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Captain Tightpants: *Firefly* and the Science Fiction Canon



"Ethics [are] indeed a science fiction, a process (narrative in many ways) of encountering an other in a relationship bounded by time and space" (Pinsky 18).

Wash: "Psychic, though? That sounds like something out of science fiction."

Zoe: "We live in a spaceship, dear" (*Firefly*, "Objects in Space," 1015).

[1] Joss Whedon's *Firefly* only aired for one season—three episodes, in fact, never made it to television at all^[1]—but somehow it managed to produce a DVD set, a thriving cult fan base, collections of essays, and a movie deal for the motion picture *Serenity*. Very few people can agree on just what the show was about, and a number of books and edited volumes have attempted to explore this question, including Wilcox's *Investigating Firefly and Serenity* (I.B. Tauris, 2008) and Jane Espenson's *Finding Serenity* (2005) and *Serenity Found* (2007; Smart Pop). It was a western, a horse opera^[2], a space opera, an action narrative, a coming-of-age show, a horror show, and a comedy. In short, it was the usual Joss Whedon text. But how, exactly, does this bizarre and eclectic program fit into the genre (s) of science fiction? What about it made sense as a traditional SF show, and what aspects made it simultaneously unrecognizable (hence, un-sellable) as television SF? For that matter, what *is* television SF, if that genre indeed exists at all? This essay on *Firefly* will explore such questions, while keeping in mind that the peculiar indefinability of SF as a genre is precisely what gives it such extraordinary qualities.

[2] I grew up watching television SF. *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*^[3], *Quantum Leap*, *Babylon 5*, *Stargate SG1*, and others. The genre was remarkably flexible. You didn't necessarily need a starship—just some form of advanced technology that opened up new frontiers of possibility for human exploration. Brooks Landon calls SF a "zone of possibility..."

the literature of the possible—or the not yet possible” (17). But these new frontiers also tend to bring with them a colonial mindset, and we might just as well define SF as a zone of colonization—the literature (or visual culture) of the not yet conquered. The most successful television SF programs, like *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*, are firmly entrenched within a political nexus of cultural interaction, potential colonization, and interstellar warfare. *Firefly* contains all of these elements, but lacks the crucial SF trope that makes them work for most dedicated consumers of the genre: aliens.

[3] There are no aliens in the show. It is entirely a show about human expansion and exploration, human chaos and interaction in the farthest reaches of space. Jane Espenson says that, at first, “a space show without aliens felt like *Buffy* without vampires...I didn’t yet understand that Joss wanted to say something clear and honest about *human* nature” (2). Since aliens, in SF, are usually the cultural mirror through which we can revisualize human nature, an SF show without aliens produces what is dangerously and uncomfortably close to a human melodrama. A show about humans looking at humans. While *Star Trek* more often than not featured humans teaching aliens how to be civilized, and *Farscape* reversed the equation—featuring aliens who taught humans that their civility was an illusion—*Firefly* did away with the equation entirely, choosing instead to focus solely on how human interaction is transformed when the concept of home no longer signifies anything. The threatening *other* in the show is a human military-corporate complex: The Alliance. The chaotic and destructive figures are the Reavers—not aliens, but humans who seem to have gone mad from exposure to the terrifying emptiness of space itself. [4]

[4] Did I mention that most of the characters are criminals?

[5] The show revolves around the crew of the *Serenity*, a “Firefly class” transport vessel, who perform odd-jobs on the far edge of Alliance territory. They begin as conventional mercs, but end up fleeing from the Alliance after picking up two wanted fugitives: Simon Tam, a gifted surgeon, and his sister, River. We discover later that Simon rescued River from a secret government academy where she was being ruthlessly experimented on. *Firefly* concentrates on Simon and River’s efforts to stay one step ahead of the Alliance, along with the rest of *Serenity*’s crew: Captain Mal, first officer Zoe, pilot Wash, companion Inara (a futuristic courtesan), ship’s mechanic Kaylee, shepherd Book, and mercenary Jayne. All of them are, of course, running from something, and *Firefly* is very much a show about perpetual motion. The family that they forge in space becomes more powerful and more enduring than their biological families back home. Whedon sums up the narrative: “You take people, you put them on a journey, you give them peril, you find out who they really are” (*Firefly* DVD Commentary, “Serenity,” 1001).

