

## ISSUE NO. 3

# Toward a Zombie Epistemology: What it Means to Live and Die in Cabin in the Woods

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**Cabin in the Woods** (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsilFNNmkY>) (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012)

begins with fertility.

The movie opens in the middle of the most banal of office scenes, with two white-shirted white men futzing around in a break room. Hadley complains about his ongoing conflict with his partner over their potential child, while Sitterson extracts a coffee from a vending machine. Although Hadley and his partner are still in the process of trying to conceive, she has already begun child-proofing the house. Draping himself over a water cooler, Hadley describes it. “Dude, she did the drawers! We don’t even know if this whole fertility thing is going to work, and she screwed in these little jobbies where you can’t even open the drawers!”

Sitterson waves off the “nightmare” of the drawers. “Sooner or later,” he shrugs, they will be necessary; to him, Hadley’s future child is an inevitability, and Hadley’s partner’s impulse to protect it is natural. Hadley, on the other hand, views the whole process as a jinx. “It guarantees that we won’t get pregnant. And,” Hadley concludes, “it takes me about twenty minutes to get a fucking beer.”

This scene was part of the initial pitch for *Cabin in the Woods*; Joss Whedon originally explained to co-writer Drew Goddard that he wanted to start the movie “with two guys in a break room, talking about fertility” (Fernandez n.p.). The film is generally described as a meta commentary on the horror movie genre, deliberately identifying and satirizing common elements of horror films to comment on audience desires. (When the seemingly inevitable horror movie zombies appear, Hadley, Sitterson, and their colleagues view them as boring and yet incredibly good at their job: “they have a 100% clearance rate.”) Whedon himself describes his project as trying to figure out “why [horror] movies follow this pattern” (“Joss Whedon and Amy Acker”).

By beginning with a discussion of reproductive technologies, and continuing to focus as much on scientists and engineers as on cavorting coeds, Whedon answers this question with an indictment of the real-world institutions of modern science in all of their bureaucratic, banal, and globally-destructive glory. He answers horror with science (fiction), critiquing the methods through which we make knowledge about the world.

What is it about us, Whedon asks, that makes us so drawn to the voyeuristic slaughter of the young? Cabin makes us reckon with the violence that feminist and queer theorists have argued is at the foundation of our social world. It dims the screen to reveal the violence that, if it were eliminated, would destroy the civilized arrangements in which we place our faith and understand our futures. The ideology of Cabin is what James Scott has described as high modernism, “a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, ... the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws” (4). The staff in the cabin’s control room work all year to create the perfectly ordered sacrifice of a select few. This efficient combination of deaths, supposedly deserved, will keep the gods happy and ensure the survival of the rest of humanity. It’s the cost of doing business; they accept ritual sacrifice just as we accept a certain number of deaths and mutilations to industrial accidents, clinical experiments, or radiation exposures in order to keep the economy roiling and our civilization alive. In our high modernist, technocratic world, a certain quantity of deaths are “axiomatic,” written so completely into the functioning of modernity that to remove them would mean death for all, the death of our future.

Cabin answers Whedon’s questions with a far more unsettling premise than that typically used to explain away our horrific obsession. We are not answering the call of our reptilian brains, not looking to fight back against modern capitalism, not grappling with the threat of plague or radiation or chemical warfare. We want to watch teenagers being fed to zombies, selfishly, because we know that our own lives depend on it.

### **What does it mean to die?**

Queer theorists have begun to take a critical stance towards a dominant politics in contemporary western culture that makes appeals based on the projected needs of the future. Often, this future becomes ideologically embodied in the form of an idealized child. As Lee Edelman describes, our politics is in the service of a child who “remains the perpetual horizon, ... the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.” For that Child, our entire conservative politics “works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (7). Edelman characterizes this drive as society’s overwhelming reproductive futurism.

