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"Go ahead! Run away! Say it was Horrible!":

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog as Resistant Text



(1) "Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death." So began Joss Whedon's 20 May 2007 letter to the Whedonesque.com community regarding the death of Dua Khalil Aswad. [1] This post was preceded two months earlier by a letter to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) calling for the removal of the rating for the film *Captivity*, a torture-porn horror film, and followed a little over a year later by the broadcasting of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. [2] While commentaries on *Dr. Horrible* have focused on the internet production's link to the 2007-2008 Writer's Guild of America strike, a connection which Whedon repeatedly has made as well, [3] the construction of gender, sexuality, and violence within the internet serial connects it not only to Whedon's oeuvre as a whole but also, and more specifically, to the death of Khalil Aswad and Whedon's stand against torture-porn horror. While easily read as a standard origin narrative for the story of a supervillain, one which some [4] claim works against the strides in narrative representation of women which his work on *Buffy* and his depiction of River in *Firefly/Serenity* represents, [5] when read in conjunction with his letters denouncing the murder of Khalil Aswad and the production of the film *Captivity*, *Dr. Horrible's* function as a self-reflexive deconstruction of the former's patriarchal narrative becomes more evident. An analysis of the construction of the gaze and storytelling within *Dr. Horrible* functions to further cement this reading. Although *Dr. Horrible* presents us with the death of the lead female actress in front of a score of cameras, it utilizes a resistant gaze in the construction of said actress and confronts the objectification and exchange of women at the heart of patriarchal discourse. Simultaneously, through its production, distribution, and consumption patterns, *Dr. Horrible* emphasizes community in the face of such dehumanization.

(2) Dua Khalil Aswad was a seventeen-year-old, Kurdish practitioner of the Yazidi religion. Authorities believe she was killed as a result of the mistaken impression that she had converted to or married into the Muslim faith, since she was seen in the company of a Sunni Muslim man. Up to 1000 men participated in her stoning, according to reports by Independent Kurdish newspapers (Kurdish). Significantly, these so-called "honor" killings almost always target women, who, it is believed, have shamed the family from which they come. In Iraq, honor killings in the dozens are reported each year; globally, the numbers are in the thousands (Tawfeeq and Todd). According to Yanar Mohammed, President of the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq, and Nazaneen Rashid, a founding member of Kurdish Women's Rights Watch, the practice of honor killing had almost died out in the 1980s, although the practice began an upswing in the 1990s. After the Iraq-U.S. war began, numbers increased a great deal, with a day-by-day increase in Kurdistan. In October 2006, 130 women's bodies were left unclaimed by family members, numbers which generally may be attributed to shamed families, according to Mohammed and Rashid. This practice thrives in part because the penal code enables lenient treatment of those family members who participate in honor killings (Garvey).

(3) Clearly, there are issues not only of gender but of religion, culture, and nation at play in these incidents. What apparently caught Whedon's eye about this particular case was the treatment of Khalil Aswad's death. In Whedon's post, he expresses horror and outrage at not only

this woman's murder but also the treatment of the murder of a woman as spectacle; the act of passively watching the abuse of women while actively recording it, foregrounded in the title of his post, becomes the subject of it: ". . . [T]he footage of the murder was taken—by more than one phone—from the front row. Which means whoever shot it did so not to record the horror of the event, but to commemorate it. To share it. Because it was cool" ("Let's Watch"). The cell phone videotaping of Khalil Aswad's murder then was distributed via YouTube.com and the CNN website, where it circulated (and continues to circulate as of this writing) as an object for consumption. [6]

(4) One might expect Whedon to simply denounce our callousness as producers and consumers of real horror—something which, he admits, has "been said"; however, instead he goes on to deny what is regularly expressed within American culture: American cultural superiority in the face of this tragedy. He writes, "Women's inferiority—in fact, their malevolence—is as ingrained in American popular culture as it is anywhere they're sporting burkhas" ("Let's Watch"). He wonders why "the act of being a free, attractive, self-assertive woman is punishable by torture and death" ("Let's Watch") and, in keeping with his assertion of a cross-cultural lens, he draws the reader's attention to the trailer for *Captivity*, a film directed by Roland Joffe. Both productions—the recording of a real woman being murdered horrifically in front of a live audience and the filming of a fictional woman being tortured—are, Whedon writes, "available for your viewing pleasure" ("Let's Watch"). But they are not available from the space of Whedon's temporary soap box. Instead, the link on whedonesque.com takes the reader to the site for Equality Now, circumventing the hyperlink convention of taking the reader to the website being discussed (in this case, CNN or YouTube).

(5) One might argue that Whedon has betrayed this refusal to glorify voyeuristic and sexist horror in his internet serial sensation, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, since the serial concludes with the death of Penny in front of a score of cameras, the wielders of whom did not intercede in her death but merely recorded it. [7] It, too, is "available for your viewing pleasure" on either hulu.com or DVD. Those recording Penny's death are interested in her not as a person but as a conduit to sensationalist reportage of the sort seen on CNN in relation to the death of Khalil Aswad. Horrible and Hammer—our male leads—are the real subject of their reports, and these reporters cannot even be bothered to find out Penny's name: her death is reduced to such vague headlines as "Hero's Girlfriend Murdered" and "Country Mourns What's Her Name." [8] Additionally, some critics contend that the representation of Penny was anti-feminist, with some characterizing her as a "refrigerator woman," [9] while others have argued that Penny was punished for having intercourse with Hammer, a classic trope within 19th century fiction as well as the genre of horror. [10], [11]

(6) In an interview with fans, Whedon admitted that, "Penny is not the feminist icon of our age" ("Joss Whedon Talks"). If nothing else, Hammer's throwing of Penny into the garbage, after which she gazes at him adoringly, is a potential indication of Penny's problematic status: even Horrible notes this mistreatment in lyrics. But she gets too caught up in the romantic story: handsome man swoops in and saves innocent young woman from certain death, and they live happily ever after. In a self-reflexive move not uncommon in his work, *Dr. Horrible* repeatedly references storytelling and the gaze as if asking the audience to look closer at the narrative. This is where it seems most clear that Whedon has forged a link between *Dr. Horrible* and his observations from 2007 regarding stories of female subordination in which the female body is one which should be watched, controlled, and punished.

