3 The right to a narrative

Metamodernism, paranormal horror, and agency in *The Cabin in the Woods*

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Horror, writes director David Cronenberg, is a genre of confrontation (Stone 2001, 5). Bryan Stone, scholar of religion and film, adds that horror startles us by chipping away at our most basic assumptions, such as the trustworthiness of authority figures or our own mind's ability to discern reality (Ibid.). This disorientation can be exacerbated when paranormal material is embedded with the horror genre. Monsters, aliens, and other supernatural agents lead characters, and therefore viewers, to confront their fears of powerlessness when beset by forces that may control us or pose other existential threats to our sense of security and well-being.

The storyline of Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard's 2012 film *The Cabin in the Woods* (*Cabin* hereafter) does something more, however, than simply confront us in the manner that Cronenberg and Stone describe. The film's protagonists are neither conventional victims nor conventional heroes. In the face of an apocalyptically dire situation, the characters (at least those who survive) manage to reclaim their agency and take back the power to narrate their own experiences. *Cabin* therefore pushes against the conventional boundaries of both horror and paranormal genres and even creates another category, one distinct from so-called postmodern horror films, such as the *Scream* and *Scary Movie* franchises to which it has often been compared.

We suggest that *Cabin*'s novelty is best understood in the epistemic[1] context in which it was made, namely *metamodernism*, a term that has been used to describe the contemporary response to the limitations of postmodernism, as well as those of modernism and premodernism that preceded it. Postmodern horror films can be distinguished from most of their classic predecessors by their employment of intertextuality and reflexivity. As Kristopher Woofter and Jasie Stokes, quoting Philip Brophy, explain, "The contemporary horror film knows that you've seen it before; it knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know" (Woofter and Stokes 2013). *Cabin*'s story builds on such techniques but yields a markedly different tone. Examining *Cabin* as a metamodern cultural artifact, we will show why its treatment of the paranormal cannot be fully explained in terms of the postmodern readings that many critics have employed.

Viewers and critics have differed in how they understand the film's use of reflexivity. Noting that *Cabin* "anticipates audience familiarity with its seemingly recycled plot and references to other horror films," Joe Lipsett observed that "genre-savvy" viewers generally appreciated the film's reflexive innovations, while other groups found it confusing or disagreeable (Lipsett 2013). Moreover, some reviewers have presumed that a film's aesthetic consistency with past conventions is the standard for judging its success or failure. A *New York Times* review, for example, complained that in *Cabin*, "[a] wink can sometimes undermine a scare. . . . Too much overt cleverness has a way of spoiling dumb, reliable thrills" (Scott 2012).

Dumb and *reliable*, however, are not what one associates with the writing team of Whedon and Goddard, who collaborated to write the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and also its spin-off, *Angel* (1999–2004). No less than these groundbreaking productions, *Cabin* refuses to declare its stance as either a horror or humor film, an ironic or a straightforward tale. If it is difficult to locate the film within a single genre or to pin down its message, it may be because the film has opened up a new space for "both/and" interpretations.

Cabin is also unique in the way it incorporates the paranormal. We were hard-pressed to find examples of other horror films that include both intertextuality *and* paranormal elements. For their own part, *Scream* and *Scary Movie* do not include supernatural occurrences; the horror is inflicted upon humans by humans. But in *Cabin*, as we will discuss, intertextuality coexists alongside paranormal themes that transport viewers into a realm that is different from everyday life, one that works to fix their attention on the fabricated world of the film in spite of its ironic self-reflexivity.

Before turning to a further discussion of metamodernism and its relevance to *Cabin*, it is helpful first to recall the basic contours of the film's plot. The story revolves around two main groups of human characters: five college students on a weekend getaway at a cabin in the woods and a team of technicians who work in the control room at "The Facility," where they surveil and manipulate the behavior of the students. The technicians are charged with constructing a prescribed scenario that eventuates in the students' "punishment" and death in order to fulfill an age-old contract with ancient underground gods, who threaten to destroy the world if their appetite for ritual cruelty is not sated annually. A third group of nonhuman characters includes the monstrous, paranormal creatures that are being guided remotely by the control room technicians.