Judith Halberstam links such a reproductive futurism to the goals that are often espoused in the name of society's hypothetical future children. "Success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily," Halberstam writes, "to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2). Such success is specifically cast as a kind of prepared hopefulness where, by financially entangling individuals into particular family and community structures, we might be able to ward off whatever it is that is impending at this moment: global economic collapse, the death of the American family, etc. The imperative to work for the survival of future generations, rather than for happiness in the moment, makes it not only possible but a seeming inevitability that life must be for many people an exercise of sacrifice.

Hadley and Sitterson's opening conversation immediately establishes that *Cabin in the Woods* recognizes this worldview. Hadley's frustration with child-proofing mechanisms situates us within a world that recognizes that sacrifice for future children is an undeniable good. When Hadley whines about not being able to get a beer, we are supposed to recognize this as both funny and a little pathetic, a man-child learning to balance his own needs against his (future) child's. Sitterson plays the role of the wise elder in their interaction, reminding Hadley that the instinct to protect is "natural" and, by implication, right. Hadley, like all parents, must submit to the technological system of child-proofing, despite its impediments to his own happiness. To think otherwise—to be more concerned with his beer than with his child's safety—is mockingly immature and selfish.

So the scene is set.

After showing us the banal white-shirted workplace of Hadley and Sitterson, the film throws us into the saturated, summery world of five college students who banter their way into the movie's ostensible plot: a weekend trip to a cabin in the woods that will eventually go horribly, horribly wrong. As they are introduced, each character is deliberately positioned both as an archetype and as a subversion of type. Curt, for example, barges into Dana and Jules' conversation with a "Think fast!" and a thrown football, but immediately follows up with an educated opinion about Dana's coursework and a suggestion (rife with foreshadowing) about how to manipulate her professor's opinion. Jules, similarly, bops into Dana's room with a brash and sexual sensibility, but all of her denigrating comments about Dana's books are clearly sarcastic. The first thing we learn about her is that her blonde hair (typically so

meaningful) is brand new, an ephemeral fashion choice rather than a permanent identity marker.

Crucial to the movement of the movie's plot are the ways that these characters submit to or resist their most simple definitions: scholar, athlete, virgin, whore, and fool. For them to serve their purpose, they must be recognizable as an ideal type, but it must also be clear that something is amiss. The extent to which these characters are stereotypes is not of their own design; their personas, as well as their trip to the cabin, have been engineered by the scientists and managers that work with Hadley and Sitterson in their underground control room. The cabin itself has been made available by a mysterious cousin; the chemistry department laces Jules' blonde hair dye with a chemical to alter her state of mind; the control room pumps pheromones into the air and changes its temperature to influence their behavior. At all stages, their path is manipulated to put them in the right place at the right time. Each of them has a specific role to play in the unfolding of Cabin's primary ritual.

The ritual is, as will become clear, a ritual sacrifice. In the conceit of the film, the human world is built upon—and in the service of—evil gods who live beneath the earth's surface and demand a yearly blood sacrifice of the young. The organization for which Hadley and Sitterson work is the bureaucratic apparatus through which that sacrifice takes place. It works in the fashion of the other twentieth and twenty-first century institutions of science upon which it is modeled, segmenting its task into specialized units rife with a multitude of staff, including lab-coated professionals, mid-level managers, technicians, interns, and security guards. (The chemistry department handles mind-altering substances, for example; the demolitions department orchestrates cave-ins and other destruction; Hadley and Sitterson manage the control room; interns scuttle around making bets.) It incorporates a complicated, nearly unknowable technological infrastructure to complete its task, one which distances technicians both logistically and ethically from their messy work of murder. And with banal predictability, it is run as a workplace hierarchy. Each individual reports to a manager in turn, from the guard at the door to the Director at the top, who only intervenes in the mess of operations when absolutely necessary.