(7) Storytelling and the gaze—how we tell our stories, what stories we listen to and let guide our lives, how we look at the world around us (both literally and metaphorically) and let that

vision guide our stories, and, ultimately, who is in control of the script of our lives—has been exceptionally important to minority groups, including women. Repeatedly, feminist theorists (as well as queer, critical race, and postcolonial theorists) have emphasized issues of voice, agency, and objectification in representation. The subject of representation and the stories we tell is one with which Whedon has repeatedly contended in his own work, [\[12\]](#) and it is one which he highlights again in *Dr. Horrible* and in his discussions of the circumstances of Khalil Aswad's death and the production of *Captivity*. [\[13\]](#)

(8) Storytelling is referenced in a variety of ways, including the emphasized act divisions, coming as they do at the beginning of each installment. It is also referenced through the opening set up of the blog format, which makes manifest both the story and the gaze. Laughing artificially, Horrible informs us he has been seeing a vocal coach to improve his mad scientist laugh: "Lots of guys ignore the laugh, and that's about standards." It's also about the traditional story of the villain and what it takes to become one. In the opening musical number, Billy sings about finding the words to tell Penny a story, one about the way he feels. Later he sings about what "a man's gotta do," as does Hammer; both are telling us the story of their masculinity, a point to which we will return later, and it is one in which the hero gets the girl. The opening of Act II lets us know that Horrible has "inadvertently introduced [his] archnemesis to the girl of [his] dreams, and now he's taking her out on dates and they're probably going to French kiss or something." He is constructing a narrative not about a real girl but about the girl of his *dreams*; he also is constructing a narrative of heterosexuality. Hammer, too, constructs a heterosexual narrative of impressing the girl through material possessions and sexual prowess in order to sleep with Penny a second time. He refers to the stories he's heard about sexuality: "they say it's better the second time; they say you get to do the weird stuff."

(9) Penny's story clashes with those of both men. While Horrible sees the evil within himself rising, Penny sees harmony on the rise. Penny refers to her own story: "here's the story of a girl who grew up lost and lonely, thinking love was fairytale and trouble was made only for me." Like Hammer, many of her responses take the form of clichés: maintaining hope in the darkest hours, keeping one's head up, and remembering that everything happens for a reason and someone always has it worse than you. However, Penny begins to question the clichés by realizing they are stories written by someone else: "this is perfect for me—so they say." Her evocation of "so they say" is different from that of the newscasters, the groupies, Hammer, or even Horrible in that she questions the story: "Have I finally found the bay?" "Should I stop pretending [that this will end happily] or is this a brand new day?" Her romance with Captain Hammer, she "guesses," is "pretty okay." Meanwhile, she's waiting in the laundromat for Billy.

(10) When Hammer takes the stage at the opening of the homeless shelter, he references a variety of clichés, including "everyone's a hero in their own way," home is where the heart is (so "your real home is in your chest"), and Lassie. Hammer's use of clichés is so excessive and absurd that it makes clear his inability to create satisfying narratives. He only knows one narrative: that of himself as desirable superhero with both women and men swooning at his feet. When he tries to exercise new muscles, such as the "deltoids of compassion," and learn a new story, he fails, frozen in his tracks. It is only in subverting clichés that these characters find power, as does Billy when he decides to achieve his goal by killing Hammer: although the sun is high and the birds and angels are singing, it is not because he is in love or finds life so beautiful (emotional conditions to which such phrases are generally linked). Penny, in turn, is killed by the narrative these men are imposing upon her. It is clearly ironic (to the audience and to Dr. Horrible) when she states, "It's okay. Captain Hammer will save us," although she says it without comprehending the irony: clichés fail her once more. Horrible responds with, "Here lies everything I ever wanted at my feet." He has achieved the goal of his story, but the price is Penny's life; she will remain a dream girl,

subordinated to his desire. By the end, Horrible asks us to reconsider our firmly held beliefs: "So your world's benign? So you think justice has a voice and we all have a choice?" He lowers his goggles over his eyes as he dresses in his now bloodred lab coat, indicating his changed vision of the world and his loss of innocence.

(11) Like storytelling, and irrevocably linked to it within cinema, the gaze is fundamentally a part of these stories and those of Khalil Aswad and *Captivity*. While the two latter examples rely upon the act of gazing upon women as an assertion of patriarchal control, *Dr. Horrible* depends upon the subversion of the gaze. Part of this is due to the ways in which the gaze consciously is made manifest. Rhonda Wilcox, in her essay on "'Breaking the Ninth Wall' with *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*: Internet Creation," argues that we, as audience, "become more conscious of our roles as watchers—and perhaps as creators of the screen image, the video blog." This is due to the structure of the serial, which begins two of its three entries with Horrible sitting in front of his computer, creating the blog. [14] It is also due to Hammer's (as well as the groupies' and newscasters') direct address to the camera. The third segment of the serial, as Wilcox notes, begins with a television set and newscasters happily and superficially relating Hammer's foray into charity: "It's a good day to be homeless," report the male and female anchors in a line markedly insensitive to the homeless population. They follow the line, "Hammer's call to glory: let's all be our best!" with "Next up: who's gay?," the latter acting as a clear subversion of the former line. The construction of the media in this scene, during Hammer's ceremony and after Penny's death, works as an indictment of the superficial and sensationalist coverage of issues within media today. The media tells the tale of Captain Hammer, Dr. Horrible, and Penny, but the story they tell is about celebrity and the effect of events on men rather than the story of a young woman killed tragically as a result of machismo (bringing us back to Dua Khalil as well). There is no analysis of the causes of Penny's death; the media cannot be trusted even to get all the facts, such as her name. They may "take a pic, do a blog, tell the tale"; they may even "run away, say it was Horrible," but their reportage remains superficial and sensationalist.

