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## Battle of the Blockbusters: Joss Whedon as Public Pedagogue

Christine Jarvis

[1] Whedon scholarship has always been interdisciplinary. Contributions to *Slayage*, to Whedon Studies Association conferences, and to the growing number of books about Joseph Hill (Joss) Whedon's work come from academics working in disciplines such as science (Nylín, 2009); religious studies (Mills, Morehead, & Parker, 2013; Koontz, 2008); philosophy (South, 2003); law (Lee, 2013; Petrova, 2013); education (Jarvis, 2005), and social science (Jencson, 2008). I hope to contribute to this international, interdisciplinary body of work by drawing on educational theory, specifically the concept of public pedagogy. The term has been used in multiple ways (Sandlin, O'Malley & Burdick, 2011), but refers broadly to the notion that "the world, not the school, is the site of teaching . . . that the education of the public occurs in public" (Pinar, 2010, p. xv). The concept has attracted particular interest from adult educators, who recognize that once formal schooling is over, many, perhaps the majority, of individuals do most of their learning outside institutional contexts.

[2] Whedon scholarship has a strong pedagogical strand, but this has largely focused on the use of Whedon's work in formal educational settings: Kreider and Winchell's (2010) collection considers *Buffy The Vampire Slayer's (BtVS)* potential for teaching a wide range of literary, media and television studies concepts; Williams (2014) uses *Dr. Horrible* as an example of a social message film, and Turnbull (2003) discusses using *BtVS* to teach television and media studies. Rather than considering how Whedon's work could be used as part of a teaching program, this paper's discussion of Whedon as public pedagogue suggests that making films can be understood as a form of teaching, and viewing films as learning. While Whedon scholarship may not explicitly refer to his work as teaching, there is

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**Christine Jarvis** is pro-vice-chancellor at the University of Huddersfield. Before moving into Higher Education, she taught in adult and community education. Her research focuses on education and popular fictions and the role of the arts in professional education. She has recently completed a chapter comparing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with contemporary heroines, ("How to be a woman: models of masochism and sacrifice in YA fiction") for *Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, edited by Jubas, Taber and Brown, and is working on a chapter for *The Handbook of Adult Education* on Popular Fictions as Critical Adult Education.

considerable discussion that implies audiences might, should, or do, learn from his work. Books such as *What would Buffy Do?* (Riess, 2004), *Why Buffy Matters* (Wilcox, 2005), *Televised Morality* (Stevenson, 2003) and *The Existential Joss Whedon* (Richardson & Rabb, 2007) all imply, with varying degrees of directness, that Whedon's work teaches its audiences about life, relationships, morality, and even spirituality. Cochran's (2014) fascinating article builds on these foundations by demonstrating how this learning, and the life changes it can engender, can be seen in the responses and testimonies of his fans.

[3] This article will first discuss public pedagogy and the reasons for considering it relevant to Whedon Studies, then go on to analyze *Marvel's The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) and Christopher Nolan's (2012b) *The Dark Knight Rises* as competing public pedagogies. Giroux described film as a "powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities, and experience" (2002, p. 6). He argues for a "pedagogy of representation" (1994, p. 87) to deconstruct "the act and process of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power" (1994, p. 87). Following writers such as Giroux and Ellsworth (2005), there is a growing body of educational writing that explores the role of popular cultures in and as education. Tisdell & Thompson (2007) acknowledge both the educational work of film and television outside the academy and the role of the academy in engaging with them. Based on their empirical study with 215 adult educators, they conclude that "the entertainment media has a strong influence on the education of adults" and argue for the systematic inclusion of critical media literacy in the adult education curriculum, to enable adults to "deconstruct this public pedagogy that regularly affects their lives" (p. 671). Scholarship on adult education and popular culture was surveyed by Wright & Sandlin in 2009 and has expanded since. Wright has gone on to discuss science fiction and horror as "critical public pedagogy that can effect critical learning about the institutions of capitalism, globalization of industry and international responsibility" (Wright & Wright, 2013. p.8). Jubas (2013) and Jubas & Knutson (2012) examine the impact of popular television on viewers' perceptions of the medical profession and health care.

