



Crushing Life in the Anthropocene? Destroying Simulated Nature in *The Cabin in the Woods*

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Abstract

The Cabin in the Woods (2011) is a highly self-reflexive movie that is aware of its generic roots. In particular, the film struggles with the meaning of “the woods” in the horror genre. *Cabin*’s central twist in this respect is that the titular “woods” are not untamed nature, but rather a place of artifice. *Cabin*’s woods are not uncanny because they are far removed from “civilization,” but rather exactly because they are part of it. The film’s emphasis on the artificiality of nature suggests that the concept of “nature” is exactly that—a concept, a cultural construct, loaded with meaning. The film’s ending envisions the end of that discursive construct—but for that to happen, humankind must vanish.

Keywords: horror film; Anthropocene; nature; hyperreality; simulation



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Crushing Life in the Anthropocene? Destroying Simulated Nature in *The Cabin in the Woods*

Michael Fuchs

Introduction

The semiotician Yuri Lotman argued that cultures are constructed around topological binaries. These spatial oppositions imply semantic ones, as the “‘cultured,’ ‘safe,’ ‘harmoniously organized’” human world clashes with the “‘hostile,’ ‘dangerous,’ ‘chaotic’” spaces of nature (1990, p. 131). He added that this opposition becomes most apparent in fairy tales, where “only in the forest . . . terrible and miraculous events take place” (1977, p. 230). For these fantastic events to transpire, a character must “cross . . . the basic topological border in the . . . spatial structure” (Lotman, 1977, p. 238), a move which is not merely a plot device, but a meaningful transgression.

Horror narratives tap into this principle by repeatedly gesturing toward the crossing of thresholds. As Roger B. Salomon has, for example, emphasized, horror tales frequently revolve around how “some spook invades our commonplace reality, or our apparently sane and rational self enters a categorically malign environment” (2002, p. 9). Although this rancorous space may take many shapes and forms, in American cultural practice, the trench warfare between culture and nature has proven particularly relevant and persistent, as the opposition between the wilderness and civilization functions as one of the founding pillars of the American nation.

In their introduction to *Frontier Gothic* (1993), David Mogen, Scott Sanders, and Joanne Karpinski accordingly point out that the central binary shaping the early American experience was “the battle between civilization and nature, between the mental landscape of European consciousness and the physical and psychical landscape of the New World” (1993, p. 15). Until (at least) the mid-nineteenth century, the wilderness was a fact of life for most Americans. Leaving a settlement was a dangerous business; unlit roads beyond populated areas quickly turned into nothing more than dirt paths, and the bears, wolf packs, and cougars which inhabited the forests posed serious threats to human lives. This harsh reality of life had a profound impact on the meaning of the word “wilderness,” which evoked feelings of horror rather than awe.

From its earliest stages, the dominant American cultural practice has “take[n] up and magnifie[d] these anxieties related to the landscape, installing within the heart of the American Gothic tradition the wilderness and the frontier as spaces of danger, savagery, and violence” (Weinstock, 2014, p. 28). And despite the revaluation of nature in view of the pastoralist imagination and more recent environmentalist movements, the negative associations attached to the wilderness have persisted. Drawing on this deeply ingrained semantic repertoire, horror texts employ woods as malevolent places where “the rules of civilization do not obtain” (Clover, 1992, p. 124).

In this article, I will suggest that *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard, 2011) engages critically with the trope of the evil forest. *Cabin* is a postmodernist horror film *par excellence*, as it is heavily invested in the genre's "past, self-referentially dependent on traces of other stories, familiar images and narrative structures, [and] intertextual allusions" (Spooner, 2006, p. 10). While, of course, any representation is political (Burgin, 1986, p. 85), *Cabin's* self-reflexive strategies expose the ideological underpinnings of all representation. In particular, the movie's self-reflexive production of the woods based on the cultural raw material provided by the "malevolent forest" trope transforms *Cabin's* woods into mere simulacra and the entire diegetic world (or at the very least a crucial part of it) into a hyperreal space.

