THE FOREST IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF AMERICAN HORROR FILMS

by

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ABSTRACT

Wilderness horror and cabin horror films such as *Antichrist*, *The Witch*, *The Evil Dead*, and *The Blair Witch Project* utilize the strengths of their medium—a film's narrative, dialogue, visuals, and sound design—to reignite seemingly archaic fears of the forest for modern audiences. Simon Estok has documented a subconscious fear of the environment, called ecophobia, that permeates and greatly affects societal practices directed at nature. Wilderness and cabin horror films, inspired by the longstanding American literary tradition of the malevolent dark wilderness, document how film techniques are uniquely able to expand upon and update the wilderness setting for horror as a genre. Films can draw upon their audiences' ecophobia by utilizing visual, aural, narrative, and extratextual (as well as meta- and contextual) establishing techniques to connect the onscreen forest with that of the archaic and dangerous colonial wilderness. After analyzing how film conveys ecophobia in the first chapter, I use my second chapter to explore how wilderness horror films draw upon the forest's consistent perception as a bewildering location that can be grouped into three general categories of disorientation: spatial, moral, and social. Each of these three forms of bewilderment likewise draws upon audience ecophobia, largely through depriving a film's characters of their agency. Lastly, my thesis analyzes the dread caused by the cabin horror genre, where monstrous antagonists, whose ambiguity aligns them with the forest surrounding the cabin, create a scenario in which the cabin becomes representative of safety, order, and control against the chaotic and dangerous wilderness assaulting it. My thesis concludes with a framework for how the analysis presented throughout this study could be utilized for further ecoGothic analyses.

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INTRODUCTION: ECOPHOBIA FROM LITERATURE TO FILM

There are few things more horrifying than walking next to a forest in the middle of the night. I grew up in the country on roughly ten acres of land. Most of the property was open field, but the border contained a thick forest, which in my young imagination projected endlessly onward. My grandfather's house was down the road, and I can remember one evening in particular, when my father wanted me to walk over and deliver something to my grandfather. I've forgotten whatever package I had to carry that night, but I will never forget the walk through the darkness. Our two dogs walked with me down to my grandfather's, so I had some much-desired company. However, the journey back was a very different story. It seems silly now, this childhood fear of such a short distance, but I still remember how it felt when I walked out of the comfort of my grandfather's house and looked down the dark path home. I could see in the distance my father's house with the porch light on, but between me and the warm glow of that light was the seemingly unending forest. The very forest I loved to traverse and explore during the day had become monstrous at night. As I started my walk, it was not the open field to my right that worried me, but the darkness of that forest to the left, where the trees hid uncountable horrors. Halfway along the walk, my pace quickened, matching my hurried heartbeat. Soon, I burst into a sprint, running as hard as I could until I made it to that little light on the porch. When I made it to safety, I turned around, expecting to see that I was being chased, but, of course, only silence and darkness waited behind me.

As I think about this experience today, I realize my fear fixated on the border between the road and the forest. The nighttime forest represented a space I did not belong in, where only harmful things must dwell. The trees created a kind of boundary that

limited my sight even more on an already dark night, so my mind populated the unseen with horrifying monsters. In studying early American history and literature, I have learned that my childhood fears echoed part of the colonial experience. For the early pioneers and colonists, the forest represented something similar to my youthful imaginings: within the forest dwelled wild beasts, the foreignness of Native Americans, and, for the Puritans, the devil. While some of the dangers were real, many others were fabrication and superstition. The forest is what helped make these superstitions real, because it hid witches and demons behind the trees. Even today, when civilization has laid claim to most of the land, there is still a deep-seated fear of being lost and alone in the wilderness. Although the superstitions of the Puritans have faded in modernity, the forest can still serve to frighten a lonely child on a dark night. There seems to be a persistent fear of the wilderness, of what can hide within it. We can see it across generations, from American Gothic fiction to contemporary horror film.

It is the latter that I have chosen to study. Ecocritical scholars, more specifically those focusing on the ecoGothic, argue that there is a historical connection between the use of the wilderness within contemporary horror films and perspectives of early European colonists (Murphy 3). Tom J. Hillard in "From Salem witch to Blair Witch: the Puritan influence on American Gothic nature," Bernice M. Murphy in *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness*, and Elizabeth Parker in *The Forest and The EcoGothic* have mapped out a dark wilderness present in American (and in Parker's case English) creative media, from Charles Brockden Brown to Sam Raimi and beyond. In each of their respective works the focus remains primarily on how the narratives within the films they study have been inspired by

previous American perceptions towards nature. While their scholarship has been extremely important, their approach does not investigate film as a unique story telling medium, but instead discusses film as a narrative form in ways insufficiently distinct from literature. While there are certainly relevant plays and other contemporary horror literature that could also be used to analyze modern uses of the wilderness, many already adequately studied in Murphy's work, film's ability to visually and aurally portray the forest creates a unique sensory experience that has yet to be adequately studied in an ecocritical context. This thesis will add to the academic discourse by analyzing how wilderness horror and cabin horror films utilize the strengths of their medium—a culmination of a film's narrative, dialogue, visuals, and sound design—to reignite seemingly archaic fears for modern audiences. Through exploring how film uses techniques unique to its medium, I can not only detail how wilderness and cabin horror films are inspired by the American longstanding dark wilderness but also document how film is uniquely able to expand upon and update the wilderness setting.

The following pages investigate colonial perceptions of the wilderness and the American ecoGothic writers who would follow in order to provide the historical context for the remainder of the thesis. I will then shift to focus on the horror film genre's consistent use of the wilderness setting, before moving into a more detailed explanation of the thesis's overall structure.

Into the Forest

There is no doubt that the forest is a common setting within American horror films. Carol Clover likewise notes, “An enormous portion of horror takes as its point the visit or move of (sub)urban people to the country” (124). Clover ponders that this common motif could be a universal archetype and links the movement from urban to rural with the movement “from the village to the deep, dark forest” found in traditional fairy tales (124). Ultimately, she decides that “[t]he point is that rural Connecticut (or wherever), like the deep forests of Central Europe, is a place where the rules of civilization do not obtain” (124). Clover is right to insinuate a connection between the East Coast woodlands and the forests of Central Europe, since the colonists and explorers who ventured to North America did not come from a social vacuum. Instead, these colonists left a rich and well-founded society of their own. Roderick Nash notes that the Europeans who first began to travel to the Americas brought with them their own viewpoints of the wilderness, based upon both local myth and Christianity (8). In this regard, the initial perspectives of the American wilderness were formed in part by superstitions and myths from the Old World.

While important, the initial superstitions and beliefs were shifted and shaped by the seemingly endless wilderness that the colonists were now faced with. The North American wilderness dwarfed the much more developed European landscape and contained its own unique dangers, such as Native Americans. Furthermore, the American wilderness, largely seen as a trial that needed to be overcome, is tied directly into not only the foundation mythos for the United States, but also the American identity. When a film is set within the American wilderness, particularly that of the East Coast, it naturally

draws from this long history, just as a film set in Europe would draw from its own history.[1] To separate the American wilderness from its cultural history can only be done artificially, and to do so severely undermines the importance of this particular setting in a film. Thus I begin my analysis of the forest space within horror films by first turning to the cultural legacy of the American wilderness that the films I will discuss draw from.

Nash writes that the early European colonists largely saw the forests in two different lights, a location that could be both good and evil: "If paradise was early man's greatest good, wilderness, as its antipode, was his greatest evil" (9). The idea of paradise stems from the notion of land as a place of beauty that sustains life, while carrying the potential that the unruly forest could be brought under humanity′s control to affect a return to Eden. The wilderness then takes on the negative components of nature as that which is untamed and dangerous. As to be expected in their highly polarizing moral worldview, it was the Puritan colonists that would take this dueling perspective to the extreme. Regarding this duality, Peter N. Carroll states, "Although the Puritans were usually confident about the physical attributes of New England, they had serious doubts about its spiritual state. For beneath the florid plenty of the New World, the Puritan settlers saw the Devil lurking within the wilderness" (11).[2] The Puritans viewed the wilderness as a space that "signified Satanic power" (Carroll 11). However, this did not deter them in their migratory practices, and in many cases only bolstered their movement into the foreign landscape.

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[1] Yvonne Leffler's "The Gothic Topography in Scandinavian Horror Fiction" is a good example of a scholarly work focusing on differentiating Scandinavian horror fiction from European fiction through an analysis of the works' use of landscape and setting.

[2] Peter N. Carroll's book *Puritanism and the Wilderness*, although published in 1969, remains a canonical source for research on Puritanism.

In the Puritan moral dualism, while on one hand the land was deemed a savage area of sin, on the other, it was imagined as a place that could be controlled and transformed into an Eden or promised land. The visceral need for control and the inability to secure it resulted in what Simon Estok defines in his essay "Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror" as the core components of ecophobia, fear of the loss of agency and predictability (4). The Puritans' dual and moralizing perspectives on nature follow closely Nash′s juxtaposing of paradise and wilderness as standing for "greatest good" and "greatest evil." While Nash did point towards Christianity as a source for these dualizing perspectives, that connection is taken to a much further extreme by the Puritan colonists. Hillard notes that the Puritans compared their journey across the ocean and into the wilderness with that of the biblical journey of the Israelites (*Dark Nature* 41).[3] By the Puritans creating this connection, they saw their journey and struggles as an ordeal—as a test of faith and ultimately a trial in a judicial sense. Carroll elaborates on the wilderness as a place of trial—God′s testing ground—to the Puritans:

> because of its isolation, therefore, the wilderness denoted a place of sanctuary as well as an area of trial. Both ideas implied that such regions lacked the amenities and impediments of human society. Since wilderness areas possessed none of the trappings of Christian civilization and, indeed, contained specific temptations for the Christian man, historical

[3] Hillard additionally argues that the ocean would be extremely impactful in shaping the Puritans' perspective on the natural world, since it existed as the first trial that had to be overcome in the journey to the new world (*Dark Nature* 34).

> Christianity interpreted the wilderness as a state or symbol of sin. These metaphors remained vivid for seventeenth-century New Englanders. (62)

The wilderness once again takes on the role of both an obstacle to overcome and a space where the price for failure has spiritual rather than entirely physical consequences. The expansive woodlands surrounding them was a place of sin that had to be conquered in order to create an idealist's New World Eden. When the Puritans found this wilderness manifestly unconquerable and with their souls on the line, it is no wonder then that the forest became a place of abject fear.

Upon further study of the term "wilderness" itself, Nash highlights that the word's origin comes from "the place of wild beasts" (2). In many ways, the etymology of the word has not truly changed, although Nash notes that the word also began to be associated in human terms with the absence of man (2). As early as 1755, the term was defined as "a desert; a tract of solitude and savageness" (3). Throughout this writing, I will use the term "wilderness" and "forest" nearly interchangeably, as descriptors for an untamed natural setting. However, it is important to note that the term wilderness describes a specific environmental state.[4] The term wilderness denotes a wildness to the land. The films I will be discussing, unless otherwise noted, take place within this wild land, which is a place where humans have little control. This is different from other

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[4] "The Wilderness Act" written by Howard Zahniser and signed into law in 1964 provided a legal definition of a wilderness: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Public Law 88-577, p. 891). Refer to the remainder of "The Wilderness Act" for an even more comprehensive legal definition of a wilderness.

modern natural places, like Central Park in New York City, which while a natural space, and even one that might be deemed forested, is by no means a wilderness.

Into the Literature

The connection to and struggle against the North American wilderness was important to early European-American writers. Charles Brockden Brown, writing in the late 1700s and early 1800s, wanted to create a Gothic narrative in the same vein as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, but he quickly ran into a problem. Whereas European authors could turn to their medieval past and set their tales in monasteries and castles, Brown had no such luxury. The new United States of America did not have these historical settings, and so Brown turned towards the only past he saw available, that of the colonial explorer. This resulted in *Weiland; Or, The Transformation*, published in 1798, which is considered the first American Gothic novel. Brown's book was based on a true case that occurred only a few years before the publication of the novel, in which James Yates was told to murder his family by voices from God (Murphey 52). More importantly, Brown followed this work with his novel *Edgar Huntley* in 1799. In comparing *Weiland* to *Edgar Huntley*, Bernice Murphy writes that the latter is "an even more defiantly *American* text. It is also the first Brown novel in which the action largely takes place outdoors" (97). Over the course of the novel, the titular character Edgar Huntley transforms from a respected member of society into someone who must eat a panther for survival and kill Indians as he traverses further and further into the Pennsylvanian wilderness. Edgar struggles with his primal nature, doing what he must to survive in an uncaring environment. In academic work focused on the American

wilderness as a Gothic location, most scholars begin with the writings of Charles Brockden Brown. It is undeniable that he began the long history of the American Gothic wilderness, playing upon the fears and struggles of the colonists that came before him.[5]

Whereas Charles Brockden Brown focused on the savagery of the wilderness, Nathaniel Hawthorne, writing predominantly from the 1830s to the 1850s, would turn to its spiritual elements. Hawthorne uses the wilderness as a theater for sin when he creates settings such as the nightmarish forest in “Young Goodman Brown.” In the text, the titular character leaves the safety of his home and his wife, Faith, to go on a midnight walk. This walk takes him deep into the heart of the forest, where he meets the devil and eventually sees the entire town, including his wife. The madness, or vision, of Goodman Brown occurs entirely due to his entrance into the wilderness at midnight. The result is that “Young Goodman Brown” is essentially a narrative of the earlier Puritans’ greatest fear: that a journey alone into the forest would not only test the soul but also could lead to irreversible spiritual corruption. Hawthorne’s forest clearly acts as a place where “good men” should not travel.

The age-old conflict between good and evil, and the forest’s place within this moral struggle occurs throughout much of Hawthorne’s writings, most notably in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne’s most famous work follows a similar set of rules to “Young Goodman Brown.” In this case, Chillingworth, a character devoted to revenge, comes from the wilderness, and the sinful act that earns Hester Prynne her scarlet letter occurs

[5] Charles Brockden Brown’s work was unique because it was the first to focus on the American wilderness as an important aspect of the setting. While Indian captivity narratives predate Brown’s work, as do Puritan journals that describe the wilderness as a spiritually dangerous location, it is Brown who begins to focus on the wilderness itself as an important component.

outside of the community and within the forest. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* thus serves to further cement the idea that the wilderness is a place of sinful temptation, since it is removed from the rules and confines of society.

Although the Puritanical impact upon modern horror's use of the wilderness is significant, it is important to note that it is not the only inspiration. The second major influence moves away from the spiritual dangers of the wilderness and instead focuses on the primal physical fears associated with an uncontrollable natural space. Starting with texts like *Edgar Huntley*, these works showcase the brutality of the wilderness. Writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote around the same time as Hawthorne, would utilize the brutality of the forest as an obstacle for their characters to overcome. Whereas characters Edgar Huntley and Goodman Brown were changed for the worse by the wilderness, Cooper's characters would be forged and made stronger. These writings showcase yet another highly influential school of thought in regard to the American wilderness and frontier, where the frontier hero begins to be glorified rather than tainted by the wilderness experience.

Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," published in 1893, moved the frontier, and thus the wilderness, to the forefront of the American social consciousness and popularized the idea of the Frontier Thesis. This now largely debunked proposition was essentially a creation myth that argued the frontier created the "American" culture and way of life. F. J. Turner argued that the frontier separated Americans from their European counterparts and made them stronger for it. Ray Allen Billington notes the impact of Turner's thesis, stating, "No interpretation of American History…has attracted such loyal support or inspired such bitter criticism as

the frontier thesis" (1). Regarding literature, one of the most interesting aspects of Turner's Frontier Thesis was the assertion that the American frontier ended in 1890. By claiming that the frontier had died, it transformed the frontier lifestyle into an objectifiable past, which made it inviting grounds for Gothic treatment.

The frontier F. J. Turner spoke and wrote about is not necessarily the modern iconic image of travelers on the Oregon Trail or of *Little House on the Prairie*, but instead the frontier as an uncontained and dangerous wilderness. This conception allowed for the creation of a national narrative arc dating back to the early colonists. In some regards, F. J. Turner is right to compare the frontier of the west to the experience of the early colonists. In fact, Turner's Frontier Thesis is entirely based on the constant search by Americans for a new frontier. The thesis claims, rather simply, that explorers will reach a location that will slowly gain population. Eventually, the population will reach a point where settlements become the norm and a semblance of government and restrictions will be founded. However, the populace of the settlement, independent settlers who survived the difficult wilderness, will make the location different than its European counterpart. Lastly, settlers will move out from that location, ultimately starting the cycle over again until there is no longer a frontier to settle. This cycle is what F. J. Turner believed forged the American identity. It is the isolation and independence of those living on the frontier that "forced them to develop inventive skills and made them receptive to innovation" (Billington 2). Nature then becomes a series of obstacles that had to be overcome to create America. In placing the wilderness in a space of opposition, he naturally causes it to be othered in a similar way to the Puritans′ practice.

While the focus of his Frontier Thesis was on overcoming the frontier, Turner still created a polarized trial of people versus the wilderness. The language of opposition works to extend the perception that the wilderness is a place of danger only the strongest are able to survive and overcome. This opposition manifests itself in American literature through stories that showcase the wilderness as an aggressive force against mankind. The aggression often takes the form of an invasion by the wilderness upon the domestic sphere.

The division of wilderness and domestic spheres can be seen in works as early as 1851, such as in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In this epic novel, the ship, *The Pequod*, houses a community and acts as a domestic environment. And yet, the majority of the book takes place out at sea, in the middle of arguably the largest wilderness on the earth, and ultimately ends with the personification of malevolent nature destroying the domestic sphere of the ship. *The Pequod* could certainly be likened to a home on the frontier. The endings of both *Moby-Dick* and Ambrose Bierce's "The Boarded Window," a post-frontier story published in 1891, are similar in their focus on destruction of the domestic space. In Bierce's work, a farmer, Murdock, who lives out on the frontier, loses his wife to a panther attack in the middle of the night. The home, which is traditionally seen as a safe space, proves unable to keep the panther, an agent of the wilderness, out. This invasion of the home, along with its isolation, works to break down the barriers normally constructed by humanity to separate ourselves from the natural world.

Into Film

Many of Ambrose Bierce's frontier Gothic works pit characters against horrors or creatures produced by nature.[6] The invisible creature in his short story "The Damned Thing" could have been the very monster I was running from on that evening walk when I was a child. However, it wasn't the literature of Ambrose Bierce or Nathaniel Hawthorne that instilled my childhood fear of the forest, but their arguable progeny: film and television horror. The chase scene has become iconic in horror, often featuring a protagonist running for help, all the while being chased through a dark forest. It was this visual image, accompanied by dark, intense music, that magnified my fear as a child, rather than the Gothic literature that I had yet to read.

For the last fifty years, American horror films have used the American wilderness as a backdrop to scare viewers of all ages with great success. Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* and John Boorman's *Deliverance* both opened in theaters during 1972, while the progenitor in film of the cabin horror genre, Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead*, was released in 1981. Since the seventies there has been a steady release of films utilizing the American wilderness as a horror location; *Evil Dead II* (1987), *Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Cabin Fever* (2002) are some of the most famous examples. In the year 2016 alone, there was a sequel to the infamous *Blair Witch Project,* a remake of Eli Roth's *Cabin Fever,* and two original works that feature the wilderness as a place of horror, Robert Eggers *The Witch* and Jason Zada's *The Forest*. Additionally, many of these films

[6] Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds notes that although characteristics of the American frontier Gothic shifted to represent changes occurring within the actual frontier there were "remarkably stable through-lines" (128). From its stability, Wall Hinds finds that frontier Gothic texts are "those that invoke uncanny fear or terror through the active participation of their wilderness, or liminal, or borderland settings" (128).

have shown to be quite successful; Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick's original *The Blair Witch Project* grossed 248.6 million dollars, an unbelievable profit considering the film's meager 60,000-dollar budget ("The Blair Witch Project," *Box Office Mojo*).

Of course, much like the early European colonists entering the North American wilderness, these films were not created in a vacuum. They are built upon a greater lexicon of ecoGothic works, which has kept images of the American wilderness haunted for generations. The Puritans′ fears of spiritual dangers are evoked today in films such as Lars von Trier′s *Antichrist* and The Blair Witch franchise, where the forest becomes a place of mental strain and confusion. Furthermore, Bierce′s violent frontier Gothic is mirrored in the cabin horror genre′s invasion narrative.

Through gaining a better understanding of how film has adapted components of the American Gothic wilderness for modern audiences, it allows for critical work in determining the reason that this Gothic wilderness still resonates in a modern setting. Throughout this study I use the terms ″modern″ and ″contemporary″ in a fairly broad sense. I will discuss films released as far back as the 1980s, clearly not quite within the definition of ″current″; however, most of the broader implications I discuss are still relevant in more recently released horror films, as will be shown through analysis of *The Witch*, *Evil Dead*, and *Cabin Fever*. Although mobile and GPS technologies have advanced tremendously, the basic fears that are derived from the forest remain largely unchanged by time. Moreover, my study allows for an understanding of how film utilizes audiences′ inherent ecophobia, knowledge that could then potentially be used in readings for numerous other genres and creative mediums that contain an ecological focus.

