

Economies of Transmedia Violence in *The Avengers* Films and the Constraints of Auteurship

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Joss Whedon's work is characterized by serialized storytelling that enables an examination of the economies of violence that form a constitutive part of the genres he writes for. When violence is used to facilitate narrative action and necessitate collaboration between characters against a common enemy, an economy is established where violence organizes the meaning-making processes of textual engagement. In *The Avengers* films (specifically *The Avengers* [2012] and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [2015]), the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) requires the maintenance of violence and its repercussions as an industrial and narrative exigency of sustaining stories and character conflict across media texts. This article examines Whedon's contribution to the economies of violence in *The Avengers* and suggests that conventions associated with his work—such as scepticism of characters who assume leadership roles, irrevocable character deaths, and the generic and gender subversion of action hero tropes—are constrained by the production model of the MCU. This model requires the continuation of violence across media texts not as a pretext for examining the economies of violence but to center violent spectacle as the incitement for audience interest in these texts. Situating *The Avengers* films within the broader seriality of Whedon's oeuvre, this article also analyses the construction of Whedon as an auteur figure capable of cohering the disparate

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transmedia texts associated with his creative input. Drawing on theories of intermedia, the article suggests that emphasizing the relationality engendered by texts associated with his name rather than the seriality associated with transmedia is helpful for both understanding the medial specificity of these texts and the stakes of a post-Whedon Studies engagement with this work.

This article conceptualises the role of violence in serialized storytelling by drawing on games studies and Henry Jenkins' essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." The role of violence in Whedon's serialized storytelling is examined as an economy of attention where engagement is rewarded with violence. At the same time, certain features of Whedon's storytelling work to deconstruct this economy by drawing audience attention to violence's normalizing function in genres as well as the gendered conventions of narrative and character. Indeed, this critical disclosure of the violent economies of genre generates much of what is considered unique about Whedon's work, which is popularly characterized as "Whedonesque." The genre of the superhero film and transmedia production model of the MCU have a narrative architectural requirement to contain critique within the text, so as to not explode or undermine its foundations. As a result, the MCU limits how Whedonesque the storyworlds in these texts can be. Because the medial specificity of serialized televisual storytelling is dependent on audience engagement across multiple episodes, this medium provides greater scope for mediation on the role of violence in organizing modes of attention to the storyworld.

Despite criticisms of auteur theory and its apparent declination by the "logics of serial storytelling" (Brinker, "Transmedia" 208), the importance of an auteur continues to be used in popular and critical reception of media texts. As Leora Hadas explains, the exigencies of cohering a disparate transmedia franchise can facilitate the promotion of a unified authorial voice. This article title's reference to the constraints of auteurship reflects three related analytical foci: how authorial coherency is instigated by disparate storyworlds but also simultaneously constrained by the production exigencies of transmedia storytelling; how Whedon's authorship means something different from the recognisably Whedonesque in the context of the medial specificity of film—in this case *The Avengers*; and finally, how auteurship constrains an understanding of what makes texts in the

Whedonverses meaningful for audience engagement. Treating Whedon as an intermedial auteur has the advantage of recognising the collaborative nature of his work and that Whedon as an authorial figure is created through networks of scholarship and fandom. In straddling both Whedon Studies and transmedia scholarship, the article’s approach is heuristic, rendering some elements of Whedon Studies and serial storytelling scrutable through an analysis of the *Avengers* films, as outlined in figure 1.

Whedon Studies	Auteurship, situating <i>The Avengers</i> in the Whedonverse	Economies of violence made meaningful in Whedonverse in practices that emphasize narrative	“De-Whedoning” Whedon Studies	Intermedia
Transmedia and serialized storytelling	Role of auteurship in medially discrete entries of a transmedia franchise	Economies of violence made meaningful in transmedia practices that emphasize <u>seriality</u>	Relational and medial specificity of serialized storytelling	

Figure 1: Article schematic.

Finally, this article analyzes genre, narrative, and character in a post-structuralist sense as both constituting the text as well as the terms through which it is understood (see Derrida; Foucault; Todorov). The generic violence of superhero texts for instance is constructed through previous textual associations as well as active audience interpretation (and in some sense affirmation) of violence as a normative aspect of this genre. There is no inherent relationship between the generic features of a text. Rather these features are constituted through textual practices of meaning-making that can be varied through genre subversion and critique as well as audience resistance. Before we explore the different approaches to media violence made possible by serialized storytelling, the article turns to the construction of Whedon as an auteur.

Whedon as Televisual Auteur

Although Whedon has written, directed, and produced a range of different texts across media (including film, television, and comic books), his oeuvre is most associated with serialized storytelling in television due to his success with the programs *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

(1997-2003) (hereafter *Buffy*), *Angel* (1999-2004), and *Firefly* (2002). Whedon is one of a number of creative workers in the North American television industry at the end of the last century and the beginning of the next who is viewed as transforming television into a “quality” and aesthetically significant medium (McCabe and Akass). In *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, Jason Mittell argues that quality television is characterized by narrative complexity where one-off episodic events are woven into a seasonal (or longer) narrative arc. Such viewing demands and rewards sustained engagement from viewers who will be able to recognize how each episode’s plots and characters fit into a larger story. The emergence of DVDs and digital media also facilitates an “operational aesthetic” where viewers are able to spend time analyzing or “unravelling the operations of narrative mechanics” (43, following Harris). For Frank Kelleter, the “self-observation” fostered by serial storytelling, where audiences are encouraged to analyze the intertextual and intramedial narrative construction of texts, is as much an economic as aesthetic outcome of the need for extending media content through practices of recursivity (18).

