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David Lavery
"A Religion in Narrative": Joss Whedon and Television Creativity

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> I'm a very hard-line, angry atheist. . . . Yet I am fascinated by the concept of devotion.
>
> Joss Whedon

(1) At the end of the first episode of the new season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* now beginning its seventh, and possibly last, season, an episode written by series' creator Joss Whedon, all the Big Bads from the first six seasons reappear. Warren morphs into Glory into Adam into Mayor Wilkins into Drusilla and finally into The Master, each picking up in turn, an oration delivered to the newly ensoulled, newly returned to Sunnydale, mentally disturbed Spike.

> SPIKE: The thing is . . . I had a speech. I learned it all. Oh, God. She won't understand, she won't understand.
> WARREN: Of course she won't understand, Sparky. I'm beyond her understanding. She's a girl. Sugar and spice and everything...useless unless you're baking. I'm more than that. More than flesh . . .
> GLORY: . . . more than blood. I'm . . . you know, I honestly don't think there's a human word fabulous enough for me. Oh, my name will be on everyone's lips, assuming their lips haven't been torn off. But not just yet. That's alright, though . . .
> ADAM: . . . I can be patient. Everything is well within parameters. She's exactly where I want her to be. And so are you, Number 17. You're right where you belong . . .
> THE MAYOR: . . . So what'd you think? You'd get your soul back and everything'd be Jim Dandy? Soul's slipperier than a greased weasel. Why do you think I sold mine? (laughs) Well, you probably thought that you'd be your own man, and I respect that, but . . .
> DRUSILLA: . . . you never will. You'll always be mine. You'll always be in the dark with me, singing our little songs. You like our little songs, don't you? You've always liked them, right from the beginning. And

> that's where we're going . . .
> THE MASTER: . . . right back to the beginning. Not the Bang . . . not the Word . . . the true beginning. The next few months are going to be quite a ride. And I think we're all going to learn something about ourselves in the process. You'll learn you're a pathetic schmuck, if it hasn't sunk in already. Look at you. Trying to do what's right, just like her. You still don't get it. It's not about right, not about wrong . . .
> BUFFY: . . . it's about power.

"Back to the beginning." "In our end is our beginning," as we know from Eliot, and if "the last of earth left to discover is that which was the beginning," as "Little Gidding" tells us, then it shouldn't surprise us that Whedon might seek there the narrative secret of his creation as it begins its possible end. Nor should it surprise us that the morphing finally reveals not a Big Bad but Buffy herself. For is it not Sarah Michelle Gellar's possible departure from *Buffy* that inspired all this talk of beginnings? (That the show just might go on without either its star or creator is both "the beauty and horror of it" [Longworth 218].) And was it not concerning Gellar's character that we heard (spoken by Tara, ventriloquized by the First Slayer) the admonition, "You think you know . . . what's to come . . . what you are. You haven't even begun," Janus-words which this critic has always taken to be a meta-commentary—about the series itself, about its narrative potential as much as they are about its eponymous hero. "It's about power," she announces to Spike. Though we will no doubt need to follow the trajectory of Season 7's arc to its end before we know for certain what the "it" refers to, we have already met the "power." "You could never hope to know the source of our power," Über-Buffy scolds Adam before ripping out his uranium power core in Season Four's penultimate "Primeval." Adam might not know, but we have glimpsed its essence: *Buffy's* power source is narrative.

(2) Emily Nussbaum reports in a recent profile of Joss Whedon in the *The New York Times* that she witnessed "a dewy young woman" who "leaned forward and gripped [Whedon's] hand between hers, pulling him in for enforced eye contact: 'I just want you to know—we trust you. We know you know what you're doing. We know it will be great'." Asked in an interview about such fan idolization of his series and himself, Whedon modestly deflects the question, insisting that such adulation is not really personal.