Whereas leading ecocritic Greg Garrard has opined that the world of simulation with its attendant "skepticism towards stable truth claims . . . must be antithetical to . . . the assumption of real environmental problems" (2012, p. 192), I will suggest that *Cabin* deploys its hyperreal forest setting to challenge humanity's self-ascribed spot atop the worldly chain of being. *Cabin's* self-conscious use of a fabricated space produced through intertextual references and constructed with the help of digital visual effects accordingly communicates an ecological subtext. This subtext is (quite literally) hammered home in the movie's closing moments when the gigantic hand of a Lovecraftian creature destroys the simulated forest along with the simulations of both human and more-than-human life populating it. In this way, *Cabin* suggests that humankind may

overemphasize its value and significance through imaginary constructs, often relayed via narratives. The deity's hand provides a blow to the self-aggrandizing tales about humanity's exceptionalist role, thereby echoing Lovecraft's "fundamental premise that . . . human . . . interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large" (quoted in Joshi, 1999, xvi). In fact, the movie's finale implies that the annihilation of humanity might be in the long-term interest of the planet.

I. Playing with Horror Conventions

As the narrative of *Cabin* begins to unfold, it seems to follow the path prescribed by its generic predecessors: five college students are about to spend the weekend in the eponymous cabin in the woods. The group consists of characters performing stereotypical roles: Dana (Kristen Connolly) is the Virgin, Jules (Anna Hutchison) the Whore, Curt (Chris Hemsworth) the Athlete, Holden (Jesse Williams) the Scholar (and token black guy), and Marty (Fran Kranz) the Fool. As *Cabin* makes abundantly clear, these roles are assigned randomly, as most of the characters do not quite fit their profiles: The Virgin just had a passionate tête-à-tête with one of her professors, the Whore wants to go to med school, the Athlete has an academic scholarship, and the Scholar is a top-notch wide receiver. Only Marty is a character squarely in the mold of the classic,

Shakespearean fool, as he delivers witty one-liners and is the first character to see the truth for what it is.

As the group is driving along an isolated road, Jules stresses that she “hope[s] this is the right road,” because the place “doesn’t even show up on the GPS” (Goddard, 2011). Her apparently innocent remark underlines that the group has left the secure space of civilization and entered the unknown. Marty seems fine with this because “for one goddamn weekend . . .[,] they can’t globally position [his] ass” (Goddard, 2011). The pothead accordingly considers the wilderness a space of freedom from the restrictions imposed by civilized society. Yet whereas the students (or at least Marty) believe they can escape these restrictions, a brief interlude set in an underground facility makes clear that the five college kids are under constant video surveillance (Figure 1)—that is, far from escaping civilization. These scenes set in the underground facility constantly interrupt the main narrative until, about twenty minutes before the movie’s end, the two narrative strands merge.



Figure 1: The college kids are constantly being watched. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

Soon, the five kids reach a rundown gas station which calls to mind the one seen in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974). The group meets the gas station owner, who claims to have lived in the area “since the war,” at which point Marty suggests that they have effectively traveled back in time, wondering out loud if it was the war “with the blue and some in grey, brother perhaps fighting against brother” (Goddard, 2011). As the college students are leaving, Marty wishes the vendor “good luck with [his] business,” which he is certain the owner will have, for Marty “know[s] the railroad’s coming through here any day now” (Goddard, 2011). Marty’s snarky comment not only draws on the meaning of the railroad as an emblem of the westward expansion but also foregrounds the well-established binary that *Cabin* invokes: The

small college town seen in the movie's first five minutes represents security and civilization (as does the RV the group uses to get to the woods), while the forest signifies danger and wilderness.

More importantly, the scene at the gas station reveals *Cabin*'s schizophrenic relationship with the genre's past. On the one hand, the gas station owner assumes the role of a prophet (underscored by his name Mordecai), who advises the college students that the road they are about to take is a one-way street that terminates "at the old Buckner Place" (Goddard, 2011; which is, in fact, where the kids want to go to). He goes on to warn them that "getting back—that's your concern" (Goddard, 2011). In her discussion of the slasher sub-genre, Vera Dika explains that the prophet figure "has no ability to actually ward off the ensuing destruction" (1990, p. 58). *Cabin*'s prophet of doom, however, does not even want to stop the youngsters from going deeper into the woods; he wants to see them punished for their transgressions. *Cabin* thus clarifies that the deviation from the rules of the genre also implies repetition, for "[d]ifference is included in repetition by way of disguise" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 17). Yvonne Leffler has suggested that these repetitions create a "determinist pattern . . . so intense that the fictional world is portrayed as containing nothing that is unique" (2000, p. 191). This "pan-determinism," Matt Hills has observed, "offers completely controlled" environments (2005, p. 65), which function as vehicles to address questions of freedom and agency.