Although separately films such as *Antichrist, Evil Dead, The Blair Witch Project*, and *The Cabin in the Woods* have seen thorough academic study, for the vast majority of this scholarship, the wilderness setting is either only briefly mentioned or overlooked entirely. For example, scholarship on *The Blair Witch Project* predominately focuses on either the success of its marketing campaign or its use of found footage. Similarly, academic writing on *The Cabin in the Woods* centers on the film′s unique metanarrative and commentary on the horror genre, not the cabin horror subgenre in particular. With the exception of Murphy and Parker, there do not appear to be any major works of scholarship centered on horror′s relationship with the American wilderness. Thus, this thesis seeks to add to Murphy and Parker′s research while also providing new perspectives on film′s use of the Gothic wilderness, and, equally important, answering why these films are essential in understanding modern audiences′ fears of the wilderness.

To achieve my goals, I have divided my study into three chapters: “Why the Forest Scares Us,” “Bewilderment in the Wilderness,” and “Why the Cabin Can’t Save Us.” Chapter 1: “Why the Forest Scares Us” works with Estok’s scholarship on ecophobia to establish a baseline as to why the wilderness setting remains relevant to modern audiences. I then move on to discuss how film, unlike literature, is able to use visual, aural, and narrative techniques to both set the tone of the forest as an uncanny location and to evoke the colonial wilderness space. By removing characters from civilization and placing them into an expansive and dangerous forest, these films recreate the expansive forest that plagued the imaginations of European colonists and frontier explorers.

Chapter 2: "Bewilderment in the Wilderness" draws attention to the longstanding perspective of the wilderness as a location that causes disorientation. From the scholarship of Bernice Murphy, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Roderick Nash, I note three kinds of disorientation that have historically been perceived to be caused through contact with the wilderness. The first is spatial disorientation, which covers the forest's ability to physically disorient humanity's already weak sense of spatial orientation. In this section I investigate *The Blair Witch Project*, *Blair Witch*, and *The Witch*'s construction of the forest setting and examine how they are able to mirror the spatial disorientation of the characters onscreen to that of the audience. The second disorientation is that of moral disorientation, or a loss of faith and beliefs. This chapter utilizes *The Witch* and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* as case studies in how the forest can cause either a crisis of faith, as exhibited by William in *The Witch*, or lead to complete loss of moral principle, explored through She in *Antichrist.* Lastly, there is social disorientation, a loss of one's place in society through changes forced by the wilderness. This chapter dwells on the necessary actions one must take to survive within the wilderness, and the repercussions they cause for the characters. The character He from *Antichrist* and Thomasin from *The Witch* are discussed as characters forced to commit atrocities within the wilderness in order to survive.

In Chapter 3: "Why the Cabin Can't Save Us" I turn to the other major grouping of ecohorror films with which this project is concerned: the invasion of the wilderness into the cabin, i.e., the cabin horror genre. In this chapter, I focus on how the forest is established via the cabin setting. The cabin itself has a long history, intertwined with the American wilderness and frontier setting. Cabin horror films pull as much from this rich,

and often violent, history of the homestead as from the Gothic history of the American forest. In order to further understand this combined inspiration, I use the Evil Dead franchise, *The Witch,* and *Cabin Fever* to highlight specific techniques utilized to establish the cabin location in ways distinct from literary frontier Gothic texts. Additionally, where the forest was the major source of dread in Chapter 2, cabin horror films require an invasive force to undermine the illusory safety of the cabin. Therefore, I consider how the Evil of the Evil Dead franchise, the witches in *The Witch,* and the disease in *Cabin Fever* are portrayed as personified vilifications of the wilderness setting. I then discuss the actual invasion of the cabin, focusing on how the cabin's fall represents the loss of a space for humanity's attempt to control the wilderness—or the loss of a point of departure from which to attempt control.

CHAPTER 1: WHY THE FOREST SCARES US

The scholarship discussed in the introduction shows the existence of a Gothic wilderness in American literature. This scholarship begs the question of why this fear might still linger so heavily within the American social consciousness. To address this subject, Murphy has dedicated an entire book to study of the influences of earlier American Gothic texts on modern horror, including both film and literature. However, while these influences are important, there also needs to be an exploration as to how and why current filmmakers would want to utilize film to evoke fears that are seemingly archaic in today's world. In *The Blair Witch Project*, on the fifth day of being lost in the Black Hills forest, an exasperated Heather, confused at not being able to escape the forest, utters, "This is America, it's not possible, we have destroyed most of our natural resources." Heather's confusion of being lost in America, in a forest bordered by a paved road, is completely understandable. The expansive forest first faced by early European colonists has been significantly reduced. Metropolises, farmlands, and roadways have dissected and changed much of the New England, and for that matter the North American, landscape. Furthermore, over the past century there has been a significant population movement in the United States from rural to urban areas resulting in a growing disconnection of American's from their country's "rural origin" (Murphy 8).[7]

Now, cell phones have a portable GPS, and connection coverage has improved to the degree that it is more likely to lose service walking into an elevator or a parking garage rather than on a day hike. Advancements in technology, combined with the

[7] Murphy, quoting the 2010 U.S Census Bureau, notes that 80% of Americans now live in urban areas, whereas in 1900 more than 60% lived in rural areas (8).

increased movement to urban areas, only serve to further shrink the wilderness in more modern perceptions. Additionally, for the vast majority of Americans, the forest is no longer the constant threat that it was for early European colonists. Even within rural communities there is not this constant fear that the trees situated outside could hide wild animals and supernatural threats. Careers that rely on the forest, such as ecotourism, logging, etc., do so from a place of knowledge and training.[8] This doesn't mean that the forest is not still a dangerous location, nor does it mean that it is impossible to get lost, just that the general perception of the forest has changed. This means that for horror centered on the wilderness to work, it must rely upon fears that are seemingly not active in the audiences' lives. Rather, these horror films must mobilize elements of the wilderness setting to reawaken archaic fears.

These elements originate from a widespread ecophobia that continues to impact how humanity reacts to and interacts with the natural world. Simon C. Estok defines ecophobia as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" 208). Estok further claims that ecophobia has conceivably existed since the birth of human civilization (208).[9] The subtlety of ecophobia can be found through examples such as the importance of

[8] Associated Oregon Loggers, Inc.'s webpage "Technology Improvements in Logging" thoroughly documents the improvements that technology has provided in both safety and conservation for the logging industry.

[9] Estok argues ecophobia can be easily traced to the Old Testament, represented in the declaration of "man" to have dominion over everything. Furthermore, he reasons that ecophobia doesn't begin with the Old Testament but could possibly be traced as far back to the evolution of opposable thumbs, which first gave humanity the ability to create tools and work the land ("Shakespeare and Ecocriticms" 17-18).

cosmetics, support for city sanitation boards, barber shops, and cutting the grass (208). In essence, Estok argues that these cultural components of modern life exist as a barrier between humanity and the natural world. This means that cutting one's yard and using products to cover blemishes is, in actuality, an unconscious act of control over the natural world that ultimately stems from fear. Ecophobia can appear in many different forms, but it always relates back to the core theme of control. Whether it be an antagonistic natural force, as seen in *The Happening,* or a seemingly inescapable forest, as in *The Blair Witch Project*, both utilize their audience's inherent ecophobia.

By using the American wilderness as a horror setting, a film can pull from both the longstanding haunted forests within American literature and the permeating ecophobia still prevalent in contemporary society. The forest remains relevant as a horror setting because it is not just an area of land with trees, foliage, and wildlife that has been largely untouched by mankind; rather, the literary or, in this case, cinematic forest becomes representative of the entire natural world, and the primal fears that stem from this connection. Mark Edmundson writes that "[t]he Gothic novel or film in effect gathers up the anxiety that is free-floating in the reader or viewer and binds it to a narrative. Thus the anxiety is displaced and brought under temporary, tenuous control" (12). The forest that surrounds the cabins in all of the cabin horror films denotes a space of chaos that cannot be entirely controlled. The fear at the loss of control and the desire to give into that chaos make these films both relevant to study and still approachable for modern audiences.

Establishing the Forest

Horror films that exploit an audience's ecophobia must at some point establish the forest in order to create a sense of anxiety or dread toward the location. The two most important elements of establishing the forest in film are its visual and aural creation and the narrative context surrounding them. The image of the forest crystalizes through an establishing shot that reveals both its expansiveness and proximity to civilization.[10] Through sound, lighting, and post-production editing the onscreen construction of the wilderness can also be used to generate an overall tone, often one of unease. In contrast, narrative establishment works to either connect the forest to past images of a dark wilderness, sometimes even through extra-textual materials, or to posit a new danger. The order in which films establish these components differ; however, such presentations must occur in order for the forest to become an impactful and effective horror setting for the audience.

Film's ability to establish the forest visually is one of the major reasons it is a central medium for continuing the history of Gothic wilderness tales. Cinema trades the imaginative work on the reader's side for complete control over the image. Thus, through visual and aural techniques, filmmakers can create a symbolic link between the onscreen forest and the colonial wilderness that haunted early European explorers. Within a context that focuses on post-apocalyptic literature and film but is equally relevant to ecohorror, Murphy writes that

[10] An establishing shot is often a wide shot (sometimes referred to as a long shot), extreme long shot, or ariel shot whose goal is to quickly and visually provide information about the films setting, such as where a film is taking place, the time in history, or the time of day.

> American literature and popular culture in general is similarly haunted by this idea of the 'wilderness-that-was'… The cities and suburbs that define the US in the twenty-first century are very far removed indeed from the forest and small settlements that dotted the coasts of Virginia and New England 400 years ago, and a nation that was, until just over a century ago, still predominately rural, certainly isn't anymore. (211)

In essence, by establishing the forest location with images that harken to the now archaic colonial wilderness, a film can distance the setting from modernity, relocating it to a wilderness that is perceived to be dangerous: Murphy's "wilderness-that-was."

Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist*, released in 2009, works well as an initial example for studying visual establishment of the filmic forest. Due to its unique stylization, there are numerous vivid examples throughout the film that show how visually establishing the forest location can greatly impact how the setting is perceived. [11] When asked about how he achieved the darker visuals to match the mood of the film, Anthony Dod Mantle, *Antichrist's* cinematographer, responded that he "dislocated the cohesion by pointing the lights in different directions and by changing camera speeds, not just within the shot but within certain areas of the image" (Johnston). The changing camera speeds create an unnerving effect which causes parts of the forest during wider establishing shots to ripple, twist, or move, while the rest of the trees within the shot remains still. These techniques create, in Mantle's words, "a lack of logic which makes your brain perceive differently, and that's a major part of the potential disturbance the

[11] Although Lars von Trier is a Danish filmmaker who has never been to North America, his film *Antichrist* is undeniably a take on the American cabin horror genre. See Murphy, *Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture,* for an expanded discussion of this (16-17).

viewers visit in the film" (Johnston). Through the manipulation of light and camera speed Mantle has created a forest that does not adhere to normal conventions of either film or reality. The visual manipulation of traditional forest imagery works to destabilize audience comfort in the forest setting.

Mantle's subtle manipulations of the forest set the tone and the sense of discomfort that in combinations with the film's grotesque portrayal of death within the natural world causes the setting to ultimately become uncanny. The *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* succinctly defines uncanny as "[t]hat which is unfamiliar—or more literally, unhomely—in the familiar or homely" (Buchanan). In the case of *Antichrist* the forest is shown to be polarizing, both beautiful and disturbing, full of life and death. It is this polarization alongside the visual manipulation of the forest that creatures a setting both familiar, and, at the same time, all too unfamiliar.

There are moments within the film that undeniably show the natural world as beautiful, such as aerial shots of the entire forest, a slow motion medium long shot of acorns falling around He, or the initial shot of the deer that He sees in the meadow. However, these are juxtaposed with images of animals in varying states of distress such as being consumed, self-mutilation, and death. The previously mentioned deer, when it turns to leave, is shown to have a stillborn fawn hanging from it. In a later scene, a hatchling is shown falling out of its nest, is swarmed over by ants, and then picked up by another bird to be eaten. In both the scene with the stillborn fawn and the hatchling time seemingly slows as the camera lingers on these images of death. Regarding the hatchling scene, the camera zooms in for a closeup lingering as the ants crawl all over its body in

agonizingly crisp detail. The camera simply refuses to look away, with the audience held just as captive.

These scenes establish an underlying grotesqueness of the forest that creates a setting capable of "weaving all the metaphorical potentialities of the Eden forest into a miasma of menace and death" (Amy Simmons 32). The visual juxtapositions of expected natural beauty with the grotesqueness of death creates a forest that is uncanny, both familiar and yet strange. The unfamiliarity generated by the uncanniness of the forest's grotesqueness causes the forest to become distanced from contemporary perceptions. The uneasy unknowing element that accompanies the uncanny likens *Antichrist*'s forest with the archaic colonial wilderness, where what awaits within the forest is never quite certain.

Establishing the forest as a horror setting does not always need to rely on significantly altering the forest's image. In juxtaposition to *Antichrist*, both the original *The Evil Dead* (1981) and the 2013 remake *Evil Dead*, use establishing shots of the forest not to foreshadow or invoke a sense of supernatural unease, but exclusively to indicate the setting's remoteness from civilization. This is shown particularly well in the 2013 remake in which the establishing shot is of a vast wilderness. Interestingly, this aerial shot begins with the camera upside down, so that the sky appears on the bottom half of the screen and the forest on the upper (see Figure 1.1). The upside-down shot is not only disorienting, but also creates an uncanny relationship between sky and forest. The camera then tilts down and focuses on a red car driving on a road through the wilderness (see Figure 1.2). The car pales in size in comparison to the seemingly unending wilderness and the tall trees that border the road.

The aerial perspective thus works to magnify just how isolated the car's final destination, an iconic cabin in the woods, is, while also showing that there are no other houses or towns nearby. Since this is a limited perspective, existing entirely within the camera's frame and providing no context of geographical location, the aerial shot toys with the audience's perception of distance and location. The audience is only shown the forest and this cabin, with no idea of how far away other signs of civilization may be. In addition to the aerial perspective, there is also a change from paved to dirt roads that occurs during a scene transition. This change denotes additional distance traveled, and further removes the cabin's location from signs of a maintained civilized structure. Von Trier's forest is similarly expanded through a train ride and hike through the forest to arrive at the location of He and She's cabin. Playing with the audience's perception of distance, both in the size of the forest as well as the distance away from civilization evokes the older, archaic colonial wilderness. It is as though the cabin in *Evil Dead* has become spatially estranged, existing in a liminal wilderness.

Where *Antichrist* works to create an uncanny forest that dispels an audience's preconceived notions and *Evil Dead* causes spatial estrangement, Robert Eggers, director of *The Witch*, uses direct reference to the Puritan era to establish the New England forest as a horror location. Visually and narratively, *The Witch* takes place in and around an actual early American landscape. The film begins with a family of Puritans being exiled from the community for their extreme beliefs. This initial scene serves the purpose of removing the family from the safety of civilized society, which isolates them. Central to the visual establishment of the forest is the choice of perspective for filming their departure of the village. The scene follows the family and their wagon, with the camera

facing backwards, as they ride out of town, capturing the fortified town gates closing behind them after they pass through. With the gates shut, cutting off their hopes of return, the camera pans to face the family and we watch as they ride across an open field towards a large forest. Like the property that the family will come to settle on, the open field here functions as a border. The mise-en-scene offers a visualized separation between the forest and protected civilization. There is then a direct cut to the family huddled around a fire, with the darkness and the trees enclosing them, shot to seem claustrophobic (see Figure 1.3). Even more so than the trees, it is the darkness in the forest which this scene captures particularly well. What isn't illuminated by the fire becomes an impenetrable darkness, in which anything could be hiding. The claustrophobic presentation and vision impairment of the forest is contrasted throughout the film to the open spaces of civilization, which creates tension when characters enter the forest and a visual distinction between areas of safety and danger.

Cinema as an art form does not consist of the image alone. Sound is also an intrinsic component. Each of the films discussed thus far utilize sound in conjunction with images of the forest or its inhabitants to help set the desired mood for the setting. For the Evil Dead franchise, this comes from the unnatural roaring that accompanies each of the point-of-view shots from the Evil's perspective. The roaring sounds establishes the Evil as something dangerous and only adds to its perception as a predator watching or chasing its film's protagonists. While Kristian Andersen's subtle sound design within *Antichrist* was created by mixing noises obtained from natural objects such as grass, wood, and rocks, alongside bodily sounds recorded by swallowing a small microphone (Simmons 24). The mixing of human and the natural world correlates to the film's motif

while also resulting in a soundtrack that matches the disorienting imagery within the film. However, it is *The Witch* that best exemplifies the influence that aural elements within a film can have when establishing the onscreen forest.

Beginning with William and his family's exodus from the Puritan villages and entrance into the forest a non-diegetic music cue plays more and more loudly, coming to a climax as the camera settles on a final shot of the forest that borders the family's eventual homestead. The music is unnerving, intense and screeching, unpleasant and unnatural. The unnatural sound for this scene, as well as the rest of *The Witch*'s score was created by composer Mark Korven using instruments like the nyckelharpa (a traditional Swedish string instrument), jouhikko (a traditional Finnish bowed lyre), and waterphone (an inharmonic acoustic tuned idiophone, which notably can utilize water contained within its resonator to create its unique, ethereal sound). In part the eerie nature of the score is derived from these instruments, but even more important was Egger's desire for the score to be primarily discordant, with no sense of either melody or traditional harmony (Fusco).[12] Korven notes that typically a score will contain moments that are consonant, so that there is a release to the tension created by dissonant intervals (Fusco). Instead, Eggers wanted "it to be like a ninety-minute nightmare that sits on your chest like a sack of lead" (Fusco). The combination of the constantly rising dissonant sounds, combined with the naturally eerie sounds achievable with the nyckelharpa and waterphone, create an unnerving and unrelenting soundtrack. There is no musical release of tension, and so it becomes a constraining force, tied to the image of the forest, and

[12] Korven mentions that much of the score is driven by the nyckelharpa, but that the jouhikko provided a scratchy and primitive sound that "seemed perfect for this old witch" (Ciafardini).

merging with the already oppressive and inescapable atmosphere being created by the film. The music peaking during the initial establishing shot of the forest outside of the soon-to-be homestead encourages the audience to connect a feeling of unease to the (image of the) forest. We can interpret Eggers' use of music as similar in purpose to von Trier's visual effects. Both work to undermine perceptions of the forest setting as familiar, suggesting instead that the forest is a malevolent and dangerous space.

Visual and aural establishments are not the only way that films seek to evoke the archaic colonial wilderness. Narrative establishment of the forest is another important tool in connecting this setting to the greater American Gothic wilderness. In films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and the 2016 sequel *The Blair Witch,* the forest is portrayed conventionally. There is no spooky music playing as the characters begin their hike into the Black Hills forest, and since both are stylized as "found-footage films," they appear grounded in reality, as opposed to the highly-stylized look of *Antichrist*.[13] The only exception is when the group in *The Blair Witch*, upon arriving at their first camp location, use a drone to gain an aerial view of the forest. While the drone does show the expansiveness of the forest, it doesn't highlight anything unexpected. Instead, both of these films, shot and edited to look like "found footage," rely upon a narrative establishment of the forest to create a sense of dread, and to link it back to the American Gothic wilderness.

The Black Hills Forest outside of Burkittsville, Maryland looks like an average East Coast forest. What makes the Black Hills Forest unique is its history, which is

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[13] A found-footage film is a film which utilizes a variety of film techniques to create the illusion that a substantial part of the work was discovered. This typically involves much of the films footage to be captured through cameras which appear to be held by characters within the film's narrative.

established through the film's narrative. The Blair Witch franchise exposits, through interviews with locals, two potential horror stories that might have occurred within its woods. The oldest dates back to the colonial town of Blair that was located where modern day Burkittsville sits. After some strange events, the people of Blair accused a young woman of witchcraft and took her out into the Black Hills Forest to die of exposure. Her body was never recovered and eventually the town of Blair was abandoned and forgotten, with the cause attributed to the haunted woods and the "Blair witch." The other narrative shared by characters is that of a murderer, Rustin Parr, who kidnapped and killed kids in his cabin, located within the same forest. Through the narrative about the Blair witch and the town of Blair, the films directly connect the modern forest to the colonial wilderness, which in turn narratively transforms the forest into a Gothic setting.

When the sounds of wind howling through the trees or trees falling during the middle of the night scare the characters, the establishment of the witch and the serial killer as referents transforms the historically significant setting into one of supernatural malevolence. *The Blair Witch Project* relies heavily on this technique to create tension, especially within the context of never showing viewers the creature, if there ever was one, that seemingly haunts protagonists Heather, Michael, and Josh.

Narrative constructions of the onscreen forest are not limited to information given onscreen but can also be created through extratextual resources meant to accompany the film. *The Blair Witch Project* is no doubt the most famous example of this, with the creation of a website and complete marketing plan designed to blur the lines between reality and fiction for viewers. The website, still accessible today at www.blairwitch.com/project, provides a timeline for the events of the film, additional

information about the three missing filmmakers, an aftermath section, and lastly a legacy link. The aftermath section provides a significant amount of additional content not provided within the actual film. This section of the website has pictures of items found by search parties, interviews by a professor and private investigator, and even fabricated news reports on the missing filmmakers. These extratextual pieces of information are one of the components that helped cause some early viewers to question whether the events shown onscreen were real or fake. Margrit Schreier, when studying this phenomenon, found that although "[f]or the most part, the film is correctly perceived as fiction; almost 40 percent of the discussants, however, are at least temporarily uncertain whether the film constitutes fact or fiction (329). Furthermore, Schreier found that "those who explain why the film might after all be fact likewise refer most often to information they had seen or heard in the media (329-330). This is significant since a film's fictionality is traditionally taken for granted by the audience. To have any number of audience members question the fictionality of the film shows at least a partial success of the film's extra-textual marketing campaign.