[6] *Firefly* certainly wasn’t the first program to borrow from earlier western genres in order to revise the idea of the wild frontier. Gene Roddenberry, after all, first pitched *Star Trek* as “*Wagon Train* to the stars” in 1966 (Whitfield 23). Both the original (1978) and more recent (2003) versions of *Battlestar Galactica* involved a ship full of human settlers looking for a new Earth. Even *Babylon 5* revolved around a space station on the galactic frontier, acting as a hub for colliding alien cultures while trying to maintain a shaky interstellar peace. But *Firefly* actually sought to combine the staples of the horse opera with the techne of science fiction [5], a fusion made apparent in the opening credits when *Serenity* literally flies over a dozen galloping horses. Rather than invoking the mythos of old westerns, *Firefly* actually sought to link both genres in a meaningful way, creating an SF show whose action takes

place mostly on lawless, dustbowl, border planets.

[7] The only other show in recent memory to attempt this was *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.*, which ran for one season (also on FOX) in 1993. Although Brisco himself was played by the inimitable Bruce Campbell (of *Evil Dead* fame), the show failed spectacularly—audiences just couldn't warm up to a time-traveling villain named John Bly who was searching for Mysterious Orbs of Power. While *Brisco* was essentially a comedy, *Firefly* was marketed as an action-drama hybrid which would successfully combine SF explosions and galactic intrigue with the indomitable frontier spirit and down-home brawls of westerns like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. Early FOX promos even showed sexy images of the character Inara while flashing the words "Space Hookers" across the screen.

[8] Ultimately, *Firefly* proved to be too character-driven to succeed as an action vehicle. Despite numerous impressive CGI sequences, horse chases, gun fights, and saloon brawls, there didn't appear to be enough explosions to keep audiences satisfied. Yet, given the show's cult following, and its reincarnation as a motion picture, audiences *were* satisfied. Some of them, anyway. And how integral, exactly, are explosions to an SF plot? The majority of *Star Trek* episodes, after all, focused on dialogue between crew members. *Babylon 5* often seemed to take place entirely in its characters' bedrooms, and *Farscape* could spend forty-five minutes talking about alien bodily functions. *Quantum Leap*—combining time-traveling hijinks with heartwarming drama, and containing very few explosions—managed to last for five seasons. Clearly, there seems to be a disagreement over what constitutes marketable television SF.

[9] *Firefly* establishes all of the requisite characters for an SF show: a captain (Mal), a loyal first officer (Zoe), a doctor (Simon), a mysterious x-factor (River), a moral compass (Book), an engineer (Kaylee), and "security officer" (Jayne). At first glance, this crew roster looks suspiciously like that of the *USS Enterprise*. We have a military superstructure (The Alliance), a monstrous threat (The Reavers), and a ship full of fundamentally unknowable characters who, nevertheless, must learn all they can about each other in order to survive among the border planets. Instead of phasers, they have rifles, which are probably a lot cheaper.^[6] Instead of a powerful starship with warp-drive capability^[7], they have an unsinkable transport ship with no guns at all. Other than that, their mission of human exploration is more or less the same, and the serial format of contained episodes (with an occasional arc) matches that of *Star Trek* and other successful franchises.

[10] The only real difference seems to be the lack of aliens. However, as Ginjer Buchanan notes, "Roddenberry...[created] a science fictional future that has so much power and longevity that, for many genre television viewers...it *is* the future" (53). If the bookends of visual SF are *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, then lack of aliens constitutes a serious offense against the codes of the genre. But if the very point in creating aliens is simply to reveal their miraculous connections with humanity, then it seems just as well to produce an SF show without aliens at all. Why not focus exclusively on humans?

[11] I'm deliberately missing the point here in order to illustrate a flaw in the logic of SF as a genre. SF is a pastiche of different genres, borrowing wildly from all sorts of literary traditions. *Lost in Space* is really just what it says...humans lost in the vastness of space. In this sense, space itself becomes the negative force, the villain, whose sheer indecipherability and power is what makes it so very horrifying. The feeling of being aboard a spaceship—the sensations "of confinement, of discomfort, of dependence" (Sobchack 112)—along with the

crushing, impenetrable power of outer space, are all revisions of Gothic tales like *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or the prototypical *Castle of Otranto*. Utopian planets (like *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* "Risa," the pleasure planet) are reminiscent of pastoral genres, while lawless border-planets borrow heavily from the Old West. Sharona Ben-Tov points out that space itself "offers a way of thinking about the American frontier. Space is a comprehensive metaphor that relates American imperial expansion to our myths of nature and technology" (91). Most SF programs, then, are already stuck in the western genre—*Firefly* merely puts it out in the open.