Cabin repeatedly touches on this topic and weaves it into its meta-cinematic layer. For example, when the group finally reaches the cabin in the middle of the woods (Figure 2), their arrival, which is accompanied by a score foreboding doom, is visually reminiscent of *The Evil Dead II* (Raimi, 1987). Its predecessor, *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1981), then provides the narrative blueprint for the next twenty minutes in *Cabin*. First, the kids make a surprising discovery (a one-way mirror connecting two rooms), and then they enjoy themselves for several hours before Dana finds Anna Patience Buckner's diary. She starts reading it aloud until she comes to a section in Latin. Marty protests, "I'm drawing a line in the fucking sand here: Do not read the Latin" (Goddard, 2011). A spectral female voice (controlled by the "puppeteers" in the underground facility), however, urges Dana to "[r]ead it out loud" (Goddard, 2011). Dana complies: "Dolor supervivo caro. Dolor sublimus caro. Dolor ignio animus" (Goddard, 2011). As she is reading the final sentence, the camera cuts to an old grave, and a rotten hand and lower arm break through the soil. The scene then cuts to the control room, where Sitterson explains that the spell has summoned the Buckners, a "zombie redneck torture family" (Goddard, 2011). The self-conscious repetition of well-known horror tropes highlights *Cabin's* struggles with the horror genre's trappings. While the characters (except for Marty) do not understand that they, effectively, star in a horror tale until it is too late for most of them, their attempts to escape from

the horror story's pre-determined pattern mirrors the filmmakers' attempts to play with the generic script. Notably, like any game, this "playful activity [is] circumscribed by certain arbitrary rules" (Stevick, 1981, p. 12).



Figure 2: The titular cabin in the woods is steeped in intertextuality. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

The movie addresses this scripted character of the events unfolding in the diegetic reality early on when the underground security guard Dan Truman (Brian White)—whose name alludes to *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998)—wonders whether the kids' dark journey is entirely "fixed" (Goddard, 2011). Hadley (Bradley Whitford) and Sitterson (Richard Jenkins), who run the show, answer in the negative and add that they "just get [the kids] in the cellar," but the students "have to take it from there," as "[t]hey have to make their choice of their own free will" (Goddard, 2011). This "free will," however, is not as free as one might want to believe, as *Cabin* makes

abundantly clear. Throughout the narrative, Hadley and Sitterson force the college students into specific situations and turn them into tools in their ritualistic and agonizing game of sacrifice.

By highlighting the ways in which the individual characters follow their prescribed paths, the movie reflects on the ways in which individuals are controlled by the societies in which they live. In addition, the opposition between freedom and predetermination also functions as a meta-statement about *Cabin*'s struggle with the horror tradition. As much as the movie's creators try to take their liberties with the genre, they need to refer to the genre and its conventions in order to be perceived as part of the genre and critique it from within. This reliance on the viewers' knowledge of horror conventions reveals that *Cabin* plays a game, as "it knows that you know it knows you know" the genre's conventions all too well (Brophy, 1986, p. 5). Beyond this ludic engagement with its generic forebears, *Cabin*'s position within a network of signs transforms not only the diegetic world but the entire movie into nothing but simulation—"an endless circuit of intertextuality with no originating text, no basic reference point, no escape to the real" (Kuhn, 1990, p. 178).

II. Constructing Virtual “Nature”: The Simulacral Forest

In the context of simulation, a highly significant, albeit brief, scene occurs between the group leaving the gas station and reaching the cabin. As the college students are driving along a forest road, they pass a small tunnel. The (virtual) camera spots a bird of prey circling in the sky, zooms out, and follows the animal for a few seconds. Suddenly, the raptor is vaporized, as it hits an invisible grid that momentarily appears when the bird touches it, thereby suggesting that the college students have entered a kind of a dome, an artificial space created by technology, a hermetically sealed and controlled environment, an isolated terrible place in which natural life has no place.