Perhaps the most unique example of how films can utilize extra-textual content as a way to establish the forest is *The Evil Dead*'s story about the east Tennessee cabin used in the film. During the 1981 Detroit premiere of the film, then titled *The Book of the Dead*, ticket programs were handed out that contained a page titled "Book Notes- The Untold Story" ("The Evil Dead Locations"). The "Untold Story" describes the cabin used in the film, built almost 90 years before the film's release. This tale claims that the cabin's builder, Emmett Talbot, was killed by a bolt of lightning shortly after completing his work. A few years later, his daughter, Clara, awoke to a thunderstorm to find her

mother and grandmother dead. She would, so the story claims, continue to wander back to the cabin during thunderstorms for the rest of her life. Next, in 1931, moonshiners staying in the now-abandoned cabin were killed when a still exploded. Towards the end of the film's shoot in 1981, and after a thunderstorm, a man whose grandfather had taken in Clara appeared and asked the film crew if they had seen the now elderly woman. The film crew mentioned never seeing her but did feel as though they were being watched. Finally, a month after filming wrapped, the crew was informed that lightning had struck the cabin, burning it down.[14] Although this was the only film viewing that gave audiences a print-out of the cabin's haunted past, the story has continued to be perpetuated by both director Sam Raimi and lead actor Bruce Campbell. In a 1982 interview with John Gallagher, for example, Raimi is asked about the strange event that occurred at the cabin and responds with a very similar tale, although he mostly focuses on Clara, leaving out the details about the moonshiners (directorsSeries). Bruce Campbell, likewise, repeats a version of the tale in his book *If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a B Movie Actor.* Campbell's version differs slightly and instead claims that "She [Clara] was found, just days before we arrived, wandering in the hills behind our cabin" (98). The *Book of the Dead* website disputes the ghost story surrounding the cabin. The site, informed by the nephew of the cabin's owner, notes that in actuality the cabin was built in the 1960s as a hunting cabin ("The Evil Dead Locations").

The cabin's fabricated ghost story shows intent by Raimi, cast, and crew to create an extratextual metanarrative. This additional layer makes the events and the horror

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[14] The website *Book of the Dead: The Definitive Evil Dead Website* on the "The Evil Dead Locations" page has an image of the "Book Notes- The Untold Story" where the cabin's ghost story can be read in its entirety, http://www.bookofthedead.ws/website/the_evil_dead_locations.html.

onscreen appear to be based more in reality, since the cabin and the forest are supposedly haunted. Additionally, it serves to tie the setting to an older wilderness, with the haunting beginning sometime in the 1890s. Through the extratextual content's fictionalized timeline, the cabin is granted a haunted past which transforms what was in all reality a cheaply made hunting cabin into a Gothic setting. Ultimately, this additional narrative invites understanding at a more mythic level where the threat of danger can feel more real.

The last form of narrative establishment is through the audience's own background knowledge. In *The Witch*, subtitled *A New England Folktale*, there is no moment of expositional narration about the forest William is entering. Nor is there a need to connect the forest within the film to the haunted colonial wilderness, since that is already the film's setting. Instead, it utilizes the audience's own knowledge in an attempt to further establish the dangers of the forest. The witches in the film have familiars that take the shape of a crow and a hare, two animals commonly thought to work with witches. An example of this type of narrative establishment at work occurs when Thomasin is sent out to see what is causing a disturbance for the family's livestock. Upon entering the barn, she finds the animals frightened of a hare. By knowing that the hare is the witch's familiar, this shows that the homestead is already starting to be breached and isn't a place of safety. Similarly, the entire film and dialogue is based heavily on Eggers's own research. In Eggers's own words,

> 'The Diary of Samuel Sewall', 'The Diary of John Winthrop,' these are easy for anyone to get their hands on. This was really common stuff and there's tons of cases of demon possession. I read through the books

> looking for good images and moments, and then as I'd go along with the script I would think, 'How can I make that work? (O'Falt)

While the average moviegoer may not have read the early American "Diary of John Winthrop" they will likely know that witches in the forest are not good, and that the animals acting strangely are aligned with them. Even the requirement of a witch signing the Devil's book, and thus their soul away, is fairly common knowledge. These details present within the world help to give the rarely seen witches in the film a stronger sense of danger. The witches are then identified alongside the forest, which further works to showcase the forest as a dangerous location within the film.

The North American wilderness, through deforestation and a change in scientific and cultural perceptions, will never be as frightening as it once was to many of the woefully unprepared European colonists. However, through connecting the cinematic forest with the archaic colonial wilderness, either through narrative or visual means, the 'wilderness-that-was' is recreated to haunt new generations of viewers. Through studying how film is utilizing visual, aural, narrative, and extra-textual techniques in order to construct its haunted wildernesses we can gain a better understanding of what about the forest is still able to evoke fear. Whether it be past horrors that have occurred within, camera work that evokes a sense of claustrophobia, a sense of uncanniness through the loss of logic, or any of the other techniques I've discussed throughout this chapter, it is evident that there are plenty of methods that filmmakers can utilize to prey upon their audience's ecophobia in order to create an effective horror setting. The continued effectiveness of these techniques supports Murphy's claim that America is still haunted by the colonial wilderness. Furthermore, it is through establishing the wilderness as a

location of potential danger that grants meaning to the interactions between the human characters and the forest setting, which will be the focus of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 2: BEWILDERMENT IN THE WILDERNESS

Getting lost in the forest seems like a straightforward danger. Dense trees and foliage can block line of sight to the trail or recognizable landmarks. Once lost, all the other dangers of the forest suddenly become viable threats. Without the trail guiding you back to civilization, the risks of exposure, starvation, dehydration, and injury become far more likely, especially if unprepared. Even with ever-increasing technological advancements, such as portable GPS equipment, getting lost is still a very real danger.[15] The threat of getting lost in the forest has always plagued humanity leading to a long history of construing the wilderness as a disorienting location. Murphy notes, "From the earliest times, […] the wilderness was perceived as a place where a person was likely to get into a disordered, confused, or 'wild' condition. In fact, the word 'bewilder' is derived from the term 'wilderness'" (20). The bewildering wilderness is therefore a location that can alter the human condition.

Murphy mentions three potential altered states—disorder, confusion, and wild—but does not expand upon these further. I agree that there have been portrayals of different wilderness conditions but believe that more concrete terms are needed for further discussion. Yi-Fu Tuan offers another three possible conditions: "The forest is a maze through which wayfarers venture at risk. Wayfarers can literally lose their way, but

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[15] Matt Rocheleau reported that there were 46,609 search and rescue missions performed in U.S. National Parks from 2004 to 2014. Although there was not a breakdown in how many of these cases involved someone unable to find their way, it should be noted that 7% of these missions occurred in a forest and that 35% occurred in mountains/ foothills 15,000 feet and below. Furthermore, insufficient information, error in judgement, and inattention to surroundings accounted for 23% percent of all missions. It appears that these cases will only continue to rise. In 2016 the New York forest rangers had organized roughly one search and rescue operation a day and 2017 was proving to be an even busier year (Mann).

lostness also carries the sense of moral disorientation and of disorderly conduct" (*Landscapes of Fear* 81). Tuan here separates the wilderness conditions into "lostness," "moral disorientation," and "disorderly conduct." For Tuan, the separation between physically becoming lost and moral disorientation allows for correlation while also signifying that they exist as different. I link "disorderly conduct" with Murphy's "wild."

Just as there is a danger of becoming disoriented within the forest, threats may also include those already living within the wilderness. Outlaws, highwaymen, "savages": these have often been the perceived inhabitants of the spaces outside of the control of society. A common conclusion is that because the forest is a source of corruption, those living within it must already be corrupted. Although simplistic, this has been the basic cause and effect often used to other anyone living away from civilization. In part, this kind of othering continues to lead to the rural poor being vilified for suburban film audiences within the horror genre.[16] A similar technique was used by European settlers and colonists towards Native Americans and anyone else seeking to live outside of tightly controlled colonial social structures. The European colonists imagined the North American wilderness as a "moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic landscape" (Nash 24). In this "moral vacuum," Nash notes, "civilized man faced the danger of succumbing to the wilderness of his surroundings and reverting to savagery himself" (24). The wilderness' freedom caused "men to behave in a savage or bestial manner," and,

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[16] "The more-than-human world is *made* Gothic: it is *made* an unsuitable site of human habitation. We quickly recognize the forest as *unheimlich* ('unhomely'), as 'Space' rather than 'Place', and as somewhere to get lost, rather than somewhere to feel at home. We are therefore suspicious of people who *do* make their homes in the wilderness and often fear—in line with 'standard monstrous geography'—that they themselves will prove monstrous" (Parker 214).

especially for Puritan settlers, it was believed that “[m]orality and social order seemed to stop at the edge of clearing” (29).

Murphy, Tuan, and Nash’s work make evident that one of the greatest perceived dangers associated with the wilderness is losing oneself, be it physically, morally, or socially. With this context in mind, I will explore modern wilderness horror films through the three concepts of spatial disorientation, physically getting lost or confused within the forest; moral disorientation, a loss of core faith or beliefs; and social disorientation, descent into savagery or separation from societal norms.

Spatial Disorientation

On the fourth day of being lost in the Black Hills forest, Heather, one of the protagonist’s in Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick’s *The Blair Witch Project*, states, “It’s very hard to get lost in America these days, and it’s even harder to stay lost.” Heather’s confidence, however, is misplaced, as the film crew never makes it out of the forest. It is easy to understand why Heather would initially be optimistic. With the river as a landmark to follow and a compass to help orient them, the fictional film crew should eventually come to some form of civilization. In fact, a similar scenario occurred to the actors Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael C. Williams, who play their namesakes in the film. On *The Blair Witch Project*’s DVD commentary track, Daniel Myrick et al. recall briefly losing the actors in a storm. Heavy rainfall caused the production team to fall behind the actors and out of radio contact. At the same time, the actors missed a note from the production team with their next GPS coordinates. The three lost actors, unsure of their camp location for the night, continued to wander around lost in

Seneca Creek State Park, the real-life filming location for the fictional Black Hills forest. Eventually, the actors came across a local residence and thus the means to contact the production team. In this regard, Heather is right in her assertion that "it's even harder to stay lost," something that becomes ever truer with technological advancements. For example, of the 46,609 people who required search-and-rescue assistance in U.S. national parks from 2004 to 2014, only 3% were never found (Rocheleau). However, Heather's belief that it is essentially impossible to get lost in America now is incorrect, as proven by actual cases and the film crew's own disorientation.

Being lost, as with many fears, is frightening because it means a forfeiture of agency and a confrontation with the unknown. When a trail disappears and you have no idea which way to go, you are no longer in control of your movement and destination. The most terrifying part about being lost is the feeling of helplessness. When you are truly lost, there is absolutely nothing you can do to help your situation, and even when you do try, it is far more likely that you'll only become further disoriented. This is precisely why since at least 1946 the United States Forest Service (USFS) has suggested, "Use your head, not your legs" ("What to Do When Lost in the Woods"). Their current website likewise suggests you STOP (Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan), because "[i]f you are not very, very confident in the route, then it's always better to stay put" ("If You Get Lost"). The emphasis on stopping is for two important reasons. The first is to make sure that any forward movement after becoming lost is made with a clear mind and not a panic-stricken movement in a random direction. The second is that if you do choose the wrong direction to continue walking in, this will only make it more difficult to be found by search and rescue operations as well as bringing an increased chance of injury. The

idea of remaining motionless while your fate rests on park rangers and volunteer searchers is by no means comforting because any sense of self-agency has been removed. Ultimately, the anxiety is not just about disorientation, or that initial moment of displacement, but about the possibility of never being able to find your way at all. When this fear of potential helplessness becomes intertwined with the identity of the forest it creates an ecophobic portrayal, one that seeks to blame the wilderness for human error.[17]

To understand why the forest has consistently been perceived as a location that can cause spatial disorientation, it is first important to understand how we become lost. The human sense of direction is so fragile that without landmarks or sight it becomes almost impossible to move in a straight path. Even if you have a general idea of which direction you came from, this natural veering can mean easily missing the trail or traveling in a circle. Paul A. Dudchenko, in "Why People Get Lost," thoroughly discusses studies on walking in circles and veering from as early as 1928 to as recently as 2009. He finds that although it is clear that "veering is frequently observed when people try to walk in a straight line without vision," there is little consensus about how and why this occurs (73). Part of the reason there is no consensus is because of conflicting reports. Initial studies focused on the difference between the length of each leg, but if this were true than the drift should be constant, something later studies dispute (73). Ultimately, Dudchenko reasons that

[17] Elizabeth Parker lists, "The forest is a setting in which we are lost" as one of her "Seven Theses for 'Why We Fear the Forest'" (47). While Parker also highlights similarly disorienting natural factors of the forest, she does not separate the different forms of disorientation, and instead discusses lostness within the forest and its various forms of disorientation as a whole (52-53).

> [v]eering can be influenced by postural shifts and by the presence of incidental stimuli during the walking attempt, so it's likely that in real world situations, veering may be influenced by a person's physique, aspects of the external environment, and perhaps most intriguingly, drift in one's subjective sense of direction. (73)

Because our sense of direction is so easily tampered with, it means that to progress without veering, certain parameters must be met; the most important is maintaining spatial orientation.

Spatial orientation requires either "a recognition of one's surrounding; an ability to use familiar landmarks to decide which way we need to turn; or a maintenance of orientation by keeping track of previous experience" (Dudchenko 5). For day-to-day life, these conditions are easily and even subconsciously achieved. When we are thrown into an unfamiliar situation or environment, that spatial orientation starts to fail. Being lost is by no means an experience unique to wilderness spaces; however, the forest is notable because of the ease at which all three of these orientating requirements can easily fail. The sheer density of trees creates a limited line of sight to possible landmarks that could be used to orient oneself, and the homogeneity of the forest makes it difficult to gain any information about the direction a traveler is heading in or came from. The forest's ability to hinder human acuity, most notably sight, makes it a particular threat.

Because the forest disorients visually, film is uniquely suited to portray the feeling of being lost. In cinema, the spatial disorientation of characters lost within the woods is mirrored by the audience's own disorientation. Time and space move differently in film than reality. Events onscreen can occur hundreds or thousands of years apart and

be shown in a matter of seconds, such as in Stanly Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s scene where a bone thrown into the air transitions into a spaceship (demonstrating both the transition of thousands of years and the technological advancement of humanity within that timeframe). Kubrick's famous match cut is an extreme example but makes the point well. By using a cut, time and space can be moved through instantaneously. As long as the transition is clear and relevant to the narrative, this movement is easily accepted by the audience. The clarity of the movement between transitions is incredibly important so that film viewers are not disoriented by the sudden change in setting.

In *The Blair Witch Project,* once Heather, Mike, and Josh enter the Black Hills forest, time and space start to lose their meaning. Each day that passes is clear because the film is edited chronologically, including a night scene to signify the end of a day. However, there is otherwise little information to be gained about how far the crew has traveled, their relative location within the forest, or even how much time passes between cuts. The lack of spatial information can be largely attributed to the homogeneity of the Black Hills forest as well as the fictional film crew's reluctance to follow the creek. The creek would have provided an unchanging landmark that could have created a sense of forward movement. Instead, Heather, Mike, and Josh decide to change cardinal directions after irritation with a given direction's lack of results. While the forested background does change as they move to new locations, the lack of notable landmarks or visual identifiers causes the forest to remain an ever-expanding homogenous construct that provides no directional context for either the characters or the audience.

Wingard's *Blair Witch*, a soft reboot of the franchise, expands upon the forest's ability to alter perceptions of space and, furthermore, makes it a major plot element.[18] In *Blair Witch*, James Donahue, Heather's younger brother, ventures into the Black Hills forest after finding what seems to be evidence that his sister is still alive. The expedition consists of James, three of his friends, and two Burkittsville locals. After quickly becoming lost within the forest, James and the others find themselves unable to escape. While similar to *The Blair Witch Project*'s original plot, Wingard's update has the forest now directly interfere with navigational devices. James and his friends follow a GPS device for an entire day, tracking their movement to show them progressing towards the forest's edge, only to find that they have arrived back at the previous night's campsite. Furthermore, the longer James Donahue and his companions stay in the Black Hills forest the more time becomes distorted. The sun no longer rises, and the characters are thrown into a constant darkness, which removes any visual indicator of passing time for the audience. Later in the film, it becomes apparent that time is moving differently for some characters than others; Lane and Talia explain that they have been wandering around lost for at least five days, when only a single day passed for James and his friends. *Blair Witch* also shares the lack of landmarks within the forest and an inability to map out or gain any form of spatial orientation like its predecessor. This becomes an even greater problem after the sun no longer rises. The darkness limits the distance of the characters

[18] A soft reboot is a film that seeks to restart a film franchise but acts as a continuation of a story or exists within the preexisting universe. In this case *Blair Witch* mirrors the former, but uses new characters, a new reason to enter the forest, and acts as a continuation in the series. The 2009 *Star Trek*, *Jurassic World*, *Superman Return*s and the 2018 *Halloween* film would all fit under this category.

cameras to what is immediately visible within a flashlight's range. This creates a claustrophobic feeling, with the darkness closing in on all sides, while also limiting visibility required for spatial orientation. The characters, as they rush through the woods in an attempt to escape the Blair witch, likewise find themselves unaware of where they have gone. Although intensified, *Blair Witch*'s iteration of the Black Hills forest draws upon the same feeling of helplessness that worked so well for its predecessor.

The spatial ambivalence of the forest is likewise illustrated in Eggers' *The Witch*, although it is not a core focus of the film. Unlike *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Witch* spends the majority of its screen time at a Puritan frontier homestead rather than directly within dense woodlands. The layout of the homestead is well established and as characters move between scenes there remains a known spatial layout, with the homestead buildings serving as landmarks. However, once characters enter the forest, distance traveled and relative location become unknown. The densely packed trees create a barrier that blocks the homestead from sight, and without any other landmarks it becomes impossible to follow the characters as they journey farther into the wilderness. This is best shown when Caleb becomes lost after leaving Thomasin to follow after their dog who is chasing a hare. As Caleb wanders through the forest, the audience becomes just as spatially disoriented as he is. When the film first cuts back to the now-lost Caleb, it has become noticeably darker than when he and Thomasin first entered the woods, showing that much of the day has already passed. Because of this time dilation and Caleb's new location within the forest, there is no way for viewers to know just how deep into the forest he has traveled.

When he does eventually come to a witch's house, there is no context for its location within the forest, nor even a foreseeable way for him to return home. Film's ability to create a seemingly endless forest through visual and editing means matches shapes a similar experience to Parker's observation; "no matter how physically small a forest may be, it seems infinite to one in its midst" (53). As a setting, the spatial ambiguity of the forest in *The Witch* is able to be directly contrasted to the clear layout of the family's homestead, which only serves to create further animosity toward the wilderness. In effect, the forests within *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Witch* are both unrecognizable surroundings for the viewer and devoid of any kind of visual landmark. The viewer is just as lost and disoriented as the characters onscreen.

It isn't just the visual disorientation that makes *The Blair Witch Project* or *Blair Witch* successful portrayals of being lost. The characters' reactions to their helplessness is likewise a driving force in establishing the forest as a bewildering horror location. *The Blair Witch Project* succeeds in this regard because at its very core it is a film about being lost, which also makes it an excellent starting point for further analysis. Hillard claims that the film is a story about "the frailty of knowing with certainty any reliable truth or reality" ("The Puritan Influence" 113). For Hillard, this lack of knowledge is evident through the ambiguity towards the sources of any given information about the Black Hills forest. He notes that the Burkittsville citizens refer to "they" and "everyone worth their salt" when referring to who has knowledge of the folklore ("The Puritan Influence" 114). In this case, the Blair witch mythos has no solid origin nor record keepers. Upon entering the forest, even Heather's language and assurance quickly begins to change, moving from statements like "I know exactly where we are now," when they

hike towards Coffin Rock, to an admittance of uncertainty about the Blair Witch after Josh reports hearing noises the first night ("The Puritan Influence" 114). Eventually, Heather finally admits, at least to the camera, that they are lost. The crew's spatial disorientation is yet another proponent of the film's theme of lack of knowledge.

Once lost, Heather, Mike, and Josh are unable to find any frame of reference for their position. They have no idea which direction is correct, nor if their long days walking through the forest are bringing them anywhere closer to safety and civilization. In their disorientation, the film crew turns to technology for solace and as a means of escape. It is in this mistaken reliance on technology that Hillard identifies another predominant "storyline" of the film; "the failure of modern technology to provide relief or escape" ("The Puritan Influence" 105). The character's reliance on technology isn't limited to the compass and the map, but also the very cameras the entire film is shot with. These same cameras frame the film for the audience, creating a limited point of view that mirrors the protagonists' own perspectives. The uncertainty and unease of what lies just offscreen, in the darkness, is then transferred to what can be seen, the forest.

