"It Doesn't Mean What You Think": River Tam as Embodied Culture Jam

Erin Giannini

[1] In the film *Serenity* (2005), the troubled and troubling character of River Tam (Summer Glau) enters a bar where business, both social and otherwise, is being transacted. She looks around at people drinking and flirting and talking, but none of this seems to grab River's attention. What does is an animated commercial on one of the screens in the bar. The commercial is for a product called Fruity Oaty Bars, and the animation itself is similar to anime. Featuring three singing girls, a mouse turning into a man (as the jingle's lyrics specify will happen if one eats Fruity Oat Bars) and an octopus emerging from a woman's shirt (also lyrically referenced), the jingle promises that this product will "blow your mind."

[2] Which is precisely what it does to River. The bright colors of the advertisement (and the bar around her) fade into a cold blue, and both River and the audience see flashes of both River's past—the experiments performed on her (seen at the start of the film) by Dr. Mathias (Michael Hitchcock); the phrase "scary monsters" spoken by one of the techs in that same scene; a flash of the dead on Miranda gleaned from River's exposure to "key members of Parliament"; and the Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the Alliance assassin (whom River has never seen) sent to retrieve her. While at this point in the narrative River has little context for these mental images, it is significant that the succession of seemingly random images is triggered by another series of seemingly random images—the Fruity Oaty Bar commercial. Despite the fact that this scene occurs within the film medium, the close-up of River's face as she watches the screen is a technique Stacey Abbott points out is more closely associated with television (235-236).

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Combined with the commercial scene in the bar, it ties the film visually to the medium that spawned it.

[3] While it is later revealed that the Operative embedded code in various broadcasts for the express purpose of triggering River (who responds violently to what she has seen) and thereby pinpointing her location, the fact that it is a commercial for a product created by a corporate entity (Blue Sun) is important. Further, despite the deliberate use of subliminal commercial messaging to control River, it also provides the means by which River can expose corporate-governmental malfeasance. She is able to see past the commercial message to what is hidden behind it.

[4] River's ability to see beyond and beneath the obvious qualities of people and objects was both created by and stands in opposition to the corporate entity that ostensibly unleashed those abilities in River. River and the arc of the series *Firefly* (as well as the aforementioned film) will, I argue, engage directly with the commercial structure of television production, particularly broadcast television's steep rise in the use of product integration and branding and assumes a cultural, sociopolitical narrative stance that interrogates not only television's economic structure, but corporate control and globalization. River thus operates as an embodied "culture jam"—that is, the practice of altering advertisements to parody or expose their less brand-friendly practices (Klein; Lasn).

[5] In this article, after touching briefly on some of the explanations and arguments around branding and culture jamming, I will examine how River Tam operates as such against the series' underlying antagonist: the Blue Sun Corporation. Numerous episodes gesture toward this interpretation of Blue Sun, including River's fear of Serenity's medical bay ("Safe" 1.5)—which is often lit in the same cold blue as the aforementioned scene in *Serenity*—as well as her repeated chant "two by two, hands of blue," in fearful tones and gestures reminiscent of trauma. I will assess how Blue Sun products are worked into the central storyline of the series *Firefly*, and what their use says about the practices of advanced branding through River's response to their presence. Drawing on the work of Naomi Klein and Celia Lury, among others, I will examine how *Firefly* incorporates critiques—through

the Blue Sun placement—of advanced branding (the ubiquity and diversity of Blue Sun's products' reach), globalization and those left behind, particularly through the so-called "border planets" in which much of the action of the series is centered, and corporate-sponsored education as represented by The Academy where River is trained. Finally, I will extend these narrative elements to examine the dissonance between the Whedon brand and the Fox brand and its role in the series cancellation.

[6] With the emergence of multiple avenues for viewing television content—DVDs, DVRs, online, and iTunes—broadcast networks, both through their programming and through offering alternate viewing or repurposed content online, are targeting smaller niche audiences that are capable of following said content across multiple platforms; that is, "brand enthusiasts" (Selznick 177). In this context, it is the program that serves as the brand, rather than just the network (C. Johnson 18); as per example, *Firefly*, its associated paratexts, and licensed goods such as action figures, games, or clothing, are branded and associated more strongly with the series, rather than the Fox network (despite who actually profits). The program brand thus moves through a multitude of iterations: from the network and series logos, its place within the schedule and what surrounds it on the schedule, the types of advertising that support it, the audience segment it seeks, and the products placed within individual series.[1] All of these form the frame or "interface" in which the program brand operates (Lury 155). Product placement has the ability to serve as short-hand characterization of both character and series; thus a "quality" brand can refer to either a placed product or the series itself; preferably, from a network perspective, both will inflect and reflect upon one another (see Pateman).