[12] Yet, for all this genre-crossing, SF has somehow managed to become cemented as either the voyages of the *Enterprise* or the heroic exploits of Luke Skywalker against a tyrannical empire. These benchmarks have become the cultural repositories that newer SF shows "borrow" from, rather than fluid texts which themselves borrowed heavily from the legacy of Hugo Gernsback^[8] and the science-fiction pulps, from the stories of Heinlein and Asimov, from Gothic writers like Mary Shelley and H. Rider Haggard, from the picaresque stories of Cervantes, and from the frontier narratives of the western genre.

[13] The only central metaphor that most SF narratives concern themselves with is space, and space doesn't necessarily require aliens and blasters. Much of SF literature isn't even set in outer space (especially the British New Wave writers), although, as Landon Brooks remarks, "most science fiction [nevertheless] rests on carefully articulated and demarcated spaces, or zones of possibility and impossibility" (17). *Firefly* is basically a story about finding home, which is also a "zone of possibility and impossibility," a space often quested after and, just as often, found in the strangest and unlikeliest of locales.

[14] With this in mind, I would now like to discuss some specific episodes of *Firefly* which illustrate the ideals of home and family as flexible spaces, zones of possibility. I want to point out how the show's characters are similar to, but also drastically different from, characters in more "successful" SF narratives, and how these disparities affect *Firefly* as a story that both upholds and disrupts many of the time-honoured conventions of television SF. I will focus primarily on the episodes "Serenity" (1001), "Out of Gas" (1008), and "Objects in Space" (1014), which was the final episode to air (and likely the most problematic). My intent with this discussion is not to somehow prove that *Firefly* "deserves" to be part of the SF canon; neither is it to affirm that the show is superior to everything that has come before it. I am more interested in looking at what makes *Firefly* a unique SF show, and, in so doing, revealing how SF itself needs to be treated as a remarkably flexible genre whose borrowing of other literary and visual traditions only makes it stronger and more appealing.

[15] The two-hour pilot episode "Serenity" (1001) begins with a battle scene—the Battle of Serenity Valley, which turns out to be the decisive moment of combat between the Alliance forces and the Independents or "Browncoats." Mal and Zoe are Browncoats, and, given how much Mal is grinning and generally enjoying himself, we fully expect the Browncoats to win this fight. They don't. The scene ends with a massive Alliance armada rising in the distance; as their ships fill the sky, Mal's eyes seem to quietly empty of all passion and feeling—this is the moment when he loses his faith and begins his slow, painful transition into the acerbic and bitter captain that we will meet later. To begin an SF show—featuring space ships—with a ground battle seems bizarre enough, but to begin with a battle where the good guys actually lose, and lose completely, runs contrary to the formula for most successful television SF. Shows generally begin in the middle (like *Trek*), or begin with a small incident

that escalates to galactic proportions (like *Babylon 5*), but Whedon instead chooses to hinge this entire battle scene on the emotional transition of Mal himself. The tanks and guns are simply a backdrop to illustrate his cataclysmic fall from idealism.

[16] Most SF shows have some kind of paramilitary organization (like "Starfleet"), but few choose to explore how that organization actually came to power. *Firefly* begins with a clear division between two armies: the Alliance who support unification and the Browncoats who are fighting for independence. Whedon is careful to construct both ideologies as fragile, revealing the flaws in their political agendas without completely favoring one or the other. While the Alliance often appears as an evil organization (like the galactic Empire in *Star Wars*), upon micro-analysis we realize that they are simply the side that happened to win. They had better resources at the time, but now, after the Battle of Serenity Valley, those resources are stretched thin, and the supposedly benevolent Alliance is unable to supply the most basic necessities of life to its newly-terraformed worlds.

[17] We then transition from this powerful and affecting battle-scene to the present day, where Mal and his crew have become scavengers, mercenaries, and errand-runners for rich clients. The camera zeroes in on Wash, *Serenity's* pilot, who at first appears to be talking to Mal on a com-link. In fact, he is actually playing with plastic dinosaurs: ^[9]

Wash: "Everything looks good from here... Yes. Yes, this is a fertile land, and we will thrive."

(as *Stegosaurus*) "We will rule over all this land, and we will call it... 'This Land'."

(as *T-Rex*) "I think we should call it...your grave!"

(*Stegosaurus*) "Ah, curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!"

(*T-Rex*) "Ha ha ha! Mine is an evil laugh...now die!" (1001)

[18] I have excerpted this monologue (dino-logue?) because it is a perfect example of why *Firefly* is entirely unlike most television SF. Like his *Buffy* characters, Whedon imbues the crew of *Serenity* with undeniably human moments. To be human is often to be silly, and to be part of a science fiction story, as Zoe reminds Wash in the opening quote to this discussion ("We live in a spaceship, dear"), is also silly. It makes as much sense to be human as it does to live in a spaceship, and so Whedon's characters often say funny and stupid things in just the kind of tense dramatic situation where you or I might say something funny or stupid—because that's just what humans are like.

