

## Introduction

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‘Art and feminism; my little show that changed things.’

(Whedon in Lavery and Burkhead, 2011: 40)

When asked in an interview what he was most proud of, Joss Whedon replied with the above comment. The (anything but) little show was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN 1997–2003) and it did, indeed, change things. It changed Whedon’s career; it changed the lives of tens of thousands of those who watched it; it established an expectation from fans and viewers of high quality writing on television long-form serial dramas; and much else besides. And it did this by treating television serial drama as ‘art’ and imbuing that art with a politics, in this case, ‘feminism’. He ensured that his television show (and all his later projects, too) told stories that were both artistically rewarding and politically engaged.

Whedon is a liberal in the American sense, which makes him more likely to support the Democrats than the Republicans, but also places him to the left edge of mainstream political action. Far from a radical in the British tradition of an Alan Clarke (Rolinson, 2005), he is nevertheless a radical voice in American mass entertainment, and part of that radicality derives from the fact that his works are mass art in the sense of striving to engage the viewer, reader, listener and draw out a genuinely important aesthetic-affective response. His work presents through its formal choices a polyglot sensibility that is axiomatically democratic. While he explicitly seeks to change the world (‘The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium’ [Lavery and Burkhead, 2011: 65]), his work is not didactic, though this is as much a pragmatic decision as a political or aesthetic one: ‘If I made “Buffy the lesbian Separatist”, a series of lectures on PBS<sup>1</sup> on why there should be feminism, no one would be

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<sup>1</sup> PBS is Public Broadcast Service, a non-profit public broadcaster and television show distributor and is commonly perceived as offering high quality educationally oriented content.

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coming to the party, and it would be boring' (Lavery and Burkhead, 2011: 65). While he does not make the connection explicit, his 'little show' as both an aesthetic object (art) and a democratic politics (feminism) contributes (and by implication is successful only if the art and politics work equally strongly) to 'changing culture'.<sup>2</sup>

This book is concerned with exploring how the questions of storytelling, art and politics intersect and interact in Whedon's works. Working across a range of media including television, film, comic books, the web and music, Whedon's writing has helped to shape the popular aesthetic landscape since the late twentieth century. In television, his shows (*Buffy*, *Angel* [WB 1999–2004], *Firefly* [Fox 2002], *Dollhouse* [Fox 2009–10], *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* [ABC 2013–present]) have received massive critical and popular acclaim by virtue of their willingness to devise formats that knowingly merge, re-shape, subvert, celebrate and invigorate genre drama with excellent writing and production standards that had been less usual in the medium in the thirty years or so leading up to *Buffy*. In addition, his well-publicised disputes with the American television networks have led to unprecedented industrial innovation – the moving of *Buffy* from The WB to UPN being the prime example. His web work (*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* [2008]) heralded an as-yet undeveloped model of creative control and distribution that could still prove to be one of his most lasting innovations. Similarly in film, the quality of his writing in movies as diverse as *Toy Story* (directed by John Lasseter), *Speed* (Jan de Bont), *Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet), *The Avengers* and *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard) has made him a hugely high-grossing and much sought after creative force: boxofficemojo.com estimate the total amount the films he has written has grossed at the truly quite staggering amount of over US\$3 billion (boxofficemojo.com, 2017). Turning the less than celebrated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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<sup>2</sup> Whedon's feminism is not a theoretically consistent one, but rather a broadly articulated challenge to the inequalities between the genders that he perceives. Strongly influenced in his political views by his mother ('a radical feminist, a history teacher and just one hell of a woman' [in Pascale, 2014: 30]), it was his surprise at attitudes at his private liberal arts university, Wesleyan, that prompted him to use writing as a vehicle through which to address these issues in order to help 'empower and protect them so they could in return empower and protect me' (in Pascale, 2014: 31). The writing however needed not just to offer strong women, but also to unsparingly address places that are 'dark' and have to do with passion and lust and things you don't want to talk about like 'the murderous gaze and ... objectification' (Pascale, 2014: 31). So Whedon's feminism, while clearly intellectually and politically understood and motivated has, in its artistic manifestations, an emotional core that is created through the mobilisation of the full array of televisual storytelling mechanisms.