[4] Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick's *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (2010) divides the field of public pedagogy research into five categories, one of which is the pedagogies of popular culture and everyday life, where they consider "the full range of cultural forces we experience on an everyday basis" and argue that popular culture is "possibly even more influential than formal educational Institutions" (p. xii). Savage (2010) highlights the relevance of informal places of learning in an "era of expanding globalisation and corporatization" (p. 104) and suggests educators need to look at particular instances of public pedagogy in order to analyze how it actually operates. Educators have not ignored the superhero genre: Maudlin (2010) argues that the film *Superman Returns* has important pedagogical impact because its flawed and vulnerable hero helps us negotiate our post-modern uncertainties. There has also been some empirical work suggesting that popular culture can challenge our perceptions. Jarvis & Burr (2012) analyze interviews with viewers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and conclude that it "prompted critical reflection and challenged their sense of themselves and their beliefs about complex moral issues" (p. 177).

[5] Educational discussions of popular culture take many perspectives, but often view popular culture negatively. Savage (2010) notes that educators frequently present popular culture as conveying a single, corporate globalizing view; Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick (2011) acknowledge that most critics identify space for resistance in public pedagogies, but claim they focus more on "the reproduction of inequality than on how political resistance might be engaged" (p. 346). Giroux (2004), however, argues that popular culture is a place where meaning is contested, not merely a place where hegemony is sustained. He discusses it as "an educational site where identities are being continually transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic as it becomes not only the condition for the acquisition of agency but also the sphere for imagining oppositional social change" (p.60 ). The comparative study in this paper illustrates how representations of the world vie for dominance within two phenomenally popular films from the same genre; whilst *The Dark Knight Rises* appears to encourage a conservative perspective on politics and human rights, *The Avengers* poses questions about authority, hierarchy and the nature of evil that are more challenging and radical in orientation.

[6] I want to consider what using the lens of public pedagogy and educational theory can add to understanding Whedon's work. Educational research, including public pedagogy research, pays particular attention to questions of teaching and learning. A focus on learning implies an analysis and discussion of learners (who are in these instances readers, viewers and audiences) and the process of learning. This paper will focus on teaching, leaving the question of the learner/viewer for another time. If the two films discussed here are considered as forms of teaching, a number of questions arise. These include asking who the teacher is, whether the teacher has specific educational aims, and what constitutes the curriculum, both in terms of content (what does the teacher want to teach?) and process (what methods are used to effect the teaching?).

[7] Thinking about Whedon and Nolan as teachers, with educational intentions, raises questions about intentionality and the resurrection of the author, or at least the resurrection of creative teams. The theoretical position I adopt in this discussion of Whedon and Nolan as public pedagogues draws on literary and cultural theory which acknowledges the relationship between author, text, and reader and recognizes the complex interplay among all these elements in the creation of meaning. Barthes (1977) famously argued for the "death of the author" and the "birth of the reader" (p. 148). His central tenet is that meaning cannot be confined to the intentions of the author. Individuals' social and personal situations will always influence interpretation and there cannot be one definitive reading of a work of art.

[8] This might imply that a director, author, or artist could not be a teacher—they are not in control of the way their works are received. Yet this appreciation of the constructive role of the recipient of a communication applies to all forms of teaching; teachers cannot guarantee that learners will learn what the teacher wants them to learn—particularly if the teacher is teaching values, promoting a particular view of the world, or trying to change attitudes rather than present facts. This does not mean that teachers' intentions and the texts and methods they use are of no interest; if there were no relationship between teaching and learning, teaching would be pointless.

[9] Stanley Fish's (1980) concept of interpretive communities is helpful. Although there are individual differences in interpretation, it

would be impossible to communicate without some commonly shared ways of interpreting signs and symbols. Hall (1980) suggests that a text will have a dominant, preferred or invited reading, which is the most obvious or likely reading according to dominant stereotypes. Directors and creative teams can draw on such stereotypes to present a particular perspective on a social or moral issue or to challenge widely held assumptions. In suggesting that Whedon and Nolan are teachers, I do not mean to suggest that they work alone; teachers work in curriculum teams, share resources, and work within frameworks determined by others. Gray & Johnson's (2013) edited collection draws attention to the hugely complex question of authorship in the twenty-first century, to the individuals, teams and institutions, often unacknowledged, who contribute to the final work of art. Whedon and Nolan are not the sole authors of the works that bear their names.

[10] This is something Whedon has openly recognised. He does, however, retain a high degree of creative control, a vision, and, as Lavery (2014) explicates, has a series of "signatures" that can be found in work with which he is associated. Curriculum is a combination of content and method, of what is taught and how it is taught, and these Whedonian "signatures" give us some indication of what he likes to teach (specific perspectives on female empowerment, ideas about the family, the concept of redemption) and the methods he uses in his teaching (humour, metaphor, emotional realism).

