



"Where Do We Go From Here?": *Buffy* Studies and *Slayage* 2006

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[1] SC2, the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, took place over the 2006 Memorial Day weekend in Barnesville, Georgia. Hosted by Rhonda Wilcox and her Gordon College colleagues, the conference provided a triumphant sequel to the first *Slayage* conference hosted two years previously in Nashville, Tennessee, by fellow *Slayage* editor, David Lavery. SC2 embraced the broad sweep of Joss Whedon's *oeuvre*, with papers on the flagship *Buffy*, the "spin-off with a soul," *Angel*, [1] the unjustly abbreviated *Firefly*, and its big screen adaptation, *Serenity*. Thoroughly multi-disciplinary in scope, the conference brought together academics and independent scholars working in the fields, not only of literary, film, and television studies, but also of sociology, psychology, religious studies, media studies, American studies, mathematics, philosophy, law, music, art, performance studies, women's and gender studies, linguistics, bibliography, rhetoric, and pedagogy. The range of methodologies adopted by individual papers and panels was equally eclectic; in addition to traditional analyses of character, genre, narrative, and symbolism, presenters also explored the influence of intertexts as diverse as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, Shakespeare and Byron, *Dracula* and *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the western, opera, cyberpunk, and comic books. Several panels examined the ever-expanding worlds of Whedon fandom, providing ethnographies of fan communities and reports on various fandom projects. Others considered questions of morality and ethics, citizenship and belonging, consumption and containment, race, class, gender, sexuality, science, geography, and ecology. To that vexing question (a question I admit to asking myself from time to time), "Is there really anything new to say about *Buffy*?" the conference provided a resounding "Duh!" To skeptics questioning the longevity and relevance of *Buffy* Studies, the conference moreover offered ample evidence of the ongoing importance of Whedon's texts to an international scholarly community.

Once More, with Feeling

[2] The astonishing success of the 2004 *Slayage* conference in Nashville must have made it clear that if a sequel were to be attempted, it would have a lot to live up to. If it were going to be done at all, it would have to be done, to borrow the title of that perennially popular *Buffy* episode, "Once More, with Feeling." It is, after all, one thing to celebrate the ascendancy of a single television series at the height of its popularity – something the first *Slayage* conference did with gusto and good humor (well, ok, sometimes with really *bad*

humor); it is another thing altogether to organize a second conference around the idea of “the Whedonverses,” a nomenclature that simultaneously signals the complex melding of fan and academic sensibilities informing this particular articulation of the field and the elevation of Joss Whedon himself to the role of auteur, of author function, invoked, whether ironically or unabashedly literally, as the veritable deity of an alternate universe. [3] Over 180 papers were presented at the Nashville *Slayage* conference and more than double that number attended. The figures for SC2 were slightly smaller, but still surprisingly impressive. Approximately 150 scholars presented papers at Gordon College and over 60 more attended. People traveled to Barnesville from Australia, Canada, England, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, and all over the United States. All this – without the lure of Graceland! As Wilcox and Lavery indicate in their introduction to the conference program, “[i]n terms of travel logistics, coming to Barnesville is not as simple a matter (especially for international travelers) as coming to Nashville; and it is a mark of the seriousness of intention of students of the Whedonverses that they–that you–have made this journey.” [2] Overcoming the not-inconsiderable obstacles of geographical isolation, lack of public transportation, and the distance between the college and the conference hotels, SC2 was in fact meticulously organized and coordinated. Superlative timekeeping of papers and panels respected presenters and audience equally, a mark of consideration all the more welcome at a conference offering up to five parallel sessions, from 9am to 7pm, for three full days. It is one indication of the appeal of the SC2 program that I almost always found myself in a quandary about which session to attend. And I wasn’t the only one. It is a rare thing in academia when a three-day conference leaves you wishing you could have heard even more papers. For every panel I got to see, there were another two I wished I could have gone to – a fact that was energizing at the time but which inevitably limits the scope of the reflections I am able to offer here. [3]

Going Through the Motions?