The students, we learn, were chosen to represent five archetypes: "The Virgin" (Dana Polk, played by Kristen Connolly), "The Whore" (Jules Louden, played by Anna Hutchison), "The Scholar" (Holden McCrea, played by Jesse Williams), "The Athlete" (Curt Vaughan, played by Chris Hemsworth), and "The Fool" (Marty Mikalski, played by Fran Kranz). The control room technicians are led by two middle-aged men, Gary Sitterson (Richard Jenkins) and Steve Hadley (Bradley Whitford). Another character,

a younger man known simply as Truman (Brian J. White), is a new security officer in the control room. As he learns what is required on the job, Truman's reactions range from cautious and skeptical to horrified and create a moral juxtaposition to Sitterson and Hadley's callous deportment.

The film alternates between the points of view of the students and the technicians, with each group treated as protagonists despite the fact they have opposing agendas. As the students come to understand the true nature of their predicament – that their malevolent reality is in fact a fabrication – the technicians are confronted by the possibility of failing in their jobs, which would result not only in their own deaths but in the end of humanity. The film reaches its climax when a previously unseen character, "The Director" (Sigourney Weaver), confronts the two surviving students, Dana and Marty, and asks them to make a ridiculous choice: either play the roles they've been assigned, sacrificing themselves to uphold the rules of the imposed cosmic structure, or stay true to their friendship and moral compasses, a decision that will bring about the annihilation of the human race.

The epistemes: tradition, modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism

As we have already suggested, metamodernism is the proposed successor to the postmodern episteme. While many readers will already be familiar with the division of 20th-century history into "modern" and "postmodern" periods, it is important to clarify how we are using these terms, as both the notion of the metamodern and its relevance to the paranormal depend upon them. Let's begin with the term "episteme" itself, which we are using to refer to the overarching category in which all of these periods belong. Other scholars have used such alternative terms as "paradigm," "zeitgeist," or "structure of feeling" to delineate one cultural age from the next.[2] But we prefer Michel Foucault's concept of episteme, as it allows us to talk about the unexamined premises that both inform and constrain the way a particular society understands "truth" and "knowledge" (Foucault 1994, xxii–xxiv). In short, an episteme denotes a society's fundamental assumptions about reality, which structure the full range of its cultural activity, spanning the arts, the sciences, and philosophy.

Chronologically, the epistemic shifts that pertain to our analysis of the paranormal correspond to the beginning of the 20th century (for the birth of modernism), the mid-20th century (for the advent of postmodernism), and the beginning of the 21st-century (for the emergence of metamodernism).[3] In more cultural terms, all of these epistemes define themselves against the notion of "tradition" (or, alternatively, "premodernism"), which in broad terms refers to a mindset that prevailed in different cultures prior to their modernization. Tradition endeavors to preserve communal knowledge as it is passed down from one generation to the next and to stabilize an individual's place within established social institutions. With regard to paranormal

entities in particular, traditional cultures typically attest to their existence in myths and folk tales of supernatural beings (e.g., gods or monsters) that go unquestioned. The paranormal is simply assumed to be real or to have been real at some point in the past.

The artistic and intellectual breakthroughs of the modernist period are characterized by an attraction to human invention and attentiveness to the structures undergirding surface phenomena. Modernist art forms are distinguished by their challenge to conventional representations of the world in favor of depictions that reveal purportedly "deeper truths." Modernist films and popular culture thus tend to represent paranormal phenomena as symbolic rather than "real." In other words, the paranormal is not what it appears to be; it is variously depicted as the product of trickery, the manifestation of a scientific process or law, or the symptom of an underlying psychological disorder (e.g., the displacement of wish fulfillment or a cognitive malfunction).

Postmodernism takes one step further in its deconstruction of inherited knowledge, rejecting modernism's own claims to objective truth, and thus undermining any attempt to assert a universal and stable sense of reality. Postmodern films are thus characterized by their eschewal of tidy "Hollywood endings," preferring stories that leave questions unanswered. They also often employ ironic humor, reflecting a hyperawareness of (and suspicion about) all forms of representation, as well as intertextuality, reminding the viewers that they are, in fact, "just" watching a film. A postmodern horror film will accordingly combine homage with an implicit mockery of the genre's conventional tropes, ones that characters in modernist films are doomed to fall for, time and time again. *A spooky cabin in the woods? What could possibly go wrong?* The audience, privy to the screenwriter's and director's in-joke, chuckles along with the ironic subtext of a postmodern horror flick. As we will see, *Cabin* uses but then clearly differentiates itself from these kinds of postmodern conventions.