[7] While the ways in which viewers interact with this brand do have an effect on it, Celia Lury argues that rather than a face-to-face communication with the brand, it is more a "face-to-profile" (132). Paul Grainge agrees that "branding relies on the participation of consumers, but on terms that have been forethought" (29). For *Firefly*, this can clearly be seen in the recent controversy of the so-called "Jayne hat," in which crafters on sites such as Etsy were served with cease and desist orders by Fox after the license for the design was sold to ThinkGeek and

Ripple Junction, despite the fact these hats had been made and sold for years (Pantozzi). These crafters' participation with the *Firefly* brand was apparently not one of the forethought terms.

[8] One response to situations like the above has been *culture jamming*, which Naomi Klein defines as "parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their message" (280), such as covering a billboard with a photo of sweatshop workers and branding it with the Nike swoosh logo. These culture jams are often aimed at the most popular and pervasive brands, much to the surprise of industry. Douglas Holt points out that:

> Academic marketing theorizes away conflicts between marketing and consumers. Such conflicts result only when firms attend to their internal interests rather than seek to meet consumer wants and needs. . . . The most puzzling aspect of the antibranding movement from this vista is that it takes aim at the most successful and lauded companies, those that have taken the marketing concept to heart and industriously applied it. (70)

In other words, to the advertising industry, bad branding (or bad product placement) is the problem; consumers do not mind brands and placements as long as it is done well (Avery and Ferraro 219; Russell and Stern 9; Russell 306-318; and Karrh 38). To certain consumers, however, branding talks *at* rather than *with* the consumer. (In this respect, River represents the ultimate brand integration; her brain has been forcibly entered by a corporate entity.) They thus seek to talk back on their own terms. As Naomi Klein argues, culture jamming serves as one response to this "one–way information flow" (281) or "face-to-profile" (Lury 156) communication of branding.

[9] Kalle Lasn argues that culture jamming is equivalent to the civil rights, feminist, and environmental movements and "will alter the way we think and live" (xi); Klein counters by suggesting that engaging with image culture could be "evidence of our total colonization by [brands]" (297). That is, "Culture jamming's strategy of disintermediating the perceived artificial effects of bad culture ironically opens new avenues of consumption through the pursuit of authenticity and the embrace of the natural" (Carducci 125). This rebellion against image

culture, by turning its own tools against it, does seek to address the ways in which the practice of branding can be used to "distance companies from the complicated, and often messy, political-economic relations they engender in the real world" (Goldman and Papson 335), that builds a "representational wall of protection" (Goldman and Papson 342) against criticism.

[10] Despite the numerous debates regarding the effects and usefulness of anti-branding and culture jamming as an alternative to consumer culture, it does offer a useful lens through which to engage with Joss Whedon's series *Firefly*, particularly the ways in which the character of River Tam acts as an embodied culture jam against the corporation (and antagonist of the series), Blue Sun. The Blue Sun brand (and associated products) placed within *Firefly* is the ultimate in achieved placement: it is both ubiquitous and (nearly) unnoticeable in that ubiquity. Blue Sun is woven into the central narrative of the extant episodes, as well as crossing multiple platforms, such as graphic novels and film.

[11] *Firefly*'s debut in September 2002 was marred by several factors (see Pateman). It was scheduled in the "Friday Night Death Slot" ("Friday Night Death Slot"), was required to replace its pilot episode, and had not had a completed episode presented to advertisers by early September, making it difficult to sell ad time for the series (Frutkin). Finally, Fox aired the episodes out of filmed order.[2] There was, at least, a particular logic to that shift; a review of which episodes were chosen to air shows that the ones high on humor and action ("The Train Job 1.2, "Jaynestown" 1.7, and "Our Mrs. Reynolds 1.6) were among the first four episodes aired. The promotional advertisements foreshadowed this strategy. They focused on spectacular effects, gun fights, and one-liners, as well as describing the characters as "space cowboy" or "space hooker"—all under the tag "Out There? Oh, It's Out There!"

[12] While such a promotional campaign and scheduling strategy was in line with Fox's own "edgy" brand (Grego 2, 32), it thus violated what was associated with Whedon-branded programs—strong continuity, feminist themes, consistent characterization, and sharp dialogue—particularly the paired issues of continuity and characterization. To air in the wrong order a program that depends on

seriality to establish these elements runs the risk of confusing and potentially alienating the audience, as both plot and characterization can thus be seen as sloppy, redundant, or nonexistent. Despite the following expected from fans of Whedon's previous work, and the fact that *Firefly* represented an in-house 20th Century Fox program airing on the Fox Network, its ratings remained low and the show was cancelled on December 20, 2002, after 11 of its 14 filmed episodes had aired.