As well as changing industrial standards that began to associate serialized storytelling with ongoing audience engagement as a desirable strategy for media loyalty (or brand exploitation), the complexity of such storytelling is often correlated with the creative and aesthetic distinction of showrunners. Showrunners are typically personnel who have created a series and direct the writer’s room. The role is analogous to the position of a director in film with respect to auteurship. The term *auteur* originated from French film criticism and was further developed by North American film critic Andrew Sarris for English-speaking audiences, who defined an auteur as a director who infused films with creativity reflective of a “distinguishable personality” and “interior meaning” of that auteur’s worldview (64). Where film auteurship emphasizes the role of director, television auteurship focuses on the writer due to differing media industrial practices (see Newcomb and Alley; Canavan and Vint 184).

Whedon has been recognized as an auteur in a range of scholarly and popular forums. Candace Havens’ biography on Whedon describes him as a creative “genius.” Hadas outlines some of the characteristics associated with Whedon’s distinguishably creative personality, including: “characterization and teamwork, a particular

style of humour, and an emphasis on fandom and a ‘geeky’, pop-cultural sensibility” (12; see also Lavery). His distinctive use of language has been studied as a sub-genre of his work (see Adams) and a common fan expression used to describe his writing is “Whedonesque.” This is also the name of a popular blog on Whedon (WHEDONesque.com), which ceased after the publication of Kai Cole’s post on *The Wrap* outlining discrepancies in Whedon’s creative and personal values. The response to the post and criticism of Whedon is reflective of his status as an auteur with significant esteem and authorial ownership of texts in the Whedonverses. The latter is the collective term for the multiple media texts and properties Whedon is involved in, evidencing auteur notions of a unified authorial voice (as the does the name of the Whedon Studies Association, which publishes this journal). The plural term “Whedonverses” (as in *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses) gives more emphasis to the different storyworlds of, for example, *Buffy / Angel* versus *Firefly*, and is used when not analysing Whedon’s reception as an auteur in the single-author understanding.¹

The positioning of Whedon as an auteur, like auteur theory itself, is not without problems. Principally, the notion of an auteur may overlook or underestimate the collaborative nature of media work and over-emphasize a singular creative authority (see Abbott). In so doing, the theory, and its use in aesthetic reception and critique, also tends to privilege white, male authors (see Turner; Collins, Radner, and Collins; Stam). The ways auteurship can reaffirm structures of privilege and silence the labor of others is reflected in Cole’s essay. In the context of the serialized storytelling associated with quality television, the extent to which their operational aesthetics can be attributed to a showrunner’s creative vision or simply emerge as a necessary property of long-form narratives is equivocal. Such narratives invite self-reflexivity as a strategy for introducing innovation and distinction in order to diversify episodic engagement, albeit requiring the aesthetic sensibilities of television writers and directors to capitalize on the creative affordances of serial narration.

Nevertheless and in spite of the transmedia proliferation of seriality, auteurship is still a popular and promotional means of framing the meaning-making processes of serialized media storytelling. In his article “Transmedia Storytelling,” Jenkins describes this practice as stories from the same world or diegesis being

disseminated across media texts to both sustain fan engagement and capture niche media audiences. Because such media texts comprise a disparate array of stories, authorial identification can provide a coherent point of entry for consumption as well as promotion. As Mary Ellen Iatropoulos notes, “When we refer to the Whedonverse, we’re really referring to a body of transmedia texts” and that from this body of texts, “discernibly Whedon ‘patterns of meaning and style’ [are reflected] through stories told across media platforms.”

Regardless of whether this discernibly Whedonesque style emerges from the properties of the genres and seriality employed in his work (and potentially is misattributed and occludes other creative workers), Whedon has developed an authorial voice by using the exigencies of serialized storytelling in television. The article’s use of “Whedon” in discussions of authorship and creative style recognizes this name as a construct for a range of media and aesthetic practices. The article will draw to a conclusion suggesting that an intermedia approach to the serialized storytelling associated with Whedon and company is helpful for disclosing the relational elements of this work and for moving towards a post-Whedon Studies engagement with it. The following examines how this authorial voice is applied to the economies of violence in serialized storytelling, in order to activate a meta-critique of violence’s relationship to genre, before situating *The Avengers* within the aesthetic style of the Whedonverses.

Violence in Whedon’s Storytelling

Violence organizes the serialized storytelling associated with Whedon and company’s work. In addition to being a generic feature, violence expedites narrative action and the collaboration of a disparate group of characters fighting against a common over-arching enemy: Buffy and the demons of the Hellmouth, or Captain Malcolm Reynolds and the Alliance in *Firefly*. Violence then forms an economy in storytelling to progress and reward audience engagement. In conceptualising this approach to violence in serialized storytelling as an economy, this article draws from game studies’ insights regarding the economy of engagement and interaction mobilized in the creation of game storyworlds. In “The Construction of Play,” Rowan Tulloch has argued that the critical problem with violence in games is not

necessarily the nature of its portrayal (in terms of how graphic or gruesome its exercise and effects are) but rather the economy of violence that is built into gameplay: the use of violence as a reward for continual engagement with the storyworld of the game.