[11] Whedon is open about his intentions; he intends to teach. He is an outspoken communicator with a huge, well-informed fan following. He blogs and gives regular interviews in which he makes it clear that he uses his work to challenge and educate audiences by presenting alternative perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and drawing attention to injustices and distorted perceptions.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with James Hibberd in 2013, he shows that he understands his work to have a social purpose: "My stories do have hope, because that's one of the things that is part of the solution. We use stories to connect, to care about people, to care about a situation. To turn the mundane heroic, to make people really think about who they are." One of the best known examples is his much quoted speech at the international human rights organization *Equality Now*, in which he provides a series of answers to the repeated question, "Why do you always write such strong women characters" including, "Because

equality is not a concept . . . Equality is like gravity—we need it to stand on this Earth as men and women, and the misogyny that is in every culture is not a true part of the human condition” (Whedon, 2006).

[12] Whedon’s passion for the popular is related to his desire to change the way we think, noting that “The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium.” He is clear, though, that popular does not mean lacking intellectual challenge; immediately before this, he comments on his dislike of “dumb TV” and his belief that “Aaron Spelling has single handedly lowered SAT scores” (as cited in Lavery & Burkhead, 2011, p.65); in an interview with Mike Russell about *Firefly* and *Serenity* Whedon spoke about not making the Alliance a simplistic evil empire: “The trick was always to create something that was complex enough that you could bring some debate to it” (as cited in Sutherland & Swan, 2008, p. 97). Arguably, Whedon pulls off the trick the most successful teachers employ: teaching complex materials in an entertaining manner. Creators of popular fictions offer us perspectives on the world. In doing so, they produce works designed to be read in particular ways by the communities and groups they target, and a close examination of their work will give us some indication of what is being taught, how those ideas are being conveyed, and how they relate to historical and contemporary debates.

[13] Nolan has also spoken extensively about his work and is credited with having a controlling vision in terms of the content and methods that characterize his filmmaking. Smith (2012/13) talks about him bringing the Batman franchise into “his own imaginative universe” and reshaping it to match “his own signature concerns.” Nolan returns frequently to his interest in showing the challenges of making the right ethical choices (Johnson, 2014)—a preoccupation he shares with Whedon. Particularly relevant to *The Dark Knight Rises* are comments he makes about situations in which people are challenged by the collapse of civilization: Joseph Bevan (2012) suggests that his work has as a key theme a fear of those who speak truth about society, thereby violating the codes that bind it together. Nolan talks frequently about wanting to create an immersive experience for audiences in which they will live through the situations facing protagonists and discusses at length the kinds of techniques that he believes enable him to do this (Taubin, 2010).

[14] Whereas both directors intend that audiences will explore the moral dilemmas of contemporary living, Nolan explicitly denies overt political intent (Macnab, 2008), saying he wants to “discuss contemporary issues . . . without being overtly political” (Nolan, 2012a). He seems wary of political conviction, saying that “truly threatening villains are the ones who have a coherent ideology behind what they are saying” (Foundas, 2012/13). In response to assertions that *The Dark Knight Rises* is a neoconservative text, he insists that it is open to interpretation. He appears to abdicate responsibility for the interpretations audiences make, referring to how his degree studies in English Literature introduced him to readers’ capacity for multiple interpretations and to reader response theory (Taubin, 2010). This seems somewhat disingenuous, given the statements he also makes about focusing on the social collapse. He talks about the collapse of capitalist structures such as the banks and the stock market as “terrifying” (Foundas, 2012/13). His statement “in America we take for granted a stability to our class and social structure that has never been sustained elsewhere in the world” (Foundas, 2012/13) implies that this stable structure is positive, rather than an oppressive system that reinforces inequalities and exploitation. It is commonly argued that there is no such thing as an apolitical position, and that those who claim to be apolitical are generally supportive of the status quo, but do not see this as taking a political stance.<sup>2</sup> The discussion of *The Dark Knight Rises* below suggests that Nolan offers audiences a primary viewing perspective, which is similar to that shown in various pieces of classical literature, such as Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, or the text referenced so strongly in the film, Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*—a perspective which acknowledges the failure of the existing system, but believes alternatives would be worse.

