Posthuman Defenders from the Zombie Apocalypse: The Cyborgs of *Dollhouse, Firefly* and *The Nevers*

Valerie Estelle Frankel

Introduction

After the allegations of abusive behavior Whedon faced in 2020, his first HBO show, *The Nevers,* was doomed. When the accusations snowballed through social media, HBO removed him officially. In his public statement, Whedon described his pleasure at making the show and added, "I realize that the level of commitment required moving forward, combined with the physical challenges of making such a huge show during a global pandemic, is more than I can handle without the work beginning to suffer" (White). An HBO spokesperson reported only, "We have parted ways with Joss Whedon. We remain excited about the future of *The Nevers* and look forward to its premiere in the summer of 2021" (White). Still, fans were clear this was a reaction to the scandal. Whedon's defensive interview in January 2022 didn't improve his reputation: His

Valerie Estelle Frankel has authored 90 books on pop culture, including *Hunting for Meaning in The Mandalorian; The Villain's Journey; Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism;* and many books in the Buffy+verse. These include *Buffy and the Heroine's Journey, Joss Whedon's Names, Pop Culture in the Whedonverse, Everything I Need to Know in Life I Learned from Joss Whedon,* and the edited anthologies *After the Avengers* and *The Comics of Joss Whedon.* Once a lecturer at San Jose State University, she now teaches at Mission College and San Jose City College and speaks often at conferences.

claiming that he had felt he "had" to have affairs and was "powerless" to resist, despite the power differential, disgusted readers (Shapiro).

Further, Covid cut short the filming, and only six episodes arrived in Spring 2021. After this double hit, the show fizzled. Part II, no longer desired by HBO, was released quietly on Tubi in 2023, available at only particular hours. Before all this, it had intrigued fans. The premise of *The Nevers* has been popular across fiction from superheroes to steampunk marginalized characters who use their superpowers to battle oppression and form a found family. Despite its short life, *The Nevers* still has useful contributions to questions of agency and remade beings.

The power of the corporation over the workers has appeared, ironically, in many *Buffy*+ projects before it became literalized here. The many apocalypses are often inhabited by zombies the victims of the one-percent's immoral experiments and commercial greed. Here are the Reavers and Dolls, the remade employees of Wolfram and Hart, and the monsters of the newest show. The steampunk series *The Nevers*, while battling the same corrupt creators, counters with its Victorian superheroes constructed beings closer to Haraway's cyborg, with the power to topple the patriarchy, transcend their human limitations, and avert the approaching climate apocalypse.

The Symbolism of Zombies

The *Buffy*+verse brims with a variety of walking dead. Even in the two original vampire series, literal zombies get the occasional appearance or allusion. "Zombies. Succubi, incubi... Everything you ever dreaded under your bed and told yourself couldn't be by the light of day," Giles warns in the first episode

"Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1, 18:22-18:28). He, Anya, and Wesley must eventually educate the team that zombies don't feed on the living. Adding to the metafictional layering, Spike watches *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in "Gone" (6.11).

> They attack almost as an afterthought at Buffy's drama-laden homecoming party early in *Buffy* Season 3 ("Dead Man's Party" 3.2); they completely ruin Xander's evening in "The Zeppo" (3.13) later that same season; they patrol Angel's Los Angeles neighborhood in "The Thin Dead Line" (2.14) in *Angel* Season 2; they stalk the halls of Wolfram & Hart in "Habeas Corpses" (4.8) in *Angel* Season 4. A single zombie comes back from the dead to work things out with the girlfriend who poisoned him in a subplot in "Provider" (3.12) in *Angel* Season 3; Adam uses science to reanimate dead bodies to make his lab assistants near the end of *Buffy* Season 4 ("Primeval" 4.21); zombies guard a fail-safe device in the basement of Wolfram & Hart in "You're Welcome" (3.12) in *Angel* Season 5. (Canavan 285)

In the larger 'verse, traditional zombies, *Pride and Prejudice* zombies, and zompires (zombie-vampires) attack in *Buffy* and *Angel* sequel comics. Their variants also menace the heroes of *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012).

More metaphorically, the ravening hordes of Reavers fit the zombie trope. *Firefly*'s episode "Bushwhacked" (1.3) specifically explores how trauma can make one surrender personhood. As Mal explains of the Reavers' victim with his self-inflicted injuries: "A man comes up against that kind of will, only way to deal with it, I suspect...is to become it"

("Bushwhacked," 38:12-38:17). Such total fear when confronted with these ravening hordes suggests the terror of mindlessness what sets humans apart in their discernment and cognition. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry in the allegorical "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism" describe the zombie threat as fear of the loss of awareness: "Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave. The zombi(i)/e is both of these, and the zombi(i)/e (fore)tells our past, present, and future" (90).