The technology used in *The Blair Witch Project*, a physical map and compass, a 16mm film camera, sound equipment, and a Hi8 video camera, although outdated by modern standards, represented accessible up-to-date tech for the film's 1994 setting.[19] Since the map and compass are the only navigational tools that Heather, Josh, and Mike bring with them, it means that the failure of these tools works on multiple levels; in part,

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[19] The *Blair Witch* similarly features appropriate technology for its 2014 setting, except for the fictional long-range Bluetooth, GPS tracking, and extremely high-resolution digital camera earpieces. It should also be noted that although not discussed in this thesis, the failure of technology and its effect on the characters is also a major storyline in *Blair Witch*. Much of my work with *The Blair Witch Project* could likewise apply for its 2016 soft reboot.

it represents the inability of "technology" to allow for an escape from the wilderness, while also signifying the film crew's own incapacity to use the tools at their disposal. Navigation is something that is learned, not an innate skill.

Mike, specifically, struggles with his own ineptitude. When trying to decipher the map, he gives up stating, "This is Greek to me." The result of Mike's inability to read the map is directly linked to his aggression and irritation at being lost. At one point, Mike's irritation causes him to irrationally throw their only map into the river, since he believes there is no point in trying to navigate by it further. Even when the crew follows the compass in a direction, chosen partially at random, they remain trapped within the forest. It is this utter helplessness, even with the tools needed for navigation, that make Heather, Mike, and Josh's plight particularly terrifying. They no longer have any agency over their fate, the realization of which begins to wear each member down. For Mike this weariness is initially shown through angry outbursts, then, towards the end of the film, transitions to a quiet resolve. Josh similarly shows irritation towards their situation, but then starts to completely give up. On the fourth day he starts taking more breaks during hiking. As Heather tries to rush Josh, Mike tells her to give him space and that he has "completely lost it." Lastly, Heather seeks to retreat into the camera, in an attempt to avoid confronting what is actually occurring.

Moral Disorientation

Peter Straub's introduction to the collection *American Fantastic Tales; Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps* inevitably turns to the early colonists, noting the importance of "[t]hese grim, suspicious people" who "lived in small communities located at the edge of the original first-growth American climax forest" (xiv). Straub can't help but wonder what they saw in the forest "in that teeming darkness" (xiv). In answer he notes that "[n]ature was much worse than merely a force not to be trusted; nature was, inherently, wicked in its nature" (xiv). Two hundred years after the Puritans, Straub continues, this message of what he calls "Bad Nature," defined as "the belief that the natural world itself deludes, tempts, misleads, wishes to devour careless human beings," can be found in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Harriet Prescott Spofford, among others found within the collection (xiv). I begin with Straub's recognition of "Bad Nature" within American literature because it aptly conveys the long literary history of the American wilderness as a place of dangerous temptation.

Like Straub, I too must first begin with those "grim, suspicious people," since it is the Puritan's wilderness perspectives that would serve to so heavily shape later ecoGothic portrayals of the forest, specifically regarding moral disorientation.[20] Murphy and Hillard, among other scholars have already thoroughly documented the Puritanical influences on America's Gothic landscape, and so I will not dwell on this connection long; however, it is important to note not only this influence, but its specific impact on

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[20] Much of my discussion about colonial perspectives are focused on the Puritans. However, it is important to note that they were not alone in their trepidation of the forest. "Although other seventeenth-century people, including the colonists of Virginia, also believed in the potency of Satanic power, the Puritans' sense of mission and prevalence of wilderness difficulties led the settlers of New England to view themselves as special targets of the devil" (Carroll 73).

narratives of moral disorientation within the forest. In the Puritans' complicated relationship with the wilderness, on one hand the New England forest was a place of sanctuary, but on the other, because of its lack of "Christian civilization" and "specific temptations for the Christian man," it was perceived as a location of temptation and sin (Caroll 62). Because of their fearful projections upon the forest, according to Carroll, "[t]he Puritan colonists translated all adversity as signs of this diabolic opposition and conceived of the wilderness as the site of moral battle against Satan and his minions" (73).

Hawthorne draws upon this perception of diabolic opposition and the concern that entrance into the woods might tempt even the most righteous when writing the short story "Young Goodman Brown." As Brown journeys into the forest where "no church had ever been gathered or solitary Christian prayed," he finds his faith tested (Hawthorne 58). Coming across a gathering deep in the woods, Brown comes to believe that many of the prominent members of his society are in fact worshipping the devil. Most notably he sees his wife, aptly named Faith, at the gathering. Just as both he and Faith are about to undertake a Satanic baptism, he cries out for her to resist. The moment after he calls to Faith, Brown finds himself alone in the forest. Although uncertain whether the events he witnessed truly transpired, Brown has been forever changed by the experience and emerges from the forest as "[a] stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man" who can no longer trust those around him (Hawthorne 63). Brown's journey and ultimate fall encapsulate the traditional moral dilemma repeatedly faced within the forest.

The Witch explicitly draws on the Puritan strain of ecophobia in its subtitle, *A New England Folktale,* and in a note to the reader found on the first page of *The Witch*'s screenplay (a condensed version of this note appears at the end of the film, before the credits begins).

> This is a tale of witchcraft, told as a simple family of seventeenth century New England might have believed it to be. All of their folkloric and religious beliefs, in this film, are true. It was inspired by various folktales, fairytales and recorded accounts (journals, diaries, court records etc.) of historical witches and possessions from New England and Western Europe before the Salem outbreak in 1692. Much of the dialogue, in fact, comes directly from those sources. (11)

Because *The Witch* draws so heavily from and is meant to replicate Puritanical fears onscreen, it makes the film an excellent subject for further analysis. Throughout *The Witch* each of the family members, William, Katherine, Thomasin, Caleb, and the twins Mercy and Jonas, are challenged by and ultimately fail the temptation of the wilderness. Importantly, the temptation and difficulties faced by each of the family members is unique, allowing for a multitude of different forms of moral disorientation to appear throughout the film. For this work I will focus specifically on the experiences of Caleb, William, and Thomasin as they are the only characters to be explicitly shown entering the forest that surrounds the family's newly constructed homestead.[21]

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[21] The twins' temptation comes through the whispers of the family's goat Black Phillip, revealed later in the film to be an agent of the Devil. Katherine, meanwhile, is distressed at the loss of her newborn son and grows continually more distrustful of her daughter, Thomasin. Like Mercy and Jonas, she is never shown leaving the homestead after its construction. Her fall comes when she is offered to sell her soul for the return of her lost son, a deal she takes, not realizing that it is all a delusion.

Caleb, the second oldest of the children, is shown early on within the film to be struggling with the onset of puberty and burgeoning sexual desires. This first becomes apparent in the scene directly after Samuel, the family's youngest child, has disappeared. Waking up, first Caleb notices and then stares for a moment at his sleeping older sister. The screenplay writes, "Caleb looks down and notices THE SIDE OF HIS SISTER'S BREAST in her somewhat open shift"; after a noted pause, "Embarrassed, Caleb looks away" (27). Later, Caleb's continued struggle with his attraction to his sister is evident as he watches her while she washes clothing in the river: "CALEB WATCHES HER LEGS. . .AND HER SMALL CHEST RISING UP AND DOWN AT THE TOP OF HER BODICE" (Eggers 52). When Thomasin notices Caleb watching her, he quickly looks away ashamed.

While Caleb's initial struggle with lust may not be directly related to the wilderness experience, it is important to note to prepare the audience for his final temptation. As discussed earlier in this chapter regarding *The Witch*'s use of spatial ambivalence, Caleb eventually becomes lost within the forest. The further he proceeds, the tighter and more encroaching the fauna around him become, until eventually he comes across a small hut. Stepping out from the hut is a beautiful woman that beckons Caleb to come to her. Visually upset and crying due to the situation he has found himself in, a hesitant Caleb moves towards the woman. When he gets close, she leans down and kisses him. Just before the scene fades to black an old, clawed hand grabs him by the back of the head. The next time audiences see Caleb he will be cursed by his experience, at first unable to speak, and when he does it is as though he is possessed. The family

attempts to hold an exorcism through prayer, but this is unsuccessful and Caleb dies during the experience.

Caleb's journey within the film is perfectly emblematic of Tuan's statement that "lostness also carries the sense of moral disorientation" (Landscapes of Fear 81). Caleb's state of lostness is directly tied to his temptation, it is what allowed the witch to appear before him and prey upon his lust. In this manner, Caleb's narrative of wilderness temptation mirrors that of "Young Goodman Brown." For both Brown and Caleb the forest preys upon the doubts and struggles the respective characters are already harboring. Within its wooded boundaries, these sinful delusions can become reality, allowing for the characters the chance to either give into their temptation or resist. Unfortunately for both Caleb and Brown, neither were able to overcome the moral disorientation they encountered.

William's moral disorientation does not occur through physically becoming lost within the forest, but rather is entirely driven by a sense of moral lostness. It is his fault that the family is ostracized and banished from the Puritan community, predominantly due to, as he admits at the end of the film, his own pride. Like Caleb's lust, it is William's pride that largely factors in his downfall. Upon surveying his struggling crops William declares, "We will conquer this wilderness. It will not consume us." However, as the film continues it becomes clear just how foolish that statement was. In particular, William's failure to conquer the natural world directly leads to much of his family's hardships. He cannot grow crops nor successful hunt wild animals. In a desperate attempt to provide for his family, he secretly trades his wife's last memento of England, their homeland, for traps. Due to these traps, Caleb lies to his mother about his and his father's

journey into the forest, saying that they went looking for an apple tree (a lie that is referenced when he spits up a rotten apple during his exorcism). William also allows Katherine to continue blaming Thomasin for her missing heirloom, rather than admit what he has done. Importantly, William's faults do not go unnoticed by his family. When confronting Thomasin towards the end of the film, she angrily retorts, "You let mother be as thy master, you cannot bring the crops to yield, you cannot hunt . . . Thou canst do nothing but cut wood." As Thomasin aptly points out, the only agency that William has been able to exert on the forest is to chop firewood, resulting in a woodpile nearly as tall as the family's cabin. It is for this reason that William consistently returns to the woodpile over and over throughout the film, each during times when it seems as though his agency and control of the situation occurring to his family has disappeared.[22]

William's inability to exert agency over the wilderness has started him down a road of sin. When Katherine finally learns that he stole and lied to her, she confronts him, yelling, "You've broken God's covenant. You're a liar. . . You cannot escape the woods." Katherine's final point, that William cannot escape the woods, will come to pass as he falls further from grace and into a state of complete disorientation. After Caleb's death, William's moral disorientation reaches its climax as he feels he can no longer trust, nor put faith in his any of his children. Uncertain whether Thomasin or the twins have made some sort of pact with the devil, he locks them all up in the shed outside, planning to have them tried in town. William's uncertainty of who he can trust at the end of the film,

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[22] William is shown chopping wood three times throughout the film, and always following a moment of hardship for William. He first chops wood after he returns from the forest journey with Caleb, where he found his traps not working, and his son lies on his behalf. The second time occurs when Caleb is returned from the woods, naked and in a catatonic state. The final scene occurs after Caleb's death when William believes that his family is being assaulted by supernatural forces.

an echo of the distrust felt by Goodman Brown after his journey, showcases how the wilderness can prey upon an individual's perceived truths, about either themselves or those they associate with. This appears in modern horror settings as well, such as in *The Blair Witch Project* and *YellowBrickRoad,* when characters begin to mistrust the intentions or directions of one another.

William is ultimately consumed by the wilderness he forced his family into. On the final day in the film, William leaves the cabin and sees everything he has worked so hard to create destroyed. Although he makes one last attempt to kill Black Phillip, the goat who has been whispering to the twins, he loses his dance with the devil. Black Phillip gores and charges him into his woodpile. Parker elegantly describes Williams demise: "The man, who wishes to subjugate Nature, is suitably armed with his axe—and is aptly destroyed by the symbols of the wounded forest," the stack of logs that he is seen cutting throughout the film (Parker 183). The only family member left alive at the end of the film is Thomasin, whose moral disorientation highlights the classic struggle of the wilderness as opposed to civilization.

At the end of *The Witch* Thomasin reaches a crossroad. Throughout the film she was constantly blamed, especially by Katherine, for the disappearance of Samuel and then later Caleb. When it becomes apparent that she is nearing womanhood, her mother and father discuss sending her away to work for another family. Additionally, it was she alone who Katherine blamed for the disappearance of their family heirloom. During the film's ending, as Katherine attacks Thomasin, the mother proclaims that she knew the way Caleb looked at Thomasin and that her daughter bewitched him. This is evidence of not just Katherine's anxiety, but a problem with Puritan society as a whole. Thomasin is

blamed and being punished for her womanhood and sexuality, which she had no control over. With all of this in mind, she could brave the wilderness and attempt to return to the controlling but safe Puritan settlement, or she could question Black Phillip. She chooses the latter and eventually accepts the devil's offer to "live deliciously."

Thomasin chooses the freedom offered to her by association with the forest. During the final moments of the film, as she joins the witch's coven, we see her

> laugh and literally ascend, as she floats up, with arms outstretched, to the forest's heights. In this last image of subverted Christianity, she echoes Christ on the cross, with the tree trunks behind her. In this image of frightening euphoria we have a monster who has found her home in the forest. (Parker 184)

There is no doubt that Thomasin's choice at the end of the film is a culmination of the Puritan's worst nightmare. From the subverted Christian imagery, to her euphoria from joining the devil and abandoning Christianity, this is the worst-case scenario for a Puritan. Thomasin's decision to leave Puritanical society for that of the wilderness-based witches is also reminiscent of the colonial concern that after contact with Native American culture white women would not want to return: "When applied to women, such fears became even more virulent in their expression, suggesting a culture that felt itself more profoundly threatened by the specter of the white woman—as opposed to the white man—gone savage" (Kolodny 56). Thomasin's choice to stay within the wilderness would have only served to further reinforce the concern of the white women going "savage."

Although *The Witch*'s end would have been nightmarish for the Puritans, it becomes more complicated for contemporary audiences. It is obviously not ideal to obtain freedom from a restrictive, patriarchal society through patricide and at the cost of your entire family; however, one can't help but feel that Thomasin's choice at the end is the right one. There is even some catharsis in knowing that her life will be better among this monstrous sisterhood than it would have been if she had returned to society. Within this ending one of the reasons that the wilderness has always been so feared as a place of temptation becomes apparent, because of the freedom offered to those that enter. By definition a wilderness is devoid of humanity, and thus the social and moral constraints tied to civilization. In this regard civilization becomes representative of order and structure as opposed to wilderness's chaos and freedom.

For many horror narratives with contemporary settings the wilderness's freedom is a core attraction for the film's protagonists. From the "college kids" in *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* to the young camp counselors in *Friday the 13th* the forest acts as a space where they are no longer constrained by societal expectations or restraints. The temptation and moral disorientation within these films seems to stem directly from the freedom allocated by the forest setting. This manifests most commonly in the form of partying and premarital sex. In fact, within the cabin horror subgenre, discussed more fully in the next chapter, the "youthful" group of friends traveling into the forest to engage in promiscuous activities is a central tenet.

Mathew Grant likewise lists this trend as an important feature of the cabin horror film, writing, "The first defining feature quality of the cabin horror film is its function as a site of released repression" (7). *Cabin Fever* has two characters who engage in sex as

soon as they reach the cabin; meanwhile Paul, another of the *Cabin Fever* protagonists, hopes that this journey into the forest will allow him the chance to become romantically engaged with his friend and childhood crush Karen. *The Evil Dead*, the originator of the cabin horror subgenre, had similar themes, where it was noted that this was Ash's and his girlfriend's first time together with privacy. The youthful desire to escape in freedom to the forest, is the very fear that the Puritans saw within the wilderness space. Since it is outside of society's control, it means that normal restrictions do not necessarily apply.

Mathew Grant attributes the cabin as a site of release for surplus repression, which is designed for the "chaotic unleashing of sexuality and violence" (7). The "pleasurable release" of the characters, however, always come with a cost (7). As an example, Grant highlights how the cellar door leading to "The Book of the Dead," the source of The Evil in *The Evil Dead*, blows open in the middle of the character's partying (7). This scene is repeated almost identically in *The Cabin in the Woods* as a likely homage to *The Evil Dead*. For Grant, the violent bursting open of the cellar door is a visual representation of the "repressed desires breaking loose" (7). In addition, the cellar door, in both *The Evil Dead* and *The Cabin in the Woods* leads directly to the artifact that will cause the respective film's protagonist's so much trouble. Seemingly the horror and violence faced by these characters is a direct reaction to their release from societal constraints on their sexuality. The punishment for sexual release within the wilderness may seem harsh in the context of these horror films, but this is largely due to the significant impact that Puritan influences still have on today's Gothic texts, as well as the portrayal of wilderness spaces.

While the texts discussed thus far have focused on the spiritual temptation of the forest and its contemporary equivalent, moral disorientation is not about sin and spirituality alone. Parker lists "The forest is a consuming threat" as one of her seven theses for why we continue to fear the forest (47). Although this fear is often based on physically becoming consumed, frequently literally portrayed through cannibalization, there is also a psychological component as well. The consumption caused by moral disorientation is the loss of core identity or belief. The Puritanical influences on the forest contribute to narratives which focus on the loss of belief, as in *The Witch,* and the violent outcome of unleashed repression, as in cabin horror films. However, the loss of one's identity or core beliefs does not need to be purely spiritual or morally focused. For the final portion of this section I turn to Lars von Trier's controversial film *Antichrist* to analyze how the forest consumes She and causes a change in her core beliefs.

Antichrist, for all of its complexities, is narratively a fairly simple story about two characters entering the wilderness and becoming completely overwhelmed by it. The two characters, a man referred to in the credits only as He (played by William Dafoe) and a woman, credited as She (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg), head into the forest to their cabin because He, who has unethically taken on his wife as a patient, believes it will help her overcome her grief at the death of their only child, Nic. The decision to enter the forest is foolhardy, as Murphy posits, "[Dafoe's character] should have known that an isolated cabin. . . is the last place in the world anyone should go for a spot of psychological recuperation," because "in the Rural Gothic more generally, positive impressions of the natural landscape are reversed. The forest intensifies rather than soothes mental torment and spiritual malaise" (18).

She's first experience with the forest occurs the summer before the events of the film, when she goes to their cabin, named Eden, to finish writing her dissertation on "Gynocide," the torture and destruction of women throughout history. Originally, she was interested in and studied "the kind of nature that causes people to do evil things against women." As She continued to work at the cabin, she discovered something unexpected in her material. She tells her husband that she came to understand, "If human nature is evil then that goes as well for the. . . the nature of all the sisters. Women do not control their own bodies, Nature does. I have it in writing in my books." The change in She's perspective towards women and their connection to nature is the direct result of her moral disorientation caused from working within the forest.

During a flashback to this summer, viewers are shown She hearing cries coming from outside of the cabin. Thinking the cries belong to her son, She frantically searches outside, but finds him playing and happy, not the source of the wailing. The camera then pans up to an aerial shot of the forest as the cries continue, suggesting that the entire forest is the source. Nolan Boyd, regarding this scene, writes, "This is the moment, it seems, that She develops her fear of nature, a fear that, through the cries she hears, is explicitly linked to her experience of motherhood." It is telling that She originally believed the cries of the forest to be coming from her own son, and that the forest's cries could be mistaken for that of an infant. Boyd is right to link motherhood to She's fear of the wilderness, especially since images of dying offspring recur repeatedly throughout the film: the stillborn fawn, a baby hawk that falls from its nest to be attacked by ants and then eaten by another bird, and the hundreds of acorns that constantly fall from a nearby tree onto the cabin.

The forest, which represents the larger natural world, as constructed by von Trier is a location of constant death and savagery. During the previous summer, the woman becomes overwhelmed by discovering what she sees at the truth behind the natural world and everything in it:

> Oak trees grow to be hundreds of years old. They only have to produce one single tree every hundred years in order to propagate. It may sound banal to you, but it was a big thing for me to realize that when I was up here with Nic. The acorns fell on the roof then too. They kept falling and falling and dying and dying, and I understood that everything that used to be beautiful about Eden, it was perhaps hideous. Now I could hear what I couldn't hear before—the cry of all the things that are to die.

She's concern towards the natural world stems from a realization that all of the bountiful life that populates the forest, will eventually die, coupled with a constant anxiety towards her own role as a mother and thus progenitor of life. In fact, she begins her explanation by mentioning how little offspring an oak tree must produce in order to propagate. This explanation further exemplifies just how many unnecessary acorns the tree produces, dooming most to fall and die, but also is telling of the woman's own situation as a mother who birthed a child that, like the many acorns, was destined to die.

The forest highlights the death and pain of the natural world, through the falling acorns and the haunting cries, and in doing so causes She to reconsider the nature of women, and therefore her own. In her state of disorientation, She links the horrors of the forest directly to women, since, as stated earlier, "Women do not control their bodies, nature does." This is a direct contradiction of her original thesis, a point not lost on her

husband who, astonished, exclaims, "The literature that you used in your research was about evil things committed against women, but you read it as proof of the evil of women? You were supposed to be critical of those texts, that was your thesis. Instead you're embracing it!"

The change in She's perspective towards women and their connection to nature is the direct result of her moral disorientation caused from working within the forest. By linking women and nature, She comes to believe that women deserve the torture and punishments that they have received throughout history. The acceptance of the "Gynocide" of women is noteworthy because it is a direct reversal of the ecofeminist movement. Essential to ecofeminism is the idea that "women are believed to be closer to nature than men" and that "we live in a culture which is founded on repudiation and domination of nature" (King 118). The result of these two points is that "[t]he hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing" (King 118). Ecofeminism, then, is a movement which seeks to gain liberation for women, or any oppressed group, and nature, since as long as the natural world remains viewed as needing subjugation, then so will the people who are deemed connected to it. Gainsbourg's character shares the sentiment of women's connection to nature, but rather sees the link as a reason for subjugation and torture, due to the natural world's inherent evil.

