I’ve Got a Theory, It Could Be Whedon: Understanding the Televisual Auteur

by

Allison Louise Cronan
Class of 2017

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Film and the Moving Image

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2017
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you first to my advisor, Scott Higgins. Your help on everything from specific ideas to organizational strategies was invaluable. Thank you for reading even my roughest pages and helping me find the good in them. And thank you for always helping me locate the joy in all the hard work.

Thank you to Jeanine Basinger, for your incredible support. You gave me the tools to dig deep into Whedon’s work, and an instrumental idea of the baseline from which he approached various techniques and genres.

Thank also to Marc Longenecker and Betsy Traube for teaching me how to critically analyze television. And thank you to the entire Wesleyan Film faculty for shaping the way I think about the moving image. I am also indebted to Lea Carlson, whose patience and overall help made the process of completing this work feel manageable.

Thank you to my family—Mom, Dad, Megan, and Ryan. Thank you for always supporting me in everything, even when you found out I had to watch over 200 hours of television to work on this.

Thank you to Sofi, Will, Kiley, and Alexa, who were a source of encouragement and a sounding board for ideas. As my roommates, you’ve seen me at my best and worst and been phenomenal friends through it all.

Thank you to Nicole, who taught me that questions of authorship have long since been churned over in fine art. And thank you to Emily, who brought me all the *Buffy* DVDs from home when Netflix removed the series from its instant library.

Finally, a huge thank you to my fellow History/Theory thesis students: Ben, Lucy, and Adam. I’m so grateful we were able to go through this process together.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: WHEDON’S CONCENTRATED AUTHORSHIP IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* ................................................................................................................................. 13

“ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING”: A CASE STUDY ................................................................. 21

“HUSH” AND “THE BODY”: THE ROUNding OUT OF AN OEUvRE .................................... 37

CONCLUSION: EPISODIC AUTHORSHIP ............................................................................... 51

CHAPTER 2: TELEVISUAL AUTHORSHIP ACROSS SEASONS ........................................... 53

GENRES IN TENSION, WORLD IN TENSION ........................................................................... 55

WELCOME TO THE GROUP .................................................................................................... 74

TELLING STORIES LONG-TERM ............................................................................................ 82

CONCLUSION: SERIES AUTHORSHIP ................................................................................. 97

CHAPTER 3: PROVING AND DEFINING AUTHORSHIP AS A CONCEPT ....................... 99

CHAPTER 4: EXTENDING WHEDON’S AUTHORSHIP ......................................................... 124

WORLD IN TENSION, GENRES IN TENSION ........................................................................ 129

NOW WELCOME TO THIS GROUP ......................................................................................... 145

POTENTIALLY LONG-TERM STORYTELLING CUT SHORT ............................................. 154

SERENITY ................................................................................................................................ 170

CONCLUSION: EVOLVING AUTHORSHIP .......................................................................... 185

CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................................... 186

APPENDIX ............................................................................................................................... 205

FILMOGRAPHY ......................................................................................................................... 210

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................................................... 215
Introduction

“Remember to always be yourself. Unless you suck.”
-Joss Whedon

In March 2017, the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003) turned twenty years old, and the Internet celebrated. Entertainment Weekly brought together most of the series’ major actors for a twentieth anniversary photo shoot. Included among the pictures is a large group photo. On a set dressed to look like a foggy graveyard, the twelve former Buffy stars form a line. Sitting in front of them—most prominent in the photo, except for maybe Sarah Michelle Gellar (Buffy herself)—is Joss Whedon. Whedon’s face never appeared on screen in Buffy. He played a minor character in one episode of Buffy’s spin-off, Angel (Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt, 1999-2004), but in such an outrageous costume it is difficult to even identify the actor as him. No, we do not recognize Joss Whedon for his compelling portrayal of one character. We associate him with the existence of all of them.

But is this association simply a nice shorthand for discussing the series, a face to blame when we like or do not like what we see on screen? Or can we meaningfully refer to Whedon as the series’ “author”? If so, what does that mean? Can we consider him a “televisual auteur”? Is there even any difference between a film auteur (which

---

3 The episode referenced is “Through the Looking Glass” (221).
we know very well how to study) and a televisual one? In this project, I will bring together both a specific authorship study and a larger discussion of televisual authorship in general, in order to answer these questions. Yet, before we can tackle these issues, we need a better sense of the direction from which we are approaching both.

To this end, academic literature and critical writing on television will be an essential starting point, as it will help us outline both an existing body of work around and a historical context for the questions addressed in this project. Across the academic and critical writing on the subject, numerous trends emerge. The first involves whether or not these sources consider “authorship” a valid method of evaluating television at all. Some writers flat out reject this practice. Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns, for example, begin their book on authorship in television with the phrase, “The Author is dead…” Craig Fehrman similarly refers to ideas of discussing “television’s own auteur” as “The Showrunner Fallacy.” However, most writers on the subject seem to operate under the assumption that the idea of authorship in television is meaningful, albeit more nuanced than the dictionary definition of “author” implies. For example, immediately after Fehrman’s article was published, June Thomas wrote an article for Slate titled: “It's Not a Fallacy to Focus on Showrunners.”

---


6 June Thomas, "It's Not a Fallacy to Focus on Showrunners," Slate, June 13, 2013, accessed October 20, 2016,
Although not completely new, it is also clear that the discussion of televisual authorship is one that has intensified relatively recently. For example, James Poniewozik claimed in a 2015 *Time* article that “the idea of the author-driven series has been growing in TV for decades, with network creators like Steven Bochco or David E. Kelley making series that--while they employed a lot of creative talent--spoke with a certain, distinctive voice.” He clarifies that it “grew in the late 1990s and 2000s, as writers like The Sopranos’ David Chase and Mad Men’s Matthew Weiner became celebrated as artists, organizing their shows around a single vision and intention.” Notably, since Buffy premiered in 1997, Joss Whedon fits into this timeline as one of the writers at the forefront of this change.

A large amount of the literature on authorship in television approaches it from a cultural perspective, rather than an aesthetic one. One such work, Jason Mittell’s book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, is still incredibly valuable in this discussion of televisual authorship, as it not only lays out multiple versions of the idea, it provides a comprehensive vocabulary with which to discuss authorship. Mittell begins with “authorship by origination, in which a single creator devises every word.” Yet, he is quick to point out that this type of authorship does not apply to film or television, for which numerous creative forces—including actors, production designers, and sound designers—must work together. Instead, he suggests that film auteur theory relies on “authorship by responsibility,” in which the

http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/06/13/showrunner_auteur_theory_it_s_not_a_fallacy_but_a_useful_and_accurate_critical.html.


director “is ultimately responsible for choosing to include [any particular moment] in the finished work.”\textsuperscript{10} Mittell then expands this idea to “authorship by management,” which combines the idea of authorship by responsibility with the managerial role of overseeing all aspects of pre-production, production, and post-production, applied to one or two producers.\textsuperscript{11} Mittell contends that since showrunners normally make key decisions about what to include in their series and work to keep the entire process running smoothly, “most showrunners earn their authorship by both responsibility and management for countless leadership decisions, and thus are regarded as the primary authorial figures within an intensely collaborative medium.”\textsuperscript{12} This conclusion appears to be common in the literature that endorses the application of authorship to television. However, focusing the definition of televisual authorship so that it is based on a slew of leadership decisions lacks the nuance required to understand the effect of an authorial voice in television. Further, as we will see, it is not always the showrunner that deserves the title of “author” at all.

In the next section of the chapter, Mittell acknowledges fault in the idea of singular authorship altogether, stating: “Given the intensely collaborative nature of the production process, such notions of authorship, even in its managerial conception, oversimplify the creative process and threaten to deny agency to the array of contributors who help make television,” even adding that “[c]elebrating Whedon as Buffy’s author does little to help us understand how that series was actually created, obscuring complex collaborative processes in the name of celebrating and elevating a

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 88-89.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 92
singular authorial voice.” 13 Although I will provide an alternative to Mittell’s definition of managerial authorship, the limits I find in his definition are not the same as the ones he does; while he believes that focusing on an individual in the creative process takes away the “agency” of collaborators, I argue instead that we can analyze the authorial impact of an individual on the series without obscuring the fact that he (or she) did not craft it alone (perhaps in part by analyzing the voice rather than “celebrating” the author). Further, I argue that authorship actually does have significant aesthetic impacts, and examining authorship provides real insights into the creative process.

For his part, Mittell proposes a second, parallel way in which to consider authorship in television: authorship as “a product of television programming.” 14 This focuses on how viewers understand and connect to television, rather than the reality of who actually created the show. Most significantly, it is the idea of showrunner as brand. Mittell contends that networks use the name recognition of successful showrunners like Joss Whedon to sell future shows by promising the familiar name’s “authorial stamp.” 15 Mittell uses Dollhouse (Joss Whedon, 2009-2010) as an example, although an even more fitting example is the currently running Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D (Maurissa Tancharoen, Jed Whedon, and Joss Whedon, 2013-), which was marketed as a dual “Marvel” and “Joss Whedon” work, despite Whedon’s limited involvement after the pilot. 16 Mittell explains how this type of branding leads

13 Ibid., 95.
14 Ibid., 96.
15 Ibid., 97.
to “establishing an aesthetic framework for judging a program,”\footnote{Mitell, \textit{Complex TV}, 98.} as well as the creation of “official paratexts” such as DVD specials, commentary tracks, and live appearances.\footnote{Ibid., 101.} These, he contends, go hand-in-hand with the greater promotion and interaction with showrunners made possible by the Internet.

Mittell concludes with another way of considering authorship in television: consumption. Specifically, he explains how television consumers create an “\textit{inferred author function},” which is “a viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses [emphasis omitted].”\footnote{Ibid., 107.} He explains that viewers who engage on this level seek to understand why and how a show functions as it does. To Mittell, this happens not just within a show, but also between episodes, in paratexts, and through showrunner engagement with fans. Hence, it typically changes over time. He explores how fan interactions with the material can cause creators to modify their own shows, although his final conclusion emphasizes how viewers tend to think of the author of a show in a religious sense, like a “higher power” executing a grand plan.\footnote{Ibid., 116.} This type of authorship is what hides behind the first question posed in this project (which asks whether considering Whedon is merely a “shorthand” for discussing the series). However, while the search for and analysis of the “textual cues” Mittell discusses will become a vital part of determining how a series places the audience and interacts with

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\end{flushright}
viewers, I argue that we can, in fact, define a type of televisual authorship that is grounded in the series, not merely “inferred” by the audience.

As was already suggested by Poniewozik’s short article, which emphasizes the author’s “voice,” there are numerous publications that do make similar attempts to relate televisual aesthetics to authorship. A particularly interesting work on this matter is the 1987 dissertation of Robert James Thompson. It actually follows a strategy similar to the one undertaken by this project. It starts by discussing some issues in defining specifically televisual authorship and then looks to the case study of a specific author (Stephen J. Cannell) as evidence “that commercial television is, contrary to many commonly-held beliefs, a medium in which there is an opportunity for the assertion of an individual sensibility.” Thompson’s study is somewhat dated now, but it offers an encouraging justification for the scrutiny that this project will give to televisual authorship and Whedon specifically.

Since I will consider the case study of Joss Whedon in depth, it is also necessary to determine the types of discourses that tend to surround him specifically. There is no dearth of literature on Joss Whedon. A Google Scholar search of “Joss Whedon” yields over four thousand results; a search of “Steven Bochco,” creator of *Hill Street Blues* (Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll, 1981-1987) and *L.A. Law* (Steven Bochco and Terry Louise Fisher, 1986-1994), yields under nine hundred. Amy Pascale’s 2014 biography of Joss Whedon explains: “From 1998 to 2012, various publishers would release no fewer than thirty books of essays exploring

---

22 As of April 16, 2017.
different facets of each of Joss’ TV series. No other series or creator has inspired such an intense and expansive body of academic work—not even Star Trek, which has been around since 1966.”\textsuperscript{23} Whedon’s works have inspired a “Whedon Studies Association,” which publishes a twice-yearly journal called Slayage. In a meeting of academia and fandom, Slayage publishes articles on everything from politics, to philosophy, to gender, and even biology in Whedon’s works. Notably, some Slayage articles reach between Whedon’s works, focus on official Whedon paratexts like commentary tracks, or make observations about Whedon’s intentions overall. The mere fact of this literature surplus indicates the massive and unusual impact of Joss Whedon.

Among the writings that grapple with Whedon’s works, there are numerous trends, many of which will not be productive for this thesis. In particular, there is a tendency for authors to try to assign metaphorical meaning to what they see on the screen. For example, Rhonda Wilcox, co-founder of Slayage with David Lavery, writes in her book on Buffy: “From the earliest episodes, it was apparent to attentive viewers that Buffy operated on a symbolic level. … [T]he horror of becoming a vampire often correlates with the dread of becoming an adult.”\textsuperscript{24} Although metaphors are important in much of Whedon’s work, this thesis’ discussion of authorship will be less focused on what particular images “mean” than on how they function as part of storytelling, tone, and audience engagement. It is less interesting

whether or not vampirism stands in for adulthood than it is how Whedon crafts a story and a meaningful viewing relationship around teenagers fighting them.

While some scholarship on Whedon does develop useful ways to write and think about Whedon from a point of critical distance, another trend that emerges among the works on Whedon is the tendency to treat *Buffy* as an almost religious text with Joss Whedon as both deity and everyman (reminiscent of Mittell’s final point about inferred authorial function). In her introduction, Wilcox refers to *Buffy* as “art of the highest order.”25 Later, she claims: “Both in terms of the long narrative arc and the subtle details of interconnection, no one has ever taken fuller advantage of the medium of television than third-generation television writer Joss Whedon and his creative company.”26 While *Buffy* is certainly significant enough to warrant extended study, and Whedon clearly has achieved a high degree of proficiency in the television medium, it is misleading to speak of either in the superlative. Similarly, Lavery devotedly details Whedon’s life and works as though he was a personal friend.27 He goes so far as to articulate an animosity between Whedon and fellow Wesleyan alum Michael Bay that appears to project more of Lavery’s feelings about both artists than fact.28 While these tendencies to deify Whedon are productive for analyzing fan devotion, they make it especially necessary to be discerning about the credit they give to him for innovation.

25 Ibid., 1.
26 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid., 13. For example, Lavery states, “I suspect that a Michael Bay-type picked on Whedon in the playground as well – perhaps even kicked sand in his face on the beach."
However, Wilcox’s and Lavery’s books do contain some solid ideas that will be helpful for the completion of this thesis. For example, Wilcox introduces the idea of Joss Whedon as “the creator and catalyst and air traffic controller,” indicating an understanding of Whedon’s authorship as similar to the one that will be developed by this thesis. Later in the book, she also moves away from discussing symbolism in Buffy and towards analyzing character arcs, seriality, and the use of light on the screen, all ideas that will be useful in this thesis’s analysis of Whedon’s authorial voice. Lavery’s book specifically attempts to define Joss Whedon as an auteur, specifying 20 Whedon “key signatures.” However, in this area it is especially important to discern what is uniquely Whedon from what is a typical mark of good television, overlooked by Lavery in his devotion to Whedon. For example, Lavery lists “Cross cutting” and “One-ers” (long takes) among these “signatures.” While Whedon uses these elements well in his works, they are both broadly used tools of the medium. Still, Lavery’s devoted discussion of Whedon may also help provide insight into how his shows keep a consistent voice across episodes Whedon did not write or direct. For example, Lavery claims that a speech in Angel in an episode not written by Whedon has “‘Whedon’ written all over it.” Hence, works that go above a preliminary discussion of the symbolic meaning of Buffy will be useful references in analyzing Whedon’s authorial impact.

Ultimately, this thesis’s task is two-fold. It will outline Whedon’s personal style across three of his main series, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, and Firefly (Joss Whedon, 2002-2003). At the same time, it will carry on a high-level analysis

---

29 Wilcox, Why Buffy Matters, 8.
31 Ibid., 105.
of authorship in television, drawing special attention to key differences between cinematic and televisual authorship. As we will quickly see, these goals are inherently tied together; through analyzing Whedon’s specific decisions, more general televisual trends will emerge. A better notion of what we mean by televisual authorship will lead to insights about Whedon.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I begin by developing an approach towards authorship, and provide a brief overview of Whedon’s early works. I then look to episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer that Whedon wrote and directed. These will help us gain a better sense of his voice when he is undeniably the source of it. Within this analysis, I focus on three particular episodes: “Once More, With Feeling” (607), “Hush” (410), and “The Body” (516). By the end of this chapter, I will have developed an idea of what Whedon’s authorship looks like on an episodic scale within a specific series.

In the second chapter, I consider Buffy in its entirety. I also spend time with Buffy’s spin-off, Angel, both as a way to confirm and expand on our understanding of Whedon’s style. I focus on three key sections: Whedon’s treatment of genre, his formation of a group and positioning of the audience in it, and his use of story arcs. By the end of this chapter, I will have developed an outline of Whedon’s authorial style as it looks across an entire series of television.

In the third chapter, I return to the question of whether Whedon can actually be considered Buffy and Angel’s author at all. In other words, I work to justify the assumptions that allowed me to write chapter two. After explaining why we may

---

32 The parentheticals here indicate the season and episode number. “(607)” indicates the seventh episode of the sixth season, “(410)” indicates the tenth episode of the fourth season, and “(516)” indicates the sixteenth episode of the fifth season.
assign authorship of the series to Whedon, I turn to the question of what authorship actually entails with regard to a television show. Through the examples of both successful and failed episodes not written or directed by Whedon, I explain how individual pieces contained in a larger work relate to authorship of the whole.

In the final chapter, I check my understanding of Whedon from the previous chapters against another of his series, Firefly. I also analyze where Whedon makes decisions that are clearly extensions of his style, or otherwise constitute challenges he is setting up for himself. These will help us understand Whedon’s authorship as dynamic and evolving, and help us gain a better sense of it overall. I then analyze Serenity (Joss Whedon, 2005), Firefly’s follow-up film. In seeing how the universe, characters, and storylines from Firefly transition from their original medium into a new one, we can learn even more about how television is authored distinctly from film.

By the conclusion of this project, we will understand Whedon as not just a person to associate with Buffy (and other shows), but as the series’ author. We will have a working idea of what it means for a television series to reflect his voice, and a preliminary understanding of how that voice changes when he changes mediums. Most importantly, we will be able to make substantiated claims about what it means to be a “televisual auteur.”
Chapter 1: Whedon’s Concentrated Authorship in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

“Every single night, the same arrangement: I go out and fight the fight.”

- *Buffy,* in “Once More, With Feeling”

As we saw in the brief survey of the literature, there are numerous ways to approach the idea of authorship. Thus, the first order of business in achieving any of the tasks outlined for this project is developing a working definition of televisual authorship. Given the aesthetic (rather than anthropological) focus of this project, we will start with a definition based on a relatively un-academic experience of the medium: the author is the person that shapes the show’s overall story. This version of authorship overlaps with Mittell’s definition of authorship by management, but it puts the focus on the content, rather than the author’s administrative role. Certainly, we can imagine this definition of authorship applying easily to series creators like Joss Whedon, as he did craft his series’ major story arcs. However, as it is with any artistic medium, the storyline alone is not the whole; such is the difference between *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994). In other words, authorship must revolve around the “how” of the storytelling as much or more than the “what.” In order to address these questions, and shed light on our more general concerns, we will now turn our attention to analyzing Whedon. This analysis will stand on its own as a study of a particular auteur; at the same time, it will support the

---

1 For which he assures readers that “[h]ighlighting producers’ managerial functions is not to deny their roles in originating ideas or taking responsibility for choices…” Mittell, *Complex TV,* 88-89.

hypothesis that television series can have distinct authors at all, and help us better understand televishual authorship in general.

But before we can dig into the “how” or “what” of Whedon, we need a better understanding of the “who.” That is, to fully recognize how Whedon shapes his series, we must first understand some of what he initially brought to them. Pascale’s and Lavery’s books both develop extremely detailed biographies of Whedon, starting with his childhood as the son and grandson of television writers and working towards the present day, making it neither practical nor necessary to outline his entire life story here. However, I will highlight some interesting points of reference they include. Pascale’s book, for example, explores Whedon’s transition from an American high school to a boarding school in England, where he was initially ostracized and isolated. From here, some of the autobiographical elements of Buffy the Vampire Slayer emerge. For example, Pascale remarks: “These feelings [of isolation] would eventually inspire a number of Buffy’s early plotlines, including the episode ‘Out of Mind, Out of Sight,’ [(111)] in which a high schooler is so completely ignored by everyone around her that she literally turns invisible.” Such anecdotes do more than simply suggest what storylines Whedon developed; they speak to the subjective access with which he was able to approach them. This personal specificity supports the idea that, when we arrive at a closer analysis of Whedon’s work, we will be able to find elements of it that are inseparable from him.

Following high school, Whedon studied Film at Wesleyan University as a member of the class of 1987. After graduation, he wrote for TV sitcoms Roseanne (Matt Williams, 1988-1997), from 1989-1990, and Parenthood (Ron Howard, 1990-

---

3 Pascale, Joss Whedon, 24-25.
1991), from 1990-1991. Some Whedon scholars have dedicated time towards assessing episodes that he wrote for these series, but ultimately, these shows were authored by someone else; to understand how Whedon writes under the direction of another creator is not to understand how Whedon functions when he helms his own projects. Hence, we must look later to start our analysis.

The first of Whedon’s original screenplays to be produced, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kuzui, 1992), is another example of his work ultimately contributing towards someone else’s project, rather than showcasing his own voice. Although he wrote the script, it was packaged and directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui in 1992. Whedon had no control over the production of the movie (and what little control he could have had, he deferred to Kuzui so as not to “disrupt the chain of command”). As a result, Kuzui’s notoriously terrible and “anything but feminist” film “didn’t turn out to be the movie that [Whedon] had written.” And, more tellingly, it differed completely from the series that Whedon would eventually create. Hindsight particularly highlights this difference in a 1992 comment by Luke Perry, one of the film’s stars: “This is not going to be a critically acclaimed movie, but I still like it. … If you’re looking to find the meaning of life, don’t watch our movie.” As we will see when we get to the series, questions about the meaning of life are much more welcome there.

---

5 Lavery, for example, includes a section (on pages 81-87) in his book *Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait* about Whedon’s work on *Roseanne*.
7 Ibid., 69.
8 Ibid., 73.
Following the failure of the original _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ film, Whedon began working as a “script doctor,” or someone who improves scripts that have already been written. One such script was _Speed_ (Jan de Bont, 1994), a movie that, unlike the _Buffy_ film, was (and still is) critically acclaimed. For this film, Whedon rewrote most of the dialogue.\(^\text{10}\) He did significant rewrites for _Toy Story_ (John Lasseter, 1995), including creating the character Rex and making Woody more likeable.\(^\text{11}\) Other doctored films include _Waterworld_ (Kevin Reynolds, 1995)—which used virtually none of his material and flopped—, _Twister_ (Jan de Bont, 1996), _Titan A.E._ (Don Bluth and Gary Goldman, 2000), and _X-Men_ (Bryan Singer, 2000).\(^\text{12}\) He also wrote more of his own screenplays, including, most notably, _Alien: Resurrection_ (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), which was made into a feature film. Like with the _Buffy_ movie, however, Whedon disliked the director’s treatment of his script and decided that he no longer wanted other directors to butcher his work.\(^\text{13}\) This lack of control over previous projects and subsequent disappointment set the stage for Whedon’s first television series, _Buffy the Vampire Slayer._

The series _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ premiered on March 10\(^\text{th}\), 1997 as a midseason replacement on The WB. The WB had originally been home to many black-oriented comedies, and, at just two years old by the time of _Buffy_’s premiere, was still in the process of redefining itself as a hub of teen- and family-oriented programming.\(^\text{14}\) Almost immediately, _Buffy_ became what an April 1997

---

\(^{10}\) Lavery, *Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait*, 77.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 78.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 80-82.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 88.

“Entertainment Weekly” article referred to as “The WB’s new horror hit,” with its first two episodes premiering to a record-setting (for The WB) 2.94 Monday rating.\textsuperscript{15} While this rating is miniscule compared to a typical rating for an NBC, CBS, or ABC hit, it thrilled The WB’s executives. Susanne Daniels, the executive vice president of the network, predicted in the same EW article: “I think *Buffy* will do for The WB what *21 Jump Street* did for Fox…It [attracted] new teenage viewers and got critical acclaim as well.”\textsuperscript{16} Not only was the series a hit by the network’s standards, but also, by December 1997, it was already publicly well regarded. For example, a cover story for *The New York Times* about “guilty pleasure” TV shows refers to *Buffy* as “[a] bit too hip” for viewers to feel guilty for watching.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, while *Buffy* may have had a relatively small following compared to its major-network peers, it was recognized for its merit and demographic appeal almost as soon as it began.

This context, particularly in demonstrating the difference between the scripts Whedon wrote and the series he ran, returns us to an even more precise version of our previous definition: more than just the initial source of narrative material, the author of a television series is the person whose position of management allows him or her to craft the series narratively and aesthetically.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16}21 Jump Street was created by Stephen J. Cannell and Patrick Hasburg and ran from 1987 to 1991.
\textsuperscript{18}Again, my definitions runs in parallel to Mittell’s “authorship by management,” but it focuses first and foremost on aesthetics, with management as a necessary requirement for having one’s voice played out across a series. Further ideas of what this “management” entails under my approach towards authorship will also be addressed in Chapter 3.
I argue that under this definition, Joss Whedon is still clearly *Buffy*’s author. Of course, Whedon did not create *Buffy* in a vacuum. Like with almost any audio-visual medium, countless individuals worked on the series. In fact, if we accept Whedon as *Buffy*’s author, it is one such case in which we cannot equate “showrunner” with “author”; while Whedon is the series’ sole creator, he was initially given a co-showrunner, David Greenwalt, due to his lack of experience.\(^{19}\) In season six, Marti Noxon even overtook Whedon as *Buffy*’s showrunner (in the sense that she ran “the day-to-day operations” of the series).\(^{20}\) Despite these facts, the assertion of Whedon’s authorship is not an outlandish claim. Fans and critics often refer to the series as “Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,*” and we already saw that, twenty years later, he is still publically recognized along with the series’ stars. Further, this assumption is clearly the basis upon which a large, organized group of *Buffy* scholars justifies its name, the “Whedon Studies Association.” Still, in the third chapter of this project, I will more critically analyze this claim using both textual and extratextual evidence.

For now, however, we will begin in a place indisputably Whedon. That is, we will start with looking at a few of the twenty episodes across *Buffy* for which Whedon received both the writing and directing credits. Because he directed these episodes, we are free to consider them as more traditional auteur works (in the sense of auteur studies of film directors). Because he wrote them, we can use them to test our assumptions about authorship and narrative. Namely, since our idea of authorship is anchored in story, we should expect that the episodes he writes himself are heavily

\(^{19}\) Pascale, *Joss Whedon,* 103-104.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 208.
focused on pivotal story arcs. The validity of this assumption, we will see, ultimately depends on how we define “arc.”

It is common to refer to a season of *Buffy’s* main external threat as its “Big Bad” (with some fans extending this idea by identifying various seasons’ “Little Bad[s]”, or mid-season villains). Example Big Bads include the first season’s vampire Master and the fourth season’s patchwork-monster, Adam. TV Tropes claims: “The structure of *Buffy* placed the Big Bad as being crucial to the Half-Arc Season, half the episodes are filler dealing with unrelated enemies while the other half involved the ongoing Myth Arc with the Big Bad.” This suggests that we should consider “arc” episode ones that are significantly driven by or against the season’s main external threat or threats.

Under this definition, the single episode in season one that was written and directed by Whedon (“Prophecy Girl” [112]), certainly counts as an arc episode, since it focuses on Buffy defeating the Master. Similarly, we can count all five double-Whedon episodes from season two as arc episodes. Yet, in season three, our hypothesis that Whedon-written and -directed episodes should primarily focus on “pivotal” story arcs starts to waver; only two of the five episodes written and directed by Joss Whedon this season focus their plots on overcoming the Big Bad, The Mayor (“Graduation Day: Part 1” [321] and “Graduation Day: Part 2” [322]). Yet, the other episodes are far from “filler.” “Anne” (301), for example, focuses on a relatively self-

---


23 However, “Lie to Me” (207), introduces a separate villain whose nefarious plot revolves around one of the season’s overall villains, and the season opener, “When She Was Bad” (201), focuses on wrapping up the previous season’s Big Bad.
contained plot about a man that kidnaps homeless teens to use as slaves. However, it ends with Buffy returning to Sunnydale after having run away. Not only does this episode serve the important function of getting Buffy back to Sunnydale, it gives her the space to begin to forgive herself for killing Angel in the previous season’s finale, and to emotionally reclaim her role as Slayer. “Doppelgangland” (316) focuses on a (non-Big Bad) alternate reality premise developed in an earlier episode. It explores the character of Willow—via a vampire version of her—and re-introduces Anya, who will eventually become a member of the “Scooby Gang” (the name given to Buffy’s group of friends). The other double-Whedon episode, “Amends” (310), focuses on Angel’s immense guilt as he is confronted with visions of the people he killed. The episode ends with an emotional moment between Buffy and Angel, in which she convinces him not to commit suicide. It too does not focus on the current Big Bad, although the “monster-of-the-week” in this episode (which torments characters by forcing them to look inward) ultimately becomes the Big Bad of season seven. The significant focus on character in these double-Whedon episodes indicates that maybe instead of revising our hypothesis, we should redefine “arc.”

I propose that there are two types of “arcs” in Buffy the Vampire Slayer: “character” arcs, which focus on internal conflicts and developments, and “Big Bad” arcs, which focus on external ones (I will group both Big and “Little” Bad plots into this same, latter division). These categories are certainly not without overlap (Angel, for example, functions as the second season’s Big Bad), but they suggest two different ways in which an episode can contain pivotal moments along an arc. Under this new definition, it would be difficult to claim that any of the episodes written and
directed by Whedon are not arc episodes. In fact, something else even more interesting emerges: with a few possible (although debatable) exceptions, all of the double-Whedon episodes, whether they further the Big Bad arc or not, significantly further character arcs. Hence, it appears we cannot define Whedon’s mark of authorship without considering his characters.

However, we cannot rely on these plot-oriented observations to make definitive claims about Whedon’s unique style as an episodic auteur. Just as easily as we can tease out these arcs in Whedon’s episodes, we can also find episodes for which Whedon is not the credited writer or director that still further the Big Bad arc (“Bad Girls” [314], “Goodbye Iowa” [414], “No Place Like Home” [505]), have significant impacts on character arcs (“Surprise” [213], “Real Me” [502], “Seeing Red” [619]), or do both (“Bad Girls” and “Seeing Red,” for example, could belong to either category). While these arc commonalities will become pertinent to our understanding of Whedon’s season- and series-level authorship in chapter two, for the end of analyzing Whedon as a more traditional, episodic auteur, we will now need to focus on his aesthetic decisions within individual episodes.

“Once More, With Feeling”: A Case Study

One episode serves as a particularly enlightening starting place for our task: the musical, “Once More, With Feeling.” Not only is this the most popular episode among fans, but it also has the distinction of being the subject of a sizable amount of Buffy scholarship. Given its positioning in Buffy’s sixth season, Whedon

---

24 “‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ Episodes Rated by IMDb User Rating,” IMDB, accessed December 16, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118276/eprate?ref_=tt_eps_rhs_sm. At least according to IMDB, where (as of December 2016) its 9.8/10 rating from 5,767 user votes puts it in the top place, with over 2000 more votes than the next top-rated episode.
approached it with many years of both television and *Buffy* experience, and thus a deep understanding how the series functions overall. Additionally, this is the only episode of the season for which Whedon is credited as the writer or director, a particularly important fact given that season six was run by Marti Noxon. Thus, “Once More, With Feeling” was Whedon’s single opportunity to insert his voice into one of the final seasons of *Buffy* in its most distilled and (for lack of a better word) “pure” form. Moreover, “[Whedon] had always wanted to write a musical episode of *Buffy*” and he worked on the episode “over the course of six months,” meaning that it functions as the culmination of an unusually long period of development for a single television episode. Given the opportunities Whedon had to develop his ideas and execution within this extended timeframe, we can expect that a larger proportion of this episode developed out of careful thought and planning than more hastily made decisions.

Although Anthony Stewart Head’s Giles had previously been known to sing a song or two, because “Once More, With Feeling” is a musical, it created a unique opportunity for the entire cast to start singing and dancing. Yet, as radical as the integration of the musical with television seems, “Once More, With Feeling” was far from the first TV musical. Steven Bochco created an entire musical series in 1990 entitled *Cop Rock* (Steven Bochco and William M. Finkelstein, 1990). *Cop Rock* sought to blend the genres of musical and procedural crime show, an ambitious

---

26 Ibid., 187.
27 Such as his acoustic rendition of “Free Bird” in “The Yoko Factor” (420).
project that ultimately failed.\textsuperscript{28} However, even limiting our focus to typically non-musical series that function as one for a single episode, “Once More, With Feeling” is still not the first occurrence of such a device. The beloved series \textit{I Love Lucy} (Desilu Productions, 1951-1957) featured numerous musical numbers, with at least one episode, “Lucy Goes to Scotland” (517), working its musical sequences into the plot outside of the easy venue of Ricky Ricardo’s night club (in this case, in a dream sequence). \textit{Happy Days} (Garry Marshall, 1974-1984) was another mainstream, popular comedy with a musical episode, “American Musical” (822), in which Fonzie tells a “colorful story…to the tune of an imagined melting pot melody.”\textsuperscript{29} Even in the types of shows with \textit{Buffy}’s specific cult appeal, \textit{Buffy} was not the first to break into unusual song and dance; in 1998 (three years before “Once More, With Feeling”) \textit{Xena: Warrior Princess} (Sam Raimi et al, 1995-2001) had its own musical episode (“The Bitter Suite” [312]). Hence, in creating a \textit{Buffy} musical, Whedon was forging new ground for the series, while also creating another entry in the larger tradition of television musicals.

Unlike the rest of \textit{Buffy}’s episodes (which usually run around 45 minutes), “Once More, With Feeling” has a runtime of about 50 minutes. Also unlike the rest of the series, it was originally broadcast in widescreen.\textsuperscript{30} For syndication, and for the version available for streaming on Netflix from mid 2016 until early 2017, it was

edited down to the normal 43 minute run time.\textsuperscript{31} For the remainder of this section, I will use the episode’s title to refer to the full-length, widescreen version, although there are some revealing differences between the two. For example, in the full-length version, during the scene in which in the Scoobies “beat” the demon, Xander admits that he summoned it, and the following exchange occurs:

SWEET [THE DEMON]: “I think everything worked out just fine.”

XANDER: “Does this mean that I have to be your queen?”

SWEET: “It’s tempting, but I think we’ll waive that clause just this once. Big smiles everyone. You beat the bad guy.”

In the truncated version, the exchange is shortened to:

SWEET: “I think everything worked out just fine. Big smiles everyone. You beat the bad guy.”

Far more than just cutting a joke, the exclusion of the in-between lines removes the explanation as to why the demon agrees to leave without kidnapping the person who summoned him. Yet, even with the loss of this plot logic, the shorter version does not feel like a vastly different experience; a viewer could (as I initially did) watch it and never guess that anything had been cut from it. Further, even in the full-length version, the viewer is made to unquestioningly accept that Xander summoned the demon, despite the fact that we had been given no prior indication that he had anything to do with it (or any believable motivation for him doing so). While these leaps in plot logic certainly tie into the musical’s tendency to foreground songs

\textsuperscript{31}“Buffy now in HD on US Netflix,” \textit{Whedonesque}, accessed March 12, 2017, http://whedonesque.com/comments/35745. The full-length version was added back to Netflix, but then the entire series was removed from the streaming service in April 2017.
above plot coherence, the fact that they translate so seamlessly into Whedon’s television series further supports the idea that when we watch a Whedon, we are less interested in the plot involving the monsters than those that revolve around conflicts between and within characters.

And “Once More, With Feeling” is full of such conflicts. Even in just a written summary, it is clear how many significant character events occur throughout the episode: Tara decides to leave Willow, Giles decides to leave the group, Anya and Xander admit (to themselves) that their relationship is on the rocks, Buffy lets slip her dark secret (that her friends pulled her out of heaven, not hell), and Spike and Buffy share a kiss. While these prominent arc progressions clearly tie back into the previous hypothesis that Whedon-written episodes will focus on important moments along the series’ arcs, we can learn even more by analyzing how Whedon executes them.

Unsurprisingly, genre is particularly important to “Once More, With Feeling.” Yet, while UPN advertised the musical as “A TELEVISION EVENT,” the genre in the episode itself is not used as a gimmick. Instead, Whedon uses the opportunities presented by the genre to further his character arcs, manipulate the ways in which his audience relates to the characters, and create a varied viewing experience. For example, for most of the preceding episodes, Willow and Tara’s relationship is depicted as one of warmth and love. However, the episode prior to “Once More, With Feeling” reveals that their relationship has turned unhealthy, as Willow performs a spell on Tara to make her forget about an argument. As a result, a consistent viewer

---

32 Steven Cohan, *Hollywood musicals, the film reader.* (Psychology Press, 2002). 10. For example, in MGM musicals, “quite often a lavish production number overwhelms or substitutes for the plot’s resolution...”

already enters the episode with an uneasy feeling about their formerly stable and mutually beneficial relationship. About ten minutes into the episode, when Tara and Willow are still blissfully in love, Tara sings a passionate love song to Willow. A multi-instrumental backing—including guitar, drums, violin, and “ahhh” vocals—supports the melody. The chorus echoes, “I’m under your spell,” a play on the idiom for being captivated by someone and the fact that Willow is a witch. For a casual or infrequent viewer (especially one who did not pay close attention to the “Previously On” sequence), this pun is a cute addition to an overall sweet song. It is less cute, however, for viewers who immediately recognize the double meaning behind the phrase; instead, the use of the term creates an uncomfortable sense of dissonance, as we feel the love radiating from the song but intellectually know that something sinister lurks beneath. Later in the episode, Tara discovers that Willow had been erasing her memory, and that rather than perfect compatibility, their seemingly idyllic happiness only verified that bliss is, after all, just ignorance.