In the same way that the overconfidence of modernism led to the emergence of a postmodern critique, many have argued that there came a point, roughly around the beginning of the 21st-century, when postmodern sensibilities had "overstayed their welcome," leading to the emergence of a post-postmodern episteme.[4] Two influential theorists of this development, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, explain metamodernism as a new cultural and artistic sensibility that "oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 2). Greg Dember has explained the progression away from postmodernism somewhat differently. "The central motivation of metamodernism," he proposes, "is to protect interior, subjective *felt experience* from the ironic distance of postmodernism, the scientific reductionism of modernism, and the prepersonal inertia of tradition" (Dember 2018, emphasis in original).

Seen this way, oscillation – or braiding, as we like to refer to it – between epistemes is just one aspect of the metamodern sensibility among many.[5]

While scholars may describe metamodernism differently, various academics have agreed that a certain set of cultural artifacts seems to exemplify the new episteme. For example, works by filmmakers Miranda July, Wes Anderson, and Michel Gondry are frequently cited as exemplary of a metamodern sensibility.[6] Linda C. Ceriello has written about Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as an early example of metamodern television that demonstrates how the paranormal can function to "protect" a work from reductive or strictly ironic interpretations (Ceriello 2018[a]). In *Buffy*, this protection results in the creation of entirely different kinds of monsters, which are drawn with a level of interiority to match that of human protagonists and which may evince friendly, quirky, even heroic characteristics.

A metamodern reading of *The Cabin in the Woods*

Having clarified these epistemic distinctions, we can now turn to three main aspects of *The Cabin in the Woods* that strike us as distinctively metamodern. These are, first, the theme of the fight for interiority and the right to one's own narrative; second, the utilization of what Raoul Eshelman calls the double frame; and third, the braiding or combining of different epistemic understandings of reality.

Like many other horror and paranormal films, *Cabin* includes a band of youths as its protagonists. A weekend adventure for these college kids becomes a forced performance of sacrifice – their own! – to satiate the bloodlust of some sleeping gods. What sets these students apart from the young protagonists of other horror movies, however, is their ongoing reclamation of personal interiority. From the outset, they inhabit a world that both presents opportunities for them to make choices and also forecloses them. But in the end, Dana and Marty, the two surviving students, exercise the ultimate agency in rejecting the entire premise of the game in which they are, unwittingly, the key performers.

Equally important, the film as a whole resists postmodern readings that would treat the youth and their situation merely as horror-film tropes. In the opening scene, we are presented with evidence that Jules and Curt are both more intellectually complex than the "Whore" and the "Athlete" stereotypes that the ritual enforcers have assigned them to. In the final scene, Dana, "The Virgin," clarifies to The Director with a snort that she is not. And Marty, "The Fool," seen getting stoned in nearly every scene, comes across as the most sensible member of the crew, indeed the only one who figures out the workings of the game. This emphasis on the students as unique persons, who transcend the roles foisted upon them, becomes an integral part of the film's defense of individual interiority.

In the final scene, Marty and Dana are put in the position of deciding whether humanity lives or dies. The Director, who appears only when things

have gone seriously awry, now begrudgingly fills in the details of their situation: "You've been chosen to be sacrificed for the greater good. Look, it's an honor. So forgive us . . . and let us get on with it." While it has appeared throughout most of the story that the students are passive victims, here we see that the two have the power to determine the very survival of the species. The Director tries to convince them that they must submit to authority and tradition, but the students push back:

DIRECTOR: The sun will rise in eight minutes. If you live to see it, the world will end.
MARTY: Maybe that's the way it ought to be. Maybe it's time for a change.
DIRECTOR: We're not talking about change. We're talking about the agonizing death of every human soul on the planet. . . . You can die with them. Or you can die *for* them.
MARTY: Gosh, they're both so enticing . . .

Marty's smart-aleck remark suggests that it does matter whether they choose to accept their role in this reality, even as they come to understand that the larger narrative into which they have been cast is already written. And yet, as metamodern heroes, they refuse to believe they have no creative agency within it. Dana and Marty's choice to extricate themselves, and in effect, all potential future victims, from the system of "archetypologization" into which they have been forced is perhaps the ultimate expression of personal agency. Goddard and Whedon (2012) have explained why this is a crucial sentiment:

DREW GODDARD: Marty's character is the soul of this movie. . . . [H]e doesn't care about the bigger picture; he cares about saving his friend.
JOSS WHEDON: . . . there's a level where you have to operate both ways. I don't disagree with saving the world, but what [Marty is] saying is, "If at some point in order to maintain order, we have to become so cruel . . ."