> It's about the show, and I feel the same way about it. I get the same way. It's not like being a rock star. It doesn't feel like they're reacting to me. It's really sweet when people react like that, and I love the praise, but to me, what they're getting emotional about is the show. And that's the best feeling in the world. There's nothing creepy about it. I feel like there's a *religion in narrative*, and I feel the same way they do. I feel like we're both paying homage to something else; they're not paying homage to me. (*Onion AV Club* Interview; my italics)

"They" may not be but I am—continuing a process I began in the Afterword to *Fighting the Forces,* a brief essay I called "The Genius of Joss Whedon" and which I hope to continue in a book comparing and contrasting the creative processes of thirty-something Whedon and fifty-something David Chase, the television lifer who created *The Sopranos.* All I can offer here is a preliminary intelligence report on the avatar of this narrative religion. As John Briggs and Jonathan Gray have just admirably demonstrated, it is wise, after all, before reality and myth begin to blur, to establish whatever truth we can about the founder of a new faith.

(3) **Of course such attention to the creator** of a television series was, until recently, extremely rare. Since television arose in a time in which the "death of the author" was proclaimed by such important intellectual figures as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and even the "death of the auteur," that supposed movie creator—first promulgated by French cineastes like François Truffaut and American critics like Andrew Sarris—capable of giving individual, even autobiographical, shape and substance to the highly collaborative process of cinematic creation, was likewise proclaimed, serious consideration of authorship in the often anonymous medium of television has been suspect from the beginning.

(4) But literary authors, oblivious to their extinction, continue to publish, cash in

royalty checks (as William Gass once quipped), and appear on talk shows, movie directors continue to attract a good deal of attention, and now even television auteurs have become prominent in the way we think and write about the medium. The major figures at century's end—Steven Bochco (*L.A. Law, Hill Street Blues, NYPD Blue*), Joshua Brand and John Falsey (*St. Elsewhere, Northern Exposure*)—began to yield prominence to emerging new talents. Indeed, at the beginning of a new millennium we seem to be witnessing in the US the emergence of a number of significant, and sometimes prolific, television auteurs: David E. Kelley (*Picket Fences, The Practice, Ally McBeal, Boston Public*), J. J. Abrams (*Felicity, Alias*), Aaron Sorkin (*Sports Night, West Wing*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), and Joss Whedon, spoken of, in a recent *Entertainment Weekly* piece, as the next new Bochco (Jensen).

(5) **We know quite a lot about Whedon's influences.** A graduate of Wesleyan University with a degree in film studies, Whedon, we know, loves Dickens. We know that he is the "world's biggest Sondheim fan" (and once dreamed, long before authoring the fabulous "Once More with Feeling," of creating a musical based on the Oliver North hearings). We know that Edward Gorey, Marvel Comics, especially early *Spiderman* and John Byrne-era *X-Men,* Frank Miller and Alan Moore are all major inspirations. That he greatly admires Steven Soderberg and Ang Lee and the Wachowski brothers (he speaks of wishing to eat their brains in order to acquire their genius). That he has watched admiringly *The Simpsons, Twin Peaks, West Wing, The Sopranos, Party of Five* ("a brilliant show," according to Whedon, which often "made me cry uncontrollably," but "suffered ultimately from a lack of rocket launchers"), and *My So-Called Life* (he has called *Buffy* a genetic splicing of it and *The X-Files,* and in a satellite seminar on "Writing for Teens on Television" Whedon bows down, literally, before *My So-Called's* creator Winnie Holzman). But we know, too, that he was a "PBS kid," "into the highbrow British stuff that my mother [Lee Stearns] watched," who wasn't really raised on American television (Longworth 207-208).

(6) We know he loves movies—that in his college days he'd "go out and see three classic films, stagger home at 2 a.m. and then watch whatever was on HBO" (Nussbaum), and, thanks to his commentary on the *Buffy* DVDs, where he mentions Hitchcock, DePalma, Lynch, Leone, Abel Ferrara, Luc Besson, Sam Peckinpah, Tim Burton, Marcel Ophuls, Woody Allen, we know something about the directors whose work he remembers (not always favorably) and sometimes emulates.