As the realization hits her, Tara sings a reprise of her song. Instead of the original’s joyful instrumental backing, the reprise begins over a slow, heart-wrenching piano track. This backing builds to include guitar and drums when Giles joins in to reprise his own song, but the duet remains mournful. In this new context, the idiom in Tara’s chorus becomes her realization of its literal truth. This re-contextualization has slightly different effects based on the viewers’ understanding of the original song, as new viewers experience the reveal at the same time as Tara does and familiar viewers experience it as a moment of tragic accord. Yet, even in these varied experiences, the moment is devastating, not only because of its content but
also because of the way it is presented to the viewer. While the use of any sad, slow score over Tara’s discovery would have helped the audience empathize with her pain, the fact that Tara creates her own music, using the same words that she so recently used to demonstrate her love, amplifies the feeling of her despair. Hence, “Once More, With Feeling” not only incorporates very real, character-based emotion into a very ridiculous premise, it *magnifies* that emotion with the generic tools enabled by that premise.

In a rather different way, Whedon uses the first song of the episode, “Going Through the Motions,” to both entertain and enter into a conversation with viewers about the conventions of the series. “Going Through the Motions” focuses on the ennui Buffy feels from slaying. She croons in a graveyard as she slays a number of anonymous vampires and demons. An audience member familiar with the series recognizes that, with very few exceptions, Buffy always easily defeats the hordes of nameless villains she is faced with. In fact, while the described effect is strongest for viewers who have experienced Buffy’s many fights themselves, even a less frequent viewer tends to be savvy enough to recognize that the character the show is named after typically survives past the first few scenes. As a result, we are relatively desensitized to the “peril” of Buffy going on patrol. With “Going Through the Motions,”—which starts with the line, “Every single night, the same arrangement; I go out and fight the fight”—Whedon has his heroine explicitly voice a complaint we ourselves have about these “filler” fights. Yet, in his acknowledgement of our shared languor, Whedon uses not dialogue, but a song. Further, he makes this the *first* non-instrumental song of the episode. Thus, “Going The Motions” actually has a unique
novelty value; we cannot find this fight predictable, because Buffy has just burst out into song for the first time. Additionally, by adding the song to the fight, Whedon enhances the external battle with an internal struggle; when we are completely absorbed in Buffy’s head, we give more meaning to her actions. The melody is also upbeat, and, because of its synchronized demon chorus (and commentators), the scene is incredibly funny. These elements all make the examination of Buffy’s boredom and depression neither boring nor depressing. Almost oxymoronically, by using the generic tools of the musical, Whedon creates a unique and lively viewing experience out of our mutual recognition of a repeated, tired one.

For one of the episode’s large group numbers, “Walk Through the Fire,” Whedon builds off of the same sense of isolation and depression in “Going Through the Motions,” but uses the conventions of the genre rather differently, to quite different ends. Instead of entertaining and connecting with us through the song, he makes us dwell on Buffy’s painful emotions, and experience the tragic irony that she feels them at all. The song begins with series of solos, the first of which features Buffy, as she sings about the emptiness she feels inside. As the others join in, Whedon begins intercutting and superimposing images in order to weave the characters together. The soundtrack unites their verses perfectly, allowing the song to build towards literal harmony. Yet, even as Buffy adds to the group number, she remains physically separated from her friends, unable to hear the others’ music. In this perceived solitude, she continues to sing about her feelings of disconnect and depression. This creates a heartbreaking sense of dramatic irony, as the audience not only hears the words of love and connection that Buffy cannot, but aurally
experiences the beautiful way the team fits together, even as Buffy believes that she is singing a solo. For example, immediately after her friends share a verse in which they resolve to come to Buffy’s aid, Buffy sings darkly: “So one by one they turn from me; I guess my friends can’t face the cold.” Tara answers Buffy’s verse in voiceover with, “What can’t we face, if we’re together?” (a line itself a callback to one sung by Buffy in “If We’re Together”), but the slayer continues her lonesome verse overtop of Tara’s message of support. By the final repeat of the chorus, the entire team is singing together. Yet, while the soundtrack blends their voices, the crosscutting of the Scoobies marching forward and Buffy walking alone emphasizes their physical and emotional distance. Whedon thus uses the musical’s unique ability to explicitly blend what we see and hear to enhance and manipulate our viewing experience. We would have understood what was happening had it been presented to us through only visuals, spoken word, and musical score, but through the direct combination of these elements, Whedon enables us to feel it in a completely new, almost overwhelming way.

Similarly, in “Something to Sing About,” the song that functions as the climax of Buffy’s arc in this episode, the music, choreography, and editing come together to mold our experience of the characters and the events on screen. Through the song, Buffy reveals to her friends what we (and Spike) already know: she was happy in death, and her depression stems from the fact that her friends resurrected her. She begins the song in a bright and cheery tone. Given the fact that “Walk Through the Fire” precedes this song, we can immediately detect the cynicism in her statements (“It’s alright if some things come out wrong; we’ll sing a happy song, and you can
The song then jumps to an aggressive tone and quick pacing as Buffy barks trite clichés like “every day’s a gift” and “whistle while you work” while beating up the demon’s wooden henchmen. The emotional façade Buffy has been wearing becomes palpable in the disunity of the song’s beat, her aggressive actions, and meaning of the words she sings. The song then continues to alternate between these two tones, helping the audience sonically experience the conflict inside Buffy.

After a few minutes of this alternation, Buffy ascends the stage in front of her friends. Both these beats give way to a new, slower piano track, as Buffy sings: “There was no pain; no fear, no doubt; till they pulled me out; of heaven.” The camera holds a close up on Buffy’s face during this moment, and the intimate shot set up, paired with the slowed music, helps her verse feel totally and completely like a revelation (an impressive feat, given that we already knew what she is revealing). Through the musical genre, Whedon thus manages to bring the audience directly into emotion we might otherwise only have experienced at a distance. Further, with the exception of one close up of the demon, when the camera cuts away from Buffy’s close up, the ensuing shot sequence involves Buffy looking at her friends and her friends reacting one-by-one to the news. This immediate experience of the group’s responses further helps us experience the full impact of the reveal. The focus on each character in the group also ties back into our experience of the previous song, “Walk Through the Fire,” except now the irony has shifted; we are no longer considering how Buffy has friends that love her despite her depression, but how the love of those friends has caused that depression. The musical genre, once again, magnifies and personalizes emotion.
Yet, in each of these cases, in which the song significantly molds the audience’s experience, Whedon is not creating the emotion from scratch. That is, although he uses the musical to change our overall experience, in “Once More, With Feeling,” he is not completely shifting the story of Buffy to make it sappier or more emotionally distressing than the typical episode. Instead, he picks up what were already active threads woven throughout the series and uses the musical genre to amplify them and make our experiences of them new.

Still, this analysis of genre has perhaps been unintentionally deceptive thus far; while Whedon clearly utilizes the musical genre to enhance the drama of his series, he is also incredibly cognizant of its ability to produce humor. In fact, as we will see again and again throughout his works, to Whedon, comedy and drama not only can co-exist, they must. Whedon has said as much himself, remarking, “I'm very much of the ‘make it dark, make it grim, make it tough', but then, for the love of God, tell a joke,”34 yet, an actual adherence to this ideology is incredibly clear across “Once More, With Feeling” and his work at large.

“Going Through the Motions” is perhaps the most explicitly funny of the previous examples. Its demon chorus creates a hilarious sight gag, especially as Buffy murders them mid-verse. The final dusting of the song makes a humorous version of a possibly dramatic shot, as Buffy appears to radiate the dust of a vampire she has just staked while she holds the final note of the song.35 Even the dramatic “Under Your Spell,” “Walk Through the Fire,” and “Something to Sing About,” all contain incredibly funny moments. For example, “Under Your Spell” features numerous dirty

34 “Joss Whedon: Biography,” IMDB.
35 Wilcox compares this moment to “a Little Mermaid’s spray of hair and foam.” Wilcox, Why Buffy Matters, 198.
jokes that escape extensive scrutiny because they either fit into the rhyme scheme and theme of the song (“The moon to the tide; I can feel you inside”), or because they gain their lewd meaning only in how they are sung, as opposed to how they would be said (“Complete” has its first syllable drawn out to make “You make me complete” a sexually explicit phrase). In “Walk Through the Fire,” Spike jumps between hoping Buffy is killed and deciding to come to her rescue over the course of a single stanza, a moment made even funnier by the seemingly pre-meditated way his final decision fits perfectly into the rhyme scheme (“Buffy’s laughing I’ve no doubt; I hope she fries; I’m free if that bitch dies; I better help her out [emphasis added]”). There is an even funnier, more self-referential example in the midst of “Walk Through the Fire,” when Willow completes the rhyme (sung by Spike), “No, I’ll save her, then I’ll kill her,” with, “I think this line’s mostly filler.” This is one of Willow’s few sung lines, due to the fact that Alyson Hannigan was not comfortable singing for the episode, but rather than letting Willow’s comparatively small amount of singing detract from the unity in the group number, Whedon uses it as a silly moment of self-referential humor within a heavy, emotional song. Although “Something to Sing About” contains the most significant dramatic moment of the episode, even it packed with humor. When Buffy arrives to defeat the demon Sweet, she quips and threatens him as she would a normal demon. Instead of immediately attacking Sweet, she then breaks into a song, which is part dance, part fight. When the Scoobies arrive, Giles assesses the situation and then declares, “She needs backup. Anya, Tara.” The two run to her side but, rather than backing her up in the fight, become her backup singers and dancers. This

moment specifically draws on the audience’s understanding of the show’s action
sequences, and the type of “backup” usually called for, so that the switch to the
musical’s definition of “backup” seems at once unexpected and completely natural.
While this specific generic switch is unique to this episode—in no other episode of
Buffy could a fight possibly require backup singers—it is indicative of a larger trend
within the series and Whedon’s works as a whole, to bring together and tear apart
opposing genres. These are far from the only humorous moments in the episode—
many of them in songs like the even dirtier “I’ll Never Tell,” as well as in spoken
lines, such as when Sweet remarks, “I love a good entrance,” and Buffy responds,
“How are you with death scenes?”—but they speak to the multifaceted goals with
which Whedon approached every part of the episode.

Further, Whedon capitalizes on the musical genre’s ability to focus on
spectacle—even when that spectacle is removed from the plot or main characters.
Near the beginning of OMWF, the Scoobies want to learn whether or not the entire
world has gone to song and dance. Buffy pokes her head outside the Magic Box door
and witnesses a triumphant number about how the dry cleaner got mustard out of a
man’s shirt (sung by Buffy and Angel writer and co-executive producer, David
Fury38). While this moment acts as an information-collecting step for the Scoobies, it
functions as more than that for the audience; rather than shooting the singing man in a
point of view shot from the Magic Box, Whedon starts with a close-up of the ecstatic
man and cranes up and out to reveal a troupe of sharply dressed dancers waving

37 This, we will explore in greater depth in Chapters 2 (how it works in the series) and 4 (how it works in other series).
brightly colored shirts, like backup dancers in the An American in Paris (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) ballet. Similarly, as Xander and Anya discuss their song with Giles while strolling down the street, various extras behind them break into song and dance, including a number in which an unnamed woman (played by the season’s showrunner, Marti Noxon39) receives a parking ticket. The 45-second song (“The Parking Ticket”) swells and covers the conversation between the main characters on screen. Both these examples add to the comedy, but, more importantly, they showcase how Whedon approached the challenge of taking on a new genre at all. He did not simply take from the genre the few elements that helped him tell a typical Buffy story, he pulled from it everything that he could use to enhance the audience’s viewing experience. His use of genre, particularly the musical, thus not only illustrates his ability to apply it to his series, but a real passion for and interest in exploring it to its extremes. To Whedon, genre is clearly more than an easy way to categorize works, but a set of exciting tools.

In addition to, and in conjunction with, a sophisticated use of a new genre, another important aspect of “Once More, With Feeling” (and, as we will see, Whedon’s work as a whole) is his placement of the audience. Specifically, Whedon invites his audience inside the main group, allowing us to participate fully in the onscreen events. One way he does this is with self-reference. These references can be anything from jokes grounded in genre—such as Willow’s “filler” line—to comments on a shared history between the viewer and the main group. For example, in “I’ve Got a Theory,” Willow references the episode “Nightmares” (110), in which a little boy’s coma causes bad dreams—including one in which Willow must sing—to come true.

39 Ibid.
The line (“I’ve got a theory, some kid is dreaming and we’re all stuck inside his wacky Broadway nightmare”) is funny on its own, especially with Tara doing jazz hands beside her, but funnier if we are in on the joke. When Buffy learns that she must rescue Dawn, her response is: “So, Dawn’s in trouble. Must be Tuesday,” a reference to the show’s Tuesday timeslot, and its pattern of placing Dawn as the perennial damsel-in-distress. Sweet’s last song similarly includes the phrase: “All those secrets you’ve been concealing; say you’re happy now, once more, with feeling.” Even a viewer watching the series live on TV would have understood the explicit reference to the title of the episode, since Whedon begins it with an unusual intro sequence that includes the title card: “Once More, With Feeling.” While each of these referential moments clearly add to the episode’s humor, more important is the fact that in each case of self-reference, we are not asked to step back and consider the clever way Whedon has constructed his world, but actually drawn closer into it.

Whedon makes the experience of getting a reference akin to understanding an inside joke between friends, rather than a joke we get as the audience because we are not one of the characters. Buffy’s “must be Tuesday” is particularly funny because of our extratextual understanding of the repeated date, but she is the one making the joke; our understanding of it thus brings us closer to her. A different version of this, for example, would be to show a newspaper headline in the background that reads, “Dawn’s in trouble. Must be Tuesday,” or to have someone say this to the group.

40 Whedon actually does include a self-referential joke via newspaper headline in this episode (“MAYHEM CAUSED: MONSTERS CERTAINLY NOT INVOLVED, OFFICIALS SAY”), but this joke is specifically grounded in our recognition of the way those outside the group treat the material we get to experience because we are inside it. Hence, Whedon turns this potentially externalizing method of joke delivery into a joke that also works because of our relationship to the Scoobies.
and for the Scoobies to respond in confusion. Both of these latter cases would give us a humorous experience either independently from or at the expense of the group. Instead, Whedon’s approach causes us to experience the moment with the Scoobies (even if our experience is better informed). The case of the demon’s reference to the title less obviously exemplifies this, as the group is clearly not aware of the self-reference (and it is spoken by someone else). However, Whedon charges this wink with a commentary on the emotional states of the characters, so that we still feel it as a line that connects us to them. Thus, at the same time as Whedon makes use of the distance between the characters and us, he lessens that gap.

While self-reference is flashiest way Whedon brings the audience into his groups, it is far from the only (or even the most effective) method he uses. For example, while “Walk Through the Fire” emphasizes the disconnect between Buffy’s perceived and real isolation, it has the opposite effect on the viewer; unlike Buffy, we actually are isolated from the group, but through being privy to the entirety of the song, we feel as though we are a part of it. Even in the cases of spectacle explored above, in which Whedon actively takes us away from the group to watch someone else, he quickly follows this up with a return to the group—in the first case Buffy’s line, “It’s not just us,” and in the second a fluid pan back into a moving Anya, Giles, and Xander. While Whedon makes frequent use of close ups, wide shots and other non-eyelevel framings, during intense group conversations he often chooses to bring us into the mix with the use of two, three, or even larger shots at eyelevel with the characters. The most extreme example of this in “Once More, With Feeling” is the song “I’ve Got a Theory” (especially prior to the “Bunnies” interlude), for which

41 A technique reminiscent of Howard Hawks’ way of bringing the audience into his groups.
Whedon not only shoots characters at eye level, he uses the camera to directly stand in for our eyes. He does this with longer shots that fluidly move the camera between characters as they speak, allowing us to follow along the same way as we would if we were sitting among the group.

This discussion of “Once More, With Feeling” allows us to draw some interesting conclusions about Whedon’s episodic televisual style. First, we can recognize his intense focus on character arcs, and the extent to which he uses genre to amplify our experiences of them. We can likewise recognize that Whedon fluidly combines moments of comedy and drama, and that he uses genre both as a set of unique tools and a method for tying together other aspects of the viewing experience. Finally, we can conclude that Whedon invites his viewers to participate in his main group of characters. However, no auteur can really be understood by a single work. Thus we will shift our focus to two more double-Whedon episodes, “Hush” and “The Body.”

“Hush” and “The Body”: The Rounding Out of an Oeuvre

Just behind “Once More, With Feeling” in popularity is “The Body” and “Hush.”42 These episodes were also both written and directed by Joss Whedon. Hence, if our assumption that we can study authorship in individual television episodes similarly to how we study film auteurs was correct, we should be able to find parallels between these episodes and “Once More, With Feeling.”

“Hush” earns much of its acclaim among Buffy fans and scholars for both being aurally unique (due to the fact that, for most of the episode, characters are

---

42 “‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ Episodes Rated by IMDb User Rating.”
unable to speak) and for being one of the scariest episodes of *Buffy*. On the surface, this second feat seems odd, given that the entire series sprouted out of a mix between the genres of teen melodrama and supernatural horror,\(^4\) but analyzing the episode itself reveals the extent to which it emphasizes this latter genre. For example, the musical score, which becomes the main aural presence after the dialogue stops, is singularly creepy, particularly when it is paired with jump scares featuring the terrifying-looking Gentlemen. The episode also begins with a dream sequence in which Buffy encounters a child singing a nursery rhyme, a classic horror moment that even Alfred Hitchcock used to produce uneasiness.\(^4\) Later in the episode, Whedon employs the exact horror movie cliché *Buffy* was created to contrast against: a blonde girl is attacked while walking alone at night\(^5\) (although, like Buffy, Tara is not completely defenseless, and is able to protect herself with the help of another unexpectedly tough girl). In other words, like “Once More, With Feeling,” “Hush” evidences Whedon’s interest in playing with genres and utilizing their unique tools, although this time not by introducing a new one, but by highlighting an existing one inside the series.

Hence, like with “Once More, With Feeling,” we can identify various places where Whedon uses genre to great effect. Most obviously, Whedon uses this emphasis on the supernatural horror genre to produce amplified feelings of fear in his audience. Some of this fear is clearly part of the horror genre’s own version of spectacle, such as when we follow the Gentlemen and their demon assistants (without

---

\(^4\) We will analyze this in greater depth in Chapter 2, but even now it is clear from the premise—a teenager attends high school and fights demons—that this is true.\(^4\) “Creepy Children Singing,” *TV Tropes*, accessed December 6, 2016, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CreepyChildrenSinging.\(^4\) Lavery, *Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait*, 68.
our heroes) as they pick out their next victim. The Gentlemen themselves are horrifying—bald, with pale white skin, black-rimmed eyes, and silver teeth. They are dressed in suits and they move by floating above the ground. Their movements are accompanied by a horrifying score (so distinctive and effective it was released as a bonus track on the “Once More, With Feeling” album). Their presence alone is the source of much of our fear. The fear we experience most intensely, however, is that which we experience alongside our heroes.

The most effective example of this is when the Gentlemen pursue Tara. In this scene, the score alternates between heart pounding and foreboding, and the exit light in the hallway casts the characters with an eerie green glow. Whedon shifts our alignment in this scene between Tara and Willow, who is sitting in her room. When Tara desperately pounds on a dorm room door, her frantic knocking is intercut with Willow’s reaction to the sound. We can feel time running out for Tara as Willow creeps closer to the door. Just when it seems Willow is about to open the door, Whedon cuts to behind Tara, and the door she was knocking on is opened not by Willow but by a Gentleman. With this slight of hand, the suspense of whether or not Willow will arrive in time to rescue Tara is replaced by a jump scare, made even more shocking because we never even considered that Tara could be at anyone else’s door. This initial scare is then immediately followed by a sense of dread, as the viewer is now less confident Willow can save Tara in time (a fear also enhanced by the fact that Tara is not yet a main character, and so first-time viewers cannot be as confident in her survival as they could a main-billed character\textsuperscript{46}). Eventually, the

\textsuperscript{46} A confidence that will eventually come back to bite us, when Tara is the unexpected casualty of a stray bullet in “Seeing Red.”
girls do meet up, and it is in the way that they save themselves by wordlessly working together through magic that we recognize the strength of their connection.

This latter point actually leads to an even more interesting discovery about Whedon’s use of the supernatural horror genre: he effectively uses it to enhance every aspect of the viewing experience, even those not based around fear, and to further important character arcs. Willow and Tara’s is not the only romance that blossoms from the horror. Buffy and Riley share their most intimate moment when they see each other for the first time once their voices are taken. Through their faces and warm embrace we recognize that their attraction to each other goes beyond words. In fact, is only when the voices are gone that Buffy cannot ruin the moment with babble, and she and Riley are able to kiss. This kiss is accompanied by a sweeping score, which helps us concentrate on the romance and interpret it as romantic. Thus, the silence, which gives “Hush” its greatest sense of supernatural horror, also enables Whedon to focus on his characters and their relationships, something we associate not with the horror part of Buffy, but with its teen melodrama. In fact, if we go back to the origin of the word “melodrama” as the combination of music and drama, we see that “[b]ecause it had to rely on piano accompaniment for punctuation, all silent film drama … is ‘melodramatic.’”47 By forcing his characters to behave more like silent film stars, Whedon not only makes us more afraid for them, he makes us feel more for them too.

In the analysis of “Once More, With Feeling,” we saw that Whedon effectively ties comedy and drama together, even using the same techniques within

the same scenes. “Hush” is no exception to this rule. In fact, Whedon includes some deeply funny moments in the otherwise terrifying episode. Some of these moments come before the loss of voices. For example, the scene in which Willow sees Tara for the first time at a Wicca group is incredibly funny. It begins with the Wiccans seated in a circle, praying a ridiculously grave prayer that is immediately followed by the head Wiccan’s pronouncement: “I think we should have a bake sale.” When Willow has the audacity to suggest that the witches should attempt to practice actual magic, the others openly mock her. The juxtaposition of serious witchcraft and silly club fundraisers is funny on its own, but becomes even more humorous because of the way it demonstrates an awareness of a version of Buffy’s premise gone very wrong, a version where Buffy gains its inspiring nature and elements of supernatural horror via a “woman power shrine” and “an empowering lemon bundt,” rather than through well-developed female characters. The humor of this scene is not directly connected to the ensuing action with the Gentlemen—though the Wiccan club does introduce Tara and Willow—but it allows Whedon to make the type of verbal jokes prevalent throughout the series before the voices are taken, and to strengthen the contrast between the lighter, verbal part of “Hush” and the darker, silent part. Yet, Whedon does not abandon comedy once horror takes over; just as he uses elements of horror to facilitate his most impactful melodramatic arcs in the episode, the strongest jokes in “Hush” occur after the voices are gone. When Riley and his friend Forrest attempt to enter the Initiative, they are almost gassed in the elevator because they cannot speak to verify their identities. As Riley attempts to type in the correct override code, Forrest can be seen over his shoulder, holding a notepad on which he has written
“Come on Come on.” Just as time is running out, Professor Walsh opens the door. Without a voice to scold her soldiers, she simply points at the sign on the wall that reads, “IN CASE OF EMERGENCY USE STAIRWAY.” Whedon is frequently associated with his ability to create funny dialogue and lively ways of speaking (see, for example, the Wicca scene), yet all these voiceless jokes rely purely on visual humor. Not only does this visual humor work, it works especially well because of the prevalence of the horror genre. Here, we again see the effectiveness of Whedon’s self-identified “make it scary-tell a joke ideology,” as well as textual evidence of adherence to another oft-quoted Whedon expression, that comedy “hit[s] ten times as hard […] in the middle of something dramatic”;48 a good sight gag is always funny, but it is especially funny when our heroes are moments away from death (or recovering from a near death experience).

Finally, just as he does in “Once More, With Feeling,” Whedon invites the viewers into his world and to participate as members of the group in “Hush.” The above-mentioned ways in which Whedon uses the horror genre to align us with characters to enhance our fear clearly also enhance our connection with them. By making us afraid with the group, not spectators in the characters’ fear, he inherently pulls us inside it. However, even from the specific technique of silence also comes the sense of being a member of the group. Part of this is purely physical; we are more engaged in the action on screen because the lack of dialogue means that we cannot avoid looking and still understand what is going on. This is not the type of episode someone could watch while folding laundry, but one that must be consumed by an active viewer. Further, the emphasis on watching, rather than merely listening, brings

48 Lavery, Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait, 191. Brackets in the quote are Lavery’s.
us into the visual aspects of the world, and the lack of other voices helps us to feel as though we are alone with the characters. As one critic phrases it: “the way the eerie quiet of ‘Hush’ sucks you in, you feel as if the experience is privately, and unequivocally, your own.”\(^49\) This idea of the silence creating a sense of ownership actually goes back to Jeanine Basinger’s broader idea that in viewing well-made silent films, starring successful “silent stars,” “you enter a strange and private place.”\(^50\) In “Hush,” this sense of intimacy is created between the viewer and the Scooby Gang, as we are brought into the silence alongside them.

From the varied, yet extensive use of genre, to the emphasis on bringing the audience into his main group of friends, Whedon’s writing and direction of “Hush” clearly align with his decisions in “Once More, With Feeling.” “The Body” furthers this pattern. Yet, if “Hush” demonstrates Whedon pushing BUFFY more towards its horror roots, “The Body” pushes it back the other way, towards teen melodrama. This episode focuses on Buffy as she finds her mother dead, attempts (and fails) to resuscitate her, and then must deal with the unavoidable truth that her mother has passed. The audience must watch Giles and then Dawn learn the terrible news, as well as the contrasting ways that Willow, Tara, Xander, and Anya deal with their initial stages of grief. Not only is this reaction-focused episode atypical for the usually monster-fighting gang, it is actually reminiscent of a specific convention of soap opera. Citing Robert Allen, Jason Mittell observes that in a soap opera, “any single event can be retold numerous times through the dialogue-heavy conventions of the


genre, as each character reacts to hearing about the event and we witness each retelling’s impact on the characters’ web of relationships.\textsuperscript{51} Although Mittell goes on to explain that this is “a facet nearly unique to the daytime soap opera,”\textsuperscript{52} it is clear that in this episode of \textit{Buffy}, the Scooby Gang’s experience of learning about Joyce’s death is more important than the circumstances through which she died. This is particularly the case given that Joyce dies of a brain aneurism, not any creature of the night. The comparison of “The Body” to soap opera is not intended to condescend the series or the episode. Rather, it is to demonstrate how much of the “soapiness” we often associate with melodrama (teen and other varieties) Whedon is able to incorporate into the episode while still creating what is recognized as a pivotal episode of \textit{Buffy}. Plus, the slowed-down effect was clearly Whedon’s intention; at the beginning of the audio commentary for the episode, Whedon states, “what I really wanted to capture was the extreme… physicality…the almost boredom, of the very first few hours… the moment you discover…you’ve lost someone,” affirming that his formal choices were “all done for a very specific purpose, which is to put you in the moment…”\textsuperscript{53} Thus, in the “soapiness” of “The Body” we see a definitive and decisive authorial choice.

Like “Once More, With Feeling” and “Hush,” “The Body” takes an unconventional approach regarding sound: (excepting theme music) it uses only diegetic sounds, or sounds contained within the story world.\textsuperscript{54} However, the absence

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Mittell, \textit{Complex TV}, 237.]
\item[Ibid., 238.]
\item[Joss Whedon, “The Body: Commentary by Writer/Director Joss Whedon,” disc five, \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Five}, DVD, directed by Joss Whedon (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006).]
\item[Wilcox, \textit{Why Buffy Matters}, 180.]
\end{footnotes}
of score is not foregrounded in the way the missing voices are in “Hush,” in which characters react in panic to not being able to speak and the silence is emphasized by the foregrounding of other noise (such as a shattered glass). There is one scene in the episode in which the noises going on outside the house provide a striking contrast to the dead air inside it, yet it is entirely possible to watch “The Body” without actively noticing that Whedon has chosen to eschew a score. Still, its effects are just as felt. As desired, Whedon thus keeps us keep us “in the moment,” even as he uses a new device. This particular technique’s success more generally affirms that Whedon understands when our active recognition of his filmmaking devices (such as our intrigue at the first song in “Once More, With Feeling,” and our shock at the shattered glass in “Hush”) adds or takes away from our overall experience.

Due to its melodramatic emphasis, “The Body” is the most obvious example of the three (and perhaps the entirety of the series) in terms of focusing on internal character conflict. This has the effect of simultaneously bringing us into the group, and furthering our understanding of each character’s personal struggle. The episode centers exclusively on members of the Scooby Gang; the fact that there is no episodic “villain” means that we do not even need to cut away from the group in order to establish some sort of conflict. Instead, by focusing on individual reactions and the soap operatic “telling,” we get to see directly inside characters’ emotional states. This intimacy inherently helps tighten our relationships with individual characters and the group as a whole. For example, we clearly see the different ways characters deal with their grief: Buffy, first with shock, nausea, and then numbness; Giles, by thinking practically and logically; Dawn, through a complete emotional breakdown; Xander,

55 Ibid.
by searching for someone to blame; and Willow, by obsessively changing her clothes. We also see the ways that they interact in their grief. For example, Whedon brings us into a dorm room as Willow, Tara, Xander, Anya, (and we) turn to each other for comfort.

There are also two sequences in which we see directly into Buffy’s subjectivity. In these sequences, we are presented with what Buffy would like to happen as though it is actually happening. The only indication that we are given as to these wish-sequences’ subjective nature is their somewhat choppier editing and much brisker pace—until Whedon cuts back to reality. The first of these occurs when the paramedics arrive. While they are performing CPR, Joyce begins coughing. The ecstatic paramedics repeat remarks such as, “We got her!” and “I never brought one back this late.” The sequence cuts first to the top of an ambulance and then to Buffy, her mother, and the paramedics inside it. Whedon then cuts to Joyce lying in a bed, surrounded by Buffy, Dawn, and her beaming doctor. The camera tracks rapidly towards Buffy as Joyce proclaims, “Buffy, thank God you found me in ti—” only for her ecstatic praise to be cut off by smash-cut to a static close up of Buffy. In this close up, Buffy is back home, and her mother is still dead. Despite the distinctly jumpy editing and obvious camera movements, it is easy to believe that the beginning of this sequence is real, partially because there was no visual or auditory marker to indicate that we were about to enter an unreal sequence, and partially because our investment in the characters makes us want it to be real. Thus, the reveal that it was not—and Joyce is still dead—is particularly upsetting. Rhonda Wilcox makes similar observations, and argues of the scene: “viewers may be shocked when the episode
returns… to the sight of Joyce’s body… Nonetheless, this experience can be conceived as contained within psychological realism, the ‘emotional realism’, of the flow of Buffy’s thoughts.”

Contents in Wilcox’s later point of “emotional realism,” is the observation that the stylized editing does not actually pull us out of the immediate moment and push us to think about form or Whedon’s direction. However, the shock Wilcox describes is a sensation felt purely by the viewer; Buffy wants her mother to wake up, and pictures what it would be like, but she never believes that her mother is better in the way we do. When we are thrust back into a reality we legitimately believed we might have avoided, we are thus plagued with an even greater sense of outrage over Joyce’s death. This outrage is directed not at Buffy—we cannot blame her for wanting her mother to be alive—but at the seeming arbitrariness of the loss, and even, possibly, at ourselves, for temporarily believing that our own desires could force a miracle to happen.

Just like the other episodes use their most salient genres to produce varying emotions within us, Whedon uses the teen melodrama focus of “The Body” to connect to other experiences, such as horror and comedy. One way he does this is through juxtaposition. At the end of the episode, Dawn sneaks into the morgue, where their mother’s body is laid out under a sheet. Here, Joyce is but one of many corpses. As anyone who has watched a typical horror film realizes, in the horror genre there is little time to consider the psychological impacts of death, since the remaining protagonists must simply focus on surviving. When this is combined with melodrama, where the psychological impact of death can become a main focus, it has the potential

---

56 Ibid., 183.
57 And, upon later (post-viewing) reflection, at Whedon himself, for teasing us with the ways he could have saved Joyce, and for giving us a kernel of hope only to snatch it away.
to create a dual experience in which death is at once a small side effect of demons and a cataclysmic, world-shifting event. In this case, Whedon brings us into a room full of dead bodies and makes our only thought be to wonder which of those bodies is the one we care about. However, Whedon quickly turns this hyper-focus against us, as he raises one of the “prop” bodies from the dead (as a vampire). Although some critics scoffed at this moment due to the fact that it includes the supernatural in an overall “realistic” episode,\(^5\) in shocking us Whedon capitalizes on the easily contradictory nature of death in each genre. Further, since we had previously experienced the scene as purely melodramatic, the effect of horror invading it makes the scene at once more terrifying and more tragic—more terrifying because our sadness has made us forget that there are bigger evils in this world, and more tragic because Dawn is now denied a private moment with her mother. Narratively, the inclusion of the vampire also means that Buffy must come to her sister’s rescue. Yet, even this horror-based narrative decision serves the greater melodramatic arcs. It means that when the vampire dust settles, Whedon can end the episode on a quiet moment between the sisters. It also restarts the interplay between the horror and melodrama genres, as it allows Whedon to return a listless and depressed Buffy to her role as Slayer. Hence, in contrasting the ways we think of death in both his genres, Whedon builds further emotional and narrative significant into the moment.

In addition to juxtaposition, Whedon uses audience expectations of genre and plot action to create a bittersweet humor and an enhanced sense of tragedy out of the “The Body.” The best example of this occurs when Dawn is at school. The first present-day shot of Dawn in this episode comes immediately after a close up of the

---

body bag closing on Joyce. We see Dawn’s face as she sobs, “Oh God, I can’t believe it.” Such an intimate experience of Dawn’s pain is immediately shocking and upsetting. However, her (previously unseen) friend’s response, “It’s not that bad,” and the ensuing conversation then changes our understanding of the scene, as we realize that Dawn is actually crying about a boy teasing her. It is at first a light reprieve to learn that she is upset over trivial middle school drama, creating an experience that is reminiscent of what Elsaesser describes as melodrama’s “dramatic discontinuity,” in which the filmmaker “let[s] the emotions rise and then bring[s] them suddenly down with a thump.” However, our new understanding also reveals to us that Dawn does not yet know that her mother has passed away. Since the episode is built around the re-telling, we understand that Dawn must still be told, and so we must again be faced with an outpouring of her emotions. This expectation transforms our feelings of empathetic sadness into ones of pity and dread. These feelings are also enhanced by our now increased awareness of Dawn’s youth, and of the fact that we are about to watch a little girl learn that she has lost her mom.

In a similar vein, Whedon makes the scene immediately following the intro sequence a vibrant holiday dinner with Joyce and the entire Scooby Gang. Whedon explains that he included this scene so that the credits would not roll during the following shot, and because he “wanted to see what they had in happier times.” While viewing the next scene without credits is certainly an important consequence of Whedon’s decision, this second reason points at its main effect: it reminds us of the joy Joyce brought to the characters (and, by extension, to us), immediately after

---

59 Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 83.
60 Whedon, “The Body: Commentary by Writer/Director Joss Whedon.”
showing us her lifeless body. We understand from the immediate season change that this is only a flashback, and that when the episode returns to the normal timeline, Joyce will still be dead. Therefore, this joyful scene, full of quips that should be funny, functions as a tragic reminder of lost love. If do we allow ourselves to forget for a moment that Joyce is gone, the humor and joy in the scene also make the return to a world in which she is gone even more difficult. Characters actually make weak jokes throughout the episode that, under normal circumstances, would have been considered part of the group’s usual friendly banter. Within the context of this episode, however, they feel at once a source of lightness and a source of dissonance, the way gallows humor is sometimes both inappropriate and necessary. Whedon thus creates comedy in “The Body,” in a way that highlights our dissonant experience of it and ultimately amplifies our grief.

While “Hush” and “The Body” were constructed under highly different circumstances with varied goals in mind, we can see clear evidence of a common voice between them. They both illustrate Whedon’s interest in and ability to use specific genres as a way to access new tools, and to create various experiences for the audience. In both episodes, he pulls us into his characters’ group—by helping us feel like part of their team—and lives—by helping us connect with them as they face internal and (with the exception of “The Body”) external conflict.

———

61 Wilcox similarly notes that “viewers will share in Buffy’s wrenching return when the episode cuts back,” concluding that this produces “real emotion in the audience; realistic emotion in the character.” Wilcox, Why Buffy Matters, 183.
**Conclusion: Episodic Authorship**

From these three episodes, we can now make various conclusions about Whedon’s episodic authorship style. In each of “Once More, With Feeling,” “Hush,” and “The Body,” Whedon pulls forth (or adds) a completely different genre, and then expertly utilizes it in ways that further character, plot, and the audience’s perceptions. Even as he does this, however, he does not lose sight of his other main genres, or the potential for comedy. He also draws viewers into his character’s group. Moreover, in “Once More, With Feeling,” and “The Body” Whedon puts a particular emphasis on the internal lives of his characters, at the expense of a completely satisfying external threat. “Hush” differs here, as its external threat is foregrounded as part of its overall emphasis on horror, yet the episode’s demons still significantly push his characters into significant growth along their internal and interpersonal arcs.

Thus, even when he highlights different genres in episodes that are relatively disjoint in storytelling, Whedon creates experiences that are consistent with each other. This point actually stands as one of the most compelling reasons as to why Whedon’s “distilled” authorship can be equated with the authorship of Hollywood auteurs at all. Like how the non-musical *The Clock* (Vincente Minnelli, 1945) is still considered a key part of Minnelli’s oeuvre and the musical *New York, New York* (Martin Scorsese, 1977) is an essential part of Scorsese’s, an auteur must be able vary genre and specific plot but retain his personal imprint; the narrative and stylistic successes of “Once More, With Feeling,” “Hush”, and “The Body” prove that Whedon is completely capable of this feat. And as much as academics and fans focus
on so-called “Buffy Speak,” in giving each of these episodes a particular sonic twist, Whedon also reveals a maintenance of consistency and development within characters that runs deeper than their speech (or song) patterns.

