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Slayer and Signal: Joss Whedon Versus the Big Bads

*In which I argue that Buffy the Vampire Slayer confronts the problem of world-destruction in a California haunted by demons that suburbia refuses to acknowledge. It is a work of advanced **nerdism** whereby **freaks and geeks** become aware of their capacity for self-and-world-defense. Here, **nerd culture** considers what new tropes, plots, and characters are necessary to resist the Powers of **predation** and **eugenics**. Buffy figures these forces as demonic Powers in the Pauline sense: the spirits of broken social institutions that attempt to destroy the nerd. Chief among these demons is Gender, the system of norms that dictates what good boys and girls must do to please the Powers. The story of the Slayer begins with a solitary female messiah doomed to destroy vampires and be destroyed in turn; it evolves into a narrative of **alliance** in which rejected children defend the world by moving into the **queer**, the **uncanny**, and the **monstrous**. Buffy's creator, Joss Whedon, extended his exploration of the **effluvial** and the **degenerate** through his space Western, *Firefly*/*Serenity*, in which a band of misfits uncovers a government conspiracy to hide the poisoning of a planet, Miranda. The broken institutions of Earth remake another solar system into a false utopia that engenders the death of millions of Mirandans and the creation of a **horde** of cannibals. Though the crew of the *Serenity* cannot undo the poisoning of the brave new world, they succeed in communicating its buried history through the "signal," a burst of social media that cannot be contained by the State. Their resistance to eco-political oppression depends on their ship, which becomes a **cyborg** community of **environmental justice**.*

“Joss Whedon, you bastard!” This cry resounded through my living room in the late 1990s, a decade consumed by graduate school. Every week my friends would assemble on couch and floor, abandoning other occupations for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Like virgins fixed in the gaze of Dracula, we were compelled to watch episodes again and again, only to discover our favorite characters dead, dying, or wounded. We cried out against Whedon, the demiurge of this virtual world, because he held our attention despite the fact that none of us had ever been petite, blonde, or a cheerleader in southern California. Using an alchemy from beyond the Nerd Triangle, Whedon turned *Buffy* into one of us, an uncanny enchantment. The claims of this chapter descend from that mythic time, a televisual *in illo tempore*, when friends would linger after hours to analyze every aspect of this strange show that never should have happened. We had seen the Beta version, the *Buffy* film that Kristy Swanson, Luke Perry, and PeeWee Herman had tried, in vain, to redeem. In a startling reversal, a bad film had become a classic television series. Whedon had achieved this by turning into the skid: *Buffy* understood itself not just as nerd drama, but as nerdist theory, a place where the tropes of nerd culture turned back to contemplate themselves. The darkness had won, and nerds rejoiced. Finally, someone understood that the American Gothic explained the dark ecology of childhood. As Tolkien anatomized the process of escape as restoration, defending the world from the curse of the false sky, Whedon turned to myth as ethnography, an account of our battle with the Saurons of suburbia, the first step in preventing planetary apocalypse. If these claims seem overblown, consider *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, which lists the 1997 premiere of *Buffy* in its “Chronology of Important Gothic Events” (Hogle xxi), and *Buffy* itself as the last entry in “Important Gothic Series Made Since 1950” (Hogle 254). In her foreword to *Fighting the Forces*, a collection of *Buffy* criticism, Camille Bacon-Smith takes on the skepticism aimed at television as a medium of meaning. Considered the prime example of a visual form long on “slick” entertainment and short on content, television appears to be driven by “raw avarice.” “Art,” she explains, “is seen to occur by accident, if at all, in the otherwise calculated search for mesmerizing images to hypnotize the audience between sales pitches” (Bacon-Smith xi). For critics ranging from Theodor Adorno to Manola Dargis, television constitutes the quintessence of garbage. A show

about a cheerleader turned vampire hunter would seem to pose no threat to this assessment. *Buffy* already occupies a place in the canon of nerd culture, though it bears no relationship to academic analysis outside the charmed circle of Whedon Studies. It is the perfect test case to determine if the object of a popular and academic cult can move, through the work of interpretation, into the realm of environmental culture.

The premise of the show is simple: Buffy Summers, once a popular high school student, moves to Sunnydale, California, because of a mysterious disturbance at her former school. Though Sunnydale appears to be an idyllic suburb, it is the epicenter of supernatural evil, and its high school is built on a "Hellmouth," a portal to the underworlds of suburban repression. Like Sunnydale itself, Buffy sports a radiant exterior that hides a dark secret: she is the Chosen One, "one girl in all the world" who possesses the power to slay vampires with her superior strength, agility, and prophetic dreams. In this task she is aided by Giles the Watcher, whose day job as school librarian puts him in charge of the nerd refuge of Sunnydale High. Offering both support and hindrance are the "Scooby Gang," a shifting group of friends centered on Xander Harris, the hapless nerd boy, and his best friend Willow Rosenberg, the computer geek. The term "Scooby Gang" refers to the animated Hanna-Barbera television show, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* (1969–1970) in which a band of teenage detectives, accompanied by the titular Great Dane, drove across the United States disenchanting supernatural mysteries. Nerdists recognize and affirm themselves by identifying as Scoobies, recognizing that *Buffy* adopts the cartoon's model of alliance while it reenchants the mysteries. The Scoobies' name begins with the ridiculous and self-referential: Xander, Willow, and Buffy are television characters who identify with cheap cartoons. Their mission is abnormal: high school children ought not to worry about saving the world. Their mission is also heroic: the world must be saved from vampires and demons, so cartoon lovers must rise to the challenge. At the same time, *Buffy* acknowledges a difference between those who were born nerds and those who have nerd-dom thrust upon them. Xander and Willow never had any other identity: they have always been socially awkward, introverted, and loyal to each other. Buffy, however, fell from popular cheerleader status because of her role as the Slayer. Her reputation as trouble maker follows her to the Hellmouth: though she tries to fit in, her mission will not allow it. This

fall into social stigma is marked by the presence of a foil, Cordelia Chase, a beautiful, rich girl with all the privilege Buffy has lost. Though Cordelia soon turns from villain to Scooby, she remains a liminal figure who marks a boundary Buffy cannot cross because Buffy has been cast to the margin of society by her work as Slayer. These basic formations mark *Buffy* as a Gothic narrative: it depends on a world of light haunted by shadows that the world cannot acknowledge. The prosperous suburbs are built upon a foundation of the monstrous and the uncanny. Sunnydale naturalizes the Gothic, even as it denies the dark. As Sunnydale natives, Willow and Xander understand that they should not venture into town alone after sunset. Their parents do not talk about this rule; everyone already knows it. As marginal citizens, however, Xander and Willow notice that the center stays silent: the recognition of repressed knowledge underwrites their willingness to aid Buffy, who seems to know without being told that something is rotten in suburbia. This resistance to Gothic repression marks *Buffy* as a nerd narrative. Stigmatized by their performance of intellect and enthusiasm, nerds gravitate toward the acquisition of knowledge and the solution to mysteries. The uncanny must be explained and the monstrous, revealed. From the beginning, the Scoobies wish to overthrow the aesthetic and existential terms of life on the Hellmouth.