The only character who reliably subverts the institutions' intentions is Marty. An exaggerated stoner, Marty is the group's prophet, and ultimately savior, in his own way speaking, living, and dying Cabin in the Woods' queer truth. When he arrives to join the group at their Rambler RV, he rolls up in a beater car, windows down, smoking out of a

bong made from a modified stainless steel coffee mug. As his friends reprimand him, he irreverently schools them: “Statistical fact: cops will never pull over a man with a huge bong in his car. Why? They fear this man. They know he sees farther than they, and will bind them with ancient logics.” Later, once they are all in the Rambler and on their way, he expounds further: “That’s the whole point [of the trip]! Get off the grid... One goddamned weekend when they can’t global position my ass... Society is binding, right, it’s filling in the cracks with concrete. Everything is filed or recorded or blogged. Chips in our kids’ heads so they won’t get lost? Society needs to crumble, we’re all just too chicken-shit to let it.”

He holds up a large joint. “You will come to see things my way.”

This is Marty’s queer theory prominently on display. As Halberstam describes the project, “The Queer Art of Failure dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world”(2-3). As Edelman puts it, “at the heart of my polemical engagement” (and at the heart of Marty’s) “lies a simple provocation: that queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism”(3).

They see the ways that locking adults, and the children they supposedly serve, into a global technological system actually does little for their own good. You can hear the plaintiveness in Marty’s voice as he describes those chips in kids’ heads that keep them from being “lost,” from experiencing a world in which they might not be rigidly positioned.

Marty recognizes that this kind of futurist orientation is, as Edelman says, “always purchased at our expense,” (4) as well as at the expense of our future children. Despite our sacrifices in their name, our children also have little hope of ever making choices that would exempt them from sacrificing themselves either. Rather, the technological system serves itself. It conservatively serves to perpetuate itself, and with it those who are positioned as its wielders.

### **Cyborg epistemology**

In the original sense of the term, the world according to Cabin in the Woods is a straightforward (if incredibly logistically complex) cybernetic system. Each year five youths are sacrificed, their blood drained into the earth through a series of manually operated pipes, leaving the gods appeased and allowing humanity to begin its preparations for next year's ritual destruction. In this sense, every actor and actant in the film is a cyborg interacting with another human or technological piece of the system. This is especially true of the five youths chosen for slaughter. They are always controlling or being controlled by a mangle of people, chemicals, monsters, and various other technologies of command and control. [1]

To Donna Haraway, this very mangle provides the opportunity for transcendence — a transcendence not of the material world but rather of one's history and subjective baggage. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," she writes of the "border war" that has been created between the organic and the machine, and she sees the creation and employment of this dualism as one of the primary mechanisms through which inequality is made manifest and justified. In its place, she proposes a theory for understanding the world in a "non-naturalist" mode, "a world without gender" which would consequently be a world without birth or origin. For Haraway, the cyborg privileges the knowing, ironic self that imagines itself to be free of its origins because of the thoroughness of its embodied knowledge. Instead of a language of rebirth of the self, which connotes both biological sex and chance for a parental influence, Haraway's cyborgs cope with the world and its violence through a "monstrous" regeneration. Such a world without birth would also, then, be "a world without end"(150).

Despite the cyborg's emphasis on communication and network building, an individual subjectivity is still central to its ontology. Without even the idol of a potential future child upon which to focus attention, the modus operandi of the cyborg appears to be the further independent development of its own embodied selfhood.

But in the cabin in the woods, any faith in an individually embodied self is skewered, proved to be not only folly but itself the very basis for continued oppression. The built environment from which Haraway imagines her cyborgs building brand new, asexually reproduced selves is allegorized in the form of the cabin's cellar. The lynchpin upon which the sacrifice hinges, the cellar in the cabin is filled with dozens of evocative objects: a wedding dress and locket, a conch shell, family pictures, film reels, a jewelry box, the diary of a young girl. It is the last, the diary, which finally sets into motion the murderous action of the film. When Dana picks it up and reads out loud the memories

of Patience Buckner, it is Dana's choice of this object that calls the whole Buckner family, risen from their zombie graves, to come kill her and her friends.

The cellar and all of its creepy, gruesome, wondrous possibility is the crucial mechanism through which Cabin's system of sacrifice takes place; it is the illusion upon which the stability of the entire system is predicated. As Dana whispers with horror once she understands, "They made us choose. They made us choose how we die."