The overlap between women and the natural world occurs not just during dialogue but is also represented visually and aurally. Several scenes use fading transitions to overlay an image of the forest on top of the woman's body, with both images merging together for a moment, such as in the transition from the flashback of the crying forest

back to the film's present events. During this transition, the flashback ends with an aerial view of the forest, which is then faded onto an image of the woman's hair. Even more explicit is when, during a thought exercise on the train, the woman imagines laying down on the grass outside of Eden and, at her husband's request, melts into the grass. The most haunting example, however, is when the forest is transformed into a dreamlike place, and countless limbs and bodies litter the ground. The pale limbs are never explicitly explained, but they seem to represent the dead women who have come before, abused or tortured and then left behind. These shots are some of the most striking in the film, and act as another reminder of humanity's, and more specifically women's connection to the natural world.

Aurally, the link between humanity and the natural world comes from Kristian Andersen's subtle sound design, which mixes noises created from using natural objects (as discussed in Chapter 1, grass, wood, and rocks) alongside bodily sounds recorded by swallowing a small microphone. Although these sounds occur largely in the background, and their sources are not immediately recognizable, this is vivid evidence of an intentional blurring of the human and the natural.

The visually disturbing and uncanny wilderness discussed in the previous chapter reestablishes *Antichrist* as an iteration of the natural world the film then connects to human nature. Rather than place humanity in opposition to its dark wilderness setting, *Antichrist* desires to further merge human and forest, suggesting that no matter how separated or rational we may feel, ultimately, we are nothing more than natural creatures that adheres to our base nature—a nature that *Antichrist* argues is evil. It is not enough to

simply engage the viewer in this philosophical quandary on humanity's place within the natural world, *Antichrist* also shows just what this knowledge does to the woman, She.

During the finale of the film, after the woman finally accepts being controlled by nature, she castrates and hobbles her husband. When he manages to escape, she tracks him down, brings him back to the cabin, castrates herself, and then attacks him with a pair of scissors. All of these acts of violence occur within roughly the last thirty minutes of the film and come as a jarring change to the earlier slower-paced, suspenseful, character-driven narrative. Boyd reads these events as a "violent rebellion against the heteropatriarchy," a way for the woman to take control over her husband as he has always sought to take control over her. During the film's finale, She is very different than the frightened woman who could hardly enter the forest. The woman's connection to the forest, to the natural world, enables her to strike back against her oppressive husband. Parker notes how She's acceptance of her connection to the natural world strengthens her: "As 'She' embraces this intimacy between woman and Nature . . . she becomes 'one' with the animate forest and becomes truly dangerous: 'She' becomes 'the she-devil in the wilderness'" (129). The violent acts She commits against He, Parker adds, are "seen to unite the revenge of the woman and the forest" (130).[23]

In this regard, She's narrative within *Antichrist* is an ecofeminist revenge tale, in which both woman and the natural world rise up and seek to, unsuccessfully, take revenge against centuries of patriarchal injustices. When discussing the importance of witches within ecoGothic studies, Parker writes, "There is a subconscious awareness that

[23] Parker lists She's sexual molestation of He as a "startling analogy for the reversal of the "rape of nature" and the use of the lathe "as symbolically associated not only with the destruction of the forest, but with the murder of thousands of women" (130).

[the witch]—as an unholy merging of woman, flora, and fauna—is somehow synonymous with her setting—and is a conduit through which to express and explore our environmental anxieties" (184). While Parker does not specifically connect She's *Antichrist* to the witches of the woods, I would argue that She both causes and prompts exploration of our environmental anxieties in precisely the same way.

Social Disorientation

Where moral disorientation causes a struggle on the level of individual beliefs, social disorientation is the conflict of the individual's connection to society as a whole. I chose to close this chapter with social disorientation because it is often the end effect of both spatial and moral bewilderment within the forest. If lostness leads to effects on the individual's beliefs, then it will likewise test their connection to the society that first instilled those very beliefs the wilderness experience unseats. After Hawthorne's character Goodman Brown returns to society, he chooses to ostracize himself from his own community because he could no longer trust those around him. His belief that everyone from his wife to the community's preacher had been tainted by the forest and thus by the devil means that he could no longer willingly be a part of the community nor find joy within it. Similarly, both Thomasin and the character She find that their moral disorientation within the wilderness has aligned them against the societal structures that organized them within it and have instead joined forces with the forest. Even Ash, who entered the wilderness because of its freedom from societal constraints and faced the consequences of that freedom, is later revealed to have been changed through his traumatic experiences and unable to return to his previous life. Through the television

show *Ash vs Evil Dead*, a sequel to the Evil Dead film franchise, it is revealed that Ash has lived the thirty years since the events of *Evil Dead 2* as a lonely drifter living on the edges of the towns he temporary lives in. The commonality between these examples is that to survive, or even attempt to survive within wilderness horror narratives, the protagonists had to distance themselves from civilization, a result that forever marks them.

Social disorientation within American film and literature is intertwined with the early colonial fear of becoming "savage." The New England colonists viewed the Indians as completely opposite to themselves—pagans that had surrendered to their wilderness instincts and did not even attempt to "conquer and transcend nature" (Murphy 29). William Bradford, whose accounts begin in 1630, saw the "New World" as "unpeopled," "devoid of all civil inhabitants," and "where there are only savage and brutish men which range up and down, little otherwise than the wild beasts of the same" (4). While the European colonists certainly feared physical attacks by Indians, they were equally frightened of losing their own identity and becoming like them, with Puritan leaders fearing that prolonged contact with "native ways and native land" would result in degeneration (Murphy 36).

This fear that wilderness contact might change an individual was only heightened the further an individual traveled away from the colonies. Murphy notes, "the further one got from 'civilized' regions of the colony, the more in danger one was of losing sight of one's original, Puritan self" (36). Importantly, this was not a momentary concern that only impacted the initial European settlers. Many of those living in the colonies during the eighteenth-century believed, Kolodny observes, "The savagery of the woods and of

their native inhabitants . . . would inevitably make savages of the whites who tried to remove there," which caused anxiety and reluctance in some who were relocating further away from civilization (54). In turn this anxiety towards relocation to and consumption by the wilderness would manifest as a fear towards those who live and try to survive outside of civilization.

The colonial fear of a reduction to savagery notably also appears within early American literature. The widely popular captivity narratives of the 1600s are an initial example of this. The most famous of these captivity stories was Mary Rowlandson's *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, which recounts her survival of an Indian attack, capture, and eventually release back to society. Within Rowlandson's text, she is "forced to act in ways that would normally be unacceptable," in order to survive the rigorous journey through the wilderness, a common theme of these American captivity stories (Murphy 93). Murphy uses Rowlandson's accounts among others to indicate that "survival in the 'New World' can only come about through adaptation" (96). Rowlandson's eventual acceptance of the Indian's food and way of life showcases just how quickly European customs and conventions can be neglected for one's survival (96). Ultimately, as Murphy writes, "The individual who has been changed by their ordeal in the wilderness may find themselves irrevocably distanced not only from their community, but also from themselves" (96).

Based upon the long fear of social disorientation within American texts, I have broken down this fear into two foundational categories: assimilation into nature and reduction to savagery. Assimilation into nature occurs when a character begins to distance themselves from civilization and the society they originated in, and instead

comes to associate with the wilderness. Although a reduction to savagery can occur alongside assimilation, this covers the specific phobia of "civilized" individuals choosing to leave society and order for the chaos and freedom offered by the wilderness. Assimilation into nature is the direct result of the moral disorientation discussed within the previous section and can be seen through She's eventual alignment with the wilderness and Thomasin's induction to forces representative of the forest space. Since these examples have already been analyzed within the context of moral disorientation, the remainder of this section now focuses on the ancillary component of social disorientation, a reduction to savagery.

The difficulty of living outside of civilization and pioneering across the expansive wilderness of North America meant that "in the struggle for survival many existed at a level close to savagery," where not even the horror of cannibalism was unheard of (Nash 30). It is in this national narrative, the stories of rugged individuals doing whatever it means to survive the brutal environment, that the fear of the wilderness causing a reduction to savagery can be found. The social disorientation component of this fear is illustrated when characters are placed within the wilderness and must commit atrocious acts to survive.

The case of individual change to survive is famously portrayed in Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Edgar Huntley, Or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, first published in 1799. Edgar is changed by his time in the wild, shifting from a "well-bred young gentleman to first, Wildman, and then, Indian killer" (Murphy 98).[24] In the novel,

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[24] Murphy draws clearer distinctions between "Wildman" and "Indian Killer" within *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*; however, it is notable for my purposes to highlight their shared

Huntley's first real test of civilization vs the wilderness influence comes from his hunger. Waking up within a cave deep in the forest, Huntley is helplessly lost and uncertain of how to escape his predicament. After a while hunger begins to set in.

> My hunger speedily became ferocious. I tore the lining of my shirt between my teeth and swallowed the fragments. I felt a strong propensity to bite the flesh from my arm. My heart overflowed with cruelty, and I pondered the delight I should experience in rending some living animal to pieces, and drinking its blood, and grinding its quivering fibres between my teeth. (Brown 110)

Because of his intense hunger an undeniable change begins to occur within Huntley. Not only does his hunger outweigh any concern for his shirt lining and appearance, but he also yearns for the cruel and violent act of murdering a living creature and devouring it. A core theme of wilderness horror narratives, the movement away from the civilized self towards a more violent and savage individual has its basis in earlier stories of survival like Rowlandson's captivity narrative and Brown's novel.

The attachment of savagery and violence to those that preserve their lives within the wilderness, is likewise associated with the individual who chooses to live within the forest and away from civilization. Fear of the backwood dwellers has a long history within America beginning with the first colonists and continuing up to the Revolutionary War, as noted by Kolodny in her discussion of Charles Woodmason's journal. Woodmason was a minister travelling around the Carolina backcountry just before the

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associations. Both were thought to occupy "[a] position on the other side of the strictly maintained boundary between civilized and savage" (98).

Revolution and he regarded those he met, "as rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them" (qtd. in Kolodny 56). In many ways this association of savagery with those living away from civilization has remained unchanged from the Revolutionary War and still lingers even in modernity. Those that live in the country or the hills, the rural poor, often find themselves villainized and othered throughout the horror genre. Parker notes that there is an inherent distrust of human settlement within the wilderness, and that the forest "renders us humans into extremes, as either dangerous monsters or endangered species" (213, 223-224). Murphy, similarly, found that, within rural gothic texts, leaving civilization results in "becoming less civilised" and ends in "a process of adaptation and transformation that turns you into something partially or wholly monstrous" (11). Tuan attributes the use of the rural poor in horror, and their remote landscapes, to their proximity to violence.

> Countryfolk live close to violence. The farm is often a place for killing. Although it is an excess of sentiment to lament the fate of plants, there remains the slaughtering of animals, a common experience of the farmer from which city people can turn their eyes in distaste. One wonders whether over the years physical hardship, combined with this necessity to kill, dulls the farm worker's awareness of suffering in himself, in other human beings, and in animals. (Tuan *Landscapes of Fear* 139)

This link between the necessary violence that accompanies rural living, hunting and farming, has and continues to be an important component of rural horror films. This is perhaps most famously evident in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where Leatherface and his cannibalistic family were all formerly employed at a now closed slaughterhouse. *The*

Texas Chainsaw Massacre creates a clear link between Leatherfaces' family's brutal work to the violence they enact upon the film's unfortunate protagonists.

Returning to the affects the wilderness has on the individual within the horror genre, reduction to savagery is often portrayed through placing "civilized" protagonists in circumstances where they must either violently combat antagonistic forces or commit atrocious acts in order to survive their ordeal. Ash's self-amputation and then grafting of a chainsaw to his arm would be arguably the most famous example. While certainly over the top, Ash's actions and his corresponding mental state at the time are prime examples of how the wilderness forces characters to forgo societal norms in order for a chance at survival. A slightly more subdued example, although no less brutal, would be Thomasin's matricide within *The Witch*. At the end of the film, Thomasin's mother attacks her, believing that her daughter is the cause of all the family's trauma. In self-defense Thomasin fights back, and eventually must kill her mother lest she be killed herself. The wilderness has broken down all societal bonds and expectations of civilized discourse and societal contracts, leaving only violence and death. This is no more evident than in *Antichrist*.[25]

Within the previous section I discussed the film *Antichrist* from the perspective of the character She. Whereas She is shown drawing connections between herself and the forest, He's story is one of opposition and trial, which serves as an excellent text for discussing portrayals of social disorientation and masculinity within the horror film

[25] Due to spatial concerns and the length of this chapter I decided that *Antichrist* would be the most beneficial film for a more complete analysis. However, social disorientation certainly deserves further study. For future studies, analysis focused on social disorientation could be applied to virtually any survival horror film, with films such as *The Grey*, *Cast Away*, and *Deliverance*, etc., presenting prime examples.

medium. When focused on the events from the husband's perspective, the film becomes a narrative about a logical man fighting against the chaotic wilderness and its representative, his own wife. William Dafoe's characterization of He is cold and detached, most notably portrayed through his calm, yet unemotional tone of speech, consisting of little inflection. He seeks to control his wife through treating her depression, attempting to deny her sexual pleasure, and forcing her to revisit their cabin against her warnings. His wife, however, can't be controlled, and it is the wilderness that grants her this power. Instead of "curing" his wife, he watches as she falls only further out of his control and into the wilderness's sway. When reading the film with He as a representative of order, and thus civilization and humanity, She then becomes an agent of natural forces. This means that the battle between the married couple can be read not just as a gendered fight for control but also as representative of humanity's struggle to control the wilderness.

Initially it appears as though He remains untainted during his entrance to the wilderness. However, the appearance of the Three Beggars, a deer, a talking fox, and a dead crow returned to life, reveal that He's mental fortitude is beginning to collapse. Simmons notes that the Three Beggars, who haunt the "Gothicized landscape" are a "grotesquely amplified" representation of the man's repressed emotions (34). The Three Beggars are essentially a visual form granted to the emotions that He is trying to hide away. He's entrance into the wilderness, a location that has a history of bewilderment and confusion, gives grotesque life to his repressed feelings about the death of his son. Simmons continues, "Significantly, it is the fear of losing control (as represented by the Beggars) and the dread of rupturing the thin veneer of civilization that informs the

philosophical horror of *Antichrist*" (34). Once again, the dread of the wilderness stems from a potential loss of control; however, the danger is not just metaphysical.

As the film progresses, the fight for control turns from a metaphysical battle of wills into a physical battle of survival. Murphy explains, "There's something about the wilderness, the film suggests, that brings primal and destructive impulses oozing to the surface" (17). This primal and destructive impulse erupts in the film's graphic finale in which the man, during an anxiety-induced fight response, kills the woman. *Antichrist* importantly brings attention to the fact that He's actions during the film's climax are tied to a biological response. Right before he chokes his wife, there are close-ups of his trembling hands, quickened breathing, and increased pulse, all done in black and white and slightly blurred. This scene specifically parallels the close-ups and stylization that was used during a panic attack the woman experienced earlier in the film. During She's panic attack the man explains what is happening, ironically letting her know that the reaction is natural and, therefore, not dangerous. Showing that He goes through the exact same physical experience right before killing his wife indicates that the man has given into a completely biological response. He survives his encounter in the wilderness only through a descent into violent primality.

The result is that humanity (represented by the anonymous everyman and everywoman characters) has been reduced to its most basic natural response (fight or flight), and, in the final moments of the film, all concepts of civilization and traditional social constructions, such as morality or marriage, have been left behind, leaving only basic instinct. *Antichrist*'s portrayal of the man's experience shows the continued utilization of the wilderness's ability to socially disorient those that enter. Furthermore,

social disorientation, as well as the other portrayals of bewilderment discussed throughout this chapter, within the forest setting continues the ongoing and ecophobic trend of depicting the forest as a location of chaos, opposing ordered humanity.

CHAPTER 3: WHY THE CABIN CAN'T SAVE US

Early European colonists feared much more than just the possible adverse spiritual and psychological effects that isolation in the wilderness might cause. Although settlers believed the devil lurked within the woods, there were other more immediate and certain dangers to contend with. The forest represented a wealth of natural resources, but it was just as dangerous as it was giving. Weather could bring harsh blizzards in the winter or droughts in the summer. Wild predators and Native Americans (angry at the expanding territorial seizures of the European colonists) seemingly lurked in the shadows and unseen valleys. It is no wonder then that the anxieties of those that braved the North American frontier have etched themselves into the American social consciousness. From frontier Gothic literary texts to the cabin horror film genre, American literature and film utilize the frontier setting and the greater symbolic nature of the log cabin to play upon audience fears. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the conflict between the protagonists and the wilderness as their relationship turns more violent. In this way the ecophobia of onscreen characters is externalized. In particular, such externalization manifests in a contest for dominion over the land.

Before discussing the cabin horror genre, the connection between this film genre and the American Gothic wilderness must be established. Cabin horror is less dependent on the bewilderment that the wilderness can bring than on a battle for control and survival. This battle is reminiscent of the pioneering lifestyle that would take colonial and later American explorers far across the continent. The American frontier made for an excellent Gothic setting, steeped in polarizing perspectives. On one hand, it showcased the American concept of manifest destiny and created heroes that represented a unique,

rugged Americanness. On the other hand, the frontier was paved in blood, not only that of the Native Americans, whose land was taken from them, but also that of the many European pioneers who would brave the wilderness and perish in their efforts. Much in the same way that Hawthorne drew from and dramatized the Puritans, cabin horror films draw from the cultural frontier mythos, seen most visibly in Turner's Frontier Thesis, and the fiction of Gothic authors, such as Ambrose Bierce.

Bierce's "The Boarded Window," "The Eyes of the Panther," and "The Damned Thing" feature a frontier homestead setting and the horrors of the wilderness that stem from the unknown and the physical dangers of the forest at night.[26] Bierce sums up the American pioneering mythos well when he describes Charles Marlowe, the protagonist of the short story "The Eyes of the Panther":

> Charles Marlowe was of the class, now extinct in this country, of woodmen pioneers . . . For more than a hundred years these men pushed ever westward, generation after generation, with rifle and ax, reclaiming Nature and her savage children here and there an isolated acreage for the plow, no sooner reclaimed than surrendered to their less venturesome but more thrifty successors . . . The woodman pioneer is no more; the pioneer of the plains—he whose easy task it was to subdue for occupancy two-thirds of the country in a single generation—is another and inferior creation. (271-72)

[26] I use "homestead" in this sentence, and throughout the rest of my work to mean the home and accompanying land that the characters either live on or are currently staying at. Using the term "homestead" allows me to discuss the entirety of the land that the characters are attempting to claim, while the cabin will refer to specifically the structural home that the characters inhabit.

Bierce's description echoes Turner's Frontier Thesis, particularly in its championing of the pioneer. This passage showcases that Bierce's writings, whether intentional or not, reflect the Frontier Thesis and the ideas it brought to the forefront of the American social consciousness. It is important to note that Bierce's glorification is specific to the woodsman pioneer, contrasting him to the lesser plains pioneer. This denotes a difference in perspectives regarding the difficulties of the forested wilderness as compared to those from that of the wide-open fields of the plains.

One sees the details of Bierce's perspective through his diction. He states that nature was reclaimed by the pioneers, using rifle and axe, and then surrendered. This description suggests a militaristic experience for the pioneers, whose sole job was to take the land. Once the conquering pioneers did manage to make claims upon the land, it had to be surrendered to those who followed them. Such terminology was not unique to Bierce but was a common discourse of westward expansion in the period. Nash notes that pioneers—in diaries, addresses, and memorials—chose military metaphors to write about the coming civilization, because they saw the wilderness as an enemy (Nash 27). Furthermore, Nash writes, "In the morality play of westward expansion, wilderness was the villain, and the pioneer, as hero, relished its destruction" (24). The pioneer and the wilderness were at odds, with the pioneer attempting to claim and shape the landscape and the wilderness blocking the ever-westward march. Bierce's frontier Gothic works illustrate the battle between the wilderness and the frontiersman, while continuing to establish the belief in the wilderness as enemy and villain needing to be shot and axed. It is from this language and imagery of confrontation that contemporary cabin horror films draw their inspiration.