(Fran Rubel Kazui) movie (1992) into the iconic television series, and then re-fashioning the critically acclaimed but short-lived *Firefly* in to the award winning film *Serenity* (2005) demonstrates that it is not just in the art itself, but in the processes surrounding the art that Whedon is so innovative. Setting himself up as a 'micro-studio' in order to produce his version of *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012) illustrates this point further. And moving away from film and television, Whedon has also sought media that are often even less highly prized as art forms through which to tell his stories. Continuing the narratives of all of his television shows in comic book form, Whedon not only allowed for the continuation of these narratives that had, in some cases, become so central to parts of popular culture, but did so in a way that promoted the comic book as a medium to those previously disinclined to treat it as a serious aesthetic form.

Despite his extraordinary range and depth across a host of media, this book will primarily focus on his television shows. The very concept of what a television show is has been challenged with the advent of web series, such as Whedon's own *Dr. Horrible*, and platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. For the purposes of this book, I am classifying a Whedon television show as something designed for television or small screen viewing (tablet, phone) and which is in episode form. This means that films, comic books, short web-based interventions, such as his attack on Mitt Romney during the 2012 presidential campaign (Whedon, 2012) and his 2017 video for Planned Parenthood, while being part of the broader discussion, will not form the main argument of the book.

This book, then, is going to try to provide an account of Whedon's career to date. It is not, though, a biography. My concern is not primarily with his life but with his works and the ways in which those works have had such an important influence in the ways outlined above.<sup>3</sup> Whedon is a writer, first and foremost, and his writing traverses song, film, television, comic books; it ranges across comedy tragedy, drama, horror, romance, science fiction, westerns, farce, melodrama, history; it blends genres, styles and modes; insists on emotional realism within fantastical fictional worlds, employs narrative complexity, character memory and development; it demands attention of its viewers and, in turn, respects

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<sup>3</sup> One way in which his life has become pertinent to discussion of his work is through the accusations made by his ex-wife Kai Cole about his sexual behaviour with female co-workers. This came to light after the current book was in publication so I cannot develop an argument here. However, I wrote a blog and posted a vlog that deal with the issue. These can be found at <http://patemanponders.blogspot.co.uk/2017/09/brand-whedon-feminism-and-damage-done.html> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNd1\\_fo2oZo&t=510s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNd1_fo2oZo&t=510s).

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them with careful, textured, subtle stories; and it is also a writing that moves beyond the page and into the studio where his linguistic skills are allied to his directorial, musical and acting skills, as well as to his capacity to produce. The combination of these skills, in the creation and development of his television series, will be the focus of this book. While I will be asserting the importance of Whedon's work, it is also true to say that in the twenty years since *Buffy* first aired, the kinds of clever, sophisticated storytelling employed by Whedon has become (thankfully) much more common-place. So much so that Jason Mittell (2015) can claim a new level of narrative complexity in the television of the 2010s and beyond. This complexity goes beyond Whedon's self-contained story of the week and its relationship to an overarching seasonal arc, to a show that '*redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance*' (Mittell, 2015: 19, emphasis in original).

Following a more-or-less chronological sequence, the three chapters in Part I present analyses of the shows in terms of their relationship with the networks, their story arcs, characterisation and themes (an industrial-thematic approach). Part II presents a series of case studies that pay attention to particularly important aspects of Whedon's aesthetic strategies, especially as they relate to genre and narrative, and these highlight the ways in which Whedon creates a televisual language that allows for his vision to be realised. This second part of the book focuses less on explicit discussions of politics, such as his feminism, and more on the aesthetic-production aspects that serve to realise the core themes of Whedon's works. To this extent, the chapters and case studies contribute to the established critical versions of Whedon, and will both draw from and supplement the already impressive body of Whedon studies. Furthermore, the chapters also seek to address other parts of Whedon's contribution to and importance in a discussion of the development of television more broadly from the late twentieth century.