With their decision, it is now certain that though Dana and Marty have fought off every demon, monster, and human antagonist that has come their way, they will die with the rest of the human world. During what we assume are their final moments alive, they pass a joint back and forth.

DANA: I am so sorry I almost shot you. I probably wouldn't have.
MARTY: I am sorry I let you get attacked by a werewolf and ended the world.
DANA: You were right. Humanity . . . [blows out smoke in a cynical "pfft"] It's time to give someone else a chance.

Even if their logic is questionable – what surviving entity will receive this "chance" if humanity is gone? – the young people's choice to spend their last

minutes together is a metamodern moment of enormous import. Though no one actually "saves the day," the students are vindicated in two senses: they are ultimately innocent within the confines of the system, and the primacy of their own ordinary reality is restored.

Scenes of surprising moral complexity also figure in the storyline of control-room technicians Sitterson and Hadley, portrayed as regular-Joe, white-collar office colleagues and also as mad scientists. Careful viewers will note that their portrayal in the first act as stock characters capable of outrageous cruelty gives way in the second and third acts to a recognition of their sense of duty with respect to the job they must do. Importantly, the filmmakers give protagonist status to the students and the technicians alike. Commenting on a scene in which the students are trying to escape and the technicians are trying to stop them, Whedon suggests, "You are rooting for both of them. You are absolutely desperate that [the students] get through that tunnel and you're desperate that Sitterson gets his job done" (Whedon and Goddard 2012). Thus comes the insight that the technicians are, in their own odd way, heroes with the morally complicated job of maintaining world order, albeit within a system that requires violence and suffering. As Goddard comments,

> I don't even view them as good guys and bad guys, because at the end of the day, if you look at this movie, both sides are right. . . . These are all just people. They believe what they believe for a reason and their reason is not ridiculous.
>
> (Whedon and Goddard 2012)

In his book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, Raoul Eshelman presents a theory of how post-postmodern artworks safeguard sincere or irony-free interpretations against a reader's potential cynicism. Eshelman proposes the notion of the double frame, or two-tiered narrative structure. The outer frame will often be a fantastical world of some sort, with its own unitary rules for how things work. Outer frames are totalizing, meaning the reader has to accept all of it as a package, or none of it at all. The inner frame is the emotional logic of the events of the story and the characters' motivations. The result of the two frames locking together is that the reader/viewer is forced inside the world that the characters inhabit and is then compelled to experience the interiority or emotional truths of the characters. In Eshelman's words, the reader is forced ". . . to make a choice between the untrue beauty of the closed work or the open, banal truth of its endless contextualization" (Eshelman 2008, 37). In contrast to both modernist and postmodernist works, which in different ways work against taking their subject matter at face value, performatist works use specific aesthetic techniques to cut the reader off from any context outside the text itself. By supplying access to the characters' subjectivity, the double frame effectively side-steps the relativism and irony that postmodern readers have arguably been trained to apply to texts.

Cabin employs a slightly unusual version of the double frame, in that the outer frame takes shape around the narrative as the film progresses, with the last piece only falling into place in the final scene. Thus the viewer is likely to experience the film through a more postmodern lens as it begins and then to gradually understand its performatist/metamodern perspective as the story unfolds. For example, during the first act, the film plays with clichéd horror movie tropes in an overt and obvious manner. Here the viewer is indeed reminded of films such as the *Scream* and *Scary Movie* franchises, which remind viewers that they are "just" watching a movie, and thus preclude any sincere emotional reaction to the events depicted on the screen. But the second act of *Cabin* subverts such postmodern expectations, as it becomes apparent to the viewer (though not yet to all of the characters) that the frightening things happening to the students are caused by the technicians. We are now moving away from postmodernism's hallmark strategy of using intertextuality for its own sake. Suddenly, the replication of existing horror-film tropes has an explanation within the film's own storyline. This distinguishes *Cabin* from *Scream* and *Scary Movie*, in which intertextuality forces the viewer to draw on other texts outside the plot.