Cabin Setting within the Wilderness

Before discussing onscreen cabins, one must understand how the cabin in the woods image first became connected to American society, and how it has maintained its cultural importance and iconography.[27] Above all, the log cabin's significance throughout American history and the frontier stems from its structural advantages over other housing styles. C. A. Weslager writes,

> Families on the American frontier faced physical change by insulating themselves against the effects of a new environment and protecting themselves against predators through the utilization of the native trees. The log cabin which they built was as important in the survival process as the thin layer of top soil in which they planted the precious seeds from which would grow the crops to sustain them. (25)

The log cabin was essential for early settlers who ventured further and further inland, approaching and then passing the Appalachian Mountains. As Weslager notes, protection from the changing physical landscapes and weather, as well as predators, was the key to survival. Additionally, for the settlers surrounded by the expansive forest, the ability to create a structure from the resources immediately available meant they gained protection promptly, and that there was no need to bring large stores of refined timber or other building materials. Almost as important as using the nearby resources was the simple

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[27] There are numerous cabin architectural styles that vary from region to region. For the purpose of this work, I will only briefly discuss the architectural definition of a cabin, specifically a log cabin, which was a popular style of housing built by early colonists and frontiersmen. My concern is not so much the specific design, whether it be a central fireplace, double-den, or saddle bag, but rather the larger purpose of why the log cabin style was built, and why it has continued to be a large part of American heritage and culture. For a thorough study of American cabins, see C. A. Weslager's *The Log Cabin in America: From Pioneer Days to the Present*.

design, allowing cabins to be built quickly, and, if need be, constructed with only a few people assisting (Weslager 19). Since the logs are held together by a combination of their own weight and the carved notches that allow them to interlock, no nails or spikes are required (14). Essentially, the only tool needed to construct the log cabin was an axe (8). The ease of locating building materials was not the only benefit of using wood logs; they also served as the foundation for creating a defensible structure. Weslager asserts,

> Defense was of primary consideration to the earliest cabin builders, taking precedence over convenience and comfort, especially in territory where hostile Indians resented the invasive white families. A well-built log dwelling provided a secure family shelter, and neither flint-tipped arrows nor lead bullets could penetrate the log walls. (7)

Despite its defensive strengths, however, the lone cabin could still be quite vulnerable. An isolated cabin worked well to keep out animal predators and lone threats, but a larger attacking force would have no problem either burning down or breaking into a cabin. Nonetheless, being quick to build, defensible, and requiring little resources outside of what was already easily available, the log cabin was by far the most efficient housing option for settlers venturing into unknown areas.

The popularity of the log cabin, due to its utility on the frontier and continued use by poorer Americans throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, helped it become an iconic American symbol that resonates to this day. Part of its ongoing relevance is directly linked to the politicization of the cabin by early U.S. presidents. Numerous presidents, from Andrew Jackson to, perhaps most famously, Abraham Lincoln, not only were born or grew up in log cabins but also exploited their

birth and early childhood homes to their advantage. They were able to link their humble origins to the positive traits associated with the mythic frontiersman through the shared cabin connection. These traits consisted of self-reliance, hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance: core values of idealized Americanness. The cabin is thus a symbol of the glorified American frontier experience and has itself become part of a persisting cultural mythos linking this abode to the very start of colonial America.

It is important to note that while the cabin was used on the frontier and by American colonists, this did not occur until at least a century after Jamestown's founding in 1607 (99). Instead, the earliest colonists would have lived in makeshift huts, spending more time hunting for gold than building a sustainable settlement. Weslager surmises that this was likely why the earliest colonies failed (100). However, as far back as 1857, at the 250th anniversary of the first Virginia colonists, both President James Tyler and Virginia's governor Henry A. Wise linked log cabins to the first settlers (99). Wise, as Weslager notes,

> dramatized the situation by telling his audience that, 'Here the Old World met the New. Here the White Man first met the Red for settlement and colonization. Here the White Man first wielded the axe to cut down the first tree for the first log cabin. *Here the first log cabin was built* for the first village, etc., etc.' (99)

The log cabin narrative has been ingrained in cultural ideas, as well as incorrectly linked to some of the earliest North American colonies. The desire to link the log cabin to the earliest settlers comes from the veneration of the colonial and frontier mythic landscape that became so important in defining what made Americans unique from Europeans and

the rest of the world and from the desire to create a unifying mythic narrative, starting with the first colonists. In the cabin horror genre, the onscreen cabin carries with it the cultural weight and meaning of this mythic narrative. Of course, any house design can invoke additional meaning, but what makes the cabin unique is the purposeful inclusion into the American national narrative and identity. In this way, the cabin is an excellent structure for horror films, since it allows for characters to be removed from modernity and placed into a more archaic and dangerous setting that has a long, often violent, history connected to it.

The Morristown, Tennessee cabin at which Sam Raimi and his crew shot *The Evil Dead* has become so iconic that it has served as a touchstone for later cabin horror films. For example, the exterior cabin design for *The Cabin in the Woods*—a film that serves as a metanarrative commentary on horror tropes—is a near replica of the Evil Dead franchise's cabin, an explicit homage. Figures 3.1-3.5 show exterior shots of cabins from cabin horror films released from 1981 to 2015. Although not identical, the cabins share an overall aesthetic. Their design is meant to evoke the iconic log cabin that is so important to American history and culture. To achieve this, each of the film cabins are constructed primarily out of wood, or at least appear that way, and have the front facing profile of the iconic cabin: an A-frame roof, at least one chimney, a simple front porch, a single door (often in the middle of the porch), and one or two windows. This basic design has become easily recognizable.[28]

[28] Of course, it is not an image unique to horror films; this design can be seen in diverse images, from the logos of maple syrup bottles to Thomas Kinkade paintings. Because the image of the cabin is so recognizable, the cabin horror genre can pull from the structure's long history, albeit with a focus on its darker, more combative history rather than the glorified Americana mythos.

The cabin’s obvious wooden construction harkens back to the rustic origin of the original frontier cabins, while also creating a visualized connection and juxtaposition between the cabin and the forest that surrounds it. The cabin becomes representative of human agency and order enacted upon the chaotic wilderness. For settlers, the cabin’s construction served as a means to clear land to create a field and repurpose the felled trees, thereby shaping the forest to their needs. Cabin horror protagonists are not quite able to claim this sense of agency, but that does not mean that the cabin location loses this intrinsic significance. By staying in this cabin, situated in the middle of this expansive wilderness space, the onscreen characters, like the frontier cabin builders, are exerting agency over the wilderness in an attempt to gain a sense of safety and control. When the cabin ultimately fails its inhabitants, the film draws upon the audience’s ecophobia by illustrating a visual loss of human agency through the cabin’s eventual destruction and invasion.

Like the portrayal of the wooden exterior, another feature of cinematic cabin construction worthy of specific consideration is the placement of stuffed animal heads on the interior walls. Both *Evil Dead 2* and *The Cabin in the Woods* use purposeful interior establishing shots to linger over these displays of nature, dominated by humanity. These trophies represent animals that have been successfully hunted, killed, and transformed into passive symbols of human potency. Equally important is their placement within the cabin, which further strengthens the idea that inside of the cabin nature is something to be conquered. The trophies thereby create a sense of opposition between the inhabitants of the cabin and the wilderness outside of it, while also showing the power that the cabin appears to hold over nature.

In comparison to the Evil Dead film franchise's cabin, the homesteader's dwelling in *The Witch* is even closer to an actual colonial log cabin. The layout of *The Witch*'s log cabin, from its single room to the loft where the children sleep and the wooden window boards, all match descriptions from Weslager's work on early colonial and frontier cabins. Robert Eggers's attention to historical detail throughout his film makes his background in production and costume design readily apparent. With the help of production designer Craig Lathrop and costume designer Linda Muir, Eggers created sets and costumes as accurate to the period as possible in an attempt to immerse audiences as fully as possible into an antiquated Puritan narrative. *The Witch*'s crew went beyond just making replicas, using period appropriate techniques for constructing sets and costumes. In an interview with Mark Olsen of the *LA Times,* Eggers states,

> I am positive it is the most accurate portrayal of this period in American history on screen. We went to such lengths to make it so . . . Everything with the farmstead that we built, everything that you see on-screen is made from the correct building materials that would have been used at the time. Most often we used the traditional tools and techniques to create these objects. And the clothing is hand stitched based on extant clothing.

Eggers, himself, explains that this commitment to authentic recreation originated from a desire to create an "atmospheric or transportive" film, and that to accomplish this he needed to approach the film as a memory (Rife). Eggers states, "[I]t has to be, like, my memory in my Puritan childhood and the way my father smelled in the corn field that morning. Without the detail, the hand-stitched everything, you can't get there" (Rife). Eggers' goals draw on the strength of film as a visual medium. Whereas language in

literature encourages the reader to imagine, film permits Eggers to construct precise images for the audience that reproduce historical context. *The Witch* does not evoke an archaic wilderness and cabin, but rather seeks to accurately recreate these settings onscreen. In this way, the film's intent is to transport audiences into a New England folktale, since if audience's do not believe that the characters and their lives are real, then the threat of the wilderness and the witch will likewise lose its merit.

Just as the cabin's interior and exterior mise-en-scène is worthy of study, so too is its placement within the wilderness setting. Isolating the cabin and placing it within a dense forest is central to the literary tradition from which the cabin horror film emerges. In "The Eyes of the Panther," Bierce describes the forest outside of a solitary cabin as "a dense unbroken forest extended for many miles in every direction" (271). Similarly, in "The Boarded Window," Bierce describes Murlock as a man who "lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest, of whose gloom and silence he seemed a part" (253). In both of these examples, Bierce specifically describes the expansiveness of the forest and the cabin's location within that space. Film provides a spatial conceptualization to the expansiveness of the forest through establishing and tracking shots, such as the examples discussed in Chapter 1, that echo the descriptions of colonial writers. A similar strategy seen in many cabin horror films, including *The Evil Dead, Cabin Fever,* and the remake *Evil Dead*, is the use of road trip footage that contrasts open highways with the confining woods.

While only some cabin horror films use these wide shots to establish the isolation of the cabin within the woods, all of the films within this subgenre emphasize carefully framed establishing shots of the cabin. When we are introduced to the cabin, it is framed

by surrounding trees and fauna. The distinction between Figures 3.1 and 3.2 is especially interesting because they come from films by the same director and illustrate two different levels of set design control. In Figure 3.1 from *The Evil Dead,* the cabin was not built for the film, but predated it. The landscape shown in this establishing shot is natural and unaltered. In contrast, Figure 3.2 from *Evil Dead 2* reveals a cabin that was constructed purposefully for external film shots, while interior cabin footage was completed in a studio. This means that, for the second film, Raimi and his production crew had complete control over how the land framed the cabin's exterior. The result may be similar, but the minor differences are worthy of comment. In the establishing shot for *Evil Dead 2,* the trees border the cabin particularly closely and also appear in the foreground. The tight grouping of the trees works to situate the cabin entirely within the forest rather than near it. In cabin horror films, establishing the cabin's location deep within the wilderness helps to visually establish the isolation of the protagonists, removing the characters from the present day into an archaic and unsafe wilderness setting.

By contrast to the Evil Dead franchise, in *The Witch* the cabin is not buried within the forest, but rather sits in an adjacent clearing. Visually, this placement highlights a hard separation between the space where the protagonists live and the wilderness that surrounds them. This distance, however, does not create safety. To reinforce the illusory nature of this apparent security, Eggers turns to another film technique—the use of sound. On the DVD commentary track, Eggers notes that he wanted "the presence of nature to always be felt." Coupling visual imagery with sound to achieve this effect can be seen in the film's early dinner scene in the cabin. Silence between lines of dialogue highlights the background sound of insects humming. Although the insect noises persist

throughout the entire scene, the many moments of silence accent the humming, filling the quiet void. Unlike simple ambient background noise or a musical soundtrack, the sound design in the scene suggests infiltration of the external wilderness into an entirely interior scene. Moreover, this is not the only scene in which the humming and chirping of insects can be subtly heard in the background. In fact, nearly every scene that takes place at night or early in the morning features these sounds. Of course, using chirping cricket sound effect isn't unique to *The Witch. The Evil Dead, Evil Dead 2,* and *Cabin Fever* all utilize a similar background effect, although only for nighttime scenes. The primary difference between *The Witch*'s use of sound design and the other films is the constant presence of natural ambience. In contrast, noises akin to the wilderness are never heard when characters are inside the cabin in *Cabin Fever*, and in both the first and second Evil Dead films this sound effect is only occasionally used for effect.

While literature cannot use sound, its language can certainly invoke it. For example, the second paragraph of Ambrose Bierce's "The Damned Thing" reads,

> From the blank darkness outside came in, through the aperture that served for a window, all the ever unfamiliar noises of the night in the wilderness—the long nameless note of a distant coyote; the stilly pulsing thrill of tireless insects in trees; strange cries of night birds, so different from the birds of day; the drone of great blundering beetles, and all that mysterious chorus of small sounds that seem always to have been but half heard when they have suddenly ceased, as if conscious of an indiscretion. (121)

Bierce's description would not be far removed from the dinner scene in *The Witch*. However, after Bierce's description, the imagined thrill of the insects and the howl of the coyote are replaced by new descriptions and events. In *The Witch,* the sounds continue past their initial introduction, persisting throughout the entire film, and ultimately creating, as Eggers wanted, the presence of nature to accompany the audience in a similar way that it does the onscreen characters.

Through visual establishment and sound design cabin horror films are able to convey to the audience both the isolation of the cabin within the wilderness and the connections between the cabin and the wilderness that surrounds it. The isolation of the cabin, its archaic appearance, and its well-known American symbolism all work to evoke the frontier experience and the fears connected it. By using this historically charged setting, cabin horror films are able to remove their characters from the comfortable confines of an urban location and transport them to the expansive wilderness. This film subgenre then places its protagonists in a recognizable log cabin, a structure that has a long and violent history throughout American westward expansion. This removes movie-goers from the comfort of their own home and situates them in a more vulnerable location at the forefront of a battle for agency and control over a chaotic and ultimately irrepressible wilderness.

What Lurks outside the Cabin

In contrast to the cabin's illusion of safety is the forest that surrounds it. I have already discussed at length in Chapter 2 how filmmakers can utilize different techniques to create a sense of uncanny towards the wilderness, and those hold true for the cabin

horror genre as well. However, cabin horror films also populate their wildernesses with a tangible threat. The Blair Witch is never shown in her titular film, and the danger in *YellowBrickRoad* and *Antichrist* comes from the madness faced by exposure to the wilderness, not necessarily a monstrous force within the forest itself. The cabin horror genre, on the other hand, usually requires a physical threat, even if it might be microscopic, to assault the cabin—a monster in the woods.

In her chapter aptly titled, "Where the Wild Things Are: Monsters in the Forest," Elizabeth Parker notes that there are a near limitless number of creatures populating haunted woods (139). From the witches and wolves in fairy tales to the Mothman and Slenderman of modernity, there has always been a fascination with populating wilderness spaces with monstrous entities. Richard Kearney attributes the consistent fascination with monsters to the fact that they are "metaphors of our anxiety" (117). He further argues that "[o]ur rational consciousness is forever haunted by unconscious demons" and monsters are "transposing our most secret phobias" (Kearney 117). In essence, monsters have and will always remain so long as humanity finds the world around them anxiety inducing. Due to their creation from "secret phobias" it makes the monsters that inhabit the forest all the more important to study through an ecoGothic lens. The natural question remains: why does the forest continue to be haunted by monsters?

In an attempt to answer this question, Parker finds a paradoxical relationship between the woods and their monstrous inhabitants. We populate the forest with monsters because we are afraid of it, and we are afraid of it, because it is filled with monsters.

> Simply put, the forest is frightening because it is filled with monsters. Their expected presence is a classic determinant of this environment's

> terrors. And yet, at the same time, it is because the forest terrifies us that we fill it with monsters in the first place. These woodland creatures, therefore, simultaneously inspire and reflect ecophobic anxieties. (139)

The monster as a conduit for ecophobic anxieties, while also serving as the inspiration for those same anxieties, is precisely why it merits academic study. The monster in the woods is thus humanity's ecophobia visually represented in the vilified personification of the forest as a physical construct—fear given form.

In her study on monsters in the woods, Parker narrowed down these creatures and focused subsections within her chapter on three categories, "ambiguous monsters," witches, and wolves. It is this first category, "ambiguous monsters," which I seek to draw from and expand upon through studying The Evil from the Evil Dead franchise, Cabin Fever's disease, and The Witch from its namesake film.[29] "Ambiguous monsters" are defined by Parker as reflecting

> intensely the haunting vagueness of our fears of the forest, for even as they manifest these terrors, they remain somehow slippery, often out of sight, and impossible to categorise. They emphasise the fundamental nature of the monster, which is to defy borders, boundaries and any semblance of order. (147)

Specifically, it is the unseen and vague characteristic of the "ambiguous monster" that I will be focusing on. Upon reading Parker's work, my mind immediately turned to the

[29] Parker analyses *The Witch* within her subsection on witches for obvious reasons; however, I will make the argument that The Witch creature is as equally worthy of study as an "ambiguous monster."

invisible monster at the heart of Ambrose Bierce's short story "The Damned Thing" as a perfect specimen for initial study through this categorization.

The "damned thing" for which the short story is named is an invisible assailant that assaults two hunters, Hugh Morgan and William Harker. The story is framed through Harker telling a coroner under oath about Morgan's death and their attack from what could only be described as an invisible creature. It is understandably difficult for Harker to portray what he saw, or more accurately, could not see. The agitation at the limitations of explanation becoming apparent from the creature's title alone, the "damned thing." In trying to convey his experience, it becomes apparent that the creature could only be discerned through known sight lines. When the creature moves toward Harker and Morgan, it is described as "a slow undeviating approach of the line of disturbance" (Bierce "The Damned Thing" 124-125). Likewise this is conveyed through the "damned things" interactions with physical matter, such as when Morgan is being attacked, Harker remarks that the vision of his friend is obscured: "I could discern but a part of his body; it was as if he had been partly blotted out—I cannot otherwise express it" (124-25). Kevin Corstorphine discerns the creature's unsettling of sensory norms:

> The conception that nature might not be observable by the human subject transforms the relationship radically. In the case of Morgan, the roles are reversed and the hunter becomes prey…The frontier becomes a space where uncertainty reigns, and even the evidence of the senses can be cast into doubt. (129)

Corstorphine's language here unintentionally mirrors that of Parker's definition for the "ambiguous monster." The "damned thing" is a creature of uncertainty; it defies "any

semblance of order" (Parker 147). There is something so primal about the fear of the unknown, about the potential threat that could be lurking at the edge of human's limited perspective, either in the dark or just out of sight. In Chapter 2 I discussed how the forest can limit a traveler's vision and thus can lead to disorientation and bewilderment within the woods. The "damned thing" is this fear given flesh, a creature who removes human agency through eliminating sight.

Bierce's invisible creature serves as the perfect example of what I would argue is a subcategory or specific focus within the 'ambiguous monster' classification proposed by Parker: the unseen monster. The unseen monster does not need to be literally invisible, but rather exists predominantly offscreen, or is never given a true form. Bizarrely enough, it is film where many of the most notorious unseen monsters can be found. The lack of visualization within a visual medium is perhaps partially responsible for their notoriety.[30] *The Blair Witch Project* became a phenomenon due in part to its distinct lack of a monster. In fact, one of the major complaints against the film *Blair Witch* was the reveal, even if just for a moment, of the monster.[31] It is within this subcategory I place The Evil, *Cabin Fever*'s disease, and The Witch.

In *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2*, the Evil's true form, if it even has a physical form, is never shown onscreen—only subjects that it has possessed and corrupted. Rather than being portrayed as a creature, the Evil invisibly possesses the trees of the forest, the cabin, and the bodies of dead characters. The Evil actively uses the forest to hinder and

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[30] In part the frequency of unseen monsters in cinema can be attributed to the limited budget of many horror films.

[31] Regarding audience disconnect Parker writes, "Viewers' anger revealed the importance of this monster's function, in the Blair Witch mythology, to give a name and individually imagined entity to *all* the terror of the woods—which should not be revealed" (179).

harm the protagonists, such as in Cheryl's assault by the trees in *The Evil Dead*. In *Evil Dead 2,* the Evil's powers expand: it has the ability to alter the forest to hide paths, and during the film's climax, to take possession of a large, demonized tree. The possession of the tree binds the identity of the Evil with the forest that surrounds the cabin. Even more intriguing is the decision to use filmic point of view to portray the amorphous Evil. Raimi uses a shaky camera to project the point of view (POV). Viewers see through the Evil's perspective. In opposition to the smooth camera movement of a steady cam, the wobbly POV highlights more jittery actions, since it can't correct for the camera users' pace, whether it be walking, running, or climbing over uneven terrain. The result is an obvious, much harsher camera movement, which creates a unique perspective for the unseen Evil in both *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2*.[32]

Not only do the POV shots allow the viewers a new perspective but also help to associate narrative traits of the Evil with onscreen visuals. The unstable movements and accelerated pacing of the Evil through the forest implies predatorial force.[33] Alongside associating the Evil with a predator in the audience's mind, it is also worth remarking that the Evil's POV demonstrates the ease with which this malevolent force can move within the forest. Characters in all three of the Evil Dead franchise films trip and drag themselves through the wilderness, while the Evil has completely free and undaunted movement. This once more connects the Evil to the forest, juxtaposing its ease against the unease of the human characters. "The viewpoint is literally ecocentric," writes Parker,

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[32] The later remake, *Evil Dead*, also uses a POV camera technique, but only rarely. Instead, this version chooses to have the Evil manifest as a demonic doppelgänger of Mia.

[33] It is noteworthy to mention that the predatory-like POV shot is a common horror film technique. Michaela Wünsch, while writing about the POV shots in John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween*, notes, "This view through a camera reminds the audience of a hunter's look" (81).

and "forces us to see from the perspective of the forest's malevolence" (110-11). Like the "damned thing," the Evil is frightening because it represents humanity's incomplete agency over the world. Although the trees and individuals that the Evil possess can be torn apart with the aid of a chainsaw, the Evil itself is an intangible, formless being that puts the forest's malevolence into horrifying action.