Of course, this terrifying restructuring is most deeply explored on *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), in which all the dolls are remade as everyday practice. "I know you've heard colorful rumors about what an 'Active' is. Robots, zombie slaves they are, of course, quite the opposite. The 'Active' is the truest soul among us," Adelle DeWitt contends ("Echo" 1.0, 0:59-1:19). While she emphasizes their temporary personhood, she ignores that they have been programed to serve a client. The zombie imagery continues as a quiet current that emphasizes how much the Dollhouse's victims are deprived of will. Irreverently, in "Omega" (1.12), Caroline asks Adelle if she will develop a taste for brains after undergoing the procedure, while programmer Topher asks if they ate his brain in "A Love Supreme" (2.08). Continuing the trope references, Topher's creation Doctor Saunders pointedly pranks him by blasting the film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) into his office in "Vows" (2.1), while the savage doll Alpha echoes its plot by remaking Echo in "Omega" (1.12). In both cases, the heroines question their identities are they empty shells or people worthy of preservation?

The Nevers continues all these traditions. Here, the zombies are true believer Doctor Hague's mental patients and the poor, remade Frankenstein-style into violent shambling servants. Once they were good neighbors, but now they are reduced to "jawless henchpeople" as executive producer Jane Espenson calls them ("Accustomed to the Impossible" 11:25-11:26). The bodies of the Touched (those with superpowers) have been tortured and reshaped. While the mentally damaged murderer Sarah Eason/Maladie retains her autonomy, most have lost their personalities entirely and cannot be restored. Detective Frank Mundi reveals that these zombies were orchestrated by the imperious Lord Massen: "I found this at Massen's. He was looking for a cure for his daughter, using some doctor to dig around in the Touched for an answer. This woman here [Maladie] was the primary case study. He took her from an asylum. Doctor carved her up, but she kept on living" ("Ain't We Got Fun," 1.11, 7:40-08:01). Massen, meanwhile, is the head of the exploiters. He insists, "We are the first generation accustomed to the impossible. What women are appalled by today, they will accept tomorrow and demand the day after that. And the immigrant. And the deviant" ("Pilot," 1.1, 17:29-17:42). He sees them all as disposable in service to the upper class.

The quest for money, power, and control dominate, as often appears allegorically in zombie films. Zombies frequently symbolize the exploitation of capitalism, as the city is "fed on the labors of the impoverished, 'third world' labor force. The zombie has thus transitioned from a representation of the laboring, enslaved colonial body, to a dual image of capitalist enslavement: the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer" (Lauro and Embry 99). On a wider scale, zombies "have been inextricably linked to systems of imperialism, global capitalism, science and

technology. From Haitian legends of zombies raised from the dead to work in sugar mills (*White Zombie*, [1932]) to zombies created by rogue radiation brought back from space exploration (*Night of the Living Dead*, [1968]) or by a pandemic virus instigated by irresponsible research (*28 Days Later*, [2002]), zombies have stood in for the unknown, unacknowledged victims of high-modernist technoscience" (Day). In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), they are capitalist drones; in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Communist sympathizers. By transforming the most marginalized into mercenaries who die to uphold the system, the pattern repeats here.

The actual zombies have no hope of rescue. They suggest the martyrs in the struggle, those who have already lost. The exploiters have destroyed them, using their last sad remains as foot soldiers. Espenson says, "There is redemption, there is hope in our story, but there is also loss and guilt" ("A Touch of Power" 16:00-16:05). Of course, they are a threat to the living, wielded by the lords in their struggle to maintain power. They constitute a walking threat as a possible fate for the heroes, as well as a reminder of audience vulnerability. Gerry Canavan notes in "Zombies, Reavers, Butchers, and Actuals in Joss Whedon's Work" that this is typical of such shows:

> In these narratives the zombie becomes a limit for society, its final destination. In creating this bleak vision of a zombie future, Joss, true to form, finds a way to transform the zombie lack into a new type of excess performing a clever kind of subtraction by addition that allows him to make the zombie function as something more than just a hole where a character used to be. (289)

Lauro and Embry likewise call the zombie "a boundary figure," as it is alive but not conscious. "Its threat to stable subject and object positions, through the simultaneous occupation of a body that is both living and dead, creates a dilemma for power relations and risks destroying social dynamics that have remained although widely questioned, critiqued, and debated largely unchallenged in the current economic superstructure" (90). The zombie is a paradox, invulnerable but exploited, mighty but not in control.

Considering that the British lords and their employees are reshaping the marginalized minorities, this becomes a metaphor for colonialism. The zombie has always symbolized appropriation in this sense. Even their story was stolen by the powerful: "The zombie is historically tied to, and has been read alongside, the expansion of global capitalism. The zombie is a colonial import: it infiltrated the American cultural imagination in the early twentieth century, at the time of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. We cannot take up the figure of the zombie without acknowledging its appropriation from Haitian folklore," explain Lauro and Embry (96).