The third act of *Cabin* commences as the surviving characters discover the underground elevator system beneath the woods and become aware that the horrific things happening to them are being caused by a human organization. They now begin to piece together the causes of all the chaos in the midst. Here again, the viewers are slightly ahead of the characters in gaining a full picture of what is happening. But when The Director appears to provide Dana and Marty with the backstory, we are *all* caught up together, and the film's outer frame – that narrative structure that pushes the viewer away from any postmodern, ironic interpretation – comes to its full completion. Concurrently, the classic cinema monsters that have, thus far, elicited cries of "horror movie trope!" now emerge as all-too-real in "the Purge" scene: a gruesome bloodbath wherein the full bestiary of paranormal creatures housed within The Facility springs loose, devouring nearly every human character. The movie's paranormal elements now turn out to have an overarching reason for being included in the plot, justified by the mythos of the film itself. This information reorients viewers' understanding of *Cabin*'s familiar horror-film tropes. We no longer react to the intertextual references with merely a "Ha ha, so clever," but instead (or also) with a more palpably felt appreciation for the characters' experience. We are compelled by the enclosing double frame to inhabit their emotional realities in an earnest, as opposed to an ironic, way.

Another crucial element of metamodernism cited by some theorists is the oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities.[7] We prefer the alternative term "braiding," first because it clearly suggests the inclusion of more than two positions. We can speak of the braiding of modernism not only with postmodernism but also with premodernism/tradition. Further, the terminology of braiding points to the fact that no single episteme within

a given work of art can claim ultimate interpretative authority. Readers/viewers can evaluate the perspective of each episteme from the vantage point of another and can ultimately claim their own felt experience of the work as legitimate. *Cabin*'s purposeful combining of a variety of epistemic sensibilities not only differentiates it from postmodern horror films. The intentional braiding of perspectives also allows the challenges, and the humanity, of the characters to emerge to the forefront of the narrative, suggesting that even the horror genre can support a 21st-century ethos that is responsive to the integrity of individual perspectives and experience.

Summarizing the opening act of *Cabin*, one *New York Times* reviewer noticed that several "parallel conceits are set in motion," forcing the viewer to try and peer beyond "the narrative horizon and figure out what these incompatible sets of clichés have to do with each other" (Scott 2012). Such an assessment points to the importance, for both viewers and critics, of understanding the metastructure within which the events of the movie unfold. Some observers have characterized *Cabin*'s braided structure as nothing more than a collection of conflicting positions (Woofter 2014, 278). In contrast, we see the movie's intentional interplay of multiple perspectives, one that requires the audience to get a view "from all the seats," as reflective of a quintessentially metamodern stance.[8]

To clarify what it means for a film to be intelligible from more than one epistemic perspective, consider *Cabin's* deployment of paranormal elements. Whedon and Goddard have created an identifiably traditional cosmology in which the existence of nonhuman and undead creatures is taken as a given. They cannot be explained away by reference to some deeper truth or structure (e.g., as computer simulations) as they might be in a modernist narrative. There is nothing ironic or comical about them, as would be the case in a postmodern portrayal. Nor is there anything friendly or multivalent about the monsters, as we might see, a la *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in a metamodern depiction of a paranormal creature. Whedon and Goddard have chosen to depict the paranormal in a distinctively premodern way, as irreducibly real in its own right.

For most of the film, these beings hold all the human characters at their mercy, as the gods' uncompromising demands go unchallenged. Until, that is, the students gain some ontological understanding of their overall situation. Survival for the students, in other words, depends on their understanding how all the various parts of their cosmos – human and nonhuman, premodern and modern, systemic and individual – engage with one another. Once this framework begins to be clear, the young protagonists are able to influence the mechanisms already in motion and bring their own agency to bear. For example, it is only when Marty busts through from the cabin's cellar into The Facility (symbolizing, in effect, modernism's emancipation from the confining aspects of tradition) that crucial information about their world becomes available.

Kristopher Woofter has characterized *Cabin* as a "deeply cynical" film, declaring it a "decidedly bleak and bitter work" (Woofter 2014, 268; Woofter and Stokes 2013). Certainly this is a viable and not-altogether-unpopular interpretation, given its cataclysmic conclusion. Tony Venezia has added that the student protagonists are not only doomed because they are "easily manipulable" but also because the film reinforces a perspective that we are all hopelessly enmeshed in a mass-media-saturated hyper-reality (Venezia 2013, 415). We might add that the character of Truman, the one technician with moral qualms about his position, is bound to further disappoint viewers hoping for a Hollywood ending: he never emerges as the savior the audience might be longing for. The fact that he fails to avert tragedy can indeed be seen as a cynical commentary: the "true man" hardly makes a dent in the plot.