I will do this by addressing a range of issues. First, the chapters will locate the different series in the broader context of the television industry, in particular paying attention to the importance of the networks and production companies, most notably Whedon's own, but also others. In this way, both the industrial contexts, which allow and impede Whedon's vision to be expressed, and the other people responsible for this process (co-producers, writers, directors, actors and so on), will be included in the discussion. This is not to diminish Whedon's achievements, but it is to insist upon them in more broadly conceived ways. Rhonda Wilcox develops a very useful way of thinking of Whedon's role in producing his shows, by likening him to 'a master builder of a cathedral' having the

overarching vision but needing a very large team of talented individuals and artisans to enable that vision to be manifested (Wilcox, 2005: 6). Describing his wife Kai Cole's plans for the house she designed for them, Whedon recasts Wilcox's metaphor saying, 'an architect is just like a filmmaker' (Whedon, 2013: 10).

However, a significant aspect of this book is that I do not want to reduce the shows to the man, or vice versa. A danger with the 'great man' view of any authorship, even if authorship is conceived of in the fashion identified by Wilcox, is that the celebration can become uncritical in the narrowest sense; the analyses can tend to view the product as a *symptom* of the producer. Or, worse, the product is used as a way to discover the 'truth' of the producer (reading a character as 'really' an avatar of the writer – Xander in *Buffy*, Wash in *Firefly*, Topher in *Dollhouse* as 'really' being versions of Whedon); and the opposite error, seeing the writer as offering us the 'truth' about the show (understanding Whedon's relationship with his mother is the key to understanding the characters of Joyce, Buffy's mother, and Maggie Walsh in *Buffy*, for example). The difficulty in such approaches is that they seek to simplify, contain and reduce narratives, characters and shows whose formats, stories and arcs assert complexity, multiplicity and heterogeneity. Whedon's artistic drive, his flair, his motivations are, of course, essential in the shows' construction and development, but it is an error to see an analysis of the shows as being an analysis of the man. Whedon clearly sees some autobiographical aspects to his own writing. He (2013: 9) says, reflecting on his own lack of perspicacity about himself, 'When I find out [things about myself] I usually find I've been writing about them for years.' However, recognising this as a truth about his own work, does not for me, endorse a psycho-biographical approach. To that extent, this book is slightly mis-named. It would be better called, *The Television Shows of Joss Whedon*. He, Joss Whedon, is not the story – his works and their contexts are.

Among these contexts are those people with whom he has created these shows – the actors, editors, set designers, producers, industry champions and, of course, the other writers. Discussions of some of these roles occur throughout the book, and I am indebted to the generosity and insight of Whedon collaborator, television producer and web show creator Jane Espenson for engaging in an email correspondence with me during the Writers' Guild of America strike (2007/08) and then allowing me not only to use the information from the correspondence to inform the main argument of the book, but also to include it as Appendix 1, so that all the information and insight she offered is available to everyone. She also gave me draft scripts of all the episodes she wrote on *Buffy*,

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*Angel* and *Firefly*, and they too have proven to be invaluable in some of the discussion in the current book.

I offer analyses of Whedon's shows that highlight their aesthetic achievements but which also draw attention to some of the most pressing questions in relation to aesthetic judgements of mass art forms, and art that is collaborative and industrial in scale. In order to do this, I will also provide accounts of industrial and production histories that directly influence either what Whedon was able to create or which, through his creations, have been forced to change or engage in debate about their status. Alongside this, the chapters and case studies presented will draw attention to Whedon's remorseless promotion and celebration of cultural literacy – few creators of art are able to span as many media, to engage in as many forms with each medium and to do so with reference to so many other forms, media and styles. The generic commingling that is so central to each of his works is matched by at least as much a sense of the necessary intertwining of the artistic, literary, musical, philosophical and political histories that have led to his creative moment. But while he is very aware of – and clearly inspired by – the 'Great Tradition' version of this history he is equally as inspired by the individuals and, almost more importantly, forms and media that have typically been excluded from that tradition.