[15] If Nolan and Whedon are teachers and their creative collaborators their teaching teams, then how do they teach? What are their teaching methods and strategies? Jarvis (2012) discusses the impact of the multi-sensory dimensions of film and television on viewers’ involvement in the narrative, reminding educators that they enhance identification with characters, “create tone and mood, and their associative qualities may directly affect our emotions” (2012, p. 488). Both film and television offer a form of embodied pedagogy. Embodied pedagogy is a term used to indicate the physical and emotional dimensions of learning.<sup>3</sup> The term has no single accepted



definition; I use it here to mean that film presents ideas, ways of being, and social relations as physical and emotional experiences. These ideas, ways of being, and social relations could be challenged more readily if they were presented as arguments, rather than simulations of life itself. Narrative, characterization, metaphor, and point of view embody particular perspectives, so that they seem inevitable and compelling. The viewer lives through a particular way of being and way of seeing the world; if it really engages them they have physical, visceral, and emotional reactions to the dangers and pleasures on the screen. Another way of putting this would be to say that a viewer lives and feels, rather than considers, a point of view. Ien Ang's work discusses how viewers of television can be swept away by their emotional involvement with characters in a television programme (Ang, 1985, 2007). In her seminal work on *Dallas*, she examines this as a significant source of pleasure for viewers, who become intensely involved with the emotional life of the characters in soap opera. What I am arguing here, and in the illustrations below, is that this kind of emotional realism is also an educative process. It positions viewers and readers so that they are able to experience the world emotionally from the perspective(s) offered by the text. Emotional and cognitive processes are intimately connected, and our world views can be shaped by the feelings which fictions such as film, television, and literature engender.

[16] The analyses of the films show that their pedagogy works by teaching us how to feel about social issues: they invite us to see the world in a particular way by engaging our emotions, through intertextual associations with other texts and events (or with symbols and images, which have established dominant meanings in many societies and locations).

[17] The popular media positioned *Marvel's The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight Rises* as rivals, vying for the top slot in the ratings. Both had huge international audiences, and addressed major international themes, factors suggestive of their global pedagogical potential. *Marvel's The Avengers* took one billion dollars at the box office in three weeks, breaking all previous records. Both took over a billion dollars worldwide (*Boxoffice Mojo*, 2012). Both films use the global energy crisis to give impetus to the plot. Both feature superheroes who attempt to find a magic bullet solution: unlimited sustainable energy. In both instances, the "magic" is thwarted when a

super-villain steals the energy source for nefarious purposes, and in both films, the population of a major city is threatened, not just by an outside force, but by its own government. The analyses below consider how the films invite the public to feel and experience contrasting political discourses pertaining to power, freedom and democracy, the rule of law, injustice, and the unequal distribution of resources. It suggests that the films operate as pedagogical spaces that support contesting world views.

### **The Dark Knight Rises**

[18] The following abbreviated plot of *The Dark Knight Rises* provides context for the analysis. Billionaire Bruce Wayne (Batman) is a recluse. As Batman, he accepted blame for the murder of a popular politician, Harvey Dent, who operated outside the law as a vigilante and became, posthumously, a public hero. The “Dent Act,” introduced in his name, reduced civil liberties, removed parole, and filled the prisons with members of organized criminal gangs. Prior to his withdrawal from public life, Wayne invested, with business woman Miranda Tate, in a project to provide clean, fusion energy for mankind. Fearing it would be used to make weapons, he hid the prototype. The villain, Bane, wears a hideous mask and has a distorted voice. He raises an army which takes over the city, frees all prisoners, and establishes people’s courts. He captures Wayne’s nuclear device and threatens to set it off if anyone leaves Gotham or help comes from outside. It transpires that he intends to trigger it anyway. He and Miranda Tate conspire to destroy Gotham as a punishment for its greed. Wayne resumes his Batman role and stops Bane and Tate, sacrificing his own life (probably) by taking the bomb to explode out at sea.

[19] The film acts as a form of public pedagogy by equating resistance to inequalities, grass roots activism, and action against oppressive regimes, with terrorism, indiscriminate violence, psychotic personalities, and a complete breakdown of law and order. Resistance to injustice and inequality becomes inseparable from violent anarchy. *The Dark Knight Rises* teaches us about the dangers of resistance by making us experience it as brutality that is worse than the inequality it replaces. It presents, as lived reality, a commonly expressed *reductio-ad-absurdum* argument, often used to denigrate protest, that anyone taking direct action (such as anti-globalization protesters or civil

rights activists) is leading civilization to chaos. The law, however unjust, must always be obeyed. Film can naturalize arguments such as this, by presenting them through powerful narratives and compelling characterization, and by determining which characters' perspectives are offered to the viewers.

