an easy classification of its characters as "good" or "bad." Truman, for all of his uneasiness at actually seeing the fruits of The Organization's labors in action, still willingly decided to serve its cause. Hadley, for all of the indifference he shows to the suffering of his sacrificial victims, displays an endearing concern for the protection of his unborn child. Most importantly, the teenage sacrifices eventually show themselves to be capable of the very same willingness to harm others out of self-interest with minimal qualms that initially seems to separate them from their heartless manipulators in The Facility. After rescuing Holden from the clutches of Matthew Buckners' bear trap, Dana finds herself with the rare opportunity to turn the tables on her attacker. Capitalizing on his moment of incapacitation as he gets stuck in the cellar door, Dana jams a crowbar through his skull while triumphantly taunting "You like pain?! How's that work for you?!!" While Dana is

acting in self-defense, her comment implies a capacity to, if not directly enjoy inflicting pain, find pleasure in vengeance. She consciously responds to violence with violence and seems to find something satisfactory, if not outright righteous, about subjecting her tormentor to the very pain he intended upon her.

Marty, on the other hand, sees a far greater enemy than the immediate threat of the Buckners or even The Organization. In vocalizing his approval for the teens' planned weekend retreat from the world, Marty expresses concern for the trappings of society's imposed sense of order. When Jules lovingly mocks Marty's conspiracy theory rant saying "Is society crumbling, Marty?" he responds with "No. Society is binding. It's filling in the cracks with concrete. Everything is filed or recorded or blogged. Chips in our kid's heads so they won't get lost? Society needs to crumble. We're all just too chickenshit to let it." Marty's words harbor an assured assertion of society's (and humanity's) willingness to use any and all means to sustain itself. He attacks what he sees as a media saturated and technology-driven culture that upholds its industrialized stability even at the cost of the rights of its constituent members. What's more, Marty echoes Thomas Ligotti in denouncing a human egoism that makes his proposed solution of self-annihilation all but impossible. While Jules and the rest of the group dismiss Marty's statement as the rambling pseudo-philosophical musings of a pothead, a close-up of Dana wearing an expression of consternation suggests that she sees merit in Marty's words.

And true to Marty's promise that "You will come to see things my way," the eventual revelation of The Organization's plans to sacrifice them for the sake of mankind's survival affirms his astute powers of prescience. Society, humanity, the world, has chosen itself over them and ignored their right to have any say in the matter. And

with Marty's and Dana's vengeful/critical streaks having been put fully on display, it becomes difficult to read their ultimate decision not to serve as martyr's for humanity's continued survival as merely a non-participatory refusal. Instead, it gains a tinge of retribution. Just as the spectator, be they in The Facility's control room or in the theater audience, cannot claim non-complicity in their "just watching," Marty and Dana cannot deny active and ethically motivated participation in the world's destruction. Even upon having the ritual's apocalyptic stakes outlined for him by the Director, Marty remains unshaken in his belief that "Maybe that's the way it should be. If you've got to kill all of my friends to survive, maybe it's time for a change." Dana, however, lacks Marty's principled resolve and is temporarily swayed by the Director's words. She holds a gun to Marty in serious consideration of killing him to complete the ritual and save the world. Shocked and disappointed by her betrayal, Marty deliberately fails to warn Dana about the impending attack from the werewolf he sees creeping up behind her. When the dust settles from the ensuing struggle that leaves the Director dead and the werewolf running for its life, Marty and Dana sit sobered and ashamed by the way they turned on one another. She apologizes for nearly shooting him and he likewise apologizes for "letting [her] get attacked by a werewolf and ending the world." But Dana requires no apology. As she says, "No, you were right. Humanity…it's time to give someone else a chance." The confrontation with her own willingness to sacrifice Marty for the sake of the world has shattered any illusions of occupying a moral high ground that would differentiate her from The Organization. Now painfully aware of the common capacity for utilitarian cruelty between her and her tormentors, Dana comfortably declares humanity unworthy of its existence. Her determining judgment is predicated on having lost the ability to view

herself as an exception to any generalizing statements about an inherent evil within the human condition. Similarly, Marty is forced to acknowledge his momentary abandonment of his friend and his principles in giving in to a baser urge to punish Dana for her betrayal.

Their decision to let humanity die is many things: it is punishment for a world that turned its back on them, and self-flagellation for turning their backs on one another; it is an expression of agency against the controlling influence of a system that marginalized them, and an acknowledgement of their non-exemption from the tendency to impose one's will on another. In many ways, The Organization and Marty and Dana are no different, thus justifying the film's negative evaluations about an inherent human nature. The difference lies in the fact that Marty and Dana are conscientious of these shared moral failings, and are therefore, willing and able to frame humanity from a perspective that puts the merits of its existence into question. The Organization, on the other hand, maintains the position of fancying itself as a righteous martyr bloodying its hands and sullying its conscience in performing the thankless duty of appeasing The Ancients for the sake of humanity's survival. It has allayed serious questioning of the means by which humanity survives by similarly ignoring the question of whether or not it should.