Figure 3: The forest is an artificial space. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

In this way, the film marks the forest, in which the majority of the film's action takes place, as a stand-in for all the meanings American culture has invested in "the wilderness" in the course of the last four hundred years rather than a re-presentation of woods in the real world. Of course, nature is inevitably "a recipient of social values and . . . a social construct" (Pugh, 1988, p. 2). As such, nature is always embedded in human discourses and primarily serves to define the human. Yet rather than simply denying the material reality of nature, *Cabin* capitalizes on nature's symbolic dimension in an attempt to convey the idea that as soon as (material) nature is transported into the semiosphere, it is reduced to a sign—one sign among thousands of others. The movie thus suggests that "we have become strangely alienated" from "this material world in which we live" (Gifford, 1996, p. 29).

In addition, *Cabin* plays with established notions of "nature" and confounds viewer expectations. Although the movie's woods may invoke all sorts of possible meanings of forests (and, at the end of the day, these spaces are dangerous—albeit not in the ways expected), they are also quite the opposite of the dangerous forests, as traditionally imagined. *Cabin*'s woods are *not* places in which wild animals roam and threaten one's life; they are *not* places untouched by civilization; and they are *not* places uninterrupted by modern technologies, but rather *created by them*. Notably, Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads

back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, 2001, p. 220). Hence, the uncanniness of *Cabin*’s woods emerges not so much from the negative connotations with which American cultural practice has charged the wilderness, but rather from the ways in which *Cabin*’s forests deviate from the familiar trope of the uncanny woods. *Cabin*’s woods highlight the interconnectedness between nature and culture rather than their separation. Furthermore, the movie’s reliance on well-established horror tropes elicits a feeling of déjà vu, a “repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere” (Freud, 2001, p. 237). Finally, the evidently artificial and virtual nature of *Cabin*’s woods turns a primarily epistemological anxiety into an ontological one by generating an “uncanny effect” that results from the eradication of “the distinction between imagination and reality” (Freud, 2001, p. 244).

The constructed nature of *Cabin*’s wilderness also becomes manifest in the movie’s production ethos and its related aesthetics. While many scenes were shot on location just outside Vancouver, British Columbia, in studios equipped with actual trees as well as miniatures, *Cabin* also features several scenes in which the woods were computer-generated. Importantly, digital filmmaking distances pro-filmic “nature” from its representation in the world of film. While cinematic realism was traditionally linked to what Peter Wollen referred to as the “integral objecthood of nature, existing as a pure being” (1976, p. 11), which the film camera simply captures rather than produces, digital images lose (or, at the very least, loosen) this connection to

the real (“natural”) world. Whereas analogue film, as an emblem of modern(ist) progress, is inherently linked with anthropocentric discourses, digital cinema, William Brown has suggested, has qualities that question the centrality of the human. Human characters, he has argued, “no longer stand out as unique agents against the space that surrounds them” (2013, p. 2). Instead, human characters are embedded into the world, which highlights their entanglement with different kinds of animate and inanimate entities. In addition, “the malleability of space in digital cinema” introduces “a democratization of space that allows us not to privilege certain points over others” (2013, p. 50). In this way, the very nature of digital cinema questions anthropocentrism and allows motion pictures to more easily draw viewers’ attention to the more-than-human elements displayed on the screen.

Cabin’s world is characterized by the spatial malleability and indefinability typical of digital cinema. The cabin’s construction exemplifies this plasticity. Similar to the house on Ash Tree Lane in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), which is described as a “spatial rape” (2000, p. 55), since the “interior of the house exceeds the exterior . . . by 5/16” (2000, p. 32), the inside of *Cabin*’s titular cabin is bigger than its outside, even though none of the characters seems to notice. Tellingly, in one of the first scholarly publications on *House of Leaves*, N. Katherine Hayles suggested that the book’s titular house is “resistant . . . to logical

