

Introduction

“A Part of Something Bigger”:

Critical Approaches to *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *The Avengers*

Eve Bennett and Erin Giannini

There is no controversy in placing *Buffy* (1997-2003), *Firefly/Serenity* (2002/2005), *Angel* (1999-2004), *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-along Blog* (2008), and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) as part of what is colloquially known as the Whedonverses. Each of these properties were written, produced, directed, or show-run directly by Joss Whedon and—for the television series—produced (or co-produced) by the company he founded: Mutant Enemy. Each of them feature many of the Whedon hallmarks David Lavery elucidated, including “bringing the funny” (183-184), a big (season or film) finish (187), genre hybridity (191), redemption (201), and family (189-190). While only two are explicitly narratively related (*Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel*), many feature the same group of writers and actors across multiple productions, offering a sense of continuity and a shared universe. Yet since *Dollhouse’s* cancellation in 2010, and Joss Whedon’s focus on both small-scale (e.g.,

Eve Bennett is a temporary teaching and research attaché in media and cultural studies at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3, and a member of the Institut de Recherche Médias, Cultures, Communication et Numérique. She has published and presented work on various telefantasy series including *Dollhouse*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Her first monograph, *Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic TV: Representations of Masculinity and Femininity at the End of the World*, was published with Bloomsbury Academic in 2019.

Erin Giannini, Ph.D., is an independent scholar. She has served as an editor and contributor at *PopMatters*, and her recent work has focused on portrayals of and industrial contexts around corporate culture on television, including a monograph on corporatism in the works of Joss Whedon (McFarland 2017). She has also published and presented work on religion, socioeconomics, production culture, and technology in series such as *Supernatural*, *Dollhouse*, *iZombie*, and *Angel*.

Much Ado About Nothing [2012], *In Your Eyes* [2014]) and blockbuster (*The Avengers* [2012]; *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* [2015]) films, television—the medium that brought him to prominence—can boast only a single Mutant Enemy-associated project—*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–, hereafter *AoS*)—and one in which Whedon’s participation is minimal compared to his earlier work.

Can one fit *AoS* and the *Avengers* films into the greater Whedonverses? The first two *Avengers* films were written and directed by Whedon, but based on characters created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and produced by Kevin Feige as part Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Not only does this undermine, as Mary Ellen Iatropoulos argues, any claim to single authorship, but the MCU’s requirements suggest a certain level of constraint on the writers/directors for the sake of multi-film continuity. (Indeed, that particular issue—the need to set up the next phase of MCU—apparently led to enough arguments over the second film’s narrative to convince Whedon to quit [Keyes]). Yet, despite this multi-pronged input (Lee and Kirby, Feige, Whedon), the *Avengers* films do bear many of the aforementioned Whedon hallmarks, including humor, epic closing battles, and redemption. In the case of the first *Avengers* film, the team itself is redeemed in the act of ceasing their individual squabbles and banding together to stop Loki. Whedon not only wrote and directed both films, but consulted on and did some writing on the films that led up to Marvel’s first “tentpole” feature in order to ensure continuity and set up some of the narrative arcs the film would address (Moore). (He also advocated for Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow’s inclusion in the film [Bleznak].) While multi-authored, Whedon’s involvement is arguably significant.

For *AoS*, however, it may be produced by Mutant Enemy, but Joss Whedon wrote only a single episode (“Pilot” 1.1). Early reviews lamented its lack of the aforementioned Whedon trademarks, particularly humor, and complained of a weak narrative identity compared to earlier series (Sternako; Valentine; Goldman). This lack of resonance with Mutant Enemy’s earlier series is perhaps not surprising. With the exception of show runners Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, and a handful of writers and directors such as Jeffrey Bell, David Solomon, or Drew Z. Greenberg, *AoS* does not employ earlier Mutant Enemy writers

such as David Fury, Marti Noxon, or Jane Espenson or hat trick directors such as James A. Contner. It does, however, make use of prior Whedonverse performers among its cast. While Amy Acker (of *Angel* and *Dollhouse*) and Ron Glass (*Firefly*) were limited to one-episode, brief appearances in its first season, *Angel* regular J. August Richards's Mike Peterson/Deathlok had a fairly significant arc of his own in Season One, and has made occasional appearances since, including in the series 100th episode, "The Real Deal" (5.12). Patton Oswalt (*Dollhouse*) has played the Koenig quintuplets in multiple episodes, with season four's "Hot Potato Soup" (4.12) deepening their story and family background. *Dollhouse*'s Dichen Lachman had perhaps the most significant role as Jiaying, Daisy Johnson/Quake's mother. That being said, given the shared authorship (*The Avengers*) and minimal involvement (*AoS*), can these Marvel co-authored properties be considered as part of the Whedonverses? Perhaps the more important question is: Does "Whedon" imply only Joss, or rather a house style suggested (or perhaps inspired) by the creator of *Buffy*?