Cabin is full of moments such as these where the unethical actions of the on-screen characters serve as a mirror for the audience. To catalog all of them and their ethical resonance would be a thesis all to itself. I have touched on these points lightly to lead into the main discussion of this thesis which is how this kind of critique reflects and constructs conceptions of humanity at large, the subject of the third and final chapter.

The Sanctuary: Judgment and Humanity

Much to my own disappointment, fan analyses of *The Cabin in the Woods* that highlight its apocalyptic ending are exceedingly rare. I must remind myself that despite the almost inherently obtrusive nature of complete human extinction as a plot resolution, it is not surprising that it goes somewhat neglected in discourse surrounding *Cabin*. Its prominence in the narrative is deceptively underplayed as the ritual's apocalyptic stakes are not revealed until the final minutes of the film. If the spectator is not attuned to the nihilistic foreshadowing of Marty's philosophical musings, the apocalyptic ending can seem simply tacked on. As previously noted in Tasha Robinson's remark that, "The whole film is metaphorical, and it ends the way it does not to make a big statement about society, but for drama and excitement," the ending is occasionally treated as a "food for thought" open narrative thread, rather than a declarative closing remark.[1]

Thankfully, scholarly interpretation of the film has been far keener on the significance of the ending. Given the polysemous nature of apocalyptic narratives, *Cabin* is obviously fertile ground for any film scholar. The special *Cabin* edition of *Slayage* offers a prime example of the opportunities for reading the apocalyptic ending, however, it is also illustrative of the folly of attempting to reduce the irreducible.

This chapter argues that the apocalyptic ending of *The Cabin in the Woods*, while easily subject to the same metaphorical allegorizing that describes most interpretations of the film, is better taken as literally as possible. Though other narrative elements of the film operate as stand-ins for different players and processes within the institution of horror cinema, the ending is flatly treating the amorality of that institution as grounds for

[1] Genevieve Koski et al., The Dissolve, Commentary from Tasha Robinson.

sweeping judgment of humanity at large. It will draw on a number of essays from the *Cabin* issue of *Slayage* to illustrate what is being missed in drawing too narrow a focus when talking about destruction on apocalyptic scales. It then moves to discuss the actual philosophical mechanizations, rather than moral justifications per se, of casting judgment on an apocalyptic scale.

Goddard vs. Whedon

The big question of exactly what *The Cabin in the Woods* is "saying" is debatable to say the least. Even between Goddard and Whedon there appears to be disagreement as to the spirit in which *Cabin* was made. Both concede that they were motivated to make the film out of a lifelong love affair, and more recent disconcertion, with horror films. Both acknowledge its intended critique of horror films and horror film audiences. However, their views on the desired long term effect of the finished product seem to misalign. On one hand, Goddard seems to see the film as something of a revitalizing force purging the horror genre of its archetypal toxins and prompting the viewer to reevaluate their role in its existence. Whedon, on the other hand, comes across as the far more fatalistic of the duo. In interviews asking whether *Cabin* was an attempt at the final word on horror films, Whedon has offered tepid resistance at best to the suggestion. He does not profess *Cabin* to be the last horror film ever, but is clear that part of its function is as a critical evaluation eulogizing a cinematic institution built on problematic tenets.

These opposing views surface intermittently throughout interviews and commentary offered by Whedon and Goddard on the film.[2] In talking about his inspiration for how to depict the Organization, Goddard cites his childhood growing up in Los Alamos, the site of the first atomic bomb test. He likens the employees of The Facility to the scientists who worked on the bomb in that he regards them as essentially "good people" just doing their jobs.[3] Goddard continually stresses his belief that there is sympathy to be felt for Hadley, Sitterson, and their colleagues in that they are people who have shouldered an unpleasant, but necessary duty. In his view, their seeming indifference to the suffering of their victims is regrettable, but understandable: there is only so much one can do to maintain innocence in the face of repeated exposure to the corrupt. Goddard sees and seems to have strived for a certain degree of moral ambiguity. As he describes the dilemma between The Organization and its victims, "both sides are right."[4]

In addition, Goddard continually stresses the divide between youth and adulthood as a central theme of the film. While he claims a number of different scenes and themes to be "the soul" of *Cabin* throughout the DVD commentary, this is the one that seems to speak to him most personally. At the same time, it is one which Whedon seems quite comfortable downplaying. The conflicting degrees of thematic emphasis even play out on screen. When Dana and Marty ask The Director (Sigourney Weaver) in the final scene what they were being punished for, she responds "For being young." The significance of

---

[2] See, for example, Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon, *The Cabin in the Woods*, DVD commentary; and Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon, *The Cabin in the Woods*, Wonder-Con Q&A, dir. by Drew Goddard (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Entertainment, 2012).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

youth as a theme is seemingly assured in that it is flatly stated as the core transgression for which the sacrificial victims are being punished, but it seems like something of a matter-of-fact addendum against the larger issues that have been driving the narrative. That the sacrificial victims are all college-aged youth is more of a corollary to the ideas they represent than the driving social issue of the film that Goddard believes it to be.