In Haitian folklore, from which zombies are derived, the word meant not just "a body without a soul" but also "a soul without a body" (Lauro and Embry 97). This stretches to include characters like disembodied Spike or invisible Buffy. Constructed beings like Frankenstein's monster (or Adam and his creations in *Buffy* Season Four) have likewise been transformed by someone else. Accordingly, other characters, like Wolfram and Hart lawyers Gunn and Lindsay, experience panic on discovering how much the corporation has turned their own bodies against them. River Tam is likewise traumatized by her remaking. On *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020), Coulson cannot live with himself unless he can discover

who revived and programmed him. "Most of these don't even really count as zombies at all. Many can talk, and most exhibit a capacity for complex reasoning and decision-making that is totally antithetical to the zombie myth," notes Canavan (285). As Spike, Gunn, River, Coulson, and the Dolls protest losing their trust in themselves and physical autonomy, they introduce conversations of personhood. Even as they explore this breadth in the zombie depiction, the articulate villains and victims emphasize zombies' traditional themes. Closer to Frankenstein creatures and cyborgs, they stress the body horror of being dismantled and remade, unable to trust one's most fundamental self. They were shaped by others, but can transcend their making to be heroes. When a literal zombie apocalypse arrives through *Serenity*'s Reavers and *Dollhouse*'s Butchers, River and Echo lead the charge.

Empowered Cyborgs

Like many other remade characters, Sarah Eason resisted her tormentor and emerged as self-directed cyborg more than zombie with new superpowers and a new identity. "God gave Maladie power because men gave Sarah pain, and now, they're both here, and I don't know! Nobody ever told me who I was supposed to be after they ripped me in two!" she bursts out ("Ain't We Got Fun" 1.11, 38:28-38:36). She soon murders the abusive husband who gave her to Hague and then Hague himself. Lauro and Embry suggest, "The zombie, in its position at the boundary between subject and object, rebel and slave, life and death, is still the best metaphor we have for what it means to resist power" (86). Indeed, Maladie directs others in disrupting the system and then saving the source of the superpowers, the alien Galanthi. Her brief returns to coherence and morality, along with flashbacks to her previous identity,

emphasize her humanity. Elaine Graham in *Representations of the Post/Human* adds:

> One of the ways in particular in which the boundaries between humans and almost-humans have been asserted is through the discourse of "monstrosity." Monsters serve both to mark the fault-lines but also, subversively, to signal the fragility of such boundaries. They are truly "monstrous" as in things shown and displayed in their simultaneous demonstration and destabilization of the demarcations by which cultures have separated nature from artifice, human from nonhuman, normal from pathological. (12)

Indeed, remade beings on *The Nevers* take both forms: There are mindless destroyers but also the superpowered human experiments. Laura Donnelly, who plays their leader, Amalia True, says, "The Touched are a bunch of mainly women, outcasts" ("Accustomed to the Impossible" 01:18-01:22). They include a Black Londoner, West Indian man, Chinese woman, and couple from South Asia, along with many poverty-class women and children.

Wealthy benefactress Lavinia Bidlow's actress Olivia Williams observes that there's "a sort of sci-fi metaphor for the human condition and I think being Touched can be anything from having a disability to being of a different race or a different religion or a different gender and just about being other…" ("A Touch of Power" 00:48-1:00). Their remaking adds to their othering. Ann Skelly, who plays the Touched inventor Penance Adair, comments how much the Touched "stick out during Victorian times and of course a few gills, it's hard to hide"

("Accustomed to the Impossible" 01:51-01:58). They are the mutants, the monsters, the threat that threatens to destabilize society.

Harriet Kaur, a foreign-born Touched woman, explores who is being deprived of rights in this society. Penance says to Harriet, "The new folk, there's rumors one or two have outstanding warrants. Petty charges, likely cooked up." Harriet replies, "Oh. It should mostly just be fines, I imagine." But Penance adds, "Some of them might not technically be citizens. They don't all speak English, so it's hard to tell." Harriet promises to help, and Penance calls her "a daisy." But as Harriet concludes, her position is keeping her from doing more: "I'd rather be a barrister. Then I could prosecute the men.... I don't see how, though. I can't even apply to Aneel's school. How are we ever gonna see justice if we're not a part of justice?" ("Undertaking," 1.4, 07:48-08:04). Reflecting historic London, this London brims with inequality, heightened by the imagery of monsters and superpowered heroines battling in the shadows.

As the Touched are gaining superpowers and transcending their humanity, they can lead the Londoners forward on a new path. Critic Neil Badmington neatly summarizes this point when he remarks that "The crisis in humanism is happening everywhere.... The reign of Man is simultaneously being called into question by literature, politics, cinema, anthropology, feminism, and technology. These attacks are connected, part of the circuit of posthumanism" (9). In 1985, Donna Haraway published the famed "Cyborg Manifesto," in which she explored emerging women and technology as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (65). This remade creature becomes a feminist boundary

transgressor contesting the dualisms of nature/artifice, organism/technology and self/other, much like the zombie.

