

Joss Whedon vs. The Horror Tradition: The Production of Genre in Buffy and Beyond

Kristopher Karl Woofter and Lorna Jowett (Editors)

Mary Going, University of Sheffield

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“The Whedonverse is a haunted house” (1)

Identifying the Whedonverse as a haunted house, Kristopher Karl Woofter and Lorna Jowett suggest in *Joss Whedon vs The Horror Tradition* that the body of work associated with Joss Whedon can be viewed as a Gothic space haunted by the monsters, conventions, intertextuality, and excesses of the horror genre. Whedon’s extensive catalogue of work in film and television has already been established as rich grounds for critical attention, from studies devoted to individual series (Abbot, *Reading Angel: The TV Spin off with a Soul*, 2005; Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer*, 2005) to works examining specific areas within the Whedonverse such as linguistics (Adams, *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon*, 2004) or television (Pateman, *Joss Whedon*, 2018) and of course the journal *Slayage* that is dedicated to exploring the entirety of Whedon’s works. Placing horror at the heart of Whedon’s oeuvre, this collection is a welcome new addition to this field. Highlighting the importance of horror, an oft-maligned genre, within Whedon’s television

and film outputs, this collection explores the multi-faceted tradition of horror in the Whedonverse through a range of fresh perspectives and retrospectives.

In their introduction, Woofter and Jowett argue that the Whedonverse is not simply haunted by horror, but it is also a hybrid spectre that devours aspects of other genres, from parody, crime, film noir, the western, science fiction, and musicals, as it continually and self-consciously attempts to “celebrate, reinvent, and subvert” generic conventions (3). The main aim of this work is to interrogate the connection between the Whedonverse and the traditional conventions and production of the horror tradition, exploring the tension between Whedon and his collaborators as re-inventors of genres or as “practitioners adept at manipulating” them (5). Dividing its fifteen chapters into three sections, the collection guides its reader through the conventions, production, and new retrospectives of horror in the Whedonverse, and with horror as its foundation, this collection offers a comprehensive examination of the traditions and legacies of horror and the Whedonverse.

In part 1, “(Under)Groundwork: Horror Concepts and Conventions in the Whedonverse”, essays explore aspects of Whedon’s television series and films alongside a diverse range of generic conventions. Clayton Dillard uses the Slasher template established within *Halloween* as well as the popularity of films such as *Scream* to explore *Buffy*’s adaptation of Slasher film conventions. Refashioning Slasher horror film traditions to the new medium of TV, Clayton discusses the importance of marketability and consumption as the TV horror market expands to recognise and appeal to female spectators. Turning to 1920s silent horror, Selma A. Purac suggests that “Hush” (*Buffy*) stages a return to early horror conventions through its exploitation of silence that functions to defamiliarise the series while highlighting the very mechanics of horror. Silence is participatory, requiring the viewers’ imagination to fill the gaps, and Purac suggests that techniques of silent film are further employed through carefully choreographed sequences that subvert expectations and “evoke

both fear *and* laughter” (45). In the third essay of this section, Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare discusses affective materiality and corporeal shock in “The Body” (*Buffy*), detailing the episode’s divergence from Noel Carroll’s classic model for horror through its focus on affect and the negative space of Joyce’s corpse as an infectious invasion. From corpses to musicals, Anne Golden’s chapter explores “Once More With Feeling” (*Buffy*) as a melancholy musical, arguing that as the episode resurrects, parodies, and subverts musical comedy idioms, it stages an avant-garde horror where the musical is resurrected as an uninvited, but still celebrated, ghost. Moving away from *Buffy*, Cynthia Burkhead’s chapter examines oneiric horror in *Angel*, using Robin Wood’s formula of horror’s collective nightmares and arguing that although *Angel*’s dreams lack the iconography of horror, these episodes create a collective horror response through the viewers’ narrative familiarity and sympathy for Whedon’s characters. Bronwen Calvert’s chapter looks beyond the Buffyverse to *Dollhouse*, exploring the interior spaces and *mise-en-scène* of the series through the production of horror-related effects, and identifies the LA House as a space of horror alongside traditional locations of the haunted house, asylum, and prison. Finally, Stephanie Graves turns to film through an exploration of *Cabin in the Woods* and postmodern horror. Graves argues that *Cabin* subverts and parodies immediately familiar horror tropes and formula, but in doing so participates in an already established tradition of parodic postmodern horror.

From traditional horror conventions to the mechanics of horror as an industry, the next section discusses the production of the 1992 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film, and the later TV series *Buffy* and *Angel*. In the first essay of this section, Jerry D. Metz Jr. discusses the original *Buffy* film within the contexts of vampire comedy and the emerging and lucrative PG13 teen market. Metz Jr considers the film as part of a capitalist industry seeking to appeal to young audiences, and particularly white women. Stacey Abbot’s chapter explores the ways that *Buffy* and *Angel* negotiate the restrictions of TV, suggesting that the context of TV

production facilitated the development of horror as allegory in these shows. Last in this section is Erin Giannini's discussion of *Angel* as part of a tradition of TV horror crime hybrids. Examining *Angel*'s generic predecessors and progeny, Gianini highlights a trajectory of metafictional commentary that relies on the viewers' comprehension of the wider corpus of the landscape of TV horror.

The final section of this collection moves the discussion to new perspectives, retrospectives, and contexts through which to consider horror within the works of Whedon. The first chapter is a retrospective examining Whedon alongside feminist horror, and Jowett's discussion of the inequalities but also the increasing representation of disenfranchised groups both on and off screen within horror is a valuable contribution to discussions of Whedon's work, particularly in a post MeToo era. While Jowett stops short from determining how close we are to seeing feminist horror, she offers a lens through which feminist horror can be glimpsed within this genre and these works. Woofter's chapter turns to the Weird tradition discussing the ways that Weird tropes such as cosmic dread, future-leaning speculation, and Lovecraftian seekers function within Whedon's series by working against horror, creating a tension between the traditions of American Gothic and the Weird. Further examining the generic instability of Whedon's work, K. Brenna Wardell's chapter explores *Buffy* through the lens of the fairy tale, focusing on the monster as a disruptive figure who facilitates the show's subversive play within genre. Karen Herland's chapter considers *Firefly* alongside *Westworld* arguing that these shows revisit the "Western notion of frontier...with a Gothic twist" (261). Exploring the borders of the body through neoliberal commodification, racism, and Whedon's complex view of sex work and consent, Herland questions the unsettling presence of the masculine will-to-power within the frontier of female resistance. Finally, the collection ends with a technological turn as Alanna Thain revisits *Dollhouse*. Insightfully arguing that *Dollhouse* foreshadows the cultural dominance of

surveillance, social media, and algorithms, Thain discuss the Lazarean body as a technological platform that manifests both the feminist potential of resurrection and cloning, but also the horror of the status quo.

Like the Slayer tradition within *Buffy*, this dynamic collection demonstrates that horror and the works associated with Whedon can and should continue to be revisited, reconsidered, and questioned. The absence of a conclusion is noticeable, although there are two appendices that compile bibliographies relating to Whedon and the horror tradition (compiled by Alyssa Hornick), and also foundational works in horror, and both will be a helpful point of reference for future scholarship in this area. However, the absence of a conclusion reflects the collection's resistance to finality and containment where the Whedonverse and the horror tradition itself continue to be haunted, resurrected, and reinterpreted, and in doing so, the collection invites the continuation of discussions raised within the chapters regarding genre subversion and play, but also conversations relating to feminist horror and race. Though there is a dominance of chapters devoted to *Buffy*, this is by no means the sole focus of this collection and I would highly recommend it to Whedon and horror scholars alike.