Apocalypse, we've all been there

Buffy proposes that self-defense and world-defense amount to the same thing. The vampires and demons that threaten the people of Sunnydale also threaten to destroy the world in the Apocalypse, an annihilation of human life that ends with demonic rule over the earth. This plot is an inversion of the eschaton offered by "The Music of the Ainur." As Giles explains to the gang at their first meeting, "For untold eons, demons walked the earth" and ruled it. In place of the Valar there were the Old Ones, the arch-demons modeled after the chaos gods of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. As Giles tells it, the rule of the Old Ones slipped away with the advent of humanity, so humankind is threatened by their descendants, the vampires, who are "waiting for the animals to die and the Old Ones to return." Predation, liquidation, and objectification characterize the demons' intentions: the human race will be

nerdified *tout court*. Each season of *Buffy* is organized around the advent of a “Big Bad [Wolf],” a villain trying to force its way back to earth to consume humanity. “The Master” organizes the first season. He is a Nosferatu-style vampire who became trapped under Sunnydale after his first attempt to ignite the Apocalypse a century ago. Buffy’s task as the Slayer goes beyond the defense of individual lives. She must oppose the Old Ones and prevent the Apocalypse as well. She combines the function of the nineteenth-century vampire hunter with the roles of the quest knight and the comic book metahuman: “It’s cool,” Xander explains, “Buffy’s a superhero.” She is also an environmental hero, responsible for saving the world from forces that would make it a hellscape. These identities cohere in her daily existence as a high school student. “Buffy” is not a traditional disguise in the way “Diana Prince” hides Wonder Woman. She really is a student, and the structure of high school life mirrors the structure of the world in peril. Just as Sunnydale is threatened by vampires, demons, and chthonic gods, the students of Sunnydale High are threatened by a social order that wants to punish them for their failure to be popular, normal, and acceptable. This analogy may appear bathetic: the high-school-as-hellmouth conceit risks the self-seriousness of adolescence itself. This risk recedes if we understand Sunnydale High as a simulacrum of American social structure, a likeness meant to teach students their caste in the pecking order and their obligation to compete for a place in the American middle class. High school is like the arena in *The Hunger Games*: a violent microcosmos that will kill you if your failures are serious; if you are a nerd, a freak, or a monster. Thousands of American teenagers suffer and die every year in the simulated world of high school, and those who escape are often permanently traumatized. As a hero, Buffy is aware of her duty to students less capable than she of self-defense, but she is also determined to change the structure that causes the suffering in the first place. At their first meeting with Willow and Xander, Giles declaims the legend of the Slayer: “Into each generation, a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world—” only to have Buffy interrupt: “—with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of their blah blah blah.” She seizes control of the story of the Slayer, disputing its end, which leads inevitably to the death of one Chosen and the rise of another, ad infinitum. She has no desire to perpetuate a line of dead heroines the Watchers reproduce in the name of patriarchy. *Buffy* is the story of a Slayer who rewrites

the metanarrative: she falls in love with vampires, rejects solitary martyrdom, insists on friendship, teaches students to defend themselves, and refuses to accept the story the authorities wish to tell. Buffy's claim to her own story, her desire to author her own life, becomes the pattern that saves nerds and the world season after season.

The first episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," contains the series in miniature, a microcosmos of the seven season run of the show. In this episode and the next, "The Harvest," the audience is introduced to the premise of high school as hell; to the main characters of Buffy, Mrs. Summers, Giles the Watcher, Xander Harris, Willow Rosenberg, and Cordelia Chase; and to the Scooby pattern of mystery, investigation, self-defense, and defense of the world. The establishing shot of the door to Sunnydale High School in the shadows of the night sets a scene of Gothic menace. The camera cuts to a window of the school broken from the outside: a young man in a leather jacket climbs through, followed by a reluctant young woman. He teases her for being afraid. We see that she is blonde, an Olivia Newton-John to the boy's John Travolta. They are alone in a hallway, about to embark on a mission that proves their defiant love in the face of social disapproval. At the moment they should turn to that mission, the girl is shot in close-up: she is now a vampire with a demonic visage and sharp teeth. She bites the boy, and the scene ends. Even before the main characters are introduced, this scene informs viewers that the norms of Gothic femininity are going to be reversed. The girl who should be the victim is the predator. The boy who should be the protector is the prey. The high school, which might have been the carefree proving ground of white suburbia, is the lair of monsters, a hunting ground for the undead. The next scene transitions from a nightmare montage of threatening images—graveyards, moons, howling—to a young blonde woman waking up to her mother's call to school. There is a chiasmatic movement back into the light of a morning in the Summers household. Buffy's mother, Joyce, is concerned: Buffy cannot make a bad first impression at her new school. She burned down the gym of her last school (in *Buffy* the film), obliging the family to move from Los Angeles to a small town where no one will know Buffy's troubled past. The conventional tension between mother and teenage daughter becomes something more in light of Buffy's past. Joyce bears the secret of her daughter's truancy, and Buffy bears the secret of her vocation as vampire hunter. Their

earnest facade of normalcy collapses immediately, as Buffy's new principal welcomes her in his office with a canned speech about new beginnings and a dramatic tearing-up of her old record. Then he reads the fragments, his tone turns threatening, and he carefully tapes the pieces back together, inserting them into her official record, which is no longer a clean slate. Buffy's hope for a new beginning takes a better turn when Cordelia Chase, the leader of the popular girls, takes Buffy under her wing, recruiting her for her social clique. When they encounter Willow Rosenfeld, the local computer geek, at the water fountain, nerd ecology asserts itself. Cordelia insults Willow's cheap, unfashionable clothes, and quips "I'm glad you've met the softer side of Sears," a reference to an advertising campaign for the discount retail store. Buffy is dismayed, and Willow flees. On cue, Cordelia instructs Buffy that "You want to fit in here, the first rule is: know your losers."