In their roundtable discussion on the series, Stacey Abbott et al. make a good case for the latter. They elucidate the various elements that *AoS* shares with other Mutant Enemy series, including "a kickass heroine....a certain genre playfulness and humor...and a performance or questioning of identity that is at times quite serious and at others playful" (421-422). As indicated above, it does make use of (some) Whedonverse regulars, casts UK actors as part of the main cast (422), and as both Lorna Jowett and Bronwen Calvert point out, features "disparate characters drawn together as part of a team for the common good" (422)—an element, as pointed out above, that *The Avengers* also made use of. In his analysis of Jane Espenson's contributions to Whedonverse series *Buffy* and *Firefly*, Matthew Pateman's interview with Espenson indicates that while *Buffy* was a "top down" writers' room (that is, it was Whedon's vision as a primary driver in shaping the narrative), it nevertheless "allow[ed] the individuality of the staff writer to be heard" (Pateman 152). Indeed, Espenson's voice was "individual" enough for David Kociemba to coin the term "Espensode"(23-40), underscoring this assertion. Tancharoen and Jed Whedon's influence as showrunners for both *AoS* and *Dollhouse* can be seen in similar narrative concerns

regarding scientific ethics (e.g., “The Asset” 1.3, in which Dr. Franklin Hall attempts to destroy a dangerous substance to prevent its use, despite the potential for collateral damage) and identity (e.g., Daisy’s search for her parents in Seasons One and Two). The Framework arc in season four, along with its narrative repercussions, addresses both ethics and identity in a way similar to *Dollhouse*.

In those respects, despite the “shared” authorship between Marvel and Whedon in the *Avengers* films and his lack of day-to-day involvement with *AoS*, we, as well as the authors featured in this special issue, are staking a claim to include both the films and *AoS* as a part of the Whedonverses. Widening the scope of Whedon studies beyond the man himself is a step away from viewing these media properties as the sole creation of a single auteur and suggesting additional strands of research. Some of this work has already begun, driven by interest in the “collective vision” of Mutant Enemy (Abbott 9-26) rather than the work of a single auteur, and thus viewing the contributions of actors, directors, and writers in television’s inherently cooperative structure (Canavan and Vint 179). (There is also a desire among some scholars to distance the work from the artist in light of Kai Cole’s revelations regarding the gap between public perception and personal interaction). Pateman’s and Kociemba’s work around Espenson’s contributions to Mutant Enemy series *Buffy* and *Firefly*, Rhonda Wilcox’s tracing of the similarities between David Greenwalt’s *Grimm* and his work as co-creator of *Angel*, Erin Giannini’s forthcoming take on Greenwalt’s work on *Angel* and its effect on his subsequent series, and Cori Mathis’ analysis of Marti Noxon represent some the current scholarship around the non-Joss members of the Mutant Enemy stable of writers and directors. (Performance studies of the equally stable group of actors Whedon works with remain an under-examined area within the discipline, excepting Janet Halfyard’s work around music [“Love”; “Singing”] and Aaron Hunter’s analysis of Sarah Michelle Gellar in *Buffy*’s sixth season [51-68].) As Leora Hadas argues in her analysis of the initial promotion of *AoS*, Whedon’s name was foregrounded as a significant “brand author” (11), one that seemed to obscure his minimal involvement with the series. As Abbott et al suggest, this might signal a particular shift to the Whedon “brand” at play, even in the absence of the individual

himself (421-430). Viewed from that perspective, *AoS* bears many of the hallmarks of the Whedon brand even in Joss Whedon's absence.

While each of the essays in this special issue approach the films and the series in different ways, all share the idea that both represent a part of the greater Whedonverses, either drawing parallels to or examining *The Avengers* or *AoS* as part of the wider corpus of Whedon/Mutant Enemy's work. In her analysis of female villains, Bronwen Calvert's "The AI and the Looking Glass: Embodiment, Virtuality and Power in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Season 4" examines the "boundary-crossing artificial body and...powerful female villain" AIDA both in comparison to similar Whedonverses characters such as Glory and Jasmine, whose powerfulness is problematically combined with—and undermined by—presenting them as "damaged," "devious," and "villainous" and by filling a much-needed scholarly gap in analyzing the figure of the female villain more generally. Identity of a different sort is the basis of Katia McClain's "It's Nowhere Special: Representations of Eastern Europe in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*," in which she not only flags the problematic view of Eastern Europe within the film and Whedon's broader work, but within culture at large. As she elucidates throughout the article, "[t]oo many literary and cinematic representations of Eastern Europe have been filled with stereotypes, inaccuracies, and misrepresentations." Surprisingly, she suggests *Age of Ultron* actually works to undercut such views—despite the fictional setting—by humanizing its inhabitants through their suffering and highlighting American arrogance.