[19] You can put people on a spaceship, give them military or scientific training, but that doesn't mean that they'll constantly be calm and rational. Kaylee is a veritable encyclopaedia of ship maintenance, but she is also an impulsive and sometimes petulant young woman who likes to wear brilliant pink gowns.^[10] Wash is a highly skilled pilot, but he also enjoys playing with plastic dinosaurs (and, in a moment of brilliant narrative continuity, when Wash and Zoe's chamber is ransacked by the Alliance during the episode "Bushwhacked" (1003), the soldiers find those very same plastic dinosaurs). Even Jayne, the

selfish mercenary whom Larry Dixon describes as being about “as classy as a jockstrap in a punch bowl, and half as charming” (14), crouches by the infirmary window and watches, silently, after Kaylee has been shot by an Alliance agent. Jewel Staite, who played Kaylee, remarks that “it’s such an interesting, unexpected thing for Jayne to be doing” (218). These characters even surprise the actors who portray them, because they behave unpredictably like humans—or at least as human as possible given the constraints of an action-driven SF narrative.

[20] Gwyneth Jones contends that “a typical science fiction novel has little space for deep and studied characterization, not because the writers lack the skill (though they may) but because in the final analysis the characters are not people, they are pieces of equipment” (5). Much the same might be said about most television SF, where the characters conform to well-used archetypes (the Captain, the Doctor, the Engineer) and their dialogue often serves merely to shuttle the plot along. The purpose of the engineer is to explain the laws of physics to the captain, so that they can later be broken; the purpose of the doctor is to explain whatever biological plague happens to be threatening the crew, so that it might later be averted.

[21] But most successful SF shows manage to invoke these archetypes without simply reiterating them as plot elements. The holographic doctor in *Star Trek: Voyager* is a nice example of this. Yes, he is the chronotope of “The Doctor,” like Doctor McCoy or Doctor Crusher, but we end up caring about him in a unique way—strange, because he is a hologram, and not strictly “human” at all, but the very purpose of the doctor is to ask pointed and impossible questions about the nature of humanity. Each iteration of “The Doctor” in *Doctor Who*—all the way down to Christopher Eccleston in *Doctor Who 2005*—is subtly different, special, and we care about them differently, for different reasons, despite the fact that they all conform to specific and necessary plot expectations. (Except for Colin Baker.)

[22] The point is that *Firefly* does produce dynamic characterization, but this isn’t to say that SF as a genre doesn’t do the same. *Firefly* simply draws upon the fluid nature of SF to go one step further, creating characters who aren’t afraid to act silly or stupid and magnifying the “human” foibles of existing SF characters to which they owe a creative debt. If *Farscape* hadn’t devoted an entire episode to explosive diarrhea (“Lava’s A Many-Splendoured Thing” 4.04), we might not have Wash playing with his dinosaurs. Nor would we have the creative epithet “explosive diarrhea of an elephant!”^[11] which Mal screams in Cantonese in the episode “Our Mrs. Reynolds” (1006). The characters’ knowledge of Mandarin and Cantonese is also a SF first, since *Firefly* begins with the premise that the United States and China were the only superpowers to survive 500 years in the future. As a result, even quasi-literate characters like Jayne are well-versed in Mandarin profanity, and most of the signage throughout the show is written in either Cantonese or Mandarin.

[23] Rather than displaying space-station promenades crowded with diverse aliens, *Firefly* gives us market squares crowded with different ethnicities. Two of the primary characters (Zoe and Book) are people of color—Ron Glass is African-American and Gina Torres is Cuban—and the character who enshrines most of the “whitest” sensibilities, Simon, is also the one that we tend to read as the most naive and the least socially competent. There is still, however, a big gap here in terms of Asian representation. Leigh Adams Wright pointedly asks: “Where are the Chinese, the other half of the great Earth-That-Was merger, the *other...* where are they?” (30). We have Asian languages, Asian extras, and a peculiar fusion of

Asian and Western cultures—especially as personified by Inara, who combines the cultural legitimacy of the geisha with the democratic mindset of a privileged western woman—but these seem more like the ghostly remnants of an actual culture. Simon and River both have an Asian surname (Tam), but they are most definitely white. In fact, no recurring character appears to be Asian, although original drawings of Kaylee in *Firefly: The Official Companion I* suggest that she was expected to have been. Susan Mandala discusses this confusing cultural dialectic in "Representing the Future: Chinese and Code-Switching in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*", while Andrew Aberdein traces the ethnic history of Inara's role as a Companion in "Companions and Socrates." Aberdein compares Inara to the ancient Greek *hetaera*, noting that "although brothels were usually run by men, hetaeras, as a professional elite, were found elsewhere. Like Inara, they were mostly sole proprietors" (Aberdein 3). Whether she is a *geisha* or a *hetaera*, Inara seems to have synthesized the cultural capital of both roles while jettisoning their oppressive baggage. She becomes a white *geisha* who chooses her clients from a registry of wealthy magnates, including a female senator.