In this spirit, many of the Touched not only are feminist anachronisms, but seek to make a better world. Penance not only invents but can sense electricity, wielding her gift to create futuristic devices. As she explains, this ability has a mystical component: "I can see energy. Potential energy. Like with electricity. I can see where it wants to go, or, move, or settle. It helps me put things together" ("Pilot" 1.1, 41:34-41:43). Invoking her spirituality, Penance tells the skeptical Doctor Hague, "Science can be like a prayer if you ask the right questions. He listens and He slowly reveals the extraordinary plan of His universe" ("Ain't We Got Fun" 1.11, 09:47-09:55). As such, her method of thought heralds her as one of Haraway's transgressors.

In her biography of Nobel-Prize-winning scientist Barbara McClintock, Evelyn Fox Keller describes how McClintock tried to see the world from the viewpoint of the corn plant instead of dominating and controlling it. Her alternative approach was ridiculed and dismissed, but she eventually made the discoveries that led to her 1983 Nobel Prize. "Keller argues that McClintock's life and work present a version of feminist science. Instead of valuing objectivity, this alternative scientific practice values sympathy for the object being studied; this approach even suggests that better and more accurate science will result from 'a feeling for the organism'" (Roberts 278). Creativity and boundary-breaking thus herald Haraway's female creators as cyborgs.

Likewise, as an advocate for the Touched, Harriet confronts the lords directly and pleads for a cooperative way forward:

> You have the most uniquely powerful group of people humanity has ever recorded here, now, in your city. Why would you send us away? A single Touched can save a burning building. Another can translate languages of all nations and facilitate trade, end war, sow harmony. There are others with unmatched strength, and some, as you know, with sight into the future itself. Imagine what future we might see if we were to work together rather than let fear keep us apart. (1.11, 31:20-32-01)

The revolution becomes feminist, as the women's exploitation at the hands of powerful men inspires a slow transformation. As such, it shows the workers of London finding a way to take power from the lords: speaking to them as Harriet does, out-inventing them as Penance does, and physically attacking them, as Amalia does. Espenson adds, "[Lord Massen] is a soldier from the past and [Amalia] is a soldier from the future who was fighting against rigid thinkers" ("A Touch of Power" 12:08-12:16). As she forges the Touched into a team, they discover how to fight the system. Skelly adds, "When they come together, those so-called weaknesses actually come together to become strengths" ("A Touch of Power" 16:21-16:27).

Even as London's lords dismiss the Touched, Haraway explains why the men will never welcome them, recognizing that "the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). Because they have no

investment in the feudal, colonialist system, they are the ones with the power to tear it down.

Like *The Nevers*, *Dollhouse* wrestles with the question of whether making cyborgs can improve the world. In "The Left Hand" (2.6), the Rossum Corporation remakes a "spoiled, pampered, selfish child" as his handler calls him, and engineers him into a passionate, powerful senator (03:15-03:17). "You were a nobody before we found you. Just a name. Everything you care about, everything you hold most dear, we gave you," she insists (02:54-03:07). In the same episode, Topher duplicates himself to do double the work. Like other social programs and saviors created by the Dollhouse, these moments demonstrate how the technology could be used consensually for evolution. This is the concept of the posthuman, showing how people can augment their potential.

The technology that unleashes Echo's potential, too, is shown offering a new future for humanity (along with the possibilities for helping people as hostage negotiator, counselor, and so on). Eventually, Echo defies her creators and becomes a cyberpunk superhero, dialing up skills and personality traits to save the day through her hybrid status. Echo also discovers groundbreaking interconnectedness: "I'm experiencing like 38 [personalities] right now, but I somehow understand that not one of them is me. I can slip into one. Actually, it slips into me" ("Omega" 1.12, 34:25-34:45). Juliette Kitchens argues, "Her assertion that her subjectivity exists but is as fluid as any other subjectivity within her body positions her not as a subject controlling other (perhaps lesser) subjects, but as an object among many (equal) objects" (13-14). Echo sees that she can transcend her body, and, as such, becomes truly superhuman.

> As in cyberpunk narratives, Echo has taken active control over her mental and physical states and is using her embodied augmentation (in this case, her imprints) in an active and purposeful way; she insists, "I made me" ("Stop-Loss"). In the same way as in cyberpunk narratives, Dollhouse's narrative challenges the notion of the separation of mind and body. (Calvert, ¶ 16)

Soldiers like former Doll Anthony Ceccoli, lacking Echo's innate gifts, must mimic her personality and skill augmentations with data sticks ("Epitaph Two," 2.12). All have transcended their birth forms to become something much more.

Amalia True, like Echo, outstrips her human limitations. Amalia is shown being chosen by the alien Galanthi, carried back from a dystopian future to Victorian London, and left with new precognition powers to find her purpose as uniter of the Touched. Kim Toffoletti, author of *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body,* observes:

> The posthuman doesn't supersede the human subject or offer a "better" or more advanced model of the human. It doesn't necessarily want to leave the body behind. Instead, interpreting the posthuman as a process of reformulating established categories of being creates the possibility of transforming identity politics based on dialectical relations. (14-15)

Thus, Amalia learns to break barriers and raise her friends in power and self-actualization. She trains them all to fight but also cherish their found family.

