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“All the Cash, All the Fame, and Social Change!”: Teaching *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* as a Social Message Film¹



[1] The short musical film *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (Whedon et al, 2008) provides an excellent opportunity for instructors of media literacy or media criticism to introduce students to the concept of the “social message” or “social problem” film. First, by providing students with some background on the production of the film (and the Writers Guild of America strike that preceded it), its free, online distribution, and its largely fan-led publicity campaign, instructors can encourage an active class discussion about the “stories behind the stories.” Here, students can be asked to consider the personal and professional backstories that contribute to the entertainment media we enjoy, and how these backstories influence the persuasive impact of these media. In simply existing, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* sends a strong social message: the old Hollywood power system is unethical, unacceptable, and, in the face of new media and strong fan networks, unsustainable. Second, the film’s story of a wannabe super villain and his repeated run-ins with the city’s resident good guy offers ample commentary on our culture’s love of celebrity and violence, its tendency to turn its back on those living on the fringe, and what it really means to be a hero.

[2] This essay details my experience in designing and delivering a lecture to an undergraduate course titled Persuasion and Film, during which I presented *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* as an example of a social message film. Included are an overview of the course, learning objectives for the lecture, and selected lecture notes. Also discussed is the way the students’ textbook and previous assignments, as well as published research on the film and other Whedonverse works, were used as guideposts in designing my lecture.

Background on the Course: Persuasion and Film

[3] Persuasion and Film is an upper-level elective course for students in the Communication and Rhetoric major at the University at Albany, a state university in eastern New York. The course blends film criticism with media literacy and communication theory,

and is structured as a lecture course that incorporates film clips and time for class discussion. The course focuses attention on the underlying persuasive messages found in mainstream Hollywood films and the impact of these messages on audiences; students are asked to look at mainstream media as not just entertainment, but as a representation—and interpretation— of our larger cultural experience. During the 2012-2013 academic year, I was a doctoral student in communication, serving as the teaching assistant for this course. I delivered the lecture detailed in this essay to students in both the fall and spring semesters of that year.

[4] Our class met once per week for approximately three hours. Typically, this time was spent viewing a variety of film clips, all centered on a common theme. For example, the first part of the semester was spent discussing representations of gender and race in film narratives. My lecture broke with the standard format somewhat, in that I showed *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* in its entirety. As I will discuss further, the film's length and structure lend itself particularly well to use in the classroom, even when instructors do not have a three-hour block of time to work within.

Evaluating a "Social Message Film"

[5] Exactly what constitutes a social message film or the criteria used to evaluate one may differ from one researcher to the next. For the purpose of this lecture, I used the description of social message films set forth by Petrie and Boggs (2012), whose book *The Art of Watching Films* is the course's primary text. The authors identify social message films as those that address or challenge a specific social issue, attempting to enhance awareness, prompt discussion, and ultimately solve—at least to some degree—the problem. The authors explain that this can be done both through scripted fictional narratives as well as documentary films.

[6] Petrie and Boggs (2012) warn that these films can be difficult to evaluate. If the problem the film seeks to address is particularly "of the moment," then the film may be rendered outdated rather quickly and may fail to resonate with audiences over the long term. However, this does not necessarily mean that the film should be considered a failure, as it may actually be very impactful even in a short timeframe. It could be argued then that a social message film can only be successful in terms of longevity (and as a potential moneymaker) if it fails in its original endeavor to solve a social problem or to better a social circumstance.

[7] Complicating the matter further is the fact that *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is not a traditional film. It did not have a theatrical or television release (it eventually aired on the CW network in 2013), but was instead streamed over the Web. Its three acts were made available to viewers over a series of three consecutive days, a format more in line with a television mini-series than with film. Without question, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a vehicle for a number of social messages. But is it really a *film*? And is it really an appropriate fit for a course dedicated to the analysis of films?