[20] *The Dark Knight Rises* presents protesters against massive injustices in wealth and major political corruption as brutal villains. Corruption and injustice are acknowledged, but resistance to these is shown to lead to worse outcomes than the inequalities themselves. The film acknowledges poverty and inequality. The audience sees the excessive consumption of the privileged elite, including Wayne himself, and the problems of the poor are represented sentimentally and metonymically by the financial threats facing an orphanage, but the narrative shows that the problems of the poor can be resolved by generosity and charity from the rich, not through revolutionary shifts in power. As such, it reinforces a basically neoliberal view of the world in which laissez-faire economics is seen to be the only logical solution, in spite of the manifest inequalities it produces.<sup>4</sup>

[21] Bane raises an army against Gotham (which clearly references Manhattan with its skyscrapers on an island, giving added resonance to the terror plot). Bane is a thug, who kills easily and shows no compassion, even to his own people. His mask is ugly, frightening and, above all, dehumanizing, rather than mysterious like Batman's or the Lone Ranger's. He is not a sympathetic villain. The audience sees him callously kill his own supporters, so that it feels shock, fear and repulsion towards him, long before his intention to destroy the city is revealed.

[22] The film creates a set of oppositions between Bane's army and the good people of Gotham. While it is possible to read against the grain and see Bane as a revolutionary, standing against US imperialism, the film encourages a different perspective; it teaches us what to think, by making us see, hear and feel the threat of revolution. Bane's army is based in the sewers and attracts the poor and dispossessed. Its hideous underground location encourages audiences to associate the revolutionary lower orders with disgusting waste; to feel repulsion. It embodies the perspective that these people are everything civilized society shuns.

[23] In one telling scene, the audience is shown an aerial view of a bright, beautiful football stadium, all golds, greens and blue

sky—colors of spring and new life. We hear the pure sound of a boy's unbroken voice, singing the US national anthem. The connotations are of hope, innocence, youth, patriotism and fair play. The film cuts between this view and images of the grey, dank tunnels below the city, where Bane's army prepares to set an explosion to trap the city's police force underground. The color contrast is important; throughout the film we see Bane and his people in greys and blacks; they are given colors we associate with misery and death. The boy's voice continues to sound as we see the police charging into the tunnels and the underground explosions beginning. This juxtaposition encourages viewers to associate blowing up the tunnels with innocence destroyed and plays on their anxiety for the innocent child. The camera pans round the stadium and we see Gotham's citizens standing up—literally upstanding citizens—with their hands on their hearts, listening to the national anthem, then cheering. They are presented as the ordinary man or woman, out for the day with the family; the everyman with whom we might identify. The camera then positions the film audience looking out of the tunnel that leads into the stadium. We see the brightness ahead—then the looming dark and menacing figure of Bane fills the tunnels, threatening and dimming that brightness. The dominant perspective is of him as a threat to us: he is positioned as the other. Bane presses a button to start the explosions as the game starts. The viewer is positioned now by the camera angle as a member of the crowd, looking across the field as explosions undermine the pitch, hearing the screams of those caught up in the carnage as players hurtle towards them, trying to escape as the ground is literally torn from beneath their feet. The danger is coming directly at us, the audience, at this point.

[24] Although Bane announces that his revolution empowers the people, this rhetoric is undermined by the audience's experience of this actual and symbolic attack on the people. He says, "Take control of your city" and claims that his revolutionaries act "not as conquerors, but as liberators," to return control, wealth and power to the people: "return to your homes; tomorrow you claim what is rightfully yours." He attacks the claims of neo-liberalism, rejecting what he says are "myths of opportunity," replacing them by the rule of citizens. In this way, the film undermines critique of injustice and attempts to seek redress; they have become synonymous with a terrorism that threatens us, the viewers, directly. The film references

*A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens, 1859) and, by implication, the French Revolution. He encourages the people to storm the prison, just as the revolutionaries stormed the Bastille—“start by storming Blackgate and freeing the oppressed,”—but the audience has been told already that the prisoners were vicious members of organized crime gangs. He says, “The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests” and sets up courts that are reminiscent of the tribunals of the French Revolution—“Courts will be convened, spoils will be enjoyed, blood will be shed”—but our emotions are engaged against him because what we *see* is looting, mugging, and families cowering in their homes. Ordinary police officers are presented as brave and decent people who are rooted out, tried, and summarily executed. In effect, a movement to restore power and resources to people and to redress inequalities in society is experienced as injustice, cruelty, and chaos. This is finally underlined when it is revealed that Bane intends to destroy the city.

[25] *The Dark Knight Rises* acknowledges corruption and inequality. It shows the plight of orphans and features compromised politicians and police officers. Ultimately, though, it celebrates philanthropy, not the redistribution of wealth. Wayne, restored to his empire, makes a will leaving his house to Gotham’s orphans. Wayne, as Batman, saves the city. The film operates as a form of embodied pedagogy by making the audience feel terror and disgust for revolution: changing the social order appears dangerous; a good world is one in which the wealthy and powerful are benevolent and the poor are grateful.

