Dissing the Age of MOO: Initiatives, Alternatives, and Rationality

Rob Breton and Lindsey McMaster

> "It is not the slumber of reason that engenders monsters but vigilant and insomniac rationality."
>
> — Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* takes place in a world where reliable knowledge and agency come not from the authority of adulthood but from the arcane experiences of youth. Indeed, *Buffy* recreates reality in ways that reveal adult rationalism to be blind, repressive, and in a word, monstrous. Despite the reason and planning of its formal methods, or even as a result of that mechanized approach, adult rationalism leads to a kind of suburban fascism, to violently irrational effects. In recent episodes, an urge to rationalize the demon-hunt governs the Initiative; they attempt to fight monsters by employing scientific methods, assuming predictability and adopting a policy of maximization: the results are insane. Meanwhile, Buffy and the Scooby Gang, far from upholding the ideal of human purity in the face of monstrosity (as one might expect from monster-hunters), instead transgress those divides at every turn, especially in terms of romance and identity. Buffy may slay demons, but the boundary between good and evil is endlessly complex for her, whereas rationalist authority structures work tirelessly to reinforce the binary. This marks a critical divergence in ways of knowing and dealing with reality. By addressing this contrast in knowledge production, our paper explores how *Buffy* undermines the traditional power structures of rationalist authority. It addresses the way in which *Buffy*'s youth culture disses the rationalisms of organized society.

[2] In the third season episode "Gingerbread," Buffy's mother,

newly awakened to her daughter's role as vampire slayer, begins by accompanying Buffy on patrol, and ends by leading a parent group to burn her at the stake. In an explosion of officiousness following the unexplained death of two children, she instigates the group "Mothers Opposed to the Occult" at a town meeting: "This isn't our town any more. It belongs to the monsters and the witches and the slayers. I say it's time for the grown-ups to take Sunnydale back." Whereas the adults of Sunnydale have traditionally turned a blind eye to the supernatural—or fabricated explanations like gang violence—MOO sets out to do the Slayer's job for her, and the results demonstrate the profound epistemological gap between PTA-style rationalism and non-rationalist, teenage insight into an extra-rational reality.

[3] Joyce's criticism of Buffy's slaying signals a bias toward predictability and measurable results: "You patrol, you slay, evil pops up, you undo it, and that's great—but is Sunnydale getting any better? Are they running out of vampires? … It's not your fault. You don't have a plan. You just react to things. It's bound to be kind of fruitless." Rather than enlisting Buffy as a source of knowledge and expertise in the monster hunt, adult systems demand that her abilities be minimized and dismissed – no teenager could possibly know better than a parent group. Buffy's ad hoc tactics threaten not the purpose of MOO but their governing strategy, which would establish a predictable, systematic world in order to control it. Indeed, Sunnydale's youth are not merely discounted by the MOO project, but are the first objects of suspicion. In fact, Joyce's complaint that Sunnydale "belongs to the monsters and the witches and the slayers" refers more closely to Buffy and her friends than to Sunnydale's hostile monster threat. Despite an organized system being implemented to address the town's subculture of monsters, it is the youth culture that feels the effects of this increasingly hysterical adult elite.

[4] PTAs have long been notorious for purging school libraries of supposedly offensive material, and accordingly MOO confiscates

all Giles's books on the occult and later sets them alight at the witch-burning of Buffy, Willow, and Amy. Meanwhile, a locker search is quickly identified by Xander as a fascist enterprise: "Oh man, it's Nazi Germany and I've got *Playboys* in my locker." The very irrational mass hysteria of the witch-hunt, then, revolving around domination and the centralizing of power, is expressed through all the established signs of an invasive, dehumanizing, and *uber*-rational fascism. MOO renders all non-adults suspect and so effectively collapses the categories of youth and monster: hence the ensuing attempt at an organized extermination. The representation of PTA groups as systems tending toward extremism, fascism, and discrimination in a series directed at teenagers is daring, especially insofar as it emphasizes the contradiction between rational, liberal, adult planning and the violent effects of those organizations.