In “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” Jenkins discusses the ludic versus narratology impasse of game studies, where proponents of the former argued for the gameplay being the site of user import and the latter, the game’s story. Jenkins suggests that both operate as constitutive features of games’ world-building. In playing the game, players are building the world of the game, which is underpinned by storytelling that narrates the parameters or logoi of the world, its inhabitants, and how they interact. This is a kind of “environmental storytelling” or “narrative architecture” which draws from audiences’ “familiarity with the roles and goals of genre entertainment to orient us to the action” (119) in order to generate “compelling spaces” (122). Of course, playing a game requires a different kind of activity than watching a television show or film. However, as Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann point out, “the state of synchronicity, permanence, and random and repeatable accessibility” (4) of convergence culture means that users engage with media in temporally disjunctive ways. That is, they consume medially discrete texts in part or whole at their leisure and then piece this consumption together to form a coherent storyworld. The iterative interaction with games’ seriality, where a coherent “story” is formed through repeatedly accessing parts of the gameplay and building causality as more of the text is consumed, is homologous to consumption of televisual series’ “continuity and discontinuous reception of episodes” (7; see also Mittell). Further, if we understand serial storytelling texts as “moving targets” per Kelleter (14), fundamentally concerned with recursive practices designed to prepare texts for variation and therefore continuation, then the use of violence to cohere temporally disjunctive modes of engagement with individual elements of a series becomes salient.

As a textual constituent of the genres Whedon and company are working in, violence necessarily structures the storytelling in the diegetic worlds of their media texts. A number of articles have been written about the role of violence in the Whedonverses (see Berridge; Craigo-Snell; Foley; Ginn; Parks; Orbesen; Boyle; Stevenson). As Lisa Parks notes in “Brave New *Buff*y: Rethinking ‘TV Violence,’” violence

can also involve institutional, ideological, or symbolic practices of exclusion and discrimination. Defensive forms of violence, exercised physically or symbolically, also have different representational effects (Craig-Snell), and much of the violence portrayed in the Whedonverses have allegorical and metaphorical meanings (Stevenson).

In the portrayal of violence in Whedon and company's works, violence is carefully elaborated according to the logos of the storyworld. Shannon Craig-Snell's comments regarding *Buffy* could apply equally across works led by Whedon: "the show does not condone all physical violence; significant norms and restrictions are given regarding appropriate violence" (2). It is through the serialized nature of storytelling that Whedon and company are able to establish these norms for violence within their storyworlds and offer a critique of the subjects who wield and are affected by it (cf. Stevenson 260). For instance, in the season five finale of *Buffy* ("The Gift" 5.22), Buffy sacrifices her life to save her sister Dawn. Her mentor Giles is able to kill the human incarnation of that season's Big Bad (Lavery 187), Ben/ Glory (the central villain from which the majority of season-long episodic conflict arises), by suffocating him. This is a rare kind of violence exercised in *Buffy*, where a defenseless human is killed without provocation. Giles rationalizes this extraordinary act because Buffy's "a hero, you see. She's not like us" (00:36:20-25). Sustained engagement with the show and seasonal arc contextualizes the gravity of this death and what it means for the characters. Giles' comments also draw attention to the ways violence is made appropriate for some characters and not others, offering a meta-critique of the role of violence in organizing audience perceptions of characters' morality (see Craig-Snell).

An infamous aspect of Whedon's work is subjecting beloved characters to sudden deaths—what David Lavery identifies as "Killing Characters" (193). The narrative effects of these deaths hinge on serialized storytelling so that audiences can develop a meaningful relationship to the characters (193). To take another example of a fatally dispatched character, the pilot Wash in *Serenity* (2005) is brutally slaughtered at the end of the film. Given that he has little character development in the movie, his death is clearly meant to impact viewers of *Firefly*, which is the storyworld that *Serenity*

continues, who have built up a familiarity with the character outside of the film.

At the same time as Whedon and company's storytelling promises an economy of violence for engaged or affective viewing, this work offers a simultaneous critique of this role of violence in structuring identity formation and social and professional relationships. To draw from *Serenity* again, an argument among the characters breaks out before the third act and final showdown between the ship's crew and the Alliance. When one of the crew, Jayne, questions why they should follow Mal's orders, the latter yells, "Do you want to run this ship?" "Yes!" responds Jayne. Mal takes a beat before meekly responding, "Well ... you can't!" (00:57:19-25). Again this scene will be more impactful for audiences familiar with *Firefly* because it overtly questions the assumed leadership position of Mal and whether the protagonist is always deserving of sympathy. In providing diegetic space for the characters to have these debates, the dialogue offers audiences the possibility to question why some characters are put into specific subject positions within the narrative. To return to the gameplay analysis of storyworlds, Whedon is encouraging the audience to not simply accept the text's narrative integrity as the storyworld is being built and to think critically about the space afforded to some characters and not others.

This critique of assumed leadership, and why storyworlds are built around them, also facilitates attention to the gendered dimensions of violence and who is able to use it. Parks argues that "*Buffy* challenges assumptions about violence that are organised around sexual difference" and in so doing, exposes and de-naturalizes "invisible and institutionalised forms of violence," thereby treating it "as an ideological and institutional problem" (119, 118). Genre hybridity, another feature of Whedon's work (Lavery 192), enables this critique of the gendered ways violence is legitimated since "acts of physical aggression take on different meanings as the conventions of different genres are activated" (Parks 123). Moreover, the serialized nature of storytelling within the television shows of the Whedonverses create the possibility for exploring the ongoing effects of violence as differentially situated according to gender. In "Teen Heroine TV," Susan Berridge argues that *Buffy*'s narrative complexity enables an examination of sexual violence and assault as a recurring element of the female characters' lives. Though Berridge does not

discuss Spike's attempted sexual assault of Buffy (in "Seeing Red" 6.19), the portrayal of this assault and its consequences across a number of episodes is helpful for dispelling rape myths that treat this violence as a one-off event (that could be contained televisually in one episode) and perpetrated by strangers rather than men known to survivors of assault.