[13] Set in the 25th century, the world of *Firefly* blends an American and Chinese government known as the Alliance of Allied Planets. There is a clear economic and social/class divide between the centrally located planets and what are called "border" planets; the central planets have technology, money, and bureaucracy. The border planets have limited resources and are prone to abuses by opportunists or colonists. Others are left to their own devices despite economic or environmental problems. In the episode "The Train Job," the environmental consequences of the mining industry of Paradiso (a place that inevitably suggests its opposite—Inferno—particularly as flames occasionally burst from the ground) has caused each individual living there to develop a degenerative bone and muscle disease, even if they work outside the industry. In "Jaynestown," Magistrate Higgins (Gregory Itzin) keeps his indentured workers in poverty and despair "so's we can pass them savings to you-the-customer." "Trash" (1.11) features a robbery of a man, Durren Haymer (Dwier Brown), who was a collector of "Earth That Was" artifacts; during the war, he bombed areas rich in these artifacts in order to claim them for himself, a type of war profiteering.

[14] Thus, *Firefly*'s text was able to incorporate critiques of globalization, advanced branding, and to some extent, notions of empire.[3] I am using the term *empire* in the sense that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri defined it: Imperialism represents an extension of nation-states' own sovereignty across borders, whereas empire is defined as a "decentred and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers" (xii). Empire is the project of neo-liberal globalization, with an American constitutional base, according to Hardt and Negri, which differentiates the old European imperialism from this new notion of empire. The text

of *Firefly* supports this definition; as the captain of the ship Serenity, Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) defines the Alliance as "[u]nit[ing] the planets under one rule so everyone can be interfered with or ignored equally" ("The Train Job"). This point is made several times within the text of *Firefly*; any planets on the borders of the universe are left to their own devices unless it benefits the central authority. The border planets are generally more rural, less technologically enabled, and often prone to harsh or unlivable conditions. Both English and Mandarin Chinese are the official languages (with implicit reference to the power of the 21st-century U.S. and China) and are both spoken within the series; this use of language cuts across social and class boundaries.

[15] The microcosmic society aboard Serenity is a mixture of passengers and crew members: Captain Malcolm Reynolds, First Mate Zoe Washburne (Gina Torres), pilot Hoban "Wash" Washburne (Alan Tudyk), mechanic Kaylee Frye (Jewel Staite), and muscle/mercenary Jayne Cobb (Adam Baldwin). The crew has varying levels of involvement (Kaylee and Wash mostly by association) with criminal activity that provides fuel, food, and other necessary amenities. It is clear that such activity is often politically motivated; that is, to "stick a thorn in the paw of the Alliance," "tickles" Mal (*Serenity*), who lost social and spiritual direction in the wake of his side's defeat in the Unification War. The trajectory of the series begins when the ship takes on passengers: a priest known as Shepherd Derrial Book (Ron Glass), a physician named Simon Tam (Sean Maher), and Simon's troubled, fugitive sister River Tam. Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin) occupies a liminal space; she is a long-term renter of one of the ship's shuttles, but it is difficult to categorize her as either crew or passenger. She is known as a Companion (that is, prostitute), a legal and well-regarded position within the diegesis of the show. She has connections through her profession with high-level members of the central planets that allow her to help crew members out of legal trouble ("The Train Job") or provide much-needed assistance, like medical equipment ("War Stories" 1.10). Although she is neither in the psychiatric nor religious profession, she also at times functions as counselor or spiritual/moral guide to various crew and passengers ("Serenity" 1.1; "Out of Gas" 1.8).[4] All share a desire to exist outside society and thereby outside of control.

[16] The series focuses more generally on the adventures of the crew and passengers of this ship, including the war of Independence, the unspoken pasts of Mal, Book, or Inara, Zoe and Wash's marriage, and Kaylee's infatuation with Simon. Within the available episodes, however, the common thread is the shared story of Simon and River Tam; that is, Simon's rescue of River from The Academy and the subsequent fugitive existence they must maintain to keep ahead of Blue Sun/The Alliance. As Jes Battis points out, River represents "the ultimate exile" (she has difficulty communicating with others, is fearful, and possibly psychic) who nonetheless "drives the narrative action" (Battis 29). In this respect, as I will address in greater detail below, River as object shares yet another similarity with product placement in contemporary television—she may be peripheral, but she often serves to "drive the narrative action."[5] For the purposes of this article, I too will focus on this story thread. In particular, it is River's relationship and response to the product placement of the goods of a fake corporation called Blue Sun within the series that will comprise my analysis. While less explicit within the film *Serenity*, I will also briefly touch on how the use and non-use of product placement operates within that context and how this placed product shifts across multiple platforms.

[17] In their analysis of the changes in the conceptions of the culture industry in the wake of globalization, Scott Lash and Celia Lury sought to examine the "mediation of things," or, as they term it, the "thingification" of culture, in which brands become humanized and humans become branded; for example, Nike shoes become humanized (or fetishized) in their own Niketown, while Michael Jordan is turned into Air Jordan (Lash and Lury 124). This "thingification" is an important element of the interaction between the placed products and the individuals within the world of *Firefly*, as will become apparent below.