When Truman, a new sentry, is introduced to the control room, it is an opportunity for the movie to explain this system. He is particularly upset by the betting that has developed around the cellar, in which individuals and departments bet on which object (and which connected grisly fate) will be selected by this year's sacrifices. Truman, witnessing the machinations made by the entire crew to even get them to the cabin, questions how such betting can work.

*Truman: How can you wager on this when you control the outcome?*

*Hadley: We just get them in the cellar. They take it from there.*

*Sitterson: They have to make the choice of their own free will. Otherwise the system doesn't work. It's like the harbinger. He's this creepy old fuck that practically wears a sign: "YOU WILL DIE." Why do we put him there? The system. They have to choose to ignore him. They have to choose what happens in the cellar. Yeah, we rig the game as much as we need to. But in the end, they don't transgress?*

*Hadley: They can't be punished.*

The way of the cyborg is not, as Haraway claims, merely non-dichotomous, a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). In actuality, to the extent that it cleaves to cybernetic discourse, it is totalizing in its emphasis on stability. The cyborg creates a new holism out of the wreckage of the built environment. But its goal, ultimately, must be that of the system from which it has so ceremoniously sprung: the continuance of self. (It is no surprise that only Marty, the stoner prophet, is adamant that the group should leave the cellar. He is aware not only of the trap of the microcosm of the cabin but also of the trap of human civilization as a whole.) This is why the epistemology of the cyborg is, in fact, a lie and a manipulation. It posits that the only way to know the self is as part of a system of technology and organism, relying on embodied knowledge to make radical new choices. Yet the cyborg and its body are literally weighted with the expectations

and desires of whomever made its parts. Its embodiment will never be its own. Because of this, it can never know itself as anything other than a child: with different desires from its parents, perhaps, but still in their image.

Haraway attempts to dismiss this dilemma, recognizing that “the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential”(151).

Yet her own concern with the future—with the continued subjective experience of the cyborg and the world it inhabits—belies this premise. Cyborg epistemology has incorporated reproductive futurity into its *raison d'être*. Cyborg fathers are not inessential, nor invisible; they are merely distributed. The cyborg father is Hadley and Sitterson, sitting behind a computer terminal. The father is the voice of the Director through a red phone, chastising underlings. The father is the chemicals pumped into the air to subdue and instigate compliance. The father is the internalized obedience of a young woman who raises a gun to kill her friend, because the alternative—a world without human order—is too much to imagine. The cyborg father proscribes his children's possible modes of engagement, whether he is at their bedside or not, because he has created their conditions of possibility. The cyborg may choose what to pick up, but it's still in the cellar.

### **Zombie epistemology**

Cabin in the Woods concludes with an affirmation of a zombie epistemology, one grounded in a drive towards death, failure, and a radical, spectacular renunciation of the individual and its symbolic future. Zombies, in their relatively short history as monsters, have been inextricably linked to systems of imperialism, global capitalism, science and technology. From Haitian legends of zombies raised from the dead to work in sugar mills (White Zombie) to zombies created by rogue radiation brought back from space exploration (Night of the Living Dead) or by a pandemic virus instigated by irresponsible research (28 Days Later), zombies have stood in for the unknown, unacknowledged victims of high-modernist technoscience.<sup>[2]</sup> Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called zombies “the only modern myth,” referring to our twentieth-century facility with rationalizing death and destruction at the population level. We understand certain individual deaths (even many individual deaths) as simply the price of civilization in a technocratic era (355).<sup>[3]</sup>



In our twenty-first-century zombie movie, our human protagonists are the victims of this monolith, although they are no less dead for being living. When Marty and Dana finally make their way down into the bunker where the monsters and the control room are housed, they are met with the disembodied voice of the Director over the loudspeaker: “What’s happening to you is part of something bigger. Something older than anything known. You’ve seen horrible things... but they are nothing compared to what came before, what lies below. It’s our task to placate the ancient ones, as it is yours to be offered up to them. Forgive us, and let us get it over with.”