Cabin Fever's primary danger is likewise an invisible threat that cannot be perceived by the human eye, and yet it is not some metaphysical demonic being. Since the disease itself is not necessarily an active antagonist, the danger within the film stems more from the characters' attempts to distance themselves from those who have contracted the disease, and the maddening effect it has on wildlife, specifically a pack of wild dogs. The active threats provide visual action for the film to engage in, while still creating a sense of dread at the possibility that characters could come in contact with the disease and never even realize it. As opposed to the violent, rushing POV shots that show the Evil's perspective, the disease is an invisible threat more akin to the danger presented in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening*. It is the danger of the unseen that becomes threatening. The tension of *Cabin Fever* comes from realizing that characters are unknowingly drinking from disease ridden water, or that one bite is all it would take from a diseased creature to infect our protagonists. The *Cabin Fever* disease is a constant and all-encompassing threat that the characters cannot escape, nor truly even fight.

Egger's *The Witch* is unique within my examples in that The Witch is neither invisible nor unperceivable by the human eye. In fact, she appears multiple times throughout the film. There are two reasons that I have included this monster alongside my other examples. In the first case, although she is shown to the audience, her presence

within the film is predominantly out of sight, especially to William and his family. She manages to steal the family's youngest child from Thomasin without ever being seen. The Witch is also able to remain out of sight by acting through her familiar, a hare, to cause William to misfire, slightly injuring himself, and to lure Caleb further into the forest. In this sense she is every bit characteristic of an unseen monster. *The Witch*'s visual lack of its titular monster follows what Parker notes is a trend of "ecoGothic portrayals of this archetype": "the witch is often largely out of sight, leaving in plain sight, instead, the woods themselves" (184). Secondly, although I call this film's monster The Witch, there is no textual evidence that it is a singular witch assaulting William's family: an older crone is shown performing a gory ritual with William's kidnapped baby, a witch transformed into a beautiful young seductress tempts Caleb, and Thomasin is shown joining an entire coven of witches by the end of the film.

Because of this uncertainty The Witch becomes an "ambiguous monster" whose nebulous shape changes from crone, to beautiful women, to hare, to the devil himself. I highlight the unseen and "ambiguous" nature of The Witch because it allows for the forest to become the focal point of tension and concern within the film, not the monsters within it. The same dissonant score discussed in Chapter 1, that creates a sense of dread towards the forest is in part able to function because it is also utilized whenever The Witch or her familiar appears onscreen. Not only does this further tie The Witch thematically to the forest, by no means a foreign concept and something covered in depth within Parker's *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, but it also means that the forest itself is what becomes the source of fear, a feat meant to mirror the Puritan's own fears of the what might await them within the dark wilderness.

The unseen monsters of the forest are worthy of ecocritical study because they both allow for interesting methods of storytelling and cinematic techniques, and, through their visual absence, place the forest as the central threat or danger. When the audience sees the cabin horror protagonists fight against the wilderness forces and fail, there is a nightmarish depiction of the struggle between humanity and the natural world. Ash and William are not in control of the situations that occur in their respective films, and they become demonstrative of an audience who themselves feel attacked or in danger from natural sources.

Films drawing from ecophobia are becoming ever more relevant, as mass media works to further show nature as a hostile force. Estok writes that,

> [t]o a global audience glued before flat screens of CNN, an audience very familiar with polar ice sheets breaking off, global warming, and Katrina, we may easily see how our media daily writes nature as a hostile opponent who is responding angrily to our incursions and actions, an opponent to be feared and, with any luck, controlled. ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" 209-210)

However, the natural world within the cabin horror genre is not something that can be controlled, and instead, shows the populace a vision of uncontrollable nature. The fact that this is not only a recurring but highly successful technique is reflective of the underlying ecophobia and anxiety still harbored towards the forest setting. With global warming only growing as a concern, it stands to reason that the ecophobia felt towards the natural world will continue to populate our literary and cinematic forests will all kinds

of "ambiguous" and unseen monsters as our subconscious fears materialize as nightmares in the woods.

Invasion of the Cabin

In much of the same fashion as the narrative arcs of the cabin horror films covered throughout this chapter, everything that has been covered thus far, the establishment of the cabin and the introduction to the monsters that haunt the woods outside it, has been building towards the ultimate invasion of the cabin. An essential component within the cabin horror narrative is the eventual disillusionment of the cabin's safety. Whether torn asunder, secretly infiltrated, or forcibly abandoned, all films within this subgenre end with the cabin no longer being held as the refuge of safety it at first seemed to be. To better understand the importance of the fall of the cabin, and the origination of the ecophobia surrounding this fall, its helpful to draw from human geography's terms of "Space" and "Place."[34]

"Space" and "Place" are two human constructs that are intertwined with one another. Parker, drawing from Fellman et. al's *Human Geography: Landscapes of Human Activities*, contends that

> space can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as 'absolute'—that is, as literal, physical space that can be precisely and cartographically recorded—or as 'relative', meaning that it is interpreted perceptually and

[34] In following Parker's choice, I have likewise chosen to capitalize "Space" and "Place" to enhance clarity (30).

> as such, refuses to be objectively quantifiable. It is thus divided, respectively, into 'Place' and 'Space'. (30)

You cannot have "Place" without it existing within a "Space." By endowing "Space" with value through acquaintance, it transforms into "Place" (Tuan *Space and Place* 6). From the acquaintance of "Place," it becomes familiar and gains associations of "security and stability," which in turn creates an awareness "of the openness, freedom, and threat of space" (6). Although "Space" for Western societies is often utilized as a symbol of freedom, it has likewise carried with it the negative connotations that accompany freedom and openness (54). "To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable," writes Tuan in his seminal work *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (54). Expanding upon the relationship between "Space" and "Place" Tuan adds, "Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values" (Tuan, *Space and Place* 54). The cabin, therefore, is a perfect example of "Place," with its enclosing walls serving as a strong boundary identifying "Place" from "Space."

Parker likewise notices the connection between "Space," "Place," and ecoGothic studies: "We quickly recognise the forest as unheimlich ('unhomely'), as 'Space' rather than 'Place', and as somewhere to get lost, rather than somewhere to feel at home" (Parker 214). It is natural to connect the forest, a wild space in part defined by the lack of humans, as "Space" rather than "Place." Just as the cabin can be easily viewed as "Place," providing a sense of safety and security to a film's protagonists (Parker 86). With this dynamic between the forest and cabin in mind, Parker concludes that,

> Divisions between 'Place' and 'Space' are permanently threatened: the human-made structures that do exist in the expanses of the forest are overwhelmed and infected by the outside. They lose their 'security' as they rot, disintegrate, or literally blow away—and are revealed as merely a part of the territory of the monster. (208)

I fully support Parker's assertion that the division between "Place" and "Space" is a core conflict within ecoGothic films. As this chapter argues, Parker's description of the failing human-made structure would fit perfectly as a description for the Evil Dead franchise's cabins, as well as the destroyed cabins of *Cabin Fever* and *The Witch*. By observing the cabin and its surrounding forest as locations of "Place" and "Space," it allows for a new lens to analyze the conflict between these two locations. Specifically, the goal of this section is to analyze the connection between the cabin horror subgenre and the frontier Gothic, how the abovementioned films each construct the invasions of their cabins, how that construction is meant to derive horror in the viewers, and what these invasions tell us about our relationship to the natural world.

The invasion of the cabin is a narrative of disillusionment. As the safety of the cabin is breached, it highlights the insecurities of manmade structures against the forces of nature and of outside threat. Tuan, writing about fears derived from open circles, in this case the open door, maintains, "We draw boundaries and protect their apertures. Nonetheless security is not absolute. Horror is the sudden awareness of betrayal and death in the inner sanctum of our refuge" (Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* 207). The betrayal of the inner sanctum, in this case the cabin, is the core foundational dread on which the cabin horror subgenre is built upon. However, it is not the only driving factor for how

these films function. There is, once more, a loss of agency at the hands of the outside agents who overtake the cabin. Due to the infiltrators' connection to the forest outside of the cabin this invasion of "Space" and overtaking of "Place" is therefore also driven by and creating ecophobic anxieties. Estok explains why this creates anxiety as simply that

> [h]istorically, things have been thought to be right . . . when they have allowed us to flourish and wrong when they have killed us or when they have (or when we have imagined them to have) hindered, threatened, or hurt us. ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" 209)

The wilderness portrayed in the cabin horror films certainly threatens and hinders the onscreen protagonists, therefore it is seen as something wrong. Furthermore, since the cabin represents humanity's ability to exert control over a section of the forest, its fall due to the threatening wilderness becomes a visualization of humanity's larger inability to truly maintain any sort of agency over the natural world.

Equally important as understanding how modern ecophobia shapes horror is gaining a better understanding of how the cabin horror invasion also evokes earlier frontier Gothic texts. Some of Ambrose Bierce's frontier Gothic short stories, such as "The Eyes of the Panther" and "The Boarded Window," work well when studied in conjunction with cabin horror films, since they also feature the confrontation between the wilderness, "Space," and humanity at the cabin location, "Place." It is through the infiltration of the cabin that Bierce showcases the dangers of the forest, while also disenchanting the safety of the cabin home.

"The Eyes of the Panther" features two separate invasions of the domestic "Place:" the first by the panther that traumatizes Irene's mother (frightening her to the

extent that she accidentally smothers her first child), and the second by Irene transformed into a panther as she looks into her suitor's, Jenner Brading's, home. In the first encounter, the panther's eyes are described as a, "menace" : "those awful eyes, in whose steadfast fire her strengthen and courage were alike consumed" (Bierce, "They Eyes of the Panther" 274). Jenner similarly describes the panther that infiltrates his room as having "two burning gleaming eyes that burned with a malignant lustre inexpressibly terrible" (279). The panther, a predator of the forest, looking into the domestic space represents both the infiltration of the cabin by the wilderness and establishes the panthers as something dangerous and other. Their presence illustrates the ease at which the cabin or home can be invaded. A point even more evident in "The Boarded Window."

Bierce's work, "The Boarded Window," also features the invasion of the cabin by a panther. In this tale, a strange man named Murlock lives alone in a log house surrounded by an expansive wilderness. For as long as anyone could remember he had always kept his windows boarded shut. Murlock was one of the first to settle in the area back when he was "young, strong and full of hope" (Bierce, "The Boarded Window" 255). With his axe and rifle he built his cabin and supported his wife and himself off the land (255). The descriptions of the young Murlock associates him with the American frontier hero. He built his own home and conquered a plot of the wilderness to claim as his own.

Returning home one evening, Murlock finds that his wife has become deathly ill. They are isolated from help, and her condition worsens until Murlock believes she has died. He goes to sleep after preparing the body, knowing that the next day he must craft a coffin and dig a grave. In the middle of the night, Murlock awakes to noises in his home

and takes a shot in their direction. The flash of the musket shows a panther who had entered the house through an open window and attacked Murlock's wife. After scaring the panther away, Murlock finds that he had been mistaken in his judgement and that his wife had actually died trying to fend the panther off. It is because of this invasion by the panther that the window remained boarded until the end of Murlock's long and lonely life.

The panthers in Bierce's stories are able to cross over into domestic spheres, threatening the safety of the home and its sense of "Place." This deconstructs the idea that the home was ever truly safe to begin with. Natural forces infiltrating the cabin setting symbolize the final loss of control and agency in the wilderness that humanity clings to, and allows a vilified nature to retake the land, "Space," that had been stolen from it.[35] The dread induced by the fall of the cabin, has not changed all that much in the last century. Ambrose Bierce's "The Boarded Window" is frightening because the readers sympathize with Murlock's loss, while they are repulsed at the idea of a wild creature entering their home. It is not only the cabin that is deconstructed through the panther's intrusion but also the idealized frontiersman. Murlock, embodiment of the capable frontiersmen, cannot save his wife. This is made all the more apparent as during the confrontation between his wife and the panther. Bierce writes: "He was terrified beyond the power to cry out or move. . . His throat was powerless, his arms and hands were like lead" (258). In the moment when his wife needs him most, Murlock is paralyzed by his

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[35] I would like to note that this might also be read through a postcolonial focused ecocritical analysis, especially when taking into context the territorial nature and warlike language that is associated with obtaining land and 'conquering' the wilderness. That would stray a little too far from the purpose of my own work but might make for an interesting direction for further study.

own fear. He could do nothing to save his wife and the cabin was easily penetrated by the panther, a predatorial wilderness force. The breach in Ambrose Bierce's work is one of the fears that cabin horror films engage with for their own invasions, making the cabin horror genre a natural evolution of Bierce's frontier Gothic works. Bierce shows readers a world where there are no places truly safe from the wilderness (as "Place" is devoured and returned to the wilderness' "Space"), a theme that resonates strongly throughout the cabin horror genre.

Differentiating from Bierce's texts is the common movement, found in cabin horror (and for that matter ecoGothic films in general), from civilization, and thus order and a sense of "Place," to the chaotic wilderness "Space." Parker argues that there is horror inevitably linked "to the transition from 'Place' to 'Space', and the happy ending (if there is one) relies on a return to the former environment" (30-31). Most commonly this occurs early within the film, either during the opening with wide shots of the forest as the camera follows our protagonists road trip towards the cabin, or shortly after establishing our characters and their reason for journeying into the forest.[36] The purpose of this journey can serve many purposes, some already discussed in Chapter 1, one of which is clearly outlining the status of the wilderness as "Space" as opposed to the cabin as "Place." The protagonists within the cabin horror films are often thrilled when they arrive at the cabin, a feeling sometimes elevated at the thought of the partying that the wilderness' freedom will enable. In *The Cabin in the Woods*, upon arriving, Curt

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[36] This movement from civilization to the wilderness is well documented horror element and has already been noted by scholars such as Clover, Parker, and Murphy. For the purpose of this thesis it occurs in *The Blair Witch Project*, *Blair Witch*, *The Witch*, *The Evil Dead*, *Evil Dead 2*, *Evil Dead, Cabin in the Woods*, *Cabin Fever*, *Antichrist*, and *Deliverance*.

exclaims, "This is awesome," followed by Jules concurring, "It is kinda cool." For both *The Cabin in the Woods* and *Cabin Fever* the rustic appearance of the cabin becomes a part of its initial charm. Even if the characters are not shown initially elated, there is always a moment of reprieve and enjoyment linked to the cabin setting, such as the dinner scene in *The Evil Dead*, Ash playing the piano while Linda dances followed by a tender kiss in *Evil Dead 2*, or the game of truth and dare in *The Cabin in the Woods.* It is through this scene that the characters become comfortable within the cabin, which alongside its naturally sheltering qualities transcends the location from "Space" to "Place."

Just as the characters need to feel some amount of comfort from the cabin, at least so much in that it is less threatening than the forest, it must also be portrayed as a plausible place of protection. The idea of the cabin as a protective location is in part inherent of any walled structure. Tuan notes: "The wall of a house or of a town provided both physical protection and magical defense against human enemies, demons, violent weather, and disease" (*Landscapes of Fear* 8). While we no longer need the walls of a town or house as a magical barrier, the physical uses remain virtually the same. Furthermore, when the protagonists of the cabin horror genre are faced with unexplainable threats, there is a return to the reliance and hope that the cabin's walls will protect them from supernatural threats.

The reliance on the cabin as a source of protection begins with the progenitor of the entire subgenre, *The Evil Dead,* and continues within its sequel *Evil Dead 2*. Within each of these films the cabin serves as temporary protection for those within. In the first film, after Cheryl, Ash's sister and one of the five college students on the cabin vacation,

has been raped by the demon-possessed trees, she escapes and runs towards the cabin. The tension builds as the Evil chases after her, shown through the POV perspective already discussed, but when Ash opens the door and takes Cheryl inside, the Evil appears to be repelled. By seemingly stopping the Evil, the cabin gives the illusion of safety; the protection of "Place" is able to overcome that of raw power of "Space."

Even as outside forces begin to infiltrate or destroy the cabin, characters will still continue to put faith in the idea of "Place" as safety over the alternative "Space" of the wilderness. In *Evil Dead 2* Cheryl's run is recreated, except that it is Ash who flees into the house; however, this time the door does not stop the Evil and it is able to burst down the door and freely move through the abode. The cabin in the Evil Dead franchise is largely inconsistent in its safety, and yet characters, especially Ash, unfailingly return to its confines. It is the illusion of safety that repeatedly draws characters back; the idea that the walls might offer some protection, or that through adding barricades on the windows they'll be protected. The only alternative to the cabin would be to brave the foreign wilderness surrounding it. Ash claims, in regard to the Evil, "It lives out there in those woods. Out there in the dark" (*Evil Dead 2).* With the forest hiding the Evil, there is nowhere else but the cabin to turn to for safety. The bridge on the main road gets destroyed in both films, and in *Evil Dead 2* the trail that Jake, a local, used to get the other supporting characters to the cabin completely disappears. The cabin is the only alternative, and although it does continue to fail, it doesn't stop the characters within the film, nor the audience watching, from placing faith in its ability to defend. This isolation and the invasion or overtaking of the cabin creates the true horror within this subgenre:

the collapse of the last vestige of safety and a symbolic destruction of human attempts to exert control over the natural world.

The reliance on the cabin and the safety of "Space" can likewise be seen in *Cabin Fever*. Our protagonists, five college students, act as though the cabin is a place that can protect them from the disease. When Henry, a crazed and infected hermit, appears on their doorstep pleading for help, Bert exclaims, "No, no, no, there is no way this fucking contagious fucker's coming in here." When Karen tries to plead that the man is sick and needs help, Bert counters arguing that allowing him inside will contaminate the cabin. Later when the group learns that Karen has been infected, Bert once again begins to freak out and doesn't let her leave her room. The group then banishes Karen from the cabin and locks her in a nearby shed, all in an effort to avoid the further contamination of the cabin's safety. This act of banishment is the result of the characters trying to maintain the cabin's sense of "Place," as a shelter from the disease they see running rampant in the wilderness outside their walls.

After the character's faith in the cabin is established, the films within the cabin horror subgenre are free to begin their relentless onslaught upon its protagonists and their place of refuge. While our heroes may hold off the wilderness forces for a time, ultimately the cabin must fall, leaving the characters to either die in the wilderness or, on the rare happy ending, to manage to return to civilization. It is to the fall of the cabin, its return from "Place" back into the wilderness "Space" where the true horror of these films resides, that we turn to next.

For the films *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2*, the breach of the cabin is shown through the physical destruction of the cabin accompanied by a change in shot

composition. In *The Evil Dead,* after Ash and his friends play a recording that reads aloud a translation of the Necronomicon Ex-Mortis, a branch breaks one of the cabin's windows.[37] This literal visualization of the wilderness invading the cabin is essentially the same kind of incursion as the panther entering Murlock's home. Where the film begins to differ from its literary predecessor is in how it can portray the spectacle of the cabin's reclamation by the wilderness. As the film continues and the cabin becomes less and less secure, Sam Raimi shoots more scenes inside the cabin using Dutch angles (see Figure 3.6). The use of the Dutch angle creates a sense of unease since it rotates the camera so that the natural horizon is on a tilt. Raimi uses it within the film to convey Ash's further descent into madness, but it also expresses the cabin's ever-increasing instability. Even more than the first film, *Evil Dead 2* makes use of this technique as the cabin itself becomes possessed by the Evil. Shooting a scene in which all the furniture in the house begins to move and mock Ash, Raimi moves from one Dutch angle shot to another, focusing on dancing table lamps and books flapping on their own, all laughing and taunting. As the camera pans out, the shot reveals Ash standing in the middle of this madness, still via a Dutch angle. At this point, the cabin has ceased to be a protective or defensive structure and has thus lost its identity as "Place"; it is in the complete control of the Evil.

The change in the cabin from "Place" to "Space," in both *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2,* is likewise illustrated through the Evil's freedom of movement within the

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[37] The Necronomicon Ex-Mortis (translated as The Book of the Dead and referred to in *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead* as Naturom Demonto) has a variety of abilities and origins that have changed throughout the Evil Dead franchise's history. However, the book consistently has the power to summon the Evil, which is its primary purpose within the films discussed throughout my thesis.

structure. The Evil's effortless movement mirrors its passage through the forest. At this point, the cabin can no longer block or repel the Evil, but has instead become an extension of the wilderness, therefore "Space." This becomes even more apparent when the cabin is finally destroyed—set on fire in *Evil Dead* and the walls torn asunder by a large, demonic tree creature in *Evil Dead 2*. The destruction of the cabin's spatial boundaries results in the unquestionable abandonment of the cabin as a place of safety. Since the cabin space is an embodiment of humanity's ability to survive in and have agency over the natural world, the deconstruction of the cabin space indicates that this believed agency is merely an illusion. The initial attack or rebellion is not necessarily the scariest aspect of these horror films; instead, it is the loss of "Place" and the safety and agency that it granted.

The Witch tells a similar tale of disillusionment at the hands of the wilderness. William, the head of the family, states early on that he will not be consumed by the wilderness and instead he will conquer it. However, each member of the family in *The Witch* will ultimately be consumed by the wilderness in one form or another. In the previous chapter, I considered the moral disorientation and conflict faced in *The Witch* due to the family's bewilderment and isolation within the forest; however, it would be incomplete to not also analyze the film as one about invasion. The film begins with William and his family finding new land to build on now that they have been exiled from the larger community. Importantly, this is the only cabin horror film this study considers in which the protagonists set out into the wilderness with the intention of conquering it before conflict is thrust upon them. Ash and his chainsaw may be literally constructed to fight the tree possessing demon at the end of *the Evil Dead 2*, but by no means did he

seek out the confrontation. William, on the other hand, is driven to prove that not only can he and his family survive in the wilderness but also prosper. By the end of the film, William's family will be torn apart, all but one of his children missing, and the barn of his homestead completely decimated, along with the livestock housed there.