[18] One element that sets both *Firefly* and *Serenity* apart is the lack of any real-world product placement; that is, neither *Firefly* (series) nor *Serenity* (film) contained any products that existed within American 21st-century society.[6] (Product placement, by the time *Firefly* made its debut, had been steadily increasing in both scripted [such as WB's *Smallville* (2001-2011)] and unscripted [*American Idol* (2002-), which debuted 2

months prior to *Firefly*] series.) This, of course, was made easier by setting the world of the series within a 25th century society; that, however, does not preclude the presence of recognized 21st-century products from appearing and, by their presence, attesting to the longevity of the brand.[7] Yet the products they did place, that is, food, drinks, t-shirts, and trash with the logo for the fictional corporation Blue Sun, as I will demonstrate, served as a critique on the practice itself because of the corporation's position within the storyline of the series *Firefly*, as well as a culmination of the placement itself. That is, if the purpose, on the part of the sponsoring corporation, is to incorporate a product within a series to the extent that it is an integral part of the story in order to influence behavior (Russell and Stern 7-18; C. A. Russell 306-318), Blue Sun products did achieve that within the series. Indeed, they were responsible, as will be seen in the episode analyses below, for educating River. As Adam Arvidsson writes:

> Brand management moves on a continuum from the highly structured brandscape or branded community where the whole environment serves to guide the consumer in a certain direction; via the 'politics of product placement', where a looser structure of expectations is created by inserting the brand into particular milieus; to, on the opposite extreme, the simple saturation of the life-world, paralleled by forms of overall macro surveillance, like trend-scouting or data-mining. (95)

Blue Sun products managed what no real world product has yet—"simple saturation of the life-world" of *Firefly*. They face no competition within the diegesis of *Firefly* because they are the only "sponsor" and perhaps the only existing corporation within the world of *Firefly* itself. The story of River Tam could not be told without Blue Sun products, representing a high level of integration.

[19] This storyline was addressed within the graphic novel series *Serenity: Those Left Behind*, which served as a narrative bridge between the television series and the film. In the graphic novels, it was revealed that Blue Sun and the Alliance government worked in concert with one another. As Lury writes: "[T]he rise of the brand is linked to the privatization of the economic functions of the state" (10). Lury's

assertion fits in well with *Those Left Behind*'s storyline, in that it makes it explicit that power is thus shared between the centralized government and this large corporation.[8] If brands are the "core meaning of the modern corporation" (Klein 5), then a government-condoned corporation responsible for training "genius" children as assassins and its ubiquity within the diegesis of *Firefly* makes clear that the Blue Sun brand has not only "intervened in the existing code" of a targeted community (Twitchell 13) or "sponsor[ed] culture," but has in fact become the culture (Klein 30). That is, "[W]hat is ultimately branded in advertising is not the object but the consumer" (Twitchell 110). River Tam, as consumed and objectified by the "sponsor" Blue Sun, represents both the brand and the anti-brand. This is made particularly clear throughout the series; I will examine in-depth two such episodes in which River's aforementioned positioning is made manifest.

[20] In "Shindig" (1.4), the opening scene informs how the concerns of the episode's narrative will unfold. While playing pool, Mal listens to his opponent explain how to prepare a ship for the rapid traffic of human slaves, then steals his wallet. Mal never explicitly states he disagrees with this man; it is his actions that indicate his ethics.

[21] This represents one of the central themes of this episode: actions speak louder than words, as words themselves can be fundamentally untrustworthy. Much like the second episode I will be analyzing, "Ariel" (1.9), the majority of the episode is set amid the society of a planet fairly near the core. Within the context of an exclusive dinner dance, Mal acts the role of a gentleman in order to secure an illegal smuggling job from a man who is a titled member of that society. Kaylee, who spends the majority of her time in jumpsuits and other attire appropriate for working in an engine room, dresses in a frilly dress to play the role of a lady, but spends the party talking about engines. Mal secures the smuggling job and dances adequately with Inara, only to revert to form by punching Inara's escort, exclaiming that "I guess this is my kind of party after all," paralleling the bar fight at the start of the episode. Within this episode, and the series itself, it is only Inara who can most easily move between worlds, men, and society with seeming ease and comfort. Much like commercial messages themselves, her demeanor and comments represent a space for a variety of interpretations.

[22] Indeed, the parallels between Inara and River are not difficult to make. They both attend "academies" that train them to be of use; in Inara's case, music, art, and language education are necessary components to her profession, in that such education is meant to make Inara a more attractive commodity. If, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, consumption is a stage-in-process that "presupposes practice or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (2), then Inara's high-level education both codifies her and serves as an explicit marker of how she should be consumed. Thus, Inara is as branded and commodified by the Alliance as River is—she serves as an "open-ended" site whose meaning shifts depending on the needs of the purchaser (Lury 46-47). There is truly only one demographic that is favored, however: that of the upper middle class. She is a commodity available only to them.