[4] “I was always brave, and kind of righteous. Now I find I’m wavering:” thus sang Buffy in the self-consciously Disney “I want” song at the beginning of Season Six’s musical, “Once More, with Feeling.” Dredging up the energy to attend yet another scholarly conference, this one outside my primary field, at the end of the academic year, I found myself in a similar frame of mind. I was having trouble dragging myself from the “untold hell dimension” of end-of-semester grading: “ergo the weirdness” (*pace* Xander). If not brave, exactly, I *had* always been kind of righteous about defending the scholarly legitimacy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which I had started writing about for undergraduate literature classes with the release of the Twentieth Century Fox film in 1992. (It has become *de rigueur* in *Buffy Studies* to bemoan the shortcomings of this early incarnation and, following Joss Whedon’s lead, to deem it infinitely inferior to the final product. I can only say that making the female lead’s “secret weapon” PMS was a masterstroke of cinematic bathos that I remain profoundly grateful for and that Joss Whedon is only one – albeit it an important one – of the many readers of the texts he helps to produce.) But fourteen years (eek!), a smattering of international conferences, and many a monograph later, in May 2006 I was feeling decidedly less sanguine about the radical potential of Buffy in general and *Buffy Studies* in particular.

[5] At the first *Slayage* conference in Nashville, some scholars and fans were already betraying an incipient impatience with the state of *Buffy* scholarship. “It’s a relief to hear papers that don’t go on about feminism” is a rough paraphrase of a comment I heard in a panel on colonialism – a remark that sets up an unfortunate and spurious mutual exclusivity. In her Mr. Pointy award-winning keynote address, “‘Not just another *Buffy* paper’: Towards an Aesthetics of Television.” Sue Turnbull offered a wittily self-reflexive

account of her struggles to justify her own *Buffy* scholarship to her colleagues (“Why I sometimes wish I was studying orthodonture”) and to do something different with the Slayer text (“a new aesthetics of television study”). A year previously, in their now somewhat notorious 2003 essay, “Feeling for Buffy: The Girl Next Door,” Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider, had offered a scathing critique of the state of *Buffy* scholarship, writing that, “[t]he irony here is that, in attempting to bring scholarship or serious discussion to bear on *BtVS*, the scholars in question evince their own lack of understanding of, and insight into, the show, and perhaps more importantly, into the kinds of tasks, purposes, and methods that cultural theorists and others who engage with popular culture set for themselves and employ” (299). Levine and Schneider went on to say, not without some justification, that “there has been much less of the kind of self-reflective work about the nature of *BtVS* scholarship – what it is about and what it is trying to accomplish versus what it should or could be about – than there should be, or than there in fact is within various disciplines in the humanities generally as regards their objects of study. It is *BtVS* scholarship that warrants study and this point, not *BtVS* itself” (301). [4] What were the chances – in 2006 – that SC2 would do more than go “through the motions,” that the conference would move through, beyond, or even more deeply into these problems – the purported redundancy of content (“not *more* feminism!”), the search for new approaches, the lack of reflexivity?

The Same Old Trips – Why Should We Care?

[6] One answer is, that in a very basic sense, SC2 had just about the same chance as any other academic conference of unearthing new content, unveiling new approaches, and being self-conscious about the state of the field. I feel sure that I am not alone when I say that during several presentations and even entire panels I was haunted by a sense of *deja vu*. Why does it feel like people are just telling us what we already know? Is the alternative to papers that assume too much insider knowledge simply presentations that include a lot of plot or character synopsis? How do we make a series we know so well new again to an informed audience? What *can* we assume about our audience? The regular conventions of paper presentations don’t seem to hold here – or do they? Admittedly, what I hear as “mostly filler” others will hear as a “break-away pop hit” or favorite “book number.” What’s new to me might be old to someone else, and vice versa. I am not arguing here for the priority of my sense of what is new and important in *Buffy* scholarship, but simply pointing out that that standard itself is an ineluctably subjective one.