The multi-genre conception of each of his artworks, and their investment in a wide range of cultural histories and events, indicate a politics that is also important to an understanding of Whedon's work. This aspect will be a recurring theme in the book, with the claim that his aesthetic strategies are always implicated in a certain politics being fundamental to its argument: aesthetics as praxis.

I (Pateman, 2012: viii) have argued elsewhere that television can be read as always already political, that we need to 'understand television as politics, representation as politics' but that we equally have to recognise 'politics as representation – which is to say that the act of creating a televisual aesthetic ... is understood as a political gesture. This gesture is implicated in histories of television, of art ... of exploitation and liberation.' The general political economy of television (often implicit or subjugated) in Whedon is explicit and central.

However much Whedon has influenced the world of television production and popular aesthetics more generally, his work has also, of course, been created and influenced by the possible conditions in which the work was created. This too will form part of the argument of this book. One of the most significant contexts in which Whedon has been working is the period described developed by Creeber and Hills (2007) as 'TVIII'. A critical term open to inevitable contestation, TVIII

continues the processes begun in the USA with the de-regulation of the television industry in the 1980s. The movement towards a fragmented market that also carries with it the technological shifts, such as, first, DVD, then Blu-ray, multi-platform access, streaming technologies and the web, opening up much greater levels of fan–producer interaction. An interaction that can be considered both positively, as a democratisation of the production process and a democratisation of voices, or more negatively, as the exploitation of fans' free labour in the service of production companies and networks. In a discussion around the concept of TVIII, Derek Johnson (2007: 68) describes one way of considering the ways that new technologies provide corporations with the capacity to exploit fan enthusiasm as free labour:

Digital media and their resultant economies afforded the culture industries a source of free labor. Digital and online spaces are largely corporate owned, but grow from the contributions of their users; the skilled and knowledgeable consumption of culture is transformed into productive activities both enjoyed by the consumer and exploited by the industry. Free labor, therefore, is the 'creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect' (Terranova 2000. 38). The intersection of television and new media via multiplatforming, I therefore argue, enabled the television industry to begin participating in this new economy of free labor.

Johnson (2007: 68) continues his analysis by locating, in particular, the role of advertising and promotion as one way that corporations utilise and exploit this resource:

As knowledgeable consumers of television culture, fans serve a productive, industrial function. As Murray (2004) argues, this utility is often channeled into the promotional sector to foster 'grassroots' buzz about television properties. This was the case with Universal's motion picture *Serenity*, adapted from the short-lived television series *Firefly*, although it could be argued that some compensation was afforded fan promoters. According to *Entertainment Weekly*, Universal offered fans prizes for exposing new viewers to the content stream (Jensen 2005, p. 20).

So, part of this book will engage, explicitly or implicitly, with the changing industrial and technological contexts within which Whedon has been working, as well as the effects these changing contexts have had on the production and the reception of his output.

In the year of Whedon's first television output, a script (see below), Ronald Reagan came to the end of his second term as president. His economic policies (often referred to as Reagonomics) had contributed to some de-regulation of the television industry, a process that continued over the next decade. It was one of Reagan's appointees, Mark Fowler,

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who, as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission approved Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.'s purchase of Metromedia, which gave him access to national VHF television stations, and control of 20th Century Fox – one of the major film production companies in the USA. The newly rebranded Fox Inc. soon had a television aspect, Fox Television Network, and the first new major network in over thirty years was soon to be born (Kimmel, 2004). Not only a new network, but a massive increase in cable networks meant that there was more and more air time to be filled, and a greater sense of consumer choice and market segmentation.