It is not just the Gothic logic of the *Slayer* that impels Buffy to seek out Willow afterward. Though Buffy has been cast out of her role as popular girl by her destiny as the *Slayer*, she was already a hero of ethics whose distaste for the hierarchy of high school demonstrates her worthiness. When the body of the dead boy from the first scene tumbles out of another girl's locker, Buffy swings into action, drawing Giles, Xander, and Willow after her. Together they discover what the audience already knows: in the tunnels beneath the town, the Master plots to escape his prison by sending his minions to devour teenagers at the Bronze, a local club. Because of a supernatural convergence, one minion, Luke, can channel the power he receives from the blood of victims to the Master, allowing the villain to escape his prison. On her way to meet Willow and Xander at the Bronze, Buffy is stalked from the shadows by a hidden figure. The modern Gothic genre of the slasher film asserts itself: the camera follows Buffy from behind, from the perspective of the stalker, as she walks, alone, down a dark suburban street. Finding herself lost in an alleyway, Sarah Michelle Gellar enacts the visual tropes of the ingenue-as-victim: she looks around in confusion, trying to find a way out that does not appear. When the scene cuts to the next frame, the audience expects an attack, and the stalker walks out of the shadows, on cue. It is his turn to be dismayed: Buffy has disappeared from the frame, holding herself on a pipe above the stalker like a gymnast on a high bar. She swings around and kicks him in the back, sending him sprawling against the alley wall. The conventions of the horror film have

been reversed, and she has the stalker at a disadvantage. They converse, and the stalker reveals himself as a tall, handsome stranger whose name is Angel, the vampire love-interest who helps Buffy to fight. He presents her with a gift: a golden cross to ward against vampires. This cross will later save her from Luke when it burns his hand as he tries to choke her. The presence of a suitor named Angel, a repentant vampire who provides a weapon of faith, represents the first and the only sign for many episodes of a divine order that might oppose the Old Ones. This is an important aspect of *Buffy*: its universe is demi-enchanted, a state allied to the “ambivalent secularization” of modernity (Hoeveler 6). The powers of supernatural evil are real and assertive: they have representatives that walk openly in daylight, the bureaucrats, mean girls, and conventional adults who prefer order over right. The forces of good lurk at the margins: the would-be lover, the feckless librarian, the geeky friends, the harried mother. This structure underscores the need for the Slayer, the person who organizes the heroes into an alliance capable of defending the world. Under Buffy’s leadership, the Scoobies discover the Master’s plan, invade his lair, and foil the attack on the Bronze. At first, Willow takes Buffy’s place as the helpless girl victimized by a male predator when she is dragged from the Bronze by a cute boy who is the Master’s minion. By the end of the episode, however, she has discovered the Master’s lair through online research and driven away a vampire attack with a bottle of holy water. Xander, the lovable but ineffective jokester, accompanies Buffy into the tunnels beneath the town to rescue a missing friend, and helps Buffy repel an attack by the minions. At the moment of greatest risk, when Luke nearly kills Cordelia during his bloody rampage, Giles joins the friends in evacuating the club while Buffy takes on Luke herself. She slays him through a signature combination of wit, trickery, and physical prowess, foiling the Master’s plan to escape, at least until the end of the season. The episode ends the next morning, at school, as the friends walk happily through a colonnade in the sunshine, bantering happily about their victory. Giles gets the last line—“The earth is doomed”—but Anthony Head invests it with the affectionate exasperation of an Englishman considering hope for the first time.

From the first episode, *Buffy* connects the demonic nature of high school to the fate of the earth. As the Slayer, Buffy must save her friends from the demons of adolescence, but she must also prevent the Old Ones from making

a hell on earth. This logic organizes each season: the gang tries to maintain a semblance of normalcy only to discover the next supervillain—the Master, Glory, the First Evil, and so on—trying to destroy the world. Because *Buffy* is so inventive at the level of dialogue, engaging at the level of character, and groundbreaking at the level of plot, it is easy to overlook this strange connection between vampires and the apocalypse. The literary and cinematic lineage of the vampire slayer does not support this pattern: Dracula keeps Van Helsing too busy to worry about eschatology, and later adaptations of the vampire trope, such as Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* and Ken Russell's *The Lair of the White Worm*, turn toward sexual-existential, not apocalyptic, drama. It is only after *Buffy* that films such as *Blade*, *Underworld*, and *Only Lovers Left Alive* yoke bloodsucking to world-historical drama. What is the nature of this connection? Why does *Buffy* portray the defeat of the undead as the first step in a project of planetary defense? How does a cheerleader from California become a postmodern messiah figure who teaches her friends to engage in what I call “advanced Slayerism,” the Gothic defense of the *oikos*? The answer lies in the symbolic language of demonology, the language of the “Powers,” as a critique of social and political institutions. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians could be writing to the Scooby Gang when he asserts that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12 NRSV). Walter Wink explains that the “Principalities and Powers” of Paul of Tarsus and the Pauline corpus have been misidentified as “an order of angelic beings in heaven, or as demons flapping about in the sky” (Wink 3). Power language in the New Testament refers not to such figures, but to the physical and spiritual aspects of “institutions, structures, and systems” of sociopolitical power (3). Schools, corporations, and national governments can all be Powers in this sense. “The Powers possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines [*sic*]) and an inner spirituality, or corporate culture, or collective personality” (3). In this paradigm, it is a mistake to spiritualize these forces, or to reduce them to their material manifestations alone: the Powers are both social institutions and the “bad vibes” they give off. The Gothic is the natural aesthetic for this worldview: apparently benevolent forces (the principal, the cheerleading squad, the prom) cast dark shadows of

malevolent intent. The school is the natural starting point for this critique as the social institution by which all American children are shaped. The school is also the central institution of nerd-formation: the Scooby Gang is an alliance of nerds who learn to defend themselves, and the world, from the hidden forces that threaten to destroy them. The school is just the first American institution to fall under *Buffy*'s critique. As the gang graduates from high school at the end of Season 3, the show moves to the town government, the state university system, corporate science, institutional religion, and the military as a network of corruption, what Wink terms "the Domination System" (9) and Chris Forbes more precisely terms "personified, 'hypostatized' salvation-historical abstractions" of Pauline thought (Forbes 61). Lest the profusion of institutions, villains, and plotlines distract us, the name of the Adversary in the *Buffyverse* is *Gender*, the archon so terrible, its name is never spoken. Gender, the system that enforces biological sex as social role, is the lord of the present darkness for Whedon. As the key component of biological reproduction, sex becomes a principle of ecological identity and evolutionary success. As a principle of cultural construction, gender builds a world in which acquiescence to social role is rewarded, and deviance punished, through cultural institutions such as school, marriage, and workplace. Slayerism, the practice of saving the world from destructive Powers, foment a rebellion against the institutions of sex and gender as riders of the apocalypse.

Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery point out that Joss Whedon "has often said that the original kernel of the idea for *Buffy* came with the reversal of an image from traditional horror; a fragile-looking young woman walks into a dark place, is attacked—and then turns and destroys her attacker" (Wilcox and Lavery xvii). The Gothic forms the native ground for the show's resistance to traditional gender roles. Jerrold E. Hogle contends that "modernity would seem at odds" with the Gothic (Hogle, Introduction 3), compounded as it is of premodern materials: "pastiche of Shakespearean, operatic, medieval-chivalric, once-Catholic, and ancient Greek features" (4). Hogle contends, however, that the Gothic is "endemic to the modern" because the Enlightenment drove so many social and psychic forces into hiding in the name of progress (7). This Freudian reading of the Gothic as the return of the repressed helps us to understand how a feminist show could employ the Gothic as a primary aesthetic mode. With the exception of Mary

Daly, few feminist revolutionaries of the last century have called traditional systems of gender *demonic*, because the language of the Powers is archaic. However, as Hogle suggests, the Gothic represents the difference between the promise of modernity and its actual achievements, the lag time between the overthrow of patriarchy as a speech act and the renovation of cultural institutions. For Whedon, and the generations born after the 1960s, there is a gap between the declaration of independence from patriarchy, the creation of new cultures of gender, and the founding of institutions that transmit those cultures. As a ubiquitous medium in postmodern culture, television presents insurgent cultures of gender critique with an opportunity to craft new stories to transmit defiance of gender norms. *Buffy* might be especially threatening because it employed the Gothic to generate all three nerd aesthetics at once: the queer, the monstrous, and the uncanny. These aesthetics rebuke the demon Gender in related but distinct ways. The queer, of course, disrupts the plots of Gothic romance by subordinating Buffy's boyfriends to the logic of the Scooby Gang: lovelorn vampires come and go, but friends last beyond death. Though the show broke new ground on network television by portraying a lesbian relationship between Willow and Tara Maclay, *Buffy's* queer alliances date back to the formation of the gang in Episode 1 of Season One. Giles, a straight but unmarried man, presides over the school library, where vulnerable young people seek refuge. Before Willow dated Tara, she dated Oz, a musician and werewolf, whose "monthly troubles" provided opportunities for male menstruation jokes. Their relationship yoked the queer to the monstrous, which rebukes Gender by blurring the boundaries of form, kind, and genre. Buffy's interest in dating the undead joins the queer with the uncanny, which rebukes Gender by disrupting patterns of reproduction and mortality. Xander's doomed betrothal to a vengeance demon, Anya, reflects the pressures of postfeminist gender slippage forced into the space of traditional marriage. His love for a monster far more powerful than he conflicts with his notions of the good husband. Despite these struggles, *Buffy* does narrate a series of victories against Gender that are eucatastrophes that break the frame of world-destruction. I will discuss three examples of this moment: the penultimate episode of Season Four, "Primeval," the "Dark Willow" plot of Season Five, and the revelation of the Scythe at the end of Season Seven.

“Primeval,” the penultimate episode in Season Four, illustrates the need for the Slayer to evolve as the institutions of gendered violence scale up. Season Three ended with the transformation of Sunnydale’s mayor into a giant snake-demon bent on consuming the graduating class. The Mayor embodied the gentler side of patriarchy, which tries to convince its victims that destruction is for their own good. The snake-demon represents the apotheosis of paternalism as it becomes confused about the motivations of lesser creatures in resisting its dominion. Buffy leads the class in self-defense, mobilizing a student brigade that momentarily turns all of her classmates into fighting members of the Scooby Gang. In Season Four, Buffy and Willow go to college while Xander goes into construction, introducing a visible split in the gang by gender and class. Xander takes a traditionally masculine job while the others continue their education, which disperses the gang into a class hierarchy that creates dissonance within the group. Though Xander’s job carries a lower social status than “university student,” it also illustrates an institution, the construction industry, that is not possessed by a demon. University of California, Sunnydale, however, hides a military-industrial project called the “Initiative,” run by Buffy’s psychology professor, Dr. Maggie Walsh, and populated by secret soldiers, including Buffy’s new boyfriend, Riley Finn. Though Riley understands the mission of the Initiative as protection of the country from supernatural threats, the season slowly reveals Walsh’s true plan: to hybridize human subjects with high-tech weaponry and demon flesh, synthesizing a secret army of supersoldiers. This threat represents a local instance of national institutions—the academy, the military, and industry—engaged in a mutually corrupting pursuit. No longer is the Big Bad a local politician with apocalyptic ambitions: in this season, the demonic multiplies into a horde supported by hidden archons of government. Though the Scooby plot of personal maturation appears to be individualistic, in fact, each member of the gang must grow in order to confront a more powerful institution. Willow hones her skills as a computer hacker, comes out as a lesbian, and develops her interest in magic. Xander takes on managerial responsibilities at work and forges a stable relationship with an ex-demon, Anya, who abandons her occupation as revenger against men in hopes that Xander is different. Giles starts a new business, the Magic Shop, to replace the destroyed refuge of the school library, lost at the end of Season Three. Buffy finds herself somewhat lost as her friends change and her boyfriend becomes a rival as Sunnydale’s protector.