The mix of genres and gender subversion in Whedon and company's television shows draw attention to assumptions about who is capable of violence and the complexities associated with violence as a means of resolving narrative arcs. Katherine A. Wagner's excellent reading of *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) (hereafter *Cabin*), in "Haven't We Been Here Before?", analyzes the storyworld of the film in terms of the spatial strategies used to illustrate how violence is normalized in relation to certain genres, characters, and national identities. Wagner argues that subjecting the horror genre conventions to a narrative critique where a larger multi-national corporation (the Facility in the film) is seen to benefit from their naturalization and repetition enables audiences to connect local forms of violence to broader geopolitical conflicts (see also Cooper). In the conflation of North American exceptionalism and the recursivity of the horror genre as something that needs to die, *Cabin* is refusing the capitalist imperative of popular culture's serial logics of continuation (Kelleter).

Without negating the effectiveness of this message, the final season of *Angel* (Season 5) staged a similar narrative where the storyworld's premise of Angel and his friends fighting the inter-dimensional law firm Wolfram & Hart was upended when they were put in charge of that firm. This narrative twist highlights the complicities of the heroes' violence with the very same forces they are contesting, as well as the larger global capitalist consequences of their local conflicts. In *Joss Whedon versus the Corporation*, Erin Giannini also explores how the bio-tech company in the television show *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), which can insert personalities into memory-erased bodies (or Dolls as they are known in the show), is subject to destruction by employees seeking to redress its broader geopolitical role in sustaining other kinds of violence. The same narrative executed through a television show (as opposed to a single film) has the potential for greater critical engagement with violence as an economy of entertainment.

Whedon and company's generic oeuvre favors violence and fight scenes as a staple of storytelling, but the serialized nature of this work has meant that the complexities of violence can be explored at length, even if violence as a narrative crux is not displaced. This critical investigation of the violent economies of genre generates much of what is considered unique about Whedon's work and his status as an auteur. It is this creative distinction, as an auteur of serialized storytelling and the creation of storyworlds organized by violence, which made him appealing to the MCU.

Economies of Transmedia Violence

Whedon had previously been involved with the superhero genre when he was engaged to write and direct a *Wonder Woman* film for Warner Brothers (see Lavery 136). This development failed to materialize and he was later hired by Marvel Studios to direct *The Avengers*. He has recently been associated again with DC Comics transmedia in his work on *Justice League* (2017) and a potential *Batgirl* film (the latter also fell through) (see Erao). In his relationship with the MCU, Whedon wrote and directed the first two *Avengers* films, and also undertook script polishing of other standalone superhero films to ensure a consistent tone (Hadas). The MCU comprises "a complex, multidimensional narrative architecture that expands simultaneously in multiple directions" (Brinker, "Transmedia" 223) as a result of transferring the "logics of serial storytelling ... established in the medium of superhero comics" (208) to a media franchise consisting of several films and television shows, each with their own narrative trajectory, all simultaneously taking place in the same storyworld. According to Kelleter, authorship constitutes the "end" of seriality within these media economies and practices because it "closes" narrative revitalisation within an oeuvre (7). Certainly the aesthetic distinctiveness of the directors and writers of the individual MCU films is muted in comparison to the seriality and inter-connectedness of the franchise.

However, Hadas offers a counter-argument that the more complex the narrative architecture becomes in the multi-serialized stories on offer in the MCU, the more important authorship becomes

as a strategy for promotional coherence. In the context of *The Avengers*, Whedon's authorship "operates as a guarantor of consistency and authenticity" for not only the films but the television series *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-), which focuses on the eponymous spy and peacekeeping agency who loosely oversee the actions of the Marvel superhero characters in an attempt to coordinate responses to alien threats to the planet. Despite Whedon's minimal involvement in the series, Hadas suggests his name was prioritised in marketing materials to signal "the importance of a unified authorial voice for the MCU" (14). Per Felix Brinker, the popularity and commercial success of transmedia franchises has led to "contemporary cinema's repositioning vis-à-vis other media" so that blockbuster films "no longer function as singular apexes of cinematic production" ("On the Political" 434). The combination of different kinds of seriality within these transmedia franchises means that individual films "still function as self-contained narratives that can be enjoyed on their own terms" (456). For the purposes of this article, how are these self-contained narratives refracted through previously understood notions of authorial style, in other words, located within the Whedonverse rather than MCU? Do these different locations and audience subject positions engender different aesthetic expectations, particularly with respect to economies of violence?