The physical destruction of the barn is similar to that of the cabin in the Evil Dead franchise. By showing the murder of the domesticated animals, the film illustrates the primacy of the wild over both humans and the creatures they dominate. The death of the domesticated animals further cements the theme that the wilderness is reclaiming the land that William and his family settled on and falsely thought they could turn into "Place." All of these events build to a scene where Thomasin enters her home, the cabin, and rests her head on the table, all the while leaving the door wide open. By this point, her family has been killed, and there is no longer any reason to even attempt to secure the house, because the cabin has lost all of its meaning as "Place." The wilderness has already reclaimed the land.

It is also of note to discuss the additional form of invasion present within *The Witch,* that of psychological contamination through Caleb as carrier. Throughout much of the film there is the tension between Katherine and Thomasin (mother and daughter) generated through the daughter's presence with and therefore perceived role in the disappearance of the family's youngest son, Samuel. William often orients himself between the two, attempting to regain control of his household, but only a tenuous stability is reached. After Caleb disappears after entering the forest with Thomasin, Katherine's faith in her daughter completely dissipates. When a naked Caleb returns unable to speak and conflicted with an unknown ailment, the family tries to care for him

and pray for his health. It is during this moment of prayer that the twins, Mercy and Jonas, are unable to speak the lord's prayer and Caleb's body shakes and spasms as though in reaction to the prayer. The Caleb who returns has been changed after giving into his sinful lust and kissing The Witch that he was led to within the forest.

After his fall from grace, Caleb becomes a contaminated body meant to sow discord within his family back at their homestead. Soon after the prayer, Caleb dies, and Katherine hysterically blames Thomasin, accusing her of witchcraft. William, uncertain what to believe anymore, locks up both the twins and Thomasin in the barn, removing them from the cabin's safety while also attempting to remove further supernatural contamination of the home. This move mirrors the decision made by the *Cabin Fever* protagonists to exile Karen after she has become diseased. However, by this point both the family and homestead have already been far too disoriented by the wilderness, and as the next events within the film will show (those discussed above), the destruction of "Place" within the wilderness is inevitable.

Eli Roth's film *Cabin Fever* does not contain the usual physical destruction and invasion of the cabin, but instead it commits entirely to an unseen contamination of the cabin, ultimately achieving the same effect. The invasion found within *Cabin Fever* more closely matches the contamination brought on by Caleb's return, where unseen factors lead to the destruction of the cabin as "Place." Most notably, Roth's film utilizes two separate methods of unseen natural invasions to deconstruct the cabin as a place of safety. The first is in the human body as a natural carrier. Even though Karen, the first case among our protagonists, is quickly isolated, the bed sheets she was sleeping on and the bathroom she used has blood spilled everywhere, a clear sign of contamination, and all

committed without even realizing what she was doing. The second unseen invasion, and the most frightening, is water entering the cabin. Not a single character within the film explicitly mentions the water's contamination; instead Roth uses a tracking shot to reveal the dead body of an infected man floating in the reservoir and then follows a series of pipes up to the cabin before settling on a glass of water being filled. This sequence uses continuity editing that ties each image together, allowing the audience to feel as though they are watching the contaminated water actually flow from the reservoir into the cup of water. Characters in the cabin never consider the possibility that the water coming into the cabin might be contaminated, since they view the cabin as a refuge, as "Place."

The collapse of the cabin as "Place" in the film *Cabin Fever* is not through its rampant physical destruction, but rather its inability to keep its inhabitants safe from the virus. Although perceived to be a location separate from the outside world, this was never true to begin with. The free uninhibited movement of the water from the outdoor reservoir into the cabin contradicts the perception of the cabin as an impenetrable fortress against the surrounding wilderness agency. Although the characters only learn of the water's contamination after leaving the cabin, there is a slow realization that the cabin is not the place of safety that it was initially seen to be, most clearly evident through Marcy's contraction of the disease. With the realization that the cabin's identity as "Place" was only one of fanciful delusion, Paul leaves seeking to find help elsewhere.

After the fall of the cabin in *Cabin Fever,* there is no comforting resolution, no happy ending, and no return to the "Place" they left before this horrific wilderness experience began. All the protagonists die trying to fight the disease and escape the wilderness. Similarly, in *The Evil Dead,* the film ends with the closing shot of Ash's face

screaming as the Evil catches up to him, presumably resulting in Ash's death. Others, including *Evil Dead 2* and the remake *Evil Dead*, leave their leading characters alive, but mentally and physically unstable. *The Witch*, by contrast, is unique in its resolution because, on the surface and from a Puritan perspective, the most nightmarish version of events occurs. Thomasin's family is dead, her mother killed by her own hand, and she enters into a pact with the devil. As discussed in the previous chapter, She turns towards the chaos of the forest and away from the order of civilization. However, a modern audience is likely to feel a note of satisfaction that Thomasin is no longer restricted by a society frightened by her oncoming womanhood, a theme further explored in Parker's *The Forest and the EcoGothic,* but even so it has come with a heavy cost. The resolution of the cabin horror narrative is rarely a happy ending, where the few protagonists that make it out alive are forever changed by their experience with the wilderness.

Moving beyond a horror film's plot resolution, consideration of the invasion of the cabin requires attention to the impact this threat has upon its victims, the film's protagonists. The characters within the cabin horror plot are forced to become more violent versions of themselves if they want any hope of survival. Like He in *Antichrist*, to survive within the wilderness, the characters must transform into a primal and savage version of humanity, a version that resembles the violent frontier hero. Although the basis for this transformation is the same in cabin horror as it is in the films focused on isolation and disorientation discussed in Chapter 2, one of the distinct differences is the idealization of the violence in most cabin horror films.

This adulation of violence stems from Turner's Frontier Thesis and the general American hero mythos. Ash and Mia most closely embody the frontier heroes of horror.

They will do whatever it takes to survive, with the audience in full support of their actions. This is in direct opposition to the murder and downfall of the character He in *Antichrist* or the savagery of the backwoods hillbillies in *Deliverance*, which are meant to highlight the darker inherent propensities of humanity modern society often overlooks and is constructed to control. Ash cuts off his own hand so that he does not become further infected by the Evil and then attaches a chainsaw to his arm as a prosthesis. A chainsaw is meant to cut down trees and so destroy the wilderness and clear it for civilization, just as the ax was utilized against the wilderness for frontier expansion and survival. Ash fights back against a wilderness possessing Evil with the modern version of the frontier hero's ax. Nor are Ash and Mia alone in this regard. In *Cabin Fever*, characters are forced to isolate their friend and fend off and murder diseased intruders and wild animals. In *The Cabin in the Woods* Dana and her friends have to fight off what the film describes as a "Zombie Redneck Torture Family," who were a family of backwoods farmers originally alive during the early 1900s.

The violent events in these films is reminiscent of the "proneness to violence and readiness to kill" that has always been associated with the United States "frontier tradition" (Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* 139). In this regard, Ash and other cabin horror protagonists become a contemporary form of the frontier hero, utilizing glorified violence while fighting against the wilderness's forces. Horror's protagonists revitalize a conflict that has persisted, and is continually retold, since the first colonists ventured into the dark wilderness.

Cabin horror films have endured because the battle between humanity and the natural world is not only still ongoing but also remains a fear that permeates modern

society. The modern film audience may no longer have to worry about a panther with burning eyes peering through the window, but it is confronted with a constant stream of natural disaster footage and global warming reports. Natural disasters and the potential ramifications of the Global Climate Crisis carry with them the idea that the natural world ("Space") is beyond humanity's control and threatens the cities and homes we find comfort in ("Place"). Cabin horror, through the use of the cabin setting and its place within the broader American cultural mythos, removes its characters, and thus the audience, from civilization and places them in an expansive and archaic nature. This setting evokes the experience of psychic dislocation, violence, and dangers of the American frontier for today's viewers. The removal from civilization allows for horror's modern-day characters to become reimagined recreations of the frontier hero fighting an antagonistic force symbolized by the forest surrounding the cabin.

CONCLUSION: "WHAT WENT WE OUT INTO THIS WILDERNESS TO FIND?"

The goal of this thesis was to provide an in-depth analysis of wilderness isolation and cabin horror films in the pursuit of gaining a stronger understanding as to how film as a medium is able to expand upon the American wilderness setting and to determine why the wilderness setting remains relevant to a modern audience. Humanity's place in the wilderness has always been in question, but as global climate change causes mounting, permanent ramifications, this question only becomes more important. Ecocriticism, in response, has seen a rise in popularity, because it is important to improve recognition of how creative mediums use and portray the environment within their work. Now more than ever before, it is essential to advance comprehension of the Gothic wilderness present within American creative mediums, since its continued relevance and effectiveness allows for insight about modern audiences' relationship with the natural world.

I have found that the wilderness horror narrative exhibited in films such as *Antichrist*, *The Witch*, and both *The Blair Witch Project* and its sequel *Blair Witch*, utilize cinematic techniques to visually establish the forest as an uncanny location, for instance through either digitally altering the footage or using non-diegetic sounds in conjunction with an establishing shot. These techniques allow for film to remove characters from the comforts of civilization and relocate them to a forest that evokes the archaic colonial wilderness. It is this visual establishment and relocation that allows for the forest to distance itself from the modern interpretation of the wilderness, making the supposed

dangers within the forest seem all the more real. However, it is not only this evocation of the archaic wilderness that allows the onscreen forest to remain frightening and relevant.

Through Estok's work on ecophobia, it is clear that the fear of the wilderness never truly subsided. According to Estok, there is a subconscious ecophobia that manifests itself though many everyday procedures designed to give the illusion of agency over the natural world, i.e. landscaping and grasscutting. The onscreen characters, through portrayals of their bewilderment (spatial, moral, and social) in the wilderness, become unable to exert any kind of control over the forest, thus creating a visualized nightmare where humanity is helpless against the natural world.

The battle for control against the natural world is most apparent within the cabin horror genre. I found that cabin horror films, such as *The Evil Dead*, *Evil Dead 2*, *Evil Dead*, *Cabin Fever*, and *The Witch*, create a visualization of the battle between humanity and the natural world. The cabin is a structure directly tied to American pioneering identity, and has always signified the hardy frontiersmen's foray into, and eventual success at conquering, the vast and dangerous American wilderness. Previous scholarship establishes the connection between cabin horror films and earlier texts, but none have worked with Ambrose Bierce's short stories to analyze the advancements made to the frontier narrative. Murphy, when writing on the cabin horror genre, focuses predominantly on the connection between cabin horror films and the Puritans' perception of the wilderness as a battle for order over chaos. I have sought to add to this discourse by further examining what makes the invasion and destruction of the cabin relevant to modern audiences, as well as, argue how film as a medium is able to add to or progress the invasion narrative in ways that the literary medium could not.

Within the films discussed in Chapter 3, and for that matter the long history of this setting, the cabin becomes "Place," envisioned by the protagonists as a location of order and safety, while the surrounding forest becomes "Space," uncontrollable and chaotic. The cabin is itself a symbol of humanity's ability to live in and conquer the forest, and its infiltration and destruction annihilate human agency in the natural world. The cabin horror genre shows viewers an attack on the cabin and its inhabitants, by an antagonistic wilderness force. This force, be it the Evil, a witch, or a mysterious disease, is connected to the wilderness that surrounds the cabin, and so becomes an agent acting for the forest. The cabin's eventual fall is a disillusionment of the cabin's safety, while also undermining humanity's perceived ability to conquer the natural world. Similarly to the wilderness horror films discussed in Chapter 2, Cabin horror evokes the audience's natural ecophobia, due to the emphasis on conflict and confrontation between "Space" and "Place" within the cabin horror genre. This evocation of inherent, subconscious fears allows for the cabin horror genre, as well as other wilderness horror narratives, to remain relevant and important for contemporary audiences.

It is my hope that through exploring the bewilderment within and invasion by the wilderness while focusing on film as a unique medium, future scholarship might then be able to apply similar analysis to other films. Hillard called for a greater investigation into America's ecoGothic literary past, but I would expand this. Film should likewise be examined further by both ecocritical and ecoGothic scholars. Furthermore, film should be treated as a medium that can scrutinize and interact with the wilderness in ways unique from literature. Film's ability to bring to life a visualization of the narrative, along with its ability to convey mood and meaning through sound, is far too much to overlook.

It should be noted that the work in this thesis, while attempting to be as thorough as possible, could not have hoped to discuss all facets of the films, nor even the complete filmography of wilderness isolation or cabin horror films. There is plenty of room within both of these genres for further analysis. Additionally, the analysis of film techniques and practices discussed throughout this essay could likewise be applied to the broader ecohorror genre, more specifically eco-disaster films. Although eco-disaster more closely aligns with the apocalyptic film genre, I would argue that it does share many similarities with horror. Cabin horror, in particular, relies on many of the same fears that eco-disaster films draw upon, the destruction of "Place" by "Space." As wildfires roar across California and the North West on a yearly basis, global temperatures rise, and reports on significant coral reef decay and rising sea levels become ever normalized, it becomes clear that the boundary between eco-disaster films and the reports on the nightly news are in some ways narrowing, making them all the more pertinent for study.

This is made further relevant by the increase in discussions and media about natural disasters and global warming. It seems fitting that the term ecohorror has been gaining more and more traction after the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and in conjunction with the ongoing conversation surrounding global warming (Rust and Soles 510). In particular, Rust and Soles note larger disaster films like *The Happening, Take Shelter,* and *Last Winter* as excellent representations of ecohorror. In *The Happening,* the world suffers from a catastrophic event as humanity begins being attacked by the Earth's plant life on a global scale. The film, not so subtly, makes the connection that the disaster must be in response to the harm that humanity has caused to the planet and the natural world. *The Happening*, while by no means a subtle film, works perfectly to showcase a

literal approach to ecohorror. Of note, the threat in the *Happening* is an invisible neurotoxin released by world's fauna and carried by the wind which causes humans to commit suicide. The antagonist of *The Happening* could be discussed in a similar manner to the ambivalent natural forces assaulting the cabins discussed in Chapter 3. Eco-disaster films are important because they allow for audiences to confront visual representation of their own environmental concerns. Additionally this genre has thus far shows no signs of slowing down as demonstrated in the continued releases of bombastic large scale disaster films, such as *2012* (2009), *San Andreas* (2015), and *Geostorm* (2017), alongside smaller scale drama or horror focused narratives, such as *Only the Brave* (2017) and *Crawl* (2019). The social reaction to environmental studies and the growing ecophobia that has led to the ecohorror sub-genre warrants further study.

These eco-disaster films should be studied with an attention to how film as a medium is able to draw upon the audiences inherent ecophobia in the same manner as wilderness and cabin horror films. Analyzing how these films establish and choose to compose shots of environmental disasters, alongside the effects these disasters have upon the film's protagonists would be excellent areas for future study. In a similar vein, ecoGothic studies could benefit in further study of contemporary environmental documentary filmmaking. As mentioned by Rust and Soles, the term ecohorror has become more popular after the success of *An Inconvenient Truth*, whose success no doubt likewise influenced a plethora of similarly focused environmentally documentaries.

The 2019 documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, whose name and partial focus is to highlight a proposal which argues that humanity's impact on Earth is dramatic enough to be classified as a geological epoch, features wide shots of enormous

quarries and mines that have devastated vast landscapes. The visualization of the human impact is almost a direct reversal of the urban destruction showcased within the eco-disaster genre. It would be noteworthy to analyze if environmental documentary filmmaking, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Anthropocene,* share common techniques with the fictional films of the eco-disaster, wilderness horror, and cabin horror genres. Especially since these documentaries are likely constructed in a manner to evoke their audience's ecophobia as a means to drive their overall message; *An Inconvenient Truth*'s first trailer, after all, did market the film as "By far, the most terrifying film you will ever see" (Movieclips Classic Trailers).

In conclusion, film evokes its audience's environmental fears efficiently because it is a medium of visual spectacle, allowing for subconscious ecophobias to become realized onscreen. Through exploring the techniques that film can provide for the expansive, collective American Gothic forest, both recent and older films can be analyzed through an ecoGothic lens. America's literary and cinematic forest is a dark and dreary place that can lead wanderers into madness or despair. Although the setting may seem archaic and no longer relevant to audiences, I elucidated the importance that the wilderness setting still holds. The subconscious ecophobia described by Estok, and thus a constant attempt to control the natural world, is at the center of modern society. Horror films have and will continue to utilize this fear because it still affects viewers. These films show their characters isolated and afraid, as they descend further into bewilderment in a wilderness they cannot escape. While creatures and dangers of the past haunt the protagonists in the films, the wilderness that was haunts the modern American.

FILMOGRAPHY

2001: A Space Odyssey. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, performances by Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

2012. Directed by Roland Emmerich, performances by John Cusack, Amanda Peet, and Woody Harrelson, Columbia Pictures, 2009.

An Inconvenient Truth. Directed by Davis Guggenheim, performance by Al Gore, Paramount Classics, 2006.

Anthropocene: The Human Epoch. Directed by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas de Pencier, narrated by Alicia Vikander, Kino Lorber 2018.

Antichrist. Directed by Lars von Trier, performances by Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Dafoe, IFC Films, 2009.

Ash vs Evil Dead. Performances by Bruce Campbell, Ray Santiago, and Dana DeLorenzo, Starz, 2015-2018.

The Blair Witch. Directed by Adam Wingard, performances by James Allen McCune, Callie Hernandez, Wes Robinson, and Calorie Curry, Lionsgate, 2016.

The Blair Witch Project. Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, performances by Heather Donahue, Michael C. Williams, and Joshua Leonard, Artisan Entertainment, 1999.

Cabin Fever. Directed by Eli Roth, performances by Cerina Vincent, Rider Strong, and Jordan Ladd, Lionsgate Films, 2002.

The Cabin in the Woods. Directed by Drew Goddard, performances by Chris Hemsworth and Kristen Connolly, Roadshow, 2012.

Cast Away. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, performances by Tom Hanks and Helen Hunt, 20th Century Fox, 2000.

Crawl. Directed by Alexandre Aja, performances by Kaya Scodelario and Barry Pepper, Paramount Pictures, 2019.

Deliverance. Directed by John Boorman, performances by Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds, Ned Beatty, and Ronny Cox, Warner Bros., 1972.

Evil Dead. Directed by Fede Alvarez, performances by Jane Levy and Shiloh Fernandez, Sony Pictures, 2013.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: FIGURES

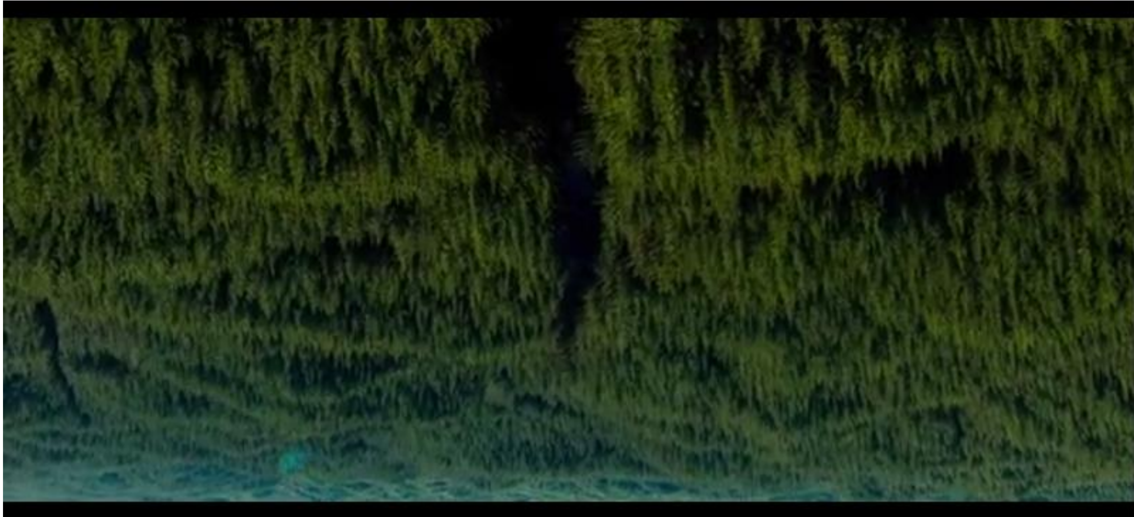

Figure 1.1: Still from *Evil Dead* (05:10). Forest Establishment that occurs directly after opening credit.

Figure 1.2: Still from *Evil Dead* (05:27). Continuation of Figure 1.1, closing in on the car.

Figure 1.3: Still from *The Witch* (03:46). Scene of the family's stay in the forest before they find the property they will settle on.

Figure 3.1: Still from *The Evil Dead* (04:50). Exterior of the cabin used for filming, located in Morristown, Tennessee.

Figure 3.2: Still from *Evil Dead 2* (02:15). Exterior of the cabin, which was constructed just for the film (interior sets were shot elsewhere).

Figure 3.3: Still from *The Cabin in the Woods* (14:46). Exterior shot of the film's cabin.

Figure 3.4: Still from *The Witch* (1:20:29). Exterior of the cabin, certainly a simpler structure than that of other cabins and representative of a period accurate replication.

Figure 3.5: Still from *Cabin Fever* (37:59). Exterior shot of the film’s cabin

Figure 3.6: Still from *Evil Dead 2* (1:13:27). Ash’s reaction to the windows shutting and opening on their own and an example of Raimi’s classic use of Dutch angle shot composition.