However, given that this project seeks to define Whedon's voice in terms of long-form, televisual authorship, and the fact that Whedon did not write or direct every episode of any of his primetime series, studying only the double-Whedon episodes provides us with a partial glimpse of the entire picture. Thus, to understand Whedon’s imprint across *Buffy* and his other series, we will need to determine to what degree the tools and techniques we found in these three episodes are utilized throughout them. We will also need to identify any tendencies across his series that cannot be recognized in these three episodes alone, such as his long-term arc patterns. Through understanding what remains and what gets added as Whedon’s direct control over episodes is varied, we can uncover not only the ways in which he approaches different types of episodes, but what it actually means for an entire series to be “Whedon.”

---

Chapter 2: Televisual Authorship Across Seasons

“In the end, we all are who we are, no matter how much how we may appear to have changed.”

-Giles, in “Lessons” (Buffy, 701), written by Joss Whedon

Not every episode of a twenty-two-episode-per-season television series can be “Hush,” “The Body,” or “Once More, With Feeling.” In order to feel the full impact of each episode’s clever manipulation of genre, we need an understanding of the baseline it is varying from. Similarly, an emotional climax would not hit as hard if such a climax happened in every episode. We may like the double-Whedon episodes the most, but we like them that much partially because of the episodes that surround them. The serial nature of television results in a high-volume of episodes (likely created over many years), which necessitates an authorship that is consistent in the long-term, even as responsibilities are increasingly diffused. This, more than anything, is the key difference between film and television aesthetics.¹ Thus, to fully understand Whedon’s televisual authorship style, we must expand our analysis from individual episodes he wrote and directed to look to how Whedon creates an entire series.

The majority of my analysis of Whedon’s serialized authorship will focus on Buffy the Vampire Slayer, although I will also use numerous examples from its spin-off, Angel, which will help reinforce patterns that appear in Buffy, as well as point to some different decisions Whedon makes in creating a different series. Angel

¹ In fact, when series, like Game of Thrones (David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, 2011-), lessen their episode count and make each episode feel more like a singular experience, we tend to call them “cinematic.”
premiered in October of 1999, during _Buffy_’s fourth season. It focuses on Buffy’s sometimes-boyfriend, sometimes-mortal enemy, the vampire Angel. For his spin-off, Angel moves to Los Angeles and (to use his team’s original motto) “help[s] the hopeless.” Whedon co-created the series with David Greenwalt, but, like _Buffy_, it is Whedon to whom we tend to credit the show. In order to utilize and test our working definition of televisual authorship as unified under a specific leader, I will refer to Whedon throughout this chapter as the actor and source of intent in both _Angel_ and _Buffy_. In the following chapter, I will more critically analyze this assumption.

To analyze _Buffy_ and _Angel_ in their entireties, we first need to understand what they are about—not their loglines, but their essences. Based on the gravitas with which Buffy is introduced as the “Chosen One” in the beginning of _Buffy_’s first few episodes, we might expect the world of the series to bend to her will like Neo’s spoon in _The Matrix_ (The Wachowskis, 1999). Yet, while Buffy’s superpowers give her the capability to save the world, they also separate her from it. Similarly, Angel possesses supernatural strength and healing abilities, but his status as a vampire with a soul detaches him from both humanity and other vampires. In fact, while _Buffy_’s and _Angel_’s premises certainly focus around the idea of an unexpected hero,² I argue that both series are more largely framed around the idea of people belonging to a society that is in tension with itself, and to which, despite their inability to fit completely in, they feel a responsibility to protect. In response to the challenges posed by these conflicting circumstances, they find people that they belong with and that make them stronger, and they change themselves. Along the way, they find happiness in love

² Although, as we will see, the term “unexpected hero” does not apply to either for very long.
(both platonic and romantic), yet this happiness can never last forever. These themes, of course, are not neatly articulated like a moral at the end of a story, but woven into the viewing experiences of both series. We will see them emerge again and again as we closely analyze three main aspects of *Buffy* and *Angel*: genre, the group, and arc.

**Genres in Tension, World in Tension**

As I suggested in the first chapter, *Buffy*’s premise combines two genres: teen melodrama and supernatural horror. Timothy Shary defines “teen melodrama” as “simply films that took adolescent conditions seriously, rather than bundling them in juvenile high jinx or faddish trends.” Combining this with the fact that “adolescent conditions” typically involve relationships and self-discovery, we can define Whedon’s version of this former genre as one that focuses primarily on interpersonal, emotional, and identity issues between teenagers (and non-teenagers who behave as such). Supernatural horror, on the other hand, is typically associated with external (often demonic) threats, like vampires, werewolves, and the literal end of the world. When laid out like this, however, the two genres are clearly in tension with each other; how do you tell a story about boy drama when demons could destroy the school at any moment? How can you introduce werewolves into a psychologically realistic story without making them feel disingenuous? And how can you create a main character that is both a petite, pretty girl named Buffy and vampire slayer?

*Angel* attempts to replace “teen” with “adult” melodrama and adopts an extra layer

---

3 A particularly significant theme in a series like *Buffy* or *Angel* in which literal immorality is possible.
5 Pascale, *Joss Whedon*. 146. Pascale states that *Angel* was “planned as a darker series with more adult themes…”
of “noirishness,” but it still straddles this line between internalized drama—especially relationship- and identity-based conflicts—and external, supernatural horror. Thus, without making too big of a stretch, we can still refer to it as a product of teen melodrama and supernatural horror.

Whedon integrates teen melodrama and horror across Buffy and Angel in a way that at once teaches the viewer how to watch a series in which both can be of equal importance and highlights the tension between them. One primary technique Whedon uses to weave both genres into his series is to create “metaphor episodes.” In these episodes, some teen (or young adult) problem is externalized as a supernatural horror issue. The villain in “Witch” (Buffy, 103) is so obsessed with reliving her glory days that she body swaps with her daughter. “Teacher’s Pet” (Buffy, 104) creates extra danger in the attraction between teacher and student by making that teacher a giant, murderous bug. In “The Pack” (Buffy, 106) the aggressive group of students is actually possessed by wild dogs. Similarly, in Angel’s “Lonely Heart” (102) one-night stands lead to a supernatural STD. In “Expecting” (Angel, 112), Cordelia (also know as “Cordy”) discovers another consequence of unprotected sex when she becomes what looks like eight months pregnant immediately after a single sexual encounter. In “I Fall to Pieces” (Angel, 104) a woman feels that her stalker is always watching her—because he can literally remove his body parts to follow her around. These are the types of episodes Buffy is often associated with, with a recent New York Times article celebrating the series’ 20th anniversary equating Buffy’s “sophistication” with the fact that, “‘Buffy’ used the monsters that crossed into the human world through the Hellmouth as a metaphor for the horrors of high school, which in turn

---

6 Lavery, Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait, 104.
were a metaphor for the horrors of life in general.”7 This category of episodes is far from merely fan-imposed. Steven S. DeKnight used the phrase “metaphor episodes” specifically, and even Jane Espenson’s example to illustrate the pitching process for *Buffy*, includes describing part of a story as “a metaphorical symbol of inner turmoil.”8 Clearly, the use of metaphor is important to both the construction and consumption of a *Buffy* episode.

It is tempting to consider these types of episodes “lessons” or morality tales: do not try to live your child’s life, teachers that sleep with students are predators (even when they are pretty women), and do not have unprotected sex with strangers. However, considering these episodes in such terms is incredibly reductive. For example, while the episode “Out of Mind, Out of Sight” (*Buffy*, 111) straightforwardly pushes a metaphor about isolation in high school (taken, recall, partially from Whedon’s own experiences), the invisible girl has gone completely insane. She pushes mean girl Harmony down the stairs, locks Giles, Willow and Xander in a gas-filled room, and tries to cut up Cordelia’s face to take away her beauty.9 In the end, she is not redeemed by finally being “seen,” but recruited by a governmental agency to be an assassin. We may easily recognize the relationship between being socially and literally invisible, but Whedon complicates both the conclusion and the victim-perpetrator relationship enough that we cannot (or at least should not) see this as parable about reaching out to the quiet students in class.

---

8 Kaveney, “Writing the Vampire Slayer,” 123, 104.
9 Just as a curious aside, the slicing of the face to remove beauty also reappears as a major plot point in *Dollhouse*. 
Similarly, in “I Fall to Pieces,” it is difficult to find a moral, other than maybe the truism that being stalked is terrifying. In fact, when we move our focus from what these episodes could “teach” us about life or even what they specifically stand for, to how they function in the series, we learn much more about Whedon’s overall style.

By constructing an episode out of a metaphor, Whedon makes the horror essential to telling the melodramatic story (and vice versa). This forces us to consider elements of both genres with equivalent importance; we cannot divorce the stakes of a story based in one genre from elements of the other genre when everything works to inform each other. Although these types of episodes appear across the entirety of Buffy and Angel (for example, Whedon demonstrates the dangers of obsessive crushes in Buffy’s seventh season episode “Him” [706], and how television can steal childhoods in Angel’s fifth season episode “Smile Time” [514]), it is particularly telling of their use in easing us into Whedon’s universe that so many of these episodes appear in the first few seasons of Buffy.

As integral as the intertwining of these two traditionally oppositional genres is to Whedon’s style, however, he did not invent it. In 1942, RKO’s Lewton Unit produced its first film, Cat People (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), which focuses on an immigrant woman who cannot have sex without turning into a murderous panther. In Cat People, we can clearly identify a metaphor: (immigrant) women’s sexualities can be fatal. However, even in this film, the relationship between supernatural horror and interpersonal melodrama are inextricably intertwined; one of the film’s most notable scenes involves the cat woman terrorizing the young lady her husband is in love with.

---

at a pool, a suspenseful horror scene motivated completely by the interpersonal, melodramatic conflict. A later B movie, *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler, Jr., 1957), was created out of a less sophisticated merging of the two genres, but functions as further evidence that the cinematic combination of issues in teen melodrama and supernatural horror significantly pre-dates Whedon. The 1976 horror film *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), based on the Stephen King novel, stands as another touchstone along this tradition, motivating its supernatural horror elements with teen troubles, from menarche to the prom monarchy. Rather than devaluing Whedon’s use of genre, these examples help us understand Whedon’s work as building on an existing tradition of teen melodrama and supernatural horror. Further, they motivate us to look for more interesting (and revealing) methods in which Whedon deploys his two genres.

In particular, even as he builds the genres off of each other and asks us to invest in both, in bringing them together, Whedon does not reconcile the inherent tension between them. On the contrary, he frequently clashes them against each other. In *Buffy*’s second season, for example, Angel loses his soul and becomes evil after having sex with Buffy (“Surprise” [213], “Innocence” [214]). The achievement of a common goal of teen melodrama—finding someone you love to lose your virginity to—creates the horror monster. In the season finale, “Becoming: Part 2” (222), Angel’s soul is restored, but only after he has opened a portal into Hell, which can only be closed by killing him; Buffy has to kill her love to save the world. In an almost mirror image, at the end of “The Gift” (522), Glory has opened a portal. This time, to save the world Buffy must sacrifice her sister or herself. While her choice to
sacrifice herself puts the teen melodrama and horror in balance for her—she can fulfill her life’s purpose and save the day—this decision (temporarily) ceases the series as it typically functions. Clearly, Whedon keeps supernatural horror and teen melodrama in such tension throughout the series that reconciling them requires the actual death of its protagonist. In fact, as we will explore in greater depth in the Arc section of this chapter, many of the series’ Big Bads are or are assisted by members of the group, a set up that usually makes it difficult (or impossible) for the characters to resolve both the horror and the melodramatic storylines happily. Even on a smaller, episodic scale, Whedon frequently pits preserving an important teen relationship against an external horror threat. Examples of this include any time he makes the supernatural horror villain a friend of the group, such when Willow’s boyfriend is a werewolf (“Phases” [215]) or when Buffy’s mother attempts to burn Willow at the stake (“Gingerbread” [311]).

Similarly, in Angel, the ability to achieve teen melodrama goals is often destroyed when supernatural elements become entangled with them. For example, the romance between Fred and Wesley meets a horrible end, when Fred’s body is overtaken by the demon Illyria (“A Hole in The World” [515]). Supernatural horror conflicts often also create direct melodramatic conflicts, such as when Gunn must choose between his old friends and protecting the peaceful demons they want to kill (“That Old Gang of Mine” [303]). The entire conclusion of Angel’s fourth season similarly highlights the inherent tension in the two genres; Jasmine is a disgusting demon enslaving (and consuming a small amount of) humanity while keeping everyone else absolutely content. Of course, this storyline has more complicated

11 And, unsurprisingly, when she returns from the dead they are once again thrown off.
philosophical overtones—can we actually be happy if we are being controlled? Is it worth it for a few people to die so the rest are happy? — but stopping the horror villain Jasmine requires that the team (and the entire world) relinquish their seemingly pure happiness. This action is even referred to in the series as “ending world peace” (“Home” [422]), and leads to them inheriting the evil law firm Wolfram and Hart.

By creating a near constant tension between supernatural horror and teen melodrama, Whedon establishes a world in which our desires and expectations are often at odds. This returns us to the overall idea of *Buffy* and *Angel* being about belonging (and not belonging) to a society itself in tension; since we are constantly participating in both the horror and the melodrama, we, as viewers, can not reside solely in either—yet, staying engaged in both will likely lead to conflicting goals and ambivalent outcomes. More pragmatically, the tension Whedon creates within the genres provides him with a variety of opportunities from which to generate dramatic change.

To populate his conflicting world, Whedon creates a cast of protagonists who embody its tensions. Buffy is small, blonde, and beautiful. Given that she was based on the idea of the girl that is almost invariably murdered in horror films,\(^\text{12}\) she is ostensibly an ill-suited heroine for the horror genre and a well-suited one for teen melodrama. However, because Buffy is a Slayer, she has both the superpowers that make her a competent horror protagonist and a calling to fight evil that ensures that she could never belong on an episode of *Dawson’s Creek* (Kevin Williamson, 1998-

In other words, she directly personifies the incompatibility between teen melodrama and supernatural horror. Yet, Whedon does not leave Buffy on the outskirts of society to struggle alone; he immediately introduces her to a group of fellow “losers.” Unlike Buffy, her friends, Willow and Xander begin purely entrenched in teen melodrama; their exile from society stems not from the supernatural, but their basic inability to fit in with their peers. However, their arcs in the series continuously push them towards the supernatural. Giles is introduced shortly after, and his dual roles of librarian and watcher keep him entrenched in—but on the peripherals of—both teen and supernatural societies. The group the four form straddles the two genres; too human for horror, and too supernatural for teen melodrama. Additions to the group maintain this tension, including: Cordy, a human who is likewise plunged into the supernatural (and, in Angel, becomes part demon); Oz, a werewolf; Tara, a witch; Anya, a (mostly) former demon; and Angel and Spike, vampires with souls.

Dawn, Buffy’s sister, is a particularly late addition to the Scoobies. She is completely human, but constructed from supernatural origins. Her introduction into the series, however, at first denies any such supernatural beginnings, insisting instead that she is the sister Buffy has always had. Highlighting the role of genre in this shock is a moment that occurs prior to Dawn’s surprise appearance in “Buffy vs. Dracula.”

---

13 Case in point: in “Normal Again” (617) Buffy is tricked into thinking that she lives in a “realistic” world, and thus is literally crazy because she believes in vampires. This is echoed in Sarah Michelle Gellar’s post-Buffy guest spot on All My Children [Agnes Nixon, 1970-2011] (a soap opera she had previously starred on), in which she plays a crazy woman who believes that she sees vampires. The young woman obsessed with vampires only has one place in pure melodrama: the psych ward. “Normal Again,” Fandom, accessed April 13, 2017, http://buffy.wikia.com/wiki/Normal_Again.

14 Lavery, Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait, 165, 194. Lavery cites Richard Burt and Matt Hill’s “loser aesthetic” as “Whedon’s TV auteur signature in Buffy, Angel, and Firefly.” He also references a quotation by Whedon that Buffy is “a show by losers for losers.”
When Giles and Riley search out Dracula’s lair, they stumble across a giant castle. As they approach, Riley observes, “I’ve lived in Sunnydale a couple of years now. Know what I never noticed before? ... A big honking castle.” Yet, while we laugh at this lampshading, we do not think much further about the castle’s appearance. This is primarily due to the fact that our understanding of the fantastical elements of the supernatural horror genre allows us to accept that a castle could appear out of nowhere. We also easily accept it because of its inoffensive utility to the episodic plot; Dracula is a much more interesting villain if he has a giant castle—even if that castle’s appearance is unmotivated in the real world—and that castle’s existence does not make us question our relationship to any of the characters, especially since they too recognize its strangeness. However, when Dawn appears at the end of the episode, and Buffy does not question her mysterious appearance, but unblinkingly accepts Dawn as her sister, we are asked to accept a change in the internal, melodramatic status quo introduced via conventions of the supernatural horror genre. Evil lairs appear out of thin air; kid sisters do not. Yet, Dawn does, and her appearance both embodies and actively renews the tension between the teen melodrama and supernatural horror genres. Overall, Buffy’s main characters do not fit completely into either the supernatural horror or teen melodramatic genres. Still, they fit together as group, and they combine the themes and concerns endemic to each genre in ways that illustrate their tension and keep us constantly engaged in both.

---

15 TV Tropes defines “Lampshade Hanging” or “Lampshading” as “the writers' trick of dealing with any element of the story that threatens the audience's Willing Suspension of Disbelief, whether a very implausible plot development, or a particularly blatant use of a convention, by calling attention to it and simply moving on.” The website includes various examples of lampshading in Buffy, including Dracula’s castle. “Lampshade Hanging,” TV Tropes, accessed Feb. 12, 2017, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LampshadeHanging.
The main characters in *Angel* follow a similar pattern. Angel is a cursed vampire with a soul, a horror character concerned with (teen) melodramatic ideas like forgiveness, acceptance, and the possibility of happiness. He joins forces with Cordelia and a cast of generically hybrid characters, including a half-demon, half-human man (Doyle); a human girl who was trapped in another dimension (Fred); a man who grew up fighting vampires on the street (Gunn); another Watcher (Wesley); and a bright green demon, more entrenched in humanity than the actual humans of the group (Lorne). These characters struggle similarly to belong in the world they live in and to either main genre. Also as in *Buffy*, these misfits belong together, and they work as a team to fight demons and solve internal crises.

It is impossible to speak of genre in *Buffy* and *Angel* without also discussing comedy (and when there is a noticeable lack of it). Whedon frequently moves rapidly between drama and humor, part of what Lavery (borrowing a phrase from Whedon\(^\text{16}\)) refers to as “Turning on a Dime.”\(^\text{17}\) In general, we can understand this as a tendency within Whedon’s works to vary the tone within the generic conventions of the series. That is, he does not randomly insert various comedic elements into dramatic scenes, but builds up his humor out of horror and teen melodrama (and, as we saw with “Once More, With Feeling,” any other genres currently available to him). One of the techniques he is most known for in this regard is making characters react to extreme tension in the horror plot with a funny remark, such as when Buffy responds to an attacking vampire with “Let me answer that question with a head-but.”\(^\text{16}\) Who likely was borrowing from Jeanine Basinger. \(^\text{17}\) Lavery, *Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait*, 191. Lavery uses this phrase in his identification of one of twenty Whedon “signatures.” He uses it to indicate how Whedon amplifies the overall experience of his series by juxtaposing emotions that seem at odds, and combines this discussion with one of Whedon’s overall “Genre-Hybridxity.”
Freshman” [401]) and when Kendra responds to her arm getting sliced in “What’s My Line?: Part 2” (210) with, “That’s me favorite shirt. That’s me only shirt.” Often, the villain is also quick witted, such as when Spike explains that he likes fighting with weapons because “[t]hey make me feel all manly” (“School Hard” [203]). It is important to note that the humor does not resolve the tension; a quip from a hero may increase our confidence in that character’s ability to succeed, but one from the villain has the opposite effect, instead making the villain seem more in control. Rather, the humor reinforces and builds upon the experience we were already having. This goes back to an idea we explored in chapter one, about the enhanced effect of humor within an otherwise humorless moment. We can also see this as part of larger tendency to keep the viewer anchored in the moment on screen. Rather than enriching our viewing experience by pulling us out the fight and signaling us to consider it differently, Whedon builds that different experience right into the action.18

These mid-fight quips are so prevalent in the series that they are important markers of Whedon’s style. Yet, again, in adding them he is not forging new ground but building off of established traditions. Most noticeably, this technique has a firm grounding in the adventure film and the action film. See, for example, the entire “You Fight Like a Cow” category on TV Tropes.19 However, even the comedic quip’s merging with horror is not unprecedented. For example, the teen horror film Scream (Wes Craven, 1996) is known for its “Deadpan Snarker[s]”, people who approach

---

18 A contrast to this would be Martin Scorsese’s use of the song “Please Mr. Postman” in Mean Streets (Martin Scorsese, 1973), which is amplified non-diegetically over the fighting so that we are cognizant of the disconnect between the rough bar fight and the cheerful pop song.
danger with a humorous, straight-faced remark. Thus, to gain an even better sense of Whedon’s distinctive use of comedy within his series, we must look beyond the adrenaline-induced quips.

Whedon clearly recognized that by using different, well-established genres, he not only had access to a toolbox of techniques, but a deep pool of audience expectations from which to draw and subvert. For example, Buffy’s pilot (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” [101]) starts by introducing a timid blonde woman—Darla, not Buffy—who is being pulled along into breaking and entering with a boy. Once she is confident that there is no one else around, Darla reveals herself to be a vampire. She murders the boy, and we realize that she was not on the lookout for monsters or the police but for witnesses. If we had thought that the (apparent) teenagers were simply characters in a teen melodrama, we are surprised at the introduction of vampires. More likely, because of the setting, we thought we were in a more typical teen horror, and thus that the boy would murder the girl (or that both would be murdered). Hence, the reveal that Darla is the vampire forces us to draw new conclusions about the way horror works in this world.

This device, which I will refer to as a “conclusion swap,” not only helps Whedon set up his specific tension between teen melodrama and supernatural horror in the pilot, but also appears again and again throughout both Buffy and Angel. In general, when swapping our conclusions, Whedon leads us to believe one thing and then shows us the entire story, so that we re-contextualize the events on screen and see how our initial assumption was wrong. Typically, this technique relies on us

---

assuming that what we are seeing is based in either horror or teen melodrama and
then finding out that it is actually based in the other genre. Other times, it pretends to
meet our expectations or desires within a specific genre, only to reveal that this is not
the case. Just as with his mid-fight quips, Whedon uses this technique not to call
attention to the series’ construction, but to enhance our experience within the series
and our relationship to it. By negating our expectations, he reminds us that we cannot
sit back and anticipate what will happen, but must remain active participants in the
action. Each time it is used, it also renews the tension that Whedon creates between
teen melodrama and horror.

Frequently, a conclusion swap occurs as part of an episode’s teaser. The final
episode of the first season of Buffy, “Prophecy Girl” (112), begins with alternating
close ups between Xander and Willow, as Xander explains that, “There’s never been
anyone else for me but you.” Once Xander realizes how silly he sounds and begins
scolding himself over his choice of words, we realize that Xander is not asking
Willow out, but practicing how he would like to ask Buffy out. Whedon clearly plays
on our desire for Willow and Xander to get together to make us believe it is coming
true, and then denies us that satisfaction. Since by the first season finale we have
already had our conclusions swapped by Whedon before, we may have, on some
level, anticipated such an expectation flip. When the swap comes, we then get the
pleasure of knowing that we have a special understanding of how the series works.
Hence, even when the technique fails to surprise us (and thus no longer requires us to
pay as close attention to understand), it continues to strengthen our relationship with
the series (and thus incentivizes us to continue paying close attention anyway).
In “Band Candy” (306) Whedon21 adds further complexity to the relationship between the series, the genre, and the viewer by repeating the same conclusion-based joke in different generic contexts within the same episode. At the beginning of the episode, Buffy and Giles converse in a graveyard. Giles announces, “And on that tragic day, an era came to its inevitable end. That’s all there is. Are you ready?” Just as we are wondering what dramatic era is coming to an end in that graveyard, Giles starts to ask Buffy SAT questions about the passage’s theme. This joke plays off of a combination of music, setting, and the literal meaning of the dialogue to cue us to contextualize what we are seeing as horror. It then uses Giles’ next line, which is to ask a multiple choice question about the passage, to clarify that while the context is horror, the content is teen melodrama. The main plot of the episode then focuses on what happens when the adults of the town regress to teenagers, and it results in Buffy learning what it is like to take charge and be the mature one. At the conclusion of the episode, Buffy and Giles speak to each other once more. Buffy remarks, “It was just too much to deal with. It was like nothing made sense anymore. The things that I thought I understood were gone. I just felt… so alone.” Giles then asks, “Was that the math or the verbal?” This joke is immediately funny because we expected it to be a sincere recount of the episode and Buffy’s emotional maturation, but it turned out to be about something completely different. It is even funnier when we recognize that we have been taken in by it before in a completely different context. At the same time, because our interpretation of Buffy’s words is also true, there is an added layer of both poignancy and humor, as we recognize that Buffy really has matured, but not

21 More precisely, Jane Espenson and Michael Lange, on behalf of Whedon, but why it is fair to simply say “Whedon” will be a focus in the next chapter.
quite enough for her to identify it in herself. Further—and perhaps most importantly—we get the satisfaction of feeling that we know Buffy better than she knows herself. From a mere repetition of a joke in different generic contexts, at different points in the episode, Whedon thus creates a complex type of comedy that helps deepen our relationship with the series and its characters.

*Angel* similarly makes extensive use of conclusion-swap teasers to create humor and immediately throw the audience into generic tension, although these uses are to varied degrees of sophistication. One of the more sophisticated ones is the second season’s opener, “Judgment” (201), which begins with dark music over a close up of a bright green, menacing demon with crimson eyes and horns. Roughly ten seconds into the episode, the demon slowly raises a microphone into the frame and begins belting out a beautiful rendition of “I Will Survive.” Since we do not yet know this character as the musically inclined demon Lorne, we are surprised (and thus amused) when he does the last possible thing we could have expected him to do. The outlandishness of this particular conclusion means that even the savviest of viewers likely did not anticipate it; thus, with this opening to the second season, Whedon creates a scene that both has the above-mentioned effects of immediately throwing the viewer back into the series’ generic tension, and delights us with its ability to outsmart us. There are a multitude of other examples in teasers of *Angel* episodes, some more complex and interesting than others. Many of these can be considered a repurposing of a technique TV Tropes refers to as a “Reveal Shot,” which is a particular type of conclusion swap done through cutting to show something

previously unseen. TV Tropes documents occurrence of this technique’s use in television, including in the 1993 pilot of Frasier (David Angell, Peter Casey, and David Lee, 1993-2004), but also hypothesizes that it actually evolved out of radio drama.\textsuperscript{23} Even the specific use of the audience’s expectations about the horror genre to execute such a swap has a basis in classic film comedy; in The Nutty Professor (Jerry Lewis, 1963), Jerry Lewis uses many conventions of the horror genre to show the main character as he is turned into a grotesque beast. He follows this with an extended POV shot, during which the audience gawks at the main character (and thus at us), and we imagine they are responding to the horrible monster. When Lewis cuts from the POV shot, however, we discover that he is not a monster, but an incredibly handsome man; the gawking was in awe, not terror. In creating his specific conclusion swaps, Whedon thus again adds his own personal touches to a preexisting tradition.

Such personal touches are clearest in the Angel episode “Waiting in the Wings” (313), which undergoes an even more complex blending of comedy with melodrama and horror in its opening scene conclusion swap. From it, we can see not only Whedon’s use of humor, but also the complex way in which he uses the generic tension to specifically tie into and create plot and character tensions. This episode begins with a close up of an illustration of a disgusting demon, over which Wesley wistfully ask: “Honestly have you ever seen anything lovelier?” As the camera pans up, Wesley continues his praise, until Cordy—clearly understanding that he is actually daydreaming about Fred—makes a joke about his attraction to the demon. A

dedicated fan, aware of Wesley’s crush on Fred, may at first be confused, but, like Cordy, will quickly catch on to whom he is actually referring. To these fans, Cordy’s joke (“Plus, six breasts. Any man’s gotta love that”) and Wesley’s indignant response (“Fred doesn’t have six breast!”) are particularly funny because the viewer herself just experienced this exact mix-up. For less astute fans, the joke loses this extra layer, but remains humorous as it prompts them to re-contextualize the scene themselves. Still, this causes the initial joke to take on slightly different effects based on viewer experience. Then, as the joke continues (“You gonna ask her out?” “The Ravager?”), all viewers receive a second chance to share in the same, layered sense of humor that recalls and reflects on our initial conclusions, no matter which stage we caught on to the joke. This helps enhance our feeling of closeness to both the characters and the series as whole as well, since it positions us as someone in on the joke. Yet, Whedon uses this opening not just as a funny moment, but also to begin a conversation between Cordy and Wesley about Fred, which will inform the audience’s experience of the potential couple’s future interactions. Following the credits, Cordy has a similar conversation with Fred, except, unlike in the teaser, she misunderstands whom Fred is referring to and helps spur on the relationship between Gunn and Fred, while believing she is encouraging Fred to go after Wesley. Wesley is then crushed to learn that Fred is more interested in Gunn than him. With this, Whedon uses a corrupted version of the teaser joke to create a somewhat Shakespearean situation that makes, upon reconsideration, the humorous opening in the beginning a tragic moment of false hope. Hence, with this same technique, Whedon manipulates the audience’s
expectations of genre and understanding of the series to make viewers, laugh, laugh again, and then despair.

Whedon draws one further benefit from the stylistic tools allowed by the genres he uses: he creates unique motifs across some episodes that both vary the storytelling of that plot and connect to the audience in new ways. We saw various examples of this in the previous chapter, such as his two uses of “Under Your Spell” in “Once More, With Feeling” and the various ways he uses silence in “Hush,” but we can also find many further moments across both Buffy and Angel. For example, in “I Only Have Eyes for You” (219), the same scene—in which a young man murders a woman so she will not leave him—is played out 4 times. Each time it is repeated, it creates a different experience or takes on a new meaning; while the first two repetitions are primarily about tension and mystery, the final two reenactments, which intercut Buffy (possessed by the man, James) and Angel (possessed by the woman, Grace) with the original couple, are primarily about catharsis. The feelings of despair and betrayal wrapped up in James’s experience of the events directly reflect the feelings Buffy has towards Angel since the loss of his soul. Hence, reciting his lines to Angel finally allows her to come face to face with him and express her pain. Buffy also finally has the power to hurt (a temporarily helpless, as Grace) Angel physically with James’ weapon. However, because Angel is a vampire, guns cannot kill him, and he (still as Grace) returns to Buffy’s (still as James) side before she kills herself. Angel/Grace then forgives Buffy/James, and both spirits are freed from their torment. At the same time, Angel and Buffy get to kiss again (although Angel runs off,
disturbed), and Buffy (and the audience) are left to ponder the nature of love and forgiveness.

Similarly, “Storyteller” (716) uses Andrew’s video recordings largely for humor and fabrication. For example, the episode begins with Andrew sitting in front of a fireplace in a fancy study, directly addressing his “gentle viewers” with tales of “Buffy: Slayer of the Vampires.” Anya’s knocking at the door interrupts Andrew’s narration, and we cut to reveal that Andrew is sitting on top of a toilet, speaking to a home video camera. This introduction is a purely humorous metajoke—from the imagined setting to the direct subversion of the phrase “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”—and many subsequent uses of the mockumentary device are similarly funny jokes. However, at the end of the episode, the device becomes a medium for confession and facing reality, as Andrew returns to his bathroom perch. This time, however, we are not brought into Andrew’s fantasy world, but a simulation of the camera’s “REC” screen, as a pale-faced Andrew admits to murdering his best friend and being terrified of the coming apocalypse. Again, what once brought us humor and joy now creates a moment of extreme pathos. In fact, episodes sometimes literally replay entire scenes in ways that change the emotion they produce. At the beginning of Angel’s “Hero” (109), for instance, Doyle bumbles through a hilarious commercial for Angel Investigations, ending it with: “Is that it? Am I done?” When Cordelia replays the recording at the end of the episode, after Doyle’s death, this once silly question becomes profoundly tragic. The clip is played one more time during season five (in the episode “You’re Welcome” [512]), in which it is less immediately affecting, but perhaps even more tragic in different ways—both textually, since the villain Lindsay
has been impersonating Doyle, and extra-textually, since Glenn Quinn had since passed away.

_Buffy_ and _Angel_ are two coherent works constructed out of seemingly incompatible genres. Across the two series, Whedon both makes both melodrama and horror essential to the entire experience, but keeps the two in tension. From both, he engages the audience in complex ways and creates moments of explosive comedy and intense drama or pathos.

**Welcome to the Group**

Although named for specific characters, both _Buffy_ and _Angel_ are ultimately about groups of people. In the first section of this chapter, we saw how genre informs the construction and utilization of Whedon’s groups. This, however, is not their most notable aspect; rather, the key property of Whedon’s groups is their ability to invite viewers inside them. Essentially, Whedon forms a type of friendship between the group of characters and the viewer. While this friendship is obviously one-sided—given that those on the other side of it are not real people—Whedon creates the feeling of our active participation in the group.

From the beginning his series, Whedon creates environments in which forming welcoming and accessible groups is of primary concern. When we first meet _Buffy_, she is dreaming of demons and monsters. Yet, the first issue she must deal with when she wakes up is starting at a brand new high school. Shortly after Buffy’s mother drops her off for her first day, the camera focuses on Xander, Willow, and their friend Jesse. Although the pretty, popular girl Cordelia initially offers Buffy a

---

24 Many writers refer to such groups in Whedon’s series as “chosen families,” and likewise assert that they are central to Whedon’s work. For example, see Lavery, _Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait_, 189.
pathway into higher social standing, Buffy is drawn to the outcasts, a “downward mobility” (to use Cordy’s words) solidified when an on-campus murder forces her out of her attempts to be a normal teenager. Before the end of the two-part opener, Jesse is turned into a vampire, tries to murder his old friends, and is staked by Xander (accidentally). However, by the time the second episode ends, Buffy, Xander, Willow, and Giles have clearly formed a team, evident both by the way they speak (“I’d say the fun is just beginning”) and closing wide shots that fit each member perfectly in the frame. Angel may be too old for high school, but Angel similarly begins with the titular character meeting Doyle, who insists that Angel needs to learn how to connect with humanity. Angel loses his first client and potential friend (his “Jesse”) to a vampire foe, but in the process is reunited with a down-on-her-luck Cordelia Chase. The episode ends with Angel, Doyle, and Cordy establishing a partnership.

Pilots that form teams are not, of course, unique to Whedon; many television shows start by either forming a group from scratch or bringing a new character into an existing one. However, in each of his series, Whedon forms his groups in ways that feel like a natural consequence of the scenario, not an artificial construction of a team, as we are likely to see in a workplace-based series like Ally McBeal (David E. Kelley, 1997-2002). He also makes these groups accessible to us. By this I do not just mean that he makes the characters’ emotions realistic and relatable (although he does do this too), but that he forms these groups out of people whom, if we knew in real life, we feel that we could easily group with if we wanted to. One way he does this is by making these groups “losers” (to again borrow Lavery’s characterization). In
Buffy, the “loser” status of the main group of friends is particularly apparent in contrast to Cordelia’s group of mean girls. Angel, which includes Cordelia as one of its “losers,” twists this initial contrast back on itself, showing a post-party Cordy, alone in a gross apartment and eating sandwiches she stole. By lowering the social status of his protagonists, Whedon ensures that they are immediately accessible, if not identifiable, to us. We may or may not have felt comfortable sitting with the popular kids in high school, but we definitely knew the losers would always have us. Or at least, the series reassures us of this assumption, by making its group of losers happy to let Buffy in, while Cordy gives Buffy a literal test to see if she is good enough to join hers.

Further, in Buffy, the group is formed partially around a secret they share with each other and us: demons are real and they are drawn to Sunnydale. Whedon highlights this shared knowledge by making one of the final conversations the group has at the end of the second episode be about how “people have a tendency to rationalize what they can and forget what they can’t.” Yet we—the viewers plus the newly formed Scooby Gang—did not rationalize or forgot. We are the select few who know the truth. In Angel, knowledge of vampires is immediately more widespread, but by that point many viewers already share even more secrets and experiences with Cordy and Angel from their time on Buffy—and even the uninitiated viewers have still gone through the life-or-death scenario of the series’ pilot with the characters. Hence, in Buffy and Angel, Whedon does not create characters we aspire to become and would admire from afar. Instead, he creates people with whom we have a unique, shared experience, and with whom we feel we could easily spend time.
Additionally, Whedon enhances our desire to spend time with these people by making his characters good people. In *Buffy*, for example, the first four Scoobies are simply *nice*. They are friendly, welcoming, and happy to help each other. Although all stray (sometimes far) from the righteous path occasionally, they are, overall, morally good characters. They also all experience and convey authentic emotions—including real remorse—that help us empathize with them and understand when characters do act out. Spike shakes up this status quo slightly, since until season seven he is always liable to do something evil. However, throughout this time, we know for sure that he lacks a soul, and that those without souls are evil. When he tries to rape Buffy, for example, we are surprised (and likely quite angry), but we can easily settle our cognitive dissonance by remembering that he has no soul and is thus “bad.” Then, in order to be worthy of Buffy, he chooses to restore his own soul and can finally become an official “good” guy; the Scooby Gang is such a force for good, it makes even the crooked eventually straighten themselves out. Faith, likewise, adds some real ambiguity to the show, but she too is exiled from the Scooby Gang until she decides to permanently fight for the side of good. Some may take issue with my characterization of these characters as all ultimately “good,” given the complexity with which Whedon treats each person’s right or wrong decisions. However, by this, I do not mean that every character only does good things (they do not), but that at the end of the day (or season, or series), we can confidently conclude that every member of the Scooby Gang is fundamentally a good person (or, if we include pre-soul Spike, fundamentally a bad demon).