[23] That being said, if Inara is one "face" of the Alliance brand, that thus "rel[ies] upon the participation of the consumer," it is also true that she is capable of "plac[ing] severe limits on interactions with them" (Lury 137). In this episode, she informs her escort that his behavior towards her has earned him a "black mark in the client registry . . . . No Companion is ever going to contract with you again." This is the point in which Inara and River diverge in their shared "object-ivity"[9]: Inara is an "intermediary" between product (the ruling corporate/governmental structure) and user (the client) of which Lury's "face-to-profile" model represents a good fit. River, as will be addressed in greater depth below, cannot be controlled within the brand boundaries.

[24] River also represents a human commodity. When she is introduced, she is a thing; she is literally frozen, boxed, and shipped. It is clear that this is an intentional introduction; as River's story unfolds, she too has been commodified and objectified as part of an experiment to train "genius" children to be psychic assassins. The government literally calls her a "precious commodity" ("Serenity"). In the final episode of the series, River claims (and nearly convinces the antagonist of the episode) that she has actually become the ship Serenity. River's object-ification and liminal quality allows this to actually be considered a possibility. The title of the episode itself, "Objects in Space" positions River as one of the objects in question. The opening scene offers the viewer an extended glimpse into River's perspective—particularly her ability to both pierce

the veneer of what is said versus what is meant, and the way she interprets individuals and objects around her. River finds herself in the cargo bay; she sees it as covered with branches and leaves, and picks up one of the branches. The dream-like nature of the moment, however, is broken by frenzied shouting from the others—and the reality of the cargo bay is reestablished; there are no leaves, and the tree branch is a loaded gun. River's response is simply: "It's only an object. It doesn't mean what you think." As Rhonda Wilcox notes in her analysis of "Objects in Space," the episode offers a glimpse into the ways in which River, paralleling bounty hunter Jubal Early (Richard Brooks), imbues said objects with meaning, including herself (158-159). By "object-ifying" herself as the ship by the end of the episode, she thus takes control of her own object-ification to avoid being manipulated by what's been done to her by others. As Celia Lury explains it: "[T]he object-ivity of the brand emerges out of relations between its parts, or rather its products (or services), and in the organization of a controlled relation to its environment—that is, to markets, competitors, the state, consumption, and everyday life" (2). That is, it is not just the object that is being branded, but rather its relationship to consumers and societies attempted to be managed by its creators.[10] The fact that within the text of *Firefly*, River Tam, a product of a corporate-sponsored school, is nearly impossible to manage, means she would be considered an embarrassment to the Blue Sun brand. In this way, River represents the ultimate in culture jamming. As I will examine more closely in my discussion of "Ariel," River, as Alyson Buckman argues, does not necessarily exist or act within a linear time frame (44). In this way, River's behavior is similar to what Barry Lowe refers to as the approaching "post-linearity" of multimedia, including television, in the 21st century, as aided by new technologies and viewers who use these technologies to assert some degree of control (Lowe 1996), much as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins have argued. Similar to these technologies, River uses the same "circular or fluid structure for the information [she] store[s] and deliver[s]" (Fiske 101). Within this episode, River rips the labels off Blue Sun products, muttering:

> There it is, there it is. It's always there if you look for it. Everybody sees and nobody sees it. . . . These are the ones

> that take you! Little ones in the corner that you almost don't see. But they're the ones that reach in and do it. They're the ones with teeth and you have to smash them! . . . A million things, and the little ends of the roots go everywhere and when you brush your teeth or all the little blue things are there but no one says it because, because sometimes they're afraid. And then they come . . . ("Shindig")

Such a monologue is particularly applicable to the practice of product placement; in the past decade, it indeed is "always there if you look for it," but seeks to be unobtrusive enough to be both seen and unseen. River does in fact "see" the product and attempts to reduce it to its essentials, to make these specifically branded products a mystery much as the corporation's actions toward her have made her a mysterious (and potentially dangerous) figure to the rest of the small society of Serenity. She is only partially successful—the Blue Sun logo is stamped on the top of each can, meaning while the particular product is rendered mysterious, the corporation that produced it cannot be erased. Thus the company's slogan—"Live Life With Blue Sun" ("The Message" 1.13)—is not just their desire but in fact a testament to the corporation's ubiquity. It is also clear that, if in fact River's "post-linearity" resembles the viewer-user's response to multimedia flows of the 21st century, she is taking an active stance within this episode to respond to the overwhelming presence of these products within her world.

[25] Buckman further argues, in her analysis of River, that it is the societally patterned way of viewing any "hysterical" female that keeps those around her from making sense of her behavior (43-45). In particular, her brother, as an Alliance-trained surgeon, is thus quick to label River's actions as mentally ill or out of control (Buckman 44-45). I argue, to tie this vital scene with the episode's focus on role-playing, it is in fact River's capacity to "see" the messages behind the labels that makes her actions difficult to understand by others. That is not to imply that she is incapable of playing a part. When River encounters Badger (Mark Sheppard), the criminal who sent Mal to the party to line up the smuggling operation, she easily slips into the accent of Badger's home planet. Badger is amused and charmed at her disparaging attitude toward

him, thereby nullifying the danger to herself and her brother. Further, she manages to imbue something as simple as Badger's clothing with meaning, telling him "you're talking loud enough for the both of us," as she runs a finger down the lapel of his jacket. River is thus capable of a variety of responses to the endless messages she receives.