[8] My position is that *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a film, albeit an untraditional one, and that it is this untraditional format and mode of distribution that makes it uniquely suited to convey the many questions it asks of its audience. The film walks the line between the two possibilities set forth by Petrie and Boggs (2012). As new media evolve, the message of shaking up the Hollywood power system and providing more access to the creative process may begin to fade away. Still, the cultural and societal issues the film raises, which I discuss in a later section of this essay, have always been with us and will likely always be. Therefore, I presented the film to the students as one that carries a message with enduring relevance, and invited them to share their own opinions on the film's long-term appeal as well.

[9] In evaluating a social message film, Petrie and Boggs (2012) suggest that we ask these questions:

- 1) Does the social problem attacked by the film have a universal and timeless quality, affecting all people in all time periods, or is it restricted to a relatively narrow time and space?
- 2) Is the film powerful enough in terms of a strong storyline, enduring characters, good acting, artistic cinematography, and so on to outlive the social problem it is attacking? In other words, how much of the film's impact is caused by its relevance to a current problem and its timing in attacking the problem?
- 3) If the immediate social problems on which the film focuses were permanently corrected tomorrow, what relevance would the film have to the average viewer 20 years from now? (469)

These questions appear in a chapter of the book that was assigned to the students in the weeks before my lecture. I reminded them of these criteria, and asked them to keep these in mind as they watched and analyzed the film.

Learning Objectives

[10] My primary objective in designing this lecture was to focus on the concept of social message films, but I had other goals in mind as well. It was important to me that the lecture be relevant in terms of previous course content, papers the students had been writing, and their next upcoming paper assignment.

[11] Additionally, I felt that it would be beneficial to bring to the students' attention some of the scholarly work that has been published on the film. The class is composed of upper-level students who may be considering graduate school, and yet may not have had much exposure to scholarly work. I believe that research on popular culture topics is an excellent way to introduce students to the research process. Popular culture is a bit more accessible than other subject matters, and students are often pleasantly surprised to see how varied the academic landscape can be. It is possible to get creative with one's academic endeavors, incorporating hobbies and other areas of enjoyment.

[12] Finally, I wanted the bulk of our class discussion to be about the students' interpretations rather than on my own or on those of other researchers. As someone interested in audience reception, I saw this as an opportunity to have a front row seat to an audience experiencing a media product for the first time, deriving meaning from that product, and relating that meaning back to their own experiences. I began to prepare for the lecture by watching the film several times, taking notes on what I identify as important themes, and identifying specific social issues that are being addressed by the film's content. I then went to the literature as a means of supplementing my own interpretations and helping me to design discussion prompts. I will provide some detail on my literature review in a later section of this essay.

Structuring the Lecture

[13] I began the lecture by offering a very brief explanation of who Joss Whedon is and why his work is so often studied. I have found—both in this case and in using an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in a class I taught previously—that most of the students have heard of Whedon's TV series, but few have seen them. Nearly all of these students, however, had seen the Whedon-directed film *The Avengers*, and this provided me with a reference point from which to introduce the film. I then moved into a discussion of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike. The strike effectively shut down the film and

television industries for several months in early 2008, as film and television writers fought to be compensated for DVD sales, online streaming, and other “new media” methods of distribution. Whedon and his collaborators chose to begin production on *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* during the strike for both practical and strategic reasons. The strike had left everyone involved with a lot of unexpected free time, and the use of new media to create and distribute an original film challenged the standard protocol and brought needed attention to the plight of WGA members.

[14] Most of the students remembered the strike vaguely, but were not aware of what the writers’ position really was. When I provided a simplified explanation of the unequal distribution of compensation at the heart of the dispute, the students were understandably bothered. This opened up the discussion to the topics of fairness, compensation, entitlement, and the experience of having others benefit from our hard work. I asked them to consider these questions: Were the WGA members in the right? Were they entitled to more? Or were they acting selfishly? On a personal level, what are we entitled to—in our personal lives, our professional lives, our academic lives? What does “entitlement” even mean?