[26] Superficially, *Marvel’s The Avengers* shares curriculum content with *The Dark Knight Rises*. It considers the hunt for sustainable clean energy—S.H.I.E.L.D, which, in the films and television series, stands for Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division, aims to harness the power of an extra-terrestrial object, the Tesseract, believing it can become an infinite energy source. Like *The Dark Knight Rises*, it envisages the overthrow of civilians, civilization, and the rule of law—Loki steals the Tesseract in order to exchange it for an army of extraterrestrial Chitauri to help him conquer Earth. And, like *The Dark Knight Rises*, it presents the saving of a US city (and metonymically, Western civilization) by “superheroes” loosely defined—people who have superpowers (the Hulk, Thor, Captain America), or those who have

honed their human powers to an exceptional degree (Black Widow, Hawkeye) and/or enhanced them with technology (Iron Man and Batman). As in *The Dark Knight Rises*, a “superhero” is prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to save civilization: Iron Man takes the nuclear bomb through the portal, where it explodes, destroying the Chitauri. Both films suggest that the authorities will ultimately sacrifice their own people—in *The Dark Knight Rises* they are prepared to kill anyone trying to leave Gotham, even a bus full of orphans, and in *The Avengers* they launch a nuclear attack on New York. In the analysis below, I demonstrate that, in spite of these similarities in overt content, Whedon’s curriculum is very different. He uses the physical and emotional power of film to confront viewers with their own ambivalence towards moral choices, to show the seductiveness of totalitarianism and to encourage critical reflection and reflective judgement.

[27] Whedon’s direction of the character Loki illustrates this. First, Loki is associated with the opposite of the people power and freedom that Bane advocates; the association Nolan creates between evil and resistance to global capitalism and inequality is absent. Loki’s villainy is located in his wish to control the world, not free it. Loki declares that far from freeing the people, as Bane explains he intends to, he “comes with glad tidings” (a phrase with biblical, messianic connotations). He is going to create “a world made free.” When Fury asks, “Free from what?” he replies, “from freedom. Freedom is life’s great lie. Once you accept that, in your heart you will know peace.”

[28] Loki argues that his right to rule lies in his inherent superiority, not in a wish to right the wrongs of the people. In response to Fury’s attempt to re-assure Loki that the people of earth have no quarrel with him, he replies, “The ant has no quarrel with the boot.” He believes he does not need to take account of lesser beings. Loki is indeed a god, but the film’s visual and verbal Nordic and Nazi imagery reminds us that human dictators also claim to be gods or superior beings to justify their work. The first difference, then, is that the major threat to civilization is presented not as freedom, but as the loss of freedom.

[29] More significantly, though, Whedon’s teaching is not simply didactic; it encourages the viewer to think about these issues for themselves. Whedon does not attempt to create disgust and horror in his audience when they encounter Loki, as Nolan does with

Bane. Although he uses imagery and intertextuality to foreground the historical and philosophical connotations of Loki's beliefs about freedom and humanity, he encourages the viewer to feel Loki's appeal; it has been suggested that the character stole the show (Ellwood, 2013). The effect of this is that Whedon, in line with his existentialist credentials, positions the audience as people who see the attraction of evil and have to make a choice to resist. Loki reveals himself to the world at a high society gala in Stuttgart. He sweeps down a neo-classical staircase to the dramatic strains of Schubert's string quartet, and the strings intensify menacingly whenever the camera cuts to him. Although the music, his black outfit, sardonic smile and glittering blue eyes signal that he is dangerous, he is dangerously attractive. His brooding sardonic menace is akin to that of the stereotypical romantic hero; Bane is an ugly, callous thug. The music mirrors Loki's violent actions as he swipes at guests. Different viewers will have different perspectives, but perhaps the majority of us would position ourselves as outsiders at this glittering gala, potentially even aligned with Loki, in a way we cannot be with Bane. Loki intimidates and attacks the West's social and cultural elite, not the common individual, as Bane appears to at the ball game.

[30] At the same time, Whedon uses his "signature" (Lavery, 2014) intertextuality to ensure that the viewer appreciates the implications of Loki's stance. Whedon creates strong visual and verbal intertextual connections between his villain and the Nazi movement, encouraging viewers to consider Loki as someone with the same ideological, ruthless, and genocidal ambitions as Hitler. Hitler made rousing speeches in Stuttgart. Nazi philosophy endorsed the superiority of the Aryan race (Nordic peoples), and we are reminded that Loki is a Norse god when he magically sprouts a Nordic helmet.