---

25 Cordy and Anya later add some cruelty, but even they are fundamentally good people (once Anya becomes a person, that is).
In making *Angel* “darker,” Whedon adds some more moral ambiguity to his characters. However, although Angel is more standoffish, even those who did not get to know of his soft heart in *Buffy* first listen to his monologue about heartbreak and then witness him save two girls. Likewise, the initially abrasive and shallow Cordy, who, if we did not watch *Buffy* we may not recognize as a potentially heroic character, is so lively and charismatic\(^{26}\) that we want to become her friend, especially when we realize how much of her brashness is an act to make her appear more successful than she is. Hence, both characters are easily categorized as “good” in *Angel* as they were in *Buffy*. Some main *Angel* characters do gain some moral ambiguity, like Fred, Gunn, and Wesley, but this shift comes much after their initial introductions, once Whedon has first convinced us of their goodness. In some cases, the character’s decision to do something “evil” can even be sufficiently justified, like when Fred and Gunn kill a man in “Supersymmetry” [405]; both their suffering from guilt and the fact that the man they killed was the one who trapped Fred in a Hell dimension allows us to believe they are still good people at their cores. Wesley, who makes even more morally gray choices, is likewise established as a good (even naïve) character who becomes world-weary and makes bad choices, but ultimately wants to do what is right. Hence, while characters who are good people are obviously not uniquely “Whedon” either, a significant part of his style is in the fact that he creates groups in which every character is someone we want to root for—most of the time.\(^{27}\)

In *Buffy*, Whedon also increases the group’s accessibility to viewers by frequently (especially in the beginning of the series) causing one character (often

\(^{26}\) Pun intended.

\(^{27}\) This will become clearer in the following section on arc.
Xander) to take longer to catch on than the rest. This means that we are seldom the last people to understand what is going on. For example, in “Witch,” we watch Amy get returned to her rightful body just before Xander tackles her. He is chagrined to learn that he missed a key event, and we get to laugh at him for his mistake because we were involved in the action enough to know the truth. In “Teacher’s Pet,” we watch with Buffy as the substitute teacher, Miss French, demonstrates her ability to rotate her head all the way around. Further, we (the viewers) are the only ones who see her most disgusting offence—eating crickets in a sandwich—and so we are positive that Buffy is correct when she realizes that Miss French must be a giant bug. Yet, Xander, who is under the thrall of her pheromones and has not witnessed any of her suspicious actions, refuses to believe Buffy’s claim. When Miss French takes Xander captive, we get to be part of the exclusive group that knew such a thing was likely to happen. The next season’s “Inca Mummy Girl” (204) functions in almost the exact same way, as we know long before Xander that his new girlfriend is a murderous mummy. In season three’s “Band Candy” we see the suspicious workers in the chocolate factory, and witness Joyce and Giles’ regression into teenagers before the others do, making us actually the first of the group to suspect something very strange is happening. And while Whedon sometimes creates larger enigmas that stretch across episodes, he typically makes it necessary for both the characters and us to unravel them at the same time. For example, we learn about Dawn’s origins at the exact same time as Buffy.

Angel lacks a designated slow-to-catch-on character—although sometimes a character will act on a secret plan that neither we nor the rest of the group know
about—but it frequently follows this “Band Candy” model, giving the viewer private (or at least very directed) glimpses, so that we have a head start at solving the mystery. In “Lonely Hearts” (102), for example, the team is stumped, but we are drawn to spend time with an unknown couple. Although we suspect the man may murder the woman, it quickly appears that Whedon has pulled a conclusion swap trick on us, as the woman leaves, seemingly alive, and the man lies died. With this private look, we are brought one step ahead of the team. However, we do not get the whole story—that the woman is not a murderer but another victim of a parasitic demon—until just before Angel arrives on the scene to witness it himself. Even when we do not learn information ahead of the group, we typically get to uncover the significance of what we all know together. In other words, each case is a group effort, which we get to be active participants in.

There are some moments in which Whedon does conceal group knowledge from us, but these are exceptions that prove the rule. For example, sometimes Whedon will neglect to tell us the characters’ plan before it is executed. However, in this case, the fact that we do not know the plan means that we must remain fully engaged in the character’s present actions to see what they will do next. By putting us slightly behind his characters in knowledge he keeps us at their side when it counts.

A final way Whedon brings us into the group is through inside jokes, which, if we understand, help us feel even more like active members of the team. Some of these are self-referential, like Buffy’s “It must be Tuesday” in “Once More, With Feeling,” and when Gunn refers to his life as a “turgid, supernatural soap opera” in

---

28 An example of this is “Power Play” (521), in which we (the viewers, Wesley, Gunn, Spike and Lorne) learn that Angel is not actually evil again but executing a secret plan only in the last few minutes of the episode.
one episode of the particularly soapy season four (“Players,” *Angel*, [416]). While too much self-reference endangers the audience’s immersion in the on-screen universe, these infrequent shout outs to the audience are more affirming (as the series recognizes *us*) and inclusive (as we recognize *their* jokes) than distancing. Many more jokes cut down on this distance further, rewarding us for paying attention without giving us reason to think outside the bounds of the series. *Buffy* episode “Phases” (215) makes a joke—Oz acts strangely around a cheerleading trophy and claims that its eyes are moving—that is funny on its own, but even funnier to viewers who watched “Witch” and remember that the statuette is possessed. In season seven’s “Storyteller” (716), Andrew shows “clips” from his past that invent scenes from previous seasons. Andrew’s ridiculous reenactments are much more hilarious if we can identify the exact gap between reality and fiction in these stories. In the same episode, Buffy encounters a girl turning invisible from being ignored. Buffy slaps the girl, and she is cured because someone has noticed her. With this, Whedon gets one laugh out of the situation and another out of our recognition of this as a quick and silly version of a dramatic episode from season one. In *Angel*’s “Lineage” (507), Spike makes a joke about having sex with robots that is amusing on its own, but a strange mix of humor and darkness if we catch the reference to his “Buffy-bot” on his previous series.

What is important about these jokes is the fact that they work on multiple levels. The entire experience is not based on our familiarity with the series and their characters, but if we possess such familiarity we receive an additional or parallel experience. That is, *Buffy* and *Angel* do not shun newcomers or infrequent viewers.
However, if we are part of the faithful, we get the extra reward—and to be one of “us.” We can view this at least partially as a pragmatic decision; broadcast TV networks historically sought the biggest audiences, which included people who had never or only rarely seen the show before. However, what is important is Whedon’s response to this practical necessity, which is to create a satisfying “lay” experience that also functions as a way to make the experience of the “in crowd” feel even more personal. From this, it is clear that Whedon creates his series not just with the idea that anyone could enjoy any arbitrary episode, but also with the intention that consistent viewers can establish a relationship with the series. This relationship helps us not only feel that we understand the characters and their actions, but also as though we are card-carrying members of their group.

While positioned inside Whedon’s groups, we both recognize and understand the need for people to bond together as a way to cope with living in (and saving) a world in tension. The strength of the bond Whedon creates between his audience, series, and characters—evidenced by the passion with which many fans and scholars cling to *Buffy*—also helps us to feel the power the characters’ love. We (hopefully) never trick ourselves into believing that the characters love or think about us, but Whedon makes us feel so included in their actions and interactions that we not only understand the characters’ love for each other, we easily love them ourselves.

**Telling Stories Long-Term**

Given that we began our discussion of a television auteur around the idea of storytelling, it is fitting that we conclude our initial analysis of Whedon as a series-level author with a discussion of his season arcs. Recall, that we split his arcs into two
broad categories, “Big Bad” (external) arcs and “Character” (internal) arcs. These categories, we have already found, are liable to overlap. In this final section, we will look at how Whedon builds these interwoven arcs across seasons and entire series. However, since arcs are told across episodes, with some holding more or less significance, even within this higher-level analysis it will be necessary to look to individual episodes. Some of these episodes will reveal information about entire arcs, while others will not, instead helping us uncover what the show looks like between major arc movements.\(^{29}\)

Almost every season starts by reuniting the group of protagonists and re-situating us in their world (or plunging them and us together into a completely new one, like college). We can see this approach to opening seasons as a pragmatic way to re-insert us into the groups each season—it is much easier to re-enter a team that had previously been fractured or at least had their world shaken, than one that stayed tightly banded while we went on hiatus.\(^{30}\) Big exceptions to this tendency are seasons five and seven. Season five starts out with the group already together, and then inserts Dawn as a group member that only we do not recognize. However, the fact that this comes in the fifth season means that all but the newest viewers have already practiced integrating into the group numerous times. In other words, by season five, Whedon has established enough of a relationship with his long-term viewers to trust that we will immediately feel comfortable returning to the group without extra assistance.

This episode also poses a puzzle for us to figure out; when it is revealed that Dawn

\(^{29}\) This section assumes the reader’s knowledge of the major plot points across seasons of *Buffy*. Plot information required to fully understand this section has been included in the Appendix.

\(^{30}\) The way I can easily talk about characters doing things between seasons itself illustrates part of the what the last section spoke to, which is that we really do think of these characters as being people.
has been artificially inserted into the group, we hold the distinction of being the only members of the group to have seen through the trick the entire time. The other big exception to this is season seven, which does not allow the original Scoobies to reunite until three episodes in (or, if we include Giles as an original Scooby, even later). This we can consider an exception that emphasizes the success of the usual case, since the fracturing of the group makes it difficult for us to immediately feel as though we belong with the characters on screen. This was clearly Whedon’s intention—he further highlights our isolation from the group by ending the episode with the formation of a Dawn’s group of friends, kids whom we never spend time with again—but it ultimately weakens our engagement with the rest of the season (especially when he adds a myriad of new characters halfway through). Hence, a Whedon season typically begins by bringing the characters together in a way that immediately helps the audience experience the benefits outlined in the previous section; when he chooses not to do this, he either gives us a replacement experience that strengthens our position in the group in the long run or sets us up for disappointment.

Seasons also tend to end in ways that require the group to unite or reconcile, and for one character to take major action (often self-sacrifice) as part of an entire group effort. While the series finale continues this trend, it also ends in a way that fundamentally reverses how Whedon opens his series (and most seasons): with the decimation of the group and their environment. While the Scoobies could potentially survive Anya’s death (although, notably, the group failed to bounce back completely
from Tara’s), the loss of setting enforces its definitive end. Further, we could not even conceive of a different group surrounding the next “Chosen One,” because Whedon has created countless new slayers. By giving his group such a conclusive ending, Whedon grounds our experience of it within the series, and puts the final touches on the show as a complete work. In other words, while the beginning of each season allows us entry into the group, we cannot take that group with us after *Buffy* ends.

Another commonality across the seasons is the inclusion of an overarching Big Bad, and at least one big expectation shift. Of course, these features—an antagonist, and some sort of twist—themselves are basic to general storytelling, but we can see the way that Whedon uses these elements as fundamental to his style across the series. Whedon’s mid-season expectation shifts tend to focus on a main character either enabling or becoming the Big Bad. The ironic effect of such repeated subversion of expectations in season arcs is that fans begin to anticipate how Whedon will subvert their expectations. For example, although *Buffy* is based on the idea of someone who we would not expect to be a supernatural hero, it is misleading to call her an “unexpected” hero. Even if we did not expect her to be the hero in the first episode, in every episode afterwards we expect that she will save the day (in fact, most of us likely anticipated that she would be the hero from the moment we learned the name of the show).

Some fans have even identified specific storytelling patterns in the series. One website, managed by a user who goes by the name “Tensai,” for example, devotes a

---

31 The way returning from college to find that your bedroom is now a craft room ceremoniously marks the end of your childhood.
page to describing “The Buffy Formula,”32 which it claims is closely followed for Buffy seasons two, three, four, and six. Other observant fans have identified trends in season openers, such as how, with the exception of the pilot, every season begins in a graveyard.33 Rhonda Wilcox finds special thematic meaning in the fact that season six is the only one to end not with a group shot or with a close up of Buffy but “with the image of another character [Spike].”34 In actuality, the reason—by Whedon’s own admission—that this season ended with a “cliffhanger” rather than “the final statement I had to make on everything ever” was because Buffy was picked up by UPN for two seasons before the sixth season started.35 However, recognizing that Whedon intended for every other season to end with a potential “final statement” does give us a sense of the scale for which he wrote most of his seasonal arcs.

Seasons also split between standalone (“monster-of-the-week”) episodes and Big Bad arc episodes, although the exact balance changes over the course of the series. Buffy’s first three seasons maintain a relatively even distribution of Big Bad arc episodes versus more standalone episodes (with episodes of both types frequently furthering internal arcs). Furthermore, these standalone plots typically break up large blocks of Big Bad arc episodes until the final two or three episodes. Season four includes almost the same number of “monster-of-the-week” as serialized episodes, but it frontloads all but three or four monsters-of-the-week plots, so that the Big Bad episodes occur in quicker succession in the second half of the season. Seasons five

32 Tensai, “The Buffy Formula.” The formula suggests that seasons typically begin by focusing on defeating a “Little Bad.” Then a character functions as the “Betrayer,” causing the focus to move to the “Big Bad.”
34 Wilcox, Why Buffy Matters, 38.
35 Lavery, Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait, 110.
and six have even fewer standalone episodes than the previous seasons, yet even they have more than season seven, which, like season four, concentrates its few monster-of-the-week plots in the beginning.\textsuperscript{36}

A relatively even split between Big Bad and episodic plots helps Whedon keep our interest in the series across the length of an entire series. Although some critics (and TV Tropes) refer to such episodes as “filler,” they actually hold a much larger role in the series. Most obviously, they create opportunities for extreme generic and stylistic changes, such as in the three episodes discussed in the previous chapter, without forcing Whedon to change the way he tells his long term plots. Their other key purpose is clear when examining what happens to season seven when it removes much of the so-called “filler”: rather than building story momentum, the inclusion of so many Big Bad episodes so close together diffuses the stakes and makes the series feel repetitive. The monster-of-the-week plots do not pad the Big Bad plots so much as allow them to be paced in a satisfying way. Still, there is something positive to be learned from the way season seven disappoints: its movement towards stories driven completely by long-term character relationships and goals suggests a conscious recognition by Whedon that they are the most important elements of his series.

In looking at these character arcs, we can thus learn even more about Whedon’s treatment of arcs. Just as we saw that the formation of Whedon’s character groups are greatly connected to the idea of creating people who straddle different worlds and do not fit correctly into either, each of his “loser” characters grow and change in ways that fundamentally represent the struggle the resolve the conflict of

\textsuperscript{36} By my own (admittedly unscientific) count, somewhere around 14% of season seven’s episodes are “standalone” episodes.
not belonging. Their struggles, although they eventually end with redemption and heroism, are full of many failures and disasters. In fact, with a few notable exceptions, we can separate Whedon’s main heroes into those who temporarily act only as teen melodrama villains and those who temporarily act as horror villains as well.

Buffy, our titular heroine, is one of the characters who never becomes a horror villain. In fact, she is an overall “strong female” heroine, the first in a line of smart, resilient women Whedon creates across his series. She is brave and tough, yet still kind and good. She not only takes care of herself, she takes care of others, and is respected for doing so. Buffy’s overall character “strength” and Whedon’s more general “strong female” archetype are noted frequently by fans, academics, and Whedon alike. Note that this is a conclusion we could also arrive at naturally in this project, by similarly delineating the personal strengths of Willow, Cordy, and other women we will discuss in chapter four. In outlining Whedon’s authorship we can thus add the easy conclusion that he includes resilient young women in his works. In looking even deeper into Buffy’s arcs, however, we can make even more interesting conclusions about how Whedon utilizes such a character. Specifically, Buffy’s arc is full of significant melodramatic downturns. For example, season two ends with her abandoning her friends and responsibilities over of her grief for killing Angel. When she is resurrected in season six, she deals very poorly with the depression of being

37 Tara, Dawn, and Giles all make various mistakes on per-episode levels that cause both melodramatic and horror trouble, but none becomes a Big Bad or commits an ongoing offense that shatters the status quo when it is revealed.
38 For example, an often-quoted line of Whedon’s is: “[on why he writes strong female characters] Because you're still asking me that question.” The same page of quotations also lists as a Whedon “Trademark”: “Features tough, strong female characters.” “Joss Whedon: Biography,” IMDB.
dragged from heaven and the fact that she still has a responsibility to be a hero. She ends up treating herself and others terribly. In other words, Buffy lives a tough life, and sometimes behaves in ways that make others’ lives worse too. By the end of the series, Buffy is far more mature and suited to a world of irreconcilable conflicts—like having a little sister that cannot reasonably exist—than she was at the beginning. However, the journey from point A to point B contains considerable flailing.

Whedon’s “strong” woman is thus allowed to show character weaknesses, as she works her way through the challenges of life. Even beyond the direct connection between this pattern of character change and Whedon’s overall theme of characters struggling to belong (and save the day), we can identify Buffy’s melodramatic shifts as effective ways of shaking or otherwise adding new dimension to our usually unwavering expectation that Buffy will prevail. Even when her fights “go through the motions,” her feelings and attitudes (both defeated and optimistic) make her struggle through life both deeply interesting and more relatable.

Xander follows a similar path. It is he who is usually last to know and first to walk into a trap, but it is also he who brings Buffy back from the dead at the end of the first season. Xander even goes head to head with Willow in the climax of season six. Ultimately, he, like Buffy, matures and learns how to be heroic, and we can see his upturns as interesting counterparts to Buffy’s downturn; since we do not expect him to be the hero, we actually are surprised when he saves the day. However, while

---

39 This is actually a place where we have organically supported something Whedon claimed about his own works, that “If I create a strong female character, I'm going to want her to go through things...if I'm not giving them real pain and hardship and tragedy, I'm not a storyteller.” “Joss Whedon: Biography,” IMDB.

While the textual analysis gives us a better (and less biased) idea of Whedon’s authorship than we can gain from reading a slew of his quotations, the fact that Whedon specifically claimed a desire to complicate even his “strong” characters’ arcs further supports that what we are analyzing does, in fact, reflect his voice.
he never becomes a Big Bad, his melodramatic flailing abounds. He has an affair with Willow, which alienates their current significant others, Cordy and Oz. He also breaks off his wedding with Anya, a decision that may have been a mature one, had he not made it while she was waiting to walk down the aisle. Each of these mistakes creates riffs in the group. Yet, while they cause major problems in the short term, they do not prevent him from heroic redemption. With Xander, as with Buffy, Whedon uses the character’s continued errors to both maintain our interest in the long term and to make the relationship between the audience and the characters feel even more authentic (since no one we know in real life can ever get everything right either).

Willow and Angel, on the other hand, both soundly fall in the “temporary horror villain” category, not simply aiding bad guys but becoming Big Bads themselves. Willow becomes an evil witch set on destroying the world and Angel becomes a soulless demon with the same goal in mind. Yet, as with Xander and Buffy, both become heroes in the end—Angel even gets his own series in which to become a temporary, but quickly redeemed, villain once more. While Whedon pushes these characters into the realm of supernatural villainy, the inciting action for both is one based in internal conflict: Willow turns evil over grief after Tara is killed and Angel turns evil after “one moment of true happiness” (sex with his true love, Buffy). Other characters that turn into supernatural villains include Faith and Riley, who aid and abet the Big Bads of the third and fourth seasons respectively. Faith turns to the Mayor as a father figure after accidentally murdering a human. Riley technically switches sides only against his will, but the technology that controls him was implanted by Maggie Walsh—his mother figure and commander—and is triggered
after her death. His perfidy also coincides with Spike having turned the rest of the group against each other (with Buffy believing she has only Riley to trust). In these horror-villain heroes, we see most clearly the overlapping nature of Whedon’s internal and external arcs. A climax of a teen melodrama arc—the loss of a loved one, the realization of true love, an irreversible mistake, or a conflict in loyalties—enables a climax in the horror arc, and functions as a major mid-season expectation shift. The conflict within these dual Big Bad and character arcs also enhances the generic tension discussed previously, and an overall tension between individual love and overall duty.

Whedon also includes a slight variation on this latter category of “losers who become horror villains who become heroes”: horror villains who become losers who become heroes. Anya, Spike, and Andrew all belong to this category. For these characters, the transition from “villain” to “loser” is what establishes them as the types of characters who can no longer fit in either of their worlds—Anya, because she is no longer a demon but does not know how to be human; Spike, because he is a vampire who cannot act like a vampire; and Andrew, because he failed at being a villain and a teenager. Their shifts then allow them to engage in similar internal battles as the others. Spike and Anya also both become villains again before they become heroes, an arc that fits them directly into the floundering and flailing of the rest of the main cast.

Thus, Whedon’s characters grow and change in ways that demonstrate their struggle to live in their conflicted world. With their ultimate redemption Whedon poses a potential response to his lingering dilemma of how to live in (and save) a
world we cannot fit in. At the same time, through giving each of his characters detours down villainy, Whedon creates stories of redemption that allow for (or even require) periodic failing; his characters can act indisputably “bad” but are always allowed to reclaim the title of “good.” Since (presumably) every viewer can tap into the characters’ desire for redemption despite their sometimes-devastating flaws, these storytelling decisions help Whedon pull his audience into even greater alignment with his series. From this greater alignment, Whedon also amplifies the audience’s understanding of his greater themes, as we recognize firsthand both how these characters need to constantly shift their lives in the face of their tempestuous world, and, because so many of these stories revolve around love, how powerful a force love is—for better and for worse.

Before we move on, however, it is important to note that Buffy’s main characters change over long periods of time. Consequentially, they tend to spend long stretches of episodes in some sort of equilibrium before an inciting moment in one or two episodes propels their change. This does not mean that the other episodes do not also continuously teach us about the characters and modify our relationships with them. In some episodes, we witness temporary, yet extreme, modifications of characters. Examples of this type include “Halloween” (Buffy, 206), in which the Scoobies become their Halloween costumes, and “Tabula Rasa” (Buffy, 608), in which the characters completely forget who they are. Mittell refers to such changes as “character overhauls,” and cites Buffy and Angel specifically in his description of the category. These episodes typically both provide the double pleasures of temporarily showing us our favorite characters in different ways and teaching us new information

---

40 Mittell, Complex TV, 138-139.
about the characters as we usually know them. For example, “Band Candy” converts its adult characters into teenagers. By the third season, the audience has such a firm idea of Giles as a stern and serious father figure and Joyce as the nurturing, unassuming mother, that seeing them behave as if they were teenagers helps us understand their present predilections, learn about Buffy through her reactions, and simply makes us laugh. Some episodes keep the characters stable, but reveal new information about them that helps us see them in a different light. Mittell refers to this type of character change as “character elaboration.” Another beloved episode, “The Zeppo” (313), functions as such an elaborative episode, teaching us both funny and emotionally affecting things about Xander. Clearly, even when episodes of Buffy do not focus on massive internal or external arcs, Whedon continuously changes our relationships to characters, helps us learn new information about them, and occasionally (and temporarily) allows us to experience them in completely different ways. All these experiences help us better connect to the characters, and enhance our experience of their larger arcs; we care more about the characters’ big moments because of the small moments we spent with them.

The above analysis helps us more thoroughly understand Buffy as a series with two types of interconnected arcs—internal and external—both of which rely heavily on characters (and especially on characters as they struggle to fit into a world to which they do not easily belong). Whedon does not create as clear patterns across Angel’s arcs. This is partially because most seasons do not have seasonal Big Bads, but unite under the Big Bad of the evil law firm Wolfram and Hart. However, all seasons of Angel contain large expectation shifts: in season one, the main character

---

41 Ibid., 136.
Doyle dies (“Hero” [109]) and is replaced with the *Buffy* character Wesley (“Parting Gifts” [110]). At the end of season two, the focus shifts completely to an alternate dimension (beginning at the end of “Belonging” [219]). Season three has a sort of Big Bad in Holtz, and contains a shift when Wesley betrays Angel and allows Holtz to seize Connor (“Sleep Tight” [316]). Season four has a Big Bad in the demon Jasmine, and an expectation shift when we learn that Cordy has been possessed by her all season (we first learn Cordy is evil in “Calvary” [412], and she “gives birth” to Jasmine in “Inside Out” [417]). Season five’s Big Bad is again simply Wolfram and Hart, but even greater shifts occur, as the Angel team completely changes venues (from detective agency to law firm) and Fred is replaced with an ancient demon when one of her love interests turns out to be evil (“A Hole in the World” [515]). Despite this lack of unity in the external arcs, even these brief descriptions of expectation shifts illustrate how, in *Angel*, Whedon continues the pattern of tying the climaxes of internal and external arcs together. Further, *Angel’s* character arcs fall into similar patterns of struggle and redemption—with most following the loser-villain-hero model. In fact, because *Angel* includes characters from *Buffy*, Whedon capitalizes on a unique opportunity for not only cross-season character growth and struggle, but cross-series; because of our familiarity with the characters and the time he already spent with them in *Buffy*, Angel, Cordy, Wesley, and even the fifth season’s Harmony are all immediately quite accessible and complex.  

Finally, like *Buffy*, *Angel* ends by “scorching the earth,” killing off Wesley and plunging the remaining characters into a hopeless battle.

---

42 This is certainly most notable for viewers of *Angel* who watched *Buffy*, but I think there is an argument to be made that Whedon’s own familiarity with the characters and previous development of them helped him write them from the beginning as complex characters the audience can connect with.
These similarities, which occur despite *Angel’s* divergent premise and attempt at becoming more “adult,” illustrate a consistency in the type of character Whedon continuously writes: the flawed but ultimately redeemable. They also speak to Whedon’s consistent interest in the tension between internal and external arcs, and in creating a strong relationship between the series (and its characters) and the audience that is completely grounded with the series (and its parent series).

However, we cannot conclude this section on arc without addressing external factors that influenced the direction the series took. While the idea of an author’s stylistic voice being tied to external demands seems at first contradictory, because Whedon is a televisual author, and television is an ongoing commercial medium, his overall authorship decisions are inextricable from the changes he was pushed to make due to outside influences. The ways that Whedon executes these changes speak to both his ability to “turn on a dime,” and the limits of variation. We already saw that season six’s cliffhanger was possible only because of the two-season pick-up. The network’s extended commitment also meant that during the sixth season, Whedon was free to send his characters, especially Buffy and Willow, down dark and treacherous paths. It was within this freedom, however, that Whedon faced a different external force: audience opinion. So dim and disquieting were these character changes—especially since many fans felt that they came out of nowhere—to that the series’ fans and star, actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, complained about the tone. When these complaints were too loud and constant to be ignored, Whedon and Noxon “course-correct[ed].”

44 Ibid., 193-194.
These changes in and of themselves illustrate how television’s longevity and communication with fans can lead to authors pivoting their original plans. Still, if we question why such course-correcting was needed at all, and trust Gellar’s account of Whedon’s reasoning for Buffy’s season six arc—that it was “about your 20s, where you’re not a kid anymore, but you don’t know what you want to do… [that] dark, depressive period”\textsuperscript{45}—we can view both what Whedon pivoted from and what he pivoted to as evidence of his personal style. The decision to go dark flows directly out of Whedon’s depiction of characters flailing around in a world that they cannot fit into. The intention to relate to a general feeling of being in “your 20’s” also ties into Whedon’s overall attempt to make his characters’ mistakes and struggles part of what strengthens the audience’s understanding of and connection to them. It also connects to his overall themes about the temporary nature of happiness, as the once joyful Buffy begins her “dark, depressive period.” Whedon then begins season seven with Willow on a path back towards redemption and Buffy, although not perfectly content in life, back to a remarkably less self-destructive personality. As we have already seen, all the major characters end the season having been redeemed in some way (either through self-sacrifice or a general shift in attitude). Thus, if we look at Whedon’s overall pattern, it seems incredibly unlikely that he never meant to redeem these characters before the ending his series. In other words, the external force may have sped up or slightly modified some arcs, but it is difficult to imagine that it changed Whedon’s ultimate plans for the viewer’s relationships to them. Similar changes can be attributed to external factors in Angel. According to David Lavery, the shift to more episodic plots and the reappearance of Spike were actually the WB’s

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 193.
conditions for renewing the show for the fifth season. The fact that these conditions helped *Angel* regain its footing after it’s “turgid” fourth season also introduces another seemingly contradictory idea, that sometimes authorship is strengthened by external checks and balances. The early cancellation of the series also allowed Whedon to deliberately and precisely decide how to end his series—and specifically which characters he could kill off, since he no longer had to worry about the show’s ability to move forward. These changes, large and small, all suggest how when faced with external pressure, authorship can prevail, and even strengthen.

Throughout *Buffy*, Whedon creates a consistent experience out of seasonal arcs, which start, end, and are manipulated in similar ways. Far from making his patterns feel like repetition, Whedon creates a show that feels fresh, hanging together stories that interweave internal and external conflict and maintain our emotional involvement. While extratextual factors informed some of Whedon’s specific decisions, rather than allowing these factors to distort his vision, he worked within and around them to ultimately create unity in *Buffy* (and, to a lesser extent, in *Angel*).

**Conclusion: Series Authorship**

In *Buffy* and *Angel*, Whedon creates series that expertly utilize and vary genre, create inclusive groups, and tell cohesive stories. Put together, Whedon helps us consider the question of how we could survive in (and save) a world in which we do not fit, by not only showing us how his characters form groups and change themselves, but by allowing us to share in this experience. Similarly, he not only

---

47 Ibid., 110.
emphasizes the importance of love (while highlighting its ephemerality), he makes us feel that love (and then takes it away at the very end).

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, however, our work in analyzing Whedon’s authorship is not done. Before we settle on this understanding of Whedon, we must first be critical about whether or not it is reasonable to call these trends and techniques “Whedon” at all.
Chapter 3: Proving and Defining Authorship as a Concept

“"I had expected to toil in relative obscurity and tell my stories and that would all be very well. Suddenly, I could talk to fans and go to Comic-Con and people knew what I looked like."”

-Joss Whedon, in a 2017 Hollywood Reporter interview

In the first chapter, I made the claim that Joss Whedon is Buffy’s author. I quickly justified it with the fact that most fans, critics, and scholars clearly consider this to be the case. This is, of course, a rather flimsy anthropological answer to an inherently aesthetics-based question, but for the rest of the chapter I confidently made aesthetic statements about Whedon’s style by looking at episodes for which his authorship is incontrovertible (since he wrote and directed them). However, in chapter two, my arguments hinged on the assumption that it is meaningful to refer to different tendencies across Buffy and Angel as marks of Whedon’s authorship, regardless of who wrote or directed the episodes they appear in. In this chapter, I will resolve the potential trouble that arises from this assumption by providing further, more compelling evidence as to why we should consider Whedon the author of these series. Once we can confidently conclude that Whedon is Buffy and Angel’s author, I will then explore in greater depth what such a claim of authorship actually entails, an analysis that will have implications both for our understanding of Whedon as an author and for televisual authorship as a whole.

Unfortunately, proving that Whedon is *Buffy*’s author is a rather complicated task. Whedon created *Buffy*, so we can easily assign him credit for the overall premise. In interviews, two *Buffy* writers describe how Whedon would come up with the season arc and then give notes—to varying degrees of detail—while the writing team broke down episodes, wrote outlines, and drafted scripts. One of the writers, Jane Espenson, explains that Whedon would sometimes rewrite scripts after the third draft and usually made further changes to the shooting draft. He also was on the set during the filming of *Buffy*’s first three seasons, even when not directing episodes. These all suggest a continued creative control past the formulation of the premise. Yet, further information makes it more difficult to quantify that control. In 2000, Whedon himself explained:

> I'm responsible for all the shows. That means that I break the stories. I often come up with the ideas and I certainly break the stories with the writers so that we all know what's going to happen. Then once the writers are done, I rewrite every script. . . . Then I oversee production and edit every show, work with the composers and sound mixers. Inevitably every single show has my name on it somewhere and it is my responsibility to make it good . . . The good thing is that I'm surrounded by people who are much smarter than I am. So gradually I have been able to let certain things take care of themselves, because my crew, my writers, my post-production crew, everybody is so competent, that I don't have to run around quite as much as I used to.

The first part of this quotation certainly highlights how involved Whedon was in his series, and how much power he wielded over them. The sentiment expressed in the middle, which states that it was Whedon’s “responsibility to make it good,” leads us directly back to Mittell’s idea of “responsibility by management.” But recall that we

---

2 Kaveney, “Writing the Vampire Slayer,” 104-106.
found Mittell’s definition unsatisfying, because, while it does not deny that the “manager” may have had significant creative control, it inherently frames authorship in a business, rather than aesthetic, sense. Yet, even Whedon’s daily managerial control of Buffy comes into question when we move on to the sixth and seventh seasons of Buffy, which he passed on to Marti Noxon to showrun (although she would spend most of the seventh season gone on maternity leave). In fact, Noxon’s ascension is merely a specific instance of Whedon allowing “things to take care of themselves.” When Whedon had three shows—Buffy, Angel, and Firefly—that simultaneously needed his attention, he decided that Buffy could “slide” because it would likely end anyway. These admissions of purposefully lessening control certainly throw a wrench in our idea of Whedon as the sole micro-manager of his series. This complication is reinforced by an interview with writer Steven S. DeKnight, who explained: “Hierarchy-wise it is definitely Joss who was running the show — this was in season five before he pulled back a bit to work on Firefly, and other projects,” a statement that highlights Whedon’s control over the first five seasons but concedes that Whedon loosened his grip for the later seasons of Buffy. DeKnight also added that Whedon “gave us all a real opportunity to be creative on the show.”

Angel even further complicates our understanding of Whedon’s specific control. Whedon co-created the series with David Greenwalt, and “[gave] Greenwalt

---

5 Lavery, Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait, 208.
6 Pascale, Joss Whedon, 209.
7 Kaveney, “Writing the Vampire Slayer,” 118.
8 Ibid.
his blessing to run the writers’ room as he saw fit...”\(^9\) Citing Stacey Abbott, David Lavery goes so far as to suggest: “Angel began as the creation of Buffy folk – Whedon, Greenwalt, Noxon, Fury, Petrie, Espenson – but became a series under the more and more independent creative control of a new team...” Whedon described his main involvement in the early seasons of Angel as “more break[ing]\(^{10}\) the story and then tak[ing] a polish pass.” He also observed that he could not be on set for Angel as he had been for the first three seasons of Buffy.\(^{11}\)

Yet, in the same 2005 interview as he named some of the ways he was distanced from Angel, Whedon explained, “People have the tendency to think that I either abandoned Buffy or didn’t do anything on Angel, and I was thickly in both of them.”\(^{12}\) He even added, “Well, there’s nothing that goes on screen that I had nothing to do with.”\(^{13}\) In other words, these series both remained under Whedon’s watchful eye, even when other people fulfilled different tasks on them. In regard to Buffy’s sixth season, Noxon explained that she was simply carrying out the series as Whedon had planned it, claiming, “The reports of his demise in season six were greatly exaggerated.”\(^{14}\) Pascale adds that Noxon “never [did] take over full creative control of the series,” referencing Noxon’s use of the phrase: “Thank God Joss is in

---

\(^9\) Pascale, Joss Whedon, 146.
\(^{10}\) “Breaking” a story refers to writing out how the story will progress from beginning to end. In an interview following Buffy’s seventh season, Jane Espenson explains that for Buffy specifically, someone would pitch (or suggest the general idea of) a story. If a pitch was accepted, the writers would discuss the act breaks, and then “it all gets written down on the whiteboard with comments from Marti and Joss so we all know it’s the final structure. All the scenes and who is in them and what happens in that scene.” Kaveney, “Writing the Vampire Slayer,” 104-105.
\(^{11}\) Kozak, “Serenity Now!” 104.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 103-104.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{14}\) Pascale, Joss Whedon, 192.
control.”\textsuperscript{15} The show we will approach in the next chapter, \textit{Firefly}, also had a non-Whedon showrunner (Tim Minear),\textsuperscript{16} but Pascale’s description as to why Whedon hired someone else to showrun the series at all reflects this same idea. She specifically cites Whedon’s explanation of his need for “a second-in-command who can control the set when you walk away.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, even with someone else on deck every day, Whedon remained the top commander. The fact that Whedon had a say in everything that went into \textit{Buffy} and \textit{Angel}, paired with the recognition that even when he relinquished everyday control of \textit{Buffy} (and \textit{Firefly}) he retained overall creative influence, all support the claim that Whedon is his series’ author.

The most compelling support, however, comes in the conclusions of the first and second chapters of this project. We began with elements that appeared across works that were indisputably Whedon—a distinctive approach to genre, a placement of the viewer inside the group, and an emphasis on internal conflict—and saw them (and other, more-long form elements) repeat across both \textit{Buffy} and \textit{Angel}. We also saw the same themes that \textit{Buffy} was founded on reverberate not only across the run of the series, but across \textit{Angel} as well. In chapter four, we will find that extensions of these qualities appear across \textit{Firefly} too. This consistency evidences the existence of a guiding voice; the fact that all were created (or at least co-created) by Whedon and then were subject to his continued involvement makes him the most logical owner of that voice. While this argument may at first seem somewhat circular (since I assumed Whedon was the author at the beginning of the second chapter) it merely points out repeated tendencies and connects them to the common factor of Whedon.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 208. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Thus, by building off of and updating our working definition of authorship from chapter one, we have successfully associated an author with a cohesive narrative and aesthetic voice, without claiming he is the single enactor of every action. This is clearly the most useful way to consider authorship in practice, since no television show—and certainly neither Buffy nor Angel—is created by one person, but is instead the product of numerous individuals. But this conclusion still does not completely resolve our challenge: even if we are justified to call what we see in Buffy and Angel evidence of Whedon’s voice, we are still left with an opaque notion of “authorship.” That is, while we can articulate what a television series looks like under a particular author’s control, we have still come short of an understanding of the crucial step between how a television author defines a style and how that style appears across his (or her) entire work.

To gain a better idea of this missing step, I will examine episodes of Buffy based on who receives the writing and directing credits. I propose that we will be able to refine our definition of televisual authorship, to clarify it not only as a specific author’s narrative and aesthetic voice (imposed from a position of power), but also as what is created when that author guides those under him to produce content that reflects this voice. However, as we will see, the results of such pushing can be rather mixed. As we work through different series, we must be careful not to exclude failed imitations from our idea of authorship, or to otherwise cherry-pick what counts as “authored,” but to grapple with the works of each author in their entirety.