[7] However, one difference, I suspect, between the experience of attending the biennial *Slayage* conference and, say, the annual Shakespeare Association of America conference is that the beloved object of study is also a maligned and imperiled object of study, so we *care* more when what we hear is substandard, even if we know that “substandard” inevitably means different things to different people. Having been asked to write a report of the conference in advance, I know that I was morbidly preoccupied with what I perceived as “filler” papers until a fellow attendee made the candid observation that when she attended an academic conference in her primary field, she was satisfied if she heard one good paper over the course of the conference. Having just heard five great papers in the space of a single day, and holding similarly low expectations of academic conferences in general, this contrast gave me pause. Do we hold higher hopes (and greater dread?) of *Buffy* scholarship than we do of other scholarship because, following Sue Turnbull, the study of *Buffy* is clearly such a joke to some of our colleagues? Does what Rhonda Wilcox has recently called the “demonization” of television studies within the wider academy influence the nature of our critical and emotional investments in the series and in the

scholarly paraphernalia (books, conferences, journals) with which the study of *Buffy* endeavors to legitimize itself? [5] And how does the embattled nature of the field impact the quality of community and conversation, and perhaps more importantly, the possibilities for disagreement and dissent, when large numbers of *Buffy* scholars congregate *en masse*?

What Can't We Face If We're Together?

[8] With *Buffy* scholarship and, perhaps more pertinently, *Buffy* pedagogy expanding so rapidly, it makes sense that the second *Slayage* conference would involve people from many levels of the academy and beyond – distinguished professors, common or garden professors, undergraduates, graduate students grappling with different stages of their masters or doctoral programs, independent scholars, professional writers, struggling writers, and loyal fans. Levels of familiarity with Whedon's texts and with the existing scholarship differed markedly as well, without necessarily corresponding closely with individuals' professional development. This is in no way a bad thing. In fact, it is one of those egalitarian, perhaps even utopian, features of this field that Wilcox and Lavery, as conference coordinators and editors of *Slayage*, have deliberately fostered and promoted. *Buffy* Studies is unusual in its inclusivity, in the deliberate efforts it makes to welcome scholars and students with different levels of expertise. Particularly at a gathering like SC2, those who write about *Buffy* are justifiably proud that – as scholars, fans, academics, and students (and often more than one of these simultaneously) – they are “in this thing together.”

[9] One of the most impressively put together visual presentations I saw at the conference, “‘Where Do We Go From Here?': A Look at Female Heroes in a Post-*Buffy* Context,” was by an independent scholar, Jennifer Stuller, who, outside the confines of academe, is writing a book about the subject (and is currently looking for a publisher). Roz Kaveney, an independent scholar whose contribution to *Buffy* Studies is already well established, shared her encyclopedic knowledge of all things Super- in her erudite keynote exposition, “Gifted and Dangerous: Joss Whedon's Superhero Obsession.” [6] The diversity of the *Slayage* audience and the reach of *Buffy* pedagogy are further indexed when undergraduates can produce papers as intriguing as those of the featured speakers. Under the editorship of Lynne Edwards and Katy Stevens, the newly established journal *Watcher Jr.* provides a unique venue for the publication of undergraduate papers, further contributing to the egalitarian development of the field.