(12) The computer and television screens through which we watch these elements unfold are not the only sources of an emphasis upon the gaze; there are also the glass doors of dryers at the laundromat, the glass of the homeless shelter, and picture frames. Dr. Horrible's goggles also draw attention to the act of watching and, specifically, Horrible's gaze. The use of split screens also draws attention both to the gaze and the constructedness of the story; significantly, in one of these, Horrible's frame pushes Penny's frame off the screen as they sing "So They Say." Horrible's vision of the future is the only one that matters to him, not Penny's wistful wondering over whether she should continue with the story others seem to be writing for her. Billy's stalking of Penny is marked visually and narratively by Billy admitting that he knows her routine at the laundromat, gazing upon pictures he's taken without her knowledge, and skulking around, hidden, in order to observe her dates with Hammer. Additionally, the song "My Eyes" draws attention to the gaze of these characters, although they each come to different conclusions about what they are seeing. Billy's gaze, while emphasized, does not suture [15] the viewer into identification with him (and the resulting objectification of Penny) due to its and the serial's clearly artificial construction. At the end of the serial, the viewer's gaze becomes one with the cameras at the dedication ceremony, coming in behind television cameras and dollying forward to a position in front of the stage; the viewer becomes complicit in watching the events unfold, much like the reporter who sits there, scribbling notes, while pandemonium erupts. It is not an innocent position; we do nothing to fight Horrible or Hammer or save Penny. The gaze is not hidden in an attempt to make what we are watching seem real (as is the case with most Hollywood-produced cinema) and authentic; instead, the gaze is made manifest and, thus, more readily deconstructed. Such self-reflexivity is nothing new to Whedon. [16]

(13) Part of this visible construction of the gaze is due to the low-budget visuals of *Dr. Horrible* as well as conscious choices in style. One of the few traditionally cinematic scenes is the "Laundry Day" musical number, which, again, emphasizes the gaze; it also emphasizes the obstacles between Billy's gaze and the attainment of Penny as they are separated by four glassed dryer doors (the viewer is separated from Penny as well by the glass of her dryer door). The lighting in this scene and other laundromat scenes is bright, but when the transition is made to the Billy-Penny dance number (a section which is purely instrumental), the lighting is warmer and a subtle iris effect is used, underscoring the romance of this moment as well as the formalism of it. Generally, the laundromat scenes seem to use available lighting coming brightly through the large, plate-glass window; the light is sometimes harsh, casting an unflattering white light upon the actors' faces and washing them out slightly, especially Felicia Day. Her fair complexion becomes very white in some of these scenes. Lighting is an issue as well in the "Brand New Day" number. While Billy leaves the laundromat singing "the sun is high," the actual lighting of that moment is low; homes surrounding the laundromat have their lights on already, since dusk is settling. This was a circumstance of the limited time they had to shoot numbers, as Whedon remarks on the commentary ("The Making...: The Music"). However, when they switch to green screen mode in order to showcase a gigantic *Dr. Horrible*, the sun is, indeed, high. Such continuity issues underscore the production as constructed, creating a break in its illusionism.

(14) In addition to formalist musical elements in which people burst into song to express their emotions or the Bad Horse chorus appears, there are occasions in which the formalist elements disrupt somewhat realist scenes, such as when Billy descends into a stairwell and returns within a moment as *Dr. Horrible* (a convention of superhero stories, such as Superman, as well). When Penny and Hammer eat at the shelter, the composition of Hammer's shot is such that the audience waits to see the change in servers behind Hammer; we are clued in that something will happen behind him by the positioning of Hammer off center with the server to his left and at the top of the frame (a position of dominance) in deep focus. The split screens, mentioned above, also function to draw our attention to the form of the production, causing us to look at the frame rather than be drawn through it and into the story. When Captain Hammer saves Penny by throwing her into the garbage, the moment functions not only to suggest Hammer's treatment of women, but also to emphasize the subversion of the narrative; while one would need something soft upon which to land if one were pushed out of the way by a superhero, several stacked mattresses or a worn out couch waiting for the garbage or even a pile of leaves would have sufficed. The standard romantic superhero moment does not feature garbage.

(15) The romance does, however, generally feature a strikingly beautiful woman, at least in Hollywood. Felicia Day, while attractive, is not made glamorous in this production. This was brought home to me in watching the video she made for her own online serial, *The Guild*. "Don't You Want to Date My Avatar?" features a gorgeous Day, complete with hair in gently falling curls, attractive complexion, and somewhat revealing clothing. The lighting is flattering as well. The Day featured in this music video is much more traditionally Hollywood beautiful; the Day of *Dr. Horrible* is a much more realistic embodiment of everyday women. Whedon's choice to represent Day realistically in this serial (and season seven of *Buffy*) is a choice that resonates when discussing the manufacture of the gaze and the representation of the female body through it. Hammer even points out Penny's unremarkable features and his objectification of her: Penny's a "quiet, nerdy *thing*—not my usual" (my emphasis). By pointing out that they "totally had sex," he attempts to subject her to the gaze of the audience as well as his own gaze. She rejects that objectification, however, through both expression and movement: she removes herself from the stage.