[15] This discussion is one that I wanted to start early in the class period, because one of the things that I find noteworthy about the film—and that I hope students will also see—is Dr. Horrible’s sense of entitlement. Much can be said, of course, about Captain Hammer as an entitled character, but his entitlement is loud and obvious right from the start. Dr. Horrible’s is much more interesting, because it is simmering just beneath the surface and grows steadily over the film’s three acts. Dr. Horrible is a character who is filled with rage and who ultimately acts upon that rage, and that comes from the belief that he is being cheated out of the things that he *deserves* to have. In his mind, he deserves respect, fame, and praise. He deserves to have the doors of the Evil League of Evil thrown open for him. And most of all, he deserves to get the girl of his dreams, simply because he has put a lot of time and energy into stalking her.

[16] Next I gave a brief overview of how the film came to be. The way it was produced, distributed, and advertised represents a new paradigm in filmmaking, a shift in power from a controlling minority to a collaborative majority. Whedon and company not only accomplished this in the moment, but in the years that followed their work has influenced other new modes of filmmaking. For example, in 2013, fans used the crowdfunding site Kickstarter to raise more than five million dollars in support of a film version of the television series *Veronica Mars*, canceled since 2007. In March 2014, *Veronica*

Mars broke the traditional Hollywood format once again, by becoming available through digital download and cable pay-per-view on the same day as its theatrical release. While these filmmakers have succeeded in shaking up the status quo, Dr. Horrible himself fails. He talks a good game about “overhauling the system” but in reality, his idea of “putting the power into other people’s hands” means putting all of the power into his hands. He doesn’t want a paradigm change, just a regime change.

[17] The sharing of power and the struggle to balance individual and group needs are common Whedon themes. While I did not expect the students to become Whedon experts in one class, I wanted them to know that this theme is something that he comes back to often. As examples, I provided a brief summary of the *Buffy* finale “Chosen” (Whedon *et al*, 2003) and its message of strength in equality. In addition, I spoke of the distribution of knowledge central to the Whedon-written and directed movie *Serenity* (Buchanan *et al*, 2005) and its fan-coordinated Equality Now screenings as examples of how this message not only reappears throughout Whedon’s work, but has been embraced by and perpetuated by the fan community. The message to Hollywood producers is a clear one, but there is also a message to fans that there are people in the entertainment industry who want to create entertainment *for them* specifically and *with them* collaboratively. Audience voices can be heard and valued. Whedon realizes that the things we watch mean something to us, resonate with us, and stay with us. He creates with that in mind.

[18] Before finally starting the film, I gave the students a handout with some concepts that I wanted them to keep an eye out for, as well as questions I wanted them to be asking themselves as they watched. For example, one of the bullet points on the handout read, “Representations of maleness: what attributes make a man a man?” Another was, “What makes someone worthy of celebrity status?” As a way of tying our class period back into the readings and assignments, I returned to many of the concepts discussed by Petrie and Boggs (2012). One such concept is characterization—the ways in which filmmakers show audiences who characters are and what they are all about. I asked the students to think about this carefully. What are the filmmakers telling us about Penny based upon the way she dresses, or the way she speaks, or the settings in which we find her? What do Billy’s clothes tell you about him, and in contrast, what do Dr. Horrible’s clothes tell you about him?

[19] Additionally, Petrie and Boggs (2012) describe characterization through internal dialogue. Filmmakers provide audiences with information about characters by letting us in on the characters’ internal thoughts. Sometimes this is done through narration or soliloquy.

In a musical, this inner monologue is often accomplished through song, and in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, much of the plot is advanced lyrically. For this reason I asked the students to pay close attention to the songs' lyrics and to consider how these lyrics compared to the musical arrangement as well as the action of the characters in these scenes.

[20] It can be difficult to take notes when sitting in a dark room, and often, I find that students who have not been prepped at all before watching a film will get caught up in just being entertained, and will find themselves at a loss to really talk about the film afterward. To combat this, I spent a few moments going over the handout. When I have used media in my classes in the past, I have found that these few minutes of preparation can make a significant difference in how much the students take away from the experience of watching a film. They are more participatory in the ensuing conversations and it seems to strengthen their confidence in feeling that what they are bringing to the table is relevant and worth sharing.

