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Title: Less Focus on Comics than Stated

Year: 2016

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Ylönen, J. (2016). Less Focus on Comics than Stated. Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art, 3(1), 81-85. http://sjoca.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/SJoCA-3-1-06-Ylo%CC%88nen.pdf

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Less Focus on Comics than Stated

by Jani Ylönen

The Comics of Joss Whedon: Critical Essays. Ed. Valerie Estelle Frankel. McFarland, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-7864-9885-7. 247 p.

In 2017, it has been twenty-five years since the world was first introduced to Buffy Summers, the protagonist of the 1992 film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the 1997–2003 television series of the same title, which made Joss Whedon's character a pop cultural icon. Since then, with his many television series and films, Whedon has built a reputation as an auteur, a creator of media products with an identifiable style. While many of his post-Buffy productions have struggled with mainstream success and longevity, he has also broken box office records by writing and directing the Marvel Cinematic Universe blockbusters *The Avengers* (2012) and its sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).

While industrious on big and small screen alike, Whedon has also been prolific in comic book production over the last twenty years. From Buffy onwards, he has written or overseen comics that continue or augment his audiovisual productions, but he has also written comics not affiliated with his other works. While these comics are not as well-known as his film productions, they have won acclaim both individually and as extensions of his canons, adding a further sheen to his auteur image.

Whedon has been the object of a substantial amount of academic interest. There are journals and conferences devoted to his works and several books especially on the "Buffyverse," as his most famous fictional universe is called, in both academic and fan discourse. However, as Valerie Estelle Frankel, editor of and the contributor to *The Comics of Joss Whedon: Critical Essays*, states, Whedon's comics have received relatively little academic attention. Frankel and her fellow writers hope to amend this situation with their collection. *The Comics of Joss Whedon* collects seventeen essays by writers from fandom and academia, even if it sometimes difficult to distinguish one sort of writer from the other. Combined, the essays discuss all the comics that Whedon has had a part in to date, in mostly chronological order.

Joel Hawkes' "*The Origin* of a Superhero: Sacrifice, Choice and the Significance of Merrick in Buffy's Journey" begins the book with Buffy's origin story, both in its film form from 1992 and its comic book rewrite from 1999. Hawkes argues that, unlike its predecessor, the latter version presents Buffy as a superhero with similarities to famous comic book superhero origin stories. Hawkes is followed by Lisa Gomez's chapter "Buffy Is in Bed with a Woman? Problematic and Perfect Gay and Lesbian Representation" that discusses the controversial lesbian scene from Buffy's eighth season, which was published in comics form from 2007 to 2011. While the latter

provides an interesting critical reading, the two essays also display two of the central problems with the collection.

Gomez's essay, among others, raises the question of identity, not only of the characters, but inadvertently also of the collection's overall one. Her critical reading is thorough and makes references to several sources, yet the expertise is built from a fan's perspective and the sources are selected essays from the Internet. While Gomez does not claim to be a scholar, an attempt to follow academic guidelines and strictures is made in her text with a fair, but not complete, success. However, it would be harsh to blame Gomez, when the problem clearly lies with the collection. There is simply too significant a difference between the writers' academic credentials (or lack thereof) and the collection, which on its covers, in its dedication, and in its preface markets itself as a scholarly work attempting to fill a gap within the academic scholarship on Whedon and on comics in general.

Often, this ambition results in interesting essays with a few academic sources, which are at times fairly dated, added to the beginning and the end. The problem is that while the analysis in between can be very interesting, it is more in the vein of popular, yet well-constructed essays than it is scholarship. One example is S. Evan Kreider's "Mind/Body Dualism vs. Materialism. Personal Identity in *Dollhouse: Epitaphs*," which discusses an issue that is central to both this particular story world, current social discourse, and to modern theoretical discussion, but fails to seriously engage with philosophers or scholars more recent than Thomas Hobbes or Rene Descartes. On the other hand, Kreider avoids the second major problem that affects the collection: an inability to concentrate on comics. While Frankel in her preface declares the need to study Whedon's neglected comics as a major inspiration for the collection and establishes comics as a worthy field of inquiry, the essays that follow have a problem with focusing on the specified material. Although, for example, discussing both the film and the comic is relevant for Hawkes' article, the trend of examining Whedon's works across media is repeated with lesser justification in many of the following chapters. Indeed, in some cases the references to the television or film releases seem to only emphasize the writers' knowledge of the overall "Whedonverse," while problematically taking space and attention away from deeper analysis of the comics in what are mostly short essays.

Of course, it would be difficult to separate the audiovisual works from the comics that often function as supplementary material to Whedon's earlier television or film productions. Indeed, the collection's unannounced strength lies in the discussion of transmediality of/in his works. For example, David Kociemba and Mary Ellen Iatropoulos' "Separate Worlds or One? Canonicity, Medium and Authorship" offers a fascinating reading of how the "Buffyverse" translates from one

medium/writer to another. The interaction between media, writers, and fans in connection to the "Whedonverse" becomes one of the central sub-themes of the collection, one that deserves a collection of its own. Here, however, it only draws attention from the area of interest that is explicitly declared in the book's title.

As it stands, the title could be *Everything Related to Comics by Joss Whedon*. The discussion of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which is the topic of the final two essays, fails particularly to adhere to the mission statement, as Whedon has not written any comics connected to *The Avengers* films or the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* television series. That said, one of these essays, Leora Haras' "Authorship Assembled: Joss Whedon as Promotional Auteur in Marvel's *The Avengers*," is a thought-provoking essay about how Whedon's auteur image was commercialized and used in the marketing of the blockbuster film and is one of the highlights of the collection.

Overall, the collection leaves me with a sense that Frankel and associates took the ambition to discuss all of Whedon's comics-related works in one book too far. The result is a collection that not only does not follow its own stated purpose, but one that is also of uneven quality. On one hand, texts such as Tracy S. Morris' "Joss Whedon, Alan Moore and the Whole Horrible Future" fails to convince the reader of the similarities between Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* graphic novel and Whedon's live action video (and not comic book) *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog,* especially in its claim that the latter is a dystopia. On the other hand, the varied nature of the essays does result in some interesting essays, such as Thalia M. Mulhivill and Christina L. Blanch's "*Do Serenity* Comics Forecast Our Pedagogies of Identity Construction?," which analyzes how Whedon's comics can be used to discuss the malleability and intersectionality of identity in classroom environments and offers a different and refreshing perspective compared to the surrounding writings.

While *The Comics of Joss Whedon: Critical Essays* establishes a need for further study on Whedon's comics, it fails to address this need itself. Too often the essays fail to reach their potential, whether in the depth of their analysis or in the connection to comics scholarship. Too frequently the writers emphasize their knowledge of the filmed "Whedonverse" at the expense of discussing the comics or comics scholarship. Consequently, the book does little to further the latter, especially on a theoretical level. Nonetheless, editor Valerie Estelle Frankel, who herself contributes two essays, and the other essayists inadvertently accentuate the need to discuss Whedon's works from the viewpoint of transmedia theories. They prove that the relationships and interactions between his films and comics, as well as their connections to fans, offer an interesting topic for further research. Indeed, Whedon might be a prime example for studying

how ideas of authorship and media has changed during the last twenty years. So, while the collection falls short on its original ambition, it does raise questions for future studies.