And this is where the primary conflict between Goddard and Whedon's opposing stances on the film's major theme lies. In discussing Marty's unwavering loyalty to his friends even in light of the global destruction that it might spell, Whedon counters Goddard's assertion that *Cabin* is about youth versus adulthood with the following:

> I think there's a level of maturity to seeing the smaller picture…I don't think the demarcation is actually that simple. There's a level at which you understand the meaning of the microcosm of your own personal relationships as being the actual world. It's like you can say "Oh all these things are happening," but what you're doing, who you're helping, who you're hurting, that's what's actually going on as much as your opinion of what needs to happen on a greater scale.[5]

Briefly setting aside the philosophical views Whedon is espousing, his description of the "maturity" of Marty's rationale is of prime importance. Whedon is recognizing that while Marty's decision is one that, perhaps, could be attributed simply to youthful idealism, that it also suggests a far deeper awareness of the moral stakes of one's actions than one might expect of Marty's meager 18 years or so. And given that Marty's marijuana-induced clarity has made him the "smartest man in the room," the archetypal "one who knows what's going on that no one will listen to," his assessment of what he sees as the non-choice of killing his friends for the sake of humanity is granted considerable clout. The narrative prominence given to his piercing powers of insight suggests that the film aligns itself with Marty's stance far more than perhaps even Goddard himself realizes.

[5] Ibid.

Whedon, on the other hand, seems all too aware of this. For him, as well as myself, it is the larger matter of the capacity to dole out and disregard the pain of others that overshadows the specifics of the victim's identity. That Dana and her friends are young is secondary to the fact that they are innocent. That their supposed "transgressions" (i.e. promiscuity, drug use, generally being a stereotypical jock douchebag, etc.) are tied to their adolescence is inconsequential before the affront against their right to simply be what they are. Whedon is seeing a bigger picture which he also sees as neglected in Goddard's shortsighted stance. Marty sees a bigger picture than perhaps even The Organization who claims to be acting in the interest of humanity. That bigger picture is their respective notions of "the world" and the human parts that constitute it. If it is Goddard's interpretation that "both sides are right," the view suggested by Marty and Whedon seems to be instead that "both sides are wrong." This is the scale on which the film depicts itself, and on which its apocalyptic ending encourages all who watch it to ponder its significance.

So why, after all this talk about symbols and multiple levels of meaning, must we say that the apocalyptic ending should be taken literally as a suggestion that humanity should meet its end? Why, if everything else in the film is a stand-in for the various players and processes of the social institution of horror cinema, would the apocalypse not also find a real-world counterpart of significantly decreased stakes (e.g. the decline/end of horror cinema)? It is precisely because the film has gone through the efforts of developing this target-rich environment for critique that the indiscriminate apocalyptic carpet bombing of this narrative landscape must be taken at face value. If, for example, the stakes of the sacrificial ritual did not include the survival of humanity and the scope

of Marty's and Dana's revenge was limited to their immediate oppressors in the underground Facility, readings of *Cabin* as critical of the makers of horror film would be entirely warranted. A similar effect might have been achieved if, say, the film had concluded with Marty and Dana managing to turn the tables on the Ancients, thus justifying readings of the film as critical of consumer demands, and the Hollywood corporate media that inflects those demands.

But this is not the case. Despite the ample opportunity the film provides itself for more directed critiques, the ending shirks such pointed outcomes. Rather than firing a guided missile, *The Cabin in the Woods* drops a nuke. The impartiality of its final judgment indicates a sweeping assignment of guilt to all parties involved, and more. In addition, the identification of the collective humanity is incompatible with the proxy-allegorical structure that defines the various entities of the film. Given that the movie uses its character alignments as stand-ins for larger social bodies, what larger group could possibly be represented by the entirety of the human race? There is none, and this is why the apocalyptic judgment stands as the moment in which the film drops its own pretense. It acknowledges that it is, as intended, an indictment of humanity. This does not mean that there is not merit in isolating the specific elements of horror film spectatorship which inform this indictment, but only if it is understood they are already included in an apocalyptic judgment. Nothing and no one is spared, and one must not miss this forest for the trees of idiosyncratic readings of the film.

Alternate Endings

Still, that does not mean that people will not try. Let us first look at the example set by Erin Giannini in her essay "'Charybdis Tested Well with Teens': *The Cabin in the Woods* as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences." Giannini's aim is to show that "From *Serenity* (2005) to *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), Joss Whedon launched a sustained critique of a corporatized media culture that uses bodies, blood, and sacrifice as a way to increase audience share and profits, including his own complicity in it."[6] She sees an increasingly overt critique of the producer/creator/audience trio across Whedon's work that culminates in *Cabin's* "puppeteers" (The Organization) and concludes in its reflexive apocalypse. When she asks just who The Ancients are, she acknowledges that the film leaves this point ambiguous, but offers the standard "the audience" response and goes on to say that "The taloned hand that crushes the cabin at the end is an apt metaphor for the fate of a box-office failure."[7] Her tracing of Whedon's critique of corporatized media is more than sound, but her analysis of the apocalyptic ramifications is overeager to connect the basic ethical question of how we deal with the suffering of others to the far less significant corporate agenda. If Goddard was overly focused on the identity of the victim, Giannini's fixation is on the specifics of the perpetrator.