Something to Sing About

[10] Three separate sessions at SC2 were devoted to the burgeoning field of *Buffy* pedagogy. I was fortunate to attend “The Whedonverses Across the Curriculum II,” the second of a two-part series chaired by Vivien Burr and Christine Jarvis, which set out to explore developments and continuities in *Buffy* pedagogy since the 2004 Nashville conference. Christine Jarvis, in presenting “Shifting Perspectives on Death – Using *BtVS* with First Year Undergraduates Considering Renaissance Attitudes Towards Morality,” drew some startlingly *apropos* connections between *Buffy*'s treatment of death and the work of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets John Donne and George Herbert, in the process providing an exemplary model of the short conference paper – a veritable “how-to” for those of us less proficient with the genre. Jason Winslade's “Aspects of Metatextuality – Using *BtVS* to Illustrate Performance Theory and Cultural Studies” offered an engaging account of student responses to his use of *Buffy* in compulsory first year writing classes at DePaul University in Chicago, and Kris Woofert provided audience members with a treasure trove of teaching materials from a module he teaches on *Red Riding Hood*, using

the Season Five's *Buffy Vs. Dracula* to "illuminate literary terms and concepts." Through their insights, interactivity, and methods of delivery, each of these presentations managed to discuss engaged *Buffy* pedagogy and at the same time *perform* engaged *Buffy* pedagogy. The audience was appropriately appreciative, proposing an online archive of *Buffy*-related syllabi, and suggesting that this may well be the "next frontier" of *Buffy* scholarship.

[11] Other frontiers were broached at SC2 as well. In defiance of what I see as the patently premature suggestion that feminist analysis of *Buffy* has been exhausted, the conference offered two panels on "Gender" and another on "The Patriarchy." Inevitably some of these papers traversed familiar terrain, but welcome inroads were made by Monique Hyman's theoretically savvy "The Geography of *Firefly* and *Serenity*: Feminist Spaces on the Patriarchal Frontier" and featured speaker Lorna Jowett's wide-ranging presentation on "Science, Power, and Gender in *Buffy* and *Angel*," a talk that offered a tantalizing taste of her new work on "Geek Chic." If gender analysis might seem to some hardened cases "the same old trip," decidedly new trips in content and approach were offered by David Kociemba's appealing and innovative "'Fake It 'till You Make It': Media Addiction in *BtVS*," which applied the theory of addiction promulgated by Alcoholics Anonymous to the fannish proclivities of *Buffy*'s "Evil Trio," and featured speaker Lynne Edwards' bravura performance (there really is no other word) of her forthcoming book, *The Other Sunnydale: Reflections of Blackness in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[12] If the above examples illustrate new content and new approaches in scholarship on *Buffy*, a question arguably remains about capacity of the field for self-reflection, and papers at SC2 that answered the "so what?" question ("so why should what you have to say be of interest to anyone not already interested?") provide a particularly important contribution to *Buffy* scholarship at this stage of its development. For *Buffy* Studies to develop beyond its cultish counter-canonical cachet (admittedly part of its appeal), it needs to explicitly demonstrate the kinds of contribution it can make to the disparate disciplines its exponents engage with. Michael Adams' keynote address, "The Matrix of Motives in Slayer Style" did this with predictable panache when he teased out the implications of "clipped phrasal verbs" not only for *Buffy* studies, but also for the broader field of linguistic analysis. Michelle Dvoskin's "Under Their Spell: 'Once More, with Feeling' and Queering the Audience" departed from existing scholarship on musical theater to ask what happens when the queer subtext becomes lesbian text, and Cynthea Masson's "'What Did You Sing About?': Acts of Questioning in 'Once More, with Feeling'" deployed a sophisticated rhetorical analysis to challenge what has become the "canonical" reading of this episode, that "each of the characters sings what they secretly feel, so the songs represent the real and the true" (in Richard Albright's elegant synopsis, but see also Wilcox and Halfyard) [7] to instead suggest that "the truths revealed in 'Once More, with Feeling' may be a *distraction* from other truths or secrets that the characters are not yet able to admit out loud, even in song, even to themselves" (emphasis added).