Intervention for Humanity's Good? Or "that is their business but not their purpose"?

Other players in the posthuman-cyborg game are the Doctor Frankenstein experimenters, playing God for good or ill. Outside entities remaking humanity for its own good have appeared in the *Buffy*+verse before. There are the programmers of *The Cabin in the Woods,* dutifully manipulating the students above and planning to sacrifice them to keep the world running. This scenario is the famous banality of evil as the true threat not the monsters but the corporate card-punchers who obediently unleash them. They would argue, of course, that sacrificing a few to save the world is the best bargain they can make, a justification used to exploit the weak for centuries.

Serenity (2005) reveals the creators of the Reavers as misguided if not evil. Likewise, *Dollhouse*'s Rossum Corporation (which nods to Čapek's 1920 worker-exploitation play *R.U.R.*) are exploiters whose victims gave little consent. In her essay "We Are Not Just Human Anymore," Meg Saint Clair Pearson sees the Dolls as Haraway's cyborg and Topher as Baudrillard's posthumanity, which positions hybridity as a reliance on machines in order to sustain life: "Perhaps the writers intentionally chose to create Topher as monstrous, as a way of almost forcing the viewers into creating a stronger bond with a human-machine hybrid than a seemingly human character" (30).

Continuing his Doctor Frankenstein trope in *The Nevers*, Hague attempts to resurrect his mother with Prudence's help. He explains, "Mother's only half there. In the wires. You can

feel her. It's just her spirit. It's just her-her-her trembling soul, but you can finish this. And then we can divert all that energy into a new body, and we can prise her from the maw of death itself" ("Ain't We Got Fun" 1.11, 20:02-20:17). However, he has been duped, as a noncorporeal being has taken his mother's place. (This false god or beloved appears in other shows as Jasmine, Glory, and resurrected Cordelia, as well as The First.) Penance hurls Hague into the electric being, and for a moment they look like an angel, in a dig at organized religion. Meanwhile, Hague's alleged mother reveals that she came from Amalia's time and was fighting beside her to protect the Galanthi.

> MOTHER: But I've had a lot of time to think it through, sweetheart. The Galanthi were heralded as saviors. But what did they actually achieve? Everything only got worse after they arrived.
>
> PENANCE: People made it worse. It wasn't the Galanthi's fault.
>
> MOTHER: What about all the lives in that orphanage of yours? Have the Galanthi helped them? And look. Who knows what they've done to your friend. Or if she'll even wake up.
>
> PENANCE: The Galanthi would never hurt Amalia.
>
> MOTHER: It may not mean to hurt someone. But that doesn't mean it didn't. Doesn't mean it won't. Are you willing to gamble on good intentions? (1.11, 45:55-46:49)

Being an ancient, wise alien, even with benevolent goals, cannot guarantee good results. Penance finally questions the

Galanthi's motives in the last dialogue of the season: "The Galanthi just took us for its own. It colonized our world without so much as a 'beg your pardon.' You think any of them asked for this?…Look! Just would you look around you! Look at what my gifts have done for us!" ("I'll Be Seeing You," 1.12, 54:36-54:56). This protest leaves the audience clear that Galanthi altruism cannot be assumed.

Toffoletti observes that in today's world, "Clear distinctions between what is real and what is virtual, where the body ends and technology begins, what is nature and what is machine, fracture and implode" (2). Observing through this lens, some fans have speculated that the Victorian London of *The Nevers* is more like the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Framework than history a simulation where the Galanthi can train its remade subjects to be superheroes. Like Ultron, Aida on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* controls humanity for its own good through a loose definition of protecting them. She creates the Framework as a simulated alternate reality in which people lose their greatest regret. "That this is achieved by either killing or putting into a coma-like sleep the physical bodies of those inserted within it does not strike Aida as problematic, nor does she concern herself with issues of consent or free will; with few exceptions, none of those in the framework are there by choice" (Giannini 74). The Dollhouse Attic follows this pattern, while specifically exploring the interconnected cyberpunk posthuman according to Kitchens. There, the many minds are blurred into a single combined reality.

> As Rossum's mainframe, the Attic translates the neural data into usable objects that facilitate data transference, which, among its many uses, alters the biological domestic space of the Dolls/Actives. The

> object entanglement created within and through the Attic maintains both the embodiment central to feminist postmodern subjectivity and the emergent nature of posthuman subjectivity. (Kitchens 10)

However, the inhabitants of the Attic are being tortured, while those in the Framework have lost all ability to impact the world. Both places are depicted as prisons whose inhabitants must be freed. The entire setting of *The Nevers* may be the same.