In general, episodes of Buffy are pretty consistent with each other. While we may think of some Whedon-written and –directed episodes as stand outs, we have
already seen how the most salient parts of these double-Whedon episodes are
generally extensions or manipulations of existing patterns perpetuated by other
episodes, such as genre, the viewer’s relationship to the group, and audience
expectations. It should not be surprising, then, that many of the examples used to
outline Whedon’s techniques in the previous chapter were from episodes neither
officially written nor directed by Whedon. For example, “Band Candy,” the episode
in which Giles and Joyce regress into teenagers, was written by Jane Espenson and
directed by Michael Lange; “The Zeppo” was written by Dan Vebber and directed by
James Whitmore Jr.; “Witch” was written by Dana Reston and directed by Stephen
Cragg, with David Greenwalt credited for coming up with the twist that “Amy” is
actually her mother. Each of these works, credited to different artists, develops and
perpetuates tendencies that can be traced across the entire series. The ability for a
Buffy episode by one writing-directing pair to speak directly to an episode by another
is itself further proof of the existence of a unifying voice; for so many teams to
produce such cohesive work there must be a greater blueprint. By specifically
analyzing such episodic conversations, we can learn even more about Whedon.

The clearest way to see how episodes may speak “Whedon” to each other is in
the pair of Buffy episodes, “Surprise” and “Innocence.” The two were aired as a two-
part episode over consecutive nights as part of an overall movement of the series from
Mondays to Tuesdays. Amy Pascale cites the pair as evidence of Buffy hitting its
“creative stride,” going so far as to state: “With those two episodes, the ‘high school
as a horror movie’ concept opened up to show that the scariest monsters in our lives

---

18 Pascale, Joss Whedon, 106.
19 Ibid., 124.
are often the people we love.”

The first of the two, “Surprise,” was written by Marti Noxon and directed by Michael Lange. The second, “Innocence,” was both written and directed by Whedon. “Surprise” thus provides an opportunity to examine both how other writers and directors emulate Whedon’s voice, and the aesthetic choices they make so that their work flows cohesively into a Whedon-written and -directed episode.

Both episodes build up the audience’s viewing experience by manipulating the genres inherent within the series: teen melodrama and supernatural horror. Yet, each episode takes a completely different approach to the tension between them. “Surprise” uses its key teen melodrama storyline, the Buffy-Angel love story, as a way to raise the stakes and the reward of the main horror storyline, Drusilla and Spike’s attempt to destroy humanity with a demon called “the Judge.” We are informed at the beginning of the episode that Buffy is emotionally ready to lose her virginity to Angel, a piece of information that promises huge melodramatic pay off. Yet, even before this reveal, we are shown a threat to that future: Drusilla returning and killing Angel. Buffy’s concern for Angel’s wellbeing across the rest of the episode continuously reminds us that the horror plot threatens their personal happiness. This creates a relationship between the genres that is in direct conflict. However, our desires for its resolution are clear and confident; we want the good Scooby Gang to beat the bad vampires, and for Buffy and Angel to end up together in the end. The conflict between the horror and love story plotlines becomes even more immediate when Jenny Calendar, who has been tasked with keeping Buffy and Angel apart by her Romani tribe, suggests that the best way to stop the vampires’ evil plan is

---

20 Ibid.
for Angel to go far away, taking a piece of the Judge with him. Resolving the horror plot, we are temporarily told, will require the loss of the love story. However, when Spike and Drusilla obtain the last piece of the Judge anyway, Angel no longer has any reason to leave. At this point, we can once again anticipate an ending where Buffy and Angel defeat the bad guys, and the consummation of the love story functions as the characters’ (and our) reward. In actuality, this reward comes even sooner, as complications in the horror plot—the two getting captured by Spike, Dru, and the Judge and barely escaping with their lives—lead to the two alone at Angel’s house. When they sleep together, we are aware that they have not yet resolved the horror plot, but we are so pleased at this positive advancement in the love story that we can ignore the coming apocalypse for the moment.

“Innocence” merges the main melodramatic and horror storylines in a way that makes such disregard for one over the other impossible, more directly linking and modifying the stakes of both. Specifically, Whedon turns Angel, Buffy’s object of love, into her mortal enemy. The first time we see Angel in “Innocence,” we watch him murder a woman who tries to help him. He then returns to Spike and Drusilla’s hide out, not to fight them, but to join them. Proof of Angel’s moral shift is made physical by the fact that the Judge’s touch, which burns up humanity and came so close to killing him in “Surprise,” has no effect on him because (according to the monster) “there’s no humanity in him.” Angel thus joins the very people he and Buffy had so straightforwardly attempted to defeat in the previous episode. And while Buffy is still confident she must defeat the Judge (and she successfully does), at the end of the episode she still cannot bring herself to kill Angel. Hence, Buffy’s relationship

21 And not in the fun, Screwball Comedy kind of way.
with Angel stops her from taking the seemingly black and white action of killing a bad vampire. Furthermore, it was the very act of Buffy and Angel consummating their love that caused the loss of his soul and transformation into the evil version of himself. Even if Buffy could somehow defeat the Judge and restore Angel’s soul in this episode (the Scoobies do not achieve this latter task until the end of the season), Buffy and Angel could not possibly return to their melodramatic love story and carry on as before. Now, the best-case scenario is that the couple does not sleep together. In “Innocence,” Whedon thus creates a tension between the two genres that goes beyond causing us think of one as simply a threat to the other. Instead, he crafts the episode so that changes in one affect our entire experience of the other—and our understanding of potential solutions to the problems posed by each.

Rather than proving that “Innocence” is somehow “better” or “more complex” than “Surprise,” these two uses of genre demonstrate how the writer and director of the first part successfully set up Whedon’s second part. The merging of good and evil in “Innocence” is especially upsetting because in “Surprise” the distinction was so clear. We really feel Buffy’s heart break as Angel turns on her because we were completely aligned with their love story, just as we feel the internal conflict in taking down the Big Bads because one of them is now a character we just rooted for. To borrow Pascale’s words, “Surprise” establishes a strong, ostensibly stable connection to “the people we love” so that “Innocence” can turn them (or rather him) into “the scariest monsters.” Perhaps most devastatingly, since “Surprise” uses the love story as a way to raise the stakes of the horror story, it implicitly sets it up as a reward for victory against the vampires; after teasing that it will deny us that reward, it ends by
giving it to us. However, this “reward” then brings about something more terrible than we ever expected.

Further, while Whedon’s episode “Innocence” is certainly flashier than “Surprise” in terms of plot and character development, it is difficult to imagine, based on our understanding of Whedon’s episodic decisions from chapter one, what he might have done differently had he written and directed both parts. Its uses of teen melodrama and supernatural horror, for example, clearly fit into Whedon’s overall tendency to create tension between the two genres that does not deny our investment in storylines from either genre. While “Surprise” is far from the funniest episode of Buffy, it is still full of quick, witty remarks, which occur naturally out of either teen melodrama or horror situations. For example, after Willow tells Oz she is going to agree to a date with him, he asks her out and she immediately responds, “Ah I can’t!” Later, when Spike and Drusilla capture Angel and Buffy, Angel pleads on Buffy’s behalf, demanding to Spike, “Leave her alone!” Spike responds, “Yeah, that’ll work. Now say pretty please.” Just as we saw Whedon achieve with the audiences’ and characters’ mixed up conclusions in Angel’s “Waiting in the Wings,” “Surprise” even creates a clever joke that points to tragedy. In the beginning of the episode, Buffy accidentally turns an innocent notion into a dirty remark (“I like seeing you at bedtime”). When a mortified Buffy tells Willow about it afterwards, she begins the conversation that ends with her deciding to have sex with Angel. Thus, Noxon’s script (and Lange’s direction of it) contains many of the generic pleasures we would have expected from one directly penned by Whedon.
Even the specific plot points that directly set-up important parts of “Innocence” are executed and manipulated in ways that engagingly meet or subvert our generic expectations. For example, after watching Jenny Calendar accept the task of breaking up the couple in “Surprise,” we see her intercept Buffy on her way to the library. Jenny offers a thin excuse (Giles needed a book from his home) to convince Buffy to get in her car. The scene is suspenseful because we know of Jenny’s ulterior motives, and we wonder what she has planned for Buffy. Our assumption that Jenny is sabotaging Buffy is made even stronger by Jenny’s annoyance when Buffy leaves the car to fight vampires. When Buffy’s friends are revealed to be inside the Bronze—and Buffy and the vampire she is fighting crash through a window into it—we are relieved to learn that Jenny has lied not out of malice but as a ploy to bring Buffy to her surprise birthday party. Similarly, at the same time as it is the catalyst to both arcs in the following episode (and rest of the season), Buffy and Angel’s sex scene is itself an effective moment of teen melodrama. It works slowly up from Angel examining Buffy’s wounds, to their close embrace, and Angel’s declaration of “I love you.” They then begin kissing and transition into the implied bits that cannot be shown on broadcast TV. In both cases, Lange and Noxon pull all of the horror and melodramatic potential out of the scene, rather than leaving it to plainly serve its purpose in the arcs.

Lange and Noxon also replicate the type of audience relationship with characters that Whedon builds his episodes and seasons around. Although the episode significantly focuses on Angel and Buffy as a couple, Noxon and Lange frequently integrate us into the rest of group by bringing us into the fun of planning the group’s
surprise party for Buffy. They also pause briefly in their climb towards the climax to explain to the audience how the Scoobies trick their parents into letting them spend all night fighting monsters—by doing a “round robin,” in which “everybody calls everybody else’s mom and tells them they’re staying at everyone’s house.” This moment has no purpose in the plot, but it directly gives us insight into how the group functions. This improved understanding of the group helps us feel even more included in it. Further, the pair gives us important glances into the interpersonal arcs of other characters—specifically the blossoming romance between Willow and Oz and the complicated relationship of Xander and Cordy.

Essentially, while “Surprise” was not written or directed by Whedon, it clearly and directly fits into what we know to be his personal style. From this, we can see how a successful author guides his (or her) staff into creating something in service of an overall voice and vision, and how the results of this guiding tie into our overall experience of the author. Yet, when we consider authorship in this way, some of the constraints placed on televisual authorship become strikingly clear; in order for this to be possible, the author must also make inherent in his voice ways in which his staff can perpetuate it. In Whedon’s series, the use of two well-defined genres (put together in tension) clearly outlines a set of tools and techniques for his team to utilize. Similarly, his distinctly defined characters establish a set of believable directions they can be brought in for any one episode and help maintain consistency across different writers. Further, by clearly establishing the audience’s friendship-like relationship to the series, Whedon creates a baseline awareness of the viewers from which his individual writers should begin and return.
Versions of this idea have actually been affirmed or suggested by members of Whedon’s teams. When asked how the writers manage “the intense quotability of what [they] all write,” Jane Espenson responded, “Quite simply, it’s Joss, and the rest of us trying to write like Joss.”\(^{22}\) From this quotation, it is clear that his team had a conscious understanding of his voice, and its effect on their writing. In addition to “quotability,” we saw a similar case of various authors “trying to write like Joss” last chapter with the repeated use of the conclusion swap in teasers of *Angel*. Of the many examples of this technique provided in the previous chapter, only a few credited Whedon for writing, directing, or story. The similar openings across these non-Whedon episodes are thus clear examples of other writers and directors identifying something in Whedon’s style and beginning their episode by trying to capture it.

One writer/consulting producer, Howard Gordon, expressed the idea that some individuals “sing in [Whedon’s] key” (he, he believed, could not), stating, “That tone was very tricky, so singular and so specific to Joss… You see it when people try to imitate it— it is just so counterfeit.”\(^{23}\) Another writer, Steven S. DeKnight, offers another interesting comment on Whedon’s teams. When describing the “executive shuffle” that occurred while he worked on *Angel*, DeKnight stated, “Not everyone who moves into a Whedon show gets the working style and the combination of humour and emotion.”\(^{24}\) Both these quotations re-affirm recognition of Whedon’s voice by his team, but they also introduce the notion that sometimes people cannot get it quite right. Although writers and directors may be able to recognize the tools made available by teen melodrama and horror, for example, they may not manage to

\(^{23}\) Pascale, *Joss Whedon*, 147.
\(^{24}\) Kaveney, “Writing the Vampire Slayer,” 128.
deploy them in ways that put them in the type of tension Whedon does. Or perhaps they can feel the way Whedon easily pulls us into the group, but in practice they cannot quite replicate this effect. Anyone who has read more than a select subset of the thousands of *Buffy* works of fan fiction can understand how devotion to (even obsession with) understanding the inner-workings of a series does not always translate into an ability to reproduce their effects, even on paper (let alone in practice). Creating good television is not like manufacturing—a clear prototype does not a successful product make—but rather requires individual artists who have the aptitude to further the voice of an overarching author. Yet, while the failed imitations that appear in *Buffy* fan fiction do not affect the actual series, the mishaps of the series’ own personnel do. And, I argue, they affect our overall understanding of Whedon’s authorship. Hence, it is the attempts that do not quite master Whedon’s voice yet still made it into his series that we must set our sights on next.

I must present a quick caveat before we approach this task. While my portrait of Whedon thus far has been generally positive, we must always be careful not to view him as infallible. That is, “Whedon” does not necessarily equal “good.” Sometimes, his scenes or jokes fail to land. There are various seasonal arcs of both *Buffy* and *Angel* that I (and other fans) find dissatisfying. Sometimes, entire episodes of *Buffy* are simply bad. Keeping these imperfections in mind is essential, as an analysis of Whedon that functions merely as a glorification of his genius loses both its credibility as a piece of critical literature and, more importantly, its ability to make further discoveries about both Whedon and authorship in general.\(^{25}\) In fact, it is in

\(^{25}\) Recall that this discussion actually came up in the introduction in relation to a Mittell quote about “celebrating” authors.
dealing with exactly how a particularly terrible episode of *Buffy* is so bad that we will be able to draw more significant conclusions about authorship.

“Beer Bad” (405) is an awful episode of *Buffy*. This statement is both my subjective opinion, and the collective opinion of the fans that rated episodes of the series on IMDB. Since it appeared during the fourth season, “Beer Bad” is from a time period during which Whedon was still the official showrunner of the series. However, it was written by Tracey Forbes and directed by David Solomon. It is tempting to blame Forbes, who also wrote another despised episode of *Buffy* (“Where the Wild Things Are” [418]), or even Solomon (although he directed many well-liked episodes too) for the failure of this episode. Yet, the work done above to explain why we can consider Whedon the author of the entire series, and why we can define his voice using examples from “Band Candy,” “The Zeppo,” and “Witch,” similarly insists that Whedon must bear the responsibility. To credit Whedon with his series’ successes, we are also obligated to saddle him with the blame for its failures.

Yet, by this, I do not simply mean that Whedon simply “managed” the creation of a bad episode, but that “Beer Bad” is actually “Whedon.” This will become clearer as we explore how many of the flaws of the episode clearly come out of a conscious attempt at using the techniques outlined in the last two chapters. It is, in general, a poorly written episode, but in specifically seeing where it uses familiar techniques to disappointing ends, we can reveal more about what we expect from a Whedon work. We can also make clear an overall limitation of authorship in television as we understand it; while we may outline what an author’s overall voice is, because

---

26. “‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’: Episodes Rated by IMDB User Rating.” “Beer Bad” ranks absolutely last, after the Unaired Pilot, on IMDB’s user-ranking of the episodes. (As of April 14, 2017.)
television is such a far-reaching medium in terms of time and personnel, his or her work itself will contain missteps and internal contradictions.  

There are a few episodes in particular that, when compared to “Beer Bad,” demonstrate both what we expect and desire out of a “Whedon” episode and how “Beer Bad” attempts, but fails, to meet these expectations. The first of these episodes is “Hush,” which aired five episodes after “Beer Bad” and begins in a strikingly similar way: with Buffy (day)dreaming in her psychology class. Unlike the dream in “Hush” however, which begins by anchoring us in the classroom before taking on dream-like aspects—such as quickly flowing time and the unexplained appearance of a singing child—the fantasy in “Beer Bad” is not revealed to be illusory until Buffy snaps out of it. In her daydream, Buffy fights off a horde of vampires to save Parker, the boy who has seduced and abandoned her, so that he seeks her forgiveness. By combining the melodramatic love interest and horror task of fighting vampires in this sequence, “Beer Bad” demonstrates a conscious attempt at generic mixing. However, the vampire part of Buffy’s fantasy lacks the atmospheric horror elements of the dream sequence in “Hush,” instead playing more like a typical graveyard fight sequence to frenetic electronic music.

Following the vampire fight, the fantasy goes all-in on melodrama. The fight is followed by stiff dialogue between Buffy and Parker:

PARKER: “Buffy, I don’t know what to say. After how I’ve treated you, and now I owe you my life.”

BUFFY: “It’s nothing.”

---

27 Recall that I am speaking, again, of the traditional model of television creation, rather than series that are micro-managed by one self-imposed “auteur,” as you might see on certain cable channels or SVOD services.
PARKER: “It’s everything. You’re everything. And I’m gonna do whatever it
takes to get you to forgive me. Do you think, one day, you might—?”

These lines are accompanied by an even kitschier sweeping score, which rises to a
crescendo in a way that makes it impossible to not notice. The extreme juxtaposition
of the two scores and the ridiculousness of dream-Parker’s words makes the sequence
feel disingenuous rather than elevated. Instead of building humor out of genre, “Beer
Bad” asks viewers to view the genre itself as a joke—a type of humor that takes us
out of the series in a way we do not want or expect a Whedon show to do. Even more
troublesomely, the type of melodrama developed in this scene is far different from
Whedon’s general use of teen melodrama. As we saw, Whedon typically uses the
genre as a set of tools that focus on internal and interpersonal issues among people
who are maturing; “Beer Bad” evokes “melodrama” in the colloquial sense, as
shorthand for overacting and over-the-top, insincere emotions. These points actually
highlight something interesting about the way in which Whedon’s genres interact:
while we may still be frightened by horror we know is unreal, we are uninterested in
fake melodrama. This, perhaps, may be true about these genres in general as well, as
much of the appeal of horror is safe terror—something that feels real, but not so real
we feel that we are actually in danger—while much of the appeal of teen melodrama
is in authenticity of emotion and relationships. In Buffy, Whedon usually remains
cognizant of these varied appeals, frequently making us safely afraid, but candidly
engaged in the characters. The opening of “Beer Bad” does neither.

The surprise reveal that this opening sequence is a dream also illustrates a
version of the conclusion swap other writers begin their episodes with. However, this
conclusion swap functions not by subverting our generic expectations, but by simply
telling us that our conclusion was wrong. Even worse, since Buffy was daydreaming,
what we saw did not even happen. Rather than a shift to a different, equally logical
conclusion, the swap feels like frustrating moment of deception. Most frustringly,
by surprising us with the fact that it is not genuine, “Beer Bad” plays with over-the-
top romantic elements that it has given us no indication it has earned. While we may
expect (and even enjoy) stiff and kitschy dialogue from a romantic fantasy, we do not
expect it—or the protruding musical score—from a typical Buffy episode. Unlike
other episodes that significantly manipulate genre, “Beer Bad” has given us no reason
to accept these elements as a genuine part of the experience. The result is a scene that
feels “off” (even dumbed-down) rather than spontaneous and clever, despite its clear
intention to manipulate genre and our expectations.

When Buffy wakes up, it is not to the sound of Professor Walsh’s class ending
and Willow’s friendly teasing as it is in “Hush,” but to Parker’s new conquest
giggling, and the beginning of a lecture. During this lecture, Buffy continues to pine
over Parker, before falling back asleep and returning to an even more ridiculous
version of her dream, in which Parker (now in an unbuttoned shirt) offers her flowers
and ice cream for her trouble. At this second iteration, we are no longer confused
about whether or not what we are seeing is real. Still, the absurdity of the situation,
coupled with the fact that we do not actually want Buffy to be with Parker, makes the
repetition more worthy of an eye-roll than the quick laugh it desires. In making
Parker’s actions even more over-the-top, the episode makes an even greater push
towards a simplistic, colloquial version of melodrama. Again, the inauthentic uses of
melodrama, paired with our disinterest in the relationship between the subjects, both fails to engage us and implicitly insults our understanding of the generic underpinnings of the series. Yet, because these failures all come out of attempts to play with genre and our expectations, we can clearly see how “Beer Bad” fails in a conscious endeavor to be more like what we expect from Whedon.

We will find a similar result in a larger analysis of the episode as a “metaphor” episode. When Buffy snaps out of her fantasy for the first time, we listen with her to her professor lecture about the conflict between the id and the ego, desire and self-control. This lecture ends on the question, “What do we do when we can’t have what we want?” before the scene fades into the second iteration of the fantasy. “Beer Bad” thus bluntly sets up a central theme: people make bad choices when their desires and urges overpower their minds. It then focuses the rest of the episode on its episodic plot in which magical beer turns college students, including Buffy, into cavemen. Clearly, “Beer Bad” pushes a metaphor—drinking beer causes people to behave stupidly—and a more over-aching theme about the disconnect between desire and proper action. This fits in to what we have seen in other metaphor episodes. Yet, in the successful version of the metaphor episode, the pleasure for the viewer is in the identification of the metaphor and then the unraveling of either its deeper meaning or, as with “Out of Mind, Out of Sight,” simply the journey in lieu of a definitive one. We feel a personal connection to each of these metaphors not just because we can relate to them (or, frequently, despite being unable to directly relate), but because we have gone through the process of fully playing them out with our characters. In “Beer Bad,” viewers need only read the title of the episode and watch the teaser—in which
the main theme is literally lectured to us—to accurately surmise the themes and main plot points of the episode. While the rhetoric-based approach to theme ensures that we do not miss out on the deeper meaning, it also removes the ability for the ideas of the episode to come across it in a way that feels organic. Plus, it suggests that Whedon believes we are too stupid to figure the episode out on our own. This is particularly frustrating given the way Whedon typically guides us on an experience and trusts that we are clever and perceptive enough to experience the way he intended.  

As poorly as the lecture lands in “Beer Bad,” even it has a basis in Whedon’s style. “Teacher’s Pet,” one of the first episodes of Buffy, includes a character waking up during a class lecture that is somewhat relevant to the episode. However, the focus of the lecture quickly becomes the fact that Buffy is not trying hard enough in school, rather than the lecture itself. It also segues into one of the rare scenes in which a teacher other than Giles is supportive of Buffy. Even the episode “Hush” begins with Maggie Walsh giving a short lecture on communication, which becomes especially important in this episode about characters being unable to communicate verbally. However, the lecture in “Hush” is actually a part of Buffy’s dream. This gives an added level of believability not afforded to the “Beer Bad” lecture—why would Professor Walsh pick this of all times to talk about the id and ego? —and directly leads into Buffy being called forward for a “demonstration” with Riley. This “demonstration” is a kiss that literally “make[s] the sun go down,” beginning the atmospheric horror elements that are essential to the opening. In “Beer Bad,” the professor’s lecture is colored with the presence of Parker and the other girl, yet even

---

28 We could say that he continuously leads us to water and assumes that we know how to drink.
they work to make sure that we understand exactly what Buffy is thinking of when she hears the lecture. The opening lecture thus operates as a hyper-specific example of how a single storytelling technique can create the experience we expect from a Whedon series in one case and completely fail to in another.

This discussion of “Beer Bad” as a metaphor episode actually leads us to one more striking counterpart to “Beer Bad,” “The Pack.” “The Pack” has a similar plot to “Beer Bad”: a group of disagreeable students—plus one of the Scoobies—becomes more disagreeable under a magical influence. In “The Pack,” this magical influence is possession by hyenas. Rather than establishing the theme, the teaser for “The Pack” sets up the situation in which the kids become possessed and lays out the hyena pathology. It explains how hyenas “prey on the weak” and how they will call their victims’ names to lure them to their deaths, elements that will become essential not to our understanding of the metaphor but to our experience of the villains. “The Pack” does lampshade its metaphor, but it does so not with a lecture but with a joke, as Giles makes light of the situation by blaming Xander’s aggression on hormones. Even further, at the time this joke is made we (and Buffy) already know that Xander is possessed, putting Giles directly into the last-to-know role that Xander usually fills. Rather than laying out the theme for us, “The Pack” expects that we already understood the metaphor. Then, we are in the perfect position to both laugh about it and feel like group insiders. In comparing this approach to metaphor and theme to that of “Beer Bad,” it is clear once again how the didactic nature of the episode (and how hyper-focused it is on pushing its metaphor) removes any possibility of the
viewers’ inclusion, pride, or delight at believing themselves to have understood the meaning and implications on their own.29

Further comparisons between the rest of “Beer Bad” and “The Pack” reveal even more about the ways it fails to fully realize its clearly “Whedon” intention. Like “The Pack,” which spends time with its pack of previously unknown hyena people, “Beer Bad” devotes significant screen time to the cavemen as they run around the college campus, climbing trees and laughing at each other. While the cavemen eventually stumble into a room and start the fire that becomes the conflict in the climax of the episode, the minutes during which they simply wander around do nothing to increase suspense, build horror, or create spectacle. “Beer Bad” clearly intends for the cavemen to straddle the line between comedic forces and potential sources of danger. However, the cavemen’s attempted humor is purely based on a type of slapstick not inherent within the series—cavemen hit each other with sticks, and one gets run over with a car. This artificial (and failed) use of humor does not resemble the organic humor (built out of genre and a relationship with the audience) that we found in our general definition of Whedon. In fact, the failed humor directly dulls the potential for horror; while the cavemen chase a few people at the end of their roaming, these moments do little to inspire fear, given how dumb and ineffective the cavemen have just proved themselves to be. While we may find the hyena-people in “The Pack” as silly in concept as the cave-students, they actually succeed at

authentically provoking emotion in us (primarily fear). When a young mother, out for
a stroll with her baby, comes across the resting pack, they creep towards her,
growling, but never attacking. This scene clearly takes a page out of the similarly
themed *Cat People*, which weaves horror into what does not happen. Further, the
hyena attack scenes directly build off of the “hyena pathology” that the episode
taught us in the teaser. In two attack sequences, the hyena-people sinisterly call their
victim’s names, and we watch fearfully, with the knowledge that an attack is coming.
In other words, from the beginning of the episode, “The Pack” builds us towards
finding its villains scary. “Beer Bad,” clearly tries to deploy tricks it deems
“Whedon” (like introducing comedy that can switch to horror), but does so without
the prior planning.

Nonetheless, “Beer Bad” is not just a bad episode of a good series; it is a bad
episode of a *Whedon* series. Even in its failures it demonstrates numerous attempts
towards replicating Whedon’s style, from his general use of genre and metaphor
episodes to specific scenes. Forbes and Solomon may not have sung in Whedon’s
“key” for this episode, but that does not mean “Beer Bad” is singing a completely
different tune. Clearly, Whedon not only guided this episode from his position of
management, but in his creative style. This exemplifies how calling a series
“Whedon” suggests not only that it will contain many of the elements listed in the
previous chapters, but also that it will contain pieces that try and fail to fit. The
moments when the series does not function as we anticipated or desired do not drown
out Whedon’s televisual voice—they are *part of it*. Since a televisual author has the
task of not only creating a clear voice for the series but one that his staff can replicate
with varied degrees of oversight from him, every attempt at replication—success or failure—adds to our understanding of him as a creative force. Hence, when we discuss televisual authorship, we must equally assign credit and blame. Except in extreme cases, this means that every useful outline we create of an author’s style will necessarily include internal contradictions. As we can see with Whedon, however, these contradictions not only do not impede our ability to outline the author’s overall style, they actually provide another opportunity to understand it.

Now that we have both a comprehensive way to consider authorship and an outline of what Whedon’s looks like across *Buffy* and *Angel*, we have the tools we need to expand our analysis of Whedon (and uncover even more about the nature of televisual authorship). Specifically, we can next focus on how our current idea of Whedon’s authorship is reinforced and expanded when he sets his sights on new frontiers.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\) That pun will make sense on the next page.
Chapter 4: Extending Whedon’s Authorship

“Wait till you see what Joss Whedon does to space!”

– A Fox promotional video for Firefly¹

At this point, our aesthetic understanding of Whedon’s voice revolves around his blending of genres in a way that puts them in tension yet engages the audience fully in both, his tendency to create a group of main characters and place the viewer inside it, and his use of arcs, both long-term external conflicts and patterns of character development. If we see these general techniques appear across the rest of Whedon’s works, we can be confident that we have accurately understood the spine of his style. By paying special attention to the way Whedon expands on and varies these techniques in his other projects, we can also improve on our original understanding. We now have a stronger awareness of what we mean by televisual authorship, and so we can even more confidently use specific discoveries about Whedon to make claims about authorship in general. This chapter will undertake all these tasks, by expanding our analysis to Whedon’s short-lived series Firefly and its follow-up film, Serenity.

The pair serves as the best focus for this chapter for a variety of reasons. First, Firefly is highly celebrated, with a large cult following. The series ran on Fox, a less niche network than the WB or UPN, and so will help us conclude that what we have been calling “Whedon” is not largely the result of catering to a specific type of network. Further, it aired before either of Whedon’s previous two series had

concluded, meaning that we can more confidently attribute many of the differences in the series to the new network and to Whedon’s specific goals for the series, rather than an overall cultural shift. Finally, the fact that it was cut short and followed up by a feature film allows us to directly observe what Whedon does differently when forced to switch mediums. At the conclusion of this chapter, we should therefore have an even better understanding of many of Whedon’s tendencies as a televisual author—and a more comprehensive set of tools to analyze other works that claim to be “Whedon.”

_Firefly_ aired on Fox from 2002 to 2003. The first episode aired was “The Train Job” (102), which was written by Whedon and Minear in two days after Fox rejected Whedon’s original (and re-shot) pilot episode, “Serenity” (101).2 Throughout _Firefly’s_ run, Fox continued to air the episodes in an order different from the one Whedon intended, with some episodes not even making it into the original US run.3 I will refer to the episodes as occurring in the order available on DVD and on Netflix, as this is the generally accepted viewing order.4 However, this does mean that the version of Whedon’s authorship in the following discussion is consequentially somewhat different than it would have looked like during and closely after the series’ live broadcast.

Immediately, we can connect _Firefly_ to Whedon’s other works by identifying how it addresses the same overarching themes of belonging, loyalty, and love. Like

---

2 Pascale, _Joss Whedon_, 213. To try to avoid confusion, I will always refer to the pilot episode of _Firefly_ as “Serenity” (101), the film as _Serenity_, and the ship as Serenity.

3 Ibid., 215.

the Scoobies and the Angel Investigations team, the crew of Serenity (the spaceship in *Firefly*) is in tension with its world, which is in turn in tension with itself. The crewmembers do not have a calling to save the world in the same way that the groups in *Buffy* and *Angel* do, but they are, at times, put in situations in which they must decide whether or not they will take an action that will help others at the expense of themselves. For example, in “The Train Job,” they relinquish stolen cargo when they learn that they have taken necessary medical supplies, despite the retribution they will face from the man who contracted the robbery. Further, as we will see in *Serenity*, they ultimately do undertake a dangerous mission to help multiple planets.

As in his prior series, Whedon suggests in *Firefly* that we may address the problem of not belonging to our society by joining up with a group of people we do belong with, and by struggling to change ourselves for the better. Also like in *Buffy* and *Angel*, these two solutions go hand in hand; it is through the group that we self-actualize. Yet, in *Firefly*, Whedon adds more nuance to these solutions by raising and addressing—or at least, beginning to address—further concerns: what if the group we join is not precisely what we wanted or needed? What if we cannot trust every member of that group? And how can we continue to grow and change when we are already adults, not coming-of-age or guided by cosmic Powers that Be? Likewise permeating Whedon’s new universe is another recurring *Buffy* and *Angel* theme: happiness cannot be permanent. However, while he certainly touches on this theme in *Firefly*—the memory of the joyful, birthday dinner in “Out of Gas” (108) is cut to only in the midst of disaster, just like the holiday meal in “The Body”—it is in *Serenity* that he makes this a final focus. In these commonalities and nuanced
differences we can begin to understand Firefly as both an extension of Whedon’s authored works and as an attempt by him to grow as an artist by grappling with new issues and constraints. In a 2017 interview in The Hollywood Reporter about Buffy’s twentieth anniversary, Whedon actually acknowledged his tendency to return to the same types of themes, defining the stories that he “always want[s] to talk about” as:

[Y]oung women who have power and the burden of having that power.... That diminishing effect on your humanity of having power. I realize I'm doing it again, but that's OK as long as I'm doing it in a new way with new characters and learning something while I'm doing it. It's OK to have the same major the whole time in college if you're not getting lazy about it.\(^5\)

Although more specific (and clearly better reflected in Buffy than Angel or Firefly), his explanation easily fits into the above observed thematic patterns, as the issues it raises ultimately point to a tension between the individual and her society. What is particularly telling about this quotation, however, is the fact that Whedon recognizes his own tendencies and acknowledges a conscious attempt to push himself further with each repetition.

Interestingly, Amy Pascale has a slightly different idea of what Buffy and Firefly are about, identifying the “central theme” of Firefly as similar to Buffy’s with the description: “A group of seemingly disparate individuals, each just trying to get by in a universe that really isn’t smart enough to appreciate his or her exceptional talents and quirks, are tossed together by extraordinary circumstances. Occasionally, and sometimes by accident, they manage to save the world(s).”\(^6\) Pascale gets at many similar ideas raised by my discussion of the key themes in these shows, but her overall statement describes quite a different theme, one that I take exception to. For

---

\(^5\) O’Connell.
\(^6\) Pascale, Joss Whedon, 201.
example, although Whedon’s characters frequently come together by chance, they cling to each other in ways far more intimate than being “tossed together” (and it is difficult to surmise how attending high school or traveling on a ship counts as “extraordinary circumstances,” given each show’s genres). In claiming that the world is too stupid to “appreciate” each character’s “talents and quirks,” Pascale also adds a level of condescension absent from the series themselves; Whedon’s universes are in tension with themselves, but they are not stupid—and many of the characters’ abilities are not actually realized until they are pushed to develop or discover them.

Despite our disagreement in definition, the fact that Pascale identifies the same theme across both works suggests a consistency across Whedon’s series that can be identified even among viewers who cannot agree on exactly what it is. However, Pascale’s definition, I think, also speaks less to an experience contained within both series than one that the inclusive experience of Whedon’s series allow viewers to bring themselves; if we feel our skills underappreciated in our own lives, it is not hard to take these feelings with us when we enter Whedon’s worlds. This in itself reveals something about Whedon’s authorship: Whedon’s placement of us (the viewers) helps us to take ownership over the entire series. In the same 2017 Hollywood Reporter interview, Whedon actually described his own experience with this aspect of viewership. He refers to it as “B. Y. O. [Bring Your Own] Subtext,” adding, “I get that everybody is going to insert their personal narrative into what we show them. That's valid. It's how we all watch things.” Whedon is speaking to a larger tendency in film and television, yet the participatory nature of Whedon’s works makes the idea of “B.Y.O. Subtext” ring especially true in his series.

7 O’Connell.
World in Tension, Genres in Tension

Firefly, like Buffy and Angel, is the product of two distinct genres: the Western and science fiction. Yet, these genres are not as immediately in tension as supernatural horror and teen melodrama. In fact, there is a long and involved history of pairing the two genres long before Firefly’s release. Elements of what is now called the “Weird Western,” go back to the “dime novel stories” of 1860.⁸ Science fiction was mixed with the Western on screen as early as 1935, when the serial The Phantom Empire (Otto Brower and Breezy Eason, 1935) began.⁹ The Encyclopedia of Weird Westerns identifies Firefly specifically as a “Space Western,” which it defines as:

A science fiction story set in outer space that contains Western genre elements or themes. These are usually disguised within a space opera or science fiction format. The hero can at times be little more than a cowboy with a ray gun… Space Westerns became more sophisticated with age but some still blatantly pay homage to their source of inspiration with thinly disguised Western genre plots.¹⁰

It is easy to understand how Firefly fits this bill; it contains large amounts of Western iconography, follows a format we can understand at least mostly as being in the tradition of space opera—which focuses on adventures aboard spaceships¹¹—, and its main character is, more than once, basically “a cowboy with a ray gun” (although Mal’s gun is typically one with bullets). Yet, while Firefly includes Western genre plots—such as a train robbery and a shootout at a brothel—it makes no attempt to

---

⁹ Ibid., 12.
¹⁰ Ibid., 4, 90.
disguise them, thinly or otherwise, but instead brings their generic elements to the foreground. In other words, Whedon does not just “pay homage,” he uses the tools suggested by his inspirations to his own ends.

Like their super-genre the “Weird Western,” Space Westerns appeared as early pulp fiction novels, such as those about Northwest Smith. They prevailed in comic books, films, and even television series for decades leading up to *Firefly*. *Outland* (Peter Hyams, 1981), for example, is a 1981 Space Western film—identified by Richard Slotkin as one of a pair of “science-fiction remakes of classic Westerns,” given its similarity to *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952). A slew of animated Space Western shows appeared on television in the 80s and 90s, such as *The Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers* (Robert Manell, 1986-1989), *BraveStarr* (Filmation, 1987-1989), and *Cowboy Bebop* (Sunrise and Bandai Entertainment Inc, 1998-1999 [first appearance on US TV in 2001]). The *Encyclopedia* also identifies several episodes of *Star Trek* as being Space Westerns. It further gives this designation to the original *Star Wars* film (George Lucas, 1977), citing, among aesthetic reasons, a quotation in which George Lucas stated, “I always considered my films Westerns.”

Not only do the two genres have a rich history of blending, they also have an inherent compatibility. David Pringle explains how “horse opera and space opera are both varieties of *adventure story*”—although he finds the space opera closer in actual

---

12 Green, *Encyclopedia of Weird Westerns*, 150.
13 Ibid., 153.
16 Ibid., 195.
origin to the “sea story” than the Western. Richard Slotkin highlights the impact of this shared ancestor when he explicitly names some commonalities between Space Westerns like Star Trek and Star Wars and certain strains of classic Westerns, stating that in both: “The tale of individual action (typically a captivity/rescue) is presented as key to a … struggle between darkness and light, with perpetual happiness and limitless power for the heroes and all humankind … as the prize of victory.” These particular characteristics speak to a clear thematic compatibility between the two genres. The introduction to the Encyclopedia echoes this notion, as Paul Green explains how Western themes such as “[t]he taming of a new frontier,” “[t]he coming together of like-minded people to build a new society out of the untamed wilderness,” and “[t]he outlaw existing on the fringes of society” are easily brought into a science fiction setting—Star Trek was not the only series to assert that space is a special “frontier.” In fact, two years before Firefly’s release, Gary Westfahl edited a book analyzing “The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction.” One chapter makes specific reference to Slotkin’s “four major aspects of the Frontier Myth: regression, conflict, progress, and savage war,” which appear—colored by more specific concerns of the era—in the sci-fi “invader” films the author analyzes. We can also identify both the Western and science fiction as genres based in an era outside of the present day, and thus as ones that allow creators to comment on the present by projecting onto another time.