I'm just worried that this whole session's going to turn into some training montage from an 80s movie

[13] With the plethora of excellent papers on offer, it might seem churlish to probe what I see as some of the more problematic aspects of the conference, but I feel this is also part of my brief. At the first *Slayage* conference in 2004, I voiced the concern that while original and informative papers abounded, *Buffy* scholars seemed surprisingly reluctant to critique the show, and that when such critiques were offered, they were often perceived as arresting rather than furthering scholarly dialogue. [8] I am most familiar with this tendency in feminist scholarship. The last decade has produced a wealth of exciting

feminist criticism of *Buffy*, but with significant exceptions, there is a tendency to focus on the series' transgressive play with gender at the expense of considering other, less obviously liberatory aspects of the show. [9] In this context, critical scrutiny of say, *Buffy's* postcolonial or racial politics, is seen by some to willfully undermine or detract from the series' feminist credentials, and perhaps by implication from the work of scholars who have celebrated it. A critique of *Buffy's* less progressive politics becomes a treacherous act of double-crossing. And if feminist scholars see a critique of *Buffy's* racial politics as an attack on *Buffy Studies* itself, then this separation will solidify by degrees. In Nashville I suggested that it is a poor reflection on *Buffy Studies* if serious minded critique of the show is somehow seen as an *inappropriate* response to the text.

[14] This tension is not unique to feminist scholarship of *Buffy*, indeed similar, sometimes unspoken conflicts might be discerned in discussions about the putative "success" of Season Seven and the respective merits of formal (often deemed "aesthetic") and ideological (often termed "sociological") criticism in *Buffy Studies*. [10] Far from endangering its development, I believe such tensions indicate some of the field's most promising avenues of exploration – but only if they are explored deliberately and self-consciously. This will require that new scholarship will sometimes take issue with existing scholarship, and such disagreements should not be seen as a threat to the field but rather as an important source of its strength. Cynthia Masson's SC2 paper offers a wonderful example of work that engages usefully with existing *Buffy* scholarship and departs from it in several pertinent respects to produce a vigorous new reading of a familiar text. Masson argues that in "Once More, with Feeling," "Buffy's words of confidence – her apparent truth of faith in togetherness – is not so confident or truthful when viewed rhetorically." Instead, Masson suggests, "she asks rhetorical questions that overtly imply togetherness, while covertly gesturing toward her ongoing separation from the group." In a different but nonetheless related way, some attendees at SC2 expressed discomfort with the fact that when they asked questions that were perceived as critical – of the series itself, of the conference papers in question – they were essentially shut down in a sort of default collective strategy that discouraged dissension. In analyzing a series as invested in the slippage between text and subtext as *Buffy*, we should be equally wary of misreading rhetorical questions as we are of mistaking genuine questions for a species of assault. One of the flip sides to the inclusive sense of community that the *Slayage* conferences foster is the sense that any critical take on *Buffy* – its politics, its narrative strategies, Spike (!) – can be misread as an attack on that community itself – a community that is necessarily (and thankfully) less unified than its own rhetoric might suggest.

[15] In "Once More, with Feeling," Buffy's anthem, "What Can't We Face," celebrates the sense of community that is a celebrated feature of the show. But as several critics have noted, this song is a wishful affirmation of unity in the face of decided differences, and, I would suggest, the state of *Buffy* scholarship is no different. [11] Similarly, when Buffy warns Giles, "I'm just worried that this whole session's going to turn into some training montage from an 80s movie," she voices a fear that the discipline and rigor of their training is about to be cheapened by caricature, portrayed with a sentimentality that drains it of significance. The extraordinary goodwill and intellectual generosity that have informed the last two *Slayage* conferences should not blind us to the fact that the field of *Buffy Studies* unwittingly courts trivialization if it pursues critical consensus at the expense of a dynamic discussion of differences. In this spirit, I want briefly to consider two developments in *Buffy* scholarship that I believe warrant further scrutiny.

It's Getting Eerie. What's This Cheery Singing All About?