(16) Unlike the treatment of Khalil Aswad's death or the trailer for *Captivity*, Penny's death is not eroticized. She is not tortured in front of cameras in order to provide 'entertainment.' The

penetration of Penny's body by parts of the death ray occurs off camera and does not serve to titillate. [17] Nor is it treated – by characters, bystanders, or director – as being her fault. Horrible's discovery of the wounded Penny is also a linguistically silent moment: there is no dialogue or singing at this moment, marking it as one of the few quiet moments of the series. Her death, too, is uncinematic: she doesn't die beautifully. She slumps against the wall with hardware protruding from her chest and stomach, struggling for breath. She dies not with her eyes fluttering closed but with them wide open. Billy *does* pick her up and carry her to the gurney, but her head dangles over his arm; she is not held to his chest in a romantic embrace that suggests she is simply sleeping. She is rather awkwardly placed on the gurney and wheeled away as pictures are snapped. Although the cameras do not record the penetration of her body and her death is not a purposeful assault, like that of Dua Khalil Aswad, her death is immediately and sensationally recorded and broadcast.

(17) One of the criticisms of *Dr. Horrible* as a feminist production is that Penny's character is developed very little: the audience knows little more than Hammer's groupies, who repeat hearsay: "They say he saved her life. They say she works with the homeless and doesn't eat meat." She likes frozen yogurt, has been fired from at least a few jobs, has been unlucky in love, and generally does her laundry at the laundromat twice a week. After their initial encounter, she's also somewhat suspicious of Captain Hammer's authenticity as a sincere human being. She's certainly no Buffy, Willow, Zoe, or River in terms of what we might term her "kick ass" quotient, [18] and she's certainly not developed as much as any of these, even speaking relatively, within the span of the 42-minute serial. More time is spent in developing the character of Dr. Horrible, the protagonist of the series. Both Hammer and Horrible gain attention through robust singing and enjoyable lyrics; Felicia Day was directed to sing with less force in order to maintain her quiet demeanor as Penny ("The Making of *Dr. Horrible: The Music*"). [19] Trapped between the egos of these two men, Penny's function is that of love interest for Horrible and Hammer; additionally, her optimism provides a foil for both Horrible's violent cynicism and Hammer's narcissism. [20]

(18) And this is yet another example of the connection between Penny's death and that of Dua Khalil Aswad, more than the merely superficial correspondence of the death of each within one year of each other. [21] Khalil Aswad was treated as an object of exchange within her culture. It was permissible (within Kurdish culture) to stone her to death because she had allegedly shamed her family by being with a man of another faith and converting to that faith herself. Khalil Aswad did not own her own body; instead, it was subject to the mandates of the men of her family. Her desires, beliefs, and dreams did not matter if they conflicted with the latter. Like Khalil Aswad, Penny is treated as an object of exchange by Hammer and Horrible. [22], [23] She is caught in a violent tug of war between them and functions in a manner similar to Khalil Aswad.

(19) She additionally provides a heterosexual object for the exchange of desire and a means to the construction of masculinity between Hammer and Horrible. [24] However, unlike more conservative fictions which attempt to conceal the heterosexual triangle, Whedon often makes evident the sexual competition between men and the violent results of such competition for women. [25] Were Whedon depicting Penny merely as a failed angel in the house, [26] punished for her sexual exploits, this dynamic would not be revealed as explicitly as it is. From the very beginning of the serial, and previous to it, [27] Horrible and Hammer are more important to the formation of each other's identity than Penny. Within the confines of the serial, before Penny is introduced, their interdependence is established through an e-mail sent to Horrible by Johnny Snow. When the latter, another supervillain wannabe, attempts to assert his credentials by setting himself up as nemesis to Horrible, Billy insists to Johnny Snow, "You are not my nemesis. My nemesis is Captain Hammer. Captain Hammer, corporate tool." Although it may be an excuse to avoid a fight, Billy's rationale for not fighting Johnny Snow, in addition to Snow's lack of credentials,

is that “there are children in that park.” At this point, he allegedly cares for the lives of innocent victims, a trait he will repudiate in later songs, such as “My Eyes” and “Slipping,” after Penny begins dating Hammer. [\[28\]](#)

(20) Hammer and Horrible’s song, “A Man’s Gotta Do,” signifies both the patriarchal nature of their identities as well as their interconnectedness, in that Penny, Horrible, and Hammer sing as trio. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do” is a clichéd justification for men behaving however they want: “all that matters, taking matters into your own hands. Soon I’ll control everything. My wish is your command”; significantly, Horrible has inverted the usual “your wish is my command” and placed his own desire for control at the center, suggesting, like the line from his first scene, “the world is a mess, and I just need to rule it.” [\[29\]](#) Horrible uses the cliché of “A Man’s Gotta Do” to justify his choosing the big heist over pursuing his romantic relationship with Penny. It functions as well to make equivalent his rise to evil with his masculinity. Hammer uses the cliché to cement his larger than life, macho image, and, later, to show off for Penny, foreshadowing her end: “When you’re the best, you can’t rest, what’s the use? There’s ass needs kicking, some ticking bomb to defuse. The only doom that’s looming is you loving me to death.” Unfortunately, the doom is all too real, and the placement of this last line within this particular song suggests the linkage between Penny’s death and patriarchal masculinity.