Pain and arrogance also form part of Heather M. Porter and Erin Giannini's analysis in "It matters who you are': Parenting Styles in S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra," in which they examine the variety of parenting styles employed in both blood and chosen families in *AoS*; that is, the actions of the nominal parents (John Garrett, Phil Coulson) and the repercussions on their "children." While their article primarily focuses on Marvel/Mutant Enemy series and the ways in which the relationship dynamics between "children" and adults in both organizations conform to authoritarian and authoritative parenting, they also touch on the ways in which these dynamics have appeared in the earlier series, as well as the limitations of parental intentions within, at best, hierarchal, and worst,

fascist organizations. Particularly in Hydra, both physical and emotional violence done in the name of mentoring and guiding a younger individual to a particular ideology has long-range effects beyond the individuals in question.

An examination of the use of violence both in Whedon's earlier work and the *Avengers* films in particular is the focus of Holly Randell-Moon's "Economies of Transmedia Violence in the *Avengers* films and the Constraints of Auteurship." Randell-Moon explicates the interactions between the way violence and authority are portrayed in Whedon's serialized television series versus the generic elements of superhero/blockbuster films such as the *Avengers* that necessarily approach them differently. In particular, it is the distrust of authority and subversions of heroic tropes, such as those displayed by Buffy or Malcolm Reynolds that are, in her words "constrained by the production model of the MCU." Yet, given the aforementioned revelations regarding Whedon's problematic interpersonal behavior, she also closes with a discussion of ways in which Whedon studies can move forward through Vint and Canavan's suggested "de-Whedoning" of Whedon studies by viewing the man himself as an "intermedial auteur" in the way his work inspires extensions of his narratives without his explicit involvement (eg, the planned Buffy reboot).

Finally, K. Brenna Wardell addresses a gap in Whedon studies by "Fooling With Fashion: Costume as Comic Catalyst in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*." While, as Wardell points out, work has been done around the way that costuming in the Whedonverses elucidates characterization, Wardell's particular focus is how costuming is used both dramatically and comedically within *The Avengers*, continuing an element present throughout Whedon's work. That is, clothes—or their lack—can operate as transformative, reveal character depths, and offer visual or emotional links. Examining historical precursors, especially Shakespeare, for whom Whedon has an avowed love, Wardell traces the "unruly nature of comedy" and the ways in which costuming frequently plays a vital role in disrupting norms and binaries as well as creating humor.

As has been recently announced, a new series from Joss Whedon—*The Nevers*—is set to debut some time in 2020, his first full-length series to air on premium cable rather than broadcast. Its

positioning on premium cable removes certain limitations imposed on broadcast series, particularly around sex and language, and could potentially offer new directions for Whedon studies itself from both narrative and production standpoints. Yet throughout this issue, both we and the authors included suggest that more work can be done on not only on expanding the scope of examination beyond Joss Whedon for his previous series and films, but by analyzing the properties in which collaboration is undeniably encoded into the films and series' DNA: the MCU and *AoS*.

In the final episode of *AoS*'s first season, Phil Coulson quotes Nick Fury's exhortation about how individuals can make a difference when they realize they are "part of something bigger" ("Beginning of the End" 1.22; 7:52-54). Coulson was talking about banding together to defeat an overwhelming foe; our goal here is not nearly as lofty. Instead, we suggest that both *The Avengers* films and *AoS* are part of the larger Whedonverses and provide a fruitful area of study going forward that underscores the collaborative nature of all the series of the Whedonverses.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Stacey. *Angel*. TV Milestones. Wayne State University Press, 2009.
- Abbott, Stacey, Bronwen Calvert, and Lorna Jowett. "A Part of Something Bigger: A Roundtable Discussion of Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Transmedia Television, and the Joss Whedon Brand." *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion: The TV Series, the Movies, the Comic Books, and More*, 2nd revised and updated edition, edited by Mary Alice Money. London: Titan Books, 2015, pp. 421-430.
- "The Asset." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, episode 3, 2013. Written by Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, directed by Milan Cheylov. ABC Studios, 2014.
- "Beginning of the End." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, episode 22, 2014. Written by Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, directed by David Straiton. ABC Studios, 2014.
- Bleznak, Becca. "Scarlett Johansson on How Joss Whedon Played a Role in Empowering Black Widow." *Showbiz Cheat Sheet*, 16 April 2019, <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/scarlett-johansson-joss-whedon-black-widow.html/>. Accessed 1 June 2019
- Canavan, Gerry, and Sherry Vint. "Whedon Studies after Whedon: A Conversation with Sherryl Vint." *Buffy at 20*, edited by Gerry Canavan and James B. South, Special Issue of *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 [48], Summer/Fall 2018.
- Cole, Kai. "Joss Whedon is a 'Hypocrite Preaching Feminist Ideals,' Ex-Wife Kai Cole Says." *The Wrap*, 20 August 2017, <https://www.thewrap.com/joss-whedon-feminist-hypocrite-infidelity-affairs-ex-wife-kai-cole-says/>. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Giannini, Erin. "Of *Moonlight* and *Miracles*: The Influence of *Angel* on David Greenwalt's Immediate Post-Whedon Series." *'Let's Go to Work: The Legacy of Angel*, edited by Stacey Abbott and Simon