[24] A show like *Star Trek: Voyager* gives us an Asian character (Harry Kim, played by Garrett Wang) without any significant cultural attachments, or even cultural difference. White viewers read Harry as white, and Asian viewers, most probably, read him with a sense of frustration, since he blends in so seamlessly with the rest of the white characters. ^[12] But *Firefly* does the exact opposite—instead of an Asian character with no Asian culture, we have Asian culture with no Asians. In this sense, Asian culture becomes a sort of white assemblage of different cultures, treading dangerously close to complete exoticization. Although *Firefly*, I think, tries harder than any previous SF show to include non-white characters and treat a diverse range of global cultures, it also falls short by providing us with all the interesting trappings of a cultural fusion while neglecting to showcase any characters who meaningfully embody this fusion. Inara is the closest example, but she is still a white courtesan whose air of mystery and exotica comes from her manipulation of the Geisha mythology. If *Firefly* had been given a proper run, of course, we might have seen a primary Asian character. But as it stands, what we're left with is a curious and provocative investment in Asian culture with a complete lack of Asian *people*.

[25] Now I want to move on to the episode "Out Of Gas" (1008), where *Serenity* quite literally stalls in space—the engine seizes due to a broken part, the life support system fails, and the ship is left floating. But this event isn't really the narrative thrust of the episode. The true action occurs in a series of flashbacks and recollections, which piece together Mal's relationships with his friends. Mary Alice Money, in "Genre Echoes and the Hero's Journey," calls this a "prism episode," since "all bands of light/theme and color/character meet here... [and] it reflects the elements of earlier shows and foreshadows those to come." Whedon's careful use of colors and camera filters actually becomes a code for communicating affect through deep blues, warm reds, and sickly greens. We see Mal trying to convince Zoe that the ship is actually space-worthy rather than the piece of junk that it once resembled. He insists that the *Serenity* will allow them to "live like real people. Small crew, them as feel the need to be free...never be under the heel of nobody again" ("Out of Gas," 1008). Later, we see him meeting Kaylee for the first time, whom he discovers in a heavy make-out session with the previous engineer. It becomes clear to him, however, that Kaylee—despite her lack of life experience—is a much better engineer than the one he originally hired, and he gives her a job on the spot. "I just gotta ask my folks!" she replies excitedly, running off, and this is one of the last significant mentions of anyone's biological family, for the surrogate family on the ship becomes a flexible and enduring replacement. Other than the fabulous orange

hat that Jayne's mom sends him in "The Message," (1012) or the underwhelming appearance of Simon and River's bourgeois dad ("Safe," 1005), no biological family ever really coheres for the crew.

[26] Mal ends up in the ship's sick bay, heavily drugged and being tended to by Simon. Mal's body is often displayed as a parodic spectacle—he ends up naked in one episode, and this time he is stripped to the waist, looking exposed and incredibly vulnerable to everyone watching. Drifting out of consciousness, he asks, suddenly concerned, "you all gonna be here when I wake up?" They all reply in the affirmative, and Mal's last mumbled words before peacefully passing out are "'kay...that's good" ("Out of Gas," 1008). He falls asleep with a smile on his face, entirely childlike in his pleasure at having a family to wake up to. Kaylee only reinforces this by calling him a "good boy" for managing to fix the ship, and, just this once, everyone seems to be watching out for Mal, rather than the other way around.

[27] What is unique about this episode, at least in terms of defining SF genres, is not the happy ending, but the very unhappy first forty minutes of the narrative. The "ship in peril" episode is a staple of television SF, as well as the iconic failure of the life support system. In *Alien*, the starship *Nostromo's* computer is actually called "Mother," and her many warnings about the failing life support seem eerily maternal. A ship is, after all, a kind of surrogate parent, and its mechanical failures often seem like parental betrayals—exposing the vulnerable passengers to the terrifying and destructive power of outer space. Barbara Creed notes that both the horror and the SF film present situations where the same "desires...are constantly staged and restaged... the subject is left alone, usually in a strange hostile place, and forced to confront an unnamable terror" (138). In this sense, being alone becomes part of the terror—the sheer vacancy and despair of being left in space, of having to figure out what it means to be human when there are no other humans around. The life support failure scenario always presents this question, focusing as it does on a single crew-member who must navigate the empty corridors of the dying ship, racing against time, and usually being pursued by something "unnameable."