[31] Once he addresses the crowd outside, however, the position of the viewer changes. We can identify more readily with the common people terrorized by Loki in the square. It is difficult not to connect the conviction of this god with the conviction of Hitler's demagoguery, especially as the Nazi connection is made even clearer in the following incident. Loki says:

Kneel before me. I said kneel. Is this not simpler? Is this not your natural state? The unspoken truth of humanity is that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your

life's joy in a mad scramble for power. For identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel.

[32] He walks through the crowd, tall and handsome, offering ordinary people his absolute leadership and absolution from responsibility. Everyone kneels except one old man, with a European accent, who says, "not to men like you." The image this man presents is important. His plain dress, lone stance, age, and relative poverty make his singular stand seem particularly courageous. At this point, the viewer is likely to be afraid for the man and impressed by his courage—they may begin to identify with him and his resistance. He replaces Loki as the rebel and underdog. The film encourages conflicting emotions. Loki responds, "there are no men like me." The man replies, "There are always men like you." Loki is about to incinerate him when Captain America arrives and makes sure audiences make the Nazi connection, saying, "The last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing." Organizations and individuals with absolutist views of the world are presented as villains in Whedon's work (Caleb in *BtVS*, The Alliance in *Firefly* and *Serenity*). Loki's Nazi associations would seem to put him in this camp.

[33] However, Whedon's "signature" humor often humanizes his villains and helps us engage with them. Even after Loki's Nazi credentials have been established, he continues to amuse and engage the audience with his wit. Whedon's work has been characterized as broadly existentialist in orientation (Richardson & Rabb, 2007). He consistently creates characters facing existential dilemmas in a morally uncertain universe and presents choice as integral to being human (Loftis, 2009). By presenting a villain who offers humanity enslavement to save it from the pain of choice, but is attractive enough to make us feel the appeal of his worldview, *The Avengers* operates as an embodied pedagogy. Whedon does not tell us what to think, but puts us in the position of feeling and experiencing what it is like to make choices in difficult situations. In teaching terms, he avoids what Paulo Freire (1972) calls the "banking" model of education, in which the teacher deposits knowledge and opinions in the minds of the student, and uses instead a form of "conscientization," in which the teacher encourages the student to reflect on experience in order to make judgements about the world.



[34] Both films show viewers that authorities do not always act in the interests of the people, but *The Avengers* presents a different perspective on human rights and the power of the state. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, the Dent Act reduced civil liberties. Bane released mobsters imprisoned under the act, and the threat they pose to ordinary citizens is immediately apparent. The film seems to support a reduction in human rights as the price of safety and protection, naturalizing a key plank of international neoliberal policy, the reduction of people's legal protections and freedoms on grounds of protecting the people.

[35] In *The Avengers*, the moral status of authorities is more equivocal. There is a pivotal scene in which Iron Man reveals to the rest of the superheroes that S.H.I.E.L.D. planned to turn the Tesseract into a weapon. When challenged, Fury justifies his actions by reference to Earth's defensive needs as a result of a previous attack by extraterrestrials, relying once again on a familiar justification (self-defense) given by superpowers for possessing weapons of mass destruction. S.H.I.E.L.D. did not share the fact that it was using the Tesseract to make a weapon with those it had asked to risk their lives to recover it, the Avengers themselves. In effect, they had been inveigled into this project on a false, or at least partial, premise. The film presents this revelation primarily from the perspective of the Avengers. We see them discover the deceit and argue about whether or not they should continue to support S.H.I.E.L.D. This is resolved by another form of manipulation by Fury, when, following an attack on their airship by Loki, Agent Coulson is killed.

[36] Fury shows them Coulson's blood-stained Captain America cards, symbolizing his faith in the heroes, and asks them to take on the fight "for Phil." Deeply moved, they set out to stop Loki again. The viewer learns, though, that Coulson was not wearing the jacket with the cards when he was killed; Fury bloodied them for effect. The viewer who has been through this experience with the Avengers now has the opportunity to stand back and consider the morality of this manipulation. This dilemma—the relationship between the means and the ends—is something Whedon asks audiences to think about again and again in his work. Petrova (2013) considers it in terms of the legal concept of the "state of exception," the rights of leaders to act outside the law in a state of emergency.