mapping” (2002, p. 784). The same argument may be made about *Cabin*’s cabin and its surroundings. This idea is epitomized in a sequence which begins with Marty sitting in his room reading a collected volume of the early-twentieth-century comic *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland* (tellingly a tale about the fluidity of time and space). Suddenly, Marty can hear a female voice saying, “I’m gonna go for a walk” (Goddard, 2011). Although Marty protests that he is not “a puppet” which the spectral voice can manipulate and that he is “the boss of [his] own brain” (Goddard, 2011), he still ends up leaving the cabin. He looks toward the sky, which is completely black, and remarks, “I thought there’d be stars” (Goddard, 2011). Even though Marty may not realize the full implications of his statement, it draws the viewers’ attention to the simulated environment’s lack of spatial markers, thereby turning the cabin and its surrounding area into what Marc Augé (1995) has referred to as a “non-place.” Whereas place usually anchors meaning, this connection is lost in the artificial place in the middle of the woods, thus underscoring the uncanny qualities of this (non-)place, which is simultaneously familiar and strange.

Katherine A. Wagner (2013/14) has argued that the college students’ inability to make sense of their places in the diegetic world and their lack of control over their lives expresses an anxiety about the exhaustion of “cultural and individual identities.” Although Wagner’s observation is astute, the lack of serviceable spatial markers also creates a feeling of

directionlessness (in terms of geography more so than purpose); of being lost, which only adds to the characters' clichéd behavior and deprives them of any agency and power they might seem to have. In combination, alienation and powerlessness move identification away from the human characters and the audience's interest toward the characters' (digital) environment. This shift results in an increased awareness of the constructedness of the world the characters inhabit and exposes the degree to which the "woods" have been both fabricated and manipulated. This re-focusing on the surroundings acknowledges that our understanding of "nature" is a social construct and suggests that humankind has misused its dominion over the planet.

III. Of Girls and Wolves: Objectifying Nature

This history of humanity's dominion over the planet is a history of man's subjection not only of the more-than-human world, but also of other human beings: "For centuries, generic 'Man' . . . and man . . . could only establish himself by exclusion of all his defining others," Manuela Rossini has aptly pointed out (2014, p. 113). This principle was key to the establishment of the United States, as the Founding Fathers not only sought to bring "civilization to the 'savages,' both Native Americans and African slaves," but also aspired to rule "over the natural world" (Semonin, 2000, p. 13).

Cabin begins to address this issue when Holden sees a painting depicting a hunting scene in his room. Several men and their dogs are shown killing and disemboweling a goat, while a man in the distance observes the bloody spectacle (Figure 4), thereby presenting a visual reminder of how animals have been objectified in American culture. This objectification is not surprising, for culture, as Sherry Ortner has remarked, presents the means through which “humanity attempts to assert control over nature.” As she continues, “the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can . . . transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes” (1974, p. 73).



Figure 4: The painting in the cabin visualizes both the spectacle of violence and the objectification of nature. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

Holden feels increasingly uncomfortable when looking at the painting and decides to move it aside. Yet behind the painting waits an even more uncomfortable sight—a one-way mirror, clearly meant to render possible the observation of people in the next room without them noticing. After putting away the painting he stared at, Holden can now gaze at Dana, who begins to change her clothes in the adjacent room, unaware of being watched. However, Holden is too much of a “gentleman” and therefore makes his presence known. Tellingly, the motion picture moves from the objectification of dying animals to the fetishization of a female body undressing. In this way, *Cabin* establishes “conceptual connections between the manipulation of women and the nonhuman” (Buell, Heise, and Thornber, 2011, p. 425).

This idea is explored further during a round of Truth or Dare some time later in the film. In the game, Marty dares Jules to “make out with that moose over there” (Goddard, 2011). “That moose,” however, is the obviously fake head of a dead wolf. That Marty cannot differentiate between a moose and a wolf not only reveals how stoned he is, but also how little contact with nature he has likely had in his life. The overly sexualized wolf-kissing scene that ensues is one of several scenes starring Jules in which the narrative effectively grinds to a halt, seemingly supporting Laura Mulvey’s well-known argument that the woman’s “visual presence tends to . . . freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (1975, p. 11). In many ways, the

scenes in which Jules’s body is explicitly “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” are similar to one another (Mulvey, 1975, p. 13). However, there is one crucial difference. The sex scene, which occurs a little later in the film, is repeatedly intercut with Hadley and Sitterson’s reflexive comments and framed in a highly meta-cinematic fashion (Figure 5), thereby distancing viewers and making it practically impossible to derive pleasure from the scene. Yet when Jules kisses the wolf, the cinematic apparatus fully embraces the objectification of both Jules and the animal and simultaneously explores the voyeuristic and exploitative gaze through the movie’s apparent self-reflexivity.