[21] In both semesters I showed the film in its entirety, pausing after each act to turn on the lights and allow for some discussion of the story up to that point. This film lends itself particularly well to classroom use because of its original distribution format. Released as three 15-minute acts over three days, it was intended to be watched in stages. It is best enjoyed when there is a bit of suspense built up between each act, and when students are allowed to speculate about where the story is going before they see it unfold. As mentioned earlier, this class is scheduled in a three-hour block, but it could easily be spread out over two or three class periods to accommodate a variety of schedules.

[22] During each of these discussion breaks, I used PowerPoint slides as a way of returning the students to specific moments in the film. As I mentioned earlier, much of the plot is advanced through song lyrics, but when watching the film it is not always possible to hear every word to every song. For this reason, I typed out key song lyrics as well as important pieces of dialogue onto slides for the students to consider.

[23] I also used a number of still images from the film, which greatly enhanced the discussion with regard to film techniques like lighting, framing, and color. For example, I used a series of still images to illustrate the way lighting and clothing are used to characterize both Penny and Billy. Penny is always shown wearing bright, feminine colors, and is lit so brightly in some scenes that she is almost washed out. One example is the scene set in the park, when Penny and Captain Hammer are on their first date. As Penny sings about her feelings from an idyllic, pond-side bench, she is surrounded by sunlight and seems to glow. Penny represents innocence, purity, naiveté, and goodness. Billy, on the

other hand, is always dressed in black or gray and is typically seen in the shadows or with part of his face obscured. He represents more than just evil as the opposite of good, however; Billy is hiding his Dr. Horrible side while also trying to kill off his Billy side. As we watch, Billy is disappearing into the shadows as Horrible is gaining strength.

[24] The final still image that I shared with the students comes from the moment just after Dr. Horrible has made the decision to kill Captain Hammer. Standing in the street outside the laundromat, he is shown for the first time as bathed in light. This is a self-actualizing moment for him, one that he is celebrating.

[25] After the last act, I wrapped up the discussion by showing a behind-the-scenes featurette included in the film's DVD release, which delves a bit into the fan community, how the film came together, and the desire of the filmmakers to enhance access to the creative process. This is a fitting way to end the lecture, I believe, because it brings the conversation full circle, back to the original social message that I introduced at the start of the class period. Also, because the featurette "spoils" Penny's death, it makes a better ending to the lecture than a complement to the earlier discussion about the film's production.

Using Existing Literature in Designing Discussion Prompts

[26] As a means of keeping this essay brief and to the point, I will spend only a short time discussing my literature review. However, I think that it is helpful to talk about the existing work on *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* that influenced and inspired me, as well as to show how much of this work ties into other content that the students were already working with in the course.

[27] Buckman's (2010) argument that the film's primary social message is of the growing phenomenon of violence against women as entertainment is one that resonates with the students, especially her point that U.S. culture tells us that we are somehow more evolved and progressive in this arena than other parts of the world. The early weeks of the semester are spent covering visual pleasure theory and its related concepts, including objectification and male gaze; Buckman (2010) makes repeated references in her article to Penny as the subject of male gaze, discussing how she is watched from afar by Billy, how she is framed (within the round windows of the laundromat dryers and within the brightly-lit homeless shelter window, for example), and how she ultimately becomes an object both to Billy/Horrible and to Captain Hammer.

[28] In this vein, students often bring up the fact that Penny is an “everywoman.” She is dressed and lighted in ways that make her look attractive but not polished and plastic. Earlier in the semester, the students watched a clip from *Transformers* (2007) in which Mikaela (Megan Fox), dressed provocatively, is seen bending over the engine of a car while Sam (Shia LaBeouf) ogles her. Students returned to this clip and to the character of Mikaela as a comparison to Penny. Some may claim, the students argued, that a woman who is ogled or objectified brings this upon herself through her dress and mannerisms. But Penny is proof that a woman does not have to be portrayed as a sex symbol in order for her to be the target of male gaze and ultimately reduced to a trophy.