The last Galanthi removes Stripe, a battle-weary, drug-addicted foot soldier, from the endless wars of the future, and carries her back to a setting in which, in the body of a widowed baker, she arguably has even less power. This act creates Amalia True. However, the Galanthi never asks consent. Stripe has been remade, becoming one of Haraway's "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism," and a public target like her friends (Haraway).

One motive appears to be to stop the environmental damage and the corporate imperialism that causes it, by forming new leadership in the Industrial Age. The Galanthi wants to increase the bonds between people to smash exploitation. It tells Amalia in a near-death experience why it has put her through so much: "You gave your life for your friends because we needed you to understand...why we would do the same" (1.12, 45:26-45:41). With this, it revives her and sacrifices itself, infecting the people of London with even more alien power. This seems altruistic, but it is endangering even more minorities. As it unilaterally fashions superheroes and time travelers, its creations are right to question.

In Which We Suddenly Need to Know the Plural of Apocalypse

Episode six, "True," confounded viewers with a new setting and unrecognizable characters (much like *Dollhouse*'s season one finale, "Epitaph One"). All is dark and filthy as futuristic soldiers battle. Claudia Black, who plays Stripe, observes, "We're getting thrown into a very different world. It's being filmed very differently, captured very differently" ("Accustomed to the Impossible" 09:16-09:22). Espenson reveals that the original plan was to flip between the two time periods, but it was confusing for the audience and needed separating ("Accustomed to the Impossible"). Instead, a single episode explores two sides, once more the corporate exploiters and the cyborg rebuilders.

Earth, it appears, has been turned into a wasteland through humans' neglect, and now twenty Galanthi have come to help with "pure water systems" and "tectonic stabilizers" (08:29-08:33). Humans have divided into those who want Galanthi aid and those who reject it. At this point, the latter have apparently killed all twenty, and nearly five billion people have died as well. The soldiers are losing hope. Skelly as Penance comments, "It is upsetting the future being so grim for everyone" ("Accustomed to the Impossible" 08:53-08:58).

The heroes are the Planetary Defense Coalition (PDC), who work with the Galanthi. Their secrecy about names (which they consider sacred) emphasizes their spirituality, as does the fact that some are Touched. As the sweetly optimistic Knitter the field medic explains, she is one. This gives her more directed powers than the Victorians. She tells Stripe, "The spores are translators. They activate parts of the mind needed to comprehend Galanthi language and tech. Not that I can. I've never even seen one. But it does broaden the perspective"

(07:35-07:49). A broad perspective, of course, works as a metaphor for being open and welcoming. She is a remade cyborg too, one created to build bridges.

As the PDC solders explore a secret base, they discover that the Galanthi there was tortured by horribly killing the human with whom it had bonded. Knitter hopes, "Maybe the twenty were scouts. Maybe the Galanthi are just getting started. This could be where we turn the tide. Do the job the PDC was formed to do. There's still time. Nobody has to die."

Stripe retorts, "Yeah. Feel like someone's gonna" (15:41-15:46). When humanity is met with angels, savior aliens who can restore the world humans have destroyed, those humans will clearly turn on them. This is sadly believable. Even the PDC soldiers are reluctant to help. "What'd you expect? They were gonna lay down their lives for something that gives them nightmares?" Stripe asks Knitter (15:04-15:09). Their cynicism and hopefulness continue to clash, representing the different responses to possible salvation.

> KNITTER: We are this close to winning. Not the war, but the world. Imagine winning the planet back. Making it livable. Floods, famine, terra-storms. The Galanthi can make them stop.
>
> STRIPE: Then where are they? The portal's stable. Why aren't they galloping through?
>
> KNITTER: It's probably not finished.
>
> STRIPE: Why didn't they come before? What about the five billion people that your great brainosaurs came too late to save?
>
> KNITTER: They're not gods.
>
> STRIPE: Then stop praying to 'em.

> KNITTER: Can you do one thing for me? Can you just hope that we make it right? I'm not afraid to fight, if that's what it takes. But it has to be for a purpose. It has to matter. To you. (17:26-18:30)

Stripe, it appears, does care under her pessimism. The bumbling PDC soldiers discover a technological wonderland they don't understand. On this hidden base, the portal the Galanthi came through is still open. The rest of the technology is a puzzle, offering clues to their operation but nothing definitive: Sim Strips and Victorian artifacts abound, along with a beautiful garden of fruit. Stripe eats an apple sensuously, like Kaylee with the strawberry in *Firefly*, symbolizing her deprivation but also consent to enter the forbidden Eden. Confronted with strangeness, she embraces it.

Claudia Black observes, "If [the Galanthi] start to awaken people or alter them in some way, then that's something that the Free Life party wouldn't be able to control" ("A Touch of Power" 13:16-13:23). FreeLife are zombies in their own way bigoted foot soldiers who have embraced destruction. They have been bombing the Galanthi sites, stopping them from saving humanity. The one member shown loudly introduces himself: "My name is Major Joseph Willing Greenbone, FreeLife for life! We do not hide from God like you PDC dogs," he shouts in a southern accent (03:13-03:20). He continues to subvert the PDC agents, trying to convince them to kill the last Galanthi. "What if thousands of them come through that rift? Millions? What if that freak downstairs is just a pet, sniffing us out?" he suggests.