Brown, Special Issue of *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*
Forthcoming.

Goldman, Eric. "Marvel's Agents of SHIELD: Season 1 Review." *IGN*.
21 May 2014,
<http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/05/22/marvels-agents-of-shield-season-1-review>. Accessed 1 June 2019.

Hadas, Leora. "Authorship and Authenticity in the Transmedia Brand:
'The Case of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'" *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA-PGN*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014.

Halfyard, Janet K. "Love, Death, Curses and Reverses (in F minor):
Music, Gender, and Identity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*"
in *Slayage: the Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4
[4], December 2001.

---. "Singing Their Hearts Out: The Problem of Performance in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*." *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon*, edited by Kendra Preston Leonard, Scarecrow Press, 2011, pp. 155-171.

"Hot Potato Soup." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Fourth Season*.
Season 4, episode 12. Written by Craig Titley, directed by Nina Lopez-Corrado. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2018.

Hunter, Aaron. "Performance as Authorship: Sarah Michelle Gellar and *Buffy* Season 6." *Journal of Film & Video*, vol. 68, nos. 3/4, 2016, pp. 51-68.

Iatropoulos, Mary Ellen. "Of Whedonverse Canon and 'Someone Else's Sandbox': Marvel, *Much Ado*, and the Great Auteur Debate." *After the Avengers: From Joss Whedon's Hottest, Newest Franchises to the Future of the Whedonverse*, edited by Valerie Frankel. Chicago, Ill, PopMatters Media, 2015.

Keyes, Rob. "Why Joss Whedon is done directing 'Avengers' movies for Marvel." *Screenrant*, 22 April 2015, <http://screenrant.com/why-joss-whedon-not-directing-avengers-3-4/>. Accessed 1 June 2019.

Kociemba, David. "Understanding the Espensode." *Buffy Goes Dark: Essays on the Final Two Seasons of Buffy the Vampire Slayer on*

- Television*, edited by. Lynne Y. Edwards, Elizabeth L. Rambo, and James B. South, McFarland, 2009, pp. 23-39.
- Lavery, David. *Joss Whedon, A Creative Portrait: From Buffy the Vampire Slayer to Marvel's The Avengers*. IB Tauris, 2014.
- Mathis, Cori. "Bringing the Pain: An Examination of Marti Noxon's Contributions to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Joss in June: Selected Essays*, edited by K. Dale Koontz and Ensley F. Guffey. Special Issue of *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* vol. 11, no. 2, vol. 12, no. 1, [38-39], Summer 2014.
- Moore, Trent. "Marvel Exec Finally Explains Whedon's Alleged Thor 2 Rewrite." *Syfy Wire*, 30 October 2013, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/marvel-exec-finally-explains-whedons-alleged-thor-2-rewrite>. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Pateman, Matthew. *Joss Whedon*. Manchester University Press, 2018.
- "Pilot." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete First Season*. Season 1, episode 1. Written by Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, and Maurissa Tancharoen, directed by Joss Whedon. ABC Studios, 2014.
- "The Real Deal." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Complete Fifth Season*. Season 5, episode 12. Written by Jed Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, and Jeffrey Bell, directed by Kevin Tancharoen. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2018.
- Sternako, Jim. "Jim Sternako on 'Agents of SHIELD': Smoother, But Too Unfocused to Be Satisfying." *Hollywood Reporter*, 2 October 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/jim-sternako-agents-shield-smoother-641579>. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Valentine, Evan. "Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The H.I.G.H.S. and L.O.W.S. of the ABC Series' Freshman Season." *Collider*, 31 May 2014, <http://collider.com/marvels-agents-of-shield-season-1-review>. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Wilcox, Rhonda V. "Smoking the Hat: Fred/Illyria in *Angel* and Juliette/Eve in *Grimm*." Paper presented at SCW8: The 8th Biennial Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses, University of North Alabama, Florence, AL, 21-24 June 2018.