Jerry Metz has an altogether different take on *Cabin's* ending, but makes many of the same mistakes. In his essay "What's Your Fetish?: The Tortured Simulacra in *The*

[6] Erin Giannini, "'Charybdis Tested Well with Teens': The Cabin in the Woods as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

[7] Ibid.

Cabin in the Woods," Metz attempts to highlight the ways in which *Cabin,* "despite [promising] liberating hipness," rehashes and reinforces the very stereotypes it claims to disarm.[8] In his multipronged attack on the "problems of apocalypse" as they unfold in the film, Metz focuses on the generation gap between The Organization's embodiment of establishment and its sacrificial victims as representative of youth. In an attempt to reduce *Cabin's* apocalyptic ending to an embittered temper tantrum, Metz reads it as little more than a reassertion of the theme of youthful rebellion against adulthood commonly seen in *Buffy*. As he says, "The conclusion of *TCiTW* proffers a dose of the cataclysmic familiar (including the pounding rock music score that, as in *BtVS*, announces histrionically that something significant has just happened) while restaging the show's obsession with how young, pretty people confront the antagonisms of the aged."[9] Setting aside Metz's own palpable antagonism towards *Cabin* – which continues in this fashion throughout the length of the essay – his recognition of victimized youth exacting revenge on middle-aged oppressors suffers from the same impotence that plagues Goddard's celebration of this very theme. The theme is, indeed, present in *Cabin*; the director notes it, the film notes it, Metz notes it, but once again, no one seems to have anything meaningful to say about it other than to note its presence.

Metz goes on to say that the ending is, like in *Buffy*, another instance of the "pleasures of talking back to power," but that in this case the retort falls flat. He asserts that there is no guarantee that the Ancients will not "re-impose their sacrificial demands on whatever life form they encounter next, *ad infinitum*," and that "the conclusion hardly

---

[8] Jerry Metz, "What's Your Fetish?: The Tortured Simulacra in The Cabin in the Woods," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

[9] Ibid.

provides narrative closure…rather, it hints woefully at the prospects of sequels, or a simple return to zero in a future film."[10] Metz's claim is a bit short-sighted in that it displays a patent disregard for the multifaceted motivation of Marty's and Dana's choice. Their decision to let the world end is just as much about taking their fates into their own hands and dying on their own terms as it is about sticking it to the proverbial "man." Even were they simply "talking back" to the power of The Ancients – which is dubious given that they are vocal that their vengeance is clearly directed towards their human oppressors – the aim could only be to free themselves from the grasp of that power, not to extinguish it entirely. It is not a matter of the will The Ancients impose upon their subjects, but how those subjects respond. Marty and Dana do not care about vanquishing The Ancients or about ensuring the freedom of whatever life form follows in their footsteps; their attention is squarely on their fellow man. And as for the prospects of sequels, the film could not be more declarative that the human stake in the world of *Cabin* is conclusively finished, a point which is soon to be belabored.

Perhaps Metz's most interesting maneuver is to employ Bakhtin's notion of The Carnival to reinforce his claim that *Cabin's* ending is not a true apocalypse in the sense of "the destruction of meaning and subjectivity."[11] In Metz's mind, *Cabin's* ending is merely an example of "overturning the status quo…a ritual rebellion…a cathartic inversion of the norm that carnivalizes it, perhaps ultimately reconstituting it stronger

[10] Ibid. Metz attempts to bolster the likelihood of this dubious assertion by reminding the reader that "After all, did Buffy not sacrifice herself to save the world as an apocalyptic ritual deadline approached in the *BtVS* season finale "The Gift" (5.22), only to be resurrected for a new season?" I would argue against the revival of the main character of a series in which half the cast are natives of the afterlife, and the un-ending of the world as comparable examples of retroactive continuity making.

[11] Ibid.

than before."[12] I would counter by saying he should have read Carroll a little closer. In accounting for the appeal of horror, Carroll says "the condition that permits this transgression of the norm is that, when all is said and done, and the narrative achieves closure, the norm has been reconstituted – the ontologically offensive monster has been removed and its ghastly deeds punished."[13] So where does Metz get the idea that any sense of normality is being reconstituted in *Cabin's* ending? If his point is that the *experience* of the film is an escapist dabbling in the apocalyptic carnivalesque which ultimately reconstitutes "the norm" of reality by having a finite running time, then why watch movies at all? After all, they'll always leave you in the end. In addition, the film ends with the clear suggestion of humanity's extinction, and the monster is still roaming free comfortably seated with a bucket of popcorn in its lap. Metz's attempts to remove the finality of the ending rely on an egregious disregard for the film's right to have any say in its own affairs, and by acting as if the apocalypse does not by definition remove all ambiguity as to its certitude.