(21) Hammer also constructs his identity and his desire in relation to Horrible. We already know that Hammer pays attention to Horrible’s activities, as is made clear when Horrible admits he must be more careful about how much information he releases on his blog, since, “apparently, the LAPD *and* Captain Hammer are among our viewers.” One might think this is simply Hammer being a good superhero: somehow, they always seem to be where the evil action is, and it *was* a dedication of the Superhero Memorial Bridge. In the penultimate laundromat scene, however, Hammer makes explicit the play of power and desire between himself and Dr. Horrible:

“You got a little crush, don’t you, Doc? Well that’s gonna make this hard to hear. See, later, I’m gonna take little Penny back to my place. Show her the command center, the Hammer cycle, maybe even the Hamjet. You think she likes me now? I’m gonna give Penny the night of her life just because you want her. And I get what you want. You see, Penny’s givin’ it up. She’s givin’ it up hard. ‘Cause she’s with Captain Hammer. And these [holds up his fists] are not the hammer. The hammer is my penis.”

He specifically threatens Billy not with ethical concepts of justice but with the triumph of his penis over that of Billy’s. This is made even more manifest in the slideshow of pictures during the following song, “Brand New Day,” when Hammer knees Horrible in the groin. In turn, Dr. Horrible’s freeze ray—held aloft repeatedly during “Laundry Day” as a phallic signifier while Horrible discusses the power he will exert with it—is symbolically renamed and retooled as a death ray, which shoots a stream of white light at Hammer at the dedication ceremony in a moment replete with sexual signification.

(22) It is Hammer’s explicit admission that he is going to take Penny from Billy through explicit reference to the penetration of and ownership of her body that makes Billy vow to kill Hammer, even though “killing’s not elegant or creative” and “it’s not my style.” Previously, he had rejected Moist’s various ideas of people whom he easily could kill: “Do I even know you?!” he asked with scorn. While he works on converting his freeze ray (designed to stop time so he can “find the time to find the words” to communicate to Penny how he feels) into a death ray (designed to crush Hammer), he leaves Penny sitting alone in the laundromat, where she hopes to share her feelings with Billy about this imposition of a “perfect story” upon her. Horrible also seems willing to

hurt innocent people when he wields his newly revised "death ray" in a crowded room and, later, in a bank. Hammer's threat to penetrate the object of Horrible's desire has had a decisive impact upon Horrible's character. Hammer, on the other hand, embarrasses Penny with his declaration that they "totally had sex" and that she is his "long-term girlfriend," sparking her decision to leave the stage she shares with him at the opening of the homeless shelter. Hammer doesn't even notice. His assertion of heterosexual prowess and power is defining him at this moment as well, just as the loss of power defined Horrible.

(23) Throughout the text, Penny is depicted as a *tabula rasa* upon which Hammer and Horrible will write their own needs and desires. From the very beginning, Billy inscribes his desire upon Penny: "I just think you need time to know that I'm the guy to make it real: the feelings you don't dare to feel. I'll bend the world to our will, and we'll make time stand still." He falsely accuses her of not caring in "My Eyes," when he sings, "Penny doesn't seem to care that soon the dark in me is all that will remain"; even as she sings about the goodness she sees in everyone and the need to keep that goodness safe. This latter song clearly illustrates their differing perspectives on how to understand and react to the pain and wonder of life. Billy seems unable to process the hope and optimism in Penny's view of the world and its foreclosure of cynicism such as his own even as she rebuffs his desire to "do great things... to be an achiever, like Bad Horse." "The Thoroughbred of Sin?!" she asks incredulously. He revises his example, stating, "I meant Gandhi," suggesting he understands that she will reject the Evil League of Evil as a model to which he should aspire even as he later tries to convince himself that she will be swayed by money and power. In "Brand New Day," he sings that, while Penny "may cry [when he kills Hammer and becomes fully evil]...her tears will dry when [he] hand[s] her the keys to a shiny new Australia!" He perverts "Penny's Song," a song about growing out of despair and into hope and compassion for others, ("So keep your head up, Billy Buddy") by repeating a line from it in the context of needed reassurance that he should kill Captain Hammer and become more evil: "It's gonna be bloody. Head up, Billy Buddy. It's time for no mercy," although he's glad she doesn't seem to be present at his showdown with his nemesis.

(24) Penny is developed—insofar as she *is* developed—in relationship to these men, [\[30\]](#) both by the narrative itself and by the public within the narrative, but the narrative makes clear that the relationship of Penny to these two men is an abusive one. The groupies find her interesting only due to her relationship with their fetish, Captain Hammer; the same is true for the news media, as stated above. Imbued with the weight of cynicism, it is Hammer, rather than Penny, who achieves Penny's goal of getting the city to donate an abandoned building for a homeless shelter: "Apparently the only signature [the mayor] needed was my fist...but...with a pen in it...that I was signing with," Hammer tells us. As discussed, it is the threat of Hammer's hammer in relation to Penny that acts as catharsis for Billy's desire for murder. It is the irony of Billy getting everything he ever wanted but having to pay for it with the death of his love interest that is at the narrative heart of this story even as, simultaneously, Penny pays the steepest price.

(25) Hammer refuses to listen to Horrible's warnings concerning the danger of shooting the freeze/death ray after the main machine powers down, resulting, of course, in the tragic death of Penny as not only innocent bystander but love object. The treatment of her death is important here as well. Penny dies accidentally and as a result of the hubris of these two men; she is not executed for violations of female sexual propriety. [\[31\]](#) Hammer, concerned only with his own pain and vulnerability, does not see to her safety but instead runs out of the room, crying out for "Momma! Someone maternal!" While Horrible gets into the Evil League of Evil due to Penny's death, he has lost his love. He has defeated Hammer, removed Penny from his grip, and has become part of the ELE. However, his ethical center, tied to his emotions, has been completely obliterated. He has become numb.