[26] River's flexibility in responding to her environment is vital, since Blue Sun messages are everywhere in the *Firefly*verse. Several episodes of *Firefly* attest to the ubiquity of the Blue Sun Corporation, including coffee cans, storage facilities, and cola. Although the film did not deal explicitly with the Blue Sun story line, its logo appears twice on beverages, and the Fruity Oaty Bars commercial features a blue sun. The food products the crew consume are all manufactured by Blue Sun. "Ariel" adds yet another product to their line; the neuro-imager Simon uses to scan his sister's brain carries a Blue Sun label.

[27] Given the diversity of products and the story that unfolds within this episode, Blue Sun seems to fit quite well into William Gibson's "megacorporation"; that is, a horizontally and vertically integrated company diversified across multiple product areas, with enough economic power to supersede governmental control and flout legal restrictions. According to Whedon, Blue Sun was intended to be viewed as a cross between Coca-Cola and Microsoft ("Serenity" [commentary track]). Further, the sun can appear "blue" after volcanic explosions, forest fires, or dust storms. Such a phenomenon is fairly common in China, again tying together the governmental and corporate relationship between China and the United States within the world of *Firefly*.

[28] The main thrust of the episode involves Simon enlisting the crew to break into an Alliance hospital on the planet Ariel. He wants to access the appropriate medical equipment to figure out what has been done to his sister so he can best treat her. Again the emphasis is on playing parts: Mal, Zoe, and Jayne must impersonate paramedics, while River and Simon literally play dead. When Simon is able to view River's brain on the neuro-imager, he discovers that this corporate-sponsored school had sliced into her brain several times in order to "strip her amygdala; she feels everything, she can't not."

[29] Although the pilot episode (and River's own behavior and memories) gestured toward the Blue Sun Corporation as being a less-than-benign corporation, it is within this episode that it becomes clear that they both supersede the government and are not above murder to maintain control and recapture River. Nor is River herself above violence when faced even with something as seemingly benign as the company's logo. At the start of the episode, she slices Jayne with a knife, right across the Blue Sun logo on his t-shirt, saying "He looks better in red" ("Ariel"). Jayne's wearing of this t-shirt further foreshadows Jayne's betrayal of River and her brother Simon to the government within the same episode, an action which Buckman reads as a manifestation of River's psychic abilities as well as her actions and reactions existing outside of linear time. That is, she is avenging a future betrayal through her actions (44), although it is arguable that River's action precipitated the betrayal itself.

[30] This episode is also notable for representing the ultimate in brand management: blue-gloved agents of the Blue Sun corporation appear to silence anyone who had contact with River. This is achieved with a small blue light that emits a pulse which causes those exposed to it to bleed from eyes, ears, mouth, and nose (that is, all sensory organs) before they die. Since the majority of those killed by these blue-gloved men within the episode were government employees, there is a clear implication that the power of the Blue Sun corporation has superseded that of the government itself. As Naomi Klein writes, "Financial self-interest in business is nothing new, nor is it in itself destructive. What is new is the reach and scope of these megacorporations' financial self-interest, and the potential global consequences, in both international and local terms" (174). It is also in line with Robert McChesney's analysis of corporate "deregulation," which he claims is a misleading term. He argues that it is in fact differently regulated; governmental regulations work primarily in the interest of corporations rather than citizens (19-20). A corporation that has the power to train children to be assassins, kill government employees, and diversify their corporations across multiple areas would arguably have benefited from initial governmental support. While *Firefly* offers an extreme example, contemporary corporate structure in the United States, including the

telecommunications industry in which *Firefly* was created and aired, has benefited from corporation-friendly legislation, including the lifting of ownership restriction caps on media outlets that allowed the development of the Fox network (Kimmel 2004) and later the WB, UPN, and the CW (Curtin and Shattuc 26-27). While the text of *Firefly* remains limited to the 14 extant episodes, one feature film, and a growing corpus of graphic novels, the idea that the corporation itself had some sort of ultimate goal in their training of brilliant children to be assassins was foreshadowed in the lengths these agents went to within the existing television text, as well as within the graphic novels that served as a bridge text between the series and the film. *Those Left Behind* made a more explicit connection between the Blue Sun Corporation and the Alliance government. Blue Sun agents enlist a former government employee—Lawrence Dobson (played by Carlos Jacott on the series)—who had run afoul of the crew of Serenity ("Serenity"), to use any means necessary to retrieve River, something attempted by Jubal Early in the televised series ("Objects in Space") with equal success. Both Dobson and the Blue Sun agents are killed in the attempt; the final panel shows the Operative (featured in *Serenity*) being assigned the job of tracking and retrieving River. Blue Sun cedes control of their unmanageable product to the government, thus setting up the main plot of *Serenity*.