As with Whedon's previous work, the MCU also uses genres premised on violence to narratively expedite the collaboration of different superheroes in one film (such as *The Avengers*) and to extend stories across multiple texts. Ensley F. Guffey argues that *The Avengers* follows the generic template of a war movie where disparate characters "need to acquire conviction, to believe in something larger than themselves in order to overcome their personal struggles and form a coherent team" (289). What coheres the team into a group defending a territory is the threat from invading Chitauri space aliens, resulting in the "hold the fort'-type military objective" in the final act of the film (283). The treatment of superheroes as soldiers results in a different characterisation of the action than typical superhero films. James Orbesen, in "Collateral Damage: How *The Avengers* is a Superhero Film, Not an Action Flick," discusses the film's treatment of violence as generically different from action films. The former is careful to frame violence and its effects within the humanist tone of the genre, in order to reinforce superheroes as morally good. This is

similar to Guffey's reading of the film as a war movie whereby the violence exercised by the Avengers is legitimated as morally sanctioned in order to secure peace.

Orbesen suggests the humanist approach to valuing life and the goodness of humans (as represented by superheroes) aligns with the humanist themes of Whedon's work. Indeed it is notable that for the DCEU (DC Comics Extended Universe) equivalent of the Avengers, Warner Bros. reportedly hired Whedon for reshoots of the *Justice League* film to balance out the realist action genre tone of the previous films directed by Zack Snyder (*Man of Steel* [2013] and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* [2016]) to restore the heroes' humanism (see Bui) (although other reports state many of his comedic injections intended to humanize the Justice League were rejected by the studio [see Evans]).

Analyzing *The Avengers* as a war film, Guffey highlights one scene that acts as a meta-commentary on the historical conflicts North America has participated in. In Germany, the film's villain Loki forces a crowd of people to kneel before him. An elderly man refuses to submit "to men like you" and Loki retorts, "there are no men like me!". The man counters, "there are always men like you" (00:40:58-41:06). Guffey suggests the "vaguely Jewish folk music" playing behind this short encounter "evokes the Holocaust" (287). Here the seriality of recurring villainy in comic book media is leant a geopolitical critique that undoes the villain's exceptionalism by pointing instead to their depressing genericism across history and media. Like *Cabin*, the scene fosters self-observation of the narrative architecture of the text at the level of production and consumption. Whedon has said of *Cabin* that they were interested in exploring the logic of seriality that drives repeated interest in horror films: "why do we like to see this exactly? Why do we keep coming back to this formula?" (in Wagner [21]). As explained earlier, Whedon's texts provide diegetic space to highlight how the unfolding narrative architecture of the storyworld being consumed is premised on an economy of violence that normalizes certain genres, characters, and national identities. But where *Cabin* or *Dollhouse* suggests that an end to this recursive seriality and its relationship to economies of violence might be politically productive at the level of popular culture, the kind of seriality informing the MCU necessarily involves a different set of narrative priorities in the economy of violence on offer.

Kelleter describes the kind of seriality practiced in the MCU as involving “*fast* narratives” designed “to reattract as many readers or viewers as possible by regularly exchanging recent innovations with new offerings” (13-14). While seriality does mean that these narratives can offer self-observation, such as the scene previously analyzed, their scope for critiquing the economies of textual engagement such as violence are limited. Discussing the superhero genre, Kelleter notes that it lacks a source origin and is therefore “a figure of seriality” par excellence (20-21). The economy of violence is a crucial textual feature of this seriality because it can narratively justify renewal: “diegetic death only sets up diegetic resurrection” (8). Although superheroes rely on serial resurrection via diegetic destruction, this practice forms the basis for the villain Ultron’s plans to terminate the Avengers in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (hereafter *Ultron*). Ultron decides that the Avengers pose a threat to human evolution by arrogating to themselves powers which prohibit non-superhero humans from innovating and learning to protect themselves. “You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change. How is humanity saved if it is not allowed to evolve?” (00:32:11-21). The Avengers embody the “multidimensional narrative architecture” (Brinker, “Transmedia” 223) of the ever-expanding MCU. Economically, the characters must change in order for this universe to continue. In this narrative sleight-of-hand in *Ultron*, they are positioned in opposition to evolution and change: they want things to remain the same but are prompted towards action and further adventure by Ultron. The violence wielded by Ultron is what narratively instigates the Avengers’ serial renewal within the diegetic world of the film and beyond in the MCU.

There is a clever allusion to the narrative repetition of death in the superhero genre when Vision, an artificial intelligence system that powers Iron Man’s suit and armoury who is killed by Ultron and rematerialises as a cyborg, encourages Ultron to understand that human finitude can be graceful. When Ultron calls him “unbearably naïve,” Vision explains, “Well I was born yesterday” (indicating his literal age) (02:06:15-21), before killing him. The duality of this straight-forward optimism for creation occurring simultaneously with decimation encapsulates Kelleter’s view that serial storytelling “always prepares its own variation and renewal” in the narrative architecture (17). Per Denson and Jahn-Sudmann, it is instructive to examine the implications of particular forms of serializing “for the social world of

lived differences and hierarchies” (16). If the narrative architecture of these storyworlds reinforces the centrality of violence to the superhero genre’s meaning-making and storytelling, then the aesthetic role of violence here is not neutral or apolitical.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence argue that superhero stories are “pop-fascist” narratives of a “post-civic” popular culture where force replaces democracy as the arbiter of justice. Such narratives encourage audiences to accept “that super power held in the hands of one person can achieve more justice than the workings of democratic institutions” (42). This exchange of democratic for fascistic economies of violence is a necessary component of the narrative architecture of superhero seriality. In Whedon and company’s web series, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008), there is a contrast between the power economies of democracy and the pop-fascism of superheroes and villains in the song “Caring Hands,” where Penny’s work in soliciting petitions for democratic change is portrayed as arduous and less exciting than the spectacular use of superpowers for violent global transformation. Other scholars have suggested that the superhero genre can be used to critique its generic reliance on violence as well as the broader geopolitical context of North American wars at the time of the comics’ production (see Dittmer; Curtis).