[29] Wilcox (2009) draws attention to the way *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* makes us conscious of our roles as watchers of, and even active participants in, media. Her point parallels previous course discussions about the breaking of the “fourth wall” and this technique’s impact on the audience. She notes that all three acts of the film open with some kind of media; Acts I and II with Dr. Horrible speaking directly into the camera as he records video blog entries, and Act III with a television screen showing a local news broadcast. There is much to be said here about the ubiquity of media and technology in our lives and our dependence upon it. The unprofessionalism of the news anchors and the frivolity of their content (caring more about “who’s gay” than on the fact that there is a serious homelessness problem in their city), draws attention to the film’s criticism of media as a vehicle for the wrong kind of message, and our willingness to accept those messages at face value. The media covers Penny’s death, not as a tragedy of a young woman killed but as a sensationalist true crime drama that focuses attention on the celebrities of Hammer and Horrible. They can’t even get Penny’s name right in the coverage. In this city, heroes are depicted as caped crusaders who save the day in grand displays of bravery and strength. But Penny was a true hero, spending her days and nights on the streets and in shelters trying to give a voice to the most vulnerable and invisible among us.

[30] At the same time, the use of the video blog as Dr. Horrible’s primary means of communication comes back to the message of access and power, and this idea that we can all be creators of media and part of the process. Billy is only able to gain an audience for his messages when he turns to the Internet. In self-producing his video blog, he is able to carefully craft his public persona of Dr. Horrible through dress, setting, word choice, and the power to decide which “fan” messages are responded to and which are not. Though he is not always successful in maintaining that persona, he does manage to acquire a following of viewers who care enough to write him emails, even if those emails are only sent to mock him.

[31] In an interesting study that follows fan reactions to the film through online forum posts, Lang (2010) points to fan attempts to cope with Penny's death and make sense of it. It is a jarring, unsettling ending for many viewers (my students were no exception), and I believe that this is the point. Penny's death makes us question the entire narrative up to that point because senseless violence in our real lives makes us question everything we know. It was supposed to be a "What the hell?" kind of moment, because what else can we say when we see news coverage of mass shootings or similar tragedies?

[32] Additionally, Barton (2012) explores the tendency of Whedon to kill off characters that the audience is attached to, and to do so in ways that are quick and dirty with no long drawn out, romantic, flowery death scenes. People are taken suddenly and shockingly, and it rattles those who are left behind. Much of Whedon's work looks at the way we attempt to make sense of death and try to renegotiate our "new" lives in the absence of someone who was once such an important influence.

[33] Masson (2012) discusses the struggle in the film between free will and destiny, and how this affects the worldviews of the characters and their actions. Dr. Horrible is faced with numerous opportunities to choose the right path and he always takes the wrong one. She emphasizes his need to be in control, to "bend the world to his will." He talks a lot about social change, but what he really wants is for society to be under his rule. He doesn't want a widespread redistribution of power, he just wants it to come into his hands.

[34] Again, this comes back to the theme of entitlement. Horrible believes he *deserves* certain things—respect, success, the girl that he has been trying so hard to win. He feels slighted and that the world is against him. Billy is invisible, but Dr. Horrible gets attention, even if it's the wrong kind. People know who Dr. Horrible is; as I've said, he has a following, even if it's a following of people who see him as a "joke, a dork, or a failure." But this attention is more than Billy ever gets. Why would Dr. Horrible ever choose to be Billy?

Bullying, Mental Health, and Warning Signs

[35] Finally, I want to turn attention to a message I see in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* that I believe is tremendously salient. It is a message that Whedon has sent many times before, and a topic he has revisited in all of his works: our society ignores or otherwise deals ineffectively with bullying, mental health, and the warning signs that someone is about to become violent.