[31] This is a significant point in terms of the political concerns of the series and film; the United States and China are currently entangled on several economic levels (Klugman 2004). In something of a reversal from the text of the series, River's mental illness is attributed to her psychic awareness of a governmental program that cost the lives of millions and was responsible for turning a select group of individuals into the ultimate consumers: the cannibalistic Reavers. Once the secret is exposed and the government (not the corporation) is weakened, River regains some level of mental balance. Although Blue Sun placement does not play as prominent a role in either *Those Left Behind* or in the feature film, *Serenity* does engage with some similar concerns to the series. Not only are River's killer instincts triggered by subliminal messages within a commercial (which prominently features a blue sun), but the crew of Serenity uses the equipment of a "hacker" by the name of Mr. Universe (David Krumholtz) (whose motto is "You can't stop the signal") to

disseminate the government secret, captured on film, to the entire universe. This too falls under the definition of culture jamming; as Norman Cowie defines it: "Media piracy sets out to take apart mass-media texts, and recombine their signifying elements . . . all in the spirit of producing new and unexpected meanings and pleasures for readers who are already fluent in the modes of address of mass culture" (319). To Cowie, media piracy questions issues of "cultural ownership, First Amendment freedoms, and political authority"; most importantly, with regards to the texts of *Firefly* and *Serenity*: "In an age when corporations invoke the First Amendment to protect their right to sell anything to anyone in any place at any time, media piracy asks about protection for citizens who wish to speak back using the same language" (320).

[32] In terms of the series itself, the lack of real products integrated into the text, *Firefly*'s status as a DVD text (Kompare), and the use of viewer-users and the industry extending the world of the series across multiple platforms open up the possibility of a "brokerage" of industry and viewers working cooperatively, rather than one or the other maintaining the majority of the power over the text (Corner 113). Whether these possibilities reached their full potential (that is, viewers/writers/producers as co-creators) or whether they merely provided free labor ends up as a somewhat unanswerable question, or rather, the answer shifts in relation to who is being asked (D. Johnson 77). Jonathan Gray's analysis of Whedon's author persona with regards to his interactions with fans is instructive. Gray claims that within interviews, Whedon positions himself as both fan and creator, as author and reader and thus, in essence, "kills himself as author" and instead serves as a "mediator between the industry and audiences" as well as functioning as a "discursive entity used by the industry to communicate messages about its texts to audiences, by the creative personnel often conflated into the image of the author(s) to communicate their own messages to audiences, and by audiences to communicate messages both to each other and to the industry" (113). While Whedon may position himself as responsive to fans, he also must be responsive to the networks, producers, and potential advertisers. That being said, the positioning of Whedon as author/reader *and* creator/fan, can serve to, in many instances, exonerate him from blame for narrative missteps or

faulty execution. If, as Robert Thompson argues, one marker of a quality program is undergoing a "noble struggle" against "profit-mongering networks and unappreciative audiences" (Thompson 14), then Whedon himself can thus be viewed as a quality brand. His outspoken arguments in favor of the WGA strike, active support of Equality Now (a human rights organization that "works for the protection and promotion of human rights of women around the world" [Equality Now "About"]), and his campaign against "torture porn" also have given Whedon a certain cachet among fans (Whedon, "Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death"; and see Cochran). Thus, the evocation of his name for each televised promo for *Firefly*, as well as the promotional material for the later DVD release and film, would carry its own resonances beyond the series or network.

[33] *Firefly* was not picked up by another network, but the popularity of the series when it was released on DVD led to Universal studios agreeing to produce a film that served as a continuation of the television story.[11] The last episode of *Firefly* to air on a U.S. network was its pilot episode, "Serenity.". The name was derived from the name of the ship upon which the majority of the action of the series was centered (which in turn was derived from the name of a lost battle), and later served as the name for the feature film that served as a continuation of the story that abruptly ended after 14 episodes. The word, in both English and Chinese, was made into a logo painted on the side of the ship that introduces the feature film, put on a badge worn and distributed by fans of the show in order to help publicize the film, and used within the studio's own marketing materials. The film itself did not garner blockbuster numbers, but subsequently, fans have mobilized worldwide to provide screenings scheduled on director/creator Joss Whedon's birthday in June ("Can't Stop"), as well as various times throughout the year, in order to raise money for Equality Now.[12]