The Horror of "Us"

By its very nature, apocalypse stands as both the ultimate problem and solution, not to be nit-picked over as to the details of what was and was not caught in its path of destruction, or what does and does not remain. In the introduction to her book *Apocalypse and Post Politics: The Romance of the End*, Mary Manjikian illustrates this point nicely

---

[12] Ibid.

[13] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 201.

in acknowledging the limitations of applying apocalyptic thought to international political theory. She points to the utility of apocalyptic hypothesizing as a valuable tool for envisioning a world totally removed of the pretense that so plagues and confines thinking in the field of international politics, but finds herself unable to articulate what that actually looks like:

> If the critical theorist's project has thus been based upon recognizing that many of our organizing principles for understanding the world around us – including maps, labels, and schematics like time lines which are taken to denote stages of developments – are constructed, rather than real, and western, rather than universal…[then] the apocalypse smashes the conceptual maps which we as analysts keep in our heads to organize the world into a center and periphery, into us and them…The question then becomes whether or not there is any theory broad enough or complex enough to enable us to theorize about this invented space.[14]

Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. 1* offers a wonderful tool for reconciling the dilemma. In the book, Thacker posits that in an increasingly "unthinkable" world, the limits of human thought offer equally increasing challenge to any attempts at understanding or conceptualizing of the world. For Thacker, much of that challenge comes from the differing and irreconcilable opposing viewpoints on how one might even conceive of "the world." Thacker proposes three different ways for thinking about "the world": (i) the *world-for-us*, the human-centric view of the world; (ii) the *world-in-itself*, the "natural" world as it is understood through science, but which always exists beyond the horizon of human intelligibility; and (iii) the *world-without-us*, the "spectral and speculative" world through which we approach the always out of reach *world-in-itself*. Thacker suggests that horror "is a non-philosophical attempt to think

[14] Mary Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2012), 30.

about the *world-without-us* philosophically."[15] The monsters, creatures, and ghouls of horror are reflective of narrative attempts at confronting, but never quite approaching, the unapproachable limits of human thought. L. Andrew Cooper makes the keen observation that this limit is reflected in the anthropomorphic form of The Ancients when he states that "Short of a cut to black, which follows the rise of *Cabin's* giant hand, film has little vocabulary for directly expressing that which cannot be expressed…The hand, as opposed to a tentacle creature from an American writer's imagination, suggests the imagination approaching its own limit."[16]

If we take Thacker's word on the matter – and I suggest that we do – then the answer to Manjikian's question is simply "no"; the "invented space" of a world without conceptual maps and the *world-in-itself* are one and the same. It is futile to attempt at conceptualizing of a world without humanity so long as the very thought process that drives such contemplation is tainted by an unshakeable human ego. And so long as the *world-without-us* remains but a feeble attempt at encroaching on the territory of the *-world-in-itself*, so too will we be precluded from utilizing it for the purpose of gaining the unique insight into the *world-for-us* that the view from the *world-in-itself* offers. Apocalyptic thinking embodies Thacker's "horizon" of human thought, while horror stands as an attempt at surpassing that limit, but which ultimately serves to reconstitute it.

What we see with *The Cabin in the Woods* then is a narrative that, by combining horror with the apocalyptic, conveys an awareness and acceptance of the limits of human capacity to conceptualize of humanity itself. "The world" at stake in *Cabin*, in both the

---

[15] Eugene Thacker, introduction to *In The Dust of This Planet*, 10.

[16] L. Andrew Cooper, "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

minds of Marty and Whedon, is of course the *world-for-us*, but it is freely offered up for the sake of a *world-without-us* that is kept neatly at a distance. As Dana says to Marty upon acquiescing to leave humanity to the wrath of the Ancients, "It's time to give someone else a chance." Who or what or whether not there will even be anything to follow in the footsteps of humanity is left both unsaid and largely unconsidered, as it should be. Even with the immediate prospect of a *world-without-us* at their whim to bring into fruition, the only consideration for Marty and Dana is the worth of the world they actually *can* think about. The monster of the movie is not some ghostly apparition or a creature from the abyss, but "the world;" specifically, the *world-for-us* as hopelessly plagued by some unthinkable dark side of human nature.

And it is, indeed, unthinkable as opposed to simply unknowable.[17] When we talk about some intrinsic capacity for evil in humanity, at least as it is conceived of in the film, we need not even talk necessarily about the nature of the individual, but simply a larger potentiality that arises out of the collective. As Harvey Brooks says in noting the challenge of avoiding the seeming inevitability of mankind's end, even attempts at a solution can fail to be such if they are misguided:

> If the human prospect proves to be as dim as the prophets of doom would have it, the cause will lie not in the direct consequences of technology but in the complex interplay between technological development and the evolution of individual and social character…The question is whether humanity can summon the collective wisdom and consensus necessary to implement these solutions without compromising other social and moral values that we also hold dear. Or will the implementation of solutions require so much social coercion that they are not really solutions in the larger human sense?[18]

---

[17] That is to say, it is not simply a matter of human's lacking mind-reading capabilities. The issue is not merely the impossibility of peering into the hearts and minds of our fellow man.