(26) In a later interview with NPR's Jackie Lyden promoting *Dollhouse*, Whedon addresses his storytelling in relation to the then-forthcoming show and his whedonesque post:

I knew from the moment I did that [write the post about Dua Khalil Aswad] that it was going to make things harder for me as a storyteller because I was going to be held to this standard that I had set, and you start to worry, 'Well, wow, you know what? They're [his supporters] going to be disappointed by this, they're gonna interpret this, uh, a certain way, and they're gonna be maybe, you know, people might be angry with me for having come up with a story like this,'" but I believe in the story and I believe that what it's going to say and where it's heading is a valid human place and so, you know, I had to take that risk. I can't just write a polemic. I have to be a storyteller, and to be a storyteller I have to go to the dark place. (Whedon, Interview)

Whedon is himself making the connection between his post and his following work. The tightrope walk Whedon must perform is exploring taboo subject matter—what some (like Toni Morrison) have termed the unspeakable—without exploiting it. He opens the space for conversation, but he cannot control people's interpretations of the subject matter without reshaping his own role. By writing the post on Dua Khalil Aswad and by declaring himself a feminist over the years, Whedon is held to a standard that other directors and writers, ones who have not taken a political stance (such as his classmate Michael Bay), are not. The polysemic nature of his texts contributes to this, in that they are not easily reducible to a fixed meaning.

(27) His role *is* reshaped to a degree, however, by his chosen method of delivery: a serial internet production showcasing an alternate method of delivery then that provided by the networks. It is in this mode of independent production and distribution that the writer's strike, Whedon's reaction to it, and Whedon's posts on the death of Dua Khalil Aswad and the advertising for *Captivity* converge with each other, *Dr. Horrible*, and Whedon's feminism. By bypassing the traditional modes of production and distribution, Whedon created a model of activism and community effort that works against dehumanization.

(28) The production of the serial itself was a communal event resulting from the writers' strike, which, in turn, was a mode of group activism meant to address the lack of compensation to writers whose work appears in the form of internet broadcasts; while they receive remuneration for television broadcasts, internet broadcasts have made money solely for advertisers and networks. As television productions ground to a halt during the strike, writers and actors alike were freed to pursue non-traditional projects. Consider the way the following, posted by Joss Whedon at both drhorrible.com and whedonesque.com in regard to the production of *Dr. Horrible*, addresses the connection between the strike, *Dr. Horrible*, alternative methods of production, and community:

Once upon a time, all the writers in the forest got very mad with the Forest Kings and declared a work-stoppage. [...] During this work-stoppage, many writers tried to form partnerships for outside funding to create new work that circumvented the Forest King system.

Frustrated with the lack of movement on that front, I finally decided to do something very ambitious, very exciting, very mid-life-crisisy. Aided only by everyone I had worked with, was related to or had ever met, I single-handedly created this unique little epic. A supervillain musical, of which, as we all know, there are far too few.

The idea was to make it on the fly, on the cheap—but to make it. To turn out a really thrilling, professionalish piece of entertainment specifically for the internet. To show how much could be done with very little. To show the world there is another way. To give the

public (and in particular you guys) something for all your support and patience. And to make a lot of silly jokes. Actually, that sentence probably should have come first.

Made over the course of a week at a cost in the six figures and written collectively by Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Zack Whedon, and Maurissa Tanchoren, actors such as Nathan Fillion, Felicia Day, and Neil Patrick Harris agreed to work without salaries under the agreement that, should the serial ever make a profit, there would be gross profit sharing. A fan donated his home, which had received a mad-scientist makeover on the series *Monster House*. To his mock question of “what can we [the fans] do to help this musical extravaganza,” Whedon continued the post above:

What you always do, peeps! What you’re already doing. Spread the word. Rock some banners, widgets, diggs... let people know who wouldn’t ordinarily know. It wouldn’t hurt if this really was an event. Good for the business, good for the community—communitIES: Hollywood, internet, artists around the world, comic-book fans, musical fans (and even the rather vocal community of people who hate both but will still dig on this). Proving we can turn Dr Horrible [sic] into a viable economic proposition as well as an awesome goof will only inspire more people to lay themselves out in the same way. It’s time for the dissemination of the artistic process. Create more for less. You are the ones that can make that happen. Wow. I had no idea how important you guys were. I’m a little afraid of you. (“A Letter from Joss Whedon”)

Fans quickly jumped on the bandwagon to promote the serial, resulting in an explosion of interest.

(29) Eagerly anticipated by the Whedon fan community, Act I premiered on July 15, 2008, with Act II following on July 17 and Act III on July 19. When it premiered, the serial quickly crashed the drhorrible.com website, where it was offered for free: the site was receiving approximately 1,000 hits per second, according to Zack Whedon. It was offered as well at iTunes for \$1.99 per act, where it speedily became the site’s number one video, no doubt in part due to audiences flocking there once they were unable to access the free site. It quickly became available on hulu.com as well. Fans on whedonesque.com, a site devoted to the discussion of Joss Whedon and affiliated actors, writers, directors, and producers, quickly weighed in on the serial—as did a host of newspapers and magazines. Pages and pages of commentary were produced at whedonesque.com. Like the production, the distribution and reception of *Dr. Horrible* was a community event.