“Primeval” stages the endgame of the Initiative plot, and forces the gang to evolve as an alliance. It reveals the structural, ethical differences between the nerd alliance and the demonic horde. Having met Adam, the Frankensteinian firstborn of the Initiative, Buffy realizes that she will die if she confronts him alone. Adam represents a mad-fanboy dream of power: already tall, strong, and clever, he becomes a nuclear-powered demon cyborg who rebels against his creator and hijacks the Initiative. As a villain, he represents a reincursion of the scenario that inspired *Buffy*: he is the monster so strong, he makes the Slayer appear to be the victimized “little girl” again. When they trade blows, her strongest punch does nothing, while his sends her flying into a wall. This outcome demonstrates the physical limits of the “Chosen One”: her superhuman strength and resilience can be challenged by the proper monster. Her physical limitations represent a deficit of social strength in Season Four, as her friends grow apart and her boyfriend challenges her mission. The idea of the Slayer must evolve. In the debriefing afterwards her initial beating, the gang concludes that they have the tools to defeat Adam, but in dysfunctional form: each one has a piece of a puzzle that none can unite. Xander—a part-time military strategist due to an earlier Halloween accident—quips the solution: “All we need is combo-Buffy.” Giles realizes that Willow could cast a spell to unite the powers of the Scoobs, and so armed, they depart for the Initiative. When Buffy meets Adam again, Willow casts the spell to unite their abilities. Buffy, as the “hand,” becomes possessed by the other powers: Willow as spirit, Xander as heart, and Giles as mind. When Adam attacks with his machine-gun hand, an apparent coup de gras, Buffy raises her hand and chants Sumerian in the voice of her friends:

We are spirit, we are mind,
We are heart. Out of the storm
We call the Primeval Power.

Adam’s bullets freeze in midair; his bazooka blast turns into doves. “You could never hope to grasp the source of our power ... but yours is right here,” says combo-Buffy, plunging her hand into Adam’s chest to rip out his radioactive power source. The military-industrial chimera falls dead to the ground. “Primeval” addresses the problem of the Slayer’s limitations by imagining the Scooby Gang as a body politic. The spell of enjoining creates a temporary

meta-Slayer to defeat the hordes of soldiers and demons. A force from the first age of the world holds this being together. It marks a decisive shift in the discourse of the show, a moment when “Power” names a spirit of friendship as ancient as the Old Ones. This common body and communal voice triumphs over Adam by synthesizing characteristics—strength, intelligence, empathy, and soul—that the rules of gender wish to confine in separate bodies.

Gender is so five minutes ago

What happens to Slayerism when attributes coded as masculine and feminine pass among differently-sexed bodies? What happens, then, when the Scooby Gang is queered (even further)? These questions are explored in the final arc of Season Six, in the episodes “Seeing Red,” “Villains,” “Two to Go,” and “Grave.” There is a dialectical Big Bad in Season Six: the misogynist villain, Warren Mears, and his antithesis, Willow. A theme of addiction to magic worked through Willow’s story during Seasons Five and Six. In the final episodes of Season Six, this theme collides with Warren’s attempt to finally defeat Buffy, the “bitch,” who refuses to understand her place as a woman in Warren’s world. In the aftermath of a foiled heist, Warren follows Buffy to her home and tries to kill her with a gun. Though Buffy is gravely wounded, Tara, Willow’s girlfriend, is killed by a stray bullet. After saving Buffy with her magic, Willow seeks revenge against Warren and his companions, Andrew and Jonathan, the villains of “Villains.” Fueled by rage and grief, Willow consumes all the magic in her path in order to destroy Warren, a quest that turns her into “Dark Willow,” as Andrew puts it. Formerly the least Gothic of characters, Willow’s red hair turns black, as do her clothes, and dark veins of magic line her face. The Gothic represents her grief and rage, her resentment of marginalization as Buffy’s “sideman,” and her self-hatred as a “loser.” Having spoken aloud the word of the oppressor—“loser”—she runs the arc of nerd transformation in reverse: she attacks her friends, betrays herself, murders her tormentor, and plots to destroy the world. She tracks down Warren in the woods outside Sunnydale and, after torturing him with the bullet that almost killed Buffy, she flays him alive in front of the other Scoobies. Tracking Andrew and Jonathan to the Magic Box, where they are sheltered by Anya and Xander,

Dark Willow fights Buffy and then Giles, who has returned from England. After a shootout-style confrontation, Giles tricks Willow into absorbing the borrowed magic of an English coven in Devon, a magic that contains, says Giles, “the true essence of magic,” compassionate connection to all beings. In her deranged state, Willow experiences this connection as suffering that can only be stopped by the end of the world. She raises a buried Satanic temple on the edge of town, feeding it energy to trigger the Apocalypse. The flow of dark magic is broken by Xander, who tells Willow that if she wants to destroy the world, she will have to kill him first. She scoffs at this: “That was your big plan, to tell me that you love me?” Xander responds with the trump card of the oldest friend:

The first day of kindergarten, you cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You’ve come pretty far. Ending the world, not a terrific notion, but the thing is, yeah, I love you. I love crayon-breaky Willow and I love scary-veiny Willow. So if I’m going out, it’s here. If you want to kill the world, then start with me. I’ve earned that.

To end “the world”—a highly abstract entity—one must also end one’s best friend. To foment the apocalypse of nerds, Willow must betray the first relationship in which she saved another, and was saved by another, from the caste of prey and garbage. Willow discovers that she cannot kill Xander, and therefore cannot destroy the world. The scene ends with the two of them collapsed on the ground, crying in each other’s arms.

To see how this queer plot defeats the demon of gender, we must recognize its allusive nature. Andrew’s epithet “Dark Willow” refers to the “Dark Phoenix” plot of *Uncanny X-Men* (Issues #127–138), a comic book that influenced Joss Whedon as a teenager. In this plot, Jean Grey, the heroic Phoenix, is seduced by a villain, Mastermind, who corrupts her by releasing her repressed desires. Phoenix is the most powerful of the X-Men, a telepath and telekinetic whose mutant powers are amplified by the cosmic “Phoenix Force.” When Jean Grey gives in to her urge to dominate others, she consumes a star, destroying its planet inhabited by seven billion people. In order to defeat “Dark Phoenix,” Jean allows her mentor, Professor X, to dampen her power to pre-Phoenix levels. When this strategy fails, she commits suicide, dying in the arms of her lover, Scott Summers. This resolution of the Dark