[18] Harvey Brooks, "Technology-Related Catastrophes" in *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth*, ed. Saul Friedländer et al. (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 132-133.

Maybe not everyone is willing to sacrifice the lives of others for the survival of the human race – a point which is illustrated in the obvious examples of Marty and Dana – but enough people were rounded up with limited qualms about doing so that the problem was successfully globalized and industrialized. How does one reconcile this seemingly variant capacity? How many people would have to possess such a willingness in order to make the claim that humanity "generally," if not uniformly, was too amoral to be worth saving? And if one does claim that darkness lurks in the hearts of all mankind, what lends certainty to such a notion?

Ultimately, the answers revolve around a crippling reliance on the Self. The same problem of being unable to remove ourselves from the picture that demarcates the *world-for-us* from the *world-in-itself* on a global scale plays out on personal level as well; that is, the inability to conceptualize humanity without oneself. There is always a certain solipsistic assumption of one's own presence in the effort to envision the collective whole of humankind. We believe we can readily envision the very obvious notion of *humanity-for-us*, the view of humanity as a species of over 7 billion people including oneself, but how well-defined is that image? For Levinas, "the Self's relationship with the Other logically precedes the formation of subjectivity; he thereby asserts the primacy of the Other over the Self. The singularity or particularity of the Self, according to Levinas, is not an outcome of the active formation of subjectivity within one's own consciousness."[19] The Self arises as a response to the non-self, the Other. This dynamic, however, is reversed when we talk about forming a conception of humanity at large. This is due to the

[19] Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, eds., *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice and Spectatorship*, Routledge Advances in Film Studies 29 (New York ; London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

fact that we cannot realistically ever encounter humanity as a whole, but merely its shadow fragments in our limited exposure to its constituent parts (i.e. other individuals). The collective humanity as an embodied and encounterable Other does not exist for it to be the basis of a formation of Self. It must instead arise in response to one's recognition of their individual status as a human being, which is of course, only possible after the constitution of Self.

What do we really mean then when we conceive of *humanity-for-us*? It is, by its very nature, something that starts with the Self and expands radially outwards growing more and more nebulous the further it goes; a kind of "me, and all the people I know, and all the people they know, and all the people they know…" and so on and so forth with the breadth of the web growing increasingly speculative and far off to the point of becoming indiscernible. It is entirely *thinkable,* yes, but its unfathomability points us towards the problem of *humanity-in-itself* in which the vital locus of Self is missing. The web does not simply grow indiscernible, it disappears, both at its boundaries and at its origin; it never starts.

It is my claim that one cannot conceive of humanity as an entity separate from oneself, and that the radially expanding nature through which such a conception is formed implies that any critique or judgment of humanity is always a projection of Self onto the Other. The qualities one recognizes in themselves as universally "human" are not inclusive examples of traits that already exist as part of human nature, but the core upon which the very notion of human nature is constructed. Whedon has posed a number of central, unanswerable questions as the hanging silence at the end of the film: Why did we make this movie? Why do we tell these stories? Why do these bad things keep

happening to these blond girls? Appropriately, the film itself offers no real answers. I believe *The Cabin in the Woods* is best understood not as a moral critique, but as an exercise in the limits of human thought which determine morality. Just as Thacker posits that horror is an effort to think of the *world-without-us*, *Cabin's* process of apocalyptic judgment and critique is a non-philosophical attempt to approach what I would call *humanity-without-me* philosophically. It utilizes its reflexive critique of horror spectatorship in conjunction with the philosophical border offered by the apocalypse to ask how what we know about ourselves approaches what we think we know about others, onwards into the unknowable.

Conclusion

> *But with the growth of modern skepticism, the idea of a cyclical return faded away, just when history, the pace of change, accelerated to a point almost unbearable for many. The craving then arose: stop this mad course by all means, stop this insane rushing forward and let us rest – even if it be in the sleep of an eternal night, when no world remains. A rest for weary men, a rest for the cosmos itself...*– Saul Friedländer, *Visions of Apocalypse* [1]

In 2007, Joss Whedon offered the following response to the spread of cellphone footage of the beating death of Du'a Khalil Aswad across the internet: "I've always had a bent towards apocalyptic fiction, and I'm beginning to understand why. I look and I see the earth in flames…I've never had any faith in humanity."[2]

As for myself, I've long known that much of my own attraction to apocalyptic narratives stems from the same source as Whedon. I doubt that there is anyone who has not, from time to time, harbored a general frustration at what they conceive of as the state of the world. We throw our hands up in submission to a momentary total inability to sustain the crushing weight of being, and surmise that only "the world" itself could possibly be responsible for generating such oppressive force. And for most people, I imagine, the experience is, indeed, momentary. They step out of Atlas' shoes and back into the very world that threatened to crush them not long before. With Whedon's statement and the prevalence of apocalyptic themes throughout his work, I glean that for him the experience is perpetual. I can relate all too well.