Whether the presentation of violence in superhero genres is viewed in the service of a humanist agenda or popular fascism, the genre nevertheless normalizes violence as central to the storyworlds as well as seriality of its texts. The destruction and civilian casualties from New York in the first *Avengers*, where the heroes battled the invading Chitauri space aliens, has a direct effect on the second *Avengers* film and the urgency to evacuate civilians from Sokovia, the setting for the final showdown with the robot villain Ultron. Events in this film also trigger international concerns with the superhero prerogative to act against what they perceive as personal and global threats without legal or foreign policy consultation (see McClain, Wilcox.) *Justice League* features a similar concern for the safety of civilians in the final battle against the god Steppenwolf in a fictional Russian village, with considerable time devoted to showing the Flash and Superman rescuing and evacuating the village’s residents.

On the one hand, this transmedial extension of not only conflicts, but how they should be fought, across texts means that

violence at a textual level is never wholly self-contained to a film or sequence. Subjecting violence to multiple interpretations and consequences throughout different texts of the same storyworld indicates there is an attempt to consider violence as having broader social and geopolitical consequences. On the other hand, the economy of violence within this storyworld is ideologically conservative. Despite ostensible debate about arbitrating superhero powers through international scrutiny, such as the United Nations, both the individual superhero and institutional prerogative to wield violence as well as audience pleasure in this representational economy is never seriously questioned, in contrast to some of Whedon and company's previous work in the televisual medium. To seriously question the continuum of violence between all characters within the text would undermine the mechanics of the storyworld and audiences' enjoyment of it through the economies of violence offered by the generic conventions of superhero texts. In this way, the generic architecture of the superhero text remains intact and violence as the organizing logic of this storyworld is reinforced.

The serialized storytelling in their televisual (and comic book) work enabled Whedon and company to explore how characters embody their powers, the violence this entails, and the ongoing effects of living a violent life. How gender and sexuality work to differentially situate characters' relationship to violence and how they can wield it (or not) is generative of much of the feminist themes attributed to Whedon's work. In *Ultron*, there is likewise an attempt to examine how gender inflects the embodiment of power and use of violence. In a scene where the Avengers are recuperating at the home of Hawkeye, Natasha Romanoff (the alter ego of Black Widow) discusses briefly the trauma of her earlier spy training and inculcation into espionage against S.H.I.E.L.D. Describing how this training made her feel robotic and different from "normal" women, she suggests that the forced sterilization she underwent (to maximise her body's proficiency for violence) makes her feel like a "monster" (01:08:26).

The scene was widely criticized for reinforcing the heteronormative notion that women's bodies are biologically suited for reproduction and that being unable to fulfil this capacity is monstrous (see VanDerWerff). Without disregarding the substance of these critiques, it appears the scene wasn't received as Whedon and

company intended, to introduce a gendered appreciation of how committing violence affects a superhero's understanding of their identity (see Hughes), because of the lack of necessary narrative build-up and character work required to make it resonate in line with the previous feminist thematic concerns of the Whedonverses. Despite the reputation of Whedon's work, and its apparent instigation in rendering him suitable for the MCU, *Ultron* is nevertheless read as an individual text in the context of gender representation. Where Kelleter suggests that authorship closes seriality, an intraserial intertextual understanding of Whedon's wider oeuvre could supply a more complex as well as potentially feminist reading of the scene.

As explained earlier, the finality of death has less dramatic leverage in the superhero genre because of the need to sustain the storyworlds in ongoing media texts. It is worth noting that (spoilers!) *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) featured the demise of central characters Iron Man and the aforementioned Black Widow. This occurred, though, after multiple film appearances and substantial commercial revenue could justify the loss of star power and potential narrative closure. In the Whedonverses, use of supernatural, fantasy, and horror genres also render some character deaths far from settled but there are many instances of deaths, such as Buffy's mother ("The Body" 5.16), the murder of Willow's girlfriend Tara in *Buffy* ("Seeing Red" 6.19), and Wash's death in *Serenity*, whose dramatic weight are infamous in the fandoms because of their irrevocability and their resonance with the structural violence experienced by women and queer communities (see Tresca; Tabron). Such deaths are narratively distinct from death in the superhero genre because of the different economies of violence that sustain the narrative architecture of these serialized stories.

Per Hadas, the paradox of the MCU's transmedia storytelling is that it generates audience engagement through the apparent interconnectivity of the different MCU films. Yet the branding of Whedon's auteur status as ostensibly cohering the storyworld indicates that the relatedness of the MCU's transmedia universe is not enough of a salient selling point on its own. Despite Marvel's claims for their transmedia universe, that "it's all connected" (O'Sullivan and Team), there is a clear medial hierarchy between the films and television shows (see Smith) that is "asymmetric" (Brinker, "Transmedia" 218), with the latter having to adapt to the storylines in

the films. For instance, to maintain intraserial transmedia continuity with the films, the first season of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* had to respond to the destruction of the agency in the *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) film. The DCEU's own struggles with branding its storyworld through an auteur such as Zack Snyder and now Whedon, also suggests that industrial standards for production and marketing still rely on authorship as a marker of aesthetic quality for audience engagement despite the dominance of serial practices networking transmedia production and consumption (Kelleter). Whereas both Whedon's television and film texts rely on violence as a constitutive feature of the genres employed, violence organizes attention economies in the MCU to sustain transmedia engagement across texts, in order to extend the storyworld, but without offering a critique of this violence as an economy, as a set of norms that legitimate audience investment in violence as a meaning-making structure of the text. Whedon's job in the MCU is to affirm the textual integrity of violence to the genre, to keep intact the narrative architecture, rather than work to subvert it or proffer the desirability of its cessation by ensuring there is no infrastructure for such economies to retail.