Espenson says, "Many people don't want to let it into their brains…. They are willing to take the whole species down rather than be helped" ("A Touch of Power" 12:51-13:03). In an era in

which American voters cheer on demagogues and vote on bills that will only help the rich, believing what the worst dregs of the internet tell them and quoting it verbatim, zombies as obedient, self-exploiting masses are all too believable. Lauro and Embry add: "Our manifesto proclaims the future possibility of the zombii, a consciousless being that is a swarm organism, and the only imaginable specter that could really be posthuman" (88).

Zombies represent "a literalization of what has already happened: the death of the individual that continues to lumber forward" (Lauro and Embry 96). The corporate stooges must be destroyed or, finally, made not to exist by creating a better future in the past. "The zombii thus suggests how we might truly move posthuman: the individual must be destroyed. With this rupture, we would undo the repressive forces of capitalist servitude. But at what cost? The zombii's dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement for the zombii can offer no resolution" (Lauro and Embry 96).

In the face of this endless hatred and xenophobia, Knitter despairs, one moment before she's shot. Comforting her as she dies, Stripe assures her that the last Galanthi is going for help, not abandoning them. Stripe promises to have hope. The Galanthi departs, but wraps the dying Stripe in ghostly blue tendrils and carries her away to become Amalia.

Conclusion: Can Amalia Save Us?

Using *The Nevers* as a model for saving the world is imperfect, as alien intervention is unlikely. Nonetheless, the show emphasizes the dire environmental and selfish condition of humanity. The plot challenges viewers to solve these problems through other types of intervention. The exploiters

have remade their followers as zombies, in an allegory for mindless obedient herds. Rather than fearing the Other as FreeLife and the British lords do, we should guard against those within our community bent on its destruction:

> It has often been suggested that zombies stand in for a fear of the masses, in contrast to earlier centuries' monsters, like vampires, that stand in for fears of the wealthy and powerful. Such critiques may be correct, but they miss the immensity of the coup that was achieved by creating this fear, by shifting our attention and our fear away from the powerful and onto ourselves. This tremendous perversion of the zombie narrative teaches us to distrust our own impulses and instincts, rather than affirming its original indictment of imperialist, corporatist masters. Embracing a zombie epistemology liberates us from our fear of ourselves, our communities, our own bodies and what they need. It is a way of knowing the world that privileges our shared experiences and our commonalities over a competitive, acquisitive gaze. (Day)

Gentle Penance is startled when Hague's "mother" tells her that she is a worthier protector of the Touched than the Galanthi. "It is no sin to consider what a little thing like yourself might do with such knowledge. I'd love to see the good you could do, Penance Adair, with all the future's technology at your fingertips. More good than any Galanthi has ever done. Don't you think?" (1.11, 47:00-47:36). Indeed, showing humanity a better path doesn't require fighting or even speechmaking. To this point, Penance has been a creative maker and sweet best

friend but never a leader. The quick end of the show doesn't reveal whether the overlooked heroine will outstrip her abilities and become a powerful savior. In context of the *Buffy*+verse, it certainly seems likely.

Espenson observes, "Unity turns out to be really important. It's when our characters come together in the show that they start making progress" ("A Touch of Power" 07:50-07:58). The team of Touched, sharing insights and wisdom, explore how to surpass their physical limitations to begin changing the world. In this reimagined London, Amalia and her friends could conceivably lead a revolution. This possibility emphasizes the need to remake current practices and ideology through the perspective of the more universally-minded cyborg.

> So long as we are building ourselves out of the literal wreckage of war, and knowing our bodies and ourselves using the same instruments of science that have made us experiments (and sacrifices), we will only ever know ourselves as our creators knew us. Though as cyborgs we might appropriate knowledge from scientific journals, in applying it we accept for ourselves the risks that were only conceived of as applying to an abstract population. Though we might free the speculum from the hands of a professional gynecologist, in wielding it we internalize the rightness of his vantage point, knowing ourselves as he might see us instead of how we might feel us. Though we might try to make the best possible choices about what to eat, where to live, when to work, and how to take care of ourselves, cyborg choices will always be informed

> by the science and technologies that were made by powerful people considering the interests of the whole system. The interests of all of the individual cyborgs were never part of the plan, and this makes system-knowledge dangerous to them. (Day)

Still, superheroes have the disadvantage of failing to model real life. Stripe's thoughts in her far-future dystopia resonate with today: "This close is where we always end up. It's where we all fold. This close, change is too scary, even for the people who fight for it. That's why FreeLife always wins."