Fox Television's success, as the fourth network, bolstered the belief that a fifth and even a sixth network would be viable and it was within this climate that The WB and UPN networks came into existence. While smaller than their more established rivals (Fox, ABC, NBC and CBS) it is worth noting that The WB was part of Time Warner. The WB was launched just eight months before the repeal of the Financial Interest and Syndication (Fin Syn) rules on 21 September 1995 (Holt, 2003: 16). These rules, which had limited the amount of content a network could produce for its own prime-time audiences, had been a source of consternation for the industry since their inception. With their repeal, the major media corporations began a flurry of mergers and take overs as each bid to develop fully vertically integrated conglomerations capable of producing distributing and broadcasting shows. The WB, although new, was no small concern. Ten years previously, Ted Turner of Turner Broadcasting had bought MGM/UA for US\$1.5 billion. He had to re-sell a huge amount of the assets due to financial difficulty, but he kept the film library, which included, among others, *Gone with the Wind* (1939, Victor Fleming), *Citizen Kane* (1941, Orson Welles), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Victor Fleming) and *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz) (Holt, 2003: 17). These films, along with the Hanna-Barbera library of cartoons, which he acquired in 1991, became central to syndicated viewing as well as to his own range of channels including WBTS, TNT, Carton Network and Turner Classic Movies, which launched the year before the Fin Syn repeal. Just two days after the Fin Syn repeal, and seven months after the launch of The WB, Time Warner merged with Turner Communications creating a US\$7.6 billion:

Colossus that encompassed a vast array of entertainment properties from Warner Bros. film and television production, HBO, CNN, TBS, TNT ... to Warner Bros. Records, Time Life, Turner's world-class film library, the Atlanta Braves, and Atlanta Hawks and Time Warner Cable ... it brought a much larger magnitude [than Disney/ABC] and range of assets under the same corporate insignia greater potential for vertical arrangements. (Holt, 2003: 18)



Viewed in this context, the emergent network that would launch Whedon's executive producer career seems less vulnerable.

The role of the networks and other giant media conglomerates in Whedon's career means that any assessment of Whedon has to include discussion of their development, and his relationship with them. Not only that, but the complex financial relations between Whedon as executive producer and Mutant Enemy, his production company, alongside other vested interests will be, at least, in the background of much of the discussion. As Catherine Johnson (2007: 7) discusses, in relation to *Buffy*:

However, in the era of TVIII, branding is not simply a feature of television networks. The dominant practice of co-producing means that one programme could potentially be understood as part of the brand equity of a range of different companies. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a co-production between 20th Century Fox Television, Mutant Enemy, Kuzui Enterprises and Sandollar Television. Brand logos for all four companies appear at the end of each episode. Meanwhile the series was initially transmitted on The WB network, where it was a central part of their re-branding strategy as the teen network in the mid-1990s (see Johnson 2005). However, the series later moved to the emergent UPN network, while 20th Century Fox distributed the series on DVD and video, and licensed its merchandise.

The financial rewards to be derived from ownership of particular brands, and the capacity to develop ancillary markets for copyrighted products, is one of the driving forces behind so many of the massive multimedia conglomerate corporate mergers. As Johnson (2007: 7) continues:

However, the example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* suggests that the unique identity associated with a programme is one that can be exploited by the owner of the rights to the programme across a range of different media. While this does not necessarily place power in the hands of production companies such as Mutant Enemy, it does suggest that owning the rights to programming emerges as a potentially valuable way to make profits within the era of TVIII.

As the conditions in which a show would be aired were changing, so too were the technologies designed to allow for the repeated viewing of that show. While VHS videos had been available for over two decades, the quality was not good and the ability to easily find a section, rewind and still-frame were limited. Video certainly offered a film or television show a sense of permanence that had previously not existed, and as such had helped to begin the processes by which the assumed transience (and therefore unimportant and triviality) could be challenged and a greater

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sense of seriousness be afforded to, especially, television as an object of scholarly scrutiny. But it took the appearance of the DVD to fully realise the concept that a show could not only be repeatedly viewed, but that many additional layers of information could also be offered: screen shots, commentaries, scripts, interviews, overviews.