17 Pringle, “What Is This Thing Called Space Opera?” 37.
18 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 635.
19 Green, Encyclopedia of Weird Westerns, 14.
Given this basis for the generic mix, we can easily surmise some reasons as to why Whedon may have been drawn to it. The themes about “like-minded people” and people living “on the fringes of society” read almost exactly like large-scale versions of major themes in *Buffy* and *Angel*, themes I have already asserted are essential to *Firefly*. Even the prevalence of the “darkness and light” and “perpetual happiness” themes in prominent Space Westerns provides Whedon with a specific, generic tradition to subvert, as he can emphasize the shades of grey between the “darkness and light,” and insist that “perpetual happiness” is impossible. These themes also connect directly to issues of the supernatural horror genre (good defeating evil) and teen melodrama (finding happiness in life), similarities that make it possible for Whedon to return to stories of this type at will. On the other hand, given what we know about Whedon’s use of the tension between genres in his previous series, their compatibility ostensibly seems to impede Whedon’s goals and style. However, as we will see, Whedon uses this as an opportunity to challenge and stretch his authorship.

Unlike in *Buffy* or *Angel*, he does not do this by starting with “metaphor” episodes. Thematic issues in both genres are so easily translated from one to the other that it is difficult to even image what a metaphor episode of *Firefly* would look like. Any attempt to bury a Western story within a science fiction story (or vice versa) could be understood and interpreted as a fully realized tale within a single genre. Further, since issues addressed in both genres are frequently reflections of modern day concerns, we are far more likely to perceive a metaphor in either genre based on what it means to us today than how it would be reflected in the other genre.\(^{21}\)

---

\(^{21}\) For example, a science fiction story about discrimination against people from different planets is much more likely to make us think of the current political climate than the relationship between
In the absence of metaphor episodes and themes that are inherently opposed, Whedon creates generic tension in *Firefly* by actively charging the genres with tension in the universe, and in plot and character conflicts. There are many examples for which this is as simple as the pairing of the Western with the common man—and thus the “good”—and science fiction with the rich—and therefore “bad.” Although *Serenity* is a space ship, it is rundown, not a beacon of scientific advancement. Its common area is more reminiscent of a Western home than a science fiction ship. Except when costume changes are required by the plot, its occupants wear clothing suitable for physical work, horse riding, practicing medicine, theology, or “companionship.”22 Characters include a civil war vet (who fought on the equivalent of the Confederate side), the prostitute, the doctor, the preacher, and the hired gun—all people completely at home in the Western. Some scholars have even outlined direct correlations between the characters in *Firefly* and those in the Western *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939).23 The ships that belong to the Alliance (a series “Big Bad”), on the other hand, are massive and imposing, full of large computers, crewed by men wearing uniforms and, we can imagine, permeated by the stench of bureaucracy. Throughout the series, the Alliance is closely intertwined with its superior technology. In this way, Whedon charges some of the clashing iconography with clashing plot or character elements. While the duality between the run-down *Serenity* and the massive Alliance ships can be seen as an extension of a recurring Western settlers and Native Americans—and a tale about Native American discrimination certainly will not push us to think about the suffering of imaginary space aliens.

---

22 River is not quite dressed for any of these things, but her usual long, flowing blouses or dresses fit well into the Western dress of the others.

theme in the Western genre—the East versus the West and the train versus the horse—Whedon does not just use this generic theme to create conflict, he maps his two genres onto opposing sides of conflicts he creates.

One of the best examples of this is the episode “Heart of Gold” (113), which focuses on the crew as they protect a brothel from the heartless man that runs their town. Although the brothel is covered in solar panels that give it a futuristic sheen, its occupants, common prostitutes—not “companions” like Inara—are among the classic Western archetypes. The title, “Heart of Gold,” plays on the specific Western idea of a prostitute who is actually a good person—an archetype already at work across the series in Inara. Further, despite the odd look of their house, it is far from a science fiction smart home; when we first see it, women are hanging laundry to dry outside. The inside is clearly modeled after a classic Western saloon, and it is prominently located in a quasi-Wild West wasteland. Perhaps most telling, the climax of the episode is a literal shootout. By the time this shootout occurs, we are aligned with our main characters and the women in the brothel, whose lives and livelihoods are almost completely grounded in Western iconography and archetypes. Thus, when shots of the approaching villains alternate between chaotic flurries of hooves and the steady hovercraft the horses are charging with, we immediately interpret the impending icon of science fiction as a threat. Subconsciously—Whedon keeps us too engrossed in the present action for us to consider this intellectually—we come to associate the simple, low-tech Western with the good and the high-tech science fiction with the bad. At the end of the shootout, the villain, Rance, flees on his hovercraft. Mal commandeers a horse and takes chase. Yet, Rance’s futuristic gun runs out of batteries and his
hovercraft cannot move faster than a galloping horse, so Mal easily overtakes him. Our protagonist defeats the villain, and the Western also beats science fiction.

However, even within this episode, Firefly’s most black and white case of Western versus science fiction, Whedon adds complexity to the generic divide. Before the battle begins, Mal sends Wash and Kaylee to the ship, with the intention that they will fly it over the brothel and act as sky cover. When they arrive at Serenity, however, Rance’s men—dressed like classic Western outlaws and carrying regular (not futuristic) guns—are already in the ship. This begins a second shootout, but this time our alignment is with the science fiction characters (the spaceship pilot and engineer) instead of the Western men. The crosscutting of the two shootouts continuously brings the two main genres into conflict, and with each cut the genre whose characters we are aligned with shifts. This hints at a more complicated relationship than a simple bijection between the Western versus science fiction and “good” versus “bad.” Science fiction cannot be purely “bad” when your protagonists live in a spaceship.

Adding further to the complication is “Objects In Space” (114), which highlights Whedon’s willingness to completely shift which genres we associate with “good” or “bad.” Its main villain, a bounty hunter searching for River, is a Western archetype, although admittedly one that easily belongs in the space opera—see, for example, Star Wars’s Boba Fett. Much of the drama in this episode comes from the crew’s isolation in deep space. In retrospect, we can easily connect this theme to ones that appear in Westerns, but within the episode we are not prompted to consider space as anything other than a vast vacuum. At the climax of this episode, River claims to
have become the spaceship (a fitting follow up from a discussion earlier in the episode, in which Kaylee suggests that River is “not a person”). From her position on the bounty hunter’s ship, she speaks to crewmembers over the intercom, and her mastery of technology leads to her victory. The episode’s drama is thus enhanced and solved completely with science fiction. Yet, rather than completely reversing the conclusion of “Heart of Gold” and showing science fiction actively conquer the Western, Whedon so greatly aligns us with a sci-fi storyline that we barely notice the other genre’s relative absence.

The episode “Shindig” (104) adds one more blow the idea of a pure Western/sci-fi good/bad dichotomy. It features a luxurious party, which we automatically associate with the bad parts of society because it is full of rich, high-class (and thus Alliance-friendly) people. Nevertheless, this party directly straddles the line between the two genres; it features a futuristic gun scanner and the gross excess of a floating chandelier, yet its existence and iconography clearly reference the idealized galas of the Antebellum South. It is even more difficult to make any claims of “good” versus “bad” in the overlapping genres here, as this same overlap is reflected at the end of the episode in a purely positive light. The final shot of the episode is a wide reveal of a herd of cows being transported on Serenity. These elements thus demonstrate how Whedon creates a tension between the genres that does not place them in static opposition, but can align us with or against characters, stories, and images based in either. Sometimes, temporarily (cows cannot live on a spaceship forever), Whedon even brings them into accord.
The complexity of this relationship is particularly clear in examining how Whedon defines not just specific plot conflicts, but his entire universe. Instead of evenly blending the two genres, Whedon continuously juxtaposes the two. Most notably, rather than defining a consistent generic template for each planet in his galaxy, he varies each planet’s use of Western or science-fiction iconography depending on its role in the larger society. The “core” planets, like Ariel, are technological meccas. The über-rich live on planets like Bellerophon, where individuals own luxurious, floating homes. Yet planets like the one the prostitutes live on and the mining town in “The Train Job” are impoverished, and generically Westernized, with trains, horses, sheriffs, and people living by performing manual labor. Again, although often we are led to feel more empathy with those consigned to the Western worlds, in his juxtapositions Whedon creates further ambivalence and tension, not a clear black and white divide. This is illustrated best by a scene in the episode “Safe” (105). In this episode, River and Simon are kidnapped so that Simon can become the poor town’s doctor. At the same time, Shepherd Book is accidentally shot in a gunfight around a corral. With their doctor missing, the crew must leave the dusty Western planet to save Book’s life. Their only hope is to be assisted by an Alliance hospital, which initially turns them away but then takes them in because of a secret backstory we never learn about the Shepherd.24 The scene in question begins when Simon confronts the town’s nurse about his kidnapping. She insists that their town is a good place to live (“[a] place where folks take care of each other”), and that he should be happy to stay there. Simon is adamant that he will not remain among his

---

24 Comics released after Serenity offer more information into Book’s life, but again we restrict our analysis to Whedon’s visual media.
kidnappers. While they speak, they are surrounded by the innocent sick, and the light in the room glows a warm orange. This produces an aura of virtue and goodness, creating a strange disconnect between this seemingly wholesome place and what the society it serves has done to Simon and River. Inserted into this scene is a cut to Mal, Jayne, and Zoe watching through glass as the Alliance doctors operate on Book. Rather than one doctor and a nurse caring for a roomful of people, this hospital can afford to devote multiple doctors to a single surgery. The light in the hospital glows green. It is florescent, impersonal, and harsh, creating yet another moment of dissonance in the audience; we are in the uncomfortable, unwelcoming midst of our enemy, but our enemy is saving our friend. We do not know it yet, but the Alliance will not only save Book’s life, they will let the crew leave without a hitch. While we do not forget that the Alliance was initially willing to turn Book away, the Alliance’s place in this episode is thus exclusively that of benevolent force—although a “benevolence” that greatly complicates our understanding of and trust in one of our own crewmembers. From the Alliance hospital, we cut back to Simon and the orange light. However, it is not long before the small-town folk become convinced that River is a witch and decide to burn her at the stake. On one hand, we have a good, nourishing place that performs terrible acts, and on the other, a treacherous place that, for the moment, performs only good acts. The incongruity produced by this juxtaposition of generic spaces is clearly part of Whedon’s greater attempt to build generic tension into Firefly’s universe, as well as his larger graying of the space between the good and the bad of his world.
Both this tension and this graying appear in another significant element of Firefly’s universe: his monsters. In a larger discussion of similarities between Firefly and Stagecoach, Pascale notes, “Finally, Professor Richard Slotkin’s influence on Joss can once again be seen as he transformed the looming threat of the Apaches into the Reavers, the brutal savages who live on the outskirts of civilized space.”

Whedon actually confirmed this in a 2005 interview, in which he stated that he intended for the Reavers to be a less racialized version of the Western Apache. In looking deeper into what this actually means, we can see exactly how the Reavers enhance and are enhanced by Whedon’s use of genre.

Like the classic Western villains, the Reavers seem to attack out of nowhere, and raze entire cities to the ground. Yet, the way Whedon incorporates ideas about classic Western “Native Americans” into the Reavers goes even deeper. While they are clearly an “other,” in that they live apart from the laws and confines of society, the Reavers are human, not alien. The first verbal description we get of the Reavers in the pilot is that of “men gone savage on the edge of space.” We watch in “Bushwhacked” (103) as a human man, a victim of terrible violence, transforms into a Reaver himself. As will see when we analyze Serenity, we eventually learn that the first Reavers were regular people who were driven insane by an artificial atmospheric gas created to calm them.

Not only are the Reavers human, they are humans whose savagery was created by civilization. This is a rather significant choice, as the setting of outer space means that Whedon had limitless possibilities in creating a vicious

---

25 Pascale, Joss Whedon, 201.
27 He affirmed in that same Wonder Con panel that this was always his plan for the Reavers.
alien race. Yet instead of constructing a new, creative beast like the many demons that populate *Buffy* and *Angel*, he chooses to demonstrate how extreme violence can be created out of human concerns, such as feeling lost in the wide universe, experiencing trauma, and living under irresponsible totalitarian regimes. Slotkin emphasizes that Native Americans in Westerns can be the objects of “psychological projection” and “surrogate[s] for a range of domestic social and political conflicts.”

While he identifies a variety of such conflicts undertaken in classic Westerns that seem contrary to the function of the Reavers in *Firefly* (many involving American involvement in wars), Slotkin also offers examples that we can see directly reflected in them. For example, he notes that a major plot point in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) is Martin’s discovery that the white Calvary is “no better than Comanches.”

The Reavers clearly build on this use of the Native American as a mirror for our own actions; instead of looking at savages and discovering that we are like them, we look at them and discover that they *are* us. In *Firefly*, this is done through the use of a science fiction device and theme (a totalitarian government creating a horrific dystopia), meaning that Whedon’s use of science fiction allows for the literalization of a Western allegory. The Reavers thus reflect and expand upon a tendency we previously saw regarding different genres in *Buffy* and *Angel*, as Whedon uses one genre to directly impact our experience of the other.

Although the villains themselves are intricately tied to both science fiction and the Western, in choosing the name “Reaver,” Whedon also draws from multiple other traditions. According to a 1996 *LA Times* article, “Reive, meaning to plunder or rob,

---

29 Ibid., 472-473.
30 Ibid., 468.
comes from the dialect of the Scottish Lowlands and borders.”

The clansmen responsible for crossing the English-Scottish border and performing extreme acts of violence—including “[stealing] cattle and women, burn[ing] homes and farms and kill[ing] rivals without mercy”—from the 14th to 17th centuries were referred to as “Border Reivers.”

These historical Reivers bear many similarities to the myths perpetuated about Native Americans in the Western. Yet, in choosing (an alternate spelling of) the name “Reiver”—the ancestors of whom can be traced to prominent Anglo-Americans like Presidents Johnson and Nixon—Whedon directly connects to a less racially charged (at least in the present day) past. While it is difficult to assess whether or not Whedon was actually familiar with this aspect of Scottish history, he almost certainly was familiar with the “Reavers” that appear in Marvel’s X-Men series, as far back as 1988 (and as recently as the 2017 film Logan [James Mangold, 2017]).

These Reavers are cyborg thieves that viciously target mutants. As Hugh Armitage explains, “The Reavers have shown up, caused trouble and been annihilated intermittently over the years.”

This again, rings true of Whedon’s Reavers (although, admittedly with less annihilation). The name “Reaver” is thus another area in which Whedon ties into an accepted “other” without the use of marginalized races. Still, the specificity qualifies it more as homage (and a wink at a knowing sector of the audience) than a technique for audience identification. Regardless, even if we

---


32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.


35 Ibid.
have never heard the word “Reaver” before, it is visceral enough—it rhymes with meat cleaver—to incite fear in us.

This fear points to one further place in which the Reavers stand as a clear extension of Whedon’s previous generic tendencies: they occupy a similar role in the world of *Firefly* as (non-Big Bad) vampires hold in *Buffy*. They are a threat that could potentially appear at any moment, in limitless numbers, and with a desire only to kill. They also have a limited ability to “convert” people to their side, and they are, at their core, simply us gone wrong. Yet, while *Buffy* defeats nameless vampires across her series so easily that these fight sequences gain a sense of monotony, the Reavers never become predictable. We are first introduced to their danger in “Serenity” (101) when a passing ship is revealed to be a Reaver vessel. Mal and Wash do not take the time to explain what Reavers are, but we can see that they are terrified. This sense of terror is magnified by the following sequence of shots, which focuses on individual crewmembers as they take in Mal’s intercom announcement about the Reavers. He ends his speech with “So we’ll see what they do,” a line inherently suspenseful in its promise of conflict paired with a lack of specificity. Zoe relieves the minor suspense of what would happen should they come aboard, by explaining to Simon (and us) first that the stories he heard about them are true and then, far more explicitly: “If they take the ship, they’ll rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into their clothing. And if we’re very, very lucky, they’ll do it in that order.” In relieving the temporary suspense of what the Reavers will do, Whedon replaces it with a more specific, and more horrifying, one. The music pounds as the Reaver ship drifts overhead. We are relieved when we learn that the Reavers have passed completely by
the Firefly. Buried in this relief, however, is slight disappointment at our unmet expectations; we certainly did not want to see our heroes raped and murdered, but we would have liked to see what sort of creature is capable of that. At the end of the episode, the Reavers return to attack. Once again our terrified suspense returns. When the crew does successfully evade the Reaver ship, we are again relieved (and exhilarated). However, when that relief fades, the mystery of the Reavers remains. We expected in at least one of these two occasions to get a real glimpse of a Reaver, but in both cases, Whedon held back.

Our next close encounter with Reavers comes in “Bushwhacked,” with the survivor who turns into a Reaver. The glimpses we get of this man’s face, which is covered with pins he inserted himself, are the closest we come the entire series to learning what a Reaver looks like. Yet we are still left wondering how much this prospective Reaver actually resembles the beasts that made him that way. All this wondering creates the expectation of a payoff that never comes. While Whedon almost certainly intended to show us the Reavers eventually—they appear in great numbers in Serenity—the deliberate way he builds our anticipation also greatly enhances our fear. In creating the Reavers, Whedon constructs a unique baseline threat, far scarier than that of vampires in Buffy and Angel. Note that Whedon actively understood the potential of the Western to delve into horror, and thus we can see this use of the Reavers as even scarier “vampires” as an organic, yet deliberate use of the genres in Firefly to access experiences endemic to Buffy and Angel.

36 A horrifying image itself a reference to the horror film Hellraiser (Clive Barker, 1987).
37 The way the Lewton Unit’s off-screen, B movie monsters were budget-friendly horror enhancers.
38 In one interview he explained, that Westerns like The Searchers “turn into horror movies for periods.” Davis, “Joss Whedon: The Master At Play.”
While the focus of this section has been on the primarily dramatic ways Whedon uses the two genres, in *Firefly*, Whedon also familiarly reinforces the idea that comedy can (and should) coexist with drama. He again uses funny lines at otherwise dramatic moments. For example, in “Our Mrs. Reynolds” (106) a bandit approaches a caravan and threatens to rape a woman on it. Jayne, who is driving the caravan, responds, “Oh, I think you might want to reconsider that last part. See I married me a powerful ugly creature.” Mal reveals himself to be the “woman,” and responds, “How can you say that? ... You are not the man I met a year ago.” As we would expect from a Whedon series by now, Whedon also uses specific generic elements to create comedy. The space-travel nature of the series, for example, means that the crew can land on planets based on hilarious premises (like in “Jaynestown” (107)) or with customs that get the characters into humorous situations (like when Mal accidentally gets married in “Our Mrs. Reynolds”). Yet, as we will see as we explore some episodes in greater depth below, even these overtly comedic situations themselves build to even more drama. Thus, Whedon’s use of genre in *Firefly* similarly interconnects and emphasizes both comedy and drama.

Overall, Whedon utilizes two genres founded on the same themes and traditions in a way that builds on how he used genre in his previous series. He aligns the audience with and against various characters and plot elements formed out of each genre, so that we read a direct tension into them. Yet, he makes this tension ambivalent, requiring us to develop complex (sometimes self-contradictory) relationships with characters and arcs built out of both genres. He also builds the genres off of each other, using science fiction as a way to not only remove race from
a common Western device, but also to literalize and explore some of the Western’s themes and contradictions. At the same as he utilizes the unique properties of these genres in *Firefly*, he also finds ways to incorporate parts of the experience of his previous series into the new show.

**Now Welcome to This Group**

Like in *Buffy* and *Angel*, the group and the audience’s placement within it are essential to *Firefly*. Unsurprisingly, the first focus of the series is constructing this group. In fact, the eighty-six minute pilot episode “Serenity” (101) is quite similar to *Buffy*’s two-part series opener, which results in the creation of the Scooby Gang. The first scene following the Darla teaser in *Buffy* is a dream montage sequence, which sets the tone for the series, and helps the audience glimpse into its main character’s head. “Serenity” (101) does not begin with a villain-focused teaser, but in its first few minutes we are transported to a war scene, in which Mal and Zoe fight on the losing side. We gain a sense of Mal’s leadership skills, his devotion, and his despair at the Rebel’s (“Browncoats”) defeat. It is far more informative and comprehensive than *Buffy*’s dream, but it nevertheless introduces us to the show and its main character in a way more about feeling than facts. Outside of the high school environment where “cool kids” and “losers” are so culturally delineated, it also establishes that Mal is a *literal* loser. In case this scene alone was not enough to help us realize that we are following the underdogs, Whedon also includes a moment in the pilot in which Zoe comments, “She still has the advantage over us” and Mal cheekily responds, “Everyone always does. That’s what makes us special.” By this point in the episode (over an hour in), we already understand the team to be “losers” in their universe—
Mal and Zoe not only lost the war, they also recently failed to make a sale with Badger and had some bad run-ins with the Feds. For people who have seen none of Whedon’s other works, the line thus functions as an affirmation of a pattern they have already noticed. For people familiar with Whedon’s other shows, it not only affirms what we have noticed in this series so far, but also acknowledges a connection between the groups we know from Buffy and Angel and the new one of Firefly. Mal’s line may be tongue-in-cheek, but we, the returning fans, recognize it as the honest truth about Whedon’s shows.

In the scene after the war teaser, Mal is already the captain of Serenity, which is crewed by Zoe, Jayne, Wash, and Kaylee—with Inara renting a shuttle. While this group is already much larger than the Willow-Xander-Jesse group Buffy enters into, they quickly decide to take on some passengers. These passengers are Simon (who has also smuggled River aboard), Shepherd Book, and a man named Lawrence Dobson. Although Whedon makes us feel suspicious of Simon, it is Lawrence that functions as Firefly’s “Jesse”—a potential group member, killed when he tries to harm other members of the group. While “Serenity” (101) does not end with a well-framed group shot like Buffy, it does end with a dialogue between Mal and Simon that establishes an uneasy peace within the new crew.

As he does in Buffy and Angel, Whedon makes it so that we can easily integrate ourselves into this charming group. Both their “loser” status and the specific device of the existing crew opening up their doors to other passengers immediately help us feel like we feel like we could “sit with them” (or rather, ride in their spaceship). By further identifying the crewmembers as the perpetually downtrodden,
Whedon all but assures our empathy for them (since people, in general, love to “root for the underdog”). In making the opposing group a faceless regime, Whedon further guides our alignment; we are familiar with the named, exciting group of “us,” and easily turned against the amorphous group of “them.”

As with Whedon’s other series, relationships between characters in the group and between the group and us remain a focus throughout *Firefly*. In a powerful moment in “Safe,” Serenity appears overhead just as Simon and River are about to be burned at the stake. Mal and Zoe storm the town, with Jayne hanging out of the ship, armed and ready to shoot at anyone who impedes their operation. As they approach the town’s leader, Mal informs the townsfolk that they have “something that belongs to us, and we’d like it back.” After, when Simon asks Mal bluntly why they returned to save them, Mal responds, “You’re on my crew.” Simon counters, “Yeah, but you don’t even like me. Why’d you come back?” Mal simply repeats: “You’re on my crew. Why are we still talking about this?” This brief interaction teaches us what it means to be part of the crew: you protect each other, and you never leave someone behind, no matter what your personal feelings are. We can see this as relating back to the scholarly idea of Whedon’s “chosen family,” and identify it as the type of bond needed to maintain (or re-build) the group in the face of characters who sometimes make huge mistakes. At the same time as he establishes this relationship between his characters, Whedon brings us, the audience, closer into the group by reminding us that investment in it is all we need to be considered part of it. I think it is not too much of a stretch to say that it also subconsciously reminds us that if we want to

---

remain with this “chosen family,” we cannot abandon it either—something Whedon requires from us when he is using an ongoing medium.

This latter point is a specific example of a larger trend in Firefly, to bring us deeper inside the crew by establishing Simon and River as outsiders and allowing us to identify with them as they become part of the team. He further invites us to join the crew by establishing authentic relationships between his characters and us, and then creating specific emotional experiences out of our familiarity with them. For example, “Jaynestown,” bases its entire premise around our understanding of the group. In this episode, the town on the planet that the crew lands on shockingly worships Jayne as a folk hero. Just prior to our (both the viewers’ and on-screen characters’) discovery of an engraved statue of Jayne, the crew mocks Jayne for his ridiculous attempts to go unnoticed. Since we have all been operating under the same assumption (that Jayne is overreacting, and no one will recognize him), the discovery of the statue then becomes a communal experience of subverted expectations. In a later scene, the crew is advised to “lay low” in a bar, right before a musician begins singing a song about “The Hero of Canton, the man they call Jayne.” We learn through this song how Jayne become their hero—he threw a large amount of money out of his ship and onto them—a reveal that is particularly hilarious because we have become familiar with Jayne and recognize him as the least heroic of any of the occupants of Serenity. The use of the folk song is especially effective, as it not only recalls a classic type of heroism and heightens the overall absurdity of the situation, it also provides an opportunity for the entire bar to sing along and demonstrate a widespread love for Jayne. This creates both an additional joke—it is not just a few
people obsessed with Jayne but an entire town—and brings us closer to the crew of
the Serenity as the only people flabbergasted by what is going on. Our shock at this
moment comes into play later, when Inara learns of the “Hero of Canton” but
incorrectly assumes this means Mal. When her client refers to Jayne by name, we get
to enjoy her shock at Jayne’s hero status; Inara, for the moment, becomes our Xander.

In each of these scenes, our enjoyment comes from knowledge—first about Jayne as a
caracter and later about the town’s traditions—that we are privy to because we are
part of the group. As we will explore more in the section on arc, this episode does
have a serious ending, but one that again has an increased effect on us because we are
familiar with Jayne as a character. This is particularly clear in considering a different
approach to the same concept, as carried out in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (Rick
Berman and Michael Piller, 1993-1999) episode “The Homecoming” (201). In this
episode, a character is made the hero of a community after falsely appearing to
perform an act of valor. Yet, in this episode, the mistaken hero is not part of the main
cast, and the reveal that he is not deserving of his praise comes as a shock to the main
characters and the audience alike. Star Trek’s version of the plot has the same effect
on all viewers; Firefly’s rewards the faithful.

By carting around the group (and us) to new locales each week on a tiny
spaceship, Whedon also ensures that we have a relationship not just with individual
characters but with the conglomeration as a whole. Here, we can actually see the
influence of Firefly’s space opera precursors, such as Star Trek, which similarly
carries its audience on individual journeys, crewed by large groups of protagonists.

---

alpha.wikia.com/wiki/The_Homecoming_(episode).
Hence, just like we are one of the Scoobies and part of Angel’s team, in *Firefly* we are active, though silent, members of the crew, who benefit from our personal relationships and communal experiences with other characters.

So far, these examples have all demonstrated ways that the group in *Firefly* functions similarly to the groups in *Buffy* and *Angel*. Yet, various elements of the group set it apart as more ambitious than *Buffy* or *Angel*’s beginnings. The second part to *Buffy*’s pilot ends with the formation of a group of four. *Angel*’s pilot ends with an even smaller group of three. *Firefly*’s crew begins with five members (six, if we include, Inara, who is unquestionably part of the core group of protagonists, but “ain’t a part of this business”). By the end of “Serenity” (101), the group of protagonists has swelled to nine members, over twice as large as the group at the beginning of *Buffy* and three times as large as the group in *Angel*. This posed a challenge for Whedon, both creatively and logistically (which, if we can believe Pascale’s reporting, was motivated by the large cast size of Ford’s *Stagecoach*). It meant that he had to quickly give us enough of an understanding of each character to keep us from getting lost in their interactions or forgetting which characters were which. It also meant that Whedon had to figure out which characters he needed to spend the most time with and which could be accepted by the viewers with less exposition, since so many characters cannot (usually) democratically share the spotlight in any given episode. Yet, it also carried with it multiple benefits, such as the fact that it multiplied Whedon’s opportunities for character growth and his ability to build individual relationships within the group—elements that would have been invaluable had the series gone on as long as Whedon had planned. In fact, a benefit of

---

immediately beginning with such a large group is clear when we compare the
formation of the crew in Firefly with the addition of the Potentials in the seventh
season of Buffy, which aired around the same time. These Buffy episodes were rather
unsatisfying, because the intrusion of the new characters made us feel less like
members of a special group. Yet, in Firefly he avoids this by making that special
group itself larger, and by giving each crewmember a name and unique personality.
Hence, in Firefly we never feel lost in the crowd, as we can in scenes with the horde
of Potentials.

At the same time as Whedon pushes us to consider more protagonists, he also
asks us to consider them in a more complicated way. For example, he makes it so that
we cannot simply think of all of them as categorically “good people.” Note that in an
action-based genre such as the Western or space opera, the usually horrible act of
killing humans is generally no worse than Buffy staking vampires. Thus, it is
particularly notable how Whedon works in this moral ambiguity, given that
generically we are already primed to accept some immoral actions as “good.”

One way he does this is through having characters murder or threaten people
we know, instead of simply hordes of faceless enemies. Although it is clear from the
beginning that Mal is generally an honest man who lives by a code, he is also the one
that insists Simon and River will be killed if Simon does not save Kaylee’s life. At
the end of the pilot, Mal shoots Lawrence Dobson, the federal agent holding a gun to
River’s head, a murder we understand (and appreciate), but a murder of someone we
know nonetheless. At the end of the episode, when Mal invites Simon and River to
stay on the ship, he assures Simon that “if I ever kill you, you’ll be awake. You’ll be
facing me, and you’ll be armed.” This statement is certainly full of honor, but it also keeps alive the threat of violence inherent in Mal’s personal code. In the next episode, Mal murders a human antagonist even more casually than in the pilot. However, this more flippant murder was included at the behest of Fox, who wanted both for Mal “to kill more people” and for the series to be “less dark”\(^\text{42}\)—seemingly contradictory ideas that make sense given how audiences frequently relate to violent genres. Whedon himself stated, “I wanted Mal to have to make really horrible decisions that were tough and that he would have to live with.” He commented on the glib death scene that he added at Fox’s request—in which Mal responds to a villain’s threat with, “Darn,” and pushes him into a running engine of the ship—with: “It’s hilarious! I just compromised my morality. Woo-hoo!”\(^\text{43}\) Whedon clearly intended for us to develop a relationship with Mal that was made ambivalent by his violent decisions. Fox actively pushed against this, but we can still see evidence of Whedon’s original intention in various moments across Mal’s arc.

Another way Whedon adds moral ambiguity is by asking us to build a relationship with a character that we never know for certain if we can trust, Jayne. In the pilot alone, he makes a crude joke about Kaylee at the communal dinner table, immediately wants to kill the Federal agent that snuck onto the ship, and is disappointed when the agent gives up information too quickly to be horribly tortured. Even more shocking, when the agent offers Jayne money to betray Mal, he seriously considers it. We think he may even have agreed to it, both when the agent somehow has a razor with which to break free, and, most startlingly, when Jayne sets the sight

\(^{42}\) Pascale, *Joss Whedon*, 214.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
of the sniper he has commandeered onto Mal. Jayne ends up completing the job as instructed by Mal, but at the end of the episode, Mal asks Jayne specifically why he did not “turn on” him. Jayne’s response is not one of loyalty or respect but simply that the “money wasn’t good enough.” When prodded as to what would happen if Jayne was given a good enough offer, Jayne responds, “Well, that will be an interesting day,” all but admitting that he certainly would sell out the entire crew for enough money. In “Ariel” (109), he does. The closest character to Jayne in Buffy is Spike, but even he fails to elicit quite the same feeling in us. Spike’s evil actions prior to season seven are easily accounted for by his literal lack of a soul. Further, Spike is introduced first as a villain, before he makes the tempestuous switch into a good guy. Jayne, on the other hand, is introduced immediately as part of the core group. Then, even when he does terrible things, like selling out the group, he is never ejected from it; rather than casting out the bad apple, Whedon asks us to live with him.

Even Shepherd Book, who is always clearly a “good” person, has a nebulous past working high up in the Alliance. It is actually Jayne who makes the most interesting comment on this fact in “Safe”—“That’s my whole problem with picking up tourists. They ain’t never what they claim to be.” In fact, Jayne’s comment about Book highlights another key difference between this group and Whedon’s previous; while the main characters in Buffy and Angel change and tell occasional lies, for the most part, they are what the claim to be. In Firefly, Whedon forces us to consider the case in which we cannot fully know that anyone is who he says he is. This creates a strange conflict in us as viewers. We feel drawn into and supported by the crew, but

---

44 At least they are in the present, even if they used to be giant balls of energy. Tara is an interesting almost non-example, as she believes she is hiding a big secret about being a demon, but she is actually completely human.
we cannot completely trust everyone on it. The relationships we have with the
characters clearly mirror the relationships most characters have with each other, as
they too understand that they cannot fully know everyone else. In fact, if we define
the term “adult” to be reflecting the types of relationships found between adult friends
(which are marked by more uncertainty and less naïve bonding than teenage
relationships) and a world that (from the start) is more complicated than “good”
versus “bad,” in Firefly Whedon creates a much more adult relationship between the
audience and the characters than in any of his previous series. Thus, in Firefly,
Whedon creates a group in an incredibly similar way to how he does in his previous
series, but significantly complicates both the make up of that group and our
relationship with it.

Potentially Long-term Storytelling Cut Short

Firefly ended much sooner than Whedon (and his fans) hoped it would. Even
worse, it was cancelled during production of “The Message” (112)\(^45\) meaning that
Whedon did not have time to perfectly orchestrate his arcs to conclude before the end.
While Serenity will later allow us to see ways Whedon elaborated on some of these
incomplete storylines, in examining the televisual arc of Firefly, we are left with
minimal canonical examples. However, given our understanding of Whedon as a
television auteur, from these examples, we may, with some authority, analyze both
what Whedon did and what he may have done.

As we saw in the group section, Firefly begins in a similar way to Whedon’s
previous series. Yet, as the series progresses, the closest Firefly has to a “Big Bad” is

\(^{45}\) Pascale, Joss Whedon, 219.
the Alliance. Rather than ending the season with the defeat of the Big Bad, we start the season with the heroes’ defeat at the hands of it, and end with the Big Bad still undefeated. This difference makes sense when we consider the vastly different nature of the Alliance from any major Buffy villain. In terms of scale, the Alliance is a much bigger Bad—even the First Evil was isolated to one shape-shifting, yet incorporeal body, and one hole from which its army could crawl. The Alliance is actually closest to Angel’s Wolfram and Hart, although its power extends over planets, rather than dimensions. Yet, as we will see, even this comparison does not quite work, and the Bads’ differences demonstrate how the Alliance marks a conscious stretching of Whedon’s ability to orchestrate long-term arcs.

Specifically, the Alliance is not so much a villain as a regime. It is not an external force at work in the world, like an evil, interdimensional law firm, or a pair of nasty vampires, but the real world itself. This type of villain actually has a strong foundation in the series’ generic mix: the space opera/Western Star Wars, for example, focuses on conflict against an intergalactic Empire; even the cartoon The Adventure of the Galaxy Rangers found an overarching villain in the “Crown Empire.”46 However, because the narrative he wants to tell is rather different from Star Wars, in which one man has the power to take down the empire, he must find ways to build up this generic arc to suit his overall goals.

First, he creates a reason for the Alliance to directly conflict with the group. Unlike how villains are likely to flock to the Hellmouth to take on the famed Slayer, or how Wolfram and Hart has big plans for Angel, the Alliance is generally

indifferent to the crew. In the pilot, for example, an Alliance ship refers to the crew as “vultures” and “roaches,” and even decides not to bother pursuing Serenity themselves. Rather than the subject of a dastardly plot, most of the crew of Serenity is inconsequential to the Alliance except in specific moments when they get in the way. Whedon solves this issue by adding the Alliance runaways, River and Simon. This immediately gives the Alliance some reason to target the group, and some specific concerns for the group when they come into contact. For example, in “Objects in Space,” the drama and action is based around a bounty hunter pursuing River, and in “Bushwhacked,” the suspense of the episode is heightened by the fact that the Alliance crewmembers may discover that River and Simon are aboard. The technique of sneaking people (even specifically people with telepathic powers) wanted by the Alliance/Empire aboard a smuggling vessel is hardly unique to Whedon; early in *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, Luke boards Han Solo’s Millennium Falcon in order to escape his home planet. However, even this comparison makes for an enlightening difference: rather than making the smuggling ship and crew an interesting device to bring the hero to victory, Whedon establishes his smuggling ship first and then adds his fugitive characters, with no motivation other than to escape. This demonstrates a clear decision on Whedon’s part to add the risk of carrying fugitives without promise of immediate reward in the Big Bad arc from their presence.

Whedon also adds a specific stand-in for the Alliance in the blue-handed men, who wield terrifying technology and relentlessly hunt River. We first learn

---

47 Although of course they add value to Whedon’s building up of the group, and eventually (in *Serenity*) do significantly push the major external arc.
about them from River’s psychotic rambling in “The Train Job,” and end the episode we get our first glimpse of them. They appear again in “Ariel,” but they never actually make direct contact with any of our characters; like the Alliance they represent, they are a force to evade, not defeat. They thus function in a way that reminds us of the seemingly limitless power of the Alliance, not as individual characters that can be defeated in lieu of the regime. They also suggest a type of long-term thinking on Whedon’s part; this continuous evasion works to build up high amounts of suspense that (like the Reavers) Whedon could eventually have followed through on.