Knitter retorts that she was FreeLife, then received Galanthi spores. "And the spores, they didn't make me brilliant or brainwashed. They were a question. And it turns out that nothing will crack this world harder than one gentle question. So, yes. I hope… for a better world" ("True," 1.6, 19:29-19:52). If this view is true, those who destroy the earth for profit and the millions who follow them need to be asked such a question. Whether it is "What do you truly want, truly fear?" or "Do you desire a better world with new voices showing us the way?" today's viewers must keep asking.

Works Cited

"Accustomed to the Impossible: The Making of *The Nevers.*" *The Nevers*, season 1, part 1, produced by Joss Whedon et al., disc 2, HBO Home Box Office, 2021. DVD.

"Ain't We Got Fun." *The Nevers,* season 1, episode 11, Mutant Enemy, HBO, 15 Feb. 2023. (Streaming Tubi).

Badmington, Neil. *Posthumanism*. Palgrave, 2000.

"Bushwhacked." *Firefly,* season 1, episode 3, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2002.

Calvert, Bronwen. "Mind, Body, Imprint: Cyberpunk Echoes in the Dollhouse." *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association,* vol. 8, no. 2-3 [30-31], Summer/Fall 2010 https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/2628893/calvert_slayage_8.2-3.pdf

Canavan, Gerry. "Zombies, Reavers, Butchers, and Actuals in Joss Whedon's Work." *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion.* Titan Books, 2012, pp. 285-297.

Day, Deanna. "Toward a Zombie Epistemology: What It Means to Live and Die in *Cabin in the Woods*," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology,* vol. 3, November 2013. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/26302/ada03-towar-day-2013.pdf. Accessed 4 December 2023.

"Echo." *Dollhouse,* season 1, episode 0 [original pilot]. Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

"Epitaph One." *Dollhouse,* season 1, episode 13. Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

"Epitaph Two." *Dollhouse,* season 2, episode 13. Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2010. DVD.

Giannini, Erin M. *Joss Whedon Versus the Corporation: Big Business Critiqued in the Films and Television Programs*. McFarland, 2017.

"Gone." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* season 6, episode 11, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television. 2002. DVD.

Graham, Elaine. *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture.* Manchester University Press, 2002.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." Warwick, 1985. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fictionnownarrativemediaandtheoryinthe21stcentury/manifestly_haraway_----_a_cyborg_manifesto_science_technology_and_socialist-feminism_in_the_....pdf . Accessed 4 December 2023.

"I'll Be Seeing You." *The Nevers,* season 1, episode 12, Mutant Enemy, HBO, 15 Feb. 2023. (Streaming Tubi).

Kitchens, Juliette. "Object Entanglements: From Postmodern Subjectivity to Posthuman Thingness in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1 22. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44259596. Accessed 6 Nov. 2023.

Lauro, Sarah Juliet, and Karen Embry. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." *Boundary,* vol. 2, no. 35, 2008, Duke University Press, DOI 10.1215/01903659-2007-027. https://www.thing.net/~rdom/ucsd/Zombies/ZombieManifesto.pdf. Accessed 4 December 2023.

"The Left Hand." *Dollhouse*, season 2, episode 6, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

"A Love Supreme." *Dollhouse,* season 2, episode 8, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

"Omega." *Dollhouse,* season 1, episode 12, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

Pearson, Meg Saint Clair. "We Are Not Just Human Anymore." *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Confounding Purpose, Confusing Identity,* edited by Sherry Ginn, Alyson R. Buckman, and Heather M. Porter, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, pp. 21-33.

"Pilot." *The Nevers,* season 1, episode 1, Mutant Enemy, HBO, 11 Apr. 2021. HBO.

Roberts, Robin. "The Woman Scientist in *Star Trek: Voyager*." *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism,* edited by Marleen S. Barr, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 277-290.

Shapiro, Lila. "The Undoing of Joss Whedon." *Vulture,* 17 Jan 2022 https://www.vulture.com/article/joss-whedon-allegations.html. Accessed 4 December 2023.

Toffoletti, Kim. *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body.* I.B. Tauris, 2007.

"A Touch of Power: The Themes behind *The Nevers.*" *The Nevers, Season 1, Part 1,* produced by Joss Whedon et al., disc 1, HBO Home Box Office, 2021. DVD.

"True." *The Nevers,* season 1, episode 6, Mutant Enemy, HBO, 16 May 2021. HBO.

"Undertaking." *The Nevers,* season 1, episode 4, Mutant Enemy, HBO, 2 May 2021. HBO.

"Vows." *Dollhouse,* season 2, episode 1, Mutant Enemy, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009. DVD.

"Welcome to the Hellmouth," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* season 1, episode 1, Mutant Enemy,20th Century Fox Television, 1997. DVD.

White, Peter. "Joss Whedon Exits HBO Sci-Fi Drama *The Nevers.*" *Deadline,* November 25, 2020 https://deadline.com/2020/11/the-nevers-joss-whedon-exits-1234622208. Accessed 4 December 2023.