(7) We know that he counts Wesleyan University scholar Richard Slotkin, author of books like *Gunfighter Nation, Fatal Environment,* and *Regeneration Through Violence* which examine the deep cultural roots of American "mythogenesis," "the creation, 'in both maker and audience, [of tales that are] mystical and religious, drawing heavily on the unconscious and the deepest levels of the psyche, defining relationships between human and divine things, between temporalities and ultimates" [Slotkin, quoted by Tucker] and that he once greatly admired Sartre's *Nausea*. We can be fairly certain that a man who is convinced that

> ultimately, stories come from violence, they come from sex. They come from death. They come from the dark places that everybody has to go to. . . . If you raise a kid to think everything is sunshine and flowers, they're going to get into the real world and die. . . . That's the reason fairy tales are so creepy, because we need to encapsulate these things, to inoculate ourselves against them, so that when we're confronted by the genuine horror that is day-to-day life we don't go insane [Longworth 213) . . .

has read Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment.* We can assume that someone who refers routinely to the "baroque" stage in the evolution of genre has absorbed Thomas Schatz' *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* and who speaks of understanding "the motivation of the man with the murderous gaze, . . . of the terrible objectifying male" (Longworth 215) has mastered the ideas of Laura Mulvey. The great directors of the 1970s and 80s often were film school

grads. Tarantino established the 1990's video store auteur tradition. Though himself a former video store employee and cognizant of the new auteurhood trajectory—he has quipped that "Actors wait tables, directors work at video stores" (*Onion AV Club* Interview)—Whedon may well represent yet a new career path: the film studies auteur, just as likely to be familiar with critical schools and narratological theory as with lenses and filters and aspect ratios. Perhaps this is why *Buffy* scholars feel so strong an attraction to the show.

(8) We know that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a recombinant hybrid of his obsessions: "We wanted to make that sort of short-attention-span, *The Simpsons*, cull-from-every genre all the time thing. You know, if we take this moment from *Nosferatu*, and this moment from *Pretty in Pink*, that'll make this possible. A little *Jane Eyre* in there, and then a little *Lethal Weapon 4.* Not *3*, but *4.* And I think this'll work" (*Onion AV Club* Interview).

(9) We know that, in addition to being executive producer extraordinaire, Whedon has written/co-written twenty+ episodes of *Buffy* and directed nineteen, in addition to several episodes of *Angel* and of his new series *Firefly* as well. Though by his own admission he knew very little about directing and virtually nothing about creating a television show prior to helming *BtVS*, Whedon, we know, has turned out some of the series'—and contemporary television's—most memorable, and most innovative, episodes, including "Innocence," in which Angel loses his soul and becomes the evil boyfriend from Hell Angelus after having sex with Buffy; "Becoming" (I and II), which was the first time the series shot on a soundstage and used historical settings and costumes; "Hush," a marvelous experiment, which broke him, he admits, out of a devolution into a "sort of a hack TV director" (Longworth 220), in which almost half the episode transpires in silence after fairy tale monsters The Gentlemen steal the voices of Sunnydale; "Restless," an all-dream episode, "basically a forty-minute poem" (as Whedon describes it [Longworth 220]), which I have described as a kind of television *8½* and Rhonda Wilcox has compared to Eliot's "The Wasteland"; "The Body," an emotionally-wrenching depiction of the aftermath of Buffy's mother's death; and "Once More with Feeling," an ingenious all-singing, all-dancing musical, the fulfillment of a long-time Whedon ambition. Whedon written and/or directed episodes exhibit stylistic and verbal signatures too complex to explore here.

(10) And we know that it is not just his own episodes that show his influence. "I have control over all the shows," Whedon explained to ET Online two years ago.

> I'm responsible for all the shows. That means that I break the stories. I often come up with the ideas and I certainly break the stories with the writers so that we all know what's going to happen. Then once the writers are done, I rewrite every script. . . . Then I oversee production and edit every show, work with the composers and sound mixers. Inevitably every single show has my name on it somewhere and it is my responsibility to make it good. . . . Every week that show is on, I'm standing in the back row, biting my nails, hoping people like it, so I feel a great responsibility. The good thing is that I'm surrounded by people who are much smarter than I am. So gradually I have been able to let certain things take care of themselves, because my crew, my writers, my post-production crew, everybody is so competent, that I don't have to run around quite as much as I used to.