[16] The level of affective response elicited by *Buffy* is demonstrably and designedly

powerful. We know that Whedon developed the series with this aim in mind: "I designed the show to create that strong reaction. I designed Buffy to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can't be loved." [12] One of the most unusual moments I experienced at SC2 occurred at 11am on a Sunday morning when Claudia Rollins' careful analysis of Anya's response to Joyce's death in *The Body* left half of the audience unexpectedly blinking back tears. We do not generally expect to be moved this viscerally by a television show, still less by an academic presentation, although perhaps we should more often. Participation in the *Slayage* conferences often blurs the boundaries between academic "distance" and fannish "immersion" in ways that help to dismantle this obdurate binary. The results can sometimes be exhilarating, as with Rollins' talk above. They can also be unnerving.

[17] Vivien Burr, in her lucid account of the interplay between fan and academic identities at the first *Slayage* conference, testifies to the mixed feelings many experience when their personal and professional passions find a common object. She explores the "tension and conflict implicit in the relationship between academic and fan identities, and the defensiveness and anxiety associated with trying to have a foot in both camps" (375-6). Based on her own experiences in Nashville and the insights of 13 interviewees, Burr examines attendees' efforts to balance emotional engagement and academic rigor. One respondent, Ben, writes:

I know that my engagement with the show is a peculiar combination of scholarly curiosity, appreciation, and deep emotional attachment . . . The best and most responsible critiques, I think, emerge from profound emotional engagements – but that emotional engagement needs to be invested with criticism and political interest, not simply taken up as an uncritical celebration. (379)

Given that SCBtVS "quite clearly identified itself as an academic conference," Burr notes, "it is not surprising . . . that it was almost exclusively the more fannish aspects of the activities that sometimes felt problematic" (376-7).

[18] The fannish aspects of SC2 that felt most problematic to me were the recurring use of two words: "Joss" and "genius." In academic circles we call Dante simply by his first name but even this is a mistake of literary history. When I'm talking to my friends, or discussing my struggles with this essay to colleagues, I will refer to the creator of *Buffy* as "Joss." But this doesn't mean it's good practice. I want to make the puny, pedantic plea that in academic conference papers we refer to Whedon by his full or last name. The problem is compounded when "Joss" becomes synonymous with "genius" and the two are collapsed in a way that forestalls conversation. "Joss" is a "genius," "Joss" "wrote" this episode, therefore, this episode is "genius." If there is a case to be made for Whedon's "genius," then that case needs to be *established*, and not just assumed. [13] I suppose one of the pleasures of conferences such as *Slayage* is precisely the fellow fannish feeling that allows such assumptions to be made, but the fact remains that we are all fan-scholars and scholar-fans with different political and theoretical investments. "Genius" is a particularly loaded term in literary criticism, with a history that harkens back to Romantic notions of individual creativity and transcendence, and which was responsible in part for the exclusion of women and other minorities from the canon of English literature for several centuries. The term "genius" is certainly part of my fannish vocabulary for Whedon, but when we use it in academic contexts I suggest we need to be careful to define, and delimit, exactly what it is we are trying to say.

[19] These admittedly anal comments are not intended to silence fan discourse on *Buffy*, or to endorse any particularly rigid code of academic etiquette. As Alan, one of Vivien

Burr's respondents eloquently argues:

I feel that fandom can certainly inform a scholar's work and adds to the playfulness that can make scholarly papers interesting. But a scholar needs to balance that with a more measured approach. I refrain from using the term "objectivity," since that notion is as mythical as vampires are. But an academic writing on these topics needs to learn to coax his or her fandom into the service of scholarly inquiry. (379)

Nor do I mean, in voicing my beef with "Joss" and "genius," to reinforce a strict division between fan and academic identities. As Burr, following Hills, notes, these identities are performative, "they are things that we *do*," not things that we, essentially, are (376). And while turf struggles between fans and academics might seem potentially divisive of the inclusive community fostered by *Slayage*, the fact that the study of fan cultures has developed alongside *Buffy Studies* and has from the outset constituted an important part of its literature suggests instead that the vagaries of academic/fan interaction within this community will continue to prove a particularly fertile field of research. In its energetic embrace of fan communities and fan idioms, *Buffy Studies* has already gone a long way to answering the call Matt Hills makes at the end of *Fan Cultures* (and which David Lavery reiterates in his Mr. Pointy award-winning paean to *Buffy Studies*, " 'I wrote my thesis on you': *Buffy Studies* as an Academic Cult"), the call for "academic commitment . . . modeled on fan commitment," for "affective reflexivity" and for "*impassioned thought* rather than the parroting of academic discursive mantras" (184). I still think we should use his last name.