Whedon also creates conflict between his crew and his bulky Big Bad by structuring many episodic plots in ways that put the crew and the Alliance or its supporters in conflict. For example, the crew attempts to steal from the Alliance or its wealthy citizens in “The Train Job,” “Ariel,” and “Trash” (111). They even go head to head with an Alliance ship in “Bushwhacked,” when they are accused of murdering the families butchered by the Reavers. However, even within these plots, we can see another challenge Whedon imposes on himself via his Big Bad: the Alliance is not uniformly and unwavering evil. The stolen Alliance cargo in “The Train Job” is medicine the government is providing to a poor community, and the hospital in “Ariel” still saves lives of privileged, yet non-evil people. We even saw another example of this in the “Genre” section as an example of the more general way Whedon builds ambiguity into his universe, when the Alliance heals Book and lets the crew leave. There are hints of ambivalence within Wolfram and Hart too, such as in the episode “Blood Money” (212), in which the law firm throws a fundraiser for a
homeless teen shelter, and in the premise of the fifth season, in which the law firm gives its resources to the team. Yet, invariably, these “good deeds” of Wolfram and Hart are ultimately done in the service of some terrible plot. The Alliance, although a horrible regime, is still a government that supplies some form of benefit—however small that may be—to those it governs. The problem with taking out a government rather than an evil vampire is that victory results in a power vacuum, not peace. Given the nature of the Alliance, we are thus left to wonder if Firefly had continued beyond its fourteen episodes, whether it would have ended with an overall defeat of the Alliance (a la Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi [Richard Marquand, 1983]), or with just a successful escape from and a significant blow to its legitimacy. As we will see soon, Serenity suggests it is the latter case.

Whedon also includes a secondary potential Big Bad in the Reavers, although our experience of them in the series is rather limited (and, as we discussed in the “Genre” section, can also be interpreted as occupying a villain-space like the vampires in Buffy). They function in the complete opposite way of the Alliance: they are not organized and they provide only destruction. Yet, they too seem impossible to defeat, as their sheer scale, ferocity, and lack of a central governing figure make them seem no more likely to be defeated than piranhas in the Amazon. And at the end of Firefly, they still reign in the fringes of the universe, and they stand as an ostensibly enduring reminder of the dangers of completely eschewing civilization in the name of the frontier. Then, in Serenity, when we learn that the Reavers were created by the Alliance, we are reminded of the equally horrible problems of completely leaning into

48 This we can actually identify as a difference between the Reavers and the Western Native American. While tribes in old Westerns could have leaders that can be defeated, the Reavers lack such an organizer, and so also the possibility to be taken down at the head.
civilization. We are also made to recognize that both our “Big Bads” are connected, even as they seem to represent oppositional thematic concerns.

As he adds complexity to his Big Bads, Whedon also complexly develops his protagonists. Within these characters, we can see two interesting extensions of Whedon’s tendencies as outlined for *Buffy* and *Angel*. First, it appears that Whedon did not intend to follow the same loser-villain-hero pattern with these characters. While he still starts with them as losers, Whedon instead makes the shift between loser, villain, and hero far more complex and difficult to catalogue. This begins with an observation I previously made in the “Group” section—that he begins with characters that are more morally ambiguous than the starting groups of *Buffy* and *Angel*—and continues as he develops his protagonists. In *Firefly*, there are moments when characters (like Jayne) make villainous choices, but no decisive points when a character transitions into a “villain.” This actually ties directly back into the series’ genres. A supernatural horror show can have good people turn into heinous villains through a magical force. When they are cured of that magical influence, we can once again be certain they are good people. Science fiction has some potential for these sorts of shifts, but the way Whedon uses the genre in *Firefly* does not directly open up any opportunities for such easily reversible growth. ⁴⁹ If Kaylee, for example, skinned a man alive like Willow and then tried to destroy the world, it would be incredibly difficult for Whedon to justify within the generic bounds of his universe why this happened, and how we could still consider Kaylee a protagonist afterwards. Even *Buffy’s* other genre, teen melodrama, is much more susceptible to large changes. This

---

⁴⁹ For example, his sci-fi tool for pushing normal people to villainy—turning them into Reavers—is implied to be irreversible.
will become clearer as we look at specific characters, but, in general, teenagers are still attempting to formulate their own identities, and so may more easily swing between extremes in their behavior, thoughts, and feelings than adults. As we will see in greater detail below, River is an exception to this general character rule in Firefly, as she has the greatest character variability. However, she is uniquely a teenager with supernatural abilities; in other words, the generic tools of Buffy are directly available to Whedon in developing her in ways they are not for the rest of the characters. At the same time, River’s psychosis means that even as she learns more about herself and her abilities, she cannot immediately put them to use. Although River’s growth could potentially mimic character growth across Buffy, the damage to her mind makes her progress much more variable.

Further, in Firefly, it is clear that Whedon understood the potential inherent in long-form storytelling. Most notably, he constructs his character arcs with the intention of their slow, long-term character growth. While, of course, Whedon gives each of his main characters in Buffy and Angel long-term arcs as well, the difference here is that we can see choices and sacrifices Whedon makes immediately because he is counting on their ability to play out in the long-term.

Mal is the closest we have to the group’s “main character” (like Buffy and Angel in their series). He is the classic Western hero: gruff, tactically brilliant, but bound by a strong sense of honor. These character elements do not really change across Firefly—although, as we have seen, we receive hints as to whether or not his code is exactly honorable, and we can imagine (with the help of Whedon’s comment about his hope for Mal) that, had the series continued for more seasons, this may have
become a much larger issue. This makes sense, as Mal is already a fully formed person, not a teenager like Buffy or a vampire trying to turn into a human, like Angel. Instead, his “identity crisis” must start from a seemingly stable, adult personality, and move in more incremental directions. Whedon’s arc for Mal specifically focuses on him learning how to get in touch with his feelings and emotions. This is executed by way of a potential love story: Mal and Inara clearly belong together, but they cannot be together until both characters are able to acknowledge and express their feelings. Repressed emotion in an action/adventure hero is far from unique, but action heroes can generally put off their desires for companionship in the name of their quests, or even ride out of town at the end without their love interests. Mal and Inara are not only thrown together each week by chance or a plot device, they live together. This means that Mal must actively deal with real, adult emotions, and that the audience both consistently feels the frustration of the almost relationship, and gains a better understanding of Mal’s interior life.

Unsurprisingly, Inara’s arc runs parallel to Mal’s. She too is a fully formed person, although one (like all people) with room for self-discovery and improvement. She is a “companion,” and the high status of her occupation in Firefly’s universe puts her the most at ease in her society than the rest of Serenity’s crew. Despite her comfort with physical intimacy, she too has issues with emotional intimacy. This makes her a particularly fitting counterpart to Mal, as their relationship cannot blossom unless both open up. From both Inara’s and Mal’s perspectives, the desired romantic arc is inextricably tied to a self-realization arc. We (the audience) may be
focused on the romance, but it can only come as a reward for the characters completing their internal arcs.

These intertwined arcs appear across many episodes, from Mal dueling to defend Inara’s honor in “Shindig,” to the anguish felt by Inara when Mal accidentally gets married in “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” which is amplified in “Heart of Gold” when Mal has sex with Inara’s friend. Whedon does not end the series with the happy resolution of this romance; in the finale, Inara is only present because she has not yet followed through on her threat to leave. The closest we come to a satisfying conclusion of their romance is when River overhears a conversation between them and psychically sees what both are thinking but neither says. This emphasizes further that the only thing standing between them is their inability to communicate. While some viewers are likely disappointed that they do not end up together, the fact that Whedon does not rush to put them together romantically—even in Serenity, as we will see—illustrates how their romance fits into their larger character arcs; the series could not suddenly end with them kissing and making up, or even having an over-the-top, tragic severance, because neither of them has yet developed enough to express these emotions. However, based on the romantic arcs of other series, it seems likely that, had Firefly continued on for more seasons, Whedon would have eventually brought both to a point where they at least thought they could be together, and then thrown an insurmountable hitch in the couple’s happiness. Clearly, Mal’s and Inara’s arcs demonstrate not an approach to characters that actively seeks to frustrate viewers, but one that is focused on the long-term. Whedon thus reveals an understanding of television as a specifically long-form medium, and a desire to carry
out complex arcs that are only possible within it. With this type of complexity, Whedon also connects to what we already identified as Whedon making *Firefly* more “adult”; instead of with passionate infatuation, Mal and Inara approach their potential relationship with a hesitance grounded in life experiences, decades of self-denial, and a myriad of other complex concerns, which he sets aside time to address before moving beyond.

As discussed in the “Group” section, Jayne is an ambivalent character, someone whom we are never sure whether or not we can trust. For this reason, his growth across the season further highlights Whedon’s contending with more grown-up characters and relationships. In the first half of *Firefly*, Jayne is self-serving, greedy, and not particularly intelligent—emotionally or intellectually. He is willing to betray his captain for money, eager to turn in River and Simon (“Ariel”), and tries to trade Mal a gun for a woman (“Our Mrs. Reynolds”). “Jaynestown,” marks the first cracks we see in Jayne’s purely self-serving exterior. As previously described, the citizens of the town celebrate Jayne as a hero, due to the fact that he accidentally dropped money on them while fleeing from a robbery. Yet, at the inevitable meeting of the Mudders and their hero, the extended joke turns into drama and character arc. While Jayne is drunkenly enjoying his fame, he becomes choked up to learn that the Mudders threw him his “very own riot” when Boss Higgins wanted to take down the Jayne statue. Still, he is happy to capitalize on his fame, sleeping with a woman fawning over him and happily singing his song. At the end of the episode, Mal wants Jayne to amass a crowd of Mudders so that they can move stolen property without being noticed. Jayne is hesitant to do this, asking, “I don’t know. You think we
should be using my fame to hoodwink folks?” He even states, “I think I really made a
difference in their lives.” For what seems like the first time ever, Jayne actually
considers the ethics of his part in a heist. The man always looking out for himself has
found the perfect dupes, and realizes he might not want to dupe them. 50

At Mal’s urging, Jayne attends the rally anyway. During Jayne’s address to
the crowd (which is actually a somewhat nice speech, as commented on by Kaylee
and Mal), the old partner he double-crossed reappears to set the record straight. In the
presence of the entire town of Mudders, this partner explains how Jayne did not
intend to dump the money (and actually pushed his partner out of the ship before
losing it). The partner shoots at Jayne. One of the Mudders, whom we have become
partially acquainted with throughout the episode, dives in front of Jayne to take the
fatal blast for him. The humorous misunderstanding of Jayne’s unearned hero status
has now led to the loss of an innocent life, and Jayne knows it. After Jayne brutally
kills the villain with his bare hands, he runs to the body of the boy that saved him. He
scolds him, asking: “What’s wrong with you? Didn’t you hear a word he said?” Jayne
then tries to explain to the Mudders why he should not be their hero, and knocks
down the statue. This touching moment demonstrates that he is capable of feeling
despair when his selfishness causes someone else to die. It also gives the audience a
glimpse into his mind, as he recognizes that he is not a good person, and verbalizes
his worldview that no one is truly selfless. During a heart-to-heart with Mal in the
final scene, Jayne learns that much of his importance to Canton is not what he did, but

50 Although, this is particularly ironic, because the pride he feels at the Mudder’s celebration of him
was purely the result of a different, accidental dupe.
the fact that the town has him as a figure to rally around. “Jaynestown” is clearly an episode of positive growth for Jayne.

Yet, Jayne’s arc is more complicated than simply learning how to care about other people. “Jaynestown” pushes Jayne in the right direction, but it does not completely transform who he is as a person. In “Ariel,” two episodes after “Jaynestown,” Jayne sells out Simon and River. The siblings escape, and Simon, not realizing that Jayne put them in the dangerous situation in the first place, thanks Jayne for helping them get out. Jayne awkwardly accepts these thanks with a “Hey, you’re on my crew.” We recognize from this interaction that while Jayne’s feelings about his actions may have changed, his actions themselves have not. At the end of the episode, Mal, who realized the truth, confronts Jayne about the betrayal. Mal threatens Jayne’s life until Jayne apologizes. Even then, his apology is weak—“It ain’t like I ratted you out to the Feds.” We could see this as a backtrack in Jayne’s character growth; however, we can also see it as a more complicated type of growth, one in which people can have moments of self-improvement, but easily fall back on their old ways. This latter interpretation is supported by the fact that, while Jayne is still convinced Mal will let him die, he dejectedly asks how the other crewmembers will be informed of his death. He begs Mal, “Don’t tell ‘em what I did.” It is this statement that convinces Mal to let Jayne live, and it is in this statement that we realize that some of the lessons of “Jaynestown” have stuck. He has a real regard for the crew, indicated by his desire that their opinions of him not be tarnished by his misdeed. Had Whedon been given more seasons of Firefly, it seems likely that this pattern would have

---

51 This is a similar conclusion to that in the Star Trek: DS9 episode, “The Homecoming,” which is, in turn, modeled after ideas in the famous Western The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (John Ford, 1962). “The Homecoming (episode),” Memory Alpha.
continued; Jayne slowly learning what it is like to have real friends and a sense of personal responsibility, in between taking selfish actions, which ultimately remind him (and us) of his personal journey. Yet, based on Whedon’s overall tendency to maintain tension within his characters and the world—and his clear desire in Firefly to introduce that tension directly into the group and our relationships with characters—Whedon would likely stop short of granting us full faith in where Jayne’s loyalties lie. Instead, Whedon would assure us that when push comes to shove, he would still be just as likely to act in his own self-interest as he would be to help the group.

As illustrative as Jayne’s arc is in demonstrating the way Whedon approaches characters in Firefly, the fact that his arc is so interesting says something in and of itself. We can hypothesize that much of the motivation behind giving Mal and Inara such long-term story arcs is to keep viewers coming back. Yet, this also means Whedon can only do so much with these characters’ arcs in each episode without sabotaging or fulfilling his long-term goals for them. A more peripheral character, like Jayne, has significant space to be manipulated without affecting long-term arcs. With many episodes across a season and series, taking advantage of such opportunities is not simply possible, but essentially a requirement to keep the audience constantly engaged. We see this occur across Buffy and Angel, as well—with the most obvious parallels to “Jaynestown” being “The Zeppo” and “Harm’s Way” (Angel, 509), which focus on Xander and Harmony respectively. Clearly, Whedon uses television as a way to give us a fuller experience of otherwise supporting characters.
River’s arc runs almost opposite to Jayne’s, and demonstrates both a direct connection between Firefly and Buffy and Whedon’s extensions of his characters. Unlike the rest of the characters, she is introduced with more backstory than personality. She is a fearful child, and a victim of the Alliance. Her arc across Firefly is not her maturation, but the reclamation of her own personality. We watch River both to learn about what the Alliance has done to her and to see what she is like underneath the periodic psychosis. Note that this is different from a mysterious character whose past and personality is slowly revealed; we are not just learning about River, she is actively changing back into herself. By “Objects in Space,” she is alert enough to recognize that the crew is uneasy with her there, and smart enough to concoct and carry out a brilliant plan to save everyone. The episode even begins by giving us a direct look inside River’s head, helping us finally understand what she sees and hears. This helps us feel as though we understand some of her disorder. By the end of the series, she is still troubled, but she is clearly a different person from the naked and screaming girl woken up from cryogenic sleep.

While this arc is unique among the characters in Firefly, River is not the only Whedon character to function this way. Like River, Buffy’s Dawn presents a specific type of enigma. She bemoans that no one understands her, yet she clearly does not fully understand herself either. In order to learn more about who Dawn is and who she could be, we must actively engage with the characters as they learn about her origin, and then watch as she matures. Further, both girls are the innocent victims of a higher power, and the youngest of their groups. These both lead to our relationships with the girls being closer to that of adult and child than of friendship. In Buffy, our
parental regard for Dawn is atypical; in *Firefly*, it fits directly into the adult way Whedon molds our relationships with the rest of his characters.

Although the other characters all have interesting personalities, their arcs are far less complex across the first season. Given the size of Whedon’s cast, it makes sense that fourteen episodes are not enough to execute every character’s arc. However, in these characters Whedon still sets up the potential for more long-term growth. Simon’s is the classic fish-out-of-water tale of the prim and proper doctor learning the ways of the rugged bunch. Given more time, Whedon could easily keep pushing Simon’s acclimation, to the point where he must learn how to behave in civilization again. Kaylee’s arc is primarily that of the sort of puppy love Inara’s and Mal’s actively are not, as she pines for Simon. However, Whedon also uses her as a place to further play with our expectations based on genre (or even our own societal gender roles), since she is both a girly girl—to the point where she is often infantilized—and a brilliant mechanic. We could also predict that Kaylee’s happy-go-lucky demeanor we would eventually reveal something dark buried deep inside her. Book, similarly, is mysterious character, whose backstory we could imagine in future seasons unfolding in elegant detail. Although Zoe and Wash experience little character growth across the series, Wash’s internal conflict does become the focus of one episode, “War Stories” (110), which explores his jealousy at his wife’s closeness with Mal. This episode actually does much to reinforce Wash’s belief in his wife’s love, but we could imagine the idea of Wash working through his jealousy coming back in other forms, given the closeness of Zoe and Mal’s relationship. Zoe is a bit of an exception in this regard however. She is a tough woman like Buffy, but she is not
only as a fully formed person, she is ostensibly flawless. She is strong-willed, intelligent, and kind. She is obedient to her captain, and she always gets the job done. Future seasons would likely have shattered some of this perfection, but it is difficult to imagine in exactly what direction Zoe’s path would have gone.

In exploring the arcs that Whedon did not have time to explore, we can see which character types Whedon clearly found most viable for immediate development versus which ones required playing a longer game. By forming different episodes around different characters (or small subgroups of characters) Whedon not only extends the time it takes to tell his arcs, he keeps up our interest and feelings of suspense in all of them; when “Jaynestown” is followed by “Out of Gas” (a Mal-centric episode) we feel both reinvigorated at the variation and a heightened sense of anticipation for when what Whedon has been building along Jayne’s arc follows through. We can also understand some of the challenges Whedon faced in creating a series with so many main characters, and recognize this as a place in which his desire to create a large group necessarily required him to lose some depth of character arc in the short term. However these shallow arcs do not necessarily correlate with shallow audience relationships. We develop and maintain a relationship with all nine of these characters, whether they significantly change or not. The arcs he does follow up on and the fact that Whedon would almost certainly have given each of these characters more fulfilling arcs had he been given more time, also demonstrates a specifically televisual mode of operation. This will become even clearer when we examine how Whedon modified these arcs for *Serenity*. 
Serenity

Whedon had the opportunity to return to Firefly’s crew in 2005, when Universal Pictures released Serenity, a feature film that begins shortly after the end of Firefly and includes the entire original cast (as their original characters). Whedon wrote and directed Serenity, making his authorship incontrovertible in the traditional cinematic sense. While Serenity’s arcs can help us determine some of where Whedon was heading to in Firefly, its role as a feature film causes it to function much differently from a pure extension of the series. In analyzing choices he made specifically because he had to change mediums, we will see some distinct difference between televisual and cinematic authorship.

While we could spend time with ways in which Whedon modifies the generic elements of Firefly in Serenity—such as the film’s lack of some prominent Western iconography like the horse—\footnote{Kozak, “Serenity Now!” 88. For example, Whedon claims: “The fact that there are no horses in this movie is only by virtue of the fact I didn’t find a place for them.” We could spend time picking this apart, examining why the story Whedon wanted to tell for Serenity could not include as basic a Western element as the horse.} it is still, as Whedon himself asserts, “a frontier story.”\footnote{Ibid.} And like Firefly, this frontier story is told in the form of a space opera, fitting it again into the classification “Space Western.” More interesting, and more enlightening, is analyzing Whedon’s groups, overall treatment of the viewer, and arcs across Serenity, in relation to how they function in conjunction with or differently from Firefly.

Inherent in the specifics of these latter points is a discussion of the distinction between the types of stories and experiences audiences expect from a film versus a television show. In film, we want complete payoff; in television, we want some
payoff in each episode, with the promise of bigger payoffs coming. Whedon actually articulated something along these lines, stating:

It occurred to me recently that one of the main differences between movies and television is that movies are an answer, whilst television shows are a question. Movies make a definite statement. They want to explain and then they get the hell out. Television, on the other hand, examines something, if you’re lucky, for seven years.\(^54\)

As we dig into *Serenity*, we will see how Whedon answers questions set up in *Firefly* and within the bounds of the movie—and, even more interestingly, which ones from *Firefly* he neglects to answer.

From the beginning, *Serenity* posed a challenge for Whedon: it had to appeal to both devoted fans and to people who had never seen the series before.\(^55\) The film’s main poster does not even mention its tie to *Firefly*;\(^56\) one trailer announces *Serenity* as “From the mind of Joss Whedon[,] creator of ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ and ‘Angel.’”\(^57\) Clearly, Whedon faced the difficult task of pleasing everyone, no matter how early or late they came aboard. The challenge itself is not unique; the issue of speaking to audiences that have little or no prior context for what they are watching is quite prominent in television. However, I argue that in television, this is to a much greater extent tied to audience expectations and convention. When creating for


broadcast television, an author cannot typically assume everyone has seen every episode. Television viewers reciprocate this assumption; a viewer who watched none of *Buffy* except for a random, mid-season episode, would expect to be entertained, but also that there may be gaps in her understanding. If she was watching a film (particularly one not marketed as a sequel), she would expect there to be no such gaps. Further, as we saw in the previous chapters, Whedon often responds to the challenge of new television viewers by creating special experiences for return viewers; in *Serenity*, Whedon had to be even more cautious that his winks at the returning viewers would not alienate the rest of his audience or come across as a barrier to entry. Moreover, television episodes can (and do) use “Previously On” sequences, which help casual viewers orient themselves. Films very rarely use these.⁵⁸ Given that *Serenity* was marketed to avoid references to *Firefly*, it was likely never an option seriously considered for *Serenity*.

We can see this concern reflected near the beginning of *Serenity*, as Whedon attempts to simultaneously bring new viewers up to speed and engage returning fans. The first shot taken from inside Serenity lasts almost four and a half minutes. It begins inside the engine room with Wash and Mal, as the ship begins to crash. From their interaction, we learn (if we did not already know) that Mal is the captain, Wash is the pilot, and that their ship is not exactly cutting edge technology (a part has just fallen off of it mid-flight). Mal then leaves the bridge and the camera follows. Mal crosses paths with Jayne, who is overloading himself with weapons for when they go

---

⁵⁸ “Previously On,” *TV Tropes*, accessed April 1, 2017, [http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PreviouslyOn](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PreviouslyOn). TV Tropes found a few examples of films that did start with these sequences, but most are sequels to other films.
on-planet. From this interaction we learn (or are reminded) that Jayne loves weapons and violence. Zoe then arrives, and from her brief statements it is clear that she is married to the pilot and (by the way she teases Jayne about his stash of weapons) a reasonable and logical thinker. Next, Mal enters the engine room. Here we meet Kaylee, and we (re)discover that she is a cheerful mechanic. Mal then has a serious conversation with Simon. This interaction teaches new viewers that Simon is the doctor on the ship, and that he is taking care of River. They talk primarily about her, and the conversation steadily builds to the final image of this incredibly long take: River, lying on the floor, ready to go “for a ride.”

While the shot does not introduce viewers to every important character—Inara and Book are not yet on the ship to be introduced—it is an incredibly efficient (and flashy) way in which to bring everyone up to speed. It lets veteran viewers know that the situation we are returning to in Serenity is almost identical to the one we left off with in Firefly, except with Inara and Book missing. At the same time, it provides new viewers (or return viewers who forgot) important information about character personalities and relationships. It also functions as an informal tour of the ship, teaching us the layout from the bridge, to the dining room, the engine room, and even the medical bay. Beyond its effect of improving viewer comprehension, this guided tour creates a feeling of inclusiveness, of being welcomed inside to view the inner workings of a less-than-well-oiled machine. Moreover, by motivating the camera movement by Mal’s own motion, Whedon instills in him an extra sense of importance. This gives new viewers an immediate understanding of the ship’s hierarchy, and his prominence in the film. This lesson is particularly significant, since
the film does not actually begin with the crew; the long-take does not occur until around ten minutes into _Serenity_. The film’s first scene takes place inside River’s mind, and the rest of the opening focuses on River and Simon’s escape from the Alliance lab and the beginning of the Operative’s pursuit of them. This introduction thus suggests that the pair—and more specifically, River—will be foregrounded throughout the film. The Mal-motivated long-take assures us that they are only a significant piece of a larger whole.

While River does not supplant Mal as the leader or become the one and only protagonist, Whedon’s choice of opening does speak to his larger upgrading of her role in the group. In particular, Whedon makes River the focus of the main antagonists’ actions, the catalyst of much of the film’s plot momentum, and the savior of the group (although not of the universe) in the climax. She is even the character that appears most prominently on the theatrical poster. While the promotion of River from supporting to main character has a basis in the series—the series finale, for example, revolves around River—it may at first seem surprising that Whedon decided to use his film, for which he re-assembled the entire group, to focus his storytelling on River. However, given what we already know about Whedon’s characters from _Buffy_ and _Angel_, this decision not only makes perfect sense, it is something that, in retrospect, we could have anticipated.

River is clearly a “Whedon” heroine. She is a small, terrified girl—the one that gets kidnapped by Native Americans and rescued by John Wayne in the Western. Yet, she is also a “Chosen One,” naturally gifted and artificially granted supernatural powers and fighting skills. She is the only one with the ability to take on an army of
Reavers, and she does so by herself. In fact, we can see this as a clear turn of a type of “captivity narrative” that Slotkin describes: the (white) woman—herself once a captive, though not of the “savage war”—is the only one capable of large-scale confrontation with the savages. The generic victim becomes the hero. Yet, she would not have been capable of such a feat, had she not had the support of the entire group—and in particular, her loving sibling. As we saw in the section on arc, River’s arc throughout the series is reminiscent of Dawn’s. By the end of Serenity, River is Buffy.

Furthermore, in Firefly, Whedon built his characters around long-term storytelling. This made sense when Whedon had months (potentially even years) to develop these arcs. But a film runs for a set period of time, and so must focus on short-term storytelling. Whedon approaches this problem by selecting River’s arc as the major plotline, and then accelerating it. River’s arc is particularly suited for this task since it is easily summarized as a high-action, yet emotionally penetrating pursuit narrative: the wrongfully-hunted young girl turns into a powerful woman, and she fearlessly defends her brother and her friends. In focusing its main story around River Tam, Whedon thus gives Serenity a compelling statement, one that he had likely hoped to stretch out in Firefly.

Despite this foregrounding of River and Mal, Whedon clearly wanted his entire audience (new and old) to still feel like part of the group by the end of Serenity. Hence, he attempts to condense and recreate the experience of being inducted into the group. Although Firefly ended with Simon and River as established members of

---

59 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 14-15.
60 Sequels, of course, allow for the extension of a universe, but even sequel films are expected to complete, independent works in a way individual episodes of television series are not quite.
Mal’s crew (recall the line from “Safe”), during Mal and Simon’s first conversation in *Serenity*, Mal refers to Simon and River as “guests” and insists: “I look out for me and mine. That don’t include you unless I conjure it does.” To those of us who watched the series, we already conjured that it did, so this feels like a step backwards. Yet, we can recognize it as a conscious attempt to “reset” conditions at the beginning of *Serenity* back to what they were in “Serenity” (101). Part of what helps us feel like one of the crew in *Firefly* is learning what it means to be a member of it, as well as the act of watching outsiders River and Simon be accepted as full-fledged members. By returning Simon and River to arm’s length, Whedon creates the ability to actively draw them (and, by extension, us) back inside the fold. In the middle of the film, Mal has the chance to leave behind River and Simon but chooses to rescue them instead, demonstrating that they are, in fact, part of Mal’s “me and mine.” The end of the film solidifies this, when River co-pilots Serenity with Mal. Thus, in *Serenity*, Whedon reposes the questions raised by group membership in *Firefly*, and answers them in no uncertain terms by the end of the film.

Yet, the group of *Serenity* is not exactly the same as it is in *Firefly*. First, Whedon essentially reduces the character count. While all nine main actors appear, the series begins with just seven people on the ship. Inara joins almost an hour through, after having been discussed and shown in diegetic videos. Book never rejoins the crew, but appears twice when they visit him on his own planet: the first time as a guiding figure and the second time as tragic one. To *Firefly* viewers, these character reintroductions are moments of restoration and payoff, returning to us people with whom we had previously built relationships. To novice viewers, they add
new dimension to the group, and offer another gateway for immersion into it. Yet their absence in the beginning significantly lessens these new viewers’ initial barrier to entry into the group.

Further, the characters themselves are somewhat different from how they are in Firefly. The most obviously changed character is Simon, whose backstory is almost completely rewritten and then “retconned”61 into the canon. In “Serenity” (101), Simon explains how he rescued River: “Money. And luck… I was contacted by some men—some underground movement…If I funded them, they could sneak her out in cryo, get her to Persephone, and from there I could take her… wherever.” Yet, the opening of Serenity tells a different story. It depicts a Simon that does far more than provide money to an organization; he poses as an inspector and coerces the scientists keeping her captive into showing him River. He then uses a futuristic flash bomb to disarm the scientists and rushes in to save his sister. Guards pursue them, and the pair clings to the walls of a deadly chasm. A ship flies overhead and drops down a platform for them to escape on. Presumably, this ship is from Simon’s “underground movement,” but this scene depicts a very different series of events from the ones implied by Simon’s previous answer, which focuses on his financial contributions.

This becomes even more confusing the more we ponder it: if Simon had been given a tour of the facility—and even a “safe word” to calm her down—why was he so clueless about what had happened to her throughout Firefly? While we might be able to reconcile some of this discontinuity by bending Simon’s initial words differently (perhaps, for example, when he said “they could sneak her out in cryo” he meant,

---

“after I physically remove her from the doctors, evade the guards, and get snuck out myself”), our time would be better spend understanding what Whedon gains from changing the story: an action-focused, more capable version of Simon than the one we had in the beginning of Firefly. While the Simon in “Serenity” (101) is not entirely helpless (recall that he threatens to let Kaylee die), his general demeanor is of someone in over his head. Although he gets into trouble frequently, he is typically the one who fixes the wounds accrued by his more action-oriented counterparts. As we saw in the arc section above, part of the pleasure of watching the series is watching how Simon, someone who is used to being polite and proper, integrates into the crew. By re-writing his history, Whedon introduces Serenity’s Simon as a ready-made action hero. Thus, while the film opens with Simon removed from the group, it simultaneously depicts him as someone who better fits into it.

From this, we see another important difference between film and TV; Firefly could start with a less action-oriented Simon because it had time to develop his character. Another quote by Whedon offers some direct insight into his intention with the characters in Serenity: “When you're making a movie, you gotta amp it up, you gotta go to a greater scale and everything is gonna be a little grander, you[r] hero is gonna be more ‘heroicaler’ . . . yes, that's a word . . . now . . .”62 In Serenity, Simon and River are clearly made to be “heroicaler” than they are in Firefly. We can imagine—even, I argue, safely hypothesize—that their heroicness in the series would have eventually reached the levels they hit in Serenity. However, in Firefly, Whedon always leaves open the question of just how far these characters can push. In Serenity, he shows them achieving these peaks.

62 “Joss Whedon: Biography,” IMDB.
On the other hand, *Serenity* also demonstrates how making the above choice for a film can cause non-heroes to become less “heroicaler.” Although Kaylee, Jayne, Wash, and Zoe are part of the main group, they feel more like background characters in *Serenity* than they do in *Firefly*. This statement is actually somewhat misleading, since there are episodes across *Firefly* where each of these characters definitely feel like nothing more than background characters. Yet, the episodic nature of the series means that each has more time for personal development. Some characters, like Jayne, get their own episodes, and the rest still receive at least a few chances in the limelight. In the single, unified experience of *Serenity*, however, they fall to the back. Jayne, for example, whom we saw in *Firefly* as someone that actually has a rather complicated arc and relationship with the viewer, is essentially comic relief in *Serenity*.

Mal’s and Inara’s arcs, however, are not treated significantly differently in *Serenity* than in the series. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this actually demonstrates how their initial arcs are uniquely televisual. In *Serenity*, as in *Firefly*, both individuals are still adults who need to learn how to access and deal with their emotions and intimacy problems. The first glimpse we get of Inara in the film is in a photograph-like video, lovingly pondered by Mal. Even before this moment, however, we listen to Kaylee explain to Jayne: “Captain’ll drive us all off one by one. Just like Simon and River. Just like Inara.” Right before this last sentence, the scene begins to cross dissolve into the shot of Mal staring at the picture. Returning viewers will feel the gut punch of the first reminder of Mal and Inara’s lost love, and new viewers will receive enough context from this voiceover and dissolve to piece together that Inara left and Mal still
loves her. The dialogue within the moving image explicitly names the reason for Inara’s leaving—“That man doesn’t know what he wants”—and primes us for their reunion. When Mal and Inara first interact, it is an awkward conversation over a video messaging service. Yet, while we, the viewers, are focused on the subtext of their longing for each other (and the humor of the crewmates watching from another room), Zoe and Mal immediately recognize from the sweetness of the message that it is a trap. Because neither party hid their feelings under insults, something had to be wrong. Inara’s surprise when Mal arrives assures viewers that Inara understood this too. As soon as they are together again, the insults resume, but now it is clear to even new viewers that this is how they normally communicate. In the end, they are reunited, but, unlike Simon and Kaylee—whose more adolescent love is easily consummated—do not end up together romantically. Their last interaction is simply for Inara to state that she “do[es]n’t know” if she wants to leave the ship. While this is a frustrating way to end a romance arc, it highlights a truth about their storylines: each is on a journey of self-discovery spurred on by a desired romance, not a purely romantic journey. And while Whedon may have been able to fast-track Simon’s arc for Serenity, to achieve the type of complex, adult growth Whedon needed his characters to undergo before they were ready for romance, he needed more than a two-hour feature film. Slow-paced, deeply internal arcs like Mal’s and Inara’s require the television format.

Whedon’s treatment of these character arcs brings us to larger discoveries about major plotlines across Serenity. As mentioned, the main arc of the film involves the Alliance-sent Operative’s pursuit of River. By including such a specific
antagonist, Whedon gives the faceless regime a face, and builds suspense into individual moments and stakes for the overall film. Most significantly, the focus on the Operative means that even if the crew cannot defeat the entire regime by the end, they still have the chance to completely defeat their foe. This is something we can reasonably identify as another difference between telling a story across a film versus a television series. A television series’ its major threat can be a more intricate one than can be defeated in the space of an hour. In a film, however, Whedon must condense his Big Bad arc into something we can still be satisfied with at the end. In reality, Serenity ends with a victory that is little more than a temporary evasion of capture and a blow to legitimacy of the regime. Yet, in watching the film, it feels (or at least should feel) as if the crew has achieved something incredibly significant.

Although in the series we were led to believe the Alliance only wanted River back as an asset, the Operative also lays out a specific motive for her apprehension: she likely read the minds of important figures in the Alliance government and may know harmful secrets. Whedon eventually allows us to know at least one of these secrets, as we discover (with the crew) what the Alliance did to the planet Miranda. This discovery—that the Alliance poisoned the air of the planet in an attempt to “calm” the population—allows Whedon to directly connect the Big Bad of Firefly with its most terrifying threat. In this way, Whedon even gives us some closure on the problem of the Reavers; although they are far from defeated at the end, since Mal successfully sent out the “signal” with the story of the Reavers’ creation, he not only struck a blow to the Alliance’s legitimacy, he (we can at least hope) ensured that the Alliance will discontinue the human experiments that led to their creation. At the
same time, Whedon also uses River’s storyline to give us a different type of closure; before, the Reavers were an unquantifiable, unstoppable force. Now, we have a girl on our team who can take down an entire horde of them. With River around, any future Reavers would feel like little more than the nameless vampires that attack the Scoobies in Buffy’s presence.

Finally, unlike Firefly’s open ending, Serenity’s ending brings the series to a close more like Buffy’s and Angel’s. Serenity kills off first Shepherd Book and then Wash. Like many of Whedon’s characters’, their deaths are neither satisfying nor inspiring. Book gets a chance to say some last words, but his wounding is not even shown on screen. Even worse, his death was not in the midst of a battle, but carried out in a cruel attempt by the villain to keep the crew from finding safety anywhere. He dies without us ever having learned the secret of his enigmatic life (although Whedon actually primed Sus for such disappointment in an earlier interaction in which Book explains that he never “[has] to tell” Mal about his past). Wash’s death is even more pitiful; he dramatically saves the entire crew by expertly landing the ship, only to be killed by a Reaver as soon as he begins to celebrate his victory. While Whedon likely chose these particular characters to kill off due to external contract issues,63 he had many options in how he actually handled their potential loss. For example, since the contract issues may only have been a problem if the film was given a sequel, he could have chosen to simply ignore them for Serenity. If he was certain they needed to be written off, he could have just as easily left Book in the village he begins (and ends) the film in and given Wash a separate mission to undertake (or even just have had him act on his previously stated desire to take a holiday with his wife). Both of

63 Pascale, Joss Whedon, 248.
these options would have allowed Whedon to bring back the characters should the external factors change, and so, pragmatically, are probably even better choices. Yet, Whedon chooses to kill them, and he kills them in tragic ways. Hence, he actively emphasizes the senselessness of their loss, and the inability of the group to retain its happiness or function as before in his fan’s minds. This directly ties back to and confirms his patterns across his TV shows of “scorching the earth” at the end.

The character deaths also connect to the question of film versus television, and the strange mix of Serenity as both. The onscreen deaths would likely be upsetting to any audience member, but these deaths mean significantly more to fans of the series than people who have only seen the film. For example, when Book is killed, a little boy that lived on his planet is killed too. We had previously seen the boy the last time the crew visited Book in the film, but never in the series. For a viewer that knows Book only from his few appearances in Serenity, it is possible (even likely) that the little boy’s death hits significantly harder than the old man’s. For viewers that watched Firefly, the little boy’s death is sad, but Book’s is far more tragic. The physical length of time the series, coupled with the devices we saw Whedon use above, mean that viewers at the end of Firefly feel a closeness, or even a sense of one-sided friendship to all the characters. But, as we also saw above, in Serenity, we may perceive some of the characters as background characters, and so while new viewers might enjoy them, they do not have enough time or incentive to invest so heavily in them. Clearly, in TV, an author can build up strong enough relationships, even with smaller characters, to make their deaths hit hard. In film, there is just not enough time to make this happen for every supporting character.
The difference between television and film viewing experiences is further apparent in the specifics of the last scenes of the film. At the end of *Serenity*, the remaining crew repairs their ship, which they had damaged and defiled in an attempt to blend in with the Reaver ships. This repairing of home is something *Buffy’s* and *Angel’s* characters are not allowed; however, even with the ship repaired, the crew remains broken, since two of its members are forever gone. An ostensibly hopeful exchange at the end of *Serenity* ("Think she’ll hold together?" “She’s tore up plenty, but she’ll fly true”) paradoxically emphasize how the crew never can return to normal. This is highlighted further in a following scene, when River becomes Mal’s co-pilot. Although the pair fills the cockpit, we feel the emptiness. As the camera pulls away, our eye is drawn to Wash’s dinosaurs, still perched on the edge of his station. Even in victory, Whedon forces us to dwell on the loss. Yet, again, how much of this loss we actually feel depends on what we brought to the movie ourselves.