I attribute the persistence of my own personal battle with the woes of "the world" to a constant sense of detachment from it. Like a kid sitting on the edge of the playground

---

[1] Saul Friedländer, ed., *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 12.

[2] Erin Giannini, "'Charybdis Tested Well with Teens': The Cabin in the Woods as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences," in special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*.

waiting for someone to invite him to come and play with the rest of the group, that detachment comes with a ceaseless feeling of life itself as something that I am watching unfold rather than taking part in. It is the perspective of always being outside of the world looking inwards, unable to simply "be" present in the moment. This viewpoint is the source of my constant production of universalized deductions on the state of things at large. That the assessment is generally negative is reflective of my own pessimistic sensibilities. For me, "the world" does not wait until the evening news to present itself; it is a constantly dangling carrot, always right in front of me, and always out of reach.

But I think there's a clearly discernible silver-lining in the frustration that both I and Whedon espouse. Karen Carr summarized Nietzche's conception of nihilism "as a condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate."[3] In essence, nihilism is the manner in which shattered perfectionism attempts to reconcile its misguidance. Whedon's lack of faith in humanity and the nature of the events that cause it to flare up reflect a poignantly humanist disappointment that mankind is coming up short, but only because he believes it should do better. The penchant towards nihilistic fantasy is just that: fantasy. It is an expression of frustration rather than a bona fide desire for cataclysm. And in the case of *The Cabin in the Woods*, that frustration is the admirable disappointment of confronting the impossibility of diagnosing the human condition.

In the humble beginnings of this thesis, the goal was to lobby my own case against mankind. I have since realized that it was a doomed and misguided idea to say the least, but the process of arriving at this conclusion has been profoundly illuminating.

---

[3] Karen Leslie Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 25.

Ultimately, it might be said that this project helped me find some personal new beginnings despite its fixation on endings. It is my sincerest hope that the reader has gleaned something of value in my attempt to shed light on the futility of staring too long at darkness.

Works Cited

Bibliography

Bartlett, Steven J., and Peter. Suber. *Self-Reference: Reflections on Reflexivity*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1987. Print.

Bettinger, Brenda. "Lionsgate Schedules THE CABIN IN THE WOODS for April 13, 2012." *Collider*. July 20, 2011. http://collider.com/the-cabin-in-the-woods-release-date/103740/ (accessed February 20, 2015).

Bibbiani, William. "Second Opinion: The Cabin in the Woods," *Crave Online*. April 12, 2012. http://www.craveonline.com/film/reviews/186571-second-opinion-the cabin-in-the-woods (accessed, February 21, 2015).

Biltereyst, Daniël, and Roel Vande Winkel, eds. *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship Around the World*. Global Cinema Series. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

Breuer, Rolf, Werner Huber, Martin Middeke, and Hubert Zapf. *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005. Print.

Brunette, Peter. *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989. Print.

Carr, Karen Leslie. *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Print.

Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.

Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror, Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Choi, Jinhee, and Mattias Frey, eds. *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice and Spectatorship*. Routledge Advances in Film Studies 29. New York ; London: Routledge, 2014. Print.

Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992. Print.

Collis, Clark. "'The Cabin in the Woods': How Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard's 'insane frolic' became the year's must buzzed about fright flick." *Entertainment Weekly*. January 08, 2015. http://www.ew.com/article/2012/04/12/the-cabin-in-the-woods-joss-whedon (accessed February 10, 2015).

Cooper, L. Andrew. "The Cabin in the Woods and the End of American Exceptionalism." Special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 10.2/11.1, no. 36 37 (Autumn 2013/Winter 2014). http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage36.htm (accessed February 15, 2015)

Dillon-Malone, A. *Censoring Hollywood: Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011. Print.

Frevele, Jamie. "People Can't Figure Out Why *The Cabin in the Woods* Is So Awesome, So Here Are A Few Solid Reasons For You [Spoilers]." *The Mary Sue.* April 25, 2012. http://www.themarysue.com/why-cabin-in-the-woods-is-awesome/ (accessed February 21, 2015).

Friedländer, Saul, ed. *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. Print.

Giannini, Erin. "'Charybdis Tested Well with Teens': The Cabin in the Woods as Metafictional Critique of Corporate Media Producers and Audiences." Special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 10.2/11.1, no. 36-37 (Autumn 2013/Winter 2014).

Goldberg, Matt. "New Teaser Poster for The Cabin in the Woods," *Collider*, December 1, 2011 http://collider.com/cabin-in-the-woods-teaser-poster/ (accessed February 20, 2015).

Gordon, Rebecca. "Horror-Comedy." *Oxford Bibliographies*. http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo 9780199791286-0077.xml (accessed March 02, 2015).