To whatever degree cynicism is present, however, *Cabin* is also a highly moralistic film. This becomes especially apparent when The Director emerges to reveal Dana and Marty's pivotal choice, but the film withholds any easy resolution. The fact that *Cabin* raises ethical quandaries that are not easily resolvable, provides no "right answer," and lacks a salvific figure who might save the day foregrounds moral and ethical questions for the viewer. This is signature Whedon. He seems to prefer to place his characters in difficult situations that demand a messy struggle, thereby engaging their humanity, rather than handing viewers ready-made solutions to complex and/or systemic problems.

As for Dana, our "final girl" who briefly considers shooting her friend Marty to save humanity (before she is derailed by a werewolf attack), the writers are clear that they portrayed her moral conundrum as a no-win situation and made her decision an ambiguous one. Speaking to whether Dana should have or would have sacrificed Marty, Whedon stated, "It's important to say that there is no right decision where she is. There's no decent way out. We don't want to come down on either side in that case" (Goddard, Whedon, and Bernstein 2012, 41). The ethical tensions in such scenes are part of what set the film's storytelling strategies apart from movies like *Scream* or *Scary Movie*. By avoiding the "easy out" of postmodern reflexivity – "It's all just a film" – *Cabin* provides viewers more challenging social and moral material to consider on their own.

In fact, even the outrageous violence in "The Purge" was not intended as an ironic nod to horror-film tropes but as an antiestablishment message. During this scene, the students push back against the blind faith of tradition and other forces that oppress them – in a literal sense, against the monsters, and in a figurative sense, against the formula in many horror movies that requires young victims to die without a struggle. According to Whedon, "There is a bloodbath because they tried to off these kids and they are getting payback for that" (Goddard, Whedon, and Bernstein 2012, 36). He elaborates further, explaining that,

> [s]ociety has dictated more and more . . . that it be young people punished for drugs and sex . . . that drives the plot of classic horror films. . . .

> This weird obsession with youth and sex, and at the same time this very puritanical desire to punish it . . . I think is unseemly and really, really creepy.
>
> (Goddard, Whedon, and Bernstein 2012, 42)

Goddard echoes the sentiment:

> As a people, why do we feel this need to objectify youth, and idealize youth, and then destroy youth? . . . It's something that's not new, it's not specific to our culture right now. We've been doing this throughout our time as humans. The question of why is . . . at the heart of *Cabin*. Why as an audience do we . . . like to pay money to watch kids get killed on screen? Why do we take these kids and put them into boxes and then dismiss them? There's something very interesting in those questions and that very much inspired *Cabin in the Woods*.
>
> (Murphy 2012)

Unlikely as it sounds, the filmmakers manage to braid their unremittingly apocalyptic ending with a vision of hope, highlighting how the students reclaim their agency, rewriting not only the roles into which they were cast but also the narrative of humanity's future.

As for the paranormal gods themselves, we might even go so far as to read them as an allegory for the immense challenges of operating in our interdependent, global society. On the one hand, separate gods rule different cultures, each one making unique demands on its people. As The Director explains: "The sleeping gods, the giants that live in the earth, that used to rule it . . . fought for a billion years and now they sleep. In every country, for every culture, there is a god to appease. As long as one sleeps, they all do." But if Goddard and Whedon remind us that it is best, even crucial, to let sleeping gods lie, they do not suggest that this is a simple task. Intentionality, technological ingenuity, and cooperation are all required. At the film's conclusion, traditional, modern, and postmodern narrative pieces braided together comprise a metamodern affirmation of individual felt experience that becomes an integral part of their survival.

Conclusion

As we have seen, one of the intriguing aspects of *Cabin* is that its focus is not entirely on monstrous, paranormal Others. Nor does it hinge upon demonized human antagonists who might feature as villains in a different movie. Whedon and Goddard purposely problematize the assumption that a class of nonhuman beings or a subset of humanity (and their behaviors) are strictly evil or amoral. Instead, their use of the double frame guides viewers to the individual interiority of the human characters, even as it works to undermine an ironic reading of the film. The circumstances of the young people in *Cabin* finally afford an odd kind of hopefulness in their elevation of personal agency.