Phoenix plot constitutes a trauma within comics fandom that plays out to this day. It was not traumatic because Phoenix died, but because the plot that led to her death was so openly misogynistic. The Dark Phoenix storyline destroyed one of Marvel Comics' feminist heroes with a story about a woman who could not contain her desires, commits genocide, and must be punished with death. Unable to undo this ending, Marvel has spent three decades rewriting it, bringing Jean Grey back as a clone, a doppelganger, her own daughter from an alternate timeline, and, most recently, as her teenage self kidnapped into the future to bear witness to her older self's crimes. The Dark Phoenix plot drove the film *X-Men 3: The Last Stand*, in which the plot of woman-as-chaos-bringer played out in even more explicit terms. The Dark Willow plot is constructed to address this problem, one of the worst examples of misogyny in the canon of nerd culture. Willow is driven mad by grief at the murder of her girlfriend, a much better motivation than the hysteria that drove Phoenix. The revenge she seeks targets its proper object, the murderer himself, who is the most unrepentant misogynist in the Buffyverse. His death by flaying is immoral and grotesque, but Willow faces this act and repents of it. Her problem is not her capacity for power itself—she is the greatest witch of her age—but the driver of that power, grief, and rage fueled by despair. The intervention of her friends allows Willow to alter her relationship to her own power, to choose not to destroy the world. The final turn occurs not because of romantic love—Xander is not her boyfriend—but because of ancient friendship that allows her to befriend the world. In this way, the logic of nerd alliance extends itself to the planet: Willow discovers the cosmic dimension of Slayerism, founded in *philia*, not romantic tragedy. The male-female pairing of Xander and Willow makes this ending more, not less queer: the straight man whose best friend is a lesbian witch helps her save herself and the planet. Not a hetero- or homonormative plot of salvation through pair-bonding, but a rebuke of the demon Gender as an agent of apocalypse.

In the Dark Willow plot, *Buffy's* awareness of structural injustice in nerd culture converges with its awareness of structural injustice built into the normative framework of gender itself. From the beginning, Buffy resisted the narrative of "one girl in all the world" as a myth of virgin sacrifice disguised as a story of female empowerment. The problem of finding oneself in the midst of a history one did not author becomes an object of repeated discussion, notably

in the musical episode from Season Six, "Once More, with Feeling." In this episode, Buffy confronts her existential angst after the Scooby Gang, led by Willow, pulls her out of heaven and back into history at the start of the season. As another round of world-destruction looms, Buffy finds herself unable to care. She sings: "Apocalypse, we've all been there,/The same old trips, why should we care?" Though expressed in the breezy terms of the American musical, Buffy's malaise afflicts everyone who works against unjust institutions, that is, "demons," for any length of time. Structural injustice exhausts its opponents by environing them. In the inherited Slayer narrative, there will always be demons for the one Slayer to fight. Buffy's first line of defense against this problem was the Scooby Gang itself: her friends allowed her to survive, to have a semblance of a life, far longer than most Slayers do. The Dark Willow plot reveals the limitations of this strategy. Finally, the sidekicks demand to be the protagonists of their own stories, even as the Slayer's mission trumps the attempt to "get a life." The Gothic frame of the series and its ambiguous enchantment compound the problem: superhuman forces of good must remain occluded, lest the Old Ones seem less fearsome, the earth less doomed, and the Slayer less compelled to hunt. The demon of Gender remains the author of the metanarrative: the Slayer is stuck in her role as a tragic heroine doomed to die because she is a girl. Season Seven provided the opportunity to end the story by transforming the terms of its telling. The last three episodes, "Touched," "End of Days," and "Chosen," find Buffy, the gang, and an international group of potential Slayers facing the First Evil, a disembodied force that haunts the characters with the figures of the beloved dead. Knowing that her friends are Buffy's strength, the First works to destroy the group from within, using a demented preacher, Caleb, to embody the forces of religious patriarchy that strive to keep women in their place. Buffy responds with an immanent critique of the story she has lived since Season One. If "one girl in all the world" is the problem, she reasons, the solution to the unbearable repetition of Slaying before the Apocalypse lies in the sharing of power. Many elements of the show had pointed in this direction: the calling of Faith, the second Slayer, after the first time Buffy died; the plot of "Primeval"; Xander's Christification as the carpenter who calls Willow back; Willow's ascendance as Good Witch; Giles's return as a peer to the group he had mentored. All of these equalitarian elements point to a process I term the

Scoobification of the Slayer, the creation of a transgendered community capable of resisting the Powers of structural injustice.

First, there is failure: Faith and the potential Slayers overthrow Buffy as leader. This pattern of community collapse is part of the unbearable repetition of Buffy's suffering. Every so often, the group must repudiate, betray, and deconstruct itself before reassembling in a stronger form. From Buffy's perspective, this is still a disaster, and it weakens her when she first confronts Caleb. Here, as in Tolkien, the First Evil contains the seed of its undoing: Caleb's lair, the Vineyard, hides an artifact that Buffy must not find: a stylized axe set in a stone that the minions of the First try to crack. The Scythe breaks the Gothic aesthetic of the show: crimson and silver, an apotheosis of Buffy's favorite stake, "Mister Pointy," its sleek curves gleam with the power to undo the Hellmouth. Search as they might, Giles and Willow cannot locate this Scythe in history, except in fragments that resist interpretation. This breakdown in the ritual of research signals the first unraveling of Scooby roles as a herald of others to come. Giles and Willow have always averted apocalypse with superior information-gathering, the foundation of Slayer strategy throughout the show. The Scythe resists these efforts: it is a material eucatastrophe, an object from outside the frame of the Buffyverse. Modeled after Excalibur, King Arthur's sword-in-the-stone, the Scythe acknowledges Buffy's identity as feminist messiah, but its origin points beyond that role. So Buffy is told when she locates a mausoleum entrance in the Sunnydale cemetery that, mysteriously, she had never noticed before. The entrance is marked with the Egyptian symbol of the winged sun, associated with the Gods Ra and Horus, and the Goddess Hathor/Isis. It is visually jarring, a disruption of the Gothic-Christian atmosphere of the cemetery, and Buffy finds within a hidden matriarchal history of the Slayer. Within the tomb she meets an older woman who claims to be the last of her line, one of the makers of the Scythe, one of the people who watched the Watchers from the moment the Shadow Men first made the Slayers. She represents the mother-line in the show that had all but disappeared with Joyce Summers's death in "The Body." In place of the Slayer narrative, the woman offers a new origin: she was "one of many" who fashioned the Scythe "in secrecy for one like you." Before it was hidden, the Scythe killed "the last pure demon who walked upon the earth" in prehistory; then its "guardian" hid with it "to help and protect you." These fragments of feminist counter-narrative,

set in the melange of Egyptian, Arthurian, and Lovecraftian symbols, makes the episode feel like fan fiction written for Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. "We're the last surprise," she explains, a eucatastrophe fashioned from the materials of unpopular feminism. Buffy appears astonished, grateful, and skeptical all at once, and her reverie is interrupted when Caleb appears behind the guardian and snaps her neck.

