

Empowerment or Empire?: Troubling the Whedon Trope of Fighting the Good Fight: Samira Nadkarni, Mary Ellen Iatropoulos, Jessica Hautsch

The Whedonverses see a multiplicity of representations that engage with theories of post/colonialism and Empire. These range from easily dismissable examples, such as Glory (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and Jasmine (*Angel*) invading from other realms in order to convert or conquer humanity to their cause, to Loki's attempt at world domination (*The Avengers*) consciously paralleling Hitler in WWII. Whedon also provides more complicated iterations through the dystopian empire of *Firefly* and *Serenity's* Alliance, the capitalist empire of *Dollhouse's* Rossum Corporation, and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s fraught expression of neocolonialist empire in *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

In effect, Whedon's theorising has traced the historical theoretical conceptions of Empire, from its original notion as imperialist expansion (with its attendant assumptions of enslaved or colonized citizens, expansion of territories, and tribute), as seen in *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, to Hardt and Negri's (*Empire*, 2000) contemporary assertion of the declining sovereignty of the nation-state in favour of a decentralized and deterritorialized sovereignty through capitalism, explored in *Dollhouse* and Marvel's properties. More recently, as Schueller and Dawson (*Exceptional State*, 2007) note, the U.S., although still functioning through capitalist systems, has begun to reassert a version of imperial global control that is centered and territorialized, suggesting a definition of postmodern Empire that seemingly inhabits both forms: its original imperialist definition as well as Hardt and Negri's.

Jessica Hautsch will discuss the manner in which the Slayer ethos rearticulates the discourse of the "just war," the celebration of war as an ethical instrument: framing Slaying as a "war" against the forces of darkness forecloses any ideological questioning of the "mission." The righteousness of this discourse underlines the Slayer ethos as one that originates within the show as fundamentally American and rooted in American culture to its later global stage within the comics.

Mary Ellen Iatropoulos will examine images of the corporation as evil empire across the Whedonverses. Scenarios of protagonists struggling against systematized corporate oppression run rampant throughout Whedon's work, demonstrating an ongoing concern with how characters construct notions of good and evil through interaction with and repudiation of exploitative, colonizing corporate antagonists. A Postcolonial reading of several Whedonverse "evil" corporations--*Angel's* Wolfram & Hart, *Dollhouse's* Rossum Corporation, and *Firefly's* Blue Sun Corporation--reveals that the attempts of Whedonverse characters to subvert corporate power structures often reinforce the very structures they attempt to disrupt.

Samira Nadkarni will explore *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *The Avengers*, and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* to suggest that their portrayal of empire and neocolonialism conflates militarism with the myth of US exceptionalism, linking back to Schueller and Dawson's assertion of a postmodern Empire in which the permeability of the borders of the nation-state is depicted as only applicable outside of the U.S..

Following this discussion, the panelists will invite the audience to join in exploring the value of these changing definitions and the complexities they pose in outlining Whedon's stances.