[37] Fury shows emotion; he is passionate in his defense of the Avengers to the World Security Council (“War isn’t won by sentiment, Director” . . . “No, it’s won by soldiers”) and in his refusal to carry out its orders to bomb New York. He may be compromised and manipulative but by showing his human intensity, Whedon ensures we can empathize with him. On the other hand, the council members, who decide to bomb their own people, appear as a set of shadowy faces on a screen. They appear to be unconflicted. Placing them in virtual space is a powerful metaphor for the moral and emotional disconnect between authorities and the peoples they affect. Much of Whedon’s work unmasks the workings of power in contemporary society, to show how the rhetoric of freedom and liberty is undermined by the machinations of global capital and the subjugation of democracy to the needs of powerful super-organizations hiding their power behind shows of benevolence (Bennett, 2011; Jencson, 2008; Wall and Zyrd, 2001). *The Avengers* adds to this overall picture by combining a story of heroism, teamwork, and individual sacrifice with one in which heroes, even when they save the world, risk being tools for an organization that has dubious moral authority.

### Conclusion

[38] By definition, the superhero genre reinforces ideas of inequality, meritocracy, and the inferiority of the masses. Iron Man, who finally saves New York in *The Avengers*, is, like Wayne/Batman, a privileged and wealthy individual. He seeks to use his wealth for good, just as Wayne tries to—but the idea that an individual should not have such wealth and power is barely challenged. Neither film directly challenges the idea that the critical issue of the global shortage of energy should be addressed by the application of private wealth to find a technological solution that will mean the rich can have unlimited energy. The prospect of energy conservation or the fair and equal distribution of this diminishing resource is not considered. It is perhaps surprising that, given the constraints of the genre, the films still offer such distinctive political positions.

[39] The pedagogical power of film lies in its capacity to make audiences experience political perspectives and social values bodily and emotionally, as well as engage with them intellectually. Nolan’s film aligns resistance to injustice with terrorism, cruelty, and chaos in

a compelling manner, in which we share the disgust and terror of people experiencing a revolution. Whedon offers a more nuanced and radical vision, in which attempting to subjugate the will of the people is deeply suspect, whether it is undertaken by an external threat like Loki, or by the government itself. Whedon gives us an experience in which we respond to Loki's attractions but ultimately challenge his actions and his view of humanity. His portrayal of the duplicity of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the council is compatible with his more radical vision. The perspective in *The Avengers* is that of the outsiders, the Avengers themselves, who have to decide which is the lesser of the evils—S.H.I.E.L.D. or Loki. The differences between the films demonstrate that, even within the constraints created by genre and the expectations of the mass market, popular culture is not a hegemonic global force, but a complex arena where competing ideologies and varying shades of political perspective jostle for position. My analyses suggest that while it is possible to identify a hegemonic and neo-liberal perspective in Nolan's film, Whedon's work, targeting the same market, takes a more existential view of the world and requires its audiences to think about the issues that are raised. The success of his more complex work, which secured even better viewing figures than *The Dark Knight Rises*, suggests audiences can be receptive to multiple discourses and pedagogical processes and can accept films which both entertain and challenge.

[40] This article argues that directors and creative teams have, to varying degrees, ideological and political perspectives which they seek to explore and demonstrate through their art, and that films position their audiences through camera angles, lighting, music, and metaphor to encourage particular ways of seeing and feeling. It suggests that popular films can be seen as important *educational* projects; filmmakers have tremendous resources at their disposal and their creations have a global reach that cannot be matched by individual teachers or national education systems. Whedon can be seen as a radical educator; he enables his audiences to experience ways of looking at the world that challenge aspects of neo-liberal hegemony, and also encourages them to become critical thinkers who have to reflect on their own feelings and perspectives and resist simplistic perspectives on morality and the difficult political choices facing global society.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lavery & Burkhead's (2011) edited collection of interviews for examples.



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<sup>2</sup> The writer Anthony Tognazzini expresses this position well in a recent interview in which he recognizes the multiplicity of interpretation, but acknowledges that in writing about life, we write about politics (Barasch, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth (2005, p. 4) discusses how “Watching a film . . . becomes an event that melds the matter of mind/brain and body with the matter of film, sound, sensation as movement,” suggesting that learning happens when the body, feelings and the mind are all engaged. Perry and Medina (2011) use the term embodied pedagogy in the context of feminist post-structural theory to explore how drama demonstrates that we learn through our bodies.

<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism—Much has been written about this term (Steger & Roy, 2010), but I use it to refer to a form of laissez-faire market economics, sustained where necessary by controls on political liberties and ultimately coercive and repressive practices. Its intensification is associated with the Thatcher (UK) and Reagan (US) eras of the 1980s, but neoliberalism is also understood to characterize governments of the moderate left, such as the Blair (UK) and Clinton (US) regimes.