(30) The serial nature of the series adds to this communal experience. Patricia Okker writes, in relation to nineteenth-century novels published in serial format in magazines, that consuming the text simultaneously with others works against the accusation that novel reading (and, in this case, we could substitute media consumption) is a “private and individualized experience” (159-160). She continues, “Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, the magazine novel was a form that not only required readers to create a novel out of individual installments – to connect, that is, parts to whole—but also encouraged readers to see themselves as part of a larger social community, one shared by other readers, editors, and writers” (160). Soon after the communal serial experience in July of 2008, viewers could consume *Dr. Horrible* on hulu.com at any time of night or day; recently, it has been collapsed into one segment rather than the three original, although there are still act breaks, just as there are on the DVD. Consumption thus occurs in a more linear format. However, given the Whedon fan community, one might argue that even the individual, non-simultaneous consumption of the serial still connects to a sense of community.

(31) Thus, the production, distribution, and consumption of the serial created a community that functions on the basis of mutual support and resistance to the dehumanization at work in the

case of *Captivity* and the murder of Dua Khalil Aswad. Perhaps it is no accident that Penny is herself a grassroots community organizer, one who dies in part because of the arrogance of a “corporate tool” who has taken the credit for her work (the homeless shelter). The narrative itself functions visually and verbally to illustrate the price women pay within a system dedicated to the promotion of patriarchal narratives. When Horrible sings, “Here lies everything I ever wanted at my feet. My victory’s complete. So hail to the king,” it is with the knowledge that he has contributed to the death of the most important person in his life through a show of machismo. The old clichés represented by these lyrics—power over others in the service of self-aggrandizement—bring only death, numbness, and grief and are antithetical to the community built through *Dr. Horrible*.

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[1] Whedon writes, "This is not my blog, but I don't have a blog, or a space, and I'd like to be heard for a bit" ("Let's Watch").

[2] Whedon wrote the letter to the MPAA as part of a concerted effort to get the MPAA to remove the rating for *Captivity* (thus curtailing its distribution in America) due to the billboard advertising for the film, which allegedly was marketed without the required consent of the MPAA. The entire letter is reprinted in Soloway.

[3] Called in November 2007, the WGA strike protested the refusal of television networks to grant writers a percentage of profits made through the webcasting of television series. Fully supported by Whedon, who walked the picket line along with other Mutant Enemy employees and fans, the strike required the cessation of writing for these networks, including Fox, for whom Whedon was developing *Dollhouse*; while script development ceased, writing internet content was not prohibited by union obligations. Whedon has stated that the writer's strike turned his attention to *Dr. Horrible*, although similar ideas for a web-based serial had come to him earlier, and he began work on it, along with his two brothers, Jed and Zack, and Maurissa Tancharoen. The strike is mentioned as well in the "Commentary: The Musical!" Special Features section of the *Dr. Horrible* DVD.

[4] See, for example, Dobbs, Purtek, opheliasawake, and the comments on their pages.

[5] The scholarship on Buffy as feminist text is far too numerous to list. For one of the most sustained and well-written studies of the subject, see Jowett. On the construction of River as a revisioning of the male gaze, see Buckman, "Much Madness...".

[6] See, for example, "Honor Killing in Iraq" and "Iraq Stoning Death Investigation."

[7] Although we don't see her get wounded, the cameras must have been there, since they were there previously when Horrible attacked Hammer and, later, when they photograph Horrible with Penny's body. Additionally, a news reporter scribbles furiously in the background as Horrible confronts Hammer (he corrects her notes, saying "that's two 'r's") and vice versa.

[8] Fans responded differently to Penny's death than did the fictional audience. In responding to *Horrible*, fans on boards such as Whedonesque.com responded enthusiastically to the first two installments. However, after the third installment, the tone of posts changed dramatically to express frustration and shock over Penny's death and the change in tone, even as fans realized they should have known better, should have expected a tragic ending from Whedon. This short post from embers on Whedonesque.com is representative of many: "Curse you Joss Whedon!!! Why do you always have to break my heart?"

[9] The term "refrigerator woman" was coined by Gail Simone, who has studied the representation of women in comics. According to Simone, the term refers to "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator." On Penny as a "refrigerator woman," see posts by Rebecca Allen, Matt Roush, Purtek, and Sarah Dobbs.

[10] See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for more on the trope of punishment for women who stepped outside the bonds of culturally appropriate femininity. See Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* for more on women, sexuality, and horror. See also Rebecca Allen and Matt Roush on Penny's alleged punishment in relation to horror.

[11] Jed Whedon notes in the commentary that it was Zack's idea to make the serial "really sad"; Joss Whedon responded, "Okay, let's kill Penny!" ("The Making of *Dr. Horrible: The Movie*")

[12] Though there have been missteps, such as the treatment of Cordelia in *Angel*. See Rambo and Battis on Cordelia.

[13] The oft-repeated origin narrative for *Buffy*, in which Whedon revises the standard horror trope of woman as victim, is only one of the most obvious examples of his repeated construction of female agency. Several authors also discuss the ways in which Angel and Spike's bodies replace the female body as a site of torture and delectation; see, for instance, Jowett, Owen, and McCracken on this. *Buffy* highlights the importance of storytelling as well, opening the series each

week, for example, with the lore of the slayer ("Into each generation a slayer is born...") and featuring Giles' exposition of the demon of the week; particular episodes take these motifs further (for example, "Gingerbread," 3011 and "Hush," 4010). One might argue as well that *Buffy* presents a revisioning or, at least, a containment of the gaze (see Jowett 22-24, for instance, and Middleton 154-161). For one of the best studies of the construction of gender in *Buffy*, see Jowett. See also Vint, Early, Chandler, Symonds, Spicer, and Rambo on gender in *Buffy*. For more on *Buffy* and its connections to literature, see Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*. Continuing this emphasis on agency and storytelling is *Dollhouse*, Whedon's most recent endeavor, as depicted most clearly in episodes such as "Briar Rose" (1011) and "Belle Chose" (2003). Clients wield the gaze in picking out particular actives to represent their fantasies and/or needs to be fulfilled, but we, as audience, are encouraged to view actives as individuals rather than as dolls with which to play.