Now again masterminding not only *Buffy* (due to Marti Noxon's maternity leave) and *Angel* (due to David Greenwalt's departure for ABC), not to mention his own new series, the sci-fi/western *Firefly*, the new spinoff *Ripper* (for British television), and a still-in-production *Buffy* cartoon series—all as part of his plans for "total world domination" (Adalian) by his Mutant Enemy production company, it would seem that Whedon's dream of peace and quiet will not be coming true any time soon.

(11) We know, too, that, though now deeply entangled in television, Whedon, like *Sopranos* creator Chase, really wants to make movies. He admits that his original

dream after college had long been to “head toward the movie world” (Interview with David Bianculli). Though it was in the movies that he made his first breakthrough, when Fran Rubel Kuzui butchered his screenplay of *BtVS* in 1992, though he has contributed, often as a highly paid—and sometimes uncredited—“script doctor” to a variety of films both before (*Speed* [1994]*, Toy Story* [1995]*, Waterworld* [1995], *Twister* [1996]) and after (*Alien Resurrection* [1997]*, X-Men* [2000], *Titan A.E.* [2000]), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the television series came on the air in 1997; though Anthony Stewart Head has remarked that “It’s only a matter of time before we lose him to the cinema” (BBC Interview), Whedon himself confesses that “I have always felt my movie career was an abysmal failure” (quoted in Tracy 44). According to The Internet Movie Data Base, Whedon once directed an episode of the television sitcom *Boy Meets World.* Though Whedon denies having done so, he does insist that he is far prouder of the *Boy Meets World* episode he never directed than he is of his work on *Alien: Resurrection.*

(12) In the medium in which he has experienced his greatest success, we know that Whedon can claim a unique genealogy. A third generation contributor to television, perhaps the only one in existence—both Whedon’s grandfather and father wrote for TV**[1]**—he speaks warmly of an important parental admonition: “The best advice [my father] every gave me . . . was, ‘If you have a good story, you don’t need jokes. If you don’t have a good story, no amount of jokes can save you.’ I’m not really that interested in jokes. I like the more dramatic stuff. But that tenet of ‘the story is god’ is the most important thing I could have learned” (*Onion AV Club* interview). Whedon himself, we know, would contribute to both *Roseanne* and *Parenthood* prior to the making of the original *BtVS* film.

(13) But he dreamed of directing, as he confessed to *The Onion:*

> I’m sure a lot of writers want to direct because they’re bitter, which is not a reason to direct. I want to speak visually, and writing is just a way of communicating visually. That’s what it’s all about. But nobody would even consider me to direct. So I said, “I’ll create a television show, and I’ll use it as a film school, and I’ll teach myself to direct on TV.”**[2]**

We possess at least a preliminary understanding of Whedon’s basic television aesthetics.

(14) We know that he expects the medium to be smart. “I hate it when people talk about Buffy as being campy . . ,” he tells Nussbaum. “I hate camp. I don’t enjoy dumb TV. I believe Aaron Spelling has single-handedly lowered SAT scores.” We know that, in concurrence with the Gene Youngblood axiom that entertainment gives the audience what it wants while art contributes what it never dreamed it needed, he does not want his narrative religion to be merely entertainment. “Don’t give people what they want,” he tells *The Onion,*

> give them what they need. What they want is for Sam and Diane to get together. Don’t give it to them. Trust me. . . . People want the easy path, a happy resolution, but in the end, they’re more interested in . . . No one’s going to go see the story of Othello going to get a peaceful divorce. People want the tragedy. They need things to go wrong, they need the tension. In my characters there’s a core of trust and love that I’m very committed to. These guys would die for each other, and it’s very beautiful. But at the same time, you can’t keep that safety. Things have to go wrong, bad things have to happen.