I've Got a Theory

[20] Closely related to the celebration of "Joss" as "genius" has been the swift rise of auteur theory as a model for Whedon's authorship. Several presenters at SC2 invoked Whedon as an auteur, notably Jennifer Stokes, who explored "The Rise of Whedon as Auteur" in her industry-aware analysis, "Joss Whedon and Contemporary Programming," and David Lavery, whose featured address, "Joss Whedon, Wonder Boy," offered an entertaining tour of his eponymous book project for I. B. Tauris. Lavery explained that his book will model its methodology on John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, in which Lowes seeks to "systematically trace the origin of each and every image/symbol/metaphor in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' to discover how the raw material that inspired the great British romantic's belief suspending words arrived in his imagination in the first place." Lavery hopes to "scrutinize Whedon in much the same way Lowes investigated Coleridge," with one chapter of his book, "Joss Whedon, Television Auteur" devoted to exploring how "Whedon's signature writing and directing are elucidated through examination of such singular episodes as 'Hush,' 'Restless,' 'The Body,' 'Once More with Feeling,' 'Waiting in the Wings,' and 'Objects in Space.'" Lavery claims that he borrows this approach from "back in the good old days" when "the discouraging words structuralism and deconstruction had not yet been heard." And, disarming self-deprecation aside, it is not without significance that one of the more recent proposals for *Buffy* scholarship, from an acknowledged leader of the field, draws its theoretical underpinning from a time before High Theory.

[21] Auteur theory is useful for *Buffy* scholars for a number of reasons: it asserts by fiat the "genius" of the object of analysis; it makes a polemic argument for reading those who produce television as seriously as those who produce film; it canonizes Whedon as innovator and master of his craft at an early stage in the development of television

studies; and it retrieves from the theoretical remains of the death of the author a single, self-conscious, self-evident author – all good grist for the New Critical mill. But it also begs the question of this scholarship's relationship to the critical theory that, over the last 40 years has spawned the very fields – of feminism, film studies, cultural studies, etc.– that gave a home to *Buffy* Studies to begin with. When I mentioned in the SC2 panel on "Media/Television Studies" that it was uncanny that auteur theory, itself the subject of fierce debate in film studies, should be resurrected in television studies 40 years after the death of the author, another audience member replied that she thought that the death of the author had been exaggerated. This moment exemplifies, as clearly as I think any can, the very different theoretical agenda that *Buffy* scholars bring to their work. And again, I would like to make the pitch that I think these divisions can be potentially productive and powerful if they are brought out into the open.

[22] In that spirit of constructive engagement, then, let me be a little less cryptic. I've already expressed my reservations about the use of the term "genius:" if it is defined in such a way as to *open up* our investigation into the nature of Whedon's artistry, then that is all to the good; if it is used simply to assert aesthetic value, then, like Buffy singing before Sweet at the conclusion to "Once More, with Feeling," it "needs back up." Similarly, while the argument certainly needs to be made that television shows are as worthy of scholarly scrutiny as film texts or literature, it seems counter-intuitive to make this claim using the *same* values of "quality" and "excellence" that have kept television from being taken seriously in the first place. The mechanism of canonization is, in some ways, inimical to the progressive politics that the *Buffy* series and many *Buffy* scholars uphold. Moreover, while auteur theory was, in its heyday, certainly a polemic movement, it was also, as Bill Nichols notes (citing John Hess in his commentary on Truffaut's watershed essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema"), "a justification couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern" (224). While auteur theory has developed in decidedly different directions since then (in the distinctive styles of Andrew Sarris, Peter Wollen, and Robin Wood, for instance), it seems important for *Buffy* scholars in 2006 to carefully historicize the theory they employ, to identify which strain of this theory speaks most to their concerns, and to unpack the theoretical baggage that travels with the label "auteur," not least of which is its gendering (like the label "genius" before it) as precocious masculine talent.