Figure 5: Viewers are distanced from the on-screen action by the film’s meta-cinematic layers. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

Due to its threatening look (Figure 6), the wolf's head serves as a cunning reminder of how dangerous the beast can be to man. Since, according to Barbara Creed, "all images of menacing, toothed mouths [...] suggest the *vagina dentata*" (1993, p. 107), the animal threatens masculine power in ways similar to the woman, as both of their meanings are rooted in castration anxiety. Whereas Jules represents the lack of a penis, the wolf stands for taking the (symbolic) penis.



Figure 6:

The wolf's head communicates a number of different meanings. Screenshot from the *The Cabin in the Woods* UHD Blu-ray released in 2017 © Lions Gate.

Cabin sets up additional parallels between Jules and the wolf. In the Truth or Dare scene, Jules ends up French-kissing the wolf (reduced to a taxidermically preserved head), with the rest of the gang watching in silent awe. As Jules playfully looks the taxidermied wolf in the eyes, she

silently comes to understand that her objectification is akin to the wolf's. Since Jules's recognition of her similarity to the wolf is depicted from her point of view, the movie implies that the viewer (who thus also comes face to face with the beast) is also like the wolf. While this equation of viewer and predator suggests the presence of an instinct-driven animal inside all of us, *Cabin* takes the idea a step further. The human being is an animal, which, due to the carefully constructed differences between man and animal and the attendant subjection to anthropocentrism, "reflects," as Jacques Derrida has highlighted, a negative "image of man . . . back to him" (2004, p. 73).

Most likely, the taxidermied wolf did not die of natural causes; rather, humans hunted and killed the beast. Whereas a wolf killing its prey is part of the circle of life, human hunters slaughtering the wolf for no particular reason other than showboating that they *can* kill the beast presents the ultimate form of demonstrating and enacting human power over nonhuman animals. Human beings have turned the dead animal into an object they can gaze at, like the numerous other hunting trophies with which the cabin's walls are "decorated." As such, the wolf's head functions as a fetish object, which "becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 14), while still communicating the notion of once having been a threat to human lives. Tellingly, in her book on taxidermy and longing, Rachel Poliquin explains that "[t]axidermy is motivated by the desire to preserve particular creatures, but what motivates *that* desire is something far

more nebulous than the animal on display: the coveted object both is and is not the driving impulse” (2012, p. 7). As a result, the desired object disappears behind a wall erected by a chain of signification.

Of course, the desires motivating taxidermy transform over time. Likewise, the desires and meanings people project onto the stuffed animal change. Whatever specific reasons might have driven someone to put the wolf on display, on a general level, the taxidermied wolf symbolizes humankind’s desire to control wildlife, which mirrors the ways in which the “puppeteers” seek to control “nature” by fabricating it. But even the control of the simulation of nature they have created cannot be maintained for more than a limited period of time. Crucially, both the “puppeteers” and the characters inhabiting the virtual forest come to understand that human control over nature is nothing but an illusion.

IV. The End of the (Simulated) World As We Know It

The film’s ending quite literally crushes this illusion. As becomes clear in the course of the movie, the college students are the latest in a long series of sacrifices made to the Ancient Ones. However, Marty refuses to be killed, which effectively “triggers a mass slaughter” (Canavan 2013/14). In the end, one of the ancient gods eradicates the cabin, the surrounding woods, and—

so it is implied—life across the globe. The fate of America becomes the fate of humanity, as American exceptionalism transforms into universalism.