While perceptive new viewers can recognize the dinosaurs from when Wash sat there before, they do not have the same associations between him and the toys that viewers who watched “Serenity” (101)—which features a scene in which Wash hilariously plays with them—do. In fact, the very last shot of the film, which directly recalls the film’s introduction of the ship\(^\text{64}\) may be enough to bring the story full circle for these new viewers. In other words, these new viewers may not actually consider the earth scorched very much at all. Viewers who watched the series will also pick up on this repetition, but as this scene was not their first glimpse of the crew, they have not gone full circle. Clearly, the long-term attachment of the televisual show enhances the emotional effect of the crippling that so frequently occurs in a “Whedon” ending. In

---

\(^{64}\) In both, a piece of the ship flies off of it and Mal wonders aloud what just happened.
these differences, we can again and again see evidence of the fundamental differences between film and TV, both in terms of our expectations of payoff and the audience’s engagement with characters.

**Conclusion: Evolving Authorship**

*Firefly* is clearly a Whedon show. It bares many of the markers we have identified as “Whedon,” including his themes, his use of genre, his treatment of the group, and his approaches towards characters. However, in each of these cases, we saw not only evidence of Whedon, but also of his growth, and the challenges he set out for himself. His later creation of *Serenity* both furthers our understanding of Whedon as a televisual auteur, and illustrates some of the differences between film and television.

While *Serenity* is a fine movie, particularly for fans of the original series, it was not a massive success. It did not spawn sequels or restart the series. It was not enough to spark the type of devotion Whedon’s series typically do. Immediately, we can hypothesize that this failure had to do with the fact that some of what Whedon was forced to drop in the translation of *Firefly* to *Serenity* were elements that we want and expect from a Whedon series, such as a close relationship with every member of a larger group and follow-through on long-term story arcs. The shortcomings of *Serenity* thus allow us to conjecture that Whedon is perhaps best defined as a televisual auteur; he clearly utilizes the medium for its unique properties, and his audiences respond well to his televisual decisions. At the very least, they suggest that understanding Whedon as a film auteur would require its own, separate study.
Conclusion

“But now we pick, pick, pick it apart. Open it up to find the tick, tick, tick of the heart…”

-Joss Whedon, “Heart, Broken,” from Commentary! The Musical

Through these past four chapters, we have gained a better understanding both of Whedon as an author and televisual authorship in general. Immediately, we saw that the relationship between an author and a series can be far more complicated than that of “showrunner” and “show.” Most significantly, we have come to an understanding of not just why it is fair to consider an individual like Whedon a televisual auteur, but what his authorship entails.

In the first chapter, I analyzed what Whedon’s narrative and aesthetic voice looks like on an episodic level by examining his specific uses of genre, his placement of the audience, and his focus on characters in “Once More, With Feeling,” “Hush,” and “The Body.” In the second chapter, I expanded the idea of Whedon’s authorship to a series level, by outlining his use of genre, the group (including the audience’s placement inside it), and arcs across all of Buffy and Angel. I then took a step back for chapter three to analyze the question of whether or not Whedon can meaningfully be considered his series’ author. Upon concluding that he can, I looked closely at three episodes that demonstrated the ways the personnel working on an author’s project can both successfully recreate and fail to recreate that author’s voice, and the effects this has both on our definition of televisual authorship and an author’s voice itself. In the fourth chapter, I analyzed Firefly, to confirm the tendencies I already identified as part of Whedon’s style and to see where he pushes and extends himself. I also

---

1 The commentary track to Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (Joss Whedon et all, 2008).
analyzed *Serenity*, which further highlighted some specific options available to televisual authors that do not directly translate into feature films.

Although we now have a significant understanding of Whedon’s televisual voice, what we do not have is a definitive or exhaustive list of elements Whedon’s series do or do not contain. That is because such a list is impossible to provide. In observing some areas where Whedon challenged himself as he moved from *Buffy* and *Angel* to *Firefly*, we have already identified ways that Whedon varies the tendencies I previously outlined. Further, just as “Beer Bad” functions far differently from what we expect or desire from an episode of a Whedon series, even individual episodes within his series can break away from a successful execution of the norm. Hence, we must bear in mind that what we have is more an outline or a summary than an all-encompassing definition. However, from the work done in these chapters, we can draw some significant conclusions. First, we can see that Whedon’s works tend to grapple with consistent themes. They focus on people who cannot easily fit inside their conflicted worlds, but still feel compelled to protect them. These people bond together, and, with the help of the others, grow and change themselves. They often make mistakes, although they typically find redemption from them. Whedon also tends to create moments of great happiness for his characters and his viewers, and then take them away, continuously pushing the idea that happiness is attainable, but not immortal.

Whedon clearly prefers to create series based in a diverse set of genres, from which he can utilize different tools, ideas, and images. He particularly likes to mix together multiple genres in ways that intertwine the stakes of storylines in each,
ensuring that we invest in all aspects of his universes. At the same time, he typically keeps the genres in tension with each other. He does this either through starting with genres that are easily brought into conflict, as teen melodrama and supernatural horror are, or by specifically charging them with tensions in his plots and overall universe, as he does with the Western and science fiction. This treatment of genre is directly connected to Whedon’s thematic idea of characters living in a world in tension with itself, and it helps Whedon directly translate the character’s conflicted states into our own experiences. Further, because audiences already understand genres, by basing his stories in them, he creates something that the audience can immediate latch onto. He also often uses genres with specific niche appeal, and larger fan communities. Hence, in utilizing multiple genres, he ties together these greater groups.

This last point is particularly significant, as we have already seen that the feeling of being in a group is essential to Whedon’s series. I previously analyzed various ways that Whedon bonds his audience to his characters. We saw, in particular, how his simulation of closeness with the group creates a type of intimacy with the series; we feel as though we are special “insiders” watching and appreciating it, even if intellectually we know we are actually watching something with widespread appeal. Yet, we can also see a larger trend of community emerging outside the confines of individual episodes. The fact that Whedon’s series (ideally) run for many years, over hundreds of hours, creates an actual commitment between the viewer and the series. While this commitment itself is grounded in television in general, Whedon combines it with our active feeling of participation, as well as the
presence of pre-existing generic cliques. When we watch a Whedon series, we feel like a special part of the team; when we are not watching, we feel like part of a larger, though still special, group of fans. At the same time, however, Whedon never locks out new audience members; instead he creates series that can be enjoyed on numerous levels, depending on the viewers’ familiarity with the series and its characters. Here, we can see that Whedon successfully balances his desire to form relationships between characters and the audience and the constraints of the television medium.

The final section I explored in Whedon’s style was his use of arcs. We saw that he typically includes and intertwines both major internal and external arcs. We have already seen how much of the arcs’ interconnection ties directly back into genre; the clearest example of this is Buffy and Angel’s storyline in season two of Buffy. Through more deeply examining how all the parts work together, however, we can find an even subtler connection between Whedon’s use of genre and his arcs: genre helps Whedon build in a version of what Jeanine Basinger refers to as “margins of safety.”\(^2\) In other words, he uses genre to give the audience enough distance in order to enjoy the characters and storylines, even when they behave in ways that might normally disturb us. In Buffy and Angel, specifically, Whedon frequently makes characters that we love do terrible things (like kill innocent people). However, because he usually ties these misdeeds to the supernatural horror genre (like Angel having lost his soul or Willow having been overcome by magic in her grief), we can continue to love them in their melodramatic arcs (and consider them “good”), once whatever has prompted their dramatic change no longer affects them. Yet, different

\(^2\) An idea discussed in her class “Directorial Style: Classic American Film Comedy” at Wesleyan University in Spring 2017.
genres mean different margins of safety. In *Firefly*, our main characters could never turn completely evil and then return to the fold, because there would have been no supernatural excuse.\(^3\) In this point, we can perhaps see the clearest synergy in all the Whedon tendencies we have outlined: Whedon gives characters the types of arcs that fit into his overall themes, and ties them to genre in ways that help the audience feel connected to them and their group.

We also saw that Whedon likes to conclude his arcs by killing off main characters and otherwise making it impossible for all the major stories we have invested in to continue beyond the bounds of the series (the exception of course being *Firefly*, which used *Serenity* to create this effect).\(^4\) A fan seeking to continue the adventures of the series in her own mind, or in fan-fiction, must either place her addition sometime in the middle of the series, ignore what actually happens at the end, or create something that responds to the new conditions established in the finale. While one possible interpretation of this is of Whedon asserting ownership over the series, it also has the distinct effect of forcing its viewers to mourn it. That is, by making it clear that the TV show could not come back (or at least could not come back in the same form), Whedon makes us actively grapple with the fact that it has ended. In this way, he also takes one final step towards reinforcing the communal experience of Buffy, as he leaves us, the loyal fans, to mutually mourn the loss of a shared experience. It is also an interesting continuation of the theme of happiness as fleeting, since it forces us to think back on the happiness we had watching the series.

\(^3\) River is allowed to be excessively destructive at times, but she *does* uniquely have a supernatural/science fiction excuse. Further, she has destructive moments, not entire arcs.

\(^4\) Again, while he did some continuations in comic form, these only work for a specific sector of his audience. Plus, in changing to a non-audio/visual medium, Whedon necessarily must produce something different from the television series.
now that it is completely gone. Clearly, Whedon not only has specific tendencies in terms of theme, genre, group, and arc; he weaves all these aspects together.

Since the creation of Buffy, Angel, Firefly, and Serenity, Whedon has continued to expand his oeuvre. Although this project must come to a close, these more recent works create many opportunities with which to further test and expand upon our understanding of Whedon. Whedon’s Dollhouse, which aired on Fox from 2009-2010, is a particularly interesting area of further exploration. It focuses on a woman, known most commonly across the series as “Echo,” who has been coerced into being a “Doll,” a person whose mind is wiped and personality is temporarily “imprinted” with another’s in order to cater to the rich. Immediately, we can see how its foundational themes directly tie into the common themes we found in Buffy, Angel, and Firefly. Although Echo and the other dolls can temporarily fit into any world or genre, without imprints they do not fit anywhere. In the face of these challenges of identity and ability, the imprintless Dolls form a community—one identified by an observing character in the episode “Gray Hour” (104) as instinctive “herd” behavior—and try to change themselves—although their initial struggle is not one of character growth but of character reclamation. Most obviously, the idea that happiness is temporary, but still worth it, is a clear foundation for the entire premise of rentable human beings. Thus, in Dollhouse, Whedon concerns himself with variations of the same thematic issues, paired with variations of the same solutions.

Additionally, Dollhouse ends by killing off major characters and putting a definitive end to the premise of the series; although we may be happy the characters no longer have to live as Dolls, this also means we can no longer watch the series we
committed to for the last two seasons. In digging deeper into this conclusion, and how it both mirrors and differs from the other earth-scorching conclusions, we can further our understanding of Whedon.

We can also look into specifics of the series to both confirm our idea of Whedon’s authorship and find more ways in which he stretches himself. By looking more generally at how the series uses genre—on the surface it seems uniformly science fiction, but it incorporates many different genres as Echo is made to be different people—we can further explore Whedon’s use of genre. By looking into character’s arcs and relationships with each other and the audience we can both strengthen and specify our understanding of Whedon. For example, it is immediately clear that Echo ties into Whedon’s “strong female” archetype, yet she bares even more similarities to some specific Whedon characters. The entire first season of *Dollhouse* focuses on the question of who Echo is, given that her personality has literally been wiped away. Most episodes in the first season end with little moments that indicate to us that Echo has retained some memory, and is becoming more than a shell of a human being. The last word she speaks in the original season finale (“Omega” [112]) is her own real name, “Caroline.” This character definition (and arc) of a woman who is victimized and must (re)discover her identity is incredibly similar to what we saw in both River and Dawn. However, it also functions as an extension of and experimentation with what Whedon has done with this character previously. While *Buffy* and *Firefly* include her as part of a larger group narrative, and *Serenity* foregrounds her for the span of a single film, *Dollhouse* focuses on a character going through this change over two seasons. Further, Whedon makes Echo’s growth non-
linear. Rather than a straight line (with a few regressions) from crazy and scared to more lucid and empowered, Echo’s growth across season one follows the pattern: human shell; completely new, fully-formed person; human shell with a little more self-awareness; completely new person; and so on. However, in season two, Whedon changes this model, giving Echo and her friends more steady personalities throughout. In analyzing more of the specifics of this growth pattern, such as how it can both delight and frustrate us as viewers, and why Whedon chooses to change it, we could uncover even more ideas about Whedon’s authorship as he experiments and then adjusts.

Whedon also wrote and/or directed numerous films following Firefly and Serenity. As I repeatedly articulated throughout, what I have illustrated in this project is a specifically televisual type authorship. However, approaching these films with an understanding of Whedon’s televisual style could both highlight some specifics of Whedon’s cinematic authorship, and potentially help us uncover aspects of his style that are independent of medium.

Even more interesting is what Whedon did that is neither completely film nor television. In 2007-2008, the Writers Guild of America went on strike. It was during this strike that Whedon had the idea for a web mini-series, Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (Joss Whedon et all, 2008). He wrote the three short episodes (together totaling around 42 minutes)\(^5\) with his brothers, Jed Whedon and Zack Whedon, and Jed’s

\(^5\) Given the short length of the series, the episodes are typically viewed together, as a single program. Hence, I will not specify separate episodes in my analysis, but consider them as one, cohesive work.
wife, Maurissa Tancharoen. Joss Whedon also directed the mini-series, which was released in mid-2008,⁶ and was the first of Whedon’s works to win him an Emmy.⁷

The series focuses on Billy (aka “Dr. Horrible”), as he attempts to win the love of Penny, defeat his archenemy Captain Hammer, and join the Evil League of Evil. Although at the logline level it is very different from the Whedon works we have already discussed, thematically it shares a clear through line with Whedon’s series. Billy, like the characters in Buffy, Angel, Firefly, and Dollhouse does not fully belong in any of the worlds he lives in. His “normal” persona is incredibly shy, and he is unable to fully integrate himself into everyday life. He also wants to be a supervillain, which unsurprisingly pits him against most of society. Yet, even this Billy fails to succeed at, and he is marginalized by the other super villains. While his attempts to become a villain seem opposed to the way Whedon’s other main characters typically feel a responsibility to protect their worlds, the reason Billy wants to be a villain is not actually so far removed. He explains in the opening monologue, “the status is not quo,” adding, “The world is a mess and I just need to rule it.” By taking over the world, Billy actually thinks he could make it better. Billy’s predicament also addresses the question of what happens if you cannot join a group of likeminded people, or if you pick the wrong group, and make all the wrong changes to yourself. Dr. Horrible further reinforces the ephemerality of happiness; even more tragically than in the other series, it never really gives Billy more than a small taste of

---


happiness, but at the same time implies that if he took a step back from his fixation he could have had it.

*Dr. Horrible*’s generic mix also fits directly into Whedon’s previously analyzed use of genre. First, the web-series is the product of many genres: it is a musical, a romance, and a superhero piece. It is also periodically a simulated video blog (or “vlog”), reflecting both Andrew’s use of the camera in “Storyteller” and a popular format of Internet video. Since superheroes typically loom larger than life, and confessional-style vlogs necessary bring their focuses to a personal, individual level,⁸ the superhero film and the vlogging format are somewhat at odds. However, for the rest of the genres, this is not necessarily the case. Many classic Hollywood musicals plainly and clearly incorporate romance. Similarly, romance is so ingrained in the superhero genre that heroes are frequently remembered in conjunction with their romantic opposite, like Clark Kent and Lois Lane. The combination of the musical and the superhero genres was a little less precedent at the creation of the mini-series than it is now,⁹ but there is nothing within the superhero genre that does not allow for song. In fact, both genres typically develop elevated and stylized universes, which do not necessarily contradict each other. *Dr. Horrible* thus presents an interesting mix of genres, some of which are and are not easily in tension with each other.

Hence, we can analyze Whedon’s approach to genre in *Dr. Horrible* through the lenses of his strategies in both *Firefly* and *Buffy*. Similar to the technique he

---

⁸ Zach Valenti, Lecture, Wesleyan University CFILM New Media Storytelling Workshop, Middletown, CT, April 1, 2017.
⁹ For example, in 2017, superhero television shows *Supergirl* (Ali Adler, Greg Berlanti, and Andrew Kreisberg, 2015-) and *The Flash* (Greg Berlanti, Geoff Johns, and Andrew Kreisberg, 2014-) had a musical crossover episode.
utilizes in Firefly, he directly builds generic tension between the romance and the superhero genres through his plot and characters. By making his potential couple a woman who fights for justice and a supervillain, Whedon puts their union into inherent conflict. In the end, Billy cannot join the Evil League of Evil unless he kills someone, but this act itself would already make him unlovable to Penny, even if it was not Penny that he killed. Further, just like how Buffy subverts a trope of the horror genre by focusing on the small, blonde girl, Dr. Horrible twists the superhero genre by making the supervillain the hero (and the superhero the villain). In this shift, Whedon creates even more generic tension. We expect the girl to fall for the superhero; this is a problem when we want her to end up with the supervillain.

At the same time, he uses the musical less as a direct point of tension than as something that highlights existing tension. We can draw many comparisons here to “Once More, With Feeling,” as Whedon uses the genre in the Buffy episode to similarly highlight conflict and amplify the audience’s experience of what is happening on screen. However, “Once More, With Feeling” is an episode of a non-musical series that temporarily incorporated the musical genre; Dr. Horrible is, in its entirety, a musical. This means that everything in Dr. Horrible, from the world itself to the plot and characters, was (presumably) constructed with the musical in mind. We should thus be able to find even stronger connections between this genre and the entire mini-series, as well as evidence of further experimentation. For example, the song “My Eyes,” in which Billy and Penny sing incredibly different words to the same tune (Billy sings “Listen close to everybody’s heart, and hear that breaking sound” over Penny’s “And I believe there’s good in everybody’s heart. Keep it safe
and sound”) sonically emphasizes the contradiction in their potential love. They can sing in harmony, yet still not listen to a word the other is saying. Even when they sing the same words at the same time (“I cannot believe my eyes, how the world’s…”), they give the phrase different endings to convey opposite meanings (“filled with filth and lies” versus “finally growing wise”). We can see this as a sort of repeat of the technique in “Walk Through the Fire,” in which Buffy sings about her friends abandoning her while they sing about coming to her aid. Yet, in Dr. Horrible, the song illustrates less a misunderstanding of other characters’ feelings than a fundamental incompatibility of beliefs contradicting an inherent compatibility as people. In “Walk Through the Fire,” Buffy really does have a support system she cannot see; in “My Eyes,” there is no correct singer, only an inability to agree on the text. Even so, they sing a beautiful duet. Similarly, in “A Man’s Gotta Do,” Captain Hammer gets in the way of Billy’s auto theft. In the process, Captain Hammer pushes Penny into a pile of trash. She emerges from it, joining the song to praise Captain Hammer. The two begin singing together, while Billy makes annoyed comments in the background, such as, “Are you kidding?” and “Did you notice how he through you in the garbage?” Our understanding of Billy’s frustration is enhanced by how in sync Penny and Captain Hammer are. Yet, because of what we have already observed about the superhero genre (that the hero and leading lady typically end up together), our frustration is colored with a feeling of inevitability. What we see in Dr. Horrible is clearly an amplified version of the use of music in “Once More, With Feeling,” and a world and story specifically constructed to be told and felt via its genres.
A similar extension of Whedon’s previous use of the musical genre is exemplified by the “Bad Horse Chorus” and “Bad Horse Chorus (reprise).” Before the first iteration of the song, Billy and his henchman Moist speak as Billy goes through the mail. Billy recognizes that one of the letters is from Bad Horse, the leader of the Evil League of Evil. We are treated to the contents of this letter via a choir of three men, dressed as cowboys, who pop into the frame from both sides. They sing the letter to a lively and fun tune, in a song full of horse puns and references. This is particularly humorous contrast, as the text of the letter encourages Billy to commit “a heinous crime” or “show of force.” Although Moist can clearly hear the contents of the letter being read aloud, neither Billy nor Moist acknowledge the appearance of these men. In a way, the trio functions like the Mustard man in “Once More, With Feeling,” although in this case Whedon even more explicitly makes the spectacle for us, rather than for his characters. Further, the Bad Horse chorus’s repetitions grow in absurdity, as they next pop out during a phone call and eventually appear in person at Billy’s house, resuming their choral position around a doorframe and with pints of beer. While Whedon does later deploy the Mustard man in the episode “Selfless,” with the chorus we can clearly see Whedon again capitalizing on the fact that Dr. Horrible was originally created as a musical, as he adds motifs and through lines to the entire text.

As we would expect based on our understanding of Whedon, all of the genres at play in Dr. Horrible are also used to build in moments of comedy. In the song “Slipping,” for example, Billy stops mid-threat to teach a reporter how to spell his name. In “My Freeze Ray,” Whedon balances subjective and objective shots as Billy
wishes he could speak to Penny. At one point, the subjective bleeds into the objective, as Billy sings, “Love your hair,” and Penny hears him and responds. Similarly, Whedon plays off of our expectations of the superhero genre by making the leader of the Evil League of Evil someone named “Bad Horse.” Bad Horse is certainly a strange supervillain name, but, in a world with a wide array of oddly named superheroes and villains, such as “Dr. Horrible,” “Captain Hammer,” “Moist,” and “Conflict Diamond,” it is not difficult to assume that this is just an evil human with a strange name and a horse fetish. Those more familiar with comic books may also have identified it as homage to “Dark Horse Comics,” the company that published the Buffy and Angel comics. Yet, in the final scene of the series, we follow Billy as he enters the conference room for the Evil League of Evil. Standing at the head of the table is none other than an actual horse.

As anticipated, all these uses of genre directly tie into the way Whedon treats another familiar area, the group. The vlog posts pose a challenge to Whedon’s tendency to include the viewer in his world, as they have the effect of placing the audience in the position of “audience.” However, within this, Whedon still finds ways to make us feel more like active participants than simply viewers. For example, in the second episode, Billy tells his audience that he is about to take his freeze ray on its maiden voyage. His confident sign off is immediately followed by a defeated groan as Billy begins a new video in which he explains how his plan failed. He adds, “I also need to be a little bit more careful about what I say on this blog. Apparently the LAPD and Captain Hammer are among our viewers. They were waiting for me at the mayor’s dedication of the superhero memorial bridge.” With this admission, Whedon
pulls us deeper into the on screen world by telling us that we are in the same position as Captain Hammer and the (fictionalized) LAPD.

Such decisions are especially significant in *Dr. Horrible*, as the plot focuses on a character that is trapped outside of a group he wants to join. Here, we can see another challenge Whedon sets for himself, since instead of placing us in a group, he aligns us with a character that cannot join one. Note that even as he rejects us from the group, he makes us outsiders with his main character, so that we are mutually fixated on the idea of being inside a group. Further, Billy is not completely without friends. His best friend/henchman Moist appears to be unconditionally accepting of him, like a Willow to Billy’s Buffy. However, Billy pushes Moist (and his other friends) away, causing us to actively consider the value and implications of joining the Evil League of Evil.

Since the entirety of *Dr. Horrible* is roughly the length of an average episode of *Buffy*, *Angel*, or *Firefly*, we cannot speak about its arcs the same way we could about the other series. However, this does not mean we cannot find many commonalities between *Dr. Horrible*’s arcs and Whedon’s other works. For example, like the pilots of the other shows, *Dr. Horrible* begins by placing Billy in a position to make friends and join a group. It also ends by destroying the equilibrium the normal series functions in, in a way both similar to and very different from the ways the other series end; in the finale, Billy is finally able to join the group he wanted to be a part of, but only because he has killed Penny, the person with whom he would have been happiest.
This brief survey of *Dr. Horrible* indicates a consistency in Whedon’s style between television and the medium of web-series. Yet, there is still much more room to analyze not only genre, the group, and arc, but also places where the medium has a direct impact on the storytelling and aesthetics. For example, we could explore the question of whether or not the generic mix of *Dr. Horrible* would be successful in a long-form format. We could also examine the treatment of the viewer and the main character, and analyze further how this particular use of the group is grounded in any of Whedon’s other works, or in other online content.

This project sought to uncover more than just what Whedon looks like as a televisual auteur; from the above chapters we can also draw many noteworthy conclusions about television and authorship in general. First, most unsurprisingly, there is an emphasis in television on long-term goals and long-term relationships. A more interesting component of this, however, is television’s ability to create a real-life commitment that concludes with a sense of actual mourning. This mourning is distinct from the sadness we may feel at the end of a film, which is a sadness due to empathy for characters or at specific situations, as it is a sadness at the loss of the medium. If we cry when a film ends, it is likely not because the film is ending; if we cry when a television series ends, it likely is.

Another key conclusion we can make about (traditional) televisual authorship is that television authors must create voices that can be imitated. This likely changes the way television shows are actually made, with the author making specific choices (about areas like genre and character) in order to provide a set of recognizable tools for others to work with. It also means that televisual authorship contains the
contradictions we have previously discussed, and that when an author’s personnel fail to create a satisfying episode, it falls to the responsibility of the author, whose job it was to outline those tools and guide that person’s usage of them. Finally, it means that, in general, traditional television series can be incredibly accessible to fans. Since the author must create something that other people can pick up and mimic, he (or she) necessarily leaves behind something for observant fans to latch onto. Once we understand the clear ways the author’s voice has been laid out for his (or her) team to follow, we can gain (what at least feels like) a functional understanding of how the TV show works; this helps us feel a sense of ownership over it.

Hence, this project points to numerous areas of additional study, beyond simply looking at more works by Whedon. We could perform specific analyses of other major television creators or producers, like Bryan Fuller, to see if they have a coherent voice across their works and, if so, to identify what that is. We could also look to more recent “auteur” television creators, who have extreme amounts of control over their series, such as Sam Esmail (who directed every episode of the second season of his series *Mr. Robot* [Sam Esmail, 2015]), or who create content for non-traditional networks, like Netflix. In addition to outlining these author’s voices, we could examine their works for specific ways that they differ from series that are created using a more traditional model. For example, in cases where one person writes or directs every episode, I hypothesize that we will find less of an emphasis on recognizable generic tools, since the author is no longer required to clearly lay out techniques for a team to recreate his (or her) voice from. We could also examine authorship in television series based on works in other mediums, such as Benioff and
Weiss’ series *Game of Thrones* (2011-), which is based on a George R. R. Martin book series. Such analyses would help us even more thoroughly tease out how narrative and aesthetics work together in televisual authorship.

As already hinted at by our foray into *Dr. Horrible*, we could also expand on this study by comparing authorship in television to authorship in other mediums, even beyond film. For example, there is actually an incredible overlap in this project’s ultimate definition of televisual authorship and the way that some Baroque painters and critics considered authorship as far back as the 1500s. Richard E. Spear focuses on the meaning of phrases regarding an artist’s “hand,” describing a system used by some Baroque painters in which their assistants would do most of the work in the style of the original painter, with the painter putting the finishing touches (or even just his name) on the piece. He explains of one artist, Guido Reni, that “already by 1610 an ‘original’ in the artist’s opinion was any work that he designed and approved of, regardless of whether retouchings were added to paintings that were not, literally, ‘by his own hand.’”10 Although some collectors were insistent on having work fully completed by the actual artist, Spear explains: “Thus, the ‘hand’ of an accomplished assistant could be as good as the master's and an acceptable substitute, so long as the workmanship and materials were not compromised.”11 This practice reads almost exactly like our understanding of televisual authorship and consumption, as something that can be (and often is) carried out by the author’s personnel based on his

---


11 Ibid., 85.
(or her) design. Whether or not we enjoy the work often depends on how high a degree of skill this is done at. The familiarity of this idea of authorship affirms both that our overall definition is not completely unfounded, and that expanding this discussion to other art forms is meaningful.

Ultimately, this project functions as both a profile of a specific author, and an attempt to add to the more general discussion of televisual authorship. As Whedon continues to create, and television continues to evolve, we will presumably see the concepts addressed in this project shift and change (as we already saw Whedon’s style do from chapters two to four). For now, however, we can conclude with the knowledge that we have developed a framework with which to assess works by a particular author, and a specific way of understanding what we really mean by the term, “televisual auteur.”
## Appendix

**SUMMARY OF BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER SEASONS 1 - 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Key Events(^1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| One    | Buffy starts school at Sunnydale High, makes friends with Willow, Xander, and Giles, and faces off against vampires sent by the Master, this season’s Big Bad.  
• By the end of the season, the team has become close with Giles’ love interest, the teacher Jenny Calendar, and Buffy’s love interest, the soulful vampire Angel.  
• In the final episode, the Master kills Buffy, who is quickly resuscitated by Xander. She kills the Master while her friends defeat a Hell monster. Cordelia Chase is not a full-fledged Scooby yet, but she does participate in the group battle. |
| Two    | Buffy returns to Sunnydale (and her friends) after spending the summer with her father.  
• The Scoobies fight the vampires Spike and Drusilla (who quickly kill The Master’s “Anointed One”).  
• We learn that there is another vampire slayer, Kendra, who was called when Buffy drowned.  
• Buffy has sex with Angel, whose soul is removed by the act. Angel becomes Angelus, a fearsome villain, who joins forces with Spike and Drusilla (and overtakes them as the Big Bad). We learn that Jenny Calendar is from the gypsy family that cursed him.  
• Cordy officially joins the Scoobies and begins a romance with Xander. Oz also joins when he starts dating Willow and becomes a werewolf.  
• Angelus murders Jenny, who was working to restore his soul.  
• In the two-part finale, Drusilla kills Kendra, Spike helps Buffy defeat |

\(^1\) These lists were constructed by me, based on events that are discussed prominently in this project and other literature on *Buffy*. I hope they are revealing, but recognize that they are not exhaustive.
Angelus (to regain the love of Drusilla), and Willow restores Angel’s soul using the method Jenny found and her growing magical ability. Buffy still has to kill Angel, since he has already opened the portal to Hell. She then leaves Sunnydale alone on a bus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• In the season opener, Buffy’s friends attempt to fight vampires without her. Buffy is living in LA under a fake name, but returns to Sunnydale at the end of the episode.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A new slayer, Faith, and a new villain, Mr. Trick, arrive. Angel returns from Hell—although it will take much more of the season for him to regain his old personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trick becomes a crony of the real Big Bad, the Mayor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Willow and Xander begin an affair. They are caught later in the season, and their significant others break up with them. Willow and Oz eventually get back together, but Xander and Cordy do not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Anya, a vengeance demon, appears. She is rendered human, and becomes interested in Xander.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Giles is removed as Buffy’s Watcher (although he stays as her mentor), and Wesley Wyndam-Pryce arrives to replace him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Faith accidentally kills a human. Unable to cope with what she has done, she joins forces with the Mayor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In the two-part finale, Buffy faces off with Faith, whom Buffy puts in a coma. During the graduation ceremony, the Mayor becomes a giant demon, and the graduates band together to fight him. After the battle, Angel leaves (to start his own spin-off). Cordy and Wesley also do not return to Buffy (but do appear as main characters on Angel).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Buffy, Xander, Willow, and Oz begin attending UC Sunnydale. Hidden within UCSD is the secret demon-fighting and -researching organization, “The Initiative.” It is run, we later find out, by Professor Maggie Walsh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Initiative captures Spike and puts a chip in his head. The chip stops him from harming people. He unofficially joins the Scoobies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Xander begins dating Anya. Willow and Oz break up, and Willow begins dating Tara. Buffy begins dating Riley, who works for the Initiative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• When Buffy tries to join the Initiative herself, Walsh attempts to have her killed. Walsh’s cyborg demon monster, Adam, kills her (Walsh) and begins galvanizing the other demons to action.

• Faith wakes up from her coma and temporarily body-swaps with Buffy. Spike and Riley aid Adam—the first in an effort to have his chip removed, and the second due to mind-control by the Initiative. As a result of Spike’s actions, the Scooby Gang has turned against each other.

• The final battle happens in the second to last episode, when Buffy literally binds together with her friends Willow, Xander, and Giles to defeat Adam. Spike switches back to the side of the Scoobies.

• Willow, Xander, Giles, and Buffy have strange dreams.

Five

• At the end of the season opener, Buffy has a teenaged younger sister, Dawn. Buffy and company are completely unfazed by Dawn’s appearance, acting as though she has been there all along. It is revealed four episodes later that Dawn is a “key” (a giant ball of energy that can open a portal between worlds), and has been incarnated as Buffy’s sister so that the Slayer would protect her. When Dawn was created, all affected parties had their memories modified.

• It becomes clear that Buffy does not love Riley, and that Spike loves Buffy. Midway through the season, Riley and Buffy break up.

• The goddess Glory, who we later learn shares a body with the human Ben, pursues Dawn so that she can open a portal.

• Buffy tells off the Watcher’s Council so that she can keep her group of friends together, and have Giles as her Watcher again.

• Buffy and Dawn’s mother, Joyce, is diagnosed with a brain tumor. She is declared cured, and then dies suddenly a few episodes later.

• Ben, who had previously assisted the Scoobies, brings Dawn to Glory to open the portal. Glory is defeated, but the portal cannot be closed until Buffy leaps into it. She closes it, but dies.

Six

• In the first episode, the living members of the Scooby Gang try to slay with the help of the “Buffy-bot” Spike created the previous season as a sick way of dealing with his unreciprocated love. Giles goes back to
England, although he periodically returns at key points of the season.

Willow, Xander, Anya, and Tara perform a spell to bring Buffy back from the dead. When Buffy returns she is frightened and confused.

- Buffy spends the rest of the season dealing with a fact that we learn soon after her resurrection—she was happier dead. One way she deals is by repeatedly sleeping with Spike, forming a dangerous sexual relationship with him.

- The season’s villains are three nerds—Andrew, Jonathan, and Warren—who try to be criminal masterminds. They face off with Buffy in numerous ways.

- Anya and Xander are almost married, but Xander leaves Anya at the altar. Anya becomes a vengeance demon again.

- Willow becomes addicted to magic, and Tara breaks up with her.

- Willow and Tara reconcile. When Warren tries to kill Buffy, he accidentally shoots and kills Tara. Willow is so distraught she becomes “Dark Willow.” She kills Warren, and then seeks to kill the two other nerds, and to destroy the world.

- Xander talks Willow down from her desired destruction (after Giles made Willow susceptible to such a talking down). Buffy has a more internal victory, gaining a new respect for her sister as a capable person.

- Spike, after having attempted to rape Buffy in a previous episode, undertakes (and succeeds at) trials to have his soul returned.

Seven

- In the first episode, Buffy begins training Dawn to fight vampires. Dawn starts high school, the principal of which is Robin Wood, whom we later learn is the son of a Slayer killed by Spike. Willow is staying with Giles in England to learn how to handle her magic safely. She returns to Sunnydale in episode three. Spike is living in the school’s basement, where he is spoken to by the First Evil, a monster that takes the form of the dead. In later episodes, the Scoobies help break the control the First has over him, and he becomes an ally once more.

- Anya becomes human again and eventually rejoins the Scoobies.

- Andrew becomes the team’s hostage, and later, an ally.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starting from the first episode of the series, potential Slayers across the world are targeted. Giles begins to round them up, and in episode ten brings the first of them to Buffy’s house to train and be protected. Willow begins a relationship with one of them (Kennedy).</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scoobies and Potentials face off with various monsters sent by the First Evil.</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith returns to help the team.</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First sends the evil preacher Caleb, who destroys one of Xander’s eyes and causes much more destruction. The group mutinies against Buffy and puts Faith in charge.</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel temporarily returns to give Buffy a necklace, which has the power to stop the First. She gives it to Spike, with whom she has begun a much more stable and mutual relationship.</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffy returns to the group with a plan. They enter a giant battle at the school, during which Willow casts a spell that makes every Potential in the world a full-powered Slayer. Anya and many new Slayers are killed in this battle. Spike’s necklace is activated, burning up him and everything its light touches. The rest of the group escapes Sunnydale as it turns into a giant sinkhole.</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hellmouth is closed, and Buffy is no longer “the one and only chosen.”</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

2 We will find out in the next season of Angel that he actually became trapped in this necklace, for later release.
Filmography

WHEDON-CREATED TELEVISION SERIES:

*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Created by Maurissa Tancharoen, Jed Whedon, and Joss Whedon. ABC, 2013-.


WHEDON-CREATED WEB SERIES


WHEDON-Written/Directed/Doctored Films:


OTHER TELEVISION SERIES:


The Flash. Created by Greg Berlanti, Geoff Johns, Andrew Kreisberg. The CW, 2014-.


Game of Thrones. Created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. HBO, 2011-.


Mr. Robot. Created by Sam Esmail. USA, 2015-.


Supergirl. Created by Ali Adler, Greg Berlanti, and Andrew Kreisberg. CBS, 2015-2016. The CW, 2016-.


OTHER FILMS:

*Cat People.* Directed by Jacques Tourneur. RKO Radio Pictures Inc., 1942.


**FILM SERIALS**

Bibliography


“About the Whedon Studies Association.” *The Whedon Studies Association*.


http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BigBad.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfjlttL9AZg.


http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0923736/.


http://www.whedonstudies.tv/journals.html.


http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LampshadeHanging.


http://buffy.wikia.com/wiki/Normal_Again.


http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PreviouslyOn.


http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/06/13/showrunner_auteur_theory_it_s_not_a_fallacy_but_a_useful_and_accurate_critical.html.


Westfahl, Gary. *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction*.


http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/YouFightLikeACow.