[28] In "Out of Gas" (1008), Mal is that crew member, and the "unnameable" terror happens to be his own impending death—a bullet wound that bleeds steadily as he stumbles from room to room, struggling to restore power to the ship. Mal's recollections are all shot in warm, grainy colors, while his present reality is all in cold blue tones, sharp and almost difficult to look at. His blood is incredibly vibrant against the steel foredeck of *Serenity*—like splashes of horrifying paint against those cool electric blues. All of these camera filters and strange angles only serve to amplify Mal's relationship with his own solitude, which in this case also means his own death. He has been completely abandoned by his surrogate family, abandoned even by *Serenity* itself, and now he has to deal with the horror of navigating an empty ship. The scariest images in this episode are not the fire that nearly consumes *Serenity*, nor the shock of watching Mal get shot, but rather the cold appearance of these empty, silent rooms where the crew once laughed and talked—the warm, convivial dining room where Simon ate his "mostly protein" birthday cake, or Kaylee's brilliantly decorated bedroom with its twinkling lights. It is as if these people have been snuffed out, replaced with the cruel voice of *Serenity* counting down the minutes to Mal's own demise, and this erasure strikes at the audience more keenly than any laser blast or explosion could.

[29] "Objects In Space" addresses loneliness and disconnection by way of a very different idea. River, Simon's sister, is perhaps the most peripheral character in *Firefly*, yet her presence is also what drives the narrative action. In his efforts to keep her away from the

corrupt scientists of the Alliance, Simon has turned both of them into fugitives. But River remains the ultimate exile. Her language is halting and somewhat schizophrenic, she is afraid of most people, and she appears to be able to read minds.^[13] Alyson Buckman discusses River's mental instability further in "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," her essay which appears in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*. River's brilliance/madness seems a little hackneyed at first, but the cliché is only present as a ground from which to start. The rest of the show is about complicating and expanding that cliché, exposing the grey areas that exist within it, and challenging the very idea that we, as an audience, can predict what a character might do because he or she falls into a particular televisual type.

[30] River's telepathic abilities manifest themselves in "Objects in Space" as disorienting moments of prescience and understanding. As she listens to her friends talk, she experiences moments of narrative fracture, wherein the characters suddenly address her directly—that is, they leave their external conversations for a moment and speak to her, cruelly, brutally, and with unsparing honesty. Whether they tell her exactly what they are thinking, or what she *assumes* they are thinking, is difficult to discern. When River stumbles into a late-night conversation between Simon and Kaylee about his medical days, she seems momentarily happy at seeing Simon so relaxed. Then, abruptly, he turns to her and says, "I would be there right now," intimating that, if not for River, he would still be enjoying his old life as a top surgeon.

[31] River's subsequent "reading" of Book is even more disturbing when he snarls at her: "I don't give half a hump if you're innocent or not." All of these impressions are abstract and evocative, not exactly decoded thoughts so much as scattered feelings that the characters seem to emanate. Their very illegibility points not only to the commonly-held idea that we wouldn't *really* want to hear what other people are thinking about us, but to the fundamental impossibility of reading another's mind, given that, in all probability, our reading wouldn't make any sense. Many SF characters have the ability to read minds or emotions, but *Firefly* twists this particular trope, giving us a character whose own mind has been brutally invaded by Alliance scientists. Her "power" is really just a complete lack of filters, the ability to "feel everything," as Simon calls it in the episode "Ariel" (1009), and thus a sort of living permeability that renders her vulnerable to other people in the same way that everyone else is vulnerable to space. River herself doesn't fear space at all. In "Bushwhacked" (1003), when River and Simon must hide from Alliance soldiers by donning space-suits and clinging to the hull of the ship, River stars up at the blackness of space with a look of undeniable wonder. Simon looks like he might throw up.

[32] Much of what River hears from her telepathic eavesdropping convinces her that she doesn't belong on the ship and that it will be simpler for everyone if she goes along with a bounty hunter, Jubal Early^[14], who's been sent to collect her. Speaking through Serenity's loudspeaker, she tells the crew that, if she left, "everyone could just go on without me, and not have to worry. People could be who they wanted to be...live simple" ("Objects in Space"). Mal does not accept this, of course. There is a scene that occurs immediately after this, a wonderful scene, when Mal, clad in a spacesuit, goes to retrieve River from Jubal's ship. River floats through space towards him, arms outstretched, and Mal catches her. "Permission to come aboard" she asks, but it is clear that Mal has already admitted her into the family, already taken her under his protective wing. "Give your brother a thrashing for messing up your plan," Mal insists, and River rolls her eyes, saying only that "he takes so much looking after."