[34] With the announcement of the cancellation of the series, the viewers it did have used multiple entry points to convince the Fox network to reconsider, including sending cards and blue-tinted gloves, developing websites, exchanging downloads or discs, and proselytizing the series to non-viewers. These efforts were initially unsuccessful; it was not until the release of the series on DVD in December 2003—that is,

when the flow text had been successfully converted to published text and therefore existed as a tangible property (Kompare 343)—that these efforts began to succeed. The biggest and most successful initiatives of the grassroots campaign for *Firefly* was buying one or more copies of the DVD box set, as the sales numbers of the DVD represented the tipping point that convinced Universal Studios to produce the feature film (M. Russell; Chonin E1). It further stands as an example of the use of DVDs to develop a "new commodity relation" between viewers and producers (Kompare 335). Both the DVD release of the series making *Firefly* tangible and its transit to a separate platform (film) thus allow *Firefly* to transcend its broadcast roots and its associated flow—making *Firefly* an object as well, rather than a moment within the endless flow of television. Yet, as Abbott argues, *Serenity* was not only developed from a television property, but in fact quite deliberately "blurr[ed] the line" both visually (though the use of close-up) and narratively (television remains a viable technology in the future and one of the heroes is a hacker) between the mediums (233-236). In this respect, *Serenity* does not in fact transcend its broadcast roots, nor does it express any desire to do so.

[35] *Firefly*'s multiplatform text, particularly through River Tam, represents a thoroughgoing, multi-episode critique of product placement, advanced branding, and corporate control. *Firefly* fans, as well, exercised social and economic power, through both promotional efforts and through their own purchases, in helping transit the series to a different medium, a point acknowledged by Whedon himself in a filmed thank you that preceded pre-screenings of the film four months before its official release. That being said, the question of fan influence is relevant to *Firefly*. Was *Firefly* transitioned to *Serenity* because of a built-in audience responsive to the Whedon brand, or because this same audience was willing to purchase goods (licensed by Fox and therefore only strengthening its bottom line) and provide free promotional labor?

[36] I argue that there is no reasonable way to separate these elements. Much as River "feels everything" because of her interaction with and colonization by the Blue Sun brand, all of these elements inform both *Firefly*'s diegetic world, the broadcast context, and the series' afterlife. As Lury writes: "The organization, coordination, and integration of probabilistic, global, and transductive relations between

products are what comprise the brand" (Lury 155). River thus also stands as a literalization of *Firefly*'s difficulties in integrating Brand Whedon, Brand *Firefly*, and Brand Fox; these multiple and competing brand flows represent their own culture jam, in that the signal-to-noise ratio between these brand flows turned them into a deluge that ultimately sank the series.

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[1] Numerous examples abound in broadcast television of the emphasis networks place on appropriate scheduling to retain program-to-program audiences. The NBC network was adept at this in the 80s and 90s, particularly with their "Must-See" scheduling (see Lotz) on Thursdays. A counter-example exists within the Whedonverses; with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s move to the UPN network breaking up

the *Buffy/Angel* scheduling on the WB, *Angel* was at one point paired with the series *Seventh Heaven*; its syrupy life lessons were a bizarre lead-in to the noir-like *Angel*.

[2] To avoid confusion, when referencing an episode, I will refer to the episode number as that which was originally intended and restored when the series was released on DVD, rather than the order in which they were aired.

[3] Jeffery Bussolini offers a detailed analysis of the way both *Firefly* and *Serenity* operate as a "potent criticism of U.S. imperial politics and current world affairs" (139). See also Sutherland and Swan's examination of *Firefly* and *Serenity*'s place in dystopic fiction.

[4] For an analysis of companions' education and social standing as similar to the hetaera in ancient Greece, see Aberdein.

[5] Another Fox property, *Bones*, has made liberal use of product integration, in which the products sometimes represent a driving force of an episode's narrative. In "The Gamer in the Grease" (5.9), an entire subplot is devoted to three of the main characters (one of whom had a role in the film) waiting in line to see *Avatar*, a Fox-produced film that opened a week after the episode aired.

[6] This is, with the exception of the 20th Century Fox and Mutant Enemy logos that appeared at the end of each episode (both broadcast and DVD). While they do operate as a product (and *Firefly* a product of them), they are not incorporated into the narrative of episodes in the way I am describing.

[7] See, as per example, the films *Demolition Man*, set in 2032, where every restaurant is a Taco Bell and every car is made by General Motors, and *The Fifth Element*, set in a mid 23rd century that still has Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

[8] The dangers of the collusion between corporations and the government represents a major part of the narrative of Whedon's next series after *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*.

[9] The grammatical splitting within this word is from Lury; it useful for emphasizing the "objectness" of brands, goods, and services.

[10] *Dollhouse* addresses this management even more explicitly; certain humans are divested of their personalities and imprinted with others at the request of wealthy clientele, developed and funded by a corporation named Rossum. The correspondences of River's story to the premise of *Dollhouse* are suggested in a promotional Rossum advertisement, which featured a blue sun rising over the earth ("November Ad").

[11] For coverage of the fan efforts, see, e.g., Mike Russell and Neva Chonin (E1).

[12] *Serenity*'s total worldwide gross was $38,869,464; its domestic opening weekend, with a wide release in 2,189 theaters, was $10,086,680, positioning it as only the second highest grossing movie for the week of September 30, 2005. Available at: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=serenity.htm