Whedon as Intermedial Auteur

In their interview, "Whedon Studies after Whedon," Gerry Canavan and Sheryl Vint ruminate on the possibilities of "de-Whedoning Whedon Studies" (182) by disassociating study in this area from an individual and highlighting instead the medial, cultural, and political practices engendered by the texts collaboratively created by Whedon. Such a "de-Whedoning" is methodological as much as it is industrial, considering that the extension of storyworlds such as *Buffy* through reboots owe their continuing appeal and industry relevance to Whedon's creative authorship but may also simultaneously supersede this authorial point of engagement by fostering new audiences and new authors associated with the storyworld (in this case a Whedon-less *Buffy*). Approaching Whedon's work, and indeed, the discursive construction of Whedon in the subject position of auteur, as intermedial may be a productive starting

point in this de-Whedoning in order to clarify the ongoing popular and critical interest in his work.

Bernd Herzogenrath defines intermedia as “*between the between*” (2) in the sense that “we can only refer to media using other media” (3). This meaning encompasses more than an intertextual acknowledgement of media production and reception, where textual meaning is derived from references to other texts, which is how the logics of seriality function in the context of the superhero genre and transmedia franchises such as the MCU. Intermedia points to the ontological conditions of mediality where media is understood as always already relational. Intermedia is then “the quicksand out of which specific media emerge” as well as “the various interconnections” that are made possible between the audience and different types of media (3).

Individual media do not exist in isolation, to be suddenly taken into intermedial relations. Intermediality is rather the ontological *condition sine qua non*, which is always before “pure” and specific media, which have to be extracted from the arch-intermediality. (4)

Transmedia approaches to media relations do recognise the social character of narrative and textual construction in the cultivation of audiences across media texts (see Jenkins, “Afterword” 362-363). As noted previously, Kelleter describes the texts that comprise transmedia franchises as “moving targets” because the production of seriality in a digital media environment means that audiences “impact the stories they consume” through media producers adjusting the unfolding storyworlds in relation to consumer practices (18-19). This “entanglement” of production and consumption practices into a particular political economy of transmedia seriality relies on exploiting audience engagement for narrative coherency (Kelleter 13; see also Brinker). Intermedial approaches emphasise the inter-subjective aspects of how we relate to texts rather than the existence of multiple texts (see Fisher and Randell-Moon). Intermedial analyses are helpful for recognising that we exist in relation to the interpretations of others (we are mediated and medial) and because of this relational contingency, there is a responsibility to critically engage with the

parameters of interpreting that mediality, or the parameters that are made available to us.

As discussed throughout this article, the texts of the Whedonverses have a repertoire of storytelling features employed to reveal the contingency of the narrative architecture of storyworlds, which are employed not always as an instigation for further seriality. This contingency means that audiences do not assume that the logos or norms of this storyworld are immune from critique, subversion, or revision. The narrative effectiveness of this generic and gendered critique of violence is realized more fully in the television work associated with Whedon because the medium fosters an engaged and critical audience due to “the periodical rhythms of a temporally unfolding distribution process” (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 5). Relatedly, Marvel television shows such as *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) and *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) are potentially better suited via long-form narrative to exploring the complexities of superhero power and violence, though they are positioned in an asymmetric relationship to the films and so narratively respond to the primacy of economies of violence in the latter’s storyworlds. As with video games, such temporally disjunctive ways of consuming the narrative architecture of a multi-episodic story require an economy of reward for sustained engagement. In this case, the article has located violence as forming a part of this economy. If critiquing such economies is discernible as Whedonesque, these characteristics exemplify the intermedial relations of identity and meaning-making practices and the media specificity of this work. Ágnes Pethő describes this version of intermediality “as something that actively ‘does,’ ‘performs’ something, and not merely ‘is’” (60). So where transmedia situates activity in the processes of cross-media serial engagement, intermediality emphasizes the embodied relationship of audiences to texts as an *a priori* condition of the activation of medial meaning.

In the Whedonverses, an assemblage of texts have been cohered through serialized practices of fandom and critical evaluation in order to relate serial practices of genre and gender to social and political hierarchies (Denson and Jahn-Sudman 16) and the structural violence in representations of particular communities (12). This article has argued that Whedon’s role in the MCU is to confirm the textual integrity of the superhero genre and its reliance on violence. In other generic work, his creative collaborations offer a critique of violence’s

normalizing function in organizing the parameters of what is possible within storyworlds in order to suggest a termination of particular genres of this seriality. For instance, *Buffy* can be read as an attempt to end the economies of violence that normalize male violence to the horror and supernatural genres in favour of the repetition of a different kind of representational economy with respect to women. The textual deconstruction of genres and their relationships to audiences is intermedial as a response to other media and the recognition that audiences are implicated in the politics of mediation, in terms of how we interpret ourselves through media. Further, much of the scholarly and popular reception of Whedon and company's work highlights relationality as a key function of these texts' meaning-making processes. This relationality occurs intra-textually through generic, narrative, and character relations to the storyworld and extra-textually in the audiences' relationship to the texts and the fan construction of Whedon as an auteur. These relations are intermedial because they are created in the inter-subjective spaces between and within media texts.