[33] Yet this relationship between River and Simon also deserves some attention. It has no correlation in any other Joss Whedon show and represents his sole positive depiction of a biological brother/sister connection, as opposed to the copious chosen-family connections that *Buffy* and *Angel* convey. Their connection is often a silent one, but their love for each other is clearly visualized in almost every scene that they share. One that stands out for me is a moment at the end of "Serenity" (1001) when both characters have only just been introduced as fugitives and accepted onboard the ship. River, seeing a cut on Simon's lip from trying to defend her, reaches up and gently touches just the tips of her fingers to his mouth. "I didn't think you'd come for me," she says.

[34] Simon's reply is perfect, in that it echoes exactly the sentiment shared between the characters Willow and Tara in *Buffy* ("Family," 5003). "Well, you're a dummy," he says ("Serenity" 1001). River accepts this—possibly because she is an uber-genius (she did manage to take over *Serenity* in "Objects In Space"). It is clear that their connection is equal to that shared by the rest of the crew, and thus they are a family within a family. *Firefly* is unique in this way, because, rather than rejecting biological families, it incorporates hereditary kinship into a radical extended family, suggesting that both emotional connections can build and inform each other. Simon and River's sibling relationship is not a pure example of family in comparison to the diluted version of the *Serenity* crew—it is, instead, a more traditional family system that only strengthens the nontraditional system of which it has become a part. Both families shape each other, and both learn from each other. This is part of what makes *Firefly* an even more progressive show than *Buffy* or *Angel*, and also, most likely, the main reason why it was cancelled: Too much emotion—not enough action.

[35] Both "Out of Gas" (1008) and "Objects in Space" (1014) are about being alone, but they are also about rediscovering family. *Firefly* demonstrates that it is possible to feel alone while being part of a family, just as it is possible to feel infused by the love of one's friends while being completely alone. In both episodes, space becomes something capable of extreme destructive force, but also a curious source of wonder and awe, a star-filled skein of pleasure and delight. Family and space blur into one another, becoming like two halves of one signification, aloneness and togetherness, emptiness and plenty, which form the day and night of living on a space ship. And that life is a lot like "science fiction," as Zoe points out, but it is also a lot like the present-day negotiations of work and family that a 21st century person might easily understand. The point is not that these characters are living in a spaceship but that they are living with each other, fumbling through their own humanity, and learning to inflect the wide-open and threatening spaces of loneliness with the warm and tender edges of familial love and compassion.

[36] All SF is concerned primarily with human interaction—what *we* do in space, and how *we* use technology. This is what makes SF as a genre so focused on ethical development. It places humans in fantastic but not entirely implausible situations, and then waits to see what we do next. And what we do next is the important thing. That moment gives us a chance to make ethically significant decisions and thus to work towards utopian goals. In that sense, what Carl Freedman calls the "dialectic" of SF is always a potentially utopian one, since "with its insistence upon historical mutability," it contains "at least implicitly, utopian possibility" (32). Book also sums this up in "Serenity" (1001) when Kaylee asks him why he doesn't seem to care where he's going. He replies: "Because how you get there's the worthier part." If all SF is concerned with "how you get there," then *Firefly* in particular is

uniquely concerned with how its characters negotiate their own ideals of family and belonging, their own personal exiles and solitudes, in order to reveal that each character only “gets there” with the help of everyone else. Explosions may be a visually attractive part of getting there, but it’s the small, seemingly inconsequential moments, the ephemera of daily conversation, that are the worthier part, and *Firefly* is really more a show about small moments than it is a show about train jobs and space ships.

[37] I have tried, in this discussion, to sketch out *Firefly*’s place within the SF canon, showing how it borrows conventions while simultaneously defying them. The show is very much an experimental fusion of western and SF genres, but it is also a unique text, a show with archetypal frameworks that, nevertheless, doesn’t quite look like anything else that came before (or after) it. As the progenitor of dozens of websites, a multitude of fanfiction, novelizations, academic books, and a film, it is truly multi-generic. It spans across many different spaces of production, and, like SF as a whole, proves to be remarkably indefinable, a fluid text rather than a static group of stock-characters or hackneyed plots. It seems like something about it must have been a failure—some aspect of its storyline didn’t quite align with SF conventions—since it was cancelled after only one season. Yet, looking back, *Firefly* is practically the consummate emblem of SF’s own mutability and genre-borrowing, the triumphant hybrid that emerged from a chameleon genre. It failed not because it wasn’t “SF,” in the strictest sense, but because it wasn’t immediately recognizable as SF given the constraints placed on the genre by its debt to *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