In the final minutes of the evening they are met by the Director in person, who confirms the rules of the world in which they are operating.

*The Director: The sun is coming up in eight minutes. If you live to see it, the world will end.*

*Marty: Maybe that’s the way it should be, if you’ve gotta kill all my friends to survive. Maybe it’s time for a change.*

*The Director: We’re not talking about change. We’re talking about the agonizing death of every human soul on the planet. Including you. You can die with them, or you can die for them.*

Marty dismisses her offer, but Dana raises her arm to point a gun at him. The Director implores Dana to be strong. Marty watches her. “Yeah, Dana. You feeling strong?”

But in that moment, a werewolf attack forces Marty and Dana to stop fighting each other. Then the zombie Patience Buckner attacks the Director, sending them both into the abyss that leads to the ancient ones.

The kids are left, beaten and bloody, on the steps of a ritual altar. And so they ask: what if, instead, we fail? What would seem unthinkable to the cyborgs—the destruction of their subjective and symbolic future—now seems the only option left. Dana takes a puff on Marty’s last joint and says, “You were right. Humanity... It’s time to give someone else a chance.”

Edelman similarly writes: “When I argue, then, that we might do well to attempt what is surely impossible—to withdraw our allegiance, however compulsory, from a reality based on the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism—I do not intend to propose some

‘good’ that will thereby be assured... We might rather, figuratively, cast our vote for ‘none of the above’” (4).

“None of the above,” as I see it, is the abdication of our obligation to the idealized future of our genetic offspring. A proposed zombie epistemology would push this abdication further, freeing us from the intense cultivation of even our cyborg selves. So long as we are building ourselves out of the literal wreckage of war, and knowing our bodies and ourselves using the same instruments of science that have made us experiments (and sacrifices), we will only ever know ourselves as our creators knew us. Though as cyborgs we might appropriate knowledge from scientific journals, in applying it we accept for ourselves the risks that were only conceived of as applying to an abstract population. Though we might free the speculum from the hands of a professional gynecologist, in wielding it we internalize the rightness of his vantage point, knowing ourselves as he might see us instead of how we might feel us. Though we might try to make the best possible choices about what to eat, where to live, when to work, and how to take care of ourselves, cyborg choices will always be informed by the science and technologies that were made by powerful people considering the interests of the whole system. The interests of all of the individual cyborgs were never part of the plan, and this makes system-knowledge dangerous to them.

Zombies, conversely, cannot deny their place in the horde. They don’t have subjectivity. They don’t optimize. They don’t bricolage. They are the sacrifice to the high modernist system, and thus they can understand the lie: the system does not serve the lives of its members. The scientists in *Cabin in the Woods* don’t sacrifice five children each year in order to save every other person on the planet (although that is a positive externality); they sacrifice five children each year for the satisfaction of powerful gods. When we punish our bodies to lose weight, optimize our cholesterol, or maximize our fertility, it is because placing ourselves on our physician’s bell curve is the only way a cyborg knows how to be good. They serve the bell curve, not themselves.

Zombies cannot know themselves, not according to the ways of knowing that generations of scientific establishment have codified. They know themselves to be part of a horde, but their knowledge is local. Their knowledge is embodied, but they know that it is tainted by the decay and destruction of the thing that made them. They are the least powerful as individual victims (it is no accident that, during her life, Patience Buckner was violently abused by her father), but also incredibly powerful as a collective. They work, not for the future or for the system, but for themselves.

To embrace a zombie epistemology is to recognize our limitations as subjects of power, but also to accept the radical implications of not seeing ourselves as high modernism sees us. It is to accept that science treats us as interchangeable members of a population, but to push back against knowing ourselves in the same way. The dictate of the cyborg, internalized from its distributed patriarchy, is to self-actualize, to actively build and rebuild oneself using the tools and knowledge left behind. The dictate of the zombie, in contrast, is simply to be: to be radically embodied, to be present only in the present, to let go of the possibility of discovering, categorizing, organizing, and optimizing a self. As Edelman puts it, “the queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves” (5).