[5] In counterpoint to the rationalism-gone-mad of MOO, the Buffy crowd's habituation to the supernatural allows them to operate on a profoundly different level of knowledge production. This habituation—an inability to be shocked—is typical not only of Buffy's close associates, but of Sunnydale's high school students in general. Early in Oz's tenure on the show, when first introduced to the existence of vampires, he skips the phase of disbelief and remarks that, "Actually, that explains a lot" ("Surprise"). This is a significant diversion from traditional vampire narratives, where the epistemological struggle that ensues from the realization that vampires exist and that reality is not as it seems is often a major part of the narrative (Gelder 54). Human adults in Sunnydale tend not to know about or believe in the monsters that surround them, but when they do recognize them, their reaction is extreme and suffused with the authoritarian impulse. Confronted with an alien subculture which undermines all they took for granted about reality, the adult response is a violent reinscription of the world order they are ideologically wedded to. The teenagers, on the other hand, have arguably less allegiance to the rules of a reality which seldom worked to their advantage anyway; the addition of monsters to it, then, is a difference of degree rather than kind. Sunnydale's youth engage in

an alternate epistemology which, like the language they use, is informal, derisive of authority, and elusive of systematized rules.

[6] In "Gingerbread," a rare appearance by Willow's mother Sheila, clearly an academic, exposes the split between adult intellectualizing and teenage ways of knowing. Sheila at once diminishes and pathologizes Willow's witchcraft: "identification with mythical icons is perfectly typical of your age group. It's a classic adolescent response to the pressures of incipient adulthood. I've consulted with some of my colleagues and they agree that this is a cry for discipline: you're grounded." Willow challenges the generalizing tendency of her mother's psychobabble by insisting on the personal: "Mom, I'm not an age group. I'm me—Willow group," but the response is mindless platitude: "Oh honey, I understand." The inability of parents to understand teenagers may be nothing new, but the expression of that in a disciplinary urge escalating to fascism lends a sinister edge to this version of generational strife. Willow's mother brings the authority of academic psychiatry to bear on her relationship with her daughter as if to force a disenchantment with non-scientific claims to knowledge upon her, and the result—that Willow gets grounded—is a disciplinary exercise in containment and control.

[7] Willow's insistence on being an individual rather than an age group is a significant signal of her resistance to categorization and those forms of knowledge that disregard the personal. Both MOO and the Initiative dehumanize and objectify their prey, rationalizing the demon hunt. The results are telling and less than reasonable, as mothers burn their daughters at the stake, and Willow's ex-boyfriend almost falls prey to the Initiative who can only see him as a dehumanized "hostile subterrestrial" ("New Moon Rising"). Both organizations rely on binary thinking to distinguish monster from human; the binary then does their thinking for them, mechanistically organizing good and evil without any need to consult the personal or the particular. As Donna Haraway has argued, when invoking the category of the human it is wise to recall that it long

functioned as an exclusionary concept, only recently being opened to non-white-males: "Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity's face has been the face of man" (86). The potential for the human-monster binary in *Buffy* to stand in for other kinds of human division is significant: in the midst of MOO's locker searches, identified as Nazism by Xander, the viewer may remember with a chill that Willow Rosenberg is Jewish. In "New Moon Rising," Riley's shock at the thought of Willow dating a werewolf strikes Buffy as blatant prejudice, and the terminology with which he voices his disapproval is telling: "Oz is a werewolf and Willow was dating him? . . . I didn't think Willow was that kind of girl." Although he qualifies this by saying he meant "into dangerous guys," the expression "that kind of girl" tends to be used to condemn a promiscuous or unsanctioned sexuality, here with non-humans (though it is also significant that this is the episode which confirms Willow's relationship with Tara). Buffy, given her past with Angel but also given her resistance to dehumanizing even non-humans, naturally takes immediate offence: "God, I never knew you were such a bigot. … Love isn't logical Riley. It's not like you can be Mr. Joe Sensible about it all the time." But the personal tension that lends drama to this scene—Buffy's loyalties to Willow, Oz, and Angel versus her involvement with the Initiative soldier Riley—resonates with the epistemological tensions underlying the series. For reasons both experiential and deeply personal, Buffy, despite being a Slayer, will not engage in categorical systems of good and evil; as she argues later to Riley, "You sounded like Mr. Initiative: demons bad, people good." Riley's response, "Something wrong with that theorem?" underlines his immersion in a system where a mathematical theorem might well be expected to map morality. What prevents Buffy's crowd from engaging in this kind of binary logic is their deeply personal relationship with the supernatural, wherein discrimination against werewolves can be a form of bigotry and elevation of the human a form of Nazism.