To be sure, one might argue that the apocalypse “has been part and parcel of American cultural expression since the Puritans” and provides a vehicle to sidestep “radical change” (Sharrett, 1996, 269). After all, the end of the world usually “permits a new beginning” (Lisboa, 2011, p. 56) which has “the prototypes of old errors” inbuilt (Lisboa, 2011, p. 54). However, the apocalypse featured in *Cabin* proves different. Unlike a typical apocalyptic tale, *Cabin* does not imagine a new beginning, but rather ends on a black screen—the visual equivalent of nothingness. Following Frederick Buell, one might argue that such an ending is characteristic of imaginations of the eco-apocalypse, which offer “no saving message” (2014, p. 263). Indeed, the film simply ends with an Ancient One crushing the cabin and the surrounding woods. These Ancient Ones are thinly disguised allusions to H. P. Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones. Like Lovecraft’s deities, the Ancient Ones are creatures beyond human understanding who invade the human domain from deep space and deep time. This aspect is important insofar as “Lovecraft’s cosmic horror . . . resonates with paradigm shifts in philosophies of ecological ethics” (MacCormack, 2016, loc. 3971). Lovecraft teaches his readers that the universe will always elude human comprehension and control. This “out-of-controllness,” as Nigel Clark might call it (1997, p. 80), troubles humankind, as it reveals that our species is “as much at the mercy of the

random forces of becoming and self-overcoming, of natural selection, as any other form of life” (Grosz, 2011, p. 24).

This lack of differentiation between the human and nonhuman world and the attendant acknowledgment of the interconnections between human lives and the nonhuman world characterize the Anthropocene. After all, in the current age, humankind appears to have god-like powers, as it has become a planetary force. At the same time, however, humanity is overpowered by forces it purportedly mastered decades, if not centuries, ago and even outsmarted by its own creations. In the Anthropocene, humankind may have its fingers in basically everything and may be extremely powerful in terms of shaping the fate of the entire planet, but since every single human being is entangled in complex systems they fail to understand, this power is, at the end of the day, for naught. Human agency is nothing but an illusion, as the Ancient Ones’ power to wipe our species off this planet demonstrates. From the Ancient Ones’ cosmic perspective, human lives are insignificant.

Cabin’s apparent use of computer-generated images in its concluding moments supports this idea. These digital images underline that neither are actual woods destroyed nor actual human beings killed. The movie imagines the annihilation of the technological and semiotic apparatus instead of the eradication of life as such, as the hand of the god becomes indicative of

a desire to put an end to the human drive to create discourses not only to endow the world with meaning, but also to separate humankind from “reality” through various layers of signification. In this way, the concluding moments of *Cabin* critique the idea that “[o]ur discourse with the real has become a discourse with the represented image” (Le Grice, 2001, p. 311).

Cabin links this meta-discourse about representation and simulation with the notion that nature is “quite profoundly a human creation” (Cronon, 1996, p. 7). The film does so by depicting woods which are enmeshed in cultural assumptions about “the malevolent forest” and by self-reflexively employing digital visual effects in the recreation of the area surrounding the cabin. Tapping into the potential of digital cinema to not simply inquire into the nature of anthropocentrism, but to overcome the human-centered perspective, which is subjected to the (human-created) image, the concluding demolition of the titular cabin and woods becomes a symbolic gesture which seeks to imagine a return to tangible, material reality. However, this return requires the symbolic eradication of humanity.

Lawrence Buell has concluded that “apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (1995, p. 285). Tellingly, a few moments before the hand of the divine creature breaks through the soil, Marty declares: “Humanity—it’s time to give someone else a chance,” echoing his earlier pronouncement that “[s]ociety needs to crumble—we’re all just too chickenshit to let it”

(Goddard, 2011). Throughout its narrative, *Cabin* repeatedly underlines the ways in which mankind has exploited others—primarily for pleasure and financial gain. In particular, the film’s employment of a decidedly natural-yet-artificial setting emphasizes how this exploitation relies upon “the aid of machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 549). By utilizing the cosmic force of the Ancient Ones in its concluding frames, the film suggests that the disappearance of what John Gray has called “homo rapiens” (2002, p. 151) would entail the disappearance of man-made discourses of power. The question which thus emerges is whether this eradication of humankind would be such a bad end-of-the-human-made-world scenario, after all. Indeed, as Thomas Ligotti has provocatively put it, “If we vanished tomorrow, no organism on this planet would miss us” (2010, p. 221).

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