[23] Finally, I want to glance briefly at the solidification of the author function that attends *Buffy* Studies' adoption of auteur theory. While it makes sense for the immediate promotion of the field, the elevation of Joss Whedon to auteur, to single-author status, also comes at a time when *Buffy* Studies might contribute meaningfully to broader, cross-disciplinary interests in the nature of collective authorship, in intellectual property, in the dynamics of television production, and in the mythology of the author function as it relates to media studies more generally. No TV episode, still less a TV series, is a single-authored work, and to proceed as if it were seems to me to jettison one of the most compelling contributions the study of *Buffy* might have to offer the wider academic community. I am not arguing here for the whole-scale rejection of auteur theory, but merely for a more nuanced exploration of its applicability. A critical analysis of the ways in which Whedon's authorship confirms *and resists* various strains of auteur theory might be able to take in new directions not just *Buffy* Studies but auteur theory as well.

Where Do We Go From Here?

[24] *Buffy* Studies in its present incarnation offers unique opportunities to explore the peculiarities and problematics of television "authorship." Whether approached via auteur

theory or from a more deconstructive position, *Buffy* has much to offer. *Buffy* Studies also offers fertile fields for the study of fan cultures and, more particularly, for the interrogation of the fan/scholar continuum. It continues to foster exciting scholarship in feminism and has branched out into many other exciting new fields. As SC2 demonstrated to admiration, *Buffy* will continue to elicit challenging responses from both the formalist and poststructuralist sides of the critical divide. The trick will be to bring the two into conversation.

Notes

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[1] The phrase comes from Stacey Abbott's edited collection of essays, *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-off With a Soul*.

[2] Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery, Introduction to Conference Program, "SC2: The Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses."

[3] Brett Rogers and I endeavored to attend different sessions in order to jointly cover as much of the conference as we could but the result is necessarily still incomplete, and my account of the sessions I did attend, inevitably partial. Apologies for any errors or omissions of attribution in the account that follows.

[4] I disagree with most of Levine and Schneider's assessments, both about the *Buffy* series and *Buffy* Studies, but the charge that there is not enough self-reflexive analysis of the field does have some merit. Significant exceptions are provided by Vivien Burr's "Scholars/'shippers and Spikeaholics," Rhonda Wilcox's "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue,'" and David Lavery's "'I Wrote My Thesis on You.'"

[5] Rhonda Wilcox, "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue': *Buffy* Studies and Television Studies," 37.

[6] Kaveney edited the first published collection of *Buffy* scholarship, *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel*, revised and updated as *Reading the Vampire Slayer: The New, Revised, Unofficial Guide to Buffy and Angel*.

[7] Richard S. Albright, "'Break away pop hit or . . . book number?': 'Once More, with Feeling' and Genre," par. 11. See also Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters* and Janet K. Halfyard, "Singing Their Hearts Out."

[8] See Pender, "Whose Revolution Has Been Televised?"

[9] I discuss this more fully in "'Kicking Ass is Comfort Food: Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon."

[10] For one take on the "aesthetic" versus "sociological" debate, see Rhonda Wilcox, "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue.'"

[11] See especially Wilcox's chapter on "Once More, with Feeling" in *Why Buffy Matters*.

[12] Joss Whedon interview, the *Onion AV Club*.

[13] This is, in fact, what David Lavery does in "The Genius of Joss Whedon."

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