[14] In a further bit of self-reflexivity, Neil Patrick Harris, who plays Dr. Horrible, also played Doogie Howser, MD, from 1989-1993. That doctor may have been one of the first bloggers, tapping out his thoughts on an IBM.

[15] A term used to describe the ways in which the viewer is sewn into the fabric of the narrative, seeming to become a participant in the action of the narrative, for example. This often is accomplished by creating identification with the protagonist of the narrative.

[16] For more on Whedon's self-reflexivity, see, for instance, Wilcox and Lavery, *Fighting the Forces*; Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*; and Matthew Pateman's *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[17] In an interview with NPR's Jackie Lyden about Whedon's latest effort, *Dollhouse*, Whedon discusses the resistance to engaging fully with such representations; instead, he states, networks want to have titillation without engagement: "My problem has always been, what happens is that you get the corporations basically enjoying the titillation of the thing instead of wanting to baldly talk about it" (Whedon, Interview). However, Dobbs writes, "perhaps it's not coincidence that Penny is killed by phallic-shaped debris from an exploding gun," suggesting that the phallus still rules in this drama.

[18] This is a repeated comment in commentaries on *Dr. Horrible*: see, for instance, Sarah Dobbs, Holly, and "Buffy."

[19] Sarah Dobbs notes as well that Penny has fewer and shorter solos than Hammer and Horrible. This would depend upon how one defined "solo": if simply measured by music sung alone rather than in harmony or parts, then Penny actually has more solos than Hammer: "Caring Hands" and "Penny's Song" versus "Everyone's a Hero." Horrible has three songs to himself. Additionally, noteworthy as Whedon's humor is, it is telling that, in discussing the lack of characterization in relation to Penny, Whedon quips, "But we shoulda gave her more jokes" ("Joss Whedon Talks").

[20] She is also the most realistic person within the serial, which functions as a parody of superhero comics. One might argue that the trope of the refrigerator woman itself is parodied, although Penny's death, ironic as it is, is treated more seriously than other elements of the text. Surely Penny's name calls to mind such cartoon heroines as Penelope Pitstop. It also suggests an influence in the form of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, whose central female character is an average blonde waitress named Penny. She is surrounded by four scientists who, happily, merely obsess over superheroes rather than trying to become supervillains themselves, as Billy does. Additionally, Simon Helberg, who plays Horrible's sidekick, Moist, also plays one of the scientists on *The Big Bang Theory*. In a nod to note 14, *Doogie Howser, MD*, is mentioned in one episode.

[21] I am not attempting to make commensurate the stoning death of a real woman with a fictional character nor cheapen her death.

[22] And implicit within this statement is another reading of text in which Penny's name refers to economic currency and the battle over her becomes a statement about the WGA strike. Whedon writes, "[*Dr. Horrible*] did start out as kind of a political statement. As we got into preproduction, and the strike was over, it was more about 'Okay, we didn't have our chance to make a bold

statement, but we still have our chance to make this” (Vary).

[23] Rhonda Wilcox sees Penny’s death as possibly a logical extension of Billy’s earlier (mis)use of metaphor with Penny: the homeless, he argues, are “a symptom—a symptom—and the disease rages on, consumes the human race; the fish rots from the head, as they say, so my thinking is why not cut off the head?” Penny asks, “Of the human race?” “It’s not a perfect metaphor,” Billy admits.

[24] See Buckman, “Is There Anyone...” for a discussion of the homoerotic triangle within *Buffy* and *Angel*.

[25] Regarding his discussion of *Dollhouse* with the board of Equality Now, to whom he pitched the show, Whedon states, “What I basically told them was I was examining the idea of fantasy, and some of the stuff that would happen would be good, and some of the stuff that would happen would be kind of awful, and that the whole point was going to be to blur those lines, to take what we want from each other sexually, how much power we want to have over each other” (Whedon, “Welcome”). Whedon repeatedly returns to these questions of power in order to explore them; the shape of this exploration isn’t always Buffy’s, i.e., in the form of female empowerment.

[26] See Gilbert and Gubar.

[27] Prior to the premiere of the serial, this construct was established by the web comic produced by Zack Whedon and released on the Dark Horse free comic web site. Focusing on Captain Hammer’s perspective, the comic lampoons Hammer’s hypermasculinity and minimal intelligence, linking these with fear, surveillance, and suspicion of intelligence.

[28] Specifically and respectively, the lines are: “I don’t know/If I’ll upset the status quo/ If I throw poison in the water main” and “look at these people—amazing how sheep’l/Show up for the slaughter. No one condemning you—lined up like lemmings/You led to the water.”

[29] Horrible’s investment in control and power is also later signified by his lyrics in “Slipping”: “Then I win—then I get everything I ever... All the cash—all the fame and social change. Anarchy—that I run.... It’s Dr. Horrible’s turn! You people all have to learn: this world is going to burn, burn, burn!” Societal change seems to be an afterthought rather than truly being his *raison d’être* as he claims.

[30] Dobbs comments upon this as well in her post.

[31] Thank you to one of the three independent reviewers of this essay for this particular insight.