[8] Opposed to the dispassionate logic of the rationalist elite, Buffy's

crowd engages in passionate associations with Sunnydale's non-human element. Far from a clear and absolute human-monster divide, for them it is a boundary compromised at every turn; it is this complex and intimate relation between teenagers and the supernatural that awakes the vicious disciplinary urges of the adults in "Gingerbread" and the suspicions of the Initiative. Riley unites the military paranoia of the Initiative with the jealousy of the boyfriend when he finds Buffy at Willy's demon-friendly bar: "now I see you're not hunting demons—you're socializing with them. Again! I thought you were s'pose to be killing these things, not buying them drinks" ("Goodbye Iowa"). Indeed, with Xander dating an ex-demon, Willow involved with a fellow witch, and Buffy paying occasional visits to her vampire ex-boyfriend, Riley may be the only all-human love interest in Sunnydale. In *Buffy*, the non-human subculture is as much a site of desire as of danger, and the complexities of youth sexuality find their fullest realization in these seemingly unnatural unions. Buffy tries to explain to Riley that when it comes to demons, there are degrees, but faced with Riley's militaristic view of humans and hostiles, Buffy finds her position hard to articulate; hers is a much more shifting, contextual, personal way of knowing: an epistemology riddled with desire.

[9] In the fourth season, the militant, adult, classification-crazed, monster-hunting rationality of MOO is transposed into what is virtually the embodiment of rationalism itself, the Initiative. At first glance, all that was emotionally driven, traditional, and spontaneous about MOO seems to have been checked at the high-tech security gates of the Initiative's headquarters. They embody rational*ism*, not simply military rationality: the Initiative manifest the over-exaggerated application of formal rationality, formal method, into every area of knowledge. Though it may enact military rationalism, the modus operandi of the Initiative is also indicative of Taylorism and scientifically managed work rationalization, minus the de-skilling of the worker synonymous with automation. One might expect the military to proceed in a systematic fashion, but the hyperbolic rationalism of the Initiative in a sense stands in for the

larger social tendency to give supreme value to structure and authority.

[10] In contrast to Giles's archaic library or homey living room from which Buffy's crowd launch their plans is the massive military lab complex of the Initiative: a juxtaposition reminiscent of cottage versus factory-based industry. The strictly observed vertical and horizontal divisions and subdivisions of labor, and the outward display of hierarchy and function in the uniforms; the always available recourse to appeal to positions of authority, to the 'relations of production' inside and outside the workplace; the systemization of conduct; the separation between manual and mental labor; the clock-based work (shifts); the fragmentation of knowledge about the operation; the attempt to implement a linear system of input and output; the instrumentalizing of soldier/worker into a machine; and the demarcation of 'work' and 'life,' all traits of the Initiative—fit under the rubric of rationalism and not only militarism. In Buffy's camp, meanwhile, not only is the work of demon hunting inextricably meshed with social life and personal relationships, but whenever rules and functions become too strictly defined or the assumption of authority too blatant, disruption and discontent quickly erupt. The representation of the non-personal or dispassionate constitution of the Initiative is not simply for the benefit of pacifists or military critics. The critique of military or work rationalization questions a general assumption of the efficacy of rationalist techniques and blind trust freely given to rationalist method by a world constantly told to revere and rely on logic, experts, and authority.

[11] The Initiative depends on the strictures of rationalism: the principles which govern its structure, goals, and conscious design. Whereas the small-scale operations of Buffy's almost artisanal monster shop respond to specific crises in ways that are particular to the given crisis, or attempt to prevent only the wholesale domination of demons, the Initiative are in quantitative pursuit, their aim to maximize the hunt. A calculating, instrumentalizing

orientation to the outside world that thinks in terms of domination underlies its fetishization of volume. They also attempt to conflate maximizing with 'reason' and elevate their procedures, pursuits, and organizing principles over any analysis of their ends. The idea that Buffy would discriminate among non-humans strikes Riley as alien because he has what is basically an economic habit of mind. He and his operatives employ the principle of formal rationality in a place where it doesn't belong.

[12] In "A New Man," Giles's long-time, chaos-worshipping adversary Ethan Rayne describes the rumors circulating in the demon world regarding Room 314:

> You know demons, it's all exaggeration and blank verse – pain as bright as steel, things like that: they're scared. I know we're not particularly fond of each other, Rupert, but we are a couple of old mystics. This new outfit, it's blundering in a place where it doesn't belong. It's throwing the worlds out of balance. And that's way beyond chaos, mate.