Armed with the Scythe, Buffy dispatches Caleb in short order, after his obligatory slur—"Are you ready to finish this, bitch?"—followed by a cleaving-in-twain that starts from the nethers and ends with a quip. "He had to split," Buffy tells Angel, and the final episode proceeds to the ultimate action. Buffy and Willow have a plan: Willow will use the Scythe to empower all the potential Slayers, everywhere. Buffy addresses the potentials—including those in the television audience, and repeats the origin of the Slayer, one girl at a time, "because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule." In response, she delivers her version of the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*:

I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power, will have the power, who can stand up, will stand up. Slayers, every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?

Buffy, Faith, and the potentials move to the caverns under Sunnydale, where the First has massed a vampire army to overrun the world. Willow, meanwhile, prepares the spell, which will change her fate as well. Earlier in the story, Willow told Giles, "If I tried something big, I'd change," a reference to Dark Willow and her love of raw power. Willow's fears reflect another weapon of demonic Gender: self-censorship driven by fear of error, transgression, and autonomy. Then she casts the spell, and an overwhelming light radiates from the Scythe through Willow to all the potentials, everywhere. In the didactic style of an *ABC Afterschool Special*, a montage of empowered potentials appears: girls playing softball, working construction, facing down abusers. The camera cuts to the underworld of Sunnydale, where a former potential gazes at the demon hordes and says, "These guys are dust." Willow, meanwhile, exclaims "Oh my Goddess," perhaps the first unironic reference to a deity in *Buffy's* history. As the glow of *thea*-phany fades, she keels over and says, "That was nifty."

The underworld and its demon hordes are repelled by the light of the Slayers and the light of the sun, channeled into the depths by the ensouled vampire, Spike, refashioned now as a Champion by a gift from his former rival, Angel. The Gothic frame of the show shatters, and the gang piles into a school bus that drives away from Sunnydale, the town swallowed by its collapsing Hellmouth. The Scoobification of the Slayer is complete. *Buffy* ends in with a resounding moment of feminist utopia, with patriarchal narratives overthrown, power shared at the highest level, and the demon of Gender rebuked as a driver of apocalypse. The resurgence of divine names, tropes of enlightenment, and the return of humor—"nifty"—mark a transformed relationship to institutions. The Scoobification of the Slayer constitutes a eucatastrophe as an institutional event. Buffy and Willow found an institution, an enduring social structure with its own origin myth and purpose. Though the institution of the Slayers will encounter internal contradictions in Seasons Eight to Twelve of the ongoing *Buffy* comic book, it nonetheless incarnates a Power of its own. (Slayers need a Power of one's own, as Virginia Woolf might have said, had she watched *Buffy*.) In the wake of demonic environmental collapse, the Slayers begin an ecological restoration of a planet that resists its prophesied doom.

Brave new world

The problem of environmental justice moves from figuration to mimesis in Whedon's post-*Buffy* project, the television space opera *Firefly* (2002–2003), and the film, *Serenity*, that completed its plot after the series was cancelled. Many of the tropes, themes, and character types staged in *Buffy* reappear in *Firefly*, transformed by its setting beyond humanity's solar system of origin. As the opening narrative of the show relates, Earth "got used up," and a diaspora of generation ships left the solar system, headed to a local star system with many planets and moons suitable for terraforming. The threatened hellscape of *Buffy* becomes the exhausted Earth of *Firefly*. The environmental issues that were represented as demonic in *Buffy* now appear, simply, as the collapse of the biosphere brought on by human activity. The fight that the Scoobies wage has already been lost in *Firefly*, but the civilization that arose in the new star system appears poised to repeat crucial mistakes. The colonization effort was

led by two imperial powers, the United States and China, acting in unison. The Union of Allied Planets, or Anglo-Sino Alliance, created a parliamentary democracy, an interplanetary cosmopolis that saves humanity from extinction. However, the price of survival is centralization: no one is allowed to leave the Alliance. Those who tried, the “Browncoats” of the outer planets, fought a failed war of independence. This premise inverts the trope of nerd alliance in general and the premise of *Star Trek*’s stellar cosmopolitanism in particular. The Alliance is the shadow of the Federation, Starfleet as Big Bad, a coercive central bureaucracy that brooks no opposition. The Scooby Gang equivalent is the crew of *Serenity*, a Firefly-class ship (which actually looks like the insect) led by Captain Mal Reynolds and first officer Zoe Washburn, survivors of the Browncoat rebellion. They are joined by Shepherd Book, a preacher; “Wash” Washburn, the pilot, and Zoe’s husband; Jayne Cobb, a mercenary; Inarra Serra, a professional courtesan; and Kaylee Frye, the ship’s engineer. In the course of the television series, this group is joined by Simon Tam and his sister, River, fugitives from the Alliance whose circumstances remain mysterious. Simon was once a brilliant young doctor of the inner worlds, and River is a troubled teenager with undefined mental powers, including telepathy. River continues Whedon’s fascination with the teenage girl as damaged warrior, and her plot began to unfold in the first season, but her origin was never revealed. Whedon campaigned for a feature film to complete the narrative, and Universal Pictures agreed to finance it. The result was *Serenity*, a film that earned critical praise and little exposure beyond the original fanbase of the television series. In *Serenity*, Whedon reveals that River was seized by the Alliance and trained under duress as a living weapon, a trope borrowed from Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*. Simon rescued her from captivity, and they became fugitives. As the film opens, the Alliance pursues the Tams because they fear that River’s shattered mind contains state secrets of an environmental disaster on a forgotten planet called Miranda.