It is not coincidental that the year of *Buffy*'s television premier, on a new network, was also the year that DVDs were first test marketed in the USA (a year after Japan, and a year before Europe). This new technology allows, as Hills (2007) notes, the television text to be removed from the flow of TV scheduling, and instead allows it to stand in isolation, as a discrete aesthetic object. He rightly points out that only certain kinds of television texts can be isolated in this way, and that the text produced by this strategy of isolation also is related to questions of authorship.

Whedon's success cannot be attributed solely to the DVD, but it is certainly true that what DVD technology allows in terms of close analysis, bounded objects, textual valorisation and repeated viewing means that his whole career as a television producer of highly regarded television texts has coincided with a technology exactly designed to celebrate and analyse the kinds of texts he creates. As Hills (2007: 49) suggests:

If DVD culture works, partly, on television to re-position many of its texts as symbolically bounded and isolatable 'objects' of value, then as a machinery of valorisation stressing the 'total system' of TV serials and series, it works to popularise 'close reading' and the artistic re-contextualisation of some TV content.

A show that benefitted from the possibility of this re-contextualisation was the popular Roseanne Barr vehicle, *Roseanne* (ABC 1988–97). Whedon's first credited contributions to a television show was on this sitcom in 1989. Hired to the writers' room, Whedon penned (and then had 're-written beyond recognition' [Bennett, 2011: n.p.]) five scripts. His first, 'The Little Sister' (R season 2, episode 2 [S2E2]) aired on 19 September 1989. Almost a decade to the day later, the second season of his hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was airing on The WB – a network that had not existed at the time of his writing for *Roseanne*. This was followed by 'House of Grown-Ups' (R S2E5), 'Brain-Dead Poets' Society' (R S2E10), 'Chicken Hearts' (R S2E13) and 'Fathers and Daughters' (R S2E23). 'Fathers and Daughters' was broadcast the same year that Whedon was writing for the film-turned-television comedy, *Parenthood* (NBC 1990), a show produced by David Tyron King, which was cancelled after a very brief run. His two scripts, 'The Plague' (P S1E3) and 'Small Surprises' (P S1E8), along with his *Roseanne* work meant that Whedon was attracting attention as a talented and reliable comedy writer that would lead to a number of

jobs writing loop lines for films. This involved a short dialogue or joke that would help connect one scene to another, and in this capacity he wrote lines for Kim Basinger and Alec Baldwin in *The Getaway* (1994, Roger Donaldson) and for Sharon Stone and Gene Hackman in *The Quick and the Dead* (1995, Sam Raimi) (Havens, 2003: 20). At the same time, he was awaiting news of the script for a feature film he hoped to get produced, called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Optioned by Sandollar in 1988, it was finally offered to Fran and Kaz Rubel Kuzui in 1991 who agreed to make the film if Fran Kazui was to be the director. 20th Century Fox agreed to pay US\$9 million to make the movie in exchange for worldwide rights. The film and its aftermath will be discussed in Chapter 1, but for now the important thing to note is that Whedon was a recognised television writer, had a film script in production and was also working as a script doctor on major Hollywood films, such as *Speed* and *Waterworld* (1995, Kevin Reynolds).

But outside of the industry, he was essentially unknown, like most television and film writers at the time (unlike film directors). Twenty years later he is a household name. The television industry has changed dramatically and Whedon remains as committed as ever to the importance of mass art's 'culture-changing' function. Declining to call his work political (I will, however maintain that his aesthetic strategy is praxis), Whedon said in early 2017:

It's not useful for an artist, for their art, to be political ... You kind of have to separate the art from the politics and do them one at a time. My politics are all over my shows. *Ultron* was basically bagging on The Avengers for being out-of-touch rich people. It's always a conflict for me. (O'Connell, 2017)

And it is a conflict that will animate much of the rest of this book.