As Marty might say, isn't it about time? As cyborgs, the teenagers “chose” the means of their own destruction. But as a zombie, Patience Buckner found her way to the Director and ended her own torture. Together, they destroyed civilization.

What new modes of being might be found in their failure?

### **The road to the end of the world**

For Joss Whedon, the road to this kind of queerness was a long one. The rejection of patriarchal control over the future has been a constant presence in his work, from Buffy Summers' early rejection of the Watcher's Council to her later insistence on protecting her sister even if it meant ending the world. But as apocalypse threatens, his heroes have always found a way to work out a solution to save the world. Even as Angel's team of investigators glibly faces down the destruction of Los Angeles at the end of the television series, they still cling to one repeated theme: going down with a fight. (Angel famously stares at the wreckage of the city and directs his team, “Let's go to work.”) And as reward for Buffy and Angel's persistence, for buying into, as Edelman puts it, “the insistence of hope itself as affirmation,” their world, in fact, does not end (Edelman 4). Buffy recognizes that sacrificing herself will save both her sister and the world, and a continuing graphic novel series reveals a new future for the City of Angels.

Cabin in the Woods embraces an apocalyptic model much closer to the one floated in Dollhouse, in which identity, the soul, and the body were ontologically and technologically split from one another. In this world, a technologically advanced corporate entity has designed technology to “wipe” the memories and personality from a person's mind and replace them with a newly programmed self. But after a series of

events in which selves are misapplied, spontaneously generated, and destroyed, Dollhouse unambiguously showed there to be nothing natural or unalterable about our conception of personhood.

Whedon's science fiction is becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that maybe there is nothing unequivocally good, or necessary, about our individual notion of personhood either. When in their blank state, the programmable "actives"—who are occasionally referred to as zombies in the series—often soothe themselves and others by repeating the phrase, "I try to be my best." At first something of a weak joke (what could it mean for a non-person to be their best?), this line achieves poignancy and horror as the audience can grow to see themselves in the actives' place, as dolls who could be made healthy or sick, wealthy or poor, or fulfilled or miserable by changing the conditions of their lives. In that world, who are we, and how do we know it?

In this way, the actives in the dollhouse are much more similar to the original zombies of western media. For the viewers of *White Zombie*, the first zombie film, or readers of William Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, zombies were actually victims, the products of evil rather than evil themselves. Unlike later blood-thirsty models, these victimized zombies were created by white, imperial business owners to work in Haiti's sugar mills. It is no surprise that Bela "Dracula" Legosi was cast as the zombie master in *White Zombie*; the master was the one to fear.

When we are tricked into fearing zombies and not their masters, we are tricked into believing that it is ourselves and our peers that we ought to fear. We are tricked into fearing that they will turn us into them. But we are all of us zombies, already, and it is a trick played by the Director that makes us think that we are not. The Director speaks in the cyborg voice, trying to convince us that we alone could be special, unique, and powerful if only we make the right choice: the virgin who can survive the slaughter by being better, purer, and more willing to play along with her expectations.

It has often been suggested that zombies stand in for a fear of the masses, in contrast to earlier centuries' monsters, like vampires, that stand in for fears of the wealthy and powerful.<sup>[4]</sup> Such critiques may be correct, but they miss the immensity of the coup that was achieved by creating this fear, by shifting our attention and our fear away from the powerful and onto ourselves. This tremendous perversion of the zombie narrative teaches us to distrust our own impulses and instincts, rather than affirming its original indictment of imperialist, corporatist masters. Embracing a zombie epistemology liberates us from our fear of ourselves, our communities, our own bodies and what

they need. It is a way of knowing the world that privileges our shared experiences and our commonalities over a competitive, acquisitive gaze.

Patience Buckner is pitted against the other kids in the Cabin, but by the end of the film they realize they are actually fighting against a common enemy. A zombie epistemology gives us license to work together to destroy the cyborg world. When Marty wonders if it's time to give someone else a shot, this could be what he means.