[38] Luckily, *Firefly* lives on in its many different incarnations, and can be studied as a unique iteration of the SF canon. Its freedom and flexibility, like that of *Farscape* which came before it, will no doubt pave the way for other brilliantly irreverent shows to take its place in the future. If we writers keep crossing the wires, and crossing the genres, by fusing beloved SF archetypes together, then producers will eventually realize that the canon actually endures *because* it is flexible, and that once you’ve stitched everything together, there really are no genres—just stories. On that day, the Browncoats will have finally won, and *Serenity* will break atmo one last time before it disappears.

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[1] The DVD set contains the three missing episodes, which are: "Heart of Gold" (1013), "Trash" (1011) and "The Message" (1012), which was actually the

last episode filmed.

[2] "Horse opera" was the name given to Western films in the 1930s, most of them filmed in parking lots. "Space opera" was a modification of this term, coined by SF fan-writer Bob Tucker in 1941 (Westfahl 35).

[3] The recent redo of *Battlestar Galactica* is a perfect example of SF's malleability as a genre, since it does away with most of the characters on the original show and even changes the central villains (the Cylons) drastically.

[4] There is one singularly horrifying description of the Reavers. When Simon asks what they'll do to the *Firefly* crew in "Serenity," Zoe replies: "They'll rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into their clothing...and if we're very, very lucky, they'll do it in that order." The origin of the Reavers is finally cleared up in the film *Serenity*.

[5] This was not a particularly adroit marketing move, since, aside from *Deadwood*, there hasn't been an even moderately successful western show on American television since *Lonesome Dove* in 1994. However, there hadn't ever been a show like *Buffy*, either.

[6] While shows like *Trek* often seem ecstatic about showing off technology, the *Firefly* crew have an almost adversarial relationship with it. Clearly, in this future, technology lies in the hands of the super-rich, and people like Mal can only afford outmoded weapons. The Alliance have what appear to be sonic rifles of some sort, which actually look quite ridiculous and make an odd farting noise when they fire—probably Whedon's purposeful attempt to show that more expensive technology doesn't always get the job done better.

[7] *Serenity* does have something called "heartburn," which appears to be similar to a nitro-propulsion system—but it's unclear just how fast the ship can fly.

[8] After whom the auspicious Hugo award was named. Gernsback revitalized the term "science fiction" in 1929, to replace what he had previously called "scientifiction." SF was actually first coined in 1851 by William Wilson in *A Little Earnest Book Upon a Great Old Subject* (Alkon 8).

[9] In the *Firefly* DVD commentary, Whedon characterizes the scene as "obviously, [a] very low budget dinosaur sequence. We just ran out of money and we wanted

to have a world with dinosaurs in it, but just...you know, all we had was Alan."

[10] In the episode where she finally gets to wear a pink gown, "Shindig" (1004), Kaylee also gives Mal the nickname "Captain Tightpants." I included this in the chapter title because it seems like a direct nod to the tight, uncomfortable uniforms in *Trek* which were always in constant need of adjustment. Espenson notes in the DVD commentary that Nathan Fillion, who plays Mal, actually split his pants several times on the set, which was what led to the infamous nickname.

[11] The exact phrase in Mandarin *pinyin* is actually: "Da-shiong bao-jah-shr duh la-doo-tze."

[12] I make this point with some trepidation, since I can't obviously speak for Asian viewers. I do know that, as a queer viewer, I feel endlessly frustrated when I see "queer" characters on television who are played by straight actors and seem to have no sex-life whatsoever. Whedon, as a straight viewer, mentions this very frustration when he cites the episode of *Thirtysomething* which featured the first gay male couple in bed with each other: "Those two guys in *Thirtysomething* sitting in bed together [look] like they were individually wrapped in plastic...it was the most antiseptic thing I've ever seen in my life" (*Onion* Interview, 37[31]: Sept 2001.) The connection between cultural ancestry and queer representation may seem a bit tenuous here, but I do think that the same issues are at stake.

[14] In one particularly horrifying scene, Early is talking to Kaylee about existential philosophy and suddenly asks her, "you ever been raped?" He then goes on to describe what he'll do to her if she interferes with his plans. In the DVD commentary for the episode, Whedon remarks that writing this scene made him wonder if he was "actually a bad person." The concept of the episode, though, was the reveal how fragile the space of *Serenity* actually was, and how easily it might be invaded—just as River's mind was so easily invaded by the Alliance. Beautiful parallel.