Ethan Rayne appeals to Giles through a shared knowledge system based on old- world mysticism, which faces the demon world on its own terms; according to this line of thought, what is really dangerous is the interference of the intensely rational Initiative into the enigmatic realm of the supernatural: a disturbance that threatens all-out chaos. The scene cuts to Buffy and Riley play-fighting, but the conflict between them is real. Not only do Buffy, Giles and the Scooby Gang repeatedly throw spanners into the Initiative's clinically-approved works; they are of the world that the Initiative, steeped in disjunctive reasoning, seeks to identify, compartmentalize, and destroy. The idea of Buffy having a calling to be a slayer is in itself contrary and antagonistic to Enlightenment rationalism. The Buffy-Initiative alliance fails because Buffy uses intuition and the Initiative uses "xenomorphic behavior modification" experts ("The I in Team"). It fails because she is integrated or integrates herself into the underworld's core of

assumptions: meaning, ironically, a refusal to de-humanize or alienate. She depends on specific, contextualized knowledge. Whereas Buffy is interested in questions of demon motivation, asking, "What do they want? Why are they here? Sacrifices, treasures, or did they just get rampagy?", the Initiative is indifferent to questions which would thus lend consciousness to the monsters, positing that the creatures are "not sentient, just destructive" ("The I in Team"). Where the Initiative looks for empirical and tested facts, Buffy looks for factors, variables; her sense of herself and of monsters is suffused with personal motivations and individual desires, and indeed, her victories over adversaries are as much victories of personality and wit as of physical force.
The dry, procedural, impersonality of the humorless Initiative cannot compare.[1]

[13] *Buffy* also emphasizes that what is highly rational – the Initiative and MOO are hyper-organized, impersonal, and quite effective in the short term – in its parts is dangerously irrational as a whole: taken to their logical ends, both organizations engender chaos and destruction. To maximize its performance, the Initiative reconditions not only the monsters (to render them non-mystical and, more importantly, to harness their potential strength) but also their own soldiers through drugs and computer chip implants. In an attempt to cleanse the divide between human and non-human, in order to eliminate the latter, the Initiative paradoxically compromises that divide in the physical manipulation of their own agents. Under its own definition of the rational/irrational split, the Initiative, though rational in its origins, purpose, and methods, spirals into the irrational in its outcome and effects. Maggie Walsh—the mad scientist whose appearance as less mad than scientific underlines the formal rationality of the Initiative—first demonizes Buffy and then plans her execution, saying merely, "she's unpredictable," as though no further explanation was required. The mechanical objectivity of the Initiative requires strict control over every agent and would demand the same from Buffy. A predictable order of things, because it is thought to accrue maximum efficiency, becomes a higher value than

justice. Perhaps, also, because she allows her scientific work to subsume and repress her extra-rational maternal instincts (extra-rational because they are random and because they do not entrain gain, something in it for her or the operation), the effect of Maggie's procedural rationality is a monster, Adam. Not unexpectedly, Adam wants to learn about people, categorize them and himself, and learn how things 'work.' Once he comprehends and classifies, he kills or disregards, not caring one way or the other: the product of laboratory testing and inhumane experimentation, Adam is equally driven by a will to knowledge devoid of conscience. The only way for Buffy and the Scoobies to destroy him is to cooperate and place trust in their friendship (an irrationality from the perspective of formal rationalism), and to summon the highly irrational force of the essential, primal slayer.

[14] Are Buffy and her friends, then, by opposing the hypertrophied and militant rationalisms of the Initiative, representing the irrational? In the final episode of season four, "Restless," the primordial slayer released to defeat Adam haunts and seeks to destroy Buffy's friends. Told through dream sequences, the episode, of course, is suffused in adolescent puns, jokes, and campy narratological devices like references to *Heart of Darkness*. The gags, although postmodern genre-savvy disruptions of fictional purpose which stand on their own, also consistently express a counter-rational alternative. Deep in dream in what might be an overexposed Freudian slideshow, Buffy confronts a very clean-cut Adam, doing some boardroom strategizing with Riley on world domination. Adam asserts that "Aggression is a natural human tendency" but that Buffy and he "come at it in another way." Buffy protests that "we're not demons," and Adam counters, "Is that a fact?" Riley cuts the debate short, reminding us of the existing alliance between demons (Adam) and rationalist bureaucracy ("we've got a lot of important work here, a lot of filing and giving things names"); i.e., the irrational whole shored up by very rational supports. In a sense, the demon-world proclivity for world-domination has ironically revealed itself, not in some marginalized monster-sub-culture enclave, but in the hands of

governmental bureaucracy—at the social center of organized power itself. This promotes a reading of *Buffy* as critical of the rationalist authority structures which at once dominate society and subjugate the supposedly irrational youth culture, suggesting a resistance to the current distribution of power and authority in contemporary culture.