[36] Most of Whedon's characters turn bullying and adversity into positive outcomes and become better people for it. They go from being inconsequential underdogs to heroes and saviors of the world. But what does the Whedonverse tell us about the long-term, negative effects of bullying? Or the effects of ignoring signs that someone is in trouble? These are important questions to ask in the wake of national tragedies such as the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School; how many times in our own lives have we dismissed someone as "weird but harmless," choosing not to believe that he or she may have the potential to be dangerous?

[37] Many of the students I shared this film with said that Penny was aware of Billy's "weirdness," but that she brushed it off again and again, choosing to believe that he was harmless. At one point in the film, Dr. Horrible tells his blog audience that the Los Angeles Police Department is among his viewers. Why then, did they do nothing to prevent his attempted assassination of Captain Hammer at the shelter opening? Over and over, Dr. Horrible is making his intentions loudly and publicly known, so why is his violent outburst met with shock? By dismissing him as harmless, his viewers are fueling his rage; after all, his rage comes from frustration at being ignored. How else can he be taken seriously other than to do something truly heinous?

[38] Whedon has gone here before with other works, most notably several characters from his television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Warren, a geeky outcast who has been the target of bullies and ridicule, will do whatever it takes to be noticed. His friends Jonathan and Andrew, also sick of feeling insignificant, quickly fall in line behind him. The Trio, as they name themselves, turn to criminal and eventually violent acts, but Buffy and the Scoobies refuse to acknowledge them as a serious threat. Buffy even seems to dismiss them after it is revealed that Warren murdered his ex-girlfriend and tried to frame Buffy for the crime. It is only after Warren murders Tara, unleashing the wrath of Dark Willow, that Buffy realizes what he is capable of.

[39] Similarly, the vampire Spike has been shown to have been mercilessly bullied in his human life, rejected by the girl of his dreams, mocked for his poetry, and ultimately pitied by his mother. This drove him to become the most vicious and feared vampire he could be. If he could not get respect as a writer, then he would demand respect as a vampire, making a name for himself as a killer of vampire slayers.

[40] Considering these other Whedon characters in comparison with Dr. Horrible prompted me to ask my students, "Who is to blame for Dr. Horrible's actions?" Is it society's fault when people commit acts of violence? Should we blame those who see the warning

signs and choose not to act upon them? Penny sees that Billy is acting strangely, but she ignores it and it kills her. Where is the fine line between reporting something that needs to be reported, and intruding on someone's well-deserved privacy? And how does technology affect this question?

Concluding Thoughts

[41] Petrie and Boggs (2012), in their guidelines for analyzing a social message film, ask us to consider how well the film will stand up to the test of time. Sharing this film with college students has shown me just how impactful the messages offered by *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* can be, and how likely they are to ring true for years to come. More than five years since the film's original online release, the fan community surrounding it remains strong and vibrant.

In years to come, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* will be discussed in media classrooms as one of the catalysts that sparked a new mode of collaborative, all-access filmmaking, and that challenged the old Hollywood norms and endowed new media with the credibility it needed to be a viable competitor in entertainment.

[42] At the same time, the film's messages about celebrity, violence, the status of women in our culture, apathy and technology dependence will resonate. Whedon's work appeals to audiences and elicits strong reactions from fans because of his ability to blend humor, absurdity, fantasy, and true human experience so adeptly. Watching my students react to this film was a reminder not just of the power of Whedon's work to spark rich classroom discussion, but the power of popular culture more generally to get people talking about important, and often difficult, topics.

[43] *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a film that lauds technology and its unparalleled gift of access, while simultaneously criticizing our increasing need for technology and misuse of it. It does this in part by taking advantage of the very new media it depicts, and technology-savvy students respond to this. The film asks audiences to consider how we are influenced by media messages and how we use, and are used by, the entertainment media we love. These are questions that as a society we must never stop asking. And as educators, these are questions that we must always be asking our students to consider.

Notes

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