The metamodern framework we have proposed here not only renders new readings of Goddard and Whedon's film but also suggests a new role for horror and/or paranormal cinema in the early 21st-century. Will *The Cabin in the Woods* be that film that comes along every so often and, in hindsight, "redefines the horror genre, stretches its boundaries, shocks us in new ways, or transforms existing conventions" (Stone 2001, 3)? Our metamodern reading suggests that it just may be, and that the cultural work performed by *Cabin* may portend new uses of the paranormal as the postmodern era gives way to a new episteme.

Notes

1 Whereas *epistemic* is sometimes employed as a shortened version of "epistemological," our specific usage here relates it to the Foucauldian term *episteme*, as we explain in our essay.
2 Vermeulen and van den Akker (2017) borrow from Raymond Williams's term *structure of feeling* to describe "a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural" (6).
3 Committing to iron-clad definitions and exact dates on these periods is of course a hazardous undertaking, since the defining qualities and dates can vary widely within specific areas of cultural development or expression. With this caveat in mind, our periodization seems nevertheless to "split the difference" pretty well.
4 While various terms have been suggested recently to replace the awkward "post postmodernism," *metamodernism* is the one that we feel is substantiated by the most robust theorization. Metamodern theory arises in the early 2000s first in the scholarship of Andre Furlani and Alexandra Balm (née Dumitrescu). It has come into wider use as of 2010, with the scholarly efforts of Vermeulen and van den Akker, whose work we reference here.
5 For explication of other metamodern methods, see Dember (2018). For more on the metamodern *life-as-movie* – a specific kind of hyper–self-reflexivity, see Ceriello (2018b, 108).
6 On Wes Anderson, Miranda July, and Michel Gondry as metamodern, see for example James MacDowell, "Quirky, Tone and Metamodernism." In *Notes on Metamodernism*, July 19, 2011. www.metamodernism.com/2011/07/19/quirky-tone-and-metamodernism/
7 For more on metamodern *oscillation* as a contemporary condition of feeling as if one is constantly reverberating between modern and postmodern sensibilities, see ch. 1, van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, eds., 2017.
8 For an analysis of how metamodern popular culture conveys such multiple perspectives, see Ceriello 2018[b].

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4 *The Dark Knight Rises*
Shamanic transformations in Gotham City

Jack Hunter

When we think of the two major comic book franchises, Marvel and DC Comics, two very different kinds of imagined worlds most likely come to mind. The Marvel Multiverse, true to its name, has been crafted as a marvelous or wondrous realm, a cosmos of bright and colorful worlds inhabited by fantastical superheroes with incredible extraordinary powers. Think, for example, of either the comic book or cinematic stories of the X-Men, the Avengers, Spider-Man, or Dr. Strange. When we consider the places and people of the DC Multiverse, whether these are portrayed in print or on the screen, it becomes clear that we are dealing with a world that is altogether *darker* and *grimier*. The entire storyline of Batman epitomizes this foreboding and even sinister sensibility of the entire DC oeuvre. To understand its noir-like edge, we need go no further than the labyrinthine streets of Gotham City, where outlandish and surreal crime lords – the Joker, Penguin, Riddler, Scarecrow, and Catwoman – rule ruthlessly over their subterranean and violent street gangs.

Since his creation by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939 for the fledgling issue of *Detective Comics*, the wildly popular figure of Batman has been an enigmatic and contradictory hero, at once a vigilante on the outskirts of society and a champion of justice (Morrison 2012, 17). In Grant Morrison's words, "[t]his fascinating new hero was horned like the Devil and most at home in darkness; a terrifying, demonic presence who worked on the side of the angels" (Morrison 2012, 26). Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet has gone so far as to describe Batman as "Superman's Gothic double" (Soltysik Monnet 2012, 96), although at first glance her comparison might not seem entirely accurate. After all, Batman is not a "superhero" in the sense that Superman is; he cannot fly faster than a speeding bullet or blast lasers from his eyes like the extraterrestrial hero from Krypton. Batman is just a man dressed up like a bat. He is the reclusive billionaire Bruce Wayne, compelled to live a double life by the pain and trauma of seeing his parents brutally murdered on the street when he was a boy, who simply uses his intellect and cunning to solve crimes and defeat his enemies (Coogan 2007, 32). And yet he is clearly more than an average human being. Batman is possessed of a certain kind