Grønstad, Asbjørn, and Henrik Gustafsson, eds. *Ethics and Images of Pain*. Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies 1. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Hantke, Steven. *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Print.

Horton, Andrew, ed. *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.

Kern, Laura. "Short Takes: The Cabin in the Woods." *Film Comment*. March/April 2012. http://www.filmcomment.com/article/short-takes-the-cabin-in-the-woods (accessed April 01, 2015).

King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. London; New York: Wallflower Press, 2002. Print.

King, Geoff, ed. *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to "Reality" TV and Beyond*. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR: Intellect, 2005. Print.

Koski, Genevieve, Noel Murray, Tasha Robinson, and Scott Tobias. "The Moviemaker Meta and Moral Conundrums of 'The Cabin in theWoods'." *The Dissolve*. April 02, 2014. https://thedissolve.com/features/movie-of-the week/491-the-moviemaker-meta-and-moral-conundrums-of-the-ca/ (accessed, February 21, 2015).

Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. 1st ed. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010. Print.

Manjikian, Mary. *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. Print.

Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Metz Jr., Jerry D. "What's Your Fetish?: The Tortured Economics of Horror Simulacra in 'The Cabin in the Woods'." Special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 10.2/11.1, no. 36-37 (Autumn 2013/Winter 2014). http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage36.htm (accessed February 15, 2015).

Mikkelsen, Justin. "The Cabin in the Woods Analysis: The Most Important Horror Film in Years." *What Culture*. http://whatculture.com/film/the-cabin-in-the-woods-analysis-the most-important-horror-film-in-years.php (accessed April 02, 2015).

Palmer, Jerry. *The Logic of the Absurd on Film and Television Comedy*. London: BFI Publishing, 1987. Print.

Panse, Silke, and Dennis Rothermel, eds. *A Critique of Judgment in Film and Television*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

Paul, William. *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Print.

Rooney, David. "The Cabin in the Woods: Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movie/cabin-woods/review/298129 (accessed February 21, 2015).

Savlov, Marc. "The Scare Game: Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon on What Went Wrong with Horror and Where to Go From Here," *The Austin Chronicle*. March 9, 2012. http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2012-03-09/the-scare-game/ (accessed April 01, 2015).

Schoenbrun, Dan. "A Conversation with 'Cabin in the Woods' Director Drew Goddard." *Filmmaker Magazine*. April 10, 2012. http://filmmakermagazine.com/43750-a conversation-with-cabin-in-the-woods-director-drew-goddard/#.VSHIm9zF-So (accessed April 01, 2015).

Siegle, Robert. *The Politics of Reflexivity: Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. Print.

Smith, Kyle. "Just 'Woods' Schlock." *New York Post*. April, 13, 2012.http://nypost.com/2012/04/13/just-woods-schlock/ (accessed February, 21, 2015)

Smuts, Aaron. "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13, no. 3 (June 2010), 333-347.

Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. Print.

Stokes, Jasie and Kristofer Woofter, ed. "We Are Not Who We Are: Critical Reflections on 'The Cabin in the Woods' (2012)." Special issue, *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 10.2/11.1, no. 36-37 (Autumn 2013/Winter 2014). http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage36.htm (accessed February 15, 2015)

Thacker, Eugene. *In The Dust of This Planet*. Ropley: Zero, 2011. Print.

Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. 1st U.S. ed. Music/culture. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996. Print.

Witty, Stephen. "A jock, a nerd and a virgin walk into a 'Cabin in the Woods'" *NJ*. April 13, 2012.http://www.nj.com/entertainment/movies/index.ssf/2012/04/the_cabin_in_the_woods_review.htm (accessed February 21, 2015)

Zunshine, Lisa. *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Print.

Television Programs Cited

Angel. Created by David Greenwalt and Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy Productions. The WB. 1999-2004.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Created by Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy Productions. The WB. 1997-2001. UPN. 2001-2003.

Firefly. Created by Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy Productions. Fox. 2002.

Dollhouse. Created by Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy Productions. Fox. 2009-2010.

Films Cited

Funny Games. Directed by Michael Haneke. Wega Film. Madman Entertainment. 1997.

On the Beach. Directed by Stanley Kramer. Lomitas Productions Inc. United Artists. 1959.

Re-Animator. Directed by Stuart Gordon. Re-Animator Productions. Empire Pictures. 1985.

Scream. Directed by Wes Craven. Woods Entertainment. Dimension Films. 1996.

Scary Movie. Directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans. Dimension Films. Miramax Films. 2000.

The Cabin in the Woods. Directed by Drew Goddard. Mutant Enemy Productions. Lionsgate. 2012.

The Day After Tomorrow. Directed by Roland Emmerich. 20th Century Fox. 2004.

The End of Evangelion. Directed by Hideaki Anno. Gainax. Toei Company. 1997.

The Evil Dead. Directed by Sam Raimi. Renaissance Pictures. New Line Cinema. 1981.

The Fifth Element. Directed by Luc Besson. Gaumont. Columbia Pictures. 1997.