[15] As Riley immerses himself in some serious paperwork, Adam, or the subconscious impulse which is conjuring him up, alerts Buffy to the primeval, irrational forces which would only be amplified in a slayer. Buffy, still in dream, the irrational's home turf, then meets the first slayer. Through Tara, it says: "I have no speech, no name. I live in the action of death. The blood cry, penetrating wound. I am destruction. Absolute. Alone. The slayer does not walk in this world." Buffy's rejoinder—"I walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. There are trees in the desert since you've moved out"—undermines the idea that modern slayers, modern concepts of forceful and assertive girls, are ruled by an irrational drive; and yet she rejects the irrationalism of the primeval slayer without referring to the grammar or sober sanctimoniousness of rationalism. (Indeed, considering the irrational forces said to govern teenage consumerism, when she says, in a sense, "I shop, therefore I am," she emphatically distances herself from any Cartesian rationality, identifying herself as a non-rational being.) She demands to wake from the dream world, and does. In other words, just as Buffy is a slayer but does not attempt to maximize her slayage as might a 'rational' agent according to economic theory, she again fights for space between rationalism and irrationalism, a non-rationalist *juste milieu* wherein she does not attempt to maximize her dominion, her authority, or her ascendancy.

[16] Though at first their star pupil, Riley ultimately deserts the Initiative, once he witnesses the inhumanity, indeed the torture, camouflaged as scientific experimentation. Because of the hard split between humans and subhumans in the Initiative's paradigm, when Riley aids in Oz's escape, his superior officer, Colonel McNamara, sees anarchy: "Tomorrow I am going to institute a court-martial to investigate the extent of your involvement with the Slayer and her

band of freaks. You're an anarchist, Finn. Too backwards for the real world" ("New Moon Rising"). Finally, when the same colonel tells Riley he's a dead man, Riley ironically counters with the colonel's own terminology: "No Sir, I'm an anarchist," and knocks him out. Considering this episode came five months after the WTO riots in Seattle, where self-proclaimed anarchists were fully demonized by the press, the implications of the show's use of this term for one of its heroes at the moment of his redemption cannot be underestimated. Yet Riley is only an anarchist from the Initiative's point of view, wherein those outside the rationalist project can only be monsters, freaks, and anarchists. Neither Riley's nor Buffy's rejection of the Initiative entails the affirmation of the irrational. Refusing to reify categorical binaries, Buffy rejects both the authoritarian Initiative and the destructive primal slayer. Buffy's way of knowing is a highly mediated one, dependent on a range of personal motivations, demon motivations, and the calls of conscience. The conceptual space she inhabits is one wherein the personal ties of friendship and the bonds forged by desire, not deemed rational by structural—adult—rationalism, take center stage in the organization of highly contextual goods and evils.

Notes

1 In Max Weber's terms, the Initiative would be formally rational but substantially irrational. An action is deemed formally rational if it is an efficacious means to a premeditated end and is governed solely by that end. 'Substantive rationality' is rationality from the point of view of an ethical end, which entails ethical means. In other words, despite the highly organized set of actions through which a project proceeds (formal rationality), the end result may be devoid of reason or value (lack substantive rationality). Formal rationality means technological control over nature, impersonal or dry self-control, and an economically based (maximizing the pursuit) preoccupation that attempts to elide interruptions from ethics, emotions, caprice, ritual, tradition, or day-tripping. For all the differences between Weber and Marx, Weber's analysis of rationalism nicely intersects with Marx's analysis of capitalism. Marxists generally hold that the rationality of individual economic agents attempting to maximize profits conflicts with what is rational for the system as a whole (Glyn 107). Private ownership eventually leads to the malfunctioning of capitalism itself. Weber emphasizes that

what is formally rational for economic agents is not rational for those same agents in terms of their lives as a whole.

Works Cited

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.

Gelder, Ken. *Reading the Vampire*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Haraway, Donna. "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 86-100.

Glyn, Andrew. "Contradictions of Capitalism." *The New Palgrave Marxian Economics*. Ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate and Peter Newman. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 104-109.