Conclusion

Kelleter has argued that analysing the seriality of transmedia franchises such as the MCU provides an opportunity to see "how modern popular culture observes itself" (18). Understood this way, authorship renders these cultural products "immobile" and "captures only a modest part of their cultural productivity" (15-16). This article suggests that from an intermedia perspective, authorship as a signature style of meaning-making and the medial specificity of serialized storyworlds continues to influence textual relations of popular culture. The article was written from the perspective of a consumer whose engagement with the MCU and *The Avengers* was prompted by their fandom of the Whedonverses and an interest in how the latter universe would interact with the MCU (this entry point has now converted a Whedon fan into an MCU fan invested in the ongoing storyworlds). In its focus on the economies of violence in genre storyworlds, serial media, and the Whedonverses, the article offers contributions to (1) the unfolding of popular culture through serial economies and (2) Whedon Studies.

With respect to (1), the article outlines how the serial logics of commercially successful transmedia franchises such as the MCU contribute to the normalization of violence as a structuring component of representational economies. In addition, the article has explained the role of authorship in cohering disparate storyworlds and providing a recognizable avenue of audience engagement in medially discrete entry points of a franchise. With respect to (2), this article has argued that the aesthetic features of self-observation fostered by serialized storytelling have been directed and interpreted into discernibly Whedonesque elements of popular culture enjoyment and evaluation. In particular, Whedon's auteurship has been developed and received through serialized storytelling in television, which has extended across media texts to create the Whedonverses. Drawing from games studies and Jenkin's notion of narrative architecture, the article has argued that the Whedonesque features of media texts, such as genre hybridity, use of humour, scepticism of heroic subjects, and language, draw attention to the narrative architecture of the storyworld. This attention can therefore offer a critique of violence as legitimating the generic and gendered processes of textual assembly and repetition.

The kind of transmedia storytelling practiced in the MCU constrains Whedonesque textuality because the narrative exigency is to sustain audience attention in the textual integrity of the storyworld or narrative architecture, even and because of the potential for textual cessation. Some storyworlds, such as the MCU, are built to normalize violence as a meaning-making function of genre, narrative, and character development. Situating such storyworlds in Whedon's oeuvre facilitates a critical opportunity to render these texts immobile and evaluate their aesthetic relationship to recurrent elements of popular culture that are linked to structural violence in the representation of particular communities. The article has suggested it is helpful to approach media portrayals of violence and auteurship in intermedial terms because it foregrounds the relational parameters of medial interpretation. This interpretation occurs between texts, in the ways audiences and authors cohere texts together into a transmedia universe or Whedonverse, and within texts, in the ways audiences cohere relationships between characters, genre, and narrative into a storyworld. Taking a cue from the Whedonesque encouragement to question whether the serial repetition of certain generic economies

should continue, perhaps the authorial currency of Whedon Studies could instigate new relational trajectories. Treating Whedon as an intermedial auteur has the advantage of recognising the collaborative nature of this work and that Whedon as an authorial figure is created through networks of scholarship and fandom.

Texts in the Whedonverses engage with the violence that can accompany how others are interpreted and treated on the basis of this interpretation. This is why the contingency of the norms of these storyworlds are open to debate, deconstruction, and destruction. Indeed, the possibility that storyworlds and their generic infrastructure should be destroyed, creating the possibility for new interpretations and intermedial relations, is often signalled as a good thing within the Whedonverses (see also Cooper). In the final episode of *Buffy*, “Chosen” (7.22), the Hellmouth, which has spawned the numerous demons Buffy and her allies have fought, is literally demolished. Watching the concaved destruction, Buffy’s friends ask, “What are we gonna do now?” (00:41:15-16). The series ends with Buffy smiling. Similarly, in the final scene of the final episode of *Angel* (“Not Fade Away” 5.22), Angel and his demon-fighting team stare down a world-ending avalanche of monsters, dragons, and fiends. Seemingly unperturbed by this imminent storyworld destruction, Angel advises, “Let’s go to work” (00:41:13-14). If world-ending or genre up-ending is able to generate work and the possibility for new and different kinds of world-building, which is in keeping with the logics of seriality, perhaps another frustrated serial example from the Whedonverses can best illustrate the possibilities for something entirely new and different emerging from prepared termination. This is eloquently, and with some good humor, illustrated in the final scene from *Serenity*. Flying through a storm, Mal assures his crew that the ship can withstand any impairment that may come about. As he finishes saying this, a piece of the ship flies off towards the audience. What audiences do with this piece of the narrative architecture is left open.

Notes

¹ Editor’s note: The different emphases indicated by the name “Whedon Studies Association” and the conference name “*Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses”—both sponsored by the same scholars—reflect some of the varying views: one seeming to

reference the single creator and the other seeming to emphasize the multiple storyworlds and thus de-emphasize the creator(s). There is a complex continuum of focus from creator(s) to creation to consumer-creators—a continuum which is something of a Mobius strip of involution (to expand Matthew Pateman's term, 109 and *passim*).

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