



Stacey Abbott and Lorna Jowett

Buffy Hereafter: From the Whedonverse to the Whedonesque

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CONFERENCE REPORT



[1] This was the fifth *Buffy* conference we have had the good fortune to attend. While the previous conferences took place in a diversity of locations from Norwich and Huddersfield in the UK to Nashville and Barnesville in the USA, locating the conference in Istanbul served as a cogent reminder of the far reaching cultural impact of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as the other works of Joss Whedon. This reach was further supported by the diversity of nationalities of the scholars presenting, a diversity that, relatively speaking, seemed to exceed previous *Buffy* conferences given the smaller scale of this gathering. In addition to the numerous presenters from the USA and the UK, *Buffy Hereafter* hosted academics and researchers from Germany, Italy, Finland, Israel, and of course the host country Turkey. Some of these were long standing researchers in the field of *Buffy* studies while for others it was their first foray into *Buffy* scholarship. This cultural mix created a dynamic atmosphere for discussion and debate, enhanced by the scale of the conference. Made up of a total of twenty-two papers over the three days, the conference was organized along a single strand of presentations, enabling all participants to attend each paper. In this the conference fostered an exchange of ideas and research that extended beyond the presentations and into the coffee and meal breaks, a characteristic not always present at other conferences, although usually typical of *Buffy* scholars.

[2] David Lavery's keynote address, "Keeping the Faith: Joss Whedon's 'Religion in Narrative' and Contemporary Television," served as an excellent opener for this conference focussing on the works of Joss Whedon and their relationship to other (television) texts. Dr. Lavery set out a lineage of Whedonesque television, drawing on Borges' idea that authors create their own antecedents because their work inevitably alters our perception of preceding as well as succeeding texts. In this way, the Whedonverses can be situated within a range of television shows that become increasingly difficult to categorise other than as 'quality' (*Six Feet Under*, *Sopranos*, *Twin Peaks*, *Heroes*), but that share a significant number of similar features. These may relate to thematic underpinnings (complex morality), modes or conventions of narrative (genre hybridity, strong seriality), or authorship. Lavery argues, alongside others working in television studies, that autism is an important factor in shows like these and he suggests that we are now entering an age of television autism. Many Whedon scholars would embrace this notion, even bearing in mind, as Lavery points out, that the creation of a television show (and indeed a film text) is the work of many people. It is sometimes difficult to avoid attributing all things notable about a favourite show to its creator (*Star Trek* being an obvious example) and at Whedon conferences it is often difficult to avoid the notion of an omniscient "Joss" overseeing every aspect of each episode. Dr. Lavery makes no secret of his admiration for Whedon and his work, but his apparently encyclopaedic knowledge of both Whedon's working life, and of the field of contemporary television fiction mean he always avoids the "Joss is God" mode (despite flaunting a "Joss Whedon is my Master now" t-shirt at the last Slayage conference) and inevitably has something new and meaningful to say.

[3] The panel that followed this address immediately took up these themes, dealing with authorship, fans, and the ways audiences and fans receive and use television, leading to some lively discussion that referred back to the keynote address. The final session of the first day revolved around

Whedonesque heroines, looking mainly at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the comic *Fray*. Despite gender issues being a staple of Whedon studies, there is always more to say in relation to how we perceive negotiations of gender and again a substantial exchange of views followed.

[4] Day two began with the only panel dedicated to *Angel*, including a paper from Stacey Abbott that examined *Angel* as an example of television horror, a rich topic in need of further investigation of this sort. Illyria's appearance so close to the end of *Angel* meant that she has often been overlooked, but Bronwen Calvert's fascinating paper on the character drew on theorisations of embodiment, action and gender and demonstrated how much there is to debate. While *Angel* is often discussed in terms of its representation of masculinity, Lorna Jowett's paper reminded us that the show is populated by a series of female freaks – women whose bodies are coded as alien and monstrous and who complicate accepted notions of female power and control in the Whedonverse. The second panel dealt with lesbian desire and skins of various kinds, including conference organiser Tuna Erdem's paper on Willow and the skin ego which took as its starting point the intriguing notion that demonism in *Buffy* is presented as a dermatological condition. A contribution on the use of sound in *Buffy* here also reminded us that there is more to the Whedonverse than narrative, themes, and characterisation. Conference papers on technical aspects of the shows always present a novel perspective and furthermore, help to situate the texts within a wider range of televisual practice. Masculinity, torture, and dreamscapes were covered in the final panel, again proving that new perspectives can be found in apparently familiar subjects.

[5] The third day of the conference opened with a panel featuring a variety of topics from the female Bildungsroman, flirting with death, and the representation of magic and science. The lively debate that followed this panel dealt in large part with the latter topic as presented by Dennis M. Weiss, expanding the discussion to *Angel* and referring to previous scholarship that has started to examine magic and science, their uses in telefantasy like *Buffy* and *Angel*, and their context within the established genres of science fiction and horror. The debate highlighted the benefits of looking at Whedon's work as part of a broader televisual and generic discourse, rather than in isolation. The final formal session of the conference ranged across several discipline approaches, with two different theorisations of *Buffy* as a quality television product, and a reading of space and places in the Buffyverse. The latter used the specialism of International Studies to focus attention on the politics of structuring spaces, proving again that telefantasy is capable of dealing with the most serious of global issues.

[6] As at many other *Buffy* conferences, the majority of the papers focused upon the parent series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with one panel devoted to *Angel* and Dale Koontz's paper being notable for its discussion of *Fray*, Whedon's first venture into a comic book extension of the Buffyverse. We were quite surprised by the lack of papers on *Firefly* and *Serenity*. A selection of presenters did, however, respond directly to the conference's main aim which was to explore the impact of Whedon's work upon contemporary television. Afşar Yeğın offered a fascinating discussion of the narrative structures of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The West Wing* while Tuba Ay examined the rise of Whedonesque archetypal heroine in series such as *Wonderfalls*, *Dead Like Me* and *Joan of Arcadia*. While the papers that focused specifically upon *Buffy* once again demonstrated the depth of material to be found in the show, we welcomed this opening up of the discussion of Whedon to his other works as well as to other series. With such a wealth of scholarly material on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* now in existence, there is a risk of finding ourselves re-treading familiar ground when there is a need to build upon the work that has been done in order to take the discipline to the next level of discourse. Hopefully the conference will encourage the scholars who attended to do just that.

[7] A collection of papers from the conference is now being edited by organizer Tuna Erdem for publication with Cambridge Scholars Press. We are sure that the other participants in Buffy Hereafter will join us in thanking Tuna for her hard work in successfully bringing together and coordinating such an interesting set of debates from a wide range of international perspectives.