“Miranda” refers, first of all, to Prospero’s daughter in *The Tempest*, whose exclamation—“O brave new world, that has such people in it”—was picked up by Aldous Huxley for his dystopian novel of social engineering, *Brave New World*. A planet named Miranda suggests the drama of colonization, the innocence of the ingenue, and the horror of dystopia. River begins to remember this place after her buried memories start to surface after a bar fight

modeled after the classic Western. (*Serenity* is the kind of nerd film that mixes genres—telepathic teenage martial artists fighting in a space tavern—without a second thought.) The trouble with reaching Miranda, whose existence has been wiped from the memory of civilization, lies in the Reavers. In *Firefly*, the Reavers begin as legendary figures—space cannibals—that gradually manifest as a legitimate threat. In *Serenity*, Reaver space lies between the crew and Miranda, a fact on which the plot turns. When *Serenity* arrives at Miranda, they find a planet of the dead. The scene of arrival is shot slightly overexposed: the planet's surface and its barren cities appear too bright. The Gothic threat of the Reavers is balanced by an excess of light, and these phenomena are linked as effect and cause. The crew discovers that everyone on Miranda—over twenty-five million people—is dead. They died in place, of no detectable injury. The planet is an open mass grave, with desiccated bodies staring blindly into space in every city. The uncanny is present through its reversal on Miranda: though its citizens should have moved in life, they did not. The scene recalls many kinds of environmental disaster: depictions of nuclear war, the Bhopal chemical spill in India, the effects of a neutron bomb, mass starvation, and scenes from the death camps of World War II. The real cause is none of these things, as the crew learns from a recording made by a scientist moments from her death. She explains that Miranda was the site of a drug test: the “Pax,” a drug designed to “calm the population” and “weed out aggression” was released into the atmosphere across the planet. It worked too well: the people became apathetic in the extreme. They stopped fighting, but they also stopped eating, working, and moving. Named ironically for the “peace” of empire—Pax Romana, Pax Americana—the Pax had the reverse effect on 10 percent of the population, making them mindless aggression machines who could do nothing but attack others and consume their flesh. They became the Reavers. The parliament of the Alliance made the memory of Miranda a state secret, which River accidentally uncovered through telepathic contact with government officials. In order to prevent another war, the Alliance committed genocide, creating eugenic horrors as an aftereffect. As Jayne says, “The whole world's dead for no reason.” Mal concludes that, after an appropriate amount of time, the government will “swing back to the belief that they can make people better,” a future that must be prevented. “Somebody has to speak for these people,” he decides, and the crew agrees. “I aim to misbehave.”

At this point, the crew encounters the same problem as the Scoobies. A system of corrupt institutions, older and more powerful than any outlaw, must be opposed. In the absence of the post-Gothic solutions available to *Buffy*, they must obey the laws of genre and find a counter-institution of science fiction. This institution appears in the form of the Alliances' information web, a descendent of our own digital media. Earlier in the film, their ally, a media hacker named Mr. Universe, had summed up the flow of information in their culture. On the one hand, there is the "puppet theater" offered to the "somnambulant masses"; on the other, there is "the truth of the signal" available to those who look below the deceptions of ideology, propaganda, and government encryption. "Can't stop the signal," Mr. Universe avows, so the crew decides to take the recording that explains Miranda to his lair in order to download its contents onto the net. Here we are back in the territory of Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* with Maxine and Driscoll in their fight for a nerd refugium. We also stand in the territory of digital activism: the Arab Spring and its use of Facebook; the Great Firewall of China; Wikileaks and its stolen data; Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden as patriot-traitors who sent a signal despite the rise of mass surveillance in the War on Terror. *Serenity* anticipated them all. Mal and company must fly through Reavers and Alliance forces to land on Mr. Universe's moon, and the battle that ensues kills Wash and reveals River as a terrifying force capable of slaying the Reavers. In the end, Mal faces the Operative, a samurai-style agent of the Alliance who killed Shepherd Book and Mr. Universe in order to prevent the discovery of Miranda. Mal defeats him but declines to kill him. Instead, Mal says, "I'm going to show you a world without sin" as he transmits the data into the interplanetary media network. Temporarily foiled, the Parliament moves into damage control, and the worlds of the Alliance erupt into political debate. The Operative orders his troops to stand down and repair *Serenity*, and as the honorable, defeated opponent, he himself disappears from the scene. The crew buries their beloved dead, and the ship flies away, piloted now by River Tam, who is finally free of the nightmares that haunted her throughout *Firefly*. A world without sin, according to Whedon, is a lesser and more destructive world than one in which dedicated bands of friends seek to stem the tide of human cruelty. Despite his reversal of the Federation's cosmopolitics, Whedon absorbed the message of eugenics' moral failure from *Star Trek*. The intentional communities of the Slayers and

the *Firefly* crew are notable as voluntary organizations that persevere through their members' flaws without trying to "make people better." The quest to eradicate sin from human existence leads to the greatest horrors known to the modern world. Khan must be defeated again and again, especially when he is running the government.

Taken together as parables of environmental justice, *Buffy* and *Serenity* extend the philosophy and ethics of nerd culture to the realm of institutional politics. The Whedonverse counsels the cultivation of individual idiosyncrasy, the joy of nerdism, in face-to-face communities dedicated to common goals. These goals include solidarity with other "losers" wounded by the culture of eugenics, liquidation, and objectification; a therapeutic practice in which friends mentor one another through the healing of wounds and the formation of community; the creation of a culture of resistance to environmental destruction in local communities and the machinery of apocalypse at the scale of the planet; the practice of cross-cultural synthesis and multicultural alliance; the revision of cosmopolitical narratives that enslave individuals to the forces of gender; and the creation of alternative institutions to perpetuate these goals through these new cultures. *Serenity* and its philosophy of the signal suggest that nerd culture becomes nerdist exactly at the point when nerds capitalize on their affinity for information technologies as the means to spread counter-hegemonic truths and word of alternative communities. The means to engage the spirits of world-destruction lie not with the individual, conceived as a heroic monad, but in counter-narratives and counter-institutions cultivated by communities, and systems of communities. Neither *Buffy* nor *Mal* fulfills the traditional role of the great leader as the person at the top of a social hierarchy orchestrating minions from above. Their leadership is poetic in the largest sense: it inspires the making of a better, not a perfect, world through the practice of friendship that scales up to the level of the planet. In a narrative universe in which the transcendent forces of good are still mere hints of a *deus* considering a role after *absconditus*, the communities of *Slayer* and *Signal* embody new Powers just coming to know their own names.

This ethos of self-transformation as a practice of world-defense has an older origin to which Joss Whedon is greatly indebted: the superhero and the comic book.