At the conclusion of Cabin, although Marty and Dana regret that they won't be able to see what happens next, they also recognize that there is nothing in the world left for them. Why attempt to preserve a mode of being that they know to be built with the blood of their friends? Their perception of the world, and their agency within it, has already proven to be so malleable as to be a fiction. Why continue to pretend that there is any desirable future in that cyborg vision? What might happen if, instead, as the giant hand of the old one springs from the earth, a zombie rises?

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**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

1. See Andrew Pickering’s 1995 book *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*.

2. For a more thorough discussion of this trajectory, see Chera Kee's 2011 article "‘They are not men... they are dead bodies’: From Cannibal to Zombie and Back Again."
3. Interestingly, in this instance the history actually belies the film. When Wendy, of the chemistry department, is explaining the system to Truman, he makes the mistake of describing the Buckners as "something from a nightmare." Wendy corrects him; the Buckners are actually "something that nightmares are from," coming from the old world. Unless zombies were merely waiting in the depths of some unconscious nightmare to emerge into folklore and dreams at the appropriate twentieth-century moment, the "zoology" department is responsible for much more than simple curation of the monster archive.
4. For a nuanced examination of the myriad ways that a fear of zombies has been understood as a fear of (or of becoming) the consuming masses, see Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry's 2008 article "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." They identify the transformation of the zombie from an oppressed Haitian slave into an unthinking consumer or a contagious host, critiquing the transformation of individuals under capitalism. However, Lauro and Embry treat the zombie primarily as an "ironic discursive model"; while they submit the zombie as a more appropriate post human model than Haraway's cyborg, they ultimately focus on the individual zombie's undead status as its characterizing feature. They seek "real world" zombie parallels in physiologically liminal individuals (e.g. patients with puerperal fever or brain damage), where this paper finds us all to be zombies: created and sacrificed en masse by a modernity that treats all individuals as interchangeable members of a population.



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## 7 THOUGHTS ON “TOWARD A ZOMBIE EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE AND DIE IN CABIN IN THE WOODS”

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**[lisa nakamura](#)**

**NOVEMBER 7, 2013 AT 6:05 AM**

Loved this analysis of a queer futurity. When I saw this film *Patience Buckner* reminded me of the embodiment of social death—burdened by debt, stateless, unemployable—and the story’s end as a fantasy of what could happen if these bodies were to rise up. She is positioned in the film as someone’s daughter. I rooted for her throughout.



**[Diane Bell](#)**

**NOVEMBER 9, 2013 AT 7:49 AM**

Thought provoking, in-depth analysis, thank you.

Please note, though: *CitW* was directed by Drew Goddard, written by Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard.

**[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1259521/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_4](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1259521/?ref_=fn_al_tt_4)**



**[Carol Stabile](#)**

**NOVEMBER 9, 2013 AT 2:49 PM**

This analysis of a queer futurity also made me think of some of Tiptree’s short stories, like “The Last Flight of Dr. Ain,” in which the end of human futurity isn’t seen as a terrible thing at all, particularly when seen from the perspective of the otters, who the narrator imagines returning to San Francisco harbor (a utopian premise still in the distant future, see **<http://blogs.kqed.org/science/2013/09/27/can-sea-otters-make-a-comeback-in-the-san-francisco-bay/>**), or other non-human species who will in benefit from the elimination of humans. Would be really inter-



esting to consider how forms of queer futurity run throughout the history of feminist SF.

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**Cwoth**

**NOVEMBER 12, 2013 AT 4:05 AM**

I thoroughly enjoyed the movie and found your discourse stimulating and thought provoking.

In the Ponzi scheme of life, ignorance is bliss. Similar to other stories whereby the protagonists chance upon the puppet master and realize they are but marionettes, adopting a nihilistic world view still enables the hope that whatever succeeds humanity will be better; a silver lining of sorts.

The sophomoric ideal that an innocent should be sacrificed to save all others plays well in war stories and propaganda. But honestly, if a giant old god palm was about to squash you like a bug, who would give a damn!

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