(15) “One of the things TV is about,” Whedon tells James Longworth (211), “is comfort, is knowing exactly where you are. I know they’re going to invite Jessica Fletcher over, one of them is going to get killed, she very politely is going to solve it. I know what's going to happen when I tune in to a particular show.” But Whedon’s narrative style takes a different approach:

> With *Buffy* we'll do French farce one week and *Medea* the next week. We try very hard structurally not to fall into a pattern either, so there's not a shoot-out in a warehouse every episode. I'm very much committed to keeping the audience off their feet. It's sort of antithetical to what TV is devised to do. (Longworth 211)

But we know too that Whedon's religion must entertain if it is to have adherents: "It's better to be a spy in the house of love, you know? . . . If I made 'Buffy the Lesbian Separatist,' a series of lectures on PBS on why there should be feminism, no one would be coming to the party, and it would be boring. The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium" (Nussbaum).

(16) **In *The Stuff Our Dreams Are Made Of:*** *How Science Fiction Conquered Reality,* the always irreverent Thomas Disch, contemplating the follies of Scientology, wonders out loud why it is that the only science fiction writer ever to found a religion had to be such an awful one. Why, oh why, could it not have been, say, Philip K. Dick whose theologizing found disciples and not the reprehensible L. Ron Hubbard? The "religion in narrative" now gestating—the magazine *The Door*, we should take note, recently named Buffy the Vampire Slayer its "theologian of the year" and the series has attracted a great deal of attention from CESNUR, as the presence of such scholars as Gordon Melton and Massimo Introvigne at this conference testifies—should produce no such qualms. It's difficult to imagine it in better hands than those of the "very hard-line, angry atheist" Joss Whedon.

Notes

[1] After a career in radio (writing for such shows as *The Great Gildersleeve*), Whedon's grandfather went on to contribute to *Donna Reed*, *Mayberry RFD*, *Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Room 222.* His father wrote for *Captain Kangaroo, The Dick Cavett Show, The Electric Company, Alice, Benson, Golden Girls,* and *It's a Living*.

[2]] In a recent article in *Slayage,* I have summarized and commented upon Whedon's DVD revelations about his education as a maker of television,

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JOSS WHEDON WRITTEN EPISODES			
Air Date	**Episode #**	**Title**	**Director**
03/10/97	1.01	Welcome to the Hellmouth	Charles Martin Smith
03/10/97	1.02	The Harvest	John T. Kretschmer
06/02/97	1.12	Prophecy Girl	Joss Whedon
09/15/97	2.01	When She Was Bad	Joss Whedon
11/03/97	2.07	Lie to Me	Joss Whedon
01/20/98	2.14	Innocence	Joss Whedon
05/12/98	2.21	Becoming (Part I)	Joss Whedon
05/19/98	2.22	Becoming (Part 2)	Joss Whedon
09/29/98	3.01	Anne	Joss Whedon
12/15/98	3.10	Amends	Joss Whedon
02/23/99	3.16	Doppelgängland	Joss Whedon
03/18/99	3.21	Graduation Day Part 1	Joss Whedon
07/13/99	3.22	Graduation Day Part 2	Joss Whedon
10/05/99	4.01	The Freshman	Joss Whedon

11/03/99	4.10	Hush	Joss Whedon
02/29/00	4.16	Who Are You?	Joss Whedon
05/23/00	4.22	Restless	Joss Whedon
11/07/00	5.06	Family	Joss Whedon
02/27/01	5.16	The Body	Joss Whedon
05/22/01	5.22	The Gift	Joss Whedon
11/06/01	6.07	Once More, with Feeling	Joss Whedon
9/24/02	7.01	Lessons	David Solomon

JOSS WHEDON DIRECTED EPISODES			
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06/02/97	1.12	Prophecy Girl	Joss Whedon
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11/03/97	2.07	Lie to Me	Joss Whedon
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05/19/98	2.22	Becoming (Part 2)	Joss Whedon
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02/27/01	5.16	The Body	Joss Whedon
05/22/01	5.22	The Gift	Joss Whedon
11/06/01	6.07	Once More, with Feeling	Joss Whedon